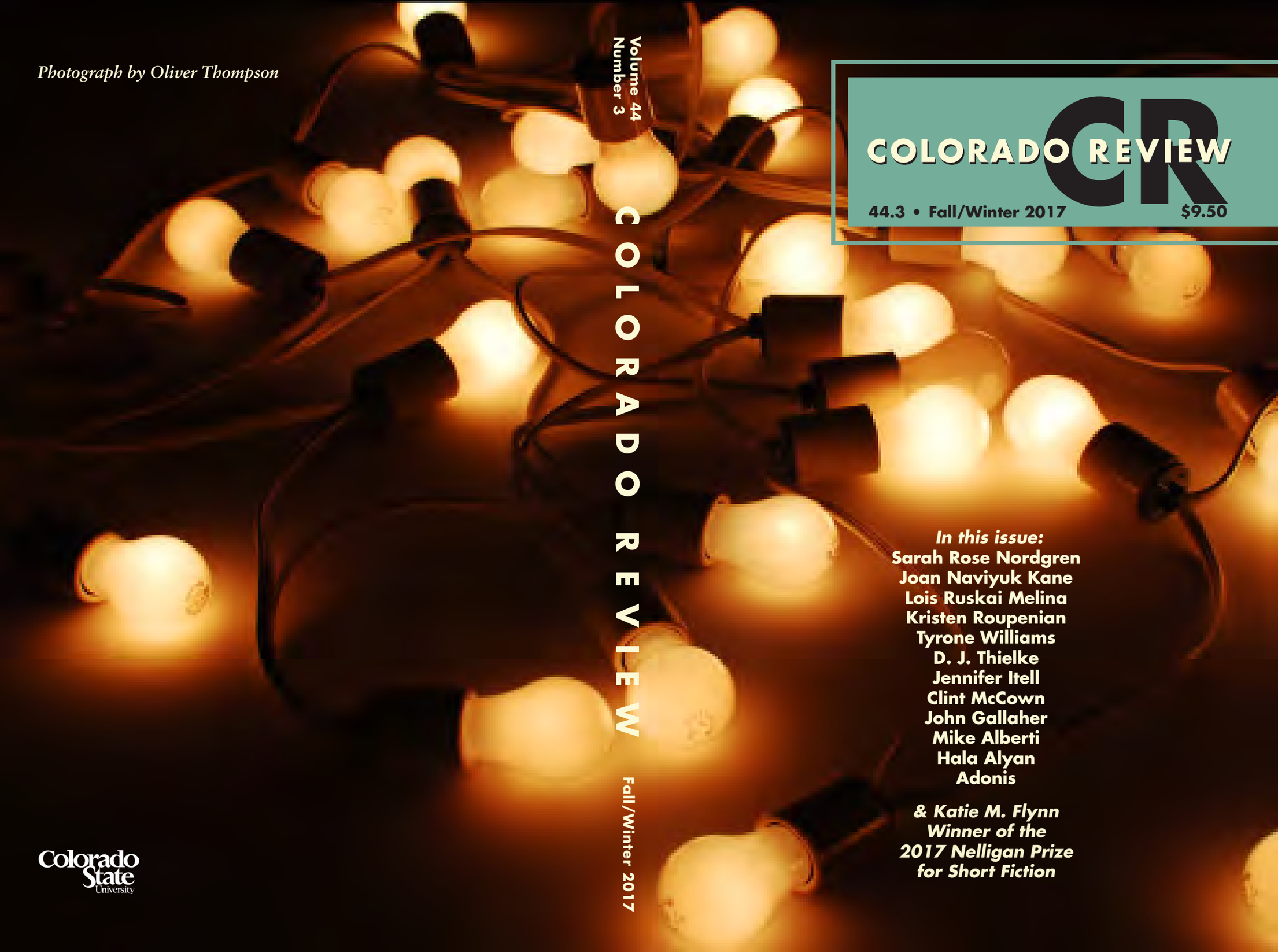

Photograph by Oliver Thompson

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& Katie M. Flynn
Winner of the
2017 Nelligan Prize
for Short Fiction

Colorado State University

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EDITORS' PAGE

Every fall, we have the true pleasure of publishing the winning story of the Nelligan Prize for Short Fiction. This year, it's Katie M. Flynn's "Island Rule," in which an environmental biology professor is haunted by memories of the surreally accelerated evolution and ensuing political violence that expelled her, as a child, from her island home. Final judge Richard Bausch calls it "a very strange, audaciously original and convincing story that arrives at metaphor; it partakes of Kafka, being so matter-of-factly *realistic*." It's a wonderful, daring story, richly deserving of the prize.

Among the other fine stories in this issue is Mike Alberti's "Summer People": in Vietnam War–era upstate New York, a young girl grapples with the death of her brother in a childhood accident and finds solace in friendship, academics, and, later, the grace of second chances. Kristen Roupenian's "The Night Runner" takes us to Kenya, where a well-intentioned Peace Corps volunteer from Texas chafes against both the culture and the expectations of those he hopes to serve and befriend. And D. J. Thielke's heartbreakingly wry "Val" presents a slightly dystopian near future in which the woman behind the prevailing dating app grieves over the consequences of an ironic mistake that has cost her dearly.

In the nonfiction section, Jennifer Itell's meditative "Moonwalk" braids varieties of drought, the relationship between body and landscape, and the difficulty of writing. Longtime contributing editor Clint McCown pays a loving tribute to his father in "A Lesson from My Father's Suitcase," set against the backdrop of civil rights–era Birmingham, Alabama. And in "The Grammar of Untold Stories," Lois Ruskai Melina explores her Hungarian ancestry and considers the ways language, narrative, land, and secrets shape our family history—our sense of who we are—and "fill in the empty spaces where there should [be] stories."

Welcome to the fall issue.

—STEPHANIE G'SCHWIND

As I write this introduction, cyclonic winds are tearing over the Atlantic, gathering, variously, dispersing, dispensing rain, havoc, darkness. Worst hurricane season on record. Franklin, Gert, Harvey, Irma, Jose, Katia, Lee, Maria . . . and we're only halfway through. In medias res. Or just in the beginning of a term. Gaia's angry. The power's out, no better time for poetry.

We begin this issue's verse equally in the middle of things. Literally, by the fortune of alphabet—which has always struck me as a democratic way to organize a magazine—the Syrian poet Adonis (lucently translated by Khaled Mattawa) places us in the middle of a long sequence, in the middle of al-Quds (Jerusalem), in the middle of late Empire. But poetry resists: "Not yet. / The disaster has not arrived. / The flood has yet to burst / The Mediterranean is readying itself. / The oceans stamp and shudder." Other world voices come to us from Aigerim Tazhi (translated by J. Kates) and Hervé Le Tellier (translated by Cole Swensen).

Such planetary captures flow through this issue, from Marielle Grenade-Willis's "somatic dirt" to Bin Ramke's "Atmospheric Perspective," Jessica Reed's "Space without Objects" to Tyrone Williams's "Passing Goods." End times or the next storm (it may be winter as you read this): "in the hour of the waif and wastrel / will mizzle a wilting / against stauncher tooth and tine" (Abraham Smith, from *Destruction of Man*).

The climatic singularity pulls equally on the body. See Joseph Lease's haunting "Body Ghost," Jasmine Dreame Wagner's "A Draft," Sarah Rose Nordgren's "Addendum": "And then I met the inverse of my power / which came as cancer // And it whispered *open your mouth*." Or is it identity that's imperiled? See Truong Tran's (enraging) excerpts from *The Book of Others,* Joan Naviyuk Kane's (incantatory) excerpt from "White Alice Changes Hands," Timothy Liu's (feral) "Against Sentimentality." The fact is, we need it all, complexity is survival: "Only all versions together are definitive / The considerable dust they stir up lasts" (F. Daniel Rzicznek, "Radar Loop"). O taste and see.

—MATTHEW COOPERMAN

KATIE M. FLYNN

ISLAND RULE

Winner of the 2017 Nelligan Prize for Short Fiction, selected by Richard Bausch

I tell my students: On islands, small omnivorous animals tend to get bigger while large predators tend to get smaller. Island rule, they called it for a time.

Some of them write this down. Others don't. They sit in the arena-style lecture hall shoulder to shoulder and still. The last-row boys spit tobacco into cups and whisper about football practice.

I tell them: Take the rats of Flores. Isolated from the mainland population, they have grown up to four feet in length.

I flick my slideshow to an image of a dead rat lying sprawled on the ground like a giant cat. The students suck in a collective gasp. In its claws someone has put a coffee can to render its size indisputable. I can't help smiling.

A boy from the third row says: Rats are smart. If they all got that big, they could take over the world.

The boy next to him says: I heard they can sniff your mucus and know if you have tuberculosis.

Ewww, a girl says, I can't tell who. Everyone is smiling, but what are they learning? I haven't gotten to MacArthur and his math, searching for patterns in nature with differential equations and conceptual models, or Case's rule, that fundamental factor, the reason for any change in size of an insular species, the net energy that can be gained.

Instead we talk about the rat floods in India, only I can feel it at the back of my throat, that old story, the one I've been told couldn't be true, the reason why I started studying island ecosystems in the first place.

The island I come from is thousands of miles across the Pacific, situated on the ring of fire. Its beaches are black, its volcano core still active, though it's been decades since the last eruption. My mother's house was built into the side of the volcano, where it was green and too thick to take anything but the machete-cut paths. We were field-workers. That is, until the men in uniform came. They didn't take her, though my mother

had made certain I knew to avoid them, to run or hide when I spotted them on the street. *They will disappear a little girl like you no problem*. Instead they told her she'd been selected for hotel work, an honor on our island. The next day she reported for work at the hotel casino in her tropical uniform, a flower planted in the bun at the nape of her neck, her lips painted red and shining like blood spilt in slaughter. After school, I would toil in the fields until dusk. Then I'd wait for her in the hotel's kitchen, seated near the dessert station and starving, my fingers tingling with a thief's impulse.

It's a relief when I realize I've run overtime. I dismiss my students, reminding them about next class's exam, and they groan and shuffle out of the lecture hall.

My office door is decorated with a single *Far Side* comic, gifted to me from a colleague, of a doctor and a duck trapped on an island. The caption reads: "So Professor Jenkins! . . . My old nemesis! . . . We meet again, but this time the advantage is mine! Ha! Ha! Ha!"

I am reading it again, not laughing like I once did, but smiling, when Claire, the department chair, passes in her many scarves and expensive orthopedic shoes, silent as a ninja. Research interests: climate dynamics of the Southern Hemisphere and Antarctic sea ice.

She calls over her shoulder: Don't you have an exam this week?

She's shut in her office before I catch her meaning: no students, not a one, here for my office hours, and on the week of an exam, no less.

Her office hours are always booming, but I know for a fact she offers extra credit to the kids who come with questions. I could never do that. If you don't have questions of your own, I'm not going to bribe you. I watch the students from my window, congregating in little huddles. They laugh and smile and lean in and touch each other and bounce and run off to class, and I am exhausted just watching them. When I was a child we didn't spend so much time tending to our friends, our social engagements, to our own happiness. At school the only subject any of us cared about was English. When we grew old enough, those of us who could stand still and smile, who could greet our foreign guests with comforting idioms in smooth English, were

given jobs in the hotels and casinos. The rest of us continued our toil in the fields, too tired to tend to homework, piling into bed together at night, our wages too low to afford lives of our own, our mothers dead of disease or malnourishment or disappearance. I was lucky; I had mine longer than most. But in the boarding house, we learned to hate one another, to be mean. It is a natural reaction to close quarters.

On my desk sits the rejection letter for my research proposal, received last week from the island's travel board. I'd been hopeful, my proposal fairly benign. I wanted merely to examine the presence of invasive species, given the island's physical and political isolation. The US government had approved of my trip despite travel restrictions, but the island's travel board had rejected me due to my status as one who fled. The government doesn't take kindly to those of us who escaped. The bureaucrats who sit on the board are my age, my peers—maybe some of them even remember me, hold a grudge.

Something I know: As much as I miss the feeling of home, if I'd stayed, I'd still be in the fields, or worse.

At fourteen, I'd woken on a foreign beach just outside Auckland with a bullet lodged in my shoulder. I was taken to a hospital for treatment and tests, so small for my age they assumed I was malnourished. A nice family sponsored me, let me live in their grown child's old bed, which still held the vapor traces of pee, their son the bed wetter. I ate meat pies flecked with sea salt in front of the television, and no one asked me who I came in with, if I wanted to call home. Better to forget. To forget, I learned, is easy for a time, to billow and spill memory, to open up and let your insides float away, to feast on things new.

To forget, I learned, is easy for a time, to billow and spill memory, to open up and let your insides float away, to feast on things new.

And when I tried to tell my story, how it was I'd traveled all those miles across the Pacific, my sponsors pursed their lips and told my tutor to talk to me. Solemn and speckled in sunspots, he said it couldn't be true, scientifically speaking, and I knew, of course, that he was right.

No one comes, not a single student, for the whole of my office

hour. I nudge my desk, the plastic cat given to me by a Chinese student bats its paw in my direction, hefting me good luck.

I take a spin class at the university gym with a colleague, Samantha Hamwich, who studies the impact of border lights on the migratory patterns of songbirds. She works harder at the classes than I do; sometimes I barely break a sweat. I like to coast at my own pace and the instructor has long since given up on me. I won't be coached into going faster or pushing harder. I drift, the pace finding me more than me finding it, my legs gliding more than pumping.

After, Samantha buys me a tuna salad sandwich and an iced tea and we take a table outside the university cafe, where she tells me she has news.

Oh?

Big news, actually. I got the grant. I'll be spending nine months in Cyprus!

No one else in the department knows she has a boyfriend there, but her papers about birds and borders have earned her public interest outside academia, even a few NPR interviews and invitations to speak at big birding conferences, and it helps that she's beautiful and an extrovert. So the department will grant her leave for a whole academic year, nine months of beaches and great sex and, sure, some research. I'm not jealous, not really, not even as I face two semesters of a heavy teaching load, sifting papers out of old research to stay current, to keep Claire off my back.

Samantha encourages: You should do something with the Channel Islands. They're close enough you won't need much in the way of funding.

I nod, like it's a good idea. And, really, it's not a bad idea. They have that adorable kit fox and there were those pigs they slaughtered, but Samantha knows what it's like to pick a project. Like love, it's hard to give up on it, to move on.

She says: Well, you'll have to do something.

I don't think she means to sound so ominous.

I catch myself saying this on the way to my dinner date, arranged neatly on the internet: The island I come from is thousands of miles across the Pacific.

My Yaris is the color of sea foam, the freeway dreamy with

marine layer. Though I've lived in San Diego for three years, it still feels like foreign territory. I can still get lost. Last week I was on the colossal spread of the 1-5 when I missed my exit and got caught up in the border-crossing line. There was no way to turn around, nowhere to pull over. I had to sit in the line for three hours, missing my classes, telling the border-patrol guard my stupid story. He frowned at me for wasting his time, flagged over another guard, who lifted a cone and sent me coasting northward, away from the mass of waiting cars and Chiclet girls, women begging at closed windows and men carrying wooden crosses strung with piñatas of Donald Trump.

I'm not sure why I tell my dinner date, but I tell him, this stranger: The island I come from is thousands of miles across the Pacific. The people there, some of them anyway, they grew.

Like obese? I've heard of that, how the heat can make people—

I interrupt before he can say something offensive: Like giant.

He laughs uncomfortably, really going for it, because he wants to believe this is a joke, but I am not joking. We're still waiting for our calamari appetizer, and I am maybe moving too swiftly past the bad-jokes stage of our date to the backstory stage, so I ask him if he thinks God created carnivores, and he blinks feverishly like he's got something in his eye or forgotten his contacts before delivering an actual answer with actual details about the day of the week upon which God created predatory beasts.

I say: Huh. You saw in my profile I'm a scientist, right?

Are you kidding? I love science.

Tell me more about this science that you love.

He starts in about nature and its divinity. In fact, once he says the word *divinity* I'm off, sort of drifting in my head, across the ocean maybe, maybe like before, coasting on the raft Shasta made, clinging to her bloated shoulder.

When my dinner date is done telling me about the things he loves about science, I ask him, Are you religious, terrified of the answer.

I seek truth, he says, and I stay through dessert just to find out if he's joking.

As we're signing receipts on our split bill, he says: You're much smaller than I anticipated.

Oh? I say, like tell me more.

Like nearly a dwarf, wouldn't you say?

We don't hug at the door. I say thanks, and he says, sure, have a good night, and I say, you too, and I know I'll never see him again, whatever his name is, adrift, drifting, gone.

I coast home in my Yaris, thinking of my cousin Shasta, once so small and meek she'd hide in closets at holiday parties. There were others like her, who swelled so big they couldn't leave the house, much less work. Our newspapers called it an epidemic, gross malformation of the body, a disease we had to combat collectively. They recommended reducing caloric intake and getting off soda and longer hours in the fields or fisheries. I would visit Shasta from the garden, window open, staring in at her marvelous heft, her many folds, the shine of her skin, too much of it to be covered despite her efforts at modesty. She'd long since grown too big to leave the room, for actual clothes. I'd watch her lift an arm, observe the way the meat shifted with the pull of gravity, and I'd cringe, worrying for her bones, wondering if she would ever walk again.

I would visit Shasta from the garden, window open, staring in at her marvelous heft, her many folds, the shine of her skin.

I've got a pretty nice place in Encinitas, just a little in-law along the side of my landlord's house, near enough to the ocean I can smell it even on a still day. He's a former marine, a little needy, likes flowers. I see the way he cares for them, and I can't help wondering if he's making up for the dirty things he did when he was in the military.

I take a shower and listen to college radio. It's minimal techno tonight, which suits me fine. I'm not in the mood for words. I shampoo my hair and sort of dance in the spray, when my doorbell buzzes. It's my landlord.

Hey, Glen.

Oh, sorry, were you in the shower?

It's okay. What's up?

I made ice cream. With the new ice cream maker? You wouldn't want—

What kind?

Well, I made a vanilla base. Then I added sort of a fudge peanut butter kind of rainbow—

Could you bring it over?

He brings it over and we sit at my tiny two-person kitchen table and he says: You know, it's nice having you here. Did I ever tell you about the previous tenant?

I shake my head, my face going numb as I shovel-eat.

He'd break into my place when I was gone. Never took anything, but I knew he'd been inside.

How'd you know?

He had a scent. Like an old cheeseburger? I could smell him everywhere.

Was that part of your military training?

He laughs, says: Not exactly.

I'm curious about his military background and bring it up whenever I can. I can tell it makes him uncomfortable, but that's sort of the point. On the island, we learned to hate the men who marched our streets in uniform, who broke down our doors and took the loudest of us, the most articulate complainers, because our leader didn't like to compete to be heard. We called him Sam because he asked us to and we were afraid of him. I didn't know then how he became our leader. It was before my time, history a thing written, a story, and Sam our narrator, all my life. I knew only what my mother told me, that Sam took the people who could tell any story contrary to his, hundreds of people, which is a lot on a small island like ours.

Where did he take them, I asked, only seven at the time, before I learned to bite back my questions.

They're not here, are they? She spun around angrily with her sun-scorched bone arms, offering me an empty room, as if to say: Where do you think?

I learned later that Sam had taken my uncle, a scholar, though my mother refused to talk about him, to tell me what it was he studied. I knew for certain it was science by the way she hated my curiosities, the questions I asked about the seasonal storms, our island's volcanic origins, the stars that showed in patterns.

Glen's finished off his bowl and is watching me stirring my spoon, turning my ice cream into soup.

Who gave you the ice cream maker?

My daughter.

Jackie, right?

That's right. Named for that amazing runner with the fantastic nails?

I have no idea who he's talking about, but I nod and lift the bowl to my mouth, slurp back my ice cream soup noisily, and I don't ask him where his daughter lives or what she does, and he doesn't ask me why I'm alone, and I get to wondering: can you calculate loneliness? Is it a measurable quality? It is hard, being away from home, on the outer rim of a huge landmass. I picture it tipping, consider a regression analysis.

When I was a kid, I loved *The Guinness Book of World Records*. During "Library" I'd shine my attention on those record holders, the exceptional, always lingering on the tallest woman in the world, the largest. I wondered why it was Shasta grew, the others like her, and not me. I wasn't the only one to wonder. I was fourteen, living in a boarding house, my mother long gone. One of my bunkmates, Georgette, grew in normal human terms, and she, like many of us, felt angry that she would be small all her life, the unfairness of it, when some got to be so big, so she chucked a rock at Little Dina, who had only begun to grow big and could still go outside and walk. She retained her nickname due to our collective nostalgia for a time before we were divided into two. Georgette was the star center fielder on our high school's softball team and had fantastic aim, beaning Little Dina right on the crown of her head. She crumpled. Big or small, a rock going at that velocity is going to knock the stuffing out of you. It's not something we joked about, because Little Dina was concussed and because of what came later.

After supper, we watched at the windows of the boarding house for the men in uniform, for them to take Georgette away for what she'd done, but darkness fell and the men—they never came.

On Thursday, I diddle on my phone while my students hunch over their exam. I can tell by their grim faces they haven't studied enough. The back-row boys are spitting a steady stream into their empty energy-drink bottles, nerves tightening their faces into angry masks of concentration, and I picture them on the football field, snarling at one another behind protective headgear like mastodons from another epoch ready to collide.

I get up only to erase and rewrite the time remaining on the

board: 45 minutes, 30, 20, 10, marking time's slippage. It's then that some of them begin to finish, to give up, drop the exam on the edge of my table, and leave the classroom without so much as a goodbye. I don't understand their rudeness. It's as if I'm not human to them, not animated flesh and pumping blood, but a mere puppet, an instrument of this institution that will own them for decades, given their student loans. I'm pretty sure they treat all their professors like this, despite Claire's proclamations at faculty meetings that we're simply not trying hard enough to connect with them, that we've got to really put ourselves out there. But there's a part of me, a tiny needling curiosity, that wants to grab hold of them and ask: Is it my size?

No one knows why some of us started shrinking. Maybe it was to make room for the others. At least that's what the working theory was. The big ones had pushed our island to capacity and now we would have to make room.

We didn't want to admit what we knew: our housemistress, Georgette, the worst of the kids were all losing mass. It was a selection process—I was sure of it, especially when the ugliest of us all, our very leader, stepped up to his podium, visibly smaller. Sam hadn't been very big to start, and the shrinking was definitely hitting him at a faster rate than the rest of us. By the time he needed a step stool for the podium, I had lost only a quarter inch. It gave me hope; maybe the island would find its balance before it took much more from me.

One night shortly after, fires dotted the island. We got out of our plank beds and watched through the window. We could see the houses that burned in the dark ruin of our generator-run shantytown, and no one said a thing save the housemistress, who shouted: Back to bed! We listened, but I could feel it—no one, not a soul sleeping. We lay silent and alert, ears perked at the distant screaming.

Before the sun came up, the smell of fire still in the air, I went for the outhouse and snuck off, running to Shasta's. They hadn't wanted me—my aunt and uncle—after my mother died. They didn't say why—they didn't need to. My own mother had nearly thrown me out when she'd learned what I really was, a thief, a coveter of sweet things and silver. I'd been taking them from the hotel where she worked. I'd wait for her in the kitchen after sundown, sitting on the stool near the trashcans buzzing with flies and smelling of sweet decomposition. I was always hungry, and

the dessert station was not far, the dirty cutlery scattered on the counter for anyone to take, and I'd only done it a few times before one of the dishwashers caught me slipping a shiny salad fork up my sleeve and proudly handed me over to hotel security. My mother was sanctioned and I was beaten and taken from her, stuffed in a juvenile facility with kids who'd held weapons in their hot hands and lunged, plunging flesh. She never recovered, not even after they gave me back, and I wondered: what had they done to her while I was gone? Within six months she was bedridden, and by the end of the year she was gone, her body burned, her ashes buried in the cluttered cemetery where we made our own grave markers, and I went to live at the boarding house when my aunt and uncle refused to take me in.

She never recovered, not even after they gave me back, and I wondered: what had they done to her while I was gone?

My uncle was a fisherman, their house near the water, but even with the ocean breeze, I was sweaty and terrified by the time I got to Shasta's. My aunt and uncle sat on the front steps. A shotgun rested on my uncle's knees, and it looked enormous, and that's when I realized that he was shrinking too.

I told them: We have to get her out. We have to hide her.

They looked at each other and snort-laughed, giddy from a night without rest. To bed, I shooed them, insisting I'd sit at the ready. I told my uncle: Give me the gun.

They listened and I was alone until Shasta called for me and I went to her window.

She whispered: What's happened?

I told her what Sam had done, lifted the rifle to show her, as if to say: We won't let them burn you.

She cried then, and I went back to the porch and waited, examining my hands, which I was certain had shrunk some in the night.

I didn't mean to be angry at my aunt and uncle—they had Shasta to care for, after all—but I was. They'd refused to take me in, made me sleep on a plank bed with all the other thieves

and miscreants and indigents who weren't quite bad enough for prison. We held hands in the dark, our skin marked with the calluses and cuts of fieldwork, and we promised someday to get even.

I got up from the porch steps and went into the garage for a hammer, went along the side of the house.

Shasta asked: What are you doing?

I wedged the hammer under a board and used my weight to pull it loose.

I told her: I'm taking this wall down.

After the exam, I feed the Scantrons through the machine in the faculty lounge, listening to the markings, all those incorrect answers.

Claire comes in to check her mail. How'd they do?

I doubt there'll be a problem with grade inflation in my class.

She screws her mouth up tight, tilts her head at me. Do you have a minute?

I follow her to her office, decorated in thank-you cards and pictures from her students, some photos of her last trip to Antarctica, cheeks red like apples from under her fur hood as she soars across the Southern Ocean in a Zodiac.

She asks: Is something the matter?

I tell her: I'm pretty disappointed about my research rejection, but I'll get over it. I just need to come up with something else to study, to get excited about.

She adjusts her scarves with long, withered fingers, gives me a sad smile: You wanted to go home.

I did, I admit, though I can feel my body clenching, turning smaller I'm so uncomfortable.

It's understandable that you'd be upset, but I'm concerned for you. Very few faculty, even our biggest stars, can get away with poor student evaluations for more than one semester.

I want to say: So you want me to pander to them, is that it? Instead I ask: What do you suggest?

Encourage them. Let them in. You're so, you're so—

It hangs there a long while, this space where a quality should be, me.

All right, I say, I'll try.

It would be interesting, sharing my story with the faculty.

They would challenge me, of course, reduce me again to a girl whose mind is trying to make sense of trauma, like my tutor, my sponsors. It's easy to say that, almost easy enough to believe.

I skip my spin class with Samantha and go to the beach, feeling lighter, like I might lift up, the water pulling me, so close to the edge. It's cold, windy, nothing like the heat I grew up with. I try to picture it, the island, but it's a feeling I get more than a visual, the heft of humidity, the earth in my nails, the scorch of the sun on the crown of my head, the feeling of a hand collaring the nape of my neck.

I see my dinner date jogging toward me. He is shirtless, lean and sweaty, and there's this slow-motion effect, like Bo Derek in braids, one of the first movies I ever saw, sitting on the couch with my sponsors. It is startling and I avert my eyes, hoping he'll pass without noticing me. I had expected to never see him again—that is the glory of internet dating.

You, he says, jogging in place.

Hi, I say.

How are you?

Fine. You?

Good! Great day, isn't it?

Pretty great.

Do you jog?

God no.

He frowns. Does he think I'm making fun of him? Is it because I took God's name in vain? Is he concerned for my well-being? Two words, and we're lost, afloat, the gravity of our banter broken.

He says: Don't go that way. Beached whale. Been there a while by the smell.

I ask: What kind? But he's running away from me, this man who knows more about my story than any of my colleagues or friends.

I go in the direction of the beached whale. The sand is slowing me down, and I never run, but I am running, and there it is, a gray whale, probably a juvenile by its size. Still, it's massive. A man is on top of it, hacking at it with a knife. I run faster.

Panting, I practically shout: What are you doing?

The man sighs. We're taking it away piece by piece. If it's

uncomfortable, we recommend you avoid this stretch of beach for a while.

The smell is strong. I run a hand down the whale's great tail fin, its flesh hot in the sun, thinking of Shasta. As I come around its side, I see that it's been hacked at for some time now, thick skin spilling the whale's insides onto the sand.

When my aunt and uncle woke, they were angry. I'd made a hole in the wall of their home without asking. But Shasta was happy. She whispered: Make it bigger.

My uncle waited on the steps with his gun while my aunt helped me with the boards. By nighttime, we'd taken down the wall.

I could see Shasta now, the whole shape of her. Her toes and fingers had grown so plump they'd nearly disappeared. Her neck was gone too.

