

Forty Stories

New Writing from

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A Fifty-Two Stories Production

with fiction by

Jess Walter • Lindsay Hunter • Shane Jones • Blake Butler

Catherine Lacey • Roxane Gay • Matthew Norman • Jamie Quatro

Kyle Minor • Kayden Kross • Ben Greenman • Greg Bardsley

and more . . .

F O R E W O R D B Y C A L M O R G A N



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For Carrie Kania

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This book ushers you into many worlds, all of them our world.
It is full of voices, sounds, and people.
Stay with them, and they will stay with you.

The stories here represent eight tenths of a year.
A year that kept slipping, yet also kept giving.
Their writers gave them freely, and we do, too.

Like all stories, they work in a thousand ways. Some lull, some lure.
Some pinch, some stretch.
Some are like a thicket, some a formal garden;
others seem like valleys slick with rain.
All replenish and reward.

They reveal, too:
That we want to be right, but we need to want.
That we're scared and thrilled when we recognize ourselves in others.
That bruising up against rules, measuring ourselves against them
and despite them, is what we do as a people,
what we share and need to share.
That cynicism is dead and ambiguity is anything but.
That language is alive and so are we.

Thanks to you for writing them and for reading them.

Cal Morgan
June 2012

Forty Stories

1.

Ambivalence

by Ben Greenman

When a girl is skinny, and calls you late at night, and you glance at the calendar, and it is four days before you are scheduled to get married, and the girl you are marrying is not the skinny girl but another girl, a girl who has already departed for the city where your wedding is to be held, it is your job, most probably, to hang up the phone. When you do not hang up the phone, you have not done your job. When you invite that skinny girl to your apartment, and then you jump into the shower so that you will be clean, taking special trouble to wash the parts that matter, and then you mess up your hair so that you will look as though you haven't gone to any special trouble, then you are doing another job entirely.

She was a painter. Panos met her through a mutual friend. She had a boyfriend, who was twenty-two years older than she, and when Panos first spoke to her, he said that he thought that the age difference was an atrocity. "Like bombing Cambodia," he said, convinced that this was a joke that she would not understand. She surprised him with a knowing laugh. They talked about his impending marriage, and about the week of freedom he had but doubted he'd use. She took out a Paper-Mate blue pen and used it to write his phone number on her hand. She wrote it strangely: not with numerals, but with letters "O" for 1, "T" for 2, "TH" for 3, "F," "FI," and so on. "So that makes your number 'Efstoofh,'" she said.

“Hey,” Panos said. “That’s my street: Efstooth Avenue.”

“For that joke I award you this pen,” she said, handing it over ceremonially. “I’ll get it later.”

When she arrived at Panos’s apartment, “Efstooth” was still inked on her hand, but that was not the first thing he noticed. The first thing he noticed was that she was carrying a suitcase. It was small enough that she held it rather than setting it down, but large enough that it seemed to have winded her slightly on the way up to the third floor.

“Are you moving in?” he said. “I don’t know how my wife will feel about this.” She set the suitcase down on the floor, unzipped it, and flipped back the top. There were white packages there, white sheets, and when she unwrapped them they were her paintings. She spread them out on the floor of his apartment. There were ten of them, each one a small landscape with a single bird flying over a marsh and a single human figure in the foreground. They were slightly different shades, one reddish, one greenish, one dunnish, and so on, across a muted spectrum.

Panos looked at the paintings and asked polite questions about them that she answered smoothly. “I like to tell people that he’s trying to capture the bird,” she said. “I always feel hilarious saying that. But the bird’s not an unwitting victim. He sees the man. You can be sure about that.” When he asked if they were all pictures of the same scene, she said that she saw how he’d think so but that no, three of them were painted from actual photographs of her father hunting and the other seven were created from imagination. “My father left when I was a little girl,” she said. “I remember that he yelled a lot, and that he was mean to my mother, and that she was happier without him. But recently I have been looking for pictures of him. I found three and made up seven more. No one should have fewer than ten photographs of her father.”

They turned the TV on but turned the volume all the way down. They ordered pizza. She sat in a chair across the room from him, and announced that she hadn’t showered that morning, because the water in her apartment was too cold. Panos told her she was welcome to take a shower if she wanted. “We’ll see,” she said, and went around

the apartment ticking her finger across the spine of books. “Lots of history books,” she said.

“Not mine,” Panos said.

“Oh,” she said. “Too bad. I love history books.” She was wearing tight stretch pants and a tight white shirt. It was obvious to Panos that she was the skinniest girl who had ever been in his apartment. She was not wearing a bra, which put her in the company of at least two other girls who had been in the apartment, neither of whom was the girl who was, in four days’ time, going to be his wife. His wife always wore a bra, and even three years into their relationship, she gave a little involuntary gasp of pleasure whenever he unclasped it. He figured that it was, at best, a reflex. The history books were hers.

The skinny girl came and stood right next to Panos. She planted her feet to make it clear that she was ready to address the issue.

“Well,” Panos said. “Here we are.”

“We are here,” she said. “No doubt about that.”

“It’s all in the way you say it,” he said. “‘Here we are’ is more loaded than ‘we are here.’”

“Is that what we are? Loaded?” she said. “Speaking of which, I’ll have more wine.” She shook her glass and sloshed out a few drops onto her shirt. “Shit,” she said.

“I have extra T-shirts,” Panos said.

“I’ll just take this off,” she said, and did.

“Come here,” Panos said.

She sat on the couch and pushed up alongside him. They watched the TV, which was showing a strongman competition. A fat Swede was jogging down a short track, the chassis of a car held on his shoulders. “I really stink,” she said. Panos closed his eyes for research. She was right, in a way: it was the smell of young sweat, of a black flower blooming. She unbuttoned his shirt and laid her head on his chest.

“Now you’ve got me thinking about my father,” she said.

“I do?” Panos said. “How?”

“It’s not that hard to do.”

“I don’t think I like your tone,” he said.

“I’m sure you don’t,” she said. “No one ever does.” She squeezed his arm. “You know what my father did? Other than leave, I mean.”

“And hunt.”

“And hunt. No, I mean what he did for work. He was trained as a lawyer but about a year before I was born he quit to work on a biography of his great-grandfather, who was a British intelligence agent who specialized in code breaking. Do you know about the Zimmermann Telegram?” Panos shook his head. She didn’t continue right away. He put his hand on her stomach, and then slipped a few fingers just inside the elastic band of her pants.

“Tell me,” Panos said.

“What?” she said after a while.

“Tell me about the telegram.”

“Oh,” she said. “Why? Are you really interested?” Panos nodded and let one finger drift a little lower. “Of course you are,” she said.

“Really,” Panos said. “Keep telling me about it.”

“Fine,” she said. “This telegram was sent from the German foreign secretary to the German ambassador in Mexico, and it announced that the Germans were going to support a Mexican attack on the southwestern United States. The British, including my great-great-grandfather, cracked the code. When the telegram was verified, Wilson armed ships to defend against Germany, and a few days after that, we were at war. World War One.”

“You know, even though the history books aren’t mine, I managed to figure that out.”

“The code was a cryptogram. We cracked it partly because one of the top German spies, Wilhelm Wassmuss, had lost his codebook in Iran the year before. We picked that up and it helped with the Zimmermann Telegram.”

“We?”

Now she didn’t like his tone. “We the British. We my great-great-grandfather.” The strongman competition had ended, and now the TV was showing dirt bike racing. She got up to go to the bathroom, and when she came back she started to pack her paintings back into the suitcase. “What color would you say this is?” she said, holding up a canvas.

“Blue.”

“And what about this one?”

“Also blue.”

“Right. But isn’t that ridiculous? Two colors that are so different, but they’re considered the same. It’s almost reason enough to become a painter, just to try to understand that. Colors are like a code, too.”

“Oh, yeah,” Panos said. “Finish the code story.”

“It was finished,” she said. “Finished enough. I was out of that and on to color. Blame your bathroom. It’s blue.”

“I didn’t pick that color.”

“It doesn’t look like your thing,” she said. “When are you getting married?”

“Sunday,” Panos said. “It’s strange. It seems like a million years away, and also like it’s going to happen the first time I let myself breathe.”

“You’re not breathing?”

“Not always well.”

“Is it because I stink?”

“It’s because I’m not sure what message I’ll be sending if I do. Maybe my true feelings will come through.”

“What are those true feelings? I assume they have something to do with the reason I’m here.” She had her chin tilted up now, and her words were falling into the space between them.

“Ambivalence.”

“That’s not a feeling. It’s the presence of two feelings at once. What are the two?”

“Joy and fear? Happiness and hatred? Rightness and wrongness?”

“Wrongness?”

“The most obvious kind of wrongness. Like maybe this isn’t the right choice. Like there are a million people to love, and how can I settle on one and be sure that I’m not a fool? I have met others. I might meet others. What about Eskimos?”

“The Eskimos,” she said. “Of course.”

“Or the Finns or the Malays or all the other people I don’t even know about. Maybe I could be with one of them without ambivalence. Don’t you have these questions about your boyfriend?”

“He’s a quick story. He’s older, is big like you, has a beard, helps pay the rent on my painting studio, treats me with what we’ll say is

kind contempt. That often does the trick for me, as it turns out.” She slipped a hand inside his shirt and hooked her leg over his. “Will you kiss me?”

“Sure,” Panos said. “But I’m not sure about more. I want to, but you know.”

“Now that’s ambivalence,” she said. After they kissed, she pulled her pants down far enough to show him that she wasn’t wearing any underwear. “Put your hands on my ass.”

“If you insist,” Panos said. “But I want you to know that I feel like I could stop any time.”

“I’m flattered,” she said, her eyes narrowing.

“What I was going to say,” Panos said, “is that it’s like when a drunk driver thinks that he’s in control of his car.”

“Oh,” she said. “Maybe I am flattered. Well, do what you want, or don’t. Your hours are numbered anyway. I have told you so many state secrets that I’m going to have to kill you. Anyway, it’s not too long until morning. I’ll be gone soon.” They leaned into each other and she pretended to concentrate on the dirt bikes on TV.

The sky outside was already starting to change color, from black to a weaker shade of black. There wasn’t any blue in it yet. “There’s a bird out there,” Panos said. “I rarely actually see them at night.”

“The man sees the bird,” she said. “You can be sure about that.” She made birds with her hands and flew them up high so that her arms were stretching as far as they would go. She was so skinny that there was something painfully religious about that pose. It was a pose of appeal to something far beyond him. “Put your head back down on me,” she said, and he did. She stroked his neck, unbuttoned his pants, made circles with her fingers on his stomach, exhibited restraint. Taking off her clothes would have been as easy as asking. How often are things as easy as asking?

At seven, it was time for her to go. Panos found her shirt and buttoned up his own. “Okay,” he said. “What’s the way to do this?” He hadn’t anticipated the need for any secrecy. He had planned to sneak her out at three in the morning or so. But now his neighbors were up, and many of them knew his wife, and he wasn’t sure what they would make of a strange skinny girl leaving his apartment early in the morning.

“I’ll go down and throw out the trash,” he said. “If I buzz on the buzzer, that means the coast is clear, so come downstairs quick. The door will lock behind you.”

“Okay,” she said. “Can you carry my suitcase along with a trash bag? That way I can get there fast. I won’t have to bump around on the stairs.”

“It’s like being a spy,” Panos said.

“It’s nothing like that,” she said. “I could tell you stories.”

Did Panos take her to breakfast? Not to take her would have been rude. But he did not pay. That would have been too conspiratorial, and too high-handed, both at once. Besides, he was not hungry, just intensely thirsty, enough so that he bought a half-gallon of orange juice from the corner store and drank it straight from the carton while he stood out on the sidewalk. She stopped in a coffee shop and ordered a toasted bagel; a bit of melted butter ran down her chin when she ate it. Her chin was slick with the butter. The sky was a brilliant shade of blue. At that moment, just at that precise moment, he wanted to invite her back up to his apartment and make all the mistakes he had avoided making. Instead he changed the subject, for the last time. “You forgot to get your pen back,” he said.

“You can keep it,” she said. “Remember me by it. That’s kind of nice, right, to remember someone by something totally anonymous? When you write with it, it’ll be like there’s an invisible ink message just under the real message.”

“What does it say?”

“You wouldn’t understand,” she said. “It’s in Inuktitut.”

“What is that?”

“Look it up,” she said. “You have books. I’ve seen them. Okay: I’m leaving.”

“See you,” Panos said.

“Or not,” she said. “Probably not.”

“Well,” he said, “I hope you enjoyed your time on Efstooh Avenue.”

“You’re an idiot,” she said. When she leaned in to kiss him goodbye he smelled it again, the black flower blooming under her arm. He went back to his apartment and pulled out history books until he found a listing in the index for the Zimmermann Telegram. He

read a few paragraphs that he didn't understand. They might as well have been in Inuktitut. In the front of the book, on a flyleaf, his wife had signed her name. His wife, almost. He shut the book hard, like a trap. He was trying to capture his ambivalence or kill it. Three days later, he watched his wife sign her name again, on a marriage certificate, beneath a paragraph he understood completely. The ink and sky were blue.

2.

Amy Having a Heart Attack

by Sharon Goldner

When Amy hears what her father has done, she thinks she is having a heart attack.

“Are you sure?” she asks her mother, who is out of state in Amy’s childhood home. Amy is talking loudly because of the din of the lawnmower going at it next door.

Her mother screams “Goddamn it” and hangs up the phone on Amy. That’s when Amy thinks she feels the heart attack give birth to itself. Her whole left breast aches underneath where she suspects her heart is. Amy tries calling her mother back but she will not answer and the heart attack lightning-bolts her. It isn’t at all what she thinks a heart attack will feel like.

“Let it be over quickly,” she says. When there is no response, Amy answers herself: “Okay.”

Amy caresses her breast, since she can’t get to her heart, and it feels good; no, it feels better, but good that she can take care of things herself, with husband and children at school. She thinks about how things could have been so different. She could have married that rabbi, freshly ordained, he wanted to marry her, and then there was that doctor, a heart doctor, now is that some shade of apropos or what, but he dumped Amy for a famous actress person, thirty years his senior. So Amy married Ralph instead and she hates him and hates this marriage, and he is always screaming how he hates her, too,

and how that time she called 911 because he was screaming so badly and they told her that they could only send someone out if he hit her or threatened to hit her. She wondered if 911 would come out if she thinks it is a heart attack but isn't really sure. Or if they would tell her mother to stop hanging up on her all the time.

Amy likes the word “tits” but only in private, and only when she is by herself. She takes off her shirt to undo her bra and now that it is undone, she lifts it up and off her shoulders. Sensing their immediate release, Amy uses two hands to caress and cajole. Her breasts are loopy and long, having stretched out beside themselves after years of expensive but essentially nonsupport bras. She considers turning some music on for mood but that would require the effort of getting up and the only effort Amy wants is the one right now on her breasts. She sings to herself instead, trying to drown out the mowers. Living in a gated community in the suburbs the lawns and gardens of the big expansive homes are always being fussed over.

Amy has all but forgotten about the pending heart attack. Her fingers deftly follow the vein down the one breast that starts in the middle of nowhere. The fingers have gone this route before. She is feeling the rise of her chest and the boldness of her C-cups elongated as they hang out with her since her mother hung up on her today. She doesn't care if Ralph wants her to have a boob job; he's got enough D-cups in his porn collection to start a new nation. “These girls are not fixer-uppers,” Amy always says.

Amy goes from the middle of nowhere vein all the way down to the nipple. When she was nursing her youngest many years ago—the swell of time bruised and bloated—her older child asked about the breastfeeding. He was precocious enough to be in a gifted-and-talented kindergarten class where he was learning his colors in *Español*. As she began to give him the beautiful explanation of the breast as nourisher, he exhaled words as if they were mucous he wanted to get rid of. “No, what's THAT? That blue thing,” he snaked, “on your boob.” Amy looked down at the vein. “It's gross!” he screamed. “Mommy's got blue boobs.” She had to explain to Ralph that she didn't show him her boob, he looked.

The phone rings. When she hears her mother's voice on the an-

swering machine, Amy's fingers let go of the breasts. "Why did you hang up on me?" Amy asks. Her bra looks funny, hanging half on the kitchen chair. Half off. Which one is it really? "You know I don't like when you hang up on me." The chair almost looks like it is wearing the bra in a very revealing way. Amy's daughter, the youngest, recently wondered why nobody thought to dress up furniture beyond the fabric of cushions or pillows. "It would be funny to see a sofa wearing a dress. A love seat could wear a skirt and a pair of pants because it's a love seat and it could be a boy and a girl together. Of course, it could be a girl and a girl or a boy and a boy, too," referring to her aunt, Amy's sister, and her wife. This child was gifted and talented, too.

"What do you mean asking me," her mother snipped into the phone, "am I sure? I'm right here. You're not here. You're all the way there. Exactly what part do you think I am not sure about?"

"It's just that . . . , " Amy stutters.

"Your father embezzled from a client," her mother says, reaching pitches not previously thought possible. "He got caught. It doesn't matter to them that he was going to pay it back before they caught him. He was going to make it right in his own time but they are going to make him make it right faster than that." Her mother exhales the last few words in a stream.

"Oh my God. Are you smoking?" Amy asks. She is appalled, particularly since her mother's recent cancer diagnosis.

"I already have the cancer," her mother says, "so what's a cigarette in the big picture? It helps me relax and Lord knows I need to relax. It's not like your father is going to take me on vacation anytime soon. And if he gets convicted, well then, that's really no vacation. And no sex either. A double damnation. Oy." Amy hears the tap-tap of the cigarette into an ashtray.

Knowing her mother, it's probably a soup can or a soda bottle. The china ashtrays of her childhood were considered part of the set—valuable pieces not to be desecrated in any way.

Amy holds the phone a little ways from her ear during the cancer talk, convinced that maybe cigarette smoke has so advanced itself that it can travel through the phone lines right into her ear, settling in for the

night before making the pilgrimage into her brain and any other body part it damn well pleases. “What about Meg and Bob? Do they know?”

While her mother extols the virtues of her siblings, Amy thinks back to a particular teenage memory with Meg and Bob. It’s the one where they were all in one of the bedrooms looking at record albums. They could hear, in the next room, their parents making love. Meg and Bob paused for a moment to listen to their parents. They had been looking at a Grand Funk Railroad album, saying “fuck, fuck, fuck” out loud a million times, which led to an argument about whether or not it had been a million times. They decided to take another hit of the joint they had been passing around before counting the million out again, and that is when they were stopped in mid-syllable by the grunting and alternate groaning of their parents in bed. Meg and Bob smiled and rolled their eyes, or for them being high, it was more like they rolled and smiled their eyes. They were lucky, they felt, luckier than all of their friends to have such cool parents.

“Mom had like six abortions you know,” Meg said. “A few after Bob and then some before me. We were her chosen ones, Bob! You were supposed to do a drum roll or something.”

Bob, picking brownie crumbs off his lap and eating them, declared, “What we just did to those brownies is downright savage. Brownies have feelings too, you know. Amy, you should have stopped us. When the brownie police come, we’re going to say it’s your fault, okay?”

Amy, against the wall, heard her parents, louder than her siblings; and found their sex sounds comforting in a way—that her parents still wanted to be together like this. Amy is thinking on this, the sounds of comfort, and doesn’t hear her mother until she hears the screaming.

“Goddamn it, of course Bob and Meg know. Who do you think posted bail? Jesus Christ, Amy. As if I don’t have enough going on. Sometimes I think being a preemie affected you in ways the doctors have yet to discover.”

Amy heard all the stories about how her mother had to trek back and forth to the hospital with baby Bob in tow to bond with preemie Amy. “Well, maybe if you hadn’t smoked and drank during pregnancy . . . ,” Amy says. She sits down, her breasts jostled by the sudden movement.

“Nobody said that was bad for the baby. Everyone did it back then. Your brother and sister turned out fine.”

“Mom—I’m just saying,” Amy just says.

The phone clicks. Amy has been hung up on again. In the old days, before the wireless technology, a hang-up was really a hang-up. It had power. It had oomph. It had drama. It required a physicality—the holding hand removing the phone from the ear, whooshing it through the air on its way to being slammed down. Now the effect of the hang-up was not quite the same. And the mowers outside seem angrier, chopping blades of grass with, ironically, blades of sharpened steel. Everything gets cut down in life, Amy thinks, drumming her fingers on the kitchen table. Her father was a respected man in their community. Everyone loved him.

He gave out sage advice. He volunteered. He served on committees. He went to fund-raisers and galas. He hosted dinner parties where he shamed friends into giving hefty sums for charities. He was stable. A righteous man. Of all the labels you could pitch on a man, embezzler was not one of them. Of all the labels he wore for this meeting and that event, who would ever dream he would wear ones that said arrest? Police? Bail? Trial? This was unfathomable, and the more Amy sat on the pier inside her mind fishing for explanations, she realized that maybe anything was possible because really, how well do you know anyone at all?

The heart attack feeling starts again, rolling in punches of pain, threatening to explode her rib cage apart. She crosses her arms over her chest in an effort to straitjacket everything in. The last thing Amy wants on top of, under, and in between everything else is a mess. The maid isn’t coming until the following week. Still hugging herself, Amy’s crossed arms send a message up to her brain that goes something like this: “Hey, don’t you see what’s happening here? Hello—remember the breasts?,” and then the rest of her goes, “Remember the breasts,” and then it occurs to Amy that she can make everything feel so much better like before.

So Amy uncrosses herself and starts with the breast massaging again, vigorously and joyfully.

Once the heart attack subsides, Amy finds ecstasy in her breasts, rolling and folding them. She works efficiently, as does a farmer who

knows the lay of his own land, except that Amy can close her eyes for brief intervals because she is not working with dangerous farm equipment. There is a new pattern to her breathing, and sometimes her chest stays filled with air for longer than it heaves the air out. Amy thinks that, as long as she is one with her breasts, the heart attack can always be averted. She feels full, the way she used to when she was breastfeeding her children, seemingly long ago. Taking out the small compact mirror Amy keeps in her pocket, she looks at parts of herself—it is not the right size for a full view of face or body, and so she moves it around slowly, glancing at her hair, her eyes, mouth, and neck.

Just as she moves the mirror down to her chest, intending on one breast at a time, the phone rings.

“I don’t think you understand the gravity of the situation,” Amy’s mother says. “Your father could do jail time for this. Can you imagine Daddy in jail? Your father an inmate? Wearing the same exact clothes as everyone else? That alone will kill him. You know how much he relishes style. And living with a roommate? I don’t think they are even called that. They’re cell mates. I mean, they can’t leave you with something nicer to call it? I have been your father’s roommate for some forty-five years now. Did I tell you we were living together before it was in style? We were pioneers, I tell you. Sharing living expenses and pleasurable expenses—that’s how he put it. Way back when they talk about the good old days, well, they really were, before anything else.”

Amy tugs the phone away from her ear just a little. While her mother continues to reminisce. Amy closes her eyes, taking herself back in time to her father coming home from work—she never knew exactly what he did, but he did have so many clients, and all of those clients paid for all of the nice things they did have. “Daddy-o’s home,” he would sing in the doorway, and Amy, faster than Meg and Bob, would leap down the stairs and into his arms. “You’re too heavy for me to pick you up, baby,” he would eventually say, but oh how he would let her wrap herself around him into his cologne and pinstripes.

“He’s going to have to pay back everything, plus lawyer fees,” her mother says. Amy can hear the grinding of the pottery wheel as she

talks. Her mother is known in town for her colorful, if not impractical, ashtrays, mugs, vases, and things that had not been tableware-invented quite yet. "You know we're going to have to sell Sunny."

Amy's jaw drops. She feels it slip away from the top part of her mouth, wide open. Her tongue, wet with that elixir of life, spit, having nowhere to unload its product allows it to sluice out of her in beads, down her chin. "No, not Sunny!" The expansive home of Amy's childhood. Amy loves that house. It has always been there. Strong, reliable, safe—what a childhood home should be.

Amy loves the breezy modern decor throughout, the theme of sunflowers in every room, even in her brother's room, where they were hand-painted by their mother, camouflage, hanging over his bed. The real outdoor picnic table in the kitchen, with the umbrella that really worked. The formal dining room, with the real knotted tree bark that twisted up from the floor, flattening itself into the expanse of a table . . . how oddly divine the table looked when it was set for one of the many elegant dinner parties, as regular a feature of their lives as the four-tier hand-carved chandelier that drove flecked shimmers of light onto the room. The hiding annex Amy had discovered in her father's study where she would sit and think and imagine. The grand entryway with the winding stairwell where Amy would pretend to be a famous megawatt movie star waving to her fans.

"You can't do this to me," Amy says. "You can't. That's my life in there." She places the phone down, turning it on to speaker. She holds her breasts up, her face down, and begins sobbing into herself.

"Oh, for Christ's sake," her mother's voice goes, coming through crackly on speaker. It fills up the kitchen like a noxious gas seeping into every space, sending its rebel forces all out with threats of overthrow down every path. "You're an adult woman, for God's sake, blubbering over a house you left long ago. When's the last time you visited? Do you ever make it in for the holidays? Practically every month of the calendar there's a goddamn holiday that you avoid coming home for. Your father and I beg . . . they're our only grandchildren. And NOW you're crying. Boo hoo for Amy."

Amy knows there's a lot more anger in her mother's hang-up than the click will allow. She turns the phone back on, waiting for the

dial tone to die, followed by the recorded operator voice that says, "If you would like to make a call, hang up and dial again," followed by the blast of beeps reminding Amy that the phone is still off the hook, before going completely dead. Determined to make the day go the way she wants it to, Amy starts back up with her breasts, fingers cooing on the skin freckled with perspiration, hips rocking in the vinyl kitchen chair. She reaches one hand down inside the waist of her jeans. They pop open, and her fingers scramble inside the dark denim.

Outside, the edger guy on the path next door motions up and down to the lawn guy on the mower. The mower smiles, the space in between his front teeth holding a toothpick captive. He shakes his head, pushing his baseball cap firmly down, squashing bits of hair this way and that.

He knows what the edger is gesturing about, and he's interested, but no, not really. His wife at home has some really great chest. This missus here, well, hers are middle-aged and old.

The edger guy mows up as close as he can to the window without seeming intrusive. He's a professional, after all. Say what you will about their line of work, but how many jobs can boast of a little breast sightseeing on the side? A doctor, for sure. The edger guy shakes his head—too much school required for that. All he had to do was read a mower-and-edger manual.

He swipes a look in Amy's window, baseball cap pulled low over his eyes, just in case he has to say he wasn't looking at anything—nothing at all—and it would seem like it was true.

3.

The Anarchist of Darwin

by Michael Ramberg

I come from a small town you never heard of, unless you know about the big ball of string—biggest one ever done by a single man—that they keep in a big glass-wall gazebo about two miles off the main road. Used to, anyway. You probably heard that story, too, how it got burned down a few weeks ago. It was in all the papers’ News of the Weird columns and the late-night talk shows, how some freak or freaks drove in, smashed out one of the windows, threw in some gas, and tossed in a lighter. Poof. A fireball, busted glass, chaos. The whole sky turned orange, fading to a dingy black smoke-cloud that hung over the whole town before drifting off toward the Cities, eighty miles to the east. The volunteer fire crew spent forty minutes drowning it with hose-water; it was dawn before they were done and before noon the whole town knew. It hit everyone pretty hard, as you might imagine. We didn’t know what to do. One by one, folks came driving out to pay respects. They parked on the gravel median and stood shoulder to shoulder, staring at the soggy mess the fire crew left behind.

Then they held a whole-town meeting at the combined high school gym. Man, everyone showed up. The grocer, the barber, the manager of the new Walmart that was driving them all out of business. Everyone wanted a piece of where the town was headed now that its most famous citizen was dead. Aside from wanting revenge on the sick bas-

tard that had done it, they couldn't agree on much. Some wanted to rebuild what was left, which was about half the ball, and that mostly char made soggy and starting to mold already from the soaking that had put out the fire. Some others wanted to plow the whole site under and move on with being just another small town dying on the godforsaken prairie. Small-time thinkers thinking small, but at least they were trying, seemed to me. This is a pretty typical small town, and what that means is anyone with big ideas gets run out early for the Cities, leaving it for the half-wits with delusions of grandeur to run the show.

After the meeting, little groups gathered out in the parking lot and talked it over. I ended up with Buddy Summers and Tank Watterman and their pinched-up little wives, who were all cross-eyed with anger over the ball of string being gone.

"I think it's a local," said Buddy. "I think it's one of the antis." The antis were what we called people who thought the ball of string was a bad idea. Mostly they lived close to the ball, so they had to put up with the occasional set of kids from the Cities who drove by at three in the morning, drunk and looking for some hick, irony-laden small-town icon to make fun of.

"I think it was some crazy from out of town," Tank's wife Mella said. "I think it was a terrorist." Mella was four foot ten, five two if you counted her hair, which she kept piled up and curly in a style twenty years out of date. It had been really something back in the eighties, but now it was just kind of sad. I don't know how her husband put up with her walking around like that, because Tank sold cars in Plymouth, which was forty miles away, out where folks from the Cities lived, so he was a little more sophisticated than Mella.

"One thing's for sure," said Buddy. "We're gonna find the guy. And then he'll pay."

"I think it was an anarchist," I said. "One of those guys who just wants to destroy stuff for no good reason." They stared at me.

"What's a anarchist?" said Mella.

"Like the devil," Buddy said with an ignorant laugh.

"That's the anti-Christ," I said.

“He thinks the devil did it.”

“I said anarchists, shithead,” I said. The world was turning red, and I could feel my face flushing in anger.

“Okay, Spaz-o-tron. Hold your water.”

I closed my eyes until the red went away. People were always saying dumb things and I was always having to calm down about it. It was why I spent so much time at home; it was the only way to avoid being around idiots and getting pissed off all the time. I said, “Anarchists believe society should be reshaped without a hierarchy of authority,” I said. “They believe all government institutions are evil, and that destruction of the current status quo is the best way to achieve a stateless society.”

“Oh,” said Mella. She rolled her eyes back to think for a second. “So why burn down the string ball?”

“Because it’s an irrational system,” I said. “With no proven methodology for implementing its core values, it strikes out at anything it despises.”

“Chris the genius,” said Buddy with a sneer. “J.C. Christ.” Buddy had never liked me. Even back to grade school he’d been picking at the scab of my personality, and I was surprised we’d gone this long without him saying some ignorant, stupid thing. “Is that what you’re doing, holed up in your house all day?”

“I’m in the book business,” I said. “So I read some of them.” I bought and sold books on the Internet. I’d started with the collection my dad had left in the basement after he killed himself, and had bought and sold enough to be able to pay the taxes on the house that had become mine, since Mom had died off herself some years earlier.

“If it helps us find this asshole, let him read whatever he wants,” Tank said. “C’mon. Let’s go out there in the morning. I bet there’s tons of clues about who did this.”

“They been over and over that lot,” said Buddy. “They even called in some expert from the Cities. If there’s anything left, he’ll find it.”

“There’s always clues,” said Tank. “Right, Chris?”

I don’t know why he dragged me into it. They turned and looked at me. Buddy said, “You should miss it more than anyone. Your momma worked with that thing for twenty years. Put bread on the table.”

My mother had worked at the visitors' center, selling postcards and charging admission to the History of the River Valley exhibit they kept in the back. It never paid much, and when she died—it was from lung cancer—the town made it a part-time volunteer job. But I didn't feel any sense of gratitude to the string-ball, and why should I? The way I figure, back in the fifties when Old Man Johnson had begun winding that thing, twine was 80 percent asbestos. Which means my mother worked every day for years in the presence of a nine-ton ball of poison.

"We'll take a look tomorrow, right?" said Tank.

They were all looking at me again until Buddy said, "Say something, Spaz-o-tron."

I don't remember anything after that. I suppose being called Spaz-o-tron may go down all right with some people, but not with me. Most likely I got pissed off and took a swing, or maybe I just stormed off and came home. But the next thing I remember is waking up in the morning and diving into my work. I scouted around, looking for people who were willing to unload books for less than they were worth just to get rid of them; then I sent some emails to people willing to pay extra for books so they didn't have to look for them their own selves. Basically I was cheating two sets of people to make my profit, but that's how capitalism works when you get down to it, and who was I to stand by while someone else took my money? I made a few deals that put me up about fifty bucks—a slow morning—then decided to go to lunch.

I went to the Twine-Winder, like I usually do, and ordered a grilled cheese sandwich with french fries and sat eating it while staring across the lawn at the place where the remains of the twine ball still lay in the afternoon sun like a big, crumbling turd. People were still coming by to look at the mess. They stopped their cars and got out and stood by the yellow police tape keeping people away from the mass of charcoal and burned out gazebo timbers still dangling from the one wall that hadn't caved in. They took pictures. Some of them dabbed at their eyes like they were starting to cry. There was even a memorial out front, where people had brought flowers and piled them up on the lawn between the charred-out string-ball and

the visitor center. It was just like those memorials you saw when that princess died in a car crash, or that spring up every time some stupid teenager goes nuts and brings a gun to school and thins out the herd a little. It's funny how people react pretty much the same way to what's important and what isn't, if you ask me.

"They sure miss that string," said a voice above me. It was Claire, come to refill my coffee cup. Claire'd been waiting tables at the Twine-Winder since she was fifteen. She was still pretty, but she'd never been bright. She'd had a kid a while back who died of cancer, and after that her husband moved to the Cities and she's been struggling alone ever since. She was about the last person in town I'd think to let near what was left of my heart, but she was damaged goods now, beyond my skills to save.

"All them flowers are pretty," I said.

"Sad to think all that pretty came from the wreck of that string-ball. Still, people miss it pretty bad, driving out there to pay respects that way."

"Pay respects," I said. "Most of it's Verna's overstock." Verna ran a flower shop two towns down. I said, "I saw her drop it off couple nights ago."

"Still," said Claire. "It's a nice thought."

Then Tank came in and sat at my table. I was about halfway through my grilled cheese and there was still forty minutes to go before I had to make a phone call, so I sat and listened to what he had to say. Whenever I left the house to eat down at the Twine-Winder, he'd always find me and sit down and talk with me for about ten hours. I don't know if what he tells me he tells other people and I don't care. Maybe he knows I won't spread it around. I really didn't want much to do with Tank, because he's such a hypocrite, but he was one of the few guys who was nice to me, so I gave him some leeway most times.

As he sat down he said, "Looking good, Chris," and he gave me a friendly wink. One good thing about Tank, he never called me by that other name, the one I hate that followed me out of grade school like a puppy that grew into the meanest Rottweiler in the world. I told him I was okay. Then he said, "I been poking around. Turns out

the ball-burner busted out the glass with a hammer. Soaked the ball with gas. Then he tossed in a lighter.”

“We all know that,” I said.

“But I found out,” he said, grabbing a fry off my plate, “it was a Zippo lighter.”

“Yeah?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“Should dust it for prints.”

“Yeah, they did that. That investigator from the Cities, he’s on the job.”

“Good,” I said. The investigator was a fat, bald guy in thick glasses who’d stood behind the mayor during the meeting, peering up at us all with his beady little eyes. He’d looked more like an expert in Big Macs than in arson.

Tank said, “He says whoever did this was a lucky amateur. Says that, in a contained area like that, pumping in gasoline creates a concentration of fumes in a small space. Basically it was a bomb. Guy was lucky he didn’t get blasted clear to Iowa.”

Claire filled Tank’s coffee and took his order and asked if I was okay, then left again, tucking her little notepad into the hip pocket of her apron. “She likes you,” Tank said. “You oughta get you some of that.”

“Not much left, what I hear,” I said, regretting it right away. Since her kid died and her husband left, Claire in her grief had taken on half the men in town, and some from outside. Men left her house all hours. Strangers, townsfolk, whoever. I only knew ‘cause on nights when I can’t sleep I take walks and Claire lives near the park, where there’s a bench I rest sometimes and it, just by coincidence, points me straight at her house, where there’s no choice but to monitor the goings-on of Claire and her parade of menfolk. I’d even seen Tank leaving there once in a while, but I didn’t say anything to him about it.

“Suit yourself,” Tank said. Tank was a guy who’d have sex with pretty much anyone. He didn’t care that he was married, or if they were, he just had sex with them. He went to strip clubs with co-workers, so he knew what he was talking about when he said everyone in the Cities dresses like strippers now; he said he even had

a couple strippers come in looking to buy a car. He could tell they were strippers by the superthin eyebrows and the superfake tan, and because they offered him a two-on-one VIP deal instead of an actual down payment on a white Tundra with a navigation system and DVD player. They were going out west to make it in the movies, they'd said. What he didn't say was whether he took their down payment or not; I'd guess he did.

"So did you see anything?"

"What?"

"I know you go out wandering at nights. Claire tells me she's seen you in the park. Pretty much everyone sees you, the way you wander around the town. Thought maybe you saw something."

"No," I said.

"I thought the cops could use some help, is all. If you saw anything."

"I'm tired of everyone thinking they know things about me," I said.

"It's a small town," said Tank. "You can't keep too many secrets here."

"Don't I know it," I said. I'd already said too much, so I kept my mouth shut. Because this is a pretty little town filled with ugly little people stuck together in groups of two, and I was the oddball single, I stuck out for easy scorn and rumor. The rest of the town was couples, husbands and wives, not that it was any better that way. Most couples I knew were at each other's throats all day long. I don't understand what it is that keeps people together. It's a surprise the whole world doesn't just go off hiding in seven billion little holes and die off from disgust at each other's stupidity. I guess I just don't have the stomach for it.

It was an anarchist that took down President McKinley, and from that we got President Teddy Roosevelt, who basically whupped up on the Spaniards and everyone else in his way until he'd turned the United States into what it is today: the biggest badass country in the world, beloved mostly except by jealous freaks blind to all the good we've done. Irony is, with all our might we just bred bastards resentful of

our success, stupid blind anarcho-terrorists bent on destroying our way of life by taking down a couple tall buildings. But to prove how stupid they were, they didn't know what a huge favor they were doing the world by giving us the excuse to take over a couple of shitty countries headed nowhere and put them on the fast track to the good life.

But try explaining that to people. They may be down with invading countries run by homicidal madmen, but if you mention that all this good was caused by a tragedy, by people doing senseless things, then they shut up fast. In my experience no one understands how entwined good and evil are, how God wouldn't be half the ass-kicker he was if it weren't for that creep down in Hell. And sometimes it's not as easy as taking sides—sometimes you need to be the one who persuades the rest of the world not to follow in your path. You start telling people things like that and the words get wrapped around each other till they don't mean anything and they look at you like you're crazy and soon enough you learn not to say a damn thing to anyone.

So you go for long walks. I do. I walked back to town and went to the park. I sat there on the bench that faced Claire's house and watched the yellow glow from her windows as she moved around in there, doing I didn't know what. She was alone tonight, which I liked. Sometimes there were men, and I never stayed long when she had men. But tonight she moved around near the window, wearing a tank top that showed the angel tattoo on her shoulder blade I could see even from across the street and in the park, and she wore small white panties that flashed when she shook her hips to the beat I couldn't hear. She was dancing, by herself, just this pinkish shadow-form glinting in the yellow light of her bedroom. Then she stopped and came to the window and stood staring out at the park, one hand cupped up by her shoulder, and she stared out the window and just about the spot where I was sitting in the dark. She had a curious look on her face, as if she was about to call out to me, but there was no way she could know I was there. She must have just stopped to think about something. Like about all the places her life had gone, and where it could have gone, all the turns that ended right here where she was. After she left the window I had the urge, like I sometimes do, to go knock on her door, but I didn't. I never did. I just never did.

I didn't know what time it was or how long I'd been there, but eventually I heard footsteps clicking down the street so I got up to leave, thinking it was Buddy, playing cop, come to give me a hard time. But whoever it was, it wasn't Buddy, because this guy was wide and his bald head and round glasses shone in the streetlamp like the eyes of a robot in a fifties sci-fi movie. When he got closer I could tell it was that investigator from the Cities. He stopped when he got close and I imagined him staring at me, waiting for me to make the next move. The move turned out to be me standing up and starting the walk back to my place.

It was a cool night and a breeze coming off the river put a chill in the air so I hiked up my collar and started walking a bit faster. My feet made loud crunching sounds against the gravel so I walked off to the side on the grass. I could hear whoever it was behind me following close and getting closer. There was a light over the next rise in the hill that was, of course, the string ball, which they still kept lit at night, out of habit, I suppose. So it was toward the string ball I was trying to make my escape, which wasn't a very bright thing to do, I guess, but I didn't have anything to hide, so I kept going.

The string ball was pretty much the same under the lights as it was under the sun, except the lights were kind of orangey, so everything had a Halloween tint. The charcoal remains were pitch-black like a ragged hole in the night, and all the flowers in the spontaneous memory garden were weirdly glowing and the cellophane they came wrapped in glinted and warped and all the cut greenery looked bright and more alive than it had ever been when it was in the ground of wherever they'd cut it from to send out here to mourn for that thing that had burned down. It was beautiful, like a ship at sea spilling its treasure on the rocks for no one to ever claim.

I looked around for the investigator, but he was gone.

Then there was another meeting at the high school gym. I wasn't going to go at all, as crowds are always hot and sweaty, but I went anyway, going in late and finding a seat on the far bench. Claire must have been late as well, because she came in a few minutes after I did and sat next to me.

“Why are you sitting here?” I said.

“Free country, honey,” she said. “Did I miss anything?”

“National anthem,” I said. “Mayor Jenkins played it from his armpit.” She laughed at this, laughed as though it were actually a funny thing I’d just said and not just a snide, empty put-down.

“Let me tell you something,” she said. “I hope that, when they find the guy who did this, they give him a medal. The town hasn’t been this shook up in years. Feels good, doesn’t it? To care about something? It gets the blood moving.” She shook her shoulders as if to show how agitated her blood was, and I felt something inside me that was something almost like what I remembered hope felt like.

Don Jentwich, who’d been running the gas station on the corner nearest the Interstate ever since Bull Tukkanen, the Mad Finn, who’d been running it longer than anyone could remember, up and died four years ago. Don had upgraded the pumps and put them under a well-lit shelter, which everyone praised him for, and also raised the price of gas, which put him on the outs. But he was a thinker, and he had a plan: “We can rebuild it, and we can rebuild it better,” he said. “There’s this artist in the city who does string sculpture. I’ve made a call, and he’s interested. He thinks we can take the remains of the original, salvage what isn’t burned away, and incorporate it into a sculpture both commemorating the original twine ball and going beyond it . . .”

He was still talking, but there was no way to hear a single word above the shouting and scorn being thrown down from the bleachers.

“Idiots,” said Claire. “That’s the best idea yet.”

“Rubes,” I said.

“Well, that was interesting, Don,” said the mayor when the shouting had let down. “And, I can assure you, when the city council meets again, we’d be glad to hear more about that . . . most intriguing . . . proposal. Now, for a further update on the investigation, please welcome our friend from the Cities, Lieutenant Mentz.”

The little fat man hopped up to the podium like he weighed about six pounds. It was weird. He tapped the microphone and winced along with the crowd at the feedback. “Okay,” he said. “Thanks. Here’s what we know. We got a profile. Whole deal. This guy—and I’m pretty sure it was one guy—was well prepared. He came in with a

gas pump and a hammer to smash out the glass. He's a loner, unhappy, perhaps with a serious associative disorder. Perhaps delusional."

"Someone like our Chris," someone shouted. There was laughter; then the whole crowd turned on me, and someone must have turned up the thermostat because suddenly it was a hundred degrees in that crappy gym and sweat was pouring down my face.

"Where were you that night?" someone said.

Everyone laughed as the room went all red, and then they stopped laughing. Even though I often don't remember what happens when I get mad, I remember all that happened after that. The detective was fixing me with his piggy genius eyes like he'd just drawn into a straight flush. I heard a woman's voice—Claire, I figured later—say my name. She asked if I was okay. I thought about the medal she might give me. About what the hell difference it made now if anyone knew or not.

So I just stood up and said Okay. The crowd got quiet and continued looking at me. Okay, I said again. Okay fine. It was me. You might as well know. I told them how sick I'd gotten of that string ball that killed my mother and drove my old man to drink and ruin. How the whole lazy town just sat around and let strangers come in and make fun of us for having the stupid thing on the lawn in a gazebo. I told how I dressed myself up in black clothes and dad's old surplus gas mask to keep out the asbestos-poison that would be released like a mushroom cloud when the thing went up, and I crept up to that crappy ball of twine with a gas can and a Zippo I got from a SuperAmerica near the Cities, and I torched it in the dead of night so the stupid town could have something better to do than worship a dead idol. I'd been right to do it, I said, because look at how the town had come together. They should give me a medal, I said.

And when I was done, when I told them what I'd done and why, the whole room was cold, and quiet like the night had been before I lit the Zippo. Every pair of eyes was on me, Claire included, and every one of those nutballs from the city I live in had the same look on their faces. They were all eyeing me like I was the crazy one. So if you want to know, it was exactly then that I pretty much gave up on the whole damn world.

4.

Another Terrible Thing

by Catherine Lacey

Another terrible thing was how I met my husband.

He was wearing a suit that day and his tie was a deep red that made his eyes seem even greener and it brought out the pale pink in his face. He was thirty-three, but still looked boyish. I was twenty-one but everyone had always guessed older. We were sitting in a small and brutally lit waiting area in the University Police office. We sat next to each other for maybe twenty minutes without saying anything at all and we didn't even bend a glance at the other because it's hard to do that when you're thinking about what a woman can do to herself and how a brick courtyard on a nice autumn afternoon can so quickly become a place you'll never want to see again. Police officers were speaking into phones and walkie-talkies and one of them walked over to ask me my name.

Elyria Marcus.

Ruby was your sister?

Adopted, yeah, I said, in case they knew that she was Korean and could see from looking at me that I wasn't.

The officer nodded and made a note on her clipboard. She looked at my husband, who was just a stranger sitting next to me at that point and it hadn't yet crossed my mind to wonder why he was there or who he might be.

Professor, we need to ask you a few questions if you don't mind, she said.

Of course, he said, and he followed her to the back of the office.

While he was gone my mother showed up, limp and sleepy on whatever Dad was slipping her these days. Dad wasn't there of course; he was still in Puerto Rico doing cheap boob jobs or something. Mom fell into the seat beside me.

Oh, it's waaaarm, she slurred. What a nice surprise.

She snaked her arm around mine and put her head on my shoulder.

Baby, baby, my little baby. It's just you and me now. No more Ruby ring, Ruby slippers, Ruby Tuesday. Oh, our Ruby, Ruby.

It's normal, I've heard, for people to talk a little nonsense at times like these, but she wasn't even crying and that just made me feel worse because I wasn't either. I tried to seem like I was in shock, but I wasn't, not really. Of course Mother didn't even try to pretend she was in shock because that's the kind of beast she is. An officer came over to offer condolences or have her sign something. Mom offered him her hand like she expected him to kiss it. He shook it awkwardly and with a bent wrist, then slipped away.

My Ruby, my Ruby. Precious little Ruby. What was it she always said, Elyria? Am I your favorite Asian daughter? Elly, you know she was my only Asian daughter. What on earth do you think she meant by that? I never understood it. Was that just a joke? Did she ever tell you what she meant?

I wiped a smudge of lipstick off my mother's nose. It looked like she had put it on while talking and driving, which was probably true.

It was a joke, Mom.

Elyria, she was so beautiful. People must have wondered how she could stand our ugly family.

People must have wondered, even I wondered. I stayed up late at night just staring at her, wondering how she'd ever be able to stand it. I guess she just couldn't take it anymore, our ugliness.

Mom, stop.

It's not our fault. We were born like this. Well, not really you, dear, but—if you don't stop this I'm going to leave right now and never talk to you again.

I said this kind of thing to Mother a lot back then and she knew it just meant I'd had enough.

She sat up, pushed her hair out of her face, and took a lot of air into her body. She let it out slow, grabbed my hand, looked me in the eye, and squeezed. It was the first human moment we'd had in years, but it ended quickly.

I need so many cigarettes, she said, while staggering away. Through the glass wall in the front of the police office I saw her light what would become the first of nearly a dozen she smoked in a row. Every few minutes someone would approach her, almost bowing, it seemed. *Excuse me*, I could see their mouths say, pointing to the *No Smoking Within 50 Ft of This Door* sign, and she would cut them off with a shout I could hear through the glass. *Have you heard of my daughter, Ruby? Ruby Marcus? She died today and it wasn't from secondhand smoke.*

If that didn't work she added *fuck off, I'm grieving*, which usually solved it.

The professor who wasn't yet my husband came back and stopped in front of me, standing a few inches too close and looking down. His paleness was glowing. I noticed his suit was too big around the middle and the sleeves were a little short.

Do you want to know anything? About her? I was the last one who, you know, spoke with her.

That's what they think.

I didn't particularly care what some professor had said to Ruby. I'd seen her that morning myself, and she was no mystery. We had stood together outside Nussbaum and drank paper cups of coffee. She looked terrible, like she hadn't slept in days, and she said she felt even worse and I asked, *How much worse?* and she said she didn't want to talk about it and I wasn't going to talk about it if she wasn't so we didn't talk about anything. We finished our coffees and walked in opposite directions. The blame (or at least some of it) was on me, I knew; I never thought she'd go through with it.

So I really didn't want to talk to anyone that day, and especially not about Ruby, but the professor's voice was so very level and calm. He sounded like some kind of radio reporter and I wanted to listen to this personal radio; I wanted his voice to play and play. My mother was lighting another cigarette outside, leaning her back against the glass, a dark bra visible through her wrinkled oxford.

Okay, I told the professor. I'll listen.

He sat down slowly, his knees angled toward me a little.

I'd only known Ruby since the semester started when she became my T.A. She seemed determined and focused and very bright. She was talented, you know, and had been working on some incredible proofs, things you wouldn't expect from a person her age.

His sentences were hard and plain, like he had been polishing them all afternoon.

I never understood what she did here, I said. We never talked about it.

Well ... I don't know how to describe it, what Ruby seemed like today. I suppose I have a hard time reading faces, emotions, you know, the descriptive stuff. I'm more of a numbers person. But she seemed, just—maybe just a little distracted. She stopped by my office to give me some papers she had been working on that she wanted me to check over and then she just left.

What was it?

What do you mean?

The papers. Was it something important?

Ah, um, no. Not really. Just simple things. Some proofs most grad students could do. She was capable of so much more than that. She'd been working on some very interesting stuff lately.

Oh.

I'm sorry.

No, it's fine. I mean, it doesn't matter that it was just regular math.

No, I mean, the whole thing. That she . . .

Right . . .

And then I wished right then that I could gently cry; just cry so very little, politely, humanly.

Outside my mother was screaming at someone, her breath making tiny smoke and steam clouds.

Thank you, I said to the professor.

He nodded his head, put his hands on his knees then leaned back a little, then leaned forward again. He looked at my mother, who was still screaming; then he looked at his feet.

Listen, I . . . When I was twenty my mother did it the same way as Ruby and, I just, well . . . today I've been thinking about it a lot, you know. Probably the most since it happened.

I didn't say anything. Mother was lighting another cigarette. A section of her hair was pushed over her head the wrong way. She turned around and waved at me with one limp little hand, a royal dismissal. She had applied even more lipstick and it rimmed her mouth like ice cream on a toddler. She sucked on a white cigarette.

I'm sorry for that, he said, for saying that. I know it's what people always do, try to tell you they've already dealt with what you're dealing with, trying to tell you how they grieved—I know it doesn't help. I'm sorry. It was just on my mind.

You don't need to be sorry, I said.

We didn't talk for a little while. He put his hand on my shoulder as if he were taking someone else's advice to do so. Then he let it stay there for a moment and then water did come out of my eyes and I felt more appropriate and more human to myself.

When we were children our favorite game was runaway, I said, my voice all phlegm-filled and real. *We'd put our hands under our seat belts and pretend our mother was taking us away.*

The professor put his arms around me and I collapsed into him, making a wet spot on his navy jacket.

5.

Barnacles of the Fuzz

by D. Foy

1.

For punishment, June played her husband, accordion that he was. Of course she had first had to flatten him into that little lump of tidily flexible compartments, what had appeared more difficult than in the end it had proved. *Boom!* She smashed him once on the head with her colossal mallet, and the job was absolute.

2.

On the operating table Franno would flatline four times before they proclaimed him “out of the woods.” They’d have his rib cage open and all of his organs and a goodly portion of his intestines too on the table beside him.

Later he would speak of the wedding he never attended. Mostly those gathered there had got lost in their cups, as goes the wrinkled saying, but there were some who kept their heads, and these were by and large folks, as they also say, who didn’t hit the bottle, codgers and diabetics and regular old teetotalers, not to mention the rugrats and such who had spent the day on their knees beneath the tables, tying peoples’ shoelaces in knots and looking at the shapes of their genitals behind their clothes and in one instance a lady’s koochie that didn’t have any underwear to speak of; it was hairless, with a tattoo of Tigger

from Winnie the Pooh in a cleft a little higher up. Every time Franno looked at June, a faintly serene smile had illuminated her face, one like Venus's there on that giant clamshell with the cherubs and favonian winds. Outside, in the rose garden, a woman he had met once or twice as a child was sitting alone on a bench, crying. The unkindly sky had been overcast, though, now, kindly, it was clearing. There were sparrows.

3.

Franno, Timothy, Gentry, and June were in the ditch. Before marching away on this pollywog safari, Franno had gone into Timothy's room and found him singing to a clutch of dolls. Each doll, the two on hand at least, had a name, the girl doll Frankie, the boy Severine. *Tell me the name of my true lover!* Franno told him their father wouldn't like to catch him like this, he had already caught him like this and told him as much, more than once, a bunch more times really, he didn't want to see it again, goddamn it, son, *it breaks my heart*. Someday, though we don't know it now, nor, for that matter, do they, June will marry Gentry.

Timothy said, "But why?"

"Go get the nets," Franno said. "I'll get the jars."

"But why?" Timothy said.

In the ditch, in the shade of a culvert, each child would recite as though some vulgar incantation the graffiti on the walls.

"Fuck," Gentry said.

"Fuck," Franno said.

"Fuck," Timothy said.

"What does it mean?" June said.

"It's what the toads are doing," Gentry said.

"Fuck," June said.

They made a row of bottles at the top of the ditch, clambered down one embankment and up the next, and began to throw rocks. After a while an old man stepped into the yard against the ditch and told them he had better not catch them messing with his pug. The pug was pretty old too but not old enough that he couldn't hobble through the ivy to bark at the kids.

"My cherries too," said the old man, "or my plums. Go on," he said, "go make trouble somewhere else."

"Up yours," Gentry said.

Timothy had appeared on the driveway slathered up with lipstick, rouge, mascara, and the like, and moreover he had adorned himself with one rhinestone gorget, one pearl earring (clip-on and fake), one blond wig in the style of the icon Marilyn Monroe, and the red leather pumps his mother had on a whim in Capwell's found adorable only to relegate to the dark of her overflowing closet. He was holding a net with a long wire handle. Frankie he had stuffed into his shorts so that only her blond head was peeking walleyed from above the waistband.

"Ooooooo," June had said.

Franno picked one of those spiny pods from the maple tree and hucked it down the street. Gentry snickered.

"You look like one of those ladies on *Saturday Night Live*," he said.

They caught toads, pollywogs, snakes (a garter), mice (one), dragonflies, lizards (bluebellies mainly though also they broke off the tail of an alligator lizard just before it had got into a crack in the rocks), carp (one, a baby), guppies, and lots and lots of crickets. They found eleven empty cans from a twelve pack of Olympia some teenagers had drunk a day or two before, and a whole bunch of cigarette butts, mostly Camel Lights but also a Salem, that was the one with lipstick on it. Plus an apple with two holes carved into it, one on top and one on the side, and some burned up stinky tinfoil, and a bunch of burned up matches. Gentry had a box of matches. Momentarily he would take a toad from the bucket of toads slimy with their own eggs and toss it into the air, whence, he did not know how or why, Timothy would clumsily catch it, his fingers trembling, shortly to see a wick hissing with fire and smoke trailing from the toad's puckered anus. A second later the toad would detonate. A second after that Timothy would find himself slick with guts and brains and little bulging eyes, splintery pieces of shattered bones. He'd still be wearing the blond wig in the style of the icon Marilyn Monroe. Gentry, by the way, had nearly ten packs of firecrackers got from his big brother Harry, who had bought a brick of them off some thugs in Chinatown the week before. June

will not have been there, having been sent home by Franno because they were all supposed to be home by then but Franno didn't want to get in trouble, June would tell their mother they'd be home in time for dinner, everything was fine, they had caught lots of stuff, it was totally, majorly boss.

4.

HALLELUJAH!

Until now, it's been an endless source of wonder why you guys have never given Timothy Donohue a spread in your magazine. I thought he'd either snubbed someone on your staff or failed to grease the proper palm, since you've never even mentioned his name in your events column. Anyway, I've been following this prodigal son since his first shows up in the boondocks of Petaluma/Santa Rosa. First time I saw his stuff (over at Pops's Old Socks, now defunct—bummer), it felt like maybe I'd just opened the Ark of the Covenant or something. But with work like his "Fire Iron," "Dynamite," "Felinus Thaumaturgus," and "Internal Combustion," it's no surprise he's finally gracing the pages of your most excellent publication. In my opinion, there are only one or two others in the genre who can stand by him today, Zokosky and possibly Swihart. Maybe next time around you'll do us all the favor of putting him on the cover and quit wasting copy on the likes of Coop, PIZZ, Shag, Von Franco and the rest of their lowbrow (with a LOWER case "l"!) ilk. Praise be the day, and keep on truckin.

Jose Inagaki

Novato, CA

>> Talk about greasy palms. Sheesh.

5.

The man, wearing a sheer white jumpsuit, shot Timothy's brother twice in the chest, point-blank, then fled on a rickety bike. Witnesses confirm both, the jumpsuit and the daring escape.

6.

In her old age June would confess her inability to fathom the day-mares she had known all those years. She swore she had never loved

Gentry one whit less than she did that day. He was her dreamboat, her hunka chunka hunka, her Pumpatron baby in the Muzak dusk. He always had been, and always would. “That is why I just don’t understand,” she said.

Timothy couldn’t do more as his sister spoke than watch his sugar dissolve into the oily brown of his ten-dollar espresso. And rightly so. From then till now, true love had eluded him like words on a Morbot’s tongue.

“He still webs me gifts,” June would tell him. “Little bottles of exquisitely distilled Cocotabs, opera tickets with seats on the Gravitational Mezzanine—even codes for those new UltraDio Laser Peels and DermaPass Tan-Thrus. However could I have thought of harming him?”

“They’re only just fantasies,” Timothy would say.

“No,” June would say, “but you don’t understand.”

7.

It was most always dark in there, even though the old gal had gas, I guess she didn’t want to pay for the stuff, which I guess I can understand, and I was always just waiting there in the gloom for old Abe Lincoln to come around and spill his guts. I don’t know how I knew all this, I just did, like any memory I can remember right now, like right now I can remember the time me and my pops went out to Sears at the mall and saw all these undercover cops wrestling with a man who my pops said must have shoplifted something while the man’s own son stood back on the walk, kind of trying to hide behind the leaves of those big old plastic looking bushes in the planter by the door. That kind of memory. This time, though, when old Abraham appeared, he told me he was tired of spilling his guts. He said it wasn’t worth it anymore, he was just going to do himself in. He had a pistol there to prove he meant business, too; it was in his hand, right there, a big old revolver-type monster with a six- or eight-inch barrel, big enough to do whatever he wanted to with. Then, instead of me looking at Abraham Lincoln with my own eyes, the eyes of John Wilkes Booth, I mean, I was looking at the both of them from the ceiling of the hallway outside my room. I know that sounds cheesy. I

would change the story if I could, but the point of all this, why I'm putting it down, is that I have to tell it the way I saw it, and that's how I saw it, no matter how cheesy.

8.

As a child, Magritte had seen his mother dragged from a river after having drowned herself among the logs and moss and reeds. The image that remained with Magritte all his life was that of his mother's body, naked save her face, horribly enshrouded by her own tangled dress. Henry Darger had painted nothing but watercolors of naked she-children, some frolicking in meadows, others warring among themselves with hatchets and sticks, primitive bows and arrows. Eric White paints grayscale scenes of holocaustic sadness viewed through the lens of LSD. What majestic visions, do you think, purr beside him when at night he lays his head to rest?

9.

Franno grew up to be a big strong man. He became obsessed with martial arts flicks, a lot of Hong Kong stuff, Bruce Lee mostly, though it's fair to say too he did rather enjoy the bardic loveliness of Akira Kurosawa's sweeping vistas, and the struggles that played out in those wondrously forbidding castles. Also, being a big strong man trained in fighting ways of his own, Franno found himself drawn, as an eye to beauty, to *underdogs*. In his presence, the Fragile Faint-lightlys and Puny McWeaks o' the world need not have feared, for he, Franno, would no sooner see such a one in plight than he was sure to pulverize and crush and rip and tear any such bully who had so unfortunately determined these meek should be lain low, limb from bloody limb, alas and alack, thou villainous fiend, the hero hath arrived.

10.

"Once," June will have said in the year 2042, "I imagined he was a beautiful sculpture carved in ice, a beautiful diving eagle. We were still young then, just after the towers had collapsed. Exquisite delicacies had been arranged all about him, beautiful, lovely morsels really,

bouche de l'homard et crevettes, gougeres avec crème frâiche, caviar osetra. You see? Our guests were having an immensely good time, good gracious, really, the soirée was a tremendous success. But then a wind swept up and destroyed them all, and I became a garden hoe. I hacked and hacked until he lay in pieces, glittering among the dainties."

11.

. . . but a review of Donohue's oeuvre could as easily begin with "Countdown" as it could with "Batrachian Love Nest." On the surface one might suggest that the only correlation between the two is manifested by the crudely imbricated, if not wearisomely tautological, thematics of sex and death. Indeed, where such a claim would not be counted as wholly inaccurate, it could not be helped but to regard it as the product of a certain moral shortsightedness. In "Countdown" we see depicted a smiling and voluptuous seductress whose vagina has been packed to an insupportable degree with a sheaf of dynamite the fuse of which, not incidentally, has been lighted, while within the creamy penumbra of the woman's open thighs a deeper, limb-shaped shadow suggests the presence of an unknown voyeur (here one is reminded of Bouguereau's "The Nymphaeum"). With "Batrachian," on the other hand, the viewer is confronted with the hideousness of a mire of quasi-frogs copulating over a store of ticking bombs. Quite clearly, the mythical implications of each are as resonant as are the religious (e.g., Leda and the Swan, Pasiphaë and the Bull, Exodus 8:1-7, to name but a few). But this is just to start. When one begins to interrogate the Marxist/Feminist repercussions of each in light of the manner with which the entirety of Donohue's work has been operating within a definitive counter-sexual/cultural matrix, one sees . . .

12.

Snapshot #127: haploid disembarks from late-night jitney; haploid fumbles in pockets for jangle of keys; goon emerges from alley with blackjack at the ready; goon pummels haploid thrice on head; goon rifles pockets of KO'd haploid; hero rounds corner; hero lands mighty

blow to ear of goon, powerful kick to liver of goon, awesome knee to teeth of goon, devastating jab to eye of goon, and then, for good measure, doubtless, yet another, albeit doubly powerful, kick to liver of goon; hero carries haploid to tenement, then vanishes into soup of foggy night.

13.

Franno really had grown up to be a big strong man, and yet it wasn't until he had fully recovered and begun giving talks to groups of victims who had survived gunshot wounds, cops and ex-gangbangers and such, that he had been able to record in his diary the dream he swore to have had just minutes after falling to the nightclub's sticky floor. Only it wasn't so much a dream as it was what he had heard so many of those boneheads on shows like *True Stories: Psychics Tell All* or *Tales of the Other Real* call "an alternate reality." His reluctance to grapple with the thing stemmed in part from his disdain for such "jerks." He couldn't remember how many times he had heard someone say, *And then I floated to the ceiling and looked down onto the scene below me. To my surprise, I was staring at myself lying peacefully upon the bed ...* The boobs he saw on these shows were the same boobs who stumbled through the world believing Snapple was "the best stuff on earth" and Wonder Bread the "Greatest." More than once Franno would refer to them as "fucking vampires": Dracula sucked blood from Lucy; they sucked meaning from life. He had spoken of his "experience"—he hated calling it that, but then again there wasn't another word for it—just once, however briefly, to his sister. This, too, plagued him. She never had been able to handle these kinds of things. He remembered her reaction to the scene where Bambi's mother gets whacked by a hunter. For months afterward she insisted on going to the zoo each weekend. She had to see with her own green eyes that the mommy deer were all okay.

14.

I can assure you that this won't be anything like Augustine or Rousseau. It's not a confession. I have nothing to confess. I simply wanted something on paper, to prove that I had done it. Words, not paint.

I don't know. Perhaps I shouldn't have winked at him when I saw him staring. Isn't that what had started it? Or would he have found another reason to do what he did? Either way, he shouldn't have been staring. This is the City. He can't say he hasn't seen enough of *that* before. Or maybe he hasn't. I don't know. We were only kissing. I suppose it's that I wish Franno hadn't been there. Well, that's stupidly obvious. What I mean is, I wish it hadn't been where Franno works. That evil little man.

"You pussy-ass little snow queen," he had said to Jorge. "Why you with that little faggot gringo, anyway, huh man, when you could have a *vato* like me and shit?"

Actually, I'd completely forgotten about Franno, that he was there, at least until the man had begun to run his hands over Jorge's legs and chest and face, not lovingly or sexily, but brutally, with hatred and spleen and, and, I don't know, with just plain *evil*. He had wanted to hurt Jorge, I think, more than he'd wanted to do the same to me.

"Go get your brother," Jorge said, slapping at the man.

Franno was across the room, by the stage. I couldn't call out. The music was too loud and people too many. But he made it easy. At least I had thought he had. He had simply taken the man by his shoulders and led him from the room. I don't know. Perhaps I should've told him, Franno, what the man had said to me, just before Franno whisked him away, when he squeezed my balls the way he did.

"You better run home now, you little faggot-ass bitch. I come back and find you here, you going to be like one dead little faggot."

Perhaps it's because I didn't believe him that I didn't tell Franno. So many people never do what they say.

15.

. . . I opened my door. Across the hall, at a table in an alcove thick with webs and dust, there he sat, sad old Abraham Lincoln. His arm had been blown off. There wasn't even a stump, just a mess of cartilage and muscle and oozing, gluey blood. He heard me open the door and cocked his head. The look of sadness was still there but the nobility was gone. It was the saddest, most pitiful look I had ever seen, just this shy of weeping maybe, or maybe unbearable shame.

Or maybe it was both. He gazed at me that way for a moment. His cheeks were empty and dark, and so were his eyes, the air was still, the hall was silent as light or dark. I was helpless to touch him, even to reach out or speak. His arm was weeping blood, down the shirt that minutes before had been crisp and white. And he never spoke, only turned back to the alcove. In his hand he held a broken vase. It was full of wine gone bad, you could smell it there in the dryness, potent and rank. Then old Abraham took up the vase and rammed its shards into his mouth. His face split open, I could see the wine spill out and mingle with the blood from his wounds, the ones he'd made and the ones he'd had. He didn't stop, either. His arm had just been blown off, but he didn't care, he was still alive, a failure it must have seemed, he just kept on drinking. The blood and the wine continued to flow, it was endless, he wouldn't look at me, he just kept on drinking from his broken vase, sad as a man who'd never made the grade. Was I me, John Wilkes Booth, or was I him, sad old Abraham Lincoln? I couldn't tell, then. Maybe I was both . . .

16.

The ditch narrowed down as it filed into the culvert where Franno and Timothy and Gentry and June had gone to rest after so much time in the sun. In the culvert there were little pockets of dirt and sand on either side of the stream. They were totting up their catch, comparing what they had caught to who had caught it. Timothy of course had caught the most, the mouse, for instance, and the lizards, and the single baby carp. He was wearing the wig, platinum blond, in the style of Marilyn Monroe. The Fourth of July was only days away. Gentry had wanted to go back to the row of bottles they had made and blow them up with firecrackers. But it was nice in the shade, cool with a breeze, and the others were so tired.

“You’re going to get it when Dad sees you,” Franno had said to Timothy.

He hadn’t said any such thing all day long, he hadn’t even thought to say it, there was too much to see and do, the way it is when you’re a kid, when it’s summertime and everything’s sunny and warm and there’s soda in the fridge and cake in the cupboard and pillows on

the couch where you watch TV, *All in the Family* and *Adam 12* and *Wild Kingdom* and *Starsky and Hutch*, when you're full of homemade enchiladas and rice and beans and Mom and Dad are in the yard or maybe just dozing in a chair with a magazine on their lap and wine on the table beside them.

"He looks like one of those fake ladies on *Saturday Night Live*," Gentry said. He wasn't looking at Timothy, just staring into the stream. "He looks weird," he said.

Timothy had a tree frog lying on its back on his palm, stroking its belly with his pinkie. The frog's throat was gently pulsing, like maybe its heart was there and not its breath.

"I think he's pretty," said June.

"How would you know?" Gentry said.

"I just would," she said.

"Maybe she would," Franno said. "How would *you* know?"

Timothy slipped the frog back under the netting they had stretched across the bucket. "But I am," he said, and you could see he believed it. "I'm pretty."

6.

Basslines

by Adam Wilson

My brother and I are in the backyard. I am in a lawn chair and he is in a wheelchair. He's wearing those leather gloves with the fingers cut off that make him look homeless. He says they're convenient. It won't be long before snow covers all this shit up. Brian passes the joint.

"Tell me what you make of this," I say.

Brian looks at me, then back at the leaves. The leaves are the same color as his beard. It feels like a revelation. It's the kind of thing that seems interesting when you're high, but isn't. "Make of what?" Brian says.

I can't remember. I'm thinking about beards: bushy ones, trimmed ones, Abe Lincolns.

"Fuck," I say. "I don't know."

"How'd it go with that girl the other night?"

"Oh yeah, that's what I was going to tell you about. Tell me what you make of this."

Brian smiles. He likes it when I fuck up. "Shoot," he says.

"So we've eaten, and the date's been okay so far. I haven't offended her or anything. She's done most of the talking, and I'm just trying not to stare at her tits. She's cute, though, and I've made her laugh a couple times, nothing big, but, you know." He nods.

"So dinner's over, we're working on the wine, and I feel like it's getting to that point in the night where she's gonna want me to

tell her something profound about my life in order to make her feel like we've bonded emotionally so when we fuck it won't just be, you know, cheap or something."

"Okay," Brian says.

"So she says, 'Tell me a story' in this kind of seductress voice. Now normally this is when I start bullshitting about Mom dying, or about some chick that broke my heart."

"Should have told her you had a brother in a wheelchair. That would have got her."

"Not like I haven't used that one before," I say.

We both laugh; we know it's true. "But that's the point," I say. "I'm sick of all that. It's like a movie I've seen too many times."

"So what did you say?"

"Well, I start telling her about this guy I met at work. He's a weird dude. He wears this trenchcoat that's entirely decorated with patches. You know, like, of bands and shit, peace signs. Those type of patches. Iron-ons. His whole trenchcoat is covered in them. There isn't an inch of space on the thing. Now he's working on covering the whole inside with patches too, but he's having trouble finding enough new patches. They all have to be different."

"So every couple of months he comes by the store to see if we have any new patches in. We never do, but he still comes by all the time just to check."

"Anyways, the first time he came in I thought he was real strange. After all, he's wearing this coat with all the patches. Aside from that too, he's one ugly dude. Seriously: acne, big-ass glasses, greasy hair. But you know, lots of weirdos come into my store, so I don't think much of it. Anyways, the first time he comes in, he asks about the patches and I tell him we're out. Instead of leaving he introduces himself and hangs around for a while."

"So get to the point," Brian says, although I know he wants me to keep going. He doesn't have shit else to do. "You get laid or what?"

"Hold on," I say, "let me tell you about this guy."

"You never get laid," Brian says.

I get laid sometimes, not often. Brian never gets laid.

"So he's still in the store, and he has these huge headphones on,

you know, like the kind they have in recording studios? He asks if I want to hear something he wrote. I'm bored, and he's the only customer, so I say okay.

"So I listen to the CD, in his headphones, and it's just this repeating four-note bassline with some weird effect on it. I don't know what you call it. Like the bass is going underwater or something. That's it. Just this bassline. No other instruments or anything."

"How long did you listen for?"

"Well I was trying to be polite, so maybe a minute, two."

"Right."

"So anyway, he keeps coming back every few weeks with new shit to listen to. And every time it's roughly the same thing: basslines. But, you know, I try to be nice."

"So you told all this to the chick?"

"Sarah."

"Who's Sarah?"

"The chick."

"Oh, right."

"But the story's not over yet. Listen, this goes on for a few months or whatever, maybe he's come by four or five times by this point."

"Okay."

"So one day he shows up and he's got this backpack. It's morning and the store's empty. He opens it up and there are like fifteen CDs that he's made. Says they're his albums. They're pretty homemade looking, but each one has its own cover art. And not just simple drawings or some shit, I'm talking about serious cover art. Like this guy must have spent days drawing all these covers. And the drawings are raw too, all sorts of evil shit, devils, goblins, skulls."

"So I'm sitting there admiring, kind of in awe, right, and he takes out one of the CDs and tells me he made it for me. His *Greatest Hits*. He wants me to listen to it with him, see what I think."

"Sounds like somebody has a little crush on you," Brian says.

"So I put the CD in the stereo because I don't want to break the guy's heart, and I'm kind of wondering if maybe it won't just be basslines this time. CD starts, we listen: basslines. Same shit as always. But whatever, I leave it on, kind of space out. CD keeps going, ten minutes, twenty minutes, whatever. Some customers come in,

and I want to turn it off but I don't. Eventually the customers leave, more come in, the whole time the CD is still rocking. We're talking maybe fifteen tracks so far of just bass. And all the basslines are basically the same. Like a tiny bit different, but basically the same. The store empties out again, and I'm getting restless and a little frustrated, so I say to him, real softly, gently-like, 'These basslines are awesome, man, but have you ever thought about adding any other instruments, or maybe getting a band together, even just putting some of the basslines together to make a song?' And he just gives me this look; stares right at me as if I've told him I fuck his mom up the ass or something. 'No,' he tells me, 'this is what I do, these are the songs.' So now I feel kind of bad, and I just agree with him, tell him I don't know what the fuck I'm talking about.

"We keep listening, another two, three tracks. It's been about an hour at this point and we're down to the last track. I'm looking at the CD case and I notice that this song doesn't have a normal name. It's just a bunch of symbols, like how people swear in comic strips, you know what I'm talking about? He says he wants to show me something. He takes out his wallet and pulls out this little piece of paper, must be folded like eight times. He unfolds that shit, and on it there's all these symbols, Greek letters, runes, I don't know what the fuck they are. I think pi was in there somewhere. 'This,' he says, 'is what this song's about, 'and it's the meaning of life.'"

"Still basslines," Brian says.

"Still basslines," I say.

"But listen. So he tells me this, and then he folds up the paper again and puts it in his pocket, and then he takes off the trenchcoat. He drops the coat to the floor like he's a stripper stepping out of a silk kimono. I don't say a word. He takes off his shirt, lifts it over his head, dramatically tosses it. I'm not fucking around. He turns around. His back is like acne city, but he's got the symbols tattooed across the entire thing—swear to God—burned into his flesh. And he stands there with his arms spread, and the bassline just thumps."

Brian doesn't seem surprised by the ending to my story and I'm disappointed. I feel something wet on my neck and think it might be a snowflake. The tips of Brian's fingers are white from cold.

"I think it's snowing," I say.

“Yeah, man.”

I watch his hands as he maneuvers his chair around and moves toward the house. The joint has been put out, but our breath is visible like smoke.

“You fuck her?” Brian asks without turning around.

“Nah,” I say. “I didn’t feel like it.”

I do not tell him that after dinner we took a cab back to her place. That we fucked each other’s brains out. That I couldn’t sleep. That I woke her in the middle of the night and felt the urge to tell her about my brother, his atrophied legs, or the way when I bathe him he closes his eyes and hums. Instead I whispered, “It was nothing, go back to sleep,” and waited, watched the ceiling fan revolve until her breath became gentle and I could slip on my jeans and disappear.

Brian reaches the house. I step in front and open the door, holding it until he’s inside. I press my palm against the glass of the sliding door so it makes a print. Then I follow.

7.

Because You Asked: an answer in eight parts

by Karon Luddy

1. Midnight Shopper

Your feet are tired from waiting tables all day, but it's late Friday night, your favorite time to shop at the super-duper Walmart. You find a couple of things you need to try on for size. You walk to the fitting room. No attendant. The stalls are empty. You walk down the corridor until you reach number seven and enter it. You read the new sign tacked on the shiny gray wall: *Shoplifting is not a prank, or a joke. It is a crime. Even for a first offense, you can serve jail time and pay fines up to \$2000. So please, don't incriminate yourself. It will haunt you for the rest of your life.*

You struggle to zip the distressed, size nine Faded Glory jeans. Damn birth control pills are making you fat, but babies are preposterous. When you look into the mirror and see a twenty-seven-year-old bloated babe, you wince. But sex is still your best weapon in your ongoing battle with the Dick Squad, which you usually win, especially since you lowered your sights good and low. Rob thinks you're letting yourself go to the dogs already. You met him three months ago, but it feels like a couple of lifetimes. He teases you about going to cosmetology school. Fuck him and all his uncles. One fine shimmering day, you will be a great hair artist.

You pull the purple sleeveless shell from the hanger, slip it over

your blond hair. Your auburn roots are two inches long. Being blond hasn't improved diddly damn squat. The purple shirt shows off the red tongue on your Rolling Stones tattoo. You turn your tattooed arm toward the mirror, look over your shoulder, and wink at yourself. You rip the tags from the shirt and jeans, stuff them in your pocket.

You grab the hanger with the Tweety Bird nightshirt—a gift for your daughter's birthday—you can afford that—it's only \$8.92.

As you turn to leave the dressing room, you notice the last sentence on the *Shoplifting is not a prank* sign: *It will haunt you for the rest of your life*. You grab your Cosmos Café ink pen, and write in big block letters: IF YOU GET CAUGHT. Then you waltz with the Tweety Bird shirt all the way to the checkout. You pull out your last ten dollars and pay the oily-haired cashier. He hands you two shiny quarters. On your way out, you drop them in the vending machine. An icy can of Walmart cola clangs to the bottom. You pop the top and guzzle it, pretending it tastes like the real thing.

2. Daughter

What mothers don't know, they sure can't tell you. And since your mama kept what she *did* know to herself, well then, Little Pilgrim, you really got screwed. She never talked about herself, what she thought, what she wanted. She quoted the Bible like she wrote it. She prayed like Jesus in the wilderness.

The word strong comes to mind. The word enigma comes to mind. The word facade comes to mind. The word frozen comes to mind. The word martyr comes to mind. The word trapped comes to mind. The word unfucked comes to mind.

Admit it. Your mama is a cave of imponderable desires.

