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In this issue:  
Jaswinder Bolina • Karin Cecile Davidson • Nina de Gramont  
Daniel Eltringham • Kelcey Parker Ervick • Jennifer Foerster  
Rusty Morrison • Martha Ronk • Linda Russo • Emily Temple  
Jon Thompson • Susan Triemert • Rose Whitmore • John Yau  
& Farah Ali, Winner of the Nelligan Prize for Short Fiction

Colorado  
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**CR**

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## EDITORS' PAGE

We prepare this issue for the printer just as summer slips through our grasp, giving way to fall, the season that requires us to let go, to give up, to give in. We put away the things of sultry afternoons and glorious, sun-stretched evenings, begin to prepare for the shorter days, the early frosts, the long march through the cool and into the cold. That note of loss sounds through this issue's stories and essays. In Farah Ali's "Heroes," winner of the 2016 Nelligan Prize for Short Fiction, selected by Gish Jen, a mother mourning her murdered son tries to reconcile some painful truths about him with her need to grieve. Karin Cecile Davidson's "Rock Salt and Rabbit" concerns a Vietnam veteran's coming to terms with the loss of a limb and the estrangement of his family upon his return. In Nina de Gramont's "The Inconsistency of Sunlight," a woman without custody of her young daughter must, amid blurring boundaries, withdraw from her relationship with a neglected neighbor child. And in Emily Temple's "Better Homes," a woman devastated by her divorce immerses herself in the bizarre world of extreme sandcastle competition and learns to accept her losses. Kelcey Parker Ervick's essay "My Viking Name" examines the convention of women giving up their so-called maiden names and suggests that it's time to reconsider the term. Susan Triemert looks to break with her family's tradition of silence when faced with grief as she recalls a long-ago tragedy in "Indian Summer." And in "Witness," Rose Whitmore revisits the anxiety—and the wonder—of a childhood spent with adventurous parents in the great outdoors: learning to let go of fear, lean into the openness of the landscape, and accept the unseen and unknown.

Welcome to the fall/winter issue; having let go, perhaps, of your own attachments this season, let us replenish you.

—STEPHANIE G'SCHWIND

To hearten the Vandals (or silence the lambs), it's Yogi Berra time, it's "deja vu all over again": another fall, another election cycle. As I write this, fact-checking swallows are twittering the skies of the 2016 American presidential election. I am alarmed. To say there's been so much surreality, so much violence of late, is to understate the obvious. Earth's got a wobble, our country's got a gun, or as Jaswinder Bolina tells us chillingly in this issue, "You do the murder too easy, habibi, like an American / spewing lunatic with three rifles in a theater." What to do? What is the poet to do?

The polymath poet/architect/healer/activist Robert Kocik declares "poetry is the hallucination of unrestricted literacy." A number of brilliant and beautiful strategies are at work in this issue that suggest it just might be possible. From diagnosis to elegy, distillation to empathy, there's ample proof of language's capacity for resistance (and clarity). Try the linguistic anodyne of Katy Lederer's "Inflammation," or Rusty Morrison's "drift intervals."

Try Daniel Eltringham's brotherly "Sheffield Shanty": "Love, then, / like photosynthesis / like breathing, is precious / but needful, it always distorts / the meaning." Or the pure discovery of Rachelle Wales's first publication, a suite of poems that should silence the clowns. Try the place-based soundings of Thibault Raoult, William Brewer, and Jennifer Foerster. Or the intense phenomenal concentration of such offerings as Martha Ronk's "The shape of silence," Merrill Gilfillan's "Sarcee Horses," or Joshua McKinney's "Inspecting a Patch of Grass in the Backyard, I Delight in My Senses, Get Distracted by Thought, Then Enjoy My Senses Again." Language is acutely awake in the poems of this fall issue of *Colorado Review*. May it show itself, a bearing, may it carry us into this becoming moment of history.

—MATTHEW COOPERMAN

## HEROES

*Winner of the 2016 Nelligan Prize for Short Fiction, selected by Gish Jen*

A week after their son had been shot dead in a street, Salma and Asaf sat staring at each other across the big white sheet on the floor of their drawing room. On one end was a pile of prayer beads, and on the other end stood two low tables with a few books of prayers on them, each book the size of an adult's palm. The center of the sheet was rumpled and made Salma think of the people who had sat here in turns, all week long, marking their spots in invisible ways. It was time to fold the sheet and take it to the dry cleaner's.

The last of the first thick wave of visitors had left, shuffling out of the gate to their cars, heads bowed in a gesture meant to convey respect. Salma felt intensely envious of them. They would hug their sons and daughters, look at them more intently and not find fault with them, at least for a few days. Now Salma's house was so quiet. Their daughter Sophia was somewhere, probably in her room. It occurred to Salma that they should see if she was hungry; there must be tea and biscuits for her to eat. But first, this quiet. Maybe the murmurs of the condolence-givers had been a necessary filler after all.

It was a strange thing to discover about oneself, she thought, to be surprised by new lows in one's character. She had always assumed that if ever faced with a problem of a catastrophic nature, she would be the one handling it with grace and foresight, helping a blundering Asaf. The opposite turned out to be true. But then, even in her wildest assumptions, she had never thought that one day her son would be dead at fifteen.

She disliked having to put away her own feelings to make room for others' sadness. Here were all these people, entering her home and occupying spaces that Jamaal used to sit on or stand on or leave his shoes on. Her husband's mother had rushed into the house, her hair coming out of its bun, as if sudden tragedy demanded unkemptness. His sisters had lurched in, mouths agape, their children and spouses entering more grimly. They looked around wildly for arms of loved ones to catch them, but Salma had not moved from her place, nor smiled nor cried nor

said words of comfort. Her parents had been the last to arrive that day. They had taken the first available flight from Rawalpindi. They stood at her door and said, in voices trembling with emotion and age, “You have lost a son, but you still have your old parents, by the grace of God.”

“I hate them,” Salma said after a while, with vigor. “Especially the parents of Jamaal’s friends. Did you see the relief in their eyes?” The mothers hugged her, the fathers patted her husband on the back, they murmured soft words, dabbed their eyes. And Salma knew that they thought, “Thank God it wasn’t him.” Or her. Or them. She spoke to them only to answer their questions. Asaf was better at this than she was. Salma wanted to stop opening the door when the bell rang. But the neighbors and the relatives and the friends kept trickling in, and she watched her parents greet them all, serve them tea and kebabs and vanilla tea cake from the bakery. “All we can do is have patience. *Sabar*,” the visitors said, and her parents nodded and murmured, “He went too soon.” Back and forth, like a seesaw lamenting endlessly. It irritated Salma, this assumption on her parents’ part that they understood; their lives had been unburdened with illnesses or untimely deaths. She was still here, wasn’t she? How she hated that. Her mother misunderstood the look on her face one afternoon after some people had left. “We are not going anywhere,” she said, reassurance and patience in her voice. “Don’t you worry, *beti*.” Salma had not wanted them to be there, but it would have made her seem completely unhinged had she said it out loud.

Every evening, her parents talked about Jamaal while her husband’s parents sat and listened, and Asaf added his own words to their description of him. So in Salma’s mind, Jamaal became taller (“he had been tall for his age”), kinder (“remember when he helped his cousin with his homework”), a model son (“he never talked back, was always responsible”). But the last phrase resisted being pinned onto the glorious monument that was building in her memory. Once he had shouted at her, his face red and his voice straining as he told her to leave his room.

It was terrible that they had to resume eating and drinking and sleeping. Now they sat at the dining table for breakfast, having ordinary toast and eggs and drinking ordinary tea. The sounds of TV and Jamaal were missing. *He would always be missing now, forever and forever.* Salma imagined a whole series of forevers climbing up her like a vine, the *r* of one linked to the *f* of

the other, choking her. “I have to go back to work,” said Asaf, and Sophia added, “I should go back to school,” and Salma realized that it would be wonderful to not have to see their eyes for a while. Then she felt guilty because what she should have been doing, what she should at least have been wanting to do, was grab Sophia and hug her and not let her go to school. Someone had foolishly said to her, “You still have your daughter.” Asaf was saying something now, and she made herself pay attention to it. “It will do you good when you go back to teaching,” he said.

*Salma imagined a whole series of forevers climbing up her like a vine, the r of one linked to the f of the other, choking her.*

So Salma allowed herself to join the movements of change. Her parents returned to Rawalpindi, Asaf to his office, and Sophia and Salma to the school they used to enter with Jamaal for many years. Each of them felt at least an ounce of relief at the moment they left home and hurried on to routines and faces that had nothing to do with the grief that now lived inside their house. Sophia worked hard at not remembering her brother’s presence in the school’s corridors and grounds. Salma made lesson plans for teaching English literature to her fifteen-year-olds. Jamaal would have been one of her students this year.

The staff room at the school was Salma’s least favorite place. The arrangement of the sofas left no room for one’s own thoughts; one’s face was always presented for scrutiny to the person sitting across the room. “At least he died when still an innocent child,” said a teacher who liked to think that she was a special friend of Salma’s during this difficult time. Her words made Salma’s mouth go thin; she wanted to growl at the woman. Another time, a well-intentioned gentleman said, “You must not let yourself become morbid.” He taught history and was used to dead things.

The school principal had a talk with Salma, of course. Was the family thinking of a commemorative plaque? A grant? His name on a bench? Salma shook her head. The woman who had taught Jamaal Urdu three years ago reminded her in soft, urgent tones that the boy had been her brightest and most respectful student. Here again a piece of truth broke free: Salma remem-

bered a day when she had cried in frustration because Jamaal had failed another test in school but had looked unmoved.

It was a new kind of normal for them to get used to. Sophia and Salma came home together when the school day ended and had a late lunch. In the evening they had tea and small cakes with fondant-like icing. Sometimes Salma asked her daughter about school and her friends, and Sophia answered in as few words as possible. One such time, Salma looked at Sophia and told her that she did not have to stay at the table if it made her uncomfortable. Her daughter took a deep breath, grasped her fork more firmly, and continued eating her cake.

For a while, Salma fell into the habit of counting how often the phrases “tragic incident” and “brave survivors” appeared in newspapers, summarizing that day. She paused images on TV, morning and night, cut out Jamaal’s detailed obituaries from one or two leading publications. She saved all the articles and showed them to Asaf. When the newspapers moved on to other things, Salma told Asaf that they should sell their house in Karachi and move to Lahore. She was surprised when he agreed. A new place, a new house, a new regular supermarket and new roads to understand and own. Get the metallic taste of Karachi out of their mouths.

“There are more trees there,” Salma said, lying in bed at night.

“They get a proper winter. We’ll need jackets. And sweaters, and maybe gloves.” Asaf loved winter.

“We’ll sell this house.”

“It shouldn’t be a problem getting a new one in Lahore.”

“How do you feel about this? Would you be OK with this?” they asked Sophia, sharing a strange feeling of excitement. She was, after all, sixteen years old.

“I don’t care,” she said.

Salma felt disappointed.

She had been expecting a fight or, at the very least, a prolonged argument. She lost her sense of urgency after that, but Asaf started looking for work in Lahore. Salma watched him as he sat with his laptop, typing and browsing and clicking furiously. His face started reminding her of Jamaal, so she stopped watching him. She remembered how, when Jamaal was born, Asaf’s family had said that the baby looked *nothing* like his mother and *completely* like his father. In postpartum daze,

Salma had looked at her baby's closed, crusted-over eyes and lightly yellowed skin and wondered where in the world they saw the likeness. Now, sitting on the sofa, hearing her husband type away, she felt angry that her in-laws had willed the resemblance upon her son. And she realized suddenly: *We're going to leave Jamaal in this city.*

When the season turned cooler, Salma rolled up her sleeves and went inside Jamaal's room. She opened the doors of his cupboard and one by one took out shirts and shorts and pants and folded them. Sometimes her heart beat fast, sometimes her hands trembled. She experimentally sniffed a shirt but did not feel anything. She packed his things into suitcases and gave them to her *maasi*, the woman who came to her house every morning to mop the floors and wash the dishes. The *maasi* had a moment of doubt before accepting such a generous donation—did she really want her own sons wearing the clothes of a dead boy? Her hesitation was only for a few seconds, though; grabbing Salma's hands with her callused ones, she called for God's wrath upon the heads of the killers.

"I gave away his clothes today. All of them," she told her husband that night. Asaf's lips trembled and he wiped his eyes, and Salma felt powerful and stubborn. Hadn't she shown that she could move on? What had *he* done?

Asaf couldn't help saying, "That was a heartless thing to do," but he regretted it immediately. Now she felt sad and mean, wishing that she had kept every last dirty sock of her son, but his cupboard was bare. She wanted to swear, so she filled the room with expletives. In his panic, so that Sophia wouldn't hear, Asaf turned on a song on his laptop and turned the volume up as high as it could go. He sat and watched his wife and listened to the song.

The next morning they woke up and tentatively, privately, did an assessment of their emotional states. Asaf wondered if *now* they had turned a corner, finally. Salma realized that her insides were always going to be a little bruised now anyway. But she managed to smile at Asaf and tell him that today she was going to complete cleaning up Jamaal's room.

She took off the sheets he had last slept on, and then she started pulling the mattress off the bed. *No room for him in a new house*, she made herself think briskly, her teeth biting her tongue



in painful fortitude. The mattress tumbled to the floor and taped to its underside was a small, rectangular plastic packet. Salma peeled it off and saw inside it small, round pills with hearts and smiley faces on them. She made a sound that was between a surprised *oh* and a calm *ah*. Clutching the bag, she walked to her room more swiftly than she had walked recently. “Ecstasy,” her browser’s search engine declared after she typed in a description, and she pursed her lips and crossed her arms. She didn’t know what to make of this. She started walking around her room in anger, putting away clothes and straightening the bed, the bag in her fist. Should they ground him, like the children in American sitcoms, or kick him out of the house? She had never seen him use drugs, she thought stupidly. She wanted to say, “It’s those friends of his,” but the tenses were confusing and nothing was easy to understand anymore. She went back to her son’s room and sat down on the mattress and wondered about other things (if her parents needed any money, and did her students want to put on a play this year) until Asaf came home and Jamaal’s glow-in-the-dark clock told her it was eight o’clock. She put the plastic packet inside a zippered space in her handbag and ate dinner with her family.

*She wanted to say, “It’s those friends of his,” but the tenses were confusing and nothing was easy to understand anymore.*

She tried to keep her voice free of clues as she talked to Asaf. She glanced at Sophia and wondered if she had known. Had Jamaal and Sophia been friendly, secret-sharing siblings? She tried to be shrewd about the past,

tried to remember her children’s behavior and expressions and statements, but nothing came to mind. These drugs could not have been Jamaal’s, she thought in bed later. Her thoughts, as she sank into sleep, were the very clichés she urged her students to avoid.

The bag and what it contained became a dangerous, coveted object to Salma. She kept it by her side as much as she could. On Monday, she taught her class while the bag stayed on the floor next to her chair. The children worked quietly, and she felt a momentary pain in her head, which she knew was only because here was a room full of her son’s friends, but he wasn’t among them. There was the chair Jamaal might have been sitting in,

exchanging nervous glances with his friends who shared his terrible secret. “Damn! My own *mom* is here, teaching Shakespeare, and she doesn’t know!” he might have said, and then they would have high-fived at the sheer daring of it all. He might have hated being taught by his mother, but she would have liked to teach him English literature. He had liked words, working with them in sentences, looking up meanings. He had written wonderful essays. He was a good boy who had been misled by the company he kept, thought Salma. Hadn’t she sized up those parents in a glance, at parent-teacher meetings? Their children left to drivers and maids, no one to check on them. Feeling angry numbed her, temporarily.

The cold, logical part of her mind, though, kept realigning the facts around Jamaal’s death: he hadn’t died because of who he was or what he was consuming. The police had informed them that Jamaal’s wallet and mobile phone had not been found on or near his body, and it was assumed that the killers had taken them after they had put the bullets in him. *Give and take*.

Salma’s eyes felt itchy with dryness. When she went home that day, she picked up all the newspapers from her bedside table, her bed, the room where the TV was, and kept them for the man who came by with his cart to collect them. Then she emptied her fridge and cleaned the shelves and threw away the vegetables that had rotted. She shook her head at her carelessness. Hadn’t she taught her children the value of not wasting food? She dusted the neglected places on the window ledges and the metal flower embellishment on the front gate. It was important to look clean.

It came to her attention that people spoke to her softly, as if she were terminally ill. The old uncle who ran the grocery store in her neighborhood, the *chowkidaar* who guarded their street at night, the attendants at the petrol station, the people in the bank. *How did they all know?* She reveled in their kind consideration (real or otherwise). If in a long line at the supermarket, she imagined tapping the shoulder in front of her and saying, “Excuse me. My son was killed. Can I go first?” And if they said no, then she would say, “He was murdered.” Then what if they said, “But, you know, he was just a low-down, dirty old addict, a *charsi*.” Then she would have to run out of there with her hands over her ears, but she would still hear them shout, “What kind of a mother are you, anyway?”

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Asaf wanted to go through old pictures. They were in different folders on his laptop, and he brought out a tub of chocolate ice cream and bowls and spoons. Sophia, who rarely said no to him, sat with her arms folded. Salma sat down as well, willing to go along with Asaf's plan. She felt guilty for still not having shared with him that very important fact about Jamaal, who had been *their* son after all. Not just hers. She felt guiltier when she saw the embarrassingly desperate look of yearning on her husband's face as he clicked on picture after picture. There was Jamaal when he was just born, then one, then two. Minutes passed and now he was fifteen, and Salma looked hard at the image of his face. He was sitting with them on a sofa wearing Eid clothes and his smile was lopsided. Cynical, almost. And here he was eating ice cream on a winter night, but he was not smiling. *Had he disliked his shirt, or his ice cream?* Salma wondered. Asaf's fingers touched the screen. "He looks so happy," he said. Sophia had sunk back into the sofa, but her eyes did not leave the screen. Now she got up and broke the spell. The ice cream was a puddle in its container.

Salma knew what she needed. Inside the bathroom, she opened Jamaal's bag and looked at the array of colors and pictures. Three yellow ones with the smiley faces, two pink ones with hearts, and two plain blue ones. They were all there, as Jamaal had last seen them. *Which one would my boy have pulled out next?* Would he have shown disdain for the ones with the hearts? She felt sad that he hadn't been comfortable sharing this secret with his mother while he was alive.

"He likes writing essays, and sometimes poems. He's been trying to finish a story," Salma told the English-language daily reporter when he had called about the obituary. He changed all her tenses to the past. She had worried that they would misspell his name with one *a* instead of two. But his name, the entire paragraph, in fact, had no errors. "Jamaal means beauty," Salma had wanted to tell the reporter but felt embarrassed about saying it. Instead, she said, "He was a good boy."

Six months after Jamaal had been killed, his parents and sister were invited to a discussion on a morning talk show on TV about violence and the families left behind. Sophia refused to go, but Asaf and Salma went and sat nervously and were assured by the hostess that they did not have to talk about things in de-

tail. Their faces looked pale in the colorful surroundings. Asaf spoke movingly, haltingly, about their bright, beautiful boy. But Salma knew that Jamaal wasn't beautiful or ugly, exceptionally kind or cruel. He was average, and not long before his death, he had stopped going outside to play cricket and stopped joking with his sister and been unkind to his mother. She had thought he was just being a moody teenager. Now, of course, she knew better. Better than her husband knew his son, she realized, and felt pleased for a moment.

Asaf watched the show and recorded it and then watched it again. Each time it reached the end, he felt more deflated. So he renewed his search for work in another city. "We must move," he said, his eyes looking extra large and bright.

In early spring, Asaf flew to Lahore for a job interview. In the car on the way to the airport, Salma worried out loud about loneliness and the house being too quiet, and were they really going to move? She spoke fast because she felt bad. *What if Asaf's plane crashed and he died not knowing?* At the airport he said to his daughter, "Take care of your mother," making Salma cringe, because that was not the kind of thing that Sophia did. In the night, she read, again, about the symptoms and signs that users of her son's drug of choice displayed. The list was familiar to her by now, but it was hard trying to get a true, clear picture of Jamaal's features in her mind. That last day he had looked so happy, she had always thought. It had been such a relief to her to see him smiling. He had said that he would be back soon and she thought it wiser to not ask where he was going or with whom.

Asaf called her from Lahore. "After they confirm my job," he said, "we can move in two weeks. I've looked around a few places here. There's one house that I like a lot. It's close to a mosque."

"You still go to pray," she said.

"Faith gives me sustenance. I have nothing if not my faith," said Asaf. He could be articulate sometimes, just like their boy, who had won a debate once at the tender age of thirteen.

"I found this," Sophia said one evening. She did not know how to look at her mother's face; she felt like she had been caught coming out of her brother's room, so she kept her eyes on the piece of white notebook paper in her hand. She had climbed over the mattress that still lay askew on the floor and sat at

Jamaal's table, opening and shutting drawers. She had looked through his CDs. It made her feel uncomfortable finding a Kenny G CD between Korn and Metallica. There were papers in there as well. She took one of them out to show to her mother. The other she kept to herself.

Salma took the sheet from Sophia's hand and saw Jamaal's handwriting on it. Beautiful slopes and curves, not a dot out of place. "I didn't know he could write in Urdu so well," Sophia said, her tone even.

"It's a poem. He wrote a poem. So talented," said Salma, reverence ballooning in her voice, and Sophia wanted to puncture it, so she said sharply, "It's only homework." But that was not enough, and more needed to be said. "He wasn't the only one who died that day, you know." There was fleeting satisfaction in seeing her mother retreat from her, and Sophia said, shouting now so that her voice could reach her mother and come out the other side, "He is not a martyr. The newspapers are wrong!"

Salma put Jamaal's poem in her bag, next to the pills. Other memories slowly squeezed to the front of her brain: Jamaal sitting, staring at his homework in perplexity and then tearing the book in half. His math teacher saying to Salma that Jamaal needed extra tutoring. The Urdu language teacher holding a whispered conference with her in the empty staff room one sunny afternoon, asking her if she knew why Jamaal had fallen asleep in class, two times now.

Then one day a video clip started going around on the internet. It was jerky, a little under a minute, and shot from someone's cellphone. It showed a pair of men, their faces covered, guns in hand, moving with speed through the crowd. Salma searched through the screaming people for her son, but she could not find him. The men yelled words in Urdu that might have been from an old Pakistani movie about good versus evil, and then they fired their guns. She watched it by herself and then asked Asaf to watch it with her. So he sat next to her, thin with resignation, worrying about Sophia. How was the poor girl going to be able to study for her final exams?

"She has done really well," Sophia's teacher told Salma after the exams in the school were finished.

"She has always been a good student," Salma said, not out

of pride, but because it was a fact, just like the color of her hair was a fact.

“A *most excellent* student.” The teacher was quick to confirm the cleverness and bravery and strength of Sophia. Her sympathy was naked: poor Sophia, who had lost a brother to violence; poor Salma, a mother bereft of her son.

In July, Jamaal’s and Sophia’s friends decided to hold a small candlelight vigil at their school for him. They wanted to remember what had happened a year ago. The children invited their parents and other people to attend it, and Sophia invited her mother and her father. It was, it seemed to Salma when it ended, a new way to mourn. She had not wanted to go, but the idea of a vigil became popular at the school, and the teachers and the principal and the custodians and the guard all decided that it was their duty to be a part of it. Solidarity. So she went with Asaf and stood at the back, holding a candle and feeling alternately numb and stupid. The pills radiated heat from deep inside her bag. In the end, it turned into a memorial for all the other people who had died that day, and it was hard for Salma to find the rectangle of Jamaal’s picture among the others on the wall. Once she found it, she kept her eyes fastened to it. Somewhere in the front row was Sophia, her face indistinguishable from her friends’ in the light from the candles. For those moments, Jamaal could have been anyone’s brother. Later that night, at home, Salma flushed Jamaal’s pills and the poem down the toilet.

The newspapers wrote about the vigil. Again, they described what had happened on a street in Karachi twelve months ago. Those who had survived were contacted by journalists and convinced to relive that afternoon. A man recalled, “A young boy pushed me to the ground and covered me.” Heroes, the reporters called the victims and their families.

## ROCK SALT AND RABBIT

There it is again. The sound of the mortars, fired overhead, hitting the target, this time a nearby village, sending red earth, fire, and smoke into the air. We are too far away to hear the cries. VC meet there at night, though intel is not always exact on these things. Especially when most of our information comes from the children—surveillance in return for sweets. I wake to the sounds, small-weapons fire marking the silence between blasts. A tracer sighs and I breathe in red dust and I'm up and out of my bunk and through the door, and only then do I realize where I am. In the backyard of the Florida lake house that once belonged to my grandfather, and now to me.

The air is not as heavy here. The scent is not thick with the nascent trace of powder that lies everywhere in Nam. And there are no cries, except my own. I wake myself now. There's no one else to wake me.

I stand in the dark and the lake water shines like black oil. There is reflection and no reflection. The moon is out, but its light is dull, meaningless. August has become a month lidded with clouds, as if the world were canopied by MEDCAP gauze, gray white and used up.

Over at the edge of the yard, the rabbits scuff about inside their hutches, the ones my daughter LuLu helped build. There are three hutches and three kinds of rabbits. I watch them from a distance. The brown lop ears lie like lumps, sleeping, while the dwarf rabbits are hunched together at a corner of their cage. The male rex is mottled with dark spots, but mostly white; his eyes burn an empty space into the darkness.

The rising moon seems to warm the still air. I take up a canoe paddle that rests against the corner of the screened porch. Between the paddle's handle and a length of support beam, a spider has sewn a long web, which falls like sticky thread to the ground. Beyond the porch, flat green grass leads out to the lake. The rabbits clatter about, their white-gray-brown movements

doing nothing to disturb the night—at that moment, there is only the lake, like glass. I anticipate setting the aluminum canoe onto its surface and breaking its quiet.

Across the water, a figure stands under a bright dock light. Lillian Walbright. She wears her white bathing suit and swims nearly every night. I will pass her in the canoe, and she will ignore me, the one-armed man who marks his passage with wide, one-armed strokes.

The canoe is facedown on the sand beach; nearby, a rock for ballast. I lift the canoe by the center yoke. Its sandy keel line meets the water, and I set the wooden paddle next to the bow seat and the rock in the forward-facing stern, step in with one foot, and push away from the shallows. I sit backward in the bow seat so that the boat works with me, not against me. There is a new definition of balance in paddling solo, left-armed, sweep stroke, J stroke. I appreciate the lack of wind and spare black skies and pass the cypresses that edge the shore.

At the center of the lake, Lillian is swimming. Breaststroke. Her white bathing cap shines, and she creates a line through the water. I lean into the paddle, concentrate on moving forward, and Lillian disappears, first her shoulders and then her head. Closer to me, she surfaces. The lake is wide, but she is a strong swimmer and I am making good progress.

“Royal,” she says, not out of breath, not ignoring me.

“Lil,” I say, holding up my paddle, letting the canoe glide and slow, while the druggist’s wife reaches up and touches the gunwale.

Her fingernails are dark with polish, and her fingers are long, her hands large.

“It’s late,” she says, then lets go of the canoe and treads water.

“Yes, it is.”

Lillian looks past the floating dock, where daytime swimmers rest and sun themselves, in the direction of my house, one of the only ones on that side of the lake. “Things we do in the dark.” She laughs a quick, breathless laugh and then sighs. “You are something, though. I have to say. Cutting straight across the lake on your own.”

“I could say the same about you.”

“Well, I guess we have something in common.” She leans onto her back and raises her arms, one after the other, in a beautiful backstroke.



I smile and remember what it felt like: the unparalleled backward sweep across the water while watching the sky. Another thing that the doctors and therapists say I'll never do again. I hope to prove them wrong.

Over a year ago, I moved into the small, rough cabin my grandfather had once kept for fishing. A single large room with a view of Lake Sybelia and the modern homes on the opposite side. And up the road a ways from that shore, the house I built, the three-bedroom ranch where Minnie and our kids live.

Months after my last view of Vietnam, face up and staring past the tall, switching grass into the blank sky, from the string of hospitals—Da Nang, Asaka, San Francisco—I finally made it home. But within weeks Minnie started to wear down under my newness—my inefficient, inconvenient, indelible newness. And then she asked me to leave, to stay, to leave again. And now it's one year out and that much closer to the divorce she's asked for.

It's not every day your husband returns home with one arm less than he once had. Or is it, these days? We're all lacking something we once had. Arms, legs, egos, energy, will. Will. Sheer and impossible. Try to climb it. Like a plate glass window, straight up and slick. You can't climb it, but you can see yourself in it. Whatever's left. You can see that.

The month before I shipped out, September 1967, Minnie held me to a promise. We were alone, the kids spending the weekend with friends, and dusk hung on, the evening taking its time. From the stereo in the living room Percy Sledge belted, *When a man loves a woman*, and beyond the open sliding doors of our bedroom, the lemon and tangerine trees looked overly green. Minnie breathed against me. "You have to come back," she kept saying. "You have to come back the same. Don't let anything over there change you." Her hair was in my eyes, and side one repeated.

Afterward, still naked, Minnie got out of bed and slipped through the open doors into the grove. She came back with an armful of tangerines and dropped them beside me. They fell into the folds of the sheets, between my legs, onto the floor. She sat, peeling one after another, eating sections, offering them, stems and skins falling on the floor. The bitter scent of citrus

penetrated the air, and seeds littered the bed. And then Minnie leaned over me and made me promise again. I did, and down the hall the song ordered, *Do her no wrong*.

