



CORVUS REVIEW

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COVER ART

"Building a Home"
Fabrice Poussin

This photograph used found objects. I was rummaging through an old barn when I stumbled upon some old windows. How hard can it be to create a new home in the wild. Can the building in fact be completed? What accident may happen during construction? In this case the home will not be built as so many obstacles intervened. Those who hoped to live there have in fact abandoned the dream. What remains are the ruins of that dream.

EDITORS

J. Mercer (Editor in Chief)

Janine Mercer is a Canadian ex-pat currently residing in Milwaukee, WI. Her work has appeared in *Sinister Wisdom*, *The Quint*, and others. Her current passion project, *Haunt Heads Podcast*, can be found on iTunes. She blogs at hauntheads.wordpress.com.

D. Vang (Fiction Intern)

Destiny Vang, a self-taught procrastinator, loves reading, writing, and creating music. In her non-existent free time, she enjoys spending time with family, trying out new hobbies, and cooking. You can find her published work in *Furrow*.

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Shirley
Adrian Slonaker

For as long as she'd filled out her census forms,
Shirley had been a one-person household,
and she wasn't a hugger, concluding that,
unless a kid is clutching you to
prevent plummeting to a painful death,
a hug is superfluous.

Yet she posted epistolary embraces to
a penfriend named Ahmet,
the fiftyish Turkish typing teacher who wrote in
dreamy undulating longhand
and sent selfies of a mustachioed face with smiling eyes
and a solemn mouth.

His warmhearted words eagerly gulped down-
like cloudy lemonade with clinking shards of ice in a heat wave,
sustained her in stoic solitude as her humdrum haze
of postmenopausal pattering progressed
from tolerable to acceptable.

Their correspondence continued until year six, when
Ahmet vouchsafed that he'd be visiting her,
snaking a romantic route from Izmir to Yonkers
by ship and by train.

On April 12th she put on her chartreuse shift dress
and Chanel No. 5
and waited at the railway station
for a passenger who never stepped onto the platform.
Shirley shuffled back every morning
for nine Ahmetless days
before she shrugged her sloping shoulders
at the ninth shrinking caboose
and silently slaughtered hope.

The Hotel Mattress
Adrian Slonaker

The mattress is long in the tooth,
if mattresses could masticate,
having dazzled in its debut in the city's haughtiest hotel,
bolstering the sweat-blotched backs of visiting VIPs
and their lovers.
But mattresses, like Hollywood honeys,
have a best-before date,
so as Joan Crawford and Bette Davis were found featured
in psycho-biddy melodramas in the sixties,
the mattress was next cast in a mid-range motel,
braving ravioli smudges, incontinent seniors, sick ankle biters,
and cursing couples cross at the requirement to rise
at three fucking a.m. for cheap Continental flights.
The mattress continued its descent
down to a roadside flophouse,
suddenly smeared with hookers' rouge and vodka-scented vomit
and grossly groped during demoralizing drug busts.
The mattress is beyond knackered,
yet pleased with its red-letter rips, stains, and sags
as a valiant vet is proud of
the Victoria Cross or
Légion d'Honneur.

Weightlessness
André Hampshire

I can feel the
weightlessness of purpose.
Where a boulder once
stood upon my chest,
Compressing my lungs,
Stealing my air,
Now stands open space,
In which my muscles ease
and my breath cycles
freely.
In this open space, I grow,
like a lobster casting off its
shell,
No longer convinced by
the illusion of its
protection.

Men and women in white
coats,
Degrees hang against their
walls,
Like beautifully wrapped
boxes, vacuous inside.
They promise peace, they
promise a cure.
Blue pills, white pills
Crushing my mind against
its impulse to grow
In that open space
Where the air flows freely,
Moving to and fro like
currents
Washing away the filth.

A Rowboat Splintered on the Rocks
AR Dugan

Resin-coated pine looks like brine-logged honeycomb / bent to contours of shale in the morning fog. Some of the stouter parts, / like the seat bracket / and the ribs every sixteen inches, / resisted the moisture and dis- / memberment. / Jagged with rebellion—they would riot in the streets / if their dependent faculties, / arms and legs if you will, were not soggy and helpless, / not even driftwood. All heart / and no means, no finger to point, / no voice to shout. Soon, / very soon, not even a thought to sink.

Lorie
Michael Lee Johnson

Lorie, you want to see me clearly
through this joy of my naked body
avoiding the sweat of my emotions,
just breathing on my neck
rubbing this baseline of my groin-
will not find us here again.
Go away, leave me thinking
louder than your breath-
body moves quietly
in a lazy sway of indifference.

A Field Guide to Ethical Necromancy
Celeste Rose Wood

A human is a brief gathering of buzzing dust, the way a cloud of insects rises from the ground like one twisting body, husks swept from copses and corners, a decision of wind. Thought is muscle, kept supple by movement. Necromancing is choreography. Think of it like this: revenants

must be allowed to dance, and to build, clean, and otherwise toil. Rent out the services of revenants and you provide succor to the living. To yourself, you provide income which is its own sort of life force. Let your mind diffuse

into the translucence of childhood, when to sculpt with sand was inviolable. At the heart of any animal is the anatomical but also the anima, the soul, malleable like dough. A body is a human-shaped cake which must remain raw. Whether some thoughts survive death

is unknowable. Death is mute. Do not counterfeit a correspondence between yourself and revenants. A semblance of afterlife is often enough for the living. Just as many people sign up for organ donation, many others will covenant their own reanimation. While

a certain class of necromancer will have no compunction to murder, that is sloppy, lazy work. Graveyards, too, should be avoided, lest we trip into the ditch that is the old stereotype of ghoulishness. Still, death is a suit of mud

which can be washed off, a crust which can be cracked like the softer stone around a geode. The way into a revenant is through the apertures of its eyes pulled wide like circles of overlapping blinds, the hand of your thought walking down its throat on fingers; inside, a house of familiar rooms.

Eminently Doable
Christopher Keaveney

I

In Japan, there is a castle that floats
on fog like a strafe of starlings,
like the shouldered globe
seen at the World's Fair
as a child,
the Hall of the Future
undone by its own hubris
and by the vendor hawking
battery operated umbrellas out in the plaza
who attempted to make
believers out of everyone in line.
Touché,
the intricacies of fish bones mother left
for the cat to fiddle with
after she went back to work
part-time at Gimbel's
during the Christmas rush,
The stigmata of the abandoned son,
his forehead and upturned palms
gracing the linoleum.

II

The old man lit out late
on the first Saturday after the solstice,
Bitches Brew
skipping in the familiar spot,
dissonance
more-or-less eloquent
in absentia,
an adjudication of the jazz hands
on weekend trips to the loft in the city
where he sought to reinvent himself,
proffering a hot dog on the steps of the Museum
of Natural History
as alimony.
gold lame hid the lacerations
while rust called our attention
to the problem in the first place,
retracing our steps to the slender-necked ingenuity
of the cormorant in the park.

III

I made him wait two summers for forgiveness,
barnacles to harbor resentments
on the somnambulist's almost perfect morning,
gone fishing on the sound,
the bunkers I caught and released habitually
just to get in a word edgewise,
stymied by the wildflowers
whose petals he pressed
into my hand along with a five spot
and the trilobite which also
had its day in the sun,
wrangling the absentee father's standard commitment.

The French
have a dozen words for practically everything
he mumbles while rummaging
through the tackle box,
but apparently no word yet for doggie bag.

When I Die
Eric Fisher Stone

Go outside. Laugh at airplanes chewing clouds,
feed horses planetary apples, lick the air
and taste all remaining light. Be happy
as a dachshund diving in a bed of biscuits.
Oink in the sun, roll in the grass.
Deck goats in blue cotton dresses
and bleat in butterfly-thundering fields.
Every ant scuttling on a stick, every man
and woman who lived and loved,
boys chasing toads in a park, strangers
brushing shoulders on crowded New York
sidewalks, every truck driver on I-35,
every sparrow and human being
will die and not be seen again.
The universe is a beautiful goblin
who eats children.

I want people to dance at my funeral.

blackwinged afterthought
{10.27.12}
Gabriel Bogart

footprints carved into the wet sand,
a thousand tiny monuments to what was.
the way we see Easter Island mysterious,
those footprints
run all around and right up to that edge
where the meticulous breath of the ocean
swallows them out of history.
onyx-feathered ravens of mystical proportion
give fleeting chase to the sepia shadows of humanity,
leaden in footprints soon washed away by the sea
and her repetitive bosom.
they all keep a memory, the ravens, and the ocean,
much the same as we keep an entwisted
record of the past,
in the feigned hopes of illuminating a future path.
the basal nerve ganglia of the sea is everywhere,
even in the night-black flight of the ravens
checking the liminal space from water to
the vacuum beyond,
which we rarely considered as anything
beyond capital expansion.

Bar Fly
Joan McNeerney

At Jewel Box Tavern
lights are always dim
so you can't look closely.

Wearing stiletto heels, she
traipses along followed by
billows of cheap perfume.

Dressed in a second skin of
electric blue velveteen
covered with silver glitz.

She looks for a mark, some
clown who carries thick wads
of cash and a stash of coke.

Tapping the shoulder of
the willing joker with her long
lacquered fingernails.

First, she must meet him
in the back alley to pay up
with her pound of flesh.

Showing its age, her face
is coated by pastes, crèmes,
thick rouge, blazing red lipstick.

Her brown eyes encrusted with
liners, mascara, and shadow
revealed a certain sadness,

Secreted in the dark and dank
women's room, she snorts
that magical white powder.

Nothing matters now.
There is no despair
only this embrace of bliss.

Linearity
Joe Oppenheimer

When the sleeping snake
wakes regains its coil
its head now clearly
at one end
rattlers at the other,

one might consider
all things to be so
ordered as numbers
and time. Of course,
there are exceptions

such as the crossing of
4th and 10th in
the West Village.
But in general one
always assumes an order

until the mind seems
to let go of what came first
and then . . . as in
Billy's terrible wreck
or Jane's suicide.

Not that it matters
anymore but so many
other events just reside
in the helter-skelter of life free
from the linearity of time

So that soon I don't know
whether Merwin is alive
or dead for he is here on my mind's
page along with Bishop and
Gwendolyn and Ethridge too

ready to break bread with me.
Just like that snake I stepped
on so long or short
ago, that then woke up, coiled
and bit creating a moment

in a time that is so lax
as to be

chaotic.

26.

Joseph Milford

I got home
After completing
All 12 labors
But

I forgot to grab
The goddamn

milk

56.

Joseph Milford

I am

Made of song

You are

Made of gold

Who do you think

Will sink faster

Into hell?

Essence
JW Burns

Her pleasure
between time zones
half tropical rot the other part mist within a bouncing net

Elbows on the table
halving everything I say
does nothing to free the silence between proclivities

She regurgitates
chicken potatoes carrots onions on clean plates
folds her fingers into endless rooftops

Without hope through these itchy
windows wind and rain transport sunshine and the icy
lips of names we call and call

Thoughts on Grass
Ken Allan Dronsfield

Can your mind sustain the burden
for the beating heart to grasp?
Will you bare witness to a being
within a lightness of the form?
Does the little weevil relent as the sun
drops in a pallid gray sky?
As you hum dirges by mahogany coffins,
ashen of face, do you peek under the black
drapes to grasp death's unfurled black hand?
Do you care for harmony, or does the chaos
of a moment feed your soul?
Without a frown, without any remorse, you react
with a hatred attacking innocence at twilight.
Do those moments make you pause
to laugh at the suffering while others cry?
Are the horrors found around every corner
a meal for your soul?
Descry with your tongue, a salted lick from
ripe pears and taste the tears of the dying.
The voyeur of listening, strains to hear the beauty
through the crackling flames of a burning heart.
I live by the pen, I've found peace there,
in a meadow of grass enjoying life's latest episode
of the twilight zone.

The Drowning Man
Lucas Powers

listen to the talk
of the drowning man

so many clever adjectives
And blunt interjections

he is like a blind archer
shooting unfletched arrows
in all directions

surely he must hit
something--

he talks so much
so fluidly

that one forgets
that he is drowning
So breathtakingly
his lungs half full

prepositions sink
and he is down
to his last pronoun--

i murmur single
syllables
to keep the
conversation going

to keep him talking
his eyes now under
blue ripples on
the surface

his nose blows out
a trill of bubbles
before his mouth
is too submerged

closing
on the verb

On Wise Whitman
Matthew Johnson

Leave me nothing
But the common folk,
And their litanies in response to the world.

For their conduct of life,
Let me see their tear-run, smiling faces,
And touch their crippling hunger of bread, and ambition.

Flow their unknowing, realized passions
In my veins, and let my words bleed
And breathe in the deep understanding
That creation is alive, and throbbing—

Miscarriage
Nikita Gill

A morning after
we conjure deficiency
from the half dead
inside the womb,
the marigolds wilt.

Monsoon slits sky,
all the pickle
sours and decays,
they tell us
don't touch anything.

Still, life corrupts
around my presence.
The dog sickens
The cook stops
preparing prayer food.

To still death,
Mother-in-law
stitches the lime-
chilli-lime-chilli
for darkened doorways.

Three holy men
bring hollow blessings,
make us bind
turmeric in cloth
to preserve permanently.

Yet nothing stops
death from stealing
our husband away;
he prefers the
moonlit madness now.

Yet nothing stops
the marriage from
becoming a fading
creature decaying inside
a corroding cage.

Dogson Unborn
Thomas L. Winters

Unborn.

I follow the stars and get lost, feeling dirt-buoyant as though my mother was clairvoyant. Clandestine doughnut saucers conduct me through the last arcade on earth. I smell newlywed lust on loose buttons; the hot sweet of burning soles; the thorny flow of gossip breath from Dogtown punk to drag-queen Joules. The air is green, the pinball machines *I-saw-this-in-a-dream*. I hear a fat exchange between cocaine and credit coins. The dealers in their sado-spikes force a laughing bark. Hacker ball busters recite morning headlines on shots of Cutty Sark. I dance with my progenitors and smoke my future self. The party lives forever, some haberdasher screams. There are no editors, no smutty filibuster kings.

Born.

Kitchen, Sinister
Laura Potts

Ten springs gone in my morning of life, I wore light
in the summer of my voice, in the candles once made
of my eyes. That night dusk swung out and away into noise
wild and white above town, and down in my childhood

garden lost the pond breathed out light grey and soft.
I remember not. But black clot and burnt in my throat
when she coughed up hot liver that night in the gloam,
the globes of her eyes gone bloodfull and long

did the birds scream murder outside. I cried. My
winter-ghost mother gone grey in her day, a tragedy
staring and wearing that cracked pale-fade skin in an old
kitchen light. When food was thin she served me lies. No,

the stars did not giggle the puddles that night
when my dark-fire youth wheeled a wind round the house,
her once-fluted mouth nursing liquor and meth. Her deathlight
was dark as a gobbet of gas, a heart in a jar on a chimney last

lit back when I was a lamb. After that? I took a bath. Black
was the path at infant's end, a lack-lanterned track derailing
and cracked was the girlhood glow of my light. O mother
of mine, the window-steam bled itself pretty that night.

Under the trees, I sit in the asylum garden.
I swing the bottle to my lips and swig.

Thus Spake the Grackles
Kay Oakes

The grackles make the mornin on
the slack high-tension wire that bows to what's under,

coughing legion rows that'll say back the stained
air in kind, like scalding censers.

The grackles prove the curve of the line
and gibberish current, blue as a river.

Throw their heads, throw their baleful eyes,
nervy jewels on the royal necklace

of electric dead.

Mercy they do speak a racket even for bein swung out
in the smoke and sun. Nonetheless,

it don't choke their art.
They ain't shy to stand on lightenin.

For all the sound at their feet
that they know in their feathers is pressed

small like wine grapes,
to a mash they wolf while laughing at the belly.

These, darlin, are livin things –
these are brinin inside water and blood where they stand

and curing from without for all that burns the air.
All the darker their shine of steamed grease, the weather.

Certainly Come a Time
Jeffery Zable

Yes, I've been around long enough, and surely
there are millions of people who would like to have my house,
my backyard, and maybe even my refrigerator.
"Why be greedy!" I say to myself.
I've lived a fairly decent life by common standards,
never having gone hungry except when I've forgotten
to take some food along for a walk in the woods,
the forest, or some place in which there wasn't a market around.
And my life has never been in any real danger
except for that time I went to a prostitute's apartment
and her pimp was waiting behind the door with a knife,
and subsequently took all my money.
What I'm saying is that I doubt it will be too much longer,
but I can't say it will be tomorrow or the day after that.
I do exercise, eat right, and I've never been much of a drinker,
nor have I knowingly put harmful chemicals into my body.
What I'm really saying is everyone will have to be patient.
There will certainly come a time. . .

Fool's Gold
Marina Ellis

Quotes from the song Fool's Gold by Dean Madonia

All the gold in silence is worthless.

How can we understand silence when with its mention we disrupt its very nature? You say "silence" and any further discussion becomes backbiting, gossip.

But silence is not innocent. Silence has crimes tattooed onto crow's feet and spider-web scars. Silence has perpetuated itself through propaganda, painted itself golden, and made you bite your tongue. And you believed you did yourself service. But justice comes best from outcries, not whispers.

Mom said that if you told anyone, Children and Family would come and take you away. They wouldn't understand whole situation, how she fed you and kept you safe. You always exaggerate things, after all. But you kept trading relief with resourcefulness and it was killing you.

You kept taking in every mention of hospitalization, every comment that you're just a kid and they could hire a better lawyer. There would be point in attempting emancipation. You started to lose sight of what was real. Walking up the stairs felt like the world was folding in on itself. You felt sick and faint and alone. The therapist wasn't going to be here in a week and a week felt too long to survive. So you called out.

And perhaps this is a lack of gratitude. but you expected a little more.

We were staying over in Apalachicola for spring break. in a little cabin a few minutes from the main town. It was the kind of day I just wanted to sleep through. But *no*, we to go check out the beach. Mom was stuck in a fantasy, but I was in outer space. A black hole held in my chest a thousand tons sinking in my gut. There was no gravity to keep my thoughts landed in my head, so they floated off in light speed out the window. Water had been found in the twin moons on my face and they were plummeting fast through the cosmos onto the leather seat.

"Come on. this is beautiful." The car rolled over the sandy road, past the Floridian forests. Dark trees were bowing down their branches. In this state, winter doesn't get much cold. It's just wind chill. There was nothing beautiful. The Sky was an ugly, murky grey.

"Why are we here? I asked, voice overflowing with pre-teen angst.

"To have fun. George, you get the towels." The beach was empty. There weren't even any birds. Probably sensed the upcoming storm.

Miami is great for maybe one thing: it doesn't get cold. It's greatest downside: beaches, sandy, salty beaches. I've learned to accept the shores for the year-long warmth, but Apalachicola wasn't giving me a compromise at all. Sometimes you can't get both, sometimes you get neither.

In Civics we learned about World War I. The teacher showed us a picture of a battlefield, but in modern-day. You'd never imagine countless people died there. The grass is green and dozens of tourists visit every day. Endless bullets hide, seeded in the ground like the only evidence for the tragedy. You dig a hole anywhere you'll eventually find one. That's the feeling I got standing at the shoreline, looking at how frozen the beach looked and how endless the sand and water went. Like something awful happened.

Mom walked over to me sitting on the wet sand. "Are you having a good time?"

"No," I said as I drew circles with a piece of driftwood. "It's just a beach. We live in Florida. Why do we need to see this one?" I had a secret. Underneath all the little circles on the sand, wrote a message. Almost a call for help if I thought I needed any.

"Look, I had a friend and every time we went to see a sunset, they'd complain say 'We see a sunset everyday what's so important about this one?'" Five minutes earlier, when my brother and dad chased each other along the shore, I got the driftwood and wrote down *I would like to leave the world, but no one would let me*. I never thought about ending my life until then.

"Yeah, so?" A year later I would stop waiting for permission and try to drown myself in our apartment's pool.

"Well, everyday there is another sunset, but each one is just as wonderful." She wrapped her arm around me and I hunched over. "I think you'll really like this if you'd just let yourself enjoy it."

Selfish, speechless. No one will ever believe me or forgive me, if they only knew.

You'd think the Chinese restaurant fiasco was enough, but it seems like there needs to another "conversation" about the family. It's pointless and unfair. A 2v1 fight. I'm bound to lose and I want out. But in this house, no one leaves the table until Mom does.

"Marina, you need to let go of all this anger." I looked at the kitchen door.

Mom kept going. "This is an act. You need to let yourself be happy and move on."

If only I had agency and with just a thought, I could stop dad from moving in with us. Maybe just changing the past will suffice. I'd suck out the trauma from history, erase his mistakes. But it's never that simple.

My dad walked in front of me and leaned against the counter to say, "Honey, you need to speak." A chorus of what's the point played in my head, the broken record. I had only myself to convince and escape plans, bittersweet impossibilities, have been mulled over since last week. I always thought they'd wait until graduation but it's obvious who's the acceptable loss. I wished could get an extra serving of rice.

"You want to hear me speak?" I didn't know what I was doing, but with dad's smile, it's clear he's winning. "I think you're both shitty parents who don't know how to take care of their child."

"You don't get to talk to us like that!" Mom is yelling. This is what I get for talking to the school. Another dysfunctional family dinner. I kept staring looking at the kitchen What if I could just run? What if I swing the door open before they stop me? What if sprint to the backyard fence and jump it? What if I go to the bus stop, pay the fare, and ride off for hours? What if-

"No, no. This is good. Let your feelings out," he said, inching closer. What if I did? I was supposed to stay silent. At least then he's not getting what he wants. But this dinner was pointless, there was point in trying anymore.

"I think you're an asshole." I was screaming by now. He's only smiling more. Stupid. I never knew how to control myself.

The vacation was for the four of us, but Mom had a meeting she needed to be at in Miami. We had a full schedule for three days of father-children family time. Until then, we were to drop Mom off at the airport.

It was a really tiny one, much smaller than Fort Lauderdale's. Kind of looked like an entrance to a hotel. I chose to stay quiet and not make a scene, for mom's sake. But I really wanted to go back to the cabin and sleep.

It wasn't even that I have gotten homesick; I really liked the town of Apalachicola. Between the time at the beach and the drive over here we went around the town and checked out all the tourist stops; the chocolate factory and their cocoa-covered oysters; the new Dixie theatre and the remains of its burnt-down predecessor; the dock filled with seagulls and fishermen. Locals sold watercolors and pastels during the monthly Art Walk.

As Mom left the rented car and dragged the luggage bag behind her, dark clouds hung above the Sunshine State horizon.

When silence kills, the truth is still you sold your soul for fool's gold.

In cases of an aneurism, internal bleeding is not felt at first. Your blood vessels bulge and swell, but under the naked eye it's a healthy brain, a healthy person. Suddenly a rupture sprouts from veins and like Yellowstone geysers your blood goes not where you wanted it to go, but where it went anyway. Even medication and treatment can't evade the inevitable. It's the hardest pill to swallow, tough as your bloodstream and as present as your heartbeat. When you accept fate as unpredictable yet predetermined, you must accept aneurisms.

My therapist suggested one session that my anger is healthy. I spent so long in fear, when did I have time for anger? I put my body on the line to protect my family from my family; I made a savior out of a child. And no messiah is allowed to hate.

If I showed too much emotion, my dad would mirror me. He would throw harsher insults and deeper cuts. He had decades of pain locked into the calluses of his palms. In his screams were bubbles of gin and any kind of childhood trauma. Mine were just filled with fight or flight. I couldn't run away from my home, so I'd freeze. But now I am thawing. He told me spitting out poison only hurts yourself, but these darts of venom are not my own.

I am shedding. I am healing.

Six hours. It took my dad six hours without Mom to walk out of the cabin's bedroom in search for a bottle. We decided to share the master bed on the second floor the first night Mom was away. He had been dry for months so Mom and I didn't even mention the possibility of an incident. She was miles away by then and we had no other adult here to save us. That never happened again, after everything that happened in that cabin.

I've developed a sort of sixth sense after years of this cycle of relapse and rehab. I could almost hear him walk over to the laundry room and drown his throat raw with Jack Daniels. Then the wine bottle, and then the Heineken, and finally the vodka in the cupboard. Mom said this much alcohol there was normal and the cabin owner put all this for guests to relax and enjoy the North Florida wildlife. I thought he might be an alcoholic, too.

A to-do list wrote itself in my head. First, wake Leo up. He looked so soft and I didn't want to end whatever dream he was having, but we needed to move. Second, tiptoe down the wooden stairs and spend the rest of the night in the bedroom below. We couldn't be there when he came back from his drinking binge. That's when he was the angriest. Third, try to sleep and plan for tomorrow. Planning after planning for something I can't expect, I can't measure, and I try my hardest to forget the next day.

I held Leo tight against my chest. The bed was so small I was like a second mattress. I wanted Mom here. I needed her next to me, whispering to me that it was going to be okay. But by the time we woke up, I needed to keep us all safe. Leo let out deep sighs into my chest. I looked up at the slowly turning fan on the ceiling. In this moment, we would enjoy this fool's gold of silence.

Full Flight
Kelley Crowley

“This is a full flight,” announced the chipper voice, “Southwest Airlines 4713 to Las Vegas is a full flight. When you find a seat please move out of the way so that other passengers may find a seat.”

Angie watched slender, snobbish New Yorkers squint and smirk at thick Mid-westerners. Old people shuffled, confused at the chaos of the festival seating. “What do you mean I didn’t buy a specific seat?”

This wouldn’t be my problem if Cal’s idiot secretary hadn’t booked on an airline with no first-class seats, Angie thought. She knew if she hadn’t groused so much at the check-in counter, he might have waited for her when she went to freshen up. *He knows I can’t hold it from Dallas to the Las Vegas airport.* She watched the back of her husband’s head swivel like their front lawn sprinkler as he scanned for seats. He was a full five people ahead of her in line and the seats were filling fast. She felt a warm vinegar rise from her stomach.

Covered in a well-polished veneer of Texas patience, Angie showed no signs of impending panic. She hated flying and she despised sitting in coach; it was noisy, cramped and crowded—very unladylike. Closeness to strangers made her uncomfortable, but a lady never shows her discomfort. She raised her chin and squared her shoulders straining the zipper on the purple velour tracksuit. She enjoyed being noticed on Cal’s arm when they went for client dinners and drinks. She knew she looked better than most women in their mid-50s. There are certain precautions, no gluten, PX90 and only red wine – and no, she won’t give up the shoulder pads or the hair spray -- they work. She didn’t care when Amber said to her at Gage’s wedding, “They age you, Aunt Ang. You don’t want people noticing the wrong things and believing your best look was 30 years ago.” Angie was convinced her niece was a little jealous since she couldn’t wear this purple velour Juicy tracksuit—the expensive one—the without the logo on the derrière.

No matter what Amber thinks, she’ll put her Dallas pageant hair up in hot rollers and backcomb it for height and volume. Her hair was always her best feature; so thick and so blonde. During the evening gown competitions the girls backstage went green over her natural rose gold highlights. Years later, when she was a pageant coach, people continued to comment on her striking hair. Her niece didn’t understand, getting that kind of attention was hard to give up.

She could tell by the back of his head that Cal was scanning the seating options. She hated sitting with the mass of humanity. When they flew first class it was never a problem; he always wanted an aisle seat and she always wanted the window. Pretty people always get the seats they want, she reminded herself. Cal, she mused, while not classically handsome was still pleasant to look at, like an aging screen star. The barely gray at his temples and his manly crow’s feet seemed to give him an assuredness, like Fred MacMurray in *Double Indemnity*. I like to think that he’d commit murder if I asked him, she thought. Smiling with pride, she watched women in yoga pants and pantsuits looking him over approvingly.

But another woman looked at him, too, eyeing him up like a steak dinner. Angie’s stomach turned. She was a fat woman in a tight black tank top and coated underneath in splashy, contemptuous tattoos. Roses with thorns, skulls with snakes and 40s pin-up girls. She looked like a Barnum and Bailey attraction. Spiky, purple hair, black eyeliner and a silver ring through her nose. With a body like that why would you ruin your face? This woman had to work for the

circus. How else could she make money? Who would hire a woman who looks like that? To do what?

Cal worked in hedge funds— or banking—something with money. Angie never quite understood what he did. All she knew for sure was that for years a toss of her head or a well-placed hand on a forearm was often helpful to Cal. As time went by, she watched eyes wander to the younger wives of older clients. She knew she'd lost some of the God-given sex appeal of youth, but still, she was never intimidated. She knew she looked good and she believed that it was her calling to give women something to aspire to after those God-given years had passed. She could still fill out a D-cup. She could still flirt and cajole. A woman should be “well put together” because anything else is just plain rude. Going out of your house like that Circus Freak was just plain rude.

“Please find a seat and move out of the aisles so that other passengers may find a seat,” the chirping voice implored from the back.

Angie perfected a skill of watching others watch her, and the man sitting in the window seat away from Circus Freak was staring right in her face. Though she was used to stares over the years there was something strange about his eyes. He had a Rhet Butler mustache, slicked back salt and pepper hair and a brown Drysdale suit—all he needed was a cheap Stetson. His stare wasn't admiring exactly. It made her uncomfortable and a little angry.

She turned her head casually and looked into his face. Not so bad, she thought, maybe more Monroe-era Gable. He gave her a slight smile and a wink as if to say, “Yeah, I've seen *The Misfits*, too.”

Just as she was about to smile back she realized Cal was moving into an open window seat two rows ahead. Long-legged yoga pants sat on the aisle; the only seat would be in the middle, and he knows she can't sit in the middle.

“Don't sit there, Cal,” she called out, “I don't want to sit there.”

But he never turned. He never even glanced back. He smiled at the co-ed in the yoga pants and she pulled her long legs up under her chin. Before she knew it Cal was settled in and she was looking at the front page of his *Wall Street Journal*.

She took pride in her ability to sway a potential client when Cal had to do his work. For years her sweet countenance and plunging necklines made her a popular dinner companion. He would tell her, “Wear the red VonFurstenburg. No man can resist you in that dress.” Now she felt like Joan Crawford in *Mildred Pierce*; she played her part—raising a son and a daughter while he traveled for work—and he knows she can't sit in the middle.

“Ma'am, you really need to choose a seat,” a surly attendant called from up front. The Indian family behind Angie was losing patience. A wave of frustration and their toddler propelled her forward. The only seat left near her husband was two rows behind him, in the emergency row, middle seat.

All Angie could see was the fleshy collage in stretch pants. Why would any woman get a tattoo? She stared down the emergency row and studied the design on the woman's bicep. It was a heart. Not a curvy, derriere-shaped heart but the actual muscle. It had veins, an aorta, everything. It was wrapped in dirty bandages, knotted and frayed like it was The Mummy's heart. And it looked like it was...decomposing?

Poised below the mangled heart was the curvy form of 40s pin-up girl with long legs in silk stockings and garters. That was when a woman knew how to dress, she thought. But why would any woman get a tattoo of another, more beautiful woman? She must be a circus

performer, or a lesbian or West Virginia white trash. No matter, I can't sit next to someone who...

"Ma'am!" The stewardess had slithered up the aisle to unclog Angie's anxiety. "You really need to sit down. There is a seat right here in the emergency row."

"I don't want to sit there. There seems to be lots of seats in the back with two seats *together*," loud enough for Cal to hear but he never looked up from his paper.

"Ma'am those seats have children in them, they are just hard to see," the attendant explained.

She didn't want to be sandwiched between the fat, tattooed woman and the bargain basement Gable in the emergency row. There was no seat back for her drink. Where would she put her carry-on? She had to be able to get to her carry on.

"Cal, switch seats with me," she called out.

Cal never looked up from his paper.

The other passengers could feel Angie's anxiety. Some looked away while others leaned in and pulled out their cellphones in case the incident became post-worthy.

Then Gable called out to Angie, "Madam, there is plenty of room and I will take care of any emergency that comes along." He smiled generously and gestured to the center seat. She was still panicked. She could not sit next to that woman. Whether he saw the horror in her Southern veneer or just read her mind, Gable got up and sat in the center and invited her to sit next to the window.

As long as she didn't have to sit in the middle—Angie stepped past the tattoo queen and fluttered into the seat. The nosey passengers settled back, the stewardess mouthed, Thank you, to Gable and moved on.

"I'm Stanton," he said, offering his hand.

"I'm Angie," taking his hand daintily.

"Short for Angela?"

"No, just Angie."

"Stanton, don't call me Stan," he smiled. She was taken. This was a man who understood courteousness and confidence—and good hair. It was not as greasy as she thought.

He settled in for a conversation with a new friend, "Do you fly often?"

"Too often," she said irritably as if to an old friend. "We are on our way to Las Vegas for some kind of conference. My husband Cal," she tossed her head back in his direction, "is a regional director and he has to give a talk."

"Sounds important," Stanton said giving a nod in Cal's direction.

She pulled out her book from her bag to prepare for the flight.

"What are you reading?"

She demurred and showed him the cover of the bodice ripper. "This is what I read while I wait for my husband," she whispered, "I enjoy the sense of adventure."

He looked at her for a long minute, raised his thick eyebrows and pursed his lips. She could not tell if it was a look of curiosity or smugness.

She remembered Professor Kline telling her that she was going to lose the brain under her hair if she kept reading those poisonous excuses for books. *Savage Surrender* wasn't a title that impressed but she never worried about looking smart.

"Please turn off all mobile devices and prepare for take off. Flight attendants buckle in."

Angie immediately tucked her book between the seat and her hip, gripped the armrest to wedge into the corner.

“I hate to fly,” she stated without looking at him. “I really hate to fly.”

She could feel the Circus Freak looking at her, too. She didn’t like to show vulnerability in front of another woman but she was close to the window and could brace herself for impact. Who cares what the fatty thinks?

She felt her hair crunch as she pushed deeper into the corner. Like a drowning man about to go under, she drew a deep breath then exhaled, spurring out words like water from a broken hose.

“Some people say they are afraid but I don’t think they mean it. People who have a real issue, a real phobia...People just don’t understand how difficult it is to keep your composure when you can’t breathe. Can you keep talking to me, Stan, Stanton, until we get to the cruising altitude? I don’t care about what, just talk to me. It is better for me if I am distracted. I’m like that when the nurse draws blood, too. I have to be distracted or I faint dead away.”

Without hesitation he patted her hand, “Of course, Angie. Have you been married a long time?”

She began to pant in time to the increasing rhythm of the wheels rolling down the runway.

“How long, Angie?” he prodded, sliding a calloused hand over her white knuckles.

“30 years,” she gasped just as the bottom fell out and the wheels pulled up. He squeezed her hand as the plane rose and said, “How is that possible? Did you marry him as a teenager?”

The cocktail of anger, flight nerves, and his gallantry made her giggle uncontrollably. She shook her head and looked down at her sparkling slippers. She reminded herself that panic is not a good look. She noticed that he was still covering her hand with his.

He knew how to flirt and cajole. Is this what it is like when she does it? It’s quite pleasant. Suddenly, the intercom bong, like a call to prayer, made her feel calm. They were up. She was up and everything was okay.

“I was 25 when we got married and that was really late in our crowd,” she confided. “He wanted to wait until he was established. All of our other friends were getting married but we waited. In fact, some were even divorced before Cal decided one day that we should go to the courthouse.”

“Still, thirty years, that is impressive these days,” Stanton said.

“You think so? Thirty years would have passed anyway.”

The drink cart began to tinkle up the aisle and she hadn’t even noticed. The surly flight attendant left her station and came to the emergency row to Stanton. Stanton placed his hand on Angie’s wrist as if to press the pause button and gave the attendant his full attention.

“Sir, may I get you a drink?” Surly cooed, “on the house, of course.”

“Well, thank you,” Stanton replied, “I think I would enjoy a drink. May I have the Buffalo Trace Bourbon and a Canada Dry?”

Surly nodded in appreciation of his choice and scribbled it down.

“And Angie, would you like a drink?” he asked.

Angie gave a catty smile to the flight attendant and said brightly, “Yes, I would like your best white wine. Please.”

Surly looked at Stanton for a long moment and he conceded. He pulled his wallet from his jacket pocket and gave over his credit card. He then touched the arm of the Circus Freak on the other side of him and she pulled off her headphones. “Would you like a drink, madam?” he asked, “I’m buying.”

“Thank you, but no,” she replied with a polite smile that made her nose ring sparkle. Without looking at Angie she returned to her book and headphones.

Surly shook her head and retreated to the cart.

Stanton turned back to Angie who sat sullen, slightly annoyed at his generosity. He ignored her pout and remarked on her attitude, “Angie, I get the impression that you are not happy in your situation with your husband right now.”

Angie decided to fall for his bait.

“Happy? What does that mean? We’ve three children, they’re 12 months apart and they’re all up and out.”

“And what are their names?”

“Calvin, Jr., Roger and Ellen after my grandmother.”

“They must make you very happy, as they say.”

“As who says? Children don’t make you happy, they make you something and someone you are not, just for their sake. Don’t you have any children, Stanton?”

“No,” he said, choosing not to take her bait, “but I admire people who do it. I had my chances but I was always a little too…” he paused, “selfish, I suppose.”

Angie raised her eyebrows at this disclosure. “Good for you,” she said in genuine admiration. “Good for you for knowing your mind and sticking to it and not letting someone talk you into something you didn’t want. Good for you.”

Surly had returned with their drinks, three bags of nuts and the credit card. She smiled at Stanton and ignored Angie as she set down her wine.

“Thank you,” he said.

“Yes, thank you,” Angie added acidly.

When Surly was out of earshot, Angie took a couple of long full swallows of the white wine and continued.

“I loved my kids. Three busy children. A 65-hour-a-week husband.” She took another sip, “it does not leave much room for anything selfish. There is a lot I gave up and I wonder sometimes if I had made a different choice…”

Suddenly, the intercom rang with a full, round bong.

“This is your captain speaking. The Rocky Mountains can sometimes make this a bumpy ride so please stay in your seats with your seat belts fastened and your chairs in the upright position. Thank you.”

As if on cue the fuselage started thumping and rattling along the air stream. She reached out and grabbed Stanton’s hand. Under his large palm, she flipped her hand over and interlaced her fingers with his. She squeezed with each thump.

“I’m terrified to fly,” she began again. “Cal makes me do it. He says that I will get over it if I just keep flying. But it never seems to help no matter how many times.

“Why don’t you take a train?” Stanton asked, reprising his role.

“Cal says the train takes too long—and he is right.”

The moment she gave her husband credit the plane leveled out and she could breathe again. She cursed him under her breath and turned to Stanton. “In 30 years I’ve never done anything like that before—held a stranger’s hand.”

“Is this something that you want to do?” said Stanton. “On a plane I mean.”

She blushed and they both laughed. The wine was making her feel randy.

“Do you mean have I ever been with a man since I’ve been married?” She paused for effect. “No. That is not who I am.”

She had offers, propositions, and drunken gropes in hall closets but she was always the picture of the proper lady, the unattainable woman. She knew it added to her mystique—that and the hair.

“I’ve never been with any other man but my husband, so I don’t really know.”

“You have never slept with another man in your life?”

She nodded.

“I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. He is my husband.”

“Oh, yes, but Angie. You don’t even have a special place to go back to. Where do you go when you want to feel like you are 25 again?”

“I haven’t felt like I was 25 in 30 years,” she laughed. “What kind of special place do you mean?”

“Isn’t there someone, somewhere who made you feel special, beautiful, and you go back to there at night, when you are alone?”

She knew, of course, what he meant but played along. “I think you are making this up. Where is your special place?”

“My special place is Biloxi, Mississippi, 1990 boot camp at Keesler Air Force base.”

“You were in the military?” she interrupted.

“Does it seem that unlikely?” he asked. “I was good with my hands and they wanted me to work on planes and I wanted to get out of Arkansas.” She gave him an accepting look and he continued.

“I loved that place. Everything about it was sensuous, you know, hot and sticky. Everyone moved slowly and the girls wore as little as they could get away with. It was a glorious time. Me and my buddies hitting the town on the weekends.”

“And the girls loved ‘a man in uniform,’” he winked, “we really played it up.”

“We found out that June 15 we were heading to Kuwait City- so on June 14 we went into town for the last time. None of us knew if we were ever going to see a Mississippi girl ever again.”

She watched him go to this far off place in his mind. He even looked younger as he talked. “There are songs about women who make men out of boys—and that was Jacki. Make any man weak in the knees. She was the ringleader of this band of local girls looking to meet noncoms. She was beautiful and smart and had a lot of spunk—like you.”

Angie blushed but said nothing.

“I don’t kiss and tell, but I will say that I was lucky enough to be the one she chose that night to leave with a beautiful experience. And I carry that memory with me to this day. Everyone should have a memory that they carry to remind them they are lovable and desirable.”

For some reason she felt tears hover heavy in her eyes but she would not let them bubble over. She wanted him to be unsure if it was his story or her heavy mascara. He leaned in and cupped her hand again.

“And I would hold hands with you any time you like,” he whispered. She did not flinch or look away and he did not relent.

Bong.

The intercom bell shook them out of the moment and the captain’s voice cleared out the space between them.

“We are beginning our descent into Las Vegas International Airport please stay in your seats with your seat belts fastened, your tray tables up and your chairs in the upright position.”

Angie had pulled away in order to organize herself for landing, mints for off the plane, the phone was in the pocket of her bag. She continued to ready herself in her own little space and ignored Stanton. She could see from her special side vision that he was sitting, just sitting in preparation for landing, not fussing or even trying to catch her eye. He sat in the center seat as if he were the only person on the plane staring off in to a world of his own. She wondered for a minute if he was on a street in Biloxi.

She envied his composure but she could never be like that, too much to worry about, too much to consider. The prevention of the panic attacks and the flirting made the flight go faster, for that alone she was appreciative. But it was time to get ready to disembark, head to the ladies room to freshen up then an Uber to the hotel.

At the hotel she could start reading her book, have her evening glass of red wine and read until she fell asleep. Cal would need to meet the partners and they would want to smoke cigars and play poker into the wee hours.

She had busied herself so deeply in her to-do list that the descent didn't register in her stomach until the plane was only 500 feet above the ground. She didn't feel any panic but she reached over with her hand and slipped her pinky finger into the crevice of his ring finger just the same; both just continued to look forward. As the plane lowered the wheels she could feel Stanton apply a little reassuring pressure to her fingertip. They continued to sit in silence, still connected through the landing and the taxi to the gate.

When the plane stopped the Circus Freak jumped up to retrieve her bag from the overhead. Angie was surprised at how cat-like the woman moved. Before waddling up the aisle The Freak turned to Stanton. Angie noticed through her sidelong vision the tattoo sprawled cross her chest *Let It Be*. With a broad smile the woman said to Stanton, "You have a lovely Vegas. Thank you for an uneventful trip."

The Freak scowled at Angie, only for a moment, but the moment lasted long enough for Angie to know the woman had similar feelings to her own. She tried to decide if this revelation was a problem but thought better of thinking of it at all.

Stanton spoke to The Freak as he stood up next but Angie could not hear what he said to her. The Freak smiled at him and turned to leave. Stanton pulled a leather satchel from the overhead and in a single move reached into the bag, pulled out a card and leaned over to place it on the armrest.

"Text me if you would like to have dinner...and talk some more."

For a split second he gave her the sparkling Gable eyes and disappeared up the aisle.

She stared at the card for a moment then reached over and placed it in her breast pocket. She let a few more people pass to make sure she would not run into him on the jet way or down in the baggage claim.

Cal was finally waiting for her standing at the gate with the carry-on. "I called the Uber," he said as he hurried her along, "so please be quick in the bathroom." Nodding she stepped into the ladies room. She emerged from the stall and stared at her reflection in the mirror. She put her hand over her pocket and felt the edges of his card then held it there close to her chest.

What would a lady do?

Wash her hands, fluff her hair and have an Altoid.

Cal again was waiting for her with the rest of the luggage. She took the smaller bag from him and followed wordlessly to the exit. She tried to look around at the other cars and the other passengers but the black Lincoln MKZ pulled up just as they stepped out onto the sidewalk.

"The Bellagio, yes?" the Uber driver asked. Cal nodded to him.

The driver opened the door for Angie and she stepped primly inside. Cal settled in next to her as the driver pulled away from the curb.

“You go ahead up to the room,” he told her. “I’m meeting Miles and Grayson in Bobby’s Room for a couple of hands. Grayson wants to impress Miles and play the big room one time. He cashed in their Bali vacation money to do it.”

Cal chuckled, “Vanessa was so angry that she gave his Mercedes the business with his Callaway driver. She thought if she did 20k worth of damage to his car there would be no way he would still choose to buy in.”

The story tickled him so much he laughed aloud and made the driver look. When he realized there was no prickly comment, Cal noticed that Angie wasn’t really listening; she looked very far away. Cal thought to ask why she was so quiet but chose to enjoy the rare silence instead.



"Birth"

Fabrice Poussin

This image is the product of a series of experiments with ice and frozen objects. The purpose of the series was to explore the possibilities of color as seen through ice. I was rather pleased with the results as I expected colors to in fact fade, and yet they were enhanced. Ice preserves, therefore when things come to life again, a new birth or rebirth occurs. In many cases I froze objects such as flowers and let them thaw. In this image one can see that other things are happening in the background. Part brushes are coming to life as the artist expresses his intention of giving life to a new realm.

UpCountry
Darcy Roennfeldt

Kai, the paniolo, took the patched-eyed dog, Robber, on the boundary ride to check fences that morning—the morning of the night the telescope moved from Kai’s low slung porch to the Boss’s upcountry porch. Most of his life he lived and worked on the Island, at the 5500 elevation mark, where rolling acres of emerald *pili* grass laid a carpet blotted with jet-black Angus cows. Tufts of tanglehead soldiered around scrubby *hau* and paper mulberry trees wriggled slowly from the hard volcanic soil year by year. That night followed a string of sour and sweet nights, of finding that desire invades through the eyes but then travels straight to the heart, shrinking and swelling it as it goes.

