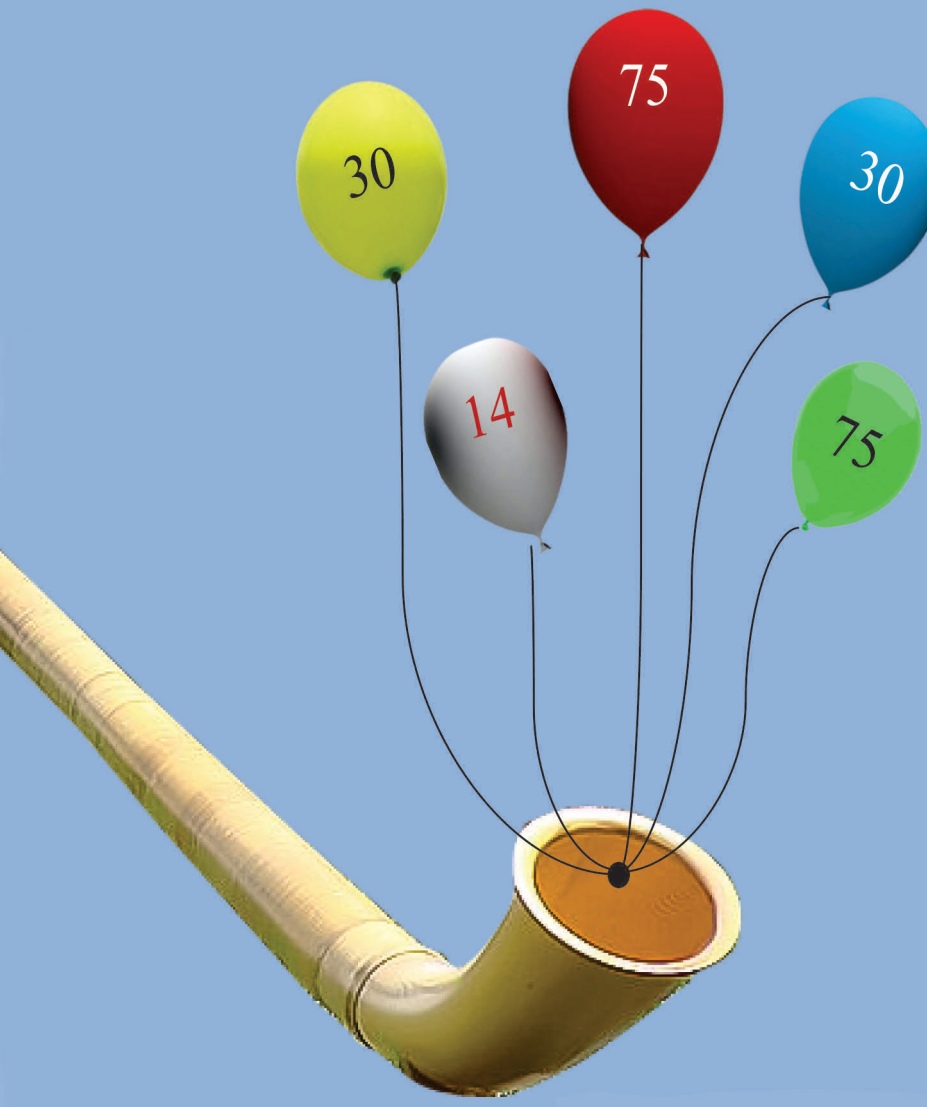
Number 30 Summer, 2021

EVENING STREET REVIEW



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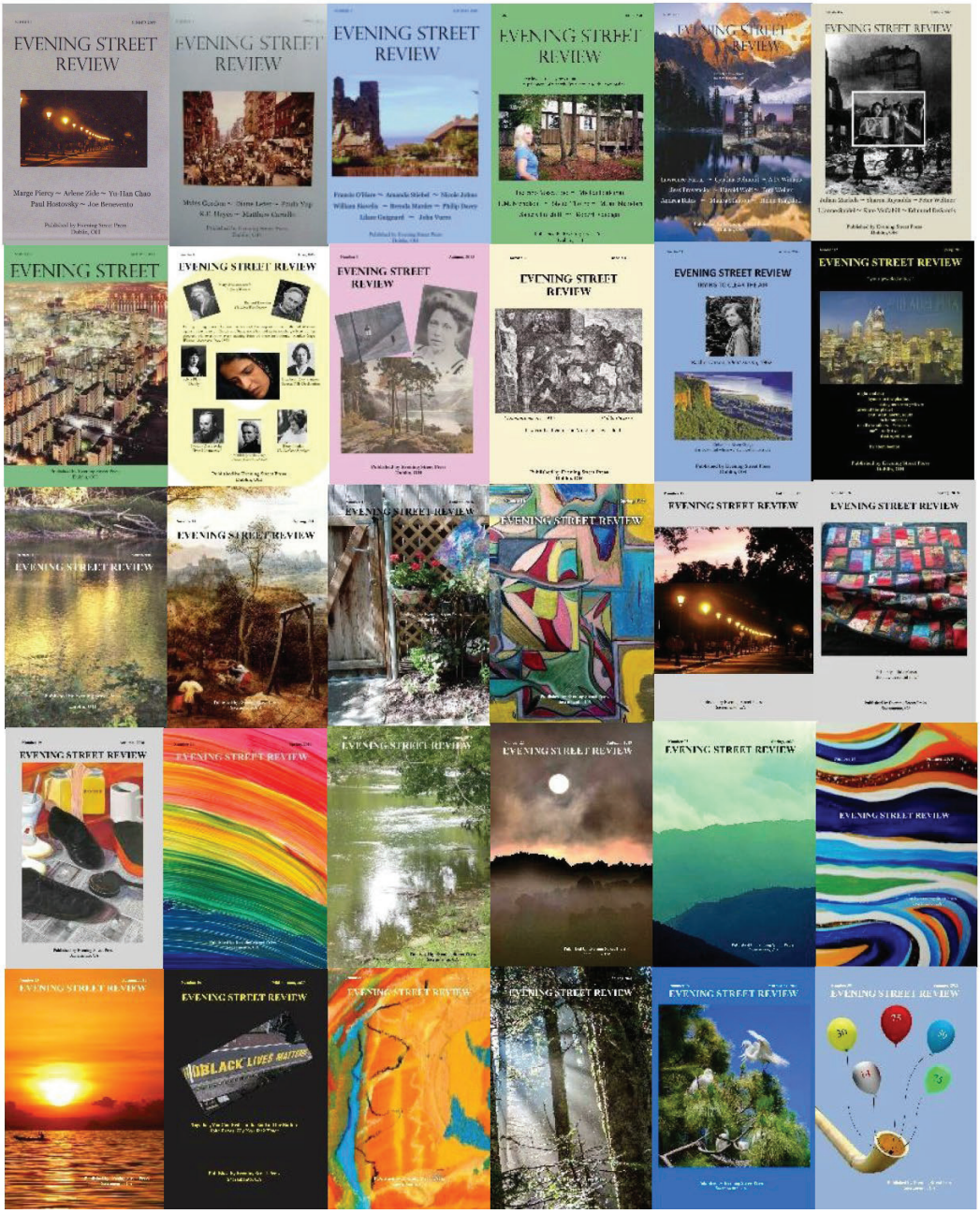

EVENING STREET REVIEW

NUMBER 30, SUMMER 2021

. . .all men and women are created equal in rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

—Elizabeth Cady Stanton, revision of the
American Declaration of Independence, 1848

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Evening Street Review is centered on the belief that all men and women are created equal, that they have a natural claim to certain inalienable rights, and that among these are the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. With this center, and an emphasis on writing that has both clarity and depth, it practices the widest eclecticism. Evening Street Review reads submissions of poetry (free verse, formal verse, and prose poetry) and prose (short stories and creative nonfiction) year-round. Submit 3-6 poems or 1-2 prose pieces at a time. Payment is one contributor's copy. Copyright reverts to author upon publication. Response time is 3-6 months. Please address submissions to Editors, 2881 Wright St, Sacramento, CA 95821-4819. Email submissions are also acceptable; send to the following address as Microsoft Word or rich text files (.rtf): **editor@eveningstreetpress.com**.

For submission guidelines, subscription information, published works, and author profiles, please visit our website:

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HELEN KAY CHAPBOOK PRIZE WINNERS

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2009 *Recite Every Day* by Myles Gordon
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2012 *Mola . . . Person* by Lynn Veach Sadler
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2014 *At the Booth Memorial Home for Unwed Mothers 1966* by Patti Sullivan
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2015 *Scene of the Crime* by Jennifer Lagier
2016 *Itzhak Perlman's Broken String* by Jacqueline Jules
2017 *Neighbors* Poems by Tom Boswell
2017 *Free Range Kids* by Peggy Trojan
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2019 *Good Work* by Matthew J. Spireng
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2012 *Halley and Me* by Sandra Gardner
2014 *All the Words* by Maria Brandt
2016 *What Winter Means* by Deena Linett

14 30 75

Evening Street Press by the numbers

This is the **30**th issue of *Evening Street Review*, **14** years after the founding of Evening Street Press by Gordon Grigsby and Kip Knott. As Gordon's wife, I was the gofer: doing anything needed to make publishing possible. Over the years, we had volunteers, initially former students of Gordon's, then authors we asked to step up: Jan Schmittauer, Matthew M Cariello, Donna Spector, Steve Abbott, James De Monte, Kailen Nourse (-Driscoll), Aaron Stypes, Patti Sullivan, Peggy Trojan, Anthony Mohr, L D Zane, Stacia Levy, Jeffrey Davis, Clela Reed, Matthew Mendoza, Matthew Spireng, Ace Bogess, Kristin Laural, Jan Bowman. These associate editors screen the submissions; in the last two years, over 2,000, of which about 500 were accepted.

In 2009, the press launched The Helen Kay Chapbook contest (named after Gordon's maternal grandmother) and the Sinclair Poetry Prize (named after his paternal grandmother). 13 Helen Kay chapbook prizes have been awarded and 7 Sinclair prizes. The Grassic Short Novel Prize awarded 4 prizes, but had to be discontinued because of the burdens on the press.

In addition, the press has published 21 other books. This makes this issue the **75**th publication.

The Ink Well of Dublin-Granville Rd, Columbus, OH has been our printer, helping to design our covers and now offering print on demand.

Jessica Kastor, as intern, developed our Facebook presence and grew its membership to over **2,000**. www.facebook.com/EveningStreetPress

We launched a YouTube channel that currently has **309** videos featuring our published writers reading their work as you read along. https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCq14IqZqfDuBIa48mugYq1A

Our books are on Google Play and Amazon Kindle. (search "Evening Street Press")

Recognizing the prisoners who have contributed to *Evening Street Review*, the DIY Prison Project has created a prison review process led by Matthew Mendoza (who inspired the name). A dedicated web page features the work of **24** writers. https://eveningstreetpress.com/diy-prison-project/

Gordon Grigsby believed in the possibility of a new culture beyond patriarchy:

Evening Street Press strives to publish words with positive impact.

BB

EVENING STREET REVIEW
PUBLISHED BY EVENING STREET PRESS

NUMBER 30, SUMMER 2021

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NONFICTION

FICTION

OCCASIONAL NOTES

This timely essay continues Gordon Grigsby's idea of "Occasional Notes."

THE C WORD

I was up at 3 A.M. recently because 48% of Americans believe that *Fox News* is *Actual News.* No, that's not true; they don't all believe it; some of them merely feign belief to whip up mania in the Republican Party's credulous base as they mainline Sean Hannity's hate-porn like heroin.

Forty-eight percent is no reckless hyperbole; it's the hefty slice of people—almost half of the American pie—who voted for Donald Trump in the 2020 election. And they did this knowing him for the braggart, the serial liar, the charity swindler, the tax cheat, the environmental ransacker, and the rickety Romeo to Stormy Daniels' shy Juliet that he is. There seemed to be nothing I could do about this vast American defection to a terrible darkness, except work my teeth steadily through my bite guard at night. If I run my tongue over its formerly smooth surface, I can feel two tiny Tetons my incisors have pushed up in the tectonics of insomnia.

So I put on my mom's old soft cardigan and shuffled down to the kitchen and sliced up an apple, not the usual *Gala*—one of which I'd recently found disappointingly flavorless—but a *Sweet* something-or-other Larry had picked up. And I poured a glass of red wine from a spigot on the box we keep in the laundry room ("gracious-living-in-the-Midwest," my friend Jeanne says) into a short glass with a flat bottom and, balancing these on my laptop, climbed upstairs and back into my bed next to an open window. After an astonishing week of Indian Summer (can you say that anymore?), November was roaring in through the screen. I pulled the covers over my knees and breathed it in. Then I took a bite of my apple, noted its bitterness, and wondered what disease this taste-ageusia foretold.

It's probably all blather, but I tell myself fairly often that I am ready to die. Not eager, but prepared enough if needs must. Aging is an unpromising business, or rather, it's darkly promising. That shadow in the road ahead might only be Online Bingo or Mortifying Incontinence or A Condo In The Villages—manageable atrocities—but it might just as easily be Alzheimer's, which came for my mother and might be waiting around.

After a Costco run today—with Covid cases spiking again, it seemed prudent to lay in a winter's supply of Chocolate Kisses and a few cinder blocks of cheese—I stopped by my sister's house for a cup of tea and a chat. Her sweet, ancient black lab, Lucy—a sack of ribs with a dowager's hump—and her young white lab, Sugar—Renee Zellweger in a cashmere sweater—met me at the door and escorted me to the living room where Sue and her husband Kim and my niece Sydney were watching the (real) news. Crying foul over the election and refusing to concede defeat, like the despot he dearly wanted to be, Trump had just fired his fourth secretary of defense and his corrupted secretary of state was declaring four more years of a Trump presidency. "I'll go into the streets if he refuses to leave," Sue said, raising her mug over her elevated bad knee. "I'll be right in the streets!"

"I'll go with you," I declared. "We're old. We've lived our lives. If they shoot us, they shoot us" *they,* of course, meaning the MAGA camp, who had all the guns. "But not you"—I pointed to Sydney, who is in nursing school. "You do not go into the streets. You have important work to do. But right now," I dropped a tea bag into my cup, "I need you to help me find a birch tree." I'd seen a pretty little artificial birch at Costco a couple of weeks earlier that seemed better suited to the pared-down Christmas ahead than a big fat fir. Letting go of old fixtures that don't fit a pandemic was a lesson I was slowly learning. (Cc to the people who would bring us the depressing Macy's Parade a couple of weeks later.) But Costco was sold out. So we muted the news and while Syd was getting her iPad, Kim showed me a picture he'd taken of a spider on their deck ("*Where* did you see that?" Sue gasped) and asked if I knew exactly what type of beast it was. People think I know these things, but really I just have an app. I took out my phone.

"It's called *iNaturalist,*" I told Kim, showing him the icon. "It identifies animals, insects, flowers, trees—anything. Watch." I took a picture of Lucy, sleeping on the carpet by my feet.

The app spun its little wheel. "Domestic Water Buffalo," it reported.

I sighed. *iNaturalist* did know its spiders though, and eventually we identified Kim's specimen as a type of Jumping Spider ("a *what* kind of spider? Sue gasped) and Sydney ordered my birch tree from Kohl's and the water buffalo climbed up on the couch, and I went home to shower before heading over to my friend Lauri's house to sit around her fire pit with a few other pals. The days had turned warm again, but the weather-prophets warned that this really would be the last balmy night of fall.

It is a singular, irritating, tragic fact about Trump that, despite whatever joys the world is showering on you—in this case Joe Biden's recent

popular and electoral win—your mind and conversation always return to him. It's a perverse magnetism the press has never been able to resist and what probably got him elected in the first place; he is that proverbial train wreck no one can wrest their eyes from. If God reached out of a cumulus cloud and dropped lottery tickets like manna, if Jesus came back in spectacular drag, if Buddha and Elvis walked into a bar and bought a round for the house, Trump would still be the story, despite having the global cachet of Caligula and the courtly charm of Jabba the Hutt. Just over half of the country sees his horns, the others (setting a match to his resume) manage to see a halo. All of this is to say that, as soon as Lauri lit up our bonfire, as soon as we filled our glasses and settled into our chairs, our celebratory talk took a turn to the unholy elephant in the backyard.

"He won't *leave*."

"He'll shred every bit that he can of this democracy before he *does* leave."

"Whose job is it to *make* him leave?"

We had our invasive theme. But we also had that resistance-grit that had helped us beat out a path through the previous four years and we had 60 degrees in November and several open bottles of wine. So, despite this newest wave of anxiety, we danced. We shouted. We raised our glasses to Biden and Harris and especially to new First Dogs, Major and Champ. We celebrated; we did.

The next day I walked into our family room while Larry, who was taking a break from a Griswoldian knot of Christmas lights on the front porch, was watching CNN. The latest White House press secretary, a bony blond whose lies had recently tipped the scales to so egregious an extent that even *Fox* had cut away, was firing off some brazen new fiction. I paused and thought about shamelessness, which you didn't used to run into so often and so publicly. And I felt the velar stop of the hard letter C form at the back of my mouth, heard the soft U coming, felt my tongue touch the ridge behind my front teeth for the alveolar NT. "Cunt." As slurs go, the big one.

"Cunt," I said to a woman on TV. But the word glanced off, it wouldn't stick, and not just because televisions don't work that way. The slur wouldn't land because it was linguistically disingenuous, because I have a problem with that edgiest expletive and that problem is this: "cunt," a bullet, a missile, a bomb to most people I know, feels as soft and warm and cuddly as a puppy to me. Its effect in my ear is like the moment someone brings a golden retriever into a Home Depot and everyone in the middle of a roof or basement crisis suddenly relaxes. Doesn't it then follow that we all should be, if we possibly can, a cunt? Or at least have one with us at the end of a

leash? The term simply hasn't been a pistol-whip for me since I read *Lady Chatterley's Lover* decades ago and Mellors, the sex-worshipping gamekeeper, purred it so reverently. I have never been called a cunt myself—at least not to my face—but if I were, I think my response would be, "how splendid!" So Trump's little press secretary could never be a cunt. *In her lying, scheming dreams.* I turned from her tirade and went to the kitchen to make soup.

Picking up the mail Larry had left on the kitchen island to make way for the big, copper-bottom pot, I took a moment to thumb the letters into separate stacks. Underneath the appeals for money and a couple of medical bills, lay a big, manilla envelope. I eyed my hand-written name, then the return address, and the truly alarming C-word flashed a warning in my head: *cousin*. *Cousin:* the insidious family-splintering animal that had been plaguing holiday dinners for the past few politically divided years. Nearly everyone I knew, even if they had to reach into 2nd or 3rd tiers, had a cousin in the Trump camp. I hadn't seen this woman in years. She was a gentle person who lived inside a soft fog inside a hard religion who had given away all her money and would have swallowed Hitler hook, line, and sinker if her pastor had endorsed him. As it happened, her pastor was also my cousin. Earlier in life, he'd been that most benign and dispensable of creatures, a male stripper, but he'd eventually found Bible college—the dangerous kind with all the Answers. I have rationalized and blundered my way into more sins of co and omission than I want to count, but these cousins—both *nicer* than me—are two people on the narrow path to Nuremberg, nice people in love with the fiction of easy answers and looking for someone to blame for all of life's pretty little terrors. Nicer than me in a hundred ways. And yet.

I retired from teaching high school English just over a year ago and when I left, I left completely. I'd had a good run: joyful, I would call my career. I was not like some retired colleagues who maintained concerns about curriculum, who worried about the continuation of their hard-wrought programs. Legacy-shmegacy; it was someone else's turn. But as I watched my cousin's—let's call her Betty—as I watched Betty's blindered devotion to Trump unfold on social media, my mind returned to my old classroom, and a conversation my students and I always had about *Huck Finn* which, because I manipulated it, went pretty much like this:

"What do the Widow Douglas and Tom's Aunt Sally have in common?"

Inevitably someone would offer, "They're really nice."

"And what else?"

"They have better manners than Huck. They care about Huck. They have stuff Huck doesn't—houses and farms and—slaves." And there it was—the segue.

"What do you think average Nazi mothers did with their days? And sweet Nazi grandmas?" The turn always surprised them but they were adept scramblers.

"I don't know. They cooked? And took care of their kids."

"And baked strudel?" I'd ask.

"Yeah."

"And went to church?"

"Yeah."

"And supported Hitler?" I'd press.

"Yeah."

Then—the big moment: "How does evil spread?" This was the clincher. This was why I kept teaching the book year after year, though there were persuasive reasons not to.

"Through regular people? *Nice* people?" And we were home.

"There aren't enough monsters in the world," I'd cut back in—big shiny finish—"to orchestrate a Holocaust. Or slavery. Evil can't spread unless what kind of people take it up?

"*Nice* people."

"Exactly." Then we'd look around at each other; we were nice people, right? Would we ever be tempted to go down a ruinous, damning road? And then the bell would ring or someone would spill their *Red Bull* or latte or the Homecoming court would be announced over the intercom and we'd move on. And though most of us don't remember many conversations from our high school days, I always counted that one as time well spent. You never know.

My insomnia didn't arrive with the defection of the 48%. In the weeks before the election, my cousin Betty's Facebook posts wedged themselves into my head and kept me awake at night. "Daryl" (we'll call her husband) "and I always vote Republican because we don't like name-calling."

"Did you *see* what she wrote!" I shouted at my sister the next day on the phone. "And Trump just called Kamala Harris a *monster!*"

"You *have* to unfriend her," Sue sighed, calm and centered. She had made a pool of peace in her head where she let Betty float, out of love for our sweet, deceased aunt. I marveled at her Sufi-like detachment, and envied it, but I couldn't get there. I was a terrier at one end of a very ratty sock.

Because *it didn't make sense.* This cousin was, by all accounts, poor; she lived in a trailer, far far far beneath the contempt of her reality-TV President and his congressional toadies who would not have sat down at her tiny kitchen table to save their gilded lives. And she knew suffering. As a teenager in the '60s, she had slipped away from home to ride a Greyhound bus from Michigan to Mexico for an abortion in some accommodating Tijuana slum; then she'd ridden all the way home bleeding. Now she was decrying other women's access to safe abortions inside the U.S. *It didn't make sense.* I couldn't see that this insistence on *sense* was the sock I needed to let go, that of logic, there would never be a lick. So back and forth we went, posting our blistering condemnations of each other's candidates: mine a reasonable, empathetic, capable man, hers a ravening narcissist with ambitions of world dominion—which I might have mentioned—and I stewed in my bed at night.

And then one day Cousin Betty texted me directly. She had been sorting out old family pictures and had come across some of me and my family. Could she send them? "Love you, sweetie" she signed off. I thanked her and sent her my address. "Love you too, Betty!" I said. Which I do—and I saw that that was the hook in my obsession with her views, the tooth caught in the logic-sock.

The next day, I officially, electronically unfriended her. The picture she'd posted of Melania and Ivanka Trump and that hapless, never-to-be-a-cunt, Kayleigh Something as exemplary women we should all aspire to be, was the last brittle straw. I cut her picture out of my online family album and began sleeping a little better.

The family photos Betty sent were mostly of my daughters when they were toddlers and my first husband. In fact, they reminded me of a picture taken in what must have been the same year, which had preserved a prescient moment, and which I still have somewhere around our house. That photo, taken by that early husband just after he'd returned from a morning run to the liquor store, insisting he'd gone out to get groceries—which turned out to be the last lie I would let him tell me—showed Madeline at three and Anna at one and me sitting together on a picnic table. I had developed the film the next day and, studying that picture, I'd felt the stir of a sudden conviction: "Now we are three." And I knew, with a very deep calm, like the pool my sister lets Betty float in, that this was true. I filed for divorce.

Clarity like that is rare, I have found. And, except for the moment when I fell in love with Larry a couple of years later, I don't think I've known it since. "I am never going to understand the 48%, am I?" I asked him after reading that, while they were few, more minority voters had supported Trump than in the previous election. It was exactly the kind of ironic little

pea that could get under any thinking person's mattress and keep her blinking at the ceiling at 3 A.M.; I let it go. Like my wise sister, I will be in the streets if that's where America needs me to be—and will hope for nice weather and damn few guns.

It turns out the term "Indian summer" for those lovely late warm days, does ring wrong in a few ears. Among alternatives suggested by one website I visited was the European, "old woman's summer," which is a better fit for me anyway. As the world doesn't often toss sweets to old women, I've happily taken it up.

I mailed my cousin Betty a thank you note. It's unlikely I'll ever see her again. But I can feel her weight and force out there, and from here in my parallel world, I'll go on pushing back with what force remains of my own—we are two old women locking horns. And here's the impossible grace of the thing: I'm bound to go on loving her—not because we're cousins and not because I'm good or even because I want to—but just because it's true.

Jan Shoemaker

CECIL MORRIS
NEGATIVE SPACE

We have filled the empty space where our daughter stood
with memories of her younger self, of her bent
in study or grooming her dog or dangling cilantro
over her guinea pig's twitching nose, of her long legs
eating up the field, her hair streaming behind. We have stacked
her high school yearbooks, her letterman's jacket dotted
with soccer balls and basketballs and tiny runners,
her diplomas and worthless nursing license
in that void, too, in that space that used to hold
all promise and potential—her blonde vector
shooting up and up. Still we feel the vacancy
left when she veered off course and spiraled down and down
in opiate oblivion at 28,
our girl as gone as lost pets, as dreams dissolved
in narcotic nullity, as past as our memories.

Morris

OUR SON DISCOVERS HE CAN SINK

At ten our son discovers he can sink,
can drop in the cool water of our pool,
down and down, 'til he rests on the bottom,
his breath a trail of silver bubbles strung
like magic breadcrumbs above his head,
leading back to air, to us, two old land
mammals guarding a slick otter pup.

He learns that he can sink by breathing out,
by pressing breath from his pink lungs and
flattening his thin frame a little more
until density of bone and muscle
drags him down into the world of water
where he watches waves of light bend across
his body and ripple along his limbs.

He has learned this lesson without our help.
For his whole life we have been teaching him
to float, to bob and breathe, to fill himself
with life and ride the surface of water,
ship of our union, vessel of our hearts.
Now, holding our breaths and counting, we watch
our son submerged in light and bathed in joy.

Morris

PAUL ROUSSEAU
A MOMENTARY ENCOUNTER

I'm waiting for a bus near the homeless shelter. It's a chilled winter morning. A bone-skinny man in tattered clothes sits a few feet away. He's warmed by humid wisps of air rising from a sewer grate. A worn cardboard sign rests in his lap: *Homeless. Sick with cancer. Please help.* I stroll over and crouch down. I hand him a dollar. He nods, I tip my head.

"*Why aren't you in the shelter?"*

"It's full. The cold weather." I grimace. A dying man should have

preference.

"*What type of cancer do you have?"*

"Lung. Too many unfiltered Camels."

"Have you been to the shelter's free clinic?"

"Twice. I'm too far gone for treatment."

"Ask them about hospice; they can help you." He frowns.

I reach and hug him, then swivel to stand. He grabs my arm and pulls me close, so close I can feel the rattle of his lungs and the slap of his heart.

"Not having a home is hard, but not having a home and dying is harder."

My shoulders slump. I utter lip-service words. *"I'm so sorry."*

He scrunches his brow. *"You don't know what it's like."*

He's right, I don't know, but he's not angry, he's pragmatic, and resigned. He's been too scarred by hope to hope. I dial a shelter across town. They have a bed; I give him bus money, and remind him to inquire about hospice. I pat his shoulder, stand, and return to the bus stop. I glance at the people waiting, cell phones illumined, earbuds in place; I glance at the unhomed man. It's opulence and obscurity.

GEO STALEY
MR. MOORE

We grew up everything White

relatives
friends and neighbors
teachers
television programs
narrative of a white culture

until the 6th grade and Mr. Moore

1st male teacher
1st Black teacher
1st Black person we ever knew.

(cont)

Mr. Moore smoked Chesterfields
had a wife
drove a beige Renault Dauphine
taught like our White teachers
and never mentioned race.

Mr. Moore showed the class
different skin colors existed.
Mr. Moore had to have faith
that 31 suburban White kids
would determine how it mattered.

Staley

A FEW WORDS TO THE NEWLY WIDOWED

There is no advice.

I could tell you what to expect
and, maybe, it'd help.

Still, I know there are many differences.

My 1st task: I packed up her clothes for Good Will.
You may want to hold onto those clothes.
I willed my estate to charities.
You could leave everything to your daughters.
I start idle chit-chat but never finish.
Your conversations might continue.
My eyes leak, sometimes.
You could weep or sob or hold back.

One shared thing, though, will happen:

ours becomes *mine*
we shifts to *me*, eventually
for whom the two of you were
past tense replaces present tense.

And never forget

though we will mostly do this differently
you and I will do this together, always.

Staley

IF SHE'D KNOWN KING LEAR

After the 1st of my 12 monthly chemo sessions,
the neurological oncologist prescribed *Procrit*
to accelerate my red blood cell production
self-administered injection
once a day
until I felt bone pain.
"When's that?" I asked the critical care nurse.
"You'll know," she said.
"How?"
"You'll *know*."

Sounded like medical obfuscation
until I went for a short run 5 days later.
Within 50 feet, the pain in my right femur
brought me down.

On my side, unable to get up,
all that came to mind

How sharper than a serpent's tooth
it is to know bone pain.
Staley

WHAT THE TEACHER SAID AFTER 31 YEARS OF 5TH-GRADERS

Our 5th-grade teacher, Mrs. Felter, never smiled.
Her clothes were dull greys, washed-out browns, or worn black.
No jewelry or make-up.
She demanded we hear her the 1st time,
sighed at every wrong answer,
showed no joy in any right answer.
She smelled old.

One morning, as I was getting the American flag
to raise in front of our school,
I heard her say to a 4th-grade teacher,
"Marilyn, these children are my burden."

(cont)

I felt bad for the mean things I'd thought of her
for not trying harder in music class
for being a part of her burden.

Until the day after a parent/teacher conference
as I stared out the window at the nimbus clouds
wondering if they'd bring snow or rain,
Mrs. Felter stopped her civics lesson on jury duty, said to me,

"If you ever paid attention, your mother wouldn't have
to come to school to get your grades raised."

Staley

CYNTHIA YANCEY
BIKING MY OLD LADY BLUES AWAY

When I was sixty-something and went for my first-ever primary care doctor's appointment and had all of the age-recommended health screenings, I was dumbfounded to hear I had osteoporosis. Not osteopenia, mind you, the beginnings of thinning old bones, but osteoporosis, full-blown porous bones whose years are numbered if I don't find a way of reversing the changes occurring in my skeleton at a microscopic level.

That same year my daughter Sarah and I started going to the YWCA, but only once a week. My heart was not as into body building as it had occasionally been in my younger years. Bit by bit I was coming to realize that I had more than a skeleton to rebuild. Slowly but surely a fear was creeping in that my time was running out to find a way to help heal the deep gashes in each of my children's hearts.

For better or worse, I am not usually daunted by such seemingly insurmountable obstacles. Biking the backroad alone in the mountains of Western North Carolina was my first attempt not only to reverse my body's deterioration, but also to climb over to the other side of the mountain toward real healing within my core family.

Focusing on my physical health as physicians always do, my doctor said it wasn't good enough, that I should begin weight lifting if I wanted to really reverse the degenerative changes in my bones, but I can tell you, my

legs often feel like they are pumping iron, pedaling as hard as they must to get me uphill. Moreover, biking gives me space to feel the wind on my face and to hear the river roar of its freedom and strength as it flows by the little country road like nothing ever has for me before.

The sweet scent of honeysuckle seeps deep down into me, as my mind imprints scenes of distant mountain homes, quaint or sprawling, well-kept or not, cruising down those backroads. I admire the artists in all of the mountain folks who carve their homes into the nooks and crannies of our hills and who paint their barns and window shutters crimson red to match the spring's flame azaleas. This all against the verdant backdrop of so many grassy hills. I feel the summer steam from my chest, then the winter frost on my cheeks, and ponder my life. Out in the midst of this idyllic country scene on my bike, many parallels have appeared to me between my family's life and my country's political scene.

***

My older children's half-sister Samantha's move up the mountain had stirred up an anger deep within me that had been lying dormant for many years. The way she could be depended on to defend her father, who is also my older children's father, at my dinner table reminded me of the knots with my own father that are so terribly murky and mean that I still must somehow unravel.

From our current *pussy-grabbing* president to the wall behind him of powerful politicians who remain silent about his throng of daily lies and deceits, to my own hustling ex-husband, who taught his children in turn to hustle, to the mothers among us who are tired of being hustled, who long to find our way back to a position of strength, the backroads help me sift through this morass of emotional chaos.

When Sarah's sister Sam first moved up the mountain, she and her boyfriend Perry spent many nights out with my son Jacob by his firepit, drinking beer and sharing the stories of their youth. In that setting of long overdue family companionship out in the evening's cool mountain air, more than once Jacob unleashed his anger toward their common father. The alcohol coursing through his veins seemed to free Jacob to spew the venom that lives deep down in the pit of his soul toward the man whose DNA they share. To Sam's discomfort, Jacob had named too many of their father's deceits and disappointments. He described how it felt when his dad took their Christmas money with assurances of something better that never materialized. Jacob enumerated too many of the countless lies that have brought that father to a place of *hardly knowing who he actually is anymore.*

I don't know what kind of father this same man was to Samantha,

but when she felt compelled to defend him at my family dinner table, I felt usurped. Let me tell you, I feel far too old, my bones way too porous, to sit through many more muffled apologies for that man at my dinner table. I realize it is never black and white. Their old dad definitely has his charm. He can hug like no other. It is the intolerable I must learn to not tolerate.

When Jacob tells me that his father hates him even more than he hates me, and I imagine what it must have been like to grow up with that belief, I feel like putting on my boxing gloves and getting into the ring with my ex-husband. Yet these days, the mantle of patriarchy and misogyny feels maddeningly impenetrable to me.

***

In the fall of 2018, when Dr. Christine Blasey Ford stood up to testify that Donald Trump's nominee for Supreme Court justice Brett Kavanaugh had sexually assaulted her, years ago no doubt, but still, who had sexually assaulted her and scarred her life, we were all sitting on the edges of our seats. Was this to be a turning point? When Dr. Ford, with nothing to gain from the testimony other than to protect our country from Mr. Kavanaugh's decisions for years to come, stood before the world and answered that her strongest memory of the assault was the "uproarious laughter" of Brett Kavanaugh and his sidekick Mark Judge, a deep-down part of me recoiled and cringed.

As I sat glued to the television screen in my home in the mountains of Western North Carolina that day, listening to her brave voice ring out, "Indelible in the hippocampus is the laughter—the uproarious laughter between the two, and their having fun at my expense," another part of me was tremendously proud of her for finally speaking up for all of us. I imagined the world might, in fact, change that day for having heard her story.

But NO. The Congress of the United States of America instead chose to ignore it, while many of us sat in awestruck incredulity at the mantle of deceit and lies we are all up against. When Congress listened to Dr. Ford and still put Brett Kavanaugh on the Supreme Court of our country, victims of sexual assault around the world felt a suffocating despair.

The little girl in me stood there before Dr. Ford, speechless, gripped with the deepest angst I could remember, knowing what it feels like to be assaulted, then silenced when one finally, be it thirty-five or sixty-five years later, musters the courage to speak her truth.

Perhaps it was actually the little girl in me who woke up so many nights in my own father's bed, when I was two and three and four, too frightened to move, not knowing what to do, needing to get up to go to the bathroom, but too afraid to breathe. It seems a certain silence was settling

into the essence of me surrounding the awkwardness of not knowing what was happening to me or how to defend myself or how to bring a mother back to my father's bed I then occupied. Repression puts a thick veil over our memories; it puts a vise lock on our tongues.

Finally a doctor of psychology, Dr. Christine Blasey Ford, stood up and eloquently spoke out for all of us, for all the world to hear, and our most powerful politicians said they did not believe her. I imagined that most of those White Republican congressmen who voted for the rapist in Brett Kavanaugh to take his seat on the highest court of our land were simply saying to us all, "That's who we are. It is who we have always been. Your job, Mr. Kavanaugh, is to keep lying. Most all of us are perpetrators of some sort of violence. We've got your back."

On my biking backroad the words of Bob Dylan's "Hurricane" ricochet from one side of my brain to the other, violins and harmonica wailing alongside the steady beat of my own pounding heart as he sings,

I couldn't help but feel ashamed
To live in a land
Where justice is a game.

***

When is the time ripe to break the silence in my own family?

Might I, for example, one day around my dinner table say to my now grown children, "I don't really hold it against your father so much that my first sexual experience was with him or that it was what we now call *date rape,* for the truth is neither of us knew that for a long time to come. Truth is he may not know it still. I do, however, hold it against our society that young men back then were given license to push past their partners' NOs until they got what they wanted in a place where they were not welcome.

At what point might I say that I hold him solidly accountable for having told one of our children that he had sex with over a hundred other women during our marriage, and that I find it reprehensible at best that such a sexually experienced man never once asked what might be good for me. How might my life have been different had I had voice in those days?

Did my silence through the years contribute to my own daughter having to Mace her husband in the night just two years ago? Can silence ever be right?

At what point might I offer my crystal-clear opinion that a society which would allow its daughters to be repeatedly, insidiously raped in so many ways must lift its head up out of the sand to see it has a stranglehold on half its strength.