Minnie volunteered at the VA hospital and knew what might happen. Already boys were coming back, riddled with anxiety, misunderstood. Some without faces, some without family. She made me promise because that's all she could do. She didn't depend on hope; hope was something different. She knew better than that. She grabbed on to what she could hold, and at that moment, she held on to me. Clothes draped over chairs and across the floor, doors open throughout the house, and empty bottles on the bedside table—wine and then whisky. And so the evening went forward into the night, into the next day. The weekend ended and the kids returned, and the next month came and I took up my duffel to leave.

*Minnie volunteered at the VA hospital and knew what might happen. Already, boys were coming back, riddled with anxiety, misunderstood.*

Her last kiss was fierce. “Don't you forget,” she said. Her eyes narrowed into shards of blue and she tried not to cry.

In the yard I sit and smoke and watch the moon sink. The canoe leans on its side against a paper birch. I'm alone, but not left alone. Minnie comes around when I'm not home and leaves baskets of clean laundry, bottles of wine hidden in the bottom. She takes up my worn clothes and the cycle keeps on. The scent of soap powder and perfume, the bottle of Barolo. How a woman can be so damned domestic and sexy, all at the same time, is nearly beyond me. But that's Minnie. Lingering in my world, while she's asked me to exit hers.

In a few hours the sun will come up, marking the beginning of a Thursday morning, and I'll finally sleep. The rabbits are still, until a sound by the house makes them jump. The screen door is opening. I can tell by the long sigh of the hinges, and over my shoulder I see someone go inside. I field-strip my cigarette and stand up slowly. Someone is on my porch and, none too shy, rattling something heavy onto the pine floor. I make my

way from lawn chair to porch. A flashlight comes on and shines across me.

“Lord!” The light lowers, and I know my trespasser is a woman.

“Who’s there?” There’s a strange, wet smell to this stranger. Algae, lake water.

“Royal?”

“Damn straight.” I push open the door and step onto the smooth floorboards.

“I’m bringing things over. Damn it, you scared me.”

I pull the cord that drops down from the ceiling, the porch light clicks on, and there she is. Lillian Walbright. Blue shorts, white blouse, loafers. Her hair is slicked back and at her feet is an ice cream bucket, the kind with a crank, the kind that asks for rock salt and physical labor.

“What the hell?”

“You’re still having that picnic, aren’t you?” Lillian’s eyes are wide, rimmed with red, and she’s taller than I remember.

“Not until the weekend.” The lightweight door bumps behind me, and there we are, boxed in. I let the silence snake around us until it gets too strange. “You know how to use that?” I say.

“Of course, I do. It could be fun. You’ll have your kids here, right?”

“Sure.” I think of LuLu and Saul and Rainey, all arms and legs and probably more in the mood for their own parties. Teenagers who moved on from ice cream and backyard picnics a long time ago.

“You like strawberry?” She nudges the bucket with the side of her shoe, not nearly the same woman who spoke to me earlier. Under the half-lit moon, out on the water, she seemed to belong to the night. Under the electric light, she disappears.

“LuLu’s favorite. I like it fine.”

“All right, then.” She moves to go, but I don’t make room. I’m in the doorway and she’s trying to leave.

“Breakfast?” I say. “May as well. You came all this way, lugging that thing.”

Lillian looks as though she doesn’t know which way is up or down. “I couldn’t.”

“Well, you could. I’ve got eggs, bacon. A new percolator.”

I move away from the door, and she raises her face, looks

straight at me. Eyes the color of Coca-Cola bottles, a transparent, pale green. She brushes her damp hair back and finally says, "That sounds nice. Thanks, I'd like that."

We move inside and, while rashers of bacon heat up in the skillet, don't talk. I feel her eyes on me, taking in my work at the stove, one-sided, deliberate, less than new. In the corner behind a curtain is my unmade bed. In the center of the room are a sofa, stacks of books; on the only side table, a tall lamp and a level that shows the floor there is uneven. The room changes as the night becomes morning, crazy with birdcalls, and the coffee kicks up, bitter-smelling and brown. We eat our eggs and toast, and Lillian stares out the big windows that look over the lake, back to where her house and dock and long green lawn all lie. She stares and she breathes like she's underwater.

June 1969. Quang Ngai Province. Vinh An, a village at the mouth of Song Tra Bong. The days were sweltering, leaning into each other like unbathed bodies. Sunk inside a bunker were sleeping pallets, men slung over them, those who had been on patrol during the night, and the heavy odors of breath and mildew. A radio droned. In July, astronauts would land on the moon. Every day men landed and walked the DMZ without the benefit of zero gravity.

USMC, Combined Action Patrol, I Corps, TAOR, Tango, Tiger Papa, one thousand clicks from home. Walt sat propped up and fingered his Guild, the wide strap across his right shoulder, the strings slightly rusted but still taut enough to play. His music, like Hank Williams's *your cheatin' heart* and *I'm so lonesome I could cry*, was lean and raw and stretched into the wide unending afternoon.

PFC Titus Shields leaned over and pulled a dented can of beer from below his bunk. The gold sheen glinted between his enormous brown hands. He pulled the tab off and pointed it at Walt. "You have to play like that?"

"You don't like my playing, Tight-Ass?"

"Don't mind the music." Titus smiled and drank from the can. "Just mind the sound it makes."

"Throw me one of them." Walt nodded at the beer, and Titus threw the metal tab at him.

Maurice pulled his hands over his eyes and moaned. "Why

don't you farm boys shut up? Trying to sleep in this mess is hard enough without all that noise."

Maurice was the only man in my squad from north of the Mason-Dixon. New York City. The rest of us came from small towns. Bogalusa, Eufala, Dawson.

"I believe we've been insulted." Walt put the guitar down and threw his legs to one side of his cot. "Hand me one, Titus man."

"This here's the only one." He stretched and handed it to Walt.

I watched the men, dozing, drinking, from over the notepad propped on my knees. A letter I'd begun again and again but hadn't had a chance to end. Another letter to Minnie. I wrote about my squad, the hamlet children, the school we were building. I didn't write about the patrols, the coconut mine that took down Jimmy, changing our number from seven to six.

"Where'd you get this shit, man?" Walt wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and tipped the beer to pour it out.

"You crazy?" Titus grabbed the can. "Same time, same place, same shit. From that little girl and her brother. Where you been?"

"Mm-hmm," Maurice said. "You boys better watch out. The suds don't kill you, that girl's mother just might."

"Girl's okay," I said.

She was thirteen, granddaughter of the district chief. A little twist of a girl. Small but long-limbed. Good at climbing trees. Not afraid of pushing her way into tunnels. She had short black hair, a pigeon-toed run, a laugh that rose in spirals.

"Her mother is the one sending the kids out with beer and cigarettes and anything else she can find. Your American dollars at work." I pulled my last cigarette from a crumpled pack and waved it in the air. The last time I'd asked her mother to keep her home, she'd yelled. Something about peace and quiet. Later, I'd understood the girl's name, An, meant peace.

"Maurice, you're on surveillance tonight. With Pete and McPhee."

Titus looked at me, his light brown eyes wide. "Then we're gonna need more beer, Sergeant."

A month later, once we'd landed on the moon, once Walt was gone, caught in a haze of cross fire under a tree covered in yel-

low flowers, Titus stopped drinking. Along with his M-16, he now carried a quiet kind of desperation. An's younger brother, Walt's go-to boy, now followed Titus, his hand held out, offering him tree frogs and crickets when cans of beer were turned down. "You take," Huy said. Titus always refused, until the boy brought him a small rabbit from one of his grandfather's hutches. Wide-eyed and dark brown, the rabbit disappeared inside Titus's large hands.

Years later, when the man on point doesn't go back to Dawson, Georgia, and ends up in the yard of my lake house, I hear him laughing. He stands before the open door of the rabbit hutch and takes out a dwarf rabbit the color of cocoa. He holds it high and then tips it into his top pocket.

LuLu questions me, like any teenage girl would. She sees past the old and the new—three years lost while I was in country and then in rehab—and then kicks her way through the rest of it. The garbage she's read and heard about the war, the shift in her mother's skirt length from high to higher, the shit her brother gives her, the fact that I came back and then left again. She kicks past it all like she used to in her swim class, way back when she was a minnow. Long since graduated from dolphin to flying fish, her suit with the YMCA swim patches outgrown, she busts through the water like she can't go fast enough, and even then she hardly causes a wake. She glides through life the same way. My Lu-girl.

Arms folded across her chest, Lu didn't want to come with me last April when I added the rex and several lop ears to the collection of dwarf rabbits.

"You still haven't told me why you want to keep rabbits," she'd said.

"To raise them," I told her.

"I think that's a dumb idea."

"Well, you're entitled to think what you want."

"Which means you're going to do it anyway. Build the stupid hutches and stuff them with cute little bunnies that will make more cute little bunnies. And then what?"

"I'll sell them."

"Well, it's still a dumb idea."

I haven't told Lu about the villagers in Vinh An and their

mangy hares, long, stringy animals with wild eyes. Not good eating, but we ate them out of courtesy, one less C ration, one more hot meal.

“Why on my birthday, then?”

“Something to do besides cake and candles. Your mama takes care of those things.”

Truth is, a hammer and a handful of nails, a cane pole, and a tin of minnows would teach her what she needed to know. Birthdays are just another day on the calendar. And I needed help then. She managed fine with the hatches, from holding boards while I tacked them together to angling their roofs at a pitch where the rabbits could stay dry even when the wind drives the rain broadside.

In late spring, after one of those rainstorms, Lance Corporal Titus Shields landed on my doorstep, Walt’s guitar hanging from a strap across his shoulder. For days he slept on my couch, that dwarf rabbit nestled inside his hands. Lu seemed to find his endless sleep a great puzzle, and she whispered things over him, touching his face and the guitar frets, and then said loudly to me that he should wake up. And finally he did.

And then, under a ceiling of blue skies and lengthening days, as if to make sure that days were for waking and nights for sleeping, Lu, lugging a tool belt like she knew how, announced the next project. Along with me and Titus, Saul, and one of the Callahan boys, she took on the porch, tearing down the old structure and then deciding on a red tin roof, the yellow pine flooring, the cypress beams for the new one. Titus stayed through the end of June and tried to teach her to play the Guild in the evenings, and she seemed to get the hang of it. “My dog has fleas,” she’d say out loud, trying out the strings. And then at me, “Your bunnies are gonna have fleas, for sure.”

“Not mine.”

“Yes, yours.”

And Titus, holding a sweating Coca-Cola, would say, “A lot of talk about nothing. Give me that guitar and y’all shut up and listen.” He played songs by some new band that played up in Jacksonville, by way of Georgia—“Where I’m from.” He’d smile and pull blues out of the box, the same ones he’d complained about when Walt had played those long afternoons, below the South China Sea and above the backyards of the Binhs.

“How come you know the Allman Brothers?”

“How come you ask so many questions, girl?” Titus was still as sore as he’d been in Vinh An, but now he had something to curl his hands around, something that would mostly keep folks quiet and listening to him.

“You know Duane and Gregg Allman are from Daytona Beach, don’t you?” Lu narrowed her eyes at Titus. “Not from Georgia.”

Titus smiled. “Darlin’, you know a lot more about those boys than you probably should. What’s important is they’re brothers, like I got brothers and you got one, too. Brothers staying together, keeping each other good. You know? Now settle down.”

Titus’s words were strung with something bitter, something steely. More than anger. Whatever ailed him was deep down, but pushing at the surface. He leaned into the guitar and struck blues chords, forcing the conversation to a close. Lu eyed him and hushed, a frown across her face. Still, she folded her arms around her legs, rested her chin on her bent

*In the kitchen I sat and smoked with the lights off, letting the dark sift around me, thinking of where I’d been and where I’d come back to.*

knees, and listened, eventually falling asleep on the sofa. Not long after, I sent Titus to bunk in my bed. In the kitchen I sat and smoked with the lights off, letting the dark sift around me, thinking of where I’d been and where I’d come back to.

With Lillian, I feel like a coin found on the tracks, flattened, but still of some value. She stands next to me and touches my arm. Her fingers press through my shirt and there’s weight and warmth behind them. She slips out of her loafers, then moves across the room, pushes past the curtain, and lies down on my bed. Each loafer is lined up, the heels and toes a lighter color, worn from all the slipping on and off.

“You shouldn’t smoke in bed, you know,” she says. I hear her moving the glass ashtray, the sound of solid glass against the bedside table’s surface. And then the click of my lighter, the odor of butane. “You could burn the place down.” Her voice travels across the ceiling and back to me.



“I’ll try to remember that.”

I wonder what Titus would say to this woman in my bed. Titus, who comes and goes, who never stays around for too long. Then I know he wouldn’t say much of anything. He’d just climb in next to her.

I leave the breakfast dishes on the table and go outside on the porch. The bin of feed is there, and I take up a large scoop and head outside. The sky is threaded with thin lines of white, no chance of rain. The grain falls into each bowl, and the rabbits gather, bumping heads. With the hose I replenish their water.

I turn around and Lillian’s there.

“Need help?”

“Sure,” I say. And then I see Saul sitting in a lawn chair, watching us.

“Morning,” he says. He’s wearing the cutoffs he always wears, and a T-shirt, faded brown, the words *TUMBLEWEED CONNECTION* across his chest.

“Hey there, Saul.” Lillian approaches him and he smiles.

“What are you doing over here?” he says to her.

“Having breakfast.”

“Awful early.” He glances at me.

Next to the chair are a small pail and a cane pole, one of mine.

“What’d you catch?” I motion to the pail.

“Bluegill.”

“You coming to the picnic?” Lillian touches his arm, and I realize this is just something she does, nothing special in the way her hand grazes and rests, then finds another place to fall. She holds on to the back of Saul’s chair and leans down to examine the bluegill.

Saul stares at me like I am this morning’s biggest problem. His hair has gotten longer, nearly to his shoulders. Lillian’s question remains unanswered. Saul doesn’t acknowledge her and instead points to the scoop in my hand.

“What’s the point?” he says.

“The point?”

“All those rabbits. What’s the point?”

“Does there have to be one?”

He looks at me, his eyes lidded, that same blue as his mother’s. “Yeah,” he says. “There does.”

“There isn’t one. Just there to remind me.” I thought of An and Huy, their rabbits. Titus’s little brown one. “Here.” I pitch

the feeding scoop at him. "You're in charge now. Mornings, so I can sleep in."

He catches the scoop.

"All right," he says. He seems on the verge of telling me something else, something I have no idea about.

I know I won't be sleeping in. It's just a reason to keep an eye on him, and by the tone of his acceptance, I can tell he'll be doing the same. Keeping an eye on me.

Saturday afternoon is blazing, the air motionless, the sky stippled with clouds. I lie on my back in the lake, floating, balancing, trying not to tip to one side. The right side. No one is around. No one would want to see the scars, the man who moves through the water and the world at an angle different from the way he once did. The sky flips yaw ways and I get a mouthful of water. The soft, green taste of algae brings me upright, treading water once again with my left arm, my legs. I breathe, lie back, straighten out. I frame the possibility of pulling backward, slowly, steadily, to the opposite shore, to Lillian, watching from her dock and waving me over. And then I raise my arm a few inches above the water, legs outstretched and ready, but I fall once more to the side.

"What the hell are you doing in there?" Titus stands on the narrow strip of sand that leads down to the lake. He shades his eyes but still squints. "Looks damn foolish."

I pull myself to shore, kicking until I find the soft sand bottom where I can stand and walk. Titus is grinning, the sole of his square-toed boot against the upturned canoe. He throws the towel I left there, and I catch it.

"Thanks." I run it over my hair and let it fall onto my right shoulder.

"Looking good for an old man."

Titus isn't looking too young himself, tired around the eyes, those eyes that drilled through black nights and heavy white days. On point, or bringing up the rear.

We walk up the sloping lawn, the grass going bald in places, Florida soil too thin to keep it tamped down. By the hutches, LuLu is leaning in to check the rex. His double coat, like velveteen, always tempts her.

"Rabbit girl!" Titus says. His call reaches up and over, the same way his singing does, teaching the day another tone.

LuLu bumps her head on the top of the little doorframe. “Titus—” She holds her head and looks annoyed. Then she smiles. “Hey, Daddy. Thought we’d surprise you.” She shuts and latches the hutch door and walks over to us. She’s seen me before without a shirt, but the marks are too definite for her not to stare.

“Well, I am surprised. Here to help?”

“Course we are. Brought things from the store like you asked. Coca-Colas and ice. All the things you wanted.” She points to the porch, where grocery sacks, buckets of ice and bottled drinks, and a bag of charcoal are lined up.

Saul stands inside the screen door, and I realize they’ve all come together. Titus’s truck is parked in the drive under the stand of pines. On the driver’s door are the words *TROUBLE NO MORE*, painted in slanting black capitals.

“When did you get here?” I ask Titus.

“Last night. I went for a swim, met up with Saul. Stayed over at your house on the other side.”

I think about the other side. How I want to swim halfway there, stand on the floating dock, and shout for another chance. Scream past the rooftops to the heavens for another chance.

I nod at Titus. “Minnie let them get in that truck with you?”

The screen door opens, and Saul stands on the threshold. “She doesn’t care where we go. And she thinks Titus is just fine. Likes talking to him, feeding him pie, hearing about his family back in Dawson. About his brothers signing up and about going back himself to hunt down more vc.”

“You are such a liar, Saul. Titus did not say that to Mama.” Lu tugs on Titus’s sleeve. “Did you?”

Saul stares at me, and I can tell he’s not lying. He’s pushing the truth as hard as he can. Only this truth belongs to Titus. Titus and Walt and Jimmy. Titus and his brothers. And Titus will spin the truth.

He puts his arm around Lu and shakes her a little. “Not going there. No, uh-unh.”

“Come on,” she says. “You promise?”

“Told you, girl.” Titus squeezes Lu and she leans into him. “Not going there.”

Titus is spending time with my family in my house on the other side of the lake. Saul recognizes this, too. I can’t, though. The words across the truck’s door would then be meaningless.

Soon Lillian will be here with strawberries and cream. The Callahans and Lingstrums will arrive with their large dishes of potato salad and their lawn chairs and wonder where the beer has been stowed. Vita Hull is certain to bring kielbasa and her small white poodle, red bows tied into his curls.

Inside I dress, and shirt buttons slip between my fingers. Every extra moment I take for the simplest tasks is set in a heap of all the extra moments. I remember Minnie, her fingers unbuttoning, buttoning, following the edges of a shirt until it was undone, done. I think of how she reels me in and then pushes me away, and I pray she doesn't come.

Outside, I hear Titus pouring charcoal, Lu asking where the sparklers are. Titus tells her they are still in the truck and what's the hurry anyway. "For later, when it gets dark," she says. I hear a Frisbee hit the side of the house and Saul laughing.

The clock shows that it's nearly four. I look around and empty ashtrays, clear books off the floor, slide the kitchen chairs under the table.

Lillian pushes through the doorway, a large basket in one hand. The promised berries, the cream, eggs, sugar. She piles them onto the kitchen counter and waves me away.

"No," I say and touch her elbow. "Show me."

"All right, then." She smiles and pushes my hair away from my forehead. I imagine she's done this with her son, not her husband. The gesture, and the recipe. "Watch first."

There is the process of making the custard: a saucepan, a wooden spoon, the stirring. Lu bumps her way into the kitchen, and I quickly take my hand away from Lil's back. But she's seen. Her scrutiny is wide and her eyes won't meet mine. She leans over to peer into the pan. Lillian hands her the spoon and Lu stirs, letting the custard burn just a little.

"I'm going back outside," she says to me. "I know how to do this already," she says to Lil.

"LuLu," I call to her. I wonder when she started lying. Her mother knows how to get around in the kitchen, but Lu is never there, except to tear open a cereal box, spoon her way to the sugared milk in the bottom, and then leave her bowl in the sink.

From the porch comes the clatter of the rock salt and the ice. I step out and LuLu is telling the Callahan boy to get out of the way, she can do it herself. Salt and melting ice cover the floor,

and Todd Callahan stands there, holding a watermelon against his chest.

“Nice, LuLu,” he says, sets the melon down, and backs out.

“That’s enough.” I try to take the bag of salt from Lu and she throws it down by my feet.

“That’s enough yourself.”

The screen door slams and she heads across the lawn.

Lillian takes a broom and I hold the dustpan, and together we clean up the mess, setting up the layers of ice and rock salt inside the ice cream bucket.

“She’ll be fine,” says Lillian. “We’ll all be fine.” Her gaze meets mine, and she shakes her head and smiles. “The custard needs to set a while. Go on and greet your guests.”

The Lingstrums all stand in a semicircle, and their youngest, a granddaughter, runs to LuLu. Lu scoops her up and shows her the rabbits. She unlatches a door and takes out the smallest dwarf, dark brown and all eyes. Its ears lie flat and it doesn’t move.

“What’s its name?” the little girl asks Lu.

“My father didn’t name them.”

And Titus is there, leaning over and stroking the rabbit’s head, its back. “This one’s Huy.” He winks at the little girl and Lu frowns.

“Since when?” Lu says.

The rabbit stretches, sniffs, and hops. The little girl squeals and laughs. The afternoon is a bright, uncertain thing filled with those arriving, waving and calling. The heavy smell of charcoal caught in flame, a plane overhead, the sound of a Volkswagen. Someone hands me a beer, and I turn to see Minnie climbing down from the vw bus.

She is always beautiful. Beauty crossed with anger. She wears polka dots and stripes, her hair around her shoulders. And like Lillian, she carries a basket, but hers is filled with wine and shortbread cookies and a carton of Lucky Strikes that she will leave on my kitchen table. She nods to me, mouths my name, and walks into the house.

I follow but stop shy of the doorway when I hear their first words—*hey* and *what you making?* I picture Lillian looking up from the colander of rinsed strawberries and Minnie standing still, trying to decide where to set her things. I should follow

Minnie, but what would I say? That I'm trying to move on, that some days it's easy and others impossible?

The Lingstrum child is crying now and LuLu is kissing her finger. Titus holds the rabbit and it burrows against his chest.

Across the yard, Saul sets the kielbasa on the grill, and the picnic table is crowded with dishes, and Vita Hull and Esther Wild are mixing drinks. Mrs. Laurent, our elderly neighbor who rarely leaves her home, sits in an aluminum chair and closes her eyes, then leans her head back, her face to the sky. No birds, only bare cloud lines and a swatch of blue. The lawn lies green and sparse under sandals and sneakers and bare feet, the lake is level behind the standing and sitting and roving guests, and the screen door yawns and slams.

*The afternoon is a bright, uncertain thing filled with those arriving, waving and calling.*

Minnie is beside me. Lillian is crossing the lawn to join the ladies with their tall drinks.

"Hey, baby," I say.

"Hey, Royal." She blinks and smiles.

Her perfume reminds me of our past, and I'm sad and filled with longing all at once.

"You invited everyone, didn't you?"

"I did. Didn't mean to, but it just happened. To be honest, the kids had more to do with it than me."

"I know they did. They even found your Lance Corporal and brought him." She points in Titus's direction. "I think Lu's kind of sweet on him. But she's way too young, and he's a good boy. Treats her like a little sister. Nothing going on, don't worry." Minnie reaches for the second button of my shirt, where I'd given up, and holds it between her fingers.

"I wasn't."

"No, you weren't." She lets go. Grins at me. "But you should. Especially if he keeps on hanging around." She brushes her fingers against my sleeve and moves toward our friends, our neighbors, stopping at Lillian's side to laugh and put her arm around her.

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The evening closes in and the party's laughter opens out. Fireflies dart and spin in the dimming light. Cream custard and berries are working their way around the cold interior of the basin, which rests in the bucket of rock salt and ice. There is uncertainty in your mind, about what you have chosen from this life, and you try to move forward, past all the thinking and back into this yard full of friends enjoying themselves. But the uncertainty persists. Uncertainty combined with the acrid scent of mosquito repellent, the ladies downing their fourth and fifth drinks, Lu watching Titus as he plays the guitar, Saul leaning in toward Minnie and Lil, the Lingstrum child running across the lawn to you and the ice cream bucket, begging for a chance to turn the crank.

Things you cannot do with one arm: hug your daughter, drive a car, carry a load of firewood, row across the lake, turn the crank on an ice cream bucket, build a porch, shoot a rifle, make love, make amends. This is what people think. This is what people will tell you. You never argue. You never disagree and muddy their misconceptions. You let them have them. With ice and rock salt at your side, you invite them over one day. It is summer, and they are neighbors and old friends, and they comment on the rabbit hutches, how your son must have helped construct them. You nod, knowing that he did, for a day or two, then disappeared long enough that you tried to finish them on your own. And then your daughter showed up because she knew her brother had abandoned you. Even with a tool belt at your waist, there was still the need for another pair of hands.

On your porch, the floor still smelling of new pine, the screen door sighing but not yet creaking, you carry out the bowl of chilled cream custard, the sugar and strawberries. The metal basin is waiting inside the bucket of rock salt and ice, its sides glistening with condensation. The little Lingstrum girl looks up in expectation and you say, "It'll be a while yet." Still, she stands by the bucket while you pour the bowl's contents into the basin, add the dasher, and cover it tightly with the lid and hand crank. She reminds you of LuLu at age five, all wide eyes and curiosity. She touches your empty sleeve, and you smile. The crank goes around easily, your left hand on the handle, until you feel a little hand on top of yours. It is small and warm, with

the barest weight, and you remember the weight of your rifle and the way there was never a breeze, the weight of your new wife in that first week after your wedding, the weight of your dreams that come every night.

You wish for better things. Friends who laugh without worrying how you will take their jokes. Lillian's smile when she looks up from her dock to see you out on the water, your single oar angling alongside the canoe, sending you across to the other side, your direction straight and steady. The moon crossed by cirrus clouds, rabbits resting in their hutches, the breath of night deep in your lungs.

The small hand is still over yours, helping you turn the crank, not taking anything from you and giving you nothing you've asked for, but there, slight and new, returning again and again with each revolution, bringing you both closer to something sweet and unexpected on this still afternoon.



## THE INCONSISTENCY OF SUNLIGHT

Elisabeth met Neveah the day the ice storm hit. She had noticed her before then, the way she always noticed children. She guessed Neveah was between eight and ten. She admired her bright red hair.

“I thought red hair was supposed to skip a generation,” Elisabeth called to the mother one day, not long after they first moved in. They were letting themselves into their town houses at the same time, two doors apart.

The mother laughed and said something like, “Not in my family.” She looked close to Elisabeth’s age, a few years past thirty. Elisabeth watched the mother-daughter set of heads, wild and curly, until they disappeared inside, closing the door tightly behind them.

And then February came, with a spate of wintery weather unusually harsh for their southern city. Elisabeth had always lived in places where it snowed most of the winter, cities where legions of snowplows rumbled the streets before dawn and nothing ever shut down. But in Columbia, South Carolina, everything closed at even the prediction of snow. The night before the ice storm Elisabeth laughed, watching the ticker tape on TV of all the closings while the sky stood placid and clear outside her window. But in the morning, when she attempted to walk her cairn terrier, the parking lot was frozen so solid that if Elisabeth had packed her ice skates when she moved she could have spent the day practicing figure eights. The only way to keep her footing was to let go of Toby’s leash. Cars sat in their parking spaces, tires stuck in the ice. The water in the neighborhood pool was too deep to freeze. It stood very still and glassy, not a ripple, as if trying to imitate as exactly as possible the sheets of ice beneath Elisabeth’s feet. Crystalized magnolia leaves curved into archways, making the neighborhood look actually pretty, probably for the first time since it was built twenty years ago.

Neveah showed up around eleven, minutes after the power

went out. Elisabeth's TV and internet had popped and then disappeared, along with an explosion from somewhere outside, and then everything shut down with an exhausted *humph*. She'd been watching episodes for the paper she was writing for her pop culture seminar, tentatively titled "Suspension of Disbelief and the Inconsistency of Sunlight in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*." The image of Spike's platinum blond head lingered on the flat-screen for a fraction of a second, lasting the slightest bit longer than her lights and heat. Earlier Elisabeth had drawn the curtains, and as she moved around the apartment thrusting them open she heard the first knock—distant but distinct, three assertive raps on a neighbor's door. A minute later, the same raps sounded on her own door. Toby jumped off the couch and ran in circles, barking. When Elisabeth looked through the peephole, all she saw was the crown of a small head, covered in red-gold curls.

"Hi," said Neveah when Elisabeth opened the door. "The power went out."

Elisabeth held the door open wider, and the girl walked inside. She wore pilly fleece pajamas and clutched an iPhone in one hand. Her feet were bare. Elisabeth cringed a little at the sight of the small, naked toes. She looked over Neveah's shoulder at the icy sidewalk.

"Where's your mom?" Elisabeth asked.

"At work."

Elisabeth shut the door, wondering where the mother could work that hadn't closed down for the day. Everything outside felt still and cold, that sensation of the whole world pausing.

Neveah sat on the couch, pulling Elisabeth's velour throw over herself. Toby jumped up next to her, and she patted his head.

"The power went off," Neveah said.

"I know. It was scary, right?"

Neveah shrugged.

"Are your feet cold?" Elisabeth asked her. "Do you want some socks?"

