Sunspot Literary Journal

Volume 2 Issue #3

Changing the World
Through Words and Art

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Gone Outranks Broken Every Time

Samantha Madway

All systems firing, frenetic, watching me
tick-tock
till the countdown clocks in at
single digits and
I detonate, birth a blast area,
auto-irradiate.
Inner peace apostate,
transfixed by all that powder on my plate,
stage whisper *mirror, mirror, on the floor,*
who's the saddest and is there more?

Morning opens,
different level of
worse, follow my nose, embrace the accursed.
Another disaster, another pyre, another
incident report in my file.

Didn't we already arrest you?
None of this is new.
And I'm repeating the very worst part, eternal false start.
But I can still deploy all the right lines,
swear
I too feel The Change
this time. (I do, I really,
really do, and now
I'm fine.)

But I'm just pacing, craving, prearranging, plotting
my next mistakes—
all I am is what I chase.

Indelible in Absentia

Samantha Madway

you never brought flowers,
but still broke my vase

I made you make me cry

you ran my mind across a washboard, later
reminisced about the day we went antiquing

I said less

you were the mudslide, but I caved me in

I lost an extra winter
watching the floor

you kangaroo courted me, smiled at
seeing me chased for days by your screams

I said less

you accused me of being nothing
more than a metaphor

I said *this isn't what I'll remember*
because you made me promise to forget

Alternate History

T.B. Grennan

Here's how it finally happens.

At thirty-two, you're working at a tech startup after years with nonprofits and publishers. Getting used to wearing t-shirts to the office instead of button-downs, to being among the oldest employees instead of the youngest. And then one day, you're asked to take somebody's picture.

Your boss likes profiling new hires for the company blog, but this one is just a year out of school and doesn't have a headshot. (On LinkedIn, he's using a photo from a college costume party.) You arrange to meet him by the elevators. The light's good there; the wall has your company's name written in foot-high letters.

He's waiting when you arrive, sunlight hitting him at an angle, hot and bright. Shirt open to the third button; chest hair peeking out. And suddenly you feel it. In your chest. At the top of your head and the back of your testicles. A shudder, an electric charge. Your hormones flickering like neon.

You take a dozen pictures. His eyes half-closed in the first few, like he's sleepy or drunk. The fifth photo comes out perfect—it's the one you end up using—but you just keep snapping away. The two of you chatting now, joking about startup life and the company's kickball team as you move him in front of the window, his white shirt blurring into the gauzy curtains.

His gaze grows softer with each picture, his smile brighter. And when it's over, you sit down at your desk, waiting for the monitor to warm back up, and wonder what just happened, what it meant.

At first, the attraction feels like a fluke. But it's still there when you see him again, see him week after week for a year, for two years. In meetings and happy hours. At company parties and a season's worth of kickball games. Until there's no way to pretend that the sparks in your chest are any different than the ones sent up by the girls you pined for in high school.

So you mull things over. Let your eyes linger on men the way they always have on women. Accept the erotic flashes you get, the confused yearning. Trying to give yourself permission to be whatever

it is you are. And when a different coworker casually mentions she's bi during a coffee run, you find yourself wanting to say, "Yeah? Me, too."

You start seeing a therapist and eventually the topic bubbles up. She's surprised you haven't told anybody; you're surprised how easy it was to tell someone. A few weeks later, your girlfriend brings you to the Bowie exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum and as the two of you take in the kimonos and knee-high boots, you decide that this is the time. Back home, you close the bedroom door and, after an agonizing prelude, you say it. She laughs with relief: "Oh, thank god! I thought something was wrong!"

You tell your male best friend over beers and your female best friend over breakfast sandwiches. You tell coworkers one after another after another. The process easier each time, though always a little hard.

Until here you are. Still figuring things out, but comfortable, finally, with yourself. Appreciating your lack of guilt or shame or angst—which could be luck, or chance, or maybe just what coming out in your thirties feels like. Thinking back, now and again, to all the other times you could have figured things out. All the other lives you might have lived.

PETWORTH — 2012

You're twenty-nine and in Washington, DC for the week, helping out at your nonprofit's profoundly dull annual conference. Forcing smile after smile. Answering endless questions about where, exactly, the bathrooms are. And when it's all over, you crash for the weekend with a college friend who works on Capitol Hill.

Your first short story has just been published and your friend takes you out for a celebratory drink—then drags you along to a full day of Oktoberfest happenings. A German-themed brunch. A temporary Bavarian biergarten on a blocked-off street. A combination canine parade and pageant dubbed "Dogtoberfest." And finally, as the light wanes, you descend into the DC metro and emerge three minutes later in Petworth.

The house party is in a newly gentrifying section of the neighborhood. And as it winds down, you find yourself on the front

porch, drinking a Märzen and chatting with a bright-eyed government administrator who's been watching you all night.

He went to grad school in West Virginia, and because it's the only thing you know about Morgantown, you bring up the experimental transit system that the Nixon administration built there. He nods, says he loves the PRT. Raves about the convenience, the speed, as his free hand flits between the railing and your forearm. Then starts talking about his boyfriend, implying that they have an open thing. And asks about yours.

"Girlfriend," you say.

He purses his lips. Like he's been there. Like you'll get through it, too.

BLASPHEMY — 2011

You're twenty-seven and walk into your favorite bar in Brooklyn (formerly a lesbian dance club, formerly an autobody shop) wearing a faded Scott Pilgrim tee. Alone for the night, because your girlfriend decided—as she often does—that she didn't feel like coming out. Surprised, as you push your way to the bar, how packed the place is on a winter Monday.

You drink one of the best double IPAs you've ever had and chat with two graying men who are sipping wine at the table next to you. It takes a minute for you to register that they're a couple, and another minute to realize you've accidentally crashed the bar's queer night. CONFESSION, it's called, the iconography all crosses and sexy lesbian nuns. Both men are lapsed Catholics—one's Irish—and feel somewhat leery about the theme, but the electropop and disco eventually loosens them up.

They buy you a drink, buy you two, and talk about gay marriage and their ex-wives and Ancient Greece until midnight. They excuse themselves, joke that they're getting old. Squeezing your hand as you shake goodbye.

You're waiting in line for the bathroom when a guy in an incongruous tank top tries to strike up a conversation. "Love your shirt," he says, running a finger slowly down your chest, tracing the outlines of the illustrations. "You're so, like, artistic." And you think both how handsome he is and what stupid shit he's saying; wondering

suddenly if this is what it feels like to be a girl getting chatted up in a nightclub.

Across the bar, the promoter—a chubby woman with a half-shaved head—fawns over the DJ, who's tall and blonde and incredibly cute. The DJ's obviously queer, but she's just as obviously not interested. Watching them reminds you of yourself, of the way you were in high school.

Then it's the last song of the night, and that song is "Dancing on My Own." You close your eyes, the synths drilling into your head, making your body move. And then you're dancing with your arms above your head, feeling drunk and happy and free, the song's beautiful melancholy filling you up. When you open your eyes, you're surrounded by a knot of queer men and women, all of you swooning there, moved almost to tears by the music and the crowd and the feeling.

And as the little bells finally stop chiming at the end of the song, the promoter hugs you, thanks you for being there. Says, "I love it when my gays come out." And instead of correcting her, you just hug her back.

CASTLETON — 2000

You're seventeen, spending two weeks of your summer vacation in a cinderblock dorm room. It's July and you're attending a government-run arts program located at a state college best known for being mocked in an episode of *Mystery Science Theater 3000*.

Every high school in Vermont gets to send one student here—except yours, which sent a half-dozen. Which means that you've got friends here, but also that you're surrounded by bright-eyed kids from nowhere towns breathlessly proclaiming that, wow, they never knew that anybody else cared about music/painting/writing/sculpture/whatever. "I never knew anybody else liked french fries!" your classmate deadpans at the dining hall, dipping one in ketchup. "This place is opening my eyes!"

You're an aspiring fiction writer stuck taking classes with a gaggle of wannabe slam poets. They're writing confessional lyrics about their angsty relationships and difficult fathers; you're working on a dark comic epic where someone hijacks a medical transport flight.

In your free time, you're corresponding by letter and payphone with an adorable girl from home who you're beginning to suspect just doesn't like you like that.

All that means you're spending a lot of time in your dorm room, typing and deleting and typing some more. In the mornings before breakfast, in the free periods after lunch. Before bed, while your roommate—who's here to be an actor—strips down to shorts and nothing else to practice his lines.

"People think I'm gay," he tells you practically the minute you arrive, "but I'm really not." You nod. Okay. Good to know.

He's a pretty decent actor, and there's a matinee idol vibe to him—the floppy hair, the slender, muscular chest, the smile that seems to explode out of him with the curl of a lip. A little slow on the uptake, a little dull. But handsome and friendly and perfectly nice, as long as nobody mentions the G-A-Y thing. The two of you aren't close, and though you talk before bed and do the nod of acknowledgement when you see each other in the dining hall, most of your time is spent apart. You've got hijackings to plan and a girl to pine after; he's got lines to memorize.

Which is why you're surprised how you react when a friend from high school tells you that she thinks your roommate is cute. She's quiet and shy—except when she's on stage—and this is the first time you've ever heard her express interest in a boy. But instead of teasing her, or asking follow-up questions, you startle yourself by saying, "Yeah, I think so, too."

WILLISTON — 1998

You're fifteen, and it's summer in Vermont. You've never had a girlfriend. Never kissed a girl. Never done anything more than accept a pity slow dance from a friend of a friend. But you're getting paid $50 to carry boxes in and out of a couple office buildings, so you've got that going for you.

The day begins in a hidden office above Evergreen Eddy's Wildlife Grill, a three-room setup where the walls are stained a sickly gray with grease from the burners downstairs. You make a half-dozen trips, carrying empty filing cabinets and desk drawers and computer monitors so big that you can barely fit them in your arms. Trying not

to trip on the carpeted stairs. Trying not to brush up against the rancid wallpaper.

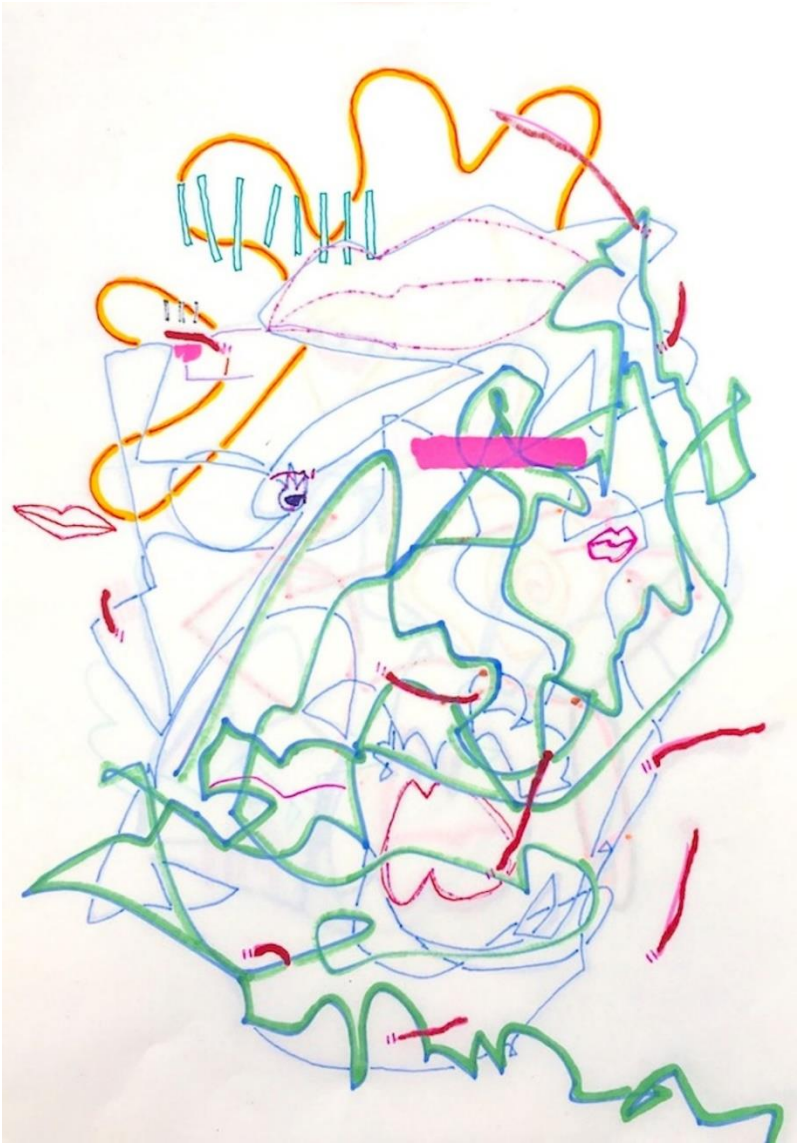
Then you're in the passenger seat of your father's massive new SUV, a company car from his new job. The kind of vehicle where you practically need a stepladder to get in. Classic rock on the radio. A hot, humid wind blowing in through the open window, sunlight painfully bright as you come around curves. Your dad is talking about the company, a tech startup building a device that lets you check your email on the TV. "They've got the device down to a pack of cigarettes," he says, "and it just keeps getting smaller." Smiling now, like he can't quite believe it.

The new building is down the road in a Williston office park. And when you arrive, it's just an empty shell: exposed pipes, exposed wires, drywall still being installed. You're introduced to the other employees, most of whom are in their twenties—one's a former Olympic snowboarder. You meet the CEO, who's gruff and friendly and drinks a half-dozen gold cans of Caffeine-Free Diet Coke over the course of the morning; he'll later leave the company under ambiguous circumstances.

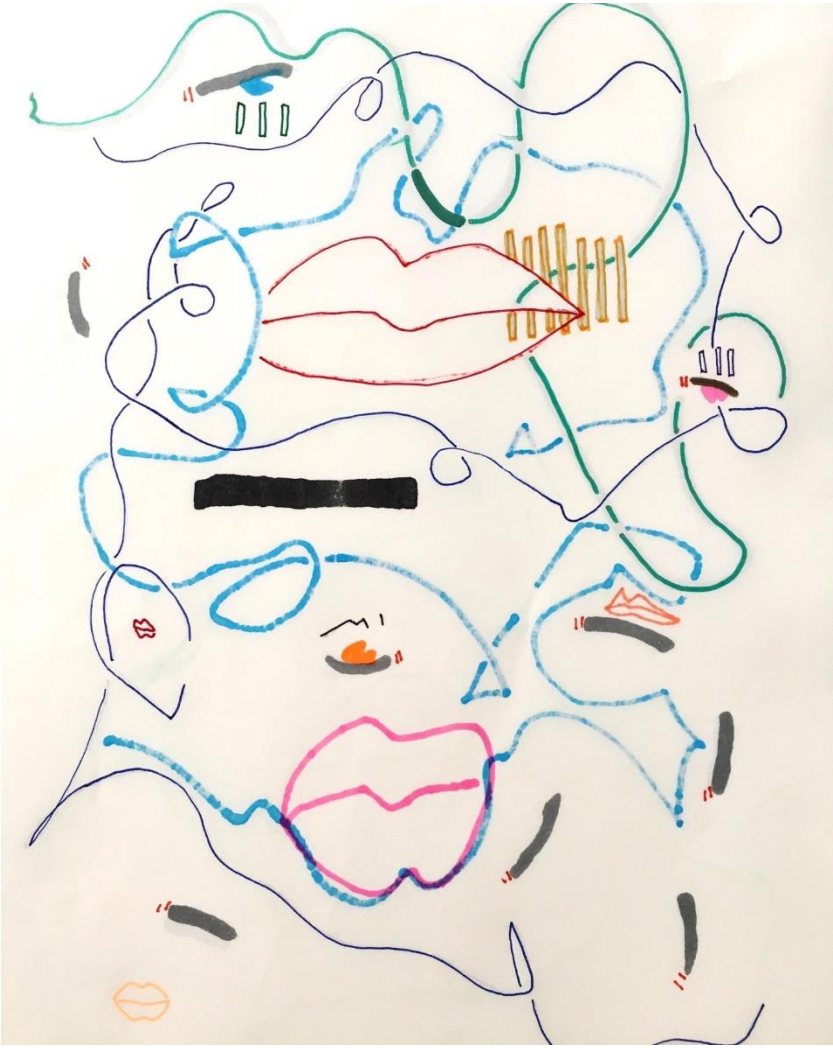
The foreman of the construction crew has brought his son along, too, and the two of you are put to work together. He's sixteen or so, taller and skinnier than you. Blond and serious, dressed in a preppy style you know only from movies. The two of you carry old pipes and debris out of the office, making room for new desks and cubicles. He chats happily about sports and other things you don't care about. But even though he's not much of a conversationalist, you look for reasons to keep talking.

But eventually the back-and-forth fizzles out.

The last time you see him, he's standing near the door to the outside, the afternoon sun streaming in, lighting him up. You don't remember his name, or where he's from. But you remember what he looked like just then, remember it to this day.



Uprising / Valyntina Grenier



We Make This Wind It's Wrath / Valyntina Grenier

A Certain Perspective

Marjorie Tesser

Annie steps inside the studio, a light-filled barn behind the Arts Center, and a familiar aroma hits—like bread baking with a lower, rough note, the tang of turpentine and solvents. She recalls the aromas of the paints themselves, each color different, with an unaccustomed lift, a stirring. Not one familiar face, although the Arts Center is just the next town over from Annie's; she'd half-thought she'd run into another mom from the PTA or someone she'd met through work. But no. Her classmates look like college kids.

Annie takes an easel in the back. A girl dressed in a white strapless sundress (not very practical for painting) gallops in on coltish bare legs. "You're new," she says to Annie. "You haven't studied with Tim, have you? We all have. I'm Phoebe."

The night before, and then again that morning, Annie had reminded Celia that Madison's mom would drive her to and from ballet. She'd warned Skyler not to attempt any new skateboard tricks, and asked Jake to check in on his siblings, from his part-time job at the music store. She packed her new expensive art supplies and thought about what to wear for class. She'd be going straight from work, in what Matt calls her "girl reporter" outfit (his little joke; Annie takes photographs and write brief profiles of local businesses—bakeries, hair salons, real estate offices—for a glossy promo magazine). She no longer had her old college painting clothes, faded overalls worn over a stretchy tube top; anyway, those days were long gone, so she stuffed jeans and an old shirt of Matt's into a tote. He'd encouraged her to take the class when she'd been accepted. "It's just eight weeks, you should be able to work it out. You've been saying for ages you want to get back to your art."

