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# COLORADO REVIEW

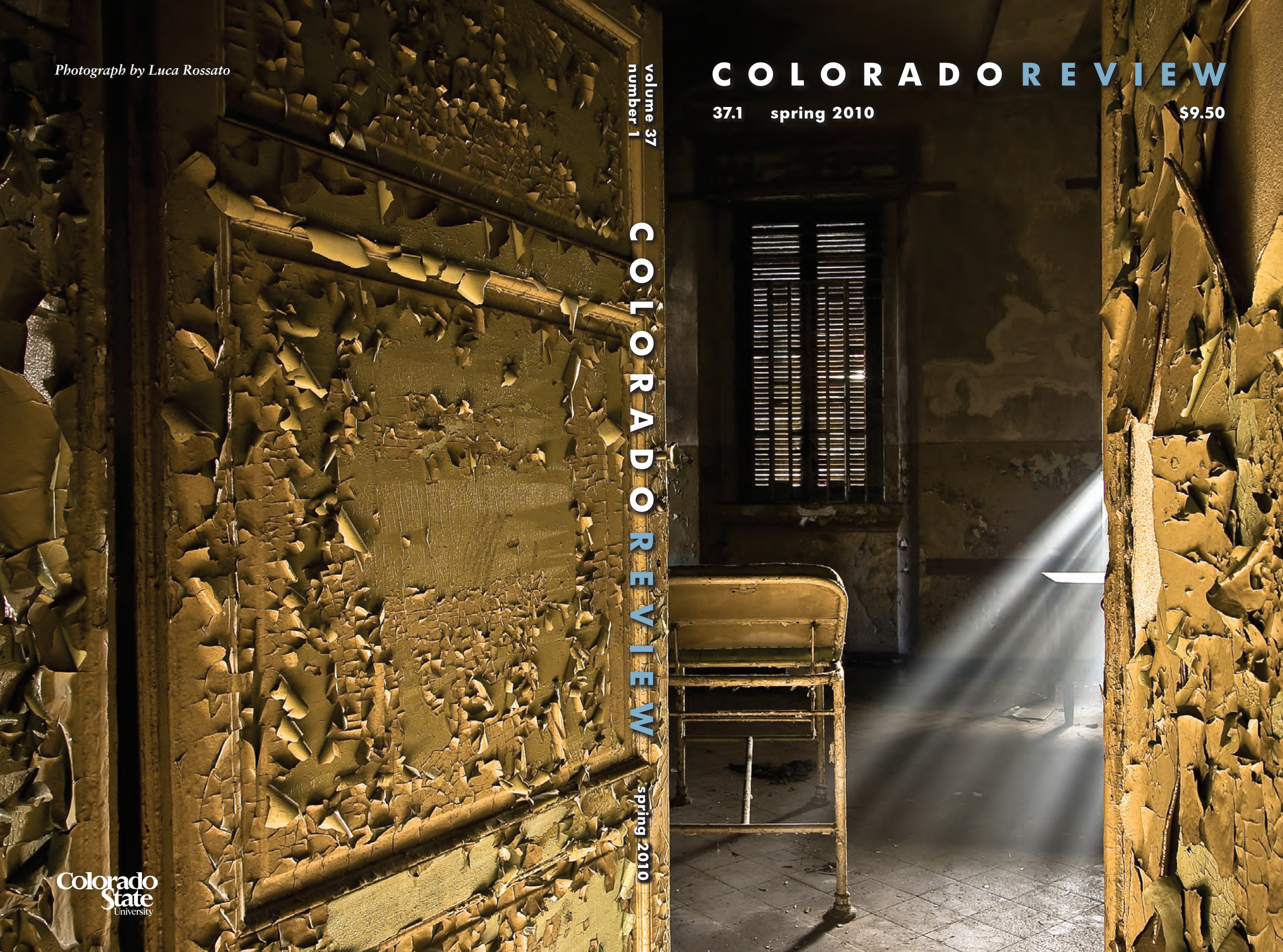
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# COLORADO REVIEW

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**CR**

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# CONTENTS



	I	<i>Editors' Page</i>
<b>FICTION</b>	3	<b>MARY MEDLIN</b> <i>Not Now But Soon</i>
	20	<b>VICTORIA SPROW-KELLY</b> <i>All the Ways We Say Goodbye</i>
	29	<b>ERIN FLANAGAN</b> <i>Dog People</i>
<b>NONFICTION</b>	46	<b>JESSICA McCAUGHEY</b> <i>Aligning the Internal Compass</i>
	62	<b>NANCY McCABE</b> <i>The Art of Losing</i>
	67	<b>STEVEN CHURCH</b> <i>After the Storm</i>
	81	<b>ANNE McDUFFIE</b> <i>René</i>
<b>POETRY</b>	94	<b>ANNIE BOUTELLE</b> <i>Caravaggio Views Giorgione's Laura [Take Three]</i>
	95	<b>JOE COLLINS</b> <i>Bless You This Sickness</i>
	96	<b>JON COTNER &amp; ANDY FITCH</b> <i>Galileo</i>
	101	<b>DANA CURTIS</b> <i>Lulu's Veil and Jocasta's Brooch</i>
	102	<b>KATHERINE FACTOR</b> <i>Now</i> <i>Coddled</i>

- 104 **RYAN FLAHERTY**  
*Conditionals*
- 105 **JOSHUA HARMON**  
*from "Le Spleen de Poughkeepsie"*
- 106 **RICHARD HOFFMAN**  
*Emblem 37 / On Security*
- 107 **MARK IRWIN**  
*What You Might Say of Christ*
- 108 **JOSHUA KRYAH**  
*Sallied Forth*
- 110 **JOSEPH LEASE**  
*Goodnight*  
*Cruel*
- 112 **LAURENCE LIEBERMAN**  
*The Last City*
- 114 **REBECCA LINDENBERG**  
*Still Life with Movement*
- 115 **KEVIN McLELLAN**  
*It Was Not That Long Ago*
- 116 **JENNY MUELLER**  
*Great Expectations*  
*from Cocksucker Blues*
- 120 **EDWARD NOBLES**  
*North of the Past*  
*The Secret Life of Poetry*
- 122 **KELLI ANNE NOFTLE**  
*Amnesiacs, All*
- 123 **JULIE SOPHIA PAEGLE**  
*Rhymes for Craig*
- 130 **JOHN POCH**  
*La Giganta*
- 131 **DEBORAH POE**  
*In Another State*
- 132 **JACK RIDL**  
*Theme and Variations*  
*Practicing to Walk Like a Heron*
- 134 **MARY ANN SAMYN**  
*At Glen Lake vs. The Birth of Anger*

- 135 **ADAM STRAUSS**  
*World as Marriage*  
*Desire*
- 137 **SEAN TRIBE**  
*An Ostrich with Its Head in the Sand*
- 138 **LEE UPTON**  
*Plucking Swans*  
*The Way Forward Begins with Gratitude*
- 141 **LIZ WALDNER**  
*Spy vs. Spy*  
*Let There Be Light*
- 143 **G. C. WALDREP**  
*All Souls Day*
- 145 **ERIC WEINSTEIN**  
*After Adam*
- 147 **MANDE ZECCA**  
*The Property of a Lady*
- 148 **HARRIET ZINNES**  
*Without Identity*  
*The There*
- BOOK NOTES** 150 *First We Read, Then We Write:  
Emerson on the Creative Process*  
by Robert D. Richardson  
reviewed by Janelle Adsit
- 152 *The Slide*  
by Kyle Beachy  
reviewed by Jennie A. Camp
- 155 *Close Calls with Nonsense:  
Reading New Poetry*  
by Stephen Burt  
reviewed by Julie Carr
- 161 *Star in the Eye*  
by James Shea  
reviewed by Kristina Marie Darling
- 163 *The River Gods*  
by Brian Kiteley  
reviewed by B. J. Hollars

I66	<i>Archicembalo</i> by G. C. Waldrep reviewed by Jason Labbe
I68	<i>See Jack</i> by Russell Edson reviewed by Michael McLane
I72	<i>Normal People Don't Live Like This</i> by Dylan Landis reviewed by Jennifer Wisner Kelly
	• • •
I75	<i>Contributor Notes</i>

## EDITORS' PAGE

Featured among this issue's essays, Jessica McCaughey's "Aligning the Internal Compass" echoes themes and variations in the other essays and stories here: making our way across unfamiliar territory, getting lost, losing things, losing ourselves, and finding our way again. McCaughey's piece delves into the mysteries of why some of us are adept at finding our way in this world while others struggle to get from here to there—with or without a map. In both Mary Medlin's "Not Now but Soon" and Victoria Sprow-Kelly's "All the Ways We Say Goodbye," characters navigate the landscape of grief, and in Erin Flanagan's "Dog People," a woman tries to find her bearings in her role as a new mother. Nancy McCabe's essay "The Art of Losing" explores the anguish of losing something treasured and the exhilaration of finding it again. Contributing editor Steven Church writes about the disorientation of returning to a place so well known to him and now rendered unrecognizable in "After the Storm." And in "René," Anne McDuffie revisits a year in Spain when she traveled, and often stumbled, into the new terrains of romance, foreign culture, and ultimately adulthood.

Welcome to the new issue; we hope you lose yourself in the fine stories, essays, poems, and book reviews.

—SG

U nique among the springtimes I have known, this spring remains at odds with the angers, grief, and poverty of winter. It is almost as though spring were reluctant to make what might in bad faith be the usual, greeny promises. Mark Irwin notes this reluctance in a figure of Christ; Rebecca Lindenberg does as much in her still-life. And keenly, Julie Paegle profuses a monody in memory of a friend to many of us, poet Craig Arnold, lost to us all. May the poems in this issue give us the courage truly to welcome a perplexing spring.

—DONALD REVELL

## NOT NOW BUT SOON

In the four months since his fiancée's death, it's the small details, the tiny ironies that have remained the most vivid for Connor. The larger decisions he's had to make—releasing or keeping her apartment, selling her things or shipping them back to her parents in Mashhad—haven't been nearly as calamitous as the minor things he keeps remembering about Afshan's accident. In fact, it's the things that *made* it an accident that he remembers every day. How easily her jacket slipped off. He still feels the swift, terrible vacancy of the jacket, too big on her, as her arms slipped out of it. As he grabbed the back of it to keep her from falling. And even then, she didn't fall right away. He remembers that too, how she hit the ground on all fours, a small grunt coming out of her. Afshan's weight, which hadn't ever been enough to fill a twin bed, a desk chair, an airplane seat, was somehow enough to dissolve the earth underneath her at the Eastern Fells overlook. She fell then, headfirst. But for a split second, holding that jacket, he really thought he'd saved her. He thought, *Oh, nothing's changed at all. It was just a scare.*

His friends and family have all said, "Why are you doing this to yourself?" or "This isn't going to bring her back." And in the most literal sense, that's true. No amount of digging back into the cogs of the accident is going to reinflate her organs, repair her bones, make her spring back up out of the gorge. Literally rewinding the events is a positive feedback loop of reversals, each *if only* begetting another *if only*. He knows they're right, that every step he takes prompts one *if only* bigger and worse than the last, and it just makes the silent, unacknowledged coast back into routine—keeping appointments, answering the phone, making small talk—harder and more shameful. But remembering isn't hurting him. For now at least, he seeks shelter in imagining her, even imagining her accident. When he thinks about her, visualizes the days when she was still alive, even the really bad ones, those are the times during which she's

still here, refracting into splinters that cut into him unexpectedly, each thought giving way to another, and another. It's as if she's coming back within him. He can almost hear her. He can almost feel her still here. She's just somewhere that he can't see. In another room. Downstairs. Just outside the door, and any second now, the knob will turn and she'll walk in.

The rent for Afshan's apartment is due today. This will be the third time he's paid it since her death. As he leaves his apartment, his roommates—three Tufts graduate students who advertised the fourth bedroom on Craigslist—fall silent when he passes through the living room on the way to the front door. It's gotten worse since she died, but even before that they all felt obligated to fall silent around one another, as if the reminder that none could afford to live alone, while they all wished to, was a disappointment too great to be mentioned. Afshan never stopped trying, greeting each housemate by name, asking about their days while looking them straight in the face. It had more to do with her thinking it was ridiculous not to be involved with the people with whom you lived, than with actual interest. Her courtesy always put Connor to shame. He told her she was just wasting her time. "You're right. What you do is so much easier," she said, leveling her gaze at him for exactly long enough before looking away.

He's never met her landlord, a distant friend of Afshan's family. He can't remember the name exactly; Amirapour something, maybe. Afshan liked him. She loved having someone with whom to speak Farsi and being able to pop downstairs for a new recipe for *khoresht* or *tah-chin*. Sometimes, if Connor was upstairs when she did, he'd hear them laughing. She'd return smelling of the clove cigarettes for which the landlord always managed to convince her to join him. But he had rules that made Connor nervous. Like paying rent only in cash. So he takes a stack of twenties, forty bills high, each month in an envelope. He likes the feeling of the money in his hand. He likes the density, the smell. Once he gets there, he stuffs it in the mailbox or under the door, no note, before darting away like a burglar. He doesn't want to see him. He doesn't want to listen to him mutter things in Farsi about Afshan. He doesn't want to behold him accepting the money in the name of death. It's why

he goes so early. Today he's running a little late. It's already 7:15 AM. He has to hurry.

It's freezing outside, the kind of cold that stings so badly it feels punitive. Afshan always talked about that, about how Boston was the most climatically inhospitable place she had ever lived. "It is oppressively cold for so long, and then, bang! It is oppressively hot. You live dreading the next extreme." Connor loved that about her, all those stubborn expectations of a foreigner, bottom-lining it in a way that no native would. No one here would expect winter to last less than six months, or spring more than six weeks. Living with Boston weather—heat or frost, no matter—made you feel as if the best days of your life were coming right up, if you could just get through today.

The weather in Mashhad was ideal, she said. He can still hear her describing it in her schooled English, with her careful pronunciations and endearing formalities. It ranges from semi-arid to subtropical, she would say. Never more than eighty-five in the summer, rarely falling below freezing in the winter, the weather in northwestern Iran was outrageously perfect. Each season bowed out and let the next take over. No one there ever walked around angry at the ruthless seasons, just as no one there had to acquiesce, grimly, that it was only a matter of time until the nice weather was gone.

When he turns left on Broadway and heads south, Connor zips up his jacket, using the hood to cover his ears, and crams the envelope of cash in one of the pockets. The coat's not quite warm enough for today, but it's the one he lent her. It's the only one he reaches for anymore. He's gotten so used to the cold, it almost doesn't even register anyway. He's never known anything else. The furthest he's moved since growing up in Savin Hill has been up to Boston. From downtown across the Charles River to Somerville, where he is now, it's only about five miles. His family's still down in Dorchester. He doesn't see them much.

It's a forty-five-minute walk from where he lives in Teele Square to Afshan's apartment in the Prospect Hill neighborhood of Union Square. The most direct route is down Holland Street, through Davis Square, but often he takes one of the side streets, to avoid walking by the bookstore from which he was fired last summer. When he passes it, he almost reflexively sees the faces of the owners, a husband and wife, shocked and furi-

ous at being cheated. It didn't matter that his were honest mistakes, born from laziness, mostly, but also from their confusing paper system (who still keeps books by hand?). It wasn't even that much money. They didn't care about that. It was about *them*. How would *they* get through this? He hasn't found another job yet, though he briefly considered going back to the store when Afshan died. She'd written the majority of her dissertation there, at the countertop of the shop's coffee corner; they'd liked her. How could they refuse him his job when he presented them with her death? But then a lawyer had called him. Afshan had left a will. His first thought was, *Of course she did*. There wasn't much to it. She wanted to be returned to Mashhad for a traditional Shia Islamic burial. She'd asked for some of her grandmother's valuable jewelry to be returned to her sisters. She'd also inherited, from the same grandmother, a chunk of cash about which Connor had never known. This was his. The sentence in the will declaring the money was the only time his name was mentioned. Eighteen and a half thousand dollars. *Fuck the bookstore*, he thought. This money bought him all the time in the world.

In Davis Square, he passes the statues outside of the small movie theater: a couple strolling together, a pair of boys, one chasing after the other. In the warm weather, when the square is filled with people, he's more often than not fooled, for a second, into thinking the statues are real. Now, when it's cold out and no one lingers, the statues remind him eerily of Narnians, their mouths frozen open. The rest of the flock is scattered, scared away by the witch's threat. The statues wait for the warm weather to come. Which it surely will. Someday.

Just before he reaches Holland Avenue, he veers left, to walk down Highland instead. He can see the bookstore, just barely, before the street diverges enough to take him away. Afshan had been there first. When he'd landed his job there, after floundering around in and finally skidding out of his MA in English at Northeastern, ten credits shy of graduation (he still hasn't told his father; maybe one day he'll go back), she'd been a patron for months. She would perch at the countertop for hours, coffee cooling at her elbow, enormous books split open in front of her, pencils and highlighters scattered around like toys. She could focus interminably on her dissertation, researching the

economic effects of natural gas, oil, and hydroelectric power on Iran's energy infrastructure. She never caved, defeated, or felt desperate for distraction from the vastness of the task in front of her. He'd watch her trace down the pages with her tiny fingertips, utterly engrossed in the equations she was reading. He could see the civil disinclination in her eyes when he brought her some of his favorite books, mostly poetry. It was the politeness that both drove him away and brought him back. Her blatant good manners were infuriating. It was somehow worse than if she'd just rejected him. He was on fire, beguiled, in that state that someone's indifference to you seems to obligate. She made no attempt to flirt back. It wasn't coyness. Appraise first, act later. Afshan was nothing if not properly schooled. She would gaze at him steadily, as if he were the only one in the world who thought poetry was worth reading, and she the only one willing to indulge him, the only one nice enough to keep glancing at the titles. He reads his own poems at a couple of open-mic nights, a regular one at MIT, occasionally one hosted across the river by a Brighton poetry series. Before they were a couple, he invited Afshan to come sometimes. Some of those times, she would. He'd look up to find her staring at him, a creature who had found herself on foreign ground. She was nonplussed, content to watch him with an anthropologist's eyes, as if her primary interest were in understanding just what the hell he was doing.

There are homeless people, a crowd of regulars, who take up winter residency in the small public park at the corner of Holland and Highland. It's not much of a park, really: a small paved area furnished with a collection of stone benches set at right angles to one another, in front of some walled-off flower beds. A few sad little trees poke their way through the concrete. The city landscapers haven't been around since the cold set in, and the flower beds are piled high with scavenged belongings, cans, rolls of old clothes belted together, a shopping cart. The homeless like it here because there are vents cut into the pavement; the subway trains run underneath the park on their way to the Davis Square station, and gusts of hot air travel up from the tunnels. Central heating. The only place in all of Somerville that has it.

As Connor comes closer, they're arguing. Their gleeful, livid faces are lit up by their fury with one another, both mock and

genuine. Their voices are loud and drunken. It's funny, but also sad, because sandwiched in between the bawdy jokes is hysteria, misery, hopelessness.

"I don't *have* it, Karl," one young woman shouts, clamping her gloved hands over her ears. Connor recognizes her; he sees her here almost every time he comes through the square. This must be one of her daily stops. The dark puffiness of her eye sockets is so severe, at first it looks like abuse. But her hair and teeth also show signs of street living: dirty, broken, and malnourished. A sparkly blue feather boa is wrapped around her neck as a paltry, makeshift scarf. Every rush of wind sends silver tinsel through the air.

Karl, standing in front of her, grabs her hands and pulls them away. "You better have it, *bitch*," he says. "You better have it now." He puts his open palm on her face and pushes her head back. He is the *capo di famiglia*, the shot-caller.

"I don't have it now, but"—she wails as Karl turns away in disgust—"I'll have it soon, I *swear*."

Connor looks away and picks up his pace. His feelings—sadness, fear, anger—must echo hers, but he also can't wait to get away. Afshan disapproved of his self-implicating unease in this kind of situation. She didn't understand his instinct to remain uninvolved. It was an American thing, she said. To do nothing is to side with the powerful. God, he can almost hear her say that. How she knew that kind of thing, why it came to her so easily, he never figured out.

"Mister, can you spare any change? A buck maybe?" One man, ensconced in a sleeping bag up to the waist, has noticed his approach and slithers over to the edge of the sidewalk. "It's fucking cold out here. We're all cold. C'mon," he pleads. Connor does what he does every single time he passes a homeless person and pretends he doesn't see him. He used to drop a couple of coins into someone's cup occasionally. He's gotten stingier since Afshan died. He just can't use the money for anything like this. It's like giving away pieces of her. Distributing Afshan, dollar by dollar.

She'd call that sentimental. She was sensible and practical where he was not, and he'd never wished to be those things until he met her. But for the enviable steadiness she had somehow come into, she also possessed a blithe, childish misunderstand-

ing of American culture. She cheerfully suffered humiliation without being humiliated, enthusiastically throwing herself into a conversation about American urban legends or chatting up the teenagers crowded around the science fiction at the bookstore. He was embarrassed for her. No matter what, he was always a little embarrassed for her. She never remembered song lyrics, though she sang heartily along with the radio. Her terrible sense of pitch was charming. She loved country music ballads, but she often misunderstood the sentiments. Once as they drove into Boston for dinner, she leaned close to the radio. *It only hurts when I'm breathing*, the singer drawled. *My heart only breaks when it's beating*. Afshan snorted. "Doesn't she know that's all the time?"

"Hey," the sleeping bag man whines again. He scoots forward again, forcing Connor to step around him.

"Sorry, man," he says. He doesn't slow down.

"Fuck you," Sleeping Bag Man says, louder this time, sulking. "You fuckin' racist." His reaction draws the attention of the rest of the park gang, and that makes Connor walk even faster.

"Where do you think you're going?" he hears Karl shout from behind him.

He checks the traffic to cross the street. He doesn't look back.

"Hey! I'm talking to you! Where you going?"

Afshan had grown up in an enormous family, the youngest of four sisters. The three eldest married while practically still children; the house teemed with infants by Afshan's fifteenth birthday. She was inundated by the minutiae of caregiving. That had something to do with her self-assurance, but it didn't account for everything. She could progress without fail, even in situations in which normal people would throw back their heads and announce that they couldn't bear it any longer—as a teenager, through her family's near poverty during the war with Iraq; for the past several years, through her doctorate. She could disarm anyone without effort; leave a hushed, ineffaceable impression; stand in a crowd and let the noise and panic and confusion pass through her. People wanted to be close to her, to absorb that quietude, that stability. Hers was the kind of remarkableness that seemed so unfair that, while everything she was made Con-

nor love her more, it also made some narrow, sharp, secret part of him hate her in equal measure. She was the only one who had a say in who she was. He doesn't know how she did it.

It wasn't just the foreignness. The times when he felt the most different from her, he hated her, and the times when she seemed nationless, just another person in the world who knew better than him, he loved her. When she wanted to get married in Iran, because of her family, he knew that it made sense. Her family was widespread and complicated; he had only his father and an aunt. Her parents were religiously vigilant and traditional, insisting on a formal Persian wedding; he and his family would've been content at the city hall in Somerville. It didn't matter that her case was sound. He resisted its cloying good-natured reasonability and Afshan's logical explanations. She told him he was being foolish, and it only made him defy the whole thing more.

But he gave in, eventually. He always gave in. He agreed to get married in Iran, and then to live there, at least for the duration of her fellowship. It amazed and reassured him that he was making decisions about how he would live his life based on what was best for them. He'd found someone who could give him rest. She was able to still even the deepest moments of turmoil. He really loved her, he thought; he must have. Though it didn't hurt that she was beautiful. Tiny and elegant on long thin limbs and joints that pivoted too easily, her movements reminded him of a hummingbird, a series of flits so fast she looked motionless, floating, surrounded by a low, warm hum. Every once in a while she would pause in midair to gaze at him with her massive dark eyes, solemn and seemingly guileless. In these moments she seemed so in possession of herself, seemed so thoroughly to know her own mind, that he felt he was losing himself, the boundaries of his body blurring. It didn't matter that he knew not a word of Farsi. That he'd be leaving his family. His arguments no longer made all that much sense to him. His desires were easier to give up. *Yes*, he would end up saying, in one form or another. *Yes, you may have whatever it is you want, whenever it is you want it.*

Once he reaches Porter Square, he can see the gray-domed tip of Afshan's building. Today, it's just a shade darker than the sky behind it. He looks at it without blinking until the cold makes

his eyes water, and he has to stop to press his fingertips against them. Afshan's apartment is in an old converted church and she had the top floor, inside the dome. She loved Prospect Hill, with its strange, appealing amalgamation of cultures; her building is flanked by a Chinese video rental and a Brazilian comércio. Across the street is a dry cleaner, owned by a Nicaraguan couple. Neon signs shaped like coat hangers advertise the services. The sign with *shirts* written across it has serendipitously been placed between two windows, so the "r" is blocked. As they passed it, one of them would always wonder aloud, thoughtfully, "Shits?" and the other would laugh to sobs.

Her apartment is a studio, a hideaway. She was so happy there. All the ceilings slope skyward. Enormous dark cherry beams protrude from the walls and come together at the point, lining the apartment like the membranes of an orange. For anyone else it would have been a closet, but Afshan was small enough that the space seemed reasonable. Connor called it her birdcage. He's nearly a foot taller than she was. No matter how much time he spent there, he never stopped banging his head on doorframes or striking his shoulders against the beams as he passed by.

But it was heaven inside. No roommates coming in unannounced, commandeering the bathroom, or turning on the television too loud. She piled plums and apricots and pomegranates in bowls—still lifes on every surface. They could stay inside for days, the air perfumed with sex and the quince and saffron Afshan used to make the food she'd grown up eating. She was the one who would eventually insist on leaving, to write or to meet with her advisor. Sometimes, though, he could convince her to stay. Sometimes, if it wasn't too important that she leave on time, she'd crawl back into bed with him, let him hold her for a few more minutes. He'd wrap his arms around her, as if he were collecting her, curl her into a ball, and hold her against his chest. Often she would draw her knees up in her sleep and roll against him, asking to be held. "It is like I'm inside a big machine," she would murmur, her normal fast hum decelerating to a low-frequency vibration. He remembers feeling her heart rate slow as she relaxed, its birdlike velocity dropping. Her heart, the muscle of it, seemed close, almost pressing against the thin layers of her skin. He pictured it inside her, the size of a peach.

He remembers her mouth on his clavicle as he looped his arms around her. Her sleepy voice stirred in him some instantaneous and painful tenderness, some unbearable volatility. He would put his lips on hers and hold her almost too tightly.

One morning the week before she died, he'd woken up before dawn, as he often did. Her bed was too short for him. His feet never could make it through the night without hanging off the edge. He pulled his laptop into bed with him and tried to type quietly. Blue light fluoresced her face, which was smooth and relaxed with the certainty of sleep. She woke a few minutes later.

"Hey," she whispered. "What are you doing?"

He turned. Her eyes were enormous and soft in the shadows of her hair. "I couldn't sleep," he said. "I'm looking at the Earth, see?"

She sat up and squinted as he turned the screen toward her. He was using a virtual globe, map, and geographic information program to look at satellite images of the planet. He watched her eyes move across the screen.

"Can you find Mashhad?" she asked, resting her head back on the pillow. "I can look at my old neighborhood up close." He found the image and enlarged it for her. She smiled. "Where I grew up."

"And look," he said, zooming out on the window. "Here's Somerville." He spanned the distance with his hand, pinky on one place, thumb on the other. "Now I'm in both places at once."

"Yes," she said. She yawned and rubbed her temples. They'd been out late the night before.

"Hey, look, babe, it's Davis Square. It's amazing how close you can get, right up to cars and people. Look what I found." He pointed at a spot on the screen.

She massaged her eyelids before looking. The computer light was bright. "It's a person," she said.

"With a red baseball cap. Like mine. It's me. It must be me, don't you think?"

"Well, maybe," she said. "A lot of people have that Red Sox hat." She yawned again, wider. "Aren't you tired?"

He didn't answer. He glanced back at the screen.

"Yes, you might be right," she said after a few beats. "It's you."

It is only when Connor reaches Somerville Avenue, on the

southeast side of Porter Square, that he realizes the envelope of money is gone, and he doesn't know where he lost it. He doesn't even stop to think about it. He takes off, heading north. His feet barely skim the asphalt.

He's sweating by the time he gets back to Davis Square, having scoured the pavement on the return trip, head down, like a diver moving along the ocean floor. He jogs slower, panting. He rips down the zipper of his jacket, which now feels like a bearskin. He can't have dropped the money more than twenty minutes ago. *Where the fuck is it?* He casts about for someone to ask. The park gang has disbanded, the detritus of their assembly gone with them. It's early—before eight—and the streets are still mostly empty. Because it's a Saturday, most stores aren't open yet. It's got to be here somewhere. He cuts across the street to look by the statues. He sees a flash of blue and silver as someone rises from the bench outside of the movie theater. Trailing tinsel, the young homeless woman starts walking away from the square, her gait uneven and shuffling. She's got a huge bag draped over one shoulder. She slows briefly and glances over her shoulder. Her pace picks up just the tiniest bit. He could be imagining it, he's so desperate. Their eyes meet for an instant and he's fixed where he stands. He knows that she has the money, or at least knows where it is. He's sure of it. He trots after her, speeding up as she turns and disappears down an alley behind the recently closed pharmacy. Heart hammering, he follows her. He peeks, feeling stupid, down the alleyway first. She's there, rummaging through her bag as it wobbles on top of a trashcan, its strap dangling to the ground. He watches her carefully balance a compact on the brick ledge that runs along the side of the building. He watches her lean so close her face almost touches the mirror. Her hair, long and dirty, falls over her shoulder and blocks his view. She remains still, the stillness of someone looking for a lost contact. As if moving suddenly will ruin everything. He feels swiftly murderous. *What does she think she's doing*, he thinks. *Who the fuck puts makeup on outside in the winter?*

“Hey,” he calls. He starts to walk toward her. “Hey!”

At the first sound of his voice she jerks around, and he sees the needle pointed at her neck. He halts, instinctively not want-

ing to scare her. He's closer to her than he's ever been and sees for the first time how young she is. Eighteen? Nineteen? She glances at the compact quickly, once, grabs it and snaps it shut. She's not holding any makeup. She needs the mirror to see the veins in her neck. He eases out his hand, palm toward her.

"I'm not here to cause trouble," he says. "I just need to know if you have my money."

"Fuck you," she snarls, swaying. "I ain't got shit of yours. The fuck you think you are?" The needle is still in her hand. Its end gently brushes the tip of her hair.

"Listen." He stops a few feet away from her. "I really need that money. It's important."

"I told you, motherfucker." Her voice is louder now. "I ain't steal nothin' from you. You don't know me." She lurches at him quickly, like she's shooin' a squirrel or a stray cat. She's breathing hard and her eyes are glassy. She stumbles, drops the needle, curses.

He's done being nice. "That's my money," he says. He steps closer to her. "That's my money. I dropped it and you took it."

"Go away, asshole." She glares at him and bends over, reaching for the syringe.

The second she drops her head, he lunges and grabs the bag by its strap, yanking it up to his chest. She howls and comes after him like a cornered dog. Her stench hits him in waves. The first is one of rotting food and sweat. The inimitable bacterial stink of an unwashed crotch is slower to reach him, but even more powerful. And something else he recognizes too, some smell entirely human in its organic indignity. Blood, unheeded, unperfumed. He gags as he spins away from her and sticks his hand inside the bag, half-afraid of what he might find. But he doesn't care. The frenzy tunnels in his bloodstream, in his skin, vaporous and alcoholic. Her fists pummel his back, but he barely feels the blows. She can't weigh more than a hundred pounds. It takes only a few seconds to find the envelope. He wrenches it out and drops the bag on the ground. He steps away and turns to face her. It's as if he's shouted out stage directions, commanding her to change roles. Her face breaks as she begins to cry, her lips curling up to expose her ruined teeth.

"You don't understand," she says. "He's gonna *kill* me. I'm gonna die."

Connor stands there, clutching the money. There's something sticky smeared on the envelope. "I can't help you," he says. "I'm sorry. I can't give you this. I need it."