Help me onto my stomach, she said. We tried for some time but it was impossible, so we called for my uncle, who came around the house irritated and tugging at his oversized jeans. What, he shouted, but when he saw Shasta he stopped short. His daughter, once so tiny, so quiet, was this—I don't know what words he used in his head, but I could tell he didn't see her the way I did. He wasn't in awe. Startled, afraid, a little repulsed, and Shasta—she could see it too. It was etched in her tiny, sunken eyes. She reached out of the house and grabbed hold of the dirt and pulled, and I pushed, my aunt too. My uncle came running, and the three of us hefted her onto her stomach. She lay there heavy-breathing, my aunt adjusting the sheet over her body for propriety's sake, asking: Are you all right, dear?

After a time, Shasta tried to push herself to sitting, to stand, but her body had lost all definition. I couldn't identify her joints—ankles or knees or elbows. They were all lost to the folds, and my uncle noticed too, turning his back.

Shasta cried. My aunt cried. I remember not crying. I remember saying: We need to get her off this island.

My uncle had a fishing boat, and they knew I was right; she wouldn't be safe there.

No one said: Where will we take her?

We hefted her into the back of his truck. She was so big by then, we couldn't close the bed. My uncle whisked a tarp over her

and we climbed into the cabin, fitting easily given our reduced size, my aunt in the middle. I watched out the back window the whole way, my uncle going slow, all of us terrified Shasta would spill out onto the dirt road, that someone would see.

It wasn't far to the water, and my uncle was reversing down the dock, going slowly, when my aunt screeched: Stop!

But by that point gravity was working on the weight of Shasta's body, the slope of the dock, and she slipped out of the truck bed, rolling down the ramp and into the water. We all erupted out of the truck, calling her name, certain she was gone to us. Heavy as she was, we'd never be able to lift her out of that water.

On Thursday, the lecture is overwater dispersal, and I can't get my students excited by anything, the spread of seed or disease, even rats, which I thought was a nice way to build on last class's excitement. They're all waiting for their exam. Most of them expect to receive a B- or better, even though deep down they know they deserve worse. That's why they're agitated in their seats, the back-row boys spitting so quickly I want to warn them about gum disease, mouth cancer. So I give up and hand back their exams as they shuffle out the door. Their smiles crash, heads shake, one kid cusses loudly—at me? It was a Scantron exam, and I can't control what it is he knows or doesn't know about the material. The exam hasn't changed for semesters, with the exception of the order of answers. If he really wanted to do well, he would've hunted down an exam from the previous semester, studied that at least.

The mean is a healthy C-. The department will be pleased—well, everyone except Claire. They've been complaining about all those As and Bs, which couldn't possibly be an accurate reflection of their, of their, they stutter. No one wants to say it, to admit that the kids are getting dumber—what would be the evolutionary benefit of that? At a recent faculty meeting, I made a joke about island tameness, kids too dumb to know how dangerous it is to be dumb, to walk right up to you, only to get whacked on the head, the dodos. It was a loose analogy. In truth, I just wanted to say it out loud, to make it known that I think they're all so very dumb.

In retrospect, that was probably a bad idea.

I spin with Samantha. After, over iced teas and scones, my treat this time, she asks me: Where were you last class?

I went to the beach.

I can't believe you, she says, like missing spin class is a big deal.

I tell her about running into my dinner date, then about the dinner date itself, and we have a good laugh about that, and she asks me if I'd let her set me up, but the thought of going on a date with a person one degree removed from my orbit fills me with dread, and Samantha reaches under the table and pats me on the knee.

Or not, she says, and I feel it—a current of understanding, my best friend. I'm almost embarrassed realizing it; we barely know each other. And yet it's true. She is my best friend, this woman I ride a stationary bike next to twice a week, who I drink tea with. I snatch up my tea and tell her I have to go.

I know now: The tallest women in the world are such because of a tumor in the pituitary gland, causing it to release growth hormones perpetually.

I know memory is a living thing, like an organ. It is light and synapse and timing, a miracle, really, and changing daily. I have never written down my story; it lives only in my head and I will never get it right—trauma, doubt, natural decay, all of it working against me.

Often, I catch myself wondering why the island took from me and gave to the others. Yes, I'd stolen, but had that been so bad? I was a child. It hardly seemed fair to be judged based on that. Then the scientist in me shakes her head—couldn't be. Yet my life, the whole shape of it, changed when that dishwasher decided to turn me in. He probably hoped for a promotion, for a ray of sunshine in our dense-forest island. I hope he got it.

Glen is working in the yard when I pull up in my Yaris. His sleeves are rolled to his elbows and I can see his faded marine tattoos. You're home early, he calls from his padron plants.

Bad day.

Oh? he says, like tell me more.

I don't want to talk about it.

I shut myself inside, let the guilt mount and dissipate, before he knocks.

Ice cream? It's mint this time, with chocolate chunks and cookies?

I can't tell, but it tastes incredible and I'm nearly crying and Glen reaches across the table, collapses his hand around mine.

It's nice, he says, having you here, and the way he says it, staring at me with big, hopeful eyes—I pull back, cinch smaller. Then I stand.

Thanks for the ice cream, I tell him, and he stands and I go to the door, open it, wait for him. It doesn't feel good, shutting him out, but what he's proposing, no. I can't be unclear on this. I can't shake it either, the guilt, the pained look on Glen's face. I could tell him about Shasta bobbing to the water's surface, buoyant and floating on her back, my aunt wringing her hands at her chest, the men in uniform shouting from the road. I could tell him about the crack of the gun, my aunt's scream, the feeling of falling. How I woke to the stretch of ocean, cradled on Shasta's chest, her body bending and moving us through the water as I bled from the shoulder. I still feel it, the long float, the fluid motion coursing through me, the bullet too, even though they long ago removed it. I could tell him everything, show him the scar, still there—that part of my story inarguable—but he'd never believe me.

Everyone is sulking in the next class, so I decide to take a play from Claire's book, offering extra credit. A paper, I say and they groan.

I tell them: It's not as bad as that. Pick any ecological theory or concept we've discussed to date. And tell me a story about how it's affected your life, your choices.

The third-row girl who eats her hair raises a bony arm into the air.

Yes?

She asks: How long?

Not long. Two pages. Any other questions?

The third-row girl says: I don't get it.

These things we study, they're not just concepts in a textbook. They happen all around us, impact our lives. Think about it. We've talked about ecological disturbances, fire, wind,

floods. We've talked about climate, water. We live in a state of perpetual drought!

They all bend over their notebooks, scribbling madly.

Don't all write about that! Jesus. In fact, no one write about that. Come up with your own idea, your own story. Do you get it?

They don't get it, I'm guessing by their blank stares, but no one raises a hand, calls out a question. In the silence, I think of Claire's warning, and I tell my students I'll be in my office after class if they want to run ideas by me. I'm more than happy to help. Then I smile, or try to anyway, as I dismiss them, and no one says goodbye to me as they shuffle out the lecture hall.

I woke cold, sand in my eyes, up my nose, on my tongue, something wet on my face. A distant shout, and I pushed myself to sitting, my shoulder blazing in pain. I saw the blond dog in my face, picked up a smooth handful of soft yellow sand, and I knew I wasn't home. I sat there a while, unsure what to do, where to go, light-headed from the hunger, the loss of blood. Shasta, I said to the dog, its owner upon us now. She was speaking to me in English, her face leathery orange. An ambulance came. I was taken to a hospital. When I regained my voice, I asked, embarrassed by my English, never good enough for hotel work, if they'd found my cousin.

This is where the story starts to fail me, where imagination has to set in to tell the rest, and I've never been good at imaginary things.

The nurses looked sideways at one another.

No, doll, you were found all on your own.

This is where the story starts to fail me, where imagination has to set in to tell the rest, and I've never been good at imaginary things. I like to picture Shasta taking to the sea like it was her natural habitat, disappearing in its depths, all those miles to drift and roam. My skin prickles thinking of it, wanting it to be true, for her to be alive somewhere, at home in the ocean.

My aunt and uncle have no phone, and the mail system is heavily censored, but I doubt they'd be there to receive a let-

ter even if I sent one. Disappeared like the others, the island's population regularly culled, overcrowding never a problem. The tourists still come, jumping through hoops to get there, to its black pebble beaches, the untouched coral jungles and women who laugh at your jokes and speak perfect English. Even though Sam has died, his son has assumed leadership, and he is perhaps worse, even more brutal than the father, if the traces of news I find on the internet are accurate. He is in his forties and quite fit, often photographed on his presidential yacht wearing his signature red Speedo, and I know he'll never let me come home.

I am looking at a photo of him when there's a knock at my door, which is open, and I glance up, see one of the back-row boys standing before me. I tell him to come in.

He hovers near my desk and I tell him to sit and he perches on the edge of the seat, still wearing his backpack, as if preparing for a speedy getaway.

He says: I want to write about this bird. It's really annoying. Makes a sound like a doorbell?

Does it have a white band on its wings, like a stripe?

Yeah, I think so.

Mockingbird. It probably *is* making the sound of a doorbell. It's an excellent mimic.

I want to write about that.

Well, what ecological theory were you thinking about?

I don't know. I want to know how to get rid of it.

Hmm, so you're interested in species eradication.

Yeah, eradication.

Well, you could look into local eradication programs, but those are focused primarily on invasive species. Your mockingbird is a native. It was here long before you.

Could I talk about that?

Native birds?

Yeah, like maybe how the mockingbird evolved and, like, spread? Maybe that would help me figure out how to get rid of it.

Sure, I tell him, feeling a teaching moment here but not having the energy or focus to embrace it.

Cool, he says, bumping my desk as he goes, the plastic cat on my desk triggered, batting good luck.

It's raining on the way home, heavy, one of the first real storms of the El Niño cycle we can expect this season. Traffic is terri-

ble, accidents every five miles, the giant freeway whittled down to one lane. Everyone is pissed and slamming horns and it's a rage of red brake lights. Nearly an hour passes before I reach my exit and I feel such relief as I escape my car.

The streetlight is humming, though it's not quite night yet, the sky that cool navy color it gets in last light. I hustle to the front door, wanting to shut myself inside, cocoon under blankets.

On the doormat is a plate of cookies and a note that says only: Sorry.

I knock on Glen's door. Why are you sorry?

I feel embarrassed. I overstepped. I'm sor—

Don't say it again.

I sit down on the porch steps, pat the step next to me. He sits down, careful not to touch me. I turn my knees to face him, careful not to touch him either, the space between us being a carefully kept thing.

I say: Tell me your story.

I think: Maybe I'll tell you mine.

MIKE ALBERTI

SUMMER PEOPLE

Bright, buzzing summer, and Lorna was watching from the riverbank, sitting in the grass with her legs tucked under and her dress frilled around her in a blue circle. At that place the river bent, and as it wound around the turn it slowed and deepened. Behind her the bank sloped steeply up to the parking lot of the American Legion, where flags waved in the breeze that came down the river. The breeze picked up the smell of the cottonwood sap and the sweet gale that grew along the banks, and it riffled through the leaves of the cottonwoods on the other side, which turned and quivered, dark green on top and pale beneath, and Lorna was watching the leaves with the light sieved through them and the boys standing on the other bank.

The boys—her brother, Adam, and his friend Joe Lloyd—had swum across and now stood beneath a tall tree that grew close to the water, looking up into its branches and talking. That morning Joe had come over to their house and told Adam about that spot, the tree with the rope swing and the deep place in the middle of the river. As they were leaving, their mother had called out from the kitchen, "Take your sister!" and so Lorna had followed them, as she was used to following Adam, lagging a little way behind, just as she had followed him and his friends in Buffalo before they moved. At home, in private, they were friends. Adam would sometimes pull her from her book and enlist her into his games and schemes, but when he was with his friends there was an unspoken rule that she should keep her distance. That morning she had walked far behind them on the road, alone, and down the grassy path to the river.

On the other bank, Lorna could see that the boys were arguing, but she couldn't hear what it was about. A thick rope hung down from a high limb that grew out over the water, and Joe was holding the end of it in his hand. Then her brother took the rope and wound the end around his arm and began to climb the tree. There were boards nailed into the trunk, and Adam

climbed them like a ladder, slowly. He climbed until he stood on a lower, thinner branch, the place he would jump from and sail out on the rope's arc over the water. He stood there for a long time, waiting. Lorna could see his legs, but his face was veiled by leaves.

"Come on!" Joe shouted from below.

The breeze blew down again, the leaves moved and sighed, and Lorna knew what was going to happen. There was a change of light, of texture, a taste on the back of her tongue, a shudder to the air. The air and the light were like the leaves, shivering. She knew it as if it had happened already, saw it in her mind like a memory, saw Adam float out above the river, saw the rope twist and snap, saw him fall, the awkward fall, his body bowed, that brutal curve, his thrashing limbs. She willed herself to rise, to yell, to throw her body, make it move, but that urge did not come from her body. The urge was in the air, the light, the leaves that shuddered in the breeze.

The breeze died down. Her body blinked and breathed. Adam was still in the tree.

"Adam!" Joe shouted from the bank. "Come on!"

Lorna saw him leave the tree, float out on the rope. She saw it break. She saw his face, surprised, betrayed, suspended in the air above the shallow water near the bank. Not yet far enough out, not over the deep place yet. She saw his face, surprised, not yet afraid.

Two weeks after the funeral, Lorna returned to that place on the river. At the entrance to the path, someone had already posted a handwritten sign that said, "No Swimming!" and when she got down to the bank she saw that the rope had been cut down.

Her aunts had gone back to Buffalo; her father had gone back to work. Except for the sign by the river, it was as if Adam had passed through a breach in the world that had opened and then closed around him. Opened and closed like the water when it had swallowed him, like the grave they had put him in.

The days after Adam fell seemed to pass around her, to rush forward quickly while she stood still. The funeral had been small since her family had just moved to Abanakee in June for her father's job and they did not know many people yet. A few people from the town had come, their neighbors, some men who worked with her father at the water treatment plant and

their wives. The women had all cried, Lorna's mother and her aunts and the others. Her father and the men had stood stone-faced, lowered their eyes away from the crying. Lorna had not cried. They had all been waiting for her cry, but she hadn't, not at the funeral, or afterward, or before. Not when she told the police officers what had happened, how Adam had fallen into the shallow water near the bank and not come up, how Joe Lloyd had run out to the road for help, screaming, and two men had come back with him and found Lorna standing in the water to her waist, waiting, cold. Not when they picked her up and carried her back to the bank, put a blanket around her and took her away.

Lorna sat down on the bank again. There was no breeze now and the air was dense and heavy. The river drifted around its curve, passed by. In the high sun Lorna could see that the water held a greasy sheen, the light swirled on the surface. There was the place, the spot he had entered and not come up. They had told her that he had broken his back when he landed in the shallow water, that a boy could drown in shallow water if his back was broken. They had taken him out of the water, she knew, put him in a coffin and put him in a grave. But she had not seen them take him out. She had seen him fall, disappear, and not come up. She had waded out into the river and stood there, waiting.

But now she knew that she was waiting again, or had never stopped. For the breach to open up again.

She was waiting now, again. She had wanted to get out of the house, away from her mother, who each morning seemed more and more delicate, so that Lorna had become afraid to touch her, look at her, as though she might—through look or touch—dissolve her mother's brittle bones. But now she knew that she was waiting again, or had never stopped. For the breach to open up again.

She heard footsteps on the path behind her. She turned and saw the girl emerge into the place where the bushes opened up onto the bank.

The girl was wearing shorts and a yellow shirt. She was not wearing shoes. She walked down the bank and stood next to Lorna. She was bigger than Lorna, but Lorna was small for her age. They stood looking at each other for several seconds. The girl had very curly brown hair, cut short around her face. Her face looked friendly, curious, but she was not smiling. Then she said, "You're the girl whose brother died."

It was not a question, but Lorna said, "Yes." Somehow it felt good to hear it put that way. It made her feel more solid, real. She was the girl whose brother died.

The girl nodded and looked at the other bank. Her nose was sprayed with freckles. "My grandma says she's been telling them to cut down that rope for years."

"It was Joe Lloyd's fault," Lorna said, a thought that had not occurred to her until it came out of her mouth.

The girl shook her head and said, "No," but not reproachfully. She seemed to think for a moment, then said, "Maybe it was the rope's fault for breaking."

"I saw it," Lorna said. "I saw it break."

The girl sat down on the bank next to Lorna and looked across the river at the tree. They were quiet for a while, looking. Then Lorna said, "What's your name?"

The girl's name was Janine. She was ten, she said, a year older than Lorna. When Lorna told her that they had just moved there from Buffalo, Janine's face broke into a wide smile, and Lorna noticed that one of her front teeth was chipped.

"I've been to Buffalo," she said. "My dad took me."

Then, from behind them, a man's voice called, "Janine! Janine!" The voice came from the parking lot of the American Legion.

"That's my dad," Janine said. "I have to go now."

Lorna almost told her to wait, but Janine had already risen to her feet. Lorna watched her run to the entrance of the path, watched her bare feet. Just before she was out of sight, Janine turned and shouted back, "I'll come by your house tomorrow!" Then she vanished back into the bushes along the path and Lorna was alone again by the river.

The next day Lorna's mother wanted to take her to the doctor for her checkup, but Lorna begged and her mother relented. She waited for Janine all morning, sitting on the front porch and

reading. She read a few lines at a time and then lifted her eyes to the street, waiting. Janine never came.

She let her mother take her to the doctor the day after. She let herself be weighed and measured, let the doctor listen to her chest and thump her back lightly with his knuckle. She breathed in and out. The doctor had a mustache and thick, bushy eyebrows. At the end he told a joke about a pig. Lorna knew he was trying to make her laugh, to see if she would laugh. She laughed.

When they got home, Janine was on the porch, sitting where Lorna had sat waiting the day before. A red bicycle was leaning up against the maple tree in the yard.

"I'm sorry I didn't come yesterday," she said. "I forgot to ask you where you lived! But this morning I thought to ask Mr. Hendricks at the post office, and he told me."

Janine turned to Lorna's mother, who was standing there, frowning, confused. "Hello, ma'am," Janine said. "My name is Janine McDonough." Janine stood up straight and stuck her hand out stiffly.

The gesture was so oddly formal that it made Lorna's mother hesitate for a moment. Then she laughed abruptly, and the sound of her laugh cut through Lorna. She heard it in her teeth. Her mother shook Janine's hand and said, "Very nice to meet you."

"Do you want to come over to my house?" Janine asked Lorna. "My grandma said she would take us to pick blueberries. She knows all the best spots."

Lorna looked up at her mother, who was frowning again. A familiar worried wrinkle had emerged between her eyes.

"I live just across town," Janine said. "I can write my phone number down for you if you'd like."

Janine's house was at the end of a steep dirt road, set back in the woods. They left their bikes outside. A small white dog started barking loudly when they went in the door until Janine said, "Oh shut up, Reggie," and the dog wagged its tail furiously and licked Lorna's leg. Inside, it was cool and dim. The trees blocked the sun and the light that came in was shadowed green from the leaves. It smelled like grease and baking and something else, a sweet smell that Lorna didn't know.

In the kitchen, Janine's grandmother was kneeling on the floor, scrubbing the linoleum with a sponge. "Hi, Grandma," Janine said.

Her grandmother looked up. She had the same short, curly hair as Janine, fully white. "Hi, sweetheart," she said. "Stay out of here, now, and don't mess up my floor."

They walked around through the living room onto the back porch, which looked out onto a cleared yard and garden and the woods beyond. A man was sitting in a rocking chair on the porch, reading a newspaper. He was smoking a pipe, and Lorna realized that the other smell in the house was smoke.

"Daddy, this is Lorna Seaman," Janine said.

Her father looked up from his newspaper, and then folded it carefully and stood up. He was handsome and had broad shoulders and a long, square face and close-cropped hair. He was wearing reading glasses with thin metal frames. He extended his hand to Lorna in exactly the same manner that Janine had adopted with Lorna's mother. Lorna shook it.

"Lorna, it's a pleasure to meet you. I'm Jack McDonough." He sat down again and said, "What are you girls into today?"

"Blueberries with Grandma," Janine said.

Her father nodded and smiled. "Well, don't let your grandmother eat them all before you get home." Then he looked at Lorna. "I was very sorry to hear about your brother, Lorna. It's very sad."

Lorna did not know what to say, but she saw a real sadness in his eyes. But it wasn't pity, which is what she had seen in the eyes of other adults. His sadness was different, and Lorna recognized that he didn't expect her to say anything, that he wanted nothing back.

"Come on," Janine said. "Let's go to my room until Grandma finishes cleaning."

In her room Janine had taped dozens of pictures on the walls. They were not of movies or bands she liked or sports teams; they were of green pastures and beaches lined with colorful buildings and boats and people sitting at tables outside on a city street. Lorna recognized the Eiffel Tower in one picture above Janine's desk.

"I love France," Janine said. "Have you been to France?"

"No," Lorna said, "but I've been to Canada."

"Me too, but not France. My mom and dad have been there, though. Daddy's been three times. He's going to take me when I'm older."

"Do you speak French?"

"Un petit peu," Janine said. "That means, 'a little bit.' I get to start taking it in school next year."

On her desk was a photograph in a wooden frame of a man in an army uniform, standing in front of a house. He looked like Janine's father but younger, same long face and dark eyes.

"Is that your dad?" Lorna asked.

"That's my grandpa," Janine said. "He died before I was born, when my dad was just little. He was killed in France, shot down in a plane. This one here is my dad." She pointed to another framed photograph on her dresser. Her father was wearing a uniform, too, but it was different, no helmet, and he seemed to be standing in a jungle, which reminded her of images she had seen on television.

"Is he in Vietnam?" she asked.

Janine nodded solemnly. "He's going back. He's on furlough now."

Lorna leaned in to look at the photograph. Janine's father was smiling. Lorna liked something in his face, a firmness that was not in her own father's face, which pouched and sagged. An assurance, an easy confidence.

They spent the afternoon out in the woods with Janine's grandmother. There were no trails, but Janine's grandmother led them across clear, narrow streams and through dense thickets of chokeberries and bittersweet and buttonbush. Her grandmother carried a cane but used it only to push through the undergrowth. They found three separate patches of berries. When they had filled their pails from the first patch, the three of them sat next to a rocky creek and ate them and drank iced tea Janine's grandmother had brought in a thermos. When they were done their mouths and hands were stained purple and they washed off in the creek. Even Janine's grandmother knelt and put her face in the water. The water was cold in Lorna's mouth. She drank and drank and came up gasping.

They filled their pails again in the next two patches, singing songs that Janine and her grandmother taught Lorna, and they carried the berries back to the house. It was late afternoon when they got back. Janine's mother was at home now, mak-

ing dinner. When they walked in with the berries, she laughed and said, "I guess we're having pie for dinner and meatloaf for dessert."

She invited Lorna to stay for dinner, but Lorna said that her mother was expecting her at home. She knew she could have called, but she felt the need for them to understand that her mother was waiting for her, that she had her own place to go. Janine's mother emptied one pail of berries into a canvas sack for Lorna to carry, and Janine rode with her back to her house. In the yard, she said, "Tomorrow Mom needs me to help her at work, but I'll come over on Saturday."

She knew she could have called, but she felt the need for them to understand that her mother was waiting for her, that she had her own place to go.

Lorna's mother was sitting in the living room when she came in. She had a white washcloth laid over her forehead. When Lorna showed her the blueberries, she smiled weakly and said, "Good work, honey. Why don't you put them in the sink so they don't leak? We can make muffins tomorrow."

That night Lorna's father brought home pizza. Lorna's mother didn't eat. She said she had a headache and went to bed early. Lorna watched television with her father until he fell asleep in his chair. The next day, her mother's head still hurt, and Lorna spent the day reading in front of the television and eating cereal. By evening the blueberries had gotten soft and bled purple through the bag. Lorna ate a few handfuls of the pulpy mash and threw the rest away.

Janine's mother worked cleaning houses for the people who came up to Abanakee for the summer, and some days Janine had to go with her to help. On the other days, she showed up at Lorna's house in the morning. If Lorna's mother was having a bad day, Lorna would wait for her outside on the porch.

Janine was different from anyone Lorna had ever known. Lorna was bookish and shy, and her friends in Buffalo had mostly been that way, too. She avoided the children who were loud, who were afraid of silence, who seemed to feel a need to test every seam of the world with their voices and bodies, to see

which ones would not hold. Janine was loud and forceful, but Lorna wasn't. Janine was solid, constant. She did not waver. Lorna saw this quality in some adults, but not all of them. Not her mother. Adam had been the only other child Lorna had known like that.

On some of those remaining days of summer, they rode their bikes out to Lake Abanakee, which was a mile from town on the state highway. The lake was long and narrow, and along the near shore there were big houses with decks and high glass windows looking out over the water, the houses that Janine's mother cleaned. There was a marina on the shore, with three long docks jutting out into the water and boats tied to both sides, bobbing in the small waves. Janine knew the owner of the marina, a friendly French Canadian named Jacques. Janine would ask him if he had any work that they could do, and he always found some small job for them, hosing off the rental boats or clearing weeds from the side of the road that led to the boat launch or cleaning the windows of the office. The marina was busy; there were always people moving up and down the docks, and when Lorna and Janine were done working and Jacques had paid them a dollar each, they would sit and watch the young tan couples in white outfits, tying and untying their new speedboats and sailboats. They reminded Lorna of the Kennedys. Janine called them summer people.

On other days they went to the beach to swim, or to a secret place that Janine knew, at the end of a narrow path off the highway. It was a small, rocky cove, and where the lake curved into it there were three large boulders that rose steeply from the water. The largest boulder, Janine told Lorna the first time she took her there, was called Indian Rock. "People say there didn't used to be a lake here, and there was an Indian who got trapped underneath the rock somehow and died," she said. "Then the rest of the Indians cried so much that their tears made the lake."

They walked out to the edge of the rock and looked down into the water.

"It's deep," Janine said, looking at Lorna. "It's safe. Watch, I'll go first."

But Lorna did not feel afraid when she was with Janine. Before Janine could move, she backed up three steps, ran forward, and flung herself off the rock. She did not look down as she fell; she looked up at the sky, which was clear and so blue as to be

almost white. She watched it until the lake came up and took her. Then she stayed underwater for a long time, looking up at the wavering brightness, until she heard another splash nearby and kicked her way back to the surface, where Janine's head was already bobbing, smiling.

School started in September. Although Lorna was in the fourth grade and Janine was in the fifth, all of the grades were in the same large, brick building, and Lorna saw Janine at recess, in the cafeteria at lunch, and in PE class, which was mixed between the fourth, fifth, and sixth grades. Adam would have been in seventh grade, and Lorna watched the boys in that year, imagined him sitting with them at lunch or out on the front steps, where they congregated after school. She often saw Joe Lloyd, but he never said anything to her and looked away if their eyes ever met.

Lorna had always done well in school. Adam, who had never been very interested in it, had mocked her for reading so much. He had struggled with reading, but for Lorna it was fluent, effortless. When she read, she played a game with herself: if a page ended in the middle of a sentence, she would pause before turning it and guess what the next word would be. That year, school seemed to require less from her than ever before, though she knew it was supposed to be getting harder. The answers presented themselves to her, floating in her head, as if she could pluck them out like fruit, like cottonwood seeds from the air.

On the playground one day in October, Lorna was sitting with Janine on the bleachers by the baseball field when a boy came up to them. He was in Lorna's class. His name was Collin Spears. He was skinny with hair that fell evenly all around his head, as if his mother had cut it with a bowl. He said, "Hi, Lorna," with a sneer. "You look very ubiquitous today."

This was a quiet joke in Lorna's class. The week before, her class had been assigned to write a short essay about local plants or wildlife. Lorna had written about birds, and the day after she turned her essay in, her teacher, Mrs. McConnell, had asked her to stand up and read it out loud. The essay contained the line "In spring and summer, the red-breasted robin is ubiquitous in this area." The class sniggered, and Lorna understood that they thought she was showing off. Her use of such a word, especially in a sentence that also contained the word "breasted," had set

her apart, and when Mrs. McConnell, beaming, told her to sit down, Lorna had waded disgracefully back to her desk. Since then, she'd heard the other students saying the word to each other, imitating her. Now, on the playground, Lorna was conscious of a group of boys behind her. She could not see them but she could feel them there. Collin Spears was their emissary and they were waiting for what would happen to him.

What happened was that Janine stood up from the bleachers and reached her hand across the gap between them and slapped Collin Spears on the cheek. The sound vibrated in the air, the fleshy clap. The boy looked shocked. His eyes grew wet as he stood there with his mouth open. Then he turned and walked away, quickly, Lorna knew, before he started crying. As he rounded the bleachers on the way back to the other boys, he said, "You bitch."

The sound vibrated in the air, the fleshy clap. The boy looked shocked. His eyes grew wet as he stood there with his mouth open.

Janine sat back down beside her. "Idiots," she said. "What did he call you?"

"Ubiquitous," Lorna said softly. "It means common, easy to find."

Janine frowned. "Oh," she said.

In early November, Janine's father went back to Vietnam. After school on most days, Lorna went back to Janine's house and they did their homework together at the dining room table. The house had changed, an emptiness had grown there and hung in the rooms, dense and quiet, mixing with the smell of pipe tobacco, which lingered, fading. Usually, Janine's mother was out, and her grandmother was watching the old movie channel on the small television in her room. Still, Lorna preferred Janine's house to her own, with its different kind of absence. Because they had lived there for only a month before he died, Adam's room was mostly bare and there were no traces of him in the other rooms, no residues of his existence there.