Kai saddled up the caramel Palomino, his platinum mane fanned in the tropical wind, like hula skirts shaking and bending. The Palomino showed off his status as lead ride by nickering to the three Morgan horses who stood like zebras in a confusion of legs and tails under the giant eucalyptus trees. One Morgan raised an eye while the other two chewed on.

“Ah—they don’t care about you,” Kai said to the Palomino. “Only you think you’re a big deal.”

He patted the horse on his neck, then tightened the girth and noticed the notch was one tighter. The horse was getting older though he didn’t know it and Kai hated to think of him one day with skinny ribs. Time and life were passing true enough even in the slow heat and heavy air of the volcano.

Robber padded along the vermillion earth path, tamped down along the fence line from hundreds of previous rides. His pink tongue hung loosely into a doggy smile. Kai brought the Palomino to an easy trot, squeezing once with his legs to send him off. They travelled along the gentle brown split rail fence made from dry *wiliwili* boards, gnarly and stunted by wind and shallow soil. The rails connected to each other through claw-fingered branches and barbwire. Once slightly damaged, the rails busted easily against the ample rump of an itchy Angus.

As he checked the rails, Kai thought of the effort it had taken to relocate the telescope, its box too heavy for a single man alone. Together the ranch hands had loaded it on the flatbed, and pulled it up onto the Boss’s porch, and the Boss patted Kai on the back to ease his nerves. Kai imagined sharing his knowledge of the stars with the Boss who would be impressed that a humble *paniolo* could have such a mighty thing as a telescope. Kai had taught himself all he knew both in the sky and on the Boss’s ranch, hoping the knowledge would fill up not just his head but his guarded heart.

Decades ago, the Boss’s hay truck came too fast and too top heavy down the narrow mountain road, losing its brakes. An on-coming green Ford pickup, whose beerloaded driver had picked up a half dozen hitchhikers, swerved too late. The Boss, helpless to the mechanical failure, watched a scatter of dark-haired, sun-soaked people tumble out like dice as the old Ford flipped, the bed of the truck covering and crushing them like a trick hand. The Boss had yelled to his boys and everyone else to right the truck. Burning rubber, hot electric smells, the wet red marks painted across the composite road—all this Kai turned his back on, scooted to turn his eyes away. He had been thrown far from the wreckage, spared himself, though not his wife of one week.

The Boss leaned down to look at Kai and asked “Are you okay, son?” Kai had blinked and then stood and brushed his pant legs off to look more presentable.

Two weeks later the Boss, driving much slower down the same road, saw the boy Kai and stopped with his elbow out the window and with a pull on his soft suede cowboy hat said.

“Hello, son.”

“Hello, sir. Do you have work?”

“You ride good?” asked the Boss.

“Ya, all my life riding.”

“You know cattle?”

“Not so much.”

The Boss chewed something small as he thought a second.

“Don’t matter. Cows aren’t so complicated. Hop in.”

Kai threw his army duffel in the back and started to hop on the fender to climb into the bed.

The Boss turned and said, “Not there. You ride in the cab. Safer.”

Kai climbed in the cab. Forgiveness had been offered and accepted. The Boss assumed at least one of the three people dead must have been Kai’s family, and Kai never said one was his wife though he had barely known her. After the accident, Kai decided not to keep things like a wife that tied the heart like a knot you couldn’t undo yourself. The Boss’s ranch was a small refuge from the harms of a greater world, which suited him well enough until his attempts at understanding his place had led him to the telescope, which had made his life seem laughably small.

Now, he took the Palomino into a swingy lope. The morning hung with plumeria and the smell of dirt freshly turned over by the hooves of an early herd. Robber stopped to lift a leg and check his mark in satisfaction. Kai looked down to the rim of the distant shoreline and the forever ocean and affirmed the rightness of his decision to know the sky and her constellations. He was not a young man now and he would need his mind in the future to keep him occupied, to satisfy his desires.

He dismounted a time or two to pull a clump of kikuyu grass from a barb or to steady a post. The fence was mostly strong, many sections repaired over the years by Kai and the young men he used to bother to know. They kept going along—man, horse, and dog, stark against the two planes of sky and grassland, weaving here and there between a sandlewood tree, a lone koa—both a testament to their once vast forests, ruined by the prize of their hard, fragrant wood. Taken down by man’s desire.

Back at the stables, he put a fleck of hay in each paddock and refilled the water buckets. A day-hunting owl perched on a far away post, swooped down as if on a trapeze line between the paddocks, extending its talons in success and carrying off its lunch. Kai took a snooze in the low swing of the hammock, a half eaten sandwich and bottle of beer at his feet, both finished by Robber as soon as Kai twitched with sleep. He was dreaming of the telescope. Dreaming of the licorice night.

As the evening came, he wanted to bed the horses early and go up to the Boss’s porch and take the first view at a constellation he could never see from his place. The view from his low country shack was often obscured by clouds that tucked in for the night. For years his view had been limited, a disappointment after so much effort to buy the contraption. Bought years back, the telescope had cost him two years worth of savings and six months not going to Waimea on Saturday nights. He and the UPS man had set it up on his porch. Kai made all the adjustments suggested in the complicated manual, and checked those adjustments many times because he had learned to be careful with machines and their explanations. Tonight he would see the sky freed

from the shroud and experience the expanse of time measured by fire flights. He might finally see constellation number Eighty-Eight.

The Boss came down before supper and said that Kai could have the porch to himself 'til 10:00p.m. but not later.

"Got a lady visitor," he said with a smile, but then added, "but only for the evening," to correct any wrong impression.

"Sure, Boss," Kai said surprised but not showing it.

"Is it dark enough for you before then?" he asked kindly.

"Oh, yeah. Dark enough."

"Well, if not you let me know and we can make another time of it."

"Sure enough. Thanks."

They both nodded plainly at each other.

Later that evening, Kai walked the long path up to the distant eucalyptus trees with their gum-grey and dappled trunks that faded into smoky black as the light slid away. The Boss was entitled to a little company, Kai supposed, though he had imagined he might supply it himself. Still, the Boss had been alone without the original wife for ages, and the second one, plucked from the air-conditioned resorts below, didn't last long. The Boss did not seem to miss the second one too much and Kai knew she had been trouble to get rid of, like the mongoose that ate everything but refused to do its job. It had been a long stretch now and the Boss could be thinking of his age and his old bones and the long rainy nights. Kai was considering these things himself, although the answer to it all did not seem to be a woman. A woman could be loosened in a flash from your grip. A woman could fall out of your life and drag your heart like a stone to the bottom of the ocean.

The Boss's ranch house, strung out and snug, was just at the edge of a tree line scored clean as a haircut. Despite his careful study, the lens gave back only an inky black stare. Kai sat heavy on the stoop in the midnight blue light, the teasing stars pushing downward. Eventually the night was near its darkest black. The *paniolo* turned the lens open again and to his satisfaction found Venus as predicted on page twenty-five of the manual. He looked at her long and steadily through the lens, as she drowned out her neighbors by her brilliant fire. She was swirling in her hot dust, kicking up debris with every revolution, acting out her beauty as a woman would do. He watched her dance in the warm night as he had watched her dance before.

The jingle of keys in the front door called his attention to the time. The Boss had returned with his lady friend and they turned on a low light in the kitchen where the Boss made her a drink and talked softly. The lady friend was wearing a red dress like Venus, with the same hemline that didn't stay down but floated in the breeze. It wore his heart down a bit to think he had imagined the Boss as his company going forward. Kai didn't stay to watch but stepped quietly down the worn wooden steps to the grass path. He turned only once to see the Boss move his arm around her shoulder and lower her to a kiss, a movement like an arc of the setting sun. A thing of romantic beauty, that was rare and bothersome to Kai. The Boss saw Kai standing alone in the grass before the shadow of his figure moved down the hill.

A few days later the Boss returned from auction with a small little body floating in the single horse trailer.

"Kai. Got a fellow for you to meet," the Boss said.

One of the new boys opened the back of the trailer and coaxed the scruffy creature into a makeshift halter. A wobbly legged foal knock-kneed down the metal ramp, stomping his unshorn hooves to the effect of both his own fright and pleasure.

“He’s a Tobiano Paint. Just weaned. The mare’s from Parker’s Ranch but he’s kind of a throwaway for them. He’s got a brain like sand, but cute, huh?”

The foal bounced his head up and down as if too heavy for his thoughts. Kai took him slow and easy and shushed him with the smell of his grass-sweat hand. The foal in search of mother’s milk and familiar fur rejected Kai’s hand at first, but quickly reconsidered the lonely alternative and leaned his shoulder against Kai’s pants and buried his head into Kai’s shirt.

“That’s all right, you.” Kai walked him into the small arena and made a rope halter that fit him better. They walked around for fifteen minutes, the foal not knowing where to look.

“Yep, he’ll go just fine.” Kai said to the Boss.

“You think she’ll like him, then?” The lady friend he meant.

“Can’t say. Suppose so. She know horses?”

“I’m counting on the fact she doesn’t. He’s not much to look at but he’ll make a steady ride.”

After taking one look at him, the lady friend said he was too long in the body, and built downhill and would probably get arthritis and be mean tempered when he grew up. The Boss walked the small foal down to Kai’s pasture.

“He’s yours, Kai. If you want him.”

“All right. I’ll train him up for you and we’ll see how he goes.”

“No, no, Kai. He’s yours. Your own little fellow.” The Boss seemed ashamed of either the foal or the lady or maybe that they were no longer two men alone but one man with someone and one without. He was aiming to fix that with the foal perhaps.

Salt, as the foal would be called, was full of fun and games and ran around the paddock whenever he saw the *paniolo*, or his yellow truck, or smelled hay from Parker Ranch where he’d been born. One evening when Kai was reading the manual again, Salt escaped his paddock because he was clever, and made his way to the open window in the sunburnt shack that Kai had lived in for many years. The pearl grey paint was peeling under a red metal roof and Salt rubbed and licked at the strings of paint pretending he was just where he was supposed to be.

Kai came to the open window, which was closed only in the worst downpours. The house smelled comfortably of oil cooked food and smoked fish. Salt blinked his starry eyes at Kai, longing for attention. Kai moved his rattan reading chair, crunchy with age and lumpy cushions, near the window so that Salt could chew the spindly tips of grass while Kai read through the settings needed to find each constellation. At last he said:

“You should be in your paddock, you squirmy bugga’.”

Salt turned a single ear to Kai but kept his neck low, head in the grass, munching on his molars. He had a habit of running away from Kai only to circle quickly back on a perfect arc with mathematical intention.

“I know you’re lonely. Too soon away from your mother, huh?” Kai reached out to the foal who thought it was play and bounded to the back gate, his stringy legs kicking out and heavy head pulling up like a seesaw. He played in the sea of grass and threw his tail into the wind, calling to his mother down the long road, announcing his life to whoever might hear him in the wind. He scrambled and dodged, begging Kai to chase him.

“Oh, you don’t know what you want, love or games.” Kai tossed a hand toward the diminishing tail and hooves. Noticing the back latch unfixed, Kai struggled out of his chair, taking a lead rope from the yard to fetch the foal but didn’t find him in the tall grass pasture. He clucked his tongue a couple times and called the foal’s name, which the foal did not know. Salt

was lost in his own orbit. Kai latched the gate for the night. Robber padded around, smelling for Salt's trail.

Despite his concern for the foal, Kai headed up to the Boss's porch that night in anticipation of that certain constellation that he had never been able to see from his porch, one that held a personal significance to him because it was humble and faint and barely important enough to be named. As he trod through the blonde grass, he heard the clomp of soft footfalls behind him. Knowing it was too heavy to be Robber, he cast a glance and saw the foal checking the grass, and sniffing the dirt patches, one eye on Kai.

"C'mon, you." Kai called him, adding a short whistle.

One trailing the other, they climbed past the slow-headed cows, wet with evening dew, tracking paths of brick mud along ridges strewn with volcanic stones. Salt, uneasy in the descending dark, moved closer to the *paniolo*, stopped once, then bolted like electricity to Kai's side.

The *paniolo* patted his neck and rubbed the leather halter he had just graduated to wearing, preparing the foal's emotions for the eventual capture of a saddle and bridle.

"There you are, frisky bugga'."

When they reached the Boss's house, Kai took the lead rope from his side to attach to the halter. Salt spun away on his young legs. Kai squatted low in the grass to sneak towards him. The foal suddenly forgot his dreams of escape, dreams that always dissolved into the terror of loneliness. Though he was standing yards away in the Aegean light, he stopped dancing around and throwing his head. He wanted to be back to his mother, who was now Kai, and to the mixture of the sweet smell of warm milk and pulled grass and fried rice in the kitchen window. In the quiet, Kai saw a moment and picked up a koa stick which was supposed to be a carrot, and they both pretended it was, and came to each other. The sky spit a last spark of orangey-blue.

Kai tied the lead to the Boss's posting block where Salt stomped nervously in the darkening night looking for demons. It was too late to take him back to the stall and settle him. Kai's boots hit heavy on the steps and across the porch which was dark except for a light over the range. The Boss would be out a little later with each date, and she would stay a little later with each day until she would not leave at all. It would come to this. He saw now that the Boss was trying to square things up again with him like before—a job for Kai's lost wife, a foal instead of friendship between two old partners. While he respected the Boss, he saw the unevenness of the deal and it shifted his heart black.

Kai opened the manual and with his pen light read the list of Ptolemy's eighty-eight modern constellations. These he intended to learn himself, or at least the ones he could find above the Island in the middle of the vastest ocean in the world. He read the last one at the bottom: Equuleus. The second faintest of the constellations, devoid of all star objects, the one he had never seen from his porch. A binary star system where two hot rocks tangoed in their orbit. Number eighty-eight on a list of eighty-eight. In his original list, Ptolemy could have tossed this one away. Who would have missed it? A constellation of no consequence. Two dots on a boundless ocean of black. Eighty-seven would have been plenty enough.

Kai carefully dialed Mr. Ptolemy's coordinates for Equuleus. The manual promised the magnified eye could see it, even if you were alone on a volcano with a knock-kneed foal, even if you were out in the dark under the only sky you had ever known, even if you had fallen into this life from an over-turned truck. Kai turned the dials with faith and looked. A milky haze, a web of gauze, but nothing more. He allowed his eyes to adjust longer. When he felt it had been as long

as could be, he opened the metal slide and flipped back the lid of the lens again. If something significant were there, Kai could not see it.

Equuleus was lost in the forever sky. To be seen, one had to be of certain brilliance, of significance. To exist in life was the same—a truth he had always known in his bones but came sharp now to his heart. He thought to leave but then stopped and drew up his patience and returned to the one-eyed device. Kai dialed again the difficult coordinates and at last was rewarded for all his searching. Equuleus! He heard Robber's far-off bark and took it as affirmation he was right. Pleased with himself, he talked softly to Salt about what was set in the sky, objects placed with care on an astronomical sized table, small and large all mattering. None the lesser. Salt nickered back his reply. While Kai had taken the Boss's invitation of the porch as a sign of his affection, he realized the true prize had been to see Equuleus and understand things about belonging and his place in the world.

One night not too much later, the Boss came to the porch with good news. Stars were poking through the black skin of night as the men shared a comforting quiet.

"I've asked her to stay. Looks like she's going to take me up on my offer." The lady friend.

"It's a good thing then, yeah?"

"Very good. Seems love saved itself for my last moments."

Kai rubbed some dirt off his boot with the corner of the step.

"With any luck, Boss, you got lots of time left."

"Hope so. Wouldn't want to miss much time with her. That reminds me, she'll need a horse to ride around here and Salt seems to be going well. I suppose I ought to take him back if that's all right with you."

Kai was staring at a bright star. He took off his cowboy hat and ran his fingers around the brim. He brushed invisible dirt off his jeans. At last he stood up and shuffled over to the telescope, adjusting the lens with the precision of experience.

"Here, Boss, look at this." Kai told the Boss to cover one eye and look straight into the lens holding his gaze steady. "You see that?"

"Yup. Pretty."

"That's Venus. Forty-six degrees from the Sun, orbiting around it. She always sticks close by the Sun, the center of the Solar System. Nothing else is brighter 'cept the Moon. Everyone sees Venus."

"Impressive, Kai. I see you've taken an interest in her."

"Not so much. She's the Sun's business. There's another one that has my eye, but its going to take looking real close to see it. Rest a few minutes."

Kai took the time to find the constellation, finding first the Big Dipper, then Polaris, then Cassiopeia, resting for a moment on Pegasus. At the dim corner of Pegasus' nose lay Equuleus.

"Look here, Boss. Just to the right. That's Equuleus. Just two stars orbiting each other every 5.7 years. That's the shortest orbit of any of them. I think of those stars like friends who need each other to shine at all."

"It doesn't look like much. Don't even know if I'm looking at the right thing."

"Yeah, it's not like Venus. For one thing it's a constellation, not a planet. But it's there."

The Boss took his eye away from the lens.

"I don't see your interest in it, but to each his own."

“Exactly right, Boss. To each his own. Equuleus is the second dimmest constellation in the sky but it’s still important enough to be on Ptolemy’s list of the eighty-eight constellations. It made the list, even if it’s near the bottom.”

“Well, sure. It’s inevitable that something’s got to bring up the rear.”

“Yup. But it’s still belongs like everything else. Nonetheless.”

“Sure, sure.”

“You see then?”

“Not sure I do, Kai. What’s that got to do with anything?”

“I’ll be keeping Salt at my place, if that’s okay by you.”

“Ah. I see.”

A moment passed between them. Even though they were both used to the heavy creation of volcanic air, the air that hung between them was even richer with the promise of a new time for them as they found their place—not as Kai had anticipated in the loosening of old barriers, nor as the Boss had thought of as long nights alone, but in a new surface where they could settle into their respective coordinates, orbiting their own planet and star. The Boss stepped off the porch towards Salt, fastened the lead rope onto the halter and handed Salt to Kai.

“We’ll have you up for supper to celebrate. You and some of the boys.”

“Sure enough.” He thanked the Boss with a nod of his paniolo hat. Then, Kai and Salt walked easy down the upcountry road, each to his own.

Punk Rock Hyenas
Joshua Wade Freeman

“Hey, you still want to be part of the movement?” Eric asked, shaking Joe awake as he did so.

“What?”

“You said you wanted to be in the group, right? Well, now’s your time to do it.”

Joe looked at Eric’s silhouette in his dark bedroom. “What time is it?”

“It’s time to prove you’re not a lightweight. Come on.” Eric flipped the lights to the room on.

Joe got out of bed and stepped into yesterday’s jeans and black and gray flannel shirt. He met Eric by the front door. “Is this some sort of hazing thing?”

“What?” Eric asked as he stepped out into the street and the rain cascaded against his shoulders.

“You know, find a guy who wants to join your club, get him wasted and make him do stupid shit all night, hazing.” Joe said, following behind Eric.

“That’s not what we’re about. You can’t change the world through empty aluminum cans and toga parties, Joe.”

The two walked to the curb and stopped in front of a black car.

“You know what kind of car this is?” Eric asked.

“I’m not really a car guy, but I know my dad would call it ‘American muscle’.”

Eric opened the door to the back seat and handed Joe a rubber Halloween mask. “Put this on.”

“It’s a little early to be trick or treating, and President’s day already passed.”

“If you’d shut up this would all go by a lot quicker.”

Joe tugged the mask past his ears and waved a victory sign on either side of his face. “I am not a crook.”

Eric reached into the back seat once more and handed Joe a brown paper bag. “If you’re going to be an ass all night you might as well go back inside.”

“Alright then.” The bag was heavier than Joe expected it to be. Through the small eye holes he had he watched as Eric motioned him to open the bag. “What the hell is this?” he asked as he pulled a revolver about the size of his hand out of the bag.

“That’s to see how dedicated you really are to the mission.”

“The mission? I thought you guys just hung out after class, listened to punk, and talked about change. I didn’t know there’d be guns involved.”

Eric opened the trunk and the rain fell harder than before, speaking out against Eric and Joe’s actions. “What’s the point of that? Why sit and talk when you can go and do? Come here.”

Joe walked over to the trunk. Inside, a man was hogtied with a black sack thrown over his head. He was lying still, unconscious. “What the hell, Er—”

Eric grabbed Joe by the throat. “Don’t say any names right now dumbass, okay?”

Joe nodded, and Eric let go.

“Who’s that guy, what is going on?”

“That guy? He’s our district’s representative, and he wants to vote *against* bill FL H1013, the scumbag,” Eric said as he walked back over the rear door of the car.

“He’s a representative, that means he’s doing what the majority of people want right? We can’t kill a guy for that.”

“We’re going to use him to send a message.”

“Which is, you’re either with us or you’re dead?” Joe asked as he walked closer to face Eric.

“Exactly, now rip that sack off his face and get it done.”

Joe looked down at the miniscule weapon in his hand and the empty street around him. “I thought you just ran some sort of club for Poly-Sci students to make sure they were active in their local government, man.”

“What do you think this is?”

“Murder.” Joe took off his mask and dropped it to the ground. It stared up at him.

“I knew you weren’t cut out for this.”

“No, I’m not. Nobody should be. I wanted to join a group of fellow angst ridden amateur politicians, not some sort of Wolverines gone wrong man.”

“Extreme actions bring immediate results.”

“Yeah if you want to make a martyr.”

Eric stared at the street light a few feet away. Its light stopped just short of the back tire. If anyone were to be looking out of their window that night they’d be able to make out the shape of a car with an open trunk, but nothing else. “Go back inside, pack your shit, and leave.”

“So that you can just kill this guy? No.” Joe pushed his shoulders back, trying his best to look at least a little intimidating, but, even with a gun, everything about him said, “I’m fine, and you?”

Eric laughed and stepped toward Joe.

Joe raised his weapon.

The rain fell harder as the two stood motionless. It was all either of the men could fully see or hear.

“You won’t do anything.” Eric said, barely audible over the rain.

“If you move, we’ll find out.” Joe placed his finger on the trigger.

They stayed frozen on the sidewalk, unable to see or hear the world around them.

Because of this, neither of them heard their representative come to consciousness in the trunk, slip out of his bondage, tear off his hood, and sprint off into the night.

“Are we going to stand here all night?” Eric asked.

“At least until you can guarantee this guy’s safety.”

“If I do that, he’ll be able to vote against what we need.”

“Well then I guess we’re going to stand here all night.”

First Tape
Trevor Almy

He drove west of the Mississippi for the first time in almost two decades. He had last seen her when he was sixteen and she had said, Bernie, you won't leave me. Who will look after you? What will you be without me? You can't leave.

And, even now, the director he had come to imagine in his mind would snap the clapperboard and cause him to do a retake—to doubt. Who was he without The Mother?

But, he was no one really.

He found that was the best way to counteract the brainwashing, a term his therapist would later come to refer to it, than to insist upon his own autonomy, his own personal identity.

He left Albuquerque that day, sixteen and with barely a quarter tank of gas. He left and had not said a word—or, no, that wasn't it. He said a word but it was random, something illogical, Bears, was it? Or Firepit? The emotion of the moment occluded his recollection. Maybe it was, I'll take care of my own damn self. Yes, that was it.

From the time he was two, The Mother recorded every moment of his waking life and more. She had returned from the store with one of those clunky Polaroid, over-the-shoulder VHS camcorders. Everything—everything was filmed—not just Little League games, birthdays, holidays, and vacations, but the random, seemingly inconsequential moments—breakfast before school on a Tuesday in February. The problem The Mother faced at first was where to position the camera so she could film life's unfolding and still participate in it. Soon, she had developed a knack for caddy cornering it on a stack of old phone books, or placing it above the microwave, or situating it in a top shelf where she had removed the china.

The second problem came with the camera batteries' lifespan. In the early days, there were moments of times—complete hours—permanently erased because of dying batteries. She quickly identified that though and solved the problem by hoarding batteries and always having them constantly charged. And, more often than not, by day's end she plugged the camcorder into the wall socket for continuous charging, where it remained on her son's dresser, always on, the red light stare never blinking but watching as the child winked off to sleep.

Those had been the formative years where his entire childhood and life had been catalogued and each VHS tape chronologically ordered for easy retrieval. Just as being under surveillance had been customary for him so too had been the nightly ritual where The Mother would sit him down and require him to rewatch the day's events. This, too, was of course recorded so the conclusion of every nightly viewing, so long as he could remember, ended with him watching himself on the couch watching himself.

There were rules for this ritualistic viewing. The first and primary rule was that no fast forwarding was allowed. The only options that were permitted were pause and rewind. And, of course, the recordings were of nearly a full day, an entire fifteen hours. The second rule, and like the first, was that the tapes had to be viewed in their entirety. When he watched them though, as was his custom, in their full length, they did not seem to him to be any longer than an hour or so, as if time sped up during the viewing. But no—that was impossible, right? He was sure he had seen every event from the most mundane tying of his shoelaces to arguments on the playground

and still only an hour had transpired. It had to be something askew in his childish brain, he told himself, something about the perception of time but not time itself. But didn't children generally perceive time as moving slower than faster? To be sure though, the clock read 9:01 pm after the end of each viewing, which was exactly one hour after the unflinching 8:01 pm start time The Mother imposed on each nightly session.

*

He passed a gas station with plastic bags on the pumps and boarded windows. The land around him was flat and featureless and the mile markers only intermittently poked up like curious moles from the ground. The sun was rising and expanding like an amniotic sac in the distance, giving birth to a new day. He had made an early start to his morning, woken up at 5:30 am from his Best Western, drank a cup of coffee, showered, and started back on the road. He'd stop at a diner along the way to get breakfast. That was what he'd always wanted: an open road, a clear schedule, and a small-town diner to eat at. He even imagined himself as a sitcom character, going into the restaurant where the cook and wait staff knew his name and him yelling, The usual, Johnny!

Certain events stood in relief in his mind, like favorite episodes from a TV show, or—he imagined—from someone's favorite TV show since he didn't watch much TV but only home videos. Life gives you the only entertainment you need, The Mother had said when they were going through a Walmart and he saw VHSes for a superhero cartoon on display and began pleading for them. You don't want to waste your time in front of a screen, The Mother said while pushing the buggy past the temptation and hoisting the camera over her shoulder, the red glare and the dark lens watching him. Other shoppers passed, kids in tow, picking up bedding, kitchenware, toiletries. None of them stopped and asked about this woman filming in the store. Or had they? Had it just been his false memory that they had circled around them, observers, like extras in a movie?

*

He stopped at the first diner he came to, about three hours outside Albuquerque. The place was empty, and, he thought for a second, closed until a waitress walked from the back with bloodshot eyes. He ordered eggs over-easy, bacon, toast, hashbrowns, and coffee. He listened to the grease sizzle and that reminded him of the static that would play but only on some of the tapes. He'd be sitting during his nightly viewing and it had only happened once or twice (or had it been more? Who could say?). The footage would be playing and then static. The interruption time would vary from a minute to half an hour and all the while he would not be allowed to get up—to get a drink of water or go to the bathroom—but would be forced into observing. He was never explicitly told this but somehow intuited this unspoken rule from The Mother who looked on. The static was important, her face said. At first, when the interruptions began happening, the Mother seemed genuinely concerned over the lost time, the dust of the past that had been dropped in a mound of sand, never to be recovered.

What had taken place in those sections of static? He wondered. Probably nothing significant. Probably more of the detritus of the day, the monotony of a morning. What had caused them, was perhaps the more compelling question. Maybe a grain of dirt had fallen into the lens. Maybe there was a malfunction in one of the tapes. Or maybe The Mother had edited them? What was it she didn't want him to see? But she wouldn't have edited them, would she? After all, she had been the one to begin the taping, who had to preserve the past, who had to have

some permanence of their existence together. And even if she would, when could she have found the time? Wasn't she always there, watching, recording? Maybe after he slept?

As he grew older, The Mother loosened her rules about television and he watched more cartoons. When he played, he imagined himself as Batman but not just as Batman but as an actor playing Batman. He would perform stunts on his bike. If his nose was runny or if his cape got stuck in a spoke, he would erupt in a fit and ask The Mother to turn off the camera. The camera stays on, was always her response. Well, edit it out, he'd say. Okay, she'd say. Those tantrums, those embarrassments, those indiscretions made their way to the nightly viewings. The only edits he could perform were ones in his head where he had entire shots of his life lying on the cutting room floor of his mind.

When he first came east, he found a job working as a clerk for a convenience store and stayed with an uncle. Those first few days, free of the camera, free of being recorded and watched, were as liberating as they were frightening. If he ate at a restaurant, if he went to a park, if he read a book and no one was there to record, was it still happening? He liked the idea of his actions having no fixed state, of ending when they ended instead of being logged somewhere and archived for later examination. His first day on the job as a clerk at the convenience store he could remember his boss, some middle manager with a receding hairline, giving him a tour of the store, showing all the exits and aisles when a small domed camera caught his eye. He could hardly believe how small it was, how compact, how unlike that clunky camera The Mother had carried around with a shoulder strap all those years. Oh that, the boss said, hoisting his pants. That's a decoy. We put it up six maybe seven weeks ago as a deterrent. But this place, never been held up in thirty five years. These days you can't be too trusting though. You just never know, you know? What do we really know?

*

He remembered having trouble distinguishing what he actually remembered and what he only remembered because of the recordings. It didn't take long for the two to get mixed in his mind. He'd remember an event happening one way only to watch the tape and see it being different. At first, this happened on anniversaries of events when The Mother had instituted Viewing Parties. The events were not necessarily significant ones either. They observed the usual ones of course—birthdays and holidays—but then extended that anniversaries to vacations, to when he first learned to tie his shoe, to when he lost his third tooth, to when he was chased by a dog. He learned the fluidity of memory when he recalled the dog as being a pitbull and then it turned out to be a hound. Or he remembered his bike being blue and in the video it was red. With the bike, it had happened on the fifth anniversary and so he remembered not only the original experience as the bike being blue but every other viewing—or had it been the opposite? Had he only remembered the original experience as being with a blue bike and in actuality the other viewings were of a red bike and he had forgot? How was he to know? He would have gone to the garage and checked but by that time he had outgrown the bike and it had been given to Goodwill.

Eventually, the false memories started happening earlier and earlier and that was when the panic set in. He opened a cereal box and the toy was a dreidel, but by nighttime he watched a recording of him opening a Yo-Yo. Or there was the time that he ate pancakes for breakfast but the viewing showed him eating oatmeal. Or, the most terrifying, was when his friend Ken had come over and they had built pillow forts on a rainy day but by that night the camera had changed that to footage of him with Tim building Legos. What was this camera but a hijacker of

his childhood memories? That night he had said to the mother, This is wrong. And she had said, for the first of many times, The camera does not lie.

*

He worked his way up to management in six years time. Somehow, the pacing of those six years seemed fast, without the camera to monitor him, it seemed instead to travel with the rapidity of those viewing sessions. Under his leadership, the store resisted change and continued on with the dummy camera through all the years. Eventually, six more years reeled on and kids were snapping pictures with their phones. Once, when there was an uptick in shrinkage likely owing to employee theft, a regional manager had suggested that Bernie get some actual surveillance cameras installed. But when the security salesman came and walked the floor, he had not been really listening, not taking into account the value and peace of mind that cameras would provide, because he already knew what his answer would be, had to be, No. Peace of mind was not what he associated with cameras.

*

He ate the hashbrowns by dabbing them in globs of ketchup and the waitress had at this point turned on the television. He tried to block out the noise, to drown out the talking heads with louder and louder chewing. The waitress turned the volume up. A newsstory was playing about a convenience store shooting. Can we turn this off? He put down his fork. Please.

The day he had left, The Mother had threatened him, had made one last attempt to get him to stay. If you leave, she had said, I have the tapes. I've seen the tapes, he said. What would I want with those? Not all of them, she had said and left her recliner and opened the cassette drawer. She thumbed through VHSes, past Christmases, past spend-the-nights, past vacations, until she came to one that he had never seen before, that almost looked lodged in a back, secret compartment. The first tape, she said and handed it to him. He stood there cradling it, debating whether or not to crush it in his hands.

*

After six more years, he was promoted to regional manager. He visited all the stores in the district and did the budgets, did all the hiring and firing of store managers, networked with vendors. His store was the lone holdout in terms of not being fully equipped with CVC cameras. When he received the call, he was on a drive out to one of his more remote stores. Shooting, was what the new store manager had said and could he please come.

When he pulled into the lot, he had already been formulating his defense. A camera wouldn't have helped, he'd say. It's usually hard to make out details in those anyway. He saw the yellow tape and two squad cars and an ambulance. One DB, he heard an officer say. Mr. Grimmel? the police officer said. Bernie Grimmel? He nodded and the officer escorted him inside.

Someone was shot? He heard himself say, but was he really saying it or thinking it?

A fatal shooting. No witnesses.

But my manager. Brad.

Brad crouched from behind a corner. Sorry boss. Smoke break. Slow night.

And none of the clerks?

Brad looked down.

All taking a smoke break at once?

The security footage should be coming back now, the officer said.

Security footage? Oh but that camera doesn't work.

Yes it does, Brad said and they were squeezing into a back office where there was a security TV and footage being played. Had Brad taken it upon himself to install a camera without him knowing? Had that camera always worked all these years and Bernie not known it? Had his original manager been lying to him? Or even worse, maybe it was a joke he had not gotten? Had that security TV always been there or had it been added by Brad? Surely, he would have seen it, would have noticed it. But he would have noticed a red bicycle too, right?

The footage played and he saw a customer, the John Doe, enter the store. The camera angle only revealed his back though as he began to walk toward the first aisle. And then, two minutes or so later, the culprit had lumbered in, raised his sidepiece and fired six shots, felling the John Doe. Turning to the camera, the face imprinted and caught in high resolution was his own. Brad and the officer turned to him.

This cannot be, he said.

That's you in the video, Brad said. Unless you have a twin.

But the time, it doesn't work, Bernie said.

The camera doesn't lie, the officer said. And even then, across all that space and time, Bernie was sure this was The Mother's doing, that this was some prank of hers. Perhaps this was on the first tape she had blackmailed him with, and now, after all these years, this was her getting back at him. He thought all these things as he sprinted for his car.

*

He was not sure how he had escaped the cops or if he had. Perhaps he was sitting back in some interrogation room now and everything was some tape he was viewing. The escape was all static. As he sat at the diner, the news story played but it made no mention of a suspect, gave no description of himself, flashed no cartoon sketch of his portrait. Had he imagined it all? Had that been a detail that he had remembered incorrectly like all those details those many years ago? What was certain about memory after all? The only thing he could be certain of was his need to get to Albuquerque to see The Mother. She would sort all this out. And despite his attempts to resist, he imagined that director, after being absent all those years returning to that scissors chair and calling, Action.

*

When he arrived back at The Mother's, he was overwhelmed with how much had stayed the same. It was like a museum of another time, his skateboard, unruined remained in the same corner of the garage where left it, the playset in the backyard looked unweathered and unmarked by time. He went to the door and found it ajar, so he nudged his way in. He went to his bedroom, and it was a snapshot of his life at sixteen, the same heavy metal posters on the wall, the same clothes scattered on the floor, the bed unmade. He checked the kitchen, The Mother's room, the sunroom—all preserved as he remembered on the day he left. The Mother, however, was nowhere. Maybe she went out, he thought. Maybe she is dead. He walked into the living room. There, on the stack of old phone books was the 1987 Polaroid camcorder. Was it recording him now? The red light was not on, but he had read where the red record light would burn out on those earlier models and they would still be recording. Maybe the red light had burnt out on this one years ago. Or maybe the red light would come on in a moment and then he would be recorded. He looked down at the coffee table and saw the VHS tape where he left it, where he set it down those eighteen years ago instead of breaking it to pieces. He picked it up. Turning it over

in his hands, he read the white label, "First Tape." He inserted it into the VCR and his finger hovered over the "Play" button, when the red light of the camera came on.

Acting Class
Alan Swyer

"I cannot make you an actor," the man often spoken of, but never to his face, as *King Kahn* told the dozen hopefuls gathered on a Tuesday morning for his new theater workshop. "I'm a teacher, not God. I can, however, help you learn to think, prepare, and behave like the professional I assume you aspire to be. But that's if and only if you're willing to listen, accept criticism, and most importantly do the goddamn work. Understood?"

Feeling like he had somehow crashed the wrong party, Ed Saks watched as his classmates, who ranged from their early twenties to a woman in multiple scarves who looked to be approaching fifty, nodded a bit too vigorously.

"But let me make clear," Kenneth Kahn continued, "that I am not, nor shall I ever be, your psychiatrist, your daddy, or your friend. If we were in New York, I would say if that's what you're searching for, go back to Poughkeepsie, Pawtucket, or Passaic. But since we're on the other coast, where shall I say, Freddie?"

"Oxnard?" offered Kahn's eager young assistant. "Or maybe Cucamonga?"

"Freddie's a veritable font of knowledge. Oxnard and Cucamonga indeed."

Upon his arrival before class, Saks felt that he was entering an alternate universe. Hearing the others, most of whom seemed to know – or at least know of – each other, speak of Kahn as the successor to people named Stella, Bobby, Sandy, plus someone called Gadge, all the while referencing their own experiences at Tisch, RADA, and summer stock, it was as though another language was being spoken. That was also true when they cited stars reportedly mentored by *The King*, plus celebrities – male and female – with whom he was rumored to have been linked sexually.

Approached by two hipsters with soul patches and Fedoras, plus a gal with a neo-Cyndi Lauper look, Saks was asked where he studied.

"Nowhere," he replied.

"So is your focus film?" was the next question. "Or stage?"

"Stage," Saks stated. "If being a singer counts."

Based on the frowns he received, Saks felt as though he had admitted to having leprosy or lice.

After Kahn's introductory remarks that morning, the next forty-five minutes of class were devoted to what the eight week session would entail (subject, it was noted, to Kahn's impulses and/or whims), plus anecdotes about the Actor's Studio, Broadway, and Yale Drama. Then came an announcement. "We're about to take a ten minute break," said Kahn. "In addition to peeing, smoking, and checking messages, I want you to prep for your first assignment, which is to pick a partner. Upon our return, I shall distribute appropriate two-person scenes. And in case you're wondering, ten minutes means ten minutes, not eleven or fifteen."

The moment Kahn left the room, jockeying commenced. In less than two seconds, everyone was matched up except for Saks and the woman draped in scarves.

"Guess we're the pariahs," she said, approaching her partner by default. "I'm Olivia."

"Ed."

"It'll be funny if he gives us something where I'm your daughter."

"Not my girlfriend? Or maybe my son?"
"How about your brother?"

The scenes handed out by Kahn came from eclectic sources: Albee, Pinter, George S. Kaufman, John Guare, plus, for Olivia and Saks, Tennessee Williams.

"In an interview recently," Kahn proceeded to inform the class, "a wonderful actor named Bill Nighy lamented that today's generation finds it appropriate to show up without having prepped, as though inspiration somehow supersedes perspiration. Here, however, you will not only prepare, you will be expected to perform without text in hand. If that seems too taxing, speak up now, since we have a waiting list."

No one uttered a peep.

Despite having rehearsed with Olivia three times – first at a coffee house in Silverlake, then on a bench at McArthur Park, and finally at her apartment in the building where Mae West once lived – plus having memorized all his lines, Saks was nervous when he arrived for the next class.

Seated with his partner, he listened while Kahn gave some preliminary instructions, then breathed a sigh of relief when it was the two hipsters in Fedoras who were chosen to go first.

Clearly accustomed to this sort of exercise, the two men proudly performed a scene from "The Homecoming," engendering applause from other students. The elation quickly vanished, however, when Kahn spoke.

"If clapping is to let Mr. Pinter know he writes well," he began, "sorry but he's dead. But if it's the acting that's being praised, I must disagree. Where," Kahn inquired of the two hipsters, "did you study?"

"We were at Tisch," said the one Kahn called Mr. Landy.

"Then the Actor's Studio," added one he called Mr. Gilmer.

"And no one ever mentioned something called *interacting*? Acting is never, and I mean never, about individuals. With Shakespeare, Beckett, or even a bedroom farce, what matters is what takes place *between* characters. Clear?"

Both hipsters nodded glumly.

"Next victims," Kahn then stated, pointing first at the woman wearing yet another neo-Cyndi Lauper outfit, then at her bearded partner.

Together, they began a scene from "Who's Afraid Of Virginia Woolf," only to have Kahn stand less than two minutes later. "Stop!" he exclaimed, glaring at the actress. "Miss Shepherd, do you have something in your eye?"

"No."

"Then why in God's name are you crying?"

"It's the emotion surging forth from within," she murmured.

"*Your* emotion, but not the character's. Martha, if I'm not mistaken, is goading, teasing, and badgering poor George. Yet you're making her the victim. Do you see?"

"I guess."

"Guessing, dear girl, means not understanding the text. Let us all take a break."

Because of the bloodletting, the dozen students returned to class with much trepidation, which meant that several people were relieved when it was toward Saks and Olivia that Kahn pointed.

Silently reminding himself that if all else failed he had another life as a rocker, Saks took a deep breath and nodded to Olivia, then the two of them began their excerpt from "A Streetcar Named Desire."

Fearful of once more being reprimanded, no one dared make a sound once the scene was over, creating a silence that endured until Kahn faced Olivia.

"Where have you been working, my dear?"

"On a soap," Olivia said softly.

"Louder, please."

"On a soap opera."

Laughter erupted around the room, causing Kahn to grimace. "That's supposed to be funny?" he snarled. "Anyone ever heard of Julianne Moore?"

People nodded.

"How about Kevin Kline, Susan Sarandon, Larry Fishburne, Tommy Lee Jones, and someone named DiCaprio? Anyone want to guess the common denominator above and beyond a certain measure of talent?"

"They were in soaps?" offered Julia Shepherd ever so meekly.

"Bingo! So here's the big question. In contrast to Olivia Mellon, who just performed for us so deftly, how many of you *artistes* make a living solely through acting?"

When no one chose to respond, Kahn faced Saks. "So tell us, kind sir. What was your motivation during this scene?"

"To feel what Stanley was feeling," Saks answered sheepishly, drawing a few titters around that room.

Kahn glared at those who had laughed. "That, too, is funny?" he demanded. "What a joy for me to find someone so blissfully free of the jargon that over-intellectualizes our art, rendering it lifeless."

Kahn took a long breath for dramatic effect, then turned again to Olivia and Saks. "Lovely work."

Toward the end of the session, after announcing that the next task would be for each student to prepare a monologue, Kahn gave out the assignments, then turned to collect his things. No longer spurned, Saks and Olivia found themselves chatted up by their classmates. Then suddenly a loud and resonant voice was heard.

"Mr. Saks, if you please—" said Kahn.

Self-conscious, Saks stepped toward Kahn, who studied him before speaking. "Are you aware," he finally said, "that in New York there'd be no chance of someone with zero background gaining admission to my class?"

"So I've heard."

"But I'm happy you're here. Tell me, though. What led you to me?"

"I've always been intrigued by acting."

"And?"

"I figured at the worst, it would help me on stage when I'm playing music."

"You should know that a Brit named Nicol Williamson was a brilliant actor who sang wonderful rock & roll. May I ask a favor?"

"Of course."

"If you're playing somewhere, please let me know."

The next week, Kahn began class by handing out copies of Hamlet's soliloquy. "Hopefully," he stated, "this is already somewhat familiar to you. But whether or not, please take a moment to peruse it."

Saks did as told, reading, then re-reading the speech.

"Any volunteers to give it a go, text in hand, with appropriate meaning and emotion?" asked Kahn not long afterward.

Seeing a redhead named Polly Arnold nod, Kahn smiled. "Please –"

"To be, or not to be – *that* is the question," she began. "Whether 'tis nobler in mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune –"

"Stop!" said Kahn abruptly. "You, sir," Kahn demanded, pointing at a tall fellow in a black t-shirt and vest. Then he, too, was stopped after only two lines.

The same was true with yet another student, then Kahn faced the class. "Anyone want to venture an explanation as to what was missing, or misunderstood?"

When no one offered an explanation, Kahn turned to his assistant. "Tell them, Freddie."

"Context."

"Context indeed!" Kahn exclaimed. "Shakespeare wrote in iambic pentameter. In contrast to far too many so-called playwrights of today, he didn't have to suggest *beat* here, *beat* there, *beat* everywhere, because there was a clear and established rhythm to the words." Tapping his hand on the wall, Kahn began to recite the soliloquy with the correct emphasis. "*To be, or not to be, that is the question...*" He took a breath before again addressing the class. "This is not a case of a so-called actor mumbling, scratching his privates, or imposing his 21st century will and woes upon a Danish prince from long ago. Context, context, context means work, work, work! Please think while we take a break. Then, instead of giving you the chance to display what you've done on the monologues you've been preparing, I shall hand out new pieces for cold readings: Zooey's speech at the end of Salinger's 'Franny And Zooey' for the women, Vince's speech from Sam Shepard's 'Buried Child' for the men."

As most of his classmates started to leave the room, Saks approached Kahn. "Since you asked me to let you know when I'm playing –"

"Yes?"

"Next Monday I'll be doing an acoustic set without my band at an open mic night in Santa Monica."

On Monday evening, Saks was midway through the second tune of his three-song set at a coffee house on Pico Boulevard when he stepped Kenneth Kahn, who immediately raised the average age of those present by at least twenty years.

Trying not to be rattled, Saks focused on his guitar work and vocals while finishing the ballad he was playing. Then, after a bit of banter, he performed an up-tempo number.

Greeted with applause, Saks grinned, then approached his acting teacher. "If I knew you were coming," he said, "I would have used iambic pentameter."

"Like Solomon Burke or Little Richard? Very nice indeed."

"Come meet my girlfriend."

Saks gestured toward a cute Chinese-American with hooped earrings, who promptly headed their way.

"Kenneth Kahn, Jenny Li."

"Call me Ken."

"So happy you made it," said Jenny.