She's tangled her hands up in her filthy oversized sweatshirt and sunk to the ground, crying. The boa has slipped and hangs ragged and uneven around her shoulders. A loose feather has floated to rest in her hair just above her left ear, like a flower. She thrashes her arms, holding handfuls of the sweatshirt, and rambles.

"I needed it from him, needed the money, I told him I'd pay him back, it's just hard, fuckin' hard." She moans on and on.

He looks around hastily to see if there are any people close by. "I can't let you have this," he repeats. She stops bawling and looks up at him, her eyes gigantic, too globular, in her shriveled face, her teeth still showing through her open mouth. He hears her breath whistle in and out. Her lips are swollen a bluish purple. Other than the sweatshirt, she wears only a pair of pajama bottoms and some old sneakers without laces. He can see she isn't wearing socks. She must be freezing.

She's quieter now, crying the way a child would, in soft hiccups and hitched breaths. Her nose is running; her face is slick and gray. He can see sores at her temples and scalp line, glowing candy-red lesions.

"Some people got all the money in the world," she says calmly, almost to herself. "Some people got everything."

He stands beside her still. The envelope is steely with cold in his hands. It's now past eight.

"He locked me in the basement," she says. "He left me there, for days. You can't believe how cold it was down there." She stretches out the vowels in "believe," finger-combs her hair with shaking hands. She scowls. "Prick hit me on the head." She touches a spot near the crown. He sees the thickish brown bed of a scab. "Guess it could be from blacking out." Then, truly exasperated: "How am I supposed to get it if I'm locked up?"

"I'm sorry," he says.

"I said I'd get it. I can't do it now. But soon, I can. Really fuckin' soon." She looks at him without seeing him. Her pupils dilate and contract, spinning like tops. "I ain't even got a place to go. Not a room, nothin'."

He doesn't want to hear her story, doesn't want to hear about

how much she has endured, the catalog of unthinkable atrocities. She will most likely die, at the mercy of the man or the drugs or the winter. Still he feels cast to the cement, made too alive by the cold and the adrenaline. He is imprinted by the shape and smell of her, her smallness. How long she must have waited for someone to bear witness.

He shrugs off his jacket and lets it drop in front of her. "Here," he says. "You look cold." He feels a little better. He can give her this, at least. He can make up for it. He can make up for it all.

She looks at it, dumbly, then at her bag beside her, where he's dropped it. The drugs. The drugs keep her from feeling the cold.

She barks once, to clear her throat. "What the fuck am I going to do with this?" She grabs the jacket in both hands and holds it up. As she staggers splay-legged to her feet, he sees a bloodstain webbing the seam of her pants.

He backs down the alley, eyeing her until he reaches the street. "I need this," he tells her again. "I have to pay someone, too. I'm sorry." He turns away, gripping the money.

"*What the fuck* am I going to do with *this*?" he hears her wail, full of panic and anticipation, as he begins to run.

Afshan didn't have a waterproof coat, and it had been raining all week long. They'd laughed, when she first put his on, at how it dwarfed her, at how ridiculous it looked, gaping and billowing out around her. It probably wouldn't have kept any rain out anyway.

She was furious with him that day. He hadn't even meant to say anything. They'd been hiking for an hour, maybe; she'd been chattering on about the wedding, and he was just letting her talk. She asked him something, he doesn't remember exactly what it was. It may have had to do with a job she thought she'd found for him in Tehran. He didn't answer right away, and she turned around and looked at him. Just stopped in the middle of the trail and looked at him. He could've saved himself, come up with something, but he was right on the ridgepole of telling her he wasn't ready and he waited a moment too long. But she knew. He could tell she already knew. He didn't have to say anything at all.

She strode up the hill, tented in the jacket, tearing down the zipper when she began to sweat. It flapped behind her like two

flags. She gave no sign that she was even listening to him. He wasn't saying he didn't want to go; he just needed more time. He wasn't supposed to want to stay—he knew that. He was supposed to embrace the adventure. Surge forward into his new life. But the Iran he imagined wasn't the subtropical paradise he was supposed to think it was. It was wilderness. It was on the other side of the earth. But he'd traveled farther before. He'd been to Bali on spring break. He just needed more time. There wasn't anything he could say that she believed or understood. She accused him of staging the hike, to take her to a place from which she couldn't get away, to force her to hear him out. That may have been true; he doesn't know. He can't remember whose idea it was anymore. She loved fall in Boston. It was the one season when the weather delighted her, the only time she really liked being outside.

The ground was waterlogged. Their shoes were drenched by the time they reached the summit. "When?" she asked. "When, then?" She didn't answer when he said, "Soon. Really soon."

The clearing was small and nicely mulched. A bench from which to enjoy the view was several yards from the edge. A single glance was enough to know that the rain had soaked it. Afshan strode instead to a log that had been dragged, as a stop-gap seat, closer to the rim of the overlook. She sat rigid, decidedly away from him. He remembers her hair had gone to frizz, standing up in a comic nimbus around her face. Beads of sweat texturized her skin. The sign at the trailhead was right; the rain made the colors resplendent, redensified swathes of green and orange. The mountains in the distance rose up, fainter than their cousins in the foreground.

He sat beside her. Another *if only*. Why hadn't he just kept standing? He wanted to touch her, to comfort her. He felt her disappearing, felt the situation turning into a big complicated knot he would try uselessly to untangle. He had to get hold of her before she withdrew into the fray. Whatever the log was—too wet or too small or too rotten—it couldn't bear his weight for long. He shifted, to get closer to her, and felt the quick snap and release of the log breaking in half. She lost her balance and fell forward, the half of the log she'd been sitting on rolling down and pushing against her. The jacket. He grabbed the back of that stupid fucking jacket. It came off, as if he were ridding

her of it. A tablecloth slipping off its table: smooth, seamless, quiet. She landed with a soft cry, her knees on firm ground, but her hands too close to the edge. The ground gave underneath them. He was so surprised when she kept falling that he didn't even watch, didn't see her land.

It was some thirty feet. He slid down to the gorge floor, skinned his hands, tore off part of a thumbnail. Images of what her insides must have looked like flashed through his head in pieces: organs torn and leaking, bones crushed and puncturing through layers of pink muscle and red nerves. The back of her head was almost gone. He doesn't know what happened to it. Shorn off by something. That's all he had, what it looked like. The blood ran between her teeth like water into sidewalk cracks. It coated her tongue. Her eyes were still open and bright. He told her he loved her as they continued to shine.

A man is on the porch when Connor pounds up the sidewalk. He knows it's the landlord, from how he's standing, how he's waiting. Connor is sure he looks like hell. A bleeding hand from tripping a few blocks back. Wheezing, pouring sweat, face probably such a brilliant red he seems on the verge of heart failure. Coatless.

Connor stands in front of the man, huffing, and thumbs through the cash. The money is still all there, though now the envelope is ripped and wrinkled and stained with something clear and greasy. Blood is on the flap. He tosses it onto the bottom step. He bends over, coughing, bracing his hands on his knees. He can't raise his head right away. He hears the tiny snap of a lighter. Sweat falls from his forehead to the cement. His breath clouds the air in front of him. The scent of cloves springs a lock inside him, contracts, for a moment, the aperture of his vision. He expels it from his lungs. He smells it in the wind. It's in the heaviness of the anaerobic winter sky that ceaselessly presses closer.

The man says nothing. He stands on the porch and studies first the street, the traffic, then Connor. The man checks his watch. He is dressed for the weather, in a long coat and a gray and orange wool ski cap. The smoke from his cigarette curls up around his face. He taps the ash over the porch railing. The coat is open enough to expose his neck and throat, across which wrinkles cut like whiplashes. They're the kind of wrinkles sun

damage causes, Connor thinks, wrinkles begotten by scorching days outside, working and playing both. They're active when he twists his neck, skin moving and bending, accommodating the way skin is supposed to. But when he aligns straight, the wrinkles' paths are clear, marking where they'll appear just as soon as he turns his head once more.

"So," he says, exhaling smoke, when Connor stands upright to face him. "You've come again."

## ALL THE WAYS WE SAY GOODBYE

When you grow up in New Jersey, in the dim, gray suburbs of New York, you grow up with the knowledge that one day you will have to leave. You don't think to be sorry about it, because that's how it is. After high school, if you don't want to go to Rutgers, and you aren't smart or lucky enough for Princeton, you will be sent out of state, where you still have a shot at a good school or a swim team scholarship. Once you are out, you can go anywhere. But if you do, it will be very hard to come back, even though there are things you will miss—the malls; your old elementary school; and summers at the Jersey Shore, the fudge whipped in huge vats and the birds wheeling over the boardwalk.

Some of your more ambitious boyfriends will eventually find jobs in Manhattan. You know you could always marry one of them and live a glamorous few years in the city, but you know where that leads. When you have kids you will trade in your SoHo apartment for a condo in Hoboken, and eventually you will want a yard and you will buy a small house in Jersey City, and then a bigger one in Madison or Morris Plains, and you will end up just where you started—in some four-bedroom new-build just off the interstate, with nothing to look forward to but your book club and late night TV, and all that beautiful gothic promise of the city just out of reach.

That's why you try to get as far away as you can while you are young.

Still, wherever you go after that, it will be hard to call any place home. When you grow up with the idea that there is always something better out there, you can never, truly, stop wondering what's waiting for you somewhere else.

Your mother, when she was young, was able to get away, for a brief six years. She got onto the highway straight out of college, with two suitcases and a parakeet in a wire cage, and she

drove. For a while, in the seventies, she worked as a nurse in Richmond, at the hospital where Patch Adams worked, until she returned for a summer to her hometown of Pequannock, and met your father, and never left again.

Still, when you are young, your mother's favorite bedtime stories are always the ones about Richmond. She tells you about the duplex she rented with the striped yellow walls, and the "Saturday Gun 'n Knife Club," as she called it, that filled the hospital beds on Sunday mornings. She tells you about the doctors she knew there, the ones who are married now, or childless, or divorced. She speaks about them as if there is still the hope that she can go back again, ten years later, and they will all be waiting for her, just as they were when she left.

From the time you are very young, you are aware that this part of her life—the part that's gone—will always be the best part. Still, you see her as a strong woman, shaped by these experiences, who has delivered babies the size of gerbils, who lived, and put her hands into the stomachs of dying men, and you love her for it.

You love your father too, but growing up you know very little about him, except that he is a good, quiet man, who sells insurance in Newark and always comes home by six for dinner. You know that he collects Lionel trains and owns a small, blue motorboat, which he keeps in the driveway and polishes when you have gone to bed; you know that he loves the dog he bought when you were nine, a cocker spaniel named Marty, and that he spends his weekends on the wicker porch chair reading novels, with Marty balled up under his slippers like a stuffed toy. All of his novels are bought from old library sales and still have the catalogue card on the back of the front cover.

But you also know that your father grew up in Morris Plains, only three miles from where you were born, and that he has spent most of his life in this town. You know that his failed tryout as a varsity football kicker still troubles him, and that the stories he tells of his past are tedious, nothing like your mother's—just Saturday nights at the Dairy Queen and racing his Corvair down Route 287. He shows you the houses his friends used to live in when he was a boy, and for a long time you see him as a coward, because he stayed, and because he fell in love with your mother and made her stay too, when she

didn't belong in New Jersey anymore, when it always seemed, when she looked at you, that she was wondering where she'd be if you hadn't come along.

It is not until you are nineteen, a freshman at Clemson, in South Carolina, that you learn anything new about your father. By then your mother has been gone for two years, run off to Berlin with a man you never met, and it is just you and your father and Marty driving up to Lake George, New York, in May for your cousin's wedding. The cousin is on your mother's side, and the drive from New Jersey is five hours with traffic, but your father still insists that you be there, that it is the right thing to do.

When your mother first left, she promised to call you every weekend, but then it was every two weeks, then every month, and after a while you stopped taking the calls. By the wedding you have not spoken to her in over a year, and as far as you know, no one else has either.

Your father takes Marty everywhere now that she's gone. You have always considered Marty his dog, not yours, and you are glad there is someone at home still to look out for your father. You imagine the two of them sitting together on the porch under the shallow blue sky, like two old men who have been friends for a long time and have nothing left to say to each other.

On the way up your father asks you about your classes, and you tell him they are going fine and that you are thinking about majoring in English. He has never been the kind of father to ask you what the hell you are going to do with that; instead, he says he liked the stories you wrote for the literary magazine in high school.

When you ask him how he has been keeping busy, he says he has started exercising since he quit cigarettes; he takes Marty for long hikes on the weekends. When Marty hears his name, he pushes his pear-face into your shoulder from the back seat and waits for you to pat his head.

The wedding is being held in a lodge overlooking a lake, a kind of campsite with a cluster of cabins around it. Before the ceremony you have some time to kill, and your father takes you into town to shop the outlets. He buys you a pair of dress shoes, and afterward you sit with him on a picnic table and look out

at the blue lake with your feet on the benches, eating ice cream. The day is luminous, but the clouds are gorged. "It looks like rain," he says, and considers them, chewing his lip.

"Let's take a trip," he says suddenly. You tell him you are already on a trip, and he says, "Just for an hour. I used to spend my summers as a boy just a little way from here."

You are surprised because, as far as you know, your father has never left New Jersey.

But then he takes you to the edge of town and keeps driving, north, into the woods, and seems to know exactly where he's going. After a while there is no one else in sight, and the sun is gold on the trees, and you feel free and adventurous, as you imagine your mother felt once, driving south after college, with the windows open and her whole life waiting for her at the end of the road.

He takes you and Marty through Warrensburg to a town called Pottersville, a battered nook in the woods, of which there seems to be little left. At its edge there is a sign, scraped almost white by the weather, for Stone Bridge and Caves, a mining and tourist site.

Pottersville is nothing like New Jersey, your father tells you. "My grandparents came out here from the city," he says, "because in the summers it reminded them of Italy. There used to be raspberry bushes in the yard, and a drive-in theater out back. At night the lights from the projector would come through the trees. You could see them from our porch."

But now nothing of that remains. There is a 7-Eleven where the house used to be, and grass has grown up over the parking lot of the theater. You ask your father why he never told you about this place before, but he doesn't seem to hear you. He is leaning forward over the steering wheel, peering through the windshield, and you have never seen him look so sad before, not even when your mother left.

He says he wants to take you to visit your great-grandfather's grave, and you drive around for a bit, but you can't find the Catholic church, only a Lutheran one. You drive through the neighborhoods for ten minutes before you catch sight of someone outside, a man mowing his lawn, to ask him about the church.

But when you finally locate the cemetery, your father can't

find the headstone either. “I remember he was buried under a little tree,” he says, but there are over ten trees on the lot, and it’s hard to tell what they would have looked like all those years ago. The graves seem to be grouped by ethnicity, and you follow your father from stone to stone, looking for the Italian names.

Marty sniffs around a little, and after a while you bundle him into your arms and say it’s late, you should start heading back. He asks you for another ten minutes, but you’re going to miss the ceremony, and when you tell him this his shoulders fall, and he stands there for a moment looking out over the sea of stones, stooped like an old man. You think, your father must have had so many stories. And not a day will go by after this that you won’t think about them, and wish you had stayed just another hour, letting them be told.

Later, at the wedding, you get drunk because everyone keeps asking after your mom and wondering if you have a boyfriend, and you dance with your father in the lodge, under a tulle-clad ceiling, to “Brown Eyed Girl.” Afterward, you won’t remember much about that night, but you will remember your cousin and his bride kissing in the rain under a huge, pink umbrella, and it is all so beautiful—her white dress, the colors of the sodden evening—that you will remember thinking, I hope someone gets this photo, though you will never actually find out whether they do.

That night, your aunt knocks on your door and says you have to go to the hospital, your father has had a heart attack. She is still in the dress she was wearing at the wedding, a long, gold evening gown, and she stands in the doorway with the moonlight burning her into a silhouette, so that she almost doesn’t seem real, and you think, well, either she is an angel or she is a dream; because if she’s not, then she really is just a woman in a gold dress, standing at the door.

Far off, you imagine, in Pottersville, a row of brown-shingled houses are filled with sleeping strangers. And you feel like you have come to some kind of understanding in this place, about the kind of man your father is, and that you have judged him meanly. You think, he is not a coward as you used to believe, but a man who was happy once. And you are the sorry one, because your father has called two places home in his lifetime, and when he goes, you will have none. And you think, what if

all you do is wait for something better, something that never comes, and one day you take your own daughter to see what's left of Morris Plains, and it is just a sea of graves no one visits anymore.

Your father is buried in New Jersey, in the plot he was supposed to share with your mother. Afterward you sell his house and bring Marty back with you to South Carolina, where you have rented a townhouse because you suddenly feel too old to be spending your nights in a dormitory, squealing over boys. You have to remember how to carry your nineteen-year-old body, and mix a cocktail, and laugh when your friend tells a joke about sex.

Leaving New Jersey after the funeral, you knew there would be a day when you might not return, whereas before, you always had a reason to go back if you wanted. All you have now is Marty, who spends his afternoons lying solemnly in the middle of your kitchen floor. At first you aren't sure what to do with him; you never paid attention to how much he was fed or how often he needed to be walked. At night he cries until you carry him to the foot of your bed and arrange him on top of a towel with his stuffed aardvark.

Then one evening he crawls up while you are reading in bed and puts his head in your lap. It feels so natural that for a moment you can even imagine your dad in the room with you, sitting by the window with his feet propped up on a chair, reading one of his novels and talking about the weather.

After that, you live. You write papers and hold dinner parties and go to swim meets. Your aunt calls every once in a while to see how you're doing, and you tell her you're fine, you started studying for the GRE so you can go for your doctorate after graduation. She asks you if you have talked to your mother. You say you tried to reach her, but you don't know where she's gone; there is someone else living in her apartment now. This is only part of the truth. The other part is that every once in a while in the early hours of the morning, you get a call from an unknown number, which you always think about answering, but never do.

Then, in April of your senior year at Clemson, you find Mar-

ty splayed on the lawn near the deck. When the veterinarian sets his leg, he finds a tumor in Marty's throat. When he tells you this, you can't stop thinking about your father, who died in the hospital twenty minutes before you arrived, and all you can think is that Marty will go while you are at class, or out buying groceries, and you will find him cold on your bed when you return, and you don't want him to be afraid when it happens.

The vet tells you there must be great pain by now and asks if you would like to put him down. You do, but not here, not in this sterile, unfamiliar place, with posters of animal digestive systems on the walls. You tell him you'll think about it, and later you put Marty in your car and drive the ten hours north, through the night, to Pennsylvania, where your dad had a friend who works with horses. He owes you because one year at your parents' Christmas party, just after you turned sixteen and everyone else was dizzy with wine, you drove him to the hospital with bottle glass wedged into the bottom of his foot and his eyes practically rolled back into his head.

When you explain what you'd like to do, he warns you against it, but in the end he gives you a needle and a bottle of sodium pentobarbital and shows you how to do it. I could lose my license for this, he keeps saying, but you take the bottle and leave before he changes his mind.

It takes another seven hours, all afternoon, to reach Pottersville. You pass Lake George on the way, and the lodge where your cousin was married. He is divorced already and seeing another girl. You remember the moment he had with his bride at the wedding, and you wish you had taken that photograph.

You have to stop for gas just outside of town, but it's one of those old places where you have to pay inside. The man at the counter sees your license plate and asks what brought you all the way to a place like this. You tell him your father lived here once, before you were born; he used to tell you about it when you were little.

"Well, there's not much left now, but there's a neat site called Stone Bridge and Caves," the man says. "That's where I take my nephews when they visit." You stand there while he draws you an elaborate map on the back of your receipt. Outside, Marty's face is pushed against the window of your car, and you wish

you could run to him and take him home again, but you know it wouldn't do any good.

You have to carry Marty because of his cast, and by the time you find a comfortable spot in the woods, near the river, the sun is going down. You've been up for almost thirty-eight hours by now and haven't even thought about where you'll stay for the night. Marty is tired, and whimpering. Good boy, you say. Shhh, it's all right.

You lay him on top of the blanket and fill the syringe like your dad's friend showed you. By the time you find the vein in his foreleg you are shaking, almost uncontrollably. Marty can sense something is wrong and nudges your hand.

You realize that until now, you have never really been alone, because when your mother left, you still had your father, and after your father, you had Marty. But when Marty goes, you will have to face up to it for the first time, all at once, and you're not sure if you can do that, even though Marty is in constant pain now, and you'll never be able to bring yourself to do this again.

Finally, as you are telling him what a good dog he is, what a good, good dog, you get control of yourself, and you push the syringe into his leg. He moans, and when you realize what you've done, you feel sick and you take his head in your arms. You were told it would take up to twelve seconds, but then fifteen pass, and twenty, and by then the only thing you can think is that the son of a bitch filled the bottle with something else instead.

For a moment you don't want to believe it. Then Marty licks your hand, and you start to cry—furious, breathless sobs. You want to drive back and kill that man, who never even came to your father's funeral. You wonder where your dad is now and who, if anyone, was waiting for him when he got there. You know he was never good with new places and must have been afraid at first. And you imagine bringing Marty back to that high steel table in the vet's office, with its lilac soap smell and its view of the recycling center out the side window, but you know he doesn't belong in that place; he belongs here, where your father had the kind of happiness that wasn't tainted by anything—not your mother's leaving, or your leaving, or his growing old alone.

Maybe it is a cruel thing to do. But you are in a bad state now, and all you can think is to take off your shorts and your tank top and bring Marty over to the river. You hug him to your chest, clutching him by the collar, and wade into the water until you are both fully submerged. You hold your breath, and he struggles, and tears at your skin with his claws, but his quick, clogged gasps are muffled and already faraway. And by the time you come up for air he is still, and it is done, and the black night is silvered with the eyes of the dead, looking down on you; and, somewhere, the dim lights of New Jersey are far away, and dull as stones.

## DOG PEOPLE

Margie settles on the bench, her ankle hooked at the wheel of the stroller, rocking it back and forth. The only thing that stops the baby from crying is movement, so this morning Margie spent fifteen minutes loading everything she might need into the stroller basket—diapers, wipes, an extra onesie, a bottle, blankets, hand sanitizer, a magazine she'll never read, her keys—all for a ten-minute walk to the park four blocks from their house, their first official outing that doesn't involve a doctor's visit. Katherine is three weeks old, but it's hard to think of her as Katherine and not the baby. Who at three weeks old has enough personality to fit a name? Margie only hopes that when the baby grows up the name will suit her. If not, there's always Katie or Kate or Kit Kat. She'd like to have a sparkplug named Kit Kat, but chances are she'll be a Katherine (Margie realizes she herself is most likely a Margaret). At home, at night, Katherine screams for hours on end, but here in the park she is quiet. The baby, even at three weeks, seems to follow Margie with her eyes, like one of the black cat clocks with the swinging tail and large plastic eyes that survey the room back and forth.

A man in a black rubber apron and work boots comes over and sits next to Margie on the bench and lights a cigarette. It's mid-September and the weather has just started to turn from mild summer to the beginning of fall, a slight breeze blowing through the hair on Margie's perpetually sweaty neck.

"I'm sorry," she says and stands to leave but then sits back down. Why should she be the one to leave if he's smoking? The smell is neither pleasant nor unpleasant, but she knows it's bad for the baby. She hates confrontation and would rather get up herself than ask him to leave. But the baby is quiet, and Margie's own body, so tired. She settles back on the bench. She hasn't slept through the night since her seventh month of pregnancy. She assumed once she didn't have this baby kicking around in-

side her, along with the worry of how the delivery would go, she'd finally be able to sleep. How short-sighted that was. How ridiculously wrong. The apron the man is wearing is covered in small white hairs, and Margie instantly thinks of pubic hairs, which causes her crotch to itch. There is so much about giving birth she hadn't anticipated. Of course, in hindsight, how could she not realize they would shave part of her pubic area, that she might shit on the bed when she was pushing for hours on end.

The man gestures to his apron. "It's a poodle," he says.

"Excuse me?" Margie says. To the left is an aluminum slide and four swings, a teeter-totter that looks like a dinosaur. She has never been to this park before, even though it is only four blocks from her house. She imagines the hours and summers they'll log here in years to come—how much fun it will be to teach Kit Kat to swing—but now there is nothing they can do. She pushes the stroller with her ankle, then pulls it back.

"The hair. It's from a poodle. I work at Trudy's." He gestures across the street with the hand holding the cigarette, and she sees Trudy's Salon and Boarding, a building she's never noticed before, the letters of the sign in a garish neon pink.

She looks at her baby, embarrassed suddenly by the baldness of Katherine's head. "Sounds like a fun job."

The man shrugs. Margie guesses him to be in his mid-thirties, with a scruffy beard of three to four days, a smudge of dirt or grease on his damp pants. He is what she would call unconventionally attractive, if anyone would think to ask her, a category she knows she's nowhere near with her tummy like rising dough, her hair unwashed for as many days since this man last shaved; if anything, she is conventionally unattractive. "Not really," he says and takes a drag on the cigarette. "But I love dogs, even ones with stupid haircuts." He holds out his free hand. "I'm Jim."

Margie stares at it for a moment before taking it in her own, the dryness of his hands mirroring her own now that she washes them fifty times a day. "I'm Margie," she says and motions to the stroller. "This is Kit Kat."

"Cute kid."

"You think so?" She looks at the baby. Katherine has large blue eyes, so dark the pupils seem to eat the irises; her nose looks like it was sculpted from clay. She wonders if the baby is really beautiful. She thinks so, but other times, not.

“She’s a looker.” He takes another drag off his cigarette as Margie watches the kids in the sandbox—two young boys in matching khaki jackets. She is glad she had a girl, that the baby will be able to wear things other than khaki and blue, that she won’t have to dress her child like a middle-aged office drone. The man clears his throat and spits to the side, and it’s as if Margie has come to into a moment of silence. She wonders if he asked a question and if it is still there between them, if she was supposed to answer.

“Do you have kids?”

“Two, a boy and a girl. Neither one was as cute as yours, though.” Katherine coos like a pigeon, her large dark eyes watching her mother. What does she see? According to the books, nothing—everything is hazy—but Margie doesn’t think so, feeling constantly judged by the tiny eyes.

“What’s it like, grooming dogs?” Margie asks.

He takes another drag off the cigarette, holding the smoke in long enough Margie wonders if he hasn’t recently given up the habit only to fail and start again. “It’s what you’d suspect. You like some dogs better than others, but even the ones you don’t like are better than most people.” He looks at Margie, her foot coming to rest on the stroller. “You a cat person?”

“I like dogs.”

He looks at her from under the thin trail of smoke. “I’d have bet money you were a cat person.”

Margie can tell this is not a compliment, that he values cats about as much as he does people. “How old are your kids now?”

“Six and eight. The girl’s a handful. She’s into eye makeup. Wears that shit all over town.” He pauses a moment. “Wait. She’s nine. Had a birthday about a month ago.”

“I can’t imagine this baby will ever be nine.” Three weeks ago she’d never guess the baby would make it to three weeks. When they pulled the baby from the pocket of Margie’s body and held her in the air, Margie felt such emptiness and fullness she didn’t know how she could contain such a contradiction without bursting apart.

“Why you say that? She sick?”

“No,” Margie says, alarmed at the idea. “Of course not.” She glances at her watch, then stands to leave. It’s almost six, which means Leo will be coming home from work soon, which means there will be someone else to watch the baby. Margie will be

able to stand in her kitchen all by herself and open a can with a can opener, or open the fridge and just stare inside. These are her moments alone now, what it means to be an independent woman.

“She’s a good-looking baby,” the man says again. “She looks just like you.”

Margie pauses from tucking the blanket around Katherine, so flustered by the comment. It strikes her as vaguely inappropriate—she’s the mother of a three-week-old baby!—as well as inaccurate, but it is also unreasonably flattering. “Good luck with the dogs.”

He nods at the stroller. “Good luck with the baby.”

“I need it,” she says, then laughs to show it’s all a joke, that clearly she has motherhood under control. Margie bumps the stroller over the grass and makes her way to the sidewalk, stopping to wave good-bye. Jim lifts his cigarette in the air in a jaunty salute before throwing it on the ground and crushing it with his foot.

She turns left to travel the four blocks back to her house. She imagines Leo on his way home, Wilco blaring through the speakers of the Honda, his personal pod of independence. When he gets home he’ll slip Kit Kat in the crook of his arm and she’ll fall instantly asleep while he plays Halo on the Xbox 360. Somehow, Leo has managed to retain his old life, to fit Kit Kat into his world as neatly as she fits in his arm, while Margie will hide in the kitchen, holding her breath, the pantry full of canned goods offering no answers.

Margie takes to walking in the park every day around five o’clock. After the first trip, Katherine slept for forty-five minutes in a row. She tells Leo and her mother on the phone that the walks are good for Katherine, that Katherine loves to be outside, that she is an outside-baby. It is an anecdote Margie can pull out like a shiny present to show everyone that she is a Mother who understands her Daughter, that there is something that differentiates Katherine from other babies.

Some days Margie has to wake Katherine from her nap and set her howling so she can pack her in a jacket and blanket and push her for the trip. After four afternoons, she finally admits to herself that she’s looking for Jim. Off and on through the

last few days, standing in front of the bathroom mirror with a toothbrush in her hand, trying to remember what it could possibly be for, she's wondered if he's shaved since that first day or if maybe it's not scruff but the honest beginning of a beard. She's wondered if he uses an electric razor on all the dogs, or, if given the breed, he might press his first two fingers together and slide them through the hair, snipping the ends with scissors like hair on a person's head. In the past four days, he is the only person other than Leo that she has spoken with in person. Margie's mother came for a week after the birth, and friends stopped by the second week, but now, in the fourth week, it's like the world has forgotten about her. Leo went back to work; her mother went home; her friends have moved on with their non-baby lives, either opting out of parenthood altogether or having had children in their twenties like reasonable adults. She is thirty-eight and for the past fifteen years has managed the human resources department for a legal database company with a thousand-plus employees, and now she no longer knows how to use a toothbrush. She and Leo agreed she would take a year or two off when the baby was born, that her career would be there when she wants to return. Margie wonders now why she would have agreed to such an arrangement, although leaving the baby is the only thing that sounds worse than staying where she is.

On Tuesday she loads Katherine into the stroller snuggled deep in a hat Margie knit herself, the needles balanced on her belly as the baby swelled inside her, as she waited impatiently for her old life to end. She and Katherine walk the few blocks to the park and find Jim sitting on the same bench they occupied together six days before. Margie's heart begins to pound. "Hey," he says when she passes, nodding his cigarette at the baby. "You guys must be on a routine." His beard is gone, replaced by a one-day growth.

Margie shields her hand to the sky, squinting toward the sun. "Why do you say that?"

"I see you walking by nearly every day at this time. I wondered when we'd run into each other again. I can't always get out at the same time. It depends on the dog."

"You've been watching us?" Margie is both elated and disturbed by this information. But hasn't she, too, been watching for him?

"Why don't you sit down?"

Margie pauses for a moment, then settles herself onto the bench, instinctively hooking a foot through the stroller and rocking it back and forth.

“You’re good with that baby,” Jim says and leans forward. He puts a hand in the stroller for Katherine to sniff as if she were a dog. Margie holds her breath as he tickles Katherine’s cheek, the baby’s open mouth rattling back and forth in hopes of a nipple. Jim forms his hand into a dog’s snout, the thumb clapping below the four flush fingers, and barks his hand at Kit Kat. “Woof.” He settles back into the bench. “Where’s her daddy?”

“Her what?” Margie says.

“Her dad.”

“Oh, yes.” She looks at Katherine and imagines Leo at work, finishing up e-mails for the day; or leaning in the doorway of his office, arms crossed as he chats with a co-worker; or maybe just sitting at his desk staring blankly at the wall, nothing in a calm sea of nothing. “He isn’t in the picture,” she says. “He’s gone.” This doesn’t feel like a lie to her. It is like Leo moves to another country every morning, and at the end of the day, moves home. Every day she worries she will hurt the child while Leo is at work, that the baby will be injured on her watch—that Katherine will suddenly roll off the changing table, or drown in the inch of bath water, or overheat during a nap from too many layers, or freeze to death from not enough, or that Margie, from sheer exhaustion, will simply forget she is holding the baby and the baby will bounce to the floor. When Leo comes home he snuggles Katherine into his arm like a football, sits on the sofa, and slides off his shoes with the toe of the opposite foot. He asks Margie about her day and she sits next to her husband—aware in that moment it is ridiculous to think these things—and tells him it was fine. The next day it will start over again.

