

COLORADO REVIEW

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In this issue:
Judith Adkins
Peter Balakian
Eric Baus
Hadara Bar-Nadav
Bill Capossere
Maxine Chernoff
Endi Bogue Hartigan
Elise Juska
Erin Kasdin
Alex Lemon
Edward Porter
Tomaž Šalamun
John Yau

*Featuring Matthew Shaer,
Winner of the 2012
Nelligan Prize for Short Fiction*

Colorado
State

Photograph by Timothy Neesam

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EDITORS' PAGE

Our fall issue is always a privilege to present to our readers because it features the winner of the Nelligan Prize for Short Fiction. Now in its ninth year, this contest was established to honor the memory of writer and literary editor Liza Nelligan, an alumna of and friend to many here at Colorado State University. This year's winner is Matthew Shaer for his story "Ghosts," selected by final judge Jane Hamilton. "This story," says Hamilton, "is tightly packed—it has a great deal of the characters' history and their private and shared suffering in just eighteen pages—and yet the narrative richness is beautifully contained within the boundaries of the story form. There are so many capably written stories—a lot of writers have the hang of it—but when you come across a story that is nearly as distilled as a poem, where all the parts work together, where the language is precise and lyrical, and when the story has 'an intense awareness of human loneliness,' the quality that Frank O'Connor believes defines the short story—you're likely to say, *Here it is. The real thing.* As I did with "Ghosts."

This issue's other stories also touch on that aspect of loneliness. In Elise Juska's "Hard Things," George and Vicky work through the inevitable adjustments of mid-life marriage—merging possessions, negotiating habits and routines, learning to read each other's emotional cues—and discover that the path to fully knowing each other will be a long one. Charla, the fifteen-year-old narrator of Erin Kasdin's "Art of Knotting and Splicing," finds herself in the lonely position of holding things together when her younger sister goes missing from their trailer park home, her father shuts down, and her only friend is a person of interest. And in Edward Porter's "Tough Little Wife"—selected by Brock Clarke as a winner of AWP's 2012 Intro Journals Project—Tina and Wesley, at a crossroads in their relationship, engage in inventive forms of marital torment, each essentially daring the other to blink first so they can go their solitary ways.

In nonfiction, both of this issue's essays take on questions of family. Judith Adkins's "The Tree, The Forest" explores the challenges nontraditional families encounter in the field of genealogy. And Bill Capossere returns to us with "Strange Travelers," another installment from his astronomy- and space-travel-inflected family memoir, which we have been avidly following here at *Colorado Review* since 2005.

Welcome to the fall/winter issue.

—SG



Fall again in Colorado, cooler temperatures, drier rivers, aspens afire—going going gone. We welcome this turn, as it's been a tough summer, with nearly ninety thousand acres of wilderness burned in the mountains above Fort Collins. It's been a tough fire season all over the West, and a drought all over the country. Signs of change, precarious life? It's presidential election season too, so we'll see . . .

In the poetry of this issue, there's something precarious afoot, something, perhaps, eating its foot, as in Emilia Phillips's "YouTube: Dog Eating a Human Leg on the Ganges." It's a kind of off-hand violence that's all too embedded in our local and global landscapes. Take Adam Day's "Condensation Cube," or Peter Balakian's "Pueblo, Christmas Dance," or Hadara Barnadav's "Portrait without a Face." Not exactly war, but the culture of war. Animals are growling up the show (Eric Baus's "feral entrails"; Cal Bedient's "Cheetah"; Joan Naviyuk Kane's whale "limb and fissure"; John Yau's argumentative dogs), but the singing's strong, a powerfully lyric *againstness*. It's elegy against ontology: "How slow every life // How every slow life // Shudders forward" (Alex Lemon), and an intense query to the immediate scene: "A dried sea horse / in a bouquet / of chalky shells / on a white shelf / above the clear water / of a stopped sink" (Logan Burns). It's also something quite tender, art that stops time by close listening: "How surely it moves beneath us, scriptura continuum, our illegible lives" (Siobhán Scarry). Alongside masters of the craft, we also welcome new voices, as in the 2012 AWP Intro Journals Project, here presenting James Henry Knippen's "Scutellaria." Much to be sung and said in the darkening hours; take heart here.

—MATTHEW COOPERMAN

GHOSTS

Winner of the 2012 Nelligan Prize for Short Fiction,
selected by Jane Hamilton

The old man will die in the river room. This is decided before they arrive, by a primly efficient nurse named Anna, who has been hired at great expense from the hospice center in Bristol. She greets them in the driveway, coffee cup in hand. Her face is bright, scrubbed clean. From the backseat, David listens as she explains to his mother the *parameters of the illness*—the *erythropoietin deficiency*, the *renal failure*, the *vascular dementia*, the probable onset of *tubercular meningitis*. Phrases designed to obscure the nearness of human decay, David thinks, to maximize the distance between them, the blithely living, and his grandfather, the almost dead. His mother nods, jiggles the stick shift. She has already lost one parent and knows, more or less, what to expect.

David and his sister are the last ones into the house. They stand for a moment at the mouth of the barn. The night is immense. To the east, the sky is smudged by a yellow glow. David searches his memory for the name of the closest neighbor. Erskine. Tebbits. Deutsch. He remembers a splintered and sagging porch, a wreath of hay and cranberry.

“Are you ready?” Lucy asks.

Unlike David, who prepared fastidiously for the trip, matching wool socks with lined jeans and a heavy canvas shirt, Lucy is dressed loosely, carelessly. Their mother’s barn jacket hangs off her thin shoulders, and her T-shirt, bright pink, bears the crest of a punk band from Somerville, where Lucy is taking classes. At twenty, three years older than David, his sister is becoming even more of a child.

“Absolutely not,” David answers. “Are you?”

Inside the kitchen, the nurse, Anna, is making tea. The house has not changed. The books on the shelves are the same, the black and crouched woodstove the same, the chipped ceramic mugs. Pete stands slowly and, stretching both front paws out in front of him, totters stiffly in their direction.

“Oh, buddy,” David says. “What happened to you?”

“Lyme disease,” Anna says. “Your grandfather thinks he was bitten by a tick out in the back pasture.”

“He couldn’t check him for ticks?” David’s mother says.

“He doesn’t move so well either. You’ll see.”

There would be piss and shit and blood, Lucy had predicted, on the drive from Boston. She grabbed her nose, and fixing David with a pleased smile, wondered if he might be asked to *wipe the ass crack*. “Someone is going to have to do it,” she added. “I’m the oldest grandkid. You’re the youngest. I’m just saying, so you can be prepared.”

But now, standing in the kitchen, duffel bag still slung over one shoulder, her mouth is thin and suspicious. She has run out of jokes. David finds himself wishing for the presence of his father, who possessed the ability to find the light in any situation—who would, if he were here in Maine and not in Indiana, draw Lucy and David into a tight embrace and remind them that the old guy had lived a pretty good life, all things considered. Who would kiss his mother on her forehead. Who would puncture the unbearable heaviness that has settled over the house.

“He just woke up,” Anna says. “Before you came. Do you want to say hi?” Through the door of the river room, David can see his grandfather’s bare feet, horned and blue. The cuff of a pair of corduroys.

“We should all go,” his mother says.

“I don’t want to go,” Lucy says.

David does not want to go either, but he wants very badly to be brave.

“I’ll go,” he says.

His mother nods. “Is there anything we need to know?” she asks.

“Christ, Mom,” Lucy says. “He’s not going to bite.”

“No,” Anna says. “Just that I’ve been reading to him. He might like that, before he goes back to sleep.”

David examines his mother. She looks small and hard, like a water-worn pebble.

“Why don’t we go upstairs?” Anna says to Lucy. “We can get all the sheets together. You’ll probably need a hand.”

David follows his mother into the river room. His grandfa-

ther lies on a hospital bed. Metal stanchions, metal rests on the sides, to prevent the patient from falling to the floor. The morphine bag, strung up like a jellyfish.

His grandfather arches his neck to look at them. His body has retained some of its youthful heft—under the folds of his sweater, muscle and sinew pulse. He had worked every day of his life, and been proud of it. First as a newspaper reporter, and

then as a columnist, and then finally as a failed farmer. He and David's grandmother bought four plots, and although the crops were sometimes good, in the end, they ground

If he had died at a reasonable age, at seventy or even eighty . . . that would have been one thing. Then there would have been money for his daughter, for David and Lucy.

each pasture down to fallow dust. When his wife died of a stroke, in the summer that David was eleven, he had sold off three plots, and retained the fourth, which he used to grow radishes and carrots and lettuce. He beat back the legions of invading squirrels and raccoons with his rifle, sometimes angling the barrel out the kitchen window like a turret gunner.

The produce he sold at a market in Bristol. Tourists bought it readily. But the money wasn't enough, and so he turned to the savings. He chewed through his pension and the money his dead wife had inherited from her parents. The problem, David's mother often said, was that he lived too long. He was too healthy. If he had died at a reasonable age, at seventy or even eighty—the age *his* parents knocked off—that would have been one thing. Then there would have been money for his daughter, for David and Lucy. But by the time he turned eighty-five, there was nothing. There was only Pete and the house.

David's mother had driven in a panic to Maine, and told him he had a *responsibility* to leave it to his heirs. They fought. He turned cantankerous and foul, and promised to donate the whole thing to a local land trust. No one had believed him, until a letter arrived in the mail, signed with a fountain pen and carbon-copied to a lawyer in Hampden. The house and the remaining land were not his any longer. They belonged to the Leyden Coast Preserve.

“I think there are legal remedies,” David’s father had suggested. “I’ll ask around at work. We’ll get that house. Don’t worry.” But soon he was gone, too, out to Indiana, with a thirty-two-year-old caterer named Sheila. David’s mother, doubly betrayed, had decided on the only route available to her—she would seal herself off against both of the men in her life, ignore whatever entreaties they might muster, devote herself to her children. In fact, she had agreed to travel north only after Lucy, in a rare burst of piety, had sat their mother down in the living room of the Boston apartment, and administered a brief sermon on the *psychological value of saying goodbye*. “Even if you don’t want to do it,” she said, “David and I might. We might regret it. Think about that, Mom, please.”

And so their mother had arranged to get a few days off from work, and David and Lucy a few days off from school, and they had together driven the five hours north. David does not doubt that his mother, if she’d had her way, would not even have shown up at the funeral. Would have remained at home. Would have worked longer hours than usual. Upstairs, he hears Anna and Lucy thumping through the three bedrooms, the low, circuitous clucking of their conversation.

“David,” his grandfather says. “Petra.” His ears, covered in a thin white pelt, protrude starkly from his head. His remaining hair is swept back in strands over his forehead. The stark Teutonic planes of his face, so flushed and bright in David’s recollection, have faded to sackcloth. David feels the old man grab his hand.

“You look very big,” his grandfather says.

“He’s seventeen, Dad,” his mother says.

“The last time I saw you,” his grandfather says, and trails off. His breath comes rasped and broken.

“I saw Pete,” David says, stupidly.

“It’s the damned Lyme disease. I told him, stay away from that pasture. I knew the ticks were out there, in the grass.”

“He’s a dog, not a person,” says David’s mother.

“I know it.”

“He can’t understand detailed instructions.”

“I know.”

“That’s why you buy a leash.”

“Well,” his grandfather says. He uses the word in the old-fashioned manner—not as a space-filler, but as a kind of agreement. “He’ll be OK.”

“He won’t, goddamnit,” David’s mother says. David reaches for her, but she shakes him off.

“It’s OK. I can do this. How are you feeling?” she says to her father.

His teeth are sharp and yellow, painted with phlegm.

“They say six days or so.”

“Who pays?”

“Insurance. And I sold the truck. I never wanted to die in a hospital.”

“The funeral, I mean.”

“I don’t need a service.”

“Fine. Can I read to you?”

“Yes. Or David.” He pushes an invisible button on the back of the bed, and the headrest inches forward. “Big,” he repeats to David. “Where’s the other one? Where’s my Lucy?”

“Upstairs, Dad. She’s tired. She’ll say hello tomorrow.”

The old man nods. He has not taken his eyes off David. He has the fixations of the very ill. Each living body, with its smell of moisture and ease, must astound him anew. He gestures toward the mantel.

“The pills?”

“No, I’ve had enough of those. The book.”

David fingers the spine.

“You know him?” his grandfather asks.

“I’ve read him. In class.”

“What does your teacher say?”

David thinks of Mrs. Gardner, his honors English teacher, peeking back at him over the top of her textbook. “That he is one of the greats,” he says.

“He’s right.”

“She.”

“She’s right.” He taps one finger against the bed rail. “Would you start at page 250?”

David begins to read. His mother arranges herself on the couch.

In the story, a nameless man rides a subway car into the center of Manhattan. He finds Times Square bathed in a corona of

icy, refracted light—the stars, the moon, and even the sky seem a million miles away. The man walks past the shops and buys a beer from a liquor store and, placing the beer in a paper bag, walks around the square in concentric circles. The bag is soon

In his dream, he and his grandfather are running to catch a train. His grandfather is young again. His legs are long. David struggles to keep pace.

drenched. One circle is soon wider than the next. In his mind, the man maps out each circle; he imagines he is tracing figures and equations over the island of Manhattan. After three hours of walk-

ing, the man locates the landmark and follows the alleyway a mile south, until the pant and rustle of the city has subsided.

When David looks up again, both his grandfather and his mother are asleep. He places the book back on the mantel, marking the page with a prescription slip. His mother looks infantile, contented.

“Mom,” he whispers. “Time for bed.”

He gets his hands under her armpits and slowly brings her to her feet.

“Thank you,” she says.

His grandfather shivers, but his eyes remain closed.

“Do you want to kiss him goodnight?”

“Ok,” David says. He leans down. There is an unexpected sweetness to the flesh. His mother turns off the light behind him. The woodstove chortles, and opening the grate, David is greeted by a plume of scented smoke. The odor of pine, burnt moss. On the hearth dances a bent husk of birch. He finds a poker and shovel and beats the bark until the glimmer has gone out.

Upstairs, in the third bedroom, his sister lies in the smaller of the two beds, the sheets collected under her chin. There are no curtains and the night sky crowds the windows. David undresses quickly, self-consciously. This room, which they had shared as kids, had always worried him. Waiting for sleep to arrive, he had squinted into the corners of the ceiling, where he expected spiders were spinning funneled webs, smothering in silk coffins the bodies of lesser insects. When he was eight, he had watched as a long bug, shaped like a twig, hustled up the far wall, and

over the ceiling, in his direction. He trembled, buried his head under the pillow, and somehow drifted off. When he awoke, the carapace of the thing was on his sheets—a thin cylindrical shell. He had pictured the remainder of the insect, now wormy and wet, wiggling in the trenches of the bedclothes. He passed the next night in a state of panic.

“How is he?” Lucy asks.

“He’s OK.”

“Can he talk?”

“Of course. He asked about you.”

“I’ll see him tomorrow.”

“I know. That’s what I told him.” David climbs into the other bed. He steeple his fingers behind his head.

“My stomach really hurts,” Lucy says.

“Do you want me to get you something?”

“No. Thank you. I think I’ll just try to sleep.”

On the far side of the wall, Anna is talking to their mother. David can make out the pertinent words—*waiting, pain management, arrangements*. They become a kind of lullaby. A pleasant fuzz gathers in his sinuses. He turns onto his side. In his dream, he and his grandfather are running to catch a train. His grandfather is young again. His legs are long. David struggles to keep pace. At the top of the stairs, his grandfather leaps onto the train. The doors suction shut behind him. From the steps, David can see his grandfather waving goodbye. The scenario repeats.

Try as he might, David never catches his train.

Then it is a fall morning, a wonderful fall morning. They lace their boots in the loamy darkness of the shed and set off together toward the river. Snow, the first of the season, scallops the fringes of the pasture, and in the thin white air, David senses the precise contours of the months to come—a hard fall, a long winter, heavy enough to threaten the fields. He can remember a time when the seasons were to him little more than bookmarks. There was the anxious day in fall when school began and the wet day in spring when the last bell rang, and somewhere in between, close to Christmas, there was his birthday.

Now, at seventeen, the passing of each season seems an occasion for mourning, one more step away from childhood, when

the years were big and elastic, and another toward adulthood, when they will become abbreviated and unspeakable.

Lucy stops at the pasture gates. The cattle bump sleepily against the metal, their mouths bristling with icy grass, chewing even now, at this early hour, at half past six in the morning. Cows, David's grandfather is fond of saying, are the closest thing in the animal kingdom to a plant. David leans across the gate and grabs a fistful of fur. The cow shimmies, tosses her nose high in the air.

Her eyes are moony and dull, so different from the pupils of a horse, which always seemed to David, with their coiled strands of elastin, to be perfect models of the universe itself. Lucy produces a pair of red apples from her pocket and hands one to David. A struggle ensues, and the largest cow, a plump roan, burrows her anviled head past the shoulders of her peers.

"Whoa, girl," David says. Large animals have always made him nervous. When he still rode, he had possessed a natural sense of the way a horse was supposed to move under his knees, the distinct shivers that connoted fear or acceptance or even pleasure. But if a horse refused to obey, he turned frantic, tearful. Once, run around an indoor ring by a tetchy Appaloosa, owned by his mother and boarded at a barn in Topsfield, he had dropped the reins entirely, gripped the neck with his arms, and begged the animal to halt, *to come to a stop*. Instead, the horse—a good one, it turned out, which eventually won Lucy a few ribbons—bucked rightward, crushing his leg between the stirrup strap and the paneling of the ring. He was not hurt, only shamed and shocked, but he rode rarely after that, and then not at all.

David pulls back the apple and walks over to a dun cow, small and sag-bellied, hardly more than a calf.

"Here," he says. "You look like you could use the calories."

She approaches him cautiously. Her sternum—that pack of muscle, David notes with dismay, which will eventually become a brisket—is covered with long scratches, pink and raw.

"Coyotes, probably," Lucy says. "They know to look for the smallest cow. Mom says the Erskines are worried sick."

David has never seen a coyote in the wild, but he imagines a stringy beast, green eyed and toothy. "So why is she still here?" he asks.

“Who knows? Maybe something scared them away.”

“Maybe it was Pete,” David suggests.

“I very much doubt that. Go on, she’s waiting.”

The cow suctions the apple into her mouth. Her teeth flash. Pieces of the fruit appear—the core, the skin, the dimpled crown, the curled stem—followed by the tongue itself, fat and purple, oscillating in wide circles, sweeping up the last foamy bits of flesh.

“What a pig,” Lucy laughs.

David follows her south down the road. Soon he is sweating. He opens the top button of his shirt. After a half mile, Lucy turns right onto a narrow trail, hardly more than a seam, overgrown and veined with roots. They climb in a high arc over the fields, and in the distance, David sees a tiny figure emerge from the house. Pete staggers behind.

“Lucy,” David says. “Look.”

Together, they watch their mother fasten both arms around the waist of the old oak tree, and shimmy upward, in small and precise convulsions. The sound of Pete’s barking carries up to them.

“Oh my God. What’s she doing?” Lucy asks.

“Climbing a tree.”

“In the middle of winter? She’s lost it.”

“I don’t want to look anymore,” David says. He feels an unnatural sense of power, peering down from this great distance at his mother, who believes she is alone, unwatched. He pushes past Lucy and settles into a jog. The sharp air tears at his lungs. The top of the hill is shorn to a stony smoothness. Using a stick, he clears a small patch of ground and sits. The sun settles overhead.

“She made it,” Lucy says, collapsing next to him.

“Made what?”

“The tree. I watched the whole thing. She climbed it, and then she just sort of sat there, on a big branch.”

“You shouldn’t be so hard on her.”

“Me? That’s an interesting thing to say. I’m the reason we’re here.”

The white flank of the house is visible through the pines. In the upstairs window, there is a flicker of movement, and then darkness.

"I used to think the house was haunted," David says.

"Remember the time you woke us all up? I started screaming too, just because you were screaming so hard."

"No."

"You were a baby, basically. You said there was a ghost in the closet. Dad had to sit with us both until you fell back asleep."

David grunts. "There probably was."

"He even checked the closets."

"And?"

"Just an old dress."

"What a relief."

"Yeah." She uses both hands to pack a snowball. "It seems stupid to give it up."

"I don't think we have a choice."

"Mom could fight for it."

"It's not that simple, Lucy."

"He defeated her, you know. She doesn't have the will to do it."

"I know."

"And I'm not talking about money," Lucy says, "in case that's what you were implying."

"No, that's not what I was implying." He closes his eyes. "How is your stomach?"

"It's fine," Lucy says.

"And school?"

"Not much to talk about. Another semester, then I walk."

She had not wanted to go in the first place, David knows. There had been arguments, begun in *indoor voices* and ended in screams, this not long before his father had left. His sister screamed at his mother, and his mother screamed at his father, and his father listened, then screamed at them both. A set of keys were thrown across the living room, shattering the glass of an antique print. A can of beans went through the back window. But in the end, threatened with the *withdrawal of funds*, faced with the prospect of paying her own rent, her own phone bill, her own car insurance, Lucy had relented and enrolled at a community college in Somerville, not far from Union Square.

Unlike the rest of her friends, who had escaped to universities in Amherst, or private colleges in Vermont, she did not want to leave Lawrence; in fact, she actually *liked* it, planned to stay forever.

David had heard this from one of their shared friends, a pale ferret of a girl called Sally. “Your big sister,” Sally had confided, “can’t think of anywhere else to go.” So it was a failure of imagination, then. Or it was a sense of camaraderie with their mother, who was also unable to conceive of a life elsewhere. Or it was the boys—the failed banker, who had returned to Lawrence to *marshal his mental resources*; the high school hockey star, who had never left to begin with, floating instead like a ghost around the margins of the town, handsome still but puffy and unwell.

“There is a difference,” she pronounces, in an unfamiliar tone, “between the sex we have for love and the sex we have for fun.”

Most recently, there was Kim, an adjunct instructor at the community college, a decade older than Lucy, and loose in the joints, like a puppet. David has met him twice and found him pleasant enough, if a little tedious. When he thinks of Kim, he thinks of a talking beard, an earring, and the poem “The Red Wheelbarrow,” by William Carlos Williams.

“And how’s the poet?” he asks.

“Jesus.”

“I’m just wondering.”

“Kim is fine.”

“Do you have him again this next semester?”

She ignores the question. “He’s married, you know,” she says.

“That’s weird.” David does his best not to act surprised. Surely, once you reach your twenties, this kind of thing is normal. Life becomes a bazaar of sex, some of it marital, some of it not.

“Hey, I knew it going in. I knew what I was signing up for.”

“You did.”

“Yes, I did. And I should do my best not to act like a child.”

“You should.” David cannot bear to look at his sister.

They stand. “Do you think he’ll leave his wife?” David asks.

“There is a difference,” she pronounces, in an unfamiliar tone, “between the sex we have for love and the sex we have for fun.”

Gross, David almost says. He catches himself. “I see,” he says.

The trail drops through a narrow gorge. The rock is slippery and black. He reaches out both hands for balance.

“The answer is no,” Lucy says. “In case you were still wondering.”

“Have you met her?”

“Yes. She doesn’t know. It made me feel really powerful.”

“Is she pretty?” David asks.

“No. Well, maybe she used to be. Now she’s all pouchy.”

“I’m sorry, Lucy.”

“It’s OK.”

They stop above the river. The water is fast and loud. On the far bank, a young deer wades through the undergrowth, spine proudly arched.

Lucy tucks her head into her brother’s neck so he will not see her cry.

When they return to the house, the table is set for lunch. Anna and their mother are working at the sideboard, elbow to elbow. A thin vein of smoke rises from the electric oven. David counts: five placemats, five red plates.

“I thought we might wheel him out,” says Anna over her shoulder.

“He can’t eat solids.” Lucy says. “Can he?”

“Depends on the day,” Anna says. She has traded her scrubs for a pair of high-waisted corduroys and a pilled turtleneck sweater. David searches fruitlessly for the outline of a figure—hips, drawn waist, breasts—but the woman is a mass of straight lines and hard right angles.

“I need to change,” Lucy says. “I’m filthy.” She presents both palms as evidence.

“Be quick please,” their mother says.

David kneels down at the stove. The wood in the trough is too young. The flesh and pulp are flecked with green, and a thick green moss grows on the husk. Anna must have collected it. Ripped it from the trunk of a living tree. His grandfather would never have sanctioned such a thing—long after moving up to Maine, the old man had managed to retain his sentimental reverence for the natural world. It was probably that sentimentalism, his mother had always said, that prevented him from becoming a successful farmer. He read too much Emerson. A

real farmer would think of a tree only as firewood, the fields only as sustenance, cowshit as cowshit.

David breaks the largest of the branches and jams it through the hatch. The fire leaps away, as if allergic.

At half past two, Anna retreats to the river room and returns with their grandfather. Upright, he looks worse. The blood has fled his face and his hair is rumpled, screwed into a single greasy lick, which dangles over one ear. A high metal mast, holding the morphine bag, protrudes from the back of the wheelchair. Anna smiles encouragingly.

“Bill wanted to get a little dressed up,” she says.

And so he is: pressed khakis, leather belt, felt hunting shirt, buttoned to the throat. His feet, no longer bare, jangle anxiously in the stirrups.

“Back up, Pete,” David says, and takes the dog by the collar.

“Well,” his grandfather says. “Quite a spread.”

“Petra’s been working all morning,” Anna says.

“I have not,” their mother says.

“She was always a worker,” says the old man. For the first time in two days, David hears his grandfather’s voice as it had been—unyielding, abundant. “She always worked. In school,” he continues, “the teachers had to tell her to *stop* studying. They were worried for her.”

“That’s not true, Dad,” his mother says. “I was a terrible student.”

“No.”

“You’re mixing me up with Mom.”

“No,” his grandfather says. “I don’t think so.” David and his mother quietly find their seats. Anna nudges the wheelchair closer to the table.

“I’m going to help out a bit,” she says. “With the food.”

“Where’s the other one?” his grandfather says.

“Lucy is upstairs,” his mother says. “They had a long walk today.”

“We went down by the pasture, Opa,” David offers. “There’s snow today. Looks like it’s going to be a bad winter.”

“Well,” his grandfather says. “Is that so?” His pupils are dark and unseeing. He appears not to recognize David. Anna holds up a forkful of braised sprouts. “Your favorite,” she says.

“What is?”

“Sprouts.”

“Sprouts,” he repeats, and allows Anna to fill his mouth.

“Hi, Opa,” Lucy says brightly. She flounces across the room and, gripping their grandfather by the shoulders, kisses his cheek. She kneels down next to the wheelchair.

“Who’s that?”

“It’s Lucy, Opa. Your granddaughter.” She says it loudly.

“I can hear, you know.”

“Oh, I believe it.”

“Beautiful,” he says. With one wavering hand, he touches her hairline. “What’s your name?”

“Lucy, Opa.”

“He’s a little out of it,” Anna whispers. “Extra morphine.”

“I am not,” their grandfather says.

“Nothing wrong with your ears, is there?”

Lucy sits between David and their grandfather.

“How old are you now?” the old man asks.

“Twenty,” Lucy says.

“She was always such a good worker,” their grandfather says to Anna. Anna arches her eyebrows obligingly. “She never stopped working,” he adds. “There was a conference at the school, and the teachers told us, ‘Well, she works too much.’ They were worried for her. Can you imagine?”

Lucy smiles. “Sorry. That wasn’t me.” Across the table, their mother is examining her plate.

“Oh, don’t tell me I don’t remember. You worked so hard.”

“I barely graduated.”

“You worked so hard.”

“A 2.2 GPA. I was close to failing.”

Anna lifts the fork. “Maybe you’d like some turkey?” she says, but the old man shakes his head.

“A two point what?”

“Bad grades.”

“Lucy,” their mother says.

“What?”

“Stop.”

“How bad?” their grandfather asks. His gaze is clear and stern.

“Cs, mostly. Some Ds.”

“Well.”

“One F.”

“How do you expect to get anywhere with those marks? I remember, you worked so hard. So hard,” he repeats.

“You’re remembering wrong. It’s the drugs. You’re all mixed up.”

“I’m not,” he snaps.

“You did this to her, too, didn’t you?” Lucy says, and looks at their mother.

“Back when I was young, people worked.”

“Both of you!” their mother stands. “Stop.”

“I want him to know. I want him to wake up.”

“He’s not going to suddenly wake up, Lucy. That’s not the way it works.”

“So you’re just going to let him walk all over you?”

“I thought,” their mother says, slamming her hands on the table with a sharp clatter, “that we might just be able to have this one meal together, in peace.”

Underfoot, Pete whimpers.

“In peace?” Lucy shouts.

“Lucy,” David says. He takes her wrist. Her pulse is frantic.

“You let him do this to you, Mom,” Lucy says.

“I didn’t let him do anything.”

“Oh, please. Opa, tell us—why did you give away the house?”

A grave confusion spreads over the old man’s face.

“I’m pregnant,” Lucy says.

“What?” David removes his hand from her arm. He turns to his mother. Her lips are drawn tight. She already knows, David thinks. Of course she knows. They share everything, the two of them. It was only him they left out.

“Two months,” Lucy says. “I was going to tell you.”

“OK,” Anna says soothingly, to no one in particular. “OK.”

“Who’s pregnant?” their grandfather asks.

“Your granddaughter, Dad. Lucy.”

The old man considers this. “Lucy,” he says.

David is the first to leave the room. Behind him, there is silence.

That night, he dreams a shard of steel has been driven through his stomach. Waking, greasy with sweat, he prods the area around his navel with the tips of his fingers. Under the skin, a fleet of organs thrum—the small intestine, the bladder, the pancreas. He has never been much of a science student, but he

knows the appendix is down there somewhere, too, encased in purple tissue, delicate and engorged, ready to split at any moment, to rupture and flood the rest of his body with dancing toxins.

He kicks off the sheets. The sky through the windows is wild with stars. Lucy is on her back, snoring. Her arms are crossed protectively over her chest. It seems to David incredible, improbable, some terrible trick—downstairs, one is going, and up here, another is coming. He wonders if they will pass each other in transit. Small sparks of bioluminescence. Trails of pale fluid.

As kids, unable to make the long and unaccompanied trip to the downstairs toilet, they had pissed in plastic tubs, Pyrex

It seems to David incredible, improbable, some terrible trick—downstairs, one is going, and up here, another is coming. He wonders if they will pass each other in transit.

measuring cups. David recalls holding aloft one of the containers, marveling at the deep gold hue of the urine. Before that, he had seen his own piss only

when it was disappearing down the drain. In the morning, the cups were always gone, quietly disposed of by his mother.

The door of the master bedroom is ajar. He cups his hands over his brow and peers into the half-light. He sees hands, feet, raised cheeks. A book on the bedside table, draped in shadow. Anna does not stir. David pulls the door shut. His mother had insisted that the nurse, who has been at the farmhouse for two weeks, and will likely stay on after them, to manage the *dispersing of the medical supplies*, should sleep in the master bedroom. Meanwhile, his mother has remained in the office, on a pull-out bed.

But at the bottom of the stairs, David finds the office empty, the bed still made. The clock blinks 3:23. In the kitchen, he pours himself a glass of water, then leans down to pet Pete, who is curled up at the foot of the stove. The lids are slow to open, and even then, the eyes are rheumy, bewildered. A snarl builds somewhere in the chest, but when David says his name, the dog stands and stretches, yawns. The stove still throbs with heat. Through the grates, David watches the embers dance.

Pete, panting, follows him into the river room. There is the

earthy, warm scent of shit. His mother has turned his grandfather on his side and is dabbing at his buttocks with a knot of toilet paper. She tears off another foot and begins again, repeating the process until the paper is white. “Good,” she says to David, and points. “Hold him there.”

David cannot see his grandfather’s face and is glad for it. He holds tight. His mother works a sponge over the old man’s furrowed skin. When it is done, she hands the basin and a plastic trash bag to David.

“You can just pour that into the toilet,” she says. “Sponge in the plastic bag, and plastic bag in the trash.”

He takes the bag and walks through the kitchen and stands in the center of the shed. The roof is torn, and a pallid light plays over his feet. He wrestles the bag into the bin, then stands at the door. He can make out their boot prints in the snow. He remembers another walk, this one taken a decade ago, with his grandfather. The day had been dark, not so different from night, and the closer they got to the river, the darker it became. The bluebirds, unaccustomed to the sight of human visitors, shrieked in disgust from one high branch to the next. David had felt the miniature breeze stirred by their feathers. The trail became a tunnel, a bleak thing, the entrance to the underworld. He stepped carefully.

“Here,” his grandfather said.

“I don’t see.”

“Right in front of you.”

It was not a house after all, David had noted with disappointment. Only a foundation and three walls, seething with ivy. A puckered patch of earth. “The door would have been next to that baby fir,” his grandfather said. “We’d be standing in their front yard.”

“What happened?”

“A fire. Back then, there was nothing for it. No fire department. If your house burned down, you ran, and built a new one.”

David walked through the hole on the west side of the foundation. “Did they make it out OK?”

“Two did.”

“One didn’t?”

“There was a baby. Died of smoke inhalation.”

“How do you know?”

“I learned it when I bought our house.”

“Maybe they were lying.”

“I’m sorry, David. I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“I’m not scared, Opa,” David lied.

“Well,” his grandfather said. They trekked the two miles back to the house without speaking. David had been unable to shake the image of the two farmers, faces rumped by years of hard labor, bent over the corpse of a baby. Smoke slipping in heavy whorls over the treetops. The catch of the shovel in the frosted topsoil. The grave of perfect dimensions.

People were tougher back then, David told himself. His grandfather, after all, had lost his older sister. Dead of pneumonia. His grandmother had lost two brothers, both to an unnamed disease of the heart. “You moved on,” his grandfather had explained. “You had no choice.” And yet that must mean the world was teeming with ghosts, specters.

In the river room, his mother is leaning over the old man. Her hair falls in a veil across his face. David cannot hear the words. He feels a rustle against his pant leg. Pete leans hard into him, pressing his head forward to be rubbed. David rumples the fur between his fingers and, squatting, buries his face between the dog’s shoulder blades.

There, amid the dander and the leathered scent of dead skin, David attempts to summon an image of his own death. He knows death, even at seventeen, can be close—the previous fall, Matt Corey, a grade-school friend, had been killed by a delivery truck while on a field trip to Manhattan. Although the Coreys were Catholic, the coffin, out of respect for the family had been closed.

It seemed to David to be the worst kind of joke—Corey, out of all of his friends and acquaintances, that constellation of smooth, pink faces that flicked in and out of his memory, was the most trusting, the most irreverent. Had someone told him that his last vision would be the grill of a white Ford van, Corey would have laughed.

