

SUNSPOT LITERARY JOURNAL

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CHANGING THE WORLD
THROUGH WORDS AND ART

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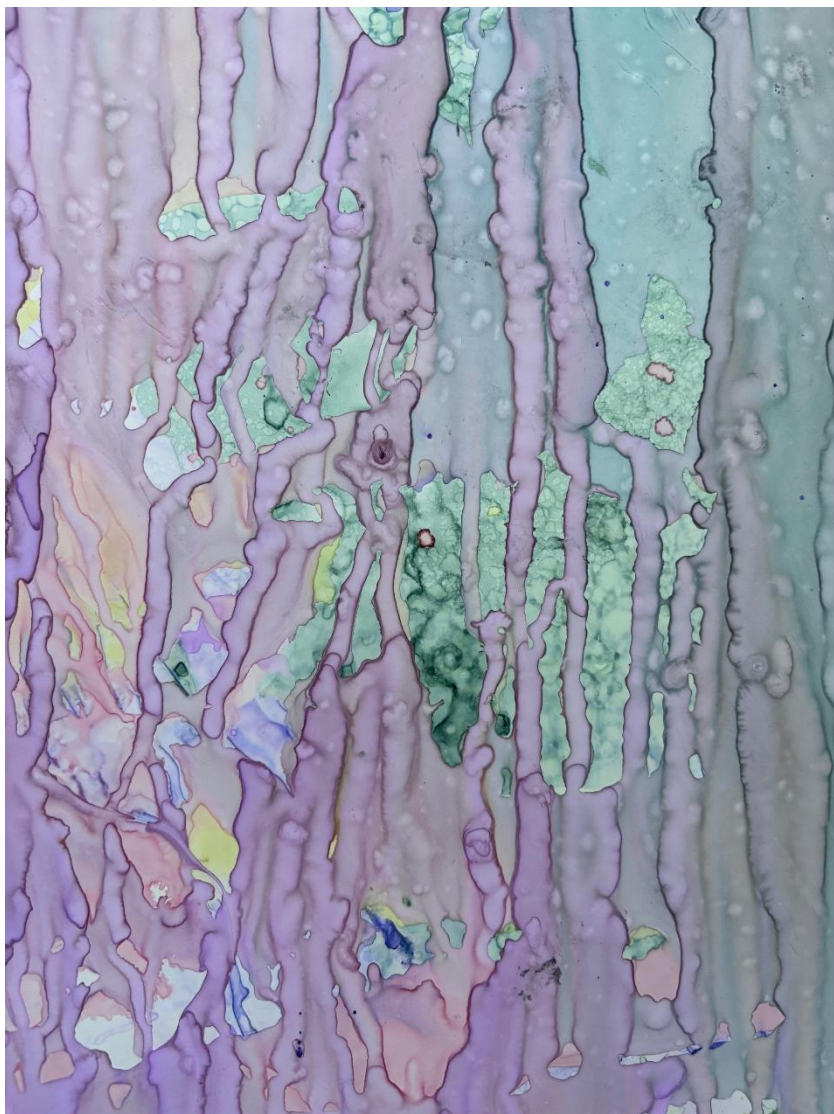
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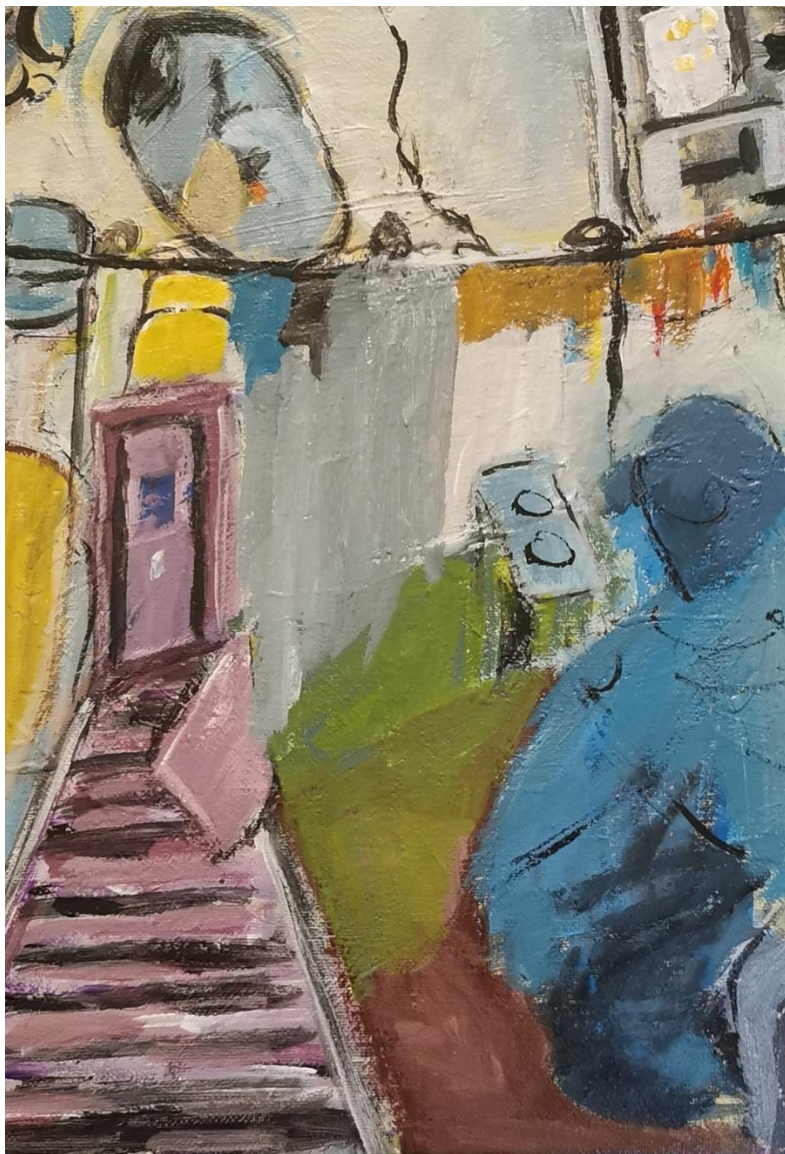
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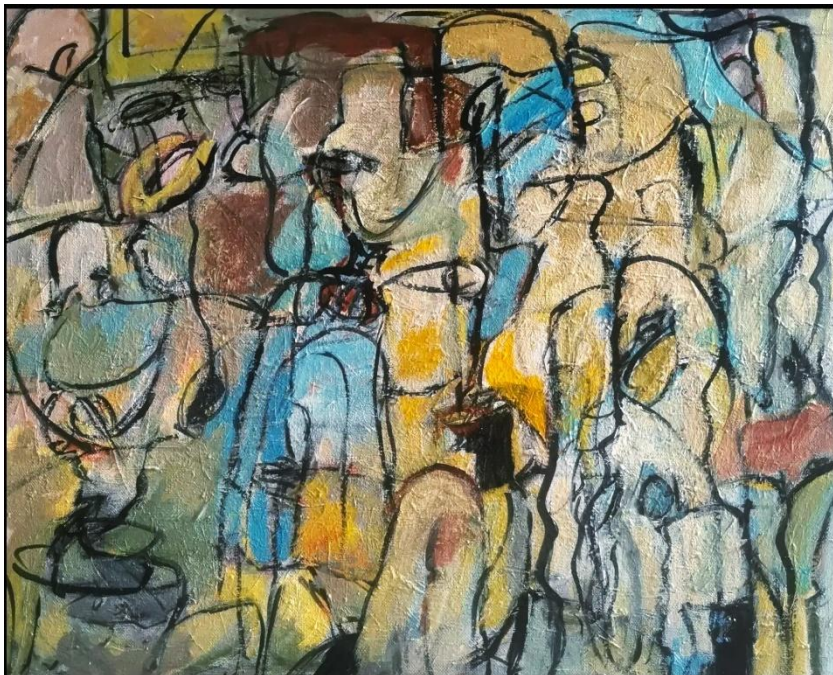
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Mongolia Grassland / J.C. Henderson



Wait / J.C. Henderson



Que / J.C. Henderson

Vacating the Premises

David Engelhardt

During the ten years it took me to make partner in one of Washington's most profitable law firms, my father lost five jobs, surrendered his half of the family home in the divorce, and said it might be time for him to find a little place near me, after sixty years without leaving Pennsylvania for more than the occasional week at the Jersey Shore. He never booked a cheap flight to London while I was studying abroad, never trusted the tires on any car he owned to reach Boston, where I was slumming between college and law school, and rarely stayed more than 24 hours in Washington, because the radios around here never played the same high school football games that he could hear back home. But all he needed was a job in the firm's copy room, or maybe the mail room, or anywhere that was a little more like takin'er easy and a lot less like having another asshole for a boss. I hoped he was joking, but his eyes were earnest, and I lowered my own.

I hustled up our walk around my new neighborhood with my old retriever. It was safer to run out our time together by asking about the deer season that ended a few months prior. I thought it might please him to address a topic that cast *me* as the disappointment: I quit hunting after one day of sitting on a log in the woods behind my grandparents' trailer in the Poconos, because my feet froze inside rubber boots that cut off my circulation. He blamed me for lacking toughness in the toe region. I blamed him for forgetting to take me to the Army-Navy store until too-small was the only size left at the closeout special. Now he liked to exaggerate the size of every kill that he saw curing on a hook on a neighbor's porch back home. He often told me how he supervised the butchering from a seat on the cooler, where he would remain until he was handed a roast wrapped in newsprint as the price of sending him home.

He asked me, "Remember Ronny Falk? They say his buck was so big, he needed help getting it on the hook." He lit a cigarette from his shirt with a lighter from his pants, then grumbled about missing the butchering for lack of invitation. He said, "They tell me it was his

sons who helped him.” He eyed his own son, who never did toughen up his toe region, and now owned a retriever who whimpered beneath a bed as soon as she heard a firecracker on the Fourth of July. No deer would hang from any porch in my neighborhood, where none of the homes arrived on their own tires, and working-class men were seen only when they came to trim the hedges.

My father should have hated that neighborhood. I should have hated that neighborhood, for which I was selling my best years by the billable hour. But on that sparkling Sunday morning, the famous cherry trees behind the White House could not compete with our winding suburban lanes, where overgrown azaleas whispered pink and screamed purple beneath dogwoods bent low by white blossoms and yellow bees that sparkled in the sunlight conceded by hundred-foot oaks that would not leaf out for another month. Through the blooms at the end of the lane, I could hear but not see the traffic on the grand avenue that fed me to the cutthroat meritocracy each morning, and often returned me past midnight, like a ghost in the suit that I might have worn to my own funeral.

I never complained to my father about the exhausting hours of exacting work, the nervous puking that sometimes overcame me in luxury hotels in the wee hours before the morning’s court appearance in yet another city that I would experience only through the windows of limousines, or the waste of the ambition that I discovered in college writing workshops. I knew his advice without needing to hear it. *Tell the boss to fuck himself up his own ass.* That line always worked on *his* bosses, and I was sometimes tempted to try it on mine.

He said, “It’s a fine neighborhood you picked for your family, Son.” His tone suggested that my interest in deer season was no longer fooling him.

I took a knee and scratched the retriever behind her golden ears. I did not raise my eyes when I asked, “Washington? After all these years of . . .”

He knew I meant to say, “going nowhere.” He told me, “You haven’t heard of my latest adventure.” He gave me a shitty grin to confirm that he would omit a woman from his story, and a shittier wink to remind me that he would lie in answer to every question. Then

he rapped my sternum with his knuckles to assure me that this adventure was so epic of plan, and so bold of execution, it prepared him for anything that Washington might throw at him. In fact, he signed up for the Republican Club's excursion to a famous place called Branson, Missouri, once he realized that the bitch was divorcing him for real this time.

He personally never heard of Branson, but someone told him he could see every country singer they had out there, until someone else told him he would need to take a shuttle, because the motel was two exits short of the theatres, because that saved ten bucks a night on the rooms. But the shuttle cost five, and even if it *was* for a roundtrip, it was still daily, which gave him an opportunity to beat somebody's ass out of five bucks every day, just by sitting poolside, which he pronounced with the satisfaction of having an opportunity *to* pronounce it. Plus, the motel had a vending machine that carried most of the major categories of snack food. Even if it did lack Pennsylvania's famous Tastykakes, his travels taught him that there were brands of cupcakes in this country that tasted so similar, no one knew they were missing out.

One afternoon he invited the maid to join him for snacks and beer by the pool when she clocked out, and she played him country music on the radio on her cart. Then he told me to stop having a dirty mind, because nothing I was thinking ever happened. But all in all he had to admit that it was definitely a wonderful experience, the best part being the naps he took on the bus, with a footrest that he could fold down if his feet needed it, or leave up if they didn't, and a job-johnny where everybody did their business without stopping the bus, which was important, because they had a keg of beer on the bus, and once everybody chipped in, everybody had to drink up before everybody else beat them to it, and that was a lot of pissing, if I would excuse his French.

Every fact sounded like another symptom of the small town that has passed down our generations like a gene for a wasting disease. No matter how carefully worded, any truthful reaction to his story would have amounted to calling him a dumbass, and he would have responded by silently blowing smoke over my head, or inspecting his

fingerprints until he found one that he could pare down with his pocketknife so I had to stand there fuming a while longer. I choked down the questions that came to me by professional habit:

You return from a great adventure to tell me about a footrest?

Okay, you saved five bucks a day on the shuttle. But did you get one thin dime's worth of entertainment out of the hundreds that you did spend?

Not counting Johnny Cash or the ones on Hee Haw, how many country singers could you name before the trip? And how many can you name now?

I hoped that some redeeming expression would overtake his face, like an extra-crooked smile or an exaggerated wink-and-nod, anything that said he was only fucking with me, and maybe gathering material for a barstool knee-slapper about the time he duped his overeducated son into believing such a ridiculous story. My hope died upon seeing his tongue search his lips for memories of the tastes and textures of Creme-Filled Swirlies, whether they dropped from the vending machine or the maid's blouse. I felt as stumped as I did each time his sad voice inside my speakerphone told me that he lost another job, then raised that voice to the heights of triumph as he quoted the latest burst of profanity that got him fired by yet another asshole for a boss, who, he assured me, was too dumb to run the business that he owned for forty years, and therefore should not have offered my father a few pointers at the end of his first week of being the newest part-timer on the sales floor. I have advised CEOs on corporate mergers, prepared deans of business schools and heads of computer science departments to testify as expert witnesses, and contested billions of dollars with my mouth and pen, but whenever I considered the possibility of counseling my father, I became mute, when I would have preferred to be deaf.

He took a heroic draw on his cigarette before announcing, "Here's the deal. I think it's time to slide me into early retirement."

But no one retires *to* this place, where *everyone* has an asshole for a boss, and there is no such thing as takin'er easy. I needed to document a liquid million just to be invited to the real estate showings where they served decent champagne. Working in the copy room would not pay my father enough to live any closer to Washington than

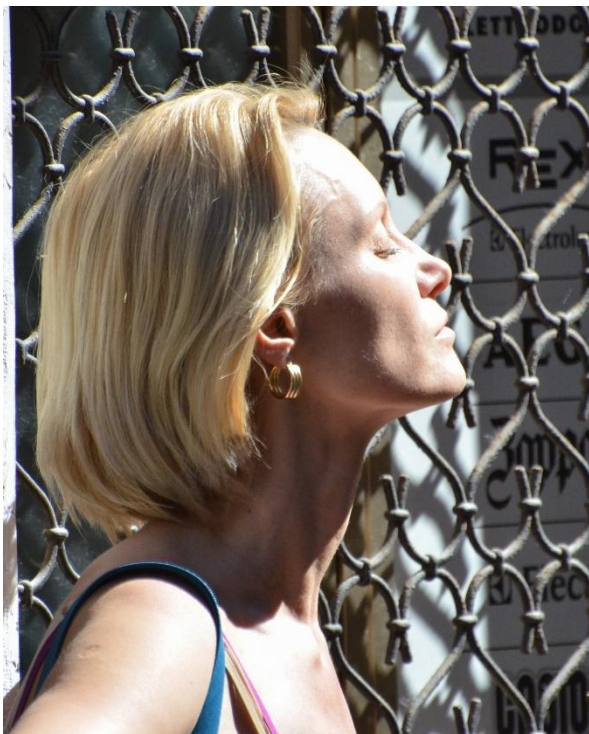
the panhandle of West Virginia, where my lawn guy lived. That was eighty minutes to my home and thirty more to the office. Even at that distance, my father would be too close to his impressionable grandchildren. I wanted to curse him for making me ponder that ugly truth, but I felt more like crying when he pointed at a *SALE* sign among the dogwoods on the neighborhood's only unkempt lawn. "How much you think a little joint like this might cost a man?"

It was the last of the original homes on the lane. The next owner was sure to knock it down, because it was as small and dated as the family home in Pennsylvania, from which the police evicted him when he refused to vacate the premises on order of the divorce court. He loved telling that story, especially when he added a tense standoff with the cops. Sometimes he boasted that it could have ended badly for him and them both if he wasn't so cool under pressure. Except one time he admitted that they were only a couple of mall cops who got themselves deputized to serve court papers one day a week, because the fulltime deputies were too busy with real police work. His sad voice never sounded so close to genuine as it did when he admitted that they didn't even have guns.

I did not correct him when he later reverted to the tense standoff. Nor did I tell him that his half of the marital assets came to less than one percent of the cost of the knockdown he was eyeing, or that the realtor probably had a list of cash bidders who were half his age, that some of the bidders would be women, and in such a liberal city, some of those women might have *wives*. However many ways they sinned against my father's sensibilities, the winning bidders would present their credentials while drinking wine on someone's patio, and when it was my turn to honor the Washington custom, I would tell them where I went to school, and where I went to school before that, and why I lived awhile in London, and why in Boston, but never where I was born and raised, because if anything I learned there mattered to me here, I would not be here.



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Needs — Sarajevo 2015 / William Lewis Winston

Still Life

Marie Gethins

Our new neighbors stood up without saying goodbye. Your splayed pomegranate at the table center trembled.

Earlier, you vice-gripped my elbow as I carried a basket of sugar cookies across the street. My practiced smile rigid while you did the intro. *Welcome to the neighborhood. Rather close today, isn't it? Please come over for iced tea.*

So genial. So smooth. You've always liked set pieces.

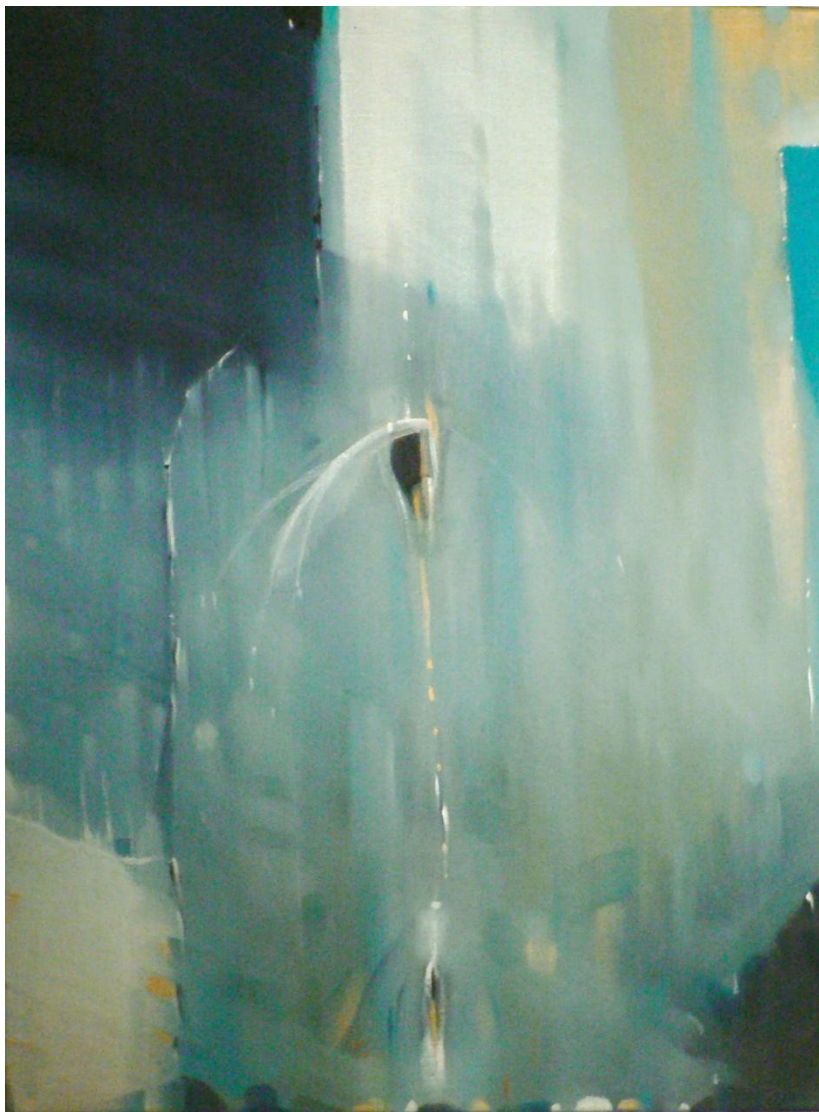
I pulled two lemons off the backyard tree, curled leaves clinging to stems. You rubbed a thumb across their pocked skin and told me they signify soul purification in Medieval art. When you pressed one against my temple, I inhaled the sharp scent. *What sins are you hiding?*

The couple arrived carrying my basket, now full of pomegranates. Glistening pink and red. You received the gift with a laugh. *How fortunate! Hades tempts Persephone once again.* We settled around the table, sipped from cut-crystal glasses, lemon slices grazing our lips.

The fresh audience tempted you into an academic surge. Dutch brush techniques, use of light, the symbolism of objects and fruit. Shadows lengthened, masking faces. From my seat at our table, I looked out at the street. A jogger and his Labrador. Two children on rollerblades. And further, the new neighbors' house. Sun seeped over our roof to set those windows—now their windows—aflame. I remembered how it turned the previous owner's white sheets gold.