She shrugged again, but Elisabeth went upstairs and got the warmest socks she had—not wool, but made out of some artificial fabric that was meant to echo sheepskin. Back in the living room, she started to kneel to roll the socks onto the girl's feet, but then righted herself, handing Neveah the socks instead.

“My name’s Elisabeth,” she said.

“Mine’s Neveah.” Elisabeth already knew this, from hearing the girl’s mother call to her. Neveah sat, holding the socks between her two hands. “It’s *heaven* spelled backward.”

“Neat,” Elisabeth said. “You want to put those on? Your feet must be freezing.”

She shrugged again, and then came an indifferent but mildly obedient lifting of the throw and pulling on of the socks.

“So,” Elisabeth said. “Where does your mom work?”

“At the Quik Mart, near Southside.”

“How did she even get there? My car is frozen in its spot.”

“I was asleep. She goes early sometimes.”

“Are you hungry? Do you want some lunch?”

Neveah said, “Sure.” And then, “What do you have?” She put aside the throw and stood, following Elisabeth across the open floor plan through the archway into the small kitchen. The refrigerator held nothing but yogurt and orange juice. Elisabeth had ignored the local news’ warning to prepare for the storm, and for the first time, she felt worried. She should have gone to the store, stocked up on dried fruit and bottled water and canned goods.

“Looks like our refrigerator,” Neveah said.

“I have some peanut butter. You’re not allergic, are you?” When Elisabeth lived in Colorado, she’d worked at a day care, so she’d known for a long time that peanut butter could be a touchy subject.

“No,” Neveah said. “Some kids in my class are. But the school doesn’t care. You’re allowed to bring it in your own lunch as long as you don’t share.”

“What grade are you in?”

“Third.”

Elisabeth spread peanut butter across wheat bread. Third grade meant she was eight, nine at the oldest. She tried to imagine leaving her child alone while she spent the day at work, especially in a storm.

Neveah said, “Is your husband here?”

“I don’t have a husband.”

“I see him sometimes.”

Elisabeth handed her the plate, chipped china from her wedding. “Sometimes my friend Paul stops by,” she said.

Neveah pointed to the side table, crowded with framed pictures of Anna. "Who's that?"

"That's my little girl," Elisabeth said. And then, before the question could be asked: "She lives with her dad."

"Is that Paul?"

"No. Eric. They live in Raleigh."

"How old is she?"

"Five."

The lights flickered. From the next room, a little flare came from the TV, a burst of noise and static, and then the whole complex of town houses heaved and shuddered and turned off again. Elisabeth walked into the living room and unplugged the power strip for the TV.

"You better call your mom and tell her you're here," she told Neveah, who set to texting with one thumb, peanut butter sandwich held in her other hand. Elisabeth went back into the kitchen to pour a glass of orange juice.

She'd had the job at the day care in Colorado nearly twelve years ago, when she and Eric were first married, but before Anna was born. Neverland was inexpensive, with rickety playground equipment and donated toys. Many of the kids were subsidized by social services. Elisabeth thought one of them, a four-year-old girl named Lyric, was being abused.

"Go ahead and call social services," Eric would say. They'd dropped out of college together, but after a year he had decided to return so he could apply to law school. He had stopped drinking, but she hadn't yet. The year Elisabeth worked at Neverland, every conversation they had took place over a stack of thick textbooks, Elisabeth with a beer or glass of wine in her hand, Eric's eyes never quite settling on her.

"I could get fired," Elisabeth said.

"Why do you want to work in a place where they'd fire you for looking out for a little kid?"

It was a rhetorical question. Eric knew exactly why. The owner of Neverland was frazzled and humorless. In a corner of the giant room where all the kids played, someone had hung a sign that read, "If you suspect abuse or neglect, DO NOT call social services. Tell Judy or Marilyn." Elisabeth knew this was against Colorado's mandatory reporting law. But she didn't

take a stand, because if she quit or got fired there'd be no one left who really cared about the kids—Lyric in particular.

Neveah's mother texted throughout the day. The text alert was set to a whistling sound that made Elisabeth jump. She found the stack of new board games she'd bought for Anna's next visit and unwrapped Operation. By late afternoon the apartment was so cold that the only place bearable was Elisabeth's bed. She

*Around them the power flickered, trying to start up, failing again. In the pale light from Neveah's phone, they could see their breath.*

decided to use the last of her laptop battery to watch a DVD. Neveah thumbed through Anna's collection and chose *Mrs. Doubtfire* ("Text your mom and ask if that's OK"). They huddled together under two down comforters,

the soft socks pressed against Elisabeth's legs. Neveah was a cuddler like Anna, moving in close, and Elisabeth placed Toby in between them. They were halfway through the movie—near enough to seven that it was dark outside—when the mother arrived, with a far less assertive knock than her daughter's. Toby popped up, barking. Elisabeth bolted off the bed and ran a hand through her hair, smoothing it down as if she'd been caught at something.

"Hey," the mother said, when Elisabeth opened the door. "Thanks so much. I hope she wasn't bothering you."

"No, of course not."

Neveah made her way downstairs using the flashlight on her phone. Her hair stood on end, as if she'd just woken from a nap. Elisabeth said, "It was fine. It was fun."

Around them the power flickered, trying to start up, failing again. In the pale light from Neveah's phone, they could see their breath.

"I'm Elisabeth," she told the mother, who hadn't asked. It seemed like she should want to know the name of the person who'd been watching her daughter for the past seven hours.

"I'm Michelle." She was pretty, in a fresh-faced, freckled way. Short, and the tiniest bit plump. She peeked around Elisabeth

and said to Neveah, who had stalled at the bottom of the stairs, “You ready to go, Princess?”

Michelle might have been younger than Elisabeth first thought. Her voice was light, full of deference and caught breaths. There was nothing in it to indicate that it had been an odd thing to do, leaving a little kid home alone for so many hours during a storm and power outage.

The long-ago girl from Neverland, Lyric—her mother had been barely twenty-two. Elisabeth felt a flash of anger at these too-young mothers, bestowing ridiculous names and then balancing one mistake after another on top of that first, constructing a tower of teetering blocks. Elisabeth might be living three hours away from her kid, but at least she knew someone responsible was taking care of her. At least she’d given her a normal name.

Hours after Michelle and Neveah left, the power finally wheezed back to life. Elisabeth carried her comforter downstairs and sat on the couch, retrieving her notebook and pen. Her paper’s focus was the way the insignificant vampires were easy to kill, crumbling to dust under the first rays of sunlight or the barest stake to the heart, while Angel and Spike survived no matter what happened to them. In the scene Elisabeth watched, and rewound, and watched again, a ray of sunlight hit Spike’s hand, making it ignite, and Spike shook his wrist, extinguishing the flames as a minor annoyance. Most of the kids in her pop culture class had never watched *Buffy*. Most of them also had not started working on this paper, the final project for the semester. It was one of the benefits of being older, a wider view on pop culture and a better understanding that something that’s been worked on longer will be higher quality in the end.

The HVAC worked furiously trying to restore the apartment to its frugal sixty-three degrees, but Elisabeth could still see her breath. She pulled the comforter closer. Her feet were cold—she’d forgotten to get the socks back from Neveah.

Because Elisabeth had worked while Eric finished college and then went to law school—and because he’d always been a generous person—she’d been awarded a percentage of his future earnings, even though he had custody of Anna. It wasn’t a huge percentage, but a meaningful one, enough that she didn’t need

a job as long as she lived modestly, and enough that as his star rose so did the number on the checks that arrived monthly, always dutifully on time. Since he'd remarried, his wife wrote the checks, sometimes adding a little bit of news on the memo line. "Eric made partner" or "Anna got a 100 on her spelling test."

Elisabeth had moved three times, following Eric's career so she could be in the same town as Anna. When he told her they were moving to Raleigh, she decided to go back to college and applied to schools in North and South Carolina. "It'll be OK," Eric promised, when the school that offered her partial scholarship was three and a half hours away. "You can come visit. She can stay with you for vacations."

Two weeks after the storm, Elisabeth walked up to the mailboxes to collect her check. She saw Michelle's car heading out of their neighborhood and looked in the backseat for Neveah. Several times since the ice storm, Neveah had shown up on her doorstep while her mother was at work. Elisabeth wondered where Neveah's father was, if he helped out at all. She opened the envelope as she walked toward home. The amount was the same, nothing but a smiley face on the memo line. Elisabeth walked the long way around to her house, stopping in front of Michelle and Neveah's door. She had given Neveah her number and sometimes would get texts from her. But she hadn't initiated contact herself. It felt wrong to approach someone else's child without permission.

"Just pick up the phone," Eric used to say when Elisabeth told him her suspicions about Lyric. "She's already on file with them, you know she is." Social services paid the bulk of Lyric's fees. "Just call them and tell them you're worried."

All these years later Elisabeth still didn't believe herself when she remembered telling Eric she needed to be at the school to protect the child.

"But you're not protecting her," Eric had argued. "You're just standing by. You're not doing anything."

Finally Eric said, "If you don't call, I will."

"No," Elisabeth had said, taking the phone out of his hand. "I'll do it."

A few days later she got a letter stating that a social worker had been assigned to the matter, and then a month later another letter to let her know the investigation had closed. Only the

absence of Lyric's father—no longer picking her up or dropping her off—gave any indication of the results. Whenever she told the story to someone else, the other person responded with praise. *You rescued her.* But all Elisabeth ever felt, remembering, was the shame at how long it took her to act at all. If she had imagined the situation before it ever happened, she would have imagined herself reacting immediately, up in arms without hesitation.

*You there?*

The text came an hour or so after Elisabeth watched through her upstairs window as Michelle drove away.

*Yes, she wrote back. Where are you?*

*Home.*

*Is your mother there?*

*No.*

Elisabeth waited. She'd thought about going to Michelle and offering to watch Neveah while she was at work, making the arrangement official. But it seemed like Michelle was at work all the time. Sometimes Elisabeth saw Neveah hopping off the school bus at the end of the complex's driveway, trudging home with her shoulders hunched, the iPhone to her ear, her mother's car gone from its parking space. Sometimes Elisabeth would get texts from Neveah while she was with Anna in Raleigh, walking with her through the petting zoo at the Museum of Natural Sciences, or at the trampoline park. *Sorry, she would have to text Neveah. I'm out of town.*

*Are you home? Neveah texted now. Can I come over?*

*Sure. I'll come get you. We can walk Toby.*

Elisabeth had been shuffling through her Netflix queue, trying to remember which episodes featured Angel surviving the usual vampire-killing methods. She stood up and put the leash on Toby. Outside, Neveah emerged wearing her key around her neck, the iPhone clutched in one hand.

"Don't you want to put a coat on?" Since the storm, the weather had warmed considerably, but the air still held a chill. "And shoes, too. Flip-flops aren't warm enough."

Neveah turned and unlocked her door without removing the key from her neck. She had to bend a little, her red curls falling over the doorknob. She was small for her age—short, like her



mother, but skinny, all angles where her mother's edges rounded, spilled over.

She emerged a few minutes later wearing a sweatshirt and sneakers, but no key. Elisabeth didn't say anything. Last week Neveah had left the key behind, locking herself out as a way—Elisabeth guessed—of making it impossible to send her home.

The door closed and latched behind her. "Can I hold the leash?" Neveah asked. They walked past the neighborhood pool, up to the busy street that bordered their neighborhood. Elisabeth raised an arm, preventing Neveah from crossing prematurely; across the street was another housing complex, with retention ponds and nature trails behind it.

"Where's your mom?" Elisabeth asked, when they were safely across.

"Working."

"Oh yeah? What time does she work until?"

"Eleven. Maybe midnight. Depending on if they need her."

"What do you do for dinner when she's gone so late?"

"Microwave mac and cheese."

When Elisabeth used to try to get information out of Lyric, the girl would sit in her lap, lips pressed together as tightly as possible, doing everything she could to keep the information inside. Neveah was four years older than Lyric had been. Lyric would be a teenager now, with no memory of Elisabeth at all.

Back at home, while Neveah clicked through Netflix for a show to watch, Elisabeth googled "age a child can be left home alone." According to a website called [latchkeykids.com](http://latchkeykids.com), it varied from state to state. South Carolina was one of the states with no minimum age.

From Neveah's phone, which she had left on the kitchen counter, came that urgent whistle, a text from Michelle. Neveah ignored it, focusing on the TV screen. Elisabeth glanced at the phone's lock screen. *I love you sweetie xxxo mommy*. The words floated above the wallpaper, a picture of Neveah and Michelle in matching bikinis on a beach. Elisabeth averted her eyes, feeling guilty for snooping, and for suspecting that Michelle didn't love Neveah at all.

What Elisabeth *had* done immediately with Lyric was go to Judy, the director of Neverland, and report what she'd seen—Lyric simulating fellatio with the anatomically correct baby doll.

“It’s just kids,” Judy said, waving her hand as if Elisabeth were being ridiculous. “Kids playing around.”

Elisabeth stood there—only twenty-one at the time, battling a brutal hangover. She thought how much easier life would be if she could just agree with Judy and stop worrying. In a group of underprivileged children, Lyric was the most underprivileged. Her parents were the only ones who didn’t pay the twenty dollars a month for swimming lessons. On the days all the other kids left for the community pool, Lyric and Elisabeth would stay back at Neverland playing Go Fish or walking around the dusty playground. Elisabeth offered to pay the twenty dollars herself, but Judy said it wouldn’t be appropriate.

Sometimes Elisabeth would sit on top of the slide with Lyric on her lap, the little girl facing her but looking away, far into the distance, at some unknowable point.

“You can tell me,” Elisabeth said, many times over the course of the summer, “if someone’s hurting you.” Tears would spring to Elisabeth’s eyes, a fury in her voice. No one would have known that all the while she was doing nothing. “I’ll protect you,” she promised. “I’ll make it stop.”

Lyric would sit, her hands closed around the hem of Elisabeth’s T-shirt, her lips sewn together so tightly Elisabeth could almost see the strands of thread, the tiny holes where the invisible needle had been inserted and then withdrawn.

Sometime in mid-March Paul made a reappearance, calling to ask Elisabeth out to dinner. She hesitated, less because she hadn’t heard from him in a while than because she thought it was one of Michelle’s working nights.

“I don’t get it,” Paul said, when she tried to explain. “You said you’d babysit?”

“No.” She was walking across campus. Before she could say anything else, her phone barked, the noise Neveah had programmed for her texts. Just like Michelle’s whistle, the noise always made Elisabeth jump a little.

“No,” Elisabeth said again, though Paul was silent, expecting an explanation. “I’m not babysitting. I can go to dinner.”

Hanging up, she looked at Neveah’s text, a series of emojis. She had arranged them—eyes, feet, hands—to look like a person, dancing.

*Wow, Elisabeth texted back. You’re so clever.*

In three days, Anna was coming to spend the week for spring break. Elisabeth sat in her car, watching bluebirds gather in the sweet gum trees on the quad, her phone still cradled in one hand. Then she googled Columbia South Carolina Department of Social Services and hit *call*.

All through her dinner with Paul, Neveah texted. *Where are you. When are you coming home? And finally, If you don't come home soon, I'm going to have a heart attack and die.*

"It sounds like you did the right thing," Paul said, when Elisabeth showed him the texts and told him she'd reported the mother. She needed this, his approval. She couldn't shake the feeling that she'd done something underhanded and cruel. It was true Michelle left Neveah alone, for long periods of time, and often. But she wasn't really left alone, was she, with Elisabeth to take care of her?

"I wouldn't leave my dog alone the way she leaves that kid," Elisabeth told the social worker. Hours later the memory of the words sounded angry, vicious.

Elisabeth didn't hear from Neveah the next day, or the next. At home she listened to see if she could hear any official sounding knocks from two doors down. She kept an eye on the parking lot for unfamiliar sedans, the respectable but beat-up kind of car a social worker might drive. Her own divorce and custody had been decided without any intervention, largely because she had conceded so fast. But there had been a time when she worried about too much beer or wine in her refrigerator and not enough fresh fruit. She knew a woman, a friend of a friend, who'd lost custody of her child because she smoked in the house next to open windows. Now, she battled the worry that DSS would do too much—take Neveah away from Michelle—or too little, maybe nothing at all. As she prepared for Anna's visit, Elisabeth cleaned and shopped as though a social worker would be knocking on her door instead of Michelle's. The fruit bowl was brimming, the crispers full of fresh greens and brussels sprouts.

On Friday she drove to Raleigh to get Anna, bringing the dog along so Anna would have company in the back seat. Eric was still at work, so the new wife was there to greet her, helping Anna gather up her things, kissing her stepdaughter goodbye

while Elisabeth slouched in the doorway. Anna's hair had been halfway down her back last time Elisabeth saw her. Now it had been cut into a bob, just over her ears, making her look taller somehow, and older. *Who decided to cut her hair without telling me?* Elisabeth wondered. She wanted to ask the new wife. *Was it you?* She imagined it scrawled on the memo line of a check. *We cut Anna's hair.* Although Elisabeth didn't say anything, her glance must have been pointed enough. "It's so much easier to take care of," the new wife said, apology in her voice, one hand absently stroking the top of Anna's head as if she were her own.

On the drive back to Columbia, they listened to *Free to Be You and Me* along with CDs of *Between the Lions*. These days it always took Anna a little time to remember their old closeness.

She would be tentative, polite, as if Elisabeth were a new babysitter. But by the time they got to the town house, she was comfortable enough to be whiny and bored. Elisabeth showed her the new games. Although

*Although she usually slept hundreds of miles away, whenever she finally had Anna with her, the distance of the downstairs bedroom seemed impossible.*

she usually slept hundreds of miles away, whenever she finally had Anna with her, the distance of the downstairs bedroom seemed impossible, unacceptable. They slept together, Anna's warm little limbs tangled up with her mother's. Throughout the night, Elisabeth woke, checking Anna's breathing with a hand over her heart, or pressing her hand to Anna's forehead. Her palm felt inaccurate, unpracticed.

"What do you want to do today?" Elisabeth asked Anna the next morning over breakfast.

Anna sat across the table, picking the strawberries out of her cereal and laying them on the Formica table. Her blue eyes looked clear and her face pleasantly flushed.

"I want to go to the mall," she said. Last time she'd visited, Elisabeth had taken her to the Richland Mall, which had a food court, a hurricane simulator, bouncy houses, and a glow-in-the-dark mini golf course.

Outside, as she bent over to buckle Anna into her booster seat, her phone barked. Anna jumped a little, exactly the way

Elisabeth usually did at the sound. Then they both laughed. The text was a series of blinking emojis. Elisabeth stood by the car, hesitating. Anna's being here had almost obliterated the feeling of dread over what her phone call to DSS had set in motion.

*Cute*, she texted back.

*Watcha doing?* Neveah's standard way of asking to come over.

"Listen," Elisabeth said to Anna. "There's this little girl next door. Would you mind if she came along with us?"

Walking through the mall a few steps behind the two girls, Elisabeth battled a rising panic. They stopped at the sunglasses booth, where she bought each girl a pair, then realized that anything she did for Anna she would also have to do for Neveah. The budget she'd allotted for this visit with Anna—and the special things they would do—started dwindling in her mind. Of course, it was Neveah's spring break too. What was Michelle's plan? To simply leave Neveah there, every day, alone in the town house while she went to work? Like she was a houseplant?

Walking beside Neveah, Anna looked calm and contained in the way of well-cared-for children, whereas Neveah's air was electric, all quick movements and darting eyes. Anna hadn't taken off the new sunglasses, child sized with zebra stripes. The simple innocence in this, sunglasses indoors, made Elisabeth's heart constrict.

"Why did you choose those glasses?" Neveah asked Anna, as they walked into Forever 21. If Neveah hadn't been along, Elisabeth would have bought Anna headbands and scarves for the dress-up box in her room.

"Because I like them," Anna said simply, missing the criticism implied in Neveah's voice. The ones Neveah had chosen were adult, several dollars more expensive. Neveah put her glasses on too, obscuring most of her face.

"Neve," Elisabeth said, a little more sharply than she meant to, nodding toward the green silk headband Neveah clutched in her hand. "You need to put that back." Elisabeth always called her Neve in public, not wanting people who assumed she was her daughter to think she'd chosen that name, Neveah.

Neveah held up the headband instead of putting it back. "Will you buy it?" she said.

Anna slipped her hand into Elisabeth's. It felt damp and clammy.

"No," Elisabeth said. "We've bought enough today." She squeezed Anna's hand and started to walk out of the store. "Let's head home," Elisabeth said.

"But can we do the hurricane?" Anna asked, her little voice rising, already disappointed.

They walked through the food court—Elisabeth ignoring Neveah's request for Dairy Queen—to find the hurricane simulator. It was a glass cylinder, big enough for both girls, pictures of hurricane devastation plastered on the inside walls. Elisabeth closed the heavy, transparent door and plunked in the coins until the wind started to pick up, rising with the laughter inside the sphere. When the wind reached its full strength of 145 miles per hour, their hair stood straight on end and the laughter reached the very edge of happiness, shrill and excited, morphing into shrieks. Anna reached out as if to grab Neveah for comfort, then pulled both her arms in—instinct protecting her from toppling in the wrong direction.

At home Elisabeth made strawberry smoothies while the girls played Sorry at the coffee table.

"We should rearrange your room," Neveah said to Anna, when Elisabeth handed them the drinks. "Move the furniture around, change it up."

"OK," Anna said. She stood, letting Toby fall to the ground, and followed Neveah down the hall, her smoothie in one hand. Neveah left hers on the coffee table. Elisabeth waited, wondering if she should follow.

"Mom," Anna called from her room. And then, something she hadn't called her in ages, which Elisabeth didn't realize until she heard the word: "Mommy!"

Elisabeth thundered down the hall. Neveah was pulling down pictures, the posters Elisabeth had tacked up, Babar's art museum, a mother giraffe kissing her newborn on its forehead.

"Neveah," Elisabeth said. "You need to stop this right now. Stop it."

Anna burst into tears. Elisabeth held out one arm and Anna stepped under it, leaning, her face pressed into Elisabeth's side.

"Look," Elisabeth said to Neveah, trying to make her voice

sound less harsh, more reasonable. “I think you need to go home now.”

“But my mom’s not there. She’s not home till after dinner.” The Babar poster was still clutched in her hand, a piece of it left on the wall beneath a thumbtack.

“I’m sorry, but this is my time with Anna.”

“I don’t have my key.”

“Then you’ll have to call your mom and tell her to come let you in.”

“She won’t like it.”

“I’m sorry.”

Elisabeth picked Anna up, balancing her on one hip, her weight and length so much more substantial than the last time she’d carried her. She went back into the living room, where she grabbed Neveah’s smoothie and brought it to the kitchen, pouring it down the sink and then perching Anna on the counter.

“She’s not answering,” Neveah said. Anna had stopped crying, but her face looked streaked and pink, her breath still coming out with little shudders.

“I’ll call her myself,” Elisabeth said, snatching the iPhone out of Neveah’s hand.

Michelle picked up almost immediately. “Hi, Princess.” And then, cutting off Elisabeth’s lengthy explanation of why Neveah had to leave: “Look. I didn’t even know she was with you.”

“You didn’t know she was with me,” Elisabeth echoed, in a voice that sounded disapproving enough that she instantly regretted it. Michelle would know without a doubt who had called DSS, if they ever appeared.

There was a sigh like her daughter’s on the other end, as if Elisabeth were the one being impossible. “Just send her home,” Michelle said. “She can wait on the stoop. I’ll be there when I can.”

“How long do you think that will be?”

“I’ll be there when I can,” Michelle said, more firmly, almost menacingly, the tone you use with a child who’s about to push you over the edge.

“Fine.” Elisabeth hung up and thrust the phone back at Neveah. “Your mother says you can wait on the stoop. She’ll be there when she can.”

“My mother says that.” Neveah’s eyes narrowed, the unspoken question clear: *What do you say?*

Anna sat on the counter, quiet, eyes wide. Elisabeth curved one arm around her waist. The small room smelled like strawberries and yogurt. Anna’s face looked quivery, while Neveah’s looked defiant, chin thrust forward.

“I’m sorry,” Elisabeth said. The sound of the words reflected an irreversible hardening. “You have to go now, Neveah. I’ll see you another day.”

“What day?”

“I don’t know.”

Elisabeth waited in the kitchen with Anna until they heard the front door click. Then they started a new game of Sorry. Elisabeth forgot to listen for Michelle’s car, forgot to step outside and check to see if Neveah still sat there, waiting for her mother. Hours later, leaving to take Anna to Red Robin for dinner, she saw that the stoop was empty, the porch light turned off. Michelle’s car was not in its parking spot, and she couldn’t determine through the drawn blinds if a light was on inside or if the glimmer she thought she saw was just a reflection from the streetlamp.

The barking texts stopped completely. For her last night with Anna, Elisabeth booked a room at the Washington Duke in Durham. They swam in the hotel pool and walked on the nature trails with Toby before Elisabeth had to deliver Anna back to Eric and the wife.

“I’ll see you in two weeks,” she told Anna, having to pry the little hands off her, the last thing she wanted to do.

Back at home, Elisabeth entered and exited her apartment like a criminal, worried about being seen. She read for her classes, and watched *Buffy*, adding to the paper that Buffy’s super strength seemed to ebb and wane according to whom she was fighting. Sometimes she would check her phone to see if Neveah had texted and she’d somehow missed the barking noise. She thought about texting her on afternoons when Michelle’s car was missing. But she never did.

Walking to the mailboxes one day—the semester done, all her work handed in but grades not yet posted—Elisabeth saw Mi-



chelle and Neveah walking back from the pool. Michelle carried a pink Styrofoam noodle under one arm and they both wore bikinis. Michelle's stomach pooched out, visible from a distance, while Neveah looked like a cricket, all pointy elbows and knees.

Elisabeth paused for a moment. It was too late to turn around; they would have already seen her. They probably registered her stopping to think about bolting back to her apartment, which was incriminating enough. She righted her shoulders and started walking again.

"Hi," she said to both of them, too brightly.

"Hi," Michelle said, not at all bright but dark, her chin pointed forward like Neveah's had been that last day in the kitchen.

"The pool's open, huh? I guess I'll see you there a lot this summer."

"I guess so." Michelle was the one speaking. Neveah had turned, wrapping her arms around her mother, hiding her face in that fleshy, exposed middle.

"Hey, Neveah," Elisabeth said, but Neveah wouldn't look at her. Michelle stroked her daughter's head protectively.

"I haven't seen you two in so long," Elisabeth said. "I thought maybe you'd moved."

"No, we haven't moved." A beat or two, and then Michelle said, "Come on, Princess," her hand moving to Neveah's shoulder. She maneuvered her around Elisabeth, an awkward production as Neveah wouldn't move her face or her arms. Elisabeth stood watching them go, leaning into each other, lurching toward home like a lopsided, two-headed beast.

Noise from the pool, children splashing and laughing. Elisabeth wished she'd worn her sunglasses; the light was too bright. In the mailbox, along with catalogues and coupons, were two letters. One from social services. One from the new wife, Elisabeth's monthly check.

Michelle and Neveah were safely out of sight. Elisabeth opened the DSS letter. It said the matter had been investigated, that charges hadn't been filed, and that help had been provided. *What kind of help?* Elisabeth wanted to ask. Part of her wanted to march after Michelle and Neveah, rap on their door, demand to know what kind of solution had been reached. Instead, she ripped the letter into halves, fourths, eighths, sixteenths, and then shoved the little pieces into the pocket of her shorts.

“Marco,” she heard from the pool. “Polo.” Elisabeth was glad to be reminded of that game; she would play it with Anna when she arrived next week. She turned the letter from the new wife over in her hands, imagining the news that might be written on the check’s memo. *Anna lost a tooth*, it might say, or *We’re expecting a baby*.

That night, Toby woke her, jumping out of bed and running to the front window, barking. Elisabeth followed him and looked down into the streetlamp’s dusty light. A pickup truck was pulled up to the curve, still running. Behind the wheel sat a man, not helping Michelle as she carried a box and put it into the bed of the truck. Elisabeth watched Michelle carry a few more boxes and then, on the last trip, she carried Neveah—too big, too long limbed to be carried, especially by her mother. If her legs hadn’t been wrapped around her, they would have dangled almost to the sidewalk. Elisabeth wondered if she were dreaming. She watched Michelle maneuver Neveah sideways into the backseat of the truck. Then she climbed in, and the man drove away.

The night stood in a silence that felt eerie for spring. There should have been crickets, cicadas, the jangling of Toby’s collar. Some time passed—how much Elisabeth wasn’t sure—and she found herself walking downstairs, barefoot, out onto the sidewalk.

The door to Neveah’s town house swung open, unlocked, as if Michelle hadn’t even bothered letting it latch behind her. Elisabeth had never been in here before, but it had just the same layout as her place, with the small down-

*Part of her wanted to march after Michelle and Neveah, rap on their door, demand to know what kind of solution had been reached.*

stairs bedroom and open floor plan through the first hall. She stopped in the bedroom that must have been Neveah’s—small bed still there but stripped and thumbtacks with the corners of posters still clinging. She thought of Neveah, reaching up to tear them away, careless. Or maybe Michelle had done that while Neveah slept. In the living room the furniture was still there, but it was the kind of furniture you could leave

behind if you had to—cinder block and two-by-four shelves, a drooping couch with the musty scent of Goodwill still clinging to it. Elisabeth turned toward the kitchen. On the counter between the living room and the kitchen lay a folded piece of paper with her name written on it. There was a *z* instead of an *s*. *Elizabeth*, in neat letters, printed, so she couldn't tell whether Michelle or Neveah had written it.