"As am I. Buy you two a drink somewhere? Or something to nibble on?"
"We don't want to impose," stated Saks.
"Hush. What's open and acceptable at this hour?"

Driving home after a Thai feast of coconut milk soup, vegetable curry, and duck, Jenny turned to Saks, who was at the wheel. "He didn't seem so scary."

"You haven't seen him in action."
"But he's fond of you."
"And even fonder of you."
"Why do you say that?"
"The way he undressed you with his eyes?"
"C'mon," said Jenny. "A guy who taught and dated stars?"
"Somebody seems flattered."
"That's silly."
"But true?"
Jenny's answer was a playful frown.

As they climbed into bed later, Jenny faced to Saks. "Think he was serious?"
"About?"
"Helping me get a job in the theater."
"I thought you were happy at the gallery."
"More like not overly unhappy."
"Well, he certainly knows everybody. Call him."
"Since he took my cell number, let's see if he calls me."

After Kahn's opening remarks, the next class got underway with the monologues prepared for the week before.

This time it was Olivia who began by doing the last fifty lines of Molly Bloom's soliloquy, which she did so movingly that there was no fidgeting, coughing, or glancing around.

"So," asked Kahn the others once she finished, "no more titters about soaps?" When no one bit, Kahn eyed Olivia. "One suggestion if I may?"

"Please."

"From time to time, instead of building up such a powerful head of steam, pause momentarily as though you're reflecting. Understood?"

"Yes."

"Then, as it were, find a word. But lovely, my dear. Absolutely lovely."

It was to Julia Shepherd that Kahn then pointed. "Ready to dazzle us?"

"I'll try."

Julia put her hands together in meditation, then commenced. "Hear me, you gamblers!" she began forcefully. "With your dice, your cards, your horses! Pause and think before it is too late! You are in great danger!" Gazing at her classmates, Julia suddenly began to sob.

"Stop!" yelled Kahn. "Why the waterworks?"

"It's so moving," Julia barely managed to say.

"Moving? 'Guys And Dolls,' dear girl, is a comedy. Which means?"

"I-I don't know."

"That it's meant to be funny! If I say something about acting, will you promise to take it in the right spirit?"

Julia nodded.

"If crying were acting," Kahn stated, "my Aunt Rivka would be Eleanora fucking Duse. Mr. Saks, kindly take Miss Shepherd's place."

Saks did as requested.

"Please proceed," said Kahn.

Saks took a breath, then spoke softly. "He stopped believing," he stated sadly. "That's it, that's why he failed... he quit." He paused, as though reflecting. "So much talent, so much potential but he stopped believing in himself..." Another breath. "He lost his way cause he couldn't figure out what to do next with his career." Saks bit his lower lip. "I guess all the stress added up and finally broke him..." Saks gazed upward for a moment. "His music was great... I would listen to it all the time. It would get me into a pumped up emotional state and his lyrics never got old." Saks frowned. "No one gave him a chance but I think that in today's world that doesn't matter. He didn't give himself the chance to take control of his career the way I knew he could have." Saks stopped for a moment as if searching for an answer. "Maybe it was fear."

"Tell us what that's from."

"A play called 'Wasted Talent' by Joseph Arnone."

"And tell us how you prepared, if you please."

"By putting myself in the place of a musician who'd just lost a dear friend."

Saks faced the other members of the class. "Did you hear that?" he asked. "That is the key to truth in acting. Now take a break and reflect upon that. Then pick new partners for two-person scenes I will assign."

Not surprisingly, both Olivia and Saks found themselves very much in demand.

Over dinner that evening at an Ethiopian restaurant, Jenny smiled at Saks. "Heard you were great in class today."

"A little birdie told you?"

"No, some sacred monster known as King Kahn. He says he really wants to help me make a switch."

"That's great."

"You're not upset?"

"Why would I be?"

"He's your mentor."

"All I'm doing is taking an acting workshop."

"With the hope of expressing yourself in a new way?"

"Yeah."

"And making some bucks we could use?"

"C'mon, we get by."

"But will getting by be enough when we're 30? Or 35? Or 40?"

"Somebody unhappy?"

"Concerned. You won't be annoyed if I meet with him?"

"What pleases you pleases me."

Three days later, Saks got together with redheaded Polly Arnold to rehearse a scene from "Cat On A Hot Tin Roof" for the second time. After discussing it for a few minutes, then trying

it with text in hand, they decided to forego the Tennessee Williams dialogue and do the scene in their own words. Pleased, they then did it again in the original.

"Okay if I ask a favor?" Polly asked once they were done.

"No, I won't elope," Saks said playfully.

"Way to break my heart! A casting director wants me to bring someone to do a two-person scene with me tomorrow at 3. Can I impose?"

"Why not the one you did the other week?"

"This is better."

"But I'm not really an actor."

"Sure fooled me. And King Kahn."

The next afternoon, at a production office in Hollywood, Polly and Saks began their scene for hyperkinetic Melissa Sklar, whose twitches diminished as she became more and more engrossed in their work.

"Very nice, Polly," she said once they were finished. "Consider me sold." Then she turned to Saks. "As for you, Ted –"

"Ed –"

"Are you SAG? AFTRA?"

"Neither."

"That mean you've been doing stage?"

"I'm basically a musician."

"Really! There's a part in the film we're prepping that calls for someone who plays guitar, and we'd prefer somebody who won't have to fake it. You play?"

"Not as well as T-Bone Walker."

"Who I assume is not available?"

"Or alive."

"We'd have to Taft-Hartley you. While I check on whether that's an option, can the two of you come in tomorrow afternoon to meet the director?"

"You're working Saturdays?" asked Polly.

"With shooting looming, we're working every goddamn day."

Jenny was riding the stationary bike in their living room when Saks arrived home with takeout food from Zankhou Chicken.

"About that hike tomorrow we were talking about –" he began.

"Yeah?"

"Can we do it Sunday?"

"Because?"

"Yours truly has an audition."

"Amazing!"

"You're telling me? Things don't happen this way."

"What time and how long?"

"It's called for 2. But Polly says we probably won't see the director till who knows when."

The next afternoon, Saks was on the sidewalk outside the production office when Polly arrived. "How can you look so calm?" she immediately asked.

"I'm really just here as your sidekick."

"But she said –"

"C'mon. Things don't happen that way."

"Well, I'm nervous enough for both of us."

"Then do what I did the first few times I played before crowds."

"Which is?"

"Imagine 'em in their underwear."

"Perfect!" Polly exclaimed with a giggle. "Ready to hurry up and wait?"

To the surprise of both Polly and Saks, there was virtually no wait at all before Melissa Sklar led them into a room where a guy in black jeans and a faded Knicks t-shirt was pacing.

"Tim Horton, say hello to Polly Arnold and Ed Saks," Melissa said.

Horton focused first on Polly. "Why do I feel I know you?" he asked.

"Truthfully?"

"You bet."

"Once you told me I was too old, once you told me I was too young –"

"Oh boy –"

"And once you hit on me at the Next Door Lounge."

Horton sighed. "Well this time you're neither too old nor too young, plus I'm engaged."

Then he turned and eyed Saks. "I've seen you in something."

"Nope."

"He's the musician I told you about," interjected Melissa.

"Then it must have been when you were playing," said Horton. "Where would that be?"

"Silverplex Lounge? The Mint? The Echo?"

"What's the name of your band?"

"Fever."

Horton cogitated for a moment, then nodded. "You guys are good."

"Thanks."

"Why aren't you famous?"

"Why aren't I 6'7" and playing in the NBA? And why aren't you Scorsese or Spielberg?"

Horton's gaze turned into a fierce glare. "Fuck you!"

"Fuck me?" responded Saks without flinching. "Fuck you!"

Horton stared at Saks for what felt like an eternity, then suddenly chuckled. "I was just fucking with you. But that's exactly the attitude the Lester character needs." Horton then turned to Melissa. "Sign 'em both."

"Don't you want them to read?"

"When people are right, they're right."

"With Ed, since he's not union, that'll mean a Taft-Hartley."

"Your problem, not mine."

"Somebody's leading a charmed life!" Polly exclaimed as she and Saks stepped out into the street. "And thanks to you, my run of bad luck has turned. I feel like we should either go somewhere and celebrate, or –"

"Yeah?"

"Maybe hit my place and you know –"

Saks shrugged. "How about if we just stay acting partners and pals?"

"Sounds like somebody's got a lady friend."

Instead of calling Jenny with the good news, Saks instead planned a surprise, stopping on Melrose for a chilled bottle of Moët & Chandon, then heading toward La Brea for her favorite dessert, something called a Tarte Tropicaine.

Reaching their apartment, he unlocked the door and heard strange noises. Tiptoeing toward the bedroom, he was stunned to find Jenny in bed with Kenneth Kahn.

Thunderstruck, Saks gaped until at last Kahn broke the silence. "Guess who promised never to be a psychiatrist, a daddy, or a friend."

Saks nearly responded, but instead turned and walked away.

Seated in his car, Saks stewed for ten minutes, trying initially to recover, then somehow to cope with the feelings of hurt and rage from the dual betrayal.

Then, realizing that somehow, some way, life must go on, he glanced at the bottle of Champagne and Tarte Tropicaine on the seat beside him. After a deep breath, he pulled out his phone.

Trying desperately to rally, he placed a call to Polly, who answered immediately.

"About that celebration—" Saks forced himself to say.

Golden Mice
Audra Coleman

“Then they said, ‘What shall be the guilt offering which we shall return to Him?’ And they said, ‘Five golden tumors and five golden mice according to the number of the lords of the Philistines, for one plague was on all of you and on your lords. So you shall make the likeness of your tumors and likenesses of your mice that ravage the land, and you shall give glory to the God of Israel; perhaps He will ease His hand from you, your gods, and your land.’”

1 Samuel 6:4

It is now cold. Middle of winter Mid-Western cold. *We* (he and I) both know cold. Fields frozen solid cold. Cattle dropping dead where they stand cold. Black hooves stuck up out of the snow cold. Couldn't-dig-a-grave-if-you-had-to-cold. That kind of cold. Here the horizon has up, gone and vanished. Try to find it with your finger. Only white. Only look out frosted windows toward nothingness cold. “What can you see but a sea gone dry,” I write down on a piece of paper by the telephone. Out there is the wind, the wind that howls, the same wind that finds its way into our wall paper making it shiver. I tell him that the wind has moved in, that it has settled into our walls, that I am afraid, afraid this house is barely anchored anymore, the way it pitches and tosses with every hard gust. He says he can't hear the walls creak and groan, that he doesn't notice the way the walls lift in steady undulating waves. I do not tell him I've become seasick, about the cramping, the nausea, and the vomiting. Instead, on the back of small red wrapper I write the word “liar” in the tiniest of letters. We are all angry when it is this cold, when the land is this bare.

For ten days as the snow falls, *We* (him, my daughter, and I) have sat by the woodstove waiting. *We* (him, my daughter, and I) sit mainly in silence, listening now for the scurrying paws of a single mouse, who, like the wind, has taken up residency within these walls. *Our* walls. *We* (he, my daughter and I) hear him gnaw and claw. “Is he cold, Mama?” she (my daughter) wants to know. “Most little things are,” I tell her. *We* (him, my daughter, and myself) are this new *We*—the *We* that I still know nothing about. Still, *We* pause mid-step upon the wide planked wood floors. *We* (all together) quit breathing. *We* strain our ears, close our eyes and follow the scritch-scratching through the rooms by listening alone. *We* (him, her, Mouse and I) are all in darkness. *We* are united in this, this stumbling unknowing of the dead end will we surely arrive at. *We* are three Blind Mice. “See how *We* run when the butcher knife is chopping down behind us,” I write on the back of a photograph taken of him, her and me. The new *We*.

He tells me he wants *Us* to have a baby, one with his blood running through its veins, one that will carry on his name. Not like her. But, the doctors say no. They say the mice are golden. Or maybe, they (the doctors) say they (the mice) must be turned golden. Or, maybe, they say there are tumors where there should be golden eggs. It's all rather confusing, but, what's clear is that they (the mice), or maybe it was they (the tumors) or they (both the mice and the tumors) have wrecked the place. Here, the temples have been toppled over and destroyed. I do not tell him this. Or, that a female mouse can conceive at just four weeks, that by then they have already begun ovulating, that in only three weeks she will give birth, become a mother of five. Or ten? Or twenty? That this is necessary because there are risks everywhere, that only the heartiest will survive. I do not tell him that mothers sometimes even eat their young in stressful situations or that if a male mouse suspects that the litter produced by his mate belongs to another male, he will kill the ones he believes are not *his*. I keep quiet about all of this.

They (him and her) have taken to calling him Mister Mouse. I tell them not to name him, that this is a mistake, that to name something before it can be seen or held is foolish, that it is like worshiping false Gods, that it is only asking for suffering. I ask them, "Is that what you want?" They don't answer, but the next day she asks him to take a sledge hammer and smash the wall into a hundred pieces. They (him and her) will crumble our house to free little him. I imagine she, too, will have a sledge hammer, a little one for her little hands. There will be holes, gaping holes. By the time it's all over, there will be too many holes and not enough pictures to cover them with. I will hang more framed photos of my dead French grandparents, more paintings of country roosters and Dutch windmills. "Mr. Rooster, star of the barnyard," I say in French to Grand-mère and Grand-père. They shake their heads despairingly from their antique frames.

Eventually, they (him and her) will find Mr. Mouse's secret house. Then, the madness will stop. Then, We (him, her and I) will stand shoulder to shoulder in a pile of loose plaster, and like giants—fee, fi, fo, fum—We will crane our necks to peer above, below and between the torn laths for a glimpse at Mr. Mouse's magnificent hidden world. "It's like a little window," my daughter will whisper. We (him, her, and I) will all agree that Mr. Mouse's house is both lovely and amazing. "He's really quite fancy, but I think he must needs a tea cup, though, don't you agree?" my daughter will ask. I, indeed, will agree. Mister Mouse is not a modest mouse. Together, We, endeavor a careful cataloguing of Mister Mouse's personal property.

Mr. Mouse's Splendid Treasures

1. A strand of red yarn
2. Two shiny buttons (one in the shape of a sailboat) and a pink barrette
3. A green bottle cap chair
4. One small music box
5. Two cotton balls
6. A walking cane and silk top hat
7. A tiny piece of shredded paper that reads "liar"
8. A tin box fireplace
9. One acorn cup
10. One tiny toaster and teensy-weensy bottle of bourbon

He (him) will play his favorite fiddle (his grandfather's) and we (my daughter and I) will dance wool socked amongst the rubble. I will think, "Maybe this wouldn't be so bad, this collapsing of the walls that creak and groan. Creak and groan. "Let the plaster fall and the fiddle play," I say under my breath. I tell myself this way Mister Mouse and the wind can both escape. We (him, her and I) can escape. But, I know this would never happen. There is nowhere else for them (Mister Mouse and the wind) to go. There is nowhere else for us (him, her and I) to go. We (him, her, Mister Mouse, the wind and I) know this all too well. There will be no sledge-hammering. I tell her things don't work like this in the world. I tell her entire lives can slip through such careless holes. Who would tuck her in at bed if the whole house came crashing down? Answer me that I say. She (my daughter) wants to know why, in that scenario, I (her mother) won't still be there to tuck her in at night, even if, say, her bed were the only thing to survive the violent blows, if the only thing left standing in that empty field of snow was her wrought iron bed, what reason would there ever be for me (her mother) not to be there? To not tuck the covers tight to keep the mice from nestling between her legs? She says, "Answer me that."

Sometimes *We* do not hear him. Little him. The walls grow silent again, except for the howling that always remains. This is when *We* (him, my daughter and I) all just look at one another with sad raised eyebrows. *We* shrug our shoulders. *We* say, “It had to happen, didn’t it?” *We* (him, my daughter and I) prepare for it, each in our own way. He splits wood bare chested in the cold. He says he’s not cold—that he was born in the blizzard of 1978. *We* (he and I) know this is a lie. Without looking up he says, “Don’t ever tell me to put on a coat again.” I shut the door and watch from the window. Only splinters of wood, the tiniest splinters of wood. She (my daughter) draws a little purple mouse with jeweled eyes and whiskers made of red glitter. Across the top she writes, “TRAVEL WELL, M-I-S-T-E-R M-O-U-S-E.” I hang it on the refrigerator and stare at it. I imagine our trapped and dying Mister Mouse, except he’s not a Mister, instead a Miss or a Missus, who felt more alive than perhaps she should have one night and, mistakenly, took matters into her own little paws. This is her desperate end. I try telling her silently not to be afraid. She doesn’t answer, so I lean in closer and whisper into her purple ear that *We* (him, my daughter, her and I) all must die one day, that there is no escaping that. I imagine she cries, “But the babies, too? Must the babies die, too?” This breaks my heart in a thousand different ways.

He says he can be happy, once he comes to accept he won’t *really* be a dad, that this process will just take time. Like the blizzard of his birth, *We* (he and I) know this too is a lie. A guilt offering is not enough to stop the swarms from coming, their short tails behind them set to ravage everything already cultivated. He does not know they will lay ruin to it all. On page twenty-six of the cookbook I write, “He says he cannot hear the walls, the way they creak and groan. Creak and groan. Creak and groan.”

Only I know the answer is yes. Yes, sometimes the babies do die. They just do. Because the mice have wrecked the place. Because furious tumors have wrecked the place. Because sledgehammers have wrecked the place. Here, in the bathroom, when they (he and her) are asleep, babies do sometimes die. I do not tell them (anyone) this. That somehow, by some miracle, a baby has formed, that somehow this has happened in a land of splintering wood and shivering wall paper. “Yes,” I whisper. “sometimes the babies do die.” But I do not tell him this. I do not write this down on a piece of paper.

She (my daughter) is awake. She stands at the bathroom door with the peacock handle. She has found me bound in blood. My blood. Brown blood. Red blood. Clots of blood. “Shhh...quiet, Baby,” I tell her placing finger to lips. “Mommy’s okay. Look at me. It’s just blood, Baby. Sometimes mummies bleed more than usual. That’s all. It’s okay. I promise. Don’t be scared.” I am on the floor that slides, rises and falls. Here the stars have disappeared. Now, only the angry slamming of waves. I want to write, “Now the anchor has been lost,” but what would I write it on. “Can you help, Baby? Can you go get the quilt on your bed,” I ask. “Quiet, quiet—like a little mouse.” These words I release in her direction. I do not know if she can hear these words, these words that pull apart, letter by letter, mid-air— if they will reach her before they freeze and fall as snow. I do not know if she will understand. But, she is back, blanket clutched in tiny hands. Only *we* are in this bathroom. The first *we*. The *we* of my body. The *we* of her body. The only *we* I have been willing to die for. I want to reach for her, to touch the *we*, but I can’t. I don’t. Everything is slippery now.

She wants to know why she can’t pee in the toilet. Why does she have to pee in the bathtub? I do not tell her (my first baby) that my other baby—the one they (he and her) don’t (won’t) know about, has died, that she is there at the bottom of the toilet, a small perfectly formed baby the same size of Mister Mouse. I do not tell her (my only child) that I do not know what to do with this almost child with beautiful fingers and toes that has just slipped out, that

here, in this bathroom, there is no tiny casket to place her in, no tiny piece of red yarn to tie around it. I do not tell her that, in this moment, she has become part of a new *we* (her, me, and almost her), a *we* she will never know. In this bathroom filling with blood and urine, I do not know what to do with my daughter (daughters). This peeing-in-the-tub daughter. This fourteen-week-I-can-hold-you-in-the-palm-of-my-hand-bottom-of-the-toilet-almost daughter. I do not know what to do with the quilt that's now covered in the blood that just keeps on coming. I do not know. I do not know—do I pull my almost-daughter from this red sea before I let her go, before she is washed from my reach. I do not know. I do not know. I only know that now it is cold here. Frozen-solid cold. You couldn't-dig-a-grave-if-you-had-to-cold.

Across the breakfast table, *we* reach for one another. I hug my daughter. Her small body wrapped up in mine. I let her go. *We* (him, my daughter, and I) drink our juice and wait for the stench. No, only I wait for the stench. There is no *We* in this waiting. How could they (him and her) know there is more to Mister Mouse's dead end than they can ever imagine? They do not understand how this grief will take weeks and weeks to decompose, how before the winter is over, *We* will all have suffocated under the burden of it.

Here there is blood on the snow. Here the golden mice ravage the fields. Here the golden tumors make war. Here the sea that isn't a sea swells. Here *We* are thrown to the floor that rises and falls. Here the walls creak and groan, creak and groan. Here the land is cold—You-could-not-dig-a-grave-if-you-had-to-cold.

Valley
Sam Bellamy

Eve's mother placed the newspaper on the table in front of her as she was eating breakfast. Eve took a sip of coffee before looking at it; she had begun to drink it black just a few days ago. Her mother stood over her as she read the headline aloud: "Severed Goat Heads Discovered in Rathbone Park".

The article described how an elderly woman had come upon three severed goat heads on her morning stroll. The Sheriff's office was investigating, and believed that it was a sacrifice that was part of a religious practice.

"See?" Her mother said. "I told you that you shouldn't be hanging around the park at night."

"I know, Mom. I don't hang around the park at night."

The truth was, the park was the only place that Eve liked to go. There was nowhere else. She went there with her two best friends, Michael and Kyla, and they would drink cheap beer, roll their own cigarettes, smoke them without filters. It made Eve feel like she was in a movie.

The park was five hundred acres, right in the middle of the town, and at the southernmost end of it there was an expanse of elm trees. Eve, Michael and Kyla already knew what happened there at night. It was the only shrouded area in the town. They once saw two men pressed up against a tree, entangled in each other. They had found a small bag lined with a white substance. Kyla had stuck her finger in it and rubbed it on her gums. Michael told them that he had come to the park when he was little to shoot squirrels with his dad's BB gun. He said that some boys did worse, hurt the small animals with their hands. They all grew out of it. A few of them became apprentices to the butcher, to satiate whatever desires they had, until one morning everyone woke up to find that he had hung pieces of raw meat from the street lamps near his shop. Now he lived alone on the outskirts of town, where the highway began. Eve suspected that the goat heads were his doing, and they all knew that he would never harm a human. She told her mother so.

"But where would he have gotten the goats?" Her mother asked. Eve knew that her mother was trying to use this as a warning. She was afraid of the park. She had probably got pregnant in that park, when she was Eve's age.

Eve, Michael, and Kyla did not stop their weekend routine because of the goat heads. When they walked through the entrance to the park Kyla threw her arm around Eve. When Eve turned to look at her, Kyla stuck her tongue out and Eve saw that it was newly pierced. Kyla held her mouth open and let Eve touch the small metal ball. It was cold against Kyla's warm breath.

The three had a spot, about a mile into the park. It was a little valley on the outskirts of the trees, perfectly hidden. They felt as though they owned it.

Eve shivered as they walked deeper into the park; the air was crisp, turning cold. There were piles of dead leaves forming around them. The ground crunched underneath them as they walked. When they got to the valley, Michael kicked the leaves away so they could sit down. They unwrapped their black plastic bags and pulled out the bottles of beer.

"I gotta piss," Michael said. He began unzipping his pants in front of them and then stepped off into the woods.

Kyla spread her legs and patted the space between them. Eve crawled over to her and leaned her back into Kyla's chest. Kyla put her arms around Eve, and Eve pressed her forehead against the inside of Kyla's elbow. Kyla leaned over to whisper something in Eve's ear.

"Tonight's the night," she said.

“What?”

“You and Michael, tonight. Come on, he totally wants it.”

“No he doesn’t.”

“Come on, you’re a total hottie. Just do it.”

Eve suspected that Michael actually wanted it from Kyla. She was the real total hottie. Eve knew that everyone at school called Kyla a slut. She had lost her virginity in eighth grade. People thought it was funny that Kyla and Eve were friends, because they called Eve a prude. In fact, she had once overheard a boy in their grade whispering to Kyla that he thought Eve was going to die a virgin. Kyla had giggled. It would not be the worst thing, Eve thought. Kyla always told Eve that boys would like her if she just tried a little harder: straightened her hair, wore mascara every once in a while. Kyla felt that she had to take charge of Eve’s love life, and she began with Michael. She had been trying to get them together for months. Sometimes Eve thought that Kyla was right, that she should just get it over with. She sighed. Kyla smelled like expensive perfume, her neck so close to Eve’s face.

Michael reappeared out of the trees, and Eve took a sip from her bottle of beer. She could feel the carbonation burn her throat, the liquid spreading, warming her. Soon she would be warm enough that she would not have to use Kyla as a blanket. They were all quiet for a while, focused on drinking. They often ran out of things to talk about, not much happening in their town. They just sat, and basked in each other’s company, breathed in the smell of the greenery.

“Did you guys hear about the train tracks they’re building that go into the town?” Eve asked suddenly.

“Just a rumor, I think,” said Michael.

“Yeah,” Kyla agreed, “No way the old people in this place would allow for technology such as a *train* to connect us to some big city that pumps pollutants into the air.”

“Not that anyone would leave even if there was one,” Michael said.

“Please, I would be out of here. I will be out of here for good, once I learn how to drive,” Kyla said.

“And get a car,” Eve said.

“And stop asking your parents for money,” Michael added.

“We live in bumfuck nowhere,” Eve said, a stray thought.

“But we love it,” Michael said.

“We think we do,” Kyla said.

Then it was quiet again. Eve stared at the grass in between her legs. She began to pick at it, to pull it out of the ground. Kyla hummed and Michael sifted through his bag to find something, maybe his sandwich bag filled with tobacco. She wondered if the grass had been planted there, below her, a plot of land planned out to be a park, or if they had just happened to build their town around the forest-like area, afraid to go into the trees.

Kyla pushed Eve off of her gently, by placing one palm in between her shoulder blades.

“I’m going home,” she announced.

“What?” Eve said. “No. Why?”

“I’m tired.” She yawned, clearly fake. “Here, have my last beer.” She put it on the ground between Eve and Michael, then winked at Eve, so conspicuously that Eve guessed Michael had seen it too. She wondered if he had known the whole time that this was Kyla’s plan, or if he was just now realizing it. After Kyla had walked so far into the darkness that they could no longer see her, Michael suggested that he and Eve go for a walk.

They wandered through the park, along a trail within the trees that Eve had never been on before. Michael took her hand as they walked.

She had been friends with Michael since they were little. They would chase each other down the streets, go into the stores along the main road and touch everything: toys, juices, cheeses, meats. Once they decided to run away. They just began to walk, past the last houses in the neighborhood, to the part of the highway where the coyotes roamed, towards the mountains. They were too young to know what they were running away from, and when their parents found them sitting at a bus stop along the highway they were relieved, happy to be taken home.

Michael paused when they passed a large, drooping willow tree. He walked underneath it, and pulled Eve with him. He kissed her then. He stuck his tongue between her teeth. He ran his fingers through her hair, put his palm on the top of her head. He pushed her head down, and she kissed his neck. Bit it lightly. Sucked on it. It felt like she was eating him, but he breathed out heavily and pushed her head down more. She tried to resist, kept kissing his neck, but he kept pressing down on her head. He was pushing her with such force that she had to kneel down. Then he finally took his hands off of her and started unbuttoning his pants. She knelt there while he fumbled with his pants and underwear, and pulled them down.

The grass was wet, and soaked through her jeans. She wondered if Michael was cold, standing there with his pants down. She put his penis in her mouth, and he seemed to enjoy it.

She wanted to go home. She thought of her warm room, her mother sleeping. She always woke her mother up when she came home, so that she wouldn't wake in the morning and think that Eve had never come back. She imagined going home, climbing into her bed, with Kyla in it. Once Kyla had slept over, and Eve woke up with Kyla's arm around her. Eve could have started crying right then and there, with Michael's hand on her head, thinking about Kyla. But Eve knew that she could not go until she had finished what she had started. She thought she heard him say that she was the most beautiful girl he knew, but his voice sounded so far away.

When it was finally over, and Michael came onto the grass, they began to make their way out of the park. Eve had lost her sense of direction, but Michael seemed to know where they were going. It was almost pitch black; Eve could barely make out the outlines of the trees. When they finally emerged from the trees, there was just meadow to cross to leave the park. No trees, only grass, for what seemed like miles. They began to walk across it, and Eve felt like the meadow would never end, until she noticed something interrupting the sprawl. Michael noticed it too, she could tell, because he was slowing his step.

"Oh shit," he said, "Eve, the goat heads! Come on, let's go see."

"Michael, no, I just want to go home."

"It's just a goat, Eve. You've seen dead goat before."

Had she? Maybe, when they were young, maybe her fingers had grazed a goat in the old butcher's shop. Michael ran ahead of her to look at the head. Eve watched him; he stopped short right in front of the head. He seemed frozen, until he swayed back and forth and then fell to his knees.

"Michael?" Eve yelled to him, but he did not respond. She did not want to go near him, if goat heads were truly that disgusting. She tried to remember, again, if she had seen a dead goat in the butcher's shop. She recalled seeing dead pig, maybe, but not goat.

"Michael, come on," Eve said again, sure now that he was just trying to mess with her. She walked towards him. Mud from underneath the grass seeped up into her shoes as she stepped. She was about a foot away from Michael, when she realized that they were not looking at the heads of goats, but some amalgam of meat.

Eve could tell how red it was, even though she could not see the color in the dark. It smelled like blood. The meat was not clean cut; it looked like it had gone through a grinder. There was so much of it. Michael stood up and stepped towards Eve; she could hear the ground underneath him squish and she could sense a sudden fear emanating from his body.

“We have to go, Eve. We have to go. We have to go.”

“We can’t just go.”

“Yes, Eve, we have to go.”

“Michael,” she said, her voice cracking after the first syllable of his name. She looked down at the meat. There were footsteps around it that were not hers and Michael’s. Eve couldn’t tell if they were the footsteps of one person or many. They did not move in a straight line or a pattern; they seemed to be everywhere at once, as if ten feet had all stepped down onto the ground at the same time. “We can’t. I mean, we have to get help.” Eve thought of Kyla. Had she made it home, or was some of her flesh in this pile? She began to cry, silently. The pain in her chest was unbearable. She didn’t think she would be able to speak ever again. Michael just stared at her.

“We don’t know what the fuck is going on here, Eve. We don’t know who’s in the park. We have to go. Let’s go.”

He grabbed her hand, and she let him pull her away, though she was not sure why. As they walked out of the park he put his hand on Eve’s shoulder and rubbed it, kneaded it like a cat. His fingers were wet, from blood or sweat.

They sat down on a bench on the periphery of the park. Michael put his hand over Eve’s but did not hold it. They sat in silence, until a horrible, high-pitched laugh came from somewhere behind them. Eve could feel the sound bounce around inside her skull. She turned around to see where it was coming from, and saw Kyla stumbling towards them. She was heaving with laughter.

“You—you guys are fucking hilarious,” she said. And as she got closer: “You smell like beer.”

“Kyla, what the fuck?” Michael yelled.

“Oh my god,” Kyla said, “Oh my god. You’re scared of fucking hamburger meat!” She was slurring her words.

“It was you,” Eve said quietly. Neither of them heard her. Michael was seething.

“That was so fucked up,” Michael said. “So fucked up.”

“Aw, come on. We need some excitement.”

“Fuck you.”

“Alright, Jeez,” Kyla said, and touched Eve on the wrist. “Come on, Eve, I’ll walk you home.” Eve started crying again, now out of relief that Kyla was okay.

“No,” Michael said, “I’ll walk her home. Can’t you see you made her upset? We don’t want to fucking talk to you right now.”

Eve disagreed: she wanted to talk to Kyla, she wanted Kyla to walk her home, wanted her to know that Michael was only angry because they had seen him afraid and now he seemed so much smaller. But she was still crying, and Kyla was storming off, and Michael was taking her hand and pulling her again.

When they got to her house, they stood on the porch and Michael kissed her.

“See you tomorrow?” he said, wiping tears off of her cheek with his thumb. Eve nodded and walked inside. It was late, her mother was sleeping, and Eve woke her up by tapping her on the shoulder.

“Mom, I’m home.”

Her mother grunted to indicate that she had heard Eve and then turned away from her. Eve walked to her room. She lay in her bed, on top of the covers, still in her jacket and shoes. Eve stared out her window. She could see the outline of the trees in the park. They swayed in the fall wind, which took new leaves with it every time it breathed.

Oh.

Robert L. Penick

It started, as it usually did, with snarky remarks, sardonic laughter, and an escalating tension. He insulted her mother; she, his manhood. So, her Mom was a troll and any 26 year old that still kept Star Wars action figures in their unopened boxes aligned on IKEA shelves badly needed either a Bar Mitzvah or a tour of duty in Iraq to prod him into adulthood. Their ritual had begun.

At the microwave he jumped in front of her and popped in a family-sized tray of Stouffer's lasagna, setting the timer for sixteen minutes.

"Dingus," she declared icily. "My Lean Cuisine only takes five."

"But I'm going to get four meals out of this, so it's less time on average."

She tried to make small talk during dinner, but it's difficult to converse with a man spattered with tomato sauce. He tried to enjoy his meal, but her nasal twang made the hair on his neck stand up. Then came another mother crack, then the threat of sodomy via Jedi insertion.

Forks were brandished, comestibles were flung. Crockery fell crashing from the rocking table as Sebastian, the stray cat who was allowed inside only until they could find a home for him, fled into the bedroom to wait out this storm. As he ducked beneath the bed, the humans continued their tiny Armageddon.

She stuck her thumb so far into his eye the glue-on nail stayed planted there. Crazed with pain, he picked her up by her implants and threw her into the refrigerator, scattering magnets everywhere. He was upon her before he saw the corkscrew in her hand. It pierced his chest and she cranked it into his aorta.

As he sank to the floor he crooned:

"Darling. No one's ever stabbed me like you."

A Tetraptych of Adhenonia in the Singular Year
Colin Lubner

Winter

After breakfast today, I put on my coat, walked to the end of the driveway, and peeled a sliver of bark off Kat's magnolia. The bark was silver on the outside, but green underneath, which means Kat's tree is okay. I've checked some of the garden's other plants—Japanese maples, forsythia, rhododendrons; unsurprising American varieties, to a tee—and they've been okay, too. But with the rest of the trees, especially in the winter, it's hard to tell. Ice and metal, at least from a distance, look pretty much the same.

Kat loved that goddamn tree, I remember. Won it in an Arbor Day contest they held at our elementary school, begged her parents to plant it in their garden back home. Threw a fit when they said there wasn't enough room. Eventually they gave in, let her plant it up here, at the end of the long driveway of their little lodge in Vermont. Maybe they figured the tree would die, or Kat would forget about it, or both. Neither occurred.

There's this fungus Kat once called to tell me about.

It was just after I'd bought the cabin from her parents. Once Kat had moved out, her parents had decided to sell the lodge. At the time, as it happened, I had recently been hired to teach English to eighth-grade skiing addicts in a district nearby. Mostly due to Vermont's winters, the position hadn't been in high demand. Kat's parents, having raised me as their unofficially-adopted son, were happy to cut me a deal.

Kat said the fungus worked by replacing a plant's cells with its own, mimicking the extant structure with an identical arrangement of its own invasive cells. She'd read about it, she explained, in that month's NatGeo. My task was to ensure her tree remained a tree in the months she wasn't there.

It was an insane request, and I told her so, and then she got quiet.

"I'm serious," she said.

"How would I even know if your tree had been replaced?"

It seemed like an obvious question.

"You know," she said. "I don't know."

"Where's it from? The fungus?"

A moment of typing.

"Bolivia," she eventually said.

She was always worried about the unlikeliest stuff.

The virus worked like Kat's Bolivian fungus. Some government, probably ours, thought it a killer idea to program nanobots with the ability to replicate organic life. Functionally, plants operated the same way: photosynthesizing, converting energy, exchanging CO₂ for life-giving oxygen. One just couldn't eat them anymore. The aim of this, if I were to guess, was to further decimate other nations' crops. At the time, both food crises and overpopulation had already become pretty regular Things.

Things got out of control, as Things like that tended to.

There were shortages in the cities, riots in the suburbs, cults in the countryside.

People, as people tended to, died.

People I probably know, or knew. I've called a couple times. Electricity, communications, both still work. Everything electric has (so far) remained operational. One of the perks, I suppose, to the brand of apocalypse we've invented for ourselves.

No one answered, though, and I've stopped calling.

This is the last year of the Earth's old life. The singular year, I'm calling it. No other year will be quite like this one, with everything still ending.

Also, like, robots? Not quite what Kurzweil was talking about, but close enough.

So I've decided to keep a log of the seasons. New England is famous for them, after all. Plus, well, it's something to do. It's a purpose. Maybe scientists will find this one day, after things have settled, and know how things once were.

Mostly, it passes the time.

Winter has become a wasted season.

In theory, sure, the season used to justify itself. For three months, nature vacationed. Life slowed, stopped. Prepared to start again.

Now, I'm not so sure. Like, sure, winter looks the same. Branches are brittle and sharp-edged; the nights are long, and quiet, and cold. Last week, it finally snowed. But there's no more point anymore, right? Nothing to look forward to, no reason to survive. All that's left is survival, nothing but the act itself.

The other day, while returning from Kat's magnolia, I found a turkey—dead, but still warm—about halfway down the driveway. The corpse took me by surprise. I hadn't known anything was still alive in the area, human or otherwise. I wondered if anything still was.

Later, butchering it as best I could, I found three holly berries in the tiny purse of its stomach. As I held them, they blinked, glowed red, then faded.

I'd intended to store the meat in the freezer. Save it for Easter, Christmas. Those days deserved real food, I thought. Something that wasn't frozen or canned. By then, I might even have company; I could wait. Maybe even bag another turkey in the meantime. One implied multiple, a community. In fact, I thought, I should probably get back out there, catch them while they were still in the area—

Suddenly, without consciously realizing what I was doing, I had the bird in the oven, temperature at 425° F, baster at the ready.

What was I waiting for? What had I ever been waiting for?

Winter is a wasted season.

Spring

You can tell which plants are fake by which flowers last the longest. For example, if a magnolia remains in full bloom come the beginning of June, it's a fraud. Same with the other trees, more or less. I just happened to be thinking of magnolias, so that's what I wrote.

It seems like some metaphorical meaning should underpin this phenomenon. That true beauty changes with time. Something stupid and easy like that, like the moral of a big-budget film. But none does. Or, if one does, I haven't bothered digging it up, and don't plan on it. As with everything else lately, I'm happy to let the metaphor, if extant, exist.

Kat's magnolia is in bloom. The flowers are gorgeous. Fat, raindrop-shaped petals. Pink at the center, flaring into white. Valentine's-themed flames.

Today is June sixth, if I've kept accurate track of the date.

Yesterday I called Kat, to tell her I failed, but she didn't pick up.

She got married last spring, just before everything started to end, at a ski resort up by Mount Snow. It had rained that morning, so the mountains looked like they do today. Flowering, acre-sized copses glimmered upon opposite slopes. The trees' colors were so bright, so real, the whole landscape seemed somehow fake: a literal uncanny valley.

It was after, during the reception, when she asked me, "When's it gonna be your turn, Germ?"

We were on an elevated patio, looking into the valley below. Kat was happy. Not that she normally wasn't. But happier than usual. Spring was her season, and today was her day.

"Maybe it's already passed," I said.

Okay, my fault. Yeah. But she'd used her old nickname for me: Jeremy, Germ. She hadn't called me Germ since we were seventeen. And by that point, yeah, I was a little bit drunk. It was my fault, okay?

"Screw you," she said.

It sounded like she was joking, and I laughed. Then she said it again, louder. She shoved me, hard, and walked away.

I've never much liked spring. The other seasons, at least from a naming perspective, are more concentrated with significance. Winter, summer. Those are ideas in and of themselves, irreplaceable by other words.

Same with autumn. Screw people who call it fall.

Spring, on the other hand, is widely, wildly meaningful. Spring is a verb, meaning to jump quickly forward, or to originate or arise from, or to pay for, especially as a treat for someone else. Spring is also a noun. A spring is an upwelling of water or oil from under the earth. A spring is a resilient device, typically a helical metal coil, that can be pressed or pulled, but returns to its former shape when released.

Spring connotes beginning. It also connotes return.

Today, on my drive into town for groceries, I purchased a power saw in the hardware store. I left cash on the counter, although no one was there. No one is ever there.

Then I went and cut down Kat's magnolia.

She would have liked that, I think.

Summer

In seventh grade, Kat and I had a race to see who could finish *Lord of the Rings* first. She completed the trilogy while I was still on *The Two Towers*. After rubbing my face in it, she asked me what was taking so long. Although she read faster, I read more frequently. Over the course of several days, our rate of literary consumption typically equaled out.

"Sorry for actually enjoying it," I said, like the pompous shit I was. "Sorry for taking my time."

Kat looked at me over the top of Carrie. Looking back, this was the first book of her King phase. This lasted for only two, three months. Before I'd even picked up *Different Seasons*—sparking what would prove to be more of an obsession, with me—she'd moved on. She was always moving on.

"Legit, there's like, thirteen ways the world could end tomorrow," she replied, very seriously. (As I've said, she worried about the unlikeliest things.) "I'm enjoying myself. I just don't think we have time to take."

And she was enjoying herself. I saw that, even then.

Junior year I started keeping a pocket-sized notebook full of pretentious, pleasant-sounding words. Words like incarnadine, limn, cordate, autumn, tilt. Some I liked simply for how they sounded, disregarding what they meant. Sclera, for example. The white of one's eye. Others had a pleasant definition to go with their pleasant sound. Cordate, for instance. Heart-shaped. Tilt. Tilt.

The first word on this list was Lothlórien. Kat and I were reading on the bank of a lake about a mile from here, where there were these wide flat rocks that warmed in the sun. It was the summer before our senior year. At the time, Kat was dating a mutual friend of ours, a hockey-playing Adonis named Alec. Noticing the notebook, she asked me what I was doing. I told her, and she laughed.

“Do proper nouns really count?”

Sure they did. To earn a spot in the notebook, words only had to sound nice. Proper nouns could sound nice. Names could, too. If they meant something, all the better.

“But it doesn't,” she said. “Lothlórien means nothing. It's just a forest.”

Only I was rereading Tolkien. Kat was onto Bukowski, Kerouac. She'd be embarrassed by the same names in six months.

“Sure it means something,” I said. “In fact, that it's undefined, that makes it more meaningful, in a way.”

“Mm,” she said, and resumed reading.

The act of defining, I now realize, has two effects—one positive, one not so much. The first is to give the definer power over the defined: they have set parameters upon a concept or object, and may now incorporate the defined term into their rhetoric. The second effect of defining, however, is one of limitation. Undefined, a word has limitless potential; defined, there is only so much something can be.

Summer is the first season to be noticeably different in the singular year. The trunks of trees remain silver, but now boughs mellow into copper branches, into twigs that are a lustrous bronze.

Leaves are golden, now. Summer is gold-leafed.

Kat's magnolia regrew. The day after I cut it down, on another grocery-run into the valley, I passed the spot where it had been. Instead of the stump I'd expected, a slender silver rod stood in the mulch—a seamless terrestrial antenna. The fallen tree was gone. Nanobots, evidently, made efficient decomposers.

Today, I checked on the tree again, and found it nearly the same height.

Tomorrow is the first of September, and Kat's tree is again in bloom.

Lothlórien, if I were to define it now, would mean “a forest in a season that is neither summer nor autumn, but somewhere in between.” Later that day, by the lake, when I tried to tell Kat what the word meant, I said, “It's like, an eternal summer, but without a beginning, and without an end. Or, like, it's always ending, I guess. Lothlórien's always as golden as it's ever going to be. So maybe it's an eternal autumn.”

“Nice,” she said. “Concise.”

“I'm serious,” I said. “It's like, if nostalgia had a season, that would be it.”

Kat laid her book flat on the rock. She crossed her legs, then leaned forward, really looking at me. I put my book down, too, but then decided to watch the lake, to be interested in nothing more than wind moving water. The intensity of her gaze unsettled me.

“What are you nostalgic for, Germ?”

“I don’t know.” I picked up the book, mostly to have something in my hands.
“Remember when we read this? You clobbered me.”

She picked up her book, too. And then we were reading again, and the conversation was over, when she said, “But to be nostalgic for something, something had to have happened. You know? Something had to have begun, and existed, and ended.” She turned a page, still reading, or pretending to read, her mouth a thin white line. “To miss something, something had to have been.”

There’s this red-faced, ginger-bearded, manly sort of man who’s started coming by the lodge. He’s the first person I’ve seen in over a year. He’s a surprise in that way, I guess. In his newness. But I knew people would eventually return. Judging by the radio reports, there’s nothing to the south except for scarred cities and scarcity.

No, the real surprise is what this man does.

Every morning, right around the same time, he pushes a wheelbarrow past the end of the driveway. How long he’s been doing this, I don’t know. I only saw him the other day when I went to check on Kat’s magnolia, and heard him coming, and hid in a nearby bush.

As I watched, the man stretched up, into the magnolia’s branches. Metal snicked through metal. When he came down from his tiptoes, I saw that the device in his one hand was a miniature, manual hedge-clipper, the kind with beak-shaped shears.

Fat, rose-gold petals filled his other hand.

I watched him repeat the ritual for a week. One day I hid in a bush closer to the road, and when he went to collect his petals, I got a glimpse at his wares. The wheelbarrow’s bucket was full of hand-crafted jewelry. The man had braided bronze twigs into delicate bracelets. He’d curled gold leaves into elegant rings. The magnolia’s petals were yet to be incorporated into a completed piece, but I saw a necklace in the making, within which fat, rose-gold petals made overlapping links.

My whole life, I’ve never really become attached to anyone. I haven’t let myself. I’ve been in relationships, sure, but rarely past the beginning bits. In those early days, I’ve found, everything important goes unsaid. A couple’s potential energy, their future heat, hides, ineffable and untapped, in the spaces between words.

I’ve never been good at the second part, either, the growing part. To grow, one must fill the silences, must actively tap the potential that is organically there.