The Pomegranate, symbolic of marriage. It's a simple matter of conquest and victory. A tough skin always will yield when sufficient pressure is applied. You tore a ruby fruit apart, scattering seeds, juice pooling like blood. *As true today as in Ancient Grece.* You grasped my shoulder, five finger points staining my blouse.

And then, we were alone.



Clear Water in Time / Tiziana Rasile



Undulation Senses / Tiziana Rasile

Blue Girl

Stan Kempton

In the side yard the birds chirped and the grass grew; Joan didn't give one lick about any of that. She was too busy gasping for oxygenated morsels through pursed lips, absently staring beyond the old furniture on the porch . . . *breathe* . . . her potted plants . . . *breathe* . . . the uncut grass . . . *breathe*.

Finally she did.

Staring at her shaky fingers, she fished a cigarette from a pack but waited to light the flame until stripping the nasal cannula away from her nose. She stayed perched on the edge of her seat, elbows on knees, an empty hand cupped in the shape of an ashtray. The blue smoke seductively trailed off the end of her cigarette, steadying her nerves long enough to wipe her cheeks on her sleeve, and sniff several times before calling 9-1-1.

"Hel . . . lo," Joan croaked. "I need someone to come out. Yes. It's my daughter. She's dead. I'm sure of it. Suicide. Uh-huh. She's in her bedroom right now, hanging from her closet door. Alright. I'll be outside waiting for them to get here."

Between puffs on her cigarette and hearing the swish and thump of her breathing machine just inside the sliding glass doors, Joan stared at the detective seated across from her.

"Did you say something?" the detective asked.

"Might have," Joan speculated. "Been known to talk to myself. Getting old ain't pretty. It's ugly. A very ugly thing that happens. But what you asked and what I told you is the God's honest truth." Joan watched the detective watching her. "Listen, detective, I'm laying all my cards out on the table. And I'm telling you, I didn't even know Ella had come home, let alone what she did in the other room."

The detective was a woman of Latino descent. Joan didn't care one way or another, just as long as she spoke English. Detective Martinez was her name, her stature on the short side, with wide

birthing hips, oval eyes, and a caring smile. Her police partner — a blond lanky fella — was on the phone in the yard, pacing. Uniform police officers stood watch on the perimeter. And before the detectives and cops had arrived, it had been the paramedics. Now the coroner was inside Ella's bedroom staring hard at what Joan could barely look at before.

All the fussing around with the questions had worked Joan up to a thirst.

"Detective," Joan asked, covering her mouth to cough, "would you be a doll and fetch me a Coke from the fridge."

The detective didn't appear put out. Notepad left in her chair; she stepped over the oxygen tube and brought back a cold drink.

"You should have got one for yourself," Joan said.

"Thank you, but no. Trying to watch my figure." Detective Martinez popped the tab on the can of Coke and handed it to Joan. "Your daughter wasn't living with you. Is that correct Ms. Stewart?"

"No . . . she was not. What can I do? Huh? Ella is twenty-five . . ." Joan produced a confused grimace. "Look at me lying to you. That's not right. She was twenty-six this past April. April 10th to be exact. A grown woman. That's what she was. Oh, she would drop in from time to time. That's why I kept her room the way it was. Nothing fancy. Just wanted her to have a place to rest her head if she had too much."

"Too much?"

"Too much of what's out there . . ." Joan broke off to catch her breath, motioning with a bent wrist toward the rest of the world. "Ella didn't have it easy. It started with Daryl, my second husband. Ella's stepfather."

"Started how?" Jotting down notes.

"The son-of-bitch had his way with her, that's how." Joan nodded at the trauma as if it had just happened. "He was sent up to prison for what he did. Got what was coming to him. But that didn't help Ella any. It didn't restore what he had stolen from her." Joan caught the subtle slip in the detective's eyes. It was only a moment, but Joan snagged it from the air. "I know. A goddamn broken record. Right? Can't throw a rock around here without hitting the same story.

Nothing new. Hell, I had an uncle tamper with me. Cannibals. That's what we are. Just a bunch of broken people feeding on one another. But that's a different story for a different time. But I do believe that Daryl planted the seed to what happened in the back room. I'm sure of it. Ella was never right in the head after that. Couldn't cope like I did. Detached herself. Gained weight. Flunked classes. Left school."

Joan steadied a cigarette between her lips as she readied the lighter. The detective nervously watched the unlit cigarette twitch up and down as if it were trying to chase down a flame. A minute later the cannula was safely stripped off her nostrils.

"Ms. Stewart, when do you think she came home last night?"

Joan shrugged. "Hard to pin an exact time. I don't like the house at night after Bucket died."

"Bucket?"

"My dog. Everyone I know is getting buried. Living just ain't what it used to be." Joan shifted her gaze to the shade under the oak where a rock marked a fresh grave. "Too much of nothing in the house at night to include silence. I don't like it. So I watch my shows in the bedroom. Ella may have let herself in any time after eight."

"And you didn't hear her?"

Joan shook her head.

"She didn't come in your bedroom to let you know she was there."

"Like I said, I left her a pillow. That's all I knew to do."

Neighbors had congregated on the fence line.

"Ms. Stewart . . ." the detective said.

Joan saw her smoking friend, Holly, mixed in with the few who had gathered. Holly uncrossed her arms and sent Joan a sympathetic wave.

"Ms. Stewart?" the detective asked again. "We're almost finished."

"Ella sure didn't deserve what happened to her." Joan nodded toward Holly, then turned back to Detective Martinez. "Now. What was that you were saying?"

"Just," the detective shook her head, "just that I'm so sorry this happened to you."

“Well, I thank you for that.”

The detective gathered her things. “By the way, we searched her bedroom and the rest of the house but couldn’t find a suicide note. Did she leave one with you?”

“No,” Joan whispered, “she did not.”

“Maybe she said something to you the last time you two spoke,” the detective fished. “Perhaps it didn’t mean anything at the time, but now it--”

“Detective Martinez, I left her a message on her birthday. We may have spoken over Christmas. But that was over six months ago. I can barely remember what I did last week. Whatever Ella was going through . . .” Joan paused to breathe, “she took it to the grave.”

From the living room came Detective Martinez’s partner, who sympathetically sent Joan a slanted smile as he passed. The coroner paused at a section in the living room where the couch and chair had been moved aside, giving enough room for the paramedics to maneuver the stretcher. Both the swish and thump of the oxygen machine and the clanky caster wheels on the stretcher took on a tangible form not of this world. It was hammer-blows and rocks moved. Joan winced at the chaos slowly rolling past, making it hard to ignore what showed itself from the black bag. As if a head being berthed from a vagina, Ella’s blue face emerged in a seam, pushing out a different version of what had been pushed out twenty-six years prior. Out came a white nose and blue lips. Out came eyes left open possessing a vacancy lost in a map of popped blood vessels. *You know what to do*, this new Ella whispered, her passing voice dovetailing off the swishing sound of the oxygen machine. *It’s what you should have done but didn’t. Make it right. The moment has already passed for me, but not for you.*

“Ms. Stewart,” Detective Martinez said, “let me do that for you.”

Joan watched the stretcher’s framing collapse as it was pushed into the back of the ambulance. From her shaky hands, the detective kindly dislodged one of the cigarettes, guided it into Joan’s trembling lips, and lit the end.

After the authorities left, Holly came over and hugged Joan. They shared a cigarette before Holly left and returned with the hard ruination of a bottle of whiskey. They talked into the evening about what had happened, about what the closet doorknob ensnared and what the black body bag had hauled away. The liquor helped to shorten tears and bring up a laugh or two. Close to ten, Holly stumbled back over to her boyfriend and children, leaving Joan with the phrase, "Holler if you need anything," as a parting gift.

Holly's bottle was a good gift. A kind, wholesome-I-have-your-back sort of gift. But the letter Joan had folded in her pocket, the one she told the detective she didn't have, that was a gift from Ella before she turned into the Blue Girl, and Joan knew that gift wasn't kind.

Not the sort of person who liked being alone, Joan heated up a frozen dinner in the microwave. She pressed her hands to the counter, drawing in those measured breaths as she waited for the appliance to ding. Behind her, half the house was dark.

You're probably right behind me, aren't you? Joan thought. But I'm too busy trying to breathe to turn around and find you.

It took two trips bringing in her dinner, fork, napkin, and her iced down Coke into her bedroom. She had to rest on the bed before slipping off her shoes. The cannula was there, shoving oxygen in her nose that never was enough. Joan gazed at her closed bedroom door. The oxygen tube ran under the gap at the bottom. On the other side the machine swished and thumped out in the other room.

"Now let's see what's on," she said, pointing the remote to the TV.

Joan had her series she liked to watch, but each bite on her mac and cheese was accompanied by the presence of the Blue Girl.

Joan's imagination made the Blue Girl into a wanderer no longer content in her bedroom but now possessed with the urge to travel through the dark house and press, with her cold finger, the off button on the oxygen machine. Joan waited for it to happen. She waited for the Blue Girl to drag in fresh rope and hang herself all over again from Joan's doorknob like an endearing ornament. She even envisioned the Blue Girl crouched outside her door in the hall, pulling

on the oxygen tube, whispering, *Go on Momma, look closer at my sad words. It's a page rubbed with guilt.*

Sliding her half-eaten dish to the side table, Joan took out the letter from her pocket. She had found it in the morning on the kitchen table, the stack of bills and medications had been pushed aside so it wouldn't be overlooked. She tilted it to the neighbor's floodlight, reading the passages about the pain of memory, and how hard it is to live with such cruelty still so close to the skin.

The next day, Joan woke early and started the tedious process of breathing all over again. There was morning coffee on the porch, later a few beers and nearly a pack of cigarettes in between. Joan was getting anxious. Sunset was five hours away and she feared the Blue Girl's visit.

Joan set the cigarette on the side table, and despite her promise she would never contact the man, dialed Earl. After three rings, what do you know, the son-of-a-bitch answered.

"Why I'll be damned," Earl answered.

"That sounds about right."

"I'm sitting here watching Fox news, and they hadn't said word one about Hell freezing over." Earl chuckled, but a feisty retort didn't come back his way. "Joan, what's wrong? Did you lose your venom?"

Joan wheezed before she coughed. "Oh, Earl . . . Hell froze over is right, and no one noticed but me. Can you come by some time or another? Things aren't too pretty over here."

"Joan, sit tight. I'm up and out of the recliner; got the keys in my hand."

Twenty minutes later Earl crushed the gravel in her drive with the tires of his Ford truck. Joan watched Earl when he got out, as well as the labor involved in making his way to the porch.

Joan had known Earl for forty plus years. They dated off and on when younger. And Earl cheated on her off and on with equal proficiency. Of course, all that drama was before Earl started losing pieces and parts off his body. Earl explained it to Joan a decade back when both had parked their widening butts on a barstool.

“Not three days after Peggy left me—”

“And this is your third wife,” Joan clarified.

“The very same, but after she left, I took off my sock and saw a pinky toe rolling on the kitchen floor like a petrified pea.”

“You’re kidding. What did you do?”

“I looked at that son-of-a-bitch hard as if it were a traitor. Probably the same look I gave Peggy and the dog when both had paused at the front door with two suitcases in hand.”

“You think her leaving and the toe that abandoned you are connected?” Joan asked, knowing full well Earl collected women like most men collected cars.

“Might have been,” Earl considered. “Ah, fuck it! I didn’t need that toe, especially the smallest one.”

“That’s the spirit, you old cheating bastard.”

“Dammit Joan, I messed up. I know it. Peggy sure was on the left side of ugly, but I miss her. No one is fully equipped to live alone.”

But ten years have passed since they had last seen or spoken to one another, and what appeared from the truck, Joan quickly realized more than just a toe had gone missing.

Earl hobbled out on two wooden crutches, with his blue jeans rolled and clipped just below the right knee.

“Well, don’t you look like warmed-over shit,” Joan hollered from the porch, then coughed.

“It doesn’t appear you’ve fared any better.”

She pulled her nasal cannula away and lit a cigarette, watching Earl’s process of turning and adjusting himself beside the empty chair, before pairing the crutches to the side and making a controlled fall into the cushion.

“If we took our good pieces and put them together,” she mused, “we might have a whole person.”

Earl chuckled. After a moment of eyeballing one another as if trying to remember what they had once looked like, Earl stared toward the house where the oxygen machine primed and thumped.

“Where’s Bucket?”

Joan only pointed back behind Earl toward the spot of earth under the tree.

“Oh, Jesus, Joan. I’m sorry to hear that. He was a damn good dog.”

“I’m surprised you remember him.”

“I do. I surely do. Must have been a puppy back then.”

“You might be right. Bucket was ten when he caught the cancer.”

“Cancer. That’s an evil son-of-a-bitch. And knock on wood,” scanning his surroundings for some grain to tap on, “I’ve managed to avoid *it* despite *it* taking down my dad.”

“I do remember that.”

She nodded at the dead air. Watching the orange glow on the tip of her cigarette, she nervously fiddled with her cannula parked in her lap.

“Having a dog is a better proxy than talking to yourself,” he said. “Bring in a middleman for me and yours truly—”

“Earl, listen, I need to confess something to you.”

He curiously eyed her. “I thought so.”

“Thought so what?”

“How you missed me—”

“Ahh, for fuck’s sake.”

“That you’re still in love with me.”

“Now Earl, those right there are fighting words. If I had something heavy, and could lift it, I’d throw it right at that big, ugly head of yours.”

“There’s that woman I used to date.”

“Oh, she’s in here all right . . . But Earl, I’m being serious. It’s about Ella.” She looked out at her dog’s grave. Tears came to her eyes. “I put Bucket in the ground not a week back, and now I need to put Ella in the same ground in the days ahead.”

“I don’t understand.”

“She hung herself.”

A stunned Earl blankly stared back at Joan, either sizing up her lack of grief or the effort it took to avoid it. Then he whispered, “Where?”

“In there,” Joan motioned without lifting her eyes. “Tied a rope to her closet doorknob and leaned.”

Earl shook his head with the weight it carried. His eyes widened on those things he didn't want to say aloud.

"I know that me and her had our differences," Joan said. "You saw some of that. The fights we had . . . hell, starting way back in the seventh grade."

"How many times did she run?"

Joan shrugged as if the number didn't matter. "Six times before her sophomore year. Not long after that, she just quit coming altogether. Carried on with the drugs and those people she ran with."

"I hate to say it, Joan . . . it's a tragedy, but it might be a kind of relief."

"Maybe," she said, and didn't want to mention the Blue Girl that took Ella's place.

"What is it?"

"I don't know," forcefully smashing what was left of the cigarette and reattaching her cannula, "to hang yourself like that takes effort. Doesn't it? I mean . . . she must have really wanted to go."

"What can I do to help?"

"I need to visit the funeral home. I got to do that. I got to pick out a coffin. Make all those arrangements no one ever wants to make. Earl, I could use the company."

"Say the word."

"And a ride. I don't trust myself to drive anymore."

"Joan, I said I'll do it."

"Well, I thank you Earl. I really do. By chance, do you have time today?"

"I have nothing but time."

"Let me grab my purse and switch over to the portable takeout machine."

"That'll give me enough time to hobble back to the truck."

Joan was thinking that for Earl, it must feel like old times: radio set to a country station that actually played country music, both of them sitting side by side, the raised view out a truck's front windshield.

"I'm not supposed to be doing this," Earl confessed.

Joan slowly turned toward Earl with a confused look.

"This right here," pointing toward the truck's floorboard. "I bet you didn't even notice me using my left leg. They wanted me to rejigger the pedals."

"You mean switch them around?"

"And it ain't cheap. So, I quietly said I would but didn't. You're driving with a criminal, Joan."

"My whole life I've caught rides with low-life characters."

Earl chuckled. At the stop sign, he asked Joan which way.

"It's out on Hwy 316. I don't know how far down, but I'll know the road when I see it."

"Sounds like a plan." Earl gave her a wink and turned right.

"But I do have to say, Earl, of all the low-life's I've had in my life, I could tolerate you best of all."

"That almost makes me feel good."

"Daryl was the worst."

"No arguments there. We came to blows when you two were dating."

"Daryl didn't say anything about that."

"Not too much to tell. It didn't change who he was. To this day, I still don't know why you kept him around."

It was that quiet appraisal that by living with Daryl, she avoided food stamps, low rent housing, poor school options for

_____. Bringing out her pack of cigarettes, Joan just held it for a while before sifting one loose, and even then, the solitary cigarette stayed unlit in her finger.

"I had my issues," Earl rehashed what should have stayed tucked in the past. "There's no denying that. But Joan, I would never have treated you like he treated you. Okay, he was a better-looking man. I grant you that. And he had money. Money I certainly didn't have. But the way he talked down at you like you were beneath him . . ."

Earl was right about that life Daryl had given her, about the looks and money; all of it did make her ignore what was going on with _____.

Say my name. The wind hissed when Joan cracked the window after lighting up her cigarette.

"Joan, your tube!"

"Ah, shit," Joan pulled her lit cigarette away, yanking off the cannula. "I guess I'm trying to blow us up."

"If it went quick, might not be a bad way to go."

Again the cracked window hissed the Blue Girl's words, *Say my name.*

"*Ella!*" Joan quickly said.

"What's that?" Earl asked as the blinker was engaged.

"Ella," she repeated. "Ella . . . she, ahhh, she also suffered when I was with Daryl." Joan felt Earl's eyes through the smoke haze of lies and mistruths before its threads got tugged on, exiting out the cracked window. "I brought Daryl in. That's on me. But what Daryl did to Ella . . . that's on him."

"What did he--"

"He tampered with her, Earl."

"That son-of-a-bitch."

"I didn't know!"

Liar, the air countered.

"I mean I found out," Joan stammered her correction, "after it happened."

Tell the truth.

Joan flicked the half-smoked cigarette out, then quickly rolled up the window, leaving the whispers on the wind.

Earl's knuckles were white as he squeezed hard on the steering wheel. His lips pressed tight. His eyes vacant.

"Earl, look at me." Earl didn't budge. "Earl, please, look at me."

"What is it?"

"We could have been different people if it weren't for our mistakes. I was already pregnant with Ella when you and I met. You knew that and didn't care. And maybe if you didn't have the need to wander to other beds, it could have been you who had raised Ella the right way--"

"So, this is my fault? You're putting what happened to Ella on me."

“God no, Earl. I’m not blaming you or anyone except the man who did it. It’s just how it all came together, like chapters in a book following a broke--”

Joan stopped midsentence. They had been travelling on 316 for a good while. Both shoulders of the road had been under Joan’s watchful eye for some time, and now there it was, a white bus with prisoners plucking trash from the medium like sharecroppers.

Joan turned around and watched the crew from the rear window.

“What did you see?” Earl asked.

“It’s him, Earl. Ella was right. She wrote it in the letter she left me. She must have seen him out on the highway yesterday; light duty and good behavior. The only thing next for him will be a signed piece of paper that justice has been served and he’ll be paroled. Earl! Turn around up here.”

“Why?”

“Earl, just turn around. If not for me, do it for Ella.”

“I take it we’re not going to a funeral home to pick out a casket.”

“Not for Ella,” Earl turned and looked at her straight in the eyes. “You with me?”

Earl checked his sights, engaged the blinker, and did what Joan wanted him to do. Earl must have known. He must have smelled it in what little air they shared between them. This wasn’t gonna be just a drive-by and a wave out the window. They both knew that nothing was ever right in the world unless you made it right.

“I’m afraid to ask,” Earl said as if he too no longer had control over the situation.

“Nothing needs to be said aloud. But if we’re gonna do it, we got to do it right.”

“I’m not sure I’m gonna do it, Joan.”

“Yeah, you are. We have too many things falling off our bodies or robbing us of air not to know what we should do. Pushed in the corner, there’s no other way out but through the wall.”

Maybe Earl checked the dead space where his leg once had been and had briefly searched out God before his heavy thoughts descended on his left foot and against the accelerator.

"Which one of the white dots is Daryl?" Earl asked, buckling his seatbelt and taking the wheel with both hands.

"Second to the front," Joan said as she also buckled her seatbelt. "That's if we're gonna do it."

"Right. That's if we're gonna do it." Earl's voice got distractingly louder as the distance between the truck's front bumper and Daryl quickly began to shrink.

What little breath Joan possessed was snatched away as Earl quickly yanked the wheel and veered into the grass. The truck left the road, lifting a few feet off the ground. Daryl was near the culvert's edge, bending down to retrieve a Wal-Mart bag when the truck came down hard, smashing him underneath before kicking him out of the culvert. Earl and Joan got wrapped in the noise of crushed steel, broken glass, gravity momentarily lost. Seatbelts cinched down tight. Upside down, strands of her gray hair hung across her face. The nasal cannula had been ripped away; the oxygen machine shattered. Earl was doing the same; still strapped in and dangling like a puppet who lost his strings.

"Earl!" Joan moaned, lightly touching the blood on her face. "Earl! You awake."