What she didn't know then and perhaps never will:

- 1.** Sex is the cake, not the icing.
- 2.** God's love ain't enough.
- 3.** If it's anywhere, Heaven is Here.
- 4.** The neighbors don't give a shit.
- 5.** *Blasphemer*

God adores transvestites and the inventor of the donut. He marvels at little girls and wishes he were a boy. His favorite tree is loblolly pine. He bites his toenails. He hates like hell being an orphan. He's proud of thumbs and long sharp thorns, but mourns every detached foreskin. He loathes bananas and snorts angel dust. He's afraid of submarines and zebras. He regrets inventing sorrow, but waxes rhapsodic about the perfect weakness of gravity. Plus he really digs brunettes. You know the *SECRETS OF GOD*. Go ahead—tell every damn one.

4. Exhibitionist

If there's a gene for exhibitionist, you have it. From an early age, you loved to shock people. That's why you begged for those tap dancing lessons. If you make enough noise, some damn body will notice you. That's all you ever wanted. Your mama, God bless her, wanted you to be a saint or a preacher, but your talents veered off in the opposite direction. You make shit up right out of the air. You see colors around people. Your daddy has that chartreuse neon glow and your mama shimmers with lavender light. Their colors look like shit together. You don't understand why certain people are attracted to each other like helpless creatures. Carl Jung called it the anima and animus. You had to read that chapter three times before you understood the esoteric theory—that each of us carries an ideal image of the opposite sex in our psyches—that waits like a stick of dynamite to be lit by someone who resembles it. Just like your mama and daddy. *Kaboom!* Day and Night. Field and Plow. Moon and Sun. Your mama a fresh ream of paper, your daddy a bottle of indelible ink.

5. Sous Chef

Your Recipe for Sorrow:

- 1 vile clock
- 2 pounds of regret
- 1 secret revealed
- 4 petrified dreams
- 3 shitty smiles
- 8 hateful words

- 1 biting sentence
- 2.5 paltry excuses
- 10 liters of sweet lies

Stir all the ingredients. Let dough rise for three days. Spread it out on a giant cookie sheet. Sprinkle with sea salt. Bake until crunchy. Crumble into pieces. Fling it to the yawning crows.

6. Daddy's Girl

For twenty years you've been a poet, but you've never written a single poem about your deepest, ugliest, most unacknowledged phantom—your dear old man, braver than the bottle—stronger than nicotine's ugly grip—the Big Star in the Silent Movie of Your Life—the man who never hugged you, who drunkenly fell down and often couldn't get up, who cursed in his sleep, who never saw your despair because he was too damn intoxicated with his own. By the time you were born, he was a quart-of-whiskey-sad daddy, who lived in a pup tent pitched in Hell. Go ahead. Admit it. You owe him your poetic license.

7. Dreamer

All night long you committed adultery with an old lover as gorgeous as he was fifteen years ago when you fell in love. You couldn't help it: his desire shocking—your hunger shameless—your tongues like wicks of candles burning into each other. You were in an unknown bed, in an unknown room, in an unknown hotel, in an unknown city—hell, it wasn't even in this world.

Oh, the smell of lover's love being made like patchouli—two fine glowing bodies praising God and the eternal fucking moment. As in life, there were intruders: aunts, uncles, his wife, your husband, sniffing around the bed as if you were invisible. I think you were, praise God—because they didn't stop you. You clung to each other, his sweat like warm honey you licked from his chest.

8. Daughter

Do you remember how you crawled under that huge blue bed and preached fiery sermons to your congregation of dust bunnies? Do you

remember how you pleaded with your mom when she drove too fast? Your red hair sprung from your head like fresh cedar shavings. Your bright morning face clouded by worried eyes as you admonished her *Slow down, Mommy.*

You were the first miracle in that small town hell of hers. A bubble of perfection she endeavored to keep from bursting when you came into contact with all the sharp objects flying around her. Your bubble never popped. The sun forced its rays through your resilient membrane revealing your spectacular colors while the wind whispered your secret names: Yellow maiden, Purple poet, Green girl, Red surprise, Orange dream, White peacock, Black butterfly. Once and for all, you need to set the record straight. The stories about how you came into this world have been so *poorly* told that even *now* you don't understand that, from the moment you popped out of her womb, you have been a bridge—never an obstacle—the final blue answer to the question, *What is love?*

8.

Before the Trip

by Adetokunbo Abiola

As soon as I came out of my house at 6 Agho Street on the March morning, someone shouted in my direction: “Hold the debtor! Don’t let her run away. Hold the debtor!” Without looking at the person, I knew it was Gomo. In the night of the day before, he sent a note through my sister, Janet, saying that I’d borrowed money from him six months ago, money meant to treat the burns on my face and arms, but I did not want to pay it back. What did I think he was? A Father Christmas? He would get his money from me in the morning even if all the people in Benin City pleaded that he should leave me alone.

After reading the letter, I tore it, and Janet asked why. Did I not know that, when Gomo was like this, he would carry out his threats? I told her: “Gomo cannot do more than a harmless rat. By the time he comes, I’ll be at the bus stop for the journey to Abuja.” I told her that Gomo, like the drunkard he was, would be too busy sleeping when I began my journey and that Janet should forget him. Unfortunately, Gomo surprised me, as he woke much earlier from his usual drunken slumber. And I knew all the prayers to Jesus Christ would not make him give me more time to pay my debts.

Despite this, I decided not to run and headed toward the bus stop, about eight hundred meters away. Gomo, shouting at the top of his voice, caught up with me before I covered ten meters. By this time, some of the women living on Agho Street, attracted by Gomo’s voice,

trooped out of their houses. Mama Sarah, a woman who owned the provision store next door, ran toward us. Mama Johnson tied her wrapper around her waist and came out to the street. Though men did not come out, some of them were disturbed by the scene. One man opened his mouth so wide that his chewing stick fell out of his mouth to the ground. As he bent to pick it, I turned to Gomo.

"I'll pay you when I come back from Abuja," I told him.

"That's been your story for the past six months!" Gomo shouted. "Is that what I'll tell Mama Gbenga when she comes for her money? I want my money now."

Mama Sarah told him to have pity on me; after all, Mama Gbenga had traveled, and I never used to owe money before I was wounded and disfigured by a kerosene explosion two years ago. Mama Johnson told him he should have the milk of human kindness and allow me to go on my trip.

"Will the milk of human kindness save me from Mama Gbenga?" Gomo shrieked.

"So you don't want to forgive and forget?" asked Mama Sarah. "All right, we'll see."

Before I knew it, the women grabbed Gomo. Mama Sarah pulled at the belt of his trousers, swearing, demanding the money for the bottle of beer he bought on credit for his girlfriend. Mama Johnson pulled at his dirty shirt and said: "Where is the money for the stick of cigarette you bought from me two weeks ago?" As they dragged Gomo from one side of the road to the other, he loosened his grip on my black blouse, and I pushed his hand away.

While this happened, I hoped more people would not waylay me. Gomo was not the only person I owed since the kerosene explosion, and the fear of harassment kept me on edge every time. Even now, if a dog barked too loudly, I jumped, thinking one of my creditors had come to say, "Abuja, where is my money?" If I heard a knock at my door, I scurried under the bed, thinking the landlord had come to collect his rent, which I could not pay because I'd lost my job over the burns.

These hassles frequently angered me. We had bought adulterated kerosene from government filling stations. Then it had exploded,

scarred our faces, made us lose our jobs, and turned us into paupers. Government officials promised to help us; instead they abandoned us, leaving us to fend for ourselves. Have they done the right thing by allowing us to live like sewage rats?

The Abuja issue came six months ago. Our leader, a man called Eldorado, told us that God had at last answered our prayers, that some doctors from America wanted to carry out surgery on our burns in Abuja. We would not pay anything; it was free. Since then, I became hopeful that my scars would go away. When the boys in Agho Street laughed at me over my scarred face and arms, I gloated, saying I would soon look better than they did, and that everything would be corrected in Abuja.

I spoke so much about Abuja that the area boys changed my name from Mabel to Abuja. I first learned this a month ago. As I walked to the bus stop for a ride to town, one of my most stubborn creditors, a man called Tolu Player, stopped me. Before I could speak, he waved his hands as though he did not want to listen to more stories. “That’s why they’re calling you Abuja. I don’t want to hear about any surgery. Just give me my two hundred naira.” Another of my creditors, Oviedo, a woman selling secondhand brassieres at the nearby New Market, came to meet me at home, and said, “Abuja, where is my money?” The day for the journey to Abuja had come, but I was having problems.

As I hurried down the street, pulling away from Gomo and the women harassing him, I struggled to overcome my disbelief I could catch the Abuja-bound bus. People trooped into the street as though they were ants coming out of their anthills, and many of them were my creditors. Any of them could stop me and say, “Hey! Abuja, where is my money?” or say that they wanted to use it to pay the second-term school fees of their son or hire a band for the second burial of their great grandmother, wasting the time I could use to catch the bus.

There was another reason for the doubts that crept into my mind. I was so anxious not to miss the Abuja bus that I woke by three at night, staring at the ceiling of my room till five, growing weak from lack of adequate sleep. When Janet came and saw me, she said that my

eyes were as swollen as a frog's and my hands shook as though I suffered from fever. I told her I was all right. But as the minutes passed, weakness overtook me, and pains from the burns on my face and arms overwhelmed me, making me fall asleep again. When I woke up, Janet, who returned from morning prayers at a church nearby, said it was seven, and I knew it would be difficult catching the Abuja bus.

But I could not afford missing it. If I did, Janet would call me a careless fool. Was it because she provided me with three square meals daily that I did not find it necessary to cure myself, start work, and begin feeding myself again? How could I afford missing the only real opportunity for cure to my burns? If my best friend, Agnes, heard I missed the bus, she would say, "Ah, ah, Abuja, how can you allow this to happen?" I was in hot soup. My creditors would say I was careless, and they would no longer have pity on me. My fellow tenants, if they heard, would say the witches that caused the kerosene explosion in the first place still dogged my life, and that I suffered from "home trouble."

I was inclined toward believing the last view. My father had taught me that when a woman sneezed, a witch was behind it. I believed him. Were it not so, how did it come about that I bought the killer kerosene when so many other people purchased the original one? Was it not because a witch put a spell on me? And now, on the day I was to go to Abuja for surgery, I was overwhelmed by fatigue because I had not slept long enough and had to sleep again. Was it not because my enemies wanted me not to travel? As I walked up the street, I wondered whether it was possible to overcome the witches on this all-important day.

While these thoughts troubled me, I looked up the road and saw Tolu Player. As soon as I spotted him, I was filled with panic. Why should he appear on the day I wanted to travel? At the same time, I was furious. How long would I continue to shake like a cold fowl when I saw my creditors on the streets of Benin City? Was this not why I must travel, no matter what happened? And a little fighting spirit flowed into me.

When Tolu Player stopped in front of me, he scowled, and I knew at once he wanted to ask for his two hundred naira and would not

take no for an answer. His scowl was so frightful, Mama Sarah, had she seen it, would have asked: "Why are you frowning as if an ant has bitten your face?" His shirt looked rough and threadbare, the kind the small boys in Agho Street called Okrika, the kind my former boyfriend, Cletus, would wear "over his dead body." Tolu's pair of shoes was old and dusty, as though dust settled on them after he trekked tens of kilometers. Had Agnes seen him, she would have asked why he always trekked on the road and could not board a bus once in a while. Was he the only one in Benin City who did not have money?

To make matters worse, Tolu was not only a debtor but also never paid his debts. He once owed Mama Sarah three hundred naira, money owed for the bottle of beer he bought for his girlfriend. When Mama Sarah asked him for it, he said he would pay her the next day. When the next day arrived, he promised to pay the next one. Exasperated after six months, Mama Sarah shouted at him: "Will tomorrow tomorrow never end?" That was how Tolu acquired the nickname "Tomorrow Tomorrow Never End." Even as he stood in front of me, I was not sure he had paid Mama Sarah's debt.

Staring at me, he cleared his voice.

"Where's my money, Abuja?" he asked.

"I told you I'll pay you when I come back from my surgery operation."

Before I could stop him, he grabbed my hand, twisted it, and removed the bag I hung on my shoulder, pushing me out of the way.

"When you come back from Abuja, come and take your bag."

I grabbed his shirt and shouted: "Give me my bag! Give me my bag!"

"What is happening there?" Mama Sarah, who still held Gomo's trousers, hollered.

I told her that Tolu had seized my bag because I hadn't paid him his money. Leaving Gomo to Mama Johnson, Mama Sarah headed toward me and Tolu, who struggled to push me away as soon as he heard Mama Sarah's voice. Succeeding, he took to his heels, heading up the street. But he did not see a cement block in his way, and he tripped over it, shouting as he crashed to the dusty street.

Groaning, he got to his feet. Dust stained the side of his face and

left arm, and he looked like a dirty masquerade. His shirt was also stained by dust, and its top right pocket was torn. He staggered on his feet when Mama Sarah grabbed him by the belt of his trousers.

“Where’s my three hundred naira?” she demanded. “I want it now.”

“Why are you doing this to me, Mama Sarah?”

Just then someone shouted on the street: “That’s him! Tomorrow Tomorrow Never Ends!”

Turning, I looked up the road and saw two men run toward us, shouting at the top of their voices. I knew one of them, a man the area boys on Agho Street called the Leader. Though he had no job, he drove a sleek Mercedes and always seemed to be in money. It was rumored that he was the leader of a ruthless moneylending group operating in the area. Also, he owned a dog named Bingo, a fearsome-looking animal that barked anytime I returned home late at night, only restrained from jumping at me by the gate locked against it. As the Leader and his friend reached us, Bingo bounded down the street, tail wagging, his leash trailing on the ground. Seeing the dog, I shifted away from Mama Sarah and Tolu.

“You can run but you can never hide,” the Leader said to Tolu.

“Give me more time,” Tolu told him. “I’ll pay the money.”

The Leader turned to Bingo and picked up the leash.

“Get him!” he commanded.

Bingo barked at Tolu, and fear gripped me. Had I heard such a bark when I returned home at night, I would never have come late again. The big dog lunged in Tolu’s direction, and the debtor cried, held out a hand against the dog, and dropped my traveling bag to a nearby patch of grass. Mama Sarah had left him since she saw the dog. She now jumped over a gutter, almost falling, and disappeared into the courtyard of the bungalow opposite us, shouting at the top of her voice. Mama Johnson ran after her friend, holding the end of her wrapper with one hand to keep it from falling to the street. One man ran down the street, yelling Bingo wanted to make a meal of Tolu.

But the dog did not get to Tolu. The Leader pulled back the leash while it jumped, and Tolu leaped away. Getting to his knees, he

pleaded he would get the money that very afternoon. A woman in the next street owed him and promised to pay by twelve. The Leader would get it immediately after, and he should forgive Tolu for not paying as it would not happen again.

“Get his shirt, Gatecrasher!” the Leader said to his companion. “When he pays his money he’ll get it back!”

Gatecrasher gave a wolfish grin and closed in on his prey. Had Janet seen his chest, she would have said, “That’s the chest of a wrestler.” Gatecrasher’s arms were big, and his biceps rippled with muscles. Gatecrasher looked like the kind of men found lurking around street corners and seedy drinking joints. He grabbed Tolu by the arm and wanted to kick his legs off the ground. Tolu dodged, flailed his hands, begging, saying he would pay the money in the afternoon.

“Kneel down!” Gatecrasher roared.

When Tolu hesitated, Gatecrasher clenched his fist and raised it in the air, aiming to smash it down the debtor’s head, but Tolu pleaded. He would get the money without fail. Still raising his fist in the air, Gatecrasher ordered him to remove his shirt and put it in his palm immediately. But I did not want to witness more of this. My bag lay on the sand five meters from me, so I ran to it, grabbed it, and sprinted up the street. Bingo barked, and Tolu yelled from Gatecrasher’s blow, but I did not stop, dashing toward the nearest street corner.

By this time, the sun had climbed a quarter of its way up the sky, and I felt the beads of sweat that broke out on my face. Worried about the sun, I quickened my footsteps, noting only a little breeze blew, unlike at dawn when it blew strongly. As I turned a corner and stepped into a new street, I caught a whiff of iodine in the air. I feared the smell because it caused me to gasp, and I hurried down the street, intent on getting to the bus stop as quickly as possible. But when I got to the middle of the street, I frowned. Oviedo, the woman who sold secondhand brassieres to women living in Agho Street, marched toward me.

An inner voice told me to run, that I stood the chance of getting to Abuja if this woman did not stop me. I was about to run, but another voice said I should not risk it, that I was without my usual strength. Who knew what would happen if I ran? Perhaps I might collapse to

the road, canceling the trip altogether, leaving me at the mercy of people like Oviedo, Tolu Player, and Gomo permanently. I decided not to run, to risk facing Oviedo, who stopped in front of me.

A very fat woman in her midforties, Oviedo was a legendary figure in Agho Street. People rumored that she'd sat on her husband during a fight and the poor man could not stand up after the incident. He had to be rushed to the hospital where doctors revived him. Another account said that he'd stood up after the fight, but he began to sweat, farting as though his wife's weight had punctured his internal organs. Still another woman, giving her account of the incident, said that Oviedo had taken him to the hospital after the fight and told him: "Next time you disobey me, I'll beat you, sit on you, and you'll never stand up again." But one thing was clear in all the accounts: Oviedo had beaten her husband, she had sat down on him, and he could not get up. It was rumored that she hated people referring to the issue.

At first, she did not see me, and she spoke to herself as she lumbered up the street, abusing someone who owed her and refused to pay the debt, that she would sit on her and she would not get up. Looking to my side of the street, she saw me, and she hardened her face. I felt like running again, not wanting the massive woman to sit on me, but I felt I could not risk it, so I stopped and faced her.

"Where's the money, Abuja?" she demanded.

"Let me come back, I'll give it to you."

"Come back when?" she roared. "Never! You must pay me now, or I'll sit on top of you."

She veered toward me, and I shouted. It attracted people who sat in the courtyard of a nearby bungalow, and one man stood up, jumped over the gutter beside his chair, and came toward us. He pleaded with Oviedo that she should sympathize with me. Did she not know that if she sat on me I could choke to death? Did she think she could sell secondhand brassieres to the women living in the area again if I died? Oviedo asked him: "If I leave her, will you pay her debt?" When the man did not answer, Oviedo told him to leave her alone or she would sit on him as well.

As the exchange went on, a small crowd, attracted by it, stood a few meters from us, silent. Joe, the local wit, stood in the crowd,

making fun of Oviedo. "Leave them alone," he told her. "Do you want to send them to the hospital?"

"Are you talking to me?" Oviedo asked.

"No," said Joe. "I'm talking to the fat woman who sits on people."

"I'll teach you to stop interfering in other peoples' business," Oviedo said with anger and headed toward him. But she stepped on a slippery pond in the way, staggered, and fell down, staining her white lace blouse and wrapper. The crowd laughed, Joe's voice sounding above the rest. Angered, Oviedo swore under her breath and stood up from the pond, beating her dress.

"This will teach you to stop sending people to the hospital," Joe said to her.

Yelling, Oviedo stepped out of the pond and ran toward Joe, people scattering in all directions. One man's cap fell off his head as he ran, but he did not stop to pick it from the ground, fearing that Oviedo would pounce on him if he did. Joe took off up the street, yelling that Oviedo wanted to sit on him when he'd done nothing, and was it now a law that she should harass innocent people?

As Joe ran away, I glanced at the sun. It had climbed farther up the sky, its heat increasing. Already, the surface of the burns on my hands was swollen; if I did not leave the sun, they would crack and blood could seep out of the wound. If blood appeared, it would not cease flowing, and I might as well forget about the journey, since it would drip all the way to Abuja, discomfiting me and causing nausea to everyone in the bus through its smell. To make matters worse, the morning air was still, and I found it difficult to breathe. If I did at all, I smelled iodine, which meant my condition was desperate. I checked my time—thirty minutes to ten. If I did not move now, I was in danger of losing the bus.

Anger over my situation flowed over me once more. Why should government allow people like us to buy adulterated kerosene from its fuel stations, making us suffer from its explosion? Were we the ones who adulterated the kerosene or owned the petrol stations? Why would government officials say on the radio and television that the victims were taken care of, that they had not been abandoned and left to suffer? Were they taking care of me when I had to borrow money from a Shylock like Oviedo so I would not die from my wounds?

I knew we'd been abandoned because no one wanted to take blame for selling the kerosene. When we met the governor, he had asked us whether we were sure we'd bought the adulterated kerosene from the petrol stations. At the petrol stations, the owners said that we hadn't bought the kerosene from them, that we'd gotten it from sharp roadside traders who mixed kerosene and petrol together in order to make quick profit. They were the ones to blame for our troubles and we should go and complain to them. One petrol station owner even said: "You people should be punished for patronizing touts. You're all enemies of progress!"

At meetings with government officials, we would tell them, "We're suffering." But they would say—especially the chairman of the explosion victims' task force, a man we called Sufferhead—that they were suffering too, and had not been paid their salaries for three months. They could not pay the school fees of their children and found it difficult eating three square meals a day. Their landlords visited them the previous day for rent and threatened to throw their properties to the streets if they did not pay before the end of the week. Their wives had lost their jobs just the day before and they did not know how they could cope with family expenses.

We were also abandoned by many people living in Agho Street. When I asked for money from a few of them who were not money-lenders, they would shake their heads, sigh, and begin to tell stories. They could not do much, I should know, because they were not government people, who had no problems with their children's school fees, ate three square meals a day, and generally lived off the fat of the land. These people were all corrupt and selfish. A revolution organized by good people should come and flush the rats into the sea.

And that is the summary of my story in the past two years—until Eldorado, our chairman, told us that some American doctors wanted to treat all of us in Abuja free of charge. The American doctors, thanks to Obama, would even give us stipends for the exercise. But now the Abuja trip was in danger, due to events I did not foresee a day back.

As I hurried to the bus stop, I wondered why I was not yet there, something that seemed so easy a day ago. I remembered how, when

Gomo appeared just as I got out of my house, my inner voice told me to run, and how I'd disobeyed the voice, thinking of the pains from my burns and fatigue. I recalled how Tolu Player stopped in front of me and the voice told me to run at once and I did not. And I remembered how, when fat Oviedo appeared and asked for her money, I looked at her like a fool because I feared to take to my heels.

At that moment, I felt the intense heat of the sun on my burns, and I glanced at my hands. They were more red than they ever were, and if I wasted any more time in the sun blood would seep out of them. It might mean good-bye to Abuja and more of the rat race with Oviedo, Tolu Player, Gomo and the others. I was convinced this could happen when I smelled more iodine and felt my stomach heave. If it got to be too much, I would have to sit down under a shade somewhere so I wouldn't faint, meaning I would waste more time.

And then I thought of what my father told me—when a woman sneezed, a witch was behind it. I knew this was at the back of my mind, weakening my resolve to solve the situation. But when the inner voice told me to run, was it a witch telling me to stand? If I said it was to the small boys living on our street, will they not ask, "Did a witch put a wedge between your legs?" I remembered when Oviedo appeared and I could have run but did not; was it a witch that whispered into my ears I should not run? If I told Agnes it was a witch, would she not ask, laughing, whether a witch had tied a piece of rope around my ankles?

Thinking about this, I checked my watch and found I had ten minutes left to get to the bus stop. If Gomo, Oviedo, Tolu Player, or any other creditor arrived, I vowed to run because I suspected it was the only way out. After making this vow, I turned the corner into the road leading to the bus stop but stopped. Gomo stood twenty meters down the street.

Sixty meters behind him, I saw the bus taking us to Abuja parked under a mango tree, but I knew Gomo could intersect my path before I get to the vehicle, so I decided to be cautious.

"I knew you'll pass here," Gomo told me. "That's why I came to stand here."

He looked terrible. Even though he constantly harassed me over

his money, I was shocked by his appearance. I wanted to ask him, with a straight face: "Gomo! Who beat you like this?" But I did not; instead, I stared at him. His torn green shirt revealed a chest stained by caked mud and charcoal, making him look no better than a madman. Had it not been that I knew him, and was desperate to catch the bus, I would have turned back and taken to my heels, shouting that people should save me from a madman. His trousers were stained by sand and dust as though he'd fallen into a pond, or rather, as if Mama Sarah and Mama Johnson pushed him into a gutter. He reminded me of the pig that came to the back of our yard, grunting, foraging through the yam peeling, rubbish, and rotted plants we dumped there. The children living on Agho Street, had they seen him like this, would have said that Gomo had suddenly gone crazy and stayed away from him. But since I was aware of my mission, I decided not to stay away.

"Won't you leave the road and allow me to pass?" I asked him.

He coughed and pointed a forefinger to the ground like a native doctor who buried a charm in the soil.

"I want my money today," he said. "If I don't get it you're not going anywhere."

Behind him, I saw three women come up the street, but I did not bother to look at them because I was thinking of how to run past Gomo.

"I promise you, when I come back from Abuja, I'll pay you," I told him.

"Are you deaf?" he shouted. "I said I want my money now. I borrowed the money to you in Benin City. I know about Benin City. I don't know about Abuja!"

"What is happening there?" one of the three women, who had got to where we stood, demanded, and I recognized her. She was Mama Gbenga, the woman Gomo spoke about earlier in the morning. It was rumored that Gomo had borrowed some money from her, saying he wanted to use it for the burial ceremony of his mother, but used it to run after women and drink beer up and down Agho Street. Mama Sarah told me that Gomo had jumped out the window of his room two days ago when Mama Gbenga surprised him and came to his

house. Agnes told me that Gomo would be in soup if Mama Gbenga ever caught up with him. Now that she had, I was afraid it could complicate matters for me, as she would ask for her money and Gomo would insist that I pay him. I might miss the bus in the course of the trouble.

“Gomo!” Mama Gbenga yelled, “Where’s my money?”

“That’s what I’m looking for now,” Gomo replied in a subdued voice. “Once I get it from Abuja, I’ll give it to you.”

“Was that our agreement?”

“No, but . . .”

“Hold him!” Mama Gbenga said to her friends. “Immediately.”

Before Gomo could run, the two women with Mama Gbenga grabbed him by the shirt. Turning, he stretched out his hand and grabbed my blouse. At the same time, the driver of the bus taking us to Abuja stepped out of a bungalow down the street and waddled toward the vehicle. One of us, a woman called Lizzy Babe, ran down the street after him.

While this happened, Mama Gbenga shouted at Gomo that he’d lied to her. He’d promised to pay his debt within a week, but had not done so after three years. What did he think she was? His mother? If he did not pay her at once, she would strip him naked, take his clothes to the nearest secondhand trader in New Benin Market, and sell them.

As she droned on, the feeling that I would lose the bus grew inside me. Could my father be right? I thought. When a woman sneezed, a witch was behind it! Could someone somewhere not want me to go for the surgery operation that would cure me of my pains?

While I mused on this, Mama Gbenga began to beat Gomo’s hand. “Leave her!” she shouted. “What has she done to you? Leave her alone!”

The other women joined her, trying to make Gomo loosen his grip on my hand. After a few seconds, I was free. The first thought coming to me was that no witch stood in my way to Abuja. At that moment, I felt the heat of the sun on my burns, and I knew that blood could seep out at any moment, but I did not care. Without thinking of my fatigue, or the weakness that came from not having

a proper sleep the previous night, I ran toward the bus, shouting at the top of my voice. The bus moved as I got to its side; but I stretched out my hand, beating the window several times, screaming, saying that the bus should stop, and one of my mates saw me and told the driver, who brought the bus to a screeching halt.

9.

The Beginning of the Summation of Our Dead

by Blake Butler

Blood violence. Scrying violence. Schools doors' locked door to door. Homes surrounded with a netting. Pastries rolled up with the asp. Tomahawks in hands of children come down on dolls and friends, come down on ants, come down on me. Fathers kill their fathers and their sons. Sons kill their friends. Wives kill their husbands and their doctors. They kill the babies in their guts. War violence in the home. Sky violence writing itself white into the cover of the hour with the screens' electrifying prisma light. What would have been watched in place of doing is become doing. Runes are written on the heads. Lawns are cut in slurs or glyph stakes, calling for the meteor or blank invasion. A burning planted somewhere in every city near the homes. The wash of the bathwater on the drowned self. The pills. The pills to erupt the cells out of the body. The naked turned to breadloaves. The football hero with the Luger to his temple on the fifty-yard line. The banker handing back a withdrawal in the form of a sheet of his own skin. Gas station attendants robbing the customers of their consciousness. Of blood. The dogs walking the dogs. "What is happening in America? The homeland commissioner is up in arms. We must act now. This is our home." The black rabbit in the east sky rises and eats a column of dust onto the air. Troops deployed in precaution of

the nature of the coming people stab each other in the chests. Intestine dinners. Ageless, graceless. The face of God: torn in strips off of a billboard and used to wrap the dead. This is an art project, someone stutters, and the teeth fall out of their mouth onto the ground and are eaten by the starving some days later. Enamel over all. Video game machines going blank. Wires doing blank. Email reading these same words in every head. A package is delivered to the homeland commissioner and he opens it on live TV, knowing it will explode. The dogs' names are changed to Darrel. The children's names are changed to Darrel. The nation's name is changed to Darrel. Michael Jackson's name is changed to Darrel. Human instances of Darrel are made piggish, crucified inside the streets as nonbelievers. The name of Darrel in the mass of names is something else. The days. The occasionally clean are surrounded by their own flesh and bone. No metaphor left behind. No building not written whitely with the curse word over the crush of any city now called Darrel. Order again is demanded. Vegetable delivery is mandated by the state to arrive each evening in a long white limousine. This we believe in, which makes us calmer. It does not happen. Another 340,000 die. Another 417,550. Another 589,000. The rising numbers count themselves in blue of pigs blood in cursive on the sky below the blank where there might have been a moon once, and still might be, though we can't remember where to look. The instance of the number is attacked by Air Force bombers to obliterate as smoke. The smoke maintains the will of concrete underneath the clusterbomb. The fallout rains us birds. We eat them. The flesh of the bird delivers word. A mechanic kills a man who's come to have his wheel replaced; he kills using the machine of his daily labor; another day he might have simply changed the wheel. Someone is counting on the fingers of those who pass him in the street. Something underneath the street puts the sound in cats' mouths and the houses rub where none of them touch. Someone with a hammer appears in one in 144 houses in one evening, mimicking at once a series of different people in one body, tolling the present number of the murdered bodies higher. There is no going backward. The faster we die we all will die. Sickness is not a shaking but a way of looking across a breakfast table or giving thanks. Anywhere this

does not happen yet, the air remains. Turnips in fields turn up with dried blood centers. The trees bow down to kiss the ground. 700,010 dead. 880,789 dead. Telephones. Locks sold from the hardware station come without a key. Each four killed make eight kill eight more and then kill themselves or kill another set of eight, bodies branching off of each eight killed kill at least sixteen or toward twenty-four, each body desisted initiates a system in the spool of those surrounding by physical creation or by name, or by walking past the wrong place in the right street in an hour of the wake or having heard; not by plague or viral idea or passion or brutal ministry or campaign, but by something they've not named but has a name, and in the un-naming of the so named the day goes on and renders shorter while the skin flies at the light above in reams of hiss and collects in lathered wreaths around a something unseen around a something. The remaining bodies of their living go on tasting each other's body in their mouth in the bite of the chew of the grand air and the cerebral matter of waking up and laying to bed. The colors of us giving up only one color, of little sex. The cars turning themselves on. A day to come of old form. Crystal visions. Winking paper. So ends the beginning of our summation of the dead.

10.

Birthright City

by Eliezra Schaffzin

“Israel,” my father said. He was an oral surgeon. It was December and I was getting a Hanukkah present. “Two whole weeks!” my mother added. She was a mother. She packed my bags: a two-month supply of tampons stashed in Ziplocs and tucked into my shoes, yards upon yards of floss, a pepper-spray key chain, and a family-pack of Dove soap, which, she always said, was pH-balanced for my vagina. I was sixteen. I knew by this time in my life that she did not mean *my* vagina, but a whole community of vaginas in need of balanced cleansing, to which, by virtue of my own parts, I apparently belonged.

It was 1986. It was New Jersey. I had Madonna posters on my bedroom walls, though I distrusted Madonna; she was loud and crass and seemed, well, fake. I was embarrassed by the particular way she put her hands on herself in her videos. But I’d needed something to replace the Kristy McNichol posters I’d had on my walls since the seventies. Kristy McNichol had always struck me as trustworthy: she skateboarded and had played someone named Buddy on TV, and her pain struck me as the real deal. Once, when I was in elementary school, I’d sent her a letter telling her to be careful, since I’d seen some of the kids who had to have dental work done in my dad’s office after they fell off their skateboards, and she sent me a 3-D poster of herself on a skateboard and cellophane glasses I could use to look at her from my bed. But Kristy McNichol was old news. And though

I was without doubt a weird kid, I wasn't stupid or developmentally out of whack or anything. I knew how to masturbate, hypothetically, and even had a name for my vagina. My friend Sarah and I had come up with it in middle school, when we realized that the three girls in our grade named Jodi with an "i" (there were none with a "y") were totally alike: they all wore frilly clothes, they were all dog-faced, and all the boys liked them and chased them around at bar mitzvah parties. "Just like a vagina," I'd said, and so Sarah said "Like your vagina," which is how mine got the name. Jodi.

I'd always liked nicknames. Madonna was not a nickname, but Buddy was—and I thought it was a pretty good nickname, as long as it was attached to a girl. While this is not necessarily true now, at the time, whenever I thought about nicknames, I thought about vaginas. Maybe it was Sarah's fault, though Sarah had stopped hanging out with me sometime around the start of eighth grade. By then I'd learned the difference between a vagina and the other parts, so I also named my other part: Heidi Clitowitz. I'd chosen a nickname for myself, too. It was Misha. Misha was a Russian bear from the Moscow Olympics, an exclusive bit of knowledge I'd picked up from a girl in the neighborhood who'd been to Tel Aviv when American televisions had banned the games, but they'd been broadcast in Israel over the Jordanian station. I'd never seen Misha; I just liked the sound of it. The problem with nicknames, at least as far as I understood them at the time, was that someone else had to make them up for you—you couldn't give one to yourself. So, as with the bear, no one knew about my nickname. Everyone called me Michelle.

It was 1986, almost 1987, and I was going on a two-week winter-break trip to Israel with a whole bunch of other Jewish kids from the Tri-State Region. Somebody was bound to know somebody, though when I waited in line to check my bags at the El Al counter, I didn't recognize anyone. I found my parents in the waiting area, where they were sitting side by side in a row of those airport chairs that had coin-operated televisions on the armrests. My mom and dad still had their puffy coats on, and they were wedged into their seats so tightly they were more or less immobile from the necks down. Once my parents snagged their seats, they really liked to keep them. When I got closer

I saw they were both nodding at a woman in a fur coat who sat across from them on a regular old plastic bench. She needed the space: she was big, and the coat made her bigger.

“Michelle, this is Rhonda Seligson,” my mother said, gesturing with her head towards the fur-coat lady.

“No, Carol, it’s Lowenthal now,” the woman corrected. She lifted her hand and wiggled a few fingers in my direction.

“To us you’ll always be a Seligson,” my mother insisted. To me she said, “Your father and I know Rhonda from camp. Her brother Danny was my *wonderful* swim instructor for five summers.”

My father’s eyes had wandered to the newsstand just beyond the woman formerly known as Seligson, where a skinny blond girl my age walked her fingers along a row of glossy magazines. She wore a tie-dyed tank top stretched over a chest that wasn’t so skinny, and jeans that were more hole than denim, billowing out from her bare legs as if a big wind were blowing through them, somehow, in that airless terminal. Rhonda *née* Seligson looked over her shoulder and then stood up suddenly, excusing herself.

“That’s Rhonda’s girl, Jodi,” my mother said. “She’s going on the teen tour too.”

Rhonda yanked a magazine out of Jodi’s hands and stuck it in the wrong place on the rack.

I didn’t know for sure then, but I pretty much figured this Jodi came with an “i.” What I imagined saying at that moment was, *Jodi’s going on the teen tour too*. I imagined jutting my crotch out a bit when I said it, a move that was more Elvis than Madonna. Or maybe I thought of all that later. Regardless, I wasn’t going to *do* anything of the sort. What I actually said was, “Jodi’s a babe.”

“Michelle!” my mother scolded, freeing one arm to point at me over the mini-television. “Women don’t say things like that.”

Like most of my mother’s pronouncements at the time, this struck me as both very true and oddly unimportant. But the real truth was that even before she’d complained, I’d felt myself backing down, as if I needed to offer an explanation. “I mean, she’s lucky, she’s really thin.”

“But her mother turned out *zaftig*,” my father contributed.

“I see Shlomo!” my mother exclaimed, struggling out of her seat.

Shlomo was our guide, a fact I'd learned from the literature my parents had handed me in a blue-and-white envelope, the tangible evidence of my Hanukkah present. My mother had known someone related to Shlomo, an aunt or something, at her synagogue when she was growing up. I hadn't met him yet. He was in his twenties, scruffy in his short beard and hiking boots. A pair of girlish leather sandals dangled from the straps of his carry-on—the footwear he would don when we got off the plane in Tel Aviv and would continue to wear until he saw us back to JFK again. He introduced himself and instructed us to say our good-byes; we had to get through security.

I got a window seat, jammed in next to an Orthodox rabbi and his wife who didn't seem to want anything to do with me. I don't know why I was surprised to hear the usual announcements not just in English, but in Hebrew as well—maybe because this Hebrew sounded nothing like the slow, methodical language recited by the American teachers at my school. I didn't understand one word of it. It wasn't until after takeoff that I realized there were two kids from the tour seated right behind me: Jodi and some boy who had a crocheted Yankees yarmulke attached to his head with a bobby pin. I didn't see much of them; I just heard them talking. Their conversation primarily concerned Shlomo, who'd started circulating in the aisles as soon as the seat-belt sign was off, just sort of nodding hello to his charges where they were scattered about the aircraft. He was apparently in transitional footwear mode; he'd unlaced his boots and was padding around in socks.

"What's with his name? Shlomo?" This was Jodi. "It sounds like a clown or a pet ferret or something. Or a word my grandparents would use for penis."

It did sound like a dirty Yiddish word, though I knew it was Hebrew for Solomon, and I figured the boy with the yarmulke knew it too, but he wasn't sharing that particular insight. He just giggled at the word "penis." It occurred to me, then, that there was an amazing coincidence going on, what with Shlomo and Jodi and all—and I felt a sudden urge to get up on my knees in my seat, lean over the headrest, and tell Jodi Lowenthal all about it. But as I've said, I wasn't

totally stupid. I didn't do anything. I put my headphones on—they were sort of tubular back then, the kind that just brought the sound up in rubber tunnels, one for each ear. If you wanted, you could skip the earphones, sit on the floor, and put your ear to the armrest, and you'd hear the same thing you'd hear with the contraption on. The music on the El Al channels was definitely not Madonna. I pretty much slept through the entire flight, and for most of the bus ride from Ben Gurion to Jerusalem, which was our home base. The brochure called it our "birthright city." It said going there would feel like coming home. We'd been on the road for nearly an hour when Shlomo woke everyone up with the bus's built-in P.A. system and made us pile out at a misty overlook. The wind was strong and there was a light horizontal rain, though everything in the distance still looked parched.

Shlomo led the group to a cluster of stone benches, shouting "Keep up the end, keep up the end!"—a suggestion clearly intended for Jodi, who lagged slightly behind everyone else, her ripped jeans ballooning when she turned into the wind. She shuffled up and immediately sat down, hugging her bare shoulders. I could hear her muttering.

"Fuck, it's cold. Isn't Israel supposed to be a desert?"

Shlomo introduced us to Jerusalem: the new city with its glossy, modern white buildings to the west, the Old City with its greasy-looking white walls to the east. Even the hills were different shades of dusty white. Shlomo's arm jumped around as he talked about one mount and then another. He taught us an Israeli army trick: when you want to point out a faraway spot to your buddies, you determine its relative distance from other faraway spots with a unit of measure called "fingers." He demonstrated this with a small Arab village that squatted in a dry valley, holding up his hand and counting three fingers to the village from the Old City's sealed Messiah Gate. I held up three fingers of my own, but when I set them against my view of the gate, my hand didn't reach the village, ending instead at a small Arab girl riding a clumsy donkey down a winding path. The animal was a whitish gray, the girl covered in dust, and I hadn't noticed the two until I focused on my hand. I inched my arm over to the right

so I could reach the village Shlomo wanted us to see. The girl was obliterated behind my fingers.

Behind me on the bench, the boy from the plane had seated himself next to Jodi again. Apparently he had offered her the warmth of his coat, if she was willing to cuddle up under his arm while he continued to wear it. Jodi was willing. The boy's skullcap rose periodically from his head, flapping in the breeze. This boy, I later learned, was one of the most religious in our group. He refused to light a match on the Sabbath due to the rabbinical prohibition against fire, but would smoke pot on that day if someone else got the joint started. In the days that followed, the boys of the teen tour would seat themselves next to Jodi, shuffle with her behind the others, press their thumbs into her back for a quick massage, and offer her the warmth of their coats while Shlomo pointed out hills of dirt and walls of stone. I wasn't sure how much of Israel my traveling companions actually noticed. But I wasn't sure how much of it I was getting, either: Jerusalem, where we spent the first week, was nothing like I'd imagined, though I gathered that was because we hadn't been to the Old City yet. There'd been a fatal stabbing of a Yeshiva student near the Temple Mount just before we'd arrived, and Shlomo said we'd have to wait to visit that part of town; we would be taken to the Western Wall as a very special finale. The new city, the only place we were allowed to explore, seemed to me full of shabby gloom, its downtown streets lined with squat, dark storefronts featuring the kind of merchandise I'd seen in the most forsaken parts of North Jersey, decrepit housewares and dusty books and bewildered-looking mannequins lost in indeterminate fashion eras. Each morning, our bus would trundle out of the city center to open, manicured, chalky-white spaces where we'd visit the Holocaust museum or the Knesset or the Great Synagogue or the miniature model of ancient Jerusalem at the Holy Land Hotel, and then, when visiting hours were over, we were trundled back to the center and set loose—to mingle, presumably, with our Israeli counterparts, noisy, aggressive, lively kids who spewed the impenetrable language I'd heard on the airplane, who passed us on the shopping strips or sat one table over in a slightly-off-looking pizza joint, accustomed, it seemed, to a presence like ours,

and therefore oblivious to it. I tagged along as the kids from the bus searched for something to do, something to recognize; when they'd given up on that, the girls turned their sights on something to buy, the boys on someone to torment. They'd lead us into the McDavid's—oddly decorated in red, white, and blue—and complain to the management that the ketchup was seasoned incorrectly or attempt, repeatedly, to order a bacon double cheeseburger. Or, when we'd crowded into a corner falafel stand, where the old men behind the counter handed us heaping portions in soft, warm bread pockets, the boys would shout "Coke? Coke?" and the men, responding "Coca Cola, yes," would head for the refrigerator until the boys appeared to change their minds, yelling "Pepsi? Pepsi?"—knowing quite well that there was no Pepsi to be found here, since Pepsi, we'd been told, had chosen to maintain its vast Arab market by shunning the tiny Israeli one. When the falafel men hesitated, uncertain how to respond, the boys would ramp it up: "Dr. Pepper? Mountain Dew? Orange Shasta? Mello Yello? Fizzy Jism?" until the old men, clean-shaven and brown in their faces, swift and guttural in their speech, nothing like our German and Russian grandfathers, finally gave up, flustered.

At night, we stayed in youth-hostel rooms, girls on one hall, boys on another. I was always first in bed, the bottom of a corner bunk. I'd pull the blanket up past my nose, nearly but not completely covering my eyes, so that I could feel my lashes against the top sheet when I blinked. I was an only child, and had never slept in a room with anyone else before, as far as I could recall. I wasn't in the habit of looking at people in those days, either, at least not when they could look back at me, so this method of hiding myself behind the covers had freed me up, without my actually intending it, to take a nightly inventory of my roommates. No one paid me any notice, but even then I avoided faces, scanning instead from the necks down: round bodies with heavy breasts that filled extra-large Benetton T-shirts doubling as pajamas, tall bodies stretched taut and thin over sturdy frames, with long, muscular legs that reminded me of frogs splayed out on dissecting pans. Nothing I could find on myself was either as pronounced or as defined. My own hand searched in vain for the hip bones I saw protruding beneath exposed skin when someone reached

up to grab the ladder to an upper bunk. I could not see, when I attempted to consider myself in that mix, what it was that supposedly made us all alike; all I saw, when I peered out from under the starched and stamped youth-hostel bedding, was what I was certain I did not have in common with the rest of them, what I was supposed to be but felt certain I was not, something soft but burgeoning, something gleefully awakened—to what, I hadn't a clue. Each night the girls primped for bed as if sleeping were a party, until Shlomo popped his head in, never bothering to knock, and declared we'd reached "The We-Bitching Hour"—a term he used nightly, to no one's particular amusement, or, I suspect, comprehension, except that it meant lights out. Most nights, he'd use the opportunity to usher Jodi through the door from wherever he'd found her. She'd plop into her bottom bunk just as the room went dark.

I was fully aware of the fact that my parents were hoping that, in addition to connecting with the homeland, I'd come back from the tour with new friends—with any friends, actually, since my loss column had pretty much overtaken the gains in the friendship department from the start of high school. It seemed they'd decided to blame it on the fact that my options were limited to my small private school, to our little cul-de-sac community. They'd already made me try all kinds of clubs, stuff for smart kids, stuff for artists, stuff that tried to turn what you did in your room at home into who you were. I'd tried a whole lot of things, but then I finally refused to try anymore. I didn't really belong to anything. Once I'd overheard my father, when he thought I was asleep in my room, tell my mother he was worried because everyone else my age seemed to have a "thing." I knew what he was talking about: He always said my generation needed a thing if they wanted to get into a good college, have a good career. My mother laughed and said, "Oh, one of these days she'll fall in love, and then she'll find her thing soon enough." Sometimes I felt like she was speaking a dead language. Still, I harbored a constant, nagging sense that I owed my parents something, so I didn't complain about the Israel trip. And I was, I suppose, kind of curious, if you could call it that. Israel was so far away, so very old; I figured something really different couldn't hurt. Once I was there, it struck me as kind of cute

that their good intentions were so pathetically misplaced, considering how the kids on the teen tour were exactly the same as the ones at home—only amplified, what with the whirlwind intensity of our Israel adventure. But in retrospect, I understood that my mom and dad weren't really willing to grant me a true change of scenery. They wanted desperately for me to find my place anywhere in the world, in any little community, as long as it was just like theirs at home.

About a week into the tour, we were told to pack for a few days' excursion: we were going to mock-military boot camp. This was a place Israeli high-school students went for an entire week, to prepare for the real thing—army service—when they graduated. For us, the youth of the Diaspora, they offered the three-day version. I'd known from the brochure that they were going to give us guns. Not for keeps, of course, just for a session on a shooting range, and a few encounters before that, for the sake of getting acquainted. We arrived at night, in another light rain, and were greeted by uniformed soldiers, who, barking at us in accented English, made us line up right outside the bus and stand at attention, our bags on the damp ground beside us. We were separated—not just for sleeping this time—into platoons of boys and girls, but the soldiers bossing us around were all female, which everyone took as a pretty clear sign of how phony the whole boot camp thing was. After some shouting and leering and warnings about how hard we'd work for the next few days, they gave us each a little stack of army-green shirts and pants and sent us off to our barracks, which looked just like another youth hostel.

I was brushing my teeth in the dorm-style bathroom, jockeying for position at the sink, when Jodi marched in, taking the stall just behind me. A moment later she screamed.

“Goddammit! Does anyone out there have any corks?”

I hesitated, looking at the other girls, who busied themselves at the sinks. In my memory, their faces are clouded in the water-damaged mirror; I can't remember their names, except for the fact that no one else was a Jodi. None of them showed any indication of having heard Jodi's distress call. I thought of a few things I might say, didn't say any of them, and then decided to say something after all.

“Wait a second! I'll be right there!” I ran back to the room, wiping

the foaming toothpaste from my lips with my T-shirt. I was back in a flash, tossing a Ziploc full of tampons over the bathroom stall with the full momentum of my run.

“Holy Jesus, you rock!”

I heard her tear open a tampon behind the stall door. I rinsed my mouth and started to introduce myself, raising my voice above the flushing toilets. I wanted to be sure she knew who her supplier was.

“I know who you are,” she said, coming out of the stall. “My mother told me at the airport. Your mom was Uncle Danny’s swim-suit girl. Michelle, right?”

I said, “It’s Misha.” I stepped aside from my place at the sink so she could wash her hands. She wore her hair in a ponytail with an elasticized piece of flannel that matched her flannel boxer shorts. Her legs had remained perfectly smooth since JFK. She looked up at me, not directly, but in the mirror. I looked away, at myself. It felt stupid. I didn’t know what else to say.

“Decent nickname,” she said. She picked at something tiny on her chin. Then she shuffled off to our room. The lights were out by the time I felt my way to bed.

The girl soldiers were all corporals, a rank they said was called “Rabat” in Hebrew, which sounded a whole lot like “Rabbi” to me. Which made the subtle differences between bat mitzvah tutoring and faux boot camp all the more apparent. For two days, we labored in our single-sex squadrons, cleaning bathrooms, peeling vegetables, lumbering through obstacle courses, learning not to light a match while on night patrol, all the stuff, they said, the Israel Defense Forces were supposed to do. We also studied the guns, and handled them a bit—M16s, a pretty serious-looking rifle that we disassembled and cleaned, with oil and handkerchiefs, right on the mess hall tables. The thing soldiers seemed to do most, though, was stand at attention, and the girls’ corporal, Rabat Osnat, liked to line us up and shout at us a whole lot. I noticed she had a stronger accent than the rest—you couldn’t tell if she was trying to say we should “get over the wall” or the “war,” if she thought we were “hungry” or “angry.” On the morning of the third day, the day when we’d fire our weapons, we endured an especially long and unintelligible lecture. We were all

standing stiffly, arms behind our backs and faces straight ahead, when someone broke ranks and headed toward the latrine—I didn’t need to turn my head to know it was Jodi, but I shifted a little anyway, just so I could see what would happen next. Rabat Osnat demanded an explanation, and Jodi spun around. I could see the tie-dye peeking out at the neckline of her fatigues. Her shirt was unbuttoned at the bottom and tied into a knot at her midriff, and her pants were cuffed tightly around her calves, creating her signature ballooning about the knees. An elaborate system of safety pins sparkled at the pant cuffs, just above her thick pink socks and mud-stained K-Swiss.

“I’m on the rag, sister. I don’t suppose you stop the real war for that, but the Fisher-Price version can sure as hell wait.”

I wasn’t sure they’d let Jodi fire a gun after that, and in fact, when they lined us up at the range, each of us standing at the edge of an army-issue blanket on which an M16 sat alongside giant, airfield-style earmuffs, I didn’t see Jodi. But then there she was, personally escorted by Rabat Osnat to an unoccupied blanket not far from mine. I figured she’d pointed out to Shlomo, who was there somewhere at the camp, slapping around in his sandals, that her mom had paid the big bucks to let her shoot guns in Israel, and Shlomo had convinced the soldiers in charge to let her stay. We’d been briefed a hundred times, it seemed, on shooting-range protocol: there was a command for waiting, a command for lying on our stomachs by the gun—which had been propped for us on a stand at the blanket’s far edge—a command to load the cartridge, another for placing the blue plastic muffs on our ears and lifting the butt of the gun so it rested against our shoulders, one to take the trigger off the safety setting (and move it to semiautomatic, not automatic), and a command to fire. There were targets across the way—not in the shape of people or anything, just black concentric circles on a white sheet of paper. We weren’t even supposed to hit the middle; we just had to try to get the five bullets we fired to hit somewhere close to each other. I wasn’t really sure what that was all about—weren’t you supposed to hit the right enemy in the right place the first time? But I wasn’t in a thinking mood: after we were reminded, for the umpteenth time, never to lift the guns from their stands, we got the signal to hit the floor. With

my face close to the ground and the headset over my ears, I could smell the blanket's musty scent, but the rest of the world seemed far away. I looked down the row of would-be shooters and saw Jodi, her ponytail high on her head, her jaw working its way around a wad of gum, her painted nails splayed out before her—just some chick in front of a pile of *Seventeen* magazines. The corporals must have saved their best shouting for the range, because their voices were the only clear sounds coming through the mufflers. The command came to release the safety, and I saw one of Jodi's hot pink fingernails slide into the trigger. I continued to see it even when I turned to my own target and fired five times. I saw nothing up ahead; I felt nothing but a shove in my shoulder with each shot.

Once we were done, which seemed about as soon as we'd begun, we rested our guns in their stands, pulled off the headsets, and awaited one final command to smile as the Rabats came around for our cameras, preserving the moment on film. I had my old plastic Kodak with me, the one my parents had given me for my bat mitzvah, filled with the same roll of 126 I'd cranked into it at the start of the trip. Rabat Osnat took her best shot—the snap of the shutter sounded small but sharp after everything else—and then placed the camera on the blanket beside me. I sat up and fumbled with it, trying to advance the reel, realizing my hands were sweating. Osnat was making her way down the row, and I watched her wrestle for a while with a complicated-looking 35mm gadget that belonged to the girl next to me. Ahead, Jodi was still prone on her blanket, headgear hugging her blond head. She made eye contact and paused her gum-chewing to smile a toothy grin; her hand formed a thumbs-up beside her face, which she tilted toward the butt of the M16. I realized she was posing for me, and I brought the Kodak to my eye and snapped. She winked and stuck her tongue out a little, letting it hover over the rifle, like she was just about to give it a good lick. I snapped again. She wriggled on the blanket, propping herself on one elbow and using her free hand to make a move on the gun that looked something like the Wicked Witch of the West—you know, when she's going after her crystal ball, *poppies, poppies*—a kind of air-caress that then reached under the barrel, almost cupping it, and before I could

snap again I saw Rabat Osnat yank Jodi's hand back right through my viewfinder. Then another set of hands snatched my camera.

Somehow I was implicated in this affair, as if I'd encouraged Jodi with my camerawork, as if my little plastic box was as likely to burn my hand—or fire a spare bullet—as Jodi's rifle. For our punishment, we were to be excluded from a weekend trip down south to the beach, left instead with a host family back in chilly Jerusalem. The tour bus actually dropped us off on the way out of town, taking a winding road that hugged the Old City walls, the closest we'd come to them so far. They were massive, the stones much larger than they'd seemed from the overlook, and neatly landscaped with grass and space-age-looking spotlights. We turned up a hill—the city was all hills—and stopped in front of a public bus stop, with people there—an old woman with a bulging plastic bag at her feet and a long-haired man with a baby in a stroller. I was sitting up front, just behind Shlomo, hugging my overnight bag, but he made cheerful use of the loudspeaker to let us—me and Jodi—know that this was our stop. I didn't turn around to watch Jodi make her way to the exit from her usual spot in the way back; I just bounded down the steps after Shlomo, nearly tripping over the guy with his stroller. His name was David, and he was a friend of Shlomo's, and he would be our host. Nobody said anything to the old lady; I figured she was just waiting for her bus. When Jodi caught up, the tour bus took Shlomo and the rest of the kids into the Judean Desert and toward the Red Sea, while we followed the guy with the baby home.

I thought we were going to stay with an Israeli family, but David and his wife were just Americans who had been living in Israel for a while, sort of religious hippies with matching long brown hair; when Shoshanna got home, my first thought was that the two of them looked like brother and sister. It was still a few hours until the sun set and Sabbath began, but they put us to work right away, washing the white tile floors with a squeegee and pushing the dirty water down a drain in the balcony, chopping vegetables for chicken soup. Jodi wasn't too talkative, and I couldn't think of anything interesting to say, so I just listened while they told the story of how they'd fallen in love with Jerusalem and with each other all at once, and while they

fed afternoon snacks of soup veggies to their little boy, Bentzi, the apparent result of all that falling in love. When they finally sent us into the dining room to set the table, I passed Jodi a stack of plates and whispered “*Faux-faux-boot-camp*,” and she let out a little chuckle. At dinner they sang but didn’t make us sing; they drank wine but didn’t make us not drink. “No drinking age in Israel,” Shoshanna said, pouring us each a new glass. Bentzi mashed soup carrots into a Sesame Street book I recognized from when I was a kid. He held it out to me with an oily hand. “Grover is a goy,” he said. It cracked his parents up.

Over dessert, they invited us to Sabbath morning services at some kind of do-it-yourself synagogue—a whole group of religious hippies like themselves—that met in the bomb shelter of a neighboring apartment building. I wondered if the wine had loosened up my facial muscles, since David could tell I was pretty alarmed by that last detail, the bomb shelter. He said it was a normal thing in Israel, that there was one in the basement of every building. Mostly kids used them, he said, to have parties or make out. All of a sudden Jodi had something to say.

“Thanks for the suggestion and all, but Misha and I are going to the real synagogue down the street.”

I had no idea what Jodi was up to, since I was pretty sure she wasn’t planning to attend any Sabbath services, but I nodded anyway. It was the first time anyone ever called me Misha. In any event, they didn’t seem to care, David and Shoshanna, where we did our praying. They were clearly all about freedom of expression. David scooped up the baby, probably to go wash the soup off, and Shoshanna showed us to the little room in the back of the apartment where we were supposed to sleep. I’d assumed it would be Bentzi’s room, full of Sesame Street paraphernalia and a crib and a couple of sleeping bags for us, but this room had nothing in it but a wall of built-in cabinets and one full-sized bed. Jodi was apparently done saying everything she was going to say to our hosts for the night, since she dumped her bag on the floor by the cabinets, pulled a bunch of junk out, and disappeared into the bathroom. I was feeling a little woozy, so when Shoshanna left me there, I just sat on the edge of the bed for a while, facing the

wall unit, looking at all the different-sized brown laminate rectangles with their matching handles, wondering which actually had hanging closets behind them and which had shelves and which were drawers, and when Jodi got back in her tank top and flannel boxers, her bare legs still looking like they never needed to be shaved, she stood and stared at me for a minute, combing her fingers through her hair to wrangle it into a ponytail, and said, “What’s the matter with you?”

I wasn’t really sure how to answer that, so I just sat there for another minute, which forced Jodi to choose the side of the bed away from the cabinets. I could feel her making little tugs on the blanket, trying to yank it out from under my butt, so I finally stood up and turned around, and as she got under the covers, she looked right at me and laughed, which made me feel even more disoriented, as if I’d never actually seen her before, and now I would have to fall asleep beside her. She said it again, “What’s the matter?” Then she said, “They’re just making us share the covers. No one asked you to get into my haunted house or anything.”

When she said it like that, I really did feel frightened for a moment—like when you’re a little kid and the mere mention of a haunted house gives you the creeps, dread and excitement all at once. But I wasn’t that terribly horribly stupid. I knew Jodi was talking about her *Jodi*, so I laughed right back, and went to brush my teeth and get into my sweats. By the time I turned out the light and climbed into bed she had her face to the wall. She’d used something for her skin—like Sea Breeze, that mouthwash-blue stuff my mother would never let me try—and the smell hovered over the bed, all cool and scrubbed-clean. I turned my back to her and faced the complicated wardrobe. It was probably the first time I’d ever had bed spins. I could feel the edge of the mattress underneath me, all along my length, my body balanced as far out as it could go without falling off. I felt like I would fall anyway, forward or backward, it didn’t matter—I was sure it would be a long way down, to some place at the bottom I knew perfectly well but still couldn’t see. Or maybe I didn’t think exactly that, not right then. Maybe I thought about all of that later. I’m not sure how long I’d been in bed, spinning, when I felt Jodi shift under the covers. The blankets lifted a little—I remember a moment of coolness

beneath them, as if for a second, I was suspended in air, in contact with nothing—and then Jodi was there, pressed against me, a warm body and breath on my neck and back. I could feel her breasts, one nestled just below each of my shoulder blades. Her bare knees fit against the backs of my own, through my sweatpants. I didn't know where she'd put her arm—not the one beneath her, which I could feel vaguely on my back as well, but the one on top, that was free to move where she liked; it did not wrap around my front, or even rest on my shoulder. I imagined she'd laid it along her side, her hand resting on her hip, or maybe it was folded in at the elbow, coming back up to touch her own shoulder. I wasn't sure how she'd managed to balance that way. I didn't dare look. The warmth of her made her visible to me, though, and a thought occurred to me unlike any other I'd had before: to feel a person pressed against you in darkness was to see that person as if in a full, radiating light. I saw her, not as she was in the airport terminal or the firing range or the back of the bus, not even as her particular assemblage of parts that bore a resemblance to one girl's torso, another's calves. It was a different kind of vision, one that I could feel on and in myself, with perfect clarity, perfect recognition. It was with that sort of intensity that I felt Jodi lock herself into me, and remain there. I was conscious for a long while of not breathing, so I wasn't sure how it was, exactly, that I was still alive. I was more than awake. When I was little, my mother used to say you couldn't fall asleep until you *believed* you were going to fall asleep, and so I grew to accept myself as the heretic I was always meant to be, a child insomniac of insufficient faith. As Jodi lay there, unmoving but still progressing—the steady pressure of her body an advance further and further into mine—I was more the heretic than ever. I knew I would not sleep a wink. Yet what I knew turned out to be wrong: somehow that condition of complete wakefulness, of illumination, slid me seamlessly into a soft darkness, and into sleep.

When I opened my eyes the room was bright. Jodi was no longer at my back, though I could feel the tension in the blanket where she lay claim to her half of it, somewhere behind me still. I hadn't stirred an inch from where I'd placed myself, face to the wardrobe, the night before. I lay there and waited. Soon I could hear Bentzi's

babbling, an original mixture of English and Hebrew. Then there was the low murmur of his parents' voices in the hall, the jingling of keys. The front door had barely clicked shut when I felt Jodi rise; I automatically brought the covers to my lashes. Jodi crouched on the floor beside the wardrobe and rifled through her bag, yanking out an extra-large men's shirt that she pulled over her head. It fell past her tank top, hitting low on her thighs. She tugged the boxer shorts down from underneath the shirt and stepped out of them, pulling a pair of leggings up instead. She carefully smoothed her ponytail, repositioning it to one side of her head. Then she stepped into her K-Swiss, faced the bed squarely, put her hands on her hips, and looked right at me. It hadn't occurred to me that she could see my eyes. Her voice contained the usual impatient mocking.

"You ready yet?"

I remember thinking, *Maybe, yes, wait, for what?*

"We're going to the Old City," she said. "I can totally find my way. I watched from the bus."

"What about David and them?" I was having trouble speaking properly. I lowered the blanket to just below my chin. "Won't they see us from services? They said their synagogue was next door."

"It's in a bomb shelter, genius. I'm pretty sure those things don't have windows."

When I grabbed my clothes and headed for the bathroom, I thought I heard Jodi's chuckle follow me out of the room, but I couldn't be sure; I don't think I was really sure of anything that morning, except that Jodi had replaced Shlomo as my tour guide, and I was allowing her to lead me into the surprisingly clear day, out of the neighborhood where we'd slept and onto unfamiliar streets, shady, long blocks of office buildings marked ministry of one thing or another, all closed up and quiet, abandoned for the Sabbath holiday. Jodi blazed our trail without hesitation, though it seemed to take us an awfully long time to retrace the path the bus had taken the day before. We walked silently for a long while, until we reached the sunny end of a road that opened out onto the Old City walls. This wasn't the same spot we'd passed the day before: there were no trimmed lawns, no evenly spaced spotlights. The streets were full

of grit and trash, the sidewalks erratically paved, as if there'd been an idea of work that was later forgotten. The plaza between us and the grand gate ahead—a dark, pointed arch between two thick, arabesque towers—descended into the archway in wide stone steps covered by boxes of goods for sale and the vendors who squatted beside them. We both paused, taking in the sudden chaos, and then Jodi plunged into the throng. I followed quickly now, directing my feet around ground-level spreads of salt and pepper shakers, children's underwear, flashlights, wind-up toys in shrink-wrap, pocketknives. Women shoppers, dark scarves encircling their heads, stooped over cardboard flats crammed with live chicks. We made our way through the crowd and into the gateway, a deep chamber inside the city wall.

The gate did not deposit us immediately, as I'd expected, into the familiar, white open; instead, the crowd thickened and our pace slowed as we moved into deeper darkness. As my eyes adjusted I saw the shops: hardware stores, money changers, produce stands, all tucked into the dank corners that routed us along a sharply angular path, preventing direct access to the city. We had entered a living arm of the Arab market. I found myself unable to direct my own movement, squeezed as I was into the mass of people moving in both directions, somehow, through the gate. An old woman with a leafy branch of figs tied around her in a sling pressed her knuckles into my back, urging me forward, and I tried to oblige, eager to keep up with Jodi's sideways ponytail. At last I stumbled out of the arch and into an alleyway—there was only slightly more sunlight here, slightly more air—where I hurried to Jodi's side. Storekeepers sat on low stools on a slim margin of pavement and stared. Some cooked meat on small grills or sipped tea in tiny shot-sized glasses, tossing dice over backgammon sets. Music blared from many radios—string instruments that played in dizzying, descending scales, an accompaniment to wailing voices, Arabic words.

"Cool," Jodi said. "Hold still a minute." She rested a hand on my shoulder. I stood perfectly still, just as she'd said, while she lifted one foot to pull a pebble from the bottom of her sneaker. The shoe had barely reached the ground before she continued onward, up an incline, the alley rising on broadly spaced concrete steps that made my

gait feel clumsy, halting, as I continued to follow. A boy navigated a cart of sesame breads downhill, riding a tire loosely attached to the cart's rear, bouncing lightly off each low step. There was something solemn about the market—it was just shopping, of course, almost the same junk you could buy at a second-rate mall back home, but there was something weighty here, like the people took it all very seriously. It was a deliberate mix of Times Square and supermarket and city park and someone's cousin's backyard. There were alleyways with flashing string lights and boom boxes for sale and posters of painted, dark-haired, *zaftig* ladies who must have been someone's idea of a movie star, and there were alleyways hung entirely with massive pieces of meat, some cut and skinned, some freshly killed; there were rows of stalls with keffiyehs and olivewood crosses, and there were neatly swept aisles with glass-enclosed storefronts, women's fashions draped elegantly inside. We had turned up another incline when a boy gave a shout; he rode his bread cart much faster than the one before him, and Jodi and I separated, making room for him to pass. As I backed out of his path I felt my head touch some sort of display and turned around to find a dozen hanging mirrors, my blank face swaying gently in each of them. They were framed in black cloth embroidered in deep reds and purples, a pouch of fragrance fitted in on top. Jodi moved to my side of the alley and, parting the mirror-vines, stepped up to the shop window and cupped her hands over her face to peer inside. I stepped up with her: it was an embroidery shop, the entire space piled high with loose fabrics, dresses, bags, all decorated in the same ornate patterns of the mirrors. As Jodi looked, one of her hands left her face and moved again to my shoulder; then it slid down my sleeve, pulling me with her as she swung open the shop's door and brought us both inside.

The room was filled with the fragrance of the mirrors and with a placid quiet, as if we'd traveled far from the noise of the marketplace just outside. An Arab man—balding, round—sat on a mound of carpets with two tall blond women—German tourists, I thought, from their light coloring and emphatic speech—and fanned a sampling of fabrics out between them. He kept an eye on us as he spoke to them in his own accented English. Jodi didn't seem to notice; she

dropped my arm and ran her hand along the hanging fabrics, unfolding blouses from their stacks and spreading them out against herself, stirring scarves in overflowing baskets. She chose a dress on a hanger and handed it to me.

“Here—hold this up to see if it fits,” she said, spreading her arms out before me, as if submitting to be frisked. I held the dress out, awkwardly, a gown for a paper doll. It dragged a little on the rug. “Pull it up so the collar reaches my neck, silly,” she said, and I obeyed, pushing it closer to her body, grazing her nose a little with the hanger’s tip. She laughed, just as she had the night before, so I just stood there and kept the dress aloft while she lifted her arms farther to unzip it a bit at the back and extract the wire hanger, which she tossed on a nearby stack. She wrapped the dress more closely around her, smoothing it against her chest, her hips. “Hold it there for a sec,” she whispered, and my ears pricked at the softness, the confidence in her tones. I felt a little off balance again, so I inched my feet nearer, steadyng myself as I pressed the dress to the places she’d shown me. Jodi wasn’t looking at the dress anymore—instead her eyes met mine, broadcasting a bewildering glint of determination. Which is why it took me a moment to realize that she’d brought her hands behind her, reaching for two fistfuls of scarves from a basket just within reach. I stood there, still holding the dress up high, while she slipped the scarves into the pockets of her blouse, shot a look across the room, and stepped out from behind the curtain I’d created for her, heading for the door. With my back to the shopkeeper, I didn’t see him rise, but I heard his shout, a kind of “Wullah!” that sent Jodi right out the door and back down the alley we’d just climbed. I pulled that dress back toward me then, and just kept hugging it to my own self while the storekeeper rushed past me and out the door, shouting more now, rousing two young men lounging in a doorway across the alley. They took off in Jodi’s direction—I couldn’t see her ponytail anymore, though I couldn’t see much from where I was glued to the carpet. The German women brushed past me next, slowly, staring, and disappeared out the door as the shopkeeper returned.

To me he said, “Sit,” pointing to the pile of rugs. He took the dress from my hands and I sat. He spun around to search the piles

behind him until he found the hanger, forcing it back into the dress as he spoke.

"The Israeli bolice," he said, pronouncing it Is-ra-el-i, each syllable distinct. He hung the dress in its place and paced the room. "I call the Israeli bolice. Your barents—they are at your hotel? They do not know you are here?"

"No," I said. "My parents don't know."

The policeman came, in blue and white, though we'd waited so long, I couldn't imagine he'd have any luck finding Jodi. He spotted me right away where I sat on the carpets in the back, but didn't acknowledge me beyond that first glance, speaking instead to the shopkeeper in a steady monotone—Hebrew or Arabic, I couldn't tell. A few women in headscarves stood outside the shop window, cupping their faces as Jodi had done, staring inside, at me, I figured. My eyes traced the patterns of embroidery everywhere in the room. The perfume felt heavier than before, the store a cavern within a cave. I retraced our steps in my mind, trying to remember when we'd last been fully outdoors, in the sunlight, under an open sky. I wasn't sure.

At last I heard a stirring in the small crowd at the window, and the door opened: there was Jodi, hesitating at the entrance, someone holding the door for her—a soldier, a boy soldier, fresh-faced, like the more palatable boys at my school, a rifle slung over his shoulder. He stood there, waiting, holding the door open wide, peering about as if he'd brought Jodi in to do some shopping, wanted to make sure they'd found the right place. As Jodi stepped over the threshold she lifted a gentle hand to his arm, the one with the gun, then let go. She stayed there by the front, her arms crossed, her look indignant. I didn't see any scarves. I imagined them cast off somewhere in the ancient city—bright flecks of color against black, wedged into a crack in massive white stone. It was only when the soldier followed Jodi inside that I saw that with his free hand he gripped the arm of an Arab man only slightly older than himself—I recognized him as one of the young men who had chased Jodi down the alley. The soldier tugged at the Arab, then pushed him into the store in a way that struck me not as rough, but decisive, older than his years. They let the glass door swing shut behind them and again we were enclosed

in silence. The young Arab did not move, did not look to anyone; the soldier resumed his grip. Something about the pair made we want to recede into the embroidery, but I did the opposite: I stood. We all stood there, Jodi and the soldier and the young Arab man and the older man and the policeman and me.

The policeman spoke first, to the soldier—in Hebrew, I was sure, because I heard the word *freicha*, one of the slang words Shlomo had taught us, a word that meant bimbo. The soldier listened, looking in one moment hardened, in another confused, shifting his gaze between Jodi and the man still in his custody. Maybe because I couldn't understand what it was they were saying, my eyes felt free to wander to everyone's faces, taking in the look of hesitation in the soldier, and the mute fury in the young man, and the exasperation in the older man, and the fatigue in the policeman, and, in Jodi, the cruelty and the beauty and the fear. I'd felt something, finally, in this bizarre gathering, something strong and undeniable, a commitment at last—a breaking away. I had stepped up, joined in, and though no one paid me any mind, I knew I'd soon find my voice and speak, confess everything, an offering of clarification and exoneration and responsibility that would mean absolutely nothing, not just because it would change nothing, fix nothing, but because it would not include the truth, the one I'd understood right then—and later as well, for sure, for every day afterward, but also, I remember perfectly, right then in that moment, when I began at last to separate in earnest, irrevocably, from everything, relinquishing everything I was supposed to be and everything I was not, turning, at last, far away from everyone, as I would always, infinitely, from then on. I remember that moment better than any other, because it was the one in which I fell, as my mother had predicted, in love—permanently, devastatingly—with my own distance, the thing I finally understood would be my rightful salvation, my rightful ruin.

11.

Can a Corn

by Jess Walter

Ken took dialysis Tuesdays and Thursdays. It fell to Tommy after his mom passed to check his stepdad out of the Pine Lodge Correctional Facility. Drop him at the hospital. Take him back three hours later.

Ken groaned as he climbed up the truck. —Whatcha got there, Tom?

Tommy looked over the backseat. —Pole and tackle.

—You goin' fishin' this weekend?

—I ain't skydivin'.

Ken stared out his window. —You stop me by a store?

There was a downtown grocery sold Lotto, fortified wines, and forties. Ken hopped out. Tommy spun radio stations till Ken come back with a can a corn.

—Oh, no you ain't, Ken.

—So got-damn tired, Tom. Can't sit on that blood machine today.

—You'd rather die?

—I'd rather fish.

—No way, Ken.

He drove toward Sacred Heart. But when Tommy stopped at a red light Ken reached back, got the pole and jumped out. Fine, Tommy thought. Die. I don't care. The old man walked toward the Spokane River. Tommy pulled up next to him, reached over and rolled down the passenger window.

—Get in the damn truck, Ken.

Ken ignored him.

—That pole ain’t even geared.

Ken walked, facing away.

Tommy drove alongside for another block. —Get in the truck, Ken.

Ken turned down a one-way. Tommy couldn’t follow.

Fine. Stupid bastard. Tommy went back to work, but the only thing in the pit was a brake job on some old lady’s Mercury: four hundred in repairs on a shit-bucket worth three. Pissed, Tommy gave the Mercury to Todd and drove back downtown.

He parked, got his tackle box from the truck and walked back along the river. Found his stepfather under a bridge, dry pole next to him.

Tommy gave him hook and weight.

Ken’s gray fingers shook.

—Give it here. Tommy weighted and hooked the line. He pulled a can opener from the tackle box and opened Ken’s corn. Carefully, Tommy pushed the steel hook into the corn’s paper skin until, with a tiny spurt, it gave way.

He handed the old man back the pole. Ken cast it.

Half-hour later, Ken reeled in a dull catfish, yellow-eyed and spiny. No fight in the thing at all. Almost like it didn’t mind.

Ken held it up. —Well I will be got-damned.

Tommy released the fish. It just kind of sank.

He dropped the old man at the front gate of the prison, his breathing already shallow. Rusty. He was so weak Tommy had to reach over and pop his door.

—Hey that wadn’t a bad got-damn fish. All things considered. His eyes were filming over already. —We should go again Tuesday.

—We gonna start playin’ catch now, too? Tommy asked.

Ken laughed. —I doubt it.

Then Tommy watched the dying old man pass through the metal gate. The fucker.

12.

Confluence

by Mesha Maren

I push my fingers into the dark green fabric, smooth the starched jacket out over the back of the kitchen chair. Through the front windows the wind kicks red sand up into the paloverde bushes. My fingers trace the stitched letters on the front of the jacket: JOHN MC CARTY U.S. BORDER PATROL. Outside the sunlight is a pale milky version of its angry summer self, but it grows hotter every day. John's footsteps pound in the hall. I press my nails deeper into the gold letters of his name.

"Layna," he booms in his preacher voice, "what are you doing, honey?"

My shoulders stiffen before his hands even reach me.

John lets out a mouthful of air. "Give me my jacket, Layna."

I don't lift my hands.

"What are you doing?" he asks again. "Laying hands on it? Trying to curse me?"

"Laying on hands is for healing," I say, lifting my fingers and sticking them into my apron pocket.

He rests his right hand heavy on the base of my neck and grabs the jacket. He smells of mint toothpaste, Old Spice, and hair gel. I breathe deep, smell for something more. I found a bottle in his truck the other day, an almost empty liter of mezcal with a pale worm bobbing at the bottom. In the glove box, beside the mezcal, lay a silver

bracelet and pink hair clip. I didn't ask him about them. He would have told me some illegal alien left them, told me he forgot to throw them away.

John lifts his hand, guiding his arms into the stiff sleeves of his jacket. "Layna honey," he says, "you worry yourself too much."

The linoleum under my bare feet is gritty with sand. It's time to mop again, fourth time in one week. That devil sand won't stay outside. At night it opens the door, slips in, and settles itself into the seams of my furniture, the eyes of my child.

From the cabinet I pull out a bag of yesterday's biscuits, take two, and place them inside the mouth of the microwave. Behind me, John fixes his belt. I wrap the warmed biscuits in tinfoil, set them beside John's thermos, and busy myself with the few dishes left from last night's dinner.

John grabs the thermos. "Thanks," he says and walks toward the front door, leaving the biscuits sitting on the counter.

He turns his pickup around in the dirt yard and maneuvers out between the prickly amargosa, driving past the rusting Oldsmobile parked under the cottonwood tree. He brought it out here a few months ago and fixed it up pretty good. Taught me how to drive stick shift in the evenings after work, bouncing the old boat over the sand hills until the sun got too low and the coyotes came out.

I set the last dish in the rack and open the tinfoil package of biscuits. They are dry and I'm not hungry. If only we had a dog to give scraps to. One of our dogs got killed by javelinas three months back and John shot the other one to save him from the same fate. He said a gun is better protection than a dog any day. He took me out into the dry creek bed and taught me to shoot the .22 he keeps in the hall closet. For a moment things felt like they did when we first got together, before His Beautiful Blood Holiness Church told us they didn't want John to be their preacher anymore, before we moved halfway across the United States. He held his hand over mine and gripped the gun just like he'd traced my fingers along the pages of Job and Exodus back in Tennessee. But when I tried to kiss him he ducked his head away.

On the front stoop, transplanted prickly pear clippings and night-blooming cereus sit in cut-open milk jugs. I grab my watering can

from behind the rocking chair and fill it at the side of the house. The first few months out here my transplanted pansies and mums shriveled to a crisp. I took to looking at a desert plant book from a shop in Arivaca. I grew what I could.

The perimeter of the yard is outlined in amargosa, creosote, and ocotillo. Fat red buds nest among the crucifixion thorns of the amargosa at the end of the driveway. Just past the bush, a chaos of footprints spill across the shifting dust of the road. The footprints run all together, one over another like a cattle trail. Illegals. We live out here for just this reason. John's boss owns the house but never comes out. He used it for a hunting cabin of sorts but then he started finding evidence of the aliens staying here. Aliens were sleeping in it, coming across the border in droves and holing up before making the last trek to Arivaca. He lets us stay for practically no rent, just to keep the illegals off his land. Only they don't stay off. At night their shadow footsteps surround the house. Most of the time they're out in fields beyond the mesquites but sometimes they come right up in the yard. They've got babies with them and old folks sometimes. John sleeps with his 9 mm on the bedside table.