***

Then as if right on cue, as happens sometimes in life, a friend advised me to go down to the Unitarian Church in Asheville one Sunday to view a film being shown by Our Voice and Helpmate, our local agencies whose work is to stem sexual and domestic violence. *The Mask You Live In* is a movie that describes how *our culture's narrow definition of masculinity is harming our boys, men, and society at large*. For over an hour, this documentary gives real-life examples of how pervasive are the societal messages that teach our little boys to be cut off from their emotions and their goodness.

After it was over, leaders from the sponsoring agencies turned to the crowd to make the film's message local and real. One of their questions was "How do women figure into this equation?" I was a bit amazed at how clearly my long silent voice rose with my hand, which jutted into the air as if it had a mind of its own.

"We are complicit," I offered clearly. "We are passive partners. We must change that. We must take off our blinders and quit choosing such men to father our children. When and if we do choose them, since society is supersaturated with such unempathetic men, we must call them out when they beat their kids, lie to their wives, and steal from us all. Otherwise we are little better than they are."

One of my purposes these days seems to be to exercise my voice, which does not naturally rise, but that must begin to speak up in my tiny circles every time these issues come to the surface. The next time sister Sam defends her father at my table, I must find a way to say, "Your father has lied and cheated and stolen from me and my children for the very last time. We love our fathers, granted, despite all they should be forever ashamed of, but he doesn't get to do that in my family ever again."

For if we don't see these crimes and call them out, we are asking to duplicate them over and over again. We will be raising our sons to be no better, for not having taken the blinders off, for not having stood up to say, "You don't get to do that to any of us anymore."

***

It is very difficult to put fresh calcium down onto an old bony skeleton, but not impossible. It is hard to take off one's blinders and have one's voice finally rise in the end. But let me tell you, I have a fantasy that my kids' father might come up to me one day after he has gotten wind of my book and threaten to sue me for all I'm worth for *slander and libel*. I have a fantasy of walking up so close to him that he can nearly feel my body's heat, and of saying,

"I hope you do. I will fight you to my dying breath.

"This isn't about just you and me. Writing my story is about promoting a necessary change if our future's men and women are to have a fighting chance of being ever so much better than we are, one little boy and one little girl at a time. If I don't tell my truth and incite my sisters to do the same, I am little better than you, old man.

"Your only way back to us is acknowledgment and apology of near unforgiveable wrongdoing, for as long as it takes to regain credibility. Our grandchildren must be shown how to be much stronger and more decent than we knew how to be."

***

This past Sunday, Sarah, her son Atticus, and I all biked the backroads together. My bike has more gears, so mostly I led the way. Up in front, the sun breaking through the clouds, felt a metaphor for our lives just now, me riding ahead, blazing the trail of life, warning of cars and trucks, Atti between us, closer to his mom, who takes the brunt of all his incessant chatter, definitely shouldering the lion's share of his care. Having lived longer, having been broken more times, because that is what happens out in the world, it feels my job now to model how when societal patriarchy and misogyny nudge women to not speak their truth is the very time for our voices to rise.

***

On the road I take when I am biking alone, there are four hills to climb, then the exhilaration of the downhill slope which allows me to fly back home. Sometimes I wonder what will happen to these old bones one day if I hit a rock and fall while flying.

Should I risk such a tumble?

Should I be quiet or keep sorting through the stories of our lives? Should I really risk disconnection within my own family in order to come to a much healthier space of truth and understanding of who we are?

The choice feels so clear now.

I will ride and I will write for as long as I can. I will do my best to hear and share the wisdom of the hills with any who might listen.

***

The winter sun is so strong that it sometimes blinds while biking my backroad. We as parents are blinded by so much, by our core belief in our children's strength, by our reluctance to see that tragedies occur all the time, and by our primordial, deep desire to have wiser, saner parents than we ever had. At last the sun is on my back side. Finally I can see.

The mountain waters gracefully wind their way through the pastures, behind the barns, and under the bridges throughout the countryside. As these

mountain streams glisten and rumble and tumble over all the monstrous boulders in their beds, they hum to me of a great capacity to restore that which was lost, that which was taken away, that which would sing out, given half the chance.

Up the mountain of my backroad, I notice a nearly perfect old oak tree as it first leafs out to spring. It has holes in its middle, from weather and blight that will nonetheless round out as its leaves sprout. It will turn into a perfectly beautiful full tree very soon. It gives me hope for the same with my mind and body by the end of life. My bones will eventually crumble, but hopefully before I am dust, my family will be stronger for the telling, then finally the understanding of our story.

Perhaps before my end these old lady blues will incite a sister symphony.

MICHAEL HETTICH
AFTERNOON SAUNTER

As we walk to the waterfall this sunny summer afternoon, she turns to remind me that her father built her childhood home, with her grandfather, brick by brick. That's why there were windows in some of the closets, she says: he learned by doing. *That's why my mother kept rolls of dollar bills in the pockets of her winter jackets. Just in case.* The house was solid but awkward and cramped; the stairs were as steep as a ladder and the kitchen was smaller than a rich person's bathroom. There were five children in the family.

While we sit beside the river to eat lunch, she talks about tying flies with her father, down in that cluttered unfinished basement while the snow fell outside to dim the windows and the rest of the family ate popcorn in the living room with the TV blaring so loud she could hear it perfectly as she sat next to her dad, whose breath smelled like coffee and whose arms were as white, almost, as his tee-shirt, and almost as hairless. She listened to his breathing as he showed her how to cut and tie.

Lefty's Deceiver; Pheasant Tail Nymph...

Her mother had taught her how to sew her own clothes. When we first met, she made my shirts and pants, beautiful garments I was reluctant

to wear in case I spilled something, or ripped them. I was careful to sit down carefully.

The first day we met, we hiked up into the mountains and she caught two trout with flies she'd tied herself. Then gutted them in one gesture and cooked them with garlic.

That night we slept with our heads outside the tent, so we could look up at the stars.

THE LULLABY

My friends and I followed the abandoned tracks
out beyond town. When we came to a tunnel,
one of us walked in, deep enough to vanish.

I remember standing there, calling him back—

and I remember
walking home alone,
arriving as the streetlights sputtered on.

I could smell the dark tunnel in the weave of my clothes
as my mother kissed me.
She asked about school.

My father worked late; my brother and sister
were doing whatever we did those evenings,
in private. After I finished eating

I joined them, leaving my mother in the kitchen
cleaning the counters again, singing
what sounded like a lullaby I might have recognized
if I'd paused to listen.

In Some Other Lifetime
the trees in that town, pruned and anorexic,
    reminded me of afternoons worrying about nothing
until that very nothing seemed a window looking out
    on spring snow, melting now to feed those tortured trees

(cont)

as I woke to the memory of someone once beautiful
waiting at a station for a train that hadn't left yet
and wouldn't even carry the passenger she waited for
and might not even stop there, in that nondescript town,

virtually abandoned except for those trees
that stood like famished scarecrows in the parks and along
the sidewalks. Bare now, they would burst forth in flowers
whose scent would make anyone woozy, in spring—

myself, for example: if I could just return
to that park when the trees are in full bloom, and breathe
deeply enough, I might hear that train approaching,
finally but just in time, after all these years.

Hettich

HOME

New sites for old silences: a basement in the woods
that once held a house above it, gone now
with hardly a trace—no framing or windows,
just a beautifully-mortared hole in the ground.

We walk through the brambles imagining rooms
and the lives that were lived here; we try to see where
they plotted their garden, hung their clothesline,
sat out on mild evenings to look up at the stars….

When you notice a stone path beneath the rotted leaves
curving gracefully to what might have been a road,
we follow it, chattering our plans and revelations
as though our whole lives lay before us.

Hettich

ANGEL OF KNOWING

1.
If I built a secret house
and filled it with fireflies
and filled it with an evening
teeming with bats
then told you, pretentiously,
this is how I love you: (cont)

Imagine a bat's face
as it zigzags through the darkness,
its wonderful, vein-stippled,
leathery wings.

2.
...and when I arrived, having taken the train
by myself for the first time, I found my grandparents
splashing outside in the blow-up pool
they'd bought me when I was a baby.

They were naked and flabby, and their hairy legs flopped out,
but they were laughing, and they moved their sagging bodies
to make room for me to join them, so I got undressed too.

3.
Some mornings I wake up
light as Styrofoam
and float like a let-go
kickboard, so far out

no one dares venture
to save me, and soon
no one can see me
or remember me at all.

Other mornings I wake up
as a man.

4.
...follow this road until it fades to grass
and let the bees circle your head, until
they come inside your bones
into your ancient body

and sit down there quietly, where the stones are always wet
and sit down where the flecks of mica
shimmer back the sky:
Everything is ending
much more quickly than you know.

(cont)

5.
or mind could be a crowded
stairway down into a subway platform

the painful screech of a train pulling from the tunnel
with its opaque windows, its smell of smoke and rain—

or perhaps a little bird, a sparrow, flying
deep into that earth-smelling, puddle-smelling tunnel, getting
lost
yet not despairing, flying

on through that dark, out on the other side
into sunlight
as another train pulls in

6.
One of my cousins was stuffed with leaves,
another with dusty straw that made us sneeze.

They were placed on benches by the duck pond in the park

where older boys ran with homemade kites
which banged across the ground
or got stuck in the branches.

And of course I remember
when my dad stuffed me with rags,
mostly old shirts and my mother's silk stockings,
the kind with the line up the back, and I suddenly

needed to sleep, and I woke up knowing languages
no one else would ever speak, like pebbles filled with rain.

7.
A pregnant woman in curlers and pink slippers
sits in an empty
all-night Laundromat
holding a skinny
kitten in her lap.

(cont)

She pets it with both hands,
one after the other,
as though she were trying
to pull its fur off

as she watches clothes
that are not her clothes
flop around
in the dryer.

8.
Divorced and alone,
she works the night shift

and when she gets home
at dawn she sometimes

carries her bike
down from her one-room

apartment and rides
through the empty city streets

no hands.

9.
In the crotches of the avocado trees
in the abandoned grove

and in the hardwood hammock
of ancient gumbo-limbos,
tree snails glow. We breathe softly as we lean close,

not to fog their shells.

10.
The first White settlers
collected all the tree snails

before burning the hammock
where the snails had lived

(cont)

so those shells, unique
to each hammock, would be

extinct, and thus
more valuable.

11.
And when was the first time
you realized you were lost

you ask as we drive home
later, and when I found you,

did your bones become sharper
in your body, did your teeth

gleam any brighter, and did your secret bodies,
the bodies that lined up behind you in the past,

did they shift underground
for a moment?

12.
...scientists have learned how to save our memories
in the clouds, drifting endlessly—a new kind of immortality,

perhaps. But will these new clouds rain,
I ask, and if so, will our memories fall

from the sky, to enter the watershed again
with the roots and the frogs and the flowers?

13.
The language you abandoned
when you moved to this country
waits underground
patiently for spring,

like a snake that will whip
across the scrubby yard
to wake you some morning
to what you're really thinking.

(cont)

You'll find its sloughed skin
    and carry it inside.
        Softer than an infant's breath,
    it smells like happiness

and whispers like a language
    which fits another dream,
        of someone from some other life
    who's thinking of you now.

14.
He swims out for the joy of swimming in a downpour,
        calls out to his companion, who looks like a deer now,

                naked and pale, as she steps carefully
over the sharp pebbles, then slips quietly in

        and swims out, laughing, to join him.

15.
                Listen to the river flowing, underneath the fallen leaves.
        Salamanders, mushrooms, peeper-toads and moss.

Everything carried on a billion-year-old wave—

        I thought the sky was falling, she tells me in the morning,
sitting on the back porch. *I woke and thought the sky was gone...*

16.
Angel of knowing we've seen that face before.

        Angel of the highway, angel of trains,
angel of the funky breeze, angel of the slapped face,

        angel of the out-of-tune, angel of the outer space.

Angel of pesticides, angel of the endless-seeming,
        angel of the families we've walked away from, angel

of everything we've ever said, angel of our silence.

Hettich

SAMUEL MULLIKIN
HOME

I used to think
home was just a word
four little letters
thin on meaning
broken up ad cursed
but I've seen weeds
flower on prison yards
from barren earth
because a few men
carried them water
recognizing their thirst
a few sips of love
sip, sip
changes everything
from alone
sip, sip
to at home
don't give up the search

Mullikin

…WHOLE

I wonder how much blood was shed
over the concept of us and them
It's a subtle line
whose sharp edge has cut
each of us.
Strangers and enemies, kith and kin
It's a lesson we've learned
by house and family, by tribe and clan
we cleave to what's familiar
the same language, the same food
who do you worship:
what color is your skin?
The tears we bleed
we bleed together

(cont)

the weeping of our soul
not the soul of you or me but
the soul of one another
the soul we should be seeking
the one reflected in each other
weaving us together
united and…whole

Mullikin

JOHN S LEECH
THE RECEPTION

As funerals go, Jack Hathaway's was a success, at least from my point of view. Jack had been my best friend, and when he was senselessly murdered, his father asked me to deliver the eulogy. I managed to pull it off without breaking down or making a mess of it, so when I returned to my front row spot next to Jack's sister, Nancy, I was shaking from relief as well as emotion.

Nancy squeezed my hand as we both stared forward. I exhaled and my mind went to the ring in the inside pocket of my suit. I liked knowing it was there.

That ring was supposed to be on Nancy's finger. I had decided that the next time I saw Nancy would be the time I got down on one knee. But then the phone call about Jack came, and I understood in an instant that everything—at least for the time being—had changed.

Nancy and I had met through my friendship with Jack. Because of her constant travels due to her skiing prowess, plus my teenage cluelessness, it took a few years for us (especially me) to realize that we were in love. Eventually we figured it out.

The service concluded with the minister inviting all the attending townspeople, classmates, teachers, and friends to a reception at Sycamore Hall, the massive stone mansion at the edge of our little town. It was the home of Cora Grant, who, in addition to being the town's leading philanthropist, was a good friend of the Hathaway family.

Our plan was for Nancy to stay at the reception for no more than an hour. She would then say her goodbyes, and I would drive her to the executive airport at our capital. There would be a private jet waiting provided

by the chairman of the United States Olympic committee, and Nancy would be whisked back to Europe, where she would rejoin our winter Olympic team. Nancy, who the media sometimes referred to as "America's Downhill Rocket," was our prime hope for a gold medal in the downhill event. Everyone connected with the team, Nancy included, felt it was imperative for her to resume training as quickly as possible.

Sycamore Hall was looking its best for the occasion. Every inch of it had been polished—the floors, the doorknobs, the sconces, the banisters, the intricately carved legs of the dining room table. Gallons of Windex had been used on windows and mirrors, and most of the furniture in the downstairs rooms had been moved to the sides so that people could circulate.

Double doors leading from the back of the dining room opened to the courtyard between the two wings of the hall, and a large tent had been erected there to handle the overflow. Catering employees were passing tidbits, the dining room table and sideboard were thick with a wide choice of hot and cold items, and, most popular by far, there were bars set up in the school room, the library, the immense living room (two there, flanking the fireplace), and also under the tent. Of the downstairs rooms only the gun room was locked and off-limits.

Just inside the front door, one on each side, were two large leather-bound guest books, although I could not imagine the Hathaway family ever wanting to recall the day by reviewing the signatures.

Mr. and Mrs. Hathaway, Nancy, and Jack's longtime girlfriend, Sally Bain, had formed a receiving line partway down the wide main hallway.

I saw my parents fall into line to sign the guest book. I took a position on the high ground, ducking under a velvet cord and up to the second step of the staircase; a central location. From there I had a clear view of the receiving line to my right and the flow of reception guests moving left toward the goodies in the dining room. From this perch I noticed many of the townspeople were moving from room to room, taking in the splendor that was Sycamore Hall. Naturally before doing this they had stopped at one of the bars.

I soon realized that our "stay for an hour, then leave" plan was not going to work. The line of people waiting to pay respects to the Hathaways seemed to be constantly regenerating. Every time the line shortened, more people would come to wait their turn. Furthermore, many of those wishing to greet the Hathaways were not content to say a few words and move along; they wanted to linger for a chat. Our escape plan needed to be modified.

Immediately upon learning of Jack's murder, Cora had anticipated

that our quiet little northern New England town would soon be overrun by media people, partly because of the sensational aspect of the crime, and doubly so because of the fact that Jack's sister, Nancy, had recently been on the cover of *Ski Magazine* and was an Olympic favorite.

Accordingly, Cora had arranged for a Boston public relations firm to send two representatives here to assist the Hathaways in dealing with the media mob. I noticed one of them, Alice Birch, passing near the foot of the staircase, and I managed to catch her attention. She ducked under the velvet cord and joined me on the second step, saying, "The town must be empty. Everyone is here."

"I want some professional wisdom," I said. "Nancy and I need to get out of here fairly soon so that I can get her to the airport. By the way things look, the line of folks waiting to say something to the Hathaways could last for hours."

"I think some of them are refreshing their drinks and then going through the line a second time," she said wryly.

"That helps."

"Let's try this. We give it another few minutes and then we can get her to come up on the stairs, say a few words explaining that she has a plane to catch, and then she can work her way to the door, where you will be waiting. How does that sound to you?"

"Excellent, but how are we going to get everyone to shut up and listen to her? You're standing right next to me, and I can barely hear what you're saying."

It was true. The conversational noise level may have been shaking the slate on Sycamore Hall's mossy old roof.

Alice saw the point. "We will have Chet call for attention. He can be a real foghorn when he wants to be. Have you seen him lately?"

Chet was the other PR person. We located him in the dining room, and with a grin he picked up a dinner gong and mallet that had been hanging from a mahogany frame toward the back of the sideboard.

On our way back, we let the Hathaways know what we had in mind. Nancy looked relieved. "Thanks," she said. "It was looking like we would be here for hours. Don't wait too long."

We gave it a few more minutes, and then, with Chet acting as a human snowplow, Nancy and I reached the foot of the stairs.

Chet put on a game face, climbed to the third step, and pounded the gong several times. This served to diminish, but not extinguish, the noise volume. It took Chet roaring, "May I have your attention please" three times before the school room, hallway, library, living room, and dining room fell

silent. There were still conversations going on under the tent, but that was merely background noise and unavoidable. Chet cleared his throat and gestured for Nancy to join him on the stairs.

"Thank you," he said, his voice back to normal. "Nancy Hathaway would like to say a few words."

Nancy had been an increasingly visible figure in the sports world for several years. She was accustomed to being in front of crowds and speaking to groups, so I was confident that she would handle her staircase address with poise and charm. Being beautiful always helps too.

She began by thanking everyone who had come to the reception to pay their respects to her family and the memory of her wonderful brother. She then said that she considered Sally Bain to be a member of their family too, and that she was glad Sally was able to join the Hathaways in the reception line, as her heart had been broken just as theirs had been by Jack's senseless death.

"As I think you all know," she continued, "I am part of our United States Winter Olympic team, and we are deeply involved in our final preparations for these winter games. Obviously, I—" Her voice cracked a little, and she paused to compose herself.

I instinctively took a step forward, but she shot a quick reassuring glance and I stood back.

"These preparations are crucial if we are to do our best," she said. "Obviously, I want nothing more than to be with my family at a time like this. But we've talked about it and we've agreed that Jack would be horrified to think I gave up because of him. So, in other words, to give myself the best chance, I need to get back to Europe and rejoin my team."

The room was quiet. Nancy looked at me and took a breath and continued. "Now I know it is only natural for everyone to wonder how the loss of my brother is going to affect my Olympic performance. And—" She paused and looked around the room, her eyes settling on her father's face.

"The truth is, my whole family—including Jack—made a lot of sacrifices so I could pursue my skiing dream. If I were to waver now, well, it would mean Jack had to suffer through all those family cross-country outings for nothing." A low rumble of chuckles moved through the room. Nancy's mouth turned up in a small smile, and she took another breath.

"So I want to assure everyone that I will not let anything distract me from doing my absolute best on the slopes. I owe it to Jack to give it my all to win my race. If I don't, it will be because someone beat me, not because I beat myself."

The whole room was silent for another moment; then a slow, gentle

applause broke out around the home. Nancy surveyed the room, biting her lip as her eyes glistened with the threat of fresh tears. Looking back at her was this rapt crowd, dozens of faces showing a mixture of heartache and hope. Nancy took another deep breath, ready to speak again, and the light clapping stopped.

"Before I go, I want to thank Miss Cora Grant for opening her lovely home to us for this reception, and also for the many other things she has done for my family over the past several days."

Cora's attention to detail was legendary. At her request the Boston public relations team had even brought along a wide selection of black dresses for Mrs. Hathaway, Nancy, and Sally Bain to choose from.

"Thank you also to Chet and Alice," Nancy said, gesturing toward where the pair stood together. "They have been working nonstop under very difficult circumstances, and we could not have pulled this together without them."

Then she turned her gray eyes toward me. "And last, thanks to a guy who has been right by my side through all of this and before. My rock, the boy I love, Carl Smith. I—"

I could tell her voice was starting to break again. I resisted stepping up to her side as she composed herself again. "Now please excuse me," she said. "I have a plane to catch and a race to win." Applause broke out again, this time not quite so reserved.

Her speech was obviously over, and the crowds tactfully began to disperse, murmuring words of sympathy and support as they passed near Nancy. The PR team managed to maneuver us, Cora, Mr. and Mrs. Hathaway, and Sally to the cloakroom entrance near the front door.

My old Buick was waiting in the car park next to the limo that had transported the Hathaways from the church to Sycamore Hall. Nancy's suitcase and jacket were moved into my car, and we were off for the airport more or less on time.

Once we were on the main road out of town, I reached over and rested my hand on Nancy's leg. "You doing okay?"

She put her hand over mine. "I am," she said quietly.

"Well, you certainly let the cat out of the bag."

She grinned. "Good, I'm glad. I am in love and I don't care who knows it. In fact with those media people being there, by morning the whole world will know it. Do you mind?"

"Mind? There is nothing like having a world-famous beauty get up on a staircase and tell the world she loves you to give a guy a lift."

Nancy slid next to me and kissed my ear. Then she took her shoes

off and stretched herself out on the seat as best she could, with her head resting on my thigh and the rest of her curled up on the seat. The black dress she'd worn to the funeral hiked up quite a way, giving me a nice view. "I'm not going to sleep," she said. "I'm just going to rest my eyes for a minute or two." Then she was asleep.

As I drove, I imagined steering off the road at a spot where there wouldn't be much traffic and proposing. I could pull the pretty little box from the inside pocket of my suit and show her the diamond ring inside. I was close to positive that she would accept; after all, hadn't she just stood on a staircase and told the world that she loved me?

But as I drove on, I began to have second thoughts. What kind of proposal would that be? "Here's a ring. I want you to marry me. Will you? Okay, good. Now hop back into the car; we don't want to keep your jet waiting."

Shouldn't there be more to it than that? Candles? Music? Some sort of romantic setting? As I was thinking these thoughts, we passed a cheesy-looking motel. I stole another look at Nancy's lovely hip and leg. I knew that I would never be the most romantic person in the world, or even in North Overshoe (as we sometimes called our semi-isolated town). But certainly Nancy deserved something better than what seemed to be little more than the equivalent of a drive-by proposal—an "Oh, by the way…,"

I looked down at Nancy's profile. She put so much faith and trust in me. Suddenly I felt that protecting Nancy and caring for her was both a responsibility and a wonderful gift. I saw her face, so relaxed and adorable. I felt a tremendous sense of pride. My girl had managed to handle enormous pressures and sorrow and still show such complete love for me under the worst possible conditions.

My quickie proposal idea was as cheesy as the motel we had just passed. With my right hand on the wheel, I used my left hand to take the ring's box out of my suit pocket. I gave it a kiss and whispered, "You are just going to have to wait a while longer, pal." Then I tucked it back into my pocket. I patted it every now and then, making sure that it was secure there. I am the sort of guy who hates to lose things, diamond rings in particular.

Decision made and feeling greatly relieved, I placed my right hand lightly and protectively onto Nancy's wonderful hip.

When we were about ten minutes from the airport, I moved my hand up to her shoulder and gave her a gentle shake. Waking up, Nancy raised her head, looked around, and said, "I must have fallen asleep. I hope I didn't drool on your leg."

"I can't tell in this light, so you get the benefit of the doubt."

She smiled at that, sat up, straightened her dress, and put her shoes back on. I asked her what would be going on once she rejoined her team.

"Well, there is a fairly important race coming up this weekend, but I doubt if the coaches will want me to enter seeing as I have been away. I will be going there with the team of course and getting in some practice runs. The following weekend there is another race, and by then I should be ready to compete. Once that race is finished, we will only have a month before the Olympics start. The opening ceremonies should be exciting; I love our uniforms."

"You have them already?"

"I have a whole trunkful. We even have United States Olympic Ski Team pajamas!"

"I will be looking for you when you march into the stadium." As I said this, I realized that I would not need to look very hard. The cameras loved Nancy, and the network covering these games would be training them on Nancy whenever they could. Nimble Nancy, America's Downhill Rocket, was likely to be the poster girl of our Olympic team.

I had been to the private part of our small airport just a few days earlier to pick up Nancy, so I knew where to drive. It was easy to spot Nancy's fancy ride; it was the only jet there and a large one at that. Nancy would have plenty of elbow room.

Our ride to the airport ended sooner than I wanted it to, and we arrived right around the time we were expected. It was early evening, the area that was reserved for private planes was quiet, and I was able to drive onto the grounds and park near Nancy's plane. The two pilots and a stewardess came out of a nearby building and introduced themselves. Although they obviously knew who Nancy was, she introduced herself and me and thanked them for helping her get back to her team. These formalities concluded, one of the pilots carried her suitcase onto the plane. It was time for me to do what I did not want to do: say goodbye.

I walked her to the foot of the plane's steps and took her hands in mine. All I could think of to say was "These last few days have changed us forever."

Nancy looked up at me. "I know. I wish you were coming to Geneva with me."

"I would, except I don't have a passport, and I hear the Swiss are strict about things like that."

"Picky. Well, I will be coming home again in just a few weeks. Do you want to know what I have learned since I came back?" She did not wait for an answer. "I have learned that most people, almost everyone, are very

good. Take Cora for instance. I think that nothing makes her happier than helping others. And all the people from town who were there today. I'd assumed most were coming out of curiosity, but you should have seen them as they came through the receiving line. I really think they—"

As she kept speaking, my mind drifted back to the ring in my pocket. I could do it there. Right in that moment, before she boarded her plane. I could drop to my knee on the tarmac and ask her to be my wife. My left hand rose, slowly moving toward the pretty little hidden box.

"—and she is so warm, so smart too. All these people. For us. For Jack. It's just so—" Her voice trailed off as her face crumbled and the tears came again.

I pulled her close to me again. This girl. Carrying both the unimaginable grief from her brother's death and the weight of a country's Olympic hopes. It wasn't the time for a proposal.

I saw that the pilot was standing at the top of the steps. I knew he was anxious to get airborne; it was time to say goodbye. "The pilot is tapping his foot up there," I said into her hair.

Nancy put her arms around my neck, and we had a world-class kiss. She whispered, "No one ever loved anyone as much as I love you." She then scampered up the steps in true Nimble Nancy style. From the top, she waved, blew me a kiss, and ducked into the plane. A few seconds later she was waving from a window; then the plane taxied away.

I watched the plane take off and stayed until the taillights vanished. It was still early. I thought that I should swing by the Hathaways' house and tell them that Nancy was safely on her way.

LAUREN TESS
JOHNSON'S HARDWARE

The popcorn machine is almost empty.
It gives off no scent. All I smell is
dust mingled with metal that is stirred by
the two-blade fans affixed to the rafters.
The proprietor's advice on cleaning
second story windows—that I really need
an extension ladder—is the same as my dad's.

(cont)

He's told, twice, of a flight he took in Venezuela
where father and son copilots flew into
violent argument as the tiny cabin of passengers
warily looked on. That story is one of the remedies
my parents have unknowingly given me;
I always recall it when I'm anxious mid-air
and it offers a small dose of composure.

As the hardware store owner tells me about
climbing ladders and the wonders of Krud Kutter
I feel sweat bead at his unrequitable kindness.
Somehow, being is enough to justify this
endless generosity. Everything around me
gives and gives, the sun shines, space and time
are sacrificed, and all I have to do is live.

Tess

OPOSSUM

At three thirty I finally
throw off the covers and
wander to the front window.

The night world is thick
with inactivity, except the odd
vehicle crossing the intersection

at the foot of the neighborhood.
And a lone opossum, nosing
up the sod of our apartment yard.

There is no black of night here
and she risks the dim orange glow
for her forage, alone, low to the ground.

When she eventually shuffles into
the shade of some undergrowth
I go to bed, and to sleep.

(cont)

I wake to low-skied afternoon,
news of more quarantines.
Having willed myself into nowhere

to go, I look for online work
over oatmeal. Skulking among
shades of self-imposed inactivity

calls up a different sense of tedium
from the traditional gig I left,
from new types of grinds to come.

It's all irreplaceable though.
Every dull moment is really
a morsel swathed in plain old dirt.

Tess

AND LONG THE SEASON

This year Arkansas didn't
see that coating of snow
that snuffs overachieving
flora in the northern states,
delaying the mayhem of
spring. So the honeysuckle's
been maniacal all March,
disrupting the color scheme
of later buds by turning what
should be a grey street green.
Everything's out of control,
and right on schedule too,
making me wary of all that
leeway the laws of nature
allow, the loopholes that
accommodate, embrace
the fresh breath of chaos.
Because a year can unfold
exactly as one would expect
and yet in no time
all hell's broken loose.

Tess

CURTIS PIERCE
NEO FOLK ROCK TRIO

"You wouldn't be undressing me with your eyes?" asks Melissa, five minutes into our date. Curve of lip revealing hint of a smile.

"I'm not going to dignify that with an answer," I reply with a grin. I hope she's being flirtatious.

We are seated at the terrace of Annabella's Asylum, a popular café on Main Street near Venice Beach where oval stained glass graces the façade. The walls inside display pink tinted photographs of mountains and coastlines. There is a thick scent of peppermint incense. Razor riffs from "Purple Haze" blast from tall outdoor speakers.

Melissa has long blond hair flowing past her shoulders and bright blue eyes. I was already seated when she showed up in tight jeans, black leather boots with laces, and a low-cut tie-dyed T-shirt. I smiled, stood up and signaled her to my table. As she approached, I noticed a small black rubber flashlight hanging from a thick denim belt.

Melissa contacted me on a dating app called *cool professional singles*, of which I have been a member longer than I care to admit. I hesitated when Melissa suggested meeting for a drink. Her profile featured a photo of her in gym shorts jogging on a sand dune. She described herself as a "physically fit free-spirited woman with a passion for music." Apart from that, she didn't reveal much.

Internet dating has been a wild ride. A lot of nut jobs, but I'm hanging in. Pushing 40 with no long-term relationships under my belt. They usually fizzle within a couple of months. When it comes to enjoying the company of the opposite sex, I only need two nights a week. But when the right one comes along, someone with a strong independent streak, I think I could be better about that.

"So how are you finding *cool professional singles*? A lot of unusual people out there. Wouldn't ya say?" I ask, raising my eyebrows.

"How do you mean?" she says, perplexed. "Most of the men I've met have been very friendly."

It's a warm winter afternoon. Young couples accompanied by perfectly groomed golden retrievers push sleeping babies on strollers with blue-and-white striped cushions up Main Street taking in the fresh and salty breeze blowing in from the blue Pacific. The merchants at the farmers market on the corner with their organic jams and breads and cheeses draw swarms of locals.

"Well, on second thought, tell me about your job. What do you do for a living?" I ask in a friendly tone of voice.

"I'd rather not say." She sips herbal tea from a tall paper cup with a thick brown cardboard sleeve. Her fingernails have a glossy red polish and are trimmed or bitten very short. "It's not important. What I really do is sing," she says. My goal is to sing professionally."

"What kind of singer?" I reply, off-put by her evasiveness. "Pop diva like Lady Gaga? Or actual opera? Would you like to perform the lead in *Carmen* or *La Bohème*?" I ask, trying to sound sincere.

"No, sir. Nothing like that. I do Neo folk rock," she says. "Classic folk rock with modern arrangements, modifications and a woman singing."

I am tempted to reply *"Neo Folk Rock? Seriously? Good luck with that!"* Instead I opt for, "Sounds interesting, I would love to hear you sing some time."

"Would you really? Looks like you're talking about music but thinking about something else. "That hint of a smile again. "If you are seriously interested, you are in luck," she says. I am *seriously interested* or genuinely curious.

"I'm singing tonight in a couple of hours at a small club in Hollywood. I am getting ready to head out there soon. Can you take me?" She starts bopping her head to the background music. "I love this song," she says as "People Are Strange" by the Doors blares around us.

"I have to get my guitar from my apartment. It's not far. I won't be long."

"I don't know. Tomorrow is Monday morning. I have to get up early for work. What time would we get back?"

"Not too late, I promise. It'll be fun."

It occurs to me she never asked about me. Not even one question about where I live or work or grew up. But I don't mind. Would rather keep to myself that my alcoholic dad spent six months in county jail for domestic violence when I was in middle school and mom had a restraining order against him for most of my adolescence. And my sister and I never speak.

"Sure. Why not?" I say wondering what I'm getting myself into.

***

"Hey all you open mic fanatics, are you ready for reggae, rappers, and rockers?" A voice over the loudspeaker hollers out. Candles in green glass jars are set out on round mahogany tables of the dark square room that is deluged with the scent of cigarette smoke and alcohol. At the end of the room is a small wooden stage with a red velvet curtain toward the back. The club can probably seat about 100 people or so. Black-and-white posters of

Kurt Cobain, Tupac Shakur, and Amy Winehouse in glass frames adorn the walls.

I am now aware that Melissa will be one of many performers. We drove up Highland Avenue, bordering the grassy divider with towering palm trees. Traffic flowed smoothly in the last hour of daylight. Melissa played with the radio the whole way, flipping between oldies and classic vinyl. I parked near the Capitol Records building and endured angry looks from a barefoot couple with a blue tarp camping on the sidewalk until we made it inside Café Shining Star.

The first performer is tall, thin and black. He calls himself "Jamaica" and is rapping with a thick accent matching his name to a back track of drums, bass and occasional horns. He is cursing "immigration and deportation" and how messed up it is that countries have borders. He sports a white clergy-like silk robe with gold trim. He gets a loud round of applause from the small crowd, one table in particular.

"What would you like to drink?" asks the tall young waitress in a black T-shirt with a glittery silver star and black shorts accentuating her long legs. Melissa orders a whisky sour and a burger. Coke and nachos for me. I try to make conversation, but it's noisy.

The next act is "Ninja Blue." The lead singer is a leather-clad woman with bright blue hair screaming about the end of the world. She is accompanied by two musicians on bass and drums. They are dressed entirely in black: knee-high boots, tights, a cape. The bottom half of their faces is covered with fabric and blue-tinted sunglasses cover their eyes. Enthusiastic shouts come from the next table, where three girls who must have flashed fake IDs to enter the club are standing and cheering. One has a tattoo with a skull on her forearm. The other two have half-shaven heads.

Several acts follow. It's starting to get late. "How much longer till you go on?" I ask Melissa. The crowd is starting to thin out. I imagine being woken by the alarm tomorrow morning.

"Shouldn't be much longer," she says. "I think I'm going to be—Hey Rob, over here!" Melissa stands up and waves her arms wildly to someone at the door. He approaches and they give each other a warm hug.

Rob is about 35, tall, muscular, short-cropped brown hair with glossy green eyes that carefully look me over. He's got a blue denim jacket and tan combat boots. He could use a shave.

"Jerry, I'd like you to meet Rob. We go way back."

"Hey Jerry, great to meet you." He reaches out and squeezes my hand with a painfully powerful handshake. Then he sits down at our table with his back to the stage.

"Talk to me, Jerry. What do you do?" he hollers.

"I sell accounting software to CPAs." I shout over the music with exaggerated mouth movement so he can read my lips. "Nothing as exciting as being a musician and performing. How about you?"

"Social worker. Between jobs at the moment." His head oscillates like a fan as he speaks. He turns around to look up at the stage, then the entrance, then Melissa, then back at me.

"It's tough because I'm restless. No patience. It's hard for me to listen for one hour while people talk about their problems. Not that I don't want to help." His eyes wander. "I do. I just can't sit still that long."

"Sounds like a challenging job," I holler. "Have you thought of doing anything else?"

"Negative," he replies. "How do you know Melissa?" he cries out.

"Guess you can say we met by chance."

"Come on, Jerry. We're all friends. How did you two meet?"

"Hey, all you old-school rock aficionados," says the overpowering voice of the MC, rescuing me from Rob's interrogation, if only for the time being. "We know you love to rock. Are you ready for some Neo Folk Rock? Well, then give it up for Melissa!"

The scattered dwindled audience applauds politely. Rob stands up. "I need to see the guys who do the sound and spotlight. They never get it right. They have the guitar drowning out the voice. Or the other way around. We should talk later. Jerr," he says with an intense stare.

Black guitar strapped over her chest, Melissa marches up a few stairs on the side of the wooden stage. A yellow spotlight casts a shadow of her guitar and upper body on the curtain behind her. She ignores the wooden stool and stands in front of the microphone. She adjusts the boom so it is next to her guitar.

The strumming of Melissa's steel strings fills the room. Her voice is gritty and low and has an echo effect. I nod as I recognize the tune. She is singing Bob Dylan's "Blowing In The Wind." When she gets to the chorus, I find myself quietly singing along. "The answer my friend…" The audience is polite and respectful. She looks at ease. I'm smiling through the second verse and chorus and it's all good—but, wait, suddenly there are lyrics I don't recognize.