Maybe I’d be good at the third part, the part where I wanted us to be, when everything that’s been grown may finally be reaped. Part of me thinks so: that, if only we had gotten there, skipped the first two seasons, everything would have been okay.

“Something had to have been,” Kat once said.

Something had to have begun, then existed, then ended.

I’ve decided to follow this man. This jeweler. An individual implies a multitude, a community.

Man is a social creature. He cannot live alone.

Autumn

There is smoke in the valley.

I forget what the town's name once was. St. Someone's. It's not the town I've been driving into for groceries, nor the town in which I used to teach. If I had a pair of binoculars, I could read the town's name off the hardware store, or the laundromat, or one of the many mom-and-pop's, because it's that kind of town.

Smoke implies one of two things. Either they, whoever they are, have found a holdout copse of organic trees, and have been chopping them down, and are burning the resultant logs. Or they are burning boards and fencing from the town itself. From what I can tell, they are relatively new residents, so this is a distinct possibility. Perhaps this is one town in a series of exhausted and yet-to-be-exhausted towns. Perhaps this group is moving on.

When I first found St. Someone's, it was September, and the jeweler had just finished the necklace. Earlier that day, lurking by Kat's tree, I'd already known he was almost done. I had to be ready, and was. After the man finished harvesting petals, there was no guarantee he'd return.

It was the day after the first real storm of the singular year, and rust had blanketed the mountains. Corroded leaves crunched under my feet like seashells, or broken glass. It was necessary for me to trail the man at a distance, especially once he left the road. Hiking through the woods, I was reminded of a snow day in middle school, when I'd tried to sneak up on Kat during a snowball fight we'd staged in the woods. My big worry had been the sound of breaking branches as I pushed my way through. But it was my footsteps that gave me away: the unmistakably human rhythm of boots scrunching snow.

We'd reached the other side of the mountain when the jeweler stopped, parked his wheelbarrow, and sat himself on a rusted log. Past the man, down in the valley, lay my first glimpse of St. Someone's.

He removed the necklace from the wheelbarrow, then began to tinker. With both his thumbs he'd bend one petal's edges, so they curled in, toward the empty space where someone's neck would soon fit. Smiling, he'd try on the necklace, frown, then begin again. It was slow work, but the man seemed happy with it, and took his time.

As I watched, it occurred to me that this, here, was it. Here was a person I could reveal myself to, a community that would take me in. Here was something beginning. Possibly the last beginning anything I'd be able to find for the rest of my life. There was smoke in the valley, but there wouldn't be for long.

I'd selected my weapon earlier that day. It was a slender branch, but heavy, effectively a length of corroded rebar. As I approached the jeweler from behind, I gripped the branch with both hands.

The man slipped the necklace on. Apparently satisfied, he stood. At the sound of a crunching leaf, he turned, and looked directly at me. He muttered a surprised something—I forget what—to which I replied, “The necklace.”

Wordlessly, hastily, he handed me the necklace. It was heavier than I'd expected.

“Thanks,” I said. “I wouldn't have...”

I held up the branch, unsure how to finish the sentence. Then, disgusted at myself, at what I'd been about to do, I tossed the weapon away. I didn't know how the man would react, and certainly didn't expect what came next.

“We have a place for you,” he said, and smiled hesitantly. His voice was a surprise, low and soft, like a father giving advice to his young son. “Once we've gathered enough supplies, we're heading south. There's a community, at Rensselaer. Do you have a radio? They say they're

working on reversing this.” The man raised his hands, gestured at mountains that surrounded us like precious, glittering scrap heaps. “Whatever this is.”

Which explained the jewelry. Collect and craft now, while materials were abundant and free. Sell the pieces later, for something approaching their pre-singularity prices. I considered telling him what the rust meant, that his jewelry consisted of little more than plated iron, but didn’t.

Hope is a good thing, perhaps the best of things. And no good thing ever dies.

Stephen King’s best quote, I’d long ago decided.

Kat had disagreed.

“Thanks,” I said. “I’ll think about it.”

“Will you?”

“No. I don’t know.”

He chewed on his reply.

“Well,” he said, as if the word was his third or fourth choice, “we’ll be here for awhile, if you change your mind.”

I nodded. Then I watched as he packed up his wheelbarrow, trundled downhill, and disappeared into the underbrush.

Every week since then I’ve come back, to that spot or one similar. I sit for an hour or two, palms pressed into the cold ground, the rusted leaves, and I spy on St. Someone’s.

The other day, for the first time, St. Someone’s church bells rang. Their peals echoed mechanically through the valley, startling not a single flock of birds. As some classic, vaguely familiar country song played—Johnny Cash, maybe—the jeweler and another man walked down St. Someone’s main thoroughfare. A small crowd cheered them on, spraying them with champagne, tossing glittering petals at their feet.

Later that day, as with every day before, there was smoke.

Still, I didn’t dare go.

And I’m not sure why.

Maybe the reason is this. By joining them, I would stop this year from being the singular year. No longer would it be the culmination of anything, and neither would it be a beginning. It would simply be a year in a series of years. And maybe I can’t accept that. Maybe I need this feeling, whatever I am feeling, to be validated by this year’s inescapable, irreplaceable finality.

Or maybe I am simply afraid.

Over Thanksgiving break our first year of college, Kat and I drove up to the cabin together. At the time, it was still her parents’ place. They said they’d meet us up there on Saturday, after Kat’s last relatives had gone home. Until then, though, it would be only us.

We’d asked some mutual friends to come, to back up their boasts of how much they could now, apparently, drink, but they said they were busy. Not that we shouldn’t still go, of course. It’d be good for us, they said. Reconnect.

We were two hours south of here, passing through upstate New York. Kat was in the passenger seat. Out of boredom, she’d dug through the center console’s mishmash of Extra wrappers and CDs and pennies, come up with a tattered notebook. The spring before, I’d cleaned out the car for the upcoming prom, and had jammed the notebook in with a bunch of other junk that had once made up my life.

“Adhenonia,” she read. “What does that mean?”

I looked over, unsure what she was talking about, then redirected my attention to the curving, climbing road. “God,” I said. “I forgot all about that thing.”

She repeated the question. “It sounds like a disease.”

I cast through my memory of books I’d read that year, searching for an association. Kat resumed flipping through the notebook.

At last I remembered. “It’s like, emotional flatline. That’s how King put it, I believe. An inability to feel pleasure.”

“Oh,” she said. “So it is like a disease.”

Behind us stretched the same sort of road we’d been on for the entire trip. Narrow, ugly asphalt. Man-made cliffs with vertical ledges and rusted steel pegs. Ahead of us, though, the view out the windshield suddenly widened. The land fell away. The shadows of clouds moved slowly over a vista of gray, leafless trees.

“I hate fall,” Kat said, staring out the passenger window.

“Autumn’s my favorite season,” I said, ever the contrarian. Then I quoted a podcast I’d been listening to in my downtime at college, which was all the time. “Funny, isn’t it? That nature is at its most beautiful when it’s dying.”

“Seems like it’s already dead,” Kat said.

I didn’t disagree. New England’s foliage had reached its red-and-gold peak some weeks ago, while we were away at our separate schools.

The car was climbing into more mountains, Vermont mountains, when Kat said, “Emotional flatline. Implying that, emotionally, you once felt.”

“That one once felt,” I said, altering the rhetorical you. “Sure.”

“That you once felt, yeah.”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Yeah,” she said. “Alright. That’s that, then.”

Then she was silent, and eventually she slept.

Two hours later, we were here.

Keep 'Em Down
Aaron Heil

A creaking sound scratched out in the darkness, like it almost always did before they entered the barn. I began to make laps around our pen in anticipation. Every night, I waited for Mary's hand and her light. Now, a light shone brightly into my eyes. A pair of hands that smelled like fatty meat, pungent leaves, and metal. Not Mary, but her brother. Curious, I didn't resist when he picked me up by the scruff of my neck. He handed me to off someone else.

"He like a long, skinny rat. Yo, England be off the hook putting him in they pants."

"Quit talking like that," the brother said. "You don't sound black. It's embarrassing."

"Can't be no redneck like you. Kiowas be just red."

"Man, this is the most 'redneck' thing I've ever done." The brother passed me into his companion's arms. Then he reached back down into the pen to grab one of my siblings.

I climbed this Kiowa's shoulders. Sweat had soaked and dried in the thick cloth that covered his chest. He pulled me back down, the rough fabric resisted my claws and smelled like smoke and pine needles.

Kiowa carried me out under the sky. The world opened around me. Scattered lights peeked over the top of the trees, but an enormous fire on the earth outshone them all – even the moon that rules over the darkness. Every creature, food or hunter, could see me as I squirmed in this Kiowa's arms looking for a way back down into the dust. His hands became a gentle trap. The muscles in my shoulders turned solid and calm. We walked toward the biggest light, the one that unnaturally spilled over the ground like an enormous fiery wave.

People with red cups and icicles from the humming white cave in the house clamored near. Kiowa showed me to the females first. I looked for Mary among the shining, straight-haired group, but no one had her exact, haylike smell. They drew back as Kiowa approached with me.

"God, that's disgusting."

I felt the laughter rumble in Kiowa's chest and ripple through the group. My head swiveled as I searched for Mary. I caught sight of the males. They towered like giant trees as they crowded in and covered the earth. They mixed into the daughters of men and doubled their number. Their shoulders hunched. Their elbows struck each other like the restless wings of carcass-eating birds. From wing to wing, they half enclosed Kiowa. Voices sang out.

"That's so gross. Put that thing down before you catch something."

They opened their mouths wide, ravening and roaring with laughter, as Kiowa tried to keep order.

"Who gonna do it?" Kiowa called. "Y'all gotta be sober. Ain't nobody drunk or stoned can play."

"I got this, I said I would." A tall fair one burst from the crowd. He bent, stripped, and exposed his whole naked chest to the smoke and light.

A faceless voice cried, "There is no way that's going in your pants."

"I got a cup, I got this."

"No cups!" Kiowa shouted. Everyone began to howl at him with indignant protests. My heartbeat thudded faster with each new, incoherent voice. I bucked and twisted. If I got to the earth, I could outrun them all. His hands pressed around my neck. I stopped moving.

"Enough!" Mary's brother returned. His voice rang deep into the very last prey in the semi-circle. He called out, "I got the rules by heart. They don't say jack about cups!"

He held one of my littermates by her neck. She, too, wiggled and tried to squirm her way out of his hands.

“Ain’t no drunk fools can play,” Kiowa snipped.

“Make a circle,” Mary’s brother yelled. “We need somebody else, now! Come on! Y’all, ‘here for a good time, not a long time,’ right?”

He grabbed another volunteer, but I didn’t get a good look at that one. Kiowa brought me over the bare-chested one.

“Alrighty. Since you’re so gung-ho.”

I scrambled. My claws spun wildly and dug through the air filled with the savage clamor that drowned individual voices. The smoke blotted any trace of Mary’s scent from the air. The tall male thumped his bare chest as they wound cords around his ankles. Then, Kiowa slipped me in through a crack in the front.

Earthward I plunged. Darkness tamped over. My spirits became glad. The tunnel denied access to the fire and smoke. I skimmed down the trunk of his legs as the tunnel narrowed. I scratched and dug, but unlike earth, cloth resists, so claw over claw I scratched my way up and over down the other leg. Again, I hit cloth.

Turning and turning around the leg in the darkness, I climbed skyward in the widening space back up the leg. My claws sank into soft flesh. He hooted and began to kick and move us around. Something out there called for him to remain still. I paused for a moment, resting on his groin, and surveying that which had entirely escaped my notice before. At the meeting of his legs, where his sex should have hung, instead he had an enormous shell. I scurried closer, I sniffed around the edge of it, and then I felt his hand smack my snout. It knocked me all the way down to his knee.

I nipped. He tasted bitter, like he’d been rolled in oily stalks, but I didn’t sink deep. He shrieked as I moved out and snagged in another spot. I tore with my claws as I ran up his legs. I locked down with my jaws closer to his groin where I could taste sweat as well as blood. The hand, with a twin this time, returned and tried to bat me or swat me down. I lunged vertically for his groin. My claws slipped in the crack between shell and skin. The darkness spun when his hands stuck me but I held on and waited.

The light returned with his hand, and I ran. I zipped around his wrist and up his arm and back down his rump until landed in sweet dirt. I moved through the dust, with the crowd’s awareness following me. Too late! I could hear Kiowa laughing again, out of time with the shrieking crowd. Some of the men hunted after me like dogs, but once I got into the long grass, I dipped low and hid. The searching men glided over me.

Then Mary called out.

“Is it over? Guys, what did you do with them?”

The gathered creatures divided and, like a mist, she rose through them. Her eyes seemed sharper, her lips a deeper red, and her hair hung straight. Not in its natural mess. No one had her voice, however. She dragged a male through the crowd by the hand.

When she found I had been lost, she fled from the light of the fire. Mary dismissed her follower with a hand wave. She called out for me. She landed on her knees in the dust the way her mother had when she dropped her hide bag and scattered its contents. I lay still and she searched for me. I let her inch closer to me. I let the scent of hay and animal hair that clung to her reach me on the wind.

She called back, “If you guys lost him you’re going to pay me. I should have charged you all rent for them!”

Suddenly, her eyes caught my shape. I felt myself bounding through the weeds. Her arms embraced me, snuggled to her breasts, and the world became her skin and scent. She choked off my air momentarily.

I bit her.

“Damn!” she growled. But she began stroke my fur, anyway. My spine uncoiled as she scratched behind my ears.

In the barn, the human forms had all disappeared except for Mary. My family received me with groans full of the frights they’d had while I’d gone. Eagerly they cuddled close and licked away at any scratches in my coat.

Mary watched us in darkness. She said, “It felt like his heart was about to explode.”

“He’ll be okay.” Her brother’s voice answered from beyond my vision. “We made like a hundred and thirty bucks tonight. We can pay you for his time.”

I could still taste of Mary’s blood in the back of my mouth. I spat. Then nibbled around in the loose hay looking for a mouse to eat.

“He’ll be okay,” her brother said again. “They do it this way in England.”

Silence

Lawrence Morgan

When the soldiers cut out my tongue it was death I was afraid of, not the loss of my tongue. I should have known better. I was on my back, and I watched the ceiling fan rotate while blood pulsed into my mouth. Then there was darkness.

I'm not sure if they left the tongue in my mouth and I managed to spit it out, or if they lifted it out to have a look at it when they were finished with me. In any case, when I came to it was lying curled and purplish on the mat beside me like a rotten fig. What unnerved me the most was that I was still alive. I discovered later that the sergeant in charge had cauterized the stump in my mouth with a Bic lighter, which stopped the bleeding and saved my life. What a kind fellow!

Of course, everything changed in my life as a result. My speaking engagements vanished; there was no money in the revolutionary coffers for a speechless orator. I began to write potent speeches for a young firebrand from a rival faction in return for food and lodging. My ears were hungry for my words, and I wrote eloquently to conquer my silence. Guillermo, the young revolutionary, had a robust voice and a way with the crowds. I enjoyed listening to my speeches on the radio.

A visiting nun brought me a sign-language manual, and I practiced in front of a scrap of mirror for days on end. I signed at myself until my fingers were numb, with only the rasp of my breathing for company. It was futile; what I craved was the sound of my own voice at the microphone. I had to make do with the speeches I wrote for Guillermo.

The authorities visited me again, and this time they insisted that I tell them who was writing such compelling diatribes against the government. I was helpless; they threatened to dig out my eyes with a spoon. I lied. I gave them Guillermo.

Now he and I share a small room, and the silence between us is profound. They punctured his eardrums with needles as punishment, so he is quite the deaf one. The military surgeon also removed his hands, rather neatly, really. An overreaction on their part; he hadn't written any speeches, but of course they didn't know that. He even had a packet of morphine tablets in his shirt pocket when they dropped him off. Progress of a sort.

He has learned to understand my mute sign-language, but his deafness has ruined his voice. We rarely converse; it really isn't worth the effort. I feed him, as he is helpless without his hands. And when he opens his mouth to receive a forkful of food I watch his tongue, and wonder why I envy him.

A Minor Discrepancy
Meagan Noel Hart

The scanner whirred, the copier clunked, and prints started shooting out the side.

Linda, my boss, snatched one to scrutinize, absently resting her hand on her pregnant belly. She groaned, returning the print to the pile. It wasn't a comment on my work but the customer's. "Did we try to up-sell them graphic design services?"

"They never take it when they've already got something done," I said, spying the original. It was a flyer for a local church's pancake breakfast. Not terrible but not good.

"That bottle of maple syrup is huge."

"Maybe the pancakes are just small." I smiled. "Like silver dollar pancakes."

"Always the optimist," she said. "Is your brother optimistic, too?"

This was the real reason she was haunting my work space. Expecting twins, her new hobby was finding excuses to ask me about being one. The questions didn't bother me. I'd been asked about being a twin all my life, but Linda's stake in my answers made me uncomfortable.

"Sure, I guess. Hard to travel the world as a pessimist, right?"

Her eyes widened. "He travels the world?" Then her expression went contemplative. I sensed pity.

As twins, Marty and I only existed through the scope of comparison. Even our parents were unable to say something about one without indicating something about the other. They're both good at math, but Marty tests better. Marty's more outgoing. Sam's better with machines. Marty travels the world and writes, and Sam works at a local copy shop.

By comparison, Marty often won. I didn't blame him. I blamed myself.

With Linda, I'd avoided naming differences. Fed her similarities instead. Our laugh, hair, gestures, and bad jokes. But this short list reawakened an old fear: that Marty and I were even less alike than I thought.

Lately, our differences were only growing more complicated.

Linda's phone rang, saving us from an awkward silence. She took the call to her office.

I took the opportunity to check my texts.

Landed. See you soon. Marty.

I pocketed the phone. I wasn't talking to him until my MRI results were in. Worrying about those was killing me. I tried focusing on work instead. I loaded another print, adjusted the settings. I imagined the blue light moving quickly along, but its unhurried pace reminded me of the MRI, which had been much slower. I had felt like a forgotten job in a high-resolution machine, and tried to imagine myself paper thin, transparent, my insides clear, free of any unintended design.

Unlike Marty who was now riddled with cancer on the inside.

"A few weeks," he had said, collected as always. No chemo. Too invasive. He was coming home.

"Why you?" It didn't make sense.

"Balance." The connection broke a little, but I heard him chuckle. "The longer you stay in the sun, the more likely you are to get burned."

What a stupid idea. If Marty had weeks, I probably had days. My luck was always worse. Another difference.

Impulsively, I had scheduled the MRI.

Linda returned, her purse strap cutting into her shoulder. “Stepping out. When I get back, you’ll have to tell me more about this world traveling brother.”

While one job ran, I boxed another, selecting a single print to adorn the lid. It would represent the rest, so I took care selecting it. While most copies were identical, there were always a bothersome few with imperfections. The small abnormalities were invisible to customers and insignificant to Linda, but I found them all. A skewed image? Evidence a sheet went through a millisecond late. A faded logo? The first signs of an old drum. I shuffled the unsatisfactories to the bottom.

My phone buzzed. The lab. I took it out back.

I was clear. Cancer free. I could go on living my life, making copies.

This made even less sense than Marty’s diagnosis.

He got cancer.

I got. . . guilt.

If Marty was right, and this was balance, then it was my turn in the sun.

I didn’t want it.

When Linda returned, I was still lost in thought.

“Break time?”

“Yeah.” I eyed her grocery bag. I could read *Eggs* through the plastic and spied a bottle of maple syrup peeking out.

She followed my gaze. “Cravings.” She sighed and headed to her office.

My phone buzzed.

Be here soon? I’m doing terrible at explaining this to Mom & Dad.

I didn’t think of Marty as terrible at anything. But he was. He was bad at sitting in one place. He was bad at keeping in touch. He was bad at explaining himself. He was bad at being loved too much.

Linda returned. “So, tell me about that brother.”

One story wouldn’t hurt, but I told many. Dolphins, mountaintops, the girl next door, inside jokes, acne, and Fiji. The postcards. The pictures. The gags. Cases of mistaken identity. How a classmate thought we were one person until graduation. I worked and talked while she listened and laughed.

“Truth is,” I said, “we’ve never been the same, not where it matters. I tried . . . I don’t know. Maybe if we had rhyming names, we’d be more similar.”

Linda smiled.

I flipped through a stack, locating the slightly different flyers. I held one to the light. “Everyone thinks you’re copies. But you’re not. It’s just similar packaging. And in the end, the packaging isn’t even the same.” I placed the imperfect copy on top.

“Thank God,” said Linda.

I looked up, confused.

“This whole twin thing has felt like a joke,” she said. “I mean I own a copy shop. You wouldn’t believe the teasing. I’m just — I’m glad there’s more to it than that.”

I wondered if my mother had felt similarly.
My phone buzzed again.
“Speaking of brothers.”
Linda smiled. “Your shift’s over anyway.”

In my car, free of the rhythmic output of the machines, I read Marty’s message.
Can’t wait to see you.

Maybe it was balance. Maybe luck. Maybe our packaging or choices. A millisecond that made all the difference. But he had cancer, and I didn’t. It didn’t matter who seemed perfect and who seemed slightly off because there’d never been an original. It was time for the comparisons to end. To stop being a twin and just be a brother.

Drive
Ateret Haselkorn

I remember the first natural lie I ever told. Not your standard, “I didn’t steal the cookies from the jar” fib, but the kind that emerges on its own to serve a purpose for however long you need, like a disposable life raft made from your own breath. I can even recall the way the lie felt as it rose to the back of my throat, before I knew what I would say, before I let the words form on my tongue and then catapult through the air. The best I can describe it is as a feeling of organic creation. I had the same sensation in the moments before my daughter was born, of a force, a likelihood, an *about to*. Then her head came out, and then she was there. It happened from inside of me as it should, as was intended, and all I had to do at that point was allow it to take place.

A natural lie isn’t exactly like the creation of birth but tinier, like resting back on your heels and looking at the sky in surprise, as if it didn’t exist at all until you glanced up and made it form. When I told my lie, I wasn’t more than sixteen and at the bar of a local restaurant thanks to a fake ID and a drunk bartender. I thought I’d pick up a freebie, like a drink or a burger, because that’s what my friend Vanka was training me to do, at least whenever she gave me her attention. She was a senior and said she hadn’t paid for a thing since junior high when her breasts grew in. I was sitting at the bar and watching her “role model the behavior,” as was often described in Living Skills or detention. I guess her trick was her smile and maybe the way she looked twenty-two or three. She laughed loudly and often and, well, her bosoms were pushed up like they were going to reach her chin one inch at a time on a slow conquest. Since Vanka said I didn’t have those curves to “work with,” we did what we could and used a five-finger discount at WalMart on a small push-up bra and the padding of a much larger one that Vanka called, “The Rusky.” The padding went into my underwear, slid right over my derriere, turning me not into an hourglass exactly but maybe a minute glass.

It worked too, once I stopped watching Vanka and started making eye contact with men. Vanka never looked at me anyway when she was “on.” Actually, she didn’t look at much anything other than men, which is probably connected to how she rear-ended someone and lost her license, and that likely led to the rare attention that she did give me. I had a car, an old Toyota that was my grandma’s when her eyes still worked, and a license. Vanka’s lessons for me were supposed to be payment for services rendered.

I don’t think Vanka noticed when the man eyed me. I should have felt excited but all I felt was sweat drip down my back and get caught in the Rusky-padding on my rear. I was scared, ok? I was sixteen and he was older than dirt. Also, he had red hair and so did my grandma before the grays came in. She used to smack everything she could reach assuming that if you didn’t deserve it for past sins you’d deserve it eventually. I’d log that as a prepayment on debauchery.

So, then I had the initial feeling hit me, not that I had to take action but that I would. I flagged the waitress and I asked for chicken soup. I had no idea why at the time since I don’t even like chicken soup because Grandma forced it upon me after church every week. When the man offered to buy me a drink, I told him I had someone waiting for me at the motel, and when the man said, well, why is he there, I said, he’s sick, and he said, why are you here if your man is sick, and I said, I’ve got to bring him soup. And right then the waitress brought it over, and my

story loop closed, confirmed and supported by itself. I was so happy that I laid ten bucks on the table and didn't ask for change.

That was my natural lie. I took my soup to the car and ate it there, watching Vanka through the windows. She had a beautiful jaw line, like her face was cut out of stone. Her eyes were green but only if you looked at them up close, which I sometimes did with a side glance at stop lights or by looking into the rear view mirror as she used it to reapply her mascara. She was chatting with a man at the bar and I could see him slowly inching over so their thighs would touch. I think he faced the mirror to use the reflection to admire her cleavage. I wondered if he'd be able to see the birthmark on her neck since it was only a few shades darker than the rest of her skin. I wondered if she'd be able to ignore his small and shiny head with those little gray hairs sticking out the sides.

Vanka never expected rides home, only to reach her destination, but she still could have called or texted me to see where I went or if I was alright. I saw her at school Monday and she didn't even ask then, but I still told her I got a meal out of the evening because it made me feel good. That was only a half-lie and, although it didn't feel the same, it was nice the way the soup continued to deliver results for me. Chicken soup is good for the soul.

I didn't ask her about her evening to show her I didn't care either, but about five weeks later she made me drive her to a certain women's clinic, so I figured it out on my own. I think abortion isn't really a question of values but more of a science question. When does life begin? When does it end? In my opinion, it begins right when God marries two cells together and only God should end it. I regretted driving her to the clinic so much that, a few years later, when it came time for my grandma to leave this earth and the doctors kept asking me to make a decision on end of life, I made it clear that was not up to me. So, that woman stayed on the machine for months and months on end. As I saw her withering away, I realized she had so much life left in her and knew I was doing what was right and good.

Vanka was gone before my graduation but I suppose she left an impression on me. No, I don't pick up men at bars, but I drive and I get paid for it with money now. The income source came pretty naturally when those apps were invented and suddenly everyone wanted to participate in what my teachers say is called a sharing economy. I'd share just about anything if you paid me, except my daughter, Bethany. I don't share her with any one, not even her dad, as he long ago departed and I have no intention of following him to wherever he may be.

It wasn't like my dream or anything to drive for a living. You may write me off as a loser, many people do, but I go to community college too. I have a full course load towards becoming an accounting clerk, which I pay for with my ever-so-flexible driving job and some cash my grandma left me. My daughter caused it all, actually. Those early morning feedings, me with nothing to do when she went back to sleep, and surge pricing calling my name. All those commuters, all those airport rides, and I only had to pay my neighbor a small fee to babysit while I hit "available" on the app and got into my car. Assets went up while my debts and liability balanced just fine. Accounting is beautiful in that it assigns all things a name and value. If I'm ever asked to stand up and read from the ledger of my life, I'm sure everything will balance perfectly. I treat others as they treat me, and I keep excellent records.

I don't drive that Toyota any more, though. My car is equipped with connections, Bluetooth enabled, and the best in wireless entertainment and navigation. Heck, my car is smarter than me. Last week the car swerved to keep me from hitting a pedestrian when I looked down to yank Bethany's baby toy out from beneath the brake pad. I turned the wheel back before

hitting a wall, which was scary, but better than what could have happened. My car is my co-pilot. Grandma might have been proud of my foresight. Probably would have thought I spent too much of her money on one thing, but she's dead now.

I have regular customers now, and my rating is very nearly five stars. It would have been an even five but I didn't get my customers mini-bottles of water at Costco one weekend when Bethany was sick and I had to stay home. I suppose an asshole or two who I drove around on Monday were accustomed to a higher level of service.

My most regular passenger is always in a suit, somewhere important to go. The early hour and few available drivers bring us together often and produce a lovely surge in price at the same time. I have him pegged as a trader, a man who deals with imports and exports, because we go to the warehouses a lot or to the airport and he is always saying things like, tell B I want the sale to close next week. Later on it became, tell B he is peddling the wrong candy and switch after this drop. So, guess I don't really know what he does but don't want to Judge him on it.

He is always on his phone, which doesn't bother me much as I'm used to being ignored. I didn't realize how ignored, though, until I once said, nice to see you again, and he said, have we met, so I guess he never noticed me at all. The weird thing was that after he didn't recognize me I went into my receipts and it was like he wasn't there. I actually import my logs into a spreadsheet so I can manage my income better and I saw no male customers with the same name appear other than a John and a Jon, no letter h, even though I'm sure I've driven him multiple times. I guess I'll call him Baldy.

Maybe Baldy reinvents himself daily, a whole new person each time the sun rises. If I were him, I would reinvent myself with a larger head and some more hair.

One time we went to the warehouses and, because he looked stressed out and let out a sigh that bore the weight of human suffering for the past two thousand years or so, I offered to wait if he just needed to run a quick errand. He declined my offer by saying no thank you the way that Vanka used to get rid of men she didn't like – polite but with no room for arguing. I hate it when people speak that way to me almost as much as when they don't speak to me at all.

I only drove around the area for an extra moment or two, only dawdled during my three-point turn in the lot to be cautious. You can't entrust all of your driving, or your life, to your car, you need to reserve some responsibility for yourself and throw the rest out to the Lord. Anyhow, I saw Baldy standing on the other side of the chain-link fence and he wasn't doing much, just looking over some stuffed garbage bags and a few larger goods wrapped in white sheets and lying on the cement. There was one stray shoe, a man's loafer, on the ground. There were a couple men standing around and one woman sitting on a crate wearing heeled booties, short shorts, and a tank top, but I didn't get a good look at her before I left.

I took myself out to coffee and made sure to thank the barista by name. Thank you, Ellen. I was sitting at a table, reading over my class notes and watching the sun climb higher into the sky, announcing itself by illuminating others, making me feel seen beyond measures like page views and number of shares, when my phone ding-dinged and the app summoned me back to the warehouse. I knew I should have waited, I thought. But it turned out the passenger wasn't Baldy but the woman and the woman was Vanka. Alright, so I didn't realize it at first because I wasn't looking at her face but at the way her cleavage was pushed up so high she could practically rest her chin but, in a way, maybe those puppies helped absorb the shock I felt as she approached my car. Lord, forgive me my dirty humor.

Vanka looked the same but blonder and thinner. She also had more piercings in her ears and she was wearing sunglasses that hid half her face, but it was her. She opened the back door

and got right in. She turned to her phone without one word or glance of acknowledgement and started tapping away with her fingers that were dwarfed by acrylic fingernails.

After a long and stunned pause, I put the car into reverse. I would have run into a fence if my smart car hadn't thought better and stopped us. Vanka's destination was along the docks and, when we were on our way, I just had to say something, so I said, hey Vanka. She looked up and said, what'd you say? So I asked, don't you remember me, and she said, I think you have me mixed up with someone else.

Perhaps it was her shame that kept her from admitting her identity. I knew what she'd done, after all, and now she was mixed up with Baldy and whatever he was into. I mean, there was no way she couldn't remember me, right? All those rides, all those times she fixed her makeup in my mirrors. We shared some moments of our lives with one another and I even helped her to end one.

I didn't say anything else and dropped her off. Would you believe she gave me four stars and made a one-word comment of, "timeliness," bringing down my average and dinging my profile? No tip either.

That night I put Bethany to bed and thought about all that I wished for her. I decided I wanted her to live with a personal value reached through her own self. I sometimes think that we spread ourselves through too many places and it has distracted us from our common good and from God. There is a new American pastime of living through others, the way that Vanka lived in my car at times, between one door and the other. Along with that, folks comment on the lives of others as if they were their own. They do it on newsfeeds, on Twitter streams, and even on the app I use for my livelihood.

When Bethany let her hand rest on mine for a moment, when I felt the natural heat of her tiny fingers, their energy far greater than her current strength, I felt her potential in the balance. I looked at her closely and tried to send one thought from my mind into hers: I see you. I see you for all you are and all you will do and become. My wish for you is simple – that you know your worth without so much outside input. That you stand with the weight of your own value. Amen.

The next week was less eventful but I thought of Vanka often. I realized how much I hated her. It pains me to divulge it, but loathing had been growing within me all these years. Hatred isn't cold or hot, it's just a dull mass of twists and turns that you don't feel until it has filled every boundary of your body. I am not proud of this. I am, however, justified.

Sometimes after classes I'd walk over the bridge downtown and pause to take a few breaths. I'd look down and think I saw Vanka below, gazing up at me from the water. I'd wonder if she had found peace within herself after what she'd done.

One morning the moment I pressed "available" as I sat on my driveway I was summoned to do a pick up a block away by a new customer, and an interesting one. He wore jeans and a large gray hoodie but had no student backpack. His thick neck was decorated with a metal chain made of many small beads that disappeared under his neckline. I thought maybe he was a military vet who still wore dog tags. Then there was his baseball cap. It was black and blank. Around here, you might see a high school team name as opposed to college or national, but never nothing. Everyone's got something to promote on their foreheads, everyone.

The real oddity, though, was that he asked me questions. Inquiries that went beyond, how ya doin'. He kept his eyes out the window while he asked, how long you had this car. I said going on two years and he said, you use the self driving, and I said, not much, maybe once, and

he asked, too scary? I said, it's like one of those trust falls into the arms of a stranger. I wouldn't say he laughed, I'd say he chuckled. Then he said, why don't you use the video camera in the car if you're so high tech, and I said, I don't need to see what went behind me, I've only got eyes for the future, and he chuckled *again* before handing me a photo and saying, have you seen this man, I'm looking for my long lost cousin. I'll give you one guess as to who he showed me, standing at the warehouse, looking much younger and unaware his portrait was being taken. Baldy, of course. I had pulled over at my new passenger's destination by then and I had a moment for a precious, natural lie to emerge and guide me. I said, maybe I've seen him but after a while they all start to look the same. Grandma always said that If you don't have time for trouble, it won't have time for you, and I've no time for trouble, none at all.

When the passenger got out, I took a few deep breaths and wondered how he knew that I'd disabled my video. It must have been because the tiny red light was off. Truth is I don't use it because I don't like electronic eyes on Bethany when we drive, but that lie I told was not a biggie. Vanka always said a lady can say whatever she wants to maintain her air of mystery. I think about that when I use my body spray deodorant and it makes me smile. My air of mystery.

The following morning, I was up and ready, surge pricing beckoning me with its index finger. The car seemed to unlock even before I put my fob near the handle and the steering wheel turned as if my eagerness was getting ahead of me. Traffic must have been terrible because the navigation system took me on a route I'd never before used to get to any of the usual places, but none of my passengers commented on anything odd as they were buried in their texting and their Facebook. The scariest thing was when my brakes didn't respond to me until I pumped them a few times. It made me nervous, so I went to the dealership first thing the next day and told the mechanic that a ghost was driving my car. He laughed at me and said, maybe this smart car drives better than you but I'll take a look. Then he became very serious and said there was evidence of a remote presence. I asked, a ghost? He said, no, a hacker. He said the only things that would leave a bad mark on a hard drive like mine would be salt water, a sledge hammer, or a very skilled hacker. I think he was trying to be funny, to make me feel better, before he offered to install a security patch that would take a while. I had to get home to feed Bethany so I said, tomorrow, first thing.

On the way out, I received a ride request through the app and I hit "accept," hoping to make a quick buck before I got home. The map took me to an unfamiliar neighborhood where two familiar people were waiting on the corner. Baldy and Vanka. I didn't realize it until I arrived, of course, as his name was never listed the same way and he never had a photo. She was wearing those sunglasses again and this tight turtle neck cropped shirt that seemed neither suited for warm nor cold weather. He was kissing the back of her hand when I pulled up. They got in silently.

The destination was a regular spot downtown and I thought I'd be done in no time but then I got that familiar feeling that I was losing control, that a presence greater than me was in charge. The feeling was slow to build, as if it were coming off the steering wheel and moving down my legs to the pedals. I could feel the moment when the full force took charge and moved us in the direction of the bridge. Why are we going this way, Baldy asked, and I said, sir, I think the navigation system is putting me on a certain route, maybe there was an accident up ahead. He didn't look too reassured and Vanka said, it's ok Baby, as if that would solve anything. Baldy leaned forward to look out the front and yelled, it's taking us to the bridge, what the hell is going on, turn around now. I said, I can't turn around, sir, there is nowhere to turn. A drop of his sweat

landed on my right forearm and I realized that was the closest encounter we'd ever had in all our rides together. It was a cold sweat.

Let me tell you, I was sweating too at this point, wishing I were home with Bethany instead of in this crazy situation. The pedestrian crossing area was up ahead and I could see tourists blissfully walking in front of my approaching car. Baldy swore something awful, I won't write exactly how here, and yelled, stop, stop! I screamed, I can't, I can't!

There are odd moments of clarity in any day, emergency situation or not. These are times when the part of your mind you need steps out of the crowd and dances solo. I have felt such moments in prayer and I felt one in the car as Vanka shrieked and Baldy swore and the car accelerated along the bridge that ran higher and higher above the water below. I asked myself if the doors were locked. I looked at my door and saw it was unlocked. I put one hand on my seatbelt and opened it. I put my other hand on the door handle and opened it. Look, I said to Baldy and Vanka.

How had I never before noticed that Baldy's eyes were hazel. I was surprised by that right before I jumped out of the car and onto the cement by the guardrail. It didn't hurt too badly, I only rolled for a short bit before stopping and hauling myself up to the side. Just as tourists looked up and began screaming and running, my smart and well-meaning car swerved. It smashed into the rail, flipped over it, and landed in the water far below. It made a strangely small sound when it entered the water, like a distant wave crashing on the sea.

Please know that I have great respect for law enforcement. I have only two problems with the institution. One, while the laws that govern our society are rooted in the Commandments, we have lost sight of these roots. Two, the police follow these misguided laws and those laws protected that clinic where I drove Vanka years ago. Still, I was polite and respectful with the cops. I only pitied them as I knew their path had gone off course. I knew I had nothing to fear. I didn't even ask for an attorney.

The mechanic said he tried to force me to stay for the security patch, which wasn't true but turned out to not matter. The car was on the record as hacked. I had no motive. That counts as insufficient evidence. Or no evidence, if you ask me. The cops told me that the circuit board was smashed up and couldn't decode itself.

At the press conference, the police chief said that anything connected to the outside world can be hacked, any device, appliance, vehicle, or other part of the "Internet of Things." When he said there was evidence that my shiny car had been hacked, the media went nuts. Baldy's body floated up to the surface and was identified using dental records. I heard he'd likely survived the crash but drowned in the water. Since he was a wanted man for running a very large drug ring, theories abounded. People wanted to know who did it, was it the FBI, or his own men. I learned that ride sharing was Baldy's way of moving about undetected. I guess that when you share yourself with everyone, you break into too many pieces to be known.

Vanka's body was found later. Her family claimed it and, when her identity was released, they used a different name but I knew it wasn't her real one because I always pay attention to these things and my accounting never errs. I even recognized her expression before I jumped out of the car because I had seen it once years before when her gaze met mine in the rearview mirror. Her painted eyebrows arched while her pupils scanned my face for something. I think she wanted to know who I was and, as she was crying, I think she finally saw me. Maybe she suspected I was there all along.

Everyone, however, knew *my* name and face. I received some five thousand emails in a week. People clapped me on the shoulder as I walked through campus or made eye contact when I entered the classroom. I admit I am still not used to it. One person set up a Kickstarter campaign to raise funds for me and my daughter. I won't say how much came in as Grandma taught me that flaunting is a poor quality masking spiritual hollowness, but I took that and the insurance money and bought myself a new car. This one is not smart, but it is very, very nice.

The thing about lying – good, natural lies – is that they move you forward and keep you safe, sometimes even better off. *I think the navigation system is putting me on a certain route.* These lies come from some instinct that you keep in your center. I think of mine as a cabin in the woods, a cozy place with a small door that only opens when you know the magic spell and, if you think too hard about it, you won't get it, not ever. *Maybe there was an accident up ahead.* You have to be open to these statements within you, the same way you have to be open to God.

Grandma always said if you want a job done, you best do it yourself. I admit that I don't know exactly what that asshole with the blank baseball cap had planned when he hacked into my vehicle, but I could not squander the sliver of opportunity between the mechanic saying my car had been taken over and Baldy and Vanka summoning my ride. You really don't need a hacked smart car to become a vessel for other power, you just have to be open to what exists within you and what He has provided. It was like I'd been handed an assignment to pursue justice and all I really had to do was step back and let myself drive. Well, that and slide a baby toy beneath the brake pad.

I tried to explain all this to Bethany recently. She rolls over now and crawls a bit to reach her toys. I want her to know that the whole world is within her grasp and she just has to listen for the instructions. Like the ones that made this story unfold itself here, one beautiful piece at a time.



"Is it nice to be me"
Nigel Ford

Oil on canvas (125 x 95 cm), the background is provided by a coastal slate quarry near my studio and the central figure is relaxed and has relinquished her concerns, spreading these out around her. The picture was sketched and partially painted at the quarry and finished in my studio. There is a poem with the same title connected to the artwork. The work has been exhibited at several art museums and other venues in Sweden. Its next appearance will be at a solo exhibition at Lysekil Art Museum 25/5 - 6/6 2019.

Counting Backwards by Sevens
Mary Wild

While planting tulips, Sandra spotted a giant slug inching down the street. “Wait ‘til I tell Skylar,” she said, and fiddled in her pocket for her phone. But it was only a mud-colored car, as it turned out, nothing to tell. The window eased down on the passenger’s side, and a white-haired woman called out: “Hello there! I used to live in this house in the fifties. Would you mind if we pull over?” Sandra was delighted to interact with seniors who seemed even older than she, in their 80s by the bend of them. She invited the women to do more than pull over, she invited them to come inside. What’s the harm? she thought. Skylar wouldn’t be home for hours, if at all.

Like a baby being born, the woman pushed out from the passenger seat. First came her head turned sideways, then a right shoulder, then a left. One pudgy hand held onto the side mirror as she swung her legs, which were encased in shiny purple jogging pants, toward the sidewalk. The driver, once her passenger had ejected, pulled across Sandra’s driveway, landed the massive car a good three feet from the curb, and turned off the engine. Taller and far slimmer than the passenger, she, too, had white hair, but it was spiked to resemble a toothbrush head worn down beyond its prime. She, too, wore a purple jogging suit, but hers had a red stripe that ran like blood poisoning down each leg. Both wore multicolored sneakers, perhaps wanting to give the impression they were ready to run, despite their slow progress, as they rustled up Sandra’s walk, arm in arm.

“I’m Violet,” the passenger said, when they reached Sandra, “and this is my friend Poppy. It’s such a lovely day that we decided we’d cruise around our old neighborhood.” I want to be like them, Sandra thought, still cruisin’.

“The house looks so different from the outside,” Violet said. “Add-ons?”

“Yes, in the back,” Sandra said. “Please come in, and I’ll show you.” She dropped her trowel in the dirt, pulled off her garden gloves, and paused as they climbed stiffly over the front doorstep as though it were a fallen oak.

“Where do you live now?” Sandra asked, once the two strangers stood in her living room. Their enormous matching eye wear featured photochromic lenses that were beginning to lighten. “Seizure Pines,” they answered in unison and then burst into laughter. “It’s really *Leisure Pines*,” Violet explained, “but so many people, well, you know. They’re put there cause their children expect their health has hit the skids. Anyway, that’s the nickname.”

Sandra did know. A brochure for Leisure Pines, requested by Skylar no doubt, had recently appeared on top of a pile of mail. Sandra had dozed off one morning while water boiled for tea, nearly causing a kitchen fire. The mishap was “cause for concern,” Skylar said. For Christmas, she’d given Sandra a fire extinguisher and a teapot that wailed as though a catastrophic nuclear event was rapidly unfolding nearby. “To a safe new year. Much love, Skylar,” the gift tag read. Sandra would have rather had a spa day together, or a shopping spree. Her clothes, like the cropped pants and long-sleeved tee she wore today, were all the same—baggy and beige.

“Would you like some tea?” Sandra asked her guests.

“Sherry would be delightful,” Violet answered, eyeing a bottle on the kitchen counter, “but first we’d love to see the basement.”

The never-finished basement was not a place likely to trigger warm memories: tangles of wires hung from splintery wooden beams; mounds of dirty laundry sat piled by a closed door; plastic containers jammed with holiday decorations still not shelved lay scattered like landmines;

rusted cans, their labels obliterated by hardened drips of paint, stood stacked by a workbench now nearly deplete of tools.

Ignoring the request, Sandra gave her visitors a tour of the first floor. Violet admired the changes that had been made to the house since the fifties— the gas fireplaces, the revamped bathroom, the home office that had once been a nursery. “These steps over here still go do the basement, do they, pet?” Violet asked as Sandra pointed out the glass block wall in the kitchen, the convection oven, the granite countertops.

“Yes, but that part of the house is hardly worth seeing. Hasn’t changed at all,” Sandra said, as she maneuvered Violet and Poppy into the high-ceilinged addition. “Let’s sit a while in the family room and have that sherry.” *Why the basement for heaven’s sakes?* She grabbed three brandy glasses from a cabinet and filled them from a bottle of Oloroso del Puerto, one of a dozen her daughter had shipped home during a recent trip to Madrid.

Sandra arranged imported almond cookies on a ceramic plate and put the offerings on the coffee table. It was pleasant to entertain some new faces, to receive compliments from such delightful ladies. She directed them to the couch, and she sat cross-legged on the rug so they could see how agile she was. Seventy was the new 50, or at least the new 60. Oprah had said so.

The talk turned to families. Violet had five children; all grew up in the very house where Sandra and her daughter Skylar now lived. Some were nearby, some far away. The distance didn’t really matter, Violet said. None of them called much, and the nearby ones, Jake and Jennifer, rarely visited Seizure Pines. Poppy, too, had lived in the area, the next town over. She had three children, had done everything for them growing up. But when her no-good husband ran off and left her penniless, she was forced to shoplift for food. They hadn’t lifted a finger to help her. “We Skype now,” she announced.

“How about you, pet; how many?” Violet asked, turning her attention to Sandra.

“Both of my kids are lawyers. Preston and his family live in Portland, and Skylar lives here with me. After the divorce, she thought I’d need the company, and the help managing things.”

