

SUNSPOT LITERARY JOURNAL

VOLUME 3 ISSUE #2 © 2021 SUN DOGS CREATIONS



**CHANGING THE WORLD
THROUGH WORDS AND ART**

Table of Contents

- The Doves** / Susan Landgraf / 1
- Preparing to Eat the Forbidden Fruit** / Susan Landgraf / 2
- With Norma on the Reservation at Tahola** / Susan Landgraf / 3
- Eloping** / Ayshe Dengtash / 5
- Hide and Seek** / Charisse J. Tubianosa / 30
- The Epigrams Roam Free** / Michael Brosnan / 34
- Never** / Amanda Woodard / 35
- Untitled (from the series Facing It)** / Jack Bordnick / 42
- Untitled (from the series Facing It)** / Jack Bordnick / 43
- A Brutal Business** / Jeanne Wilkinson / 44
- Dandelion Wine** / Alan P. Marks / 48
- Stay Where I Can See You** / Jessica Ripka / 59
- American Silhouette** / Garrett Candrea / 60
- Aunt Ellen** / Reg Taylor / 73
- Editor's Prize: Konrad's Bukovina *Khosidl*** / Peter Newall / 80
- Geminga Contest**
- Voilà** / Margot Douaihy / 104
- Girl With an Ermine** / Lilianne Milgrom / 105
- You Arrived** / Morgan English / 106
- First Light Puerto Vallarta** / Alfredo Quarto / 107
- Terra Incognita** / Julie Noble / 108
- Running Around in Circles** / Pamela Viggiani / 109
- Blind** / Taylor Moon / 110

And What of Love? / Daragh Byrne / 111

Of Being / Jackie Ta / 112

Contributors / 113

Cover: Ghost Rider/ GJ Gillespie

The Doves

Susan Landgraf

After “The White Dove,”
a photograph by Tracey Ranauro

The famous dove flew back
from the flooded land with a branch for Noah.

After the animals made up for lost time
mating among the grasses, on the sand, in the sea,
and air, Noah got drunk.

No mention about what Noah and his family
ate on board—maybe one less chicken or hare
at the end—or whether Noah had stocked
wine to last or this was the only bottle.

These days bigger boats and ample wineries—
no passenger pigeons, dodo birds or
Rabbs’ fringe-limbed tree frogs—
just this dove in black and white on the page

in a forest of trunks
knifed with initials and hearts.

Preparing to Eat the Forbidden Fruit

Susan Landgraf

Haloed at the kitchen sink by the ceiling light bulb,
I rap the pomegranate with a dinner knife's flat handle
to let the seeds know they're being
opened to the world.
I cut the thick red skin with a sharp knife.

My flesh wants the feel of my lover's hands, his lips
and loins, but he is not here, just me
in a trance-like state
with the pomegranate, knives, and bowl.
I look out the unblinded window, listen
to the translucent seeds fall louder than the rain
washing the glass.

I take my bowl to the table and to whomever
it was—Eve or a gardener
who first opened
this fruit—I give thanks.
I picture my lover in candlelight.
I eat.

With Norma on the Reservation at Tahola

Susan Landgraf

*Your color is bright yellow but there's a dark spot.
Think about your lost child who needs a ceremony,
child lost when I didn't know my body,
child no bigger than a raindrop.*
She says I can find myself after I watch a thousand waves.

Norma hires a fishing boat to bury her adopted brother
at Shi Shi in the old people's way.
She leans over the railing, lays a wreath
on the blue-black waves. I spread carnations.
An eagle circles. A whale.
They are witness.

Before she felt the weight of her people's lost voices,
she remembers running in high grasses with the wind.
She drapes the medicine shawl over her shoulders.
Waves sage smoke. Sings the old songs.
Her legs black and withered, she runs her wheelchair
in a singular track. Says, *Heal thyself.*

Norma translates cedar talk. But of the screeching gulls,
she has no transcription. *They are either lonely or crazy.*
Either way they will continue to shriek,
though the wind always wins.
It is a constant, like the moon's cycles.
Like the sacred cedars that talk to themselves underground.

On my last visit, she is making wreaths with faux berries,
miniature totem poles and gulls for tourists,
though few come north anymore. They stop
at the casino in Ocean Shores.
I can't see, she tells me, I can't see.
She locks the healing shawl in a cupboard.

I go to the sea and watch the waves.
Sometimes eagles, sometimes whales.
And once, dear Norma, I found a stone
that looks like a half moon.

Eloping

Ayshe Dengtash

The time was approaching midnight. The plane he had boarded from Stanstead had probably already landed at North Cyprus's only airport—single-storeyed, the interior congested with pigeons desperate to escape the stifling summer heat. *He'll be here soon*, she thought to herself rummaging through the small cloth bag she'd found lying at the bottom of the kitchen cabinet earlier that day. She had packed a few t-shirts into it—he'd told her they'd be plenty for her to buy in London, more than she'd ever laid eyes on—along with a plaid skirt and a black tracksuit bottom, the only one that didn't bear stains of bleach or pomegranate juice or the heavy flow that paralyzed her for a few days every month. She had also dropped a few treats into her bag—three tubes of *Bonibons* and two packets of *Eti Cins*—certain she'd never again be able to taste the sweets she'd grown up with once she boarded the plane to London, to *his* family home, a few hours later.

This girl who sat on the edge of her bed, clutching the bag from which exuded the earthy smell of her mother's favorite food, *Molehiya*, was Fatima. She was fifteen years of age with long light-brown hair which curled in all the right places. Her almond-shaped eyes were the darkest brown and her lips were red and crusty from a constant bout of dehydration, which was nothing but her own fault. Close to midnight on the 17th of August 1987, her heart beat in her temples and her fingers twined and untwined her bag's strap. She had been waiting for this day since the summer of the previous year, thirteen months ago when she saw Hasan, aged twenty. This wasn't the first time she'd laid eyes on him of course. He'd visit once every year, only during the summers, a pasty boy who stood out amongst the other boys in the village who were by then ripened under the unforgiving Cyprus sun. They'd play together: hopscotch and hide-and-seek, which involved hiding in every corner of the entire village. The summer of 1986 was the first summer they hadn't, preferring instead to stand around grand

prickly pear trees, marveling at each other's beauty through the bloated thorny leaves.

Fatima pressed down on the rectangular button on her desk clock, and watched as a tiny green fluorescent light illuminated the numbers, the large clock hand pointing to the 10, while the small indicated the 11. The house was shrouded in an eerie silence and all she could hear were the noises of the outside: an owl calling out in a rhythmic hoot, and the rustling of the bushes as rats rushed back and forth, hiding from prey and preying themselves. She thought of the letter which had been given to her two days ago by Sumeyla, a woman in her thirties, overweight and unkempt, who everyone in the village assumed was slightly deranged. She spoke to herself sometimes or pulled out her eyebrows, replacing them with irregular clumps of orange henna. Yet Fatima confided in Sumeyla, who would listen and smile and nod when Fatima told her Hasan would be sending her a letter once a month and that she should bring it to her directly without showing it to anyone or opening it herself. The latest letter, which had arrived earlier that morning, wrote that he'd be coming for her on the 17th of August.

Fatima had spent the entirety of the day planning for that night. Her primary goal was to make sure her mother went to bed earlier than her usual 11 o'clock after watching two sets of soap operas whilst drinking cup after cup of Turkish coffee to keep herself awake. And since Fatima was the one who did most of the housework—washing the clothes, hanging them up and gathering them, shopping for the freshest fruit and veg at the market which came to the nearest town once a week, cooking the food, cleaning the dishes, ensuring her mother's clothes were ironed and of course that her coffee was always cooked to the perfect consistency, the perfect flavor—this was no hard task. Her mother had asked her about the whereabouts of her coffee all evening, and Fatima had claimed, quite rightfully so, that there was no gas left in the *tüp*. What she didn't tell her mother was she'd purposefully drained it over the course of the day, leaving the switch on, the hissing released from the *tüp* inaudible due to the countless tractors—piled high with fresh *tütün*—leaving the village and driving back. "I'll make sure we have a new one tomorrow," Fatima said to her

mother. She added that it was better for her mother to drink *adaçayı* anyway, that it was good for the pains she complained she had in her knees and ankles. She made her mother two cups, filled to the brim. She was glad to see her mother's eyes closing like a broken shutter, even before the first soap opera had finished. "Mum, come on, let's go to bed," she said, wrapping her forearm around her mother's before she had the chance to protest.

Some minutes later Fatima heard her mother's soft snore and the silly vibration of her lips as she breathed in and out. *Everything's going to be okay*, Fatima assured herself as she listened to her mother sleep. *Mum will forgive me a few years down the line. Wasn't that what happened to most of the other girls' parents in the village who cried for months on end, especially the mothers, after their daughters left their rooms in the dark of the night? The girls were immediately disowned, then immediately forgiven when they returned years later, a small baby cradled in their arms*, she thought to herself.

Music seeped into her room from the road just outside her window—bubbly and energetic—a popular Turkish tune which didn't match her mood. She wiped her sweaty palms against her tracksuit bottom and walked toward her window, pulling down a section of the shutters. *Was it Hasan?* In his letter he'd written that he was to arrive at the village's *kahve* at around midnight in a navy-blue car. The car outside was scarlet, and as much as the streetlight allowed, she could see that four people sat inside. Two in the front, two in the back. As the car spun around, the driver's face was illuminated under the streetlight and Fatima saw that it was Berkan, a boy in his twenties with the largest, most crooked nose she had ever seen on anyone. He had been secretly seeing Fadime, the girl living next door, and sometimes when Fatima sat up late at night rereading Hasan's letters, she would hear her close the kitchen door. This was followed by a rustling, as she waded through the mulberry bushes to reach the street where Berkan was waiting for her. *Was she also going to leave her parent's home that night? What a morning it would be*, thought Fatima. *Would my mother blame Fadime's mother for her own daughter's disappearance? It would be so like her*, thought Fatima. She'd blamed Hatice for her low grades at school and accused Mahan of guiding her daughter onto a "wrong" path when they'd both bleached their hair a light shade of brown with a bunch of chamomiles they had brewed for several hours.

When Fatima looked through the shutter again, the road was empty save from an owl which was pecking at something on the worn-out tarmac.

Fatima opened her bedroom door and made her way toward her mother's room. She pulled her mother's door ajar and glanced in. Her mother's head was buried beneath the pillow, something she did when she had a headache and wanted to squeeze the pain out. Her legs were sprawled across the bed, her feet hanging off its edges. She watched, hoping she moved. *Is she dead?* thought Fatima. *Had she perhaps sensed what I'm going to do? That her life would change with the awakening of the following day?* When she saw her mother's toes twiddle, Fatima pulled the door behind her, making sure it didn't shut completely, worried the noise would rouse her mother. Remembering the clock in the sitting room which her mother usually set to 4 a.m. for an early start to tend to the cows before the summer sun dispersed its scorching rays upon every section of the village, Fatima wondered into the sitting room to turn it off. Fatima contemplated what difference it would make if her mother woke at four or five or six to find her gone. She knew it would make no difference, that her mother would wail regardless, beating her thighs with her coarse hands, tugging at her dress, and slapping her face, desperate for her daughter to come back. *Falling in love is not a crime*, thought Fatima. *Mother did it too, leaving in the middle of the night and only returning two years later with me wrapped in a blanket, sheltered within her arms.*

It was 1972 when Menekse, Fatima's mother, fell in love with Lutfi, the *Muhtar's* son, who lived on the other side of the village just behind the mosque which separated the village into two. Menekse would lay down on her bed all night, not sleeping, but looking up at the ceiling thinking of her lover's face, the sharpness of his chin and his golden-brown shoulder-length hair. She would do this every night, patiently waiting for the sun to rise at 5 a.m. before anybody from the village had awoken. Then she would rush out, her feet bare to prevent any noise emanating from the only pair of shoes she owned. She'd climb her father's ladder to the roof and look beyond the tall minaret of the mosque where she'd see Lutfi standing up straight gazing toward her.

They'd wave at each other. Menekse couldn't see his face clearly, but she hoped that he was smiling as much as herself. After about half an hour, just before the older men of the village left their homes, mounting their donkeys to make their way to their fields situated on a steep hill visible from every point of the village, Menekse would climb down, slithering into her bed where she would sleep for an hour before her mother came in to wake up her, complaining that she was always sleeping when there was so much to do. One humid July night, she let herself out of the window and mounted the donkey waiting outside her home, Lutfi sitting high up, urging her to hurry. They welcomed Fatima nine months later.

It started raining. Fatima pressed down on the button of the clock again and saw that it was 23:40. Opening her sack and scouring through, making sure she had gotten the few things she needed, she hoped he'd hurry before her mother woke up. The rain pattered against the metal shutters and the wind whistled through the tiny gaps where the window frame met the stone wall. She sauntered to the window when she thought she heard the rhythmic drone of a car's engine and pulled open one of the shutters, laying eyes on a navy-blue car, its wheels dripping with a light-brown sludge. She draped her bag over her shoulder and gently pulled her bedroom door behind her. Tiptoeing along the hallway, she reached the front door, wrapped her palm around its cold metal handle, and opened it. She walked out into the quiet night, making her way toward the navy car in which Hasan awaited her. She glanced around at the jagged ancient walls of the *kahve* to her right and another to her left, each owned by members of rival families; the grandfather of the owner of the one on the right having eloped with the thirteen-year-old grandmother of the one on the left almost a century ago. The village legend told he'd abandoned her in the middle of field in which he'd tried to deflower her, only to notice that the deed had already been done. Fatima gazed up, realizing that two owls sat side by side on the electricity wires, unmoving and silent. *When will I ever see this place in which I've spent fifteen years of my life?* she asked herself. *When will I be able to help mother tend to the chickens and the vegetables again? When will I be able to dance on this road at*

weddings until the soles of my shoes are worn thin? When she reached the car, Fatima hesitated before she took a step in, contemplating whether she was doing the right thing or whether she'd regret it in a few days, as had been the case with a hundred other girls in the village who'd left and been treated like maids by their husband's mothers. Her mother had told her countless stories. *But love*, she thought to herself, *where will I find it again?*

She pulled open the door and stepped in.

"Fatima you took long," said Hasan. Fatima looked into his eyes, their whites a faded pink from fatigue.

She glided over to him till her arm touched his. His arm warm against her own. "I didn't," she said, smiling. "It must have seemed that way to you."

"Hello, *yenge*," said the driver whom Fatima had never seen before. He was a young guy, a little older than Hasan, with black hair combed meticulously backwards.

"Hello," said Fatima. The young guy didn't say anything more, but pressed down on the accelerator and off they went, the engine revving a little too loudly for Fatima, who stared at her home through the back window, its white exterior getting smaller and smaller, and eventually fading from view.

Hasan placed his own palm onto her hand, and Fatima could feel that his fingers were clammy, his hand shaking. "I want to get to know you," he said to her.

Fatima faced him and was about to tell him they already knew each other, going all the way back fifteen years when she was forty days old placed into an empty pillow sack, as tradition would have it, and rolled around first vertically and then horizontally to scare away the demons hovering over her eager to take her fresh life for themselves. Hasan had been five then, in Cyprus for the second summer of his life, a child who stood out amongst all the others around him due to his smooth milky-white skin which the temperamental England sun had failed to darken. But Fatima didn't tell him any of this, realizing that seeing each other summer after summer, whilst playing with the other children in the village, or sitting for dinner with the other villagers did not necessarily mean she knew him—or they knew each other—at all.

As they drove along the dark roads devoid of any streetlights, Fatima stared out of the window at the black expanses on either side which she knew were fields sowed with all sorts of seasonal vegetables and fruits. The plump bright-yellow melons sitting on the damp soil wafted a sweet aroma into the air, conjuring in Fatima a restless hunger. She sat back and allowed her thoughts to overtake her, visions prying on her mind, the first causing her to wrap her fingers firmly around the seatbelt. She imagined herself with a belly larger than life, sitting outside on the porch of a small white house, sweat seeping down either side of her face whilst she breathed heavily.

“Fatima?” murmured Hasan. “Are you okay?” Her placed his hands on hers, and Fatima involuntarily placed her own against her abdomen, sighing with relief as she noticed that her palm touched a flat stomach.

“I’m okay,” said Fatima, turning to face Hasan, his eyes shining under his bristly thick eyebrows. “I’m okay.”

“It’s just that you didn’t say anything.”

Fatima remembered what Hasan had asked her before the vision of a time that had not yet happened. “I want to get to know you, too,” she said.

“We have a lot of time to do that,” said Hasan.

“So, what’s your home like in England?” asked Fatima.

“It’s not a house,” said Hasan. “There’s no garden with fruit trees and vegetable patches as you have here.” He did not speak for a few seconds, and Fatima stared at his face intently, trying to see if this was indeed the boy she’d fallen in love with. She traced the outline of his face, his forehead glistening with sweat, his lips round and flaky.

“What’s it like, then?” asked Fatima. She turned her head away to look out of the window, glancing at the single-story houses shrouded in darkness, aligned one next to the other, small gardens separating each, endless fields behind them pregnant with food to eat and sell. “What do you eat there then?” she continued when Hasan did not answer.

“We go to big supermarkets,” said Hasan. “Like Suleymanos in the village, but much, much bigger. They sell fruits from all over the world, things you’ve never seen and foods you’ve never eaten before.”

“But is all that food they have there enough for everyone?” Fatima said. “Don’t people need to grow their own food?” She felt a jab at her ankle and bent down to itch it, feeling her skin rising where a mosquito had just bitten her. “Suleymanos sells only some things,” said Fatima. “But if we didn’t grow our own things, we’d starve.... You know that.”

“You will never starve there,” said Hasan. “There’s so much more than anyone can eat.” Fatima looked at him, trying to decipher whether he was telling her the truth. *Where was this place he was taking her to which had such abundance of food?* Fatima tried to imagine portly aubergines piled on top of one another, from the ground all the way up to the ceiling, but she couldn’t, they always came tumbling down.

“Is there a large stone sink outside where I can wash the clothes and clean the dishes?” she asked.

Hasan chuckled and wiped the sweat on his forehead with his sleeve.

“You’ll like it, Fatima. Don’t worry so much,” he said.

Don’t worry, thought Fatima. Six hours away from home, past god knows how many seas and countries, how can I not worry?

“But I want to know,” said Fatima. “I need to know where I’m going to wash the clothes because I haven’t brought enough with me. I need to know if I’ll be able to wash them as soon as I get there.”

“You won’t be washing them by hand,” said Hasan. Fatima watched him looking up at the shimmering stars. “There’s this machine which will wash them for you.”

The car roared and maneuvered around curved roads, plunging in and out of potholes, causing Fatima’s head to loll up and down.

“But what will I be doing all day?” asked Fatima. “If others are going to grow my food and if something else is going to wash my clothes....” She hesitated, and contemplated herself sitting down all day, her bottom getting larger and her arms and legs getting fleshier as had happened to Gonul, a bride who’d come to the village three years ago from a few villages to the south. Fatima remembered how everyone was astonished by her beauty, by her large round black eyes which were now barely visible under folds of flesh, and by her slender body which now bulged out in all the wrong places, causing the villagers to gossip about her choice of clothing. Fatima felt a sudden

fatigue settle over her, deeming her unable to move her arms, her hands bouncing up and down off the backseat as the car drove on.

“Fatosh?” Hasan asked. “What were you going to say?”

She gazed at the single streetlamp which lit up the road into which they had turned. Before them stood a tiny house, the garden at the front overgrown with tall scruffy weeds; beautiful white flowers fell from a stickly tree standing tall to the right. From inside came the shrill noise of a telephone ringing.

“Where are we?” she asked.

Hasan placed his hand over Fatima’s, and she withdrew it as she saw a hunchbacked woman exit the house, walking toward them. *Three villages cannot stop me if I want to run*, she said to herself. *I can run faster than Emine’s crazy donkey, Husnu. What’s happening?* she asked herself. *Will they leave me here with this strange lady?* She remembered what her uncle had told them a few months back, when they’d gathered at Sumeyla’s house forty days after her grandfather’s passing to mourn his soul. Women with short legs and large hips, women with crooked backs are the friends of the devil, he’d said. Women listened to him, nodding, infused, believing every word he said. The wise words of the village imam.

“What time is it? We need to go we’ll miss the plane,” Fatima said as the woman reached the car.

“There’s still time, don’t worry about it,” said Hasan.

The woman whose face was lit up by the streetlight ambled past the front of the car and stared in through the window on Fatima’s side, her head craning left and right like a confused pigeon, her eyes narrowed to mere slits. “Is this the girl?” she asked.

Fatima looked back at Hasan. She watched the gentle rise and fall of his chest.

“Hello,” said Hasan, looking over Fatima’s head at the woman standing outside the car, her skin thin and almost see-through. “We’re going,” he said. “Please help make this journey easy for us.”

“She needs to come out,” said the woman. The air was pervaded by a dense mist as rain spitted down from above. “Ask her to come out.”

“What is it?” said Fatima, grabbing Hasan’s hand.

“She’s going to pray for you,” said Hasan. “We’ll be cursed if she doesn’t. You need to go, or we won’t be able to leave. Every girl who leaves comes here,” he said.

Buyucu Kadriye, thought Fatima. *It’s her*. She was as ugly as every returning bride had described, her skin thick like plaster, embedded with dark lines which seemed to inhale her flesh. *What happened to her teeth?* thought Fatima. They were rotting and engraved with century-old plaque.

“Come on girl,” the woman said to Fatima with great urgency. “Get out. I can’t be getting wet just because you want to do god-knows-what with this boy.”

“It’s very simple,” said Hasan to Fatima, leaning over her and opening the door. “Just do as she says.”

Fatima stepped out and the women moved away, dashing toward the house. She turned around and motioned for Fatima to hurry. Fatima followed the woman along a brick path and around a bend which led into the front garden of the house that she had exited a few minutes prior. Hearing the squeak of the gate behind her Fatima glanced back hoping that Hasan was coming after her.

The inside of the woman’s house was unremarkable, a sharp yellow lightbulb hung from the center of the ceiling lighting up the room, revealing a set of dirty beige sofas. Embroidered mats were thrown clumsily over the television and the rickety side tables.

“You sit here,” said the woman, pointing at the sofa. “I need to get something from the kitchen. I’ll be back.”

Fatima did as she was told, seating herself on the edge of the armchair that creaked below her weight. Its metal frame pressed firmly against her bottom. She glanced around, observing the assortment of odd furniture filling the room. A large mahogany cupboard aligned one side of the room, its bottom shelf holding mismatched photo frames, some gold, some silver, each holding the image of a person resembling the older woman. Rain pelted against the windows, submerging the outside into a blur. The woman walked into the room, quietly carrying a tray on which sat a small clay jug. A

thin wisp of smoke rose from the jug before dispersing into invisibility, engulfing the room with a bitter burnt smell.

"I'm going to circle this thing over your head a few times," said the woman. "You just sit there. It won't take long."