My eyes search the clumps of buckbrush for movement. They mostly go by at night, but it worries me some. One time, an illegal came up out of the bushes once and grabbed my leg as I unloaded groceries from the truck. He was old, his skin like the leather of a baseball glove, his small eyes sunken into his skull. He spoke words like the devil whispering in the trees, and saliva dripped from the corner of his mouth. John said he probably hadn't had water in two or three days, said the rest of his group probably left him. John took him on into Arivaca to the border patrol office.

The sun sears the skin along the back of my neck. I pick up my watering can and head back inside to check on my baby. Nathan's six years old, but he's special. Advanced Muscular Dystrophy is the medical term, but John told me when he was born that it meant we were blessed, for the meek shall inherit the earth.

Nathan lies in his crib and stares at the ceiling where a water leak made a tree pattern. I flip the switch, toggle it up and down a few times, but the light won't come on.

"Hey buddy," I call to him, "hang on a second."

In the kitchen the clock on the coffeemaker does not glow and the overhead light will not turn on. John must have forgot to pay the bill. We don't get mail out here so he pays the bills when he goes through town. I cross the kitchen and pick up the phone, listen to the steady rhythm of the dial tone for a minute before deciding not to call. John hates for me to phone him at work, says it's embarrassing, says everybody else's wife seems to get along fine without calling in grocery lists every day. Our stove runs off propane and we've got a bunch of candles and one of those old-timey lamps in the closet somewhere. John can pay up tomorrow.

Nathan lies on his side, face pushed up against the wooden rails of his crib. I lift him up, kiss his cheek, and carry him to the changing table. His body is so small and immobile, like the delicate shells the cicadas leave behind.

"The amargosa's gonna bloom real soon," I whisper, "today maybe."

He blinks. My finger traces his lips. Nathan rarely smiles.

We spend the morning at the kitchen table. Nathan sits strapped into his high chair with a plastic bib around his neck while I guide tiny spoons of applesauce into his mouth. With the electricity out and all, I plan to go for an easy dinner. Cornbread and beans and wieners, maybe. I wonder if our money's run low. John never talks about money but he works long hours and we hardly spend anything living out here.

I wipe Nathan's face, pull a small baseball cap down onto his silky head, and carry him out front to the amargosa bush. The blood petals are packed in tiny fists among the thorns. Nathan coos. Among the roots of the bush two big ants struggle to carry the body of a third. We sit and watch the funeral procession play out across the miniature sand dunes.

The sun is too strong, so I carry Nathan inside. Lay him down in his crib and lay myself on the couch. I should sweep and mop the floor, should go look for that oil lamp. But I don't like the sound of all the quiet, the way the wind rakes the branches across the tin roof and taps at the windows, so I plug my ears, close my eyes.

The sun has passed the tops of the cottonwoods and mesquites. With

the electricity out there's no way to tell time, but it seems like it must be past five. John will be home in an hour. I visualize the ingredients for dinner mixing and preparing themselves.

Nathan sits in his chair with his teddy bears and watches me cook. By the time the sun sets out the western windows, John is still not home. By May the sun never sets before seven-thirty. John's usually home by six. I light candles in the windows and call the office in Arivaca, but Agent Malone says John left work early, took off sometime around four. I hang up the phone and press my forehead against the wall. My mind goes to the mezcal, the silver bracelet and pretty hair clip in John's truck, the dark shadow images of the woman who might have worn them. My belly moves like it did during my pregnancy with Nathan. I push the vague thread of thoughts away and tell myself he left early to go get groceries and pay the overdue bill, then the truck broke down and he's out there working on it, on his way home soon.

After Nathan goes to sleep, I get the .22 out of the hall closet and lay on the couch, the gun beside me and my eyes trained on the front door. The sand slips inside and coyotes bark from the bluff out back. Our house is a small vessel in a shuddering sea of darkness and wind and voices I can't quite make out.

Nathan's whimpers wake me. My muscles ache and my fingers struggle to unclench their grip on the .22. I stumble into the kitchen, wiping my eyes, and lift the phone to my ear. No dial tone. Only empty air. My gut twists. Nathan bubbles from the other room but I can't go to him. Panic questions fill my mind and Nathan doesn't have any answers. I look out the window toward the Oldsmobile.

The day is hot already. The sky is blinding blue and the metal car door burning to the touch. I duck into the seat, push the key into the ignition, and turn it. The car coughs and whines, trying faintly to turn over. I pull the key out and take a deep breath, fit it back into the ignition and turn again. This time there is no noise at all. A wave of fear leaps up in me, swells my tongue, and wets my eyes. My mind skips to John and I don't even know what lies to tell myself about him now. I lean back in the seat, push the sweaty hair off my forehead, close my eyes and picture the cool green of the creek at my

Grandpapa's house back in Tennessee, the creek that ran down to the well-house where you could lift the cedar bucket, bring the cold metal ladle to your lips and drink long swallows with your toes spread out across the slippery rocks of the well house floor. White hot light sears my skin through the glass. I get out of the car, leave the door hanging open and the key in the ignition.

I sit on the couch and watch the shadow of a mesquite tree jump across the kitchen wall. My eyes follow the line out to the tree and beyond into the endless landscape. Just where the brown sand meets the brilliant blue something moves, a flicker of a coyote or a dog or an illegal. The more my eyes focus on it the more it disappears.

Nathan whines again from the bedroom so I set his breakfast out on the table and go to fetch him. When it's just me and Nathan at home, my mind wanders. The doctor said it's good to engage him a lot, but after running through the list of songs and patty-cake games my mind just wanders. Mostly it doesn't seem to bother Nathan; he's an old soul and he understands me. But sometimes the silence out here gets so loud. I wish like hell he could talk. With the electricity off, there isn't even the radio to listen to. The Gospel Hour out of Tucson usually comes on at noon. It's especially for housewives, runs from twelve to two. They've got good songs on there, spirited enough to make you *want* to get up and mop the floor.

We stay at the table long after Nathan is done eating. He smears the applesauce across his cheeks and into his hair. Out the front window a jackrabbit leaps, then freezes. A vulture hangs motionless amidst the puffs of clouds. The sun inches along its course across the horizon and Nathan falls asleep in his high chair, head resting on his shoulder. I go to move him, to wipe his face and carry him into his crib, but my arms are too heavy to lift. The stripes of sunlight on the wall above the stove move and change color. Must be past two. Gospel Hour would be over. On a normal day I would turn the radio off and run a bucket full of suds to mop the kitchen floor. I can almost see myself doing it. Mopping and drying, pulling potatoes out of the bin and chicken breasts out of the freezer.

* * *

The bedroom closet is a jigsaw puzzle of cardboard boxes and suitcases. I pull open five containers before finding the lamp. On my way out I pass the bedside table and stop. John's 9 mm is gone and his wedding ring lies in its place.

My throat constricts. I turn on my heel, cross the room, and jerk the top bureau drawer open. My eyes search for the gold gleam of John's granddaddy's pocket watch, but there is only a nest of handkerchiefs with a small coil of money inside. Three twenty-dollar bills curled in a circle like a snake. I let myself go, dropping down onto the floor. The bureau drawer forms a roof above my head. I try to concentrate but my mind keeps bouncing, keeps mixing up images of silver bracelets and pink hair clips and the twenty-five miles of sand and chaparral that separate me from civilization.

Nathan moans. My fingers press flat against the floorboards till my knuckles turn white.

On the third day a river forms, spreading out from the Deepfreeze and into the hall. I pull up the lid, stare for a moment at the mound of thawing chicken, hamburger, ribs, and pork butt, then snap the top closed. Out the window the amargosa bush shakes in the wind, its blood blossoms spread wide open.

Nathan is already awake, so I lift him from his bed and bring him outside in his pajamas. The bush trembles with the faint fluttering motion of hundreds of small brown moths. Ignoring the growing heat, they hover and descend among the clusters of red petals and yellow stamens. We sit down in the buckbrush and watch the quivering amargosa while the sun burns strong and stretches shadows across the sand.

When Nathan pants and sweat drips down his forehead, we head inside. I set him on the kitchen floor with two stuffed bears for company and turn the oven on. We cook all through the afternoon and as I lift the last burger out of the frying pan the sun dips behind the amargosa. A rush of deep orange through tangled blossoms.

Nathan is busy devouring his teddy bear.

“You hungry, buddy?” I ask him, pointing to the towering stack of meat. Nathan can't eat meat. He can't chew good enough.

The kitchen grows thick with shadows. I pull the glass dome off the

oil lamp and twist the wick up. Oily smoke curls into the darkening air. There's not a whole lot of fuel in it, but it'll do for a while. The room smells rich with meat, but the thought of eating makes me sick.

"Well, we won't go hungry," I say to Nathan.

The lamp on the windowsill turns the glass into a funhouse mirror, reflecting and distorting my sunburnt face. Over the regular pattern of night noises, the rhythm of crickets and katydids, comes the soft yet undeniable sound of footsteps and the whimper cry of a baby. I reach for the lamp, ready to extinguish it. But the silence of the house has grown so heavy that these strange human rustlings don't scare me like they once did.

A knock sounds out sharp against the wood of the front door. There is a pause and then the sound comes again over the background of shuffling feet and whispering voices. I gather Nathan and his bear up into my arms and cross to the front door. The metal knob is cold in my palm as I open it.

A man stares up at me with dark diamond eyes. His right hand is raised, ready for another knock. Behind him crowd five others. An older woman, three teenage boys and a mother with a baby tied to her back. They look worn out and used up. They've become a part of the desert, shifting sand people. Fear darts across their faces like a bird in a house.

The man says something, and his words come out all jumbled up and unintelligible. I squeeze Nathan. The man's words mean nothing to me and he has not taken a step back; in fact he leans his stocky body forward into the frame of the door, nearly touching my elbow. There is a form like the curve of a pistol butt below his cotton T-shirt, tucked into the waistband of his pants. He says the words again, raises his right hand in a drinking motion, and lifts an empty milk jug up toward my face.

"Oh . . . water," I say, "you all need water."

My relief at the simplicity of their request is so complete that I turn quickly toward the kitchen, leaving the door open. The man enters with me and my stomach flips but I keep walking. The others follow us inside, each carrying an empty milk jug.

In the kitchen the smell of the meat hits me full in the face. If they

need water they are probably starving too. John has told me how they lose their way sometimes, wander for days with no food or water. I set Nathan in his high chair and point to the kitchen sink. They line up quietly. The first man fills his jug halfway and then steps aside and empties it down his throat in vicious audible gulps. The baby begins to fuss and the mother passes her jug to the older woman and shifts the child from her back to her chest. No one breathes a word but their eyes jump to the plate of meat on the counter.

“Do you all wanna eat?” I point to the platter.

The man who knocked looks up at me and mumbles more foreign words. I pull a stack of plates down out of the cupboard and set them beside the food.

“Go on,” I say, “eat.”

And the Mexicans eat, right there at my kitchen table. The mother shifts her baby from her chest to her back, tightening the blanket in a knot between her breasts. I wonder if I could carry Nathan that way. He’s bigger but he doesn’t weigh much. While the Mexicans eat, I go to the hall closet, pull a sheet out and tear it down the middle with my teeth. Hold the larger half up to my body and drape it around my shoulder. I can’t let the only humans I’ve seen in three days go and leave me alone again. If we walk at night the sun won’t hurt Nathan. The more of us there are, the less the coyotes and javelinas will bother us. We can’t walk twenty-five miles in one night, but there must be shade someplace where we can wait the day out. I have no plan beyond arriving in Arivaca. The full fear of waiting out here alone blooms open in my chest and leaves me breathless.

The kitchen is full of the clang of forks and strange voices. I fill an empty gallon jug for myself, wrap the rest of the meat in tinfoil, and put it in a grocery bag. The head man stands and the others rise with him. There is no way to tell them that I am coming along. The mother is last in line. She turns and smiles at me and I hold up the ripped sheet, point to Nathan and then back toward myself. She wrinkles up her nose with laughter but helps me all the same. She bends me over and sets Nathan on my back. His knobby knees fit on either side of my spine, curled up just like when he was inside me. The mother pulls the sheet tight across my chest and laughs once more

then waves good-bye. Shaking my head, I look back at the kitchen table filled with scattered dishes. My mind glances lightly over John, wondering if he will recant and come back looking. A part of me itches to leave his three twenty-dollar bills there on the table. But I'm not stupid; we'll need food and bus tickets. I blow out the lantern and the room goes dark as a river at night.

Outside, the sky is so full of stars there is hardly any space between them. The milk jug pulls painfully at my fingers. The weight of Nathan presses down on my shoulder blade and my mind goes to the ants under the amargosa, struggling across the sand.

The Mexicans form a line behind the man and I step in place at the end after the mother. She looks back over her shoulder and wrinkles her forehead. She says something to the woman in front of her who sends the message up the line. When the man in front hears, he steps out, putting his hand up to halt us all. He walks back toward me, shouting. His words are jumbled up but his intention is clear. He's a short man, comes only to my nose, but he is strong and angry like some enraged animal, all muscle and shout. My heart leaps inside my ribs but I do not step back. I will not stay out here alone.

The man's teeth flash in the moonlight as he bellows and points toward the house. My eyes glance away across the yard to the shadow shape of the amargosa, filled now with more moths, white ones and dark ones, swarming so that the blossoms are almost invisible. His breath feels hot on my neck. He sounds like he is speaking in tongues the way they did at the revivals back in Tennessee. My fingers grip tight to the milk jug and I pretend it is the Lord's words he is burbling and not the Devil's. The man kicks sand at me. I move closer to the mother. He spits at my feet but turns then and marches back to the front of the line. The mother glances over her shoulder and her mouth twists into a tiny smile. My feet fit into the tracks of the six who walk before me. I follow them through the dark and my eyes trace their soft shapes against all that desert and all that sky.

13.

Djeser Djeseru (Splendor of Splendors)

by Paula Younger

At Luxor's airport, Patty panics about corrupt taxi drivers until she sees a man holding a Thomas Cook sign with her name. Tufts of black chest hair poke out from his thin dress shirt. The right amount: manly but not apelike. She greets him with a simple "sabah" instead of the full hissing/gargling of "sabah el-kheir," a sound that must be similar to a snake choking on a sock.

He shakes her hand like a Westerner instead of kissing her cheek like an Egyptian. "I am Hossam. Nice to meet you, Batty." Just like the seminarians, unable to say Ps. He leads her to his white Peugeot in his flat leather sandals, the type that don't give support or protection.

Patty heads for the back of Hossam's car, but he says, "Sit up front. Keep me company."

She doesn't have to keep playing the part of consecrated virgin, as the seminarians called her. During her two months of teaching English at the Coptic Catholic seminary, she kept her divorce and former married status tucked away. But she is in Luxor now, on vacation after all, eager to play the part of tourist, and a tourist wouldn't know better.

Patty moves to unroll her window, but no knob. The heat begins in her head and then flows over her chest. She dabs the sweat off with a bandana. Forty-five and already suffering from menopause. The end of her marriage and reproductive life happened the same

summer. Patty eyes the air-conditioning switch and then, miraculously, Hossam turns it on. Her first car in Egypt with working air-conditioning and a driver willing to use it; the rest swear it makes them sick.

Hossam says, "You are a good woman, I can tell." She asks how. He says, "Your clothes are respectful."

"You can hardly tell that from clothes." Patty's tank top clings to her stomach, hidden beneath her long-sleeved cotton top, part of her conservative clothing arsenal.

He raises an eyebrow. "You are not good?"

"Oh, I'm good." And she laughs at how ludicrous she sounds. Her sexual experience is limited to one man before her marriage, an unfortunate effect of her Catholic upbringing and inability to have sex without attachment. Those two men in her past work out to one man every thirteen adult years.

Hossam glances at the ring on her left hand. "You have husband?"

Patty explains that she wears it to keep men from bothering her. Sexual harassment has no age restrictions in Egypt, and the attention both thrills and disgusts her. Her real wedding ring is tucked in her underwear drawer at her house in San Diego. When she returns, her ex-husband will still be living in a downtown loft with the Brazilian, who is about to pop out his spawn. He probably married her by now, but Patty stopped reading his emails weeks ago.

"You are very pretty not to be married."

Patty scans Hossam's wrist, no cross tattoo. She asks, "Are you Muslim?"

"We all believe in Abraham's God."

At least his religion accepts divorce. She admits, "My husband left me." She feels lighter sharing that information. The seminarians and priests would have asked too many questions that require complex answers, not simple parsed-out English.

Hossam asks, "Any children?"

Patty shakes her head and rests a hand against her flat stomach.

"You don't want children?"

"Of course I do, but my husband didn't."

"Husband bad man. Against will of God to deny children. Pur-

pose of marriage is children.” Hossam gives her a grazing look, unusual for an Egyptian man introduced to a woman. Patty likes it. He says, “You must have married young. My mother married when she was fifteen.”

“Something like that.” Patty believed that within her first year of marriage she would have a child like her mother did. Patty wanted three, a good number. She keeps mum about the new phase in her life. She hasn’t told her mother and sisters yet, unwilling to feel like a failure now that the fires of menopause have scorched her eggs and left behind a barren desert. Patty should have at least had a daughter, some companionship insurance. She could have been in college by now. An art major, or some sort of degree that would cause Patty to worry that her daughter wouldn’t be able to find a job, but would help with traveling. She would know different dynasties, art periods, and symbolism. She might even fall in love with a handsome young Egyptian man and become fluent in Arabic.

To steer the conversation away from her, Patty asks, “Do you have children?”

“A boy. Fever kill him. Then wife leave.”

“Asif,” Patty trips over her answer and adds, “asif gedan.” But Egyptians don’t say “sorry” when hearing bad news. They say something about God and praying, like most Egyptian sayings, whether the person is Christian or Muslim. Patty learned a curse that translates to “may God destroy your house.”

Hossam says, “Insha ’Allah will give me pretty, good wife again.”
“I’m sure He will.”

Along the road is a Mubarak billboard, the thirteenth one that Patty has seen. Outdated pictures of him in a wide-lapel suit and sideburns are planted all over Egypt. Patty has a set of photographs of herself standing beneath Mubarak billboards, but after a month the novelty turned into an annoyance. She resents the all-seeing, judging Mubarak clinging to his youthful image and power. Twenty-seven years under emergency rule should be enough for anyone.

Hossam asks, “You like Luxor?”

“It’s beautiful.”

Cruise ships with names like *Nile Goddess* and *Alexander the Great*

crowd the river's banks. Westerners and Egyptians walk along the Nile's elegant corniche. For this one week, Patty wants to shed her layers and join the other Western women in their sundresses and shorts. After this trip, Patty will visit her favorite seminarian and his family in his village, where she will redon her conservative clothes and careful behavior, and sleep on another rock-hard mattress and rectangular pillow in another hot room while his family squashes together to make room for her.

Hossam pulls up to the Iberotel. Patty suffered biting ants, beans for breakfast, and no air-conditioning at the seminary. But the Iberotel's brochure promises a pool that floats on a barge in the Nile, omelet station, soft pillows, and "il-hamdu lillah," air-conditioning. Patty visualizes lounging next to the pool, unfortunately in her conservative, skirted swimming suit, the one she wore to the Red Sea with the seminarians, but better than the alternative of the *burqini* or wading in full-veiled clothing. Also in Patty's suitcase is a red sun-dress that she brought, just in case.

Cramped shops selling hieroglyphic rulers and evil-eye necklaces flank the hotel's skinny marble entrance. The bellboy, an older man with a hunched back, takes her suitcase from the trunk. Patty pulls out her wallet to tip him when a man in a Bob Marley T-shirt asks, "Want a *felucca* ride?" Another man with a silvery beard suggests a ride in his buggy and then points to his horse, "He is strong and good." A woman wearing mesmerizing green eye shadow descends on Patty and says, "Madame should come for sugaring. It's better than waxing, less painful. Makes skin nice and smooth, good for touching." She rubs her forearm as evidence. The hawkers pin Patty next to the Peugeot. She clutches her wallet to her chest. Arabic explodes around her.

Hossam starts yelling, probably bringing shame into it—the magic word to use against all Egyptian men. The people start to disband and Hossam apologizes for their impolite behavior.

A man in a gray *galabaiya*, a traditional robe that looks like a bland muumuu, walks by and leers, "Want an Egyptian husband?"

"*Fil mish mish*," Patty replies. She doesn't understand how "*fil mish mish*" translates to "in your dreams" when *mish mish* is an apricot.

Hossam claps his hands and grins. “Ah, you Egyptian woman. *Fil mish mish.* Very good.”

His lips might taste like the salty Mediterranean Sea. Patty imagines him as someone ancient, one of St. Mark’s descendants before St. Augustine infected the Church with his views on sex, before the Catholic Church even existed, a time when most Egyptians were Christians in defiance of Rome. But Hossam is Muslim, part of another culture, another conquest. It must be impossible to have a singular identity when your country has been repeatedly conquered. The abrasive desert where Persian armies disappeared in sandstorms kept Egyptians huddled to the one water source that flows south to north, bringing people to Egypt, but rarely out of it. Even Cleopatra was Greek.

First on Patty’s list is Hatshepsut’s Temple, site of Egypt’s first female pharaoh, whose reign, like Patty’s marriage, lasted for twenty-one years. The sun beats down on the dusty earth. Hossam wears a red baseball cap with an awkwardly stitched NY, as if someone unsure of English letters had created it. His mustache shades his thick lips, unlike her ex’s spotty facial hair.

Patty gives Hossam four hundred pounds, eighty dollars, and says, “For tickets today.” She was told to sneak money to her guide, because it’s shameful for a woman to pay.

Hossam hands her tickets at the entrance and says, “I wait.”

“You’re not going with me?”

He *tsk-tisks* her. “I driver, not guide. Other sites, yes. But this one is too important.”

“I thought you were a driver and a guide.”

“No one is a driver and a guide.”

“Come with me. I’ll pay you to be my guide.”

“They think I take business from guides. They ask for license. Just driver. I study engineering, not tourism.”

“You went to college?”

“University. My friend Mahmoud,” Hossam waves at another mustached man standing next to another white Peugeot, “is a social worker. No jobs in Egypt. Some go to Gulf to work.” Hossam hands

her a bottle of water and adds, “Be careful. Wear your hat. Take care of your pretty white skin.”

Hossam returns to his car, about to become a roasting tin can. The temple is a three-level structure carved out of the base of a limestone cliff, looking ’70s modernist in its simplicity. Patty gets on the shuttle and hands over her ticket that cost twenty-five pfisters, five cents. Everyone has to be paid and tipped, even for distances that would take a ten-minute walk. At the airport, a man’s job was to push the button to lift the parking arm.

Patty tries to read her guidebook on the first terrace of the temple, but one of the guards grabs her arm and says, “Madame, here. Look here.” He lifts up a red rope to let her into a cordoned-off area. She backs away, unwilling to damage thousands of years of history for her own gratification. He sticks his hand out, palm up, and flexes his fingers repeatedly, as if to say, “gimmee gimmee.”

Guides lead Italian and Spanish tour groups unmolested, but each part of the temple lands Patty into a section of *baksheesh*-seeking men who are supposed to guard the sites but instead subsidize their measly pay by opening restricted areas. Clusters of guides hang out in the front, but they look shifty. Hossam should have entered the temple with her, even if he would have broken some driver/guide rule. After all, she’s paying.

Patty hears a slip of English, blessed English. A short Egyptian guide leads a British man with bursts of red in his hair along the temple’s lower terrace. Patty lags behind. Her water bottle is dangerously low. She should have brought a Camelbak like her ex suggested.

The guide points out the gaps where Hatshepsut’s images and cartouches were chiseled off the temple’s limestone walls. Many of her statues were torn down and smashed or disfigured before being buried in a pit, and the official history was rewritten without her. Still, in some places, especially ones outside the line of sight, her image remains.

Patty asks, “How could they erase her like that?”

The Brit turns around. “Quite fantastic, don’t you think?”

Patty says, “If her reign had been filled with wars and economic disaster, they would have left her image up so everyone would remember a failed female pharaoh.”

The guide says, “That’s just an opinion,” then turns his back to Patty.

The men walk up to the middle terrace. Patty follows. The guide keeps looking back and begins to walk faster. But the Brit stops and asks, “Are you here alone?”

Patty nods, hoping she doesn’t appear too pathetic.

“Brave to be wandering here without a guide, especially as a woman.”

“Or dumb. I hired a driver but not a guide.”

“I did the opposite. I figured I could walk, but not read my guide-book and fend off these hooligans.”

Patty introduces herself and learns the Brit’s name is Edmond.

The guide points to Edmond and says, “I call him Khwaga. It’s a better fit.” The Egyptian equivalent of gringo.

She asks him, “Esmak eh?” Proud that she knows how to ask ‘what’s your name?’

“Ashraf.” He has the familiar cross tattoo on his wrist. But unlike the seminarians, he doesn’t have a mustache.

Patty asks, “Are you Coptic Catholic?”

Ashraf wags his finger. “No no. Coptic Orthodox.”

Pope Shenouda declared that a Coptic Orthodox woman would be better off marrying a Muslim man than a Coptic Catholic, the ultimate insult. The seminarians complained about the pope betraying his Christian brothers and Patty reminded them they follow the pope in Rome, not the one in Alexandria. Still, rejection from a minority must be humiliating, like wandering around a Middle Eastern country alone as a divorced, childless, barren, middle-aged woman.

Edmond says, “Please join us. We wouldn’t be gentlemen if we left you alone in the desert fighting off *baksheesh*-seeking men.”

Ashraf stiffens until Patty announces, “I’ll pay too.”

He leads the tour again, slowing down, answering questions, hoping for a larger tip. Ashraf says, “Hatshepsut called this place Djeser Djeseru, Splendor of Splendors. It also translates to Holiest of Holies. Splendor and holy can have the same meaning.”

Edmond looks at the topless men in kilts carved into the temple wall and says, “Back then they knew how to dress in this infernal heat.”

Ashraf points to a cow with a sun disc between its horns. The cow smiles coyly, as if it is the original Mona Lisa. He says, “The Goddess Hathor symbolizes love, sexuality, and motherhood. Egyptians believe no woman is truly a woman until she has a child.”

Patty’s body probably reeks of infertility, a smell she imagines as a musty basement. She dabs her forehead. “Why does she have to be a cow? Rabbits are known for their fertility.”

Edmond says, “But cows are mighty. A rabbit goddess could be squashed.”

At the center of the middle terrace Ashraf announces, “This is where they died.”

“Who?”

His English slips and his “tourists” sounds like “terrorists.” “Government calls it ‘the accident.’ Ten years ago, terrorists dressed like security and killed sixty-three people. They still remember that day.” Ashraf points to men waiting on the cliffs, ready to offer donkey and camel rides to tourists hiking from the Valley of the Kings over to Hatshepsut’s Temple.

After Patty mailed the divorce papers and announced her travel plans, her ex sent articles about tourists attacked in Egypt. A mother covered her daughter with her body to protect her, but they both died. Patty imagines being pinned between the pillars as security guards fired into the group of tourists. She almost expects someone to come running down the cliff and end her life. What would her ex do when he received the news? Would he name his baby after her? Patty rubs her flat belly, wondering if she had a daughter if she would have sacrificed herself too. Each year she told herself that her ex would change his mind, that all men at some point want to have children, although she believed it a little less each time, especially when he called children “small people with needs.”

Edmond touches her arm. “Don’t worry. That was the last major attack here. Just stay out of Sharm el-Sheikh.”

Ashraf points behind one of the main temple doors and says, “Senenmut designed and built this temple, as well as Luxor and Karnak. Many people believe he was Hatshepsut’s lover. He was too low in society to marry her, so he ruled through her bed. In her tomb, men carved sex acts between them. He did great things for Egypt.”

Patty's shoulders tense. "She didn't need a man. She made herself one." She points to the statue's slender arms and rounded breasts, which contrast with the pointy beard. Maybe some of Hatshepsut's powers will seep into Patty through the three-thousand-year-old sandstone. Hatshepsut didn't bear a son, but instead of being relegated to a favored second wife after her husband's death, she made herself co-regent for her stepson and took power. She was too busy bringing prosperity to her people to cry over dried up eggs and whether a man wanted her or not.

Patty asks Ashraf if he lives in Luxor.

He frowns. "No, no. Cairo. It's a much better city."

"But Luxor is cleaner than Cairo, and prettier."

"Yes, but it's boring. Not for tourism, of course. There are many wonderful sights and tourists who love them, but Cairo is for Egyptians."

Traffic laws seem to exist in Luxor and there are fewer donkey pull-carts along the road than in Cairo. Trash is properly concealed instead of piled along roads or in massive roadside dumps. The sky looks wider and bluer without high-rises blocking it. So different from Cairo's overloaded city, where iron rods poke out of incomplete concrete buildings, waiting for the next level that won't come, where people live on roofs with goats and no ceilings because its owners are skirting the tax laws. Luxor is a tourist mecca, too important for the government to allow its skyline to be marred with incomplete buildings. The land of the dead attracts plenty of the living.

At the end of their tour, Edmond mentions he is also staying at the Iberotel. Patty asks Ashraf if he is a guest there too. His face darkens. Edmond explains, "We can't stay at the same place. The nice hotels worry about prostitution. They see a Western and Egyptian man together, and they assume."

Edmond and Ashraf stand close together, their bodies loose and comfortable. Men hold hands with their male friends in Egypt and kiss their cheeks. Affection within the same sex is allowed in public, and Patty admires that. Still, they look too comfortable. Patty says, "But homosexuality is illegal here."

Ashraf wags his finger. "You should not use that word. That's worse than cursing someone's mother."

Edmond smiles. "Sometimes things are more accessible because they're taboo." He explains that in Egypt, if a man is the giver, he's not considered homosexual. Some see it as a way for men to satisfy their desires until they can afford to marry, which may take years or never happen. But these poor men have sex drives and good women remain virgins until marriage to maintain their family's honor. What's a man to do?

Ashraf adds, "Our government makes us scrounge from tourists." He glances at Edmond and adds, "Too many poor people and too many khawagaat."

"Please, I just cut hair."

Edmond's skin is turning pink. He should have worn a hat. Ashraf suggests waiting at a restaurant until the temperature cools, then walking back to the ferry landing where boats take people from the west, the land of the dead, to the east, the land of the living. Patty offers them a ride with her and Hossam.

They walk the gauntlet of aggressive shopkeepers when Hossam appears from one of the stalls with a sealed bottle of relatively cold water. "You must drink," he says and hands the bottle to Patty. She gulps it. He gives a polite hello to Edmond and Ashraf, and *ma feesh mushkila*, no problem, about giving them a ride. Hossam grabs Patty's hand and leads her through the shopkeeper onslaught. His hand is surprisingly soft. Most Egyptian husbands and wives don't hold hands or touch each other in public.

She says, "Hatshepsut was a smart woman."

"She was good leader. Women wise, not snake. Many men think woman has two face, cause of sin and evil in world. They forget woman is the mother, the sister, the friend, source of love and emotions."

He's probably saying it for a larger *baksheesh*, but it's worth it to hear feminist words emerge from an Egyptian man's mouth. Some of the seminarians would say woman is the temptress for men, the reason for original sin. Others seemed too interested in women. One night after dinner, Patty's favorite seminarian invited her on their usual walk. He bought her the requisite drink, a pineapple Fanta, despite her preference for water, which he deemed not special enough.

He asked how could he become a celibate priest when he doesn't know what he is giving up, but then stopped and said, "Aye, but I forget. You are the consecrated virgin." She almost told him about sex and her ex-husband. Instead, Patty hugged him. His hand grazed the side of her breast. He gave her a suggestive look and she knew he was hoping she would sleep with him. And she felt gratitude. This young man, boy really, was twenty years her junior and wanted her. She imagined sneaking him into her room, but hers was situated between the other female teachers; the section the seminarians dubbed the *haremluk*. She dismissed it as a silly, momentary thought. Still, she couldn't help but look at the seminarians' young bodies and think they were the type of men for her—nice and brown with just the right amount of facial hair.

Hossam strokes Patty's index finger. Because of sexuality taboos, Egypt feels a little more romantic. Each glance, each movement, carries more meaning and intention.

At the car, Patty heads for the front seat when Ashraf says, "No, no. Disreputable women sit in front. Good women sit in back. It's not right to be next to a man unless he is your husband."

Away from the seminary two days and she's already the bad woman in Egypt. She slides into the back. Hossam blasts the air-conditioning. It cools her skin as another rush of heat starts from her head. She mops her forehead with her bandana, hoping the men don't notice.

They cross the bridge to the eastern side and Edmond asks why she's traveling alone. She tells the tired story about her ex-husband. He says, "The bastard." She loves his immediate allegiance. She asks how he knows Ashraf. Edmond is a hairdresser who travels to Egypt once a month. He has wealthy oil clients and likes to spend his free time soaking up the sun and sights. Ashraf is the nephew of one of his top clients, and a licensed tour guide. Edmond helps Ashraf with his English and Ashraf helps Edmond make the most of his trips. Life is much cheaper, and more pleasurable, in Luxor than in England.

Patty asks Ashraf, "Have you been to England?"

"I will." No insha 'Allah. The first Egyptian man she met who doesn't make his future plans dependent on God.

Edmond asks, "Any interest in joining forces? My tour guide for

your driver? You can play the part of my wife. We could be downright respectable and have two children at university."

Ashraf says, as if to prove his worth, "Luxor's name in Arabic is El-Qosor. It means the palaces." The *baksheesh* she gave him must have been big.

Patty asks Hossam if it would be okay with him.

"If it makes you happy. Ente mab sota?"

Patty agrees, relieved not to be traveling alone. But outside the Iberotel, Hossam watches as Edmond walks inside and asks, "Can you trust him? He might have bad ideas." Patty assures Hossam that she is not Edmond's type.

During their second round of drinks at the Iberotel's lounge that night, Edmond tells Patty, "Well-done with Hossam. I like the gruff, manly type." Patty protests, but Edmond insists, "You're a dream come true for many Egyptian men. You're well-preserved."

Patty raises her glass. "Thanks to power walking and yoga." Hossam could be a possibility. Someone she wouldn't have to see again. She says, "He studied engineering. Such a waste that he shuttles people around."

"It's best to focus on the sights."

"Are you going to help Ashraf move to England?"

Edmond glances at his scotch. "I pay him plenty. In a few years he'll be able to marry. That's what they all want."

Before falling asleep that night, Patty prays to Hatshepsut, thanking her for the gift of companionship.

The next few days Hossam, Edmond, Patty, and Ashraf take turns playing photographer, memorializing themselves at the various sites of the dead. Each morning Patty gives Hossam money for the day. He buys her water and food, and doesn't give change.

At the Tombs of the Nobles they walk among closed graves, littered with dust and rocks. Squat concrete houses blend into the limestone hillsides above. Hossam searches for someone to open the tombs while Patty, Edmond, and Ashraf take refuge from the sun under a storefront's abandoned canopy. Their newest guide insists he lead the tour. He makes a show of pointing out each loose rock and step,

but in the Tomb of Userhat he holds up a jagged mirror to illuminate the artwork with reflected sunlight, just like the ancients did, and temporarily blinds Patty. Hossam steadies her and lectures the man about his carelessness. After that, Ashraf resumes the lead, making a show of correcting the man on time periods. Hossam holds Patty's hand to ensure her safety. In the tomb of Ramose, Hossam looks at the image of swaying mourners and begins to sing, a throaty type of warbling that sounds thousands of years old. Patty leans against him.

When their foursome begins to leave a group of boys come running out with trails of postcard collections flapping behind them. Hossam buys Patty two sets. Instead of the standard Egyptian *nom bad el dohr*, an afternoon nap, Patty, Edmond, Ashraf, and Hossam plunge into the next places on their list. Hossam carries Patty's water and sunblock. His eyes flick over her, watching for signs of amusement or exhaustion, but looks away whenever she dabs her forehead with her bandana. Each day he wears his faded black chinos. Good Egyptian cotton is exported; the dregs are left for its people. Patty wishes she had a pair of nice linen pants to give him.

In Deir el-Medina, the Workers' Village, Hossam walks ahead and advises Patty when to watch her step. He offers his hand for steep descents. Most ancient Egyptians lived on the east side of the Nile, where the sun rises and life begins, but the men who created the royal tombs and artwork in the Valley of the Kings were sentenced to live and die here with their families to keep the tomb locations secret. Every two weeks they received supplies of wheat, beer, onions, dried meat and fish, equal to the price of a bull. In their free time, the workers created their own tombs and artwork, scenes of family life and lovemaking. Hossam holds Patty's hand and says, "This is greater than any royal tomb." She squeezes in agreement and stares straight ahead at the scene of a husband and wife in supplication to Nut, the tree goddess, while their bountiful children stand behind them.

Patty takes a picture of a shrub with bright pink flowers. Hossam asks her what is so special. She says, "There are flowers growing in the desert."

He kisses her hand. "Many things bloom in the desert." Her hand warms beneath his lips.

Ashraf takes her aside and warns, “He is a driver and a Muslim. Be careful about encouraging him.”

But Patty likes the way Hossam looks at her as if she is special, not a lower-paid second-grade teacher. She spent too many years craning her neck up at her college professor husband, forgetting that at one time they had been equal college students, even forgetting that she supported them while he studied for his master’s and then PhD.

At the Colossi of Memnon, Ashraf stays inside the car blasting the air conditioner while Patty, Hossam, and Edmond wander around the gigantic, faceless statues. Edmond jokes about what other type of colossi the statues must have had. A young policeman leans against the giant statue’s toes and his rifle is slouched across his chest as uselessly as a beauty pageant sash. Hossam talks to him but keeps watch over Patty. A little girl follows her selling handmade dolls with vacant eyes for five pounds. Hossam buys two for forty pounds. He shoves the scrawny straw dolls into Patty’s hand and then grabs her camera. As if on cue, the girl latches on to Patty’s thigh. On their way out, the young policeman points to a blond European couple kissing. The woman’s shorts barely cover the tops of her pasty thighs. The policeman asks Patty, “Why do Westerners like to make sex in front of us?”

Each night Patty and Hossam part ways with Edmond and Ashraf. Hossam hires private *feluccas* to ride down the black Nile lit by the moon, and to take Patty across to the western side, where the Thebes necropolis waits and where Hossam lives. At the different local restaurants, Patty feels like he is splurging on her, then remembers the large amount of money she hands him each morning and the change he doesn’t give her. Each night ends on the Sheraton hotel’s rooftop bar, where Hossam drinks at least three beers, odd for a Muslim man.

On the fifth night, Hossam takes Patty to Sofra, a restaurant in the backstreets of Luxor. It’s filled with foreigners and carved wooden furniture, inlaid with hundreds of iridescent mother-of-pearl pieces. Hossam and Patty sit on the rooftop terrace, the night still heavy with heat from the day. Patty wears her just-in-case red sundress, feeling naked without sleeves, but sexy too. Hossam tells her, “You look like the goddess Isis.” He offers her a gift: an *ankh* pendant, a sign of everlasting life. He clasps the chain around her neck. His breath

caresses her shoulders. Patty rubs the *ankh*, feeling part of something ancient, enjoying the surprise even though she gave him five hundred pounds that morning. He orders their meal and a *sheesha*, flavored apple. The waiter sets the tall water pipe in front of Hossam, the spiraled glass a delicious ruby red. It feels decadent to smoke before eating, and careless too.

Patty clasps her lips around the reed's plastic end. She sucks in, but nothing happens.

Hossam says, "You try too hard. Look like you play flute."

She relaxes and the smoke glides through her mouth and out her nose like a dragon.

Hossam smiles. "You pro."

A familiar buzz settles in, reminding her of when she would smoke pot with her ex. Patty's head floats. She asks, "What type of engineering did you study?"

"Electric. Egypt's electricity is very bad. I want to help my village, but I do not have government friends or money for baksheesh. But I have a car and license, so driver is good."

"Why don't you become a tour guide?"

He taps his chest. "Too old for school. Too much money. People need drivers."

The candle flickers on the table. She puts her hand on Hossam's knee, a bold move, especially in a public setting. His thigh tenses beneath the thin cotton. "What I really want to know is, how does 'mish mish' translate to 'your dreams' when it means apricot?"

Hossam scoots a little closer. "Sweets are important because we have them so little. They are special and rare, like you."

Through the restaurant's speakers, a woman's throaty voice sings in Arabic. The melody makes Patty feel as if a beautiful moment is happening and ending at the same time.

She says, "I love this song," and fixes her eyes on Hossam.

He leans in. "This song by Fairuz. Beautiful Lebanese singer. She sings: Visit me once a year, just don't forget me, I fear that love would come in a glimpse and go." His words sound smooth and big for him, rehearsed even, but, Patty tells herself, sincerity isn't necessary for romance.

Around the room other foreign women breathe in *sheesha* or eat a decadent meal, some with their boyfriends or husbands, others with Egyptians, but they fade into the dark lighting and it feels like it is just Patty and Hossam.

His hand brushes along her bicep. The hairs on her arms stand on end. He says, "First time I saw you, I feel I know you before, from years ago. You are the moon." The compliment rests on her shoulders. To say a woman is the moon means she is the embodiment of perfect beauty and femininity.

Patty recites a silent prayer to Hatshepsut that she doesn't embarrass herself, then says, "If anything happens, it won't mean anything."

He says, "I know this." The desert inside her stirs, turning into something lush and filled with splendor.

Patty says, "It doesn't mean anything," a couple more times as they walk back to Hossam's apartment, a slinky bounce to her step, as if she is wearing high heels instead of flat sandals. She says it once again when she steps inside his concrete walls, bare except for a poster of a red racing car. She says it once again when she sees an inferior Egyptian condom in Hossam's hand and wonders why he has one anyway. But, she reminds herself, he is Muslim and he probably hasn't slept with anyone other than his wife and he thinks she's beautiful and this is just a fling.

Patty wants to rest, but Hossam's twin bed doesn't have the space or the spring. So few things are soft in Egypt, no wonder people spend most of their time socializing along the Nile's corniche, next to the water and away from their concrete homes. At Patty's house in San Diego, and it is her house now thanks to the divorce settlement, she has rooms she forgets to use, a plush sectional, and sheets with a twelve hundred thread count. Her ex declared traveling too much of a hassle and spent their extra savings on a home theater, an outdoor living room with a privacy fence, and a king-sized mattress adjustable on each side so that they wouldn't have to agree on the firmness. A home so comfortable he couldn't feel comfortable anywhere else. The Brazilian's loft better be minimalist, with uncomfortable boxy furniture.

Patty calculates a way to return to the Iberotel when Hossam suggests they go for a drink. On the Sheraton's rooftop, he finishes a whiskey and then announces, "Insha 'Allah, you will marry and have children with me."

Patty laughs, but he stares at her. She thinks of his cheap cotton clothes, his car's window handle without the knob. If she married him, she would have the power.

He leans forward and says, "I can give you children. I am a better man than your husband."

"I'm too old to have children."

"No no, not too old. Beautiful woman."

"How old do you think I am?"

"Thirty-five."

"I'm forty-five."

His face falls and he looks at her more closely. She asks him how old he is.

"Thirty-three." His eyes look yellow and his nose red and lumpy. He announces, "We adopt."

That word has lurked inside Patty's mind since she learned about the Brazilian's pregnancy. Hossam probably would be a good father. Her mother and sisters would forgive the Muslim detail for a baby.

Patty states the obvious. "I've known you for five days."

"I tell you my hard stories. Now time to share life with me. We can live abroad. Egypt no good." He tells her again about his wife leaving him and his dead daughter. But didn't he say *dead son* before?

Hossam clutches her hand. "It's hard life alone. A woman should have a man take care of her. I can be a good American man."

Patty forces herself to ask, "How old is your mother?"

He looks down at his whiskey. "Fifty-three."

Patty's widowed mother often complains that men her age either want a nurse or a purse. Patty looks at Hossam's thin sandals and says, "I don't want to pay for you."

He protests, but she stands and says, "I no longer need your services."

She has a shawl in her purse, but she leaves her shoulders bare as she waves down a taxi. A black-and-white one pulls over, the ones notorious for overcharging. The young driver whistles and begins tell-

ing her how pretty she is. She shames him, asking if he would talk to an Egyptian woman this way. At the Iberotel, she rejects his inflated fare and haggles for a fair rate.

At the front desk, she leaves a message for Edmond that she isn't feeling well. She sleeps late, then spends the rest of the day next to the pool in her skirted black swimming suit, which the seminarians called a bikini, their name for any Western swimwear. The European bikini women lounging around the Iberotel pool would blow their seminarian eyes out. Patty sips piña coladas, margaritas, and every other fruity alcoholic concoction she can think to order from the full Western bar. On their honeymoon, she and her ex stayed at a hotel like this in Hawaii. She was young and firm in her bikini, and was served alcoholic drinks in pineapples. She saw a future for them like the beach, spread out and seemingly infinite.

Her mobile fills with missed calls from Hossam and Edmond. Patty is ordering a banana daiquiri when she spots a leathery, midfifties Italian woman next to a much younger Egyptian man two beach chairs down. He slathers baby oil onto her hardened back. Her skin would fit in at the Khan el-Khalili's leather *souq*. She turns to him, glistening, but he retreats to his laptop.

Edmond and Ashraf appear next to Patty's lounge chair. Edmond says, "Where's your eye candy? I expected him to be feeding you grapes."

Patty bites into her pineapple slice and imagines Hossam staking out the ferry landing, waiting like a man afraid of missing his last ship out.

Edmond asks, "What does he want? Some clothes? Shoes? An apartment? Things are cheap here. Probably not as expensive as you think."

The pineapple lodges in her throat. "Marriage."

Edmond laughs. "Now that's greedy."

"He's thirty-three. Can you believe that?"

"It's a hard life here." Edmond pats Ashraf's leg. "No offense."

"That's why you will take me to England. I must live abroad."

The leathery Italian cajoles her younger Egyptian cohort with

words like *mi amor* and *per favore*. From Hatshepsut's temple to Sofra restaurant, women like her waited in the background, with their dyed hair and fancy sunglasses. Their laughs and smiles were too big, they touched the young men's arms too much, and they leaned in too close, hoping for the same second act men get. Those women Patty chose not to see because she was doing the same thing. Hers and Hossam's connection was an illusion, like an oasis in the desert.

Edmond takes Patty's hand. "It's time for you to rejoin the living."

Ashraf says, "Hossam is just a driver. Not important for a good Christian woman like you." He glances at her empty daiquiri glass and adds, "He drinks too much, especially for a Muslim."

"What about you?"

"I smoke bubble bubble. It's from nature. A gift from God." Ashraf taps his shirt pocket. "Want some hashish?"

Edmond says, "Brilliant idea."

Ashraf leads them down to the pier and then sits on a rock next to the Nile, tucked against the corniche, out of sight. The granite pokes Patty's rear end as she sucks the hashish in. The police might come, but she could probably mollify them with baksheesh too.

Afterward, Edmond and Ashraf lead her deep into the eastern side of Luxor. The city looks like it's floating in a fog. They order at a falafel stand when a burst of trilling interrupts from the opposing sidewalk. People form a protective circle around a groom and his bride in a Western wedding dress. The women welcome the newly-weds with their ululations, that ancient Arabic sound of female joy or grief that reminds Patty of Indians in old Western films.

Ashraf says, "Arabic word 'farah' means wedding, but also joy and merriment. We all hope for a wife and children. Someday I will have this, but in a better place, far away."

She admires the newlyweds' simple pleasure, happy to be marrying one another, not worrying about careers or accomplishments or children. They radiate the young's innocence and happiness, before love is convoluted with too many needs and wants. Whatever else happened in their story, Patty and her ex had been that way once.

Edmond says, "Thank God that's not for us. Can you imagine one person the rest of your life?"

He wraps his arm around her waist. She rests her head on his shoulder. If Hatshepsut could return to glory in Egypt after being carved out of history, then Patty can find her way too.

Ashraf and Edmond walk ahead on the high sidewalk, built steep to protect pedestrians from erratic drivers. Patty lunges up to follow and the women's trilling cries of joy trail behind her.

14.

Eighty-six Ways to Cross One Desert

by Alexander Lumans

When curious about the depth of a strange river, do you throw in a nearby rock? If so, how long does it normally take you to realize the futility of this supposed gauging? Do you ever? Do you run away instead? Are you someone of the temperament who prefers to “go it alone”? Is that the naked truth? Have you ever closed a wound with hot glue? Is it the same moon every night? Will it rain today? If it rained some object other than rain today, would you go out into the streets to celebrate? What if it were raining down lobster claws? Or Olympic gold medals? Or Japanese woodcuts of copulating butterflies? What would you be willing to go out into the streets to celebrate other than the wet wet rain?

Did you have any allergies that I didn’t already know about? They’re explained as overreactive immune systems—what’s akin to firebombing an amateur sniper, or just an amateur *whatever* with a gun out in the desert looking for asylum in the heavily walled city of your body—does this sound true? When did the phrase “unconditional surrender” migrate into our everyday lexicon? Are most crevasses judged too short? Too far? Or just right? Should I sleep with one eye open?

Have you ever witnessed a butterfly’s first flight? Would you want to? Would you, with me? In “silence, exile, and cunning” is a nice way to go, no? Would you be honest with me, or would I have to ask

you to be honest with me in order for you to be honest with me? Is there a problem here, officer? Are the graves ready?

When you “break up” with someone, doesn’t that phrase summon the image of an Antarctic explorer’s ship foundering in a sea of pack ice with the frostbite sinking in and the sled dogs baying at the moon and the one football lost in the falling snow?

Are you coming back?

How many meters are we from the nearest bomb shelter? Is that nearer or farther than the nearest white flag?

Was it my piano hands? My large feet? My lazy eye, the one I keep open while sleeping? (Is it not possible that my other eye is simply more alacritous?) Is the truth always naked? Could I dress up the truth so ornately that it’s no longer said to be truth, dressed in, say, a kimono or a lobster suit? If such were possible, then the truth is clearly mutable, and therefore no truth at all, and so to change or to come back to old loves is no crime whatsoever—so what about me needs to change? Do you trust shamans?

Why not award gold medals for screaming? Do they even make lobster suits? I imagine that if more celebratory items were made with an eye toward actual proportionate sizes of anatomy, we would have a much more educated populace, is that too much to ask? In a perfect world, would you hot glue claws in place of these feeble little feelers called hands? Alone, can you cook?

Wasn’t Ernest Shackleton an amazing fucking person?

Is your idea of a nice afternoon one spent in the company of sixteen hundred butterflies in an artificial rain forest, or does that strike you as a nice afternoon filled with sheer terror, one bound to end in bloodshed? Butterflies taste with their feet, isn’t that frightening? Would you, could you, opt for this transference of sense from tongue to toes? Wouldn’t the day be filled with mostly the taste of sock and sole? Would you walk into rivers to taste them, rather than to gauge their depth? Or would it be best then to walk on your hands? Drop stones and bombs with your lips?

Are you vexed by sorting recyclables? Do you keep an updated travelogue? A running tab? A bird count? A wallet card listing known allergies? Would you hit a nail with your Stradivarius in order to be

awarded another Stradivarius? Who'd take the fight: Shackleton, or Jackie Joyner-Kersee? Is a gate not a gate unless it creaks?

In *Goodnight Moon*, why does no one say goodnight to the telephone?

What is a body pillow, if not a bed? Was poetry once a forte of yours? Is Irish something you only claim to have in you? Did firing your first gun confirm or refute your suspicions concerning the danger of a loaded weapon in the home? When did safety equipment not come with safety labels? Why must we turn the gun's safety *off*?

Given a black-and-white photograph, could you tell the difference between the Antarctic tundra and the Saharan desert? If I had a nice large mirror, would you look into it?

Are you comforted or dispirited by the fact that we no longer live in a time when lazy-eyed trolls under bridges are a daily concern? Will "cool" ever not be cool? Urns: a treasure? A burden? Or a talking point? If the moon could speak, what wouldn't it say? Are you being honest with me? Honestly, a man like Shackleton would not have survived this lengthy desert crossing. Do you still not trust shamans?

What strikes you as the most advantageous to survival: the fear of bridge trolls, the fear of foundering in pack ice, or the fear of butterflies? If, in an imperfect world, I unknowingly awakened in you an allergic reaction, would you be mad, even though I specifically related to you the analogy of the amateur gunman storming the body's gates? Is there time for an unconditional surrender before the bombing raids begin? What if I were that sniper, and you the target? If I came dressed not as an amateur or as a gunman, but as a lobster crawling over dunes on my anatomically correct claws, would you be put off or intrigued by a large crustacean crossing the Sahara? If I said, "I come in something, exile, and something else," what next? If I said, "I'm rain," would you drop a rock on me? Or would you come out into the streets to celebrate me falling from the sky?

15.

Everyone Loves a Person Who Doesn't Give a Fuck About Anything

by *Laura Jane Faulds*

For every, really, every *single* thing she'd ever done: every movement, moment, choice that had ever really been *hers*—the nights, days, springs, summers, winters, falls, or sorry *autumns*, all the PG-13s and the Xs and the Rs, for every kiss, man, cherry in season, leg spread, sundown, green sunrise, girl, movie, all her friends, every mind-blow, comedown, heartbreak, fever, holiday, her entire childhood, meeting him, marrying him, the album coming out and seeing their two glossy faces looking sullen and impressive on the cover like anyone in the world would kill to be them—it was *still* so easy to believe that this thing she'd just done—just now, fifteen seconds ago, after he'd gone to bed, where she looked forward to him going all day every day, pawing across the kitchen, her feet *definitely* still bleeding, uncorking a bottle of Cave d'Irouleguy Gorri d'Ansa, which she was so in love with these days, every intention in the world of drinking it all to herself (which she did)—was the point, the absolute, what all the rest of it had been leading up to.

Plopping her bony ass down on the swivel chair in front of the desktop she wasn't *really* supposed to use (because it was his and she broke things), opening up Word and saying a hello that fell through her whole chest to her best friend the picture of the page (well, there

were two pictures of the page, just as there had been two moons (drunk) and, in her beloved twelve-point Bodoni, so “flattering” she liked to say, she wrote:

Everyone loves a person who doesn't give a fuck about anything.

She was twenty-eight years old, turning twenty-nine on the thirty-first, and if there was one person in the world who, if you asked anyone who ever met her, would be the *last* person to ever stop giving a fuck about anything, if they remembered her, they would tell you: Allison Altamont, who was, and once thought she always would be, a person who *cared*.

Which was exactly what had gotten her into this mess. She'd thought she was really cool for it at the time. Sometimes she'd walk to the bookshelf and find that old notebook: red with a bendy binding, a heart on the cover drawn in ballpoint surrounding her initials, Triple-A (her parents were so clever), and inside, closer to the beginning than the end, there they were. She'd written them drunk and alone in her father's basement five years ago, the night she sold out her commitment to never listening to any record past 1972 that anyone said was any good and heard *Charlie Caswell* by Charlie Caswell:

dandelions and gravel, or black cherry magic markers and black cherry mixed with Coca-Cola Slurpee, and the real serious permanent markers, the toxic kind of headache-inducer, Citroëns and crinoline, citron Citroëns, standing at the gas station pumping gas into his Pontiac Parisienne. Biting down on someone else's teeth. Hearing your alarm clock go off on a TV commercial and the ensuing hit of lethargy LASSITUDE. The words “bagel nosh” but not anything real about a bagel. Maybe a soft pretzel? Mr. Stupid Peanut and his monocle and all other such mascots who are similarly smug assholes. Glass shards in your bedsheets, sniffing in subzero temperatures, drunk in the middle of the day in either spring or fall but definitely not summer or winter. Probably a Sunday. Beethoven went deaf and that's sad. My ear-worm, my phantom limb. A hot man baking black-and-white cookies at his deli day job and watching The Simpsons on a brown tweed couch in his mother's basement, jerking off and Kleenex roses and chubby basslines tumbling, inaudible through the pink cotton candy lined with pictures of the Pink

Panther's face plastered behind his mother's basement's plaster walls plastered with posters of the Who. Charlie Caswell alone in terrible underwear, hopelessly lighting a lighter on and off with his opposite hand, adjacent to the beer and Coke can graveyard.

She'd never romanticized jerking off before, but on him, it felt right.

That was such a heavy month in her life, the month leading up to the night she knew she'd meet him. It sounds really negative and embarrassing written down, but she basically starved herself all September—pineapple chunks, almond Snickers, Onion Blossom Pringles stacked as high as a roll of quarters, cottage cheese mixed with tropical fruit muesli, apples, baby carrots. She went to the gym every day for thirty-seven days, even fucked up on Dayquil with a head cold and, with every bounce on the elliptical, a brick was lifted from behind her eyes to the top of her skull. She saved up all her money to buy this really sick Karen Walker minidress, this gray little A-line made out of T-shirt material and covered in all these little ruffles arranged in a shield over the bodice and fanning out like lamb's ears at the shoulders, these fucking *gorgeous* Rachel Comey pumps in a blue kind of leopard-looking print, thinking up her opening line and rehearsing her opening line and imagining herself saying it, wowing him, like, you'd have to actually be the dumbest idiot in the world not to fall for it:

“Hi, I’m Allison Altamont. We both have alliterative names.”

When she finally got to say it, he replied, “Huh. Huh-huh, *wow*. I’d never thought about my name being an alliteration before,” and she kind of wanted to kill him for a second: *How* had he never considered that?

“Let me buy you a drink,” Allison offered, “Because you’re such a giant fucking genius.”

“Mmmkay,” he sniffed, looking as he was saying it like he was coming to terms with it: his strange new life of stranger-girls offering to buy him drinks for being such a giant fucking genius, which maybe could be something other than all bad.

“What do you want?”

"A beer," he said, "Whatever's cheap."

"I don't drink beer. I don't know what's cheap. Just ... what kind of beer do you want?"

"A Stella?"

Allison laughed. "That's probably the *least* cheap beer there is."

He didn't look apologetic. He was numb in the face, impossible to see through. "Okay, um, a Heineken."

At the bar, Heineken and Stella Artois cost the same, but she went with Heineken, because it was manlier, and she preferred the idea of herself as a Heineken-drinker's girlfriend. Stella made no sense on him, as he wasn't a banker. She would rather die than be a banker's girlfriend.

She realized fast that Charlie was a completely different game than every other man she'd had, and once she realized how easy it came, she loved herself for being the person she'd suspected she would become once she was with him, grew more confident, twisted and turned herself and him around her, leading.

"You must be so lonely, so sad," she said.

"I don't know. Why?"

"I don't know, I just think . . . you don't have a band up there. People in bands, like, always have someone to hang out with."

"Yeah," he said, "I was thinking about getting a drummer."

"That's cool," said Allison, "I love the drums."

He nodded into the neck of his Heineken. "Yeah, I didn't really used to, but I'm coming around to them."

"Yeah, it's really easy to listen to a song and, like, not hear the drums at all. But then if you like listen to a song from the perspective of *I'm gonna listen to the drums*, like, hear them first over everything, it sounds like a completely different song."

This amused him. "What are you going to do tonight? After you leave here?"

"I don't know," she shrugged. Her legs were crossed over his knees. "I guess just check the Internet and then like lie in bed and think about how this happened. What about you?"

"Um. Play piano, I guess."

"Are you just gonna, like, make stuff up?" she asked, and he chuck-

led, looked at her with a faint awe in his eye and she saw, thought “Thank God”—he wanted to love her.

To him it wasn’t *make stuff up*, it was *composition*, and though he knew “an endearing innocence” was not a major one of her selling points, she was stupid about the biggest thing he wasn’t, his *music*, which drove him crazy and hung out at the core of everything he was and he felt lighter with her legs around it.

“Yeah,” he chuckled, “I’m just gonna make stuff up.”

And so began the phone calls, the late-night phone calls, Charlie having just played a show to a cramped room full of a thousand cool people. They thought he was *coolest*, but he didn’t think he was even cool at all. This all was so confusing for poor Charlie Caswell. This was how it went.

It was so cool to like Charlie Caswell, comparable to when it was cool to like Ariel Pink, or the White Stripes circa *White Blood Cells* or the Strokes before their first album came out or Odd Future the day after they fucked shit up on Jimmy Fallon. Charlie Caswell and his crazy song lyrics, long song titles, usually sentences, a singing saw on “Coco,” backmasking the likes of which had not been seen since *Revolver*. His shiny chocolate pudding bowl of a haircut hanging down over almost all his moony face. From the audience, he was only his chin jutting out like the bottom hammock of a fingernail moon, reminding Allison Altamont of that picture that always came up in childhood: a little boy fishing off the side of the moon, fishing for stars.

And after the phone calls became too much to bear, he flew her out to San Francisco, and together they traveled North up the West Coast in a big brown van, eating carbohydrates remorselessly, kissing so, *so* delicately in hotel rooms, the tiniest pause of lip pressed up against lip, damp as two dogs’ noses. Pulling away, that face you make when you love him and your shoulders heave, you’ve got question marks in place of pupils, he asking her and she asking him “How could you love me?” It’s always such a surprise.

He didn’t ask her to marry him in any cool or interesting way. Actually, he didn’t even ask her.

Disillusioned with fame, in what Allison marveled at being the least annoying instance of any rock and roll musician ever being disillusioned with fame ever, Charlie decided that he wanted to move to France: specifically Lyon, a bummy sort of half-city noteworthy mostly for being a major player in the international biotech scene. If Lyon belonged to any other country in the world, it would be a Pittsburgh. It was so, *so* like Charlie not to want to move to Paris. When he first said “I want to move to France” and Allison—naturally—had asked him “Paris?” he curled up his lip as if she’d asked him “Baghdad?”

“Will you come with me?” he asked.

“Well, of course I’d love to, but I don’t really see how that could be possible … I’m an alien! A foreign alien!”

Always so adorable.

“My Dad’s Irish,” said Charlie, “So I have EU citizenship.”

“My Dad’s not Irish,” said Allison mournfully. “So I don’t have EU citizenship.”

Charlie didn’t say anything.

“I could, like, sham-marry you,” said Allison, “And, like, bogart off your EU citizenship.”

Charlie didn’t say anything.

“Sorry,” said Allison, “‘Bogart off your EU citizenship’ doesn’t really make any real English sense.”

“Yeah,” said Charlie, after an impressively long pause, “We could do that.”

“I’d be into doing that,” said Allison, dying inside but masking it, “I mean, if you’d be into doing that.”

“Sure,” said Charlie, “Why not?”

She wondered what he’d think if he knew how hard she’d been scheming all along, how scared she’d been in the spaces between the schemes she’d crafted being pitched and the pitch being received, the scathing heat of every night she convinced herself it wouldn’t work this time and it was over. And even though she was the shittiest/slowest/least reliable email/text message-responder she’d ever met in her entire life, she still felt her entire spine and life collapse when he didn’t write her back within four seconds, how hard she’d

cried the night she brought up phone sex when he was in Osaka, so the time difference was way off and she couldn't call him, she had no idea, what if he never wrote her back ever ever and she'd just ruined it? Over stupid phone sex? Terrorized by pulsatile tinnitus and insomnia, pressing her thumbs against her earlobes and taking deep breaths to make it stop to no avail, she flicked the lamp on, walked to the computer crying and searched "pulsatile tinnitus" on Wikipedia. She wanted to understand if excess of fear in one's heart was a key trigger, maybe, but the entry was mostly just a bunch of science and acronyms. At its very bottom, she found a list of "Notable Individuals with Tinnitus" and it shocked her to see: sandwiched between Peter Brown and Eric Clapton, Charlie Caswell.

"What a life," she thought, what a life she led. "Wikipedia knows more about my boyfriend than I do."

Fresh from her Farewell Dinner—nachos and sangria with her girlfriends, a few of their boyfriends, a couple gay guys—she listened to "C.R.E.A.M" by Wu-Tang on headphones and contemplated the eternal question: "*Does cash rule everything around me?*"

Deep in the dark, dark thicket of Claver meeting Ashtree by the hostel, she crossed paths with a cut, hipstery black guy, the kind of guy she and Eliza once referred to as "The Dream." It made her remember her old life, when whenever she passed a black guy on the street while listening to Wu-Tang or Wu-Tang solo or whatever on headphones, it *killed* her how he couldn't automatically know it: "See that cute white girl at three o'clock? She's listening to fucking *Wu-Tang*, and she's, like, *real* about it." And she'd always felt so powerless in those moments: if only he could know it, he'd fall in love with her that second, he really would, she was *sure* of it, but what could she do? She couldn't just kill the magic and grab him by the wrist and tell him, "Hi! Would you believe that I'm listening to *Wu-Tang* right now?" because it would be creepy, and also racist.

But it didn't matter. Her life had answered itself, and there was no longer any need to indulge the dream of a hot hipstery black guy because she'd done way better, she didn't have to *do that* anymore. She was marrying a famous rock star and whenever she wanted to listen

to Wu-Tang or Wu-Tang solo or whatever, he was the only man who mattered, and whether he thought, “Thank God for my hot white wife, her love of rap music is so genuine,” or “What the hell *is* this racket?,” she felt prepared to be cool with it forever.

The first two months were bliss. All Brie and baguettes and Orangina and Malbec, so much Orangina and Malbec that Orangina may as well have flowed out of faucets and Malbec from the drinking fountains. Tuna and black olives and hard-boiled egg on baguette: in France, you could get that *anywhere*. It was like Subway.

After posing for the picture, he told her she could do whatever she wanted, so she ran in the mornings, and wrote him a story. She called it *Charlie: An Introduction*, the concept being the *Seymour: An Introduction* Buddy Glass never wrote because he kept digressing: a descriptive and invasive account of the only subject in the world she *really* cared to write about: her husband’s face. The simile flowed out of her like Orangina from faucets; the obsessive misuse of “sanguine” spewed like the bottle of Chambord she knocked off their strong kitchen table in January, which inspired her to write the sentence “Chambord spewed sanguine,” assuming that “sanguine” meant “like blood.” She wrote *a peach smashed into a newspaper* and *The Sazerac of Dudes and his Strawberry Fields Forever-ly hazel eyes* and *his Ibexy shoulders* and *He looked like a strapping young lad who played running back at Yale in 1917 and I’m looking at a faded black-and-white photograph of the whole squad on some Tumblr at noon on a Sunday and there is one particular dude who stands out as being the beauty, and it’s him.*

She’d wanted to marry on New Year’s Eve; it’d been her plan her whole life to marry on New Year’s Eve. New Year’s Eve necessarily blows, so if New Year’s Eve is your wedding anniversary you’re granted a free pass out of ever participating in anyone’s corny New Year’s Eve celebration again—but Charlie had found the idea of a New Year’s Eve wedding very corny. They married on December 14, making Valentine’s Day their two-month anniversary, and on that day Allison climbed into bed with four fried eggs on two croissants and *Charlie*, folded in half. When she came back from her shower

he'd pulled his brow into a knot and shook his head, shook his head, the most frenetic gesture she had ever seen beam from her normally stolid, rocklike man.

"Is this what you're gonna do now?" he asked, his voice quivering and becoming louder over the course of the sentence's delivery like a picture of a cone, getting bigger, "You're just gonna sit around and write about me? You think that's gonna get you a book deal? You think everyone's gonna wanna read about me? Charlie Caswell, by his fucking *wife*? You think that's what writers do? Sit around, writing about their husbands' *faces*? *Insipid*. *Insipid*, Allison. Write a story. *That's* what writers do. That's the difference between a writer and a fucking . . . teenager."

She nodded at the floor and chewed on the inside of her mouth, walked to the front door still nodding and slipped on a disgusting pair of Toms that belonged to both of them. She walked to the end of the driveway and stood at its very end, kind of pretending or imagining that it was the edge of a cliff. Through the gray-yellow sky, she squinted at the sun, confronting, if only for a moment, the unspeakable burn of knowing—for sure, now—that she was the one who was loved less.

Two blasts from the past in quick succession: 1) the twenty-first anniversary of her mother's death, 2) Eliza at De Gaulle in her Sunday best.

"*Please*," she begged, "*Please* be good."

"Be good?" Charlie asked, disgusted, "Sorry, I didn't realize I was your son. I didn't realize I was a character in the fucking *Bible*."

"Sorry, I don't know what to say to that," said Allison, and made a big show out of sweeping out the bedroom door the way she imagined Carole Lombard, an actress she had never seen act in any movie, would sweep, hitting a scarf over her shoulder like it was the last thing in the world she cared about but it still happened to land perfectly in a really beautiful scarf way that flattered her chin.

In the cab, she wondered how a life story this romantic could extend to the depths of this godawful. She didn't know how to feel about Eliza coming. Eliza was the only friend from home who had visited her in *three* years, since all her friends from home were way too

broke and poor to afford a plane ticket. She knew they all thought about how hard they hated their lives, and then they thought of *her*.

She couldn't know whose lives really were worse, hers or theirs. Shittiness of life is relative, a shitty life is a shitty life no matter what, and every day she woke up in the morning and ate a bowl of oatmeal and drank three cups of black tea and watched movies and didn't eat, ate a handful of baby carrots, pressed her ear to the door of Charlie's studio, listened to a bunch of guitar drone that she worried was garbage, ran for forty-five minutes on the treadmill, did two hundred and fifty upper ab crunches and two hundred and fifty lower ab crunches, three sets of twelve reps of bicep curls and overhead extensions, took a shower, blow-dried her hair, straightened her hair, put her hair in a ponytail, figured out dinner with Charlie, ate dinner with Charlie. Sometimes he would try to tell her what he'd done that day, and she'd purposely antagonize him: "Dude, I don't even know what a G even *is!*" "Whatever, Ross Gellar!" "Do I *look* like a person who reads books from a long time ago?"

After dinner, he'd return to composing, and Allison would binge-watch entire series of TV shows while crying in bed and eating baby carrots. Charlie went to bed early, and Allison would leave the room, get wasted alone, and Tweet a bunch of bullshit.

She never kissed him, never touched him, barely looked at him. She cried into Eliza's big chest at the airport, acting like it was because "Oh God! It's been forever!" but by the time the cab pulled up to the cottage, the pieces of hair that hung closest to her face were soaked straight through. She'd told Eliza everything, and Eliza, the ferocious best friend, said "Let's not even give him the chance to be good."

They changed into pajamas and scrubbed their faces, drank wine and ate *fraises confites* and *pralines à l'Ancienne* with their fingers. Eliza told Allison all the gossip that had happened since Allison moved away. Lily and Jared got married, and they'd had the most embarrassing wedding:

"So, they decided to do, like, this *canapé* wedding? Like, instead of having, like, a sit-down, actual meal, they just had a bunch of cana-

pés. Really stupid canapés. Michelle and I were so drunk. They had these, like, ridiculous fucking, like, crostini—”

“Oh God. Crostini. It doesn’t get much tackier than crostini. In this day and age.”

“Uh—*yeah*. So, yeah, there were these crostini, and, like, some cheese, and tomato jam. Michelle was so fucking drunk, and she kept doing this whole ‘tomato jam’ shtick she made up, like, ‘Tomato *jam*? That doesn’t even make any *sense*! Jam is for *strawberries*!’ That was her big line: ‘Jam is for strawberries!’ It was fucking *classic*. She got so out of control with it. At one point, the guy came up with the tray and she was just, like, ‘Getitthefuckawayfromme.’ We were dying.”

Allison felt sad. She wished she had been at the wedding, making fun of the wedding, saying “Jam is for strawberries” with Eliza and Michelle. She would have been so good at “Jam is for strawberries”! That was her exact sense of humor style.

“But anyway, that’s not even the point,” Eliza continued. “The point is, Lily and Jared are retarded. Trying to be all classy with their *canapé* wedding, but it was so fucking retarded. Everyone was so hungry. There were fucking *kids* there. You can’t, like, not feed kids, you know? So, okay, this is the best part—everyone just fucking *left*. To go find food. And the only restaurant in the vicinity was a fucking *Wendy’s*. So everyone comes back to the fucking reception, with fucking *Wendy’s*. Steaming paper bags of fucking *Wendy’s*. The entire fucking place smelled like *Wendy’s*. Can you imagine? Can you imagine that being your *wedding*?”

“It could be kind of cool, you know. If you actually, like, planned it like that. Like, you had the whole ceremony, and then everyone was so hungry and it was time to eat and you were like, ‘Hey! Guess what? You get to eat *Wendy’s* now!’ And all the waiters would put paper bags of *Wendy’s* down on all these expensive china plates, and everyone would be so stoked. Sorry to be contrary.”

“No, I get it,” Eliza nodded, “That would be cool. But it, like, *so* wasn’t like that.”

“Yeah, I know,” said Allison, “They’re retarded.”

Charlie walked in.

“Hi, girls,” he said. For the first time in months, he wasn’t wearing

his pale denim housecoat over plaid pajama pants and no shirt with flip-flops. He stole a chocolate out of the Alain Rolancy box, ate it, and sucked the chocolate off his fingers.

“France!” he announced happily to Eliza, “It’s something swell, isn’t it?”

It’s something swell, isn’t it? Any dumb jerk can prance around with that showy English in front of any woman in the world, and she’ll fall for it, *point finale*, no questions asked. Allison watched the lights go on in Eliza’s eyes and it was over; it wasn’t going to play out anything like she’d expected. All it took was that one stupid sentence, and now Eliza wouldn’t want to hate on Charlie anymore. Now Eliza thought Charlie was charming, and would, in true “women are bitches to each other” fashion, think Allison to be “ungrateful.”

“There are two sides to every story,” was the unwarranted advice she gave as they said good-bye, “He’s a really great guy. I *know* you can make this work.”

“I don’t,” said Allison, “I don’t know that at all.”

She never knew what day of the week it was. Charlie stopped leaving his studio. He slept on the floor of his studio.

“I should probably do something,” Allison decided, and climbed into his makeshift bed: stacks of towels arranged like Jenga pieces and covered with a blanket. She rubbed his back.

“Your feet smell,” he said into his pillow, “Your feet smell fucking disgusting.”

Allison called her dad and told him everything.

“I don’t know what to do!” she cried, sobbing, and her dad said nothing, because he didn’t know what to say.

“FUCK YOU,” she screamed into the phone, threw the receiver at the wall, took a sip of Orangina, and tried to walk somewhere. She tripped over a loose cable and stubbed her toe really hard into the ground.

“FUCK,” she screamed and, making her body go limp like an idiot trying not to get arrested, fell over, still holding one drippy ice cube and the rest could all go fuck themselves for all she cared.

She imagined every little girl in the world standing in a line in front of her, asking her what to do.

“What should we do, Allison?” they chirped, “Please tell us what to do!”

“Don’t do what I did,” she told them, slipping the disgusting Toms on. She rode her bike to the *Jardin botanique* with Ghostface on headphones, bangin’, found a pond, impulsively threw the Toms into the pond, tore every petal from a water lily and played that old game, gratefully concluding, *He loved her not*.

Her feet were still bleeding, cut up from the pedals, when she wrote the sentence. She hadn’t bothered to bandage them, even wash them, just let the blood cake and hopefully get infected when all the nasty dirt percolated into her bloodstream. Her lips were stained blackish from the wine, she limped to the studio and realized he was sleeping in the bedroom tonight, whatever that meant.

She got into bed and whispered “Wake the fuck up, asshole!” Grinning, feeling happy, she shoved her bleeding feet into his sleeping face.

“What the fuck?” he asked, waking up, and she pushed her feet harder and harder into his eyes and cheeks, curling her dirty toes around his hawkish, beautiful “statement nose,” laughing so he’d see it was a joke, and he laughed. He grabbed her by both ankles in one hand and flipped her over, laughing so hard, climbed on top of her, and she kissed his neck.

“What’s this?” he asked, pulling a lily petal out of her hair.

“Oh, it’s a lily petal,” she said, pulling it out of his fingers, “I guess you love me.”

“Yeah,” he nodded, “It’s something swell, isn’t it?”

And whichever book or movie he’d stolen that line from, whichever man he imagined in place of himself as himself to himself, she didn’t really mind. It worked.

16.

Fire Weather

by Brady Hammes

The fires began the day of the appointment, and the repercussions of both events are making it difficult for Kate to breathe. To find some peace, she busies herself by preparing for her guests who are scheduled to arrive shortly. She washes the wineglasses and empties the ashtrays. She runs the vacuum and puts clean sheets on the guest bed. She pours a cup of coffee and walks to the front porch, where she can see the mountains burning north of the city, mushroom clouds of smoke that press against the atmosphere and cement into giant hanging anvils. To Kate the anvils represent a kind of punishment for her recent mistakes, and she would very much like to speak with whomever is controlling the system of ropes and pulleys. She would like to get this over with.

Phil is lost. Kate's directions make no sense, and the afternoon sun burns pink through the smear of the bug-splattered windshield. They left Tulsa yesterday morning, doing eighty across the flats of North Texas and through the scorched canyons of Arizona, finally arriving amid the filthy, breathing traffic of Los Angeles sometime around rush hour. It's spring break for the kids, and Phil promised them a week in Southern California. He promised them Hollywood and the beach and Universal Studios, but money is tight and a curtain of fire is closing in on their destination, so he's a little unsure how this will

all play out. “These street names aren’t even in English,” he says, straining to read the little blue signs.

“What are we looking for?” Abby asks. Abby is sixteen and, according to what she told her friends back home, about one month away from celebrity. She said she was coming to LA to get headshots and a nice tan and maybe talk with some agents her cousin Kate knows, Kate being a pretty good actress herself.

“San something,” Phil says.

“San Rafael?” Abby asks.

“No.”

“Because I just saw San Rafael.”

“It’s not San Rafael.”

“It could be. You said it was San something.”

“Cut it, Abby,” Phil says, riffling through the mess of papers on the dashboard. “Where are those directions, Claire?”

Claire grabs Phil’s hand and redirects it back to the steering wheel. “Honey, keep your eyes on the road.”

“My eyes *are* on the road. But it doesn’t do me any good if I don’t know where the hell I’m going.”

Phil is an impatient man with the temperament of an ostrich, and in their twenty years of marriage Claire has learned to negotiate his fits with the caution of a zookeeper. She hands him the Subway napkin he scribbled directions on during lunch in Barstow.

Phil glances down at the napkin, then back at the road. “San Fernando,” he says, suddenly pleased, as if remembering a song title that had temporarily escaped him. “We’re looking for San Fernando.”

They pull into a gas station. Claire and Abby run to the restroom while Phil gasses up. Miles, the youngest, climbs a small hill to get a better look at the fires. Miles is eleven and large, not fat really, just overinflated. Prior to arriving, he had no interest in this vacation; Los Angeles was not his first choice. His first choice was Alaska, where he knew a kid from his online geology club, a junior volcanologist who invited Miles on a three-day trip to the Chigmit Mountains, home of Mount Redoubt, the most active cone on the North American plate. Aside from the slight chance of being thrown from bed by an eight-

plus magnitude earthquake, Miles expected very little from this trip, geologically speaking. But now, with this new, unexpected display of nature, everything has changed and suddenly LA isn't so boring. "Dad!" he yells, pointing to the sky. "Look. Pyrocumulus."