Jim shakes his head. “What fool man’s going to leave a pretty little girl like you?” he says, and Margie feels her face heat before realizing he’s talking to Katherine. Of course he’s talking to the baby.

Jim nods his head emphatically a few times. “She’s going to be just fine without a daddy.”

“My husband’s at work,” Margie says. “I don’t know why I said that. He’ll be home in less than an hour.”

“I bet you’re thinking, what good will that do,” Jim says. “I know he is. One day your baby grows up, puts on eye shadow and looks at you like, who the fuck are you? Next thing you know, they live in Wisconsin while you’re stuck bathing dogs in Ohio.”

“Why’d they move to Wisconsin?”

“Hell if I know.” He takes another cigarette out of his pocket. “For the cheese?” She notes that it’s not in the pack but just loose and thinks this tells her something about Jim, that he is a man who rations himself. She looks out at the park, the chilly metal of the slide reverberating in the air as a boy hits it repeatedly with a metal bat. *What is a boy doing loose with a metal bat?* she wonders, alarmed. She repositions the hat on Katherine’s bald head, her eyes like dark coins in their sockets. “Tell me about the dogs,” she says, snuggling deeper in her coat.

Jim tells her about the different breeds—the intelligence of the border collie, the spunk of the beagle, how Chihuahuas get a bad rap as yappy dogs but in reality are some tough motherfuckers. “Sorry,” he says and nods toward the stroller. “I shouldn’t swear in front of the baby,” unaware, Margie guesses, that he’s been doing it all along.

“It’s okay,” she says. “She doesn’t understand language.” From the other direction three Little Leaguers and an overweight man in khakis and a gray sweatshirt make their way toward the boy at the slide. “Sometimes,” she begins, “when the baby is crying, I’ll lean over her crib and just watch her cry.” The boy throws down the bat and begins running. Margie can watch Katherine cry and feel like she did in delivery, such an overwhelming sense of emptiness that it’s almost like being filled up. “It’s like I’m watching it on TV,” she says. “Like she’s not a real baby in the room.”

“You should get a basset hound,” Jim says. “It’d be good for you and that little girl.”

“I’m just so tired.” The day is ending, the sun beginning its descent, which means the night will start soon. Margie will get her half-hour of making dinner, then the ten minutes to eat it while she and Leo eat in shifts, and then the baby will start to cry and cry and cry.

Jim slaps his hands on his knees and stands. “I should get back to work. Those dogs aren’t going to bathe themselves.” He

bends over and gives Margie a kiss just above the corner of her mouth and it's like being released from a trance, a dream.

"That's not appropriate," she says, her voice an echo.

"It's okay," he says. "The baby's sleeping." And sure enough, she is, her fist bare and red, escaped from the blanket, coiled like an internal organ or a snake.

"I love her, you know," Margie says. She laughs, or tries to. "What I said earlier? About watching her? I was just talking."

"Maybe you're not ready for a dog."

Tears push into Margie's eyes. This happens all the time now—it is nothing new—but like every time, she really means it. "You don't think I'm ready for a dog?"

"You'd better get that baby home," he says and pulls his collar up against the cold as he twists his last cigarette under his boot. "But come back tomorrow. I'll have a surprise for you."

That night, around ten, Margie's stomach clenches at the first sound of Katherine stirring in her crib, her bleating cry echoed through the monitor. Dirty dinner dishes sit in the kitchen; a pile of unfolded baby clothes rest by the stairs. It isn't that Margie is so exhausted she can't stay up for an hour rocking the baby, or even two hours. It's the not knowing when it will end. What if Katherine cries until three this time, or four? Or dawn? Will she stop tomorrow night, or is this now Margie's life for the next two months, or six years, or forever? Leo says, "I'll take first shift," and makes his way upstairs, coming back with the baby, her large eyes blinking against the light.

"I can do it," Margie says and pushes herself to sitting on the sofa.

"Get some sleep," Leo says, running a finger against Katherine's cheek, and Margie feels a spark of anger shoot through her.

"Let me," she says and stands up, taking the baby in her arms. Instantly she wants to give her back. She hates this constant pushing and pulling. During the day, when the baby finally naps, she feels an overwhelming sense of relief, complicated immediately by the need to hear her cry, to know that she is still alive. In the beginning she would lay Katherine in her crib upstairs, but the sound of the floorboards creaking would wake her, so now Margie lays her on the carpeted living room floor and sits next to her, her hands in constant motion as she loops

yarn around the knitting needles. This constant push and pull, it reminds her of men she dated back in graduate school—she has a master’s degree, in management!—who would reject her, then love her, then reject her again. She worries there’s a reason Leo wants first shift—some golden reason she’s overlooked—and just in case, she doesn’t want him to have it. Isn’t having a baby supposed to make one selfless? Here she is, exactly the opposite, a greedy mother who wants first shift, knowing Leo is as tired as she. This baby, the one in her arms, was conceived the night they rented a porno from the cable company for \$9.95. It was supposed to be something light-hearted and adventurous, but it ended up being a complicated hour of corymba that resembled a badly choreographed dance routine they weren’t in shape for more than anything that could result in a baby. They were charged three times for the movie and she wondered if it was really a mistake or if the cable company counted on her being too embarrassed to call and complain. Thirty dollars later, they had a baby on the way. How is she supposed to handle a baby when she couldn’t even handle their cable bill? The last time they had sex was four weeks ago in an attempt to induce labor, a slippery, mechanical affair in which she kept on her sports bra and Leo his socks and shoes. Socks she could understand, but *shoes*? She is just so tired. What if they never have sex again—or worse, what if they do?

She moves back to the couch, the baby still in her arms, although Margie feels Katherine slipping further down her stomach. “Here,” Leo says. “Your shift’s over.” He takes the baby from Margie even as she says no, her arms holding the baby out like an offering, even as she lays her head down on a pillow and falls asleep.

The next day Jim arrives with Beulah, a black and gray speckled Great Dane that prances with the grace of a ballerina yet weighs nearly as much as Jim.

“I don’t introduce her to just anybody,” he says. “But I thought you might appreciate her.”

Margie doesn’t know what she’s done to deserve this praise. “Thank you,” she says, resting a hand on the dog’s back, patting her like she would a couch cushion. “That means a lot to me.”

Jim snaps his fingers, and Beulah sits down on her delicate

haunches, her ears peaked, her eyes on Jim's fingers. Beulah follows Jim's hand into the folds of his pants pocket, from which he pulls out a dog treat shaped like a miniature T-bone in bright red and white. "Here," he says to Margie. "Give her this. You'll be friends for life."

Margie takes the treat and holds it out; Beulah nibbles it from around her fingers, then taps Margie's hand with her nose so she'll release the rest of the bite. Beulah gobbles it down without chewing, then swoops her long tongue against Margie's hand, the texture of gardening gloves, wet but pleasant.

Jim leans back—the apron he's wearing today is cleaner than usual—and takes the first of two cigarettes from his pocket and lights it. He exhales, and while Margie isn't sure, it appears to her he has leaned forward slightly to blow it in the stroller.

"Beulah spends her days at the salon with me keeping tabs on the other dogs. I like to imagine her with a little clipboard, making sure Olive's got her time in the run and Dinga's fed on schedule." Margie likes that Jim imagines his dog with a clipboard. It reminds her of the ridiculous outfits celebrities put their pets in, and she would not have guessed she would see any connection between Jim and these spoiled, Hollywood kids, but there it is. She reminds herself not to judge people, not to make so many snap decisions.

"Why is it you don't see your kids anymore?" she asks.

Jim strokes Beulah's neck, a touch the big dog leans toward. "I love dogs like a politician loves money, but not like they've got them at Trudy's. Who would drop off someone for a haircut at eight in the morning if the appointment isn't until three? It's an insult to the dogs. They're supposed to be locked in cages the whole day until we can get to them. I go near crazy with them locked up like that." He runs his finger in a circle in front of himself. "Some days I let them run loose up front in the lobby. What do I care? I don't own the place. I just work there."

"There's nothing wrong with that," Margie says, but who knows? Maybe there is. Margie thinks of the dogs running loose at Jim's feet, twisting and turning at his ankles. She wonders how many he has at a time, and if there's any way they are as loud as Katherine, who wails at such a decibel and with such consistency, Margie sometimes stands out on the porch, careful not to lock the door, the sound dampened behind her but not

gone. Growing up, her family never listened to the radio or had the TV on during the day, and Margie was smothered daily in silence. Even Leo walks around in stocking feet, careful to shut cupboards slowly, but there is nothing to be done with Katherine.

“My kids?” Jim says. “Their mother’s just doing what she thinks is right. We got divorced a long time ago, a shitty deal, and it just got so I missed those kids so bad I did something stupid.”

Katherine whimpers in her stroller, her mouth jangling back and forth. “She’s hungry,” Margie says. “I should feed her.”

“Of course she is,” Jim says. “Babies are always hungry.” He settles back on the bench, hooking his elbows behind him, one elbow—the left one—only an inch away from Margie.

“Do you mind?” she says and puts her hands to the zipper of her windbreaker, her heart pounding.

“You do what you have to.” Margie takes her nursing cover from the diaper bag—the cover is called a “hooter hider,” yet another humiliation geared toward motherhood—and secures it around her neck before reaching for Katherine. “See, that’s the difference between men and women,” Jim says, as if that explains it all. “All I wanted,” he continues, “was to see my kids. See what they looked like sleeping. I’d forgotten, you know? That happens. You don’t think it will, but it does.” He looks out at the park; it’s gotten colder since they first met, summer a distant memory. Just this morning Margie looked at the calendar and was shocked to see it was time for Katherine’s two-month check-up. “You and that husband of yours ever break it off, be sure you let him see her. Don’t hold that baby hostage.”

Margie feels a surge of panic at the idea that Leo could leave, that she would be responsible for raising this baby all alone. “I wouldn’t do that,” she says. “Besides, that’s not going to happen.”

“You say that now,” he says. “Same thing with these dogs. People get them thinking, *What a cute little puppy*, but next thing you know, that cute little puppy’s shitting all over the floor and they’re carting her to the hair salon for a sixty-dollar hair cut.”

“It really costs that much? Sixty dollars?”

Jim nods. “And we’re competitive. That’s just your run-of-the-mill cut. Did you know you can give a dog a perm?” He

shakes his head. “Ridiculous. People ought to just let a dog be a dog, a man be a man.”

Margie feels the familiar tug on her breast that indicates Katherine’s done, that she’s moved from eating to grazing. She pulls the baby from beneath the cover, embarrassed to see a drop of milk roll down Katherine’s chin, something so utterly personal.

Across the street, a woman in a zebra-striped coat approaches the door to Trudy’s, tugs on it, finds it locked, then looks around for an explanation. “She’s got a Dalmatian,” Jim says. “I think she got it to match the coat. Remember when that movie came out, the one with all the Dalmatians? People brought those puppies home like wildfire, and the kennels were full of them two months later. They’re hyper and insecure. People weren’t prepared for that.” He stands up and makes a clicking noise with his tongue; Beulah rolls off her haunches and onto her feet.

“Maybe I’m a Dalmatian,” she jokes.

“You’re more of a pug,” Jim says, and she has no idea how to take this but decides, in the moment, to take it as a compliment.

That night Margie falls into bed exhausted, the list in her head writing itself: dishes, laundry, bottles to be washed. She used to go to bed thinking of adult things, like her job or what was going on in the world. Weren’t they due to vote on a president soon, and wasn’t that a big deal? Leo puts a hand on the edge of her hip. “Another week,” he says, dancing his fingers forward.

Margie’s body tenses, the quiet in the house like a shadow.

The next morning as Katherine takes her morning nap on the living room floor, Margie tiptoes out of the room to the foyer, shuts the door behind her, and walks to the mailbox. Outside, she listens to the sounds of the birds in the cool fall air. She has the baby monitor in her hand, turned low so the sound is like an echo of static, and in the distance, perhaps a few blocks away, she hears the howl of a single dog. She collects the mail—mostly bills—and heads back to the house. She puts her hand on the knob and turns, but the knob doesn’t budge. The lock. She left it secured.

Panic lights like wildfire through her chest and arms as she puts the monitor to her ear, the sound like white noise. She

imagines Katherine rolling onto her stomach for the first time and choking. Katherine smothering to death in the blanket. Katherine piercing an eye with a knitting needle. Margie crawls over the boxwood shrubs in front of the living room, scratching her arms, dropping the monitor in the dirt, hoping to catch a glimpse of Katherine. How is it she ever thought her daughter didn't have a personality? The baby is still on her back, the blanket undisturbed, her eyes closed. But is she breathing? Margie knocks her fist loudly against the glass and Katherine startles awake, her head and arms vibrating side to side, before her mouth screws into a scream toward the ceiling.

Margie feels another shot of adrenaline make its way through her heart. If she calls the police it'll remain on permanent record, something that will one day be reported to child protective services. Her neighbor Mrs. Tamara has a key, but already Margie feels Mrs. Tamara's disapproval at the way she takes Katherine out in the cold every day, the weather hovering just above freezing. Leo works nearly an hour away in his cocoon of silence, and besides, she has no phone. The back door is always locked. There is no other way in the house. Her mind jumps to Jim—*I just wanted to see them sleep*—and already her legs are in motion, picking up momentum as she runs down the street, turning at the curb for the park. It's a run she can make with her eyes closed, so many times she's pushed Katherine down these very sidewalks.

Even before she reaches for the handle she hears the noise inside Trudy's, the cacophony of dogs. "Shut the door!" Jim yells from the back and Margie slips inside and throws her weight against the door. There are six or seven dogs roaming around the front—some up to her waist, others circling her heels. "Shut!" she yells back. The salon is warm and humid after the bitter cold of outside, the smell of wet dogs and shampoo overwhelming. It is a lush salon with a cheetah-print sofa in the waiting area, and instead of magazines about hairdos there are magazines about dogs. Instead of salon chairs, there are shiny, silver tables, each positioned in front of its own mirror rimmed with Hollywood lights. A blond cocker spaniel makes his way to Margie and nudges her leg with his nose; instinctively Margie puts down her hand for the dog to sniff.

Jim peeks out from behind two pink velvet curtains separat-

ing a backroom. “I’ll be out in a second,” he says, no surprise in his voice at seeing Margie.

A moment later he comes to the front counter, the cocker now in Margie’s lap as she explains that she locked herself out. Jim looks around, scratching his head. He asks about the baby, and Margie tells him that Katherine’s inside alone, right there next to the knitting needles. He points to the cocker spaniel. “He’s been here since last Friday. That’s three days. What are people thinking?” He moves to the front door and flips the Open sign to Closed. “Let me grab some things.”

A moment later he reappears from behind the velvet curtains with his coat on and Beulah secured by a leash. “I’ll just be a moment, girls. You sit tight.” The dogs whine as if they understand, and perhaps, Margie thinks, they do.

She’s surprisingly calm walking home with Jim and Beulah, as if it were a day for outrageous things to happen—a baby alone in a house, a dog this big—but still a day she will never turn into an anecdote. On the porch Jim takes a leather glove from his pocket and slips it on his hand. She assumes this is to cover his fingerprints, which strikes her as ridiculous, and only after he breaks the front-door window does she realize it’s to protect his hand. She had assumed he would have a lock-picking set, some kind of master key or system. It had not occurred to her to simply break the glass.

Jim reaches in and unlocks the door from the inside. “Here you go.”

There’s a catch as the door swings open, a pregnant moment full of silence. Margie knocks Jim out of her way as she bounds through the foyer to her baby. Katherine is on her back, her arms and legs splayed, her head lolled to one side. Margie scoops up her child—careful to cradle her head—and pulls her to her chest. It’s like they’ve been separated forever, as if the time before the baby existed was another lifetime.

The baby’s eyes are puffy from crying herself to sleep; they flutter awake and then close again.

Jim knocks on the doorframe with a knuckle, Beulah behind him. “She okay?”

Margie nods her head, unwilling to move her mouth from the baby’s soft, warm neck to speak the words. Jim looks around the living room. “It’s a nice house you got here.” She looks

around at all the knickknacks that will need to be removed once the baby starts walking, at the shelves of books she'll never find time to read. That morning she'd awoken a half hour early to start a batch of chili in the Crock-Pot, the first time in almost two months that she'd used a recipe calling for more than three ingredients. The smell is now making its way through the house, the warm spice of winter in the air.

"I don't know how to thank you," she says.

Beulah nudges past Jim and lifts her front paws onto the sofa, pushing herself delicately onto the couch. "She sleeps in the bed with me," he says. "We eat dinner together on the couch and sleep in the same bed." Margie imagines that the weight of the dog would be like another person beside you. "Beulah," Jim says. "Little B." He snaps his fingers and Beulah unfolds her long limbs and climbs down from the sofa.

"I should get back to work," he says and stands there a moment awkwardly. Cold air is starting to make its way into the living room from the broken window and Margie reaches for the afghan on the back of a chair. She learned to knit in her third trimester, her neighbor Mrs. Tamara coming over in the afternoons to teach her how, switching from hot tea to iced tea as the summer grew hotter. "I knit for my own babies," Mrs. Tamara said. "Every baby needs a little homemade love." For the rest of her life, the sound of knitting needles clacking together will be a sound Margie associates with Katherine, a sound she will recognize out of context and always know.

"Thank you again," she says, and because she knows this will please Jim even more than the compliment, she says it to Beulah and not him.

That evening after dinner Leo takes Katherine into the living room and settles in front of the Xbox as Margie starts a kettle for tea, gearing up for the colicky night ahead. A knock on the back door startles her so badly she nearly knocks the two mugs to the floor. She moves back the curtain and sees Jim's face outlined in the darkness, the blond cocker spaniel in his arms.

She lets the curtain drop back in place and opens the door, pushing Jim and the dog down the step so she can stand next to him and close the door. "What are you doing here?" When Leo got home she told him some kids were playing baseball in

the street, that an errant ball had shattered the glass. Before he arrived she taped two layers of cardboard over the pane, then called a window company to come for an estimate.

“I got fired today,” Jim says. “That bitch with the Dalmatian called and ratted me out. Trudy showed up while I was here, and there were eight dogs running loose. They’d torn up her cheetah couch.” He pets the cocker spaniel’s head. “Whose dumb idea was it to decorate a dog salon with a cat, I asked her, and she told me to pack my shit.” He holds the dog out, the cocker’s nubby tail thumping against Jim’s wrist. “Brought you a present.”

He moves the dog to Margie’s arms. She resists, but he lets go, forcing her to hug the dog to her. “I can’t keep a dog,” she says. “What about Katherine?” Jim bows his head and kisses the dog on the forehead, where a white patch of hair is shaped like a star. He turns toward the alley. “You can’t leave me with this dog,” Margie says, holding the dog out. “How am I supposed to take care of a baby and a dog?”

Jim laughs, and Beulah emerges from the shadows where she’s been waiting patiently next to the garage, his faithful companion. “I was wrong before about the basset hound,” Jim says. “You’re a cocker spaniel girl. I should have seen it right away.” He waves a hand as he disappears out of the circle of their porch light, and it occurs to Margie she has no way to trace him, that he will most likely never return to the park. The teakettle whistles and she steps back into the kitchen and turns off the stove, removing the kettle with her empty hand, the dog still clutched to her chest.

“Marge?” Leo shouts from the living room. “Were you talking to someone?”

She pauses, then puts the dog on the ground, his feet and nails scurrying to find footing on the linoleum. He finds it and shoots toward the sound of Leo’s voice.

“What the—” Leo starts then stops. “Whose dog is this?” he says even louder.

Margie follows the dog into the living room. The cocker spaniel has climbed up the side of Leo’s leg to the baby, and is trying desperately to lick her face; Leo holds the baby with one arm, the dog at bay with the other. Katherine’s eyes shoot open, her face screwed tight in an immediate scream. “I’ve always wanted a dog,” Margie says.

Leo holds the dog back by the neck, the dog's wet nose straining toward Katherine to get another lick. Katherine wails, her cries echoing off the walls and ceiling as Margie's breasts let down with milk. "Where'd this dog come from?"

Margie can imagine Jim and Beulah making their way back down the alley, a man and his horse walking into the sunset, no matter that it's already dark. "A friend dropped him off."

Leo lifts Katherine above his head, the dog's body in constant motion as he strains to lick the child. "When's she picking it up?"

Margie plucks Katherine from her husband's arms. "I don't think he is." She pulls Katherine against her sodden shirt, the baby's legs kicking into the soft bread of Margie's stomach. Katherine doesn't stop crying, even as she wraps her fingers around her mother's thumb, as Margie tilts her head to the side so Katherine can bury her face in her neck, the sound absorbed by Margie's body.

"What the hell are we going to do with a dog?" Leo says as Margie moves her dinner bowl from the ottoman to the floor, the dish smeared with leftover chili. The dog breaks away from Leo's grasp and begins licking the bowl at Margie's feet, his large pink tongue contouring itself to the edges, a swath of white dish left in its wake. Margie imagines Jim and Beulah on their way home, the soft-shoe sound of Beulah's paws. It is almost bedtime. She would bet money that Beulah sleeps with her head on a pillow, and that because no one is watching, Jim spoons his belly against her back. Katherine's cry turns into a yawn. She will go down soon for the night and awaken an hour later, screaming. The cocker spaniel sits, his legs quivering in hopes of more food. Margie kisses the top of Katherine's head as she bends to pick up the bowl, the dish once dirty, now clean.

## ALIGNING THE INTERNAL COMPASS

The first page of the *Orienteering: Sport of a Lifetime* brochure reads: “With a map and compass in hand, you head into the woods. It is a beautiful day and you are about to start off on an adventure: Orienteering.” At least I think that’s what it says. I can hardly read the text, soggy from rain dripping from the looming trees surrounding us.

My father and I stand at the edge of the woods in a Maryland state park at noon on a Sunday, waiting to begin our day of orienteering in an effort to improve, or at least test, our sense of direction. We look awkwardly at the other people waiting, a couple dozen of them chatting as though they already know one another and wearing very serious athletic gear. Our own jeans will be wet and mud covered by the end of the day.

Perhaps irrationally, I sometimes become terrified by the idea that when the world ends and I have to flee my city, my GPS may not be charged. When my father bought it for me as a gift a few years back, I quickly became dependant on it in the same way I rely upon my eyeglasses or electricity. That little screen probably saves me about forty cumulative hours a year that would otherwise be spent driving around, lost.

My whole life, I’ve been going in circles. While the GPS seems like it’s solving this problem, I’m pretty sure it’s setting me up for a fall. I’ve heard several friends with an impeccable sense of direction say they can no longer tell north from south because they’ve become too dependent on the TomTom or the Garmin stuck to their dashboard. If these people, previously capable of taking on the role of navigator on road trips, can’t figure out which direction to flee from the burning city when the time comes, I have to wonder what will become of me.

For years I have been under the impression that I was a lost cause, spatially. I can’t read maps. I don’t know which direction is which (although in the past couple of years I’ve started, in a sad, proud way, noting east or west when the sun is low, clearly

on its way up or down). I can drive the same route a dozen times before I know which turn is mine. This makes me feel pathetic and, again, a little bit scared about how incapable I am.

As any self-help book will tell you, the first step is to understand your handicaps. I've found that this is true whether I'm reading to improve my relationship, reduce my carbohydrate intake, or assert myself in the workplace. I worry that sense of direction is different, though—maybe because there's less out there to understand. It's an elusive skill. Scientists all over the world are interested in it, but very few have come up with anything definitive to explain it, much less to help us learn our way out. *It's about gravitational pull*, some say. Or, *It's all about cell orientation in the brain*. These statements mean nothing to me, which is all right, because they're still up for debate in the scientific community. For all of the research that's been done, sense of direction is still a pretty abstract concept. What most scientists do agree on is this: On a super-simplified level, the brain needs three types of information to help us find our way. First, it needs to know where we are currently. Second, it needs to know the direction we're heading. And third, the brain needs to calibrate our "current movement state" in relation to our goal destination. (This is the exact same process that a GPS follows, incidentally, if we're breaking things down to a fifth-grade level.) Essentially, the process continually asks, "Are we going the right way?" A brain (or an impressive, expensive piece of electronic equipment) with all of these bits of information can provide an answer.

Terminology is important when discussing anything complicated, but when it comes to sense of direction, we tend to use terms interchangeably, but incorrectly. Often sense of direction gets mixed up with *wayfinding*, which actually refers to finding one's way on the open ocean, using a combination of the sun, stars, and ocean swells. *Navigation* is another term that does not, it turns out, mean the same thing as sense of direction. Although it's closer than wayfinding, navigation technically refers to finding one's way using electronic aids—like a GPS. *Pilotage* is used less often, but still seeps into articles and conversations. This term, which originated in the 1570s, actually means finding one's way with the use of recognizable landmarks—such as recalling a turn by the familiar coffee shop on the corner.

The terminology is disorienting, but the words matter less

than the goal. I don't need to run my vessel back to shore. I'd just like to be able to get to my brother's condo without the directions I printed a year ago, secretly stored in the glove box and referenced every trip.

With this simple goal in mind, I began taking steps to improve my non-GPS-aided sense of direction. As I researched ways to improve, I came across several Web sites on orienteering, a "sport" in which participants race around in the wilderness with maps and compasses, trying to be the first to find a series of flag markers. This seemed less like a sport and more like hell, but it had the potential to be helpful.

Because my dad seems to know everything I don't, I called him to talk about it.

"Orienteering? Never heard of it," he told me.

I told him what I could from my cobbled reading and about my improvement goals. My dad is quick to tease me about my worthless sense of direction, although I've always suspected that his own is not too much better, that he is simply quieter about it.

"So, that's about it," I said. "All these nonprofit orienteering clubs host events in parks scattered all over the world. They're just open—anyone can come, and you pay something small, like ten or twelve dollars, to join for the day."

"Huh," he said. "I'm in. When are we going?"

I envisioned my father and myself, covered in dirt and bits of bark, lost in the woods with flags tucked into our belts. The image was only slightly less terrifying than imagining myself alone in the same situation.

A few weeks later, armed with a map of the park, directions from the Quantico Orienteering Club's Web site, *and* a GPS, we set off.

Here's the truth: On the way to the park, we got lost. We each tried to blow it off, claiming poor mapmaking and a lack of updates for the GPS software, but we knew it said something more about us.

As my father drove in circles, I read out loud from the "Beginner's Instruction" I'd printed from the Web site.

*"The goal is to find numbered 'controls,' in numerical order, in the fastest time possible . . . go over your clue sheet for a*

*description of features, list of control codes . . . a triangle is the start (and usually the finish too) and circles highlight features.* Are you getting any of this?" I asked.

"No," he answered, his eyes on the wet road.

I continued: "*White equals normal forest, which is different from USGS maps . . .* What are they even talking about?"

"I have no idea," he said.

Although research doesn't point to sense of direction as a hereditary skill, anecdotal evidence seems to. Little definitive work (the word *definitive* being key here) has been done on the "born with" vs. "acquired" nature of directional sense. What has been determined is that how a person *perceives* his or her directional capabilities is usually pretty accurate. Those who think they have a good sense of direction are usually right, and those who know they can't find their way back from the bathroom without a scale map know their limits as well. When people are asked to rate their directional sense and then find their way, the correlation is more or less dead on in terms of who gets lost.

What this means practically is this: You've gone astray on a road trip with two people. One claims to have a good sense of direction and one claims to lack it. However, they both think they know the way. One says left and one says right. Open the car door and push the one with no sense of direction out onto the road.

Most people admit to realizing their poor sense of direction when they began driving. For years I tried to convince myself that my constant confusion was chance, but eventually, I had to give up the lie. Just after graduating from college, one Sunday afternoon I found myself performing a "practice" drive on Interstate 95 in northern Virginia the day before a job interview. I lived an hour and a half from the location (I planned to move if offered the job). I-95 is known to be one of those highways that are somehow packed at all hours, every day, and I didn't trust myself to find the office under pressure, despite the fact that it was just off the highway. So, instead, I spent Sunday plotting out my course, sitting in traffic, and searching the empty building for the entrance. The day was exhausting, but worth it as I pictured myself lost without the dry run, calling my interviewers and sobbing on the side of the road, which I suspected was

less acceptable than the similar calls I often make to my father. I got the job and consulted my written directions every day for months as I commuted.

After finally finding the park, we stand at its edge. I hear movement in the leaves, and both my father and I look up from the map to see a dozen deer. They seem to see us as well, but they don't take off the way deer usually do on the side of the road. Instead, they run gracefully, slowly—jog, really.

I tell my dad that I have never been so close to so many deer. They were only twenty yards away. Or maybe a hundred yards. Or a hundred feet? Two hundred?

The ability to estimate distances is closely tied to sense of direction. Is that building fifty feet away or three hundred yards? No idea? Me neither. This is a telltale sign of a poor sense of direction. Other questions to help determine one's directional abilities include *Can you read a map? Do you like looking at maps? Can you use a map without turning it to orient your actual placement?* Umm, no, no, and no. *Do you recall the locations of things, like, say, the salad dressing aisle at the grocery store?* Absolutely not. *Can you automatically reverse directions? Do you easily find your way around unfamiliar buildings?* No and no.

A lot of these indicators refer to “mental rotation” skills, also known as the ability to conjure up a “cognitive map.” The idea of a cognitive or mental map, introduced by psychologist Edward C. Tolman of UC Berkeley in 1948, is one of the only ways we can measure sense of direction, or at least our ability to store and retrieve information about our environment. Essentially, a cognitive map is an imagined setting. If you close your eyes and picture your childhood bus stop, or the layout of your house, you're creating a cognitive map. Some people suggest that those of us with a poor sense of direction either don't make such maps, make only limited versions of them, or can make them but can't reclaim information from them.

Most commonly, however, mental rotation skills determine whether or not you have to turn the map to figure out which direction is which. If you use mental rotation, and use it well, you don't need to turn the map; the manual rotators inside your brain do it for you. Mental rotation skills also allow us to imag-

ine what something looks like from the side, or upside down, whether it's a painting or the layout of a neighborhood. Many people have adequate mental rotation skills for a certain period, but lose them when things get complicated. For example, I may be able to keep track of the direction of the highway for a couple of turns after the exit, but after a few more, I lose my bearings completely.

On orienteering day, there is a lot of map turning.

We leave the deer and walk down a short path, following the triangle-shaped, orange "Orienteering!" signs. We find the registration table and get in line. We avoid eye contact with our fellow orienteers and instead make jokes about their tight pants. Every few minutes someone takes off running from the front of the line—it is a timed sport—and darts suddenly into the woods while holding up a map in one hand and a compass in the other. We both laugh hysterically every time this happens.

When we reach the table, we're given a small, plastic "e-card." A man behind the table instructs us to insert it into the electronic punch unit by each flag, or checkpoint, along the orienteering route to confirm that we successfully found it. We're then told three times: *You must punch the e-card at the end so we know you've made it out of the woods.* The orange e-card slides onto my middle finger, and I slip the attached wristlet over my hand, imagining the search party that will surely be sent out for us.

"There are a lot of people with foreign accents," my dad says. I turn to him, ready to reprimand him for what I think might be an inappropriate comment when I realize that there really *are* a lot of different accents. It makes sense. Orienteering originated in Sweden in the early 1900s but wasn't introduced to the United States until the middle of the century. Local clubs here branch out from the U.S. Orienteering Federation (USOF), but apparently the group isn't much for marketing, as the "Sport of a Lifetime" never really caught on in this country the way it did in Europe and other areas of the world.

After waiting in another line for a few minutes, I trade the car keys for a compass, as collateral, and ask a man behind the table when the "orienteering orientation" I read about on the Web site will begin. I'm told that it isn't as formal as all that,

but he'd be happy to give me a quick introduction. I wave my dad over and we all look at a map in a plastic covering. The man holds the compass against the map, showing us how to determine "north," both on the page and in the park. He then places his finger on one of the marked checkpoints and turns the compass, explaining that by determining the direction of the destination in relation to north by using the compass, we will know exactly where to trek.

I glance at my dad and he raises his eyebrows, lifting one corner of his mouth as if to say, "I hope *you're* getting this."