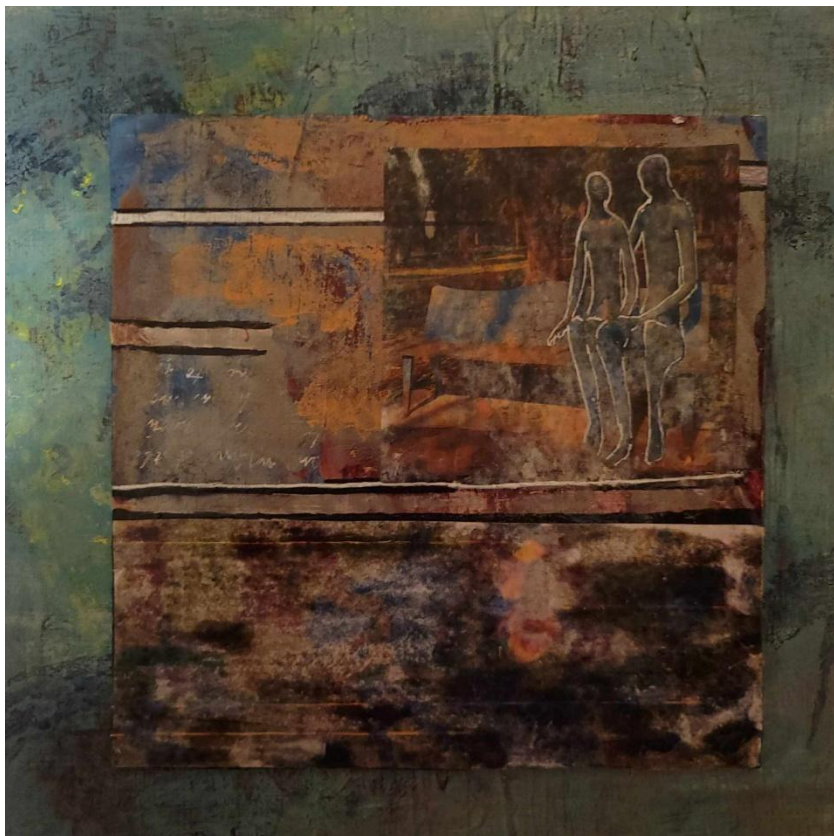
Earl didn't budge; both of his arms hung across the side of his head.

In the cracked windshield there was a section whole enough to see out. Twenty feet ahead in the grass, Daryl lay crumpled. His legs were crushed, his face bloody and caked with grass, but he wiggled a bit and moaned even more.

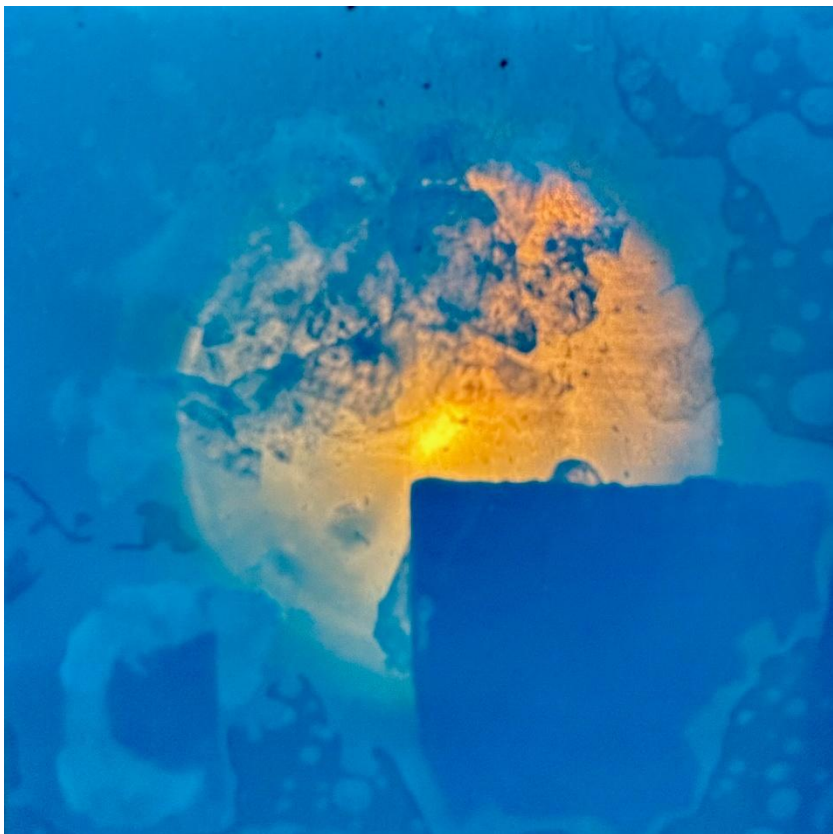
Joan was tired of ghosts and attempts at redemption. Tired of blame and guilt, heroes, and villains. She called out to Earl repeatedly but Earl just hung there. Her body ached as she chased after air through pursed lips, strapped in, trapped.

She heard voices of other people before seeing the Blue Girl. Like a dark angel, the Blue Girl slowly made her way through the tall grass. Daryl had been bleeding a good bit on his own, but she saw how

the Blue Girl helped that man bleed a little bit more. Whether she used teeth or fingers Joan wasn't sure. Afterwards, the Blue Girl crawled toward her. Both the Blue Girl's hands and her purple lips glistened with the sinner's blood. Inverted, the Blue Girl sat on the hood, staring back from an image transposed, reversed, flipped. Then the Blue Girl moved through shattered glass, pressing her cold purple lips to Joan's mouth, sharing just enough air to hear the words, *I forgive you.*



CDMX / Eileen Nittler



Obstruction / Jamie L. Smith



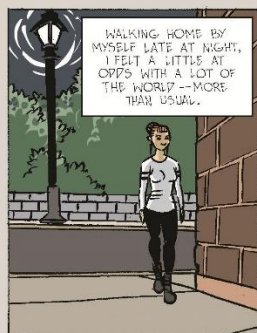
Hiroshima A / Jamie L. Smith

BrainFood

Patrick McEvoy (Author)

Olivia Pelaez (Illustrator)





AND IT SEEMED LIKE WHATEVER I WAS DOING OVER THE NEXT FEW



WORDS THAT MADE ME FEEL CONSTRAINED, PUT IN A PEN OR

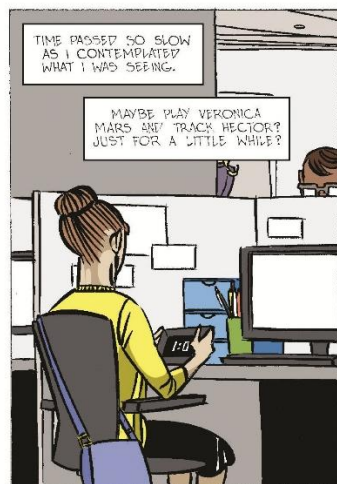


(AFTER ONE BEER NO LESS).

SOMEONE WAS READY TO MAKE A COMMENT SAYING I WAS THIS OR THAT. SKANK. BITCH. ALCOHOLIC.







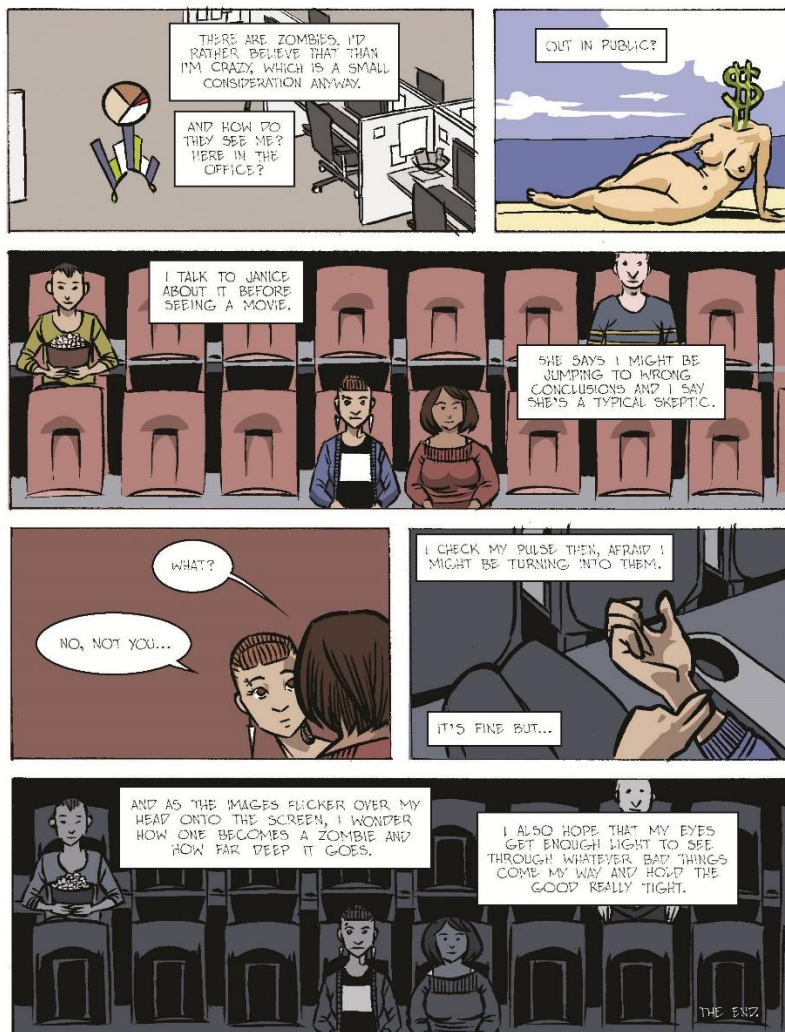






I CONTEMPLATE WHAT THE OFFICER'S FACE MIGHT LOOK LIKE IN A MIRROR THEN. HOW HECTOR'S ATTACK WILL BE PRESENTED TO EVERYONE.





STORY: PATRICK McEVoy ART: OLIVIA PELAEZ

BRAIN FOOD



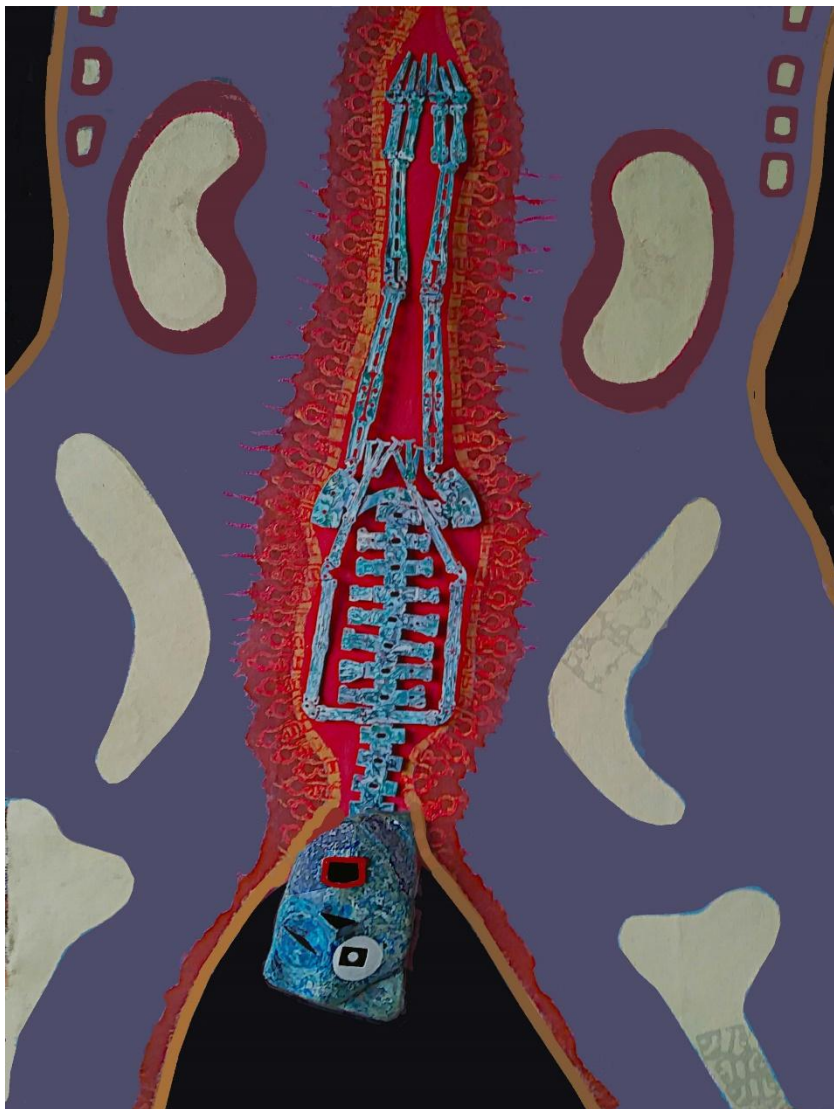
The Traffic Light Within Me / Karin Reimondos



Geode / Eileen Nittler



Mother Spider and Twins / Serge Lecomte



Locolobo's Reluctant Birth / Jeff Mann

The Old Man at the End

Mark Wagstaff

Hate the country. Been on the road long enough to know nothing goes straight in the country. This village, like hundreds strung along the dust roads: shanty houses; store, for what they make or trade—bolts of cloth, axe heads, ropes to bind; a little dirt hole, to drink yourself blind. Slim business for me. But when you transit, town to town, you scratch up in sores like this. Nearly evening, sick and tired of walking. Sickness makes me tired. Mine, and everyone's. Couldn't catch a ride not two, three days. No one goes your way in the country. All the same, these places: wombs for the dead.

Not cautious, not hiding. Why would I? Town clothes, dusty with road; traveler's skin, long-time hate in every crease, tells tales, shouts me out, from every barn and attic. They knew there was a stranger before I got here. Why hide? In plain sight, where everyone sees, I walk the length of the village, for dogs and local curses. Introduce myself in silent parade: up the street and back, up and back, till everyone sees. Till they come out their houses to see. Then I'm ready.

Everywhere, in the country, got these dirt holes: drinking holes. Counter, few rough tables, maybe some game: of force, not skill. The usual human bonfires sat round, drinking like it upsets them. Like they can't stop. All the old men at the end of their use, swilling filth and harking back to what they can't remember. Old men. The owner glares me down against a wall of silence. Noise stops when I walk in. Good. They better know me from the get-go: I don't care, I'm a stranger too often. Let the whole village come, then it's done. Then I don't have to get tired with new hate, new sickness.

The owner, he doesn't want town money. Makes out he doesn't know it. He'd rather something bent and clodden, sprung from spongy earth. That country money these hard-heads make of scraps. He juggles the coins like they burn. "Not this. I can't have this."

"It's exchange."

"Not proper."

"It's exchange." So long doing this, I know the looks of scarecrow eyes probing my stiff back. A traveler, here, is always a thief, whether by night in the hayricks; in distant smoke on the road; or in ragged uniform, taxation in both barrels. I'm not any of that. But I'm still a thief. He's right, for the wrong reasons. That's my favorite joke, on cold nights in town alleys.

The rest gawp, hairy jowls slack from beer, from long played-out hard times. I'm not unfeeling: there's no rest out these ways till they lime you in the pit. They've done their turn, working muscles long wasted away. I got charity, generosity for that; when it doesn't cost. The oldest, bloodiest, worst starts up: swampy voice sucking words out the ignorance of years. "You traveler?"

No point wasting breath on what I am. "Passing. Going to town."

"Passing quick?"

Not quick enough for their slow days. "Staying tonight, maybe. There rooms here?"

"Not for this money."

Don't blame them, wanting me gone. "I'll work: a day for a night." I've seen enough road to look like a man who works his turn. I keep strength in my back pocket, like those colored ribbons towners say make you bulletproof.

"No work here."

I'm not without understanding. Nothing happens in these places. A day, a year goes by and nothing happens. A stranger threatens entertainment, a rat for dogs to worry. If they don't want my work I'll stay idle. But I'm staying. "All done is it?"

A stir of old bones, going nowhere. Twenty years back, they'd have been up, pushing my shoulders, digging my chest. Making waves by moonlight. But now I'm young in a room of remains. Young some ways. They stir and mutter, dim old minds lost for some power against me.

"No work here."

A fine night, and no road where every door is bolted. Back of the village, fields rise in silver waves to echo a vast moon. In towns, you forget the sky, only see it drenched in rain. In wilds, the sky

reaches down, to touch, almost, the cowering earth. Easy to know, out these ways, trouble comes from above. Alone outside. Fear, exhaustion, tomorrow's chores, keep the locals home nights. But word spreads, quick as plague, on unseen tongues, in unheard voices, down the street, in every cottage. They all hug their fireside; they all know I'm here.

I've drank enough rain, breathed enough ice; I'm clean of local emotions. Under a moon and night all my own, sickness fades a little, as a sense of strength comes on me; strength to rope this place up tight with my presence. Them: inside, watching their fires, counting their fingers, splitting bread to last one day more than it can. Tied to these fields and what little grows. But I have the night, the wide country, the world beyond their imagining. If they want fear, they can fear me; I'm outside.

Find a shed of ruined things; make my bed on old sacks. Hunger and cold, always; no worse than anywhere. My village lies below, uneasy thoughts fracturing its sleep. I'm not reckless: I reach, almost gently, for what worries them by night. Taste the gleaming air for what dark poison keeps them late when they should be early, tired when they should rest. I sleep, cold and hungry, knowing I'll wake as a man for whom days and roads are the same.

First place I knock, a stubby, angry creature makes fists on sight; says there's no work. Second knock's a nervy woman, greying hair pressed in a tumorous knot. Says to ask her husband: he's in the fields or something. Says she can't help. Whatever it is, she can't help. I swagger the length of the village, so they can despise me some more. I've seen these places through and through, huddled to the dust roads. But this scrap of nowhere's no accident. I'm called.

Young men, brought from chores early, by the same inaudible warning that projects my presence all over. The fear that multiplies me, from the road to the fields to the hills, till I'm a brigand army come to bleed their lives of everything they don't have. A squad, but they let me surround them, scared if I see a way through their ranks, they'll split to cinders.

"Going?"

"Later."

In the second it takes them to look at each other, I know they've no fight. But I knew before. If they were strong, they wouldn't be here.

"You don't start nothing," says one, like there's anything he might do.

I've been run from places, hard; seen crowds with hands aflame. Felt stones in my back. Heard gunshots. In towns, where there's nothing but enemies, hate bubbles up through cracks in the road, elemental in the ruins. The wilds, chained by frost and rain, by the fetish of harvest, are sick on fighting nature. Nervous of their thresholds, they face war prone. They don't know what to do with me; they drift, making threats that mean nothing. Women watch and know their men have no stomach.

I knock here and there, where I need to, enough to the end of the village, the patched and spattered cottage with boards for windows, neglect instead of desperation to survive the weather. I knock.

A small creature, wasted from bigger men's bones, fusses and rubs his fingers. His ridged, disrupted face flees daylight. His eyes are dull, even for here.

"Is there work?"

No words: a strangled sigh.

"I can fetch and set. Bridge and cover. I can dig. Dig deep."

His arms crackle in a starved arc.

"I'll work for a crust. A swallow."

Does he know me, to let me in his door? Or does my breath push him back? The weight of my stare, roll him like a punch from these strange fists? He crumples, needing the wall for a spine. I'm here.

"I make good and mend. Tie ends."

I walk, he follows, his wheezy lungs a creeping fog behind me. In towns, there are places with cloth on the floor, pictures on the walls. But these country hovels are bled of comfort, his worse than most. A table of blocks; a sacking bed; a chair, hardly joined. All dust, except that: the metal box. Metal, so rare. The wheezing gets harsh, struggling itself to words.

"No work here."

All of it formed from the same lack of substance as himself. All needing a spine. "I could fix that table. Make good."

"No . . ."

"I could wash the walls."

His skin, starved of shape, a rag sheet giving nothing of what he once was, before he was hollowed, shrunk and collapsed. I've seen enough not to trust skin.

"I'll start here. Have you tools? Are there tools in the box?"

"I . . . no . . ."

"Shall we look?" It's held fast with a piece of work I've not seen in a long time: a thick, oblong slab lock, needs two keys. Not iron: steel, its turned insides, its springs and rollers, the most intricate craft for miles. The young men who failed to close me down would have seen nothing like it. I give it a knock. "Is this a problem? Does it need the axe?"

I smell his sudden panic, ripe as a juicy fly. He twitches, trembles. "No . . . tools . . ."

"Might be something use."

He's scared, and I'm no more cruel than I need to be. Find a rabbit snared, I'll always break its back.

"I can mend. Shape and form. I can use what's in this box."

"Mend everything?" Shaking, like he's swallowed thunder.

"Not all. Not at once. Bit by bit."

A shiver of his jaw, a ricked drag to his wasted throat brings a flash of light on cratered skin. He smells of terror, feces; stinks of flesh and blood. White flesh, red blood. In folds of dead tissue I catch the spark: a chain round his neck, fine and careful metal, and two shiny keys. When I lift it clear he stumbles, as though the chain had held him up. I watch him flail for the wall, no more than a husk and windpipe, rasping. I know bones; he's near the end.

The keys kept bright—I don't want to know how—but the lock's mistrustful. The keys have to be turned opposite ways the same time with equal pressure: hard for an impatient man; impossible for him. "You not opened this lately?"

No words: a starved gasp.

I'm impatient, I jab and twist, mistake it again and again. Need to remember: discipline; rigor with care. Bunched over the lock, cursing, while he watches, clawed to the wall, the remains of his ribs rattling with narrow breath. He flinches, so do I, as a sour metal thud rebounds from some other time.

"No . . ."

Too late: I crack the lid.

I'm not sentimental; how could I be? I've had years of road. Real years. To open this box defies memory: looking inside, I look in myself, seeing what most reminds me of safety, of distance travelled alone. The communicator: dead of course, its channels long silent. Radiation monitor. Oxygen meter. Here from the day they were hidden, in fading hope of resuscitation. The helmet: its tinted visor, its life support inputs for lives other than mine. This gun: a gleaming scrap of some brave time in the last of this man's centuries, brought to places foolish enough to think they'd done with all that. Not me: I like guns. I feel its balance, its weight: nothing without the armor pack; the shot, as these men say. I show it him. "Bet you were deadeye."

He has no color, no shape. The dirty puddles left for eyes wet his lunar face. His shroud of baggy flesh, once pinnacle of its race. We had different training, different adaptations; we call things by other words, but our lives were the same. We could talk of unquestioning duty; we could compare our science. Conquerors of what these men used to call gravity.

His chest, his throat, churning; crippled mouth, aching for words. "It was . . . long ago."

"Yes." I've seen dust roads, ruined towns. These villages, stinking of fear.

"You know . . ." His lips chew and shake, the strong jaw, the clean-lined cheeks perished. "It was hard for us."