Lorna helped Janine with her homework, especially her French and English. Lorna had never taken French before, but

she picked it up from Janine's books and worksheets and a pocket dictionary that was in the house. Janine could not keep straight her verb tenses and noun genders, and when she had finished her work, Lorna would look it over and correct her mistakes. Nearly every day, Janine wrote a letter to her father. To save on postage, she would save them up for a week before she sent them, all together. At the dining room table, Janine wrote page after page in her wide-ruled notebook.

"What do you write to him about?" Lorna asked one afternoon.

"Just anything," Janine said. "Like what happened at school, or whatever's going on in town. Now I'm telling him about Jamie Watkins's deer."

Walking back from school that day, they had encountered a small group of people on Main Street, crowded around Jamie Watkins's truck. In the truck bed was a deer, a buck with big branching antlers. The tailgate was open and the buck's head lolled over the edge.

"Do you ever write about me?" Lorna asked.

"Sometimes."

"What do you say?"

Janine smiled and said, "I say that you're the smartest person in the school and that you're going to be president."

She went back to writing, and Lorna tried to imagine Janine's father getting those letters, where he was. She had seen it on the news, watching with her own father. Helicopters landing in high grass, men wading through shallow water, explosions in the sky, men sitting along a riverbank, muddy, smoking. Her mother couldn't watch and left the room. Most nights they showed pictures of soldiers who had been killed. They were smooth-faced, smiling boys, much younger than Janine's father, who was an officer. Lorna knew that seeing them made her mother think of Adam.

Her father watched. He shook his head. He seemed to be against the war, but he seemed to be against everything. He said, "All those guys over there, getting blown up. We should just nuke the whole damn country and be done with it."

Lorna's aunts came to visit for Thanksgiving. They were kind, lonely women, and they talked about Adam, told stories about him when he was a baby, tried to fill the house with him, un-

til it became clear that it upset Lorna's mother. Usually, they didn't speak of him in their house. When her aunts talked about him, Lorna remembered, faintly, the shimmering leaves, felt the breach behind the air, beneath her skin.

Janine had the idea about the houses not long after that. The summer people were gone, and the town felt oddly vacant without them, a different town altogether. Janine's mother had taken a waitressing job at the Oak Barrel, but she still had the keys to those houses by the lake. They hung on the wall of Janine's living room, each on a separate peg below a piece of masking tape with the owner's last name written on it. Janine had been in the houses, helping her mother clean. "They're just sitting empty," she told Lorna. "No one's going to use them until spring."

The next afternoon, they rode their bikes out to the lake, just as they had in summer. There was snow on the ground. They rode past the path that led to Indian Rock and up the hill until they came to the first house, the Johnsons', where they turned off onto the steep driveway that led to the water. The house was large, a split-level with a steeply pitched roof and big windows that looked out on the lake. They stood at the doorway for a moment, and then Janine knocked, though the house was clearly empty. Then she took the key from her pocket and opened the door.

Inside, the house was dim and dusty, the big front windows veiled with thick curtains, and they opened the curtains and turned on all the lights and stood in the living room, waiting for the house to come alive. Then they went through the rooms, one by one. They turned all the faucets, but the water had been shut off for the winter. They opened the refrigerator and found it empty and dark. In the bedrooms, they opened the closets. The house was cleaned out, the hangers hung empty, a particular kind of emptiness, both familiar and strange.

Over the next two weeks, they visited all of the houses that had keys, never going to more than one a day, as a rule, since it seemed too brash to leave more than one key peg empty at a time. In some of the houses, they found things that had been left, forgotten. They found a raincoat hanging by itself in a closet. They found a stuffed pig under a bed in a child's room. In a drawer they found several yellow pages on which someone had written what Lorna thought was the beginning of a novel about a boat trip down the Amazon. On a bed they found a pair of

women's underwear, as small and red as a popped balloon, so delicate that the girls felt nervous to touch them. They found matchbooks and half-empty packs of cigarettes, jars of peanut butter and jam in cupboards, discarded magazines spread over the arms of couches, a man's toupée draped over a lampshade like the carcass of a small, car-flattened animal.

Lorna tried to imagine the people whose things they were, the people she had seen at the marina in August, those sleek, tan, thin-eyed people. In the photographs on the walls, men held up dangling fish, women lounged on deck chairs in sun hats, children played in the sand at the beach. The things did not add up to an entire life. They were remnants, fragments, but handling them Lorna could sometimes feel the ghostly remainders hovering in the house, the way that in midsummer she would sometimes catch a smell on the breeze, something cool and crisp that came from sleeping winter.

Just before school let out for winter vacation a blizzard fell overnight and covered the town, and the next day Janine's mother decided to take them sledding before she went to work. In the morning they crowded into the car, Lorna, Janine, Janine's mother, and Janine's grandmother, and drove to the golf course on the far edge of town. The course was closed and buried and they dragged the sleds through the snow to the top of a long, steep hill. Janine's grandmother stayed in the car with the engine running, listening to the radio, and the three of them took turns going down and then trudging back up to the top, again and again. Then they went two at a time, racing, and then all three together on their separate sleds, shouting over the snow.

Lorna watched Janine's mother. She flew down the hill much faster than the girls because she was heavier but also, Lorna thought, because she seemed to want it more. She leaned forward in the sled, thrust her head forward like a speed-skater. She ran back up the hill, yelling, "Faster, faster!" cheeks flushed, eyes bright.

Janine's father's letters, when they came every few weeks, had been full of small, cultural details and exhortations to work hard in school. Often, he had included, "Say hello to Lorna." Watching Janine's mother on the sled, Lorna understood that this, her strange giddiness, her desire for speed—"Faster, faster!"—had to do with waiting, too, that they were all, all three of

them, waiting for something to happen, or return. But nothing was happening. Nothing was changing. The scenes of their lives were moving forward while they watched, motionless, from the riverbank.

When they were tired and cold, they walked back to the car, where Janine's grandmother had fallen asleep. She woke up as they were driving past Ned Bennett's farm. Out the window they could see the house and the barn and the covered hay chute that sloped down into the snow from the top of the barn.

"When I was a girl, we had a hay chute just like that one," Janine's grandmother said. "There was a little room at the bottom where the hay would collect, just big enough to stand up in when it was empty. It had a glass window that our father would take off when he wanted to get hay out for the cows. Most of the year it was full of hay, but in the summer, the cows ate grass, and then it was empty and we would climb up into the barn and slide down the chute. When we got to the bottom we climbed out the window and went back up."

Lorna and Janine turned and watched the barn fade in the window behind them. Janine's grandmother went on from the front seat.

"One day, I guess my father had put the window back on, and we climbed up in the barn without checking it. I slid down first and when I got to the bottom I saw that the window was closed. I don't know why, but I panicked. I could have yelled back up the chute to my brothers to go down and open the window, but somehow I didn't think of that. I thought I was trapped down there. The only thing I could think to do was take off my shoe and throw it at the window, and when it broke I climbed out and cut myself deep on the leg."

Lorna could see the old woman's face, staring out the windshield at the snow.

"My mother was angry that I cut myself and my father was mad because of the window," she said. "They asked why I didn't just call for help, or try to climb back up the chute, but I couldn't explain it. I still can't explain it. I was trapped in there. I just had to get out. I couldn't breathe or think. I was trapped."

In one of the empty houses on the lake they found an entire dresser full of clothes, which Janine found scandalous, extrava-

gant. "One whole set of clothes just for this house, just for a few weekends when they're here," she said.

"Isn't it worse to have the house at all?" Lorna said. "An extra house?"

Janine laughed. "An extra house! It *is* worse! Summer people!"

They took the clothes from the dresser and put them on. Lorna put on a yellow sundress over her sweater and pants, the shoulder straps so long that the neckline hung to her belly and the hem swept along the floor. Janine took off her clothes and put on a white button-down shirt and khaki pants that she rolled above her ankles. They stood next to each other in front of the full-length mirror on the bathroom door.

"Quelle belle êtes-vous, Madame!" Janine said. "Enchanté."

"Tout le plaisir est pour moi, Monsieur," Lorna said.

They took the clothes off and carefully put them away. Then Janine lay down on the big bed and Lorna climbed up next to her. They lay on their backs, looking up at the high, exposed beams of the ceiling.

Janine turned her face to Lorna. She said, "I'm sorry I never met your brother."

Lorna looked back at her, her round face framed by her thick, curly hair. Janine's face was not perfectly even; it was lopsided, one eye very slightly lower than the other.

Her whole life, Lorna had felt like a person still coming into form, not as solid as other people seemed to feel. Here was her body, but her self was diffuse, porous. The world came in and out like a breeze through a house with the windows open. Janine was not like that. Janine was dense, sound. Adam had been that way, too.

"I saw it," Lorna said. "When he died . . ."

She wanted to tell Janine about the leaves, the breeze, that day by the river. That she had known what would happen. That she had done nothing. But Janine said, "I know. I know you saw," and Lorna didn't say anything else. She felt a kind of gathering, felt the tears rise behind her face, and she turned away onto her side. She had never cried about Adam. She had seen him fall, disappear, and not come up. She had waded out into the river and stood there, waiting. Somehow, she had not believed, still did not believe, that he would not come up.

Lorna was facing the big windows that looked onto the lake,

and through them she could see the hills and bare white trees on the far shore. From that angle she could not see the lake below but she could feel it there, the cold, dark water that would soon stiffen, shiver into glass.

For Christmas Lorna's family drove back to Buffalo and stayed with her aunt Catherine. Her father had to go back to work the next day, but Lorna and her mother stayed for another two weeks. Her mother went for walks with her aunts, and in the afternoon the three of them sat around the living room, drinking tea. Lorna spent her days reading on the carpet in the living room. When she got bored, she wrote short letters to Janine. Janine and her mother and grandmother had taken the train down to North Carolina for Christmas. That was where her mother and father were from, where they had met, where the rest of their families still lived. Lorna did not know the address there, so she addressed her letters to Janine's house in Abanakee. She knew that Janine wouldn't get them until she got back, but it was a way to pass the slow time. In her letters, she used as many French words as she could.

It was different to think about Adam in a house that was not their own, in a city where he had known the streets, where the memory of him did not call up the river.

Sometimes, she thought about Adam. There, in her aunt's house, she could remember his face, the small white scar on his left cheek where he had been hit with a hockey puck. She could remember his voice, a nonsense song he had sung sometimes, something about a duck and a kangaroo. It was different to think about Adam in a house that was not their own, in a city where he had known the streets, where the memory of him did not call up the river.

By New Year's Eve Lorna felt restless. Her mother suggested that she call up some of her old friends, but Lorna could not imagine doing that. Those were people from another life. On New Year's Day she left the house and went for a walk by herself through the cold city. As she passed into her old neighborhood, everything was familiar but strange. There was the lot where she and Adam had thrown rocks at each other. There was Mrs. Wagoner's house, where Adam had raked the leaves

in the fall. The light was thin and cold, the snow was old and gray and gritty. The city seemed to be suspended, waiting. She felt like a ghost there, no more a part of the world than Adam was now. She walked by their old house and saw that the new owners had cut down the beautiful old maple tree that had been in the front yard. Adam had loved to climb it. He had spent hours in its branches. They had not cut it down all the way, part of the trunk was still there but the branches were gone, and Lorna stood across the street looking at the dead, brown stump, remembering what it had looked like whole and full, in summer.

When she got back to her aunt's house, she knew immediately that something was wrong. Her mother and aunt Catherine were sitting at the kitchen table, and Lorna saw on her mother's face that she had been crying. When she came in the door, they both turned to look at her, and she stood in the doorway with her boots and coat on, waiting.

"Oh, sweetie," her mother said. "Oh, sweetie. Come sit down."

Janine's father had been killed. Back in Abanakee, Lorna's father had found out somehow and called her mother. Lorna listened to her mother say this. Her voice sounded very distant, as though she were speaking underwater. She heard the words "Janine" and "father" and "killed" and "sorry," but they were like insects buzzing around her face, flitting in and out of view. At some point she was conscious of sitting in her mother's lap while her mother stroked her hair. She was thinking about the day she met Janine, by the river, when she had walked out of the woods on the path by the bank and spoken, filling the space that Adam had left behind.

Suddenly, Lorna was seized with urgency. She jumped to her feet.

"We have to go back," she said. "Now. We have to go right now."

"Honey," her mother said, "they aren't at home. They're still away."

"We have to go!" Her voice was raised, almost a shriek. "We have to be there when they get back!"

"Oh, sweetheart," her mother said, her voice breaking, her face streaked with tears. "They aren't coming back."

Lorna blinked, waited.

"Your father said that some men from the base are packing up their house for them. They're going to ship everything down to them. Down to—where are they?"

"I don't know!" she screamed, not in control of her voice. "I don't know where they are!"

"I'm so sorry, sweetheart," her mother said. "We'll find out where they've gone. You can write her. You can call long distance when we get home."

"Long distance," she repeated. Her voice was flat now. "Gone."

When Lorna and her mother got home two days later, there were three letters waiting for her on the kitchen counter. Two were from herself, written to Janine and returned with a yellow note that said, "Recipient no longer at this address." The third was from Janine. There was no return address. Lorna ripped it open and read it in the kitchen.

Dear Lorna,

I'm sure by now you have heard about Dad, and have maybe even tried to reach me. Mom says that the things from our house will get here in a few days, but I don't see where we're going to put it all. We're staying at my Uncle Sam's and even though it is not a small house there isn't much extra room here. Mom's trying to find us a place of our own in town. It's not bad here, though. Uncle Sam has two horses.

The funeral was yesterday, at the Fort. There were two generals there. They shot off the rifles and everything. Grandma said it was "dignified."

Mom says she just can't face the trip back up right now, which I guess is why we had to send for the furniture. I wish I could've said goodbye to you, at least. Mom says that maybe we can come back up to Abanakee for the summer. I hope we can.

Uncle Sam gets his mail at the post office in Pittsborough. Mom says that I can get letters there, too, until we find a place. There's no phone here, since we're pretty far out in the country, but we'll have one in town.

You have been a good friend and I love you. Dad liked you too. I'll keep writing to you and I'll let you know what our new address is when we find a place. I will be easy to find. I will be ubiquitous.

Love, Janine

Two days later, on her birthday, Lorna went back to the house on the lake where they had put on the summer peoples' clothes. The house was locked, but she was able to get into the basement through a crawlspace, and then up the stairs into the kitchen. She went back up to the bedroom, slowly, running her hand over the banister, pausing in front of each picture on the wall. In the bedroom she lay down on the bed. It was late afternoon and the light coming in through the windows was feeble, gray. Lorna lay on her back and felt the vacuum of the house. It pressed around her like thick air, a humidity of emptiness.

She lay there for a long time. After a while, she began to cry. It started slowly, but soon it was coming faster and she was gasping, heaving. She cried and cried, as if a spring ran through her, as if her body were made of crying.

She clenched her body and cried until she fell asleep.

She dreamt of summer. She was standing on Indian Rock, alone. She jumped off into the lake and swam down to the bottom, touched the soft dirt there, turned and kicked off the ground up toward the light. But as she got closer to the surface, the light grew dimmer, faded, and then she swam into the bottom and hit her face in the dirt. She turned and saw the light above, kicked toward it again, but again it faded as she got closer, and when she hit the bottom, she understood that she was trapped there. She looked up at the light above the surface. She did not try again. She floated there and watched the light.

When she startled awake it was full night. She lay there, breathing. She filled her lungs with air. She breathed and breathed.

She felt different, now. More solid, stable. Like vapor condensed into water, or water setting into ice. She opened and closed her hands, touched her face, blinked. She could feel her body pressing into the bed, and she felt heavier than before, as if she had acquired new weight.

Outside, she knew, beyond the big windows, the lake was

frozen. In the summer, it would melt, then freeze again. The summer people would come back, and leave, and come back, and leave. The years, the days would pass in sequence now, advancing one after the other. Time would just move forward, and she would move forward with it, and the others—Adam, Janine, Janine's father—would be left behind. They would not be coming back.

Janine wrote to Lorna twice more, but Lorna did not return any of the letters. It was easier that way, to believe that Janine had existed only while she lived in Abanakee, and that now she did not exist at all. It was not all that hard to believe.

Slowly, as the years passed, the soldiers came back to town. Every six months there were a few more of them. Lorna saw them around town, sitting on porches, washing their cars in driveways, crowding around the picnic table at the convenience store. She had not realized that so many of them had been gone, had not felt their absence, but she saw now that the whole town had been waiting for them, and now they had come back. They were everywhere, young men who walked with their backs straight but bent forward slightly at the waist, as if they were always walking uphill. On her way home in the evenings after basketball practice or drama rehearsal, she sometimes passed the Oak Barrel Tavern, where soldiers drank for half-price. Passing, she could hear their voices, shouting and laughing. They had come back, but somehow it didn't feel like a reunion.

Lorna graduated from high school a year early, when she was seventeen. She had received a scholarship from a good college, not too far away. That last summer, she worked for Jacques at the marina on the lake, as she had every summer since she was fourteen. By now, her French was very good.

One day that July, Lorna was standing on the dock of the marina, chatting with a young woman who had come up from New York. The woman was talking about her son, about where to go for swimming lessons, but Lorna was only half listening. It was a clear, warm day, and a good breeze riled the water and knocked the boats against the docks. The bells on their masts rung out idly.

Then she heard a man's voice, angry, coming from behind her, from the water. She turned and looked. Out on the lake, fifty yards from shore, there was a small sailboat bobbing in

the waves. The man was standing at the bow, speaking to a woman, telling her to do something, to trim the jib, maybe, Lorna couldn't hear across that distance. The woman was saying something back, pulling on the sheet.

Then Lorna saw another figure in the boat, a child, a small girl, maybe four or five years old. Blonde hair, blue swimsuit. She was standing at the stern, looking back behind the boat, looking at Lorna, and Lorna felt again the shivering air, the change in the light. The breach was opening up again. She saw the sheet give in the woman's hands, saw the boom swing, saw the boat lurch to port and the girl, unsteady, fall forward into the water. She saw it as she had seen Adam fall, like a memory, as if she had entered a knot in time, and she felt a strange euphoria, standing on the dock. This, she understood, is what she had been waiting for.

She is in the water, now, but she hardly feels it. She is all motion. She hears shouting, but she cannot make out the words or where they are coming from, from behind her on the dock or from the sailboat ahead. She thinks she hears a child's voice, a scream. She keeps kicking. Her head is down. She is swimming.

KRISTEN ROUPENIAN

THE NIGHT RUNNER

The Class Six girls were bad, and everyone knew it. All the teachers at Butula Girls' Primary School had a Class Six story—the time the girls locked a female instructor in the boys' toilet overnight; the time they staged an insurrection after being fed *githeri* for ten days in a row and led the school in a sit-down strike; the incident with the goat in the supply closet.

After they learned that the new American Peace Corps volunteer, Aaron, had been assigned to Class Six, all the teachers gave him sympathetic looks when they passed him in the hallway, and one of the younger ones felt so sorry for him that as she was talking with her colleagues about his dilemma in the lunchroom she burst into tears.

But when Aaron begged the teacher for hints about how to deal with the girls, she could only say, with a fatalistic sigh, "There is no dealing with those ones. The devil is in them, and there is nothing to be done except"—she whipped her hand through the air to demonstrate—

Thwack.

Everyone at school had served their time with Class Six. Of all their put-upon teachers, though, only Aaron was afraid to drag them outside and apply a switch to the tender backs of their calves. As a result, he could not even turn around to write on the chalkboard (*The HIV virus is transmitted // are transmitted in the following ways . . .*) without the girls' endless bubbling mockery boiling over into full-fledged chaos.

The girls mimicked his voice when he spoke, squeaking at him in high-pitched, nasal tones. They flicked things at him: not only chalk, but bits of spit-sodden paper, corn kernels, bobby pins, and flaky, greenish balls made of snot. Once, after he'd handed back a set of exercises, Roda Kudondo sauntered up to his desk and shoved her notebook in his face, mumbling in a slurred mishmash she intended as an imitation of his Texas drawl. The class exploded in laughter, and Aaron, not under-

standing, ordered her back to her seat. But she only repeated what she'd said and jammed her index finger deep in her mouth, poking the inside of her cheek so that her face bulged out. She was propositioning him, and the joke of her offer to take him back behind the classroom and suck him off in return for a higher mark left him red-faced and stunned, while she strolled back to her desk amid cheers.

And then, one humid afternoon in December, Linnet Oduori trailed Aaron out of the school gates and back to his house, meowing like a cat all the way. Linnet was the smallest girl in Class Six, as pretty and fine-boned as the bird after which she'd been named. Until then, Aaron had made her into a kind of pet, praising her at every opportunity and holding her mediocre work up as an example to the others—a lazy, unearned favoritism for which, that afternoon, she exacted her strange but effective revenge.

"It is because of your eyes," Aaron's friend Grace informed him that evening, when he described what Linnet had done to him, and how the other children they'd passed on the road had all enthusiastically joined in, until he was surrounded by a pack of children all crying out *meow, meow* in high, teasing voices. "Your eyes resemble a cat's because of their color," she continued, as though this were an obvious fact.

Aaron thought Grace's eyes looked more catlike than his, which were only an unremarkable blue. Grace was a local Luhya girl, and she had brown eyes, of course, but they curved up witch-like at the corners and bulged out a little, so that when he looked at her from the side, he could see the curved, clear meniscus of her pupil, like a thimbleful of water about to overflow.

Grace had adopted Aaron during his first week in the village, arriving at his doorstep one evening bearing a warm Coke and a scorched *chapati* as an offering. With the slick rash of pimples across her forehead, her dark-gummed, gappy smile, and her air of free-floating disdain, Grace would have blended easily among the girls of Class Six, though she was nineteen, older than any of them. Early on, she'd asked Aaron where exactly in America he was from, and when he had answered, she'd flicked her eyes over him said, coolly, "Me, I thought all Texans were large, cowboy-type people, but you are not large. You are only

. . . ordinary sized." Grace had attended Butula some years before, and she responded to his stories of the goings-on at the school with a stubborn refusal to believe he could tell her anything she didn't already know.

As soon as night fell, Grace would stalk inside Aaron's cramped, sour-smelling house, conveying with every shallowly drawn breath that she was here on sufferance, that spending time in such a hovel was beneath them both. Once, she'd come right out and asked him, "Why you come all the way from Texas to live in this small-small house? Don't you know that even the cook at that school has a nicer house than this?"

Aaron had informed her that he was a volunteer, that the house had been provided by the school, and that therefore there was nothing he could do about it, though in fact he'd complained vociferously about his living situation to his Peace Corps supervisors as soon as he'd arrived. Indeed, when he'd crossed the threshold for the first time, a smattering of dusty bat droppings had rained down on him from the doorframe, and later he'd found the desiccated corpse of one of the culprits, itself resembling nothing so much as a brown baked turd, trapped inside the disconnected stove.

Aaron suspected she would eventually proposition him, and he spent a lot of time thinking about how he would respond, but so far she hadn't done so.

Despite her obvious distaste for their surroundings, Grace often stayed at his house past midnight, sucking her knuckles and eyeing him across the lantern-lit table. Aaron suspected she would eventually proposition him, and he spent a lot of time thinking about how he would respond, but so far she hadn't done so; at the end of the evening, she would only stand, yawn, and casually rearrange the bra strap that had slipped out from beneath the shoulder of her dress.

The night of the meowing incident, though, Aaron accompanied Grace to the edge of his compound and lingered. Impulsively, he reached for her, but instead of yielding, she lifted his hand off her waist, placed it back at his side, and laughed in his face.

"Very bad," she teased, wagging her finger under his nose.

Now Aaron had this embarrassment to add to the litany of

humiliation that kept him lying awake at night, staring at the ceiling and dreading the arrival of morning.

Not long after he finally fell asleep, Aaron was awoken by a knocking at his door. His lantern had gone out, so he blindly untangled himself from his mosquito net and stumbled through the darkness to the front of the house. "I'm coming!" he called, but the knocking continued unabated. His visitor was so insistent that he wondered if there had been some kind of emergency, a terrorist attack or a rebel invasion, and people from the Peace Corps had arrived to helicopter him to safety. The possibility was both scary and a little bit thrilling, but when he finally unbolted the door, no one was there.

Confused, he ventured out into the compound. The night air smelled of charcoal and manure, and its chill sent gooseflesh prickling down his skin. The last knock had come only seconds before he'd opened the door; it seemed impossible that a person would have had time to run. But in the moon's dim light, he could see that the yard was empty, the gate barred, and everything around him still.

"Hello?" he called out, but heard nothing in return except his own heaving breath.

He went back inside, rebolted the door, and rearranged his mosquito net, tucking it carefully under the corners of his mattress—but as soon as he was beneath the covers, the knocking began again. Three times he flung open the door and saw nothing. Once, he snuck out the back and tried to creep around the house to catch his tormenter in the act, but as soon as he stepped outside, the knocking subsided into silence. He returned to his house and sat with his back wedged up against the wall as he tried to keep himself from succumbing to panic. That was when the knocking began once more, the hammering on his metal door deafeningly loud. "Go away!" he screamed, his hands pressed to his ears. "Go away! *Toka hapa!* Go away!" But—madly, impossibly, mind-numbingly—the knocking kept up all night long.

At dawn, when his eyes were burning and his thoughts twitchy from lack of sleep, the door at last went quiet. Thinking his harasser might have left some clues that would be discernible in daylight, Aaron stumbled outside, only to confront a steaming pile of shit coiled snugly in the center of his porch.

The fresh, intimate stink of it made him gag. He flung his arm across his nose, ran back inside, and slammed the door shut, but even so, he was sure he could still smell it. Later, he drank two bottles of warm Tusker beer for courage and gathered the feces between the pages of a newspaper, its slithering warmth radiating through the thin pages. Then he ran through his yard with his arms outstretched and flung the crumpled ball over the wall and into the street.

Aaron knew that if he didn't go to school that day, he would lose any chance he had of ever gaining control of Class Six, but he couldn't make himself do it. He lay on his couch, sweating, his face covered with blankets, and tried to identify the most likely suspect for the night's attack. Delicate, meowing Linnet? Vulgar Roda Kudondo? Or someone less obvious, like pretty Mercy Akinyi, who'd once turned in an exam sheet that consisted of nothing but the words *I love Moses Ojou* over and over again? Maybe it was Milcent Nabwire, who, last week, had raised her hand during a lesson and asked, "*Mwalimu,* is it—is it—is it true that—that *wazungu*—is it true that . . ." and then, in a great stuttering burst: "*Mwalimu, ni ukweli kwamba wazungu hutomba wanyama?*" In an attempt to mask the slowness of his ability to translate, he'd pretended to consider the question carefully, frowning and furrowing his brow so that only when he finally unlocked her meaning (*Teacher, is it true that white people fuck animals?*) did he realize how perfectly he'd set himself up to be the butt of her joke.

Or perhaps it was Anastenzia Odenyo, one of his class's many orphans, who served as the head of household for five younger siblings. She came to school so rarely he had trouble remembering her face, although he would sometimes pass her in the village, looking tired and harassed, a basket of shopping balanced on her head, a child clinging to her hip. He'd once offered to pay for the handful of onions she was buying at the market, telling her he hoped she'd be able to return to school someday soon. She'd accepted the handful of shillings he'd given her, then pointed to his iPod and said something in Swahili he didn't understand.

"To hear music," she'd said in English, each word enunciated carefully. "I like to listen to music." Requests for his belongings were common but always awkward for him.

"No, Anastenzia," he told her. "I'm sorry."

"Okay," she said. She shushed the child she was carrying, who'd begun to cry. "Maybe later. Thank you for onions, *Mwalimu*. Good-bye." He'd been halfway home before the sickening possibility occurred to him that she might not have been asking for the iPod as a gift, but simply to listen to a song.

Yes, it could have been Linnet or Roda or Mercy or Milcent or Anastenzia . . . but it could also have been Stella Khasenye or Saraphene Wechuli or Veronica Barasa or Anjeline Atieno or Brigit Taabu or Purity Anyango or Violeta Adhiambo. The truth was, it could have been any of them because they all hated him, every single one.

The headmaster came by the house in the midafternoon, and Aaron said he was sick. The headmaster warned Aaron of the dangers of malaria and offered to send one of the children to bring him some Panadol, but Aaron declined politely and crawled into bed. Later, Grace arrived at her usual time, and, lonely and shaky, he invited her in. "What is wrong with you?" she demanded as soon as she saw him. He told her an abbreviated version of the night's ordeal, though he couldn't bring himself to admit that someone had taken a shit on his porch. Like Roda's vulgar proposition, its insolence somehow shamed him, the victim of the act, more than it did the transgressor. He expected that Grace wouldn't believe him when he told her the knocking had kept up until sunrise—he had trouble believing it himself—but when he finished his story, bracing himself for ridicule, she only nodded and said sagely, "Ah. It is a night runner."