"But--"

"It's to make sure the evil forces stay away from you. You do something to betray your parents and these evil forces are always there," she said, placing the tray onto the table besides Fatima. She then scurried around her, carrying the jug, encircling it around her head. Fatima felt the urge to cough as she inhaled the smoke which wrapped itself around her throat, but she kept it in. After a few minutes, she put the jug on the table and dawdled toward the cupboard, from which she picked up a yellowed plastic bottle filled halfway with water. Twisting the cap, she poured some into her palm and sprinkled it over the jug. The smoke petered out with a hiss, releasing a grey swirl that gradually dissipated. Beside the bottle the woman had placed down onto the table, Fatima glimpsed something sparkly in a glass ashtray, in which also lay cigarettes smoked down to the filter. She leaned forward, eyeing the thing that had captured her attention. It was a bracelet made of a pink thread with two silver shells attached to it.

"You'll be okay now," said the woman. "You're all safe. Go."

Fatima tried to read the woman's expression. *Have I upset her?* she asked herself. *Why that tone?*

"Come on, now, go," said the woman. A clatter came from inside one of the rooms down the corridor and Fatima wondered if they were indeed not alone. The woman sauntered toward the sound; her hand tucked into her waist. When she was out of sight, Fatima grabbed the bracelet and rushed out of the open door. The streetlight that illuminated the road was now out, cloaking the road into a deadly darkness where field merged into road. She saw the car, its silver *Sahin* symbol glistening as it met the moonlight.

"What happened?" asked Hasan, as Fatima let herself in.

"She did something with some smoke," said Fatima. "She told me we'll be okay now."

His eyes glided across her face questioningly, then he sighed and stroked her cheek. "Who can stop love?" he said. "Who would want to?"

The driver, too, sighed in his seat as he cracked his neck, twisting it one way then the other. "Shall we go now, *gençler?*" he said. "There's still quite a while to drive. We'll try and get you in through the security before people notice that she's missing."

He reversed the car, looking over Fatima's head out of the rear window. They turned left onto the main road, light returning almost instantaneously as the streetlights illuminated their path. Fatima glanced at the houses on either side of the road and wondered whether there were girls like herself sitting quietly on the other side of the shutters, peeking through waiting for boys to take them away to strange, unknown worlds.

They proceeded in silence and Fatima thought about this boy sitting beside her. She'd known him for a long time. *Why are we not talking? What is there to talk about?* she asked herself. *Was there really nothing to say?* She contemplated married couples she knew closely, *did they talk?* She remembered her own parents, always bickering over this and that: the way her mother had stitched his loose button too much to the left so it was always on the verge of bursting off again, how she never listened to him when he came home from the *kahve* eager to tell her about what he'd learnt from Sukru, the village gossip. She'd talk over him, arguing that what she had learnt from Kadriye, Sukru's wife, was of even more importance. Then, Fatima recalled them working side by side in the fields, planting courgettes, picking courgette flowers, digging up potatoes, as Fatima herself, five years old, sat under a tree watching them, a hot wind blowing across their faces to shake the brittle leaves of the olive trees surrounding them. She remembered how much she enjoyed watching her parents working with the soil, the whole world quiet as they toiled. She knew that had been peace.

Her heart grew cold as she realized that she had left her mother, in that house where her father had died, all by herself. She glanced at the rearview mirror at the driver's eyes, a severe expression creasing the surroundings of his eyes.

"How long left?" asked Fatima.

"Not long now," said the driver. "We'll be there in about twenty minutes."

Is it too late? asked Fatima to herself. *Is it too late to return home?*

About twenty minutes later, dazzling, yellow lights surrounded them as they neared a large, elongated building, brown with a navy sign that read ERCAN. Cars were parked in front of the building; to Fatima it seemed as if all the vehicles in the world had been dumped here.

Hasan sat forward and tapped the driver on the shoulder. “You don’t need to park the car in the lot,” he said. “Just leave us somewhere here, we’ll go.”

“Let me drive you around near the entrance at least,” said the driver.

Fatima gazed out of the window breathlessly at people carrying suitcases, loading them onto metal structures that they wheeled away into the building, disappearing from sight. She realized that there was no one like her mother around, with her long flowing flowery dresses and the embroidered flowery kerchiefs she laced over her head to keep her hair away from her face so she could toil on the land, scrub the clothes, and sift through the rice one grain at a time, removing small pebbles that had somehow made themselves into the cloth sacks of grains her mother bought from the wholesaler who visited the village once every two months. Women wore trousers here, the cloth tight against their thighs and accentuating their figures as she had seen on celebrities on TV, and their jackets were made of the shiniest material, with buttons on their cuffs that served no purpose.

The traffic had started to build up outside the airport, cars beeping and drivers waving goodbye to people they’d just dropped off. Eager to see what was on the other side of the doors, Fatima swung around to see Hasan leaning into the back of the car. He pulled out a navy suitcase, pushed the trunk shut, and wandered over to Fatima. Fatima thought about whether she should have brought more, clutching the sack closer to her body, but she’d wanted to leave something for her mother to grieve over, as all the other mothers did in the village, pressing their faces into their long-gone daughters’ clothes, inhaling the scent of those they’d given birth to, those who’d betrayed them.

“Are you ready?” he asked, extending a sheet of paper toward her, at the very top of which was written her name in navy ink, the

letters scrawny and nervous. “You need to show this to the attendant we’re going to see inside,” he continued. “Do you have your passport?”

Fatima nodded, dipping her hand into her bag and pulling it out.

“Hold onto it,” he said. He hesitated, then turned around to face the driver who was standing on the other side of the car.

“I’m going to go, cousin,” he said. “You need anything?”

“No, cousin, you go,” said Hasan. “Thank you for bringing us all this way. *Hakkini helal et.*”

The driver raised an uplifted thumb and bowed before entering his car. “Take care,” he said before driving off.

“What was I saying?” said Hasan when they were alone.

“About the sheet,” she said. She looked at where the car had been a few moments ago, traces of its tires embedded into the thin layer of mud gathered on the side of the shallow pavement.

“There’s a girl inside I know,” he said. “She knows about your age but she’s okay with it. She’s going to help us pass security.”

Fatima glared at the tire marks, unable to believe what she’d just done. How had she allowed the only connection between herself and her mother to drive off like that, leaving her here with this boy who had told her he loved her once last summer?

“But you need to be calm,” he said to her. He tapped her forearm. “Fatima? Did you hear me? You’re my fiancée and that’s all they need to know.”

A pair of tracksuit bottoms and six packets of Eti Cins, thought Fatima to herself, *that’s all I have.*

“Okay,” said Fatima, nodding.

Hasan grabbed her hand and they sauntered toward the sliding glass doors, his smooth hands warm against her coarse cold ones. She’d never felt such a hand before, with a palm so soft one would never know it could belong to a human being. It reminded her of the bright-orange skin of the oval-shaped loquats she picked every May from the tree in her back garden or the purple skin of the aubergines her mother charred before scooping out their flesh to mix with creamy yoghurt bestowed to them from the udders of a goat they owned, Fatima’s favorite, she’d named her Feride, meaning *unique*.

They went in, Fatima’s eyes fluttering under the bright lights. Sounds came from everywhere, culminating into a nonsensical chatter.

She glanced around at the sea of heads, and the assortment of suitcases, pink and navy blue, some decorated, some plain.

Hasan detached his hand from hers and plunged his hands into his pockets, tiptoeing and looking ahead, his head moving swiftly left and right.

“Our check-in is over there,” he said. He gripped her forearm and pulled her as Fatima looked at blurry faces, bodies releasing the ripe scent of sweat.

They joined a short queue, standing behind an old man who had dark brown freckles on his bald head. Fatima stood counting them.

“It’s us next,” said Hasan, as the man walked toward the counter, dragging along his suitcase. “Once we’re finished here, we’ll go in and eat something. I’m hungry,”

Fatima remained silent.

“Aren’t you hungry?” he asked.

Fatima knew it was dark outside, late night-early morning, a time when she should have still been in bed, wishing the rooster, who would be crying out his morning prayer, to calm down so she could continue sleeping for a little while longer, before her mother would come barging in, hissing down at her. There were always a thousand chores to do. *It’s not a time to be eating now*, thought Fatima to herself.

“I am a little,” she said to Hasan, not knowing why she said it. She wasn’t hungry, just tired. *But that’s what wives did*, she thought. *Saying yes when they meant no. Always agreeing. Always saying yes.*

“Next,” said the woman sitting behind the counter. She smiled when she saw them, her lips a bright red, a startling contrast with her pure-white teeth.

“Hasan. How are you?” she said.

“Can’t wait to get going,” he replied. “How’s your mother?”

The girl turned to Fatima, her smile growing.

“She’s fine,” said the girl. Fatima glanced at the plastic nametag hanging over her breast. On it was written *Rahme*. “You know what she’s like, always running around to please everyone, and now Fahriye’s given birth again. Another mouth to feed, another child to look after.”

“Must be tough,” said Hasan.

“Where are your passports?” asked the girl. Hasan took his own out of his pocket and grabbed Fatima’s from her grip.

The woman flicked them open and hovered her eyes over Fatima before doing the same with Hasan. An officer passed behind the counter then, bulky and armed, a ginger moustache sitting below his pockmarked nose. Hasan seized Fatima's hand which was dangling by her side and squeezed it, pulling her closer to himself. When the officer ambled away and out of sight he let go, placing his palm on the counter in front of them.

"You're all ready to go now," said Rahme, banging against the pages of their passports with a wooden block that left behind faded imprints of numbers and letters.

"Thank you so much, Rahme," said Hasan. He pursed his lips and forced a smile. "Really, truly, thank you."

"Don't worry so much about it," she said. "Just take care."

The woman put the passports back onto the counter and Hasan picked them up. "Bye," he said. She wished them goodbye, and Hasan intertwined his fingers with Fatima's as they walked further into the airport, past metal seats occupied by people who were either sleeping or staring idly ahead of them, their eyes heavy with sleep and their laps full of gorged backpacks.

"Which way do we go?" asked Fatima, pointing at the signs hanging high up on the walls. There were arrows pointing left, right and ahead.

"That way is arrivals," said Hasan. "We're leaving, so we're looking for departures." He stopped abruptly, and rotated on his hips, glaring around. "Look for the D," he said. Fatima wondered whether he was aware of her inability to read. She could identify letters, having learnt them at school in Year 1 and 2, the only years she'd attended. The teacher shouted at everything; at the students who sat at the back yawning with their mouths opened; at their inability to curve the swirl of the lowercase g. "Round and up" she would yell, "How many times do I have to repeat?" Fatima knew this wasn't the only reason she'd left, there were bigger things, bigger causes. She remembered those days vividly, sitting in the corner of the classroom on a yellowed cloth her mother had torn from a tattered bedsheet, wrapped to prevent the dark-red blood from running out and down her legs. She could still feel the knots pressing against her hips and the blood that seeped out little by little. She'd slightly lift her bottom every so often when her teacher swung around to write letters on the board, glimpsing at the

blue fabric of the seat, hoping that the cloth had done its job. She'd done this month after month, walking to school slowly, her thighs numb with pain. One day she felt the knot on her right hip unravel as she watched her friends play hopscotch wishing she could take part. She held it as soon as she felt it, but the puddle of blood flooded out and down her thighs, forming streaks that ran all the way to her shoes. She ran back home where her mother was pulling out potatoes from the red soil in their garden. "I'm not going back to school," she said to her mother, holding the cloth within her grip, her hands a red mess. *Did he know that I can't read?* she asked herself as Hasan clasped his fingers around the strap of her bag and tugged for her to hurry.

"They're calling for us," he said. They ran toward a police officer who had his arm plunged into a bag, a young girl nodding before him as he looked up down at her, his glasses hanging off the tip of his nose.

Fatima felt Hasan's fingertips pinching at the skin of her forearm.

"You wait," said the police officer, pointing at the ground near their feet. After a few seconds, he passed the bag to the young girl, unzipped, its contents on the verge of spilling. He summoned them to walk over.

"You got anything you shouldn't be bringing in your bag?" he asked.

"No," they said.

"What do you have in your bag?"

"Just come clothes," said Fatima. She contemplated telling him about the snacks but decided against it, unsure of whether the police officer would take them away if he knew.

"Give me your bag," he said.

Fatima dropped its strap from her shoulder and shifted her position, moving closer to Hasan.

"Fatima," whispered Hasan. "Give the officer your bag. It's okay. It's just a routine check."

She extended the bag and the police officer picked it up with the tip of his finger, as if its very existence was an offense.

"You've never been on a plane before?" he asked, squinting.

"She hasn't," said Hasan. "She's going to England for the first time. We got engaged last night."

“What district do you live in?” said the police officer. “You’re from Karpasia, I bet, they don’t go anywhere over there. Marrying each other. Brother sister, everything.” He plummeted his hand into the bag and scabbled about, the *Bonibons* clattering in their tubes, the *Eti Cin* packet crinkling.

“What’s this?” he said, pulling at the *Bonibons*. “You’re bringing these with you? You’ve got one bag and that’s what you choose to fill it with?”

Fatima thought about what to say, she knew exactly why she had brought them, but knew it was nonsensical, a packet of *Bonibons* that would go bad in a year.

“I can do with these myself right now,” he said. “I’m a bit jittery you know, from all the standing, the noise in here. It’s always so loud.” He chuckled and placed the tube into his trouser pocket. “Off you go, then,” he said, handing Fatima her bag.

She knew that there was no sense in it, that the police officer had done her a favor, relieving her from a remnant of home she’d have spent days holding within her palm, lamenting a life she’d already given up as soon as she’d stepped into the car that had driven her to the airport. *It’s better to forget*, she said to herself. *Remembering is too much pain.*

They walked over to the only two seats that were empty, settling between a rustic-looking man who seemed as if he’d just left the fields, his long nails brown, filled with fresh soil, his boots holding clumps of earth, and a young man with ears that sat on either side of his head as if they were not his own but mere attachments.

Fatima hugged her bag and listened to a man behind them excitedly talking with someone about oranges and lemons. She gazed outside at the sun, which had started to make itself visible behind the shallow mountains in the distance, spreading its rays upwards towards the heavens. She thought about what her mother would be doing, whether she was awake, glimpsing at the clock on the bedside table before deciding to sleep a little more until the sun’s rays penetrated through the curtains mercilessly, making it impossible to relax. *It’s almost that time of the morning*, thought Fatima to herself, *maybe one hour or two hours away before mother discovers I’ve gone, before she blames herself for having done a bad job bringing me up.* “You should have remarried

after Hulusi died,” the neighbors would say to her. “A child needs a father in the house, someone she fears.”

“It’s cold in England,” said Hasan, placing his hand on her thighs. Fatima winced, imagined her body moving further away, out of his grip, but when she looked down again his hand was still there, his fingers splayed like the spindly legs of a spider, caressing in rotating motions. “It’s so cold you can’t even imagine.”

“Colder than early morning at the farm during winter?” she said. “It can’t be colder than that. My ear lobes go numb when I’m at the farm. I get scared they’ll fall off.”

“Much colder,” he said. “But there’s clothes for it there.”

They sat in silence. Fatima played with the strap of her bag, twirling and untwirling it around her index finger.

“It’s Sunday today,” said Hasan. “Everyone will be around to visit you. They’re looking forward to it. Mum has been cooking for weeks.” He itched at his cheek. “Then we’ll have the engagement. Dad has already bought the ring. We were just waiting for you to come and then we’ll get it done.”

The man sitting beside Fatima lifted his right leg, propping it horizontally over his left, his shoe digging into her thigh. Fatima sat there staring ahead, looking down occasionally, trying to ignore the red mud that filled the dents under his shoes, some rock-solid, others threatening to crumble off.

A ring echoed through the airport, descending on them from above, a cacophony that startled them. Fatima sat up straight.

“This is an announcement to all who are boarding the two a.m. plane to London, Stanstead. Boarding will start in five minutes,” bellowed the voice of a woman.

“That’s us,” said Hasan. “You take these. They’ll ask for them when we reach the front of the line.” He gave her the ticket and her passport. “You give this one,” he said, tapping the ticket. “And sometimes they ask for this, too.”

A woman strolled by, a plastic badge attached to her blazer like the one on Rahme. She was wearing a pencil skirt that wrapped her curves, a bright-red silk scarf was tied around her neck, her hair tied neatly into a bun. She’d seen women like her on TV before, smiling women with pure-white teeth, wearing heels, sitting behind desks. She wondered where those women came from, why there was none where

she lived where women owned just two pairs of flat shoes, one for the field, one for when they travelled far—two villages down—at Eid twice a year to visit family. She thought about whether they were like herself when they were not dressed like this, when their faces were not concealed under a layer of paint that made them look glamorous. She stared at the woman's solemn expression, and noticed she was pulling a plastic box on wheels behind her.

“Come on, Fatima,” said Hasan. “We should go, too. The line's getting longer.”

He gripped her forearm and pulled her along. Fatima let him guide her to the end of an L-shaped queue which meandered around the seats. They moved little by little. Fatima glared down, making sure she didn't bump into the woman in front of her. Occasionally she lifted her head to look toward the glass door where people gave the attendants tickets and the attendants scrutinized them before handing them back. Out of the door they walked when the process was over.

1, 2, 3, 4, 5 ... 6 ... 7. Fatima counted the passengers ahead of her as they neared the doors.

When it was finally their turn, they were called over with an exhausted “Next.” *Give the ticket*, Fatima kept repeating in her mind as she walked up to the woman. She extended the ticket and the woman snatched it out of her grip, tore half of it and gave the other half back to her. Fatima stood waiting for her to ask for her passport. The woman took a step back, glanced at Fatima and said, “Walk, go on that way.”

Hasan pushed her from behind. “We need to go out now,” he whispered. “The plane's waiting for us.” She strolled toward the tinted glass doors and put her hands out, just in case they didn't open, ready to pull them apart, but they parted as if they'd been waiting to take her all along. The sun had partially risen, painting the sky into a silky pink. Pointing at her was the airplane's round snout, its wings outstretched on either side, suspended in midair, its body white, its tail a sharp red. It exuded a loud noise which caused her surroundings to recede, the mountains in the backdrop moved away, the sky rose, the sun a glowing sphere in the distance. She put her arm out to touch Hasan, but her arm was heavy in the wind that emanated from the hum of the plane. She craned her neck and saw he was right behind her, looking straight at her, a smile distorting his face, his eyes barely slits. *Were*

his eyes always this small? she asked herself. *Who is he? How strange it is,* she said to herself, *that I was there just a few hours ago, surrounded by familiar structures, on a familiar road, the same owls hooting, the same rats scuffling about amongst the mulberry trees, and here I am now, walking on concrete I've never walked on before.*

Suddenly a strong wind swept around her, blowing her hair across her face, submerging the world into darkness. When she pushed her hair away, she noticed that it wasn't the wind at all, but instead hot air bellowing from the plane's vast body. She wondered if it would be this hot inside the airplane, how she would sustain herself in that heat for the entire journey, fearful it would be like the August heat in the village, so hot one could almost hear the sizzling of flesh.

Hasan held her hand and coughed, leaning in closer to her. She felt his sour breathe warm against her cheek. "We need to go up these stairs," he said to her. Fatima stood at the foot of the stairs and looked up the metal stairs.

"There?" she asked, attempting to count them. Several times taller than the ones she climbed at home. They climbed up them one step at a time, Fatima timidly holding onto Hasan's hand on one side and the cold metal rail on the other, not daring to look down. The stairs creaked and bounced below her as more people joined the line. She counted till twenty-four before she heard a voice.

"Welcome on board." She looked up and saw it was the woman with the red scarf and the pencil skirt she'd seen minutes earlier standing in front of her, lifting her arm and pointing at the interior of the plane.

Fatima turned left and walked into what appeared to her a rather narrow hall, seats neatly arranged side by side, aligned back further than her eyes could see. It reminded her of the weddings she'd attended with her mother all summer, maybe one, most times two a week, in enclosed outside areas where concrete had been poured over areas that once contained thousand-year-old olive trees. A concrete floor on which the bride and groom's family would arrange rows of plastic garden chairs that had been hosed down with water to cleanse the grime of the previous summer.

"When do I stop?" asked Fatima, speaking over her shoulder.

“The numbers are up here,” said Hasan, tapping onto the plastic cabinets hanging high up on the walls of the plane. “We’ve still got a while to go,” he said. “37A. That’s all the way near the back.”

People opened the cabinets, cramming in their suitcases, others had already seated themselves, resting their heads against their seats, their eyes gently shut, as if they’d done this a thousand times before. A baby was crying somewhere behind them, and to their right, a woman was picking at some grapes in a plastic tub. They strolled further down, and Fatima could finally see the back of the plane where women stood wearing the same red scarfs, the same navy pencil skirts.

“We’re here,” said Hasan.

Fatima slithered in, her chest rubbing against the seat in front of her. She sat, and rose when she felt a hard object digging into her bottom. Gliding her hands under her, she pulled out two short straps.

“You’ve got to fasten those in front of you,” said Hasan, who was still standing. “Put the thin metal bit into the slot of the other.”

Fatima did as she was told, letting the metal clasp fall into her lap when she heard a satisfying click. She glared at the back of the seat in front of her, reading letters and trying to remember the sounds they made when they came together. She listened to a conversation that a man and woman were having behind her about the contents of their suitcases, each listing the abundance of fruit and the likes that they’d brought with them, oranges and lemons, *molehiya*, *pastelli*, *sucuk*, *tarhana*, halloumi. Fatima stopped listening halfway, remembering her own tiny sack which she had placed on the floor between her feet. She was saddened by her lost opportunity, the plump citrus fruits that could have been placed into her luggage too, *cakistes* packed into plastic tubs which were once filled with sweet ice creams. She recalled her mother kneeling on the ground, bent over her various cousins’ suitcases who were returning back to rich-old London, filling them with the remnants of a summer that was gradually dwindling.

“Are you ready for the journey?” said Hasan, placing his hand on her thigh. She winced and looked ahead at the same letters she had been unable to decipher. She nodded.

Before long a ring reverberated in the air, followed by the gruff voice of a man. “Ladies and gentlemen. Welcome on board. I’m Eser Baygin, your pilot. We will be flying very shortly. The weather in London is rainy and cold. Ten degrees.”

Fatima thought about whether the human body could grow accustomed to such a cold and what it would feel like. She remembered the coldest winter of a few years ago when the oranges hanging off the tree in their garden froze. Her mother had suggested they'd pick them before the ice melted away and transformed the fruits into a slushy pulp. They'd pulled them off their thin branches and placed them into the freezer for the summer, when they'd defrost them before squeezing them into the sweetest lickerish juice.

"Excuse me. That's my seat over there," said a voice to her left. Fatima gazed toward the voice; a tall man with a busy beard looked down at her. Fatima glimpsed to her right at the empty seat beside her. Hasan stood up and so did Fatima, allowing the man to pass by with his bulging backpack. They waited till the man had seated himself, dropping his bag onto the floor right in front of him, before they sat down too.

Fatima could smell that his breathe was tinged with wine, just like her father's, who would always go to the *kahve* to drink a few before he went home. The uniformed women walked by glaring into their laps. Another ring echoed in the air, the pilot's voice again: "Cabin crew ready for lift off."