The teacher appears in the doorway, and the students, who'd been setting up, or chatting, or checking their phones, look up, pocket their devices, and watch him cross to the front. Tim Caine is in his mid-forties or so. He's dressed like the male students, in worn jeans and a V-neck t-shirt. Hair spiked jauntily in front but thinning at the temples, bit of a Dad bod (though she's no one to judge). Annie's only seen a couple of his paintings "in person" but she's checked him out on

the internet. Tim is a wonderful artist. His works are representational with a twist, the narratives hard to pin down. He's represented by two galleries, one in Chelsea and one upstate in Hudson, and has had a respectable number of solo shows. Annie feels lucky to have gotten into to the class, on the strength of an old group of sketches she'd worked on the first year Celia was in school.

Tim Caine waits while everyone quiets down. "So," he says, "we gather here to make art. Your art, whatever that is, and we will help each other make it better." The girl Phoebe waves her hand; Caine frowns and gives a quick shake of his head and continues. "I will help you make it better. We will engage in an investigation, an inquiry, a honing. Hopefully each of you will end up with a few pieces that have stretched your capabilities, whether or not they prove marketable." He'll provide a focal point for each session, a still life set-up—as he talks he arranges some fruit in a bowl and places it, along with a metal watering can, a vintage man's wingtip, and the skull of a small animal, upon a drape of iridescent greenish cloth—or once in a while a model, but students are under no constraint to paint it, and should follow their own inclinations.

It's been twenty years since college and Annie's barely picked up a brush. She sticks to painting the still life Tim Caine had set-up. The other students all seem to be doing something different. Chatting during a break, Annie learns that they're actually not college kids, but are all post-grads; a contingent had studied under Tim in the Bard MFA program and followed him here; Maria and Niles, the guy with the huge Afro and striped suspenders, had gone to, respectively, Cooper Union and RISD before studying with Caine. Annie waits after class to talk to Caine. After each of the other students has had a lengthy chat, she gets to say, "I'm so glad to be in the class. I saw your work at my town library exhibit. It was wonderful." Tim shrugs. "Just a favor for a friend," he says, turning away. "I usually don't bother with those things."

Just a couple of weeks into the class, Annie already can see that each of Tim's students has developed a signature style. Quinn Reynolds, the boy with the dark hair who reminds Annie of a young version of Matt, does stick-figure people and shiny robots on fields of mottled white.

The one called Jinx paints big rocks. Phoebe Klein's work, mythical winged creatures in nursery hues, reminds Annie of Chagall and also of Lisa Frank (Annie recalls a notebook she'd loved in middle school). Maria Vega paints abstracts with super-saturated color; a smoky blue, a deep, ferrous Rothko red. The rest, three voluble young guys Annie secretly dubs "The Art Squad," produce socially-aware, hard-edged propaganda pieces, indistinguishable save that two of them work big, the third, Niles, only in miniature. This is an Advanced Class; the students are expected to know what they're doing. These kids consider themselves serious artists, the ones to be famous in a few years' time. Annie had thought that herself, back when she was their age.

Now, she's just happy to be back in the studio again. Tim puts on music (last time, vintage jazz, this week, cowboy songs) and Annie sketches and mixes and paints. Her body remembers the old gestures, and her mind, usually a running litany of worries, reminders, and concerns—work, the kids, Matt—becomes a neutral contemplative blank. She notices how painting differs from photography, the only thing close to art she'd been doing lately, not just in the execution, but in the way you see. Taking a photo, you're aware of the interplay of light and dark, and the arrangement within a frame. With painting, it's more about depth, breadth, and choice, what to omit and what to show, and how; the opportunity for the symbolic. The once-a-week class is her own creative time, which she realizes she's not had in any structured way for the past seventeen years, since the birth of Jake, then Skyler, and then, when they'd thought they were done, Celia.

In college, Annie's work had incorporated black scribbly lines, vivid blocks of deep color and painted slogans: her heroes were Basquiat, Holzer, Kruger. Now, it's emerging differently. Annie, tentative, is sparing with her brush but works toward interpreting the subject so that it's minimally indicated, barely recognizable. Sometimes her pieces end up having oddly focused moments of realism, an unexpectedly-detailed flower or piece of fruit, or a hand, mid-gesture.

Tim moves around the class, gesturing at one canvas or another. Those who take his advice invariably get a better painting out of it; those whose work is praised, preen. Annie watches closely as he critiques the other students' work, especially when what he's suggesting seems counterintuitive. She tries to see as he sees, the

spaces, the colors, the forms. He spends a good deal of time with the Squad guys, then Maria, until Phoebe clamors for his attention, and then back to Maria. Annie waits for him to comment on hers, but perhaps he's idea-ed out by the time he gets back to her part of the classroom. He gives her work a glance and a nod or once in a while a little shrug. She tries not to take it personally.

One week, Tim has arranged for a model, a Rubenesque older woman whose luxuriant folds of skin are echoed by those in the thick red drapery she's posed on. Annie is scrutinizing the subject, deciding on her approach, when her hip buzzes. She slips her phone out of her pocket to check; it's a text from Madison's mom, Lori. She looks up to see Tim's scowl, and quickly steps out to the hall. Lori is stuck at Ninja Warrior class with her younger son. Can Annie pick the kids up from ballet? *I know u have class, but u can leave, right?* But luckily, Annie reaches Kaitlin's mom, who will save the day. Annie ducks back into class with a little half bow and a mouths a *Sorry.*

"A reminder, guys. You all know the rule—absolutely no phones in my classes," Tim takes the opportunity to state, and Annie's cheeks warm.

A few days later, Annie is taking a short break between work assignments, lingering at her local coffee shop, The Bean Tree, for ten minutes with her latte instead of rushing back to her desk. She sees a girl in line with hair like Phoebe's, platinum tipped with purple and green, but this one has on a baggy sweatshirt and patched jeans, unlike the girly stuff Phoebe wears. She turns and it is Phoebe; she gives Annie a little wave and walks over.

"I almost didn't recognize you," she says to Annie. "Coming from someplace special?"

"No, just my job; I work around the corner from here."

"That sucked when your phone buzzed in class. Tim hates that," Phoebe adds.

"I noticed," says Annie. "My daughter was stuck and needed a ride."

"You have kids? That's so cool, I love little kids. How old?"

"The boys are seventeen and thirteen and Celia's eleven." Phoebe's eyebrows go up and she looks closely at Annie. "I didn't

realize you were . . . you had kids. Wow." Annie's often mistaken for younger; she's petite and slender, and her hair style, unchanged since college, seems lately to have come back into vogue.

"Do you live around here?" Annie asks, to change the subject.

"Nope, I'm up in Peekskill. I'm just stopping in at The Crafty Fox to pick up some supplies," Phoebe replies. Her fingers idly play with the end of her ponytail. "Tim recommended it." She says his name like she likes the feel of it in her mouth. "You should have stuck around after class last week. We were having such a great conversation we took it to the Wayfarer and continued over drinks. It was awesome—Tim hung out with us all night."

Annie has noticed that at the end of each class the three Squad guys and Phoebe cluster around Tim. They interrupt each other to pepper him with questions—What was his take on a recent article in *Hyperallergic*? How did he feel about a show a bunch of them had gone to at a gallery in Beacon? Should they apply for a residency at Haworth or Charrington? They're all fluent in art-speak and display insider status by employing the latest buzz-words, *speculative*, *rupture*, *transverse*, each gunning for his attention, his wisdom. They clearly understand the benefit of having a mentor to give them a helping hand. Annie gets it. In college, her senior advisor, Benoit O'Reilly, had approved of her then-style of painting. He'd became something of a mentor to her, recommending her for a group show and an Art Department prize. His mentorship of the good-looking guys in the class was of a more intimate sort, and he'd cycled through them, dispensing favors and close companionship.

The students here hang on Tim's every pronouncement. Annie, who hasn't been up on the gallery scene, who doesn't even subscribe to art magazines anymore, would have liked to have been part of these conversations, but isn't confident or knowledgeable enough to venture an opinion or formulate questions. After the second class, she'd lingered, but didn't push herself forward, and finally left; at her age, she'd felt ridiculous acting the acolyte. And the following week she'd been half embarrassed, half piqued at being chastised for cell phone use. Anyway, she usually has to get back to check on what her own kids are up to, or finish an interrupted work assignment, or

pull together dinner for the family. Matt's stuck at the office late most nights and somebody has to hold down the fort. Annie has noticed that Tim isn't in any hurry to escape; he seems to enjoy the conversation and perhaps isn't immune to the admiration.

One week, the Squad is more interested in arguing about an exhibit they'd seen over the weekend than in getting down to paint. "It's pandering!" says Brian, one of the guys who works big, of the new show by an artist they'd previously all admired. "Sad," says Niles, the minimalist guy. "He used to do good work. Now it's *decoration.*"

"I thought it was kind of modern," Quinn said.

Tim runs his hands through his hair, which makes the spiky front part stand up like a feather. "Okay, you all want to do this? Right. So tell me. What is art?" He takes the time to look at each student in turn, his eyes narrowed.

"Making," says Jinx.

Phoebe speaks up. "Nope. That's craft."

"Statement," says Brian.

"Nuance," Niles puts in.

"Design," states Quinn. The third Squad guy makes a rude sound.

"Imagination!" Phoebe.

Maria raises her hand. "To me, it's the intersection of intelligence and emotion."

It's seeing, thinks Annie. Seeing and sharing. And maybe having what you saw be seen.

But Tim is already on it. "Art," he says, "is two-headed Janus. It acknowledges the past and gazes out toward a future. It's a marriage of the personal and the universal. It's primal—beauty and horror, creation and ruin. A window, a microscope, a mirror. But bottom line . . ." and he gazes over the heads of the listening students to some point in the far distance, "it's what someone else will pay for." The Squad nods sagely. Maria slowly shakes her head.

Phoebe looks crushed. She puts such stock in Tim, Annie thinks. But it's more than that. Each week she comes to class with an expanse of skin exposed. A plunging neckline over which peek twin half-globes of small, high breasts, or a crop top revealing a milky plain of stomach. Annie finds herself remembering her own first job at the ad agency. She'd get plenty of attention when she wore skimpy clothes

(in fact, had been wearing a particularly short skirt the day she'd met Matt). But Annie knew from experience that it can backfire, the subject considered an object, fun to flirt with but passed over for advancement. Annie thinks about saying something to Phoebe, but stays mum. It's her right to wear what she likes.

"Tim, help!" Phoebe tosses her long platinum hair, ends tipped purple one week, pink and green the next, like the pastel creatures she likes to paint. She flutters curled, super-long black eyelashes (false?) and employs an inelegant giggle, a series of short snorts, at Tim's every *bon mot.* Phoebe contrives to call him to her easel several times each class. "Tim, look!" She sounds like a kid going high on a swing, seeking parental approval. Annie feels sorry for the girl, dangling herself like ripe fruit without garnering so much as a nibble. There had been one or two times in her own past she'd paraded before indifferent reviewing stands; she recalls the pre-meeting excitement, the rationalizations. She's glad her youngest, Celia, hasn't reached this stage. Tim smiles politely at Phoebe, but his gaze drifts. Toward Maria.

Maria is the one whose work he notices. He acts the firm taskmaster, chiding her on a misplaced brushstroke, a too-easy or expected shape. She seems to be nothing but professional with him, nodding and taking instruction and executing under his watchful eye. But Annie sees that blue, assessing eye travel to the girl's rich dark hair, to the small hollow at the base of her long throat in which nestles a tiny silver crescent moon on a thin chain, visible at the deep V of her faded chambray work shirt. He always finds a way to circle back to Maria's easel. Once or twice he lectures from that vantage point, his large hand resting lightly on the girl's ballerina-straight back.

Unfortunately, Annie has to miss one class entirely, but it can't be helped. Just as she's about to leave work, she gets a call from the school nurse. Skyler, chronically ill with diabetes, had practically passed out in Science. Annie rushes to the school; one look at his pale face, hair plastered to his forehead with sweat, and she whisks him right to the ER. Annie is relieved to see a nurse she recognizes from a period before Sky was diagnosed, when he'd been repeatedly hospitalized with similar symptoms; in such a situation, it's always nice to have someone

who sees you as a human, rather than a case. Annie spends the better part of the afternoon in the cubicle with Sky as he naps fitfully, while she alternates worrying and idle wondering what Tim had set up for the class to paint. She texts Matt, who's in a meeting, says his away message. At last they get the test results. It turns out, to her relief, to have been a minor episode, and Sky, by then feeling better, doesn't need to be admitted. They can go home.

In class, Annie is trying not to find Tim irritating. Cynical definitions of art aside, he loves to tell long, name-dropping stories about the art scene back in the day. Worse, he offers the students gems of advice from the perspective of the wise elder, about the pressures of having a family—he has one middle-schooler, a super-gifted kid. "The sweetest thing in the world, being a parent. Wait till you kids experience it. But it's relentless." So hard to keep the kid adequately stimulated. How difficult to balance going to openings and art events, which he has to for his job, his career, and being there for the soccer games, the science fairs. How tricky to juggle art's irregular income with the influx of bills, inexorable as the ocean. "When you're older, you'll see," he says sagely to the class, and Annie, likely several years his senior, feels invisible.

During a slow afternoon at work, Annie browses on the computer and chances upon Tim's social media profiles; she finds his pictures from college and his first gallery show. He'd been handsome then, golden, athletic, the type she'd have gone for when she was that age, before she'd met Matt.

The next time she sees him, she acknowledges to herself that Tim is still a good-looking man. Then he starts with another of his anecdotes, starring Damien, or Cecily, or Cindy, or Takashi, artists whose names make the students perk up like puppies shown a treat. Annie rolls her eyes and glances over at Maria, who appears absorbed in her work. Hair gathered up in a messy bun, her work shirt paint-spattered and a streak of blue on her cheek and she still manages to look elegant. When she was that age, Annie hadn't had Maria's confidence, her composure. "All right, enough of that. Let's get back to work kids," Tim finally says.

Annie finds herself curiously unsettled on the mornings when she's to have painting class. She packs a nicer shirt and takes more care with her eyeliner. One night she has a strange dream. She's with

someone; someone's hands are on her, not Matt's. She wakes, still in the glow of the dream, to Matt in bed beside her, gently snoring, cocooned in the quilt.

Annie gets to the studio earlier than usual and finds Maria alone there. The girl turns to Annie. "So how 's the class going for you?" Annie, happy to be chatting with the usually reserved Maria, answers quickly that she's had so much fun. "Yes, quite a teacher, our Tim," says Maria. "He can be a pain in the ass sometimes, but he's a really good painter. And he definitely takes an interest in his students. The personal touch," she adds, with a little smirk. Does Maria know Tim's interest in her may be . . . more than professional? Were they, possibly, seeing each other? If so, there wouldn't be anything wrong with that, right? Maria's young, but an adult. Annie hopes she'll go on. But Phoebe bounces in, calling out, "Guys, I had the best idea for a painting. Wait till you see what I'm doing today!" Annie feels a small prick of disappointment as Maria turns back to her own easel.

Too soon, the final session arrives; class is ending for the summer. The others will be off, interning in galleries or for arts organizations, teaching in summer camps or waitressing or bussing at a beach resort. For Annie, it'll be the usual, working and trying to make sure her kids are productively occupied; maybe a family week at the shore, if Matt can get away. Phoebe, to everyone's surprise, has won a fellowship to a prestigious art institute on the Pacific coast. "Yay, you! But to be honest, I'm jealous," Niles says, as he hugs her. "Everyone wants to be the one to get picked." Tim himself has been awarded a residency in Wisconsin and has proclaimed himself eager to go and paint cows, eat cheese, and drink beer. He's set up a still life for the last session but for once Annie isn't going with it. She doesn't even bother sketching, but picks up her brush and begins whisking pigment on, filling the empty white.

She works quickly, with her customary light hand. She renders the hard-edged precision of Quinn's canvas of battling robots, the romantic lyricism of Phoebe's dancing unicorns, Jinx's photo-realist phallic stones, the Art Squad's revolutionary slogans and ironic depictions of crushed plastic water bottles and rude cartoon characters. Actually, she's come to differentiate among them; the tall,

ex-quarterback-looking guy who styles himself Brian Orange (né Orenstein) does stuff that's inventive, a cut above the others'. And in the center, like a heavenly queen surrounded by lesser saints, Annie paints a woman, using the most economical of brushstrokes, rendering out of the air a river of hair, the delicate flared nostrils, dark eyes and curve of the lips, the long throat, the tiny points of nipples beneath the chambray shirt, soft from many washings. Annie paints her bathed in light. Tim makes his way around the room, critiquing and kibitzing. Annie doesn't watch for him; her brush flies, layering tiny embellishments of the main figure, each feathery incursion elucidating more of its beauty, setting it in the canvas as a jewel, un-ignorable.

She feels a prickle at the back of her neck, hears a soft intake of breath. It's Tim, behind her. His eyes on her painting, transfixed by the figure. "You're doing something interesting here," he says, quietly. "That central figure. It looks like . . ." and he trails off. He's in love with the girl, Annie thinks. He can't even say her name. Phoebe jumps over to see what's going on. "Annie, this is amazing. Maria, she got you perfectly!" Maria rises and weaves her way to Annie's easel in the back. Annie sees the line that etches itself between the girl's brows, the tight downturn at the corners of her pretty mouth. "I don't know," she says. "I'm pretty sure my boobs aren't that big. Right, Tim?" Something twists in Annie's stomach. "Maria, I'm so sorry, I didn't mean . . ." Maria gives her a crooked smile. "No worries!" but Annie still feels terrible.

Later, when everyone's packing up and saying goodbye, Annie dawdles in hopes of apologizing again, but Maria's in close conversation with Brian. The two of them stroll out together, and it's too late. Annie is gathering her things when Tim, surrounded as usual by students, looks up and says, "Um, Anna? Can you stay a minute? I'd like to speak with you." Annie waits, wishing she could vanish. What could he want? She's afraid she's going to get scolded for objectifying Maria. That's what it looked like, right? But she doesn't think she had been; she was just seeing, trying to see her in a certain perspective. After the students finish an interminable round of "goodbye" and "have a good summer" and "catch you in Beacon for the Kramer retrospective," after the last of them has trotted out the door, Tim motions her forward.

"Anna. I wanted to talk to you," he says. "You've been doing some good work lately. Your painting is strange. Intense." That isn't how Annie would have described her style. Interesting. He rests a big hand on her shoulder. "So. An artist I know, a friend, gives a summer class down in Soho; two days a week, a six-week session, extremely competitive. He's offering a fellowship to one of my students who'll do it as a work-study, come early and stay late to assist in the studio. Might you be interested? To work with . . ." and he drops a name that makes Annie catch her breath. Tim goes on, "I'd planned to recommend . . ." he surprises her with, ". . . Phoebe, but she got the Sandhill fellowship. But today it hit me—how your work has progressed here. How much you've gained from my instruction, the class. So I thought, hell, why not Anna?"