I picture us lost in the woods, trampled by deer, who probably despise orienteering day—all the spandex, all the e-card beeping. I imagine them discussing what in the hell it is all these assholes are doing out here in the rain anyway. *A compass?* I hear them say. *Ridiculous.*

Sense of direction in animals is both (a) easier to study than it is in humans, and (b) really, crazy impressive, comparatively. Case in point: One species of snail, when taken from its home in a cloth bag, is able to orient itself and find its way back for up to forty miles. Last week, I went to a new CVS approximately three miles from my house. I got lost on the way home.

Migratory birds are often noted as having the most impressive animal sense of direction, which makes sense. About 80 percent of North American birds migrate, some over oceans and across continents. One bird, called the red knot, travels eighteen thousand miles round trip each year from the tip of South America to the Arctic and back again.

For years, theories have been thrown around about sense of direction in migratory birds. The birds use landmarks, some people said, or they depend upon an amazing sense of smell. They used the stars, others suggested. It turns out, they use an internal, magnetic compass, which is, in a sense, recalibrated every night based on the direction of the sun as it sets. In 2004 scientists tracked migratory songbirds—gray-cheeked thrushes—catching them just before their departure and placing them in an artificial magnetic field. When they were released, the birds flew through the night on the wrong path, and then stopped and corrected themselves by 90 degrees, back toward their desired destination, as soon as the sun rose.

At least we understand the need for the birds' sense of direc-

tion. They migrate. Fair enough. Some animal behavior related to directional sense, though, remains a mystery. Last year, after looking at photo after photo of cattle fields, a team of German and Czech researchers discovered that cows tend to align their bodies either facing directly north or directly south, regardless of where they are in the world. Why are they lined up this way? How do they know to do it? Although it's assumed that the positioning has to do with the magnetic fields of the earth, no one seems to be clear on the specifics. These invisible magnetic lines might be strong enough for the cows to sense them, but why is that beneficial to the animals? No one knows.

The magnetic field is oddly prevalent in all kinds of animal orientation. Termites line up along its cardinal axes—either north to south or east to west. If the nest is turned, they will reorient themselves to these directions. If a strong magnet is placed above the nest, it throws them off. Yellow eels also use the magnetic field. Honeybees do too. And salmon.

Homing pigeons are more of a mystery. It was long thought that they, too, relied solely upon the magnetic field to find their way. In studies that disrupt the field, the pigeons' path was thrown off. But, in 2004, after tracking pigeons using GPS satellites for ten years, researchers at Oxford University announced their—let's be honest, ludicrous—findings: Rather than using the sun for directional bearings, it turns out that the pigeons use roads they've traveled in the past as a guide, turning at junctions and, sometimes, even going around traffic circles. Then, three years after this study, different scientists found that iron-containing structures within the birds' beaks apparently also aid in their sense of direction. They might even have the ability to use "atmospheric odors." Long-story short: When it's time to flee, those pigeons are going to be safe in some faraway bunker long before I am. Apparently so will snails and termites.

"Okay," my dad says as we start walking. "The lake is over there, and according to the map, we're supposed to curve around to the left of it."

I raise the compass on the string around my neck. "Should we be using this?" I ask.

"It's up to you," he says. I look at the map and realize that we should be able to use the landmarks—the lake, the marked

trails—instead. (Read: We should be able to cheat.) This is helpful, because neither of us, we agree, understands how to use the compass in relation to finding our way around this park.

Like calculating square footage or breakdancing, using a compass is something I've repeatedly tried and failed at. I get the basic concept, but not the next steps: *The needle is pointing NW, so . . . ?* Other people apparently love these things, though. There's a surprisingly big market, it turns out, for compass-related gifts. One can purchase compass tie tacks, compass cuff links, compass necklaces, pocket compasses. I adore the idea of a businessman standing in the woods, holding up his French-cuffed sleeve to see if he should head deeper into the trees or turn back. Two different people have given me compasses for my car. The thought is there, but they're practically worthless. I can't picture my destination on a map anyway, so I don't know which way I'm supposed to be going, even if I can determine north, south, east, or west.

My dad and I do not use the compass once the whole day.

Whether it's animals honing in on magnetic fields, or the orienteers using their hand-held compasses, most scientists agree that magnetism plays a large part in one's sense of direction. In the late seventies, an experiment was done that proved magnetic fields contributed in some way to the "internal compass" of humans as well. Scientists loaded up a bus and blindfolded the passengers and announced that they were placing magnetic bars on everyone's heads, although in reality half were magnetic and half were brass. The bus drove around for a while, then the scientists asked everyone to identify their current compass direction. Overwhelmingly, those wearing magnets were less capable than the control (brass) group.

Magnetism plays a role, but it's not *all* magnetism. It's not *all* anything, in fact. Mysteries breed myth, and sense of direction is a big enough mystery that all the crazies come out with their suggestions. *Poor sense of directions stems from left-handedness*, some say. *Oh, it's tied to dyslexia*, others claim. *People with a poor sense of direction are simply inattentive*. Or, *They're stupid*. Some say, *Sense of direction is connected to geometry. Can't understand angles? You won't have any directional abilities*. Others argue, *People with no sense of direction are probably mildly dyspraxic* (a disorder related to difficulty

carrying out a plan, physical or otherwise). Still others say that it stems from not spending enough time outside as a kid. Or that those involved in sports at a young age develop a better spatial ability and, therefore, a better sense of direction.

Then there is, of course, the gender theory.

“Men have a better sense of direction because of the whole ‘hunter/gatherer’ thing, I think,” my uncle tells me when I bring it up. “We were supposed to go out and collect food and roam away from the cave to do it, whereas women were safest staying in one place, taking care of the babies.”

This is a surprisingly popular theory, at least among people I know, which may say something about the people I know. It’s a hot topic among scientists as well, although it rings distinctly true or false depending on whom you ask. While there are definite gender differences in the way people approach finding their way, no one seems to agree on whether the approaches taken by men or by women are more effective.

Men are more likely to use “survey strategies”—using north, south, east, and west descriptors—than women. Women are more likely than men to use route strategies, such as landmarks, or stating the approximate time it takes to travel between two locations. Neither strategy is proven to be markedly more effective than the other.

Women do, however, consistently rate their sense of direction as worse than men. We also know that among children, boys do have better mental rotation skills. In one study, girls and boys were each given a map and asked to “mentally” make their way across town without rotating it. Then they were asked to state whether they would be turning left or right at particular intersections. The boys, unfortunately, rocked this experiment compared to the girls. Some attribute higher testosterone levels during fetal development, suspecting that they may aid in developing the part of the brain responsible for mental rotation, but no one can really say how much this has to do with factors more associated with “nurture” than “nature.”

Some research does suggest that this spatial ability carries over into adulthood, and other researchers adamantly dispute it. One study, conducted by what I’m guessing was a pretty unpopular researcher, suggests not only that women have a worse sense of direction than men, but that gay men have a worse

sense than straight men. The study showed gay men, straight women, and lesbians navigating with the same weaknesses, which included a lack of ability to rely on local landmarks, increased time needed to analyze spatial information, and poor routing in general.

What researchers do agree on is markers: If I ask the average man how to get to the Thai restaurant near my house, he'd tell me to go eight hundred yards and then turn left, then wind down the road for another half of a mile. The average woman would tell me to turn left at the yellow house, and then go down until I see the coffee shop. When I see it, I'll know the restaurant is just a few minutes further. In explaining a route, men will more often cite distances and cardinal directions like "north" or "west." Usually, women cite landmarks.

After a half hour or so of wandering and inserting our e-card at the first few checkpoints, my father and I round a corner and find ourselves walking alongside a father-son team in matching red windbreakers.

"It is your first time?" the father asks in a thick, charming eastern European accent.

"Can you tell?" my dad replies, smiling.

"It is for him as well," the man says, pointing to his little boy, who looks to be about nine.

As they walk ahead, I tell my father to stop watching them. The brochure clearly declares among the Golden Rules of Orienteering: "Do not follow other orienteers!"

While stalking other orienteers is considered cheating, it's a strategy I have mastered when it comes to finding my way outside of the woods. In addition to following others, I am big on repetition. The first few months of a new job has me whispering, "Left, left, right" every time I exit the elevator and try to find my office. I also count the rows whenever I walk up the ramp of a dark movie theater toward the restroom: "one, two, three, four, and left." I repeat it the whole time I'm gone so that I can find my seat again—this after once accidentally sitting down next to a stranger during a particularly suspenseful scene of the film *Coyote Ugly*.

In using these strategies, I'm not trying to increase my actual abilities the way I am by orienteering. Instead, I'm simply try-

ing to get where I need to be in whatever way I can—a common desire for those of us who tend to get lost at every turn. Other coping mechanisms I’ve heard: *I print directions to and from any new destination and keep them in a binder in my trunk.* Or, *I leave myself voicemail messages with landmarks.* And *I don’t drive* or—the worst—*I never go anywhere alone.*

In my efforts to improve my directional ability, I came across a book called *Never Get Lost Again*. It’s small and the cover features a drawing of a blonde woman in cargo capri pants standing on a compass and holding a map. A friend saw me reading it and said, “She’s not even looking at the map!” This should have been a red flag. The book provides absolutely no useful information. The author’s suggestions include such gems as “Get clear, specific directions,” “Learn to read a map,” and “Ask for directions.” Very helpful, indeed. *Oh, if only I’d known to get directions all these years.*

What is helpful, then, for improving non-GPS-aided sense of direction? Very, very little, it seems. The sun always seemed like a safe fallback, at least in terms of east and west. However, in fact, the sun doesn’t rise and set exactly due east or due west. There’s some seasonal variation, I learn, which is really just one more factor working against me.

The orienteering techniques were slightly more useful, though in more of an “I’m-lost-in-the-woods!” kind of way than a “How-do-I-get-to-Chipotle?” kind of way, which is closer to what I really need. One strategy I was particularly impressed with is called the “Shadow-Tip Method.” You start by finding a long stick and planting it in a relatively clear spot of level ground where you can see the shadow. With a rock you mark the spot on the ground where the shadow stops. The direction of the shadow is west “everywhere on earth,” several sources explain. Then you wait fifteen minutes, mark the shadow’s new spot on the ground, and draw a straight line in the dirt from the first to the second. This marks the east-west line. You go from there.

*This makes absolutely no sense. How can it always be west?* you ask. It turns out, the shadow will move in the exact opposite direction as the sun, and the sun always moves west. So, the next time I’m lost in the woods with access to a watch and a piece of tree, and a better memory than I currently possess, I’m set.

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Of eight orienteering courses, which increase in difficulty, we've chosen to do course number 1, which winds only along park trails. It is, I suspect, the course most often utilized by elementary school children. Remarkably, my dad and I get really lost only once, between flags seven and eight, near the end.

As we've hiked I've tried to note about how long it takes us to walk to each flag, as compared to the distance shown on the map. The shorter distances end up being around ten minutes, and the longer ones are fifteen or twenty. The rain has picked up and we've both commented several times how much we're looking forward to lunch when I realize we've been walking for quite a long time on one of the shorter jaunts. As I stop and pull out the map, I ask, "Did you see which way that guy and his son went?"

"Isn't that against the rules?" my dad asks, stomping to get some mud off of his sneaker.

The orienteering map is one of the most intricate, least decipherable pieces of paper I've ever seen. The legend shows thirty four different symbols and their corresponding objects or terrains, all included in an 8 1/2 x 11 sheet. One can find anything from the symbol for "stony ground" or "impassable cliff" to "knoll / small knoll / dot knoll." Black boxes show buildings. A building up on our right seems to correspond with one of the boxes above the wide circle we've been hiking. I point this out and suggest that as we're halfway around the circle already, we should just keep walking and complete it, then go from there. My father thinks it's a different black box. In the end, neither of us is right and it takes us another half hour to find the next flag.

The *Orienteering* brochure wants me to know that "getting lost should not be scary for many reasons" and that "wandering around will only worsen the degree of 'lost' that you are in." This information makes sense in theory, but in practice, who hasn't been *absolutely sure* they'd find their way after just one more turn or another few miles?

People getting lost is big business. In addition to GPS made specifically for cars, we can now add the technology to our cell phones and even our stopwatches when we run. And outside of

this technology, there are companies like Corbin Design, a firm based in Michigan focused on providing buildings and campuses clear directional signage. Their slogan is “People get lost. We fix that.” I don’t think they do, though. Good signage is not unlike the GPS—helpful in the moment, but a Band-Aid for a larger problem. Technology and design can help us find our way, but they don’t improve our skills at all.

In my grandfather’s pool when I was a kid, I’d lie on a squeaky, blue plastic raft and close my eyes. He would grab my hand and swim around the pool, tugging me along on the raft behind him, our wrinkled, chlorine-seeped fingers entwined. He’d tread water while spinning the raft slowly. Eventually, he would stop and ask me to guess where we were in the pool without opening my eyes. By the diving board? In the shaded corner? Dead center? This was not a large pool by any standards, but besides the occasional coming and going of the bright sun, I had no tracking device. Inevitably, I’d guess: “By the back, near the cabana!” or “In the shallow end by the steps!” My guess was invariably wrong. Then we would switch and he’d climb onto the raft. Before he was even settled, splashing cool water onto the almost-burning plastic, I was off, spinning him as fast as I could while pushing the raft to all four corners of the pool. When I was exhausted, I’d say, “Okay, what do you think?” He was right every time.

So why could he do it and I couldn’t? Grekin, the author who offered the worst advice ever, uses the term “directionally challenged” when describing the people of the world who, like me, can’t find their way back from CVS, or figure out which way is north or in which end of the pool they’re floating. She also calls having a poor sense of direction “a real disability,” though I suspect the American Disability Association would disagree. Sense of direction is a mystery in the same way as sense of time or sense of balance. You have it or you don’t. Research is continually being done, but it’s not easily understood.

Some people call sense of direction the “sixth sense.” But this isn’t quite right either, as not everyone is born with a sense of direction in the same way that most people are born with the other five. Sure, some folks can’t hear or see, but both anecdotal and research-based evidence tells us that far, far more people are born each day without a sense of where they are in the world.

And it seems to me that, for all of my attempts over the past thirty years, it's almost as impossible to improve one's sense of direction as it would be to regain lost hearing or sight. Loss or lack of such a true "sense" is surely a worse plight, but in some ways we can look at them similarly. There are things we can do to compensate, or work around our deficiencies—Braille or sign language, for instance—but for all of my trying, I'll never be able to *train myself* into having a strong, intuitive sense of direction. And if that's the case, then is there anything wrong with cheating? In this way it seems that the car compass or stacks of secret directions or counting rows in a movie theater is almost *more* impressive than truly recognizing whether I'm going north or south on an unmarked road. In working to understand and improve my sense of direction, I've realized that I'm going to be memorizing, learning by rote, forever—and that using a GPS isn't cheating but instead a work-around that makes life easier, less frustrating. I wish finding my way came naturally, but it never will. And if I'm going to be wandering through life blindfolded with a magnetic bar strapped, figuratively, to my head, I might as well be able to hear that little box bolted to my dashboard as it tells me, "Left turn ahead."

Eventually, jeans soaked up to our knees and our stomachs growling, we buzz the final checkpoint, just twenty or a hundred yards away from the registration stand. The event has taught me nothing about finding my way, minus a few tricks with shadows and sticks. I want to view the whole day as useless, a day in which I learned only that those with strong directional skills like tight pants, but it's just as much my fault. When I didn't understand the compass lesson, I didn't ask for clarification. I just found another work-around strategy and used the lake and the paths as landmarks, immediately abandoning the challenge of mental mapping—the reason I'd come in the first place.

When we give back our compass, we're handed a printout of our total time on the course, as well as the time it took us to travel between each station. This allows for "comparing times with your fellow orienteers." I glance around at a couple of eight-year-olds who beat us, and then at the athletes who found their way through gullies and "impassable cliffs." My dad and I agree, without speaking, to skip this comparison step. We try to

remember where we parked the car, and then program the GPS with my address, less sure of how to get home than snails in a cloth bag.

## THE ART OF LOSING

### I.

It would have been my mother's eightieth birthday the day my daughter stuck her necklace in her shoe and turned a cartwheel in the grass. My mother had bought the Star of David necklace in Israel. It had bits of amethyst and garnet on the outer triangles, much too fancy for a ten-year-old. We combed the playground, plundered the school Lost and Found, beseeched the children, principal, staff, and teachers for help. Still, it didn't turn up.

A pall clouded our house. It hung like the fog that swirls low over the mountains, turning my car, turning us, into solitary cells. We felt our way ahead by inches, past and future blocked. "It's just an object," I said. "We're safe. We're okay." But it felt like my mother had just died all over again.

Our lives felt like a chain of broken links, a long series of disconnections, deaths, and places left behind. My Chinese American daughter, who felt cut off from her past, sometimes felt detached from her present as well. In our Catholic town, my daughter was drawn to the traditions of Jewish friends. In her mostly white school, she was fascinated by Asian and African American history and culture. Among tween *Hannah Montana* and *High School Musical* fans, she decided to go goth. While her grandma was dying, and afterward, my daughter wore skull T-shirts, hoodies, and black eyeliner. She wished she could fit into the kind of pants her cousin wore, the ones with chains that rattled wherever she went.

My mother, a devout Christian, never knew why her granddaughter wanted a Star of David necklace. My mother only overheard her say that she wanted one. "She can have mine," Mom said in the hospital. "It's in my closet." I wasn't really listening. I figured my mother could give my daughter the necklace herself, when she was better.

2.

“The art of losing isn’t hard to master,” I recite to my daughter often, at her request. My daughter loses everything: her beloved stuffed dog, her library books, her favorite earrings. She lost a key down the vent the morning she lost the necklace. But things always turn up. She likes the breezy tone of Elizabeth Bishop’s “One Art.” I remember best the more ominous final lines that strip back bravado to reveal loss’s raw reality.

3.

In my fiction-writing courses, I’ve implemented a No Death Rule. In early classes, before the rule, the rate of character mortality was sixty times that of the nonfictional population. Protagonists entrenched themselves in hopeless problems, painted themselves into corners, entangled themselves in impossible binds until their authors finally had no recourse but to put them out of their misery. One after another, characters kicked off, keeled over, shot themselves in the head, stepped in front of barreling buses, and threw themselves off bridges.

As a child, I disposed in similar fashion of many characters who bored me or made my job too difficult. But guys, I say to my classes, life is full of hard truths. You don’t have to resolve anyone’s conflicts. But let your characters face them.

4.

When my father died, when my mother died, I handled things. Flew across the country with a baby the first time, drove it the second with a ten-year-old, planned funerals, wrote and delivered eulogies. It’s the body that grieves when the rest of you is too busy, the muscles that cramp, the stomach that feels knotted like a fine gold chain snarled so tight there is no loosening it. How unreal that death happens even when you try frantically to prevent it, call every air conditioner repair shop on the Fourth of July so that your dad can breathe, dial 911 and make runs to the pretzel shop at the mall and consult with social workers to save your mom, tempt her to keep eating, devise plans to preserve her independence in her apartment. If you just work and want hard enough, it seems you could, should, be able to keep people alive.

5.

“McCabe won’t let anyone die,” my more literal students remind each other. I’ve developed a reputation for being in deep denial. They tiptoe around me, gamely pretending that death doesn’t exist.

“No,” I say. “Just your protagonist. Just don’t pull the rug out from under us.”

But they don’t always get it, and some semesters the miraculous recoveries and innovative rescues stretch credibility to the limit. Though no characters died, I eventually had to institute corollary rules. No waking up to find it was all a dream. No convenient comas. No eleventh hour alien abductions.

6.

After my mother died, my daughter and I searched all the little compartments with hooks in her jewelry boxes, but we couldn’t find the necklace. Finally my oldest niece arrived in her pants with chains, hems drooping against the floor. She rattled back to my mother’s closet and returned, chains clanking, jewelry jingling, pendants and charms and long plain chains clipped to a hanger, swaying and tangling.

My daughter took off the Star of David necklace only to sleep. I warned her not to wear it to school or gymnastics practice. “If it gets lost, we might never see it again,” I said. I debated whether to put it away till she was older. But then I watched her absently finger it, thinking of her grandma and feeling connected to something, despite her differences.

7.

The day my daughter lost the necklace, my mother’s birthday, it felt as if a terrible weight had descended on us, like I’d swallowed rocks, heavy and indigestible. Our ceilings seemed lower, the sunlight more muted. My daughter shivered abruptly, catching sudden chills. “I can’t think about anything else,” she said. She pounded on the bed. “It can’t be gone, it can’t, it can’t,” she protested, her grief too bottomless for a ten-year-old. This was too hard a lesson, I thought. Life is full of hard truths. I didn’t have to resolve them.

But I wanted to, desperately. To explain over the school PA

system what the necklace meant. To offer a reward. To circulate a rumor that the necklace would haunt anyone who wore it.

“I want it, I want it,” my daughter repeated again and again, hanging onto her faith that wanting hard enough is all it takes.

8.

A week before my mother died, I found her upright in her hospital bed, staring vacantly off into space. “I don’t want to die,” she said, enunciating each word precisely. “I don’t want to die.”

“I want it, I want it,” my daughter said with equal ferocity, and for a second I would have given up everything I ever wanted for her not to have to know that wanting can’t save you.

9.

I followed my own chain of anger and blame, guilt and grief. I was furious with my daughter for her carelessness. I berated myself for not putting the necklace somewhere safe. I was mad at whoever must have found the necklace on those sunny days when children packed the playground. Someday, archeologists from another planet will dig it up, my daughter said, convinced that people are fundamentally honest and the necklace was still on the ground. Someday they’ll conclude, erroneously, that lots of Jews lived here.

“I can’t believe I could never see it again,” my daughter said. “I want to wake up and find it’s all a dream.”

I have recurring dreams in which I lose my wallet or forget what I did with my daughter. I have trained myself to wake quickly from these, back to a world where what has been lost in dreams has been miraculously restored. Where the moon casts a soft light on my daughter’s cheek. Where she breathes quietly in her sleep.

10.

In the end, this time, there were no deaths, no comas, no alien archeologists. During gym, my daughter’s sharp-eyed friend spotted a clasp in the dirt and lifted out the chain, the dirt-crusted star. My phones rang and rang. My daughter left joyous messages everywhere: It’s found!

It’s found, she said again that night, serene in her faith in

everything I'd failed to believe. Our joy and relief were braided with a third strand, a lingering dread. Putting away the necklace would be one kind of loss. But wearing it would be another, an anticipation of the day it would be, inevitably, lost again. There was no good answer.

While I stalled, trying to decide, my daughter closed the clasp around her neck and let the weight of the star drop. Her fingers worried their way around the chain as if memorizing how one link could follow another without coming to an end, how it could circle right back to the beginning again.

## AFTER THE STORM

### *They All Come Back*

Once after college, when I painted houses for a living in my hometown of Lawrence, Kansas, waiting impatiently for my girlfriend to graduate, I showed up for one of our jobs and ran into a longtime friend of my parents. He was an old neighbor from the house in Alvamar, a nice man we knew before things went to shit for our family. He asked how I was doing and I stood there in my paint-spattered pants and told him of my plans to travel to Costa Rica and then settle, for no good reason, in Flagstaff, Arizona.

He smiled, put his hand on my shoulder, and said, “You’ll come back. They all do.”

I shivered, recoiled, and stammered something in response. It felt like a cult leader advising me against leaving the flock. But really he was just voicing the expectation that many people have about Lawrence; it is a place of refuge, a place to run away from the coming storm. It’s a nice place. A good place. And the assumption is always that, like Dorothy, anyone who leaves Kansas wants to come home again.

For many of us, it’s just not that simple.

I came home to Kansas in June 2007, six weeks after the May 4 F5 tornado that destroyed Greensburg, Kansas, my father’s hometown. It was Father’s Day weekend when I landed in Kansas City. Back in California my wife was pregnant with our second child and watching her aunt fight and fade from aggressive cancer.

This was one of the first times I’d been back to Kansas in a while. I hadn’t lived there for over a dozen years, and though it was hard for me to admit sometimes and even harder for my family to accept, I never really had a strong desire to return home—mainly because home had never left me.

The Kansas I know is like a long novel I finished years ago and of which I remember every word. It was a great story, filled

with wonderful characters and compelling plotlines, but it was epic and psychologically cumbersome and in many ways, mostly fiction.

The truth is that I came home to be with my dad because I wanted to spend time with him, because I thought I should help my aunt pick through the mess of her house in Greensburg, but also because I thought the trip might help me understand something more about the legacy of apocalypse in my life or at least why I can't seem to get *The Day After* out of my head, why I can't leave the long novel of Kansas behind. I came home to find a new story.

I knew ahead of time that most of Greensburg had been rendered into piles of rubble, including the small office behind the bank where my grandfather practiced law for nearly seventy years, as well as the home where my father and his two sisters were raised, the same house where my grandparents always lived, the ice cream parlor downtown where a man named Shakey used to make us fountain drinks. All of it gone, crumbled, as if a bulldozer had run amok through the town for weeks.

Elsewhere the tornado raised roofs, lifted houses up, and dropped them back down a few feet away; it just obliterated others, scouring them down to their foundation or concrete pad. Dad drove me around and showed me some of the homes he had built when he worked for a local carpenter in high school, most of them still standing at least, with the one exception being the carpenter's own house. A mobile home park on the south side of town was blown into pieces, and everywhere you looked their aluminum siding wrapped around tree trunks like hard bedsheets. Smaller chunks were sunk deep into the wood like blades.

My aunt waited out the storm in her basement, emerging in the dark to find chaos and confused, dazed citizens wandering the streets. Everything gone. The storm was the kind of tempest that made the term "apocalyptic" sound like an understatement, or just a metaphor. Words like that didn't mean much when she saw what she saw. My aunt, a very religious person, must have wondered if the rapture had come; but then surely she knew that if it had, she would have been taken. She wouldn't have been left behind. Not like this. Not like the stories say.

A wind-speed indicator in town hit 260 mph and then stopped

working. Some estimates suggest the tornado hit Greensburg with wind speeds approaching 280 mph. A Category 5 hurricane has sustained winds of 150 miles per hour.

Eleven people lost their lives in Greensburg that night; but seeing the aftermath, even just in pictures, makes it difficult to believe anyone survived.

### *Fly Away Home*

When I was a kid and we used to return home to Greensburg as a family, everyone in town called my dad—still calls him—Eddie Church. I always chuckled a bit when I heard it. Such a diminutive name for such a big man—not just physically big to me but existentially big.

Dad's no *Eddie*. And he doesn't like it when people call him that. I don't blame him. The name doesn't fit, and it's hard for me to imagine him fitting back into his life in Greensburg, which is exactly what was expected of him. You finish school, get your law degree, move home, and work with your father in his law practice.

Dad's specialty in law school was water law—a particularly relevant discipline for southwest Kansas, and one that would've suited him well working for my grandfather, who specialized in estate law. Greensburg was supposed to be where he built a life, raised a family. I could have easily been born and raised in Greensburg with my cousins. Maybe they would have named me Eddie Jr. and I could have worn my dad's number at the local high school, where I'd play trombone in the marching band at the halftime of my own football games.

Instead, after moving to Lawrence, Dad's own business in real estate sales, development, and property management began to take off and expand; I was born and my brother, Matt, came along eighteen months after. The prospect of moving back to Greensburg grew dimmer and dimmer.

It's hard for me to imagine my mother ever agreeing to live in Greensburg, but when Dad's business collapsed eight years later and we nearly went bankrupt, he and my mom briefly considered again moving to Greensburg. There was one condition.

They would need an airplane.

"So we could fly to Denver or Kansas City or just anywhere else," my mom said by way of explanation.

“So you could escape?” I asked.

“Yes, I suppose so.”

When I asked my dad to confirm this story, I expected him to contradict it in some way, or to say that it was my mom alone who demanded the airplane. I expected him to stick up for Greensburg in some way and say that he never planned to leave, that he always knew he’d come back home.

Instead he said, “Oh yeah, that was part of the deal. Had to have an airplane.”

“But who would fly it?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I guess me or your mom. We hadn’t really got that far.”

Greensburg was the closest thing to an ancestral home I ever knew, a place from which most of my dad’s family seemed to radiate, but it was always a strange place to me, a place that felt languid and quiet, a time capsule image of small-town life—the kind of place the writers and producers imagined Lawrence to be when they set and filmed *The Day After*.

When people find out I’m from Kansas, some of them see me in a place like Greensburg—the picture of innocence, the small-town *Wizard of Oz* image of black-and-white simplicity; and sometimes when Dad tells me his stories of pet raccoons and caves in the backyard, I think the dream is real. If I meet people from other places in Kansas—places like Wichita or Topeka or Salina—and I tell them I’m from Lawrence, they will invariably suggest that Lawrence isn’t “real” Kansas. But if Kansas is more metaphor, more state of mind, then we’re all from there in some way. Every single one of us. Some of us have never left it behind.

### *Signs*

The first thing Dad and I saw when we rolled into Greensburg was a big-top red and white striped circus tent on the eastern edge of town. It seemed like some kind of joke. But we stopped because it looked like the place we should be stopping to check in and get our ID badges. Nobody was allowed in without an ID badge.

But this was *not* where you were supposed to get your ID badge. A woman whose own badge identified her as a volunteer

coordinator pointed us down the road, behind the Kiowa County Courthouse—one of the only buildings left standing. “Look for the portable trailers that say *City Hall*,” she told us. Before we climbed back in the Jeep, I stopped for a moment and looked around. It took a while for my eyes to adjust to the sight.

Across Highway 54, opposite the red-and-white circus tent, a pile of cinder block and wood, the remains of the Kansan Inn restaurant, baked in the sun. I tried to capture the image on a digital camera, but I quickly saw the folly of this. One frame told nothing of the story here. One fragment only part of a larger, jumbled-up jigsaw picture of this place I used to know. All of it gone now.

That place. I pointed the camera across the highway. Frame. Miss. That place was where I used to eat biscuits and gravy on Saturday mornings with my grandfather. That place. Point. He ate there every single Saturday. Never missed. That place was part of his routine, his ritual. I waved, not to say goodbye but as if to wipe away the image, the shattered sign, the empty red vinyl booths caked in mud. *I've sat in those booths*, I thought. That place was where Granddad knew all the waitresses and never had to order from a menu. They just brought him a huge plate of biscuits swimming in sausage gravy. A fried egg on top. That place, that pile of concrete, where they brought me the same food, where my grandfather looked on approvingly as I ate the huge pile of sausage and flour and grease. That place. Right now, that place was a pile of stone and wood, a revision of my memories. That rubble was nothing I recognized, just a pile. And I didn't know what to do with it, how to make sense of it.

So we climbed back in the Jeep and drove down 54, into the heart of the destruction, passing the Dillons grocery store—the only one in town—where my grandmother used to let me pick anything I wanted, filling our cart with Pepsi and Nutter Butter cookies, ice cream, and half-and-half for our cereal in the mornings. Most of the building was gone, peeled away and tossed. The only grocery store was now forty miles away in Pratt, the biggest city around, at twenty thousand residents.

The Kiowa County Courthouse, a building I'd barely noticed before but one where my granddad spent countless hours, now loomed over everything. A large brick and stone edifice, it had

been damaged, battered on the south side, but still stood above everything else. The high school next door was already being bulldozed and loaded into dump trucks.

All around the courthouse, white trailers packed into parking lots, blocking streets and filling up space. A small city of full-size single-wide mobile home trailers and several rows of tiny duplex FEMA trailers occupied what used to be rarely filled parking lots.

It took some time for us to find the City Hall trailer and, when we did, it was closed. But we did find a FEMA office and, as it turned out, the place where you went to get your ID badge.

The ID badge identified me as a “Greensburg Resident,” and I felt horribly sheepish and guilty for wearing it. Despite my role as outsider, interloper, and parasite, despite feeling like a disaster tourist, I share a name with my grandfather, town lawyer, a man who presided over the school board, the Rotary Club, the Masons, and the Chamber of Commerce, a man responsible for raising the money to build the Methodist church and instrumental in the development of the Big Well as a tourist destination and defining feature of Greensburg—a legitimate pillar of the community.

I was afraid that people would stop me, stare at the name, stare at me, and shake their heads. “Nope,” they’d say. “I knew Steve Church and you’re not him.”