“She’ll get the house, I suppose, once you’re out of the way,” Violet noted, reaching for a cookie. “It’ll be easy for them, being lawyers and all.”

Sandra was having a hard time following the conversation.

“But you love your children no matter what, right?” Violet continued. “Just got to be tough love. Husbands, now sometimes they’re another story!” A few drops of sherry dribbled down her whiskered chin, and she deftly blotted them with one of the cloth napkins that Sandra had unearthed for the occasion. “Too bad we can’t Skype to the beyond,” she said, pointing to the rug. Sandra noticed the need for refills. *The old gals can really knock it down. Don’t they realize this stuff isn’t boxed wine?*

Violet segued to doctors. “‘Have more tests in three months, eat more cardboard, walk more.’ That’s all they ever say, or rather shout, these days. They assume we’re all hard of hearing.”

Poppy nodded. “It’s true. Walking was fine, but roller blading was just too painful. The surgeon didn’t want to give me one—said a hip replacement was a poor investment at my age. Can you imagine? Talking about people as *investments*? Well, I just pushed and pushed until he gave in, the bald-headed bastard, but the gall.”

“My worst was a gynecologist,” Violet confided. She had unzipped her jacket to reveal a tightly fitting royal blue tee shirt with “American Academy of Neurologists 2010 Annual Meeting” printed in squiggly white letters on the front. “Told me she couldn’t *find* my ovaries—

said they were ‘probably blocked by a tumor of some sort.’ Just that casually she said that! And she was a woman! I expect more of women. Or I used to. Told her, ‘Well, I know I have some o’s. I had five babies.’”

“You should see the machine my doctor forced me to use,” Sandra said, warming to the topic of physicians’ insensitivity. “For sleep apnea. I think I sleep just fine, but he scared me into it. Look at the extra wrinkles on my cheeks—all because of a mask I have to wear at night. Skylar says I look like a little piggy in it.” The two guests peered at Sandra’s face for what seemed like a long a time.

“My second husband had one of those masks,” Poppy finally said. “I think it’s what killed him.” Sandra waited for clarification. “But the worst was our experience trying to get into Seizure Pines,” she continued. “They run you through a whole bunch of hoops to make sure you’re competent.” She fingered her Olympic-medal-size earrings, to illustrate the point.

“Right,” Violet said. “Competent to write them a big fat check. You pay a whole lot of your own money to get a dinky place at Seizure Pines--until you die and then *they* get it.” She slapped her knee so hard Sandra feared for the “they” who might profit from her demise. “There’s ways to break a contract, of course,” she continued, “if you cause enough ruckus and you got someplace else to go. One doctor told me he suspected dementia when I couldn’t remember the President’s name. Probably what your gal suspects too eh? I could remember his name. I just don’t like to say it. I don’t approve of what he’s doing in Germany for one thing. To prove it, I led the march.”

“Turns out getting into Seizure World was no piece of cake for either of us,” Poppy chimed in, steering the conversation back to acceptance issues. “That’s how we became friends. A mutual acquaintance heard of our similar experiences and introduced us. There’s worse places, believe me.”

Sandra wished she could usher these ladies back out the door and return to her tulips. “How funny that you both have flower names,” she said.

“Well, those are more or less our stage names,” Violet explained, reaching for the sherry and refilling each glass once again. “Some of the silly tasks are easy enough to figure out. ‘Quick as a bunny, they say, name five words that begin with the letter *F*.’ Furnace, familiar, fuck, fangs, fly—not at all a problem. I named ten right off the bat. But others just make your head spin. They put you in a room cold as a meat locker, offer you nothing but bottled water, the kind that’s really just recycled sewer bilge, and then an officious socialist of some sort asks you questions meant to trick you up.”

“What kinds of questions?”

“Counting backwards from 100 by sevens for one thing.”

“Why in the world do you have to do that?”

“To prove you’ve got all your math marbles, you see. If you can count backwards by sevens, it’s presumed you’re complacent.”

“Competent, doll, not complacent,” Poppy said, shifting slightly toward Sandra and raising her eyebrows. They seemed to be sewn on just above the frames of her glasses. “We fought the results and were both hooked up with a neurologist. She’s in the car.”

Sandra, for whom a doctor had recently suggested a hearing aid, thought she had misheard. “In the car?”

“In the back seat,” Violet said. “We threw a blanket over her. One of those thin, cheap ones that AARP gives out with membership. I checked off the box that says don’t send me a gift,

but I guess they didn't pay attention. No one does. It's a garish color too, and very rough to the touch."

Sandra tried to take hold of a thought. It slipped away as though skittering over an icy surface. "I didn't realize someone else was in the car. Please, let's invite her in."

"No, no pet. She's unable to move. Stiffer than ever."

"We should call someone, 911 or someone!" Sandra said. She struggled to stand up, leaning on the small table, knocking the plate of cookies to the floor. "What happened to her? Is the window open so she can get air?"

Poppy and Violet exchanged glances. "No need to worry," Poppy said, "she's dead. Has been for some time. It's her ashes under the AARP tarp. We've been looking for a safe place to put her, and Violet thought of her house—your house—with those deep shelves in the cellar. Lucky, I got to keep my car. We'll go get her so you can have a look."

Arms linked once again, they headed back outside as Sandra watched in disbelief through the slats in the dining room blinds. She thought of locking the front door behind them. *100, 93, 87.... No, 86. No, 82. Shit. Who are these women?* She fished in her purse for a pen, found a lipstick, and smeared their plate number on the back of an envelope. But it was too late. They were walking up the front path at a considerably quicker pace than earlier. Violet was carrying a blue and silver metal box that said, in wanted-poster print: "Salt Water Taffy—Souvenir of Atlantic City." As she paraded past Sandra, her gaze seemed to fall on the envelope. *Had she seen the numbers?*

"My undertaker friend tried to sell us something fancier," she wheezed, as they all made their way back to the family room," but we told him this was a treasured piece of memorabilia. You see, I used to babysit her, Dr. Brody that is, at the beach many years ago. A real sourpuss of a lass. That should have told me something. Never wanted to build castles or jump the waves. Constipated I suspect."

Sandra tried to remember where she'd put her cell phone. She'd promised Skylar to always have it with her, just in case. *100, 93, 87, 80...fire, facial....* She resumed her place on the floor, this time hugging her knees. Sunlight was streaming into the family room, making her squint. She made a mental note to get photo gray lenses like these weird sisters had next time she got her prescription updated.

Violet was not done: "She was my great niece; well, not so great you see. A real cold fish. Always was standoffish. At first, I was glad to see her name on the list of neurologists on call. Now here's a family member who'll help me out, I thought, and my friend, too." She put the box on the coffee table and settled into the sofa, tossing pillows out of the way to accommodate her girth and moving closer to Poppy.

I was relieved when Violet told me the news," Poppy said. "Thought we'd be in like McGlynn then, what with a niece neurologist."

Violet was wrapping three cookies in a napkin and tucking the parcel into her toaster-sized purse. A teal object caught Sandra's eye. *My cell phone?* "She had no living family except me," Violet explained, "but you wouldn't know it from her airs. Thrilled with herself at being a doctor, I imagine. Stiffened like a corpse when I tried to kiss her at our first meeting. Wouldn't even help me fudge a few answers for family sake. Didn't inquire about her Uncle John either. Had to tell her of his untimely death."

How did she die?" Sandra whispered.

"What's that? My husband John? It was a freak accident. He had..."

"No, No. Your niece. The neurologist. How did *she* die?"

“From the blueberry buckle. It was one thing she liked as a child. She was allergic to just about everything under the sun as I recall. I brought her a piece from the cafeteria for old times’ sake. It was the first I saw something like a smile cross her skinny face. ‘You need a little sweetening up, Ashlee,’ I told her, in a jolly old auntie sort of way.”

Poppy added, “They serve up blueberry buckle just about every Tuesday in the cafeteria. Gluey purple mess with a few berries mixed in. No taste to it whatsoever. And it stains one’s dentures.” She used her index fingers to pull up her upper lip.

“Remember, I have all my own teeth in the front,” Violet said, smiling widely at Poppy, “but you’re dead right about the filling. And the crumbles are just sugar and sawdust, seems like. Not at all like my homemade. They figure us old folks aren’t going to complain. The staff eats there, too. Suppose they put up with the bad food because they eat for free. Cheapskates. That’s what gave me the idea to use Belladonna. Isn’t that a pretty name? Means ‘beautiful woman’ in Italian—used to use it to rouge up their cheeks. Eat just a few berries, though, and you’re a goner.” She ran a jeweled pinky across her wattled throat.

Sandra rocked gently. *100, 93, 83, 75...no 76, 61. Wait. Shit, 100, 93....* “You poisoned her? How?”

“Had the berries in a plastic baggie in my purse. Bought them on the Internet. Used a code for free shipping too! She pecked at the buckle while I took one of the asinine tests. I was afraid she hadn’t eaten near enough of it, but wasn’t long before she slumped over right at her desk. I put on surgery gloves, copied all her files unto one of those thumbtacks and then skedaddled.” She reached over and wrapped a free arm around Poppy’s shoulder. “We can get great scores now. If we want. “

“We had it all planned out,” Poppy added, freeing herself from Violet’s grasp by reaching for a cookie on the floor. A price tag stuck out from her jacket collar. “We both love mystery stories. There’s so much you can learn, especially about giving someone their just desserts.”

“But wasn’t there an autopsy? An investigation?” Sandra asked, ignoring Poppy’s giggles.

“It’s alright, pet,” Violet confided. She leaned toward Sandra and patted her on the head. “Yes, yes, they knew she’d been poisoned. Police questioned me, of course. My fingerprints were on the fork, the napkin, the paper plate, but I told the officer just what I told you. Bought my flesh and blood a piece of buckle for old times’ sake. They could see I was grief stricken, and their attention soon went elsewhere. Once you reach a certain age, you’re invisible. Don’t you agree? They expect foul play from young roosters, not us old chicks. It’s the cafeteria help they focused on, mostly blacks and Spanish.”

“All of Seizure Pines was a twitter,” Poppy said.

100, 93, 83, 75, 62. “No one in the waiting room?”

“Just yours truly,” Poppy said. “We took the last appointments of the day—4 pm—that’s when everyone’s at dinner. I just sat there and waited. When 20 minutes or so went by, I knocked, knocked again, then went in. I worked up a good scream when I got a look at her, face down in the buckle. Then I called for help.”

Sandra pictured the niece neurologist, fallen head first into a mash of berries. *This can’t really be happening. 100, 93, 83, 75, 69, 62.* She tried to skate on to another question but her thoughts slipped from under her. “I need to use the bathroom,” she shouted, and stumbled off, crushing cookies in her path.

Sandra tore off a piece of toilet paper and pried a pen from the bathtub drain. Furiously, she scratched out the numbers: 100, 93, 86. When the pen tore a hole in the paper, she continued

counting on her fingers: “85, 84, 83, 82, 81, 80. So 79 is next, then 72? I can do this. Of course, I can do this.” She flushed the mangled paper down the toilet and returned to face her guests.

“I’ll take my chances passing those tests when the time comes, but I cannot do *this*,” Sandra said, when she returned, a piece of toilet paper trailing from her left sandal. She stood with her arms folded, hoping to convey authority. The two women seated on the couch were silent.

“I really don’t think I can go along with this,” she repeated, her voice shaky. *Did they not hear me?* “I mean, you just confessed you murdered this young woman.” She shaped her hands into pistols, index fingers pointed to the urn.

“Not really murdered.” Poppy said.

“You mustn’t think of it that way,” Violet added. “We didn’t.”

How *should I* think of it?”

“As an investment in your future,” Violet explained, slowly, as if to a petulant child. “After all, you’ll likely find yourself eavesdropping on a ‘What shall we do with Mother?’ conversation before all that long. If you want to get shipped off to a halfway decent place you’ll have to pass the brain tests. Who’s going to coach you? Anyone in your family chomping at the bit to help you with that sort of thing? You got to look out for yourself, like we do.”

Perhaps they’re right, Sandra thought. Her own so-successful daughter seemed to suffer from an empathy deficit. “Skylar’s caught up in her own life, her career, her social life, working out, but if I practice.” She counted off: “100, 93, 86, 79, 72, 63, no 61, then...”

“Way more to it than that.” Violet said. She nudged Poppy, who excused herself to visit the “little girls room,” and went on. “The whole test is all of 25 pages—we downloaded it. It’s used everywhere. There’s no escaping it. You let us use the space on the shelves, and we’ll provide you with a nice clean copy of the test. You’ll have it when your time comes.”

A thought, slug like, crept into consciousness. “Could I use it to prove I, you know, was competent enough to stay here—in my own home?” *freedom*

Violet plucked a loose thread from the hem of her jogging pants and considered. “Well, I suppose so. Decompose in place. Very popular these days. I don’t see why not. You own the house straight out, right? Those house deeds—and the test papers we’re going to provide to you—no lawyer can pry you loose.”

Sandra was up off the floor and pacing now. “I could take a course, Spanish maybe, to keep sharp. And start going to the gym again.”

“Maybe even meet a new man,” Poppy added, “if you did something with your hair. Either go gray all the way or be a blondie, call yourself Forcynthia, if that’s the look you’re after. Halfway is for the faint hearted.”

“And get some new digs,” Violet added.

Sandra looked down at her pants, gathered them in at the sides to show the outline of her thighs. “Maybe so.”

“We’d be glad to take you shopping, pet, next time we drop by. Tuesday maybe.”

Another bottle of sherry, half gone, rested against a couch pillow. Sandra couldn’t remember having opened it, or even having gotten it from the wine rack for that matter. *You’ve got to look out for yourself. Future.*

Violet was prattling on: “Of course, we’ve offered sexual favors to get on many a doc’s good side, men and women. Don’t even think about going down...that road. It’s better to eliminate them, not advisable right now though. When the time’s ripe, you might want to whack a few of your own. Come on now. It’s down the basement we go.”

“Where the hell is my phone,” Sandra thought, “and where is my daughter when I need her? She couldn’t be home for a dinner together one goddamn night? Maybe she could be tempted by blueberry buckle.” She shuddered. *Bad joke. Terrible joke.*

“It’s late. Perhaps we should do this another time,” was all she could manage to say. She feared the suggestion would fall on deaf, and possibly dangerous, ears. Once she was rid of them, she could pry open the tin, see what it held. The pulverized bone fragments of a once-successful neurologist, she thought? More likely nothing but dried up salt water taffy. She’d go back to her gardening and forget the whole thing happened. Go back to burying bulbs deep in the earth, dormant for now.

Violet was already descending the stairs to the basement, clutching the makeshift urn to her chest. Poppy was close behind her. She grasped the stems of two glasses, brimming with sherry, in one hand. In the other hand, she held another full glass, as if carrying a chalice.

The door to the basement didn’t have a lock, Sandra realized, with considerable apprehension. She couldn’t contain them down below, but she could run outside right then and there and knock on a neighbor’s door for help, likely giving Skylar one more reason to question her judgement should she come home to find police officers trampling across the lawn. *I’m perfectly capable of living in my own home ‘til I’m 100, 93. Grandpa did it, didn’t he? Canned his own kohlrabi, too.* She flipped on the light, so these fearless old broads wouldn’t fall and shatter their hips on the steep staircase, then began her own slow descent. *Fearless.*

When she reached the bottom of the steps, she grabbed a flashlight from the workbench, and shone a light on the shelves. Darkened by dust and time and filled with the detritus of a family life now gone, they took up one wall of the basement. “They’re just as I remember them,” Violet said, setting the urn on the workbench and gulping sherry from one of Poppy’s trio of glasses before motioning her to put them down, too. “Now let’s get to work. She grabbed a broom and began brushing cricket carcasses, cobwebs, and spider egg sacs, from corners. Mildew, like powdery liver spots, dotted the partitions. *Brush away the cobwebs. Look after yourself.*

“I’d say this resting place would be best,” Violet said, motioning Poppy to help her shove aside battered suitcases, sagging boxes of books, tangles of sports equipment. Then using the broomstick, she carefully pushed the tin to the far reaches of the chosen shelf, the one highest up and closest to the laundry room. The job done, they joined arms, grabbed their glasses and did a wobbly cancan. “Here’s to empowerment,” Poppy said. Sandra repeated the toast. “And to empanadas,” Violet added. “I love those. They’re the Thursday special.” She turned to Sandra: “We’ll let ourselves out, pet. Stay and rest. You look a little flushed. And finish off your drink; that’ll do the trick. We’ll stop by again soon and bring you the test.” They disappeared from view.

Legs splayed, back pressed against a post, Sandra remained seated on the basement floor. “We should have worn masks,” she whispered to a spider advancing on the brandy glass turned over at her side. Her throat itched and a vise slowly tightened at her core. *“100, 92, 82, 72, 62. Perfect! Perfect makes perfect.”*

She heard the front door open, then close. It was dark now. “They must have turned the lights off on their way out. If they really stashed the remains in my basement, surely Skylar can help with a defense. I was coerced into giving Violet and the other one shell space. Coerced by two 80-year olds? Would a jury buy it? Skylar will be home soon, won’t she?” The spider changed course. *Well so god damn what if she isn’t? She wouldn’t approve of my new friends, anyway. Better to keep the whole thing a secret.*

Hungry
Laurie Shiers

Since the dawn of time, or at least since she was old enough to remember, the refrigerator at Eloise's was always full, but its contents were questionable. Her mother Marilyn hung on to even the smallest leftovers—better to save than be sorry—and could never quite master the art of fully covering a container. And so, half-eaten ribs quickly dried out, exposing the gristle. Corn, set in a shallow tray of coagulated butter, became withered and pockmarked. The expiration date on the skim milk was treated only as a suggestion, which made drinking from the carton risky. Only her father's favorite, tripe, remained pristine inside its professionally Saran wrapped package; and neither Eloise nor her little brother Nathan would eat that thing no matter how much you paid them.

One day after school, Eloise and Nate climbed into the fridge looking for junk food when they discovered a beef heart in the meat drawer wrapped just like the tripe.

"This is new," said Eloise, lifting the bloody package up by its corner, the weight of the organ now pressing through the edges of its clear plastic membrane. The heart looked squishy, practically alive, and Eloise wondered exactly when it was removed from the cow's body and put into their house, because she did not remember its arrival. And where was the rest of the cow?

"Dare you to poke the artery," she teased, hoping for a reaction. Nathan screamed when he realized what she was holding, and left to grab the last fruit roll from the counter. Eloise stood for another moment, letting the cool air fill her lungs and thinking about whether or not the cow had babies. Then she remembered what was in her purple book bag—half of a Twinkie from her friend Raj, and the casting notice that Mr. Damon, the drama teacher, had posted for the whole school to see. Eloise closed the fridge and sat on the floor on the tiny entry hall, rifling through her bag. She found the carefully folded notice, two paperclips, some raisins, a gold barrette with a red flower attached to it, and finally, the Twinkie. El stuck her finger in the middle of it and licked off the frosting while reading and re-reading the notice. The paper had her name right at the top, handwritten in big loopy letters, and next to it, the word LEAD. The play was Dorothy and the Wizard of Waste, a takeoff on the classic with a focus on recycling. After school, Mr. Damon handed the paper to her personally and said "congratulations" in a way that made Eloise feel important. Out of everyone who auditioned, she had been chosen to play Dorothy. Rehearsals would start in two weeks.

Eloise polished off the Twinkie, wiped her hands on her corduroys and stood up. She placed the casting notice on the right side of the entry table. It was closest to the front door and next to the grey Japanese vase with paper flowers, where her dad always put his keys. No way to miss it. Eloise straightened the paper's edge, and went to her room until her dad came home.

On this night and every night, dinner was called for 6pm. At 5:58, the October sun streamed through the horizontal dining room window slats, exposing an ensemble of dancing dust specks that settled as Nathan and Eloise took their places around the oval oak dining table, awaiting Raymond's arrival. Eloise's heart jumped as she heard her father's key in the front door. The entry hall was visible from where she sat, and Eloise watched intently as Raymond dropped his briefcase by the door, and tossed his keys onto the table next to the casting notice. "Be right there," he said, his back turned to the family. Eloise wished she could see his eyes. Instead, she heard the crumpling of paper and a sigh. On his way to the table, Raymond dropped the notice and the gum wrappers from his pocket into the trash bin.

Eloise could taste her own disappointment but could not speak it. Still, the feeling burned the back of her throat. Raymond took his regular spot at the head, kicked his off his tasseled JC Penney loafers and waited to be served. Marilyn shuttled last minute side dishes and nearly forgotten utensils to the table until everything was finally in its place. At the center of it all, medium rare chuck eye steaks surrounded by wilted lettuce leaves, made more inviting with the addition of a couple of found radishes.

“Bon appétit!” Marilyn said, finally sitting down and then filling her family’s plates. She looked across the table at her husband for approval. Raymond’s lips curled into an appreciative half-smile as he tasted the hours his wife had spent in the kitchen. Then Marilyn let out the smallest sigh, adjusted the elastic on her floral pantsuit and began to eat.

Midway through the meal, when Raymond released a deep throated, close-mouthed belch, Eloise was overcome with nausea. Her father, an ardent carnivore, finished off every meal by picking apart a dizzying assortment of animal bones, cracking them with his teeth, and then sucking out the marrow like a too-thick milkshake through a straw. That night, sitting next to her father as he showed more enthusiasm for the protein on his plate than he ever did for her, was when 10-year-old Eloise made the decision to become a vegetarian. It wasn’t a planned rebellion, but a visceral one. Disgusted by both the meat and the eater, she stood up and gagged a little.

“Can I be excused?”

Eloise was already heading to the kitchen, dishes in hand. Her mother was absorbed in the skit Nate was performing with his broccoli-- the one where the stalks are robots that hop and speak in beeping noises. It was equal parts cute and cloying. As always, Marilyn was mesmerized.

“Clear your plate please,” her mother said, eyes glued on her youngest.

Nathan missed the burp, or he’d have echoed it with a fake one of his own and then Eloise would’ve gotten busted for laughing. Instead, she dropped the dishes into the sink, and went back to her room without anyone missing her much at all.

The next night should have been dinner as usual for the Novaks, but Eloise had other plans. “Stuffed cabbage,” her mother sing-songed from the kitchen in an attempt to whet the family’s appetite. It was 6:17pm, and Marilyn was hurrying to put the finishing touches on her Everything Salad, which was exactly what it sounded like. A third of the contents, fully dressed, had mysteriously jumped overboard onto the Formica counter, perhaps in a flavor rebellion. Eloise was lining up her Monchichi Colorforms on the mirrored closet and reciting part of Blondie’s “Rapture” when she heard her mom’s familiar call.

“Not hungryyyyy!” El sang back loudly. Being called for dinner was expected, but the rush of excitement from her own response was a surprise. It was a bold, deliberate lie and the speaking of it made her giddy. Eloise returned to the mirror, moving the Colorforms aside to reveal the flush of her cheeks, physical proof of what she was feeling inside. “Then you’re in the man from Mars, you go out at night eating cars. You eat Cadillacs, lick us too—” she rapped. What was that line again? “And you don’t stop to punk rock,” she continued, skipping over the parts that gave her trouble.

Eloise kicked up into a headstand, keeping the song going silently, picturing herself instead of Blondie as the star of the video which had just come out on MTV. After a few minutes, her mother crept up, and cocked her head sideways to get a better view of Eloise who looked surprisingly sturdy upside down. Marilyn continued staring until Eloise shifted her gaze to catch her mother looking not quite at but through her.

Eloise dismounted, ready with her excuse. “I had a big lunch,” she said to the woman

who had packed her average-sized lunch just that morning. And then as if it might somehow validate her fib, “Ask Nathan.” (Nate was in kindergarten. Eloise’s world did not even exist to him.) Didn’t matter; Marilyn wasn’t listening anyway. Her attention was back at the table where the rest of her family sat waiting. She smoothed down her daughter’s unruly curls and went back to serve dinner.

Eloise easily scored a get out of dinner free pass on the first try. But after two more days of excuses, Raymond grew impatient. “Dinner time is family time,” he declared, rising king-like from his recliner in the den. Raymond’s fast, heavy footsteps approached Eloise’s room, ready to force the issue. He had laid his hands on her in anger before. Not hard and not in the face, but enough for Eloise to know he was serious and that she was in trouble. Enough to have humiliated her in front of the neighborhood kids who would later re-enact Raymond’s rage for entertainment. Watching Fat Brooke from down the block knock screaming “You WILL listen!” in a horrible Polish accent as she stomped around in a pumpkin-colored knit turtleneck and tights pretending to be Eloise’s dad left Eloise feeling the sting of an inferno inside, with the kids’ cruel laughter only fanning the flames. She could never tell her parents about that. But skipping dinner didn’t seem like that big an offense. Just to be safe, as Raymond approached Eloise’s bedroom, she sprang to her feet and marched to her usual spot at the table like a good little soldier. Her father followed so closely behind she could feel his breath on her neck.

“There’s no place like home,” Eloise said under her breath, like a prayer, as she sat down at the table. With napkin in lap, she delivered a wan smile to her parents before picking up her spoon. A layer of brown gelatinous fat had begun to congeal on top of the sour Polish stew that sat waiting for her. Only Nathan noticed as Eloise broke the seal on her stew, trailed the thickened pieces of fat in circles, then put the empty spoon to her lips.

“Eloise poked her finger in the beef heart,” he suddenly blurted.

“Gross, no I didn’t!” she screamed, lit up by the exchange.

“Enough from you, Eloise,” Raymond grumbled. Nathan, satisfied, went back to playing with his food. Eloise paused for a moment, letting the dust settle before finding the courage to continue.

“Why do we have to have meat at every meal, anyway?” She asked.

“It reminds your dad of home, sweetheart,” Marilyn said. And then, as if that weren’t enough, “We like it.”

“More than anything else?” Eloise pressed.

The flicker in Raymond’s eyes told Eloise that maybe he understood what she was asking. Then, as he pushed his empty bowl to the middle of the table and lit up a Winston, it vanished. “Do as I say, not as I do,” Raymond said, gesturing to his cigarette and then pointing at Eloise like he had done a trillion times before. He got up from the table to finish his smoke outside in peace. The rest of the meal was eaten—and not eaten—in silence.

Over the next week, Eloise shoved animal parts to alternating sides of her plate, making it appear as though she had enjoyed her food when not a single bite was actually taken. It was a game she played alone, with no eyebrows cocked or questions asked. If Marilyn and Raymond had been paying attention, they might have worried their daughter wasn’t eating at all. But the truth was, Eloise ate all the time—just never in front of them. Her self-imposed dietary restrictions forced her underground, where she got creative with her eating habits. After school, or later in the evening when all the lights were off in the kitchen and the sound of the dishwasher drowned even her dad’s snoring out, Eloise tried her best to get her fill. She foraged through the pantry, opening and closing the thickly painted yellow door, hoping tasty options might

magically appear. When they did not, she invented recipes using some of the eccentric ingredients inside. Stale Ry-Krisp slathered with bread crumby-butter and Houston's huckleberry jam (a thank you gift from a neighbor for taking care of their blind dog) became a regular afternoon snack. Nathan's old baby biscuits, Zwiebacks, were good on their own, but better when dipped in honey and strawberry Quick. Getting excited about items among the sardine tins and leaking flour bags was rare, but not impossible. Brown sugar with a dash of applesauce, Eloise told herself, was practically a serving of fruit. The biggest prizes, however, were found in the cans. Condensed milk, anything in heavy syrup, candied yams, these rust-speckled containers were like buried treasure found only in the deepest recesses of the dark pantry. Forgotten by mother, devoured by daughter. Eloise was starving for sweetness, and pilfering off-limits items from her parents' unkempt cupboard was one way she knew to get it.

A week into Eloise's subverted meat ban, she could no longer hold her tongue. "My desk partner Raj says people in India eat with their hands—" Eloise finally said at dinner to no one in particular, trying for casual. Families were supposed to talk at the table, at least that's what they did at friend's houses and on TV. The Bradys had conversations about grades and baseball and getting along. Even the Bunkers at least antagonized each other around meals. Next door, Eloise could sometimes hear Ritchie Valens tapes playing at dinnertime, so she knew there were other options. But at the Novak house, pauses usually stretched on for days, interrupted only by "Could you please pass the milk?" Half-hearted attempts were tossed out, then abandoned. "How was your day, honey?" Marilyn would ask somebody, anybody, and Raymond's reply was a single syllable, dictating the tone for the rest of the family's responses. But now the silence was killing Eloise. There was something poisonous she needed to get out of her system. She didn't plan to be a secret vegetarian. Eloise wanted to her parents to know. Wasn't that the point? Maybe, El hoped, in the saying of it, she'd also understand why she was doing it in the first place.

"Pass the salt," Raymond said. He was so focused on the ribs on his plate that Eloise's comment presumably didn't register. She gathered her courage, and after a beat, continued. "Did you know that cows are sacred in India? Nobody eats them." The room went quiet again, but not back to the regularly scheduled silence. Marilyn tore her eyes away from Nathan long enough to register a change in the air. Eloise's heart began to pound. Raymond's eyes narrowed a bit. "Luckily," he said, "we're Jewish," and licked his fingers. Marilyn placed the saltshaker right into her husband's hand, breaking the tension with her awkwardness. And that was the end of that.

Eight days into her protest, Eloise was called to the dinner table early. Nathan was at a friend's and her parents would be going out later, so she would be eating alone. There at her spot sat a steaming Big Mac. Two all beef patties, special sauce, lettuce, cheese, and an expectant look on her father's face as he stood behind his chair, watching Eloise. Was it a peace offering, she wondered? Did he even realize that they were at war? He hadn't said much to her during the weeks after the India conversation, and this new degree of invisibility was causing her to feel numb. It was as though a scab developed and, without the pain to remind her, Eloise began questioning the existence of her original wound. But then, the Big Mac. Its thin yellow wrapping paper was undone, exposing the saucy layers of flat meat and half melty squares of cheese. Set atop a bag displaying the golden arches and placed at her spot at the table, the hamburger's presence was like a mirage in a food desert. Eloise tried to untangle her cravings from her emotions. She hadn't eaten meat in eight days, she hadn't even wanted to. But her parents didn't know any of this. Before she became a vegetarian, McDonald's was a treat. This felt like a trick.

And yet for the first time in a long time, all the attention was on her.

“Not hungry?” said Raymond pointedly as Marilyn looked quickly from father to daughter and back. He stood over Eloise, waiting for her to take a bite. She registered her mother’s nervous energy and removed her hands from the yellow wrapper she had absentmindedly started touching. Trapped.

“No,” Eloise whispered, and started to cry. If she could have swallowed the lump in her throat and eaten it for dinner, she would have. Her tears were hot and fast, an involuntary betrayal of all that she had been holding. Raymond saw her tears and immediately lost patience. “Eat!” he demanded, shoving the chair next to Eloise so hard that it shook the table, releasing a confetti of lettuce shreds to the scratched hardwood floor. But instead of forcing Eloise to comply, he went out back for a smoke.

The phone rang and Marilyn scurried to the kitchen to answer it, and Eloise was left standing alone in front of the hamburger. It didn’t matter to her parents whether she was a vegetarian or not. It only mattered that their oldest did as they said, without question or conversation.

Eloise sat down and stared ahead for a few moments. Then she took a deep breath and unwrapped the Big Mac completely. She dragged the yellow paper in a circle, so she could view the burger from all angles, finally settling on the one with the perfect triangle of cheese hanging over the side, with the wavy edge of a pickle just peeking out. Eloise cradled the burger with both hands and looked it up close. The soft sesame seed bun gleamed with grease, making it slippery to hold, easier to drop. So Eloise gripped tighter. She scanned the room, making sure she was alone, then tentatively bit into the Big Mac, tasting each ingredient separately, then together. Rapture. The tang of the pickles and sweet bite of thick Thousand Island dressing, the crunch of the lettuce shreds and the velvety texture of processed cheese that swaddled warm, welcoming charbroiled-looking patties tasted like salvation and felt like everything she ever wanted. With that realization, she devoured the Big Mac wholeheartedly. Then Eloise rose from the table, and the greasy yellow wrapper sailed to the floor.

It was quieter than usual in the backyard. The waterfall had been turned off and Raymond was standing in the recently drained fishpond, examining the broken filter up close. “I did as you said, Daddy,” Eloise said too politely, as he turned around to look at her in the doorway. She felt full and bold and tall. With Raymond’s eyes still on her, she picked up his burning cigarette from the flimsy tin ashtray, took a long drag, and headed back to her bedroom. It wasn’t a planned act of rebellion, but a spontaneous one. “Cadillacs, Lincolns too,” Eloise said out loud as she walked through the door, finally finding the words to her song.

Pens
Benjamin Selesnick

Mrs. Gardner was kneeling next to LeShawn, a 5-year old self-proclaimed master of finger painting. His fingers were coated with green and yellow paint, and he smeared these colors in large oscillating circles on a thick sheet of paper.

“What’re you drawing?” Mrs. Gardner asked.

“Snowmans.”

“*Snowmen*, LeShawn.”

Mrs. Gardner stood up and surveyed her preschool classroom. The room was her creation. The posters, paintings, and toys were hers from previous classrooms and lifetimes. The set of alphabet letters in little blocks were hers. The colored carpets that had towns designed on them, hers. The plastic fruit on her desk and the Beanie Baby collection, hers as well. If she could put her mattress in the classroom, she would spend her nights here.

On the opposite end of the room sat a boy. His name was Toby. Mrs. Gardner liked to keep tabs on him. Toby hardly socialized; instead, he would paint and pace in class, and when he was outside, he would draw pictures in the dirt. Mrs. Gardner would gently bring him back in the group when it seemed appropriate, but other times she would simply watch him as he rustled around in his own world.

Toby had a row of pens placed in front of him. He was sitting cross-legged on the ground, touching each pen in what appeared to be a very particular and precise order: he’d skip every other pen and then go back and touch the ones that he’d missed. Then he repeated the pattern with his other hand. Then he’d do it all over again until each finger had touched each pen. The process went very quickly as Mrs. Gardner watched from the middle of the classroom. She saw him go through this procedure three times, meanwhile ignoring the students at her feet. She walked over and attempted to disturb his process.

“Toby,” she said, “are you going to draw something?”

Toby shook his head and continued poking at the pens. His pokes pushed the pens out of place, for they were spaced evenly from one another, but then the pokes from his other hand would push them back into their original position.

“Is there something you want to do with the pens? Maybe we could make some shapes out of them.”

“No.” is all he said.

“Then can you tell me what you’re doing?”

Toby shook his head again and continued his poking. His brow was rumped up, his cheeks pushed upwards on his face, his dingy blonde hair dripping over his forehead and into his vision.

“Are you sure?”

He nodded his head.

“I could join you.” Mrs. Gardner said, letting the statement hang in the air like a question.

Toby stopped and looked up at Mrs. Gardner. His eyes looked glassy like the edge of a fish tank. Mrs. Gardner held his gaze for as long as he allowed.

“Just for a little bit?” she asked.

Toby picked his head up and began pointing at the pens, “You touch this one, then this one, then this one. Then you touch this last one. Then you go this one, this one, this one, and this one. Then you do it with the other hand. Then the other fingers.”

Mrs. Gardner bent down and started touching the pens the way Toby described. She got through the first row of pens before Toby jumped in, “You did it wrong! You supposed to start with the left hand. You started with the right. Undo it. Undo it and started with the left.”

Mrs. Gardner sat back on her heels, “How am I supposed to undo it?”

“I don’t know!” he yelled.

“Okay, Toby. That’s alright.” Mrs. Gardner cupped her hands over her mouth in contemplation. She removed her hands and held them above the hands, “Is there anything I can do to help?”

He let out a grunt, “Just wave your hand over the pens and ask if you can undo it.”

Mrs. Gardner nodded her head and complied. Toby watched with thin eyes. She waved her hands over them and asked, “Pens, may I take back what I did?”

She looked up at Toby for recognition to see if she’d completed the task the way he’d described, but instead of seeing a face of assertion or approval, she saw Toby’s head sunk between his shoulders. His bangs blocked her view of his face, but after waiting a few seconds, she saw a tear drip off his nose and into his lap.

“Dear,” Mrs. Gardner said, “It’s okay.” She got up and sat next to him, putting a hand on his shoulder. She looked to the teacher’s aid, Ms. Perry, who was across the room helping LeShawn put the paints away, and beckoned her to come over.

“Ask again.” Toby lamented.

Mrs. Gardner obliged, “Pens, may I please take back what I did?”

Ms. Perry looked on with confusion as Toby’s tears continued to melt off his nose like candlewax.

“Toby, can you tell Ms. Perry and I what’s wrong?”

Toby shook his head. Sitting there, he didn’t look like the four year old child that he was. He looked younger, infantile even. Like a child propped up in its crib, like a baby waiting for its mother to come home.

“Can you tell Ms. Perry?”

He shook his head.

“How about me? Can you tell me what’s wrong?”

He didn’t nod his head but he didn’t shake it either. Ms. Perry got the signal and went back over to the other side of the room to help LeShawn, who’d opened up the paints again.

“Was I able to undo it?” Mrs. Gardner asked.

“Yes,” Toby whispered, “but the pens don’t want you touching them.”

“How come?”

“They think you did enough.”

“But the pens can’t talk, sweetie. How can you know what they’re thinking?”

“They didn’t say anything,” Toby said, “That’s how you know.”

Free Delivery
Jessica Bonder

Whoever said your boy here'd never amount to anything clearly never understood the power of cheese. No such thing as justice or a free slice, y'all just keep on telling yourselves that. Keep on doubting, Thomases, as you stuff your greasy pie-holes with the Old World delishness that is classic Lenny D's. Complimentary today because I saved all y'all's asses, delivered deliverance in thirty minutes or less.

Here, take a napkin. You got something on your face.

My key to the city, no, you can't touch it.

Look, when I first took this job, it was just a paycheck. That was the attitude that I went in with. It was me working through college, me earning my credits, one pie, one address, one delivery at a time. It was me carving donuts, me cranking Death Grips, me fantasizing about MILF's opening the front door. Saying wait right there, let me get your tip.

Sad to say, shit like that never happened.

After a semester, it got predictable. The routes, the customers, most nights were the same. Moms and dads too tired to cook. Desk jockeys stuck in their cubes past 5. Blue collars at posts they couldn't leave from: dispatchers, receivers, gas station attendants. And undergrads at the very same college I attended, up late studying, in their dorms passing bongos. Dorms and bongos I'd never see the likes of, the "college experience" I couldn't afford.

I commuted to campus. I lived in my uncle's basement. I felt like a visitor in my own life. My moms had her own problems that she was dealing with. My father I wouldn't know if he punched me in the face.

This one night, though, this one night was different. Lenny D himself was on the premises. Tossing pies in the back, keeping tabs on his dough. Lenny hired me, God knows why, said I reminded him of him when he was my age. He slid me a box, slid it real slow, said this one, Miles, deliver this one first. I looked at the address. I made a face. A face like no way, you have got to be kidding. No way am I driving out to the Druthers. Shit's crazy out there, I could get shot.

Lenny made a face that was hardcore Lenny. A face that meant do it or you're out a fucking job.

So I took the box, stacked it backseat with the others, the priority pie on top, the first one to go.

The Druthers, as it's called, starts at 40th street, at the outer edge of campus, the no-fly zone. During student orientation, we all got a map, a map of the campus and that's where it ended. What's past 40th? some girl asked, some girl obviously not from around here. The head of campus security, some rent-a-cop, said just don't. Just don't go there.

Same girl, a week later, same girl goes missing. All they find is her designer purse. Eviscerated on the sidewalk, emptied of Daddy's money, a pink Kate Spade like a sliced-open organ. School holds a vigil on 39th street, passes around candles, just one block short. Just one block short of doing anything about it.

I know because I walked right through it.

Balled fists in my pockets, hoodie zipped up, I shook my head no, I didn't want a taper. I didn't see the point—how was this one special? Girls kept going missing. There would be more vigils.

A pit bull was snarling before I even parked the beater. It was chained to a chain that was hitched to a post, that impaled the yard, that stabbed it. I said nice doggy, tossed it a garlic knot,

my one trick, kept them in my pouch; the pit pounced like a fiend on the twisted appetizer. The building was a corpse, its windows X'ed eyes, the pavestones of its walkway like cracked shoulder blades. The moon was street smart, knew better than to shine.

That's the Druthers pretty much: a cement block hell.

I knocked on the door, the doorbell was broken, dangling like a loose tooth, wire roots exposed. Shoddy stairs crumbled beneath my Converse, white rubber toes like on the edge of a cliff. A steady thumping, *thump-thumping*, the vibration of bass, what I hoped was music, was a party, inside. A party I could handle, I did those all the time. Did parties all the time I wasn't invited to.

A black slot slid open. A gun barrel poked out. It politely requested, Password, bitch.

It was not the first time I had seen a gun. My uncle had one, had more than one. It was not the first time a gun had pointed at my face. My uncle, with me, liked to play little games.

I said, Uh, pizza? And the slot slid closed. And the door swung open. And a wad gagged my mouth. With a huge hand over it, cleaved to an arm, a muscley noose cinching my neck.

I struggled hard as I was dragged inside, struggled hard to ensure that the box stayed straight. This fucker, I was guessing, would not be all too sympathetic, would not take too kindly to his mozz stuck to the lid. Dude slams me in a chair, the metal folding kind, with the pizza on my lap, says you wait here. Don't move, understand, or you're dead, kid. Dude and his glock disappear down the hall.

I guessed he was going to go get money. It's what everybody did. Nobody was ever ready.

The hall that I was in, it was more a holding pen. A smokey mass of shadows, of lined-up faceless men. They were waiting for something. They shuffled heavy feet. They seemed to know exactly what they were waiting for.

Somewhere a girl screamed. I swore I heard a girl. Layers through layers, walls through walls. There it was again. It was not the same. It was different, another.

It was more than one girl.

So this was it, I thought. This had to be it. Where they were keeping them, the gone-missing girls. Doing to them—what? My mind went there. Went there so fast I disgusted myself.

I had to do something. But what could I do? I was a kid delivering pizza. That's all I was.

The horde of men around me, I couldn't see past them. They were a solid block of crime that I'd never push through. The dude with the gun, no idea where he went. Could be coming back to pay me, or to kill me, any time. There were girls here, though, and bad things were happening, they were possibly the missing, that much I knew. I had the address, written right here on the box. In Lenny's chicken scratch, what I'd learned to decipher.

It occurred to me, then, how stupid this was.

An old Batman episode, was what this was like, me Adam West left alone to escape. Frank Gorshin riddling out for some reason, Cesar Romero vamoosing at the key moment. My whole life I'd been lied to. Batman *was* real.

Criminals were as dumb as the ones on TV.

I darted out the door, box over my head, pit snapping at my heels, the hot reek of garlic breath. The police station, the nearest, I knew exactly where it was. It was muscle memory, stored in my bones. Past 40th street is where my moms grew up. Past 40th street is where I grew up, too. Past 40th street is why I was going to college.

It was not a place I wanted to go back.

At a red light in the beater, breaking a key delivery rule, I opened up the box, just to see what kind. What kind of pizza did evil-doers eat? Bet it's something nasty, like anchovy Jell-o Spam.

Turns out it's not a pie. It's not a pie at all. I thought the box felt light. I was not wrong.

It's a note from my boss, Sharpied on a receipt, totalled with the words:

I BELIEVE IN YOU.

Hi, Grandma
Bill Pieper

Yeah, that one. Nevada plates and looked enough like the piece-of-shit Ford Focus Clay was driving. Early March and weather like this, there would always be folks overnight at Sugar Bowl, skiers who could afford the tariff for a cabin upslope, figuring their vehicles were safe in the lot. Years ago, when he first ran away from home, Clay had worked here in the lift house, so he knew the setup, but a little luck didn't hurt.

In the area closest to him, the yellow-orange overhead light was even halfway blown. Sunday, 4am, his phone said, and he'd already timed two rounds of the security guard's departing taillights. Bastard had to spread his badge into the overflow lots too.

With a maybe twelve-minute window, Clay scrambled from the crusted snow mound he'd hidden behind, ran crouching into the shadowed lot and dropped to his knees at the target car's rear bumper. It was fucking freezing. Hard to work his fingers on the screwdriver and keep hold of the retaining screws through these damn gloves. A simple plan, though, and pretty ingenious if you asked him.

Fumbling in the dim light, surrounded by eight-foot piles of dirty snow left wherever the plows had dropped them, he stripped off the rear and front plates and replaced them with the set he'd just removed from Slade's Focus. He put the stolen ones in his coat pocket, crabbed along on his butt to a different row and stripped the plates off a California SUV. Those also went in his pocket. Then he hot-footed behind the piled snow again and back to Slade's car in the lee of a maintenance barn holding heaps of sand and rock-salt.

Minutes later, new plates installed, he rolled the grade west from the barn with his lights and engine off. In this whole stretch, the old highway cut a narrow trench between walls of snow and Clay was the only moving object. The sky looked like a puddle of tar streaked with sugar sparkles. Well behind him, as the trench curved toward where it rejoined the interstate at Soda Springs, what he guessed were the security patrol's returning headlights glimmered briefly in his mirror and were gone. Clay felt himself smile and let out a long breath. See, just like he'd thought. Simple.

He started the engine, put on his own lights and picked up speed. The California plates were under the backseat mat and would go into the first sizable river or lake he saw, weighted to sink. Might be weeks, months or a year before the Nevada asshole Clay had just stiffed realized that Slade's old plates weren't his. Meanwhile, the cops would be looking for the California ones. There were so many damn cameras out there nowadays checking cars you couldn't be sure of blending in. You had to work it so you would.

On the pre-dawn interstate, mostly trucks grinding down to Sacramento. Clay lined up between a couple of them in the right lane and maxed the heater. Anything to keep the drafty, salvage-title crate warm and at the limit as the occasional other car sailed by. He saw a few CHIPS staked out too, but no real worries. It was like his mom sang when he was little: over the hill and through the woods to grandma's house we go. But Clay's grandma was dead. This would be the grandma of Ricky, his ex-cellie, a woman Clay didn't even know.