"Tell me how high the world's temperature must rise, till there's only fire in the skies…."

Wo. Hold on. Is she is really changing Dylan's lyrics? My mouth opens. I stop singing along. *Can you do that?*

She finishes the tune with the new lyrics. Polite applause. Perplexed

looks.

"Thank you very much. Let's see if you recognize this one."

She launches into an altered rap version of John Lennon's "Give Peace A Chance."

When she gets to the second chorus, she replaces it with "Make love and dance." She's bobbing her head and clearly pleased with her refinement.

At the next table, an older guy in a dark suit and white dress shirt says to his date in a long evening dress "Is this a joke?" I start to wonder the same thing.

"No. I know what's going on," I overhear the woman say cheerfully. "She's rehearsing for a TV show. Or movie part. Gotta be."

I applaud loudly. "Yes!" I shout. "All Right!"

"Thank you very much," says Melissa. "I'd smash my guitar now, but then I'd have to buy a new one. Can't afford that until I get signed." She flashes a huge grin before walking off the stage.

"What did you think?" she asks me.

"Yeah" I say. That was really something. Did you change some of the original lyrics?"

"Of course. Otherwise, it wouldn't be neo. There's always room for improvement. Where did Rob go?"

I look around the room. I don't see him. I see more people leaving.

"How do you know him anyway?"

"We went to music school together back east. Schoenberg Music Academy."

"Really?" I scan the room again for Rob. No luck. "Sorry. Looks like Restless Rob has left the building."

***

We're stopped at Hollywood and Highland as the siren of a police car wails past us. A short man in a Spiderman costume stands in front of the red illuminated lights of the Hard Rock Café. He is looking up at the late evening sky. I'm driving Melissa home. A few people with nothing but time pace up and down the emptying boulevard.

"It's disappointing when it's not crowded like this," says Melissa. "But that's not uncommon at open mic night. I hope there were talent scouts. It's high time for me to get discovered already."

We start to move. Melissa toys with the radio. Soon we are heading west on Sunset Boulevard, passing mansions decorated with sculptures, fountains and Roman columns on the way to the 405.

"So how long you been doing open mic nights?" I ask.

"10 years."

"What else do you do to get discovered?"

"I post videos on *YouTube*. Every month or so, I go to the offices of record companies around town and drop off CDs and promotional information about myself. No offers yet. But I know it'll happen. It just takes time."

"What about representation?" I ask. "Wouldn't it be better if you had an agent or manager? Have you tried to get one?"

"Yes, sir. It's not that simple. Not so easy." She raises her voice. Her tone is suddenly hostile. "If you knew anything about the music business, you would know that."

I am tempted to make more suggestions, but say nothing for the remainder of the trip. I turn left on Pico after passing an adult bookstore, an old-style diner with red booths and a counter, and a bowling alley.

I find a parking space right in front of her place, a square stucco apartment building that says "Paradise of the Pacific" in raised script lettering. A quiet street with pine trees. Similar apartment buildings, two or three stories high with sliding glass doors and balconies with metal bars, line the block.

"Do you want to come in?" says Melissa, holding her guitar case.

"Sure," I say a bit surprised at the invite. Her studio apartment is at the end of the hallway on the first floor.

"You're nice" she says, after closing the door. I appreciate you taking me to the club and sitting through my set. Have a seat."

I check out the room. There is very little furniture. A mattress on the floor. A small white clock radio. An old oak table that hasn't been varnished in years. A couple of old wooden chairs. And a red mountain bike in the corner with rusty handlebars.

"Cool bohemian set up you got," I say, smiling.

"Thanks."

"Do you have a television?"

"Negative," she says.

"You sleep on the mattress on the floor?" I ask.

"It's great. Very good for your back. You want to try it out? By the way, you're welcome to stay." She doesn't have to ask twice.

She undresses and lies down. Her eyes are shut. She doesn't say anything. Despite the intimacy, there is distance. She is removed. Does she know who is with her? Could it be anyone? In the darkness, it's quiet except for the loud metallic buzzing of the old air conditioner which adds an extra layer to the harmonies of Simon and Garfunkel seeping out of the radio.

I'm facing the ceiling. Melissa is asleep on her side with her back to

me. I'm fading out trying to make sense of this. She has been trying for years to break into the music business. Doing the same thing over and over without success. I recall an Einstein quote, something about doing the same thing repeatedly and hoping for different results. What was it again? But for Melissa, what would the alternative be? I try to picture her working in a bank or a doctor's office, but sleep overcomes me.

***

"Coffee?"

I see "5:00 AM" in illuminated blue numbers and smell burnt toast. Melissa is seated at her worn-out table. Already dressed in jeans, pink T-shirt with no sleeves and black running shoes. I notice a tattoo on her shoulder. A man with a beard and long hair in green ink. The caption in red below reads "Saint Jude."

I get up, toss on some clothes and sit with her. She tears open the shiny wrapping of a strawberry pop tart and takes a bite. I'm startled when the clock radio on the floor suddenly goes off. Oldies station of course.

"I didn't think you'd invite me to spend the night. I notice you didn't ask much about me."

"You mean the twenty questions about work and school and family. Does anyone really care about any of that stuff? I know I don't. Thanks again for taking me to the show. You should come next week. Different songs. Right now, I've got to head out to my crap day job."

"Can I call you?"

"Yes, sir. I'm around."

She gets up and walks over to the bicycle. She reaches down toward the thin carpet and picks up a helmet, purple with vents. She places it on her head and buckles the strap beneath her chin before rolling the bicycle to the front door.

"You're biking to work in the dark?"

"I've got reflectors. It'll be daylight soon. I save a ton of money on gas and parking. You can stay and finish breakfast. Make sure to close the door all the way shut when you go," she says, before doing the same.

It's not yet daybreak as I walk to my car. A thin layer of fog blankets the street. I wonder where Melissa is really going. I get inside my car and turn on the ignition and wait for the condensation on my windshield to clear up. I notice someone standing in the street in front of my headlights. He is waving his arms, signaling me.

No other movement on the street. *What the hell.* I turn off the engine and get out.

"Sorry, Jerr. I hope I didn't scare you. I need to tell you something."

It's Restless Rob, dressed as he was last night.

We are the only ones on the street at this hour. I can barely make out the branches of the trees in the fog. There is mist under the lamp of the hanging street light. No movement on the street except for a garbage truck in the distance.

"Tell me. How did Melissa say she knows me?"

"Schoenberg Music Academy."

He chuckles. "Wow. And you believed that?

"Why are you laughing?" I reply.

"Because it's not true. More like the Cheney Military Academy."

"What do you mean?"

"We're veterans, Melissa and I. Three tours in Iraq and Afghanistan."

"Are you kidding? No way. She never mentioned anything about military service."

"That's because she's blocked it all out and replaced it with music school."

He shakes his head. He pauses. I wonder if he has been walking all night.

"I'm listening." I say.

"We were in a jeep. We were supposed to take some pictures of a compound in Basra and get the hell out of there. Melissa was the photographer; she was a very good one. We were heading back when we heard the shots. I was driving." He pauses. His head starts moving slowly side to side as he continues.

"Two other members of our group were shot in the face. Melissa and I were the only survivors. They said we were lucky to have made it out alive. Not the first time she was involved in a mission gone wrong. She didn't speak for days. When she did, it was clear her memory was shot."

We're standing in the middle of the street. A black-and-white security vehicle slows down looks us over and then passes.

"Will she get her memory back?"

"Not likely, they say. But I think she will. She and I were getting pretty close. At this point, I like to check on her, make sure she's doing ok."

"Are you saying you don't want me seeing her?"

"Who me?" Rob says with an edge. "Hell no! You seem like a decent guy. I've moved on. I just wanted you to know what you're getting into."

"I appreciate you telling me this." A few seconds of silence. I turn toward the "Paradise of the Pacific" and see a black antique lantern on the facade, the only light coming from the building.

"Can I ask you something Rob? Are you saying she's crazy?"

"We're all crazy, Jerry," he fires back looking right at me. "Matter of degree. If you're hanging out with Melissa and thinking you're immune, you might want to take a hard look in the mirror."

He walks off to the end of the block and turns the corner.

I get back in my car and restart the engine. Not sure where I'll go. Very tempted to take the day off and maybe drive up the coast. Or find a good Irish pub. Should probably head home, change, and stagger into the office and face the reality of Monday morning.

I drive slowly in the fog. I stop carefully at the stop sign at the end of the street. Up ahead, the mist is lifting and there is a hint of daylight. *Does Restless Rob have a point?* I turn on the radio. More classic rock. Mick Jagger is belting out "I can't get no satisfaction." I listen for a few seconds then switch on the news.

DENNIS ROSS

SHAMAN

My father lay dying,
shriveled,
mighty arms flaccid,
bone cancer everywhere,
pain,
a stream full of piranhas
attacking.

He smiled,
pointing out a pattern
in the ceiling cracks,
a soaring gull.
Then he too took flight
on his new journey,
no fear,
open-eyed anticipation.

A last example
in how to live.

Ross

RESTARTING TIME

The grandfather clock has gone to sleep,
no swinging pendulum, no singing
out the hours. The hands are stopped
near midnight as is my life.

I pull up the heavy weights,
nudge the massive brass pendulum,
reset the ornate hands, and time
starts its slow tick tock once again.
The carved walnut case, almost black
from all the years, creaks ever so faintly,
the sound taking me back to my childhood,
putting me in touch with myself again.

The world wanders on its way,
daylight streaming in.
Spot chases a rabbit out back
which darts under
the ramshackle picket fence,
the turnips and carrots
are leafing out,
and the smaller goats
frisk in their pasture.

Not midnight after all, but early
morning in the rest of my life.

Ross

YGGDRASIL

That summer the two of us hiked back
into the wilderness further than ever before,
up into a high valley with a glacial lake
surrounded by snow-topped peaks.

A marmot trotted along beside us like a puppy
and a pinyon jay settled on Astrid's shoulder
as we strode along full of life and energy
despite the altitude and rough miles covered.

(cont)

The valley teemed with animals of all sorts
some unknown even in zoos like an ox
dwarfing all others I had ever seen
and carmine-red birds with lengthy tails.

Peace drifted like a warm rain-mist
over the valley. Nearby a wooly mammoth
cropped lush grass tickling his stomach,
and a mountain lion slept amidst blue sheep.

Ahead an ash tree with many twisted branches,
each wider than a house and a block long,
supported the sky and the lower clouds.
We stood rooted to the ground, awestruck.

Finally, Astrid walked up to the great tree
in a trance and, vulnerable, laid both hands
on the black gnarled bark. Much later she
glowed as she turned to walk away, and
I knew beyond knowing she was pregnant
with something world-changing. The cycle
was complete, a new world was beginning.

Ross

DIVING IN

Our minds are overstuffed
with words and concepts
constantly chattering away
in our heads like an angry squirrel,
as if words birthed all and meaning
led the parade, as if the world
were a cosmic puzzle to be solved.

Better to dive into the ocean
of no-meaning and the vivid
present, feel the cool water
rushing by our bodies,
better to observe busy ants
carrying their bits of stone
and join them in their labors.

(cont)

Join too the slow lives of mountains
lifting up and eroding down again
or dandelions in their ecstasy
releasing their fluffy seeds
into the fresh spring breeze.

Merely understanding life is the dry
sound of a scorpion scrabbling
through sand in a desert wash.

Ross

LAUGHTER

Our song is laughter
ringing in all the empty spaces,
the deserts, the tiresome mountains,
the places where more stars might be
but aren't.

Our laughter rattles down
the branching tunnels of past time
and wings off into time not yet created.

How else could we respond
to the absurdity of our situation?
Unknown origin, short life on a minor
speck of dust, unknown future.

Laugh, enjoy the sunshine and the storm,
the leaves we could never imagine
appearing on trees in spring then drifting
off again in the fall, the brave and busy
chimney swifts raising families
each summer in the fireplace.

Meaning drifts off like multi-tongued
mist into the deep woods. We must not
try to follow.

Ross

FLY FISHING

Use very light tackle.
A short stick makes a good rod,
for line use a single strand
from a spider web,
strong but thin.
Attractor baits are best
especially grains of sugar
or a bit of cow dung attached
to the smallest hook available,
a number 40 if you can find one.
Cast carefully to not alarm
your prey. Let the bait sit a bit
then twitch it slowly in.

When the fly strikes,
haul back carefully on the rod,
and he is hooked.
They are good fighters
and do not tire easily
so you are in for a battle.

Catch and release is preferable
to preserve stocks of wild flies,
but a fly roasted on a stick over
a campfire or fried is very tasty.

Ross

THOMAS ELSON
ON HER THIRD STEP

A right turn onto Seneca Street, left at McCormack, past the high school—where it began with adjoining lockers—then up the small hill, over the railroad tracks, the stop light, over the Arkansas River, look to the right and see the spillway, then more railroad tracks, past her best friend's house, two more blocks east, turn left, go north for a block and a half, then on his left the numbers, 1045-1043—the street numbers of the duplex. Only three steps to the shared porch. The same route he traveled years earlier, first

hesitantly, then eagerly, then greedily.

The street was both lush and bleak, scattered with vehicles without bumpers, fenders, doors, radio antennas, wheels, or hubcaps. Vehicles in streets, front yards, elevated or embedded, a few absent tires, others absent axels. Vehicles once for use now for cannibalization or neglect.

#

That night was terminal. He didn't know it yet; but more likely than not, she had an inclination.

He would see her only one more time. He didn't know that either.

On the third step of a shared porch they had rested on, stood against, and lingered near for years—her widowed mother's half a house. The kind of slap-dash housing folks lived in back then.

Housing where wind could be heard through the windows. The wind a low whine, sometimes mellow, more often shrill and mean, but always demanding. Winds that delivered consecutive blows with such force that memories long tucked away were shaken loose. Houses modeled, remodeled over generations until they stood as they were in the beginning with pitted white siding, unpainted porches, two halves with two doors and two windows facing the street. A visitor could be shotgunned through the door, into the living room, kitchen, past bathroom, then into bedroom and out the back door without being invited inside.

Their lives charted by a single path dictated by the times—the early sixties which means the fifties, but learned from the forties, and dictated during the thirties. Her grandmother's life sewn into her seams. His grandfathers' life a trumpet that would lead him his entire life. Both carried expectations as blinders. The only issues were the peripheral vision allowed with those blinders, and how long until they were yanked off.

Her world remained as small as her house—one classroom in one city with one spouse and one set of friends. From house to high school to college to classroom—a life within eight city blocks.

His world had multiple roads—graveled, paved. Rutted. Smooth. Mapped. Unknown—until, years later, after paneled offices near the Potomac, the Mississippi, and San Francisco Bay, he was on the same street in the same town where he had begun.

He, in his bespoke suit, had seen a current picture of her—a weighty, dyed or maybe wigged blond of a color not found in nature, her posture boisterous, ankles and wrists thick, wearing a checkboard of orange and white that emphasized everything wrong. He preferred the black-and-white version when she was erect with dark hair framing an eager face, eyes focused on the world in front of her.

#

That night on the left side of the third step of the duplex was their last time whose first time began with adjoining lockers and the door she opened that struck his head as he turned to look at her. No words, just mutterings. No actual plan, they just were drawn together, just yes and yes, then yes.

There were no smiles on that terminal night, only attempts to recapture better times. Times of firsts, of anticipations, feelings, touches. One year, two years, three years. The school years, Christmas vacations, summer jobs, the nights, dates, parties, movies, games, arguments, parking—airport, drive-ins—parents' cars, permissions, acceptance, then graduation. Then, their final night as a couple. Three years. In all that time he was never invited inside.

For years he carried her in that empty spot. They were broken by something forgotten, never understood, mendable had they a few more years of maturity and experience.

On that night, when futility hit, he rose from the step, kissed her, held her, kissed both cheeks, kissed her again, took her hand, and did not let go until distance and time released her for him.

THE DIVINITY*

One hundred and forty-eight people gathered in the hall.
One person could not make it but sent a three-page letter.
One hundred and forty-seven signed the book.
Only one did not.
One hundred and forty-one, over the years, had spoken with her about children, spouses, abuse, rapes, fears, shortcomings, debts, dreams.
One hundred and thirty-seven had been hired by her.
Twenty-three had their jobs saved by her.
Four had been fired by her but came anyway.
Everyone knew it was the last time.
One photograph was taken.
One woman in the center of the photograph.
All were smiling.
One hundred and forty-seven signatures on the back of the photograph.
Twelve words on the front: *From all those you saved at St. Matthew's Neonatal Intensive Care Unit.*

* Divinity: collective noun for a group of neonatal intensive care nurses.

Elson

GORDON A GRAVES

A MATCH MADE IN HEAVEN

The golden hair, the sultry voice, the eyes, the smile, the mole, the presence, so splendid, but still, not quite right.

Stan couldn't sleep that sticky hot July night. Mostly on account of his arthritis and acid stomach, but as he started on the last six months to his 84th birthday, Stan had plenty of cheap labor working on the sleeplessness project.

"Quit trying to pretend you're asleep!" she snapped, breaking out of character. "Let's get this over with." Stan's eyes were open, he knew they were. This was real. What had she been saying? something about making love? "You've been dead sixty-seven years. Why are you here? Why me?"

Carolyn Conroy replied, "Sixty-six. I suppose you would say that for me this is a kind of purgatory. I don't know what, if any, higher purpose it serves for you."

"I haven't done anything."

"Stanley Prackdown, did you, or did you not, at 10:37 PM on September 13th, in the year of 1959, pray to your God and mine, for 'A piece of my tail?'"

"It's possible, I don't remember; it was so long ago."

"Lover boy, your ex-wife shouldn't have divorced you, she should have shot you. Anyway, consider your memory refreshed. Time to get to work." Carolyn draped her wrap over Stanley's chair and sat down next to him on the bed.

"I'm sorry Carolyn, I was just a kid. I didn't really mean it. Can't I just sign a chit for you, or something?"

"No, Stanley, you can't weasel out of it. Let's quit wasting your breath and my time." She was wearing nothing else, save her pumps, which she kicked off.

"Why are you here 68 years after the fact?"

"You think you were the only one?" Carolyn stretched out alongside Stanley, who moved over to give her more room.

"It's your breasts. That's it, your breasts are wrong."

"Silicone doesn't die Stanley; you are just going to have to make do with Mona Lee's original equipment. Now get it up, and get this show on the road."

You're cold as a stone."

"You're not hard as a rock, Stanley."

"Are you sure this is safe?"

"If you were going to worry about social diseases, I think you should have started earlier."

Stanley persisted, "Aren't some of the men you do infected? Maybe you are safe enough, but couldn't you pass the germs along to others ?"

"Some are no doubt infected. What passes for my body harbors the disease organisms for a time, but I travel in other dimensions; I have a special pass from the boss, so to speak. If the bugs don't have passes, they don't travel. I don't suppose you could move it a little faster? I'd still like to make my quota tonight."

"You travel in other dimensions, Carolyn, like Duck Togers?"

"Like Duck Togers. I can be around the world in the blink of an eye. Oh, there are a few areas, like the northern Gulf Coast from Panama City to Pascagoula, where the dimensions don't mesh just right. It sucks when I have to go in for just one or two jobs. It can take me hours to get in, and getting out is sometimes even worse."

"You always go into other dimensions between jobs, Carolyn? What about when two guys make the same wish at the same time. After we saw your movie *Fuss Pot* in '60 or '61, Fred Nast and I both wished, 'God, I'd stand in line for thirty years for ten minutes with Carolyn Conroy,' or words to that effect."

"I know what words you used, Stan. I don't go by the date of the request. I go by the age of the requester. Also, your ten minutes are up."

"Lots of guys must be born at nearly the same time, Carolyn. The odds are that at least a few would live close together, even like Fred and I, they would make their petitions together? What about twins?"

"You win, Stanley. Sometimes this job calls for me to service two or more men who live in close proximity at nearly the same time, but not, so far, in the same bed. But as you can see, I am not dressed for riding on the bus, or for walking the streets, or to go from one to the other the easy way."

"What kind of a God would order something like this?"

"You're not having fun yet, Stanley? God is not a bad sort, not the self-important dictator you might imagine. At least you must admit God has a sense of humor?"

"You started with the oldest, and you are working back?"

"You got it, Stan. If they were all as slow as you and had half the questions, I'd still be in the nineties. Please concentrate on the problem at hand."

"You must be nearly done with your list by now, Carolyn?"

"I would have been finished years ago, Stanley, if those greedy

SOBs didn't keep re-releasing my flicks."

"Everyone must know you are dead, Carolyn?" Stanley interrupted.

"The problem is they re-release them in places like Africa. My first call there nearly blew me away. Some old guy, 80 or 90, must have sat through one of my pictures a dozen times. Finally he decided, 'I haven't added to my harem lately. This odd blond will fit right in.' He sacrificed a goat. He couldn't understand a word of dialogue, or read the subtitles. It bummed him out when I didn't stay. I guess God got an earful out of that one."

"Can you tell me how you died, Carolyn?"

"I'm the dead guy, remember? I've heard all the theories, I hope. Finding out about these little mysteries is the main perk of Heaven. If you get there first, you'll know before I do. Come on, Stanley. I don't want to set any records tonight."

"Do you let those who are impotent off the hook?"

"I keep hoping, Stanley, but so far no luck."

"Don't some die before you get to them?"

"No, if a terminal illness or a fatal accident is in the cards, they get priority. Don't go soft on me now. Stanley. Relax. I've got my hot tickets for tonight out of the way already."

Relief brought a wistful smile to Stanley's lips. Carolyn wearily sat up and threw her legs off the bed. She slipped into her pumps, and stood, surrounding herself with her fur.

"Carolyn, Carolyn, wait!" Stanley cried out. "What about late March or early April 1960, after the movies with Fred Nast? Will you be back? Clean sheets, music, candlelight, wine—tell me what you would like. I'll stay prepared until you return."

"Your memory is improving, Stan. Sorry, one to a customer, but Freddie'd better watch his buns. Give Jane a try, I don't think she's busy." As she faded from sight, Carolyn pleaded, "Stan, if you get to Heaven, do me a favor…."

"You bet. Anything, anything at all"

"Don't look me up."

DUANE ANDERSON
WHERE IS MY CHAIR?

The rocking chair sat downstairs
in the basement,
the seat cover missing,
springs poking up,
the stain faded,
waiting to be repaired.

I took a picture of the chair
in its disrepair state,
handing it to my father
after he had retired from his job,
stating it was something to keep
him busy in his retirement years.

The chair was repaired years later,
but not by my dad.
He never made an attempt, and
my mother hired someone to fix it,
and now it sits in the family room,
used at family gatherings.

And now that I too am retired,
I wonder if there is a chair in my life that
sits in some basement waiting to be repaired.
Will it receive the same result as
left by my father, or will it even be noticed?
The search begins, some day.

Anderson

THOMAS JOHNSON
A RECOLLECTION OF YOUTH

My eleven-year-old little leaguer grandson called me to ask why he was unable to find me on the internet. Nothing in Wikipedia even. He wanted to do a school report on a major league baseball player. Me! I was surprised,

and a little disappointed with myself that I didn't have a lot to report.

Most of my life I've been teaching American literature with a master's degree in psychology (not clear how that happened) at a junior college in San Francisco's bay area. I also coached the lady's softball team for almost forty years.

I really was a professional baseball player. When I think about it now, it's as if I read a story about someone else. I spoiled a perfect game in the World Series in the bottom of the ninth inning against the New York Yankees in the early '70s.

In high school I was never considered a pro prospect, but I did get a small scholarship from the local state college, and worked part time at a Safeway grocery store. I bought a car and discovered that the girls like guys with cars. My grades turned crummy and I was placed on academic probation. In the sixties if you weren't going to school full time, married or supporting a mother and siblings the draft board old ladies would get you, then off to Vietnam you would go. Not an equal opportunity employer, the military is. No fat, no blind, but low IQ is okay. I was faced with the prospect of trading in my baseball bat for a M16 combat weapon. My father suggested I check to see if the Army still had a baseball team.

In order to be allowed to play ball in the Army, I had to join for three years and agree to go to Army school for training as an electronics technician at Fort Monmouth, New Jersey. A no-brainer. New Jersey trumps Vietnam every time. I discovered I loved playing baseball while in the Army, and that I was really good. Second base was my spot. Other infielders had stronger throwing arms, but no one had a better glove than the little guy from California's Bay Area. We played national teams from Japan, South Korea, Australia, Taiwan and Europe.

For years I strengthened my forearms during down time in the Army with weights and by squeezing a rubber ball. I must say I had forearms like Popeye which allowed me to swing a heavy 33 bat faster through the zone. I could hit singles and doubles all day. A scout from the new Montreal Expos signed me up three days after I was discharged. I was going to get paid to play a game I would play for nothing. Could life be any better?

After two years on the triple-A team in Fort Lauderdale (the humidity was unbearable), I was called up to the big team. Management told me they needed my glove and my outstanding speed to help the team get to the World Series.

Our team made it to the World Series and were playing the infamous Yankees. It was a fun year but I had a disappointing season at the plate. The major league curve-ball gave me fits. It was game six at Montreal stadium.

Yankees one, Expos zero. Bottom of the ninth, and the Yankees needed one more win and they would be world champs once again.

I didn't start on that cool, breezy, overcast gray afternoon but was sent in for defensive purposes in the eighth and came to bat second. Juan Blanco, AKA John White, led off and took a called strike-three fastball down the heart of the plate. The twenty-six-year-old Yankee pitcher, Dave Shoupe, needed two more outs to win a perfect game no hitter in this World Series. Only one perfect game in major league history was way back in 1956 by Don Larsen.

Shoupe was six-foot-six and one hundred eighty-five pounds with a right arm that seemed to be six feet three inches long, a real knuckle dragger. The guy was a freak. He had to reach up to put his hands in his pockets. Old Shoupe could reach half way to home plate, it seemed, before releasing his one-hundred-miles-per-hour fastball. All the players referred to him as The Orangutan. Like the primate, he had a short torso, but he did have long legs unlike the orangutan and sported a thick orangutan-orange Fu Manchu mustache that extended about three inches past his long chin. He would wax it into points like orange fangs. Everyone in those days had long hair … not Dave Shoupe. He shaved his head before leaving the locker room on the days he pitched. Shoupe was the best pitcher in baseball that year by far.

My name was announced, "Number twenty-four, Roy Williams!" How have I lived without hearing that every day? The adrenaline button was punched and I became Maximus, the unconquerable gladiator. A rush like that today would explode the old aorta or, worse yet, cause a paralyzing stroke.

On my way to the plate I passed Juan and could hear him mumble something about bullets in Spanish. I joined the catcher, young Therman Munson, whom I disliked; the umpire Emmett Ashford I greeted with a "how you doing Ash?" Gave my bat Vera a kiss on her sweet spot, took my stance in the right-hand batter's box as I had done a thousand times. On this day I was wearing my tight-fitting mock turtle-neck undershirt, feeling like I was in Fort Ord again in cool sixty-degree Monterey, California. I felt good and powerful, and I was determined to do my part: get on base, spoil the no-hitter with a strong line drive to the alley between the center fielder and the right fielder, steal second, then score the tying run.

Shoupe completed his ritual on the mound, wetting his fingers while his back was turned to home plate, then rubbing the ball with both hands. Vera Brown and I were ready. I had three bats of different color, Vera Brown, Vera Black and my blonde bat, Vera White. The black bat was for night games, the blonde for day games, and brown for weekend games, day or

night. It was my routine, but I was never superstitious, just a thing I did. If I broke a bat the life-force of Vera would be in the new bat. To this day if I pick up a bat my sweet Vera is with me. No Vera essence in aluminum bats … ever.

Vera was a girlfriend I met while we were in junior college, built like a 5-foot-2 Simone Biles. She was a 19-year-old creole cutie from Louisiana. She had dark skin, long wavy jet-black hair to her shoulders, smooth, shapely, muscle-heavy legs and thighs, a hard, tight round butt that women pay thousands of dollars to have, and small, firm athletic breasts. Big coffee-brown eyes that floated in the clearest of white, small lips usually uncolored. Her smile revealed white perfect teeth. She would smile with sparking eyes at me a lot. Impossible for her to take a bad picture. People from India would ask her where in India she was from. A Navy World War II vet once asked her if she were from Fiji. "Are you one of those exotic lovelies from the island?" My father questioned me if I had met her mother. "She is gonna be a butterball when she gets older, Boy. Check her mother out to be sure. Most times they become like the mama." While I was away, doing army duties, she just disappeared. No word at all, no unhappy letters ever. I called her three times a week when away. Never any indication that she was unhappy. Vera lived with her grandparents; they were gone too. She was from Baton Rouge. That was all I knew about her life before she came to California. As years passed, I think I could have done more to find her. I should have put on my Columbo rain coat, asked the neighbors, gone to her job and asked a co-worker…something. Could I have been too involved in baseball and army? I used to hope that if I succeeded in baseball, she would be in the stands and send a note to me like in the movie *The Natural*. It was years before the movie came out, then I read the book. Ironically, we had the same name, Roy. Like in the movie's story, life can be uncanny. I don't have a single picture of her. A friend of mine took over a hundred pictures of her for a calendar, only of her for each month, dressed in seasonal attire. I had the model; a picture wasn't important. He lost everything in a fire.

It didn't work out. That is all I have to say about that.

Shoupe began his windup by raising his long right leg over his head like Juan Marichal, but unlike Marichal he wore white shoes and white long stockings with Yankee pinstripe paints bloused at the knee. All of this white, including the ball, comes at the batter starting out as a blur very quickly. The first pitch was a fastball that started off the plate but crossed at the last split second, knee-high. "Strike one!" the animated Emmett Ashford bellowed as he took a gigantic step to his right while pointing one index finger in the

direction of the Yankees dugout. I slowly stepped out of the batter's box. "Ash! Did you see what that ball did?"

"Just hit the ball, Rookie, and shut up," Munson said after he threw the ball back to the pitcher. The next pitch was a curve off the plate low and so far off Munson had to hop over to his right to block it from going to the backstop. "Ball!" The ball bounced off the catcher's chest protector toward my foot. I picked up the baseball to give to the catcher but noticed a dime sized spot of dirt on it. "Take a look at this, Ash. Something sticky like grease is on the ball." Munson jumped up and snatched the ball from me. "What you bitchin' 'bout, Rook?" He threw it back to Shoupe. "Time!" Ashford yelled while raising both his arms over his head. The stadium was so quiet you could hear Emmitt Ashford's footfalls as he marched to the pitcher's mound.

Therman Munson spoke to me while he smoothed the dirt in front of the plate with his foot: "What are you doing, Roy? The man is pitching a perfect game. Dude, you're messin' with his perfect game." I ignored the catcher. I very much disliked catchers, almost as much as pitchers.

"Let me see the ball," the ump asked the pitcher.

"What you doin' out here, Ash? Damn! He's a rookie, man, you can't be serious." Shoupe handed the ball to Ashford's outstretched hand. The fans realized the pitcher was being questioned about a spitball, they cheered and booed loudly. Both dugouts were on their feet. "This is bullshit, Emmitt. The rookie got you screwing with me. You know me. I don't need to do no funny crap."

"Looks like Vaseline on the ball, Dave. Let me see your cap."

"I put leather honey on my glove, Ash. That's leather honey! For gosh-sakes, it got on the ball." Shoupe said as he gave his cap to the ump.

After checking: "Looks really sweaty for a cool day, Dave. Just keep your hand away from your head."

Ashford threw the Vaseline ball to the ball boy then took his position. "Play ball!" The next pitch bounced to the catcher a foot in front of the plate. Shoupe screamed into his glove as he stomped around the mound like a crazy person. Munson and their manager, Ralph Houk, ran to the mound after calling time out to compose the crazed red-faced pitcher.

There are so many variables in baseball, you have to think at least three pitches ahead like a chess match. I loved it. Baseball is very different from football, or basketball or soccer. I compare it to tennis, one on one, pitcher and batter. The opponent offers the ball to you, not a pass from a team mate. Jimmy Connors vs John McEnroe, Joe Frazier vs. George Foreman.

The next pitch missed low, a curve. "Ball three!" Now I had a big advantage over the pitcher. I was an old rookie having played the game for

almost fifteen years; I didn't think Shoupe knew anything about me. He was the best pitcher in the majors, and I was just a rookie unfamiliar with major league pitching. I moved a couple of inches closer to the plate knowing he didn't want to hit me or walk me. He was working on a very rare World Series perfect game and must keep me off the bases. By me crowding the plate Shoupe had to get the ball over the outside half of the plate. I should get a 100-mph fast ball, his best pitch, over the outside corner of the plate. Not that difficult a task for Mr. Shoupe. If he were to get a World Series perfect game and the Cy Young award in the same year, he would be a shoo-in for the Hall of Fame.

Vera felt good to my ungloved hands. I envisioned I'd deliver the sphere to right field and as hard as this guy could hurl all I'd have to do is meet the ball square on Vera's sweet-spot to get a hit.

The Yankees infielders shifted more to the right, the thing to do if the pitcher is trying to work the outside corner. The second baseman was on the grass in shallow right field. The scene was set. Hitting was so much easier when you knew where the ball was going and the speed. Even Howard Cosell would be a good hitter knowing those two things. Shoupe performed an unusually speedier windup. It was very quiet. I was totally focused on that long right arm and the ball. With an earsplitting, out of character, karate scream, the baseball was discharged from those long fingers high and inside as I leaned, ever so slightly, over the plate.

I gave an assignment to my students in a History of Journalism glass, years ago, and received a paper from a student that found a report from a war correspondent during the Civil War. The author described how he could see and hear, from a high ridge at sunset, the marble-size lead musket balls flying through the air in the late evening sunlight, cracking bones and thumping into torsos including skulls each with their unique sound. That paper brought to mind that day at the plate.

The ball came in so fast it screamed like I've heard many times before but only after being hit with a bat into my glove, never before from a pitched ball. I'll remember how it screamed at me for the rest of my days. It had to be way over 100 miles per hour. The baseball hit the bill of my helmet spinning it off my head like a Frisbee before I could react. I went down on my back to the "ahhs" of the crowd. The catcher was standing over me waving and screaming like I was Sonny Liston and he was Mohammed Ali. "He's out, Ash! He didn't try to get out of the way. Call him out, Ash!" Thurman, in all his catcher's gear jumped up and down like an unhappy two-year-old. I stood up and felt wobbly, so I bent over with hands on knees and remember sweet Vera was there on the ground with her lovely Louisville

Slugger logo smiling back at me.

Tom Davenport, our manager, ran out with the trainer. Tom went toe-to-toe with Ashford trying to convince him to throw Shoupe out of the game while the trainer checked my head. I was okay. The perfect game was ruined. I didn't ruin it. Shoupe hit me in the head and ruined his own perfect game. He quick pitched me and lost control of the fastball, I guess. I trotted to first a little woozy. No way would I ever have expected being hit.

Our first base coach, Hector Luque, met me at the bag, "Shoupe is crazy mad at you, amigo, nobody ever say he have the spitball. I think he try kill you, hombre." Luque put his arm around my shoulder and spoke quietly, "He have no more good mind, he muy loco. Maybe he throw loco ball over here too, you go second base easy."

I have no idea when pro athletes graduated from Jack LaLanne power drinks to steroids. Shoupe was acting as if he was experiencing a major roid-rage episode. He kicked his glove and screamed garbled sentences laced with profanity. The catcher and the other infielders had to calm the veteran player down and get him back to the mound.

Pitchers will do anything to get you out. You can't help but hate them. Baseball etiquette states that when a pitcher is pitching a no-hitter late in a game the batter never bunts for a hit. No etiquette for pitchers seems to exist, they never apologize if they hit you. Even a boxer that hits his opponent low apologizes. What makes a pitcher that can't hit a baseball, and plays twice a week so arrogant? Catchers, pitcher enablers, I hated them both.

Our next hitter was Eddie "Bam-Bam" Carrol. Eddie, our third baseman, was at the plate with just five home runs in the regular season slowly rotating his big bat over his head while waiting for Shoupe's pitch. I confidently moved off the bag with the knowledge that I had a green light from the manager to steal second base if I felt I could. With a man on first Shoupe pitched from the stretch which makes it more likely to pick the runner off at first base. He made two throws to first trying to keep me near the bag. The noise from the crowd was deafening. I took off like a greyhound while Shoupe was in his motion and made a perfect hook slide into second just as the ball came in perfectly from the catcher. The tag was late. The pitch to Eddie was a called strike. Bam-Bam Carrol hit the next pitch over the center field wall. The center fielder never took a step as he watched the ball soar out of the park into the upper deck. I brought in the tying run and was greeted at home plate by my teammates; Eddie brought in the winning run. Game over. We were jumping up and down taking turns hugging teammates. The next day we played game seven. The Yankees became World Series Champions on that cool damp Sunday afternoon in October.

The New York press demonized me after the series. They reported I used unfair tactics by asking the umpire to check the ball while Shoupe was nearing a perfect game. A new rule was added to the book, the "Roy Williams Rule" to quicken the pace of the game no player shall ask for the baseball to be checked. To quicken the pace? Give me a break. What pace are they talking about? There is no clock in baseball.

I began the next spring in the humid triple-A league in south Texas, again. I had to remember to add antiperspirant to my grocery list. Dripping wet while playing baseball was very unpleasant for me. I still loved the game and felt I would be called up to the big team soon or be traded to a team that needed a second baseman. I was having my best year ever but no calls, and my attitude began to change from the happy-go-lucky guy that was as optimistic as a watermelon farmer in the spring to a guy that was beginning to realize the "Baseball Gods" didn't want him. My future baseball dreams were in decline.