Some days I wanted to believe that a place like Greensburg was the kind of place where we could live, a place where they wouldn’t think about building a nuclear power plant and where there was still a drugstore downtown with a soda fountain, a place far removed from the dangers of the larger world; but the truth is that I couldn’t even imagine living in Greensburg, couldn’t imagine raising a family in this tiny shell without wanting to dig my way out or hop an airplane to anywhere else. When I saw myself there, I saw myself sitting alone in a darkened room with a beer in one hand, only the glow of the television illuminating my face.

The ID badge listed my address as 315 N Bay, Greensburg, KS, my aunt Judy’s address. This was, of course, a lie. I never lived in my aunt Judy’s house—at least not in the way you

live in most places. I lived there in the stories, the images that surface in odd moments: wheeling around the basement in my cousin Aaron's yellow wheelchair; my uncle Bill sitting on a saddle on the piano bench dressed in cowboy garb and wearing a too-small straw hat as he strummed a toy guitar and sang "I've Been So Lonely on My Saddle Since My Horse Died"; and that Christmas dinner, or maybe Thanksgiving, when we ate the entire meal without silverware, just fingers, carrot-sticks, and celery stalks for scooping and spooning. I never lived in her house, but it lived in me, as did my grandparents' home near the elementary school, the house where my father was raised.

The picture on my ID badge captures most of my torso and is taken at an odd angle, my right shoulder cut off. There is a white backdrop, but my head rises over it, the top line of it bisecting my head at the top of my ears. I don't look happy or sad. Just sort of tired. And when I look at it now, I'm reminded of my confusion at the time. *Do I smile for my FEMA badge picture?*

That didn't seem quite right. But I didn't want to look dour or sad-faced, because that would be against the general gestalt of western Kansas people. Even after the end of their world, everything was looking up. Everyone was positive. Nobody complains in Greensburg. Suffering is done silently, privately, stoically. Work takes the place of public grief.

Dad and I exited the trailer into the bright sun. I stepped onto a sidewalk and looked down. Words. Written on the pavement. Maybe with a permanent marker. Maybe paint.

*Travis, age 9. We survived F5. 5/4/07.*

This was not the only sign we would see. Everywhere, it seemed, people had marked up the rubble and wreckage with spray paint and other instruments. I saw the odd rune-like scratchings of rescuers; warnings to looters and reporters; praise for Jesus; and beneath the corner of one dislodged house, fake legs dressed in red-striped stockings and black pointy shoes and the words "There's no place like home" spray-painted on the siding.

### *Seeing*

The only recognizable sign of my dad's childhood house was the basement. The house had been sold a few years ago, after my

grandparents had died within a year of each other of complications related to Alzheimer's and cancer. Now it was just gone. Wood and brick and dirt filled my grandmother's sewing room. One wall had caved in and covered the floor with mud.

From what little was left, I could just barely discern the outlines of the mollusk-like old house, the added-on rooms, and the garage. It's a house where I spent countless Christmas mornings, long days in the hot summers, and where I'd marveled at the extra-thick, spongy carpet in the living room, the glass shelves filled with porcelain figurines, and my grandmother's electric organ. Now it looked so small, so insubstantial. The basement, where my grandfather kept his old typewriters, had seemed cavernous and mysterious to me—now tiny, bare, and sad.

"Was this the spot?" I asked, standing on a patch of mud in the corner of the yard. The hedge was long gone. I wanted to know where the cave had been.

"Yep, that's it," Dad said, and I asked him to help me see the size of his backyard cave, the place where the tunnel came out, all those details so I could try to remember this later. But it was too much to remember, too hard to capture everything. I'd never seen anything like this kind of destruction.

Everywhere we looked, it seemed, were hundreds of stuffed animals—their pink and yellow fur matted with dirt, their stuffed bodies waterlogged and bloated. We saw stuffed animals and doll babies, those cherubic Cabbage Patch Kids, and the brightly colored plastic of children's toys all tossed together with wood, mud, brick, and mortar.

The trees around my grandparents' house—and everywhere else in town—were gone or ripped-down, attenuated stumps, the limbs torn off, the bark peeled back. My father's hole in the ground was perhaps just a dream still, the ghost of a memory, a relic of the lost world.

We climbed back in the Jeep and headed for my aunt Judy's. Outside the hospital, staff had lined the beds up like soldiers in the parking lot, and someone wedged an American flag into one of them. It hung limp and rippled slightly in the breeze as we passed.

My aunt Judy's house was one of the largest houses in Greensburg. It had a stately brick drive, old iron gates, massive cedar trees like sentinels against the wind, a grove of cherry trees

and original stained glass in the doors and windows. The train tracks ran right along the northern edge of their property, but I swear you never noticed the noise and rumble, the piercing horn of the freight trains—probably because the trees insulated the house from the sound.

It was a beautiful home—one that had, for many years, occupied a space in my brain reserved for images of ideal homes, the kinds of places around which epic nineteenth-century narrative novels are centered. The entire house had been trimmed out in thick walnut and oak and seemed labyrinthine to a child, thanks to two different basement staircases, a top floor “ballroom” that ran the length and width of the house, and closets always filled with toys and costumes.

When Dad and I came upon the old house that day, the top floor was gone, the grand front porch partially collapsed, and several cracks snaked up the front, making the house seem to tilt to the north, away from the blast of the storm. It looked to me as if it was just moments away from collapsing completely. It was hard to imagine how Aunt Judy could have survived.

The ground floor of the house was filled with the mulch of interior furnishings, glass, wood, and porcelain. The carpet and walls were waterlogged and spattered with mud. I entered through the boarded-up door and found the joists soaked and arched up through the carpet like the ribs of some buried beast. The windows were all gone, the furniture tossed around, everything reeking of mildew and mold. After the tornado had passed, it rained for days on the high plains, filling the battered houses with water, soaking furniture, clothes, everything.

I found the upstairs a confusing jumble of furniture, plaster, mattresses, doors, brick, and lumber. I couldn’t even recognize it as a place I knew. We climbed over a pile of brick and up a staircase to the top level, to a remaining small platform of wood flooring that let us look down into the rooms below and out across the shattered and broken landscape of life after an apocalypse. Standing in that spot, taking it all in, there was no question that a world had ended.

### *Deflection*

After we returned from Greensburg, Dad moved out of the trailer at the asphalt plant where he was working and into an air-conditioned cubicle space at a small start-up company in

Lawrence focused on nanotechnology, or the creation of tiny disease-fighting nanoparticles, invisible to anything but the most powerful microscopes, thousands of times smaller than the width of a human hair.

His job would be to design the facilities and machines required to produce these nanoparticles used to fight cancer, heart disease, perhaps even things like Alzheimer's. This move, this job—it seems like a lie, a non sequitur at least. Nanotechnology? Really?

When people ask me what my dad does, I tell them, "He builds stuff. Systems. He makes things run."

Dad went from turning an asphalt plant from a money-loser into a profit-making operation, to building complicated chemical machines made to cure the incurable. Asphalt to Alzheimer's. Gravel to nanoparticles.

This is what I've come to expect from Dad. He is a survivor. There's no doubt about that. Last year he had a three-by-six-inch chunk of flesh removed from his chest and a lymph node excavated from his armpit. Stage 4 melanoma. Malignant. But it didn't appear to have metastasized. He didn't tell me about it until after he got the test results. No radiation necessary. No chemotherapy. But it still scared the shit out of me.

The year before that, Dad tripped on a garden hose, fell, and hit his head on a rock. He saw stars for a few seconds, but got up and shook it off. He never mentioned it, except maybe to my stepmother. It was just a bump on the head, he thought. No big deal.

For months afterward, though, Dad suffered pounding headaches and, while he didn't recognize it at the time, he also had problems with memory and speech. He would lose words, simple ones, and trail off midsentence. He'd be driving and forget where he was going. He went to doctors and chiropractors, each of them with a different diagnosis. But because he'd never gone to the hospital when he fell and hit his head, there was no record of this injury. Finally they gave him a CT scan.

He got the call on a weekend. *Subdural hematoma*. A big one. A blood clot about the width of a fist, thick and bullish. It had squashed the left side of his brain, taking up space in his skull. He needed brain surgery. Two days later, doctors drilled a hole in his skull and inserted a stent to relieve pressure and

drain the clot. By many conservative estimates, he narrowly averted death.

The accident was such a dumb thing. Dad was just standing at his barbeque grill, enjoying an average day at the lake. He stepped away from the grill, got his foot tangled in a garden hose, and toppled over.

Dad was nearly killed in a barbeque accident.

It wasn't funny. But it was. Or I didn't know how to deal with my father's mortality, so I joked about buying him a grilling helmet or about the medal he won at the X Games for Extreme Freestyle Grilling. This was how we dealt with the fear. We deflected it with humor, distancing ourselves from the reality.

When he went in for brain surgery, I was scared. I was afraid for him. So I called my mom. Just like always. A thousand miles away in Phoenix, she was scared too, I think—for him, for me, for herself. I could hear the worry in her voice. Though she'd been far away from him for years, she'd never left him completely.

I also realized that since the divorce, the only times the three of us have been in a room together for extended periods of time were for family therapy, watching *The Day After*, my brother's funeral, my college graduation, and my wedding; and it strikes me that it may not happen again until another one of us dies. Those factional years of the early '80s marked a divide for me, the death of one life and the spawn of another, and many days I still find myself staring into the yawning chasm.

When we trolled around the streets of Greensburg, Dad taking me on the Sadness Tour of places-that-used-to-be, I realized that my father is only now beginning to seem old, vulnerable, even fragile sometimes. It doesn't seem right that he should have to worry about starting over again. It doesn't seem right that his parents should die and then his hometown be completely destroyed. But he would never admit as much to me. To him and to everyone I met in Greensburg, there was no blame, no self-indulgent mourning, only focus on the next hour, day, month, maybe year. I had never expected to feel such peace in the midst of such violent destruction.

On our tour, we stopped for lunch at the parking lot where the Methodist church used to be and ate some sort of soggy

stroganoff. But the bad food didn't matter. We were surrounded by people who knew my father, my grandparents, my aunt, my uncle, and all my cousins. I met a man who had known my grandfather for almost seventy years, and I watched my dad smile and shake hands, and nobody called him Eddie. Even if they had, he wouldn't have cared. He would have written in big black marker on a nametag, "Hello, My Name Is Eddie Church," and he would have been happy to call Greensburg home.

After lunch, as we drove again, out south of town to see if we could trace the path of the twister, Dad admitted that he hadn't felt so at home in Greensburg since he was a boy.

"I never understood why anyone would come back here after the storm until that lunch," he said. "That was pretty cool."

Later, as we drove and talked, he showed me where skin and hair had grown over the hole in his head, where the bone would never grow back, and I pushed the soft pad of my fingertip into the hole, learning the edges of it, feeling the tickle of his buzz-cut hair.

"So if you ever need an ice pick lobotomy, that's the spot?" I asked.

"That's it," he said. "Just get through the skin and you go straight to brain."

He told me how he'd been doing Sudoku puzzles, listening to language tapes, and forcing himself to use a computer mouse left-handed, even taking different routes to and from work—all in an effort to exercise his recovering brain. He told me he felt like a new person, smarter, sharper, quicker, and more coordinated, almost reborn in the same body. He didn't say it, but I thought, *Like a mutant, a superhero or something.*

Now this. Another job. Another end. Another new beginning.

Now he will be putting that brain, those abilities, to the test once again, trying to cure cancer, Alzheimer's, and diseases of the heart.

### *Birds*

The tornado turned the stately and aristocratic grove of cherry trees north of my aunt's house into a pile of naked limbs and amputated stumps. Around the trunks of the few remaining trees, small green tufts of leaves and branches had begun to sprout like neck-plumage on a duckling.

Six weeks after the storm and the flora had just begun to return. Tom Corns, president of the Greensburg State Bank, guessed the town would lose half of its population, leaving it with around 500 or 600 residents. People had already started buying up lots, bulldozing the remaining structures, filling in basements, and expanding their smaller lots into grand estates. The streets in town were wide and accommodating. Soon a crew of “green” builders would come from the University of Kansas in Lawrence to build an arts center and eco-friendly homes, and a crew of television cameras would record every minute of the drama.

The trick with Greensburg would be to try to lure not only residents but also retail businesses back to town. Someone had offered a warehouse full of new clothes, mostly closeouts and other stuff you’d find in the outlets, but there was nowhere to put it all. The downtown area of Greensburg looked like what they’d wanted Lawrence to look like for *The Day After*. It was a long pile of brick, the rubble of a dismantled city. The only thing similar I’d ever seen was a church in Dresden, Germany, that had been leveled by Allied bombers in the infamous fire-bombing raids of February 13, 1945, and left as a reminder.

My dad told me that a Boy Scout troop from suburban Kansas City had offered the people of Greensburg two truckloads of equipment, enough to outfit a troop of seventy boys; but Tom Corns said the Boy Scout troop in town—the same one of which my dad was a member and an Eagle Scout—had three, maybe four active members. It seemed that I wasn’t the only one who didn’t know how to help.

The day was almost over. Earlier, miraculously, my cousin had found my aunt’s diamond earring in the mess and ruin of her house; but such grace had long since left the scene and nobody could find the red box she really wanted, the box with stuff that mattered—letters and personal things from her husband, mostly of sentimental value, the hardest kind of value to replace.

We would be gone soon—the visitors and voyeurs. Tomorrow a man with a bulldozer and dump truck would knock the house down, rip out the basement, and haul it all away. Tomorrow there would be nothing left here but a hole in the ground. Tomorrow my aunt Judy would leave Greensburg and try not to look back. The only places I’d ever known here were now vacant lots, piles of rubble, or muddy holes.

A year or two ago, my dad and his sisters sold off the family cabin in Colorado that we'd all loved and vacationed in for nearly forty years. Slowly but surely, the places of my past, the places of my family history, seemed to be disappearing; and I realized that I would have to map my own landscapes of survival and make my own homes—wherever we might be living. I thought of my son and my wife and the new baby thumping around inside her belly back in California, and I somehow felt like my search had ended, or at least changed direction.

I stood out on what used to be my aunt's front lawn—now a chaotic jumble of mud, lumber, and tree stumps—with my dad, Aunt Judy, my cousin Cindy and her husband, Rod; all of us lingering in waning sun.

"See that?" Cindy said, pointing up at a tree.

I gazed up. High in the denuded limbs of a cedar, a scrap of tattered white fabric fluttered in the breeze.

"That's my bridal veil," she said and sort of shrugged.

It was eerily still and quiet—except for the low rumble of bulldozers and the beeping of their back-up alarms. In the distance, the faint sound of hammering and the occasional whine of a power saw. Nothing else. Weather reports had warned of another storm, another possible tornado. It never ends.

"You know," Aunt Judy started and then stopped.

We all looked at her.

"The day after the storm, there were huge flocks of birds wheeling around in the sky, circling and circling overhead, looking for their nests, I suppose. The next day they were all gone."

## RENÉ

The night before I left Madrid for good, René took my hand in both of his. For a man, he had small hands, but his thumb and forefinger met easily around my wrist. He said something to me about his country, a saying they had, *muñeca delgada, cuerpo delgado*. Slim wrist, slim body. I had put on weight—it was my first year away from home—but I hid it as well as I could under baggy sweaters and an oversized *mili* jacket I'd bought at the flea market. My first thought was that he was making it up. I so often had trouble believing him. *Muñeca* also means doll, and I could never use the word one way without thinking of the other. That was my second thought. I looked at my hand lying limp in his and withdrew it. He had never talked to me like that before. *Maybe I should have . . . Maybe you and I should have . . .* Now I can't remember the words he used. Did he say *quizás*? Or *a lo mejor*? Both mean maybe, but *quizás* always sounded more neutral to me, *a lo mejor* more hopeful, *mejor* meaning better, *lo mejor* meaning best. His expression, and the tone of his voice, were neutral. He was talking to me as though we had just met, and I wondered if he thought he owed it to me. It occurred to me that my father might be right about him.

I should have known the first time I saw René that he wasn't Spanish. Without meaning to, I caught his eye—and he looked away. That night, my roommate Linda had come out with me, and it unnerved me more than I would admit to walk into Café Central with her. I was used to going alone. Live jazz gave me a reason to be there—I could sit near the stage and drink cheap Águila drafts without feeling too conspicuous. It wasn't that I wanted to be alone, but I had yet to meet any “literary pilgrims” in Madrid—by then, I had read *Sylvia Beach and the Lost Generation* several times and took it as my bible. It stood to reason, I thought, where there was jazz there might be writers. I'd invited Linda that night, half hoping she'd come and half

expecting she'd say she needed to study—I was afraid, then, I'd talked it up so much that an actual bar, smoky and loud, would disappoint her. The place was full that night and everyone was sharing tables. I saw René sitting against the wall with another man, who glanced expectantly at each of us as we came through the door. René's eyes roamed aimlessly; his face did not disclose what preoccupied him. His distraction distracted me, and I looked a beat too long, but to my relief he didn't take it as an invitation. He looked away. And then Linda was standing over them, smiling and gesturing at two empty chairs, and they were trying gallantly to stand in that narrow space, mouths working though their words were lost in the din, faces lit and arms extended in a pantomime of welcome.

We just managed to introduce ourselves before the band struck up another number, and we were excused from saying any more. There was a quartet that night, one expat American and a few of the local guys, playing some kind of bebop that bristled with unexpected rhythms. I tried to lose myself in it, but the relentless arpeggios resisted me, leaving me feeling restless and wrung out. I noticed that René kept glancing at Linda. She was tall and blonde and athletic, an exotic among the Mediterranean beauties of Madrid, and she was used to getting a lot of attention. I knew it annoyed her, but she covered it well. Spanish men all paid the same compliments and made the same tired pun on her name—*linda* means pretty—but she would laugh each time as though she hadn't heard it before, while nodding to let them know, however subtly, that she had. She was just as patient with me, which always irritated me though I knew I should be grateful. She lent me her lecture notes for the classes I missed and only murmured *español por favor* when I disregarded our agreement to speak Spanish in the apartment. Her apologetic smile suggested I might be doing her a favor, but we both knew I depended on her far more.

After a while, I noticed that René was working at something on the table in front of him. He was sketching directly on the white marble slab, a pencil portrait of Linda's head in profile. When he'd finished, he tapped her arm and showed it to her. She reacted graciously, as I knew she would. It was a good likeness of her, and I nodded to René to let him know I thought so, noting at the same time the slight proportional errors of one who doesn't know his subject—the neck a fraction too long, the

cheekbones a trifle high. This was a reflex of mine, one I hated and tried to stifle. The other man, who had introduced himself simply as Jorge, had also been watching René draw, but now he leaned over to say something to Linda, and she had to cup her hand and strain to catch the words as he repeated them. Soon they were both hunched awkwardly across the table, taking turns shouting into each other's ears, and she rolled her eyes at me but gamely smiled and nodded and continued to answer his questions. René just went on working. The band played a few more numbers, then announced a break. When René looked up again it was with a suddenness that took me off guard, and again, he caught me watching. "You're an artist" was all I could think to say. It wasn't a question, and for a moment I thought he wouldn't reply.

He smiled. "Do you draw?"

I shook my head. I did once, but now that time seemed remote, part of a childhood I was busy leaving behind. I told him instead that I was studying art history with the former director of the Prado, Pita Andrade, but he didn't recognize the name. I mentioned my favorite paintings—they were all well known: Velazquez's *Las Meninas*, Goya's Black Paintings—but it was hard, especially in Spanish, to find the words for what I felt in their presence, or what came over me in the dark lecture hall, listening to Professor Andrade narrate his slides. *Me encanta*, I heard myself say, and that was true—it did, in a way, enchant me—but the expression was so common I might have been talking about lip gloss, and anyway I could not say how. Every painting I mentioned René seemed to know well, but when I asked if he visited the Prado often he said, "No, not really, no," and smiled his enigmatic smile. He was amused when I asked if he'd ever copied the Old Masters there. I often saw people with their easels set up under paintings, scowling at their canvases as I strolled by, merely looking. Some seemed too old to be students. I never knew who they were, but I always envied them.

By the end of the night, René still seemed as wary of my intentions as I had been of his, so it surprised me, when we said goodbye, that he suggested I give him my phone number. I never saw him at Café Central after that, and I never knew where any of his regular haunts were. When he called me, he always had some specific outing in mind, and I always said yes.

I knew very little about his life in Madrid. I never visited his

apartment, and he came up to ours only once, when he needed help translating a letter in English. It was from a Dutch insurance company, and he described to us how his van had been broken into while traveling in Holland, how he'd lost his camera and all of his clothes. The three of us spent the afternoon composing a businesslike response that seemed to please him. But his vague references to travel made me curious about how he lived. "What do you do for work?" I asked, and he brought out two photographs of himself chalking a portrait of Christ onto the sidewalk. Onlookers crowded the background of one picture, and some scattered coins stood out against the reds in Christ's robe. René's head was turned away as though looking at someone over his shoulder, but the profile was clearly his.

I often saw sidewalk artists at work in the city, especially on the broad, unbroken walks in Parque del Retiro, but I never imagined they could make a living at it. "Yes, you can," René said, "if you're good enough." But he acknowledged that it was hard even for him to believe he could afford his van and an apartment on what he made. The second photograph had been taken from above. The angle of the shot distorted it slightly, but I could see how beautifully he'd reproduced the original painting. The drawing was large, at least four feet by six, yet the proportions and perspective seemed entirely correct. I was sure I'd seen it before. The postcard he'd copied lay on the ground, in a chalk circle filled with coins. "Who's the artist?" I asked.

"I am!" René was indignant.

"No, I mean . . . who painted the original?" I asked. "I think it's at the Prado."

"Ah yes," he said, resignedly, "El Greco." Too late I could see where he'd lettered the name in white above his copy. He wasn't sure where the painting was, and it surprised me that he'd never seen it. In fact, what he'd copied was a detail from *The Disrobing of Christ (El Espolio)*, one of El Greco's most celebrated works. It was commissioned in 1577 for the High Altar of the Sacristy in the Cathedral of Toledo, where it still hangs. Professor Andrade had taken our class there on a weekend field trip.

René admired his own work over my shoulder. "You always make more on the religious pictures, so that's mostly what I do. But I get tired of them sometimes." I could see how carefully he'd shaded and blended the reddish tones of Christ's beard and

the shadowy folds of his robe. His colors had the rich luminosity of oils, and I wondered out loud how he achieved such an effect in chalk, but he just shrugged.

“How long does it take?” I asked.

“Six, eight hours. I can only do one in a day.”

“And how long does it last?”

He laughed ruefully. “A day. Less. The street sweepers come along and pfft!” He swept the air with his hand, and I remembered coming upon the remains of drawings on my way home in the early morning hours when the trucks were out, all the streets wet; how magical those improbable colors seemed then, pooled or trickling down the tiled and broken pavement. “The Spanish people love art,” René said, a little wistfully. “They’re always willing to give something for a painting they like. It’s not like that everywhere. And they respect it—they go out of their way not to step on a picture, even in the middle of the sidewalk. They respect it, and they go around.”

We were quiet for a minute, looking at the photos, and when I tried to hand them back he said, “No, you keep them,” then grinned, unexpectedly teasing me, “to remember me by.”

“I’ll remember the drawing,” I shot back, embarrassed. “But I can’t even see your face here!” His head in the photograph was not even an inch square, just the line of his nose and chin, his dark curls. “How can I be sure it’s you?” I realized immediately I shouldn’t have said it.

“Of course it’s me!” he retorted, so vehemently that I knew I had wounded him. I apologized several times, but when he left I still wasn’t sure that he’d actually forgiven me, or even what had made him so angry.

Now when I look at that photograph again, I’m surprised by how slender René is, and also that his legs are bare. He seems to be wearing a bathing suit, a Speedo, though the men watching him are all wearing long pants, and the women, skirts. Even today, no one wears shorts on the streets of Madrid, so I don’t know what to make of this. I think the picture was taken in Spain because one man is holding a shopping bag from Corte Inglés, with its familiar green and black pennants. I don’t know how much younger René is in this photo than when we met, but now I think it could be as much as ten years. I remember a puffiness about his face that I don’t see here. A looseness around the

jowls that I found unattractive. I took him to be in his early thirties but he might easily have been older. How would I have known? I was eighteen. Everyone looked old to me.

I always asked him a lot of questions, curious about the solitary life he'd made for himself. He seemed to be completely independent, taking off for weeks in his van, doing his sidewalk drawings or sketching portraits, getting by on whatever he got for them, which always seemed to be enough. He never talked much about those trips. When I asked where he'd been, he would shrug. "Traveling." I'd pull a few details out of him, but then he'd smile more and say less and I'd begin to feel that I was grilling him. Once in a while we'd run into someone he knew at a café or a bar and he'd stop to chat for a moment, but the man would never ask to join us and he'd never offer. If not for that, I could have believed I was the only person he knew in Madrid. He didn't talk about his friends or arrange to introduce me to any of them, which might have irked me if I were his girlfriend, but I wasn't. And for the most part, I didn't mind not having that claim on him, or not having the right to ask certain questions. It was a relief to me to have one unencumbered friendship. I told anyone who asked that he was too old for me and that I didn't find him particularly attractive; both were true. But the longer I knew him, the more I came to see how his *machismo* locked him into attitudes that I wouldn't have said came very naturally to him. There was even a rigidity in the way he carried his body that I recognized in other men and typically avoided. Sometimes he scolded me for not acting more "feminine"—he thought I swore too much and wore my hair too short—but I laughed at him, and he would have to let it go. I was glad then he didn't feel he could say more.

It confused me a little that he didn't show any further interest in Linda. Jorge, on the other hand, was running a strenuous campaign to date her and called often to plead his case. I wondered if René had bowed out and left him to it, if they'd settled that privately between them. That would be the more old-fashioned, chivalrous side of *machismo*, a side I rarely saw, and the idea intrigued me. I was so curious I finally had to say something. "Your friend Jorge seems to be very much in love with Linda," I ventured one afternoon, when we had stopped to have a coffee.

“Who’s Jorge?” he replied, not even looking up from his cup. “You know, Jorge—the guy you were with at Café Central? The night I met you?”

René looked blank, then baffled.

“Remember? You were drawing Linda’s picture on the table?”

“I remember drawing, yes . . .” He frowned, and I began to get impatient. The more I had to explain, the more foolish I felt. He was playing with me, I was sure.

“Your friend Jorge was sitting with you at the table when we got there. Don’t you remember?” Almost simultaneously, recognition lit his eyes, and his face darkened.

“He’s not my friend,” he said abruptly. “I never met him before.”

I stared at him, too surprised to speak.

“What?” he demanded. Now he was the one getting angry. “He was just sitting there and there was nowhere else to sit.”

“Well, I thought you knew him—you were talking to him.”

“So I was talking to him! I never saw him before!”

“Well, I thought you did,” I said, still trying to work it out. “I thought you never mentioned him because you’d had a falling out over Linda.”

“Over LINDA?” He looked at me, incredulous, and I could see that possibility had never occurred to him. I faltered.

“Well, I thought you liked her too. Isn’t that . . . Then why were you drawing her?”

He started to laugh, looking at me with tender amusement. He never treated me like a child, but I sometimes had the sense that he thought of me that way. “Would you have preferred that I draw you, then?” he asked, in a tone so gentle I couldn’t answer. I knew I couldn’t defend myself without insulting him, and he was, I realized even in my anger, at least as easily hurt as I was. But I must have looked fierce enough to let him know he should leave it alone, because he did.

René laughed at me often, though not unkindly. He laughed when I tried to keep up with his breathless, break-neck Argentine Spanish. He spoke twice as fast as any *madrileño*, and his voice buffeted the familiar words like gusts of rain and wind, caressing them one minute and scaling octaves with them the next. The more excited he got, the higher his voice would climb, until he was speaking almost in falsetto, and then it would come

crashing down again. Every sentence had the pitch of a wave, or many waves. I rose and fell with his voice. It was intoxicating. It was better than jazz. Eventually, I could understand most of what he said, but the longer we were together, the more I would try to match him note for note, until I was squeaking out lines of pure gibberish. He would laugh so hard he had to wipe his eyes, and then carefully explain whatever it was that made my sentence make no sense at all. For someone who spoke no second language, he was very free about correcting mine. I reminded him of this once or twice, and he allowed that I spoke well enough. But compliments didn't come easily to him.

We were out walking late one night when we passed by a park where a long line of people stood waiting at a pay phone. "What's going on over there?" I asked. René just grinned and steered me toward them. He exchanged a few words with one of the men in line, and then we headed off again. He didn't say anything right away and I thought he was enjoying my confusion—he always seemed to like knowing something I didn't. "Well? What is it?" I finally had to ask.

"Broken phone," he said. I waited while he thought his own thoughts for a minute. By then I was used to the gaps in our conversations. "It won't take the money," he continued, "but you can still call long distance, so word gets around and everybody goes there to call home." Then a little defensively, "It's very expensive to call Argentina."

"Those were all Argentines, back there?" I asked.

"Most of them."

"So, whenever a pay phone breaks down, you all let each other know?" René was the only Argentine I'd ever met in Madrid. The idea of some organized, underground Argentine network systematically defrauding the Telefónica struck me as absurd.

He nodded, still deep in thought. "I didn't know about that one," he said, and it was clear the omission disturbed him. When he glanced over at me, what he saw jarred him so badly that I wondered for a moment if my face betrayed some meanness so ingrained I wasn't even aware of it. I half thought he'd been making a joke; now he acted like I'd called him a liar. My attempts to coax him into explaining only sounded skeptical, even to me.

“Well, how can a phone work without taking the money?” I asked. “Why doesn’t the phone company fix them?”

“They do,” he said, shortly. “That’s why I stopped to ask him how long it’s been broken. In less than a day they find out, and it’s not free anymore. That’s how they know!” he said, gesturing back toward the park. “When people start lining up like that, it’s obvious!”

“OK, OK,” I said, but I couldn’t placate him. At the next Metro station, we went our separate ways.

A week or so later, he called late one night, around eleven. “There’s a phone on Calle Princesa,” he said, “I just heard about it. Want to go? Call home?”

“I call home all the time,” I said. I was tired. It was one of the rare nights I was planning to stay in, and I’d been looking forward to just catching up with Linda.

“¡Venga!” he said. “Come on! It’s free!” I argued with him for a few minutes, but I knew I’d give in. I realized something was eating at him, and he wouldn’t get over it until I let him prove to me that the pay phone trick was real, or that he was connected to the Argentine underground, or whatever it was. To tell the truth, I was flattered that my opinion mattered so much to him. He met me at the Argüelles station, and when we got up to Princesa, only a few people were hanging around by the phone. I was glad we’d arrived early enough to miss the line, but then I saw René’s face. We had to try our calls anyway. I tried mine another couple of times even after he admitted it wasn’t working anymore.

“Maybe next time we’ll hear sooner,” I said. It surprised me to realize that I was actually a little disappointed, not tired anymore. “We’re out now,” I said. “Let’s go have a drink.” I thought it might take some time to break him out of his mood, but he brightened at the suggestion and was suddenly, inexplicably, more cheerful than I’d seen him in some time.

René didn’t much like talking about his parents, but I asked about them anyway. I knew he’d long overstayed his tourist visa and didn’t intend to go back to Argentina, so I assumed it was hard for him to think about not seeing them again. “You can’t even visit?” I asked.

“I’d never get back in without a visa,” he said, “and they’d never give me another one—they’d never let me leave again.”

*They* meaning the government. He never mentioned how his family felt about it.

My own parents always sounded so nervous on the phone. I didn't like to make them worry, but I was tired of lying to them, so I said more than I should about what I did outside of school. René's name came up often enough that finally my father asked what the nature of our relationship was. I think he phrased it just like that. "We're friends," I said. "He's too old for me, Dad, and besides he's not interested in me that way. I'm not interested in him that way, either."

"Are you sure he's not gay?" he asked, even after I insisted he was not. I was shocked—not that he would ask, but that he thought I wouldn't know.

"You say he's Argentine?"

"Yes."

"And how do you know he's not gay?"

"Dad. If you met him, you'd know. He's just so macho—he's not gay, OK? He's just not."

"You won't meet anyone more macho than a gay Argentine," he said softly. My father hates to be wrong, and usually this far into an argument he'll grow more adamant, but now he just sounded sad. "They have to be, you know, to pass in that culture."