She had no way to know for sure if they were gone for good. They might return any second and find her here. Elisabeth unfolded what she thought would be a note, ironing out the creases with the flat of her palm. Nothing—just blank paper, wide ruled, the left edge frayed from being torn from a notebook. She turned it over. There was nothing but her misspelled name.

She could hear Toby from two doors down, barking, objecting to her middle-of-the-night disappearance. And her heart, too, beating calmly, despite the sound of a car outside. She listened to it pulling up, the engine turning off, doors slamming. And then stillness as they went into a different town house, closing the door, disappearing into invisible lives. Elisabeth wondered if she should call 911. She wondered if she should get into her car and drive to Raleigh. Load Anna into it and drive her away in the night.

“What did you want?” she asked the blank piece of paper. “What did you want to tell me?”

There was nothing but the sound of her dog, still barking from two doors down, and the night—she realized now—pulsing with spring music and the promise of summer heat, and feeling silent just the same.

## BETTER HOMES

**M**y plot is about halfway down the beach, counting from where it turns into that sort of sandy marsh at the north end, and close to the access road that leads into town. The beach is more than a mile long, maybe even two miles, and it's covered with plots like mine. I'm lucky: I've got a good spot; there's even a little shade. Not everyone gets shade, and it can really be a lifesaver, especially in these early stages, when you've got nothing to lean against and no place to hide and the California sun just keeps on galloping down your neck. The man in the plot to my right has even more shade than I do, but the woman in the plot to my left (this is left and right when facing the water, of course) has zero. So I'm feeling pretty good.

I've seen the man before, at last year's competition. I don't know his name, but I remember the castle he built, huge and smooth like a skull, with a narrow hole in the crown, just big enough for him and his necessities. I heard he lasted a long time. I wave to him as I measure out my plot in paces. He waves back. He's not handsome, but there's something about his wide, clear face, sand-colored itself, that I find appealing. He's pacing too, and we must look strange, taking wide parallel steps and waving to one another. Like queens. But these early decisions are crucial: set your foundation too close to the water, and it'll be washed away like *that*. Set it too close to the rocks, and you're dealing with the stiff slope of the beach, the coarser sand, and the high winds, not to mention longer toting distances. You have to find the perfect balance. Which I do. I draw a line in the sand with my toe. Then I unpack my backpack and line up my tools along the toe mark: shovel, bucket, spade, and the biggest palette knife I could find at the art-supply store down the street from my new apartment. The rest of my supplies I leave in my backpack in the pool of shade.

The woman on my left does not respond to my wave. She is pacing quickly, measuring tape flipping around, all her other supplies strapped tight to her body with fancy Velcro straps and

harnesses. Her brown hair is sleek and shiny, and she keeps reaching up as if to tuck it behind her ears, finding it untuckable (that is, already tucked), and then going back to work with extra ferocity. This woman means business. I'll have to keep an eye on her. I grab my bucket and head down to the water.

Everyone builds sandcastles as a child. Even I did, though I didn't see a real beach until I was an adult. I always loved sand, though. I used to sit in the community sandbox down the street from our crooked little duplex for hours, turning a cracked plastic cup over and over to make towers, digging out windows and outlining bricks with a dead pen my mother had given me to play with. Or maybe we had found it there, buried. I can't remember. I do remember my mother watching me while I worked, sitting on a peeling park bench, smoking a cigarette. Once, I picked a lipsticked butt out of the sandbox, waddled over, and climbed up next to her on the bench, copying her movements. It took her several minutes to notice me and knock the sandy cigarette out of my mouth. She didn't say anything, or gasp in disgust, or even sigh. She recrossed her ankles and tapped out some ash.

When you grow up, you stop building sandcastles, of course. Unless you don't. Unless you discover a talent for it, or at least a passion. If you don't want to give up your sandcastles, you become a Builder.

Most of the time, that doesn't mean much. You have a particular affinity for beaches, maybe. You spend hours playing in the sand with your kids, or your sister's kids, or your neighbor's kids, or whatever kids you can find lying around. You take a pottery class, and all of your pots end up with spires and drawbridges. You get into sand art. You move to Florida. It depends on your temperament, really. But once a year, there's a competition for all the Builders in the country, or at least all the Builders who can get to this particular stretch of beach in California. It's called the Sandcastle Experience.

Honestly, I felt grateful to get the invitation this year. I hardly get any mail anymore, and I didn't know if the organizers had my new address. But somehow that intrepid little card made it to my mailbox, and I knew that it meant that this was the year I was going to win.

Here are the rules: Everyone is randomly assigned a plot. No switching. You are allowed one medium-sized backpack—they

have a sizer at registration, like the ones for carry-on luggage at the airport—which must contain all of your tools, food, water, and whatever other niceties you think you need to survive. You have twenty-four hours to build your sandcastle, during which no one else may enter your plot for any reason. After that, it's simple: the last castle standing wins. If you are inside your sandcastle, no one (except the sea, or the wind, or other external forces such as God or coyotes) can knock it down. If you are not inside your sandcastle, your sandcastle is open to attack. You may, of course, defend your castle if you are not inside it (and to be clear: “inside” means “enclosed within”—Dadaists take note: even if you have an army of disconnected walls scattered around your plot, it doesn't count). When your castle is knocked down, you are out. You are not allowed to use any mixers (cement, tar, egg whites) in your sand to increase the strength of your castle walls. Also, no guns. I heard that one year some guy built himself a thick brick of sand and just camped out inside of it with a sniper rifle. Most people were happy to walk away once they saw that, but there were six dead, in the end. After that they added the “no guns” part.

There are different strategies. Some Builders swear by simplicity: four ultrathick walls and nothing else. Their packs are filled only with food and fresh water. Some people spend all their time building moats threaded with wooden spikes to keep out would-be attackers. Some are in it for the design aspect, the challenge of building something extravagant and beautiful in just twenty-four hours, and they go big with the drawbridges and barbicans. Some try to use that beauty to their advantage. This one guy, two years ago, built his sandcastle in the shape of an enormous pair of praying hands, big enough that he could fit between the palms. The hands were amazingly detailed: they had fingernails, and knuckles, and even little errant hairs. One hand had a long scar down its side. The other had a constellation of freckles. I like to think that when the man was inside, he was reading the creases of the giant hands' palms. I like to think that he gave whoever it was a good, long lifeline. He counted a bit too much on other people's respect for his castle's religious overtones, though. When he went to refill his water bottle at the gas station across the street from the beach, his neighbors dusted it.

Me, I'm not too big on the religious overtones or extravagant curlicues (or not anymore, anyway). My plan is to go simple,

but with some frill so it's clear I'm not just one of those survivalists who don't even care about making their castle look like a castle, who just want to wait everyone else out without really participating. One way or another, those people tend to get eliminated pretty quickly.

This is my third Experience. The first year, it was just for fun. My husband and daughter came to California with me, watched me build and took pictures inside the castle I built. There's one—of my daughter holding up a spade, grinning, her ponytail dipped in sand, while my husband tries to wipe his hands clean in the background—that I just love. I'm not in any of the pictures, of course. I was always the one taking them. That year, after I'd stuck it out for a couple nights, a respectable length of time, I collected my gear, abandoned my post, and treated my family to a huge pasta dinner at a little Italian restaurant across town from the beach. I'm sure my castle was knocked down within the hour, but I didn't mind. I didn't even go back to check.

Last year, they didn't come. Last year, the Experience was held the same week my daughter left for college, which she did with more of her things than I thought possible and with a promise to *not* ever come home for the holidays. This was, incidentally, also around the time my husband left me for—get this—a much *older* woman. She's a paleontologist. He finds her *distinguished*. So perhaps

*My plan is to go simple, but with some frill so it's clear I'm not just one of those survivalists who don't even care about making their castle look like a castle.*

you won't judge me when I say that I can barely remember last year's Experience. I admit it: I was a wreck. I think after I'd blown my nose on everything that wasn't covered in sand, I just wandered

off looking for tissues and/or whiskey and got eliminated that way. But this year will be different. I've had enough of losing.

There's no official information about what you get if you win the Experience. I've heard they give you an actual castle of your own, somewhere in New Zealand or rural France, and your property taxes are paid every year by everyone else's exorbitant

entry fees. But that's just a rumor. After the closing ceremony, which very few people are usually around to see, no one ever really hears from the winner again. Probably on account of his or her life being completely changed by all that money and happiness.

One year, the winner was a woman who built a tiny castle, the size of a tennis ball, and actually kind of the shape of a tennis ball, too: just a mound of sand hastily pulled together, with a toothpick flag stuck in the top. She hid the castle under her bucket and left her tools scattered everywhere, so that when other Builders came marauding, looking for castles to tear down, it looked like she was out and they ignored her plot completely. The woman wandered around for a week, waiting for other people to sneak out of their castles so she could knock them down. Finally, after she razed a fortress (it could have fit a family of four) whose owner was out desperately looking for the other holdout on the empty beach, she was declared the winner. She's not back this year. I heard her parents' home, somewhere in Pasadena, burned down under suspicious circumstances.

I begin by tracing the shape of my castle in the sand. It'll be a sort of squat square, with rounded edges and, if I have time, some nice battlements. Nothing fancy. It's boring, but I'm trying to maximize my chances. I build the sea-facing wall first, tiring out my legs going up and down the beach to get the good, wet sand. It takes a long time. My legs burn. Note for next year: incorporate hills into my daily run. (Unless next year I find myself living in a castle in New Zealand, in which case there will be no running of any kind.) For a while, I keep pace with the guy on my right. We chat as we carry our buckets of sand. His name is Leonard. It's his sixth year in the contest. Last year, he confirms, he got pretty far.

"What's your secret?" I ask him.

He tries to wink, but he's panting a little from hauling sand, so he ends up looking sort of like he got caught in the middle of a sneeze. It's cute.

The woman on my other side does not respond to my polite greetings or questions. She is methodical, almost robotic. All her tools are brand new and have matching sky blue handles; she is also wearing new boots. Most people, including me, go barefoot in the sand, both for the comfort and for the nostalgia



factor, but I can see how the boots give her extra traction walking up and down the beach to the water. I picture her home, which must be spotless, her children, who must sit all in a line on her couch in identical sweaters, raising their hands when they have something to contribute to the conversation. Her children would never leave her. They're far too polite.

To be clear: it's not that my daughter isn't polite. She's plenty polite to other people; she must be, or she wouldn't have gotten anywhere in life (and she's a neuroscience major at a fancy school, so). But she was never polite to me, even as a little girl. It was always about her daddy. She forgave him everything: when he missed her soccer games, when he forgot about her choral concerts. When he drank so much he passed out at the dinner table, one ear sunk into his coconut cream pie. Even when he slept with one of her teachers—her *math* teacher, a prim woman who was, now that I think about it, also older than me—she cried and cried but called him at the hotel every night so he wouldn't feel alone. (He wasn't, of course, alone.) I'm sure he told her it was all my fault. That I hadn't loved him right, that I had driven him into the arms of another—that old story. She forgave him. She got an A in math, which was not her best subject, and after that she forgave her teacher too. But me? Nothing I do is forgiven. When they finally left, my daughter told me I was a monster. My husband told me I was disgusting. People in glass houses shouldn't throw stones, I told them, but they didn't seem to know what I was talking about. I guess my daughter's precious father never taught her about proverbs.

By the ten-hour mark, I've built two walls: the seaward wall and one sidewall. I've left the wall toward Leonard open. I feel more comfortable about the idea of him watching me sleep than the woman. She's someone my husband would probably want to fuck. When we still lived together, he constantly admonished me for my messiness, my laziness, my lack of matching tools. He likes order, refinement. Maybe he's even slept with her already. But I think that about everyone now.

When I'm spent, I lie down on the little bed I've made from the driest sand I could find (you think sand is soft until you try to sleep on it) and sink my face into the inflatable pillow I brought in my backpack. I have to force myself to eat a granola bar before I fall asleep. I'm nervous, and I never want to eat

when I'm nervous. I set my watch to wake me up in six hours exactly. I have a lot of work left to do, but I've seen what happens to people who don't sleep in the first twenty-four hours. I won't take any chances.

At hour twenty, my shovel breaks. The handle snaps clean off. I still have half a wall to build, and now all I have to work with is a sharp-edged metal pan and a wooden stake. I could slay a vampire or, I don't know, enter a discus-throwing contest, but I can't finish my sandcastle. I can't help it: I start crying. The woman to my left looks over and frowns. I wave again, even through my tears, because screw her. She turns her back to me. She's putting the finishing touches on what looks like a smaller version of a tower that might hold some kind of crooning, follically blessed princess. She's even outlined bricks the way I used to when I was a child.

"Hey," Leonard says from my other side. "Yikes."

"Don't mind me," I say, waving the pieces of my shovel at him. "Just another loser, here."

Leonard disappears into his egg-shaped castle for a moment (this time, he's put the entrance at the bottom so it looks a bit like a tall yurt) and then pops back out again. He waves a shovel like a flag. It's not the one he's been using; this one's red. "You want?" he says.

"Are you serious?" I say.

Leonard shrugs. I hear the woman on my left clear her throat dramatically, but I don't turn to look at her.

"It's not the best," he says. He walks up to the edge of his plot and sticks the shovel in the sand on my side. I come forward and pick it up. There's a crack in the handle, and it wobbles a bit, but it's a whole shovel.

"This is really nice," I say.

"It's extra," he says.

"But you didn't have to," I say.

"It's no big deal," he says. He looks less tired today. His egg-yurt is mostly done, so it looks like he'll have time before the next stage to cross the road and get extra supplies from the gas station, if it hasn't been completely cleaned out by the survivalists.

I thank him again and then we stand around smiling at each other for a few seconds, neither of us sure what to say, until he

shrugs, turns, and goes back to work. I do the same, filling in the final piece that will make my sandcastle a viable building and not just a series of packed lumps waiting to be kicked apart, but I keep looking up to see where Leonard is. I want to wave my new shovel in the unnamed woman's face, but I don't have the time to spare. It's hour twenty-three when I finish. I've left a small hole in the back wall for a door, but otherwise I am completely enclosed in my castle. I get to work on the battlements. They're just for show, but they make my castle look more like a castle, and I'm feeling pleased with my new shovel and also with myself for having finished in time. I look over at my neighbors: Leonard, back from the gas station with a few bruised bags of Flamin' Hot Funyuns, is drizzling water over his perfect egg to cement the outside. The woman is already sitting in the top of her tower. She has little windows built in, and through them I can see the curve of her brown head, but nothing of her face.

The second day is quiet. No one in my line of sight down the beach leaves his sandcastle. Most people have brought enough supplies that they're still comfortable, or as comfortable as they can be, and the weather is holding, so there's no real reason to even try to sneak out, other than boredom. To that end, Leonard and I have discovered that we can talk to each other quite easily while remaining safe in our castles, me resting my chin on one of the little indents I carved out, him just sort of yelling from inside his egg. He tells me he's a widower with two sons in the army and that he lives on a little plot of land in Atascadero with an old basset hound named Bongo and six chickens.

"Ah," I say. "Hence the egg."

"It's one of the strongest shapes around," he says. "That and the female body."

"I don't know about that," I say.

"That's normal," he says. "But I've got a feeling about you."

A thin laugh spools from the tower on my left, and I realize with a jolt that of course the woman can hear us. The piled sand had given me a sense of privacy, like a cell phone held to your ear in public. I feel my face get hot.

Leonard doesn't notice the laughter. He asks me about my daughter. What he actually says is "That strong body of yours has given birth, I'll bet."

"She's a smart girl," I say. "She's majoring in neuroscience." I don't tell him that I haven't spoken to her in almost a year, or

that I actually have no idea what she's majoring in now, because no matter who picks up when I call her school, they won't release any information about a student without that student's consent. I don't tell him that the last time I saw my daughter, she was sitting in my husband's car, refusing to look out the window at me, while he told me about the papers I could expect to receive and what I ought to do with them. Even when I pressed myself against the glass and said her name over and over again, smearing up the window with my lipstick, she wouldn't look.

*I don't tell him that the last time I saw my daughter, she was sitting in my husband's car, refusing to look out the window at me.*

"You must be a wonderful mother," he says.

I start to cry again. At least this time no one can see me through all the sand.

That night, Leonard slips through the makeshift doorway in my castle wall. I hear him coming and sit up.

"Hi," he says.

"Hi." I'm wearing a purple flannel nightgown that's seen better days. It gets cold at night on the beach, but any sleepwear gets, as you might imagine, more or less completely ruined in the sand. He's wearing a ratty sweatshirt that says YUKON on the front and a pair of baggy sweatpants that say SYRACUSE down the leg, so I don't feel so bad.

Leonard comes over to where I'm sitting. He has to sort of scootch/crawl because the walls of my castle aren't very high and he doesn't want to be seen.

"I couldn't sleep," he says.

"Why not?" I ask.

"I was thinking about you."

"Thinking what?" I ask, although I think I know.

"I want to know all your secrets," Leonard says.

"I don't have any," I say. "I am secretless."

Leonard smiles, as if I am a naughty child caught in an obvious lie. "You remind me of something," he says. He puts his hand on my breast.

"Something like what?" I whisper. He kneads my breast

thoughtfully. It's the left one, the smaller one. I wish he had chosen the right. My nipple stands up inside my nightgown.

He is quiet for a long time, kneading. I have to work hard to keep from breaking the silence.

At last, he says: "Home."

I sit back a little bit. Then I reach down, pull off my underwear, and spread my legs wide.

I wake in the morning to the sound of Leonard's screaming. I'm curled up, the way I always used to sleep with my husband, only of course my husband is not there and I'm covered in sand. Leonard stamps a foot and more of it flies into my face.

"You bitch," he says. "You stupid whore."

I sit up. "What?" I'm hurt, and a little sore from the sex, and I'm starting to think there's some sand up inside me, and now there's sand in my eye.

Leonard kicks more sand at me, then leaps away. I look around and see, through my battlements, that his beautiful egg is nowhere to be seen.

"I can't believe I fell for this," Leonard says. He picks up his cracked shovel and shakes it at me. I don't point out that it was he who offered me the shovel, not to mention came into my sandcastle all on his own in the middle of the night and started in on the sweet talk and fondling. Instead, I just stare at him.

Leonard crouches to leave my castle, but then suddenly rights himself. He turns and looks at me. Then he spits in my direction. The spit doesn't get far because he's a little dehydrated, like all of us, and as I'd recently discovered, he has only average tongue strength, but I still understand the message and feel wounded.

"I take it back," Leonard says. "All of it." Then he whips around and crashes straight through the doorway without ducking, in fact swinging his reclaimed shovel, taking half of the back wall down with him.

I jump up, all insult and soreness forgotten. "Cheater!" I yell. "Cheater!"

Leonard begins to kick at the crumbling wall. "Oh yeah?" he shrieks. There's more yelling and swearing and name-calling, but his voice soon thickens to a clod in my ears, and I can't differentiate one word from another. He sounds like my husband, only less so, because he doesn't know which words will hurt me

most. It's during this torrent of abuse that the Castle Guards appear, wearing their bright blue T-shirts and plastic helmets. The shorter of the two has one of those decorative broom things sticking out of the top of his helmet, like a Roman soldier, and it's bright red. Everybody knows the Guards have Tasers in their scabbards.

"Plot 83?" says the broom-headed Guard. "You're out."

"Also, illegal destruction, two counts," says the other. "Destruction while occupied and destruction after elimination." He's writing this, or something, anyway, down on a little pink pad.

"You're going to have to come talk to the eligibility council," Broom-head says. "And you better come along right now. You're definitely going to be facing a fine. And this could bar you from participating next year."

The other guard is now taking photos of my destroyed wall. "Big, big fine," he says, as though he finds the idea sexy.

"This is horseshit," Leonard says. "It was her fault!"

The Castle Guards shrug. "You know the rules, Leonard. Now come with us."

After Leonard and the Guards disappear behind a dune, I notice the woman in the tower staring at me. I wave. She raises her eyebrows at me and gives me a weird sort of smile. I almost give her the finger because, again, screw her, but I don't. I might not want to make any more enemies just yet.

I spend the rest of the day repairing my wall. You'd think the Guards would grant me some special dispensation or something, but they don't return, so I make certain to stay inside of the structure as I'm working. I want to ask the woman to keep watch while I get the wet sand from the water line, but I don't trust her. Instead, I dig a hole. It's hard work without a shovel, and by the time I hit moisture my hands are red and raw and I'm bleeding from somewhere underneath my fingernails. But I don't care. I repair my wall from this new well of wet sand, slathering it on and packing it together, making it even better than it was before. I've already had to move once this year. I won't let another home get destroyed.

After the third night, people begin getting bolder. Most of the Builders who came only to show off their construction skills or

build their art portfolios or meet other Builders and have weird sand-fetishist mermaid sex have been eliminated—they've carefully photographed their castles for posterity and walked down the beach to stretch their legs and admire everyone else's work and maybe find some good *shawarma* and then come back to empty plots. As they knew they would. They don't care. They're just like I was my first year. They all have real homes to return to. But the rest of us are getting antsy. Most of those people won't be back, anyway. You could say that they're in the Experi-

*It should be obvious by now that if you go out to destroy someone else's castle, you're leaving your own undefended.*

ence for the experience. The Builders who come back year after year, who need it, who feel more accepted, more normal on this stretch of beach than they do anywhere else, or who just want their escape from the world to last

forever—those are the people who really belong here. And if you belong, it's more likely that you'll last.

Now I can see people sneaking up and down the beach, looking for unoccupied castles to ransack. I wonder where their own castles are. It should be obvious by now that if you go out to destroy someone else's castle, you're leaving your own undefended. Unless you've worked out some kind of system, of course. I've heard some people put knives in their moats. I've heard some castles are booby-trapped. I don't have a system. I still have some food left, so I'm staying put. I figure, why not wait for everyone else to fight it out for a little while?

"Hello," someone says. It's the woman. She's standing on the edge of her plot, looking at me through the battlements.

"Hi."

"Getting interesting out there," she says.

"I guess."

"I call it stage three," she says.

"Have you gotten this far before?" I ask.

"We should team up now," she says. "We're more likely to survive stage three if we team up. One of us can run interference while the other goes destroying."

"How can one person guard two castles?" I ask.

She smiles. “Mostly by trickery,” she says.

I look over my shoulder at Leonard’s empty plot.

“You might prefer *that* kind of teaming up,” she says, following my gaze. “But I’m afraid that’s not really on offer. Mostly because it never works.” She has a smug little smile on her face. I notice suddenly that she still looks completely clean. There’s no sand in her hair or mashed into her knees, and her manicure is still in place. She might as well be sitting in her living room at home, waiting patiently for a set of illustrious guests to arrive. She has that vibe.

“I prefer to go it alone,” I say. “But thanks.”

“Don’t be stupid,” the woman says. “They go for the castles that look easy to knock down first.”

“Yours looks easier than mine,” I say, without knowing if this is true.

The woman snorts but quickly collects herself. “Fine,” she says. She climbs back into her tower.

That night, I decide I’m tired of waiting. The woman to my left is still in her tower, apparently asleep—I can just barely see her ponytailed head through the little window—so I sneak out. Leonard took his cracked shovel with him when he left, and so I bring the pieces of my old one, which are better than nothing. I clutch the broken handle in my hand as if it were capable of emitting light. On the other side of Leonard’s plot, an old man sits in a little square castle, barely wider than a telephone booth but with a pretty peaked roof, holding a camp flashlight under his chin. *Move along*, his face tells me. I force myself not to look back at my now-unguarded home, so as not to give anything away. Not home. Castle. I keep moving.

Farther down the beach, I find what I’ve been looking for: a castle that seems unoccupied. I approach it warily. It is small and bowl-shaped, with a circular opening at the back. Inside I find the typical backpack full of clothes and supplies, plus a pink blanket, a pillow, and a little battery-operated clock radio. Someone has painted little hearts and stars on the clock radio in glow-in-the-dark paint. I can imagine it: mother and daughter painting the little hearts and stars together, then turning out the lights and going *oooooooo*. It’s love, this little clock radio. I throw my body against the back wall of the castle. It doesn’t budge. I back up a few steps, treading sand all over the pink



blanket. Then I run again, and this time I break through the wall, landing hard on my shoulder on the other side. After that, it's an easy task to dismantle the castle. I am like a whirlwind, with the slice of metal in one hand and the stake in the other. I am like death.

When the curved walls are completely decimated, reduced to little piles of loose sand, I take one final look. Somewhere in the process, I've stepped on the clock radio, and I can see its weird metal guts poking out into the sand. It's bad form to destroy a fellow Builder's personal belongings in the process of attacking their castle, but it's recognized that it happens. I feel a little sorry. Then I stomp on the clock radio again and again and again, grinding it into the sand.

I run back to my own castle, lungs raw. It might be over for me now. I've been gone for a while. But when I get there, I see that it's still standing, and the relief I feel is like dropping into a bath. Or like coming home. This could be my new home, I think. My husband took my home away, and not only my home, but my house too, claiming that having bought it meant it belonged to him. But he didn't even live in it. He just cleaned it top to bottom, threw out everything that had been mine, and then sold it to the first person to make an offer. I wrote an anonymous letter telling the buyer all about the asbestos, the leaky roof. I got a letter back, from my husband's lawyer, but I didn't open it.

On the afternoon of the sixth day, I'm lying on my back inside my sandcastle, watching clouds. Once or twice, sand-covered people poke their heads over the walls to see if anyone is inside. I wave at them, and they go away. The clouds are moving quickly, and they seem to be changing color, gaining weight and darkness, though it can't be later than two. No, it's not just the clouds. It's the whole sky that's getting murky. At first I think I'm just falling asleep, or maybe passing out—I've been rationing the hell out of my water—but then I hear what is unmistakably the screech of a megaphone. Castle Guards begin walking up and down the beach, informing us of the THUNDERSTORM WARNING. COMPETITION IS SUSPENDED UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE. PLEASE MEET AT THE SAFETY POINT.

Panic pinches me. I have no idea how my castle will fare in a downpour. Better than those intricate confections some people

make, probably, but what if it's completely washed away? What if all the castles are completely washed away? What will happen then? I gather my things as well as I can while keeping one eye on the clouds, which at this point might as well have glowing red eyes and outstretched claws and be calling out my name. Before I leave, I nestle my bucket upright in the sand, to catch myself some extra drinking water. Do I congratulate myself for this foresight? I do indeed.

The safety point is a high school gym located a few streets inland from the beach's midpoint, as fair a location as possible, we were all assured, but still a significant distance from my plot. As I walk away, I can see for the first time the spread of remaining castles, and the many blank spaces where castles used to be, like a long row of brown teeth—once strong and now rotting, knocked out and broken. There must have been more than two hundred castles at the beginning, and from what I can see now, it looks like less than a third are left. Other Builders are walking toward the safety point too, but no one speaks, or even gets within range of speech, except one group I see far ahead of me, who seem to be walking together and talking, even laughing and touching one another. I realize I might have waited for the woman on my left, looked for her, walked with her. She wanted to be my teammate, after all. But still, it seems better this way, just moving silently forward through the sand to the place where they'll tell us what to do next.

The gym is small and dingy; I can only imagine what the high school it belongs to must be like. Then again, everyone's high school experiences are small and dingy, once you get a little distance. There's a big red M painted on the floor of the gym, along with thick curving lines that undoubtedly have meaning to those who watch basketball. One of the hoops has no net. Blank pennants hang on the walls: the students here have not won very many state championships, except for Girls' Lacrosse '04, which is something, at least. My heart fills for Girls' Lacrosse '04. The bleachers have been pulled out from the wall, and there are rickety tables set up in the middle of the room with what looks like bug juice and little packets of snacks in little plastic bags: one per person. Castle Guards tick your name off on a little sheet when you collect your food, so it's fair to everyone. I get my juice and snack pack and, feeling like a fourth grader, find a spot on the bleachers to wait out the storm.

The last time I was in a room like this, my daughter was in eighth grade, putting on a Christmas pageant. I remember they had all the kids walk in with penlights clutched below their chins, singing a song: *It is better to light just one little candle than to stumble in the dark.* I thought it was ludicrous at the time, all those kids walking toe to heel like brides, singing a repetitive and obviously metaphorical song, but now I'm tearing up just thinking about it.

The gym begins to fill with people. By the first crack of thunder, there are some seventy Builders milling around, talking, eating, or napping, and I'm surprised to see that we're actually a pretty diverse group. There are, perhaps, slightly more men than women, but the ages and races and sizes vary wildly, from the short, fat black teenager flirting for extra juice to the old, translucent woman hovering under the netless basketball hoop, looking up at it, or maybe through it, as though it's going to hand something down to her. One man has curled himself into a ball in a corner. Two women are sitting back-to-back on the bleachers, spades out, alert to attack, even here. A middle-aged man with a rapidly deflating paunch is crying in the middle of the room, even though two women, equally middle-aged, are vigorously rubbing their breasts against him, petting his wispy hair, and making cooing sounds. Lots of people are sitting alone, but lots of people are also talking to one another, just socializing, perhaps, or maybe making deals, plans, pacts. I should, I think, join them.

