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In this issue: Lee Ann Brown • Liza Cochran • Brad Felver
Kate Folk • L. S. Klatt • Goldberry Long • Jeffrey Pethybridge
Elizabeth Poliner • Maya Catherine Popa • Daniel Sherrell
Jan Shoemaker • Mathias Svalina • Laura Wetherington

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CONTENTS

CR

	1	<i>Editors' Page</i>
FICTION	3	BRAD FELVER <i>The Dogs of Detroit</i>
	18	KATE FOLK <i>Tornado Season</i>
	35	GOLDBERRY LONG <i>How Sister Concepción Burned Down Nuestra Señora de Los Luceros through No Fault of Her Own, Which Everyone Agrees</i>
	49	ELIZABETH POLINER <i>Sometime, Springtime</i>
NONFICTION	73	LIZA COCHRAN <i>Natural Forces</i>
	90	DANIEL SHERRELL <i>Big Pin</i>
	115	JAN SHOEMAKER <i>Tenebrae</i>
POETRY	125	SUSAN BRIANTE <i>October 29—The Dow Closes Down</i> IIII8 <i>May 15—The Dow Is Closed</i> <i>November 20—The Dow Is Closed</i> <i>Meditation</i>
	132	LEE ANN BROWN <i>Mortal Sonnet</i> <i>Altars Everywhere</i>

- 134 **SOPHIA DAHLIN**
Worse Luck
A Magic Radish
- 138 **JEANINE DEIBEL**
Effigy
- 139 **CAROLINA EBEID**
You Ask Me to Talk About the Interior
[If I say ghost, would you]
- 142 **JOHN FRY**
As Samuel in the Temple
- 143 **SARAH JANCZAK**
Desire, the Tree We Climbed Upon
- 144 **L. S. KLATT**
The Eunuch's Happy Vehicle
- 145 **AARON KUNIN**
"not a" hand / but an eye?
Poem
- 149 **ELIZABETH LANGEMAK**
Blue Hole
- 150 **NANCY L. MEYER**
The Ghosts of Leaves
- 151 **ROSALIE MOFFETT**
Remedy
Safe
Weather
- 154 **OSCAR OSWALD**
Living
- 155 **KATE PARTRIDGE**
M 4.0, 21 km S of Knik-Fairview
A Range of Manners, or Rather Lack Of
As If
Earthquake Park
- 161 **JEFFREY PETHYBRIDGE**
Found Poem Including History [O, sing, System,
of the city and its oil,]
Found Poem Including History [To write,
finally, of that obsolete rose,]
Found Poem Including History [Leave
the political nature of the given,]

	<i>Found Poem Including History [A desert of legality (Iraq)]</i>
	<i>Methodology Constellation</i>
	<i>Found Poem Including History [In light at risk, hostage to this historic]</i>
	<i>Found Poem Including History [The power of the commons disrupts]</i>
	<i>Found Poem Including History [Our city was the radical organ]</i>
	<i>Ode Including History</i>
	<i>Found Poem Including History [To determine the record of history,]</i>
175	MAYA CATHERINE POPA
	<i>Palimpsest</i>
177	BRET SHEPARD
	<i>Compassed</i>
	<i>Note to Self</i>
	<i>Our Chemistry Is Desire</i>
180	MATHIAS SVALINA
	<i>Wastoid</i>
	<i>Wastoid</i>
	<i>Wastoid</i>
	<i>Wastoid</i>
	<i>Wastoid</i>
185	LAURA WETHERINGTON
	<i>Pierre Rivière Spectacular 06</i>
	<i>Pierre Rivière Spectacular 10</i>
	<i>Pierre Rivière Spectacular 08</i>
188	JAMES WHITE
	<i>Measuring an Arc by Every Other Degree</i>
189	CORRIE WILLIAMSON
	<i>Ante</i>
	• • •
191	<i>Contributor Notes</i>

EDITORS' PAGE

It's easy to get a little lazy during the summer, settling deeply into that poolside chaise longue, umbrella drink within easy reach, scent of coconut in the air. And why shouldn't you? You've earned it, this "weekend" of the year: June, July, and August standing in for an extended Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. But don't get too comfortable just yet; the stories and essays in this issue promise to keep you on the edge of your beach towel.

Striking the first note of disequilibrium in this issue's fiction, Brad Felver's "Dogs of Detroit" presents a city in which "the natural order of things has been upended": feral dogs roam the city, buildings are abandoned and left to decay, and a boy's mother goes missing—leaving him and his father to work out their grief through art and violence. Amid an out-of-season twister, Kate Folk's "Tornado Season" finds a teenage girl and her single mother harboring a fugitive whose attention they both desire. Goldberry Long gives us a nun painfully out of sync with her parish, unable to reconcile her true heart with her faith, in "How Sister Concepción Burned Down Nuestra Señora de Los Luceros through No Fault of Her Own, Which Everyone Agrees." And in Elizabeth Poliner's "Sometime, Springtime," a woman works to regain her balance after her lover unexpectedly dumps her, navigating a world that now seems "a kind of foreign universe . . . a place where she felt alien, displaced."

Carrying this discordant tune through the nonfiction, Daniel Sherrell's "Big Pin" pulls back the curtain to reveal the culture of high school wrestling—a limbo world that is neither school nor life, but "somehow takes the place of both"—in which boys starve themselves down to unnatural weights, strive to knock one another off balance, and subject themselves to abuse and humiliation for a dubious return on their investment. In "Tenebrae," a meditative essay on art and religion, Jan Shoemaker reflects on the destabilizing experience of tending to her dementia-stricken mother, the roles of caregiving inverted. Liza Cochran, though, examining addiction and depression, writes about righting oneself again, finding a spiritual compass—a higher power, perhaps—amid the wilderness in her moving essay "Natural Forces."

So if your chaise has a seatbelt, you may want to fasten it: it's going to be a bumpy read.

—STEPHANIE G'SCHWIND

As I write this introductory statement, I am at the Denver International Airport. I have been here for several hours, and I am told I will be here for several more. This space, to borrow some words from Gertrude Stein, “is a space of time that is filled always filled with moving.” It is a space constructed by, and always aware of, passing hours. The good news: for company, I have the poetry for the summer issue of *Colorado Review*.

These poems, oddly hourly, are full of waiting. Laura Wetherington’s Pierre Rivière “was known to sit for hours, watching birds and frogs he’d nailed to trees.” Lee Ann Brown tells us in her elegy for Amiri Baraka that, despite his being two hours late for a reading, “everybody Stayed.” Some poetry is not only worth waiting for, but it transforms the very makeup of an hour. In the presence of these poems I find that I no longer dread the hours ahead of me; I eagerly await them because “already the hour / is less than an hour” (Carolina Ebeid). I anticipate that you, too, will spend many happy hours in and among these beautiful poems.