As he reached Auburn, 100 miles now from Reno, the rising sun threw indirect light over the ridgeline behind him and onto the bathtub of the central valley, capped with a layer of fog, like the dry-ice vapor casino magicians used for stunts. Everything was blanked out except the tops of the coast range far to the west. On the downgrade, just before he plunged into it, spears of sunlight turned the billowing surface from gray to an iridescent charcoal purple. Seconds later,

bathed in leaden mist, he could barely see the road and barely trace the reflectors on a big-rig twenty-five feet ahead.

The worst of it, he passed through in a minute or so, now lumbering along below the cap in a generalized gray-beige, still lock-step with his guiding trucker. He'd seen this winter fog before, and the *Roseville 12* sign that went by his windshield punched some mental buttons. Roseville's where his real grandma had lived, in a little house by the tracks when his grandpa worked for the railroad. Everyone else, teachers, his big sister, a lot of his classmates and, eventually, both his parents thought he was stupid and a loser. Only grandma, his mom's mom, could sense who he really was. Maybe Ricky's would be like that.

Clay grew up in Herlong, CA, a scabby town in the alkali flats north of Reno on 395 halfway to Susanville. His dad worked for the army depot there, and his mom, who liked to gamble, wasn't around much as he got older. About the only good thing he could remember except for grandma was plunking bears at the dump in Otis Canyon. Summer evenings they'd take their .22s and steady against the roofs or hoods of their cars and go for the bears' butts. How a puff of dust or whatever would come up off the fur on a direct hit and how the damn things would jump and yell and scurry away like clowns in a cartoon. The cubs really carried on when you got one and their mamas just flipped out. Funny as hell.

But the fog thickened again big-time when he left the freeway in Sacramento, close to where the two rivers came together, and his skipping wiper blades weren't worth a shit. What he remembered from Rickey back in their cell was the name Nelda Trigg and an address in a trailer park called Riverdell, which you came at from the stub-end of a Del Paso Boulevard he hadn't yet found. Oh, and that she was blind.

Ricky and Clay had been thrown together at High Desert Prison, before Clay got rotated into Susanville pre-release. Ricky would be locked up a long while yet, but he'd had this fantasy of living with his grandma when he got out and would write her letters about it almost every month. Some old biddy from a neighboring trailer would read the letters to Nelda and transcribe her replies on stationery printed with sunflowers at the sides and top.

Clay's partner in Reno, Slade, was a bright light compared to Ricky, and had come up in the Nevada prison system, starting with juvy. Last fall, when Clay finished his sentence for car theft and for dabbing waxed meth—he liked the rush of crystal but hated needles—he drifted into Reno and met Slade at this hell-hole bar called The Bottom, off of 4th Street by the tracks near Sparks. Next thing, they were sharing an apartment and in business together, robbing pills from drug stores—oxy, hydro, norco, whatever.

Soft-target independents at first, but as they got good at it, Rite Aids, CVSs and the big boys. Clay liked surprise hits, jumping the counter when the stores weren't busy. Slade liked hiding in a rest room or closet, terrorizing the janitor if there was one, and popping open the flimsy cabinets with a Superbar or Sawsall. A hoodie and face makeup defeated the security cameras, and whichever of them went inside, the other stood watch and drove.

As for customers, no problem: the parking lot at The Bottom, under the big I-80/580 junction or anywhere along the north side of the river channel. And a lot of times you'd be surprised who they were. Business types, housewives who'd fuck you for a discount supply, jocks from the college. You just had to not be conspicuous. Night was your friend, and forget the southeast, along Neil Street, where there was competition and gangs to worry about. For three or four months, they did great, but the stores got smarter, so Clay put his creativity to work. That hospice hit in Truckee had been a real score, with plans for more like it, pain clinics and doctors' offices, until Slade suddenly disappeared yesterday.

Without saying a word, and leaving his car behind and his wallet, along with most of their inventory and the last of their reserve cash. Taking just the pistol and his phone, he'd apparently gone to sell outside The Bottom per usual, but nobody there remembered seeing him. Then the fact of it hit: busted. Which meant Clay hung by a string. So bang, like that, grab the car, load it with merchandise and spare clothes, destroy his burner phone, buy a new one and get out of town. Back to California and a perfect place to lay low, with a quick pass through Sugar Bowl on the way.

Finally, he found fucking Riverdell in the fog, a peeling sign and a long, rutted driveway to an apron of packed gravel upstream on the Sacramento from where the American tied in. Except the place was a ghost town. Twenty-five or thirty oil-stained concrete pads, only six of them with trailers, and two of those were weed-choked and boarded up.

Too early for Nelda to be awake, by the look of things, so he parked outside a mangled gate that must not've been closed for years, pulled the California plates from under the mat and walked past the coaches to a muddy beach at the water's edge. No rocks in sight, but he did find a bent hunk of rebar with rusty bailing wire attached, which was better yet. One step forward, an underhand, skimming toss followed by a flat sploosh out in the current, and the plates were gone. Wouldn't be long before he'd sink Slade's car somewhere too.

Clay sat on the trunk of a downed cottonwood tree and waited. This fog here was really something. The sun was up, he'd seen it, yet there wasn't even a bright spot in the sky to say which way was east. But a light came on at Nelda's and he started thinking about hot coffee and some kind of breakfast. He waited a bit more, then walked to the door and knocked. Inside came a shuffling sound and a wavering voice through the door. "Who is it, please?"

"Hi, Grandma," Clay called. "It's me, Ricky." But wait a minute. Why would a blind woman need the lights on?

* * *

Nelda couldn't remember exactly what she'd said when he first arrived. Something like "Oh, Ricky, I knew you'd come," which wasn't really true. She'd thought his letters from prison were daydreams, a way he'd found to make his life there easier. She hadn't seen him since before he was a teenager. Why would he suddenly want to be with her? She barely had a roof over her head, and not much to offer anyone else. She'd even told him that when she started writing back. But she always wrote back. God bless Bonnie for helping.

He was a vigorous young man too, from the sound of his footsteps, and probably six feet tall. The macular degeneration she had still left a sense of dimension. With enough light, she could see shadowy shapes, which kept her from bumping into absolutely everything. It had come on gradually over the years, so she'd been able to adjust. And being blind wasn't too bad, actually. Not as bad as she'd feared. She had her daily routine and her happy memories of how Riverdell used to be, and Bonnie knew just what groceries to shop for.

Muscular denigration was what Ricky called it since he got here, no matter how she corrected him, and now she just thought it was funny. He could be sweet, though, would run errands, took her to the market every week, and could cook a bit from working in restaurant kitchens, but he was moody and spent a lot of time in the spare room with the door closed. Still, the pancakes he made that first morning were a wonder and he repeated them every so often, even if he didn't care for the Folger's instant coffee she bought.

How any of this fit with the blocky, tow-headed little boy she remembered from when her daughter Anne brought him to visit from Redding, she didn't know. He'd been a hellion in high

school and was away in the Army when his mother died of breast cancer. Nelda's son-in-law had remarried and moved to Phoenix, leaving poor Ricky to land in prison. He'd sworn in his letters he wasn't guilty, that he'd been set up and had no idea how the stolen guns and drugs got in his car. At least he was out now and, criminal or not, he did have her. What was left of her. And of course she felt safer with someone here.

If her husband Earl were alive, maybe the two of them could have bolstered Ricky into a more of a fresh start. Not many neighbors around anymore to ask for ideas either, what with Riverdell being sold out from under them. If a unit fell vacant, it had to be hauled away or boarded up until no one was left, because some new office complex or hotel was waiting to be built. This engineer—female, if you can imagine—from the city came by with plans to show people, but she, Nelda, couldn't see them anyway.

Early on she had persuaded Ricky to sit on the floor in front of the couch so she could reach over his shoulders and run her fingers down his head and face and neck. She hadn't been blind all that long and never tried learning Braille, but this was a way to see him. And life makes such changes. He was rangy now, not blocky, with thin lips and short brushy hair he said he was growing out from what the prison made him wear. Same with the beard she felt coming in at his chin and neck. But under one eye her fingertips found what he said was theatrical makeup, heavy enough to cover a tattoo he wished he'd never gotten.

"That the only one?" she said.

"Yes, ma'am," he answered, sweet as you please, though he seemed to look down at his arms as he said it.

"Good," she told him. "I hear men come out of prison now covered with them and wonder why they can't find jobs. Maybe that's why they let you out early."

He stood up then and made them hash and eggs for dinner with a nice salad, but later they had another argument about the radio. Her TV didn't work, and why fix it? What she liked was classical music to keep her company and there were two good stations, but he only wanted Rush Limbaugh and those blowhards, always shouting and belittling people.

She also asked him last week about her medicine closet, that some bottles seemed to be moved and possibly missing. He denied any knowledge of it and did help straighten things out. Her own fumble fingers could've been the cause, she realized, but how was she supposed to manage if she took the wrong pills because current prescriptions got mixed with outdated ones from her dentist and her gall bladder surgery?

Lately the situation was better, though. He'd gotten a job at a tire shop over in Woodland and went there most days or sometimes, evenings. He was saving money, he said, to get an apartment nearby so he could still check in on her. Of course, that would take a while. He also seemed less moody the last day or so, but less alert, probably because wrestling those tires, some of them from big tractor-trailers, he said, left him exhausted.

It was past dinnertime now and he was due back, so she'd saved him a nice serving of weenies and beans. Steady rain had fallen all afternoon, a late-season storm according to the radio, and at this hour it would be dark, so she hoped he drove safely. She assumed the noise at the door was him, in fact, but, no, it was Bonnie in her crackling plastic raincoat carrying what her agitated voice said was a letter mis-delivered to her box. A letter for Nelda.

* * *

Clay jam-shifted the Focus from reverse into drive and gunned it down the alley behind Big W Tires. Fucking place! None of this was worth a shit. Yeah, he'd stiffed the Reno cops. For what? After a month-and-a-half, the old bitch about drove him crazy, he had to kiss up to her all the time, and at work, nothing but Mexicans. Bastards, probably illegal, worked like dogs, slept three to a room and sent their money south, or else had a *mamacita* and kids in some little shack on the back roads. Either way, they didn't use and were no market for his kind of injectables and pills.

Worse yet, the Woodland streets were controlled by Salvadorans, who'd kill anyone freelancing and disappear the bodies. So there Clay was, sitting on a stash of hard-earned product, short of money, nowhere to turn, and his pay at Big W sucked. What he needed was another Slade, Sacramento style. He missed that fucker bad. Fearless, had known Reno like the back of his hand, and to top it off, trustworthy. Without him, Clay was scared.

And then these ratty wipers in the goddamn rain. Hard enough to see the road anyway, but one blade was scraping now, as much metal on the glass as rubber, and the other one left opaque streaks, back and forth. Besides, other than headlight beams, this west-side River Road was unlit. Hardly anybody used it, most took I-5 past the airport, but the CHIPs hung out along there. So Clay found a different route, winding and slow, levee on one side and swamps and sloughs on the other, down to the I Street Bridge.

In prison, Clay had quit dabbing. Not just that smoking crystal was tough to do in there, he'd never wanted to tweak out anyway, and plenty of pills or other shit were available. But the risk of getting caught and what you'd owe the kinds of guys who ran that trade weren't worth it. And in Reno, selling, he looked down on the buyers. Not using let him feel superior for a change, like he really was somebody. Slade had popped a dose off and on, but not Clay.

The last few days, though, just to deal with Nelda and drag his ass around that noisy shit-hole of hydraulic jacks, grease, torque wrenches and the stink of exhaust and that rubberized plastic they made tires of now, he'd begun sampling from his stash. One pill, mid-morning, and the 20mg oxys really were good. Mellow, as if you could roll with anything.

Like the lug bolt that had sheared off on him this afternoon, on a big-rig too, with the driver cussing in his ear about the miles the guy still had to rack up before being in SoCal tomorrow. Normally Clay would have decked the asshole. Instead he just stuck his head in a propped up tire casing damn near shoulder high, never mind the stink, and shut the guy out till one of the mechanics could take over. The delay even meant he had to work late.

Before lunch he'd emptied and discarded a bottle he pinched from Nelda—what the hell, ripe for the taking—but now that he got the idea, he slowed down and reached in his pocket. Just in case, he'd also brought the last of the unopened plastic pop-tops he'd scored from that hospice. Time for a fresh oxy to ease his evening through whatever dear grandma would be fawning on him about. He chewed down hard on it too, the rush would be worth the piss-bitter taste, because the main thing ahead of him later was sacking out.

Not knowing the area and not fully trusting the fake DL that he'd snagged from Slade's wallet before he tossed it—the photo sort of looked right, but not exactly—Clay couldn't risk prowling the bars to find a local version of The Bottom till he bought a new car on Craig's List. But that would take money he still didn't have.

Through puddles that were more like ponds, Clay splashed along the driveway into Riverdell. The rain had let up but fog was already building. And there was Nelda's isolated double-wide with its scatter of neighbors, nosey old Bonnie's the closest. First thing Clay did when he got back at night was check the outside mailbox to intercept new letters from Ricky.

He'd insisted on bringing in the mail and reading it to her. "Let's give poor Bonnie a break while I'm here," was what he said, but Nelda even wanted to hear the fucking junk ads, every damn word. Nothing, so far, from Ricky, but there always could be.

And a strange-ass thing as he mounted the bowed wooden steps, today's mail in hand: the lights were off, inside and out, like no one was expecting him. Also strange, the deadbolt was set, which she knew he didn't have a key for. He thumbed the doorbell, heard its donking through the door. "Go away!" shouted a voice inside, not Nelda's, but Bonnie's. "You've caused harm enough!"

"Grandma, let me in. It's Ricky," he called.

"You're no Ricky!" came Nelda's voice, part outrage, part grief.

"We already called 911," Bonnie put in.

"Come on, I need my stuff," Clay pleaded, shocked. How could they know? "Let me in!" The mail dropped from his hand, two envelopes and a flier fluttering down onto the mud.

"Not on your life!" Bonnie said.

"Leave now and don't come back!" Nelda added, voice louder than he'd ever heard it.

With the second oxy kicking in big, Clay should be chilling, had almost looked forward to classical music at dinner. But instead, an adrenaline shot of anger. That fucking Bonnie! She'd butted in and called the prison or some damn thing. He thought of the gas can in the Focus. Yeah, serve them right. Torch the place and both old bitches with it. If he was going down, they would too.

He went to the car, raised the trunk lid and grabbed the can by its handle. Could smell the thing, in fact. But then he heard a wailing siren, not so distant and getting closer. Fuck! Better haul. Stumbling forward in the dark, he cranked up the Focus, heading it back out the driveway with the lights off. Again, fuck! Here came the siren, louder. This would be tight.

As he reached the paved road, flashing red lights shone through the trees and Clay about shit his pants. But it was a fire truck that roared on by. Panting with relief, he faced a new problem. Where would *he* go? Six blocks north, following the truck, was a funky strip mall with the Grocery Outlet where he'd taken Nelda to shop and the cheapo Qwik Fill station he liked. Maybe he could park round back with the homeless guys and their shopping carts and just nod off. This new bottle had real kick. In the sharp let-down from these last minutes of anger and fear, even more so.

No. Too risky. The cops were aggressive lately in rousting the homeless, so he turned south toward downtown instead and suddenly knew a perfect spot. At the overpass, as he merged into the inbound lanes, a rapidly moving police cruiser tore by in the other direction, probably headed for Riverdell. OK, west on I Street, back across the Sacramento and up the River Road. Same route he drove to work. Fighting to stay awake he slowed, then sped up in the gathering fog, wet enough that he still needed those crappy, scraping wipers. A couple of other cars slid by like glow-eyed ghosts and finally, he saw what he was looking for: an unmarked turnoff into the sprawling bird refuge, across a slough on some kind of island.

The dirt access track ran narrow through the tule reeds, no pull-offs and too visible from the road for parking, but beyond a bridge that crossed the slough he could see dark, spindly trees. The bridge, of old sagging wooden planks, had a sign on two boards making an X to block the entrance: *Closed. Danger. Keep Out.* Couldn't be better, he thought. No one, but no one, would find him over there. Beat-down stoned, he dragged himself from the car, moved the boards aside, then eased his front wheels out onto the structure. It sagged a bit lower but held, so he pulled all the way on and crept ahead.

The water looked deep, he didn't know how deep, but he'd noticed this place going by as a possible for dumping Slade's car when the time came. Less than ten feet from the opposite side, he heard a loud crunching, cracking sound behind him and the car lurched, tipped to the left and lost traction. Even with Clay goosing the throttle, it slid backward down the planks into the slough. The engine quit, the wipers and lights went out and water blacker than night rose quickly on his window and on the windshield as the full weight of the engine came off the last planks and took the Focus deeper, side first, at a forty-five degree angle.

Water so cold it shouldn't have been liquid was already at Clay's knees, with more of it gushing in through the heater and defroster vents. Screaming, incoherent, he grabbed wildly for the seatbelt release, but it was layered under submerged food wrappers, slurpee cups and a hooded sweatshirt that had slid over from the other seat and tangled there. He had to get out, had to crawl up to the passenger window, but his hands had no strength and his legs were numb. He lunged and stretched his body upward, screaming and screaming until the water was at his chin, then his lips, then his nostrils.

Light Changes
Carl Fuerst

Brittany woke to the shrill squeals of her two young daughters arguing outside her bedroom door, which was strange because Brittany did not remember ever being pregnant, let alone giving birth.

She rolled onto her stomach. She pushed her face into a pillow. She didn't recognize the smell of the sheets, nor the room's grey walls, nor the dusty best seller next to the empty phone charger on the nightstand. She was not hungover, nor did she crave a cigarette, nor had she fallen asleep on top of a pile of coats in someone's absent roommates' bedroom.

She left the bedroom. She caressed two toddler-aged heads, unthinkingly, as one might dunk fingertips in holy water while hurrying into church. She walked down the hall and into the bathroom, where she regarded herself in the mirror and instantly understood the problem: her wings were gone.

This was not the molting that she occasionally endured during her teenage years—those unpredictable seasons when iridescent scales sloughed off her body, exposing fragile arcs of naked scaffolding, like branches stripped of leaves, or like the antlers of a deer.

This was more complete than that. Only small constellations of itchy white bumps marked where her wing-bones once pushed through the skin.

It seemed like only hours ago when she'd soared through boundless, moon-streaked nights in the unchallenging company of friends whose middle names she'd never learned, exploring endless, vacant, exquisite cartographies. But here she was, grounded, and with teeth more suited for opening packets of fruit snacks than tearing flesh from bone, and with skin like a deflated balloon, and with limbs that surged with strength she'd never known. Her eyes were brilliant, focused, and clear.

Small, probing fingers jutted through the gap between the carpet and the bathroom door.

Later that morning, she sat at a table with her two daughters plus a thumb-shaped man slumping into the fourth decade of his life. His forearms were hairy bowling pins. His method of chewing waffles produced the sound of ripe fruit being smashed under the soles of wet and heavy boots.

Brittany was worried for these people. She knew them better than she knew herself, and they were strangers. She felt trapped by their stares. She missed them even while they sat with her at the table.

At work that day, she slinked into her cubicle, afraid that her co-workers would notice the sudden change and force her into prying conversations. But as the day wore on, the only difference she detected was that the worries and fears and preoccupations of her colleagues that she once found as inscrutable and distant as black holes had now become her own.

That evening she stood on the sidewalk in front of the house. A storm battered chain link fence. A trampled, frost-damaged lawn. A derelict jack-o-lantern rotting in the untended garden.

The descending night turned the windows into bright cards scattered across a table. Into sheets of translucent fabric illuminated from behind. In the back of her mind she clung to a brilliant, shining glimpse at a vast sea.

The air was crisp and new-smelling, and clouds hurried past the moon. The sky pulled at her. She felt an itching in her back, where her wings used to be.

The First One is Never the Last
Andrew Yusi

Jimmy sits in the back of an eighteen-wheeler and grips the jerry-rigged seat that is welded to the floor. The bed of the truck shakes as he bumps shoulders with the men that sit next to him. Metal clangs and sounds from the engine fill the awkward silence in the tiny space these thirty men occupy. He looks at all the faces in the back of the truck. Each man does something different to pass the time and calm the nerves. One taps his nails against the metal chair he sits on. Another closes his eyes and prays. The truck comes to a stop. Jimmy turns to the man to his right.

“Are we here?” Jimmy asks.

The man puts on his gloves but ignores Jimmy’s question.

“He doesn’t talk to anyone before a job,” the man to his left says. He takes off his glove and puts it in front of Jimmy. “Daryl.”

He shakes his hand. “Jimmy.”

“Lemme ask you something, Jimmy,” Daryl puts his glove back on. “Jimmy your real name?”

“Yeah.”

“Don’t trust any of these fools with your real name. Not even me.”

Jimmy nods.

“And no, we’re not there yet. You’ll know when we’re there,” Daryl says.

The truck begins to move again as all the men shift in their seats from the momentum.

“I’m taking you’ve done this before?” Jimmy asks.

Daryl chuckles. “Once or twice.”

“This is my first time.”

Daryl looks down at Jimmy’s feet which repeatedly taps on the wood paneled truck bed. “Couldn’t even tell, Jimmy.”

“I’m just doing this one though. I need the cash.”

“That’s funny.”

“What?”

“That’s exactly what I said on my first job.”

“I’m serious, I’m not built for this kind of stuff.”

“You got on this truck tonight, didn’t ya?”

“Yeah, so?”

“So, you are built for this kind of stuff. You just don’t know it yet.”

Jimmy nods but continues to tap his foot.

“You can always bail if you’re too nervous,” Daryl says.

Jimmy stops tapping his foot and looks Daryl in the eyes.

“Once we stop and everyone runs out, all you have to do is run out the gate.”

“They’ll kill me,” Jimmy says.

“How are they gonna find you? It’s not like anyone here knows your real name.”

Jimmy breaks eye contact and continues to tap his heel against the floor. The engine revs as everyone grips their seats. The intense shaking of the truck bed causes Jimmy to firmly plant his feet on the floor so he doesn’t slide out of his seat.

Daryl smiles. “We’re here.”

The eighteen-wheeler slams through a metal fence and sounds an alarm. As the truck comes to a halt, the two men closest to the back doors shove them open and jump out onto the pavement. Jimmy stands up with the rest of the men as they file out the back of the truck. Jimmy jumps down as men run past him, shoving and bumping him as they run into the lot.

Jimmy freezes and stares at the open spot the fence used to occupy. He begins walking towards it. He stands on the beaten-up fence that lays on the ground and puts his hand on the outer wall of the compound. He stares out into the street as the metal fence clangs from his tapping foot. He looks back at the lot, then the street, then the lot again. The metal banging stops as Jimmy forms fists in his hands and runs back into the compound.

The car lot is littered with luxury vehicles of all kinds: SUV's, convertibles, sedans, sports cars. Jimmy jogs down the rows of cars and looks for the one he was assigned to.

"Black two-door convertible, black two-door convertible," Jimmy mutters to himself. A car engine starts two rows over from him and pulls away. It peels out of the broken gated entrance. Jimmy looks back to his row and finds his car. He gets out his lock pick but freezes.

"Oi," Daryl yells from a couple rows over. He makes a glove motion with his hand.

Jimmy puts on his gloves and starts picking the lock. His shaking hands make it difficult but he manages to get it open. As he does this, more and more cars start their engines and pull out of the lot. Jimmy breaks open the plastic cover on the steering column and pulls out the wires. He strips a red and a green wire, exposing their innards. He touches the two wires together as it creates sparks. He repeats this several times but does not get his car to start. He looks up to see Daryl drive away in his car. He hears sirens in the distance. He gets out of his car and looks right at the front gate. He takes a step forward but stops himself. Jimmy sits back down in his car, takes a deep breath, and sparks the two wires again. The engine revs as the dash lights of the car illuminate his face.

"Woo!" Jimmy closes the door and peels out of the car lot. As he drives away he looks in his rear-view mirror to see red and blue lights break over the hill and turn into the lot. He turns on the radio and taps his foot to the funky beat as a smile overtakes his face. He parks the stolen car at the rendezvous spot. He gets out and dials his boss on his cell phone. "Car 17 is parked. When's the next one?"

Freed from Analysis
Kim Farleigh

The track the hikers were on plummeted to a rocky cove. Sheep bells clanged with escaping hooves, the hikers gripping ropes, the ropes connected to trees, each step perilous, a bare track slippery from hammering feet.

Relief glittered like the sea that faced them when they reached the shore. They had reached that shore along a path that cut across steep inclines, the track eventually falling down to where marine-green-edged turquoise met Turkey from where thousands of rubber boats had come with escapees from war, robbery and murder.

Scores of boats littered the cove.

Claudio distributed knives. The heavy boat rubber hissed when slashed along its seams. Sweat stung their eyes. The sun baked the cove's uneven rocks. The boats were becoming bundled piles of rubber.

Life-vests straps and prime rubber were being collected by Maria to make backpacks.

"We can catch the boats back today," she said, during a break.

Boats were coming to collect the rubber. Her eyes glowed with good news. Hiking back to their camp during the day's hottest part took an hour and a half.

"You okay?" Maria asked Laura.

Laura's cheeks resembled flames, her eyes pained.

"I just need to rest," Laura said.

She was in the shade under the steep incline that rose above them.

"Keep sipping water," Maria said. "But only in small amounts."

"I've got plenty," Claudio said. "So don't worry."

"Me, too," Liz said.

"Laura, stay there," Maria said.

Laura tried rising, Claudio saying: "Don't move."

"Believe me," David said, "it could happen to anyone. Don't move."

Shame tightened Laura's mouth. She wasn't used to sustained heat.

"You're courageous for getting here in the condition you're in," David said.

"Thanks, David," she said, brushing his arm with her fingertips.

Thousands of refugees had paid a thousand euros a head to reach those shores that in rough weather had caused several deaths, the rocks ice-slippery, most refugees non-swimmers. One slip on the rocks and under you go, misery mixing with joy and relief on those rocky shores.

Liz removed ropes from the iron rings on the boats' bows, the ropes used to pull the vessels from the water. She tied up the bundled, cut-up rubber with the rope, leaving the bundles for the approaching boats. This meant bending, crouching, and rising; then struggling over uneven granite with heavy loads.

"Jesus!" she gasped.

A back twinge knifed her as she turned to step on a flatter surface to avoid falling on rocks that had regularly cut and bruised the beach cleaners.

She leant back, grimacing.

"What's up?" Maria asked.

Maria was nearby, holding a life vest.

"My back," Liz said. "I twisted quickly, trying to stop falling."

Ultraviolet struck her raised face, her lips plastering her teeth.

"Damn it!" she gasped.

David and Claudio held her arms, lowering her against the cliff's base, Liz saying: "Friggin' stupid!"

"Relax," David said. "The boats are coming."

A fishing boat, dragging a dinghy, was approaching, volunteers aboard, Gema in the dinghy, the fishing boat owned by a local fisherman.

David entered the water, his head bust-like on the sea's glassy mantelpiece. Everyone on board waved with the felicitous freedom that signals great adventures, sunlight shattering into silver flints when hitting the sea, the boats tiny under a dome of blue.

Soon the beach cleaners would be heaving the rubber onto the boats, the fishing boat's engine groaning.

Gema waved and yelled: "Ahoy there."

She had lied to Maria about the local refugee camp's administration not wanting a backpack-making project in the refugee camp. Projects increased Gema's responsibilities. Behind "Gema's pretentious sweetness lies self-deception" Maria once told Claudio, who had laughed at this bold accuracy.

Gema's religious mother bragged about funding the NGO on the NGO's web site.

"Beautiful people, I love you all," Gema often said in her speeches to the volunteers about developments in the refugee camp.

The silence produced by this resembled ice set to crack.

"I love you all, even though I haven't spoken to you all. But you're here, so you must be beautiful."

"She and her mother," Maria had told Claudio, "are chasing reunification in heaven after lives of glorious sacrifice."

The sea's surface, glistening above transparency, reminded Maria of Gema.

The fishing boat eased around slowly so that the dinghy faced the shore. Through the water, pebbles of different hues could be seen on the bottom: black, white, orange, green and rusty brown, like people in a crowd, similar with different shades, their beauty hiding their slipperiness.

Volunteers wearing gloves leapt from the fishing boat to pull the dinghy onto the beach's granite rocks. The small boulders created an uneven surface, like natural rubble. Along the shore rose piles of rubber. The contrast between the rocks' light tone and the darkness of the rubber sprung to Maria's mind when seeing Gema smiling, a smile Maria thought "as surface as the glimmering on the transparent sea."

When Gema saw Liz sitting at the base of the steep slope that rose above the beach, she clambered over the rocks to show concern. Gema's light-brown hair was immaculately kept; no one ever saw her sweat. Sheep croaking came from an olive grove at the top of the slope, Maria whispering to Claudio: "Showing concern helps you avoid work while magnifying self-perception."

Claudio covered his grin with a black glove. He and Maria were helping to get the rubber onto the boats. One of the volunteers was a tall, blonde Englishman called Orlando. Orlando's shins were covered by scabs from falls onto the slippery rocks. His dour attitude contrasted with Gema's syrupy brightness.

"What's up?" Gema asked Liz.

Gema's brown eyes shivered with dramatic sensitivity.

"Just resting my back," Liz replied. "A slight twinge."

The "slight twinge" meant she would have to walk slowly to return to camp.

"Can you walk okay?" Gema asked.

"Yes," Liz replied.

Liz wasn't self-indulgent enough to elaborate. Others had suffered more than her. She could endure.

Gema heard what she needed to hear. Asking was kind, this enough to protect her self-perception, analysis unnecessary because "reliable sources" confirmed her picturesque kindness.

Pile by pile the volunteers filled the boats with rubber. Sweat stung their eyes. Sheep groaned. Liz stared up at the sky, the pine trees above muted witnesses to man's indulgences.

Gema offered Liz water. Gema constantly sought ways to reinforce self-perception.

"And now she's offering her water," Maria whispered, holding a pack of rubber she had tied together.

"God's work is never finished," Claudio whispered back, his eyes shimmering with naughty delight.

Gema joined in as the beach cleaners began collecting the rubber from the final pile. She grabbed the last bundle and carried it to the dinghy, knowing this would be photographed by Maria who was creating a visual record of the beach cleaners' work. Gema knew when to be seen. God was watching.

Claudio and Maria smiled at each other as Gema climbed onto the rubber-laden dinghy.

"Wouldn't it be better," Claudio whispered, "if we worked to turn the earth into paradise instead of worrying about some fantasy place?"

Maria's lightning smile made Gema pose for a photograph. Why else would Maria have been grinning so radiantly, other than to acknowledge the occasion's splendour?

"Let the heathen infidels walk back," Orlando pronounced, as the boats entered silvery-blue, leaving the beach cleaners behind.

Friction's first sign back at the beach cleaners' camp was Claudio's face, his lips fused by disdain, his brown eyes now dark holes of enmity.

A volunteer had had to wait hours in the camp before being taken to where that volunteer was overseeing refugees doing rock-climbing.

"The lazy bastard should have been doing beach cleaning," Claudio growled.

Maria explained to the other volunteers: "They didn't let us board, including Laura, who's got heatstroke and Liz who had a bad back. Too much weight for the boat's engine, apparently. Nobody offered to walk back so Laura and Liz could take the boat. They all sat, staring in different directions on the boat as Gema explained the situation regarding the engine. Her sorrowful look would have won her an Oscar. You have to understand she had to get back here to attend a vital meeting in the refugee camp, a meeting that could transform the lives of every refugee in Greece. No doubt that's what she believed, belief essential for entering God's realm. Claudio would have torpedoed the boat had a U-boat been handy."

Maria smiled like a flame made from translucent flesh.

"I photographed the dinghy stacked full of rubber," she continued, "to record our work. Gema was on the rubber. She thought I wanted to photograph her. She raised her hands and smiled, holding peanut butter in one hand and a banana in the other. Laura said: 'The humanitarian who's making suffering people walk back.' Gema, thinking her pose was amusing, asked me for the photo, probably to impress her mother. She's done no beach cleaning and there she was, under Greece's timeless sun, receiving paparazzi recognition for her sacrifice amid Lesbos's trying elements, that famous holiday spot, Turkey, the birthplace of philosophy, backing her like a

tribute to her ethical purity."

Liz and Laura laughed at what many described as cynicism, real cynicism now clearer to them than ever before.

That Moment When Time Stopped
Alex Rezdán

That moment when time stopped, I saw the future. It surprised me, because I always thought I would see the past flash through my mind before everything ended abruptly, like a film reel burning out, the blackness invading from every direction until that was all there was. Sometimes I thought of it more like when the battery on a laptop dies. It just shuts down, every circuit grasping for an electric current the way my body was grasping for air. I wished I could simply plug in to recharge, and perhaps that's what led me to ingest those pills as if they were batteries for my soul, but instead, what I got was a glimpse of our future together.

In the park, you—whom I have yet to meet—sat at the bench waiting for me to arrive. You were tapping your foot to the music that always seemed to play inside your head and waved your arms around when you saw me as if you had been stranded in the desert for days and I had come to save you. I liked to think we had saved each other, really. You pulled out your flask from inside your coat, and I graciously took a swig before we followed the crowd into the fair. Maybe it was the drinks that did it, or more likely your terrible aim at throwing a softball, but this was the day I realized I loved you, not in that sense that movies and television have distorted the word, but in the sense that I knew I wanted you to be part of the rest of my life, and even if we strayed apart for ten years, I wouldn't forget to contact you when I visited your city or be too busy when you came to mine.

It pained me to think I probably walked past you, too shy to strike up a conversation, perhaps several times in every variation: sitting next to you on the train, standing behind you in line at the grocery store, stealing glances at you at the bar.

In another glimpse, in that future city when I visited you, I experienced snow for the first time. I shivered in my thin jacket, and you teased me about being from Southern California. You suggested ducking into a bar to warm up and introduced me to grog, of which I was not a fan. You noticed that I kept looking at the old, beat up piano in the corner and, because the place was empty, I agreed to play a song. It was during that detuned rendition of *The Entertainer* that we realized this could be it. Our last day. We didn't say anything, but I knew we were both thinking the same thing: at least we'll always have those great memories to look back on.

Except maybe now we won't.

My feet felt heavier as I walked you back to your apartment, each step taking more effort than the last, yet you twirled and danced, giddy from the alcohol. I wanted to grab your shoulders and shake you and scream, "Can't you see our story is about to end? Stop being so happy!" But instead, we said goodbye as if we'd see each other during lunch the next day. It hurt to see you disappear into that stairwell, but later I realized I preferred this over the farewell hugs we gave each other all those years ago. Looking back at our last day, I wouldn't remember us standing outside your door, trying to delay the inevitable with awkward conversation. Instead, I'd see us passing around your flask, singing *The Middle* by Jimmy Eat World while you led me through streets that all looked the same. That song always did make me think of you.

As I walked back to the hotel, the weight in my legs became too much. I stopped in the middle of a bridge—*Schlossbrücke*, you had called it—and looked into the water, the rippling reflection of stars, moon, and me, and returned to the present moment. Alone in the dimly lit room. Empty beer cans scattered on the bed and my last cigarette burning on the ashtray next to the glass of red wine I swiped from downstairs. The smoke clouded the room, and I wished I could dissipate the same way, leaving nothing but a lingering scent as a reminder that I once

existed.

You—who surely must exist somewhere—were not the only thing I saw in that moment. I saw the birth of my child and the name Amelia escaping my lips when the nurse put her in my arms. I experienced the loss of my parents, bittersweet in that I never truly felt independent from them but glad they didn't have to suffer in outliving their only child. I met other people in other countries and laughed—yes, laughed—with them. I was interrupted in a romantic pursuit due to cat hair. My eyes puffed into bulging slits of red and all the water in the world couldn't wash away that blunder. I knew it blew any chance I had with that person, and cats forever became a deal-breaker.

Futures that could but would never be teased me with happiness. I inhaled them all until my body rejected them and coughed them into the air together with those pill-shaped batteries and acid-tasting bile. My hands gripped the itchy bed sheet as my eyes focused on the fedora-shaped water stain on the ceiling. My breath returned to me, shallow at first, then steady like a heartbeat. I turned my head to the side and watched the red liquid sway gently in the glass. I looked at time as a pearl in the oyster I created around it and imagined it dissolving in the wine until only a grain of sand was left drowning at the bottom of the glass, and then I swallowed it.

Don't Try to Be the Forest
Tamara Burross Grisanti

I met my spiritual guru while I was a cashier at Quick Mart. She darted into the store out of a rainstorm one day. I recognized her as one of the homeless ladies that frequented the store—one my coworkers called Bridge Lady—but that day, as she settled onto the dingy tile floor, legs akimbo, I asked her real name. She introduced herself as Pam, and my shift never passed so quickly. She told me eloquent vignettes about the people she had known and loved in her old life, before encamping under the bridge, people she would never see or speak to again. She fascinated me with her conspiracy theories and fears of thought insertion. I was not the first person to offer charity to her, but she said I reminded her of her daughter, so when I suggested that she spend the night at my place rather than under the bridge, she agreed.

I ran a bubble bath for her and threw her clothes in the wash. She submerged herself up to her chin in the suds, her rinsed gray hair down her back, and I sat on the toilet seat across from her. I cracked open two bottles of beer. We exchanged our philosophies on life, our fears, our hopes. When I told her that I was a writer, she looked perplexed.

“What are you doing working for the Quick Mart, if you’re a writer?” Pam asked. “You should be penning exposés about the corporate rule over education, or something.”

I told her that I wanted to write fiction and poetry. She told me I should read more Marx. We chatted amiably, sipping our beers, until she was shriveled like a raisin and the water was cold. I handed her a towel and some fresh clothes to wear to bed.

“Where is your daughter?” I asked. “Maybe you could arrange for her to come visit you here.”

She bounced on the mattress in my spare bedroom, gave me a wily grin as she lit a joint and passed it to me. “Darling, that’s sweet of you, but my little girl only got to breathe eight years of this Earth’s air before she was taken from me.”

“I’m so sorry,” I told her. “I can’t imagine.”

“Try,” she said.

We sobbed and held each other.

That was ten years ago. My friends have gotten used to Pam over the years that she has inhabited my house with me. Some guys I brought over thought my caring for Pam was noble. Others didn’t understand my love for her, felt threatened by it, or repulsed. I don’t feel that having Pam’s companionship and guidance in my life have been romantic blockades, though she has never liked a single date I’ve introduced to her.

Some days I will get up early to go to work, and there will be Pam—still awake—sitting at the kitchen table in her flimsy nightgown with a forgotten cup of licorice tea, smoking a roach with my eyebrow tweezers. Though she is twenty-two years my senior, I love her like a sister, even as I pick her wiggly gray hairs out of my shower drain and wash her dirty dinner dishes.

I keep her abreast of my submissions to literary journals, read her all my new pieces. When I get back a stream of rejections, she listens to my whining and offers her suggestions for improving my craft. I follow her advice—always. Through the years, Pam has coaxed me out of many a writing block, only to be my muse for a great new story. Her stores of enthusiasm for my work are inexhaustible. In return, I buy her groceries and new clothes and shoes and pay for a smartphone that she refuses to carry due to her suspicions that it’s downloading her thoughts.

I take a break from my novel, but write a sestina for my watering can on my iPhone while I smoke on the balcony. I sit with Pam at the table until the pot wears off, chain smoking her

Winchester little cigars and browsing literary journals. The windows are open to the August night's heat. The cat-clawed sheers billow in the breeze.

"Maybe I should concentrate on writing flash," I murmur through the haze of smoke.

"Don't try to be the forest," she warns. "You can make gods on cold, delicate cycle, but only with demons in the dryer." Pam chuckles heartily, her round belly punching at the blue paisley of her gown, screeches her chair away from the table. She takes a glass of buttermilk with her to the bedroom and forces the swollen door shut.

A Day for Everything
Adam Giles

Sweat rolls down Alice's face as she sleeps, cascading around the oxygen mask muzzling her nose and mouth. Nurse Tom, in full hazmat suit, checks Alice's IV, presses a button to silence a beeping machine, and places a cool cloth on his patient's forehead. Nurse Tom twists the plastic cap off a bottle of TastyWater, pours some into a Styrofoam cup, and leaves it on Alice's bedside table in the event that today is the day she wakes up.

Alice's grade 11 Environmental Studies students gather outside the big glass wall of her quarantined hospital room because the school only had one Environmental Studies teacher (Alice) and now these kids all have a last period spare.

This superbug Alice has contracted is the 999th confirmed case of antibiotic-immune bacteria in the Greater Toronto Area.

Nurse Tom unpins the calendar from the bulletin board over Alice's bed. He flips the page to December and pins it back up.

December 1: Phishing Prevention Day

Stop clicking links in bogus emails. You're costing your employers millions. What is it that gets you? The promise of a "larger unit?" Subject lines like, "Confidence Pills...Cheap" or "Totally Real Stock Tips?" Blindly clicking links and opening attachments is akin to having sex without a condom: there are bugs everywhere out there, just waiting for you to let your guard down. Help us spread the word by forwarding this message to everyone in your contacts list—tell them to click the "Practice Safe Emailing (and Sex)" link for additional helpful tips. Toronto forecast: 26°C, mainly sunny.

December 2: Rock Hard Abs Appreciation Day

For too long, men and women with rock hard abs have been alone in appreciating their own rock hard abs (typically in front of change room mirrors). Seriously, do you know how hard it is to get rock hard abs? Participate in today's March to End Obliviousness about Rock Hard Abs—the exercise might even help you firm up that soft middle of yours, tubby.

December 3: First Annual Heckle a Scientist Day

The scientists have been muzzled; they can't say anything back. It's amazing. They have to stand there and take it like those British guards with the big fuzzy hats. Toronto forecast: -1°C, freezing rain.

December 4: Drone Safety Day

Yes, there is a metric ton of traffic up there. Mid-air collisions are not necessarily intentional. Drone safety starts with minimizing air rage, so breathe, take it easy, and have a cold refreshing bottle of TastyWater. Why do you have to get upset over every little thing? Didn't anyone ever teach you to pick your battles? Everyone's got a drone to fly. A little consideration goes a long way. And, for the love of god, can we collectively agree to stop hovering outside the windows of those who are careless with their curtains? It's called not living up to the stereotype that all drone operators are perverts? We all love the naked human body as much as the next special interest group, but let's try to keep it professional up there.

December 5: Deter a Smoker Day

Don't be afraid to get right up in their face about it. Smoking tobacco is socially unacceptable now—strength in non-smoking numbers! Toronto forecast: 24°C, partially cloudy.

December 6: Day to End Vaping

Because, really, just smoke a cigarette. You look stupid.

December 7: Ham Sandwich Appreciation Day

The ham sandwich—increasingly demonized for its “unnecessary” slaughter of “innocent” pigs—doesn't enjoy the love it once enjoyed. Do we want the pigs to have died in vain? The best way to honour the pigs is to eat their carcasses. They're already dead. What are we going to do, just toss out all that perfectly good meat? Let us appreciate the ham sandwich. The pigs would have wanted it that way. Toronto forecast: 41°C, heat alert.

December 8: TastyWater Superbug Selfie Challenge Day

Post a selfie of yourself enjoying a cold, refreshing bottle of TastyWater and the TastyWater Corporation will donate five cents to superbug research. Together we can take the *super* out of *superbug*! Don't forget to tag your selfie with #TastyWaterIsAnEthicalForwardThinkingCompany to make sure your entry counts. Important cause! Spread the word. The clock is ticking on people with this terrible affliction. Look at poor Alice here (pictured with bottle of TastyWater on bedside table). She's been unconscious for weeks. And her grade 11 Environmental Studies students? There's less of them looking in on their teacher through that big glass wall because some of them are using their last period spare to make out behind dumpsters and try out this vaping thing everyone's talking about. So let's see those selfies. Help us help doctors help Alice.

December 9: Hug a Proctologist Day

Look, they don't want to be up in there any more than you want them up in there, but those action figures have to come out. Show some appreciation. Wouldn't you say their job is a total pain in the...butt? We'll be here all day. Toronto forecast: 43°C, crazy humid.

December 10: Frolic in Nature Day (weather permitting)

Get out there and enjoy this balmy winter weather. Have a picnic, frolic in the bushes, join the tree-huggers and hug a tree. But if it happens to be at all chilly and you're not up for frolicking in nature, Plan B could be to find one of those tree-huggers and ask where their global warming is now. Watching them try to explain science they don't understand is a delightful little shit show.

December 11: Mysterious Itch Identification Day

As usual, mobile dermatology labs will be set up in a neighbourhood near you. Frolic in Nature Day participants encouraged to attend. Toronto forecast: 45°C, gustnado watch.

December 12: Airborne Sheet Metal Awareness Day

How many unsuspecting pedestrians must be decapitated by untethered sheet metal blowing away from rooftop construction sites before we, as a society, act? With the sustained winds and unpredictable supergusts nowadays, the amount of sheet metal swirling around out there is only

going to rise. Until our lawmakers beef up (and actually enforce) our sheet metal regulations, keep your heads up.

December 13: Toenail Fungus Sympathy Day

It's time toenail fungus sufferers got the sympathy they deserve. What, just because toenail fungus isn't one of the sexier ailments, these poor folks have to go unrecognized? Well, guess what, sometimes we have to face things we don't want to face. Sometimes we have to pay attention to the discoloured, smelly signals our bodies are sending us and adjust our behaviours to avoid a full-blown discoloured, smelly public health catastrophe. Bring a toenail fungus sufferer near you some synthetic socks and watch their face light up. Toronto forecast: 47°C, gustnado imminent.

December 14: Preferred Sexual Position Verbalization Day

It's healthier when we can be open about sex. Plus, wouldn't you like to enjoy yourself for once? Today's the day to come out and tell your partner what drives you crazy (in a good way) and what drives you crazy (in a bad way). Your loins will thank you. Enjoy.