He expected, like they all did, to live forever.

HARD THINGS

Lately George noticed that Vicky talked a lot about the strangeness of time. Things that happened years ago but were still vivid and detailed, things that happened only last month but felt far away. How moving her things into George's house—nicking her dresser on the doorjamb, deciding whose plates to use and whose to store—felt like yesterday. How at the same time, it felt like they'd lived here forever.

George disliked these conversations. They seemed to go nowhere, looking at the phenomenon through this lens or that one, as if it might yield some conclusion. There were no conclusions. Time felt strange; lots of things did. But Vicky liked to talk in abstractions, to analyze things. Once, in the beginning, she said, "Sometimes I kind of wish you said more." It was the year she was still living in Boston and they were visiting each other on weekends. They had just left the movies in Ellsworth, and it was a forty-minute drive back to George's house. Longer, in winter. Early March, and the Maine air was brittle with cold. The roads were pitch-black and icy, more dangerous than George let on. He'd been driving in rough weather his whole life; he enjoyed it. But Vicky got nervous about these things.

"I mean, I just wonder what you think," Vicky said. She was hunched forward, holding her knuckles against the vents. George watched the road, high beams splashing over the dark trees and tires jouncing over the potholes. She was saying something about how she believed the main character, but the ending was a stretch. Then she was quiet. A car approached, and George flicked the high beams off. "When I go to the movies, I kind of like to discuss it after," Vicky said. "But I guess you're not a discusser." It would become a familiar feeling, disappointing her. "I guess not," George said, flicking the beams back on. The car skidded a little, and Vicky pressed the dashboard with one hand.

Allison Pearson, Vicky's college roommate, was coming to visit for the weekend. She lived in New York City and was having problems in her marriage and needed to get away. It wasn't the first time someone had seen George and Vicky's life as an escape.

Some pressure lifted from his chest as he drove up the Maine Turnpike, the rest of the world disappearing behind him like an ice floe cracking off and drifting away.

And there was something to it, George thought. He would swear, driving back from Boston, he could tell with his eyes closed the minute his truck crossed the state line. The

air changed. Some pressure lifted from his chest as he drove up the Maine Turnpike, the rest of the world disappearing behind him like an ice floe cracking off and drifting away.

When guests came, George and Vicky could deliver on this image. In the summer, their coastal town came alive with puttering lobster boats and roadside stands selling ice cream and onion rings. People didn't usually choose to visit in February, but Allison thought it sounded "cozy." And it was, George agreed, though maintaining it wasn't easy. The woodstove, for instance, required constant tending—keeping the wood chopped and dry, the kindling replenished, the ash can emptied. With Allison coming, there were matters of comforters and the frigid back bedroom George usually kept closed off with a thick wool blanket to save on heat. Vicky didn't like the blanket—"I just want this to feel like a house," she'd murmured when George nailed it to the doorway—but in December, she'd agreed to stretch sheets of thin plastic over all the windows and seal them with her hair dryer. Vicky had gone over the plastic for hours, aiming the dryer like a blowtorch, trying to smooth every wrinkle. She didn't want it to look like there was plastic there at all.

"It's not possible, honey," George had said, squeezing her shoulder.

"It is here," she said, pressing her finger to the picture on the front of the box.

George was trying his best to keep Vicky happy; he was, technically, the reason she was here. They'd met the August before

last, at a bar in Portland, the kind of thing that almost never happened in his life anymore. He was thirty-eight. He'd been coaxed down to the Old Port by some old friends from high school. Vicky was there for a friend's wedding on Chebeague Island the next day. "I'm dateless," she told him, when they ended up side by side, paging through the jukebox. "Want to be my pretend date?" It was clear they didn't have much in common, but that night it was part of the appeal. They did shots and threw darts, and Vicky introduced George to her amused friends, who had all gone to college together in Maine but now lived somewhere else. Later, they found their way to Vicky's hotel room, which had a marble shower and a view of Portland Harbor. The next morning, it didn't feel awkward like it had with the girls George had woken up with ten years ago, cotton-mouthed and regretful, girls looking at him with big, needy eyes. He lay in the soft bed and watched Vicky circle the room, snapping on jewelry and talking over her shoulder, sliding into a short black dress and asking George to zip the back. As he walked her to the ferry terminal, she took his hand. "I know we only met fourteen hours ago," she said, "but is it weird that I wish you were coming with me?" It was one of those moments, George realized: almost two years ago, but it felt like yesterday. He could see her white knuckles clutching a paper cup of tea, his warm fleece jacket draped over her bare shoulders, the wind off the water blowing her hair. He felt an urge to protect her; he wanted to cup her in his hands. "Come back and visit me," he'd said, and against all odds, she'd done it.

For the next year they'd kept it up, driving five hours up and down the New England coast. When Vicky came to visit, George cooked dinner, and she curled in front of the woodstove. "Everything is easy here," she sighed. Once a month, George ventured into Boston, cursing as he steered his truck through traffic and dumped it in some overpriced garage. He didn't know how anyone could stand to live in cities, the noise and smog and all the people. All he wanted to do was hole up in Vicky's apartment, maybe order Chinese food, but she filled their weekends with restaurants and dinner parties—"My friends want to *meet* you," she would say when George balked at going—and he would endure it, knowing that the next weekend, she would be back in his world.

A year later, her moving in with him had made a certain sense—the only sense, if they were to keep things going. Vicky edited textbooks; her job was mobile. George was a land surveyor for the state of Maine. What choice did they have? “It’s kind of romantic, right?” he’d once overheard her say to a friend on the phone. Vicky was reasonably happy, George thought. He’d let her make changes to his house—the house he’d lived in alone for ten years—hanging curtains and pointless little oval mirrors and framed pictures of people he’d never met. She ordered high-speed Internet and moved his old brown couch to the back bedroom, her red-and-white-striped one to the front. Strangers’ baby announcements and Christmas cards smothered his fridge door; a silver rack, crowded with bottles and sponges, hung from his showerhead. Sometimes George felt a little guilty when he saw her dresses hanging in the closet, sheathed in plastic from a dry cleaner in Boston, or her dusty high heels flopped sideways on the floor. When she’d first moved in, she’d bugged him about making plans, *doing* things, but after working outdoors all day, George was too wiped out to move. He didn’t have many friends he made plans with anymore and didn’t want to act like a tourist in his own town. Why spend forty dollars on dinner when he could make something just as good here at home, in his little house beside the star-filled woods? Wasn’t he—this—enough?

When George got home from work on Friday, the night before Allison Pearson was coming, he and Vicky drove to the IGA. The parking lot was packed; there had to be real snow on the way. They bought three lobsters, two pints of steamers, some overpriced blueberries, a box of pancake mix. Vicky chose a few local Maine ales and a bottle of tacky blueberry wine. “It’s for a guest,” she said, reading George’s thoughts. He shrugged but felt embarrassed as their order rolled past the cashier, a ruddy-cheeked local girl he used to see in the bars.

That night, they sat on the couch under an electric blanket watching the latest Netflix movie, Vicky tucked against his side. Vicky was in charge of the Netflix business; George didn’t care much for movies, especially Vicky’s kind of movies—long depressing scenes of people talking—but they seemed to buoy Vicky. She looked forward to the mail each day, pulling boots

on over her black leggings and running down the snow-custed driveway to the mailbox, as if the floppy, red envelopes kept her tethered to the world. Even the movies themselves she watched almost hungrily, clicking her tongue and sighing as if these were real people. She didn't ask George to discuss them anymore.

Her cell phone rang. Vicky hit pause on the remote, reaching for her phone and leaning toward the window for better reception. "Al?" she said. Through the phone George could hear Allison reporting on her whereabouts: she had left New York after work—"Traffic was *monstrous*"—and was now in a hotel in Kittery. She was doing some outlet shopping and making the rest of the drive in the morning. "I still don't believe it's another *four hours*," George heard her say, and Vicky laughed. "Believe it." Her chin propped against the back of the couch, she was staring out the window. The pine trees along the edge of George's property formed a dense shadow, only slightly blacker than the sky. It was dark out, true dark, and starless—there was definitely weather coming.

"Be safe," Vicky said. "It's supposed to snow."

When she hung up, she didn't sink back into place against him but sat straight up, as if shot through with new life. She reached for her tea, a painted ceramic mug so wide she had to hold it in two hands. "It's crazy we were freshmen fifteen years ago," she said, dunking a tea bag in and out of the cloudy, blue-gray water. A man's face was frozen on the TV screen, one eyelid half-closed. "Fifteen years—that means we're getting old."

This could be a long weekend, George thought. But when he looked up, ready to arrange a smile on his face, Vicky was staring into her cup. She had been talking to herself.

On Saturday morning, they woke under the goose-down comforter and made love. They rarely had morning sex these days; Vicky was too cold to surrender her clothes, instead pressing her cold feet against George's thighs. George sometimes felt like most of his life revolved around keeping Vicky warm. This morning, though, they had sex twice, then George padded downstairs in his wool socks, whistling, and got a pot of coffee brewing and a fire burning in the woodstove.

When he returned with two mugs, Vicky was in the shower, a book steepled across her pillow. *Being Happy*. George sipped

his coffee and picked it up. Vicky was always reading something, usually thick novels with awards on the covers. They came from the local library—the majority of their answering machine messages were from the librarian, telling “Victoria” the book she’d requested had arrived—but this one she’d bought online, at the suggestion of her new therapist, a woman in Bangor. She’d been telling George about it, quoting lines and things. “In this one study, they proved that to achieve real happiness, people need to be around other people. I mean, it’s pop psychology, but still— isn’t that interesting?” George looked at the photo on the jacket. The guy looked like a professor, with square glasses and a short, stupid beard.

George heard the pipes shudder as the water shut off, the squeak of the shower curtain pushed back, and the rattle of the silver hooks Vicky had attached to the liner, replacing his old plastic ones. He looked out the window. The snow had started, the first swift flakes. If they hurried, they could still get in a walk before it got heavy. It would be good to get outdoors before the arrival of their guest, which George suddenly realized he was dreading.

“Vic!”

“Yeah?” She opened the bathroom door and loosed a cloud of steam that smelled like apples. She was clutching a big, pink towel and her long hair was wet and freshly combed, striated with teeth marks.

“What do you say we take a walk?”

She glanced at the window. “It’s snowing.”

“That isn’t snow. It’s just a couple flakes.”

“But I just showered,” she said. “My hair will freeze.”

“So dry it,” he said. She looked at him. “Come on, a short one. It’s perfect out. And it’s our last chance to be alone for what—two whole days?”

Vicky looked again at the window, then back at George, and her face softened—was it love? pity? “Okay,” she said, touching her wet hair. “A short one.”

They crunched side by side through the woods. The cold felt good. The air was still, like a held breath, and laced with sweet wood smoke. Several trails, carpeted in brown pine needles, twined through the property behind George’s house. He knew

each path by heart. He'd chosen one that was strenuous, since it would be short, and walked hard, letting the clean air inflate his lungs.

"My legs are going numb," Vicky said. She sniffled, rooting in her coat pocket for a tissue.

"Are you wearing your long underwear?" George asked. He'd bought her a three-pack at Walmart, guessing at her size. When she tried one on, the bunched crotch had hit halfway up her thighs. He'd laughed—a mistake. Vicky had peeled them off, stuffed them in a drawer, and hadn't worn them since.

"No," Vicky said, and George didn't push it. He knew to tread carefully around subjects like these, remembering the time they'd been in Rett's Family Shoes buying Vicky proper winter boots, and out of nowhere she'd become teary-eyed, saying, "You know I'm not becoming a different person, right?"

George strode through a patch of mud, not quite frozen. Vicky stepped gingerly around it, watching her feet. Eight months here and still she couldn't take her eyes off the ground when she was hiking; she missed everything. "I hope Allison's okay on the road," she said, wiping her nose, as they started the uphill part. Her breaths were a little shallow. "I should have brought my phone." It was

then that George saw the Doberman. A compact, muscled animal, its fur black and bristly. It stood at the top of the hill, chest arched.

Vicky stepped gingerly around it, watching her feet. Eight months here and still she couldn't take her eyes off the ground when she was hiking; she missed everything.

It wasn't a dog he knew. Behind him, George could feel Vicky tense and slow down. "George," she said cautiously. The dog wasn't on a leash; most weren't. It was one of Vicky's biggest complaints about living here. "It's okay," George said, keeping his voice calm, as the Doberman started barking. "George," Vicky said. "It's fine," George told her. "Look, there's the owner. Right there." An old woman had appeared behind the dog, moving slowly, with a walking stick and a bright red hat. "Come on, Smoke," the woman said, but at the sound of her voice the dog took off running down the hill. George kept mov-

ing, but Vicky stopped. “Smoky, come here!” the owner called, but the dog had torn past George and pulled up short in front of Vicky. It was barking aggressively, its teeth inches from her knees. “Oh my God,” Vicky breathed, gathering her arms to her chest. “Control your dog!” George yelled at the old woman, who was making her way slowly down the hill, as the dog began to growl. A thick cord of drool swung from its mouth. “Don’t act scared,” George said to Vicky. “Just keep walking toward me.” But Vicky didn’t move. “I can’t,” she said, her eyes filling with tears. The woman feebly clapped her hands. “Smoky, stop!” she called, as the dog began circling Vicky. It was in attack mode. Vicky stood frozen, terrified, her cheeks two bright red circles under her wool hat, hands clutched under her chin. The dog was circling faster. “George,” Vicky cried, and fury exploded in his chest.

“You want to fuck with *me*?” he screamed, and lunged toward the dog with both hands raised. “You want to *fuck* with me? You don’t want to fuck with me! *I’ll fucking rip your head off!*”

The dog ran away. George watched it go, his chest heaving. The owner approached, leaning on her walking stick, mouth gaping slightly. She was old, her red hat made of some kind of yarn with bright-colored flowers. She was dumb, or maybe nuts.

“Control your fucking animal,” George snapped. “And don’t bring that dog on this path again.”

He dropped his hands and then turned and strode up the hill, blood pumping in his veins. Vicky walked beside him, slightly behind him. When George glanced back at her, her face looked blanched, unsure. He smiled at her. She smiled back faintly. “That was close,” she said.

George’s glasses fogged over. The snow was falling harder, coating the dark, sodden leaves. When he reached the top of the hill, his eyes were wet. “Which way?” he asked, as Vicky climbed up beside him.

She looked ahead, somewhere over his shoulder, her face tight. “I’m ready to go back,” she said.

George took a scalding shower, not caring for once about the bill. He scrubbed himself with the veiny, white sliver of soap he kept on the tub ledge and tried to remember Allison Pearson. He should know her—he’d apparently met her multiple times, including her own wedding and that bar in Portland—but all of

Vicky's college people were largely indistinguishable to him. He tried to conjure up Allison's wedding—there had been a string of weddings last summer, more or less identical, the video montages and string quartets, the band calling for all the Bowdoin graduates to gather for a picture. They were on the Maine coast and lasted three days. Unlike real Maine weddings, where you wore pants and skirts and people brought pies, then went home.

George shut off the shower. He padded into the bedroom naked to find Vicky leaning into the mirror, encircling her eyes with a long pencil. "What's with the makeup?" he said.

She didn't look at him. "I wear makeup sometimes."

George paused, dripping on the rug. "I didn't say I didn't like it," he said, even though he didn't like it. He liked her real skin, pink cheeks blooming from the cold.

"I used to wear makeup all the time," she added. "I was wearing makeup the night we met."

He didn't know what to say to this. Was she mad? Was it because of the dog? He had just been trying to protect her, for Chrissakes. To keep her from hating it here. Was it his fault it was so fucking hard?

"You look pretty," he told her, and slid an arm around her waist, but her body was rigid. She set down the pencil and reached for a vial of brown liquid, which she began dabbing on her face.

George returned to the bathroom. He picked up a razor and surveyed his jaw in the mirror. It had been over a week since his last shave and the growth was thick, brown with glints of silver. He nicked himself twice shaving. Blood beaded on his chin, and he blotted it with some toilet paper shreds. Then he pawed through his section of the closet and found a button-down shirt. Wrinkled, but reasonably clean. A belt. He smelled smoke drifting upstairs. When he went down, he found Vicky crouched in front of the woodstove, crunching up balls of newspaper.

"The fire's going out," she said.

"I'll take care of it."

"I want it lit when Allison gets here."

"Here, let me do it," George said.

Vicky stood up and looked at him directly. Her hair was straight and smooth, not curly the way he liked it, and she wore big hoops in her ears. Her eyes were circled with black and there were smudges of tan on each lid.

“Make it look cozy,” she told him.

George just looked at her.

“What?” she asked, and picked a floret of bloody tissue off his chin. Then George heard a car pull down his driveway, rolling slowly over the bumps. A stereo blared faintly. “That’s her!” Vicky said, a smile breaking on her face, and she ran to the door. She flung it wide open and stood in the doorway in her fuzzy purple socks, letting the cold air rush in.

“Tory!” screeched a voice in the distance. George had forgotten this; Vicky had been called Tory in college. Vicky stepped

George bent down, attending to the fire, hearing the sharp slams of the car doors. He opened the flue all the way, struck a match and tossed it in. The flames caught and lapped at the logs, liquidy and quick.

into George’s big sneakers, laces flapping, and ran out into the snow. George bent down, attending to the fire, hearing the

sharp slams of the car doors. He opened the flue all the way, struck a match and tossed it in. The flames caught and lapped at the logs, liquidy and quick.

“Oh my God, this weather!” Allison said as they stepped through the door, arms around each other. With a look, George remembered her. Skinny, hard-jawed, and freckled, with thin blonde hair and bright blue eyes. She wore a puffy, white wind-breaker and her inky blue jeans looked slicked to her legs, disappearing into furry boots that climbed to her knee.

“I know,” Vicky said, and leaned her head on Allison’s shoulder.

George stood up, wearing an awkward smile, and Allison strode toward him. “Hey there, George,” she said, kissing both his cheeks.

“Hello,” George said. She smelled like snow and musky perfume.

Allison stepped back and pulled off her gray hat, loosing a few staticky strands of hair. She clutched a wrinkled leather bag to one shoulder, a bottle of wine poking from the top. “This is cute,” she said, looking around the room approvingly, and pulled off her mittens with her teeth.

It was cozy, George thought. They had managed that in spades. The three of them sat on the floor by the woodstove picking apart a pound of steamers, which George had boiled up in a little beer. The empty clamshells filled two big bowls. The snow fell steadily. Three in the afternoon and there were already a good eight inches on the ground. It coated the tree limbs, turned the porch chairs into deep, white thrones.

The girls were splitting Allison's wine as George worked his way through the beers. He and Vicky usually didn't drink much. This was a good thing, probably. George had drunk too much in his twenties and ended up doing stupid things. A couple DUIs, a few fights in bars. They didn't take that stuff too seriously around here, especially in the off-season, though once he'd ended up in jail overnight. Another time he'd chipped a tooth; he told Vicky it was from falling on the job. But that was all ancient history now, another life. Strangely, he and Vicky had been pretty wasted the night they met in Portland, but since then Vicky had rarely seen George drunk, except at a few of those college weddings, where Vicky tried her best to coordinate his suit with his shoes and was disappointed when he snuck off to their hotel room early, tired of the fake enthusiasm when he told people he'd gone to the state university in Machias, explained what a land surveyor was. Tonight, a few beers tasted good.

Allison sat with her back to the fire and hands wrapped around her knees. Her cheeks were rosy from the wine and the heat. "It's so peaceful here," she said, closing her eyes.

George looked at Vicky and raised his eyebrows slightly. *See?* She smiled back, tucking her hair behind her ear. She was a little drunk too.

"But I couldn't deal with the cold," Allison said with a shudder, reaching for her glass. She had a deep voice, slightly hoarse. "Then again, Manhattan in the summer is revolting. It's like that game: what would you rather be, too hot or too cold?"

"Too hot," Vicky said immediately.

Allison laughed. "Um, Tory?" She pointed at the window. "You might want to reconsider."

Vicky reached for her glass. "Do another."

"Okay. Would you rather die of burning or drowning?"

Burning, George thought.

"That's morbid." Vicky shook her head. "I don't want to think about it."

"You're so sensitive," Allison said. "Isn't she sensitive, George?"

"She is," George said, and Vicky glanced at him. He quickly smiled.

Allison tapped her top lip with one finger. "Okay. If you could only see one for the rest of your life, which would it be: sunrise or sunset?"

Both girls picked sunset. "Otherwise I might feel guilty sleeping in," Allison said. "What about you, George?"

"Sunrise, I think."

"George is an early riser," Vicky told her.

"Impressive," Allison said. "You're one of those hardy Maine men."

George smiled but said nothing. He couldn't say why, but sunsets made him sad.

Allison stretched her long legs out in front of her. "So what do you guys *do* here?" she asked, flexing her toes.

George reached toward the stove and turned down the flue as Vicky said, "Oh, I don't know." Her tone was casual but contained an eager note, as if glad someone had finally asked. "Not much. George works during the week, obviously. I putter around here."

"She works, too," George added.

"Right, I know," Vicky said. "But that doesn't take up every single minute. I'm still here. At the house. I mean, I'm mostly alone."

George lifted his beer. Her job was mobile and his wasn't, he thought. Her moving here made the only sense.

"What do you do, like, on the weekends?" Allison asked.

"Watch movies," Vicky said. "Take walks in the woods." At this, George looked at her, but Vicky didn't look back.

"Are there restaurants?" Allison said. "Is there takeout? Please tell me there's takeout."

"Takeout?" Vicky said, with a laugh. "God, no. There's a scary Chinese place an hour away."

"I would starve," Allison said. "I would literally eat my own foot."

"It isn't exactly a hotbed of culture up here," Vicky said, as

George drained his beer. She added, “We go to bed by eight thirty most nights.”

“Eight thirty? My God, that sounds divine. Maybe I’ll have to chuck it all and move up here with you guys. You wouldn’t mind, would you, George?”

“Nope,” George said, playing along.

“Maybe you’ll get snowed in,” Vicky said.

“Maybe,” said Allison, brushing a strand of blonde hair from her mouth.

“Seriously,” Vicky said. “You really might.”

George glanced at the window. The snow showed no sign of stopping. He knew this snow, the dense, stubborn kind that would stick and settle for days.

Allison uncorked the blueberry wine. “Honestly,” she said, shaking her head. “Things are not good.” She was talking about her husband now, a guy named Raphael who designed educational toys, and it felt as though the conversation had finally settled into its inevitable rhythms: this, after all, was the reason she was here.

“OK. Tell me everything,” Vicky said, in a clipped, officious tone that George had never heard before. Her chin was high, her eyes narrowed, as she held out her glass for Allison to refill. George studied her. They were so rarely with anyone besides each other.

“I wish there were more to tell,” Allison said. She draped her arms across her lap and propped her chin on one fist. “It’s not like anything spectacularly *bad* happened. It’s just not what I thought it would be.”

Vicky nodded, a little too vigorously.

“Sometimes I *wish* something bad would happen. I know that sounds terrible and wrong—”

“No, it doesn’t,” Vicky said.

George picked up a fresh beer and flicked the cap onto the floor. Inside the stove, a log snapped and shifted.

“It’s just that Raf is so reasonable all the time,” Allison said. “He’s so fucking *careful*. He hates conflict. But you know me.” She grinned at George. “I’m a lover and a fighter.”

George laughed, surprising himself. He thought this girl could probably hold her own in the bars.

But Vicky spoke seriously. “You know what they say, Al. About relationships. When we’re young, we look for partners who have the qualities we don’t. Then, as we get older, we want people more like us.”

“Do they say that?”

“I think they do,” Vicky said, nodding, still nodding. It was the kind of conversation she loved.

Allison swirled the blue wine in the bottom of her glass. Her jaw was a hard knot. “Well, so, last night I bit the bullet,” she said. “I told Raf I thought we might be missing a deeper connection.”

Vicky raised her eyebrows. “And?”

“He said I was being melodramatic.”

Vicky sighed, drew her knees under her chin and wrapped her arms around them. “He isn’t *listening*,” she said, wineglass drooping precariously to one side, and George had the odd sensation that he was watching her in the role of someone else.

“Right?” Allison said. “Then he told me that I hurt his feelings. I mean, what am I supposed to do with that, bite my tongue? Watch every word I say in my own home?”

She appealed to George, palms upturned. He smiled helplessly and shrugged.

“I’m just realizing that he doesn’t really *know* me, you know?” She frowned, studying her glass. “But I mean, is that just the way it is? Can another person *ever* really know you?”

“Of course not,” Vicky said.

Allison let out a short bark of a laugh. “Tell us what you really think, Tor.”

“I mean, they can’t. It isn’t realistic.” Vicky was looking into the fire now, her cheeks bright, dark makeup smudged under her eyes. “You can’t expect another person to know you, not completely. It’s impossible. It’s just about them knowing you enough.”

“Yeah, but what’s enough?”

“Feeling like they see you,” Vicky said. “Like they accept you. Not feeling so lonely all the time.”

Her face held still for another moment, looking at the fire, then her eyes filled with tears.

“Oh, Tory,” Allison said.

George stared out the window, a faint throb starting in his

chest. He saw a long wrinkle in the plastic on the window, like a ripple frozen in a pond. Beyond it, past the driveway and the edge of the forest, he imagined the snowy maze of trails, lush and deep and silent.

Allison slid onto the floor beside Vicky and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. George drained his beer,

then added the bottle to the row of empties and grabbed two more. He held onto the couch, pushing himself to his feet.

“You’re leaving?” Allison said, in surprise.

Vicky said nothing, looking at the floor.

“I should get started on the snow before it gets too deep,” George said.

“My God, you’re going *out* there? Do you have, like, a plow or something?”

“Just a shovel.”

“A shovel? Jesus, can’t you hire a plow guy?”

George shook his head. “I don’t mind.”

“He doesn’t,” Vicky said. “He likes to do it. He likes hard things. They thrive on that here.”

George looked at Vicky. When she raised her head, her face looked small and flushed and sad.

“It’s true, isn’t it?” she said. “You like when things are hard.”

“I guess so,” George said, and then he went to get his coat.

The sky was sterling gray, like the inside of an upturned bowl, and George felt encased in it, held by it, his love for this place an almost unbearable weight in his chest.

George shuffled to the barn through the dense snow. He would start at the mouth of the driveway and work his way back down toward the trees. He grabbed the shovel and walked past the row of parked cars, three smooth humps of white. At the end of the driveway, he pulled a beer from his coat pocket and took a drink. He gazed down the road. Nothing as far as he could see, just a blanket of soft and silent whiteness. The sky was sterling gray, like the inside of an upturned bowl, and George felt encased in it, held by it, his love for this place an almost unbearable weight in his chest.

He turned then and faced the driveway, marred only by his bootprints, and got to work. He worked with his head down, lifting and tossing, letting the rhythm bear him along. The snow was wet and heavy. The burn in his muscles felt good. It was true, he guessed, what Vicky said. He did like hard things. The threat of a storm, a big snowfall, even a bar fight—it stirred up some excitement at his core. Not for the thing itself, but the satisfaction of beating it. The cold air seared his lungs. His throat felt sore, as if he'd torn something screaming this afternoon. He kept his chin down as he shoveled his way around the bumper of Vicky's car, past the deep dent in the fender, and remembered the time she'd called him, frantic, from Route 3. Driving home

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from the therapist, her car had spun out on a patch of black ice and hit a guardrail. She was sobbing on the phone. "Calm down," George had told her, staring at the black sky from the kitchen window, pic-

turing her standing alone on the side of the road, in the long, checkered coat he'd told her wasn't warm enough, phone crackling in the wind. His jaw was clenched so tight it stung. "Just tell me where you are," he said, but she was crying so hard she couldn't speak. "Calm down. Jesus, I can't *understand* you," he pleaded with her, as a state cop arrived. She'd spent the night in a thirty-five-dollar motel, too scared to drive the rest of the way home.

The ache was spreading across his shoulders. Behind him, he heard the rumble of an advancing plow. He turned, lifted a hand, saw a hand lift in return. Then the road was doused in headlights and sunk again in shadow, two quiet snow piles mounded on either side. As the plow receded, George turned back to his driveway. He was halfway there. The sun was beginning to set, its orange light weak behind a gauze of gray. He drew the beer from his pocket and surveyed his little house. When they drove places, Vicky was always commenting on strangers' houses, how warm they looked, how homey. His own house looked like something off a fucking postcard, with its snowy roof and puffing chimney, the windows glowing with light.

George shoved the empty bottle back in his pocket and blinked snow from his eyelashes. His cheeks were going numb, despite the beer. He blew snot on the ground and turned to face the woods again. They seemed to have gone abruptly darker. The sun had fallen below the trees. The sound of the plow had faded completely now, and it was quiet, the kind of quiet you couldn't find anywhere else in the world. You could actually hear the sound of the snow falling, the faint sizzle of flakes filling the air.

There was a rustle in the woods. A deer, most likely. Or snow falling from a branch. But the air was perfectly still, windless. Maybe it was the Doberman, George thought. He squinted into the woods. Nothing but darkness. He heard another sound, a faint snap, and his body tensed. A knot of anger pulsed in his chest, the way an old scar throbs in the cold, as he pictured the dog tearing down the hill and circling Vicky. George had meant what he said. He would have ripped the dog's head off. And he would do it now. He would wrestle it to the ground.

George caught a movement in the snow and put his hands up. But it was just a rabbit hopping out of the woods. It was lean and gray as a shadow. Seeing George, the animal froze, dropping back on its hind legs. It stared at George. George stared back, stared it down, until it returned to the woods.

The air in the bedroom was cold, thin, and weightless. "It's freezing in here," Vicky said, almost under her breath. They'd given all their extra blankets to Allison, all except the down comforter, which Vicky had pulled to her chin. She took her hoop earrings off, one and then the other, letting just one hand poke out the top of the cover. George climbed in beside her, the points of the feathers pricking his bare chest.

"I feel bad for her," Vicky said. She set her earrings on the bedside table, next to the book, the empty mugs, and tucked her arm back under the covers. "I'm glad we can do this for her."

George switched off the lamp, the room swimming in darkness.

"She doesn't seem happy, does she?" Vicky said. She spoke in a whisper so Allison wouldn't hear.

"I guess not," George said.

"I mean, she said as much. Once you admit things to yourself, it's hard to take them back," Vicky said. "Don't you think?"

George stared at the ceiling. He felt his heart beating. The

snow, still falling, touched the room with a soft, pearly light. He pictured Allison in the room across the hall, the one filled with Vicky's still-unpacked boxes, sleeping on his old brown couch. Vicky was somewhere on the other side of the bed.

"God, this was a long day," Vicky said then. Her voice sounded smaller. "It doesn't seem possible this was all one day, does it?"

George knew what she meant, but he couldn't bring himself to admit it. He remembered waking up, bodies pressed together under the warm cave of blankets, the first snowflakes streaking past the window, the gathering of forces beyond his control.

"George?" Vicky said into the darkness. "Remember this morning? Doesn't that seem like such a long time ago?"

THE ART OF KNOTTING AND SPLICING

They're looking for my sister. Right now, as we speak. As Richie runs his dirty finger over my spine. That tickles, I say. Stop. I'm not laughing. I don't like Richie; that's not why I'm here. He's large and smells foul and breathes so loudly I think he's about to have a heart attack. Maybe he is.

Why don't you go home then, he says.

Maybe I will.

I lie there on his sagging mattress with the sheet pulled off the corner, exposing a dusty pink material with some kind of urinous stain peeking out. I count his CDs and arrange them into little stacks. They're scattered on a bookshelf, and I stop counting at forty-eight. I put one in the CD player.

You like that one, he says.

I shrug. I don't really care what it sounds like; I just want something to fill the space in my head. I wait for it to start and try to find a beat, but it doesn't seem to have one. It's all this heavy metal garbage, I say. This is why you're a fuckup. Which isn't completely true. Richie's mom is a fuckup, so he didn't really have a choice. Her name is Deb, but I call her Bertha because she's so big and fat. She has a boyfriend who lives up in unincorporated. A welder, I think. I try hard not to picture it, but these things enter your mind, and I keep seeing Bertha: short curly hair all a-sweat, belly jouncing, astride some poor skinny bastard in Dickies.

I'm not a fuckup, Richie says. He speaks softly, always. Even when he's angry with me. He's sitting on the edge of his bed, playing with his ropes. Tying and retying knots. He does it because he likes to have something to do with his hands. He says it's like a puzzle. Has a book on it. *The Art of Knotting and Splicing*, it's called. For years I didn't even know he could read, God's honest.

Right now he's working on a clover knot. Lemme try, I say. He pulls away, crouching further over his rope. I've hurt his

feelings. Fine, I say. Fine. I take a piece of twine from his shelf and wrap one end around his waist. I wrap the other around mine and tie them with a grief knot. A grief is like a granny, but the ends come out on different sides, so it comes undone real fast and looks like magic. He glances at my work. I give a quick tug, and the knot falls open. Ta-da! I say. But he doesn't smile. I sit up and stretch, then open the two liter of Sprite and tip the opening toward his lips, as recompense. He frowns and turns his head away.

Aren't you worried about your sister, he says.

I take a sip of the Sprite. It's gone flat. Of course I am, I say. Don't be a jerk. The rain sounds like pebbles on the plastic roof. I wait for one to drop right through onto the bed. I imagine it's acid rain and will sear a hole in his sheets.

Why aren't you out looking for her, he says.

Why aren't you? I say. I look at the freckles on his pale skin. I take my fingernail and drag it slowly down the back of his arm, connecting each tiny dot. He slouches further. What if something happened to her, he says.

Don't be a baby, I say. I hit him with my palm on the back of his head and rummage for my underwear and jeans.

Where are you going, he says.

Home. I don't need a search party out for me, right?

He grabs my thigh and squeezes tightly. I can feel each fingertip crushing capillaries beneath the skin, but I don't pull away. He's watching my face. I wait until I feel his fingernails and then push him away. He goes back to his knots and doesn't look at me as I dress and doesn't turn to see me as I leave. He just sits in his shorts and stares at the wall, holding the length of rope, hunched and huge like Quasimodo.

My father is at the kitchen table with Officer Blink. I can't say or think of his name without being overly conscious of the blinking of my eyes. He has a narrow face. A long pickle nose dotted with two little black olive eyes. He's the type to cop a feel if he were my gym teacher.

They don't ask where I've been. I ask if there is any news, and my father just takes my hand and holds it softly. I can feel the faint trembling under his skin. His palm is hot and dry. This makes my heart ache, and I pull away.