Oh yes: them. Hard for them. He chokes to be heard.

"Hard when we got . . . there."

"There?"

"That planet."

This strange sound: planet. Not heard in so long.

"There was nothing . . . nothing we knew about . . . other . . ."

"Life. There was nothing you knew about other life." Speak his language better than he does. They didn't listen, and didn't see, and didn't know anything.

"No one expected . . ." His bones sing, his face convulses. "No one knew."

"We thought wars were over." I never thought wars were over. "We thought you were friends, come to share learning." The story we were told. But anyone who remembered what our grandfathers lived through knew that for a lie. It was impressive, what one ship of these men could achieve.

"We thought we were attacked. It was all . . . unexpected." His eyes are bronze moons. "We were scientists. Explorers. When we left we were kings . . . heroes. The first human beings to walk on another world, in the light of another star. Everyone wanted to know us, to be us. There was . . ." The words, old words. "Television. Us, on television. Int . . . int . . . internet, all over the world. The launch was the most watched event in the history of humanity. Humanity. Ninety-seven percent of the world watched."

"How many watched the landing?"

"No one." He looks desperately at me. At me. "You know. Your equipment jammed our signals."

Not on purpose, but I let him think it. It was what the old-time techies would call a functionality thing.

"We were out of contact. Lost. We didn't know why. That's why we were wary. In training . . ." He raises a hand, almost falls. "In training we talked about system backup . . . radio silence. But no one thought everything would fail."

How like these stupid, hopeful people.

"Our systems were good. They were tested in ice, in deserts. We came down blind, deaf . . ."

Stupid. Hopeful.

"You don't know." A lick of color finds his cheek. "You don't know what it's like to stand on a new world alone. We were frightened. We'd not trained for that."

He means the first to stand on a new world and not know where they were going. They really were explorers.

“Once systems fail . . .” Words, strange words. “Confidence goes. Don’t know what’ll give next. We weren’t sure we could leave.”

Not all of them left. We made mistakes: our guards, badly led, lazy, unprepared for action. Out of the habit. Perhaps if they’d challenged the intruders in a form they recognized. There might’ve been talk, assistance, some fleeting fraternity. Both sides: scared, hasty. But it was our earth they were stood on. “But you left. And the other survivors.”

“Help me to the chair.”

I watch.

“Please. I need to sit.”

Take his arm: fragile as the stone bones in our museums. An old man’s stutter—swift feet and no movement—an age to sit him down. Near the end.

He looks with molten eyes. “You must know what happened. You’re scientists, you . . . people. You watch the sky.”

We watch, but not as we used to.

“We thought we’d make a report. For discussion. To explain...about the dead.” The wreck of his face behind a shriveled hand. “How could we think there’d be this?”

Far away, on our little greenish-silver speck of platinum rock, we watched. To know that creatures, advanced enough to shoot you dead, lived somewhere else was compelling. We watched, mesmerized.

“Panic . . .” He closes his eyes. “The terror . . . Fighting. No one knew what to do. The story got out we’d be invaded. We were blamed: the hero-men who’d flown to the stars. Blamed for bringing down a plague . . . the fear . . . the wars.”

The wars of the starmen. We watched it unfold, relayed through the cloud of broadcast clutter we’d always ignored before. Till the broadcasts stopped. We—successors to so much grief—amazed at how wars spread.

“In the end . . .” His voice fractures. “They used everything. Broke everything. Every scrap of everything, in the war of believers and unbelievers. Some wanted the stars . . . some wanted death. And they broke it all. Look outside. You know. This is all we have. Dirt

roads. Wood shacks. No light, no heat. No science. The fist rules. The gun . . . those who have them. This is what your people did.”

A tiny loop in the computer controlling this skin I’m fixed in brings his words into my main brain. I don’t need to refresh, to replay that last sound pattern. I know his language. This man: the last of them, that I spent years to find. “We changed.”

“Not like us.” Shouting, in what voice he has. “You’re here.” Something lights his face, some thought. “You have a craft? A ship? You . . . landed here? You have medicines? Yes? You have medicines? They hung the doctors. Last government we had. They hung all science. To make it better. You could take me? Take me . . . there? I could say . . . sorry. If you want. We’re astronauts. Brothers. Please.”

“You killed my brothers.”

“We were frightened, and they looked . . .” He stares. “You look . . .”

I can breathe this air but it riles me. See in this light, enough. I can eat and drink, walk and fight as these men do. On hind legs, bone-fisted. I’m sunk deep. But I’m not his brother.

Still he goes on. “You have a ship? I could come . . . please.” Reaching out his withered hand, trying his withered self against age and sickness.

From my pocket—as though I’ve had pockets and uses for pockets all my life—I slide the smooth black slate that sweetens when things go sour, that’s rectified them all who came that day. No matter how they were hiding. No matter how deep. He’s the last. The old man at the end.

“Is that some . . . device? To call your ship?”

“We had to find these. In memories. In locked rooms. We had to find these again and make them new. This is what your people did.” In our halls, our assemblies, cautions, doubts were raised. Learned discussions were had. But not me: I like fighting. I like that the old days came again. For our worlds.

He collapses, finished, empty. “Then do it.” A final spark in his scaly eyes. “Kill me. Do it. Look outside. I’m already dead.”

I’m no more cruel than I need to be, and I think: let him live, leave him to his pain. This is punishment: he should suffer. But I’ve

killed the rest. I can't accept an untidy process. I do the favor: I'm not without charity, not some alien monster.

In the box, I find his badge torn from a suit long shattered. Maybe they hung it, in effigy of hanging the sky that rains endless trouble. I lay the badge on his chest: still bright, the pretty blue-green planet crisscrossed with brave accelerant lines. Showing . . . what's their word? Atoms? Like the weapons, still hidden somewhere. We could have learnt peace together. But not me: I get things done.

The same nervy faces watch me go.

"You leaving?"

"Going to town."

"That's right. You keep going." Brave: telling someone to walk who's already walking.

I let them have my swagger, my strong, steady stride. Let them think from my clenched fists I could be back anytime. Down the dust road, in light that, to me, is hazy grey-silver, I stop. I look at the sky. Where I can't go. Severed from home, on a suicide mission. I don't miss the cities, the endless talk, the politics: that's for civilians. I miss my comrades, but not much: we volunteer; we die. Could complete: my slate, my discarded skin, puzzled over by archaeologists in some long distant future when these apes come again. But not me: I'm no suicide. I'm off mission. I know more than anyone else in this world. My power is immense. I'm going to town.



Beneath the Mask / Wenqing Gu



Threshold of Remembrance / Wenqing Gu



The Eternal Embrace of Nature / Wenqing Gu

Cold, Wet Prose of a Dog

Candice M. Kelsey

ALWAYS BEGIN WITH THE ENDING

I killed a dog. Ava was ready to confess to the American Airlines gate agent who, upon inspecting her boarding pass, straightened up and peered over her Warby Parkers. 'Just a moment, Miss. You cannot board.'

Varvara 'Ava' Winston's greatest talent is confession, always quick to apologize. Guilt has manned her helm, iron-jawed and ready, for decades, steering into the headways of contrition. She assumes everyone walks ankle deep in shame, ambling about skittishly waiting for a cosmic shoe to drop. Exposing her and her fellow impostors. For Ava, shouldering blame is home. Being stopped at Gate A5 triggers her guilt reflex. Plus, she did kill a dog.

A lot of dogs. And cats, the occasional squirrel, several gopher tortoises too. Even a western fence lizard who scampered under her roller blades. It is not like Ava was the sole brute; other people kill more than their share of animals. Indirectly at least. Didn't carnivores have some blood on their hands, supporting factory farming's empire, knee-deep in slaughter, marching toward ecological destruction? When she found herself moralizing, it was time to turn the screws on herself. The private armies of hurt she is dispatched on friends and family over the years. Disregard for former lovers. Doors slammed on difficult relationships. Her trademark recklessness.

How she prioritizes animals over humans. Ava's problem, one of her problems, is reconciling the desire to rescue animals with the responsibility to end their suffering. How to love them, when to kill them. Like Elsa, Skippy, Kramer, Dulcinea, Zuzu, Lulu, and Pinto. Blood on her hands. The undercurrent of mercy in a sea of sudden death should rouse the guilt, but it doesn't.

ENTER BOONE

Boone of the soulful eyes and enormous stature; Boone, the rescued Dober Dane; Boone, the most recent entry in Ava's gentle-death ledger.

"Miss Winston, there is a hold on your ticket. I cannot let you on the plane."

Blonde and petite, like Ava's mom, Shannon wears AA authority well. Unlike Ava's mom, she has a gentle voice. And the power to thwart this escape back to L.A., rending the leash to her future. She grounds herself by staring at the shiny emblem across the gate agent's heart. Pinned to the fitted Land's End cardigan is American Airlines' motto: *Let Good Take Flight*. She was screwed.

They know. Is this her moment of reckoning? Making peace with missing her flight home, she waits. She is skilled at biding her time. A year in the South has trained her. Still, did she deserve to be detained? It must be some glitch on the airline's end, but these days, after all she has been through, all she has done, she heels to the irrational. Who kills a dog and gets away with it?

A HIGH SCHOOL ENGLISH TEACHER

That is who. Ava catches herself, tries to refocus, stop ripping her chest open and pulling serious shit out. She cannot help it. In some ways it makes her the dynamic teacher she is, training students to rip open characters like Tea Cake and Janie, pull the serious shit from Circe and Calypso. Scoop from their own adolescent hearts and write.

People liked to say she could be too much. Sometimes too-fucking-much. Ava agreed, but what could she do? It was the only way she knew.

Her oldest daughter could also be a bit much. She is the one who set Boone into motion a year ago, pleading 'there is a Dober Dane mix in Beaufort, SC, and he's soooo cute. Can we get him today please?' The last thing she wanted was to take on a new dog, but she also

wanted to assuage the guilt for uprooting her three kids from California to Georgia.

She had the cliché love-hate relationship with Los Angeles, loving its Xanadu-El Dorado composite and hating the requisite struggle to enjoy it. For almost two decades, since their first child was born, Ava had begged Rob to move. The grind of parenting in addition to the grind of L.A. was too much; it was a dumpster fire inside another dumpster fire. Rob refused. ‘L.A. is where I’m supposed to be,’ he would tell her. Instead of standing up to him, she raged at the city, blamed L.A. for her exhaustion, loneliness, and anger. The kids did not want to leave; Los Angeles was the only home they had ever known. Georgia was nothing but Sammy’s fourth grade state report on a cereal box float. “The Peach State” had a romantic pull to her children. For a day or two.

ROB WINSTON

Ava’s husband of twenty years was the only one for the move. Which made no sense. He had always wanted to stay in L.A., no matter the cost of living, the battle to make ends meet, the Herculean effort to get to the beach, and the hellscape called Lincoln Boulevard. When she wept about not having family to help with three little ones, he promised her God would provide. Translation: I am not leaving. Now he had lost his job and was ready to bail, return to the Southland where he was raised.

“Let’s move, get outta L.A. finally.” He was blunt and quick about it. A bludgeoning, which she both appreciated and resented. She was in the kitchen of their rented Mid-Modern ranch, watering down the orange juice as usual. An L.A. sunset covers a multitude of sins, but it did not buy groceries or pay the rent. ‘I want to move back to the South.’ She wanted to run. Out the French doors, across the synthetic grass, and up the sound wall to feast on the 405, the juicy flesh a pink mixture of red and white lights. Traffic, its incessant noise and energy, the life of the city, had come to mean everything to her. Contempt and awe, struggle and triumph, something amniotic. All

packed into a six-lane concrete womb laboring just twenty yards from her bed.

WHERE WERE THE CARS GOING, WHOM WERE THEY LEAVING?

The idea of leaving stunned her. It is what she had petitioned for year after year to no avail. Now that he wanted to go, she could not bear it. After a good thirty minutes, she delivered herself inside, dutiful, and obedient, beside Rob to finish what felt nothing like a conversation and everything like a cruel surprise wrapped in a bad idea and dropped onto a speeding conveyor belt. What she had wanted all those years was now repugnant.

Then came the nightmares. The Marjorie Taylor Greene-Confederate-flag-pig-pull-chained-dog kind. She imagined Anna Grayson, nineteen, devolving into a Bama rush girl, or worse, dating a Braves fan; Sammy, fifteen, trading his skateboard for a skeet rifle or worse, becoming a Braves fan; and Bracha, thirteen, monogramming her wardrobe, or worse, becoming a UGA fan.

She had always been leaving Rob. There had been a thousand tiny exits along the way. When he didn't show up, emotionally or physically; when he showed up too much, emotionally and physically.

UNWANTED KISSES

La Cienega Boulevard became a conveyor belt delivering her and Rob to and from a little North Hollywood school for eight years. To and from Ava's second marriage. Two years in with a diaper bag in tow, she left that school for another. To establish a start-up high school across town. Somehow, Rob managed to come along at the last minute.

When that school became fucked up, she left. He followed. They both landed at Brentwood Village Catholic School. A decade in and the head of school began harassing Ava to join her for lunch off campus, room with her at all-school retreats in San Diego, and meet

her for drinks after open house events. A Sister of Christian Charity, Jackie was a menacing live oak of a nun known for her clicking heels of doom echoing down the school's halls. The more Ava rebuffed Sister Jackie's invitations, the more she pursued. Ava understood pursuit.

By April of 2018, her final year at Brentwood Village, she had fielded four unwanted, open mouth kisses from Jackie. Assault after assault, and the inability to find any recourse. The leadership was an incestuous tangle of spouses, priests, and golfing buddies. Ava resigned.

Rather than spiraling like a lost helicopter seed, she beat her wings, landing on the most colorful flower around. A nectar source called Pathway to Success, the equivalency program for the Department of Juvenile Justice. Even when COVID kept her home soon after, and like most of the world's educators she began teaching remotely, she thrived under Pathway's leadership.

NO AMOUNT OF WATERED-DOWN JUICE WOULD DO

Rob was fired from BVCS a year later. Again, he followed Ava's lead. But Pathway was not hiring, and he could not find another job in Los Angeles. The seas parted for his journey home to the South. Ava was happy teaching for Pathway, and the healthy school environment was exactly what she needed, but it was not enough income for the Winstons to survive. Rob needed employment.

Although Ava had been leaving Rob for years, she had not admitted it to herself. She was confident he had no clue beyond his immediate needs—protein bars, ear plugs, sunscreen, ESPN. Practice plans for basketball. Ava's undivided attention and apologies on demand. Now he needed to leave Los Angeles, which required her to show up in a more conspicuous way. Still bury the loneliness but be present.

THE SNOWPLOW GAME

She had been showing up and being present since their first New Year's Eve at the Venice apartment when Rob told her he would be at Hinano's. McNabb was taking on the Bucs in a Philadelphia blizzard. If Rob loved anything, it was a good snowplow game. Wouldn't he also love ringing in the new year with her? She was his fiancé after all.

When he returned past midnight, she was asleep on the couch, one cat curled in the crevice of her knees like a fluffy, warm football. Unopened champagne was sweating on the mahogany table beside two 99 Cents Only headbands. Unopened poppers had rolled onto the carpet. Rob was stupid drunk, proceeded to undress, and woke Ava with an invitation to bed. 'Let's ring in the new year!' She removed her engagement ring, placed it on the coffee table next to his bare ass, and moved to the bedroom, locking the door behind. And in many ways, locking the bedroom of her heart. It was 2001; they married in August. She became deft at burying her emotions.

MAGIC IS EXHAUSTING

Twenty years later and they were moving across the country. Ava was tasked with writing two sets of resumes, cover letters, and philosophies of teaching. "I would have no idea how to do all that shit. You are good at it. Do your magic, Ava!" Rob struggled with ADHD. Over time he began using the word neurodivergent, which made her happy; she liked his commitment to self-advocacy, to understanding how his brain works and asking for what he needed. She liked helping him too.

But she did too much, and things tilted out of balance; Ava shouldered the entire household. Finances, insurance, permission slips, summer camps, coupons, car repairs, three kids and everything else adulthood entailed. She even read the list of books Rob prepared for her, titles like *How to Support Your ADHD Spouse* and *ADHD Love: A Guide for Wives*. At first, she was driven by pride, a sense of resourcefulness to counter her nagging insecurities, impressing

herself with how much she could handle, proving to the universe she was capable.

She became a woman with her hair on fire, working full time, side hustling, and parenting. Rob doubled down on coaching basketball. Ava read more books about Rob's needs. The line between exhaustion and loneliness effaced.

They were textbook codependents. Loraine, the school secretary where Ava and Rob met, had warned her. "Be careful. You are setting a dangerous precedent in the relationship by doing everything for him. Mark my words." She did not mark the words. And she paid for it with compound interest. As if finding them jobs was not demanding enough, Rob added his caveat. "We have to teach at the same school." Ava shifted her approach to selling a package deal.

On paper, she was the more impressive, so the offers rolled in. English department chair here, first-year composition there, she was flooded with interview requests. Package deal. She had to turn down the solo offer in Louisville, the one in Virginia Beach, and the one in Nashville. But further, deeper south and one school welcomed a husband-and-wife team no question.

AUGUSTA, GA

Like a speeding car swerving into her lane at midnight, Gutenberg Academy on the Hill, Augusta's premier private school, plowed into her life.

Not unlike meeting Rob in the supply room at a North Hollywood school over two decades earlier. "Rob is short for Robert?" she had asked. He nodded.

"Robert's a family name?"

"Kind of."

"Kind of?"

"My dad was a Civil War buff. Fascinated by Lee."

"So, you're related to Robert E. Lee?" She teased, intrigued by his southern upbringing.

"I'm related to Robert E. Lee in the way everyone in the North is related to the Algonquins." Ava was from New England, specifically southeastern Connecticut, where the British slaughtered the Pequots. Her parents lived in Mystic, home of the infamous Massacre at Mystic. She had studied the macabre woodcut prints depicting birds-eye views of the Mistick Fort siege where Captain Underhill torched wigwams.

Total carnage.

The Mohegan nation assisted the British by killing any Pequots trying to escape the conflagration. Today the Mohegan Sun Casino lights up the Thames and Pawcatuck River basin; Ava's mom played the slots with her sisters, claiming their minuscule percentage of Algonquin blood brought them luck. Rob relished needling her about it and many things to come.

AMERICAN HISTORY

"I'm surprised you know American history so well, considering . . ." he liked to goad her.

"Considering what?" she would bite.

"You know, New London public schools and all." He was good at amusing himself. Repeatedly, she was his preferred butt of the joke.

For a while she tried to best him at his own game. Rob's dad had graduated law school and was given a non-combat position in the army, assigned to trail and protect the children of foreign diplomats. Craig admitted he failed every target practice of his self-proclaimed pathetic military career. Ava bragged, "My father, a dyed in the wool Yankee, was a Lt. Commander on the USS Robert E. Lee. Put that in your reed-stem clay pipe and smoke it." Banter, that is what they did. During their first official date on the Marina peninsula, they learned they both run track in high school. She challenged him to a race down the north jetty, a flirtation more than a challenge, something she would never win but that would create a memory and give Rob fodder for some welcome and spirited teasing.

The parking ticket on Rob's two-door Rav4 at the end of their date provided Ava with her own fodder. But the banter turned to hours

long debates about her tone. ‘You’re not listening to me’ was Rob’s favorite retort, accurate or not. He then moved to the moral implications of her go-to Calvin Klein baseball cap. She moved to Rob’s unneutered dogs. Then a debate about geography, New England versus the Bible Belt—all of which devolved into unrestrained mockery and eventual derision. Tension was the fuel of their relationship, revving the engine of connection and passion toward a future.

But fuel is expensive and dangerous when mishandled. And they both were reckless.

‘THE MISSION’

And now the brutal march toward Georgia’s coast, three kids and a motley crew of rescued animals. Ava hoped to cut free the bundle she had been dragging. She replayed that 1986 film, *The Mission*, in her head. Her bundle was stuffed with mistakes, unkind words, impossible expectations, and a dearth of forgiveness; Rob’s with distractions, half-assed efforts, dating apps, and dearth of intimacy. She hoped somewhere between Albuquerque and Alabama a cosmic blade would sever its rope, and Rodrigo’s iconic penance scene would tumble behind the Kia’s wheels, exiting her mind forever.

But guilt is not just a slick cinematic symbol.

She found an old, laminated map of the United States in the garage left over from the few years she had attempted to home school Anna Grayson. Ava pinned it to the shiplap wall in the kitchen. The kids were used to her doing strange things, conspicuously educational things. There were documentaries on classical antiquity, the sudden appearance of library books on the Harlem Renaissance, day trips through East L.A. A map was not so unusual. Only this one had a bright orange circle in Sharpie, straight east and far from home.

Xs AND Os

“Look how close Augusta is to your sister’s college,” she told the two younger kids. “This is a chance to be near Anna Grayson.” She explained how it was better to be together in the tail of a pandemic. The oldest, Anna Grayson, shared her mother’s brilliant red curls and galaxy of freckles. She was finishing her first year at Emory; Sammy, an avid skateboarder had a shock of thick chestnut hair and unmatched confidence. The youngest, Bracha, was a California blonde with sky blue eyes and bottomless optimism.

“And,” Rob added, “L.A. has become too expensive. Your mom will be much less stressed in the South.” This is what they did now, a light, quick parenting dance. She was comfortable with some persiflage; she had been raised in it.

Her mother often teased her about Mimi, Ava’s imaginary childhood friend who would take the blame for any of her naughty behavior. Who drew kittens on the kitchen wall in crayon? Mimi. Who tucked urine-soaked panties under the living room couch cushions? Mimi. Who helped little Ava dissociate from the criticisms of her borderline personality mother? Mimi.

Ava’s imagination had always been a spirited dancer but packing up her family and moving from California to Georgia caused disorientation, clumsiness. She also bristled at how Rob presented it to the kids. He was skilled in the art of triangulation, pitting the kids against her without anyone catching on.