The plane started moving, slowly at first before picking up speed, the outside a green and grey blur. Fatima rested her head against her seat and took a deep breathe, trying to ignore the vibration of the plane and the loud roar that drowned out any other sound. Within minutes the plane rose, and Fatima felt her back pressing firmly into her seat, her head being pushed back by an intangible force. The plane continued to vibrate and she lifted her arm eager to grab her armrest for support. Her hand settled on a warm hand, her palm ticked by a thin cluster of hairs, no doubt Hasan's. She wrapped her fingers around the hand, intertwining her own with his. The hand responded, enveloping her fingertips into its grip. A finger prodded her right shoulder, followed by a soft, "Fatima." She opened one eye and saw Hasan looking into her face and realized that the hand she had been caressing was not his, but belonged to the stranger she'd not even said a word to.

ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF TURKISH WORDS

Bonibon: A round chocolate candy with a colorful sugar coating sold in Turkey and Cyprus, much like Smarties.

Eti Cin: An Orange Jelly Biscuit; another Turkish candy.

Molehiya: A traditional Cypriot dish made with the dried leaves of the *Corchorus Olitorius* plant. The leaves are picked, dried, then cooked in a tomato sauce with onions, garlic, and either chicken or lamb pieces.

Tüp: A gas cylinder which in Cyprus is used to provide gas to stoves and heaters.

Tütün: Fresh tobacco

Adaçayı: An herbal tea made with sage.

Kahve: A coffeehouse

Muhtar: A senior member in the government; one in charge of a village in Cyprus. Every village has its own *muhtar*.

Yenge: Auntie, generally used to refer to a close male relative's wife.

Buyucu: A necromancer and psychic of sorts. In Cyprus, they are believed to be able to predict the future and inhibit impending catastrophes by chanting prayers and providing people with rituals to undertake.

Sahin: A brand of a Turkish car.

Gençler: A word used by someone older to refer to youngsters.

Hakkini helal et: A common saying in Turkish which is uttered by one who is going to do an arduous, risky job and wants the other's blessing.

Pasteli: A nut and sesame seed brittle popular in Cyprus, and commonly sold at summer fairs.

Sucuk: A sausage-shaped sweet made of condensed grape juice. Not to be confused with the Turkish *sucuk*, which is an herbed processed meat much like salami.

Tarhana: A base for a soup made with buckwheat, black sesame, and soured yoghurt. Dried on the roof in summer and stored away for the winter.

Cakistes: A traditional Cypriot olive, cracked, preserved in salty water, and marinated in olive oil, lemon juice, and coriander seeds.

Hide and Seek

Charisse J. Tubianosa

Please remember our kiss, a big fat kiss while we are huddled under the dining room table laden with *lumpia* fried chicken spaghetti *pancit* and barbecue, hidden by my Mama's favorite mantle for when guests come where we are waiting to be found by cousins who didn't want us to play hide-and-seek with them in the first place because they said: *You're too little*—we are six—but you took my hand and whispered: *Let's hide anyway*, as they started to count down. I protest, again, that nobody would ever come looking for us because we're not part of the game and you, so calm so confident, shrug and tell me: *It's alright the important thing is that we're still playing*, then you beam me a big happy smile I smile back and I look at the mole on the left side of your upper lip, that's when you kiss me; now I don't want to be found I just want to stay here with you where it feels safe, still, someone looks under the table and finds us but then we don't want to hide-and-seek anymore we go to play with my doll house to invent our own family instead.

We are eight when Mama says I can't play with you anymore when I press her for answers she says it's because your mother is not a good woman: *She does bad things with men for money*, what things she won't tell me but neighbors talk about the fancy jewelry, the expensive bags, the trail of cloying cologne your mother leaves behind, the parade of much older men coming by your house and how these relate to you or me isn't quite as clear until Mama tells me: *Kung ano ang puno, sya ang bunga*, which is something about knowing a fruit by its tree and how such laws of nature are too powerful, so powerful that I imagine your mother as a tree with all her bracelets and bags on her branches and all those old, *very* old, men struggling to mount her, I want to ask more but Mama looks like she's done explaining. I hide from you when you ring the doorbell I find I'm really quite good at hiding and the day comes when you finally stop trying which makes me cry which makes me angry at how quickly you let me go, I spy on you from the window to see what you're doing without me I listen to your laughter as you

play with the other kids in the street, then we are thirteen and I don't hear your voice anymore and I overhear Mama telling Papa that maybe your mother has finally done right by you has taken you to your grandmother, some other responsible adult who can care for you properly—or so she hopes—because my Mama fears your mother might have sold you to the perversities of some dirty old man and my father scoffs at that: *But she's only thirteen*, Mama counters with the case of that congressman who went to jail for soliciting sex from a minor (in his blubbing defense: *I thought she was eighteen!*) and Mama adds: *I wouldn't put anything past that woman*, she crosses herself which signals that the subject is closed.

We are twenty-three when news breaks out that an adult-movie actress about our age hiding behind a ridiculous stage name is accusing a trio of local comedians of drugging her of kidnapping of rape, the case drags on for months and overnight everyone is an expert tossing unsolicited ideas about: she had it coming she was hallucinating she just wants to be famous; but suddenly the charges are dropped and the tabloids say the matter has been settled out of court, the actress receives a huge sum of money and a condo unit way up on the twenty-fifth floor so she stops making movies and we no longer think about her and we laugh again at the antics of these three comedians, until one day she leaps from her balcony on an express journey to arrive at the poolside of the building that was designed so lovely with coconut trees and trellises and her blood splattering on the immaculate whiteness of the plastic deck chairs. I look out from the wide window of the hotel room overlooking streets office buildings shopping malls after my lover who is married who is also my boss has fallen asleep, I find myself speculating if that actress had been you and I see you sitting in that condo alone in the dark remembering the un-funny things those comedians did to you what people said about you, I wonder as you jumped if you had spared a thought for me for how things were so much simpler when we were under that dining table, I pore over news articles video footages with images of the dead actress checking every grainy photo for that telltale mole just above the lip

and I don't know if I am relieved or disappointed she doesn't carry your mole.

We are twenty-eight when the papers go crazy again about the chop-chopped body parts of a woman which had been found inside large garbage bags under the Guadalupe bridge a woman without identification without anyone to claim her, I let your name idle in my tongue to see how it would fit this poor broken-up woman wondering whether she was someone's wife someone's whore, was she someone's mother was there a child waiting for her to come home was she missed at all? But I'm also thinking if I should change jobs as my boss-lover explains about not being able to come over because there is a dinner with the in-laws but promises to take me on the business trip to Hong Kong—I don't really care but care enough to lie to my Mama about the people I see and some of the things I do—if only we can be six again be safe again, this time I find myself praying she's not you this quartered unnamed woman and though I haven't heard mass haven't prayed in quite a long time I cross myself.

Now we are thirty-four and I am sipping on a piña colada much too sweet on an island off-Palawan that's only accessible by chartered plane because my ex-boss-on-again-off-again-lover would like to make amends, I am thinking of you and in my thoughts we run away together to live in some other city some other country, somewhere where we are so regular that nobody double-takes to see two women kissing, where you're a teacher just like you told me you wanted to be and I am a celebrated but reclusive painter hiding from the limelight—instead of someone trudging day in and day out in a bank in a crowded joyless loveless city with too much heat traffic pollution—some weekends you let me paint you my deft brushstrokes translating your long brown-black hair on canvas, I always tell you: *Sit still for a moment! Please!* Stop twitching that lovely mouth so that I can place that mole perfectly but it's not possible because our Labrador our Pit Bull our Chihuahua all three come bouncing around demanding total attention wanting to play hide-and-seek. Or, I am a naturalist an explorer and you a photographer we travel endlessly from Borneo to Madagascar to Ecuador never staying in one place for too long

publishing articles and photographs in top magazines, I give lectures at universities at conferences and wink at you from across the room. We adopt a baby girl a baby boy or we just have a terrarium, we settle in a country where we can marry where we decide not to marry, whatever we do we laugh ridiculously way too much over many years—and we kiss we always kiss—then we are old and when you die it is a peaceful death while you sleep, I follow you a few weeks later because what point would there be to stay on without you and I too die easy knowing you have been safe with me.

We are forty and I am sitting in a café along L. P. Leviste Street in Makati near where I work where I am ignoring a phone call because I want to be alone because I don't want to be alone, I look up my breathing comes to a full stop because there you are—right there really there—two tables across from me sipping on a large cup long hair pulled back in a ponytail, I search I see the mole right above your lip, you wear glasses now you have on a plain white T-shirt tucked in faded blue jeans your face free of makeup so clean; you sense me you also look up and I'm not sure how much you see because the sun is behind me, I am uneasy of this sun that shines on the bracelets on my arm on the latest designer bag that sits smug on the extra chair beside me—would I remind you of someone else? That I look at you doesn't unnerve you in any way, still calm still confident, you return my look so I wait I hope for you to remember until you are distracted by a little girl who comes suddenly who wraps her small arms around you, I hazard a guess she is five or six this little girl looking so much like the one I hid with under the table looking like it was someone else's life a long time ago, but behind her is a man, a man who looks solid strong stable a man with his smile that warms his smile that protects who plants a soft kiss on your lips as the floor beneath me crumbles, then oh then you turn to look at me again you smile but it is a vague smile the kind given to some strangers the kind where the lips spread to a thin line and reluctantly turn up at the edges; finally and finally I look away I don't smile back—I don't give smiles to strangers.

The Epigrams Roam Free

Michael Brosnan

A line I read last night, waiting for dinner guests to arrive:
“What we understand and love understands and loves us also.”

This was on page 67 of Robert Walser’s strange and sad
and lonely novel, *The Walk*, which was published in 1957, when

I was 2½ and had enough language to beg my mother
for a small turtle, which died soon after I named it.

I read lines like Walser’s on occasion. I underline them.
Write them down. But never fully fathom them.

I feel like the terrier staring down the garden gnome,
thinking, “Friend or foe?”

Later in *The Walk*, the protagonist says brightly,
before his psychic collapse,

“How beautiful is beauty, how charming is charm!”
I read this after the dinner guests left

and the peepers in the neighboring swamp
had reached the peak of their pressing chorus.

I know now not what they mean,
but why, in the web of nights, they must keen.

Never

Amanda Woodard

Ruben's always really nice to me. He's like my dad or like a dad could be, I think. He treats me like I'm his daughter. He drives me around and lets me play CDs in his car: *Hey, Mickey* and *Will the Real Slim Shady Please Stand Up*. He laughs when I sing along to *Hot in Herre* on the radio.

"Do you even know what that means?" he asks me, his eyes shining. Passing car lights show me he's watching me and wanting to laugh, his dark hands lazy on the steering wheel.

"Yeah," I tell him because I do know sort of. They're getting naked. He's hot for sex. I probably know more than he thinks I do.

He half smiles and just drives. We're at Braum's again. He loves taking me to get ice cream, and I love going to get ice cream with him. I either get mint chocolate chip — my best friend's favorite — or milk 'n' cookies. I know that's boring, but it tastes good. I always eat the ice cream really fast, so it doesn't melt all over the car seat.

Usually, it's just me and Ruben. Sometimes, my best friend comes with me, and we sing *Hey, Mickey* really loud, and Ruben doesn't get mad at us.

One time, he said we could draw on him. We were in the sitting room together, and he was on the floor watching TV with his shirt off. He likes to have his shirt off when he's at home. I get it, I think. I like to sleep in my underwear—but I don't do that now that Mom and I are sleeping on Barbara's couch and loveseat. I guess they're Ruben's couches too since he's Barbara's boyfriend, but we tell people we're staying at Barbara's since that's Mom's friend.

Jessi slept over with me one time, and Ruben said we could draw on him, but he fell asleep, so we thought it'd be really funny to get nail polish and paint him too. It was pretty funny, but I guess Ruben didn't think so. Barbara told me in the morning he was mad about it because it wouldn't wash off, but Ruben never told me that.

Mom told me something weird today. She's a light sleeper because of her sleep apnea, so she wakes up at least halfway when she hears

something. She heard something in the living room with us, so she opened her eyes and saw Ruben sitting on the couch I sleep on, and he was looking at me, sleeping.

“What are you doing?” she said.

“I just wanted to tell her goodbye before I went to work,” he said.

And she went, “So, tell her.”

And he did apparently, but I don’t remember that. I’m not a light sleeper.

It’s summertime, so Ruben took me to work with him. He works at a gas station behind the counter. People don’t ask me why I’m there when they come in and see me sitting in a chair beside him. It’s just the two of us. He doesn’t work with anybody.

There’s no paper here, but there are envelopes. Ruben is really good at drawing on them. He’s like me: he never uses pencil. I like to use pen and make the mistakes part of the drawing. It’s easier to shade with pencil though, like my mom taught me. She’s an artist, but people only know that because I tell them. Well, except once she came to do pencil portraits of kids in my class in the second grade, and it felt really cool to have my mom be there, being an artist, but a couple of the kids got mad ‘cause their portraits didn’t look like them that much. Mommy rolled her eyes to me in the car when we left. “Well, they kept *moving*,” she said. “What did they expect?”

Ruben doesn’t draw kids. He doesn’t even try to draw things that he sees, like Mom tells me to do, to practice, but I guess I get that. The things around here aren’t all that interesting: sticky counter, cigarette cartons behind glass, oil on the concrete through the door. He draws scary clowns, but they look really cool. He shows me how to shade using pen. I show him the heart I draw, with a dagger stabbing through it and a ribbon around it that says something different every time I draw it. It could be one of his tattoos or maybe mine one day.

“That looks really good, Famanda.” He calls me that, and I don’t know why. He thinks it’s funny. It’s his nickname for me.

I've never really had anybody spend money on me before. Ruben takes me to the store to get some clothes. One of them is a striped, purple, sparkly shirt like one Jessi has, so now we can be twins. People already think we look alike; we both have dark, kind of wavy hair that goes to our shoulders, and we both wear glasses. She has green eyes though, and I'm bigger than her, wider. I wish I looked more like her.

He buys me some pants too, some bell bottoms. Mom says they're coming back in style. She liked them a lot when she was a teenager, back when her cousin Donna was alive. I don't really care about being "in style." A girl at school tried to show me that one time: how to be pretty, like Sandra Bullock on *Miss Congeniality*, except I liked her better at the beginning of the movie anyway.

We don't stop at Braum's on the way to Barbara's house. We go straight there.

"When we get home, Famanda" he tells me, "I want you to give me a fashion show." Fashion's fun when it's just pretend, so I tell him OK.

When we get there, it's just us. He has to go to the bathroom, he says. I'm sitting on the couch with the shopping bags next to me, crinkling when I move, and I realize I've never been alone at the house with him before, and I feel weird. Scared. But Ruben's never hurt me. *He wouldn't do something like Wes did, right? I'd know if it was going to happen again?*

A few days earlier, Ruben and me were sitting on the couch, watching *Jimmy Neutron*. Ruben loves that movie even more than I do, and we were wrestling. Mom and Barbara were probably outside on what Barbara calls "the stoop," since she's from New York, smoking their cigarettes.

Ruben teaches me how to wrestle in case a boy tries something one day. He doesn't know that I *hope* boys try something one day. I hope the boy I like will kiss me. We almost held hands once.

Ruben pushes me down on the couch and tickles me. I get free and tickle him back—that's how it usually goes. But the other day, he pushed me down into the couch, face down, and he got on my back, and he told me I needed to be careful, that boys better not get me in that position. He bounced on me once then let me up. It was quick, and he laughed a lot, so I knew he was just messing around.

We're alone now. Ruben is in the bathroom, and the bags are beside me. *Where will I change? What will Ruben say when he looks at me?*

The front door opens, and Barbara walks in. She brings in the smell of outside heat and cigarettes, and it's like when my mom surprises me and picks me up from school: the smell, that feeling.

"What are you doing here all by yourself?" she says.

"Ruben's in the bathroom," I say.

She looks at the shopping bags, and her little eyes squint and give her more wrinkles, but she doesn't say anything.

I'm in the car with Barbara and Mom. I'm having to put up my hand like a car visor to block the sun. My glasses magnify my eyes really big, so I'm scared that if I look at the sun just right, it'll do that anthill thing to my eyes. I wish I had sunglasses I could see through.

Mom's asking me about pictures she found at a car shop Ruben has a second job at—no, police found them there. *Why are police looking at his stuff?*

"They found some pictures of you," she says, and I know which ones she means. Ruben took me to the car shop once. It was just the two of us again, and he told me to take my glasses off. He wanted to take a picture of me without my glasses, so I could see how pretty I looked, except I already knew what I looked like. I had Jessi take a picture of me without my glasses on one time with her digital camera, and you could see my lazy eye. I forgot my glasses correct my lazy eye. I didn't want to take my glasses off in front of Ruben.

But he really wanted me to take them off; he wouldn't stop asking. So, I did it, and he took the picture, but I wrote on the back of it, on the white bar at the bottom, "He made me do it!" in case someone saw the picture and thought I was trying to be pretty.

"What does that mean?" Mom wants to know. "He made me do it!?"

I tell her; it's nothing bad. "Why?" I ask.

Mom looks at Barbara who doesn't say anything or even move her head. Her thick, red hair whips around a little. Her cigarette ash doesn't blow back at me this time because my window's rolled up. Neither of us can tell what she's thinking.

Mom turns her head toward me, in the middle seat, talking to me out of the corner of her eye. “A girl has accused him of abusing her,” she says. Some people say “molest,” but when Mom and I talk about what her boyfriend did to me, we always say “abuse.”

“But Ruben wouldn’t do that!” I say. I almost shout it.

“He never did anythin’ to you? You’d tell me?” Mom asks.

“Yeah, of course I would!”

“You know what to look for? What’s inappropriate touchin’?”

“Oh my god, Mom!” She doesn’t tell me not to say the Lord’s name in vain this time because Barbara curses a lot. I think she’s her best friend. “He never *touched* me.” It disgusts me to have to say that.

“Good,” Barbara says for the first time. “Good.”

It was some girl who went with him to work sometimes. I don’t know her name. She’s older than me, fourteen. She’s skinny and has straight blonde hair; that’s what Barbara tells me. She said she saw the tapes of Ruben at the gas station with her, and he never did anything to that girl.

“And if he was going to do something like that,” she says, “he’d do it to you. Look at you! You’re fucking built. Why would he want some flat-chested little kid?”

My boobs are “developing”—that’s what Mom says—and I don’t like having to wear a bra now, but I feel grown up when Barbara talks about me like that.

Barbara laughs in her raspy, high-pitched way. Her voice cracks at the edge of each *ha*, like a boy. “He never touched you,” she says, only half a question.

“Never,” I answer anyway.

We’re at court. I don’t remember ever coming this far with my mom’s boyfriend. I remember being little and having to tell a whole group of people what happened, and I remember that I kind of didn’t look at them when I was talking, but it wasn’t like on *Law & Order* with a judge and all that. Wes said he was guilty before we ever had to come to court.

I'm here with Barbara, and we're watching the case. Everything goes really slowly, and people say a lot of things that aren't true. We're sitting behind Ruben, and his hair is different, I think, or maybe I've just never seen it from behind.

The girl is on the witness stand. She's just like Barbara told me she'd be: skinny and blonde. I guess she's pretty. She talks slow, and I hear someone say she has a learning disability, but I don't know if I believe that. I can barely hear what she says, and I can't hold onto anything I hear. It's too many lies.

But in the car I'm thinking, *How did he meet her?* and *Why did he bring her with him to work? Where was I when that happened?*

Barbara says there will be more court dates, but I can't go again; I can't miss that much school. In the passenger seat, I read my book about teenage girls who become witches and try not to get carsick.

I learned, from what my grandma calls "crime shows," that people are innocent until proven guilty, but I guess that's not really true because Ruben has been in jail for a long time. He sends letters to Barbara and draws on the envelopes in pen. Scary clowns. Sometimes Barbara lets me have them.

Ruben's been in jail for months and months when Mom says she has something to tell me in the car. It's dark outside. I don't know where we're going; I'm usually just happy to be going somewhere.

I can see the outline of her head turn toward me when she says, "They found Ruben guilty." She sounds sorry, or maybe just sad.

I'm crying before I know it. It's all just coming out. I haven't seen him in a long time, and I didn't miss him every single day, but I did miss him. I do. He's the closest thing I've ever had to a dad, next to my uncle RJ, who doesn't even like to hug me now that I'm "developing."

"Honey, we gotta know," Mom says, looking at Barbara, who is talking this time, but I can't make it out. She's always talking so loudly: it's "fucking" this and "youse guys" that. I practiced not saying "y'all" anymore because of her. I want to be tough too. "Did he ever touch you?"

I'm crying really hard when I say it, so they can't understand me at first. "He *did!*!" they say at the same time, scared and angry.

"NO!" I sob. "HE DID-N'T!"

They're quiet in the car after that, and they just let me cry. I play with the necklace Ruben gave me to calm me down a little, to make me feel like he's here. It has a black, cloth string with a piece of coily glass on the end, and inside, it has this tiny piece of rice with my name written on it — my real name, not "Famanda" like he calls me. Like he used to.



Untitled (from the series Facing It) / Jack Bordnick



Untitled (from the series Facing It) / Jack Bordnick

A Brutal Business

Jeanne Wilkinson

I called him Henry. I'm not sure why, but Henry he was, the last of my Holsteins. Black and white, but mostly black, with a white star on his forehead. I'd sold the rest of the herd to a farmer in the next county. To be with you.

No, that's not quite true. I would've sold them anyway, because it was all too much.

Illnesses, injuries, weather, weeds, breakdowns, bills, sweat, stings, fly strips, fieldwork, calf deaths, cat deaths, and the price of milk going nowhere but down. When you came along, I went with you. Left it all behind except for Henry. My last calf. A boy. Most of the calves born in my barn had been boys. Can't keep a herd going with boys. Useless boys. Cows are girls. You know. Milk?

Not even worth putting on the cattle truck, those adorable little ones with their wobbly legs walking up that tragic plank to a non-future, at best a cattle yard, food and drugs scientifically formulated to make them grow too fast: a terrible stink, squashed side by side, shit to their knees, rotting hooves, no room to roam. No. Some of the local farmers would bonk them in the head, the boy-babies, toss them into the woods to become a frothy maggot-wave squirming on the forest floor, a creamy carpet for deer to sniff and walk away from.

A brutal business, farming. I kept Henry, my last.

I backed him into a corner and slipped a rubber band around his balls with the stretching tool: snap. Better than cutting. Maybe. It seemed better. The band cut off the circulation; his bullish self withered and died; he became a steer. Magic. Not about to smash through fences to get to the source of that delicious cow-lady smell wafting in the wind, not about to run fierce and fast and bellowing to humpetty hump hump, humpetty hump hump, hindquarters twitching, pounding, pumping. No, none of that. Instead those sweet and salty smells would drift right past his cold steer-nose, no more delicious than a diesel truck chugging down the road.

You and I picked each other up in the wind, across the room, down the road. We chased our sweet-and-salties smashed through fences fields forests humpetty hump hump ohmygod humpetty hump

hump, shedding old lives with our clothes, rising up brand-new beasts from fragrant steamy soil. We had no rubber bands squeezing our randy souls, snap.

Oh, we were wild. We were delicious.