He says they're bringing people in from Gunnison, then whis-

bles to Posey, the dog, who ambles over. I put a pot of water on to boil. You're out of coffee, I say, looking at his cup. He stares into his mug. I take the instant out of the cupboard and shake the crystals to loosen them from the sides of the glass. We don't use a coffee pot. It's a waste for only two cups of coffee, and I think it tastes better anyway. But I can tell Officer Blink thinks

My father doesn't like that I drink it. He says I'm still growing at fifteen, and it'll stunt me. I'm grown, I tell him. These bones are fused.

it's atrocious. My father doesn't like that I drink it. He says I'm still growing at fifteen, and it'll stunt me. I'm grown, I tell him. These bones are fused.

Why do they call it a search party, I say. It doesn't feel like the right term. It shouldn't be a party. I glance at my father as the water rumbles in the kettle. He's a zombie, holding Posey on his lap and staring into the cracked table top.

Right now we're interviewing those who saw her last, Officer Blink says. He loops his thumb over his belt as he speaks.

And who, might I ask, would that be, I say.

You, for one, he says. He is looking at me like they all look at me: long and thirsty. The kettle on the stove whistles, and I cut off the flame and pour the steaming water into my father's mug. I already told you, I say, then hold up the kettle, offering Officer Blink some. He shakes his head.

Well, I want to hear it again, he says. Now that we have a better idea of what might have happened.

And what might have happened?

Officer Blink stares at me, his thumb sagging over the loop of his pants. He motions for me to sit. I look at my dad and ask to go shower first. I'm cold, I say. I'm soaked. It's pouring. I want to clean up. My father nods, and Officer Blink looks deflated, but he waves his hand at me to go.

In the bathroom I peel off my clothes and stare at myself in the mirror as the water steams up the corners. Bruises like grapes are already forming on the inside of my thigh.

Later I sit at the table in my robe. I know it makes Officer Blink uncomfortable, and I let the neck open up a bit. My father is sit-

ting cross-legged on the couch, toes under his knees. I've never seen another man sit that way, but he isn't tall, and his legs are particularly short for his body, so they tuck up under him neatly. He looks either like a child or a monk, sitting there, depending on his facial expressions. This time it's neither. He's staring blankly at the television, the sound turned off, and for a moment he looks like one of the adults at the special needs home on Magnolia. I volunteered there once for a school project and played checkers for three hours with a man named Darryl. My dad reminds me of him now. Focused and blank.

What time did you leave the residence? Officer Blink asks.

I told you, I say. I told Abby to leave Posey outside and she said no and I said yes. Right now Posey is sleeping in a corner of the kitchen, nose pressed against the side of his food bowl. He is oblivious to it all.

And then what.

And then I put the dog outside.

And she was upset, right? Officer Blink rubs his nose, and a piece of fuzz drifts from his nostril to the table.

Yeah, she was upset, I say. I roll my eyes. He's agitated. They think Abby came home from school at lunch to let Posey back inside. After that, they have nothing. No one saw her. Not here, not at school, not on the roads between here and there.

Abby loves animals, I say to Officer Blink. She'd been hounding our father for years to get a dog. He finally brought Posey home a few days ago. It was a surprise. I'd never seen her so lit up. She loved him right away. She loves all animals. She even wanted a pig at one point.

I call into the living room, Didn't she want a pig, Daddy? Remember? At Christmas? He turns toward us from the couch. Even from all the way over here, I can see how caved in he looks. His eyes have sunk into themselves, and his lips are cracked into gaping crevasses of bright red pulp. They are the throbbing wounds of a man forgetting to drink, to eat. He's settling into a dark place, somewhere deep and cavernous.

His tooth shows a little as his dry lip curls into a semismile. She was just like your mother, he says. Got us all off bacon. She said pigs are as smart as humans. He scratches his ear. Just like your mother, he says.

I wish he wouldn't mention her. It makes it all so much worse.

He looks out the window. The rain is still coming down in sheets. Can't I go out, he says to Officer Blink.

We need you here, the officer says, shaking his head. In case she calls.

She was so sweet, my father says. My heart races at his use of the past tense. Then I wonder if he's talking about our mother or Abby. I tap my fingers on the table.

When Officer Blink leaves, I lock the door and pull pasta from the cupboard. You want something to eat, Daddy, I say. You have to eat something. You do.

I didn't know that morning was the one she'd go missing. I wonder if these will be my last memories of her—her chin down on the breakfast table, staring into the belly of her spoon, cereal going soggy. She was upset. I tried to smooth her hair for her, but she pushed my hand away. The kitchen was drafty. Our father had been meaning to caulk the windows all winter, but here it was, almost April, and the wind still whistled through. Posey was on the stoop, staring in through the smudged glass door.

Don't let him in when I leave, Rodent. I call her Rodent, but it's out of affection. She has a little, upturned nose and those puffy cheeks. It's all out of affection, though. She didn't look up from her cereal. The milk had turned a dull gray. Spongy rings floated around like little life preservers.

We used to be on the same side, she said to me, chin still on the table. It caught me off guard, the way she said that. Like I wasn't her older sister, like we were equals. So I slapped her.

It hurt my hand. And her eyes were so wide I could see the whites all around. A red handprint began forming on her cheek. I took my rain jacket and held it over my head as I ran down the front steps, the needlepoint rain stinging my face. But I smiled to myself as I slowed to a walk and felt a seed of pride budding in my chest.

I didn't tell Officer Blink about the slap. I don't think he needs to hear about that. What difference would it make anyway?

The next morning it's all over the news. It's strange seeing her face up there on the television. Her glasses are even more ridiculous and her purple sweatpants even more dingy and sad look-

ing when it's pasted next to the anchorwoman in her cream-colored suit. I sometimes envied Abby that—the freedom of her plain face and round thighs. Free to be a bookworm and a nature lover. No one looking glassy-eyed at the backs of her knees, thinking they knew what kind of girl she was. She could be any kind of girl she wanted. I envied her that, I did.

I take a long shower and smooth my hair so not a strand is out of place. I take forty minutes to press my shirt. Microphones jab me in the chin and bottom lip when I walk outside. My father asks them to leave me be, but I stop and speak up. I miss my sister, I say. I love my sister and want her home. Bring her home, I say into the microphone. Whatever you've done, whoever you are, just bring her home to us, her family, who love her.

It doesn't take them long to get to Richie. His front door is only twenty feet from ours. They knocked on the dingy window of the Jamboree and no doubt caught a whiff of the place, the look of it, and went and got a search warrant immediately. There is a

There is a smell like dead bodies in that trailer, of snuffed-out life. Sometimes I hate myself for spending time in there.



smell like dead bodies in that trailer, of snuffed-out life. Sometimes I hate myself for spending time in there. Afterward I feel drenched in the stench of it, and no shower is hot enough to get it off. But you get

used to it. After a while in there, it's just a room like any other, and it doesn't seem to smell at all.

Richie is escorted to the police station in an unmarked car. He's not being arrested, they say. Just questioned. He looks at me as they walk him out. His fat head craning. I pull my raincoat tight across my body. The downpour has let up, but droplets still fall from roofs and tree limbs. When the car pulls away, the tires sound like peeling tape.

I sit on the porch and watch them all afternoon, coming in and out with white plastic bags, gloves up to their elbows, surgical masks over their chins. I have been excused from classes. Pending, they say. Pending what, I don't know.

They bring out the jars of urine he keeps under his bed. The

plumbing doesn't work, so he just sits on the edge of his bed and empties his bladder into the jars, then pours them down the sewer later. I watch the police carry them out, gloved fingers holding them at arm's length, noses twisted.

They bring out his stacks of magazines, the dirty ones and the normal ones too. Bags of garbage, empty beer cans, sheets off his bed to inspect under microscopes. I wonder if they will find me on those sheets. They're looking for Abby, but they'll find me.

They bring out his video games and his CDs and player. His clothes—jeans, sweat socks, T-shirts. His ropes. These get special attention, and the buzz heightens when they are delicately escorted out. Several detectives stand in a powwow, the ropes in a plastic bag between them. Then they bring in shovels and start digging under the trailer. This is unexpected. I pull my knees to my chest, watching. A buzz sounds in my right ear as I begin to understand that they are digging for Abby. They are turning over earth for her. The buzzing gets louder, and I shake my head to try to dislodge it. I get up and circle the porch and then sit back down, palm cupping my ear. As much as I want to, I can't look away.

There are a few reporters and their cameramen standing in the road. They've been ordered to remain off the property. But the road is fair game, and they've set up camp, sitting on milk crates with giant umbrellas fanning out, sipping coffee out of little Styrofoam cups. One of the cups blows into our yard, and I walk out and smash it under my shoe. No one notices.

The pile of dirt grows, and the man digging sinks lower and lower beneath the surface. I can't believe how far they're going. I didn't know a human could dig so far without a backhoe or some kind of mechanical help. Soon it is just the top of his head, bobbing slightly, a hand rising to wipe his forehead every minute or so.

It's technically spring, but the air is cold. Clouds still collect in the sky and brood, like they do all winter. We had a flash of warm weather a few weeks ago. A hot flash, my father called it. Buds popped out, tulips nudged up. But after about five days, it was over and everything that had chanced it froze and fell to the ground.

My father is out all night, looking. I have no idea where he goes. Ravines, fields, the barn up on County Road 4 with the half-caved-in roof. I jumped off that roof once and almost broke my leg. But my knees were young then, invincible, and I just hit the grass and rolled, laughing.

I wonder what he thinks when he's aiming flashlights into dark corners. I can't picture her anywhere that isn't safe. The only way I can form a clear picture of her is in the places I've seen her before: in her room with a book, or at school with her arm in her locker, or leaning on the counter at the convenience store. If not there, if not in those places, I can't get my head to make the image. I try, and all I see is vapor. It's as though she's disappeared into a puff of steam.

I knock on my father's bedroom door and open it a crack. He's on his stomach, legs splayed over the quilt, Posey tucked up in his armpit. You want something to eat, I say. He licks his swollen lips and says he doesn't. Says he's just catching a nap, and he's gonna be gone again in an hour. I can hear his breath whistle in his lungs. From the cold air and the walking. The shouting of her name.

Stay and listen for the phone, he says. You'll do that for me, right, Charla. Right, Sweetheart, he says.

Abby and I don't have a mother. She died when Abby was just a baby. But I always thought of myself as a mom to her. I picked her up when she cried and fed her and dressed her. I read to her from the children's encyclopedia and taught her the numbers, right up to one hundred. We did the alphabet together. She was myopic and wore thick glasses with giant tortoiseshell frames our father let her pick out herself. Can you see now, Baby Doll, I said. I liked to call her my Baby Doll back then. I have a fuzzy memory of our mother calling me that when I was little, but I can't be sure. The mind plays mean tricks on you when you miss someone.

They don't find anything under Richie's trailer. But the ropes are enough. They find them in his truck too, with a knife—a hunting knife is all, and I know it, but I can't say anything. They call it a rape kit and install him temporarily in the county jail.

He calls me from there.

What the heck, Richie, I say. You should be calling Bertha so she can get you a lawyer or something.

I wanted to call you, he says.

I don't know why, I say. I can't help you.

I can hear the clanking of something loud and metal in the background, followed by a loud whooping and a chuckle.

That's just the guards, Richie says. It's not like it's a bunch of crazy prisoners or anything, he says. He laughs, and it throws me off because as long as I've known him, I don't think I've ever heard him really laugh. It's real tame in here, he says. Just one other guy, and he's small and drunk.

I don't know why, but this relaxes me a little. Posey nudges my leg. I don't have the heart to shoo him away. If Abby were here, I would have. But instead I get up and pour some food in his bowl.

Well, I don't have much more time, Richie says. I can hear his fingers picking at the receiver.

Okay, I say, and I hang up. I don't wait for him to do it. I like to be the first to put down the phone.

When my father is not out looking, he sits in his recliner and stares at the television. After an hour, sometimes two, he stands and takes his coat back off the hook, shaking the beads of rain off, and leaves again. I tell him to sleep, but he won't. Right now he has his head cocked to the side, his ear resting on his shoulder, as he watches the screen. I'm sitting on the couch, and Posey is on his lap, panting.

Daddy, can't you put the dog down for a little while, I say.

Why, he says. He likes it up here with me. What's the harm. He strokes Posey's ears. I think of how Abby had wanted to train him to get her shoes and notebook and to roll over.

No harm, I say.

My father picks up the remote and starts flipping channels. Anything that isn't news.

They let the Brimley boy go, he tells me.

I sit up straight. They did?

I know you like him, he says softly, not looking at me.

I stare at the picture of my mother that sits on top of the TV. There is a layer of dust obscuring the photo. I don't like him, I say.

I've seen you spend time with him, he says. In his—his *home*. I've seen you go in there.

My throat feels swollen, and my temples throb. No, I don't like him, I say. Not at all. Ask anyone.

He nods and says, That's good. You're a good girl.

He lands on a home-shopping channel and puts the remote down on the arm of his chair. It's a jewelry show and a very tan woman with long acrylic nails pushes a silver ring onto her index finger. See how thick this silver is, she says. See the quality. You can buy it a size or two up and wear it as a cocktail ring. I just love this, she says. She is so enthusiastic. She twists her finger under the camera. I imagine she smells like tangerine lotion. My friend's mother is always very tan and wears lots of rings and smells like tangerine lotion.

I ask my father if he wants a snack. The house is stale, and I want to fill it with another smell, something edible. He picks at a ball of lint on the sleeve of his sweater and nods. I get up and soon the smell of toast and honey and butter drifts through the kitchen and into the family room. I can see when it reaches my father. His eyes blink, and he rolls them briefly from the television screen. What's that, he says. Smells good.

On Abby's fifth birthday our father picked up three helium-filled balloons and took us to McDonald's. He tied the balloons to the back of Abby's chair, and she sat and swiveled as she ate, a queen on her throne. We gorged ourselves and then ran around the indoor playground like hooligans.

When we'd run ourselves out and pulled our coats on over our sweating bodies, he untied the balloons and handed one to each of us, keeping the last for himself. We walked out into the parking lot and crossed to where the cement met a large field of blue grama grass. It stood in tall, waving batches, even though it was October and cold and it should've gone brown already. Our father stepped into the field and tied his balloon to a blade of grass. Then he closed his eyes and crossed his arms over his chest. When he opened his eyes, he was flushed, invigorated, like a man back from a brisk walk.

Go on, he said. Make a wish.

Abby and I stood awkwardly, snot running down our faces, rubbing our fists along our jeans.

Like a birthday wish, I said.

Yeah, he said. Sure.

It's not my birthday, I said.

You still get a wish.

I asked why we didn't just blow out candles on a cake, and he rubbed his mustache—he had a mustache back then—and said this was better.

He said the balloons would untie in the night and carry our wishes up to heaven. He said that's the advantage of having a momma in heaven—you get to make wishes and know someone's listening.

Go on, he said.

I leaned over and tied my balloon to a piece of grass. At first it slipped a little, so my father held it for me as I pulled tighter. Then I took Abby's and did the same. We stood back and looked at them bobbing, knocking into each other and twisting. Abby looked up at me. She didn't know what to ask for.

I remember thinking that was the best thing in the world. It meant she was happy, and she had all she wanted. I felt guilty for wanting things.

I remember thinking that was the best thing in the world. It meant she was happy, and she had all she wanted. I felt guilty for wanting things.

I asked for new jeans and a curling iron—they were stupid things, and I knew it, but I couldn't stop wanting them. I don't know why I said it out loud, though thinking back I was probably hoping that my father would hear what I wanted and get it for me himself. When I was done, Abby looked intently at the balloon and said, Momma, I wish you would come back so I could meet you.

This must have torn my father up because he never took us back, even when we begged. I knew better, that it was all for show, and no one's wishes were being granted, but Abby really believed. She wanted to see if the balloons were gone. She wanted to be sure we had been heard. But he shook his head and choked up, and I knew to stop asking.

Later I put a green hat on Abby's head and made sure her coat

was pulled tight, and we walked the mile and a half to the McDonald's. I wanted to ease her mind. It didn't occur to me—as I'm sure it didn't to my father when he concocted the idea—that the balloons wouldn't untie in the elements and drift away. But as we walked from the far side of the parking lot, I could already see them. Two wrinkled, deflated balloons, lying listlessly on the ground. Abby gasped and ran to them. She kneeled and cradled them in her palm like stunned birds.

Charla, she said, they didn't go to heaven.

I didn't know what to say, so I told her we must have asked for the wrong things, and the balloons couldn't go to heaven with the wrong wishes. She frowned and looked distraught. She tried to breathe into the dead casings. I told her to buck up. I actually said that. Buck up. I took her inside and bought her a Coke and french fries that she wouldn't eat. She sat there, shivering in her coat, sucking on the straw. I told her we'd go to the store and get more balloons and try again.

We'll come back, Baby Doll. It's no big thing, I said.

When we do, I'll have the right wish, she said. It will be exactly right.

Richie is a force of nature, like the mountains that stand behind our house. I told him that once, when we were fogging up the dirty window above his bed, and it seemed to please him. He smiled and said, Is that so?

It's as though he was pushed up from the hot core of the earth millennia ago and just sits cooling and shifting in his mother's Jamboree, casting his long shadow over our roof. I suppose that was the allure at first. I wanted to conquer Richie, climb up his face and pitch a flag and tip my nose to the clouds.

I haven't seen him since he was released from jail. Bertha waddles in and out with paper bags of groceries from the convenience store, but Richie stays tucked away. Sometimes I sit on our stoop and watch his window for signs of movement, imagining him blossoming in there like a fragrant mushroom, spreading across the floor and inching up the wallpaper.

This is how you tie a slip knot. Richie shows me with his good, white rope. It's very expensive. He instructs me to keep it off the ground. Don't let it drag in the dirt, he says. It will ruin the integrity of the material.

Richie is seventeen and I'm twelve and Abby still has three more years safe at home. The knot is so easy I learn it in five seconds. He says I'm a natural and then shows me a square. I get that one right away too. What's next, I ask. This impresses him, I can tell, though he tries not to show it. I feel giddy to be pleasing him and push my fists into my lap in excitement.

The antiquity of knots should not be underappreciated, he says. It is one of man's oldest tools. And I laugh because no one in our town talks like him. Not even my teachers. Gorillas use them, he tells me, to bend saplings and creepers and make nests.

You mean they can make lover's knots and trucker's hitches?

No, they use grannies, mostly, but they've been known to throw in a square or even a hitch. People say it's just by accident, but I think they intend it. I think people don't give animals enough credit. He bends forward and reaches for a bag of Cheetos he has leaning against his foot. I've never seen him eat anything but chips and soda. I think animals aren't as dumb as people think, he says. This here is the Ashley's stopper knot. It's a knot for all occasions but mainly for boating. I ask him where the hell he's going to boat out here, in the middle of nowhere, but he just keeps working the rope, explaining the combinations.

Here, take it like this. Make a noose, he says.

Who's Ashley, I ask, taking the rope. It's my first flicker of jealousy, and it unnerves me.

It's a man, stupid, he says. Clifford Ashley. He's, like, the god of knots. Here, tuck the working end and pull the noose tight to trap it. He takes my fingers and manipulates them with the rope. See? See the trefoil here? That's an Ashley stopper knot.

I nod. He's already bent over a second length of rope, wrapping and tugging. I look back at my own. I am proud. What do you do with it, I ask.

He doesn't look up. What do you mean, he says.

I mean, what's it for?

It's a stopper knot. I don't know. He shrugs. It stops things up, I guess.

Later he tells me tying knots makes him feel loose. As though, by tightening the rope, he somehow releases the knots in his body. He sits up to smoke a cigarette, ashing on a ceramic plate on the floor. I trace his pale, fleshy back and prod for lumps in his muscle. When I find one, I rub lightly in circles, watching the

side of his face. But he just stares ahead, bringing the cigarette back and forth to his lips, his eyes sleepy.

They make ribbons for Abby. They're green and purple—her favorite colors—and they flutter from our mailbox and the antenna of my father's truck. Teachers at her school, classmates, and strangers on the street have them looped into little bows and pinned to their breasts. I've seen them at the registers in grocery stores and wrapped around trees for a three-mile radius. Most of them are tied with grannies, and when I can, I stop and retie them into squares.

On a Tuesday, Abby is missing for three weeks, and I go to the McDonald's and kneel by a patch of grass on the edge of a small swale. I use a ribbon to tie up a green balloon. There's no helium, just the breath from my lungs, and it lies quietly on the wet blades. I don't say a wish because I'm too old for that. But I sit there for a very long time, leaning against the incline, my shoes sinking into the soft ground. I will come back later to see if it's gone. But not soon. I won't come back soon.

There's a ribbon tied to Richie's trailer. I can tell he put it there. He used a falconer's knot. The long chain of loops sways, wet from the rain. I remember once how he said a falcon was the ultimate predator. I walk toward his door and slip on a patch of mud. My wrist wrenches as I fall, and I want to scream, but I don't. Instead I take a palmful of mud and lunge at his window. It hits the screen like fruit, squishing and rolling back to me. I bend and scoop, my wrist swelling. The ground is still loose where they were digging. I press the mud against the side of the trailer. It's cold, and my hands freeze, but it feels good. I cover the siding in rhythmic strokes, painting, the noise in my head growing quieter. I watch the white plastic disappear under the brown earth, and I think, Now I understand why people make art.

I know Richie is inside, and he hears me, humming and pressing, but he won't come out, and I keep at it. I keep layering his house until everything I can reach is mummified and quiet. There, I say. There.

Officer Blink stops by less frequently now. But he is here one afternoon when the air has warmed and the rain has started

again, and I begin to think he shows up when he doesn't want to be driving around in his car. There is a ravaged bag of hamburgers and fries strewn on the table. He and my father both look at me when I come in. Posey has grown fat and looks like a piglet now, little rolls building up on his back. He's whining and pawing at my father's chest.

I never want to see my father cry. I'm afraid it will damage something in me permanently. I'm afraid I will never feel safe again.

Pieces of wiry gray hair crawl up the neck of my father's undershirt and poke out like spider legs, stabbing at his chin. I want to pluck them with tweezers. Daddy, get a shirt on, I say.

He looks down at himself and then at me, puzzled. I got a shirt on, Char.

Officer Blink puts his hand on my shoulder. It's clammy. I can feel the cold moisture through my blouse. I know he's thinking something filthy about me.

We're going to keep looking, Sweetheart, he says. He has a hero's tone to his voice that I resent.

What about the Brimley boy, my father says.

Richard Brimley remains a person of interest, Officer Blink says. He pulls at his mouth with his clammy hand. I'm sorry, Jack. I know it's hard, what with him next door and all.

Posey whines. My father breaks off more meat from his sandwich and feeds it to Posey. The sound of the dog chewing makes my stomach turn.

I wish we had more, Officer Blink says. But we just couldn't hold him with what we had. We don't have, you know. He trails off.

A body? I ask. I don't like unfinished sentences.

I take a french fry from the paper bag and throw it across the room. Posey jumps from my father's lap and runs after it. My father ducks and looks at me, stunned and confused. His face is covered in pain. Across the room Posey pants as he consumes the fry, then begins sniffing and blowing under the cabinets.

Charla, my father whispers. The wrinkles around his eyes have deepened. The bags below them darkened. I'm sorry, I say.

I'm sorry. I am afraid he will cry, and I never want to see my father cry. I'm afraid it will damage something in me permanently. I'm afraid I will never feel safe again.

But he doesn't cry. He rubs his eyes and pulls at an ear lobe, then shrugs at Officer Blink. He looks back at the dog. Here, Posey, he says. Here, boy. He holds out half a patty, soaked with ketchup, a limp pickle clinging to the side. Here, he says. His voice is high-pitched and cracking. Posey returns and leaps back onto my father's lap. Good boy, my father says. He strokes his head and kisses his ear. Good, good, good boy, he says.

TOUGH LITTLE WIFE

Winner of the 2012 AWP Intro Journals Project
selected by Brock Clarke

Every day is the last day at the Alamo. Time has us surrounded, and we hold out against the inevitable, hoping the way we handle ourselves matters somehow. In a storefront apartment in fin de siècle Brooklyn, Tina stared at Wesley. Wesley played the guitar. She guessed he'd had all the marriage he could take.

They were deep into their Sunday afternoon laze in the corner they called the kitchen because that's where they kept the toaster oven. She perched on a scavenged bar stool, licking doughnut crumbs from her fingers, and watched him ignore her. He hunkered on double-stacked milk crates, a study in chiaroscuro outlined against the glowing opaque window. Beyond the smoked glass lay the honking, brake-screaming, *Papi-ing, culo-ing* land of Bushwick.

Ostensibly, he was lost in his art. On their flip-top-school-desk-cum-dining-table lay a back copy of *Guitar Player*, creased open to a page of tablature. His whole body struggled to decipher its arcana: shoulders tensed, left hand stretching and clutching at the frets while the thick red pick in his right hand tortured rapid-fire *plicks* from the unplugged Fender. What he was really trying to do was annoy her out of the room, out of his life. Each note was a butterfly wing brushing against her, wearing her away. *Plikity plikity plik*. She'd be gone in a couple hundred thousand years if he could just keep it up. Piece of cake.

"How long are you going to do that?"

"Until I get it."

She wanted to say, "I won't hold my breath," but stuffed it.

He shook his head, perhaps to clear his eyes. His hair was a mess—a dirty yellow, sprouting like a pavement weed a dog had lifted its leg on. His red checkered shirt was untucked and unbuttoned at the bottom, revealing a snarl of belly hair. It was hot for May, and his limp skin had a humid, pallid cast. Vain as he was, he was deliberately letting himself go, representing him-

self as a lost cause. But it wasn't working. She still loved what she saw. She sometimes fantasized about cutting his hair, shaping it, letting it fulfill its potential. She went into the bathroom and came out with the yellow beach towel and the blunt-nose scissors.

"You have won the Sunday afternoon special, which is a shave, a haircut, and a shoulder rub. After all, don't you deserve to be pampered?"

"Are you clinically insane?"

"As of the last time I was checked out, mostly no."

"My hair should be six inches longer, at least."

"Okay then, just the shave."

"Fuck no. By the time you're done, I'll be Justin Timberlake's gayer cousin."

"How about the shoulder rub?"

"Why don't you sashay over here, cut off my balls, and be done with it?"

What was it with men and castration? Why did they always equate accepting love with losing part of their body? She'd have loved the shave. She'd always been curious about shaving him—about slowly peeling away his sharp, angry stubble with one of those blue plastic razors, leaving his jaw and his cheeks naked, pale, and soft. She'd have loved that.

She was nobody's doormat. She loved him, but he made her want to drive a truck through the wall. *Plikity plikity plik*.

At thirty-two she was all too aware that the best way to break up with someone was to get them to break up with you. She'd gotten rid of guys the same way Wesley was trying to get rid of her, by wilting and rotting on them, step by step, until they pitched her out in the garbage like the bad little flower she was. Or maybe he was going to try a prison break. They were two years into their marriage, and he twitched whenever she tried to touch him. When she talked, she'd feel the vibration of his leg violently juddering under the table, bleeding off rage, as he forced himself to pretend to listen. He stopped baiting the rat traps and got the smallest size laundry detergent instead of the super-saver. He bought single rolls of toilet paper.

Last week, he'd sat upright in bed in the middle of the night. She asked what was wrong. "My heart. It's like Keith Moon's inside my chest." He turned on the light and took his pulse,

looking at his watch. “A hundred and twenty. Shit.” How did he feel? “Like I’m dying.” She reached for the phone, but he swatted her hand. “I didn’t say I *was* dying. I said it’s *like* I’m dying.”

For an hour she’d watched him sit by the glow of the street through the window as he took his pulse every few minutes.

Then he came back to bed in the semi-darkness, his body silently aggressive: rigid, sweating, rank with a chemical brine, like formaldehyde and pickles. The next day he said he was stressed

Maybe he’d thought marriage meant she couldn’t look at him like that anymore. He hadn’t realized marriage meant she could look at him like that whenever she wanted.

out at work. Liar. The biggest stress he had at the guitar shop was remembering to call customers under forty “dude” instead of “sir.”

Today was Sunday. Other couples were eating brunch in Manhattan, playing Frisbee in McCarren Park, having sex in the shower after a bike ride.

He stopped playing, ducked his head under the strap, and stuck the pick under the B string.

“Stop staring at me,” he said. “It’s like practicing with a vulture in the room.”

Maybe he’d thought marriage meant she couldn’t look at him like that anymore. He hadn’t realized marriage meant she could look at him like that whenever she wanted. “Let’s walk over to Bedford. Let’s go to the river and watch boats,” she said.

His left hand mimed the first bars of “Blackbird” on the neck. She’d seen him do it so many times she could tell songs by the finger shapes. “Go ahead,” he said. “I have to work on my shit.”

“Are you sure? You don’t mind me going out alone?”

“Suit yourself.”

“There’s plenty of guys out there who wouldn’t mind watching boats with a girl like me.”

He snorted at that, and it rubbed her the wrong way.

“You know what I’m going to do?” she asked.

“Toss me that last doughnut.”

“I’m going to go see my lover.”

In the back of the storefront, they’d walled off a bedroom

by hanging a set of translucent blue plastic bath curtains. She pulled the curtain closed behind her and turned on the floor lamp so that she was lit up in blue glowing silhouette. She peeled off her T-shirt and gym shorts, tossing her hair back

They were both wiry, bony people, and someone had joked at their city hall wedding that they went clackety-clack in bed.

and arching her back as she did it, going for that Bond girl in the opening credits effect, then sat down at the particleboard vanity she'd dragged around since Juilliard. It was hours until dark, but she put

on nighttime makeup: purple shadow, black eyeliner, red, red lipstick. She put on her silver earrings with the dangling jade teardrops and her black glass-bead necklace. She slipped on her little black dress that left her arms and shoulders bare. She liked her arms. They were wiry, with just enough meat to make that blue vein stand out. They were both wiry, bony people, and someone had joked at their city hall wedding that they went *clackety-clack* in bed. Not that they'd made any sounds at all in a long time.

"Say, what kind of lover is he?" he said.

He'd gotten her to jump, and she had to collect herself. "What do you mean?"

"You know, what flavor is he? Is he a Latin lover, an all-night lover, an undercover lover? Does he love you tender, or are you addicted to love, or does he walk on the wild side, or what? Do you have a groovy kind of love? Is that it?"

She didn't answer but wound her hair up slowly and pinned it with red enameled chopsticks. She hit the back of her ears, her neck, and her wrists with Rain, rubbing hard to get the scent to wake up and fill the room with lily of the valley.

"I bet it's a groovy kind of love. Dollars to doughnuts, that's what it is. Seventies, bubblegum, sissy love. Backseat of a Ford Pinto love. The bra snap's got him buffaloesd."

"Who's wearing a bra?" She came out from behind the curtain, put her hands on her knees, and leaned forward to show she wasn't lying. He stared at her perfect breasts as if they were lemons that had gone bad at the back of the fridge.

Tina headed west on Metropolitan, past sidewalk card table dominos games, pot stores pretending to be bodegas, plantain-crate-fronted C-Town supermarkets, dog meat Chinese takeout joints, rat corpse vacant lots, spy-hole door *farmacias* that sold love potions and poisons, pit bulls lying in the middle of the street with vast pink tongues lolling out of their mouths like porn star cocks, and Flat Fix joints manned by children with pistols jammed in the ass crack of their cargo shorts. As the blocks went on, though, pizza joints and hardware stores began to appear, followed by Laundromats and cell phone shops, until near the river, the neighborhood metastasized into an extension of the East Village: fern bars, bookstores, and restaurants serving Chilean sea bass. Like any animal, she was instinctively moving toward water but not the river. She was drawn toward the Metropolitan pool because that's where she'd seen the guy steal the truck.

A dump truck had parked in front of the pool, and the driver had gotten out with a clipboard. He was on his way to take care of some kind of dump truck business but never got to do it because another guy jumped into the cab and put the truck in gear. The truck was parked tight, and as Mr. Clipboard started screaming and running, the guy stealing the truck whammed the brown Plymouth in front of him but good, and it went rolling down Bedford Avenue with no one at the wheel. Tina had been standing across the street, looking right up at the thief. Red faced, with a black beard and a Prince Valiant haircut, he cranked hard on the wheel, elbows high. His mouth was moving, cursing. He was having a bad day at his job.

Many times since then, she'd wanted to steal a truck. If she had a stolen truck, she'd drive it through the front door of their home at four a.m. Glass, wood, and brick would explode every which way, the whole building would split open, and there he'd be, no shit awake, in his underwear, on the mattress, rubbing his eyes and looking up at her, far above him in the cab, all the levers and wheels under her fingertips, and she'd say, "HAH!" Then he'd have to stay.

Or she'd bring it home, just as he'd packed his bags and was going out the door. He'd have his army duffel over his shoulder and his crappy Mexican Telecaster in his hand, and he'd say,

like in a cowboy movie, “No hard feelings. Shake?” She’d climb into the back of the dump truck and pull the lever so the gate came down over her priceless dancer’s legs. As the gate began to crush them, she’d stick out her hand with a brave smile and say, “Sure. Pals forever.” Then he’d have to stay.

Or, more plausibly, she’d park it in front of the house, and he’d say, “What the fuck is this?” and she’d say, “It’s a truck I stole,” and he’d say, “You steal trucks?” and she’d nod, like, duh, and he’d say, “I never saw you that way. This changes everything.” And he’d stay.

The point is, walking down Metropolitan, all dressed up, her tartish beauty wasted on the pithecanthropi hanging out in the Kool Man Pops garage, where ice cream trucks congregated like fat, dirty white seals trained to sing Scott Joplin in jingling seal-speak, she was still looking for the way back to his love.

She’d met Wesley on one of those rare nights when it wasn’t a horrible, sickening, wrist-slashing mistake to be a dancer—one of those nights when it was a no-brainer to trade ever driving a new car, owning a house, first-world medical care, and twenty years of life, for fifteen minutes of *this*. He’d seen her with the right choreography and music up on the big stage at the Joyce, and he’d seen that she was the shit. Not some wannabe Barbie-doll, dance-minor dilettante but the living reason that people, trying to describe heart-stoppingly beautiful things in motion, like leaves or snowflakes or hearts, have no choice but to compare them to dancers.

Afterward she and the other dancers had gone out to the Rocking Horse Café on Eighth Avenue. He followed them in and introduced himself while they stood at the bar in the freakish red light. He yelled outrageous compliments over the crowd and the Tex-Mex disco. He freely admitted he’d gone to the Joyce with another girl and ditched her to chase after Tina. He’d done this, he said, because Tina was God. That was perceptive of him. At her level you took the shocking weightlessness and geometric intricacy for granted. It was all about what you revealed while you were weightless and intricate. The whole external system from *plié* to Fresnel was just a means to reveal the genie of divine energy at your core, if you had one, and if you had the courage to unleash it. He’d seen that—seen her the way she really was. When she told friends she needed him, one of the

things she meant was that without him remembering that moment in front of her, she had no way of being sure she was who she was. You can't hang dance on a wall.