—SASHA STEENSEN

THE DOGS OF DETROIT

N ights when Polk cannot hunt the dogs, he instead attacks his father. He has grown to crave the hot pain spreading over his face, the bulging of his knuckles when they connect with bone. His father fights back just enough. They roll around on the floor, struggling and grunting, sneaking in shots to the ribs and the temples. When they tire, they each collapse, wheezing, moaning. They rub their flushed faces and lick away the blood pooling on their gums and retreat to their corners. No resentment or words, as if they are not punching each other, not exactly. A narcotic hunger being fed, one that brings no joy, but rather is a conduit for torment.

After their fights, they lie there, panting, blinking back tears, and only then does Polk confide in his father. He lists off the revenges he wants to take on the universe. He imagines the worst things possible: toddler coffins, flayed penguins, pipe bombs in convents, napalm in orphanages. He hates himself for it, his selfishness, his appetite for sloppy justice. Always he ends up wondering the same thing: *Does God hate me more than I hate God?*

His father reaches for Polk's hand, but Polk pulls away. No touching unless it is to create violence. "Patience," his father says. "We must learn grief."

After school, Polk hunts. He ranges across the urban wilderness of the East Side, ducks through the cutting winds off St. Clair. He lugs a Winchester bolt action by the barrel, dragging the stock on the ground, leaving a crease in the snow. He tracks dog prints through the industrial fields, through the brambled grasses and split concrete and begrimed snow. Through decomposing warehouses and manufacturing cathedrals that nature has reclaimed. Hundreds of deserted acres. These are wild dogs he kills, no longer bearing any trace of domestication. Few people left, but the dogs—tens of thousands of dogs, abandoned during this great human exodus. There is no Atticus Finch to

blast the rabies from them, no little girl to drag them home by the scruff to her father and say, *May we please?* As all else crumbles, the dogs remain.

And then one day: his mother's tracks, long and narrow, weight on the outside ridges. Keds. She always wore Keds. She

And then one day: his mother's tracks, long and narrow, weight on the outside ridges. Keds. She always wore Keds.



has been gone two months now, disappeared. She was there when Polk went to school, sitting at the kitchen table, sucking on a menthol, gone when he got home. But these are her prints. He knows them. They mix

in with the dog prints, as if she has joined them. Perhaps she has been hunted by them, perhaps something else altogether.

Eventually, he thinks, *I'll whiten the canvas, leaving only her tracks. Eventually, a pattern will emerge.* But with each dog he kills, his palate mutates: joy. The heavy thunk of bullet piercing a ribcage. Eliminating a contagion. A growing pleasure to be found in mindless violence. Carcasses left to rot, to be ravaged by predators. Always there seem to be more dogs, like a muscle in need of constant stretching.

At school, he sits alone. He is a large boy, the largest in the junior high school, his feet flapping on the concrete hallways as if they were made for an adult but then attached to him instead. The art teacher, Mrs. Roudebush, prods him to rejoin the world. More pictures of Mom, Polk? More charcoal? Why not try the acrylics? Some greens and yellows and magentas.

"No thank you," he says. His face remains placid, all its topography flattened, grown numb, unable to flex. He refuses to look up, and she soon wanders away to check on other students.

After school he walks home to their house on the East Side, then through the tunnel of tall grasses, which have swallowed up all but the second story where they never go. Collapsed staircase, plywood windows, a contentedness in allowing it to erode.

These winter days, the sun never truly rises. No direct light, no marbled streaks or roiling clouds, just a vast gray slab. Slowly, the night mottles into blued steel as if other colors have not yet been discovered. He grabs the Winchester and sets off, fol-

lows the freshest of the dog prints as far as they will take him, across the freeway and toward the old Packard compound, its remnants. He nestles onto a hillside, his favorite perch, downwind. A sniper in Stalingrad. He takes down two dogs quickly, the echoes of the rifle shots ballooning out in waves. The sun droops. A mangy pit bull trots into the field, and Polk takes it down, the round ripping through the dog back near its haunches, and it stumbles, tries to limp away, dragging its paralyzed legs. For several minutes it struggles forward and Polk watches. Then it stops moving. Polk trudges home, stomping wide holes in the snow, the butt of the Winchester digging a crease behind him. His mother's prints, which had been clear the day before, have vanished, taken by the wind.

Mrs. Roudebush introduces tertiary colors: chartreuse, magenta, russet, azure. "These," she says, "are the gems. The true colors of nature. Turned leaves are not red or yellow or pink. They are citron, plum, vermilion."

"Hey, *Poke*," one boy with shaggy hair and an earring whispers across the table. "Hey, mama's boy." Polk used to know the boy's name, but he has forgotten it. Usually, they leave him alone, but sometimes he is such easy prey they seem not to be able to help themselves.

The kids at his table whisper just loudly enough that he can hear. "His mom used to smoke crack," a girl says.

"I know it," another girl says. "I seen her do it with my stepdad."

"Poke likes crack, too, don't you, Poke?" The boy leans across the table, but just then Mrs. Roudebush kneels next to Polk.

"This is one of my favorites," she whispers. She hands him a tube of paint. "Viridian. I wonder if you might try it today."

Polk feels that this lesson is designed specifically for him. Adults talk differently after tragedy, as if he is suddenly six years old rather than thirteen. He paints a picture of his mother at the kitchen table. The tip of her cigarette is viridian, the smoke coiling off is slate. Her hair is russet, the table is buff. The clock on the wall, which is actually yellow, he decides to paint plum so that it barely distinguishes itself. He catches the shadows with gray-browns and blue-grays, and before long the scene emerges from his memory, protrudes through the paper like a hologram.

He paints her teeth, paints the spaces between them, wide

enough for a pencil point. Her rotting gums are some mix of gray and brown, like frozen mud. Her foggy eyes tired, unable to focus. Her head rocking, as if to some silent melody. He paints his father standing in the doorway, arms crossed. He is half looking at her, half looking at the floor, as if he cannot decide which is more painful.

“Fetch your mother a Diet,” she says to Polk, and he does. It’s warm. Broken refrigerator. She tries to light another menthol, but she shakes too badly. She puts her elbows on the table, leans down toward the lighter. Polk watches her struggle and fail, and then he snatches the lighter, bends down and lights the cigarette for her.

“You love your mother, don’t you, Polk?”

“Marie,” Polk’s father says. They stare at each other.