Your place had irregular fences. Or none at all. A swamp—we didn't call it wetlands then—and a sometimes corn or hayfield leading up into the woods, woods, woods all around that bled out deer, small herds and families nibbling corn and dappling themselves back into the woods again waiting for cold-snap hunters to take their corn-filled bellies home on top of cars, heads hanging slack over back windows, glazed and deadly glares knifing into the car at men in blaze-orange who should have been wolves. Couldn't see a house anywhere from your windows. A long driveway that flooded. Jesus, that driveway, with me always stuck on one side or the other in the track-grooved muck where the stream passed over, or parked by the road where everyone knew my car. Knew my story. Knew my past. Knew my gone-now herd. But better the smalltown scandal than my car sunk in a swamp-black slick of slurried ruts that filled with tiny fleeting fish during hard rains, fish who slid swimmingly into bird gullets or baked into mud-fried fish sticks in the subsequent sun.

We brought Henry there, to your place. We put him in a shed but he got out. It wasn't much of a shed. He wandered the abandoned fields and we found his shadowy self not far from the deer, herded him home, gave him corn. We'd ring the Henry bell; he'd saunter down to get his treat and sleep in the shed, and yes, he did that every night. We didn't fence him in; we didn't tie him up. We took chances with Henry. He ran wild, he did.

We took chances with each other. We cut our arms and bled each other's blood when the midsummer moon shone full on our shining blade. We were mother, father, sister, brother, cradled infant at our breasts: closer than words on paper; closer than lovers. Summer nights were star-pricked, candle-shadowed, floating in music, floating in flesh. Summer days were wind-songed, wildflowered. Roaming with our book we named those tender blossoms one by one: scorning the invasive aliens; breathing pistils and petals; leaving them be.

We ran wild, we did. We were pistil, petal, stamen and sepal. We did not leave each other be.

We wondered when we would eat him: Henry. Because Henry was not a pet. Henry was meat. Yet he *was* a pet, and happy, happy as a lone steer could be. And sleek. Furry black back smooth as oiled onyx. Henry and his good life. Then it was fall, with that snap in the air that hit you in the morning, that little slap of things going brown, shutting down, closing up, sleeping, rotting, dying. Hunting time. Butchering time. We wouldn't do it ourselves. We'd call the locals. It would be them, not us who shot him in the head, sliced him down the center, cut him into four pieces, and left us his heart in a pail on our doorstep, which I would give to neighbors. All too real, that heart. And the tongue, too, long and pink. Jesus. Then they would haul the quartered carcass to the cutting place of saws and knives where beasts become chops and steaks and burgers, letting him hang for a while to age and mellow, eventually returning Henry to us wrapped in clean white waxy paper. We would freeze and thaw him out piecemeal; he would sizzle in our pan permeated with that sweet-earth nutty rounded full and melting flavor common to right-living domesticated flora and fauna not stressed or poisoned, pushed or prodded. He would come back to us delicious.

This is the bargain we've long made with our food animals: we feed them; they feed us. Who gets the best of that bargain? After years of farming, I don't know. But the least we can do for our meat is to give it a good life, was my thinking.

A brutal business, farming.

Then one day that fall, you had gone somewhere, probably to one of your jobs, the odd ones. It was one of those mist-rising season-turning days neither warm nor cold, where you could wear a jacket or not wear a jacket. I went outside to feel the still-warm sun and saw a strange thing, which was Henry lying on a pile of straw in front of the shed, rays of golden light striping through the fog onto his dark fur. Henry who was usually up and about and even gone by that time, leaving us to wonder once again if we should tie him up or fix the pen because would he really come back to us? *Really?* we would wonder as his dark form disappeared into the trees, scratching our heads, doing nothing. But here he was this sun-battered morning, our Henry, on his side,

legs sticking straight out so I walked up to him lying in that strange way and saw that he was stiff and still as a stone, and I saw that he was dead.

I stared down while fog drifted in, a thick swamp mist that covered us like a blanket and tucked him in up to his eyes, Henry's eyes that lay wide open to the sky above, filmy and blank under long beautiful lashes. And I was alone. Alone in that sky-blotting mist with Henry, who was dead. Alone, alone, alone. I sat on the grass, wet like tears had fallen, yet my eyes stayed dry. How did it happen? Did he eat something bad? Did he swallow a piece of metal lying about? How did he die? Why did he die? Why why why? Still as stones we were that day, Henry and I. And when you got home, still as stones we were that night, you and I, sitting at the kitchen table, smoke from our cigarettes the only thing moving in the world.

We chewed on Henry's death like cud. He was too big to bury. We performed no ceremony. We called the locals who take dead animals, fresh dead animals. I didn't ask what they were used for. Mink food? Did they pay us? Did we pay them? I don't remember. I only know that a truck came and took Henry away, unceremoniously. He did not come back to us delicious.

We were still wild, that fall, you and I. We ran fiery-footed in frosted grass, me crazy frantic to warm myself at the fount of your hot soul and bathe in it naked like temple water, you cooling with winter winds that whistled through the cracks in Henry's empty falling-down shed. You with a gun chasing after deer in Henry's old stomping grounds; me curling up on the kitchen floor drinking a whole goddamned beer in the morning first thing, life slipping slithering into a slurried mess, ruts in the driveway freezing into mountains and valleys, no birds no fish just deer flying wild and wounded, just me flying wild and wounded, trails of cold thin winter blood dripping from our love skinned and sliced into pieces ...

... heart in an old tin bucket that I left behind that winter day. But I took my tongue with me, I did.

Dandelion Wine

Alan P. Marks

Driving into town he felt like a stranger. He hadn't been back at all since he'd cleaned out the old house when his father died five years back and, if he thought about it, he hadn't been there all that much in the five years before that. All those little changes, the things that you hardly even notice if you see them while they're happening, were suddenly all piled up, one on top of the other. A new house here and there. Some that he remembered—or at least thought he remembered—not there anymore. He couldn't quite say what was new and what was missing. There was just this sense that the landscape had shifted on him somehow.

It was less like coming home—odd that he still thought of it as “home,” quotes and all—and more like going someplace you'd only read about. It seemed familiar but the details didn't quite fit with the picture you had in your head.

Worried that he might not make it in time, he'd ended up being too early, so he pulled over just down the street from the church and parked. Farther down, temporary *Funeral Parking Only* signs had been staked out along the side of the street. He couldn't actually read them from where he sat but that neat line of orange rectangles across the street from the church couldn't be anything else. Other than that, though, nothing said it was anything other than a normal Saturday morning. No hearse. No grieving family.

The idea had been to mix in with the crowd going in and sit in the back, then sneak out quietly at the end of the service. Not a great plan if you showed up almost an hour before everyone else.

From where he was parked, he could see all the way to the end of Main Street. Buggy's Market wasn't there anymore, but he'd known that already. Except in the back of his mind, Buggy's had always been there and that meant it would always be there, mean old Mrs. Wilson still behind the counter. But they'd knocked it down almost fifteen years ago, not long after Mrs. Wilson died. The way they told it, she'd been hollering at some kid she'd caught stealing and had dropped dead of a heart attack right there behind the register. Scared the hell out of

the kid who'd dropped whatever it was he'd been trying sneak out with and had run screaming out of store. That was how they told it, anyway.

There was a bank there now.

A little farther down the street was a Rite Aid. That was new since his father died. He couldn't quite see it—the building was just a bit too far back from the road—but the sign for it was visible and he didn't really need anything more than that. One Rite Aid was pretty much the same as the next. You could see it even if you couldn't actually see it.

Most of the rest of Main Street was still familiar, though. Some new paint. A new sign here and there. But when he closed his eyes, he found that the picture in his head had at least the same basic outline.

It surprised him a bit, just how glad he was of that.

In his mind's eye, he could keep going down past the Rite Aid and around the bend right after. Just beyond that there was a flashing yellow light—still the town's only traffic light—marking the turn onto Miller's Road. A left there and he could go a couple miles along and be at the old house.

Somebody else lived there now, though, and they were welcome to it so, in his mind, he didn't go any farther than the bridge.

She was sitting on the rock wall just on the other side of the bridge, whoever she was.

He could see her there from his side of the stream but, until he was most of the way across, all she was to him was a pair of legs.

Bare legs.

Bare swinging feet.

They shimmered like a mirage in the late morning heat.

He slowed a little crossing the bridge, taking his time. She might know he was there. Could probably hear him. But if he couldn't see her face, then she couldn't see his. Couldn't see him looking at her.

They were thin, those legs, on the bony side maybe, but long and tanned dark even this early in the summer. In his sixteen-year-old's imagination, the rest of her might have worn just as little as those legs. For a moment, at least, she was nothing but possibilities.

The reality wasn't as good as the fantasy, of course—it never would be—but it wasn't all bad either. She was leaning back, resting on her hands, so she revealed herself to him a piece at a time the closer he got. Faded jean shorts, cut off so high he wasn't sure how they still held together at the bottom, high enough to show a line of white skin above the tan line. Exposed belly, as brown as the legs, maybe more so, and even from a distance he could see it slick with sweat and with the cheap coconut suntan oil he could smell the closer he got. A faded flannel work shirt, too heavy for a day like this, but with the arms torn off at the shoulders, and tied up tight under her breasts. From the shape of that shirt, it didn't look like there was anything else underneath. Maybe that was just more sixteen-year-old's imagination. Maybe not.

He was suddenly aware of the sweat dripping down the middle of his back.

She nodded to him and he leaned up against the wall next to her, saying hello as he did. He knew her a little, knew who she was, anyways—it'd be almost impossible not to in a town so small— though he'd never talked to her before. She'd be a senior in the fall, a year ahead of him, and she ran with a different crowd.

Her house was on the far other side of town but it turned out she had pretty much the same problem he did, the same reason for being outside on a day as unbearable as this one instead of inside where it might still be hot but would at least be out of the sun. She was hiding out from her mother instead of her father the way he was, but both their parents seemed to share the opinion that hanging around doing nothing wasn't the best way for a kid to spend the summer. It was dangerous to be too much in their line of sight unless you wanted something terrible to happen, like being made to get a job, or worse, being put to work unpaid around the house if there weren't any real jobs to be found. That she was all the way over on his side of town just meant that she had felt the need to get the heck outta Dodge earlier in the day than he had.

As if his showing up was what she'd been waiting for, she slid off her perch, into an old pair of sneakers, and started walking back towards town. There was something she needed to get, she said. She didn't wait for him but didn't seem to be in much of a hurry, either. It looked as if it was up to him whether he tagged along or not. He'd been headed that direction

anyway, so he fell in beside her and, when she didn't look his way, he figured that she'd been pretty sure he would.

They didn't talk much while they walked. A little bit about their unfair treatment at the hands of their respective parents covered most of what seemed important, and it was too hot for much else. It was just over a mile back into town and it took almost half an hour to cover the distance. There was no reason to hurry, even if they wanted to.

Besides, killing the day was kind of the whole point.

They stopped at a rundown little store just at the end of Main Street. Buggy's, for some reason he never knew. He'd never heard of anyone called that and it had been old Mrs. Wilson who'd run the place as long as he could remember. Everyone who knew her thought that Bitchy's might have been a better name for the place.

Just before they went inside, she fished a couple of sweaty bills out her pocket (the struggle to do so making him aware all over again just how small those shorts were) and stuffed them into his hand, asking him to grab her a pack of cigarettes. It didn't matter what brand. Whatever was cheapest. Generics. Whatever. Before he could ask her why she couldn't get her own smokes, she disappeared into the back of the store leaving him to face Mrs. Wilson.

Either that or bail.

Did his father know he'd started smoking? Didn't he know that it was a filthy habit? Was he even old enough to buy cigarettes? No, Mrs. Wilson, he didn't. Yes, Mrs. Wilson, it was a filthy habit. Yes, Mrs. Wilson, sixteen and a half.

And then she took his money just like she was always going to. As she reached into the case behind the register, he caught a glimpse out of the corner of his eye of blonde hair and tanned skin heading out the door.

No, not that one Mrs. Wilson, drawing her attention to him as her head started to swing towards the door.

But you said . . .

Oh, you're right, Mrs. Wilson. Sorry. My mistake.

Outside again he couldn't find her until he went around behind the store out of sight from the street. Yes, Mrs. Wilson, no Mrs. Wilson, she mocked, but she was smiling and laughing and holding out one of the four bottles of Narragansett she'd lifted from the cooler in the back of the store, the top already popped. So, he didn't take it too personally.

Careful not to let the already sweating bottle slip out of his hand, he traded the smokes for it. He could see hers was already half empty but mostly he was wondering how she'd gotten them open and thinking there definitely wasn't any bottle opener hiding in those shorts.

She took the cigarettes from him but then, laughing still, flipped the pack into the dumpster beside her. Didn't he know that smoking was filthy habit, she said, and this time her impersonation was so dead on that he laughed along with her, taking a drink as he did.

It was piss, but at least it was icy piss and he finished half of his own bottle in one long swallow. Why, he wanted to know, hadn't she grabbed something good? She wasn't paying anyway, so why go for the cheap shit?

If he didn't like it, she smiled, he could always give it back, but he tipped the bottle back out of her reach and finished the rest. She did the same, and then both empties followed the pack of cigarettes.

They wandered aimlessly through town, each cradling one of the leftover bottles in a way that, as long as someone wasn't looking too closely, it could just as easily have been root beer. She wanted to save them for later. His had left a soapy taste in his mouth and he thought he'd probably let her have them both if she wanted.

The drink had loosened them up a bit, or maybe it was just that it had cooled them off, at least for a little while. Or maybe they were just easier with each other after their shared bit of larceny even if he hadn't known that was what it was at the time. They talked more now than they had before.

Nothing that really mattered much. He'd just gotten his license, for all the good it did him since he never got to take the truck. She might be spending some of the summer at her cousin's in the southern part of the state. He really hoped Mrs. Wilson didn't tell his father that he'd been buying

cigarettes. Eventually they'd talked their way back out of town, by accident or design heading in the direction of her house a few miles away.

Every so often, she'd sneeze, a silly, squeaky little thing that hardly sounded real, but that made her whole body shake when she did. Allergies, she said. Pollen that he'd never have known was there if she hadn't told him.

The sun was at their backs, just starting down in the afternoon sky, and it burned the back of his neck in a way that didn't bother too much then but that he'd regret later on. It seemed even hotter now than before, if that was possible, and soon enough their talk dried back up.

His heart did a little jump when she took his hand, her fingers sliding in between his, but he tried not to let it show. Hers was quite a bit smaller, and damp, though not in a bad way. Warm in a way he didn't mind. He was hot and sticky and uncomfortable everywhere else, but this was nice.

A mile or so out from town, but still a ways from where she lived, they turned off down a small side road. The trees pulled up closer to the broken pavement down that way and, if the air was even more still because of it, at least there was shade.

If they kept on that way long enough—too far to walk even on a cool day—it would eventually take them to the next town over. Not that they would want to even if they could. If their town was small, that one was little more than a wide spot in the road, something most people would barely notice driving through on their way to someplace else. But it was a quiet place to walk if you didn't have anywhere in particular you needed to get to. There were no houses along that stretch, no cars coming either way to drive them out from the middle of the road, each of them swinging a now warm (and probably undrinkable) beer in one hand. The fingers of the others still laced together.

He wasn't sure if it meant anything or not. Probably not. But he didn't let go and neither did she.

At the bottom of one long hill he wondered aloud if maybe they ought to turn back. It was stifling, even in the shade of the trees, and he could see that those pulled back from the sides of the road towards the top of the hill and they'd be back out in the sun. Since they weren't really going anywhere, the hill didn't seem worth the effort. She didn't answer but just kept walking.

It was either let go of her hand or keep up, so he didn't argue the point.

The trees didn't just pull back a little near the top, he discovered. Instead, they disappeared completely and there were wide rolling fields on either side of the road. Overgrown with dandelions, they were more yellow than green and almost too bright to look at after having been so long in the shade.

As if on cue, she sneezed again, and even he could see the pollen floating in the sunlight now, could see it caked in yellow streaks in the dirt along the edge of the road where it had been washed the last time it rained. His own nose itched, but maybe more from the idea of it than anything.

Tugging at his hand, she drew him off the side of the road to the right. Two small trails like old tire tracks—which was probably what they were—just as overgrown as the rest but more green than yellow, wound across the field tracing a lazy arc towards the treeline off in the distance, disappearing behind a rise part of the way there. They followed along that track, winding as it did, keeping in between the two trails of green as if it were the obvious thing to do.

When they were out of sight of the road, she finally pried her fingers out of from his and sank down onto the ground into the bed of yellow, closing her eyes against the sun, the almost forgotten beer rolling away into the grass. His hand missed the feel of hers but seeing her stretched out in the sunlight made up for it, made him think of first seeing her next to the bridge.

She cocked one eye open, catching him staring. Embarrassed, but not sure he should be, he dropped down beside her. The ground felt cool underneath him, even more so in contrast with the sun beating down, but the grass scratched against the sunburned back of his neck in a way that made it hard for him to relax. When her hand slipped back into his, he stopped worrying about the grass or his sunburn, but it didn't do much to relax him. If anything, her hand was warmer than before. Or maybe that was just his imagination.

It wasn't his imagination when she squeezed his hand, though. He squeezed hers back.

She sighed and he could almost hear her shaking her head. While he was still trying to figure out if there had been some sort of signal he hadn't picked up on, she was suddenly leaning over him, her long hair hanging down in his face, her mouth pressed against his. She tasted faintly of Narragansett

and something else he couldn't quite tell, but that wasn't unpleasant. The scent of coconut, faint and in the background all afternoon, now strong in his face.

All of a sudden, his shorts felt uncomfortably tight, but he tried to stay focused on the taste of her and the smell of her, and not on how much he wanted to reach down and adjust himself. He didn't want to look like he was reading more into things than she might mean. Didn't want to look like a dumb kid.

But then her leg swung over him and the tightness increased, painful now but also not as she pressed down on him, her lips never quite leaving his the whole time and that taste mixed in with the staleness of cheap beer growing stronger as he ran his tongue over the salt of her sweat. Afterwards he could never be sure how long they stayed like that, her face against his—the pleasure/pain of her on top of him—before she reached down to his waistband, shoving it down just far enough.

Somehow, she'd slid out of those shorts without him ever realizing. Maybe before she'd kissed him. Maybe during. He could feel her, warm and soft as she moved against him. And then a sudden shiver as she reached down to guide him into her. The same hand that had held his. The same feel of skin on skin. The same, but not the same. Not even close.

Her lips finally left his as she moved over him, her hair tenting his face, playing back and forth over it, making him keep his eyes closed even though she shaded him from the sun.

And the heat of her breath.

And the salt of sweat as it dripped off her face.

He reached up underneath her, fumbling at the knot of her shirt, wanting to find out if he was right about what wasn't underneath it, and she pushed herself up, sitting back on him, her weight pressing down wonderfully as she undid it herself showing him that he had been.

She stayed that way, her own eyes closed, hardly moving, the whiteness of her breasts stark against the brown of her shoulders, her neck, her stomach.

And then she sneezed.

One of those silly little sneezes that shook her whole body and she tightened around him and suddenly he was reaching down and grabbing her hips, pulling her harder to him and she was grabbing his shoulders and doing the same.

And then she was laughing in his ear and rolling breathlessly off him to lie again on the grass beside him.

When he'd finally caught his own breath and looked over at her, he was disappointed to discover that she'd already pulled her shorts back on again, just as quickly and as mysteriously as she had taken them off.

Her shirt still lay open, though, and after fixing his own shorts he propped himself on one elbow and let his eyes wander over her. He'd never forget how she looked lying there like that, watching him as he watched her, smiling as she did.

But he'd always wish he'd gotten a look before she'd put those shorts back on.

They sat in the shade of a half-fallen tree and drank the last two beers. She had tied her shirt back the way it had been before, only now there was a dandelion tucked down into the v of it. His eyes kept being drawn back to it, which was probably why she had done it.

The beer was warm, but it was wet and it didn't seem to taste so bad as it had before. It wasn't exactly fine wine, maybe, but maybe it wasn't piss after all.

When they got back to the main road, she turned one way towards home, and he turned the other. He'd hoped she might slip her hand back into his while they had walked, but she never did.

He did end up getting a job that summer, one that actually paid, and he found out later that she had ended up at her cousin's place down south. By the time school started in the fall and he saw her again, she had a boyfriend, another senior. They stayed together all that year, though it didn't last much past graduation.

She was a year ahead of him and they hung with different crowds.

Every once in a while, though, when they were passing in the hallway, she would brush up against him, giving a funny little sneeze, a hint of a smile on her face as she did.

They'd started showing up without his realizing it.

The hearse had pulled up out front and a lot of the spaces right across the street from the church were filled. He hadn't seen the casket go in, though. He was pretty sure he would have noticed that at least. It must have been inside already, in place long before the family got there.

Dark suits and dresses. A few sunglasses, even though it was cloudy. Your basic funeral uniform. But not a lot of familiar faces. A couple that he thought he might recognize but not enough to put names to. Not after so many years.

The husband he'd definitely never seen before, and he hadn't recognized the name in her obituary. He thought he'd heard that she'd married someone from away, so that made sense. He looked like a decent enough guy, at least from a distance. For whatever that was worth.

Seemed older than she had been.

He had his arms around the shoulders of two young girls, maybe nine and eleven. Maybe a little older. Their daughters.

Her daughters.

The younger of the two was already crying and the older one didn't look like she was far behind. The obituary had said she had "died suddenly," code that could mean anything from an unexpected heart attack to a car accident to swallowing a bottle of pills. Whatever it was, they had the shellshocked look of people who hadn't seen it coming.

They looked just like her. Even from a distance he could see it in their faces. Could see her face. This had been a mistake.

Starting the car, he pulled away from the curb and drove slowly past the gathering mourners and on up Main Street. These people were strangers to him, even the ones he might have known once upon a time.

She was a stranger. A dream he'd had a long time ago.

The funeral was for someone he'd never met.

Buggy's might not be there anymore, but he wasn't the least surprised to find that they carried Narragansett at the Rite Aid, even if he had to settle for cans. By the time he headed back the way he had come, a

six pack on the seat beside him, the street in front of the church was empty. The mourners had all moved inside.

He kept his eyes on the road in front of him as he drove past.

He shut the car off but left the keys in the ignition when he got out, bringing the beer with him. He wouldn't be there long.

There was that same 'there but not there' feeling that he'd had in town, everything only half-remembered. The basic details were there, but not quite the way they were supposed to be.

It should be sunny and hot, not cloudy. He shouldn't have to keep his suit jacket on to stay comfortable in the wind. And even if his eyes could almost see those long-gone tire tracks winding through the field, there were no dandelions. The season wasn't right for it. The field was all tall grass, brown instead of green, and the only yellow was in his memory.

The beer was the same, though. Still tasted like piss.

But no, that was wrong, too. It was too cold. That had been behind Buggy's, not up here. He should have grabbed some from off the shelf instead of out of the cooler, but he knew it wouldn't really have made a difference.

It hadn't been being warm that had made it taste good.

He finished it anyway, pitching the empty into the ditch when he was done and leaving the other five sitting on the edge of the road. He hoped maybe some high school kid would come along and find them. You had to be a certain age to appreciate that stuff.

Then he climbed back in the car and turned around towards home. This place wasn't that. Not home. Not anymore. Maybe it never had been. At least not the place he had in his mind.

That place might never have existed at all.