"Pretty neat," Phil says, capping the tank. He pulls his phone from his pocket and dials Kate. He says they're a little lost. He doesn't see San Fernando but he sees a cement river, a truck selling tacos, and a billboard for a movie about robots. He asks if she has any idea where they might be, and, to his surprise, she does. She gives him turn-by-turn directions and says to park on the street.

Abby returns from the mini-mart, Diet Coke in one hand, a magazine in the other. "Was that her?"

"Sure was," Phil says.

"Who?" Miles asks, crawling back into the van.

"Your cousin Kate," Phil says.

"Do I know her?"

"She was around when you were little. You may not remember her."

"I don't remember her."

Phil closes the door and keys the ignition. "You'll like her. She's a real California chick." He says this as if she were a type of exotic fruit.

When her uncle Phil called two weeks ago to ask if he and the family could shack up with her for a few nights while they were in LA, Kate scrambled for a reason that wouldn't work. She had a mental file of excuses for whenever she was asked to take part in something she found unsavory. It was stunning how quickly she remembered the dinner plans with an old co-worker who was leaving town, or the college friend she was planning to visit down in Huntington. But at seven A.M. on a Sunday, hung over and half asleep, she had nothing. So instead she said, yes, of course, she'd love to have them, and ended up committing herself to a weekend of entertaining family she barely knew.

Kate's father was the eldest of four boys. Phil, the youngest, worked for a senator in DC and was rarely around, appearing only very briefly with his family on Christmas Eve or Easter morning. One of Kate's few memories of Phil is from the Christmas before she moved to LA,

when she saw him slap a five-year-old Miles after the boy flicked a spoonful of mashed potatoes on their grandmother's Nativity set. Kate recognized that her cousin was being a little shithead, but the fury it unleashed in her uncle was something she hadn't seen before. She watched Miles fall into a heap of wailing fat on the kitchen floor as Phil stood over him, threatening to knock his head clean off if he didn't quit his goddamn whining and clean up the mess. An hour later the boy and his father were curled up on the couch in a post-dinner defeat, and Kate remembers the entire day as one big complexity of feeling.

Kate sees them approaching from the street, a cloud of ash swirling like fine snow around their heads. "We got dinner," Phil says, holding bags from In-N-Out Burger in each hand, displaying them high and proud, like a savage returning with the severed heads of rival tribesmen. He hands the bags to Miles and throws his arms around Kate. "So good to see you, kiddo."

"You too," she says.

"You look wonderful, honey," Claire says. "I just love your little house. It's so cute. Abby guessed which one it was when we drove by."

Abby gives Kate a bashful wave. "Hi, I'm Abby. Not sure if you remember me."

Kate wraps her arms around her younger cousin. "Of course I remember you."

"*Sooo . . .*" Claire says through an eager smile. "Give us the grand tour."

Inside, Phil and Miles tear through their burgers, while Kate walks Claire and Abby through the house. When they return to the kitchen, Phil tells Kate about the drive: the lightning storm outside Phoenix and how the Grand Canyon was closed because some animals accidentally fell in. "Can you believe that?" he asks.

"No," Kate says.

"Good. Because I was making that part up." He lets out a thick belly laugh that leaves Abby shaking her head in a kind of routine mortification.

"Always the comedian," Claire says, smiling at her husband.

Phil has close-cropped hair and some farm in the face. He reminds Kate of someone, someone on television, but it isn't until they've started in on cocktails that she realizes that person is Glenn Beck.

After dinner Miles retires to the living room and flips through the TV channels, finally settling on local news coverage of the fires. A man with a field of white hair stands in front of a satellite map. He explains that the fire's erratic behavior is due to something called coupled fire atmosphere dynamics, the result of the fire and the atmosphere interacting with each other and creating its own microclimate. "You guys," Miles yells. "Come check this out."

Kate, Phil, and Claire walk to the living room. "This is crazy," Miles says. "Basically what's happening is that the fire is creating its own weather patterns. I've never heard of anything like this before."

Kate has never heard of anything like this either, but it makes perfect sense to her now.

Abby enters the living room holding a doll that emits a piercing wail from a tiny speaker in its back. "Mom," she says. "Will you hold this thing a sec?"

"Shut it up!" Miles says. "I can't hear the TV."

"You shut up, you fat turd!" Abby yells back. She hands the doll to her mother, then fishes through her backpack for a bottle.

Kate looks the doll over. "What is that?"

"This is Baby Think It Over," Claire says, rocking the plastic child. "They give these to the kids at school. It makes them think twice when they're necking at some party."

Abby finds the bottle and takes the doll back from her mother. She inserts the nipple into the baby's mouth and the crying subsides. "It's the dumbest thing in the world," she says. "They act like it's the same as a real baby, but it's not. I keep the stupid thing in a backpack."

"I think it's great," Claire says. "It cries every so often and if you don't feed it or change the diaper, it sends a message that says you're neglecting the child. I think it really works."

Baby Think It Over. Kate likes that. That's clever. And such good advice, too—applicable to so many things. Like how about Drunk Driving Think It Over, or Cocaine Think It Over, or Getting-Impregnated-By-Some-Guy-You-Met-At-A-Bar-And-Then-Aborting-

The Baby Think It Over. Do they make a doll for those things? She guesses they do not. She'd had to think that last one over for a long time. She stayed in bed for forty-eight straight hours thinking it over. She drove to Bakersfield and back thinking it over. She thought it over in the shower, beads of water racing down her belly and the sum of her mistakes brewing inside. She was raised Catholic and knew that, of all the unkind things she'd done in her life, this was the only one that might not be forgivable. She worried that, when she finally did meet someone she loved and wanted to have children with, she wouldn't be able to, that the judgment might come cold and swift, something like: *I'm very sorry, Kathryn, but you had your chance and you blew it.*

"Wanna see it?" Abby asks, extending the doll.

"No thanks," Kate says.

With her guests down for the night, Kate pours a glass of wine and sneaks out to the patio for a cigarette. After a moment, the sliding glass door opens and Abby appears with the crying doll, holding a bottle in its mouth. Kate hides the cigarette.

"You don't have to hide that from me," Abby says. "I have lots of friends who smoke."

Kate takes a drag and points to the crying doll. "What's wrong with your baby?"

"It's hungry again," Abby says. "Stupid thing eats like a horse. I swear I'm never having kids."

"You don't know that."

"Yes, I do. Or at least not until I'm old like you." Abby pulls out a chair and sits. After a moment the doll stops crying, letting her know that it's full. She sets it on the table and looks to Kate. "So you're an actress?"

"I'm a bartender. Sometimes I'm an actress, but usually I'm a bartender."

"Do you go on lots of auditions?"

"Not anymore."

"Have you done any big movies?"

"I've done some small movies. I've done lots of commercials."

"For what?"

“Pizza Hut. Office Depot.”

“Oh,” Abby says, disappointed. “How was that?”

“Take a guess.”

“Do you have a boyfriend?”

“Nope. You?”

Abby tells Kate about a guy she had been dating, a senior with an El Camino and a wild streak. Not surprisingly, her father wasn’t fond of the kid and went so far as to slash his tires when he found the car parked on the street and the boy hiding under his daughter’s bed. At school the next day, Abby discovered a note from the boy taped to her locker. He wrote that her father was crazy and a little scary and that he couldn’t imagine a scenario in which he’d ever be welcome in their home, so it was probably best if they end the relationship before someone got hurt. He wished her a lifetime of happiness and said she owed him eighty bucks for the tires. “That’s about the extent of my dating,” she says. “Pretty pathetic.”

“Your dad’s tough, huh?”

“He makes my life hell.”

“I’m sure he has his reasons.”

“That doesn’t make it okay.”

Kate wants to tell her that it could be worse, that it *will* get worse (oh, you sweet thing, *so* much worse), but then it will get better too, and back and forth like this it will go forever, sometimes in exaggerated leaps and falls, but more often in very subtle ways she won’t always notice. She wants to tell her all of these things, and she wants to tell her none of them, because she herself remembers what it’s like to be sixteen and certain.

“What do you think will happen if the fire makes it to the city?”

Abby asks, staring at the distant flames.

“I don’t know,” Kate says. “Burn it down?”

It’s one hundred degrees by noon the next day, so they decide to head to Venice Beach in search of cooler temperatures and cleaner air. Overnight, a layer of ash has collected on the van, and as they pile in Miles scoops up a handful and throws it in his sister’s hair.

“Prick,” Abby says, kicking him in the shin.

“Abby!” Phil yells.

"He just dumped ash in my hair!" Abby says.

"Be nice, Miles," Claire says.

"Yeah, Miles," Kate says, grabbing him hard by the neck when no one is looking. "Be nice."

When they arrive at the beach, parking is nonexistent and Kate can sense her uncle losing patience. He inches the car forward at a crawl, as if expecting one of the parked cars to suddenly disappear. Kate suggests they visit the pay lot but Phil refuses. According to him, only assholes pay for asphalt.

The car behind them, a white truck, lays on the horn. It's not a polite reminder, not a simple *excuse me, sir*, but rather a sustained bellow, the kind of honk that conveys a message of deep hate.

"Fuck you, pal," Phil yells out the window, flipping the driver the bird.

"Phil!" Claire says.

"Jerk's more than welcome to just go around me."

The truck darts in front of them and stops. The driver, a tattooed surfer, gets out and walks to the van.

"Dammit, Phil," Claire says. "He's probably got a gun."

"Just go, Dad," Abby says.

Phil rolls down his window. "What?" he says in his toughest voice.

"No, no, no," the surfer says, shoving his middle finger in Phil's face and smiling. "Fuck *you!*"

The surfer walks back to his car and Phil rolls up the window. Miles stares at the floor mats, and Claire shakes her head because her husband has done it again. There is a silence in the car, the kind found in long hallways, and it stays like this until Abby spots an androgynous figure crossing the street with a bulk-size package of toilet paper. "Dude or chick?" she says to Miles, breaking the silence.

"I don't know," Miles says. "But whatever it is, it's got a butt hole."

Claire picks a spot near a lifeguard tower and spreads a bedsheet on the sand. With the tide heading out, Miles takes to beachcombing while Abby flips through a magazine. Phil, still seething, attempts to sleep it off with a nap. Baby Think It Over lies facedown in the sand.

* * *

Kate stands and looks at the ocean, studying it like a map, then starts sprinting toward it, high-stepping through the retreating tide-water and throwing her shoulder into the breaking waves. She dives below the surface and swims away from shore. Her stroke is ungainly but effective, and before long she's a hundred yards into the sea. The water is now too deep to stand, so she dog-paddles for a moment, looking back at Abby waving from the beach. She swims on, farther yet, until the shore is a distant thing, a foreign country and a language she doesn't speak. She remembers a newspaper article she recently read about a man who fell from the balcony of a cruise ship late at night. She remembered the wife saying that although she knew her husband was likely dead, what upset her most was the fear he surely felt, the fear every person must feel if alone in a black sea, all life moving slowly away. With this in mind, Kate swims farther still, until the tanker ships that once seemed so distant now appear within reach. She continues on, pushing and pulling through the heavy water. Her arms tire and her breathing quickens. There's a place in the ocean, a sort of fence or line, and she knows that if she goes past this point she won't return. She swims until she reaches that line, then touches it with her foot and heads back to shore.

"How was it?" Claire asks.

"Nice," Kate says, the ocean dripping from her.

"You were way out there. We couldn't see you after a while."

Kate falls onto her stomach and presses her face into the towel. "I couldn't see you guys either."

Miles returns with a handful of shells and stands next to his sister, casting a shadow on her face. Unable to get her attention, he leans over and lets his wet hair drip onto her back.

"What are you doing?" Abby says, annoyed.

"Look," he says, displaying his treasures.

"Wow, you found shells at a beach. Congratulations."

Miles sits in the sand and begins categorizing his loot, separating the univalves from the bivalves, the keepers from the dreck.

"Kate," Abby says, slapping her magazine shut. "Let's go to the boardwalk."

“What’s a boardwalk?” Miles asks.

“Don’t worry, you wouldn’t like it.” Abby stands and slides into her flip-flops. “We’ll be back in a bit,” she says to her parents.

“Be careful,” Phil yells as they walk away. “Don’t talk to weirdos.”

“That might be tough,” Kate says under her breath.

The boardwalk is a salt-stained strip mall, kiosks and small tables situated along the sand. There are women applying henna tattoos and men selling paintings of sunsets and a girl dancing to the beat of tribal drumming. Abby spots a cute boy painting portraits outside a Winnebago decorated with driftwood and Jamaican flags. She grabs Kate by the shirt and tells her to follow.

Abby approaches, smiles at the boy. “What do you do?” she asks.

“I paint,” the boy says. “Want me to paint your picture?”

“How much?”

“I don’t charge the cute ones. Sit down.”

Abby looks to Kate for permission.

“Go ahead,” Kate says. “I’ll go get something to drink and meet you back here in a bit.”

Abby sits on a pair of stacked crates, brushes her hair from her eyes, and feigns elegance.

The boy pulls a clean sheet of paper from his bag of art supplies and fastens it to the easel. “I’m Zylan,” he says. “Like Bob Zylan.”

“I’m Abby.”

“You from around here?” he asks, beginning to sketch the outline of her face.

“No, but I’m moving here soon.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah, I’m an actress. I just got cast in a new TV show.”

“Cool, what show?”

“It’s on the CW. It hasn’t aired yet.”

“Isn’t that channel all cartoons?” Zylan asks, coloring her eyes with all kinds of blue.

“You’re thinking of the Cartoon Network,” she says, staying very still. “The CW is really great. The executives are all super nice. They let you be as creative as you want. It’s like a big family over there.”

“Wow, so you’re about to be famous?”

“We’ll see,” Abby says, giggling.

“Shhh . . .”

“What?”

“Don’t say anything for a minute. I’m doing your mouth.”

Kate buys a frozen lemonade and wanders the boardwalk. The fires aren’t as pronounced this close to the ocean, and for the first time in a week she is able to take a deep, satisfying breath. She notices an elderly man with a sign that reads: *Saul the Spiritual Healer (As Seen on YouTube)*. She approaches and asks what he does.

“I heal people,” he says. “Spiritually.”

“Yeah, but what does that mean?”

“I work on the inside. I clean the soul—fix karma problems. Stuff like that.”

“Sounds vague.”

“Are you feeling spiritually drained?”

“I just feel drained.”

“Maybe I can help.”

“I doubt it,” Kate says, “but thanks.”

As much as she’d like to believe in Saul’s healing power, she’s pretty sure he doesn’t have the necessary tools, almost certain those instruments don’t exist. It’s worse at night, this malaise, when she lies awake in bed with the sheets weighing on her like lead aprons. The thing with the baby was a big part of it, but there’s also the singleness and the forward march of time and the realization that maybe she isn’t very good at the thing she always thought she was really good at. Whatever it is has been festering for weeks, like a squatter siphoning her resources, leaving her unhinged and rotten, wanting for something she cannot put her finger on. She has little faith the hippie can help.

* * *

Zylan finishes the portrait and presents it to Abby. Though lovely, it looks nothing like her, and she wonders if he’d even been paying attention, or just painting the only girl he knows how. “It’s really good,” she lies. “Are you sure you don’t want some money for it?”

“Nope,” he says, handing it to her. “This one’s on the house.”

Abby grabs a pen from his easel and signs her name in the bottom right corner. “You keep it,” she says, handing it back. “It might be worth something someday.”

Zylan takes the portrait, then looks to the ocean, as if fielding ideas. “Come with me,” he says. “I want to show you something.”

“What the fuck?” Kate says when she returns to find her cousin and the artist gone. She walks the boardwalk a hundred yards in both directions and then, not finding them, goes to deliver the news.

“What do you mean she’s gone?” Phil says.

“She’s not gone,” Kate says. “They probably just wandered off somewhere.”

“They?”

“She made a friend.”

“A boy?”

“Yeah.”

“Dammit, Kate,” Phil says. He pulls on his shirt, slides into his sandals, and grabs his cell phone. “Call me if she turns up,” he says, walking away.

This is the kind of shit that drives Phil nuts, this testing of boundaries. He believes in the sanctity of order and the importance of consequences, which is why he will search every square foot of this goddamn beach until he finds his daughter, and when he does he will have some choice words for the little shit, words that he’s currently arranging in his head as he weaves through the archipelago of beachgoers.

The area under the pier smells of dead fish and urine. Deflated balloons and punctured soccer balls collect in the shallow water sliding along the sand. If this is some kind of club, it’s one Abby has no interest in joining. It’s grossly unromantic and she wonders why Zylan brought her here. “What do you think?” he asks.

“It’s nice,” she lies. “Do you come here a lot?”

“Kind of. It’s like my tree house without trees. I come here to think,” he says, pulling a pipe from his pocket. “And to get stoned.”

Abby has never seen a pipe like this before, all glass and swirling colors. The only one she'd ever known was the smooth wood piece her grandfather used to pull out after hearty meals. Zylan twists off a small bud and presses it into the bowl. "Do you get high?" he asks.

Abby says yes, though the truth is she does not. The only people she knows who get high are the stoners at school, brooding kids with dirty hair and poor attendance. She remembers a story a teacher once told her about a girl who smoked pot and jumped in front of a train. She was terrified by the idea of smoking anything that might make her want to jump in front of a train, and so when the joint was passed her way at parties or after football games she always politely declined, claiming an impending drug test or some lingering virus. But looking square in front of Zylan is not an option, so she puts the lighter to the bowl and feels the burn crawl down her throat. She coughs and hands the pipe back to him.

"You okay?" he asks.

"Fine," she says, letting out a few more hacks. "Just went down the wrong tube."

Zylan steps closer and puts his hand on the small of her back. "You sure you're okay?"

"Fine," she says, smiling, eyes watering. "Totally fine."

"Are you *sure* sure?" he says again, this time wrapping his arms around her waist and pressing his lips to hers. His mouth goes to work, wide and ravenous, devouring the bottom half of her face, like a boy eating a large sandwich. Abby has never been kissed like this before and prays he isn't leaving marks her father will notice. After a moment, Zylan pulls away and smiles.

"Wow," she says. "You're a passionate kisser."

"Duh," he says. "I'm an artist."

Zylan has her in the sand now, one hand through her hair, the other searching her pants. This is the furthest she's ever gone with a boy, and she recognizes the moment as something important, a milestone, a memory she will carry with her for some time. Zylan kisses a line down her stomach, then looks across the beach. "Uh-oh," he whispers into her belly button. "We've been spotted."

Standing fifty yards away, Phil has now seen everything he needs to see and starts jogging toward the young couple. Abby, spotting her father's large frame charging toward them, pulls her shirt down and says, "Oh, shit," because she knows whatever is about to happen will not be good. Zylan, a little confused, stays real still and watches as Phil grabs him by the shirt and throws him in the sand. He drags the boy into the shallow water and puts a knee to his back, pinning him with the weight of his body. Abby screams, "Stop it, Dad! Stop!" but her dad doesn't stop, instead taking it further, now holding the boy's head under water and rubbing it back and forth in the sand, like a man scrubbing a dirty dish, all the while screaming, "That's my daughter, you little shit!" as if his words might reach the boy with his head under water.

Kate arrives in time to see Zylan wrest himself from Phil's control and sprint away. She watches her uncle standing in the shallow water, his hands trembling, while Abby sobs dramatically in the sand. Kate looks to the north, where the fire has quieted significantly, now just a smoldering mass of embers, then begins walking away, not feeling sympathy or pity so much as relief that a little order has been restored and the fire on the mountain has finally run out of things to burn.

17.

A Girl

by Lindsay Hunter

There was a girl gone missing a few years back. Her mama standing out front of the Dairy Queen, eyeing your cone like you was hiding her child within. You seen Dee? Dee Switcher? You seen her? Nope, was always the answer, but I'll keep an eye out. And before you knew it that cone was gone.

That was the year that old bitch Miss Shane was teaching us algebra. Solve for x , children. Chalk dusting her dress like she had a ghost dress on over her other one. Them arms like dough on a spit.

That missing girl used to do her eyeliner during class. Over and over, underlining her eye like Miss Shane underlined them nasty equations. Solve for x .

We all had plans for that girl. She had a chest. She smoked them long thin lady cigarettes in plain sight of the custodian. When that retarded boy ran into the girl and knocked her purse down a condom spilled out, flashing there in its gold wrapper, looking for all the world like a coin.

The girl picked up her lipsticks and wallet and hair things and left it there, left that condom on the ground and walked off. Us thinking hard about ways to spend that coin.

There was other girls of course. The entire cheerleading team could get you going, save for the chubby one, but she'd do in a pinch. The majorette, Glenda was her name, rumor had it she'd drink too much at parties and beg you to fondle her.

So it wasn't like this girl was the cream of the crop or nothing, there was plenty of girls. We wanted them all, Dee Switcher included.

Her mama was the town skank. Everybody knew. So you couldn't take her all that seriously when her girl went missing. Stay home all night for once, our own mamas would whisper to each other, swat each other on the arm. You so bad. I know it.

Nobody ever picked up that condom. It got kicked around and pushed into corners, and once Dee went missing we all got scared of it, and kicked it harder. Girls would shriek should they see it rocketing toward them. Some boys too.

Then one day we all realized it wasn't there no more. Probably the custodian got it. Or it was somewhere no one cared to look.

Her daddy came to the school on a Monday morning. No one had seen her daddy in years but here he was asking where was Dee, why did the school let her skip so easy, where was the truant officer, demanding to know who took her, who had his girl. We watched the principal pat his shoulder like you would a sick animal, watched Dee's daddy get led to the door; it was a bright day and for a second he got swallowed up by the glare. He didn't come back.

There was a big homecoming dance a few months after the girl went gone. We all paired up and parted our hair and wore suit coats and danced slow when we were told to.

Dee's mama showed up at the dance in a fancy nightgown dress thing, asking could she chaperone. We watched the principal lead her over to the punch bowl, but Dee's mama wasn't there for long; no one came for punch and after a few songs she walked out with her head so high you worried for her neck.

Some of us met at the diner after, eating pancakes while our girls fiddled with our belt loops under the table, if you were lucky. Others of us went to the after party at the Days Inn, but that turned out to be a bust. The stereo ran out of batteries and Miss Shane's freshman boy showed up and puked into the trashcan and everybody went home.

Dee had left school after fifth period, was the story. Snuck out while everyone was scrambling for their lockers. Rumor had it she was going with an older boy, he might could even be called a man.

One day a skinny lady cop came and asked a few of us what we knew, but really we didn't know nothing.

We skipped school all the time, was the thing. Sometimes it felt like if you didn't skip you'd close your eyes and die, right there in the middle of Civics, so you did skip, and you'd go to the Circle K to buy Slim Jims or over to a friend's house to look at his dad's titty magazines. And nothing bad ever happened.

The lady cop seemed to find us not knowing nothing a relief. That's what I figured, she'd say in agreement with you. Which meant, to us, solving for x really was an impossibility, a waste of time, so why bother?

At Christmastime Miss Shane told us she had skin cancer, she wouldn't be back the next semester. We stared at that mole on her cheek, as we had done for months. That's what I figured, some of us wanted to blurt. Miss Shane's eyes went wet, we started feeling soft toward her, but after she assigned two chapters of homework for over the break we went back to hating her guts, which felt better, more normal, than feeling sorry for her, so in a way you got to feeling grateful toward her for being such a cooze.

Over the break we saw Dee's little brother at the movies by himself. We forgot all about him, but there he was with his money in a wad, staring up at the listings like he couldn't read. We went on in and spent all our money on arcade games. Then later that night, in your bed that smelled like socks and sweat and secretions and powder Tide, if you weren't careful you'd start thinking how when you came out the boy was gone, and how maybe you should feel regretful about not inviting him to man the firetorch gun, really the best gun to have if you were playing Immortal Fear and you made it past the first two rounds, which everyone did.

But he had gone.

That winter someone found the girl's yellow purse on the side of the road. The strap was gone. One of us heard their dad saying how you could use a strap to strangle someone, or at least tie up her hands. Her perfume bottle was smashed. That girl ain't coming back, we told each other, shifting our nuts like we'd seen our dads do whenever they said something serious.

But really, we already knew that. You just had to say some things out loud.

During the spring semester Miss Shane's boy got in a fistfight with the custodian. No one knew why but we figured it was stressful, having a bitch mom who had cancer. Then on Palm Sunday a dog found a skull and carried it to his master's doorstep. There was excitement for a time but it turned out to be the skull of an infant, probably buried by some of them country folk who can't afford no funeral.

A rumor got spread that a girl tasted like a nine-volt battery down there. It got hot, hotter than the last summer, and a old lady died in her house 'cause she was too weak to open some windows.

We'd see Dee's mama working as the greeter at the Walmart. If she recognized you she'd say, Seen Dee? Dee Switcher? and most of the time we just shook our heads, stared at our shoes till we got to the magazines aisle. Guns and girls, we needed more info on both.

Some of us got for-real girlfriends. Some of us snuck in to their rooms at night and made love, you had to call it making love or your girl got mad, to these girls while you listened to their dads sawing logs just to the other side of the wall, you biting your girl's pillow hard so you wouldn't make no noise, you ignoring how sometimes your girl just laid there, her fingertips on your back limp and uninterested, you despite the dud your girl turned out to be feeling like your bottom half was exploding up into your top.

Dee one time punched a girl in the mouth, she'd been crying hard just before, her face ruined, black smears down her cheeks and her upper lip all glistened with snot. By that time we knew girls sometimes got ugly. Dee got sent home, came back the next day with her makeup all set again. Lips all wet. Eyes so blue you got to feeling indecent. See, we had seen Dee, we'd seen her a lot, but back then we had our eyes on all the girls, and over time it got to be hard to see how losing one was such a tragedy.

18.

Glossolalia

by Kyle Minor

“Are you interested in me because I’m a girl or because I love Jesus?”

“I am interested in you because I like you.”

“But if I didn’t love Jesus, would you still be interested in me?”

“I would like to think that I would be interested in you no matter what.”

“But if I didn’t love Jesus, I don’t think I would be the same person.”

“If you didn’t love Jesus, I think in some ways you would be the same person.”

“But I wouldn’t see the world the same way, I wouldn’t read the same things, I wouldn’t make the same choices, I wouldn’t be around the same people.”

“But I think you would still like a lot of the same things. You would still be a ski instructor in the winter. You would still spend the summer here on the beach. You would still run. You would still bodysurf. You would still be physically very beautiful. You still would be a person who cares about other people, and you still, probably, would have taught me to bodyboard.”

“But I used to be a person who didn’t love Jesus. I used to make different choices. Like when I was a freshman in college, there was this older guy, and he used to come into my room and sleep in my bed and he knew how to do things with his hands and his mouth. He knew how to make me feel things.”

“You didn’t have sex with him even though you didn’t yet love Jesus.”

“I didn’t have sex with him because I had an idea of Jesus, but I didn’t yet really know Jesus. I thought I did, but I didn’t.”

“But you prayed to Jesus, didn’t you?”

“I did pray to Jesus, but not in tongues.”

“When you start to pray in tongues?”

“When I was filled up with the Holy Spirit.”

“Is that when you stopped messing around with this guy?”

“No. It was later. There were other guys. In Madrid, this one guy took me to an R.E.M. concert.”

“Did it make you feel dirty to mess around with him?”

“No. It made me feel good. But I still felt empty inside.”

“How did you learn how to pray in tongues?”

“I prayed to be filled up with the Holy Spirit, and then I was given the gift.”

“Can you do it on command?”

“I can do it anytime, if that’s what you mean.”

“Can I hear you do it?”

“Would you like to pray with me?”

“Will you do it if I pray with you?”

“When I pray I do it. It comes naturally.”

“How do you know what it is you are saying if you are speaking a language you don’t know?”

“I don’t know what I am saying. It is my spirit that knows what I am saying. My spirit is communing directly with God’s spirit. I can’t explain it, but I can feel it, like this energy pulsing through me.”

“If I held your hand, could I feel the energy, too?”

“I feel like you are being glib.”

“I am not being glib. I just feel like this is something I don’t understand but I really do want to understand. I want to be a person who is open-minded to new experiences.”

“Take my hand. Here. Take my other hand. Let’s pray.”

“What did you think just now, when I was speaking in tongues?”

“I thought a lot of the sounds were repeated and there were a

lot of consonant clusters. I heard maybe some sounds that sounded like German and some sounds that sounded like Hebrew or Arabic maybe. There were also a lot of sounds that you don't make when you speak in English, like rolling your R's and flattening out your O sounds."

"That's true. I have noticed those things, too."

"Do you ever try to think about recording what you say when you say it? Like, maybe you could do some code-breaking and make a dictionary."

"Again, I feel like maybe you are being glib."

"Hear me out. I'm being serious. The idea is, you are speaking a language that people don't speak on Earth, except people who speak the language of angels. So consequently, if you follow the logic, it's a real language. So wouldn't it have the things a real language has, like grammar and syntax and vocabulary? And if that's so, couldn't you study it just like you could study any other language?"

"That's movie stuff. That's like something starring Patricia Arquette."

"Why not, though? There's people who do this for a living. They go over to Papua New Guinea or wherever, and they spend time around a language, and then they reconstruct it, even though when they first get there they don't know the first thing about it."

"That's missing the whole point."

"Why?"

"Because if you knew the language, then the purity of the communication would be lost. You'd start crafting all the words instead of the spirit that indwells in you crafting the words."

"But—and here I'm not being glib, I'm just trying to understand—don't you want to know what it is you are speaking to Jesus or the angels or whatever?"

"You don't pray to angels."

"But it's an angel language, right?"

"The idea is that you're not in control. You're giving yourself over to it."

"Is that why you jerk your body to the left when you pray in tongues?"

“That’s a manifestation.”

“Why do you do it?”

“I don’t do it. It comes over me when I give myself over to the Spirit.”

“Does it happen to everyone who speaks in tongues?”

“Some people fall down like they are dead.”

“That’s slain in the Spirit.”

“Right. Some people fall into fits of laughter. Some people bark like dogs, but not too many people. I don’t want to judge, but I think sometimes when that happens a lot it can be for show. But I don’t know.”

“That’s something that worries me. It’s a little bit frightening, don’t you think, like on TV, when a lot of people are doing it all around, and there’s this ungodly cacophony?”

“That’s the fear of the Lord you’re feeling.”

“How can you be sure?”

“How can you be sure of anything? You know. I know. I know that I know that I know.”

“Here this stuff is at odds with logic, maybe, I think.”

“I think that’s a wrong way to think about it, but tell me what you’re thinking.”

“I took this philosophy class. Dr. Willard Reed. He was talking about the distinction between belief and knowledge. He said that knowledge is problematic. You can’t really know stuff that isn’t somehow verifiable. Like you didn’t see it with your own eyes, or experience it yourself, or there hasn’t been some kind of consensus among the people who study the thing. And even then there’s problems. How do you know you aren’t fooling yourself? Or how do you know the consensus might not be wrong? Like the consensus used to be that the earth was flat. And on top of that, how do you know that the universe didn’t just begin two seconds ago? After a while, everything starts to be belief.”

“I don’t guess it matters much which is which, then, if it’s all so slippery.”

“I don’t guess it does.”

“But what kind of way is that to live? Walking around not being sure of anything. Everything tentative. No place for boldness. No

place for meaning. Wouldn't that just throw you into some kind of paralytic feedback loop or something? Wouldn't you just be staring at your navel forever?"

"Not necessarily, but I don't know. You just described a lot of the way I think a lot of the time."

"That's why you have to let go control. That's what praying in the Spirit is. You're letting go that control and giving yourself over to your Creator. It's an act of faith in the unseen. Although, I have to tell you, there are things I have seen."

"What kinds of things?"

"Visions. Gold dust."

"Gold dust?"

"There have been meetings where the Spirit of God has come down and the manifestation was gold dust that began to appear on everyone's shoulders."

"Manifestations, like the jerking to the left."

"I'm not going to say any more if you're going to mock everything."

"Honestly, I'm not mocking. I really want to know. Tell me about the visions."

"Once I was praying in the Spirit, and I had a vision of a golden vessel."

"Like a ship?"

"Like a vase or a container. It was on a cloth of purple silk. There was an angel there, and he was holding out his hands."

"What did the vision mean?"

"For a long time I didn't know what the vision meant. But then my friend who is a prophetess—quietly, quietly a prophetess, like, literally, hardly anybody knows. She said it was a message about being a vessel for the Spirit, and about a royal calling, but I had to give myself to it."

"That's why you write the magazine articles?"

"That's why I'm writing the books. That's why I'm traveling around so much. To speak into people's hearts and lives."

"But you like it, too. You're good at it. You don't want to work at a desk job."

"That's true. I don't want to be chained to a desk. I was made this way for a reason."

“Any other visions?”

“Yes.”

“Tell me.”

“Another time. Later.”

“All right. It’s a lot to risk, right? Telling me all these things?”

“It’s nothing to risk. I already have given myself over to all of it.”

“I can wait. I want to get to know you.”

“Would you hold me now?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t come over here inside my blanket. You stay inside your blanket and I’ll stay inside my blanket, and you can hold me that way, with the separate blankets.”

“Do you like it here?”

“I’m uncomfortable here.”

“Why?”

“I don’t like the cold, and I don’t like all the soldiers in their uniforms, and I don’t like all the military songs. I think I might be a pacifist.”

“But these are the men and women who give their lives to keep us free.”

“I like watching the football game, and I don’t mind cheering for Air Force, but I am uncomfortable with the whole martial atmosphere. It seems to me to have a lot to do with death and killing.”

“But sacrificial death and killing, don’t you think? Not death or killing that anyone wants to do.”

“I don’t know if that’s true. That’s what basic training is for, I think. To break down the part of a person’s conscience where they have this inhibition against killing, so they can want to kill, so they can kill at will, to save their lives or save their buddy or fulfill their mission.”

“I think that’s a selfish way to think about it. Because it’s because of these guys and gals here that you have the freedom to say something like that.”

“I can’t deny it. I know that’s true. That complicates the way I feel about it.”

"You are shivering. Here, let's combine our blankets."

"Can we put them under our legs, too, because these bleachers are so cold."

"You know, if you moved out here with me, I wonder if you could take the cold all winter, if this is what it does to you."

"Are you really here for good? I mean, you were in Florida, and now you're here, and you've been back and forth. But maybe you would just end up back in Florida."

"I don't want to be anchored anywhere. I want to be free to move around. But I like cold places. I wouldn't mind moving to Alaska. My aunt has a hotel in Alaska. I like the idea of spending some time there with her, helping her run it for a while."

"What if you—even we—had children? Wouldn't you want to stay put for a while, for the sake of stability?"

"I don't want to have children, ever. I mean, I love children. I think I would be an okay mother. But the things I'm meant to do with my life would, I think, make it very difficult to have children."

"I didn't know this about you, that you wouldn't want children. It surprises me."

"This is why it's good, I think, you came out here. We need to sort these things out. We need to find out if we love each other."

"I feel like you're holding some things back."

"That's true, but here we are, and I want to watch this football game since I paid forty bucks each for the tickets."

"Is it okay with you if I put my hand on your knee while I drive?"

"Yes. I'm very happy that you put your hand on my knee."

"It's interesting, you know. Whenever I relate to you in a physical way, you respond very positively. But whenever I relate to you in a spiritual way, it gets complicated, and I don't know how to read you, exactly."

"I feel like in some ways they are different issues."

"I don't think they are in any way separable."

"I feel like the physical expressions of love are very important and they mean something."

"I don't disagree. That's why I won't let you kiss me."

“But it’s strange. You will let me do other things that seem to me to be more intimate than kissing is.”

“I feel like, if you and I were kissing, I would be giving myself over to you in a way that I’m not ready to do.”

“Why is that?”

“Because I think that spiritually we are in very different places. I think you’re open to spiritual things, but I don’t think that you are really very far along. And I can’t tell if you are open to them because you really desire them or if you are just open to them because you want to be closer to me.”

“That’s a fair question to raise. I don’t know, either, sometimes. There’s a lot of things going on very quickly, and it can be confusing to me.”

“Also, I don’t know if I love you.”

“Do you think love is some kind of lightning flash? Like it strikes you and then the reverberations just ring out forever?”

“That’s how love is with God, I think. And I think that’s one thing you haven’t really entered into the fullness of.”

“I think that maybe love is a choice that people make.”

“That’s not very romantic.”

“I don’t know what good romance is, sometimes. I mean, it’s good to be romantic, and it’s good to have feelings. But I’ve had feelings for people before, and they’ve had feelings for me, but what was lacking, I think, was a choice to make a life together. A commitment.”

“It’s very scary to me to hear you speak that way. Because it seems very mechanical to me. It seems in keeping with many of the things that seem cold about you, to me. Everything seems so reasoned, so calculated. It makes me think that everything about the way you approach me must be some kind of calculation.”

“If that were true, though, wouldn’t I just tell you everything you wanted to hear all the time? It seems to me evidence of good faith that we have these kinds of conversations all the time, and that we have these, for lack of a better word, arguments, or disagreements.”

“I don’t enjoy arguing or disagreeing.”

“Me either.”

“I’m just going to keep my hand on your leg here, except when I

have to shift gears, until we get up to the top of the mountain, okay? I just want to enjoy the ride and enjoy you and enjoy this kind of closeness while we look at the mountains and enjoy the creation and all its wonder. It's not a slight to you. It's just something I need right now, if it's all right with you. But I want to keep my hand on your leg, okay?"

"Of course. I love that you have your hand on my leg. It is really nice."

"That right there is called Witch's Titty."

"Why?"

"Because look at it. It looks like a Witch's Titty."

"Yeah. I guess it does."

"You know what I think whenever I pass this place?"

"Tell me."

"There was this dance in high school, and there was this boy, let's call him Bob, he asked me to this dance. He was a senior and I was a freshman. I got all dressed up and he got me a corsage. When you go with a senior and you're a freshman, it's exciting, you know, because he picked you. You're the one he picked, and he passed over older girls to pick you. And before I left, my dad told him he could keep me out until midnight but no later. And he kissed me on the cheek, my dad, and he said I love you and we trust you, me and your mother. So we went to this dance, and it was all right. There was music, there was food, there was dancing. And afterward, I wanted this guy, Bob, to kiss me. It was something I really wanted. I had built it up big-time in my mind. He drove me out to this park I'm going to take you to later, out by the ski lifts. It was the place where all the kids went to sit in their cars and make out. We had to drive past Witch's Titty to get there. And I knew that was why we were going to this park, and it was okay with me. But when we got there, this guy, Bob, he started acting really nervous. He was staring straight ahead and he started sweating at his forehead. I felt sorry for him because I could tell he was very nervous. Then he said, like he was apologizing, "This is just something I really have to do." And he leaned toward me and I thought he was going to kiss me. But then he put his hands up my dress. I wanted to say no to him, but I was so surprised I guess my voice

caught in my throat. And then I put my hand down there to push his hand away and he grabbed my wrist and held it so hard that it bruised a ring around my wrist where he was holding it. Then he put his hand in my panties and he stuck his finger up inside me and poked around. It didn't hurt. It didn't feel good, either, but it didn't hurt. Then he just held his finger in there like that for a while and moved it around. Then he drove me home."

"What did you do?"

"I didn't do anything. I went inside and went to bed and stared at the ceiling for a long time. It wasn't until a lot later that I cried."

"So nothing happened to him?"

"He's still around. We became friends again later. I forgave him."

"I don't forgive him."

"You don't have to. But that's something you'll have to work on. Unforgiveness. Like the things you sometimes say about your mother."

"I just feel protective of you. I don't like it that for him there were no consequences."

"You carry the consequences around inside yourself, don't you?"

"Me or him?"

"Something about you reminds me of him sometimes."

"That makes me feel terrible that you would say that."

"I just think there's things you should know about me if we are really going to think about being together."

"Is that what we're doing?"

"It's just something I thought of because we were driving by Witch's Titty. That's all."

"When a long time passes like this and you're so quiet, I wonder what you're thinking."

"Do you think you have the right to know what I'm thinking?"

"I had a girlfriend in college one time who used to say things like that. She used to say, 'You know what I like about my thoughts? They're mine. I don't have to share them with you.'"

"Did she say that after you were prying at her to give up her thoughts?"

“Usually, yes.”

“All right. What do you want to know?”

“So many things.”

“You choose one thing. Any one thing. I’ll tell you.”

“One thing. Okay, the visions. You told me one time you would tell me more about the visions.”

“You see this here?”

“What? The road? The mountains? The sky?”

“The motion, through space. Through time, too. Once I was driving this road, and I had a vision of motion through space and through time.”

“While you were driving?”

“I saw all of creation as though it were a liquid, and we were swimming through it. Me, and all the creatures, land creatures and water creatures, too. The water was a deep blue, sparkling, but also translucent. You could see through it. And the rock faces were shimmering like precious jewels.”

“Was this a distraction while you were driving?”

“It was almost as if I were no longer driving anymore. I had given up control and although in the physical world my hands were on the wheel, and even though in the vision I was moving through a space not unlike the one we are moving through right now, and even though I had given up control, and even though there was that drop-off there just out your window, a couple thousand feet, maybe, I wasn’t afraid. What I was mostly was in awe.”

“Was it like you imagined seeing these things, or was it like you actually were moving through these things?”

“It was physically real. I could even smell the perfume of it.”

“What did it smell like?”

“There was a sweetness to it. There was a honey-and-almond quality to it.”

“Was the car moving through it, too?”

“The car went away. It was just my body being carried forward on the current of it.”

“Sometimes when you talk about these things, I want to believe you, and I want to understand, because I do believe you, but it is

very hard to believe you, and it is very hard to try to know how to understand.”

“Because you aren’t yet seeing with the eyes of the Spirit.”

“Because I haven’t had experiences like this, and I’ve never known anyone else who has. There is a certain light that gets in your eyes when you talk about them, and it is a little bit frightening to me.”

“That’s something you have to let go.”

“Maybe so, but I don’t know how.”

“You do it by doing it.”

“That’s easy to say, but if it were easy to do, wouldn’t many other people do it? If nothing else, to speak the tongues of angels and harvest the gold dust and sell it at market rate?”

“When you speak of it that way, it makes me angry.”

“I don’t mean to make you angry, and I am not making fun. I like you and possibly want to love you. I’m just trying to look at what you’re saying from all different directions and turn it over in my mind that way.”

“That’s not letting go. That’s holding on to control.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Maybe it would be better not to say anything else for a while.”

“Okay. All right. Okay.”

“Rise and shine.”

“I’m so tired.”

“It’s morning.”

“It’s dark.”

“The idea is to hit the slopes early.”

“Really, I’m wiped. I’m sorry.”

“I’m turning on the light.”

“Please don’t. Really. I don’t know if it’s the altitude or the nonstop going or just maybe general emotional exhaustion. I’m not trying to bail out on you. I’m still willing to ski. But my body doesn’t want to get up so early right now, and I feel like I should listen to it so I don’t get sick.”

“It smells like sickness in here. Your breath has a sinus quality to it.”

“That’s what I’m talking about.”

"The only way out is through. Please, get up. Let's ski."

"You know people there. Why don't you go on without me, and let me catch up with you this afternoon."

"Really?"

"Please understand."

"Really? This is really the choice you are making?"

"Please?"

"There are many ways in which I feel more like your mother than like a person with whom you might be falling in love."

"This is because I didn't go skiing this morning."

"It's so many things. You are, I have come to believe, a fundamentally passive person."

"What do you mean?"

"Like it was me who drove all the way here from Colorado Springs."

"I can't drive a stick shift."

"I offered to teach you."

"Don't you think it would be horrible to try to learn while driving up the steepest mountains in the whole country?"

"Those are in Alaska."

"Those drop-offs, though."

"But that's a spirit of fear."

"That's a spirit of safety. I want to be safe. I want you to be safe. I don't mind learning to drive a stick, but I want to learn in a parking lot."

"I have to ask you to clean up after I make dinner, or to do the dishes."

"We're staying in all these houses where friends of yours are out of town for the winter. I don't know what I should and shouldn't be touching or when it is an imposition to take the initiative. It's a situation where I feel like you're in the driver's seat and I'm mostly taking my cues from you."

"I'm thinking about gender roles here. It seems to me like the man should be taking the leadership roles in a relationship. But you are always taking your cues from me. I am the de facto leader, even though I am a woman."

"There have been many instances where I have tried to take the lead, but you have made it clear that you don't like the choice I make."

"That's what I mean by passive. You just concede the high ground to me."

"I don't think you would respond well to being strong-armed."

"With love you have to do it. With love."

"To me, the more loving thing would be more of a give-and-take. More of a partnering kind of thing."

"I feel like, because you are so passive, that one day the anger is going to come spilling out. I feel like you don't tell me when you are really angry."

"I have only one time been angry, but I knew it wasn't right to be angry, so I didn't say anything about it to you."

"When?"

"When you were still living in Florida and you went to visit that guy in North Carolina and you rode on the back of his motorcycle and you called me and told me what a good time you were having there on the back of his motorcycle."

"That's true. That was fun. Really, truly fun. I loved visiting him, and I loved going for a ride on his motorcycle."

"That made me angry, but I didn't say anything because I didn't feel like I had the right to say anything because I don't own you, we aren't committed, you have the right to make your own choices."

"So why get angry?"

"Because I wanted you to be having fun with me and not that guy on that motorcycle."

"You don't own a motorcycle."

"I don't even like motorcycles. People I knew kept getting killed on motorcycles."

"So you were worried about me getting killed?"

"No, I was mostly worried about you having fun. And one other thing."

"What?"

"I know some women who had orgasms from riding motorcycles. I had a picture of you with your arms around his waist, riding those mountain roads, holding on to him, having an orgasm."

“So you weren’t concerned about whether I was going to get killed?”

“Did you have an orgasm?”

“Of all of the questions you should never have asked, this is the number one question you never should have asked.”

“Your flight leaves in six hours, so I think we ought to leave in three. That gives us an hour to get to the airport and an hour for security and baggage and another hour cushion in case we hit bad traffic.”

“Let me finish packing my things, and then do you want to have dinner together before I leave?”

“You can have dinner at the airport, and it’s too early anyway, don’t you think? I don’t think I’ll be hungry until much later.”

“The reason I was thinking dinner was I have a feeling that after today we may not keep seeing each other anymore.”

“I haven’t decided about that yet.”

“If that is what happens, I want to spend one last nice time with you and let you know that I cared about you and that I care about you.”

“That’s something I want, too. I’m going into the bedroom and lie down while you finish packing. I’m tired, and I know you’re tired. When you’re done packing, why don’t you come into the bedroom and lie down and rest?”

“I love holding you.”

“Shh.”

“I mean it. This is something I will take with me when I leave.”

“Shh.”

“The reason I can’t let you kiss me is the same reason as always. Even though right now I want you to kiss me. Do you understand?”

“I don’t understand.”

“I want you to understand. I don’t want you to be hurt.”

“I will be hurt, but let’s not talk about it right now and interrupt what is nice.”

“Will you do one thing for me? When we get to the airport?”

“Yes?”

“When you go through the gate, and you want to turn around and look at me, don’t look back.”

“I know what it means, for you to say that to me now.”

“Shh. Put your face against mine. Touch your face to mine.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Don’t say anything. Just put your face against my face.”

“Language fails.”

“Just close your eyes and let go for a while. Let’s be together. Let’s be.”

“But what does it mean?”

“You don’t have to understand what it means. I don’t understand what it means. It’s not less beautiful if you understand it.”

“I want it to mean when we get to the gate I’m going to turn around and take one last look at you.”

“Shh.”

“So I can remember you until the next time I see you.”

“Shh.”

“I love the way it feels, being so close to you.”

“No more words.”

19.

God's Plan

by Daniel Browne

Finally. That's what I thought when the reporter from the *Times* called about Greg.

Every reading I went to, every opening, every show from Chelsea to Bushwick, I talked about Greg and Cara: about our time together at Wilmott, Greg's music, and the tragedy that took him from us. I'd corner any art-schooled, trust-funded loft-dweller who'd listen and say, "Someone needs to tell Greg's story."

Invariably they'd say, "You're a writer. Who better than you?" So I'd have to explain that of course I'd written about Greg, how could I not, but I only know how to write plays, and getting the backing for a show about him, enough to do it right, on the scale he deserved, was tough right now. If they knew me, or knew of me, this would surprise them. "Didn't you win that Kennedy Center Young Playwrights thing?" they'd ask. "That's got to count for something, right?" I'd tell them that was a long time ago, another lifetime, when Greg was still with us and I believed Broadway was just waiting for me to remake it, and Cara was the spark that kept the fire burning in both of us. The music industry had nearly missed out on Greg, and I wasn't going to just wait around for the theater industry to wake up from its stupor. What I needed was someone who could get the word out right away. Someone who could make Greg's story, our story, into news.

I never doubted the call would come. I'd prayed for it. Don't get

me wrong: that wasn't the source of my confidence. I mean, I figured God owed us one, me and Cara, but I'm not the kind of Christian who thinks of Him as a wish-granting genie. The reason I was so certain was that I'd put in the time. I'd gotten to know the right people. That was why the three of us had come to New York in the first place.

Truth be told, Greg and Cara never really settled in. They missed Ohio something awful, especially Wilmott, with its red brick and redder maples. I tried to get them excited about steampunk exhibitions and political burlesque, but the two of them preferred to hole up in their crummy apartment in the East Village, playing at the domesticity they would have had if they'd stayed behind: Cara canned green beans; Greg searched the animal shelters for an Irish setter in need of a home, though he knew their place was too small. I'd forward them invitations, and Greg would just say he was allergic to cheese cubes. So I had to network for all of us. You see, I said silently to Greg when the reporter called, I told you it would pay off in the end.

He said his name was Mike. "Amy Wright told me about your friend."

Amy had been in a few of my one-acts back when I was killing myself trying to get into festivals. You try hard not to be too impressed by people in this town, but I was impressed that Amy had an in at the *Times*. I'd been hoping to get to someone at *New York* magazine, maybe *Esquire*. But the *Times*?

"How do you know Amy?" I asked.

"We dated last summer," Mike said, which didn't exactly answer the question but was enough for me. That's what I admire about New York: people are sophisticated about their relationships. They hook up, they break up, but they stay cool, keep each other in mind. The door is always open to exes—and friends of exes.

"What she told me was really sad and interesting," Mike went on. "She said I needed to talk to you to get the whole story."

I waited a beat to answer. I'm an award-winning playwright. I know how to build suspense.

"He was a genius and cancer ate his brain. That's the story, man."

Mike cleared his throat. Some directors and actors I know hate that sound, but I understand what it means: someone in the audience is unnerved. You've got your hook in him and he feels the pull.

"Could we meet in person, maybe tomorrow?" Mike said. "It doesn't feel right to talk about this on the phone."

"I've got prayer group till ten," I said, "and I teach an improv class at five. Anytime between, I'm yours."

I suggested we meet at the High Line. I can't stand hanging out in the coffee shops, surrounded by all the laptop jockeys working on their "projects." None of the successful artists I know do it. If you want to be out in the world, be out in the world.

For decades, the High Line was a blight; now it's an inspiration, tall grass and taller flowers sprouting between rusted rails, all kinds of cool art installations claiming the dead space between buildings. And who's responsible? Just a couple of guys—one of them a writer—guys with a vision, guys who knew how to line up the right people. The High Line is my kind of place.

Mike was about my size, which is to say short, but he was stocky where I was wiry, grizzled where I was clean-shaven. And his clothes—no comparison there. The summer between high school and Wilmott, I signed up for an exchange program, spent a month in China. The lasting legacy of that trip was the five three-piece suits I had made to order, still the best hundred bucks I ever spent. I was wearing the gray pinstripe for my meeting with Mike, a white shirt open at the collar, no tie. Mike was wearing jeans and a Columbia hoodie. Taking him in, I had to revise my opinion of Amy just a little. She slept with him? *New York Times*, I reminded myself.

"Which section do you write for?" I asked.

Mike took one hand out of the marsupial pocket of his hoodie and scratched his beard. "I freelance for a few different sections."

A freelancer. I smiled to hide my annoyance. I wondered if he'd pitched the story yet, if the *Times* was even interested.

"I think this would be a good fit for Our Towns," Mike said.

I'd never heard of Our Towns. The name made me suspicious that he was going to portray us as a bunch of hicks who'd been chewed up and spit out by the big city. Be cool, I told myself. He hasn't even heard what you have to say yet.

"Hey, you're the writer of this little piece," I said. "I'm just the subject."

Mike squinted at me. “Isn’t Greg the subject?”

“Source,” I said. “I meant I’m just a source.” On impulse, I grabbed his shoulder and squeezed. “But you’ve got to understand. This is a story about the three of us. Greg, Cara, and me.”

I looked Mike straight in the eye and waited. He nodded and pulled his other hand out of that baggy front pocket. It was holding a tape recorder.

“How do you want me to start?” I asked. But I already knew how I was going to start.

“Amy said you met Greg in college?”

All three of us were from small towns outside Cincinnati. Wilmott was something else altogether, a tiny campus lost in rolling farmland. It was a place for church-raised kids to prepare for a decent, thoughtful life of hard work and service. But even out in the heartland, among the righteous, there are the weirdos, the ones who can recite every word of Monty Python by heart, who hear God’s voice more clearly in Jeff Buckley than the chapel hymns. That was me and Greg. He was the first to respond to my bulletin board posting, “Sketch Comedians Wanted for Something Completely Different.” And when I played him “Hallelujah” for the first time—the two of us sitting Indian-style on my dorm room floor—the tears streamed down his face onto the lumpy dun carpet.

Years later, when Nonesuch finally called with the contract offer, Greg told me he owed it all to me. If I hadn’t introduced him to Jeff Buckley that night, he would’ve never known to write his own songs. If I hadn’t been there to lead the charge, to grab him by the scruff of the neck, and say, “I know this is what God wants for us,” he would’ve never come to New York. The Kennedy Center thing was a real boost for a young artist, but Greg’s success and the part I played in it—that’s what I’ll always be most proud of.

Mike nodded every so often, but it was hard to read him. He could’ve been hanging on my every word or weighing his dinner options.

“So you and Greg were tight from the start,” he said. “Where does Cara come in?”

I smiled, the way only the thought of Cara can make me smile. “Cara? Cara doesn’t come in, man. She’s the through line.”

Mike opened his mouth, but before he could ask for an explanation, inspiration struck. As they often do, the right words just came to me: “Greg and I were the stars of our little universe, okay? Cara was the sky.”

Greg and I majored in Divinity, took Introduction to Pastoral Ministry together our second semester. Cara was the only girl in our section. Of course, we both noticed her severe beauty: long, straight hair; sharp nose and chin; delicate, ballet-slipped foot tapping under her desk, like an urgent telegraph. I also noticed her noticing Greg. How could she not? The guy was six feet tall, captain of the swim team, jaw like Batman; he played guitar on the quad and held his sides when he laughed. I saw from the beginning how it would play out. I swear I even saw myself presiding at their wedding. And I was never once competitive or even jealous, because I knew I would be her best friend, just as I was Greg’s, and the intimacy among the three of us would be absolute. That was God’s plan for us.

She was always the practical one. In that first class together, while Greg and I debated the finer points of theology, challenging our professor on predestination and biblical literalism, she asked questions: How does a ministry support itself? Do pastors get 401ks? A year later, when Greg and I had the shared revelation that our true calling was art, she switched majors without thinking twice, graduated with a degree in business administration. I teased her, of course, called her “Business in the Front, Business in the Back,” but she was unflappable. “Someone’s got to have their feet on the ground,” she said. “God knows you boys don’t.”

She booked Greg gigs around campus and even a few engagements at townie bars, unheard of at the time. For me, she found rehearsal space, wrangled budget-conscious alternatives to my grandiose set and costume designs. When my first student play went up, she lorded over the till, refused to let us blow the take—all forty-five dollars of it—on a celebratory keg. I knew then, no matter who I ended up

sharing a bed or a name with, I'd never be more cared for. I'd never feel more loved.

Our senior year, when I found out I'd won the Kennedy Center award, she was the first one I told. The play was about a minister who defends a painter accused of making sacrilegious art. I'd been reading about the showdown between Giuliani and the Brooklyn Museum, saw the potential there. Sure enough, there was interest in New York. I'd known for a year the city was our next move, but I also knew I'd need Cara's help convincing Greg.

He'd spent the previous summer gigging around Ohio, winning converts in Cincinnati, Columbus, Cleveland. Somewhere along the way, he'd found his voice. The crowds in those coffee shops and basement clubs must have felt like they were at the Gaslight in '62 seeing a kid named Dylan for the first time, only Greg could sing like an angel and work a room like Sinatra at the Sands. Sometimes the stories he told—dead-on impressions of his brothers, Billy Graham, the Irish setter he had as a kid—went on longer than the songs, which admittedly were still working themselves out. Seriously, if you didn't get to see him live, you really missed something. Seems like the record company finds a new Jeff Buckley concert in the archives every few months. The only tape of Greg singing live is in a shoebox in my closet.

The point is Greg was happy with the way things were going. The buzz was building; the tour he had planned for the summer after graduation would take him as far as Chicago. He could be an artist and still be close to home. Cara was thinking about a house with a yard, trading stocks on the Internet, a kid bobbing on her knee. But all I had to say was, "You know he's too good to stay." She let it go with a sigh.

"God's plan?" she said.

I took her hand. "No doubt."

A few days after we made the decision, the two of them gave me a card with a picture Greg had drawn: three hands clasped together. Inside, Cara had written in her precise hand, "Will you marry us?" I still have it in the same shoebox with the tape of Greg performing. By then, I was an ordained minister. Greg hadn't bothered taking the licensing exam. He figured, I'm an artist now, what's the point? I was

just as committed to writing as he was to music, but remember, I'd seen this moment coming. Besides, I figured being a man of the cloth would set me apart once we got to the godless cesspool of New York.

I performed the ceremony in the backyard of his parents' house. Cara walked down the aisle barefoot in a simple white slip dress. Greg and I received her, he in a rented tux, me in the most formal of my Chinese suits. I spoke of what it means to have a path in life, of how important it is to have companions walking that path alongside you, and how blessed I felt to be walking with Greg and with Cara on the same path, together. They kissed, and then Greg sang a song he'd written just the day before that brought all of us to tears. After the picnic-style dinner, he and I dusted off some of our freshman-year sketch comedy repertoire. I've got to say, we killed.

Cara and I made the move in June. The plan was to live together until Greg joined us in September—he had to go through with the tour—and then I'd find my own place. I was living off my Kennedy Center prize, taking meetings with agents and producers. I tried to convince Cara to take it easy for a while, explore the city with me, but being Cara, she signed up with a temp agency right away. We'd reconvene in the evenings in our fourth-floor walk-up. No furniture, so we'd lie side by side on the floor, just like we did at Wilmott, drink wine out of pint glasses, talk about our days, about Greg.

“Was it different when it was just the two of you?”

Easy, I told myself. He's a reporter. He has to ask.

“Man, everything was different. I was a professional writer. Me, a preacher's son from Nowhere, Ohio. Living above a lesbian biker club. Cara was the only part of my life that wasn't different.”

Mike obliged me with a half-smile. “I just find it amazing. Greg's off doing his thing while his bride and his best friend are living this exciting new life together. And he's cool with it?”

“Greg was an amazing guy,” I said. “Isn't that the whole point of this?”

Mike broke eye contact to look out at the river behind me. I could almost hear the machinery in his skull humming as it generated cynical thoughts.

"I talked to Greg on the phone every day," I said. "I could hear in his voice how badly he wanted to be here."

Mike shifted his gaze back to me. "And you?"

I stared back as hard as I could. "If I'd known how little time we had, I would've told him to drop everything. I would've told him not to stop for red lights."

That last bit was a spin on an old Aaron Sorkin line. You know what they say: good writers borrow, the great ones steal. But the heat I put behind it was all mine.

Mike looked a little crumpled, like a balloon slowly losing air. A soft click broke the silence between us: the tape in his recorder hitting the end of Side A.

"How long was Greg here before he died?"

I wanted to tell him to flip the tape first, but I pushed the thought out of my mind. An audience is like a wild animal—a moment's hesitation, and you're dead.

"Ten months," I said. "But we packed ten lifetimes into them."

It took me a while to find my own place, so we all crammed in together for a few weeks. Even once I moved out, I ended up crashing with them half the time anyway. It was the three of us again, the plan was finally coming together, and it was both exactly and not at all like I'd imagined it.

The friendship was strong as ever. Greg and I still cracked each other up with our Cockney accents and inside jokes. Cara still rolled her eyes. We still stayed up all night, playing each other music, wondering out loud why there's so much great rock and roll made by Christians but no great Christian rock. Cara still kept us honest and on task, saying, "If you boys are just going to jerk each other off, we could've stayed in Ohio."

The part that didn't live up to my expectations was the work. No, not the work—Greg and I were both coming into our own as artists, discovering what we could really do, realizing that God had given us the green light. The problem was the city. The city didn't care. My play went up in a decent-sized black box off Broadway, but no one reviewed it. Greg was getting gigs, even an industry showcase, but his

style wasn't connecting with the skinny-jeans-and-mullets crowd. He was too openhearted to play it cool.

After a couple of months, he started pining for his fan base back home. "They want to like you. Here, they want to hate you." I was frustrated, too, but I wouldn't give in to homesickness. Did he think we weren't going to struggle? He knew Proverbs as well as I did. "By long suffering is a prince persuaded." He answered me with, "Like vinegar on a wound is one who sings songs to a troubled heart." I asked him if Cara was putting pressure on him, and he said no. I told him if we left without making a name for ourselves we'd always feel small-time. He said he wasn't sure he minded being small-time. I begged him to give it a year. He agreed.

Of course, no one has a more twisted sense of humor than God. I should've known that when the big break came it would come for Mr. I Don't Mind Being Small-Time. One night, after opening for an established local act, Greg left the club to find David Byrne waiting for him on the street. Byrne said he'd never seen anything quite like Greg before; the closest was this indigenous singer in Peru who mixed plaintive ballads with traditional storytelling. He asked to hear Greg's demo, and when Greg said he didn't have one, he offered up his home studio. A month later the brass at Nonesuch were drooling over the tape. A month after that, Greg's voice was purling through a Volkswagen ad—you know, the one with the good-looking guy and the good-looking girl racing up opposite sides of a hill in matching Rabbits. They both stop on a dime when they reach the summit, the grilles of the cars almost touching, as if they're about to go at it like . . . well, rabbits. Greg sounds amused by the whole thing, practically sighing, "See you there, see you there, with the red leaves in your hair."

When I saw that commercial, I'll admit, I was finally jealous of Greg. A singer-songwriter can just drag his guitar from joint to joint until David Byrne steps out of the woodwork to be his guardian angel. A playwright needs actors and directors and stagehands and technicians. I'd decided I'd have to form my own company if I was going to get anything done, but the prize money was dwindling, and I didn't have any upcoming commitments to entice the right people,

the ones who could give my words the treatment they deserved. I felt myself becoming a guy who'd done something once, while Greg was striding from strength to strength, unassuming as ever. It had all happened too fast. At my weakest, I wondered if I should've let him go back to Ohio, if it would've made things easier for me.

God took care of that nonsense, too. The day of Greg's first recording session for his debut album, the headaches started. By the end of the month, the tumor had been diagnosed, and I'd never be jealous of my friend again. I knew if I did nothing else in my life but help him through his trial, keep his spirits up so he could finish the album and find peace, I'd have fulfilled my purpose.

Right before all this happened, Cara got a full-time job with one of the companies she temped for. If it wasn't for her health plan, Greg wouldn't even have gone to the doctor for his headaches. Eventually, he would've collapsed, and even if we'd gotten him to the hospital in time, we wouldn't have been able to afford treatment.

As Greg got sicker, Cara wanted to quit so she could take care of him. But she couldn't lose the insurance. So I took care of him while she worked. I slung his arm over my shoulder and helped him down the four flights from his apartment to the street. In the studio, I held him upright while he sang, even though he was a foot taller than me. During those final sessions, he was determined to manage the pain and pour every last drop of himself into the songs. Even when he went blind in his left eye, his right eye just shined brighter, as long as the tape was rolling and he was making his music. At the end of the day, the light would go out and he'd collapse with exhaustion. I spent the last of my money on cabs to take us home from the studio.

After Greg checked into the hospital for good, Cara and I would stay with him most nights, sleeping in chairs. Once I woke up to the sound of her choking on her own tears. Before I was even fully conscious, I'd reached over and laid my hand on hers.

Between sobs, she whispered, "How could God do this?"

"Do you think God gives people cancer?" I asked.

"Do you hear him screaming?" she said. "He's begging for mercy. Why won't God show him mercy?"

I watched her chin tremble—the chin I'd always thought of as im-

perious—and raised my hand to cup it. “He did,” I said, turning her face toward mine. “He gave him you.”

Her lips parted for a moment, then closed again: the saddest smile I’d ever see.

“And you,” she said. I wiped away a tear with my thumb.

Afternoon had faded into evening. I’d already blown off my improv class. I still had my key to the walk-up, so I figured I’d wait for Cara to come home from work. I sat on the futon where I’d slept so many nights, looking through the doorless doorway at the cramped bedroom. The bed was unmade, the sheets snarled and kicked aside. I thought about how much better I liked this place when there was no furniture in it, when Cara and I slept on an air mattress on the floor.

When the door opened, I was staring at a framed photo of Greg, Cara, and me back at Wilmott, Cara smiling properly at the camera, while Greg and I mug on either side of her. I’m fingering my chin like a philosopher lost in thought, Greg raising his eyebrow like it’s Santori Time.

“Who are those people?” I heard Cara say over my shoulder.

I set the picture aside. “Just a bunch of kids with a crazy dream.”

I got what I wanted: the Cara eye-roll. She dropped her company tote bag on the floor. “Sorry I didn’t go to that thing last night. I just . . . well, I didn’t want to, to be honest.”

“I met a reporter today,” I said. “To talk about Greg.”

Cara glanced at me, then ducked her head into the fridge. “So you got what you wanted then. Beer?”

“He wants to talk to you.”

Cara didn’t answer. She was searching the one drawer in her kitchenette for a bottle opener.

“We can do it together,” I said.

“Did you tell him I was too fragile to do it myself?”

I moved the picture so she could sit beside me. “No. I told him you might not want to talk, but he said the piece needs your perspective.”

She sat on the coffee table facing me. The three of us had found it on the sidewalk and hauled it up the stairs together. “My perspective.”

“It’s the *Times*, Cara. Greg’s going to be in the *New York Times*.”

She looked at me blankly, took a sip of her beer. “And your project? Is your project going to be in the *Times*, too?”

“My project?” But I knew what she meant. I’d told her I was working on a new play, a musical actually. I was writing it around Greg’s songs. After he died, I was paralyzed for a time. But at the end of the day, I was still a writer, and there was only one way I knew to deal with the grief. The show would be a celebration of his music and his life, his devotion to his art, his faith, his friends. I told Cara it was going to be bigger than *Spring Awakening*.

I reached out to take Cara’s hand. She let me, but there was no response to my touch.

“Hey,” I said. “I didn’t say anything about the project. Come on.”

She cocked her head to the side as if she needed to see me from a different angle. “You didn’t tell him you and Greg started working on it together before he died?”

I pulled my hand back. “Hell no. Cara, look at me.”

She was already looking straight at me. Still, I felt the need to say it again: “Look at me. I didn’t say that. I promise you I wouldn’t say that.”

Cara put her beer down between her slender thighs and sighed through her perfect nose. “Good. It’s better if I say it.”

I wanted to answer her, but something happened to me then, something I’d never experienced before: the words didn’t come.

“I’ll say you suggested it to keep his spirits up,” Cara said. “He always felt better when he was working.”

“Cara . . .”

“I’ll say it was all he could talk about. He thought of himself as just a guy with a guitar, but you, you were going to be the poet laureate of our generation.”

My tongue felt dense in my mouth. “Did he say that?”

I thought the smile she’d given me at the hospital that night was the saddest I’d ever see, but I was wrong. I closed my eyes.

“He loved you,” Cara said. “And I love you. So I’m going to do this interview for you. But after that, I’m going home. I can’t be here anymore. Do you understand?”

I could’ve gotten on my knees and begged her to stay. I could’ve

said, "I don't know if I can make it in this city without you," and I would've been telling the truth. Then again, I could've said, "I'll go with you." "Forget the *Times*, forget Broadway. We'll go home together. Have an Irish setter and a boy named Greg. You can trade stock on the Internet, and I'll spend my life raking the red leaves in the yard."

But I didn't say any of that. God has a plan for each of us. I know it. And I knew this was all part of his plan for me. So I just said, "Whatever you want." Cara leaned over and kissed me on the forehead. Then she told me she was tired.

As I walked down the stairs, I recalled what it was like having to hold Greg steady as we negotiated those four flights, one step at a time. It made me feel light, unburdened. I took my phone out of the pocket of my vest and started scrolling through my address book, all the poets and painters and dancers I'd met since I came to the city. I wondered where everyone was tonight.

20.

Granaby

by Brandon Hobson

Crowe Street is quiet at night. Murphy likes it this way, though most nights he has trouble sleeping. For weeks he hasn't gotten a good night's rest, averaging four or five hours each night, sometimes less. He attributes his restlessness to his worries about his job at Granaby Youth Corrections. At thirty-six, he's the youngest administrator since the facility was built in the early nineties, but in truth he hates it. He wants to believe in the kindness of strangers, the fierce possibilities of hope, the beauty of color. Some nights after work he sits on the back porch and watches fireflies and moths while his son Stephen plays with their dog, Rufus. Lately he has to supervise Stephen outside. Stephen is six, and for several weeks he's been trying to hurt the dog—poking him with a stick, pulling his tail, throwing rocks at him. Last month Murphy talked to his wife Kate about counseling, but neither of them got around to calling anyone. Murphy's so beaten down by work lately he can't concentrate on anything.

Much of what he describes about his work to Kate is corroborated by the younger guys from his neighborhood who've been through the system and talk openly about being locked up when they were minors. Outside the Portuguese market down the street, Murphy listens to their stories and pretends to be interested. In the apartment building next door, one of the upstairs tenants, Jack, has Monday Night Football parties that Murphy's never been invited to. Jack,

who's slightly dyspneic and overweight, talks about his life as a delinquent, all the times he smoked hydroponic pot with his friends in a dim basement while listening to Jane's Addiction and eating Nutter Butters. When Jack was seventeen he got drunk and stole a car from the neighborhood, put it through the window of a Repo Records, and then got out and asked if they had anything by the Del Fuegos. "But that's all history," he tells Murphy. Another tenant, a thirty-four-year-old construction worker named Lyle, says he was caught trying to steal a rosewood-handled boot knife from an estate sale. Ever since, his father refers to him as slightly worse than useless.

About once a week Kate sends Murphy to the Portuguese market even though she knows Murphy can't stand the food. Codfish, pickled onions, red peppers, chourico, pork pudding, cacoula, and so on. Murphy can't stand any of it. On nights she cooks that stuff he purposefully works late, then stops by Anchor Tom's on his way home for a slice of pizza or a bowl of chowder to go. But the truth is that Murphy never minds going to the market because he has a small crush on the woman who works there. Her name is Mina; she's divorced and dark and in her thirties. Murphy can tell she has a good bullshit antenna, so he hasn't even attempted to flirt with her. She shrugs off the guys who try, or else tells them straight, "Sorry, not interested." Murphy has never once seen her smile. The way her mouth droops on one side is basically the way she looks all the time, but somehow he finds this sexy. He imagines sleeping with her and searching her face. Her expression, her mouth, the whole time looking like she's just been handed a used sock.

Tonight, yet again, he is thinking about her as he lies in bed next to Kate. "Do we need anything from the market?" he asks quietly in the dark. "I was just thinking."

"What? It's midnight."

"I meant for tomorrow. I could dash over there real quick."

"Stop talking."

"Just trying to help out."

"No."

He loves Kate absurdly. He loves that she's neurotic, afraid of spiders and planes, worried about catching colds or a sore throat. Before

they married, he sometimes playfully gave her Indian rub-burns on her arms while they watched Letterman at her apartment in West Haven. She grew up with three older brothers, so she didn't mind playing rough. In the beginning they were spontaneous; he often took her against the wall in a sort of arabesque position, but that was several years ago. They married just out of college. He was working as a program coordinator in a small juvenile detention center. Now all he thinks about is quitting his job or fucking some stranger, like Mina from the market.

Although, more and more frequently, he is aware of how incredibly lucky he is. He reminds himself of this. Stephen is a joy regardless of his recent behavior with Rufus. Sometimes at night they gather in the living room and play board games or draw pictures. On Sundays, Murphy helps Kate with yard work. When the weather is nice they take walks through the neighborhood, Stephen riding his bike in front of them. "We're blessed," Kate said one Christmas Eve when Stephen was a baby. "We have to remember how blessed we are."

Murphy sits up in bed and turns on the TV, mutes the sound, finds a nature program on cable. A magnified butterfly sits on a leaf. The butterfly materializes, pulsing, then flutters away.

Murphy's boss, Hank Drucker, says the city doesn't like runaways or delinquents. Hank, who's been a detention director for twenty-five years, is overweight and asthmatic and drinks heavily. He spends most of the day in his office, sucking on his inhaler and leaving Murphy to supervise the staff and handle the residents. For as long as Murphy's known him, Hank's been a man who speaks his mind. "I need someone to put out fires," he told Murphy when he hired him several years ago. He pumped his inhaler in his mouth and sat back in his swivel chair. "The juveniles at Granaby are runaways and criminals. Some get kicked out of youth shelters for getting high or stealing from staff. Others get picked up by the police and brought in. I'll worry about the court documents and paperwork. I need you out there on the floor, putting out fires."

For the past fifteen years, Murphy has seen these kids come in and out of juvenile detention. Sometimes the court places them in the cus-

tody of social services and they sit in detention and wait to be placed in group homes. Then they run away from the group homes and return to the streets, and the whole cycle starts over again. Murphy is the assistant director and serves as a sort of in-house counselor. The juveniles he talks to during intakes, after they've changed out of their street clothes and showered and put all their money and jewelry in baggies, after they've carried their bed sheets and pillows down the hall past the medical supply room to their rooms, they tell him what happens when they return to the streets. They always want to talk their first night. Especially the newcomers. Part of Murphy's job is just listening to them. He thinks they see enough in six months to provide a lifetime of nightmares. Some of the Hispanics tell him they stand in the alley behind MG's Liquor on Albany Street and see skinheads in leather jackets and camouflage pants walk by and stare at them. The skinheads smoke cigarettes and throw bottles. The skinheads lean against the fence and piss in the street and yell at them.

"We're not scared of them," Paolo says. "I've seen these guys and they don't do anything." Paolo is sixteen and from the north side of Hartford. He's lived in six different foster homes since he was twelve. His father is part of a large Latin gang and is doing time for possession of firearms and drug trafficking after what the FBI called one of the largest raids since the prohibition era. Paolo tells Murphy about pickpocketing tourists in Boston on the subway T train from Government Center to Harvard Square. For two months he stole toilet paper every day from Captain Jack's Fish House's bathroom until the place closed down due to failing health inspections. For a while, before he was picked up and sent to the shelter, he slept wherever he could—in the homes of strange men, under a pavilion in a park on Albany, on the wood floors of abandoned houses. As he talks to Murphy, he looks at the dried blood in his fingernails from scratching the scabs on his scalp. He has lice. Impetigo of the scalp. Tonight the staff will treat his hair with olive oil and a lice comb. They've been through this before.

Later in the night, Paolo is upset. His hand is bleeding from punching the concrete wall, and he's threatening to kill himself. He's made threats like this in the past. After he calms down, two staff members

help him into the medical room and wrap his hand. His fingers are swollen and bloody. Murphy thinks Paolo's fingers might be broken, so he and Paolo's probation officer, Rob, have to transport him to the hospital. Rob cuffs Paolo's hands in front rather than behind his back since his hand is injured, then puts on the ankle restraints.

"Always a flight risk," Rob says.

Paolo sits in the backseat with his head down. They drive toward downtown to St. Francis. Been here before, Murphy has, but not for a long while. They pass liquor stores, beauty parlors, sheet metal wholesalers, old warehouses and apartment buildings. Downtown, Seymour Street's darkness is broken at intervals with the yellow light of apartment windows, the open doors of restaurants and bars. The scent of decay emanates from the parking lot as they help Paolo from the car and walk him into the emergency room. Low priority emergency, so they will have to sit and wait as usual. Nobody's really attempted suicide at Granaby, but Murphy tells the staff they have to take threats seriously, especially when a kid like Paolo is punching a wall until his hand bleeds.

"You need to sit up," Rob says in the waiting room. But Paolo is exhausted, sitting slumped with his head resting against the wall. He can't keep his eyes open. When the nurse takes them to a room, Rob uncuffs him so she can check his pulse and take his blood pressure. She takes his hand and studies it. "Can you move your fingers?"

Paolo moves his fingers but winces.

"They're pretty swollen," Murphy says.

Paolo sits on the exam table, staring at Rob's military-style crew cut. The nurse writes something down on a clipboard, tells them the doctor will be in soon and leaves the room. Murphy knew they would be there at least a couple of hours, so he brought along the *Courant*. He unfolds it and starts on the *New York Times* crossword but struggles to keep his eyes open.

"I could fall asleep right here," he says.

Rob sits next to him and chews on a toothpick.

By the time they return to Granaby it's late, after eleven. The graveyard crew is there, starting laundry. All residents are in bed. Murphy takes Paolo to his room in wing A and logs the prescribed antibiotic

in the medical room. Nothing broken, thankfully. He tells Cliff, the eleven-to-seven supervisor, to have someone from the morning shift go to the pharmacy and fill the antibiotic.

“We’ve got other problems,” Cliff says. “Thomas in Wing C.”

Murphy can already guess. Thomas, a fourteen-year-old, seriously unstable kid from Allston who’s in for rape by instrumentation on his five-year-old stepsister. Thomas will possibly be charged as an adult and remain locked up until he’s twenty-one unless the long-term treatment is successful and the justice system considers him rehabilitated. These kids, they’re called youthful offenders, which is a polite term for sex offenders. They’re unlike the others in detention in that most of them are socially inept, immature, obsessive about little things like hiding extra toilet paper in their pillow cases and masturbating two or three times a day in the main bathroom with the door open. Thomas always wants attention. His father is one of those low-grade knuckleheads who wears flannel shirts and drives a 1993 firebird and chews Red Man. During weekend visitation, he once told Murphy he drinks Stolichnaya vodka only. Thomas has an unfortunate facial tic that Murphy thinks he exaggerates for attention at certain times throughout the day, like during meals when no talking is the rule. He’s been in detention for more than ninety days while he’s waiting to be placed in residential treatment. This week he’s in room confinement for making inappropriate remarks about sharpening a broomstick and using it as a weapon on detention officers.

“I can already guess,” Murphy says.

Sure enough. In Wing C, Murphy opens Thomas’s door and sees him sitting cross-legged on the floor with his shirt off. His shirt is crumpled on his bed, and feces are smeared on the wall and all over the floor. Feces, everywhere. Murphy radios a staff member to Wing C and Thomas looks up.

“What’s wrong with you?” Murphy says. “Again?”