"Thank you, Tim." His name feels awkward in her mouth. Even if it sounds like it was something of an afterthought, he'd chosen her. Annie tamps down her rising excitement, calculating. How could she manage to fit in two days a week down in lower Manhattan with her job, the kids? What if there's an emergency and she and Matt are both in the city?

"Wow, thank you so much. It sounds wonderful," she stalls. A chance to work with an artist whose work she's admired forever, a genius, really. What would that experience let her see? How might her own style, whatever it was, articulate? She'd have to take more control of her work assignment schedule. Celia could go to camp; maybe a day-trippers program for Sky? Jake would be home the summer before college, able to be called on if Sky needs help. Come summer, Matt might even have more flexible hours . . . .

Annie becomes aware of Tim's hand, still on her shoulder, the warmth and weight of it. Has the pressure increased, or is it her imagination? Is this the price of being seen? After another second of pretending it's not there, she shifts her feet and the hand is quickly retracted. Tim raises his arms, palms facing Annie, as if in benediction or to show blamelessness, like perps when they're caught or contestants in TV baking contests when they're told time's up. Annie backs up another step; gives him a steady look.

"Yes," she says. She allows herself to feel a little thrill. "Yes, I'd love to." She has the sudden impulse to press on further with the day's painting, maybe scratch some scribbly lines into the canvas or

add more vibrant color. Maybe something she hasn't even dreamed of yet.

Gary Copeland Lilley's Recipe

Susan Landgraf

Keeping wickedness from your door
is magic you can count on:
a haint blue bottle tree.
Fill the bottles with the blessed earth –
stones, bones, old letters, and prayers.
Against the curses of certain
ancestors and practitioners
of blame and shame this invitation
for ancestors that have your back.
If you don't have an oak or pine,
build a facsimile. Pour a shot
of good whiskey and baptize
the ground under your tree.
Pour a second shot and bless yourself.

Elephant in the Room

Susan Landgraf

She will adopt this white elephant,
this mended chair
sit for awhile and dream a mirror
that doesn't produce poisoned apples.

Seeing the horse-child reminds her
of an upside-down question
under glass. It can't speak.
It can't wither or sprout.

Even under the brightest sun
and oddly shaped shadows
the first word in her dream
was "o." The second "no."

There is this chair
her father made
that no one wanted
because of the memories.

She will put it, too, under glass
where the moths can't go, where
except for the elephant
it has lost memory.

On No Account Should You Shout "Fire!"

Mary Byrne

And some rin up hill and down dale, knapping the chucky stanes to pieces wi' hammers, like sae many road makers run daft. They say it is to see how the warld was made.

Sir Walter Scott, *St. Ronan's Well*

Clinamen

You'd cooked the dinner: a big fresh fish on a bed of tomatoes (doctors would be pleased) in an earthenware pot on an outdoor fire.

Old friends and new (of whom I was one) cheered by wine and newness and dusk, I didn't know who lived where or with whom.

A muezzin sang out hoarsely from a minaret exotic against a rich sunset.

Storks settled to sleep in their huge nest.

When you offered me more fish, I swerved from predicted course, and things were never the same again.

History Recorded in Rock

After dinner everyone relaxed over cake and champagne. There was talk of a son, freshly graduated in geology, now hunting for gold in northern Canada. Outdoors on a warm July night, the candlelit company was enthralled by memories. You had barely left us. Someone asked if I could sense your presence still.

Each of us had a tale of yours: of the canoe that capsized, losing radio and food a week before the seaplane was due back, of the intense damp that made you light a stove in the tent at night so you could fill your notebooks, of a hat with a net against flies, of Native American cemeteries but no people as they'd moved south for the summer, of how pre-sliced white bread was flown in regularly – until one day the seaplane couldn't make the drop and it turned out the cook could make

wonderful bread; and of how you all had pedometers because the land was so flat and wooded it was the only way to mark it out.

You laughed at the idea of such a summer, mocking yourself who had up to then imagined all summers Mediterranean. You never blinded us with science, you just smiled at our idea of old: "Old is billions of years," you said patiently.

Your green metal trunk was bumped and rusted, the paint missing in many places. For field missions you filled it with things like the rock hammer, the handheld loupe, compass, special pens for marking and the bags for carrying stones, knife, ziplock bags, plastic bottles, and the all-important notebooks with the squared pages in which notes were made by firelight in smoke-filled tents. You'd given up bringing medical gear and salves. All other bags were soft so they fit easily around things and you could use them for pillows. The trunk also contained tinned sardines, beans, toothpaste tubes a Russian colleague had cleaned out and filled with jam. You could make a fire anywhere, and once did so in a river bed just before a flash flood, then told the story against yourself. Once, you forgot the barbecue grill and made one by crisscrossing green twigs. When driving, you rarely spoke, too busy reading the landscape. It spoke to you in voices we couldn't hear.

The young people at the table that night were happy. I found their voices loud. I remembered that geology had only come into its own a century or so ago. Each generation has to find out for itself, and this will go on until there are no generations left.

The Lead-in

The cardiologist resembled W. C. Fields, shuffling amid a chaos of machines as elderly as himself. He asked you to describe how you felt. You shrugged. The doctor looked at me: "He's worse than the Normans."

The radiologist was only slightly younger, his office pristine, his secretaries noisy and efficient. He looked at your head, sat back in his chair and studied you. "Nothing unusual for someone your age who once smoked sixty a day."

The ENT man was young, decisive. When he put his camera-scope down your throat and saw the way you trembled, he said, "Not another millimeter without seeing a neurologist."

Your Man Charcot

In the latter half of the 19th century, French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot transformed neurology and prepared the way for psychoanalysis. Among the things he discovered was a neurodegenerative illness that attacks the motor neurons of the brain and spinal cord, causing the brain to lose contact with muscles and leaving patients unable to swallow, talk or breathe. In another version of the disease, trouble walking is often the first problem noticed. In France it is called *Maladie de Charcot* (Charcot's disease). In English it is called a motor neuron disease (MND), specifically amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS,) which Americans call Lou Gehrig's disease after the legendary baseball player who died of it in 1941. Because it is an "orphan," or rare disease, diagnosis can take time, in your case over a year. The disease attacks both young and old, all ethnic groups, more often men over fifty. Average prognosis at first symptoms is usually three to five years. Scientist Stephen Hawking went way beyond that, but some, like you, only get a matter of months. In all cases, the mind of the patient is unaffected, so they can watch and understand exactly what is happening to them. The end is usually caused by respiratory failure. The cause of the disease is unknown. There is no cure and no truly effective treatment.

Attic Insulation

It seemed a simple enough affair, to insulate the attic. It would make the house warmer. The dormice wouldn't be able to get in any more.

Sometimes a dormouse sat on top of our open bedroom door, studying us, as if to say, "You people really disturb us, you know." They'd already wreaked havoc with the previous insulation – we didn't know if they'd eaten it or taken it away: first we heard them gambol in it, then it disappeared.

You said, "If they managed to eat it, they'll survive the next big global mess, like cockroaches."

So I said, "Right, go ahead with the insulation."

But first we had to redo the roof.

I get vertigo, so all I saw of the roof work was the guys in my kitchen. The older roofer complained about having cold feet. The middle roofer just drank the coffee, a judgmental air about the set of his shoulders. He disapproved of chitchat but needed the coffee. The youngest of the three had a cherub's face and ears that pointed upwards like an elf. He smiled all the time. The older man said he'd seen self-heating boots advertised. He wondered how long the batteries would last. The middle man wondered if they worked on solar energy. The youngest looked like twelve years old although he was obviously old enough to be a roofer's apprentice. He said nothing and only spoke if asked a direct question. The others told us that he was doing extremely well at school where he attended one week in two, learning how to measure and calculate for estimates, how to mix lime even on a cold day, how to arrive at a shade of pointing the client would agree to. His smile wasn't a social thing: I later saw him smile to himself as he labored alone on some aspect of our roof on the coldest day of the year.

After the roof, we got down to the insulation. Dismayed by the sheer volume of the material and the weight of the various things that weren't the actual insulation itself, I was utterly at a loss to imagine how they would tack all these various layers onto our poor rafters.

"Might stop the roof blowing away during the next storm," you said.

It took huge amounts of brute force to manhandle all the stuff off the trucks and up the stairs before sawing and hammering and installing. And I felt, in a very little way, the strength and determination it takes to make war, to fight beyond one's own energy, beyond tiredness and pain, to the death. It dawned on me that, in spite of having a fair amount of brute strength myself, I didn't have the kind that some are made to, expected to, possess. This was why I would always seek compromise and conciliation, would always hang back from the bigger things, stick to being evacuated, godhelpus as my mother would say.

I felt very sorry for our dormice. In my very foxed copy of *Alice in Wonderland*, the dormouse was always nodding off, being bullied by the Mad Hatter and the March Hare who pushed his head into a teapot, and by the Queen who told him to shut up. I wondered if, once the insulation was over, it would be too late to get back to that original me, the one who read Lewis Carroll, was gentle and kind and dreamy and who, like the dormouse, would tell stories about girls who lived in a treacle well and ate treacle and drew pictures of objects beginning with M, and quite unlike the dormouse in the new film version.

On No Account Should You Shout "Fire!"

Day is just discernible through heavy fog. Across from us a row of little houses, one a cheery yellow with a light in the kitchen: how warm the coffee must be! How wonderful to ignore our grey side of the road with its over-cheerful nurses, its porters waiting in the night, its fire instructions (*On no account should you shout "Fire!"*), its empty sitting room, its notice announcing that someone hangs around to listen to our grief, its bookcase of disparate books clearly abandoned in the little rooms and bathrooms littered with notices (*Don't grab the grab-bar, it's not steady*; *Water 60 degrees – risk of burns*), and its table of magazines considering the misery of others: just how *is* Vanessa Paradis getting on without Johnny Depp?

In the hall, an ambulance man's jacket reads *Ambulances Malnuit'* (Badnight Ambulances). I wonder if he does the job because of his name, like the one who trims our hedges severely after a few scoops of homemade apple-brandy and whose name translates as *Bad Drinker*. Once, in Germany, I knew a doctor called Friedhof (cemetery) and an insurance man called Leich (corpse).

We are here to see the neurologist. He has already guessed what is wrong with you but has to examine you twice before pronouncing, his computer converting your twitches into graphs and screeches.

Finally both of you come back to his desk and the neurologist announces some of the disease's colorful names. He watches us carefully to see if we realize just how bad this is. Your version will see

you lose your ability to speak, breathe, swallow (you will walk to the loo and play Scrabble till the end).

You ask no questions, so neither can I. You're relieved to put a name on it. You smile as you tell friends on the way home.

Before and After Photos

We took a narrow winding road down to the river bed. You sat on a rock watching the water's green reflection on the cliff on the other side. Electricity company warnings showed dramatic photos of the water level before and after the dam released water. This might take only a minute or two. We were exhorted to flee as soon as the alert sirens sounded.

You did one of your Gallic shrugs and we got out the kind of rough picnic you loved: garlic sausage, local fat cucumber with thick skin, flavorsome tomatoes. Where once you would have torn at the crusty bread and drunk your rosé with gusto, you ate little and stared at the water. Sometimes you dabbled your hand in it, as if amazed.

I took photos that day that I don't need to look at ever again: you so handsome in a black T-shirt with a work of art on the back, looking at me over your shoulder, the reflection of the water moving over the rock in the background.

The Parallel Universe of Country Life

Robert Frost could take his time over a poem. He didn't have distractions like emails and internet – let alone Twitter – maybe a few leisurely letters, and he could go about his country business meditating on a phrase or a theme he might tackle: a dividing wall, a tree at his window. But life in the country has changed. Now I run between universes – preparing classes, driving to classes, teaching classes, feeding the cat, checking the stew on the stove, pulling ivy off the garage roof, tying up the wisteria detached by a big wind – sending an email confirming a review, confirming receipt of book for review, starting review of book that is about nothing in my present. Feed the stoves, bring in more wood, brush cluster flies out of the attic, peel apples for stewed apples, prepare fruit for jam. I do a lot of things while

stuck between two universes: headset on, I listen to news of other places, to books being read. You make bread, call the roofer, the plumber, the electrician, the carpenter, the internet provider about glitches since the last storm. I click on an article that looks interesting. At the very same moment, the phone rings, someone knocks at the door, a tractor drives through the gate tearing a big branch off the pine which suffered during winter snow, my chair rolls two feet to the left, following the slope of the floor. I give up trying and go to sort things out downstairs. Better than pretending one can write anything, even in the country.

Search for a Lost Paradise

We talked about and planned the outing: *Search for a lost paradise: best of Austrian baroque*, the brochures said.

We flew. North of Rome, villages snuggled against soft hills in the sun. A dusting of snow over the Alps surprised us, darkening Vienna by four. Bussed to town without looking around, we jumped a bright warm train that dropped commuters all over a twinkling valley.

Late and cold we came to the Goldener Stern – reasonably priced and very old.

Above us it loomed in river fog, monstrous, yellow, unthreatened: Melk Abbey. We'd made it.

Frau X served beer to us, her husband and several of his peers. A giant spaniel slept at our feet (it was cold out, but here we could hardly stand the heat). Men like uncles of ours talked of cracks in vaults, cement and plaster, and how much time it would take to pay the bank back, after.

In time Herr X straightened himself and his apron to serve us soup, then sauerkraut with *knödeln*.

On the landing later we passed another dog, porcelain and grey, it watched over us all night.

Next day we climbed the steps through the great doors, wandered from room to room, heads thrown back, nonplussed by church walls dripping gold, then on its great terrace we tried for panoramic photos of the bend on the Danube. We pored over models of paradise (none of which was the one lost), watched videos of monasteries elsewhere – places to visit in other years – were

disappointed with the cellars, linked arms through gardens in fog, listened to Mozart's *Apollo and Hyacinth* again and again, on special earphones.

In the staterooms a jeweled monstrance in the shape of a tree housed the jawbone of St Colman – an Irish prince – and miniatures of the instruments used to try and make him speak. On his way to Jerusalem, his strange tongue and clothes had forced a halt: Was he a Moravian spy? A Danube pirate smuggling salt from Traunsee to Bohemia? His Irish language and lack of German rendered him steadfast under torture. Once hanged, his scaffold came alive, sprouted leaves, his body incorrupt. The about-turn was abrupt: the Austrians made him patron saint, his day October 12th.

At day's end we reached the library of caged books, in room after cosy room they lay, in ornate cases beneath baroque ceilings: books about everything, going back centuries, collected by and for monks. Books.

Near the door the post, momentarily abandoned, of the library guardian, her own book open on a simple green table: the Austrian equivalent of *Hello* magazine.

Back down the town, the lights were lit. A lone Romanian, the only beggar we'd see, played accordion for the last of the stragglers in the fancy boutiques.

You and I had 'done' Melk, and Paradise was still nowhere to be found.

Hindsight

That time we ate in a five-star place in a tiny village in deepest Normandy: we were exploring. You liked to drive and walk and explore. Gourmet dining wasn't really your style, but there was nothing else within a huge radius. Deep France villages didn't do fast-food. The place was empty, even on a Saturday night, the owner-waiter smiling but distant, the food all right but nothing special, you'd have produced a feast at home with less. I wondered if they were on the way out, about to close, perhaps reheating yesterday's leftovers. You said nothing. I think now perhaps your illness had already begun, making you more patient, less critical. The pall of silence in the high-ceilinged room, empty of all but us, and we quiet too in spite of the wine, the

stillness of a green Norman evening, the lack of music in reverence to food – Norman dining rooms sacred and somber as churches – the décor old-fashioned, smacking of the 19th rather than the 21st century. Looking back, all the silence and seriousness seems to me now a presage of the thing that was hiding within, waiting to activate and eat your life (mercifully fast, but too fast for me, for us), prevent you making better meals than this, cut short our plans for years of traveling, exploring, querying, puzzling, of enjoying simpler meals in places with no glass in the windows, a cold desert outdoors, a television high on a wall shelf replaying the moon landing in black and white to a room full of men.

Your Man Freud

It was you who introduced me to Freud, really, although I'd studied him a bit, at college. Only later would I discover his connection to Charcot. Freud had already been a medical doctor for five years, and was still far from inventing psychoanalysis, when, in 1885, he came to Paris to study with Charcot who was director of La Salpetrière, a large women's asylum on the left bank of the river Seine south of the Jardin des Plantes, a city within the city.

Freud found Paris "magically attractive" but also "repulsive." It was Charcot's work on hysteria and hypnotism, rather than his work on ALS, that interested Freud. Freud seems to have felt an outsider, his initial enthusiasm for Charcot waning until he got invited to Charcot's house. On that first visit he wore a white tie and white gloves and had a little cocaine "to loosen my tongue," as he wrote to his fiancée Martha Bernays. Freud was at La Salpetrière the same time as Gilles de la Tourette and also met Alphonse Daudet who was a visitor to Charcot's house. Freud was nevertheless very ambivalent about the whole Paris episode and swore Martha Bernays to secrecy about his boredom during such outings, and about the lie that Charcot kissed him on the forehead "à la Liszt."

You Were:

French and Italian cinema; doing the tango to a scratchy vinyl of Carlos Gardel; Leo Ferré singing Louis Aragon's *"Est-ce ainsi que les hommes vivent?"*; Jacques Brel's "Amsterdam;" Boris Vian's *"Le Déserteur;"* Paris cinemas where you forgot everything but the film and never needed to smoke, although you chain-smoked everywhere else; mover of mountains: on paper, tectonic plates and continents pushed into each other, on field trips you hammered slivers of rock, licked then viewed them under a loupe while a gang of kids imitated your movements in every detail, fascinated as I was by the magic of the gestures; rationalism and scientific attitude, frowning at anything silly or unproved or impossible or emotional; readings in psychoanalysis: Freud and Groddeck particular favorites, you couldn't get hooked on my interest in Jung; the garrigue: walking the Larzac plateau, stirring up perfumes of wild thyme and fennel and rosemary, we slept outdoors and studied the stars (if it was a test of me, I must have passed, although I complained bitterly about having to carry water); Collioure, where as a child you'd summer-camped for years in the old buildings on the port that have now become a military training center; Morocco, where you felt at home from the minute you arrived; Béziers stories about a saint who walked off with his head under his arm, and a man who made soup of stones; words and phrases in Occitan which you understood because your grandparents spoke it when they didn't want the grandkids to understand them; France Culture's *Les Chemins de la Connaissance* when you would decide what to do with your day or what to prepare for lunch; France Inter's afternoon scientific program when you picked a spot for a siesta, head in the shade, feet in the sun. Near the end, you were like a happy child in front of a DVD of funnies put together by your children and grandchildren, our entertainment was watching you.