Stay Where I Can See You

Jessica Ripka

There's a fifth-grade class doing presentations on their family trees in the Greencastle Elementary School auxiliary room. There are sneaker stains on the peach linoleum floor and a heavy smell of chilled milk gone sour. And there's a girl with pink aviator frames and Sunday School skirts speaking into a microphone while wearing her best lace blouse. The girl is ten and talks about how her mother loves blue flowers and Danny Kaye musicals but is allergic to cats. How her father gets cream vanilla candles every Christmas and wears a bright orange Hawaiian shirt from their favorite thrift store. How she has an older brother and sister both with very straight hair and every night they all sing a song called "Circle of Prayer" in pale cotton pajamas to ask Jesus to help them get to heaven. How they also sing as a family on stage at church every week and the father wears a tie with a white feather on it but changes right back into his orange shirt the moment they're all off stage. How every time he's in that shirt, everyone says they could see him even with their eyes closed or from a hundred miles away.

A hundred miles is a very great distance – the girl knows this now that she is no longer in fifth grade. Now she is forty and living 2,634 miles away from every member of her family as well as that Greencastle Elementary School auxiliary room. Now the mother sings in the audience of a megachurch surrounded by strangers and the sister homeschools her children with a house full of guns. Now the brother lives in a mental hospital with a locked metal cabinet full of bagged pills. Now the girl wouldn't set a single foot into heaven even if she believed in it and the father lives in a seedy motel in Alabama with insulin shots and cheap sneakers; a cell phone without service. Sometimes the girl closes her eyes and tries to picture the curves of her father's clean-shaven face or the laugh in his voice. Sometimes all she can see is the back of that bright orange shirt walking further and further away. Sometimes she still hears him singing.

American Silhouette

Garrett Candrea

It's a slip of paper about the size of his finger and it perhaps saves his life. It comes to him in a complimentary fortune cookie tossed in among a #7 combo platter and a can of cola and he's sitting in his cubicle reading it, somewhere near nine p.m., the fluorescents dimmed and a vacuum going in a corner of the office. The floor is otherwise empty. Perhaps someone from Sys Ops or some other backend team but he hasn't seen him or her or them. The AC has been turned off and the day's stresses are seeping out of him in a faint and sour reek and it's just three words printed on the fortune slip. He reads them over and again. He thinks maybe he's missed something. A janitor wanders over and flashes a perfunctory smile while music blares away in her earbuds all handclaps and antic wailing and without a word he rolls away from his desk so she can access the small waste bin beneath. She upends it, rattling out candy wrappers and chip bags, crumpled soda cans, food scraps, cryptic notes, the wadded dates of days gone by and their useless bits of trivia, on this day in history, all falling away into a large trash bin on wheels while he sits there staring at the slip between his thumb and forefinger.

It reads:

Don't stop now.

It's seventeen months ago:

Here he sees the silhouette of life. It is grainy and striate and there is a clear form to it that he can recognize, such a little thing huddled in a cavity, the image rendered from soundwaves.

The doctor says, I'll give you two some privacy.

It is the profile of life. Perhaps this sounds better. A fetus framed within a shape that makes him think of the symbol that means Wi-Fi, only upended. Perhaps the symbol for Wi-Fi was modeled after this, meaning connectivity, a thing connected. He can see the cord. But no, he can't. Or he thinks he does, the thing that tethers it. That is not a penis. But it might be. Only there's no way.

This is the shape of life, what he is seeing there on the sonogram screen, the outline of it. It makes him wonder how such a thing is possible, it makes him marvel at the science of it. It makes him wonder how he could be capable of such a thing. Because he is just himself. He sits in a template cubicle for ten hours a day breathing stale office air while he types out some simple code and stares numbly at a screen, keyboard patinated with fingergunk and a stack of business cards in a drawer somewhere with his name printed on them along with the words *Senior Data Analyst* but what he really is is a cliché.

Do you see it? he says, and points it out to her with one hand on her shoulder in this room that smells of plastic and disinfectants and the fluorescents in the tegular ceiling are humming a cold flat light. He's hunched down so that their faces are side by side, nearly touching, smiling, and he tells her, whispers, That's ours.

He will see it soon. He sees it every time, twice a day. He makes sure to find a window seat facing the Hudson River so he won't miss it. These are the palindrome times, from Cold Spring to Grand Central and back, the syncopated clunk of the wheeltrucks that pace the commute and the onboard air whirring numbly. Five days a week. Sometimes more, those crunch times before some deliverable or new build is to be shipped and he's sitting in the stifling must of his cubicle on a Saturday sweating in gym shorts and a plain tee because the AC isn't running.

He will see it today for the second time, it is coming. The canted rust-scabbed sign that flicks past in the window tells him to perk up, get ready, only he's limp weight in his seat with his forehead propped against the fingersmudged glass and his worn satchel in his lap, the work phone buzzing dully in a side compartment to inform him of afterhours tasks as monotonous as this commute, somewhere between Cold Spring and Garrison.

And here, there it is, way out to the south, the river meandering off into the folds of the flanking mountains and there's something in the image that seems not to belong. It's a steel structure sprouting out from a point where the mountains east and west of the Hudson seem by some trick of perception to fuse together, this is what he's looking at, what he makes sure never to miss, and maybe jutting

is a better word. The east tower of the Bear Mountain Bridge that erupts from the landscape.

It's ten months ago:

He wakes at some anonymous hour and again finds himself alone. The empty spot beside him and the hint of downstairs light in the hall, he checks for the first and then the other. He knows the first guarantees the other. A cold wind is grinding against the window and the walls shift and settle and he can hear her down there through all of this, stirring numbly about in the kitchen with a cup of tea gone lukewarm in her hand while the other holds the nothing in her stomach, he's seen it too many times to doubt this very image roused up from the groggy ache in his mind.

Tonight he won't go down there, won't descend the creaking steps to stand in the kitchen entranceway and offer stock words of solace to the woman pacing in a nightgown, the dark hair frayed and matted and the face so haggard in the sallow light and those dark eyes, pupil and iris one black hole holding no reflection or else this is what such deep sense of guilt looks like, standing now remote among the shadows cast on the floor and a wall clock tracking the silence all tick and tick and tick.

Instead he reaches down beneath the covers, closes his eyes, thinking of the cam girl he'd earlier that day chatted with, flirted with, spent a portion of his paycheck to wad her up among her sheets from half a world away while his wife sat in her therapist's office in the town over. Because there is a threshold. There are only so many times you can say a thing before even the thought of it raises a taste like bile to the back of your throat.

You couldn't have done anything. You didn't do anything wrong.

It's not your fault.

Or you say it so often you begin to wonder who are you truly trying to convince here?

Because didn't you fucking tell her?

He raises his hand over the water, a father showing something to his son. Think of a father sitting beside his son on the rocky bank of the Hudson with the rail tracks behind them and the sleepy country homes obscured by trees and he is pointing something out to his boy. Can you see it? he says. I want you to see it.

The green mountains across the way, the escarpment there and the sheerness of it with its parapet of ancient trees you can't imagine anything on the other side.

It is yours.

This is what he tells the boy, what he wants to tell the boy, staring off over the water with a mossy smell wafting up from the shallows and a commuter train clattering by at their backs. He points up now, over there, in the east. He likes to see the moon like this, already high among the clouds with the sun not yet down and it looks like another world indeed.

It is yours.

There is a thing you can do: you take the ashes of a loved one and use them as fertilizer. You watch how her remains give birth to a flower in a ceramic pot that sits on your windowsill. Or the pot is plastic. Or it is unfired clay because your days and thoughts have become just as malleable and it sits on the kitchen table. Let's put it in the garden.

Let's watch the freight train go.

There. Do you see it? Across the river there.

It's a great chain of rusted bars sliding slowly along the hazy bight, mute and toysized and now its whistle the lonesome bawl of it.

All of this is yours.

Now imagine these words are handwritten. Imagine you are reading this out of a notebook, dogeared pages and the cover peeling back at a corner. Imagine the words are in blue ink, black ink, sometimes red, and they carry in their curves and slants all the idiosyncrasies belonging to a person. The scuttering shorthand and spastic flourishes and pay attention to the stroke patterns that make the *I* between faded blue lines—I love you, I love you—the slight variations that betray the nuances of your mood. And imagine there is another line that swings up into the margin, handmade among the dirty thumbprints, it meanders through scrawled annotations and

doodled reveries to terminate in a slapdash arrow that points to the beginning of all of this, and a note:

None of this real. This is fiction.

Imagine these words are crossed out, the frantic strokes that make you think somehow of the boarded windows of an abandoned home. These are dreams that are dogeared, not pages.

This is a wish. This is a fantasy. You have no son. You are no father. The boy is dead and has been, was so before you ever met him, before you could even tell him his name.

He sees it first on his walk from Grand Central to the Bank of America Tower, the shape of something unfamiliar through the park trees, a glass structure, it looks like, flickering out now and again from behind the busses and trucks groaning along West 42nd.

At the corner he crosses the street and ascends the broad granite steps at the end of the park and he's staring at it now, wondering first how they managed to get it there, then what the hell is it exactly? It's an enormous glass sphere centered on the lawn of Bryant Park. But that's not what it is. It's a new public art installation. Or what the hell is it? Someone walks past him, a woman with a small white dog, talking to it in a goo-goo voice as she steps onto the lawn and toward the thing, *look at that, what is that?*

It looks to be two, three stories tall and just as wide. There are some boom lifts scattered about it. At its center floats a smaller sphere, also glass or appears to be, and branded with block text going around its center. From where he stands he can read the words AN AMER, or rather just one word and a fragment of another.

There are some people gathered about it as well, the backs of their skulls tucked into their napes, staring up in awe, with more on the way, approaching the thing with steps that seem wary. They touch it experimentally, as if to make sure it's real. It is real. They knock on it, *knock knock*. From where he stands it makes no sound against the soft trickle of the fountain or the traffic seething along the avenue behind him but still he can imagine a dull bong with each strike, a kind of tedious Morse ringing out behind his ears.

Or it's his work phone vibrating in its compartment.

His boss' name is displayed there on the screen in LCD-white and he knows he's late for a meeting.

There was the time when he looked forward to his business meetings, when he would make her feel alone even when he was right next to her, receding into his work, the spreadsheets and particolored graphs. One night she told him—they were sitting side by side on the couch with the TV on and she told him that she missed him. He didn't look at her. He had his laptop open and positioned where it was designed to be and he told her that he was right here.

She just sat there staring at him for a while, watching his fingers clack over the keyboard and his eyes how they flitted across information so esoteric to her she wanted to take the fucking thing and chuck it across the room. She wanted to yell at him. She wanted to hit him. She wanted to lay her head in his lap and feel the weight of his hand.

But she had done none of that.
She said, But you're not.

It's fourteen months ago:

The intercom above the blackboard has clicked on with the morning announcements, blah blah blah, and now for the pledge. They still say the pledge here. It goes like this:

I pledge allegiance to the flag . . .

The door opens. The door closes. The class has gone silent, their small hands slowly falling from their hearts while the pledge continues over the loudspeaker flat and fringed with static, recited by rote.

They do not scream, the children, though already some have begun to cry. They are young but still they know what this is. They understand what is about to happen. A few remain still, stiff, paralyzed, while others have by now dropped to the floor, clambered beneath their desks where they wad themselves into little shivering balls and close their eyes. As if that will make the man go away. As if that will save them. Because this is what they have been trained to do.

The man has yet to speak. He doesn't need to. Standing there in front of the blackboard beneath the flag sagging red white and blue.

One nation under God. Everything he's ever wanted to say will come flashing out from the barrel of that gun.

Of the children still standing some never take their eyes off the man. Others look to the teacher. But the teacher cannot help. She'd just that morning made a breakfast of eggs and toast and at the train station sent her husband off with a kiss and she'd parked the faded sedan in the lot beneath a budding oak and said hello to a colleague in the hall along with a small joke that solicited a smile and she'd made her coffee in the teachers' lounge and sat drinking it at her desk while she went over her planner and greeted her children as they entered the room by ones and twos to store their belongings in their cubbies and she'd written the day's agenda on the board before they'd begun the pledge and her fingers are still dusted with chalk. That is all. A dusty smudge against her blouse, lilac for the coming spring.

She is thinking that the last thing she will ever do is say please but instead she vomits.

The man with the gun stands there, as if waiting for her to finish, just the curdled splatter of it against the linoleum and the small voice still reciting the pledge in the wall and the whimpers of children.

He asks her, What are you?

He has the gun leveled at her and that is what she sees when she raises her head with the rank slaver on her lips and her hand on her stomach, so feeble a gesture.

What are you?

Please, she says.

She wanted to say please I'm pregnant but could not get all those words out and instead placed her hand upon the boy yet taking shape inside her and she doesn't hear the shot until she's on the floor. She collapses into her chair and sloughs down into her vomit clutching at her stomach, on her side and watching a dark spot bloom in the fabric of her blouse, trying with desperate fingers to claw the blood back into the neat red hole from which it's pumping steadily.

Then she hears the shot.

She's in the garden now, something precious in a pot of unfired clay, there in the dappled light among other perennials and tarnished décor, the wrought-iron aphorisms stuck in the ground and things hewn

from stone, small sculptures in allegorical poses. She is among these things. Only of course it's not her but a type of Hibiscus, *Hibiscus coccineus*, this is what the plastic label says, scarlet rose mallow. This is who she is now, what she is, with her petals fluttering in slightest breeze beneath a twilight sky scuffed with clouds.

Only of course it's not her.

But he talks to it as if it were. Never saying her name but just hey, or hey, and all the anecdotes he's pocketed between his morning commute and the evening, never becoming undone by this, just opening the sliding backdoor and walking out over the patchy lawn to say hey there, bad day, good day, perhaps just a shrug.

Just letting his work satchel slough to the floorboards and opening the fridge for a beer and something to microwave and cleaning his dish by hand before going out back and filling the galvanized watering can with the hose and walking out over the yard mottled with light and shadow to say hey, here you go.

Or, Hey, they put in some new art installation at Bryant Park. Jus' this giant sphere, glass sphere.

He had to order proprietary soil from a private company because the excessive sodium content of cremated remains prevents the release of nutrients within natural soil, so he was told, and he was never undone by any of this. This is therapy. Something a blog post told him might be helpful. Reading the instructions at the kitchen counter and mixing her ashes with the specially formulated dirt and setting the rose mallows in the pot and placing the pot on the bedroom windowsill, then the kitchen table. Finally the garden.

It's an interactive piece. He sees this now. Standing here before it with his satchel slung from his shoulder, just ten minutes off the train and already sweating in the borough humidity. There are people sticking photos to it. Photos of themselves. Photos of landscapes. Of buildings, company logos. But mostly it's photos of people, in all manner of poses and settings, or just faces, in whatever attitude you can imagine. These are photos taken from family albums, printed from social networking sites, there are even some freehand sketches here, a caricature of a child, a collage of time and demographics. He's walking around it. He will tell her about this. He will tell her it's been up only a day and yet

perhaps a third of it is already covered. All the way around. The images overlapping, sort of panoplied, shingled, scaled, sequined, louvered. One of these words is right.

He finds a bare spot big enough for a fist his size and he makes one and raps against the glass and, no, not a dull bong but something that beckons the word sonorous into the mind. He knocks it twice more. It resonates all the way through, he can feel it in his chest. Then a man comes to say, Excuse me. He steps aside and watches the man cover the bare spot with a picture of a dog, it looks like a Border Collie. He asks the man if it is, gestures at the picture and says, What kind is it? The man shrugs, says he's not sure, was a rescue. Tells him it's some sort of mix. Then turns and walks away.

He watches him go, passing a group of people depositing photos into a bucket to be hoisted by the person standing in the boom lift perhaps some twenty, thirty feet above.

And the words up there, wrapped around the inner sphere. He glimpsed them before on his first trip around but forgot to read them, to register their meaning, and he circles the sphere again, reading the text as he goes, his lips moving mutely amid the stray voices and laughter and the electric whine of the boom lifts rising above the body heat gathered here on the lawn.

It reads:

WHAT DOES AN AMERICAN LOOK LIKE?

He keeps his picture in a notebook. Taped to the inside of the cover. The sonogram. This was his son, was and only was, was to be, who never was, future and present tense without. He looks at it every time, sometimes just a glance to make sure it's still there, the silhouette, the outline of life, then flips to the next blank space and transcribes a memory, a thought. This is another thing he learned from the blog post. Remember the good times. Record them. When he'd lay his ear against her stomach and imagine the nanopulse beating within, it conjures a sensation like a fingertip tapping away beneath your temple. It makes you smile. It makes you look up and kiss her, holding her face and kissing her and you cannot wait.

Or write about the pain, let the pain bleed out from the penpoint. Only lately they've been dreams, his writings, they've been fantasies. A father and his son catching fireflies in the dusk or walking through the snow with a thermos of hot cider and hacksaw in hand,

looking for the perfect Christmas tree. Or sitting by the river with the mother just below them skipping stones across the surface, clear to the other side.

What does she look like?

What would he have looked like?

A week goes by and the sphere is nearly covered. Photos and drawings and a vast assortment of tchotchkes, memorabilia, there are even locks of hair, all colors, some beyond what is natural, these are things that seem to completely disregard the question posed by the inner sphere but perhaps that is the point.

There are records up there, old LPs and CDs and cassette tapes. There are menus and cooking recipes. There are so many items overlapping and jutting out at odd angles the thing is becoming shapeless. They're just putting things up there, beautiful and ugly all at once, grotesque is better, with tree bark and dust and withered flowers, spent cigarettes, boluses of gum, candy wrappers parrying the summer sun and national flags that ripple all likewise in the wind. Countries that are not this country.

Someone has put an old arm cast up there, signed with names, and book pages and dustjackets, magazine covers, newsprint clippings. He sees one with the shooter's name printed so formally in reportorial black, one more label among the ruck. But it brings it all back of course, that awful day and the weeks and months after, and he stands there staring at it until the letters resolve into a kind of ideogram.

The name of the shooter is not important. It means the myopic precepts found scrawled out on notebook pages among ethnocentric ravings. It means the interviews with family members and neighbors, former colleagues, the generic quotes stating that they never would have guessed, can't believe it, still in shock. Killed by a gunshot wound to the neck after exchanging fire with a SWAT team in the school hallway.

It means candlelight vigils and orange awareness ribbons pinned to shirts, hung in storefront windows, fluttering on car antennas.

It means the countless messages of condolence collected on an answering machine, with the light blinking red and red in a dark corner of the house.

It means the murder of seven children not including his unborn son, who died still in his mother's womb, the bullet that wrecked his prenatal skull.

The name means all the sick heartache and tension that loss presses on a marriage. You pay six thousand dollars to bury an empty casket and you need to select a reading and there are forms to sign and you fucking told her, didn't you? You told her you wanted her to stop going in, to take it easy. Because she was only three months away and you wanted her to take it easy.

The name means this:

Standing in a tiled room and watching a licensed crematory operator comb through your wife's ashes with a high-powered magnet to extract her fillings.

It's four months ago:

Their anniversary is a numbered square in a wall calendar showing a month from a bygone season but it is rather the long week's sundry disappointments and frustrations that make the ride so silent, heading across the Bear Mountain Bridge on their way back from Costco, the trunk crammed with bulk purchases and BOGO deals and the late sun glinting off the river below when she cuts the wheel just so, drifting into the shoulder, easing to a stop with the radio playing some garbled tune and the rear of the car jutting cockeyed into the eastbound lane and the traffic already mounting, horns blaring in irate staccato while the sedan's hazard lights blink a sound that goes *click click click*.

He says her name. He asks what is she doing. She doesn't answer. She's looking straight ahead with her hands gripping the wheel. She's put the car in park and hit the hazards but her hands are still gripping the wheel, gripping hard, blood fleeing from her knuckles.

She does not look at him. She closes her eyes for an extended moment, her breath whistling through her nostrils, punctuated by the odd muffled curse from the cars rubbernecking by. He says her name again and she's looking at him now but says nothing, her eyes betray nothing. Then she turns off the hazards and puts the car in drive.

One week later she goes back to the bridge. She parks in a scenic rest stop near the eastern approach and walks along the footpath in a serene daze of slurred colors and shadows and the backwash drag of traffic till a point perhaps midway where all of this recedes ever further as she climbs over the guardrail to freefall toward whatever comes next.

Before she left she stopped in the front door and said, I'm going. Not looking back but facing out at the weedy lawn and the street of faded asphalt, her hand on the tarnished brass knob. I'm going, she said, louder.

He never asked where or said bye or anything at all. He pretended he couldn't hear her and went up to his home office to see if cam girl Plum was online and it's not till hours after, sitting now amid the long shadows in the living room and a commercial for asthma medication listing breathlessly all possible side effects, that he begins to wonder where his wife is.

Then it's gone. He's standing there with the only photo ever taken of his boy and of course it's gone. There's nothing left of it save the pressed spot in the grass where it just yesterday had been, now pale of green and gleaming in the heat. This is its outline stamped here into the ground, its shadow, its silhouette. His phone is buzzing. The wind carries the slightest suggestion of dog piss. The photo in his hand is a photo of the original photo. He'd taken a picture of it with his phone and uploaded it to his computer and printed it out in grayscale, which it more or less already was.

There are people sitting at the tables beneath the trees, lounging on towels on the lawn, some even within the circle of flattened grass. Nothing has changed. His phone is buzzing in its compartment and he sends it to voicemail and he almost wants to enact some Hollywood moment where he sets the photo down in the grass and it means the perfect thing. But he knows how silly a gesture that would be. So he stows the photo away in his satchel and turns, makes his way toward the office.

But then he stops. He stops halfway across the lawn and doubles back and he does the thing regardless of how silly it is, how exceedingly romantic and ineffectual.

Taking out not the photo but the fortune slip and folding it, tucking it into the flattened grass, though perhaps interring is the better choice.

It's eight years from now:

He's on the couch with his ear to her stomach. There's a sitcom playing on the TV and there's a laugh track tapering away in the speakers but he hears none of this. He hears the little nanopulse beneath her skin. The word familiar makes a sound such as this. It makes him lift away his ear to replace it with his lips. It makes him whisper three words smaller yet than the thing its message has borne.

These are not words in a notebook. This is now, with the lights off and colors flashing palely against the walls, a flowerpot on the sill.

Aunt Ellen

Reg Taylor

My aunt Ellen was born around 1900 in a part of Adelaide that is almost unchanged. The original Georgian bluestone homes are nearly all still standing and the plane trees shading its broad streets then are just taller now. It's still quiet, too, though people might have to wait till very late at night to imagine the distant twitch of trams or the clop of horses heading into the East End market, or the unsteady steps of some reveler making his way home.

For many years my aunt taught at one of Adelaide's best-known schools, and for a time shared its faculty with someone who was to become a famous writer later on. He and my aunt must have met at school and since the writer dwelt on the College premises and Aunt Ellen lived close by, they might have crossed paths outside school hours as well; she modestly astride her bicycle, he marching bareheadedly along on the sort of blazing day he apparently enjoyed. In an incident on which one of the writer's best-known stories is based she might even, in the longest of long shots, have witnessed the teacher and an Asian pupil who had attempted to bribe him with a bag of golf clubs, getting into a taxi at the school. But it would be pointless trying to otherwise connect them; they were separated by age and milieu—Aunt Ellen was a loyal Methodist while the writer seemed to have spent most of the time outside school hours in pubs with cronies—which meant their orbits would have barely registered on each other's consciousness, and if they intersected left no trace at all.