Thomas doesn’t say anything. But there is shame, if not embarrassment, and Murphy has to remind himself that most of the state custody abused kids like Thomas developed a habit of smearing feces in bed or shitting in their underwear to ward off their predators. These

are the times that test Murphy's patience, and residents like Thomas are good at grating on his nerves. Before he started working with delinquents, Murphy taught ninth-grade civics at a public high school in East Hartford but got fired for cursing at the students. Murphy, at twenty-four, young and just out of college, still single and staying out late at night, then hungover the next day and trying to deal with hyperactive adolescents with mood swings and hormones. The day he got fired he lost his temper. His students were talking and laughing and being generally disruptive as he stood at the blackboard, and after several attempts to quiet them, he threw his head back and screamed, "Can't you people ever shut the fuck up and listen to me for one goddamn second?" He has to remind himself of those days when his job gets stressful, as it does trying to deal with Thomas.

"You know the drill," Murphy says.

Thomas gets up and follows Murphy to the closet, where they fill a mop bucket and get a spray bottle full of cleaner and paper towels. Thomas spends the next thirty minutes cleaning his room and then takes a shower while everyone else in Wing C is trying to sleep. A staff member relieves Murphy so he can go home after such a long day. A twelve-hour day, in fact, and he doesn't get paid overtime. The extra hours accrue as comp time, which means he can at least take off early tomorrow.

"Try not to call me at home tonight if there's a problem," Murphy tells Cliff.

"Don't call you?"

"Let's hope for a smooth night. I need sleep."

At the market, Murphy pays for the jar of pumpkin jam on the counter and waits for Mina to say something as she opens the register and hands him his change. He is nervous near her, edgier every time he sees her. She has an insouciant manner about her that makes him burn with anticipation. And yet he will not tell her he finds her attractive, he knows this. He doesn't trust himself—how else but by silence can he hope to keep her a stranger? When he doesn't fill the silence, she does: "Sleeping any better?" she asks, putting the jar in a little brown paper sack, and he remembers he'd told her about his insomnia a couple of weeks ago.

"I think about work too much," he says.

"Oh, so you're one of those people."

"Pretty much."

"I feel sorry for you," she says, and he notices she's joking. "Were you a deprived child? No SweeTarts, right? No candy except on holidays?"

She stops at the sight of what has come over him. He feels flushed, nervous. He crosses his arms so that she can't see his wedding ring. On the counter behind her, in fastidiously arranged rows, are stacked cartons of cigarettes, Marlboros and Kools and Camels, and for the first time in four years, since he quit smoking, Murphy feels the agonizing craving for a cigarette. What is it about her?

She inhales sharply. "Look at you, all embarrassed."

"No, no," he says. "I mean, it's work."

"Lack of sleep."

"Especially that."

"Have nice dreams," she says, and as he leaves he hates himself.

At home, he no longer feels tired. Why does this happen? He goes to the back porch and tends to the dog. He empties the water bowl, refills it with the water hose. He fills the other bowl with dry dog food. Murphy's dog Rufus, a terrier mix he adopted from the shelter nine years ago, eats with civility. Murphy scratches Rufus on the scruff of his neck and goes back inside.

Upstairs, Kate is asleep. When he gets into bed, she turns over and asks him how work was.

"Fine. We had to take a kid to the hospital."

She yawns. "Yeah, I thought so."

"I would've called but I didn't want to wake Stephen."

"Tonight I caught him hitting Rufus with a broom."

"Jesus," Murphy says. "Why?"

"He didn't say anything. I took the broom and sent him to his room."

"I don't know what to do. I thought about taking him fishing on Saturday."

Kate turns over. "That would be good."

Murphy turns on the television, flips through channels. For a while he watches some sort of fishing show on cable. A man in a fish-

ing boat, holding a bass by its open mouth. The man tosses the fish into the water. Murphy leans over to embrace Kate, resting his arm against the sheets. “Hey,” he whispers.

“Tired,” Kate says, and yawns.

Mark, a detention officer on the seven-to-three shift, is filling out Intake papers on a resident when Murphy arrives to work. The resident is Eddie, a seventeen-year-old boy who’s been to Granaby twice in the last year. Eddie’s been in juvenile detention centers since he was twelve, when he was caught stealing cold medicine and beer from a Cole’s pharmacy. For a while he was living off and on with a man he calls his uncle. Eddie has seizures, so the staff has to be careful with him. The seizures are mild. He once told Murphy that his seizures taste like battery acid. He came in several months ago with damp clothes and a fever, burns, and chills, and spent the next day vomiting in his room. He’s the only resident who can beat Murphy in chess.

Today, at rec time after lunch, they play chess in the Day Room. Eddie plays fast, moving his queen out early. Murphy is all defense; before he can make an aggressive move, Eddie puts him in checkmate.

“You’re really terrible,” Eddie says.

“You’ve gotten better or I’m worse,” Murphy says.

“Play again?”

Eddie beats him two more games. Afterward, he tells Murphy he thinks of his mother often. When Eddie was nine, she died in the hospital. He says he should’ve been with her, that he should be the one who disappeared. For Eddie, everything feels ragged, as if he has left behind a thousand lives who depend on him—the ones he takes care of, the younger boys who are left alone. They creep around the city at night, through winding tunnels, dark streets, sidling upon drunken old men and then rummaging through their wallets, forcing up particle board and removing nails, anything they can find and use as weapons if they need to. They aren’t afraid. They struggle to survive.

Later in the afternoon, outside on the basketball court, Eddie runs for the fence and starts to climb, but two detention officers manage

to pull him down. He's taken inside and confined to his room. When Granaby was built, Murphy's boss, Hank Drucker, wanted the fence fifteen feet high with razor wire at the top. So far no residents have attempted to escape. At staff meetings, Hank is always reading news stories of juveniles escaping from detention centers around the country. Just last month in Gastonia, North Carolina, a juvenile escaped from a detention center and stole a car. "That's why we need five detention officers with the residents whenever they're outside," Hank tells the staff. "I didn't earn my reputation for nothing. I promised safety."

Still, there are those in Red Owl with uncertain fears. There are those who believe the residents will escape. There are those who believe they have unique and elaborate plans of hurting young children. Madeleine Simmons, who lives a mile east of the facility, approached Murphy one morning as he was pumping gas at the 7-Eleven on his way to work: "My husband and I took our daughter out of Rose kindergarten after a group of those boys started hanging around," she told him.

"Sorry to hear that," Murphy said. "They didn't run away from Granaby, if that's what you were wondering."

"I'm not blaming you. We're not saying it's your fault."

"Nobody ran away. We're a lockdown facility."

"We picketed when the county was trying to raise the tax to have the place built in the first place," Mrs. Simmons said. "We know Judge Arnott and his wife. Just to let you know."

The community hates him. They hate Granaby's location on the outskirts of the city, close to new housing. They wanted the facility to be downtown by the Bureau of Juvenile Services and the courthouse. To get through the day, Murphy sometimes has to remind himself that what he's doing is a good thing. He decided on this type of work because he wanted to help troubled kids. He was determined then, just out of college. He used to play basketball and volleyball with the residents. Now it's dominoes and chess.

"But you're still young," Hank Drucker wheezes. Murphy's in Hank's office while Hank sits behind his desk. Hank's swivel chair squeaks every time he moves or laughs. "Murphy, you miserable

fucker, you're still in good shape. Look at me, all old and fat. I'm from the streets of Houston. I was raised on red meat and grease. I worked my way here by hard work. No college degree. Just plain old hard work. I can't do one goddamn active thing anymore."

"You look fine."

"I'm pushing three hundred," Hank says, leaning way back in his swivel chair. He sucks on his inhaler and pumps it twice. "Don't bullshit me. I drink scotch every night. Johnny Red. When do I have time to exercise? All I'm saying is get the fuck out there and stay active with the residents. Play ball. Shoot hoops. Don't let yourself turn to shit like I did."

"Lately I don't feel like it."

"Murphy, you miserable shitspeck, I like you. We need to have drinks sometime. Bernice and I need company. Ever since her hip surgery she's a fucking invalid."

"Sure, I'll check with Kate."

"Check with your wife," Hank says. He laughs and wheezes. His chair squeaks.

Later, a detention officer radios Murphy that a transport officer is in the carport to take Paolo to court. Murphy helps Paolo clear out his room. Paolo changes back into his own clothes and Murphy walks him down the corridor to meet the juvenile transport officer at the door. The transport officer cuffs and puts ankle restraints on Paolo while Murphy unlocks the doors that lead to the carport outside.

"Hope I'll get released," Paolo says.

But Murphy knows it won't happen. He'll be placed in a temporary youth shelter or foster home. Then he'll run away and return to the streets until he gets arrested again. The transport officer helps Paolo into his car. From the carport, Murphy sees him sitting in the back-seat with his head down as the car backs out of the garage.

After work, at the market, Murphy buys a jar of green olives, but Mina isn't working. The cashier who rings him up is an older woman with a veiled, dreamy expression, a kind of pout. She has a rocky chin and cheekbones, her bangs gray-blond. Murphy's never seen her before. When he asks about Mina, she looks at him.

"I'm new," she says, "but I don't think she works here anymore." She hands Murphy his change.

"Thanks," Murphy says, and as he walks out he wonders if Mina quit. The thought that he won't see her again is depressing. He'll no longer have a reason to look forward to going there. On his way to his car he sees Antonio Perez, who lives in a small house down the street. Antonio's oldest son was placed in detention once for shoplifting from Repo Records, so Murphy got to know Antonio. Fifteen years ago, Antonio left Queens with his wife and kids and took the train up here to Hartford. He walks with a limp from getting stabbed in the foot with a barbecue brochette by his first wife. "We used to drink whiskey," he once told Murphy. "Then we'd get into bad fights. Crazy whore. She pulled a knife on me once a week."

Tonight, Antonio limps over to Murphy and puts his hand on his shoulder. "How are you, my friend?" he says.

"Just getting off work," Murphy says.

"Plumbing problems for me tonight," Antonio says. "And my son's sick. I need cough medicine and a plumber. Any help?"

"What's wrong with your plumbing?"

"The faucet makes a noise and spits. I don't know what to do. I can't afford a plumber."

"I can have a look," Murphy tells him, and after Antonio buys red peppers and cough medicine inside, Murphy gets into his car and follows him down the street to his house. The neighborhood is rough, cars parked in yards, wood-frame houses with dirty paint. Inside, Antonio's wife Rosa is watching TV in the living room with their kids.

"Cough medicine and red peppers," Antonio says, handing the bag to his wife. "I brought the miracle man."

"Are you a witch doctor or a plumber?" she asks Murphy.

"Who knows what I am," he says, and Rosa laughs. He follows Antonio into the kitchen, where Antonio turns on the water. The faucet coughs, then makes a gurgling noise. Water bursts from the spigot.

"I have tools," Antonio says.

"Where's the valve? We just need a screwdriver and pliers."

They go downstairs to the cellar. Pipes are vibrating, and they find the valve next to a box meter. Murphy turns the valve left to

turn off the water. On the pliers, there's corrosion between the gear teeth. Murphy blows on it and hits it a couple of times against the floor. They go back upstairs and Murphy disassembles the cold water handle. With the screwdriver he chops at the plaster, then puts everything back together again. Antonio goes downstairs and turns the water back on.

"Fixed," Murphy says, turning the faucet on and off.

When Antonio comes back to the kitchen he is overjoyed. "You fixed it, saved me money," he says. He invites Murphy to stay for coffee and dessert. "Rosa made pie," he says. He gets plates from the cupboard and cuts them both a piece of banana pie. They sit in the kitchen and talk. Antonio tells Murphy he's currently working in a little machine shop downtown making nine bucks an hour. He removes screws from a box marked "Made in China," counts and cleans the bits and then puts them in new boxes marked "Made in the USA" and "Made in Taiwan."

"Machines will count screws," he says, "but they cost fifty thousand dollars, plus software and maintenance. People are cheaper and I need work."

"My job isn't much better," Murphy says, and immediately feels guilty for saying it.

"Be thankful it's a good job," Antonio says. "You do okay, make a decent salary, right? I have four kids and a house payment." He takes a sip of coffee. "When I'm not worried about money I'm happy as I've ever been."

Murphy finishes his coffee and sets his cup on the counter. On the way out, in the living room, Antonio's son Freddie is standing by the fish aquarium, staring into the glass. Murphy stops and kneels down next to him to look. The filtering system is bubbling, but Murphy can't see any fish. He taps the glass. "Anything in there?"

"He's in the castle," Freddie says. "He's asleep I think. Papa says he's sick, too."

"Is he hungry?"

"He won't eat. We gave him fish food. You can see it on the rocks."

"Wake up and eat," Murphy says, tapping the glass. It's too dark to see anything in the castle. Freddie puts both hands on the glass. He

coughs, stares into the glass with his mouth open. Murphy can hear the rattle in his chest as he breathes.

Back at home, Murphy goes into Stephen's room and checks on him. Stephen is asleep, curled up under the covers. Murphy can see his face in the dim light from the nightlight beside his bed. He closes the door lightly, then goes into the kitchen and fills a glass of water in the sink. Kate is standing in the doorway in her pajamas.

"Antonio needed me to fix his faucet," Murphy says.

She looks at him. "Seriously?"

"I fixed it," he says. He takes a last drink of water and sets the glass down on the counter. "That Portuguese market," he says. "I hate going in that place. There's a woman who works there."

"I know," Kate says. "You've already told me that." She walks down the hall to the bedroom. Murphy pours himself a cup of coffee and sits at the kitchen table. He hasn't slept well in months. Tonight will be no different.

21.

Graveyards

by Scott McClanahan

I didn't even want to go to the graveyard, but Ruby told me I had to. She was giving my uncle Stanley hell about it for weeks, until he finally said: "Oh shit, Mother. That old road up there is rough as hell. What are we going to do if I get my truck stuck up?" My uncle Stanley just lived down the road, so he was always stuck with taking us places.

But she kept going on and on about it, saying: "Oh Lordy, I'd like to go to the cemetery. I don't know when I'll get back up there."

She told us there was a grave up there she wanted to put flowers on.

There was a grave up there she needed to see before she died.

My uncle Stanley finally gave in. He picked up some plastic flowers from the dollar store and drove her up to the graveyard in his truck. He drove down into Prince and we listened to the radio—99.5 The Big Dawg in country. Lord have mercy, baby's got her blue jeans on.

We drove through the places where Ruby had given birth to babies in shacks that no longer stood, and where my grandfather sold moonshine. We gunned it up Backus Mountain with my uncle Nathan, sitting in the back of the truck trying to hang on with his palsy legs. Then we finally pulled up the hill and into the Goddard graveyard.

Stanley stopped the truck, and on top of the cow-paddy hill we got out.

He said: "Damn, it's bad enough being buried up here, let alone having to come up here when you're still alive."

But my grandma wouldn't listen to him and started walking through the grass. I remembered to watch my step because my uncle Larry stepped in cow shit one time up here when he was wearing flip-flops.

I told Ruby I didn't like graveyards. She told me it didn't matter.

Even though I was only fourteen years old it was no telling when the angel of death might come to get my ass.

I stepped over a big fossilized cow paddy and then I stepped over another as Uncle Nathan laughed at us from the truck.

Earlier that day she fed me peanut butter fudge she made and told me: Nothing lasts.

Now we walked past the graves of all the people she knew.

There was Grandmommy Goddard and Daddy Goddard and Great Grandmommy Goddard and Virginia Goddard.

And there was her aunt Mag Goddard who starved herself to death. Ruby stood in front of the grave and said, "No one knows why. She just locked herself in her room and starved herself to death."

Then there were other graves and she started walking through them.

She said: "I don't think they've been mowing it very nice out here."

Then she stopped in front of one.

I asked her if it was her mother.

And Grandma said, "Yeah, that's Mommy. The day of the funeral they tried putting her in the ground facing the west. I just hollered and carried on 'cause she was facing the wrong way for the resurrection."

Then she was quiet and smiled a gummy grin.

Then she walked on.

"Oh, look at all the little graves," she said, walking past the grave of her uncle.

She turned to it and said, "They had to bury him on his stomach. He always said he never could sleep on his back. So he had them bury him on his stomach."

Then she said she never could sleep on her back either.

She had me pull away some tall grass from the graves.

She said that it seemed like all there was to do anymore was die.

That's all people did in this day and age. She said she couldn't even get the ambulance to pick her up anymore when she needed them. Of course, I knew that they stopped coming because she called every day claiming she was dying. When they got her into the ambulance, it seemed like she was always feeling better and just needed them to just take her down to Rogers and get a gallon of milk. Finally one of the ambulance people told her: "Now, Miss Ruby, you call us when you're having an emergency, not just when Nathan runs out of 7-Up. The taxpayers can't be paying for your trips to get Nathan's 7-Up."

But I didn't say anything about it. She walked away from the graves and I noticed all the tiny graves beside her mother's grave. There was a grave here and then there was a grave there—the stones all broken off and covered up by the grass.

"Whose graves are these?" I asked and then I wondered: "Why all these little graves?"

I knew the answer. They were baby graves.

I walked away, looking at the end where Ruby was.

And I thought about her own mother losing baby after baby after baby after baby after baby and still going on—surrounded by the graves of sons and daughters, brothers and sisters who never were. They were in this ground—all this great big lump of flesh we call Earth.

I had even looked in the back of Ruby's mother's Bible with all of it written in the back. There was a date and then—baby died. There was a date and then—baby died. There was a date and then—girl baby died.

So I said, "You want me to put the flowers down here? Are these the graves you wanted to see?"

But Grandma just shook her head.

She pointed to a couple of graves at the edge of the mountain and said, "That's where I want to put them."

THANK GOD.

Ruby moved her walker and started moving closer to the graves, past the grave of her own little baby who died, and then past her husband, my grandfather Elgie, who died of his fifth heart attack when I was three.

I heard my uncle Stanley from far over at the edge of the field say:

“Daddy would have shit himself if he knew you put him up here with all these goddamn Goddards.”

Ruby got mean and said: “Well, I figured I wanted him where I wanted him. And I put him where I put him.”

She hobbled along some more and I walked behind her.

She said: “This is the grave I wanted to see. This is the grave.”

I asked: “Whose grave is it?”

I walked in front of the stone and I saw...

... IT WAS HER GRAVE.

It was the grave of...

Ruby Irene McClanahan

BORN 1917. DIED . . .

. . . and then there was a blank space—the space where they would put the date of her death.

She touched the shiny stone and explained how Wallace and Wallace gave her a really good deal on the tombstone. She told me I should start saving. It was a good investment.

So Grandma pointed to the grave and finally told me to put the flowers down. And that's just what I did. I put the flowers down on my grandmother's grave. Then she reached into her purse and pulled out a camera.

She said: “Well, come on now, Todd. You want to have your pictures taken by Grandma's grave?” I told her for the thousandth time. “My name's not Todd, Grandma. My name's Scott.”

My uncle Stanley shouted at her: “Ah hell, Mother. Just leave him alone. He doesn't want to touch your grave.”

Then she started in on my uncle Nathan, who was still sitting in the back of the truck. “Hey, Nathan. You want to come and sit in front of Mother's grave? It's a pretty thing.”

Nathan just sat in the back of the truck and shook his head like: “Fuck no.”

I finally gave in and Grandma took my picture next to her grave.

Then she waddled over to the side of the shiny marble tombstone and I took her picture.

I looked through the camera and all I could see was my grandma Ruby standing beside her stone.

Ruby Irene McClanahan

BORN 1917. DIED . . .

and then the blank space.

Here was the date of her birth, and the date of her death, which we didn't know yet, but which we passed each year without knowing.

So I got ready to take the picture and I saw her smile.

I saw the graves filling up all around her and I saw how Grandma would be here beneath it one day and then Nathan and then one day Stanley, and then one day . . . me. So I saw her whisper "Oh, Lordy," and claim she was dying like she always did.

I wished we were already back at home so I could eat some more peanut butter fudge. Nothing lasts.

I snapped the picture and it was like she was already gone.

It was like I saw that she was dying right then—real slow—and she knew the secret sound. It's a sound that all of us hear. It's a sound that sounds like this. Tick. Tick. Tick.

But there is a way to stop it. I promise you there is a way to stop it. We can devote our hearts to its opposition.

So I ask you now. Will you? Will you devote your heart to its opposition?

22.

Head Down, Palm Up

by Mitchell S. Jackson

It's hard to see Unc in the shade, with his being the same shade as the shade, but you can always depend to watch his mouth, to track that gold tooth, a glinting last to last extravagance. "It's position, not possession," Unc says. "Not possession, but position," he says, and swanks into view.

Unc throws contemplative eyes to the sky. They're the familial bug eyes, impressive eyes, so big he might see the future, or maybe even another dimension.

The man motions me closer, flaunting the only ring he wears—probably his only ring left to wear—a pinky joint set with an ambit of murky diamonds, and warns we can't let this highgrade reach the wrong ears. Then he pauses for what's likely the sake of suspense, pauses, and says, "You've got to have tools G O T D A M N Y O U M E, meaning your rides, your crib, your clothes, your gold, you've got to, but all you got's a molehill without a mouthpiece." He points at his cracked lips, opened with a sliver of space between them, a pipe-smoker's lips, forever scorched. "And those gorilla moves," he says, "I S W E A R F O G O D try em and see don't they get you nothin less than more of what you never wanted. That gorilla ain't bout nothin," he says. "A smart one comes from here," he says, and touches his temple, "never from here," he says. Unc assumes a southpaw's stance, shakes miniature fists with abnormally big unbruised knuckles, then

switches to orthodox and whispers G O T D A M N Y O U M E again for God only knows.

Okay, now is as good a time as any to ask, good people, if you'd please, please, preempt the hatetrocity. He's my Unc, all right. My real blood relative.

"Say, Nephew," Unc says. "This how you play it. Soon as you knock one, you keep your head down and palm up. Head down. Palm up," he says again, assuming the pose. He stands a while after, a Buddhist maybe, lanky limbs hanging, lank neck sprouting out of his weathered silk shirt, double-creased slacks, secondhand gators sprawled, big-knuckled babyish hands unfurled to show nails long enough to dredge coke, sharp enough to cut steak.

To be true, Unc is sympathetic almost with what the years have done to him, with what he's done to himself over the years, though with the way he yearns he might make more years than us all, be the only one alive the next coming, which is unsuspecting as shit, considering advice you'd call unholy. Or might couldn't. "Don't turn down nothin but your collar," he advises, which helped him become the first and penultimate around our way to hustle a plane, though he now borrows hubcaps forever, hawks scrapmetal for rent, and sends the mother of his youngest to a strip where the going rate is less than you'd drop on prime sirloin.

Unc says I S W E A R F O G O D again for who knows why.

And people, you can say or think what you will, but my Unc might not be, matterfact most likely isn't, one of those old heads you can pay no nevermind without it costing.

"Your rides," he says. "Hellified mouthpiece or not, just you try to knock one in a bucket. Just you try to knock one worth a damn without a coupla rides from the year of and at least one American-made manufactured when times was good."

Unc says his bottom leaving tripped a weak run. "But that's how it goes," he says. "One minute you're up and the next—well, you know." He pitches his formidable bug eyes at me, eyes that can't anymore see past his past. He hops on a bench, plants a second-hand gator on the seat and leaves another hovering. He rubs his puny hands over a head of semireceding stubble, and says that normally the

high-grade is sold not told, but since I'm family and all, he'll accept an I.O.U. and a pack of menthols. He laughs and frisks the capacious pockets of his double-creased slacks, pockets once laden with down payment enough for anything, but now most often filled with less than, with atoms, straight zeroth!

"Position not possession," he says again, and warns never capitulate in so many words. My bad, I mean in so many words, the man says it.

That's Unc.

Now me.

My girl's so bad, so bad, that to lay sight on her is as if accepting a wound. In here, among these strobes and kaleidoscopes of color, the early evening crowd can see what I see and I see them willfully, achingly, damn near greedily receiving hurt from her. Unc asks me to point her out and when I show him he says, "Now that, that I S W E A R F O G O D, is a goldmine!" I say, in so many words, that I don't have the heart to ask, much less convince her. I tell him about what I feel and so on and he says that not all of them is meant, but the ones that is you can't keep from sending themselves. "Nephew," Unc says, "it's either in they nature or it ain't."

My girl's a spectacle up there, syncopating and twirling and shimmying and stomping in heels tall enough to fall from and die, a semaphore for the sound. We sit tables away—how could I do anything but sit tables away?—while my girl dances a song, a song, a song. I watch her step down and hear the deejay ask us to give her a hand, calling her by the name she's named herself for here.

The crowd claps. Then stops all abrupt-like. The deejay tells us to hold tight for a quick intermission, and meantime my girl sends me that smile of hers that's a constellation of white and leads one of the harmed to a section reserved for special attention.

What I don't tell Unc is, I've accepted so many wounds from her I might be experiencing an afterlife. Then again, I might not be marred enough for a rebirth.

As I was saying, my bad, I mean as I was about to say, my Unc is vivid under the lights. His silk shirt is iridescent in HD! And you

should see the grays glowing in his coveted stubble. I buy the man a double shot of top-shelf and watch him sip with a snort-length pinkie awry.

He says, “You got to have a name, G O T D A M N Y O U M E. ’Cause ain’t shit else more important.” He offers up choices, Broadway or Bootleg or America or Famous or Slick. He says that he knew someone successful named Social. Tells me that I can name myself Super anything except Man. “And be careful with those Pretty’s too,” he says. “Pretty Tony, Pretty Ricky. It’s been enough already with them ones named Pretty.” Unc warns when I’m ready, really ready, I’ve got to choose. Choose maybe Maverick or Sir or Hero or Hype or Juice or Slim or Quick or Charm. He says if I want to go for color I’ve got Black or Red. “But since you brown-skinned,” Unc says, “thou shalt not.”

Unc waves his dinged-up diminutive fists—fists so small they might be the Antichrist—back and forth and makes exclamations out what’s borderline unmentionable. Those hands of his about the size mine were when Unc was bulletproof, faster than you name it. Before in ways that matter most to me, he couldn’t measure up—or wouldn’t, previous to it being hard for me to trust a man who talks with that much flourish.

“You listenin’?” he says.

“Maybe,” I say.

“So now I guess you some kind of comedian,” he says. “Well, all jokes aside, Nephew, scratch those gangster names too.” He says Jynx and Pistol and Stitches and Killer are all absolutely out of the question. He says to me for me to be leery of naming myself little anything, and that’s ditto for small animals. “And somethin else,” the man says, gesturing again with those timid-ass fists, “a good name can’t be bout surprisin them with some shit they ain’t expected.”

“Sounds good,” I say, “but tell me what it is for real.”

“What it is, is what’s at stake, Nephew,” he says. “I B U L L S H I T Y O U N O T, it’s always bout what’s at stake.”

“And what’s that?”

“The question is what it ain’t?” Unc says. “What the hell ain’t it?”

Unc serves more choices, Ten Toes or Dollar or Fly Guy or Champ.

He sweeps his collar for God knows why and reminds me that without a name I ain't certified. "But when you claim one," he says, and downs the last of his top-shelf, "the world knows you are not to be fucked with."

My girl dazzles over and sits herself near us and swipes at strands of silky weave stuck to her face from sweat. I watch Unc eye her and see he isn't accepting any wounds but he also isn't compelled to look away. I touch her wrist—about the most I ever do in this place—and she leaves it still. "This my uncle," I say, and ask how her night's going.

"It's goin," she says, fixes her top, exhales what could be her soul. She says to Unc that she's heard so much, which, O N E V E R Y T H I N G I L O V E, isn't the least bit a lie.

"How you diggin it here?" says Unc to my girl.

"I got a feelin," she says, "this is not to be dug."

"Believe, Baby Doll," Unc says, "if it's anybody know that, it's me."

Unc makes his remarkable front tooth something to behold and prospects around before visiting a gaze on my sweet thing.

The two of them carry on until the music is too much anymore to be heard without screaming. My girl gets up, kisses my cheek—more than she usually does in this place—and virtually levitates toward the exit. She comes to rest right before she reaches the threshold and gifts me a smile with just those eyes.

"Trust, that ain't one to send," Unc says. "Not when she looks at you like that."

I want to ask Unc if he's absolutely, positively, undoubtedly, irrevocably sure, but all I manage is some predictably silly-ass hesitation.

"Say, Nephew," he says, "this uncle of yours ain't gone hype you on no half-ass truths. What I tell you bout this here is the best of what's best."

Another girl comes in. Astonishing as mine? Yeah, fuckin right. This girl, she's holocaust-thin with a worn face and mottled legs, and stutters around in a sequined two-piece with her unpolished toes pitched over the ledge of low-heeled sandals. Unc glides his chair out from the table, says about her before we leave that even an old pro such as hisself would be hard-pressed. "Be lucky to check a tank

of gas outta that one," he says, blows on his diamond-spec ring real dramatic, and buffs it on his wrinkled slacks.

Next thing, we're in Unc's ride from a year other than the year of, from the past that's kept him captive, a joint he keeps spotless, fragrant with evergreen, with its leather seats and dashboard glazed.

No lies, when he fires the engine, it sounds like breath.

"Ready?" he says.

"For what?" I say.

He crafts an eyebrow into a half moon and says remember the rules, position, palms, collar.

I tell him in my own way that I'm not so sure if I got what it takes, if I've been blessed or cursed with heart, and so on.

Unc says, "Listen G O T D A M N Y O U M E, you got to be aggressive bout this bread and meat."

"But?" I say.

"But me-ass, Nephew," he says. "We're born, not made. Me and you, we are born. We ain't nothin like these squares."

We listen to tunes while real laid-back-like Unc finger-steers his ride from the year of decades ago to a street that's always featured on the news for something uncouth. He parks blocks back from a busy intersection, unbuckles himself, gets out, and throws on, with the utmost suavity, a suit coat of innumerable buttons. Unc tells me to come on, assures me all I got to do this time is keep my mouth shut and watch.

Next thing, the man angle-foot struts up to the only live body for a block in any which way. Nearer, I see she's semi-alive, see she's pale, almost martyrly thin, and needs to comb the tangles out her hyper-colored shrub of synthetic curls.

"What it look like?" Unc says, looking every which way.

"Slow," says Unc's throwback broad.

He offers his palm and she spectates it a moment before excavating a meek-ass wad from the plunge of a fossilized lint-bulleted Lycra number.

"Who this?" she asks.

"He's a small part of your business," Unc says, "till I make him more."

“Humph,” says Unc’s throwback minute moneymaker. I watch her jerk her neck and tug the end of her high-ass hem. She even has the gall to totter off proudly.

“See, it ain’t nothin to it, Nephew,” Unc says. “When it’s in them, all you got to do is nurture.”

He folds her meager salary and, as urbane as ever, slides it into his sport coat’s inside pocket.

Morning, my sweet thing smells of last night’s smoke and something unsacred. I can’t explain it. For a time I’m content to watch her sleep—I do this sometimes, more times than I’d admit—to count the perfect knobs of her spine where the blanket is strewn off, to watch the tiny heave of her shoulders. Can’t help sometimes but wonder how far she’s gone. How far they’ve gone, or tried. Hard to touch her the nights I’ve seen her with others, so work nights most nights I don’t. We sleep with a healthy space between us. Or maybe, just maybe, this space is sick. Either way, don’t bust me down about it—please. This practice isn’t to be indicted, only conceded as the way of things. And if she’s accepted it, then why can’t you?

The traffic outside translates to no more than a low hum. The rain’s metronomic against the gutters. The early light is a big-ass universe in our room, as is this stack of bills—all hers—on the nightstand. To be true, what she brings home confirms I’m indefensibly less than. What I can’t shake is the sense that I should be slapped or slap my-damn-self for even, however brief, considering my sweet thing. I sit against the headboard and wait, bracing for a righteous blow or lightning to strike. Who knows how long it takes before she stirs, before my woman rolls over and touches me the way only she can.

“You up?” I say. “I mean coherent.”

“Close,” she says.

“So,” I say. “I been thinking.”

“About what?” she says.

“My Unc,” I say. “He’s been rappin to me about business.”

She says my name as if she wants everyone on earth to hear—God too, and sits up, bare-chested, with those eyes of hers ringed with half moons of old mascara.

“You can’t be serious,” she says. “Don’t you see that man’s a has-been?”

“Maybe so,” I say. “Probably so,” I say. “But that man’s my family,” I say. “And what’s worse, a has-been or a never-was?”

Nights later, under a gauzy starless sky, listening to more slow tunes, me and Unc cruise, or not so much cruise as patrol, slick streets that seem empty as ever. Unc mutes the music at a stoplight and swoops around to me. He does it real cinematic-like too. My Unc stays on his theatrics. “Say, Nephew, you can wait on a life or take a life,” he says, “but once you’re in the life—well, there it is.”

What I’m thinking is now, right here, this is the perfect time to speak on it, opportune to mention what I feel. But guess what, I couldn’t ever admit to Unc that it isn’t the starting, but not knowing where and how and if it ends. That what’s enough to make me a punk-ass bronze statue, is the chance of what could be my life becoming the only life it could have been.

Does that make sense?

Whether it does or doesn’t, it’s no way at all I could summon what I’d need to confide; okay, it’s a slim chance at best, with what Unc knows, with what we know—shit, with what the world knows, of how the man stepped in and stepped up.

And answer me this peoples: What’s that worth? Or more important, what isn’t it worth?

We bend more corners, reach another part of the city, a block where the traffic crawls and every other streetlight is either quivering or flamed out. Unc parks his aged ride where it’s easier to see than be seen.

“Ready?” he says.

“I guess so,” I say.

He says, “You see her over there? Go get it,” he says. “Go get all of it.”

“Just like that?” I say.

“Just like that,” he says. “Any problems, tell her I sent you.”

Not until I get closer do I see who he’s sent me to. She swivels and right away it feels to me as though there are no words between us for as long as I’ve been alive.

"Oh. My. God!" she says. "What're you doin here?"

I look every which way, including past her. I am careful not to look into her.

"Unc sent me," I say.

"That black bastard did what!" she says.

She shakes a golden weave around. "Get away from here," she says. "Leave!" she says, and resists a step.

My uncle vaunts out of the dark, dark as the dark, his miraculously extravagant tooth glinting, a lit menthol in his scrawny sacrilegious hands, the taps audible on his double-vintage gators, his infinity-buttoned sport coat buttoned at his nexus. He calls her by a name I've never heard.

"What seems to be the problem?" Unc says, and flares his menthol.

"How could you?" she says.

"How could I not?" he says.

I see Unc saunter closer, take an exaggerated drag, blow out a stream of perfect O's. "He's got it by blood," Unc says, "look like in more ways than one." Unc proceeds to stab his earth-sized eyes at me, eyes that make me wonder what in the world he sees. "Nephew," he says, "we can't stop no one's nature. Me nor you can, no matter what, stop it."

I put my head down and reach out my hand, palm up.

My fucking word, I reach it out hoping in the shadows neither of them can see the tsunami in it.

I leave it out with an incantation murmuring. Head down, palm up. Head down. Palm up.

"To me," she says. "Of all people, me," she says. She calls me by the name she named me a life ago.

"No," I say. "It's Champ," I say. "Call me Champ," I say, and pronounce it stern, like I mean it, like it was for me. As if it was in me all along—or should've been.

The tsunami shakes up my arm and floods my chest. An eon passes or more before I feel a few crumbled bills alight, not many, but oh so heavy. I clutch the mass of them and leave my eyes shut for how long who could know, and when I open them, I see her down aways and stumbling. I watch her stop and peer and turn away from us. Farther, I see her slaughtered by shadow.

Then it's me and Unc under a frail spastic light. The man drops his menthol and murders it under his shoe. This Unc of mine, he annuls the little space between us and throws an arm over my shoulder. He pulls me closer than he ever has, closer than I think he might ever again, and just like that he whispers something I don't hear for how hard my heart is pounding. Unc but for God knows, for me and him might never know why or will, he stops and turns us face-to-face, laying his hand—gigantic, colossal, massive, immaculate—on me. "It's where you are in relationship to, not who you claim ownership of," he says, positions us eye to eye, and makes a comment that to my mind means never capitulate.

Only Unc would never say a word like that.

And me neither.

Until now that I did. I mean till now that—shit, shit—I just have.

And please, pleeeeease dead the undisputed heavyweight hatetrocity on my old Unc, cause say or think what you will, the man could've killed me. Instead of only leaving me wounded.

Really wounded. Afflicted for all time, but alive.

Which is all—B E L I E V E Y O U M E, R I G H T H A N D R A I S E D,
T R U T H B E T O L D, O N E V E R Y T H I N G I L O V E, O N E V E R Y
T H I N G G O D L O V E S—my uncle, yes, my uncle, has done.

And do you know where I'd be, who I'd be, minus this man's compassion?

You don't.

As a matter of fact, you couldn't.

Me and my uncle swagger almost in tandem to the spot where he's parked his ride. He swings his door open, steps halfway in, and flashes that expensive grin of his across the hood.

"Now," he says. "Now, you ready?"

"Ready for anything," says me, the man's nephew, this man's flesh and blood.

23.

Hers

by O. A. Lindsey

Mundleson asked if I wanted to come with her. She arched her thick brown eyebrows, used the word *latrine* without awkwardness. They had taken her makeup away, revealing a drama of settled red pocks. Her dye-blond hair had no benefit of product.

I stared at her a little too long. Told her I had a fiancée.

“Oh. I’m sorry. It’s just that, well.”

It’s just that everybody was fucking in the latrines. Port-o-lets labeled in Arabic whose plastic shells would rock and creak, emitting bathtub sounds throughout the night. Just that we were stuffed inside a corrugated-metal hangar outside Riyadh, were sweating, scared, and unwashed, confined to ordered rows of olive-colored canvas cots and duffel bags. SCUD missiles traversed the night sky and the moon hung sideways. Half a million Iraqi troops were poised for the Mother of All Battles.

We stared at each other for days. We picked out the weaklings and placed bets against them. We cleaned, then re-cleaned our carbines. Oiling barrels, breaking down sight assemblies. They knew better than to issue us ammunition.

It’s just that, when not an activated Reservist, Evie Mundleson bar-backed at Game Day, a strip mall sports bar in North Tuscaloosa. Her body was losing to the free potato skins. Her nights were defined by Misty cigarettes, dead kegs, and tip-outs. And she was okay with

this, there, between walls covered in Crimson Tide jerseys and plastic NASCAR flags. Here, she was scared beyond panic, wanting only to be groped in the community toilet. Many felt the same.

They flew us to the front in the belly of a loud C-130. We sat in cargo nets attached to the walls, bobbing in turbulence like babies in bouncer seats, too low to see out the window. We landed in a gulf of dust and were jammed into trucks and taken to the compound, a small collection of tents inside a head-high berm of sand. A rocky desert horizon surrounded. We were ordered to calm down but stay sharp. Drink water.

Take chemical pills. Rumor was the pills were untested on humans, yet we stood at parade rest every morning on the Iraqi border in saggy, ill-fitting chemical suits, chewing the pills on command. It had been raining for days, so everything was soaked and beige and barren and slopped. (They had not briefed us on this wet climate.) (They had briefed us that Iraqis use American tanks and planes—we'd supplied them, after all—so the only way to discern the enemy was if he was firing on you.) The chem gear felt like a fatsuit as you lumbered around the compound, your boots sucked into the mud. A-10 Warthogs and F-whatevers ripped the sky, unleashing their arsenal a few seconds north. Concussions from missile strikes buckled your knees, and shook you awake at night. Breathing meant wondering about Sarin or VX asphyxia. A primary concern was whether your gas mask was truly airtight, or whether the atropine needle would break off in your femur when the time came to self-inject.

Take the pills. Drink water.

Atropine: often fused with opiates, used to quell the death rattle.

After a week, one woman refused. She said her body was messing up because of the pills. Actually, she said “fucking up.” She was African American, late twenties with short straightened hair. Thin legs but huge torso. She was ornery, and said fuck that, because the pills were fucking her up.

We took the pills. She would die from a SCUD. They told us she was crazy, and told her “Suit yourself.” They snickered in her face, treating her like another loud black chick with fat breasts and fried

hair. Like them, I imagined her cruising the mall in Tuscaloosa, talking loud, dragging a baby boy by his arm.

She refused the pills. A couple of weeks later she had to go to the medical tent. She wasn't pregnant—they knew *that* much. But her period had disappeared; she wouldn't bleed, and nobody could tell her why. The medical tent shipped her down to the battalion hospital, which shipped her down to the main hospital in Riyadh, which shipped her back up to camp to pack. "Mother *fuck*," she said. "All I wanted in this life was to serve, then to get home and start me a family. Now I can't even have no babies."

More tests were required. They sent her home. We never heard anything else.

Spec-4 Janette cried about her kids. You went to the motor pool to requisition a truck, ducked in the tent and saw their photos taped to her field desk: two boys, towheaded, in miniature Alabama football uniforms. Don't ask if they'd been to the stadium on game day, or Janette would tear up and tell you about Mike Jr., singing made-up verses to "Yea Alabama." (Danny had fallen asleep during the Iron Bowl!) She talked and cried over them to nobody, while sitting near you at chow. Raised her voice to nobody at all about DAN-NY'S TURTLE DIED OH MAN WHY AM I NOT THERE? She missed them while you ate breakfast, just off of guard duty. For hours you'd sat alone in a hutch at the edge of the compound, in the dark, facing the void through a slot between sandbags, your rifle aimed, your mind confabulating structures from the blackness. (Republican Guard Advance or geometric patterns, the mind must see *something*.) You tried to forget that you'd spent your entire month's furlough stuffed into the back of a transport truck, breathing diesel exhaust and eating dehydrated pork, in order to wait to use a pay phone to hear your fiancée's answering machine.

And missiles burst. And the rains passed and the mud turned back to sand and windstorms engulfed everything for days, filling your boots, your eyes, your lungs, covering you in rashes. And Spec. 4 Janette yapped.

In our twelve-man tent, talk cycled about her tight, workout body.

One night, PFC Lomes tells everyone that during guard duty he snuck into the motor pool to smoke and found Sergeant Cross pumping her. Says it just like this: "Sergeant Cross was pumping her, man. She had that good-hurt look on her face. Like, she was bent over her field desk, gripping the corners!" While telling us this he throws his hips like Sergeant Cross, grapples the air.

After Lights Out, in the break between jet screams, our tent was alive with fists rubbing against nylon sleeping bags. Everyone coming in silence.

When by-the-book Sergeant Motes was sent home for being too old and sclerotic, Tetley Teabag and I became the de facto Supply and Armory leaders. Benefits included our very own tent, just Teabag and me. We bartered goods with other squads, companies, camps, armies, whomever. Extra boots got us a large, in-tent ice cooler; surplus cammies were good for two foam mattresses; tent poles meant a radio, and so forth. We were sultans.

Tetley Teabag was a late-twenties, rural Alabama high-school graduate, desperate to be seen as a hard ass. He had the mustache, buzz cut, and accent, but was squat and soft and round. He also had the toe.

The Tetley Toe. Stateside, just before deployment, Tetley had thrust a post hole digger at the big toe of his left foot. This earned him an odd reattachment and a relentless wound. The medics made Tetley limp around on a so-called Chinese Jump Boot: an oversized medical shoe constructed of royal blue canvas and white Velcro straps. The roughnecks harassed him for this, as did the officers, and the women.

But forget the boot. The thing about Tetley was that he NEVER went to the showers. Night after night he shut the tent flaps and wiped himself clean with a wet rag. In the dim orange lamplight, he'd turn his puppyfat back to me and use this propane-powered camp stove to heat water in a tin basin. (By this point I was taking two, three, four cold showers a day. They kept drilling us for an attack that never came. The sand was everywhere. My lungs wheezed and my breath stank with it.) (This was also after Charlotte had stopped writing me.) As finale to Tetley's cleansing, he would put pajamas

on, then wrap a Tetley teabag around his blackened appendage. His grandmother sent boxes of them, instructing him that a woman's remedy was the only kind of medicine a man could trust.

On guard duty one night I realized I had forgotten my gas mask, and had to come back to the tent. Though Tetley curled up the moment I cut through the flap, I saw what might be described as a mole or a nub, protruding from the thick beard between his legs.

I did not care that Tetley had the penis of an infant. Conversely, he seemed relieved to be uncloseted, because the next night, during a violent sandstorm he confessed to me that he was a virgin. Said he was worried about dying unfulfilled.

"Mundleson is lonely," I yelled. We had to scream over the wind. We lay on our cots with our goggles on and our mouths covered by Government Issue scarves. Rubbers were unrolled over our gun barrels to keep the sand out. It was no use looking at each other because you couldn't see anything.

"What?"

"I bet Mundleson'd be your girlfriend," I shouted again.

"Screw that, man." He called her pug-ugly, which was unfair, and which failed to trump the fact that he could not expose himself in theater. No two ways about it: to keep his secret and find a willing partner, Tetley would have to get home and marry some Christian.

After the nonmenstruating woman was sent away, only two black girls remained. Back home they went to the U. of A. One of them, Davis, had screwed this cheeseball Joe Minetti in the toilet back at Riyadh. So there was *that*, and somehow *that* had become attractive.

This, too, was after Charlotte stopped writing.

Davis was inspiring. Curvy and defiant and laughing, always sharp. One morning, the X.O. ordered the two women and me to burn the latrine waste. He didn't say as much, but I figured this was my punishment for hiding in the showers. The black chicks did not have to figure anything. Our company was all Alabama rednecks and Spec 4 Janettes, so they knew they'd just been born wrong.

We yanked large metal tubs from beneath seat-holes in the plywood toilets and burned what was inside. Having been half-filled

with diesel the week before, we found the tubs brim-high with turd and tampax, vomit and ejaculate and toilet paper. And we lit all that on fire, and then walked from tub to tub, hour after hour, taking in putrid black smoke.

Diesel burns slow and won't explode when you light it. Nor will it penetrate the surface of the sewage. So you use a two-by-four to stir the char, to expose the flame to the sludge below.

Scorching shit in the desert. You get used to it. After a few hours, the three of us flirted around the feces. The sky was beige and gray. The sliver of landscape we saw over the compound berm was as barren as the moon.

"Y'all don't date black girls in y'all's fraternity?" Davis asked.

"Probably not," I said. "But I'm not against it."

"You sayin' you *have* dated a black girl?"

"Well, no. But I've thought about it."

"I bet you have." She laughed, then coughed.

She and I both knew a liaison would follow. She had overnight guard duty, alone, at the far corner of the berm. She said she needed company. I needed company.

Diesel will now and again race like gasoline. This happened as I was stirring a tub: a flame shot straight up the two-by-four, which I flung out of panic. It hit Davis across the chest, smearing on her desert camo blouse.

"What tha hell was that, you?" she yelled.

"Sorry, sorry. Fire just jumped."

"You out your goddamn mind?" She wiped her hands on me, then peeled off her blouse and wiped that on me, too. She was not wearing her required T-shirt and her breasts bulged from the top of her olive green bra.

"Reaction," I said. "I—"

"What kinda man throws a flaming sticka shit at a woman?"

Both women cursed me and left for other fires. Though I tried to apologize several times, and soon bartered them both to the Frogs, neither spoke to me again.

This, in slow motion: the soiled board, twirling like a helicopter blade, aflame.

* * *

I strung up a large piece of cardboard across the tent wall behind my cot. I pinned photos on it of women I'd slept with, or whose pictures with me indicated that I might've. Drunken hugs at fraternity parties, suggestive poses, kisses on my cheek. These weren't the only photos I brought to combat. But after word got out that I'd spent a week on suicide watch in the medical tent, it became vital that I not be seen as a weak-ass, a Tetley.

Not Pictured: Charlotte, in a royal blue armchair near the window, dressed only in a white cotton shirt that was unbuttoned at the top. Sleeves gently rolled, her tan legs tucked under her on the wide chair cushion. I lay on the motel bed, naked except for dog tags. The windows were open, the transparent curtains billowed. She said we should look forward to being married when I got back. I did.

They dragged rank prisoners down the dirt road beside camp like a slave march. They had stains on the seat of their pants and dust in their mustaches, and begged us for the chewing gum and the salt packets from our MREs. Who knows where they went. Rumor was that they were nobodies, just a bunch of *haji* towel-head farmers, and we had better forget about them and get focused for the ground assault.

There was nothing happening. It was all outside compound walls, staggering by, exploding in the distance.

My grandmother wrote a letter in scrabbled blue ink. It was the first she had written since World War II, when my grandfather had done tours both in Europe and the Pacific. I do not know why she didn't send word to my father, in Vietnam.

When I was very young, going through a drawer, I found an old black-and-white centerfold. Opening the tri-folded paper, I was floored by this first vision of glorious sex. So much so that I did not recognize the subject. My mother walked in and caught me ogling, then nervously explained that she'd had her face superimposed on the body as a joke for my father when he was in combat.

Every day, every war, everybody waits for mail call.

* * *

At some point, reborn from a psych eval down in Riyadh, I came to realize that war was more about dividends than killing. I needed a product. I started to make wine.

This old Choctaw cook had deep gulleys in his cheeks and when he spoke he emitted a soft whistle over the letter S: *Sholdier, biscuit, misshile*. He gave me a few packets of yeast, and taught me how to make applejack. Soon after, I was trading liters of it, alongside grape-jack, orange juice-jack and whatever-fruit-juice-I-could-get-jack, for fresh chicken and near-beer and battery-powered speakers.

One morning, a couple of French troops appeared. Not because they'd heard of my work as a vintner, but because they needed a translator, and because one of the mechanics suspected that I might know a little French, being a college faggot and all. I cannot remember what the Frenchmen officially sought, but the next morning, in exchange for five gallons of two-week-old applejack, an entire pallet of French rations was delivered to my tent. Tetley was angry. I told him to get ready for the Perrier.

The French meals came in tins, not brown plastic sacks. You didn't heat them by dropping floppy packets into warm water, you set the entire tin on Tetley's propane flame, then let the food baste in its own juices and herbs. Instead of Dehydrated Pork Patty, this was *lapin avec haricots verts*.

"No shit, Tetley. It's rabbit, man. Bunny."

"No shit?"

"Yeah. And we got tons of bunny, man. Half yours, too. You can bitch-bath in Perrier if you want."

This was, indeed, a moment. A fine moment. Cluster bombs, tracer rounds, intestinal parasites—*avec haricots verts*.

A five-gallon jug of bad wine was only worth a pallet of rabbit. The Perrier was traded for information about the location of the female sleeping quarters, when and where to cross over the berm, whether the women drank, if they were easy, and so on. My French was better than I thought, and my answers worth an ocean of bubbling water.

The next morning we were ordered to a meeting with our C.O. He informed us that a bunch of drunk stinking Frogs had spent the

night in the women's tent. He said this was a war, not an orgy. Guard duty was redoubled. I was ordered to latrine detail.

Charlotte wrote that she was pregnant. Then she never wrote again. I burned shit in the desert and watched A-10s rip the sky.

The battalion colonel briefed us by saying that Intel had lost an Iraqi Special Forces unit in our area—So Stay Sharp, Dogs. That night I left my guard post, climbed over the berm, and walked into the void. The red lens cover was on my flashlight; I aimed it forward and followed the circle. Daybursts of missile hit just up the road, briefly illuminating the blackness. I prayed for someone to fire on me as I neared the front. Nobody did. Darkness swallowed me, though the rocks and sand in the red circle of the flashlight vibrated with the missile strikes. I lay on the ground for a while to feel this, then put my ear against a large rock to see how it sounded. I got up and wandered for an hour or so, scouring that landscape. I found a cluster of three tiny white flowers—the only living nature I'd seen for weeks. I yanked them, then went back to the tent and wrote Charlotte for the last time, asking her to remember no matter what. To please make a list of details about me from back home, from before. I put the flowers in the envelope and was done.

One sunset, some general helicoptered in, gave us a ten-minute speech about victory, then left. He had a slight gut but strong posture, and he walked back and forth in his beige cammies as the red sun melted down behind him. We never saw him again, but he made clear that we would lead the invasion, would spearhead a 155-mile thrust into Baghdad, “crushing any rag-wrapped cunt” who got in our way.

Every vehicle was armored. We sandbagged the deuce-and-a-half truck beds; we welded metal plates on the dozers and dumps. We jerry-rigged a .50 cal mount on a pickup cab and pretended to know how to use it.

They said Go.

For a mute instant there was no gender. We charged north, trucks and guns, past missile craters, charred vehicles and burned trash. It was apocalyptic and eerie, and we were wonderfully on edge.

We located a collection of goatskin-covered foxholes, and exited the trucks. Our rifles set on 3-round semiautomatic burst, we stalked up with gunstocks to our cheeks. The holes were empty save for Arab pinups and empty water bottles and cigarette butts. The airplanes had done all the killing. We pushed on, north, so very much in search of death.

The convoy drove for hours on the same scab of earth, no enemy in sight, our own tracks disappearing behind us in sand drift. At some point the combat-support vehicles just stopped.

They had radioed and said to turn around. The war was over.

We got out of the trucks in the middle of Iraq and took our helmets off. We yelled and unloaded our rifles, ejaculating brass casings all over the desert. The silence was unbreakable.

Tetley and I were ordered to make a supply run and find a victory feast. We cruised the desert highway, a crisp gray seam of asphalt through the beige landscape. Out of nowhere, an enormous cloud of sand rose ahead of us. Tetley drove straight into it, passing a massive armament convoy. Flitting strips of red, white, and blue nylon tied to tank antennae against the grainy Arabian sky.

On the shoulder to our right I saw a camel. She sat there, buckled down on all fours, groaning. To our left, soldiers stood up in the beds of transport trucks, whooping and dancing and grabbing their crotches. Pop music blared, brakes squealed. The convoy trucks were sluggish and clumped together, billowing the enormous sand cloud. Armed Forces Radio announced total victory; President Bush declared an end to the Vietnam era.

A thin film of sand coated the camel's black eyes, and crusted her eyelashes. The troops, many shirtless, their silver dog tags wagging, yelled and waved, and danced, the exhaust stacks spewing and horns blaring, the music cranked from boomboxes. All of it, us, charging east-west in a horde along an unmarked two-lane in the desert.

Next to the camel was her calf. It had tire tracks on its belly and a bunch of bloody black gut-ropes shooting out its ass. I was amazed at how precisely indented the tread grooves were on the tiny ribcage. Tetley never saw this. I looked over and watched him pump his fist at

the soldiers, and I didn't say anything. We passed the camels, the female's head cocked upward, her eyes staring at me, her mouth open, bleating.

When we started to break camp, Saudi farmers loitered outside the compound, lured by our discarded plywood and burlap and such. Given their gestures and keyword English, we determined that they wanted to use the scraps to repair animal hutches, make sheds and so forth. Do whatever it is farmers do with wood and corrugated metal. Hour after hour, days in the sun, the men stood there, white robes and red headscarves. They grinned and mock-saluted, standing just beyond the compound wall next to their tiny white Datsun trucks.

We were ordered to give them nothing. Haji fuckers are tricky, they said. You never know what kind of weapon can be fashioned from canvas or particleboard.

After a few days the farmers brought their daughters out to greet us. Not kids, not sons, but daughters, head to foot in black robes, bearing the wind like polluted ghosts. Waving at us. When this had no effect, the daughters were made to remove their veils. They prostituted smeary lipstick smiles. (One of the guys who talked to them swore it was house paint, not makeup.) Still, we trucked all of the materials out, passing them by, diesel exhaust and catcalls from cabs, en route to the burn site.

Tremendous pyres dotted the desert expanse around us. Streaks of black smoke rose into the sky. Tents, tarps, plywood scraps; Meals Ready to Eat, water jugs, candy wrappers, tires, extra uniforms . . . All of it was stacked into large pyramids and set on fire.

The farmers still stood there, waiting. We tried to run them off. Their enthusiasm waned but they still smiled, smiled and waved when you took stuff to be burned, and we couldn't look at them anymore, and we yelled at them, or just waved and smiled and said "Hi, Haji fuckface" or whatever, or swerved the truck at them just a little bit, just enough to get them to jump back. We catcalled their daughters. We spat.

Alongside the order to burn, we had orders that every single grain of sand be removed from every single piece of equipment: dozers,

pans, back-end-loaders, trucks, and so on. By no means would we be bringing home any Holy Land. They built a massive parking lot in the middle of the desert, then parked hundreds of vehicles there, in rows. With the pyres littering the landscape around us, we washed sand off of things.

Evie Mundleson and I were ordered to scour the ambulance with power sprayers. It had never been used, so the detail was a joke. We opened the bay doors and sprayed the metal walls and the metal bunks and the open metal shelving. Sandy water poured onto the ground. Three large black scorpions washed out.

I walked over, kicked the scorpions around for a minute. Laughed while they pinched at my boot.

“Come on, man,” she said, then stomped them.

I asked her if she was excited to go home.

“No way. You?”

“Nope.”

Last stop was Khobar Towers, a residential building complex outside Riyadh. In the courtyard between the high-rises the Army leashed up a camel. You could pay five dollars for a Polaroid with it. They set up vending, bad pepperoni pizza, and nonalcoholic beer, and kiosks sold cheap Saudi souvenirs, prayer rugs and T-shirts. There was a pool.

Amid the thousands in that sober Araby I ran across D. Garcia, this skinny Mexican I’d grown tight with during basic training at Fort Jackson. An Army truck driver, D. Garcia had logged over a million miles in theater. I told him I only wanted to be back in that sand. He wanted to be back on that highway.

That night—the last time I would ever see him—D. Garcia and I falsified a requisition for a transport truck, a deuce-and-a-half, and stole into some immigrant area of the city, Filipino, where he’d discovered you could buy black market rotgut. It was nasty and clear and came in plastic water bottles. We got drunk and skidded all over back-alley Riyadh, screaming out of the truck cab.

Back at Khobar we staggered through the hallways, playing commando. We gave hand signals like in the movies, and then snuck into

rooms. There, Garcia aimed his fingers at sleeping troops, mock-fired several rounds, then stepped back into the hall and on to clear the next quarters.

Behind one door we found the women, splayed out on cots, sleeping in army green panties, a thin layer of sweat on their exposed skin. Evie Mundleson was among them, asleep on her chest, shirtless, her breasts all smushed out. D. Garcia cocked his eyebrow at me, raised the barrel of his finger-gun to the roof, motioned for me to go inside. I nodded. He pointed two fingers at his eyes, and then at me, and then disappeared forever. I saw myself stumble over to her; I heard the moan that would erupt as I yanked down her battlefield panties and shoved it all straight up her ass.

I still don't know what stopped me from doing this. Really, there was no barrier left. Yet I'm pretty sure I went to my bunk and jerked off in silence.

Families and cameras on the tarmac at Bragg. It was hot and humid, and Charlotte was not there, though I couldn't stop looking for her. People hugged people, hugged children, hugged reporters. Every hand waved those little American flags you find in the cemetery. Someone handed out Southwest Asia Service Ribbons, the same medal awarded to Vietnam vets.

That night we put a bunch of bottles together, tequila, Jägermeister, Jack, whathaveyou. It was guys only. Everyone brought a fifth of the liquor they'd missed most. We drank violently, sitting Indian-style on the patio outside the barracks, our dog barks reverberating off the concrete into the warm southern evening. We piled into a minivan cab and went to town. The driver didn't even ask, "Where to?" He just dumped us on a busy, soldiered street full of bars. We wandered among hundreds of redeployed troops, amidst loud music and vendors and neon. A barker talked us into one of the endless, nasty clubs.

Cigarettes and air freshener and terrible music. A brown-skinned woman in a denim miniskirt and halter top marched up to me, and I asked her for a beer. She said nothing, only yanked me to the back of the room by my upper arm as the guys howled. She pulled me behind a curtain, lifted her halter, placed my hands on her large breasts, then

put her own hands over mine and began rubbing us in circles. It made me think of a Laundromat.

“You like these tits?” she asked.

“Uh-huh,” I answered. She might have been Mexican. She walked me into a small room with a lamp and an olive-colored military cot. I had to put both hands on the wall to hold myself up as she undid my pants and put a condom over me. She sat on the cot and started to work me over like a machine, licking my anus for a few seconds, mouthing my testicles, fellating me just enough to promote erection. Straight-up checklist: hike miniskirt, panties to ankles, bend over. Enfranchise me with hard statements about my masculinity as I penetrate. I finished instantly but tried to keep going, accidentally lodging the condom inside her. I handed her all my money, then stumbled into a bathroom stall and wept.

In Tuscaloosa I borrowed a pair of eyeglasses from a friend, pulled an Alabama ball cap low on my brow, and went to see Charlotte, unannounced. I had never worn glasses, so everything was blurry. My clothes felt borrowed and dated, and were musty from a year in the drawer. She answered the door and we stood there, saying nothing, until finally she said she was glad to see me. She was sorry how things worked out.

It had just rained and was July hot. There was no baby. You could smell that the box hedges outside her apartment had just been clipped. I had not re-acclimated to southern humidity and a constellation of zits had erupted on my face. I asked if she wanted to go to the zoo or something. I cannot remember if we went. I really have no idea.

I am positive, however, that the next time I saw her it was twelve years later, far from Alabama. At the edge of the frozen fish section at Costco Wholesale, in Chicago, Illinois. Another Bush was president, and a war in the same desert was breaking wide open. And there she was.

Only, I wasn’t nineteen. I was a grown man. One of thousands who’d been slowly drawn away. Away from fathers who fought in better wars, from male friends whose only interest was whether or not they’d killed anyone. From churches in small southern towns

where they were made to stand on Veteran's Day. Instead of the VFW or the VA, this crybaby diaspora sought out spaces both alien *and* familiar: exurb, highway, divorce court, Costco. These were grown men who shopped for discount liquor in bulk. Grown men whose doctors could not explain the sensation of fire beneath the skin. Men who could not pin their failed relationships on anything quantifiable, who obsessed over the inability to recover the lives they saw on TV. A grown man in a beige suede jacket that had lost its nap, and who had spent the many previous days on the floor of his efficiency, watching a new invasion unfold on a small television. Missile strikes at remove, rabbit ears adjusted, a rerun that somehow eclipsed the original. He showered and sobbed and masturbated.

Nobody ever asks about the grown women.

Charlotte was still pretty and soft-spoken, though now with a master's and a career, and the confidence to look squarely at the past. We stood under the fluorescence, smiling past each other, eyeballing bulk cod, scrod, halibut. Before I could ask, she got my phone number, and said we should get a cup of coffee.

Of course, she never called.

"Why on earth would we ever go back?" was the last I ever heard.

24.

The Highline Highway

by Nathan Oates

Driving across the country had been Jacob's idea, but Sheila was the one who insisted they return along the Highline Highway. Throughout the trip she'd navigated and he'd done most of the driving, a compromise he'd insisted on to keep her from behind the wheel where she turned into someone else altogether: obscene, misanthropic, possibly homicidal. The route she plotted was circuitous—revenge, he suspected—always avoiding interstates, opting instead for old two-lane highways. The Highline fit right into that.

Jacob had suggested they just go south a bit, get on I-90, which would take them through Bozeman. He'd show them where he'd lived and the stadium where he'd played cornerback for the football team. But Sheila said no, they'd stay up where they were. They hadn't come on this trip for a nostalgia tour.

Other than the miles that passed through Glacier National Park, there was nothing to look at except endless fields of low-cut barley, broken only by the syncopated thuds of telephone poles, and pathetically small towns named after lonely men. Sheila said, "I can see why you left this place."

"I didn't live here. Bozeman's in the mountains."

"I know, I know, so pretty, all that skiing, blah, blah. But this," she rapped the window with a knuckle, "is what I always sort of imagined. This is what I thought you were running away from." Her

window was cracked open and dark hair blew around her face. She kept pushing it behind her ears, but in seconds it was free again.

“It sure is bleak,” he said, to get her to be quiet, though he wanted to say he hadn’t been running away from anything.

In the backseat, Janey had her headphones plugged into the iPhone they’d bought her as consolation for coming away all summer with her parents. For the past few thousand miles she’d poured her attention into the little screen as if it were her last link to a dying civilization. He’d known Janey wouldn’t want to come on the trip, but he hadn’t expected the almost imperturbable sheen of indifference she’d put on since the second day. She pretended not to hear them when they asked her questions, and remained bored and annoyed even as they’d visited the Grand Canyon, the La Brea tar pits, and through the hike in the Redwood Forest. She wanted to be home with her friends from fourth grade, lying around the public pool, watching the older kids flirt in their too-revealing suits. And though he’d been relentlessly upbeat all trip, even Jacob was ready to get home. The Accord, which he always kept immaculate, was littered with food wrappers, tourist flyers, ripped-up maps, and the seats were sticky from spilled soda and mashed crumbs.

“Did you ever come up here?” Sheila asked.

“No,” he said, too quickly.

“Never?” He didn’t look over, but could tell she was smiling at him.

“Maybe, I don’t know.”

She picked up the map and ran a finger along the page. “But isn’t Bozeman just down here? It’s not far at all. For you Westerners.”

“I said maybe.” He knew he sounded defensive, but he couldn’t help it. Twenty years had passed. Half his life. This place had nothing to do with him anymore.

“When? When did you come up here?” She always knew when he was hiding something, and could never let it alone.

“I don’t know. One time, I think.”

“For what?”

The lie surged up in a welcome rush. “With the football team. We played an exhibition in Saskatchewan. I think it was a recruitment thing. Up in Regina.”

She turned the map over to the yellow mass of Canada.

The memories came steadily: Jacob had answered the door in his boxers, mouth sweet from a night of beers, and blinked. Standing there was a man with a white beard who said they'd been watching him at practice. For a second he'd thought the man was a scout, but that didn't fit with the coarse black suit, the beard with no mustache. In the old man's hands was a large black hat with a wide brim. Behind him was a younger man with the same hat, only on his head. They had a proposition for him. Why didn't he get dressed and they'd take him to lunch?

"It's kind of mesmerizing," Sheila said. "Just goes on and on and on. I think you'd go a little nuts, living here."

"Sure would."

"And there we go, one of the local crazies." She pointed to a horse and buggy, standing in the breakdown lane. "What're they, Amish?"

"I don't know." He sped up, but the cart lingered in the rearview.

"They live up here all winter? Without electricity? With wood stoves?"

"I guess."

"That must be so cold. The poor kids."

"Must be."

Sheila turned and looked out the back window and when she straightened out said, "Hey, why don't you stop."

He looked in the rearview, thinking she meant to help the cart. An old man with a thick white beard had been kneeling beside the wheel. "Why?"

"Just stop," she said.

"I can't, we're on the highway."

"What? Just do it, Jacob. There's no traffic."

"Jesus, Sheila, it's dangerous. And Janey's watching her thing."

"So what? Janey can pry herself away for five seconds."

"What do you want to stop for?" He could no longer see the cart. It was probably miles back by now.

"I want a picture. Just stop."

Easing into the breakdown lane he said this wasn't a good idea, but she turned back to Janey and snapped her fingers in front of the

girl's glassy eyes. Wind slammed into the door when he opened it. As he made his way around the car a semi roared past, shaking the air.

"Here," Sheila shouted over the wind, holding out the camera. "Get one of us."

Janey held her mother's hand, dazed and compliant. They climbed down the gravel slope so that when he looked at the camera they were framed entirely by the yellow fields. They were beautiful, his ladies: both with thick dark hair, pale skin, and translucent blue eyes. The backs of their legs, he'd seen as they walked down the slope, were red and impressed with the crisscross seat pattern, but through the camera lens they were perfect, the finished version and the smaller replica, both prettier than he felt he had any claim to hope for.

"Smile," he shouted into the wind.

Sheila insisted on checking the image, wanted another, but he refused, imagined the buggy catching up to them, imagined Sheila striking up a conversation with the man. He walked around the car and got behind the wheel, started the engine, and because he was rushing he didn't check the mirror and so didn't see the truck, passing so close it seemed to hit him in the eyes, the horn blaring, the wheels within inches of the hood, then the second set of wheels, and he turned them back into the breakdown lane, wheels spinning in the loose gravel. Only at the last second did he manage to correct the turn and head back out onto the road, but too fast, so that they hit the ridge of asphalt with a crack.

The truck disappeared into the distance. They drove in silence.

"Oh my god," Sheila said

"We almost died," Janey shouted. "We almost had an accident!" She leaned forward, clutching Sheila's headrest.

"Yes," he said, pushing on the accelerator. Then, "Put your seat belt on, right now."

"What happened?" Sheila said.

"That truck just came out of nowhere."

"You almost killed us."

"On purpose, Sheila. I did it on purpose."

When he looked over she was crying. "I'm sorry," he said. "That just scared the shit out of me."

In the lull that followed he noticed a rattle coming from the back of the car. The noise got louder. Soon he could barely hear Sheila shout they should probably stop next time they found a place.

The mechanic wiped his hands on a rag and said there was a crack in the manifold. Could they drive? That was all they needed, just to get home. They could, the man said, but if they hit a bump the whole exhaust system might just fall out on the road.

“So how long to fix it?” Jacob said.

“Well,” the man said, looking back into the shop. “I’m pretty full.”

Jacob said he’d pay whatever it took. The man frowned, squeezing the oily rag. “For another five hundred, I could probably do that.”

“Good. Great, fine,” Jacob said. With the cost of the labor and parts that brought the total over two thousand, but what were they going to do, sit it out in this road-bump town for a week until the mechanic got around to them? Sheila would be pissed and blame him. But she was the one who’d insisted on the Highline Highway. If they’d gone his way they’d be in Bozeman, strolling through campus, or driving slowly around his old neighborhoods. Now they were in this nothing town, which he’d realized, as soon as they drove past the welcome sign, he had been through before.

Twenty years ago, he’d taken the bus up from Bozeman with the ticket the old man with the white beard, Elisha, had handed him across the diner table. The bus would be more comfortable, the old man assured him, than riding all the way up with him and his son, Adam, in the buggy. They’d pick him up in this town, where I-15 hit Route 2, and take him the rest of the way out to their community.

He’d heard of these people before, some sort of Amish, or Mennonite, or Anabaptists, he wasn’t sure exactly. He’d seen them a few times while riding to football games in the bus.

How familiar was he with their community? the old man had asked over lunch, which it turned out only Jacob was eating. Not very, Jacob admitted, chewing a strip of bacon. They wouldn’t bore him with the details, but one thing about their life was that they were isolated, out in the plains above the Highline. The old man seemed to be winking at him—a tick, but it drew attention to the old man’s

eyes, sunk into a thicket of wrinkles, the whites distinctly yellow and thatched with red veins.

“Must be tough,” Jacob had said, stupidly, as the man seemed to want a response.

“We manage. By working together. We are a very close community.”

And that was also the problem. Elisha had hired a researcher at the university to study their bloodlines and had been told that if they didn’t get an infusion of new genes, the community would begin to degrade. The truth was they’d already started to see this: stillbirths, defects. “Mental retardation,” the old man had said in his weird accent, as if he’d come over on a boat from Germany.

Jacob was about to say he didn’t have any interest in joining their community, but the old man held up a hand. “You would only need to come and live with us for one week, and we will pay you very well for this.”

“Pay me for what?”

“Three thousand dollars,” Elisha said, leaning forward, clearly awed by the number.

“For what? Three thousand dollars for what?” At the time, Jacob had twenty-seven dollars and nineteen cents in his checking account.

“I explained,” the old man said. “We need new blood. You will be the new blood.”

“For one week,” Jacob said. They wanted him to come up to their community and give some of his blood. No, his genes. Fuck that, his sperm. He almost laughed, but looked over at the old man’s son, Adam, who was glaring with just-contained hate. Jacob wondered if he’d be screwing this guy’s wife.

“That is all the money we have,” Elisha said, holding his calloused palms up, as if to prove it. “We cannot offer more.”

“Okay,” Jacob said, sipping his coffee. “That sounds like a deal to me.” Even that afternoon he’d wonder why he said yes. The money? The plain weirdness of the offer? But he didn’t think it was even as rational as that. He’d been hungover, which made him both euphoric and depressed, and it was this swirl of feeling that had made him say yes, a surge of hysteria. Then, as soon as he said yes, it seemed there was no way to back out, though of course he could’ve at any point.

There was no one he could tell about the proposition. His friends wouldn't have believed him, and what if they had? That might be worse. So he was on his own to wonder, increasingly, why he'd said yes, and why they'd chosen him. How long had they been watching him? Just this weekend, or had they been watching him walk to class, watching him head in sweatpants and sweatshirt to the gym each morning for weight training, head out to the fields in the afternoon for practice? Had they followed him back to his apartment and watched him through the kitchen window, shoveling mac 'n' cheese into his mouth? And what had they seen that had made them settle on him? Why not any of the other guys on the team? He knew he was good-looking, had always had an easy time with girls, could just wait for them to drape themselves across the hard slabs of his shoulders and soon they'd be moaning beneath him on whatever creaky bed or sofa was on hand. He was six foot three, two hundred twenty-five pounds, with a thick head of light-brown hair (which, in his mid-thirties, had started thinning, leaving him bald on top, a trait Elisha and Adam probably weren't yet aware of), and he had a strong jaw. His mother had called it a movie-star jaw. "My little leading man," she'd called him. They must have chosen him for his looks, since they propositioned him before meeting him. His personality, such as it was, didn't matter in the slightest. He could've been anyone, a murderer, a sadist. The old man's plan was stupid and even dangerous. For them, and for him. Out in their community he'd be surrounded. They could kill him and bury his body in some barren field. But still he'd packed a small duffel bag and, as soon as the semester ended and the cold had gripped all of Montana, he walked through the creaking snow to the bus station.

After the mechanic settled up with Jacob's credit card—"I'm afraid in this case I'm going to have to get it all now," he'd said—Jacob asked if there was a car he could use.

The man led him out to a back lot, through a chain link fence to a battered old Datsun with South Dakota plates. The car barely ran, the engine dry and raspy, and the seats smelled like body odor and mold. Jacob honked for his wife from the lot of the diner and had to step out of the car to wave when she didn't recognize him.

As they drove to the motel, a low-slung building like a supersized trailer, bound on all sides by a field of weeds and small, wind-shaken trees, he explained the situation.

"We have to stay here?" Janey said, glaring out the window at two boys standing up on the pedals of their bikes.

"Just for tonight. It'll be fine."

"How much is it going to be?" Sheila said, face already hardened with blame.

"Enough, honey, okay? It's going to be enough." Thankfully, she let it go.

In their room, which cost eighty dollars a night, he asked what they wanted to do.

"What exactly is there *to do?*" Sheila said. "Did I miss something? All I saw was a Dollar Store and that disgusting diner."

"There was that movie theater. Or we could just drive around."

"To look at cornfields?" Sheila said, sitting on the creaking bed and turning on the television. "I think we've done that."

"Barley," Jacob said.

"Whatever. The answer is no. I'm staying right here in our lovely room."

"Well, I'm going to go drive," Jacob said. "If that's okay."

"Whatever," Sheila said, waving him away.

"Janey?" he said. She shook her head vigorously, as if otherwise he might scoop her up and subject her to some arcane torture.

"I'll be back," he said, hurrying out.

As he backed out of his spot the Datsun coughed and clattered, exactly like a car he'd driven back in college, a clunker he'd bought from a graduating senior for four hundred dollars, a car you could drive drunk and not worry about, because what was the worst that could happen? You'd crash the thing, but that was no big deal. They were nineteen, twenty, invulnerable. He felt for a moment that sense of his old self, his old confidence, was returning, as if the fabric between the man as he was now and the man he'd been was lifted by a strong wind. But then he caught a glimpse of himself in the rearview as he backed out: his wrinkled face, the tanned top of his head, dusted with the remains of his hair, grown too long on the trip, and the curtain

fell heavily back in place and he was once more a thirty-nine-year-old high school teacher and football coach in rural Pennsylvania.

He passed the garage where he saw his car parked in the lot, the windows all rolled down, two other cars up on the jacks. The town dwindled away to nothing after that.

When he'd come up on the bus twenty years ago, Elisha had been waiting for him at the station. Elisha explained he wasn't allowed to park the buggy in the lot, but it wasn't far. Jacob noticed people eyeing them as they walked out onto the main street. Maybe Elisha had come here first, made the offer to a few of the locals, before heading farther down to Bozeman and the gullible college students who had nothing at stake. All he'd had to do was call his parents back in Pennsylvania and tell them he had to stay after the end of the semester, but only a few days, for a football thing. Anything having to do with football had always been good enough for them. Throughout high school, when he'd been a varsity starter from sophomore year on, they'd prepared him for his time as a star, but by mid-junior year it was clear he wasn't good enough for Penn State, or any Big Ten school, so he started looking through the letters sent him from schools he'd never heard of, including Montana State University. On the cover of the brochure there'd been a red brick building and high, snow-capped mountains in the background, students walking through pristine air. He'd known no one in Montana and though he'd always made friends easily and did on campus, he'd felt completely alone the entire four years he was out west. Maybe Elisha had seen something of this. Maybe the old man's spartan, religious life had allowed him some insight into the person Jacob was. Maybe he'd be able to let Jacob in on what he'd seen.

Had they talked on that buggy ride out to the community? It'd taken hours, but he didn't remember saying a word. What he remembered was feeling, as they rumbled along, that he was doing the right thing. Elisha's people needed one of the most basic things in life, and he could provide it. But what the hell was going to happen, exactly? Since that breakfast in the diner Jacob had masturbated many times to fantasies of sleeping with young women, virgins, but also older women, widows, or maybe even married women. But as they pulled

out of town and started along the breakdown lane of the highway, he started worrying about the details. Would there be specific rules? Was someone going to be watching, to make sure he didn't do anything forbidden? As they turned onto a narrow road marked by two white mailboxes—which were still there when Jacob drove in with the Datsun; he braked hard, just making the turn—he started to get afraid. What if this was actually some sort of death cult, some sort of ritual sacrifice? He'd thought about getting a gun before leaving Bozeman, of hiding it in his duffel, just in case. In the buggy, as they were enveloped by the endless fields, he wished he had.

There was another turn off the state road to get to the community, but he couldn't remember where. He'd have missed it if not for the family walking along with their cows, the mother leading the way, two young girls beside her, all three women with black bonnets on their heads, long black skirts brushing around their ankles. Behind the cows were a father and son, the boy no older than five or six, the father probably not much older than Jacob had been when he'd been brought out here, which was how old his child, the child he'd been brought to make, would be now. He'd been twenty and that was nineteen years ago. His kid would be eighteen. Father and son wore straw cowboy hats and stiff black pants rode up above boxy black shoes and held long switches they brought gently down on the swaying rumps of the cows. Jacob backed up and turned onto the narrow dirt road. As he passed, the father looked up and touched the brim of his hat.

When they'd arrived in the buggy, Elisha had taken him directly to the house where he'd be staying. The building was behind Elisha's house, in the center of the community, a tidy cluster of white houses. To Jacob it looked more like a glorified shed, a single room with a bed, a wooden dresser, a single wooden chair. There was one window without shutters or a curtain. On the wall beside the bed was a pot-bellied stove, a funnel running up to the ceiling, and beside it, a pile of chopped kindling. An outhouse was just down the path, and a bedpan was under the bed, Elisha said.

“Does this look acceptable? We thought you might like this better than staying in the house. We thought you might want privacy.”