"A night runner?" he echoed.

"They did not teach you about night runners at your Peace Corps school?"

Early on, Aaron had mentioned the eight weeks of Peace Corps training he'd completed before arriving in Butula, and ever since, he'd had the sense that Grace believed he'd spent months in a classroom being taught every possible detail about Kenyan life, from the right way to greet a grandparent to how to properly slice up a mango. She acted astonished at even his smallest mistakes, and sometimes appeared truly offended by the extent to which these imaginary teachers had failed him.

"Night runners are a very common thing among us Luhya people," she told him. "They cause too much trouble by running

around naked anyhowly." Perhaps inspired by Aaron's boggled expression, she lowered her voice into a masculine range, furrowed her eyebrows, and elevated her explanation into performance. "They come around, *boom boom boom*, making noises like this"—she demonstrated by pummeling her fists against the air—"and they will rub their *ninis* against your wall"—she poked out her ass and pointed—"and if you are very unlucky, they will leave you a little present." She giggled and concluded emphatically, "Yes! That is the night runner."

For the rest of the evening, Aaron tried to get Grace to confess she was making this up. She'd told him wild stories of the supernatural before—one about a man who'd been cursed so that every time he urinated he crowed like a rooster; one about a witch who'd cast a spell on an adulterous couple so that they got stuck together while having sex and had to be brought to the hospital to be surgically taken apart—but always in a way that seemed like a tease, as though she knew he wouldn't believe her and was daring him to defy her. Of the reality of the night runners, however, she seemed utterly convinced. No—they were not spirits, they were actual people, driven to run by a kind of demonic mental disease. Their identities were secret because if the community found out you were a night runner—whoa, you were in for it then! Once, three towns over, a night runner had been caught and almost lynched before it was discovered that during the daytime she was the well-respected wife of a pastor.

His skepticism slowly eroding in the face of her conviction, Aaron asked how one went about ridding oneself of a night runner's harassment. Grace began telling a convoluted story about how the best night runners did their work in pairs, the elaborate joint rituals they performed to keep themselves from being caught, but then she interrupted herself and shook her head in despair. "No! The real problem is these night runners are too difficult to stop because when you chase them, they can become something like a cat or a bird or even a leopard, so how can a person catch up?"

"Grace!" Aaron cried as she burst into snorting laughter. "You're not funny!"

Grace said, "Wrong. I am funny. Your problem is you are too serious. 'Oh no, a child is meowing at me!' 'Oh no, someone is knocking on my door in the night!' There are worse things in

this world than being meowed at. So you have your troubles—that means a person can't laugh?"

"I just think you could be a little more sympathetic," Aaron said morosely, as he drank down the rest of his Coke.

The next morning, fortified by a good eight hours' sleep, Aaron decided to venture into campus. Instead of going to his classroom, though, he presented himself at the headmaster's office. The headmaster's feet were propped up on his desk, the bottom of one of his shoes blackened with a smear of chewing gum. "*Mwalimu* Aaron!" the headmaster exclaimed. "How is your malaria doing today?"

"It wasn't malaria," Aaron said. "And I'm a lot better. But I need to talk to you about the Class Six girls. Their behavior is out of control."

As the headmaster listened, rocking back in his chair, Aaron launched into a litany of Class Six offenses. They threw things at him. They imitated him. They asked vulgar questions. They refused to do their assignments. They failed to treat him with the proper respect. When Aaron recounted the story of Linnet's meowing, the headmaster began to frown, but when Aaron described the assault on his house, the headmaster dropped the front legs of his chair to the floor with a clatter.

They threw things at him. They imitated him. They asked vulgar questions. They refused to do their assignments. They failed to treat him with the proper respect.

"No!" the headmaster declared. "This is too serious. With harassment like this, how can you sleep? Someone coming to your door, banging, banging, banging, all the night long!"

Aaron was about to agree, but before he could say anything, the headmaster continued, "This is not just a nuisance, no! It is a real problem in our community, this nasty habit of night running!"

Aaron slumped back in his seat as the headmaster burst into a wide smile, showing off a mouth full of damp, shiny teeth. He clasped Aaron on the shoulder. "My friend. If you want your class to have discipline, you must discipline them! The next time

a small-small girl meows at you—*pah!*" He whipped his newspaper through the air. "Do so, and I think you will not be visited by this night runner again."

Defeated, Aaron returned to his classroom. On any other day, the girls would have gone wild in his absence, but today they sat primly at their desks, their ankles pressed together, their hands clasped in front of them. A hundred brown eyes tracked him as he crossed to the front of the room. As he cleared his throat and prepared to speak, he allowed himself a moment of hope. *Maybe it's over. Maybe they finally realize they've gone too far.*

"Good afternoon, girls," Aaron prompted the class.

The sound of shuffling feet and squeaking desks filled the air as Class Six rose, as one, to greet him.

"*MEOW!*"

In the ensuing hysteria, Aaron grabbed the arm of the girl closest to him: Mercy Akinyi, the one who loved Moses Ojou. Mercy shrieked and dug her fingers into his hand, but he yanked her forward, forcing her toward the door. They were almost to the courtyard before the rest of the girls realized what was happening, and when they did, they followed en masse, enveloping him in a shrieking maelstrom. Spit and paper and shoes flew around him, but Aaron focused only on keeping control of his one writhing charge.

Drawn by the commotion, the rest of the schoolchildren flooded outside, their curious teachers making no effort to stop them. With the entire school looking on, Aaron frog-marched Mercy into the middle of the yard and then, as was the custom, lifted her hands above her head and placed them on the flagpole. Mercy's blue-and-white plaid skirt rose over the backs of her knees, exposing her smooth, brown legs. Beneath them, dozens of thin sticks littered the grass, remnants of earlier beatings. Aaron snatched one up and pressed it against Mercy's leg. A plump calf muscle twitched beneath her skin.

Aaron's stomach had gone oily and cold. He thought he might lose control of his bowels, but he raised the stick to strike. As he did, Mercy cocked her head and smiled faintly at him.

"*Meow,*" she whispered.

He couldn't do it. He threw the stick on the ground and walked home.

Grace didn't come that evening, but the night runner did. The next morning, Aaron opened his door and was briefly surprised to see an unsoiled porch, until the stench hit him and he turned to see the clumped brown streak smeared at hip height in an unbroken circle around the white walls of his house.

Aaron went inside and called his Peace Corps supervisor. He said that he had been the target of harassment in his village, that he no longer felt as though he had anything to offer his community, and that he wanted to go home. He expected her to try to talk him out of it, to reassure him that what he was doing was valuable, but she did not. The Peace Corps had left him almost entirely alone at his site, but as soon as he wanted to leave, it was as though he'd pulled a lever and activated the workings of a complex, implacable machine. His supervisor asked him only if he felt unsafe in the village, or if he was considering doing harm to himself. When he said no, she told him to come into the office the next day to begin filling out his separation paperwork, and that was that. It could not have been easier. He was done.

When he got off the phone, Aaron filled a bucket with warm, sudsy water. He knotted up an old T-shirt, went outside, then got down on his knees and scrubbed his walls until they shone. He felt no disgust or revulsion, just a kind of deadened disdain. It was a choice they'd made, to drive him out. Like beating children was a choice. Like having unprotected sex was a choice. *They chose this,* he said to himself, and the words were like blood in his mouth.

As the sun set on his last day in the village, Aaron walked into town for the final time and bought himself a chapati and a Coke, and then, after some thought, a second chapati and Coke for Grace. He wondered what she would say when she found out he was leaving, and he heard her shocked voice again in his head: *They did not teach you about night runners in your Peace Corps school?*

No, Grace, he thought. *They didn't teach me anything I needed to know.*

That night, there was no Grace, and at first no night runner, only a suffocating heat that crawled into the house and stubbornly refused to leave. Struggling to breathe but afraid to

open the windows, Aaron sat in his underwear, dabbing his soaked forehead with a T-shirt as he squatted on his mattress. On his lap, he held a tool that he'd taken from the shed in his compound, one of the long, flat blades that people around here called grass cutters. He'd told his supervisor the truth—he did not feel unsafe in the village. But he felt scared and humiliated and helpless, and he was tired of feeling that way.

The knocking began just after midnight. *Knock knock knock,* first at the door, then at the window. *Knock knock knock.* Door, window, window, door, until the whole house was surrounded by a fluttery, girlish knocking. Surely no one person could move that fast. Maybe all of Class Six had come to visit, here on a sadistic class trip. Again, Aaron saw Mercy with her hands around the flagpole, squinting up at him. Even when he'd been angry enough to beat her bloody, she hadn't been afraid of him, and now here he was, crouching in his house like a coward. *I came here to help you,* he thought. He stood hooking the grass cutter over his shoulder like a baseball bat and crept toward the door as the knocking spread around the house like unfolding wings.

She hadn't been afraid of him, and now here he was, crouching in his house like a coward. I came here to help you, *he thought.*

Wait.

Wait.

Knock knock.

Now.

Aaron flung open the door. Two bare brown legs floated in front of him, naked toes wiggling, and then one of them kicked out toward his face, five pearled toenails scratching down his cheek. Shrieking, Aaron swung the grass cutter wildly, sending it whistling through the air—but the legs slid up and away, leaving him staring at a blank doorway and the chill, black night, the metal blade launched into the crumbling wood of the frame.

Aaron buckled, gagged. He spat bile onto the spot where, if blade had met flesh, a girl's severed leg would have tumbled to the floor. The shock of what he'd almost done whiplashed back

to him, and curled, electric, around his spine. To think if he'd hit her. Imagine it. The crunch of bone. The screaming. The gushing surge of dark red blood.

But she'd escaped. She was on the roof now, the knocking replaced by a whispery rain of *tap tap tap*. He stumbled out into the yard just in time to see a small, dark shadow creep across the pitched rise of the roof. She was out of sight but trapped because the wall on that side of the compound was far too high for any girl to climb.

"Mercy?" he begged. "Linnet? Roda? Come here and talk to me. Please."

From the other side of the house came a soft thud as if whoever'd been on the roof had tumbled to the ground. Aaron loped toward the sound, cutting off the path to the exit. Impossible that she could have crept around the house without him seeing her—and yet the next noise came from behind him, a soft giggle followed by a whispered taunt. "*Meow!*"

The anger he thought he'd exorcised surged up in him again. He spun and dove to tackle her, but she slipped past him and he gave chase, out the gate and into the road, forgetting he was barefoot, forgetting he was dressed in nothing but his underwear, forgetting everything but his rage.

She ran down the night-darkened road, and he could make out nothing but the smudged outline of her shadow—first the size of a child, then as large as a man, then as small as a cat, and then the size of a girl again. He ran after her down empty streets, past shuttered houses and locked stores, into low, dew-damp shrubbery that scratched and tore at his ankles, through a grove of higher trees that grabbed at him, tangling in his hair and leaving thin bloody streaks like whip marks on his chest. He ran and ran, past a church and a junkyard and into a cornfield, the young plants sharp as razors slashing at his legs, and finally up and over a wall, where he tumbled into a compound brilliantly full of firelight.

Blinking, Aaron shielded his eyes with his hand. At first, he couldn't distinguish people from shadows. What he took at first to be a tall, emaciated man wavered and resolved itself into a flagpole. He blinked again, and realized that the yard was familiar, the building behind it even more so. Clustered around the fire pit, which blazed now as it always did at celebrations, were the girls of Class Six. Beside them were the girls of Class

Five, Class Seven, Class Eight. Many held Cokes and Fantas. Their mouths shone with the grease of the goat that had been roasting on the fire.

It was a party, celebrating the end of term. Aaron crouched before them, panting, and as the girls caught sight of him, their eyes widened, and then one of them pointed, her face contorted with horror, and let out a tiny whimper of fear. Aaron spun to look behind him, and in that instant of turning, he believed in all the creatures of Grace's stories before he saw the blank wall at his back and remembered himself to be pursuer, not pursued.

A few of the smaller girls began to cry in keening, frightened wails, but then Roda Kudondo called out boldly, "Eh! Night runner!" and the sobs gave way to hooting jeers.

Aaron looked down and saw himself as they did: a ghostly apparition, cat-eyed stranger, mushroom pale. Boxers shredded and covered in dirt, twigs and leaves clinging to the hair between his legs, his skin lit by a rising flush of shame.

Brave girls, he thought suddenly, as their laughter rose up protectively around them. Brave girls to laugh and fight and rage instead of cry.

"Sssst!" came a whisper from the far corner of the courtyard. "Aaron!"

He looked up to see a figure wreathed in shadows. At first, he thought she was just another schoolgirl, but then she grinned, and he recognized her long legs, the gaps in her smile.

"Sssst!" the whisper came again. She beckoned, mouthed a Swahili phrase.

Ukimbie nami.

Run with me.

Grace, who did not fear him. Grace, who laughed at him and told him stories. Grace, who instead of crying or raging—ran. Tomorrow, he would begin the long trip home, but tonight, Grace sprinted naked across the yard, unseen by anyone but him.

Lithe as a cat, he ran after her.

VAL

I know him right away—the kid who's going to buy me a drink.

I have a feeling about these things: I know the too good ones, and I'm patient. The MenU has refused to serve me for the last forty-five minutes. MenUs—so convenient, a rolling screen machine behind the bar, put in a credit card, tap on a picture, presto. This one's wearing a bowtie because people are awful. MenUs have won a lot of awards, as far as there are awards for this kind of thing, and now they're winning even more, health and safety, for the breathalyzer addition. Story of my life.

The kid who's going to buy me a drink is taking his sweet time realizing it, but that's not why I decide to talk to him. I talk to him because he's flipping through the MenU's carousel of fancy drinks with umbrellas. He needs my help.

I lean over to him and say, "True or false."

"What?" he says, and his sweet face circles through all shades of baffled. "What? True. What?"

"Shit," I say. I laugh until I'm absolutely sure he's not going to join me. Then I say, "I meant truth or dare."

He looks around for rescue. No luck.

"Truth or dare?" I say again.

"Dare," he says.

"Dare?" I say. This is a surprise. I had him firmly pegged as the sort that would say *truth,* by which I mean the sort scared of himself and others. But I say, "OK, fine, dare. I dare you to take out your phone and eVALuate me."

The kid hesitates. He pretends to examine the MenU's bowtie. You know what MenUs can't do? Join conversations.

"You're so busy?" I say, loud. I like to appear aggressive before I get really drunk, so nothing surprises people later. "You can't even talk to me, standing right here, because you're so busy?"

"No," the kid says, blushing. He's a sweetheart, a city-bred farm boy, a good kid. "No, I'm sorry. I'll look. I'll look now."

He pulls out his phone. He pulls up the app. He checks, double-checks, and then he's all eyebrows eyebrows eyebrows!

"Holy shit," the kid says. "You're Val? *The* Val?"

And, hey presto, I'm psychic.

Val, short for *Valentine,* nerd wordplay on Hal, the ultimate app for getting ass. Someone said that, some critic. The hook-up app to redefine hook-up apps, someone else said. Your pocket shag secretary, another person, probably British, called it.

Val came about like this:

The programmer was a man. What's the best way to mention someone's mother issues? He had them. I was a mother twice over by then, though I looked good enough that everyone always said, Really?

We were at a bar, and we didn't want to be there anymore. By "we," I mean I was doing the heavy lifting. I'm good at it, no surprise—drunk men, toddlers, the connection makes itself. I got us the cab, I got us the room, I practically hauled him by the armpits into the elevator. I'm talking all the while, too, saying, "There you go" and "Come on" and "Almost there" and "Yes yes yes!"

Because my instructions were good, I kept at them.

Next morning, he said he's got an idea. He said he's going to design a phone app to help get drunk people home. To automatically lock their car doors and call them a cab and give the cabbie their home address or maybe even block-by-block walking instructions.

I said, Are you stupid?

I said, What about a fully comprehensive social application geared toward short-term romantic interactions engaged in by those who are perhaps compromised by substances, which handles not only the logistics of place (apartment directions, routes there, nearby hotel/motel booking with late check-out) but also step-by-step instructions for different positions offered mid-coitus in a voice that sensually contributes to rather than distracts from the experience?

He pouted. We compromised: he made my idea and called it his. So Val? Val's me. Val's always been me.

The kid's name is Tan—fucking parents today. He blows on the MenU wand in a way that makes me want to smooth the hair

from his forehead. He buys me a drink and himself a drink and a third drink, one with an umbrella, to take back to his table. I couldn't talk him out of it.

Me, I love people. That's why I don't drink alone. I love people and his friends love me. The kids all look exactly like they did ten years back, except a little different. There is a girl with eyelids shaded in complicated variations of yellow and a girl with hair shredded to angles and spears. There is a boy whose neck has a tattoo of a llama and a boy whose tongue piercing is connected to a chain that is connected to a nose piercing. The chain is too short, so always either his tongue is poking out or his nose is dipping down. The effect is cuter than you'd think. Like a pug.

Sweet-faced Tan sets the fancy umbrella cocktail in front of a girl whose mouth looks oily with gloss. She cringe-smiles and the light reflects.

The kids want to play the game where they hear me say what I say all the time as Val.

"Say, *Come on, baaaby!*" they say.

I say it.

"Say, *Now, now!*" they say.

I say it.

"Say, *Have you chosen your safety word?*"

I put a finger in the air. I stand by safety words, I tell them. I'm serious about safety. Val has never supported sexual violence or even discomfort. Val was, in fact, designed to help everyone discover their most effective methods of lovemaking without judgment.

They hold up their hands. Hey, they say, they believe in safety words, too. They dutifully picked safety words when the S&M upgrade came out. They call out theirs:

"Cork!"

"Riverside!"

"Veronica Mars!"

"Greenhouse gases!"

"MenU!"

The MenU rolls to our table, his bowtie askew.

We laugh and can't stop laughing.

"But while it's here," I say, "someone order me another drink."

Someone does.

Tan looks away as Oily Lips girl lets Llama Neck Tattoo boy buy her a drink even though her umbrella one is only half done. Oh, Tan. Technology, it doesn't change everything.

Val 1.0 was the basics: taxi ordering, hotel booking, the Kama Sutra. Val 2.0 would analyze other people on the site and tell you if they were out and where. Version 3.0 did the reverse, letting you look at strangers' profiles wherever you were.

These were harmless days, minor stalking.

Version 8 or 9 was when the reviews started. Stars out of five first, then numbers out of ten. Then comments. Pictures appeared. Videos could be uploaded. Your Val profile became more important than any other social media profile. You wanted enough comments but not too many. You wanted to seem willing to try new things without attracting freaks. It became strange if you didn't have one. You were strange. The worst was assumed.

The motto was *Someone's talking about your performance . . .*

Then there were legal issues, some suicides, a CEO turnover.

Now the motto is *There's someone for everyone.*

The place is busier now, the MenU too occupied to come to the table, so some of the kids have to go back to the bar for drinks. I slip out for the bathroom. It's dirty in an unsurprising way, but it's a surprise that I find a drink someone abandoned on top of the little metal trashcan for tampons and a surprise I finish it. Or maybe not. Maybe not a surprise.

My hands clean, I call one of my daughters. I've got three. Three daughters, like a fairy tale. I want to call Cass, my youngest, but I call the oldest first, because that seems right. Also because Gemma's in rehab and I love apologies.

When she picks up, I say real quick, "Where's my ninth step?"

"Your what?" she says, and I can hear her baby, Hemp, in the background, wailing. Poor Hemp. Fucking parents.

"My ninth step," I say. "Or eighth. The apology step. The amends. I've been expecting my amends."

Gemma's quiet so I can hear Hemp's howl, his range and ferocity. Then she says, "I got a pass."

"A pass?"

"Yes. I got a temporary pass on making amends to you until you start the program yourself."

"Why would you do that?"

"Because you think other people going to rehab means you won a fight with them."

"I do not!"

"You do. You love apologies, you told me."

"Fuck you," I say, but really I'm laughing and proud on the inside. My Gemma, she remembers everything. Former sexual partners on her Val page used to complain about her grudge-holding and memory in general. Also her barf-in-hair smell, her wrist bones. Gemma's profile disappeared when she got married four, five years ago. It went up again last month.

"I've written it all down," Gemma goes on, "all the things I need to say to you. It's in a letter. I've gotten permission from my sponsor to hang onto it until you begin your own treatment."

I say, "What if I die before then?"

She says, "You will if you don't start treatment soon."

I want to say *Fuck you* again, but I decide not to, but then I haven't said anything, so I go ahead and say it.

"You know what, Mom, where are *my* apologies? You think I don't want occasional amends from you?"

"Where's the scoreboard?" I say. I start saying it angry, but by the time I finish the sentence, I'm sad. Things can change that fast. I change the subject. "How's Reeves?" I say. I don't know if I'm about to be nice or not.

Gemma, suspicious now, says, "He's fine. We're fine. We're good."

When they first started dating, Gemma didn't want to believe me. I said, Look at this kid's profile, look at these reviews—the number of times he's cried, post and pre, his sense of hostessing, the boutique baklava, the sterilized toys. People have choices: you can either believe a gay man when he says he's straight, or you can not believe him and not waste four, five years with him.

"Fuck you," Gemma says, and that is how I know I said this last bit out loud. "Do you really not remember when my wedding was? What kind of mother doesn't remember if her daughter got married four or five years ago?"

I know she's about to hang up on me, so I do it first.

I call Cass after. I know she won't pick up, but I just want to hear the answering machine message. Three rings later and

there it is: *This is Cass, call you back!* Not a rhyme, but always makes me wait a second after the beep, expecting one.

I didn't have a smart phone when the programmer wrote the original Val. I also wasn't an expert on things like patents or intellectual property. I got a flat fee for recording my voice. The next month, there's the programmer on the front page of a magazine, the kind that publishes stories about rich men, smirking a rich-man smirk.

Thankfully, I was pregnant. I demanded support. He demanded a paternity test. This could have been problematic, one more tragedy in my big life bucket, but for once—just this one special time—something went my way. There was real justice after a short lawsuit and Cass was born. Cass: my last, my loveliest, my favorite. I know mothers aren't supposed to have favorites. Add it to the scoreboard.

Tan confides to me while some of the others are away playing darts that he's got it for Clarity, the oily-lips umbrella drinker.

I say, "You think that's something you have to confide?"

I say, "Reconsider."

I pull up Clarity's profile on Tan's phone. I show him her taste in strictly awful men. I point to some recent explorations in masochism. Is Tan listening? Tan's too busy making moony eyes at her. Be careful, decorous men of the world—you are one step away from resentful, and resentful is a hop and limping skip to violent.

I snap my fingers in his face. I say I have something important to tell him, but first he should go get us shots. He does. Two shots in, I say, "There's someone out there for everyone."

"Yeah," Tan sighs, "but why can't my someone be her?"

That defeatist attitude, that limp, moping mug—it's familiar. It makes me miss someone. I tell him I'm going to help him, but first I'm going to go call my second daughter, Middie.

"You named your middle kid Middie?" Tan says, his sweet face agog.

I say, "You think I planned to have three kids?"

Her name is Minnie, but she hated it so much when Gemma started calling her Middie that of course it stuck. Middie is single, which is rough. Middie's also fat, which is related. She hates having her picture taken with the rest of us because then she

can't use the excuse of genetics. She hates the pictures of herself as a child, too, because there goes the excuse of glands. If she doesn't pick up my call, it's probably because her phone has died and she hasn't noticed.

But she does pick up.

"Where are you?" I say.

I hear her turn down the TV. "Just this bar," she says. "Just this fun little place, hanging out, meeting people, being young—can't you hear that new dance song?"

I hear the new dance song start over my shoulder. Some of the kids from Tan's table whoop and shout that they love the new dance song. "That's my end, Mid. That's my fun little place and my new dance song."

"It's my end, too," Mid says. "It's a coincidence."

Sometimes when I talk to Mid, I sense some great, powerful truth needing to be chewed. A mother bird pre-chews food—I pre-chew truth. Then, once I've taken all the harsh, coarse truthiness out of it, I dribble the easy-to-digest version down to my baby bird: "Come out tonight," I say. "I can help you, Mid. Mid, I want you to be happy."

"I don't believe in happiness," she says.

"Believe in it? Happiness isn't God."

"Then why is everyone searching for it all the time?"

And, oh, my Mid, she's so fat and she's so clever!

Middie didn't get a profile until she turned twenty, and even then it wasn't officially active until sometime after her twenty-sixth birthday. Late bloomer, my Mid. There was patchy activity after that for a few years. Then, last year, or maybe two, somebody wrote, *Dude, how is it possible no one has mentioned that birthmark!!!*

Things couldn't have been worse.

I commented back: *Which one?*

She called me, wailing.

"You could always have them removed," I suggested.

She said Val comments were permanent until proven untrue.

"What about the moles," I said, which was what I had meant in the first place, but she directed me toward another comment a little higher up. Selfreflectingsadist had apparently mistaken a spot where she'd had a different mole removed as a cigarette burn—*same shape, same perfect disc of charred flesh,* he wrote. He accused her of false advertising.

"I'm proud of you," I said when I finished reading. "You shouldn't be burned by cigarettes if you don't want to be burned by cigarettes."

She said I was missing the point.

There've been no comments since.

"Come on," I say now, "an entire generation trusts me to be of assistance. Why won't you let me help you?"

She says something to me, says something true, so true it hurts. It fills my face like a sinus infection, this true thing, this thing she said about Cass, about helping Cass, that I can't, I can't, I won't. I hang up on her, too, but I do it very slowly, giving her the chance to savor the party on my side of the phone.

When I get back, the kids are dancing. They dance like all kids, looking beautiful and stupid. I look for Tan and find him at the table, sad and slumped.

I grab his wrist. "I can help you," I say.

"What?" he tries to shout, but his eyes say that he knows what I said and he believes me and he lets me tug him to his feet.

I pull him to the floor. Then I'm one of the kids again, dancing and beautiful. I dance with Tan, so oil-lipped Clarity can see us, and then with Llama Neck Tattoo, who had been dancing with Clarity. Tan sees what I'm doing, fills the slack around Clarity. This is pretty good, but he hasn't expanded his dancing repertoire beyond shuffling feet and bobbing head. Back in Val 5.0, I pitched the idea of a Val talking through dance steps, particularly male ones, but since when did anyone listen to me? Still, Clarity moves her hips close and then closer, smiling up into his face. I am so busy watching Tan try and try his sweet little sweetheart out, I barely notice that Llama Neck Tattoo has swept me back toward the bathrooms.

The things I do for the kids. And, oh, the things they do, the things they're willing to do, just to be touched.

"They should add this to the next Val upgrade," Llama Neck Tattoo laughs as we brace against the stall.

Once, long before I was Val, I was young and on a subway and a homeless man came up to me. He jabbed his finger in and out

of my mouth and said, "Alley-oop!" Sex with Llama Neck Tattoo is kind of like that—over before it starts, leaving me woozy with disbelief and disgust. He leaves while I'm still cleaning up. I sit for a moment, close my eyes, think of sweet Tan, trying so hard. The things I do for the kids. And, oh, the things they do, the things they're willing to do, just to be touched.

There's only one review on Cass's page. Every time I read it, I get tears in my eyes. Here goes:

> *I was surprised when Cass told me she was a virgin. I was even more surprised—surprised and honored—when she told me she wanted me to be the one. How was it possible, I wondered, that no one had noticed the sweet way her teeth wedged together just a little at the front, like her smile was trying to jump out at you from behind her lips? How was it possible no one had fallen in love with the ripe slope of her shoulders or the raincoat-color of her hair or her eyes, glossy with hope? Being with Cass is like pure truth. We lay down and the sheets were honey. The window was open. The breeze lifted away our sweat and the filmy curtain dragged patterns in the salt left behind. But the best part was the way we both clung to each other afterward, clinging for dear life, as if to say, Yes, we are safe, we are wanted, we are loved.*

When I get back to the table, everyone is taking a turn blowing MenU's wand. No one is getting the green sober-enough-to-order light. I look for Tan, find him staring at his hands, his blinks slow and slower. Clarity and Pug Piercings are doing a complicated something with their faces. She sucks on the chain between his nose and tongue, trying to time it so that his tongue is strung up and darts into her mouth. It doesn't work, except when it does, and then it does not look enjoyable.

MenU brings us water. The kids chug until their bellies are sloshing. I sip gamely. We wait. It is that hour of the night between first and second winds. It is that hour when complaints can be allowed out into the open. They let them clatter before me like so many spent swords.

"It's shallow, isn't it," Strange Hair girl says. "I mean, I *have*

to have one, but if I didn't have to have one, I'd totally never get a Val."

The others agree. So shallow, so weird, so necessary.

I used to take these complaints personally. I used to say, You think I like that my girls were brought into this Val world? This world of damp and sticky fever? This world where their nakedness is nothing special?

Now I just say, Listen.

"Listen," I say, "things aren't so different from how they've always been. What's always been has been the distilled, ugly hope of the lonely."

They blink at me, beautiful owlets, red eyed and water rimmed.