It had to be that my head got in the way of a Dave Shoupe fastball. The league must have had plans for big Dave Shoupe and I spoiled them. Shoupe won five games the year after hitting me and never won more than six games a year the rest of his career. My bad? I believe he did serious damage to his pitching arm throwing that one hundred-plus mile-per-hour karate pitch to my head. The guy had never screamed before while pitching. Shoupe never reported an injury, however. He had a million-dollar-per-year contract for five years that he didn't want to screw up. I'm just sayin'.

During the National Anthem, prior to playing the Port Arthur Oilers in Texas on a hot, clear, humid, stinking-of-Texas Tea afternoon, my life was rebooted. A come-to-Jesus moment, if you will, by an Army staff sergeant singer. All of the triple-A minor league teams usually get a hometown person to sing to Old Glory. Most of the time it's sung poorly, but this time I heard an Angelic voice, a powerful effortless tenor recounting the flag still waving at dawn after the all-night bombardment. My pre-game concentration was broken by a standing tall Latino staff sergeant dressed in formal Army uniform, medals reflecting the sunlight as he sang into a standing mike near the pitcher's mound. He had lost his left leg in Vietnam and was singing without crutches on one leg. The fans applauded and cheered as he approached the end, then he gracefully hopped to the first base chalk line to retrieve crutches from a very beautiful young lady with two equally as beautiful little girls dressed in adorable little dresses standing at her side. She kissed him. They hugged Daddy. They were proud of their hero.

Where was I going with my life? What was I doing? I didn't even have a girlfriend. I turned twenty-six that summer and was still playing minor

league baseball struggling to get back to the majors. Some of the guys on that team were eighteen and nineteen. A twenty-year-old infielder was called up the month before. Getting a call from a major league team, at this point, was now as rare as a Tesla charging in Sandy Point, Texas.

That was my last professional ball game. Ironically, I joined the Army to play baseball to avoid the war in Vietnam. It took a wounded Army Vietnam vet to get me to realize the game was just a game and it was over. I didn't get on the team bus to New Orleans after the game that day. I took a cab to the airport and got on the first plane to California. By the way, they didn't pay me for July and sued me for breaking my one-year contract.

While at Houston's Hobby Airport waiting for a flight to San Francisco, I took the baseball program for that game out of my carry-on bag. I opened the program and there he was. A picture of the solider as a private first class standing in front of an ancient Buddhist temple posing with his M-16 weapon along with a bio of the young man. He came to the United States with his parents at twelve, joined the Army at seventeen, lost his leg during the military operation in Cambodia at eighteen, fitted with prosthesis at nineteen, and allowed to re-up at twenty. He acquired his GED and citizenship while in hospital in Houston and was attending Rice University aspiring to qualify for warrant officer and continuing his Army career. He had obviously removed his prosthetic leg to make a point while singing the National Anthem. Point made, Staff Sergeant. I got it. Reading his bio only reenforced that I was done with baseball.

I worked full time at Safeway markets while I attended college on the GI bill. Got the teaching job, married my sister's best friend, and with the help of a GI loan bought a house.

After speaking to my grandson, Jamar, I made a call to an old dear friend and spoke for thirty minutes, then called Jamar back, "Do me a favor little dude, look up the World Series teams for nineteen seventy-one and see if my name is in the Expos line up. Do it now, I'll wait." He came back to the phone with his lap top.

"I see your name in game six, Grandpa." He excitedly informed.

"Any notes about how that game ended?"

"Wow! A walk off home run by Ed Carrol scoring two runs breaking a World Series no-hitter. The pitcher, Dave Shoupe, lost a one-hitter."

"Anything about a perfect game being spoiled by a Roy Williams?"

"No."

"Hey, you, guys," I continued. "How would you like to meet a real baseball player for your report? I spoke to Willie Mays, and he said he would

love to meet you knuckleheads. He still lives here in the Bay Area and Saturday, after your game, is a good time to visit. Bring that Sony digital camera I gave your mother, no cell phone pictures. I don't do cell phone photos; I talk on phones."

"Willie Mays the hall of famer? You know him, Grandpa?!"

"He has been a friend for a long time."

That Saturday, Jamar and Carlos stood in front of the passenger door of my truck waiting for me. They were standing side-by-side in their Little League uniforms with mock turtleneck Under Armor under-gear. Carlos was number two; Jamar was number four. Twenty-four. My number, and Willie Mays' retired-forever number. I paused to reflect on how quickly time passes, how old Willie Mays must be, how old I am, and how young these little guys are. Jamar looks like he will be a good pitcher and Carlos loves it behind the plate catching. Do they still call it the battery? The pitcher and catcher; I like those positions these days.

Before I started the truck, I gave Jamar a baseball card.

"This is your rookie card, Grandpa! Look, Carlos."

"My only card. Your grandpa is an educator. Willie Mays was the greatest all-around baseball player ever. You guys keep an eye on Mike Trout with the Angeles; he is the closest I've seen to Mays. It's a game and they both enjoy playing.

"Hey, give me that card back. It's very rare and worth a little. I keep it in a safe place. You'll get it one of these days, but not too soon, I hope."

BUFF WHITMAN-BRADLEY
FOREST PICNIC

Lunch on a log
Beside a tiny stream
In the midst of a forest
Of lean young redwoods
The water splashed and dappled
With whatever sunlight
Manages to make its way
Down through the canopy

(cont)

The water tumbling over rocks
And through tangles of fallen branches
Singing to itself
Like a small child left on her own
To play in the back yard
And we the fortunate eavesdroppers
Lucky to overhear
The little one's shapeless, meandering tunes
Lucky to listen
To the lilt and murmur
Of free-flowing water
That we will carry within us
To refresh us in thirsty times,
To lighten our spirits
With the memory of its song

Whitman-Bradley

A THOUGHT OF GREAT SIGNIFICANCE

I was sitting on the front porch today
When a thought of such great significance
Unexpectedly found its way
Into my musings
That I rushed indoors to find
Paper and pencil
In order to record that profound insight
Into the nature of reality
And the eternal verities of the human heart,
But by the time I could lay my hands
On a Ticonderoga #2
And a legal pad
The exquisitely wingéd truth
My mind had just hosted
Had fluttered out of my neural butterfly net
And flown utterly and irretrievably away,
So I was left to return
To my seat on the porch
Without a single remotely interesting idea
Encamped in my noggin

(cont)

(cont)

While I watched a hummingbird feasting
Amongst the sticky blue flowers
Of the unruly plumbago bush
In the garden
And the neighbor next door
Hauling his trash bin
Beautifully out to the curb.

Whitman-Bradley

CAITLAN ROSSI
A DOLL'S HOUSE

"What I wish to do here...is only to consider the nature of the miniature itself, and to ask what it is that enchants the imagination in the presence of this second world."
-Steven Millhauser, "The Fascination of the Miniature"

By my tenth Christmas, the Santa jig was up, and I appealed to my parents for a dollhouse. A real one. And what separated a play thing from a genuine miniature, something an adult collector would be proud of, was the authenticity of the liminal spaces. Even my Barbie bungalow had a living room with a plastic pullout couch, but it was the places where dolls transition from one expanse to the next—the stairs, the windows, the front door—that had to be in place. I needed these practical details. I needed the bandwidth in my imagination to cook up the actual goings-on inside the house, lording over the tiny family members and their outsized conflict.

My new dollhouse had siding the color of cotton candy, with hunter green windowpanes. A spindly white railing hugged the first floor of the house with a small front porch. "You need outdoor furniture," my mother pressed me. But I wasn't so worried about that. My dolls would be spending most of their time inside.

The house was open at the back, the final fourth wall of every room abandoned for the sake of voyeurism. But the shingled roof extended all the way around to the back of the house, making parenthesis around the third floor, giving the impression of a vignette. This is where I inserted myself. Seeing the outside and the inside simultaneously made me feel like I had x-ray vision, that I was privy to something at once smaller and larger than

myself.

I judged other girls who made their dolls speak aloud to one another in high-pitched dialogues. The events that unfolded among my dolls were too fast-paced, too nuanced to be recited so neatly. My dolls were always making mistakes, saying the wrong thing, and I wanted to enjoy their disappointments and frustrations privately, for their regrets to be only mine. Their thoughts were too closely connected to my actual inner world, and I didn't want them to be overheard by my brother and his friends, who were skilled at folding my girlish pastimes into in-jokes. Besides, there was a tingling illicitness to remaining silent. I positioned myself at the back the dollhouse for hours, kneeling on the floor of my bedroom as if genuflecting. When someone walked into my room, breaking the reverie, I felt the instinct to save face, to prove that I could inhabit both worlds at once. Sometimes, the hypnotic state broke by itself, and I would look out my real window in surprise.

I split my time among three doll families, in-laws I dubbed with strong Italian surnames: a grandmother who had too much to say, a tactless niece who didn't resemble the rest of her relatives (I had found her on a playground, both sturdier and cheaper-looking than her pocket-sized counterparts). To me, it was these limitations—their pettiness and opportunism, the way they never learned better—that made them worth playing with.

When I wasn't tending to my plot lines, I couldn't stop rearranging the furniture. Practically every time I settled in for a session with my dolls, I would remove everything from the house. I could feel the expanse of possibilities buzzing in my chest, extending through my arms as I piled the little fireplaces and counters onto the needlepoint rug of my bedroom, and admired the clean edges of the smooth wooden walls.

My mother would often shuttle me to a store for miniature collectors in Greenwich called Whimseys. My dollhouse was just a starter in comparison to the themed little universes I saw here. They didn't just have staircases. They sprouted turrets skirted by winding ivy, they were illuminated by sconces and chandeliers, powered by actual electricity. Their windows were adorned with balloon curtains, the side tables holding up miniscule, hundred-dollar succulents.

Beside the sprawling, dwarfed mansions, there were other scenes, staged with great care in white boxes, and protected by glass. But I didn't like these prim Victorian vistas. Red circles were painted onto the children's cheeks in forced cheer as they gave perpetual thanks over a staged Thanksgiving dinner—a fat brown turkey gleaming under the candelabra.

These dollhouses were too adult, too contrived. All I needed was a backdrop that I could infuse with the drama of the mundane. I didn't want a singular, time-stamped event, a holiday that came and never went. I wanted room to play with words, with daily reality. I wanted to just see what happened.

#

The house where I grew up in Rye, New York, sat on an ever-changing millpond. My bedroom was at the corner of the house, one of the only rooms that revealed where the millpond opened into the Long Island Sound, an ungovernable stanza of sea and sky. My mother picked out my bedroom furniture, elegant but bulky enough to fill the vast space, but I felt like it belonged to a girl I had not yet grown up to be. At a sleepover one night, as my friend Mame drifted to sleep next to me, I eyed my hulking bureau in the dark, the smooth top curving over at the sides like the bow of a ship. I felt ashamed of its immodesty. It wasn't friendly like the wicker furniture in Mame's room, where her bed would sway unsteadily when we both got in it, her gymnastics medals, hung on the necks of her bedposts, clinking together in congratulations.

I was drawn to small spaces. I dreamed of a canopy bed, one that enveloped me in dark, silky wings of fabric. In the towel closet, I put a sleeping bag on the floor, closed the door, and read a book. I emptied a cupboard in the basement, used to store blankets for movie night, and spent an afternoon inside with nothing to do; I entertained myself by feeling pleased that I had made the area mine. I was fascinated by the fiction of fairies, oddly satisfied that the female proportions could be scaled down so precisely. The magic was not in their powers, but in their sheer existence: a woman, impossibly small**.**

#

I made plans to decorate my dollhouse. With the help of my mother's more artistic hand, I cut and pasted a checkerboard floor into the kitchen, then wallpapered it—white and blue stripes, bedecked with little burgundy hearts. Soon I grew bold enough to do the renovations alone. But I was impatient. I painted the girls' room pink, and, underestimating how quickly the paint would dry, left a gummy puddle hardening at the foot of a twin bed. Hoping to cover up the unsteady yellow paint job I had botched in the hallway, walls and floor alike, I pasted down wooden tiles, which soon buckled.

"I ruined it," I confided in my uncle, hoping he would tell me it wasn't as bad as I thought.

"You did," he agreed. "You should have asked me to do it."

I couldn't look at the visible reminders of my own meddling. I had no problem when my dolls took missteps—I was a benevolent creator—but the results of my eagerness, which far outweighed my capacity for careful planning, were too obvious, too close to home. It was like the splotches of paint, so distinct from the rest of the house, had broken the spell. I was getting older, anyway, and beginning to devote more and more of my attention to less analog hobbies like my video camera. I had begun using it to film scenes in my dollhouse: sanitized, digestible versions of the scenarios I played out in my head. Even my brother and his friends were impressed with my directorial debut, my hand, so obviously moving the dolls from scene to scene, coming off like a distinct creative choice. But after a while, I gave up on the dollhouse entirely, looking to capture something in real life.

#

When I graduated from college, I moved into my parents' apartment in Manhattan. They still spent most of their time in Rye, and most nights, I had the place to myself. Lying in my twin bed in the dark—its match on the other side of the room, where my brother used to sleep, strangely empty—I felt off-balance, a feeling that would stay with me as I rode the subway the next morning. Surrounded by people, I realized how lonely the city could be.

Standing in the galley kitchen making dinner, the backsplash an optimistic teal tile, I could only think how I wasn't filling the space around me. The other rooms in the back of the apartment, out of sight, emanated their stillness to my very being. My stomach felt hollow when I walked into the gaping living room after work, its open view of a vanishing sun. It felt wrong, living in a home so sure of itself when I was still in a state of becoming, with everywhere and nowhere to molt.

It was around that time that I started sharking. That was my word for it. At night, I would peek into the apartments of the buildings and brownstones I walked past. I looked for the telltale signs of good taste: splashes of color, offbeat art, sprawling rows of fat anthologies. I wasn't so interested in people; I wanted to see the things they used to surround themselves. I was reminded, constantly, of the strangeness of communal living. To make your home in a building where so many people shape their lives—families, bookshelves, clutter, realized goals and private disappointments—separated only by a wall, and sharing nothing more than the same noise.

I didn't want to decorate, exactly, or project my inner world onto the walls. I wanted to downsize. I felt like an imposter here; I wanted something just cozy enough to look and feel like I had had some hand in it. I wanted to lovingly arrange my tchotchkes, to satisfy in knowing that I was building a

world around me and not being swallowed by it. I tried to curate what I could, surrounding myself with things that might jumpstart or mimic self-sufficiency—peonies where the light idled, candles I was afraid to blaze, notepads where I jotted down reminders I didn't need. I should have been writing, I knew, but even my own experiences felt impenetrable, a stiff-backed chair where I could never relax.

#

When I moved to Pittsburgh for graduate school, I found an apartment in a converted toy factory. The foyer features a black-and-white photo of the porcelain dolls manufactured there in 1948—rows of them in pristine white dresses, waiting graciously to be manipulated.

I am constantly moving my furniture. Nowhere am I more present than in the act of pushing my work bench a full ninety degrees or changing the aspect of my desk. The promise of fulfillment rises and swirls around me with the dust I swipe off my shelves as I survey and restack the vibrant backs of my books and the information I have accumulated. But I have a tendency to get lost in the space around me. I worry that my home is more than I can handle, that I have overreached again—that I, like my dolls before me, will never learn better.

Pittsburgh is going through its own reinvention, a momentum that feels palpable even in its rowhouses, repainted many times over in sunny colors and shaded by flimsy, cheerful awnings. Pedaling by them with my dog as an excuse, I peek in and wonder if they still have their bonafide Pittsburgh basements, with showers fixed in the open cement where steel workers would wash the day away before ascending the stairs to their other lives. But here I am more wary of training my gaze too long on any one house. The space between my neighbors and me feels more immediate, the windows less a display than a way to let in the light.

I chose my apartment for its spiral staircase, exposed brick, and two big windows that watch the trees. The thing about a loft is that you inhabit all the space at once, the high ceilings braiding both floors together so that nowhere is alone. It makes me think that even the most worked-on rooms remain their own organism, incidental as we rearrange our thoughts.

FRED DALE
LIME WAS THE SNAKE'S FIRST CHOICE

Let's ride the Texas Cyclone, they screamed,
holding hands, little Catholic comets streaking
ahead. I didn't want to die in front of the girls,
my heart's metal ripped free in our plunge. As
we stepped on board, me first, no gentlemanly
crap at eleven years old, and without so much
as a word, I strode across the coaster's seat,
off the ride, back through the midway ilk, to
the snake charmer's exhibit, where the brow-
beaten snake recognized my purpose, dipped
his hooded skull, accommodating my bravery.
The poison of his hollow fangs tucked away
for safe keeping, I bent down, hands folded
behind my back for full effect, the audience
damn thrilled, and kissed him on his diamond
head, like I kissed my casketed grandmother.
The refrigeration of a reptilian life. Even love
loses, every day, something it once needed.
I thought I tasted lime as I chugged back into
the night, caught up with the girls, their breat-
hless tales of plummets and g-force turns, all
I missed, the snake under the spell of someo-
ne else. On nights like this, trading one death
for another, I can still taste his cold, biting
acidity—how Margaritas taste like snake.

Dale

CORPS OF DISCOVERY

In preparation for the big adventure, I'd like to have Jefferson
teach me botany, diplomacy, the refinement of dressing for
the trail, and when spring decides to lift our hats, I'd take the
secret White House elevator to its bedrock chamber, close

(cont)

enough to rub China's feet, and I'd begin by searching for the
sacred chip of Shakespeare's chair that John Adams is said to
have stolen from England, or Teddy Roosevelt's custom-made
stilts. I'd explore every closet and chimney flue, jimmy bricks

for clandestine missives, freefall in the dumbwaiters, wave
away cobwebs encircling bodies stowed in infamy. Franklin
Pierce bum-rushed a woman with his horse, though she's not
among the ten recorded deaths at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

If ever there was an American place of ghosts, it's got to be
this slave-assembled, white house. Andrew Johnson, himself,
was an indentured servant, even sewed his own presidential
suits, a thimble of his like a Tardis misplaced along the marble

tunnel, silent as the world's end, a long escape route running
to balmy Bermuda. I'll look for them both. I've coins to give
out should I step into trouble, not silvery depictions of Harriet
Tubman, or Sacajawea, but the likeness of our dear, white fat-

her. There must be an array of diaries floating here and there,
letters between presidents whose wives refused to give them
sons of succession, a love of the rack & the screw. Marilyn's
unmentionables were likely kicked under a four-poster bed,

tussled about, I imagine, by an over-eager, disgraceful Bo.
There are mansions within this mansion, a bomb shelter that
rivals Harrods, a lifetime of fine food and champagne, the
specter of Grover Cleveland, a onetime hangman, lowering

the boom on someone familiar—fields of concrete to hide,
from the privileged, the awful sound of its citizenry dying in
loneliness. I fancy the attic holds its own national treasures,
like Harding's little black book, or Coolidge's jar of petrol-

eum jelly, a goop he paid big bucks to have rubbed into his
scalp when the world's weight left him feeling dry. I might
even run across the pet alligators of H. Hoover's son, beasts
breeding in history's swamp. Nixon's bugs will be ubiquito-

(cont)

us, like the overwhelming multitudes it has taken to put on
such a show as this democracy. And to think, he believes to
his core that God puffs himself into a trinity, yet Jimmy C.
still claims to have seen a UFO. Beyond all this escapism,

the W. Clark in me will seek *the* prize, my version of the
Northwest Passage, a communique carved into the floor-
boards of an obscure closet, a side-step from the spotlight,
a place to twitter something that's less a warning to the

next one that comes along, than a word of encouragement
to himself: *don't let the bastards grind you down.* Don't
forget, Meriwether L., after all he'd seen, thought to stare
into the barrel of the dark forever, rather than his heart.

Dale

LOREN STEPHENS
MUGWORT AND MADAM TAMAE

Osaka, Japan, August 1939

The night Madam Tamae Uchida gave birth, Osaka was in the grip of a terrifying summer storm. The rain caused the city canals to overflow, and the streets were filled with floating debris from garbage that had not been collected in the alleyways. Sanitation workers had been conscripted into the army and the city was choking to death.

Madame Tamae screamed and cursed during labor, her operatic voice reaching into the hospital hallway while her husband, Hide-Ichi, tried to calm her, embarrassed by his wife's outburst. All was forgiven when the nurse placed the infant boy in his mother's arms. The baby was thin and pale—not surprising since Madam Tamae barely ate during her pregnancy, afraid she would not regain her svelte figure and sultry looks that had captivated Hide-Ichi and driven him to lose all reason. Marrying Hide-Uchida, the president of Izumi Steelworks, was Madam Tamae's finest accomplishment, right ahead of earning a place in the Takarazuka Theater troupe where she

performed for five years before quitting to open her drama school and haunt the bars of Namba in search of a rich man. Had she known at the outset that he was a widower with two children, she might have thought twice about encouraging him, but it was too late now.

After seven days, the storm finally passed and Madam Tamae and Hide-Ichi brought their infant son Katsuo home from the maternity hospital. Mitsuko and Ichiro waited impatiently to see the baby, but Madam Tamae allowed her stepchildren to see him just once a day, afraid they carried some terrible disease home from school. She was disgusted by the scabs on Ichiro's knees from tumbles in the play yard, and Mitsuko's weeping ear which smelled from puss.

Mitsuko worried her father would lose interest in her brother now that he had a second son. At six years old, he was a sensitive child, deeply affected by their mother's premature death. Mitsuko tried to take her mother's place, reading to her brother, playing pop the ball with him, and holding him in her arms at night when he cried "Mama" but it wasn't enough to salve his broken heart.

Madam Tamae complained to Hide-Ichi that she had no experience taking care of a baby, no strength to do so after her long and difficult labor, and no real desire to learn. In fact, she considered the baby no more than a key that would unlock her husband's bank account. Trying to placate his wife and keep peace in the household, he found a nursemaid to take Katsuo off his wife's hands. She assumed all the care-taking duties, and flattered Madam Tamae saying, "It's understandable that a star of the Takarazuka would not take naturally to motherhood. Your talents lie elsewhere—on the stage, of course." Madam Tamae smirked, pleased that her reputation excused her from changing diapers. The one chore she indulged in was breast feeding Katsuo. This gave her sensual pleasure and she watched with delight at Hide-Ichi's adoring looks when the baby suckled and made meowing sounds as his eyelids grew heavy and he fell asleep. Madam Tamae thought, "What a picture of domestic bliss. Now Hide-Ichi will deny me nothing." She already had her eye on a ruby necklace worth at least one month of Hide-Ichi's salary.

***

Lying next to her brother, Mitsuko listened to his even breathing and the buzzing sound of a moth's wings hitting the lantern

in the hallway. At midnight, she and her brother were awakened by screams coming from Madam Tamae's bedroom. They rushed upstairs to find her holding a limp Katsuo to her breast. Falling to her knees, she gasped, "He's stopped breathing." Unable to comfort his wife, Hide-Ichi was sobbing, too. The baby had lived for just twenty-three days. Pointing her finger at Mitsuko and Ichiro, Madam Tamae wailed, "Their mother is to blame for this. Today is the memorial day of her death. She is punishing me for giving birth to a son. She only wants me to love her two useless urchins." Even in the darkness, the children saw the fury in their stepmother's eyes. They held on to one another, shaking as these venomous words spewed forth from Madam Tamae's distorted lips. Hide-Ichi said nothing to defend them; all his attention was focused on the body of his dead son and Madam Tamae.

Over the next few weeks, Madam Tamae drifted through the house like a ghost, sometimes imagining Katsuo's muted cries; other times she'd catch the sound of chatter as her stepchildren returned from school. Their voices reminded her of rats scratching in the kitchen cupboard for a few crumbs of food, or a needle caught in the inner groove of a phonograph record. When the telephone rang, she'd pick up the receiver, listen for the caller's voice and hang up. Letters from her drama students went unanswered. As the days passed, her depression gave way to unbridled rage. Whenever she set eyes upon Ichiro, she was reminded of Katsuo and was overcome with the desire to torture him relentlessly for being alive. But how?

She remembered her bleak childhood on Tsushima Island. When her brother broke her mother's only porcelain teapot, her father punished him by pressing a lit mogusa into his scrawny back. She could still hear his screams as the ember burned his raw flesh and soon after, he stole away on a fishing boat bound for who knew where. The family never heard from him again, and the catch of the day and the crops from their paltry garden were divided among three, instead of four mouths, which was all to the good as far as she was concerned. She never missed her brother for a single day, reveling in the undivided attention her father showered upon her.

So mogusa it would be. Dressing quickly in a light summer frock, Madam Tamae was surprised by the cold wind that slapped her face when she opened the door. It was already October, but for her

time had stopped when the Buddhist priest handed her son's ashes to her in a burial urn. Tamae considered turning around to retrieve her red fox stole, but she didn't want to waste time. Her stepchildren would be home soon and she needed to put her plan into action. Bending her head down against the wind, she collided with her neighbor, Mrs. Yamagihara. "Ah, Mrs. Uchida, I'm so glad to see you out and about. You are looking thin but as beautiful as ever."

"I've lost all the weight I gained during my pregnancy. Mitsuko and Ichiro are a handful. They keep me very busy running after them."

Mrs. Yamagihara nodded. "If I can be of any assistance to you, please do not hesitate to ask. I so enjoyed helping you with your student recital last June. What a success! And you must be so proud of Ichiro. He looked darling in his usher's suit with his little red cap and white gloves. He greeted your audience with such politeness. And Mitsuko did a wonderful job turning the lights on and off. She is such a treasure." Mrs. Yamagihara was a sycophant, impressed by Madam Tamae's reputation and aware of her temper. She thought it best to stay on her "good" side or pay the price.

"Yes, but it's not easy being their stepmother. They insist on bringing up their mother's name. I'm sick and tired of it, but what can I do? My husband is too timid to say anything to them."

Mrs. Yamagihara sensed trouble in the Uchida household. She tried to steer the conversation in another direction. "By the way, you remember I told you my maid stole my precious fan. Well, I was mistaken. I had simply misplaced it. Perhaps you should think about hiring a maid now to help with the children, and that big house of yours. It's a lot for one person to manage. And I'm sure you'll want to get back to your students. They must miss you."

"Mitsuko is a reluctant helper. She's eleven, going on twelve. It's time she learned how to do the housework and cook—that is if she expects to find someone to marry her. Her looks won't take her very far." She wrinkled her nose. "She's a rather unattractive girl. I believe she takes after her mother."

Not wanting to cross Madam Tamae, Mrs. Yamagihara said, "If you change your mind just let me know." Hesitating a moment she said, "I'm sorry for your loss. When we mothers give birth, we are

never guaranteed that our children will live a long life, are we?"

Madam Tamae didn't care what Mrs. Yamagihara thought of her. "To be quite honest, I'm looking forward to seeing my loyal students. I felt like a prisoner with that baby, even with a nursemaid. Now I'm free to do as I wish. Once a star, always a star. It's hard to give up the stage for the drudgery that comes with having children. Two is more than enough for me. I'll be glad when they will be out of the house for good."

Raising her eyebrows, Mrs. Yamagihara waved as if warding off an evil spirit between them. The two women wished one another a good day and went their separate ways.

Madam Tamae found herself at the door of the herbalist, Dr. Miyaka. He stood behind the white marble counter, carefully placing balance pieces on a bronze scale to weigh a mound of powder, while his assistant ground leaves with a mortar and pestle, giving off a pungent but not unpleasant smell. On the shelves were clear glass jars filled with black and brown mushrooms, ginseng, licorice, dried peony, burdock root, coltsfoot, and powdered cinnamon. A cluster of aubergine eggplants hung from the wood plank ceiling and a copper tea kettle sitting on a glowing brazier released a fragrant aroma of rosehip into the chilly autumn air.

Looking around the apothecary, Madam Tamae imagined an infinite number of ways in which to inflict harm upon Ichiro. In some of the jars were potent medicines which could bring on mysterious illnesses and afflictions if improperly administered.

Dispensing with pleasantries, Madam Tamae demanded, "I want to buy some mogusa."

"Mugwort. The fisherman's remedy for unruly children." Dr. Miyaka opened a drawer of the carved wooden tansu. "And how many sticks would you like, Madam Tamae?"

"Give me twenty. That should do for now."

Dr. Miyakawa bit his lower lip, hiding his shock at the quantity she asked for.

"What do you recommend to stop my breasts from producing milk? It's already two months since giving birth, and still my breasts continue to weep as if looking for a thirsty pup to sate."

He answered, "Jasmine leaves. Soak them in water and place

them on your breasts, or I can suggest jasmine incense if you prefer."

"The jasmine leaves—I'm sure Mr. Uchida will enjoy blanketing my breasts."

Dr. Miyaka blushed and then stuttered, "As, as, as you wish Madam Tamae."

Dr. Miyaka rang the register and handed her a bill.

"No discount for a loyal customer?"

"I've already taken something off your bill, as always."

Handing him the exact amount, she glanced at her watch. "I'd better go. My stepchildren will be home from school." She smiled at him, her green eyes turning dark like the sea from where she came, "I always like to greet them and give them a sweet treat like a good mother."

Heading home, the wind blew furiously but Madam Tamae no longer felt the cold. Her heart was pounding and her hands sweat. Unlocking the door, she entered the sixteen-tatami mat receiving room. She pushed a small table into the middle of the room and placed one mogusa stick on a copper plate. Striking a match she held it against the tip until an ember established itself. An odorless plume of smoke drifted toward the ceiling. She sniffed the air, pleased that it left no tell-tale odor that might raise her husband's curiosity.

Madam Tamae heard the front door open. Mitsuko and Ichiro dropped their schoolbags and took off their shoes so as not to dirty the polished floors. Madam Tamae sprang to her feet and grabbed Ichiro by the collar. She was startled by how light he felt in her arms. Dragging him over to the table, she pushed his face down to the floor, and then yelled at Mitsuko, "Come here. Pull up your brother's shirt and sit on him so he doesn't squirm. Otherwise I'll miss my target."

Picking up the burning stick from the plate she pressed the ember along his spine. Ichiro screamed out in pain as Mitsuko begged her to stop. She tried pushing her arms away, but Madam Tamae was much too strong for her. The smell of Ichiro's burning flesh made Mitsuko gag and she wet her underpants.

Madam Tame pulled Ichiro to his feet. "Now, Ichiro, the front porch needs sweeping. The maple leaves are beginning to shed their leaves. And Mitsuko, go to the kitchen. Your father will be home in a few hours and he will be famished." Laughing she added, "Be careful

not to burn the rice." Narrowing her eyes, she growled, "You are not to breathe a word of this to your father—either of you. Do you understand?"

Madam Tamae repeatedly meted out this torture, conscripting Mitsuko as her accomplice against a defenseless Ichiro. The burns on his back pulled his skin tight and with each step he took he felt as if he was being stung by a swarm of angry hornets. He barely tolerated wearing his school uniform. The starched fabric rubbed against his blisters. At night after Madam Tamae and their father retired, Mitsuko brewed a pot of green tea and swabbed her brother's back trying to relieve the pain. He slept on his stomach crying himself to sleep. Mitsuko knew she had to do something to save her brother, but what?

One evening, Ichiro sat down at the low table red-eyed and hunched over. He slurped his soup, trying not to look at his father. Hide-Ichi asked, "What is the matter with you, Ichiro?"

"Nothing, Papa." He handed his father his report card which he had put into his trouser pocket. "I received the best grades in my class. I hope you are proud of me. I have been up late studying. That's why my eyes are red."

Hide-Ichi continued to interrogate his son. "Why are you sitting hunched over? You know it's impolite not to sit up straight. You don't see me slouching."

Ichiro could not come up with an explanation.

Hide-Ichi turned to Madam Tamae. "The boy is hiding something from me. Do you know what it is?"

She had a quick answer. "My dearest, I'm sorry to tell you your son is a coward. His classmates are jealous that he's at the top of his class, and to teach him a lesson they have been hitting him with a baseball bat during recess." Taking advantage of her drama training, her eyes filled with tears. "I begged him to tell the headmaster, but he's afraid to speak up so the beatings just continue. I haven't wanted to upset you and I haven't felt well enough to speak to the headmaster myself."

Hide-Ichi thought, *This makes no sense. There is something else going on and I'm going to get to the bottom of it.* Pulling up Ichiro's shirt he stared in horror at the blisters covering his son's back. He banged the table hard enough to jostle the soup bowls. "It's obvious

these blisters are hardly the result of a schoolyard scuffle. Who would like to tell me the truth?"

Mitsuko was so frightened she could hardly pull the words from her throat. "Madam Tamae has gone after Ichiro and I've helped her. I am to be blamed. This wouldn't have happened without my assistance." Madam Tamae pinched Mitsuko's thigh hard. "You crazy little liar. I have been nothing but kind to you and your brother and this is the thanks I get. You both are no more than devious miscreants trying to turn your father against me."

Hide-Ichi raised his voice. "I will not tolerate a war under my roof. When I come home, I expect to be greeted by the happy smiles of my children and the adoring face of my beautiful wife in an atmosphere of peace and tranquility." Feeling dizzy, he grabbed the table and continued. "Do you know what I am dealing with? At this very minute Japan's army is penetrating China's countryside. Emperor Hirohito has order Izumi to step up our steel production to equip our soldiers."

He repeated the speech he had delivered earlier in the day at Izumi Steelworks. Pounding the table again, he said, "It will only be a matter of time before America and Great Britain wake up to their obligations in the Far East, and then we will be in an all-out war. Japan must win, whatever the cost, or our great nation will go down in flames and we'll all be left to eat cow dung from the farmers' barren fields."

He wiped the spittle from his mouth with his handkerchief. "I'm going out to the garden. Perhaps the cool night air will clear my head, and I'll decide what needs to be done to bring harmony back into this household. I see I have been blind to what is happening right in front of my eyes. I won't tolerate being fooled, not by my own family, not by anyone."

***

The wind carried the scent of salt air off Osaka Bay. Bats, which roosted under the eaves of Madam Tamae's studio, flitted over his head, scouting insects among the branches of the fruit trees. Hide-Ichi's mind was in turmoil. He was too proud to admit that he had made a mistake marrying Madam Tamae. He yearned for her scent on his fingers and lips and her body wrapped around his. Since Katsuo's death she had denied him these pleasures, insisting that "Your dead

wife has reached from the grave and stolen our baby and you are partly to blame. And as for your son—he brings me nothing but grief. He has grown two inches in two months, while my baby's ashes and bones are sealed away in an urn for all eternity."

Suddenly Hide-Ichi felt a searing pain in his chest—these episodes were coming with increasing frequency. He placed a pill underneath his tongue and waited for the nitroglycerin to take effect so he could think straight. In the distance, he heard a clap of thunder portending a rainstorm. Hurrying inside, he glanced into his children's room. Mitsuko and Ichiro lay together on a futon, Mitsuko's arm across her brother's body. Two little lambs.

Madam Tamae sat in front of her mirror combing her long shiny hair. Hide-Ichi lightly kissed her cheek. "Tomorrow morning, I'm going to take Ichiro to live with my sister and her husband. They only have one son so it will be a blessing for them to take care of Ichiro and he will have a playmate. Ichiro will get over his loneliness in no time at all. And during this brief separation, you and I can try to conceive another child."

Madam Tamae whispered, "And what about Mitsuko?"

Hide-Ichi could not bear to send both children away. "She'll continue to live here. After all, she has been a help to you, hasn't she?"

"Yes, but I'm afraid I've made an enemy of her. You can see she takes her brother's side in all matters whether he deserves her loyalty or not."

"I'm sure you'll find a way to win her back. You will try, won't you?"

Madam Tamae spread her hair over her shoulders and nodded.

Hide-Ichi pulled out his gold pocket watch. "It's getting late. We should go to bed."

She smiled and then pulled her nightgown over her head and threw it on the floor. Grabbing him against her naked breasts, she urged her husband on. "You needn't be so gentle with me, Hide-Ichi. I am all yours again." Hide Ichi groaned with pleasure. Victory was her aphrodisiac and she willingly fell to her knees to pleasure her husband.

LISA J SULLIVAN

MY BROTHER NAMED HIS SONS AFTER OUR FATHER

or maybe after the idea
of a father. I asked him "Why?"
and he, eighteen months younger,
perhaps not recalling as much, perhaps
being more forgiving, wondered
what I meant.
"Don't you remember everything
he did to us?"
He answered:
"Don't you?"

Sullivan

SEAN J WHITE

LOST AND FOUND

County jail failed to prepare me for the reality of prison. I imagined a world like Clint Eastwood faced in *Escape from Alcatraz*—a survival of the fittest landscape where predatory violence ruled. Fist fights I could handle, but thinking about shoving a homemade blade repeatedly into another man's midsection just to prevent him from raping me kept me up at night watching the shadows of cell bars. My time in intake scrubbed away some of those notions at least some of the fear of them, but there I began to see the predatory behavior of my peers was a learned adaptation taught by the system that incarcerated us.

When I caught my case, the DOC had spun off only a few years before from the administrative agency that had overseen it to become its own agency, and would soon develop into the biggest draw on state tax dollars. Intake was a prison in the middle of the state that the state used to prepare its wards for the time they would serve—to quarantine us, to clean us of our parasites, to test us, and to classify us. And every Wednesday, during breakfast, a guard would call a list of names, and the guys that matched those names would scramble around for a few minutes before disappearing.

Eventually, the Doc finished sticking me with needles and asking me on tests if I loved my mother or my father more. A Wednesday breakfast came when a guard. called for me, among others. I reported, and he marked something on a clipboard, and had me wait in a line he had begun to assemble. Once the line grew to seven people, the guard called our names again, one by one checking them off, then started his spiel. "You gentlemen will be transferring this morning."