But I don't move. It's not that I'm afraid to talk to people. I'm not. People like me. Or, I should say, they like me at first. It's around month six that something sours. That's when people seem to decide they've made a mistake. It's not something I understand; I feel like I'm the same person at month six as I am at month zero, but the pattern is unmistakable. I tend to get fired after half a year at any job. Other women decide they're allergic to my perfume, nothing to be done, it's really too bad, sorry! Even the Korean pen pal I had in the third grade gave up on me after a few months. (That or she died. I never found out.) I saw it happen to my husband, saw the love drain out of him, almost immediately after we were married, even as I loved him harder and harder. But I was pregnant, and he was stuck, and he stayed for a long time. I guess that makes him a good man.

I used to torture myself, trying to figure out what it is that

people dislike about me. But I suppose most of what we feel about other people, good or bad, can't be explained. It's chemical, or subconscious. Maybe it really is my perfume. Now, I feel lucky. Some people don't even get those six months of likeability. A lot of those people are, from the look of things, here in this gym.

"You know Aaron Spencer?" I overhear a muscular woman say to a small group. "Well, Mark and Frank and Michaela snuck up on him last night and began to tease him about his divorce. Apparently after only ten minutes Aaron came storming out of his castle to punch Frank in the face, and that's how they got his castle down."

"Isn't Michaela out?" someone asks.

"Oh yeah," the woman says. "She's been out for days. But there are no rules saying you can't hang around with your friends while they compete, as long as you don't actually help in the destruction. You can *say* whatever you want. And you know how mean Michaela gets, especially after she loses. Remember last year, when she lured Camilla out of that *monstrous* castle by just *mentioning* her son who overdosed?" There is general laughter and head nodding. Part of me longs to join this group, to smile and snicker with them, to be part of them. Isn't that why we're all invited to the Experience? Because we share something, because we're the same? But just looking at the talking woman, with her sharp smile and calloused hands, makes me tired. If, as I am starting to believe, the Experience is the final vestige of the rejected, the stunted, the cruel, the absurd, then joining her hyena pack would mark me irrevocably as one of them. But I am not one of them. I am a winner.

*Part of me longs to join this group, to smile and snicker with them, to be part of them. Isn't that why we're all invited to the Experience?*

I see the woman who has the plot to my left over by the basketball hoop. She's conferring with a group of four men with their backs to me, all in tight black shirts. I wave. She ignores me.

Thunder booms overhead. A fight has broken out on the other side of the gym. Two men are silently pushing each other

up against the red mats that line the far wall. I can only hear their outbreaths and see their bodies mashing together; from a distance, they might be fucking, or hugging each other through abject despair, or both. Their faces are as red as the mats, but their expressions are somehow serene. A pair of Castle Guards power walk past me to break it up.

“None of these lunatics should ever be allowed out in public,” I hear one mutter to the other.

“At least they have each other,” says his friend.

I wonder: Is that what we have?

Around ten o’clock, the Castle Guards declare the thunderstorm threat passed, and we’re given half an hour to resituate ourselves in our castles before play resumes. I look for my neighbor and see her ahead of me, walking briskly back to her tower. The black-shirted men are nowhere to be seen, so I hustle to catch up.

“Hey,” I say.

“Oh,” she says. “You.”

We power walk in silence for a while.

“So who were those guys you were talking to in the gym?” I ask finally. “Your friends?”

She scoffs. “Entirely not,” she says. “Just colleagues.”

“Where are you from?” I ask.

“Why?”

“Do you have kids?”

“Look,” she says, without slowing her pace. “You had your chance to team up.”

“I’m just talking.”

“I’m just walking,” she says, and then she stops walking. “Yes!” she hisses. I follow her gaze and see her tower, still standing. My castle is standing too. “It looks like the storm missed us,” she says. This, I think, is the nicest thing she has yet said to me.

“Thank God,” I say.

“Don’t be stupid.” She rolls her eyes and disappears into her tower. She’s right, though, about the storm. The bucket I left to catch rainwater is empty, and so, nearly, is my water bottle. I probably should have saved some of that bug juice.

At the ten-day mark, I am severely dehydrated. I haven’t had the strength to go out and attack any more castles, or to do

much of anything. I can only sit between my four sand walls to thwart those who now roam in packs up and down the beach. The woman in the tower seems to have the same strategy as I do. I try to talk to her, calling up to her in her tower, but she ignores me.

I can't see any castles except for my own and the woman's, but I think there must be more still standing around the bend of the beach. I eat the last bit of food I have, an apple that's so red it looks like it must be evil. I wipe it off, of course, but the sand still squeaks in my teeth.

Maybe it's a day later or maybe it's a week. Whenever it is, it seems as though I've been in my castle for an uncountable number of days, an uncountable number of hours, when my neighbor approaches, seemingly from the water, as if she's been birthed there. She even looks wet. Like a Bond girl, you know? I'm having a hard time standing up, but I call out to her.

"Woman on my left," I say. My voice is all sandy. "Ahoy."

"Come out," she says.

I don't know what she means. "Have I won?" I manage. "Have I won yet?"

She says nothing. I wonder what she's doing out of her tower. I look up at it blarily and can still see the shape of her head through her little sand window, leaning against the wall as if in sleep.

The woman has followed my gaze and is now smiling toothily.

"How are you here?" I demand. "I can see your head up there."

"I told you, the only way to win is by trickery," she says. So she hasn't been ignoring me. At least not every time.

"You're smart," I say. "But I'm going to win."

"You've already won," she says. "So come out."

I've won! But where are the Castle Guards, coming to give me my prize? It doesn't matter, I think. They must be on their way.

I look around my castle. I don't want to leave. I could just stay here, prize or no.

"I won't come out," I say. "I live here now. This is my home."

The woman scowls at me and then disappears. *Aha*, I think. But then I see Leonard, my Leonard, bent down and smiling at me through the door of my castle. He reaches one large hand toward me.

"I'm sorry about before," Leonard says. "I was a fool."

“Yes,” I say.

“Come watch the sunset with me,” he says. “We can live here forever. You and me.”

“Did I win?” I ask.

Leonard smiles. “Almost,” he says. “Come on.”

So I take his hand. As we walk toward the water, I notice his black T-shirt, and the black T-shirts of the other men who have appeared silently around me.

“Wait,” I say. I turn, but the woman on my left has already begun. I try to go back, to stop her, but suddenly I feel myself held down, pressed into the sand by eight strong hands, all applied carefully to chaste body parts—knee, shoulder, head—so I can’t complain about harassment, and then the woman proceeds to take my castle down, piece by piece. Leonard pets my hair, makes soothing sounds. The woman slices through my battlements with her knife. She punches through my walls. She looks wild, and finally dirty, and thick with passion and anger. She looks, suddenly, just like me. I lie on the sand, under so much polite weight, captured, held, cradled safely between man and sand, waiting for it to be over, so I can start again.

## MY VIKING NAME

### Maiden

In my seventh-grade language arts class, there was a boy I liked. He sat two rows over in a red hooded sweatshirt with his right arm propped up by a cast. I liked him a lot. I liked him so much that I wrote his name in cursive next to my name on the back of my spiral notebook. I liked him so much that I started combining the names: replacing my last name with his last name. Soon enough, I was writing only his name: I had replaced my first name with *Mrs.*

### Married

When I married the boy from seventh grade, it seemed right to take the name I had doodled for so many years. It also seemed wrong. I liked my name. I would miss my name. But his would be easier to use when placing a reservation or calling for take-out. And taking one's husband's name was what one did. Unless one didn't, which I didn't contemplate quite enough. Instead I wrote a poem about it, about losing my name; or, more aptly, about giving it up.

### A Maiden

A maiden is “a young girl,” “an unmarried woman,” “a virgin,” “a tree in its first year of growth,” “a farm animal: unmated,” “the supports in which the spindle of a spinning wheel turns.”

### A Viking

A Viking, on the other hand, is “one of those Scandinavian adventurers who practiced piracy at sea, and committed depredations on land, in northern and western Europe from the eighth to the eleventh century.”

In Norwegian, a *vik* is an inlet or bay. A Viking is thought to be “one who came out from, or frequented, inlets of the sea.” The coast of Norway is full of villages with names such as Aar-



vik, Hoddevik, Knarvik, Leirvik, Ervik. My grandfather, Ragnvald Ervik, emigrated from Ervik, Norway, in the 1930s.

### Planet Earth

The clerk in the basement of the St. Joseph County Courthouse tells me I need \$200 cash, not the \$140 I brought with me. She tells me I need my ex-husband's signature on the forms I present to her. But my ex-husband is in Vermont, I tell her. And he is already my ex-husband. Why should I need his signature to change my name?

On the front door of the courthouse was a sign: NO CELL PHONES OR PAGERS ALLOWED ON THE PREMISES. There were clip art illustrations of a cell phone and a pager. I returned my phone to my car. Inside the building, two security guards were sitting at a table on the other side of the scanner playing Sudoku. One hoisted himself up to screen my bag and wave me through the metal detector. He asked where I was headed.

"The basement," I told him. "To apply for a name change."

"You want to go upstairs for that," he said.

"But the woman on the phone told me to go downstairs."

"Nope. You want to go upstairs. Sorry in advance if I'm wrong."

He was wrong. I went upstairs, and that clerk sent me downstairs to the basement, telling me to return upstairs once I got a case number.

Now, downstairs, the basement clerk is telling me I need more money than I brought and a signature I can't get. She is going through my file of finalized divorce papers and new forms requesting a name change. It's 4:45, and I doubt I'll make it back upstairs before they close for the day.

"Why do I need his signature?" I ask, convinced that this woman is not listening to me. "We're already divorced."

"Oh! I thought you said you were *filing* for divorce!" She conks her forehead with her palm.

She returns to her desk, where she fills out my ten-digit case number on each of the forms; consults with her coworker, who is typing at an adjacent desk, and confirms she has (oops!) entered the wrong case number; then goes back through each form and covers the number with Wite-Out to write it in again. She returns to the counter and asks me to sign each copy.

As I sign the forms, the clerk counts my \$140, which turns

out to be the correct fee for a name change after all, and says, “I don’t even know what planet I’m on!”

Her coworker doesn’t look up from her desk. “Earth,” she says.

### My Name

It’s been a year since my divorce, and I tell my coworker, my daughter’s piano teacher, my hairdresser, and my neighbor that I am changing my name.

“To what?” they ask.

I want to say that I’m changing it back to *my* name, but I know I need to be more specific, and there is only one term I know to call it: my maiden name.

### Maiden Name

“Maiden name” or “maiden surname” was first used in 1686 in *Strange & Wonderful Hist. Mother Shipton*: “The Child . . . was ordered . . . to be christned, which was performed by the name of Ursula Soothtell; For the later was her Mothers, and consequently her Maiden surname.”

### A Weird Law

After downstairs at the courthouse is upstairs. By now it’s 4:55, and I’m grateful that this clerk seems willing to process my papers in the final minutes before closing time. She sets my court date and walks me through the next step of Indiana law: I have to post an announcement of my intended name change in the local newspaper. It needs to say that I, Kelcey Parker, intend to change my name to Kelcey Ervick. It needs to be published—in print—three times in consecutive weeks, and “the last weekly publication shall be published not less than thirty (30) days before the day the petition will be heard as indicated in the notice.”

“I have to do *what?*” I say.

“You’ll probably want to publish it at the *Mishawaka Enterprise*,” she tells me. “It’s the cheapest.”

### A New Name

As the youngest of five siblings in a tiny coastal village, my grandfather Ragnvald Ervik had little chance of inheriting land or a house. Born in 1906, he was twenty-three when he boarded a ship named *America* and landed in America on New Year’s Day, 1930. He left behind a fiancée and never returned for her.

(She never married, I learned, but spent the rest of her life helping to raise her brother's children after their mother drowned in the bay—the *vik*.) In the US my grandfather met a Danish woman, married her, and lived the rest of his life with a new name: Ray Ervick.

### A New Me

But isn't it exciting to be renamed, to imagine yourself as someone new? Perhaps that was part of the appeal of changing my last name. I was twenty-four, finished with college, and ready to start my adult life, to be someone new.

I think of my grandfather's name change as unfortunate, as a loss of his Norwegian identity. I imagine that some government official told him, "This is what we'll call you here. This is how you'll spell it." But maybe he wanted an Americanized name. Maybe the bland name Ray sounded new and exotic to Ragnvald. Maybe he liked the new *c* inserted into Ervik.

I spent a year teaching high school as Miss Ervick. When I returned the following year, I was Mrs. Parker.

But this was not someone new.

*Mrs. Parker, Mrs. Parker, Mrs. Parker*, all my students said.

And I kept looking around for my mother-in-law, the only Mrs. Parker I knew.

### The Great Mishawaka Fire of 1872

It's a quiet, cold morning, and I park in front of the office of the *Mishawaka Enterprise* and peek in the glass windows of the storefront. Seventh Street in Mishawaka, Indiana, looks a lot like it must have fifty years ago: a corner bar sits diagonally across from the corner Catholic church, and there are parallel rows of single-family homes and modest brick storefronts. A few blocks north, parallel to Seventh Street, are the train tracks that run through town.

"Just a minute!" A woman in a dated paisley dress is coming toward me on the sidewalk with a bouquet of flowers. "Sorry about that," she says as she unlocks the door. "I had to stop next door at the florist."

I follow her into the office of the *Enterprise*, a mostly unused space with high ceilings and wood trim. The first thing I notice is a vintage wooden arcade game on the floor, the kind Joseph Cornell would turn into shadow box art. On the otherwise bare

walls are a couple of other vintage items, including a shelf with an old Pepsi bottle and a large thermometer advertising Morton salt.

The print edition of the *Enterprise* is the size of my university's campus weekly and this woman is the only employee here now, but the paper has actually been in print, under a long string of owners, since 1853. Several years of files were lost in the Great Mishawaka Fire of 1872, but the new owner, Edward Jernegan, made sure the paper didn't miss an issue. He was known for writing editorials intended to sway public opinion in favor of new technologies such as streetlamps.

The woman guides me to the left side of the room, where there are two cubicles behind a large counter. She goes behind the counter and sets her wrapped flowers on a desk. I open my purple file folder and spread my paperwork before her, not really sure which forms she will need.

"I'm here to submit an announcement for a name change," I say. Then—I can't help myself—I feel like I have fallen into a parallel world with its own set of arcane rules, and I want someone to tell me that I'm not crazy, that it's the process that's crazy, so I add, "It seems strange, though, to have to announce my intent to change my name three times in a newspaper." I don't say that I may as well click my heels together three times, but I do say, "I mean, doesn't it seem kind of outdated?"

But of course everything in this office is outdated, from the woman's dress to the beige cubicle dividers to the vintage items that are not so much decorations as remains. The newspaper itself is a remnant of the past. And, like the clerk at the courthouse, this woman is not interested in discussing the relevance of the law; she is only interested in carrying it out. She takes my forty dollars and promises to send me notarized copies of the announcement after it has run three times.

On my way out, I say, "How much for that arcade game? Would you take fifty bucks?" But when she looks like she just might consider selling it to me, I decide against it. "Never mind," I say.

### A Different Law

Under Indiana law, maidens do not have to publish their intention to change their name in three consecutive newspaper announcements before getting married.

### Back to the Roots

In 2008 there was to be a reunion of Erviks in Ervik, Norway. *Tilbaken til roten*: Back to the roots. One of my grandfather's nephews, Magnar, who was in his early seventies, did an Internet search of our name and found my sister's contact information. (He did not find mine because my last name was no longer Ervick.)

"Do you happen to be related to Ragnvald Ervik?" he asked her via e-mail.

Then he invited our whole family to the reunion in Norway.

### Back to the Courthouse

Not less than thirty (30) days after the final posting of my intended name change has appeared in the *Mishawaka Enterprise*, I return to the St. Joseph County Courthouse to make my petition heard. This time I remember to leave my cell phone in my car. I set my bag on the scanner and greet the Sudoku-playing security guards. I check in with the desk ladies upstairs, and they direct me to the courtroom doors located on the balcony of the rotunda. The building dates back to 1896, and according to the courthouse website, "One must only walk into the rotunda and look up to witness the truly magnificent craftsmanship that covers the inside of the dome." Until now, I had only been in the stairwells that doubled as storage, the side hallways, and the basement office of files and employees who didn't know what planet they were on. Now I turn from the rotunda and enter the courtroom. Its mahogany walls must be thirty feet high, and there is a grand centerpiece desk for the judge, who has not yet arrived. Behind the desk is an enormous oil painting, a portrait of a previous judge. There are only a half dozen people in the hushed and dim room, and I take a seat toward the back. On my purple file folder that has documented the entire process, I nervously sketch my view of the desk, the portrait, the decorative pillars and woodwork.

The judge enters and proceeds to handle the first case: a couple who own a printing business, representing themselves passionately, if not quite successfully, regarding a matter of improperly printed pamphlets, while the lawyer for the absent other party makes a display of being exasperated with their redundancies and inaccuracies. I stop sketching, having gotten caught up in

the drama. The judge, who seems very judge-like, attempts to convince the couple to resolve the matter here and now, but they refuse, and another court date is scheduled several months later (on account of the judge's vacation schedule).

Then I am called up to the bench.

The judge questions me about whether I am me and whether I in fact want to be renamed. I agree that I do, and I agree that I am free to do so, and then it is done. He signs the documents and pronounces me Kelcey Ervick.

### **The Custom**

Ervik, Norway, is a village on a small inlet on the coast of the Norwegian Sea, about two hundred miles north of Bergen. It's one of the most beautiful places I have ever seen. Surrounded by two modest mountains that jut into the sea, it is a beach-front village set in a lush, green valley. There are only about twenty houses for the seventy-five inhabitants, all of whom are extended family. When we arrive for the family reunion, several households take turns hosting us—eight Ervicks from the us—for a meal: breakfast at Per-Gunnar Ervik's, lunch at Jonfred Ervik's, dinner at Olaf Ervik's. It has been fifteen years since my Pop Pop died, but Olaf reminds me so much of him, with his tired blue eyes and gentle demeanor.

We stay in the house that belongs to Jon Ervik, whom we will soon meet in Bergen, where he is a doctor, and who keeps this as a second house for visits home. We sleep with the windows open, and the midnight sun makes the rooms glow all night long as we listen to the waves crash on the beach.

Between the house and the beach is a cemetery full of stones etched with the name Ervik, including those of my great-grandparents, buried side by side. Pop Pop had seemed so old when he died in 1993 that it never occurred to me that he had parents, that I had great-grandparents. But there were their graves—Johannes and Helene Ervik—and they were alive until the 1950s.

Magnar, who had invited us and served as translator throughout our visit, explained that my great-grandfather Johannes was actually from the neighboring village of Hoddevik and that when he married Helene and settled in Ervik, he changed his name from Johannes Hoddevik to Johannes Ervik. The custom was to take the name of the place, not of the man.

### **My Name Is My Identity**

In the 1850s Lucy Stone became the first woman in the US to refuse to take her husband's name when she got married. "A wife should no more take her husband's name than he should hers," she said. "My name is my identity and must not be lost."

She lived for a brief time in Cincinnati (where I grew up as Kelcey Ervick, where I became Kelcey Parker), where she met her future husband, Henry Blackwell.

She was a featured speaker at the National Women's Rights Convention in Cincinnati in 1855, where a heckler accused her of being merely a "disappointed woman." Stone replied: "In education, in marriage, in religion, in everything, disappointment is the lot of woman."

### **The Lot of Women**

On that November day in the courthouse, my name change became legal, but I didn't take any further steps to make changes on my Social Security card or driver's license or credit cards. I didn't tell anyone, not my family, not even my daughter, until January, when the issue was forced by another legal document: my class syllabus for the new semester.

In each class students asked about my name change: "Did you get married?"

And I explained: divorce, maiden name.

### **A Good Story**

In February, at the Social Security office in South Bend, I sign in at the computer, take a printout of my number, and wait almost two hours in a room crowded with people ahead of me in line. I had come a previous time, and as soon as I opened the front door and saw how many people were there, I turned around and left. I came again the next week, excited to find so many free parking spots, only to find that the office had closed at noon, as it evidently does every Wednesday. Now a toddler in the seat next to me eats chicken nuggets from a plastic take-out bag his mother is holding and uses my arm to prop himself up to a standing position on the seat.

"What are you doing?" he asks me, looking at my book, Barbara Kingsolver's *Lacuna*.

"Reading," I say.

“Why?”

“Because it’s a good story,” I say, though, frankly, I’m a bit bored by it at the moment.

He rubs his runny nose with his free hand. The other is on my shoulder. “Why?” he says again.

“Because,” I answer.

“Oh,” he replies, and his mom tells him to leave the lady alone.

### **This Form of Naming**

Long before I ever went to Ervik, Norway, I was told two things about my last name: that in Norwegian, Ervik was the word for *duck* and that, according to the naming custom in Norway, my father should have been named Gary Ervickson, son of Ervick. Neither of these was quite correct. When I asked my Norwegian relatives about the *duck* translation, they shook their heads. In fact, they didn’t actually know what Ervik meant.

As to the naming, according to the tradition, my father would not have been Gary Ervickson but Gary Ragnvaldsen Ervick. Son of Ragnvald. And if we continued the tradition, I would have been Kelcey Garydatter Ervick. Daughter of Gary. Instead, my middle name is Celia, after my grandmother, the Danish woman my grandfather married after he moved to the US.

On many of the graves in the Ervik cemetery were such identifying names: Serine Larsdatter Ervik, Mari Knudsdatter Ervik, Peder Pedersen Ervik, and Peder Matiassen Hoddevik. Daughters of Lars and Knut; sons of Peter and Matias.

Later I trade e-mails with Magnar, who tells me he is the son of Johannes, and so the name on his birth certificate is Magnar Johannes Johannesson Ervik. He says this form of naming had been a custom from old times, and in Norway and Sweden it ended just a few generations ago.

### **The Wrong Name**

When my new Social Security card arrives, I go to the BMV to get a new license. My current license is not expired, so I don’t expect them to take a new picture; I figure they’ll use the old one that they have on file and just print out a new card with a new name. But they do take a new picture, which is a bummer because it’s Saturday morning and I happen to be hungover.



(Another myth I learned in Norway was that the Scandinavian toast *Skål* refers to the Viking tradition of drinking from the skulls of their recent victims. But apparently it means what most other toasts mean: a wish for good health.)

Before I leave, the clerk has me sign the electronic signature for my new license, and even though I am here to get a new license to match my new name, and even though every bureaucratic hurdle—from the courthouse basement to the courthouse upstairs to the *Mishawaka Enterprise* to the main courtroom to the Social Security office to the BMV—has been for this very purpose, I sign the name I have signed for most of my adult life; that is to say, the wrong name. And she has to erase it from the system and let me do it again.

### A Viking!

A thousand years ago there was another Ragnvald of Ervik, a Viking. In 986 he fought with Håkon Sigurdsson, who was then the ruler of Norway, in the famous Battle of Hjörungavåg. Håkon Sigurdsson believed in the Norse Gods and resisted the Danish ruler, Harald Bluetooth, who sought to impose Christianity on the land. Together with Svein Hakonson, Ragnvald of Ervik and Håkon Sigurdsson controlled sixty ships in a battle against the Jomsvikings.

### Congratulations?

I sign up for a drawing class at the local museum, and by the time the first class is scheduled to start, I have changed my name on my checks and credit cards, so I send an e-mail to the coordinator to let her know.

“Are congratulations in order?” she writes.

“Sort of,” I reply. And I explain: divorce, maiden name.

### My Viking Name

I e-mail my girlfriends—my brilliant, grad-school girlfriends—and tell them I have done it: I have changed my name. Then I launch into a lament about the term *maiden name*. As if the custom (as well as the process) of changing our names weren’t dreadful enough, we have to use this awful phrase. I tell them I want a new term for this former name of mine: I want to call it my Viking name.

*It’s time to rename the maiden name!* I proclaim. I use lots

of exclamation points. *Let us pillage and burn it! Let us rend it asunder!*

Our e-mail thread, which had begun with a renewal of a recipe exchange we started a decade ago in graduate school, now turns into a discussion of the decisions we have each made over the years: of which name we call ourselves, and when and where and why. Throughout the exchange we address one another as Vikings.

Sarah, who is pregnant with her first child and has recently signed a major book deal, says that she finally, after four years of marriage, legally added her husband's last name to hers, giving her a non-hyphenated double last name, which, she reports, confuses everyone from the postman to the obstetrician. She intended to use her name professionally and her husband's name in her personal life, but, she says, "I'm finding this line isn't as definitive as I'd thought."

Lauren admits, "I, too, am confused as hell when it comes to my name." Her married name is fairly common, and she says she still doesn't really identify with all the other women with the same name. The combo of her name with his is a mouthful to say, but she felt compelled to keep her name because, reminding us of her first marriage, she says, "I'd already given it up once (remember that 'Lauren H——' girl? I barely do)."

A friend I'll call Bethany, who liked her original "quirky last name," admits that she "enjoys inhabiting the more serious" name of her husband, which she qualifies by saying, "Even though I do feel, at times, like it wasn't a feminist move."

I tell them I can't believe we have never discussed this before.

## Related

In an e-mail to Magnar, I ask if he thinks we might be related to the Viking Ragnvald of Ervik, and he replies with his typical indirect and wry humor: "By comparing relations between inhabitants in the Ervik nowadays, I should be surprised if we in some way or another weren't related to Ragnvald the Viking."

## A Sad Story

I have a new Social Security card, a new driver's license, and a new name on my syllabus. Now at the bank, the teller says that I need to meet with Cindy to change the name on my accounts. I step into Cindy's office and introduce myself to her. I tell her I

have changed my name and that I need to update my accounts. She searches the system, wondering aloud if any of the accounts have already been adjusted.

I have no idea what she's talking about. Do accounts adjust themselves?

"How long ago did you get married?" she asks as she scrolls through information that I can't see on her screen. "Maybe this one hasn't switched over yet."

I realize that this is where I need to stop and explain that I have not gotten married: divorce, maiden name.

But instead, I find myself clutching the chair's armrests: How long ago did I get married? The answer—almost twenty years ago—comes to me suddenly and painfully, and I can feel it, the weight and heft of all those years of marriage, of those teenage years of doodling his name, and of the last two years of separation and divorce that I have divided into manageable day-by-day, one-step-at-a-time bits. The sheer mass of it threatens to overcome me in Cindy's office at KeyBank.

### **We Forget Who We Were**

Which, it occurs to me later, means that I have not been Kelcey Ervick in twenty years. That Kelcey Ervick hasn't existed for twenty years. Now Kelcey Ervick, who became someone else at the age of twenty-four, has to inhabit the body of a forty-four-year-old. And the forty-four-year-old has to reckon with the twenty-four-year-old she has entirely outgrown.

When I think of who I am becoming, I have to think of who I was. And at first I think fondly of my youthful athleticism and my aspirations. But then I am going through boxes and files, and I come across my old notebooks. Things Kelcey Ervick wrote. Musings about world enough and time, poems wrong in both form and content. It's insufferable, the lot of it. No wonder this person was stupid enough to change her name.

But Joan Didion says in "On Keeping a Notebook": "I think we are well advised to keep on nodding terms with the people we used to be, whether we find them attractive company or not. . . . We forget all too soon the things we thought we could never forget. We forget the loves and the betrayals alike, forget what we whispered and what we screamed, forget who we were."

### **The Present Laws of Marriage**

Lucy Stone had not been inclined to marry, but she and Blackwell wrote numerous letters exploring their sympathetic beliefs, and they fell in love. He agreed that women and men should be equal in marriage and in all other aspects of life.

Their wedding was presided over by Rev. Thomas Wentworth Higginson (better known for being Emily Dickinson's publisher and preceptor), who read a statement composed by Stone and Blackwell at the ceremony: "We deem it a duty to declare that this act on our part implies no sanction of, nor promise of voluntary obedience to such of the present laws of marriage, as refuse to recognize the wife as an independent, rational being, while they confer upon the husband an injurious and unnatural superiority, investing him with legal powers which no honorable man would exercise, and which no man should possess."

### **A Lovely Story**

In our e-mail thread, Courtney tells us what she calls "a lovely story" of a woman who took matters into her own hands after her divorce: "Her mother had gotten divorced and rather than return to her 'maiden' name that she didn't feel attached to, she chose the name of the lake she had grown up sailing on. Her two daughters also grew up on the lake, and together they all changed their names, three women with a new name of their own."

### **Her Own Name**

After her marriage, Lucy Stone instructed people: "Never add Blackwell to my name. If a wife have any character, her own name is enough. No husband would take his wife's name. By the Golden Rule, she should not take his."

She emphasized her point by signing her letters, "Lucy Stone (Only)."

### **Hip Nineteenth-Century Literary Chicks**

Then my smart girlfriends ask me: What name will you use for publishing?

They know I have published two books with small presses as Kelcey Parker. I have a website, [kelceyparker.com](http://kelceyparker.com).

Before I even started the name-change process, I e-mailed

my publishers and told them I was thinking of changing my name. They published my last book, and they are publishing my next book. They did a lot of work to promote my book and the name I now wanted to change. So I was reluctant to tell them, but they—women who kept their “maiden” names when they got married—were very wonderful and supportive. And we tentatively agreed to publish the next one as Kelcey Ervick Parker.

I report this to my girlfriends, and I try to convince myself that three names is hip in a nineteenth-century-literary-chick kind of way: Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Lydia Maria Child, Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Maybe I would even add my middle name and make it four, like Frances Ellen Watkins Harper.

But then I think of Lucy Stone (Only).