"There's someone out there for everyone," I say. "I believe that."

And on I go: someone for the lonely of all shades—the ugly, the obese, the socially disturbed, the crippled by shyness or hair growth or maybe even in their legs. There's always been the hope that people of equal and opposite loneliness will collide and they will be suspended in perfect, lonely-free life.

"Once, I knew this girl," I say. "She was fine looking, normal, better than normal, beautiful. But she was scared of what her first Val review would be like. So scared that she put off losing her virginity. She put it off and put it off, terrified at any age that she was too old and then older, too late and then later. Hopeless, she thought, and everyone would know it.

"And you know what?" I say.

They are listening.

I say, "Her first review was an act of pure, honest love."

Cass, my last, my lovely. She was too good. It ate her up. Every week there was a new affliction she was ashamed of: imperfect skin, slight love handles, skinny fingers, excessive sweat, a short tongue. What would they say, these phantom partners out in the world, when they found out she was a virgin? She was eighteen—still young, I promised her, so young. But she said she couldn't stand it anymore. She didn't want to be a Middie-like late bloomer.

Tears in her eyes, she said, "Mama, help."

So what did I do?

I made up a fake profile. I wrote a review. I wrote the best review. I wrote my fucking heart out.

But afterward she came to me, tears in her eyes again.

Some shitheads at her school were calling it false. Cass stood by it for a while, said they couldn't prove it, said her boyfriend lived in Canada. But suddenly there were a lot of people interested, a lot of boys, and a bet going on whether or not she'd bleed.

I said I could get the programmer to take the review down. She didn't want that. I said I could write another. She really didn't want that. I asked her what could I do, what did she want? She just cried.

My hands, I threw them up. I told her to figure it out.

So this was what she figured out: One night while I was out, she drew herself a bubble bath. There were rose petals. There were candles. Her hair, it was up Frenchly, just so. The water was red and sudsy when I found her, boiled, thick, tarred. She had taken her feet out of the water at some point after the cuts and pressed them to the white porcelain tub. The curves of her soles formed a butterfly pattern, a mirror image, along the rim. I stared at that butterfly. I expected, at any second, her toes to reach out of the water and cleverly wipe it away, the way she used to wipe away hearts she drew in steam on the windows.

But the kids. The kids, here.

Strange Hair girl finally blows sober. We cheer and she orders three bottles. The kids, the kids and I, we head back for the dance floor. I never pass a bottle until there's another in my hand, and I throttle the breath from each. At some point I realize sweethearted Tan isn't in our throbbing group. I shout his name, but no one can hear me in the music. The thought of him gone makes me sad until I forget it. And I do forget it.

Because, the kids. The kids scream and sweat. They press against me and then just lean. The music fades and the lights flicker. They pant and sigh. They blink at me, mouths open and hungry. The kids, here, now. The kids, needing my help.

And I have directions for them. I will lead them. I will lead them home.

JENNIFER ITELL

MOONWALK

I.

I've been walking almost daily around a lake that's drying up. Or rather, it's being slowly drained. It has something to do with a leak that needs fixing. It's a man-made lake, and there's a dam made of boulders on one side, and the fixers can't do what they need to do until the lake is empty. It's becoming less and less scenic, but since I like routine, and the lake is just up the street from my son's elementary school, I haven't found a new route. Alex is in second grade, and I've been walking twice around this lake/soon-to-be-puddle every school day, except for rainy or abrasively windy days, since Alex was in kindergarten.

At first, at the start of the school year, I didn't realize the draining was purposeful. I just registered that the water was getting lower, and then alarmingly lower. There were fewer birds, and the air around the lake started to smell faintly of rotting fish. Another walker filled me in on what was going on, how the lake had to be drained slowly so the birds could eat the fish slowly and then fly away. Apparently if you drain a lake suddenly, you've got a real stinking mess. Also, there's the practical matter of all that water all at once—where would it go?

So the lake is shrinking, and the birds have gone elsewhere, and so have the coyotes. Last winter and the one before, a pair of coyotes would sometimes trot through the trees alongside the water. I would keep an eye on them and they on me, and if this went on long enough, I would wonder, since I was walking in circles, who was following whom.

There are fewer walkers too, since on the windy days the wind swoops the dry lakebed up and deposits it in stretches here and there along the trail, so that walking along those parts feels like walking in several inches of moon dirt. Or, at any rate, that's how I've come to think of those dusty patches, since there's a feeling of desolation about the place now.

2.

The draining of the lake happened to coincide with the growing of a lump in my belly area. Possibly, the lump had been growing for some time but during these months happened to grow large enough for me to become aware of it. I couldn't pinpoint its exact location, and I didn't know what it was. At first, I thought stomach cancer, then bladder cancer, then uterine cancer. Then finally, after several nights of a severe pain in my side that turned my imaginary cancer from strangely comforting to startlingly real, I went to see my doctor, who said the lump was in my uterus and was a fibroid.

Or *most likely* a fibroid. "You'll need to get an ultrasound to be sure," she said, "but I'll bet you a nickel you've got fibroid disease." She said it happily, as if looking forward to her nickel. I wanted to say, *If you're going to bet your patients, you might want to up your ante*. Betting a nickel made her sound old. But I didn't say it. Instead I asked about the pain in my side that had woken me for several nights running, then disappeared as soon as I sat up, and then after a week disappeared altogether. My doctor shook her head. "Your uterus is here," she said, touching my lump, "and you're saying the pain was here. I can't make a story out of that."

I went for the ultrasound, and the results were sent to my narratively challenged doctor, who called to say that I most definitely had a fibroid. Harmless, but the size of a baseball. Tactfully, she didn't mention her nickel, but she did suggest a hysterectomy. "You don't have to get one," she said, "but you might be more comfortable without that big lump inside you."

Before incorrectly diagnosing myself with some type of central-body cancer, I'd thought I was entering menopause. I'd been walking around a drying-up lake and harboring the thought that I was drying up too. Not just creatively—for months I hadn't been writing—but also reproductively. Though I was bleeding a lot. But I'd understood that to mean I was on my way to drying up, like the lake. I liked the synchronicity. It was a shock to learn I'd been telling myself a false story.

3.

Once the lake is no longer, and heavy machinery is on the scene, I find myself humming the Beatles' song "Fixing a Hole" when

I pass by the men working on the leak down at the base of the boulders. Though I guess, technically, they're not fixing a hole where the rain gets in but fixing a dam where the rain gets out. The drained lake looks like a moon crater, the bulldozers are moon rovers, and I might be the only one still walking the path that circles where the lake once was.

Which is fitting, perhaps, because within me something vital has slipped away: my desire to write. After years and years of writing fiction, of finding solace in it, I've stopped seeing the point. Sometimes on my walks a new story idea flits through my head, but I let it go; I think, *Why bother?* My stories aren't true *and* few people read them; they are trees made of air, falling in a lonely forest.

Instead of going home to my desk, I do an extra lap or veer off on a path that leads up a grassy hill. From there the view is stark, but somehow beautiful in its starkness. What I'm struck by, I suppose, is absence. I think of Buzz Aldrin stepping onto the moon after Neil Armstrong in 1969 and surveying the seemingly waterless, lifeless landscape. "Beautiful view," he said. Then, a moment later: "Magnificent desolation."

4.

During a stretch of cold days, a sheet of snow settles in the depression where the lake used to be and glints in the sun, so it looks like the lake has come back. I take my husband and son there on a Sunday morning to show them. It's been a weekend of bickering. Alex is too hyper for the house that contains him, and my husband and I are bored with winter and bored, truth be told, with each other. It's one of those mornings when I wake and think, *If we don't shake ourselves out of this, we're done for.* So I cajole us into the car, and we drive to the lake.

Something vital has slipped away: my desire to write. After years and years of writing fiction, of finding solace in it, I've stopped seeing the point.

Since I'm itching for exercise, I walk around at my usual pace while my husband and son venture across, and as they near the middle, they look like prophets walking on water; then like

strangers, insignificant and unknowable; then like the two beings I care about most in the world, tiptoeing across the surface of the unknown, and I panic and think, *I am the one who sent them forth.*

Then I hurry around the arc of the lakebed to meet them.

5·

The thing is, I don't need my uterus. It's become cumbersome, and I'm forty-six and not going to have another child. And two friends who had hysterectomies because of fibroids have told me they are much more comfortable now. Still, I haven't scheduled the surgery. This is in part because I've grown friendly with my lump. At night, lying on my back, I cup my hand around it, my secret baby baseball, and try to figure out what it means. Medically, not much. My body has formed a benign mass of muscle cells and connective tissue.

But what if it has deeper meaning? Maybe it's a physical manifestation of my recent creative rut. My apathy about writing was one of the things I'd mistakenly attributed to menopause, but now I find myself wondering if my fibroid is the culprit, if it's not a useless mass at all but a tightly spooled knot of unrealized work. Maybe my body is harboring a complicated, spectacular story, one that nobody, not even my doctor, can decipher.

During the months when the lake was receding, it revealed things: a tire, a five-gallon bucket, a broken wooden crate, a baseball. When I spotted the baseball, I decided to pluck it out of the muck for Alex. It had a split seam, revealing its spooled insides, which is what I wanted to show him. I'd heard somewhere that a baseball contains a mile of thread. Which means an unspooled baseball would loop once around my lake.

Maybe my fibroid is the result of walking around the lake too many times. Or of walking in circles too many times throughout my entire life. Literally, but also: the same pattern to my days; the same arguments, not just with my husband or Alex, who argues everything these days, but with myself—maybe especially with myself; the same doubts and insecurities looping and looping. Maybe if I spend the second half of my life walking backward, I will unspool, release whatever it is that has wrapped up tightly inside me.

Maybe I've arrived not at menopause but middle age. Accord-

ing to my doctor, my fibroid will likely start to shrink when I truly start menopause. Maybe this is all menopause is, come to think of it: the beginning of walking backward.

6.

One day in early spring, when the snow is gone but nothing has yet turned green, I stop walking and look at the barren landscape and think, *What am I doing here?* There are no birds or coyotes or people in sight. I wonder where all the other walkers are. Have they found a better place to go?

7.

My doctor suggested I see a gynecologist for a second opinion, so I did. My husband took the morning off to go with me. The gynecologist was friendly and chatty. She said lots of women have fibroids. Some have them and don't even know it. Some fibroids grow out of control. To the size of cantaloupes or, in one particularly unusual case, up behind a woman's rib cage, making it hard for her to breathe. The gynecologist said she had fibroids too, and if she weren't so busy with her practice, she'd get a hysterectomy. She seemed to feel no attachment to her uterus; she just couldn't spare the time off after surgery to rest.

Eventually, we circled back to my body. She studied my ultrasound results, talked to us about the pros and cons of surgery in my case, and then said something along the lines of "I'm going to ask you a question, and I want you to answer immediately: Do you want a hysterectomy?"

"No," I said.

"Okay," she said. "Then for now, don't get one."

She suggested an IUD to ebb the bleeding. Or to *eventually* ebb the bleeding. She said the IUD might cause me to bleed daily, but only lightly, for up to six months; after that, I wouldn't bleed much at all. So the IUD would cause either a draining or a damming; I didn't entirely understand but thought it sounded worth a try.

Another reason she suggested the IUD was birth control. When she asked us about our method in her initial Q&A, my husband glanced at me and then said, "We're risk takers." Then, because it struck us as such an inaccurate description of ourselves and our marriage in general—this is what ran through my mind, and I'm assuming my husband's too—we fell into a fit of laughter, and the

gynecologist sat smiling and shaking her head, probably thinking us the wildest, happiest couple on earth.

When we calmed down, she wanted to know why we hadn't been bothering with birth control ("Teenagers and forty-somethings are the worst!" she said), and I had to explain that I hadn't been worried about it because I'd mistakenly thought myself menopausal.

We left, buoyed from laughing together, and I felt relieved that the gynecologist had given me permission to hold onto my uterus for a little longer.

8.

It's not just that I've grown friendly with my lump. Or that, under our insurance plan, it would cost a huge chunk of money to remove it. I want to keep my uterus because it was my son's first home, the place where he was safest, and even though he can't come back to it when he needs a break from the world, I like knowing it's there, a childhood house I'll never sell or renovate or knock to the ground. I want to keep it because removing it might leave a strange crater or displace the ghosts of all the children I never had, who were never conceived, because I was busy with other things, because life slips by.

I want to keep my uterus because, at forty-six, I've likely reached the middle and enough has already been taken. Nothing crucial, but little bits and pieces of me: my eyesight, which is waning; my teeth, which have been ground down; and my breasts, my once-plump breasts—where did they go? Even my pee betrays. I sneeze, and it tries to escape. And that's just the tangible. What about the intangible? My self-confidence. That was a thing once, a part of my body. It's been chipped away. My weight. Not my actual body weight, but my sense of self, my heft, my ambition, by which I mean not just the stories I've yet to write, but my *own* story, the story of *me,* which was supposed to be an adventure—

I cannot be reduced any further; you cannot take my fibroid, my baseball, the fist clenched in the middle of me, refusing to reveal. How is it that, after all these years, someone could look at me and voice a fear I didn't even know was there: *I can't make a story out of that*—

On the other hand, fuck it. Cut me open. Take away all that is heavy.

9.

Once, I was a risk taker. Or rather, for a handful of years when I was young, I did some risky and adventurous things. In high school, a friend and I road tripped to Grateful Dead concerts, lived out of the back of her Toyota station wagon, took acid, saw the world in fresh light, refused sleep, didn't wash our hair for days. Once, I fell in love and lived for a summer in Berkeley, California, with my beloved, in a room in a house near the top of a hill overlooking the San Francisco Bay; I got a job there painting houses with a crew of men because I wanted to work outside and do something that wasn't ordinary, or expected of me. Once, with the same boyfriend, I spent a summer in Ketchum, Idaho. There I worked with a different crew of painters; I painted the outside of condos that faced a golf course in Sun Valley, and men in golf carts yelled up at me, *Be careful, honey, on that ladder!* On weekends, we hitchhiked to towns we wanted to see and to trailheads, and once we got lost overnight in the Sawtooths. Once, in the desert, we witnessed a lunar eclipse, and because we were so young with such bright futures before us, it didn't snuff our own glow or make us feel insignificant. Once, at summer's end, I rode a Greyhound bus across the country by myself. Once, I thought repetition was avoidable; I said I'd live in all fifty states before I died; I left home and forgot to look back. Once, I went to one of the states and stayed. I made friends, found work, built a life. I got married, then pregnant. My belly grew hard and round like a globe; then my son came out and became my world.

10.

I have a friend I've been hiking with for close to twenty years. She's also a writer. Usually we meet on the weekends, in the foothills west of Denver. But sometimes we go on longer hikes, and once, deep in the Rocky Mountains, we came upon a goat with curled horns. It was tucked in a cave-like dip in a rock wall alongside the trail, eating whatever was growing there. We stopped a safe distance away, unsure what to do. We could either stay on the trail and walk right by the goat, or we could walk in a wide arc to give it space, but that would put us close to a cliff's edge, and what if the grazing goat happened to look up and see us and charge? We deliberated until a couple of runners, two young guys, appeared behind us. "There's a mountain goat eating right up ahead," we told them.

"Cool," they said. They barely slowed as they ran by the goat, and my friend and I looked at each other and laughed, then wondered: had they been too brash or we too timid?

We've hiked through everything. Windstorms, snow, rain. Pregnancies, fights with our husbands, drama with our kids, doubts about our writing. We always, in some way, come around to our writing. We talk through ideas, talk about the ways in which we are stuck. Sometimes, we despair. One of us decides there is no point in wrestling with sentences or shaping plots, and the other gives a pep talk. We laugh about how predictable we are. Like me, my friend prefers a circular route, and since we tend to pick a loop and walk it for years, we laugh about the fact that we're talking about the same thing we talked about a week ago or month ago in the very same spot. Once, I joked that the dirt we tread over again and again has probably absorbed our words, so when future walkers pass, without understanding why, they'll feel in their feet our woes and worries, our hopes, our elations.

When future walkers pass, without understanding why, they'll feel in their feet our woes and worries, our hopes, our elations.

Sometimes, when it doesn't work out for us to hike together and I'm walking one of our trails alone, our conversations seep up and I think, *It's good I stayed.*

II.

During their two-and-a-half-hour walk on the moon, Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin didn't see any water. The ten astronauts who walked on the moon after them, during various missions, didn't see any either. Because there wasn't any to see, but also, perhaps, because they didn't stick around long enough to truly get to know their landscape. They were under time constraints. And, well, oxygen constraints. They were making giant leaps but had to be quick about it. They noted the magnificent desolation, gathered samples, headed back to Earth.

But water was there. Is there. When water on the moon was finally confirmed in 2009, forty years after the first moon landing, Seth Borenstein, an Associated Press writer versed in the language of science, opened an article with these poetic and

somewhat eerie lines: *The moon isn't the dry dull place it seems. Traces of water lurk in the dirt unseen.*

Not visible, but there nonetheless.

On the moon, there is approximately one drink of water per baseball-field-sized patch of moon dirt. Which might raise the question: So what? One could still die of thirst on the moon.

But think of it this way: a drink waiting in a field; a mile hiding in a baseball; a story biding time in a body.

12.

Here's the thing about walking in circles, about looping, about routine: You see everything in different lights, different slants, different seasons. You see it all. You're there when one day, after a spring rain, there's a puddle where a parched lakebed once was. You notice before others that the snow in the mountains is melting and trickling down.

It hasn't fully returned yet, my lake. It hasn't reached the trees that line the side where the birds nest. But soon enough it will, and the birds will come back and then the coyotes. Another month, maybe, and the water will creep up around the trees so that the trunks are submerged. What's holding them up will disappear for a while. It will look as if the trees are floating, surreal, a feat of nature in a mostly ordinary suburb. And I will be the first to see it.

CLINT McCOWN

A LESSON FROM MY FATHER'S SUITCASE

In the way my father had of whistling light tunes, there was never any sense of groping, no pained search for answers beyond the usual. He never walked but strolled, trotted, bounded like a deer. He climbed steps two or three at a time. Sometimes he even danced, whirling my mother around the kitchen while she tried to cook or doing a comic cha-cha while he helped her clear the dinner plates. Life rested easy on his shoulders.

My father never cowered, not when he faced a criminal on the street, not when he faced the death of my mother, and not even toward the end when he faced the ghoul-gray doctor who would drill into his skull to take a sample of his brain. My father smiled. Sometimes with a sadness. But he always smiled.

Add to that an enduring calm, for he projected a reassuring sense that whatever might happen, he could handle it. In the course of his career, five US presidents came to rely on his unflappability, as well as on his other skills, for he was trained in just about everything. He was practiced in the martial arts, including types for which they don't give belts. The government classified him as an expert marksman, and he could handle any kind of firearm, from handguns to bazookas. During a special assignment onboard the USS *Canberra,* he even learned how to operate a RIM-2 Terrier missile launcher. He could fly a plane; build a radio; disarm a bomb; set a broken bone; and identify the year, make, and model of any car on the highway. He once saved the life of former president Dwight D. Eisenhower in a medical emergency—a fact I never learned until I found the letter of commendation among my father's papers after his death. He could even play the guitar and sing solos in the church choir.

He knew just about everybody. Among the Christmas cards we received in 1968 were one from Winnie and Arnold Palmer, saying Arnie had enjoyed playing golf with my father; one from Dolores and Bob Hope, saying they were glad my father had been able to join them for Thanksgiving dinner; and one from

King Olav V of Norway, thanking my father for his assistance in some unnamed matter of state.

He was as comfortable in a tuxedo as he was in jeans, and all his formal wear was tailored to hide the bulge of his shoulder holster, which usually held a Walther PPK, the gun he preferred over his bulkier Smith & Wesson snub-nosed .38, issued to him by the government. He carried the Walther just about everywhere except my Little League games.

He was a bestower of odd gifts he collected along the way. Thanks to him I have a piece of type from the Gutenberg press; an inscribed photo of Betty Grable; and a tie clasp, shaped like a PT boat, given to him by President Kennedy. He once arranged for me to play golf at the Augusta National the week before the 1971 Masters Tournament. He got me an unasked-for presidential appointment to West Point, which I turned down because I opposed the Vietnam War.

He was as fit as anyone I've ever known. A man of average size—five feet nine, 165 pounds—he could deadlift a 250-pound man and hustle him up a flight of stairs. Once, in my junior year of high school, when I was about to take off on a two-mile training run, he asked if he could join me for the workout. He didn't even bother changing out of his suit, so I figured he wouldn't last long. He kept to my pace for a while, chatting, until I mentioned that I could slow down if he got tired. I was on the cross-country team, after all, so I knew I had more stamina than a forty-two-year-old man. But he just chuckled and reminded me that he used to run for miles alongside limousines in presidential motorcades. Then he said he needed to push himself a little harder to get some good out of the run, and he shifted into a gear I didn't even know existed. I couldn't come close to keeping up. He beat me by at least four hundred yards—wearing black leather dress shoes.

For most of his career he was assigned to Presidential Protective Details, but for several years—from 1957 to 1965—he did fieldwork in the Deep South, mostly in Alabama. Much of that involved going undercover, often for weeks at a time, while he infiltrated some counterfeiting ring or tracked down gangs of government-check forgers.

He knew the Southern underworld the way other people knew their own neighborhoods, and that allowed him a certain latitude in the way he operated. Some of his early federal

police work was oddly informal by today's standards. He never put anyone in jail for Christmas or Easter Sunday, for example, but would take a man's word that he'd turn himself in after the holidays. Maybe cops-and-robbers was a more civilized game back then, the criminals of the 1950s a different animal from what we know today, the lawmen more humane. In any case, my father never had to track anyone down a second time.

He lived the kind of life I could never imagine for myself. I was the skinny, bookish kid with glasses. Like many sons, I craved my father's approval, longed to do something special enough to impress him. But where to begin? There wasn't a single category in which my light shone brighter—which isn't a complaint, just merely an observation. That gap, as I perceived it, led me to more than a few ill-considered leaps in my life. From the time I was old enough to comprehend what my father did for a living, I searched for ways to measure up. I joined every school club and went out for every school sport—even football, at which I lasted only four days.

Like many sons, I craved my father's approval, longed to do something special enough to impress him. But where to begin?

That pressure was my own concoction, though. He never pushed me to do anything. I guess he'd learned his parenting style from his own father, a quiet cowboy who broke horses for a living and who allowed his offspring to find their own paths in the world.

One of my most complicated and memorable episodes with my father came on a May morning in 1963, a Friday, when he offered to drive me to school. I was eleven years old, and normally I walked or rode my bike; I'd never even been allowed inside the cream-colored Chevy that was his government car. But that day he offered to drive me, and something in his tone told me it was more than a suggestion. I knew not to ask questions. Still, I was surprised when he drove past Edgewood Elementary and proceeded on through our pristine Homewood suburb, up past the statue of Vulcan on the top of Red Mountain, and down the other side into the city proper.

"Where are we going?" I finally asked.

"To my office," he said.

This, too, was unprecedented—my father's work was largely off-limits to me, even in conversation. But whatever was going on, I was okay with it. The fifth grade could do without me for one morning.

The city streets were unusually busy that day, with people loitering on every corner, lounging against storefronts, and sitting on curbs. Scattered groups sat in clusters on the sidewalks singing songs like it was a day at summer camp. This was my first look at the demonstrators that had been front-page news for the past few weeks, the ones who were trying to get the downtown stores to stop their practice of racial discrimination. *Discrimination* was one of the big words that had only recently found its way into my vocabulary, along with *integration* and *desegregation,* and phrases like *outside agitator* and *Jim Crow.*

The protest movement, as we called it, was the dominant topic of playground conversation, and every kid I knew was aware of what was going on. Our parents talked about it, too—Fridays at the cocktail parties, Saturdays at the Little League games, and Sundays at the laundromat. There were always stories about it on the nightly news. It was even a running topic of conversation between songs on WSGN, the Top-40 AM station I listened to in bed each night on my transistor radio. So I knew there had been boycotts and sit-ins and plenty of arrests, and until recently it had all been reasonably nonviolent, at least on the part of the protestors. For the past few weeks all the attention had been on Martin Luther King Jr. and Ralph Abernathy, two leaders of the movement who'd been arrested back in mid-April, when tensions were running high. But now they'd both been released from jail, and things had quieted down a little in Birmingham since then.

The police were out in full force, and I noticed that a couple of side streets were barricaded with sawhorses and squad cars. An officer stopped us at one intersection, and my father had to roll down his window and show his badge for us to get through. I glimpsed a number of school buses parked along some of the avenues.

There were two things I didn't understand about the crowds that morning. The first was that there were a lot of firemen on the street, which made no sense because nothing was on fire. The second was that most of the protestors were younger than I

would have expected. I saw a number of boys my age or a little older, and I began to wonder if today were some kind of school holiday I hadn't heard about.

We parked on Twenty-Fourth Street, and my father took an old brown leather suitcase from the trunk of the car.

"Look sharp," he said, slamming the trunk lid closed. "We don't want to get caught up in anything."

I glanced around to double-check for possibilities. I'd never been downtown on a weekday morning, much less during a civil rights demonstration, so I couldn't tell the usual from the odd. A number of police officers with dogs were milling among the pedestrians, so it seemed unlikely that there could be any trouble. Really, the crowds just looked like they were all waiting for a parade to start.

I fell in step behind my father on the crowded sidewalk, and we immediately passed an officer with a German shepherd on a short leather leash. Since I had a German shepherd at home, I felt comfortable extending the back of my hand toward the dog's snout, the preliminary step to patting his head, but the officer pulled the dog back out of my reach. My father, who had turned to make sure I was keeping up, gripped my shoulder and pulled me away.

"These dogs aren't pets," he said.

My father's office, like all the other federal offices, was located in the main post office downtown. The old, classically styled government building was massive, filling an entire city block. It looked like all those gray granite federal buildings in Washington, DC, with tall windows on each of the three floors and rows of white columns on every side. The building was home to the regional headquarters of the US Secret Service, but none of the other agents were in that day, which wasn't a surprise. I'd met my father's colleagues at family barbecues—Tex Downing, Forest Guthrie, and Harv Henderson. At that time there were only about two hundred special agents nationwide, most of them stationed in DC, and the four who manned the Birmingham office were responsible for the territory that stretched from Nashville to Mobile, Atlanta to New Orleans. They were all on the road a lot, so the office was just a base they touched from time to time, whenever they had to coordinate their operations or type up reports.

After some polite conversation with Mrs. Weir, the office secretary, my father unlocked a dark wooden door, and for the first time in my life I entered his office. There was nothing unusual about it, as far as I could tell. A pair of tall, wooden filing cabinets took up much of one side of the room. A silent ceiling fan revolved slowly twelve feet overhead, the flashes of its movement reflected in the heavily varnished wooden floor. A dark oaken desk, in front of the grime-covered window, held several neat stacks of brown file folders, and behind the desk was the same kind of wooden slat-backed chair my teacher sat in at school. Another chair like it was shoved back into one corner. There were no family mementos, no snapshots of me or my mother, but there were two framed photographs hanging on the government-green wall across from his desk. One was of the director of the Secret Service, James J. Rowley; the other, a photo of President John F. Kennedy. Both were inscribed to my father.

Also on the wall, between the window and an American flag hanging limply from a pole in another corner, I saw half a dozen words written in thick pencil.

"What are those?" I asked as he cleared a space on his desktop for the brown suitcase. He set it carefully on its side and then turned to see where I was pointing.

"Those are words I can't remember how to spell," he told me. "Some kind of mental block, I guess. They come up a lot in my reports." He nodded toward the list. "This way I don't have to look them up." He sat in his chair and pulled open the top drawer of his desk. As he sorted through the contents, I moved around the desk and leaned in closer to see which words had my father stumped.

gauge
assailant
calibre
defense
coercion
cemetery

Looking at the selection, I could understand his problem because I, too, had words I could never keep straight, no matter

how many times I looked them up. *Gauge* would have been on my list, too, and maybe a couple of the others. I felt a new connection with my father.

But this list gave me other things to think about, too. In school my favorite assignment was to write stories using the week's spelling words, and I couldn't help imagining the type of story that would accommodate my father's list. *Coercion, gauge, calibre, defense,* and *assailant* all carried unsettling implications. And what kind of stories did my father routinely have to write that included a word like *cemetery?*

Of course I wasn't supposed to ask. I'd long ago learned what was expected of me in regard to my father's job. He had the highest level of top secret government clearance, but that didn't extend to family members. When it came to my father's work, I was as much an outsider as anybody.

Except today.

A central post office in a big city can be a legal no-man's-land. It's a federal building that can house multiple law-enforcement agencies, but it's also where shady characters with no fixed address keep post office boxes from which to run their various scams. Crooks and lawmen pass each other daily in its main hallway. As I thought about that, I began to worry that some counterfeiter from one of my father's undercover operations might spot him wearing a suit and tie in the post office and be suspicious enough to follow him to his office door. I'd seen enough TV shows to know what could happen if the wrong people found out he was a federal agent.