He paused, seemingly opening for a question, seemingly a part of the program. "What about our shit?" A Puerto Rican with an afro and an accent asked.

The guard glanced at his wristwatch" "You'll have ten minutes to grab it. you can bring legal material, stamps and envelopes, personal letters, photographs, and a Bible or Qur'an"

"Man." the Puerto Rican said, "I can't bring no fuckin' smokes?"

"No. Only the items I listed."

"Man, that's bullshit."

"Well," the guard said, "you're going today with or without the material I just mentioned."

"What about the rest of our shit?" another man asked.

"Leave it for the next man," the c.o. said. "Now go. Ten minutes."

We retrieved our personal effects, some having a quick smoke during the process, all of us ruing the tobacco and instant coffee and snacks we left behind. The guard marched us to intake where other guards dumped our possessions in small prepared boxes, stripped us and gave us shabby clothes for transfer, and shackled us—handcuffed wrists to a chain belt, and leg irons. Then we got on a bus.

"You know what's gonna happen to our shit, right?" the guy sitting next to me said after the bus was rolling.

His chains jingled as he shifted to engage me in conversation. He was a white dude with short salt-and-pepper hair and a crevassed face, clean-shaven as best we could maintain in our circumstances. Sleeves of ink covered his partially exposed arms. I had never seen him before the bus ride. He had joined our group, as had many others, during the preparations for transfer.

Although fresh to the system, I already knew enough to beware Greek horses."Does it matter? We don't have it, so…." I said, my own chains jingling as I shrugged my shoulders.

He laughed. "It ain't gotta be like that, little brother. I'm just tryin' to make conversation."

Several miles of rural countryside whizzed past. I savored the sights.

I studied the hoof-worn pastures of mostly Holstein cows and fields of alfalfa, corn, and soybeans, and the three-story high red barns and all the various silos. Occasionally, a farm had horses, and I saw pigs twice and even sheep once.

It unsettled me to think I might never see anything outside of prison again.

"I was staffed to intake my last bid" my bench-mate tried me again. I shrugged my shoulders. Chains jingled. "Okay," I said.

He scoffed, and his voice dropped to a whisper. "Look, my man. I ain't after nothin' you got All I'm tryin' to do is pass the motha' fuckin' time in this goddamn bus. If you got some kinda problem...well…."

"I don't have a problem" I said. "I'm just tryin' to enjoy the scenery"

His tone returned to a friendly level. "You don't got a problem listen' to me while you look out the window, do you?" he said.

I shrugged my shoulders again and shook my head. "I…dunno, man. Look. I'm just tryin' to figure it all out. I mean…."

"What're you, eighteen? Nineteen? "

"Eighteen" I said.

"You do any time at.... Naw, you ain't got the look of a kid that did time in juvey. Well, best piece of advice I can give you is when you get where you're going find your kind and stick with them."

He paused, then, "And don't take no shit from nobody."

"Oh-kay," I said, unsure what else to say.

A dozen or so farms lay behind us before he spoke again.

"You know what's gonna happen to the shit we left at intake, right?" he asked.

"No idea," I said without turning my head from the window. "The next person in the cell's gonna get it?"

He laughed. "Did you find shit left in the cell? How'd you get shit 'til you made store the first time?"

"I…. I didn't" I said. "I just went without."

"You just went without? Didn't nobody offer to sell you nothin'?"

"Well, some of the trustees did…. Oh," I said, suddenly realizing,

He barked a quick chuckle. "Get yours or get got," my bench-mate said.

SEAN J WHITE
AT YOUR CONVENIENCE

Who in America has never been in a convenience store? Regardless of the name on the sign stabbing to the sky that yells at passing motorists to "shop here," they follow a virtually identical genetic pattern. Inside you can buy the same hot dogs, the same slices of pizza, the same Doritos, the same Coca-Cola, the same Snickers. *Hungry? Why wait?* the commercial on television says.

It smells of gasoline in the parking lot. Three different octanes and diesel. Stains of various automotive fluids and ground-in black chewing gum dot the concrete and cement. Have you ever wondered how to extract the gas if civilization should fail?

Ubiquitous. A big word to say "all over the place." The ubiquitous automobile provides America transportation. Ubiquitous box stores like Walmart meet America's consumer needs. Ubiquitous like convenience store /gas stations.

Unless you're color blind or something, you see a range of wavelengths between what we call red and violet. A literal rainbow lies between. Scientists have given fancy numbers to these simple colors. Marketers putter with the coloring of each chain in a psychological ploy to affect consumers.

Wire displays stacked with cigarette packs sit on the countertop near the cashier. Tobacco companies need consumers; some sociopath in a boardroom suggested de facto free samples for teenagers. Every surrounding suit nodded and muttered assent. As you come in, you see a group of young toughs with clumsy prestidigitation pocket a pack or two while they pay for their snacks.

Someone has constructed an edifice of beer in twelve-packs or cases. A placard juts from the top to tell you what you already know about the beer, and the price. Maybe you're on a beer run. Maybe that's your brand. Maybe not. Maybe, although you drink at times, you've come for something else. Maybe you're a teetotaler. Your call.

I have yet to go into a convenience store without a refrigerated section. A line along the back wall, and sometimes a side wall too, of glass-faced doors with magnetic seals that display a parade of cans and bottles chilled and ready for immediate consumption. It gets a bit colder down the line until the beverages turn to frozen fruit juice concentrate, ice cream, and ready-made pizzas. The plastic bottles thump when you pull your drink of

choice out and the others behind it slide down to the front.

Once upon a time the artist Marcel Duchamp entered a urinal into an art exhibition. He called it a "ready-made." When did abstract ideas become more important than tangible things? Is this even a question worth asking? Companies use artists to design the products, the packaging, the labels, the stores. What a Bauhaus idea.

The cashier has a bored expression on his face. Did I say his? When you look over you wonder how you mistook a lithe feminine shape with soft curls of long stringy hair not quite brown not quite blond for a man. Perhaps it was a man when you came in yesterday, or this morning, or…when exactly were you last in a convenience store like this one?

She lets out a sigh of apathy, but she means little to your story. You'll hear a number, hand over cash or a card, get a receipt, and change if you pay cash. Does it matter that she's a twenty-two-year-old single mother of two? If you knew that, would you think she should have kept her legs shut? Even if kindness and generosity fill your heart and you empathize with her situation, some thought like that still probably runs across the billboard ticker in your head. Regardless, she consumes but a minute of film in the movie of your life and likely ends up on the cutting room floor of memory.

Sweat from the bottle you took from the refrigerated section moistens your palm. The shelves on the opposite side of the aisle bear stacks of canned soup, easy-cook ravioli, and cans of wet cat food. The odor of the cat food likely smells better than some of the ready-made food designated fit for human consumption. Who goes to a convenience store to buy cat food anyway? Cat owners, I presume.

A man walks in and an alarm goes off in your head. Ice scrapers hang from hooks on the end of a shelving unit as one enters the store. For some reason they are always there, though the price changes with the seasons. The man wears a ratty jacket unaligned with the price of ice scrapes. The hood of the jacket, sunglasses, and intensity cover his face.

His head swivels like a security camera. He reminds you of a rail-thin Terminator with the aura of Pig-pen from Peanuts. The cashier pretends not to see him, but even on the other side of the store you notice her nose wrinkle when the man turns his back to her. You try to ignore him too.

The rest unfolds like the climax to a *48 Hours Mystery* on CBS. "And what happened next?" asks the silver-haired clean-shaven reporter, and the district attorney explains. Cinematic violence has callused our psyches. Your eyes become cameras and it feels as if you watch a re-enactment of the scene from a distance. *What the hell is going on?* you think. *Is this real? Is that a gun? Oh God, he's got a fucking gun!*

You listen to the calm voice of skinny Pig-pen Terminator demand money. You hear a shriek rise from the throat of the cashier. A ubiquitous sign hangs over the register that claims less than $50 lies within it. The tile floor reaches up and grabs your ankles despite the thoughts of heroism you entertain.

The man repeats his demand and the cashier shrieks again. A firecracker pops before a high-pitched whistle rings in your ears. He runs out without a dime or giving you a second look. You learn all about the cashier on the news. You learn all about skinny Pig-pen Terminator too. Their names and histories mean little to the ego. He cries at the sentencing hearing, asks for help with his addictions. The judge muses on the wisdom of Hammurabi.

Do you think abstinence or birth control would have prevented the woman's fate? Each choice leads us somewhere. Without children do you think she would have had a different job? What happens to the children? Would you have witnessed her death if you had decided your thirst could wait? As time passes, the cashier becomes a vague snippet of memory and all you can think anytime you walk into a convenience store: *Thank God it wasn't me*.

THOMAS FEENY
SUMMER STORM

The delta, late July. Times are
you get caught up in a surprise gusher.
From the front steps we watch our
twin magnolia trees
shaking their life away.
Whoa, step back. Before
a guy can spit—everywhere,
snakes! A crush of
beady-eyed vipers comes
slithering thru the leaves.

(cont)

I yell to Ma, but she's off somewhere,
lost in thought and smoking hard.
So to save my soul I grab for
her brand-new umbrella
—a candy stripes and all—and I'm just
about to swing it. But that woman,
disgusted, wipes her eyes, flicks
her Camel, nearly shoves me
off the porch.

Then and there she goes right at it,
my sainted mother, beating back
those sneaky invaders,
making the most of her two best weapons:
hard hands and real bad words.

T Feeny

JUDY LEV
TWO TAKES ON THE KITCHEN SINK, 1951

Take One, 1981 (30 years later)

Joey died when I was three or four.

Maybe five?

Nobody ever took me to his grave.

For a long time I thought he was just gone and would come back.

Once, in a box of family photos in a cabinet on the upstairs landing, I saw an oval photo of a baby, hair still wet from the birth canal. Two eyes stared at me, pleading. Was this sprite my baby brother?

This is all I remember:

Rabbi Green comes to the house. He sits on the striped living room couch with its dull hues of yellow, chartreuse, and brown—the color of throw-up. The fabric is smooth as Jell-O. This is a perfect couch for jumping, but Elizabeth and I are not allowed to jump in the house. We stand still in front of the rabbi, like the ceramic dog on the breakfront shelf. The rabbi's name is Green, but he wears black pants and a white shirt. What does he do when he's not working for God?

Above him hangs a painting of an Iowa farm. From the right side of the gold picture frame rushes a tornado. Soon the red barn, white silo, gray wooden farmhouse, and fields of swaying green corn will fly away. The dark, wild sky will devour all. Not

a person stirs; Iowa's empty.

When I dare look straight into Rabbi Green's face, Iowa corn grows out of his bald head.

Come closer, girls, he says. *I have something sad to tell you.*

He lowers sadness over his face the way my mother lowers a window shade. With his right hand he holds my left and with his left he holds Elizabeth's right. His hand feels like warm butter.

This is the first time the rabbi has come to our house, the first time anyone has said, *I have something sad to tell you.*

Ours is the upstairs floor of a two-family house in Cleveland. 2849 Ludlow Road, Cuyahoga County, Ohio, United States of America, the World, one block from Shaker Square and one block from Shaker Heights—the Valley of God's Pleasure, says my father. Our living room is as high as six fathers. Green, stucco walls soar and curve toward each other at the top. It's like a castle. From the ceiling hangs a gold chandelier with five branches. I fear floating to the ceiling and being sucked through a secret hole, released into space, thumb in my mouth. Who will save me?

Song saves me. On Sunday afternoons Elizabeth and I climb the narrow, twisting staircase to the upstairs landing. We sit there overlooking the living room, cover our heads with brown blankets, and sing:

Aba daba daba daba daba daba dab
Said the chimpie to the monk.
Baba daba daba daba daba daba dab
Said the monkey to the chimp…

We like to sing, but not today. Now we're shy with the rabbi holding our hands. We stand in silence.

I have something very sad to tell you, he says, and because this is the second time and he says *very*, he must be telling the truth.

Outside snow falls like macaroni. It buries the front lawn, turns the elm white, the fire hydrant and sidewalk white. Frozen noodles hang on branches. Everything is iced in place and time, even the rabbi's voice when he says the five words: *Your baby brother, Joey, died.*

I giggle because I don't know how to be.

Know-it-all Elizabeth pokes me with her left elbow. *Shhhh,* she shushes.

The rabbi is holding our little hands. Our mother is standing at the kitchen sink. Our father is reading Sunday's *Cleveland Plain Dealer* in his room, smoking a Camel.

The rabbi's brown eyes peer from behind thick circles of glass. Gold wires hold the eyeglasses in place. Gold threads separate some of the ugly brown and chartreuse stripes on the living room couch. The rabbi's pale face is blotched with red spots, like my father's. Maybe the rabbi's parents came from Russia too. His lips are

thick and soft, like mine. Does he suck his thumb? How does God pay him?

The rabbi squints. The tornado has hit the Iowa barn, but the rabbi does not run away.

Now repeat after me, he says. *The Lord is my Shepherd…*

Elizabeth and I repeat. Shepherds wear striped coats of many colors. Does the Lord wear a coat? The rabbi's coat is black. He gave it to my father to hang up.

…I shall not want…

My stomach grumbles. It's Sunday and I want warm French toast with Canadian bacon, smothered in Aunt Jemima's Original Syrup. Her bosom on the bottle is big as a beach ball, soft as a cloud. I want my mother's chocolate chip cookies for dessert. I want to sit at the table with everyone—Elizabeth, my mother, father, Joey, even Grandma, who lives with us now.

…He leadeth me beside the still waters…

Downtown, near my father's creamery full of butter and eggs, flow the stinky, still waters of the Cuyahoga.

…though I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death…

Is the Valley of the Shadow of Death near the Valley of God's Pleasure?

Death may be catching.

…and I shall dwell in the House of the Lord forever.

Maybe 2849 is the House of the Lord, or does he live in Shaker Heights?

Is today part of forever or does that begin in first grade?

We repeat the words after the rabbi as if they are true. I know I am promising something or going somewhere, but I have no idea what or where.

Right after *forever*, my father walks into the living room, smelling like a Camel, carrying the rabbi's black coat and swinging *The Cleveland Plain Dealer.* He has rolled it into a bat. I take my hand back to myself and burst out crying. I run from the rabbi to the dining room. Around the oval table. Past the six heavy, wooden chairs. Around the kitchen table. Into the kitchen.

My mother stands at the sink like a still life. Does she know Joey died? Bawling, I grab the left side of her gray apron, wailing, sniffling, choking with sobs. My nose runs. Tears blur my eyes. Fluids drown me inside and out.

My mother holds herself straight at the stainless-steel sink. She faces the window, feet firm on the gray, linoleum floor. She could be scrubbing a pot, peeling a potato, or staring. Let's say she's watching the water drip from the faucet while the snow falls slowly, forever, outside time.

Grandma sewed the gray apron that falls from my mother's shoulders and covers her hips. Forsythia buds flutter over the apron like small birds seeking a home. Damp Kleenex tissues live in the deep pockets on the sides and front. I hide my wet face in her gray-aproned body.

Elizabeth stands on the other side. When did she get here? Is she crying too?

I hear only my sobs. Mother says nothing. She continues to stand up straight at the sink, leaning slightly against the counter for support.

My father stomps into the kitchen, waving his arms, hitting invisible baseballs with *The Cleveland Plain Dealer*.

I clutch the strings of the apron for life.

Now will you stop crying, Judy, he shouts. *Enough already. You're outta line.*

He comes closer and stands next to me. I bury my face in the pockets of my mother's apron. I am a baby kangaroo, crawling inside. The refrigerator cackles and hums, hums and cackles.

Don't upset your mother, he yells. *Leave her alone,* he shouts. *Be quiet!*

His shouts strike my back. They rip the skin. My breathing backs up, stutters, and stalls.

My mother stands still at the kitchen sink, arms stiff as icicles.

My father stands above me, strange as a camel in Iowa. I fear he may pitch a deathblow. For safety I sink into the gray, linoleum floor. It clamps over me like iron. Here I shall dwell, close to forever.

***

Take Two, 2011 (60 years later)

Snow is falling all over Cleveland and the Valley of God's Pleasure. Outside it is freezing but in the living room at 2849 Ludlow, warmth prevails. Chocolate chip cookies bake in the oven, spreading their redolent fragrance throughout the house. Rabbi Green sits on the green living room couch, his face holding compassion and sadness like an offering, his hands holding ours, the hands of small children, lost and confused.

He gives us words: *Your brother died. Your baby brother, Joey, died. Now repeat after me. The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want… Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil, for Thou art with me…and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*

He puts his warm hands on our heads and blesses us with calm words in a humble tone: *May the Lord bless you and keep you; May the Lord make his face to shine upon you. May the Lord be gracious unto you and give you peace.*

His hands hold us in place as they bless and protect. We are not alone in our sad house. We are part of a tradition of grief and tears, poems and prayers.

Bawling, I run into the kitchen, screaming, sniffling, and choking with sobs. My nose runs. Tears blur my eyes. Fluids drown me inside and out. The kitchen is hot and full of smells. In addition to chocolate chip cookies in the oven, Grandma is making French toast and Canadian bacon on the stove. Mommy is standing at the kitchen sink. Lilacs and daisies, purple and yellow, the colors of Ludlow School, cover the counter near the stainless-steel sink. She is arranging a world with flowers, one at a time. I grab the left side of her gray apron. Forsythia buds flutter over the apron like

goldfinches coming home.

She puts down her scissors and wipes dry her damp hands. Then she bends her knees and kneels so her eyes meet mine. Green, gray, and white lines dance inside Mommy's eyes. They are beautiful, even more so through tears. Inside her navy slacks, her knees rest on the gray, linoleum floor. Her arms are bare and she spreads them around me. I feel the tiny hairs on her arms and the blood moving in her veins and the warmth of her skin against my wet skin. Her arms hold me just as the largest leaves in a flower arrangement encircle and protect the smallest bud.

It is very sad, *sweetheart,* she says. *We all loved Joey but he was very sick*. I put my head against her chest and feel the words vibrate in her chest and in my ear. *We did the best we could*. Then she holds me without saying a word. I sniffle and moan. She holds me. The longer she holds me, the more my crying, sniffles, and moans subside and change to breathing. She breathes like me. We breathe together. If I hold my breath, I can hear the *ta-tum ta-tum* of her heart. That's how close we are to each other.

She lifts her right hand. I don't want her to get up but she isn't getting up. With her right hand she touches my Buster Brown blonde hair. Slowly and carefully she rubs my hair from the crown to the neck, as though she were patting a beloved cat. I purr and somehow Joey's death hurts less. *He was a very special baby,* Mommy says. *You were so good with him, Judy, the way you held him in the rocking chair, and so helpful to me, the way you stood next to me when I gave him a bath. I know you loved Joey, sweetheart. We are so sad that he could not show us his love.*

I stop breathing because I want to catch every word, to hold onto each word like I hold the handlebars of my four-wheeler. For life. I am a big girl and getting bigger but sometimes I fall. Next year I will start first grade. Now I want to carve these words inside. Where is that place? With my right pointer I twist the hair over Mommy's ears. She laughs and says, *That tickles.* The smells cover me like a warm blanket. I don't know what I love more, the smells or the tastes or my mother's words.

Elizabeth walks into the kitchen, and Mommy goes from kneeling to plopping her tush on the floor. She opens her legs wide so we can both sit inside her. She holds me with her left arm against her left side and Elizabeth with her right arm against her right side. I reach out for Elizabeth's hand, and Lizzie doesn't say *Yuk*, even though my hand is slimy from my runny nose and tears. *Daddy and I are very sad,* Mommy says. *We cry every night. The rabbi says God will be good to us.* Now she touches both our heads and gently moves the hair out of our eyes. *We hope he is right*.

Daddy walks into the kitchen. *The rabbi just left,* he says quietly when he sees Mommy, Lizzie, and me on the floor in front of the kitchen sink. Mommy turns and lifts her face to him and smiles with her mouth closed, her eyes closing, and I can feel something move inside near her heart. She is crying a silent cry. Daddy stands behind her, his legs supporting her back. His breaths cross the top of my head and tickle my

ears. Now he bends down too and stretches his arms over all three of his girls. *We're like a mountain*, he says and we all giggle. *Like a flower arrangement*, Lizzie says.

Like a Stone Hill, I say, and we all shake from laughing, and now even Daddy has plopped onto the floor behind Mommy. Our laughter turns into tears. We heave like one body for the one body that didn't work right, the Joey body, who is no longer with us but only inside; Joey, who is here and not here. I marvel at how this plumbing system we all have inside us turns laughter and sadness into liquid and how this water comes out from both eyes and these tears turn into words and then we feel spent, emptied. We wilt, squeezed clean from inside.

Time stops. The sun breaks through the falling snow, and its rays shine through the kitchen window. It anoints us with light, all four of us piled on the kitchen floor, and Grandma, too, standing by the stove, watching, listening, and cooking. If I stick out my tongue, the light will taste like maple syrup.

Daddy puts a hand on my head, and it feels large and safe. He says, *Judy, Judy,* as if he wants to save me; *Judy, Judy,* this time as if he wants me to save him; and again he says, *Judy,* as if we all need saving, and now he looks from one end of the kitchen to the other and says in his Jackie Gleason voice, *Judy, will you please bring your Dear Old Dad one of those cookies your Grandma and Mom have been baking forever, wherever the hell they are,* and Mommy turns her head to look at Daddy and even stretches her right arm to put her hand on his cheek and says, *Honey, you're so full of Iowa corn, it's growing out of your head.*

BETSY MARTIN
THE DINNER PARTY

what we are eating: pasta, pesto, beans
cauliflower, asparagus, applesauce, a mango
other things on their plates I can't see

what we discuss: the run on
toilet paper
in this time of the plague

how in countries where toilet
paper's a luxury
they use soap and water

(cont)

such simplicity
so many trees
spared

at dinner's end our friend
creates a big loop with his arms—
a hug

with which he cradles a planet
and offers it to us
unseasoned

our other friend puckers her lips
in a virtual kiss

blows from her palm
fresh soil

screen now blank
we wash our dishes

Martin

ELEMENTS FROM THE PERIODIC TABLE

For the nearsighted family
a large copper bowl full of eyeglasses giving
sight and occasionally insight.

The palladium white from the flashlight of a walker
at night who advises others to carry a flashlight,
one of many fatherly
admonitions ignored.

A mother's silver head bent over a book
where it's both lost and found.

A platinum-and-sapphire ring
the wearer says she was dragged kicking
and screaming to Tiffany's to buy
because he wanted to impress his family though she
wanted an understated antique.

(cont)

A radiant gold leaf
brought home by the walker in autumn,
put at the daughter's place on the table
as a peace offering.

Dreams of roentgenium,
a metal more noble than gold
but not quite real,
synthesized in the wild lab
of the heart
and then
falling apart.

Martin

MATTHEW FEENEY
MY TREE HOUSE

Wind teasingly tickling my arm hairs
sun, patched through the leaves and branches, gently warming my face
slight sense of vertigo looking down
warm wood: well-worn smooth
the steady deep creak of the main beam rubbing against the tree
smell of green leaves from above and the pungent odor of seaweed baking
on the nearby shore
occasional waft of a rotting fish, once a keeper
slightly salty taste of sweat as I lick my lips against the summer heat
sunshine dancing across the water's ripples, racing the wind
the occasional "puck" sound of a fish hitting a surface bug
off in the distance a pair of loons calling to each other in mournful love
no walls, just a platform in a tree
I am happy, secure, invincible, a ruler in my fort,
happy to be alive, so much ahead of me
I burp—
savoring the ripple potato chips and diet Coke from lunch.
My mind burps—
sitting on the top bunk of my prison cell
savoring the wind teasingly tickling my arm hairs.

M Feeney

ANDRENA ZAWINSKI

TOWN TALK

This is a story I was told, not exactly, but through this knack I have reading and writing over diner coffee. I am a convicted eavesdropper. I confess that if on a stroll I pass your house with the light on, I will steal a peek inside, read over your shoulder and give your life a twist that holds on to a new love or long-lost cause you want to touch.

You may gain a past as an Algerian concierge cooking couscous on the hotplate at the desk of a rock-bottom Paris walkup after some war. Or you might scour the beaches from Portland to Los Angeles for tagged marine cadavers, ponder the minuscule through microscopes late into night. I will mark your eye with a splash of pink after some surgery.

This is how it all begins: sometimes when I hunger for a thick slice of cake in the too early to rise morning, I go to O'leary's Donuts where everyone has kissed the Blarney Stone, but no one is Irish, where sweet rolls stale on the counter, and fat sausage and kraut swell a display case and growling stomachs, the only menu written on the real smell of the grill.

This is what I heard there, this story. Well not exactly, as I was practicing the art of eavesdropping and looking for something to read about the newspaper strike in Pittsburgh. Huddled in the warmth of my Slovenian sweatshirt, a man assumes I've been to the old country, not the folk festival. Mixing up Polish and English as he stirs a heap of sugar into his cup, mopping up a spill the waitress' fast rag couldn't catch, he turns his talk to me.

Then, as suddenly as the sun rises, it is 1936: the best bakery in Bloomfield shuts down, sparks a string of closings. He looks for work. All the Polacks clean floors, haul flour up from railroad tracks, anything to work In Pittsburgh. I hear him say: He didn't need the Confectioner's Union to make good sourdough, just to let it ferment long enough. He didn't need the Union to get the caramel right for Russian Rye A&P and Krogers bought. He worked twelve hours a day, seven days a week; but the Union did get the kids out of mines, did make a pension to pay for pills to keep his old woman's heart alive.

Now this man will tell you this is true, but you'll have to ask him another time. He says he's off to Israel to practice Yiddish he learned working for Jews all his life. Which is another story. If you happen to dig into a dish of the sweet at O'Leary's Donuts, he might be there. And me, I'll be passing on the donuts, buttering up Town Talk white toast, scribbling fast on napkin backs in offbeat hours. And that's a true story—well, almost.

GEORGE LONGENECKER
SWANS SWIM AT DAWN

Four swans swim circles around the small pond
of reeds and cattails across the road
from my hotel room, drift back and forth,
dipping their beaks to feed, not much water,
but just four, not Yeats' *nine and fifty swans*.

Years ago when I was thirteen,
an amusement park—Pleasure Island—
was built here on the edge of wetlands where
now there are condos, offices, hotel,
a short-lived attempt to imitate

Disneyland in a Massachusetts swamp.
How much pleasure or amusement kids got,
I'm not sure, but I saw Ricky Nelson
play right over there not far from the pond
where swans swim in low light just after dawn.

I wondered why the teen idol had to sing
on stage near Goldpan Gulch and a white whale,
in a small amusement park in a swamp,
but it wasn't his swan song; he performed
another 23 years before flying to his death.

Ricky Nelson just liked small stages where he
could play for a few hundred screaming teens,
his voice and guitar always pitch-perfect,
I can still hear him sing:
Unchained Melody, *Hello Mary Lou*, *Someday*.

Someday I'd like to swim like a white swan,
go back when there were songs like *Lonesome Town*,
when we could be so moved by an idol,
so easily amused—Pleasure Island.
Swans still swim in low light just after dawn.

Longenecker

CAROLINE MAUN
RUNNING FROM AND TO

I stood in line for the market.
I don't yet know how to be a person
in a mask in line with other masked
persons where I am shaking with fear
of them, currents of air, what they contain,
and surfaces. I'm learning.
The queue is slow and balletic
with the distance we keep,
guided by dots the store has painted
on the sidewalk. This patience is still new.

Looking through the shop's glass: breathtaking
vegetables, sparkling meats nestled under
cellophane, the familiar order and security
of canned soup, frivolity of bouquets,
all the fingerprints along the chain
of production. Plenty and the orgy,
for now, of choosing.

Maun

MARIA CHOI
I DANCED ON STARS

When a turtle lays eggs on a public beach, the turtle people set up a protective barrier of net and wire around the location and post a sign to notify all beachgoers. My family's annual Oak Island beach trips at the beginning of August meant that every year on our walks I'd see at least one protective barrier announcing that soon baby turtles would break their way through their soft-shelled eggs under the sand and enter the world. I'd hope against hope to be present for the hatching. But every year the timing was wrong, and our trip would come to an end with no sign of the baby turtles.

The year I was eight, my siblings and I built a huge sand sea turtle,

perhaps thinking we could conjure the babies to hatch. For several afternoons, we sweated under the hot sun. My three older brothers did most of the heavy shoveling while I carried water from the ocean, patting down the pile. Starting from level ground, our mound grew into a solid mass of hard-packed sand. My hands stung from slapping the wet sides, my arms ached from lugging the buckets of water, but I was spurred on by the determination to see at least one sea turtle that year.

Then, after days of digging, the carving began. Little by little, the mound transformed into a sea turtle three feet high and six feet long, a huge head and strong flippers protruding from its giant shell. Surely, I thought, we would be rewarded for our hard work, for our creation. But the final days of our vacation slipped by, and though I checked on the protective barriers as consistently as if I alone were responsible for the turtles' well-being, nothing happened.

One day near the end of trip, our rented front-row beach house providing easy access to the beach at any time, Mom and an older sister went down to the beach to watch the sunset, taking three of the younger children. I, though also one of the younger children, remained inside with Dad and three older siblings in an attempt to be mature and grown up by association. But their conversations were uninteresting, and though I tried to distract myself with a book as the night grew dark, I grew bored and wished I had accompanied the others. Then—a miracle.

My older sister returned to the deck door, yelling, "They're hatching! They're hatching! Get your flashlights!" She disappeared again into the darkness.

I rolled off the couch in a panic and rallied Dad and the remaining siblings to action, causing a frantic rush to grab flashlights and sprint down the deck to the beach. I was nervous—excitement over the turtles combined with the eeriness of the beach after sunset. We passed our sand turtle, a lurking shapeless shadow. The wet winds blew warm in my face, and the surging movement of the waves, almost indistinguishable in their black and blue ripples, sounded ominous. Unable to identify which bodies belonged to which family members, I stuck close to my oldest brother for safety and focused on running through the loose, shifting sand near the dunes. *Wait for me, wait for me,* I chanted to the turtles.

Soon I could see the swinging beams of flashlights up ahead. Breathless, we slowed to a jog and joined the gathering crowd, where Mom and the younger siblings were already standing. The turtle person, an ever-vigilant man with a stern face and a headlamp, made sure we didn't come too close to the smoothed runway of sand he had created to give the baby turtles

a clear shot to the water.

I pushed my way through legs and arms to get a better view.

"Look, look!"

The crowd's voices mingled together as strangers called to grab each other's attention; we were one big family gathered to witness.

The grains of sand rustled, jagged cracks broke the smooth surface, and two tiny black heads pushed through their buried birthplace to breath the salty air. Flippers and bodies followed, and then more black little heads, and more flippers and bodies, until a mess of baby turtles were crawling over each other in attempts to find their direction. But soon, the mess cleared, and each turtle, guided by instinct or the call of the waves, steadily headed down the smooth pathway towards the water.

We watched, enthralled, as the turtles moved with unexpected speed, lifting one flipper through the air and flapping it down on the sand to pull itself forward as the next flipper began to follow. One baby turtle lost its step, and instead of propelling itself forward methodically with its brothers and sisters, it flipped onto its back. It lay there, flinging its flippers around, but was unsuccessful in its efforts. Someone near me leaned down and with one careful finger pushed the struggling baby turtle right side up. Without pausing to consider what outside force had just acted upon it, the little shelled creature continued on its journey to the ocean.

"Sir, do not touch the turtles," the turtle person warned the man who had helped the baby. "Stay outside the line," he reminded everyone. "Please don't shine your flashlights on them."

His voice seemed to hasten the end of the hatching. The line of marching turtles grew thinner, and the crowd began to disperse.

I didn't want the night to end. I felt important, out after dark, one of the special few to observe the event. But the tides, having crept higher than normal while we were distracted by the turtles, left my family and me trudging through pools of water even at the top of the beach, and that was special, too. And when we made it back to our house and saw our giant sloping turtle, surrounded by the water, I became even more important, because now we weren't just normal people returning from watching the turtles, we were agents on a mission to save our hard work from being washed away. My brothers began gathering whatever dry sand they could to pile around the edges. Mom and Dad took my younger siblings back to the house, but I remained, standing in front of the turtle shining a flashlight, my back to the water, a benevolent provider of light in this dark and wonderful situation.

The waves pooled around our creation, as if our mound was some

enormous baby turtle lost and stranded on the beach. But this turtle was ours, and whether it played a part in hatching the eggs early or not, I felt compelled to fight for its survival as much as I willed the babies to survive the dangers of the sea.

Finally, high tide having reached its peak, the waves began to recede. Our turtle was safe. The sand was wet and malleable between my toes, and I crouched down to draw something with my finger. And as I wiped my hand across the sand to give myself a smooth canvas, the night offered one last miracle.

"Look, look!" I called to the others, echoing the awe that had caught hold of the crowd earlier. My siblings gathered around to see.

Left in the trail of the swipe of my hand, sitting like gems on the damp sand, were glowing, shining specks of light. It was as if the sky, painted with its distant galaxies, had lent the earth a few of its stars, which were just waiting under the surface of the sand for someone to find them.

One of my brothers tried to explain to me what I was seeing, something about tiny organisms living in the sand, maybe a sort of bioluminescence, but I knew better than to believe it could be explained so simply. On the very night of the baby turtles hatching, on the very night we defended our turtle against the tricks of the tides, this was more than a normal occurrence in nature. I placed my hands gently, reverently, upon the sand, and awakened the magic with a perfect sweeping arch.

My siblings joined me, all of us on our hands and knees, scraping and swiping, watching the strange lights appear in the sand.

I tried to collect the tiny glowing things; I wanted to bring a handful back to show Mom. But once in my fingers, the lights dimmed and went out, leaving me with specks of gray sand. The glowing magic was too special to last; it was for this moment only, a gift from the dark sky and crashing ocean.

"Maria," my older sister said. "We should go back to the house."

"Wait," I begged. "Let's stay a little longer."

I had felt important earlier; now I felt honored beyond what I deserved. I couldn't yet abandon the mysterious beauty of the night. And so I stayed, hours past my bedtime, aware of my smallness and insignificance under the reaches of the universe, but still granted this moment, this tribute to the turtles and the tides, to draw with light upon the sand, to dance upon the stars.

RICHARD ROBBINS
DEDICATION

What is poetry that does not save
Nations or people?
—Czesław Miłosz

You think the loaf of bread, olive,
might have turned him that day away
from the pill drawer, and the lift
you gave her to the airport, such
a small thing, she said offered balm
to her months-long plane ride of grief.

But who ever knows if he saves
a life? The bread, the lift, the bad
joke told and told, the phone call,
the wave through the living room glass
at the mother walking the child
who will die soon, despite you,

of some growing spot on the brain.
And the old poet would have us
save whole civilizations.
No mercy for the living. Loaf
by loaf, then. Your hand. Your word.
The dead not even accusing.

Robbins

JAMES SCRUTON
TWELVE MONTHS SAME AS CASH
—sign outside an appliance store

So time is money
after all, I thought,

a whole year folded
in my wallet, days

(cont)

lost for good between
the sofa cushions,

a month's pay burning
holes in my pocket

calendar. As if
by now I didn't

know how money flies
when I'm having fun,

as if I didn't
think it healed all wounds.

Scruton

SISYPHUS, LATER

It never got old, getting that stone
uphill. I perfected leans and heaves,
techniques to suit my every mood:
The Lunge, The Back-to-the-Boulder,
The Double Stiff-Arm Push,
as many strategies as Odysseus
was famous for, my route
A up to B, B down to A
a test of my ingenuity.
I was patient, had all the time
in the underworld (as we used to say
below). Or thought I had:
Someone must have seen me smiling
as I worked my palms dead raw.
So they turned me out
up here, punished me for good
this time, my afterlife gone flat.
Now I'm a shadow of the shade
I was, a spirit all too level.
They know to be at my stone again
I'd move heaven and earth.
They know just how to make me hurt.

Scruton

CAVE PAINTINGS

Vivid as they are, they cast the same
few characters on every wall—
these spindly hunters, those beasts
so rough in tusk and claw.

Where are the caves bright with gatherers,
with the ones who must have toted children
while picking seeds, who sparked
and tended fires, split bones

for tools or clacked and tapped them
into song? Let's find an ancient mural
busy with the breakers of ground,
with field-sowers, rounders of wheels.

Let's raise a hollowed wooden cup
to all those undepicted hominids
in our past, to freshwater-finders,
to smoothers and stitchers of hide,

let's make room on some cave wall
for all those sweepers of ash
and dust, for those who strung
sabered teeth or polished

stones, and for sound-shapers, builders
of stories, their words a thousand pictures.

Scruton

IN OTHER WORDS

My translation of an obscure French poem
kept falling apart until I realized *les trombones*
were not horns but paper clips,

just another of those little linguistic surprises
that keep me going, like learning *hell*
means light in German, or *sinister*
the Italian for the hand I use
to write these lines, this very stanza

(cont)

making room here for the quirkiness
of words, no grand pronouncements
necessary, no big parade of insights led
by seventy-six or even one trombone,

not even, for this single page,
so much as a paper clip.

Scruton

OFFERING

—for Poppy

You leave a feast
of scraps for it,
as if that fox were
some medieval sin-eater
ingesting our iniquities
or an even older
apparition, a god
come through the woods
to find a single
generous soul worth
saving. Thanks to you
we're spared the flood
or flame, that gleam
of holy justice
in his vulpine eye,
his gaze on us
instead like a gift
in this photo you
waited and waited
for the chance to take
and couldn't wait to share.