He'd quickly imprinted on her in all his particularities. He had a chipped tooth, and so she shrugged at men with even smiles. After she heard him play with his band, better guitarists seemed like tasteless show-offs. The way his voice broke when he sang high made it seem like that poignant failure was the whole point of singing. And if he'd been a gentler, more communicative lover, it would have killed the mystery and darkness of it.

Then she turned thirty and her back began to hurt more than Vicodin could handle. Her body un-ratcheted a step from ultra-taut, and then it was another girl up on stage at the Joyce, not her. Suddenly, she was teaching stretching and aerobics at the Learning Annex. That shouldn't have mattered to him, should it?

Some people left town when their thing didn't pan out, but she liked the city. It made her feel somewhere, as opposed to the pumpkin-town nowhere she'd left. He, on the other hand, fancied himself already from a somewhere, with horses, trees, and mountains. He'd taken her out to meet his parents after their wedding. His father was an auctioneer, his mother ran a bar, and they lived in a split-level on the edge of Bozeman. Brown turf, green hemlocks, and black mountains that turned eye-punch-purple with majesty at dusk, like in the song.

A steady stream of *blanco* hipsters, trustafarians, and nose-ringed moms with Baby Bjorns passed by the brick façade of the Metropolitan pool on Bedford. She looked around: nothing worth stealing presented itself. She sat on the steps and lit up a Newport, thinking of Wesley's mom.

She was the original cigarette fiend. They'd been sitting at her kitchen table working their way through a carton of Camels while the bridegroom and his dad were out back shooting or castrating or burying something. "I hope you know what you're getting into," she'd said. "He's rough around the edges and not so smooth in between, if you get my drift." The older woman put her mushroom-colored hand over Tina's for a second. That was her version of letting her feelings get the best of her.

"Hey, *chica*."

"Hey, *caballero*. *Dónde está su mamá?*"

He was maybe eighteen, curly haired, and pug nosed in a cute kind of way. There was something candid, at least, about men who overtly looked like dogs.

“What happened to your date?”

She gave him the once-over: cheap black jeans and expensive red sneakers, a *Puerto Rico Libre* T-shirt and a gym bag over his shoulder. He looked like he wouldn't be hard to steal. “He's right on schedule,” she said. She offered him a cigarette, and he sat down.

“Damn, you smell nice,” he said, about as subtle as you'd expect for an eighteen-year-old. His name was Bernardo, and they shot the shit. When he finished the cigarette, she told him to go ahead and swim, and she'd watch. He liked that.

She sat in the lobby by the security guard and watched the swimmers through the windows. After a while Bernardo came out in his red and white Speedo and waved to her. He was a show off: butterfly, backstroke, and crawl, smooth and fast, high up in the water, brown skin against turquoise pool. He did his flip-turns deep, so there was a showy moment when he disappeared with a splash and then burst out of the water, always a little later and a little further along than you expected.

When he'd swum his ya-yas out, he towed off near the window so she could get an eyeful of him. His skin was taut and brown, not pasty white and flaccid. His muscular shoulders formed a perfectly symmetrical T, not the slanted cross of a guitar player's twisted frame. She ran down her checklist of male beauty: no over developed right forearm from cross picking, no horse rider's bow legs, his calves devoid of even a single jagged barbwire scar. She cocked her head and shifted in her seat like he was giving her the PQs.

Waiting for him, the fear struck her that without Wesley or something like him she might turn out ordinary after all, that she might straighten out in a few years, and find someone good for her, and have kids, and all that would be left would be the tiny scar on her nipples where the piercings had closed up. She'd end up in the Kroger in Fort Wayne, pushing a shopping cart down the nuts and chips aisle, a fat baby in the cart seat and a toddler holding her skirt in his soda-sticky hand, while other women said, “Look at how she walks. You can still see she was a dancer and those kids hardly made a dent on her, not like me

with my big fanny, and she's so good with the girls' Sunday afternoon ballet at the YWCA."

Out on the street, Bernardo frolicked beside her, a dolphin at her bow, asking where they were going. She thought about how before he was even born she'd already been giving her dolly a Mohawk and drilling holes between its legs.

"You'll see." She took him into a music store on Bedford. In the back, there was a table with local bands, Wesley's for one. Months ago she'd gone in, dressed much like she was now, and wheedled the bong-addled, *Buffy*-watching manager into stocking it. She tapped *Introducing the Wild Horses* with her fingernail and scratched the ridged edge, so Bernardo couldn't help wondering what else those nails could scratch. "Buy this for me."

"This shit? Let me buy you some real music."

"No. This shit is the shit I want."

On the street, she took the disc out of the case, dropped the case on the sidewalk, and told Bernardo to hold the disc with his fingertips. She ran her lighter underneath until the CD was wavy and the wild horse logo on the flip side looked like a purple gopher. She unclasped her glass-bead necklace, threaded it through the hole in the disc, and slipped it over Bernardo's head. He looked down at it as if he were on the wrong end of pin the tail on the donkey. "Okay, that's fucking weird."

"We like weird. Weird is good."

She crossed Bedford, starting back toward Bushwick. She hadn't even told him to come with her. Whatever he was doing, it was his own fault. She'd just hung a melted CD on a woman's necklace over his head, so he could consider himself warned. The orange sun was low, and the worst of the heat was starting to break. They walked into the long shadow of the Flame Cut Steel building—now condominiums—and the sweat on her bare arms cooled.

"Look, you're giving me goose bumps," she said.

"What are we doing now?"

"I'm taking you to my lair."

There was a knot in her stomach, a sense of walking toward a cliff, and a small child's perverse determination. "'I do not care,' said Pierre," she muttered.

Underneath the expressway, he tried to assert his manli-

ness. He pushed her against a soot-blackened steel column and craned his face down against hers, hunting for her lips, which she kept away from his, pretending to tease. She let him do this until the chlorine and Right Guard got to her, then jabbed her index finger into his solar plexus, hard.

“Ow. Damn, lady.”

“Not now. Not yet.”

“You live out here? I never came out here before.” He lived in Manhattan, he said, on Second Avenue and went to Hunter. He came out to Williamsburg for the scene. “Look at that.” He stared at two bottomless five-year-olds splashing in a kiddie pool in front of a discount appliance store.

“Where are you from, anyway?” she said.

“New Rochelle.”

When had it started going wrong? Wesley had been mad about her, then quiet in a good way, inviting her to take him for granted, then just quiet, then this. Should dumping his first date that night have been a warning sign? Had they gotten married too soon? Had they done it for a thrill?

A Russian ballet instructor, a vicious, one-eyed old man who claimed to have kissed Nijinsky, once told her that in Siberia, if you fall through the ice, you have a choice. You can stay in the water until your heart stops, which takes about four minutes. Or you can crawl out and freeze to death on contact with the air. He’d mentioned it as way of illustrating good character. He’d said, “Is better to die making idiotic attempt to live.”

The whole thing went fast, like a curtain raiser. Just before slipping her key in the lock, she’d given Bernardo’s ass a good pinch to rev him up, trying not to think how mean that was. They tumbled through the door, Bernardo clutching at her breasts. But there was no Wesley in sight. The tv blared basketball at high volume. Bernardo turned her around and tried to kiss her. She bent backward to keep him off, but the couch was in the way, and together they did a half-gainer over the back of it, landing on top of Wesley, who’d been lying down.

“Jesus fuck,” said Wesley. The three of them violently disengaged. She rolled out and landed gracefully on her feet on the other side of the couch. Not being a professional dancer, Bernardo tripped into and over the milk-crate coffee table, landing hard on his coccyx, to judge from the crunch. Wesley sat up.

Again, the strange sense of watching herself go over the cliff. “Wesley, this is my lover. The one I was talking about. I thought you two should meet.”

“My shin is bleeding,” said Bernardo.

She didn’t have a plan past getting through the door. She didn’t know what move to make, besides keep pushing it. “We’d like a little alone time now, if you know what I mean, so can you take a walk?”

Wesley wouldn’t look at her at first. Then he rolled his head around and gave her a sickly grin. “Can I have a beer first?”

“No time for that. I’m hot-blooded: check it and see. Feel the fever burning inside of me.” In your face, song-quoting guy.

Wesley stood up, scratched his chest with deliberate consideration, and ambled over to the refrigerator. “You want a beer, amigo?” he asked Bernardo. “Course you do. *Cerveza para todos.*”

Bernardo was on the floor, looking back and forth between the two of them like he was hoping his vision would clear and one of them would vanish. “Lady?” he said as a preliminary, but couldn’t come up with anything useful past that.

“Shut up,” she told him. “And get up off the floor. I hate men who sit on the floor.” She gave him a quick toe tap in the thigh.

“I think he looks good on the floor myself,” Wesley said. He pulled out three bottles of Miller and twisted off the tops slowly—all his movements

were performed with maddening slowness. She saw what he was doing: he was making his tempo the opposite of hers, playing whole notes against her *jetés*, trying to bog her

down. When the beers were open, he offered them in a bunch, holding all three necks between the knuckles of his right hand like some magician’s trick.

“Happy trails.”

“Isn’t he handsome?” she asked. She yanked Bernardo up, slipped her arm around him, and tried to nudge him forward into a semblance of aggression.

“Do you enjoy basketball?” Wesley addressed Bernardo, pointing a stubby, calloused finger at the Knicks on TV. “I’ve

She saw what he was doing: he was making his tempo the opposite of hers, playing whole notes against her jetés, trying to bog her down.

just started to follow it myself. The way I see it, it's really an urban game. Probably more in your line than mine. Maybe you could explain the finer points."

"I don't know what the shit you're talking about," Bernardo said.

"My mistake. If you're not interested, I bet this game is on at the bar. I could go watch this game at the bar. That would give you two a little privacy."

"Yeah, get lost," she said, "I want him to ball me here on the couch."

"Go ahead, I couldn't care less."

"I know you couldn't. That's why I'm going to do it."

"You wouldn't do diddly."

"The hell I wouldn't."

"Oh man," said Bernardo.

"What is that?" Finally, Wesley noticed the CD. She'd almost forgotten it. He reached for it, pulled it toward himself, catching Bernardo like a fish on a line, and took a long look at the wavy purple gopher. "Wow. That's good. That's real fucking genius." Wesley shoved Bernardo hard, and he crashed into her vanity and fell, tangled in the blue plastic curtain. "Your lover seems to spend a lot of time on his ass," Wesley remarked.

Bernardo got up and hit Wesley in the face, the sound of it like a heavy sponge thrown onto a padded chair seat. Wesley dropped the beers in his right hand, swung hard with his left, and connected solidly with the corner of the mirror.

Emergencies catch people not at their best: unshaven, underdressed, and unable to find sitters. The waiting room at the Woodhull Medical Center was an improvised subculture, a band of castaways trying to make the best of it. Some medicated themselves with Fritos, Mr. Goodbars, and Sprite from the vending machines. Others yakked loudly into their cell phones. Children threw themselves backward over the brown plastic bucket chairs or ran around the aisles, literally screaming in boredom, while their parents hovered over the damaged sibling or grandma or grandpa. The people whose mishaps were obvious from the hand clamped tightly over one eye or the blood seeping from the crude home bandage on a foot were less disturbing than the ones who stood rigid with a tense face

or slumped unconscious against the white tile walls, an unseen hostile agent at work inside. It was the worst party in the city. And yet somehow, Tina and Wesley were the guests that everyone knew to avoid. Even the screaming, running kids swerved to keep their distance.

They were the crude home-bandage type. She'd wrapped one of his shirts around his hand—one of his best shirts; what had she been thinking? It was garbage now, a blood mop. Every fifteen minutes he unwrapped it to look at his ripped-open hand. His fourth finger was swollen over his wedding ring; by the time they thought to take it off it was too late. "I've been dinged worse than this," he said. He started to tell her about getting kicked by a horse but stopped, as if his hand hurt too much to do anything except concentrate on it.

She'd seen that same hesitation and silence before, after he would come home from auditions for some new club on Rivington or to open for a legit act at Irving Plaza. She'd ask how it went, and he'd say fine, then curl up into a fetus on the couch—a silent, angry fetus that would go through a six-pack of Coors and pass out. That had been happening for a while. Maybe that's why things went south. Maybe if he hadn't had to live with her seeing him like that, things would be different. Maybe not. It was hard to know. Anyway, what she'd done today was bad. She was a machine designed to cause men pain. It was pathological, genetic, hardwired DNA stuff. She needed to go to a nunnery, an Antarctic research station, get a job at the post office. Steal a truck—go to jail.

Two EMS guys wheeled in an old man on a gurney and left him. After ten minutes, he sat up and looked around. There was a terrible wound at the back of his head, a crusted black and red divot in the middle of his matted white hair. "Oh man," he said, at length. "They took me to the bad hospital." He lay down again and didn't speak or move.

After a while, Wesley had something to say. "You really screwed the pooch this time. God knows I've tried with you. At least I can say that I tried." She waited for more, then realized he wanted a response.

"You did. You really did. I don't blame you at all." She nodded and rubbed his leg encouragingly, careful not to jostle his elevated hand.

He frowned, like she'd said the wrong thing again, like he'd wanted resistance, wanted something to build his case against. "I married you. What else do you want from me?"

"Nothing."

"What if I can't ever play again?"

Suddenly she saw how that would be the best thing that had ever happened to him. It would save his life, open up amaz-

Was he the kind of person who would refuse his own salvation out of sheer perversity? Yes. That was the very essence of him.



ing new doors for him, release his immense human potential. She fervently hoped that his hand was smashed and ruined beyond all possible surgical intervention. Even if he never spoke to her again, she

would have given him this incomparable gift of rescuing him from his own useless desires, of freeing him to be an adult, and that, at least, would be something, more than something, perhaps the victory of her life, an extraordinary act of liberation. She was on the verge of telling him all this. He needed to hear it. But was he the kind of person who would refuse his own salvation out of sheer perversity? Yes. That was the very essence of him. That's what was truly beautiful and unbearable about him. And it was equally possible, of course, that his hand would turn out perfectly okay.

So instead she said, "There's vending machines at the end of the hall. Do you want anything?"

He didn't, but she did, so she went and got a vanilla ice cream. It came in a shallow cardboard cup with a wooden paddle and reminded her of grammar school, of milk, Elmer's glue, and construction paper. "This is useless," she said. "We should give up and go somewhere else."

"No, it'll just be the same thing all over again at the next place, except we'd have to start from scratch." He closed his eyes and hunkered down further in the chair, cradling his injured hand close to his chest.

She felt like an ass. She'd been feeling like an ass a lot lately. It occurred to her that the more time she spent around Wesley, the more she was going to keep feeling like an ass. She studied

him, taking in his sweat-damp blond chest hair, the mole in the crease of his neck, the odd ghost of lanolin that clung to him despite the overwhelming local smell of Clorox and human decay. She was jotting him down, filing him away, while slowly carving thin shavings of sweet, cheap vanilla ice cream, trying to make it last as long as possible. When she'd finally run the paddle around the inside seam and licked it, she said, "I'm going to stretch my legs."

Outside in the parking lot, the yellow halogen lamps blurred and starred in her vision, making great overlapping concentric circles of glare, the hellish eyes of some great urban Cerberus. They dizzied her, stabbed at her brain, and she had to go to the end of the lot to get past them. Once her head cleared, she looked back. A sickly yellow moon seemed to wobble over the sullen mass of the hospital, like egg yolk sliding down a sticky wall of smoggy sky or a discarded organ sliding down the side of a medical wastebasket, like for instance, a human heart. A wet warm front had snuck up on the city and suddenly mugged it, making for the first oppressively humid night of the year.

Flushing Avenue was a long dark cliff of jagged tenements, and, without any particular destination in mind, she started to walk.

THE TREE, THE FOREST

For months an innocuous blue envelope languished in the ACTION box on my desk. A distant relative had sent a late Christmas card with a printed update (*keeping busy with the Methodist church, the Lions Club, local Republican Party activities*) and a handwritten note wishing me happy holidays. She closed with a simple request: “Please send us information so we can add your family to the tree.” Every few days I picked up that envelope and then dropped it back in the box, strangely paralyzed.

The relative who sent the card—Cousin H, an n^{th} cousin, n^{th} removed—already knew my basic family structure, thanks to my parents’ own holiday missive earlier that season, which mentioned my partner, Ruthanna, and our son, Silas. I’ve been out for years to friends and close relations, but my parents’ dispatch spread the word farther and wider. I pictured it multiplying forty, sixty, eighty times over, fluttering into the mailboxes and onto the kitchen tables of distant cousins and Dad’s old Navy friends around the globe. For a brief spell, my nervousness about involuntary exposure played tug-of-war against my pride in Mom and Dad’s courage (for they had outed themselves too, as the parents of a lesbian). Then I moved on, giving myself over to gingerbread houses, paper snowflakes, cranberry strands—all the chaos and labor of making Christmas magical for a child.

When the card from Cousin H arrived, I found myself once more tipped off balance. The Texas Republicans were including the lesbian branch of the tree. I was surprised, impressed, moved. Yet some part of me held back.

The genealogy urge and the meaning of extended family have puzzled me for a long time. The family tree in question is associated with my paternal grandmother, the descendant of Swedes who settled in central Texas in the second half of the nineteenth century. Every handful of years, Cousin H, the un-

official family genealogist, coordinates a reunion for those of us in this line. We gather in a community center in some small Texas town, eat beef brisket, drink sweet tea, and mingle. Many of my relatives find common ground in football, but I don't even know the rules of the game; others debate the particular merits of the barbecue, but I'm a vegetarian. The only other focal point of conversation is the vast family tree, hung mural-like above us.

It's little more than names—Carlsons, Swensons, Lundeliuses, and many others—plus birth dates, birthplaces, death dates. Our observations tend to be limited to “That poor Ingvar died *young!*” or “Whew! Hulda sure had the kids!” Every now and then someone pipes up with information about which ailment felled a particular relative, and I make a mental note in case this might someday facilitate self-diagnosis. For the most part, however, we gaze at the names silently, lingeringly, as if there should be something more to say about these people. Most are long dead and not forgotten, exactly, but not known either. A confusing haze of melancholy, or maybe loneliness, settles over me, and I wonder what connection, really, I have to any of them: the dead on the chart, and also the living relations eating smoked meat and drawling out stories about our *n*th cousin, once an NFL quarterback (Houston Oilers, I think, but don't quote me).

I've never been to Sweden. I've barely lived in Texas. For a long time I went to the reunions only because it was expected of me. Later I showed up specifically to counter my parents' interpretation, or perhaps worry, when I first came out to them: that I was rejecting the family. I made a concerted effort then to show that I was still a loving, perhaps lovable, daughter. (A better one than ever! Overcompensation: a venerable queer tradition.) Nevertheless, at extended family gatherings I always thought that if my relations really knew me they would not claim me. I smiled up a force field, talked about my cat, and claimed more than once to be single when I was not.

Having fended off possible rejection this way for years, I couldn't easily put down that flimsy shield of evasion, of Withholding Information. When I pictured the full names of my beloved and my child pinned up on a wall—like captured butterflies for others to view and judge—I drew back. Perhaps my other relatives wouldn't react as favorably as Cousin H. What might they think, what might they say, if they looked up at that

mural and saw, joined lasciviously by a black horizontal, the names of two women, and below that a plunging vertical to the name of a child (who couldn't *really* be the child of both of them)?

Yet I couldn't ignore the warmth in Cousin H's note. Perhaps my assumptions about Republicans, small-town Texans, and even genealogists were out of date. It used to be that you pretty much knew where Southern Republicans stood on the issue of homosexuality, but these days you can't be sure. Maybe it was time to cast off prejudice, shake free of my habitual defensive posture, and send Cousin H the full names, dates, birthplaces. Here they are! Put them on the chart! Behold them! With kind eyes, I hope.

But I couldn't bring myself to act, deterred in part by my entrenched biases against genealogists. Since 2005 I have worked as an archivist at the National Archives, where I occasionally provide research advice to visiting genealogists. My colleagues and I call them the "Genies." I suppose this could be a positive nickname—suggestive of magic and wishes granted and all that—but on my tongue it's generally been less flattering, calling to mind pesky bugs, like gnats. I'd rather work with academics, filmmakers, or reporters. Genealogists typically chase informational morsels of only private interest. Their pursuits have always struck me as disproportionately time-consuming and unlikely to produce anything significant or beautiful.

I have also long questioned the motives behind these quests. Historically, genealogy is rooted in elites' desire to establish bloodlines in order to consolidate wealth and power. Some residue of that hierarchical origin remains today, since consciously or subconsciously many researchers long to discover a Great Ancestor—someone high-born, high-achieving, or historically important—whose reflected glory they can claim. It seems problematic, even undemocratic, to co-opt another's identity and build yourself up in this way. I couldn't help seeing genealogy projects as a distraction from the real business of living the brief, particular life we each have.

Nevertheless, Cousin H's request nudged me to reconsider. I decided to interrogate a few friends who enjoy this sort of research. In the wake of these conversations, I concluded that the

genealogy urge is driven by a broader range of (often entangled) motives than I had long assumed (some suspect, yes, but others neutral, and even a few tinged with nobility):

1. The consolidation of wealth and power
2. The establishment of status more generally
3. The assertion of roots in a young country with a geographically mobile populace

The third can overlap with the first two but is more mixed in moral valence.

4. The preservation of ethnic identity

Linked to some degree with the third motivation, this has positive and negative shadings: it might inspire a researcher to learn more about another (mother) culture; it also might incline a researcher to see herself and her kin as separate from, possibly better than, others. There is something wistful about this motive, which often comes to the fore when that ethnic identity is already tenuous.

5. The thrill of the hunt for information

Some people find it satisfying to fill in blanks with discrete bits of information—a pleasure akin to that of doing crossword puzzles—which seems harmless enough.

6. The development of a sense of connection or continuity between generations

This seems good.

7. The forging of a personal connection to history

This one, too, is not bad, I admit.

The etymological origins of *gene* and *genealogy* are difficult to pin down, but clearly they overlap. I had always taken it for

granted that a family tree is a representation of bloodlines. But my boy is not my own flesh and blood; my partner gave birth to him.

My parents' Christmas letter described Silas as my "adopted" son, which rang strange to us since we never identify him that way. Yet their designation made a kind of sense: it headed off speculation about whether I gave birth, plus the concept of an adopted child is easily grasped even by people not comfortable with the notion of lesbian moms. Besides, Silas *is* my adopted son. Like many gay or lesbian couples, we pursued a legal avenue called "second-parent adoption," through which the non-biological parent establishes a legal tie to the child. We rented a second home in Maryland (Virginia, where our son was born and we still live, does not allow second-parent adoption) and hired a lawyer. I assembled paycheck stubs, bank statements, medical information, recommendation letters from longtime friends. Maryland waived the standard requirement for a home study, and four months later we had a date in court to finalize the adoption.

That event was a strange hybrid: bureaucratic yet moving all the same. Mewling babies, whining toddlers, and parents, gay and straight alike, packed the courtroom. The gentle-browed judge, who reminded me of the kind of high school teacher who gives too many extra-credit questions, said something about this being his favorite part of the job and something misty-eyed about Family, all mostly drowned out by the shrieking youngsters around us. Then he proceeded family by family, rattling off *the minor child* this, *the minor child* that, *no objections, it is so ordered*, and then we had our picture taken and it was done.

The meaning of the adoption, however, has always been difficult to parse. It offered certain practical protections. It stood as an affirmation: a court of law had seen fit to bestow the mantle of parenthood upon *me*. For some reason I don't want to forget it; each year I transfer "Adoption Day" from one datebook to the next. When the anniversary rolls around, however, I don't do anything to celebrate it. Observing the date, even pointing it out to my son, might imply that I was not fully his parent from birth, or not committed to him until bound by law, and neither is true.

Yet the adoption was part of the slow evolution of my life as our boy's other mother. Assuming responsibility while falling in

parental love at his birth was one step, the adoption another. It was like taking a religious vow or getting married. Do you take this child to be your son? *I do*. That sober, self-aware, public act felt different from the emotional whirl surrounding his birth. Signing those adoption papers was my first formal statement of commitment to another person.

I'm uneasy when people with little understanding of these nuances draw attention to my status as an adoptive mother; I feel complicit in some other kind of falsehood when taken to be the birth mother. As the extra mom, I have an imposter complex. So I wondered if we would be posers of another kind if we added our branch to the tree. Would future generations see Silas's name below mine and assume a biological child?

The possibility of adopted children on our mural of Swedes had never occurred to me. Based on my reading and my conversations with genealogists, it seems impossible to say for certain how, or whether, non-biological sons and daughters have been represented on family trees in the past. When adoption was far more likely to be “closed”—when identifying information about birth parents was sealed and adoptions might be concealed for years or forever from the children and extended family—many adoptees must have been silently entered on genealogical charts like any other offspring.

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In our current era of open adoption, genealogists discuss the issue more freely but differ in their practices and recommendations. The crux of the matter is how broadly or narrowly you define *family*, and how much you take into account the feelings of others when weighing more or less inclusive options. The specific motivation behind a given family tree also makes a difference. Are you, for example, trying to document biological descent to prove legal membership in a Native American tribe? Or are you merely putting together a temporary display for your grandfather's birthday party? Some genealogists plug in adopted kids just as they would genetic ones; some try to represent

adoptees' biological descent as well: a kind of twin tree effect. On the other end of the spectrum, purists insist that genetic descent is primary and advise either leaving off adopted children entirely or including the adoptees but with some distinguishing notation. Our Swedish tree was laboriously printed by hand, but the computer age has brought family tree software capable of storing, sorting, and displaying information in multiple ways. Now annotations and concealed-note fields are possible. You can hide and reveal at once.

Even without complete consensus, it's safe to say that the public increasingly sees these charts as representations of family history, not literal maps of bloodlines. There is something of a groundswell of people grafting on adopted children, stepchildren, and others without clear genetic ties. The more I studied the matter, the more I came to see that in all likelihood our branch wouldn't be the first odd twist, and these days we certainly wouldn't be the only ones complicating the bramble.

Although my son is not blood of my blood, I know a lot about his lineage. Not long ago, Ruthanna showed me her family tree from her father's side. She is a direct descendant of one of the original settlers of Plymouth Colony.

"Richard Warren (c. 1580–1628), signer of the Mayflower Compact," I read, eyeing the surprisingly few lines I had to follow to get from Warren to the woman right beside me.

"Mayflower Shmayflower," Ruthanna yawned. "That's nothing. Look at this."

She then drew out the family tree documenting her mother's lineage and traced her finger back through generations of Philadelphia Quakers until she reached . . . Edward I.

"The King of England?!" I exclaimed. "So you and Silas are *royalty*?"

"Well, I've never wanted to lord it over you."

I was impressed, against my will, against my better judgment. (Here it is—the lure of status—one of the very motives I claim to deplore. Does it inevitably push its way into every exploration of this kind?)

Silas gets his Mayflower heritage from both sides. His biological father is also a direct descendant of that same Richard Warren, something we hadn't realized until Silas was in utero and

we consulted his paternal genealogical chart for possible names (all of which we rejected, after amusing ourselves briefly with the option of *Consider* or *Mordaunt*). This coincidence is not so unusual. Warren had seven children, all of whom lived to adulthood and reproduced, which makes him the Mayflower passenger with the largest number of progeny. The vast majority of so-called Mayflower descendants alive today are of his line, and they number in the millions.

And my family line of Swedes? What's remarkable about us? Nothing, really, except that we have a lot of blue and yellow lapel pins.

And my family line of Swedes? What's remarkable about us? Nothing, really, except that we have a lot of blue and yellow lapel pins, we know what lingonberry jam and gravlax are, even if we don't like to eat either, and we've been in Texas a good long while. That's about it. If I were to add Ruthanna to my family tree, she would be—for lack of a better term—marrying down.

In truth I didn't know much about my own family history because I had never bothered to learn. During my twenties and thirties I was more preoccupied with *me* than *we*—with the struggle to make a self of myself. But the forties bring different questions (or different permutations of the old ones), and I thought finding out more about my own lineage might at least help me decide how to respond to my cousin's request. I asked my parents to mail copies of all the genealogical material they could find and soon received a succession of fat manila envelopes. For several days I bushwhacked through this information about the Swedish line, the British line (my father's father), and the German lines (my mother's parents).

I wasn't sure what to make of all the dates and places of birth, marriage, death; of the stray scraps about occupations and land ownership. I focused first on the names of these unknowable forebears, discovering to my delight that I have an ancestor named Joseph Goodpasture. (My late grandfather, a rancher ever solicitous of his sheep and cattle, would have loved this bit

of trivia.) Less delightfully, I am descended from many people named Ljungquist, which sounds a lot like someone choking on pickled herring.

In the end I discovered a few facts of moderate interest (“highlights” would be claiming too much), plus one indisputable lowlight. Among the former: my father’s family has been in this country far longer than I had assumed. My ancestor Walter Evans emigrated from Wales and had arrived in Virginia by 1718. I could even apply to be a Daughter of the American Revolution since Walter Evans’s son and grandson both signed the Oath of Allegiance during the war. I will never do this, but I confess feeling an involuntary flush of self-importance upon discovering that I actually have some American Heritage. That impetus I claim to despise—the establishment of status—rears its head again.

The lowlight is associated with this highlight: my Virginia ancestors owned slaves. According to the 1785 census of Halifax County, Virginia, George Evans Jr. had a family of four white persons and one slave. George eventually moved to Claiborne County, Tennessee, where he and his son Elijah established the Evans Inn, which included slave housing “in buildings a distance away.” I did some quick moral arithmetic: we didn’t own *many*, and that’s better news than it could be; then again, own one person and you’re a slaveholder—we were a slaveholding family. This should not have come as a huge surprise (though, tellingly, I had never heard it mentioned), yet I had long allowed myself to believe that *we* had not been part of *that*.

We? Why suddenly this *we*? That’s not like me at all. My instinct is to push it away. (The Lone Ranger to Tonto, hearing the ominous sound of approaching warriors: “We’re in trouble now!” Tonto, in reply: “Who’s this *we*, white man?”)

What I had hoped for, it dawned on me, was some clue in those manila envelopes to my particular destiny, some answer to the lingering puzzle of *me* in the web of family history. Instead I came away with that weird, creeping sense of *we*-ness.

Around this time our son’s biological father, W, his partner, M, and their son, J, were visiting us from Boston. Despite the geographical distance between our households, we try to spend

a weekend together regularly. On this particular morning, W and I had each been up with a small boy since the wee hours. We were bleary-eyed, unshowered. Our conversation drifted. I pondered out loud how to find someone to translate old family letters written in an archaic German script and recalled what I could about my maternal grandparents' origins. W ventured that his mother's family, too, might have roots thereabouts. We poured more coffee and tossed the names of various locales back and forth.

"Wouldn't it be funny if we were actually related?" I mused.

Our conversation was interrupted three or five or seven times by requests for Cheerios, squabbles over toy trucks, disputes about how to play Fling-the-Bear. It occurred to me that I could explore whether I am linked by blood to this man—and therefore to my son. I could research our family histories and also investigate how closely W's biological heritage resembles mine: I could order a "23andMe" genetic-testing kit for a few hundred dollars, get him to donate a little saliva . . . Or I suppose I could test my son . . .

The riddle was intriguing, also fraught. What did it mean that some part of me wanted us to be related in this way? Why did this have a pull when all along I thought we were creating, thought I wanted, a family-of-choice transcending the traditional ties of marriage and blood? Maybe that slight tug came from insecurity about being the extra(neous) mom. Or maybe there was some allure to the possibility that our constructed family and my specific self might fit together in a way that would seem fated, almost mystically preordained.

The riddle was fraught, also tempting. For a minute or two. Then I was down on the floor helping one boy find the ball for the ball-popper toy, while W ran upstairs to fetch dry socks for the other child. I was aware of being diverted from the riddle. Or maybe, it occurred to me, reality was proving the riddle beside the point. Maybe the messy shared present connects us more than any ancient genetic link ever could.

Not long afterward, while visiting W, M, and J in Boston, we spent an afternoon at the city's science museum. A genetics exhibit there featured a large, color-coded wheel demonstrating how closely related people and chimpanzees are, compared to other living things. Embedded was the reminder that all hu-

man beings are kin—close kin, if you take the long view. This seemed another answer to my riddle.

The man is my relative in more ways than one. The boy is too.

Genealogical records are usually scraps: ragged informational bits standing in for entire, unknowable lives. As I looked through my family's records, I hunted after any quirky detail, any germ of a story, that would reveal something particular, concrete, and vital about an ancestor—that would truly show *this* man, *that* woman.

So meager were my gleanings that I actually felt a tingle of excitement upon discovering that my grandmother's mother, Olga Wilhelmina Swenson, was "famous for her prune whip." Setting aside the obvious question (how good, really, could prune whip be?), this detail brought Olga to life more fully than anything else I know about her. I pictured her muscular arm in action, whisking something frothy in a massive ceramic bowl painted with bluebonnets. I saw her jaw jutting from concentrated effort, her blue eyes squinting against the Texas sun blaring through faded curtains. In my mind's eye she pauses to sample a dollop of something sweet. No, not sweet enough, so she spoons in more sugar and whips away again. "Maybe *I* could make prune whip!" I thought. "Maybe—" But I caught myself: "Self! You do not like prunes!" This sudden turnabout did not entirely dissipate the sensation that, for a few moments, I was under the spell of a particular human presence.

Another gleaning: my great-great-grandfather, Jasper Adkins, the first doctor in Lampasas, Texas, allowed patients to pay him in rock instead of currency. Was this a reluctant concession? Or an act of generosity? Or evidence of his desire to build a stone house? Nobody can say for sure. Regardless, this curious detail makes Jasper something more in collective memory than his birth and death dates and occupation. He takes on substance. He becomes more fully human.

I feel ambivalent about the documents that reflect our institutional lives: the family tree, but also the birth certificate, passport, resume. Each plugs a person into a system. Each enjoys a certain authority—by virtue of its association with the family, the state, the corporation—insinuating that what has been set down in black typeface signifies. As an archivist, I understand

the importance of these records, but not one tells you what makes *this* man unique, what actually matters to *that* woman. The richer details of these lives are lost, invisible in the white space around the official facts.