It Begins

A crossroads near the hospital in A, driving through the late-night desert looking for food, a bag of chips, a kebab, anything, before heading back to you lying with the hitherto-unheard-of PEG installed

in your side, maybe gasping for breath, and the gastro man confiding, "If I'd known how thin he was I'd never have operated."

Even talking to him in a dilapidated corridor was better than the outdoors emptiness of the sleeping provincial town.

I Thought I Was Strong

I hated words like feisty and gutsy (I liked gung-ho right enough), I thought I'd do better than others in my position, expected I'd be loved by you and yours, admired by neighbors and friends, so tough I'd refuse all offers of help, find time for my own work – headphones pumping Patti Smith in the darkest hours "Because the Night"…, thought I'd look after food, laundry, rising in the night, setting up your feeding tubes, wheedling you into accepting more liquid, taking your meds, finding lights and heaters to replace electric points that mysteriously stopped working (you'd've fixed them, *ni vu ni connu*, now the electrician didn't return calls – I hated the artisans too), tending stoves to keep you warm, hauling wood before dawn when you were stable and dozing, rushing to shops while other women held the fort, forgetting essentials because I pored over shelves and fridges in the hunt for tempting morsels – "Just a little, not to lose the habit, the pleasure," they told me – for you who used to feed the hordes so well, your glass-in-hand-French-chef antics in the kitchen.

I still pour your glass of rosé each time you agree to eat, you pretend to take a sip each time, I throw the rest down the sink, we hide our sorrow from each other. At the local *8 à 8* they know cases like ours so well they sell half bottles of champagne at Christmas. You drink a glass – after I threaten to syringe it down your tube – and I polish off the rest. I'm surprised next morning to find lights burning in odd places, marveling at what a mere sip can do for someone in distress.

Hysteria, Hashish and Orientalism

Effectively, it turns out that the most interesting aspect of Charcot is more his interest in hysteria than his discovery of your disease. His fascination for bizarre and exotic behavior began as a student, when

he would smoke hashish and sketch weird and wonderful scenes. You might say this partly explains why it took him nine years to qualify (in all your years in Morocco you took no interest in hashish). I would reply that medicine was a slow business then and anyway there were only 400 medical graduates countrywide the year he did qualify. His greatest strength was observation. He called himself a "*visuel*." Freud considered him an artist.

Charcot had patients from all over the world, including the Grand Duke of Russia and the novelist Ivan Turgenev (whose mysterious pains Charcot diagnosed as *angina pectoris*). Crowds flocked to watch him hypnotize famous hysteric Blanche (Marie) Wittmann. She was dubbed the Queen of Hysterics, but then it was an epoch for such monikers: Charcot was known as the Napoleon of Neuroses. I feel guilty using the term hysteric. Asti Hustvedt (*Medical Muses*, 2011) sees 19th century hysteria reincarnated in today's eating disorders and self-mutilation, CFS, MPD, and reads all of these as a metaphor for women's repressed position in society and woman's image in the history of scientific discourse: "Hysteria, that bizarre rupture between symptom and source played out on the female body has resurfaced in our post-Freudian era in new but oddly familiar forms." Charcot worked with two other renowned hysterics, but Wittmann was made famous by the young Pierre Aristide André Brouillet who painted *Leçon Clinique à la Salpetrière 1887*: the scene from one of Charcot's Tuesday clinical demonstrations in which a fainting (?) and scantily-dressed Wittmann is supported by a man, while two nurses hover expectantly. A crowd of fascinated men watch, many well-known and identified (one is Charcot's son who will abandon medicine for polar exploration), many have moustaches and beards like you, although Charcot, who will be dead in six years, is cleanshaven.

Apparently Freud had a lithograph of this painting, which hung in his Vienna rooms until he moved to London, where it was installed over his famous couch. Today the original hangs unframed on a wall of the Université Paris V René Descartes which is just up from the statue of Danton at métro Odéon where you and I used to meet to go to the cinema, and just down from the Café de la Sorbonne where we'd meet when you were moving mountains and tectonic plates on paper.

Wittmann stopped having convulsions when Charcot died. A fictional account of her life after Charcot has her working with Marie Curie (whose notebooks will remain radioactive for another 1500 years, according to nonfictional reports). The real Wittmann did have both legs and one forearm amputated due to radiation, which may have happened when she was assistant to a photographer who experimented with radiation. She died at fifty-three from hemorrhaging. It is said that twenty years after her death Wittmann's notebooks were discovered, but I can find no trace of them. I picture her writing about love with her remaining arm.

I follow Brouillet down the rabbit-hole of the internet. He stares at me intently from a self-portrait with a handlebar moustache and beard. Your beard and moustache were modest affairs based on your unwillingness to shave every morning and the impracticality of shaving on field trips. Another of Brouillet's paintings, *The Exorcism*, hangs in Reims and shows Arab musicians chasing a djinn from the body of a child. Brouillet, a fervent orientalist, often traveled in North Africa, and married a woman from the Jewish elite of Constantine. He would die on the front, bringing help to Belgian refugees, on a freezing night in December 1914.

Dead Horses and Things

It is said that artists' supply shops in Paris run out of shades of grey in winter, for grey is everywhere: sky, buildings, pavements, river, faces.

One such Sunday we slip into the Musée Delacroix on a deserted Place de Furstenberg. In the entrance hall two English-speaking ladies hover, crestfallen, clearly mother and daughter.

The mother: "De-la-croix all one word? Nothing to do with religion? No crosses?"

The daughter (shifting from one foot to the other): "Apparently it's not the 'Musée. De. La. Croix,' it's Delacroix all-one-word – the painter."

The mother hesitates. "What kind of painting?"

The daughter eyes a reproduction on the wall, shrugs: "Dead horses and things."

They pass through the door into the greyness, abandoning enough color to brighten any Parisian winter.

Later, you and I repair to a café in Barbès, full of men in winter djellabahs, their hoods up, hands warming up wool sleeves. In mismatching jacket and trousers – like a bachelor farmer in the city for the day – the boss by the stove, the only source of heat, keeps endless mint tea on the go while studying some far horizon beyond the windows. You and his assistant exchange pleasantries in Arabic. Over mint tea and fresh doughnuts doused in sugar we discuss our surroundings, the people, the cool outdoors, Delacroix's visit to Morocco and his amazing notebooks, anything to help us forget the low winter sun creeping towards the grey horizon.

The Little Man in the Big Coat

"Your" disease "progressed." All shame gone, I ranted, bawled, harassed the doctors to a man – they were mostly men – who, asleep at the helm, were awakened from time to time by an army of women nurses, secretaries, carers, dieticians who kept them informed.

"Like clerks in Dickens' England," I bawled at you. "They sit behind their desks and write scripts!"

You said little, sunken into your pillows, twenty kilos down and counting, your voice already hoarse, hesitant.

The only woman doctor we saw had arrived from Eastern Europe to help make up for the shortage of doctors in rural areas. My abiding memory is of her wringing her hands in a hospital corridor, eight months into a foreign world. ("They're a referral service in Bulgaria," a local practitioner said. I hadn't the repartee to ask, "And what, pray, are you?")

In reply to my tirade, you looked at me from under your eyebrows and growled, with great effort, "Keep ridin' 'em like this, you'll be pickin' iron outta yo' liver."

Amazed that you remembered my movie quotes from decades earlier, I was more impressed that you managed a whole sentence. The little man in the big coat in *The Maltese Falcon* took on new meaning, and I knew that I was weak and you were strong, the old you buried inside that tired bony hulk.

Somehow you communicated with carers and nurses, although by then your voice was almost gone. I left you all to it so am not sure how you managed. They asked about your career, your travels. They were delighted to find you on the internet: "He has loads of publications!" they said when they came down for tea. You smiled at the thought of the fat roll of maps in the attic, not to mention the thesis that moved mountains.

I wasn't jealous, I thought I was strong.

I complained to the nurses, "I thought medicine was a vocation," I said, remembering family doctors in old movies. I referred to a local practitioner.

"Should've become a butcher," the nurse replied, "He could stand behind his counter, chop up meat and ring his till!"

We laughed till I nearly cried.

But I saved my keening for the day you left that bony hulk, and went, at peace from MND, and me.

Edith Wharton is Alive and Well

I stopped reading. Edith Wharton's *Morocco* hurt – so much *indolence*, so many *Lazaruses* in *grave-clothes*. I got out of the car.

I could see no sign of you. "You stay and read, I'll deal with this," you'd said, pocketing the car keys out of habit and heading off with my passport and yours.

It was almost midday, Saturday, first day of Ramadan, already hot. There wasn't yet the razor-wire climbing the hills around Ceuta to hold the *harragas* back from Spain and Europe. The only sign of a border was a line of little booths where passports were stamped.

I approached the place I'd last seen you and inquired.

"Oh he's here all right," the official replied. His voice indicated trouble, possibly hatred.

"Is there a problem?" I asked.

"He's being taken away." They wouldn't say where or why, told me to wait.

The sun climbed hotter. No fresh cars arrived. No one was visible, in grave clothes or any other kind.

After what seemed ages a small official in mismatching jacket and pants appeared, you following. You indicated our car and you both came towards me. "We have to go back to Tetouan," you muttered. The man indicated we shouldn't talk and got in the passenger seat, with you at the wheel. I got in the back.

As you drove, I tried to read over the man's shoulder the documents he was perusing. It appeared that a Frenchman, with a similar first name and the same surname as you, had kidnapped his children from his Moroccan wife. This wasn't uncommon, there'd been a famous case involving a Scandinavian sportsman.

At Tetouan I was turfed out of the car, again without keys or passport, and you were swept into the Commissariat.

I contemplated setting fire to petrol from a pump at the filling station next door to draw attention to my predicament. I wasn't sure I could carry it off – or even if that old cinema trick worked at all.

Luckily I had some loose change. I took a taxi to family friends of yours. One of the young men of the family accompanied me to the post office. We stood in line for a booth after giving the number at the desk. I listened to a message saying the embassy was closed for the weekend. There didn't seem to be a contingency arrangement.

Your friends advised me to be patient.

I went back to the Commissariat and begged that they at least return my passport. They refused. They were waiting for the Commissaire to arrive. He would make a decision.

Given the heat and Ramadan, I guessed he was in bed.

I remember little of the rest of the day. There was a lot of mint tea. I had time to recall other trips to Ceuta, your amusement at my delight with some very salty bacon and cabbage in a Galician restaurant.

As the sun dropped towards the horizon, the Commissaire arrived. He immediately spotted the error. You were brought out, mild as ever, smiling a bit now. The Commissaire apologized to us both – "A minor official hoping for promotion," he said – and invited us to dinner. We instantly refused.

As we drove across the border at last, into Ceuta, I asked you to slow the car. I opened the window and spat on the ground, as I'd seen Moroccans do, completely forgetting my earlier dislike of Edith Wharton.

Rational and Irrational

By December even your spam emails are drying up. In an irrational attempt to keep you close for a while longer, I research ALS. I become adept at skimming through medical abstracts. I fill notebooks.

You always used the word *go* when playing French Scrabble, for the Chinese game using black and white pieces called stones. This often led to argument but *go* always emerged as a valid, an allowed, Scrabble word. Only now do I see that a board game in which the pieces are called stones was an obvious notion for a geologist.

Can't Hurt You Now

Late one Friday coming up to the shortest day of the year – when primitive peoples in northern climes must have thought: *Dude, this thing is over* – I have an appointment with the notary. Country roads are busier than usual with what I imagine are happy people rushing home to happy arrangements. The light is fading rapidly, it is that time the French call *between dog and wolf*. If a deer were to cross the road now, it might be mistaken for something else, or not seen at all. A murder of crows explodes into the air, cawing loudly.

Here is the very spot where your trouble started, not so long ago: one late afternoon, two big deer burst out of the forest and ran straight into your car on the driver's side, denting it unmercifully, blocking the door, exploding the window next to your ear. The deer ran off, big enough to be unscathed. You continued to your destination – an important and successful interview. Arriving home that evening you climbed out by the passenger side of the car and made light of the whole episode. Yet you were never the same again, more silent, I might have said mystified. Your hair grew whiter and stood up as if in shock. It took almost a year to find out what was wrong.

In reply to a question posed by the professor of neurology, I told him about the deer. He looked at me as if I were one of Charcot's hysterics. He repeated my words back at me: "The. Car. Was. Hit. By. Two. Big. Deer." By then you were unable to join the conversation – you had all of ten days left – but you didn't indicate agreement either.

You were still you, more on his – scientific, rational – side than mine. These were our roles.

I still think a trauma like the deer might have triggered and accelerated a quietly sleeping disease.

I arrive in the town. It is clogged. I am angry with Christmas lighting, plastic snowmen, idiotic Father Christmases climbing walls and chimneys.

The notary is no longer tanned and gung-ho. Now winter-pale and distant, he favors a modish quiff at the top of his head, some statement related to the many car magazines in his waiting room. His office is dilapidated, dusty, its ancient moldings in sharp contrast to his glass desk, another statement. I sign another piece of paper affirming your death, as if they are trying to make me admit it.

As I return to the busy street, a lone secretary leans over her work in the only pool of light in the penumbra of the reception-area.

On the way home through the forest, I open all the car windows, to give those deer the benefit of my mood. I scream along with Patti Smith. *Can't hurt you now.*

Always Inevitable

I was jealous of your radio, of you wrapped into another culture and language, immensely smug and sure of itself. (A colleague once bent my ear about France having the best education system in the world – I and other adjuncts delivering it against all odds without tenure, bitterness our state of being, our *être* with no *bien.*)

You may have felt the same when I wandered house and garden sporting earphones, listening to BBC or Russian novels, chuckling at American standups, applying the secateurs as Raskolnikov planned his murder and Mark Twain mocked "the awful German language."

Now it is I who listens to France Culture on every radio in the house. It echoes through the garden, slightly out of sync with my headphones.

I pretend that you are here too – somewhere – listening – planning the next meal – working on your laptop – fixing a plug – puzzling over big things, like pain and suffering which, as Raskolnikov said, are always inevitable for deep hearts and large intelligences, causing them great sadness on earth.

Eating Artichokes

It is April, the year advances quickly. I am a large still rock in the middle of a fast river.

Each year I miss you not less, but more.

An appointment has been cancelled, I am eating lunch early. I didn't sleep much after the burning of Notre Dame.

As the artichokes cooked, I read David Foster Wallace's "Consider the Lobster." The artichokes on their plate now have a strange association with lobsters and a summer festival in Maine. DFW discusses whether or not lobsters feel pain, describes how they shrink backwards when you try to empty them into the boiling water and how, when you manage it and cover the pot, they rattle the lid. Some cooks flee the kitchen at this point.

I will probably never eat lobster again. The last time I did was with you, in Al Jadidah, in a dining room open to the sea where birds flew in and out. The patronne, in a striped djellabah more like a man's, sat beside the cash desk. She had a little *kanoun* for tea, and called the town by its old Portuguese name, Mazagan, now the name of a nearby resort and golf course.

Then I made mayonnaise for the artichokes. I don't often do this, because you did it so well, adding the oil to the spoon before dropping it into the bowl, because the secret of mayonnaise, you said, is having everything at the same temperature. You added more and more oil until the mayonnaise was pale and thick. I joked that it was geological. In the kitchen there was often discussion about why mayonnaise might refuse to take, and French rumors that it couldn't work if a woman having her period was making it or nearby. This often branched into discussion of the patriarchy. Madame Saint-Ange – your cooking bible – has four whole pages on mayonnaise, in French: the bane of my life as I tried to cope with Arabic in the street and French at home, with memories of Sister Philippine and Kennedy's French

Grammar, and the excruciating subjunctive (*"Elle s'est brulée la main,"* said Sister Philippine). I still can't remember the rule. One night on a book program, George Steiner used a past subjunctive and the audience went "Oooooh!" because the French just dodge it.

You forbade a blender for the mayonnaise, and showed all my friends how to make it. They still think of you when they do.

I peel off the outer leaves of the artichoke, select a fat one and dip it in my mayonnaise.

And I've got it right, finally, after all these years: plenty of lemon but not too much to drown the taste of the egg, the oil, pleasantly tart with just enough seasoning. You liked lots of pepper.

I don't remember when I first ate artichokes with you. I recall you making mayonnaise in a kitchen in Morocco, blinding sunlight outdoors, a hibiscus-lined alley, a lemon tree where the chameleon hunted, stepping and gripping cautiously, giving himself time to change color, and his long toffee tongue when his stereo eyes spotted an insect.

The pomegranates were small, unlike shop-bought ones. You prepared them for us, adding rosé to yours. Pomegranates appear in the Bible and in Greek mythology. You said Adam and Eve probably ate a pomegranate, not an apple. Normandy made more sense for apples.

There was a tree with red flowers resembling bottle brushes. No one knew its name, but everyone with access to the internet now knows it is Callistemon.

All these things had been planted lovingly by an elderly Frenchman who thought he was in Morocco forever, believing that colonial privilege could protect against age and fortune and change.

The avocados all ripened at the same time. You can only give away so many avocadoes or eat so many dips (although I know now we could have added pomegranate to the dip). Giving things away was easy in Morocco: you put things neatly near the dustbin and within minutes they disappeared. Nothing went to loss. Shepherds grazed their sheep in the green sward along the outside wall of houses like ours, with watered lawns. I suppose shepherds still do that.

So there we were, in a past life, eating your mayonnaise. We were young and handsome but we didn't know it. We were funny and hard and cruel and nice. We had visceral likes and dislikes. Later we

would drop the harder bits, when it was too late to make any difference.

An Origami Girl

Charlene Stegman Moskal

expert at elusive
folds in on herself,
hides in the empty paper,
creates whatever
one needs to see;

is a shape changer,
a box, a bird, a basket,
both opened and constrained –
illusory, absent, a cipher
who hides in blank spaces.

I never hear her walking,
silent, sliding steps, soundless –
tissue paper that floats on air;
there are no footsteps.

Her voice quiet, paper thin
she sings comfort songs
written for someone else.

She is secure in two dimensions
flat as the family photographs

sealed flat in a yellow clasp envelope.