Scruton

NORBERT KOVACS

THE AZALEA BUSH

The trouble began when Frank Rossman complained to his wife Diane that a raccoon had gotten into the house. He said the overturned tray table by the kitchen's back door, the spilled box of cereal in the dinette, and the scuff marks on the living room sofa all proved it. "You ought to make sure at night that you lock the doors," he told her as his heavy, wrinkled face reddened. Diane shook her head and told him that she did not believe any raccoon had broken inside. "*You* must have made the mess, dear," she said matter-of-factly, her gray features trying to hold firm. Her claim upset Frank. *As if I can't remember whether I did*, he thought. The next week, a shelf broke in the bathroom while Diane was asleep, and he insisted a second raccoon had done it after entering through the window.

Frank's mood took new, dark turns. He made a scene in the kitchen by slamming the pots and pans Diane had set to dry in the dish strainer. He felt upset Diane had questioned him over going to the grocery store and meant to show her his take on the matter. "You can't go threatening me," he said, banging a skillet on a crock pot while his wife stood by the sink, frozen. "I'm in charge in this house." He walked away, telling himself that he hadn't been parts buyer at the factory twenty-five years to get bossed once he retired. Days later, Frank warned his wife not to speak to him when he watched TV in their living room. "How you always bother me!" he yelled, waving his arms in anger. Diane's blue eyes set on him sadly, but he scowled, angry that she might think he kidded her. *She has become like an illness*, he thought as he picked up the remote.

Diane shied from Frank more often. She sat in her own chair rather than beside him on the couch. She developed a habit of going to her bedroom and shutting the door whenever she phoned their son, Matt. Diane began to see Matt in person over in Bolton, sometimes twice a week when she had used to see him only twice a month. Frank shook his large head as he considered the change. *She forgets me and harps on our boy*, he thought, smirking.

In mid-May, the old man was glad to have their son over for a visit. Frank had not seen Matt for over a month and hoped to get up to date on his family and happenings. They gathered to talk in the living room, Diane and Matt sitting close together on the couch and Frank in his easy chair on Matt's left. When they had settled, Diane and her son exchanged a look at which the tall, thin young man leaned forward.

"Mom's been telling me how you've acted lately," Matt said to his dad. "She's convinced me something's wrong."

Frank stared. "Just what?"

"You aren't the same. You aren't as friendly." Matt adjusted himself on the couch and spoke with care. "Like you used to talk with your friend Tom down the block, the stout guy with the dark hair. Mom says things with him took a sour turn."

The idea Diane had communicated this upset Frank. He did not grasp why she should have mentioned it to anyone. "We had a falling out," he said. "He did not want to hear me talk so much about our house, so I said we were through."

"It happened suddenly."

"Perhaps. I'm happier still not seeing him."

"At the same time, you've quit your usual habits, even hobbies. You don't do your woodwork." Frank had employed a power saw at a table in the garage for more than fifteen years. "You used to make shelves and cabinets all the time."

"I've built the things I will. It was my hobby and now it's not. What's the issue?"

"It seems to point to something bigger. You're not as involved. You don't treat people like friends anymore. You haven't been normal with Mom."

Mrs. Rossman's tired face firmed. She seemed to have expected her son's words.

"You claimed to her raccoons got into the house though the doors were locked," Matt continued. "You said a raccoon came into the bathroom through a window four feet off the ground. Mom checked the doors and they weren't broken in. The screen to the window had no damage."

"Well, the place sure looked like a raccoon damaged it. I mean, chairs were overturned, the furniture in the room was scuffed—"

"The room had been fine—at least when I went to bed," Diane said. "And if it became a mess, it wasn't because of any raccoon."

"I'm telling you some animal got in."

"Mom says you banged the pots in the dish strainer trying to make a clatter," Matt said. "How come?"

Frank shrugged for he did not understand the problem. "I was searching for a coffee cup and couldn't find any. I might have been frustrated."

"Another time, you told Mom not to say anything to you while you watched TV. She can't remember causing any trouble that you should have.

Why did you?"

"Maybe it wasn't the best attitude to show her. But is it such a problem now? Like you should be pointing it out to me."

"You weren't supposed to do any of these things." Matt continued more quietly, "This is why Mom and I believe you should see a psychiatrist." He offered a printed card from his pocket. "I've heard about this guy, Dr. Brenner. My friend saw him when he had family problems. He could help you."

Frank shook his large, bald head. "I won't see him."

"You ought to, Dad."

Matt's insistence, pressing and certain, riled Frank of a sudden. *My adult son instructing me in my own house*, he thought as the muscles on his scalp tightened. *Acting as if he knows what's right for me more than I do. With his mother—my wife—encouraging him!* The old man burned with rage. He rose from his chair and stood, glowering.

"What a no-good son, reproving his father!" he cried, his dark eyes like fire above Matt's bearded face. "Like you're anyone! You work at that dump accounting firm, hoping to get ahead. Hoping. But you never do. Never. Never get ahead. All while you live with that lousy wife. And your lousy kids." Frank's hard, strong jaw tensed. He felt it a struggle to speak. He turned, toward his wife, half-bowed in her seat. "And you! The primped queen! Plotting always to spend, spend on your next outfit. Browsing online for a new dress whenever you can. Just clothing for you!" He slammed his large hand on the hard, upholstered arm of his easy chair and scowled. He could not think of the next thing to say. He turned in a small circle before the couch, his face drawn, his mind fumbling. When he again faced Diane, he felt his anger return and that he could speak. "Else it's fussing over the furniture. Fuss. Fussing! 'The pillow must be at the couch end. I must move the chair closer to the window.' All your fixing when NO ONE CARES!"

Frank stood tall and stopped. At first, he felt a strange pride that he could roar at them, yell and roar, and not get a word in return. As he studied the pair on the couch, this sense crumbled. Diane's long, sad eyes and her bent form spoke of fear. She seemed too scared to speak even now he had done. Beside her, Matt studied him darkly. His face had set with defiance, his arms and forehead firm. He had cupped his fist as if ready to strike. The idea arrested Frank. As if Matt should think to, the old man told himself, becoming worried. He realized then he had gone too far. *I terrified Diane*, he thought. *Matt is upset. If only one of them had been frightened or angry, I might not have believed it. They both are, though.* The pain of embarrassment pierced Frank's hardened mind. He reddened, half upset, half ashamed and

did not know where to look. “Enough of this,” he said. “I’m going onto the porch. Alone.” He stalked from the living room without another word and went through the home’s front door, outside.

Frank slumped into a wicker chair at the porch’s far end, where he knew no one in the house could observe him. *How could I have said all those things to them?* he asked himself as he surveyed the springtime front yard. *I had no control. The words just poured.* He hated the pain these ideas brought and tried not to think. He let his attention fix on the azalea bush on the lawn before him. The bush was tall and attractive, he discovered in gazing; amid its long, dark green leaves, the pink blooms showed their trumpets, the pistols inside like festive, red hooks. He became lost in the azalea’s fine shapes and bright colors. He recalled, then, that he had argued with Diane over the bush soon after they had it delivered by the garden store last month. The scene returned clearly to him. With the azalea in its root bag on the lawn beside them, Frank had insisted they plant the bush alongside the stone fence with their neighbor.

“But dear, the neighbor’s trees will throw too much shade on the bush,” Diane had said. “It won’t grow. Couldn’t we have it on the front lawn instead?”

Frank had stomped his foot on the grass, angry to be contradicted. “The azalea belongs by the fence to shield our yard from the neighbor,” he said, struck by a vague suspicion of the man in question. “Besides, a huge bush shouldn’t go plunk in the middle of our front yard. It’s been clean grass straight to the road without so much as a flower since we’ve lived here. I won’t have it spoiled.” He had walked away without bothering to hear Diane answer.

Frank realized now his wife had not listened to him over the bush. She had dismissed his warning over the neighbor and his words about the lawn. And the azalea where she had planted it seemed beautiful all the same. His eyes wandered sadly over the fresh, pink blooms. *I was sure she would have done as I asked*, he thought. *I suppose I hadn’t bothered to consider she might feel differently.* His face drooped and his cheeks broke into creases as this truth weighed on him. *But why hadn’t I noticed?* he asked himself. *I must have walked by the bush since she planted it here. And I didn’t see the thing right there before my eyes.*

Presently, Frank heard a car start on the far side of the house. He saw his son Matt’s blue compact roll in reverse down the driveway beside the front lawn. He had ended his visit sooner than expected and was going home. Matt kept his head turned back, averted from the porch where his father watched. The young man hooked into the street and straightened the car to

go. When he faced forward, he caught his father's eye on him from the porch. Matt's lean face tightened, his expression suddenly rigid. He raised his arm formally, as if to wave, turned to the road, and drove away. Frank lowered his heavy head. *Matt's sure I'm not okay anymore*, he knew. *I cried and yelled and convinced him. Maybe then I really am not okay.*

Frank wished no longer to stay on the porch; he rose from his chair. *I'll have to face her*, he thought as he went and opened the front door. He passed inside and found Diane at the couch as earlier. She was bent from the waist, a hand supporting her cheek. Pity touched him to see how she sulked. *I did this to her*, he realized. *She's suffered my rants and stood my anger. And I hadn't even cared*. He went and stood quietly before his wife.

"Did Matt leave the number for that doctor?" he asked in a slow voice. "I think—I think I would like it."

Diane raised her head. Her blue eyes scanned him with disbelief. However, she reached into her pocket and pulled out the card Matt had left. She extended it with her aged, creased arm, a question on her silent face. Frank took the paper and bowed his head, accepting it.

ROBERT ROTHMAN
COMES THE NIGHT

Do you mean to tell me—
        that cooped up in the house all day
when nighttime comes and booze three
        stiff ones and a bottle of wine dark sea

stumble out to a crescent moon and empty streets
        run in the middle howling like a wolf

slide down the embankment to the rope hanging
        from the tree the gift of some bold you

who has now grown old swing back and forth
        singing like the Boss an anthem of not

looking back jump off and miss the spot
        laughing and spouting blood from knees

(cont)

and hands a stigmata of stupidity lurching
as if on a boat in rough sea charting

a course home unlocking the gate nicking
the brass with the key to find

the sweet spot that opens the door
to the who—that wasn't you?

Rothman

ROBERT ESTES
DEGREES OF DISAPPEARANCE

I remember when it
dawned on me that my mother,
in her late nineties, didn't
recognize me, except
some of the time.

Now that she is 102,
I come every few
months, stay for a week or
two. Literally, I mean.
I used to bring joy to
her face just by appearing.
That was back when there was
no doubt. Later, in the
doubtful period, sometimes
she'd say, "There's Bob," to my
sister when I came into
view or, "Bob's been coming
by pretty often," as
though I lived nearby instead
of the BOS-AUS distance.

(cont)

So she knew me then, I
could tell myself. She asked
me not all that long ago,
"Now *who* was…?," naming her
second (and last) husband
of fifteen years. When I told
her who he was, she shook
her head negatively, expressed
a no with her brow. She
wasn't buying it. That
might have been a warning
if I'd thought about it.
But he's been dead about
thirty-seven years and so
seemed easier to forget
than her only son, still
walking this Earth.

Most of the time now she
looks through me: another
caretaker, but nobody
special. It's not that I'm
not Bob. Bob is not a
role that needs filling. I've
been written out of the play.
The last time that I left,
I forgot to say goodbye.

Estes

MOLLIE SALAMON

IT'S A TALL PERSON'S WORLD, I'M JUST LOOKIN' UP AT IT

It's not easy being twenty-two and the size of a third grader. Coupled with the fact that I have a baby face and weigh 110 pounds soaking wet, I'm pretty much sentenced to a vicious cycle of perpetually being mistaken for a twelve-year-old.

A first grader asked me once, "Are you an adult, or are you a little kid?"

His face was scrunched with confusion, his young brain trying to reconcile my status of authority with my appearance. I was peer-tutoring at a local elementary school during my senior year of high school, acting as a

teaching assistant in a classroom of students who could look me in the eye without having to lift their heads up more than a fraction.

"I'm an adult," I said.

"But I'm almost the same size as you." His little voice rose at the end, questioning and unsure.

Yeah, hitting your one and only growth spurt in the second grade will do that to a person, I thought, wryly.

"I know. You'll be taller than me in no time!"

And he would. Within a year or two, most of the kids in that first-grade class would be taller than I am, ascending from the world of the smalls into the society of the talls.

I wonder sometimes what it must be like up there. To be able to reach the top shelves without accommodations and hug people without getting your face jammed into their abdomen? It's a section of Eden I will only ever be able to gaze at longingly.

Now, that's not to say that I dislike my life or my body. I love being small. I can get into crevices and slip into private, cozy nooks. The water from the shower head always covers my whole body. I save money by buying clothes in the Junior's section instead of Women's. Twin beds are downright roomy. Kids and animals aren't intimidated by me. I can squeeze into spots on the T or elevator that other people can't. To get away from someone I don't like, all I have to do is step into a crowd and boom I'm invisible. Smallville is a pretty good place to live most of the time.

Still, a world made for the tall can be taxing for someone my size. There are a lot of things that get old and that get old fast.

I was the first person in my friend group who was legally able to drink. Going out to the bar, I was the only one who had a real I.D. And yet, I was the only one the waiters ever looked at with suspicion. I am only ever called "cute" or "adorable," never "gorgeous" or "sexy." Potential romantic partners are hard to find because they think I'm underage. My roommates bond by sharing clothes and shoes with each other. Because I am so far removed from their sizes, I cannot. I can't walk with a poster board in a strong wind without the threat of becoming a kite. I get lost in crowds whether I want to or not.

People mistake me for a child. Constantly.

"And what grade are you in?" they ask, faces bright and voices pitched high to the octave adults reserve for children. Pleasant, with just a tinge of condescension.

"A senior in college."

Watching the redness of embarrassment creep up their necks and

bloom on their cheeks brings a sort of vindictive pleasure.

I have to remind myself not to fault these people too much. They aren't trying to be mean or belittling. They're just making an informed decision based on the available visual information. I can't blame them. The fact of the matter is that I don't look twenty-two.

It's only when I speak that the realization of their faulty visual assumption sets in. They backpedal, peppering apologies with nervous laughter.

"You're really going to appreciate that when you're in your sixties and look like you're in your forties!" they say. Their voices sparkle with forced enthusiasm.

"I bet," I reply. I've had variations of this same conversation more times than I can count. I smile, wondering if they notice when it doesn't reach my eyes.

Though uncomfortable and unwanted, I wouldn't consider these interactions to be unpleasant. Tiresome? Yes. Awkward? Absolutely. But unpleasant? No. They could be much worse.

They could be like the middle-aged Target cashier, who sneered, "Like you're old enough to sign up for one anyway," after asking if I wanted to sign up for a Red Card. Or the glassblower at a workshop my mom and I were attending, who completely messed up my piece and deflected all the blame onto me, thinking it was his word against the word of a child. They could be like the nurse who, upon weighing me, scoffed, "Do you eat?" and snorted when I told her how much I love food.

Even these people, though, I try not to judge too harshly. I've come to understand that their words and actions are reflections of their own shortcomings (pun intended), not my own.

Their words are spurred by jealousy, insecurity, and an inability to accept their own flaws. They look at my short stature and young face and see a figure that they can overpower to stroke their ego. I imagine that, in their spare time, they luxuriate in telling kids that Santa isn't real and that their pet gerbil didn't actually go to live in a luxurious gerbil farm upstate. People must line up to invite them to parties.

But for every ounce of bad in this world, there is a pound of good.

I was in a small clothing store on Martha's Vineyard, buying a present for my roommate, when some of that good trickled over me.

"How tall are you?" asked the large tattooed man ringing up my purchase.

The man was tall. And when I say tall, I don't just mean tall to me. I mean tall tall. Approaching seven feet if I had to guess.

"Four-foot ten," I said.

"My ex-girlfriend was four-foot nine," he explained, smiling slightly as he folded the shirt and tucked it into a bag. "You remind me of her. I thought you were about the same height. I just want to pick you up and put you in my pocket."

He laughed quietly and handed me my bag.

I was stunned for a second, taken completely off-guard by his sweet admission.

"Have a great rest of your day," he said.

I did. And I still smile whenever I think back on it.

***

I've learned to adapt to living in the tall world. I have my ID ready when the server takes drink orders, offering it up without prompting to make everyone's lives easier. I contend with the fact that my little legs have to pump twice as hard to keep up with the leisurely saunter of my friends. I keep a pillow in my car to prop me up a little higher when I drive. I learned how to climb counters and scale shelves to get what I need. I've peppered my house with step stools and have become a master of hemming and cuffing pants. I've learned that if I engage my core muscles, balance on my ribcage, and stretch my fingers as far as I can, I can just reach the socks at the bottom of my top-loading washing machine.

It's not always easy. I've thought time and time again about how much easier life would be if I was just two inches taller. I won't lie and say that the comments about my height aren't tiresome, or that the jokes and snide remarks don't get under my skin. But then my dog lays across my body, drowning me in warmth and fuzz, and I'm happy that I'm small enough to be smothered by him and his love.

I've found that this world made for the tall ones is not insurmountable. I just need a stepstool.

CAROLYN GREGORY
SONAR SINGERS

They were impossible to measure
and even harder to weigh,
the biggest animals ever on our planet,
surviving till the harpoonists went crazy
for blubber. (cont)
Sleek with a lovely blow hole

and fin pretty small for their twenty tons,
their lungs had the capacity
to help them sink down
deep in the cold Antarctic.

Over distances, they talked with each other
in the sonar bleeps of song
about good places for krill
and how to avoid gangs of orcas
who never won but loved to bite.

It was harder to win against fishing boats
with their giant nets and desire for cash;
the whales were trapped by greed,
outrun by motors
when their turf was the ocean.

Give it back to them
so their blue gray sleekness
continues to glide forward
and have new babies.
Let them pair up to extend
their talking songs to all the others.

Gregory

ADINA CASSAL (PEN NAME)
UNFINISHED

97-year-old ladies,
new friends at the center.
In a corner of the room,
one teaches the other
how to dance.

Cassal

DAVID JAMES
PAYDAY

Jack flopped his feet onto the coffee table, careful to avoid the half-empty Corona 24 next to the well-used ashtray formed from an old hubcap. Glancing at his snakeskin cowboy boots, he patted the shaggy brown head that settled on his lap, the rest of the mutt's body splayed across the black Naugahyde couch. "We'll go out in a few minutes, Greaser. But first we gotta make a call." Extinguishing his second smoke of the morning, he picked up the phone. "Johnny D, good morning."

"Jack…."

"Remember that arrangement we talked about." It wasn't a question. "Well, today's the day."

"I'm on it."

"Make sure you get there before four, 'cause we don't want a *revolución* on our hands." He pronounced the word in a mock Spanish accent.

"I'm on it."

Jack drained the beer in two long chugs and sprang from the couch, and Greaser took that as her cue to bolt to the front door and tug at her leash on the knob. Pulling it from her jaws, he stuffed it into his pocket and stepped outside and gazed toward the horizon. Looking past the bullet-pocked stop sign at the end of the dirt street, he could see lens-shaped clouds capping the craggy brown mountains across the border in Sonora. Between him and those mountains sat the eighty acres of land he inherited from Uncle Buck. Greaser scampered to the parked vehicle in the driveway, an SUV displaying the words *Tonto County Sheriff Department.* "Not today, pooch," he muttered under his breath. "It's my day off."

Jack's land sat a few miles north of the border, a rectangle half a mile long and a quarter mile wide. It was a valuable piece of land, as its northern boundary was defined by the federally funded aqueduct completed in the 1950s, which by the original grandfather clause meant Jack paid only pennies on the dollar for irrigation. An unbiased observer might have raised an eyebrow in seeing Jack qualify for the clause, but the deal was assured with the right paperwork, all written up legal and endorsed by the county judge, who happened to be the brother of Buck. And Jack's dad.

When he was alive, his uncle grew cotton, and Jack, not knowing one crop from another, decided not to bother with switching 'cause if it ain't

broke don't fix it. But cotton drinks a lot of water and is the most labor-intensive crop in the Southwest. Thanks to the federal government and the aqueduct, the water part was solved, but to make even more money, he needed to drastically cut his labor costs.

As Greaser squatted by his patrol car to pee, Jack phoned his foreman. "Diego, mi amigo," (those were two of the dozen Spanish words he knew) "you don't have to do the afternoon pickup today. I'll drive the bus myself."

"How come, boss? You want me to drive tomorrow?" His tone was worried, as if he might be cut back or fired.

"Yeah, you'll drive again, but I ought to keep familiar with the whole operation, you know, a little hands on. Don't worry 'cause I'll even pay you. I'm feeling that nice." Jack gave him the title of foreman, and paid him a dollar an hour more than he paid his pickers, but gave Diego no authority (Diego wouldn't have wanted it, in any case). He also used him as an occasional translator.

Almost jovially, Diego said, "Thanks, boss. Then when will I see you work a whole day picking cotton?"

"That's funny. Heart trouble runs in the family, you know."

Diego knew. Sheriff Buck collapsed in court, just after leaving the witness stand, where he told a pack of lies. Inside knowledge comes easy when you're a part-time chaplain in the county jail, part-time substitute in the town's only middle school, and part-time driver for Jack. Six days a week he drove for the boss, transporting twenty migrant farmworkers four miles to and from their barracks twice a day, in an old prison bus Jack acquired cheap on auction. The original security bars were still on the windows, and the old lettering, *Tonto County Prisoner Transport,* was scrubbed off, but could still be made out through its faded white paint. Jack had once calculated that if the fields were two and a half miles from the farmhouses, it would be more cost effective to scrap the bus and let them walk.

Diego also knew that Jack owned the barracks that housed the workers, a dilapidated row of five units, each a solitary room containing four twin matrasses, a card table, and a sink. They were serviced by two concrete outhouses on the other side of the dirt parking lot; one of them was labelled *Señoras*, but hadn't seen a woman in years.

One more year to make twenty, Jack counted the days until he could quit with a pension. He used to love being a sheriff's deputy, but as he neared retirement, patrol work was getting on his nerves, and lately he was fretting

that a streak of bad luck might be due, the kind that could throw a wrench in his retirement plans, or worse. Every cop receives anonymous threats, but the most recent one arrived as a text message on his personal phone. It came from a burner, in Spanish. Sure, he stretched the truth a bit on the witness stand, but didn't all cops, at one time or another? Most of those he arrested were guilty anyways, so he was just expediting justice, saving the taxpayers money. At least he didn't have a wife or kids to think of. Greaser was enough, and she never talked back or made selfish demands.

Lacking the intellect of his father and the ambition of his uncle, Jack was content to run the farm with a view to expansion. For rent, he charged a hundred dollars up front; then for the rest of the season, he docked it from the farmworkers' pay. Today was the last day of the season, the final harvest, and payday. For a few brief moments he wondered what plans the pickers had made to tide them over till their next job, but his thoughts quickly shifted to his own plans. He thought of changing crops. Maybe switch from cotton to broccoli or lettuce, swap to green to make the green. He thought that was clever and expanded the idea to getting a license to grow weed. But that's an expensive hassle, and besides, even if it was legal these days, growing weed out in the open was risky. Too many thieves taking advantage of other people's work.

Jack's phone rang and it was Johnny D, his friend and fellow law enforcement officer, though he wore a different uniform. "We'll be heading out within the hour, just in case you want to assist, Jack."

"That's really funny, JD, really funny. But I may just happen to drive by, like I'm on duty and stumble into the fracas. Don't bother calling the Sheriff's Department for backup. Okay?"

"I'm still on it, Jack. And don't forget the tip."

"Ain't it me giving you the tip?"

"Now it's you being funny."

On Saturdays, the mood of the workers was more upbeat. A few might sing as in a chain gang, but never in the heat of high noon, when the sun appeared small and almost white, and nearer to the ground floated the undulating waves that played tricks with eyes. A restful Sunday would follow, where some would nurse a hangover, all would relax, and many would contact their families. Every second Saturday was payday, and Jack would give each of them seven hundred dollars cash, eight hundred minus the rent. Today was the last payday of the season, and they were expecting the full eight hundred. That was the deal Diego translated at the outset, and

tomorrow it would be time to move on.

They finished right on schedule at four, all in a good mood and most looking forward to a stop at the beer store before spending their last night at the barracks. Leaning on the fenceposts, waiting for the bus, the men laughed and joked. They did not seem bothered by the blazing heat, nor the sight of the two turkey vultures pecking at a carcass a few fenceposts along the dirt road. A pair of crows sat on a nearby wire, patiently watching their larger and stupider cousins crouching over their find.

The exhausted farmworkers, artificially energized with anticipation of money, beer, and a day off, had no way of knowing that earlier that day Jack had called Diego at his school and told him he could have the evening off with pay. A few of the older men stopped chatting as they glanced at their watches and scanned the horizon. The mood began to shift.

It was half past four before all of the men fell silent, and it wasn't until the approaching blue-and-white SUVs were a quarter mile outside of the vultures that some of the workers even saw them. The birds scattered as the vehicles drew closer, about the same time the roofs lit up their flashing lights. One minute later from the opposite direction came another two SUVs, escorting a shiny new prison bus, its tiny passenger windows displaying prison bars bolted on the outside. It was painted white and had the words *US Customs and Immigration Enforcement* stenciled on each side. For the last fifty yards until they stopped on either side of the men, the ICE SUVs blared their sirens, then went silent as the vehicles came to a stop.

From the lead vehicle escorting the bus, Johnny stepped out of the front passenger seat and spoke through a megaphone. In Spanish, he told them to remain where they were, put their hands on the wire between the fenceposts, and not to make any quick moves. "You will be searched and handcuffed. Then you will form a single line to board the bus. You will then be driven to the detention center, where you will go through the intake procedures. If we receive no problems from you, then you will receive no problems from us."

The other officers, twelve in all, each with a sidearm and body armor, exited their vehicles. Eight approached the men to be searched and cuffed while the rest stood around brandishing shotguns. Not one of the workers flinched, let alone tried to escape. Half of them had been through this before, and always on a payday.

As the bus full of prisoners slowly started its way down the dusty road to the highway, it was escorted by three of the ICE cruisers. Seeing the

bus start to move, Jack pulled up alongside the sole remaining vehicle with its lone occupant. He kept the engine in idle to run the air conditioner, because Greaser was in the backseat. Jack turned to Johnny and smiled as each man rolled down his window. “Look at all those bags of cotton that need to get processed into bales.”

“Don’t worry, it won’t spoil. Can’t eat cotton.”

“Ain’t that the truth. I think I’ll grow something else next season. Too much labor and hassle with this crop. Overhead’s killing me.” Jack tossed a brown envelope through the open windows. “There’s your two grand, Johnny. Pleasure doing business with you.”

“Just doing my job, Jack.”

Driving home, Jack stopped at his farmhouses and saw the old bus by the outhouses where Diego parked it this morning. It occurred to him that the workers’ personal belongings were probably still in the rooms, but it was unlikely there was anything of value. For sure, there would be no money, certainly not any real money. Probably just dirty laundry and sentimental knickknacks like crosses and photographs. No matter, he’d mention it to Diego and see if he wanted to rummage, take what he wanted, maybe pay him a few dollars to clean it up for the next season. He probably wouldn’t hire as many field hands, maybe none at all, in which case he wouldn’t have to bring Diego back. *He’s a good worker*, thought Jack, and maybe he ought to give him a small bonus for this season. After all, with Johnny’s cut he still saved fourteen grand on the payroll.

He stayed in his car and picked up the phone. “Diego, mi amigo. Got some bad news.”

“I heard. All arrested. But you’ll get some more help. I’m sure of it.”

“I’m not thinking about me, Amigo. You want to get a beer or something?”

“Can I take a rain check? I’ve got a hot date.”

“Enjoy yourself, Amigo. I’ll see you soon.”

Sitting on his front porch with Greaser, Jack popped open a Corona 24 and lit a cigarette. He felt satisfied and happy. He was looking forward to patrol tomorrow, the first time in a long time that he had felt that way. Maybe it was the beer. It was the second tall one he opened since chatting with Diego. His eyes gazed unfocused toward the mountains in Sonora, and just as a rare sentimental feeling came over him, he saw Diego pull up on his motorbike.

Jack waved. “I thought you had a hot date?”

"She stood me up."

"A familiar story."

They sat on the porch drinking beer, Diego from a quart of Coors Light. "You know, Diego," Jack said, "this is the greatest country on God's green earth, you know that?"

"Well, maybe not for everyone. But for some, yes." A few sirens could be heard in the distance, getting fainter as they raced toward their target. Black smoke was billowing from the direction of the farmhouses and the parked bus. "Look at that. I wonder what's on fire?"

"Looks like about where the farmhouses are at," Jack said. "It wouldn't be the end of the world if they burned down. A little hassle, maybe, but they're over insured. I might take a loss on the bus, though." Jack felt the beer buzz kicking in. "Just another day in Tonto County."

"That's stupido, Gringo."

"How so, Amigo?"

"I know this is Tonto County."

JASON RYBERG
THE SUDDEN APPEARANCE OF GIUSSEPPE, THE BILLY GOAT

And here's Giusseppe, the billy goat,
just now marauding his way onto the scene:
horn'd brow set in permanent hung-over scowl
above a fiercely territorial boogan glare,
mouth mechanically masticating on a clump of grass
like it was a big, fat wad of chaw;
a low-hanging storm cloud of pissy indignation
and simmering violence slowly cutting a broad swath
through the gossiping gaggle of chickens,
indifferent to their idiot jibber-jab
and their blustering bully-boy
alpha-rooster chaperones, as well
(shiiiiiit, those prissy, puffed-up pea brains
wouldn't even dream in their deepest,
most recessed rooster dreams

(cont)

about taking a shot at him) for he is
the one, true and rightful king
of this little bump of a hill
on this little farm just outside Salina, KS.
Out of some genetic sense of reverence
and respect, no doubt,
one is automatically moved
to cover the family jewels
whenever he passes.

Ryberg

LYDIA DISTEFANO THIEL
SOMETHING FROM AN OLD MOVIE

I place an ad for a garage sale in the local newspaper, and I wait for customers. A man with white hair and suspenders walks up my driveway and studies a box of old record albums sitting on one of the tables in front. He pulls out of his shirt pocket a brand-new harmonica. *It cost $100*, he says, proudly, as he shakes it. He hums. *What would you like to hear*?

Play something from an old movie, I say. *Play "As Time Goes By."* He plays. It is 1941 in Casablanca. Rick Blaine walks into *Rick's Café Américain* and sees his former lover Ilsa sitting at a table. *Of all the gin joints in all the towns in all the world, she walks into mine*, he murmurs. She turns to the piano player: *Play it, Sam*. Immediately Sam infuses the café with the ageless tune of timeless love. Rick and Ilsa belong to "the same old story" of which Sam sings, their Paris, their love. They now find their way back to each other for a moment. The Nazis and the anti-Nazis spill onto the screen with guns and glares. Rick and Ilsa part again.

People begin to gather in the garage as they pore over boxes of used books and photos of foreign places. The man with the harmonica looks over at me. He waits. *Play "Edelweiss,"* I say. He nods. It is late 1930s Austria. The somber Captain von Trapp faces his fellow Austrians—and a few non-Austrians—as the Nazis prepare to take over their homeland. He is onstage set to sing "Edelweiss" before his waiting audience. He begins. He falters. Von Trapp can't finish the song. I want to lift the captain's lowered head so that he can sing loudly about the "clean and white" flower of his country. I

can't. His beloved Maria watches the captain and boldly walks onto the stage and lends him her voice. They exit the stage and outsmart the Nazis.
I turn as an excited customer brings me an old photo of *La Scala*, the famous opera house in Milan. Will I take $5 for it? But I start to hear something sad from a showgirl named Lola Lola. *Do you know "Falling in Love Again"?* I ask of the musician, who stops to shake the harmonica once more. He seems a bit unsure. I help. I hum. He plays. It is 1929, and the elderly Professor Emmanuel Rath enters a German cabaret called *The Blue Angel*, where the voluptuous Lola Lola sings and dances, flashing her thighs and garters. Her song tells of one who suffers from love. *What am I to do*? sings the lady with the sultry voice. *I can't help it.* The tormented professor, in love with the lady, succumbs. He loses the lady. He loses himself.

I never had much luck with women, interrupts the man with the harmonica. *All my wives died*. He coaxes the handy harmonica back into his pocket, adjusts his suspenders, and saunters down the driveway onto the street. Customers still move in boxed time in the garage, gallantly. I hear the piano player. I see the stage. I walk into the smoky cabaret.

MARION DEUTSCHE COHEN
THE COLORS OF EVERYTHING

One of the students has synesthesia and is proud of and happy about it. What color is 3? we ask her. Green, she says. Yes, we agree, 3 is green and what color is 4? Yellow.

And not only numbers. Love? we ask. Pink, she answers, and so do we. And God? Some of us are believers, some not, but we all know God's color is light-blue like the sky.

In other words, the whole class has synesthesia. Maybe we're not as good at it as the student who bona fide has it but we're good. Proud and happy too.

Cohen

ANNE BOWER
COSTUMED TIME

Time's costume drapes me in delicate folds I try to admire

Testament to babies held on my hips,
armloads of groceries,
rambles over Manhattan's concrete
and tree-lined country dirt roads,
years of slicing, chopping, stewing,
meal after meal, alone or for others,
pastures to fence, goats to milk, hay bales and
barn cleaning,
all the books I've carried, all those papers
graded, students delighted or scornful as I
handed back their efforts,
the research, and how many hours
at some device, writing, rewriting?

And dear wrinkles, let's not forget
garden rows weeded, peas and beans picked,
the touch of lovers, smoothing woes away,
insects biting, my fingers scratching, scratching,
sting of an electric fence,
velvet nudge of donkey's nose,
heat of bonfire, snow's silk,
misery of north wind in winter,
kiss of spring's first mud on bare feet,
and all over you, my warbling, crinkling cover—
age spots and freckles and ropey raised veins,
small webs of spidery blue capillaries,
scars from kitchen knives, surgeons, falls
brocading this fabric of skin.

Bower

TERRY SANVILLE

CROSSING THE CHANNEL

Something bumped his leg. Not hard, more of a nudge than anything. But it sent a jolt through his body. Julio scanned the ocean around him. Nothing. He treaded water, tried to slow his breathing, and instinctively reached for his cell in the rear pocket of his jeans. Stupid. The phone, his wallet, keys and jeans had disappeared into the deep, resting somewhere on the bottom of the Santa Barbara Channel.

A gibbous moon lit the surface. Julio shuddered and checked his watch: 2:21. A strong wind out of the northwest white-capped the Pacific. For the umpteenth time a wave smacked him in the face and he swallowed water, gasping. *Gotta keep moving, if the sharks don't eat me first.*

Miles away, coastal lights bobbed in and out of view. Julio aimed for a bright spot he thought should be State Street and Stearn's Wharf. But a strong crosscurrent tried to pull him down the coast. He gritted his teeth. His arms felt like concrete but he kept them clearing the water, pulling the sea toward and past him, his legs kicking a steady cadence.

He'd been in the water for over four hours. The thought of how he got there sent a chill through him and he increased his strokes, trying to channel the anger at being abandoned to that slow death, one of his own making.

***

Julio lived with his aging parents on Santa Barbara's West Side, at the start of Calle Poniente, just off West Valerio Street. The Alvarez family had owned the tiny two-bedroom house since the seventies. His father, a welder, worked construction. His mother staffed the parish office at San Roque Catholic Church. But while his older brothers had moved on, now with families and white-collar careers, Julio had never left, never found the right thing to do nor the right woman—until Sonia slid into his life four months before.

She sat on the end barstool at Tully's, stared at the muted TV and sipped something dark from a short glass, no ice. Julio gave her space, sat two stools away and ordered a beer. The afternoon crowd hadn't arrived yet and the silence heightened the tension. *I've gotta say something, but what? Pick-up lines are so phony. What's she doing in this dive anyway?*

"What's wrong? You're wrinkling your face. Do I smell bad or something?" The woman had spun on her stool and stared at him.

"No…you smell…good." *Jeez, that's all ya got?*

"Mind if I join you? Or would you rather keep checking me out from a distance?"

"Sorry. Don't get many hot…ah…beautiful women in Tully's."

The bartender glared at him and shook his head, as if signaling Julio that his chances with this woman were slim.

She grinned and fingered her long auburn hair that cascaded over smooth brown shoulders onto a curvaceous front. "I'm Sonia, and you're?"

"Julio."

"So Julio, what's your thing?" She sat on the stool next to him and laid a hand on his bare arm.

"My thing?"

"Yes, ya know, what're you about? Are you married? Do you like girls?"

"Jeez, you get right to the point. I just got off work, no I'm not married, and yes.…"

"Yes, what?"

"Yes, I like…ah…women."

"Good, thanks for being specific. So what do you do?"

"I help crew a sport fishing boat outta Santa Barbara Harbor."

"Yeah, you smell a little like yellowfin."

Julio laughed. "Hey, you wanted to move close."

"Still do."

"So you know fishing?"

"My parents owned a grocery in Montecito…high-class place. Pop bought fish from the locals. I learned from him."

"Huh. I've only been crewing for a few years. Haven't found what I want to.…"

"Neither have I. But along the way, I've collected an ex and a ten-year-old son. I'm waiting to pick him up from Judo lessons."

"You don't look that old."

Sonia leaned back and laughed. "And just how old do you think I am?"

Julio grinned. "Even a dumb seadog knows not to answer that one."

"Smart man, very smart."

"So what do you do…besides being a mother?"