The Xs and Os of manipulation came naturally.

IT’S EASY TO GROW ACCUSTOMED TO LOSING

The days leading up to the move were a tarantella of boxes, tape, and bubble wrap. They booked pet friendly hotels every six to eight hours of driving. As she prepared the three cat carriers, she found unwashed blankets inside one. The urine-stained remnant of too many final trips to the VCA. Euthanasia was the orange circle around the family’s geography; she loved her companion animals, but they were a study in

delayed grief. Then Gus the corn snake slithered into the plans, Anna Grayson's 18th birthday gift. Rob thundered, "I have it handled. Enough already, just step aside, Ava."

He brought home a large plastic bin from Home Depot and began puncturing it with the lone steak knife hiding in the back corner of the silverware drawer, cold and reptilian. Stab after stab until thirty quarts of clear plastic transformed into not only the Gothic beast transit they needed, but also a slick cinematic symbol. The brutality of a forced transformation.

She worried Gus would be cold. Rob had the answer. Disposable heat packs under his bath towels and Gus should feel safe and secure on the cross-country drive. "He'll never know the difference." The difference between the wild, a terrarium, and this plastic crate are legion. How much deception lives inside a home.

NO ONE PLAYED 'I SPY'

There was no excitement, no I Spy nor cheers to celebrate the next state's welcome sign. It was an asphalt tunnel of numbness rocketed by grief. Her family was not quick to accept defeat, but no one avoided loss. Especially Ava who always opened her heart and home: her fourteen-year-old niece from Tennessee who needed a year away from her parents and her peers to recalibrate, the fifteen-year-old Pakistani exchange student whose original host family had a change of heart, and the ten-year-old who became the Winston's foster son for a few years. She cherished the excitement of settling in, the pageantry of her family's new shape, her children growing and changing in response to a new presence.

She liked imagining her home was functional enough to offer safety, love, and acceptance to those in need. Like if she willed it enough, it would be true. She did not like, however, when it ended, when Blaire returned to Tennessee and lost touch, when Tahreem returned to Karachi and sent an occasional Facebook message, and when Copeland was reunited with his biological mother, never to be heard from again. These changes affected Anna Grayson, Sammy, and

Bracha too, in ways yet to be discovered. She spiraled into guilt for introducing them to loss so early in their lives.

Two days before leaving they had to put one cat down, Charlie, as in Chaplin. And while transporting him to the car, the new kitten, Randy, as in Inglewood's iconic Randy's Donuts, escaped. Charlie was sent to the needle; Randy bolted for the desert cholla. What kitten could survive the hunger of urban coyotes? The flimsy corners of Ava's heart folded. The kids searched the agaves, the golden barrels, the yucca until the final honk signaled the time to leave. The kids' one game of I Spy thwarted and unsuccessful. Survival is in the heart of each Los Angeleno, even its four-legged ones.

THE DAY THEY LEFT LOS ANGELES

The marine layer was thick, softening the sharpness of the city. Ava aimed her eyes into the rearview mirror as they shot straight down 74th toward La Tijera, cutting their many SoCal threads. The Kia held Rob, Ava, and their youngest who tended to the three cats in the third row. The Honda Fit cradled the two older kids who tended to the dog and the snake. As they hurtled south on the 405 past the giant donut and LAX, a surreal turn of events brought the cool shadow of an eighteen-wheeler. Parallel and setting the pace was their very own Berger Allied, allowing them to draft behind. Everything they owned lay blanketed in captivity behind orange aluminum doors. In rebellious unison, the Winstons' living cargo either vomited, howled, or defecated. They headed east on the 105.

She predicted they would lose a cat in Texas, they did not; a kid in Arkansas, they did not; a tire in Tennessee, no. Would they eat Circle K pickles-in-a-pouch? Yes.

A WITNESS OF FOOLS

Twenty years ago, Ava's soon-to-be-mother-in-law drove her from church to church to find a pastor willing to marry a non-Christian to

her son. She had suffered a witness of fools unwilling to officiate. She devolved into needing it to happen, to feed the gods of Southern approval. The bluntness of her fiancé's mother had a certain charm, showing attention she had never known. Ava succumbed. Father Lorrie, a professor at the University of Chattanooga, the only queer pastor in the area, agreed out of who-knows-what sense of obligation or mercy. She liked to think he too understood rejection.

He, his seven dogs, and his partner were more than willing to perform a stellar ceremony, much of which was their own rebellion against the First Presbyterian Church of Chattanooga's values. Decades after the ceremony, she would exchange Christmas cards with Lorrie, keep up with which of his dogs had not made it through the year, and reiterate her gratitude for what he had done—not just marrying a non-believer to a good Christian boy in the deep South, but living his truth amidst a hostile community.

The Winstons traversed their laminated map, starting at the Hualapai Lodge on historic Route 66. They found a closed pool and windowless rooms. The first night away from home proved inhospitable at best and hostile at worst. The trigger had been pulled; they had left the Golden State.

SHARON OLDS

The second day of driving from Peach Springs, Arizona, across I-40 toward Albuquerque offered endless construction delays. She attempted to cheer the kids with a fun fact: Disney/Pixar's *Cars*' Radiator Springs was inspired by Peach Springs. She played 'Life is a Highway' from the soundtrack, but no one was up for Rascal Flatts nor her nostalgic overture.

The eight-hour drive became twelve. It was as if the universe was shouting *go back! You don't want to do this*. As if the voice of Sharon Olds called out from her famous poem, *Stop, / don't do it — / you are going to do things / you cannot imagine you would ever do*. All Ava heard was Sammy's gentle sobs in the Kia's third row, a cat on his lap and his head against the glass. A detour sent them north to the Colorado

border, literal and physical tanks empty. The cavalcade of life, everyone just passing through, people who have killed dogs and people who could never imagine they might have to do awful things someday.

A Southwestern labyrinth and its string of cars hoping to make it to the other side, the Winstons too could run out of gas, overheat, or face any other minotaur looping around the Navajo Reservation. Ava was used to looping around rather than going through. Marriage had trained her to stay in the proverbial car, keep her hands on the wheel, and drive forward. Tank empty? Keep driving. Landscape unwelcoming? No matter.

A personal exercise in civil disobedience, the detour ended at Thoreau, New Mexico. Its broad valley bowed under a wall of entrada sandstone. Known for its majestic escarpments, the town exhaled separation—long, steep slopes marking the southern edge of the Colorado Plateau, dividing the Navajo from the *bilagaana*, cleaving Ava's family from the West Coast. The thread had been cut—they made it out.

MARY VINCENT

Before reentering I-40, a stray dog darted across the on ramp. Anna Grayson begged her to pull over. What is one more animal in this entourage?

As she slowed, the dog's tail swept left to right, as if some cosmic traffic police officer waving them by. Ava rejoined her senses and instead pulled into Jiggie's; refueling and choosing a true crime podcast was all she could take on. The episode about fifteen-year-old Mary Vincent, a California hitchhiker who survived the unspeakable. After being thrown off a thirty-foot cliff on I-5 near Del Puerto Canyon, her attacker severed her arms from her body, leaving her to bleed out a pulpy, disoriented torso with only her legs to lead her. Literally disarmed, she still found her way home. Ava smiled, always heartened when the discarded find survival.

Hurtling east through the night, she and her nineteen-year-old daughter listened with horror. Freeways are often crime scenes.

An occasional gasp or high-pitched shriek lit up the car's interior like the city lights appearing beneath the Sandia Mountain skyline. Mother and daughter at their best. A neon red and purple trim above the freeway signs lit the way with its bastardized NMDOT rendition of a Pueblo pattern. New Mexico at its worst. The farther from L.A., the uglier.

EXPOSED BALCONIES

Ava suffered from emotional blunting. Her nervous system had become a faithful disciple of the freeze response, which had been hardwired into her psyche for the sake of survival. When a boy held her down in the basement of her parents' Blue Ash condominium, she tasted the sour flesh of his left hand. *No, no, please no.* She froze; he entered. She was no fighter, no Mary Vincent. Sister Jackie's assaults triggered this memory and wanted to explore the association but was buried under a pyramid of self-shame for having not fought.

Freeways, the stretch of time and horizon, offer paths forward, but also necessary unburdenings.

Albuquerque's Pyramid Marriott North offered twin rooms with exposed balconies to the courtyard below, an easy leap to end it all. But then she would not be able to visit Craig, her father-in-law, the next day, the last time she would see him. Instead, she stayed up late while the others slept; she decided to make a list of why she had occasional thoughts of ending it. She knew it all had to do with an inability to trust.

GARDUÑOS' CHIPS CON QUESO

Morningstar Assisted Living & Memory Care opened for visitors at 8am. Rob started down Paseo del Norte with the same abandon he exercised on his morning soapbox lectures for Ava, keeping her apprised of just how selfish she really is. The visit was short, painful, and disorienting. Rob's dad, a retired family law attorney, could not

adjust to his new home, wandered the antiseptic halls in search of his makeshift garage workshop where he fussed over homemade retablos. A brief yet strange kinship since displacement agrees with no one.

Craig had been a father figure to Ava, spending hours talking to her, helping her problem solve, sharing political ideas, discussing history, and celebrating even the smallest of her successes. He was familiar with the depths of human suffering only a family law attorney of forty years could encounter. He was tenderness, resignation, compassion. She could not resist his presence.

She cherished early morning hikes with Craig up the Rinconada Canyon trail, long drives listening to his CD set of The Great Courses while drinking free hotel coffee, and hearing his witty stories steeped in trial lore and surprising punch lines. He was the father she had always wanted. When dementia took him, and he no longer knew her from the host at Garduño's, Ava grieved. Visiting him in an assisted living home numbed her. She refused to feel anything.

MORE AMERICAN HISTORY

The Winstons rolled through the Lone Star State and the Sooner to the Natural and the Volunteer which delivered them to the Heart of Dixie and finally Georgia, the Peach State. Loading and unloading three cats, an aging dog, and a shedding corn snake in and out of roadside motels, this broken family of five animal-loving vegans was opening to new geography and the life it might sprout.

They spent the final night in Birmingham at the vacant family home of Anna Grayson's college roommate. Before settling in, she demanded they visit the 16th Street Baptist Church and pay respects to Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, and little Denise McNair. Her own children were used to hearing about the riots in L.A., had visited Watts Tower even, but this landmark struck deeper.

The cats protested into the early hours. They could not keep from playing under and knocking over a portrait of the host's great grandfather in his gray wool jacket and brogans. Framed and leaning

against the wall on the office floor, their host's family heirloom took a beating. Hawk, Bryce, and Perseus released five days of car captivity upon one framed manifestation of the Confederacy. Ava liked to think they were detonating a feline response sixty years after September 15th.

FLAGS

As they navigated the final stretch from Atlanta to Augusta, she made note of the time it took, still under the delusion Atlanta was a viable option as an airport. LAX had been a neighbor, mere blocks down Manchester. What the fuck was she doing?

Then they entered Georgia, and the flags were flying. All of them. Trump flags, Confederate, Don't Tread on Me, Blue Lives Matter, and Go Dawgs. Proud Boy bumper stickers in fact existed. The percentage of cars with Yak racks dropped like the Mississippi River's water line, and the frequency of gun racks rose in tidal ferocity.

As they pulled into the driveway of their new home, the cars were silent. Each kid opened a car door; the Georgia summer opened its maw to greet them. Sammy said what they were all thinking. "This is not normal. What is this?" L.A. kids do not understand humidity. Damp and unnerved, Ava unfolded. Raised in New England, she was no stranger to weather, but this was offensive, unseemly even. An assault.

What was this indeed?

FIGS, LEMONS

The moving truck texted they were stopping in Florida first; it would take three days to get their furniture, their belongings, the stuff of their life. Everything in the South stopped in Florida it seemed. Their first foray into Southern living manifested in the mind-numbing aisles of America's favorite superstore, searching for air mattresses, a travel set of utensils, and every vegan product Walmart carried. Arriving

home, they found a Publix bag full of freshly picked figs on the front porch. Their realtor had left a welcome note and delicious gift from her tree.

One of her favorite things about living in Los Angeles was Monday mornings at work. The faculty lounge table would have a plump Ralphs bag with a note: *Free—from my tree! Please take home.* Sometimes it was lemons, sometimes limes or even oranges. A citrus *pilón* to start the week. She liked figs. She willed herself to see them as a symbol of hope. What choice did she have? She could not pin a sign to her chest: *Free! Please take me home* and stand on the corner by the Wife Saver Restaurant.

Ava fell asleep on the floor of the largest bedroom she had ever known. Her eyes rested on the loblolly pines at salute outside her obscene wall of cathedral-size windows. Like the SoCal-unhoused in neighborhood encampments, she unrolled her sleeping bag onto an air mattress and rolled up the memory of their laminated map. She buried herself into the flannel trying to dream of home. After five lonely minutes, she fired up a sleep meditation on her phone and drifted off.

FOURTH OF JULY

She found herself covering her own ears and checking on the cats and the dog every five minutes while the husband-and-wife sheriff neighbors proceeded to rain down holy terror from a haul of fireworks. Brock and Emily were Iraqi vets who kept a gun and ammo collection, curios from their service in Iraq, on display in their garage. Emily chose an American flag bikini to celebrate. One strap came loose as she chased her mother with a Roman candle, retribution for telling her she looked fat.

Their five dogs howled as did the neighborhood kids. Brock sprinted to restrain his wife who was three drinks in. Ava marveled at his legs, squat and square, testaments to military and police training. Two years later Brock's left leg would be amputated after a drunk driver nearly killed him. Blue lives are messy too.

She tried to enjoy the celebration, wanting to savor the serene sky void of LAPD helicopters, but faux exhale after faux ooh-and-ahh could not hide her growing dysregulation. Neighborhood fireworks were not the post-cross-country balm she needed. The buckshot exodus from Los Angeles which once threatened to scatter her family into tiny pellets across the Central Savannah River Area became dulcet beneath the pyrotechnics of twangy hollers, sizzle of sparklers, and hiss of curbside comets.

The sudden and unpredictable nature of fireworks triggered her deepest of wounds. Each July she faced PTSD pyrotechnics. Mimicking the chaos of her childhood with a borderline personality mother, provoked intrusive thoughts of cowering under her bed when her father wielded his belt buckle, polished and shining like a flash. By late evening, the street had cleared, and Ava's family was tossing their bodies into a Walmart air mattress night.

The morning, of course, brought a graveyard of charred paper and cardboard. Extending from their front step to the mailbox, the yard was strewn with tiny omens.

BIRTHDAY LAKE

A week later, Ava turned fifty-two. Rob and the kids were aware enough to know this would be the first birthday in decades not spent at the L.A. Zoo's reptile house. The irony was in Southeastern Georgia, she was surrounded by water moccasins, canebrakes, and copperheads; she preferred them behind glass rather than behind her house.

Anna Grayson, ever ready with word play and a worthy plan offered, "Let's go to Clarks Hill Lake. You can have birthday *lake* instead of cake!"

Ava was pleased, both by the rhyme and the image of her family bobbing in the fresh water like five upright candles ablaze from the sun's rays. The trek wove them in and out of South Carolina; the reservoir straddled Georgia's state line and therefore had two names. Split and polarized like so much of the world, America, her marriage.

LOCAL HISTORY

Local governance could not agree on a name, so while the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers were busy excavating and damming, Georgia christened it Clarks Hill. South Carolina, in touching ode to a segregationist Dixiecrat senator, went with J. Strom Thurmond Reservoir.

She found the perforated lines splitting bodies of water like the Savannah River and Clarks Hill-Strom Thurmond a type of map humor. She imagined cartographers laughing it up, good old boys clinking glasses of sweet apple brandy as they pretended to establish boundaries for water, aware they were engaged in a necessary fiction.

What but the shore could mark, name, and claim portions of a river? "This wave belongs over here, and currents must mind the margin." Ludicrous. Ava's body, her life of late, was a perforation; her past dammed up true emotions while the present required excavation. The dotted line ran down her middle, and the only heavy machinery she could muster was her intuition, which she was learning to operate.

For now, she was looking forward to taking a cool dip in a freshwater lake, no matter its history.

CHURCH

"What in the world?" asked Bracha as they drove down Hardy-McManus toward the reservoir. It was a bright yellow street sign, with block letters: CHURCH.

"There's a church coming up," Rob, familiar with the quirks of the South, explained.

"Subtle," Ava smirked.

"I saw one of those signs on Fury's Ferry the other day," Sammy piped in. "Very Churchy McChurcherson."

RAIN

Two hours in, the weather crashed the birthday party, blowing out their five little flames with a jaunty east-north-east surface wind. The thunder forced them to shore; the downpour taught them to adjust their expectations.

Ava was last to leave the picnic table. Rob and the kids motioned for her to get in the car, their voices muffled and their movements out of focus like the universe had painted an Americana portrait of her family with sfumato strokes. Her chest was tight, not from an overwhelm of typical birthday gratitude, not from taking stock of her blessings as the party winds down. Her chest was tight with grief.

For Dockweiler Beach, the Malibu Bluffs, Topanga, the twin red-diamond rattlers at the zoo, and in many ways her youth. She was streaked with tears, lake water, rain, and the frustrated eyes of her family. The mud between her toes precluded any grand attempts at spinning this debacle into some baptismal scene.

She was no Rothko study in watercolor and graphite; she was a middle-aged woman in soggy Birkenstocks slapping mosquitoes from her ankles while climbing into the third row of her family's exhausted Sorento in a strange new place where it was best to expect rain daily.

Anna Grayson caught her eye in the rearview mirror and smiled. Ava was not sure if it was pity, an apology, or relief. It was love, a birthday offering wrapped in their shared DNA. Still, it was strange to see the silhouette of herself in her daughter's reflection.

FOUR-LEGGED FIRST MEMORY

People often remark how much Anna Grayson resembles her. But never did she look more like her mom than when she flashed viridescent across the check-out line at Publix a week later, holding her cell phone over her head like the winning Powerball ticket.

“I found a dog! There’s a Dober Dane mix in Beaufort SC, and he is soooo cute. Can we get him today please?” She recognized that tone of voice, that look. It was her own. For the nineteen years her daughter had been on the planet, Ava had adopted more than nine cats and four dogs plus an occasional spider she could not bear to exile from the shower. They did not just adopt dogs and cats. They were all in.

Ava’s Sunday mornings in L.A. had been spent deep in the Valley, north of North Hollywood in the industrial pocket simmering at the foot of the Santa Susana Mountains. Leash in hand, treats in a fanny pack, and a boxer on each hip, she volunteered as a dog walker at the Los Angeles Boxer Rescue. Where she met Lucy who became Simba. And Pinto who stayed Pinto because Sammy liked the name. And Rufus who became Elephant. But the elephant in the check-out line was whether to pursue another dog adoption so soon after driving across the country.

It was a stupid decision. But her children had lost so much in the move. She had taken something from them they could not get back. She had to reverse the current somehow, and this dog would be a way to give them hope. A four-legged first memory in a place devoid of personal history.

NICKI MINAJ

“No. It’s not fair to the cats.” Rob refused to go along with it. He was brimming with pride for having transported the dog and cats and snake across the country unscathed, and for having returned the fish to Allan’s before the move. They had reassembled the tank and planned for new bettas and tetras. The cats were adjusting to double the amount of square footage, an upstairs, an attic, and the 5 a.m. buckshot. Ava was adjusting too, although not as well.

She had confronted the lone hunter on his ATV behind her house and to the right of the salt lick she had set out for the deer. It did not go well. She brought out the Amazon Echo, still yet unpacked from Los Angeles, and blasted Nicki Minaj’s ‘Barbie Dreams’ to scare the deer away. *I’m just playing, but I’m saying.* He never returned.

Rob just wanted to get started on practice plans for his new basketball team and their summer league. She just wanted to get started on settling into the house.

THEY COULD NEVER TELL THEIR DAUGHTER ‘NO’

“He’s in Port Royal, South Carolina.” It was happening. This was how she came to kill a dog. The drive would be over two and a half hours southeast toward Hilton Head. One hundred and thirty-eight miles through the Lowcountry, even deeper into the South, below the proverbial belt.

Ava reached out to the owner with some questions. *Hi! We’re interested in Titan. A name they would have to change. What can you tell us about him? Is he okay with cats?*

An instant response. *Hi, it’s Mari. Titan is ok with cats. I also have cats lol he never chased them or anything, he ignores them.*

What does he weigh? How old is he?

IT SOUNDED GOOD

Although it might have been wise to find out why they were rehoming him. She understood rehoming. 3004 Pacific Ave. 436 Pier Ave. 8964 84th Place. 5837 W. 74th. Now 1170 Hunters Knoll.

Their own process had consisted of everyone flying out six weeks earlier to look at houses. They stayed at an Airbnb across from the Augusta National Golf Course. Curious, they drove the perimeter, unimpressed. The Masters Tournament was long gone, and its green was the color of Chick-fil-A nuggets—Southern gold, drive-thru bullion. That is why they hire landscapers to airbrush the grounds a perfect shade of green, known locally as the Masters Spray tan.

Mari explained they were a military family and were being relocated. She sent a picture in his camo harness, *BEST FRIEND* stitched in green. Eyes gray and kind. What she needed was kindness—to receive it and offer it. Perfect, a best friend.

TRUCK NUTS

As Ava was slipping into the driver's seat, Brock from next door came over to ask where they were going. Bracha had just asked what was hanging from the tail of his colossal truck.

"We're getting a dog," Anna Grayson leaned over and told him.

"Just one?" After an awkward chuckle or two, "Where from?" Brock asked.

"Near Hilton Head," Ava said.

"Now why in the hell would you drive all the way to Hilton Head to get a dog? That's like two hundred miles when you could just get one from Pete down on the corner?" Truck nuts thrived on the strand at Venice Beach, but she was not prepared for the sacks hanging from Brock's cache of unneutered dogs. She also was not prepared to answer Bracha's question concerning the Dodge Mega Cab RAM 3500's swaying adornment.