“Of course, it’s fine,” Jacob said, tossing his duffel bag onto the bed, which creaked under the weight. When he looked back at Elisha the old man was frowning, as if he’d expected something more from Jacob. Thanks? Excitement?

“Everyone is at a meeting. They are waiting for me. Do you need anything?”

Without giving Jacob a chance to respond, Elisha walked out. Jacob thought he heard a lock turning, but when he tried the knob a few minutes later it opened and he looked out. He found what he thought was the church—there was no cross, but it was the biggest building in town—and studied the windows, trying to see in, but from that distance all he could see was the hint, now and then, of a dark shape, and though he strained to hear complaints, shouts, protests, rage in the voices of the men who’d come and find him in this shed and bludgeon him with the sharp edge of a shovel, he heard nothing but wind.

There was a single gas lamp beside his bed, but he wasn’t sure how to light it, so he used the flashlight he’d brought when dark came early. He was looking at the white spot on the ceiling when Elisha came in, stepping aside to make room for a woman, his wife. She set a plate, covered with a towel, on the dresser. They’d brought him some dinner. They hoped he was comfortable. Again, without waiting for an answer they left and this time he distinctly heard the turning of a key, and when he tried the door he found it locked. Maybe for his safety. After eating the entire plate of potatoes, green beans, and chicken, he turned off the flashlight and was plunged into solid, depthless black.

Jacob recognized the church, and farther on he saw Elisha’s house. Behind it the gray shed looked even smaller than he’d remembered. After that first night he’d thought maybe he was going to be locked up in the shed all week, but the next morning Elisha took him around the community and introduced him to the men. They greeted him kindly, though once or twice the men seemed to squeeze his hand harder than necessary. He wasn’t introduced to the women, but they were there, walking past on the roads between the homes, nodding to him, or maybe it was to Elisha. The same was true of the children,

especially the little boys, tiny, creepy versions of their fathers with the same hats in smaller sizes.

As he drove past, the doors of the meeting hall opened and children poured out, little boys leading the way, leaping off the four white steps and landing clumsily in the yard, then racing toward the playground equipment, an elaborate dark wooden structure with swings and a bouncy bridge. Back when he'd been here before, there'd been no playground, and from what he'd been able to tell the kids hadn't spent much time playing, but now even the girls were climbing onto the swings, which the boys had left empty, and soon they were rising high, their hair trailing out beneath their bonnets, the thick pleats of their skirts lifting up and falling down. The oldest looked like they were not quite teenagers. Twelve, maybe.

His second night in the community he'd been led back to his shed after dinner with Elisha, his wife, and their unmarried son, Matthew, who was mildly retarded. Dinner began with a long, elaborate prayer, and then followed in near total silence. Matthew kept looking up quickly, as if continually surprised to find Jacob there, opening his mouth, then snapping his thick lips shut again and staring down at his plate. Back at the shed Elisha held open the door for him and looked at his shoes.

"She will be here soon. I will leave you to prepare."

"I'll be waiting," Jacob said, but knew that that sounded strange, maybe too eager, so he smiled and tried hard to think of something else to say. Then he saw the lamp and said, "Can you help me with that thing?"

The knock that came a few minutes after Elisha left was barely audible. "Come in," he said, not sure if he should go to the door.

Her hand appeared first, gripping the edge of the door, then her arm, covered in black, then her face. She couldn't have been more than eighteen, and perhaps not even that, he thought, as she came all the way into the room and closed the door. She was at most seventeen. Maybe sixteen. Jesus fucking Christ, she might be fifteen.

"Hi," he said, standing up. The room was too hot: he'd stoked the fire until it was raging, pushing in most of his wood, so he'd probably be freezing later.

She folded her hands over her stomach and looked like she wanted to run, but instead she stepped quickly over to him and put her hand on his chest. She was more than a foot shorter than Jacob, her hair in a thick brown braid down her back. In all his fantasies he'd imagined some demurely beautiful woman, but this girl was plain, almost dowdy, with a wide nose and a gap between her front teeth. Standing in front of him, she was breathing hard, panting, almost, and her cheeks were flushed.

"I'm Jacob," he said.

Rising up on tiptoes, she tried to kiss his mouth, but he pulled away.

"I don't think," he started, but saw her face harden.

"Here," she said, stepping out of her shoes and climbing onto the bed. She hoisted her skirt, lifting her butt to get it all the way up. She had on nothing underneath. Her pubic hair was a light brown, tinged with red.

"Look, I think," he started.

That's when he heard something just outside the door. A man, coughing.

The girl on the bed just stared at him and lifted her hips. He unbuckled his belt, pushed down his pants, and climbed on top of her. He was as gentle as possible, fumbling for a while trying to get himself positioned, almost losing his erection, but then he'd looked at her face and she'd turned to him, and he slid in, watched her gasp, then roll her face away as he began to move.

As soon as he'd finished she slipped out from under him, pulled on her shoes, and left the shed. He thought he heard her talking, but Jacob just rolled his face into his pillow. Tomorrow he'd go home.

But he stayed. The next day he walked toward the more distant farms whose land pushed up against the sand hills. Beyond town he could see men working, leading horse-drawn wagons, repairing the roof of a shed, doing something to a silo. Back at the shed he had nothing to do, so he chopped the logs of wood stacked beside his barn, then moved on to those beside the house. Elisha's wife brought him a bucket of warm water and a greasy bar of soap and shivering behind the shed he washed as best he could.

That night, his third, the knock came at the door after dinner. It

took him a minute to realize that the woman standing before him was the same as the night before.

“Wait, I thought,” he started, but stopped himself. But what had he thought? Of course it had to be the same girl.

She lay down and pulled up her dress, just like the night before.

“I was wondering,” he said, as he unbuckled his pants and pushed them down over his erection. “Maybe you could tell me your name.”

She blinked as if the idea had never occurred to her. Then she said, “Rebecca.”

“Hi, Rebecca. I’m Jacob.”

She rolled her face away from him, toward the wall.

“Well, it was nice talking with you,” he said, kneeling between her ankles, but he paused. “How old are you?”

“Shhh,” she whispered, reaching down and grabbing his dick.

The next morning, after breakfast, which Elisha’s wife left outside the door, Jacob followed a narrow dirt track to the rising slope of the hills where the fences ended. At some point he expected the ground to turn to sand, like at the beach, but instead the crumbly dirt got grittier, looser, the low, yellow grass sparser. Why hadn’t he brought water? When he looked up, panting, he saw nothing in every direction but the billowing swells of the hills, the shuddering yellow grass. The sun was straight up overhead, so he couldn’t tell which way was east and after wandering a little, he sat down and waited for the sun to drop. By the time he was able to start back his shadow stretched, long and thin in front of him and the wind had turned sharp out of the north. He ended up too far south and had to trudge along the edge of the hills until he found the cow trail. By the time he reached his shed his lips were cracked, his face red and burned, his ears throbbed from the cold wind, and his hands were numb. He drank the ceramic pitcher of water and lay down in the dark.

The knocking didn’t wake him that night, and he only drifted out of sleep when Rebecca poked his shoulder. “Wake up,” she said. She lit the lamp beside the bed and he covered his eyes with his forearm.

“What?” Jacob said, forcing himself up on an elbow. “What are you doing?”

“I’m here,” Rebecca said, folding her arms across her chest.

“No,” Jacob said, collapsing back against his pillow. “Not tonight.”

“I,” she started, then after a pause, “no, you—”

“Get out,” he shouted. He could tell she was standing above him still. “Get the fuck out of here,” he shouted, louder, and this time he heard her hurried steps, the door slam. There might have been voices outside and the door might have cracked open, a head peering in at him, then the door closed with a click.

Rebecca was surely still here, in the community, he realized now as he drove out to the edge of the town, and then did a five point to turn to start back out toward the road. She’d be in her thirties now, but with the cold and wind and working the fields she’d look older, older by far than Sheila with her faint wrinkles and pale skin. Rebecca probably already looked like an old woman. Presumably she’d been married off and raised the child. His child. Except he didn’t really think that. He knew that having a kid wasn’t just a matter of shooting your wad.

He slowed until he was barely moving, hoping to see something in the women’s faces that would spark a memory of Rebecca, or maybe something of himself in a young man, taller than the rest, with dusty blond hair, a strong jaw, big shoulders. The young man would be pushing a wheelbarrow in front of one of the white houses and he’d glance up as the battered car rolled past. Through the dusty windshield, they’d see each other.

He’d turned Rebecca away the fifth night as well, and the next morning Elisha had came to talk to him. Was there anything wrong? Was he uncomfortable?

Jacob was lying on his bed, his arms behind his head. Of course not. He was fine.

Elisha considered him carefully, rubbing his white beard. Then he said that it was important to remember that Jacob had been brought here for a job. This was a job they had hired him to do. They had agreed to pay him good money for his services.

“My services? That’s what you call it?” He sat up and took pleasure in seeing the old man flinch.

“Please,” Elisha said, holding his hands out, “cooperate with us.”

"Right, fine," Jacob said. "No problem. I'll cooperate."

That night Rebecca came at the regular time and he was standing naked just inside the door so the wind made his skin prickle.

"Are you ready?" he said. "Because I'm all set to cooperate. How about you?"

She'd stayed by the door. He told her to come closer. Closer. When she was nearly up against him he started to unbutton her shirt. She grabbed at the flaps of her shirt, trying to fit them back together, but he stopped her hands and told her to behave. He slid the shirt off, then unlatched her skirt and pushed it over her hips. Trembling in her heavy bra that looked more like a bandage and her wide, sagging underpants, she started to cry. He turned her around and eventually figured out how to undo the bra, so that her small, high breasts were free. He ran his thumbs over her pink nipples, watching her face, but she only looked afraid. Then he pushed down her underwear and pulled her to the bed. She lay down on her back, eyes clenched shut. He knelt above her, looking down at her pale, trembling body, then he grabbed her hips. She let out a cry as he turned her over, lifted her ass up, her face in his pillow. Unlike the other nights he didn't finish quickly, held himself back, drawing it out. At first he was angry, but the longer it went on, the more he wanted her to let go of herself for just a second, to moan, to rock her hips back into him, but she didn't make a sound, even when he reached around and rubbed her clitoris. When he finally came she climbed quickly out of bed and dressed. She left the door hanging open behind her so he had to get up to close it against the cold.

Behind a house, framed by a large red barn, a woman was hanging laundry. It wasn't Rebecca. He hoped she never thought of him, but he doubted that was true. Or maybe not. Maybe this kind of life purified her mind, sloughed away all the nostalgia and grasping after youth that was so much a part of his own life.

The last night, his seventh, she came to the shed as usual. All day he'd been trying to think what to say when she arrived, because even after what he'd done the night before, he knew she'd come. What choice did she have? And he had to say something, but all he could come up with was, *I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you, worry you,*

frighten you. Those were bullshit, but there was no way he could get at the truth, because he didn't have any idea what it might be. Still, he had to say something. He couldn't leave her with the idea that the father of her child, her baby, was a bastard.

When she came into the room she stared down at her hands.

"Come here," he said, patting the mattress. "Come sit next to me for a minute."

She wouldn't look at him, and he could tell from the tenseness of her posture, and the way she leaned away when she sat down, that she hated him. With good reason.

"I want," he started, but then couldn't think of anything to say. He just stared at her profile, at the slight puffiness of her lips, the perfectly straight line of her nose, her thick eyebrows, which were probably not thicker than other women, but she didn't pluck them.

"I wanted to talk to you," he said.

"All right," she said. "Talk."

"I mean," he said, forcing out a fake laugh. "I mean, I barely know your name, you know? And you don't know anything about me."

She looked at him for the first time, a brief glance.

"I mean, considering all this," he gestured at her stomach, "don't you want to know anything? I mean, anything about me?"

She shook her head, then said, "What should I know?"

"I don't know. What do you want to know? Anything. You can ask me anything."

She pursed her lips, frowned and said, "All right. What do you want to do? What kind of work do you want to do?"

Like anyone else, this was almost all he'd thought about during college, but like almost everyone else he knew, he didn't have an answer.

"I guess I'd like to be a teacher," he said.

She looked at him. "A teacher?"

"Yes. High school, I think. Or little kids. Either one."

"What would you teach?"

"History," he said. This was the first time he'd even considered this, but as soon as he said it, he knew it was true. This was what he would do. He was already majoring in history. So why not?

“What history?”

He laughed and said, “Any kind. American. American history.”

She seemed to be considering this, then shrugged. “Okay.”

“See, isn’t that better?” he said. “Now you know something about me. Come on. Ask me something else. Anything else.”

“I don’t know.”

“Come on. Anything,” he said, and he wanted to touch her, to take her hand, to hug her, but instead he just bounced on the bed, making the springs squeal. She shook with the bounce, and he did it again, then again, and her smile widened.

Still bouncing he leaned over and whispered, “Come on, help me out.” At first she didn’t move, just sat there, shaken by his movements, and then she lifted her butt and brought it down and they went on like that, bouncing the bed, the springs wailing. A few strands of her hair, which had been tied up in a bun, drifted loose around her face, catching in her half-open mouth. She left just as she always did, not looking back at him, and he lay down on the bed that seemed to still be vibrating and he closed his eyes, trying to hold on to that feeling.

He drove back through the community as quickly as he could. Sheila and Janey were probably wondering where he’d gone. They’d drive back to that diner, sit in a booth, play music from the little jukebox on the wall, and tomorrow the car would be ready, and they could finally get out of there and head back home.

25.

House Guests

by Alan Rossi

Lisa has rules: a movie, but that's all; a dinner, but that's all; a walk somewhere, a show, a drink out, but that's all. I'm trying to find a way to break her limits. Tonight she wanted to swim. We're on the bay side of the island where the waters are easy and the sand thick as mud. You can step in spots and lose your legs in a minute, sinking up to your knees. We've been here an hour and I'm out and dry, but she's still skimming the surface like a bug, pulling herself farther and farther out and then dipping from sight. I'm in sinking sand trying to sink as far as I can. The lights of town blink on and off in the water's reflection. The smell of fry oil dwells in the air.

You going to Pacheco's after this? she calls, treading far out, her voice thin against the wind and carried away.

I tell her no, I'm going to her house.

I saw him trying to surf last weekend, she says. He got so pissed off he broke his board. On her back, she begins a slow swim in.

I wasn't with him, I say.

He's kind of stupidly violent, she says. Are you two still going to the empty houses?

Sometimes we go, I say. You should come. It's fun.

A salty wind sticks to my body and I watch her going under and coming up. A few minutes later she gets to shore cast in orange-brown light. A quiet splashing. The sun's like a dying bulb seen through a bottle of whiskey, cloudy and flickering through clouds.

I'm gone, she says, stepping through tide pools warm and clear. Time's up, she says.

This is ridiculous, I say.

She stands in one large tide pool and sinks down some and I toss a towel and watch the way her reflection is continuously sliced and rebuilt on the rippling water.

Pacheco has three new surfboards and can barely stay up. He lives in this bungalow near the beach and is selling the house he and his wife lived in. She's been gone two years and is so much less than a memory for me, only a name; for Pacheco, I can't say. The wind here whips off the sea, the sky a raucous hot summer blue with blooming blue clouds, but the waves are shit. Pacheco goes out every day and tries. He shows me the bruises, the sand-scraped skin. He tells people he lives in a beach house and surfs and smokes pot because it's better than having a life. I don't know what this means, but I go see him. It's what I'm supposed to do.

This is what we do: we find who's vacationing, then we break in. We don't steal, we only use: their food, their cable, their computers. We get to live some other life a minute, be who we want to be.

Pacheco's stretched out on a leather sofa, sunburnt and thin. We're playing Scrabble in the Parkers' home, an older couple who're up north for the summer: it's a dark, damp place, with condensation on the windows and no air-conditioning so it feels and smells like being in a crotch. Out the back windows is a deck, and beyond, the ocean, a full moon above it. People shuffle by on the beach, flashlights lighting like holy lamps, searching out sea turtles. I'm here and abiding until I leave for home and get to think about how to break Lisa's limits.

Tofu, I say, arranging the squares on the board. Fifteen points.

I need something very definite and dramatic to happen, Pacheco says. I need to throw these Scrabble pieces across the room and yell, You all fucked my life.

Please don't, I say. I'm winning and this isn't your house.

Two years ago, he told me his wife fucked some other guys. I later found out she just started playing racquetball and going swimming. I told Pacheco this and all he said was, Is that really what you think of me? She lives alone now; she could be anywhere.

I need a new mountain bike, he says, disregarding Scrabble. I think that would fill some need.

Your turn, I say.

If not a mountain bike, then watching someone drown.

He's brought a speed bag and has it hanging from a doorframe and he goes to it and smacks it with quick punches, running it against his fists. Outside, the flashlights move up and down the beach. He has the bag thrumming, humming quick to his hands. With a hard right, he smacks the bag so it clutters and viciously bounces. He's mixed martial arts; my father tried to teach me to box when I was younger and then tried to watch boxing with me when I got older and I now get to regret not doing either. Pacheco turns and comes back to Scrabble. He flings a pillow from the sofa which I block. It hits the coffee table and nearly knocks over a vase.

Be careful, I say. I have a smoothie machine you can borrow, I say. A smoothie fills many of my needs.

Letting me borrow your truck will do it for me, he says.

Sold, I say. Your play.

Do other people want to see other people ruined? he says.

You like making us something we're not, I say.

Later, with the house still dark and humid and outside great palm leaves shuffling in the wind, he says: Look at me. Thirty years old. I have sixty dollars in the bank. Do you realize we're still children?

Outside, the ocean's a constant hushing echo. The flashlights have stopped and the moon hangs above the ocean, a sick cloudedness.

I want you to bring that Lisa girl around, he says.

Can't, I say. She dislikes you. She more than dislikes you.

She doesn't know me, he says.

I can't be around him more than a few hours. I tell him I have to go and he tells me he wants to test our balance, which means he wants to do this kind of wrestling: he clears out the Parkers' living room so nothing breaks; we match right feet up, each with a left foot back, a wide stance for balance; our left hands are free, our right hands joined; low to the ground, calves and hamstrings burning. Go, he says. We try to throw each other off balance. First to move a foot loses. His right hand crushes mine, pushes me back, and my weight

swings to my back left leg, then he pulls me toward him, my whole body shifting to my front right leg and I'm done and down on him and we're in a pile on the floor. Again, he says. You can do better than that shit.

I lose, lose, lose, and after each time I go down I want to break a vase across his face.

When I get up to go, I'm sweating and he gives me a Gatorade from the Parkers' fridge. He says, I do need to borrow your truck on Tuesday. I'll give you money. I hold the sweaty Gatorade; he feels he has to pay and I agree he probably does. I give him what he wants.

Some other night I drive over to Lisa's late after work. I've closed the restaurant down and prepped for the morning. The golf course sparkles under the water of sprinklers. An old man walks his dog along the beach road and the quiet here is more than some can be comfortable with. The beach houses facing the ocean seem like broad-foreheaded men, looking out for some ungettable thing.

At Lisa's, she's got the Ping-Pong table set up in her living room. This means that after a best of seven in Ping-Pong, I'm going home. I get a Coke from the fridge and she bounces the Ping-Pong ball on her paddle, following me. She's got this bandana in her hair, a pair of sweatpants on, a T-shirt of a bunny holding a machete.

You with Pacheco? she says.

Nope, I say.

She gets on her tiptoes to turn off the ceiling fan and her T-shirt stretches up, shows me her stomach, a ring in her belly button. I flip on the lights, pull the blinds. Her apartment is spare, a white room with new cream carpet. Little carpet ball fluff. She's big into coffee and has used mugs out on tables, the TV, the mantel. She's told me there's a kind of coffee bean that has to be found in the shit of a goat for it to taste right. The goat has to eat it. I was confused until I realized the goat didn't actually chew the bean. She's told me this with such passion, such knowing want.

We unfold the table, play three games, four. The crack and pong of the ball fills the room. I'm up three-one, so I let her catch me by

knocking backhands to her forehand so she can convert. And she does. I have this vision of a life with her. I want to stay.

Don't let me win, she says.

I'm not, I say.

It's patronizing, she says.

Would it be patronizing if I said I was letting you win because I wanted to be around you longer?

Yes, she says. I think.

It gets to three–two, three–three, then I win the last game. We fold the table back up. She turns the ceiling fan back on. I'll see you tomorrow at work, she says.

This is ridiculous, I say.

Tomorrow at work, she says.

A man comes from the apartment upstairs and knocks on her door and then comes right in. Let's watch a movie, he says. This is Fred, who does not matter at all to me.

Yeah, I say. I'm tired. I don't want to drive. Let's all watch a movie.

I've got some new Netflix, Fred says.

Fred's got Netflix, I say.

Lisa looks at me: Your time is up, she says. Fred, if you want to stick in that movie, go ahead.

I stay standing in the pale family room, Fred unsure if he should start setting up the movie or not. Lisa moves her body across the room, turns around in the kitchen in socked feet, her legs crossing. Crosses her arms across her chest. I'll see you tomorrow, she says to me, then spins on the kitchen floor again and walks to the back bedroom.

Good night, Fred says to me with a stupid grin.

It's a Thursday night and Pacheco wants to go to the Heights, this part of the resort town that huddles the golf course. We drive, windows open, the damp smell of salty air. Palm trees line the main roads. Spanish moss swings from everything. I once dropped a pile of the moss on Pacheco's bed to make him suffer some. He gave me a black eye for it. This was when Molly was around. Molly with the great swinging breasts and the terribly pale face, as if carved from

wax. She liked Pacheco more around other people. I dropped moss on their bed when I learned Pacheco had been filching my dope. The moss has these bugs in it, you understand.

We get to the office. Pacheco's got the desperate eyes for Lisa, but I make him wait in the car.

Ask her to come with, he says to me out the car window.

I pretend I don't hear him and go in.

She sits at her desk, tells me which homes are vacant. She's got on the work clothes: white starched collared shirt, black suit pants. Her hair is amazingly straight, like crazily impossibly straight and black. Try the Meyers', she says. They're gone for three weeks.

It'd be easier if you gave me the key, I say.

I'd give you a key if you weren't doing this for him.

You should be nicer to Pacheco, I say.

He should stop being such a whiner, she says. He's got a temper.

He's harmless, I say. He could use somebody paying him some attention. Really. It'd be nice if you at least let him know you see him.

How the fuck old are you two? she says. You think you're using him, she says. He's using you.

We're all using somebody, I tell her. That's something they would say in a movie, right?

And then you'd walk out that door and tip your hat at me and maybe wink.

Then you'd give me a blow job.

Oh, that one has me, she says. That one definitely has me joining you morons.

At nine, we pick up Lisa and the sitting in the car gets confusing. Pacheco doesn't realize he needs to let Lisa sit up front, so I have to tell him, and in that time Lisa says, No, no, I'll just sit in the back and let you boys give each other hand jobs. Pacheco looks at me and I don't regard him. I want to smack him. Lisa kind of lounges across the entire backseat. Not in work clothes; she's got this sort of library thing going on. She texts on her phone and I imagine it must be Fred, the guy who lives above her apartment. I found myself falling in love with her leather anklet one day, then her legs, then her jean shorts and

frayed edges, Ping-Pong, cruelty, rules, and then, once I noticed Fred, everything else.

We should just go to the Meyers' first, Lisa says from the back. I got something else to do tonight. You boys only get two hours of my time.

That's not how it works, Pacheco says.

The first house is a stone ranch Pacheco picks out. My dad lived in one like it. We wait a few houses down from this ranch. We see people out walking dogs, lights in houses going off and on, figures in windows, all these lives going by quiet. I like the sitting part, the waiting part. The waiting part, the part right before you touch the door handle and it comes open, that's almost as good as being inside. I used to like coming home to my dad's house and being the only one up. Up at three A.M. and listening to the house do its breathing, quietly walking by his room, some woman over. Now the house is empty and I don't know what to do with it.

I need to be a lawyer or a doctor, Pacheco says.

Lisa rolls down her window, rolls it up, rolls it down. She stretches out and all I can see of her are her delicate feet hanging out a window. That anklet.

I always wanted to work in an office building, I say. Where there is a clearly defined thing I always have to do and then instead of doing it, falling asleep in the supply closet.

Instead you're a chef, Lisa says.

I need to save people from serious life dangers, then betray them, Pacheco says.

Instead you work in a bank, Lisa says.

When we're done waiting, Pacheco goes. His skinny figure ducks around the back of the dark house. How he was ever in mixed martial arts is incomprehensible. Yet he's put me in a hold I could not escape from and took my breath and put me to sleep. A minute later Pacheco's back in the car.

Nope, he says.

Some houses have a key hidden, a window open, an easily picked lock. Not all of them though, not even most of them. We're persistent. We're that bored.

We find a two-story angel, a pink thing, lightless inside. No way in. Then: a brick job with a window everywhere, but nothing. Finally, a castle, some kind of pillar sticking up where a fireplace might be. It's the Meyers', the first one on Lisa's list.

Your turn, Pacheco says.

I check the door then under everything: the flowered mat, the pots of flowers, the bench leg, then in the mulch beneath a couple rocks. I go around back. There's a pool back there, skinned with leaves. There's a sliding glass door, patio furniture, and this fake statue in blackface. I check under him and we're in.

See, Lisa says.

We make drinks; open the cupboards; spread out cheese and meats and bread that's not bad yet. We light up the big-screen and keep the lights down or off. These places, they've got dimmers usually, and we sit in half-dark. A good silence sweeps up through our hearts and we're kings and a queen in a minute. Even Lisa goes around admiring, grinning. We use the good china that's propped up on little plate-stands in glass cupboards. I rub the rim of my glass and make it sing. How these people live is unfathomable, the depths of their joys and sorrows or the lack thereof. The house makes us better: we share our food, our wine, we clean our messes, we put the toilet seat up, we wash our hands, we do the dishes, we put away the food, we arrange everything as it was. One thing, though, we change. We've turned paintings upside down; we've switched vases on end tables; we've moved jewelry from jewelry case to nightstand; we've left a shoe in the middle of the room; we've left the television on; we've put a pair of her panties in his sock drawer. We leave a bit of ourselves behind. I wish I could say this was my idea, but it was Pacheco's. My idea was to smoke a joint and leave that smell in the house.

Let's change all the candles, Lisa says. Switch places.

Later, we get bored and the house is a house. It always goes like this. Pacheco says, I want to ruin these people's life. He's taking down a joint, the smoke clouding up the room. He's lying stretched out on the floor, I'm on the sofa, Lisa's at the window watching the leaf-lined pool.

Defecating on their bed would ruin their life, Lisa says. I have to get going, boys. Your time is up.

I want her sickeningly. I'm tired of Pacheco and him being there at all, him even existing at all.

Defecating on their bed might scare them, but not ruin them, I say. You'd have to do something way more drastic.

I wish we were animals, Pacheco says. I can't play this way anymore.

You don't have the moxie, Lisa says.

We're not men of action, I say.

You're passive men, she says. And as a woman, I'm the one who's just here. This life is not for us, we're just guests in it.

We have no moxie, I say.

Speak for your fucking selves, Pacheco says.

Please, I say. You're the worst.

He passes me the joint, eyes all swampy and sad. I wonder what happens if we get caught, he says.

That's more like it, I say.

We can't get caught, Lisa says. Me and him are employees.

I go to the bathroom, the master bathroom, up three stories, which has a Jacuzzi and a kind of sauna, but not to go to the bathroom, just to get away from Pacheco. The master bed is a four-poster with a thousand pillows. Like my father's. My father used to box and he tried teaching me. He built his house, he had an earlier marriage annulled, he didn't cheat on his women, he invested his money well, he had a broken nose from boxing in college, he fell asleep driving home from the coast and wrecked his car and killed himself. I got some money and the house. Sitting there on the four-poster is like sitting in the dream of the life I wish I wasn't living. I turn on the ceiling fan, thinking that's amusing.

It's three stories I have to descend to the basement. I go through each room and want to never leave. When I get to the basement, I hear hard voices, and at the bottom of the stairs I see Pacheco's skinny figure in the dark atop Lisa. She's telling him to get the fuck

off her and Pacheco's got her in some kind of hold and she's getting louder, telling him that he's hurting her.

You said you want to see what I do, Pacheco says. You want to know what mixed martial arts is.

Get the fuck off me, she says. He's got her pinned, knees atop her chest, a forearm at her throat. I've never been that close to her. Her legs are kicking air. Her face is red, veins cutting through her neck.

I stand at the bottom steps and back up one step and feel some flip in my stomach, some sick excitement, something that feels like when you slip off the high dive, when you think you might miss and yet somehow know no matter what you'll hit water even if you hit board first. In a moment, I'll go in there and push him off her. In a day, Lisa will not talk to me anymore. In a month, she will not see me anymore. In a year, she'll be a memory, another person I get to regret the losing of. But not yet. I stand motionless and needful to make this last.

This is what I do, Pacheco says.

Do you see? he says.

Do you want me to let you up? he says.

26.

I Like Looking at Pictures of Gwen Stefani

by Elizabeth Crane

I like looking at pictures of Gwen Stefani. I do not need to know any more about Gwen Stefani than that she looks really good in red lipstick. Looking at pictures of Gwen Stefani in red lipstick with pale skin and pale hair and a white tank top and a baby on her hip provides as much information as I feel I need about Gwen Stefani in order to imagine Gwen Stefani in the way that I want to imagine her. Very occasionally, I like listening to Gwen Stefani, but listening to Gwen Stefani does not affect the way I look at Gwen Stefani and what I get out of looking at Gwen Stefani. When I look at Gwen Stefani in her red lipstick I think maybe I should try red lipstick one more time, just to be sure, though really I know the truth, and my red-lipstick desires are almost fully satisfied by looking at pictures of Gwen Stefani. All that said, had Gwen Stefani never come into my line of sight, the likelihood is high that I would not feel that anything was missing.

I like looking at photographs of New York City in the 1960s and '70s to see if they remind me of something I forgot. I like looking at old advertisements. I like looking at B movies on Spanish language channels. I like looking at some of your pictures on Facebook, even when I don't know you. I like looking at your bookshelves. I like

looking at everything in hardware stores and stationery stores. I like looking at my grandmother's sewing machines when I go out to the garage; they look like snazzy old cars, though they each weigh about forty pounds, I don't know if they work, and I only ever look at them when I'm looking for something else. I like looking at tall shoes that cost a thousand dollars. I like looking at two men kissing. I like the slightly electronic thwacking sounds of the automated postal machine, which I suspect could have been made to be silent but were made to have this sound so that the user might feel a sense of accomplishment, a certainty of delivery, and which could have been any sound, a bell, or a chime, but which was decided, finally to be a thwack. I like the sound of *Car Talk* in the background on Saturday mornings more than I have a regular need for the content of the program. I like seeing old maps on your wall. I like seeing old black men wearing hats so much. I like seeing bodegas, though I rarely go in. I like looking at sculptures by Jeff Koons. I like looking at street art, sometimes, like when they cover lampposts and things with sweaters. I like looking at craft websites. I like to look at my craft supplies. I like to look at your craft supplies and see how they're organized so much more interestingly and efficiently than my craft supplies. I like to look at numbers. I like looking at the same old brownstones again and again and again. I like looking at old warehouses with broken windows surrounded by vacant lots filled with weeds and rabbits. I like looking at *Girls Gone Wild* commercials in the middle of the night when I can't sleep, the ones on network TV with the body parts blurred out. I like looking at videos of awkward twelve-year-old boys lip-syncing and dogs and puppies and cats and kittens and anteaters and anteater babies and unlikely animal friends.

Some of these things I would like in my house, some not, although mostly that's beside the point. At first I thought I should simply say I look at these things, instead of I like to look at these things, but because I look at them for as long as I do, or as often as I do, I have decided that I must like looking at them, otherwise why wouldn't I look away? I dislike looking at as many things or more, women in dresses with only one sleeve, new subdivisions with no

trees, anything I'm told is intended to be "shocking," grisly things in movies, the trash that blew onto your lawn, and the big gray sky. I dislike the word ugly, the sound, the meaning, the implication, though it is occasionally useful in instances of describing a blackness of heart. There may or may not be rhyme or reason to any of it. Sometimes I try to wish these things away that I do not like and there they still are.

27.

I'll Take You There

by David Williams

She was in the claw-foot tub. She was in there with her flesh and her bones and some suds, reading a book of stories. Ivy Coldwater was her name. She had a short glass of beer on the yellowing tile floor beside one of the claw feet. She took a sip of beer and set the book, spine up, on the side of the tub. She sank low into those suds. Ivy figured if the world ended right then, and wouldn't that just be the way, she'd at least be clean and only slightly tipsy.

She wondered how the world would end. She thought maybe a flood. It would just rain and rain some more, carpet tacks and carpenters' nails, the great sky unsheathed. And then Ivy Coldwater, of general delivery, Prophet, Mississippi, would float away in her claw-foot tub, on the current's whims, to heaven or hell or the swamps of Louisiana.

Ivy loved claw-foot tubs. Once, as a little girl, she saw one walk across the bathroom floor. This was in the big house on Peabody Avenue, up in Memphis, before her daddy became a white-collar criminal and was sent to country-club prison and her mama took up with God and lost her sense of joy and wonder.

The tub took three steps on its claw feet and then seemed about to break into a run. But it did not. Tub water sloshed and then settled as the claw-foot tub hunkered anew. No more did it move. The tub seemed enormously proud of itself, still and all.

When Ivy drew a picture of what she'd seen, the tub was up on its hind legs, dancing something like the Dog. Bathwater was up to the tub's ankles—Ivy had given ankles to those claw feet and short lengths of shapely legs, too, and a body that bowed and swayed. Ivy had seen her mama dance the Dog with a perfect stranger.

The picture of the dancing tub was crayon on paper plate. Ivy was a girl of eight, already an artist.

"Why, Ivy," her mama said when she saw it. "That's a lovely picture."

"It really happened, Mama," Ivy said. "Swear to Jesus."

Swearing was much the fashion in the big house on Peabody Avenue those days, most all of it sweet in nature. Ivy's mama swore to God and Jesus and the ghosts of soldiers, to the local law, Rock City and the House of Bourbon. She'd swear to whichever singer was singing on those records she always played. She'd stub her toe or spill a swish of drink and swear to Fats Waller. She loved sly talkers, blues shouters. She loved the old stuff.

"Well, that is something," Ivy's mama said with joy and wonder and a voice like song itself. She had black hair bobbed like a flapper girl's and she carried a martini glass she used as an ashtray. "Why, girl, I'd never seen that tired ol' tub take more'n three steps and stop."

This was all before Ivy's mama went sane and stopped dancing the Dog with perfect strangers and grew her hair out straight and let it go natural; now her hair was the color of the mouse that lived under Ivy's kitchen sink. This was all before Ivy's mama took to wearing loose dresses and low heels and before she quit gin and cigarettes and banished Fats and every one of his sly-talking cronies to the crawl space of her mind.

"Ivy!"

The window over the tub was open and so she could hear her mama's voice from the sidewalk below. Ivy could hear her mama's voice from underwater. Ivy reckoned she could float clear to the swamps of Louisiana, to the great ocean beyond, the vastness there, and hear her mama's voice over the awful racket of the world ending. She slipped down into the water again. She imagined what her mama was out there shouting. She well could guess. Her mama was saying, Now, you get out of that tub and put on a loose dress and some low heels and come to church with me, girl.

Ivy was not a girl. She was a full-grown woman of thirty-three and a third, like those old records her mama used to play. She was the age her mama was when her mama went sane.

"Hey down there, Mama," Ivy finally shouted back, after she'd come up from under the suds. She wondered if she was going to go sane, too. She did not think she could cope with the world if that were to happen. The world was in the pisser, pretty much, was Ivy's view of the world. The varnish was off the old place. It was shabby and worn and starting to smell, bit of rankness about. Maybe it really was about to end. Maybe it already had but the government was keeping it hush-hush and the newspapers had not caught wind. Ivy sighed and waited for what her mama would say next.

"Hurry now, girl," she said. "We going to be late for church."

Ivy's mama's way of talking had taken a turn for the country after she found religion. It was as if God was just a bit of a hick himself, and so was naturally suspicious of that uptown city grammar.

"Come on up, Mama," Ivy said. "Door's unlocked. I'm not going to church but you're welcome to come in and hound me some."

Ivy didn't know why there needed to be church on Wednesday. She didn't know what the Lord needed with a second day. The Lord's ways and means were much on her mind. She sighed some more. She took a sip of beer and set the glass by the claw foot. She stood and looked out the window. Suds dripped from her skin and her bones and onto that book of stories. She had been reading one about a man who takes his son to the mountains. They weren't going up there to fish.

Ivy shook her head at her mama's loose dress and low heels and her straight hair the color of a poor kitchen mouse. And she remembered her mama in that flapper girl hair and that martini glass that had cigarette ashes in it even when she was using it to drink martinis. Ivy remembered her mama dancing the Dog with that perfect stranger and wondered whatever did become of him. Maybe he'd gone to country-club prison, too, on account of the scam he'd tried to pull—selling the Coldwaters' own house to Ivy's mama, and getting as far as her signing certain legal documents before they commenced to dancing and then to other things. Maybe he was cell mates with Ivy's daddy. Maybe they passed the days talking about a woman they'd both known, black-haired and tipsy-wild, loved to hear Fats

Waller sing “All That Meat and No Potatoes.” Maybe they wondered how she was getting on, what she was doing, wherever she was. Ivy wondered, too.

Ivy missed her daddy some, but she missed her mama more.

“Hey there, Mama.”

“Mother,” her mama said, as if even country folk with their hick grammar ought to carry forth with some small bit of dignity in the eyes of God and small-town Mississippi. Ivy’s mama walked into the house as she always did, with suspicion, as if she might be set upon by beggars or addicts or God forbid some artists. “And hurry,” she said. “We be late.”

“Late’s when you’re dead, Mama,” Ivy said. “You’ll be there when you get there and they can wait or go ahead on. Besides, you know every word Preacher Mull’s going to say before he says it.”

“His name ain’t Preacher Mull, Ivy.”

The preacher’s name was Mill, but Ivy called him Mull because he couldn’t wish you a blessed day without worrying over it first. Ivy didn’t blame him, for he was young and did not know his own mind, much less have the audacity, the gall, to stand before a congregation and tell its members what to think and how to think it, though they had come for that very purpose.

“Mother,” her mama said yet again. “I prefer”—her voice turned country-formal—“to be called Mother. And hurry it, girl.”

“You can be the Queen of Soul, if you like. But I don’t go to church on Sunday, so I damned sure am not going on a Wednesday. Mama, Mama, Mama.”

Ivy stood in the kitchen doorway in an old bathrobe that was yellowing like those bathroom tiles. She had left her beer beside the claw foot. She wished that tub would up and bring it to her. Maybe she could train it, like with a dog. Teach it tricks and dance steps and basic household chores, like dusting and straightening and bringing her beer to her. If it could only go a few steps, all well and fine. She’d meet it halfway. She was a reasonable woman.

Ivy sighed. Her hair was sopping. It was short and black but she could not get it to look like her mama’s used to. Her hair was not to

be tamed. It draped wild down in her dark eyes, and, doing so, drove men of the region to bold acts. They wanted to steal cars for her, bilk corporations, break banks, turn those Tunica County, Mississippi, casinos back to cotton fields with their slick card playing and call it White Christmas. And in that way, Ivy's was much like her mama's used to be. But Ivy had pretty well had it with men. One had left her for the war and another for professional baseball and one was a rock 'n' roll star who sang songs of her on the radio. (Worth noting: A man had never left Ivy for another woman.) But Ivy didn't think the world was ending just on account of she couldn't hold a man. Men were the least of it. There were the women and children, too—all of humankind, really, and their general petty nature, their bickering and instigating, their trifling ways and shiftless means, their bone-meanness, and the way they drove like their cars were the only rocket ships in the sky, and how they'd shoot one another over a chicken wing or a rib bone, how they liked to draw blood, just generally. It was everything, really. It took an Act of God to get them to act half-civil to one another. And then they'd fall all over themselves, ass over casseroles, to help a neighbor. A hurricane would do it. A flood would.

"I sure did hate to hear about the levees," Ivy said, feigning neighborly human concern. "Here's you a covered dish."

"What, Ivy?"

"Nothing, Mama," she said, and thought about that phrase, Act of God.

She went to the refrigerator for another beer. Ivy drank Schlitz, like Patsy Cline and Elvis's mama, Gladys was her name, and James Earl Ray and lots of people, some good and some evil, nobody ever heard of. Ivy liked the taste of it, but mostly Ivy just believed in drinking cheap. Ivy believed in a good many things: drink cheap, think twice, sleep late, and never trust a man who carries his guitar by the neck like it's a chicken he's just killed, were some of Ivy's wisdoms.

That left a lot Ivy did not know, though, a lot for her to wonder over and ponder on. She had a wondering mind, Ivy Coldwater. She wondered, like for instance, if the eternal question wasn't so much "Why?" or "What's next?" but "Huh?" Damned if Ivy Coldwater,

in her study of man, God, and the macrocosm, could divine a reason for it all.

"It's a hell of a god," Ivy said now, "who'd act like that."

"What's that, Ivy?" her mama said. "What's that about God?"

"Why don't they call them Acts of the Devil? You know, hurricanes and floods and the like, that earthquake they say we're going to have. Every time there's a flood or something and somebody calls it an Act of God, I bet God's got to pay the devil royalties." But Ivy did not believe in the devil. She thought he was made up and his story told to everyone so they'd be kind to one another and not grow up to rob the First National Bank of Clarksdale or shoot their spouses over a chicken wing or a rib bone, though some of that bad stuff happened, anyway, and some worse—but how much worse would it be, Ivy wondered, if people weren't afraid of bein' sent way down south to the land of shackles?

Ivy sang a little of the old Skip James blues, "Devil Got My Woman." She sang, "I'd rather be the devil, than to be some woman's man." Ivy could sing a little blues, all down low and scratchy, but she couldn't go up high and moan like only Skip James and some ghosts could do. Ivy was pretty sure she believed in ghosts, though in a straight-up practical sense it didn't matter whether she did or not: Ghosts believed in her. One night, late, she caught one taking a bath in the claw-foot tub, reading that book of stories. He was reading her Bible and singing, "Jesus Is a Mighty Good Leader" and "Be Ready When He Comes." Ivy detected a sly mocking tone. She stood in the bathroom doorway in nothing but a Piggly Wiggly T-shirt and said, "Are you real?" But the ghost didn't say, just kept on reading and singing. He didn't seem to notice the near-naked woman standing in the doorway, though he did go from "I Got to Cross the River of Jordan" into a little snatch of the dirty blues number, "She's Got Jordan River in Her Hips," and back again. Then, without even looking up, the ghost slapped his thigh and laughed real big. You would have called it a guffaw. The next morning, Ivy thought she'd dreamed it all, but there were six empty Schlitz cans on the floor beside the one claw foot and there was a ring about the tub. The Bible was open to Revelation, the bit about Jezebel on a bed of suffering.

There had been a time Ivy could have told her mama all about it, asked her what it meant, and they'd have settled in the parlor and pondered it together, over drinks and smokes. They'd have had a good laugh themselves, the odd guffaw, and Ivy's mama would have said something like, "Why, I hadn't seen that ol' ghost drink more than three beers and start looking for something to hump."

Ivy called her little sister Jess up in Memphis instead. Jess said, "Maybe you weren't his type." Jess was a scientist. She was trying to cure cancer at the cost of untold hundreds of mice. She didn't believe in God or ghosts and only half-listened to what Ivy said and then made as unpromising a reply as possible; she really had work to do, cancer to cure, mice to poison. Ivy said, "You run across many men up in Memphis, Sis, that near-naked aren't their type?" Jess, who preferred to be called Jessica or better yet, Dr. Coldwater, did not say, one way or another.

"I really have to go, Ivy," she finally said.

"You know, Jess," Ivy said, "sometimes I wonder if you'd rather be poisoning people to save the mice. Because mice don't heap their petty bullshit on you. They don't burden you that way. They don't pull family rank on you."

"Are you finished, Ivy?"

"I'm just getting revved, I think, Jess. But I won't bother you anymore. I'm sorry, about what I said just then. I am. It's just—I don't know. I'm no better than anybody else. I'm marginally worse than most. I'm a pain in the ass, I believe's the technical term. But at least I can see that, can see it all—life itself, I mean—for what it is."

Silence on the other end of the line.

"Jess."

"Jessica."

"Let's get together real soon, have some beers and talk. What say, Sis? I'll meet you halfway."

"You mean, like, Rosedale?"

Ivy laughed and Jess seemed very nearly to join her. It was a moment, however small.

"Yeah," Ivy said. "What the hell, Rosedale."

But Jess had gone cold again. The flash of old times, of the girl the

woman used to be, passed, as flashes do. She said, "I don't know, Ivy. I, you know. I can't get away just now."

Silence again.

"Good-bye, Dr. Jessica Coldwater," Ivy finally said. "Tell Jess I love her, still and all. Tell her I miss her, and Mama, too."

"You always push things that little bit too far, Ivy," her sister said. "You always did."

"The devil is real," Ivy's mama said now, as if she might have been reading her girl's thoughts, as if doubts and wonderings were visible things, dust mites in the air or flies a-buzzing.

"I know, Mama. And Jesus, he's a mighty good leader." Ivy thought of a couple of words—battle royale—but did not say them. She loved her mama, still and all.

"Don't mock," her mama said. "You need to get right, girl. You need to get you some of that old-time religion." She about broke into song, the way she said it.

Religion, Ivy thought. That's the worst of it. Why couldn't they just stop at faith? You could keep faith in your pocket, like a lucky stone or that quarter she had from her little-girlhood, smashed by the Pontotoc Rocket train as it made for Memphis. Nobody even had to know it was in there. Ivy Coldwater didn't have much faith, but it was hers and she kept it close.

"Oh me of little faith," she said.

One other night, Ivy awoke and heard singing from down the hallway. There was not a soul or a ghost in the claw-foot tub, but in the kitchen at the table she saw Jesus, reading *As I Lay Dying* to the kitchen mouse. Or anyway, Jesus was reading it and the kitchen mouse was there, rapt as a thing can be that only knows to skitter and zag and flee, that knows no home but the lam and no art but the chase. Ivy stood in the doorway and listened for the longest time to the master's words, to the savior's melodic way with them. Ivy had forgotten what a funny book it was, for it being about a woman's dying. She awoke the next morning curled in the doorway of the kitchen. The mouse was a foot away, its face scrunched and knowing, but mostly sad, it seemed.

"You feeling low, little fella?" Ivy said.

The mouse did, in fact, look a little pink, what Ivy's mama used to call peaked. Pee-kid, was how she said it.

"Well, if it's the cancer I can send you up to Memphis to my sister Jess. She'll finish you off. Won't hurt but a little bit."

The mouse skittered and zagged and fled.

This, though, was a dream. Unlike the ghost business, it had not happened except in the mind's romp of our girl's fitful sleep.

"Mama, you know that story about God telling Abraham to take his son up to the mountains?"

"God was testing Abraham. God tests us all, Ivy."

"I've been reading that one. That and other stories. The Old Testament, you know."

"You'll like the New Testament better. It's nice. Jesus is there."

"Nice?" Ivy about laughed. "You make it sound like Gulf Shores, Mama."

"Oh, it's nicer than all that, Ivy." There was something like slyness to the way she said it. "'Course, it don't matter where you find Jesus, so long as you do. It can be up in Memphis or down to Hattiesburg."

"I had a dream about him, Mama," Ivy said. "Not the dream where he was reading Faulkner to that mouse, but a different dream. I better not tell you more."

Ivy's mama didn't pursue that bit about Faulkner and the mouse. She just said, "It's between you and your savior, daughter."

Ivy said "Woo-boy" to that.

A week later, they were back in the kitchen. They were at it again. It was ritual now. It had become a religion of sorts, or anyway a service: There were holy rites and airings of the psalms, hymns, brimstone. There were tender moments and sometimes they laughed, though never at the same thing. Mostly they shouted across the gulf, the canyon, that had split the kitchen like the parlor act of some supreme being with too much of something—time, perhaps: damned eternity, anyway—on its hands.

Ivy still was reading that story about Abraham taking his son up

to the mountains but not to fish. She kept reading and rereading it, could not shake it.

"If you could just tell me that God was having a bad day, just that once, I'd say all right, okay. Even God has a bad day, forgets himself. I guess Lincoln had days he'd just bite heads for spite. That I could believe. I wouldn't even think all that less of God."

Ivy's mama pondered this for the longest time.

"God is God, Ivy," she finally said. "I mean, he's God."

Time passed like a month of Wednesdays.

"Ivy. Ivy. What's so important you cain't come to church with me?" Her mama was making for the door; the woman clutched her purse as if some freshly unearthed religious artifact of the Delta region, the Shroud of Itta Bena or some such, were inside.

"I'm talking to you, Mama. Please. This is important. This is more religion than anything that's going to happen in that church of yours. I want to know. I need to know."

"You asking does God talk to me, Ivy?"

"Yes, Mama. And other things."

"He does. Why, just this evening he said, 'Junie Coldwater, here's what I want you to do, daughter. I want you to go fetch that heathen artist girl of yours'"—Ivy watched for some slight curve of lips, the hint of a smile, the falling away of years. But nothing—"and take her to church with you, if you got to carry her."

"Mother," Ivy said, "you're killing me."

"Well, roll away the stone, girl, and come to church with me."

Ivy's mama was back the next week and the week after and the weeks that followed. There were righteous pleadings and prophesies of doom. There were readings of the holy word. There was singing, crying. Bawling, really. It was about this time that the kitchen mouse moved out.

"Ivy, did you hear me?" her mama said now. "Girl, are you drunk?"

But Ivy did not say. She was done with the arguing. She was thinking. She was thinking she'd get the big silver pail that was atop the refrigerator and fill it with ice cubes and as many beers as it would hold

and tote the pail out back to the shack behind her little house and then paint and drink and listen to some old soul songs by the Staple Singers on the boom box, "I'll Take You There" and "Heavy Makes Me Happy," and see if there was a joint left in the tackle box and smoke it slow and get a little high, six feet or so, and look down at herself as she painted. Ivy Coldwater had a wild, dripping brush for a left hand. She painted specters and visages and black polka dots, snatches of Bible verse, and old blues laments. Lately she painted Jesus, almost exclusively. She painted Jesus turning tin cans into tallboy beers. She painted Jesus dancing the Dog. Jesus in the claw-foot tub.

"You'd call it sin and blasphemy so let's not go into it, Mama. Let's just say you're going to your church and I'm going to mine."

"Church," Ivy's mama said.

"Or anyway, religion. I think we all have our own, or ought to."

"You've been drinking, Ivy."

"Christ, Mama. I'm free and legal and only slightly tipsy, so what if I am?"

Ivy's mama left in something like a huff. She may actually have said the word itself, huff, as she huffed away. She may have let slip with a harrumph, even. It was the closest she got to swearing, these days.

And Ivy, she repaired to the little shack out back, there with a fresh beer from the silver pail and a little bit of a joint, with her wild brush of a left hand dripping paint in bold hues, with her visages of a world about to croak in its sleep or drown on its own drool, one. And she thought, as she so often did in these last, dying days of ours, of Sweet Jesus.

She had so much to ask him. It might be days before they'd dance the Dog, weeks before she'd have him in that claw-foot tub. They'd just be together. They'd just be. They'd go on long drives to nowhere in Ivy's blue pickup truck, wind up at some catfish shack and go inside. They'd ask for a table in the back by the open window. They'd just talk and talk and he might help her to understand every little thing and some of the big things, too. They'd clink tallboy cans. He'd squeeze lemon on her catfish. He'd have eyes as soulful as one of those old songs by the Staple Singers.

28.

In the Manner of Water or Light

by Roxane Gay

My mother was conceived in what would ever after be known as the Massacre River. The sharp smell of blood has followed her since. When she first moved to the United States, she read the dictionary from front to back. Her vocabulary quickly became extensive. Her favorite word is *suffuse*, to spread over or through in the manner of water or light. When she tries to explain how she is haunted by the smell of blood, she says that her senses are *suffused* with it.

My grandmother knew my grandfather for less than a day.

Everything I know about my family's history, I know in fragments. We are the keepers of secrets. We are secrets ourselves. We try to protect each other from the geography of so much sorrow. I don't know that we succeed.

As a young woman, my grandmother worked on a sugarcane plantation in Dajabón, the first town across the border Haiti shares with the Dominican Republic. She lived in a shanty with five other women, all strangers, and slept on a straw mat beneath which she kept her rosary, a locket holding a picture of her parents, and a picture of Clark Gable. She spoke little Spanish so she kept to herself. Her days were long and beneath the bright sun, her skin burned ebony and her hair bleached white. When she walked back to her quarters at the end of each day, she heard the way people stared and whispered. They steered clear.

They were terrified by the absence of light around and within her. They thought she was a demon. They called her *la demonia negra*.

After saying her prayers, after dreaming of Port-au-Prince and lazy afternoons at the beach and the movie house where she watched *Mutiny on the Bounty* and *It Happened One Night* and *The Call of the Wild*, after dreaming of the warmth of Clark Gable's embrace, my grandmother would tear her old dresses into long strips so she could better bind the cuts and scratches she earned from a long day in the cane fields. She would sleep a dreamless sleep, gathering the *courage* she would need to wake up the next morning. In a different time, she had been loved by two parents, had lived a good life but then they died and she was left with nothing and like many Haitians, she crossed over into the Dominican Republic in the hope that there, her luck would change.

My grandfather worked at the same plantation. He was a hard worker. He was a tall, strong man. My grandmother, late at night when she cannot sleep, will sit with a glass of rum and Coke, and talk about how her hands remember the thick ropes of muscle in his shoulders and thighs. His name was Jacques Bertrand. He wanted to be in the movies. He had a bright white smile that would have made him a star.

My grandmother is also haunted by smells. She cannot stand the smell of anything sweet. If she smells sweetness in the air, she purses her lip and sucks on her teeth, shaking her head. Today, when we drive to our family's beach property in Montrouis, she closes her eyes. She can stand neither the sight of the cane fields nor the withered men and women hacking away at stubborn stalks of cane with dull machetes. When she sees the cane fields, a sharp pain radiates across her shoulders and down her back. Her body cannot forget the labors it has known.

Now, the Massacre River is shallow enough to cross by foot, but in October 1937 the waters of what was the Dajabón River ran strong and deep. The unrest had been going on for days—Dominican soldiers determined to rid their country of the Haitian scourge went from plantation to plantation in a murderous rage. My grandmother did the only thing she could, burning through a long day in the cane

field, marking the time by the rise and fall of her machete blade. She prayed the trouble would pass her by.

It was General Rafael Trujillo who ordered all the Haitians out of his country, who had his soldiers interrogate anyone whose skin was too dark, who looked like they belonged on the other side of the border. It was the general who took a page from the Book of Judges to exact his genocide and bring German industry to his island.

Soldiers came to the plantation where my grandmother worked. They had guns. They were cruel, spoke in loud, angry voices, took liberties. One of the women with whom my grandmother shared her shanty betrayed my grandmother's hiding place. We never speak of what happened after that. The ugly details are trapped between the fragments of our family history. We are secrets ourselves.

My grandmother ended up in the river. She found a shallow place. She tried to hold her breath while she hid from the marauding soldiers on both of the muddy shores straddling the river. There was a moment when she laid on her back, and submerged herself until her entire body was covered by water, until her pores were suffused with it. She didn't come up for air until the ringing in her ears became unbearable. The moon was high and the night was cold. She smelled blood in the water. She wore only a thin dress, plastered to her skin. Her feet were bare. When a bloated corpse slowly floated past her, then an arm, a leg, something she couldn't recognize, she covered her mouth with her hand. She screamed into her own skin instead of the emptiness around her.

Jacques Bertrand who worked hard and wanted to be in the movies found his way to the river that ran strong and deep. He moved himself through the water until he found my grandmother. He tapped her on the shoulder and instead of turning away, she turned into him, opened that part of her herself not yet numb with terror. She found comfort in the fear mirrored in his eyes. His chest was bare and she pressed her damp cheek against his breastbone. She slowed her breathing to match his. She listened to the beat of his heart; it echoed beneath the bones of his rib cage. "An angel," she told me. "I thought he was an angel who had come to deliver me from that dark and terrible place."

My grandparents bound their bodies together as their skin gathered in tiny folds, as their bodies shook violently. Jacques Bertrand, who worked hard, who wanted to be in the movies, wrapped his arms around my grandmother. In a stuttered whisper, he told her the story of his life. "I want to be remembered," he said. She cupped his face in her hands, traced his strong chin with her thumbs, and brushed her lips across his. She followed the bridges of scar tissue across his back with her fingertips. She said, "You will be remembered." She told him the story of her own life. She asked him to remember her too.

My grandmother still hears the dying screams from that night. She remembers the dull, wet sound of machetes hacking through flesh and bone. The only thing that muted those horrors was a man she knew but did not know who wore bridges of scar across his back. I do not know the intimate details, but my mother was conceived.

In the morning, surrounded by the smell and silence of death, my grandparents crawled out of the river that had, overnight, become a watery coffin holding 25,000 bodies. The Massacre River had earned its name. The two of them, soaking wet, their bodies stiff and on the verge of fever, crawled into Ouanaminthe. They were home. They were far from home. My grandmother laced her fingers with my grandfather's and they sought refuge in an abandoned church. They fell to their knees and prayed and then their prayers became something else, something like solace.

When night fell again, the Dominican soldiers crossed into Ouanaminthe, into a place where they did not belong. My grandfather was killed. He saved my grandmother's life by confronting three soldiers, creating a window through which my grandmother could escape. Jacques Bertrand died wanting to be remembered, so my grandmother stayed in that place of such sorrow, took a job cooking and cleaning for the headmaster of a primary school. At night, she slept in an empty classroom. She gave birth to my mother and later married the headmaster who raised my mother as his own. At night, my grandmother took my mother to the river and told her the story of how she came to be. My grandmother knelt on the riverbank, her bones sinking in the mud as she brought handfuls of water to her mouth. She drank the memories in that water.

When my mother turned twelve, she, my grandmother, and the headmaster moved to Port-au-Prince. The school had closed and the headmaster took a new appointment in the capital. At first, my grandmother refused to leave her memories, but the headmaster put his foot down. She was his wife. She would follow. My mother recalls how her mother wailed, her voice pitched sharp and thin, cutting everything around her. In the front yard of their modest home, a large coconut tree fell, its wide trunk split neatly in half. The fallen fruit rotted instantly. My grandmother went to the Massacre River, her long white hair gathered around her face. She took river mud into her hands, eating it, enduring the thick, bitter taste. When my mother and the headmaster found her, my grandmother was lying in a shallow place, shivering beneath a high moon, her face caked with dry mud.

In the capital, my grandmother was a different woman, quieted. The headmaster consulted Catholic missionaries, *houngans* and *mambos* in case she had been possessed by a *lwa* or spirit, and needed healing. Finally, he resigned himself to living with her ghosts. He loved her as best a man whose wife loves another man can. He focused on my mother's education and waited. Sometimes, the headmaster asked my mother if she was happy. She said, "My mother does love you."

It wasn't until the day my mother left Port-au-Prince that my grandmother became herself again. I've been told that the headmaster and my grandmother stood on the tarmac white with heat, the air billowing around them in visible waves. My mother kissed her mother twice on each cheek. She kissed the headmaster. She turned and headed for the staircase to board the plane, a heavy wind blowing her skirt wildly. My grandmother didn't run after her only child but she did say, "*Ti Coeur.*" Little heart. My mother stopped. She didn't turn around.

My mother is a small, nervous woman. Her life began, she says, the day she got off the Pan Am flight from Port-au-Prince in New York City. She sat in the back of a yellow taxicab driven by a man who spoke a language she did not understand. She stared out the dirty window and up at the tall steel buildings. She was twenty-one. My

mother found an apartment in the Bronx. She took a job as a seamstress for Perry Ellis making clothes she loved but could not afford. She learned to speak English by reading the dictionary and watching American television. Once a month, she wrote her mother and the only father she knew a long letter telling them about America, begging them to join her. My grandmother always wrote back, but refused to leave Haiti. She would not leave the ghost of a man who could not be forgotten.

My mother went to doctor after doctor trying to find someone who would free her from the sharp smell of blood that has always suffused her senses. Each doctor assured my mother it was all in her head. She took the subway to Chinatown and tried acupuncture. The acupuncturist carefully inserted needles into the webs of her thumbs, and along her body's meridians. As he placed each needle, he shook his head. He said, "There are some things no medicine can fix."

When I asked my mother how she met my father she said, "I wasn't going to marry a Haitian man." She rarely answers the question she is asked. My father is an ear, nose, and throat specialist. He is the last doctor my mother consulted. When she told him she could only smell blood, he believed her. He tried to help her and when he couldn't, he asked her to join him for dinner. Eventually he asked for her hand in marriage. She didn't say yes. She told my father she would never return to Haiti, that he would have to accept that her life began a year earlier. She was a seamstress whose senses were suffused with the smell of blood, who didn't know her father and couldn't understand her mother. They were married in a Manhattan synagogue, nine months after they met.

My parents remained childless for many years but never discussed the matter. If my mother was asked when she would start a family, she would say, "I am very much in love with my husband." When she learned she was pregnant with me, at the age of forty, it was a hot July afternoon in New York, 1978. She ran out to the street, threw her hands in the air, stared into the incandescent sun. She cried as the light spread over her. A joyful sound vibrated from her throat, through her mouth and into the city around her. She went to my father's office and told him the news. He cried too. When I was born, I was crying lustily. We are a family unafraid of our tears.

My mother has never been able to accept that she will never know her real father. She worries that her mother has woven the story of her conception into an elaborate fable to hide a darker truth. My mother has an imagination. She knows too much about what angry, wild soldiers will do to frightened, fleeing young women. My mother looks in the mirror and cannot recognize herself. She only sees the face of a man she can never know. When I was a little girl and we sat together at the dinner table, my mother often stared into the distance, grinding her teeth. My father would take her hand and say, "Jacqueline, please stop worrying." She never did. She was the keeper of her mother's secrets. She was a secret herself.

Every summer, once I turned five, my parents took me to JFK and sent me to my grandmother's for three months. I was dispatched to do the work of dutiful daughter in my mother's absence. My grandmother and the man I know as my grandfather, the headmaster who took in a scared young woman whose skin had burned ebony, whose hair had bleached white, who bore a child with no father, they were kind to me. I brought them pictures of my parents and money my mother carefully stuffed in my shoes. I brought cooking oil and pantyhose, a VCR and videotapes, gossip magazines, corn flakes. I knew never to bring anything sweet.

My grandmother kept her promise to Jacques Bertrand. Each time she saw me, she offered new fragments of their story or, if my mother's fears were correct, her story. I looked like him, had his eyes and his chin. Like my parents, my grandmother and the headmaster doted on me. When I returned to the States at the end of each August, I would try to ask my mother questions, to better piece things together but she would only shut herself in her room, rub perfume across her upper lip, lie on her back, her eyes covered with a cool washcloth.

When I was thirteen, the headmaster drove my grandmother and me to their beach property in Montrouis for the afternoon. Just before leaving New York for the summer, I had celebrated my bat mitzvah. The three of us sang along to *konpa*, and the adults listened to me chattering from the backseat. It was a good day. I longed for my mother to know there was so much joy to be found in the country of her birth. As we pulled into a gas station, beggars suddenly

swarmed our car, a throbbing mass of dark, shiny faces and limbs needing more than we could possibly give. There was a man with one leg and one old, wooden crutch. His face was disfigured by a bulging tumor beneath his left eye. He planted his hands against the glass of the window, leering at me, the skin over the tumor rippling with his anger. It was the first time I understood the land of my mother's birth as a place run through with pain.

Each time I returned to New York and the comforts of home, I brought pictures and long letters and special spices—these affections, mother by proxy. My mother always took me for lunch, alone, at the Russian Tea Room the day following my return. She had me recount my trip in exhaustive detail, inhaling from a perfume-scented handkerchief every few minutes, carefully probing so as to get the clearest sense of how her mother was doing. Once in a while, I forgot myself and asked my mother why she didn't just go to Haiti to find out for herself. In those moments, she gave me a stern look. She said, "It is not easy to be a good daughter."

When I turned sixteen, I went to summer camp in western Massachusetts because I was young and silly. I wanted to do *normal* things. Haiti was too much work. I was tired of the heat and the smells and the inescapable poverty, how my sweaty limbs caught in mosquito netting, how I had to go to the well for water when the cistern wasn't working. I was sick of the loud hum of generators and tiny lizards clinging to window screens and the way everyone stared at me and called me *la mulatte*. Summer camp was a largely disappointing experience. I was a city girl and the Berkshires were far too rural for me. I wasn't any kind of Jewish the other girls at the camp could understand. I spent the summer sitting on the lakeshore reading, lamenting that I could have been at a real beach in the Caribbean with people who loved me and looked like me. It would be ten years before I returned to Haiti.

The next summer, my father took me to Tel Aviv. He showed me the apartment where he grew up in Ramat Aviv. He showed me his parents' graves, told me how much they would have loved me. I saw all kinds of people who did indeed look like me, who didn't laugh at my stuttered Hebrew. We spent a week on a kibbutz, my father in his

linen shirt and shorts, tanned, laughing, home. I felt a real sadness for my mother, who couldn't take such joy in the land of her birth. We went to the beach. We went to Jaffa and looked toward the sea and Andromeda's rock. We cried at the Wailing Wall. I understood that Haiti was not the only place in the world run through with pain.

The year after I graduated from law school, the headmaster died. I called my grandmother to ask how she was doing. She said, "I have been a good wife." She was ready to return to Jacques Bertrand. I told my mother we had to go see her mother. She was lying on her bed, rubbing perfume across her upper lip. She had not taken news of the headmaster's death well. He was the only father she ever knew. She turned to me and said, "This is my home, where I am needed." I said, "You are needed elsewhere," and she waved a hand limply, conceding the point.

My father prescribed my mother some Valium, and the three of us flew to Port-au-Prince. By the time we landed, my mother was sufficiently sedated. As we disembarked and walked into the terminal, she dreamily asked "Are we there?" My grandmother and her driver were waiting for us. I inhaled sharply as I saw her for the first time in a decade. She was impossibly small, a frail figure, her dark flesh much looser now, her features hollowed, her white hair swept atop her head in a loose bun. She and my mother stood inches apart and stared at each other. My grandmother took her daughter's face in her hands, nodded. That night, in our hotel, I heard my mother whisper to my father that she could hardly breathe but for the smell of blood.

After a few days in the capital helping my grandmother settle her affairs and visiting the headmaster's grave, she was ready to return to Jacques Bertrand. Despite our demand she stay in the capital or return to the States with us, my grandmother was resolute. We drove across the country to Ouanaminthe on the only passable road. It took hours and by the time we arrived, we were all tired, sweaty, sore, and irritable. Ouanaminthe was not the city it had once been. It was a sad, hopeless place, crumbling buildings everywhere, paint peeling from billboards, the streets crowded with people, each person wanting and needing more than the next. Most of the roads had gone to mud from

recent flooding. The air was stifling and pressed down on us uncomfortably. As we stood in the courtyard in front of the small concrete house my grandmother had purchased, men hanging from a passing Tap Tap leered at us. My father stood in front of me, glaring. My mother rubbed her forehead and asked my father for another Valium.

My mother and her mother kept to themselves for the first few days, huddled together, trying to make up for nearly thirty years of separation. There was no room for my father and me in what they needed from one another. On the second night, I went to a local bar where everyone stared as I took a seat at the bar. I drank watery rums and Coke until my face and my boredom felt numb. I danced to Usher with a man named Innocent. When I snuck back into my grandmother's house, I found her sitting in the dark. She nodded to me but said nothing. On the third night, the moon was high and bright, casting its pale light over and through everything. I lay beneath mosquito netting in a tank top and boxers, one arm over my head, one arm across my stomach, my body feeling open and loose. I listened to the sounds of everyone else sleeping. I tried to understand the what and why of where we were.

Just as I was on the verge of drifting asleep, I heard a scratching at the door and sat up, pulling the sheets around me. My grandmother appeared in the doorway. She curled her bent fingers, beckoned. Slowly, I stretched myself out of bed, pulled on a pair of jeans and flip-flops. I found my grandmother by the front door. My mother was standing next to her, fidgeting, shifting from one foot to the other, clutching at her perfume-scented handkerchief. "What's wrong?" I asked. My grandmother smiled in the darkness. "Come with us," she said.

We walked nearly a mile to the banks of the Massacre River, my grandmother pressing her hand against the small of my mother's back. In the distance, we could see soldiers keeping watch at the checkpoint, their cigarettes punctuating the darkness. I heard hundreds of frightened people who looked like me splashing through the water, searching for safety and then, silence. My grandmother climbed down the damp, steep riverbank, my mother warning her mother to be careful. She waved for us to join her. I slipped out of my sandals, took my mother's hand, helped her into the river. We

stood in a shallow place. I curled my toes in the silt of the riverbed and shivered. I had pictured the river as a wide, yawning and bloody beast, but where we stood, the river flowed weakly. The waters did not run deep. It was just a border between two geographies of grief.

My grandmother pointed down. The hem of her dressing gown floated around her. "Here," she said softly.

My mother's shoulders shook but she made no sound. She gripped my arm. "I cannot breathe," she said. Then she dropped to her knees, curled into herself. She said, "I must know the truth."

I knelt behind her. I held her, tried to understand her. I said, "You can breathe." My grandmother said, "You know the only truth that matters." Again I heard hundreds of frightened people splashing through the water, keening, reaching for something that could never be reached. The ground beneath us trembled from the heavy footsteps of roving soldiers. I smelled their sweat and their confused, aimless anger.

We knelt there for a long while. My grandmother stood, whispering the story of how she came to know and remember Jacques Bertrand until her words dried on her lips. I stroked my mother's hair gently, waited for her breathing to slow, her back rising into my chest with a melancholy cadence. We mourned until morning. The sun rose high. Bright beams of light spread over and through us. The sun burned so hot it dried the river itself, turned the water into light. We were left kneeling in a bed of sand and bones. I started crying. I could not stop. I cried to wash us all clean.

29.

Jail Break

by Matt Stewart

My mom is driving me to prison. She's pretty drunk, but she'd know the way coked out too, which she'll be on the way back. I'm ditching the last of my stash with her.

"Don't fraternize," she says.

"Ma, c'mon."

"People talk. I know what happens in there."

"I'll be fine, Ma." And I truly am a lot less jittery than last time, having invested last year's profits into buying protection from the Aryan Brotherhood for the next six to nine years. "Pass the Scotch."

She swigs a mouthful and sends it over. I take a sip, pour a little on my hair, dribble a line down my back. Thirty years old from a craggy island in Scotland I'll never get to. "This is the kind of shit I should do," I confess. "Make something beautiful, that people have for their last drink before prison."

"Scotch is basically cocaine for rich people," my mom says, which makes it clear that she doesn't know cocaine that well, since cocaine is really crack for rich people. I'd say Scotch is more like cocaine for people too chicken to risk mandatory sentencing guidelines, but then again here I am on the losing end of that one.

"Jerry will be done with school when I get out," I realize.

"I hope he makes it," she says, followed by her first swerve, dodging an imaginary cyclist.

"Why wouldn't he make it?" I wonder, helping myself to more of the Scotch, dousing my nose, slurping from the bottle like Gatorade after a basketball game.

"It's right around the age kids go bad in this town," she says, veering to avoid an invisible chicken, a dog, then banking hard for the mail truck. "Benjamin," she says. "Daniel. Kerri. Caitlin."

"Caitlin was a fuckup from the start," I point out.

"That may be true, but fourteen's when she got violent," Mom says. And I remember when Caitlin came back from her first tae-kwon do class, all nunchucks and jump kicks, how she beat me purple on the front lawn and still it was the most fun I'd had since Street Fighter broke at the arcade and you could play all day on a single quarter. I pass Mom the Scotch and she gulps it, spraying it back at me in a tropical mist.

"But Jerry?" I wonder. "I hear he's getting decent grades. Can make a jump shot here and there. A good head of hair on his shoulders. Where's the trouble in that?"

"Crapohontas!" my mom exclaims, then yanks the wheel toward the shoulder and up a small incline, braking hard at a scenic overlook of a dung-splattered cow field and an assortment of decomposing motor homes under a lemon-lime sun. She caps the Scotch and hurls it into the backseat, then slaps her face into serious, frown tips hanging limp like a pervert's mustache. "Look, Jason. When it's your own, you don't see it coming. One day your daughter's helping clean the toilet; two days later she's out-dancing you at the wet T-shirt contest. And I got five kids' worth of statistical proof that the fourteenth birthday is always the day in the middle. Present company included."

"You too?" I wonder, and I suppose I can see it, the old pictures of Ma with electric orange bra straps and hair styled like elaborate topiary and puddles of purple and green makeup, PCP and stickups radiating in her eerie yellow smile.

"Me too," she admits, wiggling the steering wheel. "You too. All of us. Makes you wonder if we were decent at sports or school, how things'd've gone." Translucent froth drips from her nose, leading me to wonder if her brain has gone to mush and is leaking out her orifices, finally, until I spot the coke clumps like unmixed sugar, her headstart on the stash.

"Well, we've all been pretty good at the cop sprint," I point out.
"There is that," she agrees.

"Caitlin had her tae kwon do blue belt. Daniel made the spelling bee once. Kerri could draw bird pictures like they flew right onto the page. And Benjamin, well," and it is a reach on Benjamin, two years younger than me and a life of canned chili and video games and Internet futzing and silence, "he can stay up for two days straight if we have enough Red Bull on hand."

She stays quiet. The engine chortles and traffic screams and bluegrass pops and slides on the radio. "Danielle's looking after Jerry," I note, "and I'd appreciate it if you could check in on him now and then."

"Danielle's even loonier than Caitlin!" she exclaims, and I recall why I divorced Danielle in the first place: how she drove motorcycles blindfolded and threw dinner plates at mailmen and left the oven on all night with the entire contents of the bathroom cabinet inside. "I got two jobs and guardianship of three other grandkids and a suitcase worth of snow to sell," my mom continues, "now give back the Scotch."

Yellow-tipped fingers foxtrot over the armrest, itchy and devastated like squished caterpillars. I dig out the Scotch from the back-seat, give it a shake like a Magic 8 Ball, except no answer surfaces and I'm forced to take a long ruminative pull before I send it over. "Let's go see him," I decide. "Jerry."

I get the cowed look back, sorry and sad and too scared to say it. "What time are you due?" she asks.

"I'll be fine," I tell her, and now it's an order: "Let's go."

She points the truck off the highway and we backtrack down local roads for twenty minutes, rolling through identical suburbs and past identical strip malls until she tucks in at one of the identical Starbucks. "His school's across the street," she says.

"Good," I say. "Here's money for coffee." I slip her a twenty and catch her wrist, squeeze her palm, as close to a hug as I get.

"Be nice," she urges, "and try to listen," but I'm out the door before I catch the brunt of her lecture.

The school's done up like an old Spanish mission, with a wide courtyard paved over and stocked with basketball courts, an audito-

rium doubling as a chapel, nifty white-arched classrooms offset by grungy temporary units arranged like boot camp barracks. It is hideously sunny, the worst kind of school day. I tip my baseball cap at a custodian hosing down a pile of mats on the sidewalk and look over at a ramshackle guard building carrying a hand-painted sign that says OFFICE, a pride of bulky Hispanic women chitter-chattering and a platoon of dazed students ambling in mindless orbits like penguins on a hot day at the zoo.

I walk, fast, out, away, charged, striding beside a bashed fence laced with hot-dog wrappers and soda bottles, waiting, waiting, feeling time slip, time dripping like sweat, the hot stupid sun, pulling down my cap, creating more and more distance, feet on top of miles on top of months on top of years. Halfway around the block I hear scrapes and murmurs, a wave of radio static. I creep up on a green Dumpster in a secluded nook walled off by trees and a chain link gate, perfect for trying out cigarettes and adventurous girls so long as they can take the smell. Boys flip skateboards off a curb and swig energy drinks, their backpacks piled in a trash heap, rap music fuzzing from cell phones. Leaning on a guardrail a near-teen kid with Jerry's square chin and Danielle's hazel eyes and my monstrosity of a hairdo scrawls into a notebook held two inches from his face.

I step out from behind a parked van and it's like I'm knocking off liquor stores again, six sets of spooked eyes deciding whether to pretend to be a tough guy or not. "Get out," I tell them, and kick the Dumpster hard twice for effect. They snatch their backpacks and shoot out for the street, but when I jab a finger in Jerry's sternum he coughs hard and stays put, neatly folding up his notebook and plumping his hair hedge and rubbing his hands on the back of his jeans. The spot stinks of fry grease and fungus, and I'd bet all the cash buried in my backyard that yesterday's lunch special was fish sticks.

"Hey, man," I offer. Then, to be clear: "It's me. Dad."

He coughs, then spits, then frowns, staring at the Dumpster, scratching his neck, his cheeks softening like water put to oatmeal. "How you doing?" I ask, and he stands perfectly still for at least a minute before I slap my hands together in front of his face.

“Don’t mean to be rude, but I don’t have much time,” I explain. He’s hunched over and blank as a bus seat, waiting for me to lose interest and leave, like usual. “Say something,” I order.

He grunts and shuffles and snorts before risking eye contact: “Hiya, Pops.”

Which makes for the first time I have ever been addressed that way seriously. Laughter pours out of me like the first beer of the night, but when he tries to turn my handshake into an eight-part gangster breakdance I clamp on to his shoulder instead.

“Good to see you,” I say, though I haven’t actually decided yet, the kid’s sprouted from bungling toddler to life-sized human being since the last time I tuned in, complete with a regulation-size basketball taking up the entirety of his backpack and four wisps of hair on his lip matted up to imitate a mustache. “Whatcha writing?”

He unfolds his notebook, shakes open a page. “Lyrics,” he admits.

“Nice. What kind of song?” I dredge up the pictures Danielle posts online, mostly Jerry cowed around a birthday cake or leading a fast break, though it’s possible I’ve seen him buried in the back row of a marching band or church choir, hoisting a beat-up guitar around a campfire, staring out a truck window singing along to Toby Keith.

“Hip-hop,” he says, with a salty sneer that says he’s proud of it.

“Ha!” I exclaim, though it’s less a laugh than an alligator bite. “Well, let’s hear it.”

He glances straight at me, just enough waver in his eyelid to tell me he’s scared. “It’s not that tight,” he says.

“I just want to hear it,” I insist. I pop onto a knee and build up a grin, sequestering off the Scotch for a few seconds of good-natured get-up. “I’d appreciate it pretty bad.”

He looks around for witnesses, flips through his notebook and back again. He hasn’t gone bad yet, you can tell by the fluttery eyes, the watery-sick breathing, the sweat bubbles amassing on his forehead. His duct-taped sneakers begin heel-tapping and words spill out of him, not a flow, not a river, not a babbling brook, nothing peaceful or natural but rather human-made and purposefully ugly, like a sewer or gutter runoff. He rolls through a list of profanity and sexual positions and narcotics terminology laced with gibberish, made-up words

that don't come close to rhyming, like a harsh and sickly Eastern European language that's relegated to long-distance phone calls and bad memories. The number finishes with a massacre of thirty-five gangsta enemies topped off with a seven-woman orgy back on his yacht, the musical equivalent of running seashells through a lawnmower.