Come Live with Me and Be My Love

Michele E. Reisinger

Somehow, I acquired a dead man's interrupted life.

His grey stone cottage, mid-forest. Books, a barn, blank stationery veined with mold. Curled edge photographs stacked like kindling in a dusty hope chest. They claim me.

A rusted horseshoe slumbered in the cook stove. I burnish it with wire, secure its resurrected luck with a trinity of nails above the threshold. His ashes, scattered within the orchard, coalesce. Wonder.

The locals say he lived sad and died fierce.

Me, too.

I lower onto our front porch stoop and caress its sun-warmed face. Yes love, I say, as he approaches. Welcome home.

Chasing the Dragon

Kathy Hoyle

'Con Rong, Chau Thien'

Vietnamese proverb: Children of Dragon, Grandchildren of Gods

TJ

That summer was one of the hottest on record. Mama's radio piped out Tammy Wynette, and she would sing along. Then afterwards she would cuss, "Hell, Tammy, why you always tellin us to stand by that shit-for-brains man?"

Mama sliced watermelon on the counter, but that was the first summer she didn't two-step us around the kitchen table.

"It's too goddamn hot to live," she said.

Nothing but heat, crawlin out from under the porch every morning, spreadin down past the hog field and the wiltin corn crops, all the way out to the dyin pecan tree that sat on the county line. It scorched our arms and left us parched and breathless. Mostly we just put on the hose and let the water soak us down or we had spittin contests under the shade of the haybarn roof. There was no hidin from it. It sucked the air right out of our lungs, made the world slow down till we were all wilted and sleepy, like belly-filled possums.

"You boys gotta stay cool an' make sure you drink the water. Gotta drink the water," Mama said, wafting at her flushed cheeks with an old lace fan.

When we'd had our fill, she'd wipe the sweet watermelon from our chin with a cold cloth and give us an ice cube each from the freezer out back. Cal would try and fit the whole cube in his mouth, just like us, opening his jaw wide and shoving at it with his chubby fingers and Mama would flick him on the ear with a towel and cuss.

"God dammit, Cal, why'd you always gotta try and choke yourself? As if I ain't got enough on my mind without having to worry about you."

Me, Jacob and Richie would push our cubes into our mouths as we ran past him, back out into the heat, and Cal would trail behind, ice cube melting into the palm of his hand.

There were four of us that summer, Richie, Jacob, me and my baby brother, Cal. I was always complainin to Mama 'bout havin to drag Cal around, and she would always give me a look that would freeze the sun when I did. In the end, Cal got to hang with us anyways, even though none of us wanted a nine-year-old kid in tow.

Richie cussed about it.

"Why'd you gotta bring a baby? What the fuck we gonna do with a baby?"

Jacob just shrugged and said, "One more won't make no difference, quit whining," and Richie shut up, cos it was Jacob had told him. I was glad. I fought Richie once, last winter, and still had a chunk of tooth missin that Mama said would need fixin up when I was older. After Jacob had told him to pipe down, Richie sat in the yard chewing his lip, looked like he was swallowing cuss words right down into his gut. But he would never fight Jacob, we all knew it, Cal especially.

Jacob was smart, like his Pa, I guess. Mama said Jacob's Pa was the smartest guy she ever knew, went to one of those fancy colleges and everything. I guess all that knowin was just too much for Jacob's Pa. He was kinda wasted in this place and maybe he knew something about the next life that us folks don't. Maybe he was needed up in heaven. I don't know why he did what he did. But Jacob don't talk of it none. He don't like guns none either. He says he's a pacifist. That he don't like hurtin no one nor nothin. I guess that's just how my mind would be too, if my daddy had blown off the side of his head with a shotgun.

Jacob stood head and shoulders above all of us. Big and smart together meant Richie knew Jacob could crush him into mush if he took a mind to it. Richie never was the type to take on someone bigger an' him. I guess Richie was just like his pa too.

Anyways, once Jacob told Richie how things were gonna be, Cal took to following Jacob like a dog on a leash. Mama never had to worry no more 'bout where he'd be. Always sittin in Jacob's shadow.

"Mary-Lee done got herself a pure angel when she got that boy," Mama would say, every time Jacob came to call.

And Jacob was all good manners and *yes Ma'am no Ma'am* and letting Cal stick by his side, like a fly on a turd. I could barely stomach it. Richie mostly stayed out on the porch, scuffing his heels against the timber post, scowling at nothin in particular and Mama never really paid him any mind. But she sure did love Jacob.

Me? Well, I knew I was nothin special. Just plain old TJ. Or Thomas Jefferson Scott, when Mama was hollerin 'cos I done something bad. Mama never spoke too well about my Pa. Mine was a no-good son of a bitch accordin to Mama. I got a letter once or twice a year with a New York stamp on the front, that's about it. I still remembered him, bouncing a wailin Cal on his knee in the kitchen, fixin up the truck with Granddaddy. He was here, but he always seemed to be somewhere else in his mind. He would stare out over the prairie and write and write in that notebook of his. Seems he wrote so much about this place, he needed to find somewhere new to write about. One day I'll ask him why he left. And why he never came back. One day, when Mama don't need me to take care o' her.

I like to write too, maybe I am just like him, a no-good son of a bitch. I sure feel like it ever time I look at Mama's worn face and her sad eyes. But writin out all that happened that summer eases me somehow. I can't never make it right, but I guess if I can put it out on the page, it don't stay inside, eating up my guts.

That day we first heard about Cousin Willy, was a midmornin' in July, and hotter than hell's furnace.

"The phone done broke again," said Mama, as me and Cal wandered into the house after a mornin's chores.

"Cousin Willy's got the withdrawals. I saw Aunt Claire down at the store this mornin buying up all kinds of pills. She's tried everythin. Told her I'd be right on over. TJ, ride your bike out to Aunt Maggie's and tell her she needs to get to Aunt Claire's soon as she can."

Claire and Maggie were Mama's sisters. They'd stuck by each other through most things. Mama says 'kin is all we got an' all we need' but even so, I wasn't fixin to get burnt to a crisp that mornin, so I whined.

"Aw Mama."

"You do it," hissed Mama, picking up her purse and keys, "Willy's family and he's ridin a tornado to hell right now boy, so git gone."

I sighed, no use arguin' with her.

"Here take this," she said, giving me an old soda bottle filled up with water, "you make sure you drink it."

Mama dragged Cal up from the table by his scrawny arm and I followed them outside as they hurried to the pickup. I'd heard 'bout the withdrawals from Richie. His Pa had 'em when he first came back, but seems he took to hard drinkin just as well. I knew Willy musta been in pretty bad shape to get Mama out into that heat.

Mama screeched off towards Willy and Aunt Claires, as though the devil himself was on her tail. I stood there choking in a cloud of dust, shading my eyes from the blinding sun.

Willy

You go right ahead and ask me why, Mama. Again, and again, you keep askin me why. But when I tell you, it's like you don't hear me. You just see what was and not what is. I'll tell you again, Mama. This time you gotta listen good. I gotta make things right. Unlock that door, Mama … please. You out there?

You can put me in here, Mama, you can put a man in a box, but you can't stop his mind from seein.

I seen things. I followed a dragon, followed him down, down into that shit-stinking water, followed him through hell. And you wanna know what else, we came out of that water, him an' me, we came out together. I am him and he is me. I'm one of his children now. Me an' that dragon, we go together.

I got a chance now, a chance to make it right. 'Cos there weren't nothing right about that place. Nothing, except that goddam beautiful golden dragon.

When I go down with him, down into that place, Oh Mama! It's like the sweetest dream. The water ain't so bad down there and the noise, the noise it's all gone cept for his voice, whispering, tellin me what I gotta to do.

Gotta save the boy.

Mama, please….

What you think is good ain't good, what you think is bad ain't bad.

Mama?

TJ

By the time I reached Aunt Maggie's, I was wrung through with sweat, panting like a fevered dog. Chester, Maggie's son, was swinging in a hammock wearing just his scuffed boots and a straw hat, blowing sweet-smelling smoke rings up to the turquoise sky. Johnny Cash was mumblin' through a beat-up radio, hung up by a wire above Chester's head.

Chester was kinda mean lookin, and creepy as hell, thin and wiry, like an old rattlesnake ready to strike. He had him these yellow eyes that seemed to burn right through you. He always spoke real low too, like his words were as thin as his body. Even though I'd known him my whole life, I never once had a mind to spend time alone with him. Mama used to say he and Willy were "like two peas in a pod, always runnin' around together" when they were kids. But seemed that since the war had turned Willy, Chester liked bein alone.

I shook him by the boot, and he squinted out at me.

"What?" he rasped.

My throat was dry from the ride, I guess, 'cos the words stuck hard to my tongue.

Chester was fixin' me with those mean yellow eyes o' his, when Aunt Maggie came out onto the porch, hummin and pullin at the thin strap of her top. She looked up and threw her hand to her chest.

"Good Lord child, you gave me a goosebump. What the hell you doin' all the way out here? Come on, come on now, get in outta this goddamn heat."

I followed her through the porch door into the cool kitchen, glad to get away from Chester, and sat on the chair she'd kicked out for me. Glugging down the ice water she handed me, I held fast while she rubbed at my forehead with a cold cloth.

Aunt Maggie smelt like fresh lemons. She was always real easy to talk to. I never worked out how she an' Chester could be kin. She

was the nicest person I ever knew, like she was made of spring sunshine or somethin. Seems a lot of folks thought so too, well menfolk, anyways. She always had some guy or other helpin her out. I never knew Chester's pa. Mama said she'd rather spit than talk about him and Aunt Maggie didn't seem to miss him none.

"Mama sent me," I said, when she'd finally stopped scrubbin at my head.

"Your Mama told you to ride on over here, in this?"

I nodded. "Phone's broke."

Aunt Maggie picked up her purse and took out some dollars.

"Here. You give her this. Should be enough to fix it. Tell her she gotta tell me next time. Those fuckers just cut you clean off, you even miss one day."

I took the dollars and stuffed them into my shirt pocket. She lit up a smoke and folded her arms eyeing Chester, who'd wandered into the kitchen wearing just the suit God gave him.

"Y'all might wanna cover up that peanut, boy. Damn thing gonna shrivel up an' drop off."

Chester opened the fridge, drew out a cold beer and glugged it down, smacking his lips and driving out a great belch.

"I like my freedom, Mama. I earnt it."

He sure was weird. I became awful interested in Aunt Maggie's tablecloth.

Maggie shook her head and blew out smoke.

"What in the hell did I raise?"

Chester ignored her and walked over to me. I looked up at him. He stared me down.

"Well? You gonna tell us why your Mama sent you, boy or we gotta wait all day?"

"It's Willy. He's real bad with the withdrawals," I stammered.

I looked to Aunt Maggie. "Mama said Aunt Claire needs you, right now!"

I needed Aunt Maggie to hear the worry I had seen in Mama's eyes.

Her face turned pale as milk.

"Again? Goddam it."

She nodded to Chester who shook his head, and gave a low whistle then went out back.

"TJ, you wait here," said Aunt Maggie, "there's ham and watermelon in the fridge if you get hungry. Don't ride home till after six, cos you gon' fry to a crisp if you do."

Maggie went out back and got a cube from the freezer and shoved it into my hand. "Here. And you make sure you get plenty water."

Chester strolled back into the kitchen wearing cutoffs, pulling a Vipers T-shirt over his head. He plucked a cigarette from Maggie's pack on the table, lit up and nodded to her.

"Let's go, Mama."

Aunt Maggie grabbed her purse and ruffled my hair.

"Willy's gonna be just fine, don't you worry." She turned to Chester. "I don't know why those bastards sent him back like that. Ain't no better than in a goddamn body bag. At least then he'd be some kind o' hero and Claire could hold her head up in town."

Chester slammed his hand against the counter, eyes blazin. "You wanna help him or you wanna whine and bitch about what you think you know, when you don't know shit, Ma?"

I held my breath.

Aunt Maggie turned and stormed out, the porch door slamming behind her. Chester gave me one last scowl before he followed her outside. I sat for a second sucking on the ice cube, then I pushed back my chair and wandered out onto the porch. I looked out across Maggie's farm wondering what the hell I was gonna do with that long old stretch of time left before supper . . . then my eyes came to rest on the wood.

Willy

"Troop! Don't you drink that water. That shit will kill you stone dead."

First thing I heard from Harvard when I got in-country. I remember thinkin, if alls I had to worry about was the water, then things sure were gonna be a hell of a lot easier than I thought.

I was dumb as shit.

I mean, there was water everywhere in that goddamn place. Ain't like home, Mama, miles and miles of dust and dirt, ain't like anywhere I'd ever seen before. Seemed like most of the time, I could

hardly breathe. If we weren't walking through water, leeches suckin at us, the water was rainin down on us. You talk about hellfire, Mama, but hell ain't fire, it's one giant shit-stinking river of water.

And all that noise, burnin a hole in my brain. I needed to get aways from all that noise. The rain rapraprappin, bam, bam, bam, guns popopin, and there ain't nowhere to go, you just gotta move. Move! Popopop! Move! Get down, troop, get up, troop! See, Mama, without the dragon, it's just noise. Guns, blades, and screams . . . boys like me, screamin out for their Mamas.

Y'all told to think of 'em as gooks, as dinks. They don't mean a thing to nobody. But the dragon, he made me see. Made me see, we all his children. Grunt like me ain't supposed to ask why? Why we killin? What the hell did we do it for, Mama? Ain't nobody won nothin. Y'all think Chester's some kinda hero. I used to think so too.

Now I know, there ain't no such thing as a hero.

I tried, tried to turn my mind to the killin. Chester, he loved it. Got him a man's scalp hooked to his belt like he's some mean motherfucker. I ain't no coward, ain't no pussy but you can't just kill a man, or a woman, or a goddamn kid for nothin.

You go on point, rain ratatattin on your helmet all night long, just waitin and waitin, knowing either you or the man next to you gonna die, and it's just goddamn pot-luck if you make it back to the hooch next mornin. Chester had him a scalp, but all I had me was a rabbit's foot from Granddaddy. And I was scared, Mama. I ain't never told you that before, but I was so fucking scared.

Then I found Thùy Linh. And her voice, it was so soft, felt like a velvet cloth wrapped all around me. And her hands, her mouth, all over my body,

"Relax, GI. Thùy Linh take care of you now. Take the pipe. Close your eyes, lay back, I tell you story of sacred dragon."

And Mama, I did, I lay down on that mat and I took that pipe with the golden dragon curled around and around it and I went someplace so beautiful, it was like Jesus took my hand and gave me a goddamn tour of heaven itself. For the first time I didn't hear no screams, didn't hear that popopop, didn't hear the blades coming closer, ready to take those boys home in boxes.

See you can put a man in a box, Mama, but what you think is good, ain't good.

You got to let me out, now. Open that door. 'Cos I got a chance, I got a chance to make it right. I see Thùy Linh', I feel her hands on me. Only now she ain't soothing the itchin' that's crawlin' all over me, Mama. And the dragon, he ain't whisperin. All I hear is Chester's voice. Rising above all that noise. I see him pushin away that friend of Thùy Linh's, the one with the long black hair and those real small titties.

Chester hissin, "I don't want me no gook bitch."

Those yellow eyes of his, searchin' that hooch till he found what he wanted hidin' in the corner.

And those words, Mama. I hear those words that changed everythin between me n him…

"How much for the boy?"

TJ

I filled up an old soda bottle with water and set off.

Whenever we visited Maggie's farm, Mama had always said no 'bout goin to the wood. She said we would have to be done with chasin the hogs and chickens out back 'cos she couldn't trust us not to fall down the ditch and be dumb enough to drown. Trees. A great clump of cool, shady cottonwoods, magnolias and oaks, all sat beyond Maggie's farm. The wood had always been off-limits, but here I was, with no Mama to stop me, freedom fizzin in my gut. I was gonna go see what I could find.

It was cool, almost damp, like stepping into a whole different world. I could breathe for the first time in what felt like months. I left my bike flat down in a clump of ferns and picked my way across the spongy ground under the cool shade of the trees. Birds were singin overhead as I kicked at leaves and pulled up a clump of switch cane to swipe at the flies. I could smell that real sharp stink of wild garlic mixed up with sweet magnolia, and I found myself hummin as I walked through the shady wood. It sure felt like I was on an adventure, just like Huck Finn.

It was the noise that stopped me. Trickling water. Maybe a creek that lead to the ditch Mama was always warning us about? But something else too, kinda like a motor running, but high and whiny,

the pitch all wrong. I ain't never been what you'd call real bright, so I walked towards it. I came to the edge of a sloping, mossy bank and looked down. At the bottom was a pool of dark, sludgy water and all around, there were frogs. I could feel a vibration underfoot and that sound was so goddamn hypnotic, it drew me closer n' closer. Man, they were ugly suckers. All brown and lumpy, amber-eyed and slash-mouthed, slick and squelchin in the mud, and I ain't exaggeratin when I tell you, they were bigger than my granddaddy's hand. I reeled back, falling straight onto my butt. There were so many of them all hollerin out that weird noise. I ran. My breath caught in my belly. Heart hammering. I was scared, but kinda excited too. I couldn't wait to show Jacob and Richie those ugly-ass toads. I ran all the way to back to my bike, pushed it through the trees and jumped on, ridin out into the burning sun.

Mama and Cal got home long after the sun was settin. Mama flopped onto the couch and wafted her face with a fan while I ran to fetch her an iced tea, sure to make it just how she liked it, with extra lemon. She looked like all the cares of the world were beating down on her shoulders. When I asked Cal about what happened, he said he didn't know 'cos Mama had thrown him out at granddaddy's on the way to Aunt Claire's. He had rabbit's foot curled in his hand.

"Granddaddy says its lucky."

"Not lucky for him when Mama finds out he let you at his shotgun."

"She won't find out," said Cal, stuffing the foot in the pocket of his shorts, "me and Granddaddy know how to keep a secret."

Cal held that rabbit foot close all night long, strokin his cheek with the fur.

Next morning, Mama found it stuffed down the side of his bed.

"That man and his goddamn guns," she hissed, whipping up the foot and tossing it in the trash, "I told your grandpa, over and over, I don't want my boys near any goddamn guns. Jesus H Christ, My own Pa."

Mama was so angry.

That was when she said Cal gotta stay with me, instead.

Guess I was right. A rabbit's foot ain't so lucky after all.

Willy

It burns. Shit, Mama the truth, it's burning a hole in me so big that no matter how I look at it, I can never fill it. Not with praying, not with drinkin, not even the dragon can stop the burnin.