“I know it,” she says. “Tomorrow.”

“Time for school,” his father says, reaching for him, drawing him away from the kitchen, out the front door. What he remembers now is that he never answered her question—*You love your mother, don’t you, Polk?* He went to school instead. Yes, he should have said. *Even like this.*

That afternoon she vanished.

Polk’s father is waiting for him on the front sidewalk. Polk tries to sidestep him and go in the house and take the Winchester and do his duty.

“Polk,” his father says. “No more guns.”

Polk stares blankly.

“The police called again. They’re done understanding.”

“Have they found her or not?” Polk asks.

“Polk, that’s not—”

“I know what you think.”

“You don’t.”

“I know you don’t miss her. I know that. You never even cried.”

His father sits on the top step. He won’t look at Polk. “I know you feel like you’re stuck with me now. I know you loved her more. I can’t do anything about that.”

Polk points toward the industrial complex. “I see her prints.”

His father squints. “All kind of bums and druggies hide out in that place. What are you doing over there?”

Polk doesn't answer.

"You can't trust those. Those could be anything. We both knew her."

"I can tell when people think I'm lying," he says.

His father sighs and looks away. "Polk," he says, but then decides not to finish. Finally, he says, "We can't keep doing this."

"You don't believe me. You never believed her either."

"Polk, I believe you."

"Don't do that."

"Polk, you need to stop this."

Something in Polk fractures. Can't compartmentalize anger and pain anymore. They bleed together. He puts his hands on his knees, tries to slow it, long breaths, closed eyes.

His father recognizes the signs. "Can it wait?"

Polk shakes his head, no, and his father nods, all right then.

They stomp through the high grass and dirty snow of the front yard, tamp down a wide circle that feels like a cage. Polk tackles his father but can't bring him down. He yanks and twists a leg, secures it under his armpit until his father finally goes down, knees to the snow. They're trundling around then, back and forth like a rolling pin, neither gaining position. Polk takes an elbow to the sternum, which knocks his breath loose, and he rolls to his back. He kicks up, punches, his father smacking Polk's face raw and red. Polk feels the meat of his fist half-connect with something but doesn't know what. White noise and blur. His nose gets mashed, and the tears come then, no stopping it. He bucks, letting loose the last bit of his anger, exploding up, pivoting at his hips and driving his father down, then hammering his fists into chest. He clasps his fists together and churns his arms down like a piston, boring his way down onto his father.

And then it's over. No more energy, no more anger. They exist together. For several minutes they hardly move, just pant and cough. This is the normal trajectory. Soon they will rise to their knees, then stand and move into the house.

"Syringe Ebola into baby formula," Polk says. He's gasping, the words pulsing out in blurred waves. "Hack a newborn giraffe with a machete."

"Okay."

"Dynamite the Statue of Liberty."

“Enough now.”

“Grocery bags full of puppy ears.”

“Polk.”

Polk stops sleeping in his bed. Too soft, too warm. Goodness to be found in small miseries: cold floors, festering splinters, fingertips burnt on light bulbs. He lies on the floorboards, no pillow, no blanket.

Outside the wind ravages the old house. The dogs, he can hear the dogs, howling and snarling, and then more snow comes, dampening the yelping echoes and covering old tracks. There is no sleep, not anymore, only an untended aggression that needs to be fed.

She is near, he knows this. He begins smelling her perfume, flowers and vanilla. More than once he moves her old ashtray from the table to the counter, only to have it moved back by the morning. His father does not smoke. And of course, her prints. Is she too ashamed to come back? Is that it? Or is she angry with him because he didn't say he loved her?

He sees her tracks again one morning, fresh tracks in the fresh snow. Not twenty feet from the front door, pacing around the grass cage where he fought his father. Keds, very clearly Keds. They slither through the tall grass, around the north side of the house, up to each of the front windows. There they shrink and push deeper into the snow. On her tiptoes, peering in. He feels her lingering presence, as if they are trying to occupy the same space, as if she is trying to make sense of what has happened since she left. He examines each print, follows them out the backyard and through the split chain links. He tracks them north, fifty yards into the fields, the longest he has ever been able to track her, but then they enter into a depression of ice and evaporate. He circles around looking for an exit point, but there is none. Gone again.

Nearby is the pit bull mix that he shot the week before. It has a distinctive brindle pattern to its coat. Dilutions of gold on a black base crawl as if trying to escape. He is exposed, vulnerable without his rifle. Its stomach has been opened up, devoured. The other dogs, hungry for whatever protein still exists in this wasteland. And he thinks for a moment of the oddity of it all, how he kills the dogs and leaves them to rot, how the other dogs

eat their pack mates to survive. He hunts them and hunts *for* them. This canvas will never whiten. He isn't sure what all this means, but he does know that the natural order of things has been upended, that he is caught up in it somehow.

Polk steals paint from school, tertiary colors, fills in every set of prints that might be hers. He squeezes paint into each print, filling it fully, cleanly, spreads it over every contour, and then moves on to the next print, and soon her trail glows, emerging from the snow and mud like collapsed stars. The paint will harden, freeze, will remain fixed there for as long as it takes for Polk to make sense of them. No more disappearing trails. He uses his stash of paints

He squeezes paint into each print, filling it fully, cleanly, spreads it over every contour, and then moves on to the next print.

to categorize them by color, by direction, by time frame, then draws a tape measure around the expanse of the compound, slowly, from one set of prints to another, even measures stride lengths. He notes everything.

The dogs eye him but keep their distance, curious and mocking. Like an undertaker gazing at a body, perhaps. Polk doesn't feel hunted exactly, but he feels something at the base of his skull, their lurking curiosity, feels how little he now belongs in this place. It belongs to the dogs.

Nights, he sits at the kitchen table. He moves the ashtray with her menthol butts to the counter, begins drawing a scaled map, every feature of the area, every print of hers, every color noted. He feels like a scientist tracking the migration patterns of some near-extinct species of bird. In time, her own patterns will emerge, her location. They must. For the first time since she disappeared, he feels a goodness in himself, a warmth not from violence.

"What's this?" his father asks.

"I'm not allowed to shoot the dogs anymore."

His father sits next to him, looks the map over for a moment. "These are places you've seen her trail?"

Polk nods.

“This many?”

Polk keeps drawing, tracing a pencil across a ruler. Slow, precise movements.

“Polk?” his father says quietly, but Polk ignores him. He spends all evening drawing a map of the area, each set of prints noted and appropriately colored to indicate a timetable.

“My little cartographer,” his father says, but Polk ignores him still. This is more than a map. This is a time line, a psychological study.