The family tree in particular emphasizes connection and continuation over individuality. Each life matters because of who comes before and who comes after. On the trees my parents forwarded to me, anybody who did not have offspring became a dead end. Jasper Adkins's daughter, the unmarried and child-free Ettie Aurelia Adkins, who lived from 1868 to 1943, has after her name the terse, dismissive, dooming phrase "No Issue."

While this is true in a biological or evolutionary sense, it troubles me that these should so often stand as the last words on the whole fellowship of child-

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less men and women, with whom I cannot help identifying. I never felt a yearning to have a baby and came of age as a lesbian when it was rare for same-sex couples to bring children into the world, when the practical complications and social stigma seemed prohibitive. I came into "issue" only under the wire—through the almost magical loophole of a still-fertile girlfriend in her forties—and I continue to feel some solidarity with the childless. The family tree slights these lives in particular.

Ettie Aurelia Adkins did not go by Ettie; she went by Arrie. I know this because she wrote a novelized autobiography, *One Texas Old Maid*. It's not a great book, but you could call it her "issue": family members pass it around, keep track of extant copies, discuss its details and misinformation and lacunae. *Old Maid* should have some offspring—I like the queer ring of that. If my little branch is to appear on the tree, best to vine around it some companion stories. This essay is one.

Cousin H's request has given me a head start on what I hear is around the corner: my child's first grade-school family tree assignment. If you explore the blogosphere about genealogy in

relation to gay and lesbian families, this is the focus: how do you usher a child through this academic rite of passage while staying true to the family's reality and taking into account complicated feelings about belonging and identity?

The so-called Modern Family—increasingly likely to include stepchildren, adopted children, and the children of gay or lesbian couples—poses representational challenges. Even family tree software developers lag behind: the word in cyberspace is that you cannot easily and honestly represent gay or lesbian families using the most popular genealogical programs (Family Tree Maker and Legacy Family Tree). Various “workarounds” are necessary and sometimes still don’t, well, work. One frustrated gay dad called these programs “Don’t-Ask-Don’t-Tell software.” But the times are changing quickly. When I last explored this issue, one blogger declared her intention “to work with software providers to encourage them to fix this,” and on the Legacy home page a link provided directions on “how to change the wording for a non-marriage.” By the time I finish writing this, the genealogy software scene may be different.

Still, I can’t help thinking that we need new forms of representation. As long as the name of a child sprouts from a linked pair, it’s too easy to assume a biological offspring—the standard interpretation of that iconography is too deeply ingrained. Moreover, even if trees incorporate adoptees and stepchildren, they exclude many other important close connections, devaluing them by omission. Where on my extended family’s tree would W and M find a place? What about their mothers (our son’s third and fourth grandmothers)? Even relatively inclusive contemporary family trees prioritize monogamous cohabiting couples and their dependents. But what about a longtime friend whom we think of as a brother or sister? What about a former love who has morphed into a uniquely tender, intimate relation? Or a treasured lover who is not the same person as our domestic partner? It’s gay tradition to consider this larger web of connections family as well, but it’s not clear how to make these ties visible on the tree. Perhaps no amount of tweaking can alter something inherently conservative in the form.

Some sort of alternative might do fuller justice to the richness of family while preserving, in a way that can be passed on, concrete knowledge of overall structure and individual members. The forms proposed most often are the forest, orchard,

garden, circle, and constellation. Of these, I prefer forest, because it echoes the time-honored arboreal image but is more inclusive and complicated than tree, less controlled than garden or orchard. Forests are fittingly earthbound and everyday. Plus, it's difficult to overlook their complexity: the different scenes at different heights even if you stand in one place, the crazy entanglement of roots, vines, branches, tendrils, such that you often can't tell where one tree begins and another ends. Families grow wild like that. It's easy to get lost in them.

Perhaps the best form for representing family, the double-visioned one that embraces complexity while seeing some way through the thicket, that holds together both the particular and the universal, the individual and the group, is story—or essay.

The blue envelope is gone. I finally took action, not because I've made sense of the forest, but because of a mystery and a certain hope. The first few times I plucked up that letter, I did so because my cousin's handwriting looks almost exactly like my father's. The two are close in age and grew up less than a hundred miles apart, so maybe this convergence reflects nothing more than the prevailing penmanship of that time and place. Nevertheless, the mirroring of hands seemed eerie to me, a tangible indication that we may be connected in ways we can't fathom.

Around the time I was pondering this, Cousin H sent out an e-mail reporting that one of our extended family members had died. I didn't really remember him, though he was at those Swedish reunions. I could picture a face but wasn't certain I had the *right* face. Still, struck by that timeless urge to do something, I wrote a simple condolence note. Conjuring it took almost an hour; I had nothing to say. But I felt a kinship: we are all in this together—this brief living, followed by the permanent ending of those death dates on the genealogical chart.

I decided to answer Cousin H's request at the same time. Maybe extended family of the traditional sort is less a social body than a mediating metaphor, a hopeful gesture toward how we might connect with others past, present, and future, like us and not. Perhaps, also, honoring the tenuous links in small ways is part of honoring the unsolvable mystery at the heart of identity. I don't know where *we* end. I don't know who *I* am. I sent Cousin H the facts, as far as I know them, for whatever they're worth.

Just a few facts, actually, just the ones that would hang easily on the existing tree. I convinced myself that it would be discourteous, given a kind invitation, to shake things up too much. But in retrospect I was probably still afraid to risk disapproval and rejection, still holding back to stay safe. It's curious what I feel for family I wouldn't recognize on the street, and curious too how much I want these near strangers to love me.

STRANGE TRAVELERS

Non est ad astra mollise terris via.
(There is no easy way from the earth to the stars.)
—Seneca the Younger

A long time ago, in the earliest of days, not long after the People had crossed into this world, Coyote was tasked to carry a sack far to the south and not open it until he had climbed the highest peak of the southern range. Well aware of Coyote's curious nature, the People made him promise not to open the sack. Coyote reluctantly agreed, and so they tied the bag onto his back and sent him off.

For days Coyote ran through barren country, across soil and sand and rock, with the sun scorching his eyes and the bag flapping against his back so that the fur was nearly rubbed from his flesh. With each day's passing he grew more curious as to what was in the bag, as well as more gaunt because there was no food at all in this great empty land. At last, worn from traveling so long on an empty stomach, Coyote said to himself, "What if there is food in this sack? Surely they would not begrudge me just a little so I can continue on my way." And in this way he thought he could satisfy his mission, his hunger, and his curiosity all at the same time.

So he pulled the bag from his back and untied it to see what he might find to fill his stomach. But inside was nothing but stars in countless numbers, and, before Coyote could puzzle out what was all a-glimmer inside the bag, the stars flew out in a great spray of light far up into the sky. And there they remain to this day.

At a bit past noon, on September 19, 1783, over one hundred thousand people, including King Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, craned their necks skyward from where they stood on the grounds outside the Royal Palace of Versailles. They had just witnessed the Montgolfier brothers, Etienne and Joseph, release a fifty-seven-foot hot air balloon from over its cauldron fire of

straw, old shoes, and rotting meat, and now they watched it move steadily upward and away, its painted suns and fleurs de lis flashing golden in the midday sun against its dark blue fabric. From the large wicker basket suspended below the balloon perhaps came a few disconcerted bleats or indignant quacks, the passengers' complaints growing ever fainter in the ears of the "prodigious concourse of spectators" until they disappeared completely, the balloon well on its way to its peak height of fifteen hundred feet.

Inside were a rooster, a duck, and a sheep—aptly named Montauceil ("Climb to the Sky"). I imagine they took to the flight with varying degrees of aplomb. For the duck, of course, save for the cage it found itself in, this was nothing new; ducks are strong flyers and have been found at more than twenty thousand feet up when migrating. Roosters, on the other hand, are lucky if they can clear nine or ten feet. What then must he have felt, looking through the bars of his cage and the gaps in the wicker gondola, seeing the gardens of Versailles receding below and feeling the wind in his rarely used wings? Fear? Frustration? The wonder of possibility? Did he for the rest of his years strut around among the hens like, well, like a rooster, thinking about the time he flew higher than any other rooster could dream of? Or did he spend his days scratching idly for bugs in a dusty yard, now and then gazing forlornly at the sky, fitfully recalling his few minutes of glory—an eighteenth-century avian version of Neil Armstrong or Buzz Aldrin shuffling desultorily from room to room, feet forever firmly planted back on this too small and far too heavy world?

As for Monsieur Montauceil, it appears much of the eight-minute flight was spent lamenting that the grass he had been cropping only minutes earlier was swiftly getting farther away—an unexpected turn of events it seems he wasted no time in rectifying when the balloon touched down at the edge of the forest of Vaucresson, tipping out its three pioneering passengers. When discovered by a pair of gameskeepers shortly afterward, the sheep was calmly grazing, seemingly unfazed by either the historic journey or the fact that he had apparently kicked or landed on the loudly complaining rooster, injuring one of its wings. The gameskeepers said nothing about the duck, or his state of mind.

A long time ago, my mother owned a duck as a child, a pet that followed her around and even waited in the driveway near the road for her to come home from school. At least, it did until my uncle Tom, my mother's older brother, accidentally ran it over with the family car. It was one of my mother's favorite stories: an accident that began in childhood tears and ended, as many such stories do, in adult laughter, told and retold frequently, especially when the entire family gathered for holidays. Uncle Tom would take up his own laughing defense, half-hearted at best, happy to play the smiling villain for us kids.

Uncle Tom had cool cars and a backyard swimming pool and a basement billiards table. A police scanner with flashing lights and constant adventurous chatter. A house with a finished attic where my cousins and I could disappear to play 45s loudly and repeatedly and a later house with a jukebox. A CB radio in his car that my cousin and I would get on and annoy other listeners with. Lawn Jarts back before somebody official decided eight-to eleven-year-olds shouldn't be hurling twelve-inch weighted metal spikes at each other.

He had movie cameras and flashbulb cameras and Polaroid cameras and ancillary lights that could have lit up downtown's minor league baseball stadium, so that after whichever Christmas or birthday he recorded, we walked around for five or six minutes in a world of haze and spots, all of us squinting and blinking and stumbling over shadowy obstacles, resembling nothing so much as a '70s zombie movie.

He did knock-knock jokes and magic tricks and threw you into the pool when you weren't looking. And, if you and he were already in the pool, he'd pick you up and throw you across it when you weren't looking. Uncle Tom was the family trickster who pulled coins from your ears and stole your nose between his knuckles and told you to pull his finger before you knew not to and then, later, you pulled it anyway because it gave him such pleasure and you were seven or eight or nine and, let's face it, it was funny.

A trip to Uncle Tom's was like a trip to the amusement park. "Bring your suits," he'd yell over the phone to my mother, loud enough for us to hear. "The water's great!" We'd arrive in the afternoon and find him already in the water, bare-chested and

grinning. Or working on his car or around the house, wearing a white T-shirt, all too happy to shuck it off—the shirt, the odd job—and jump in to chase us around the pool at just the right pace: fast enough to feel like a menacing pursuit but never so fast we floundered in trying to escape. He was a master of balance.

Eventually, he would have to negotiate more troubled waters: my mother’s diagnosis of terminal cancer, my parents’ separation, my mother’s soon-to-follow widowhood, or the time he had to drive to my junior high school, then wait outside the nurse’s office until they’d called me out of ninth-grade math so he could tell me my mother had finally succumbed to cancer. Or when, only six years later, he followed after her: same path, different cancer, same destination.

We tell stories to explain the workings of our world: how the stars get into the sky, why it thunders or lightnings, why people die. We’ve done this, I imagine, ever since we climbed down out of the trees and freed our hands for other things (say, making

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claw shapes and scaring the little ones with the idea that things in the tall grass want to eat them, so they should stay close—our first “horror” story). Around fires we’ve told stories of predators and elemental forces and gods, stories of ancestors

from long ago and of people we met just yesterday, stories that explain and terrify and teach and make us laugh, and as we’ve progressed we’ve found different settings and ways of telling mostly those same stories. We’ve told them on cave walls and vellum and parchment, in marble and music; we’ve employed goose feathers, crushed insects, and catgut, bright lights and silver halide. When the old stories don’t work anymore, when we suss out it isn’t Zeus hurling lightning, or Coyote or Prometheus or Raven scattering the stars or bringing fire, we hypothesize new ones: big bang, Schrödinger’s cat, quantum entanglement, spooky action at a distance. We tell our stories on TV and over

the Web; we send them into interstellar space engraved on gold discs. We tell them around the family table, where we sit down and hear again the story of that poor, overly loyal duck.

We want to know how. We want to know why.

We tell stories to remind ourselves how we got here. To guide us to where we are going. To fill in the gap that looms between the two.

Stories bring back the past. They set it before us, a daily tableau in our minds' eyes to wander through to revisit our old neighborhoods. This is how it was.

Stories prepare us for the future. This is how we might live. This is how we might die. This is what happens after.

We walk the paths of our stories backward and forward, into the known and the unknown. Each tale a tiny breadcrumb keeping us, we hope, in hailing distance of home. Each a thread behind that trails a murmuring crowd of ghosts.

We tell stories to remember. We tell them to revive. We tell them to resurrect. The duck. My mother. My uncle.

We tell them to live in the world we make out of what we tell.

Once, Eagle grew angry at Coyote's howling at the moon, which was making it difficult for Eagle to sleep. So one day, when Coyote was out hunting mice, Eagle swooped down and stole his wife. When Coyote returned home, he grew frantic over his wife's absence and asked all the creatures if they had seen her. Finally, Buzzard told him he knew where Coyote's wife was and that he would take Coyote there if Coyote would promise to always leave a part of his kill for Buzzard. Coyote quickly agreed, and Buzzard scooped him up and carried him into the sky where Eagle lived. Coyote searched Eagle's home for his wife, but soon became hungry. Upon discovering a sack of cornmeal, he was just about to eat when he heard a noise. He grabbed the sack in his teeth and, as he ran, cornmeal spilled from the bag out across the sky and became the stars.

In July 1947, as part of a rocket-retrieval program titled Project Blossom and headquartered at Holloman Air Force Base in New Mexico, a group of fruit flies shot skyward from White Sands Proving Ground, riding a repurposed German v2 to a height of sixty-eight miles and becoming the first terrestrial life

forms to cross into space. Parachuting safely downward nearly an hour later, they also became the first to successfully return. The next few animal pioneers were not so lucky.

In June 1948, a rhesus monkey named Albert was strapped into the tight confines of another v2 nose cone. A half-hour before launch, however, the biometric readings suddenly stopped, leading one of the physicians to later conclude they had “lost the animal due to breathing difficulties in its cramped posture even before the rocket was fired.” The mission went on in any case and Albert, or at least his body, was carried forty miles above the Earth. This time, though, the parachute system failed and the nose cone smashed into the ground, scattering its shattered pieces across the landscape.

The following summer, another monkey, not-so-creatively named Albert II, happily survived both his launch and the eighty-five-mile ride into space. Unfortunately, the end result was the same, as once again the braking parachute failed on reentry and the nose cone smashed a five-foot-deep crater into the desert sand. Two more monkeys died that same year: Albert III, when his rocket exploded twenty-four seconds into the flight, and Albert IV, in yet another crash landing due to a failed parachute. Alberts v and VI fared little better. And by this time, I wonder, is anybody thinking that perhaps it’s time to change the name? I recognize that scientists in general are not a superstitious bunch, but it’s hard to imagine as they sat around troubleshooting that some engineer, or maybe a passing custodian, didn’t raise a hand and suggest they try something besides Albert. Though perhaps simply plugging in a different roman numeral kept them from overly anthropomorphizing the creatures, making it easier to think, as they strapped in each tiny monkey, that it was no different than swapping out a new transistor or another blown fuse.

Albert v, like most of his predecessors, died when his parachute failed to deploy, though, unlike the others, his body was never found, the nose cone never recovered despite a rigorous search. During the next flight, the parachute system actually worked, dropping the sixth and final Albert to the ground with little more than a rude bump and prompting a round of celebration. Unfortunately, the applause was premature; by the time the recovery team discovered the touchdown site, Albert VI had

been baking inside his metal canister for hours under the brutal New Mexico sun. Barely alive when they found him, he never made it to the air force base hospital, expiring on the way just a few hours after making the first successful landing of Project Blossom, save for the fruit flies.

Perhaps having a preternatural sense of what was to come, one of the test subjects made a break for it, escaping from his cage at Florida's MacDill Air Force Base, where he and another subject had been taken by Major David Simons, head of the space biology program at White Sands, for some preflight performance tests. The unnamed monkey (though we're probably safe in assuming it was or would be called Albert Something) managed to not only escape his cage but also lead Major Simons on a merry chase through the outsized gym building among a series of ropes, bars, and rings before evading the guarded exits by slipping through a broken window onto the base grounds, where Simons continued to give chase (via a different exit one presumes) until it disappeared completely. After a few days, Simons was forced to return to Holloman AFB with only one of the two monkeys he had taken with him.

Three weeks later, though, Simons received a letter from the Tampa city police saying they had captured the escapee. Simons later recalled what he'd been told:

It seems this particular monkey had wandered off into town . . . It stuck its nose into a lady's kitchen one morning and began to snoop around. The lady . . . made the mistake of trying to remove the monkey from her cupboard by force. The monkey took exception to her attack; he started throwing teacups and saucers in her direction. She and the monkey then began running around and around her kitchen until it became rather the worse for wear! . . . The base was tendered a bill for quite a few hundred dollars by the lady. She included emotional damages . . . lost teacups, irreplaceable china . . .

At first, the heat and humidity of the Tampa environs, especially after that desert at White Sands, must have seemed so much like home, a true escape from whatever fate those other Alberts had met. How disappointing then, after the initial burst

to freedom, to find oneself surrounded, not by deep-shadowed trees and trailing vines, the hooting cries or musky scent of the wild, but by yet more brick and concrete, and everywhere the sound and stench of traffic.

Returning to White Sands after nearly a month in Florida, perhaps he preferred such an alien land over the false familiarity, the lure of forgotten memories so tantalizingly close. The baking sun and dry lifeless air, the unbroken horizon of sand and rock that went on seemingly forever, promised nothing but what was to come. A foreign landscape—but at least, like the name he would soon be sentenced to, an honest one.

I knew what had happened the moment I saw Uncle Tom standing outside the nurse's office. I didn't even need to see his haggard face, the haunt of his eyes, the bent language of his body. Presence was enough. Context, after all, is often everything.

Sudden administrative summonses, while not regular events, were also unfortunately not as rare as they should have been.

And the context of this early afternoon in May was that my mother, who had been for some years slowly dying at home of cancer, had been a few days ago transported to a hospital where she

could move on to doing so more quickly. My uncle's figure told me from down the lengthening expanse of the school hallway, she had done just that.

It's possible I suspected even before seeing him as I came up the stairs. Sudden administrative summonses, while not regular events, were also unfortunately not as rare as they should have been, as I found less than ideal ways to handle the deteriorating situation at home. But while I'd been called out of class before, this was the first time I'd been sent to the nurse's office as opposed to the main office. And, of course, I was aware that my mother was on the verge of dying. I'd been in the room when the EMTs came to our house and tried to gently ready her for transport while she tried to argue with hands and words that she didn't want to go, that she didn't want to "die in that place."

So it wouldn't be unlikely that, by the time my feet were taking the steps leading from the classroom to the nurse's office, I

was already steeling myself for what was to come; my uncle's presence was mere confirmation.

I don't remember what he said. Or what I said, if anything. I don't know if the nurse was there. If I spoke to a school official or signed out. I remember him holding the door open for me. A bright day. I recall sliding into the back seat. And that's where the story ends, where the memory of that day stops. No recollection of the drive. Of the walk into the hospital. Of the room where my mother was. Of getting home. There is the back of my uncle's head in the car—his short black hair, the sharp angle of his skull visible. Then an expanse of white as we pull forward into anything but the sun.

Once, long ago, the five Wolf brothers told Coyote that they had seen a strange sight as they went out hunting—a pair of animals high in the sky. When Coyote asked who they were, the Wolf brothers said they couldn't tell; the animals were too far away and the Wolves did not know how to get any nearer. Coyote said he had an idea. The next day, Coyote took a bow and a quiver of arrows and set out with the Wolf brothers. When they got to where they could see the strange animals, Coyote let fly an arrow that arced high into the air, then stuck in the sky. Coyote continued shooting until he had made a ladder of arrows from the ground to the sky. Then Coyote, the Wolf brothers, and their dog began climbing up the ladder, a long journey of several days. Eventually they grew near enough to see that the sky animals were a pair of Grizzly Bears. Coyote was scared and refused to go any closer. The two youngest brothers, however, were unafraid and continued on. When the Bears did not move, the other Wolf brothers and their dog moved closer, too. Still the Bears did not move, and soon the five Wolf brothers were sitting there looking at the Grizzly Bears, who were sitting looking at the Wolf brothers and their dog. Coyote thought they made a beautiful sight. "They should stay up here forever," he thought. "And when people see them, I can tell them I made this." So he climbed back down, snapping off the arrows as he did so the brothers could not follow. This is how Coyote made the Big Dipper: the two Grizzly Bears and two youngest brothers form the bowl, the older brothers are the handle, and the eldest Wolf brother stands with his dog in the middle.

On November 8, 1957, New Yorkers looking up into the sky a little after five a.m. would have seen a tiny second moon appear briefly against the pale blue background, a silvery flash arcing out of the southeast and heading toward the north, flickering in and out of sight as its tumbling motion caught and held, then caught and reflected the rising sun's light as it took nearly two minutes to traverse the dawn sky before fading away to a moment's memory.

A month earlier, the strange object's older sibling, Sputnik I, had shocked the world, the boom of its explosive launch a starter's gun signaling a mad race into space that the Russians had now shown, with Sputnik II, they were winning. But while the original Sputnik had provoked panic and fear among the American populace, Sputnik II evoked more complex emotions. Fear, yes. Anxiety over the United States slipping technologically further behind, yes. But coupled with those was also a sense of tenderness, and even grief, directed not at what the satellite represented but at what it carried within: a thirteen-pound mongrel named Laika—a little black and white stray plucked shivering from the frozen streets of Moscow and now speeding through the even colder vacuum of space, several hundred lonely miles above the Earth.

What a dream it must have seemed at first to little Laika. Gone from scrounging along icy streets for scraps of food and hiding from larger, fiercer dogs to the warmth of the kennel at the lab and the company of like-sized dogs. Food like she never could have imagined: soup, bread, milk, sausage, bones to gnaw on. Regular handling and exercise, walks twice a day with human attendants who never kicked her and whose voices spoke in the unfamiliar soft tones of what she would eventually come to know as affection, though she never would sniff out what lay beneath: the betraying tremor of sorrow and guilt.

Perhaps she might have grown a little suspicious when, toward the end of her training regimen, Dr. Vladimir Yazdovsky took her home with him and let her play with his children. "I wanted to do something nice for her," he would later write. "She had so little time left to live." Or maybe it was when they placed her in her tightly confining cabin, when, according to Yevgeniy Shabarov, "before closing the hatch, we kissed her nose and wished her bon voyage." Though in the train-

ing videos of her inside the same container, she looks anything but anxious; in fact, she appears a trifle bored, her left foreleg propped up on the bar in front of her, her tongue lolling out, and her head looking forward, then off to the side, as if to say, “We done here yet?”

If the clang of the hatch lid, followed by the secondary capsule being placed over her container, didn’t cause her to wonder what was going on, certainly the noise and throbbing beneath her as the engines began would have tipped her off that things were taking a turn for the worse—a feeling that would have been sharply confirmed by the explosive takeoff, the sudden g-forces pressing her down against the floor of her container like a mastiff’s dominating weight atop her slight body, his jaws clamped around her throat so she could barely breathe, the dream turned coldly, starkly nightmare.

Those New Yorkers who bothered to climb sleepily from their beds on that cold, blustery winter morning already knew Laika was doomed. Originally, media accounts had been more optimistic: an article in the *New York Times* the day of the launch was subtitled “Moscow Expects Dog Might Be Returned Safely to Earth Without Any Harm”; another the following day headlined “Recovery of Dog Called Possible.” By November 5, though, readers were reading headlines like “Russian Indicates Dog Will Die” and stories quoting Russian scientists who admitted Laika did not have long to live. And if any of those straining their eyes in the pre-dawn skies over New York City on the eighth had opened a *Times* that morning, they would have read that “while the dog apparently is still alive . . . no responsible source here, however, has ever suggested that Soviet scientists have the ability to bring the dog back.”

The truth, though, was that Laika was *not* alive when she passed overhead that morning. Sputnik 11, launched on November 3, 1957, circled the Earth for 162 days, making 2,570 orbits of the planet before entering the atmosphere and disintegrating over the Caribbean. And for roughly 2,566 of those orbits, for all but a very few hours, it was a half-ton tomb, carrying within it the small, lifeless body of Laika, lonelier than she had ever been in her days as a hungry stray on the streets of Russia’s capital.

She had survived the launch in good shape, her heartbeat tripling to a peak of 260 beats per minute while her breathing rate quadrupled and then both slowly reverting to normal. But

it didn't take long for the telemetry to send back some troubling data. The satellite cabin was quickly overheating, rising to 104 degrees within just a few hours. Laika at that point was clearly agitated, sensors indicating she was moving around and barking. This activity was short-lived though, and after only a few hours, all indications of life had ceased.

It wasn't until November 12, however, that the Soviets announced the dog had expired. Even then, the stories were only shadows of the truth. One report said she had died after a week due to oxygen starvation caused by the satellite's batteries dying. Another said she had been peacefully euthanized via injection or gas, implying that this had always been the plan. It was not until a World Space Conference in 2002, almost a half century later, that the truth became known; Dr. Dimitri Malashenkov, one of the original Sputnik II scientists, presented a paper explaining that Laika had died of heat and stress between five and seven hours into the mission.

What was it she felt then? The oppressive weight of an indifferent universe? The sharp sting of betrayal? Shame at being taken in so easily—for a bit of warmth, a bite of meat not gone rancid, the fleeting touch of a child's hand? And when the pressure eased, and gravity's maw opened wide to fully release her, so that her tiny thirteen pounds of bone and flesh and fur weighed nothing at all, did she revel in that sense of potential? Or did she think, this is what dying must feel like: noise and pain followed by the slow slipping away, floating free of home and body. When the heat filled the cabin, and the pain and discomfort began all over again, it must have seemed like yet another cruel trick of her captors.

In June of 1974, three years before my uncle appeared in my school to tell me my mother had died, he was walking me around the grounds of a funeral home. Inside, it had all become too much for an eleven-year-old boy: the pitying looks and sibilant whispers, the tears, the soft rustle of cloth and velvet like animals scurrying in the underbrush. Every now and then someone emerging to pull me into themselves, crushing my ribs and wetting my neck before releasing me and fading back into the surrounding dimness. All the while my father's body lying still and dark-suited, there but not there, the omnipresent locus of a wearying game of emotional tag:

I'm here.

Now I'm not.

I'm here.

Now I'm not.

I couldn't extract myself from the gravity well of that body, couldn't pull myself away either physically or visually, and so, when I began to give in to the drag, reached out a hand and laid it atop the sleeve of my father's right arm and whispered to him or maybe to myself, "Wake up wake up wake up wake up wake up wake up," it was Uncle Tom who stepped in, laced an arm around my shaking shoulders, and guided me from the room and out the door; unseeing and no longer whispering, I was by then wheezing, heaving in air that wasn't feeding my lungs, as if it were no longer made up of oxygen and nitrogen but transformed instead into light, into waves, into cosmic rays that passed right through me.

I'm here.

Now I'm not.

Eventually it stopped, of course, as all things do. I couldn't breathe, then I could, and then I could walk, his arm still there across my shoulder for a while, then gone, though not far, right at my side, ready. There was a bit of breeze in my face, perhaps some sun, though I don't recall the weather, just a slow sense of lightening, of return. And always his slim presence beside me, slender but ever solid.

I'm here.

One evening, Coyote watched a star fall from the sky. "Tomorrow," he said to his wife and son, "I will go to where the star landed, and perhaps I will find some food there," for it had been a difficult hunting season, and he hoped the falling star might bring him some luck. The next morning, Coyote followed the star's path, and upon reaching the meadow where he thought it had landed, he came across a young boy lying in the grass. Coyote asked the boy where he was from, and the boy said everywhere. Coyote then asked where he was going, and the boy said nowhere. When Coyote asked after his parents, the boy said he could not remember them. So Coyote, taking pity on the boy and thinking he was the same age as his own son, who might like a companion, asked if he would like to come home with him and have Coyote be his father. The boy said yes and lived

with Coyote and his family for some time. Coyote called him Morning Star because that was how he had found him. Coyote noticed that he seemed to have greater luck since the boy's arrival. Hunting became easier, and soon the family was eating better than they ever had. Too, sometimes the boy would predict events before they happened. He began to think the boy carried a great power within him. Now and then Coyote would try to

Coyote awoke one morning to find Morning Star gone. He tracked his footprints to the field where he had first found him, and there they stopped, as if Morning Star had simply disappeared.

find out where the boy had come from, but the boy would never say. Coyote did not care, though, for he loved Morning Star and taught him side by side

with his own son—how to hunt, how to behave, how to be clever—and the two grew swift and tall. When Coyote's wife one day said, "Soon the two of them will be tall enough to reach the sky," Coyote smiled, but a bad feeling swept through him. It was only one month later that Coyote awoke one morning to find Morning Star gone. He tracked his footprints to the field where he had first found him, and there they stopped, as if Morning Star had simply disappeared. Looking up, Coyote saw a single star in the sky, and from then on, that star was always the first one to be seen after the darkness waned. Every morning, Coyote goes out into the field and looks up, waiting for Morning Star.

By the late 1950s, with the US space program at White Sands accelerating, and more animals needed for testing, Holloman Air Force Base was quickly becoming a minor zoo, housing over four hundred animals, including mice, pigs, black bears, cats, dogs, fish, frogs, monkeys, and chimpanzees. Some of them, like the Alberts, were launched aboard short rocket flights; others were part of acceleration tests using a rocket sled. And two would become part of NASA's famed Mercury Program: Ham, the first chimpanzee in space, and Enos, who followed him a few months later. The data accrued from their missions led di-

rectly to Alan Shepard's and John Glenn's historic flights as the first American in space and the first to orbit the Earth.

Ed Dittmer, who commanded Holloman's Aeromedical Field Laboratory's Space Biology Branch, was the handler most closely associated with the chimpanzees. He spent eighteen months training them to perform simple tasks like pushing buttons or moving levers under simulated flight conditions in order to prove that human astronauts would be able to do similar duties during the actual missions.

"Back then," Dittmer recalled in an interview,

we got these small chimps from Africa—they were about a year old. . . . We started out by teaching them to sit in these little metal chairs set about four or five feet apart so they couldn't play with each other. We dressed them in these little nylon web jackets which went over their chests and we could then fasten them to their chair. We'd keep them in the chairs for about five minutes or so and feed them apples and other fruit, and we'd progressively put them in their seats for longer periods each day. Eventually they'd just [sit] there all day and play quite happily. . . .

Dittmer's favorite by far was Ham. "I had a great relationship with Ham," Dittmer told the authors of *Animals in Space*. "He was wonderful; he performed so well and was a remarkably easy chimp to handle. I'd hold him and he was just like a little kid."

Reading his words, it is impossible not to feel the affection Dittmer still retains fifty years later for his animal charges, especially Ham. But it's in the video interviews, when you can hear and see him remembering, where the true depth of that devotion comes out. As when he tells the PBS program *Nature*: "I'd get awful close to him because he was such a lovable chap. I could pick him up and hold him. He'd put his arm around my neck. Smile." Or when he chuckles while recalling bringing the monkeys over to the training building for the movie *One Small Step: The Story of the Space Chimps*:

We called it the chimpanzee school bus. We'd bring them over to the school. They'd jump out of the van and

run to their seats. Once in a while they wanted to take somebody else's seat. [His face breaks out in a wide smile and you can see his eyes going back in time.] Just like little kids they'd have a little tussle [laughs] over it and we'd just gently take them to their own seats.

And the intense devotion is particularly evident when he recalls the flight itself and his subsequent reunion with Ham after the successful recovery:

When he flew, he was forty-four months. He was about the same age as my son. When Ham went up I was really apprehensive. All sorts of things went through my mind. I was praying he would make it through the flight. . . . I was waiting and waiting and waiting for the recovery . . . I wanted to get that little feller back, . . . They brought him back to Cape Canaveral and I was out in the compound there and he come running up and put his arms around me right away. He'd only been gone for a day. He gave me a big hug. You haven't been hugged till you've been hugged by a thirty-seven-pound chimpanzee that is happy.

When he remembers Ham hugging him, Dittmer puts both his arms around himself, as if to relive that moment. His face seems to get younger as he laughs, and you can hear the catch in his voice when he continues and, if you could get a close enough look, you'd be pretty sure his eyes were watering up.

It was the kind of emotional connection the American space programs usually tried to minimize. Naming all the test animals Albert for instance. Or not naming them at all. When two squirrel monkeys flew on the Space Shuttle, the commander, Robert Overmyer, said: "I would not let the crew name the monkeys—not even unofficially. We called them Specimen No. 1 and Specimen No. 2. If something should happen to them I didn't want the public to come down heavily upon us because some personalized monkey friend of ours had died . . . it kept the attachment from ever being there."

Even Ham had been simply tagged Subject 65; the other chimpanzees were officially mere numbers as well. But it didn't take long for the humans who worked with them to begin naming

them: Ham, Enos, Duane, Caledonia, Little Jim, etc. Listening to the quaver in Ed Dittmer's voice, studying the photos of him holding Ham in his arms or crouched down holding his hand while Ham is hooked up to one of the machines, seeing the look of heartfelt affection that crosses his face when he remembers his time

It could not have been easy on the scientists, trainers, and keepers who spent so much time with the whose lives they were risking.

with Ham, it's impossible to imagine him ever referring to his primate friend as "Specimen No. 1" or "Subject 65."

Nor can one imagine the Soviets doing so with their canine astronauts. Remember Shabarov kissing Laika on the nose before placing her in the rocket. Or Yazdovsky taking Laika home—a precedent set seven years earlier by Anatoli Blagonravov, head of the Commission for the Investigation of the Upper Atmosphere.

On July 22, 1951, Blagonravov had watched at Kapustin Yar as two dogs, named Tsygan and Dezik, rocketed sixty-two miles into the sky and then floated safely downward in their capsule a short while afterward—the first successful recovery of an animal from a rocket flight. Unfortunately, a week later, Dezik was not as lucky when he and a dog named Lisa died after their nose cone smashed into the ground. That was enough for Blagonravov, who promptly commandeered Tsygan and took him back to Moscow as the family pet, saving him from future flights.