Publicly, she recalled only a flamboyance he brought to the school's annual Gilbert and Sullivan productions, which might not in any case have been to her taste. I can imagine the young browbeaten boys being swept along by the writer's energy and exasperation, but she would no more have given way to any spell they and their mentor and the medium were trying to cast than to the parlays of some showground hypnotist. She came from what used to be called a "musical family," and I can imagine her damning with faint praise Sullivan's music with some phrase like, "Oh, it's good *fun* ..." which, were he able to have heard it, might have been an infuriating reminder to the composer of light opera's—and his own—limitations.

Unfortunately, the encouragement of her parents could not extend to endorsing their gifted daughter's ambition to become an opera singer: the professional stage to them being, like medicine, an unsuitable female choice of career, they forbade it, and so inflicted the first disappointment of her life.

She was almost twenty when the First World War ended, and with the numbers of physically and psychologically sound young men so reduced, lucky perhaps to meet a returned soldier who was quite intact. The conflict had impaired neither the young man's health nor his equanimity and he became a welcome visitor to the home until Aunt Ellen's parents learned he was a Roman Catholic and all further invitations to afternoon tea were withdrawn.

It's sad and surely unfair, that love or its approximation seems to be handed out so inequitably in life, so that some become almost jaded from their enjoyment of affection while others live self-deluded and ultimately ruinous lives without it. Once Aunt Ellen's love, if she conceded her feelings that luxury, went unrequited, it was never to be granted another repository and for the rest of her working life her maternal feelings, at least, had to be spent on a new troop of small boys each year who, while their company might not stale, could never disappoint or please her as much as if they were her own.

Each Christmas she was rewarded with parent-wrapped chocolates and cakes and embroidered handkerchiefs from outgoing students, who most probably forgot her as fast as she did them, unless one of them rose to eminence in later life when her recollection of them in some phrase like "little *wretch*" could deprecate both their infant predisposition to impertinence or dirtiness or savagery, and any claim to adult distinction.

I was never quite sure what she thought of us, her sister's children. I can remember her restrained shows of amusement in our company which might have only veiled her disapproval. She *was* kind: apart from the five- and ten-shilling postal notes she awarded us on birthdays she once sent up from Adelaide a package of football boots abandoned by their original owners, but otherwise she seemed most reluctant to stray far from her natural environs—until one year, while she was getting over an illness, and her employers, in a civilized example of the conservative ethos, had invited her to take extra time

off on half-pay—she accepted an invitation to come and spend some time with us.

I don't know if, or how soon after her arrival, she missed home but she stayed on, perhaps out of loyalty, so she could attend rehearsals of the local Gilbert and Sullivan Society with her sister. They were performing *The Mikado* that year and my mother, thrust into a lead role by the resignation of one of the perennial principals, might have been glad of her elder sister's support. The resident diva who had assumed by right the lead soprano role for years had this year, in a gesture casting invidious reflections upon her maturity she contended, been invited to take the part of the ageing and vengeful Katisha, instead of her youthful and traditionally appealing rival Yum-Yum. High words were exchanged between her and the school teacher-director but in the end her protest was self-sacrificial and she went, leaving memories of her tendency to forget large chunks of dialogue under pressure and a way of negotiating high notes that reminded some listeners of a car changing gears.

On the very first evening, however, when the sisters attended rehearsals together the Company was in a state of crisis. A no-show from one of the principals was followed by an announcement from the director that the player in question would no longer be part of the production ... for unspecified reasons.

Which soon became specified: Owen Coates, mimesis of Ko-Ko and scout leader in some other part of real life, had been accused by one or some of the wolf-pack cub members under his charge of making indecent advances towards him—or them.

Under normal circumstances the scandal, disturbing as it was, would not have affected the Company greatly. Coates would not even have had a leading role. His singing voice (and my mother always drew the distinction) might have been borrowed from another, and spent sparingly on those grounds. Ejected from high in the nasal septum it had a strained "N-yah" quality to it, prompting more than one member of the Company to suggest its owner could do with a dose. He could not act—he could not even over-act—for years he had been planted where he could do least damage in the male chorus, but the indisposition of the Company's comic stalwart, whose "turns" had finally been stalled by arthritis, had thrust this pale shadow of the original into the limelight. The director's options had been limited; the

glory days of the G&S Society were behind it, television's implicit home detention was already taking hold; a contemporized production from the previous year full of topical local references that would have had Gilbert fuming, while designed to breathe fresh life into *The Pirates of Penzance* had been played out in half-empty institute halls. The director had agonized over his selection of the scout leader: "I don't know, it could be the makings of him, it might bring him out of himself ..." he willed. But it didn't. Coates was very tall but drooped like a plant transplanted from warmer climes during rehearsals, chin lowered and spectacle-less so he didn't have to deal with the already intimidating space beyond the stage or even the proximity of his sometime partner, my mother, who was left like a pilot fish in her charge's wake.

His absence spared them both further embarrassment on stage but could not save Coates from something worse. It seemed incredible; his ineffectualness, extending to an incompetence in knot tying, tent erecting and navigation that had more than once led to cubs under his clueless charge spending the night shuddering under the stars, would have seemed to forensically exculpate him. But he was charged and a few days later he took his own life.

"Best thing he could have done," my bush-born father said, who probably saw the scout leader's demise as another kind of disposal of an unwanted or distorted life. But it left a gap in the Company's ranks much too close to the season's opening.

In this darkest hour though a savior appeared: if reluctantly. Kenneth ("Ken's the name") Brough was one of that rarest of breeds in the Riverland, a kind of gentleman farmer, which added to his enigmatic status; he'd also enjoyed youthful success on the stage in Adelaide, interrupted by the closing days of the Second World War when he enlisted and won a Military Cross in New Guinea, and then retired from all theatres of conflict to the large family fruit property. He was almost apologetic about its dimensions—"The old man did all the work, I'm afraid, God rest him"—while living alone in a Federation bungalow among an acre of roses. They might have been just for his enjoyment but he gave away masses to grieving and other deserving parties, brushing off thanks with signature asperity: *There they are, do what you want with them*, his manner seemed to suggest. He was tall, just greying, with a characteristic twitch to one corner of his lips

suggesting that something, some memory or association, the person he was talking to even, having just been submitted to his scrutiny had provided him with momentary amusement. How he allowed himself to be drafted into the part remained a mystery—to others—he'd long made it clear to anyone who enquired what he thought of adding his presence to any public forum. Once he had given his assent though he slipped into the part the way the permanent man he employed on his property eased the top off his first bottle of beer for the day. After assuring my mother that he would give her all the room she wanted in their scenes together they struck up the most comfortable relationship while conceding each other all the space they might need. As a clown Brough performed his business with offhand nonchalance, as a singer he approached the score like a batsman with an appreciation of his limitations, utilizing the vocal equivalent of a firm low bottom hand grip. For some reason my aunt confessed—to her sister and no one else—that she was rather “taken” with Mr. Brough. She could hardly fail to be amused by him during rehearsals, of course, even if her appreciation was expressed in terms like *silly ass*. But perhaps there was something else in him that appealed to her, something other than his impeccable Old School background—“only St Peters”—as he actually joked with her—something in his appearance: a certain remediable neglect, a shirt crying out for a decent press ...

She stayed on for the run of the operetta anyway, an extended (seven night) season concluding with a cast party whose celebratory tone was only tempered in hindsight by a claim that the director, carried away with success and a Berri Estates sparkling wine, had fondled one of the prop-master's wife's breasts.

It was an indiscretion that proved minor in the larger scheme of things: a month or two later one of the Three Little Maids (Pitti-Sing), after first complaining of feeling unwell and reluctantly agreeing to see the family doctor, was bluntly diagnosed as being pregnant. Apart from being what used to be called “well-developed” for her age, the sixteen-year-old girl hadn't otherwise been very noticeable during the production. A member of the Lutheran church choir, she had also attended one of the local elocution classes designed to turn ten- or twelve-year-olds into excruciating prosodists, and had minced her way through her few lines of dialogue, but had otherwise performed her small role blamelessly enough.

Not long after this scandal broke, she disappeared from town altogether, though, and when she reappeared, babyless, and went shopping with her mother it was with cheeks red for the entire outing. Imagining that she was the cynosure of the town—which she was—anger and resentment must have added to her sense of betrayal as she realized she had got a very poor deal out of what so little time ago she thought would leave her forever poised on a pedestal of exclusiveness. She had long since given up the name of the putative father and some of the details of an affair which began when she had called at the predator's home as an emissary of the Lutheran choir seeking a floral donation and after that, having made no attempt to deny the accusations, there was no question other than for how long the offender, Brough, would spend in jail.

The original revelation had left people aghast or agog—the voyeuristic wondered how Brough could have short-circuited the normal resistance and misgivings of a sixteen-year-old: some might have wondered what extra mask he would have had to put on, what canniness—of the kind lacking in the scoutmaster's sad overtures, say—he would have had to employ, and whether the girl, if she had the wit and wasn't simply "sex-mad" or keen to impress her friends, was ever actually in love with him. She might have been and he, if he wasn't just trying to grasp at some scrap of his own youth, with her ... People could only speculate. Whatever their relationship, though, its legacy did no favors to either of them.

While he was in jail, Brough's property was sold off and he was never to come anywhere near the Riverland again, while years later the girl married a wool-classer with no knowledge of her history who was apparently at first shocked on their wedding night by his bride's complaint that he smelt of unwashed fleece, and then by her insistence on assuming a dominant role in their union's consummation.

Aunt Ellen seethed when she heard of the scandal, *And to think he invited me to have afternoon tea with him one day*, she wrote to my mother. *The pair of them want whipping!*

It was at least the third but not quite final disappointment of her life. Years later at what must have been the last musical get-together with her sisters she insisted on taking on something from her

old repertoire and after failing to reach or cling onto a note broke down and retreated to a bedroom in tears.

She should have known better; while still managing to keep up the old family home in Kent Town, she was nearly eighty. As one by one her siblings exchanged the home for marriage outside of it, she had shared it (briefly) with both parents and then with just her father whose activity in his last years amounted largely to a scrutiny of the death notices in the morning paper, succeeded very often by the exhumation of a dark suit and tie from a handy recess and a measured stroll to the ex-acquaintance's place of committal. When even that activity was beyond him, he surrendered to the inevitable and the house became entirely and echoingly, I imagine, his daughter's own.

The day before she died, she was seen "pottering" in the garden by neighbors (and the day after obviously not). The house may have changed hands any number of times since, but from the outside it still looks much the same, and I sometimes wonder if any of the memories of the family still inhabit it. People may scoff but one of the reasons they buy old homes is surely in the expectation or hope that they will inherit some of their legacy. If any of Aunt Ellen's spirit does remain there, though, I can only think of her lying awake in the long pre-dawn hours—and listening; wondering if she can hear the step of a long banished and never actual lover now the coast is clear at last (not to be confused with the ghost of the once often-drunken milkman and his loyal steed who'd been known to stamp a hoof to recall its owner to his duties when he passed out holding the reins); or if it is just an echo of that unreliable chronicler and colleague-in-passing of my aunt, who having in a not unusually tipsy state himself slept past his tram stop, is now retracing his steps from the city fringes to the school ... where he will, of course, as Aunt Ellen crushes her handkerchief into a ball, make a clear eyed, bristling and guilt-free appearance before his adoring boys, as the bell sounds for morning prayers.

Konrad's Bukovina *Khosidl*

Peter Newall

Quarterly Editor's Prize

The sky overhead was completely dark, a muffling darkness that did not admit the faintest white dot of a star. He stared into it until colored patterns began swirling in front of his eyes. He blinked; the patterns disappeared, the darkness remained. Turning cautiously, unsure what obstacle might be near him, he saw a faint pale streak stretched across the blackness.

Could that be the horizon, and the light be dawn? Was it that time already? He tugged back his coat sleeve, but even staring hard, he could not make out his watch. He touched the glass with his fingertips; the watch was there on his wrist, but invisible.

So the faint glow might be the first hint of dawn, or it might be the lights of a town, reflected on the cloud. He tried to guess what towns might be nearby. *Zadowa? Strozhnitz?* A string of places ran through his mind before he gave up. He might be anywhere; they'd gone through Czernowitz, and while he didn't remember seeing Stanslaviv, he might have been asleep. Somewhere in the Bukovina, that's all he could say.

He'd been dozing in the darkness of a goods car when the train stopped for water, and they'd found him, the door slid open unexpectedly, a dazzling torch in his face, shouted orders, he'd had to scramble down to the tracks, dodging a half-hearted blow, then the train pulled away again. There was no station here, only a water tower and a crossing sign, nothing to tell him where he was. He'd seen flat fields stretching out towards the horizon in the light of the engine's yellow headlamp, but he wasn't prepared for how black it would be once the train rumbled away into the night. Its small ruby taillight glowed out there for a while, then vanished.

The Bukovina is named for its trees, but I can't see any trees, he thought, and I can't smell any trees, only coal dust and stale smoke, the smell of the railway, it's been absorbed into the earth here and it's soaked into my clothes, I can even taste it. I want to get moving, but I can't set out across country. I can't see my hand in

front of my face, let alone see to walk across ploughed fields and climb over fences. If I am not to stay here for the rest of the night, I'll have to walk along the railway line. He looked hopefully at the distant streak at the bottom of the sky, but it was no brighter than before.

He tucked the violin case under his left arm, the familiar awkward shape of it nestling there, and set off, feeling the loose gravel between the soles of his boots and the broad wooden sleepers.

He had to walk carefully, like a slow dance, a hora, the *Moldavian Hora*, left, step, right, step, the melody revolves as the dancers' feet are picked up and set down. He could hear, as he walked, his violin part over the rhythm of his steps, then Artur's clarinet, weaving in and out like a wild rose climbing along an old wooden fence.

How often they had played it, he and Artur and Jerzy, the *Moldavian Hora*, in so many places, Poland and Hungary and the Banat, at weddings, in the taprooms of inns and village squares, at the garden-parties of the rich. And now they had been in Moldavia itself and they had not played it, had not played anything at all.

A heavy, hushed silence hung around him. The air seemed thick and stuffy. Now he had settled into a stride, awkward to match the spread of the sleepers but one he could sustain, he began to feel warm in his jacket and waistcoat. He was conscious of the beat of his footsteps, of the violin under his arm, of his shirt collar rubbing against his neck below his left ear.

Even after walking for perhaps twenty minutes, he could not see anything around him. Possibly the black of the sky was a lighter shade than the black of the trees alongside the track, but looking down he could not see his feet. Stretching his eyes wide open did not help; the night was just too dark. Crickets chirped occasionally, in and out of rhythm with his steps. On such a dark night they don't make much noise, and even if there is water nearby, the frogs too will stay quiet without moonlight or starlight.

A mess, the whole business back there in Moldavia had been a mess. Everything was difficult enough these days, but to get arrested in Suczawa was an unexpected extra problem. Usually a bribe will fix these things if you can only afford to pay it, but this time it was more serious, all of a sudden the police claimed Jews

were not allowed in the hotel, even as musicians. They picked out Artur by his appearance, and because the others tried to stop him being taken away, they all three were arrested.

His first fear had been that their instruments would be stolen from them, or wantonly smashed, but that had not happened; once they had been marched down to the police station and pushed into a cell they'd been forgotten. The next evening, although it took all the German marks he had sewn into his coat and most of the dinars Jerzy had hidden in the shell of his accordion, the three of them had got out, with a warning from the fat sergeant, a threat mixed with garlic and stale brandy, that if they were still in town at morning there would be no such luck for them again.

There was not enough money now for their hotel bill, so without going back for their meagre luggage, they bought third-class seats on the night train to Vadul Siret, to get across the nearest border as soon as possible. They arrived just before sunrise. Artur wanted to stay there; Poland was safe for Jews and he had relatives in the town. Jerzy wanted to get further away from the border, so the three of them agreed to separate. Standing on the steps in front of the small white railway station, they shook hands. Artur walked off down a street lined with dusty plane trees, disappearing into the soft early morning light. Jerzy, who had papers that would stand almost any scrutiny, took the slow train on to Lwow, reckoning he had a good enough chance of avoiding ticket inspectors.

He himself had passable papers naming him as Konrad, Wojciek Konrad. It was not the name he was given at birth, nor the name printed on the posters and handbills when the trio played at cafés and theatres throughout Galizia, but it was a name that did not attract trouble, and there was no point in making matters more complicated for himself than need be.

So he waited, sitting on a bench at the back of the station with his violin beside him, looking out over a yellow sunflower field until the late afternoon sun had turned it a dusty orange-gold, then jumped the local train heading west through Czernowitz, riding in a goods wagon because even the few groschen for a third-class ticket were precious; he would need to eat sometime that day or the next.

The train had got to Czernowitz just after dark, the high arched doorways of the station lit up from within like giant

keyholes, in front of it shiny black cars and horse-drawn carts weaving in and out of each other's way in the light of flaring streetlamps. After the train had pulled out again, heading toward Stanyslaviv and then Lwow, he'd allowed his chin to drop to his chest and dozed, aware as he slept of the rhythmic rattle of the wheels and the smell of the sacks of grain piled halfway up the wagon's sides.

He was walking automatically now along the sleepers, his legs sore from the foreshortened stride, but he was wide awake, he could walk all night like this if he had to. He moved the violin case from under his left arm to under his right. His collar stopped rubbing his neck. That was simple; if only he'd done it half an hour ago.

Without this violin I am nothing in this world, merely a man with bad papers, without a job, who speaks every language, even my own, with an accent, a foreigner everywhere except in the valley round my home village, and I am not going back there.

But with the violin I can at least get a welcome, a suspicious guarded welcome in many places, but a foot in the door, a place near the fire, a drink of slivovitz or beer or wine, maybe a meal, a bed, sometimes better even than that. And there is the music itself, the tunes run deep in the blood and playing them is a joy. With Artur and Jerzy it's best, but even by myself a pleasure, the soft sweet sound of the bowed strings, more human than the voice, the sound that makes listeners fall silent, even in rowdy inns. The old remember their youth, the young feel theirs. And I too feel entirely alive when I play. Sad tunes, the old *doinas*, or happy, a *freilach* learned from the manuscript books or from another player, but all of them make me feel alive.

Konrad smelled the dark earth in the fields around him; the railway stink had left his nostrils. Heavy soil, recently moistened by rain, a bitter reek from the tall rank weeds growing beside the track, somewhere beneath that, a faint scent of damp pines or firs, coming across the fields with a slight breeze. Ah, the air is moving, dawn must be not far away.

It is strange how little we know of what is to befall us, and how our feelings are straws on the wind, blown about in any direction by circumstance. Three days ago I was tolerably happy, about to start a week of playing for weddings in Suczawa. I

had money in my pocket and was about to come into more, for we were certain to profit from the generosity of bridegrooms and brides' fathers, made liberal by the occasion and wanting to show their standing in the world. And from guests, warmed by wine and moved to tears or to dance by the music, pushing banknotes, blue, purple and very occasionally a red one hundred note, into our pockets as we walk around, or tossing them into my open violin case, making a lovely multicolored heap on the rusty green silk lining.

Then two days ago, because the local police captain had a whim, or received an order from Bucuresti, there was no happiness and no music ringing in our ears, just the hollow sound of our voices echoing in the stinking cells as we talked to each other trying to dispel the fear, the fear that we would be left there for months, that we would be beaten by the bored guards, or worse, if our papers were looked at too closely, sent back to a jail in the capital.

And then yesterday that fear gone, but our money gone too. So back to the start again, like playing a *nign*, you get nearly to the end and the tune goes round on itself again. Same with us; three men once again at a railway station, carrying our instruments under our arms, dividing between ourselves, once again, a pitifully small bundle of dinars and lei, no future apparent except whatever God might grant us.

And now, as a consequence of all those apparently unrelated actions, I am walking along a railway line in the Bukovina in the middle of the night, when I thought I'd be sleeping in a hotel bed, the sleep of the pleasantly drunk, the night's music echoing in my head, the violin resting in its case but still with a faint vibration in its strings from the last song, *Kolomekyes*, probably, one of the old tunes. When I play it well, I can see flames dancing along the bow. And now I'm here under a black sky, neither happy nor sad nor fearful, but once again poor in the world.

A dog barked, off to his right in the darkness, out there is a habitation, maybe a village, or even the edge of a town.

Konrad stopped, carefully put the violin case down on the railway cinders, stretched his cramped arms and flexed his fingers, and looked around him. There was a dirty cream-colored smear

low in the sky, which this time had to be dawn. As he looked at it the breeze freshened. Another day, and an end to the darkness, God be thanked. Now what am I to do with it, this day I might not have seen as a free man, how am I to get the first necessary things, food, coffee, a place to sit, that come before thinking about money and a clean shirt and the future.

The sky was lightening enough to make out something of what lay around him. The countryside was flat. A little way off the dark shadow of a pine forest, the resinous smell coming to him as the dawn-wind got up. On the other side of the railway line, fields stretched away toward an uncertain horizon.

In front of him a road crossed the railway, a good road, wide and straight and level, very different to the rutted, muddy Romanian roads curving round rocks and tree stumps nobody could be bothered to remove. You can see where the Austrians have been, he thought wryly; roads and bridges. But a road like this must lead to a substantial town, and from a town he might go one way or another, but he would surely find food and rest. He walked to the crossing and took the road to the right, to the north.

It took him another fifteen minutes' walking, and the day had really begun, a soft autumn day with a pale blue sky mostly covered with thin cloud, before he saw anything more than ploughed fields and distant trees. He came up to a small crossroad, with a sign pointing in three directions. Kolomyja ahead, said one arm, Kosmach, back the way he had come, said another; the third, pointing down a small side road, was blank.

Ridiculous, Konrad thought, they have gone to the trouble of nailing up a sign, complete with its pointed end, on this signpost, they've even painted it white, but they didn't know what name to carve on it.

Kolomyja, that was a big enough place, with three or four hotels, some lively restaurants, and a whole street of tailors. There was a theatre, an officers' club, women in nice clothes, plenty of people, and there he could, once he had played a bit, get the money for a new suit and a second-class railway ticket on. And from there he could get to Lwow, meet Jerzy there, or even on to Krakow, where there were friends, even relations, and many places hiring musicians, restaurants and inns and dance houses.

But the small side road and the blank signpost bothered him. What does it mean, a blank signpost? How am I to understand a sign that points somewhere but does not tell me what that somewhere is called, or how far away it is? That is contrary to sense. There must be something down that narrow road, roads lead to places, that's in their nature, so where does this one lead that they do not want to tell me?

Just go to Kolomyja, he told himself; straighten your hat, put your violin under your arm and set off. At least one cafe will be open by the time you get there, and there is enough money in your pocket for coffee and rolls. Considering food made Konrad's stomach cramp slightly, he had not allowed himself to think how hungry he was until that moment. When you have eaten you should be able to get a cigar, too, he thought, and suddenly he wanted tobacco very badly, even more than food.