The next day, her ashtray is back on the table again. There are cigarettes in it, menthol butts that do not seem new but that he can’t recall seeing before.

He begins to see her footprints everywhere, glowing at him. They emerge from his father’s eyes. He sees them in headlights and oddly thrown shadows; during art class; in his dreams when he sleeps in short, hateful spurts. Sometimes the dog tracks morph as he stares at them, become longer, narrow, deeper on the ridges. Sometimes they are large and sometimes small, but they are all hers, this he knows.

“It’s not fair,” his father says. “None of it. I know that.” He tries to massage Polk’s shoulders, but Polk shies away. These attempts are clumsy and practiced now. They aren’t a family; they’re remnants of one. When she disappeared, their tripod crumbled.

There was a time, not very long ago, when they had been happy. He knows this now because he never thought about being happy. They had jobs, his father at the machine shop, his mother in the deli at the Kit Kat. She always brought home bologna that was almost expired, and they would fry it up until it bubbled and popped.

He clings to a single memory. Sledding down a small scoop of a hill near baseball fields, dirty snow packed down. He tries to remember where this hill was, but the location eludes him. Is it a false memory? he wonders. Something he has manufactured to cope? His mother would give Polk a big shove, and he would slingshot down the hill, skittering and spinning where it turned into ice, and when the speed became too much, he closed his eyes, afraid to see what lay below. Each time he shot down the hill, he lost control, but always he would end up at the bottom, face up in the snow, always his father waiting, asking, *Should*

we go again? Then walking back to the house, having to wedge himself between his mother and his father because they were holding hands. He remembers the smell of her perfume. When they got home, he took a shower, but the water had gone cold again. Bad plumbing, dud water heater. When he walked into the front room, still shivering and wet, his father pulled a towel from the oven and swaddled him with it, and his skin slowly softened, his breaths lengthened until he felt whole and content.

Polk stops going to school, spends the days painting tracks, updating his map. He is meticulous, always bent over a set of prints or making notations. The pattern will emerge, the methods to her movements, this he knows. He plunges deep into the grounds of the Packard compound, even venturing into the buildings when he is feeling brave. Sometimes he sees vandals, other times photographers, but mostly he sees dogs and homeless people who share the various buildings in relative peace. He maps and paints, maps and paints. He stops sleeping, just expands the map, growing weary and unpredictable. Everything begins to feel random. It begins to look like a star map, with constellations emerging, glowing at him.

One day, Polk comes home to find Mrs. Roudebush sitting at the table with his father. She clutches her purse and smiles at him, her sad smile like an apology. "We've missed you," she says.

Polk looks down, and his eyes land on his hands, his large and awkward hands smeared with paint. He looks back up at Mrs. Roudebush, but before he is forced to speak, she reaches into her purse and pulls out a paper bag. She sets it on the table. "I was doing some cleaning," she says. She stands up to leave, hangs her purse from her shoulder. "My husband," she says, "he died three years ago."

Polk feels himself flinch and stares at her.

"I used to roll over in the middle of the night, and he was in bed with me. Sometimes I even heard him snore. I swear I did. Sometimes I would wake up, and his radio would be going. I told my sister about it, but you could tell she didn't believe me. That was hard. I couldn't understand why it had to be like that. I refused to change the sheets because I thought he was in there somehow. I slept on those sheets for a year, every night, hoping to feel him or smell him or hear his snores. Sometimes I did,

and sometimes I didn't. It was all I thought about. I moved the microwave and the television into the bedroom. I lived in there. One day, my sister found me like that, and she made me take a shower and wash the sheets. Do you know what we found when we stripped the bed?"

Polk shakes his head, no.

"A small painting, an acrylic on canvas, no stretcher. At first I didn't recognize it, but then I realized it was a scene I had done, probably thirty years ago, not long after we were married, my husband thin and clean shaven, me thin and with a long ponytail. We were standing in front of our first house, not far from here. I had forgotten about that painting, but there it was under the mattress pad."

She looks to Polk's father. "There's no explaining that."

"Did he put it there?" Polk asks.

"I don't know, dear. I really don't. But I think the dead teach us how to grieve," she says. "I don't understand it either, but that's what I think. Sometimes people can be gone and not gone at the same time. They know things we don't know." She smiles at him. "God doesn't hate you, Polk."

That night Polk lies on the floor. The bag of paints sits next to him. He hasn't yet opened it, but he knows what's in there.

"Sometimes people can be gone and not gone at the same time. They know things we don't know." She smiles at him. "God doesn't hate you, Polk."



He wants to go outside right then and use them, take a flashlight and find the tracks and paint them. *What are you trying to teach me?* he wonders. He finds himself packing a bag of supplies: bottles of water, beef jerky,

Skittles, dog treats, extra socks, a Maglite, toilet paper. He rolls his set of maps up tightly.

He walks out into the kitchen, where his father is sitting at the table. He turns to look at Polk, and dangling from his lips is a cigarette butt. Remnants of her. It has been stubbed out and twisted, unlit, hanging limply. His father is startled. "Polk," he says. "Can't you sleep?"

"She's out there," he says. "Every night, right now, she's out there. Her tracks are freshest in the morning."

“No,” his father says. He pulls the cigarette from his mouth and delicately places it back in the ashtray, as if it is some fragile treasure. “You’re not doing this.”

Polk shrugs. It’s time, he knows this. If he waits much longer, he’ll lose her.

“I’ve let this go on too long.”

“You have to sleep at some point,” Polk says.

“I won’t allow this.”

“I’ll bring her home,” Polk says.

“She’s not out there, Polk. You’re looking for trouble. You want to join her.”

“You’re just glad she’s gone. You don’t have to help her now.”

His father smacks him then, the flat of his palm on Polk’s cheek. This is by no means the first time his father has struck him, but this time is different, this is anger.

Polk pounces on his father. They tumble over the table, spill onto the floor. They struggle. Polk hears himself grunt and snarl. He doesn’t punch and kick so much as he thrashes wildly. Then he catches an elbow to the eye, and the world blurs. He yelps with the pain, grabs at it with both hands. His father stops, bends over Polk to examine it.

“Let me look at it, Polk.”

There is a cut clean through his eyelid, like a half-peeled orange. It won’t close all the way. Even when he tries, light seeps through the crack. Everything is mottled, ill-defined edges, blurred colors. They put ice on it, then a hot rag, then some ointment. “Polk,” his father says. “Jesus, Polk. I didn’t—”

“It’s fine. I’m fine.”

“You need stitches.”

“Stop.” Polk wheezes and coughs. “It felt good, didn’t it?”