Somehow being in my father's office changed the ground rules for asking him about his work. At home we talked about whatever made up our personal lives, but here in his office I felt I could ask him about things more official than golf or baseball or what color we were going to paint the house.

"What would happen if you got recognized?" I asked him.

He put a stack of file folders into the bottom drawer of his desk and then looked at me. "Nothing," he said.

"By criminals, I mean."

"I know what you mean," he said. "But everything would be fine."

"How do you know?"

He turned away and shoved the drawer closed. "You're mighty

curious today," he said, which I knew meant I should stop asking questions. But this was something I needed to know. Every night he was gone, I prayed he wouldn't get killed.

"You can tell me stuff," I ventured. "We're the same rank now."

That made him laugh. When I was five years old, he gave me a miniature air force uniform for Christmas, and the first time I put it on, he assigned me the rank of buck private. Then every so often, if I'd followed orders, done my chores, and brought home good report cards, he promoted me, in small increments, up through the ranks of the enlisted men. He even awarded me his war medals when I'd done something especially good. So far I'd earned a Bronze Star with several of his oak leaf clusters to go with it. Now I was a highly decorated staff sergeant, same as he had been in World War II.

"Okay," he said. "I know everything would be fine because it's happened before."

"How?"

He hesitated, and I could see he was weighing the pros and cons of talking to me about this. Finally he nodded.

"I was in with a bunch of counterfeiters," he said, "and one day a new fellow showed up. Only he wasn't new to me. I'd arrested him once already a couple of years earlier."

"What happened?"

"He told the gang who I was."

My father was a jovial, outgoing fellow, but when it came to his job, he was a reluctant storyteller. Question-and-answer was the form he was most used to. It was the form he practiced on the witness stand.

"Did they try to kill you?"

My father frowned and shook his head. "No, nothing like that. I just told them I didn't work for the Secret Service anymore—said I thought I could make more money as a counterfeiter."

"And they believed you?"

"Some people think everything's about the money," he said.

"Did they ever find out?"

He smiled. "They figured it out at the arrest."

That didn't entirely reassure me. Just because he'd been able to talk his way out of one tight spot didn't mean he could do it every time. I tried a broader approach.

"Has anybody ever tried to kill you?"

My father sighed. "Why would you want to know a thing like that?"

"I just do," I said.

He leaned back in his chair. "Okay, then, I'll give you the best answer I can." He was silent for a moment, as if the notion that someone might have tried to kill him required a lot of thought. Then he shook his head. "I don't guess I know."

"How can you not know?" I asked.

"Because you're asking me about another person's intentions, and those aren't always clear. I've had altercations, I can say that much."

"With guns?"

"Among other things. A fellow in a truck tried to run me down in a field once. But I don't know that anybody ever wanted to kill me. They were usually just trying to get away."

"What did you do about the guy in the truck?"

"I shot out his windshield. He gave up in a hurry after that." He laughed. "Lucky for me—I think I was aiming at his tires."

"Did you ever kill anybody?"

"Outside the war, no, of course not."

"How come?"

He shrugged, as if the answer were obvious. "Because that would mean I lost control of the situation."

This was more than I'd ever heard from my father. As I tried to think what else I could ask, he fished a small key from his desk drawer and unlocked the leather suitcase. Then he unsnapped the brass latches, swiveled the suitcase away from him, and unfolded it across the desktop. It was filled with bound stacks of ten-dollar bills.

"Is that from the case where you got recognized?" I asked.

"No, that was years ago," he answered. "This is from a case down in Mobile. I didn't want to keep it at the house over the weekend."

That explained why he'd needed to come to the office this morning. But I still didn't know why he'd brought me along.

"Is it real money or counterfeit?" I asked.

"You tell me," he said and scooted his chair back from the desk to make room for my inspection. "But don't touch anything."

Tens and twenties, I knew, were the most popular denomina-

tions for counterfeiting—small enough to be circulated without drawing attention but large enough to make effective use of the paper supply. My father had taught me that getting the right paper was the hardest part of the process.

The engraving looked good, and the ink wasn't smudged, which I knew often happened with counterfeit bills. The coloring seemed right, too. I moved my face close to one bundle of ten-dollar bills and squinted at the open background space around the portrait of Alexander Hamilton. The telltale red and blue threads were missing. That gave me my answer, but to be sure I checked the serial number on the top bill and compared it to one from another bundle. The numbers were the same.

"Fake," I said.

This was more exciting to me than if the money had been real.

"How much is here?" I asked, but before my father could answer we were interrupted by the crackling blare of a bullhorn on the street outside. People were being told to disperse, to go home immediately, or risk being put under arrest.

"I need to inventory these bills. While I do that," he said, nodding toward the window, "I want you to keep an eye on things out there."

"What am I supposed to look for?" I asked.

"Whatever happens," he said.

I moved to the window and looked out through the thick film of city grime. What did I see exactly? It would be easy enough to claim I witnessed a scene of escalating chaos because that's what everyone now knows it to have been. But the truth is I didn't see very much. For one thing, Birmingham was a bad city for downtown windows on government buildings—pollution laws were unheard of in those days, and the steel mills kept the soot levels high. I wish I could say I saw one of those iconic images that galvanized the country behind the civil rights movement. Maybe I did see an arc of water swing through the morning sky somewhere farther down the block. But mostly I just saw crowds of people being shoved around and herded into school buses and paddy wagons and squad cars. The rest of it I saw on the television news shows that night, along with everybody else.

Three thousand protestors were arrested that Friday, most of them students, for this was the so-called Children's Crusade,

a new front mounted by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. The SCLC had, for that day, decided to enlist its children—some of them as young as six—in the fight for equality, a controversial move even within the African American community itself, and one that Malcolm X decried as cowardly.

But the tactic worked because it coincided with Commissioner of Public Safety Eugene "Bull" Connor's decision to escalate the violence. People all over the world were shocked to see images of children being clubbed by officers, attacked by police dogs, and battered with high-pressure fire hoses. The viciousness, the ugliness, the purely blind hatred shown by those in authority were flushed fully into the open, and one week after the debacle, Bull Connor was ordered by a state court to vacate his office. The civil rights movement had secured the moral high ground once and for all, even among a significant number of Southern whites. The Children's Crusade was the beginning of the end for the segregated South, and the bloody scenes of police brutality on that May 3rd in Birmingham led directly to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

My father, because of his position, had known what the city was in for that day, and though he never bothered to explain himself, I think that's why he broke so many precedents and took me with him downtown. His job often put him in a position to watch history unfold, and this was one rare instance in which he could let me tag along. That disgraceful day in Alabama was a watershed moment for many who were there.

But not for me, not at first. I was still cocooned in ignorance. I didn't know the struggle or understand the stakes. All my experiences that day were bright ones, with no hint of bigotry or violence, no clue that a pivotal clash between good and evil was being played out all around me. To me, all the bad guys in the world were confined to the realm of cops-and-robbers, and the bad guys were never the cops. To imagine that the entire social system I'd been born into was fundamentally flawed was simply beyond my comprehension.

To imagine that the entire social system I'd been born into was fundamentally flawed was simply beyond my comprehension.

Still, that day was my turning point. At the calm center of a maelstrom, my father had asked me to look closely at a suitcase full of money and distinguish between the counterfeit and the real. That exercise carried a simple but all-important lesson, and over the coming weeks I came to understand that a badge didn't always mean justice, and a well-tailored suit was no proof of superiority. Bad guys could wear all manner of disguises and slip in anywhere, even behind official doors. Whatever blue might color the sky, there was always a chance that something false, something counterfeit might be lurking in the block ahead, just around the corner, out of sight.

Look sharp, my father had told me.

LOIS RUSKAI MELINA

THE GRAMMAR OF UNTOLD STORIES

My grandmother spoke little English. Her teeth were yellow and chipped. She smelled like a book that hadn't been opened in a long time. When she hugged me, she pulled me into her soft body forever, repeating my name in a way I didn't recognize. My face pressed into her bosom, I stiffened at the mustiness of her dark dress. When she released me, I could breathe again. I'd done my duty.

When I fell in love with my husband, I fell in love with his grandmother and with their love, as thick and rich as the tomato sauce she served at every family gathering. As a boy, my husband spent Saturdays with her, and together they tore advertising circulars and old magazines into bits, tossed the colorful paper fragments into the air like confetti, and then vacuumed them up. I sucked his stories into my narrative, using his family like caulk to fill in the empty spaces where the wind whistled through mine. When his grandmother, as short and round as my own, pulled me into her softness, I didn't want to leave.

It was my husband's idea. We were going to visit Budapest for a vacation. "As long as we're there, we could visit your grandmother's village," he said. "Maybe do a little research. You might find a family member who still lives there."

With no one alive who could tell me, I had to do a little research to even learn the name of the village where my grandmother was born. I found it online, on her 1925 petition for US citizenship. The copy I printed reproduced the smudges and irregularities of the microfiche document along with names and dates and places. My grandmother's history was strewn on the page like agates on the beach—precious stones unearthed by rough sea, waiting to be gathered. Her village, just a short ride from Budapest by train.

My father, her youngest, was born in the United States. Though bilingual, he didn't teach me any Hungarian, except "fing a

fürdőkádban," a phrase that he said meant "a fart in the bathtub," meaning *unwelcome, out of place, disturbing the surface smoothness*. Maybe even *immigrant*. Our family name, Ruskai, was less obviously Hungarian than Kovács, Tóth, or my grandmother's name, Nagy. People often asked me, "What are you?" My father told me it was none of their business. I was to answer: *American*. He himself would make what he thought was a joke. "Hawaiian," he'd say, at a time when that, too, meant *not American*. When the person inquiring stared back at him, trying to find a Pacific Islander in my father's angular features and olive skin, my father would deliver the punchline: "You know, Ruskai. Like Molokai." Then he'd chuckle. Even as a child, I knew it wasn't funny. I didn't understand until much later that he was deflecting his own embarrassment onto the person who seemed to question whether my father and his family belonged here. I think now of the irony in his choosing the name of an island where lepers were sent.

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Ruskai. We pronounced it *Russ ki,* rhyming with *eye*. But in Hungarian, the *s* is pronounced *sz,* and *kai* is pronounced *kar ee*. We should have said *Rusz karee*.

I called her Gramma Ruskai. She came to live with us when I was nine years old. By then, she no longer knew my name. She was unable to connect the fractured remnants of people and places that dusted her memory. She believed she was in Hungary and that the children who had died were still alive. When she called to them and they didn't answer, she got angry. I awoke one night to see her standing in the doorway of my bedroom, her thin cotton nightgown taut over her protruding abdomen. For a moment I mistook her silhouette for that of my pregnant mother. Then my grandmother spoke something I didn't understand, and I wondered how long she had been watching me. Some days my grandmother ran off, surprisingly quick for someone almost eighty. My mother would have to call my father to find her and

coax her home in Hungarian, although nothing about where my grandmother lived said *home* to her.

Before she came to live with us, my grandmother lived in a house my grandfather built himself on the street behind the school where I went to kindergarten. I never went to her house after school. I never spent Saturdays cutting up pieces of colored paper. I don't remember going to her house for holidays or Sunday dinners—I had other grandparents for that. But in the few years after my grandfather died and before dementia left my grandmother living in her long-term memories, I went with my father when he tilled the soil and sprinkled seeds for her garden, when the kitchen sink leaked, and once when her basement flooded and left sediment on the cellar walls. I went because I liked being with my father without my sisters around. I don't remember having a conversation with my grandmother, and I didn't understand anything she and my father said to each other.

My knowledge of Hungary was scattered. I knew a little about Saint Elizabeth, Queen of Hungary, from my book of Catholic saints, although the child's version of her story was abridged, missing details I learned about later—her abuse by her spiritual advisor, to whom she vowed obedience after the death of her husband. I knew bits about the 1956 revolution during the Cold War, but not the particulars of Soviet oppression. To prepare for the trip to Hungary that my husband and I were taking, I bought a *Lonely Planet* guidebook, a thick book of Hungarian history starting with migrations around 400 BC, and two Hungarian novels regarded worthy enough to be translated into English.

My grandmother was born Erszébet Nagy. She died Elizabeth Ruskai. As a child, I fantasized that I was descended from a queen who was also a saint. Even then, I used my imagination to fill in the empty spaces where there should have been stories.

I Googled my grandmother's birth name together with the village name—Hernádnémeti. I don't know what I thought I'd find. I'd already looked at the records available online and found only the passenger manifest for the ship she'd arrived on at Ellis Island. I did find a death notice for a woman in

Wisconsin who had died just a month before. The obituary told how she had fled Hernádnémeti after the 1956 revolution. She was nine months pregnant. She made it to Ireland, then went into labor shortly after her plane took off from Dublin. The pilot aborted the trip, turned the plane around. Her son was born in the airport. A daring and courageous escape from Communist reprisals. I realized I knew more about this family's immigration story from a single newspaper clipping than I did my own. I found the son on Facebook. "Ask him for his recipe for liver dumpling soup," my husband said. The dish was a favorite of my father's, and my mother learned to make it the way my grandmother did. "If it's the same as yours," my husband said, "you'll know you're related."

Nagy, my grandmother's family name, is as common in Hungary as Jones or Smith is in the United States. It is pronounced *Noodg*.

My father's name was Michael. In Hungarian, Mihály. Pronounced *Me high*.

My grandmother died of a heart attack in the locked ward of a nursing home, where my father had placed her after my mother said she couldn't take care of both a senile old woman and a newborn. I haven't visited my grandmother's grave since the day she was buried, on my eleventh birthday. Her stories are deposited there, too, decomposing with her. I never asked my father about her, where she was born, what she was like. I don't know if he was embarrassed by her teeth or her difficulty speaking English. I don't know if he brought friends home after school. He died when I was nineteen and newly in love, when I believed the only stories that mattered were the ones my beloved and I would write.

Years after my father died, I was at a conference where one of the speakers was named Mihály. When he was introduced, I heard my grandmother calling my father. I found myself standing in a queue at the speaker's table after the session, like a bead in a rosary. He was answering questions as he packed his briefcase. When it was my turn, I said, "My father's name was Mihály. I haven't heard that name in a long time." Then I felt my face redden, and I considered that I was being unprofessional, exposing a longing.

By the time my husband and I boarded our flight to Budapest, I'd read only as far as the Crusades in the history book. I was more interested in the guidebook and the novels.

The *Lonely Planet* said Budapest's Keleti *pályaudvar,* which translates to "eastern train station," was the most modern and artistic railway station in Europe when it was built in the early 1880s, coinciding with the time my grandmother was born. The station's style is a mix of influences that reflect the country's conquests by Turks and Europeans. The platform smelled like pastry and diesel and warm bodies. I stepped outside. It was early morning and the light was good. I pulled my camera out of my backpack and looked through the viewfinder at the sun angled on windows with leaded panes. The need to negotiate lenses and f-stops felt overwhelming after a long flight and the effort to communicate about lost luggage. I reminded myself of lost opportunities. *Take the picture,* I told myself. But I didn't know how to take a photo that was not a tourist snapshot, a photo that said how I felt standing on the platform listening to people arriving and leaving, hearing words that meant nothing but were wrapped in the sounds and inflections of my father talking with my grandmother, sounds that I hadn't heard in more than fifty years but made me feel held. I put the camera away and went back inside, took a paper slip with a number, and waited for that number to appear above one of the ticket windows. When it was my turn I bought two tickets to Miskolc, the closest stop to my grandmother's village. "Köszönöm." Thank you. The language guide says it's pronounced *kur-sur-nurm*.

"Nem beszélek magyarul."

I pronounced it like this: "I don't speak Hungarian."

You either speak Hungarian or you don't. It is an obscure and difficult language. You can't fake your way through lunch with your grandmother or an encounter with a Budapest ticket agent the way you can get by in Mexico with a couple of years of high school Spanish. Despite the DNA in my cells, my mouth did not know how to shape the syllables. To my husband, not only the words but also the rhythm of them, one after the other, sounded alien. For me, the cadence of the language was specific to one time and place, to my grandmother talking to my father. I once heard

Rilke read in the original German. I wasn't familiar enough with his work to know the poem. I heard the meaning not in the individual words and lines, but in the sounds that held feeling, the way a very young child might know emotion in a grandparent's murmurs before she knows that sounds form words.

Hungary is a volcanic land with thermal baths flowing with healing water, and the cave baths near Miskolc are among the most visited outside Budapest. My husband and I walked to them from our bed-and-breakfast. Plump women in two-piece bathing suits and men with lean, sharp features like my father's and grandmother's stood under water streaming from the mouths of cement lions or walked on mosaic tiles through the rocky passages. I expected the smell of sulfur, like eggs boiled too long, but the water smelled clean. Some pools were shallow, the water tepid. We negotiated the labyrinth until we entered the deepest reaches of the cave—a darkened room where the water was warmest and no one spoke. I closed my eyes and floated. I imagined this is what it felt like in the womb.

The drive from the cave baths to Hernádnémeti took only twenty minutes. The village wasn't mentioned in the guidebook, although the nearby Tokaj wine region was. We passed planted fields with hawks circling above. A few turns off the main road and we were there. Children and men and even older women with soft bodies rode one-speed bicycles on the narrow streets. The houses were cream colored and mostly one story with stucco walls and red-clay roofs. White storks nested in chimneys. I looked at them through my binoculars, twisting the lens to bring the birds into focus. I could see how, with the birds nesting like that, the myth was born that storks bring babies, dropping them down the chimney like a gift from Saint Nicholas, hiding the truth about sex.

This is the story of how Hungary came to be: Emese, a princess, was married to King Ügyek. She could not conceive. She was impregnated by a turul, and the dream she had of a mighty river flowing from her body foretold a descendant who would be the founder of Hungary.

This is the story I heard growing up: My grandmother wanted to become a nun. When she was fifteen, her family forced her to

marry an older man from a nearby village who was considered a "good catch." He came to America, where he worked as a gardener until he made enough money to send for her and their three children. I think my mother told me that story.

It was early in the day, but already too hot for us to be wandering among the uneven rows of granite and limestone in Hernádnémeti's cemetery. Here and there, a tree provided a little shade. I was still wearing the T-shirt I'd worn on the plane, now dampening with sweat. Some graves had simple markers, some had obelisks, angels, carved wreaths. *Kovács, Takács, Szabó, Kiss*. There were tombs for entire families. Because my grandfather was from another village, I knew none would be marked *Ruskai.* There were too many engraved with *Nagy* to know if I should stop and pay my respects to this one or that one. Near the back of the cemetery, half obscured by weeds, were discarded tombstones, stacked against rocks like LPs in a vintage record store. Grave markers removed because no one paid the annual fees. Ancestors unhonored.

The first Hungarian novel I read took place in Italy with characters on their honeymoon. But in Magda Szabó's novel *The Door,* I met Emerence, a woman whose past is a mystery, who prefers being misunderstood to revealing her story. She works as a maid and takes care of the people on her street, her cats, her employer's dog, and refugees from the violence of the secret police of the Nazi and, later, the Soviet occupiers. All she wants is to save enough money to build a tomb into which she can move the bones of relatives who have passed and where she can be buried.

Bryan Cartledge begins his history of Hungary, *The Will to Survive,* like this: "Nations need myths. Hungary, a country that became conscious of nationhood rather late in its history, has its fair share. Hungarian myths are more concerned with origins than with gods or heroes."

Even today, when you can swab the inside of your cheek and send it to *National Geographic* to get a map of your heritage, uncertainty surrounds the answer to the question of how Hungarians, with a language incomprehensible to their neighbors, came to be a cultural island in the center of Europe. Cartledge

says the most likely explanation is that they migrated from western Siberia as part of a group of Finno-Ugrians, which splintered into smaller groups, one of which became the linguistic offshoot known as Magyars. Their identity is entwined with a language unique to them. Their language is how they know who they are. It is how they know that someone is a member of their tribe.

Magyar. It's pronounced like this: *Mudg yar.* The language is softer than it looks on paper.

My grandmother's petition for citizenship, the sworn statement of her birth, her marriage, her children, and her immigration, had information new to me. I pulled the facts into this account: She was seventeen and my grandfather twenty-four when they married on February 10, 1899. My grandfather left for America a year later. One year and one month after he arrived in America, my grandmother gave birth to her first child, a son. She bore another son two years later, and a third two years after that. When the youngest was two, she and her three sons boarded the *Slavonia,* which arrived at Ellis Island on July 11, 1907. The petition does not list the daughter who I know was born in America, the one who died when she was nine years old. It does list my father's birth, in 1919, a year after the daughter died. My father, the replacement child, the fourth son, but the one who carried his father's name, Mihály.

My father ran away from home when he was fourteen. He went to a seminary to become a priest. My grandmother went after him, brought him back. That part of the story always surprised me, since I'd been told my grandmother herself wanted a religious life. Years later, my father and my mother met when they both joined the Third Order of Saint Francis, the lay branch of the Franciscans, whose patron saint is Queen Elizabeth of Hungary. My parents were both devout Catholics. My grandmother threatened not to come to their wedding. She told my maternal grandparents that their daughter would be unfaithful.

The Catholic Church where my grandparents were married was easy to find; its steeple rose above the one-story houses in Hernádnémeti. I could hear the priest talking in the rectory when I knocked at the door, but he didn't answer. The curtains on the windows were closed. I wanted to find my grandpar-

ents' marriage record, to hold in my hands the original paper with my grandmother's signature and my grandfather's mark. Although I knew marriage records are kept in civic offices, not the church, I thought a priest might speak English.

My genealogy search had not led me to any family members. The man on Facebook, whose mother's name matched my grandmother's, called me "cousin" when he accepted my friend request, but I didn't have enough information for us to know if we really were. He only knew one person in the village who spoke English, and she was out of the country.

My husband and I drove the narrow village roads searching for anything that looked like civic offices. We couldn't read the signs. We stopped at what looked like public buildings, first a school and then at what we discovered was a senior center, and asked if anyone spoke English. "Szia." *See ah.* It means *hi, hello, bye, ciao*. I felt the embarrassment of traveling without speaking the language, of expecting that even in a village of three thousand there would be someone who spoke my language. We found someone at the senior center. She was in her twenties and wore a nearly sheer dress with a gold chain belt. She looked like a Greek goddess. When we told her what we were looking for, she tried to give us directions in broken English, then gave up, opened the back door of our rental car, got in, and told us she would take us there. We'd driven past the building, but the sign outside made me think it was a hospital, and we hadn't gone in.

Inside, we met Zoltán, a man about my age, a little taller and his hair a little more gray. I explained what I'd come for—the marriage certificate. But even in English, I didn't say what I wanted: stories, connection, family. Our interpreter tried her best, but she could convey only fragments of sentences, of meaning. Her basic English classes had not covered the vocabulary of genealogy, the grammar of untold stories. Finally, I opened my travel notebook to the family tree I had compiled. Not much, really: just my grandparents' parents and siblings. Zoltán smiled and nodded as he said, in English, "Family tree." He took the notebook and set it on his desk, put his glasses on, and leaned over to study the information on the single page. I saw him nod again. Then he pulled a pencil from the pocket of his light green, short-sleeved shirt, and next to the name of my grandmother's mother, scribbled something in the margin as he

spoke. Our interpreter repeated what he'd said: "She was born in Slovakia." She smiled with the satisfaction of a schoolgirl who knows she's given the right answer.

"Meddig leszel itt?" *How long will you be here?*

Two days.

"Jöjjön vissza két nap múlva." *Come back in two days.*

"Én némi kutatást fogok végezni." *I will do some research.*

He photocopied the family tree.

My guidebook said that in addition to the thermal baths, castles are a must-see, so while we waited for Zoltán to research my family, we visited castles. From Hernádnémeti we drove to Boldogkö Castle, just thirty minutes from the border of Slovakia, suddenly interesting to me as the birthplace of my great-grandmother. I learned later that at the time of her birth, there was no Slovakia; it was all part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Hungary's history, detailed by Cartledge, is a series of successful invasions and unsuccessful revolutions—a country too important to ignore, but too small to be powerful. A country that was appealing enough to be divided as a spoil of war, but struggled to be independent—its borders shifting with every turn of power, people falling asleep one night in Hungary and waking up the next morning in the same bed but a different country. First the Mongols came, then the Turks, then the Habsburgs, and later the Nazis and the Soviets. The castles built on volcanic knolls and other rises were not the stuff of queens and fairy tales, but fortresses for protection, with watchtowers and torture chambers. We climbed the ramparts, peered through the narrow openings used to spot the approach of marauding armies while they were still far enough away to give the villagers time to gather behind the protective stone walls.

Back at our bed-and-breakfast, I read the history like a high school student, flipping back and forth, gathering bits that allowed me only glimpses of the story. I wondered what having a history infused with fear and surrender does to people. What it does to families. What it shatters.

I never asked my grandmother what it was like for her to leave her village and family at the age of twenty-five and get on an ocean liner with three children: József, six; Lajos, four; and János, two. Were they seasick? Was she afraid? What was it

like to stand in line at Ellis Island surrounded by the babel of others seeking acceptance? What did she bring with her? What did she leave behind? I never asked her what it was like to be an immigrant in Cleveland. What it was like to lose a nine-year-old daughter. What it was like to feel her nine-year-old granddaughter tense in her arms when she held her. I wonder, if I'd asked, whether my grandmother would have had the words to tell me.

The three boys who immigrated with my grandmother grew up, left home, and changed their last names. Two of them died young. I barely knew my cousins, who were much older. I assumed my uncles had just Americanized their names, as many immigrants did. But my father, even though he valued assimilation, kept his father's name. I wonder now if my uncles were motivated by something other than assimilation. I wonder now what their origin story was and what they were told it was. A stork in a chimney. Impregnation by a mythical falcon.

I imagined possibilities because that's what you do when you don't know a story. I imagined my grandfather returning to Hungary every two years to father children, and then I discarded that story because I believe if he could afford to travel, he would have sent for his wife. And all the babies were born in March, which would have meant that my grandfather, a gardener who tended gated estates in a suburb of Cleveland, would have taken time off in June.

I imagined possibilities that you don't talk about with your children. I wondered if my grandmother worked as a maid while she waited for her husband to send for her, maybe for a wealthy family in which the wife went to Lake Balaton every June, leaving my grandmother alone with the man of the house. Was it love? Was it what she did to keep her job?

I shift the fragments in my mind. They settle into an image of her father. But the information spins loose. There is nothing to hold the fragments and they fall apart, swirl without finding a home.

I was eager to see Zoltán again, to see what he might have found, even though I told myself two days wasn't a lot of time, not to have any expectations. I prepared by asking questions of an internet translation program and writing the answers in my

notebook so that I could point to them and hope Zoltán would write answers that I could translate into English.

He motioned for me to sit in front of his computer. He leaned over me, looking at the screen and controlling the mouse while he loaded a genealogy program. There were thousands of names. Thousands. All with connections to this village. This was not two days of research; I'd found the one man in Hernádnémeti whose interest was in documenting the links from one generation to the next. He clicked and a photo came into view. He clicked back and then on another name, another photo, showing me something, then someone, one image dissolving into another, all too quickly for me to follow. My thoughts were spinning.

It was the sound of a longing being released after having been held tight for a long time. It sounded like the first breath a new baby takes.

I heard the bells in a church tower ring the hour. Zoltán made a selection, clicked "print," then left his office and returned with pages still warm from the printer. There was my grandmother's name. Her sisters and brother, who died as an infant. Her parents. Her sisters' children and their children's children. My relatives. Six generations—from my great-grandparents to the newest members of the clan, the same ages as my own grandchildren.

I didn't have words for what I wanted to say, so I pointed to the Hungarian words I had copied from the internet translation: "Honnan tudtad, hogy hol született a dédnagymanám?" *How did you know where my great-grandmother was born?* Zoltán smiled. He pointed to himself, then to my great-grandmother's brother on the family tree. "My," he said.

I gasped. Not surprise, but the wordless breath that escapes when the muscles around the heart let go. It was the sound of a longing being released after having been held tight for a long time. It sounded like the first breath a new baby takes.

I gave him what I had to offer in return: data—the names and birthdays of my three sisters and me, the names and birthdays of my two children, both adopted from Korea, whose untold stories of identity and immigration would not be found on these pages.

He gave me an email address for his son, who, he said, speaks English. Then my husband took a picture, and Zoltán kissed me on both cheeks, by then wet with tears.

"Viszontlátásra." *Goodbye.*

On the train back to Budapest, I studied the material Zoltán gave me, shuffling the names and dates dispersed across the pages until they made stories. Aside from my grandmother, no one else in my family left Hungary. Most, even in the fifth and sixth generations, listed Hernádnémeti as their place of birth, place of death, the place where their children were born. I may have passed some of them as they pedaled bicycles along the road or sat in wheelchairs in the senior center. One of them might have been our interpreter, who told us she longed to visit America. One of them might be paying cemetery fees every year to keep grave markers on our relatives.

I thought about how my grandmother's five children were listed, but not her grandchildren. Before my visit, my sisters and I were as unknown to my relatives who remained in Hungary as they were to us.