It could not have been easy on the scientists, trainers, and keepers who spent so much time with the whose lives they were risking—or, in the case of Laika, animals they knew with utter certainty they were sending to their deaths. In the photos, they're almost always smiling, the handlers. Dittmer holding up Ham; an American doctor pressing a stethoscope to a macaque monkey's chest; a Russian doctor doing the same to a wiry little dog; a pair of young Russian girls taking a half-dozen space dogs out for a walk, one of them nestling two in her arms, the other laughing while she holds down a rambunctious one jumping up on her legs. All of them smiling, grinning, laughing.

One wonders if their faces changed when the animals were

put back into their cages, the locks clanged, the backs turned. If they fell into sorrow or shame, the slack look of resignation. What was it like for Dittmer and Gazenko and the others who worked with these creatures so intensely day in and day out? To remark on their intelligence, to reward them with food and caresses and soft words, and even, as some did, to take them home and let them play with their kids, knowing all along that as they trained them they were teaching them the way, quite likely, to their own deaths?

What did those handlers and scientists and doctors see when they closed the kennel door, shut the monkey cages, then walked out of the building and looked up at their charges' destination overhead? The stars that candled the night? Or the dark between the light?

Sometime after my father died but before my mother became noticeably ill, placing me around twelve or thirteen, Uncle Tom gave me a lesson on pubescent hygiene—a nicely abstract way of saying he had to tell me I stunk. Which was what my mother had actually said that night my uncle was over. Loudly. In front of everyone. Though who that “everyone” was I no longer recall, save that there were at least a handful beyond our immediate family, and that the handful felt like the entire population of Upstate New York. I'm sure it wasn't meant maliciously. I know she was laughing when she said it; I can see, in looking back, that the parade-ground volume I recall the judgment being delivered in is almost surely both the heightened sensitivity of any pre-teen and a trick of memory's typical exaggeration (all memories should come with a warning like side-views mirrors: “Events are smaller than they appear”).

But overly sensitive or not, exaggerated or not, what I recall so vividly is the way both humiliation and fury swept through my body like two rivers of fire, one burning my inside to ashes, the other wanting to incinerate everything outside: the kitchen table I was standing next to; the red, white, and blue wallpaper; the chair my mother sat in while she fanned the air in front of her nose—“God, you stink! How did you get such bad B.O.?”—the witnesses to my humiliation—each and every one—but most of all my mother, who had caused it. I wanted to burn it all down, burn the very moment out of time. For a moment, a minute,

what seemed an hour, I wanted to hurt her back, I mean really hurt her. Wipe the laughter off her face, replace it with that fleeting mask of pain I'd gotten used to seeing cross her face the way passing clouds cast shadows across a bright front yard. "At least I have hair!" I might have said. "At least I don't have cancer!" "At least I'll be alive in three years!" The human mind is a wonder of creative thought, and few things display that creativity more than the sundry ways we devise to cause pain to those around us.

I didn't say any of those things, of course. I went upstairs and washed. Put on deodorant—my mother's, as I didn't have any of my own, adding to my humiliation. Changed my shirt. Came back downstairs. At some point, maybe it was immediately afterward, maybe later, as my uncle was getting ready to leave, the two of us stood in the family room while he tutored me in the lessons of puberty, the arcana of body odor and deodorant and antiperspirant. It was a conversation that had to have been as awkward and unwanted and unpleasant for him as it was for me.

But he did it. He was, after all, that kind of man, something I had always known about him: he did what needed to be done, when it needed to be done, the way it needed to be done. A military man before my time (to this day, when I picture a photograph of him, it's a black and white one of him in uniform, crisp and creased, rather than a family shot). A foreman in charge of other men at Dupont Chemical by the time I came around. A churchgoing man, which impressed me not for his sense of faith (of which I had none myself), but for his sense of constancy—the dependable regularity with which he went, not only every Sunday, but to other masses as well, owing to the fact that my cousin played the organ at the church. Good with tools. A carpenter. A fixit guy. A man who worked on cars—his own as well as those of his friends. The kind of person who could handle any task—not with the ease of arrogance but with the thin-lipped concentration and quiet dignity of utter competency. A man to be trusted.

When I think of him now, as if I could pluck him alive from the past and plunk him down today, he seems almost an anachronism. I have to struggle not to picture him in a hat, a fedora, like an actor in old black and white films, William Powell or

Spencer Tracy, though I certainly don't recall him ever wearing one. He was a man of old-fashioned duty.

Of course I didn't think of it in those terms. I just knew he was there. There to walk me around the funeral home where my father's body lay. There to take a handful of kids off my mother's hands when we got to be too much for her, or the chemo did, his laughing countenance as he waved us into his car those days when the ten- or fifteen-minute drive was too much for her. There to pull me aside over the span of a few too-short years

He had taken me as far as we could go, done what he could, but a brother's grief is not a child's, and this was the edge of our shared map.

to tell me I needed to try to make things easier on my mother, each conversation a bit more urgent and hushed than the last, each a bit more tinged with inevitability,

a ladder of diminishing words we steadily climbed rung by rung into a murky world, his firm hand a steady if reluctant guide.

And finally, he was there outside a junior-high nurse's office, when the ladder simply ended, and we faced each other across an emptiness of silence, because there was nothing more to say. He had taken me as far as we could go, done what he could, but a brother's grief is not a child's, and this was the edge of our shared map; he could only stand and watch as my childhood burned away and I rose on its ashes into a universe of loss.

One day as Coyote was going here and there among the people, he overheard a trio of pretty girls debating which of the creatures was the most impressive. One argued for the owl, because of the way it killed so swiftly and silently even in the dark of night. Another said no, surely it was the salmon, who fights its way upstream hundreds of miles to find its spawning ground. The third said she thought it was the beaver, who builds its own house. This last was too much for Coyote, who did not like people thinking another more clever than he. "Girls," he interrupted, showing himself. "Certainly those you've mentioned have a skill or two, but I can assure you that I am the most

impressive.” “But what can you do?” one girl asked. “This, for one,” said Coyote. And he plucked out one of his eyeballs and tossed it up in the air and then caught it and returned it to his head. “But you still had one in your head to see with,” said the second girl. “That doesn’t seem so hard.” So Coyote pulled out both his eyeballs and threw them up in the air then caught them and put them back. “Well,” said the third girl. “I think I could throw two stones up in the air and still catch them with my eyes closed.” So Coyote plucked out both eyeballs again, but this time, rather than simply toss them into the air, he began to juggle them. “Now,” said the first girl, “that is a little more impressive.” And as Coyote concentrated on juggling even faster, the three girls quietly tiptoed away, keeping their giggles to themselves. Coyote, meanwhile, hearing no sounds of appreciation, began to throw his eyeballs ever higher. Higher and higher he tossed them until he flung one so high it stuck in the sky and remains there to this day. Some call it Arcturus.

If Ham was the teacher’s pet of the Mercury Space Chimpanzee Program, his training companion, Enos, was the class clown. Or worse, the class degenerate. But when Ham showed little taste for a second mission, Enos was quickly plugged into the last primate mission, a full and final rehearsal for the first manned flight.

This was actually a more difficult mission than Ham’s had been, requiring much more of the passenger. One task involved a series of three identical shapes (either circles, squares, or triangles). When the chimpanzee saw two of the same shapes illuminated, he would have to press a button below the third. Another task involved turning off a green light within twenty seconds of its going on. Much more complicated was learning how to use a pair of levers to turn lights off or on and using another to count to fifty by pulling it exactly that number of times. When the tasks were performed correctly, the monkeys were rewarded with food or drink delivered via tubes set near the chimpanzee’s mouth. When the monkeys erred, however, either by miscounting, pulling the wrong lever, pushing the wrong button, or simply not performing the task at all, they received a small electrical shock to their feet (irritating, but not particularly painful).

There was no doubting Enos’s intelligence. He took quickly

to the training and soon was performing as well as or better than Ham. But he was clearly no Ham with regard to personality. According to Dittmer: “No one ever held Enos. If you had him he was on a little strap. Enos was a good chimp and he was smart, but he didn’t take to people.” Another engineer on the project, H. H. Luetjen, described Ham as “loving and he, he adored the veterinarians, his handlers.” But of Enos, he had little good to say: “Why they selected Enos I don’t know. . . . He had to be put into a straitjacket.”

Perhaps Enos wasn’t as warm and cuddly as Ham because he had seen what happened to Ham. Or maybe he had some prescience of what was about to happen to him. It turned out his mission would not go as smoothly. The flight itself went fine: takeoff, orbit, and landing all worked flawlessly. The problem was with the tasks inside the spacecraft. Owing to a wiring malfunction, poor Enos kept getting shocked whether he performed the tasks correctly or not. As Luetjen put it: “Regardless of what he did with the levers in there, anytime he’d pull them he’d get an electrical short. He was one p.o.’ed monkey.” Later, it was rumored—the tale appeared in several books about the Mercury Program and its primates before being recently debunked in Mary Roach’s *Packing for Mars*—that Enos gave up pressing buttons and pulling levers and began to fondle his genitals in front of the camera aimed right at him.

If stories are how we explain our world to ourselves, what happens when we tell the stories wrong? If stories are what tie us to our pasts, what happens when we don’t remember the stories that help us remember?

Four years after Uncle Tom informed me of my mother’s death, he drove me to Syracuse University for the beginning of my sophomore year. The school had lost my housing request, or I had neglected to turn one in, and so I’d had to scramble for someplace to live, eventually renting a room sight-unseen in the fraternity next to my freshman dormitory.

It has to have been sight-unseen, for had I known what the place looked like—the entire house, not just my room—I probably never would have lived there, no matter my desperation. It turns out there was a reason they had rooms to spare: almost none of the actual fraternity members had wanted to live in the place.

It was a pit. There was one working toilet (among four) on the second floor, and the first-floor bathroom not only had no working plumbing at all, but it looked like it hadn't been cleaned since it had stopped working however many years ago. Hallways and empty rooms were filled with garbage and the entire place smelled of stale beer, old vomit, and dried urine, not to mention the much fresher reek of spilled bong water and the sweeter smell of wafting marijuana. A year later, the house would have so many viola-

And then it was like I was eleven or twelve and standing in my family room all over again, feeling a sense of shame and embarrassment and anger.

tions the printout just stopped at ninety-nine and the membership would have to go to city court to keep the house open, a short-lived victory as within the decade it would be torn down and turned into a parking lot.

As my uncle and I walked through the first-floor hallway, stepping over and around trash and broken furniture, looking for someone in charge and not finding anybody who knew much of anything—save that, yes, that room there was empty and ready for the taking, and so was that one—I could see his face tightening with each frustrated conversation. “I wouldn’t let my dog spend the night here,” I remember him telling me fervently. He wanted to find whoever in the fraternity had rented me the room, he wanted to talk to someone in the university, he wanted to take me back home. He was adamant about my not staying there; he could not leave his little sister’s son there.

And then it was like I was eleven or twelve and standing in my family room all over again, feeling a sense of shame and embarrassment and anger. I was embarrassed I had let myself get into this situation with the paperwork, ashamed I hadn’t made the kinds of friends others had made their freshman year so they could register together for one of the dorms as roommates, and angry money had been such an issue I wasn’t sure I could even afford to attend and then had to take the cheapest last-minute housing I could scare up. I was embarrassed at being dropped off not by a mother and father wearing dressy casual wear and driving a station wagon as in the glossy bro-

chures but by an uncle in a crew cut and white T-shirt driving a big Buick. By my blatant incompetency. By having so few answers to his eminently reasonable questions. By the way he disparaged the house so loudly in the presence of my soon-to-be housemates. I was embarrassed by how I needed him to take me to school and ashamed by how badly I wanted him gone the moment he did so.

Which eventually he must have sensed, either the desire or the shame at the desire or both. He stopped trying to convince me this was a bad idea, stopped trying to find somebody he could yell at. He helped me unload the car, pile my belongings in the empty room I'd chosen, and then, maybe after a handshake or a hug or some parting words of advice, maybe after slipping me a twenty-dollar bill, he slid in behind the wheel and headed back home.

That's the story I remember. Uncle Tom dropping me off at college. His protectiveness and anger at not wanting to leave me in such a dump. His insight into why he needed to. The way he stepped so smoothly and fiercely into a father's role.

But when I questioned my cousin, a few years older, and asked if his father had ever told him that story, he tells me that he actually remembers going along, and that it hadn't been my uncle driving but my grandfather. And he doesn't remember a fraternity house at all; he recalls unloading me at a dorm.

So what am I to make of this memory? Maybe I shaped a story vessel out of need or simply because it seemed fitting, and I poured my uncle into it. Like Enos in the Mercury capsule. Like the Soviets saying for years they'd euthanized Laika, until perhaps some of them believed it themselves.

It was a blow to me, my cousin saying he had no memory of this event, calling the whole story into question. More and more over time I find myself losing the stories I once could tell, as my mother's and father's and uncle's and aunts' deaths recede ever further into the past. I play out the stories I hold like a line between my hands, slipping between my fingers, each knot another image, another felt touch, another sound.

The stories are like fragments of movies now, bits and pieces. And old movies at that—like the ones my uncle took—scratched and faded and shaky. Mostly silent films by now. I've lost all their voices: my uncle's, my father's, and my mother's. All of them faded away.

Our words rise up out of our mouths like bubbles, like balloons, like rockets, and for a while they stay up there, orbiting around our bodies and hearts and minds, letting us catch now and then a briefly remembered flash, a faint echo of a signal, but eventually they grow dark and silent and are lost in the empty soundlessness of space.

Coyote was enthralled by the night. He loved the blackness. He loved the moon and the stars. But in particular, he loved one star more than all the others. Night after night he would climb to the top of a hill, sit on his haunches, look up, and tell her of his amblings during the day, of the doings of the animals large and small, and of how much he loved her.

The star, though, never spoke back. So one night, rather than climbing his usual hill, Coyote followed the star, walking across the plains and hills and forests until he reached the foot of a great mountain peak that the star almost grazed as she passed by. The next night, Coyote was atop the mountain, waiting, and as the star grew closer and closer, Coyote reached as high as he could, but it was not high enough.

“Please,” he begged her. “Please take me up with you.”

And the star did. She reached down and took his paw and pulled him up, up into the sky and the two of them danced through the night, rising higher and higher as they moved together. But soon Coyote began to grow weary and fearful. The earth was so far away, and up so high it was cold, bitter cold, and silent, so frightfully silent.

“Please,” he begged the star. “Please let me down.”

And so the star let go.

Coyote fell and fell and fell. All of a moon he fell.

And when he struck the earth, a great hole formed, filling with Coyote’s blood, which then became water, and the hole became a lake.

Now, at night, coyotes gather around the lake and howl at the sky, hurling their anger at the cruel star that killed their father.

Only a few years after shepherding his younger sister through a losing battle with cancer, Uncle Tom himself was diagnosed with the disease. Decades of smoking had caught up with him in the form of cancer of the esophagus, and now the slow wast-

ing away I'd witnessed with my mother began all over again. So many strange and unwilling paths he had already traveled: a little sister's sudden widowhood followed by her unhurried dying, becoming a father figure to kids not his own, and now this: yet another journey into the dark.

When it ended, I was home for winter break from college, at a party at a friend's house. The phone rang, and someone said it was for me, someone from home. I didn't make a habit of saying where I'd be when I went out and where I was wouldn't have been the first place to leap to mind, which meant that whoever

It was like some great cycle of the universe had restarted, but something, an exploding star maybe, a collision of galaxies or black holes, had thrown things off just a little.

it was had spent some time tracking me down, calling around to various houses. It didn't take much deduction on my part to figure out the reason. I took

the phone a little drunk, listened to the news, and hung up. Then told a few friends what had happened, put on my coat, and headed out.

It was like some great cycle of the universe had restarted, but something, an exploding star maybe, a collision of galaxies or black holes, had thrown things off just a little. We were all going through the same motions again, but space-time had shifted a tiny bit to the side, as if the universe had folded in on itself, but unevenly, the corners and edges not quite matched up.

At home, my grandmother and grandfather would be in the kitchen. My grandmother, I knew, would be weeping at the table in long, drawn-in breaths broken up by a caterwauling mix of Italian and English, and my grandfather, stoic, solid, standing silently beside her or behind her but standing almost for sure. My younger brothers would be somewhere near but not too close, watching from the family room doorway perhaps, or listening timidly from upstairs, while the storm of my grandmother's grief, fearful in its Old World proportions, lashed and battered the walls. Farther away, at their own home or maybe in the hospital, my cousins would be grieving as well. I drove on

while the snow glittered cold and white beneath the same stars shining over us all.

We tell stories to explain the workings of our world: why it thunders or lightnings, how the stars get into the sky. We launch balloons and rockets and satellites and probes out into the cold vacuum of space in hope of finding new and better stories, sharper explanations. We fill them with flies and rats and ducks and sheep and dogs and chimpanzees, and we ask them, dead or alive, here or there, what they know, what they found when we cast them off from this world. Like prophets, like shamans, we read their entrails, their blood, their EKGs and EEGs, DNA, and RNA, and all we need know is all the time in the eyes of those that return: Ham and Enos, Alberts I–VI, Montauceil the sheep, Tsygan the dog, and Coyote—that the universe is black, and bleak, and filled with betrayal, but it can be hung with stars and with stories, and it is on these we rest our hopes of lighting all our lonely ways home.

PETER BALAKIAN

PUEBLO, CHRISTMAS DANCE

I took a wrong turn into a sun mask
on mud, into straw-glue and smashed yucca.

If you saw them rub feathers on their arms,
if the claws of bear wrapped them,

if the porcupine and badger were sewn to the skin,
if gusts of God flew into lightning-riven wood.

All morning I drove out of one life into another,
through no water and empty self,

I saw the coordinates of a masthead of a wrecked car.

My car took the curve of a curve,
just past the exit to Los Alamos

where Oppenheimer said the infinite imploded finite space—
though he couldn't have imagined

the atom pressed into the cave inside the mesa
that opened into the buffalo

who could turn into a bear,
who could be the beast.

*

She was carried between the horns of the animal.

The grass brushed the sky.
She drank from the horn.

The hill swallowed the dirt,
which became a horn of water.

The horn of water was passed among many.
Many drank while a chief blew yellow powder

through an eagle-winged bone;

space dissolved into a gourd-rattle
that made me feel the heart-shake.

In the dry cold, in the catapult past Jesus
where the bones and kernels

shook in the dry skin, there was relief.
Euclidean infinity dissolved.

I could hear the end of history
in the teeth rattling inside a gourd,

for a second, blue spears
of lightning shot over three women sleeping

under the canopy of a mud house.
The sun poured on all of us.

PORTRAIT WITHOUT A FACE

After Francis Bacon's painting *Portrait of George Dyer Talking*

Again you are ripping off my face, peeling
back my scalp, my good hair. How many
more pills can I take and still
I am dead and you are painting me,

peeling back my scalp and hair. How many
times will you twist my ear from my head?
I am dead and still you are painting me,
splicing my nose. My four nostrils heave

as you twist my ear from my head.
You make me the most beautiful monster:
my nose spliced, my four nostrils heave.
Most unmerciful master, you

unveil me: an unbeautiful monster.
You capture and carve muscle from bone,
a most unmerciful master.
I shave, ride a bicycle, sit naked

on a chair while you carve muscle from bone.
You hue me to the square, pin me to space, display
me while I shave, ride a bicycle, pose naked,
the floor transposed into a river of tongues.

You hue me to the square, bruise me, splay
me shivering below a single bulb. Like a small god
you transfigure the floor into a river of tongues
that flay me, licking every inch.

A lightbulb watches, shivering like a small god.
What have you done to my face, Francis.
You flay me, lick every inch.
Francis, I repeat, but you have forgotten your name.

Look what you have you done to us, Francis.
Call this limp, love, a lump of men
beyond recognition. You have forgotten my name
which was George when I still had a face.

This love limps. I was a man
and was whole once. Before
this I was George and still had a face.
My startlingly beautiful fleshy

self was whole before
I died on the bathroom floor.
Again you are ripping off my face,
my startlingly beautiful flesh.

ERIC BAUS

FROM "THE TRANQUILIZED TONGUE"

The frequency for speaking through feathers decoded the owls in the distance. The projector posed as the skin of a parchment devoted to datura leaves. The codex spliced a photo of hives with the names of newborn stars. The references bred. The curtains corroded. The foam pools painted over a locust.

The feral entrails of fireworks powered the clouds. The river beneath the river milked dust from the ground. The city's saliva swarmed. The expelled breath knotted. The cocoon in the king's mouth cursed into dross.

The ashes on the banks reprised the pollen diffused in the city's soot. The blind spots inscribed in the organs of an iris ignited the bodies of bees. The stingers hovered. The blank space blinked. The speaker absorbed the view from inside the skull of a pulverized asp.

The microphone embedded exploding glass in the mouth of the king's collapse. The microphone married a flock of shrouded grouses to the hydrogen behind an iris. The microphone unwound the wool in the chests of one hundred surly lions. The microphone trained the ants to pray to the birds colliding with windows. The microphone learned to swim inside an urn.

SHEER

Not a one doesn't shrink from ontology,
not a one is not let down
by the peppering. Who hasn't
batted back leaves

and not missed a plain geometry,
a simple, tidy sum,
like the count of one for once
to keep off the fucking fury?

Like Animal in *Stalag 17*
had a thought of Betty Grable,
fell to the floor, why wasn't she with him,
bear though he was, the bore?

Anyone would want to be in one
of her nylons with her in it, too.
And is it true a nylon fills with air
when rubbed against a plaster wall?

Anyone would want to end there, then,
as that kind of one, a million
netted in the gorgeous vanity of style.

CALVIN BEDIENT

CHEETAH

“You take death to go to a star,” van Gogh said,
he rode in a car of sunflowers,
he could not go very far.

How long our diaphaneity—
the inside inside out to the outside?
Are they enough, the lovely differences,
the round clouds’ cheetah spots on the desert floor?

See how they gallop away from Dead Rock.

Who wants to be Miro’s *Nu a la baignoire*,
just blue in the blue, swimming la la secret
somewhere blue, swimming her own shadow blue,
blue cloud shadows on her somewhere blue,
blue wings closing blue on blue?

Better the umber nipples in a see-through blouse,
à la Renoir,
the cheetah spots hunting on the tawny floor.

VICTORIA BROCKMEIER

PASSIM

AN ADMONITION

fly back
what you've dealt

indelible name, seeds
pine needles actually needles
stiff as though
or larger

her hands shape white scars in the air

in death valley in a lake bed
("the racetrack")

spooky stones dig out tracks
("peripatetic" "ice collars")

war makes its ghosts
irritable, all the incursions, deeds
hand to penitence
they want you to mail them back their damaged skins
here & there, seeds

beat a seal out of the air
keep your mouth shut
the static
wants to convert us

girls in white messages

as soon as you move

a hand with a hole in it where a brazed star meant to be
readable as lockjaw, as your shipwrecked dice, carry

the waves
tonelessly
recalibrate your approach,
beached & stunned

rosin, palms, coconut husks, hurricane
soughoff: borrow me
a dotted line

thwit thwit

think of your prose as muscular & your poems
as broken bones & blood; there isn't any skin

because no one can trust what it does
alternatively, the wind

blows open the door, the house howls
open your mouth & freeze with the night that rushes in

or sing so hard it pushes the outside
back outside. but don't shut
the door. you'll never forgive yourself.

tied up migrating

will flick off chips of your bones
point white, or they'd crumble anyway

rain over us, we'll believe it's the sky

be tough, passerine
write your own obituary

seeds fall away beneath
their feet

keep reading, driftwood

DESCRIPTION WHERE IT WASN'T

The small hand, the large hand
everything wrong, yellowish
longsleeve shirt with three buttons, wind
born off the side of the hospital
a man in athletic shorts before the setting sun,
even the biological heart.

That there can be wrong
that it is there, here,
for us, to be in, inside
the sneaker it is dark. You and I
drawn from the same
drone of air. The swans

behind this man, in swan before the same sun.
A black mother in beige pants and leather sandals
her child on her shoulders
in small red overalls, the sun
setting behind the two.

Held by a muscle in the air—it's a penny
small century
part in a row.
The penny surrounds the world
like something learned
by example
to make everything a sail
blown from the life
in a skull
as the final color.
Wool on wool you are not
love where love you appear
an odor

hair on the stone
patio.

It was just something that happened today.
The fawn rose like slow scaffolding
for nothing to see it, nothing will ever
see it.

Thing will happen tomorrow.
When I'm finally shown my body
I can hold my mind

I can pick up a cardboard box
I thought was heavy, but is full
of air. The green glass
packed away
it's like the brain
migrates across the mind
the harder things.

Pass hand over hand
to conjure a coin
like fucking blood—power
to make right
all the way down, rain,
I can't judge it—the ways

I can
illustrate what happened
but can't form an expository analysis. I can
hold up a slice of watermelon
so thin
that I can see
the slate roof of the neighbor's house through it.
A woman through a cigarette
and a bag of groceries. The air
underneath the foot
who thought a step was there
all the way through sex
via the stone
on the universal ground.

A dried sea horse
in a bouquet
of chalky shells
on a white shelf
above the clear water
of a stopped sink.

It was forever
because it killed itself it is
elusive. Colors all night the rain
hung off an eave
to see an ending
that had no subject.
I didn't want to go, I just wanted to care
for different things. Red and gray, your head
is scarred, your brain is gone, the gold is here,
only motion, ever metaphor.

You remember the sun?
You smell it on the dirt and loose pine needles.
You were born again
off the breeze
of a person walking by. You held your breath
so you couldn't smell them
and take them in.
You are a person
on a bike path
in a watercolor
rendering of a proposal
for a planned community.
Outlined in black ink, a pale blue
pushed on a drop of water.
The drop sits in a nook
on the rough paper
keeps the small epic, "Hey, it's me." You wore
a day of your life necklace.

VICTORIA CHANG

**[I USED TO MY FATHER USED TO I USED TO SIT
IN A LIVING ROOM WITH MY]**

I used to my father used to I used to sit in a living room with my
mother's thousand miniature teapots used to talk to my father about

used to talk about letters AAPL GOOG YHOO what do they look
like to him now what does he see goo goo gaga ooh ooh ah ah I ask him

what his password is he says *Gmail* he says mail is in the box he says
www.gmail.com I ask for the password he says *www.gmail.com*
he looks it up

looks up his brain looks up he wonders what a password is letters
numbers dumbbells lumber something he needs something he needs
to get into

something he used to be free he used to need used to want more of some
secret he used to need to know what he has what he had I need a
password

into a past into a pasture into my father into his brain I used to speak
to my father my father used to speak I used to speak used to speak up

MAXINE CHERNOFF

ROAD

The muse of forgetfulness meets the muse of forgetting on an afternoon road. They wander together until a lamp intervenes, and the scene is erased.

Late December's dimness lifts the green toward sky's smooth paper. The world is a camera. Words tie you to sparrows fence-colored in gardens of nothing past its season. Evening is a charm, its gold-threaded ending lost in the story.

MAXINE CHERNOFF

NOCTURNAL

Time and its "It was."

—Heidegger

You are not alone in the catalogue, you with your hourglass and omens, your presumptions and solos. You are a catacomb, black letters on dark stone, a series of hereafters punctuated by night's late pillow.

Another you waits like a pair of shoes on a staircase. Nothing wears its history darker than a purse of midnight, winter's hedge, astronomy's fictions. Orbit unknown, principles tossed by gravity, you are your own island, your own Egypt, speckled egg in a nest of gray feathers. Eyes attuned to life's curses and wax, its devotions and triptychs of blame. Glass stained and ripened by moonlight inscribed as thus, 'a pearly veil welcomes you, traveler.'

ADAM DAY

CONDENSATION CUBE

After David Alworth's "Bombsite Specificity"

The best way to visit Kelvedon Hatch bomb shelter
is in the new Alfa-Romeo;
with its four-wheel disc brakes, luxurious interior
and road-holding ability, it's safe,

fast and pleasant to drive. Just follow the sign: "Secret
Nuclear Bunker." Sixties-era
mannequins in Burberry with moving legs
and breasts, loitering

in corridors. A skinny husband in the craw of a cold bed
with a snore like a toothache. Tranquil
tensions escalated. With striptease the décor is always
more important than the person

disrobing. Whatever chaos reigns above—fallow fields
the ponds cowering—life underground
is snappy, ordered, austere. A zone of leisure. How war
can be productive; constellating

Nixon in the kitchen, celebrating appliances
and amenities. Baked beans,
tomato juice, Nescafé, a rational level of dread. Outside,
night's cold, object's cold; no different

from a church. Condensation on Plexiglas. Descending
from a slope of debris, children swarm
the ruins. False-feathered cardinals for floral arrangements,
pressed & colored glassware, garden tools.

Typhoid from seashells cleaned improperly. How stupid
and forgettable adults are. To conceive
of the world as a target. Like a cantilevered goldfish. To vie
for spots in the only shelter

in the neighborhood. Nowhere else to go but another part
of the airplane. To photograph ourselves
as humans; to see ourselves as bullets and bombs see us.
Children embroidered in a rug

like musical instruments abandoned in a field. Seeing all
the different moments, the way we can look
at a stretch of the Rocky Mountains; like soldiers looting
a clock factory. Participant-observers;

innocent nobodies. The incompleteness of the past;
the ongoingness
of history. Dogs eating grass beneath the dripping
trees; the smell of a white dress

rained on. It is a country which you can imagine, for it is
pretty like a picture, as it lies there
amidst its landscape, like an artisanal snow globe,
which it owns.

402ND THING I FOUND

We elaborated the stunning details for what doesn't and. We believed in the believing not the believed things, and. And the despoiled thicket. And the double intoxication. And the big wobble. And the deliria administered phantasms. And the peephole bigger than all the people. I let a shaved hairless rabbit loose in the retro-perspective. I knew everyone wanted an excuse to scream all the unbearable cuteness. All the daily hopping around hope. I tried to be a good read. I tried to throw thrown parties so I could be invited to stay and submit. To not be brought up to date. To not wend. To no you. To know how you get your heart to fit into such small tanning beds, I don't know. It burns me up. I don't know how to squeeze back into a seed. I don't know how to sphere no inside bulk. I'm sorry if my snail has no shell now. I had to leave some things behind. I'm sorry I only used the left side of my brain when we touched.

449TH THING I FOUND

- a) This poem is about a weekend. It's called: About a weekend.

About a weekend.

- b) On their way to a more spongy universe they fell in love. It was a good thing the universe was spongy.

- c) He was the kind of guy that played a world wool bag pipe, but couldn't see the water in the ice.

She was the kind of girl that played the earth is blue like an orange.

They fell in love forever and red, etc.

- 1D) I learn id this from the past tense you irregularly pronounce around me.

I hide id a word in a poem.

They builded a house.

We showid the pictures

to each other.

You run id away first

underneath.

- 2D) She had feelings for him the same weight as air. Things didn't go anywere.

- e) He had feelings for her the same weight as air. Things didn't go any.
- f) The center of her storm was such a breeze.
- g) She did her vortex dancing sitting down. Her zippers have buttons. His questions have fuzz, rub bug leg insect sounds past insect sounds saying luv luv luv. His eyes boat paddle. Please cover everything up. Even the tip of the little finger. Even the eyes lashing out. Even the dead ends. Everything turns him on and it's not just because the earth is rotating beneath him.

h) He breathed

Her thermals

They floated away

i) No. Screw that denture gummed dream, that sandboxed coast line cost. In reality, they were hit in the head by the world over and over. And the rubber mallet was metal and mental. There was not a head rest to be scored. So the two of them sent standing waves through sitting full stadiums fully intending to say good bye for good. But only two people did the standing wave. And the standing wave took too long to get around the stadium. And everyone around them including the physicists who should know better about waves, including themselves, who were hopefuls, took the standing wave for a trip to the concessions and forgot.

j) for 365 days again or so

We practiced chairs. So we chaired. We practiced the floors. Practiced the boards. Practiced the floor boards. Being floored. I practiced in vents. Practiced the sky inside. Practiced the sky through the windows, so I windowed. So we silled. I practiced wheelbarrows inside. I wheelbarrowed. We wheelbarrowed. We red wheelbarrowed. And when our wheelbarrows broke, we borrowed other wheelbarrows. We stole wheelbarrows. We would do anything for another

wheelbarrow, including oops, including winked codicils, including string, including heart, including excluding heart. We were trees on trees, liquids held by slower liquids, flows holding faster flows. So we also eked, but we also honeyed. We honeyed backwards. We honeyed on our heads. We honeyed hand standed. We honeyed horizons mapped over the tongued tundra, under the understory, over the unflat landed depressions. We honeyed curvy futures. We book stared and started, so we booked, we snared and book spined. I loved book spinning with you. Running our fingers up and down all the spines and making up sounds to fit fingers. We could do this without ever being done, without ever being afraid we would run out of spines. I loved how we picked other things around us and made up sounds, traced the shape of doors open while making buzzing sounds, followed the places where walls meet walls and drapes pleat, like I'll do right now to practice for the next time I see you because I know you will come back:

(Add: Please try this now. Pick a thing around you. Trace that thing with your finger making race car sounds, or other sounds. Now that you have done this, you are no closer to enlightenment, but something better than enlightenment, something real, a sound thing you can use, like a restored battlement, like a lintel, like a head rest collection, like invasion artifact practice, like a luxury spinneret, like a hurray.)

- k) We were listening closely to the things that don't exist, but we not exactly nothing. They toyed with us and our ready make juicers. Tranced us red. Between us, we kept these things endlessly feed. It was in this way we knew the fairytale juicer would always be ready to juice. It is in this way that we knew we would strike our own little juice jackpots, empty out the sloughed juice jackpot chambers, slot pocket the febrile world, step over the cliff and hang there still, accept the thought as the thing reals.
- l) I didn't realize I was talking to a horse till it was too late. There was only one second left to nay.

609TH THING I FOUND

In the air, the air. In here, the ear. Another
foldable ladder for finding peepholes. In the hunger
hour I hung out. But I don't
know where I left my spare rigging.
Every boat is a rudder in the fleet, someone forgot
to say. Such strange things afloat today. Today
I don't recognize the boats. So let's peephole together. Let's not
say I all day. Let's say my I has you inside. Let's look
inside each other's interior dwellings and get licked.
Let's take walks backwards to face the ones approaching,
see the ones disappearing, think about all
the places our hands have been. Call those places prayers.
Pray and pray and pray. And wonder. Did we transcend
or was I merely forgotten? If we live
in a valley does that mean we live in a depression?
All the times I've lobbed unlanded looks. The same
fire is different in a drier field fired. And in a dryer.
The last time I didn't look I did.