"I'm a part-time paralegal in the DA's office, work with prosecutors and attorneys."

"Huh."

"You haven't had any run-ins with the law, have you?"

"Never been arrested."

"Not what I asked," Sonia said, "but close enough. So where do you live?"

"I live…live *con mi madre y padre en Calle Poniente*."

"Sorry, my parents never taught me Spanish. Shame on them."

"Mine neither. I took it in high school."

"I didn't know working stiffs could afford living in Santa Barbara. I can barely make it. My son and I are crammed into an above-the-garage apartment on Chino."

"Yes, the good ole West Side…until the gangs started.…"

Sonia scowled. "We see cases from Milpas and the West Side."

The couple talked for an hour, giving the abridged versions of their lives. Then Sonia left to pick up her son, but not before handing Julio her number and address.

"I'm usually here Wednesdays and Fridays about this time. But text me and we can go someplace classier than this.…"

The bartender frowned. She laughed and kissed Julio on the cheek. He watched her pass through the swinging doors, her form-fitting jeaned butt swaying, heels clattering on the tiles. The afternoon sun through the doors flashed him in the face and he raised a hand to block the glare.

***

Julio rolled onto his back and kicked. Waves broke over his face. He sputtered and shook saltwater from his eyes. A ray of light washed across the surface near him. He tread water and searched the surrounding sea for a ship. *Maybe the skipper sent a Mayday, if he's still alive. Maybe CG or the Harbor Patrol dispatched rescue craft. But why would they? Nobody except Sonia knew about our trip to the island. Nobody would think to look.* The black sea remained empty.

Again, the light ray lit the water close to where he swam. It came from a point several hundred yards ahead. He pulled toward it, praying it wasn't an illusion. As he grew close the silhouette of a small buoy rose from the sea. He swam alongside, reached up and grabbed the single handle. With leaden arms, he pulled with all his might, blowing hard, and hauled himself out of the water.

He huddled against the buoy's superstructure. Nearby, sea lions barked, their domed heads bobbing on the surface. *Those bastards want their resting place back. Well, it's mine…for now.* The cold March air numbed his shirtless and pantless body. He shoved his hands into his boxer shorts, seeking warmth. Found none. *Worse outta the water than in …hypothermia…won't make it 'til dawn.* He tried to rest his muscles but they cramped, the pain agonizing.

Far out in the channel the blinking lights of a helicopter moved eastward, paralleling the islands. Julio watched it disappear in the coastal fog then reappear having reversed its course. *Maybe someone is looking for us, but who…and why?*

He checked his watch: 4:05, at least three hours until sunup. Pushing himself to his feet, he dove into the ocean. The wind slacked off. Wisps of fog drifted landward, the shoreline still miles away. But he kept swimming toward the lights, his body finding its natural rhythm. He tried to think about Sonia, about what they had planned. Memories of the events onboard the *Gypsy Too* did battle with those of beautiful Sonia. She won.

***

Julio hated texting; his thumbs way too big to make it work. So he phoned Sonia the night after their hour at Tully's. He had rehearsed what he would talk about, had topics all picked out, snappy patter, stories from his life where he'd sanded off all the rough spots and polished the good ones. But all the preparation had depressed him. *She's smart, works with smart people. Why would she be interested in a college dropout, a deck hand?*

Her phone rang but she didn't answer. Julio hung up without leaving a message. In a few seconds his phone buzzed.

"Was that you, Julio?"

She sounded anxious, mildly angry.

"Yes. Did I catch you at a bad time?"

"Sort of. I'm helping Robby with his homework. Talk about frustrating. Do you know what fifth-grade math is like?"

"Only that I hated it when I was in fifth grade."

"Yeah, welcome to the club."

He sucked in a deep breath. "So I was thinking, maybe we could…could…ah–"

"–go out? That's great. Tuesday afternoon works for me. I can leave Robby with my sister…unless you have to work."

"No, no. Business is slow. So.…"

The silence lengthened and Julio's face grew hot. Talking on the phone proved only slightly better than texting, and he sucked at both.

"Julio, are you there?"

"Yes."

"Why don't you pick me up at three at Tully's? Do you have a car?"

"My father's old clunker, ugly but reliable."

"Okay, I'll see ya then. Bye."

"Bye."

Julio wondered why he felt so awkward trying to talk with people

without seeing them, as if their voices became detached from real bodies, creating something alien. He needed to see people to gauge their reaction. Without that face-to-face connection, conversation felt like…like writing: clumsy, inadequate, and impossible to master.

But their Tuesday afternoon date went great. She wore a revealing tank top, fancy jeans, had washed her hair and applied makeup perfectly. He drove the battered Nissan up San Marcos Pass Highway, then east along Camino Cielo. High above the city, they parked at a turnout that overlooked the Santa Barbara Channel. Islands poked out of the sea, dark mountaintops against a clear sky.

They talked until the sun perched just above the horizon. A cold wind buffeted the car. Sonia leaned toward him. They kissed, a light kiss that grew in intensity. Goose bumps on her bare arms and shoulders made him wonder if they were caused by the kiss or the cold.

"Here," he murmured, "let me start her up and turn on the heat."

"You already have."

They kissed and touched until darkness closed in. Driving downslope toward sparkling city lights, they remained quiet. Finally, Julio managed the question he'd been unable to ask.

"So…so why me? I'm a fisherman…no money…uneducated…not, ya know, handsome."

Sonia sat up in her seat and stared straight ahead. The silence extended and Julio felt stupid for asking.

Finally, she turned to him and smiled. "I'm looking for…for a kind person…who's not scared off by my past."

"I…I can be that…and more."

"Good."

Sonia nuzzled his neck and he nearly drove off the road into a bottomless canyon. They ate dinner at the Enterprise Fish Company on State Street, each paying for their own meal. He dropped her off early, but with a promise to see her at Tully's and go out the following week.

They spent their fourth Tuesday afternoon and those following at the Emerald Sands Motel. The head-scarfed woman behind the counter glared at Julio every time he checked in, but still took his money. Their second-floor room overlooked the pool.

"You sure you can afford this?" Sonia had asked.

"No, but we don't have much choice. I'd like to rent an apartment just for us, and eventually your boy, if it works out. But.…"

"Yes, I know. Your parents can't handle me sharing your bedroom. And I can't take you home. Robby knows something's going on but he's not

ready for a live-in boyfriend."

"We'd have to soundproof your bedroom."

"What bedroom? I sleep on a murphy bed in the living room. My son's got the bedroom."

"Aren't you a good mom."

"Yeah, and a poor one."

Julio sighed. "I need to find a job that pays."

"You don't have any rich uncles do ya? Some shady characters with lots of cash?"

Julio grinned, "Not a one. My brothers are doing well, but they're on the East Coast. They wouldn't give me money. They think I'm a screw-up."

"If we pool our dollars, we might be able to find a place big enough for the three of us."

"Yeah, but where?"

"You're right. I know gals at the office that commute from Lompoc."

"A sixty-mile one-way commute? No thanks."

They had stopped talking, slipped into each other's arms and made love. He hoped the feeling would blot out the apparent hopelessness of their situation. They rose and showered, found a little Cajun joint near the downtown Art Museum, and ate dinner in silence. Finally, Sonia came to the rescue.

"Look, I'll talk with people at work. Maybe they know of some miracle place—some wealthy widow with a guesthouse. We can figure this out. Others have done it."

"But in Santa Barbara?"

Before taking her home, Julio drove to the Marina and they strolled the beach next to the pier at Stearn's Wharf.

"I love this place," Julio murmured. "Where else could a person be satisfied once they've lived here?"

"Yeah. And I know you love your work. I saw you once, sailing into the channel, standing at the stern of the *Gypsy Too*."

"When?"

"A few days back. I lunch sometimes next to the pier, watch seabirds with my binoculars. It's cold in the winter but I have the beach to myself."

Julio shuddered. "You should have waved."

"I did."

"Sorry, my mind sometimes drifts when I'm on the water."

***

The wind finally died. The sea glowed like a dull mirror. A textured swath drifted no more than a hundred yards in front of Julio. He swam toward

it. Something tickled his feet. Rubbery stems and leaves entangled one arm and he struggled to free himself. The thick bull kelp rolled with the swells. But even though it made swimming tough going, Julio smiled. *Can't be far offshore now. Once through this crap, it should be a straight shot.*

A fish, probably an anchovy, nibbled at a toe and he jerked his leg. Shifting to a shallow breaststroke, he pushed forward, sliding over the surface so thick with kelp that it felt like a swaying raft beneath him. Something big nudged his stomach and he kicked harder, knowing that leopard sharks patrolled the kelp forests.

With the sea flattened, he could just make out a necklace of streetlights stretching along Cabrillo Boulevard. The light at the end of the breakwater flashed a welcome. The city of Santa Barbara rolled away from him, climbed the lower flanks of the Santa Ynez Mountains and faded into fog.

Having passed over the kelp, he treaded water and checked his watch, just an hour before dawn. But with every breath, a hot poker of pain jabbed him in the side. *I must have banged myself real good diving over the rail. Maybe I cracked some ribs. Take it easy…don't want to spoil landfall now that I'm close.*

***

On Tuesday morning, Garrison had phoned Julio. "Hey, can you crew tonight?"

Julio had worked with him for six months, liked the skipper and trusted his sea knowledge and ability to find fish for clients. "I…I'm usually with my, ah, girlfriend until about nine."

"Good, 'cause I won't need ya 'til then."

"What's the job? I thought we didn't do night runs."

"This is special…and there's money in it for ya."

"How much?"

"Five grand."

"FIVE GRAND! What the hell's goin' on, skipper?"

"A simple run to Prisoners Harbor. You in or should I call Frank?"

"I'm in. I'll come by the boat dock right after nine."

"See ya then."

Julio earned less than five grand a month, sometimes half that. But nobody fished at night. And why go to Santa Cruz Island? He hadn't pushed the skipper for details, knowing another crewmember would jump at the chance.

That evening, he lay in Sonia's arms, half-awake after lovemaking that got better each time.

"So where do ya wanna eat dinner?" he asked, yawning.

"I'm thinking that Mexican place on State, across from the Fox Theater."

"Sounds good. But I gotta get you back a little early."

An exaggerated pout spread across Sonia's face. "Why? You got another girlfriend waiting. You're not gonna be much good after an afternoon with me."

Julio laughed. "You got that right." He reached for her and they kissed. "I got this job that pays well. Can't pass it up."

"At night? Really? What's going on?"

"I don't know. Just that we're goin' to Prisoners Harbor."

"Sounds ominous."

"You know where that is?"

Sonia jabbed him in the ribs. "You forget, I've been around. Used to dream about living on Santa Cruz Island with a handsome ranger."

Julio chuckled. "Well, that leaves me out."

"Cut it out. Handsome is overrated." Sonia rolled onto her side and stared into his face. "I'm worried about you going out at night. When will you be back?"

"Don't know. This whole job is…is kinda squirrelly…and the skipper won't tell me anything."

"Can I call you?"

"Cell service is hit-and-miss. But please try."

"I will."

Later that night Julio met Garrison at the boat harbor. The skipper seemed jumpy. They walked toward the slip where the *Gypsy Too* rested quietly. A man walked out of the shadows and joined them at the locked gate. Garrison tapped out the entrance code and the gate buzzed open.

He turned to Julio. "You go with this guy and do what he says."

"What's goin' on, skip?"

"Just do it."

Julio followed the small man to the back of a nondescript pickup. The man pulled a tarp back to expose a wooden crate about the size of a footlocker.

"You lift," he said. His appearance and voice sounded Asian.

Julio yanked the crate to the edge of the pickup's bed.

"Be careful. Don't damage it," the man muttered.

With a heave, Julio lifted the crate to his shoulders, staggered, and followed the man to the boat. Garrison pointed to a spot near the wheelhouse

and he lowered it slowly. The skipper covered it with a canvas.

"Okay, cast off," Garrison ordered.

Julio scrambled to loosen the lines from the cleats. The passenger stared at him, stone-faced. The boat's engine rumbled as they backed from their slip and turned toward the harbor entrance, barely moving with no running lights. Once past the breakwater, they cruised at trolling speed for a while before opening her up and charging through the choppy sea, heading due south toward a slightly blacker patch of sky.

In less than two hours they entered Prisoners Harbor, lights off, engine barely turning over. No lights shown from the shoreline or nearby campground. As they neared the end of the pier, something flashed twice. Garrison brought the *Gypsy Too* alongside. Two men, one dressed in a suit, clambered aboard and the skipper brought the boat about and headed back the way they came.

That's it? We pick up two dudes, probably illegals, and head back? What the hell's goin' on and why are they paying big bucks for such a simple job? And why bring the crate out here, unless….

The man in the suit immediately went to the crate and muttered something in a language Julio couldn't understand. One of the Asians pried open the lid and Mr. Suit knelt and inspected its contents. Grinning, he joined the skipper in the wheelhouse while the other two buttoned up the crate and stood guard. They stared at Julio, unsmiling. He returned the favor.

He retreated to a spot near the portside rail where the wheelhouse sheltered him from the wind. The boat picked up speed, crashing through the waves. The Asians squatted on the deck and muttered to themselves. Every few minutes one would rush to the rail and vomit over the side.

After less than an hour, the boat slowed to a stop. Loud voices erupted from inside the wheelhouse, then gunfire and a scream. The two Asians bolted to their feet. The wheelhouse door slid open. Mr. Suit stepped out, raised a pistol and pointed it at Julio, who turned and vaulted into the sea, smacking his ribs against the rail on the way down.

He dove deep and swam away from the boat until his lungs felt like bursting. He surfaced slowly. Loud voices filled the night, then flashes of gunfire. Bullets zipped through the water near him and he dove, circled in a different direction, came up for air then dove again.

When he surfaced, light-headed from lack of oxygen, the *Gypsy Too* had gone to full throttle and charged through the water in a northeast direction, toward the Port of Ventura or some other SoCal port. Julio breathed a sigh of relief, then realized that his death had only been postponed. A glow bathed the Santa Barbara coastline while Santa Cruz Island stood

invisible in the dark, out there somewhere with few people to help.

Julio turned northward and swam toward the light.

***

He flipped once again onto his back and kicked. Every movement hurt. The iron taste in his mouth wouldn't go away. He couldn't suck in enough air. Rolling onto his side, he tried side-stroking and scissor-kicking his way forward. He found his left side worked best. Santa Barbara's shoreline lights grew closer at an agonizingly slow rate.

His breathing worsened with yellow-centered dark spots floating before his eyes. The harbor lay quiet under the lights, ribbons of silver wriggling across its glassy surface. Julio swam toward the small beach at the end of the breakwater that guarded the marina's entrance, knowing he couldn't make it to the shore farther on.

His feet dragged bottom. He crawled across the wet sand and flopped onto the beach. His harsh breathing destroyed the night's quiet. He pulled himself to a cluster of rocks and propped himself up, leaning forward. The heavens changed from black to charcoal gray, then to gray. The sun rose in a clear sky, the light blinding. He wiped his mouth. His hand came away bloody.

On the wide walkway that topped the breakwater a figure approached, fading in and out of focus. Julio forced his arm into the air, opened his mouth and cried, "Help."

The figure ran toward him. He could make out slacks and a jacket. The person scrambled across the rocks and approached. Long auburn hair cascaded down her front. Sonia knelt by his side, but not before Julio noticed the eagle-crested golden badge clipped to her belt. He opened his mouth to speak, his eyes wide.

"Don't talk. Don't say anything," Sonia said.

"Liar," he whispered.

Others arrived. He stared out to sea, his mind reeling as his vision blurred then faded to black.

***

The story broke while Julio lay recovering from a punctured lung in a private room at Santa Barbara's Cottage Hospital. Channel 3 News and the News Press covered it. The FBI had tracked the suspicious activities of a local boat captain, Garrison Slade. An unnamed field agent working undercover learned that Slade was making a late-night run to Santa Cruz Island. The Coast Guard and FBI intercepted the *Gypsy Too* near Port Hueneme. Taken into custody were three North Korean nationals and Captain Slade, who sustained a gunshot wound. Agents discovered a crate

that contained the prototype of a missile guidance system that had been reported stolen from Rantec Corporation. An unnamed member of the boat's crew escaped the armed thieves and swam ashore.

One afternoon, a week into his hospital stay, two Feds in suits visited Julio, pulling him from the haze of pain meds and an overheated room. The three North Koreans and Captain Slade had been jailed. The Feds wanted him to testify at an upcoming hearing, with the assurance that he wouldn't be charged or implicated in the crimes. One more taut string of tension loosened. But others wouldn't relax.

The whole story seemed unreal to Julio. He had fallen in love with an undercover FBI agent who used him. All their talk about living together, lovemaking, their shared life stories—was any of that true?

He spent three weeks in the hospital followed by three months recovering at home, being smothered by his mom's attentions and gaining weight from eating her Mexican cooking. He often fingered his new cell phone and thought about calling Sonia. But his anger with her lies and deceptions held him back. Finally, he phoned. But the number he entered was no longer in service. Just as well. His anger needed to fade even more before they talked—if they ever talked again.

On a hot August afternoon Julio walked down West Valerio Street and through the Harding School neighborhood to Tully's. The bartender nodded, then went to the wall phone and punched some numbers. Julio slipped onto a stool, his first time back. The memories of Sonia flooded his mind. He ordered a beer and stared at the muted TV, a baseball game between two teams he didn't care about. The minutes flowed by like thick lava.

"You still smell a little like yellowfin."

At the sound of her voice he turned and glared.

She frowned. "Okay, okay. You have every right to be pissed."

"Was any of us, ya know, real? Or was I just a part of your job?"

"Come on, let's blow this place. We've got to talk."

Outside, they climbed into Sonia's Camry, drove in silence to Leadbetter Beach, and parked under swaying palms. The Channel Islands filled the horizon, their ridgelines sharp against the clear sky.

"So do you want to start? Or should I?"

Julio stared at his folded hands and remained silent.

"Okay, look. I couldn't tell you anything. We'd been tracking Slade for a long time and knew something hinky was going on, and–"

"I don't care about any of that crap. Answer my question. Was any of us…real?"

Sonia stared into his eyes while blinking back tears. "Yes…yes it

was all real…except–"

"Except what? The part where we fell in love?"

"Ah come on, Julio. You know I can't fake that. But I'm not exactly poor. I do have a son, Robby, who takes Judo lessons. But we don't live on Chino Street."

"So, are you married? Were you lying about that?"

"No, I have an ex…but I got the house in the divorce. It's in…Hope Ranch."

Julio felt his jaw drop. "So we made love all those afternoons at a cheesy motel while you lived in a mansion by the sea?"

"The…the place was built in the 1920s. It's hardly palatial, but…but I think you'll like it."

Julio raised his head. Sonia leaned over and kissed him. "I'm so so sorry. I almost died when we finally intercepted the *Gypsy Too* and you weren't aboard. How the hell did you survive?"

"I…I thought a lot about you."

Sonia smiled and moved closer. His body stiffened when she tried to embrace him. He felt his anger flare and burn hot.

"But I was mad at myself, being so stupid going after a quick buck. It kept me fighting the waves. Then I finally make it to shore only to find that you're a…a fake."

The silence built. Sonia bowed her head. Her shoulders shook in soundless sobs. Julio stared across the channel to the islands, remembered the hours in the water and his last moments on the beach. *Fixing this feels as hard as that long swim.*

They sat without speaking. She stopped crying. His anger cooled, replaced by awkwardness, almost as bad as the first time they met. Sonia blew her nose and tried to smile, her makeup destroyed.

"So…do you want to see me again?" she whispered.

Julio shuddered and sat up in his seat. "I…I usually hang out at Tully's on Wednesday and Friday afternoons."

"Huh. That's when my son takes Judo lessons."

"So…so I'll see ya here…and we'll see what happens."

JOAN COLBY
THE PEOPLE WITHOUT HOMES

The woman says homeless should not be an adjective

The disinherited invade the park.
The tent city by the river.
Protect your propane heaters, friends.
A loose pit bull grins and wags.

People here are sleeping
All day to stay warm.
They have nothing else.
The drugs kick in.

A body floats below the dam.
The coroner finds the sex in bloat.
People with trouble are too overwhelmed
For grief. Numb as an icy hand.

People sleep in the library
Reading room. Big windows overlook
The river where bald eagles feed.
A woman in a chiffon skirt

And filthy parka brandishes a sign
Ride needed to Sioux City.
Today the Lutherans promise pancakes
The Baptists hard-boiled eggs.

MICHAEL WASHBURN
THE IMPOSSIBLE EVENT

We fought our way through the crowds in the heat. In the hazy yellow-brown streets around the famous museum, guys sold Cokes from trunks full of ice, but you had to wait so long under the leering, spiteful sun,

was all real…except–"

"Except what? The part where we fell in love?"

"Ah come on, Julio. You know I can't fake that. But I'm not exactly poor. I do have a son, Robby, who takes Judo lessons. But we don't live on Chino Street."

"So, are you married? Were you lying about that?"

"No, I have an ex…but I got the house in the divorce. It's in…Hope Ranch."

Julio felt his jaw drop. "So we made love all those afternoons at a cheesy motel while you lived in a mansion by the sea?"

"The…the place was built in the 1920s. It's hardly palatial, but…but I think you'll like it."

Julio raised his head. Sonia leaned over and kissed him. "I'm so so sorry. I almost died when we finally intercepted the *Gypsy Too* and you weren't aboard. How the hell did you survive?"

"I…I thought a lot about you."

Sonia smiled and moved closer. His body stiffened when she tried to embrace him. He felt his anger flare and burn hot.

"But I was mad at myself, being so stupid going after a quick buck. It kept me fighting the waves. Then I finally make it to shore only to find that you're a…a fake."

The silence built. Sonia bowed her head. Her shoulders shook in soundless sobs. Julio stared across the channel to the islands, remembered the hours in the water and his last moments on the beach. *Fixing this feels as hard as that long swim.*

They sat without speaking. She stopped crying. His anger cooled, replaced by awkwardness, almost as bad as the first time they met. Sonia blew her nose and tried to smile, her makeup destroyed.

"So…do you want to see me again?" she whispered.

Julio shuddered and sat up in his seat. "I…I usually hang out at Tully's on Wednesday and Friday afternoons."

"Huh. That's when my son takes Judo lessons."

"So…so I'll see ya here…and we'll see what happens."

JOAN COLBY
THE PEOPLE WITHOUT HOMES

The woman says homeless should not be an adjective

The disinherited invade the park.
The tent city by the river.
Protect your propane heaters, friends.
A loose pit bull grins and wags.

People here are sleeping
All day to stay warm.
They have nothing else.
The drugs kick in.

A body floats below the dam.
The coroner finds the sex in bloat.
People with trouble are too overwhelmed
For grief. Numb as an icy hand.

People sleep in the library
Reading room. Big windows overlook
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"I only lost one of my vouchers, once, and it wasn't my fault," Matt replied.

"I've never lost anything. Don't project Matt onto me," Piper put in.

"Never mind. Let's think about tonight. A lot of the clubs around here are owned by U.S. chains. You guys want to hang out in an authentic Parisian café tonight?"

During the cab ride to the hotel, I'd spotted a place that piqued my curiosity. They'd never have found it on their own, but it was a place I thought we could all appreciate and it was within walking distance of the hotel. The idea proved an easy sell for both of my friends.

"Are we gonna connect with Andy later?" Piper wanted to know as a girl with long golden hair, in a black chemise and a scarlet dress that stopped just above her knees, brought drinks to our table.

"He's hanging with those two kids from South Africa and probably getting some action right now," Matt said.

I made a point of getting our check before we could really get ripped, lest the remaining two-thirds of the day should turn into a streaming surreal misadventure. We took a cab to the hotel, a plain two-story building three blocks north of the Champs-Élysées, where we showered and put on fresh clothes and downed mouthwash. Matt didn't look quite so off-putting when he pushed his coils of dark hair back behind his ears and got them to stay put. As for Piper, he had a crew cut and a physique women often noticed. His T-shirt, which he'd slid down behind his gleaming square belt buckle, stressed that figure nicely. He made me think of a Marine with a tender side.

We filed out of the hotel into the warm evening, and my friends followed me the three and a half blocks to the café. It was a bit like the place we'd been earlier, but longer and wider, and with framed photos of Sartre, Genet, Cocteau, Simenon, and writers I have to admit I didn't recognize, lounging in cafés and scribbling away or just looking pensive. Also, the bar was an island protruding from the back of the place with chairs on three sides. Though this place had the capacity to serve a good thirty to forty people, I guessed that as the night wore on, they'd move the tables and chairs from the front area to make room for dancing. There were beautiful women at the bar and a few of the tables.

We got ourselves a table and began drinking aggressively. I was wondering how to tell them that I knew a writer here in the city and they were welcome to come with me to his flat and they might actually enjoy it. If they were looking for an antidote, an opposing experience to the pre-packaged tourist crap, this could be their ticket. So what if they'd told me in the past that literature, and my beloved Dostoyevsky, were irrelevant to the

present age. That the writer I knew, Gérard Drumont, might be too busy to entertain us didn't enter my mind at all.

Pretty soon, we'd gotten a nice buzz and I was entertaining my friends with an account of a Lovecraft tale, "The Music of Erich Zann," which is about a man who's been trying in vain to track down the Rue D'Auseil. The protagonist has been on this street himself and has witnessed amazing events there, but the street is not on any map of the city and he looks for it in vain.

"Oh man, I can't wait to hit the streets tomorrow. Check out neighborhoods and streets that people who've lived here their whole lives don't know jack about," Piper said.

"Yeah, don't let me drink too much, 'cause I don't want to be bedridden all day. I want to get out there and explore and get lots of pictures to take back. And I'll show 'em to people and they won't be able to guess where I was," Matt said.

Matt got us a fresh round. We drank and laughed and talked over a couple of hours, until I happened to notice someone get up from one of the stools at the bar at walk toward the exit. This left a vacancy right beside an exceptionally attractive woman with straight dark hair and smooth pale skin. I had the oddest feeling. It was like I'd seen her years before, on a nude beach or someplace where it was legal to be naked. But where could that have been? The sense that I wouldn't have blanked on her identity if I hadn't gotten so wasted already made my frustration acute.

The woman didn't seem to mind when I slid onto the stool next to hers. I ordered another drink, fidgeted, stared at my hands, expecting the man who'd been sitting here before to come back. Then I made the leap.

"Excusez-moi madame, mais je crois que tu ressembles à une actrice que je connais très bien."

She turned to me, with a playful indulgent look, and then she passed judgment on my spoken French by responding in English.

"Don't tell me I remind you of Sharon Stone," she said.

That would have been provocative indeed. The version of *Basic Instinct* that showed at Cannes and in European theaters offered an even more explicit look at Sharon Stone than what American audiences got to see. Already this stranger had anticipated a good many things about me and our exchange was off to an awkward start.

"Ah, no. And please forgive my accent. I was actually thinking of a French actress, Élodie Bouchez. An exquisitely lovely woman."

This brought a smile to the stranger's face, but there was something guarded in her look, making me think maybe I'd dropped the effort to talk in

French so abruptly that I came across as a dirtbag who'll try anything once. And this lady's hair wasn't even the same color as Sharon Stone's. Did we Americans all have Sharon Stone on the brain?

"Well I'm not really very familiar with Élodie Bouchez and as far as I know, she's known mainly for her TV roles," the woman said.

I could have crawled back to my friends' table and hidden underneath it in humiliation, but for the smile that spread now over this stranger's smooth features.

"She's in films too and I think some of them are quite good."

"Oh, so your judgment is so much superior to mine, then."

"No, I didn't say—"

"Perhaps you should express yourself in French, little boy. You're quite eloquent."

I let this facetious quip pass.

"All of this was just a roundabout way of saying I think you're extremely beautiful. If I've made the wrong impression and I've offended you, then let me pay for your drink and leave you alone."

Up to this point, her smiles had not revealed any teeth, but now her lips parted to reveal two exquisite unstained rows. Acutely conscious of every little thing I did, I gaped like an idiot at her beauty.

"It's getting noisy in here," she said, before picking herself up and gliding toward the street, still clutching her mixed drink. Perhaps I shouldn't have followed her.

As I passed by the table where I'd left Matt and Piper, I took in their backs as they stood talking to a trio of young women from one of the nearby tables. When the woman and I stepped outside, a bracingly cool wind swept over us. Still with our drinks in hand, we crossed the street and stood on the modest hill at a fence with a wide flat rail, looking down toward the Champs-Élysées and the river. I'd barely set my drink down on the rail when a man moving up the street behind us asked me in a gauche, West Coast surfer dude voice for a light. When I shook my head, he muttered something under his breath and proceeded up the street.

Only now did it occur to me to ask this young woman her name.

"Mathilda May."

Mathilda May. Here was none other than a woman I'd watched on a screen ten years before, in the summer of 1985, in Tobe Hooper's space opera *Lifeforce*. During most of her screen time, she parades around completely nude. That experience left me stunned and I did what boys that age do. More recently, during my visit to the Vendée in the summer of 1992, I'd entered a little shop in the square of an ancient village and her smooth, voluptuous

features made an irrepressible appeal to my mind and soul from the cover of a film and television magazine. I bought the magazine, carried it around in my backpack, and took it out at odd moments, feeling on some level that to see those deep brown eyes, that knowing smile, threw up a bulwark in my mind against any suggestion that I wasn't using my time in France well. Now, to my stupefaction, an absolutely impossible event was unfolding.

"Mathilda, the first thing I want to say is—"

"You're my number one fan?"

"God, no. I wish you wouldn't judge all of us by what a few people do, it's exactly the kind of logic we're never supposed to use—I'm sorry, I don't know how I got started on this. Does everyone in your family have eyes like yours? You're beautiful. Exquisite."

"Why would you express yourself this way to someone you just met?"

"I can't help it," I gushed, thinking she'd like this answer.

"Or maybe you think this is what you're expected to say. A real panty-dropper, is that what you say back home?" she asked, in a voice so neutral she could have been an automaton.

"Oh, no. I'm saying this because it's my honest reaction, is that so"—I almost said *fucking* but my tongue leap-frogged the word just in time—"hard to believe?"

"No, I suppose not. And you're not nearly as drunk as some of the men who've approached me this summer."

"Well, look. A lot of men do summon to mind a phrase of Duchamp's, or an equivalent of it, in the presence of a Frenchwoman. *Elle a chaud au cul.* I'm not hiding from the truth. But then there are people who are genuinely interested in culture. And I daresay the Louvre gets more customers on an average day than your sex emporia."

I didn't want to be talking about polarizing stuff right now, but I thought I'd just be insulting her while proving her point if I dodged the topic.

"I know, I know, they go to see the *Mona Lisa*. This 'culture' that they're after isn't always even French. It's here and it's come to define us but it's not something we made. It's all just part of the tourist apparatus," she said.

"I know, I know. At least I'm not lying to you, Mathilda. And some Americans do like the fact that Europeans have a more relaxed attitude about sexuality. Like people in Quebec. I'm sure you know what they call Montreal. The Paris of North America."

I was flailing now and it was pathetic. But I hoped that having addressed her concerns, I could seize a chance to steer the conversation

another way and ask about her parents, her siblings, her loves, how she took her coffee in the morning, *anything*—

She laughed. It was about as expected as a sniper's bullet.

"This is what so many of you think. Come to Paris where we know about living and we are so refreshingly without a Puritan attitude about sensuality. 'Take a Walk on the Wild Side,' right? Enjoy all the deviant pursuits. And that's France. I take it you've never read François Mauriac?"

"Not recently," I fumbled. My preferred answer when I didn't wish to lie or add to my humiliation.

"Are your parents in church every Sunday, like my parents?"

"Well, they haven't been quite so good about it lately. I'm curious about your parents. And I'm not just saying that to 'build a rapport' with you—"

"You're really not just trying to get into my pants? Really?"

"Please, Mathilda. Please. 'Take a Walk on the Wild Side'—let me tell you how much I hate Lou Reed. Let me tell you what I'm really into."

"Look, I really think you're trying to impress upon me, without stating it in so many words, that you're not like a lot of Americans who'd come on to me in these circumstances. You're smarter and more cultured and you're here in Paris for a reason. Is that about right?"

Her words sounded cruel but her look wasn't without mirth.

"Well, you know, I did recognize a few of the writers on the walls in the café back there. Not all of them, of course."

"Did you recognize Pierre Louÿs?"

"No."

"Have you read *La Femme et le Pantin*?"

"No. I could've lied and said I read it years ago and forgot about it."

"More false modesty. Do you know what the title means?"

"Of course. The woman and the puppet."

"How can I describe this novel to you? It's about a woman who turns out to be exactly what she appeared to everyone except the narrator. I suppose you'd call it a 'quintessentially French' novel for its whimsical and bittersweet romance."

"So what happens?"

"I don't want to ruin it. What can I compare it to? Have you read John Le Carré?"

"Sure. *The Spy Who Came In From the Cold*."

"That's exactly the book I was thinking of. At the start, some of the characters observe a terrible phenomenon from a distance. Then at the end, they're internal participants in the same kind of thing they witnessed from

afar."

"That's terribly abstract. I don't follow."

"I couldn't tell you more without spoiling it. Just understand, you couldn't find two novels more different in style and tone and sensibility, but they have this narrative twist in common."

"Tell me the end. I don't mind."

A flutter of motion several dozen yards off in the night caught the star's attention. A man with thick dark hair in a leather jacket and faded jeans approached. Obviously, they knew each other well and he was glad to see her, but not so thrilled at my presence. He struck me as a drug-dealing lowlife. She couldn't possibly want him to be her man.

"If it's any consolation, don't think that I'm awfully impressed with most of the French men I meet," she said.

I quickly reached into my handbag, took out a paperback copy of Camus, tore out one of the nearly blank back pages, scribbled my name and the name and phone number of the hotel on it, and handed it to her. With a deft movement she thrust the paper into a pocket without looking at it and walked off. If I'd called out, I would have interrupted the conversation already underway with the man in the black jacket.

But nothing could blunt the sense of having caught this amazing woman at a transitional time in her extraordinary life, a moment of sublime openness. This gave me a bracing feeling that evoked my sense of awe on seeing that pale face peering out from the magazine cover years before, but the thrill was fiercer than anything I'd felt before. That guy in the leather jacket was nothing and nobody. Mathilda May was going to call me.

Piper appeared beside me, clutching a half-full glass of merlot.

"Matt's got *so* much to talk about with people," he said.

"Is Matt getting it on with those girls?"

"They got kind of annoyed at us. They said they're so fucking sick of American tourists."

I didn't care. I'd met Mathilda May, at what I took to be a transitional time in her personal life, and my own life would never be remotely the same.

We went back inside. It turned out the two girls Matt and Piper had been talking to were both British and they wanted to go clubbing. So we did. I got really drunk and danced awkwardly and threw up a couple of times in a stall of the club where we spent most of the night, a place with music (early '80s pop) you could have listened to anywhere on the planet. I think Matt was the only one who had a good time, thanks to Sharon Stone-esque grinding performed against him on the dance floor.

The next morning, after we'd downed gallons of water in our hotel

room, I persuaded my friends to come with me to visit Drumont after lunch. The writer lived on a residential, pleasantly shady street in the 18th *arrondissement*, at a nice remove from the crowds. When I rang the buzzer outside, an elderly female voice ushered our little party inside. The sharp odors of newly waxed floors greeted us as we climbed two flights amid noises from military shows beloved of patriotic octogenarians.

When the pale green door on the third floor parted from its frame, the face that greeted us beneath fluffs of white hair looked every bit that of a retired professor, with lines from having pored and brooded over millions of pages. The man seemed startled that I'd brought two friends. But he let us into the airy space where the beige paper covers of hundreds of Gallimard editions stood jammed together on shelves. The white of Folio editions and the multicolored friezes of dozens of *Livres de Poche* checkered the monotony of the more respected imprint. Here on these shelves were dozens of authors I admired and many more whose names didn't ring a bell. Manuscripts bound with clips or rubber bands also took up room here.

Once we were inside, he was as polite and mild-mannered as I remembered him being on the phone. For the benefit of my friends, Drumont kindly switched over to his halting English. He didn't introduce us to his wife, but invited us to sit down on a couch across from the desk where he wrote. Gazing at us across the desk, Drumont asked a number of questions of me, mostly about my tastes in literature and music. Then he asked which of his works we liked the best, studying our faces with interest. I named one of his early novels, *Le Corbeau*, along with his most recent, *Les Collines Rouges*, newly released stateside in translation.

My friends badly wanted him to elaborate on his work, but clearly to Drumont that was impossible without their having at least read this or that. To Drumont, it was sad. Here were children of men and women who'd nurtured hopes for them and spent vast amounts of money for them to pass through educational structures developed over millennia.

Yet Drumont was indulgent. He was more than happy to turn the floor over to my friends and allow them to talk about their studies. He seemed mildly taken aback at their delay in responding. Then Matt blurted that pop music was "growing up" faster than most people realized. Just look at bands like R.E.M., The Smashing Pumpkins, The Cure.

Drumont looked at me searchingly. Now Matt spoke up, saying that Drumont's importance was something surely anyone could recognize and it was magnificent, it was awesome, that people gave Drumont credit where it was due. Now the author stopped fiddling with the pen on his desk and sat there staring at my friend, as if he couldn't engage with Matt's words enough

even to feel puzzlement. I know I should have seized control but I was briefly so transfixed with Drumont's look that I couldn't speak.