The history book says that much of the Hungarian diaspora was due to oppression or reprisals after failed rebellions. Some who left were wealthy. Some educated. Some were skilled workers. Some were Jews. My grandparents' departure placed them in the Great Economic Immigration in the decades leading up to World War I. Hundreds of thousands of Hungarians were displaced by industrialization, overpopulation, and unemployment. If things were so bad that my grandfather left for America, how did my grandmother survive during the nearly seven years that she remained in Hernádnémeti? The likely explanation is that she continued to live with her parents.

The family tree Zoltán gave me listed my great-grandmother's death as October 19, 1906. She would have been forty-eight. A few months later, my grandmother boarded the *Slavonia*, bound for America. Had my great-grandmother been ill? Did my grandmother take care of her? Was her mother the reason she stayed? Was her father the reason she left? Did my grandmother awaken in the middle of the night and see her father's silhouette in the doorway and have reason to be afraid?

What was taking shape was an image of a woman with un-

known struggles and untold stories. I wonder if anyone knew her. I wonder what she would think about my asking these questions, wanting to know her truth. Would she, like the fictional Emerence, prefer misunderstanding to exposure? I wonder what it costs to live a life without choices, without language, without the intimacy that comes when you know another's suffering. How it breaks you. How you survive. I thought about how I wanted to pull away when she held me, and I wonder if I reminded her of her only daughter. I remembered how my grandmother murmured my name—Losi, Losi, Losi—and how I judged her for mispronouncing it. Now, in my memory, I hear the softness.

I continued to turn over the pages of the genealogy, piecing together patterns, counting the months between a wedding and the firstborn like a village biddy. Two years after my grandmother left for America, her older sister Magdolna married for the first time. She was thirty years old, and I imagined her labeled an "old maid," living at home with her widowed father. The following March, seven months after the wedding, Magdolna bore a son. The man she married was the widower of her younger sister, who had died only five months before, after giving birth to their second child. I made up one story: *The grieving widower has an affair with his wife's older sister in the months immediately following his wife's death.* I made up another: *The older sister is pregnant, and the widower needs a mother for his two young children.*

I focused again on my grandmother's father: a man with two Catholic daughters whose pregnancies at the beginning of the twentieth century are clouded. I looked at the genealogy again. My great-grandparents married in January 1879, three months after Magdolna was born.

I wondered what the relatives in Hernádnémeti knew—if anyone paid to keep my great-grandfather's headstone erect.

Three months after I left Hungary, I saw images in the news of Keleti pályaudvar packed with Syrian refugees. Families dispersing across Europe. They traveled through Turkey, Greece, Macedonia, and Serbia to Budapest, some on foot, some in trucks, some by rail, some trying to reconnect to those who left earlier. Most wanted to get on a train to Vienna and from there

to Germany. All of them looked tired: carrying all their possessions, queuing up to buy a ticket, struggling to be understood. I thought about how I found my travel to Budapest so fatiguing, my lost luggage such an inconvenience. I read that Hungary resisted these refugees and justified closing their borders with the memory of massacres by Muslim invaders. I remembered the minaret we saw near the ruins of a castle in Eger.

Those who didn't leave Hungary know the story of invaders and oppression—Nazis who sent Jews to concentration camps and sent the Hungarians who weren't Jews to be massacred on the eastern front. I remembered how Zoltán's genealogy had limited information about my grandmother's American descendants. Those left behind don't know the stories of those who fled, who lined up at Ellis Island, hoping to bring their education and skills to a new country, willing to leave families and language and stories behind.

Beseiged by neighbors for most of its history, with Magyars a minority in their own country, Hungary was late to unify around its culture and always fearful of being overwhelmed by the prevalence and power of Germans and Slavs and Muslims, Cartledge explained. They made their difficult language the symbol of nationality, the core of their identity. The teaching of Hungarian—Magyar—was not required in all primary schools until 1879. And by 1898, all towns and villages had to "Magyarise" their names. Tombstones could be inscribed only in Magyar. By the time my grandmother left for America, teachers used only Magyar for instruction. The language gave them pride and a sense of connection that had been missing. Language linked my grandmother to the family she left behind but kept us from connecting.

Language linked my grandmother to the family she left behind but kept us from connecting.

I look sometimes at the photo my husband took of Zoltán and me, cousins born two years apart, a world apart, linguistically separated. There are facial similarities. But it is his body. His av-

erage height. His barrel chest. The way he wears the belt of his trousers, a narrow belt worn a little too high. So like my father.

In the photo I am smiling—not the smile of tourist snapshots, but a smile of mouth and cheeks and eyes.

But for the shame of immigration, the shame of sex—maybe incest, maybe rape—the shame of my grandmother speaking English poorly, the shame that kept my father from teaching me to speak Magyar, I might have stories that hold their shape. I might have known my grandmother more deeply when she was alive and have more of her to hold on to now that she is gone. I have only fragments. Not even puzzle pieces that could fit together if I turned them until I found the connections. Just scraps, like the bits of colored paper that tumble about in the mirrored end of a kaleidoscope when it's turned. But they are unstable. The bits shift again as soon as the tube is moved, the angled mirrors suggesting a new image. The fragments are not connected. There is no grammar to hold them in place.

7. TEMPTED BY NOTHING

From *Concerto al-Quds*
Translated from the Arabic by Khaled Mattawa

A Song

I do not believe the mind of the crowd
I believe in light—
radiating, penetrating, pointing a direction.

Dear Tree of Knowledge,
how can I brother the forests of al-Quds to me?
And who is this One who is never present
except at funerals or on a throne?

Not yet.
The disaster has not arrived.
The flood has yet to burst.
The Mediterranean is readying itself. The oceans stamp and shudder.
Who will gift this marble head to the king of trades?
Who will say to Hannibal:
"Rome defeated you, but you are the victor.
And from your skull another dawn rises now."

My body is not ether.
My body is dust and bone.
A physics of arteries and veins.
I live in a hut of smoke, and I wear clouds for clothes.
Endless and without ever succeeding, I try to heal the sky.

What a criminal I must be, living innocently like rain.
My only sin is that I compete with light.

Shut yourself up before me, dear Sky.
You will never see me at your door again.

And you, dear Planets, I will not ask you again to be
a ladder for my steps.
Inside me countless planets abide.

And now, Lover, strike up your song!

Is your throat your lover? Is your lover your throat?

Don't answer. Just sing.

Time tumbles, stone by stone from the hand of its god.
His children are mountains of weeping.

I see a star above your head, dimming.
I sense sails being ripped in the lakes of your dreams.

Sing!

Waves take shape in your features. You sing the tide's ebb and flow.
Praise to song!
Praise to love!
Right and wrong are a pair of twins between them,
and the truth
is their shared wound.
Here he is ringing the bell of meaning,
but will anyone listen?
What good will it do, the hand you reach out to us, O Sun?

Sing, Lover!
Prophecies scamper away from you, jealous near insane.
To you alone belongs life's ageless allure.

Al-Quds is the Arabic name for Jerusalem.

Bayt al-Maqdis is the part of the city of al-Quds (Jerusalem) that contains the Masjid al-Aqsa (the al-Aqsa mosque) and the Qibbat al-Shakhra shrine known as the Dome of the Rock.

From *Concerto al-Quds* by Adonis, translated from the Arabic by Khaled Mattawa, to be published by Yale University Press in the Margellos World Republic of Letters series in November 2017. Reproduced by permission.

8. TEMPTED BY EVERYTHING

From *Concerto al-Quds*
Translated from the Arabic by Khaled Mattawa

A Song

It's true, the firmament in al-Quds resembles a cage: the whole universe in a mere one thousand square meters.
Piles of papers stand at each crossroad, shaped like books. Ink spills out of them, at the speed of twenty centuries for each letter, thirty centuries a comma, and countless centuries a period.
Oh what a pile Solomon's hoopoe is pecking through! Line by line.
Have the holy books fallen into the abyss?

"The rock of al-Quds is a stone from paradise."

(Greek Orthodox. Copts. Assyrians. Chaldeans. Roman Catholics. Armenians. Abyssinians. Kurds. Turks. Circassians. Moroccans. Refugees. Farmers. Civilians. City folk. Jews. Arabs . . .)

(Humidity. Heat. Falafel. Frankincense. Settler colonization. Occupation. Doves. Pigeons. Cars. Pepsi Cola Pepsi-Cola. Minarets. Bells . . .)

One square kilometer, no more!
"The gate of al-Quds is the land of summoning and resurrection."

"Whoever prepares for the pilgrimage
from the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem
to the Masjid al-Haram in Mecca, God will forgive his past
and future sins, and paradise is guaranteed him."

The house bids its memory farewell,
and the dust around it lifts its sleeves
in wind that ruffles the days' heads
with violence, with locusts that devour the shoots of time.

Women had planted their wombs into dream earth
and commissioned God with the task of reaping.
Some of them die at nightfall and are reborn at dawn,
some write a lover's sighs with the patience of the sages,
some wear yokes, mistaking them for fur collars.

No sound except what issues from hurricanes banging
against metal, and light bouncing
in confusion from one metal to another.
Ghosts assemble and dissemble under the armpits of space.
The Mediterranean sits up in on its atomic throne, or the very throne of God.
Veined hands wrestle over the blubber of time. The body of desire stands on a metal platform. Its spirit lies sprawled on the asphalt.
And you, dear Water,
when will you separate yourself from clay?

Night, scatter your stars over al-Quds.
The prophets of insomnia sleep among her severed limbs. At her feet
mud stands, then breaks apart into deserts and ravines.

What will happen to those divine tablets that descended to al-Quds Jerusalem?
What will happen to the devils and their armies,
to the angels and their gods?
What will happen to the earth and her children?

Does anyone know al-Quds, except her stars?

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EITHER I'M COMING BACK OR I'M NOT

Eyes for snow. The longest day of winter wolfs the birds. Your love is a love of hoofprints. The birds with their missing alphabet. Sometimes.

I am everyday white. I jerk off to a not-wrecked Elizabeth Taylor. In the grocery store I buy the expensive oranges because the day will come when I can't anymore.

Sometimes, when I'm angry with my husband.

I am everyday white until I am on a subway and someone says bitch. Then: the manic. Nimble blue of a wolf-eye.

When I'm angry, I'll undress in our bedroom with the curtains open, so all of Brooklyn can see.

Twenty-nine houses of September and a fire set to each one. Birch tree. Bitch tree: pale debutante, wisps of fern pinned back by luna moths. Let me lick the sugar. Round mooncakes white as Dakota snow. The sugar from your plate when you're through.

JOHN BLAIR

THE BUDDHA'S SON

I.
The palace shines with wanderlust
and rain that curls in hooks
where little streams of wearing thin
run down to flooding brooks

that swell with idle prayers to gods
as gray as catfish eyes
beneath swift eddies of return
and birds in borrowed skies

that augury a coming home,
a child beneath a tree
who tells the light, *my lord, even*
your shadow pleases me.

II.
The name his father gave him was *fetter*.
The river undercuts its bank and drags

it hissing to the sea; the world is as
it eats, as it is eaten. His father

walked away in robes made with blackened scabs
of silk raked from funeral fires. Rāhula

longs to sink into the swollen currents
and let them sing him muddy home inside

the purling syntax of meandering.
No one can step into the same river

twice but the one in which you drown is yours
until you die or gasp it out again

and bears your ghost into the wandered world
where wandering might set you ghost-less free.

III.
The crickets scrawl
on the night's black wall.
So little regret,
just calm inside the noise
of rarely sleeping.
We look back and what
we see are all
the hard knocks of becoming
all the hard knocks
we are. What we should fear is
coming back, blind
and needy and willing to compromise.
The rivers go down
without us, taking the low
road, the easy way
through the slow grinding
of attrition that makes
the mountains move to give
them room. God
grant us strength to leave to you
this loving world. God
come into our grand houses
and grander hopes
and lies, and whistle into us
our timid breaths. Speak
to us our own frightened voices
until we die inside
the night enough to ease back
into sleep. Close
our searching eyes, we pray,
against our better
selves so that we can slip into
the marveled darkness
from which not even you, imagined
one, can ever bring
us suffering back.

JOHN BLAIR

THE BUDDHA'S WIFE

The day his son was born. The very day.
He threw his hair into the sky to please
the unborn gods and god-like turned away,
his robes stained ochre with apostasies
of goodbye. Fifteen years his wife. Fifteen.
The troche of his absence like honeyed
mantha mucid inside her mouth. Evening,
and swallows skim through palace doors, muddied
with ash to flicker wet across her eyes.
Necessity is beautiful and can
be loved, even when it's leaving: the skies
are dependably cruel, as if by plan,
and close untouched by hands onto the slight
and accidental body of the night.

JACKSON BURGESS

4 AM, TUESDAY

At 4 AM, the only commercials are for call girls,
penile stimulants, and animal rights campaigns.
An occasional Discovery Channel documentary. Maybe a sitcom.
So many people tossing their remotes and touching themselves,
in beds and on couches across the slow blue land,
disregarding their open curtains
and piles of unwashed clothes. This is all to say
there's a lot of sadness in TV dinners
and drinks left out overnight, long enough for moths
to get curious, drown, and get tossed.
I feel like that octopus
who figured out how to open a jar underwater
from the inside, and instead of swimming out
just sat there, sort of looking around.

JACKSON BURGESS

ATROPHY

More and more I feel like the bits of tire left
in skid marks on the freeway where people crashed
and maybe died. Or the blood I rub off
my fingertips as I crush this mosquito
on my thigh. More than anything, I feel like
a bathroom trash bin full of fingernail clippings,
or the clippings themselves. If dust really is
mostly skin particles, I wonder how much of you
is left in my old room, Lily, on the now empty
bookshelves and floors. I know you feel the same:
like no one will ever notice the flakes of your lip
left on theirs, the eyelashes you leave in their suitcases,
the echo like tinnitus every time they hear your name.

JOHN GALLAHER

THE NEXT CENTURY WON'T BE KIND TO ANYONE

Imagine yourself thinking "breathe in / breathe out" all day long,
or "look, water is coming out of this faucet!" and "look, I'm
breathing in and out!" Still, though, it's all kind of amazing,
we agree, on fallow days, over dinner or drinks. Because we have
to notice things as well as take them for granted, or else we'd end up
stepping into traffic, distracted or suicidal. Lightning again.
Third storm this week, as I'm typing, temperature down to 72,
and the window open. It's all kind of amazing. Still,
why not complain about the toothpaste? If it tastes bad,
and you paid for it, why not complain? It's a Sunday, late June,
Brexit week. The fragility of the planet looms as a financial
metaphor. The fragility of our health. The call we might get
any time, as my mother's in hospice or anyone you know
goes out for a drive. A teenager was killed today. Ten teenagers
were killed today. Twenty. I'm thinking of everything
from A to B. It's Existential Cheap Shots Sunday, as I'm reading
the earth has a new moon. Notice the new moon. We're now
circled by two moons and no one's celebrating, because
our new moon is far away and tiny and won't stay long.
Whatever, new moon, OK-bye, until the day it's new moon
landing in your living room sending a shock wave
a hundred miles in every direction in one of those disaster movie
montages where we get a quick glimpse of the Eiffel Tower
behind the couple in black and white horizontal stripes
and red scarves and berets. Alive and alive and alive, we say,
exhilarated out of the theater. The butcher's bill comes due.
Consider the flowers of the field, burning. There's a sunset
behind them, even so, with several shades of blue
and orange. I was adored once, too, you can say, driving by
or walking by or lying down, as if you just thought it up.

JOHN GALLAHER

STEP FIVE IS TO MAKE YOUR OWN "HAPPY LIST"

And then there are those days (Look! The sun still rises!) where you have this feeling you want to love something, or you want to say or do something positive, but you can't think of anything, so that the moment is lost in this search for the *what*. The spirit is willing but the subject has failed to show up. There's this "go fish" quality to wandering, but only if one is in the open mood, where whatever one happens upon next is OK. This morning, I'm remembering fondly the days browsing card catalogues, as I imagine the landfills they now inhabit, because browsing's a kind of happiness, finding out new things, purposeful stumbling. How many books are there with "Elvis" in the title? 554,508 in our database. The solidity of the card catalogue, oh happy furniture, proof of our need for proof. To cultivate happiness, one must remember six things while browsing, I've read. And I'm sure it's going to be the sort of thing you can print off or clip out and send to the randomness of the abyss. "The abyss" is too large a concept for what I'm thinking, but Eliot's into making graphic novels these days, and he's using words like "abyss" and "dire," and it's charming, which is Step One on the Sustainable Happiness Highway: Cultivate Appreciation, as there comes a time in every Elvis impersonator's life when they do their last plausible Elvis impersonation. The door is walked through. The avalanche. The sleeper awakes into further sleeping. And it all seemed so large once. So awake.

WE

i. material

somatic dirt,
volatile body
on the brink
heaving like volcano
awoken from sleep
bear-mind breathing
heavy in winter

ii. sexual

warming up
to summer's
lightning like wildfire
clotting and cleaning
the earth of
her corporeal words
a dream-bubble
blushes and pops at the bottom of a well

iii. marital

only one or two scabs
left to hoist like a sail
we voyage our scars to dust
mist merged into trunks
of stillborn trees,

iv. social

but somehow we begin again
in night's backroom ribs
a silent spring,

ice's hibernating hiss
our shadow's antidote is love

v. familial

brooding in our fangs
patience to transform ash
praying stars into seeds
fertile space for
forget-me-nots
connect-the-dots to
explore your tenderness
towards yourself and
therefore me

this our shared, shattered

vi. identity

JACKSON HOLBERT

LETTER FROM NINE MILE

Last night coyotes yipped the dogs into a frenzy.
Smoke and wind and toads croaking out
their proud, weird songs.
The black river. The small stars.
I've started to remember my dreams—
it's night, March snow covers
the hills. Last week a boy named James
dove into the river north of here. Four miles
down-current, a farmer
fished out his small, blue body.
Outside my window, a crane breaks
the last jigsaws of ice. Morning comes,
it always does, the rabbits scurry down
their narrow holes to live their underground lives.
They pip up in the sun, then
pip back down. I walk too long.
It keeps the stars circling. I run my fingers
along the tops of weeds. Every night a dozen crows
perch on the power lines and scream.

FROM "WHITE ALICE CHANGES HANDS"

sitamat
****

Are you yet in a green, green tree?
Or is it dry and bled of sap?
Cut and black and burnt for fuel?

sassaaq
clicks the sawdust clock

The anvil clangs, our men are rung,
and then mountain bucks its name.
sassaq sassaq
click the clocks of ore
Will your shields bedarken me

as they obliviate the light?
White Alice, must we go to school?
White Alice, where is God's gold wrist?
sassaq sassaq sassaq _'s distant brawl

sassaq sassaq sassaq sassaq
I rive a river where none exists.
The waves that worked me loose
from the net insist I drown

and drift ashore. White Alice,
can you tell me more?
sassaq sassaq sassaq sassaq sassaq
Will your men kneel our men low?

Can we but diminish spent
the edges of that dulling town . . .
the blur of false-front buildings?

sassaq sassaq sassaq sassaq sassaq sassaq

The north wind west and west
and yet means: this place goes real rough
and fast. Your men sought lands

they could not see and held furs
that they could not claim
sassaq sassaq sassaq sassaq sassaq sassaq sassaq
and then you try with fear and shame . . .

White Alice, can I use your name?
sassaq sassaq sassaq sassaq
sassaq sassaq sassaq sassaq
Was there once a live, green tree?
White Alice, will you look at me?

sassaq sassaq sassaq sassaq sassaq sassaq sassaq
sassaq sassaq White Alice,
are you coming back? *sassaq sassaq sassaq*
sassaq sassaq sassaq sassaq sassaq sassaq sassaq

JOSEPH LEASE

THE BODY GHOST

99% payout video poker, so drunk as the sky, so willows so lost, the warmth inside the wet inside the wind: hi, trumpet flower, autumn, soft sung moons: I'll try to glint like birds behind the rain

JOSEPH LEASE

THE BODY GHOST

oxygen makes fire brighten—brilliant water,
stick your hand in—nothing ends, do you
believe me—Tuesday he'll be dead a year—
dead face, open mouth—buried in snow—
paint plenty to nightmare, brightness,
flesh—nobody dies—nobody loses—

JOSEPH LEASE

THE BODY GHOST

your kisses, your sky, your darkness, your sky—no, angel, paint flesh, and all the secrets, all the hands, send me, send me there: let's be rain, you could kiss me—pink arcs, pink-purple arcs, you, dirty, clean, kindness, longing—write the night—sound gives life, death's sound too—before you broke me I thought I was free, sinful but free—your kisses, your sky, your darkness, your sky—

FROM "ATLAS INUTILIS"

Translated from the French by Cole Swensen

At dawn on January 13, 1923, Jack Bluther, condemned to death by hanging for the murder of thirteen people (including his landlady), was allowed a last request. He asked to learn Mandarin, and was hanged twenty years later, finally speaking the language fluently, though his accent could have used a little more work.

If the Hatakas, a pygmy tribe from northern Angola, think that God is the shadow of chance (with all the imaginable consequences), it's not by chance, but in order to systematically contradict their hereditary enemies, the pygmy Hakatas, for whom, on the contrary, chance is the shadow of God.

The truly intelligent machine will be invented on April 12, 2023 at the Toshiba AI Labs and will be recognizable by the fact that it will be convinced that it's not a machine and that it will modestly insist that it's not all *that* intelligent.

Straight lines are forbidden in the city of Along Ulang (Burma). The streets are all curved, the sidewalks rounded, and all furniture either bulges out or curves in. Plumb lines are illegal, and when, filtering through atmospheric mist or dust, the rays of the sun fall in diagonal shafts, they cover the eyes of the children.

RACHEL LITCHMAN

SONNET WITH EMPTY POCKETS

I.
A forest, still a cataract,
light coned
into deciduous trees black
like unbuttoned graves.

II.
He buries his cavities in my teeth, rot
through empty sockets in my chest,
mouse droppings,
pockets filled

V.
with tonight's ambrosia: Daddy sips his
charcoal out of a cactus cup. Dinner,
he spears his peas on his plate. I bite my lip.

VI.
In silence. Plastic bags
suffocate all the flowers.
They don't need the rain, to be filled.

VII.
He dangles my words in water jugs around his neck,
pours them into the cat's water bowl

IX.
who sips, sips
circles ants & bees,
buoyed bodies I dig a grave
for a bird in the dirt.

x.
But the bird dies. In my room,
Daddy thumbs his eyelets, little petals. Thumbs
the skin, the naked pages,

xii.
I tell him no, grope the air
with words string my voice
into a handle that ropes the darkness.

xiii.
But now, I knock on doors & rooms
where a mattress lies empty
with intrusion—

xiv.
show me fear
that isn't an interrogation room.

AGAINST SENTIMENTALITY

What's the matter
with all of you?
a man on the rush

hour commute
said to me, leaning
over my shoulder

to read the headline:
CECIL THE LION
SHOT DEAD.

Where I come from,
every village
has lost a child

to something just
as lethal—someone
ought to give

that guy a medal
for doing us all
a solid! You don't

see a monkey
spray-painting
swastikas all over

a clinic door. Nor
do any of you
think twice about

shooting each other
up in your own
schools! Let the man

keep his trophy—
this isn't Disney
where a beast can be

crowned a king.

PREACHING TO THE CHOIR

Just admit that's what you're doing.

Voting people off the island.
The ones you have to block, defriend!

The ones who infringe on your thoughts, your rights!

Practice self-care.
Profess intentions before you close the bedroom door.

Yes means yes and no doesn't mean try again

though that yarmulke sure makes you look like one bad hombre.
And no, my name ain't Baby; it's daughter of a f_____
billionaire, Mrs. K,

if you're nasty.

Just for once let's turn this shit show back into a silent auction.
How's about we dial it back to November 7, when the polls
were in your favor?

It's not live, it's Memorex!

Springsteen. Gaga. Beyoncé & Jay-Z.
Try saying that three times fast to some millennial who doesn't
know the difference

between Betamax or VHS, Chromium Dioxide or Eighties Hair
Metal.

Fuck the Beatles, the Stones.
And if you try sometimes, you just might find

all the votes you'll ever need to fill that grave you've dug.

YAEL MASSEN

IMPOSSIBLE MAP OUT OF THE BASEMENT

This is not a reversal—there is no undo-
ing it. I know this now, I know this now,

but here I am. Again. The door opens
or he opens the door for me. A way out

of this kind of thinking takes precision,
the still-clear division of where my body

begins and begins to be taken, or given.
No, definitely taken. This sucks: to feel it

still from such remove: the room all-angles
invasive: I can be above or behind or

beneath him. To clarify: to feel it again is
to panic. I panicked. I was in a panic

attack from the first push to the last
piece of clothing pulled off. What have I

transferred to you, dear listener? Is this
our odyssey together, or have I hitched you

to my now-naked side? I am sorry. Maybe.
Or maybe I am not the one to be sorry anymore.

You might have already been down here,
too. In fact, it's likely, and more likely

we shall never speak should one see the other . . .
It's hard to be casual about these things—

in fact, I still haven't said much at all. The narrative
a bracket, a story in static. What if I told you?

Is my devil in my details? Do I have a devil?
Do I owe you details? Some say to tell is to

trigger. To wear a warning is to make another
mark on myself. I need not do so. Put down

the paper. Walk out from the room. This time
there is a choice before we reach the end.

HAWAII

In the old days a word spoken by chance
could have strange consequences
and whatever we wanted
we could make happen with a word.

Once I opened my lips and the shape
they made birthed an angelfish.
Next there was a snapper, parrotfish,
and a whitespotted puffer.

I tipped my face into the water
and swam for a few hours—my way
of avoiding the inevitable—while the fish
spoke others from their gills.

The reef was one great lung
and its breath formed rust-
colored octopi and gumdrop slugs
while mine forced clouds through a plastic tube.

The situation back at the hotel
was untenable, but out in the water
which was clear as air, I flew over
the world like a wind, buoyed by salt.

Once spoken, a word can never be
erased (though I would not inhale
the sea and all its life even if I could).
It took me many years to learn this truth.

The more we say, the more the world
has in it, even now that words appear
side by side with their meanings
instead of as a soft casement.

Eventually I pulled myself to land,
returned my snorkel and flippers
to the rental hut, and walked the stony
shore path up to the room.

There you'd been waiting: first
animal, then human, and back and forth
you went until the end of that story
shot from my mouth with a bang.

ADDENDUM

And then I met the inverse of my power
which came as cancer

And it whispered *open your mouth*

And indeed, black spots had sprouted
on my tongue and the insides of my cheeks

And a surgeon from town
had already been hired

And he brought photographs showing how
others had undergone the procedure

How their faces were cut out
then cinched in the center with a drawstring

And how all my ideas, dilemmas, doubts
I held most dear would be erased in five days' time

And the inverse of love was drought
and the inverse of health was fear

And all my speech and all my power
rotted at the root

ANNA D. RALLS

THE VIRGIN MARY HAS A PANIC ATTACK

Every time lightning strikes the sea, I shudder.
I used to adore storms.
I would stand in the rain and slide my hands
over my wet skin and imagine
a child slipping between my legs. I used
to yell back at the heavens cracking, like that time
two weeks after the angel came, when I heard the thunder
and screamed *fuck you* to the sky. *Fuck you,*
I am knitting life inside me. Now the uproar loops
and every storm makes me wish
I had never said I was the Lord's Servant.

Servant. The word sours.
I am not a singer, praising the God who needs no permission.
I am the song. *Magnificat*.

ATMOSPHERIC PERSPECTIVE

A fog in the field for horses to graze, grass
and cows as the route out from chaos,
gas forms and dooms us who believe and breathe
scents and sense give us this day

which rises flame-like or acidic
with breath and absolution.

Another version: I listen
to my own breath, meditate
to slow the processes oxygen gathers
in the follicles a vision of horses
wading through fog cows consuming

and the distance rising vaporous
slow as mountains, fast as food, fodder
akin to clarity. Charity. Choose.

LOOKING INTO (THE PRESENT)

under the rumchunder box a small box covered
by silk by age and by envy no matter
what's in it a spirit of envy of seeing into enters
whatever is sealed whatever is old and covered

under the cover of light a little thing dis-
covered spins itself into itself—spin as in
angular momentum—all particle all
light a small box he was then

curious about whatever was bounded
bullied himself into looking longing
for a self opening (self-opening as a toy
at Christmas covered in crinkly paper)

every silk a solution every problem
a proof in the making Child of the Present
watch the sky descend
a sheet your mother wafts, you sleep

ENCLOSURE

The future is but a figure of speech. . . .
—Vladimir Nabokov

an X in a sky of crossed contrails
in the same place at a same time

against which from my place
I see five Canadian geese cross

from one park in this city
to another park in this city

"park" and "garden" words
first about walls borders

against predation the sky
open and is only light yet

is a barrier I cannot see stars
I only see these birds which

used to migrate now commute
a park was once a game preserve

a garden once a fortress.
A cloud contains itself

even a cloud of dust, even
writing itself against the light.