Mama, I gots to tell it, so I can breathe easy again. I think maybe if I tell it, if I do somethin, maybe the dragon, he might set me free.

Mama, what I did out there, that ain't the worst of it…

I shoulda stopped him. I know what he's doin'. I seen that boy runnin round town with Chester's stink all over him. Ain't nobody to stop it but me.

All that hate, it sticks in my throat like that shit-stinkin swamp water and its's choking me up, choking me up and I'd be happy to take my last breath, but the dragon, he weaves his way through it all, he always finds me no matter what. And he takes me down, down away from the noise and the guts and the blood. He's the only one can take me, Mama. He whispers, oh, I can hear him saying, *Willy, now you can be something more, someone better.*

Mama, I hear you out there, don't think I can't hear Y'all. I hear Aunt Maggie and Aunt Sarah. Y'all think you know what's good for me. But what's good ain't good, what's bad ain't bad. You think you can stop it? You can't stop the dragon, Mama. Only the truth can stop him.

I hear Chester out there too. I knowed that voice my whole life, it's like when we speak, we are ringin the same bell. He is my kin, but he ain't like no brother no more. I hear him. Mama, don't you let him in here, don't you dare.

Jesus, Mama, I'm so goddam cold, they're all over me. Rats, runnin all over my body.

Mama, please…

TJ

"Toads," said Jacob, peering through his glasses over the edge of the slope.

"Huh?"

Richie had a stick, mottled with moss, and was swiping at the air with it.

"Let's go down and kill 'em," he said, grinning as he hopped and jabbed. He caught Cal in the side with the stick and Cal fell to his knees, tears threatening.

"Baby," hissed Richie, catching a look from Jacob.

"They're cane toads," said Jacob, stepping back from the edge, "not frogs. Don't normally get 'em here. Must be the heat that's brought 'em. I read about 'em once. They kill all kinds of bugs n critters, to help the crops grow."

Richie started to slide down the slope toward the pool, stick in hand, face full of menace.

"Get back Richie, you goddamn idiot!" shouted Jacob.

"Why?" shouted up Richie grinning, "gonna kill me some stinkin toads."

"Richie, I mean it, get outta there. They're poisonous," Jacob hollered down the slope.

Richie dug his nails into the mossy bank to stop himself from sliding down. He was stuck a halfways up and a halfways down. He looked down at the toads then back up at me Jacob and me kneeling on the edge.

"I mean it Richie. Get your ass back up here!" shouted Jacob.

I held out a hand as Richie crawled to the top. He grabbed it and I yanked him back over the edge, losing my balance when I took his weight. We tumbled to a halt by the log where Cal was sitting.

"Goddamn idiot," I said, giggling at Richie as we rough n tumbled a little more.

Jacob came and parked on the log next to Cal, took the rucksack from his back, unpacked cans of soda, and handed them out.

"You sure are a dumbass, Richie," he said, shaking his head. Cal sniggered, and took a can from Richie.

I popped the top off the soda and slurped it down.

"Got any smokes?" asked Richie popping his own can open.

"Sure, like you smoke," snorted Jacob.

"Do too. I tried it last week, Chester showed me how. I smoke all the time now."

"Chester?" I asked, "why's he hangin' with a scrawny ass kid like you?"

"Cos I ain't a dumbass like you, TJ . . . . He's pretty cool. Showed me his medals and somethin else too."

"Yeah? What?" asked Jacob

"Aw, you wouldn't believe me even if I told you."

"What'd he show you?" whispered Cal, eyes wide.

Richie smirked. He had us eatin from his hand now.

"Chester got him a gook scalp. Keeps it in a jar. He done brought it over to my house and showed me. Still got gook hair an' blood an' everythin."

"Fuck you Richie, that's a downright lie," said Jacob, shaking his head.

"Ain't no lie!" shouted Richie, "I saw it true. An' Chester, he says I'm in his unit now. Gave me two dollars, just for takin a grocery bag to some buddy o' his."

Jacob shook his head again

"You sure are dumb, Richie. Chester got you runnin around for him. You gonna end up in real trouble. Chester's a mean-ass snake. You should stay the hell away from him. If you had a Mama, she'd tell you that straight."

"Oh yeah? Well I got Pa, and he says it's just fine! Him and Chester got big plans."

Richie walked over to the edge of the mossy bank and swiped at the air with his stick. We all left off a him then, knowin the only plan Richie's pa had was to drink himself to death. He had a medal from the US Army hangin on his wall, but he never had no job, and Richie's mama left bout three seconds after his pa came back from Nam to go and live with some guy out in LA.

Cal was leanin back in the grass next to me eyes closed. I was staring up and the wisp of cloud floatin over the yellow sun.

"Goddammit those calm toads sure do make the worst noise," said Richie, breaking up my daydream.

"Cane toads," said Jacob sitting up and shading his eyes.

"How they poison anyways?" I asked, "do they bite?"

"No," said Jacob. "Glands."

"What's glands?" I asked.

"Well, they got these bumps full of poison right behind the eyes. If you touch 'em you get poisoned. Some folks say, if you lick 'em, it makes you higher than a cloud. But mostly it can kill you stone dead."

"Jesus. Cousin Willy would make a soup outta those guys," I laughed.

"I'd take a lick," said Richie jumpin up and swipin at a clump of fern with his stick. We all laughed.

"Quit it now," he scowled, "I would. You yellow bellies wouldn't dare. But I would. Chester told me what it's like. He said it's like you swallowed a rainbow, all colours an' music and warm inside. Like the best dream you ever had in your whole goddam life."

Cal's eyes were wide as he jumped down from the log, puffing out his chest.

"I would do it too," he said, "I ain't no pussy." Then he scowled at Richie. "Ain't no baby either."

"Siddown, Cal," I said, grabbing his arm. "You ain't to go near, y'hear. Mama would strip the skin from my hide if she knew I'd even brought you out past Maggie's farm, let alone getting all rainbowed up on some crazy toad juice."

Richie clutched at his stomach, laughing so hard, "Ha ha! Baby lick the toad, baby lick the toad."

He pulled his mouth into a hard, thin line and cuffed Cal around the ear. Cal steadied himself but when Richie jumped forward, Cal lost his footing, staggering back and falling into a patch of stingers.

"Get up, pussy," said Richie.

Jacob pulled Richie away. I put out a hand for Cal, but he pushed himself up and shoved me away. Angry patches of red were spreading across the back of his thin legs and Cal couldn't hold back the tears this time.

"You always spoil it, Richie," Jacob said, quietly. "Why you gotta be so mean?"

"You hate him too!" Richie shouted. "You said it. Said it was just until his mama can take him back and all we gots to do is ignore him. He ain't one of us. He ain't never gonna be one of us."

Richie's knuckles were white around his stick as he pointed and jabbed it toward Cal.

Jacob had turned beet red.

He turned to Cal, "I aint never said I hated you."

But Cal was already gone, stridin toward the clearing, arms wrapped tight around himself, tears coursing down his cheeks.

Willy

You let him in, Mama? Why?

Alls I see now is that dragon. The water it's so blue down here. Dragon scales shimmering like sunlit glass. It's so quiet Mama. Let me stay here. Wait now? There's something I gotta do?

I'm swimmin, Mama, swimmin through that water. I'm following that dragon's tail, swirling and curling around and around. The colours, like rainbows, I'm swimmin through rainbows Mama, don't never wanna come up.

Shhh now, Mama, no more noise.

Shh now, Mama, stop hollerin.

Y'all can leave me now. It's peaceful here, Mama. So quiet.

Don't cry. Shh now.

TJ

Mama looked dead tired, her face all creased and pale, with dark hollows for eyes, like one of my comic-book ghosts.

"Ya'll gotta take care of yourselves for just one more day," she said, setting out bowls of oatmeal.

She splashed milk into the bowls and slammed down spoons. Some of the milk had spilt onto my shorts but Mama was angrier than a wasp in a jar, so I kept my mouth tight shut.

She was slammin and bangin, opening and closing, the cooler, the cupboards, the porch door. We'd barely finished, when she snatched up our bowls and slammed them into the sink. She almost scrubbed them invisible, and all the while, she was muttering.

"Goddamn Willy. Always had shit-for brains, always full o' the goddamn jitters. Claire shoulda sent him on up to Canada. Even when

he was a little kid, he couldn't cross the road unless he was hangin' off Chester's shirttail. What goddamn use was a boy like him to the Army."

Seemed like Mama was workin' herself up to blow. I sat at the table, too scared to move. Cals eyes were wider than a racoon. We'd never seen Mama so spittin mad. She banged those bowls and knives and spoons onto the drainer so hard I thought they might smash clean through the counter.

"And now lookit! Like a goddamn horror movie, hollerin, eyes poppin outta his head, sweatin an' shakin, three of us holding him down. In this heat! Where's the army now? I ask you? Cos they sure as shit ain't takin care o' him. Thank the sweet Lord Maggie had the good sense to bring Chester. Only one to get Willy calmed. Chester always had to look out for that boy."

Mama was breathing real hard.

"Mama," Cal whispered. "Is Willy sick?"

Mama whipped around from the sink.

"Sure is. Oh, he's sick alright and lemme tell you boys now. I ever see or hear about you takin' them mind-bendin drugs, you better hope you die right there n then, cos I will whip you into next spring if you ever touch that shit, you hear me? They can put a man on the goddamn moon, but they sure as shit can't fix our boys once they've broken them."

Mama looked like Reverend Johnson, eyes all bulging, an ungodly demon swelling in her chest. I almost peed my pants.

Cal trembled a little but held fast. I think he always knew, deep down, Mama would never take a whip to him, but I wasn't so sure. A memory still burned deep, the day I told her she must have driven Daddy away on account of her bein so mean, and she hit me with the hog bucket so hard, I thought I'd lost an ear.

Mama picked up her purse and took my chin in her hand.

"You're a good boy, TJ. You're the eldest and you need to take good care of your brother again while I'm gone. I know it ain't what you wanna hear, but I can't take him. Claire done some readin bout how to help Willy, she says this'll be the worst day. Then it'll be done. You understand? I'll be no more than a couple hours. You drink the water."

"Don't worry, Mama," I told her, proud to have her trust me. I pulled Cal to me and put an arm around Cal's bony shoulders. "I always take good care o' him."

Mama smiled, then kissed us both on the top of our heads and rushed out leaving only the faint scent of her lavender cologne.

I let go of Cal's shoulders and he sat down on the kitchen chair and began picking at the welts on the back of his legs. They'd scabbed to a crisp in the heat.

Willy

"Do it Willy, fucking do it, man. He ain't one of us, he ain't never gonna be one of us."

Moonlight on metal. Chester's yellow eyes, brighter than all that fire lightin up the sky around us, my heart, pounding like it might punch straight outta my chest. He looked more alive than any person I ever saw, laughing real hard when I drew that knife across Harvard's throat. I see it over and over Mama, Harvard, fallin face first into the mud and Chester's boot on the back of his head, twistin and twistin until the mud and the blood and Harvard all became one rain soaked, shit-stinkin lump of nothin.

"Eat dirt motherfucker. We don't take no orders from no pussy college boy."

I was strung out, Mama, is all I can tell you. Took me something made my mind swirl and my heart pump. Voice in my head saying, *It's okay, it's okay, do it, Willy. Do it for the unit.*

Harvard was a short timer too, been crossing off the days on his calendar, and I killed him. He never got to see his girl back home and he ain't never gonna go to that fancy college of his.

Mama, I killed one of our own men and that ain't the worst of it. I did it and it can never be undone. I could maybe even learn to live with a thing like that if I had a mind to, I could convince myself that I done right, that it made it easier for all of us. Those suits, they was gonna stop the boy bringing in the bag, and I knew, Mama I knew, I couldn't face another night in that rain, with the noise, and the blades, without those two dollars' worth.

"I ain't no pussy," I told Chester, "I ain't no pussy."

I'm ashamed to say it, Mama, I cried. And Chester, he told Harvard.

"Let the kid through. Give these goddam men what they need."

But Harvard, he stuck fast. Scared to break the rules that some suit put in place. Some suit that never walked one goddamn step in-country.

Harvard was just a dumb college kid. Playin at bein a hero. All that blood bubbling outta his throat. It wasn't my fault.

But the boy. God forgive me, Mama He was just a kid. He had a name, Binh. Chester had him runnin for him and the kid was too goddam scared to say no. That night, the whole sky was lit up like the goddamn fourth of July. Binh musta known his village was gone. But he sat by Chester, head down, with that sack between his knees. He never moved, not one inch.

They threw Harvard's boots on the fire. Got it goin real high. Then Binh brought it out of the sack. A King Cobra.

They were chantin my name and Chester's too. Willy! Chester! Willy! Chester! Yayayaya! Screamin an hollerin like a bunch of goddamn Red Indians. Chester took that huntin knife o' his, grabbed that motherfucker and sliced it clean open. Tore out that snake's heart and shoved it in his mouth.

There was so much blood, Mama. So much blood. It was rainin blood that night. Chester's mouth, dripping with it when he bit through that snake-heart, and the boy holdin that dead cobra with blood all over his hands. Harvard's blood on my knife and the fire and the noise, chanting my name Willy! Willy! Willy!

Mama, it's in my head. Ever goddamn day.

I watched them. Watched them disappear into the darkness, Chester's arm slung around those thin shoulders, and the boy's tears shinin in the firelight.

And I didn't do a goddamn thing. Just sat by that fire and puked all over my own goddam boots.

Thùy Linh gave me that pipe, Mama and I sucked on it like it was goddamn air for livin' … and the dragon, he came, and he carried me, down, down, down.

God forgive me. I shoulda stopped him.

Don't you let him in here no more, Mama.

TJ

Aunt Claire was wrong. It took more than a day to get Willy straight. Mama said it was like the Devil himself done took hold of Willy, and she and Aunt Claire and Aunt Maggie were praying so hard, their knees were as raw as skinned hide.

Mama would come home every night and fill the washbowl with ice, drag it out onto the porch. and sit with her feet in it till the sun went down. I asked her bout Willy how he was doin.

"That boy spittin up all kinds of stories. Won't let nobody near him now, not even Chester. Claire says she got God on her side. She gonna fight every day to get her boy back. I just pray she's right, 'cos from where I'm sitting, God got too many other things he needs to attend to."

Seemed to me like Willy wasn't fixin to get better any time soon, but Aunt Claire believed the Almighty would pull him through. Mama said the waitin was unbearable.

"Like waitin for death or salvation and you ain't sure which one's comin first."

I would make Mama her iced tea and Cal would sit next to her on the on a little wooden stool that granddaddy made. I'd long outgrown my stool, so I helped Mama best I could, by making sure the chores were done and the hogs and chickens were fed. It seemed like I was doing all the hard work, comin back to the house with sweat drippin down my neck, while Cal got all the hair-strokin and Mama hummin sweet songs into his hair.

I kinda liked Willy. I thought it sure was nice of my Mama and Aunt Maggie to try and help him. He sometimes gave me a dollar here an' there, and once he took me and Cal to a movie, but that was before Nam, before he ended up with his head like a box full of jigsaw pieces.

Sometimes, I lay next to Cal in bed and said a prayer for Willy. I would ask God to make him better, so Mama could come home, and we would get her to ourselves again, before school started. Cal said that was prayin for us and not Willy and that was a selfish kinda prayin. I felt bad after that and gave him a dead arm for making me

feel that way. Then I felt bad again, when the bruise spread gold and green above his elbow and Mama asked him what happened, and he said he slipped on the hose water. Cal could make you feel bad about most anythin.

With Mama over at Claire's, we could do as we pleased, so every day, we took an old corn bag filled with jello sandwiches and rode our bikes, out past Aunt Maggie's, to the toad wood. Jacob and Richie were usually close behind and in the cool shade of the cottonwoods, we hung a rope that Richie had found in his Daddy's pickup. We took turns to swing across the ditch, our hearts in our mouths, for fear of fallin down, down, down, into that nest of toads, eyein us, all menace and hate, in the ditch. They seemed to get bigger each day, some as big as alley cats, but as Mama says, boys sure are stupid. We would whoop and holler as each one of us made it to the other side. Even Cal got so good at the swinging, he joined in the jump, letting go of the rope midways across and hurling himself onto the bracken on the other side.

One day, we built a hooch, Richie was CO of the unit of course, but we all knew it was really Jacob and eventually Richie let up on Cal a little ways, since Cal was the best at tyin knots and lightin a fire from the magnifying glass Aunt Maggie got him on his last birthday. Jacob said that Richie must never, ever get a hold of that glass, otherwise we'd all be burnt like sinners, cos Richie got no sense at all. Cal was always careful and built a good fire, with rocks all around, to stop it spreadin, and he made sure it was all doused out every day before sundown, just like Grandaddy had taught us. Cal said, when he grew up, he would live all alone and cook rabbit on an open fire and sleep under the stars. Richie said he probably would, 'cos he wouldn't have no friends, 'cos nobody liked him, but Cal just laughed, and Richie went and hacked at a tree with his stick for a good while after that.

Richie sure was set on catchin him a toad. Ever day he would sit at the top of the slope, giving those ugly critters the stink eye, thinkin of ways to do it. He tried his daddy's old net for fishing, but it had too short a handle. They were too mean and slippery for a snare wire, lowered down on a piece of old rope, and the rocks we threw just seemed to plop into the creek, scattering the toads every which way, causing 'em to holler even louder.

"One day, I'm gonna get me one of them suckers," said Richie, "an' I'm gonna make Cal lick it and then I'm gonna slice it's belly open eat its heart. Chester told me if you eat the heart of something you catch, you take on its power. I'm gonna be the biggest, meanest critter in town. An all you pussies gonna bow down to me!"

"Sure, Richie," I said, laughin, and Jacob chuckled, his back resting against an old tree stump, head tilted toward the sun.

"You wait, pussies. Chester told me I can be king of the world if I want to!"

"Ha! and my Mama told me I could fly me a rocket like Neil Armstrong," chuckled Jacob.

Richie scowled at Jacob then turned to Cal. Seems his belly was full of vinegar and he just needed somewhere to spit.

"Baby," hissed Richie, as Cal sloped off to his spot on the log.

He took a few steps toward Cal, swinging his stick to and fro.

"Hey guys," Richie shouted, his voice echoing through the forest, "how long you think till Willy's better now?"

I shrugged. "I dunno. Aunt Claire thinks he's through the worst."

Richie had that sly smirk on his face. He was itchin for trouble.

"So, your Mama'll be home real soon, then?"

All the while he was snakin closer and closer to Cal.

"I guess so," I answered, standing up. The air got real cool and I swallowed hard.