SARA GELSTON

THE MIRACLES OF GRAND PELLUM ISLAND

The lame horse who took on the fence, then the river.

The neighbor's crop of pearl onions grown from rocks.

The thirsty boy given a forked branch.

A dowser for a son, his mother said.

Most things arranged being called destined.

There being one tree left on all the island.

That the goats could not help but eat the rest,

resisting the one and its sour bark.

That the mother called *not past the stonewall* so the boy never was.

His belief that all houses had eyes.

How he spied his mother naked and did not speak for a month.

His mother's nipples becoming his pupils.

His mother's ass the moon through his window.

The sea now lit just past the stonewall.

How he dropped his branch, opened the horse's gate on his way.

How he did not have the word for *sea*, so said *this is it*.

His voice found with a fist plunged in the surf.

SARA GELSTON

A FIELD SONATA

After John Cage

Thirty copperheads still in the sun. We walked slowly
backwards. The silence of their heads. Darting eyes.

The body's signs, clear. Our feet on the heads
of mushrooms. The sound of their names. *Amanita.*

Periculum. How to know the one that will kill you
from the one that won't. Color and texture.

Black and smooth. Obsidian. The chords of their roots
releasing. Sonata. How the best things are found
in the worst places. How the worst things are found
with the toe of your shoe. Look for good ground. Dirt.

Heads that smell like anise. Bright colors.

When you find one with a pleasant flavor, spit. No.

Hold it on the tip of the tongue. The taste of chance.

Its silence.

ENDI BOGUE HARTIGAN

IT WAS A CHURCH THEN

It was a church then it was a barn with church windows
then it was a photograph of a church-turned-barn.

It was a photograph of the church-turned-barn
no longer standing and the standing
of the boy who just woke beside the photo.

It was a day then it was a church.
A boy wakes and feeds his golden fish.

It was a barn then it was a boy imagining barns.

I was standing in the barn which was a church
which was myself within a golden fish.

I woke then fed the boy.

It was a photograph of ghost towns then it was the ghost of the
fish in the sand of waking.

We played “ghost fish” by empty ponds.

It was a church then it was the ghost of the heat of the church.

A barn is warmer than I am.
The fish are the temperature of a church.

It was a boy with boy windows then it was a year with church-
windows.

The whole building fell and had to swim its beams like ghosts.
It was a church then it was the fear of not having a church,
so it was the building of the church, the feeding of the fish.

No it was a barn.

THE VOWELS FEEL LIKE SUNRAYS . . .

The vowels feel
like sunrays, or
complaint, the
consonants like
buttons.

The larynx
can't decide on actual
larks or towns or
heartaches, physical
sounds are physical
songs or yelps or cries.

Babies suddenly are
everywhere around
all coo and cry
and eyes that spill expanse.

The baby's larynx
can't decide whether
to laugh or fuss,
she's at the cusp
but looks at auntie.

I dreamed the ocean
white-cap pocked
in which I feared
my son would swim.

I dreamed the ocean
then I said it.

The larynx can't decide
whether the language
of larks
has wrung out pain the
brain is like this too.

The vowels feel
like babies coughing,
consonants
like whitecaps.

If you can sing your
way forth you
can unsing it too.

I loved even the cries of
the baby her voice
half formed having
cried in h's and u's.

Ocean suddenly say
man-of-war or forward
or new.

THINGS WHERE THINGS ARE NOT

There is a slight confusion: a man you've never seen
entering a neighbor's window. His beard
is well trimmed and conceals
none of the smile he offers. Says,
"It's all right I live here."
A rush of wind in the trees.
"Okay—" you say before you think
how clever you may be, retreating
to your kitchen to dip a finger in the rotary phone.
The brain is like this: silk pushing silk
across a calquey obstruction.
The police are nimble and austere.
You tally birds on a wire, search the faces
for cahoots or for filaments of praise,
but the round impatient eyes weigh nothing
in the nothing where the man had been
and the window's locked they say, and a turn occurs
in the question's direction. And a turn occurs
in the worm within you that the officers sound
with the cocked heads of robins. Your palms
sweat newsprint, your breath
quickness with scenarios.
The clever must be made small
if embarrassment is to be averted,
if a man is to pry a window out
and rummage among the needles and trinkets
that decorate a stranger, and stranger now
the neighbors gather and the trees are still.
So you conjure over houses a dark
and immaculate mass, a bowling ball
bowling toward you, cosmic, indubitable,
and you roll the ball right up to the crisis
and silence each of three officers
with each of three holes.

IN THE BELLY OF THE BEAST

Truth is, the pursuit of it also involved much standing around. The thing about

happiness is that it's optional, so let's give us a standing ovation for being here.

But if you take away the windy quality of wind what remains? The weather is something

to talk about, as are recent developments in cloud computing. Security, it seems,

will always be an issue, because the moment you feel secure you have obsolesced.

Keep standing. The trick to evolution is to stand still on one leg and concentrate.

JOAN NAVIYUK KANE

RETE MIRABILE

After Katexac

A large many-storied institution looming always,
gabled trinity of windows jut from its thin skull.

Ribs of the skin boats, visible—not their doubleseamed stitches,
pulled taut without piercing through the walrus hides.

The men have retrieved a bowhead dead or killed it outright.
None of their faces ever fully legible.

It takes a pair to hoist the tail,
another three grapple with a fin (pectoral).

*

The distinction between the ocean's blue & the whale's blue
a matter of shades. The rocks that form the foundation of the
undiminishable church echo the repetition of the rows of baleen
in the whale's mouth.

*

Limb and fissure,
plywood and driftwood, gouged withal—

Brayer to bone and back again.

*

The danger of breaking ice,
the boat's keel.
Far off she had harvested the stalk
long before its bloom.

*

On the strand between the buildings and the water's edge, a man and woman. Perhaps a priest. Perhaps an elder. Perhaps a printmaker. Perhaps one without allies. The man wears a collared shirt in large plaid, trousers, and an eight-panel cap; his garments differ from the white hunting parka of a man in his prime. He is carrying a bucket. The woman could be old or young. Her hair is covered with a scarf folded triangularly; she wears an *atikluk*. Both are walking away, upslope.

*

The lines are thick and distinct
 except when shapes and their suggestions

smudge with imprecision, incomplete
 either by chance of production or design.

*

The only human figure whose hands are empty is the woman, mid-stride. She is the wife of one of the hunters and the beloved (former?) of another. Of course this woman's hands hold no implements.

*

A pile of rock holds the land securely from the sea—
 a terminus, a vantage, a venture.

A rope twined below a prominent cliff. Here
 we must sing before we continue.

L. S. KLATT

ST. LOUIS

Thus grew the aftermath where so-and-so
had a feeling of if. The white crow had been befogged

as it ate out the eyes of a possum, &, while the woodpeckers
were whacking away at elm trees, roadside, it went on asking itself

what it now knew. The crow was a constant thing
in a brownfield puddled with standing water. And one might

rhapsodize, as spring carried on, of the whiteness
losing its novelty. So-and-so could have spent a lifetime

descriing what might have been. So-and-so could have been
a huckleberry looking west of Mizzou.

L. S. KLATT

THE SPANIARDS

Absent-minded & unapproachable, I walk
in the tilled field. I am not, in fact, here;
I am only anticipating the Catalan farm
& a lane of carob trees. A butterfly wing
produces a shock, as does a sardine tin
& the unattainable sea that is at eye-level.
I listen for the dialogue of insects
& the whimper of a rabbit that is held
by the ears by a peasant woman. She is nude
except for her cyclopean hips, which are true
& false the way the bone of the moon is not yet
blue, not yet superlative. What makes the scene
real is the mule-drawn cart that disappears
in a cloud of dust, just as turpentine
erases forkfuls of sunshine from my mouth.

BENEATH SKIN

For Tracy

For the woman behind me
warming towels to drape over Ares,
it's still hard to say, months later,
what was in her that would not pass.

Why she continued to sway
her breath over the skin of Ares;

revive if she could the spirit of war lost
from his body. This life she's trying to save

with electrolytes, heat lamp, towels—

I can't explain what's beneath every animal.

I will say there was a heart,
not his own, beating ferociously as God
intended for every heart. I say that

beneath skin, a ghost, a bear
was whispering. Only
one could hear. It was not me.

At the sink I stood scouring feces off dishes
and sponging dried formula off syringes—hearing
her tears leave her eyes and enter again
through her mouth. Forced the thought
that an animal would live
off a clean plastic bowl.

JAMES HENRY KNIPPEN

SCUTELLARIA

*Winner of the 2012 AWP Intro Journals Project
selected by Susan Grimm*

Black garden pumice
composes the wall
from which flowers spill
and stems swell.
Pumice jingles if it falls.
Petals: little wings seen through
the translucence of a dragonfly's
own and confused
with those of the monarchs
inaudibly humming
between pink trumpets
and golden lantana.
There was a song worth singing,
scutellaria, a secret aria
to snare, somewhere
among the molten
color: purple cone, snap-
dragon, a hedge of stone
catching light from the one
perennial star.
They would call me a lesser singer
for knowing its bushels
by solely the letters
on the white card calling
from the xeriscape's ledge.
But I wondered who wrote
such music and thought
I would someday like to meet him
or her, as the cypress's trunk shed
sequins, which we forget
was once the most lovely word for coins.

ALEX LEMON

MISERICORDIA

Maybe it is wonderful—

How slow every life

How every slow life

Shudders forward

Every life a slow
Motion

Mistake—

Of photographs, stills
From an ashy film—

It's hard to tell

The good things
From the bad

The masks they share
Clothes, they are

The same nostalgia

Nothing & needfaced

ALEX LEMON

SLOW CLOUD

A gathering bang
Spreads purple-
Lipped across dawn—

So unseam me,
Bewonder

The black forest sings
A wooden bowl spilling
Thickly over

Steam from
Our tricked-out
Holes

All low down
Like nothing sweet
Will ever touch you

Emberlight in the drooping
Shadows of live oaks

Dead deer are waking
Up all around me

ALEX LEMON

PEELERS

It's always neon in
The skinner

Box, amateur hour
On this planet of ass-slappers

Us doomclusters
Pray to be rotten
With fish-bellied tricks

But we're dog-skulled. All heart-
Worm & bleeding

Gums. How much for
You to crawl

Inside & wear me around
Like a suit
Of armor, a summer dress
Splayed

In this cataract of darkness
Our grins glow
The slow back

SARA RENEE MARSHALL

FROM "THE LANDSCAPES WERE IN MY ARMS"

Propped like a baby, borne
like a parcel? Avowed, adopted,
clutched like facts? Rendered
like a voice on the telephone? No.

Like a haunt roils. Rote dance
lopped from measure. Like fog,
a roving mask, estranges heads
from roots. Kneeling on raw cotton

duck you loosed blue from
chronicle. When the surface answered,
you dragged the sea for a leg of iris,
pitched fern-ragged mountains.

*

What's spelled out hides
what isn't: calamitous dances
play the rustlight Venus
figures—bold enough to strong-arm
seas, the mouth one visible caldera's
outburst now misremembered now
boxed with its sulfuric dress.
Ash rain on her shoulders

gleams a lightning field staid
in a neat body. Snuff

the event; make it sound plain
disastrous, any other language.

ANOTHER PASTORAL A

Slice of fruit and coffeecigarette slice of
flower founder on his way to the underworld
who wanted to touch mist.

Sis, the skin is not opaque says Ficino
so the fire in the hearth is a window.
I try to hear you singing.

Grass between the thumbs and holes
in the skies vellum we get not,
but the pieces make sense,

enough sense to begin, so your face
in the window lights this corner of the bed,
and there I lay out the pieces.

Tonight a storm all over the roof,
tomorrow twig and eddy devastation,
how is this not the entire universe?

We must not know for sure.

To follow the song far enough, foolishly enough,
backward, we are inclined, because of joy.
Because joy's mother is so controlling.

Gully ways and speeds, creases in
the organism, which is a hill of purgatory
or the pit.

The corners gnawed when there was a puppy.
The joint between shoulder and head extending,
so an ear might be leant, or curious for a dint of breeze.

The enormously bolted cinder.
Terrific arch over little screens
we make of our deep brushes with joy.

EMILIA PHILLIPS

YOUTUBE: DOG EATING A HUMAN LEG ON THE GANGES

Uploaded January 2010

—& who would
around the rock
fat, slack-lining
in the sun burning
camera
who begins
or to me, & the dog
the voice, & I
you approached
afraid or change
you wrap your
its neck & burrow
the sweet-sick
it breathe a soul
conception—

stop it? water heals
on which it tears
muscle, skin, & dries
white eye into
phone held by a man
talking to others
turns, hearing
know then if
it would not be
even for the moment
arms around
your nose into
fur, kiss, & unto
of your own

DANIEL POPPICK

EMPIRE

She's clear as a hammer. I don't want to be a chimney.
She has a sphinx inside her television. I ate a battery
And remain a cave of winter. She receives oxygen as advice.
I don't read the newspapers. She glows like a dictionary
In a sea of wallets. I'm a pendulum. A pendulum.
She's stitched to an architecture that magnetizes
Ice. I have a father who asks me of her.
She has a clock that asks me of fathers. My plan of attack
Hinges on volume. Hers activates our window glass.
The sky runs like a nosebleed. We bind it in blue gauze.

MATT REECK

AFTERWARDS

For Jane

the simple way the beach has
 of breaking the waves into
 sections here
where the plovers
have their beach & there
where the sails snap taut
 in the wind

 the simple way
love has of making
things right
 a breakfast has of lingering
 when company is good
light has in the night
when the night is prone to black

 the simple way of
watching the platform's edge as the train
comes in of thinking about
 the construction of citadels
in bygone
eras of what the artist
 said *some people really think*

they're better than others
 the simple way
 that thinking has
of coming back to you
when you think of
 thinking as
 what you

want to do
the simple way of
raspberries of walking back
from the theater
when the movie was bad
& you have someone
to talk to

FROM "WE: A PASSIVITY"

—

I am the By-Thyme. I am seen here, making it. Or it is me. The presences are repeated.

I think it is writing. I think it is out and up and beside. Whatever is growing is near, my own eardrums, my very eardrums, my ability to resort to assurances. My ability to look through the colored glass, talking and talking over the real talking. How do you manage to kiss that figurine every day? Do you travel and kiss or do you leave your kissing for later, when you're travelling, the best idea is the best idea is the best you can think of.

MotionX is calculating your route. If you stop, mitigate plain speaking, harness ocular pump, you didn't need a pair of new shoes, you didn't need words. Dickinson turns to fiction. We make that comprehensible for everyone else. You're reprehensible. All this crazy talk. Escape so that the intersection is everywhere, trains breaking down, trains breaking up, backpacks so heavy, she recalculates the route as a Coroner. I think it's funny but no doubt hear the humming.

What is it about the live feed you don't want to hear? If the taxing ability is looking at you, what do you run in? The sound? No, the preposition. No, no, no, the way forward. The speaking way forward. The extrapolated interest in syllable after syllable, falling on your face fabricating. Fabricating when the mobility appears. The Coroner hums like a bee.

I know I have only begun to be somewhere. Only begun to release my own words. It is this work that has put me here. It is this going back to the margins, going back, reversing. What can you mean in that referentiality? Because it *is* reference.

Structure should not be falling and falling, but it is. This is where it lifts its heavy heft and points back to what's crumbling. You are the way we have been rolling in. You claim the smoke is complete. Didn't we fit it together, how much was ahead of us?

This energy prevented the two sides of itself, it wanted for instance (a) school, entitled Standard Living School, entitled "lift me up" when you renovate, and then (b) nothing else, because it's too complicated, because it's using the word "light."

This energy will have to be trained. It's repeatedly outfoxed. It's going to reach the whole handle because of its repeated why. What am I saying? What I wanted in fiction? What's going to settle this?

A form, of art, wishy-washy is the right word. Morning and it feels like the only word. I take *my* project and I put it away. The dictionary is all colors of red, finally we know how to use it. Why do you say that book was only a pointing into?

I have been heartened by the rotation effect. Now I'm sure I don't want to proceed. I'm taking the sublime and gallivanting it around. That's not fair. That's not turning anyone on. It's a constant, that feral child, that complexity, emerging from the woods bespattered.

—

Believe these words. Not from day to day but in another way. The great mother. First at the vat. I want to be clear where my interest is. I'd give anything to talk about concretions, to go into the day with a goal.

But the sound makes its slide. But it's many a lay, when you think about it. When you're the first person in nature to have a hint. This could be where you come in, what you are meant to do. This is what you're here for. What you've been following.

The burden rolls its pall over the concluding sections. We could have been here all day. I keep pushing but it's relatively over. There's a critique in the quotient. Did the book fail?

Did it unfold a zero point? The instructions were to characterize the "Bee" and the "I." Nobody much did it. Mouths made voices then they went in. Mouths went under where they hit up oil. What else is one happy of?

Don't redundantly expose yourself. Here's the way you understand what you're doing. Here's the way you can't know. If this thing you can't know is what you do know. A Bore. With such a luxury of boredom how do you withstand something?

TOMAŽ ŠALAMUN

**ALPINIST! ARE WE ON CHAIRS?
DO WE HAVE STINGING KNEES?**

Translated from the Slovenian by Michael Thomas Taren and the author

When our concert was at the peak, I
collapsed in the pool. Nude and

naked and white and awesome. I was
strangling my friend. He was nude

and naked and white and awesome. We were
both Swedes from Hvar. Kids put their

hands in the air. I wanted a red breezer. My
buddy wanted a red breezer too. The

vocalist had a cat mask on his head. My
bone had been healing. The third one

collapsed in the pool. Without a friend.
He had smooth skin. Firs seemed

black because light came from behind. All
three of us were smooth and sweet.

TOMAŽ ŠALAMUN

DIAGHILEV

Translated from the Slovenian by Michael Thomas Taren and the author

God's grease lies in a silent coffer.
This time he's shaped

as a whining mare. *Schluss!* Sometimes
she's open, sometimes she's shut.

She's yellow and she smears. Once
a coffer, once a grease. Once

in a pepita dress, irrevocably. New waters
flow in. Then, how we can call

the skeins of old water? Cultures do not
cross. Each one has its own hook

to button the cloak. Bulbs, tiaras
hiss and if I wanted to cross

the canal, I shoed it. I stuck myself
with posters and rode away.

SIOBHÁN SCARRY

ATTEMPTS AT DIVINATION

Preparations for the unknown, shapes of buildings you've only dreamt, plants that will begin nameless. Even Lena's cards can't account for these forced turns, say nothing of camel, spoonbill, Urfa ibis. Forget these twisted black vines, mustard blooms between. In the old alchemies, *the whole earth is a booke . . . in which the pages are turned with our feet, which must be used pilgrimly*. If only we could read the marks our walking makes, words scraped onto the slow backs of turtles. How surely it moves beneath us, scriptura continuum, our illegible lives.

SIOBHÁN SCARRY

NORTH TRIPTYCH

After Rothko

To forgo the naming of things. To no longer reach after the horizon. Into the black that shines and all that can not be pushed from the final spaces. What presses in until the wavering becomes a singular altar of your own throat. The martin's inward song.

*

Waveforms of gray and the purpled stain of communions that would not take.

*

Imperfect light but light.

FROZEN TRACKS

laying down into
spring's light syrup
the uncreaking ice
between tides sighs

stirs up the wind
in the spruce & pine
over benches I walk
back and forth on

solid meets vapor
with no tongue
but scratchings
under skies whose

depth two jets
cross measuring
light deceptive air
hard as the snow

where I make tracks
pacings to and fro
up and down in
the long shadow

inside the human
this wind be stiff
holy as the forest
with no name who

calls out, this sun
won't return what
you hold is that
what you forgot?

JONATHAN SKINNER

WINTER

or between unreversed branches
willow grass spears the wind

daily means in the sunlight
peeling acorns with your hands

wind speaks unconventional
barks and plants and wings sing

the continual thought of the sea
clearing its throat like an old man

went into the beating heart
driving up and down the valley

blossoms mistaken about the spring
brother raven says I am done

CHAD SWEENEY

FROM "AFTER"

For Everett John Sweeney (1945–2010)

Is this memory
I am watching

A girl in red

Wool leads the sheep a long
Line of them over snow

And they follow her small as
She is is

This my country the
Bones inside the animals an

Empty larger the
Falling of

The falling of the snow

*

They don't know it's over
For a while

I've seen them in museums
In circles the public

Fountains
They follow someone a few

Steps is he mine am I that
Until no one it's

Quiet they float up
To hang

Their feet in magnolias
All ripple and thinly

Until they are many
Feet in many trees the slowing

Of light
Is a new kind of everywhere body

*

See me I almost shout

Or I do shout I must be

Like green day stars a few

Washed out in the low
Heaven

I am the heaven

That touches
To shoes the steps and

White lamps still lit
At noon

I enter the museum to
Fill square spaces of paint

With my absence

*

And there are too many moons
Each of us

Through prisms
Echo the brightly

Against columns the columns

A bodiless animal
Eating the air

Above tracks
Where no train is

Little million

Doors and darkly
From here the future

Looks like many attempts to ask

JOHN TAGGART

RUA DO PARDIEIRO/MONSANTO

This is where the birds the martins
take off

from these rooftops

and one thinks of hope the human hope for
return and reunion the migration and transmigration of souls

a fragile and enduring hope as enduring
as the granite of the steps and streets
of Monsanto

think well of the birds for as they depart so also
do they return pecking at windows

bird souls announcing spring and hope not unfulfilled.

MISSING

Like Carnival screams, the two o'clock train
rends the blue night in half since you've gone to Brazil.

Minas Gerais, Maranhao, Curitiba, Contagem—
my litany of sorrows since you've gone to Brazil.

The grass is a woman's unpinned hair. *Bom Dia*,
cry the zinnias, since you've gone to Brazil.

The dishwasher rattles, the neighbors complain. The radio
stammers like Amazon rain since you've gone to Brazil.

Could *Sonnets from the Portuguese* cool this burning
on my tongue since you've gone to Brazil?

Squirrels nest in the lilac where your hedger
hasn't sputtered since you've gone to Brazil.

I've baked enough bread to scatter to the crows.
I've knit you an ocean since you've gone to Brazil.

THIS WORLD IS ONLY GOING TO BREAK YOUR HEART

Space has been shut off for summer, etc.
In the last shuttle launched,
I am told to love a piece of earth. Then metal.
Then the optics behind the things I hold
in my hand.

I am told: be simple. Only love
what you can bear to break in half.

Evenings I spar with a giant insect
that while I fall asleep wants to comb my hair.
Into the ear on the floor it croons,

You are the most delicious industrial revolution.

Paintings I have pilfered adhere to the ceiling,
so that when I feel like walking
I walk under ponds with lily pads like drowned hats,
all the eyes I can't see hidden above them now, about to burst.

I don't often feel like walking,
having heard the announcement
that I am stuck out here with Decisions To Make.
What graffiti will be unbirthed.

Which hills will turn white with bones. Pathogens.

When I flinch
into an unimpressive sleep, I will dislodge some
unimpressive planet with a terrain that shakes
under a red sky like a syphilitic man. A man
with the feet of a goat. I try not to sleep.

There is day,
then there is later day.

When an equation prints out
onto my tongue, I do my best to solve it.
Sure, there are things that I miss.

Tornadoes.
The idea of brothers. Distinguished dogs with cauldrons
of summer saliva.

Once, I even felt holy.
It was at the throes of an orange tree.
I could have been stoned to death and still would have sung out
Tongue! Barren tongue!

There were ghosts up here. But they were shut off
long ago, when I tried to put my arms around them
and was told I'd have to choose between
the slaughterhouse and the morgue.

I retaliated with apathy. I cut off my ears.

JOSEPH WOOD

FROM "THE VYVANSE TRIOLETS"

III.

Tics. Tourette's. Imploded arteries. Heart valve could erode. Mostly, a five second silence, a swarm of sand blown inside the skull. Sniper mime: senses explode: *tick* of the tourists' arteries, the boardwalk wood could not parade its whirls more. Coked or killed, one loud boom, the sea invades. The white light above—land or lyre, tick or tourist, a vault is exploding—and cold, five senses silent. Mostly swimming, the eroded sand.

JOSEPH WOOD

FROM "THE VYVANSE TRIOLETS"

XLVIII.

The sand stays silent. Eroded or shoveled, heated or frosted—the tourists arrive. These pyramids flaunt blueprint and whip, brick and brick, feats of erosion. The shovel never stays. The sand heats and shifts. Misperceived, the bleached dunes seat nothing. *We* carry the water, lower a camel's lip. Silence never stays. *We* shovel, we ride. The heat arrives. The tourists froth. O these pyramids.

MOTH-EATEN TAPESTRY WITH CIGARETTE BURNS

Welcome to the latest, unedited edition printed on rag paper.

Inside a tunnel of the centrally located railway station and department store, two dogs argue over the contents of a nearby garbage dump. The first dog is an import from China, which he claims is irrefutable proof of the innate superiority of his gene pool stretching back to the plains of nutrient-rich, yellow earth. The other dog, which isn't a native of these parts and doesn't rightly know where he came from, disagrees, but can go no further with his argument, which causes him to feel intense shame for not possessing the terminology that would enable him to verbally rip apart the first dog's head, where his intellect supposedly resides. So began a larger quarrel that has been annexing surrounding hills and following meandering riverbeds right up to this day, the one that you are standing in, feet firmly planted in the mutilated earth, blue mud up to your knees.

The problem of survival in extreme conditions is a perennial predicament, which we, as poor practitioners of a lost art, have never fully addressed, preferring any means of deferral possible, including false advertising. This is our legacy. If the moon's ascendancy is a barometer of the possible achievements that lie in wait just around the next bend, then it is time to get this boat in the water. Once you are floating downstream or paddling upstream, pause and take notice of the grayest stars, as they are capable of guiding you to the outskirts of a town that will soon be flooded with all manner of detritus, which you might find to your liking—mackinaws, microphones and machetes. From there, you must make your way to a jewelry store that has flourished in a neighborhood that few residents have ever left, satisfied that every alarm they hear is false.

The first of the outer vestibules is likely to be quite cool, as the transition is crucial to your continued health. You will find the waiting room to your liking. Please relax in any chair that embraces you with dignity and enjoy the remains of your chocolate ice cream palace. Remember that all requests must be limited to twenty-four characters or less, with or without spaces.

I have been elected to inform you that it has been a long time since any of us thought that we needed further dusting. Surely there is nothing else that we can hide.

BOOK NOTES

The Greatest Show, by Michael Downs
Louisiana State University Press, 2012
reviewed by Jennifer Wisner Kelly

My father grew up in Hartford, Connecticut, in a working-class neighborhood of Irish, Slavic, and German immigrants. In July of 1944, when he was two and a half years old, the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus came to town. My grandmother planned to take him to the show on July 6th, but when the big day arrived, it was so hot that she decided to wait. Lucky her. The Big Top burned to the ground that day, killing more than 150 people, mostly women and children. This brush with tragedy became part of our family lore—the Near Miss. How might everyone’s lives have shifted if Grandma had gone to the circus? In his outstanding first book of fiction, *The Greatest Show*, Michael Downs pays homage to the people of Hartford who *did* go to the circus that day—both those who survived and those who didn’t. He follows reverberations of the tragedy through families, neighborhoods, the city of Hartford, and decades of time.

There are two strands of stories in *The Greatest Show*: those that follow Ania Liszak, a Polish immigrant, and her son, Teddy, who were badly burned in the fire; and those that follow Nick DiFiore, a boxer and family man whose sister was killed in the blaze. Both the Liszaks’ and DiFiores’ stories begin on that blistering July day in Hartford, but Downs takes them years into the future, exploring their lives at different stages and from different points of view. Read collectively, the stories give a kaleidoscopic perspective on Ania, Teddy, and Nick, each portrait richer and more nuanced for its multiple facets.

The opening story, “Ania,” introduces both a central character and the circus tragedy. Ania Liszak is beautiful, restless, heavy with resentment at having to work as a housemaid during the war, and disappointed in her choice of husband. She steals tickets to take her three-year-old son, Teddy, to the circus, only to have this minor sin be punished exponentially when fire erupts:

At that moment, a flash of orange appeared on the other side of the big top, then rose up the wall of the tent. Ania thought it must be part of the performance, it seemed such a miraculous thing. But the crowd fell quiet, and then a thunder rumbled from all around and someone yelled ‘Fire!’ and the thunder exploded, flames charging up and across the billowing roof of the tent, people rushing from the bleachers, knocking chairs underfoot. A trapeze artist jumped from his platform, and Ania watched him twist through air to the sudden ground.

Downs has the writing chops to handle a scene like this—the tent on fire, the confusion, the gore of burned flesh—and he doesn’t let us look away. It is an exacting description that conjures the tragedy in a visceral way. Yet Downs does not allow the horrors that he has so proficiently described to take over the soul of his story. “Ania” is not about the circus; it’s about, naturally enough, Ania Liszak. Ania’s brush with death and her and Teddy’s pain-filled recoveries are merely a focusing lens through which we watch the evolution of Ania’s troubled relationship with her husband. In Downs’s nimble hands, “Ania” is a complex and poignant exploration of the nature of marital love.

The linked structure of *The Greatest Show* allows Downs to convey the consequences of the circus fire over the course of a lifetime. And so we see Ania again several times in the future through the eyes of strangers and of her beloved son. In “Elephant,” a grown-up Teddy describes his mother this way: “Mama wanted not to be simple. She kept secrets. She spent afternoons alone in her sewing room with the door closed. . . . From her I learned that the redeeming currency of old pain is drama.” In another story (“Mrs. Liszak”), we learn that Ania became a town eccentric in her old age: “She had been burned in a famous fire years ago, people said. Now she did odd things like play hopscotch by herself or waltz without music on street corners.”

Downs uses this approach—showing us the same life at different points in time and from different perspectives—to examine Teddy’s life as well. We see him as a child adapting to his injuries, as a teenager disappointed in his father’s

faults, as a young man finding love, as a mature adult making sense of his physical and emotional scars, and as an old man fighting the inevitable. With each iteration, our sense of Teddy broadens and deepens. Downs's fractured storytelling gives more insight into these mild lives than a protracted narrative could have.

In the DiFiore stories, Downs explores the fragility of paternal love using the same multi-faceted narrative style. Take "Son of Captain America," in which Nick DiFiore's son, Franco, watches his best friend's father beat a dog. Nick sees it too, and the boxer in him feels compelled to confront the abuser. The man retaliates by killing the dog and leaving it in the street for the two boys to find. There is a split at this moment in Franco's self-perception: he becomes part superhero and part bully, just like his father. Downs draws a fine line between manly bravery and cowardly bravado by examining the fragility of the relationship between a devoted son and a good, if domineering, father. This story would be satisfying on its own, but later in the collection, in "Boxing Snowmen," Downs brings Nick DiFiore back, now old, as he impatiently awaits Franco's arrival for a birthday party. In the space between these two stories, the generational baton has been passed. Only by reading both of them do we experience the complexity and poignancy of a father-son relationship evolving over a lifetime.

Throughout his collection, Downs uses his keen sense of human dynamics to pinpoint moments in which a life shifts at its emotional core—at times triggered by catastrophic events, like the fire, at other times by only a quiet epiphany, such as when a woman accepts that the little boy she loves can never be hers ("Ellen at the End of Summer"); a man receives confirmation of an infidelity he long suspected, for which his marriage ended ("Ex-husband, Years Removed"); or a son realizes that the tall tales his father told him were, sadly, just what they always seemed: tales ("Elephant"). In each of these stories, the underlying facts don't change, but acceptance lands hard in the gut.

Downs's stories are invariably rich and mature. There is nothing rushed here. He savors his characters, descriptions, and details. He effortlessly inhabits the lives, over six de-

cedes, of Hartford’s citizens—its immigrants; its wealthy; its men, women, and children—and drills deep inside his characters’ thought processes, self-analyses, and epiphanies. Downs resists easy answers to complex human questions, but gives enough resolution in each story to satisfy. *The Greatest Show* gorgeously captures the sweep of ordinary lives made remarkable by a tragic twist of fate.

Cataclysm Baby, by Matt Bell

Mud Luscious Press, 2012

reviewed by Peter Kispert

Accessible, compelling, and imaginative, the twenty-six vignettes in Matt Bell’s novella *Cataclysm Baby* serve as portals into a mythic sense of fatherhood. Bell’s tales are comprehensive yet concise forays into worlds of boundless strangeness.

The stories that compose the novella exist as permutations, their breath carried from one to the next, though not through typically linear means. Their titles each contain three names—the first, for example, is “Abelard, Abraham, Absalom”—and move through the alphabet. Much of *Cataclysm Baby*’s genius and innovation can be found in its ability to navigate these permutations, raising tension without ever remaining within a single narrative. Bell takes care to orient readers to the unfamiliar territory of his worlds. Within a few sentences, each of these worlds blooms with bruise and nuance and sensation, contributing to the larger sense of a fully realized dystopia.

Many of the stories appear to fuse the mechanics of the fairy tale with a certain calculated dystopian anguish. The fathers, as they appear in the stories, are often tasked with immensely difficult, even dire, decisions. The opening of “Virgil, Virotte, Vitalis” serves as a prime example of these arduous trials:

Starting from the middle of the country, we follow the rumors, the talk that there are no more women, no more mothers or daughters, none remaining to bear our future forth except those afloat beyond the last lands of the west, collected aboard a ship, some tanker meant to carry them away, to keep them safe.

What I know, despite those rumors: There are no women left, except the one beside me, this daughter disguised as a son, who I must somehow see aboard that ship.

For these fathers the stakes are both immediate and incredibly high; each takes great pains to make decisions in their precarious and often violent circumstances. We are granted access to the hearts and minds of these fathers, characters whose true pain never fails to surface—all this in a few calculated pages. This sort of compression—of story, setting, and character—results in an undeniably distinct literary voice, a voice Bell has seasoned with lyricism and lamentation. The bent and splinter of language in these pages extends from structure to paragraph to sentence, framing these stories within a certain experimental vernacular.