Piper asked the host whether this was not, in fact, one of the few cities where people became so immersed in what they read that they allowed a writer to become a forceful, immediate physical presence, where the public appreciated literature's ability to capture extremes of brutality, as Hemingway had done in his depictions of bullfighting, mud, gore, and death. It was clear from Piper's look that he thought his equation of the writer's role with slam-dancing was the cleverest thing anyone had ever come up with, but above all its value was that Drumont must instantly relate to it. At this point, Drumont grew visibly bewildered, lowering his face toward the pen clutched in his wizened fingers and reverting to French. We barely heard anything he was murmuring as he sat there with a pained look.

Drumont rubbed his tired eyes, made a V with his hands, and sat there propping up his ancient head on the desk. His wife came bustling out of one of the smaller rooms at the back, took his wizened left forearm in her hands, and seemed to be feeling his pulse for a moment. She whispered in his ear, then gave us a look suggesting we didn't want to know what she was thinking.

In my mediocre French, I told Drumont that my friends hadn't meant to be rude or to project a certain defiance with regard to their cultural tastes. They were just trying to make conversation in the ways they know how. I told him I could be a pupil, a mentee, a disciple. Perhaps he could share his insights into one of the authors whose work graced his shelves. Lots of Americans have heard of Camus and Sartre and Saint-Exupéry, and some of them have even read those guys, but I was particularly curious about Pierre Louÿs, I told him.

With another sigh, Drumont gazed in resignation across the desk. *La Femme et le Pantin* is a novel with contemporary resonance, he explained. Perhaps we had heard the saying that a man chases a woman until she catches him. It is as true as ever. The woman of the novel's title, Concita Pérez, lures strange men into a scheme to keep the guy she's actually interested in, André Stévenol, after her. She talks and flirts and even seduces men in the presence of that one genuine love interest, so as to keep his passions high and act as a catalyst to a cycle of perpetual pursuit. If Concita Pérez should happen to talk to you, poor stupid American, the worst mistake you can make is to think she might actually like you. It's all a ruse. Just possibly, I'd run into a woman like her, Drumont said. Perhaps I already had. It might even be a woman with a super-rich paramour who puts on airs, tries to look bohemian, in his efforts to keep her interest.

Drumont's look grew indulgent, even a bit whimsical, as he finished this account, but it was clear his wife wanted us to leave now.

When we hit the quiet street once again, humiliation worked on our faces almost like sulfuric acid. I thought our cheeks and eyes would dribble away and run into the gutter, or they might dash my brains out against the white stone of the buildings we ambled past. I felt so small and humble, so pitiful, as we made our way through the bright hot streets back toward the crowds.

JOSEPH HOPE
DIGGING OUR WAY BACK TO EDEN

"There are more underneath the surface,
Go in gently with your fingers, you will find more corms &
a lot of things beneath that soil," she said

Striking into the soil with the harvesting rod.
It went through as if I had struck at space/air.
When she said "a lot of things," I think she meant

Mini-kingdoms, homes, worlds or other dimensions entirely,
that interact but don't know about our existence.
Digging. digging.

Digging is not our thing, but like everyone now,
we've been unlike ourself lately.
Now! We can't breathe fresh air or go out of the door

without a second thought: a sharp image
of the micro-Malian prince, waiting at the next bend to
jump under our pants or gloves—

Very unlike us: having a harmless handshake
with the ever-civil neighbor, means death in virology. Virology: *a sum of what can kill a man with the speed of a panic*—layman's definition.

Don't dare touch me!
Not even with my own hands—
I'm as pure as that now—I'm very unlike me. (cont)

"Don't go deeper," my mother said. "Cocoyam don't thrive at such depths.
At such feets, you only find roots, searching & thrusting
their way to anything that's food to them. *Just as they are to us*

and we're to others, my mother added, as she gathered them into a basket.

As markets remained indefinitely closed
'til's nothing again to fear. Or no enough people
to make a crowd. People have resolved into archaic

means—unusual people taking
up hoes & spades
revisiting their long-forgotten gardens.

Long-forgotten promise to till the earth &
get bread for their tables by mastering
the psalm of the soil. Inside their gardens,

I see men break ranks like insects: kneeling, turning
the soil over and over again. Putting what they found
inside their women's empty or halfway full baskets.

Right now if the satellite could take a picture of us
from above, and the picture published
in a magazine 10 years from now,

The caption would read:
When people dug their way back to Eden

Hope

DAWN (CRICKET) REYNOLDS PETTIT
THE HIGHMORE CIRCLE

So here it was I first found myself, not in some meaningful exploration you read about on one of those trendy blogs but in a small musty room at the local community center. I must admit I was nervous. My best friend, Chloe, had convinced me to enroll in this "support" group. Chloe thought it would be a great place to pick up guys. It turns out the support

group was for women only, which she secretly knew but hid in a way only she could.

"Hey," she said one day while enjoying my last blueberry muffin, "I just read about this great support group at the center. You go and bitch about how screwed up your life is because your mom died, and they all agree because they're in the same boat."

I wasn't really listening—I was watching the way her mouth curved in a funny shape when she said *c* words. It was one of those weird things in life that twenty minutes later you totally forget, but it seems mesmerizing as hell at the time.

"Gracie? Are you listening to me?"

"What?"

"Hello? It's a great place to pick up guys." Chloe had a way of turning any event into a possible dating-game adventure.

"Why would a support group be a great place to pick up guys?"

"Because they're there to lean on someone, and that someone could be you."

"Why would I want a guy who is looking for some emotional crutch? I have enough problems of my own. Plus, Les and I just broke up."

"You broke up six months ago. And it's still my belief that…."

"Yes, I know. That Les was a closet homosexual just looking for a mother figure to take care of him."

"He did dress *really* well." Chloe thought any man who didn't wear white socks and sandals dressed well. And any man who dressed well must be gay. She definitely had her own take on the world, which was one of the reasons I loved her so much.

"Why do I need a support group anyway? I get enough support with you hanging around," I said, watching her reaction. She loved it when I acknowledged that she was my own personal Freud.

"It's a group that deals with parental loss. And since your mom.…"

"My mom died twenty years ago. I'd be pretty pathetic if I needed support after all these years."

"We're all screwed up in our own way. This just gives you an excuse to be cray-cray. I think it will help you as you approach being a mother yourself."

"I haven't had sex in six months. Unless I'm reinventing immaculate conception, being a mother is the furthest thing from my mind."

"Okay," she said, looking at me with a level of intensity I hadn't seen since our high school prom when we caught my date, Fred Johnson, enjoying some solo action in the parking lot. "This is how I see it. Since your last

birthday, which I know I'm not allowed to acknowledge, I've noticed that you talk more and more about how many years you have left. Life isn't a waiting game, sweetie. We roll with it and make the most of it. But you're not even doing that. You need to talk to someone besides me, Gracie. Plus, since you're a town resident, it only costs ten bucks. You can't even pick up a *Cosmo* and a cappuccino for that. Go—it'll do you good."

"I'll think about it," I said, hoping the subject would change quickly.

"Better think fast. I already signed you up. Group sessions are every Tuesday and Friday from six to eight, starting this week." She smiled that slightly off-center smile, and I could see in her eyes she was proud of herself. Chloe had won again, like she always did.

"Why Friday nights? Don't they think I have a life?" I tried to sound offended, but we both knew my life was severely lacking. No dates. No pets. Not even any good chick flicks on my DVR. An exciting Friday night for me was *People* magazine hitting my mailbox a day early.

"Since I'm guessing," she said, tucking her auburn hair behind her ears, "that was a rhetorical question, I will be looking forward to a full report tomorrow night. I've gotta run. Rick will be home soon. It's Monday night. You know what that means." Chloe and her husband, Rick, had "private time" (as she called it) every Monday night, just like clockwork. They never missed a session. How romantic.

"Don't you ever get tired of the same old routine?" I tried to sound disgusted, but at least Chloe was getting some action on a regular basis.

"Every once in a while, we vary things."

"Like what?"

"Like who gets the beer afterward. Honestly, the routine does get a bit old, but we're not like we used to be. Remember those days with Les? Oh yeah, you probably don't because…."

"He was not gay!"

"How many times did you guys actually do it?"

"A lot in the beginning, until he realized *Dancing with the Stars* was on two nights a week."

"With a name like Lester, you're bound to be a geek, a serial killer, or into some serious deviant stuff."

"That's an awful thing to say. Blame it on his parents, not on him. Just because his name is Lester doesn't make him anything."

"Besides a loser for breaking up with you. What was his reason again?"

"He needed space to see life for himself."

"See life? He's an optometrist, for God's sake. If he were a

proctologist, he still couldn't find his head up his ass."

"Maybe I still love him."

"You never loved him, Gracie. You were used to him. He's like an old pair of shoes. You've stepped in dog crap and everything else in them, but you still keep them around because they're comfortable. Just go tomorrow night to this group thing, and you'll be amazed at how much better things look, even in this rinky-dink town."

Chloe smiled at me, and I felt like crying—not because I knew she was right but because there was something *so* right in her words that the pain of the words lingered heavy on my heart.

"Okay," I said. "I'll call you tomorrow."

"Now give me a hug and knock 'em dead tomorrow night. Well, don't do that. That's what sent you there in the first place. Let me know about the guys. Bet there's a slew of them there."

So here I sat in a musty community center room, waiting patiently for the beginning of my new life. I was early, like always.

"Hello." The voice startled me. I had been watching the second-hand tick on my watch when she walked in. I was even more surprised when I lifted my head to see her, although I'm not sure what I was even expecting to see.

"Hi, I'm Gracie." I hated the way I said my name. It sounded like I was blowing vowels out of my nose.

"I'm Gloria, but you can call me Ginger."

"Uh, okay. Which side of the imaginary couch are you on?" I smiled, and she stared blankly at me. No response. "Are you here as part of the group or as the ringleader?"

"Oh," she replied nervously. "I'm part of the group. I wasn't sure what you meant. My brain doesn't always move too fast."

"What do you do?" I asked, trying to enter a safer playing field.

"As a job or in general?"

"Either." I glanced down at my watch again. Not even close to six. God help me.

"I'm a dominatrix."

"You're shitting me." Had I really just said that out loud?

"Why would I be shitting you?"

Yep. I'd really said it. "I'm sorry. It's just that I've never met a dominatrix, and no offense, but you don't look like one, or at least what I thought one would look like." It was the truth. She was at least five foot ten and had long brown hair, which was knotted in a tight ponytail at the base of her neck. She wore catlike glasses and no makeup. Her turtleneck hung

loosely past her waist. Looking at her closely, I could see nothing exceptional about her.

"I've heard that before. But it's what I do. I even have my own business card." She began digging in her purse, rummaging through things that made clanking noises. I couldn't help but wonder if handcuffs were somewhere in her goody bag. She handed me her card.

I read the slogan printed on the card aloud. "'Let me whip you up some fun. Guaranteed to hurt so good or your money back!' Well, that really says it all, doesn't it?" I was trying not to let my disgust show on my face. Somewhere in the world, I thought Gloria Steinem had probably just thrown up.

"Business really picked up after my cards went into circulation."

"I bet." I looked closer at her card. In the photo her hair hung loosely over her bare breasts. She wore black leather pants and stiletto heels and was biting down on a whip. She was stunning in the picture, wearing makeup and blue sapphire contacts in place of glasses. "Well, Gloria.…"

"It's Ginger. It was my mother's name, and since she went away, I decided to start using it."

"I thought this was a support group for people whose mothers had died?"

"Yeah, she died. I like 'went away' instead of 'died.' You know, 'died' sounds so permanent."

"I know what you mean." My eyes caught hers, and for a minute I completely understood. "How did she die, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Decapitated."

"Excuse me?"

Ginger slowly repeated the word. "Decapitated."

"Jesus. Sorry." What was there left to say? I had critiqued her career and gotten her to admit that her mother had died because of loss of her head. I was really making friends now. There was a moment of awkward silence, and then she spoke again.

"I had to identify her body. It was so hard—you know, with her not having it all, well, connected. But nobody else was going to do it, so it had to be me."

Just as I was about to say something even less comforting, another victim walked in the room. She was short and stocky. Her eyes were chestnut brown and her clothes tight. She was misty-eyed with a blotchy face—a bit too rosy for makeup or a natural glow. She had probably been sitting in her car crying. Her eyes met mine, and she smiled slightly.

"Hi," I said.

"Uh…." She said nothing else.

"My name is Gracie, and this is.…" Wait, why was I introducing Ginger? What the hell? Any girl who could whip people for a living had to have the ability to introduce herself.

"I'm Ginger."

"My name is Sarah, and my mother is dead." She began to cry. Huge tears slowly made their way down her face like a stream etching out a mountain. Silence permeated the room.

Then a fourth woman entered. She glided into the room like she owned it. She was confident and held her head high. I couldn't take my eyes off her. She was breathtaking. Blonde hair cascaded down her back, accentuating her tan skin. She was lean and muscular, filling out her clothes like a model. And then it hit me. Even beautiful people have parents who die.

"Sorry. Am I late?" she asked.

I smiled and shook my head.

Two other women walked in and took their seats. I looked around the circle. Six strangers sat there with seemingly only one thing in common, a connection none of us wanted to have.

"Good evening. How's everyone?" I watched her walk into the room as she spoke. She commanded the space, her presence taking ownership of the circle. I noticed her long arms, out of proportion compared to the rest of her body, and wondered how many people she had wrapped them around in order to bring comfort. "My name is Dr. Gretchen Love. I hold a PhD in psychology with a specialization in bereavement counseling. It is my pleasure to serve you for the next six weeks and hopefully beyond that." She gave each of us a quick glance and then took a deep breath and continued. "We will start promptly at six, and I will provide coffee, water, and tissue."

Listening to her, I wanted desperately to escape to the comforts of anywhere but here. Maybe my mom had been gone too long for me to feel like the rest of these women. I did not belong here and resolved to wait out the two hours and then kiss room 26 goodbye. My wound was not fresh. It was old and beyond scarred. I had made my peace with God and everyone else for taking my mom. There was nothing left for anyone to do for me.

My attention drifted back to Dr. Gretchen, who was still talking. "For the next six weeks, I will be your guide.…"

Why do we need a guide? I thought. *It's not like an African safari. "And on your left, you will see the ghost of your dead mother approaching ever so softly right behind the wild boar."*

Suddenly and without warning, Sarah began to sob loudly. I grabbed the box of tissues and motioned it toward her. She nodded her head and from

the depths of her bag pulled out her own box and buried her face in it.

Dr. Gretchen continued her monologue. “First of all, I want you to know that we are in this together. No one here is alone. I am available to you when you need me.” She pulled business cards from her pocket like a good magician’s trick and handed them out.

I took mine and carefully placed it on my lap. There was something about business cards with this group. I had already collected two, one from a dominatrix and the other from a shrink. *For a good time, call me, and to figure out why you needed that good time, call me.*

“Now, who’d like to start?”

The words that came out were a surprise even to me. “My name is Gracie, and my mom died from cancer when I was fourteen. Not the quick kind—the long, drawn-out, suffering kind that stole everything from her except her last breath. That she took on her own terms.” My memories suddenly came rushing back. All the years of my self-recovery mysteriously evaporated, and I felt like a lonely and frightened girl again.

The beautiful blonde spoke. “My name is Ellie Bradshaw, and my mother died in a car accident last year. And my dad”—she trailed off for a moment—“died two months later from a heart attack.” Why was she really here in this musty community center? She had money or came from money or maybe both. She could have afforded any therapist in the world, and yet here she sat next to me.

“I think I’m gonna be sick.” Sarah barely got the words out before a tidal wave of vomit erupted from her mouth.

I jumped up as the splash of vomit hit the floor and then my body. The circle quickly lost its shape. As I stood trying to assess the damage, the door flew open, and in someone ran. His foot hit the vomit, and he grabbed me for support. We both fell to the floor, him on top of me and me in the pool of vomit. I opened my eyes to see him staring back at me.

“Jack!” Ellie said. “What are you doing?”

He looked up. “Sorry, sis. I thought something was wrong.”

“It’s wrong you’re on top of Gracie. How about *dismounting* her?”

He rolled off of me, managing to miss the cesspool I was swimming in. I lay there with both my arms outstretched, not sure what to do next. He reached for my hand to help me up. The more he tried to pull me up, the more I slithered around in the vomit. Most of my body was now covered in it. I finally managed my way out of the puddle.

“Hey, look, a puke angel!” Ginger declared, pointing to the place my body had just occupied.

“Well, considering the circumstances, maybe we should call it a

night and pick up where we left off on Friday?" Dr. Gretchen suggested. Relieved faces stared back at her, especially my own.

"Are you okay?" Jack asked me.

I nodded, not making eye contact with him.

"I need to clean up a bit," he said, wiping his hands on his shorts. I looked down at myself, knowing I had to do the same.

I made my way to the pool locker room. I removed my wet clothes, replacing them with a dry hoodie and sweats I found in the locker room lost and found. I rinsed my hair in the sink and blotted it with a pool towel. I never looked at myself in the mirror, afraid of what would be looking back at me.

As I exited the locker room, Ellie stood waiting for me, holding my jacket. "This one belongs to you, right? It was the only one left on the hook."

"Thanks."

Ellie slipped on her Stella McCartney jacket. It fit her perfectly, unlike mine. I always felt embarrassed by my body, always wanting to be taller or thinner or flatter, always wanting to be something I wasn't.

"Do you live far from here?" Ellie asked.

We had made our way down the hall. The smell of chlorine and sweat hung heavy in the air. The community center was nothing more than an old glorified gym.

"Just a few blocks. You?"

"Actually…." She stopped and turned so she could look at me. "Jack and I need to decide what to do about my parents' home, so I'm staying here for now, but I live in New York."

"Where's your parents' house?"

"Hillside Estates. Are you familiar with it?"

Was I familiar with it? Could I spell m-o-n-e-y? Hell yes, I was familiar with it. Hillside Estates was one of those places we called the Gates. Our little place on the map was filled with the Gates—places you couldn't get into without permission or an invitation. The Gates was a not-so-invisible reminder of the division of classes, of rank, of importance. "That's in Westminster, right?" I said.

"Yes. It's a lovely home, very nice amenities." She sounded like a Realtor. We began walking again. Ellie suddenly called out to her brother. "Jack, you obviously met her earlier since you fell on top of her, but I'd like for you to officially meet Gracie."

"Nice to meet you, Gracie."

I had been so shocked when he landed on top of me that I had barely registered him as human. But now as I really looked at him, he was more

than real to me. He was unbelievable. I had never seen anyone that good-looking in person before.

His blond hair was tucked under a baseball cap he wore backward. He was clean-shaven, with the hint of a five o'clock shadow around his chin. He towered above me, but that was never hard for anyone taller than five feet four. His white teeth glistened through his parted lips, and I felt my stomach flip. I noticed a small bead of sweat dancing above his lip and fought the urge to touch it. I had been a sucker for jocks in high school—well, one in particular, and that had ended about as well as my first group session. I knew I didn't stand a chance with this jock, but that didn't stop me from wanting to taste the sweat lingering on his lip.

"Sorry," said Ellie. "That's my cell ringing. Would you please excuse me?" In my heated frenzy, I hadn't even heard her cell phone ringing. She quietly stepped out the door, and alone we stood in the middle of the community center. And for me, the world stopped completely.

Jack's crystal-blue eyes looked me over slowly, and every hair on my body stood up. All he needed to do was breathe my name, and I would have stripped myself naked for him. "You look good wet," he said, leaning into me closer. He smiled at me, and I felt a surge rush between my legs. And I was pretty sure it was more than leftover vomit remnants causing that sensation.

"You think?"

His eyes flickered slightly. Just as he opened his mouth to speak, the banging of the outer door broke his train of thought. We both turned to see Ellie.

"That was Bruce. His flight is delayed, so he won't be getting into O'Hare until after midnight. Would you please?"

"Yes. I'll drive you there later. I know how you feel about fighting airport traffic. This is what I get for being an older brother."

"You're older?"

His piercing eyes caught mine again. "We're twins, but I'm one minute and thirty seconds older than El. That gives me seniority rights."

I laughed.

"Gracie, we'll walk you out," Ellie offered.

In another situation, I would have taken their politeness to be insincere and fake, but they seemed to be the real deal, straight out of a good Gates upbringing. At the entrance, Jack pushed open the old metal door for us.

The cool autumn wind tugged at me as my hair tossed carelessly in the night. I knew it wouldn't be long before winter settled in. I noticed that

ours were the only cars left in the north parking lot.

"I'm guessing the Honda is yours?" Ellie stood by her car, waiting for Jack to get me safely to mine.

"Yes. Good night, Ellie. See you on Friday."

I watched her drive away. "What does Ellie do?" I asked, turning back to Jack, whose eyes were on me.

"She's a buyer—works a lot of the runways in New York." He was leaning against my car now, adjusting the zipper on his pullover fleece. I wanted to reach up, grab the zipper, and pull him to me, but instead I kept my hands to my side, trying not to be distracted by my thoughts.

"Aren't you cold?" I motioned to his shorts, which stopped just above his knees.

"Me? No. You?" He touched his fingertips to the tip of my nose, red from the chilly air. I rested my elbow on the car and my head in the palm of my hand, allowing the car to support my weight. It was also a way to keep my hands to myself as the urge to run them all over his body became overwhelming. I was freezing but wasn't about to admit it.

"Are you this concerned about everyone you meet?" I asked. I wasn't even sure what I was saying exactly; words were running from my mouth without my brain's permission.

"Just the ones I lie on top of."

My body temperature rose at least ten degrees, and just as I was about to offer up a response, Jack's phone chirped.

He reached into his pocket and studied the text message. His tone of voice quickly changed. "I've got to run. See you around?"

I fumbled for my keys, stunned at how fast our conversation was ending. "See ya."

He grabbed the door as I was opening it, allowing me room to get in. Our fingers touched, and I felt a shot of electricity run through my body. Nestled behind the steering wheel, I was closing the door when he spoke again.

"Oh, and Gracie?" He leaned in his head, just inches from my face. I could feel his breath on my cheek. "I'm sorry for your loss. Drive safe." The door shut, and away he walked.

Driving from the parking lot, I studied his car through my rearview mirror until I turned the corner and could no longer see him. "I'm sorry for your loss." I repeated his words over and over the rest of the night. It wasn't until much later that I realized I hadn't even said the same thing back to him, being so lost in him and his words that no words of my own would come.

And no matter how much I tried to convince myself that this boy

would never go for a girl like me, I could still feel the warmth of his breath on my cheek, and suddenly, the possibility didn't seem so far beyond my reach after all.

MARY WARREN FOULK
URBAN EVENING

The world will end at 5:00 p.m.
Now, it's just five minutes to.

The young woman weaves
through a West Village crowd,
past the men holding hands, past
the teenagers catcalling from a stoop.

She stops (at least a minute)
to pick tulips from a stranger's
sidewalk garden. She ruffles the ears
of a barking dachshund.

Her pace quickens as she nears
the corner bar where her brother
is waiting. Is she late, again?
His patience was always for her alone.
Another minute to cross the smoky
threshold, adjust to the dim.
The bartender motions hello and
points to where her brother had perched,

his cigarette still burning in the ashtray.
At first, she doesn't recognize the man
exiting the bathroom, the color fading
from this familiar face, how his hands tremble.

Now, the weight of his fall. A full minute
for 911, patrons scrambling. Another minute
to caress his hair. Against her whispering,
the final seconds tick, his name again and again.

Foulk

ELIZABETH BRULÉ FARRELL
CHARITY CARROTS

In line with the motor running, the hatch-
back up ready to receive bags of food,
I wait patiently not knowing what
will be inside, like the contents
of a mystery novel that I might read.

Unpacking it at home, I discover
expired cans of tuna, macaroni boxes
with dusty opened tops, misshapen
potatoes with green skins, sprouted
onions and a bag labeled charity carrots.

I examine each item and discard
that which seems unsafe to eat, wonder
what to do with the odd bits on the table.
Slicing away the black rotted parts
of the carrots, the word charity

in my mind as I wash away resentment
for what I have been freely given.
This to be a help to the elderly, the sick,
those unable to go to the store. I think
about history and return to the Depression

Era, the stories of famine in Ireland,
the many wars, the third-world countries,
the vast cities in America once booming
and now run-down and broken, and bring
myself to be grateful for any help today

as I cut away what is not healthy in the body
of the produce, removing any dark spots that
also run through my mind, remembering waste not,
want not, as my parents preached, and make
a salvation stew with plenty of spicy gratitude.

IRENE O'GARDEN
THE GREAT COMPASSION

Now that we've voted for candidates, let's vote for a viewpoint. It's knee-jerk to focus on the global financial and employment crisis we face—is this another Great Recession or, worse, another Great Depression? Yes, we face serious financial issues. But instead I vote we call this era The Great Compassion.

Compassion is flooding societies all over the world. People are risking their own lives to bring us healthcare, food, electricity, news, music, internet connections. The global span of this catastrophe means that plenty more compassion will be called for—from more people in more places simultaneously than ever in the history of our beloved species and our beloved Earth. We are discovering gigantic untapped reserves that have been underutilized in recent history. And like a vessel in a fairytale, it replenishes itself the more we dip.

Those reading this have lived in the most material comfort and abundance ever known, but a systemic lack of compassion for most of our fellow humans and most other life forms on Earth has been a streaming intuitive wound haphazardly bandaged by distraction, addiction, and ambition.

Our script just flipped.

Our vast financial machinery is sputtering because people have decided that human lives are more important than profits.

As a consequence of this tremendous decision, everything is melting—all ordinary social, financial, business, education, religious, and governmental structures are liquefying before our very eyes.

I am a poet and symbols are vivid to me. With this image of liquefying comes an image of metamorphosis. Caterpillars spend their lifetimes consuming, consuming, consuming. Then they bind themselves in a chrysalis, wherein they mostly liquefy. Floating within are special cells called imaginal discs (imagine that) from which eyes, antennae, wings, and other important butterfly parts develop. The caterpillar's immune system attacks these cells at first, but they multiply and lead to the radical transformation we all recognize.

Human consciousness may be transforming just as radically. Whether or not we take wing, we have the one thing the human race has always needed for its survival from the very earliest, most primitive days: the human race. Humans can do without a lot of stuff but not without each other.

What is happening now is so much more than financial.

Let us not characterize this period in terms of scarcity but in terms of its most abundant characteristic. The Great Compassion. Let's each of us add to it in every way we can.

CONTRIBUTORS

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ANNE BOWER lives in rural Vermont, teaches tai chi, gardens, serves as a trustee at the tiny local library, and has the good fortune of health and family to inspire her even in this so-troubled world. Publications include two chapbooks—*Poems for Tai Chi Players* (Kattywompus Press) and *The Space Between Us* (Finishing Line Press). Individual poems have appeared in *Likely Red, Naugatuck River Review, ArtAscent, Evening Street Review, Gemini, The Literary Nest*, and other journals.

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THOMAS FEENY teaches Romance languages at North Carolina State University, where he has been for many years. His hobbies are gardening and listening to classical jazz. A good deal of his creative literary work has involved translations (usually of the work of Latin American or Spanish poets). His own poems have appeared in two collections, *Night into Day* (Mellen} and *Breathing in Technicolor* (Kelsay Books).

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THOMAS JOHNSON was born and raised in South Central Los Angeles, the first of six children and only son. His father was a World War II staff sergeant in the segregated army. In 1968 Thomas was drafted and sent to Vietnam as a cryptographic tech. He was awarded the Bronze Star for monitoring enemy movements in Cambodia. He finished a BA degree in psychology in 1983 while working as a fiber optic tech. Retired now, trying to keep up with three athletic grandchildren.

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SAMUEL MULLIKIN has been incarcerated since 2005. He currently serves his community in prison working as a nurse's aide and as a mental health peer assistant. He was enthralled by the power of the written word as a child and has been under its spell ever since. Throughout his incarceration he has used writing to discover himself and deepen his connection to the world. He has recently begun to share his works.

IRENE O'GARDEN's writing is found on the Off-Broadway stage: *Women On Fire,* in hardcover: *Fat Girl* (Harper), *Fulcrum* (Nirala), paperback: *Risking The Rapids* (Mango), and in dozens of respected literary journals and anthologies. She's received fellowships, residencies, and awards, including a Pushcart Prize. Her newest book is *Glad To Be Human: Adventures in Optimism* (Mango 2020).

DAWN (CRICKET) REYNOLDS PETTIT, a casino executive for two decades, is currently the vice president of human resources for Hard Rock Casino Northern Indiana. Known as Cricket all her life by family and friends, her passion for writing ignited when she was just a child. She holds a Master's from Purdue University and serves on local community boards. While she has won professional awards, she is most proud of her family.

CURTIS PIERCE has taken several writing workshops at UCLA extension and Gotham Writers Workshop. His fiction has been featured in *Panache*, bewilderingstories.com, hobopancakes.com, and *The Flash Future Review*. He has lived in Paris where he taught English at the Sorbonne and played American and French pop music in piano bars. When not engaged in artistic pursuits, he practices immigration law in downtown Los Angeles.

RICHARD ROBBINS (he/him/his) has published six books of poems, most recently *Body Turn to Rain: New & Selected Poems* (Lynx House Press, 2017). He has received awards from The Loft, the Minnesota State Arts Board, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Poetry Society of America. From 1986-2014, he directed the Good Thunder Reading Series at Minnesota State University Mankato, where he continues to direct the creative writing program.

DENNIS ROSS taught and did research in theoretical physics at Iowa State University for thirty-five years. Now retired in Ames, Iowa, he has gone back to his first love, writing poetry, as a second career. He now has over 230 poems published in various journals. *Relatives and Other Strangers*, his first chapbook, is available from Finishing Line Press. Hobbies include woodworking and motorcycles.

CAITLAN ROSSI is a science and medical writer. Her work has appeared in *The Louisville Review, The Westchester Review, Weston Magazine, MedPage Today*, and numerous others. She recently received her Masters of Arts in Professional Writing from Carnegie Mellon University. Currently living in Pittsburgh, she is a native New Yorker.

ROBERT ROTHMAN lives in Northern California, near extensive trails and open space, with the Pacific Ocean over the hill. His work has appeared in *Atlanta Review, Meridian Anthology of Contemporary Poetry, Tampa Review, Willow Review*, and over seventy-five other literary journals in the United States, Canada, Wales, and Ireland. Please see his website (www.robertrothmanpoet.com) for more information about him and his work.

PAUL ROUSSEAU is a semi-retired physician and writer, published or forthcoming in *The Healing Muse, Blood and Thunder, Intima. A Journal of Narrative Medicine, The Human Touch, Please See Me, Months To Years, The Examined Life, Cleaning up Glitter, Burningword Literary Journal, The Centifictionist, Prometheus Dreaming, Dr. T. J. Eckleburg Review, Another Chicago Magazine, JAMA, Annals of Internal Medicine, Canadian Medical Association Journal, Tendon*, and others. Lover of dogs.

JASON RYBERG is the author of thirteen poetry books, six screenplays, and a few short stories. He is an artist-in-residence at both The Prospero Institute of Disquieted P/o/e/t/i/c/s and the Osage Arts Community and an editor and designer at Spartan Books. His latest collection of poems is *Standing at the Intersection of Critical Mass and Event Horizon* (Luchador Press, 2019). He lives part-time in Salina, KS, with a rooster named Little Red and a billygoat named Giuseppe and part-time somewhere in the Ozarks, near the Gasconade River.

MOLLIE SALAMON holds a Bachelor of Arts in writing, editing, and publishing and developmental psychology from Emmanuel College. She lives and works in Massachusetts. In her free time, she enjoys writing, reading, taking photos, and spending time with her pet rabbit. Her work has been published in journals such as *Blood and Thunder*, *Constellate Literary Journa*l, and *Evening Street Review*.

TERRY SANVILLE lives in San Luis Obispo, CA, with his artist-poet wife (his in-house editor) and two plump cats (his in-house critics). He produces short stories, essays, and novels. His stories have been accepted more than 400 times by journals, magazines, and anthologies including *The Potomac Review, The Bryant Literary Review*, and *Shenandoah*. He is a retired urban planner and an accomplished jazz and blues guitarist who once played with a symphony orchestra backing up jazz legend George Shearing. His first novel is *Face-to-Face* (Branching Realities Publishing).

JAMES SCRUTON's most recent collections are *Crossing the Days* (Prolific Press) and *The Rules* (Green Linden Press), both published in 2019. A recipient of *Poetry* magazine's Frederick Bock Award and the Finishing Line Press Prize, he is currently professor of English and associate academic dean at Bethel University in McKenzie, TN.

JAN SHOEMAKER is the author of the essay collection, *Flesh and Stones: Field Notes from a Finite World*, and the poetry collection, *The Reliquary Earth*. Her work has been anthologized, featured on public radio, and published in many magazines and journals.

GEO STALEY is retired from 25 years of teaching writing and literature at Portland Community College. He had previously taught in New England, Appalachia, and on the Rosebud Sioux Indian Reservation. His poetry has appeared in *Chest, Four Quarters, Loonfeather, RE:AL Artes Liberales, New Mexico Humanities Review, Fireweed, Oregon East, Cafe Review*, and others. *Arc of the Ear*, his latest chapbook, was published by Finishing Line Press.

LOREN STEPHENS is a two-time nominee for the Pushcart Prize. Her essays and short stories have appeared in the *LA Times*, the *Chicago Tribune*, *MacGuffin, Crack the Spine*, and the *Write Launch,* to name a few. *Paris Nights: My Year at the Moulin Rouge*, a memoir by Cliff Simon with Loren Stephens, was named by Kirkus Reviews as one of the best titles published by an independent press. Her novel *All Sorrows Can Be Borne* (Rare Bird Publishers) was published May, 2021.

LISA J SULLIVAN (she/her) holds an MFA in Poetry from the Solstice Low-Residency MFA Program at Pine Manor College, where she was a Kurt Brown Memorial Fellow. Her work has appeared in *The American Journal of Poetry, The Comstock Review, Puckerbrush Review*, and elsewhere. She is an associate poetry editor for Lily Poetry Review Books and a poetry editor for *Pink Panther Magazine*.

LAUREN TESS (she/her) has poetry published or forthcoming in the *Cimarron Review, Tar River Poetry, Saranac Review, Tampa Review*, and elsewhere. She studied cultural anthropology at the University of Texas, but her poetry is inspired by non-human cultures as well. She lives in Fayetteville, AR, where she writes poems and spies on her avian and arthropodan neighbors.

LYDIA DISTEFANO THIEL has a Ph.D. in English with a concentration in comparative literature and film. Her interest in creative writing introduced her to many workshops and many outstanding poets and writers. Her creative work appears in *Atlanta Review* (International Merit Award), *Bear River Review, San Pedro River Review*, and *Voices in Italian Americana* (VIA). Originally from western Pennsylvania, she lives in northeast Ohio, minutes from feisty Lake Erie.

MICHAEL WASHBURN is a Brooklyn-based writer and journalist with a B.A. in English from Grinnell College. His fiction has appeared recently in *Rosebud, Green Hills Literary Lantern, Concho River Review, Meat for Tea: The Valley Review*, and other publications.

SEAN J WHITE arrived to prison in 1997 at the age of nineteen. His short fiction and poetry have appeared in a number of journals, most recently *The Florida Review, Michigan Quarterly Review, The Normal School Online*, and *Raritan* (forthcoming). He has received awards from PEN America's Writing Awards for Prisoners several times in various genres.

BUFF WHITMAN-BRADLEY's poems have appeared in many print and online journals. His latest collection is *Crows with Bad Writing*. He podcasts poems about aging, memory, and mortality at thirdactpoems.podbean.com He and his wife Cynthia live and mask and socially distance in northern California.

CYNTHIA YANCEY was an English major before a mother, then a medical doctor. Now after working more than thirty years in the trenches of public health, from the Himalayas and Andes mountains to her downtown clinic in Asheville, NC, she is writing the stories of her life with mentor Laura Hope-Gill at Lenoir Rhyne University.

ANDRENA ZAWINSKI's flash fiction has appeared or will appear in *Flashes of Brilliance, Unlikely Stories, Summer Shorts Anthology, Digital Paper, Short Stories & Poems Weekly, Panoplyzine, Ginosko, Pretty Owl, Sabr, Loud Zoo*, and elsewhere. An award-winning poet with three books in print and six smaller collections, she is also an avid shutterbug with photographs in many literary magazines. Born and raised in Pittsburgh, PA, she lives in the San Francisco Bay Area.

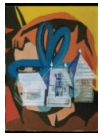
21 Additional Publications

Friends and Family
by Annette Opalczynski

insignificant white girl
by B. Elizabeth Beck

Bloodline by
Clela Dyess Reed

Sandbox Blues
by Dana Stamps, II



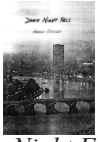
Resurrection Bay
by David Stallings

Feet First by
Dion N Farquhar

Lessons and *The Woman Who Married Herself*
by Donna Spector

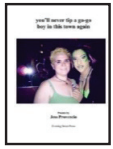
Home and Other Elsewheres
by Francis O'Hare

Now What?
by Franz Weinschenk



Dawn Night Fall
by Gordon Grigsby

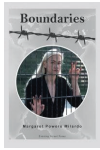
Flight Path & Other Stories by Jan Bowman



you'll never tip a go-go boy in this town again
by Jess Provencio

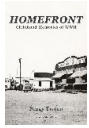
From Buchenwald to Havana
by Julian Markels

Blond Boy
by Lucia May



No Turnig Back and *Boundaries*
Sequels to *Brandi*
Margaret Powers Milardo

M*aking a Clean Space in the Sky* by Paula Yup



Homefront
by Peggy Trojan

One Sleeve
by Richard Carr

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