He looks up at me with a pink sheen over his eyes. Sour liquor pulls my scalp, the first pangs of a world-class still-drunk hangover. "That's good," I lie. "Real good. Dang!" I paste the smile back on, shake out a wink. His teeth form a wobbly sliver, and it's the best chance I'll ever have.

"Do you need any money?" I ask.

"What?"

But it's not an offer I'm inclined to extend twice. And as Jerry stands there wondering if he misunderstood, if I was serious, how much—or, worse, not wondering at all but instead waiting, for me to repeat myself, for somebody else to do something—I am seized with a rare fatherly vision.

Running with the same bozos when he gets up to high school.

Landing his first bust doing somebody else's dirty work, selling a dime bag or fencing an iPod or riding shotgun on the wrong night.

Vacationing a few months in juvie before graduating to dropout-land, revolving through lockup and small-time gangs, stealing old clunkers, snorting battery acid, screwing insane women, and bad-rapping his way to a pile of nothing, until the second strike hits and he's tracking down his kid on his way to federal prison without a single thing to say.

"Stick to the music," I tell him, "you've got promise." I make a fist and tap it gently to his shoulder, then spin out to the street, hulking, enraged, dying of thirst. I will get the Scotch and drink it and then I'll call the police and turn Jerry in, I'll plant cocaine on him, it'll be easy, he'll go to juvie and the process will begin now, the crimes will come and the prison cycles will rotate and he'll be done with it sooner, the stupid shaken out of him. Maybe he'll uncover a mentor along the way, a basketball coach or English teacher who puts him to work sinking his free throws and learning to craft a bankable rhyme. Somebody who would rather be honest than awesome.

A cop car glides down the road and I flag it down with both hands. A bald patrolman hangs an elbow out the window, his sunglasses tight enough to leave ear rash.

“Officer,” I state. “I think I may have observed some illegal activity.”

“Don’t pester the kids,” he says.

“What?”

“We got a couple calls about you harassing boys by the Dumpster.”

“They were skipping class,” I point out. And it strikes me that I have never once in my life called the police, whereas at least two of those kids called the police within the last fifteen minutes.

My third strike.

“That’s not your concern,” he says.

“One of them’s my son,” I press, “and I’m going away.”

“Take care of it at home.”

My mom jogs down the sidewalk with one of those new Starbucks coffees the size of a bathtub, and it’s impossible not to grin at her old-lady jiggling. It is a fine final memory. “I’m not going home, you dumbass,” I tell him. He gets out of the car and I could hug him as he puts me in the backseat, as he hears me out and calls in the request and nods and drives, heading back out on the highway, the rest of the way to prison.

30.

Jon and Maeve

by David Backer

At the bar the lights were low and green and everyone's faces were close together and they were laughing and talking loud so they could hear each other over the music and some of them played pool and others sat at tables and leaned forward into one another and others played darts and everyone brought up beer bottles or glasses to their mouths and sipped them and the bartender took orders for drinks and the men and women who bought the drinks held them at the height of their stomachs and they laughed and when there were pauses in the conversations they would sip the drinks and look away or laugh and sometimes they all sipped their drinks together.

Maeve Fesnying sat with Vicki Sord who was a reporter at the *Blue Ash News* and they laughed and talked and Sord had thick blond hair that was curly and she was thin and wore bright red lipstick and tight purple pants and Maeve talked and laughed and drank her drink with Sord and their faces were close.

A few stools away a man with a beard and a round face and auburn hair mixed with gray and dark brown sat by himself with a mug of steaming tea in front of him and his shoulders were slumped over and down to the bar and there was an oval stain of blood on the right thigh of his khakis but no one could see this because his thighs were tucked beneath the bar and his head hung over the mug so the steam of the tea rose up into his face and he breathed the steam in and sighed it out.

Maeve laughed a loud laugh and the man with the tea and the beard looked up at her and his eyes rested on her for a moment and his eyes rested there for long enough to see that her hair was curly and her face was sharp there in the dark by the bar and that she was wearing a purple button-down shirt with large orange buttons and the man with the tea sat upright and his shoulders turned back and his lower lip tucked into his teeth and he stared at Maeve for a few seconds and Vicki Sord wiped her red-lipsticked mouth and excused herself to the ladies' room and Maeve watched her walk off and turned to face the bar and sip her drink and she looked to her left and noticed the man with the tea and the beard staring at her and even in the low green light of the bar she could see his eyes were very blue and she saw the roundness in his cheeks and she sipped her drink again and leaned toward him and said into the noise and the music of the place,

"Do you have a girlfriend?"

The man with the tea blinked and wagged his head and looked around and away from her eyes and her eyes were smiling and he said,

"I'm sorry, I wasn't . . . "

"But do you?"

"Do I what?"

"Have a girlfriend."

"No. I'm . . . No. I don't."

Maeve leaned in closer to him and blinked a slow blink and said,

"Well, I do. I have a girlfriend. Just to let you know."

The man shook his head and put his shoulders down again and said into his tea,

"I'm sorry."

"What?"

"I said, 'I'm sorry.'"

"I didn't mean to make you feel sorry. It's just a line I use on guys that stare at me in bars."

The man took a deep breath and looked into his tea again and brought his face up to Maeve and said,

"Sorry. I just couldn't help noticing your shirt."

Maeve looked down at herself and she moved closer to him and said,

“You like it?”

The man brought his hands up to the bar and they were shaking and he sipped his tea with his shaking hands and said,

“I bet I know where you bought it.”

“Really?”

“Yup.”

She leaned in and he could smell her breath and she said,

“Five bucks says you can’t.”

The man put his elbows on the bar and put his face in his hands and rubbed his face and looked back at her and said,

“It’s not really new, is it?”

“To me it is.”

“You bought it at a thrift store, right?”

“Nope,” she said and sipped her drink.

“Yes you did.”

“No I didn’t.”

“Yes. You bought it at a thrift store in a town in Iowa, Ottumwa, Iowa.”

When he said this Maeve’s eyes opened wide and her face went out to his face and she said,

“Get the hell out of town! How did you know that? I was just in Ottumwa for work last week.”

“The Salvation Army, right? Next to the Target and the courthouse.”

“Stop it! Yes, absolutely. Yes. How the hell did you know that?”

“Do you really want to know?”

“Yeah. Yes. I do.”

The man tucked his lower lip into his teeth again and said,

“I just donated all my parents’ clothes to the Salvation Army in Ottumwa. That’s my mom’s shirt.”

“Why’d you donate their clothes?”

“They died about a week ago.”

Vicki Sord was out of the bathroom now and talking to a woman by the dartboard and didn’t see Maeve drop her drink on the floor but she heard glass shatter and Vicki looked in the direction of the noise and she saw Maeve hug the man with the tea and hold him there at the bar while the steam from his tea steamed up from the mug.

Maeve hugged him and kept hugging him and he put an arm around her and her breath was on his ear and it was warm and she was warm and she pressed herself into him and he let his hand rest on her lower back and his nose pressed into the purple shirt and it smelled like home to him and he said,

“Thanks.”

“I’m so sorry. I can’t believe it,” she said.

“It’s okay, thank you.”

“No, I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry.”

The man laughed and it was first time anyone had touched him in a long time and Maeve released him and looked at him and lunged into him again with a big hug and locked his arms to his sides so he couldn’t move and she said,

“I can’t believe your parents died and I’m wearing your dead mother’s shirt. I’m so sorry.”

“I appreciate it. Thanks.”

She leaned back and looked down at herself again and started unbuttoning the orange buttons of the shirt and she wasn’t wearing anything underneath it and the man put his hands out to stop her and said,

“Oh, no, please, it’s fine. Keep it on . . .”

“No. I can’t believe I’m wearing your mother’s shirt and your mother’s dead.”

“Listen, please, I—I don’t even know your name yet.”

Maeve stopped and took a breath and put a hand on her forehead and she wavered around and smiled and looked at this man and said,

“Hah!”

Vicki Sord walked over to the bar and sipped her drink and said,

“What’s going on over here?”

Maeve turned around and blushed and said,

“Give this man five dollars.”

“What?” Sord asked.

“Give him five dollars. He deserves it. He won a bet.”

“What bet?”

“It’s nothing,” he said.

“Nothing?” Maeve asked.

The man’s face fell back to his mug of tea and he put his hands

around it to warm them and his shoulders fell again toward the bar and he said,

“Don’t worry about it.”

Maeve looked at Vicki and Vicki’s eyelids were drooping and she was smiling at everything and said,

“Do you have your little pad, Vick?”

“Yeah I do.”

“And a pen?”

“Yeah, yeah hold on.”

Vicki reached inside her purse and handed Maeve a journalist’s notebook and then reached in again and picked out a pen and handed the pen to Maeve and Maeve took the notebook and the pen and pushed them to the man with the beard and the tea and said,

“Write your name and where you live and I’ll bring you the shirt back.”

“It’s really not necessary.”

“No, no, no. Let me. I’ll bring five bucks with it or something.”

And the man looked at her and her hand was on her hip and her hip was out and he saw her Converse sneakers and the curve of her thigh where her hand rested and he said,

“Okay.”

Then he took the notebook and the pen and he wrote his name and an address and a phone number and he slid the pad and pen back to Maeve and she ripped the paper out of the pad and folded it and put it in the pocket of her jeans and she stuck out her hand and said,

“Good. I’m Maeve, by the way.”

“I’m—”

“No, wait!”

She took the paper out of her pocket while holding his hand in mid-shake and read it aloud:

“Nice to meet you, Rubber American Jon Sowse.”

“Rubber American’s where I work, it’s not . . . ”

“Jon, it’s a pleasure.”

“Well, it’s nice to meet you, Ma—”

“Maeve, like May with a ‘v.’”

“Maeve,” he said.

“Right,” she said.

“So I’ll see you tomorrow or something?” she asked.

“Okay.”

“Good.”

Then Maeve turned back to Vicki and Vicki asked,

“Did you just get his number?”

“Yeah.”

“But you’re gay, I thought.”

“No, no, no, no, no. You got it all wrong. I’m not *anything*.”

Then Vicki and Maeve laughed and the music was loud and Maeve drank her own drink and put the piece of paper back into her jeans and she looked back to Jon whose dead mother’s shirt she was wearing but he was gone into the green light and the music.

31.

Miss November

by Matthew Norman

I'm in my pajamas looking out the window, peering through the blinds like a weirdo, watching my neighbor move out of his house. He's stretched this out over the course of the last week, showing up at ten each night, backing his douchey Land Rover into his driveway, and going about the process of leaving his wife one cardboard box at a time.

I'm morbidly fascinated by this, which explains why I'm rubber-necking through mini-blinds. Why doesn't he just get a U-Haul? He could get it over with in one fell swoop. And why does he show up so late? He's got a normal job, just like everyone else. Maybe he did a Google search and found that it's less traumatizing for kids if they're asleep when their dad loads his golf clubs and diplomas into the back of a \$90,000 car.

His name is James. Not Jim—James. He's one of those guys who wears his cell phone on a plastic clip attached to his belt. He's talking on it now as he Tetrises another box next to some other boxes. I've found that there are two types of guys who clip cell phones to their belts: sweet nerds who fix your computer at work and white-collar criminals who guzzle Red Bull and swindle old ladies out of their Social Security checks.

I suspect that James is among the latter.

Sometimes Ellen, his wife, comes out and stands there in the drive-

way and watches him. She wears these brown clogs and her nighttime things and crosses her arms. She hardly ever says anything to him. Instead she just sort of stands there glaring either at him or out vaguely at their browning front yard.

He's smiling as he talks, standing in the driveway. His teeth are startlingly white. I can see them glowing from here. My guess is he's talking to her—the other woman. She's a pharmaceutical sales rep, of course. My wife and all of the other wives refer to her, simply, as "The Blonde."

Kristine comes into our bedroom. I don't really look at her because I'm pretty busy leering at James, but I get just enough to see her drop a magazine onto our bed. "Do you think that asshole got his teeth whitened?" I ask. "Does that really work? Maybe I should pick up some of those white strip things at CVS next—"

"I found this in Bradley's room today," she says, stopping me.

"What?"

When I look over I see my wife standing at the side of our bed next to a *Playboy* magazine. My first reaction is to laugh, because this is funny, but I bite my lower lip instead, like I'm being thoughtful. I've learned this trick slowly over the last fifteen years. I bite a little harder when I notice Kristine's shirt. *TAKE ME DRUNK, I'M HOME*, it says across her chest in faded letters. It's mine. I bought it in stupid Dewey Beach years ago to be funny. It's too big on me—way too big—and so it's downright cartoonish on her.

I sit down on our bed and pick up the magazine. It's all wrinkled and dog-eared, and the girl on the cover is blond and airbrushed to the point of looking like a slightly blurry computer animation. Breasts and lips and hips and a crop-top thing and a gleaming navel ring. We got rid of our movie channels last year, and so it's been while since I've seen a girl dressed like this.

"Well, it's . . . good to see him reading."

Kristine is prepped for this sort of reaction, and so without pause she says, "I don't think it's funny, Mitch."

"It's kind of funny?" I say. I add a question mark at the end in an attempt to lighten the mood with punctuation, but no luck. On the TV, the day's baseball scores are running across the screen. I find

myself wondering about the TV in James's new apartment in the city. I imagine it's the size of a foosball table, which is a thought I keep to myself.

"No," she says. "It's *pornography*."

The word sounds weird. My wife has a slight speech impediment, like she's talking with a very thin sheet of paper at the back of her tongue. You can hardly notice it, but it flares up on oddball words like *cinnamon*, *chrysanthemum*, and, apparently, *pornography*. She touches her mouth, hiding it—a reflex wired in since adolescence.

"Weelllll," I say, drawing the word out. And for a while that's all I say, as if this, alone, is a solid argument. "Let's keep things in perspective here. Remember that freaky kid with the vampire teeth? The one on the news—from Towson? He shot up that TJ Maxx last month with the hunting rifle. They found cat skulls in *his* room."

"They were squirrel skulls," she says. "And it was a K-Mart."

I'm not sure how these details weaken my point, but somehow, strangely, they do, and so I just sit there for a moment, deflated. On the *Playboy*'s back cover, there's an ad for cologne. A good-looking actor I kind of recognize from a cop show is having a pillow fight with a pretty brunette girl in her underwear. I briefly consider grabbing one of our decorative throw pillows and smacking Kristine across the face with it. I wonder what would happen. Would she laugh and strip to her underwear and forget, if just for a moment, about our pervy son down the hall?

It seems doubtful. They should include a warning at the bottom of the ad in legal type: **Outcome unlikely in most situations involving wives.*

Outside, there's the gentle thud of a car door closing. I can still hear James's voice, blathering on into his cell phone. I can't make out any words, just happy mumbling through our well-sealed windows.

"I'm just saying . . . it could be worse, right?" I say.

She shakes her head and sighs. I've found that women sometimes pretend to be more infuriated with men than they actually are in order to make larger, more general points. But I can see by the look on her face that she's genuinely mystified "How can this *not* make you mad? Are you really that . . . clueless?"

"Kris, have you heard of the Internet? Do you know what kind of stuff is on there? Compared to that, this magazine is really kind of charming. The fact that we haven't caught him watching fetish videos on the computer represents probably our greatest achievement as parents. You didn't have brothers. You don't know boys like I do. Trust me . . . this is perfectly natural."

She's prepped for this, too, and her eyes roll. I get the feeling she's been rehearsing this conversation with a stunt husband. "Oh, right, right," she says. "The 'it's natural' argument. That's very in-fashion right now, huh? You're all just animals. It's all evolutionary. There's no way to control you or your overwhelming masculinity. We should all just get used to it, right?"

This seems like something different than what I just said, and I briefly consider hiding out in the bathroom and pretending to brush my teeth. But then something dawns on me. "Wait. How did you find this thing anyway? You weren't going through his stuff, were you? He's not a little—"

"No, I wasn't *going through his stuff*. It was sitting in his underwear drawer, Mitchell."

"His underwear drawer?"

"Yes. I'm his mother. I was putting away his laundry."

To articulate her point, she moves to the basket of unfolded clothes that's been sitting on her reading chair for three days and starts angrily balling socks into haphazard pairs. This seems like a little bit of a stretch, barefoot and folding laundry. She's a corporate lawyer who makes twice what I do. And so as she continues taking her frustration out on our clothing, I think about the Catholic-guilt-ridden *Playboys* of my own youth. When I was Bradley's age, I hid five of them elaborately with Cold War paranoia in the false bottom of a giant cardboard box of baseball cards. My goal—and I'd actually thought this through—was to hide them so obsessive-compulsively that if I were to die in some freakish, crazy accident, no one, particularly my goddamn mother, would ever find them. My knuckleheaded son has been a hell of a lot less careful, and now we're both paying for it. It doesn't seem fair.

"What if it was Ella then?" she says. "What if *you* found a magazine with naked guys in *her* room?"

I shudder at this. I know that's usually just an expression, but I actually do.

"You think men are the only ones who think about sex, Mitch? Like it's all just *Dancing with the Stars* and Lifetime movies for us? Come on . . . we just know how to actually control ourselves. It's a novel concept."

"But Ella's not a woman, Kris. She's nine. Thanks for the imagery, though . . . it's every father's dream."

And here we are, in this place we've been before. Right now we're pretending that we're actually talking about what we're talking about. We're pretending that this conversation about our children and a creased, six-year-old girlie magazine isn't happening a hundred some-odd feet away from the exact spot in which Kristine's friend is being replaced by someone younger.

She sighs at the laundry and bites a cuticle. There's a 50/50 chance this conversation is over. Some stop suddenly. Others drift on aimlessly for weeks, like British costume dramas. So I flip through the magazine. There are more ads for cologne, and some for sports cars and body spray, and then it falls open to the centerfold, Miss November. She's prettier than the girl on the cover—seemingly less computer-generated. She's lying on a beach chair, smiling, kind of shy—or at least pretending to be kind of shy. A tiny green bikini top lies cast aside in the sand, and she's making a halfhearted go at covering her breasts with her hands. I'm not sure how this lovely girl and her mostly naked body are supposed to make me feel, but sitting here in my pajamas, I feel suddenly a little sad, and I think about Dewey Beach again, back before we got way too old to go there anymore. Lazing next to Kristine on towels because we were too broke and disorganized to get beach chairs. Dizzy and stupid from daytime drinking in the sun. The wind blowing her hair all over the place. Picking grains of sand from her navel while she laughs and swats me away. Her skin bitter from saltwater and sand and sunscreen.

"Mitch," she says. She's given up on the laundry bit, and she's standing in the middle of our room tugging at her lower lip in my giant T-shirt. "I want you to talk to him."

"And what am I supposed to tell him?"

Her irritation with me is palpable, like smoke in the room. “Tell him his mother doesn’t want that thing in the house,” she says. “Think you can manage that?”

For no legitimate reason, I peek in on Ella first. She’s right where she’s supposed to be, sprawled out sleeping in her bed at weird angles like a gunshot victim. If she’s currently hiding horrible penis magazines in her underwear drawer, I hope I never find out.

Kristine has gone downstairs to make an unnecessary amount of noise. She’s knocking plates around and opening and closing cupboards and cabinets. The cat’s probably ditched the scene by now and curled up behind the dryer. It’s his go-to spot at the first sign of unpleasantness. Maybe later, I’ll join him.

From the window in the hallway, I can see the front of James’s car next door. I wonder what his plan was. What did he take first? What has he left until the end?

Standing outside Bradley’s bedroom door now, I clear my throat and fake a few coughs to give him some fair warning so he can cease and desist whatever unholy thing he’s doing in there. When I knock, he answers fast—“Yeah?” he says. I put the *Playboy* behind my back, which seems unnecessarily cruel, but it’s too late now. His room smells like a teenage boy and the décor he’s chosen is what a local Foot Locker might look like if it got hit by a grenade. I step over a pair of red and black Adidas basketball shoes and a largely ignored backpack filled with schoolbooks.

“What’s up, Dad?” he says.

“Hey,” I say, and then I pull the magazine out like it’s some sort of prize and every muscle in my son’s body tenses at once. Streaks of heat darken his face, and I wish I’d chosen a method that wasn’t so much like an ambush. “We need to talk about this, buddy.”

“Oh, dude,” he says, but that’s as far as he gets. He pulls a lone earbud from his ear and hangs his head, defeated. I expected more, if I’m being honest—an escape attempt or, at the very least, a passionate denial. His little flat screen is on in mute. He’s watching the same thing I was.

“It’s all right, Brad. I’m not mad. I just . . .”

He waits for me to finish this sentence, which makes two of us. I should have had Kristine write me a script. At least some talking points.

“Where’d you even get it, anyway?”

I can read his mind right now and I watch as he considers the ramifications of being a snitch, like he’s a low-level mafia goon. The fact that I don’t seem to be madding is throwing him off. He’s trying to figure out my angle. “Uhhh,” he says.

“Brad, I’m not gonna waterboard you. Just tell me where you go it.”

“Luke Hackman,” he says, giving up. “This guy from school. I traded him an A-Rod rookie card for it.”

“Wow, Luke Hackman got screwed in that deal,” I say, and then I surprise us both by laughing. Bradley just watches, a little dopey-looking, as I sit down at the side of his bed and flip through the magazine again. Apparently it’s impossible for even a reasonably intelligent grown man to hold a *Playboy* without looking at it. Miss November, whose name is actually Amber, has filled out one of those idiotic questionnaires. I scan her answers and wonder what infuriated my Rhodes Scholar wife more, the fact that this twenty-year-old girl has allowed herself to be so shamelessly objectified or that she’s dotted the Is and Ts in her answers with an apparently random combination of bubbly hearts and smiley faces.

Bradley sees me reading. “Her favorite movie is *The Notebook*,” he says.

I read on and, of course, he’s right. “She likes horses, too,” I say. “That’ll come in handy if she ever fulfills her dream of becoming a . . . wow . . . large-animal surgeon? Is that even a real thing?”

“Arizona State’s got a really good Pre-Vet program, Dad,” he says. “It’s, like, ranked and everything.”

I’m surprised suddenly then by a drive-by hit of love for my son. It leaves me a little dizzy atop his wrinkly New York Yankees sheets. These debilitating waves of affection are more commonly directed at Ella, who wears butterfly clips in her hair and tells me that I’m the best ten times a day. But I love this skinny punk, too, and his cracking voice and his impossibly big Adam’s apple. He’s the same boy I was a hundred years ago. The same boy we all were. He studies Miss

November's loopy words at night over and over after the rest of us have gone to bed, memorizing them along with the thrilling details of her body and wonders if a girl like this—if any girl at all, really—will ever let him see her naked.

"Okay," I say. "I wish Dr. Amber here all the best. But we need to talk about your mom. She's not exactly thrilled about this, Brad."

"What? Mom? Oh. Oh God. Does she . . . like . . . think I'm a perv?"

"Well, maybe a little. Here's the thing you gotta understand. They're not like us. To your mom—to women—this isn't just a magazine. It's more like a . . . a worldview. She thinks that this is how you see women. As . . . sex objects?" Another question mark creeps in, but this one's less choreographed. I'm not articulating myself very well. "Does that make sense, Brad?"

"Um," he says. "I guess so. Kinda."

That means no. I can tell by the completely blank look on his face, and now I have an overwhelming urge to slap the back of his head. A moment ago I loved him, and now I'm contemplating low-level child abuse. That, basically, is fatherhood.

"Okay, let me simplify it for you, then. *Playboys* are going to piss your mom off. So next time maybe think about a better hiding place. Your underwear drawer, Brad? Are you kidding me? Did you think about just cutting out the middle man and duct-taping it to her steering wheel?"

"Huh?"

"Brad, you're busted. Give up the stunned look. She found this thing in your underwear drawer. She told me herself."

"What? Nu-uh. It wasn't in my underwear drawer. Seriously, I'm not stupid, Dad. I had it over there, with Grandpa's *Sports Illustrateds*."

"What are you talking about?"

He hops out of bed, all ropy in baggy gym shorts, and kneels down to the bottom shelf of his bookcase where he keeps my dad's old *Sports Illustrateds* in three leaning piles. "See, I had it here. Middle pile, fifth one from the top." He counts out five magazines and lifts, revealing a boozy looking baseball player from the '70s instead of a *Playboy*. "She must have, like, found it or something."

"Jesus," I say.

“What?”

Bradley doesn’t see what I see. His mother didn’t stumble randomly on this thing while perusing antique *Sports Illustrateds*. She was looking for it—or for something like it, at least. She probably started with me, riffling through the harmless crap in my desk and nightstand, and then moved on to Bradley, a not-so-innocent bystander. I look down at Miss November again. She’s looking back at me all pouty and oblivious, and I know exactly what my wife was thinking. If this is what men like James want—if this is what they’re willing to leave their wives standing in their driveways for—then maybe it’s what we all want.

“Dad?” says Bradley. “Are you still, like, not mad at me?”

“Go back to bed, Brad,” I say. “Tomorrow you’re apologizing to your mother.”

“But—”

“But nothing.”

“I mean, what do I say?”

“You’ll think of something.”

I drop the stupid magazine into the recycling bin in the kitchen, but I rethink that and move it to the garbage. As the metal lid closes with a satisfying bang, it feels definitive.

She’s standing in the kitchen, looking out over our dark yard and onto the street. There’s a bag of Oreos open on the counter, double-stuffed. For a while, I look at her from behind. One bare foot hooks gently around its opposing calf. In silhouette, she’s like one of those long birds at the zoo, resting on one leg and pretending no one’s looking at her.

Just then, the street over her shoulder and out the window lights up and James’s Land Rover passes with a hum of European acceleration, and then it’s gone. I wonder how many other households this dickhead has disrupted this week. Maybe if he comes by tomorrow night I’ll slash his tires. That seems reasonable enough.

“Well, Brad feels like a complete pervert now,” I say, popping an Oreo into my mouth. “You can look forward to an incredibly awkward apology tomorrow.”

She bites a cookie and keeps staring, holding its remainder in her fingers like a cigarette.

“If it makes you feel better,” I say, “I think he actually *did* read the articles.”

“Where’d he get it?” she asks.

“The city last week. He and his friends found it sticking out of a Dumpster. Some little creep named Luke Hackman dared him to take it.”

I’m not entirely sure why I’ve told her this. I guess I’m protecting Brad. Or maybe I’m just covering for all of us. It’s probably better if they think our behavior is less calculating and more a recurring symptom of our own hopeless stupidity.

The cat slinks by silently, assessing the situation in his snobby cat way. The unpleasantness in the house has passed. Just a small, domestic storm.

“Do you ever feel old, Mitch?”

I do, all of the time—right now, in fact—but I don’t answer her. It’s dark in the kitchen. Just a row of low lights illuminate the wine-glasses in the cabinet. The green light over the oven has been blinking 7:22 for as long as I can remember. I put my hands on her hips and turn her around and kiss her on the mouth. Nothing serious. Nothing cinematic. Just a small, Oreo-flavored kiss, our tongues touching only for an instant. When we were young, I spent large sums of energy concentrating on the strawberry-like surface of Kristine’s tongue. I thought if I put my mind to it, if I really thought about it, I could identify the slight imperfection that caused the occasional word to gently slur like it did. I loved it about her, and now it’s just another thing that I don’t even really think about anymore.

“You can’t kiss me,” she says. “I’m eating Oreos.” Her fingers move to her lips again, but I don’t want her to hide from me so I take her hands and pull them down to her sides. There are things I want to tell her—that I should tell her. I’m not sleeping with a pharmaceutical sales rep, and I’m not planning to. There’s no secret in my desk or my nightstand, just a bunch of ATM receipts and golf tees. I think belly button rings are kind of trashy-looking. I didn’t impregnate our foreign housekeeper and keep it a secret, even after becoming gover-

nor of California. I didn't get a blow job from an intern. I didn't have Twitter affairs and send teenaged girls in Delaware grainy pictures of my junk. Our son is a good boy. He's not a misogynist or a future date-rapist. He's just a kid. I love her, and I'm not as bad as she's gradually beginning to fear that I might be. Not even close.

She's waiting for me to say all of these things. But I don't know where to begin. And so I say the first actual words that materialize.

"Only a complete asshole would spend ninety thousand dollars on a car during a global recession."

32.

Most Wanted

by Eric Raymond

The Mexican girl at the west Texas rest stop faced New Mexico as if New Mexico was all of tomorrow's problems stretching before her in rust and fire. She was en route to nowhere, standing by the vending machines, her beat-to-hell Tercel parked where the state troopers would not see her expired plates. My Peterbuilt rig idled in the painted light. We were on the westbound side of I-40, close to the ghost town of Glenrio. Texas was where the night's long-haulers would roll in from. She was short and round-cheeked, hair tied up in a bouquet of auburn corkscrews, eye shadow lavender. In her line of work, it was early. In mine, the middle of a long day.

Her youth was bent from a scarcity of comfort. Or maybe that's what I projected. I had this bad habit of seeing the girls working the truck stops as victims, especially the young ones. But I knew that if you let your guard down, you'd be left pondering how it all went wrong so fast. She tracked me the whole time without meeting my eyes. She had watched me step down from my cab and walk up with the MISSING flyer in my hand.

"*Mira, por favor.*" I held up Sarah's picture. "*Conoces? Mira aqui.*"

"No," she said with a scant glance.

I stapled the paper four cornered to the inside of the lean-to sheltering the vending machines.

"Maybe you rest?" She lifted her eyes the direction of my rig.

“No rest,” I said.

I walked back to the rig and looked up the grade to where the girl was little more than another signpost along the road. I refrained from lecturing them, but I thought a few good thoughts for her, for at least enough mercy to keep her leg from turning up in a coyote’s mouth one morning. I couldn’t remember if her toenails were painted, or if she had any visible tattoos. Those things were important, as they would connect her to this world again if my well-wishing didn’t hold.

I was out of flyers. Five hundred down, another five hundred to be printed. In my cab I emailed a new master copy to an Office Depot in Albuquerque, where a stranger would prepare Sarah again for me. She was always ahead of me and behind me and yet nowhere.

From this rest stop and a hundred others, two pairs of Sarah’s eyes, fourteen and eighteen, gazed unblinking onto the rivers of interstate traffic and the insides of doorless bathrooms.

She rode along with the sympathetic long-haulers and territorial state cops, lay taped down to convenience store counters between the herbal methamphetamines and headache powders. She crumpled under the backseats of family SUVs, tucked politely away on others’ vacations, then promptly forgotten, mashed with the clay, candy, and dog-shit shoe soles of other people’s children.

The ink and toner of Sarah as she was and Sarah as she might be ran in the sleet, baked in the sun, and withered in the rain. When the staples holding her fast gave up, she stared into the empty sky from littered ditches, among the cellophane discards and chucked lug nuts. I replicated and distributed, shared and asked, scanned her and posted her, and as always, in the end, it was the same. I left her behind.

One of the lucky breaks amid the compound fractures of my divorce from Miranda was the fact that we sold the house at the height of the real estate boom. We were gifted in our quitting. We sold, divided, and quickly relinquished the painful sight of one another. In less than a year, everything else collapsed. I went through trucking school just as the safest real estate you could own was portable. My rig was the only six-figure loan I carried. I went from a priest in the church of home and hearth to a full-time nomad on eighteen

wheels in under a year. If Sarah swam out willingly, or against her will on the back of one of these big alligators, I would swim with them, too.

I made the Office Depot in Albuquerque a half hour before close. I locked the rig with its engine idling and trotted across the soft black-top to work the stiffness out of my legs. I was forty-two and beginning to feel it. It was easier to freeze up as I got older. I tried to keep off the weight I'd lost. I ate a lot of canned tuna and did pushups in parking lots and playgrounds.

A few kids slouched on ruined Hondas. I counted three guys and two girls. I never stopped looking at boys of that age without imagining what I'd have thought if Sarah had brought them home. Maybe I stuck on it because I last saw her on the cusp of full-blown high school adolescence and never had to get acclimated to the boys coming to the house, never had to divine their true natures beneath junior varsity jackets and drugstore, body spray deodorants.

It was much the same way when I went to truck-driving school. Scrawny redneck kids without the granddaddy that owned a fernery, poorer than the migrant workers because they didn't even have family, buying a case of Budweiser and shoplifting a jar of peanut butter every week to stay alive. I knew those kids personally after so many weeks in the driving classes, and I still couldn't keep from looking at their axle grease nails and thinking *If Sarah had brought one home, I would have choked him at the door.*

I smelled sage and lavender on the desert wind before disappearing into the shrink-wrapped air of the Office Depot. The clerk behind the print counter wouldn't even have been a contender. He was a smeary white stoner with dyed blond hair and tribal tattoos, the sort who went vegan in the desert and filled up on drum circle, his vacant head drifting with tumbleweed stories of an older cousin who went to Burning Man.

“Picking up. Name's Robbie.”

He scanned the shelves below the counter.

“Flyers?” he asked. His eyes flicked over my face. Having done this in a dozen copy centers across as many states, I developed a story to cover for the fact that the girl on the flyer was my stepdaughter.

"Part of the program," I said. "*Truckers for the Lost?* Ever heard of it?"

"Nah," he said. He scanned a bar code taped down to the counter and entered in the number of flyers.

"It's a good organization. They send the flyer, I post it along the way. Back and forth," I waved my hand in the air. His eyes tried to track it. He was anxious to close, high already.

"Mind if I post one near the door? That okay with your manager?"

"I am the night manager. Go wild."

I peeled a fresh color copy of my Sarahs from the cardboard box and rubber-banded the box closed again. The kid looked at her and made a show of scratching the black soul patch under his lip, a kind of burner's bad acting for careful consideration.

"You ever find one like her?" he asked.

"What do you mean, 'one like her'?"

"A runaway."

"I never said she was a runaway."

Maybe he put it together, maybe not. I didn't think Sarah looked at all like me.

"Well, yeah, I guess she coulda been kidnapped. But she looks like a runner."

"What makes you say that?" I looked at the young version of her for something I'd missed over years, but it was the same photo, a yearbook shot with the false blue sky-and-cloud background.

"Takes one to know one, maybe? I was a runner. She's almost jumping out of that picture. Like she was thinking about it when they took it."

Outside, the night was not any cooler, but had come alive with a wind. I held the box of flyers under my arm. One of the boys I'd counted on my way in was looking at my rig. He had his back turned to me. They looked like high school dropouts. I scanned their hands for spray paint cans, in case they planned on tagging my trailer. The two girls and two remaining boys idled near their cars, a few bottles poorly hidden in white McDonald's bags by the tires.

"Evening," I said outside of the kid's striking distance. It was a well-lit lot. Not empty, but you could never tell.

I expected him to return to his friends, but he stood unperturbed by my presence, hanging around as though he'd been waiting for the guided tour to start. I unlocked the cab and stepped up. The kid craned his neck to see inside. He was wearing a no-known-color hoodie, hands stuffed in the kangaroo pocket. His jeans slouched far below his waist. His mouth was open enough for me to see the drunken clutch of teeth forming his overbite.

"You can sleep in there, right?" he asked.

"Yep."

"I knew it," he said, like he'd nailed a game show question. "Hella tight."

"Mind taking a look at something for me?" I asked him. I wanted to see his hands.

"You one of those Jesus freaks? Highway holy roller?"

I unbanded the box, pulled out a flyer at arm's length, and put the box on the stairs of the cab. He looked back to the car where his friends watched with the girls. He leaned forward to look at Sarah.

"Here, take it." He took it and bit the quick of one thumbnail.

"Hey, Tanya!" he shouted over to the cars.

"What?"

"Come here!"

"A.J., leave that guy alone."

"Get your skank ass over here."

"Best watch how you talk to me," she shot back. "I'm not your bitch."

She sulked over with her bagged bottle. She was the youngest in the group, on fire to burn the brightest, the one with the most fear of being left out. She was short, a little splay-footed and skinny-hipped, built like a Little League t-ball player with tits. Out-flourished orange-blond hair in a midlength Japanese helmet, two different drugstore hues. She'd taken on the boys' mouth to cover up the fact she was about fifteen and wearing tough around like it was the one nice pair of jeans she owned.

"You seen this girl?" he asked her. She drank from the bottle openly.

"No."

One of the boys, his black hair parted in the center and smoothed to his knobby head, loped over to where we stood. They were all by the rig now, including the third boy, a stumpy, muscled, pimply kid who looked like he had a religious devotion to steroids and Big Macs. The girl with him looked Navajo. She had an unlit cigarette between her fingers. She stood behind him and picked at the filter with her nail. The muscle kid stepped up, and by the way he parted them, I could tell he was their alpha dog. He had a moon face, a shiny black ponytail, and a dust-brush mustache as fine as baby's hair. His biceps must have seventeen inches around.

"All you truckers like crystal, yeah?"

The kids seemed to draw together then, an unspoken change in the flock, a less significant *me* standing before a unified *them*. The first one, A.J., turned his back to me and put his hand on the muscle-head's shoulder. "This dude ain't no tweaker, Ali."

"They all tweakers. Wheels ain't turning, he ain't earning." He folded his hands in front of his waist. "What do you say, Dad?"

No one ever called me Dad. Not even Sarah.

"You ought to be more careful," I said.

"Why's that? You a cop?"

"I'm not a cop."

"Don't matter. I didn't make you no offer. Just asking if you got a *substance abuse problem*."

"You're a drug counselor, then."

"That's right. You gonna hate on that, I show you how I handle my business." He lifted the edge of his shirt, revealing an inch of pistol stock and gothic lettering above his elastic waistband. The Navajo girl moved in closer to the Ali kid and draped her arms around his shoulders. She was a little taller than he was, no longer a young girl but not the ground-out woman she would become. Her beauty was cutting her to pieces and she couldn't feel a thing.

"How much?" I asked.

"How far you wanna go? Forty get you through tonight. Sixty, you have a little extra just in case."

I took out my wallet. Ali slit his eyes at A.J. and fired a shaming laugh. "What I tell you. You gotta listen to me, homes. They all tweakers. Go get his shit."

“Skip the shit.” I picked up a stack of flyers from the box and held the two twenties on top of the stack with my thumb. “Take the forty, keep your shit, and hand these flyers out.”

Ali took the stack of flyers and stuffed the twenties into his front pocket. He frowned.

“Give them to your customers, the guy who’s cooking the shit for you, anyone who might know where girls go when they can’t be found.”

He showed Sarah’s face to the Navajo girl on his shoulder. She looked at Sarah’s face, then to me, and unwrapped herself from Ali. Ali considered Sarah, then threw the stack of flyers straight up into the air.

“Fuck your flyers.”

They fluttered and caught in the breeze of the diesel. He rested his hand on the gun stock under his shirt and slinked off a few steps before turning back to the cars. The Navajo girl stuck the unlit cigarette into her mouth and followed him.

“Let’s ride,” Ali shouted at A.J. and the mouthy girl. A.J.’s jaw tensed as his only apology. He followed, but the mouthy one didn’t. I picked up the flyers that hadn’t escaped yet. I could hear the girl take another drink. She dropped the bottle in the bag on the asphalt and it rolled away. I pulled a flyer from under her dirty white Keds.

“Tanya!” A.J. shouted from the open door of his Civic. “Now!”

I looked up at Tanya, her face smoldering where the booze had doused her fire. A.J.’s patience expired. He slammed the door and started the engine. Bass and a razzing electronic music Dopplered past as he sped out of the lot, chassis sparking on the asphalt.

Tanya watched him go, unperturbed by abandonment. The truck rattled its sweet rattle and a downdraft brought the warm exhaust across my neck.

“You think you know what you’re doing, hanging around guys like that.”

“You don’t know me.”

“No. But I recognize you. You think you’re invincible.”

She scoffed. “No I don’t.”

“You want to end up on one of these flyers?”

“Depends.” She was so full of herself.

“It depends?”

“Depends on what got her on the flyer.”

“It’s a MISSING flyer,” I shook it at her. “What do you think got her on the flyer? She disappeared. No one can find her.”

She took the smeared flyer from my hand and looked at Sarah’s face.

“Alls I’m saying is, how do you know where she is *now* ain’t better than where she’s from?”

The lights in Office Depot darkened.

“Is that really what you think when you see a girl’s face on a MISSING flyer? It’s a sign of her good luck?”

“Maybe she got something better and kept it to herself.”

I could see the shadow of the Office Depot stoner behind the big windows. He pushed the automatic doors open with his bony arms, stepped outside, then closed them and locked up.

“You don’t think that hanging out with drug dealer assholes and talking to strangers in parking lots at night is a more likely reason to end up on a flyer?”

She returned a look of impenetrable indifference.

“Sweetie, if it’s such a good idea, why don’t you climb up in that cab and hit the road with me?”

She looked at the twilight interior of the cab and smirked. “You don’t seem like you’re going somewhere better.”

I stepped closer to her, into the radius of her candy perfume and Kool-Aid booze. She stood her ground, may have even leaned in a little. I lowered my words on her head.

“You know who the biggest serial killers in this country are? Long-haul truckers.”

She raised Sarah’s flyer between us and pulled it tight against her face like a mask, her features distorting the twin photos. She twitched her head left and right with each mocking word.

“You’re. So. Scary.”

I surprised her when I ripped the paper from her hands. But she was fast, and she decked me with a closed fist before I could step back. She threw a right cross like she learned from older brothers. The blow caught me across the cheekbone, glancing over the bridge of my nose. My eyes stung. I caught myself before slapping her back,

which was a good thing for a lot of reasons, the first of which was the night manager, jogging toward us across the empty lot.

“Hey!” he shouted.

“You like that, you fucking psycho?” she spit.

“Go home!” I shouted at her. “Go!”

She reached down and picked up her bottle from the ground. I backed away and she pitched it into the side of the rig, where it shattered in the bag and rained on the ground. I scooped the box of flyers into the cab. They sloshed onto the floor.

“Think I can’t protect myself? Fuck you!”

I slammed the door to the cab, but I could hear her outside.

“You go home! Run! You ain’t never going to find that girl! That’s a curse on you, motherfucker! Never in your fuckin’ life!”

I ground the gears bad, my eyes watering, my heart unused to the adrenaline. I heard something solid hit the side mirror of the rig and the glass fell out in a funhouse spider web. I gripped the suicide knob and hammered the gas, the cab bucking over its air shocks. The rig heaved away in a large arc, tilting from the girl still screaming profanities and the jabberwocky night manager by her side. The big diesel roared. I felt the load shift and the trailer start to get light on me. Horns lit up. I bounced across two lanes, let off, and tucked it in just before pulling head-on into oncoming traffic. Four hundred copies of Sarah sloshed around me.

At 4 A.M., I parked in a rest area near Barstow. Getting socked in the face by a teenage girl was about as good as crystal for keeping you up all night. I replayed the image of her with Sarah’s flyer pulled to her face. There was no sleep in the air, just the absence of any image in the busted side mirror, which was doubly disorienting when you expected to see your own exhausted face.

I watched a lot lizard climb out of a sleeper cab down the line of rigs, a midriff jean jacket flung fast over her shoulders. Her red hair was perm-fried and cab-tussled. She scanned the lot self-consciously, looking for the twilight cockpit of a state trooper, gentlest of her natural predators. The rig she climbed out of kicked on the low beams and lurched into gear. The guy got his rocks off and had to start turning those wheels.

I blipped through the dead channels on the CB radio until I heard a guy singing a spiritual in a strong, low voice. The last note carried and died. There was a long emptiness, and then someone squawked back "Amen, brother," and then it was silent again and stayed that way. Nobody looking for conversation in the holy pre-dawn hour.

It was about this time of night Sarah disappeared. No more talking. That's what the abandoned phone had meant. She was like a satellite that had just broken orbit, momentum carrying her deeper into the void with each passing minute.

Six years on and I often woke at this hour, unable to sleep. The stars would be over soon. Idleness was no good when you were solving for peace in the long division of estrangement. I squared up Sarah's flyers and peeled one off the top of the stack. With my staple gun hooked in my belt loop, I stepped down from the cab.

In the men's room, the tireless war between vandals and the manufacturers of automatic hand dryers continued. On the women's side of the building, I could hear the hooker gargling, brushing her teeth. Time passed in the click and running intervals of the water conservation faucets. My cheek was swollen. I had a scrape on my nose where the girl's ragged, bitten fingernail grazed me.

On the narrow grass island by the bathrooms was a hutch protecting a faded map behind a scratched up Plexiglas panel. On the map, the roads and landmarks were redacted by hieroglyphics of paint pen. It was the legend for the underworld beneath the trucker's atlas. I found a clear spot on the side of the hutch, facing east. The sky was lighter by degrees, dawn coming. I stapled Sarah's flyer looking at the miles I'd covered. The sun would fade her fast, but it would be a good view while it lasted.

The hooker bought a Coke and a pack of peanut butter crackers from the vending machines. She perched on top of a picnic table with a passing glance my way. I flattened out a rumpled dollar bill and fed it to the machine. The machine rejected it. I fed it again; again rejected. I worked the bill on the side of the machine in two hands, ironing out the wrinkles, but the bill ended up wet from the dew. The machine scorned it a third time.

The hooker walked over and reached around me to feed four quarters into the change slot. She pulled the tongue of my damp dollar from the machine and pocketed it. She returned to her breakfast.

“Thanks,” I called after her.

She raised her hand in my direction. A gesture between *you're welcome* and *be quiet*.

33.

The Mountain Population Is Me

by Shane Jones

It began as a joke. But soon I found myself in our dirt-pit of a backyard, gazing at the empty horizon over the flat grassy fields that dominated our lands, and imagined what the mountain would look like. Not a large mountain, I told Gwen, but definitely big enough that it would never be considered a hill. A hill is something Sammy builds from snow. I told Gwen what the sun would look like coming up and over the peak of our first mountain. She pointed at the horizon, and with an extended finger, drew a triangle on the sky.

The elders were the most difficult to convince. At our town hall meeting they took turns standing, hollering, and shredding a textbook featuring other countries' most beautiful mountains. Several were concerned, after eighty or so years of flat living, that their legs wouldn't move in a motion for mountain walking. Standing at the front of the room, I told everyone to practice, and marched in place while smiling. They took turns, slowly moving their thighs upward until horizontal, and complained in a chorus of phlegm-coughs and boo.

"Wait," said one elderly man who I knew as Johnson. "What would the air be like up there, on a mountain?"

I explained how for hundreds of years the air quality of flat living had polluted us. That from my research, using a type of weather balloon, an invisible smog had formed a sphere one hundred yards skyward. The benefits of building a mountain would be tremendous.

Think of future generations, the children, I said. Concentrate on a future where you look out your window and see a mountain.

The children, of course, were the easiest to convince. I told Sammy about sledding, skiing, downhill cycling, and hiking. I showed her my sketch of a playground in the sky, near the peak of the proposed mountain. Afterward, I watched her from the front window of our home lifting her bicycle over her head in the middle of the street, her arms trembling to balance it at a severe downward angle.

The town meetings continued, and one by one, the residents began to agree that a mountain was a feasible and good idea. During the traditional fifteen-minute break after an hour of debate, I'd stand outside smoking and notice more and more of the elders using the Practice Hills, exclaiming to loved ones that it didn't hurt their legs *too bad* to climb. Others proudly rattled off my list of new animal species that would flourish in the deep forests of our first mountain. Many predicted an influx of athletes to our country, which the politicians translated as increased revenue.

Construction of the mountain took a year. There were deaths. Several men hadn't properly prepared their lungs by jogging the Simulation Scaffolding, a massive structure made from wood and metal slightly half in height of the proposed mountain. A few workers simply couldn't handle the idea of a mountain—a pile of dirt and gravel—bringing them closer to the sky, and took their own lives via self-burial. Two men were murdered by residents desperate to ascend the mountain, which was related to something important I didn't account for: building a mountain so grand that no one could touch it until it was finished, which is why I'm currently here, alone, on the mountain.

Even Gwen had her moments. I'm thinking of the night I found her in the backyard, lying flat on her back, crying. She had pasted her face with dirt, and she said her entire life was physically contained on one flat plane. I told her that was true, that the mountain would be completed soon. The next night, Gwen was again in the backyard, but I didn't go out to bring her back inside. Instead, I watched from the bathroom window while Sammy brushed her teeth next to me, my wife running full speed through an open field and sliding

stomach-bare across the flat grassy surface, her body halting into a crumpled pile of sobs.

Security was an issue. Many were arrested during dark hours for trespassing as the mountain grew with each truckload of dirt, and the tutorials that replaced the town hall meetings about what to expect when first climbing the mountain were attended less and less frequently.

But what really surprised me was that, after all the initial desire, the ridiculous drive to first experience the mountain, people not only stopped caring, lost interest, but soon came to view the mountain as a symbol of fear, and soon after, hatred. A black pyramid had been built, and it was my fault.

Opening day was a disaster. I remember standing at the base of the mountain in my best suit, surrounded by a half-crown of politicians, a fat red ribbon tied to two big trees, and looking out and seeing only Gwen and Sammy, a few of the other men and women's family members and children. Everyone bored. The protests to dismantle the mountain would come later. I cut the ribbon, turned, and applauded the mountain to soft background clapping.

On my first walk up, I too, wasn't very impressed. Sure, the air was better, and the forest sections with deer and squirrels were eye-catching, but it didn't seem to matter much. Like everyone else, I missed our flat country because it was once just, and only that, a flat country. I found myself walking in rings around the mountain, surveying others who shrugged at new foliage; children who rode their bikes downhill were only interested for several trips. Even they missed the uniqueness of a country once described in a tourism magazine as "... flatter, and sweeter, than a field of syrup-drenched pancakes."

What had I done?

I was prosecuted for crimes against "the history of our flat, long ago once beautiful land." That's to say, after several years of the mountain driving residents to madness, nights where they hand-dug dirt in pathetically collapsing piles at their feet, many needed to blame someone for destroying our country. I still remember the elderly man Johnson, even as I sit alone at the top of this mountain (Gwen, Sammy, so very far below, perhaps simply watching a ball roll

effortlessly along a flat field) looking at me across the long-forgotten town hall meeting room telling me that I would be the only friend of the mountain.

I'm not sorry for what I did, because at the time it seemed like the right thing to do. My love for mountains was an infection. They say I will be executed if I leave this mountain. They say I have made our country like every other country. No longer, the judge told me, can a man stand in a field with his family and spin in a circle seeing nothing but expanding grassy fields. I understand what I've done. Sitting on this mountain peak, rubbing a leaf between thumb and finger, I know who will bury me.

34.

opal one, opal two

by Tessa Mellas

opal one—insect smallness, brown-gray girl, who scurries on spindly legs. so busy crossing empty spaces, sometimes she doesn’t breathe. thus the miniature hiccups. staccato sounds that lurch from her throat. pinprick hiccups. and pit-pit patters, raindrop feet pocking patterns on the floor. little daughter. watch her flutter. little daughter. watch her twirl. she darts. she spins in circles. so pretty when she’s flitting. a blur of brown-gray limbs that look like wings. but when she sleeps, her features crumple. eyes and nose so close together. forehead furrowed. wrinkled chin. scrunched little face like a moth. edda thinks opal is more ruby’s daughter than hers.

edda—sews seams with the sight of her fingers. sews robes for all the priests. for prayer. for choir. for blessing water in baths of birds. edda with thread spinning under her fingers. toes tapping the pedal that powers the lever, that moves thread through the needle. the needle sharp. the needle thin. all that sewing, and opal always whisking away. past the edges of edda’s glasses. to the peripheral fog of muddy eyes. such frenzy. like edda’s sister ruby. whose voice was always zip-zip zipping. throat erupting with words. a pulse that buzzed in edda’s ears. and only ceased when ruby took glass on her tongue. melting it with her breath. the vaulted roof of her mouth bending it round. unlatch the lips. to release the rose-colored lens. that mends the muddy eyes. that colors the world. until the glass outlives its time. and the eyes get muddier still.

father babcock—singing his way through all the hymnals. kneeling in pew number eight. the singing such work he's split a seam in his robe. the flesh of his elbow pokes through. he sings to sister maurice who rubs oil into the altar. he sings to crucified jesus. and one-dimensional mary, piecemeal, soldered with lead, spider-line crack splitting her face in two. three sheep on a hill behind her. the sun intersects the hill, shines green on the bald of his head. a cap like peter pan. all he needs is a feather. bathed in the green of the window. singing a string of hallelujahs. a moth cries for help in the rafters. he looks but can't find it in all the wood.

opal one—fond of the big machine's rumble. purring needle. warm light from its tiny sun. when she comes close to her mother's fingers, edda blows at her shadow and opal is swept away, suspended on breath from her lungs. whisked to the window. where two little girls excavate worms from the dirt. opal might like to uncork a worm from the ground herself. but she is not a sister. so she stays inside and goads the needle. with her nine-hundred thread-count flesh. today too close. the tip of the needle catches her skirt. leg stitched into the seam, sewn into the robe. dark in the crease of the hem. ecclesiastical velvet, a mask that muffles her tongue. saliva leaks into velvet. cloth transposes to moss under her head.

edda—furious whir of the needle. manic winging of opal's legs. the buzzing resurrects ruby. ruby five years dead. poor ruby. glass in her lungs, shards splintering into her blood. remember ruby clenching her fists. remember ruby pursing her chin. everything tight because everything hurt. because glass was etching her insides, burrowing into her organs. little razors under her skin. but edda didn't believe her, told her to stop her clenching or she'd grind her teeth to nubs. she was always shushing her sister. saying still those pulsing lips. now no sister to shush. only snot erupting from nostrils. spittle caught on her tongue. sogginess steams her lenses. and she doesn't see opal under her fingers. hears the thread knot. hears the cloth catch. then in the silence. the wind through the window. a bird in the mulberry tree.

antoinette—mud. mud. mud. squishy squish in the hands. scrippity scrape on the legs. sands the bump of the elbow. rubs fur from little girl arms. softens the skin. eases the itch. covers sister's rosy smell. rosy sister squeals, keep the dirt to yourself. so dirty sister does. mud

on the worms instead. worms weave through the tines of her fingers. stretch over her palms like cello strands. their bellies smooth on her cheek. the pentamerous beating of hearts seeps into her skin, does jigs on her tongue. where's opal? dirty sister needs a partner to dance to the rat-tat-tat of the worms. gone from the window. nobody's sister. drop a worm in the jar for opal. opal dances alone.

edda—tangles and knots under her fingers. the pit-pit patter gone. floor space quiet. except the breath of the dust. everything still like rubble. except the bird perched in the mulberry tree. spreading her wings. puffing the fringe of her throat. hysterical chirping. manic scissoring beak. tizzied creature. like opal. dear god. where's opal? has opal turned into this bird? oh ruby. sad suffering sister. edda's comeuppance earned. come back, edda calls to opal. the tree shifts its branches. the bird startles, leaps out of the tangle. the sky swallows her up. edda lurches. thinks exit. but her leg is snagged in velvet, velvet caught under the chair. cheek slams to the floor. rose-colored lenses splinter. eyes begotten by ruby. bowed by the might of her tongue. a shower of rose-colored seeds disperses. color leaks from the world. and edda escapes the house.

opal one—mother crashing down. mother gone the house. opal all alone. hung from the weave of scalloped threads. stitches pierce the toes, and cuff the bone to the cloth. lick the dark cocoon. lap the velvet smooth. fed on the juice of the tongue, velvet blooms into a coppice of moss. mossy meadows creep. over brown-gray skin. weasel under the arms. wrap wreaths around the womb. hold the daughter tight. rock the daughter still. cup mossy hands to her eyes, but leave the ears unblocked. let her listen to the rattle of rose-colored seeds. shells split open. seeds let loose a chorus of tiny screams.

helen—shaking a jar of worms. the glass blurs pink with skin. antoinette holds the spoon that does the digging. antoinette with dirt on her tongue. dirty sister. wash her down with the hose. then tack her to the clothesline. hung by her dirty hair. dirty sister points to edda. edda rushing down the road. to see the jar of worms. is that opal? she asks the children. antoinette shakes her head no. edda looks at the sisters. exactly the same. except one holds a jar of skin to her chest and the other holds fistfuls of dirt to hers. helen leads, and an-

toinette follows. they walk and edda goes too. quick little heel-to-toe steps. a parade marching. cobbled road to cobbled church.

father babcock—such a day. a moth lost in the rafters. edda's opal lost in the clouds. terrible trouble. what to be done. first, the abducted girl. ripped through a tear in the sky. send sister maurice to staple it shut. then rip a hymn from the hymnal. the one illogically transposed. too many sharps to be sung. scribble message to minor angel. *send second daughter. send soon.* fold into a bird. set out on the wind. such work, clerical robe splits up the back. never mind. the sewing's halted. light a candle instead. now bless the fretful mother. bless the jar of worms. and also this: the dirt on dirty sister's tongue.

edda—home again, but no opal. rose-colored seeds sprout rose-colored fruit on the floor. velvet rots to moss on the table. moss spills from metal mouth of broken machine. moss covered needle. moss covered thread. everything tangled. gather it up in a bundle. stow it away in the cedar chest at the foot of ruby's old bed. chest filled with lace. dowry for damaged daughters. one with muddy eyes. the other with glass in her lungs. lace knit with delicate fingers. fanatical mother. who knit with the bones of birds. her thread the silk of spiders. so many harvested webs.

opal one—dark in the thick of the moss. cedar smell feeds belly noises. hushes hiccups. cedar seeps into her tongue. ruby's room with ruby's ghost. mother's voice through the wall. singing the hymn sent away with the bird. opal wriggles around in the moss. moss holds tight to her leg. flexes her toes. reaches her hands through the lichen. gathers fistfuls of lace buried below. pattern of knots in her fingers. grandmother's worries like braille on her skin. worried the birds will forget the maps inked on their cerebellums. the clouds slip from their perches. moths knock their spines apart butting against the moon. so many worries wear opal out. smell of cedar swaddles. dear opal. sleep long, sleep well.

helen—stars recite insomniac sermons. treetops moan from holding so many leaves. owls cooing to ivy. ivy tapping morse code messages into the brick. helen tiptoes through yards, avoiding pockets of space where language passes through darkness. looking for opals. white rocks with rainbows glittering under their skin. granite pebbles

sprinkled in gardens. almost opal. the best she can get. pick prettiest pebbles. put in pockets. bring to edda's stoop. leave them with other gifts: mulberry pie. basket of fruit. gold leaf bible. and something left by dirty sister. her arm unstitched, fist full of dirt.

edda—wakes with ache in her organs. crawls out of bed. feeds ache with rose-colored fruit from the floor. thinks of ruby. glass lungs and glass intestines. vessels of blood a lattice of crystal, brittle between her bones. icicle hair breaking off behind her. feet crumbling on cobbles. glass teeth raining out of her mouth. coffin a pile of shimmering shards. for days, edda watched over the corpse. stroking the shards of shiny sister. finger pricked, sliver of sister entered her blood. grew into a daughter. now the daughter lost. edda goes to the door. but no opal. just offerings. who else but the clouds? hurl pie and fruit and bible back. the sky gives guilty gifts. gather the pebbles. gather the arm with a fistful of dirt. good gifts, come inside and sit on opal's bed.

father babcock—heavy bellied clouds graze shadowed steeple. stones in churchyard shiver. buried bodies call father babcock out. buried bodies wearing church clothes. can't get church clothes wet. father babcock with wheelbarrow full of umbrellas. pinwheel colors. sister maurice helps wedge them into the ground. look, the graves wear little fedoras. little yarmulke caps.

watch out, sister maurice. that cloud's dripping soupspoons. a fork hits father babcock's head. it's edda on the steeple. fist full of kitchen utensils. hurling cutlery at the clouds. a war on the thief that stole her daughter. a daughter made from velvet and glass and guilt. sister maurice, huddle under the yellow umbrella. keep close. we'll wait it out. a butter knife reels through the air, pierces the sky. gold leaf pages leak out of the clouds. catch one on your tongue. the gospel according to mark.

antoinette—gold leaf pages raining. raincloud raining fruit. dig faster clumsy elbow. scoop harder wrong-handed hand. the one-armed girl is saving the world. dirty girl, you better hurry. or the worms will drown in psalms. have to shovel them out. helen, hold the jar a little closer. helen, help dirty sister dig, soupspoon for a spade. two hands only holding. hardly helping. lazy girl. now too many psalms in the soil. pink worms bloat under the weight of the word.

knock Helen over the head. lazy sister, you let them drown. swollen worms split out of their skin. tackle selfish sister. scoop out her ear with the silver spoon. selfish sister lies in the grass and yelps. tell her, still those pulsing lips. blessed be dirty sister. so says the word of the worms. go forth dirty sister. with helen's hearing hidden. in a jar of muddled skin.

opal one—slumber slipping away. roused by a hum in her ear. grandmother's voice soft like steam. grandmother's voice thick like milk. opal's tongue so dry. she suckles the moss, pulls water from its plumes. there there, sweet girl. ruby's fingers in her hair. stroke her head. opal feels the glass. little pointed stars. quills that prick the scalp. shush, ruby says to the stars. allay that burning glow.

father babcock—travels cobbled street. umbrella for a head. umbrella knocks away shiny missiles. protects the tattered robe. and sacerdotal crown. sabbatical leave from cobbled parish. to halt crusade of mournful mother. launched on odious clouds. father babcock stands on stoop, hand lifted to the door. paper bird falls through fingers. lands on jar at father's feet. jar with an ear cupped in a cradle of worms. look, it's solomon's bird with wisdom at his beak. father babcock reads the bit on its wing. bird advises break the girls. and share their holy skin. father babcock runs. back to cobbled church. sounds the message from the bells. hailing christian mothers. with fleshly daughters in their homes. split the bread of your wombs.

antoinette—waterlogged worms. entrails spilled through a rift in their seams. to mend: roll garbled flesh against softest stone. roll with the palm of the hand. roll until flesh is smooth. then drop them back in the dirt. you'll have to mend them alone. selfish sister sleeping. missing absent ear. no girls to help dirty sister repair the damage. all girls tucked in bed. nursing open wounds. mothers line the sidewalk. baskets on their arms. bringing gifts for grieving mother. unstitched from goodly daughters. stalwart soldiers, get used to phantom limbs.

edda—second daughter. laid out on opal's bed. pieces puzzled into a body. parts of goodly daughters. head of little lamb. stitch the parts together. fill gaps with rose-colored fruit. fill hollow space with pebbles and worms. stitch on eyebrows. stitch on dimples. drip honey in

her mouth. kiss her downy forehead. hold her trembling hand. she is opal too.

opal one—sweetness seeps into ruby's room. crawls through key-hole. into cedar chest. smell of fruit clammers into nostrils, rouses opal. stirs the sap in her stomach. pricks the freckles on her tongue. so hungry she nibbles the robe. so hungry she bites the lace. she eats and she listens. quiet in the chest. the ghosts are sleeping. but there are nighttime sounds in the house. a clatter in the hallway. slanted rhythm of hobbled feet. the clunk of mistuned bones. not at all the delicate patter of opal's delicate feet.

opal two—seeds rattle in her belly. pebbles clink against her ribs. percussive girl on mismatched legs. she shambles over cobbles. limbs aligned at awkward angles. matted tufts of woolly hair. all the girls throw pebbles, chase her into the mulberry tree. perched aloft, watching the clouds. remembers dirt trickling down her chest. remembers granite marbles in her fists. and also the heat of a mouth. grains of a tongue pressing the body round, and bleeding roseate swirls into the skin.

edda—opal in a tree. rose-colored fruit swelling through the house. clouds ogle second daughter. mother shoos away the clouds. ushers daughter down. come, help mother harvest fruit. pluck bulging berries from the stems. squeeze fruit in iron pot. feed fire. add honey. stir until juice leaks from your thumbs. ladle into teacups. serve to girls with missing parts. watch them gulp. juice dribbles down their chins. stack teacups into tower. carry tower into house. so much work, mending malcontented neighbors. wears on mishmash body. stresses newly anchored limbs. rose-colored sap seeps from stitching, sweetens seams, scents the house. rose-colored worry seeps into the pillows. drips down the eaves. stains the walls.

opal one—crowded in a box with grandmother's worries, ruby's ghost, mountain of moss. stiffness in the limbs. heaviness in the throat. moss for breakfast. lace for lunch. sounds of mother and daughter for dinner. indigestible bits: harden to glass in the lungs.

father babcock—sunday sermon. parish full. mothers and damaged daughters, goodly glow around their heads. bonnets and capes to hide the missing pieces. munificent daughters, who give of them-

selves. tiny sips of wine. melt the bread on their tongues. father babcock presses prayers into their foreheads. closes his eyes and feels their breath on his nose. his robe, a gauze of tears and tatters. a moth weaves in and out of the holes.

antoinette—paper bird lands on finger. chirps. where are the worms? how to explain. the worms couldn't be mended. all that rolling. squashed their little heads. chirps. where is sister? sister making bonnet to cover empty ear. sister doesn't speak to antoinette. chirps. do i look like a bird? antoinette shakes her head no. unfolds it wing by wing. a message. *rose-colored house. tea at noon.* antoinette shakes off the dirt. puts on pretty dress. sews spoons to the hem. metal clinks against her knees. now she sounds like opal two. opal two can be her sister. they can clink and clack together. every day. through cobbled streets. go on, and clatter to her house. underfoot: the smoothness of stones. overhead: a paper flock of folded birds.

opal two—damaged girls, it's time for tea. edda's gone for honey. opal two passes the cups. the girls sit in a circle, skirts whispering at their knees. a one-legged girl pours tea into her hollow stub. the one beside her (noseless) blows steam away from her cup. antoinette goes tinkle tinkle. her spoons clink as she sips. earless sister scowls. swats at dirty sister. topples rose-colored platter from opal's hands. the cake goes splat. the platter splinters. rose-colored seeds disperse, fall at their feet, grow into fruit. earless sister hurls cake and fruit at opal. the others follow and opal flees the room. pebbles knock in her belly. seeds rattle in her chest. antoinette chases opal, juice dripping from her lips. she rounds the corner. but opal's gone. which door hides the second sister? the right or the left?

edda—jar of honey in her hands. just in time for tea. but all the little girls gone. except the one wearing spoons. rose-colored fruit drips from the ceiling. pink frosting splatters the walls. teacups toppled. earl grey rivers run around archipelagos of crumbs. where's opal? edda asks. opal one or opal two? either, edda says. antoinette shrugs, and the spoons hit together like bells.

opal one—ruckus in the house. smashing plates. thumping feet. the door of ruby's room screeches and slams. now the rattle of mismatched limbs. a sliver of light at the top of the chest. the lid bangs

shut, and a girl falls through the moss. slips through pockets of lace and ruby's ghost and grandmother's leftover thoughts. comes to rest by brown-gray sister's head. fingers touch her scrunched little face. knees collide with spidery legs. opal two licks her sister's skin. belly hungry for flesh. just a little bite. from the gauze of brown-gray wings.

35.

A Plain Kiss (Letters to Allison, 2006)

by Jamie Quatro

1.

Tell a dream and people quit listening. Will you quit if I tell you mine?

I'm sitting on a pew in a sanctuary full of worshippers. The minister is delivering the homily, and I'm playing the violin. I intend to create a soft background music to the text, which is from the Old Testament—desert wanderings, tabernacle. I play in a minor key. From his elevated dais the minister looks down at me.

Thank you, he says. You play very well. But your gift is drowning out the gospel.

I place the violin in my lap.

When the boys have nightmares—Parker about dead parents, Winston about robbers—I tell them: we dream about what we *fear* will happen, not what *will* happen. I want to turn them away from the notion of the prophetic dream. But can I be honest? Sometimes I just repeat the things Mom told us and hope they're true. Those prophetic dreams are all over the Bible. Nebuchadnezzar. Peter's sheet of animals. Or Joseph's dreams: *Give him the name Jesus. Hie thee to Egypt.* “Drowning out the gospel?” That sounds prophetic. But what gospel? It was the *Old* Testament. Drowning it out for others, or for myself? And *what* gift?

I heard from Dad last week—he sold two of the paintings you left in the Dumpster to a gallery in Santa Monica. And one in La Jolla, on Prospect!

Everyone wants your work now. You need to know this, Ali: you were the one with a gift.

2.

Did I ever tell you about Parker’s violin lessons? Eight free sessions from a college student who needed a child for her pedagogy class. In eight lessons, Parker never bowed the violin. Instead, the teacher showed him how to lift tissues from the ground by curling his thumb and middle finger into an *o* to get the feel of the bow hold. After mastering tissue, Parker graduated to crumpling newspaper to build strength in his hand. The final lesson, I held an empty paper towel tube while Parker bowed through it to practice the proper angulation of the wrist.

Parker also had to learn the note names of the open strings: G, D, A, E. I made up an acronym to help him remember: Good Dogs All Eat. Like the treble clef—Every Good Boy Does Fine—although, according to the violin teacher, today’s kids are demanding edgier acronyms: Empty Garbage Before Dad Flips, Even George Bush Drives Fast.

Before sending the violin back to the music store, I handed it to Parker.

Bow away, I said. Scrape up a ruckus.

But neither of us knew to tighten the knob that pulls the horsehair taut, nor did we find the round chunk of rosin, hidden in a plush red compartment inside the case. Parker bowed and bowed and never struck a note.

3.

I’m thinking about joining this program. It’s for people who aren’t recovering anything, and want to talk about the things they’re not recovering from.

For example: I am considering having an affair. In this program, I could talk about what it would be like to recover from it.

Does it shock you, that I would consider such a thing? It shocks

me. The older I get, the more I shock myself. Sometimes I make a mess in our bathroom—powdered makeup on the floor, soap left in a puddle in the sink—just to see if Daniel will clean it up. So far, he always does. He says it gives him *joy* to serve me this way.

The program encourages people who worry about the fact that they have nothing from which to recover to look back and see what they can dig up. Think of things you'd be embarrassed for anyone else to know. Write them down. Here's what I've come up with so far:

- 1) I tried bulimia for a month in high school. I used those long Benders padded hair rollers instead of my fingers, because they were soft, and because I didn't want to get vomit on my hand.
- 2) I mark up library books in blue ink. I believe that I'm helping the next person see what's *essential* in the text. I don't return the books until the notice comes from the collection agency. Then I buy the books, because I feel guilty about returning them all marked up.
- 3) When I practice the piano, I imagine someone's breath is taken away.
- 4) My last semester at UCLA, Dr. Muller gave me an A for four independent study units in eighteenth-century poetry, a course for which I never read a page or wrote a word. She gave me the A, she said, because she'd seen enough of my work to know that, had I written the papers, they *would* have been As. I promised I'd do the assignments over the summer. She lent me her books and, as I turned to leave her office, she pulled me back and kissed me on the mouth. I returned the books along with a letter apologizing for never having finished, and thanking her for the grade, ten years later.

If I had told you these things, would you have written *She is the good sister, I am the bad* on the mirror? In the bathroom, where your roommate found you, pills scattered on the tile around your head—would you have called me?

I want to keep telling you. I want to tell you about this affair I'm thinking about having.

I have considered it twice, adultery. (Let's use the weighty word; "affair" just trips off the tongue, doesn't it?) Both times I confessed the temptation to Daniel. The first time it was in grad school. Jeremy, one of Daniel's MBA buddies, said he'd go pick up the pizza for their study group, which was meeting at our apartment. I said I'd go along to get drinks. When he parked we didn't get out of the car. Jeremy pointed to the moonlight on the hood of the truck. Bright, he said. I leaned over and put my head in his lap so I could look up through the windshield. He stroked my bangs. *Daniel's a good man*, he said. That ended things.

The second time, I was thirty-three and the man was twenty-eight. Latino. His son and Winston were on the same mini-mites hockey team. At one of the games in Conejo, he told me, in my ear, that he'd dreamed about making love to me. I'd imagined the same thing—was imagining it even then.

I said, Daniel's a good man.

When I told Daniel about Jeremy, he punched the closet in our apartment and left a hole. When I told him about the Latino, he put Parker and Winston in the car and drove all the way up to Ventura.

Later, in bed, this is what Daniel said. Both times, this is what he said: *Show me what you would have done with him, if you had.*

I showed him. And I thought, How could I cheat on a man like this?

4.

I know what I look like on the outside. A perfect marriage, unstained faith. But I want to tell you something I can't tell people here (we left San Marino; Daniel took a transfer to Chattanooga, buckle on the Bible belt): I am a double-minded woman, unstable in all I do.

I joined that program, by the way. We're supposed to read books about people doing shocking things so that we experience them vicariously and, as a result, feel less like we ourselves are boring. It's cheap therapy.

Remember the matching Bibles Mom gave us? What happened

to yours? I looked everywhere in your apartment, after. I still have mine, binding has split, but I hold the two halves together when I read. That double-minded thing is James on prayer.

In my case, the older I get, the further away from double-minded I become. I worry that, without any help, I'll be entirely single-minded. On the wrong side. Purity of heart is not to will one thing. Kierkegaard was wrong. Purity of heart is a lost cause: we will and will and will things, some of which align with God and some of which fly in his holy face, but worrying about this is *also* a sin. Otherwise, why did his son die? Wasn't it exactly so that I could rest easy about my lapsarian will?

Lapsarian. Now I'll show you how it is with me. I look up the word. It's not in my dictionary, so I look up *lap*. It has either to do with a large genus of rough-pubescent herbs (*lappula*), or, more likely, it derives from the Latin *lapsus*—fault, error, fall, slide. Back-sliding. Or the Greek *laparos*—slack, loose. Unstable in all we do. “Lap dancing” is the next entry: “seminude performer gyrates on lap of customer.” I look up gyrate, from the Greek *gyros*, rounded. Rounding my lapsarian hips. It is one of the shocking things I've never tried, and therefore desire to try, against the will of God if it is not done overtop of Daniel.

But I want to lap dance on this man I've met.

After you'd left Bryan and were living back at Malibu Horizon (you were painting those giant butterflies on panels, which I found under your bed—I've kept them all), you said during a family session that I was a Pharisee. Hanging on to the exterior trappings of religion out of fear. You were right. Even *I'm* impressed with my exterior. But it's the old whitewashed tomb. When I was twenty I thought my mind was a walled city. Now I know it's a dark highway to which anything can obtain access. The only thing I'm learning is not to trust it.

Do you want to hear more? I want to tell you more.

- 1) Email from this man excites me. That bolded subject line. Sometimes I ask Daniel to hide my computer. He always puts it in the cupboard with the leftover buckets of paint.

2) Remember that bikini I bought on our Young-life trip to Newport? I shoplifted it in a boutique on Balboa—with \$200 cash and Dad’s American Express in my purse. The owner caught me. She called the police, but decided not to press charges when our team leader told her I was a doctor’s daughter, from an upstanding family. When I paid for the suit, the owner wrapped it in pink tissue and tied it with raffia.

5.

Yesterday I dialed your apartment in the Palisades. I imagined, had you been there to answer, you would have left paint smudges on the receiver.

The man’s name is Kurt. I met him at the Chickamauga Battle-field ten-miler in October, right after we moved; we finished the race together, a personal record for both of us. He’s got dark hair, like Daniel’s, but curly. He lives in Nashville—ABD in theological studies at Vanderbilt. He’s married, no kids. Neither of us is looking for anything. We’re both in love with our spouses.

A group of us from the track club is training for the Country Music Marathon, and Kurt drives down every other weekend to run the river front with us. We distance ourselves from the rest of the group. We discuss sullied words like “perfection,” how it has retained its original sense—a property of something that has been *completed*—only in music (a perfect cadence) and grammar (the perfect tense). We discuss the ontological versus cosmological arguments for the existence of God; we discuss causation, whether the universe exists *in esse* like a house (deism, Aristotle) or *in fieri*, liquid in a vessel (theism, Aquinas).

And then he says things that choke me up so that I have to stop and pretend to tie my shoe. How his grandmother died with her arms up, gasping “Jesus, Jesus, my sweet Jesus.” How waiting for God to answer prayer is like standing in line at the farmer’s market. The farmer is your best friend, but he’s helping other people and seems not to notice you standing there, waiting. He’s handing out sunflowers and honey and fat eggplants and zucchini, and here you

are, his best friend, and he's ignoring you. You turn to leave and finally, *finally* you hear your name. Wait, he says, and pulls out a basket of perfect grapes: the very thing you were there for. He says, I was saving these for you.

One evening around the holidays, we stopped to stretch in front of a shop window that had a Christmas tree decorated with beaded oranges and lemons. The ornaments sparkled, and I said the tree looked beautiful, that the fruit was a noble attempt to mimic nature. He said that decorating a dying tree as if it were alive was an appropriate emblem for today's church.

Our collective moral collapse goes way beyond personal ethics, he said. He was stretching his quads. He said: People say Christianity's just about a personal relationship with Jesus, but no one talks about rebuilding the ruins of God's world, about getting politically active—an entire continent dying of AIDS while American evangelicals are hunkered down trying not to commit any gross moral failings.

I don't know. I think I want to have an affair with him because I'm in love with God. My body is so mixed up with my soul I'm not sure there's a difference anymore.

6.

What was it like, to wash your hands of religion? I think I know what it would be like for me. I'm running, it's hot out, I move to the shaded side of the road. The run gets easier.

I had a dream about one of your paintings. The colors had collapsed into the bottom of the canvas, all mixed up in swirls. But the suggestion of the form was still there; if I squinted my eyes, I could make out what the painting used to be. There was this tiny thread running through the canvas and hanging off the bottom like the string on a slack puppet. If someone pulled the string, the image would right itself, the collapsed colors would disentangle and lock back into their proper places like stained glass. (That night I had read *The Human Body* to Winston; when he pulled the tabs, the bones, organs, and muscles slid into place.) The solution was already part of the painting. Someone just needed to pull the string.

That day on Westward Beach, the year Mom died. I was twelve,

you were ten. Dad was throwing ice cubes at me, a plastic tumbler full. He was really pelting them, sitting low in his chair, wearing headphones. I took it. When one hit me in the head you knocked the glass onto the sand and ran, swimming out past the breakers. I sat up—I could see you out there, treading water, sunlight on your wet hair, yellow tie around your neck. You were giving me the thumbs-up. Did you wonder, then, why I didn't follow you? Why I lay back on my towel?

I needed his love more than yours.

7.

Today Kurt and I are supposed to meet for a run, lunch afterward. It's not a regular track club day. It's Tuesday. Daniel's in Orlando on a consulting engagement. The boys will be in school.

How do I know he wants to commit adultery? When we bump elbows, I say I have a cramp just so I can stop to catch my breath after the surge. When we're stretching on the pedestrian bridge over the river, I hold on to the rail with both hands to keep myself from leaning against him, slipping my hands into his and asking him to pray for my purity of mind. Maybe I'm the only one thinking these things, but his coming today makes me doubt it.

I wish I could say that all I want to do with him is have sex. That would be the shocking thing to say. But from where I am, I don't think it's possible to go directly *there*. Adultery happens by degrees. I lean against his chest. Maybe try a kiss. A plain kiss would be enough—I think it would startle me back into faithfulness, the feel of someone else's lips after fifteen years. Wouldn't Daniel forgive me, for just a plain kiss?