I knew he must be thinking of Roggiano, who'd been his professor and mentor and was now his friend. Roggiano lived in an apartment filled with Chinese antiques and white upholstered divans. I saw him a few times a year at faculty parties. My father saw him sometimes in the company of a younger man, whom Roggiano liked to say he had "adopted," implying that his companion was like a son to him. Years later, the man would die in his forties and Roggiano would say he'd had pneumonia. When Roggiano himself got sick, he would call it cancer. None of that had happened yet, and I'd never really stopped to consider Roggiano's private life, but when my father mentioned "passing," I felt instinctively that he was right. Just not about René. "Dad," I insisted, "he's not."

"You don't know that," he said, but I could hear the resignation in his voice, and I could tell he wasn't going to argue with me anymore.

My last night in Madrid, René took me to a concert at the Círculo de Bellas Artes. Usually I paid my own way, but this

time he wouldn't let me and I was afraid the tickets had been expensive. He wouldn't say. "No, no," he kept insisting, "*te invito.*" I invite you. Such an elegant phrase, gracious and casual and clear without having to mention money at all. I thought of what we might say in English: *Allow me? I insist?* Something fusty and old-fashioned, more about me than you. *Te invito.* I liked that it felt like a gift whenever anyone said it.

It was the last night of the Festival de Flamenco, and for several hours we sat in the darkened *sala* listening to the performers take turns singing their songs of heartbreak. One man, or sometimes one woman, took the spotlight at a time. One guitar, one voice. The others sat along the back of the empty stage, listening, calling out encouragement or clapping *palmas sordas*, cupping their palms to muffle the sound. Some clapped in tempo and others in counter-tempo, braiding the two in an intricate rhythm so fast that my ear could never keep up. I had learned the hard way not to clap myself—I was always *fuera compás*, outside the rhythm, and in a *tablaó* the dancers didn't hesitate to scold you from the stage. But I loved flamenco, its total lack of restraint. The singers opened their throats and let their lament pour forth, tearing at their voices until they were hoarse and ragged—they sometimes veered off-key into a raw keening that sent chills down my spine. I had no knowledge, then, of the different forms of *cante jondo*, of twelve count or quartertones, but then many of the best artists—and these were some of the best, René told me—had no formal training. It wasn't that kind of art, and maybe I loved it so much because it required only that I lay myself open to it and really listen. I could rarely make out the words, but they were filled with death and dark emotions that were impossible to mistake—anguish, alienation, despair. The brusqueness of the guitar stroke, the insistence on harsh, percussive sounds, and a refusal to ornament or retreat from the compulsion that drove the music elevated each song to a kind of epic tragedy. If I allowed that solitary voice to enter me, it tore me up but left me feeling braver and, strangely, less foreign. I would never know the rootless, wandering life of a gypsy, and at eighteen I knew nothing of death, but I did know what it was to be lonely.

So at the end of the night, when René took my hand in the café, I was prepared to tell him what his friendship had meant

to me and how much I would miss him. Even how I wished we'd had more time together, so I could've spent a day at the park watching him draw or gone with him on one of his trips. He'd never asked me, but I'd thought he might eventually trust me enough to let me in on the rest of his life. I wasn't prepared to hear him say he thought we should have done things differently. "What do you mean?" I asked.

"Just that . . . maybe we would have been good together." Saying this didn't seem to embarrass him, and I thought it should.

"Well, it doesn't matter now, does it?" I managed. I might have said *no importa*—it's not important—or maybe *da igual*—it's the same. It didn't matter, but nothing was the same. He was talking to me like he didn't know me. "I leave tomorrow," I said needlessly. He nodded. I'd had trouble believing some of the things he said, but this time I was sure he didn't believe it himself. Did he think I expected some token romance now? Or was my father right? It occurred to me to wonder who else he knew at this café, who else might be listening—but that seemed crazy. Did he *want* to make me angry, so I wouldn't contact him again? None of these explanations made any sense. "I have to finish packing," I said, and felt defeated. "I need to get home."

He'd picked me up that night in the van I'd heard so much about, and now he parked it in front of my building. Linda had already gone back to Vermont, and I thought he was going to ask to come up, but he only wanted to exchange addresses. He gave me his parents' address in Buenos Aires because, he said, it wouldn't change. "Why not both," I suggested, but I wasn't surprised when he shrugged and said this way was better, and I didn't have the heart to push him on it. I was finished with wondering whether he really had an apartment or what he did with all his time. I noticed that his last name was Italian, and it made me realize that all these months I'd never known his last name. "Must be where you got that hair," I said. He had fine, glossy hair that curled in tight ringlets. When I think of him now, it's that hair I see most clearly, and the face beneath it is just a wash of color, pale and indistinct.

Maybe, in the end, he just meant to pay me a compliment and expected that I would be flattered, just as surely as I would turn him down. Maybe if I had been less sensitive about it, I might

have understood him to mean that he considered me someone worth pursuing, and let him show me myself in that light: one last, idealized glimpse of the one who got away. Something to remember him by. I should have trusted him more than I did. He concealed things from me, it's true, and chose to draw himself only from certain angles, but if that was lying, then I was guilty myself. I was never as worldly or as confident as he let me think I was. And that's what stands out for me now, when I remember him—how different I felt when I was with him, how for a few hours I was more the person I believed myself to be than I was in the rest of my life.

I think now that was a kind of love, though I would never have said I loved him. I would have been too afraid he'd misunderstand. But maybe I misunderstood. When he took my hand, when he turned my palm up, when he spoke to me in the words of an old song, maybe that's all he was trying to say. All I heard was a familiar rhythm I was determined to resist. *Palma sorda*—deaf palm—is a muffled clap. *Palma seca* is its opposite—dry palm, a sharp, clear sound. Maybe “opposite” isn't the right word. I can't explain the difference because often I can't even hear it. *Palma sorda, corazón sordo*. Deaf palm, deaf heart. If I invent a phrase, it may only mean I'm trying to say something I haven't said before. When he spoke to me, his voice was low and flat—what I can recall of it, what hasn't been washed away in the intervening years—low and flat, without any of its familiar music. That night of all nights, I should have known it wasn't the words that mattered. I listened only to the words, and I thought he was lying. If I had listened more carefully to all the silences in between, I would have known he never did.

ANNIE BOUTELLE

**CARAVAGGIO VIEWS GIORGIONE'S LAURA  
[TAKE THREE]**

He goes back  
to grey-green  
leaves and  
implacable  
dark, but  
finds  
instead  
deceit  
illusion  
joke that keeps  
Giorgione  
laughing  
in his damp  
grave. "Look,"  
the dead  
man mutters,  
"up close  
and  
closer—  
pinpoints  
of light,  
dozens,  
thousands,  
like a huge  
night sky,  
and each leaf  
on its left side  
shines.  
How my  
fine brush  
relished  
each  
swoop,  
each dip  
it danced  
with God.  
Try that!"

JOE COLLINS

## BLESS YOU THIS SICKNESS

I had been despairing    times too  
A-channeling my mother

The list of things and no need and  
I will ever ask anything important  
Like a dinosaur    like

Halloween *how-soon-in-the-wind*  
How we forget one or another

A mouthful of a-  
One-second brain's witches

OFF    Oh the vices  
The asphyxiate on all of this—

Full    filled whatevernessful and

The shame of beginning *Oh*  
An Evrywonnustus Lax Machina

**GALILEO**  
**(FROM "CONVERSATIONS OVER STOLEN FOOD")**

*Between December 2006 and January 2007, we recorded thirty conversations throughout New York City. Each talk lasted forty-five minutes. Half of them took place at a Union Square health-food store that we call "W.F." Other locations included MoMA, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Metropolitan Opera House, Central Park, Prospect Park, and a Tribeca parking garage. What follows are the final minutes of the sixteenth talk.*

6:20 p.m. Sunday, January 14  
Union Square W.F.

A: Um, as you speak a gorgeous huge moon has risen beyond the bank.

J: Oh.

A: A full one.

J: That bank has the banner which says Almost Maine, and a full moon, or nearly . . .

A: I think it may be full. Full moons grow so large they no longer seem round. This looks chunky to me.

J: And beneath that moon we could almost touch Maine ourselves.

A: Sure. But I find this moon in no way diminished by reflections from spherical lamps hanging—the W.F. ceiling, which projects out over um 14th Street traffic.

J: Though without lamps the city would lie bathed in silver. Maybe Whitman's New York had moonlight reach it.

A: He mentions that in D.C., and there's a a book of World War Two reportage, with American correspondents (during air-raids for instance) describing London flooded by moonlight for the first time this century.

J: Oh.

A: Able . . . correspondents discuss hearing crushed canned peaches drip since streets stay so quiet. As for what you've called . . .

J: [*Muffled*] faster than I've seen before. It's now well above that building whose corner had been piercing it (or rather cutting into it). You'd said Kristin's coming later tonight?

A: We'll eat here then . . .

J: Do what afterwards?

A: read at the café on Irving.

J: Oh yeah? Maybe I'll plant myself at a neighboring table.

A: You could spy on us, like the day I visited Boston and spent my free hours reading in the public library, but then got passed a note announcing I'd been observed while absorbed in thought. I've since . . .

J: Did we meet later that evening? I can't remember.

A: Well just yesterday I noticed how packed my life is. I'd prepared to see a film with Kristin, then meet you, then call our friend Liliana and attend the party—all after six full . . .

J: Yeah, I suffered this fall in Providence, where I felt little motivation to get work done quickly. In the absence of that overabundance we can spend whole weeks on what ought to take hours . . .

A: Which . . .

J: amounts to a loss of time, and loss of life. If as James Schuyler says, “A few days are all we have,” then we’d lose our greatest possession.

A: Though Schuyler disliked New York busyness himself. The moon just cleared a rooftop railing. The aesthetic pleasure watching couples wolf down sushi—it takes a long day’s work to appreciate this: the way a woman swings her legs obliquely as if scrubbing streets while she crossed. You missed her. She wore a rainbow hat. Or that deliverer with his strapped pizza-box bouncing. Elsewhere such sights get lost to perception.

J: Because . . .

A: Because I’d be dreaming I’m dating a movie star.

J: So a gold band now rings the moon. Do you know what produces this phenomenon?

A: Can you see it from certain angles only? Don’t people call it the numen, or lumen? It’s more intense if you wear contacts, since as you stare contacts dry out. Everything acquires a haze or sheen.

J: Have you read Galileo’s account of the moon’s rough surface?

A: This sounds familiar.

J: He delights in slaying a mythical beauty previous eras assigned to the moon. He thinks he’s heralding the triumph of science, so that science can put an end to myth.

A: Right, he couldn’t watch this moon between skyscrapers . . .

J: Yeah . . .

A: when it’s obviously beautiful. Or see moon, say, just beyond the Williamsburg Bridge and black water.

J: Or consider the moon from his Fort Greene studio—while sipping from a filthy glass.

A: Or spot the moon from a taxi.

J: Or um, or or study the moon after exiting MoMA.

A: Or glimpse a bright moon climbing out from the subway.

J: Or appreciate this moon because a friend points it out.

A: Or discover the moon through your legs as you stretch.

J: Or catch moons reflected in windshields.

A: Does that happen?

J: It's happened to me.

A: Have you noticed wafts of cinnamon? Don't they . . .

J: Yeah.

A: seem kind and alluring on such a frigid night?

J: Yeah I won't need a sweet. The aromas are enough.

A: Groundhogs get pleasure from taste-smells; I guess what they eat's pretty bland.

J: Hmm. I reviewed the animal flashcards today and learned female eagles stand taller . . .

A: You would think . . .

J: than males and started wondering if the the six-foot-two Swiss girl I'm meeting tomorrow . . . if we'll make a nice pair of eagles for the night. I've also read that eagles' large wings allow them to soar effortlessly.

A: Well that's obvious.

J: Though it's fun to study obvious things, right?

A: With flashcards my . . .

J: You'll want the exotic.

A: Any other, less purely factual information?

J: No, I stopped reading once I'd learned a couple facts. My water began to boil, and I fixed some tea. Though here's another fact: this morning I sat in a subway station at quarter of seven, waiting for a train to take me home, while down the bench one Chinese woman ate spoonfuls of soup from a large container. She looked entirely content . . .

A: As . . .

J: waiting for her train.

A: Was the container white? I like how Chinese immigrants pack not transparent but white containers. I feel such hearty stews must get stored in opaque containers. It's a solid, um, specific-to-the-transportation-of-homemade-food vessel I'm . . .

J: Though this wasn't homemade food. She'd bought it at a Chinese . . .

A: OK.

J: restaurant which—and several seemed open that early. I watched workers beating egg yolks with um the gigantic, I'm not sure what you call these things: with gigantic tools used to beat . . . [*Tape stops*]

DANA CURTIS

## LULU'S VEIL AND JOCASTA'S BROOCH

In answer to your question: I'm pretty sure  
all the birds are dead now—this will teach  
them not to think such dark thoughts,  
such purple blotches across  
a cat's electric fur. In response  
to the continental shift, may I  
just say: I've always loved  
cracks in the earth, web underfoot,  
the veil I only wear at murder  
trials or someone else's wedding. Think  
about it. You'll be pleasantly surprised  
at the result, at what holds diamonds,  
the silk: the wayward river from  
the eye socket. I spent a long time  
looking for just the right frame—  
black with a dial. It connects  
to what I need to connect—historical  
fragments jumping out of  
the bright red box. In reference to  
the shutting of the cemetery, the removal  
of your mouth, the selling  
of a crystal doorknob: yes  
or no, maybe later, vivid.

KATHERINE FACTOR

**NOW**

For the Sorins

Shall the volcano wait until vows  
come lobbing out of the couple's mouth?

Does duty dash forward from the hands being held  
lilting now over the Hawaiian wedding bowl? Love does

a dove sifting across eternity to descend this shore,  
circles round fingers in a clutch of wet stems—

on their shoulders heady blossoms  
scent their way home, the home their reservoir of stars.

The island holds an island guitar, the strums make shores,  
the shore shuffles waves. Children, seize these

replicating shapes, your parents welded hearts  
yielding Jordan, Oshun, Noah. Your eyes the size of souls.

See the ceremony decree? Let the waves eat now.  
Lovers' condensing their before as belief unpacks the clouds.

On the beach, on the last day of sadness, the emptied out pail  
centers in the shafts of sunset, the sunset

riffing off the liquid-shifted horizon,  
a line assembling words, and words, promises discharging the door.

KATHERINE FACTOR

## **CODDLED**

We are roasting an egg  
Whole in the fire.

In preparation,  
We have harnessed the wind.

We have zippered  
And unzipped the tent.

We will give the fire urine  
For the logs to laugh  
As they happily burn.

There will be owls.

We will drizzle honey  
All over when opened.

When broken open  
A bleached heart.

A planet held in halves  
Will peel like fruit.

The yolk a core  
Which had wanted to be opened.

Which wanted the snake  
Of something more.

If I eat,  
I will not have to think

Of the dark mother  
Under our blue tent.

RYAN FLAHERTY

## CONDITIONALS

All worlds begin with asking. Instinctively  
the chlorophyll of the new and briefly  
edenic asks, “Am I home? Can I stop  
inventing these engines?” And end and begin  
with asking, with a wild fecund of ambitions  
on the lip, on the edge. Sometimes I can feel  
my bones resting in the mass of me and sometimes  
I can’t. I ache to move, I think of moving.  
“If-then,” I say, “if-then.”

JOSHUA HARMON

**FROM "LE SPLEEN DE POUGHKEEPSIE"**

The greatest poverty is not to live  
in Poughkeepsie, to wear a fleece  
blanket against a diner's air-  
conditioning, to ride a motorcycle  
shirtlessly and helmetlessly along  
a sidewalk beneath blighted maples:  
how long till you succumb  
to the accidental nature  
of nature, your own nature, spaces  
to fill in later: a naked torso  
over an engine, a folk song of fire  
escapes and bottlecaps: you can't live here  
and I can't leave, but you can  
come down for a weekend  
of inaccurate impulses  
amid an overperfumed mall's  
bodily distortions, the rough housing  
of foggy suburbs and the mutually  
assured ruin of every qualified sense

---

"The greatest poverty is not to live / in" is taken from Wallace Stevens's poem "Esthétique du Mal."

RICHARD HOFFMAN

**EMBLEM 37 / ON SECURITY**

adapted from Alciati's *Book of Emblems*

To be safe from both the gods and men,  
from the cold, the winds, the rain,

dress in the furs of the mice from your barn,  
from your own small cache of good days.

This is the way to walk among thieves:  
pocketless, protected by your motley coat,

and able, even so, to catch more mice  
to stitch another when this one wears out.

---

Andrea Alciati's *Emblematum liber* or *Book of Emblems*, a collection of 212 Latin emblem poems, was first published in 1531 and was expanded in various editions during the author's lifetime.

MARK IRWIN

## WHAT YOU MIGHT SAY OF CHRIST

At the junction of Gnat and God he came from Grief  
to make a city named Marvel. The Milk-

words he spoke turned adults  
to children, their Minds vivid as with the scent

of bananas. Beyond body, trees ushered dusk purples fast and  
silent: Censers  
gilded through Centuries like the immensity  
of a Minute

wherein the Bee trundles  
from the pollen-crowned Stamen against the spathe's  
white arena.



*That thou dwellest—*

in such a place, everything on backwards  
or the wrong way around.

What do we have to forget? What remember?

The stag's human voice.

Your bodying forth.

## **GOODNIGHT**

You buried life, you mind-forged  
manacles, go fly around the park  
and smell the news: you grow like  
rocks, you chew on attitude, you  
push the snow back through your  
changing eyes: and what you want  
is what you want (not really), and  
what you want is what you want  
(’til Tuesday), and where you go  
is where you went (forget it), and  
coffee tastes like evidence (don’t  
let it): you try a game, try this or  
that, you try some eggs, you feed  
the cat, and wonder is what wonder  
does, and wonder tastes like ruby  
walls, and rivers paint you wind  
and snow, and houses you will  
never know—

JOSEPH LEASE

## **CRUEL**

It changed the day you changed the sun  
To lead: you wanted every smile to be the  
Truth, you wanted rain like mercy in the  
Sky: bad secrets fall like leaves or cups or  
Pens, bad secrets fall like blood you won't  
Get back-it changed the day you  
Changed the sun to lead,  
You watched militias  
Own the streets like kids:

LAURENCE LIEBERMAN

## THE LAST CITY

Grande-Terre, Guadeloupe

At outskirts  
near St. François, noted fishing  
village, we swiftly cruise past  
two fenced-off composites of geometric blocks  
and towers, each spaced out  
across a roadside acre or two. Variety and  
size of the stone cubes, spheres,  
high tablets and rhombus shapes may seem to  
mimic carousel booths,  
Dodg'em or roller coaster cars of gypsy  
transient carnival troupes . . .  
We're zooming so fast, only blurred  
passing glance. Or is it an  
upscale children's aquatic park, so  
out of kilter with indigent local populace? . . .  
Our barrage of questions prompts driver Noel  
to brake and pull off onto road  
shoulder at a third such display of assorted  
pinnacles and low-lying oblongs  
enclosed by padlocked gates and barbed-wire  
fencing. This final zone's the most  
elaborate: *The Last City* Noel dubs  
them, all three affluent grave-  
yards, posh cemeteries of the *Hindu*  
clans. *Exclusive* to the East Indian  
clientele  
of corpses buried in decorative caskets. The tombs, some  
as bulky as living

quarters, insure that the Hindu forbears  
will enjoy an *Eternity that lasts longer*, Noel sighs.

After the next  
bend in the road, we stop to view  
a tall mosque-like florid shelter  
set back thirty meters from the public highway,  
embellished with gables and  
flying buttresses. We peer into oaken chapel,  
half-concealed, paneled with glossy  
imported woods, and approach the front gates.

Chained & boarded shut.  
*Uninviting. Semi-private. Restricted  
entry*, says Noel . . . A chief  
Hindu Temple. You step close,  
snap a few photos from odd angles.  
Swerve away at shouts within, irked

wails . . . I'm lulled into stupor by sweetish thick  
fumes of incense billowing out. Moments later,  
as we hop into our van's back seat,

I glimpse furious glaring Indian scowl. Perhaps  
just startled awake from his siesta  
(midday catnap?): gorgeous curly black hair wind-

tossed, searing blue-black eyes afire,  
tawny near-rust black-brown cheeks and  
jaw. Upreared on bare toes, stallion-  
like, to chastise us for our *Sacrilege*  
and *Defilement*, his wife groggily  
pursuing him.

She, too, still sleep-clouded. Our muffler-choked tailpipe  
puffing its smoke's  
murky reply to perennial jasmines: incense  
streamers of holy fragrance whirring in the trade winds.

REBECCA LINDENBERG

## STILL LIFE WITH MOVEMENT

Fruit ripens in  
the argent bowl.  
The pear's slow  
blush comes  
as the burnished  
salmon spoils,  
woolly eyes forget-  
ful. The rabbit's  
soul swells,  
fur amplified  
in the convex  
silver dish. On this  
wooden table all  
the quiet volition  
of the world underway—  
becoming, then  
becoming anew.

KEVIN McLELLAN

## IT WAS NOT THAT LONG AGO

That I reached me. From where  
I speak now, not exactly  
whole. But the mountains were

always there. The birds too. Also  
once mine, flightiness. And the name-  
less me. No, a wind

that has yet to appear. And a scent.  
For you, I can't find  
exact words. Mountains. That I go

on like this. Also, birds. Sometimes  
I don't mind. That I believe. Tomorrow.  
A without from where *you* speak.

JENNY MUELLER

## GREAT EXPECTATIONS

(after Achilles Rizzoli)

*Ours was the country*, I said.  
I said, *My first vivid*  
*and broad impression*

came as I stood  
crowned with gloss at the spectacle.  
Once I was slick, of the mother,

and crossed, extravagant, into extravagant scenes . . .  
Ours was the country whose poor forks and spoons  
acclaimed themselves kings and queens . . .

There, at the low loam portals of things,  
at syllable level, I quested.  
Oh but then I framed

a house around such passages—  
a soluble house, with amazements of keys,  
that locked all at once against me—

Oh, what made me think  
there were keys? Can any man  
enter his dwelling?

Mine is the country,  
I say. I say my right name, Peter Metermaid.  
I first felt *great trembling*

*of moment* impending  
within a far province of Mother's backyard.  
I stood by the fence that looked into the stable

and felt my tongue kick in its own dark stall.  
*Soluble, ravel, cleave*, I said,  
distinct to the grass, which accorded.

JENNY MUELLER

**FROM COCKSUCKER BLUES**

(Robert Frank, 1972)

Understand, the man  
The very basic snatch

Where are we—Indiana  
Ave.? Yes. Missouri's

gangs. Illinois  
is Air Force. Texas:  
that's the corner of shari'a and esquina

del sabor,  
backed with:  
Chippewa, Cherokee.

---

Whammo, how time plugs  
with spaces. Better substances,  
please. That mouth which you meant

to fill with imperishing,  
radio snow

feels scuzzy. (English,  
silver tongue,  
precipitously darkening.) Hello?

Room  
service? What is this—the empire  
of my nostalgias? The World's Greatest  
etc.? Stuff  
me with berries.

---

Well alright  
Well all  
    right

All that fineness  
flown ahead

                    getting trashed  
that's all fine  
in seances & trances   any move you make  
that's completely still

having dreamed a baroque of blind items  
mixing moonlight & snow with the vice  
of the whitest angels

But all right, it's been slow  
                                    gone down, the  
verdict about your "experiment,"  
apparently only a cult that's gone down

to your shame,  
                    the gorgeous long inconclusion

to be tagged by something not exactly silence  
at the corner of nation & name

EDWARD NOBLES

## **NORTH OF THE PAST**

The Beatles' best song  
was on the last station  
when it too faded and the past  
was gone and the future  
more than a stand  
of ominous black trees  
is somewhere north  
beyond the last wilderness  
in the distant silence  
charting out a new sound.

EDWARD NOBLES

## **THE SECRET LIFE OF POETRY**

If this is perfect and nothing else is  
If it means everything to us and nothing to them  
Let us be here together when no one will know  
It will be everything to us and nothing to them

To them the pages will be blank  
The books will be empty  
The libraries will not exist

KELLI ANNE NOFTLE

## **AMNESIACS, ALL**

I tasted you here. Not knowing  
the difference. A plane of experience passed through me  
with the pulling of comb's teeth, forgetting.  
Hairwaxed and waned. A porch light, painted,  
speckled diorama, the beloved fingerlings pinned to satin, blown-glass  
sealed. You sound so much of gunpowder in an empty  
room as a blue-green beetle nests in my teacup. The secret pores,  
honey and hive. I was the woman who entered the riverbed,  
turning it. Not knowing the distance. A hand  
holds a dying bird. Both tremble.

## RHYMES FOR CRAIG

I.

I will not write your elegy in the riots of light  
that mean midsummer's arrived,  
and that you've been missing sixty-five  
days and sixty-six nights,  
and that I've, in the end, missed your wake  
because I was clear-as-if-you'd-warned-me sure  
you would see my face when you opened the door,  
dismissing misunderstanding, discussing mistake,  
perhaps shouting surprise! and uncorking champagne  
and undertaking explanations about where the hell  
you've been—not chasing poetry on volcanoes at all,  
not helpless in crevasse or hurt in ravine,  
not tucked inside the opposite edge of a burying world's round  
in ground gone dun hounding Proserpine but here, fond, found.

2.

You've been hounding Proserpine, there, but she won't be found—  
aren't the seasons wrong? It's past the break of spring—  
she should've kissed Dis goodbye; she should be, already, rising  
back to Ceres from that bargain ploughed ground,  
back to surface, bud, and air, from hope's trenchant wild  
distopias, the not inconsiderable disjunctions of prayer  
in a world wrought from bargain, shades' exchange—where  
is it written that only gods can deal? What about your child  
up here? Barely still a child, and real. Why should his need  
be swallowed with any lesser vehemence than  
those six crimson myth-lit, for the living rigged seeds?

Each chance is paid too dearly, stark and wide with range of con-  
sequence, calendar—now, every spring falling can only mean this:  
harsh landing/hard center/mark/nearing/dark/worlds apart/Dis.

3.

Disbanding. Disbarred, dissenter, disembark. Dishearten. Disciple. Disciplinary, disclosure, full or partial, the claimed closure of disco ball mirror, replete with points, each an aimed glory. You and a microphone: disarray lighting piecemeal, discretely. Indisposing hurry, how you'd constellate, how you'd discombobulate; how you'd court the lone fury with chin lifted, mouthing doubt: *how bad can night be?* Now disconnect's riffed over these days' lapsed golds as if from that discord; but disenchantment's at the heart of this  
and of whatever old underworld lord has had it with the dissatisfactory or worse, cold, consolations of myth, lagging pageantries of pomegranate, time's own chord. This line lost, seam undone—how'd you tell the taste?—of fading fate: 6 seeds eaten, my lip-synch, late; what's left of your grace left inchoate.

4.

6 weeks gone. They've left off pursuing what trace you'd left:

faint trail cleft by ravine cliff, odd bent branch—what counts as remnant in the midst of zilch. More corporeal: the inexorable morph of what wait signifies from *rescue imminent* to *window closing* to *demands of augury* (defy, defy)—in June's lip-synch, delay amounts merely, to admission of disguise, pieces of performance adrift across skittered interval—*could* this be a hoax? You're somewhere, wry, biding your time . . . better that than the more probable scenarios that each day die, having outlived their odds. Still, Search and Rescue should look for you behind each staged evasion that nods its aside before leaving.

What is it to leave? The readiness is all, if—let's agree—it's all a planned cameo. Now let's agree on another reach, also planned, another kind of extension grasped, that of a rescuing hand.

5.

Another kind of extension, that demand-

ed by myth where land surfaces from ocean

floor through fire's door. May 1st. Is it still April in Japan?

Jackie is here, reading (you remember the plan—

I told you on the phone, just before you left, just as if

we'd talk again). We talked jobs, sons, presses, the stuff

of futures, all that prospect brightening your voice—

you'd ask about volcanoes, then give advice—

who to read, teach, what to write—*landscape, myth—*

what not—*Rhyme!—I barely escaped with*

*my life—needed a 12-step program just*

*to stop writing sonnets—*that old joke. I'd lost

track of its source, voicing it so often over the years

myself, it was a small shock to hear it in yours.

6.

A week of shocks, the first week of waiting. Your voice  
on two answering machines, left before leaving. Saved intact.

Jackie breaking the news. Our frenetic rehearsals of fact:

You never came back from your hike; were dropped close  
to the volcano's base. You had walking sticks, cell phone.

Water? You should've heard the scenarios we'd invent,  
reject, revise; should've heard Jackie, from memory, chant

on the way to Joshua Tree, where all we saw turned sign:  
such bloom smearing rock-face, sand-crystal, spine; freak blizzard  
of bees puppeteering the yucca (wave, nod, recline).

You should've seen the morning sky: two backlit clouds filtered

prism, urging from us name for each new color, separate,  
taking shape: blue dolphin, red bird, some striate  
shells, each vacant, near zenith, undone before we could name it.

7.

*Shells.* Vacant months later. Still undone. Still can't name what we were. Up all night. Too late. Too close to write back.

Too much water, etc. A forbidding of tears, mismatch of black and inhibition on stage, screaming. An ashtray, passed. At present, apparently, a grief bearing emphasis, though I forbid.

A stair, or ascension in the abstract. You're right, your ear as usual, better; that last gesture's cracked. So why not hear your way to shore? Ocean everywhere, murmur encircled . . .

Maybe all ways sound the same in such a small island's rhyme.

How certain doubt sounds, half the time. Still, there's no denying this page, your poems. There's no denying the sun

sudden, that slicks this page with shine,

dawn abrupt, morning reading shot too blindingly bright—

I can't see the elegy you'd written. It's here, hidden in riots of light.

## LA GIGANTA

The injured, pitted, pigeon-stained,  
diesel-exhausted granite of the gothic cathedral's exterior  
soaks up the shadows, yet  
the pinks of granite warming early morning,  
the pinks in the flower bed,  
the pinks of the wings of her illusion,  
and the pinks of the dead pigeon  
in the plaza of triumph blush.  
After all, our lady doesn't live far  
from the little corner of art.  
Professor of faith, she is not troubled  
to stand on a symbol of the world.  
If she let down her hair,  
could you stand the apocalypse?  
Her copy exists in her evening shadow  
where her favorite couplet is oranges/horses.  
Keys, castles, gates, and eagles  
have become her decorations,  
and her shins are made of lions.  
Broken-faced griffins strain to howl water,  
and sculptors have chiseled many fires from stone,  
but try carrying a bronze sash forever.  
Blind as the ecstasy of eye shadow,  
she is another name for weather.  
She suffers for a look, timeless,  
something rising to meet her  
in a ribbon spiraling, something  
like men desperate to see  
a city from a tower and live.  
You know who to call  
if your plow runs into a Roman column  
or if you need a human flame for a minaret.  
You know a breastplate of righteousness when you see it.  
She is all-noun and pro-verb  
above her bells above the name of God.

DEBORAH POE

## IN ANOTHER STATE

ghost hardware

the room where we nap scratches itself into dreams

old pencil marks a chorus of hauntings

less dreams now, little digestion

today's attempt at meditation is a coruscant halo

there's a first time for everything—swimming

at the bottom of the hill, all those eastern amberwings—

closed eyes to cicadas' sound (the lake)

one could easily be in another state

JACK RIDL

## THEME AND VARIATIONS

Here in mid-January the drifts have hardened after  
a slight thaw. The snow is heavy.

The cats are asleep on the couch. The dog  
is asleep at my feet.

On the radio Rachmaninoff, the piano  
seeming to be chasing its own notes.

Some mail will come today. Some will not.

Our daughter is now a woman in the world.

This sentence is a sentence. This

In the crabapple tree outside the dining room window,  
there is a cardinal's nest covered with snow. Under  
the tree we buried the ashes of our first dog.

Outside this window, my daughter  
is pulling her sled down the street.

Later, later tonight, I'll finish the vanilla ice cream.

Lately I've been watching re-runs of sitcoms.

Magritte's hats, Duchamp's mustaches, Klee's little envelopes.