But he was used, over the years, to having to wait to eat, sometimes for a day or more, and to going without cigars when he did not have cigars, and he knew unless things went very badly he would eat sometime that day, some way or other, even if he had to beg at a farmhouse. And the blank sign still bothered him.

It struck him it was intended only for the initiated, not written in ordinary letters for the ordinary traveler, but set there for the particular person who would understand its meaning. And having thought that, he did not like to admit that the secret unwritten language was meant for another, not for him. He turned onto the narrow side road and walked down it without looking again at the broad level one leading to Kolomyja.

It was now full daylight, the sun was up behind him, and the plain stretched away into the distance. Mingled with the grass beside the road were scattered banks of buttercups, the small yellow flowers looking at him inquisitively. Closer to him, in the damper soil at the road's edge, purple mallows sat among their dark green leaves.

Some young birch trees came into view, two or three standing alone, and then a small grove. There were more ahead, along both sides of the narrow earthen road. Their slender trunks, at first glance straight but actually curving slightly, reminded him of violin bows, the long thin branches resembled strings, and the

white bark with its delicate black markings looked like musical scores rolled up tightly and changed into trees.

Looking up at the birches as he walked among them, a melody began to create itself in his mind, a melody based on the arrangement of these trees, their simplicity and grace. The melody wound on as he walked, and he heard it in the form of a *khosidl*, played over a slow rhythm.

The tune he heard was lovely, it moved him almost to tears as it unfolded in his head. He had no part in shaping it, it simply emerged, drawing on all the tunes he had ever played, all the tunes he had ever heard, *chocheks* and *doinas* and *bulgars*, Polish songs and Russian songs and Gypsy songs and even Hungarian *czardas* with their dancing cimbalom decoration.

And as the *khosidl* developed, he heard it sounding on the violin in the sweet clear morning air, even though the violin was shut in its case under his arm. He could hear the strings vibrating with the lovely melody, the birch tree *khosidl*, the Bukovina *khosidl*, as it came into being in his head and his heart.

As he walked on under the blue sky, between the birches, the tune went back to the beginning, replayed itself, went through the same changes, imprinted itself in his mind, his fingers knew already how to shape it on the violin's neck, a sweet smooth slender white tune, sad but happy, like all tunes that stay in your heart.

He had it now, he could hear every bar of it, this tune which had never yet vibrated in the air, never yet danced its way through the smoke and shouting of a taproom, never yet entered the ears of lovers at a village dance, never yet drifted and hung in the evening sky after the twilight had ended, never yet been accompanied with clarinet or accordion or bass fiddle, a pure tune, just as it had come from God, this tune given to him, his *khosidl*, his Bukovina *khosidl*.

And he knew he would never, however often and well he might play it, hear it again so fresh and perfect as he heard it now in his head as the graceful birch trees danced around him, swaying as they made their circuits, dancing to his *khosidl*. No man will ever be able to render it like this, he thought. I could not, even the great Avram Makonovetsky could not, play this tune like this. Once you play it on a real violin, wood and gut and glue, once you put

clumsy human hands on it, it will be imperfect, like all human things, a flawed mirror to God's perfection.

Even so, to play it on the violin will be wonderful, it will give pleasure to me, to those who hear it, to the air, to the heavens. God will look down on me playing it and will smile, and say, ah! I gave that tune to the right fellow; listen how sweetly he brings it out for the world to hear.

He smelled woodsmoke, and dragging his eyes down from the dancing birches he saw a house near the road, a small place with dark walls and a low roof, and at exactly that moment two or three dogs behind the house burst into furious barking. Thank you for waiting until my tune had finished coming to me, he thought, now you can bark all you want. He heard a man's voice shouting at the dogs and they retreated into sullen growling, but he was past the house now.

Another bigger house stood just down the road on the other side, and further on he could see more dwellings, and further on beyond the houses a spire and a dome showing where a church and a synagogue stood.

This must be the place without a name. The blank signpost sent me here, Konrad told himself, feeling a surprising happiness swell inside him. I understood I was to come here, and I came. And because I walked down that narrow road, I am not the same man who stood at the signpost. Because I took that road, I am, on this autumn morning, transformed, I am the one with the Bukovina *khosidl* in my head, in my hands, in my violin, God's gift to me, which I will pass on as my gift to all those who hear it. Konrad smiled into the morning sunlight.

II

He was walking down a paved street now, with rows of houses flanking it. The church spire above their rooftops showed he was approaching the center, the town square.

Turning into the square he saw half a dozen people, the first he had seen in the town. One looked over at him, then began walking directly towards him, a short, bearded man who strode

across the open space with the confidence of one who had an official purpose there.

They met in the middle of the square. The bearded man looked him up and down, and Konrad was aware he was unshaven and dusty, and carried nothing but a worn violin case.

“Well, stranger, what is your name?”

“Konrad, Wojciek Konrad, at your service.”

“All right, Konrad,” said the bearded man, “I am Weisser, and I am the mayor. What do you want here?”

“I play the violin for a living, and I came here thinking you would have a wedding or a funeral, a christening, a bar mitzvah, or a dance.”

The man looked him directly in the face, in the country way that in the city would be rude. Konrad knew he was assessing him, weighing up his odd accent, his clothes, his eyes.

“You have no money?”

“No,” he agreed. Beyond a few groschen coins he had perhaps two hundred lei, but that was not money here in Poland.

“Come with me,” said Weisser. They walked together across the square to what Konrad saw was a tavern, a two-story building in brick with an awning over the front door.

Inside it was dark, except where crooked rectangles of bright morning sunlight fell through the windows and broke over tables and chairs and onto a wooden floor. The mayor spoke with the innkeeper; to his surprise Konrad understood he would be served breakfast, and given a room to rest for a time.

“You will not have to pay for this,” the mayor told him. “It is our custom to give a meal to a musician who visits here, and if you wish you can go on your way this afternoon, when you have rested. But if you stay, I want you to play at a party tonight in my house. I will come back at evening to see if you are still here.”

Konrad nodded to convey both thank you and yes, not so many words needed here in the country, no need for the explanations and repetitions filling up city conversations.

He was suddenly tired now that he could stop walking, his legs ached, and he ate the food and drank the bowl of coffee mechanically. Then, directed by the landlord, he climbed a short flight of stairs to a small room, one of several along a corridor,

and, taking off his coat and boots and laying the violin case on a bedside table, fell asleep on the narrow bed.

He had been watching the tall white shape moving to and fro for some time when he realized it was a curtain, a long curtain of thin white cloth, languidly swelling and retreating on a slight breeze. He was lying in a room with white plastered walls and a low dark wooden door. There was light behind the fabric of the curtain, a full even daylight, departing afternoon daylight or growing morning daylight he was not sure. And the particular smell of this room, a mixture of paint and drying herbs and beeswax, was new to him; he had not been here before.

Turning his head, he saw the violin case near him, on a small table. Then he remembered, he was in a country tavern, somewhere in eastern Poland, he had walked here. In another moment he had it all back, he'd come here after getting out of the police cells over the border and jumping the night train, and here they had given him breakfast and a bed. The light suffusing the window curtain must be afternoon light, and now he heard pigeons cooing outside the window. He swung his legs over the edge of the bed and held the curtain aside.

Below him he saw the town square. It was late afternoon. Sunlight, surprisingly warm and strong for autumn, slanted in over the edge of the roof above him and fell onto the flagstones.

Directly beneath his window two or three small tables were set out in front of the tavern. At one, two men sat with small glasses before them. Across the square was a restaurant, its name in faded letters on the plaster above its arched doorway, *Królewskie Jadło*. As he watched, a cook in a white apron came through the double wooden doors and stood outside, caught in the golden light from the westering sun, his sharp shadow falling onto the mustard-yellow wall behind him. He looked up and down the square and went back inside.

There was still a sound of pigeons cooing. Looking up Konrad saw them circling overhead, caught in the sun's rays while they were

above the roofs of the square, then fluttering down into the shadow to settle on the windowsills to either side of him.

He heard a soft knocking. As he turned toward the door it opened, and a maid came in carrying a steaming ewer and a towel, and put them on a washstand in the corner of the room, a wooden washstand with a stained mirror set into its frame. She went out without speaking, treading silently in felt shoes.

With pleasure Konrad saw that with the towel he had been given soap and a razor. Stripping off his shirt, he bent over the porcelain basin, delighting in the hot cleansing water, feeling a younger, stronger man as he washed the railway smoke and dust out of his hair and shaved the stubble from his face.

He stood at the window drying himself on the coarse grey towel. Even while he had been washing, the afternoon shadow had taken a great stride across the square, and was climbing the walls opposite. A low door in the building next to the restaurant opened and his acquaintance of that morning, Weisser, emerged. He turned and locked the door behind him slightly fussily, with a key from a large bunch which he returned to his coat pocket. Without looking up at the man standing in the window he walked directly across the square toward the tavern.

Konrad reached for his shirt and put it back on. As he did, he noticed his wristwatch and, after a moment's thought, unbuckled the strap and slipped the watch into his coat pocket. Shortly there was another, firmer knock on the door; he opened it to the bearded mayor.

They exchanged greetings, slightly awkwardly, then Weisser told him that as Konrad had stayed in the town, he wished him to play at his house that evening, a party for his daughter who had become engaged, that he would pay him ten zloty for this, and that if he were hungry the restaurant across the square would give him a meal on account until he was paid. Konrad said he would certainly play, and could he also get a couple of cigars on account? The mayor smiled slightly and fished a thin black cigar out of his coat pocket.

"It is six now," he said, "and I will send someone here at eight to bring you to my house." Konrad nodded, and Weisser departed, his boots stumping down the bare wooden stairs.

When he didn't have a cigar, Konrad was able to do without. Now he had one, he had a problem; he wanted to smoke it straight away, but he knew he would want it even more after he had eaten. He agreed with himself to smoke just less than half of it now, and finding matches on the night table he lit up, and stood at the window, smoking and watching the light outside fade.

It's odd, Konrad thought, this fellow is treating me as if he knew me, or has recognized me, why does he want me to come to his party, when there must be violin players, musicians anyway, already in this town? He stood at the window for a little longer without finding an answer. Shrugging, he stubbed the cigar out regretfully and put it in a twist of paper in his shirt pocket.

Pulling on his coat he left the room, taking the violin with him. He came out onto the square to see a pale violet evening sky above the roofs. Lights were on in most of the buildings, their windows glowing dull yellow. Konrad strolled around, looking with interest at the shopfronts.

He walked around the whole square, then returned to the restaurant door. *Królewskie Jadło*, he thought, *king's feast*, there were restaurants called that all over the country, but not too many kings have eaten in this one. Inside were wooden walls and small tables crammed together, and a pleasing smell of cooking meat. He told the waiter the mayor had sent him to have a meal, and he was shown to a table without comment.

From the list of dishes chalked on the wall he ordered veal and potatoes and a liter of beer, which came newly brewed, cloudy and smelling of fresh hops.

He ate and drank slowly, enjoying the meal. He listened to the conversations around him to see if he could at least discover the name of this place, but all he learned was the state of the weather and the price of pigs.

Finished, he walked out into the now-dark square and lit the remaining half of his cigar. It still tasted sweet, and with the first lungful of smoke he felt straight away content; calmer, happier, wiser. The night was soft and pleasant and the food in his stomach sat well with him. When he'd finished his cigar he walked back to the tavern and, nodding to the landlord as he entered, went upstairs to his room to wait.

He sat in a straight-backed wooden chair near the window, picked up the violin from its case, bowed a few chords from it, then began to play, a slow tune, a *bulgar*, the “*Kishinever Bulgar*.” The old song drifted out the window into the night, floated around the chimneypots on the tavern roof, hovered above the still-warm paving stones of the square. For five minutes Konrad played the melody, embellished it, then stripped it back to the basic tune, brought it back in through the open window, back into the violin, brought it to an end. He laid the instrument down. Then he sat for a time in the darkened room in silence, his hands resting unmoving on his knees.

III

When the mayor’s man came for him Konrad was ready, and they walked out of the tavern together. For three or four blocks they walked in silence past shops, storehouses, a fire station, its big wooden doors barred, then past the fences and gardens of private homes. This is a bigger place than I had realized, Konrad thought, and this is the better part of town, the houses are large, the roadway is level and the footpaths are paved. They came to a house set back from the street, a substantial two-story villa with lights shining from every downstairs window, and an avenue of what looked like walnut trees leading to the main doors.

Turning into a small gate in the fence, Konrad’s escort led him along a brick path to a side door, showed him into an anteroom, and told him he could have a drink if he wished before he began to play. Konrad nodded, slipped among the hurrying waiters to a table on which bottles and decanters stood, and poured himself half a tumbler of slivovitz.

The spirit cleared his head and warmed his stomach; he breathed more deeply and easily. Looking around, he saw an accordion sitting on a table; ah, so he was not to be the only musician. He saw coming through another doorway a short, dark man with heavy bags under glittering black eyes. A *zigeuner*, a Gypsy, thought Konrad, he will be the accordion player.

The Gypsy picked up his accordion by its worn leather straps. "Will we play together, fiddler?" he asked, in thickly accented Polish. "Why not?" said Konrad, and putting down the case, took out his violin and tucked it under his chin, holding it there while he tautened the bow. He bowed two chords to test the tuning, then the opening phrase of the old song "*Swiodeshka*." Before he had got four bars into it the accordion player had picked it up, and they ran through it together. This fellow is good, thought Konrad, he has a lighter touch than most accordionists, not too many notes, he gives me some room to breathe. He grinned at the Gypsy, who shrugged, smiling faintly, as if he had read Konrad's thoughts.

They left the anteroom and entered the main salon, a spacious room with a high ceiling, lit by a chandelier with electric light bulbs. People stood around talking, some holding glasses of wine. They walked through the room as they played. Konrad, warmed by the slivovitz and the music, smiled at people who caught his eye as they wove through the crowd.

As always, the music filled him, filled his heart and mind and blood. He didn't think of anything while he played, he was absorbed in the swoop of the bow on the strings, the sobbing of the violin. He was happy to have the accordionist with him. He hadn't even asked the fellow's name, but names didn't matter, they were playing, they made the music come out and live, breathe. They played the "*Moskva Chocek*," then they played "*Bei Mir Bistu Shayn*" especially to the mayor's daughter, a short plain girl, who giggled and held on to her fiancée as the two musicians circled round her, making eyes at her. They played the sad Romanian song "*Ben Avrameni*," then a polka they made up as they went along, then a *czardas* the accordion player started but Konrad took over, playing in the hot style, enjoying it so much that he finished the tune sweating into his shirt and with horsehair trailing from his bow.

To have a rest, he started "*Lyuba*," a Gypsy song, and let the accordion player take it. A sentimental tune, Konrad thought, even though Gypsies are the most unsentimental people in the world.

When that was done, he played the first bars of “*Erdelezi*,” but the Gypsy put his finger to his lips. “Not here,” he said. Konrad didn’t understand why, but he let it go and started “*Beygele*” instead, which they played for many choruses, walking round the rooms of the mayor’s house, rooms full of drinking, talking, laughing people.

At the end of that they stopped for a drink in the small anteroom. The accordion player produced a pack of cigarettes and they each lit one. They exchanged names, but didn’t shake hands; it was unnecessary, they had played music together, an acceptance far closer than a handshake.

Konrad was leaning against the wall, smoking, allowing the fingers of his left hand to hang loosely, nervelessly, a discipline he had learned as a student at the Academy. He wanted nothing more than to stand there, drawing in the blue cigarette smoke, knowing soon he would play again, that later tonight he would get some money, not much but a start, and later still would sleep in a clean bed.

It was then he saw the girl. She came into the room with a man, a tall pale fellow in a blue chalk-striped suit with padded shoulders, but Konrad ignored him after a glance and stared at her. Her hair was the first thing; reaching down past her shoulders, heavy black ringlets framing her face and cascading, there was no other word for it, down to her breast. Her eyebrows were black too, a soft black as if they were marked in charcoal, and only after seeing them did you realize her eyes were also black, a shiny black like olives or bitter aloes.

Her skin was soft pink, flushed with the warmth of the night and with youth and happiness, and she wore a blouse that showed her throat and the same warm pink skin there. Her hands were white and slightly chubby, her forearms, bare, shadowed with a faint dark down.

But it was not the detail of her appearance that entranced Konrad, but the whole of her, her presence, the liveliness that made her seem illuminated by a different light to everyone else there, and within all that, a mystery behind her eyes, an unguessable unique self that Konrad did not know, but in the moment of looking at her wanted to know very much.

She looked round the room. Her eyes passed over him then returned, perhaps noticing his intent stare. Embarrassed, he looked down at his cigarette as he drew on it. When he looked up again, she was turning to leave the room, the long black hair waving even more thickly down her back.

He caught the accordion player's eye and took up the violin again, wanting to play straight away. He played "*Gaspars Freilach*," fast and sweet, walking through the main room toward the high doorway at the far end, the accordionist behind him. A blonde woman in a long dark blue dress swayed toward him and smiled as he passed her, but he kept walking through the rooms, looking for the dark-haired one.

This time he played no longer just for the pleasure of playing, to hear within himself the music he created, but to reach out to someone else, the black-haired woman, to tell her he recognized her worth. And to tell her in turn who and what he really was; his playing would convey that. She was somewhere ahead of them in the crowd, but Konrad was sure she could hear the music.

He played quickly and lightly, stepping deftly around guests in his way. Someone pushed a banknote into his top pocket. He didn't even look at the fellow, but kept his eyes fixed ahead. Then he caught sight of the girl's glossy black hair, and slowed his steps. He wanted her to hear him, to give her time to take in his message.

The *freilach* was too simple for his purpose, so he ended it and began the "*Stoliner Sher*," playing with emotion, bringing out the sadness and nobility of the tune.

She had turned back toward him, watching, listening. He played another chorus; her companion in the suit leant over and spoke into her ear, but she shook her head slightly and put her hand on his sleeve to silence him. Konrad knew the music was working, his playing was working, she wanted to hear it, and with the next tune she would realize he was playing only to her. A scent of night-blossoming jasmine came into the room through the tall open windows.

Without breaking off he moved into the "*Odessa Bulgar*," the slow beginning decorated with elaborate flourishes, an announcement, something is coming, watch out, the Gypsy picked

up his intention and played that way too, it became a contest between them in melodrama. Konrad drew out his last note as far as it could go, until it was stretched in the air as thin and high as a spiderweb, then, grinning, swung into the fast break. Someone behind him cheered, *oy oy oy*, and she laughed and clapped her white round hands together. Konrad smiled at her, and she smiled back, openly, and didn't look away from him, he kept looking at her as he played, he brought the tune back to its slow part and took a pace toward her as he did. He was beyond pretending now. He wanted to play for her, to woo her, to steal her, and he wanted her to know it.

Then it came to him; he would win her if he played the birch-tree *khosidl*, his new Bukovina *khosidl*. The beauty and purity of the melody would announce his good heart. The newness of it, sounding in the air for the first time, would be as sweet and sad and melting as it would ever be. A perfect gift, it would warm her soul, it would sweep away any reservations, any thoughts of others, it would be the theme tune of their romance, for however long that lasted.

In the moment he thought of it, he knew he should not do it. He had been a musician all his life, and now he had been marked out for this high gift, this melody, he had been found worthy to receive it. It was a gift from God. He could not use it selfishly, for profit, to steal. When he played it, he had to give it to the world openly, openheartedly.

Then he looked again at the girl, flushed, smiling, caught up in the music. And is she not one of God's creatures, too? And if God gave me this beautiful tune, He has also placed this woman here on this earth, given her this particular richness of hair, whiteness of skin, given her her time as a small girl in the village, her coming of age, friends, a sweetheart, rides in automobiles, walks in the forest picking mushrooms; made her choose this dress and these shoes, placed her here tonight and then brought me here with this tune in my head and heart, the tune that came to me as I walked down the nameless sandy road to this town.

The tune is a gift, a gift for her. A gift to youth and beauty, a gift to the loveliness of all women at parties on autumn evenings, a tribute to the fleeting sweetness of being alive.

He played a long slow chord to end “*Odessa*,” and glancing at the accordion player made a quick flat gesture with his bow-hand, stay out of this next one. The fellow nodded slightly with his chin. Konrad took a deep breath, held the bow over the strings for a moment, and began to play.

The first long note, a simple low G, swelled out of the heart of the violin, out of the dark space within the old curved wood he had handled so much that he knew it better than his hands or his face, and wound into the air, and Konrad felt it was not like any note he had ever played before, it had a strength and richness he had never heard under his own hands. Wondering, he shaped the next notes of the melody, hearing for the first time from the strings the tune given to him there amongst the birches. It flowed out of his violin, flowed outward and upward.

The room had fallen into a hush. Conversation had stopped. Only the notes of the violin filled the warm autumn evening air. The melody flowed and swooped and climbed, and it was tears and laughter and regret and hope all in one, it was joyful and melancholy, it carried every emotion with it as it surged out into the room, curved round under the ceiling, stretched itself out through the windows into the warm night, so the birch trees outside in the garden resonated with it. And it blended so much with the scent of the night-jasmine that for everyone who heard Konrad play that night, the two could never again be separated, the scent of jasmine and the melody of the *khosidl*, the birch-tree *khosidl*, Konrad’s Bukovina *khosidl*.

Konrad had been playing with his eyes closed. He opened them; the light from the chandelier was too bright at first, but he could see a circle of faces around him, and another circle behind those, all looking at him. And he smelled the rich smells of tobacco smoke, of perfume on warm bodies, of brandy, of jasmine, all in a rush together.

He was bringing the tune towards its end, moving toward the last chorus, when he realized he was looking directly at the black-haired girl and she was looking at him. He could smell her perfume alone amongst all the others, he could feel the warmth from her over the several paces between them and he could see the light shining on her blue-black hair as it tumbled down over her shoulders. Her

eyes, black and shining, held his, and he stared back into them as he played, as if each dared the other to look away, and neither did.

But the skill of his playing did not desert him and the tune did not falter but flowed through the repeat of the last chorus and came to an end, resolving from the minor third to a major chord, so the hearer was satisfied, and the tune ended.

He stopped, and there was silence; that moment seemed to last a very long time, then all at once someone said, "Bravo, fiddler," and several others laughed delightedly, and some others clapped, and Konrad took the violin from under his chin and looked down at his hands; he offered a silent prayer of thanks. Then the accordion player started up a Gypsy tune on his own, fast and rhythmic and cheerful, and people's voices all burst out at once, talking of whatever they had before, and the room moved again and the night moved on.

Konrad stood looking down in wonderment at his hands, at the violin. But when he looked up again, she had not moved but was standing front of him. The fellow in the padded suit was not there, and the girl looked at Konrad now in the same frank way she had when he was playing, only now he was not playing, he had no violin between himself and her. If he wanted to speak to her now it had to be with words, however poor they would be after the music.

He inclined his head in a small bow, and said to her, "Konrad, Wojciek Konrad, at your service."

"Rebekah Hannewitz," she said. Her voice was low, dark, husky, surprising. And Konrad wanted badly to tell her his real name, names generally did not matter to him much, but now he wanted this woman to know who he was, why she should take him seriously. But his caution had been earned dearly over many years and even now he did not abandon it.