Pete was the resident German Shepherd dealer with a yard full of virile predators who sired most of the CSRA canine population while terrorizing everyone who came and went, like Amazon Prime drivers, kids in Club cars, and the occasional copperhead.

She wondered why Brock did not just offer up one from his own pack. He had at least five or six. It seemed a Southern badge of honor for a Deputy Sheriff to own his own herd of dogs.

A FAMILY TRADITION

Ava was focused on Titan, who, unlike Brock's dogs, at least for the moment, was about to be homeless. And piling into the family car with her kids to rescue a dog was familiar. It's what they did in Los Angeles, a family tradition, looking out for abandoned, lost, or helpless four-legged critters.

When they were loaded up, Anna Grayson sat in the passenger seat eager to navigate, Sammy in the back, a water bowl and treats and Bracha on the seat beside him. They launched their Winston valley for a new family dog. Sammy asked if they should start parking on the lawn too. Anna Grayson replied, "First things first. Can we buy a crappy boat we wash every Saturday but never use?" Ava accelerated, pleased to be leaving if only for a few hours.

In the rearview mirror stood Brock like an indignant auctioneer at the county fair, perplexed why no one wanted to bid on the three-legged hog. Soon he too would be dismasted, another sheriff-turned-amputee in the line of duty. A car chase gone wrong. The drunk driver died; Brock joined the fifty-seven million living with nonfatal traumatic limb loss. She wondered if he could still feel his leg like she could still feel the southern California sun.

JAMES BROWN

They drove downtown to pick up bagels and coffee from a trendy café in a Queen Anne style building next door to Woodrow Wilson's childhood home, the pride of Augusta, second only to James Brown, in the heart of Augusta. They passed TopGolf, the two hundred light poles lining Riverwatch Parkway like a picked-clean rib cage, and the neo gothic Sibley Mill beside the canals.

Confederate Powder works became the site of weekend walkers; these canals were Augusta's best kept secret. Famed for its locks, the nautical and the Valentine kind, at the headwaters where mules once labored towing barges up and down the river for the textile industry. Thousands of padlocks adorn the fencing like Tibetan prayer flags, marking the promise of lovers. The CSRA was more than Ava had expected. It was whimsy. It was yellow poplars and water oaks. It was cottontail rabbits and whitetail deer.

A mural on the wall of Cushman's Paint and Body near the city center grabbed their attention. It was a woman with her eyes closed and arms raised. *Lord, give me patience because if you give me*

strength, I'm gonna need bail money. She missed the Muckrock murals in Venice and the graffiti wall by Muscle Beach on the boardwalk.

UNDER ATTACK

One block over was First Presbyterian Church of Augusta, where the Winstons had tried to find a faith community the first few weeks in town. It should have been easy. The lead pastor was the president of the board of trustees where Rob and Ava would be teaching; he had Zoom interviewed with them both back in Los Angeles and exuded a warmth they both appreciated. They were used to a diverse Inglewood church community whose worship band was eclectic and electric.

Not bow ties, gingham pants, and all things coiffed. Mothers and their grown daughters parading by in matching dresses. After a week or two, Rob insisted they attend one of the Sunday Morning Community classes after the service; they would meet people and take steps toward belonging. The pastor who led the first meeting bumbled through a PowerPoint presentation; the first slide was *Leviticus 20:13*.

"Friends, we are under attack," the pastor began. "Correction. Our children are under attack."

All but Ava and Rob's heads nodded with the vim and vigor of indignation. She squeezed Rob's leg and leaned over, whispering, "Let's go. Now. I am not sitting through this bullshit." It would not go well and rolled her essential oil calming balm onto the inside of her wrist while Rob contemplated what emergency action he should take. He was reluctant to make any sudden moves since at least five other couples in the small, humid room were parents from their school, parents of his basketball players no less. And Rob was the bible teacher.

What would Father Lorrie, her neighbors Steve and Bill and their gorgeous toddler Amelia have to say about this class? Her cousin Frances who died from AIDS? Her hundreds of queer students over the years who fought to attend prom with their partners.

All eyes were on Rob and Ava. She pulled the *emergency text from the kids'* ripcord and ejected them both from the class. They landed

in a year of First Pres shunning. Which she relished. When that pastor visited Gutenberg Academy, she made note of his vanity license plate: *HIS GRACE*.

ONLY IN THE SOUTH

At the center of Broad Street stood the Richmond County Confederate Monument. Anna Grayson and Sammy bolted out to look at it before Ava had settled the car in park. The dedication plate read, *In Memoriam / No nation rose so white and fair: / None fell so pure of crime / Our Confederate Dead*. The granite base was topped with Carrara marble and dotted with four statues . . . including Stonewall Jackson and Robert E. Lee. A more exhilarating monument caught her kids' attention, however, and they erupted about their find after tumbling back into the car.

"You won't believe it, Mom!" Sammy exhaled. Anna Grayson pulled his ear as she had done since he was a toddler, her way of reminding her little brother she was the star of the show, and he was part of the ensemble. Nothing personal, just a casualty of birth order, she reasoned.

"Mom, the crosswalk talks, you know like for the blind, to help them. But this one uses a thick Southern drawl! Do it Sammy," and she released her grip, signaling it was time for his supporting role.

"*The waaaaalk sahn is owrrwn across Brawwwwrd Street*." They were not mocking it; they were enchanted. These were the moments Ava hoped for, the flashes of creativity and regional delight. Who could help but fall for this strange land?

DISGUSTA

Bridges like embossed gold buttons connected downtown Augusta to North Augusta, South Carolina. The city was held together by a well sewn seam: the Savannah River. Across it stood the AAA baseball stadium, home of the Green Jackets, a nod to the Masters Tournament

and its iconic prize, *the* green wool blazer. It was Faith & Family Night at SRP Park, with an added enticement of Craft & Vine's famous pimento cheese and frisbee golf stations in the outfield before the first pitch.

"Sammy, find a Facebook page for stuff going on in Augusta," she urged.

"I got you." Moments later and Sammy could not stop laughing. "Um, I found a Facebook page for *Disgusta*."

"Ay, don't dis 'Gusta," Ava retorted, winking at Sammy, her second child who sat slumped in his seat an ever-shifting version of the tussle-blond toddler he once was.

Georgia's second largest city sat like a stomp-stomp-clap under the rising sun of another day, straddling urban regality and hometown pride, a mere drumbeat riff bringing its own timbre. All harmony to melody, except for the cacophony of humidity.

As she buckled her seat belt, preparing to leave downtown Augusta, she looked around for some sign of protest in response to this Richmond County Confederate Monument. Something, anything. Did no one object to this monstrosity? A quick Google search on her phone, and she shared, "Yeah, a 2018 commission the monument had to go, but nothing has happened yet." It has been three years and there it stood in stiff salute to a county, sixty percent of whose citizens are Black. One of the statuettes was William Henry Talbot Walker.

COUNTRY OR COUNTRY CLUB

She and Rob were hired to teach at a private school called Gutenberg Academy on the Hill; it was the heart of country club Augusta. Where most girls donned Lily Pulitzer dresses in an unspoken competition of who could wear the brightest tropical hues. Where most boys tried to look country in self-muddied Chevy 2500s with Yeti stickers and square toed boots no horse-kicking cowboy would wear.

The most outspoken moms were overgrown Masters Tournament brats who spent the 90s ushering in the Garth Brooks and Shania Twain era after Southern rock bowed out. Moms who were

now nosy and bored with nothing to do but drink wine, surf Facebook, and coddle their sons while their husbands courted gun kits, Polaris Ranger ATVs, and alcohol.

Finding her people would be harder than Ava could have imagined. She started with her students. The theatre kids, the queer kids, the ones on the spectrum, the military transplants. She opened her classroom to them all at lunch, a safe space where they could drop into their true selves at least for forty minutes a day.

Augusta was hard to read. Many families were transient, not unlike Los Angeles; cyber security at Fort Eisenhower, formerly Fort Gordon, as in the Confederate General John Gordon, brought people from all over the world. Ava focused on meeting these people, her fellow outsiders loosening the Bible belt a notch, just enough to fit in. Something she never managed to fully accomplish at Gutenberg Academy.

She would finish the academic year, serve her students and their families well, but not renew her contract.

LIKE A MORGUE

Come September, she ascended the stairs to the wing of the English department devoid of camaraderie or even good mornings and how was your weekends. She met affinity bias from her new colleagues, something she was guilty of too. She could not begrudge them.

Who was this new teacher with her messy buns, androgynous groutfits, and crazy ideas about factory farming? Who were they with degrees from UVA, hunting rifles, and family land?

Sister Jackie didn't help, popping up in her intrusive way just when Ava was gaining the courage to join a colleague at the lunch tables. Here she was a stray dog wandering onto their property and expecting it to be easy, like she could just wag her tail and trot up to their food bowl uncontested. The school was harmless, and there was no unhinged nun trying to kiss her.

The assault was to her self-confidence.

CHICK-FIL-A

When she and Rob came to interview at their school in the spring, the administrators held a meet-and-greet. A bucket of deflated bagels and a box of coffee in the conference room, a popular faculty meeting delicacy second to Chick-fil-A and sweet tea. Everyone was asked to share an interesting detail about themselves.

One of the first teachers Ava encountered was Richard Scott, chair of the math department at Gutenberg Academy, who, before she had so much as a chance to extend her hand, offered his interesting fact: he was a direct descendant of William Henry Talbot Walker. He seemed to be overly impressed by this. Less an interesting fact and more a core tenet of his identity, his *raison d'être*.

"He went to West Point but stood by his home state when the chips were down."

She had heard Southerners were still fighting the war, but she wanted evidence. "What rank?" she asked, willing herself into curiosity.

"Brigadier general. There's a bronze statue commemorating the very spot where he expired. I will show you a picture some time." he could not stop himself. "Shot right off his horse in the Battle of Atlanta. He is buried down the street at Augusta University."

Five minutes later and he was still rambling on about the exploits of William Henry Talbot Walker interspersed with references to his inherited family land when Ava interrupted his tidewater aria to ask if he would like to know her interesting fact?

"Oh, okay," he said, as if she had just interrupted his commencement speech. An apt pupil she was not.

LIKE GRAVY, LONELINESS THICKENS

"Alright," he said. "What is interesting about you?"

Unsure why, her mind went to a May morning fifteen years past. The steel-gray marine layer thick in her memory. Bracha was just a month old, and the Winston's finances looked grim. Bracha would

have to be the last baby. Ava assumed Rob would do what most of her friends' husbands did, taking a snip for the team. He refused. She had no choice but to take the snip, which turned out to be a burn. In more ways than one. The cauterizing of her fallopian tubes. Rob had refused to drive her to Cedars-Sinai at 5:00 am, what with the three sleeping children and all. Too much hassle.

When people ask her to share an interesting fact about herself, or to play two truths and a lie, she is tempted to use the tube-tying taxi story. She never does though. The idea of a post-partum mother of three alone in a Yellow Cab hurtling from Venice to Beverly Hills before sunrise to tie her tubes is a bit too much.

A bit too-fucking-much.

"In L.A.," Ava started. The most ill-fated two words she could have uttered. Los Angeles. The moment the L word came out of her mouth, she lost him. He turned his head and scanned the room while smoothing the front of his Masters' polo shirt and khakis. What did California have to do with the Civil War anyway?

SHE HAD NO CHANCE

"... I used to walk Boxers at a shelter."

"Uh-huh," Rick said, winking at his friend, the Dean of Students, who wore Clemson swag yet graduated from a small Christian college in Ohio. And then he was gone. But not before leaving her with the distinct impression he would never be able to pick her out of a lineup if he had to. Although she proved herself wrong when, a month into the first semester, Rick admired her parallel parking in the faculty lot.

"Nice parking job for a woman," one hand in his tight khakis and crappy cup of Krystal coffee in the other.

Lest she had gotten the wrong impression from Rick, she was asked numerous questions about another L word—*Liberals*—each time she shared her Boxer walking story. It got so bad, at one point Ava was tempted to Google the name of a Confederate general and

start claiming she was related to him as well, just to see what kind of reaction she got, but the idea made her feel ill.

Instead, she stuck with her sad little dog walking fact.

SOUTHERN GOTHIC

She was also introduced to the English department, which consisted of Britney Carlson, the chair and AP Literature teacher, and Buck Cedar, the ninth grade and AP Language teacher. She learned Buck was also the varsity girls' soccer coach; rather than discussing student portfolios, Zadie Smith's latest book, or Turnitin.com, Ava had been sucked into a black hole of his team's wins and losses. She recommitted herself to an attitude of curiosity rather than judgment.

A week into the Boone adoption, She and Buck were invited to Britney's house for an English department pizza lunch. She had a new baby at the time, so Ava offered Anna Grayson to babysit in the other room while they broke bread to christen the new department, the upcoming year. She was thrilled to weave Anna Grayson into this new community, sure it was a win for all. How Southern and quaint to intermingle the professional and the personal so quickly and with such ease. Britney hosted a podcast with her husband, an English professor at Augusta University, focused on Southern Gothic literature. Ava made sure to listen to some episodes before attending the luncheon.

She even tried to get her hair cut and styled, but when she pulled into Pamela's Coiffures, the Trump flag startled her into a U-turn. She made the courtesy call to cancel, feeling awful it was so last minute, but she was able to blame it all on 45 and although her hair would be a bit unwieldy for the luncheon, she never looked back. Trump flag, Schrupp flag, she told herself; Ava was ready and determined to make this place home. To move in curiosity. Make the luncheon work even it meant playing defense against Buck's inevitable punting all conversations toward soccer.

She left the house in Birkenstocks with her usual air-dried hair and minimal makeup. Anna Grayson reminded her the beachy look would not fly in the South. "You have to step it up now, Mom," and

she grabbed the car keys. “I’ll wait in the car.” She appreciated the wisdom of her daughter who attended college in Georgia albeit slightly annoyed she had to ditch the casual, laid-back vibe of Los Angeles.

1984

Anna Grayson’s comment transported Ava to her mom’s woody station wagon. Speeding down Cornell Road ten minutes late for first period, she began the day hearing her mom’s criticisms. “Oh, Ava, what are you wearing? You look like you dressed in the dark. Oh no. Put this lipstick on.”

SERPENT IN THE GARDEN

She put on more makeup and added a little fancy hat; she slipped into red patent leather wedge sandals. She even had a big rescue dog named Boone now. She was ready to play the part. But she was not ready for Buck’s total narcissistic reveal. No amount of lip liner or puff sleeve midi dress could protect her from his pathology. He dominated the conversation while Ava was stuck eating bad Mellow Mushroom pizza—the third most popular culinary delight for awkward social gatherings—wishing she could join her daughter in the other room to wipe saliva from a toddler’s chin rather than hear about Buck’s bow tie collection, the Fairway soccer organization, or his Proverbs 31 wife who breeds their German Shepherd as a side hustle. She is also handy with a machete, wielding it on copperheads who wander into the yard.

She sat at the table about to vomit. Killing one of the most beautiful creatures in the world was intolerable. She loved snakes, considered them the most gorgeous creatures, and would kiss them on the mouth if given the chance. And an antidote.

All she needed was an hour at the L.A. Zoo’s reptile house, and she would be content staring at the red diamond rattlers. Each birthday, her present was a trip to the reptile house where no one

rushed her out. She would spend twenty minutes sitting on the floor in front of the Baja rattlesnake, a golden scepter of a gentleman who never disappointed; then, thirty minutes in front of the Ethiopian mountain adder, his head a perfect spade bedazzled with emerald scales and glass pellet eyes. The two red diamond rattlers, shy but dangerous, completed her visit—they were always active for her, and she appreciated their showmanship. It was silly to feel sad about not saying goodbye to the snakes, but she regretted it, nonetheless.

Ava's mom had refused to visit her for years because of the corn snake they kept.

"Snakes are from the Devil," her transparent and flimsy excuse for not visiting. "Evil, Satanic." Like the First Pres pastor who condoned rejecting the LGBTQ+ community in the name of God? Ava was dismayed Augusta did not have a zoo, let alone a reptile house. Of course it has its share of snakes. And mean, awful people who kill them.

JUST KEEP SWALLOWING

She swallowed it all because Buck and Britney were her new colleagues, but she imagined having the benefit of a forked tongue she could poke out. A receptor to smell the bullshit, her own Jacobson's organ like a garter snake to navigate this awful luncheon. One more hour and she could slither home. Walking to her car, she turned toward Britney's front step where the Georgia state flag flew and raised a surreptitious middle finger salute to it, one of three remaining state flags composed of stars and bars.

That fall, she drove Mullikin Road toward work each morning, vigilant for snakes, turtles, and deer. When she was lucky, she would see a family of whitetails a few hundred feet from the shoulder; when she was unlucky, she would see a carcass blanketing the shoulder. On one late start morning, she saw two deer carcasses. She caught her breath. A glance in her rear-view mirror confirmed the grisly site.

BASKETBALL WIDOW

Rob had stayed back from the Titan trip. He was taking his new basketball team to Rome, Georgia for a summer tournament. Ava had grown accustomed to wearing the basketball widow's mantle. November through February were miserable; in season meant she was on her own with the three kids. She was expected to be at every game, kids in tow, looking cute in the school's colors cheering on their daddy. Tiptoeing around Rob after a loss became second nature for her and the kids; keeping the house quiet while he watched game tape was not negotiable. Date night meant filming a rival team's game, usually an hour deep in the Valley. No wonder she was discontent—she had married an orange ball.

PUNCH BUGGY

Caffeinated and carb-filled, they headed out, passing Gwinnett and Ninth where white police officers had suppressed the 1970 riots over the beating death of Black teenager Charles Oatman. Where Governor Maddox endorsed shoot-to-kill orders. Brock Mack Murphy, William Wright, Jr., Sammy McCullough, John Stokes, John Bennett, and Mack Wilson were shot in the back. No monument stands even today. What does exist are oodles of shopping centers with names like Mullins Colony, High Cotton Arcade, and Belmont Plantation.

They crossed the Sixth Street Bridge toward the Savannah River Site, a nuclear power plant built in the 50s. With Anna Grayson driving, Ava and the kids soon picked up Route 125, a confused road unsure of its identity, both highway and winding two-lane road. This West Coast family now Southern residents. Bracha was the first to address the two elephants in their new room — Bulldawgs and peaches.

“Instead of punch buggy, let's play punch UGA Bulldawggy.”

Sammy added, “Okay, but we gotta include peaches. Any pictures or references.” And with that, he blurted, “Punch peachy!”

Seeing the entrance sign for Peach Tree Townhomes seconds after the two of them hammered out their new car game, he landed a solid thump on Bracha's shoulder. They were on their way.

MILEY CYRUS

Googling the time away, Ava fielded questions from her family. "Georgia is the second largest producer of cotton," she reported. Never one to resist tapping for a new morsel of research, she added, "Here's an old postcard. *Greetings from Augusta, GA: A Busy Day in the Cotton Field*. I'll spare you the image."

The car was silent as they drank in the bittersweet landscape, a slippery sylvan page of Southern Gothic prose punctuated by cows and Dollar General stores. Anna Grayson grabbed the AUX and brought her trademark talent for DJing, warming Ava out of her maudlin spiral and reviving her siblings with a familiar song. *But here I am*, cooed Miley Cyrus, *next to you / The sky is more blue / in Malibu*.

After a while, the kids were quiet, and the sound of the road took control of the car, what she called a traveler's coma. She sank deep into the back of her mind as she always did when the world around her slowed for a moment. She wanted to make sense of her five-thousand-piece jigsaw of a life, tried to put the pieces together, looking for the straight edges and the corners to get something, anything, started.

SOME MORE AMERICAN HISTORY

On the right stretched a flat field, a cotton-picked wasteland of bare dirt in slow motion. Ava saw a lone tree, an oak with brawny arms and a solid trunk. It looked dead, devoid of leaves, just a torso and extended arms, branches so thick as torches in the dark, shadows dancing off the white. Her mind went where it should not, or perhaps where it should—the lynching, the despicable murders of so many beautiful people.

Like every fifth-grader in California, her kids worked on California Missions projects. Learning about enslavement and the forced conversions of indigenous peoples by Spanish colonists rocked their young worlds. It was not just the South; California had a brutal history of white Southerners carting their enslaved west during the Gold Rush, forcing them to surface mine. Even though California entered the Union as a free state, the framers of its first constitution declared no suffrage nor any civil rights would be granted to non-white citizens.

Golden State sounded so shiny; Peach State, so sweet; United States, so hypocritical. This land was a testament to loss.

She settled her eyes on the kids, their familiar bodies slumped about the car in various stages of transition. She had almost lost Sammy to Hermosa Beach, where he and his friends would skate and dabble in weed, or a swiped White Claw from the corner liquor store. She had almost lost Anna Grayson to L.A.'s intractable expectation girls be thin. She had almost lost Bracha to a home intruder during the L.A.U.S.D. teachers' strike, home alone and dialing 411 instead of 911.

Loss has little to do with latitude or longitude.

ADAMS IN THE GARDEN

They contemplated Titan's new name, relishing the power to impose identity. Anna Grayson led the charge, firing off Atticus, Beaufort, and Sawyer. Gunner! "No, for it to be truly Southern, it has to have *two* names," Anna Grayson explained. Her year at college in Atlanta made her the resident expert.

Ava retorted, "And we have to call it by the middle name only." Anna Grayson's roommates, Georgia Mae and Lily Brie, had taught them about this Southern tradition. "Just like Mae and Brie, right?" The eye roll from Anna Grayson was encouragement enough. She relished this naming game, the reentry into animal rescue, the resurrection of her family at its best. Rob would have to hear all about it.

Ava was torn between Tennessee Williams, Will for short, and Boone. “As in the boondocks, Mom?” asked Sammy.

Anna Grayson injected, “Wait, there is a place in North Carolina called Boone something . . . it is a former plantation. One of the sororities at school held a formal there.”

“Google it.” They were stopped for ten minutes while a train crawled by, hugged by a Circle K and MeeMaw’s retail antique store.