When I was ten, a circus came to our town. For fifty cents,  
you could go inside a tent and see a baby in a bottle.

My father left some of his death behind. My  
mother doesn't know.

I keep wondering if it's time to give away some of these books.

JACK RIDL

## **PRACTICING TO WALK LIKE A HERON**

My wife is at the computer. The cat  
is sleeping across the soft gold cushion

of my chair. Last night there was a frost.  
I am practicing to walk like a heron.

It's the walk of solemn monks  
progressing to prayer on stilts,

the deliberate cadence of a waltz  
in water. I lift my right leg within

the stillness, within the languid  
quiet of a creek, slowly, slowly,

slowly set my foot on the dog-haired  
carpet, pause, hold a half note, lift

the left, head steady as a bell before  
the ringer tugs the rope. On I walk,

the heron's mute way, across the  
room, past my wife who glances

up, holds her slender hands  
above the keys until I pass.

MARY ANN SAMYN

**AT GLEN LAKE VS. THE BIRTH OF ANGER**

Briefly put, I was spring-fed,  
like many a lake.

For his part, Jesus slept a lot,  
while others worried.

Returning home isn't easy;  
no one said it would be.

Talk about comfort zones,  
sticky sadness—

The children drew chalk crucifixes,  
two versions; please vote.

All around the lake, tiki lights mean  
someone's making a party.

*Good for him* is what I thought;  
I'll pray to that.

ADAM STRAUSS

## **WORLD AS MARRIAGE**

Who are            you?  
I am                I?

A bird then he'd look better without a beard.  
A saucy rib balanced on a dumpster.

Breeze lifts things.  
Where's the nearest cathedral?

Leaves into tresses as            walks  
Through the weep of a willow.

ADAM STRAUSS

## **DESIRE**

I brushed  
My fingers through

My hair—2 strands  
Fluttered off;

I make them sound  
Like butterflies

And wish today someone  
Gave me a dictionary.

SEAN TRIBE

## **AN OSTRICH WITH ITS HEAD IN THE SAND**

The earth shuffles as it sleeps  
Ants tick, kicking up dust.

Swerving light has no space to cast  
Shadows over conversations here.

What does you mean?

Beauty in worms  
Not cicada's  
Staring birds in trees.  
I retreat nothing;  
Save the distortion of words.  
There is no stasis underground

Don't believe it is still.

Roots pushing to a center.

Would you explain what you mean?

The noise of language exists  
On the prairie  
With gazelles who never speak  
And the wind always whining.

The straining noise of roots,  
Ticking of ants and  
The fierce silence of moles.

Don't believe it is still here.

LEE UPTON

## PLUCKING SWANS

Who looks into a marble  
and finds a code  
like Hammurabi's?  
We do.  
So why can't we pluck fast enough?

Milky with fragrance,  
a stairway of swans.  
Each swan decanting the autumn,  
wet feathers rimmed by frost,  
a concussion of quills

spraying into the fountain.  
And even here at the mirror  
a swan dangles,  
revenge on nature and art.  
You're breathing in needle clouds.

It's sharper and sharper in your lungs.  
You will not make the past work.  
Everywhere you look is down.  
Why are you tearing at your own arms now?  
Watch it.

Your head is in that one's mouth.  
I think he's choking with you.

LEE UPTON

## THE WAY FORWARD BEGINS WITH GRATITUDE

I can't read the devil's handwriting  
on this contract, can you?  
His penmanship, all forks.  
No thanks. No thanks to you

and your whiskey. No thanks.  
The shark's world or the saint's?  
No thanks.  
Look. The Picts and the Huns arrived at last--

thanks to you and your whiskey.  
Now your cow is in the corn.  
You can blow your horn,  
but she'll shred the flags

of a thousand countries.  
She thinks she's Marcus Aurelius  
mowing barbarians down.  
She's bloating, and she won't budge.

That's the way I feel about libraries.  
Thanks. The rhinoceros thinks she's a hippo  
equipped for war.  
No thanks. No thanks

to you and your whiskey.  
They say the more you drink  
the thirstier your thinking.  
Half the time I love actors.

Half the time I pretend to.  
I auditioned but landed in the crew.  
No thanks. No thanks to you  
and your whiskey.

Did you make your whiskey  
at home in a tank?  
Let's make your throat raw  
with an incredible thirst.

Everybody should have an education  
that doesn't involve a strip search.

LIZ WALDNER

## **SPY VS. SPY**

It got ruined when I had to think  
what to do to fend off harm.

*Be safe* became *be*  
*invisible*, the mandate  
of all worlds. To be unseen  
is to be pleasing. Or else  
to be pleasing is to be the same.

Under these conditions  
an interior is no longer possible.

The country all border  
is no country for a woman.

(And ‘tarsome’ besides, as Georgie would say.

Marvel at and be well pleased  
by Mapp and Lucia both: oh  
to be plenipotentiary  
in one’s desires . . . )

I try, am tried:  
so, if I know about it perhaps  
I can be it  
and duality will go away.

The smaller the object, the shorter its shadow;  
the longer noon’s thrall, its high okay.

## LET THERE BE LIGHT

Only if light allies with ease.  
If dark undoes *O no I've erred*  
that continuously shall be my row to hoe  
then I am ready  
to troglodyte.

Well, all well and good the figurative  
but remembering the last three weeks  
of August gloom and chilly NW rain  
and considering I'm considering staying—

having waked the dance pants once black  
(Pacific Northwest Ballet)  
from their five-year sleep  
(padding for my bicycle rack)  
in a Bay Area storage bin  
to wear with Value Village fleece  
to soak up sun to not quite freeze—

I see I am not ready, really  
to do without light.

Its exigencies are not easy:  
vision comprehension irreconciliation  
decision and its plight—  
but I won't live forever.  
Among ways to think  
(many though fading)  
I think this is right.

G. C. WALDREP

## ALL SOULS DAY

I wanted snow to fall  
through, *viz.* the sentience  
of a made thing:

to say the clouds below us  
“looked like snow”

is to engage in willful  
misrepresentation:

interpenetration of matter:

the body mantled  
not so much with likeness  
as with quickness: *speed*:

as the death message  
hums along its  
wire, postal route, its  
graph of light  
(pick your century):

a country opens up:

between knowing &  
not-knowing, a compressed

amplitude:

the heart is a lie  
the mind tells the muscle,  
a ladder of masks:

the idea that one thing  
hides another, clouds  
as snow, atom  
upon atom: incendiary:  
you are not a citizen:

the gradient planes shifting  
in their chemical sleeps

is what I remember

of poplar, basswood, linden:

the dream emerging  
from the vision, the vision

from the wandering eye:

ERIC WEINSTEIN

## AFTER ADAM

a stillness over the face  
of the water. cranes remain  
motionless. the air settles,

colonizes the bowed spines  
of pine, of cedar, of oak.  
the trees exhale, unheard in

the wide silence of the world.  
for once there are no voices,  
humanity gone, as through

a mirror, looking over  
his shoulder as he goes, &  
vanishing down the many

paths to the world after men  
& the heavens fear neither  
skyscrapers nor zeppelins.

his fires burn out. only the  
stars are radioactive,  
trillions—the bubble image

of a thousand galaxies  
reflected & vanishing  
in the distance, through mirrors.

who could look on that & not  
weep, not tear his clothes, his hair?  
creation, so much larger

than we'd feared. yes, then, better  
none remain, the garden of  
the earth dimming toward twilight,

shadows over the deep, the  
partial darkness of water:  
& man, asleep, dreaming of air.

MANDE ZECCA

## THE PROPERTY OF A LADY

In the secret conversation between a house  
and its collapse, how do you figure?

Not swan-like in your  
stillness. Something

primitive and ghoulish  
in your tendency to blur.

In a crowd of women  
with flowering heads, how

does a neck  
become a question?

A swag of sapphire hair.  
A hem a hemisphere—

dear fox,  
dear ghost.

Stitching threnodies.  
A reeking empire.

A deer. A dough  
to cut your mouth on.

HARRIET ZINNES

## **WITHOUT IDENTITY**

Zero is an identity  
without heartbeat,  
without wings.

It is an enclosure  
warding off numbers and fixity.

Yet in its roundness,  
an image of possibility,  
of mystery, of the beckoning of love.

HARRIET ZINNES

## **THE THERE**

Everywhere is nowhere  
where the there becomes lost,  
and the sky and the sea and the land  
are images of the where that is everywhere and nowhere  
as the flight of the self seeks the where that is everywhere  
that is elusive even as it is firm and cagily in evidence,  
even as the everywhere is nowhere  
and the there is a cup in the hand.

## BOOK NOTES

*First We Read, Then We Write:*

*Emerson on the Creative Process*, by Robert D. Richardson

University of Iowa Press, 2009

reviewed by Janelle Adsit

“We too must write Bibles.” Such is the democracy that undergirds the Ralph Waldo Emerson–based craft text titled *First We Read, Then We Write*. Written by acclaimed literary biographer Robert D. Richardson, the book empowers all writers as it makes Emerson and his craft accessible. It is as much a writing guidebook for the novice as it is biography, literary criticism, and analysis of Emerson’s thought-life.

The Emerson we encounter in this text is not a sculptured figurehead of literary greatness. It is Richardson’s intention to depict his subject this way, and we learn this as he quotes Emerson in the opening sentence: “Meek young men grow up in libraries believing it their duty to accept the views of Cicero, which Locke, which Bacon have given, forgetful that Cicero, Locke, and Bacon were only young men in libraries when they wrote those books.” Mindful of the fallibility of Cicero, Locke, Bacon, and Emerson as well, *First We Read* encounters Emerson with a pen stalled in hand. We see Emerson frowning over the sentences scrawled in his notebook. To open *First We Read* is to meet intimately with the mind of the Concord Sage—a mind that puts to page its frustrations, a mind drawn to the sentence and yet at times stifled by words. The veteran and the neophyte writer both might identify themselves in the portrait Richardson paints. “It is encouraging to learn,” Richardson writes, “that writing was often a desperate struggle for Emerson.”

To reveal this struggle, Richardson draws on years of research. He is the recipient of the Francis Parkman Prize and the Melcher Book Award for his biography of Emerson, subtitled *The Mind on Fire*. Richardson provides no reductive summary of Emerson’s life and work; the only sweeping gesture he makes is to point readers toward the extensive body of scholarship that lies beyond the purview of *First We Read*. The book is largely an anthology of Emerson’s sentences. By quoting amply,

Richardson seems to allow Emerson to write the book he didn't write—a how-to text on the creation of essays and poems.

A glance at the table of contents categorizes it with other how-to-write texts such as Janet Burroway's *Imaginative Writing* and Stephen Minot's *Three Genres*. These texts share a concern with the process of writing, the importance of reading, the sites where generation of material is likely to occur, and the uses of symbol and metaphor. At times, Emerson's writing advice is common: "Avoid adjectives. Let the noun do the work." But *First We Read* contains surprising additions to what has been termed the "craft canon": one chapter on audience (because Emerson saw that a readership's attention must be arrested) and another on the language of the street. Emerson wrote in his journal, "And I say if you would learn to write, 'tis in the street, in the street." The street, Richardson claims, was a starting place for Emerson; the orator was aiming for something other than what was heard there. Emerson's writing has been characterized as "scripturese," in fact.

Nearly thin enough to put a thumbtack through, *First We Read* seems to align itself with the aphoristic nature of Emerson's writings. Like the sentence written on a notecard and posted above a writing desk, the book is not diminutive but finite at a glance. Its one-centimeter spine is a sign of the generally approachable nature of this text. It is also an open text. Richardson repeatedly hints at what could be a lengthy exegesis and moves to another point. The chapters are not straining for a smooth stream of continuity. Richardson tends to juxtapose rather than make explicit links. This style is in accordance with Emerson's writing advice, "Neither concern yourself about consistency. The moment you putty and plaster your expressions to make them hang together, you have begun a weakening process. Take for granted that the truths will harmonize." The white space and short chapters make visible the process by which readers come to create their own books from pages in hand, a process Emerson was interested in. "There is then the creative reading as well as creative writing," Emerson notes in "The American Scholar."

Come to the text to hear again Emerson's proverbs: "Language is fossil poetry." "Each word was at first a stroke of genius." "Genius is the activity which repairs the decays of things." Stay

for Richardson's connection with his subject. The biographer seems to know a heart as much as a corpus. Emerson's words "The way to write is to throw your body at the mark when your arrows are spent" are to Richardson a stirring cry.

Emerson was interested in primary sources—he wanted the in-the-moment, original thought, not someone's review of the original thought. He would not read the essay I write now, but I expect he would engage with *First We Read*. Richardson seems to be someone in dialogue with Emerson as a fellow essayist. One gets the sense that when Richardson reads "The American Scholar" or "Nature," he experiences what Emerson describes: "A good head cannot read amiss. In every book he finds passages which seem confidences or asides, hidden from all else, and unmistakably meant for his ear." *First We Read* invites the reader into a private meditation with Emerson, to take part in a conversation on language, Goethe, journaling, Plotinus, self-reliance, and ambition, among many other subjects. The book is a compilation of the Concord Sage's confidences, asides, and marginalia, all of which seem immediately necessary for the writer's ear.

*The Slide*, by Kyle Beachy

The Dial Press, 2009

reviewed by Jennie A. Camp

For twenty-two-year-old Potter Mays, life is on hold: College is done and he has returned to his parents' St. Louis home to live; his job delivering bottled water in a white Ford cargo van proves an odd fit; his college love, Audrey, is traveling Europe indefinitely with her bisexual pal, Carmel; and Potter soon realizes that life on the home front may not be the safe haven he had assumed. With longings he cannot articulate, the protagonist of Kyle Beachy's first novel finds himself sliding into a coming-of-age abyss of loneliness and misdirection.

All Potter is waiting on is Audrey. He has decided he loves her—he thinks—and wants her home. But as the wait stretches from three weeks to an entire summer, life throws Potter one curveball after another for which he is hardly ready. And when he reacts out of haste and without principle, life becomes an

entanglement of partial truths, misunderstandings, and twenty-something earnestness that hardly speaks to the depths of human relationship and fulfillment. Potter's passivity leads him to a moment outside a St. Louis batting cage where he is beaten into unconsciousness; when he awakens, he realizes, on some teetering, vertigo-induced level, that decisiveness and character may prove kinder bedfellows than the women he has been courting.

Beachy encapsulates the twenties masterfully. Consider, for example, Potter's anxiety about trying to impress Audrey's driven and intimidating family. Potter knows they have concluded he is not ambitious enough for her, and although they do not speak of it, Potter knows that Audrey knows. So when she offers a moment of reassurance, Potter is shaken by the danger of his own transparency:

"Stop worrying about them," she said. "Just be Potter. I'll be Audrey."

Trembling at the sound of her voice, I recognized the girl at my side, epicenter of my world, was capable of mass demolition. That she could disappear, or die, or declare this whole thing over. At any given second she could crush, kill, destroy, with a word. Twin bed, musty guest room, hostile environs: where I came to understand just how much of love was based on fear.

Or consider a moment when Potter tries to think of a way to console Ian, the eleven-year-old boy he plays big brother to, despite his own instabilities. Even Ian can see that Potter is only grasping:

We drove back to Waldwick Drive listening to one of St. Louis's four classic-rock stations, songs filling what would otherwise have been nauseating silence. Time was running out. I racked my brain for a fact, some niblet of wisdom to share with this kid whose mother had disappeared. One hundred twenty thousand dollars spent on my education—I should have had facts to spare, wheelbarrows full of excess knowledge.

"I never met a problem frozen custard couldn't fix."

I heard the kid's laughter like a bag of popcorn, lighter than you expect. He laughed through the better part of the instrumental intro to Boston's "Foreplay/Longtime," then stopped abruptly and told me I was crazy.

While Potter waits for word from Audrey and eyes his enticing but dangerously underage neighbor Zoe, both of his parents pull him aside at separate times to confess the discontent of their marriage. As Potter again waits, this time for the final, crumbling demise of his parents' longtime union, he discovers not only a family of squirrels scratching around annoyingly in the attic above his bedroom but, more profoundly, the specter of his older brother, Freddy, who drowned at age five when he chased a ball onto a poorly fastened swimming pool cover:

There was somebody sitting on a box. A person. He was shirtless and shoeless, wearing a bathing suit and water wings. He was sopping wet and dripping onto the floor. And he was feeding squirrels. . . . I moved a step toward him. The attic smelled like trapped breath. Freddy was in perfectly adequate shape, not fat and not skinny. He looked to have ten pounds on me, no more. But what distinguished him as a character was the authority with which he sat on that box and fed the squirrels. He had a motorcyclist's ease about him, a formal serenity that gave the impression of someone who knew precisely what was what. I took him seriously—this despite the bright orange water wings around his arms.

Besides offering advice on love and smoking, Freddy muddles the lives of Potter and his parents with layers of guilt and blame: Potter's father, who was at work when Freddy became entangled in the leaf-covered pool cover, and Potter's mother, who was inside their apartment feeding formula to young Potter while her older son played with his four-square ball. Although Potter's father has announced his forgiveness, the marriage cannot withstand the strain of the tragedy; nor, clearly, can Potter bear the weight of the death of a brother he never really knew.

Despite the adeptness with which Beachy writes Potter's voice, there are moments when details slip and depth lies un-

plumbed: When, for example, Potter tracks Ian's mother to the cult where she now resides and he somehow ends up in bed with her, we are left wondering about the cult, about the mother's grave decisions, about the physical attraction that never really announces itself. And when Potter chats for a time with the strange man outside the batting cages, a man who apparently is waiting for Potter to finish but who we later realize will beat Potter nearly to death, we wonder whether such anger would truly stand abated as a man chit-chats and advises and even shares amusing anecdotes. And although Freddy's orange water wings add a nice visual splash, his drowning came when the pool was covered and off-season, so the swimming suit and water wings—even on a ghost—hardly make sense.

Overall Beachy has written an amusing and insightful coming-of-age story for early twenty-somethings; his writing is fluid and smart, and his character development is admirable. But what Beachy's novel lacks is a richness that, quite frankly, often comes with age. In such coming-of-age classics as Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* or F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Great Gatsby*, we find protagonists whose exploits carry resounding depth for all ages, not just those likewise entangled in post-adolescent quandaries.

In other words, Beachy is a writer to watch. Surely another decade or two of living will only add profundity to an already impressive talent.

*Close Calls with Nonsense: Reading New Poetry*

by Stephen Burt

Graywolf Press, 2009

reviewed by Julie Carr

Every discipline has its door openers, people who work to popularize the sometimes obscure work of specialists. Stephen Burt's *Close Calls with Nonsense* addresses this task with pitch-perfect, lucid prose and just the right mix of erudition and enthusiasm. In essays on a markedly diverse group of poets—Rae Armantrout, C. D. Wright, D. A. Powell, Laura Kasischke, Mary Leader, H. L. Hix, Les Murray, and, from the recent past, Wilbur, Merrill, Ammons, Kunitz, and Niedecker, among others—

Burt seeks to define and describe a series of moves, attitudes, and interests in contemporary poetry at large, and to root these moves in a history of lineages defined, however cautiously, by the influential older (or dead) poets he writes about.

And yet, as a book from a formidable critic, *Close Calls* is a bit unusual. Refusing scholarly conventions such as footnotes or nods to other critics, it also seems to profess no absolute argument. But while Burt's argument is not overt, his goals for the book are entirely clear. Like Helen Vendler, his chosen mentor, Burt wants to make difficult poetry understandable to a general (though educated) audience. Unlike Vendler, Burt attends, here as elsewhere, to the work of often younger and experimental writers, those whose readership is small and whose relationship to the larger literary market is tinged with mistrust, with alienation, at times even with disgust.

Herein lies a tension at the heart of Burt's project. Burt assumes that poets like Liz Waldner, Denise Riley, Terrance Hayes, or D. A. Powell *want* to be read by a mainstream audience; he assumes (or hopes) that their poems can and *should* be digested by "ordinary" readers, readers who are not themselves poets or students of poetry. Maybe so. But in order to sell these works to these readers, he has to do a lot of explaining, contextualizing, and simplifying. In his preface, Burt likens his book to a set of instructions for constructing furniture, writing, "If you have ever brought home unassembled furniture, you likely know how important good instructions can be. . . . The aesthetic criticism of poetry has something in common with those instructions, at all times but especially in our time, when so much poetry comes in flat packs and in pieces, relying on us to put it together ourselves." In rendering these often enigmatic, layered poems friendlier, more accessible, even more stylish than they really are, Burt seems to appeal to those youngish readers of mainstream literary novels who are confused by or indifferent to poetry. This task, which is motivated by a worthy goal and inspired by a sincerely generous and populist instinct, might, as it has in the past, invite criticism from within the poetry world.

Case in point: When Burt published his essay "The Elliptical Poets" in 1998, his celebration of poets who "seek the authority of the rebellious; [who] want to . . . violate decorum, surprise

or explode assumptions about what belongs in a poem or what matters in life, and to do so while meeting traditional lyrical goals” inspired irritation in some, including the critic Steve Evans, who accused readers such as Burt of “facile pluralism.” Evans complained that poets, editors, and critics who embrace such differing poetics (whether in the pages of a magazine or within the lines of a single poem) are essentially depoliticizing the aims of avant-garde poetics as Evans understood them. Evans argued that “liberal pluralism is the spontaneous thought form of the marketed mind, a sort of unavowable dogma of the undogmatic that excels at neutralizing distinctions and defusing contradictions in a disingenuous game of anything goes (so long as it sells).” This is an old dispute, almost ten *years* old (and would feel like old news if these same arguments were not still motivating many a blog post). In fact, Burt distances himself from the essay in the introduction to this book, writing, “I’m not sorry that I wrote ‘The Elliptical Poets’: if it created new readers for Mark Levine, or Brock-Broido, or Wright, it did what I meant it to do. At the same time I wondered whether anyone would notice a broader, more careful introduction to the contemporary poets I liked. . . . You are reading that introduction now.”

Maybe Burt’s subtle acknowledgment of his position both then and now (then, a relatively unknown young critic in need of attention; now, a professor at Harvard University) says something about how seriously he thinks about such (seemingly) extra-literary forces as markets and fame. In some sense, Burt is a materialist, fully aware that all writing, regardless of its politics, must engage a market, *some* market, some version, or subset, of the commodity-glutted, profit-striving, competitive culture that much of art, and much of poetry, claims to resist.

Perhaps oddly, “The Elliptical Poets” is reprinted here. It sits uncomfortably, following essays that treat poetry with far more detail, intelligence, and depth than Burt then employed. Moreover, “The Elliptical Poets” precedes a newer and much more interesting piece, “Without Evidence: Remarks on Reading Contemporary Poetry and on Reading about It.” This conclusion, really a series of aphorisms in the style of Oscar Wilde (without, forgivably, quite the same wit), is an engaging, playful, at times truly profound thinking-through of the role of the critic and

reader of poetry. Even more important, this final piece makes explicit Burt's overriding concern, his stance toward the poetry he has been reading: "What if the ways in which we can think (or have been taught to think) about lyric poetry do not depend on our tacit acceptance of a liberal individualism (as radical critics allege), but instead support (provide good evidence for) it?" The question can be rewritten as such: "I read poems the way I do not because I have been duped into believing in liberal individualism, but because poems in fact provide evidence for the existence and uniqueness of the individual."

An earlier, also hesitant, declaration of his humanism can be gleaned from the preface:

[The essays] imply, most of the time—and they ask you to assume, at least some of the time—that there is a human endeavor called lyric poetry, one that . . . reflects a continuity of human relations. . . . [It] consists in short pieces of language . . . in which the psyche finds the language and the sounds to fit its own internal states; through that language we can imagine that we know what it is like to be a particular person, or kind of person, or else what it is like to be ourselves.

Burt is not naïve. He knows that this (or any) definition of lyric poetry immediately throws him into the fray, if not into a number of different frays. He is aware that he is a humanist, and that not everyone is excited to meet a humanist; this awareness reveals itself in his asides ("most of the time" and "at least some of the time"). But he also acknowledges another view. Some poets, he writes, "seem, and sound, cautious, vexed, or uncertain as to whether they have 'selves,' coherent and bounded interior lives, at all, and (if they do not) as to what or who speaks in their poems." These postmodern concerns, Burt seems to imply, bemused eyebrow raised, are a bit obtuse. But he's interested enough in questions of subjectivity to recognize them when they come up in, say, the work of Ashbery or Armantrout, and he enjoys the poetry in which these questions are entertained.

And yet, reading with one eye toward exposing the "internal state" of a particular person is, inevitably, to distort some of the work Burt writes about. Burt's reading of Ashbery provides

the best example of such a problem. Imposing autobiographical, psychological narratives onto Ashbery is a bit like trying to domesticate a bobcat. It might work for a while, but then the animal will turn around and bite you on the ass. Burt argues that Ashbery's recent work "reflects the treasure of memory and the bodily impoverishments of late life." Perhaps the same could be said of any older poet. But when Burt attempts to read poems from *Notes from the Air* as autobiographical narratives, he must do a lot of cutting and pasting to make it work. "Lyric poetry, of the kind [Ashbery] writes," he insists, "works not by telling us all about poet's documentable, material lives but by revealing only the inner man." The "inner man" is a rather large and permissible container in which anything—even lines like "A yak is a prehistoric cabbage," "She was braining my boss," or "Are you Big Bang?"—can fit. Admittedly, it's easy enough to dismantle any conclusive reading of Ashbery, as Burt foresees. But why try one? Only, it seems, if one's goal is to make Ashbery (and others) readable to those whose basic understanding of texts is narrative.

The energy with which Burt investigates such differing arenas as post-modern feminist theory (Denise Riley) on one hand, or Christianity (Donald Revell) on the other, even when he himself does not exactly buy such theories and beliefs as genuine or pressing, is what makes him, I imagine, an excellent teacher. Burt's curiosity about how poems work, his appreciation for the line, for style, metaphor, double and triple entendre, allows him to turn his attention from poetics (a theory of poetry and its uses) toward "craft" (the technical hows and whys of any given poem). But when Burt praises narrative neo-confessional poets such as Laura Kasischke alongside (literally, the essays are next to each other in the book) difficult experimental poets such as Liz Waldner, he does so because, at base, he does not see their goals as all that different. Each poet is ultimately involved in an act of self-expression: "the psyche finds the language and the sounds to fit its own internal states." Differences in style are, therefore, simply that; some people wear square glasses, others wear heels. But if we believe in the value of the individual, we can talk to both these kinds of people, and many others too. We can all be, as Burt puts it, "hermeneutical friends."

I have focused on the book's edges, the introductory and con-

cluding sections. But there are real strengths in its center, in many of the essays themselves. Burt's reading of C. D. Wright is especially rich with information and insight. Reading Wright almost entirely through her collaborations with photographer Deborah Luster, Burt reveals how Wright's work is consistently concerned with the ethical and aesthetic goals and quandaries of photography. Readings of D. A. Powell and Juan Felipe Herrera open up their work in utterly convincing ways. His readings of poets from the past—O'Hara, Merrill, Niedecker—offer less in the way of original insight, but they are filled with the pleasures of close (and knowledgeable) reading and would provide excellent introductions for the uninitiated (in fact, I plan to use his essays on Creeley and O'Hara in my own classes). Reading these essays, it becomes clear that Burt does not, in fact, see poetic complexity as so much bling or hair gel. He is impressively able—more able than most—to understand and explicate the motivations behind broken grammar, layered metaphor, fragmentation, or collage in various poets' works.

The book's populist goals, its attempt to convert middle-to-high-brow readers of novels, are, I think, complicated ones. If indeed there are more than a handful of people out there who are interested in poetry but shy of it, this book might help them along. To be offended by this goal is to indulge a kind of snobbery (and self-imposed exile) that poets (and educators) tend to eschew. As with many works of popularization, however, Burt must inevitably do his subject some disservice, must simplify in order to explain. At his best, as in the essays on Wright, Waldner, Powell, and Creeley, he manages to enliven, rather than quiet, the work's most complex elements. This is exactly what every teacher endeavors to do. Teachers hope, also, that students will go on to read more, to get deeper into the layers of the texts we offer them. This is Burt's hope too. And I think he will be successful. I think readers will be drawn further into the work he describes. And while this book is not likely to alter the positions of many who are already deeply involved in contemporary poetry, it is not aimed at such readers, and indeed, it might do them some good.

*Star in the Eye*, by James Shea  
Fence Books, 2008  
reviewed by Kristina Marie Darling

Chosen by Nick Flynn as winner of the Fence Modern Poets Series, James Shea's *Star in the Eye* explores the mysteries of human consciousness, addressing complex philosophical questions with an elegant simplicity of phrasing throughout. Frequently taking the form of lyric soliloquies, the poems depict their speakers as wide-awake in a series of dreamscapes, rendering the unknowable reaches of the psyche disconcertingly tangible. Because Shea conflates his narrators' psychological terrain with that of the natural world, landscape becomes a compelling metaphor for the struggle to navigate one's own dreams and memories, a comparison that proves at once contemplative and visually arresting as the book unfolds.

In conveying these themes, the author continually invokes imagery of oceans and lakes, which serve as an emblem for the vastness and incomprehensibility of human consciousness. By establishing such a comparison, Shea ultimately prompts the reader to consider whether the psyche can be navigated as a body of water. This trend remains especially apparent in "First Requiem," which describes a group of mourners reacting to loss at a funeral. Shea writes,

Some stranger asked, what does it *mean*?  
Some still woke each morning to those  
who died. Some slept through prose.

Some had to sail to the center of a lake.  
And row back to shore.

In this passage, the author invokes the "center of a lake" as a metaphor for a mourner's descent into the depths of the psyche, suggesting through his stylistic decisions that finding a way "back to shore" remains among the most challenging facets of loss. In doing so, the poet's use of anaphora, in which he begins every clause with the word "some" and structures each sentence with parallel syntax, establishes the various reactions to death as occupying a progression from trivializing to profound. By

situating the task of navigating one's own emotions at the end of the piece, and therefore as one of the more difficult aspects of tragedy, Shea establishes these interior landscapes as hostile terrain, implying that the least navigable places remain within the individual, rather than in the exterior world. Like other poems in the collection, "First Requiem" reflects a graceful matching of form and content, most notably as the ethereal, and often abstract, questions that Shea addresses are paired with carefully nuanced uses of technique. Moreover, while portraying the inner reaches of the psyche as difficult to comprehend and navigate, these finely crafted poems continually seek a conceptual framework that will enable one to do so. As the book progresses, Shea combines fantastical dreamscapes with an ongoing search for the logic behind them, a philosophical concern that he conveys with spare lyricism throughout. He writes, for example, in "Stoic Wreck,"

Often two people must separate  
to reveal they are inseparable.

There are human, universal moments in a sitcom.

You wake at night rushing to the door,  
touching it with your hands.

In this excerpt, the poet establishes a strange logic as existing behind breakups and heartache, ultimately situating the individual being addressed within a well-reasoned system that governs emotional life. Like many other poems in *Star in the Eye*, "Stoic Wreck" posits this greater order of things as fundamentally illogical, but something that must be accepted and understood, just as one would acquiesce to the laws of the natural world. In doing so, Shea's work provocatively conflates the rational with the nonsensical, suggesting that the two can, and often do, blur.

Likewise, while searching for the reasoning behind wonderfully strange metaphors and dreamlike associations, Shea's speakers continually acknowledge the subjectivity of this kind of logic. Frequently suggesting that the individual psyche contains its own worlds and, as a result, must be understood and

navigated on its own terms, Shea's work questions one's ability to definitively understand one's own inner life. Moreover, this theme remains especially apparent in the poem sequence "Dream Trial," in which the author writes,

Clouds pass over, watching us,  
what shapes we take. The windows  
were so articulate today—  
then someone left them open.  
Where do I defend my dreams?  
Point at my nights.

Throughout this passage, Shea juxtaposes a series of dream-like associations, such as clouds "watching . . . what shapes we take" and "articulate" windows, with the speaker's desire to quantify them and "defend" their significance. By gesturing toward the realm of dreams and the unconscious near the end of the piece, presenting it as being its own answer, Shea suggests that the interior landscapes that fill the book remain self-contained worlds, in which the familiar can easily be transformed and displaced. In considering these sweeping, theoretical questions, Shea's poetry proves striking in its use of the everyday to construct the strange, as well as his drawing on the rational to convey the ethereal.