December 15: Day of Remembrance for that Time Richard Gere Learned Sign Language to Communicate with his Deaf Driver

Today marks a decade since Mr. Gere's viral Facebook post about how he googled sign language in the back of a cab to say "thank you" to his hearing-impaired driver. A candlelight vigil will be held to compensate Mr. Gere for the online backlash he endured for coming across braggish about his good deed. Yes, Mr. Gere has since confirmed that the story was fake (and that he doesn't even know what The Face Book is), but we take today to remember the general message of kindness/consideration anyway. Toronto forecast: 20°C, calm and clear, post-gustnado.

December 16: TastyWater Let's Get to the Bottom of Why There's Hardly Any Bees Left Day

The superbug thing brought in so much money—for the cause, we're focusing on the cause—so TastyWater is at it again. This time for the bees! Post a selfie of yourself enjoying a cold, refreshing bottle of TastyWater and the TastyWater Corporation will donate five cents to getting to the bottom of why there's hardly any bees left. Don't forget to tag it with #TastyWaterIsAnEthicalForwardThinkingCompany to make sure your entry counts. Important cause! Spread the word. Back to the superbug thing for a second: Alice's quarantine room is empty and her Environmental Studies students are gone. Nurse Tom is wheeling in this new unconscious superbug patient named Bruce. And—lucky Bruce—his superbug is officially the GTA's 1,000th confirmed case, which, given the nice round number, means some reporters and camera crews may be popping by the hospital later today. We've sent someone to look into whether Alice got better (thanks to our company's efforts) or was carted to the morgue (in which case, it was out of our hands, but hopefully the money we raised will help this Bruce guy). Anyway, about the bees: let's see those selfies!

December 17: National Day to End Corporate Sponsorship of Social Issues

Is it not icky to have these corporations use society's problems as marketing opportunities? How about, if you really want to help, just write a damn cheque for the cause and stop being all loud about how great you are? We don't want to get into naming names, but when certain companies

that bottle natural resources flip-flop on which issue to “own,” it feels decidedly unethical and backward thinking. All of this and more at tonight’s town hall at Budweiser Stage. Toronto forecast: -16°C, thundersnow.

December 18: Day to End Fresh Water Pilfering

Piggybacking on yesterday’s corporate sponsorship thing, we’re here to publicly shame certain unethical and backward-thinking companies that syphon the Earth’s life blood out of the Earth, bottle it, and sell it back to us with their stupid lip-smacking logo (indicating tastiness) on the label. Join us for this evening’s event: Jell-O Shooters to End Fresh Water Pilfering. Always a great time: after your first six or seven shots you’ll even forget what cause you’re supporting! We understand it’s easy to get bummed out by all the bad news out there, which is why sometimes it’s nice to incorporate booze into fundraisers: toss back a buttload of Jell-O shooters and numb the part of the brain that gets bummed out. Do yourself a favour though: after all the shooters, don’t go home with that guy at the end of the bar who’s always scratching his crotch. It won’t lead anywhere good (and Mysterious Itch Identification Day next December is a long ways off). See? We already forgot what cause we’re supporting! And hey, that guy at the end of the bar is attractive. Who says social do-goodery can’t be fun?

December 19: Humour a Conspiracy Theorist Day

Take a day (today!) to hear them out. Have some empathy for these folks and their busy minds. Moon landings were faked, you say? Elvis is not only alive, but managing a KFC in Indianapolis? The planet is doing everything in its power to eradicate mankind? Let them talk and smile through it, knowing you’re better than them—if it helps, there might be a couple Jell-O shooters leftover from yesterday. Toronto forecast: 20°C, rain, flash floods.

December 20: Day of Appreciation for Phil Collins Lyrics

Seriously, listen to the words in those songs. The man wasn’t just good at the drums. He didn’t just have a voice sent to us from heaven. He tried to get people to focus on important social issues. Sadly, all anyone cares about is what’s going on in their own little bubble. Just another day in paradise? Wake up and smell the injustice.

December 21: Middle-Aged White Male Day

Privilege schmirivilege. Middle-aged white males are people too. Find one and tell them they’re alright in your book (if you say it to the right one, who knows, maybe they’ll even hook you up with a sweet internship—they have connections). Toronto forecast: 25°C, sustained winds, unpredictable supergusts, potential airborne sheet metal.

December 22: No Sexting and Walking Day (in conjunction with National Preservation of Snails on the Sidewalk Day)

Save that dick pic for later. Do you want to walk off the curb, get hit by a motor vehicle, and have a first responder find that shit on your phone? Plus, think of all the snails on the sidewalk you won’t have to hear crunch underfoot when you pay attention to where you’re stepping.

December 23: Overpriced Fossil Fuel Outrage Day

Can you please make it more expensive for us regular working-class folks to get to and from work? If we didn’t have regular working-class jobs to get to and from, we’d organize and

congregate and show you how angry we are rather than bottling it up and taking it out on our spouses after work. Toronto forecast: 0°C, freezing drizzle, potential flurries in time for Santa!

December 24: Bacon Shortage Panic Day

Calmly acknowledging perpetually low pork belly inventories, we've partnered with the Ham Sandwich Appreciation people to raise money for the creation of Pigs Unlimited: Toronto's new happy place for pigs to breed and roam and breed and graze and breed (and where nothing bad will ever happen to the bacon—we mean, pigs).

December 25: Religious Observance of Your Choosing Day

Look, do whatever you want today, just don't wish anyone anything—you know how sensitive people are. If you're going to strike up a faith-based conversation with someone, do it with an atheist. Convert the hell out of them. Those people are animals. Toronto forecast: 10°C, steam devil over Lake Ontario.

December 26: National Day of Advocacy for Nuclear Disarmament

Because why do we want to kill ourselves? There are so many other things in this world that will do that for us.

December 27: National Day of Advocacy for Nuclear Proliferation

Because those soft pinko lefties are turning us into a nation of soft pinko lefties. Enough of this hippie political correctness. Religious Observance of Your Choosing on December 25th? Really? Keep the *Christ* in Christmas, keep the nukes proliferating, and if you don't like it go back wherever you came from (unless where you came from is here, in which case stay, but quit ruining everything for the rest of us). Toronto forecast: 63°C, scattered flame cyclones (stay indoors).

December 28: TastyWater Cycle Against Superbugs Day (formerly Diabetes Awareness Day)

The thing about the bees was a flop (apparently no one cares about the bees), so TastyWater is back to fighting the fight against the superbugs. Such an important cause. You might be wondering what happened to Diabetes Awareness Day. TastyWater bought out the diabetes people for the rights to December 28th because, really, what's a bigger threat to humanity, diabetes or the superbugs? Sadly, it turns out Alice is dead. So let's help out Mr. One Thousand (Bruce)! Grab your bike. Go cycle somewhere. And while you're at it, post a selfie of yourself enjoying a cold, refreshing bottle of TastyWater. You remember the hashtag, right? #TastyWaterIsAnEthicalForwardThinkingCompany. Five cents to superbug research for each one. Spread the word. The clock is ticking.

December 29: National Crud off the Streets Day

What a mess all those cyclists made yesterday. The streets are littered with cycling bibs and orange-stained Styrofoam containers from when they all went for wings after. So let's get out there and pick up after those slob. Let's show them what a respectable city looks like! Toronto forecast: 30°C, lingering flame-cyclone-related wildfires at various city golf courses, the Toronto Islands, and that green patch in front of Queen's Park.

December 30: Big Picture Appreciation Day

As usual, The Fourth Wall art gallery will be offering free admission to its Big Picture exhibit: literally, the largest photograph in the world, ever. Remember, when you stand before the big picture, when you're considering it, step back from it, open your mind, take it all in, notice how insignificant (and unworthy of your time) some of the smaller elements are. Actually, as an exercise, prioritize the various elements, distinguish the crucial from the extraneous. How does this make you feel? Reflect on what this says, generally, about our collective focuses and energies. Also, take the time to appreciate the subtle (and not so subtle) metaphors at work. Free lunch (ham sandwiches and TastyWater).

December 31: Day in Support of No One but Yourself

Sometimes it can feel like there's a day for everything. Everything except you. Take today, ignore all those other causes, and do something kind for yourself. Buy that gas-guzzling Hummer you've had your eye on. Get that facial tattoo you've always wanted. Solicit a prostitute for once. While you're out and about, enjoy a free bottle of TastyWater at one of dozens of pop-up TastyWater stands throughout the city, on this the Fourth Annual Day in Support of No One but Yourself (sponsored by TastyWater).

Nurse Tom, hung over from New Year's, face bandaged from that forehead tattoo he treated himself to yesterday, unpins the calendar from the bulletin board in the hospital's quarantine room and tosses it into the garbage. He opens the new calendar to January and pins it up.

Sweat rolls down Bruce's face as he sleeps, cascading around the oxygen mask muzzling his nose and mouth. Nurse Tom, in full hazmat suit, checks Bruce's IV, presses a button to silence a beeping machine, and places a cool cloth on his patient's forehead. Toronto forecast: 26°C, mainly sunny.

The Boy in the Reeds
Daniel Fraser

The bus is going to your home town. It has been years since you returned there. It's always the same way, the same story. Your head is pressed against the window, looking out. The road moves through the base of the valley beside the canal, the river, and the local railway line. There is not much further to go. Soon you will pass the little train station on the outskirts of town, hidden from the road by trees, and the bus will stop outside the old cinema. A car will be waiting to take you up to the house. There is going to be quite a gathering. The buildings and the trees are all in place, as though they had been drawn up from a photograph taken right before you went away. Nothing has changed. Time doesn't pass the way it does in the city.

The day outside is warm and bright. The sun is shining and there is very little cloud. You feel the glow of the day in your body. Tiredness settles on you, tiredness and a desire to get back. You place a hand on your suitcase and tap your finger and thumb against its plastic casing. Your eyes wander on the hillside as it rises up over the wooded slopes and steep fields of grass that pattern the walls of the valley.

You lift your head from the coolness of the window. Below the road the land continues to fall away to the water drifting through valley bottom. Out beyond the river you see a curved meadow of long, dense reeds. Your memory stirs. These tall stalks, pointing up like fluted javelins towards the sky, are familiar to you. When you were a boy you used to play among them with your friends, hiding there for hours and hours. Tom and Sam were their names. As your gaze rests upon the reeds, you see a flicker of movement, a distant unsettling, and you decide it must be me, the boy you used to be, calling to you, asking you to come and play again among the green spires and the tall, thin rushes. I slope through the meadow, darting from shadow to shadow, speaking softly in a voice you know too well. The past can move quickly when it wants to.

It cannot be. Not really. You know that very well. It cannot be. You know that it is nothing more than an illusion, a lapse into memory, a trick of the light. Yet still, still, you want to make sure. There is no harm. You can postpone your visit for half an hour, your friends will not mind: they themselves are often late. You turn from the window and press the button—a bell sounds—and you head down onto the pavement with your suitcase, thanking the driver.

The sun seems even brighter now. The surface of the canal shimmers in the distance. The river gurgles with delight. Your case appears lighter in your hand, lighter than it had been before. As the bus moves off, you cross the road and then the river and turn down the shaded road beside the little train station.

There is not far to go. Your footsteps are calm and slow. I don't mind waiting, there is no rush. The present always takes its time. Your mind turns to what lies ahead, thinking about how long it must have been since you have seen everyone. Sam has gone away now but Tom will be at the house, Tom will be there and Mary and so will many others. Just like a birthday party. There will be plates of food and stories and a table in the garden and... You'd better not be long you decide, just a quick look, a quick walk through the reeds, a feeling of their stalks against your hands, and then, then you will go back. You will go back and take a car to the house. The rooms will all be well-furnished and each object will be in its proper place, just as it always has been. The other guests will still be arriving, and everyone will wait to take their turn to speak, you will not miss anything.

The gravel crunches underfoot. A little further, past the weir where the water is flushed with red and brown like folds of molten iron, you step from the path and climb the gate that leads away into the meadow. Small white flowers are scattered through the grass. The incline reduces after three or four paces and there you see them—the forest of reeds. They are still tall, almost shoulder height, and stretch back out of sight. As you reach the edge of them a gentle breeze starts up, causing the reeds to sway back and forth. I'm waiting. You hold your hands before you and step through, feeling the spines on your palms like the touch of some ancient creature.

As you pass deeper into the reeds the light shifts as though the even rays of the sun had been covered by a veil of cloud. You cannot remember where you put down your suitcase. The echoes of memory brush through the spines of grass like a soft wind. You see me all the more clearly, the boy you used to be, playing with imaginary guns and spears and arrows, lying prone against the earth. Sam and Tom are with me, out there in the field, waiting. In front of your eyes the hands before you seem to be getting younger and younger. As the game draws on it is no longer me hiding there but you. The reeds are taller than you now. Your clothes are different. Your memories have fallen away. You have never really left this place, never really grown up. We have become one. Your small hands hold the rifle close as you crawl deeper and deeper into the undergrowth. The reeds brush against your mouth and scratch your sides as you move.

The sound of the wind in the rushes is punctured by the thrum of an engine. A car is coming. Panic grips you. The memory that has been searching for you, moving from shadow to shadow, has found you. My work is done. The man in the car is chasing you. He lives in the walled-in house over by the woods, remember? You have been stealing from his garden. He is coming. The reeds will not hide you for long. Sam tears past, parting the reeds as he darts deeper into cover. No sign of Tom. You follow on your knees, the green blades scrape at your skin, heart racing. You will be in trouble if he catches you.

A shout rings out above the field, a giant's growl. A thud of footsteps: we must hurry. There is no choice. You run as fast as you can, your breath punches you hard in the ribs, your throat is burning. We reach the canal. The water is deep and still. The reeds continue beyond the wire fence and down into the liquid dark.

There is a gate which has been padlocked. It guards a green pipe covered with rust that rises up from the ground and crosses the canal, fifteen feet above the surface, before returning into the earth on the far side. Beside the pipe is a ladder, a ladder and a narrow walkway that leads to the other side. You know what to do. Your friends know the way. Over the gate and down. Now the hard part. The top of the ladder shifts beneath your weight, your legs are cramped and tired from running. Sam and Tom are safely across. It is your turn. Below you, far below you in the water, you see the reflection of a face, a face you almost recognise as your own. The walkway creaks beneath your body. Dizziness overcomes you. The face in the water is calm.

You look down once more. The water rises up to meet you and falls away at the same time. Your eyes dart back to where you have just been. Something is different. The man from the walled-in house is nowhere to be seen. The car has gone. Where are Sam and Tom, where could they be? There is a creaking sound. The walkway shudders. You grip the metal tight. The hands you hold out are older now.

There is a sound like thunder. Now the water just comes up. It covers your face and your hair. You open your mouth to cry out but no words make it through—only water, water rushes in.

The green liquid shimmers on your lungs. Your feet kick deeper into the mud. Your eyes are glazed with a thin film. I am long gone, the boy you used to be. This is no time for games.

Time stretches out, forwards and backwards all at once. It cannot be. It cannot be. Your mind searches for something else, some other outcome. It must be nothing more than an illusion, a lapse into memory, a trick of the light.

Your hand reaches out for something to hold and grasps a handful of tall, swaying reeds.

Numerals
F.F. Amanti

My least favorite number?

One.

Why is that you ask?

Well, it's the number I started with, really. It's the number we all start with if you think about it. Everybody starts at one.

My favorite number was four, which is the number I ended up with back when life was a happy affair. That lasted a little while.

But time takes its toll.

Two of my four moved away, and they don't much talk to me no more. Can't say I much blame them. They have their own worlds now, much like I did when I had fewer years upon me.

So for a while, four was two. That was ok. Two was easy. Two was warm. I was comfortable with two.

Until, like it always does, two became one.

One.

It's all I have. It's all any of us have, really.

I am not afraid of zero.

I won't feel it when it gets here. That's the only courtesy time affords you. You aren't aware of the last subtraction.

Until then, all I have is one.

Nothing more.

Nothing less.

And it's my least favorite number.

Winter River
Julien Levy

There is a couple married for 52 years, we see their modest home with gabled roof, their two cats, their garden. Crickets chirp as the living room window slides open. We see a leg and hand, a head and then a man dressed in black. We watch him cross the room and climb the stairs, a knife and rope tucked between his back and pants.

We see the funeral, the sparse but teary attendance, the man we know is responsible in the crowd. Later, he will burn the old man's store to the ground, leave town and disappear into California.

The cedar boxes disintegrate, nails and hair grow long, worms and moles tunnel through what has become earth. Their cats have run away and their house is sold. It is renovated and resold. A woman and her two children move in, grow, then move out. The house changes hands again.

A young married couple move in on a Thursday. We see the young man convert the backyard shed into a ceramics studio, we see her belly begin to grow, we watch a gaze of raccoons born under the front porch. Life and life and life.

The old couple returns on a fall night when there are no stars. They stand at the doorway of their home and look in, wondering. They look back into the black of the woods, the lights of the town in the distance, and we see them understand somehow that they cannot stray too far from the house. We hear them weep for one another in the dark, the sound waking the young woman upstairs. She goes down in her robe and calls out to nobody. The old couple whisper from the crawlspace beneath the floor. They share this home now, and that's that.

We see the old couple wander the rooms, finding to be their own, but not their own. During the day, the empty house is quiet and we see the old couple surface from the walls where they've discovered all new plumbing and wiring. We see them careful to replace the new couple's books on the shelf when they are done. They watch television on the flat-panel mounted above where the old man's liquor cabinet once was. We watch them test the limits of their existence, which they're delighted to find are few. To pass through occupied space leads to floating a few inches above the ground leads to soaring weightless, laughing room to room. We find them remembering and becoming any of the selves they'd been—him at 25, sleeves rolled up to show his crisp Navy tattoo, every hair in place; her at 16, full red lips, tight skin, limber joints. The way he looks at her excites something that resembles fear. She remembers how much she'd liked that.

We see them watch the new couple build their future without much performance. They gather what they'll need, both of them working and saving. From the heat vents, the old couple weigh in privately and disagree about their counterparts' excited plans, teary admissions, lists of names.

The old couple lie in the attic between boxes of ceramic projects from the young man's college days. What animates them now? Is it unfinished work? The hail-pocked northfacing side of the house had long been replaced. Unpaid debt? None. Maybe, the old man submits, they should seek vengeance for what was taken from them. But who had taken it? They silhouette, shape, impression—as if it had been a dream. All is now as it would forever be. That's a kind of freedom. She kisses him on the forehead.

We see the old couple pass afternoons dancing together in the kitchen to the oldies station, inspecting photo albums, playing chess, reenacting their own lives together, correcting one another's performances. They sink into surfaces when the new couple's cars pull up alongside one another in the gravel driveway.

The new couple's spats begin and end in the same room, but become more frequent as the woman grows. Assuming more space in the house, bearing more than herself alone. The old couple lies on the roof under the stars as the old woman listens to her husband reaffirm their life's decisions: lucky that they'd owned their own business, paid off their mortgage, forwent children. Meanwhile, we see the young woman stare at the ceiling in the dark, unable to sleep for the family of squirrels scurrying in the crawlspace.

One morning in the attic, while the old man snoozes, the old woman looks through the window across the misty driveway at the young man sitting in his car, screaming until he's out of breath. He forces his face into his hands, pulls back as if a seam might split at the center of his forehead. You think he's alright? The old woman asks her husband. He is his middle-aged self, bald and soft. He's a captive man, he says without opening his eyes.

Later, the old woman follows the younger one as she sips her coffee and sneaks a cigarette with her hand on her belly. Gazing past the nearly untouched ceramics studio, the young woman loses herself in the dark corners of the woods. Hovering unseen in the doorway, the old woman reaches out to touch the young, smooth shoulder. A white-hot wave breaks over the young woman as a flood of electricity bursts across skin, sinew, muscle. She stumbles forward, hits her cheek on a hanging bird feeder and stands panting, staring at the cigarette clamped between her fingers as if seeing it for the first time. She tosses it away, brings her hand to her bruised face, sinks onto the whitewashed porch and cries. The old woman wants to apologize, but doesn't know how and retreats deep into the house. The old woman does not tell her husband about this.

We see now that in his boredom, every day the old man assumes a different self. A scrappy boy with a crew cut running through the house whooping like an Indian brave; his dark-suited, professional self sitting in the breakfast nook reading last week's newspaper. She looks at him from across the room as he shakes his head at the state of things. He snatches at her as she descends through the ceiling, and pulling her into his lap, asks if she likes a man with money. She's taken to wearing her 32-year-old self all the time now: a thick braid of brown hair thrown over her shoulder and a simple house dress, about the same age as the young woman. She wriggles away, smooths her dress. He grabs at her again, his hands moving through the table. I'm not the answer to your boredom, she tells him.

What if I looked like this? He asks, transforming into the boy with whom she'd fallen in love.

Would you have done anything differently if you had the chance?

He says nothing.

Do you think there's anything you don't know about me?

He blinks, waiting for her to tell him. She melts into the wall beneath the staircase.

The baby, a girl, comes with the first snow, and the old couple's days of free rein are over. The house full of voice and light and warmth, we find the old couple hiding most of the day, wafting between basement and attic. We hear them agree that as long as the mother is elsewhere, it'd do no harm to look in on the bright-eyed baby cooing and sputtering in the crib beside the bedroom window when not on her mother's hip or breast. She would never remember them anyway.

One morning while the young mother is asleep, the old couple stands at the base of the crib. The husband wears the likeness of his wiry, over-serious teenage self. He moves his hand in front of the baby's unfocused eyes, and when she fails to follow, reaches out a finger to touch her cheek. No. She catches his hand. No. Acting the part of his form, he asks But why?

No.

All you say these days is no, he says.

He misses her 16-year-old self, the one who wrote him letters while he was deployed, the girl who'd worshipped him. He grabs at her breasts with his small, knobby hands. She floats away, across the room. Suspended a few inches above the floor, she evaluates the boy she'd never known him to be. Twisting her braid with her fingers, she looks at the sleeping woman curled on her side faced away from the gauzy light from the window, the white sky, the bare limbs of the trees shuddering in the wind, tapping the window as the baby gurgles. She descends onto the bed beside the young woman. Curled together the two of them look like quotation marks. I'm still your husband, he says.

She doesn't say anything.

You hear me?

Days and nights and days. We see the old couple watch the young man find purpose and duty in fatherhood. Up and down in the night, he requests time off work to help out more. He learns to cook, he does their laundry. In the space of a season, they're nearly happy again.

Days, weeks, a year. Beyond the need for sleep now, the old woman busies herself in the family: ferreting out lost keys, toys, and wallets, hiding them where she knows they'll be found, weeding the garden by moonlight, rocking the crib to put the baby back to sleep when it fusses in the dark. It's not your life, we hear the old man tell his wife one night from where they're hiding behind the dishwasher. The young man stays to clean up after dinner, sends his girls upstairs to rest. I miss eating, we hear the old man complain. He spends most of his days now pouting, reading in the attic alone, growing ever more careless about returning what he has moved or taken. What if I just took something off a plate? He asks. What could they even do?

Why do you resent them?

Why do you resent *me*?

She doesn't speak.

You think this *my* fault?

He moves his skinny, pubescent frame pierced by pipe and wire, closer to her. He reaches out and touches her hair. Come back to me, he says, but she moves away, into the refrigerator.

We hear the young husband humming, warming milk on the stove. A hand comes through the refrigerator wall, reaching for her. She slips beneath it into the electrical wiring and speeds through the universe of the house, past a colony of mice nesting in the insulation, ants trooping across the pantry, birds weaving a new home in the cavity of a lost chimney brick. The house teems with lives, crackles with possibility. She surfs the copper artery making lightbulbs blink and flutter as she remembers their first apartment together: three rooms and all he could talk about was the house he'd buy her someday, this house, set back from the road, girt by forest, the town of Winter River just across the little covered bridge, where he had his shop, where refusal of a loan to his only employee, a friend's son, would someday ordain their last moment.

Missing items around the house give way to bumps in the night, doors snapping shut, electrical shorts. The old man titters to himself from beneath the bed one night as he hears the husband ask his wife if she can explain any of it, and isn't this all getting a little strange?

You're being cruel, we hear the old woman admonish as her husband tosses a slipper into the kitchen garbage can. The family is out on a Sunday drive.

You never burnt ants with a magnifying glass?

Why would I do that? She says.

He shrugs, tilts his head back as his adult form falls away, and he is ten-years-old with strawberry hair and freckles. She shakes her head. If this is all just your way of trying to get my attention, it's sick.

He floats, reclining in the center of the room. It's not like I'm hurting anyone, he says, then tilts his head back to look at her upside down, standing with her arms crossed. He backstrokes around the room. And if you did, she says. Then what?

He shrugs. Does it matter?

It matters.

To who?

Don't.

I didn't say I would.

Just say you won't.

Why are you taking their side? You're *my* fucking wife.

Don't speak to me that way.

She winces as he laughs, reaches up, tilts a dinner plate off the counter.

We see the old man alone in the bedroom staring down into the crib at the sleeping baby while her mother is elsewhere. We see him reach down and stop with a finger just above the baby's cheek. Looking up, he sees his wife, wide-eyed, through the bedroom window. She follows him now, polices him. She reaches through the wall toward him, no, no no, as he smiles at her and grazes the child's skin. We hear the wail as it peals across the house before the baby's eyes are even open, and at the thump of feet on stairs, the old couple disappear in opposite directions.

The young husband's taken the baby on a car ride, something that almost never fails to calm her. We see the mother standing in the shower, her face in the spray, eyes closed, mouth open as the old man watches from behind the medicine cabinet mirror, his adolescent form shuddering as he grips himself. We see the old woman on the roof, alone in the wan light of the moon, her back against the chimney, knees pulled to her chest, braid undone, hair whorled around her shoulders. We feel her inhale the floral new spring, the building pressure, the coming storm hissing in new leaves. She knows where he is but she can't stop him. What else can she do?

Cones of light and the roar of the car pulling into the driveway, then darkness and quiet. We see the young man step out, into the damp air, leaving the sleeping child while he lights a cigarette and turns to look at the house. The old woman leans back into the chimney. Home, we hear him say, this is our home. She wants him to run, to sprint upstairs and take his wife by the hand and ride away into the rest of their lives, safe.

The sparrows living in the chimney fly up and away as we see her step out onto the roof and into the light. The young man stubs his cigarette out with the bottom of his shoe. She soars above the roof, the driveway, between the moon and him, casting a shadow on his back as he reaches into the car. Higher and higher, she can feel herself unraveling as she moves further from the house. Small bats, sensing her, flit and dart away as the young man sees her shadow. He assumes it's a cloud passing across the moon. He lifts the baby from the carseat. With her distance from the house, the old woman's control of her shape fails. She is now her last self, the

one beyond which there is only dust, the brutalized, grey victim who hadn't known her own life at all until it was done. I can't protect you, she says. Run. We hear the young wife scream inside the house, but the husband doesn't hear her as he shuts the car door. The old woman can only hear her own breathing. We can't see what's happened.

The young husband turns, hefting his child as the old woman descends, deteriorating, her now clawlike hand extended in warning as she stretches with what's left of herself before she's dust. Her jaw comes apart with the effort to speak, her eyes sink into her head and she's blind, and seeing something white fluttering in the corner of his eye, the young man turns to face it.

Leave, we hear her say, her voice hissing like radio static. Get out of this house.

Turbulence
Kasisi Harris

Three rows up, in the seats closest to the concourse window, a young man sits with his arm across the back of his lover's shoulders. He pulls his blond haired partner close. They kiss. She rests her head on the man's chest and he squeezes her more firmly.

Three rows back, Kevin exhales deeply. His head drops back against the seat before turning to Jason, eyes rolling, and head shaking. "Look at them," Kevin whispers. "Can you imagine what all these people will think if we kiss like that right now?"

Jason's eyes meet Kevin's and he smiles. Mickey Mouse ears are slanted on his bald head, a memento from their vacation. He shrugs and opens his mouth moving his tongue rapidly in and out like a snake which culminates in him licking his lips and laughing.

"You're such a butt-face," Kevin says.

Without a word, Jason smiles and turns his attention back to the concourse window to watch the planes taxi, park, take-off, and land.

Kevin laughs, but he doesn't turn away. It isn't a chiseled body or superior intellect that makes him appreciate his partner. Those things faded long ago in a battle lost to fried chicken, World of Warcraft, and too many pints of Stella Artois. It's the way Jason communicates with Kevin without speaking, his protective nature, and the way he looks at him; that look that always says I love you. Kevin's head leans towards Jason's shoulder but stops short. He straightens up and sighs as he joins Jason in plane watching. Though, his eyes keep returning to the couple, sitting and spontaneously sucking face. *I wish. I can't even touch my partner without the world's scrutiny and disgust.*

The passing thirty-two minutes eat away at Kevin's mental constitution. He tosses and turns in the uncomfortable chairs at gate twenty-three. The leather is loose and worn with no back support. Because the seat bottom lacks rigidity, there is no way to lay across them. The boarding announcement from the flight attendant brings much needed relief. Kevin and Jason are one step closer to home.

"What seats are we in?" Kevin asks.

"24 A & B," Jason Replies. "Here we are." He lowers the collapsible handle on the couple's carry-on and places it into the overhead compartment.

Kevin makes his way into the window seat.

Jason sits beside him in the middle seat. "You sure you don't want to sit here?" Jason says.

Kevin replies, "Nope. The seat is all yours." He laughs. A pack drops into the empty seat next to Jason. Kevin's head snaps to the sound.

A tall man places his carry-on into the overhead compartment. He looks at Kevin and Jason briefly as he closes the overhead hatch. He releases the straps holding the top flap of his pack and takes out a bottle of water and the most current edition of the *American Conservative* and places them in the seat back in front of him.

Kevin's facial expression shifts. The lines in his forehead become more prominent and his eyes more focused. He turns to Jason, then leans his head back against the head-rest. *Just great.* An elbow pokes Kevin's ribcage.

"It's okay." Jason moves his lips to form the words but does not speak them aloud. He nods.

Soon after, the plane is at cruising altitude. The seatbelt light disappears and a queue forms for the bathroom. Kevin fades in and out of consciousness. His head sinks forward only for him to wake mid fall and catch it. Jason's shoulder is a tempting resting place. However, he would not do it. Only one type of person reads a right winged magazine like that, and after such a happy vacation in the Magic Kingdom he has no desire to see the ugly side of anyone. Eventually, Kevin places his forehead on the seat back in front of him and surrenders to the Sandman's embrace.

Following a ding in the cabin, the Captain's voice comes over the intercom. "Good evening ladies and gentlemen. This is your Captain speaking. We are making our initial descent into Seattle. Unfortunately, the air at the lower altitude will be very choppy. For your safety, we will turn on the seat belt sign and ask that you return to your seats and buckle up. We thank you in advance for your patience. We'll have you through this in no time at all. Flight attendants, prepare the cabin for arrival."

The plane rumbles as it dips suddenly. Kevin's heart rate soars. *It's like a roller coaster. Think roller coaster.* The sudden drops increase in intensity and frequency. Kevin grips the arm rest tightly; the muscles in his arm flexing. His shallow breathing is heavy and apparent.

Jason places his hand over Kevin's, rubbing his thumb over his partner's. He says, "We're almost home, babe."

Kevin nods. He closes his eyes and takes deep breaths. Releasing the arm rest, he grips Jason's hand; fingers intertwined. He gives no care to what the man in the aisle seat is thinking. He gives no care to what anybody is thinking. In this moment, his partner is the only other person in existence. There is one final thud as the landing gear touches the runway. Kevin feels relief. He is still holding Jason's hand. He doesn't let go.

The seat belt sign vanishes. A chorus of metallic clanking fills the air as the passengers unbuckle their seat belts. Kevin releases Jason's hand and shifts his focus to their neighbor in the aisle seat.

"That was a rough one," says the man.

"Definitely," Jason replies.

"When I travel with my husband Stan, we avoid flying. Stan hates turbulence." The man says. "Couldn't help but hear that this is home for you two. Welcome home."

"Thank you," Kevin says. "Same to you."

Black Out Scream
Salvatore Difalco

Hector Ganz couldn't see his hand in front of his face. Power was out in the whole neighbourhood. The only visible light shone from emergency lanterns, flashlights, and candles people had lit in the surrounding apartments. Spooky effect, all told. Not that Hector scared easily. He had been a biker in his past life. Rode a nasty Fat Boy back in the day and had fiercely worn the full colours of Satan's MC for a decade. Luckily, he got out of it in one piece, notwithstanding some sharp regrets. You don't live as a ruthless biker for ten years and retire unscathed. It's like going to war. At least Hector liked to think so. Even if you're one of the good guys you're going to get dinged up. Not that he was ever a good guy.

He managed to find his red Craftsman toolbox in the dark; he recalled sliding it into the broom closet when he first moved into the flat, a year ago. It was one of the few things he'd retained from his old life: his mother, who was still kicking, had kept it for him. He rarely saw her these days, they'd never been close. Hector was too much like his old man, she said, who was shot to death in a gun battle with narcs back in 2001, just after 9/11.

He opened the toolbox and ferreted out his flashlight. He switched it on and shone the beam around the apartment, surprised the batteries had held out for so long. The back of his T-shirt stuck to his skin, sweat burned his eyes. The hottest week of the year in late September, fucked up. They'd already turned on the heat in his building. But the unexpected hot spell—every ac in the city churning on max—had wreaked havoc on the power grid, transformers popping in every quadrant. Overwhelmed hydro crews had failed to keep pace. A lot of folks were going to be stewing in the dark for a while.

Hector wiped his face dry with a dish towel. The darkness reminded him of prison at night. So did the air: his apartment smelled rank. He recalled how frightened he was the first few nights in his cell, all the coughing and snoring, dudes talking in their sleep and doing other things. But except for an indeterminate murmur of voices and distant sirens, it was quiet here. Really, he had nothing to fear. Power had been out since early morning. He'd managed without it, but now in the airless dark, sweating profusely, he felt claustrophobic and uneasy.

He had served a nickel up in Kingston Penitentiary for narcotics possession, and that had gone as well as could be expected. His biker rep had given him instant cred and protection, but he kept his head down and rarely mingled with the prison population. This caused him trouble a few times, namely with two members of the Outlaws MC doing time for a gang rape. They'd tried to show him up in the mess hall on more than one occasion, but Hector had thick skin. Nothing they said or did meant anything to him. If they were playing a game, he was playing at not playing the game. That said, they clearly wanted to punish him, for abstract reasons, whether he chose to play their game or not. He figured at some point he would have to handle it, and he wasn't worried about that. He didn't think he'd have any trouble with a couple of rapists.

They called him out for real one afternoon in the gymnasium, during exercise hour, where the men were playing basketball. The guards disappeared; the other prisoners stood back. This was biker business.

Hector turned to face his would-be attackers—who looked rather toothless in their shapeless gray prison sweats—and they started toward him. But then, as Hector braced himself, the gymnasium lights went out. Boom, just like that. Except for the red glow of a few exit signs, the entire gymnasium was pitch black.

Guards and prisoners alike hotly debated what occurred next. Fucked up things happen in the dark, mad things. When the gymnasium lights finally came on again, the two Outlaws were sprawled on the hardwood, bleeding from everywhere. Someone had given them a terrible beating. Hector sure as hell didn't do it, though many believed he did. No one else ever took credit for it. It forever remained a mystery. Just one of those events that are never explained. After a few weeks in hospital, the Outlaws were transferred to another facility, Hector never found out where. He did the rest of his time without issue.

So this was where he found himself now. In the middle of another blackout. He wondered if it was city wide. He went out to the balcony and looked toward the downtown core. Yup, black. The whole grid must've been fried. He smiled. It wasn't funny. But he tried to imagine what would happen if the grid, for one reason or another, terrorists or what have you, went down for a long time, or for good. How would he fare? Would he survive? Could he? He had survived ten years as a biker and five years of prison okay, but surviving something like a serious breakdown of the power grid would call upon other resources, more primal ones perhaps, and he had a reservoir of those. He thought he could handle just about anything life threw at him.

Left with no choice, he had cleaned up his act. It was that or oblivion. He had to confront his own nothingness, as a Jesus freak in the joint had told him. Most of the old crew were dead or doing serious time. Some had gone into hiding or had simply fallen off the face of the earth. Few had made the leap to civilian life. Hector had managed, but only with the aid of some Good Samaritans. A social worker had helped him score the apartment—a clean, decent place—and thanks to the super of his building, whose son managed the produce department of a local grocery store, Hector had found part-time work there loading shelves. The money was peanuts, but he was happy to start at the bottom and work his way up. More than anything, he was grateful for a second chance, improbable as it was. An opportunity to redeem himself. The temptations of his old life, such as they were, no longer held sway. He had every reason to hope that the second half of his life would be as honest and fulfilling as the first half was not.

Nevertheless, a cloud darkened Hector's life, a shadow. Even though he'd served five years for narcotics possession, he could have done life for all the other crimes and misdeeds he had committed. The list was long, and ugly. He couldn't help but feel that he wasn't square with the universe yet, that his comeuppance wasn't complete. The Outlaws from the joint represented the biggest tangible threat, but he wasn't worried about them or other bikers per se; he knew justice wasn't always meted out by human hands. His punishment felt incomplete, but he had no inkling what that really meant. He went back in and shone the flashlight toward his door. He opened the door and looked out into the hall. Pitch black and hot as an oven. The emergency lights must have been down as well. Horror in the event of a fire. Old people lived on the floor. The whole neighbourhood teemed with seniors. He wasn't about to knock on any doors, but he wondered what these people were doing. Hearing nothing, he went back inside.

What now? Even his smartphone was dead. He'd forgotten to charge it earlier, of course. There was a knock at the door. He beamed the flashlight and started in its direction, but stopped and waited for another knock. His breathing quickened. When another knock didn't come, he steeled himself and opened the door. He looked out. No one as there. No time to be playing tricks on folks, he thought. You'd get shanked in the joint pulling that shit.

He shone the light and made his way to the living room but tripped on the little table holding a blown-glass lamp. The lamp shattered. He moved backwards and heard a crunch.

“Fuck!” he cried. “Jesus fuck!”

He'd gashed his right heel on broken glass. When he shone the flashlight on his foot he could see it bleeding thickly through the sock. It was bad. Bad shit happens in the dark, he thought, biting his lip.

He wrapped a dishtowel around the heel. He opened the door and shouted into the hall, "Someone help me! I'm hurt!" No response. He limped up to the door across the way and knocked. He knew an older couple lived there, but he'd never introduced himself and they'd made no effort to know him either. He waited a minute, but no one came. He checked the peephole, but detected no activity. They must've been out. He could feel blood oozing from his wrapped foot.

He went back into his apartment, avoiding the area where the lamp had broken. He bumped his elbow heading to his bedroom. It smarted. He stretched out on his bed and adjusted the bloody dishtowel around his foot. He rubbed his elbow. It hurt like a cocksucker. He looked out his window. Black except for a flat across the street, illumined by candlelight.

The knocking recommenced, louder. Someone was really banging.

The candlelight across the street flickered as an old woman in a loose white nightdress danced to music Hector couldn't and didn't want to hear. His eyes blurred up as his frustration grew: the knocking continued. He jumped out of bed and hobbled to the door. He stood there staring at the door and after a time the knocking stopped. He waited a beat, then flung open the door. Nothing: no one was there. For the first time that evening he felt afraid.

He wrapped his bleeding foot with another dishtowel and slipped on his flip-flops. He moved into the hallway and shut the door behind him. It was shockingly dark, his flashlight beaming into a void. Nor could his eyes adjust enough to discern any features of the walls or determine distance. Without windows or emergency lights the hallway was a virtual black hole.

Nevertheless he groped like a blind man to the stairwell. He found the door and pushed it open. He descended the staircase with great care, almost stumbling at one point. When he exited into the courtyard he saw that some people had set fire to a garbage bin and stood around it murmuring. Something about that disturbed him. A dog barked terribly in the darkness.

Hector scoped the grounds but made out nothing except for two figures in silhouette at one end of the courtyard speaking in low voices. For some reason he started toward them, as if they might have provided answers the people huddled around the burning garbage bin could not.

But as he moved closer to the figures, they split off in two different directions, each absorbed by the darkness. Indeed, total darkness suddenly engulfed the courtyard. It seemed that all the lanterns and candles—and even the burning garbage can—had been abruptly extinguished. Hector stood there at a loss, his bearings thrown off. The fear he had tasted earlier filled his chest like a cold particulate. He waved his flashlight around trying to find purchase with his surroundings, but as in the hallway, his flashlight beamed into a void.

He aimed the flashlight toward what he thought—judging from its shadowy outline—was a tree. But the tree appeared to be moving toward him. At first slowly, then quickly. He started, dropped the flashlight with a crunch and froze like a statue.

"Hector," said a voice in the darkness.

He didn't recognize the voice. It had a hollow, metallic quality that filled him with dread. Blind to the speaker, and too frightened to speak, Hector wrapped his arms around his chest and cringed.

"Hector," the voice said, "calm down. It's okay."

"Who the fuck are you?"

"That doesn't matter. I'm just here to deliver a message."

“Show yourself, motherfucker!”

The darkness swirled, black and darker shades of black overlapping and twisting. Even the sky was pitch black, a starless curtain of black, a fluttering sheet of fathomless black. The absence of light felt painful, breathtaking. Hector couldn't see anything, not even the hand he held up to his eyes.

“What do humans fear most?” the voice said. “Perhaps being obliterated, being erased, forgotten, expunged from the historical record—terrifying. And sometimes the conditions of the obliteration prove uniquely terrifying to the individual—customized as it were, tailor-made for him or her.”

Hector stepped toward the voice, swinging his arms.

“No use fighting it. You cannot thwart your fate. You cannot shake it. Indeed, it is your duty to bear it.”

Now the voice was behind Hector. He turned and lunged toward it, lunging at nothing in effect, grabbing only handfuls of the blackness, of the nothing. He rubbed his eyes; perhaps something was wrong with them, hysterical blindness, the corneas somehow clouded . . .

“But you, bless you, are clueless.”

Now the voice came from the right. Hector swung his fists in futility. Who could be doing this to him? Was this real? It felt real enough. Sweat poured off his face. His gashed foot throbbed and bled. It felt real enough.

“I know what you're thinking. Is this a dream or am I going crazy? Well, it's neither nor, and yet a little of both.”

“What do you want from me?” Hector cried, the black air thickening around him, his breathing growing laboured.

“That's the wrong question. I want nothing from you. It's what Nothing wants from you that's important.”

Hector didn't understand. He stood there blinking in fear and confusion, chest heaving.

“The blackout was for you, Hector. It's your blackout, all yours.”

“Why are you doing this to me?”

“Nothing is doing this to you, Hector. It's your Nothing.”

Hector started screaming.

“That's good, Hector. Let it go. Where can you scream? It's a serious question: where can a man go and properly scream?”

The Toast
Wendi Dass

Now. "A toassstt," a man says with slurred speech. He raises a glass in one hand and loses his balance. "To Roger and Lacccecy."

Two hours ago. In the receiving line, I pinched a smile at my cousin, Lacy. She greeted me with an equally fake one.

Four days from now. Grandma will call. "Wasn't that a lovely wedding?" she'll ask. "When are you going to get married?" Then she'll add, just to make sure I understand, "To a man."

Now. "To Roger," the slurrer continues, "my brother in Beta. You can drink me under the table."

Nine years ago. "You don't kiss boys, anyway," Lacy said through a giggle as she left prom with my date. I wanted to say, I kiss boys and girls, Lacy. But I said nothing.

Twenty minutes ago. "Doesn't Lacy look beautiful?" a relative asked me. I replied, "Doesn't she always?"

Now. The slurrer swaggers upright and raises his glass, "To Lacy, the best fuck I've ever had."

Fifteen minutes from now. Lacy will sob in the bathroom. Everyone will tell her it doesn't matter, but everyone, including me, will know better.

Loomis, OK
Robin Zlotnick

Stealing is a crappy thing to do. It's like universal, commandment, "thou shall not" shit, right? You steal, you're bad. That's what I thought. But now, things are getting messed up in the majorly moldable mind of this *poor, innocent, super awesome girl*. And it's not my fault. I'm only eleven. It's the adults' faults. Not all of the adults, I guess, but a huge portion of the ones I know.

There was this theft in my town a couple days ago and people have "mixed feelings" about it. What even is that? Mr. McRory may be super old and way weird, but that doesn't mean that he deserved to get his shit stolen away from him. My mom keeps saying it wasn't really surprising because most of the town keeps hating the old man more and more ever since the movie was made two years ago. But I don't get it because first of all, *House of Heads* is AWESOME. About a billion people get axed and my favorite part is when the slasher guy, Skinface, is wearing the face skin of the main girl's boyfriend and he tricks her and makes her follow him into the bed where they do stuff under the covers and just as she realizes it's the killer, he machetes her flat out! Then her head falls off the bed and rolls and lands by her underpants. Oh man. It is basically the best movie ever. It makes a lot of sense that the whole country loves it so much. So much that basically all of the tourists there are started visiting the town it got inspired from: my town.

I read this one interview on my favorite website ever, *GOREmag*, which you should really check out because it has the best interviews with all different people who make horror movies like directors, actors, and makeup guys. The interview was with the director of *House of Heads*, Sid Rath (just saying his name in case you haven't heard of him, but you definitely have, unless you live under a rock at the bottom of the ocean, which you don't because you would not be able to breathe). One day, Mr. Rath was driving through this area because he was looking for an old house to shoot one of his movies in. (We have the best old houses for that kind of thing.) He stopped at Mr. McRory's place and thought it was so incredible that he wrote the entire script for *House of Heads* in fifteen days, and then shot the whole movie in twenty, which is really impressive, because it's a freaking masterpiece.