His father looks like he is the one who is wounded. “Do you really think that?” His face is drawn, defeated. He bends and picks up the ashtray and butts and sweeps the ashes into a pile. He doesn’t look up. “If you want to go, I can’t stop you.”

The moon glows full, or near full, throwing an eerie sort of light, like the structures themselves blush. Polk must cock his head to the side or cover his thrashed eye to see more clearly. Soon he is trolling the site, rummaging from building to building, tracing his way methodically, following his maps. Even after months of scouting dogs, tracking his mother, noting every-

thing, he has explored only a fraction of the compound. It is like a series of cave systems that turn out to be linked, spreading out forever in all directions. But he has supplies. He will mimic her movements for as long as it takes.

He sniffs his way through one building at a time, one floor at a time, scouring every closet, every side room, behind every pile of rubble, his flashlight flickering in every direction. Collapsed staircases and crumbling masonry and bowed walls. Drips through the open roof, frozen like milky stalactites. All abandoned, as if in haste: filing cabinet drawers thrown open like gaping maws; a '57 Clipper, no engine block, sitting mute on the line; rebar poking through split concrete; cottonwood trees growing from floorboards, leaning away from St. Clair's wind. He shoos away dogs, passes sleeping bodies without a word. For the first time, Polk feels real fear, a coldness clenching his torso. The feeling that he is not alone, that he is the one being tracked now. Until now he didn't care what happened to him, but the vast quiet of this crypt is too terrifying, the fact that he sees shapes and colors more than fully defined objects.

He soon feels that he could map this system for years and still be no nearer to finding her. All night he explores, makes notations on his maps, stoops to examine prints. Prints all over. This is a populated world, crowded with life: dogs, cats, foxes, at least one coyote. Humans. He passes them silently as they lie curled, backs to the wind. Some of them shiver, but most seem not to notice him. He is certain he hears a baby cry at one point. He stands still, waits for the cry to pierce the silence again, but there is only the long quiet, the creaking of the buildings. When he moves off, there is a long and shrill howl of a dog, first a single wail, and then others respond, some far off, but others nearer, too near. He twists his head to listen. Are they communicating? Pack mates on the hunt?

Then a crawling sensation, like the shock from a nine-volt on the tongue. Then the smell: his mother's perfume, flowers and vanilla.

He spins around. No one. He narrows his eyes like an eagle, glares into every crevice of the room, tilts his flashlight at every angle, sees nothing, no one. He tilts his head, uses his good eye. Nothing. He sniffs deeply: menthols.

"Are you here?" he says. The first words he has spoken all night. Then: "Why here?"

This is when he would usually attack his father, loose that confused anger onto the world where it might dissolve. But there is no one here, no violence he can inflict. He tries to think of brutal things to do to the world, but none come to him. It is as if some awful weariness has flattened him. How long has he been here? When did he last sleep? Everything is tertiary colors pulsing from a fuzzy black background, moonlight, haze.

When he moves away from the wall, it is green moss everywhere. Where there was snow, now there is moss. Plush, spongy. Her prints stamped into it. They should be his own prints, but they are hers. The deeper trenches at the ridges, the veiny webs on the soles, the short span between each heel strike. They are hers. He follows them, careful not to trample. They lead up a grand staircase, through a series of offices, over creaking wood floors and concrete ground into gravel. Silence, all silence, and the cutting reek of menthol.

He follows the trail, follows the smell. They tug him along as if he wears a belay line. Soon he is trotting, climbing upward, ignoring the stomping noise he makes, the commotion of disturbing a closed system. He emerges on the roof, a surface so vast it seems like he is back on the ground. He meanders among a grove of cottonwoods that poke through the concrete. They are leafless, their icy limbs shaking in the wind, clattering and creaking. The tang of menthol grows stronger. He coughs and has to wipe away the hot seep from his eye. He doesn't trust this, none of this. To the east, a small breach in the darkness, the sun climbing toward the horizon, the moonlight diffusing. The scent dissipates. He turns and looks behind him. No moss, only snow, pure and untouched but for his fat mashed footprints. He gazes around, everything blurry, like he is underwater. There is nothing here, not his mother, not even traces of her.

Another high-pitched wail, closer this time, washing over the whole rooftop. Silence for a few heartbeats. Silence. And then the response, an answer that seems to emanate from the cottonwood grove behind him. The limbs clatter in the wind, camouflaging its stalkers.

Polk walks on the sides of his feet to dampen the sound, but his commotion still echoes about. He moves to the edge, looks down at the vast fields below. Then he sees it: glowing prints. The paint. Whether it is the foggy haze, moonlight and sunrise occupying the same world, or perhaps his own split eyelid dis-

torting things, or if it is perhaps God himself, he does not know. But those painted tracks glow. All those tertiary colors erupting from the ground. Colors that do not belong to this season or to this place.

Polk sits on the edge, his feet dangling. He stares at the painted prints. It is the prettiest thing he has ever seen; he cannot look away, like staring into the belly of a fire. New colors. He loses track of time, just stares, his breaths coming quicker. They seem alive, crawling tracks, blurry emissions from the core of the earth.

“Is this what you wanted me to see?” he says aloud, his voice bleating through the hush. He waits for a response he knows is not coming. After all this? Mrs. Roudebush was wrong.

Polk hears the soft padding of paws before he sees the dog. A thin squeaking sound, fresh snow being tamped down. Not so much a palpable noise as an echo with no architect. He is afraid to turn around, to see what he already knows is there. When he does turn, he first notices the ribcage bulging through skin and fur. Such hunger. That distinctive brindle pattern, writhing, uncoiling around the torso. The low rumbling of anger, not a simple growl but slow-burning fury surfacing. Behind it, more movement in the cottonwood grove, a slow swaying not caused by wind. Polk stands slowly, his heels hanging over the edge of the roofline, afraid to make any quick movements. Is this about survival? Or is it revenge? The pit bull encroaches like a lurching shadow, deliberate and menacing steps, its muscled haunches tightly drawn and trembling. Polk edges along the roofline, but there is no retreat, no escape.

He turns away, looks back down at the glowing prints. He can see very far, miles, the individual glass panes of windows in the skyscrapers downtown and the mossy roofs of hundreds of houses on the East Side. All the city is out there, yawning itself awake. He looks down. Is it far enough to kill him? Or just to maim? To break his body apart. He pictures this for a moment, tries to feel the swelling terror in his gut as he plummets, the piercing ripple shooting through his legs, collapsing his body into an accordion when he strikes ground. Would this be the moment of relief? He wonders when the pain would strike, how long after impact? One second? Five? Never? He wonders about the precise instant when life stops and death starts. He wonders about that moment for his mother, for all the dogs he has killed.