### **An Entirely New Name**

Lauren, who is an editor and who is named after Lauren Bacall, says: “I think if I ever publish anything creative, I’ll pick an entirely new last name. Too bad I don’t have a beautiful lake in my past. I also thought of maybe going back to a grandmother’s last name (I think I remember reading that that’s how Betty Perske became Lauren Bacall).”

Bethany tells us of a friend who “just picked a new last name for herself after her divorce—a name that belonged to no one, just one she liked. Maybe that’s the way to publish—with no allegiance to any name but the one you’ve chosen for yourself?”

### **A Preliminary Epiphany**

Almost a year after my official name change, I am being interviewed by a student writer for the university newsletter about a story I published as Kelcey Ervick Parker. The interviewer sends me the draft of her article:

*Parker says that she . . .*

*In Parker’s story . . .*

*When Parker moved to . . .*

And all of a sudden I can see it with such clarity: even with this change to three names I will still be Parker. And I don’t want to be Parker anymore.

### A Question

Lauren asks me directly: “When you open the box full of copies of your next book, what name do you want to see on the cover?”

### A Burning

Years before Ragnvald of Ervik fought against the Jomsvikings, his father, Lodin of Ervik, was killed by a man named Torolv Skjalg.

Ragnvald took revenge by burning the home of Torolv Skjalg, with him inside.

### A Good Idea

Joan Didion concludes that “it is a good idea, then, to keep in touch . . . keeping in touch is what notebooks are all about.”

But I don’t want to keep in touch with the old Kelcey Ervick. I want to start fresh.

I start a fire in my fireplace, and, one by one, I burn my old notebooks.

### An E-mail

I compose a new e-mail to my publisher.

“For the next book,” I write, “I want to be Kelcey Ervick (Only).”

I imagine myself lighting a match.

I hit *send*.

### A Different Epiphany

And so I imagined my triumphant return to my native self. My publisher agreed to my request, and I changed my website, rewrote my bio, updated my blog. I felt powerful, like I’d rendered some violence, severed an unwanted limb. I had reclaimed my Viking name.

I want this to be the end, to say that I am now Kelcey Ervick (Only), but it’s not so simple.

On campus, my students, even those who knew me as Parker, make the adjustment to Ervick faster than expected. My colleagues are a bit slower to remember. My name is constantly misspelled. My daughter’s polite friends don’t know what to call me anymore. I publish a story as Kelcey Ervick and feel am-

bivalent instead of triumphant, though I'm not sure why. I am invited to speak at an awards ceremony at a boarding school, and they send me a draft of the flier that introduces me as Kelcey Ervick, author of *Liliane's Balcony*. I can't help but think: Actually, Kelcey Parker is the author of *Liliane's Balcony*. It says so right on the cover.

That's when I have a yet another revelation: Yes, Parker was my married name, and I'm no longer married, but Parker was also my writing name. And my writing name is, in many ways, even more important than my Viking name.

### My Writing Name

"Maybe you can do the John Cougar Mellencamp thing," Kristin suggests. "You can be Kelcey Parker Ervick."

I know she's right. I've lived in Indiana for ten years now, and the link to Mellencamp appeals to me both ironically and aesthetically. I remind myself once again of those hip nineteenth-century literary chicks I admire. So I discuss the subject yet again with my publisher, and we agree on Kelcey Parker Ervick, which allows me to add my Viking name as a surname, but also to hang on to what has long been my writing name.

### Remains

The Viking age ended over a thousand years ago, but Vikings live on in artifacts, stories, and the mythic imagination. Their words appear in our language. The *viks* where they came from punctuate the Scandinavian coasts. Archeologists are still unearthing remains of Viking settlements far from the Norse lands.

In Ervik, Norway, there is a small mound at the edge of the beach that Magnar pointed out and said is known to be a Viking ruin of some sort. It would be easy not to see the mound amid the rest of the natural terrain transitioning from grass to sand. But it's impossible not to notice the ruins of a stone building on the side of the adjacent hill, where goats are grazing on its overgrown roof. Or the long cave carved into Hovden, the hill that juts into the sea. The cave ends at the far edge of the hill, where there is a concrete circle with a view of land and sea in all directions. "What are these things?" I ask Magnar. He tells me that Ervik was occupied by Nazi soldiers in the 1940s. The Nazis used dynamite to create the cave and on the concrete

circle they had a cannon ready to shoot at Allied ships. The building the goats were grazing on used to be the Nazi dining hall.

The Nazi occupation was not a happy chapter in the history of Ervik, Norway, but its ruins, more visible even than those of the native Vikings, are a part of Ervik's story, and the inhabitants have left the remains.

Parker, I have come to accept, will always be part of me. It shows up on my books and old documents. It's even my daughter's Viking name.

Ervick, I have just returned to. It will take a while to build and resettle.

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Definitions for *maiden*, *maiden name*, and *viking* are from the Oxford English Dictionary.



## INDIAN SUMMER

1977

Nowhere else in the world could there be as many stars. Brilliance blurring, streaks reaching and smearing across the darkened sky. *Is this what they mean by infinity?* Roof to headlight, we lie across my mother's olive-green Pinto, the warm engine baking our hips, our necks, the smalls of our backs. Here in Renville, Minnesota, the farming town where my mother was raised, my sister and I point out constellations—Orion's belt, the dippers, both big and small—and create our own. A tabby playing with string, I say, then point north—a bridge lit up at night. Stargaze, starlight, stardust, utterly starstruck. So many stars.

As if driving by the rows of crops on the way here had not mesmerized us enough. The columns of soybeans and corn ticked by, lane after lane. I'd focus on the spaces, the unused soil, seeing how far each groove snaked off, hoping to catch a line that had veered, proof a farmer had made a mistake.

I had been looking in the wrong place. It wasn't until high school, my grandfather gone for over a decade, that I heard about the accident. The one in the driveway. My grandfather had done it. Hit and killed his own son. Their fifth child. Jerry, they called him.

### A Sad Accident

A tragic affair took place on the Art Kottom farm near here Tuesday when Mr. Kottom in moving a truck accidentally hit his young eighteen-month-old son, Gerald. The lad was fatally injured and died while under a doctor's care.

The funeral will be held at the  
 First Lutheran Church of Renville  
 Saturday, at 2 o'clock,  
 Rev. Strom officiating.  
 The sympathy of the entire  
 community is extended to the  
 stricken family in their hour of sorrow.  
 —September 26, 1940, *The Renville County Star Farmer*

Because my family has spoken so little of Jerry, I want to unearth his past, imagine the parts I'll never know. Perhaps this urge tugs harder now that I have children of my own and would not want their histories, however brief, forgotten. I'm certain if I had learned of Jerry's existence earlier, I could have woven him into my thoughts as I stargazed atop my mother's Pinto in my grandparents' driveway—perhaps in the same spot he was killed. Could have nudged his memory into existence and slowly changed the way things had always been done, in spite of tradition, small towns, and family dynamics. Could have broken the cycle of silence. Perhaps.

#### 1940

Indian summer. An ordinary day. A dusty haze, the stagnant air clenches and recoils against the abnormal heat. Despite the warmth, I imagine my grandmother may have baked Swedish coffee bread early that morning, a family recipe. In Svenska-merika Ada had learned the tradition of *fika*, twice daily coffee break. From the wood-burning stove, a light breeze delivered outdoors the scent of yeast and cardamom, mingling with manure, sun-drenched hay, and sodden soil, all musty and dank. The eldest daughter had since crossed the gravel road to the one-room schoolhouse, leaving the younger in charge.

*Margaret, you've got Jerry, right?* my grandmother said, as she brushed the crusty braid with egg white and a sprinkling of sugar. Perhaps Margaret had been distracted, had turned her back, had not heard the back door creep open. Hard to hear above a boisterous mother and three spirited brothers. A pale, towheaded toddler roams the yard, chubby legs tottering in a threadbare cloth diaper, safety-pinned and pulled snug. Had Jerry stopped to squat—as children often do—to tug at a blade

of grass, clasp a dragonfly, puff at a dandelion? Or maybe he had been steering a toy tractor across tire tracks and over ant-hills.

His father must have been accustomed to checking for children. One last peek in the rearview mirror, one final glance beneath cars, behind bumpers. What had been different this time? Had the boy been in his blind spot? Had shards of sunlight blocked his view? His father may have been distracted—by all the work that lay ahead, all the mouths he had to feed, the looming hours until sundown.

Did he pause, wonder what he'd hit as he backed up the grain truck? Assume it was a tricycle, a raccoon, possibly a farm cat? Or, without a doubt, without a flicker of curious wonder, had his father known upon impact—that slap of a second—what had happened?

*ADA, COME QUICK!*

Undoubtedly my grandmother raced out the back door to her child. Elbows shoving. *What happened?* Pushing. *Help.* No one to hear. Panicked instructions screeched at Margaret. Bellows of *no, no, no, no.* Orders to get him in the car. *Hurry.* The hospital, an hour away. *Go.*

*It all happened so fast.*

How does one recover from such loss, such grief and guilt? Did my grandfather lose himself in his thoughts as he sped by the rows of corn, disappear into grave regret? Perhaps he turned to the bottle. Hard to pass judgment, considering all he had been through. When night settled in, blanketing the land in dark despair, had he turned toward those same stars, thrown his hands in the air: *Why has God forsaken me?* Made deals with God, searching for answers, for second chances? For anything? Truth be told, losing a child was more common back then, especially in rural communities—but this was avoidable, an accident. There was blame to be placed.

2008

When I was growing up and my mother was asked how many kids had been in her family, she'd say seven. *Two boys, five girls.* Always the same. Jerry, the brother she never met, the brother who died in the driveway before she was born, was never mentioned. As a teenager, I was confused by his existence: If

a sibling died before you are born, did they still count? Did you include them in the tally?

Perhaps my mother weighed her brother's brief existence more heavily as hers was slipping away. She was, after all, the first child born after the accident. His replacement, of sorts.

In the final weeks of her life, her head clouded by cancer, her dignity long since departed, my mother was not herself. The nurses and caretakers asked her questions, sometimes to be polite, sometimes to check what remained of her mind. *How many kids were in your family?* a nurse asked. *Eight*, she said. *Three boys, five girls.* My sister and I exchanged wide-eyed glances. We did not interrogate. We wondered if she felt her brother's presence toward the end, though this was hard to imagine with how little his name had been brought up.

It makes sense that my grandmother crocheted each of her twenty-one grandchildren afghans when they graduated from high school. As a girl, Ada had been taught the Swedish belief that when troubled, it is important to keep one's hands busy. I imagine that at some point after the accident, Ada dug out her Swedish spinning wheel with its twin treadles and large drive wheel, threaded the leader through the loop, and spun: hats, scarves, socks, woolen mittens. If she could not keep her children safe, well, at least she could keep them warm.

### 1939

Undoubtedly, like most farm children, Ada's children had been assigned chores. Kenny had been taught how to properly stack the firewood, and the girls to help with the churning, baking, and soap making. All the kids were assigned to clean the eggs down in the cellar. *Margaret, you've got Jerry, right?* And Jerry—was it Jerry who liked to play with the milk spigot, dip his hands in the cloudy water of the drip bowl, climb in and out of the stone butter crock? Delores, the eldest daughter, didn't understand why the younger ones had to help with the eggs—they were more of a nuisance, really—but figured her mother appreciated the half hour of peace and quiet to nap or knit. On occasion, Delores would guide her younger siblings' little fingers across the feces and blood-spattered eggs to include them.

The children made a game of this chore they had grown so

tired of. Delores would ask Dick and Jerry the popular Swedish riddle: What is round as an egg and reaches around a church wall? A ball of yarn. Jerry wrinkled up his nose and giggled at the joke, although he could not have possibly understood. Even Margaret, the child who would let her mother down, the child who would never truly forgive herself, joined in on the fun. That, too, was before. Before Margaret had been asked to watch her brother. Before the weight of the world had been shifted onto her knobby, sun-freckled shoulders.

Ada had been angry with her husband but was unable to deny that she also blamed Margaret. A couple of days after the accident, as they would forever refer to that Indian summer day, Margaret, after speaking so little, broke down in front of her

*Ada tried to comfort her daughter, but found she couldn't; she knew her daughter felt terrible, yet could not find it in herself to forgive.*



mother. During a rare moment of solitude, Ada had been sitting on an afghan beneath a chokecherry tree when Margaret, her cheeks shiny from dried tears, came to her. Ada tried to comfort her daughter, but found she

couldn't; she knew her daughter felt terrible, yet could not find it in herself to forgive. Ada may have been playing a dangerous game—if she had to lose one child, any of the five, who would it be? Jerry, the youngest, her baby, would not have been it. Undoubtedly, Ada would have felt evil for thinking this way, but given how she was feeling toward Margaret, she might not have been able to keep from dipping into such dark, unimaginable depths. While Margaret wept, trying with her slender, pale arms to embrace her mother's full, matronly body, Ada, from out of nowhere, screeched, *Get away from me. Now.*

Hot or cold, Ada found herself since the accident. Never lukewarm.

Long before Jerry died, Ada's mother had told her about funerals back home, in the motherland. About how invitations rimmed in black arrived decorously in the post. And how, at home, the bereaved cloaked their windows in ivory sheets, adorned their walkways with finely cut spruce twigs. Services were attended by men dressed in *frack*, white ties and full dress

suits; the women, also in black, donned hats with heavy veiling to cover their sorrowful visages. And if the deceased were a parent or spouse, the mourner dressed in black for the entire year, which most likely distressed Ada: the thought of wash day and the endless ironing of black.

Ada must have known Jerry's funeral would be different. The community, however, would still prepare a smorgasbord to be eaten after the services: sandwiches, headcheese, pickled pigs' feet, roast meat, rice pudding. But who could possibly eat at a time like this? Ada had joined the Ladies' Aid Society at church when they first moved to town and, although food preparation had never been her strong suit, was sure to donate pea soup or boiled pork shanks to families in need. What comes around goes around, and all.

### 1973

I crawl onto the denim mountain of my grandfather's lap. He's a tall man, sturdy, with enormous hands—rough, calloused palms, dry fingertips, battered fingernails. While I sit on one of his knees, my sister on the other, my grandfather gently taps and nuzzles the tops of our heads with his cheeks and chin and lips, but with a little pleading, he becomes playful and bounces us. *Like a horse*, we say through our giggles. *Faster*. At two years old, I am not much bigger than Jerry was when he died. And I find it hard to weave my memories of this man, the one whose lap I am perched upon, into what I now imagine of a farmer, a Christian, who once stood beneath the stars, who suffered such loss, who believed the preaching of Ecclesiastes: "To everything there is a season. . . . A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted." Thirty years earlier he must have rocked his son, too. Although, if he resembles most grandfathers I now know, he did not carve out as much play time for his own children as he did for theirs, especially with all the work that lay ahead, all the mouths he had to feed, the looming hours until sundown.

### 1983

It is Sunday morning, and we are at my grandmother's church. My grandmother quickly recognizes people as we walk toward the large wooden doors. *Elsie*, my grandmother bellows above the parking lot din. Indicating my mother, she says, *You re-*

*member my daughter LaVaune, the widow?* I speed up, duck inside the arching door frame. I do not want her next words to be about my lack of a father. I do not want her next words to be about me. Would it have been worse if she'd said, *LaVaune, the one born after Jerry died?* Perhaps Elsie never knew Jerry, but with the way small towns operate, it would not have mattered much.

Earlier that morning, in the driveway of her new home in town, my grandmother reached toward my mother's olive-green Pinto, now rimmed with coarse amber rust, and gingerly patted the hood. *I once owned a pinto.* She smiled softly, and I thought of the days my sister and I would sprawl across our Pinto's hood and gaze at the stars. *Think Father got her from the Dakota prairie,* my grandmother continued. *Fed her cubes of sugar.* Moments later, as if the metal were hot, she shot her hand back, cooling her fingertips. Now lukewarm, like the memory.

#### 1940

My grandmother had always been superstitious—perhaps she clung to anxieties passed down from her parents. Before the first full moon of the new year, toting a sack of meat or bread in one hand and a hymnbook in the other, her father may have stood sternly before the moonlit sky—for he believed his fate to be written in the stars. While Ada pointed out the Little Dipper, her *pappa* would glide his fingers across the scriptures of a brushed-open Bible page. He believed, like many farmers before him, that the words he read, and the deciphered messages, would determine the fate of the upcoming farming season. Not Ada. Not my practical grandmother. She would have thought any verse could be rephrased to her family's advantage, which she suspected her father of doing from time to time. Her mother, equally superstitious, had also adopted the anxieties of her ancestors and shivered over the possibility of thirteen diners at any given table. She also fretted over black cats—bad things were bound to happen if a black cat crossed in front of your automobile. But this was all before. When superstitions were just that. Nothing, really. Did Ada ever wonder, just once—for a brief moment—if there was something she could have done, some superstition she could have abided by to prevent the death of her son, of Baby Jerry?

Ada recalled how her mother worried whenever she and her sister frolicked near the stream behind the barn. To keep them safe, she told the girls about *Näcken*, the water sprite who would tug you under and never release you if you were not careful. Ada recalled the admonishments of her mother, spoken in a Swedish accent so strong that it ironed out the *j* sound, and “angel” became “an-yel.” *My an-yels, do not forget Näcken. He’s lonely and loves the company of small children.* Did Ada ever wonder if there was a sprite who tugged small children beneath truck tires, never to let go? The sprites, the black cats, one’s fate written in the stars—deep down she knew it was all *sopa*. Rubbish.

After Ada’s grandmother passed, Ada’s mother, in accordance with Swedish custom, displayed a photograph of her late mother on the mantel, alongside a small mason jar. Each day, following tradition, Ada’s mother made sure the makeshift vase held a fresh tulip or daisy for an entire year. Did Ada do this for Jerry? Most likely not, since they didn’t own many photographs—only a couple of the boy were shot after his birth and one at his christening. Plus, everyone knew Ada was not much of a gardener.

Weeks after Jerry’s funeral, when fewer people came to visit, Ada recalled a Swedish nursery rhyme she had heard her mother recite to her at bedtime or when either she or her sister scraped an elbow or knee. Ada could sing the Swedish lyrics but needed her mother to translate:

*Hush hush child  
The cat is tangled in the yarn  
Hush hush child  
The cat is tangled in mother’s yarn*

Perhaps Ada thought of the bedtime story she’d read to the boys—Richard and Kenny and Baby Jerry—mere days before the accident. *Snippy and Snappy* is a sweet tale about two field mice who, while playing with their mother’s ball of yarn, wander away from home and end up in a nearby farmhouse. Just as Snappy is about to nibble at the cheese in a mousetrap, his father jumps in to rescue him, to return him safely home.

Yarn. Was it yarn that passed through Ada’s mind as she



settled in for a night of crocheting? How it all goes back to Mother's yarn?

I like to imagine, long before the bad things happened, all the good in the lives of my grandparents. In the early years of their marriage, shortly after Ada and Art had built the farmhouse, Art planted fruit and shade trees around the property. Ada recalled one spring, how the two of them linked arms and, through the second-floor windows, gazed proudly upon their property—the blossoming apple trees, the freshly painted crimson barn, the endless rows of wheat. Ada remembered how dry the previous summer had been, how the brittle corn leaves rustled like newspaper when the hot wind blew, and how they used to worry so about the crops, about the future. But on this day, an afternoon so unlike any of an Indian summer, Ada could not deny her happiness.

### 1993

We are back in Renville for my grandmother's funeral. Although gone, she lingers in her home. The scent of Vaseline lotion, Starlight mints, and tight, stale air crowd the room—all forlorn remnants of a life that has passed. During the day, we imagine her sitting at the kitchen table, her brittle hair wound around puffy rollers, scribbling away at the pages of puzzle books. Evenings are different. No more Bible verses recited at a deafening pitch. From the book of James, she'd choose verses with a personal slant: "Therefore be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious produce of the soil, being patient about it, until it gets the early and late rains." On those nights, in the next room, my cousins and I would cup our fingers to stifle our giggles, although she couldn't possibly have heard us with her increasing deafness and the drone of her own voice. As she read scripture, did she think of Jerry, the child who lived but eighteen months? Remind herself that God only dishes out as much as you can handle? Recall the good-intentioned phrases heard decades earlier: *He's in a better place* or *God's newest angel*. And though she was a Christian woman, a God-fearing one at that, did she know this too was *sopa*?

We arrive at the church for the funeral service. My cousins and I shuffle into a chipped wooden pew near the front—the last time we had been together in this church was for my uncle's

funeral, seven years earlier, and once before that at my grandfather's funeral, when I was four, though it is disputed whether or not I actually attended the service. On this day, the day we lay our grandmother to rest, my sister reaches into the wooden pocket before her and pulls out a tattered hymnbook. Inside the front cover, it reads, "In loving memory of Gerald Kottom, 1940." I feel a stab of discomfort—a pale shade of budding guilt?—because we had not thought of the boy, of Jerry, not even at the funeral of his mother. If he was not to be remembered on this day, then when?

Silence—that I know. After my dad died when I was nine, we did not talk about him. I learned not to ask questions or bring up memories, as my mother's eyes would turn glassy, her nostrils moist and red, her downturned lips quivery—a silent prelude to her weeping. My mother had not been taught to deal with death, to speak of grief. When nothing is said of the sibling who died before you were born, how do you learn? Perhaps family secrets become tangled when home is a place you are straddling, with one foot on the soil of your birthplace and another stretched an ocean away. I wonder how many years passed before my mother heard the details of the accident, and I wonder how the facts had been parceled out. All in one big heap? Or perhaps she had been cast threads of information each Indian summer, just as the heat stood still, as her parents could not help but think of Jerry. Her mother may have shown her a photograph of him, let her smooth the ragged fur of his stuffed bear, sniff his beloved blanket, but did she ever hear about the stars and the yarn and the sprites and the stifling heat?

My grandmother would not approve of what I've written—secrets spilled about a child spoken so little about. But I like to imagine things differently for their family, because the silence surrounding my father hurt. I now talk about my mother's death with my sons, who were six and two when she died.

I am not silent.

## WITNESS

In 1996, my father, a high school biology teacher and avid hunter, won a lottery for a bighorn sheep tag and thus the rights to hunt and kill one of the most elusive, solitary, and perfectly camouflaged animals in the world. We couldn't sell the winning ticket, which apparently was as rare as winning an actual lottery ticket, nor could my father pass up the opportunity for an adventure, so for three weeks over Christmas break, my family broke camp in a rocky corner of the Southern California desert known as Devils Playground.

Our days in the desert were filled with rifles and scopes and wind. We had high-caliber binoculars; sights that ranged hundreds of yards; and a base camp, fit for some level of infantry, that could be accessed only by turning off one dirt road, onto another, and finally onto a hand-cleared one. This small desert driveway led to a stretch of land my father dubbed "Area 52." There were no trees or paved roads, no running water or shade. Our hunting range straddled a wide, wind-swept valley, just south of a large military mining operation and east of Joshua Tree National Park. We were at the end of the line, in a swath of nothing, where old Route 66 tucked itself neatly into the folds of memory, where diners and nostalgia faded into the chalky, white landscape and the ghosts of strangers lived in abandoned towns between modern-day gas stations. Here, stones piled to the sky and thin desert flowers buckled under the dust of the earth.

My father and brother arrived first and set up a parachute shelter, sage green against the red of the mountains. Our tent sat on a small ridge, overlooking a dry creek bed that snaked across the land and served as a trench to explore when solitude was needed. This was camp. This was our winter vacation. This was Christmas that year, heralded by a spindly ocotillo draped with ornaments my mother brought from home.

The first morning, we piled into my family's oversized pickup. My father and ten-year-old brother wore desert camo. Nestled

neatly in the truck's bed were a host of rifles and scopes and sights and complicated instruments, expectant, ready to be eased into the long, precise vision for which they were created. I sat in the backseat next to my brother. My mother sat in the front. Dad drove. No radio played, no music. Scouting, it seemed, required the utmost concentration. Under my father's fastidious rules of hunting, looking for a bighorn sheep was accomplished by a family buy-in of scanning the repetitive and slow-moving landscape. The whole family had hunting licenses: more eyes meant more opportunity to find one of these elusive animals. Although I was never going to have to fire a shot, this was the first time I was required to participate in the act of hunting.

The going was slow. We were in the backcountry, far from any road. From the backseat, I watched the desert scenery slowly shift by: mountains that piled on mountains the color of rust, silica-laden, refracting the light. Dust covered everything. The air was dry—stiff with a chilling wind that whipped across the landscape and created sheer veils of sand that eddied at the base of ocotillos and stunted shrubs. There were no houses, no sign of human life, just our truck lurching over the open desert, rocking back and forth like an ocean liner at high sea, pulling itself over stones and cacti and anything else in our way. My stomach churned. I pressed my face against the cool glass of the window and waited for my car sickness to pass.

We were looking for the curve of a horn or cascade of rock down a slope, signaling movement. Maybe a rocky enclave or even a territorial spat between two males. Too much to hope for. It seems the bighorn's sole objective in life is to go unseen.

Within fifteen minutes, I fell into pessimism and slight boredom. There was nothing to see—just rocks and sand and abandoned mines. But complaining was not a part of the agenda. It never was. It did not matter that I was fourteen and nauseated. In my childhood, complaining led only to a piercing reminder that when it came to vacation, adventure, or hunting, I was not in any kind of control. This is why I didn't dare close my eyes. This was serious business, and my father could see me in the rearview—if he caught me sleeping, he'd wake me and insist I keep looking. Most of our trips involved some level of serious business—usually it was the business of rubbing up against danger to see ourselves reflected back on the surface.

I cannot count the number of times I feared for my life on our family vacations. But to admit fear was to admit weakness. This haunts me still: how easily people express fear or doubt, the vanity of it, the freedom. It falls in direct contrast with the refrain from my youth: Participation is not an option. You will like the activity presented no matter what. Revolts will be quashed. Teenage angst is utterly off the table. Complaining amid perils that any child would fear is not only frowned upon, it will earn you ridicule for years to come.

This is how I witnessed the Sierras, at age seven, under the load of a backpack, my brother still in diapers, strapped to my mother's back. And how I witnessed the Arctic Ocean at age ten from a canoe, mosquito-plagued and hungry. These experiences were bestowed upon us under the auspices of love: One day you'll love this. One day you won't be afraid. One day you'll do this yourself. One day.

What I know of hunting is mostly imagined. It is largely a synonym for things I never see: Camouflaged duck blinds that can be reached only by wading through waist-deep water in the early morning hours. There, pregnant with hope, men sit in low-lit, warm little nests, waiting. They drink whiskey and hot coffee, eyes focused overhead as a heavy sun rises. Guns loaded, they're ready for dawn, for that ephemeral moment when ducks fill the sky and are lured down into range by painted impostors of their own kind.

At home, I knew these approximations: Duck decoys that lived in the garage, piled in netting, painted by hand. Eyes rendered with a careful precision—as lifeless as the real ones that showed up later—eyes that stared through the glass compartment of our industrial-size refrigerator as I reached for an after-school snack. Iridescent wings beneath a gallon of milk. I never saw them leave the sky, never saw them grace the fold of the blind, made warm by human bodies and something else, a crackling pulse—primal and glowing.

I know of structures. A small cabin, held in by the walls of other small cabins, blending into the early morning fog and tule of central California. In the fall, everything is golden and brown, a dying color. When not serving as a home base for my father's duck hunts, this cabin is where we'll spend Thanksgiv-

ing in a few years, tight together in bunk beds, warm against the chill outside.

I know of culture, of autumn cold snaps and the taut skin of a buck hanging from a pine at high camp in the Marble Mountains of California. I know of campfires and the slow gait of horses; the cold clap of breath in the night air; wet lips on the open mouths of beer bottles and jokes that caused eruptions of laughter, followed by silences held by the depth of the forest.

I know of logistics. Early wake-up calls, sleeping in the back of the truck, rolling in before dawn. Daylong gun-safety classes, little brother itching in his seat, asking for hot chocolate, worried he won't pass the test. Worried he won't get his license.

This was my father's life. A life of camping and divining, of fishing twine and the cold, hidden crevices of high Sierra streams where he knew fish lurked in the shadows. A life of hardened meat in the freezer, stiff after the kill. It was the thrill of the open ocean, chasing salmon, throwing nets across smelt as they ran through the waves. In his life, he recognized that beautiful chasm between what we can see and what we cannot, and chased to close it with his bare hands.

By fourteen, I was an accomplished smelter, graceful with a throw-net, unafraid of the cold of the Pacific, and could inhabit a Zen-like state watching the waves for runs of small fish in the water. In the ocean, everything is a mad rush, flooding at you, pulling you into its own tidal heave. Bighorn sheep hunting was different. Scouting for a notoriously elusive animal was a tedious affair, buttressed by the fact that I did not particularly care to see one killed—a desire that magnified as the hours in the desert rolled on.

The outward gaze of looking for a bighorn was exhausting. It required constant attention. When I allowed myself quick breaks from the landscape and looked around the interior of the car, my eyes always settled on my father's hands, loose on the wheel, each of his thumbnails stained with a dark and permanent bloom of old blood, remnants from an ill-fated nature lesson with a rattlesnake in front of a group of his students on a backpacking trip nearly twenty years ago. The blood under his thumbs made me think of what we see and what we don't: In the desert, the elusive bighorn was there, but not seen. In

the car, it was my father's heart medication. I knew it was in the glove box. There were some spare pills in the center console. Perhaps a baggie stuffed in the back, under the lining of the bed. The medication was a constant presence in our lives: A series of different colored pills congregated in every corner of our house. They

*These pills followed us, a conversation laid bare between us, a ubiquitous and yet overlooked sign that this was a dangerous, precious life.*



were in every drawer, on top of the dresser, and in a small basket above the microwave. There was a set in his desk at school and in the mess of paperwork in his office. Everywhere pills sat idle, an

unspoken guarantee against disaster—omnipresent but never seen. These pills followed us, a conversation laid bare between us, a ubiquitous and yet overlooked sign that this was a dangerous, precious life.