Richie stopped in front of Cal who was fiddling, head down, with a blade of grass.

"Well goddamn hallelujah!" shouted Richie, right in Cal's face, causing him to jump up like a scolded cat.

"That means baby here, can go back to his Mama and we can all go back to bein how it should be. No Fucking New Guys. No goddamn babies!"

Richie jabbed Cal with his stick, but Cal stood fast, his little hands curling into fists.

"I told you I ain't no baby. You quit sayin' that, Richie."

I ain't never seen Cal like that before, eyes black with temper.

But Richie was outright laughin now

"Pussy boy, baby boy," he sang, darting around Jacob, who had hurried over to stand in front of Cal.

"Shut up, Richie!" said Jacob, giving Richie a shove.

"Leave him, Richie," I said, moving toward them, but my words came out kinda stuck and my legs seemed to be filled with sand. Richie turned on me like a rattlesnake.

"You shut up. You hate him. We all do. You gotta drag him around cos your Mama says so, you dumbass."

He spat on the ground and wiped his mouth with his sleeve.

"I ain't no pussy!" screamed Cal and ran at Richie, his little fists balling into his back, cuffing his head and ears with all he had.

Richie turned and shoved Cal away. Cal staggered backwards but Richie strode towards him again with the Devil in his eyes. Maybe I shouted out? Maybe Jacob tried to pull Richie back. I don't know. That moment seems like a blur, like a picture that ain't quite in focus, me and Jacob, frozen in time.

Richie took Cal down with one blow. Smacked him hard, right on the side of the head and Cal folded to the ground as though his bones done turned to mush. Richie gave him a kick in the stomach for good measure and Cal whimpered but made no mind to move.

"You're a baby," Richie hissed, then glared at me, "and you're a pussy, ain't both of you a pair o' dumbass pussy boys. Your just like your no-good Pa, a pair of goddam yellow-bellies."

I came unstuck and ran at him then, rage burning in my throat, but he was ready. He caught me a good one in the gut and the air rushed outta me. I curled over, panting hard, throat stingin, and Richie kicked me hard in the ribs.

Jacob yanked him away, pushed up his glasses, and squared right up to Richie. Jacob was shakin so hard, his fists balled up real tight. Richie sucked at his teeth for a moment then it seemed like the fight just drained clean out of him. He stuck out his chest, shook his head and picked up his stick. I heard the swish and whoosh as he walked away, hacking at the ferns, as he made his way out of the wood.

Jacob helped Cal up. He spat out a little blood, then staggered as if a hard wind were blowing at him. Leaning against a thick oak tree, he took some deep breaths. I was down on the floor, tryin to catch some breath. I looked up at the sun, burnin through the flickering leaves, then closed my eyes against the glare. I felt the vibrations of the toads through my body, their dull hypnotic drone soothing the pain in my gut.

"I ain't no pussy." Cal broke the silence.

I opened my eyes and sat up, pulling my knees tight to my chest.

"I would lick that toad and see the rainbows, and I would fight Richie again," Cal said, "Any goddamn day or night. I ain't scared of him."

Jacob made his way over and pulled up me and Cal. The three of us slowly wheeled our bikes home, the hot sun beatin down on us the whole way, with Cal in the middle, and me and Jacob righting him, whenever he stumbled.

It was almost dark when Mama came back from Claire's. When she saw Cal's face, she let out a noise I only ever heard from a cow, keenin through a birthin.

"My God, baby, what happened to you?" she asked, scooping Cal up tight.

"You were supposed to take care o' him," she snarled at me. I backed up to the counter and steadied myself.

"Goddamnit, TJ."

Mama pushed Cal down onto a chair and came at me.

I took the beatin, made no attempt to cover myself. Mama ran out of steam, pretty quick. She shoved me away and I leant my face against the cooler. I never told Mama that Richie had got me real hard too. I guess Cal had some pride, and I had a mind to let him keep it. Nobody wants to fess up they got a beating. Not even to their own Mama.

I looked on while Mama bathed Cal's jaw with an ice cloth, then she rubbed some arnica on the side of his head, where the swelling was pretty bad. She soothed and crooned, until finally he fell flat out asleep in her arms and she carried him up to bed. A low rumble of thunder shook the house. A storm was comin.

I lay on my bed listening to the tap-tap-tap on the windowpane. The rain had started. A sharp flash of light lit up the whole room, then another deep rumble shook my bed. I began to count. One one-thousand, two one-thousand, waiting for the next flash. The door opened, and Mama peeked around the frame, her face pale in the dusk-light.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, careful not to wake Cal.

"Me too," I whispered back.

"C'mon,"' she nodded, and I crept from my bed.

She let me sit with her on the couch till real late, snuggled up warm and tight watching a cop show on T.V. Outside, the thunder yelled, and the lighting sparked.

Willy

Bambambam! Guns popopop. Get down! Get down! I can't breathe. Mama get the pipe! Please, I'm beggin you. Make it stop make it stop It hurts so bad itchin' it hurts so bad. I'm so cold so cold I can see that fire flashin outside I hear them guns, Mama.

Let me out!

I hear you I know you're out there Mama. Let me out. I'm scared. The noise. Get down, troop get down troop move! Move! Move!

… need to save the boy. Save the boy Mama please Rats everywhere.

So cold.

TJ

The lemon-pine perfume from the purple sage drifted through the open window. I winced as I turned over, the bruisin on my rib was tender. Richie was right, I was a pussy. I shoulda socked him hard. Shoulda got him first, before he even got to Cal. Like I said, Cal always made me feel bad. I'd dreamt all night bout how I woulda done things different. Now, eyes full of grit, I knelt up on my bed and looked out of the window. The clouds looked bruised, like their bellies were still full of thunder. It was spittin rain. I watched as a mockingbird sat on the fencepost, singing out an early morning hymn to me, just like he was in church, or something.

"Sure is dark out there," I said, keeping my voice low.

I yawned and rubbed at my rib. I poked my head through the window and let a little rain fall on my tongue. It felt good to suck in

some of that that cool air. I looked up at a cloud dragon forming in the sky.

"Look, Cal. A dragon," I whispered.

Cal was silent.

I sighed.

"Cal, I sure am sorry 'bout what happened."

It hurt my gut to say it. But I was just as mad at that fool Richie as he was. And I took a whipping off Richie AND Mama for it.

"C'mon, Cal," I whined, sore at him for being so stubborn.

I turned and looked across at his bed. His sheet was rumpled up against the wall. Cal's old bear was limp on his pillow, one eye squinting at me, but there was no Cal.

A twist of worry curled in my gut. I slid the window shut and made my way across the landing to Mama's room. She sat up when I creaked the door open.

Rubbing her hands through her hair, Mama glanced at the clock. "What?" she croaked.

"Cal's gone," I said and gnawed at a hangnail as Mama stumbled from her bed.

"What?" She made her way across the landing and into our room, staring blankly at Cal's empty bed.

"Cal?" Mama called, yanking at his bedsheets.

She looked under the bed and in the wardrobe then she went all around the house checking each room faster and faster like a spinning top, until she was red-faced and breathless. She shoved me out into the yard. Rain pounded my face. The storm had turned again. I shivered as Mama shouted from the porch door.

"Check everywhere, I mean everywhere. You don't come back till you have him!" Then she disappeared, leaving the porch door swingin in the wind.

I did as I was told. I made a real show of checkin the yard and the barn, the hog house, even inside the pickup. I wanted to look like I was helpin Mama. Wanted her to think it wasn't my fault. I was drenched through and breathing hard when I finally came back into the kitchen. Every cupboard was open, boxes and buckets pulled out onto the linoleum. I stepped over the debris and peeked into the den. Mama was heaving the old couch from the wall to check behind it, all the while shoutin for Cal to quit hidin. Looked like everything we

owned had been pitched across the floor. A crack of thunder shook the house and I turned to Mama, shivering in my wet shorts and T-shirt.

Mama lifted the phone from the kitchen wall and jabbed at the buttons. She waited a second, then I retched a little, as she smashed the receiver, over and over, against that wall.

"Goddamit! Goddammit! I paid, you motherfuckers, I paid it yesterday."

I put my arms around her as she slid to the floor, the fight seepin from her body.

I knew there was no place in hell good enough for me, but I fessed up anyway.

"M-, M-, Mama," I said, teeth chattering with cold.

She looked up and I wiped her hair from her face.

"I think I know where he is."

By the time we got to Maggie's farm, Mama was no longer crying, just real quiet, her lips a tight thin line, her knuckles white on the wheel of the pickup. She screeched to a halt as Chester came onto the porch, fixing his cap over his dirty blonde hair. He sucked on his stokie and squinted at me as Mama ran past him up the steps shouting.

"Maggie! Maggie!" she pushed open the door and disappeared inside.

I got down from the pickup and waited. I'd only told Mama to head to Maggie's. No more. After that, she'd grabbed me by the collar and threw me in the truck.

I knew Mama would get to it soon enough, but I sure was scared by now. I knew I would get a whoopin when I told her I thought her baby was wandering the woods all alone. That he was maybe even rollin around high like Willy, after licking the meanest ugliest critter she would ever see. Only thing I couldn't get to thinkin straight was why he would go alone?

Chester walked over and rested a hand on the pickup door. I pushed myself back as far as I could. He leaned in real close and blew smoke in my eyes. I coughed and tried to get by, but he pressed me hard against that door, yellow eyes narrowin.

The grey clouds parted, and the sun streaked through blinding me. I put up a hand to cover my eyes.

"Seems like ever time I see you there's some kinda trouble," he said.

I hung my head.

"Why you here, kid?"

I looked up at him.

"I need to go tell Mama--"

He gave me a shove

"Why you here? Willy shootin' his mouth again? My Mama's already done enough for him--"

"No. No sir … its Cal."

"Your daddy done come and took him? Goddammit. Thought that piece of shit was gone for good."

I shook my head. Chester leaned back and pulled on his cigarette and squinted at me then turned as Mama and Maggie came running outta the house.

They stopped in front of me and Chester, Maggie was tugging at her bathrobe, Mama's face was white with worry.

"Well?" she asked, "you said Maggie's."

I looked down at the ground. I wished Jacob was here. Maybe I wouldn't get whooped so hard if she knew Jacob had been to the wood too.

"He ain't here, Sarah. Why would he come here?" asked Maggie. "Do you know what the hell's going on?" she said, turning to Chester.

"I don't know shit," said Chester. "Spit it out dumbass. Where's your brother?" he asked, shoving me in the chest.

The clouds were slidin across the sky thin as a whisper and the sun was rising higher now, seems like it was hottin' up ready to burn me like the sinner I was. I pointed, out across Maggie's backyard towards the woods and heard Mama gasp.

"Shit," said Chester. Then he set off, faster than a rabbit from a gun.

Willy

Mama I
… are you there

It's okay, Mama.
It's me Willy.
I'm so tired, Mama.
I know what you done was to save me.
I know I done broke your heart, Mama.
I gots to go,
Can't stay here. You know that.
Chester gon' get around to killin me someday
Ain't no doubt
gon kill me kill me kill me
I thought I could do somethin bout him.
But see
how see how my mind it don't work right
See how I'm all broken.
Tiny
tiny
pieces

TJ

We buried Cal in early fall. Reverend Johnson spoke quietly. Aunt Maggie and Aunt Claire held onto Mama while she keened for her baby.

The sun had lost its heat and the leaves were fallin across Maggie's yard when we all got back to her place. Jacob had gone on home and I was scuffing my heels against the porch, not knowing what the hell I could do to help fix Mama's heart.

I sat on the steps and slowly read the letter Pa had sent. He said he real was sorry he couldn't come to bury Cal. That he was fixin to write about what happened to men like Chester and Willy. He'd been working hard to find the truth about the war, and he was gonna tell folks what really happened. I hated him then. I knew nobody cared 'bout that goddamn war. He shoulda come. Shoulda come and said goodbye to Cal.

I wandered into Aunt Maggie's kitchen wipin the tears off of my cheeks. The counter was filled with home cooked pies and at least four pots filled with stew we'd never eat. Folks from town had called

in and out all day long, and now the last of them had gone, it was just Aunt Claire and Aunt Maggie, sittin at the table with Mama. She was starin at nothin but the wall, her hands folded in her lap, and she was still wearin her church hat.

"TJ. Sweetheart," said Maggie, her voice soft as ice cream, "Come and sit down, I'll bring you some water."

She stood up and pulled out her chair for me. She wandered out back to get some ice and I sat down next to Mama. I put my hand on hers and squeezed. She pulled it away and tucked it into the folds of her black dress.

I looked to Aunt Claire who was scowlin at something behind my back. She was angrier than a wasp in a jar.

"Jesus Christ, have some goddamn respect."

I turned around to see Chester grabbin a beer from the fridge. He was naked 'cept for his vipers cap and boots.

Mama looked across at him frowning under her the shadow of her hat.

"This is my home, Claire," hissed Chester, drunk and full of the devil, "I can do whatever the hell I want in my own goddamn house."

Maggie came from out back. She slammed the water onto the table in front of me. The ice cubes rattled in the glass.

"Chester! Jesus H Christ! Put some clothes on. Go on now. Git."

Chester walked right on up to her and pushed his face into hers. "I told you before, Mama. I like bein' free."

He smirked at her then nodded in my direction,

"Besides, TJ here been side-eyeing me all afternoon, trying to get him a look at what a real man got, ain't that right, TJ?" He winked at me and my cheeks flamed like hot chillies.

Aunt Claire stood up and narrowed her eyes. She spoke real quiet.

"You better take yourself on outta here, Chester, I mean it."

Chester swigged at his beer. His was swayin back an' forth, slurrin and mumblin. He looked at Claire and narrowed his eyes.

"How's Willy, Claire? Couldn't make it out here, huh? Not even for the kid.? Y'all give him my love next time you visit."

"Get out!" screeched Aunt Maggie, rushing at Chester and shoving him hard. Chester stumbled. Aunt Maggie looked over at Aunt Claire who was standing now, holdin on to that table like she might faint. Chester wandered toward the door, chuckling to himself. Maggie came towards Claire,

"Claire, I'm sorry, I--"

"He ain't worth it, Maggie," whispered Aunt Claire. She was cryin kinda hard now.

"He ain't worth me an' you--"

"Oh hey, TJ!" Chester interrupted, he was leanin by the door fixin me with those yellow eyes, "you come on over anytime now."

I felt the air seep outta the room.

Chester winked again and cupped his hand around that corn dog o' his and started wavin it around, laughing like he'd just told the world's best joke.

Mama was out of her seat like a streak of lightenin, lettin out a roar like the fiercest dragon I ever heard.

My glass fractured on the kitchen table. One half lay belly-up against Aunt Maggie's fruit bowl. Ice water dripped onto the shoes I'd shined up for church.

Aunt Claire grabbed at me then, tryin to pull me into her, it seemed. I buried my face in her black dress, my heart poundin like a jackrabbit … 'cos it was too late. I'd seen it. Seen it all.

Aunt Maggie, leanin over a screamin Chester, his hands pushed between his legs,

Mama, white with rage, the other half of that jagged glass in her shakin hand,

… and blood. So much blood.

Willy

Help me

need to find me someways to getting wired up right again.

Dragon he done left me left me all alone in the water
Mama.

Popopop bambambam

Take me to that fancy clinic you and grandaddy been savin for, Mama.

See if them suits can't fix me.

Rats comin

TJ

We ride our bikes over to the new arcade in Gainesville. Jacob is king, his high score flashing bright, at the very top of the list of names. Sometimes, we buy cokes and candy and sit on the wall at the skatepark, watching older kids flip and spin. They bust some real cool moves. We never go to the woods by aunt Maggie's, we never talk about toads and no one ever talks about why Chester left town.

Sometimes we see Richie at school, but he hangs with a new crowd now. Older boys with greased hair and a likin for cars and swiggin booze.

These days Mama sits on the porch sipping iced tea, gazing out toward the county line as if she's expecting someone, or somethin. Ain't no talking to her and ain't no getting close. I watch TV alone. The black suit I wore in the courthouse hangs in the wardrobe, next to Cal's good shirt and pants, his church clothes. Mama said I ain't to touch a goddamn thing. Cal is gone and there ain't no bringing him back but sometimes, when Mama is sleeping, I lay on his bed and he is there. I can smell him. I can feel him. I can hear his breath in my ear.

I tell him he's the bravest brother anyone could have.

They said he would have been confused. A blow to the head that hard, the swelling, it most likely would have made him woozy. He still rode all the way out to the toad wood, though. There were scratches on his legs and back. They said he musta fallen so many times. But seems Cal was determined to get there.

They asked us over and over. Which one of us did it. But if you don't say, if you bite your lip real hard to stop the words spinnin out, then they can't blame anyone of you. We already lost Cal. Couldn't let

em take Richie too. So, we stuck tight and sweated it out in those black suits with the bible burning our palms. I know I'm going to hell. Probably Jacob and Richie too. I see it in Mama's eyes, every day. The way her mouth slams tight when I try to talk to her, the way Aunt Maggie and Aunt Claire only look at me side on.

But Cal? He's some place good. Some place real sweet, where Mama will go too, to stroke his hair and sing her songs. Just as soon as it's her time.

They said when Cal licked the toad, he would have taken in so much of that poison as to cause him to hallucinate. When Jacob explained to me what that meant, I was real happy. I like to think Cal did see rainbows when he took his last breath, in that cold wet ditch, covered in those mean-mouthed cane toads. I like to think he heard their strange, hypnotic song, lulling him to sleep, soothing the pain in his head, from Richie's blow. I like to think he was surrounded by colors and music and felt so warm inside, like it was the best goddamn dream he ever had.

I sure do like to think that, cos, in the end, Richie was right about Cal all along . . . . He was just a baby.

Still Life with Poppies

Chukwuma "Chuks" Ndulue

Trees are more vicious
in their lean, the whinnies
of road dogs, more menacing.

You offered a swollen hand,
on a corn moon night and
the night turned in on itself.

Summer is gone now.
No more beach front
swilling, or casual palmistry.

The forecast is cloud-cover,
dry embraces, looming hours,
square shouldered shaking.

We count telephone poles,
plan discount pyres, talk of life
under a skimmed layer of creosote.

Five Major Ideas with Flat Design

Susan Landgraf

1. Equal Surfaces

Skin, sermons, songs.
Ideas lined like trees.
Watch for birds and the next
full-color catalogue to come.

2. Buddhist Space

Everything is here.
Eggs and the wombs that hold them.
Eggs and snakes to eat them.
The mouths of bullhorns and trumpets.
Pockets with keys and coins
and their owners whose mouths
choose *joy or fuck*.