Mr. Rath says he was "entranced by the unapologetic backwoods eccentricity" of my town, which I had to look up some of the words, but I found out it means he was, "filled with wonder by the not acknowledging or expressing regret bush country weirdness," which I think just means he loved it. He also said, "with *House of Heads*, I wanted to explore that fear of what lurks in the comfort of your own home. Small town America ain't what it used to be. No one trusts the neighbors with their children anymore. There's an unspoken, constant level of discomfort with 'the other,' even when 'the other' has lived two doors down for twelve years. We like to think that we like each other; that we exist in an idyllic community of people who all work together and that everything's hunky-dory. But we can't admit to ourselves that we're deathly afraid of our own mistrust." ...which I'm pretty sure just means if we're nice to people, we probably won't get axed by murderers.

The recognition from *House of Heads* was score a million for Mr. McRory. No one ever went to his foot museum before the movie came out. People always thought it was weird that the old man collected feet. Plus, he didn't have ads in the *Gazette* or on channel six, so I don't know

how he expected people to show up. But luckily, when Mr. Rath shared it with the world, so many tourists started coming to town. They came from all different places, even places that are super far away like California, which is kind of crazy because you'd have to fly and then drive a long time to get here. But they did, and Mr. McRory finally got famous like he must have always wanted.

That's when people started hating the old man. It makes no sense though because he's not actually a killer who murders people to steal their heads, like Skinface. He just collects feet. He finds them when there are dead animals on the road or he goes to pawn shops. It's the same thing as collecting stamps, only way less boring.

I went to Mr. McRory's Foot Museum once a few months ago right after the sequel, *House of Heads: The Reaping*, came out. It wasn't as good as the first one but there were some pretty cool death scenes, like the one when Skinface went to the prom and had the face skin of the new main girl's boyfriend on and they danced with their faces touching until his face fell off around her and she realized it was the killer in her boyfriend's skin but he had already stabbed her in front of everyone. She tried to yell but she couldn't because he held her super tight and kept dancing her away from the crowd, so no one noticed! They danced out of the gym until she died once and for all in the deserted hallway. It was very clever, I thought.

There were loads of visitors in town again. I was walking home one day and I saw the sign. It was just on a piece of wood and it said, "Foot Museum" in black marker with an arrow pointing down the road. Mr. McRory must have put it out there for the tourists to find the museum better, but it was pretty crappy and you could definitely not even see it if you were driving too fast down Greenhill, which everyone and their mother does. I thought I should probably talk to Mr. McRory about getting a better sign that's way bigger with colors and a picture of one of his weirdest feet. Also, I wanted to see what all the fuss was about. I'd never been to the Foot Museum before and I love exploring. I'm pretty brave, but another thing is my mom told me about how this one time when I was little, she lost track of me in Wagner's. Mr. McRory saw me sneak away and crawl into the cereal aisle and he told her I was there, so how weird could he be? But my mom really should have guessed where I was because if you know me at all, you know I love cereal. So I went to the museum which I figured out is also Mr. McRory's house because there was a kitchen and stuff.

It is most likely the coolest place that there will ever be in the world. Mr. McRory had so many feet (well duh, it's a foot museum, but still, it's surprising to see that many feet in one spot). I touched a chicken foot and a frog leg and a boar hoof and this weird Siamese turtle that had its feet connected. Mr. McRory's coolest, weirdest foot was giant one that kind of looked like a human's but it was bigger, hairy, and super gross. It had webbed toes and nasty crusty nails. It was bonkers. The plaque said that it belonged to a prehistoric caveman swimmer creature and that it was found off the coast in a big ocean rock. I wanted to touch it really badly, but it was in a glass box.

His house wasn't that big, but still, every room had feet galore in it. On the shelves, on the floor, on top of each other in piles, in glass boxes, and in shoeboxes, which is pretty ironic if you think about it.

I was looking at tiny lizard feet that mostly looked like dried twigs, and I yelled to Mr. McRory, I said, "How many feet you got?!"

"Three thousand seventy-nine," he said from the kitchen.

"That's odd because feet always come in evens."

I thought it was pretty clever but he didn't laugh. I said it must feel good to finally get famous like he always wanted, and all he said was, "Mergh." I don't think he hears the best.

There are always new people who come to visit the museum. They mostly wear *House of Heads* t-shirts and a lot of the guys have ponytails. It's exciting and it's fun, and I don't understand what's the big problem.

It is a big problem, though. It all started with the hugest argument over the banner that was hung up under the town border sign right after the first movie came out. The border sign is a big piece of dark wood and it has mountains all on the top that are covered with snow and then green trees below and then under that, the name of our town carved and painted gold. People go nuts over it, but it's just a sign. I guess it makes us look important, even though only 2,456 people live here. But under our big sign, they hung a big bright yellow banner with red letters that said:

Home of the Famous Foot Museum!
Inspiration for the Smash Hit, House of Heads!

Mrs. Dimwad, this old lady that makes people miserable like it's her job, even though her actual job is to help Dr. Walden do teeth cleanings, which, never mind...her real job is to make people miserable too. But she started this whole campaign to take down the big banner. (I should tell you that her real name isn't actually Dimwad, I don't think, but whatever it is, it sounds a lot like it so I just call her Dimwad because it's convenient, especially since she's a giant dimwad.) Here's a reason Mrs. Dimwad is such a dimwad: She made all these posters and hung them up all over town to campaign against the banner, but the poster had a picture of the banner on it, so instead of getting rid of one big banner, she posted about a million little ones all over the place! Pretty stupid, right?

One day of this campaign, Mrs. Dimwad and a bunch of other people, like Ms. Nan, the piano teacher, Mr. Douglas, the post office manager, and the Billingsley family went and knocked on everyone's door and gave this whole long talk. The Billingsleys make up like half the town; they are everywhere and all their kids never want to play outside. They're so boring. Once in science, we had to search for ecosystems in the forest but Sandra Billingsley complained literally the whole time that she didn't want to get dirt on her dress. Such a whiner.

But they all came to our door one day and were like, "The reputation we're getting from the *House of Heads* movies is 'killing' our town just like Skinface killed those 'poor, innocent teenagers.'" I would have shut the door right in their dumb faces but my mom is too nice, so she just let Dimwad stand there and go on and on and on: "The tourists are 'slashing' our pride with their rude behavior. Some of them wear Skinface masks while walking in our streets and it terrifies the children—"

"Not me! You'd only be scared if you were a total wuss!" I said from behind my mom. But Dimwad acted like I wasn't even there! She and the twit army just kept going while I stayed angry on the stairs:

"We're not a town full of Skinface enthusiasts and do not deserve to be treated as if we should worship this disgrace of a film."

(If you're smart or cool, you love *House of Heads* and Skinface. I told you. You get it, so...)

"We don't deserve this invasion of privacy."

(Pretty ironic, I thought. It's not like tourists are knocking on our doors and going on and on and on, unlike some people I know, so...)

“We aren’t all hermits who collect feet, but that’s the implication. The world looks at us as some kind of weird science experiment!”

(Science experiments are awesome like this one I did where you put a piece of bread in a plastic bag and then look at it for several days and watch for all the mold that grows. You don’t even have to touch it and it gets green and white and fuzzy all by itself, so...)

“We’re good, moral, Christian people—”

(UGHHHHHHHHHH! So...)

I had to walk away. I made sure to stamp my feet and be really loud so they knew I was angry.

After all that, the banner was taken down and replaced with the smallest banner ever that’s not even yellow and red. It’s just black and white and it says, “Home of The Famous Foot Museum,” and you can barely even read it. It’s not fair. Mr. James, Veronica’s dad, is the mayor, and he made this decision, which makes sense because Veronica James is just about the lamest person in my grade, so she must learn her lameness from her dad.

A couple months after that, Dimwad went berserk one day when there was this tourist who asked her if anyone in her family was killed by Skinface. Obviously the guy was just stupid, or else he would have known that we don’t actually have a killer in our town. Dimwad freaked her shit though and screamed at the guy and then marched over to Mayor James’s house and screamed at him too.

If a tourist asked me about Skinface, I would think it’s so funny that they thought we really had a killer that I would make up a whole entire story about him. I’d be all spooky with my voice and put a flashlight under my chin and go, “Way back in history, all the way in the ‘70s, there was this family, the Marshalls, that moved into the house on Bleaker Street. That’s right, the abandoned one on the corner. They were quiet and no one really got to know them and they never decorated their house for Christmas and the daughter didn’t really have any friends because she didn’t take the bus to school or sit with anyone at lunch. They were pretty mysterious until one day the Marshall daughter didn’t show up to school and one teacher only noticed that she wasn’t there in the last period of the day. So she called home and the phone was off the hook. A couple more days passed and no one really thought about it except that teacher started worrying and called the police. She had to convince them a lot but they finally went to the Marshall house to see what was up.

“They slowly walked up the steps and knocked on the door and no one answered but they heard noises from inside: feet shuffling and squishy weird noises. They opened the door and what did they find? Mr. Marshall, the dad, sitting in the middle of the floor, not saying anything. Only he wasn’t just sitting there...his daughter was around him. In pieces. All chopped up. And her face skin was gone, because Mr. Marshall was wearing it. And that’s how we got Skinface.” I’d say something like that and totally freak out the tourist and it would be awesome.

Ever since Dimwad started yelling, whenever Mr. McRory comes into town, he gets dirty looks or is flat out ignored, and same with the tourists. Mr. McRory never tries to make trouble or even talk to people. He just buys his groceries or mails his letters and goes home. I try to smile at him whenever I pass by him on Main, but he never even looks up.

In the last few days, since some bozo stole a whole buttload of Mr. McRory’s feet, the whole town feels like the first twenty minutes of any scary movie. Everyone mostly acts normal but there’s something in the air that makes everyone quiet and suspicious. Kids laugh and play

but there's this dark and warning feeling that makes you just know that shit is about to go crazy. In movies, it's awesome. In real life, not so much.



I have good news and bad news. I'm going to say the good news first because it's simple to forget about good news and come back and think about it later, but it's not so easy to do that with bad news. The good news is that the reviews of the newest Sid Rath movie are things like, "The third installment of the *House of Heads* series, *House of Heads: Revelation 3D*, is frightening like you wouldn't believe! Rath's most nuanced...and violent film yet!" And there was this article about a lady who fainted during a screening of it, so that's always a good sign that it will be nice and gory.

Now the bad news: Another theft happened. It hasn't even been a week since over three hundred of Mr. McRory's feet went missing, and now three hundred more are gone too. It's not like they're walking away by themselves (ha ha). The worst part is whatever creep stole them took the best foot: the super rare caveman ocean swimmer foot in the glass box. No doubt that it was one of a kind, and Mr. McRory will probably never get it back! More tourists are coming to visit the Foot Museum because of the third movie, and at this rate, Mr. McRory won't have any feet left to show them!



It's been a day since the second theft and nothing has happened. Mr. McRory reported it to the police, but they haven't done anything. I just don't get it. If someone gets his stuff stolen, don't you help him get it back? Even if it's feet? Even if you think he's the weirdest, most creepiest person alive, if he's not murdering people, you should help him.

The whole town is going nuts over the theft, but in the opposite way you would think. Dimwad and all the other dimwads are getting in your face outside Wagner's and saying to give thanks that God has recognized the damage that the Foot Museum has done to our town and is now reversing it. They yell at tourists in the street. Some hooligans started putting up signs everywhere in the town that said "Foot Museum This Way" with an arrow and had them pointing in all different directions to confuse tourists so they can't actually find Mr. McRory's place. Someone Skinfaced the school—they put Skinface masks on sticks all over the lawn outside one night. It was wrong, but I have to admit it did look kind of cool.

It was definitely Dimwad's people that tore down the banner though. She made such a fuss about it, got the mayor to put up the dumbest, smallest sign ever, and now it's flat out gone. Pretty suspicious. And the police aren't doing anything! They didn't even help Mr. McRory try to find his stolen feet. To make it worse, people like my mom who even feel a little bad for Mr. McRory won't say anything, because they're too nice. My mom says she "doesn't want to stir up trouble," but I think that's ridiculous, because look around! The whole town is stirred up in trouble now.

Now, it feels like the middle forty minutes of a scary movie, where everyone is freaking out and no one knows what's happening. There's a murderer on the loose and people do stupid things like copycat the killer or leave their doors unlocked or still go camping. The police are useless and they get totally schooled by the crazy killer. This is the point in the movie when you just know there's going to be another big horrible death scene, probably at a town carnival or a

school dance. It gets all quiet and tense because everyone just knows it's going to happen no matter what they do. They go to the carnival or the dance because they want to believe that somehow things could be normal, but deep inside, they know that all hope is lost. That they can't win. That's what it feels like in my town right now. But we don't have an actual murderer, or a town carnival, or a school dance. We just have crazy foot thefts and people yelling at each other, so no one knows what the next big horrible thing to happen will be.



Mr. McRory stopped coming to town. I would too if everyone was treating me terribly. I wanted to take him some pie, but my mom said not to go over to his place and that I'd be grounded for two weeks if I did. Usually that scares the bajeezus out of me and so I don't do it, but I argued good this time. Mom just finished making her famous apple crumble pie, so I figured I'd take the whole thing to him. She let me take one slice. Better than nothing, I guess. I put it on a paper plate and wrapped it in tin foil and I wrote him a note on a post-it in lots of colored markers that said, "Dear Mr. McRory, This is for you. Hope you like apple." I feel like I've seen him buying apples before. Plus, no one can resist my mom's apple crumble pie.

I was going to walk all the way there, but with all the scary shit that's happening and the fact that everyone and their mother drive too fast down Greenhill means that my mom is driving me.



The pie got a little smushed in the car ride. We had to stop short so we didn't hit a squirrel and it flew out of my lap and landed on the floor, top down. I picked it up in a hurry though, so I think it'll be okay. Besides, it's the thought that counts. My mom parked on the end of his driveway because she didn't want to go all the way up to his house, so now I'm walking down the gravel. I hope Mr. McRory likes the pie and knows that there are people who think his foot museum is the coolest thing ever. From here it looks like his door is open, so maybe he has some nice tourists over who are still excited about his feet, even though most of the really cool ones got stolen.



I've been knocking on the door for a whole five minutes even though it's open a little. My mom says it's never okay to just barge in on someone, and I agree—what if Mr. McRory just took a shower? He's a nice old guy, but if I saw him naked, I'd probably puke my guts out. The door is open though, and I peeked in a tiny bit. It's really quiet. The most amount of quiet I've ever heard...or I guess haven't heard, in my entire life.

It's like in the very end of a scary movie when the police or the parents get to the place where the main character was just axed, and they walk really slowly and breathe really deeply and in their eyes you can see that they know that they're about to see the grossest murder scene ever. They gulp and step ever so slowly around the corner and BAM—headless girl knifed to the wall...or something.



I call Mr. McRory's name a whole bunch of times, but I feel weird yelling in the super quietness. I look back and see my mom's car at the very end of the driveway. It looks way more far away than it did before. I turn back to Mr. McRory's and I put my hand on the door handle. I take an end-of-scary-movie big breath and open the door.



I am just standing here, totally shocked. If I was watching myself in a scary movie right now, I would be yelling and screaming at myself to run away, stupid! Now I understand why they don't run in scary movies. When you're scared enough, your legs forget how to work.

There's nothing here. And when I say nothing, I mean no Mr. McRory, no feet, no anything. The piles, the shoeboxes, the Siamese turtle...all gone.

Before my brain starts to work, my legs start to work, but my hands stop working, so I run out of the house and drop the pie at the same time. It doesn't even matter, I just keep running up the gravel to my mom's car, which doesn't seem like it's getting any closer until I ram up against the door and hop in as fast as I can and fasten my seatbelt. My mom can always tell when something isn't right, so she asks me something, which is probably, "What's wrong?" but all I hear is, "Xlkdbi sdsaklg?" I just say, "Police!" and she looks at me with her crazy eyes that she got that one time I broke my arm from climbing the tree at recess and she had to meet me and the school nurse at the hospital. I breathe again and explain that Mr. McRory's house is totally empty. No feet, no old man. "What if Mr. McRory caught the thief while he was stealing all the feet?! What if the thief killed him when they saw each other?! What if the thief cut off his feet?! What if the killer leaves Mr. McRory's feet on the steps of the police station to leave them a warning message?! What if—" That's where my mom stops me. She says I have been watching too many scary movies. That's ridiculous.



We went and reported it to the police and I made them come out to Mr. McRory's to check it out. There was no sign of Mr. McRory anywhere. He didn't have a car, so it couldn't have been missing, but all his feet were gone and so were some other things like a clock and a painting. There was a glass of milk on the kitchen table that was partway drank. That means someone ran in on Mr. McRory minding his own beeswax. The police just said he probably decided he didn't want his milk anymore, but I know the truth. He was just an innocent old guy who was a little weird because he collected feet, and now he's lying in a ditch somewhere with his feet chopped off!

The police were in the middle of saying there was nothing they could do when they got a call on their walkie-talkies—there was a vandalism of the town sign. My mom said we had to go home but I cried until she agreed to go. I was really worried about Mr. McRory. Also, if I cry enough, I can pretty much convince my mom to do anything.

The sign looked pretty normal when we pulled up, but then I got out of the car and took a closer look. Something with the L was strange. I went right up to it because I'm pretty brave, and do you even know what it was? Nailed right to the L, swinging from the town sign that everyone loves so much, was the one-of-a-kind prehistoric ocean swimmer caveman foot with webbed toes

and crusty nasty nails. It was right there in front of me. I watched the foot dangling from the sign for a long time. I thought about Mr. McRory.

Did the thief take all his feet then tease him by nailing the coolest weirdest one to the sign?

Did Mr. McRory catch the thief in action so the thief killed him before he could finish his milk and dragged him out by the very feet he would chop off later?

What if Mr. McRory was the one who stole his own feet in order to see how the town would react, and when they didn't care at all that his feet were missing, he kept stealing his own feet until eventually he made himself disappear?

Or maybe Mr. McRory got kidnapped by a crazy tourist, or—

OOH OOH, what if Mr. McRory skipped town to go on a feet finding revenge mission that will end with him coming back to the town and he'll go crazy and start actually murdering people and start a real foot museum of real townspeople's feet?! That would probably be super scary but also kind of ironic because it would be like real life inspired a movie that inspired a whole bunch of real-life trouble that inspired a real movie-like slasher killer! I don't think Mr. McRory would do that though. Plus he's kind of old and I bet he doesn't fight the best.

It was probably a crime scene, and I was really thinking a lot about poor Mr. McRory and how terrible people had been to him and I felt horrible that he probably was murdered by a crazy foot thief, but I kept looking at the hairy crusty foot and it was practically calling my name and I swear I felt really bad about Mr. McRory but I reached out my finger and like I wanted to since the very first time I saw it, I touched it. It was gross.

A Way with Stones
Brendan Gillen

Figure I know just where to find him. If there's one thing I know about Grady Fanning it's where I'll find him when he's got nowhere to go. Poor Grady. They found his Ma floating face down in the river. Say she walked right in like a day at the beach. But except instead of a bathing suit, she loaded her robe pockets with stones and down with the fishes she went. I wonder if she could see their eyes, the fishes. Ink black and darting. And I wonder if they could see her mouth go open and closed until the bubbles stopped coming. You're one of us now Mrs. Fanning, they'd say.

I go round to the coup and sure enough I hear him moving about inside, the wood planks whining, the birds with their low yodel. It was right here in the lane by the coup we first met, Grady and me. We were no more than five and I was chipping away at a puddle of ice with a stick. I don't know why I was doing it other than it felt nice to break something. He strolled right up and didn't even say his name he just asked me what I'd do if I won a million trillion dollars. He looked like he needed a bath and a friend. I don't remember what I told him, but I do remember what he told me: a big clean house for Ma and a guitar for Pop that's not broke. That's it? I said. That's it, Grady said.

I reach in through the busted window and undo the latch. Grady broke that window with a stone on his tenth birthday. Suppose his family has a way with stones, don't they? Into the back of the coup I go and right away I can feel it in the charged air something's wrong. The hanging lightbulbs jitter with their dim glow. Up in the front room of the shed I hear heavy shuffling and scraping. It's two bodies, not one, I can tell, and then I hear Grady say a single word: *Wes*. For fuck's sake Grady, I say through my teeth and run into the other room, sweeping the light bulbs out of my face. There's a whoosh like a John Wayne lasso and a thunk, and by the time I reach the other room, Grady is drawing up the plank to take a swing again. Down on the floor of the coup on his hands and knees is Wes Guff and he looks weak and pathetic and he's sweeping the floor with his hands for his specs. His face is all twisted up like a mask and he's terrified. Grady doesn't see me. All he sees is blood and the hole he's going to put in Wes's face and before he gets the chance I yell his name: *Grady!*

He looks at me and the red rage in his face turns white. The plank slips from his grip to the floor with a thud. Wes scrambles to his feet and dusts off his cable sweater. He puts on his glasses, but one of the lenses is spider cracked. Poor Grady. I can see right then and there I've lost him. The boy is gone, just like his Ma.

Get the fuck out of here Wes, I say. He doesn't think twice, just scrapes up his books all dusty from the coup and runs past us and out the back door with a bang.

I'm sorry Vince, Grady says to me. He tries to smile, but it's more like a wince. Mrs. Guff is telling the whole town I'm the one killed Ma. How could she say that, Vince? I didn't mean anything by running away, I swear it. I brought her back a present and everything.

From his pocket, Grady draws out this carved wood dolphin, the kind you buy cheap at the knickknacks shop. Made in China no doubt, but I don't say that.

Instead I say: You could've killed him, Grady. And then what? Then you'd be right fucked. Did you think about that? Did you?

Grady shakes his head. I'm sorry, Vince, he says.

This is the end of it, I say. No more.

The end of it, Grady says.

You'll leave Wes alone?
Grady nods.
And I want to believe him.

We leave the coup and go down to the river and neither of us says much, because what's there to say? Grady starts to dig a ditch and build a fort and I help him because I know he needs it. Then he takes the sharp end of a broken stick and draws it across his forearm until the scratch turns pink, then red, then bloody. He smears some of the blood in the palm of his right hand and holds it out for me to shake.

Blood brothers, Grady says. No more fucking around from here on out.

Poor Grady, I think.

I take the stick from him and before I have the chance to think twice, I draw it across my forearm until a thin line of red blood shines through. I dab it in my palm and look at Grady and then I shake his hand because it's the only thing to do.

Blood brothers, I say and know right then that things will never be the same.

Acid House
Brendan Gillen

Saturday bled Sunday as you licked your grinning inky teeth. We swam a candy-coated glow. I pulled you close. Sweat slick. Wide irises.

Chained above, the speakers were a tank.

Our feet pedaled the rumble gummy floor. Drums like mud, but our bodies glanced and flowed, a simmering ocean. Stop motion riot arms flickered in the strobe, bending and beseeching, cresting like freelance waves. Free, or maybe under siege.

This was our refuge, our ecstatic canvas. Where we met, tested chemicals. For me it was a prelude. For you it was preempted. Outside these beating walls, I became your anchor, a radio edit. Life for you is a sinewy song. You may never escape the escape.

The chrome pulse pounded as I reached for your hand, something familiar in the building froth.

Your lips said, *Be right back*, but your eyes clicked a new horizon. I watched you merge, a buzzy body swallowed up, convinced myself the crescendo wouldn't explode.

In the pillowy dim of the car ride home, you stared ahead, the plastic rush a fading blaze.

We have the rest of our lives to reach, you said. You turned, your smile a brittle descent.

It could have been our credo, the tone of our future.

Instead, the bones took hold and you were gone, a fading dawn, a chorus I'll never know.

Move On, Irene
D.T. Mattingly

To Ivan, time stood still. A calm surged through his blood and bones, vanquishing physical pains, while his emotions remained. Unable to find comfort in his surroundings, Ivan floated in a seemingly limitless sea, the sky a dull gray and the clouds pacing their currents quicker than usual.

The longer he drifted, the more he was reminded of his transient existence, and even worse, his mistakes. Thoughts of Irene never abandoned his lamentations. He sulked of their five years of marriage—and how he failed her.

“Why!” His voice echoed for moments, leading him to ponder. Wondering of how he remained afloat induced angst, his ruminations bouncing around in his mind like erratic molecules. He missed Irene even more, sobbing and splashing the water around him as he attempted to turn from his back, his heart racing at groundless ideas of massive sea creatures sweeping up from beneath him.

Then, a voice called: “Relax, son.”

Ivan stopped, glancing around as far as his neck allowed, confined to his back as if the sea continued to tug on his spine. “Who’s there?”

“A governor of worlds.”

“So, like a god?” Ivan remarked, oddly placated.

“Yes. Ivan, do you plan to move on to the next world, or will you rest?”

His brows furrowed. “There’s no mistaking it. You are a god. You know my name.”

“Yes.”

“Just ‘yes’?” Ivan sighed. “I’m sorry, but I don’t know what you’re talking about. If I were to rest, then it wouldn’t be here. Don’t you think I deserve my home and wife?”

The deity chuckled. It reverberated, seeming brash enough to cause the mountains of Ivan’s former planet to shiver. “Your wife isn’t dead yet. Thus, I cannot give you her. And even if I wanted to, she has the same decision to make.”

The deity appeared far from solemn. “When will I be able to see her again?”

“In about ten to twenty years, depending on her answer.”

“What! She will only be in her forties or fifties!”

“Ivan, I’ll admit: I’m aware of when all life forces begin and end. You have died. Do you realize this?”

Ivan gazed into his wet palms. “I kind of figured so.”

“You may see Irene again, but please for your sake, think before you speak to me.”

A chill stroked Ivan’s spine. Questioning the deity’s legitimacy seemed inconsequential considering the god’s ability to speak from beyond the plane he felt restrained to. “Okay, what are my options again?”

“My days of absolute judgment are over. No more eternal damnation, but rather, infinite opportunity. I’ve learned that humans require lifetimes to learn from their mistakes.”

“So throw everything we’ve learned about certain religions out the window?” Ivan questioned.

“*Religion* is an evolving paradigm. Don’t toss away that knowledge. Add to it.”

“Okay, but what are you getting at?”

“Ivan, there are infinite worlds. You were born on World 3. Generally, once people pass on their birth world, I give them the choice of resting or moving onto the next. However, some folk are coerced into moving on to start anew and repent for their wrongdoings—”

“I think I’ve heard enough,” Ivan interrupted, clenching his fists. “What I desire is rest. I’ll wait for Irene and we will live in harmony. Together.”

“You aren’t the slightest curious?”

Ivan smiled, countless memories inundating his head the more he thought of his beloved. “We had promised to spend our lives together.”

“Very well. I’ve already tapped into your mind to gather your ideal paradise. First, merged paradises only exist via consent from each involved person. Do you consent to living in a joint-paradise with Irene?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. If you seek another consultation with me, then ring the bell outside of your new home exactly three times.”

Ivan exhaled. As everything occurred, he tried contemplating what paradise the deity foresaw in his mind. He recollected his isolated life, no kids, parents deceased when he was the age of three—rarely any family outside of them—and only one spouse who had yet to pass. Asking the deity about other folk who may have requested him to join a merged paradise seemed futile.

“Do you have any questions?”

Snapping out of his trance, he searched the plain scenery for ideas. *I have to ask the god something, right?* “Um, maybe one.”

“Yes?”

“Time, is it constant? I feel stuck in a vacuum here.” Ivan again examined his hands, the water of the sea flowing down his forearms at a speed in conjunction to the clouds.

The deity laughed. “Time? If you’re able to approximate in your head, about every day in paradise is maybe a year on your former world. I hope that helps.”

So, the most I should wait is a couple of weeks, a few max. “Thank you ... I believe I’m ready now.”

A scintillating light flashed before Ivan, revealing the endless sea and solidifying a sense of hope in him. He had the deity to thank for keeping him afloat, and offering him an underserving chance at peace.

* * *

Weeks passed. Ivan awoke to sounds of soft rustling winds and chirping flocks of birds. He gazed out of a window to witness a realistic nature. As much as he tried to find a discrepancy in his paradise, everything felt identical to back home.

His feet touched the cold hardwood floor of his rustic cabin. He looked around and sighed, tapping his right foot before rising and busting through a door leading to an empty hallway. *Nothing.*

He searched more before wandering outside and staring down a short trail leading to the bell. Without deliberation, he caressed the bell’s shiny and sophisticated exterior, trying to ignore any desire to venerate its foreign texture and composition.

Ring. Ring. Ring.

“Hello,” the deity promptly answered.

“Why didn’t you tell me? Three weeks! I’ve waited three weeks!”

“It isn’t my responsibility to tell you anything, Ivan.”

“Did Irene not want a joint-paradise! Or did she move on! Tell me!”

“I cannot.”

Ivan huffed and slammed the bell, it ringing louder than the deity’s tongue. Soon regretting his actions, he thought back to the deity’s warning, fear cementing in him the longer silence bred.

“I’m ... I’m sorry,” Ivan mumbled.

“Now, what is your decision? Stay, or venture forth?”

Ivan couldn’t wrap his head around Irene’s choice. He found himself at a crossroads, realizing the risks of moving onto World 4. *What if she is resting in an alternate paradise? What if she had already moved on to World 5 from World 4? What if I never find her?* But, he knew of one thing: His cabin was no paradise without her. Hopefulness fell into the idea of searching for his love while accepting the chance of never seeing her again. Determined, he made a decision. “Send me to World 4. Please, I must go now.”

The deity conjured another ubiquitous light. Instead of a sea, Ivan beheld the worlds beyond his paradise: a neighborhood of utopias. In one of the adjacent paradises, he recognized an ostentatious penthouse, immediately eliciting memories of a notorious man from World 3. Dante, a former confidant, and Ivan’s worst of worries.

“Don’t tell me she’s over there,” Ivan said.

“Doubting your decision? May I ask why?”

“I know what kind of man Dante is. I know *that* is his paradise. I assume its no coincidence that we are placed alongside each other. My entire platoon...”

“Yes, perished together—a fatal ambush while dispatched—careless orders from your commander to infiltrate that city. My condolences, Ivan.”

“Have you spoken to him too?” Ivan probed, reluctant to recall anymore of his former demise, but even more shocked by the deity’s attempt at empathy.

“I speak to everyone.”

“Did he mention her?”

“You’re running out of time. Ivan, saying this is against my moral code, but I’m rooting for you. I shouldn’t be telling you this, but yes, he mentioned her. Finding Irene is a quest he chooses to embark on during his time on World 4.”

An overwhelming anger made Ivan immune to the blinding light of world transmission. He stared into it, seeing only the face of the man who once undermined his marriage, visualizing a thousand ways to execute him. Ivan never mentioned homicide, but it appeared the deity wanted him to win, and he believed that meant by all means possible.

* * *

A staunch man sat in a regal throne made of lavish, crimson velvet. He wore a harmonizing robe, gold streaks embroidered along its many seams, his blonde hair freshly tapered and cut militaristically, and his eyes an azure in color, similar to an illuminated ocean. He placed a cup of tea down on a round table stand aside his chair near a small, exquisite bell. Closing his eyes, he concentrated on a voice emanating in his head.

“Dante, saying this is against my moral code, but I’m rooting for you.”

He smirked. “Ivan, you fool.”

* * *

Both paradises vanished. Two men were to start anew on World 4, blinded by ego and driven by a resolve to not only find Irene, but also each other.

Amidst it all, Irene had yet to make a decision. She found temporary peace on the sandy shores of the sea Ivan fell prisoner to, drinking margaritas and watching nature take its course. Aside her beach chair, a bell rang on its own.

“I’m here.”

“Irene, *they* are no longer your problem. You may rest without vexation.”

She smiled, ditching a straw to down the remains of her margarita with a few colossal gulps. Wiping her mouth clean, she gazed into the emptiness of the sea, relishing the nirvana. *They say death liberates. But, what they don’t mention is this concept of immortality—the ideas of infinite worlds, rebirth, starting anew and leaving behind the poison. Paradise.*

The entity continued, “Your paradise is ready.”

“Thank you,” Irene replied. “You’re positive they’re gone?”

“Yes. Please do not worry.”

She rubbed one of her fists into her palm, alike someone using a mortar and pestle, at thought of all the times she fell victim to either Ivan or Dante treating her as the former.

“Even after their deaths, the remaining years I spent on World 3 were haunting. I’m still not fully over it, I guess.”

“You’re free of their torment. After seeing the dread in your eyes once I informed you of Ivan and Dante’s requests to share paradises, I knew right away.”

“How long may I stay in paradise?”

“For eternity.”

Irene shook her head. “Maybe a few dozen years. A century. Who knows? After giving those two plenty of time to chase me and each other, that is when I’ll move on.”

The deity snickered. “Very well. Is there anything else I can do for you while I’m present?”

For the second time in many years, Irene smiled. “Yes. Another margarita, please.”

Bio's

Kelley Crowley has worked as a radio personality, a music journalist and as the lead publicist for the world's largest invention show. Crowley currently teaches in the Media and Communication department at Shenandoah University in Winchester, Virginia where she encourages students to listen to the words, not just the beat.

Tamara Burross Grisanti's work has appeared in New World Writing, Chicago Literati, and Eunoia Review. She is editor of Coffin Bell Journal, associate editor of ELJ - Elm Leaves Journal, and social media editor of New World Writing.

Alex Rezdan is a nomadic fiction writer originally from Los Angeles and currently living in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. He has lived abroad in six countries since 2010 and has held a different job in each one. You can see more of Alex's published work from his website: alexrezdan.com.

Kim Farleigh has worked for aid agencies in Kosovo, Macedonia, Iraq, Palestine and Greece. He likes taking risks to get the experience necessary for writing. He also likes painting, wine, and bullfighting, which might explain why this Australian lives in Madrid. 149 of his stories have been accepted by 87 different magazines.

JW Burns lives in Florida. Recent publications in Danforth review, Ginisko Literary Journal and The Sierra Nevada Review.

Andrew Yusi is an up and coming writer. From video games as a teenager, to Legos as a kid, Andrew has been creating stories, characters, and unique plots all his life. Writing feature length films and exciting television shows is the next step in his personal story.

Carl Fuerst is a writing teacher who lives in Madison, Wisconsin. His fiction has appeared in Underground Voices, Flapperhouse, F(r)iction, and other publications. Additionally, he is head editor of The Breakroom Stories, an audio journal specializing in strange tales.

Bill Pieper, a member of the Squaw Valley Community of Writers, writes and lives in Sacramento, California. His stories have appeared in Farallon Review, Red Fez, Chiron Review and Scarlet Leaf Review, among others, with two of them receiving Pushcart nominations. For links to all his published work, see: <http://www.authorsden.com/billpieper>

Jessica Bonder is an American fiction writer. She has published short stories in The Stockholm Review, The Lonely Crowd, STORGY Magazine, Split Lip Magazine, Black Heart Magazine, The Fiction Pool, The Writing Disorder, and The Cabinet of Heed, among others.

Website: jessicabonder.com

Tweet her @jessbonder

Benjamin Selesnick is a student at Northeastern University. His work has appeared in Literary Orphans, The Cantabrigian, Bull & Cross, Anti-Heroin Chic, The Remembered Arts, Embers Igniting, and Spectrum. He was also the runner-up for the 2017 Stony Brook Short Fiction Prize.

Laurie Shiers is a late bloomer who, for fifteen years, hid her literary ambitions beneath a successful copywriting career. She is now her own kind of writer and creative development coach. Laurie lives in Los Angeles where she works with artists to connect with the passion and purpose behind their projects.

Mary Campbell Wild is the author of numerous short stories. Two have recently been published: one in the anthology *After Effects*, Zimbell House Publishing, 2017; another in *deLuge Journal*, Fall 2017. She holds an M.A. in International Communication from the American University, Washington, DC, and lives in Maryland.

Ateret Haselkorn writes fiction and poetry. She is the winner of 2014 Annual Palo Alto Weekly Short Story Contest (adult category). Her work has been published in *Anti-Heroine Chic*, *Scarlet Leaf Review*, *Literally Stories*, *Mused Literary Review*, and *Page & Spine*. She maintains a website at: <https://aterethaselkorn.wixsite.com/author>. Twitter: @HealthyHalo1.

Meagan Noel Hart is a writing contest junkie, chocoholic, and lover of words. Her writing spans many genres and has appeared in *Everyday Fiction*, *Mothers Always Write*, *Unusual Pet Tales*, and *72 hours of Insanity*. She has three collections of flash and short fiction.

Lawrence Morgan was born in Miami, raised in Istanbul, left home at the age of 15 to have adventures and see the world, and currently spends most of his time between Scotland and South Africa.

Aaron Heil spends his days in a library located underneath a university in Kansas's Flint Hills. His work has appeared in *Mad Scientist Journal*, *Memoir Mixtapes*, *Cold Creek Review* and others. He regularly contributes book reviews to *The Game of Nerds*.

Colin Lubner is a writer and math teacher from southern New Jersey. His short fiction has appeared in *100 Word Story*, *365 Tomorrows*, and *The Blue Route*.

Robert L. Penick's work has appeared in over 100 different literary journals, including *The Hudson Review*, *North American Review*, and *The California Quarterly*. He lives in Louisville, KY, USA, with his free-range box turtle, Sheldon, and edits *Ristau*, a tiny literary annual. Find more of his writing at www.theartofmercy.net

Sam Bellamy is from Brooklyn, NY, where she spends most of her time teaching, hanging out with her dog, and wishing that she was driving through the states in an airstream.

Audra Coleman lives in Asheville, North Carolina where she is earning her MLAS at UNCA. She has been honored to see her work appear in *WNC Woman*, *Mothers Always Write*, *The Good Mother Project*, *3288 Review*, *Kestrel*, *Palaver*, *Quail Bell Magazine* and *The Great Smokies Review*.

Alan Swyer is an award-winning filmmaker whose recent documentaries have dealt with Eastern spirituality in the Western world, the criminal justice system, diabetes, boxing, and singer Billy

Vera. He has also produced an album of Ray Charles love songs. His novel *The Beard* was recently published by Harvard Square Editions.

Darcy has been a lawyer for over twenty years, keeping writing on the back burner until now. She studied literary fiction at the University of Washington where she completed two certificate programs and was published in their literary magazine, *Stratus*. She is only recently submitting her work again and was published in *Halfway Down the Stairs* earlier this year. Darcy lives, hikes, and writes in Seattle, Washington.

Joshua Wade Freeman is the best part-time Publix employee one can come across. He can be found somewhere classy, like a Taco Bell or Wendy's. Follow him on Twitter @jwfreeman2017.

Julien Levy was born and raised in New York City. He graduated LaGuardia High School of the Performing Arts and received a bachelor's degree from Skidmore College. He now resides in Brooklyn, NY.

Trevor Almy lives in Jackson, Mississippi where he formerly taught high school English for three years and was the inaugural Poetry Out Loud teacher. He founded a literary magazine known as *The Wolf Skin* that operated from 2013 to 2016. He has two daughters and a son.

Kasisi Harris is a Continuous Improvement Manager and writer of fiction residing in Marysville, Washington. He is a graduate of the United States Naval Academy and has served as a commissioned officer in the Marine Corps. His work has recently been published in *Down in the Dirt Magazine*.

Daniel Fraser is a writer from West Yorkshire. His work has featured in the *LA Review of Books*, *Gorse*, *the Quietus*, *Music and Literature*, and *3AM Magazine* among others. He is an editor at Readysteadybook.com and lives in London. Find him on Twitter @oubliette_mag.

Sal Difalco splits time between Toronto and Sicily. His work has appeared in a number of journals.

Adam Giles's short fiction has appeared in a variety of literary journals. He lives in Mississauga, Ontario with his wife and two children. On Twitter, he's @gilesadam.

Wendi Dass is an emerging author from Central Virginia. Her short stories have been published in *Black Fox Literary* and *Pilcrow and Dagger*, among others.

F.F. Amanti holds a B.A. in English from Williams College. His short stories have previously appeared in *Under the Bed*, *Storyteller*, and *Five on the Fifth*. He lives with his wife and children in Palm Harbor, Florida and is currently working on his first novel. He is online at ffamanti.com

JW burns lives in Florida. Recent publications in *Danforth Review*, *Ginosko Literary Journal* and the *Sierra Nevada Review*.

Robin Zlotnick is a writer and editor and puppy enthusiast living in LA. She's originally from New York, but she doesn't talk about it too much. You can find her work in McSweeney's, The Belladonna, and at robinzlotnick.com.

Brendan Gillen's fiction has appeared in The Molotov Cocktail, (b)OINK, Flash Fiction Magazine and elsewhere. Originally from Charlottesville, VA, Brendan lives in Brooklyn, NY and is an MFA candidate at City College in Harlem.

Delvon T. Mattingly, who also goes by the pen name D.T. Mattingly, is an emerging fiction writer and an incoming Epidemiology PhD student at the University of Michigan. He currently lives in Louisville, Kentucky with his two cats, Liam and Tsuki.

Marina Ellis has been published by Canvas, Poetry Matters, and more. Marina has been awarded two Gold and one Silver Medal from Scholastic Art and Writing and second place in the National Federation of State Poetry Societies' 2017 contest. In free time, Marina enjoys to garden and cook family recipes.

Thomas L. Winters is a writer from Ontario whose parents immigrated here after meeting in Athens. He primarily writes poetry and speculative fiction, with a sharp interest in the surreal, the fringe, the macabre, the corners of space and time that have been criminally swept under the rug.

AR Dugan has an MFA in creative writing from Emerson College. His poetry can be seen or is forthcoming in a number of literary magazines and reviews, most recently Salamander. He reads poetry for Ploughshares and currently teaches literature and writing at Emerson College and Wheaton College.

André Hampshire is a classical composer who considers writing an equally significant means of expression, and uses one to speak where the other cannot. He is winner of no prestigious award and is relatively no one. His music can be heard at soundcloud.com/andrehamshire

Nikita Gill is a Pushcart Prize nominated poet. Her work has been previously been published in The Rising Phoenix Review, Literary Orphans, Monkeybicycle, Eunoia Review, Gravel Magazine and elsewhere.

Joe Oppenheimer is an award winning poet and fiction writer. Previously a professor of mathematical social science, his poems and stories have been published in a variety of literary journals including Corvus. More of his writings are available on his website <http://www.gvptsites.umd.edu/oppenheimer/id43.htm>

Christopher T. Keaveney teaches and East Asian culture and Japanese at Linfield College in Oregon and is the author of three books about Sino-Japanese cultural relations. His poetry has appeared in Columbia Review, Spoon River Poetry Review, and elsewhere, and he's the author of the collection Your Eureka not Mined.

Adrian Slonaker works as a copywriter and copy editor in St. John's, Newfoundland, Canada. Adrian's work has appeared in Squawk Back, The Bohemyth, Queen Mob's Tea House, Pangolin Review, The Honest Ulsterman, and others.

Ken Allan Dronsfield is a disabled veteran, poet and fabulist from New Hampshire, now living in Oklahoma. He loves writing, thunderstorms, walking in the woods at night and time with his cats Willa and Yumpy.

Michael Lee Johnson lived ten years in Canada and is a dual citizen of the United States and Canada. Today he is a poet, freelance writer, amateur photographer, and small business owner with more than 1016 publications. He was nominated for 2 Pushcart Prize awards for poetry.

Luke Powers teaches English and Folklore at Tennessee State University. He received his Ph.D. in English from Vanderbilt University and M.A. in Folklore the University of North Carolina. He is a poet and songwriter who has recorded with Garth Hudson (of The Band) and Sneaky Pete Kleinow (Flying Burrito Brothers).

Matthew is a poet, an irrational sports fan, and a graduate student in North Carolina. Formerly a sports journalist, he once wrote for the USA Today's College Program. His writing has appeared in several magazines, including: The Yellow Chair Review, Jerry Jazz Musician, The Roanoke Review and elsewhere. His debut collection is expected to be released in June 2019 by Kelsay Books. You can find him on Twitter: https://twitter.com/Matt_Johnson_D

Joan McNerney's poetry has been included in numerous literary zines such as Seven Circle Press, Dinner with the Muse, Blueline, Halcyon Days and included in Bright Hills Press, Kind of A Hurricane Press and Poppy Road Review anthologies. She has been nominated four times for Best of the Net.

Eric Fisher Stone lives in Ames, Iowa as a graduate student at Iowa State's MFA in Writing and the Environment program. His poetry has appeared in over a dozen journals. His first full length poetry collection The Providence of Grass is forthcoming by Chatter House Press this year.

Joseph V. Milford is the author of the poetry collections CRACKED ALTIMETER (BlazeVox Press) and TATTERED SCROLLS AND POSTULATES, VOL I. (Backlash Press). He is an English professor and Creative Writing instructor living south of Atlanta, Georgia. He also edits the online poetry thread, RASPUTIN, A POETRY THREAD.

Celeste Rose Wood's poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in Nimrod, River River, and Barking Sycamores. As a hermit, i.e. agoraphobic, she thinks it sucks that many people buy into capitalism's opinion of "disability entitlement" as dirty words. Her dreams are of things like necromancy, mermaids, and healthcare for everyone.

Jeffrey Zable is a teacher, musician, and writer of poetry, short fiction and non-fiction. His writing has been published in hundreds of literary magazines and anthologies, more recently in Bricklight, After The Pause, Rosette Maleficarum, Uppagus, The Soft Cartel, Hedge Apple, The Lake, Spider Mirror and many others.

Kay lives and works as a teacher in South Texas. Aside from poetry, Kay writes fiction and just can't stop thinking about coyotes. Kay's writing can be seen in upcoming issues of *formercactus* and *Scalawag Magazine*

Laura Potts, a twice-named Foyle Young Poet of the Year, was last year shortlisted in The Oxford Brookes International Poetry Prize and nominated for a Pushcart Prize. She also became one of the BBC's New Voices for 2017 and received a commendation from The Poetry Society in 2018.

The Honorable Reverend Gabelicious is somewhat of a Jack of all trades: bartender, poet, possessor of the finest taste in music, and voracious consumer of all things baseball. He is master of only an acerbic, frightening wit. Just recently, he became a non-smoker.