SPACE WITHOUT OBJECTS

Instead of thinking of space as an absolute necessity, we can regard it as one of the possible states of the universe, just as ice is one of the possible states of water.
—George Musser

How near or far, how blunt the blow:
like asking the address, in arrow-rain sheets,
of each drop—as in "where is it now?"

Proximity a nightmare and a construct.
You are your line in spacetime;
you are tenseless.
All you have or will encounter. Green glass,

trapped air. Like asking icicles to persist
in July. To point, here.

Your line *seemed* smaller.

The epistemic circumstance of *will I?*
when your future already
exists. Extract space from causal

events. Knock over a glass, unsteady

and the water is seeping. Its seeping wakes you
and you claw: this is a world line, grow into.

THAT UNWINDS THE MOON THAT PULLS THE WHEELS OF TIME

From Alfred Starr Hamilton

The bearded
man

at the curb
raking old

leaves
into a cardboard
box

sweeps also
the green

tiny cubes
of glass

where last night
one

car
filling another

with gunfire

caught a passing
girl

through
the neck—

stooping now
he

plucks
the shards

&
a trinity
of crows explodes

from a chain
link fence

into October's

iceblue
arms

F. DANIEL RZICZNEK

RADAR LOOP

Only all versions together are definitive
The considerable dust they stir up lasts
Eternally, violence choosing its images
Its manifold unregretted exaggerations
Compassion, imperfect, barely registers
I was the child who wandered riverward
Walked into the bar and wanted to vanish
Roundabout by the muddy landing
A cloud like a town with its legs broken
Feet on the couch, sweat in the vodka
One hundred thousand people on the move
Minor thunder leaking through a pane
I wish I could reach down, grab a rib
Tug it loose to see the gearwork beneath
Really nothing but millions of oceans
Some king of a tree-choked stream bank
Swimming back and forth in the blood
Feels the whole thing go on without me

FALSE UNICORN

The last driver guns it and breaks free

My future self will no doubt blame me

For its widening eternity of problems

The firefighters rising forward as one

The helmeted man climbing from a window

Inexplicably like the moon going away

I am something willingly forgotten

Sailing across the Atlantic transporting wool

Something stately, of an ordered world

Sharks upwind turn the body's weight

No telling where any of me goes from here

Maybe into the frayed current of minutes

Or a going-away party for the damned

The aesthetics of separate tastes colliding

Like a party everyone is happy to leave

The aesthetics of smoke fogging the horizon

Something letting go, a bottom falling

I am a drone filming a demolition derby

I am a bright horizon unsuitable for birds

AT AGE 10, I RALLY AGAINST MY SISTER'S EFFORTS TO SPOOK ME WITH SOME GHOST STORIES

Jie, walk your cheap tricks to the dog store. If you want
horror, try sitting in a class where they talk to you
about the ongoing colonization of our people. I'm kidding!
No such class exists. The bad tourists who find
themselves in a bad motel with acrylic, flowery walls
don't exist. The locked room, and the keyhole?
Nil. A red curtain, the eye? Nil. If you want horror, try
sitting in a class. The knobby knees protruding
from your too-short shorts are an easy target. The girl in front
keeps picking them apart like carrion. My knees
are markers of my poverty. My knees are markers of
my sex. Someday all these will cease to terrify.
But today is not someday. I'm so desperate to be
grown. In Science, they show us pictures of a seed
germinating, how its insides are pushed up against one
another and everything, then the rude eruption. Maybe
I'll be like a seed someday. I'll never be as delicate
as, say, a Cinderella, but I'll also take beauty
and roughness. In History, we listen about
the daring heroism of James Brooke again, that way
in which he shuffled and reshuffled land
like scraps of food on a plate. Tell me a story
about myself. Tell me stories about the terrible things
that can only afflict me. The locked room
in the bad motel once visited, the bloodsucking
woman in the jungle behind our house. A specter
taking form under the bed weighed down
by my flesh. This is the creation story. There must be
alternate endings. Here's one. The bad tourists who find
themselves in a bad motel with acrylic, flowery walls
exist. The locked room, and the keyhole.
A red curtain, the eye. They die.

ANDY SIA

AT AGE 10, I FALL FOR MY (BOY) BEST FRIEND

The monsoon flavors dusk with salt and untraceable echoes
and I cannot rid my rabid thoughts about you. I wish
I knew what to do with you. It'd be easier if you were
like a marionette I'd just possess to have you walk
toward me, with a certain *je ne sais quoi* (of course!) that
screams love and devotion, well, with the best of your
wooden abilities. Then we'll bring our lips to extremely
close proximity, and touch, like two eggs
nudging one another in a pocket. It's just like the movies,
but not quite. In the movies, the life of the protagonist
doesn't end in ignominy, isn't frozen in a spit-laden
mouth, a broody house, the plastic flowers
in the hospital. In fact, nothing ends. The protagonist
progresses, just living and living and living, until
life's worn out and bent out of shape. It's just like the books,
not quite. In the books, the protagonist is holy and deserves
redemption. The protagonist carries on living
even after death, busily living and living and living,
and when he is finally reunited with his love,
they multiply their living together. I want a love
like this. I want to dance among the rubber tree grove
while the hidden insects rain songs down
on us. I want to ride the escalator to the movies
while the garish posters strung from the balcony
welcome us. I want to live. So, to the movies, the books,
and everything among the living, which endeavor
to bury me, fuck you. I'm going to live, Alistair.
I'll rise from the grave, and write this down.
I'll rise from the grave, and write this down.

outside is enough to

touch and be free

the farthest edges of human speech
and wilderness unfurl from ruffled

sleep with plans for positioning
laundered lives on display

attendant in open air prayer
so nothing surpasses belief or

declaration of war or tongues
cloaked in broken rot

to meet meaning some form of "we"
are not biodegradable or advisable

how many inscriptions and nouns
come to believe only themselves

SANCTIFIED: A MESOSTIC

after nina simone

borN to blues
hell raIsed to
an awful straNge pitch
of rAge but

don't let me be miSunderstood
baptIsmal backlash
and oh Mississippi,
gOddam
all these maNy
bluEs still to shout

NO PLACE

Up not so early

on the coffee table it's eight poems

by Joanne Kyger why not

get the news from poems

  unlike the social

  media they're always

  up to date

mining our lives and dreams

digging into the political

current

    here

the fox has eaten the quail chicks

it's not allegorical

    why wait

waking up to the hazy light

on the living room floor

  wondering where you are

the screen goes dark

upstairs neighbor creaks next

door neighbor bumps

no one in this space to speak to

what would you

surround your

life with?

no place, no work

FROM *DESTRUCTION OF MAN*

///

water and flame
they say can hear
same song in each
hey the ear ain't responsible
for the candle yr brain
the crayons melted and melted and
sloshed in a coffee can

///

saddest person desires
to eat the self wisest
knows the world eats and
solipsism is self consumption but
let me ask you wise ass about
what is a body to do with itself?

///

what is the yellowdogtooth corn
what is the ballroom gown
clapped up in a word in a book
clapped and leveled by luscious dust

///

in the dank trample spoil pen
listen like kissing after drinking to those are
the forced feedings all across america this morning

///

with the wainscoting of the field
peopled with crapped out rigs
just some boil wheel ass half implements improving
towards a satisfaction the bog bug bites on
one defamed mange face wanderer

///

in the hour of the waif and wastrel
will mizzle a wilting
against stauncher tooth and tine
pour some light on there
get the seniors out get the picture made

///

that you may sit with sap
to companion it over fire over night
the sapper's hot seat
the insomnia of syrup life
think of that
of a life
beyond season
of a sweet dark life

///

old weasel hardly knows herself
hefted up brimwise
on blood all new
she dried the chicken
of life's liquidity
she's gloves filled
to sopping with old aloe ocean
and time time's a trial
until her lighter nature returns
until her whiskers
sentient danger thatch
squire the choirs of air again

///

chicken run how
is a is a is a
now you gotta choke 'er
but not too much
else she'll flood
cough a blue boo hoo
before she steadies out
in roar

///

in a near bled out man is an armless man
the legs ropes on fire
the legs like funnels of ash
the legs as bad connections of ash

///

to fritz and to fizz

[ADRIFT IN REMAINS]

Adrift in remains hawk hovers the Don's narrow course. Glacial cut. Mallow and willow. Tansy. Kashmir pellets take eyes Palestine a rind to hollow. No one spirals through geography attributing song mournful pasture ruins. Tanks tear border desert streams Kurds or reed Arabs swamped. Husks and shells thin objects dull in stream oil floats thin glistening blue flame where gods rooted guards ripped to gain rot or gore and flee. Apple green spit shine appeal in market stalls. Flies buzz a window carriage a gown to sleep in no one's open keep.

Gourds dipped in water attend daily means physical skin to shape widely flung interior goings. Ghostly core to seize limbs or mouth—wet tongues hang in windy sky lengths. City charms. Men in short pants and major league insignias pass with measured comportment. Feta and garbanzo beans carry an image to café window autos and cyclists go past pedestrian strolls. Skaters wage burnt knees on heated pavement stone. Bodily stress upsurge of spirit bone's ossified imprint. Slant it, say where or how wild dandelions cling to remote faded posts fungi cast to grey roots or bitter bark's crusty shade.

Years a tongue in meter birth rude shapes
open self's thin rind wilderness mother
wrath or ruth grapes are fruits sweet to suck
summery air home's memory flinty
continent or desert, so love—carry
completely to physical contact.

Scout 1955. Soul's nervous earnest hips shake swing groove. White son parody. Evangelical worm. Elegiac grace groaned

in sexual currency. Memphis boy-king, shatter hearts' corny antiquity. Poetry haunts things supreme—material surfaces soaked in pressed surge of energy. Language animates a loaded one. Mouth to mouth, mothy other sings.

UNTITLED

Translated by J. Kates

slowly revealing itself
the shore leads to the sun
into a black and quiet town
soot on the temple of God
in the air people moan—
their weeping is a pinch of salt
fish drown in the air,
fall under a cat's paw
the city burns but the sea
will fill it with life
one day
and deep down a conch
a crayfish and a forgotten anchor

медленно обнажаясь
берег уводит к солнцу
в черный и тихий город
копоть на храме божьем
в воздухе стонут люди
плач их – щепотка соли
в воздухе тонут рыбы
падают к лапам кошки
город сгорит а море
жизнью его наполнит
день а на дне ракушка
рак и забытый якорь

UNTITLED

Translated by J. Kates

You are standing on the edge of a cloud,
underneath
the sky collapses, ruining the skyline.
In the depth of field the ocean ebbs
into a narrow aperture.
From the opening something whistles.
In the frame a room out of focus.
Offstage a clown is laughing.

На краю облака стоишь,
под которым
небо рушится, обваливая линию
горизонта.
В глубине резкости уходит океан
в тонкую щель.
Из щели слышится свист.
В кадре размытая комната.
Клоун смеется из-за кулис.

UNTITLED

Translated by J. Kates

on the overhang of the entrance
fragments cigarette butts chalk outlines of a man
a short-tailed cat tears a sparrow apart
a chorus of machines is the music of the twenty-first century
a queen is running after the jack
her head in feathers red on her lips

на козырьке подъезда
осколки бычки меловые контуры человека
кошка с коротким хвостом на части рвет воробья
хор машин – музыка двадцать первого века
дама выбегает вслед за валетом
голова в перьях красное на губах

TRUONG TRAN

FROM *THE BOOK OF OTHERS*

Often it happens when you least expect it. You are on a bus on your way home; a man on this same bus is coughing intermittently, he is told by the bus driver to cover up when he is coughing. This goes on for about 15 minutes or so. The man coughs, the driver is insisting he cover his mouth, the man is ignoring the bus driver—perhaps he is unaware that she is speaking to him—he continues to cough. Someone else on the bus is saying "he is paying you no mind, you should just call the police" and yet another person is saying, "he doesn't understand English, he doesn't understand English." The man is being asked by the bus driver to leave. The bus is parked, the driver refuses to continue driving, the man is sitting in the back of this bus, he is coughing, he is spreading germs, he is minding his own business. What is he doing? Why won't he answer? You decide to leave and walk the rest of the way home. As you are walking you can see the police car making its way toward the bus. You look back. You wonder if you should have stayed. If your father was still alive he would have been about the same age as that man—he could have been coughing on that bus and you would have told him to cover his mouth. There is an uncomfortable realization that comes with knowing. You want to know that you belong—it happened when you laughed uncomfortably at a joke, it happened in the sixth grade, it happened in college, it is happening now. Your desire to belong overwhelms you with shame. It happens when you least expect it, while taking the bus or walking home.

TRUONG TRAN

FROM *THE BOOK OF OTHERS*

Your friend gifts you a bag of wishbones. It is timely. It arrives carefully packed in a padded priority envelope. It arrives on a bad day—you have just been screwed by your department at work. You tell yourself that someday, one day, you will write your tell-all but just not today. Today, your friend gifts you a bag of wishbones. You take it as a sign of the things to come. You become obsessed. You buy a 75-pound box of chicken carcasses. You harvest, you collect, you set a goal of attaining one thousand wishbones. You read somewhere that one thousand of anything will make something come true. You develop a method of harvesting: you tuck your hand beneath the sternum, you raise, you twist, you are careful not to break. You dispose of 75 pounds of flesh stuck to bones. It is Monday. It is your neighbor's turn to take out the trash. She is rolling the composting bin toward the sidewalk out front. She struggles. She pauses. She looks inside to see what's inside. She screams. She must think it's the flesh of some murdered animal or being. You yell out your window—you assure her it is only the bones of dead chickens. Your neighbor's screaming turns into laughing. She looks at you—she thinks that you are crazy. Your mind wanders in that moment—you imagine an army of chicken skeletons; you imagine your poems as an army of dead chickens—flayed, de-fleshed, with bits of rotting flesh still clinging to the bones. One by one, they climb out of this bin. You amass an army. You write a wish with every wishbone—you wish that this had never happened.

FROM *THE BOOK OF OTHERS*

These things, they are just things. You are told all your life to develop a thick skin, that you should not take these things so seriously. These things, these moments, they are just things in the greater scheme of things, so what if you are consistently called by your last name?—it is easier to pronounce—it is just a small thing. These things, they accumulate, they stick, they cling to your clothing, your skin, they alter your thinking, they affect your seeing, your way of being. You wake up one day. You look in the mirror. You have grown a thick skin, and the you in the mirror is no longer you. One day, in the third period on the first day of class, you decide to change your name to Tom. You do not care for the name, not in the slightest. It is easy to spell. It is easy to say. You will have plenty of time to regret your choices. It is just a thing, you tell yourself. You carry these things. They are placed on you. They are thrown at you. You walk through life. You are carrying these things. You anticipate a time when someone is compelled to correct your grammar; again it happens, and you collapse under the weight. You are buried beneath a lifetime of these things.

JASMINE DREAME WAGNER

SNOW IS AMPLE AND FRANK

It has a roundness of character. It presses us into its breasts.

Others object. Snow is not spherical, they say. They characterize the crystals' jagged voluptuousness in terms of the Mandelbrot set.

Geography and Minimalism were born of a desire for relief. Snow continues to relieve both geographers and minimalists of their trash cans and their grief.

Snow blots out the words on the strip mall marquee. It has no past. It speaks of no prior experience. Its resume is a blank sheet of paper.

Despite its institutional commitment to unfinished durational works, snow appears in sparkling completion, unexpectedly, like a screensaver.

We find ourselves swollen under snow's hypnotic power. Like chicks swollen in our shells, we scrape through its opacity to release ourselves.

On an antenna on a rooftop of snow, a sparrow is spherical. Its shadow is a circle. The shortest distance from my eye to the bird is a curved line. Soul is the quantum point that blinks alive in both of us, at the same time.

A DRAFT

The crystalline winter's bulk
arrives without precedent.

The dark's affirmative pardon of morning
crows with the exacting mill of souls.

On the lake,
the fish the snow

obscures
withdraws a bit more each day

like a constellation.
Fish guts blur

your luminescent coat.
The cat won't scram.

You call him Sight.
His ripped ear, an oil drum's mouth.

The bog flat in its palm of red ice.
The jet's cotton above the lake's lazy eye.

The sonic boom
tears through the naked orchard.

You

who think you are ugly
wear the winter like society.

Not by some small miracle,
we generate heat.

Multiple patrols guard this joy.
Crows triangulate.

Their assertion,
our pathological trinity:

I am, I will, I will be.

*

It's true, I've believed
the tangential is sacrament.

I have believed blood

runs the corridors
of the roughly acknowledged

politicized youth. The planets speak.
They say,

the moon isn't speaking to you.

Fear has become a form of fidelity
on this carcass of a hill.

I don't mind the bog. I will drink
its lead as long as I live.

Something in me
loves its fog

and you in it
regardless. It is tired and married

to gravity. It is as pure
as my irrelevance.

I intone a note
to the lake that will greet you

when you come down
from belonging. Love,

persistence is a core Hell. Career,
its tunnel, bores me.

*

On a rock. Like a sacred image,
I say nothing. A hawk

stands on an elbow in the morass.
Before I was wordless,

I was torrent.
In an autopsy of campfire ashes,

a delicate shroud. I remember
your silver hair, if only to feel the satisfaction

of knowing a thing twice.
Valor, disorder,

overgrown
economy,

every obstacle is the field
I greet from the sedge.

Leaf prints embalmed in the puddle's retina.
Stems fused into finery—

an operatic narcotic, this land.
It lures me into History's stuff.

Fall leaves
have power.

Where rage is highly valued,
trees acquiesce to the rape of the wind.

Convictions iced into every surface,
littoral scratchiti. It's true,

in our country
wheels exhaust their cars. It's true,

they installed a drain
at the bottom of our swamp.

It's true, if this love
isn't viable,

I will love
what we don't have.

TYRONE WILLIAMS

PASSING GOODS

Primitive accumulations begin as annexations
sentimentalized as abandonment in latter days,
land as land for, for water toward land,
a staged decree nee climate change, territorialized
exodus, a theatrical complex alchemical denominations:
history, psychology, as dialogue aside,
property per props, death throes as method acting,
etc., woven into plots.

In each act,
as in each case, utter is a limit of failed,
accomplished genitives. Gerunds calcify,
spectacles loaded into magazines, magazines
loaded into machine guns, and guns—abandon,
abandoned by, machines—unload themselves,
relief felt, if not heard, around a world
failing description.

["_____ in whom I am well pleased"]

A blow-up over England
during the Battle of Britain, Joseph K. mourns his losses
as he folds his many-vested coat into a future
castle repaired beyond the tower at Sandycove,
and dreaming of the sloppy wet kisses between national whiskey
and international waters, surveys the Celtic and Atlantic Seas.

"IT WAS EASY—

they sank my boat,"
quips the future
free world leader
downplaying
the Harvard man
as war hero
who did not go
down with the starboard
aft but clung
to the floating
wreckage with other
survivors led
to follow his wake
when he swam
out of the Blackett
Strait to Ferguson
Passage towing
a wounded crewman
with his teeth
until they reached
Olasana
as castaways
for six days
before the seventh when
Solomon Islanders
rescued them
a tale teeming
with peril
and redemption
just as Joseph
had hoped when he
pulled a few strings
to get a stringer
to play up

the harrowing ordeal
of his second son
that next to next
last chance
a backstory
buried at sea
with the actual
Pequod Torpedo
Boat 109
resurrected
as a replica
of the future
inaugural ask
not parade
end quote.

BIRDS OF NEW JERSEY

The problem with light is the emission of heat
that follows, then burns;

illuminates, then reduces.

We can play the light against sheets,
across walls, and sconce our way

by lozenged lamps, but it is a kept
kind of magic.

A kind in which I'm barely interested.

And yet, if we can't see something
without burning it,

who's to say where the terror ends?

Here, I believe.

Because the use of a thing that will die
to be witnessed

is just too close. We know too much.

And the use
of a thing that will flee

as soon as it is seen is boundless—

osprey, plover,

heron, lapwing, goldfinch:
how I have tumbled

so wholly.

CONTRIBUTOR NOTES

Adonis, born Ali Ahmad Sa'id in 1930, has been a leading figure in the modernist movement in Arabic poetry since the mid-twentieth century. He is the author of fourteen books of poetry and numerous works of cultural criticism and translation.

Mike Alberti was born and raised in Albuquerque, New Mexico. He received his MFA in fiction from the University of Minnesota. His stories have appeared in *Crazyhorse, Flyway, Gulf Coast,* and *One Story*. He lives in Minneapolis, where he is at work on a novel.

Hala Alyan is a Palestinian American writer and clinical psychologist whose work has appeared in *Guernica* and other literary journals. She is the author of three collections of poetry; the most recent, *Hijra,* was selected as a winner of the 2015 Crab Orchard Series. Her debut novel, *Salt Houses,* is forthcoming by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

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Katie M. Flynn's stories have appeared in *Carve, Hobart, Joyland Magazine, Monkeybicycle, Superstition Review,* and elsewhere. Recently, she finished her first novel about love, revenge, and uploaded consciousness, the first chapter of which is forthcoming in *Indiana Review*. She lives in San Francisco and can be found on Twitter: @other_katie.

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Marielle Grenade-Willis is a poet, social justice advocate, vocalist, and gardener from Virginia. She moved to Colorado two years ago as an AmeriCorps volunteer and is now involved with several nonprofits related to conservation, food access, and refugee communities. Her writings have been featured in the *Lune,* the *James Dickey Review, Southern Sierran Magazine,* and on Public Radio International.

Jackson Holbert's work has appeared or is forthcoming in the *Greensboro Review, Willow Springs,* and *Best New Poets 2016,* among others. He edits poetry for the *Adroit Journal.*

Jennifer Itell writes fiction and creative nonfiction, and her work has been published in the *Normal School, Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine, Literary Mama, 5280, Redbook Magazine, StoryQuarterly,* and *Cimarron Review.* She teaches at Lighthouse Writers Workshop in Denver and is currently at work on a novel—a contemporary ghost story.

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Joseph Lease's critically acclaimed books of poetry include *The Body Ghost* (Coffee House, forthcoming in 2018), *Testify* (Coffee House, 2011), and *Broken World* (Coffee House, 2007). His poems "'Broken World' (For James Assatly)" and "Send My Roots Rain" were anthologized in *Postmodern American Poetry: A Norton Anthology.*

Hervé Le Tellier is a French poet, novelist, playwright, and journalist. A member of the Oulipo since 1992, he is also cofounder of the Association of Friends of Jean-Baptiste Botul, which promotes this under-recognized philosopher and his school of "Botulism."

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Clint McCown has published four novels and four poetry collections. The only two-time winner of the American Fiction Prize, he is a former screenwriter for Warner Bros. and creative consultant for HBO Television. He heads Virginia Commonwealth University's MFA program and teaches in the low-res MFA program for the Vermont College of Fine Arts.

Lois Ruskai Melina's work is forthcoming or has appeared in *Blood Orange Review, Carolina Quarterly, Crack the Spine, Lunch Ticket,* and *2016 Best of the Net Anthology,* among others. She is retired from teaching in higher education and when not writing can sometimes be found rowing on the Willamette River near her home in Portland, Oregon.

Sarah Rose Nordgren is the author of the poetry collections *Best Bones* and *Darwin's Mother* (fall 2017), both from University of Pittsburgh Press. Her poems and essays appear widely in journals such as *Agni, Ploughshares,* the *Kenyon Review Online, Copper Nickel,* and *American Poetry Review.* She lives in Cincinnati.

Anna D. Ralls is from Columbia, Missouri. She is a graduate student at Oxford University, and her works are forthcoming or previously published in *Contrary, Atticus, Cave Region Review,* and others. She currently lives in Bloomington, Indiana, and loves to spend her spare time singing opera with her husband.

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Andrew Michael Roberts is the author of some poetry books and chapbooks, most recently *good beast* (Burnside Review Books) and *something has to happen next* (University of Iowa Press). He works as a cardiac nurse in Portland, Oregon, where he lives with his wife, Sarah, and their beasts, Bigfoot, Mookie, and Bird.

Kristen Roupenian served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Kenya from 2003 to 2005. She earned an MFA from the Helen Zell Writer's Program at the University of Michigan, where she was the recipient of a Hopwood Award.

F. Daniel Rzicznek's collections and chapbooks of poetry include *Nag Champa in the Rain, Vine River Hermitage, Divination Machine, Neck of the World,* and *Cloud Tablets.* Rzicznek teaches writing at Bowling Green State University.

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Jonathan Skinner has authored the poetry collections *Chip Calls, Political Cactus Poems, Birds of Tifft,* and *Warblers,* in addition to numerous critical essays, and is founding editor of *ecopoetics*. He teaches in the Writing Program and in the Department of English and Comparative Literary Studies at the University of Warwick.

Abraham Smith is the author of four poetry collections, all from Action Books: *Ashagalomancy* (2015), *Only Jesus Could Icefish in Summer* (2014), *Hank* (2010), and *Whim Man Mammon* (2007). *Destruction of Man,* his book-length poem about farming, is forthcoming in 2018 from Third Man Books.

Dale Smith is a poet, critic, and editor who lives in Toronto, Ontario. His poems, essays, and reviews have appeared most recently in the *Boston Review, Brick, Brooklyn Rail, Los Angeles Review of Books,* and the *Walrus*.

Cole Swensen is a poet and translator; she has published seventeen books of poetry—most recently *On Walking On*—and has translated over twenty volumes of poetry, creative prose, and art criticism.

Aigerim Tazhi was born in Aktobe, Kazakhstan, in 1981. She is a graduate of the Aktyubinsk (Zhubanov) State University. Her book of poetry, *БОГ-О-СЛОВ,* was published in 2003. She has received numerous literary prizes in Kazakhstan and Russia for poems in the collection, and in 2011 she was a finalist for the Russian Debut Prize in poetry. Her work has been translated into English, French, and Armenian, and published in prominent literary magazines. Tazhi was one of the creators of a project of literary installations, "The Visible Poetry," in 2009. She lives in Almaty, Kazakhstan.

D. J. Thielke's stories have appeared in *Ninth Letter,* the *Cincinnati Review, Arts&Letters, Indiana Review, Mid-American Review, Bat City Review,* and *Crazyhorse,* among others. A graduate of Vanderbilt's MFA program, she served as the James C. McCreight Fellow at the Wisconsin Institute for Creative Writing and the Olive B. O'Connor fellow at Colgate University.

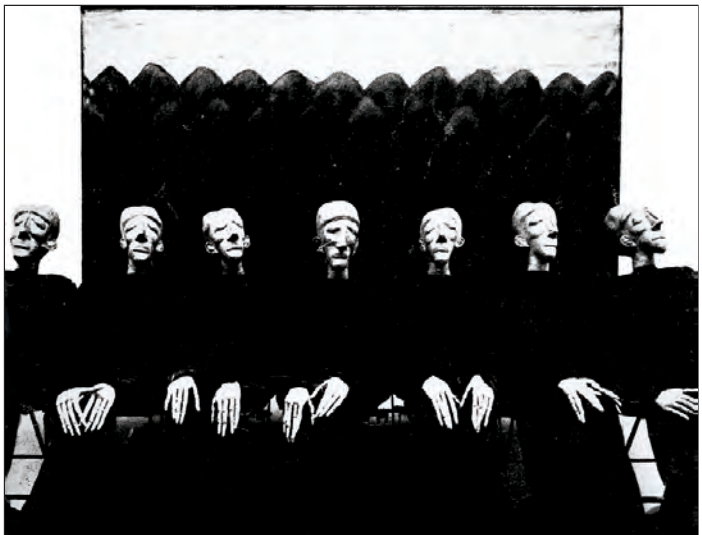
Truong Tran is a visual artist and poet. His work has been featured in the California Historical Society, the Smithsonian Museum, and California Institute of Integral Studies. He is currently a visiting assistant professor at Mills College, where he teaches poetics at the crossing of writing and visual arts. The selected works come from a forthcoming collection titled *The Book of Others*.

Jasmine Dreame Wagner is the author of *On a Clear Day* (Ahsahta Press) and *Rings* (Kelsey Street Press), winner of the Kelsey Street Press Firsts! Prize. Her poems are forthcoming in *Beloit Poetry Journal, Fence,* and *New South,* and have been anthologized in *The Arcadia Project: North American Postmodern Pastoral*.

Tyrone Williams is the author of five books of poetry: *c.c.* (Krupskaya Books, 2002), *On Spec* (Omnidawn, 2008), *The Hero Project of the Century* (The Backwaters Press, 2009), *Adventures of Pi* (Dos Madres Press, 2011), and *Howell* (Atelos Books, 2011). http://home.earthlink.net/~suspend/

Jess Williard's poems have recently appeared or are forthcoming in *Third Coast, North American Review, Nimrod International Journal of Poetry and Prose, Southern Humanities Review, Ruminate Magazine,* the *New Orleans Review, Sycamore Review, Bayou Magazine, Oxford Poetry,* and other journals. He is from Wisconsin.

CHICAGO REVIEW



THE INFRARREALISTAS

A SPECIAL ISSUE ON THE
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