The low rumbling draws closer, so close it seems to emanate from Polk himself. He squats down, his back to the pit bull, cinching his body into a defensive crouch. He squeezes, fights against trembling. And yet some strange joy tempers the fear, like a return to the world. He closes his good eye and waits, several ragged breaths he waits.

When he opens his eye again, he sees in the distance the baseball field, the chain-link fence of its backstop. That small scoop of sledding hill next to it, so much smaller than he remembers. There it is, not so far away, a handful of blocks to the west. Has it been there this whole time? His mother pushing him down, his father dragging him back up. And then he is falling, skittering downward, spinning in some wobbly oblong orbit, the pull of gravity on his stomach. He will crash—he can feel it; he is moving too fast, out of control. Once unleashed, gravity takes over, no stopping it. Blood pulses into his head and he clamps his eyes shut and multicolored stars pour over him like a meteor shower. A piercing throb. His breath catches and he clenches, hardening muscle into concrete, bracing for impact, and when it comes it jars the breath loose from him, and all seems lost until his father pulls him up and brushes the snow from his face and says, *Should we go again?*

TORNADO SEASON

It was fifteen the summer Jacob came to live with us, in what would become known as the Year of Tornadoes. In April an F2 ruffled the edges of a soybean field five miles south of my high school, nibbled the roof of a decaying shed, and evaporated over 480th Street. In May an F3 twisted along the river that separated sleek downtown office buildings from graying grids of low-income housing and strip malls. It gnawed a chunk off the side of a Pizza Hut and hobbled the pole of the old Dairy Queen sign before withdrawing into a placenta of green cloud. June and July had been hot and dry: blue sky, unblemished cumulus puffs. Tornado season, in our minds, was over.

My mom had been looking for a boarder to make extra money while she finished nursing school. I thought it was an idle threat until one night at dinner she said Marjorie, her best friend, knew of someone perfect. I'd never trusted Marjorie, with her dull eyes and perfunctory questions about my scholastic life, the way she inspected her lipstick in the blade of a butter knife as we ate Sunday dinners at Perkins. My mom and Marjorie would wait for me to go to the bathroom so they could discuss their sex lives; I'd come back and they'd shudder abruptly to silence, faces flushed. Marjorie seemed like the kind of woman who'd have an affair with a married man or bring a suitcase through customs for a lover she'd met on the plane. Not that my mom was much better.

"His name is Jacob. He's a doctor," my mom told me, like that was all I needed to know.

The next day, I was lying on my stomach in my room making a collage of eyes cut from my mom's *Cosmo* and *Glamour* magazines. The rubber cement set my head pleasantly aspin, and at first I thought the doorbell was just another effect of the fumes. Then I heard my mom's voice—the lilting one she used around men, an octave above its normal range—as she ushered him across our green-tiled foyer. I continued cutting out the

eyes of makeup models and marginal celebrities. I pasted small eyes into the whites of big ones.

“He’s here,” my mom said, standing behind me in the open doorway.

“Great,” I said.

“Come on, Molly.” She sounded nervous, afraid I would embarrass her, and so I remained on my stomach an extra five seconds, shellacking an improbable lavender iris.

Jacob sat at the kitchen table, staring at the cream-whorled surface of his coffee. His long fingers caressed the side of the mug, a piece of pottery with a green-blue glaze that my parents had bought on a trip to the western states. His hair was sand colored, grown long, and tucked behind his ears. He wore rimless rectangular glasses and a white undershirt that betrayed the contours of his sinewy frame. His tan left forearm was tattooed in cursive script that bent toward his elbow: *First Do No Harm*.

“Molly thought she was too old for summer camp. So here she is.”

I rolled my eyes and Jacob smiled.

In the years since my dad left, my mom had used me to court men. We fell instinctively into unsubtle roles. I was the oblivious girl-child, bumbling and shy. My mom would address me with small commands. *Don’t put your elbows on the table. Double knot your shoelaces or you’ll trip on them.* She summoned unappealing men to fix things, to install new lightbulbs into fixtures whose covers were screwed on too tightly by previous men or were too high for my mom to reach.

Recently I’d begun to outgrow my role. In April, a few days before the first tornado hit, the showerhead detached itself from the tile, as if trying to escape. My mom put on lipstick, her red tie-front shirt, and white shorts that displayed her firm, tan legs. Steve, a paunchy accountant who managed my mom’s meager finances, arrived half an hour later. My mom stood in the bathroom doorway asking dumb questions about grout and caulk. When he finished, Steve sat in the living room drinking coffee. My mom went to the bathroom, and Steve asked me questions about the pop bands he assumed I liked, his watery eyes roaming the faded seams of my dress.

Jacob’s gaze did not linger on me. I regretted not changing out of my striped pajama pants and baggy gray T-shirt. When

my mom said our boarder was a doctor, I'd pictured someone old, like my pediatrician, Dr. Jones. Some dumpy middle-aged man, thick through the haunches and smelling of camphor.

"Let me show you your room," my mom said to Jacob. She walked through the kitchen and opened the basement door with an ironic flourish.

When she came back upstairs, I said, "What about the guest room?" My mom changed the sheets on the guest bed every week, though no one ever slept there, except Marjorie, once in a while, when she'd had too much wine.

"Oh, he's gotten in trouble with some bad people." I stared at her, waiting. "It's a long story, and not suited to little girls," she said.

"I'm not a little girl."

My mom sighed and recited the story in stark terms, trying to shock me. In the domestic violence shelter where he volunteered, Jacob had met a teenage girl who'd been raped by her stepfather. He helped her arrange an abortion. Her religious family found out and hired a bounty hunter. The basement was the best place for Jacob to stay, because he could get out through the window if someone came looking for him.

"What will they do if they find him?" I said.

"They won't find him here."

"But what if they do?"

"I don't know, Molly. Beat him up? Who knows?"

"Isn't it weird to have a guy like that staying here?"

"We need the money," she said. She went to the sink and began washing Jacob's mug.

The next day my mom went to her internship at the hospital, so it was my job to bring Jacob his lunch. I waited for the twelve o'clock siren to sound, then descended the sharp wooden steps with the tray of food my mom had prepared.

I had always found the basement creepy, but it was the best place to shelter from violent storms. As a child I'd reserved for tornadoes a special terror beyond my other fears, which included spiders, aliens, and a faceless man composed of green gum-drop material who lurked in the margins of my nightmares. My parents did not share my concern. They refused to collaborate with me on a Tornado Preparedness plan. When watches were issued, the siren wailing from its post by the water-treatment plant downtown, I went alone to the basement, to the window-

less space behind the drywall, hugging knees to chest and envisioning my new life as an orphan.