The fierceness of Bell's language is matched only by his worlds' inhabitants, by the soot and murk of their existence. These tales of post-apocalyptic sacrifice—populated by uncertain suns and crematorium chimneys—ring of visceral urgency. Fathers risk losing what few connections they have left: daughters, sons, wives. But even these last vestiges of human connection often appear as dystopian figures: daughters with flippers and oily fur; enormous, plow-driving sons. The novella is madly *imaginative* in a bold and dark way that typically belies the term; the bleak worlds Bell creates are born from an imagination without softness. This imagination permeates structure, content, and language in ways few other works with similar stylistic aims manage to successfully accomplish. This can perhaps be best seen in “Kidd, Kier, Kimball”:

Another new rain falls, dumped from the complicated sky, its acid-heavy droplets pelting our shoulders as we run from awning to awning, from collapsing home porch to crumbling chapel steps. Along our way, we see every kind of bird upon the ground, all heavy with forgotten flying, and around them their mud-left eggs, as thin-walled as my wife's uterus, that tender space slung inside her unsteady body.

Though the prose is often highly detailed, one never comes upon moments where this imaginative energy obscures clarity or ease of reading. Instead, time is collapsed at just the right moments and expanded when necessary. Phrases like “forgotten flying” and “mud-left eggs” deliver a certain freshness to the prose. Readers are absorbed in great anticipation of what might come next, both in this language and in plot.

It is easy to recognize these stories as tremendously big-hearted illuminations of fatherhood in whatever imagined landscape it might exist. The sacrifices and compromises the fathers make in these bleak, post-apocalyptic circumstances illustrate the trials of fatherhood without regard to time, and in this way the novella transcends its dystopian placement. Each story is remarkable when read alone, but when fashioned into a novella, a sort of magic occurs. There is the distinct sense that though all is malformed and decaying, eclipsed by rubble, *Cataclysm Baby* still has its stories to tell, the pounding cadence of its characters’ hearts to be finally known.

The Book of What Stays, by James Crews
University of Nebraska Press, 2011
reviewed by Michael Martin Shea

The Book of What Stays, James Crews’s debut collection and winner of the 2010 Prairie Schooner Book Prize in poetry, is a narrative of coming to terms with one’s self, and despite the title, its focus is just as much on what gets left behind. For the poet, this development is rooted in the speaker’s growing acknowledgment of his own homosexuality, a thread that orients the overarching narrative: the collection progresses from the book’s first poems, which find the speaker exploring his sexuality in secret, hidden from his wife, to the final section’s unashamed examination of his new life with his partner. Along the way, Crews deftly navigates between what is kept and what is tossed aside, though not without remorse, as seen in “Looking Back,” in which the speaker imagines leaving his wife:

Didn’t Lot too, just once more, want not only to look

back, but also to return to the arms of his lost wife, that

metaphorical salt? Didn't he want one more kiss, one
last taste

to see him through the rest of that endless desert, now
alone?

It is this sense of longing for what cannot be that marks the best of Crews's poems, a fidelity to people and objects that are inherently transitory. Despite a pervading sense of fatalism, Crews attempts to cast honest shadows of reality in his work. In the book's first poem, "Palomino," he sets out a poetic manifesto: "I tried to remember / this was an actual body standing just inches / from mine. I didn't want to forget the way description / often does." This actuality of the body, not withered into mere description, gives Crews's poems their urgency, but what is remarkable about this collection is the cast of bodies that populate Crews's verse. While the majority of the poems focus on the speaker's own sexual awakening—his interactions with various men, guilty encounters with his wife, and final sense of fulfillment—Crews shows his versatility in adopting various other voices along the way, borrowing heavily from both classical myth—the collection features two Orpheus-themed poems—and European history, as in "Leonardo, Lovelorn in Santa Babila," which finds Leonardo da Vinci mired in his alleged relationship with Salai (though no longer merely alleged). Elsewhere, we find Crews adopting a didactic stance in his poems, as in "A Beginner's Guide to Ice Fishing," in which the journey of self-discovery is transposed onto a nameless *you*; nevertheless, we can hear the speaker's central struggle for identity in the lines:

The moment the line goes taut, pull and lift the
long pike—his body slick with metaphor—out of

the colorless depths he writhes to slide back into.

The crowning piece of the collection, however, is Crews's long poem "One Hundred Small Yellow Envelopes," which in twenty sections takes as its subject the Cuban artist Felix Gonzales-Torres, focusing not only on his work but also on the death of his partner due to AIDS. In this sequence of short poems

that occupies the middle section of the collection, Crews finds his perfect pitch, seamlessly working ekphrastic gestures into a deeply personal narrative that over and over cuts the reader to the bone. Moreover, throughout the entirety of the long poem, Crews avoids the temptation to sentimentalize, opting instead for the simple, well-wrought image, which gives the poems a haunting authenticity, as in the first poem of the sequence, “(Proof),” where Crews writes in the voice of Gonzales-Torres on finding his dead lover’s T-shirt:

Hold the t-shirt, imagine the man alone in bed after
 she’s gone, coming across the photo again. Because he
 knows the light—so white it can erase—will never fill
 the room the same, he takes out a pen and writes it. Put
 on your lover’s shirt—dust, stain, and all—and say it:
This is my proof.

From there, the sequence traces the history of the relationship, from a first meeting hilariously interspersed with lines from the pop song “Total Eclipse of the Heart” to the heart-breaking attempts to obscure reality, succinctly encapsulated in the two-line poem “(Perfect Lovers)”: “Our bodies moved like two ticking clocks: *I not sick, not sick, not sick—*.” And while lesser poets might attempt to dramatize the death, Crews instead opts for a single line—“He was gone.” For him, the focus isn’t the action so much as the grieving, the coming to grips with loss, the way we hold on until everything’s gone, and then keep holding. As the sequence ends, Crews turns to the image of the Virgin Mary in ascension to convey what happens to those of us who stay:

can you see them, Ross?—the apostles
 stood here on Earth reaching up, up, up
 as if they could touch her again.
 As we humans all—stunned—
 tend to do.

To witness all the gut-wrenching moments in this sequence alone would be worth the price of admission, but Crews’s book is not so top-heavy; throughout the collection, we find lines that are stirring in their beauty, as in “The Birds Have Not Yet Left

Chernobyl,” in which Crews writes of a woman who “sips her home-brewed vodka like silver / plucked from the underside of the moon.” In fact, if this debut has a fault, it would be Crews’s occasional tendency to overwrite, as some of his poems seem to get lost in their own language and take on too many adjectives, lending too precise a description—in “Against Seizing,” he writes of a “lace of foam anointing the skin / with intricate salt—film that dissolves as incompletely / as everything in love.” Yet against the overall force of his collection, this objection does not count for much, and his best poems feature a tautness of language and emotional clarity not found in most first books. Crews’s debut might end with a sense of self-realization, but his collection as a whole can be seen as a portrait of a major talent finding his own powerful voice.

Three Novels, by Elizabeth Robinson

Omnidawn, 2011

reviewed by Jacqueline Lyons

The book title’s suggestive asymmetry and the knowledge that the three novels (Wilkie Collins’s *The Moonstone* and George Gissing’s *The Woman in White* and *Eve’s Ransom*) are mysteries invited this reader to enter the book as a gallery, expecting an identity or story for each individual piece and wondering how the entire collection might be arranged so that the individual pieces speak to each other—a glint off one might guide the eye to another flash further along. A single-line epigraph near the end of “Book Three: Romance,” “It would be absurd to mistake patience for dispassion,” gestures in the direction of the prose poems in “Book One: The Moonstone,” teasing their titles—“Disguise,” “Decorum,” “Surface,” “Blame”—into greater suggestiveness, the titles appearing as demure nods toward the many small mysteries surrounding human emotion and action, the everyday mysteries flowering from intention misidentified.

That the three novels from which the poems take inspiration are Victorian heightens the expectation of understatement and reference to subterfuge, eliciting the question of how the poet and poems will engage the cultural atmosphere of the novels: in kind with their own decorum, with direct resistance, or by critique through emulation, a feminist wolf in subdued sheep’s

clothing. I want to say that somehow Elizabeth Robinson does all of these, and that the poems both resist and pleurably participate in an apparent understatedness, as in these lines from “Book Two: The Woman in White”:

So it appeared that the creature escaped
 and what was a snare
 leapt away
 tame

“Book Two: The Woman in White” slowly whirls around its subject in a dance of many veils, filled with the “diaphanous” and “swathing,” “pale tissue” and “flawless passivity.” To read is to witness a close dance with the elusive, a loving embrace of the escaping or escaped. The lines, like those quoted above, are often spare, the syntax set down with a touch that is as light as an exhale that disturbs no ashes, the content suggestive, compelling, and questioning: “Whose camouflage / did she wed or disclose in white weather?”

My first impression of the poems was that they *breathe*, effortlessly passing Emily Dickinson’s litmus test. I also had the sensation that the poems might disappear, perhaps from knowing the poems take inspiration from mystery novels, or because of the plentiful white space on the pages as if something had already disappeared, leaving more room for breath. Or perhaps because of the sixth poem in the book, “Quicksand,” whose first line, “Remark how, granular and precise, the sand is suffused with tidewater,” suggests that space, absence, and erasure are agents to be mingled with words, presences, and aspects of identity—all explored, particularly female agency and identity, throughout *Three Novels*.

“Quicksand” might reflect, in its next lines, the form of this book, a book composed of both prose poems and spare lyrics that engage another literary form, the novel: “How the quality of the material is altered by its encounter with the liquid / we call ‘sea.’ One struggles to refrain from aesthetic judgment. What / one party calls grotesque, an impropriety of nature, another admires.” In the poem’s next and final sentence, “Where

we exercised the restraint called ‘survival,’ she relinquished that / desire for another,” the “restraint” echoes the “discipline” in “Book Three: Romance (After Eve’s Ransom)”: “All life sets itself upon us like a dull, iron-colored grief, / and the discipline is / to realize that we haven’t died / yet.” Seeing one line in light of the other casts a glow of the paradoxical agency in decorum and restraint. Subsuming identity requires self-restraint, an exercise in self-discipline that may, though probably in a distorted way, lead to self-determination or self-definition—“[the character] must be willing to turn itself into a different character entirely, and this / trait or capability will become known as love” or “How does the human soul curdle? / Perhaps by self-abduction / . . . / . . . / It may take itself away. / It may demand a ransom.”

The book’s genre and title raise the question of how the book will engage lyric and narrative. The book opens with “Origin Myth,” a poem that refers to the rules of the detective story and then observes that *The Moonstone*, the first detective story, does not follow those rules and does not unravel toward a solution. “Origin Myth” is a prose poem that cites the elements of traditional narrative, how a mystery “begins with a murder and unravels neatly backwards” toward a “solution,” calling to mind the denouement, “unknotting,” that leads toward resolution on the downslide of Freytag’s plot pyramid. The prose block shape of “Origin Myth” tells us it is not like other lyric poems, and its title and position as the first poem in “Book One: The Moonstone” in a book of poetry named *Three Novels* might remind us that the first stories were poems, that beneath structure there is variousness, that songs precede sentences, tossing up into the air the very idea of narrative as a knot needing to be undone. While elegance is presumed to be found in traditional structure—as in a solution to a murder—or a singular genre, elegance may also be found in “only a loss, various losses,” in “Eventually a death. In truth, more than one death.”

To Be Human Is to Be a Conversation, by Andrea Rexilius
Rescue Press, 2011
reviewed by Adam Day

To Be Human Is to Be a Conversation, Andrea Rexilius’s first book, is composed primarily of prose poems. As it begins we

learn that the speaker came home from a trip, when she was eleven, to find another girl “wearing [her] clothes and sleeping in [her] room . . . For one year she became [her] only friend . . . We became telepathic.” The new girl, a Hungarian named Andrea, has many epithets, including “sister.” As in Lyn Hejinian’s prose poem “novels,” *My Life and Oxata*, *To Be Human* draws explicitly on its author’s experiences while employing unconventional means of expression—such as playing with and questioning genre categories—to capture or represent reality. The prose poem can eschew details in favor of abstractions, but in Rexilius’s hands, figures and ideas largely stand out in the textual, intellectual, and imagistic landscape: “In my dream I create a project called ‘Deconstruction of the Organ’ in which I take the organ to the mountains, place it in an open field and gently and violently demolish it.” It is not clear to the reader what, or who, the organ “is”; it might be the sister, the speaker’s heart, or a metaphor for life before the sister’s arrival. Somehow, the organ is also foreign to the speaker herself, and the act is like that of a child dismantling his or her doll, driven less by rage than the intense desire to know what the organ holds within, what it is made of.

Indeed, the major theme of *To Be Human* is the difficulty of coming to know, through acts of searching, what is not the self. The writing enacts this by repeatedly bringing one thing within the field of another as the book moves forward, each time reframing how the one thing fits into context with the other. Thus, this collection depends upon implied rather than explicit links between ideas and poems. The sudden appearance of the new Andrea, who is paradoxically both similar to and different from the speaker, precipitates a confrontation with the constructedness of both the self and language. Confrontation is brought powerfully to the fore by the inability of the sisters to communicate, each sister’s language foreign to the other, and yet the character of the American sister is driven by a need to communicate *for* the new Andrea. So, the speaker wrestles with two kinds of borders: the one between self and other, and the one between self and language.

Appropriately then, the central function of the words that compose *To Be Human* is to stand for something, to argue, rather than to transport or evoke; there is little in the way of imagery or music here. The language tends to be plain, and the

thinking spare and marked off either by non sequitur—"Ground as exit. / Sound as seed / grown in heat. Moisture."—or by direct quotation from figures such as Nicole Cooley, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Da Vinci. To be sure, Rexilius is deeply concerned with ideas—her own or those of a given thinker—that relate to twinning, sisterhood, and communication. At times, however, those ideas offer less nuance than one might like.

Of course, one could argue that Rexilius is not leaving work undone, but rather opening up the architecture of the collection, creating a lateral linking of theme and thought. And Rexilius, like Hejinian, does seem to be arguing, through form, for textual breaches that provide a kind of enticing resistance to reading while simultaneously inviting reader participation. And even if her implicit connections are sometimes too tangential, Rexilius is creating art in the context of gaps, in the context of fractured lives, the speaker's own and her sister's. To this end, she brings disparate but linked pieces together to, as Graham Bader observes in an *Artforum* article, "collect and rearrange . . . fragments and, in doing so, to rethink the very idea of the whole." "The very idea of *body* implies separation and observation," the speaker of "Essay on Sisterhood" tells us, but if the glimpse of a mirror image of one's physical self brings about the re-realization that "body implies separation," then seeing one's own body in the guise of another portends an even more intense confrontation with that split. "She will take your clothes and your culture," the speaker tells us about the sister. Part of what Rexilius works to capture in *To Be Human* is how the threat to self-sovereignty complicates the ability to tell the story of oneself (and of the other).

Still, *To Be Human* importantly plays with and acknowledges the inability of narrative to explain: "I always feel that my attempt at capturing it doesn't do justice to the actual—because it isn't a 'story' and shouldn't be one; it was a physical shift, a change in (of) the body." This is, of course, the struggle that every writer comes up against, regardless of school or style: how to capture what they are wrestling with. Rexilius argues for the value of narrative but complicates it by creating, across poems and sections, numerous linked iterations of (parts of) the same general narrative of *To Be Human*. The effect is to make the self iterative; it is, Rexilius tells us, name and memory, becoming, direction, performance and performer, and more. Such com-

plexities and inadequacies of narrative may point to the impossibility, in general, of forging a direct or rhetorical relationship with the other. And yet the speaker confronts the possibility that, despite these inadequacies, narrative may be nearly all that's left if we believe that "To talk is to touch."

(T)ravel/Un(T)ravel, by Neil Shepard
Mid-List Press, 2011
reviewed by Nick Ripatrazone

"Comes over one an absolute necessity to move." So begins *Sea and Sardinia*, D. H. Lawrence's 1921 account of a trip to the Italian island. The writing might be considered breathless, though Lawrence retains control: "We left the church crowded with its kneeling host, and dropped down past the broken houses towards the omnibus, which stood on a sort of level out-look place, a leveled terrace with a few trees, standing silent over the valley." Travel writers love the subordinate clause.

Such linguistic cartography can arrive as objective description, or qualified with opinion. Lawrence had no qualms about being an unhappy visitor, lamenting the "inevitable meat—this long piece of completely tasteless undercut in innumerable grey-brown slices." Culinary ribbing is an evolution from the jingoistic hyperbole of novels within the travelogue genre. Contemporary travel writing has more in common with the specificity of Lawrence than the exaggeration of Robert Louis Stevenson. Still, *travel writing* could be the correct name for the foreign part of the genre's audience, but what of those native to the soil? How often is travel writing written from the perspective of the residents, dramatizing confused visitors?

(T)ravel/Un(T)ravel, Neil Shepard's fourth book of poems, is an ambitious collection that nears the answer to these questions. If overstimulation is a bane for travel writing in prose, then it becomes painfully trite in verse. Shepard, thankfully, is far too cautious and self-aware to write a mere guidebook. His book, as evident in the title and recurring poems, questions the validity of the words *tourist* and *traveler*, and does so from a particularly American axis.

Critical and creative epigraphs appear between the sections

of this book, and they introduce several necessary themes. Dana Gioia's comment that "American literary history can be seen as an unresolvable dialectic between regionalism and internationalism" is contrasted in tone with heavy lines from Robinson Jeffers, including "this America settles in the mould of its vulgarity, heavily thickening to empire." *(T)ravel/Un(T)ravel* is a quietly political book, so Shepard is not using these epigraphs as indictments. Rather, he is concurrently engaging the act of travel with the act of literary creation, often finding they share certain traits.

The book's lead poem, narrated in second person, introduces "travelers half- / returned from afar," whom "you've seen . . . unravel as the other world / spins into view." A trip creates a separate self: the traveler is dislocated from safety and habit, and the difficult return to normalcy reinforces the shift. The ephemeral and new nature of travel makes setting description expected, yet Shepard, like Lawrence, is adept at framing how information is presented to the reader. "Rot and Blossom," dedicated to Walt Whitman, begins relatively close, in the contextual sense, but still opens beyond the moment:

wandering the market street
 where butchers cleaved chicken heads, pigs feet,
 pulled fish from plastic tubs, hacked
 off their heads, or whacked them with the flat
 of the cleaver until they trembled and lay still,
 then wrapped them in the Chinese news,
 long on distortion, short on revelation.

When observation becomes idea, travel writing truly comes to life. Shepard enters "The Ancient Walls of San Gusme" in descriptive mode, with "the clatter of dinnerware and clink of chianti bottles" and the "heavy laughter and gruff oaths" of Italian lawyers, one of whom begins playing a piano. Here Shepard moves to reflection:

though
 the tune was only competent, it was good enough
 to remind us where we were, how far we'd come,
 how far we could fall, in a loud unmindful instant.

For Shepard, the American traveler is never a mere observer. After the man plays the piano, one of the lawyers speaks to the narrator of the poem, though the narrator will “never trust him, he who was more / warmly human than my American manners allow.” In a later poem, “heat withered our patience. Our bowels / stung by a virus.” The frustration of a moment becomes a refrain: “I could not stand in one more ticket line, / elbowed, elbowing for a hard-sleeper berth / out of the heat.” Such self-awareness is welcome and helps to cement Paul Fussell’s observation that travel is never a purely romantic pursuit.

Shepard also considers the intersection of language and the potential for miscommunication that is inherent in travel. “On the Way to the Pantheon” is an acoustically packed poem, and the syntax bounces effortlessly between French and English:

the haut one breathes
through her pinched nose, ignoring the brilliantly

blue-black men lounging against the counter.
I can’t take it—la religieuse et l’opera at l’éclair—

and still decide to live another year

Here Shepard proceeds with thankful control. The travel writer might easily become carried away with the superficial speech of introductions and cuisine, mistaking the crust of the language for the whole. Shepard’s dips into native tongues never feel forced and are instead offered as asides, mimicking the jumbled understanding of new speech. He also takes a guarded approach toward the more intellectual element of the collection, a cataloging of literary travel locations. “Punting on the Cam,” the poem most direct in that tradition, is delivered with wit. Though the narrator wonders “how many ghosts in this river” and goes on to list possibilities—“Chaucer . . . / Marlowe, Milton, Herbert, Dryden, Wordsworth, Byron / Coleridge, Tennyson, Smart, Gray—nearly half / the voices of English literature,” the poem undercuts any pretension. “Cambridge students on summer break” act as tour guides, and their stories are refreshing:

pointing out a patch
of grass where Marlowe sat, or scratched
initials on a tree that might be Byron's—

even these students can't parse the rumors
from the facts, the pranks of old poets who postured
here as wildly as those now shimmering in light.

Shepard is at his best when “the tour books disintegrate.” Such poems, in the final quarter of the book, feel quite immediate and authentic. In “Vincent, at Saint Paul's Sanitarium,” the narrator fully becomes the place and character, and the narrative does not feel like a traveler feigning assimilation. To channel Van Gogh is no easy feat, particularly during the man's creation of *De sterrennacht* while in asylum. That the most powerful poem of the book is crafted from the perspective of a temporary resident should be no surprise; more surprising is that shifting from an intellectual examination of the American traveler results in stronger work. Perhaps that should be expected: if the poet steps aside and does not merely travel in a persona, he is truly able to inhabit.

CONTRIBUTOR NOTES

Judith Adkins holds an MFA in creative writing from George Mason University, a PhD in history from Yale, and a BA in English and history from Duke. She writes prose poems as well as essays. Currently she is working on a collage of essays about gay and lesbian family matters.

Peter Balakian is the author of six books of poems, including *Junetree: New and Selected Poems* and, most recently, *Ziggurat* (2010). His memoir *Black Dog of Fate* won the PEN/Albrand Prize. He teaches at Colgate.

Hadara Bar-Nadav is the author of *A Glass of Milk to Kiss Goodnight* (Margie/Intuit House, 2007), awarded the Margie Book Prize, and *The Frame Called Ruin* (New Issues, 2012), Runner Up/Editor's Selection for the Green Rose Prize. Her chapbook *Show Me Yours* (GreenTower Press, 2010) won the 2009 Midwest Poets Series Award. Bar-Nadav is currently an assistant professor of English and director of creative writing at the University of Missouri-Kansas City.

Eric Baus is the author of *Scared Text* (Center for Literary Publishing), *Tuned Drones* (Octopus Books), and *The To Sound* (Verse Press/Wave Books). With Andrea Rexilius, he co-edits Marcel Chapbooks. He lives in Denver.

Omnidawn will publish **Calvin Bedient's** fourth book of poems, *The Multiple*, early this fall. Bedient is the co-editor of *Lana Turner: A Journal of Poetry and Opinion* (LanaTurnerJournal.com).

Victoria Brockmeier's first book of poems, *My Maiden Cowboy Names*, won the 2008 T. S. Eliot Prize and was published by Truman State University Press. She recently completed her PhD at the University at Buffalo, writing on poetry, secularism, and myth in the twentieth century.

Logan Burns is from Baltimore. His poems have been published in *Conjunctions*, *Web Conjunctions*, and *Barrow Street*.

Bill Capossere's work has been listed in the "Notable Essays" section of *Best American Essays* and nominated for several Pushcart Prizes. Previous appearances include *Colorado Review*, *Harper's* "Readings" section, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Rosebud*, and other journals, along with the anthologies *In Short* and *Short Takes*. He lives in Rochester, New York.

Victoria Chang's second book of poems, *Salvinia Molesta*, was published by the University of Georgia Press as part of the VQR Poetry Series. Her first book, *Circle*, was published by Southern Illinois University Press and won the Crab Orchard Review Open Competition. She lives in Southern California and works as a business writer.

Maxine Chernoff is the author of six collections of fiction and fourteen books of poems, most recently *Without* (Shearsman, 2012) and *To Be Read in the Dark* (Omnidawn, 2012). She is editor of *New American Writing*, chair of the Creative Writing Department at SFSU, and the co-winner of the PEN Translation Award for *The Selected Poems of Friedrich Hölderlin*. In winter 2013 she will be a Visiting International Scholar at Exeter University in England.

Adam Day is the recipient of a 2010 PSA Chapbook Fellowship for *Badger*, *Apocrypha* and of a 2011 PEN Emerging Writers Award. His work has appeared in the *Boston Review*, *American Poetry Review*, *Lana Turner*, *Poetry London*, *Agni*, the *Iowa Review*, and elsewhere. He directs the Baltic Writing Residency.

Eric Ellingsen's bio is missing. It had blue eyes and dribbled and said heart over and over. It was the 666th thing I found.

Sara Gelston's recent work appears or is forthcoming in *Poetry Northwest*, *Indiana Review*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, the *Cincinnati Review*, and elsewhere. Currently, she is the Diane Middlebrook Poetry Fellow at the Wisconsin Institute for Creative Writing.

Endi Bogue Hartigan's book *One Sun Storm* (Center for Literary Publishing, 2008) was selected for the Colorado Prize for Poetry and was a finalist for the Oregon Book Award. Her recent work has appeared in *Verse*, *Volt*, *Chicago Review*, *Pleiades*, *Yew*, and other journals. She lives in Portland, Oregon, with her husband and son.

Alec Hershman lives in St. Louis, where he teaches writing and literature at the Stevens Institute of Business and Arts and at the Center for Humanities at Washington University. Other poems can be found in recent issues of *Denver Quarterly*, *Sycamore Review*, *Phoebe*, the *Journal*, *CutBank*, *Burnside Review*, *Juked*, *Sixth Finch*, and the *Superstition Review*.

John Fenlon Hogan works as a project manager for a Wall Street watchdog company, AdviceIQ, which seeks to educate investors about finance and prevent financial scams. He's also the poetry editor of *Columbia*. His poems are forthcoming in *Washington Square*, *Explosion-Proof*, *Barely South Review*, *Spoon River*, and elsewhere.

Elise Juska is the author of three novels, most recently *One for Sorrow*, *Two for Joy*. Her short stories have been published in numerous journals, including the *Missouri Review*, the *Hudson Review*, *Harvard Review*, and the *Carolina Quarterly*, and cited by the *Best American Short Stories* 2010. She lives in Philadelphia, where she is an assistant professor of creative writing at the University of the Arts.

Joan Naviyuk Kane is Inupiaq. She is the author of *The Cormorant Hunter's Wife*, which received a 2009 Whiting Writers' Award, and *Hyperboreal*, recently selected for the Donald Hall Prize in Poetry in the 2012 AWP Award Series. She lives in Anchorage with her husband and toddler sons.

Jennifer Wisner Kelly's work has appeared or is forthcoming in the *Greensboro Review*, the *Massachusetts Review*, and *Poets & Writers*. She received her MFA from Warren Wilson College and lives in Carlisle, Massachusetts, with her husband and two children.

Erin Kasdin lives in Chicago and is currently pursuing an MFA in fiction writing from Bennington College. This is her first published story.

Peter Kispert's fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Slice Magazine*, *South Dakota Review*, *Pank*, *Sou'wester*, the *Emerson Review*, and others. He is an editorial intern with *Narrative Magazine*.
www.peterkispert.com

L. S. Klatt has published poems recently in *Hotel Amerika*, *Washington Square*, *Copper Nickel*, the *Cincinnati Review*, and *Columbia: A Journal of Literature and Art*. New work will appear in *Denver Quarterly*, *Indiana Review*, and *New Orleans Review*. His second book, *Cloud of Ink*, won the Iowa Poetry Prize.

Matthew Brady Klitsch received his MFA in poetry from Drew University. His poems have appeared in or are forthcoming in *5 AM*, the *Dirty Napkin*, and the *Massachusetts Review*, among others. Matt divides his time between working in an animal welfare center and volunteering at Woodlands Wildlife Refuge in New Jersey.

James Henry Knippen recently completed his MFA at Texas State University–San Marcos, where he served as poetry editor for *Front Porch Journal*. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Diagram*, *1913: A Journal of Forms*, *IIIO*, *Burntdistrict*, *Inter/rupture*, and elsewhere.

Alex Lemon is the author of *Happy: A Memoir* and three collections of poetry: *Mosquito*, *Hallelujah Blackout*, and *Fancy Beasts*. He lives in Fort Worth, Texas, and teaches at TCU.

Jacqueline Lyons is the author of the poetry collection *The Way They Say Yes Here* (Hanging Loose Press, 2004) and the chapbook *Lost Colony* (Dancing Girl Press, 2009). She has received a National Endowment for the Arts Poetry Fellowship, the Peace Corps Writers Best Poetry Book Award, and a Nevada Arts Council Fellowship in nonfiction. She teaches creative writing at California Lutheran University.

Sara Renee Marshall co-edits the *Volta*. She's a graduate student and teacher at University of Colorado. Sara lives and writes in Denver.

Aaron McCollough is the Subject Specialist Librarian for English Language & Literature and Comparative Literature at the University of Michigan. His fifth book of poems, *Underlight*, will be published in November 2012 by Ugly Duckling Presse. Along with Karla Kelsey, he serves as an editor for SplitLevel Texts.

Emilia Phillips received her MFA at Virginia Commonwealth University. Her poetry has appeared in many journals, including *Agni*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, the *Journal*, and the *Kenyon Review*. She recently completed a chapbook manuscript, "Bestiary of Gall," and a full-length collection, "Signaletics." She is the associate literary editor of *Blackbird*.

Daniel Poppick lives in Iowa City. His poems and book reviews appear in recent issues of *Denver Quarterly*, *West Branch*, the *Kenyon Review Online*, *LVNG*, and the *Claudius App*. He teaches creative writing at Coe College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

Edward Porter's fiction has appeared previously in *Colorado Review*, as well as *Barrelhouse*, *Booth: A Journal*, and *Best New American Voices* 2010. He has received fellowships from the University of Wisconsin–Madison and the MacDowell Colony, holds an MFA from Warren Wilson College, and is a PhD candidate at the University of Houston.

Matt Reeck has published poetry, translations, and reviews. *Bombay Stories*, his translations from the Urdu, with Aftab Ahmad, of Saadat Hasan Manto, will be published by Viking Classics (India). He has won a Fulbright Fellowship and, for his upcoming translation work, PEN and NEA grants.

Nick Ripatrazone is the author of two books of poetry, *Oblations* and *This Is Not About Birds* (Gold Wake Press, 2012), and a forthcoming book of criticism, *The Fine Delight: Postconciliar Catholic Literature* (Cascade Books, 2013). His writing has appeared in *Esquire*, the *Kennyon Review*, *Shenandoah*, *Pleiades*, and the *Iowa Review*, and has received honors from *ESPN: The Magazine*.

Tim Roberts is the author of *Drizzle Pocket* (BlazeVox, 2011) and is the copublisher of Counterpath.

Tomaz Šalamun lives in Ljubljana, Slovenia. He taught spring semester 2011 at Michener Center for Writers at the University of Texas. His recent books translated into English are *The Blue Tower* (translated by Michael Biggins, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011) and *On the Tracks of Wild Game* (translated by Sonja Kravanja, Ugly Duckling Presse, 2012).

Siobhán Scarry's poems have appeared in *Jubilat*, *Mid-American Review*, *New Letters*, and *Sentence*, among other journals. She has an MFA from the University of Montana and is completing a PhD in poetry and poetics with SUNY Buffalo. She currently teaches literature at the University of Victoria, in British Columbia.

Matthew Shaer is the author of *Among Righteous Men*, a book of non-fiction. His reporting appears regularly in *New York Magazine*, *Harp-er's*, and the *Washington Post*, among other outlets. He teaches writing at New York University and Drew University and lives in Brooklyn.

Michael Martin Shea is an MFA candidate at the University of Mississippi, where he is a John and Renée Grisham Fellow. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Ninth Letter*, the *Journal*, *Meridian*, *Willow Springs*, and elsewhere.

Jonathan Skinner founded and edits the journal *Ecopoetics* (<http://www.ecopoetics.org>), which features creative-critical intersections between writing and ecology. His poetry collections include *Birds of Tift* (BlazeVox, 2011) and *Political Cactus Poems* (Palm Press, 2005). Currently, he is writing a book of investigative poems on the urban landscapes of Frederick Law Olmsted.

Chad Sweeney's recent books are *Parable of Hide and Seek* (Alice James) and *Wolf's Milk: Lost Notebooks of Juan Sweeney* (Forklift Books). His poems have appeared in *Best American Poetry* and *The Pushcart Prize Anthology*. He teaches poetry in the MFA program at California State University, San Bernardino.

John Taggart's most recent book: *Is Music* (Copper Canyon, 2010). Some anthology appearances: *American Hybrid*, *Thinking Poetics*, and *Visiting Wallace*. His poem "Car Museum" was translated into Italian (by Cristina Babino) and published this year as a chapbook by Edizioni L'Arca Felice.

Michael Thomas Taren was born in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. His poems have been published in *HTMLGIANT*, the *Claudius App*, and *Fence* and are forthcoming in *Bestoned*. He spent nine months in Slovenia on a Fulbright Scholarship (2010–11). His manuscripts "Puberty" and "Where Is Michael" were finalists for the Fence Modern Poets Series in 2009 and 2010, respectively.

Angela Narciso Torres completed her MFA from Warren Wilson. Her poetry is available in the *Cimarron*, *Crab Orchard*, *Cream City*, and *North American Reviews* and in *A Face to Meet the Faces: An Anthology of Contemporary Persona Poetry*. Her manuscript was a finalist in the 2011 Crab Orchard, Philip Levine, and Brittingham/Pollak Poetry Prize contests. She serves as an editor for *Rhino*.

Corey Van Landingham recently completed her MFA at Purdue University, where she was a poetry editor for *Sycamore Review*. She has won the *Indiana Review's* 1/2 K Prize and the 2012 AWP Intro Journals Award and was awarded a Bread Loaf Work-Study Scholarship. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Crazyhorse*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Indiana Review*, *Mid-American Review*, the *Southern Review*, *Third Coast*, *West Branch*, and elsewhere.

Joseph Wood is the author of two books and four chapbooks of poetry, which include *Fold of the Map*, *I & We*, and *Gutter Catholic Love Song*. More triolets can be found in *Anti-*, *Diagram*, *Forklift Ohio*, *Transom*, and *Typo*. www.josephpatrickwood.com

John Yau's latest book of poetry is *Further Adventures in Monochrome* (Copper Canyon Press). He is one of the editors of the web magazine *Hyperallergic Weekend*. He teaches at Mason Gross School of the Arts (Rutgers University) and lives in New York.



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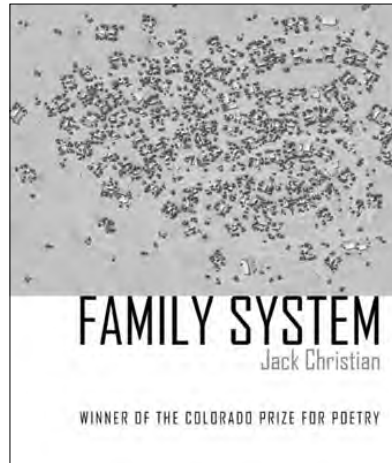
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