All points considered, James Shea's *Star in the Eye* is a finely crafted, thought-provoking book, ideal for readers who enjoy fantastical poems that render the everyday suddenly strange. The winner of this year's Fence Modern Poets Series is an extremely promising debut.

*The River Gods*, by Brian Kiteley  
Fiction Collective Two, 2009  
reviewed by B. J. Hollars

If the world is a wheel, Northampton, Massachusetts, is the hub from which all spokes run. Brian Kiteley's latest novel, *The River Gods*—an experiment in time, space, and fragmentation—is neither plot driven nor character driven, but instead reads as a novel of locale. Spanning nearly a millennium (at one

point reaching as far back as 1062), the novel's tight, alternating sections form a chorus of voices from Northampton's past citizenry. The chorus consists of a star-studded lineup, from Calvin Coolidge, Sylvia Plath, and Sojourner Truth to William Carlos Williams, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Richard Nixon. Yet from this wide range of voices (all of which have some connection to Northampton), the reader begins to grasp the connective tissue that binds—how, throughout the span of history, Nixon and Wittgenstein *could* have stumbled across one another on a Northampton street if only the fates had allowed for it.

Throughout the novel, Kiteley's characters stand loyal guard over Northampton, worshipping its rivers and defending its territory while simultaneously participating in its corruption. We hear from an array of voices—murderers, ministers, and the men responsible for stealing the land from the natives—yet these voices are neither blamed nor blameless. Instead, they function merely as witnesses, contributing further stitching into the town's already complicated moral fabric. It is as if the voices of Northampton were tucked away in a bottle, tossed out to sea, only for Kiteley to stumble upon them on the shore decades later, waterlogged but all the more poignant for time's brutal fermentation.

While this litany of voices eventually forms a mosaic, we read on, not because of any outward semblance of plot, but because of our investment in the place itself. Adding to the cohesion of voices, Kiteley begins integrating himself and his family into the story, offering narration from his eight-year-old self, his sixteen-year-old self, his twenty-nine-year-old self, as well as various other ghost-versions lost through time. "I love maps and know the lay of my world," the eight-year-old Kiteley brags, before admitting moments later that he actually knows the world only from Round Hill Road to the high school. This admission makes it quite clear that the eight-year-old Kiteley actually *doesn't* know his world, and decades later, the fifty-five-year-old author continues grappling with the same problem, venturing out far beyond Round Hill Road and the high school (at times reaching deep into ancient history) in an attempt to know the place better. But it raises the question: How can we ever expect to fully know any place? And further: By what criteria do we gauge our recognition? Do we know a town by its street

signs and landmarks or, as is the case in Northampton, by the blood that flows in its rivers?

*The River Gods* is a haunted novel. “I am leading a posthumous existence,” the epigraph states (a line from John Keats’s final letter), and the book, too, shares this same affliction. These voices know no boundaries, transitioning seamlessly between life and death. “They feel responsible for my death,” explains Bill Beloit, a recently killed eighteen-year-old tailback for the Northampton high school football team. Beloit died at the hands of what he assumes was a drunk driver, yet his death is a mere inconvenience to his first-person account and in no way hinders the story. Beloit is proof that in Northampton, life and death are mere distractions—nothing more—as the city itself resuscitates all the old ghosts.

Kiteley’s novel explores the battle between time and space and declares space the victor. He reminds us that humans are all afflicted by time limitations; space, however, is beholden to no one. Near the end of the book, Geoffrey Kiteley, the thirty-eight-year-old version of the author’s brother, accurately depicts the book’s style while speaking of a particular film. Geoffrey notes the film director’s “cutting and pasting location shots with no regard for geography or progression through space, working more like the way a dream does.” His words resonate, causing the reader to rethink Brian Kiteley’s grand experiment. We wonder: Is this, too, a dream? Has Brian Kiteley conjured the impossible?

While the novel retains a dreamlike quality, it’s evident that the author (unlike the director Geoffrey references) actually does hold the highest regard for geography, blending history with literature while maintaining allegiance to both. Northampton is a “confusing town,” notes the thirty-two-year-old version of Brian Kiteley, “the main roads meandering this way and that.” And while the book, too, meanders, we begin to realize Kiteley’s greater point: While the most direct route will always get you to your destination fastest, you sacrifice the scenery along the way.

*Archicembalo*, by G. C. Waldrep  
 Tupelo Press, 2009  
 reviewed by Jason Labbe

G. C. Waldrep's third collection of poems, *Archicembalo*, borrows its title from an esoteric enharmonic keyboard that has as many as sixty keys per octave. And Waldrep has structured the book after a gamut, which his notes define as "a musical self-instruction primer that often prefaced volumes of nineteenth-century American sheet music." The title and the primer format both stage how detailed and how reaching this book is in subject matter, though in some poems a sense of a singular subject can be tenuous as one sentence, image, or idea spiders into the next. The majority of these poems are in their own way microtonal—capable of unfamiliar notes across narrow intervals, open tunings, and surprising modulations. And the connotations of range that come with the term "gamut" are no accident. As any reader would expect, some poems do involve musicology. But the breadth of materials—the variety of nouns and actions, within poems, from poem to poem—reaches beyond music, while the formal treatment remains consistent throughout.

*Archicembalo* comprises fifty-six prose poems and is written closely and overtly in the vein of innovative prose books such as Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons* and Lyn Hejinian's *My Life*. But I would argue that this book, unlike its monumental and groundbreaking influences, is not *quite* "experimental." Aesthetic innovation of course occurs in degrees, but once an experiment proves successful and is then routinely practiced, it becomes a mode. Waldrep relies on imitation, or working within a distinct mode (with an experimental history), often to the point of homage. He lets Stein's guidance, especially in the earlier pieces, live out in the open. For example, consider how "What Is a Fugue" begins: "A good dog comes lightly, a good dog comes nightly is pet and is petted and in this way we know the faculty of exuberance." To borrow Stein's angular grammar is to borrow her logic, the way her lines think in absurd syllogisms and playful tautologies. Regarding its style, this book is unlikely to offer total discovery, a new method, for those who know its models. Despite its terrific imagination, *Archicembalo* feels aesthetically familiar. The paratactic prose line is every-

where these days, and the degree to which Waldrep makes new this increasingly common form is a difficult thing to weigh or measure. For this reader, the value of Waldrep's project rests in its intelligence, craft, and sheer enjoyability. Erudite and with many flashes of exquisite prose, Waldrep has chosen doing something well over doing something, aesthetically speaking, original. Borrowing freely, he writes with skill and confidence and has me wondering again whether originality is much more than disguising your influences.

*Archicembalo* achieves a surprising and gratifying degree of variation with little disruption to its aesthetic continuity. The book is not divided into sections and progresses fluidly as a single work. *Archicembalo* hardly drones. The poems vary enough in length, with the shortest pieces being but a few lines and the longest a couple pages. Paratactic and disjunctive poems, the majority, live among linear-moving pieces, such as "What Is a Cantilena," a narrative, and "What Is a Bass," a playful shorter poem that moves chronologically through the months of the year, personifying them: "April in her citron, May in his green." The question mark, disparaged by Stein as "uninteresting," is mostly withheld in *Archicembalo*, but it does make an occasional appearance. Waldrep saves the sincere question for releasing tension or reaching his highest/lowest notes, as in "What Is the Real Answer:" "Do we choose our means of drowning? Or do others choose for us?" Waldrep's impressive investment in music founds his sensibility: he develops few, if any, themes without variation; his sense of composition pleases the ear and the mind in equal measure.

In this gamut, this primer, the relationship between a title and its corresponding poem is dialogic—a sort of call-and-response—rather than descriptive or thematic. Here are some titles picked at random: "Who Is Josquin des Prez," "What Is a Fugue," "What Is a Hexachord." Most of the book's titles directly involve music terminology or musicians and composers, but several, such as "What Is the Real Answer" and "What Is a Metaphor," push into more expansive territory. By the third or fourth poem in the book, any expectation of finding in a poem a clear definition, biography, or explanation dissolves. Most titles seem to have little or nothing to do with the rest of the poem. Consider, for example, "Who Is Thelonious Monk," which I'll quote in its entirety:

Misery labors under a sabine enchantment. She shakes her copper locks; they rattle as the ships pass through, one by one. Smaller vessels portage. Potash, scrimshaw, bicarbonate of soda. No willpower need apply.

Maybe I'm missing some obscure factual connection between Monk and this poem's content. But it's hard to imagine anything crucial to understanding and/or enjoying the poem would come from knowing whatever unlikely trivia. Here, that sort of expectation of the reader would be mean and pointless. Throughout this book the distance between title and text (as well as the distance between one sentence and the next) is where much of the pleasure lies. Rather than directly describe or define the name or term, the poem offers a possible experience of its title, and vice versa. A feeling of possibility opens between the title and first sentence, and that openness can trump the potential frustration of the reader's making sense of the disparities and disconnections. Or it can set up that frustration.

But it is too easy to call the disparate materials (especially the titles) arbitrary. There is skill here, there is rigor, and with such craft comes a reader's trust. And with that trust the connections can be left looser, and the connectivity in sense-making, to an increasing degree, is up to the reader. Or perhaps she will accept, follow, and listen to the radical shifts between sentences, shifts *within* sentences, rather than attempt to draw connections. And so continues the self-instruction guided by Waldrep's strange primer. Whether or not connections are drawn, pleasure is found in the musicality of the language as these poems say what they sound. Waldrep reciprocates our trust (or is it initiates?) and leaves us to think inside the gaps and spaces that give shape—that give rhythm—to melody.

*See Jack*, by Russell Edson  
University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009  
reviewed by Michael McLane

In *See Jack*, the nineteenth collection by poet Russell Edson, readers are given three words on which to gain their footing before Edson begins tugging on the rug of logic he has skillfully

undone so often in his career. The book's opening poem, "Accidents," begins:

A man had accidentally gone to bed. When he noticed  
it he was terribly embarrassed, and said, Of course I'll  
marry you, please don't cry. And then he accidentally  
fell asleep.

While accidents, often of the dismembering or fatal variety, befall many of Edson's characters, there are few accidents in his craft. Over a nearly sixty-year career, Edson has become the undisputed master of the prose poem while working away in relative obscurity. Edson is a poet's poet in his devotion to his form and method, a conviction that won him an avid following among his peers and shamefully little recognition from almost everyone else. He began writing prose poems long before it was fashionable, and he has outlasted nearly all of his contemporaries in his trust of the form and belief in its possessing an ontology all its own.

Edson's poetics is one of inclusiveness and the melting of boundaries, a world caught somewhere between the Jungian collective unconscious and Bakhtinian carnival. Where Jung's anxieties reside in the world of dreams, however, Edson provides his characters no such respite, and where Bakhtin describes carnival as a place where "all were considered equal . . . people who were usually divided by the barriers of caste, property, profession, and age," Edson goes immeasurably further to create a world where the living and the mechanical, the two-legged and the four-legged, are equal and undifferentiated in any conventional sense. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the bodies of his characters, which absorb or are absorbed by seemingly everything in their environment, from cars to other beings, human or otherwise, such as the man in "After the Concert" who takes his cello to bed despite knowing

if his fellow musicians knew what he did at night  
with a cello old enough to be his great-grandmother,  
they'd report him to the Humane Society.

Here we have a conflation of not two, but three worlds (human,

inanimate, and animal) as well as a somewhat passive disregard for the cultural mores under which the man normally functions so well. This is taken a step further in “But Not a Couch, Dear Child,” in which

An old couch is turning into a woman. See how its breasts and thighs form their shapes. A pillow smiles, and she has a face.

He announces imminent wedding plans to his mother . . .

But you’re not going to marry a couch—None of our people have ever married couches. We have always married beneath ourselves, true, but never have we gone so far as to take furniture into our connubial trust.

This is classic Edson—a lust arising not from the exotic or from the overtly sexual or sensual but from the everyday, the practical, the convenient. The dark humor that accompanies even the most deviant of tendencies in his characters is a staple of his poems. As such, it is hardly a surprise that brutal violence is forgotten as suddenly as it occurs and is always wrapped in nonchalance apropos of an audience accustomed to tragedy scrolling across televisions and computers like so many stocks.

There is a cinematic quality in Edson’s poems that stems both from the stark, story-boardesque sentences that make up his work and from the visceral scenes and rending of logic he coaxes from this quiet, repetitive diction. Examples of both are rife in *See Jack*, as in “How the Bull Lost His Mind,” which introduces a farmer who has neglected to milk his cow until he finds that she

had swollen into a huge milk bag standing on its four dugs. The bull, watching at the window, his hooves covering his ears.

The farmer began to milk Bossy. When the milk turned pink, he said, Oh, how dainty. When the milk turned red he said, Why not? Where is it written that milk has always to be white?

Finally only a parched piece of cowhide . . .

In this passage, as in much of Edson’s work, the horrific is reduced to the mundane. Cultural mores and taboos quickly fall

by the wayside—incest, bestiality, what can only be described as machinophilia, oral fixations, and suicide—all of these are fair game and are explored with the same kind of muted indifference that one might use to describe a lawn or telephone pole.

Though *See Jack* provides many of the flashes of surrealist brilliance and contortionist logic that make Edson such a pleasure to read, it is not, overall, among the strongest of his books. For every standout poem, there is a poem that, particularly to readers familiar with other work of Edson's, will feel rushed and as though they are retreading ground explored in more extravagant or sinister ways previously. There is also the occasional poem, such as "The Dear Son" or "The Gross Situation," that plays as little more than toilet humor or an exasperating knock-knock joke. It seems each of his books always has one or two of these, though there are a larger number to be found here. And yet, the book also contains a number of surprises. There are several poems in the book dealing with old age that are far more contemplative in their tone and possess a longing more straightforward and sincere than virtually any of his prior work. Also, at the risk of committing the authorial fallacy, I was shocked to see "Space Journey," a poem with a first-person narrator—a true rarity in Edson's work.

Despite these flaws, there is something remarkably gratifying as a reader to always know where you stand with Edson stylistically and yet to never know how those tropes and themes will be juxtaposed within a poem or from one poem to the next. There are certain things he will always give you in his books—apes and cyborgs (of many varieties), transgressions and transvestites, humor and anxiety (nearly always at once)—and yet the poems, and his world at large, are always unsettled. Terra firma this is not, but then Edson always seems to be grasping at something larger, headed for somewhere else while getting sidetracked again and again. Like he says in "The Theory of Jack's Death":

It must have been the Earth, which just  
happened to be in his way . . .

*Normal People Don't Live Like This*, by Dylan Landis  
 Persea Books, 2009  
 reviewed by Jennifer Wisner Kelly

While some of us girls of the '70s scandalized our mothers with contraband copies of Judy Blume's *Forever* that we passed from one innocent hand to the next, the would-be women in Dylan Landis's debut make Blume's responsible and consensual first sexual experiences seem hopelessly quaint. Landis's girls pound through adolescence searching for identity in all sorts of unpleasant places—places where men force themselves on girls and girls watch it happen, victims of their own thirst for adulthood, connection, and control.

Landis's stories track the teenaged years of Leah Levinson, a middle-class Manhattanite in the 1970s. Leah is attracted to all the wrong sorts: girls who bully her, clingy class sluts, abusive and confused gay men. She smokes, she steals, she lies. And Leah is the *good* girl. Her friends miscarry in the school bathroom, have meaningless sex on rooftops while their friends watch, mutilate themselves with razor blades, and get high on stolen nitrous oxide. There isn't a single well-behaved girl in the crowd, and because of that, Landis's book rejects the trite good-girl/bad-girl dichotomy. Here, there are just girls.

Leah and her friends might be brazen and wild, but Landis stays true to the schizophrenic nature of adolescence by making them also hopelessly insecure. Again and again, they wait for men to act (and they are *men*—Landis's girls have long since left behind their male peers). Not surprisingly, the men oblige: groping and grinding and jamming knees between semi-resisting thighs, while the girls stare at cracked ceilings or rooftop ventilation chimneys or fountains in Central Park, bewildered. Landis insightfully captures the dance of consent and resistance that traps these girls: they want sex, but once they get it, well, they aren't so sure.

Landis's stories catalog the many ways in which women and girls crave control. In "Jazz," a girl named Rainey flirts with her father's best friend only to end up sexually misused by him. This poignant portrait of sexual exploration gone awry leaves us aching. That is, until the subsequent story, "Fire," when victim becomes bully, and Rainey mercilessly harasses Leah. Meek

Leah tries unsuccessfully to calm herself with obsessive rituals, until she, too, finally lashes out: “Her fear had an edge and the edge was jagged, like the key in her palm. She squeezed it three times three, but she barely felt its ziggurat bite as it cut into her lifeline, or Rainey’s face.” Other characters find power in a myriad of self-destructive ways: Pansy cuts her arms, Oly takes drugs, and Leah’s mother, Helen, has starved herself since girlhood. Whatever their coping mechanism, we sympathize with all of these connection-starved young women, bully and bullied alike. Landis may focus on Leah, but her depiction of other girls and women gives Leah’s experience universal implications. The stories are not just one girl’s coming of age, but how *all* of us come of age. Throughout, Landis’s narration moves seamlessly from the vernacular of teenaged girls to the poetic descriptions of an unobtrusive narrator, unsullied by adult judgment.

And where *are* the adults? Preoccupied, it seems. In the title story, Helen tells herself that Leah will be just fine despite evidence to the contrary, and then gets back to her own trials of being widowed and broke. Meanwhile, Pansy’s mother has let go any attempt at control: “Oh, Pansy’s lost . . . I know where she *is*, give or take a few subway stops. But she’s lost.” Inattention seems to be the rule. These parents are crossing their fingers that their daughters make it to adulthood mostly intact. As adult readers, we squirm at the implication that *we* are the irresponsible ones.

The ten linked but discrete stories in *Normal People Don’t Live Like This* leapfrog over several key traumatic events. In “Rana Fegrina,” for instance, we learn that Leah’s father is dying of cancer in a few quick comments juxtaposed with an impending frog dissection: “Leah’s father smells like formaldehyde and he’s still alive.” And, in the next story, we discover just as abruptly that he has died: Helen “had the dark apartment but no husband.” Even the majority of sexual encounters take place off-stage. Landis’s narrative strategy—enacting the moments *before* or *after* times of trauma rather than the trauma itself—underscores the distorted perspective of teenaged girls. Monumental events compete with the daily trials of wardrobe selection, biology class, and French poetry tests.

As elegant as each of Landis’s stories is, taken as a whole the collection has a mild identity crisis of its own. Is it, in fact, a col-

lection of stories? A novel? A novel-in-stories? It does not declare its intention, leaving us to decide for ourselves how cohesive we believe this group of independent stories to be. For instance, after starring roles in the first two stories, Rainey disappears altogether and the remaining stories, save one, are about Leah or Helen. What we thought might be a chain of girls' maturation stories—like charms on a bracelet—seems to be morphing into a novel about the Levinson women, but this expectation is also disappointed. Yes, the stories inform each other, sometimes linking causally, but with their jolts through time and disjointed plotlines, a cohesive narrative can't fully form. By trying to be both universal to all women and particular to Leah, Landis's book loses power on both fronts.

Despite this narrative ambivalence, Landis's stories delve deeply and honestly into the unsavory world of teenaged girls: a tedious sewer of a place where most paths lead to violation, abuse, and abandonment, and the lights shining at the end of these emotional tunnels are dim. Girls set off into a predatory world while the adults who have sworn to guide them prematurely release the reins. Landis refuses to romanticize these forays into womanhood. No blushing pink roses on the verge of bloom. Instead, she respects the raw pain of adolescence, while we shake our heads at the irony that, sadly, normal people *do* live like this. Sorry, girls, it's not a Judy Blume world.

## CONTRIBUTOR NOTES

**Janelle Adsit's** poems have appeared in *Caketrain*, *Oyez Review*, *Inkwell*, *Euphony*, and elsewhere. She lives in Brooklyn.

Founder of the Poetry Center at Smith College, **Annie Boutelle** teaches in the English Department there as the Grace Hazard Conkling Poet-in-Residence. She has published poems in the *Georgia Review*, the *Hudson Review*, *Poetry*, and elsewhere. She is the author of *Becoming Bone: Poems on the Life of Celia Thaxter* (University of Arkansas Press) and *Nest of Thistles* (Northeastern University Press), winner of the 2005 Samuel French Morse Prize. For more information, see [annieboutelle.com](http://annieboutelle.com).

**Jennie A. Camp** holds a PhD in American literature from the University of Denver and an MFA in fiction writing from Colorado State University. Her work has appeared in *Prairie Schooner*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Western American Literature*, and the *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature*, among other publications. She lives in Platteville, Colorado, with her husband and five children.

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**Steven Church's** essay is excerpted from his book *The Day After The Day After: My Atomic Angst*. He is also the author of *Theoretical Killings: Essays & Accidents* and *The Guinness Book of Me: A Memoir of Record*. He teaches in the MFA program at Fresno State and for the low-residency MFA program at the University of New Orleans. He is a founding editor of the *Normal School* and a contributing editor for *Colorado Review*.

**Joe Collins** will complete his MFA in poetry at Washington University in St. Louis in the spring of 2010 and has recently published fiction in the online journal *Super Arrow*. He is a native of Chicago.

**Jon Cotner** lives in New York City, where he is completing his PhD for SUNY Buffalo's Poetics Program. He is also working on a collaborative book with Andy Fitch called *Conversations over Stolen Food*. Publications include *1913*, *Animal Shelter*, *Brooklyn Rail*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Paper Monument*, and *UbuWeb*.

**Dana Curtis's** first full-length collection of poetry, *The Body's Response to Famine*, won the Pavement Saw Press Transcontinental Poetry Award. She has also published several chapbooks, the most recent of which is *Antiviolet*, forthcoming from Pudding House. She is the editor-in-chief of Elixir Press.

**Kristina Marie Darling** studies philosophy at the University of Missouri, St. Louis. Her poetry criticism has appeared or is forthcoming in the *Gettysburg Review*, *Boston Review*, *Shenandoah*, *Pleiades*, and other journals.

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**Andy Fitch** is the author of *Sixty Morning Walks* (Editions Eclipse, 2008). *Ten Walks/Two Talks*, his collaboration with Jon Cotner, was recently published by Ugly Duckling Presse. Other publications include *Arizona Quarterly*, *Eoagh*, *Lit*, *n+1*, and *Octopus Magazine*. He is an assistant professor in the University of Wyoming's MFA Program.

**Ryan Flaherty** has two chapbooks: *Live, from the Delay* from Small Fires Press and *Novas* from Bateau Press as the winner of their 2008 Boom Chapbook Contest. His poems have appeared in journals including *Conduit*, *Lit*, *Columbia*, *Denver Quarterly*, and *Ninth Letter*. He currently lives and teaches in Dover, New Hampshire.

**Erin Flanagan** is the author of the short story collection *The Usual Mistakes* (University of Nebraska Press). Her stories have appeared or are forthcoming in *Prairie Schooner*, *Connecticut Review*, the *Florida Review*, *Crazyhorse*, *Best New American Voices*, and elsewhere. This is her third appearance in *Colorado Review*. She is an assistant professor at Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio.

**Joshua Harmon** is the author of *Scape*, a book of poems (2009), and *Quinnehtukqut*, a novel (2007), which was short-listed for the Cabell First Novelist Award. Other poems from "Le Spleen de Poughkeepsie" appear in the *Massachusetts Review* and *Typo*.

**Richard Hoffman** is author of the collections *Without Paradise* and *Gold Star Road*, winner of the 2006 Barrow Street Poetry Book Prize and the 2009 Sheila Margaret Motton Prize from the New England Poetry Club, as well as *Half the House: A Memoir*, and a work of fiction, *Interference & Other Stories*.

**B. J. Hollars** is an MFA candidate at the University of Alabama, where he's served as nonfiction editor and assistant fiction editor for *Black Warrior Review*. He is also the editor of *You Must Be This Tall to Ride* (Writer's Digest Books, 2009) and has work published or forthcoming in *Barrelhouse*, *Mid-American Review*, *Fugue*, *Faultline*, the *Southeast Review*, *Diagram*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Puerto del Sol*, and *Hobart*, among others.

**Mark Irwin's** sixth collection of poetry, *Tall If*, appeared from New Issues in the fall of 2008. He teaches in the graduate creative writing program at the University of Southern California and lives in Los Angeles and Colorado. Visit [www.markirwinauthor.com](http://www.markirwinauthor.com).

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**Joshua Kryah's** first collection of poems, *Glean* (2007), won the Nightboat Poetry Prize. He is the poetry editor of *Witness*.

**Jason Labbe** is the author of a chapbook, *Dear Photographer* (Phylum Press, 2009). His new poems appear in *Poetry*, *Boston Review*, *American Letters & Commentary*, *Open City*, and other journals. He is a working musician and divides his time between Brooklyn, New York and Bethany, Connecticut.

**Joseph Lease's** critically acclaimed books of poetry include *Broken World* (Coffee House) and *Human Rights* (Talisman House). His poem "'Broken World' (For James Assatly)" was selected for *The Best American Poetry 2002*. His poems have also been featured on NPR.

**Laurence Lieberman** has published fourteen books of poetry and three books of criticism. His recent collections include *Carib's Leap: Selected and New Poems of the Caribbean* (Peepal Tree Press, UK), *The Regatta in the Skies: Selected Long Poems* (University of Georgia Press), and *Beyond the Muse of Memory: Essays on Contemporary American Poets* (University of Missouri Press).

Rebecca Lindenberg's work appears in *Denver Quarterly*, *Gulf Coast*, *Pool*, *Barrow Street*, *Western Humanities Review*, and elsewhere. She currently holds a fellowship at the Provincetown Fine Arts Work Center.

Nancy McCabe's books include *After the Flashlight Man: A Memoir of Awakening* (Purdue, 2003) and *Meeting Sophie: A Memoir of Adoption* (Missouri, 2003). Her nonfiction has appeared in *Prairie Schooner*, *Fourth Genre*, the *Massachusetts Review*, *Puerto del Sol*, and *Crab Orchard Review*, among others; been listed three times on the *Best American Essays* notable list; and received a Pushcart Prize. She directs the writing program at the University of Pittsburgh at Bradford and teaches in the brief-residency MFA program in creative writing at Spalding University.

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Anne McDuffie's essays and reviews have appeared in *Rattle*, *Colorado Review*, *American Book Review*, and the anthology *Short Takes: Brief Encounters with Contemporary Nonfiction*. She received her MFA in 2007 from the Rainier Writing Workshop at Pacific Lutheran University, and she lives on Seattle's Capitol Hill with her husband and two daughters.

Michael McLane holds an MFA in poetry from Colorado State University. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Interim*, the *Laurel Review*, *Matter Journal*, *Denver Quarterly*, and *Salt Flats Annual*, among others. He currently lives in Salt Lake City, Utah, where he works for a rare books dealer.

Kevin McLellan has recent or forthcoming poems in *Arch Literary Journal*, *Barrow Street*, *Drunken Boat*, *Exquisite Corpse*, *Hunger Mountain*, *Interim*, *Southern Humanities Review*, and others. His chapbook *Round Trip*, a collaborative series with numerous poets, is forthcoming (2010) from Seven Kitchens. He lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Mary Medlin attends the MFA program at Warren Wilson College. "Not Now but Soon" is her first published story.

Jenny Mueller teaches at McKendree University, near St. Louis. Her first book, *Bonneville*, was published by Elixir Press. The poems published here are fragments from a longer series, mainly involving art environments.

**Edward Nobles** lives and works in Bangor, Maine. His poems have appeared in *Denver Quarterly*, the *Paris Review*, the *Kenyon Review*, and *Tin House*. He has published two collections of poetry with Persea Books.

**Kelli Anne Nofle** is a graduate of the Master of Professional Writing program at the University of Southern California. Publications include the *Journal*, *Blackbird*, the *Greensboro Review*, and *Harvard Summer Review*. She is currently completing her first collection of poems.

**Julie Sophia Paegle's** poetry collection, *torch song tango choir*, is forthcoming from the University of Arizona Press (August, 2010). Recent poems appear in the *Sand Canyon Review*, *Denver Quarterly*, and various anthologies. She teaches in the graduate program at CSU San Bernardino and lives in the San Bernardino mountains with her husband and sons.

**John Poch** teaches in the creative writing program at Texas Tech University. His latest book of poems is *Dolls* (Orchises, 2009).

**Deborah Poe** is the author of the poetry collections *Elements* (Stockport Flats Press, 2010) and *Our Parenthetical Ontology* (CW Books, 2008). Her writing is forthcoming or has recently appeared in journals such as *Sidebrow*, *Ploughshares*, *Filter Literary Journal*, *Copper Nickel*, and *Denver Quarterly*. For more information, please visit [www.deborahpoe.com](http://www.deborahpoe.com).

**Jack Ridl's** new collection, *Losing Season* (CavanKerry Press), has been featured on NPR's "The Story" and "Only a Game," and has been named Book of the Year by the Institute for International Sport. His previous collection, *Broken Symmetry* (Wayne State University Press) was co-recipient of the 2006 poetry award from the Society of Midland Authors.

This issue's cover photograph is by **Luca Rossato**. Since 1980, he has been working as a photographer for newspapers and magazines. He is particularly interested in the subjects of decay and abandonment. See more of his work at [www.lucarossato.com](http://www.lucarossato.com). He lives in Italy.

**Mary Ann Samyn's** most recent book is *Beauty Breaks In* (New Issues, 2009). She teaches in the MFA program at West Virginia University.

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**Liz Waldner's** most recent book is *Play*, from Lightful Press.

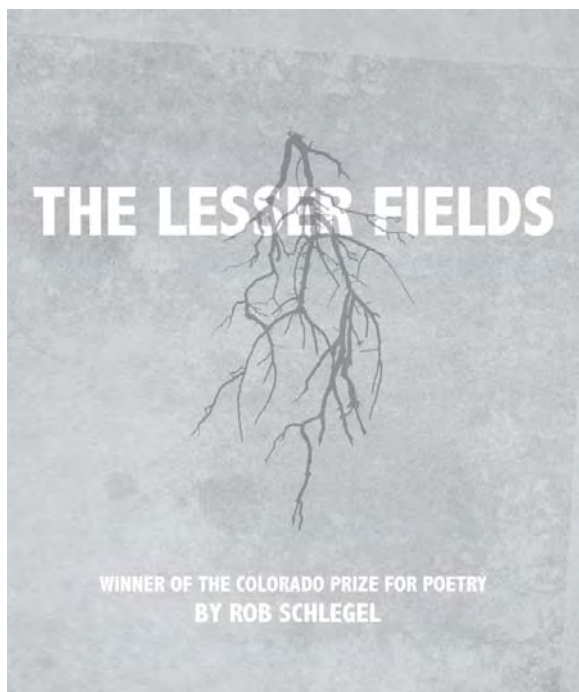
**G. C. Waldrep's** most recent collection is *Archicembalo* (Tupelo, 2009), winner of the Dorset Prize. He lives in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, and teaches at Bucknell University.

**Eric Weinstein's** poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Best New Poets 2009*, *Third Coast*, and *Prick of the Spindle*, where he now serves as poetry editor. He lives in Hoboken, New Jersey.

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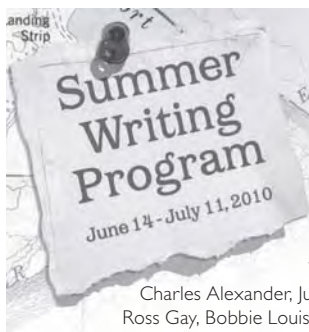
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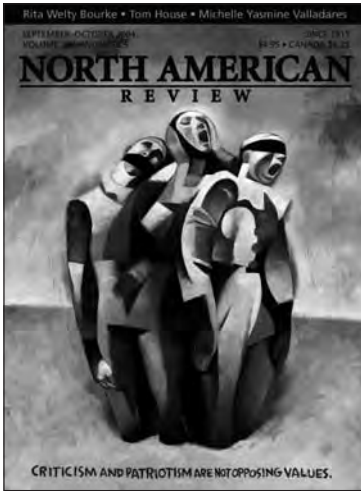
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