Jacob was staying in the outer segment of the basement. His bed was the nubbly orange couch, its guts of spring and stuffing sagging to

the floor from where the rabbits, when we'd had rabbits, had chewed through the bottom lining. Sunlight filtered through the three narrow windows set at the intersection of brick wall

I went alone to the basement, to the windowless space behind the drywall, hugging knees to chest and envisioning my new life as an orphan.

and beamed ceiling. One window stood open on the strength of its rusted hinges, a chair set under it to facilitate escape.

Jacob sat typing on a portable typewriter set on the card table my dad used to drag upstairs for poker nights. I set down the tray of dun-colored food: turkey sandwich, potato chips, wrapped hexagonal snack cake.

"Thanks," Jacob said without looking up. Just to linger near him, I began a chore my mom had been nagging me about for years. I began piling accessories of rabbit ownership into a Rubbermaid box: unwashed ceramic bowls, a sack of dry food, the wire comb they never let me near enough to pull through their silken fur.

We'd had two rabbits, both white with gray ears and red eyes. My dad gave them to me for Christmas when I was eight, and I christened them, unimaginatively, with winter names—Snowy, Snowflake. They died three autumns later of a mysterious rabbit illness, a bacterial infection whose symptoms (snuffling, lethargy) I was too slow in recognizing.

The rabbits were early casualties of my dad's departure. He had always gone with me to feed them when he came home from work. We would sit on the braided rug and feed them dandelion greens and Ritz crackers broken into quarters. Once, Snowy had bitten the round lace of my dad's shiny leather work shoe and sucked it up like a strand of black spaghetti.

When my dad left, I had to go by myself, and as the fall days shortened, the basement seemed suddenly menacing, with its pockets of darkness and rumbling heating ducts. Each night

I freshened the rabbits' water, added greenish pellets to their food bowls, and fled up the stairs. The faster I went, the more strongly I felt a pull at my ankles like the tentacle of some large, lonesome creature. The rabbits grew sicker. Death moved sinuously beneath my imperceptive eyes, until one day I found their stiff white forms huddled in the corner and felt only relief that I would no longer have to visit the basement.

I had never wanted rabbits in the first place. I wanted a cat, but my dad was allergic. When he was still here, my mom liked to joke that she looked forward to my dad dying so she'd be able to get a cat like the ones she'd had as a girl. But the subject had never come up in the years we'd been free of him.

Jacob joined us each morning for breakfast. My mom didn't bother waking me; she wanted me to oversleep so she'd have time alone with him. I began setting my alarm for six a.m., then showering and applying mascara and blush. Over congealing bowls of Grape Nuts and lewd grapefruit halves, my mom talked about her work at the hospital, assuming that was what would interest Jacob. She didn't notice the way his shoulders tensed, how he'd shift the subject to me.

After breakfast Jacob showered. I lay in bed, pretending to read, and imagined him entering my room, safflower bath towel coiled around his waist, tan skin beaded with water. He would lie back, wetting my pillowcases with his hair, and guide me to the completion of an education I'd begun last year—in furtive fits and starts—in windowless practice rooms above the orchestra wing with various boys who played cello.

I used my collaging scissors to cut strips off the hems of my shorts. I cropped my tops. I altered the necklines of T-shirts into plunging Vs. At breakfast my mom would say some belittling thing about me, and Jacob would flash me a sardonic look of sympathy, so fast I might have imagined it. It was enough; my obsession could have run on less.

Thursday night, Marjorie came over with her new boyfriend, Mark. Short and tan, he was in his forties, with dark hair shot with flamboyant streaks of gray. He wore a brown leather jacket and kissed my cheek in lusty greeting. I thought of drug smugglers, men with dubious South American connections. Marjorie was wearing too much perfume, red satin high heels, and a black leather jacket. A doll dressed to match her current man.

Last month, when she'd been dating a college professor, Marjorie had worn long printed skirts, rope sandals, and ambiguously ethnic wooden jewelry.

My mom put on a Fleetwood Mac record and went to the kitchen to uncork a bottle of wine. Jacob sat on the couch. His eyes had the look of a cornered dog about to bite its way free. I saw how intensely he wished to be elsewhere, in that mysterious, featureless fog-land of pure freedom into which my father had vanished one night.

When my mom finished pouring the wine, she noticed I was still there, standing next to the TV.

"Don't you have a book to read?" she said.

I went to my room and stared at the densely printed page thirty-one of *Pride and Prejudice*, the first book on my summer reading list. Their loud, laughing conversation continued until ten p.m., then grew ominously hushed. I tiptoed over the plush brown carpet and peered around the corner. Marjorie's legs were slung over Mark's lap; they chatted with the lack of urgency of people who had already slept together. My mom and Jacob held hands, her face close to his, her head falling against his shoulder as she laughed at something he said.

The next day I set down Jacob's lunch tray and walked away. He disgusted me. I'd thought he was better than the pathetic men my mom seduced in her artless, obvious, desperate way.

"Where are you running off to?" Jacob said.

"The store," I said icily, pausing by the stairs. I couldn't help adding, "Do you need anything?"

Jacob moved to the couch and patted the cushion next to him.

It was strange to be so near him, close enough to feel the heat of his skin. I had imagined this exact scenario—me and Jacob on the orange couch. I would reach for him; he would wrestle me down, pin my cheek to the stale upholstery.

"How's the summer reading going?" he said.

"Fine. Almost done with *Pride and Prejudice*."

"That's a good one." He took off his glasses, sighed, and pinched the inner corners of his eyes with thumb and pinky.

"What will they do if they find you?" I said.

"Take me back to Minneapolis."

"Doesn't sound so bad."

"Maybe not to you."

"I mean, what will happen to you there?"

“I don’t know, Molly. Jesus.”

I had an idea.

“I think I have an irregular heartbeat,” I said. I didn’t really think this. I just wanted him to touch me.

“Give me your wrist,” he said. He placed two fingers on my wrist’s translucent belly. He stared at the yellow-painted brick wall and concentrated on the rhythm of blood inside me.

“You’re fine,” he said. Long after he released me, I felt the pressure of his touch. In my own room I kissed my wrist, coating my lips with the oil of his fingertips.