“More importantly, what the heck is a *MeeMaw*?” asked Sammy.

Feeling at once proud and disgusted, Anna Grayson blurted, “Boone Hall. It was founded in 1861 by John Boone, whose family built up a working plantation. Ew, you can visit the original slave cabins, or you can have your wedding there. Oh, get this: the website says it is the #1 Slave Plantation in the Charleston area according to *USA Today*!”

Naming a living being is a task not to be taken lightly. She had agonized over each of her kids’ names, terrified her mother would criticize each one, rant about the torture they would face at the hands of cruel classmates. “Anna Grayson is a redneck name, plus it’s too complicated,” she would argue. “Her poor teachers.” Her mother deemed Sammy’s name as too boring. And “Bracha Marlene? Great, a Jewish name paired with your mother-in-law’s. Thanks a lot.” She had been tempted to name them Zalman, Moonface, or Abernathy out of spite.

This was what her mother did. She criticized the things Ava loved most.

BLEEDING BLUE

When the Los Angeles Dodgers hosted the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, a charitable, protest, and drag performance troupe, at Pride Night, her mom texted, *I hope you don’t cheer for the awful Dodgers anymore, you should boycott them for being anti-Catholic.* Ava wore her Dodgers hat the rest of the day.

The Dodgers—Dodger Stadium—were at the heart of what her family loved about Los Angeles; they not only bled blue, but they also breathed and lived blue. She hated to admit it, but her mom's irrational text message hurt. It was nothing new. She also criticized the things Ava once loved. Like her dad. And herself.

"Sammy, you grew up in Los Angeles. Apple? Blue Ivy? North . . . come on." In so many ways the South was just as eccentric as the so-called weirdo Left Coast.

"Let's just ask Siri what to name the dog," suggested Bracha, ever practical.

"Sorry, I mean Siri *Anne*." She glanced at her mom for approval.

"I feel seen," quipped Anna Grayson.

IT RARELY ENDS WELL

This went on for fifty miles before they settled on Boone. A name with just the right amount of Southern. The Charleston plantation seemed an irrelevant concern since they were in no way paying homage to John Boone's awful legacy. Bracha confirmed the decision by claiming they were repurposing a terrible thing into a good thing. Boone, it turned out, was just right. Even Ava's mom would appreciate the monosyllabic masculinity. The *Genesis 2:19* portion of the drive was completed, and they entered a new type of garden—South Carolina's Lowcountry.

Stopping for drinks in Varnville at a Hardees, Sammy shouted, "Feed Our Happy!" As they pulled up to the drive-thru, a ramshackle house emerged by the parking lot. Behind it sat fifteen cages full of barking dogs.

"Those people must really like dogs," Bracha commented, her signature blue eyes ablaze at the sight of any animal she could help or adopt. The cages were tiny with little space for the dogs to stir. They did not stop barking or turning in their cages to bare their teeth. The din of it was too much, so she closed the windows and cranked Anna Grayson's playlist. Still the sound seeped in.

She comforted herself with self-congratulating, feeling superior for rescuing a dog who would be brought to the pound if no one took him. She once again rested in the glow of opening her home, her childlike optimism at offering refuge, having never learned it rarely ends well.

Sammy could not look away. "I do not know, man. It looks more like a prison for dogs than the house of someone who loves dogs. Why would you have that many dogs and just keep them in cages?"

"And they all look super hungry," Bracha added, her eyes dimming.

Anna Grayson and Ava exchanged a knowing look.

"They're just mad they have to sit all day and watch people eat Hardees," Sammy quipped, aware his younger sister was beginning to unravel.

"Can I pet one?" Bracha asked.

"No!" they replied in unison. Ava ordered and pulled to the pick-up window where the barking was not so loud.

"I hope Boone isn't like that," Bracha exhaled as they turned the corner toward the main road, looking back through her window at the dogs disappearing behind them.

CAREFREE CURSIVE RED SCRIPT

When they hit Port Royal Island, the air became thick with a Southeastern coastal loneliness. Saltwater bluffs, marshes, and inter-coastal iciness were plush and permeating. Ava was disoriented, like clouds surrendering to the horizon after battle. The town was cornfield flat, a shimmering illusion as rain released a song of salt. "Put your windows down," Sammy shouted, excited for this sudden reunion with the ocean. It did not matter the Pacific was three thousand miles away; the Atlantic would do.

The Marine Corps Air Station populated the town with grit and rank. Somewhere between the U-Haul dealer and the Urgent Care they found a Mexican restaurant. With time to kill before picking up Titan-now-Boone, Rancho Grande offered the perfect diversion.

Sitting in the Sorento, eating wet burritos with the windows down, the sky dancing a storm cloud mariachi, all was right with the Winstons.

Ava had yielded to the illusion leaving her home of twenty-eight years would be smooth. Just yielding to life as everyone must. She not only acquiesced to the destruction, but she also dug her hands in and got to work. The move was a brutal uprooting of the desert cholla and yucca trees in her heart. Roots up, and the remnant soil, ever pungent, gloved her hands the color of night. The color of their Kia, which had served them well over a five-day drive from California to Georgia, and here it sat on the opposite coast.

The carefree, cursive red script of *California* plates shuttled her family from soccer games to schools to the beach and back thousands of times and now would shuttle a new dog into their hearts.

SOMETIMES MAPS LIE

They drove the final few miles to Atlantic Marine Corps community housing. Mari's husband was active duty. Sammy and Bracha took turns reading Dober Dane facts from their phones, not unlike the previous month's pause to read the laminated wall map in L.A.

"Look, Georgia touches the ocean! Whoa, I had no idea Washington, D.C. is so close to Philadelphia." Moving to a new place and adopting a strange dog aroused similar feelings, none of which was lost on Ava.

"Augusta's not far from the Appalachian Trail and the Ocean!" she had told the kids. "We'll have access to the same amount of hiking and beaches."

"There's a skate park too. And a few in Atlanta. Oh, there's a cool one in Macon!" Sammy had added, eyes as big as ball bearings.

"I'm looking forward to the lakes," Bracha had confessed. "No sharks."

Maps were at the center of her family's life of late, yet they offered no real advice, no answers, or warnings. A map brought excitement and anticipation mixed with a fear of the undiscovered.

Like adopting Boone, the move to Georgia offered something new, a blank slate of possibility, even reprieve from life's stagnation. Like the move to Georgia, however, adopting Boone meant shifting the shape of their family and accepting the potential for unimaginable loss.

TURNIP TRUCK

The Kia's blinker clicked her into the present. They turned into Creekstone Villas, a tract style neighborhood with mass-produced homes exuding efficiency and high turnover. Each home stood on its small parcel of land as if at attention with minimalist architectural elements and prefabricated uniformity.

"Doberman Pinscher and Great Dane mix dogs are considered a designer breed!" Anna Grayson informed the car. "They're sharp, alert, vigorous, and loyal."

"That's what they said about my last girlfriend," Sammy quipped.

"What does *naturally reserved* mean?" asked Bracha. "And what does it mean *they don't have a strong prey drive*?"

"It means they're boring and never pray before bed," Sammy continued to lighten the mood at the expense of his younger sister.

Ava ended the barrage with an optimistic find. "They're gentle giants who are even tempered and often referred to as big teddy bears."

Mari's two-story townhome with a one-car garage was no different, only it was marked by its own monument covered in fur with a granite base and Carrara-like marble top. This was no Confederate memorial; it was Titan, the hundred-and thirty-five-pound, hip-boots-high Dober Dane. Four children of various ages adorned his Greek Doric legs while a Filipino American woman wrangled a tactical no-pull harness. Her haggard face held a thousand tales.

Ava, ever ready with a literary reference, immediately channeled Jonathan Swift, and the Lilliputians. "We do not have enough leashes. We are but *diminutive mortals*," she whispered, lowering her Ray-Bans. "And he is the *Man-Mountain* whom we must tame." Another eye roll from Anna Grayson, herself an English major.

Mari's four children volleyed, "He likes to fight other dogs!"
"He bit my brother's head once!"

"Why do you want a mean dog?" This whack-a-mole conversation left them not holding a mallet but the leash to a hyperactive, half-barrel beer keg with a tail.

Mari interceded and ordered the kids back to the house, shooting Ava one final glance, a look like they had just fallen off the turnip truck.

BOONE AS AIR BAG

Ava was driving when they left Port Royal. Anna Grayson and Sammy were in the back with Boone, and Bracha sat indignantly in front. Soon they were heading north on Route 21 to the screeching of toy squirrel. Boone's mouth was a multi-tool: rather than teeth, he had pliers, bottle openers, and clamshell cutters.

The sun had set; the air was violent with bullfrogs. This was Hampton County, where a father had recently murdered his wife and son. Where privilege danced with poverty. The two-lane rural highway offered an occasional Dollar General or Pizza Hut. Deer moved like pale specters through the tall Goldenrod by the railroad.

Twenty miles in, Boone was trouncing the kids in the back seat, jaunting from window to window. No matter how tightly they held his collar, there was no restraining him. Ava pulled into a Circle K and swapped seats with Anna Grayson, but not before she ran in and grabbed cold drinks for everyone.

Well caffeinated now, Anna Grayson was at the helm. Boone had settled down, collapsing onto Ava's lap, her hand through his collar. He was enjoying his squirrel toy when suddenly, from out of nowhere, headlights fired toward them. She screamed, startling Anna Grayson, who also screamed before steering off the road. Everything shifted into slow motion. Down went the front of the KIA into a ditch then up it came like a boat plunging a swell and bobbing up again.

That the car did not hit them meant nothing, for now they would collide with the very emblem of South Carolina—a lone palm tree.

Anna Grayson attempted to steer to the left, but to no avail. The back tires emerged like buoys, and the car undulated left, slamming broadside into the tree. The oncoming car, with its dead golden eyes, slid past them in the dark a large, round, lifeless mass. A bull shark gliding in the salty murk. She slammed forward into Boone. Her unwitting air bag, he had saved her life.

DOUSED IN SWEET TEA

Everything was silent. The other car swam away; the KIA floated, lifeless. All they could hear was heavy breathing and the engine's heart surrendering its final few beats. And the faint screech of a toy squirrel.

Ava began to wipe her skin. Boone's paws had slushed the cup holders, leaving a trail of Styrofoam and fur. Twisting metal harmonized with the neon lights of New Hong Kong restaurant and police strobes. They unfolded from the road into the nearest parking lot. Everyone but the Kia was fine.

Fine until Boone broke free, thrashing the car as if attacking a sea lion from beneath and behind. Ava could not open her door, wedged against the tree. A little bit concussed, she was not sure of what she saw. Anna Grayson had climbed out and was yelling. "It is the radiator. It is leaking, I think! What should we do?" There was a hole in the Winston boat.

THERE ARE NO UBERS IN RURAL SOUTH CAROLINA AT MIDNIGHT

Wild and agitated, she and Boone blurred into each other, sloshing inside the crumpled aquarium. Dog, woman. Woman, dog. Sweet tea. Windows cracked just enough to taunt aeration but not enough for either of them to be heard. The scene was familiar, the birthday lake

moment when her family motioned for her to get into the car and out of the rain.

“Start the car. I can’ breathe!” Ava begged Anna Grayson, who was trying to manage the police and the trauma. One leg in the passenger seat, one leg folded beneath her hips, Bracha turned the key. Nothing. Again nothing.

The name Kia was derived from the Sino-Korean character *ki*, meaning to awake or rise, the Asian version of a Phoenix. Their Kia was a Sorento, a grotesque nod to the Amalfi Coast. Incurable and unfixable now, the Kia had become just a mound of parts destined to be repurposed.

Ava and Sammy tried to find an Uber, but this was rural South Carolina at midnight, and he had a better chance of finding an indie bookstore or boba shop than an Uber. She tried to call Rob, but he did not answer. Waffle House with the team and all. Or watching coaching videos on YouTube. Either way, no time for a call.

The same story, only this time, in the wake of this collision, something was different. As if the impact had jarred her own chassis loose, realigning her perspective on all things Rob. What would it be like without the weight of him? Wasn’t she more alone with than without him?

‘JAWS’

Ava’s greatest fear, to be stranded and helpless at night, had arrived. A child of the movie *Jaws*, she did not find the shark cage scene or the floating head or even the pond to be the most terrifying. She was haunted by Quint’s retelling of the USS *Indianapolis*, sunk by Japanese torpedoes in the Pacific. Out of nine hundred sailors set adrift in the open ocean at midnight, just over three hundred survived the ravaging whitetip sharks. “Ravage rhymes with marriage,” she whispered to her future self.

She contacted the only two people she knew in Georgia: her realtor, the one who left the figs, and Rob’s new boss, Anthony.

Neither of them could, or *would*, drive two and a half hours to rescue them and their giant dog at midnight.

“So much for Southern hospitality,” Sammy muttered. Ava secretly agreed but ignored his comment. Stuck in the middle of nowhere with no prospect for help. L.A. to Georgia. From a home of twenty-eight years to this hell. In her imaginary postcard to Los Angeles, she wrote: *The Kia made it across the entire United States, coast to coast, was sidelined in a small town with no Ubers, no tow trucks, and wild ass drivers who fuck your life up. Be happy you’re not here!*

She climbed out from under Boone and found the night air.

“Is he okay?” asked Bracha.

Ava thrust her uninjured arm in the air, announcing, “Boone is okay!” Officially renamed and part of the ragtag Winstons, Boone’s was baptized by survival.

A MODERN MERCENARY

A small woman with white hair and small, white poodle approached. At the sight of her dog, Boone became more agitated, threatening to break through the Kia aquarium. Did this wild-haired woman in a coffee-stained tank top and ill-fitting plaid capris also predict what happened on June 7 of that year? Moselle Road, the dog kennels; the boat wreck, 2019; the housekeeper on the stairs, 2018; the classmate left by the road, 2015. Beaufort County had become the Bermuda Triangle of the South, and the Winstons were its recent victims.

“I was just walking beside the train tracks and heard the crash.” She spoke through Ava’s cracked window, unmoved by the thrashing shark. After a long drag on her cigarette, she walked into the fog of night, an apparition tossing butts like names of the dead. Is she still walking those train tracks, an eternal, flawed witness of late-night accidents?

If only she could reverse time, tell her daughter no, we are not adopting a dog from South Carolina. Manage to avoid the collision. Avoid being left for slag and dross curbside.

They could not get home. Midnight: Beaufort, South Carolina, and no Ubers, tow trucks, or selfless friends willing to make the trek and retrieve a family with a huge, incorrigible Dober Dane. Stranded at the Dollar General store lot. Almost operatic. How they convinced a strange man with all the pizzazz of a carnival hustler and a pick-up truck to drive them two and a half hours to Augusta, promising him six hundred dollars from the soonest Wells Fargo. He was more than happy to gallop in on his fiery, white, hook-and-chain steed for that price.

Although they were deep-sixed in the Deep South, a modern mercenary emerged.

CARL

He could smell their vulnerability. Desperation breeds danger, and danger breeds fear. Two hours knee to knee with a strange man who was in control of Ava's family. Like the whole move across the country, it was an exercise in absolute terror and blind trust. She had watched the moving truck consume her life and swim the depths of the 405, and now this tow truck opened its steel maw to swallow their desperation and dive into the shallows of HWY 278. Every turn he made was suspicious.

Would they be bound and raped, kept as slaves on his family land? Would they ever see the South Bay again? Was she awful for thinking those things? He was a good person. After all, he showed up when no one else did.

Carl wrestled alligators, some on the front porch of his house, where he lives with his wife who has top secret clearance with the U.S. Government. He told of exploits on the Alaskan oil fields after earning a Congressional Medal of Honor for his service in Iraq. In his free time, he built a recreation center for at-risk teens, whom he counsels and tutors. His son, the youngest EMT in the Southeast, is a nationally ranked monster truck driver. They too would become but a footnote in his tales, or better yet an aggrandized version of this midnight odyssey, a timber wolf in the crate rather than a dog.

After explaining how alligator tastes, Carl shared how to assemble explosives from everyday items. She stared at the dry skin on his hands, the red knuckles of delusion driving their vulnerability into the endless and unfamiliar. One turn after another, she feigned amazement at the smooth-talking snake oil sales associate, eyes darting from cell phone to gun rack to her daughter's tiny body, just nineteen. The course of towing helpless strangers, a totaled Korean SUV, and an oversized dog never did run smoothly.

They crossed the Sixth Street bridge and reentered Augusta. Things would be okay. Carl's winch and recovery steed was going to deliver them home. But like astronauts after the reentry into the earth's atmosphere, she was nauseous. Disoriented, like she had been lying down headfirst on an incline for the past two hours.

LOS ANGELES CALLING

It was Judith, her former principal in Los Angeles. She let it go to voicemail, planning to listen to it the next day when all the dust settled.

NASA is good at training their astronauts emotionally. Where was Houston when she needed them? The familiar equestrian stagecoach beamed its red and gold glory in the distance, a beacon of civilization. A reminder of the West they had left. Carl whipped them into the Wells Fargo lot and parked by the lone ATM. She crawled over her children like the scullery maid to which she had been reduced and stood in supplication under the Fresnel beams of this on-demand God of commerce.

It denied her. She could only withdraw two hundred dollars. Here she was, her time to shine, paused mid dramatic action, the audience alert and ready for the soprano to belt her third act aria. She could produce a faint song, not the expected coloratura of Carl's six hundred. Boone's baritone bark filled the night and emboldened Ava to crawl back into the cab, offering to Venmo the remainder of his fee. She would just explain their withdrawal limit and apologize. Now he

had no choice but to trust *her*. He was happy to oblige. How quickly villains become heroes.

Each had gambled on human kindness. And even though their ante was substantial, they both cashed in.

SUPERSTITION

Their neighbors' twin Richmond County Sheriff's cars sat like Patience and Fortitude, the famed marble lions of the New York Public Library, a welcome landmark signifying they had made it home. Whatever that meant. In a few short weeks, Brock's vehicle would meet its own demise at the intersection of Mike Padgett Hwy and Moore Road where the Georgia State Patrol declared the other driver dead on the scene. Over the next two years Brock would undergo twenty-two surgeries to save his leg. None of them would take. Ava carries a germ of guilt.

Could they be responsible? It was Boone—a black dog crossing the unwitting deputy's path.

Brock and Emily heard the commotion or saw the truck's strobe lights and came out to see if their neighbor was okay or needed help. Southern hospitality at last. Carl unstrapped the wheels and kicked in the hydraulics to lower the Kia. Like a Russian nesting doll on wheels at the hands of Angel Towing & Recovery's employee of the month, Ava and her three smaller dolls exited the cab; then, the Kia was released; next, the dog crate; and Boone. In the traditional Matryoshka set, the innermost doll is the smallest. Not a giant German hybrid with haunches of steel.

In some ways, though, Boone *was* just a puppy, never trained, an orphan of sorts, and the newest of her many responsibilities.

PREY DRIVE

But there was one more doll inside him, a self-destructive landslide of a beast who would terrify a century of czars let alone the Winston

family's two thousand square foot home. Boone went after the Winstons' three domestic short hairs. Still skittish from their own journey of crappy hotel to crappier hotel, crossing ten states to never again sleep under their Japanese pine under the SoCal sun. Enter the new Dober Dane. It might have been better to bring home one of Carl's alligators.

Boone did in fact have a prey drive. An unquenchable one. With a hankering for twelve-pound tabbies. First to topple was the dining room table and over went the bowls of cat kibble. Perseus, unable to live up to his namesake, bolted and hid for the next few weeks.

The other cats followed suit. When the new normalcy descended, they could not come out unless Boone was on a walk. An absolute nightmare for the cats.

She found a moment to listen to her voicemail. "Ava, we need you back. Your greatest talent is teaching high school English. Would you please consider returning to Pathway School? We will make it worth your while, help with travel and moving. Let's talk soon!" The Aussie accent coupled with Judith's sentiment were the balm she needed.

SONYA RENEE TAYLOR

Like the doomed astronauts on Space Shuttle Columbia, Boone's reentry process was unsuccessful. Hyperactive, huge, and strong. Even with Rob at home, each Winston was soon decorated with either a full set of bruises, broken appendage, or Wolverine scratch pattern. Boone hip-checked any sense of hope. There was no containing his energy. Whoever raised him did such a disservice by not training him as a puppy. The sheer size and strength matched with his abysmal sense of boundaries made for an absolute Tasmanian devil loose in their home.

He could be sweet. But only when he was sleeping. His leaden skull resting on Ava's lower abdomen like a weighted therapy blanket almost made up for the reign of terror. Boone was both winning them over and warding them off.

Bracha had a summer reading assignment for her new school, Tolkien's *Hobbit*. Boone too had a summer assignment—to grate books like fresh parmesan, reducing pages to pulp. She made the mistake of leaving her book on the couch unattended. Losing Bilbo Baggins was an epiphany into Boone's multi-tool jaw. They nicknamed him Smaug. Three more copies of *The Hobbit* and it was the complete desolation of Smaug. Then Ava's books. Sonya Renee Taylor's *The Body is Not an Apology* took the worst hit; its spine dismembered without apology.

Anna Grayson found a trainer to come over even though by this point they were hemorrhaging money for Boone. Multiple failed harnesses: tactical step-in, front-clip, back-clip. CBD treats, canine essential oil diffusers, gargantuan elephant ear chews. After three sessions with the trainer, she declared, "This dog is too far gone. I don't know what to tell you. I can give you other recommendations. But I'm not going to work with this dog." Ava needed to believe she, *they*, were not too far gone, and this new home, Augusta, the deep South could work.

She begged Rob, all six-feet-four of him, to wrangle Boone, use his strength to train him on leash instead of petite Anna Grayson being dragged through Hunters Knoll each morning and evening. "I've got basketball practice." Or "Anna Grayson's fine." Or "I can't handle another responsibility right now."