Once, I asked my father why he liked hunting. “It’s a primal thing—an adrenaline rush,” he said. He didn’t expand, but I imagine it like a sliver of intoxicating power, slipped into your blood, and with it comes some greater understanding or vision concerning our place in the natural order. The narrow scope of our attention is focused, for a moment, on what is before us and the nanoseconds of anticipating what comes next. Perhaps that’s what my father meant—to witness the before and after of *life* is the thrill.

But hunting usually involves some level of deception or distortion of perception. We hunt the things *we* can’t see, usually knowing what *they* can see. It’s understanding the space between vision and shadow. These contrasts weigh heavily when it comes to life and death, and hunting is largely a narrative of voyeurism we carefully sculpt: perched in the reeds, we know where the ducks will land. We know the path of the deer, unsuspecting of an ambush. We wear camouflage and call out to animals in their own strange tongue. We approximate a life and, in that moment, have power over it, power to pick and choose where and when it ends—a power we don’t have over our own lives, or the ones of those we love.

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In those long days in the desert, we drove as a break from scouting. We drove two hours to Barstow to walk through the brightly lit aisles of a grocery store. Once, to my delight, my mother accidentally bought only non-alcoholic beer and we had to make the round trip once more for beer that would suffice. On these trips, we could listen to music. We could be leisurely. We could enjoy, not scrutinize, the scenery. We drove through the back entrance to Joshua Tree and marveled at those wild trees, spectacular in their strangeness. We stopped and dug for trilobites, ancient little sea creatures that had been pressed into clay long ago and were now upended on the side of the road, seeing the sun for the first time.

There were no rules in the desert, and we were just as free. One afternoon, my father found a strange, wild bush growing in our valley that he inexplicably boiled into a rudimentary tea. He bounced around camp, proffering cups to each of us, buoyed by his discovery. "It gives you a little pep to your step," he said. He loaded bushes in the truck and carted them back to San Francisco, where he went from shop to shop in Chinatown, looking for a buyer. He was met by stern expressions and shut doors. He had ephedra. A substance banned by the FDA. He burned the bushes shortly after but kept one in his classroom, an otherworldly talisman, the only thing we would bring back from the bighorn hunt. For the years we were together at school, it perched in plain sight—a strange weed above the requisite jars of creatures frozen in formaldehyde—a secret only he and I shared.

As a teenager, I was wary of the division of life and death in the hunt. I was not patient with the contrasts the desert presented to me. I'd like to say I dreamt of bigger things while we hunted. I'd like to say I dreamt of words, lived myself into a philosophy, inched my way toward being a better, more grounded human. I wish I could say I saw the future of my days stretching out across a fine line of good things, and that I shed my teenage malaise as easily as slipping into a new skin.

But all I wanted was escape. Back at camp, after hours of driving through the desert, I curled up in the tent, out of the wind. I lay in that little dome of warmth, listened to music, and waited for dinner. I waited for the moon to illuminate the shad-



ows that fell across the desert floor. I closed my eyes and tried to nap, but behind my lids, all I could see was wash upon wash of glittering desert sand.

I saw my father take aim and fire at an animal only one time. We were in a canoe, on a winding river in the Arctic, surrounded by harsh, wild, unexplored land. The trees were stunted, their lines of growth held captive by the changing seasons. The presence of unseen animals lingered everywhere: grizzlies, moose, the great song of the unknown. A duck, startled from ahead in the river, flew wildly toward the sun as we turned a bend. My father quickly loaded the rifle, paused to track the bird in his sight, and let loose a shot, missing. The duck went briefly out of vision. We pulled up on a sandy bank around the corner to see if the bird had been wounded, fallen, or if we could startle more to take flight.

In the sand, unmistakably fresh grizzly tracks marred the bank. They came from a copse of thin willow on the far end of the shore, meandered down to the water line where we stood, and from there, in a rush of wild, they galloped back into the brush. The paw prints of the startled grizzly were bigger than my head. Wild scars in the sand. My brother, who loved dinosaurs, pressed his tiny, six-year-old hand into the claw marks with reverence.

“He must have heard the gun and been scared off,” my dad said. He paused and looked up river. “He must have scared the duck.”

We were quiet, each carefully imagining the subtle shift in the power of the unknown.

To escape the monotony of camp, I went on long walks along the washed-out creek bed. As the days passed, I slowly found myself giving into the art of awareness. It was easier to appreciate where I was when I immersed myself in the desert as opposed to simply scanning it. I felt the stones that piled up against the pale sky. I touched the bent and frayed edges of desert grass, and inspected the cold crevices where rowdy wildflowers bloomed in small, surprising bursts. I watched sunsets paint the desert hills purple and rose, and smelled the sweet desert air that welled up from the earth at the end of the day.

I noticed small brush bent by the winds that roared through

our valley; the whole landscape sculpted and challenged, churned by eternal forces, written and erased and rebuilt by passages of time that dwarfed our short visit. I began to lean against it—time. I leaned into the openness of the landscape and with it, a gentle understanding of the freedom that the wilderness offered. I began, in that desert, to see the faint shadows of someone I could become, and with that, I looked down to see myself on the precipice of understanding. I began to understand what drew my parents to the wild. That day, that long-awaited day my parents promised, had finally come.

*But try as I might, I still could not see the bighorns in their rocky holds, or the murmur that was slowly eroding the comforting beat of my father's heart.*

But try as I might, I still could not see the bighorns in their rocky holds, or the murmur that was slowly eroding the comforting beat of my father's heart.

On Christmas Day, 1999, three years after our bighorn sheep hunt, my father collapsed at the door of the duck-hunting cabin, in the land of tules and fog, where men hid in folds with rifles slung, their breath warmed with whiskey and hope, waiting to own that twilight between life and death.

We were told he died instantly. No pain. I was not there, though. I did not see it. What I know is just another approximation.

We had spent the morning together, until he and my brother left to meet my uncle for a few days of duck hunting. There, while unloading the truck, he slumped down against the door of the cabin—the cabin of our Thanksgivings—after safely driving my little brother five hours north with no sign of trouble. A missed stoplight or minute delay might have kept them on the road. A minute might have cost us my brother's life, too. The silent tick of an invisible clock kept my brother safe, but it did not spare him what he had to witness.

I was not there. I did not have to see it.

On Christmas Eve, 1996, a bright moon illuminated the desert floor. Beneath the parachute back at camp, we huddled around the warmth of a fire and sat with the emptiness of the night: a

cold breeze, clear skies. We were quiet. We seemed to be waiting, but we were living. We opened one present and sat again in the stillness.

“Come here,” my father said to me and my brother.

We walked over. He wrapped his arms around both of us and hugged us into his lap. We were too big, the mix of limbs too awkward, but he was insistent, pulling us closer to his chest even as we struggled to get comfortable. He smelled of the earth, strong and sweet, and of the surrounding desert: of sage and dust and a distinct smell that was all his. He smelled of things both ancient and temporary.

We squirmed; he drew us tighter. And with no record, no one but the stars and that old, ancient desert as witness, he said, “I love you. I love my family. I love you more than anything.”

With his words, and the weight of all their clarity, he was grounding us, placing us in time. His words were the earth—and he was holding us all suspended, connected, while overhead the spiraling of distant galaxies exploded in wild, mesmerizing arcs. We were real. He was real. It was all before us, laid out in a world that did not require foresight or vision or a delineation between what we knew to be in the shadows and what we knew to make of them. It was the last time we would be in the wild like this again. It was our last camping trip together. A thing none of us could see.

A light breeze lifted the branches of our Christmas ocotillo, making the ornaments dance. Thinking of those sheep, folded tight in sleep and alone in the desert beyond, I leaned my head against my father’s chest to feel what he felt. I did not feel the faulty beat of his heart, the channels gasping and the arrhythmic pounding, but I was happy under the ruffle of our parachute, safe within the definitions of our lives, away from our troubles, alone in the wilderness. I understood and accepted the solitude we sought together.

The parachute snapped against the wind, and he let us go, to find our way to the tent through the desert, to unknowingly count down our days together. My brother and I pulled ourselves off his lap. We said goodnight, and when we walked away from the fire, we were met by darkness.

SHAUNA BARBOSA

## **WHEN I SAY I WANT A BABY, YOU SAY YOU MISS ME THAT MUCH TOO**

Let this letter find  
you well as I found your well,  
sullied and full, ill-timed  
ocean water  
on my tongue.

Summer  
still feels like your head locked  
in my lap. Your bareness  
stepped out for a river run.

The day you discovered the sun  
is a noun you can't touch,  
I licked the mole on your cheek  
excited to make amends  
with a verb I can't love.

I watched you in winter  
unfold like a travelling tragedy;  
drunk, womb, memory,  
sunk, uncertainty.

A body's not just a body.

What is surveillance if not  
a world where you are the man?

You survey, yet you don't learn.

I howl your name, a woman  
raised by wolves, inept were we.  
A soft fog dims  
all lights and chokes me. Please.

## **UPON LEARNING HER TRAJECTORY TOWARDS INTERSTELLAR SPACE, VOYAGER TWO MOURNS WHAT COULD HAVE BEEN**

Awaiting the thrills of divorcing content from conquest,  
our miracle shells were cast upon infinity. We searched

for fingers to cross and hair to twist, swearing our girlhood  
was merely untended and we could build ourselves proper

nouns from the tea-cupped fumes of chance encounters.  
Even Uranus' thinnest rings reflected back our shine.

But you were all about the mission, tending discovery  
like the lighthouse keeper tends to her own drowning.

I could never pull your body back to shore. Still, I wish  
your sensors were programmed to whisper from the tin can

you carry yourself within, to kiss me goodnight across the string  
cast from your bedroom to mine. How I would sleep then.

A thousand necks would arch to see us arc, thistle and worm  
shrugging in soil like space struggles itself to dark.

## COURTING THE JIHADI

You do the murder too easy, habibi, like an American  
spewing lunatic with three rifles in a theater. You do the murder  
hyperbolic, like a capitalist, like an industrialist, like an imperialist  
razing a nation for a salt mine. You do the murder lazy,  
off your soft targets where we stand pigtailed or playing horses  
in municipal districts where my cousins live, my lovers live,  
others live who are willing to do things for me, strangers who bless me  
whenever I sneeze in any market, any cramped plaza under clouds  
that detonate slow as if they're blast plumes drowsy with opiates,  
clouds that flatter whole afternoons with that exertion,  
whole drenched seasons they gather themselves up and eviscerate  
their bodies slow, then go their guts go etching in the rivers  
and revising the land. This is how the terrain changes.  
This is how refreshment arrives, not in the plasma flash of lightning  
but by the slow insistence of water. Still, you do the murder quick  
like it's a bright idea, like the cosmos is split into a faction of gods  
and a faction of meat, and you're a lieutenant for the idols,  
but no pulsar, no tidewater, no quark spinning in us,  
not even the automatic voltage in our ventricles pays you or me  
much mind, so why do you believe any god would want you  
for a hammer, mammal, you're on the side of carpal and sinew,  
on my side, and I can't say I ever saw a god go, but if one of those  
took to our turf demanding your head or mine, you better believe  
I'd spare us both, habibi, and nail that savage to a tree.

## STORY IN A WHITE DICTION

Then, the American flambéing her corpus poolside motions for a margarita, a basket of chips and dip, a detective novel or a romance novel or a novel about a detective romancing a suspect, but the only English the pool girl can offer of the lobby's lost and found is a procedural memoir the detective writes nights staking out a bistro where the suspect is a sous-chef, but the suspect doesn't see her there with her notepad, her telephoto lens, her GladWare of trail mix, and directional mike. The suspect is eager for his shift to end so he can meet his Pilates instructor for a third date on which he'll convince her after a beet salad after the Wes Anderson movie after a stroll by gaslight through the common he's ready for love in spite of the garish death of his second wife who fell from their lofted master suite onto a crystal decanter and not, as local bloggers have suggested, the other way around, he mutters, *She'll believe me, she'll believe me*, to the sine wave of the meat slicer gliding forward and back until an entire block of prosciutto is shuffled and stacked, his mantra so consuming he doesn't register the executive chef's irritation at his othermindedness, his pestering requests to punch out early, his tattoos and legal entanglements she has no patience for now she's cutting ribbon on a second location, soon a third, someday a chain, a syndicated cooking show, the cover of *Forbes* magazine so many paunchy middle managers will read relieving their feet of their loafers, fingering their peanuts, sucking on Fiji waters, and one of them will recognize her across the wide aisle of a Virgin America airliner and glance then glance again strategizing his savvy introduction, a quipping banter, a chardonnay segued into an exchange of private email addresses, personal cell numbers, maybe a fuck in the can, which is a chief ambition among men of terrible wealth and learning, but she can do better, she thinks,

slipping on a sleep mask in her lay-flat seat en route from a TED Talk in Monterey to a week's R&R in Cabo. She's on the cover of *Forbes* magazine for chrissakes, she can certainly do better she says a few days later to the pool girl who's sweating a lot by now, her black braid plaited against the damp back of her uniform oxford, her uniform khakis clutching her thighs, a sober musk overpowering her perfume, but the American doesn't notice any of this when she offers, *Honey, we can all do better*, as if they are girlfriends brunching, as if they're chitchatting in an Uber escaped from a lousy mixer, as if hers is a sentence every body is serving, hers a shared language both of them dream in nightly on Tempur-Pedic mattresses in adjoining row houses, and bland ambition is the only difference between her and her and everybody wants to be like her.



## **OXYANA, WEST VIRGINIA**

Fallen kingdom, conquered first by bedlam,  
then bedlam's hunger—hush—heavy  
in the air between the hills that crash  
like waves into each other. What is a hive  
without its queen? Thirst can rule, so can want.  
A crown of needles, a gown of clouds she parts.  
Bees in the streets below, their tongues  
like hands reaching to the sky for an offering.  
This is what want does, this and the raindrops  
becoming pills in their throats, spurring wings,  
all that fluttering the hum of a false heaven.  
And who, through that, can hear a few wings  
folding under the weight of death? It is too late.  
Like timber, like anthracite, death is a natural resource.  
The colony glows. The colony does its work.

## NOT TRASH DAY

The holiday pushed it back.  
I drag my crates out anyway. I threw away  
my roommate's rotten produce to liberate the crisper,  
but I did it a day too early. On the street, the only other  
trash bins are empty, left from last week.  
I put a teakettle on the curb and it filled  
with rain water and then somebody took it.  
I've started putting water out for my neighbors'  
cats, who seem to live on my porch.  
Does this mean I don't trust my neighbors? Yes.  
But I don't trust most people to take care  
of animals, not even myself—that's why I don't  
have a cat and have to steal my neighbors'.  
It's not trash day. One crow says "no no  
no no no no" and two others say  
"nuh-uh" "nuh-uh." They sound like a family  
on vacation, nothing left to talk about,  
just sitting at a restaurant booth commenting  
on the local color. Once at IHOP there was a woodstork  
walking past the window and we watched the cook  
out the back door give it kitchen scraps.  
Was it being taken care of? If the volunteer  
cactus in the side yard suddenly  
has yellow flowers, so thin they could be made  
out of crepe paper, does that mean it doesn't need me?  
And the dog at night off leash, running after a shirtless  
running man who stopped and let it catch up and lie down  
under the streetlight, tail wagging, and the man hit  
it slowly, heavily, rhythmically, on the stomach  
with the flat of his palm, were they playing?  
The two disappearing around the corner, the dog's tail  
still wagging, me startled alone in the dark,  
like I was somewhere I wasn't supposed to be.

## NOAH'S WALMART

When the skies open up over Walmart and it sounds like a soundtrack of a storm all across the low flat endless roof, I am in the hardware section looking at night-lights. A little light to help me orient when I wake up and think the Siamese kitten on my wall calendar is an ice-eyed demon. You're in electronics ogling video games you can't afford. You weren't able to find just the right pair of shoes to replace the ones you wore holes through. If the flood took us now, made of this glorified warehouse an ark, there'd be two of every kind: what kind are we? Are we two of a? How many bags of birthday cake flavored Chips Ahoy could you eat before the olive branch? Would I survive without organic? Why can't we help ourselves, help each other, help someone—we're floating, preserved, but it's not clear that we've got a lot to offer the dry land we want to get to. It's really figurative at this point, anyway. Nobody's said anything about a covenant. It's just an extra wet day in a semi-evil world and no total destruction to give us our holy purpose. So we push our carts and have no idea which quadrant holds the one thing. We wander in the desert—that's another Bible story. In the end we find each other, unprovisioned, but we find each other, and I am glad to see you.

## FROM "SUMMER SCRAPBOOK"

### Part 2

In August,  
with gusto,  
in the untamed West. The cowboys are long gone someone said  
but there are  
plenty others, grandchildren of those who channelled wild raging  
courses of  
Gunnison, Colorado, their tributaries, under the spinal range to  
irrigate  
Denver.  
Bald hills razed by fire as seeds need to singe, so, breaking arid topsoil.  
Dryland.  
Green lawns. Go figure. We need to get over universal chlorophyll,  
forget  
meadows  
as made places, retrain or revision rocks tossed by giants, super-sized  
bracing  
the continent, keeping its balance, holding things divided in place from  
New Mexico  
to Canada, shedding snowmelt waters to east, to west. Silver sagebrush  
land round  
a peak called Rabbit Ears home to hawks, all kinds, at a slight dihedral.  
Diet spectra  
of cows, sheep, goats. Parable. You walk beside me afeared of  
serpents.  
Hummingbirds sip porch feeder, western bluebirds prelapse car  
down track  
along fence posts, a ranch escort, western garter snakes slip off under  
foot. An  
ecology, partial. A grassmap, types of ear, grain, nearly all the biomass  
underground,  
how can they possibly know where they really are unless they know  
what grass

they're on? Great Plains logic. Flatlands, sudden Rockies. Front Range  
logic. A  
confluence of axes where up meets along, opposing principles  
confused yet contrary.  
Thinking of the first people to come here, hit the range (by people  
one means  
white people, *claro*), think fuck, after months of this endless  
seagrass  
no water to speak of then to see the mountains ahead, foreground  
definition,  
background bluegrey phantasma of the true canyon stuff  
shrouded  
in haze from distant forest fires, dryland, go figure, tough,  
then think *fuck*,  
*god what did we do why'd ya put them mountains there?*  
As if  
the answer weren't obvious. Destiny less than manifest. Then  
compare,  
contrast the counter-vantage high in the Front Range looking  
back at  
puny Denver's brittle scrapers, why plant a city next to this?  
Go back  
to the 1870s when wire claimed the West, Michael Kelly's  
Thorny Fence  
a more-pliable bramble cutting through migration paths  
driven by  
instinct, the inside drover, trapping animals fleeing—*knowing*  
*to flee*—  
the coming cold.

### Part 3

Thus the fall of the flawed commons, short-lived  
predivided  
polity of open-range rangelife, made mythos almost before lived,  
premised  
on a misconception of all that lovely space, pre-existent cultures  
misconceived  
as sparse (they're not *using* most of it), rather than simply

scattered in  
elaborate  
looping recurrence, making scarce use of scarce stuff. Not territory  
but *terra*.  
So the fences came. Still, they clear things up nicely, dice them to  
parcelled clarity,  
Jeffersonian yeomanry dug in for good tethered to these relations,  
these perimeter  
homes, held in good stead of the plain uninterrupted, so. So  
we find them  
everywhere, these pertainings, squared-off prairie exclosures  
ring-fenced  
for purposes of scientific comparison, grazed or ungrazed, for  
purposes  
of social comparison or to claim big candy seams in mountain rock.  
Can they  
be met by these material premises, that all we see hear touch smell  
is all there  
is, that that distortion or trick of the light is a sensory failure not a  
failure of  
that thing to be irreducibly what it is, that the world is tactile as  
seeming,  
that dripping water hollows a stone, that the word god is a name  
for an object?  
Touching you, after all, it is true that the only good is that which  
skin says  
is good, the only evil bodily pain, going so by Lucretius, leaving  
all else to  
the moralists, hymning virtue's maculate microcosm. Private  
plaint of summer,  
its ending. Thus they set off, cancelled additives, unbound  
conjunctive  
static, surface noise, this plus this equal in equity, in favour of  
through-travel  
on a continuous plain, shift joining shift in anticipatory memory,  
unhomed though homing,  
already nostalgia's subtle slander a cutpurse apprehended only  
by limits  
of last light, first dark. Cold comes. Go back. Waste nothing. Stop.

## SHEFFIELD SHANTY

Clocking out from the social factory Tonight  
I'll cook something that requires  
near-constant stirring An image  
of attentiveness A  
night of private vice If you know  
what I mean

it's been a long day

Narrative, like work, is pernicious  
but necessary, it always distorts  
the meaning Arranging the stuff in series  
In just one of its myriad assemblies Lining  
it up like Linnaeus going large For  
once in a long life For just one night  
of the *really* long 18th c Ask  
him, if you see him, What price  
your taxonomy now?

I dunno for  
a rare stuffed fox I'd give a lot. It's a vice  
versa sort of vice What would you do  
I know what Darwin would He's a knock-  
it-over-the-head-with-a-geological hammer  
-first-inquire-into-scarcity-later kinda guy  
For that matter not dissimilar to cool J. J.  
Audubon He who wept over the  
necessity of turning double gun  
on Arctic Tern & which, Thus halted,  
"easy and graceful motions"  
had, held, Wired

Up "whirling  
down upon the waters" Such a tool.

it's been a long day  
as long as all the rest  
but long Enough of  
that talk Get on Get  
gone Get some rest

Cooking up a perfect storm Tomorrow  
the subarctic will bloom For now, though,  
I wanna give a big shout out  
For all my white male  
natural historian explorers Thank  
you for all your work And don't think  
we forgot you Humboldt A cracked  
teacup The useless fragments  
wash up on the shore of the kitchen  
Sink like a counterweight, or  
ballast. A longer day Buy my  
watch Out there, where the sky  
pinks & will be made new

I too am an observant of Saint  
Monday if you know  
what I mean A lover  
of *really* long weekends

“Brother workmen, Cease  
your labour, Lay your files & hammers by:  
Listen while a brother neighbour Sings a  
Sheffield shanty, a cutler's destiny: How  
upon a good Saint Monday, Sitting  
by the smithy fire, We tell what's been  
done o't Sunday, And in cheerful  
mirth conspire.”

Love, then,  
like photosynthesis  
like breathing, is precious  
but needful, it always distorts  
the meaning In the reworking  
of work technology has ever



been both trap & key “We are  
products,” said Marcos, from  
the Lacandon jungle [Of our  
history, he meant Of canonshot  
& Article 27] & Before us  
“Villa & Zapata sprang up  
like maize shoots to take the city  
Now we speak to the future  
using past materials, a key  
for a door yet to be built.”  
Therefore are we still

*aquí mismo,  
productos de ejidos, hombres de maíz.*

ADAM FAGIN

**FROM "BRIGHTFORECLOSURES"**

just look:

chance dresses

every face

may name our

absence this unwarried

ly very

veer a beauty

name your

counterpublic

hum it

through vernacular

tho

roughfare

perceiving

as being

near

not with

## **HIRAETH**

I want to tell you about the light that comes through train windows but a poet knows our language negligent in the verse of varied light: it makes altars of tables, it hotwires the romantic Victorian gardens of our consciousness, it splays across faces just so—I can see freckles hint at surfacing: I want to tell you about movement and the incessant clacking of a mind on the tracks: the repetition of trees, of pine of birch and then of lake and sunset, of bridge in the distance, of bridge carrying me across expanses of pines, birch, lakes, sunsets, red, red, golden, broken red. I want to tell you about the people I meet on trains: they want to talk about where they are going: I want to know where they have been, why they are running: maybe I can learn why I am running, why I cannot stop running: but they tell me about loss: that universal cunt: they give me a reason to sprint: there is so much grief: grief like choking on brown water: grief like inhaling a swarm of bees: grief like shedding skin with each step: how can we move toward anything we know will die: but we do: we run to these dying loves, pretend our journey has just begun: the man at dinner tonight lost 53 years of love: the man at dinner tonight cried and I cried with him: the man tonight waited until dinner to thank someone for letting him talk: there is utter loss in every fold of this planet: I give you no consolation: I can only give you terrible advice: stay in transit, Dear Reader: stay moving so the plucked black-feather of this fractured place may never scratch you.

JENNIFER FOERSTER

## INHERITANCE

You do not see her immediately

red-ochered Beothuk

sailing into the sphere  
like a white syllable

Her beach camp remains

dead fire, snare

She travels through mist  
the way a poem travels

by fuel, high winds

skiff of fox fur  
auk's eggs

oily words  
dropped into the sea

You are witness  
but do not see

the wave form's irregular patterning

entrails, seal skin

Her skull among the Skraelings' skulls

sailing north to Scotland

## WALLPAPER

Bright-spun  
webs above the aquifer.

Humid streams, cottonmouths  
cutting through grass.

I clip the sheets to last night's wind  
then listen to its operatic shrill  
through the tin roof—

ghosts of javelinas  
gnashing at the screen door.

On telephone wires doves coo,  
dip and swoop through soupy skies.  
They sing to me through the window.

A dragonfly planes across the cornrows  
where a cold snap killed  
the acanthus  
pinking just days ago—

days late in their ceaseless bellow,  
paper animals crossing the plains—

& I trail them to the place  
where flatness buckles,  
steel tracks tilt the landscape

where the wall splits—flame-tipped  
painted aviary—

shredded yellow warbler  
beak stuffed with straw.

## SARCEE HORSES

Carl was restless all morning, pacing the room, smoking an Omar Ortez, out to the yard with the mockingbird and back, tense and wrinkle-browed, until finally, on a whim, I said Let me tell you about the Sarcee horses.

While living in Montana, I made a trip north into Alberta to have a look around. One day I was driving back roads not far from Calgary and eventually happened onto the Sarcee tribal reserve.

It was a warm July. I glanced to my left and noticed a herd of twenty horses resting in a quiet meadow, all standing at ease and facing north. I stopped along the road: *Sarcee horses*. I then saw that they were—every one of them—methodically nodding their heads in deep, almost ritualistic nods in common rhythm, on and on. It had to be the flies, of course, a strategy to keep them away from their eyes, that had them going in such a hypnotic unison.

The image stayed with me for years, then I finally found a home for it as a filmed tableau vivant. From a helicopter high above the Bighorns, the camera gradually descended to close on a troupe of two dozen actors of varying hues as they stood in a loose formation, all facing northwest. As details cleared, you saw they were all standing at relaxed attention, one foot just ahead of the other, and formally nodding their heads in deep synchronized nods, the rest of their bodies poised and still. This pattern was explored from various camera angles for five minutes, and then the chopper slowly receded into the sky above.

We called the piece—Carl was listening closely from the sofa, cigar in hand, now nodding slightly himself—*Sarcee Horses*.

## SUGAR TREE

One quiet childhood afternoon I dreamed up a sort of game, a pastime no doubt descended at some level from Chinese checkers. I gathered fifteen or twenty of my first-tier marbles and put them in a cereal bowl. One by one, I picked them out and held each up to the window light, studying their illuminated colors and whorls, and eventually began to register associations: tiny scenes or glinting visions, as in a little Book of Hours. And then placed each one into a second bowl, until all were viewed, read, cleared for the day. I can recall none of the actual images, but tend to picture such generalities as a lime green interplanetary spaceship scape or a lapping blue-and-white Robinson Crusoe shore.

Yesterday I opened the canvas drawstring bag holding the marbles—the very same quart and a half from 1950—and looked at them with great pleasure for the first time in many years. So familiar to the eye! A cocoa brown with cherry streaks, a white one capped exactly like a chickadee (*I wanted to sink them in a piney hillside or pour them into a hollow sugar tree as testament to point-blank earthly affection, as if returning an ore to the ground*) . . .

Expecting little, I tried a few against the May morning light. The third, one with drifting flecks of rose through olive, called up an elegant trogon sunning in a southwestern canyon tree. In an unassuming amber with just a slash of what might be winter sky, a scene of Dog Soldier “sleds” being pulled across snowy Colorado plains by flocks of crows. And then, from a chipped veteran shooter angry with waves of dark crimson and moon-milk, the long gone *Sultana* burning wildly at midnight on the big river seven miles north of Memphis.



## INFLAMMATION

I.

We had been short-term, irresponsible.  
How we had lived inside a house.

How we had lived inside a hole.  
*Dolor* (pain), *calor* (heat), *rubor* (redness), *tumor* (swelling),  
*functio laesa* (loss of function).

We can look into the tissue,  
can examine the fine gradient.

We can speak in foreign languages, the language of the internet,  
or maybe in the language of cell death.

Have we reached the site of injury?  
We have been injurious.

Have we served well on our jury?  
We have juried. We have *jured* and *jured*.

We are sad.  
Sad as a parent.

How then is the weather right outside?  
We see the sunlight. It is raw out on the landscape, where we try  
to hide.

We miss the internet.  
It let us search.

We searched for our lost children,  
but on the same day that we found them, we abandoned them.