3. Constructed, measuring space

Rulers and lines with scales
and mathematics. Tools of the creator
looking inside the void. There angles,
there the idea of door in a context
of walls and rafters where a woman's breath
can steam the windows.

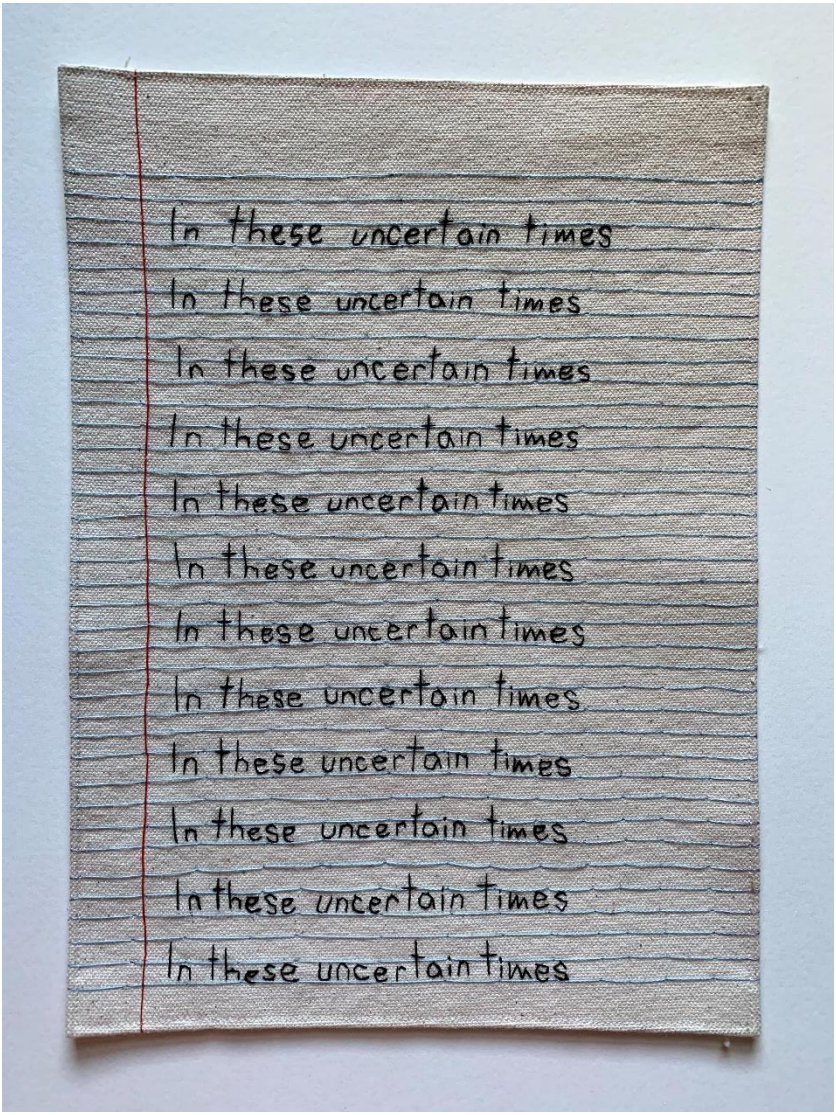
4. Light

Cataclysms – leaves burnished, grief
brought out and laid to dry. Peach
on the sill. Shadows struck dumb.

5. Expressionistically

Time on fire.
Space an iceberg, double-minded,
sequoias the same and mountains.
Space shouts out dimensions
through the telescope,
an invented eye.

Footnotes:
There is no equal surface.
A Buddhist Space holds air space.
Breath is always in a context.
Headstones throw shadows.
You can't breathe fire.



In These Uncertain Times / Alice Dillon

$100 for 100 Words or Art 2020 Winner

Willow Widow

Karen Walker

$100 for 100 Words or Art 2020 Winner

A willow grew unbidden in my backyard, flattering me with shade.

But the roots that crept under the fence proved insatiable. The tree's slender silver leaves sympathized, agreeing that virgin soil and a fresh spring should have been enough, and pointed which way the wind now blew. A conspiracy of branches, each one as thick as a man, soon blocked my view.

I cut the willow down when green shoots—curly-headed like my little one—appeared all over the neighborhood. Until I find another tree (this time choosing wisely at the garden center), baby and I will plant flowers around Daddy's stump.

Time a Grand and Final Judge, Grow Bravely in Love /
Church Goin Mule

$100 for 100 Words or Art 2020 Runner-up

Guernica

S.T. Brant

"Staring" 1

Staring at Picasso's *Guernica*, Wondering What Turns Life to Art

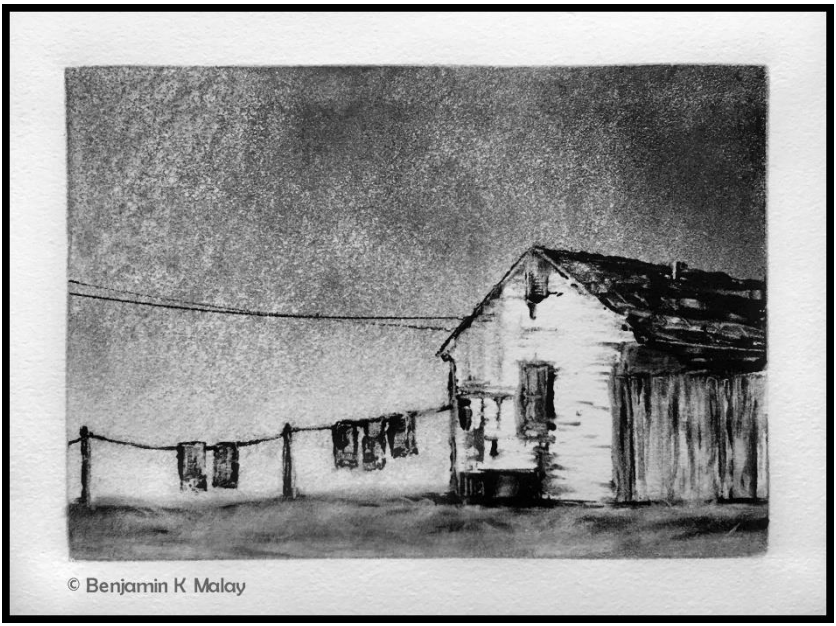
The bull's a bull, the horse a horse. I'm dumbfounded at the locking of ideas into things. Break the things apart. Find the stable, pull out the bolt, Yeats says. What's fascinating will rise from the shapes of freed ideas. The Galateas of the mind, through the marriage of their will, incarnate these shapes. Guernica's a place—also an idea that took a shape: intellect in form. Guernica is not a canvas. A place: not a place upon a canvas, not shaped to match the canvas shape, but that canvas is a canvas named *Guernica.* We must keep these separate.

Tilting Towards Self-Annihilation / George L Stein

Rescue

Charlotte Wyatt

Do I miss the burnt-sugar smell of the red-tail's meal? Those pink intestines tossed like streamers from white rat pelts splayed across the ground? People who know me now cannot believe I scraped sundried entrails from concrete. "You worked in a shelter?" they ask, and imagine what? Gratitude? Affection? That bird was broken-winged, miserable and afraid. So was I, because he could not confirm any happiness in the life we forced upon him. Would memories of flight offer solace or suffering? It's been years; he must be gone. I still think of him. I still don't know the answer.



Keep Those Hard Times Away / Benjamin Malay

Red

Jacqueline Schaalje

Through the window where I sleep
Mars is a tab.

My mind has puzzled over other
things since.

I think
of a boyfriend, long
ago, shoving in my blank.

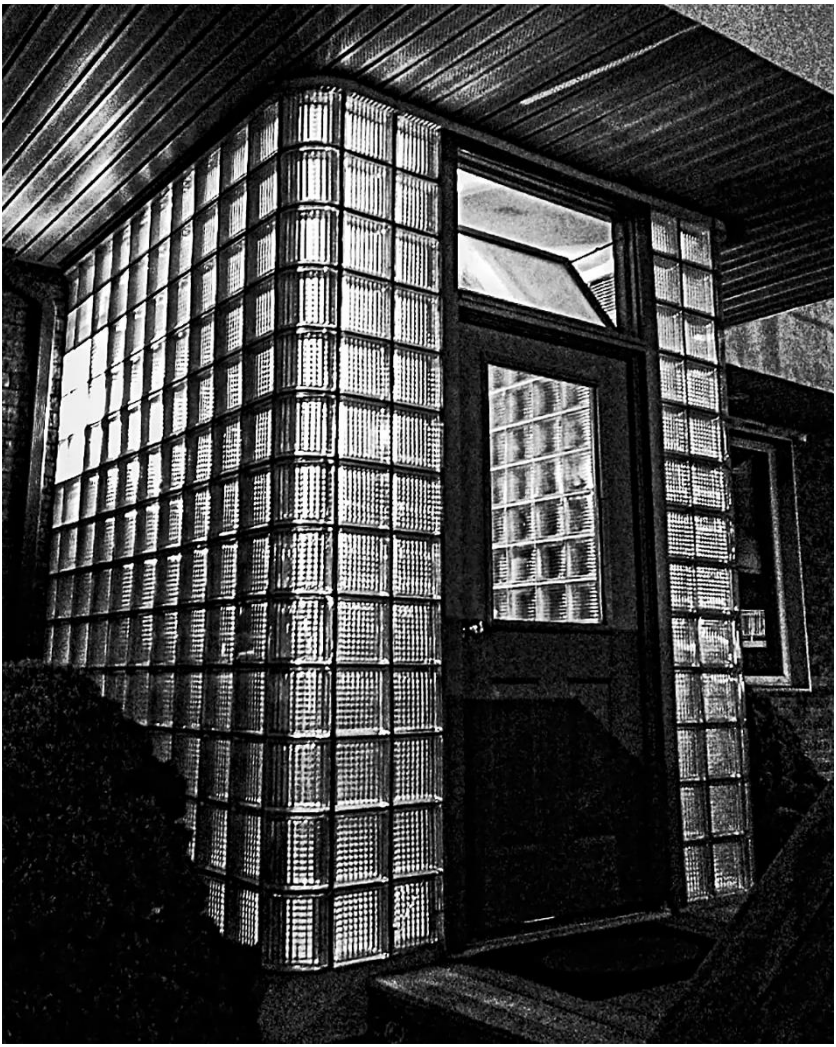
I couldn't tell (you) whether
he and what we did then
was something lost or stained.

When his red cabbage head
bumped away in goodbye,

I turned up
the car window, sealed
the edges, and zipped

on the freeway. He still looks
for me online. Still cross?

He wants his fluffy
bunny and I'm still hankering
after his cabbage hands.



Resident Light / Louis Staeble

No Rest for the Weary / Craig Anderson

Contributors

Craig Anderson is an award-winning artist whose work is represented by private and corporate collections nationwide. He is a signature member of the San Diego Watercolor Society and has served as a juror in a number of art exhibitions, and is in demand for live demonstrations and workshops. He works exclusively in transparent watercolor. Craig believes that art is a timeless expression of the beauty that surrounds us: a fossil of some piece of real life that existed in time and space, a real, living, breathing thing.

ST Brant is a teacher from Las Vegas. Publication credits include *Door is a Jar*, *Santa Clara Review*, *New South*, *Green Mountains Review*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, *La Piccioletta Barca*, *Cathexis Northwest Press*, and a few others. You can find them on Twitter @terriblebinth or Instagram @shanelemagne.

Mary Byrne is the author of the chapbook *A Parallel Life* (Kore Press) and the short story collection *Plugging the Causal Breach* (Regal House, 2019). Her short fiction has been published, broadcast and anthologized widely. She was born in Ireland and lives in France. https://twitter.com/BrigitteLOignon www.marybyrnewriter.com

Church Goin Mule is a southern outsider artist. You can find their work online at churchgoinmule.com, and on instagram @churchgoinmule.

Alice Dillon is a fiber artist from Worcester, Massachusetts. Her roots in fiber art trace back to receiving a sewing machine as a gift in middle school. Alice began actively identifying as an artist in college when she taught herself how to embroider. Her works range from highly detailed to cleanly linear. Alice has recently become interested in repeated linear imagery, which brings a modern androgyny to a classically feminine medium. Alice is a graduate of Clark University. She is one of ArtsWorcester's 2020 Material Needs Grant Recipients, and is utilizing the grant to create life-sized, full-body embroidered portraits to be exhibited in 2021.

An LGBTQIA+ multi-genre artist living in Tucson, Arizona, **Valyntina Grenier**'s work has previously appeared in *Sunspot*, *Gaze*, *High Shelf Press*, *Lana Turner*, *JuxtaProse*, and *Bat City Review*. Her tête-bêche chapbook *Fever Dream / Take Heart* was published by Cathexis Northwest Press, January 2020. Find her at valyntinagrenier.com or Insta @valyntinagrenier

T.B. Grennan was born in Burlington, Vermont, and currently lives in Sunset Park, Brooklyn. He received an M.F.A. in Creative Writing from the University of Virginia and his fiction has been published in *Brokelyn*, *Digital Americana*, *White Stag Journal*, *The Seventh Wave*, and *Construction Literary*

Magazine, as well as *Spaces We Have Known*, an anthology of LGBT+ fiction. His nonfiction has appeared in *TIMBER* and the *Indiana Review*.

Kathy Hoyle writes short stories and flash fiction with bite. She holds a BA (hons) and an MA in Creative Writing. Her work has appeared in a variety of literary magazines including *Spelk*, *Ellipsis Zine*, *Lunate*, *Virtualzine* and *Cabinet of Heed*. She has been both long and shortlisted in many competitions such as The Exeter, The FISH memoir prize, and the Ellipsis Zine Flash Collection Prize. She is powered by tea and biscuits.

Susan Landgraf has been awarded a $50,000 Poets Laureate grant from the Academy of American Poets. Two Sylvias Press published *The Inspired Poet* in 2019. More than 400 poems have appeared in *Prairie Schooner*, *Poet Lore*, *Margie*, *Nimrod*, and others. Books include *What We Bury Changes the Ground* and *Other Voices*. She is Poet Laureate of Auburn, Washington.

Samantha Madway is working on a collection of interlinked poems and flash fiction. She loves her dogs, Charlie, Parker, and Davey, more than anything else in the universe. Though technophobic, she attempts to be brave by having an Instagram @sometimesnight. If the profile were a plant, it would've died long ago. Her writing has appeared in *Linden Ave*, *High Shelf*, *Sky Island Journal*, *Aurora*, *mutiny!*, *Clementine Unbound*, *SLAB*, and elsewhere.

Benjamin Malay works in a variety of mediums to create deeply personal images of people and places, embracing imperfect memory and fleeting life. Influenced by patterns of the natural world, he is most inspired by the spontaneous use of available materials. He is the sole proprietor of a fine art framing business in Seattle, Washington.

Charlene Stegman Moskal is a teaching artist with The Alzheimer's Poetry Project under the auspices of the Poetry Promise Organization of Las Vegas. She is a visual artist, a performer, a voice for NPR's *Theme and Variations* as well as a writer. She has been published in numerous anthologies, magazines, and ezines, most recently in *Southwestern American Literature*, *The Nervous Ghost*, *Sky Island Journal*, *Sandstone & Silver*; *an Anthology of Nevada Poets* and *Other Worldly Women*. Her second chapbook, *One Bare Foot* is published by Zeitgeist Press.

Chukwuma "Chuks" Ndulue is a writer/teacher and author of the chapbook *Boys Quarter* (Ugly Duckling Presse). His work has appeared in *BOAAT*, *Muse/A Journal*, *Tinderbox*, *PANK*, *Brooklyn Poets* and other publications.

Michele E. Reisinger's fiction has been featured in *Light and Dark Magazine*, *Prometheus Dreaming*, *34th Parallel*, *The Mighty Line*, and TulipTree Publishing's 2019 anthology *Stories That Need to be Told*. She studied English

and Political Science at Pennsylvania State University and received an MA in English Literature from the University of Delaware. She lives near Philadelphia with her family.

Jacqueline Schaalje has published stories and poetry in the *Massachusetts Review*, *Talking Writing*, *Frontier Poetry*, *Grist*, among others. Her stories were finalists for the Epiphany Prize and in the New Guard Competition. She has received support and/or scholarships from the Southampton Writers Conference and International Women's Writing Guild, and One Story and Live Canon workshops. She joined the Tupelo Press 30/30 project. She earned her MA in English from the University of Amsterdam.

Louis Staeble, fine arts photographer and poet, lives in Bowling Green, Ohio. His photographs have appeared in *Agave*, *Blinders Journal*, *Blue Hour*, *Conclave Journal*, *Elsewhere Magazine*, *GFT Magazine*, *Fifth Wednesday Journal*, *Four Ties Literary Review*, *Inklette Magazine*, *Light: A Journal of Photography*, *Literary Juice*, *Paper Tape Magazine*, *Qwerty*, *Revolution John*, *Rose Red Review*, *Sonder Review*, *South 85*, *Tishman Review* and *Your Impossible Voice*. His work has been shown in The Black Swamp Arts Festival 2016, 2017 and 2018 as part of the Wood County Invitational. Web page: staeblestudioa.weebly.com Instagram@louiestaeble.

George L Stein is a writer and photographer in the New Jersey/New York metropolitan area with interest in monochrome, film and digital photography, urban and rural decay, architectural, street, and more generally, art photography and digital manipulation. His work has been published in *Midwest Gothic*, *NUNUM*, *Montana Mouthful*, *Out/Cast*, *The Fredericksburg Literary and Art Review*, and *DarkSide Magazine*.

Marjorie Tesser's poetry and fiction have appeared in *Anomaly*, *Drunken Boat*, *Exoplanet*, *SWWIM Everyday*, and others. She coedited three anthologies, most recently *Travellin' Mama* (Demeter Press, 2019), and is editor in chief of *Mom Egg Review*. She has an MFA (fiction) from Sarah Lawrence College, where she won the 2019 John B. Santoiani Prize from Academy of American Poets.

Karen Walker writes short fiction and flash in Ontario Canada. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in online magazines and anthologies including *Spillwords*, *Reflex Fiction*, *The Brasilia Review*, *Commuterlit*, and *Blank Spaces*. People say Karen is fun and frustrating, and her chicken lasagna is pretty good.

Charlotte Wyatt is a recent graduate from the University of Houston's MFA program, where she was an Inprint Fellow and a recipient of the Inprint

Donald Barthelme Prize for Fiction. Her fiction may be found in *Joyland*, and her interviews of other authors are in *Gulf Coast* and *Electric Literature*.

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