NANTUCKET SLEIGHRIDES

Five weeks of obedience training, and Boone still attacked the cats. Ava zip-tied every corner of every wire on the crate to make a safe, calming time-out corner or dog-man-cave to soothe Boone when he became overwhelmed. To no avail. It stands today at the back corner of her walk-in closet, a giant hollow rib cage, zip-tied carrion picked over by the vultures of her guilt.

Anna Grayson was the last to give up. She spearheaded every renewed effort to train him, watching endless YouTube tutorials, trying new trainers, driving to and from Petco for just the right toy to

mollify him, teaching him how to walk on a lead. All five feet and six inches of her one-hundred-and-ten-pound frame sparring with Boone's obscene frame.

In Melville's epic novel *Moby-Dick*, her favorite, Ishmael describes the terrifying phenomenon called a Nantucket sleighride—the dragging of a splintering pine rowboat by the harpooned whale at high speed over the ocean's unforgiving chop. For Anna Grayson it was the cement sidewalk lining their neighborhood. Then the dog bit Rob's arm. And when Sammy found his skull between the hinges of Boone's pearly clam cutters, an unfortunate decision had to be made.

AWFUL THINGS HAPPEN EVERY DAY

Even in Columbia County. Ava stuffed Boone into Anna Grayson's black speck of a Honda Fit, opened the sunroof for fresh air, and played Zach Bryan at top volume. *Don't stop goin', goin' south / 'Cause they'll let you play your music real damn loud / Don't stop headin', headin' south / They will understand the words that are pourin' from your mouth.* She wasn't sure if it was Boone she was serenading or herself. They drove west, a woman and her dog, all but strangers united in a shared exile. A common desire for home. The loblolly pines rushed past, and every red light was a lodestone between competing churches.

But the blue sky was a hand on both their backs, hovering above the sunroof, offering the kindness of a warm breeze like the breath of God. Or the South transcending its dark past. A middle-aged California woman softening to the reality of her limitations and her needs.

The women who greeted her at the front desk of the Columbia County branch of Animal Services could not hide their fear when they saw the size of Boone and how unmanageable he was, even in a reinforced no-pull harness. She could barely get the words out. "We can't keep hi-- him, we just cannot. Please he-- help me find him a sanctu-- a home." They asked her to be more specific about his behavior and how she had tried to correct it. Meanwhile, Boone lunged

for a child exiting the building, yanking Ava off the waiting room chair and leaving her in absolute desperation.

JOHN MILTON

The animal technician relayed their policy. There had been a recent event involving an untrained Dober Dane and a twelve-year-old boy in Appling. “We will not take an untrained dog of this size and power, nor can we in good faith transport him to a sanctuary. If you surrender him, which you one hundred percent should do, he will have to be euthanized.” She accompanied Boone down a metallic hallway with chain link catacombs, the burning scent of bleach, and an aura of no escape. Of all the hard places into which she had descended in her life—her dad’s beatings, her mom’s mental illness, the assaults, a failing marriage, moving to the South—this *populous and smoky city* as Shelley described hell was the most desolate. Boone would soon be reduced to ash. It was a scene from Milton: *a great Furnace flam’d, yet from those flames / No light, but rather darkness visible*. Pulling from literature was how she coped.

EXIT BOONE

Boone of the soulful eyes and enormous stature; Boone, the rescued Dober Dane; Boone, the most recent entry in Ava’s gentle-death ledger.

THIRTY YEARS EARLIER

A crisp, cool November morning in Marina del Rey when she was twenty-seven and still married to James. The decision to fix her eyes into her Saturn’s rearview mirror rather than the road ahead as she shifted into second gear, accelerating up Driftwood toward Pacific, late to work. The thump of Sydney under her wheels still haunts her. How

her neighbor heard the screech of brakes and ran out in half a bathrobe and crumpled beside his cat. Awful things.

SIDDHARTHA

Her back slid down the side of the metal cages in the exam room once Boone's nose went dry. She had put down many animals in her life, but this one was different. It was not cancer, old age, or even incontinence—it was aggression. The veterinary behaviorist saw no other option. Ava took responsibility, questioned if she had done everything possible for Boone, a question which tunneled into more questions: what if she had been the one driving the night of the accident instead of Anna Grayson; had she done enough to prepare her family for the move to the South; had she sabotaged their new home by reducing Georgia to MTG, Confederate flags, pig pulls, and chained dogs?

Driving home from the vet, she was haunted by the emptiness of her car, the silence of the drive, the vacuum of it all. She pulled into a neighborhood, Riverwood Plantation, and took a moment to breathe. She had come so far, miles and years, and the bitterness no longer served her. She tapped into the Buddhist teachings she had been exposed to at The Bodhi Tree Bookstore's lunch-and-learn Saturdays in West Hollywood—a community she missed. Ava closed her eyes. Her breath made space for sensation in her fingers and toes, allowing herself to feel the longing for acceptance, for peace, for home. She identified with Siddhartha Gautama, who left his palace to experience life and found a world of suffering.

She did not tell her family what really happened to Boone. Some things were impossible to confess. The kids accepted her fairytale, the Dober Dane rescue in North Georgia, the acres of rolling hills peppered with squeaky squirrel toys. Rob never asked. She carried Boone with her through the tough year ahead, wondering if the guilt would ever subside. When she was pulled over for rolling through a stop sign a month later, she was sure the sheriff knew she had killed

Boone. After teacher conferences, she was convinced many of her students' parents knew.

There was no red B on her chest, but she carried it in her backpack, in the trunk of her Subaru, and down the Publix aisle. And right into therapy, where she began the process of healing.

'GO, DOG. GO!

Her mother loved that she truncated Varvara, the name her father gave her, into Ava. When her dad passed away months earlier, she was unable to make it to Lawrence and Memorial Hospital in time. They Face Timed. "Varvara, my *solnishko*, I'm fading fast." So proud of his Russian heritage. Of her.

When she was a little girl, he read her Varvara Annenkova's poems in between *Go, Dog. Go!* and *The Busy World of Richard Scarry*. From that moment on, she reclaimed her birth name: Varvara, she who captures, she who seizes.

A father lost to Alzheimer's, a difficult marriage, a challenging exodus, a sudden drunk driver, and a mercy killing—suffering could not be avoided. But it could still bring meaning and transformation. Not everything should be harnessed and trained, but everything, everyone must be accepted.

Everything, everyone must come to an end. L.A. to Augusta. Titan to Boone. From Ava to Varvara.

She was redefining herself. At that moment on the side of Washington Road in Anna Grayson's tiny Honda Fit, her hand gripping the deflated BEST FRIEND harness, she had clarity. Geography was not the problem at all.

MOVING IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION

It was not L.A. she had hated all those years; it was Rob. It was not the South Varvara despised; it was Rob. Not Rob exactly; he was fine, she supposed, from a distance. It was being married to Rob, living with

him, listening to his lectures, cleaning his messes, apologizing on demand, putting out all his little fires. Being his handler for two decades. It was not the marriage she loathed. It was her anger, the righteous indignation, low self-worth.

It was all the unresolved shit, the unprocessed grief that erased her best self. Her heart had never been truly open to Rob because it had never been truly opened to herself. When she entered therapy, her intention was to kill Ava, a mercy killing of her old self, the one who was always trying to leave.

She was tired of being that woman. Instead, she found self-compassion. How to love, not to kill. How to stay. She had been empathetic to her students and the animals she rescued for decades but never to herself. By integrating rather than exterminating her worst self, she arrived in a promising new place of compassion. For Varvara, for Rob, the South even. She was moving in the right direction.

IRONY

In February, Rob's dad died. He took the kids to the funeral in New Mexico. The service was uneventful and even a bit enjoyable for Rob. He heard stories from many people who worked with his dad, mostly stories about how he had mentored them early in their careers. Craig was a self-proclaimed asshole, but his heart was huge for anyone just starting out in law.

He had learned the hard way what that struggle can do to a man, a marriage, and a family.

Rob was five, the youngest of three boys, living in the Palm Springs neighborhood near the mesas of Albuquerque when his father's working eighty hours per week was not enough and ran for lieutenant governor. He kept himself going with coffee, cigarettes, and an increasing amount of alcohol.

Soon Rob and his brothers had a stepdad. Soon they were coerced into legally changing their last names. Soon they moved to Tennessee, where their mom taught them to pretend their dad was dead. In case anyone asked.

Craig lost the bid for lieutenant governor and his family. The irony of the most successful family law attorney embroiled in the bitterest divorce north of the Rio Grande was not lost on anyone nor did it make anything easier. Rob had sworn he would never get divorced.

SEPARATION

Accepting Judith's job offer in March, Ave began the process of returning to L.A. She would be gone by August and return every four or five weeks, coming back for Thanksgiving, Christmas, and summer break with the family. "It's more like commuting," she spun it. "Tell your friends your mom travels for business; make it sound fancy and feminist."

Rob insisted Sammy stay with him in Georgia. Bracha agreed to go with Varvara. Anna Grayson was protected from choosing, happy to drink each weekend away at off-campus parties. The tidy little collection of literary characters Varvara used as her crutch never seemed so irrelevant, so far away. This was going to be the hardest year of her life, and she needed to stay grounded, dwell in the nonfiction of a broken home, two addresses, this new identity. When she plummeted into a familiar guilt, itching to confess it was she and only she who had destroyed her family, Varvara caught herself. Dropped back into the truth.

Upheaval was not a mercy killing; it was a rebirth.

ALWAYS END WITH THE BEGINNING

The gate agent returns with a Cheshire smile and an apology. Confesses it's an airline error and Varvara is "free . . ." Free to board. She hears *free to leave, free to live, free from the guilt that was, is, and is to be*. Bracha is already barreling down the jetway. Varvara strolls confidently behind, knowing her daughter will enjoy locating the seats. Once they nestle in, she exhales, sure to squeeze Bracha's hand

before sitting back and letting go. To have her youngest by her side—
such a boon.

Grateful Acknowledgements
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Dead Mule School of Southern Lit: “Relationship Smarts”

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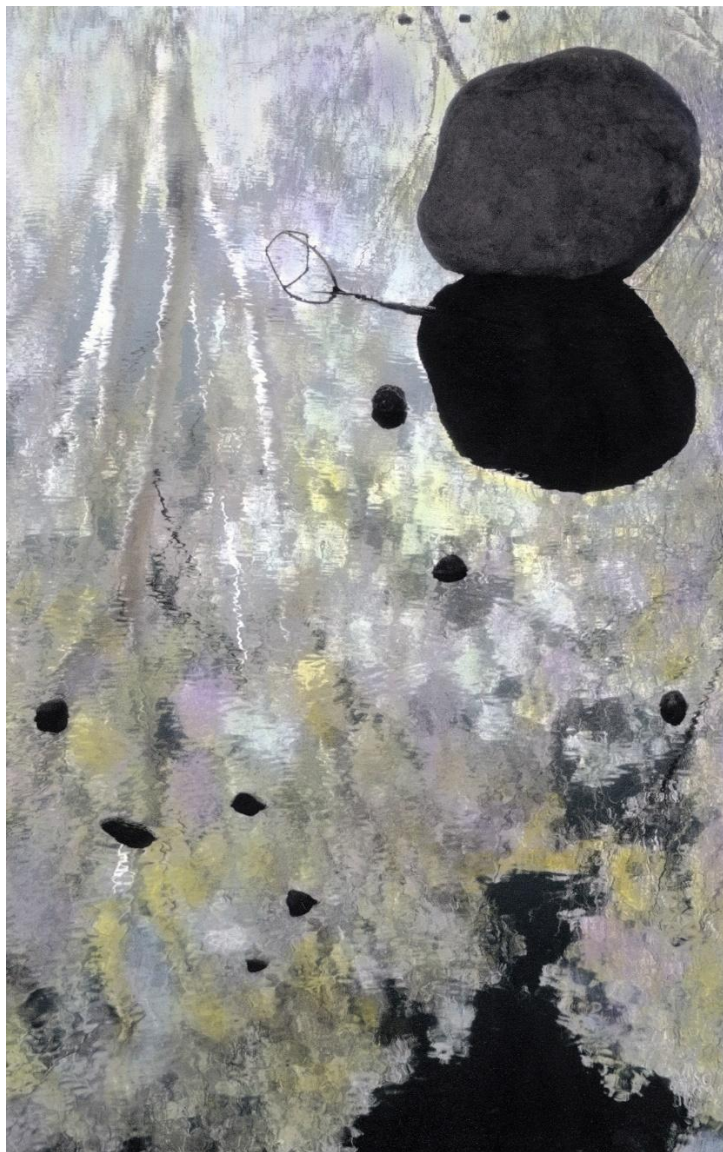
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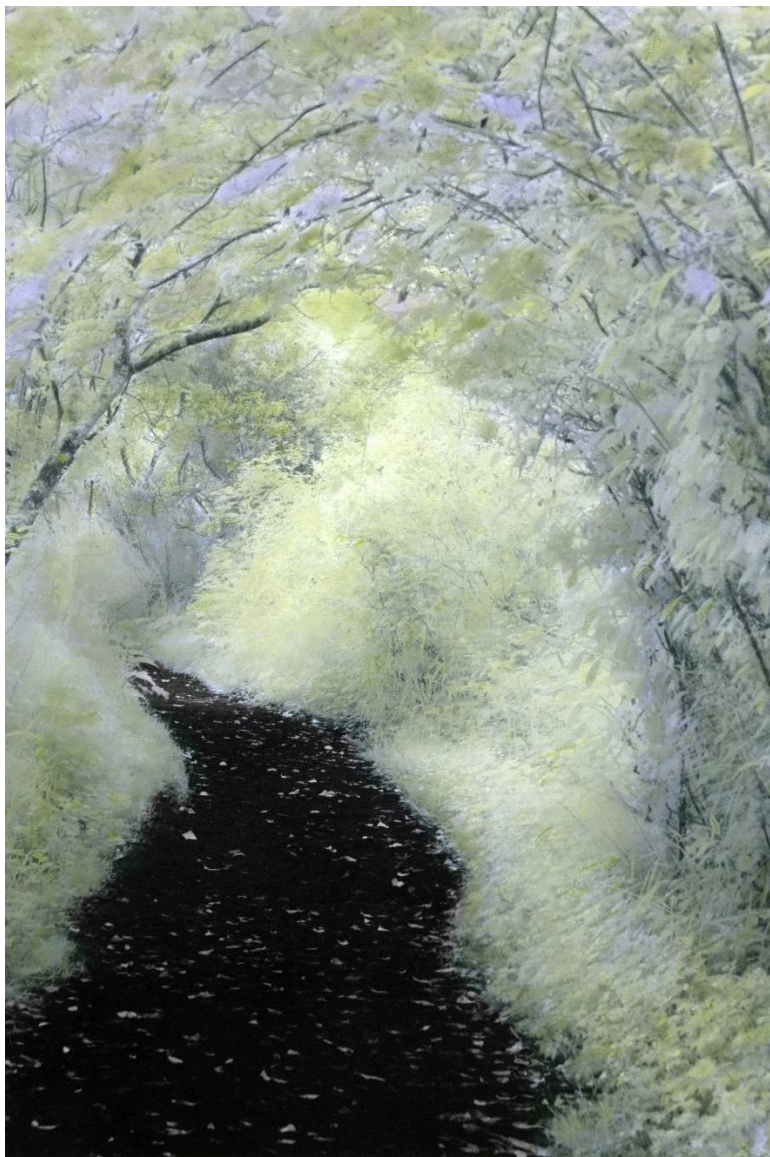
Rio Grande Review: “The 505”



Bamboo Forest / Lisa Rigge



Rock Reflections / Lisa Rigge



Forest Arch / Lisa Rigge

Contributors

Three of **David Engelhardt's** essays appear together on Scoundrel Time. One was a "notable" in Best American Essays, two were nominated for Pushcarts, and another won the editor's prize for best nonfiction of the year. His short stories have appeared in *The Baltimore Review*, *Folio*, and twice in *West Branch*.

Marie Gethins lives in Cork, Ireland Her work has been selected for BIFFY50, Best Microfictions, and Best Small Fictions. She is the flash fiction editor for *Banshee* and a coeditor of *Splonk*.

Wenqing Gu is a Las Vegas-based illustrator whose bold, playful digital work combines editorial clarity with poetic depth. Honors: AI44 Chosen Winner; Applied Arts 2025; Society of Illustrators 65 selected winner. Exhibitions: LACDA Electron Salon; Shoebox Arts; Ten Moir; Fusion Art; Winchester Gallery; Clark County Government Center; Consulate of Mexico (Las Vegas).

J.C. Henderson is an artist as well as a poet. Her inspiration for art resonates with her poetic impulses. Images of her paintings, some of which are cover images, have been featured in literary and art magazines in the US and England, including *The Emerson Review*, *Blue Mesa Review*, *CALYX*, *Ignatian*, and *Indelible of London Arts-Based Research Center*.

Candice M. Kelsey (she/her) is a bi-coastal writer and educator. Her work has received Pushcart and Best-of-the-Net nominations, and she is the author of eight books. Candice reads for *The Los Angeles Review* and *The Weight Journal*; she also serves as a 2025 AWP Poetry Mentor.

Calling New Orleans home but currently dedicated to traveling fulltime with his intrepid wife of thirty-six years, **Stan Kempton** defines his writing by the many truths he's stumbled upon in their wanderings. His stories and novella have been shortlisted and listed as finalist in numerous contests. His work has appeared in *Northwestern Indiana Journal*, *Charleston Anvil*, *Valient Scribe*, *The Wisconsin Review*, *CafeLit*, *Seems*, *Tribes*, and the 2025 Wordrunner anthology.

Serge Lecomte was born in Belgium in 1946. He spent his teens in South Philly and then Brooklyn before joining the Air Force Medical Corps. He earned an MA and Ph.D. from Vanderbilt University in Russian Literature with a minor in French Literature. He worked as a Green Beret language

instructor at Fort Bragg, NC, received a B.A. from the University of Alaska Fairbanks in Spanish Literature, and was a language teacher at the University of Alaska. He worked as a house builder, pipe-fitter, orderly in a hospital, gardener, landscaper, driller for an assaying company, bartender and painter.

Jeff Mann lives in Fort Erie Ontario, near Buffalo. Jeff has been steadily moving West from Maine to upstate New York to Kingston, Ontario then to the Niagara River. Somewhere along the way, he discovered car parts and it's been all downhill from there. Strongest influences: Hundertwasser, Schiele, this amazing planet.

Patrick McEvoy has had illustrated stories appear in *The Fantastic Other*, *Flora Fiction*, *Quarter(ly) Magazine*, *Glint*, *Best of Penumbra* Vol. 6, as well as being featured in a group show by TAG Gallery in Los Angeles. *Um* has been published by Metastellar. His short plays were performed at various festivals in NYC. His photography has been exhibited with *Abstract Magazine*, *Kelp Journal*, *Artistonish*, *HMVC*, and literary journals.

Eileen Nittler lives in Montana and spends her time creating things and walking her puppy. She has previously been published in *Oregon Humanities*, *MUTHA*, *The Chicago Story Press*, and others.

Olivia Pelaez is a NJ-based comic book artist. She has a BFA in Cartooning from the School of Visual Arts. Published works include the four-issue series *Little Girl*, *The Kitchen Witch*, and various shorter comics in anthologies and literary magazines. She has one daughter and one cat.

Tiziana Rasile was born in Rome where she lives and works. She completed the course of study at the Academy of Fine Arts, specializing in Painting. Her research explores light through overlays of soft chromatic textures and focuses on the possibility of creating a dialogue between scientific and philosophical realities, spiritual and artistic insights. The artist is represented by Laura.I Gallery in London.

Karin Reimondos is a freelance photographer, writer, and horse breeder, living on a farm in Sweden with her Welsh Springer Spaniels. Her poems were published in two Poet's Choice anthologies. Her photography has appeared in *Fusion Art*, Light Space & Time Online Art Gallery, and *Beyond Words*, and is forthcoming in *L'Esprit*. Her debut poetry collection, *Baby Steps Towards Acceptance*, was published in 2025. Her poetry book *Shelter* and her YA novel will be released in winter. Her photography can be found on social media under Humble Moments Photography.

Lisa Rigge has been involved with photography since the early 1980s. Her schooling includes the M.I.T. B&W Photography Lab in Cambridge, MA, Chabot Community College in Hayward, CA, the University of California, Santa Cruz, and the Santa Fe Photographic Workshops, New Mexico. She has studied with nationally-known photographers, including Kate Jordahl, Al Weber, Holly Roberts, Kathleen Carr, Mark Citret and Debra Fleming Caffrey.

Jamie L. Smith is the author of the poetry collection *The Flightless Years*; *Trojan Horses: Voices from the Opioid Crisis* won the 2025 Unleash Press Book Prize. Her chapbook *Mythology Lessons* won *Tusculum Review's* 2020 Nonfiction Prize and is listed in Best American Essays 2021. Other works appear in *Southern Humanities Review*, *Bellevue Literary Review*, *Best New Poets*, and *The Good Life Review*. Visit jlsmithwriter.com for more information.

Mark Wagstaff's work has appeared in *Heavy Feather Review*, *Adelaide Literary Magazine*, *Neon Origami*, and *Cagibi*. He won the 3-Day Novel Contest with an off-kilter romcom *Attack of the Lonely Hearts*. Mark's new novel *Mascara*, a post-modern tale of politics and mayhem, was published by Cinnamon Press in 2025. www.markwagstaff.com

William Lewis Winston, teacher of writing, lives in Oakland, California. His poems appear in various literary journals nationally. His story *The Sound of Snow Not Falling* appears in *Litro*. Behind a camera since age ten, until publishing in *Sunspot*, his street photography, in distant lands, he had kept to himself.

Cynthia Yatchman is a Seattle-based artist. She works primarily on paintings and prints. Her art is housed in numerous public and private collections. Her work has been shown at Harborview Hospital, Seattle University, Seattle Pacific University, the Tacoma and Seattle Convention Centers and the Pacific Science Center. Her art has been published in multiple online galleries and journals.

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