2.

We write.  
We write of phagocytes.  
We write of chemokines.  
We write.

We write of fibrin clots, coagulation systems.  
We have been missing our three ghosts.

The vasoactive host.  
The mother is the host.

The mast cells as the chemoattractant.  
Let us take our chemotaxi to the moon.

The moon is like a heaven or a mother or an open wound.  
Our children once manifested themselves as swelling.

We are contemplating children,  
the attack phase of immune.

3.

How we like it when the words collide.  
In rhyme, to make a parallel.

Metonymy: we like it well enough.  
One child, two child, three.

Put them all next to one another in a dish and you get  
triplets.

Metaphor: we like it well enough.  
One child, two child, three.

The same person, just  
“one and the same.”

How we talk to ourselves,  
like a parent.

Simile is best, the more specific:  
how we like our one, we like our two, we like our three.

One is like two is like three.  
We like our simile.

It may be that plasma-derived proteins allow these enzymes to act  
as inflammatory mediators.  
Is this real life?

4.  
We break down.  
Instead of grandpa we call the man granule.

Instead of sibling we write histamine.  
We swell and we swell in an arteriole dilation that increases venous  
permeability.

Adherence, chemotaxis.  
How we get into our taxis.

Racing around the genetic lottery universe,  
wailing.

We love to say granulosa cells:  
sounds like sugar.

Purulent:  
disgusting, like it sounds, that filled with pus.

Serous: sounds like serious.  
With serous, you get copious, nonviscous, and skin blisters.

Ulcerous: sounds serious.  
Remove the dermal layer, hurt.

Thrombotic complications: how our hearts will thromb and thromb  
and thromb.  
(That makes three thrombs.)

They thromb for children  
that could be.

Is this the side effect of being we?  
The reproduction of our we?

PAIGE LEWIS

## I'VE BEEN TRYING TO FEEL BAD FOR EVERYONE

I'm learning that a miracle isn't a miracle  
without sacrifice, because when the birds  
brought manna, we ate the birds. I'm learning

that we forgive those we know the least,  
like when my brother had another episode  
and stabbed his wife, I said to my new lover,

*disorder, genetic*, and he never yelled at me  
again. Lord, teach me patience, for every fruit  
I've ever picked has been unripe. Teach trust

that reaches past an opened and unwatched  
purse. Lord, I've seen painted depictions  
of an infant Christ winding toy helicopters.

I know it isn't always about suffering, so send  
us a good flood. Deliver a nectar that will soften  
fists and lift these red stains from our doorframes.

JOSHUA MCKINNEY

**INSPECTING A PATCH OF GRASS IN THE  
BACKYARD, I DELIGHT IN MY SENSES, GET  
DISTRACTED BY THOUGHT, THEN ENJOY MY  
SENSES AGAIN**

bright coupling of  
air and bird

                    song drowned in  
                    the drone of jet

engines Doppler off  
over red petals

                    paling against  
                    fence boards

where the heard  
assemblage confounds

                    the word  
                    *camellia* is

picked in what passes  
for attention

                    to detail but  
                    how might the smallest

shard read  
read outside

our grammar  
of default?

to question such  
thinking I hold still

the smell of dog  
in my hand

the near instance  
of this where

senses consult  
the will

which wills while apart  
a part of

the will fights  
the willing I

outside myself  
an ant takes a stand

on the edge of  
a fact called clover

**LEPUS**

I thought I saw through the ear of a hare, where  
    it sat in the morning sun, light-glow  
        behind the dilated vessels there, so near  
the warmth of the ambient air,  
        yet below

the heart's heat at the hare's core—  
    and what's more, I thought I could hear the blood rush  
        down, into its long limbs abeyant,  
aware as the nerve current sang in its flesh.

    And I smelled sage  
merge with stone, fresh earth-breath after pre-dawn  
    rain, the wet nearly gone as the sun rose;  
        and the hare, unmoving forth in its massive stillness,  
leapt, fierce and alone with its ear-light,  
        through me.

## DRIFT INTERVALS

learned to stay safe from yourself    which is when you are most in  
danger since there'll be no crash    & so no waking up though  
it seemed you'd been holding your    eyes open walking to work

some days everyone is well    concealed by their assumptions  
then maybe an ambulance    siren so close it squeezes  
us together at once the    fear siphons off a little

more anonymity as    we turn in unison glad  
for the others near us as    if sharing were a relief  
& relief were a virus    that diminishing loudness

spreads but not to the next block    where some stand in line doing  
quiet so separately    among each other which you  
know requires vigilance    easily mistaken for

patience in line outside this    shelter where lunch is free each    noon



RUSTY MORRISON

## **CEILING REFRIGERATOR SINK REFRIGERATOR CEILING**

tragedy has no traction when eating cereal at  
three a.m. counting each lost soul afloat face-down in your  
cold failure rate your faith in personal change just won't hold

water ask anyone who's pulling at the oars in their  
leaky boat concept with all their might already shedding  
emergency equipment disclosures from certified

visionaries you've largely ceased to translate clockface to  
carbon futures long past their sell-date can't purify your  
*nobody loves me* into anything more than anthem

into anything less than vestige of what you might think want

RUSTY MORRISON

## **ANY MOTION MIGHT PRODUCE VAGUE DISTURBING SENSATIONS**

a state of exhaustion has borders & tariff must be  
charged for the meanings that you think to carry out but the  
rigors of realism have made you not one but a

several-person context clouds break open so very  
far over all your heads that rain is only the precise  
salt crystal seeping from your eyes as if by accident

to say 'you' in this life could be anyone who can't reach  
where elsewhere must be pageant your feet naked you forgot  
to find your shoes & step on the voltage wire warning it's

illegal to pass through now you're dyed & numbered with all  
the other intangibles did you think because of your  
multiplicity you would not be counted that isn't

the sun in your eyes but a checkpoint interrogation lamp

JILL OSIER

## **HOMILY**

Let us  
take our time  
to know these things.

The snow has brained  
these mild weeks,  
sunken, grayed.

The vole, a single  
blazing thought, hurries  
no day.

JILL OSIER

## **ONE LESS THING**

The flowers so easily open,  
fall apart. Understanding this means  
not having to tomorrow.

The silence sometimes is me  
straining for words of counsel.

Love sometimes does not  
but people have limits. The flowers  
and I are sitting down to dinner.

Far away I am explaining.

## SOUTHEASTERN SUITE

*If I am Tennessee*  
& honeysuckle  
vanishes  
I'd be out there  
myself  
fucking up the rain

(drooling for drilling  
(for new skies  
(tests & more tests  
(cicadas & less  
(oh microfiche of mine  
(our weekend about  
(breathing but  
(also firemen  
(in their downtime

We get it: horses have the life, early is midnight.  
This teaches us we can't rely on any light that  
doesn't also make a sound.

People have different wattages  
& it can get ugly for us reservoirs  
  
like how owl flips through me  
& my democratic belly, how it flits  
  
at an oligarch's onyx-like motives  
while a mill unravels: life of  
  
a therapeutic underdog

Your world, my rubble  
Because the sky

Could not be here  
More ours

The only thing I had  
To do today was

Stick with lilies  
Today was LILIES

Unfuck the ocean  
Yesterday  
Unfuck the ocean to say

Nothing with my mouth  
Of white trees & how  
I know sweet limes

MICHAEL ROBINS

## **FROM "DAY'S EYE"**

ideas more than things    places you liked to hike    the it we  
inhabit continues    out across the lake, the dog nearby    did  
you remember to take the garbage    did you now    we posed  
and traded jackets in the kitchen    in the snow I planted  
chocolate    surely we'll return to enjoy it    it, an inkling  
and what address, leaving a hole, does a bullet call home    not  
anyone rolls in the neighborhood beds    not then    the phone  
not now    I listened and uh-huh    despite what's in movies  
blue mornings in the windowless room    despite what they say

MICHAEL ROBINS

**FROM "DAY'S EYE"**

saying no more says something      shady as your spring keeps  
passing      maybe enough left over from last night      say under  
this flight path      the don't-blame-me sky      and given time  
we'd each wear smooth      light flushed when we round the bend  
love-like      you collapse no less than the falling stars      tonight  
the waning moon between girls      we still haven't spoken in  
years      muscle and pollen      absolute      the engines tonight  
pulling folks home      saying someone made this world      miles  
and miles of brake lights      someone lit the fuse and walked away



## SHE HEARD SPARROWS

Something making a sound never made before, a series  
of slurred whistles in increasing tempo common, uncommon,  
invented for the sake of geography, birds of the air,  
the narrow eye ring, a song never heard from a branch  
of *artemisia absinthium* and bathing in indentations,  
a scattering of wings scattering dust, the rapidly unforeseen,  
something not exactly bird-like, night falling in layers,  
as the hidden aspect of all things hidden in paper and feathers,  
the brushed technique of feathering to disappearance . . .  
after a time the more they sound like creatures falling outside  
the imaginable, rustling, unfolding, a doubling of moments  
of having been here before, yet never, a feeling  
of transparent thickness over-layering then the sparrow  
speaking four or five times *prolonged and piercing in Greek*  
*from trees in the meadow of life beyond a river*  
*where the dead walk, how there is no death.*

## PAUSE

Reading pages then turning the paper aware of the under-thumb or fussing to get 96 rather than 97 the flap of sound, and the necessary pause between of *course being good scholars, both know that their respective views are partial* allows for no developed thought, but perhaps a catch of the breath at—or the pause of trying to turn the pages as slowly, quietly as possible so as not to wake whoever’s sleeping on the other side, listening to what might “break the silence” and ruin the pause that reading alone in time, stolen from the dark, from talk and the day’s perpetual latching of one thing to another, allow, secretive and holding the breath as if it provided loft, hopelessly clutching at timelessness.

MARTHA RONK

## THE SHAPE OF SILENCE

The shape of silence takes color from a long boat  
carved from one log, a color never encountered but close  
in its eddies to the various blues of Caribbean waters  
on a day or in a country clearly named but impossible  
to paddle days and nights to, slightly curved near the prow  
and bowspit yet from considerable distance  
a bend straightening towards a line parallel to the horizon,  
not unlike the sky in its ability to shapeshift  
each half twinning the other as the spectrum hues meet  
in a circle the interior of which has been rubbed and sanded  
so that the surface mirrors the arch above and the faces  
that stare into the mica-like silver their eyes turning to right  
and then left searching for the middle point  
are mine and yours as we might have been  
in our various incarnations and maneuvers  
around which the turtle moves slowly  
carrying the surface of the ocean on its shell as it swims  
towards a destination known solely to each alone  
but with the communal certitude of silence.

MICHAEL RUBY

## FOGHORN

*(two notes,  
then a pause)*

There's no reason  
For this spray

Hold the tooth  
To face the sauce

Go through  
Go through

In responses to houses  
An Arthurian

Purely right  
And oscillating

For this polished  
Peacepipe (incident)

After eleven  
And fifty cents

Because Dakota  
Drink soda

Believe this  
Elementary particle

If we're perched  
Beyond tulip

The long range  
Eats to the pit

Filament of  
Told rice

And once again  
The two returns

The polevault  
Forgotten here

All the long  
Time delay

For once in a while  
Riled and topped

Before this  
Poodle holiday

Yes it's possible  
On the mother ship

Before honest  
Impossible hounding

Go through  
Go through

\*

Inside crying  
Tights and lights

To believe this  
Without that

To wrestle  
Wholehearted

Piled  
And proofed

How to pellet  
This red place

. . . Heads on  
At last

Ambushing  
The told

Theorizing  
The red

This belongs  
In glass

Take the sauce  
Leave the lace

## ITINERANT MAYFLY MATRICES

*Plants, having no nowhere to go, are never lost.*

—Alexander von Humboldt

They sees mayflies how they sign barely with wings evading capture in their sunlit columns of light in the erratics of occasional zagging. One begins a catalogue of planes of light of small square footage in its largeness beneath the surface deep roots as dirt is thought as worms making dirt is thinking. They sees one frog nestled in a scrapwood bucket, silk ants nestled in a vacant water feature making small spaces visible as pockets of coherency. One sees hidden ghost-white sprouts in the darkened forest of compost fully entangled with worms. They being brave believe writing like nothing larger than the shimmery world, a matrix of movement, what's there in the shimmer they brings, or shadows and remaining light as the matrix simply breathing, plant-like, having everywhere to go and never lost, entering at any point in the everycycling intertwine of place: that hand, that pace, that sun, that seed unfathomably fast and unimaginably slow never still.

## INDUSTRIAL GREEN WAVES

*If nature had endowed us with microscopic powers of vision . . . the vegetable world would present a very different aspect from the apparent immobility and repose in which it is now manifested to our senses.*

—Alexander von Humboldt

They goes out into industrial green waves of grass a whole surface waving in moments of more landscape to notice new beauty the new meaning of still familiar trees in industrial green waves of wheat. Not a mountain peak but approaching a single blade of grass like a mountain in lowly dirt sublime, the force of human in the medium of grass. One notices the largeness of audience and returns to garden a site of small-scale knowledge listening for chemical conversations growing cells in the spread effect.

One senses loss of all fact in largeness dirt and gravel and pick up dust in a cloud. They steps out of the car turns off the engine disengages from carbon transference combustion. One enters unfamiliar language energetics of grass somewhat windy and green like sex between trees just before vulnerable landscape moments. They feels at that edge of green a dirty flower blooming in monochrome in dust geography and lost distribution of plants, a manufactured strange sameness that remains a science of unknown fears and lesser diffusions beyond the scale of footscape. Not one's self but a site of grass brushing up to knees on the path returning in the mode of animal enlivening.

How to stay when to go how to solve emotion engulfed in deep swarms of farm soil one's body ceases to be in motion dissolves into material fact resolves back into rolling car windowscape trying to join waving conversation grasses, to sip with their huge lungs of breath too human alien grasses where so few blades familiarize to touch.



Few know sublime in a lowly dirt way as the full rich shades and shapely shadow, the deceptive latent power of sheer area and low slow grow of things. They finds them astonishingly aliving. One names tilling planting harvesting what the combine does the whole long grow of combed lines their feet set among.

One sees from the car the flesh of grass in wind when the alternate side of the blade turns to sun, the animal aliveness of grass pelts in breeze stirred animate greens. They senses oneness their enscaped animal figure the broadening aliveness of shadows rising between gently-clouded skies, gravel road dirt dry at the surface deep down holding water and grass sprung never still in immense moment of small human waiting.

## LOVEBIRDS

Angharad tells me about her lovebird who's killed his partner  
three times  
in the night, a species named for its need of one other. But this bird,

though made for monogamy, can't help but thrust his sharp, long  
beak into each partner—once it was the chest, two times the neck.

Perhaps it's the crap beneath the perch, piling up. Maybe she never  
sweeps up her bright green, molted feathers, or he wonders what one

with an orange chest might have to offer. It's his duty, too, to feed her,  
to chew and regurgitate, chew and regurgitate. To have someone

depend on you so wildly and in such vivid color, with such  
songful praise!

But probably, he's just scared he may need her song too much,  
her caw

along with his. That he's made for this frightens him. New love,  
do not be surprised if our bed sprouts copper bars, arching over  
our heads

in the dark, a temple to expectation, its only door embellished  
with metal doves,  
our only cover synthetic ivy. Too pretty not to be a trap, but we  
are fooled.

In the morning one of us may be gone, the stabbing ache of need  
too biting  
not to bite back, our last song the echo of pierced cry, in harmony.

## LOVE POEM, INTERMENT

A mud-chunk-covered iguana crawls out of one of the stone beds mounted on top of the coral. Your family history an ode in boxes: the cramped galley for coming from Cuba, the stamped and hinged for an hour's rolled cigars, and these at our feet now, for sleep. One tomb is smaller, tilting out of the ground, as if it is giving her back to us.

Miles away my father is feeding the magnolia that hovers above his grave in the soft dirt where his body is deep now, his dry skin and cartilage fertilizer for the leather and lemon. Their white swells for only a few days, then browns, dropping its fruit pit hard, scattering red seeds.

Nearby, past the wrought iron stars of David, a loud backhoe grabs the ground to make a place among the *Brothers of Zion*. There are so many interpretations of family. What is excavated now will become a tower, stacked stories of intersecting lives.

I say to burn and you say to bury, and the rest we agree on—we will become nothing together, we will expose the entirety of our bones, to dry and be bleached white in the sun.

## SUDOKU

For when the half-dressed neighbor across the alley opened the window, I was holding a clothespin in my mouth.

For the waiter stepped onto the sidewalk, lifting a glass of fruit halves and vegetable stalks, singing, *a radiant morning*.

For he entered the outpatient clinic two doors down singing *Itzik, my darling, for you*.

For at the #189 bus stop in the direction of Holon, the black, shined shoes, the well-groomed hair of poverty, the pressed pants, white shirt, polite black jacket of it, was last to board.

For wick  
is to wicked as \_\_\_\_\_ is to light.

For a sofa is crossing the city on the roof of a car, parallel to the sea, under wisps of clouds in the heavily monitored sky.

For the radio waves rest as lightly on our heads as air stirred by a hand moving from a blessing.

For when we moved the bookshelves six blocks north, disassembled in a shopping cart whose left rear wheel veered, seven cars stopped to offer advice, and two passersby.

For no one asked where we got the shopping cart, and one asked if he could borrow it later after we had returned.

For once we went to the river to ascertain whether or not the wild parakeets take attendance in the trees forty minutes before sunset.

As for the neighbors, the wife loves the husband  
and is content with the division of labor,

or, for the wife is content with the division of labor  
and therefore loves her husband.

As for the friends, the husband is good at board games.

For the City of Skypapers is what my child calls the intersection  
of the legal district with that of the diamond.

For the woman next to me on the #56 bus does sudoku with a pen,  
certainty determining the size of the number, as a small child  
growing at an irregular rate.

## WEIGHTS AND MEASURES

*Many systems of measurement were to some extent based on the dimensions of the human body according to the proportions described by Marcus Vitruvius Pollio. Thus, units of measure could vary from location to location, from person to person.*

Whenever the mulberries stained the patio with maps no  
one read, my cousin Charles lifted me and my brothers one  
by one to the peep show  
at the telescope where Saturn's body gleamed through scarves  
made of years, dust, ice, and space, jeweled  
with spry spinning moons. When the honeysuckle wasn't  
blooming, the  
garden stank of dog shit. I didn't want to be a girl,  
a sharp, flat cosmic key good as long as I remained unmarked  
and never leaked. While

my cousin was talking about cosmic weight, girth, gravity,  
moons, and rings of ice, my mother was talking about cosmetic  
weight, girth, gravy  
spoons and belt size (everything relative's related).  
My dad and cousin were raised by  
my aunt as brothers. My cousin studied astronomy and then  
worked in the Caterpillar warehouse, parts division, which  
isn't, after all, so different from outer space. In 1960, the mètre-

étalon was replaced as the official measure of the  
meter. Now a meter is the length of the path traveled by light in  
a vacuum  
in 1/299 7

92

458ths of a second. The expression, to be  
raised, my cousin always lifting. I've been unjust to my  
mother. Under the sign of cancer, my mother's breasts are cut  
away. Now she's the girl she

never was, the girl I no longer am. My cousin died on  
Thanksgiving Day lifting a fork to his mouth then dropping the  
fork back. His brother  
died discussing where to hang a picture in Houston,  
falling and skewing the frame. I  
have never been able to change a thing about time or space. But  
I've been dreaming the same dream for eight years—that I  
have a daughter. Before that, I dreamt I was pregnant. My  
daughter tells me *stop it*.

JON THOMPSON

## PAUL ELUARD DREAMS OF AMERICA

I speak of cities

of imagined cities  
cities made from deepest desires,  
cities early and late, unafraid  
of excess, cities  
unlike other cities,  
cities without boundaries  
shadowless under the sun.

Cities that dream and cry.

≈

A city is a kind of self  
that invents itself.

A mask.

It deeply resembles you.

And you seem nothing like  
a sky shivering with flashes of lightning.

You reveal yourself to yourself  
to reveal yourself to others.

≈

Between the torments  
between despair and the reason for living  
there's injustice and this evil of men  
that I cannot accept.



I hear the fire talk of conscience.  
I hear a man speak of what he has not known.

The fire is rising,  
dying.

≈

Dreams in broad daylight  
make the sun evaporate

make us cry, laugh  
and cry.

Speak, then, dreams with nothing to say.

Make me speak of what is necessary to say.

≈

After years of assurance  
during which the world was transparent

where then do

we think we are?

There are new words for cities  
that've grown beyond our dreams.

≈

What's become of you            why this  
solitude

which

we love to death?

A face like all the forgotten faces.

I said it to you for the clouds.

For the eye that becomes landscape or face.

I said it to you for your thoughts,  
for your words.

≈

So many reasons to lose ourselves  
on earth under horizon-less skies

under an exact goodness  
that sets the earth in order.

I'm speaking to you now  
of the living who resemble us.  
All the living we fail to love.

Their lips tremble with joy  
at the echo of leaden bells  
at the muteness of beaten gold.  
A lone heart among other hearts

singing of the earth, as if it were ours.

SAM TRUITT

## **FITTING IN WATER THIS AIR THIS TIME**

To the balls of my feet  
to the brick of my loin

the song of my heart  
—

to everything  
I carry—the meat

of my consciousness  
weighs nothing

more than what  
nature's face

leaps out

SAM TRUITT

## **A TOTALITY OF LANGUAGE IS POSSIBILITY**

We walk echoing  
in our hearts

the surface  
of the sun

& so can't  
see in the sky

where we are  
our image

concealed  
calling us

to listen  
once

SAM TRUITT

## **THIS PLACE IS HERE FOR YOU**

At the entrance  
to my kingdom

there is a wilderness  
of mirrors

in place of words  
in place of sound

like 2 mountains  
in place of myself

kissing the ground  
& a rough patch

of road to nowhere  
that can be found

in the space  
of beginning before

I have begun in  
place of eyes

to touch the rain  
no rhyme swallows

like the sun

MARK WAGENAAR

## **A CHARM FOR PROTECTION FROM THE PROTECTORS**

*Assume the position—  
stop look & listen*  
—“The What,” Notorious B.I.G. & Method Man

Because it's not enough for your son  
to have a platelet count of 100,

because once his bilirubin levels fall  
he will have to leave the tent

of light he lies beneath, little  
phosphorescent idol, neon glow worm

with capillaries & aortas & aqueducts  
a thousand times more complicated

than the uncounted tracheal tubes  
within the butterfly's chrysalis,

because he will be made, one day,  
to lie facedown in the street, nose & lips

to asphalt, & you can only dream the ark  
of feathers, the Kevlar-stitched

cradle (even holding the half-god  
by his heels & dipping him in the Styx

did not work: we are vulnerable  
at the place we are held),

because beyond teaching him to raise  
his hands slow, slow, to say *sir*

when he hears *boy*, there is nothing  
else you can do, say his name

to the spillway pulsing with last night's  
rain, repeat his blood type

to the wind, alive now in its wounds  
of petunias & honeysuckle.

Leave the last lock of his first haircut  
in the empty mouth of the lone

Confederate statue on the town square.  
Rub out the oracle figures in the blood

that rivulets the asphalt  
from the deer hanging by its heels

in a driveway. Press yourself against  
a net of thistles & stones, against

your shadow, which holds the shadow  
of a boy falling, the shadows

of flowers piled in the street  
are falling like rain through

the bare rafters in the house  
that is his future, the rafters your hands

are holding up, your hands  
are counting his ribs, each rib.

9

propensities a song, the false marsh light. small fingers arouse my i.

chosen the danger of 'everlasting' i.

heavy with threatening snowcoat, i think bridge bridge. i tend  
tallow, divide the skull.

a girl i die of nothing, see i become less, the choice

i provide hips for the service, a courtesy. i fail to respond, answer  
you you you

our bodies we hold a glass needle, numb. i indulge in a  
fantasy about power, attempt to crush out reason.

i the wilderness live by the mouth, a jumble of prayers drawn along  
to move the waters, an empty feast.

i a brook, a stony bed

i liable to flooding

i a small burning, freed in the sense of miles

on hands a rose fragment of failed i  
a morning traveled for hours



## UNTITLED

such a pretty man and what a dancer  
a song cottoning as soon as he came  
home her moon he danced and touched  
down and she knew he was a latent lash  
laughing easy all kisskiss she knew he  
came to make a man's gain and the hole  
mystery becomes how to keep a woman  
on the premise she means repair or a  
town or a face or a mothersplace behavior  
for clean leaks had come back the rough  
smell of body she watched Mr. R change  
furniture change faces watched her i little  
i exchange i sacred i prayer for death

**12**

fitful sleep            comparing torture with joy

blue ear                i wife enter bidden, find the bodies of all  
former stories, their thin tissue whispering still.

you name my i        yes it is true i join together broken  
threads, spin in your chest from  
morning till noon and create in hell  
paradise, that mountain in you  
where i live.

## THE WORLD THUNDERSTRUCK

i forgot about death  
that darkness like a bellows  
one blink away  
from permanent  
is the only way i could bear  
to lose you  
wouldn't kill me  
any more than winter's  
perennial glaze of ice  
would a knot of birches  
like shadows on snow  
& yet  
"the stressful environment of a typical lawn"  
shortens their short-lived lives  
the birch my parents bought with the house  
got lonely / outside my window  
it whispered  
what did it say  
before my mother hired the men  
(inevitable) to shear it  
from itself & the earth  
a glass partition cloaking  
the buzz snap of its dying  
love, you're real life in a dream  
luminous as the place  
where my knee hits the saddle

## **EVERYONE ASSUMES THE ANIMALS ALL KNOW EACH OTHER**

Geese these days really need to work on their Vs.  
Tornados need to slow their roll & keep their cones tight.

Don't get it twisted: the dogs are here to teach us how to lose  
Something important. The bears know what's what. The ants just

Want it more than we do. The cats have reached consensus  
On refusing to pull us out of fires. It's that old grift: if

You love someone, leave them be. So they've sent in the magpie  
To work us undercover. It's important to have someone

On the inside. A wasp would be too obvious, nervously  
Banging itself against each glazed windowpane like an amateur.

A roach would just bring up all the old nightmares, skittering  
Across the floor like a cigarette cherry thrown out a car window

Onto the dark interstate. But a magpie is our ultimate prize:  
A thief who doesn't need us but chooses us anyway—&

All the while, he's picked up on all our tells,  
Tucked certain of our favorite words into his beak,

Smuggling them out for constructing his next nest until  
We're left with only our own small commands: sit, stay,

Speak until we lie down together. The magpie, without telling  
Us in so many words, will be the one pulling our strings when

We play favorites with the ones we know we cannot keep &  
The ones we try to replace: the collarless puppies falling all

Over each other like fountain water, tussling while we lie  
In wait for the moment they become motherless.

JOHN YAU

## MELTED FIGURINES

Yes, I spray painted this line in a sandstorm  
*The man who bakes biscuits is a crook*

She whispers to the carpet when no one is looking  
The wind is a whistler no one has ever painted

The man who bakes biscuits is a crook  
He crouches beneath the cherry tree and weeps

The wind is a whistler no one has ever painted  
The night, with its wires sticking out, is a broken radio

He crouches beneath the cherry tree and weeps  
The beekeeper's husband recites another story to his dog

The night, with its wires sticking out, is a broken radio  
Did I ever tell you about the crackpot who heisted my crockpot

The beekeeper's husband recites another story to his dog  
The inhibited cur is momentarily afflicted with amnesia

Did I ever tell you about the crackpot who heisted my crockpot  
He said his checkbook was crammed with clouds

The inhibited cur is momentarily afflicted with amnesia  
A luminous moon, like what you find in children's books

He said his checkbook was crammed with clouds  
We wear makeshift clothes and scowl at vacuum cleaners

A luminous moon, like what you find in children's books  
Yes, I spray painted this line in a sandstorm

We wear makeshift clothes and scowl at vacuum cleaners  
She whispers to the carpet when no one is looking

## CONTRIBUTOR NOTES

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**Jaswinder Bolina** is author of *Phantom Camera* (2013) and *Carrier Wave* (2007). His recent poems are collected in the digital chapbook *The Tallest Building in America* (2014). His essays have appeared at the Poetry Foundation and in anthologies, including *The Norton Reader*. He teaches at the University of Miami.

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**Kelcey Parker Ervick** is the new name of Kelcey Parker, author of *Liliane's Balcony* (Rose Metal Press) and *For Sale by Owner* (Kore Press). Her new book, *The Bitter Life of Božena Nemcová*, is a biographical mash-up of found texts, postcards, collages, and images of the Czech fairy tale writer.

**Adam Fagin's** poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Boston Review*, *New American Writing*, the *Seattle Review*, *Fence*, *Volt*, and many other journals. His chapbooks are *The Sky Is a Howling Wilderness But It Can't Howl with Heaven* (Called Back Books, 2016) and *T's Alphabet* (Little Red Leaves, 2013).

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**Mark Wagenaar's** books are *Voodoo Inverso* and, most recently, *The Body Distances*, winner of the Pollak Prize and the Juniper Prize, respectively. His poems have appeared in or are forthcoming from the *New Yorker*, *32 Poems*, *Field*, *Southern Review*, *Image*, and many others. This year he is serving as a visiting assistant professor at Valparaiso University.

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**John Yau** has recently put together a book of essays, *The Wild Children of William Blake* (forthcoming from Autonomedia), and is finishing a book of poems, "Firefly Promises." 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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