Instead he told her he'd arrived today, and he asked her the name of the town. She smiled and said, "Did my uncle not tell you where you are?" and he realised this was the mayor's niece, someone with money and importance in the town. He hesitated, because here he was no more than a wandering musician, but then he remembered how she'd looked at him when he was playing, so he brought out his best card, and told her he had just written that tune, and he wished to name it after her if she would allow him, and she said it

was a lovely melody and she would be happy if he used her name, so he told her the tune was now called “Rebekah’s *Khosidl*,” and she smiled, and dear God her teeth were so white in her flushed face and Konrad, who could hear the accordion playing in the next room amongst the voices of the partygoers, reached out and took hold of her plump white hand and brought it to his lips and kissed it, and she smiled still, and Konrad put down the violin and stepped close to her, and she looked up at him, and he put his hands on her shoulders, feeling the heat of her skin through the black silk of her dress, and kissed her, and she kissed him.

Then he took her arm, and leaving his violin there on the table, which he had never done before in his life, he walked with her across the room and out the French windows into the night garden, where the scent of jasmine was all around them.

And when they had been out there a little while, she said she had to go back inside, and she stepped carefully across the wet leaf-strewn lawn and through the double doors into the lighted rooms. He waited a minute and then went in himself. He picked up his violin, untouched where he had left it, and walked through the house looking for the accordion player.

He found him standing at a table eating. There were baskets of rolls, plates of cheese and pickled cucumbers, a bowl of potatoes and a ham, but Konrad was not hungry. “*Ach, manus*, what was that song you played before?” the Gypsy asked. Konrad shrugged. “I made it up,” he said, “today.” The other looked long at him.

“Well, if you say so, Pan Konrad,” he said at last. He picked up his accordion, slipped the straps over his shoulders, and played a couple of runs to loosen his fingers. “But it didn’t sound like a song anyone just made up, it sounded like one of the old songs I heard as a child, one of the songs my grandfather learned from his grandfather, yet I know I have never heard it before.” Konrad said nothing.

“If it’s your tune, what do you call it?” The Gypsy played a few notes which, to Konrad’s surprise, resolved into the melody of the *khosidl*. He was amazed to hear it played by another’s hands on another instrument. Was it even still his song, or did it have its own life now he had brought it out of the magic lamp?

“I call it ‘Rebekah’s *Khosidl*,’” said Konrad.

“If I had made that tune,” said the Gypsy, “I would not call it after any woman. I would name it after myself, so I would be remembered forever when I am gone from here.” He shivered slightly, then smiled. “Anyway, Pan Konrad, shall we play some more to earn our ten zloty?”

So they struck up another tune, Konrad didn't think about what they played, the songs came easily to him, but all the time he was thinking of the embrace of the dark-haired woman in the garden, her perfume mingled with the jasmine, and his blood was hot in his face as he thought of seeing her again at the end of the night; they had not spoken of that, but he knew he would look for her and find her.

They passed through the downstairs rooms of the big house often enough that Konrad recognized each guest there, the men by their suits and the women by their faces. About the third time through the main room Weisser stepped over as a song finished and gave each of them ten zloty. Konrad had already been given nearly thirty zloty, in ones, twos and fives, by guests as they played. Weisser told them they could stop if they wished, and told Konrad he would owe nothing if he wanted to sleep in the room at the tavern tonight, but that he owed two zloty at the restaurant, and Konrad thanked him and said he would pay tomorrow.

Konrad had no desire to stop playing, even though he had been paid and the crowd of guests was thinning. By midnight, though, many more guests had left, and Konrad and the accordionist, by unspoken consent, put down their instruments, dragged two wooden chairs out through the French doors into the cool night air, sat and smoked. After a bit the Gypsy cleared his throat, spat into the darkness, and stood. “I will go now, Pan,” he said, and Konrad said “Another time, then,” and the accordion player said yes, and then, in his awkward Polish, “I have to tell you, some men in there looked very ill at you as you passed by them in this last hour, and then spoke among themselves. I was behind you and saw it. Do you want to walk away from here with me, so there are two of us and you do not remain here alone?”

Konrad was surprised; he hadn't noticed anything. But there was no question of him leaving, he was staying to find the black-haired woman, and so he told the Gypsy he could look after

himself, and the man shrugged, and asked him if he had a knife, and Konrad said yes, and laughed, thinking the fellow was making too much of it, and the Gypsy said very well, and took up his accordion and, hanging it over one shoulder, walked away across the garden. Watching him go Konrad remembered that his knife had been taken from him in the lockup back in Suczawa, but it could hardly matter, what mattered was to find the woman, Rebekah. The feeling of her warm, firm shoulders under his hands returned to him, and he drew in his breath sharply. She is waiting for me, and every minute I sit here and do not find her is a minute wasted.

He dropped his cigarette on the ground and put his foot on it, then rose and stepped back through the open French doors into the house.

IV

The next summer was unseasonably hot, with drawn-out sunny days and long warm evenings. It was still twilight at ten at night at the end of June, and people were in good spirits as they strove to enjoy all there was to enjoy. The restaurants and theatres were full every night, and there were parties and weddings in every city and town and village. Officers and soldiers garrisoned across Bukovina and Galizia and Ruthenia seemed feverishly anxious to have a good time, and landlords sold more champagne and beer and slivovitz than they had in memory.

And in the dance halls and house parties, at wedding receptions and engagement parties and in restaurants, in Czernowitz and Wittwitz and Stanyslaviv, and further east and west, in Tarnow and Premysl and even Lwow, there was a tune all the bands played that last hot summer, dance bands and klezmer bands and Gypsy orchestras and violin trios, a haunting, slow dance, sweet and sad and elegant and romantic all at once, a lovely tune, a masterpiece. No one knew where it had come from, although Henryk Wars, who led the Odeon dance orchestra in Lwow, said he had learned it from a Gypsy accordionist from Czernowitz.

Everybody knew the song as "Konrad's Bukovina *Khosidl*," but nobody knew who Konrad was, except with that name he was a Pole,

and everyone agreed he was a master fiddle player. Some said he had given up playing in despair after writing this perfect melody, knowing he could never write another as good, others said he had gone to America and become a millionaire leading a band in New York; another story was that he had been killed in a knife fight over a woman. The Gypsies said, spitting on the ground, that the devil had given him this melody in exchange for his soul, and had taken him.

And that summer, just for that summer, the custom developed everywhere that it was the last song of the night, this slow, sad but joyful melody, this melody everyone stopped talking and drinking to listen to, which ran through their heads as they took their way home, groups of tipsy officers humming it as they walked arm in arm back to barracks down dusty streets in wretched villages or through busy garrison towns, in a state of melancholy rapture.

And it was so on one moonlit night in September, after an autumn day almost as warm as high summer. At restaurants and music theatres and dance halls and parties, the last tune played that night, the last night before everything changed, before the guns began, was the final chorus of that lovely, sad and sweet tune, "Konrad's Bukovina *Khosidl*."

Voilà

Margot Douaihy

Geminga Finalist

There it is: there you are, *voilà*, she thought, I've been waiting for you, moon, but she did not think, the thought thought her, the floating rock brought her to the firmament—that's it, *voilà!* here she is—here we are—nodes in the rhizome, embers glowing in the furnace of the heart of the breathing planet, hovering slowly, *voilà*, the us-ness, the you of me & the me of you, the id, ego, supermoon, *voilà!*, a true fact, even when it's not, like the orb of eye always awake & always asleep—the brightest light under the darkest lid.



Girl With an Ermine / Lilianne Milgrom
Geminga Finalist

You Arrived

Morgan English

Geminga Finalist

like a boot in my trawl, craving myth.
A forest of figs. Scuppernongs.
The iron forged dinner bell.
Going to a dance, eucalyptus in my hair.

First Light Puerto Vallarta

Alfredo Quarto

Geminga Finalist

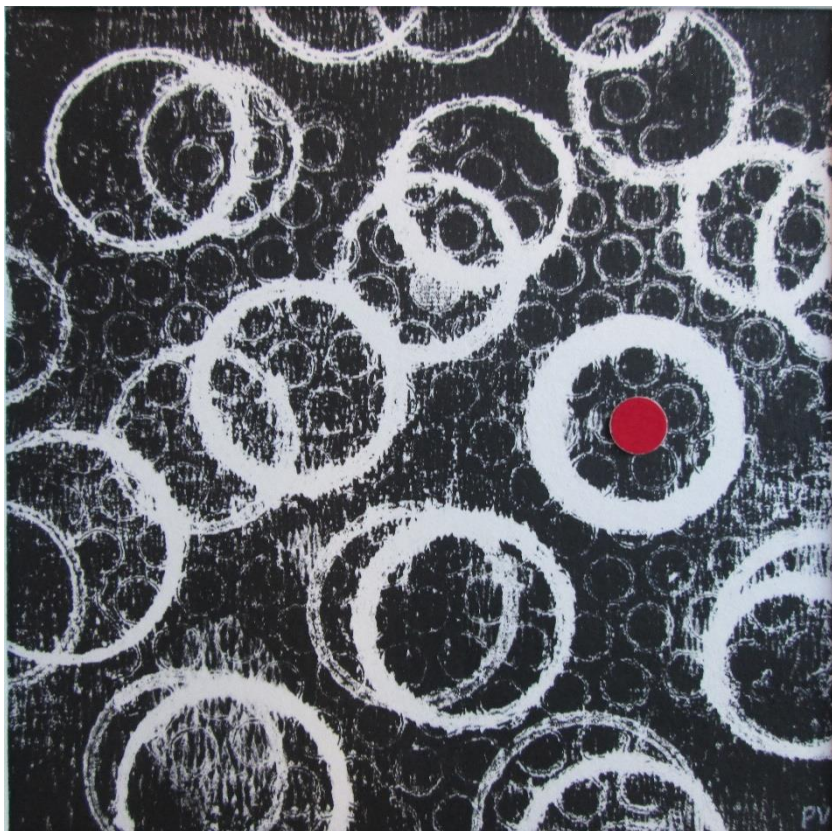
Soft skin of morning
Bright-plumed birds sing hosannas
To harbor dawn.
Ripples define where
Fish have tempted water bounds
Sea reflecting clouds.

Terra Incognita

Julie Noble

Geminga Finalist

When the arid winter is coming, leaves the color of pumpkin flesh fall late from trees in the isolated walled patios of unassuming adobe houses camouflaged against the earth they came from. Shy homes among the pervasive spiky *ichu ichu* show pride in their sheep and llamas, the rows of potatoes nearly ready to harvest and make *chuño*. On *Ruta Nacional 1*, beyond Machacamamarca, the city has not yet leached into the *altiplano*, swallowing or squeezing as it urbanises with brash metal roofed cubes on tiny crop and animal-free plots; for now, this is still terra incognita on Google Maps.



Running Around in Circles / Pamela Viggiani

Geminga Finalist



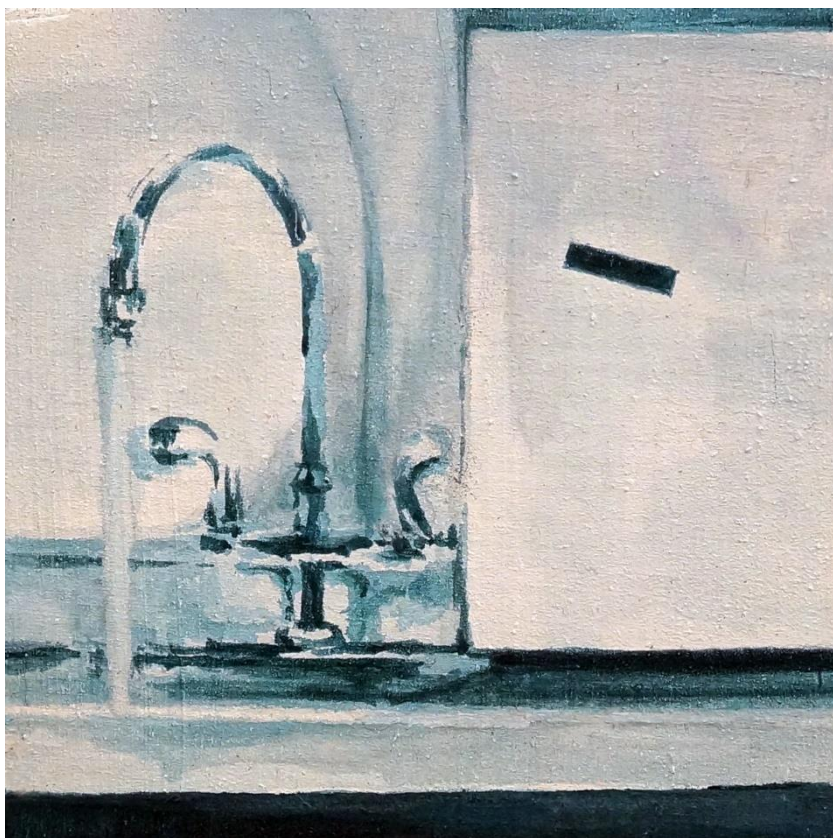
Blind / Taylor Moon
Geminga Runner-up

And What of Love?

Daragh Byrne

Geminga Runner-up

And what of love, that vast and splendid thing
That eats her young, while teaching them to sing?



Of Being / Jackie Ta
Geminga Winner

Contributors

Jack Bordnick's sculptures and photography incorporate surrealistic, mythological and magical imagery—often with whimsical overtones—aimed at provoking our experiences and self-reflections. The predominant imagery deals with facial expressions of both living and “non-living” beings, and things that speak to us in their own languages. They are mixed media assemblages that have been assembled, disassembled and reassembled, becoming abstractions unto themselves. Jack has been a designer and design director for the past twenty years, including for numerous companies and projects.

Michael Brosnan's most recent poetry book is *The Sovereignty of the Accidental* (Harbor Mountain Press, 2018). He's also the author of *Against the Current*, a book on inner-city education, and serves as the editor for the website Teaching While White.

Daragh Byrne is an Irish poet writing in Sydney, Australia. He has had work published in *The Blue Nib* and *The Honest Ulsterman*, amongst others. His poems have been commended or placed in a number of competitions in Ireland and Australia. He runs The Sydney Poetry Lounge, a long-running open mic night.

Garrett Candrea grew up in Eastchester, New York and currently lives in Astoria, Queens. In college he elected the wrong major and now holds a bachelor's degree in computer science from Fordham University.

Ayshe Dengtash was born to immigrant parents from North Cyprus. She spent the formative years of her childhood on a council estate in Southeast London, in the United Kingdom, and her teenage years in North Cyprus. Her first novel *The Grieving Mothers of the Departed Children* was published by Alden, Allegory Ridge in November 2020. Her short stories have been published in *Cleaning Up Glitter*, *Newfound*, and *The Journal*. She currently prose reads for *The Walled City Journal* and Black Lawrence Press. She lives in Hong Kong with her partner and her two cats.

Margot Douaihy, PhD, is the author of *Scranton Lace* and *Girls Like You* (Clemson University Press). Her work has been featured in *PBS NewsHour*, *North American Review*, *Colorado Review*, *The Florida Review*, *The South Carolina Review*, *The Wisconsin Review*, *Tahoma Literary Review*, and elsewhere. She is a member of the Radius of Arab-American Writers and Creative Writing Studies Organization.

Morgan English is a Vermont poet and textile/garment maker. Her poetry has appeared in *St. Petersburg Review*, *Literary North* and she has been nominated for Best New Poets (2012).

GJ Gillespie is a collage artist living on Whidbey Island north of Seattle. Winner of seventeen awards, his art has appeared in dozens of regional shows. The artists he admires tap unconscious feelings of longing for existential meaning that emerge from cultural icons. In his view, abstraction should be more than pleasing design. Art should evoke connotations that permit the viewer to experience a sense of wonder, awe and new perspectives of being.

Susan Landgraf was awarded an Academy of American Poets Laureate award in 2020. Books include *The Inspired Poet* from Two Sylvias Press (2019), *What We Bury Changes the Ground*, and *Other Voices*. More than 400 poems have appeared in *Prairie Schooner*, *Poet Lore*, *Margie*, *Nimrod*, *Sunspot*, *The Meadow*, *Calyx*, and others.

Alan P. Marks received his MA in Creative Writing from the University of Maine (Stephen King's alma mater) in 1998, and then never left. He has spent the last twenty-three years there as an instructor of writing and literature (teaching a course on Stephen King among other unusual topics such as vampires, monsters, and the apocalypse). A later-in-life emerging writer, he had his first short story publication earlier this year in *Carcosa Magazine*.

Born in Paris, **Lilianne Milgrom** grew up in Australia and now resides in the United States. She is an multimedia artist, author and published writer on the arts. She is the recipient of multiple awards and residencies. Her artwork can be found in both private and institutional collections around the world.

Taylor Moon, Class of 22, is a junior from South Korea who attends the Chapin School in New York. Taylor has studied art at TASIS International School in Switzerland, studied with Sheery Camhy at the Arts Student League of New York and the Ashcan Studio in New York.

Peter Newall was born in Sydney, Australia, where he worked as a road-mender, in a navy dockyard and as a lawyer, but later lived in Kyoto, Japan, where he sang for a popular local blues band, and now in Odessa, Ukraine. He has been published in England, Hong Kong, and the USA; his story "The Chinese General" won the 2021 New Millennium Writings Fiction Award.

Julie Noble is from the northwest of England but has lived in Bolivia for over twenty years, where she works with young offenders. She writes regularly about the challenges and delights of life in Bolivia. She is currently studying for an MA in Creative Writing and, apart from reading and writing, loves cycling.

Alfredo Quarto is an environmental activist and poet. He's been published in numerous poetry publications including: *Poetry Seattle, Catalyst, Raindance Journal, Piedmont Review, Haiku Zashi Zo, Paperbag Poems, Seattle Arts, Spindrift, Arts Focus, Arnazella, Dan River Anthology, Amelia, Americas Review, Vox, Middle House Review, The Closed Eye Open*, and *Tidepools*. He has also had articles published in *The Guardian, Cultural Survival Quarterly, Earth Island Journal, E-Magazine, Wild Earth, Bird Conservation, Tokyo Journal* and *Biodiversity Magazine*.

Jessica Ripka is a writer, audio producer and musician based in Los Angeles. A Tin House Fellow and graduate of the Transom Story Workshop, her writing has appeared in *Hippocampus, Pithead Chapel, Pidgeonholes* and *Eclectica Magazine*.

Jackie Ta is a twenty-three-year-old Vietnamese artist working in the US. Ta is currently pursuing an MFA degree in Painting at Clemson University. She has been exhibiting throughout the United States, and took an internship at Josephine Sculpture Park in Frankfort, Kentucky. Having a chance to stay inside more, she created a series of mini paintings of mundane still lives to act as memory-keepers. They keep her calm and help her react to the beautiful surroundings that have always been there, but which can be difficult to notice.

Reg Taylor is a South Australian writer whose stories, often based in the River Murray area, published in a number of print and online venues within Australia and overseas.

Charisse J. Tubianosa was born in Manila, Philippines where she started an MA in creative writing, but ended up getting degrees in economics instead. She currently resides in Barcelona, Spain. Her stories tackle themes related to identity, race and the immigrant experience. She's completing a collection of stories on being a Filipina woman in her country and beyond its borders. She was selected to join the 2021 Voices of Our Nation (VONA) Summer Workshop, has a story published with *Spanglishvoices*, and another forthcoming with *Litbreak Magazine*.

Pamela Viggiani is a mixed-media artist and art educator living in Canandaigua, NY. Her art has been featured in *Small Works, Light Space & Time Online Art Gallery, Another Chicago Magazine*, and *Press Pause Press*. Her works are manifestations of ambiguity. She produces visual interpretations of particular ideas or concepts in order to explore the relationship between word and meaning. While reflecting the world back to the viewer, Pamela gives room for alternative reactions to each piece of artwork, revealing hidden realities and challenging our own entrenched ways of thinking.

Jeanne Wilkinson is a writer, artist, and art professor sharing time between Brooklyn, NY, and Madison, WI. Her essays have been featured on WNYC's Leonard Lopate Show and NPR's *Living on Earth*. Her fiction has appeared in *Columbia Journal* and *Digging Through the Fat*, and chapters from her memoir *1969: My Year with a San Francisco Drug Dealer* have been published by *Raven's Perch*, *New Millennium Writings*, *The Write Launch*, and *Metafore*. Her short experimental films have been screened at BAM and the Greenpoint and NYC Indie Film Festivals, and a video installation was shown at the 13th St. Repertory Theater in Manhattan.

Amanda Woodard is a freelance poet, essayist and ghostwriter, and an MFA candidate at Antioch University. She studied social science and journalism at the University of North Texas and attended writing workshops at the Mayborn Literary Nonfiction Conference and Writing Workshops Dallas. Her work has been performed in Oral Fixation and published in *Ten Spurs*, *eris & eros*, *Cathexis Northwest Press* and *Button Eye Review*.

NEW ENGLAND REVIEW

Forthcoming

Helene Achanzar
Aldo Amparán
Scott Blackwood
Scott Broker
May-lee Chai
Samantha Xiao Cody
John Cotter
Melissa Crowe
Nicole Cuffy
Alice Greenway
Sarah Gridley
Emelie Griffin
Mark Harman
G. K. Heart
Blair Hurley
Rachel Mannheimer
Nathaniel G. Nesmith
Ademola Olugebefola
Benjamin Paloff
Julie Riddle
Leslie Sainz
Natalie Scenters-Zapico
Rob Shapiro
Jenn Shapland
Gregory Spatz
Yerra Sugarman
Marguerite W. Sullivan
Leath Tonino
Emma Trelles
Shelley Wong
Yanyi
Marek Zaganczyk
Jakob Ziguras
and more

Read
Write
Submit
Follow
Subscribe

NEReview.com
@NERweb
@newenglandreview

WRITING A NEW WORLD

Sunspot Literary Journal believes in the power of the written word. Fiction, nonfiction, poetry and art speak truth to power with the power inherent in all human beings. Our mission is to amplify every voice. Four digital quarterly editions are produced per year, along with one print volume.

SUPPORT *SUNSPOT LIT*

Today more than ever, literary journals are forces of change in the world. *Sunspot Lit* is funded entirely through private means. Every donation, even ones as small as a dollar, makes a difference. Please take a moment to drop a few bucks into the *Sunspot* magnetic field flux.

A PayPal link on the website makes it easy to send a tip, donate enough to publish the next digital edition, or go supernova and fund the next print edition. Please visit <https://sunspotlit.com/support> for details.

ADVERTISE IN *SUNSPOT*

Classified ads are available in quarterly digital editions and special editions. Spread the word about your writing and arts contests, residency programs, awards, workshops, and more. All classified ads are also posted on the website's classified page. Ad rate: \$150 for up to 25 words; \$5 for each additional word.

Print ads are available for the annual edition. All ads are black and white. A full page is \$850, a half page is \$450, and a quarter page is \$295. Buy two ads of the same size for the same issue or for two sequential issues to receive a 10% discount. Set up three or more ads and receive a 15% discount.

Sunspot's groovy graphic designer can set up your ad to your specifications. Flat rate of \$325, and the design is yours to use multiple times in *Sunspot* or any other magazine.