The truth is, I'm not sure I'm even capable of such a gross moral failing as adultery. I think Daniel sees my body in palimpsest, current breasts superimposed over the breasts I had at nineteen. What would my breasts look like to someone seeing them for the first time, now, after two children? Could I let Kurt touch my C-section scar, when Daniel was the one who saw the incision open to reveal a still breathless newborn? When he was there to squeeze my hand while the nurse pinched out the staples?

Daniel takes the boys fishing at the pond next to their school; he

shows them how to release the fish, first moving them back and forth underwater a few times to circulate the water through the gills. He tells them never to *throw* the fish back into the water: “Reentry can be disorienting.” After a fight, he sends me emails from work that say things like *Sometimes it’s bliss, sometimes it’s blah. Always it’s you.* We fight about sex now, because he wants to more than I do. I say it’s because I’m so *satisfied*, but it’s because, when we make love, it’s Kurt’s hands I feel, his voice I hear in my ear, and I feel so guilty about this I’d rather not have sex. But Daniel feels better about himself, and about us, when we do. So I end up telling myself that the sin of the fantasy is less destructive than the sin of depriving him.

It’s adorable, how Daniel worships you, my friend Eileen says.

But I want to be the worshipper. The one whose breath is taken away.

8.

Do you remember what a burden it was, to see your own sinfulness all the time in front of you? The remedy, they told us, was this: for every glance at your own sin, glance twenty times at the cross. Every sin you commit will make the cross appear bigger. The more sin you see in yourself, the more thankful for Christ you become.

This is what is supposed to happen in the life of a true believer.

Dad coming into our room to say good night. The hard, wet kisses all over our faces and necks; the way he cried and said mom’s name. I would sing *This Old Man* in my head to see how many verses I could get through. When it was your turn—those times you spit in his face and he pulled you up by the hair and said *ungrateful*—do you know what I was thinking? This old man, he played eleven, he played knick-knack up to heaven.

9.

I know you thought I’d never have a dog, with three cats in the house. But we got a yellow Lab puppy when we moved. (We actually have *land* now.) Here’s what I’ve learned since we got Hank: raise a cat, you learn about cats; raise a dog, you learn about yourself. Yesterday, from the kitchen, I watched Hank dragging this giant branch across the yard toward Daniel. It was so undignified, the joy of a retriever, retrieving. He ran to Daniel in a crooked lope, head angled,

intent on proving that he was worthy of the call. And then the eager bounce away and turn back, driven by delight to do again and again what he was bred to do. He was dog fully *dog*, too absorbed in the joy of his task to think about dignity, or love—he attained them for lack of trying.

Augustine says worship of God is the thing for which we were created, the only thing that will bring joy. And C. S. Lewis says (you won't mind if I quote him, will you?) our desire for heaven is "the secret signature of each soul, the incommunicable and unappeasable want, the thing we desired before we met our wives or made our friends or chose our work, and which we shall still desire on our deathbeds—when the mind no longer knows wife or friend or work."

Every now and then, I feel this longing.

More often, I long to feel Kurt's whiskers on my inner thighs.

10.

I remembered something else. Your rehearsal dinner at Geoffrey's. Dad never even looked at Bryan—who I know, now, was stoned, his shock of long unwashed hair pulled into a low ponytail—and that night when you said *Dad hates him*, sitting on the edge of your mattress, a joint quivering between the tips of your fingers, I saw the reason you were getting married. I should have said something. Instead I flushed your bag of weed down the toilet—because I thought that's what a good sister would do.

11.

We've done it, Kurt and I. This is how it happened.

We met at the bridge, ran a couple of slow miles. Very little talking. I said, You up for this today? And he said, Let's go back and have that lunch. We *walked* back to the bridge and I realized we'd never walked before and it was incredibly sensual, the walking, it gave me time to experience our accustomed route in slow motion, to see and smell and hear things that, running, we'd never seen or heard or smelled, and then we came to the tunnel at Ross's Landing.

There wasn't even a plain kiss.

But when you thought I'd done it, was there a moment where your heart released me?

Reality is, I made a fool of myself. I leaned into him. He took me by the shoulders and pushed me away.

People need to see your faithfulness to God, he said, more than you need to see if God will remain faithful to you.

He spoke of Daniel, Parker, Winston, my parents, Daniel's parents, all the people who know us, who receive our Christmas cards.

And he said, I'm sorry if I've misled you.

12.

Listen to me, all these letters. I think I've made such *progress*, when I don't even know if I'm capable of loving my own family. The reading to them, the snuggling, the driving to and from this practice and that music lesson; my delight in their achievements and their smiles; the clean, decorated home, the sexual fidelity—I don't think any of it is for them.

I never went to meet Kurt for that Tuesday run and lunch. (You might have known from that speech I wrote for him.) I stayed home and uprooted every invasive plant I could find around the border of our property. How's that for cliché? For trite symbolism?

Please don't stop listening to me.

I've decided not to run with the track club anymore. I told Daniel about Kurt and asked him to forgive me.

For what? he said. You didn't *do* anything.

For thoughts, I said. For considering.

For being human, he said.

And when we made love, it was comfortable. Predictable. Safe.

I'll never be shocking, Ali. Nothing beyond the ordinary temptations. My attempt to prove anything to you only shows I'm too invested in God to disengage. How could I leave him, when he saw every mistake I'd ever make before I made them and said, It's okay, I've got your back? An incomparable burden, an incomparable relief.

Maybe this is a temporary thing. A postponement. But until the singing sun stops turning me loose—until I stop noticing the sublime—I belong to him. And to Daniel. And (I swear) to you.

Would you still be here if I had told you these things?

Love me again, please, won't you?

36.

Plank

by Kayden Kross

The sleep would spit you out into mornings that were so harsh you would stay behind with the rustle of the tent, all of the canvas and the weatherproofing, still slick with dream and the sound of the sleeping bag rubbing on itself. Then you would know where you were and slowly come back into the world. You'd feel the rocks beneath you through your spine, feel like a princess high on a stack of mattresses, discerning, feel like a cowboy in the muscle, like a pauper and a king and every necessary piece of a conflicting whole. You feel your part in it. You feel like your roots might go straight back through the fabric and to the ground.

You feel the heat and where it ends, right at the line of your body, hard where it stayed on the surface and blurred where your energy absorbed into the dirt. You feel constant. You note the outline as proof of yourself when you shift your shoulders to the side and listen to the voices through the tent, close, close enough to bind together and bring themselves back to the source, to drop their guards and tell their stories, mix their children, lay the world out to dry by the fire and stare openly over the flame. You hear them with their pots and their pans banging together, mixed and matched, their coffee that you're too young to need. You hear the water being poured from one thing to the next and you know it's freezing or it's boiling and it came straight up out of the land. You know that it matters. You hear

the dogs barking, one, two, three, four, one for every family, dog-sized dogs, the hardware on their collars hitting a high note where they spin and carrying for miles on the clean lines of clean air. You can name each person by the footstep, by the motions muffled in their shirtsleeves and the layers underneath. You can hear their buttons done up to the neck.

You turn over and you listen again. Now it is to the breathing of your brother, your sister, shallow and untroubled, sweet the way the mouth falls open and stays wet. You hear the teeth coming through the gums and you remember how you were there for the birth, the screaming and the wet, the first broken bone, screaming and wet, twisted ankles, your kisses on the stitches and scraped skin, screaming and wet, perfect life trying to stay in place with heels dug into the dirt as it's pulled along, screaming and wet, screaming and wet. You want to reach down and wrap the wounds with yourself and the way a child breathes with your same blood rushing over his lungs you know you would. You would and you would never look back.

You hear the murmur of the voices again over the pans and flannel shirts, quieted for you and the children and other children in other tents with their own sweetness and their sleep. They quiet the dogs too and move the kettle just before it squeals, they heat the gristle of the meat and hot slick balls slide and pop from the pan. They think of you when they unpack small plastic plates, the odd ends of old cutlery, heat chocolate over a gas flame with their foreheads tilted into each other when they speak, their voices passed on the same breath, eye contact dropped while they watch the camp and breastbones turned to the world because they would fight it for you. They would fight it and they would never look back.

You shock yourself now with the way that you are. You've watched clothes float above the ankle in a season and you've watched boxes overflow with the things that you used to be, sloughed off, hauled away with thick-tipped markers taken to the flaps and sealed shut with tape in the garage. You didn't eat green this time last year and now you take your sugar a little less sweet. You sweat. You made a true friend and it took time. You've grappled with honor and fell short and you're aware now that you can do wrong, real wrong, things beyond

a child's wrong and things you can't change. Some days you feel like every next step forces you to cause pain or ease it and the best you can throw at it is a blind guess. You miss. You've killed things because you thought it would help and others for sport. You've been drug in yourself, screaming and wet, thrown down in the dirt with the words that you couldn't keep. You grow. Then some days you know what's right on your own and you wonder how.

Yesterday you made a marker in your memory when you thought you'd be safe if you stopped at the shore. You stood with your toes to the water and watched it lap and pool where they spread and watched the sand inch up and back again, never making progress but somehow already closer to landing somewhere else, becoming bone dry but never settled. You lurched. You watched a stick float in the distance and needed an anchor, something to stay in place to show you that it could. For one long low breath you were able to hold on but then when you blinked it was somewhere else too. You exhaled. The wind moved and the water washed over you again and already the trees were a little higher. You threw your head back and faced the sky and watched the way the green never caught up to the blue, watched the way they spun when you tried to stay too still. You realized that it would all be gone in a moment and you pressed your lids hard over your eyes and flattened it down and made it clear. You knew it was worth holding on to because something new was happening and this was the last of another thing but you didn't know what. It was new like the first time you noticed, really noticed, the things that were hung on the walls of your home. The first time you saw that other people had lives outside of yours, everyone had a man named father and every mother was a daughter too.

You suck in your air suddenly, drowning, bobbing your head between the lake and tent. Then you are present. You count the hours backward to the stick moving away from you, impossible to pin down, cold washing over again. You face the way you can't look head-on at the sky for too long, the way each time you examine it there is a larger gap. You count how much closer you have come to the next ten years in the span of a breath. To twenty years. To thirty and thirty more and then you see each night's sleep as the plank that you will walk

into the morning's change. You always knew but had never believed that you will grow eye level to your father. The children will grow out of themselves and more will come and then some will belong to you. They will pour from you and you will hollow yourself out trying to tuck them back in. You are aware, irrevocably, of things bigger than yourself. Bigger than your parents and your summer, cold things, opportunistic and unjust things. Things that don't stop at the crosswalk on your street.

There is an impatience now with what you don't know and what you will learn. You fear you will learn why poor men go to the front lines of the rich man's war, why fur doesn't come cheap, why strangers shouldn't need your name and skin color changes at the train tracks. You will learn that not all dogs die quickly and that whole countries can be drug in by the cat, left on the back porch, all of the pieces fluttering and broke, your fault because you lived there. You will learn that right and wrong floats like a stick in the water and the waves you make moving toward it are the same that push it away.

When the tent wall falls down beneath the zipper and the morning spills in with the smell of bacon and soot you turn your face to your mother and for the first time see that she is flawed.

37.

Poof

by Joseph Scapellato

My nephew said to me, “What’s your favorite thing?”

He was five or six, a crazy-haired smirker tall enough to tug my shirt. He tugged my shirt. I scooped him up, gave a goofy look, and waited for him to get that I’d given my answer.

“Speak up,” he said.

Speak up—exactly what his ma would say whenever she had you where she wanted, at the wrong end of her questions. Awful questions, the kind she used to cut you open. A lousy woman, but there she was, a piece of her in my nephew’s throat—my nephew whose fate it was to turn eighteen, get good-looking, and talk, spilling everything he thought he had, grabbing at my arm to tell me he’d been cooked down and carbonized, was needing weight, real weight, the kind you carried in your chest. My nephew who would borrow my van (my suggestion), pack it with his buddies (my suggestion), and hit the road in May, in the summer before college was supposed to put him and us and all his friends in separate places.

His ma would slap me on the ear and scream, “You think we think you didn’t know?”

I didn’t know how long, how heavy: he would come back that August by himself on a bus, broke and sunburnt, a scar like a stain on his neck.

“Speak up!” he said, and tugged with both tiny hands.

We were at a clump of picnic tables in the woods, waiting, like every other knucklehead, for Auntie Rossella's *mostaccioli* to arrive in pans the size of suitcases. Gnats burst up wherever you walked. Cicadas went to town in every tree. Cousins from the South Side, Cicero, Kenosha, Carbondale, they'd all come out to the wooded western burbs to see our weepy Nanu turn ninety-five, wave his wrinkled arms, and press any nearby hand to his face. "Family," he was famously saying, tottering to each of us, "you, and you, and you!" while we stood, rooted, looking like bad sketches of each other, wanting guiltily to go back to bocce, briscola, beers.

"Speak up speak up speak up!"

"You speak up."

"*You* speak up!" he shouted, so I gasped and mimed together the dreaded drill-fist, popping it from an imaginary case. He squealed. I switched the drill-fist on and tickled until he fell squirming into the grass, his armpits, his ribs, his little plank of a belly. It might have been I was trying to dislodge his mother.

My own uncle used to say, "Some hearts, they beat in the belly." When I was growing up he'd sometimes spend all day laying cement in the neighborhood and pop by for dinner, sweaty, crusted, uninvited, always looking like he was hugging what he said. My ma, charmed, would rip open an extra pound of pasta. It didn't make a difference, there'd be hardly any leftovers. That's not to say my uncle was too much. He just made the many messes on his plate disappear, so gracefully, in breaks between grins. This alone astounded me. At the time I couldn't clean my plate, I'd push the food around and push the food around.

He'd tell a story about his job, about almost losing it. "What can you do?"

My ma would shake her head but be beaming. "When you gonna get yourself together?"

"Burner's on," he'd say, pointing. When she turned to look he'd switch our plates.

In this way my uncle was a magician: pasta, jobs, wives, money. His whereabouts: *poof*.

He's in me more than in my brother, whose plates he never

switched. In the him in me, I hope, is a heart inside a belly. Even if it leads to *poof*.

I'll say it: I hope it's in my nephew, too. However low this hope, however lousy, however much my brother and his wife won't answer when I knock or call or write.

When the kid came back that August and was not himself, even his ma couldn't cut to *how* or *why*. He'd been opened up and emptied by a sharper blade than family. He'd looked at everyone with eyes that weren't anybody's.

He'd said to me and me alone, "I'll tell you when I have it."

Before the month was up, he left again. I think he took a bus. Not a word from anywhere.

I let him drill me back, his knuckles lost inside my love handles.

His mother was watching from a hundred feet away, flanked by her skinny cousins. Their faces gorgeous.

"Show him good," said my brother, walking by, his arms crammed with spent beers. Then gone.

The little guy leaned into my throat.

"I'll talk," I choked.

"Speak up!"

Instead I hooted "Gotcha!" and stood fast, snatching his ankles. He kicked but I swung him up and off the ground, into circles, watching the woods and my family smear along the barrel of his body, Nanu, trees, cards, bocce. He was laughing, his eyes tearing. "Let go," he shrieked, "you let go!"

"You sure?"

"I'm sure!"

"I'll do it!"

He screamed.

38.

Some Kind of Rugged Genius

by Greg Bardsley

The new guy walks right through Accounting eating a rat on a stick.

Roasted rat on a stick. Kid you not.

I see him first, can't believe my eyes. He's content and happy, eating that rat on a stick. Like a kid at the fair polishing off a corn dog, humming happily as he parades past me and Danzig with this rat on a stick, his teeth tearing away at the meat, like it was the most natural thing in the world.

Danzig stands up, his eyes giant, his mouth open. "Hey," he mutters, and that's all he can say.

The new guy keeps walking.

Danzig walks over, invades my space. "Who was that?"

"The new guy."

"That thing had legs." Danzig's breath is atrocious. It's like he just opened a jar of rotting meat and sour milk. "You see that thing?"

Gently, I push him away. "That thing was a rat."

Danzig looks at me like I'm the one with a rat on a stick. You can nearly see his mind doing the math.

That was the new guy.

The new guy eating a rat on a stick.

We've all been hearing great things about the new guy.

Fitzroy can't stop talking about the new guy.

The new guy, some kind of out-of-the-box thinker.

Fitzroy's new genius.

Finally Danzig says, “You think they taste like chicken?”

The new guy doesn’t look like us. He has this whole *I-don’t-give-a-shit* scene going. Long dark beard that comes to a point near his sternum. Big head of black, wavy hair. Big, thick tribal tattoos on his long, muscular arms. Dark sunglasses, worn indoors. Heavy, charcoal-gray jeans, worn-in T-shirts and big black boots. Yeah, he’s a pretty jarring sight around here.

I wish I could dress like the new guy. Then I stop and ask myself, *Well, could I?* Sometimes these days, I wonder what people would do if I came to work rebel-style—my dick and balls flapping in loose jeans, my feet free in hemp flip-flops, my T-shirt untucked, my whiskers out for everyone to see.

God, that would be something.

Lately, Janice from Finance keeps bugging me for the master doc for the Procurement PMO. She’ll come over with her face in a knot, all worked up, snapping, “Waddington needs the PMO master doc for the P5s by EOB. And if you can’t get the Q1 POD results sooner, then we’ll need to put the P6s into the FOD, and that includes the L2s and L6s.”

Danzig will holler from across the aisle, “And don’t forget the SWAT reports for the L10s and L16s in FOD.”

My throat is so dry, I feel like it’ll crack.

Sometimes when I’m passing Fitzroy’s office, I look in and see the new guy at the white board, sketching something out—God knows what—and Fitzroy is sitting there listening, completely attentive, nearly blown away, like they’re uncovering the secrets of the universe right then and there.

Yeah, the new guy doesn’t worry about L16s in the FOD. Or Janice from Finance. I’m sure of it.

The new guy is sitting in the break room, wiggling his tongue through the rat, getting at the meat. Penny from Legal walks in, gives him a double take, drops her Swedish meatballs, and trots out of the break room. We can hear her retching in the women’s room.

We watch him from afar, through the glass.

“It’s a stunt,” Danzig says.

“Maybe,” I say, “maybe not.”

“Oh c’mon, you think he just loves rat?”

More people join us.

Gasps abound.

Several folks have to turn away.

“Well,” I say, “in Africa, a field rat is a real treat. Millions of people eat them.”

“But this guy isn’t African.”

“So you’re saying only Africans should eat rats?”

Danzig stiffens. “I’m saying, this is America. People don’t eat rats in America.”

Carol from the second floor says, “But Fitzroy loves him.”

“Out-of-the-box thinker,” I add. “That’s what they’re saying. ‘Out-of-the-box thinker, out-of-the-box thinker.’ On and on and on.”

Barbara from Analytics joins us and squints into the break room. “That’s Fitzroy’s new guy.” She watches him. “Some kind of rugged genius.”

Danzig snaps, “Genius? Who said that?”

“Well . . .” Barbara watches. “They say Fitzroy loves him.”

Fitzroy is the boss—the boss’s boss’s boss.

“What’s he eating?”

“Rat.”

“Rat?” Barbara straightens her blazer and clears her throat. “We’ll see about this.”

She charges in.

We all look at each other and decide to follow.

Barbara stands over the new guy, hands on her hips.

“So you’re the new guy.”

The new guy looks up, licks his teeth. Slowly, he grins. “Yeah.” He says it nice and slow—lazy-California-surfer style. “That’s right.”

Barbara seems unfazed by the glistening rat skeleton that’s now on the napkin in front of them. “Where are you from?”

The new guy pulls his head back, grins. “All over.”

Barbara frowns. “No I mean, where were you working before this?”
The new guy grins wider. They’re nice teeth. “Long story.”
I like this guy. It’s like he’s saying, “Fuck you, lady,” smiling nice
and easy the whole way.

Danzig feels brave now. He leans in, over my shoulder. “So what’s
the deal with the rat?”

New guy turns and looks up at Danzig.

Long silence.

“Well . . .” The new guy waits extra long. “. . . what do you think?”

Danzig studies him. His voice is high from the stress. “Fitzroy
loves you.”

Those dark shades, that grin growing.

“They say you’re some out-of-the-box thinker.”

He smiles and nods, like he’s saying, *Okay, man, it’s cool. I hear you.*

Barbara bursts out, “What are you going to do here?”

Slowly, the new guy turns to her.

“Are you familiar with the California Stink Beetle?”

Barbara squints.

“Well, the Stink Beetle can thrive in some of the world’s harshest
environments—like a desert—even though it’s this big juicy insect.
So the question one might have is, *What gives?* How can this black
beetle thrive in a place like that?”

Barbara’s still squinting.

“So here’s the deal.” The new guy straightens. “The deal is, the
Stink Beetle innovates. At dawn, it ‘drinks’ from the moist air simply
by positioning its rear into the breeze and opening its anus.” His
smile is gone. The new guy is dead serious. “Now that’s innovation.”

He looks up at Barbara, an eyebrow emerging from behind the
shades. “So the thing is, maybe it’s time to open your own anus to
the moisture that breezes over you each and every day.”

Barbara loses the squint. She’s frozen, speechless.

Danzig says, “So it stinks or something?”

The new guy turns to him. “You fuck with the Stink Beetle, it’ll
stand on its head and expel some seriously nasty gas.”

Danzig mouths the words.

The new guy folds his arms. “Yeah, I dig the Stink Beetle.”

* * *

We circle the wagons at Armadillo Willie's.

Danzig is working on a chicken wing, his face shiny with grease.
“I can't believe that guy.”

Barbara pulls the meat off a baby-back rib, slurps it in. Her cheeks bulge as she chews. After a big swallow, she says, “Someone should file a report with Business Conduct.” She thinks about it and squints. “Eating a rat, saying that to me.”

I stick to listening. I mean, what good will protesting or whining do? The new guy is gold. Fitzroy loves the new guy. Nothing is gonna happen to the new guy.

Barbara gazes into space a moment, thinking. “You think the new guy was repeating something Fitzroy said about me?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, do you think Fitzroy wants me to ‘open my anus’? You know, innovate?”

Danzig leans over the table, makes a weird smile, and I fixate on the chicken strands wedged between his teeth. “Either way, we need to do something out of the box.”

Barbara snaps, “But what?”

“Doesn’t matter what. Just needs to be out of the box.”

Barbara nods, her eyes almost crossing. “That’s the thing now. Out of the box. We need to get out of the box.”

“So what do we do?”

Long silence.

Finally I say, “How about eliminating some of these reports no one reads?”

Silence.

Barbara says, “What if we shaved our heads bald?”

Danzig frowns. “Smells like a stunt.”

“Well, let’s keep the ideas coming.”

No one says another word.

Next day, Fitzroy scares the shit out of me.

He walks right into my cube.

This is unusual. There are about four levels of management between

us, and I always figured he didn't even know I existed. So now I'm thinking, *He's gonna can me*. Fitzroy does that a lot—can people, lay them off, by the thousands. But the thing is, he always has HR do it.

He leans over me so I have no chance to stand up.

“Hey, Roger.”

It is only now, at this close range, that I see how bloodshot his eyes are, and how deeply sunken they sit in their darkened sockets. His skin is marked by broken capillaries, his gray hair is thinning, and his neck is so gaunt that he reminds me of a turkey. And he's only forty-three.

“Morning, sir.”

He puts a cold hand my shoulder. “What are you doing today?”

I stumble. “Oh, I’m putting a few PLDs into the FOD for the Q3—”

He blinks, cuts me off. “Don’t worry about that today, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Yeah, I want you to join us this afternoon.”

“Okay.”

Fitzroy tells me I’ll be joining him and the new guy for an afternoon offsite. Something the new guy set up.

“It’ll be fascinating,” he says, a grin developing.

“Just us three?”

He nods. “Don’t worry about that. It’ll be fun.”

“What’s the topic?”

Fitzroy lifts an eyebrow. “Preemption.”

I want to ask, *Why me?* But I can tell he wants to leave already, and I don’t want to annoy the boss’s boss’s boss.

I nod, as if to say, *Cool*.

A toothy smile spreads across his face. Damn, those are long teeth. Dark, too. Probably all that coffee he drinks. Hell, his admin has a steamer outside his office so she can make all those espresso shots he throws back throughout the day. If I drank that much caffeine, I’d be vibrating.

“What are you, by the way?”

“Sir?”

“What are you, six-four? Six-three?”

“Oh.” I feel my brow crinkling. Weird question. “I’m around six-three, I guess.”

Fitzroy nods, looks away like he’s embarrassed. “Yeah, I was just figuring you must have played ball in school.” He forces a smile. “I mean, you look like it.”

“Yeah, I played a little.”

“Tight end?”

“Linebacker.”

He brightens. “Even better.”

I look down. It’s always weird talking about my football years.

“I bet you were a bouncer on the side, eh? Easy money.”

I chuckle. “Nah.”

“Oh well, linebacker is good.” Fitzroy turns away. “Come to my office at ten, okay?”

“You bet, sir.”

It’s easy to find the new guy’s car in the parking lot. It’s a beige, mud-caked Oldsmobile—probably a ’72 or ’73—surrounded by a sea of candy-colored SUVs, BMWs, and Hondas. I scribble the plate number and call my wife’s cousin at the DMV. The name he gives me doesn’t match. Alias—I knew it. So I call my buddy in HR, the buddy with access to the name of every employee who’s ever worked at this dump, even the ones who were laid off eight years ago on the other side of the country.

We’re so deep into the Santa Cruz Mountains that if we had to yell for help, no one would hear us.

We have fern branches tied to our backs, green grease smeared over our arms and faces. The new guy has removed his shades; he’s got enormous green eyes. Intelligent eyes.

“Put it that way,” he whispers, and points Fitzroy and his crossbow away from us. “And be careful.”

This is our offsite, hiding behind a cluster of redwoods, waiting for deer.

I ask, “So what did you do at Robards International?”

The new guy shoots me a glare, whispers, “Paradigm rationalization.”

What the hell kind of job is that?

Regardless, he's a liar.

"You work with a guy named Livingston over there?"

It's a trap, and the new guy isn't biting. He waves the question away, shushes me.

We sit in silence for twenty minutes. Fitzroy is still focused on the forest before him, still gripping the crossbow, still waiting, his upper lip curling back in some kind of demonstration of predator lust. "Nothing," he announces through gritted teeth, his eyebrows arching. "I see nothing out there."

Finally, the new guy tells me to walk up the hill, travel east a bit and then loop back down in hopes of flushing out deer, sending them toward Fitzroy's position here.

"You sure?" I ask.

"Just be open to the process."

Fitzroy is still staring into the forest, his crossbow still pointed outward. "Stay here, Roger."

The new guy looks flustered, throws his hands up.

Fitzroy turns toward us, the crossbow turning with him. "Because if you—"

Thud.

". . . Oh, shit."

I blink twice, look at the new guy. The end of an arrow is sticking out of his chest. His eyes widen as he sways from side to side. He tries to spin, and I see the arrow tip sticking out of his back. Both sides of his T-shirt are darkening, and he's coughing up blood.

Fitzroy can't suppress a grin. "Oh, shit." A giggle escapes as he peers into the new guy's eyes, takes a step closer. "Sorry, man."

New guy drops to his knees. Fondles the arrow with both hands, smears the blood with his fingers.

Fitzroy drops the crossbow, turns to me, forces a serious face. It's so obvious he's enjoying this. Fitzroy, the predator, preying on the prey. "Thank God you were here to see this. No one would believe me, otherwise."

The new guy topples over.

"They'd think I murdered him."

I back away.

The new guy gasps for air.

“When in fact, all we have here is a very unfortunate hunting accident involving an established executive and a disgruntled, laid-off employee posing as a change consultant.”

I nod.

“And a witness,” he says, cheerful. “A most important witness.”

I find myself saying, “It was an accident, sir. I know.”

The new guy is in spasms.

Fitzroy turns from me, walks to the new guy’s big backpack that is propped against a redwood. “Why don’t you go find some help, Roger? I’ll see if I can resuscitate him.”

I mumble something.

He peeks into the backpack, pulls out two pairs of handcuffs, then a buck knife, then some rope, and then a Taser gun. “I knew it. He was gunning for us, Roger.” He looks up to me. “Go, Roger. He doesn’t have much time.”

I back away. “Okay.”

“And Roger?”

The new guy gurgles and chokes.

“Yes, sir.”

“Roger, my guess is you’d love to retire early, really early.” He pauses, bites his lip. “If you had sufficient funds.”

“Oh, well . . . I just—”

He stops me. “Roger, consider it done. All this blows over, we’ll send you on your way, set you up. Put you on retainer as a consultant, help you create that life you always wanted.”

I don’t know what to say.

“Okay, you need to get help, Roger.”

I turn and head up the hill, toward the car, where I can flag down a motorist. But after a hundred feet or so, I look back. Fitzroy is kneeling beside the new guy as he smears the blood over his hands, around his mouth. He’s not helping the new guy, but he’s saying something to him. I can’t hear a thing, but I can imagine the words. Something like, *You think you’re smarter than Stephen Franklin Fitzroy? You think I wouldn’t do my own background check? You think I*

didn't see this coming the first week you arrived, that I wouldn't kill you before you could kill me? Don't you realize I was just playing with you, just toying with a loser?

It's hard to imagine him saying anything else.

I continue up the hill, panting.

The new guy wanted to kill us.

I reach the top, head down the other side, and breeze through the forest, wondering how long I'll need to wait before I can tell Janice from Finance that I'm finished being her bitch, that she and her FOD reports can fuck off, that our relationship is EOL'd ASAP.

Finally, I reach the road.

Approaching Fitzroy's black Beemer, I imagine the new guy standing there, leaning against the front fender, legs crossed at the ankles, the shades back on. He's saying, *Hey man, you're better than this. Way better than this.*

And I say to the moist air that's washing over my newly opened anus, *That's what you think, dude.*

39.

What Good Is an Ark to a Fish?

by Kelli Ford

I

I pad around my house in the morning, turning on faucets and lights to assure myself that the apocalypse is still self-contained over a thousand miles away at Mother's doorstep. Texas border states have already begun rationing plans. Through their television noise, scientists and preachers scramble to understand such centralized tragedy, use incantations and formulas to predict where this may go if it ever leaves Bonita. Some claim aliens.

II

To be clear, I'm not speaking in metaphor when I tell you the end of the world began on my wedding day. Leaves littered Mother's lawn. Dried bits the grasshoppers left behind turned Bonita parking lots and roads a pale green ocean. A case of wine left too long in a truck exploded. Trees stood naked, bare arms raised to the sky as if seeking answers.

Mother's temperature gauge read 112 that day more than a year ago, but I was in love, if sweaty, in my sundress. Outside, grasshoppers crunched underfoot. We kept a broom handy to push them outside, letting three in for every one swept out. Mother, embarrassed, ran her well dry trying to turn brown grass green, as if the weather

and bugs were a reflection on her and her housekeeping, not a sign of what was to come.

III

I fill the bathtub each night. When the faucet squeaks to life come morning, I water the plants, fill the dog's bowl, and empty the tub, watching the clear water swirl away to nothing. Plant stalks swell and leaves droop. I wander out to check the sky for dangerous cloud formations, kneel and place both palms upon the ground. Neighbors wave, keep walking. Leaves shift in the breeze, lazy and unconcerned. My Idaho sky is blue for days. Rainbows come and go in the sprinkler's twirl.

I don't know if a thunderstorm would make me feel better or worse at this point, so I turn on the television. Bonita's apocalypse is growing old for the rest of the country. No news for almost a week.

IV

It's probably true that we all have our own self-centered versions of when this started, when we decided to believe, or stop believing in coincidence. The tornado that ripped off a section of Mother's roof, causing her to box her sequined tops and fall upon her knees, was weather and nothing more in my mind. Her fundamentalist upbringing wouldn't allow her the luxury. She heard the roar of the wind twisting metal and dislodging bricks. The sky took her bobtailed cat and left her half a home. She was chastened by the rain that pelted her carpet, only to watch the clouds dry up with not a drop of relief for months on end. She looked to God for answers. As far as I could tell, he wasn't speaking, so she looked behind her, made a list of transgressions and underlined *mother* in red.

I thought I had run far enough away to be sure I saw things back in Bonita clearly. I couldn't have known that, in my flight, I would forever keep one eye over my shoulder, and in doing so would circle back again and again. When the second earthquake hit, shortly after the first round of fires I'd called plain old bad luck, I knelt in my closet and tried piecing together my own prayer, unable to remember anything beyond "Thy kingdom come." Disaster close to home had not given the words new meaning, so I left supper to burn on the stove, called home.

V

I work her every way I can from my Idaho kitchen to hers, our voices ones and zeroes pinged through space satellites. I tell her we'll load the horses, haul them across the canyons and mountains, and put them in the backyard. Bring your chickens. Just brick and wood, I say of the three-bedroom home she's scraped for, the patched-up house whose mortgage will probably outlive her. I hear her switch the phone to the other ear, bang a door shut. I brag on the depth of our town's reservoir and the snow at the tip of the mountains you can see in August. A preacher buzzes radio noise in the background. I've never even heard of a tornado in Idaho, I say. You can carry your gun on your hip in the grocery store! She sits there, jaw set in silence I can see. Then—You know the story of Job, she says. What if God picked the wrong person for the job?

VI

NPR finally runs a story, a color piece on Bonita's Riders for Christ—a group that takes its message almost as seriously as its method of delivery. Before all of this, they opened rodeos performing cowgirl tricks against the backdrop of fireworks and “God Bless the U.S.A.” Now sword-packing Riders sit sentry at each of the cardinal directions outside of town, certain the Four Horsemen will gallop down from the heavens any day in need of spangled escort. Steve Inskeep says a few have liberal enough interpretations to pack rifles, which has created something of a rift, and those Riders man only the southern outpost, where the group's leadership think the Horsemen least likely to appear. Steve outlines stories for tomorrow's program in the event the rapture doesn't occur overnight. Then he cues Blondie. I pick up the phone to make sure Mother hasn't found herself a sword.

VII

Every day before she died, my grandmother bowed her head and prayed for Mother's gambling and carousing to stop. She prayed for Mother to humble herself before the Lord and care about what good Christian people thought. She prayed for Mother to *get out of that mess she was in*,

as she referred to Mother's second—and then third—marriage. Both adultery in my grandmother's eyes, though my only memories of Mother's first (and God-recognized) husband are the blue welts he made of her eye, the way the bruises bloomed purple, then yellow on her chest and back, the way he swung the red suitcase as he walked down the hallway of our apartment building, as I followed, crying for him to stay. Grandmother prayed for God's love to rain like fire from the heavens. I wonder if this is what she had in mind.

VIII

There will always be those ready to don a cowboy hat and ride the bomb down with a yippee-kye-yay, those who sell hats and work the levers. While the Bible church holds twenty-four-hour prayer meetings, sinners filter to the casino and the VFW, filling up the dark places, no need to conserve, no need to conceal pent-up desires. Faithful to no end the time is nigh.

Mother refuses to step into a church, but she's taken to covering her head, wearing long dresses. I find myself in the unexpected position of suggesting she go to the casino to keep some semblance of normalcy. She won't hear of it. Mysterious are the ways.

IX

I get an all-networks-busy recording and punch *end* and *send* until I get a crackly ring and she picks up. I don't tell her I'm half-believer. I insist that, while surely some kind of geo-seismic shift has occurred beneath her very feet, this does not necessarily mean that the Christian God of Fire and Fury has returned. I tell her it probably has to do with all the oil Texans sucked up. Arrogant Texans messed up the tilt of the earth, perhaps. Somehow altered weather patterns, I say. I was never good at science, and she reminds me of this. I duck, jab. Ask if she's taken up embroidery or churning butter, ask if Laura Ingalls is the First Saint of the New Apocalypse. She sets her jaw. Okay, the end of the world maybe, I say, but show me this God.

X

What do I love the way I used to love the mystery of my mother, her strength in suffering?

XI

Today I ask if she wishes she'd left before it got so hard, come to live with me and my husband in the high desert where we could listen to the end of the world over the airwaves and cook frittatas still. This is what we do when there is nothing new to report and the line goes quiet. This is how we push back at the distance and the catastrophe. Do you wish you'd stayed, she says. I am afraid she's getting religious.

XII

CNN runs a segment on the Mayan calendar. A reporter runs around interviewing people in front of the Mall of America, asking for views on the Texas apocalypse and the End of Time. I wonder what the Mayans had in mind as they toiled, fashioning stone chink by chink: a twenty-four-hour news cycle, complete with a running Twitter ticker of the apocalypse?

An African American woman claiming Mayan and celestial ancestry speaks during the second half of the segment. She wears a purple tunic with strange lettering. Says this whole Mayan hysteria is a big misunderstanding. The Mayans didn't create a *calendar*, and 2012 isn't the end of time. They were measuring divine light, *outside* of time. One the back of a Chinese take-out menu, I try to doodle light and circles of time. In the end it all looks like lightning bolts and cyclones.

The anchor seems relieved until the Mayan lady places a hand upon her polyester arm and explains that just because the Ancients weren't concerned about our modern world, doesn't mean the events in North Texas aren't indicative of what's to come. We must practice seeing with our eye-eyes, she sighs, before we can see with our mind-eyes. And then: North Texas is now. When she smiles into the camera, she seems sad for us. I hear my husband's key in the door, home from giving a final, and I turn off the television, fold the menu into a tiny square and cram it into my back pocket.

XIII

My husband is a skeptic. He thought the grasshoppers were a nuisance last August, nothing more. Of the heat, he said, it's Texas in

August, what did you expect. When I speak to Mother, he opens the computer, goes quiet. As soon as I hang up, he closes the laptop, and his sigh misplaces the rest of the air in the room. I don't think he does this for my benefit. I think he does not appreciate what he cannot tie down with reason. I think this is why he loved me in the first place: I am a good challenge.

XIV

At first nobody danced at the wedding, or Mother's Event, as I began calling the night. The Legion Hall filled with Bonitans and relatives of Mother's third husband, the one who died in a freak accident when his pony horse spooked into the crowd at the track, crashing into the pane glass window of the V.I.P. suite, crushing fancy hats and knocking my stepfather stone cold dead. Few friends made the trip to Texas, and when I bemoaned the fact, Mother knocked back her white zin and said, Yes, it's too bad you have a family that loves you.

As ladies in tight jeans and men in broad-brimmed straw hats streamed in, they brushed one another's backs, checking for grasshoppers, made quick for cold Dos Equis and napkins to dab sweat. The swan-carved melon soon sat empty, save the black seeds. People fanned themselves. Mother cocked her brow toward the empty dance floor, so I gave up on Rebirth Brass Band and put on the AC/DC that she had insisted I load onto the playlist. As soon as the bells began to ring out and the guitars snarled to life, cowboys began setting down drinks, clasping hands with their women, marching bow-legged toward the rented speakers. I took a hard pull off my beer. She knows her crowd, my husband said.

I told you, Mother said, and led us onto the sawdusted floor, "Hells Bells" echoing off the walls. My husband shrugged his shoulders, pushed up his glasses, and proceeded to get down, banging his head and bouncing his ass off Mother's as I clapped them on. In those sweaty three minutes, Mother was right—everything was, somehow, just right. But soon I'd had two beers too many, and barefooted and half-cocked, I was out Bonita-ing the Bonitans. I woke up the next day as ready as ever to leave and never come back.

XV

I get the all-networks-busy signal for two days before I decide I have to go. My husband calls the plan hopeless and vague. He says we need to save our resources. He quietly reminds me of my job search. When he asks me what my goal is and I shrug, he walks away, comes back to say she is a grown woman who can take care of herself and never has been inclined to listen to reason. That's easy to say, I blab, when it's not your mother living on the brunt end of the beginning of the end of the world, which is mean because his mom died years ago.

Being the man he is, he agrees to go to Texas if I wait for him to enter final grades and agrees to use his credit card to pay for the gas that has skyrocketed. Despite rationing, you can still travel freely if you have the money and don't live at the end of the world. He tells me I am about to put an end to that freedom on both accounts. Then he squeezes my hand hard and begins to pack.

I pack with one hand, work the phone in the other. Sending, ending. Sending. I fill my backpack with Ziplocs and wool socks. I check the tent for stakes. My husband packs a few shirts and underwear and fills his bags with books on Greek philosophers whose names I can't pronounce. When I come in with the orange cat-hole trowel, he takes it gently from my hand and puts it back in the garage. I don't know how to pack for the end of the world, so I imagine a backpacking trip.

XVI

Mother picks up as we're driving through the red rocks of Moab listening to a classic rock station. It's Don Henley's birthday, and every station seems to be in on the awful celebration. When I hear her voice, I punch off the radio and sit up. Everything is fine, she says. A trembler, not too big. She tells us to turn around and go home. Or head west—everyone should see the Grand Canyon, she says. She sounds tired.

Why don't we all go see it together, I say. You know, she says, it's just a few miles from one rim across to the other. Imagine all that sky, she says and fades off before adding, People die all the time trying to get across.

We're coming, Mama, I say and snap the phone shut. I lean my head back and close my eyes. All I see are burned-out buildings and twisted metal. My husband touches the side of my face and pushes the car faster.

XVII

A fierce wind greets us when we pull to the top of the hill outside of town. A line of delivery trucks waiting to move into Bonita has us backed up alongside the roadside park. From the looks of it, the park was recently a happening place, but news teams have mostly abandoned makeshift camps. My husband points out that Texans favor a liberal definition of the term *park*—it's just a couple of cement slabs with picnic tables and a trashcan off the highway, usually devoid of much else besides prickly pear or bluebonnets in springtime.

I point to the farthest table, tell him this is where Mother and I came to watch the sun set when I was a girl. I absorbed as much at that time as I could, that time after work and school before she reapplied her lipstick and walked through a cloud of perfume and out our front door where she'd spend the night dancing the sun back up as I slept.

Now tarps pop and snap in the wind, strain at the lines holding them to earth. One guy in a dingy brown suit huddles on a bench squinting into his phone. We roll down the windows despite the wind. A brown beer bottle rolls across the cement slab. Plastic bags flutter against the table legs, trapped just east of the freedom stretching ahead on the endless Texas prairie.

Toward town, things appear just about normal, aside from a gas well that billows orange flames and hazy, electric smoke. My husband is taken aback by the sight, but I tell him this happens from time to time in oil country, even when there isn't an apocalypse going on.

XVIII

Mother, speaking on good authority I assumed, had always told me nothing good happened after midnight. I have a feeling that's when I was conceived. I know it was sometime the summer before her ninth-grade year, not long after she started to sneak bell-bottoms to school

where she changed out of her holy-roller dress and put on eyeliner she stole from the drugstore. I can imagine her scrubbing her eyes red to get the makeup off, rolling the jeans into a neat ball and putting them in the bottom of her locker, walking back home at the end of the day defiant but looking like the holiness girl she was supposed to be.

Mother told me plenty, wanting to make certain I didn't follow in her footsteps. I listened close, until late one night my junior year when I let a stout little running back named Bunzy sweet-talk me into going to see a well fire that had erupted when drillers hit a gas pocket. We left a party around eleven, me peering out the back window every few minutes, sure that every set of headlights belonged to Mother. After parking his truck in a ditch, we followed the orange glow through pastures, carrying a bottle and blanket over tree-lined fences until we got to the flame.

I snuck into the house close to sunrise and tiptoed past my step-father's snores, and only after I was tucked deep into my bed did I smile to myself, excited at the new life that awaited me outside Mother's hypocritical rules. The next morning, I discovered a hickey the running back had left, like a badge. He told everyone except his girlfriend that he got further than he did.

You could say I got the last laugh—he turned into a meth-head, still in and out of jail. Mother always swore it was him who broke into the house and stole the change bucket. I was long gone by then, of course. Cause and effect, my husband says, and inches the car forward.

XIX

Two rangers lean against their Mustangs at the front of the line. Just beyond them sit two women atop paint horses holding purple flags emblazoned with a golden cross and sword. The horses shift and stomp. Flags pop in the wind. Would you look at that, my husband says. They wear cowboy boots and white tunics gathered at the waist. Wide leather belts and giant gem-encrusted cross buckles hold their swords in leather scabbards. I hope they've got Gold Bond in Bonita, my husband says, but he doesn't laugh. I raise my hand toward them, but they don't seem to see. Over the wind you

can hear the thrust of the gas-driven flames from the well fire. The women stare beyond us out toward the western horizon in certainty. One dismounts and kneels in prayer, her voice lost to the wind and flames.

XX

The rangers let us pass after we explain our purpose, sign a dossier, and complete a few forms. They assure my husband that the fire will burn itself out and that there's no reason to call 911. Don Henley's been running through my head since Moab, and as the Ranger waves us past, I sing, *You can check out any time you want, but you can never leave.* Not funny, my husband says, and accelerates past the snaking flames that dance high into the sky welcoming me home.

XXI

On the stretch into town a hand-painted sign warns, Welcome to Pretty. Slow down—rough going. My husband says the road could be buckled from the heat, but I think earthquake. You can see where the earth bucked and bowed, picking up the two-lane road and setting it several feet off to the side, leaving the double yellow stripe misaligned. Infinity broken. What was a major geo-seismic event is now simply a few bumps that our steel-belted radials take with ease, nothing to it.

XXII

While we were busy packing tent stakes and books, it never occurred to us to bring more than road food. The stupidity strikes us at the same time when we see the beat-up grocery store in the middle of town, which is really just the middle of a highway. There never was much to Bonita, especially before the casino. A few gas stations. The VFW and Legion Hall. Two drugstores. One or two grocery stores, depending on the year. Plenty of churches and a rodeo arena. After the heathens voted the town wet, there was never a shortage of liquor stores, and the sign for one is half lit just down the road. That will be the next stop.

The gas station across the street is nothing but charred rubble and bits of metal that skitter in the wind. Gas lines ruptured in the last earthquake, and dust coats the cars in the grocery store lot. A boy who can't be more than ten stands in the back of a pickup holding a shotgun. His little brother is yanking on a kid goat's ear. Not that unusual, I say to my husband who's gone quiet. When I open the car door, my husband stays put. She's not going to leave, he says. I nod at the boy with the gun, but he just shifts feet and stares at me. I can't believe we didn't bring bacon, I say.

The checkout lady recognizes me, though to me she is only a face. She tells us that a few other places have reopened but they'll rob you blind if you don't watch. Tell your mother we miss her at the V, she says. No sense moping around waiting on the big one. She smiles, and her teeth are stained from coffee or cigarettes, both likely. Her eyes are lined in dark blue, and you can see where the powder has settled into the wrinkles crisscrossing her face. She doesn't smooth her rouge, just leaves the circles be, like setting suns.

XXIII

When we pull up to Mother's, the place looks empty without her usual array of petunias and marigolds. A blue tarp still covers the roof on the east end. It's buttoned down tight with bungees in all directions, looks professional. Her horses run up to the fence and nicker, toss their heads at us. They're skinny. Mother's told me grain's hard to get and she's down to her last few round bales, but it's still hard to see them looking like the horses kept by people who aren't horse people—people who stake a horse to a lead in the backyard and cram three kids on the bony animal to ride through the streets unshod during parades. I wonder what those horses look like now. I wonder what those kids look like.

XXIV

Mother walks out and stops, as if we are a vision she can't trust. Standing there on her cracked concrete porch with sagging steps, arms crossed, she seems small. The bonnet covers her eyes. Then she bounds down the steps and grabs me up and feels again as whole

and big as the world. My husband stands back watching us. When we don't let go or stop our crying, he begins to unload camping gear. Bless you babies, Mother says, stroking my hair, Bless my sweet babies. Those are my grandmother's words, not Mother's. I pretend not to notice and hold on tight.

XXV

I don't know my father, but I have my mother's hands. Our left lateral incisors each stick out just a hair. When I've drunk too much, my husband reminds me that I have more than her hands and mouth.

XXVI

The wind knocks out the electricity at night. The tarps covering the unrepainted portion of the roof rumble across the ceiling with each gust. Mother's healer burrows beneath a pile of quilts stacked in the corner. Mother doesn't seem fazed even though it's her night on the grid. She goes around muttering prayers and lighting candles. When she's not squeezing my hands and stroking my hair, it's almost like she's not even here. My husband fills the lantern I brought. I ask him if he'd like to play Frisbee with his laptop.

XXVII

It turns out the end of the world has been subsidized. We must, however, convince Mother to accept the food FEMA ships in. God will provide, she says. It's for us sinners, we say, and she gets a worried look, grows quiet.

When we pull up to the Tuesday pickup, my husband says in a big, booming voice, BEHOLD GOD FEMA. Great, I say, on the seventh day God created formaldehyde trailers. He says the end of the world is making us dumb and walks away to grab a box. I'm happy he's making jokes, and when he comes back I'm grinning. Hey look, two-by-two, I say, dropping cans of tuna and chicken into the box.

Why would a fish need an ark, he says. What good is an ark to a fish?

XXVIII

Time moves slowly at the end of the world. Each day Mother cooks a breakfast to end all, but won't eat. She's in there cracking store-bought eggs before we wake up. When we shuffle into the kitchen, she shakes her head at the pale yolks in apology. The hens have stopped laying her prized multicolored eggs with the hard shells and yolks like setting suns. With a set jaw, she flips the sizzling sausage that we splurged on when there was no bacon, plates the biscuits and the FEMA milk gravy, and sets it out on the counter. When we finally sit down to eat, my husband and I exchange looks as Mother blesses the food and the day and gives thanks for everything from the table and chairs to the hairs on our heads. She only smiles standing over us while we eat. We do our best to keep eating.

Mother spends the rest of the day in her room. When I'm not recovering from breakfast, I drive my husband crazy with my encyclopedic store of Don Henley songs. I don't know how I know so many or how to stop singing. He retreats to the garage to read. Or stares at the blue roof, his face smashed in concentration, muttering numbers and supply lists. I can see he feels bad that he's not a son-in-law who can swoop in with a hammer and make things right again. Sometimes I see him standing next to the barbed-wire fence trying to work up the courage to climb over and pet the horses.

I go to the bedroom to lie down beside Mother while she reads the Bible. Sometimes I stand on the bed and sing *all she wants to do is dance*. I remind her of her disco days and toss my hair like a stripper. I find her box of sequins and play dress-up. She doesn't get angry. She smiles and reaches out to pull my hand to her mouth where she breathes it warm and kisses it. We have to be ready, she says.

XXIX

On Day Four, my husband comes into the kitchen and plops down a grocery sack of toilet paper, pulls out a packet of powdered eggs. Fresh out of the real ones, he says. He starts to say something, then trails off, smoothing the edge of the fake eggs as if what he wants to say can be found there and coaxed out.

People were talking about cattle dying, he says finally. The guy hauled them to a sale because he didn't have any grass or water left on his property. When he let them out, they trampled each other trying to get to the water. Within minutes, they all collapsed. Water intoxication. And if that isn't bad enough, he says, the bag boy says there's a sex room at the VFW.

I squeeze the toilet paper to my chest like an idiot and sing: *We've been poisoned by these fairytales.* It works because he hops onto the counter, and sighs, All right, which song? I shrug my shoulders and dance a little more. Then he surprises me and says that maybe we should just go to the V and have a drink.

Eyes Wide Shut II: Apocalyptic Cowboys and Hellbent Barmaids? No thanks, I say. Do you remember the lady at the grocery store? Do you really want to see her naked? He rubs his eyes, says things may be getting to him, says I need to think about what I want to do. Then he picks up a leftover biscuit and walks into the garage. The weather has been calm for two days, the skies blue. It's making us all a little crazy.

XXX

Before all of this, my husband loved that Mother wasn't like his first mother-in-law, following him around tallying up his shortcomings, holding secret court with her daughter over the telephone. While he feared what harsh truth might come out of Mother's mouth, especially when she was onto her second red eye, he loved that she was a let-it-loose kind of lady who wore too much eye shadow and did her lipstick every hour on the hour. Sometimes he walks back to her bedroom and stands in the doorway awhile before he turns and walks back out. I think he's starting to worry about that with which he cannot reason.

XXXI

I approach Mother with half a plan. She is lying on her bed with her hands clasped, Bible open beside her. The wind has picked up. You can hear it whistling through the small spaces and moaning through everything else. Out the window I see a dust devil moving across the pasture. The horses are running. A large limb cracks in the tree that

stands bare in the front yard. I watch, waiting for it to fall. When it doesn't, I sit on the bed. Let's take a drive, I begin. I tell her we need to fill up the car. The corrugate gate is banging against a fence post, ringing out again and again. God wouldn't want you in here hiding behind prayer, I say, pushing.

The birds are all gone, she says. I tried feeding them, but the little things blew off. Tumbled away one after another when they gathered for the seed. I guess I shouldn't have. The ones didn't catch on the fence rolled right across the pasture. Haven't seen a bird in two months or more.

I look out the window for a sign of something okay, something not terrifying. A yellow grasshopper thunks onto the screen. Mother begins to massage the top of one thumb with the other. What if you're right, I tell her. What if God's decided, *Well, so much for Earth and all those little people down there. And you know, I think I'll stretch it out, make them suffer good.* If this is all we've got, then what? I want to hear you laugh. I want to hear you say, throw dirt on it, and give the finger to anybody who doesn't like it. I need you to fight. I need you.

She doesn't say anything, but her eyes fill with water. I pull her hands apart, wrap them in mine. I raise her hand to my mouth, take her index finger, and run it over my sticking-out tooth. Then I run my finger along hers, feeling the bump of imperfection. Remember when you used to come into my room when I was dead asleep and do this, I ask, leaning my forehead against hers. Looking into her eyes is looking into my own. You'd open the door, say *Are you asleep*, before barging in to lay down and tell me about your night.

You needed your rest, Mother says. I start to say something but she cuts me off, says, He'll come like a thief in the night. She picks up her Bible. Well, I say, if he's a thief, he's not a very good one making all this noise.

XXXII

When I poke my head into Mother's room to tell her we are going to leave for a bit, she is sitting on the edge of her bed. Her purse is at her feet, and her head is covered in a silk scarf tied beneath her chin. She looks tiny there, and older than I've ever imagined she could be. I wonder if she's been hiding these old lady purses and scarves beneath

her bed for years, just waiting for the right moment to become this person I see before me. She smiles thinly and hugs her purse tight against her chest. The uncertainty I see in her eyes tells me it's not faith keeping her in her bedroom.

The wind has let up some, I say. It'll just be a short drive. Honey, she says, it's not the wind I'm scared of.

XXXIII

The sun's close to setting, and as we pull out of the drive, the wind blows us onto the gravel shoulder before my husband yanks it steady. I've left him up front alone so I can sit in the back with Mother, like the new moms I see on the road, unable to let their baby rest buckled behind their backs for a second. When she didn't fight the seat belt like she always has, my husband gave me a look that said *We've got to get out of here* as plainly as if he'd written a note. I make soft cooing sounds and hear myself saying, There, there. We'll be just fine.

Remember our sunsets, I say. Remember how we'd pack an ice-chest with baby beers and Dr. Pepper and go up to the hill and watch the sun go down? How it'd stretch for miles, lighting up the sky blood orange and blue and everything in between? Mother looks out the window, and I imagine that she smiles.

My husband fiddles with the radio up front. He passes a fuzzy news station long enough to hear that a tornado has ripped through downtown Oklahoma City. A big one. They're interviewing the police chief who sounds confused. His voice catches. It's just gone, he says. I lean forward and punch it off. There's no sound for a while except the sound of the tires on the road and the wind. Always the wind.

Finally my husband speaks up. I know Oklahoma's close, and I feel for them, he says. But isn't this good news, in a sense? It's weather, just horrible weather. Science.

Mother is praying to herself. Her whispers grow louder. I find his eyes in the rearview and give him the please-shut-up look. He jerks his head over his shoulder toward Mother, says, We need to talk.

I lean my head over onto Mother's shoulder and think about a new

apocalypse unconstrained by precedent or the absurdity of town borders. Words run through my head: Mother and plenty of water. Safe haven and plenty to eat. Understanding and safety for the man driving us, love. I can't tell if I'm begging for these things or thanking something or someone or both. As if awoken from a dream, Mother looks down on me and says, It's been forever since I've watched the sun go down from the hill.

XXXIV

When we pull up, the well fire still hasn't burned out. My husband just shakes his head, giving up on understanding anything, I'm afraid. One of the Riders is leading her horse toward a trailer at the base of the hill. Her head hangs, stiff from sitting on top of a horse for God knows how many hours. The wait can't be easy on the faithful either.

Two new Rangers man the exit out of town and past the roadside park. My husband stops, and one of them sticks his head in. Got everything you need, he asks. I lean forward and tell him we just want to catch the sunset. My husband doesn't protest when I say we'll be right back, but I know we're going to have to make a move quick. I can let you go, the Ranger says, but they're shutting down unofficial entries. The man does not put up with any kind of reasoning or logic, so my husband puts it in reverse and pulls perpendicular to the road. He puts the car in drive, leaves his hand on the gearshift. Ahead, a horse trailer pulls onto the road. The Rider raises a weary hand. Finally, my husband speaks, but I have to lean in to hear him—*We could just go.*

XXXV

I turn to Mother. What do you think, I say. Want to grab some things? Somewhere things are better, somewhere things can still be okay. We'll visit the library, go to a restaurant. We can swing wide and see the Grand Canyon. The animals need a new round bale, Mother says. And they'll need another one after that. My husband slams the car in park, and when he sighs, I have to roll down the window to get some air.

XXXVI

Mother picks up her purse, opens the door, and steps out. You know we can't stay here forever, my husband says. I love you, and I'll help you tie her up and make her go, or I'll hold you when we leave her, but I've had enough of whatever you want to call what's happening here.

Do you even know what you're asking me to do, I say. I hit the seatback with both hands and begin to cry. Mother is holding a crumpled tissue to her mouth, teetering across the cattle-guard, heading toward the well. I fling the door open and say, Do what you have to do. He's still sitting there when I look back.

When I catch up to her, she's standing at the base of the flame, close enough that when I take her hand it's already warm. You can't imagine heat, she says. You have to feel it for yourself.

XXXVII

Flames dance shadows across Mother's face. Heat vapors make the world look unsteady, dreamlike. Please, I say, but this close to the flame, its roar swallows the word. The pressure comes and goes, whips in and out, a giant blowtorch below the earth's surface beginning to run itself dry. An orange ball billows twenty feet or more into the sky before the flames shrink down and snake wispy in the wind. The fire makes its own wind, and I feel it moving through my clothes, pushing back stray hairs. My husband crosses the cattle-guard but stands back a ways watching us. He shrugs his shoulders and gives what smile he can. Mother offers him her hand, and he comes over and puts his arm around my waist, working to be the person I need him to be a while longer.

XXXVIII

Above us, the new Riders keep watch on the hill, silhouetted by the setting sun. They step high in their stirrups and lean forward, bracing for something we can't see. We stand there, staring into the flame until it begins to grow dark outside our circle. The wind picks up, whips the flame around, lighting up our faces. Mother pulls my

hands close, turns them over, studies them like she used to when I was a girl. I'm not crazy, she says. I don't think so anyway.

I know, I try to say, but she cuts me off. To tell you the truth, she says, I don't know if it's suicide or salvation. If I did, maybe I could go. But you, she says, you were always my perfect angel.

She wipes my face, leans her forehead against mine, and tells me, I'm glad you're not like me in the ways that count. I hold her gaze, try my best to see past my own reflection, to see her as she is right now, as she must have been all those years ago, defiant but afraid. Space opens up, the sky goes soft, and I know she won't be in the car when we drive away. I see what's before us, I see what's been, and I see out past the sun where stars explode and life starts anew. When I've seen more than I can take, I give in, close my eyes, feel the warmth of her skin. I imagine her as big and whole as the world, pretend her words were lost to the flame.

40.

You Can Touch This!

by Jim Hanas

Steven had just finished a cigarette and lofted the butt off the loading dock when Bitsy appeared and told him there was barf in the interrogation room. This was no surprise. There was always barf somewhere. In the interrogation room, in the supermarket, in the post office, in the dentist's office. In the nail salon.

Steven arrived in the interrogation room to find a woman holding a crying child by the hand. Wherever children played and ate cake, some of them barfed. Usually the smaller ones. Steven threw a wad of paper towels down and told everyone to clear out. The name of the place was You Can Touch This! but barf was an exception. No one touched barf but Steven.

The interrogation room looked like a real interrogation room, only much shabbier. All the furniture—like most of the furniture at You Can Touch This!—had been donated, in this case by the local police precinct, on the (entirely true) premise that anything grown-ups did for real, kids would enjoy pretending to do. Bitsy and her partner, Tina, had done a reasonably good job of removing the rusty metal parts from donations like these—and covering the electrical outlets and fuse boxes, and so on—providing beleaguered parents a guilt-free environment in which they could let their children roam around like wild animals. Bitsy had a marketing degree and she understood the market.

There was a table in the middle of the interrogation room surrounded by three aluminum chairs and a lamp that could be trained directly on the “suspect.” In one corner, there was a cart with wheels on it, on top of which sat a broken polygraph machine. The thin metal arms that had once recorded vital signs were bent like a tangled clot of coat hangers, but kids still loved attaching each other to it. Its surface was dappled with fruit juice and icing. The half dozen photocopied flyers posted around the room—featuring a clip art image of a tank—had failed to prevent this. They said: “Absolutely no food and/or drink in the Interrogation Room.”

Steven locked the door behind him. The kids could still see him, through the window and via the surveillance camera that broadcast the contents of the interrogation room on a screen outside the door. Foreheads lined the window and children’s eyes peeked just above the sill. Steven cleaning barf was suddenly much more interesting than the operating room, the telemarketing center, the broken MRI machine, or the forklift with no engine. Steven swirled his mop self-consciously until Bitsy’s voice came over the intercom, informing everyone that a puppet show was about to take place.

The foreheads vanished from the window, and soon Steven heard Bitsy’s husky voice from the other side of the warehouse in the twin roles of Fairy Godmother and Prince Charming. Steven sprayed deodorizer in the air and closed the door behind him.

Steven decided it was a good time to go to the bathroom. He was aware how dangerous it could be to go to the bathroom at You Can Touch This! It took only one hysterical child—and, as far as Steven could tell, it was the rare child who was not hysterical—to report that you had touched them inappropriately, and your job and your life (as you knew it) would be over. This was what had happened to Steven’s predecessor—Randy—whose picture now appeared on a popular government website devoted to the criminally touchy. Bitsy and Tina seemed to think that in Randy’s case this was deserved—that he had in fact done some touching—but Steven thought this just proved that once one hysterical, sugar-crazed kid started talking, suspicions never really went away.

Steven did not take chances. He made it his policy never to be alone

in a closed room with anyone younger than eighteen, even though he himself was only sixteen and a virgin. Most of the time this was easy. Like the interrogation room, every room at You Can Touch This! had half walls or a window to prevent just this kind of secrecy. The official policy was to leave the doors to the bathrooms open—according to the photocopied flyers that appeared above the mirrors and in every stall—but Steven felt this left him vulnerable. He preferred to wait until the children were trapped in the puppet theater and then go to the bathroom by himself, locking the door safely behind him. He had tried other strategies, including clapping his hands while he was in the bathroom—to make it clear he wasn't touching anything at all—but this made it difficult to handle his business and he was always peeing on himself.

After Steven locked the door and sat down, he flipped open his phone. No messages. As he was finishing up, he received a text from Tina—this is how they found him when they couldn't find him—announcing a “juice spill in the copy room.” The copy room, in this case, was the actual copy room, where Tina and Bitsy made copies of the warnings and instructions that were taped up everywhere—always in layouts involving clip art of clowns or dinosaurs or tanks.

Steven unlocked and opened the bathroom door to see that a line had formed. The puppet show was short. There was a woman shepherding five little boys, one of whom looked up at Steven with a confused look.

“What are you supposed to be?” he asked.

This question made sense. Bitsy and Tina not only put on the puppet shows and served pizzas to parties in the private rooms that had been constructed along one side of the warehouse, but they dressed up too, based on the season and occasion. They dressed up like princesses and queens and witches and lady golfers and whatever was required, really.

But Steven was not wearing a costume. Steven was being Steven (or so Steven thought), with his blue hair and his black fingernails and his pierced nose with a chain that ran to a clip that gripped the rim of his right ear. They had agreed on an answer to this question,

however, which he was to provide whenever kids asked what he was supposed to be. That way, Bitsy said, he would fit right in.

“A zombie,” he said, brushing the hair out of his eyes and smiling vaguely. The boy—like the woman and her other charges—seemed satisfied.

In the copy room, it was Tina who had spilled her juice, laced as it always was with Southern Comfort. The paper was jammed and Tina was stabbing at the Copy button, producing a steady stream of useless beeps. Steven rolled his eyes and told Tina to step aside. In some ways, Bitsy and Tina were as hopeless and irritating as his own mother, except that they weren’t ashamed of him and they gave him someplace to stay.

He carefully dried the buttons with a series of paper towels and opened up the machine’s various hatches to relieve the jams before running off a dozen copies of a page with a dinosaur on it that warned of a “\$10 fee for cleaning up of ‘accidents.’” He wasn’t quite sure what Tina was after, but he figured she meant the barf in the interrogation room and he wondered who would get the ten dollars.

He taped the flyers up in the interrogation room, in the supermarket, in the post office, in the dentist’s office, in the nail salon, and in the pond of rubber balls, which was basically impossible to clean when barfed in. He then took his spot at the cash register. The last of the day’s parties were getting ready to leave, but they’d first have to clear the gauntlet of goodies Bitsy and Tina had amassed by the exit in an attempt to generate incremental income. (Bitsy understood the market.) These items ranged from the arguably educational (balsa wood models of triceratopses), to the frivolous (candy jewelry), to the ethically questionable (toy soldiers painted in desert tones). Nevertheless, the area where they were sold was impossible to avoid. Bitsy had turned it into a sort of corral through which all traffic had to filter. On the way into You Can Touch This!, children flew through without distraction, hypnotized by the promise of fake teleconferencing centers and cupcakes with blue frosting. By the time they were leaving, however, their ability to resist was compromised by sugar and fatigue and that terrible childhood sense that the best day of your life

is coming to an end and can't it please, please, please last just a little bit longer?

Parents huddled outside the enclosure, hoping to hustle their children through quickly enough to avoid delays, whining, and discretionary spending. Some succeeded, but many did not, and Steven waited at the register for negotiations to wind down in screams and tears and final, desperate purchases. Once the last child had extorted the last candy cocktail ring, the silence inside the echoing expanse of You Can Touch This! practically rang.

"Holy fuck!" Bitsy groaned like a bear while she stretched her back. "I thought they'd never leave."

She said this every night and Tina, tipsy, always laughed. With the kids gone, they all smoked cigarettes while Tina tallied the day's receipts and prepared to close for the night.

"Need a ride somewhere, Stevie?" Bitsy asked. "Want to catch a movie?"

He rolled his eyes and shook his head. He thought he might die of embarrassment, even though no one was around.

"Too cool to be seen with a couple old lesbos?" Bitsy said, grabbing the much smaller Tina around the waist and poking her face over her shoulder, like they were posing for a picture.

"I'll just stay here," he said.

"Suit yourself, Champ," Bitsy said as she and Tina left the merchandise corral and headed out the front door. "Catch you in the morning."

Steven checked the lock on the steel door by the loading dock, shut off the industrial lights that hung far overhead, and settled into the Holiday Inn Express Child-Friendly Accommodation. The bad part about the Holiday Inn Express Child-Friendly Accommodation was that it had to be referred to by its full name. Holiday Inn Express had donated it to You Can Touch This! on this condition. The good part about it was that it was an exact replica of an actual Holiday Inn Express Child-Friendly Accommodation, which meant that Steven had a hotel room where he could stay for as long as he wanted. That's why Bitsy and Tina had been able to take him in when his mother had thrown him out for being, as she said, a total

queer-bait. The only other slightly bad part was that children played, and fought, and peed, and jumped on the bed all day in the donated Holiday Inn Express Child-Friendly Accommodation, so it was a mess and it smelled like milk. Steven didn't mind too much. The television worked and if you kept the lights off, you couldn't see the fingerprints all over the screen.

He shook the bedspread to rid it of giant plastic toys and crumbs, then carefully smoothed it out on top of the bed and propped himself against the headboard. The remote control was nailed down, but he'd gotten good at operating it without looking. As he surfed for horror movies, his phone buzzed in his pocket. He pulled it out and slid it open to see a text from his father. "Call your mother," it said.

Steven tossed the phone on the bed and zoned out to an airing of *Near Dark* he'd been lucky enough to find. He was startled when he heard the door by the loading dock rattle. The warehouse was creepy at night, but Steven liked its stray creaks and its weird hollowness. Who knew what could be lurking where? It was his milieu. This noise was not mysterious, however. It was someone trying to get in. His father, or his mother maybe, with the police. He turned off the television. He got up and slowly crept out of the Holiday Inn Express Child-Friendly Accommodation and to the power box to turn the overhead lights back on.

Almost as soon as he threw the switch, which made a big sizzling click like something in Dr. Frankenstein's lab, he heard a shriek by the loading dock. He ran across the warehouse as fast as he could, slipping on the smoothed concrete floors in his socks, to reach the room just beyond the dentist's office. But the banging and shrieking was not coming from the outside. Right by the door was a little boy, crying and thrashing at the door with his fists.

Steven froze. Images of Randy's image on that government website flashed before his eyes, and this—this was so much worse. Here was a child who could not be more hysterical, in a situation where they could not be more alone. In a warehouse? It was like a joke. Steven searched his mind and couldn't discover a single reason why this was not, in some sense, a kidnapping.

The child didn't notice Steven. He just kept pounding and crying. He was maybe five, although Steven had trouble distinguishing ages from four to fourteen. He was blond, and pale, and had a round face that was now as red as a tomato from crying. Steven worried that the zombie explanation wouldn't go far this time, but he had no choice, so he approached carefully and leaned down toward the boy.

"Can I help you?" he said. He knew this was ridiculous, but the kid turned and looked at him full face, blubbering, and fell into his arms. Steven cradled him awkwardly—he would have preferred to handle barf—and tried to calm the kid down. He reached for his phone and realized he'd left it in the Holiday Inn Express Child-Friendly Accommodation.

"It's all right," he was saying. "It's all right."

Steven could not remember the last time he thought anything was all right.

"All right," he said. "Calm down. What's your name?"

He was careful not to scratch the boy with his nose chain.

"Ashton," the boy said.

"Action?" Steven clarified.

"Ashton!" the boy said, impetuously, rubbing one of his wet eyes with the heel of his hand.

"Okay, Ashton, we're just going to get my phone so we can find your parents. Can we do that?"

Ashton nodded limply.

Steven stood up and took Ashton by the hand and led him through the dentist's office, the supermarket, and the post office to the Holiday Inn Express Child-Friendly Accommodation. His phone was where he had left it. He picked it up and—without letting go of Ashton's hand—dialed Bitsy's number.

"Bitsy, Bitsy," he cried when she answered, relieved to be freed of total responsibility. "There's a kid named Ashton . . . Ashton, what's your full name?"

"Ashton Jacob Hunter."

"Ashton Jacob Hunter, and he got locked in, and he's here right now, and we've got to find his parents, and you've got to come right away."

“Son of a bitch,” Bitsy bellowed into the phone. “We’ll be right there.”

Steven sat on the bed and looked at Ashton, who was just standing there, staring at him. Help was on the way.

“I’m hungry,” Ashton said. “I need to go to the bathroom.”

The bathroom. The word was like a knife in Steven’s heart. Here they were, already so far past his well-considered comfort zone, and now the bathroom?

“There it is,” Steven said, pointing to the fully-functioning bathroom in the Holiday Inn Express Child-Friendly Accommodation.

“I need help,” Ashton said.

“Help? Are you sure you can’t hold it?”

“I need to go!” Ashton said. Steven, aided by more images of Randy’s image on that government website, quickly calculated whether it would be better to have a happy, satisfied Ashton when help arrived or an angry, impetuous Ashton. He plucked the child from the bed and took him into the bathroom. He got down on his knees, undid the button and zipper on Ashton’s corduroys and picked Ashton up and sat him on the toilet seat. And there they were, facing each other, their noses just inches apart. A shiver of relief worked its way through Ashton’s little body.

“What are you supposed to be?” Ashton asked.

“A zombie,” Steven said.

Ashton pulled his pants up on his own, and Steven helped zip and button them. He took Ashton by the hand again and led him back through all the rooms and the dentist’s office just as Bitsy was throwing open the steel door from outside, along with a policeman and a frantic woman who was Ashton’s mother.

“Ashton, oh my God,” she screamed as she ran up to him and plucked him from Steven’s side. “Oh my God, honey, what have they done to you?”

“Now let’s not jump to any crazy conclusions,” Bitsy said. She remembered Randy too. “It was an honest mistake. He’s fine.” She reached out and tousled Ashton’s hair with one of her big hands.

Ashton’s mother pulled the boy away from Bitsy angrily.

“What did this man do to you?” she asked the boy.

“What man?” Ashton asked earnestly. “What man?”

Ashton’s mother hustled him away from the loading dock and toward her car, the policeman right behind her. “He’s not a man,” Ashton sang as the woman buckled him into his car seat. “He’s a zombie.”

“A zom-beeeeeeee,” they could hear the boy happily wailing as the car wheeled around and turned toward the exit of the industrial park. “Zom-beeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee.”

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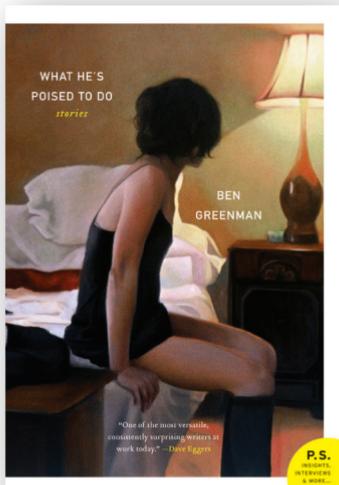
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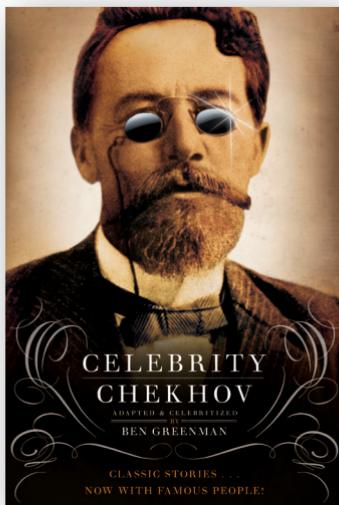
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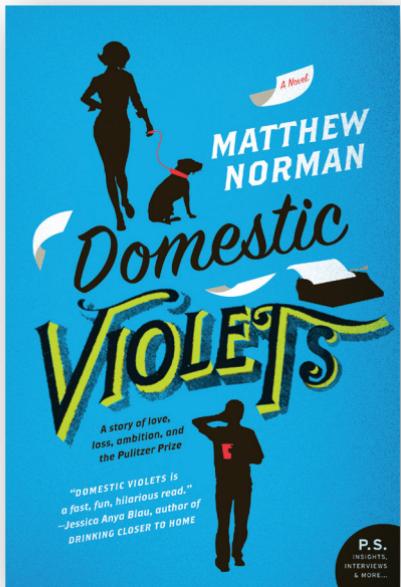
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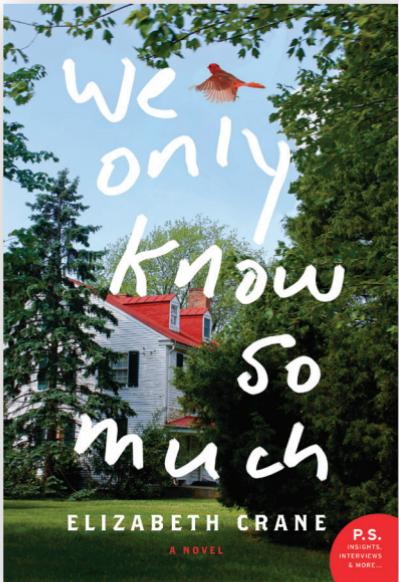
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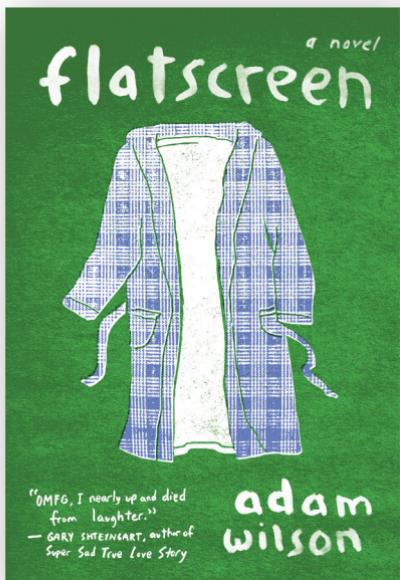
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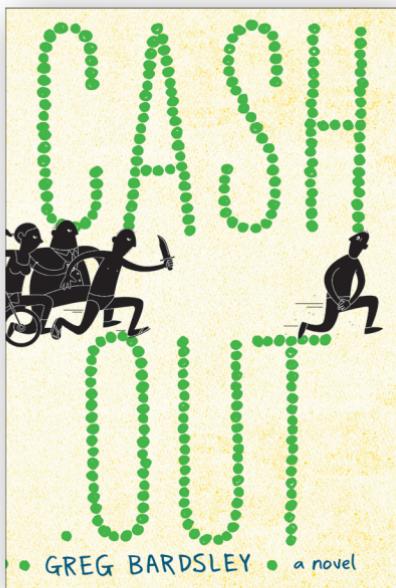
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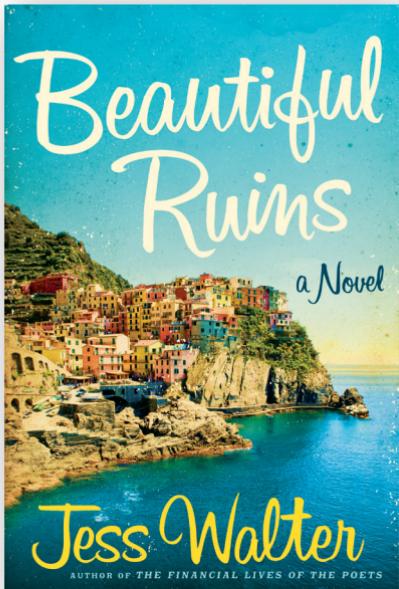
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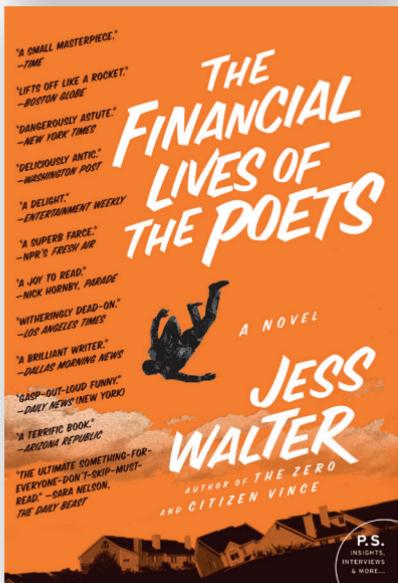
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