Jacob had joined us for Sunday dinner the week before. Assuming he’d do so again this week, I shaved my legs and put on the white dress my mom had bought me for the christening

When the doorbell rang, I froze, staring into my own eyes in the mirror. No one ever came to our door.



of some baby related to Marjorie. It was knee length and punched with eyelets in bands around my stomach and thighs, a feature that my mom somehow missed while I turned for her in the store’s three-way mirror.

I stood in the bathroom agonizing over my hair, which would not lie perfectly flat. I lacquered on hairspray, began ripping out individual hairs.

When the doorbell rang, I froze, staring into my own eyes in the mirror. No one ever came to our door.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” my mom said loudly. “It’s just me and my daughter here.”

Murmuring male voices and the dull clatter of closets opened and closed. I punched in the lock. This must be the gang of men who’d come for Jacob and to punish my mom and me for sheltering him. Craggy-faced, in motorcycle jackets, with dim drugged eyes and narrow mouths oozing tobacco spittle.

The basement was the best place to be during a tornado, but this bathroom—an interior room with no windows—was a decent second choice. I lay in the damp tub and counted the tiles, the constellations of mildew in the grout. I waited for a man to force open the door and drag me to the scene of a trauma that would shape my future.

Half an hour passed, and no one came for me. I tiptoed into the foyer, expecting to find my mom tied to a chair while a volatile man applied burning cigarettes to her bare limbs. Instead she sat at the kitchen table with a man and a teenage boy, peering at a spread of documents. The men both had guns holstered at their hips. Otherwise they looked harmless, plainly dressed, the type of anodyne midwesterners you'd chat with in line at the grocery store about milk expiration dates and the caprices of regional weather.

The boy saw me first. He was long limbed, shaggy haired, and attractive in a bland, sexless way, like a golden retriever or a member of a Christian boy band. He looked at me like I'd been sent to him by God, like this was one of those moments he'd remember the rest of his life. *The first time I saw her, she was wearing a white dress, a trickle of dried blood on her ankle from where she'd cut herself shaving.*

"I'm Marcus," the boy said.

"Molly," I said.

The man looked up sharply; my existence was clearly a surprise to him.

"How old are you?" the man asked me.

"Fifteen."

"You let that pervert stay in your house with a pretty young girl like that around?" the man said to my mom.

My mom was staring at a girl's picture, a grainy, blown-up image from a high school yearbook. She was blonde and dimpled and she smiled with small, straight teeth, her chin jutted toward the camera.

"Jacob lied to us," my mom said. "He got this poor girl pregnant."

"You gals don't need to be scared of us," Marcus said. "We're the good guys. You're safe now."

"Marcus," the man said, to shut him up. "Molly, come with me." We went to the basement, where the man questioned me about Jacob's habits while inspecting the items he'd left behind.

"We're here to protect you, Molly," he said.

"We don't need protection," I said.

"Jacob Bennett is not a good man to have lurking in your basement."

"Seems good enough to me."

"He talks a good game."

"You know him?"

“Not personally. Can you go upstairs and close all the blinds?”

I paused, considering what he’d do if I refused.

“Please,” he added, and I slunk up the stairs and did as I was told.

The man, John, spent the rest of the day setting up a watch post behind the drywall that separated the habitable section of the basement from the dusty storage area that housed the water heater, racks of my mom’s old sequined evening dresses, and the boxes of things my dad had left. John hacked a hole in the wall so he could see the windows and intercept Jacob when he came back to retrieve the rest of his things or to continue his stay with us, thinking the danger had passed. I knew Jacob was too smart to stumble into such a crude trap, though part of me hoped they’d catch him. If he was sent to prison, I could write him letters. I could visit. He would be so lonely and vulnerable that his heart would cleave itself open to the possibility of me, of our future together.

Upstairs, with all the blinds drawn, the rooms assumed a dim attitude of mourning. My mom and I ate a stilted dinner while Marcus sat on the couch, watching TV at a considerably low volume. He claimed not to be hungry. My mom and I didn’t look at each other. We didn’t speak in the presence of the occupier.

I helped my mom wash the dishes, whispering to her through the screen of rushing water.

“How long will they be here?” I said.

“Until Jacob comes back.”

“He’s not coming back.”

“I hope he does,” my mom said. “He deserves what’s coming to him. He can’t get away with it. That poor girl.”

I saw the pain in her face and felt an odd sense of triumph. Jacob didn’t want her; she was past her prime, used-up, pushing forty. He wanted a girl like me, a fresh slate, an expanse of newly fallen snow in whose flawless surface his tread would appear stark, crystalline.

After I brushed my teeth, I lingered before the mirror, contorting my face to mimic the hollow smile of the girl in the picture.

My mom went to class the next morning, and I was left with

Marcus, and John, who never strayed from his post in the basement. Marcus told me sternly that I was not to leave the house for any reason. I didn't speak a word to him all day. I read and watched TV with Marcus by my side. He talked continuously, as if silence were unbearable to him. He told me everything he knew about what Jacob had done.

One February night Jacob came home from his overnight shift to find a girl on the stoop of his apartment building. Marcus knew the girl; her name was Christine, she went to his former high school, and he was friends with her older brother. She was inadequately dressed for the cold, frail, and high off airplane glue she'd been huffing from a paper bag. She told Jacob she was running away from her family, who hated her. She was on her way to the bus station. Jacob brought her into his apartment, fed her, clothed her, and eventually fucked her. She stayed with him a week. He later claimed not to know she was only fifteen. Her birthday was in three months; had she been sixteen, it wouldn't have been a crime at all.

Two months after she returned to her family, the girl called Jacob to announce she was pregnant. He wired her money for an abortion. Her mom traced the money to him, and since then he'd been running.

"He's a pervert," Marcus said, his honied eyes scanning my face for a reaction. Beneath my placid surface, I burned with jealousy of this Minnesotan girl, this Christine. I considered the steps it would take to bleach my hair blonde.

That night I couldn't sleep, tortured by thoughts of Jacob. I conceived elaborate scenarios in which sex mingled with violence. Jacob pulled me from the smoldering tangle of a car wreck; he dragged my unconscious body to the grass, arranged my limbs with medical expertise, breathed into my mouth until I gasped back to life. Another fantasy included Marcus, who cornered me in a dark alley and ripped at my clothes, trying to rape me. Jacob arrived, beat the shit out of Marcus, and carried me to the safety of his car, in the backseat of which I offered up to him the spoils of my body in blind, ravenous gratitude.

I wandered out of my bedroom and into the guest room, where Marcus slept. I found his mouth in the dark. His tongue was a sleeping creature, slow in meeting mine. My body had been primed for the past two weeks by the erotic promise of

Jacob. In total darkness I hastily dispensed with what remained of my virginity.

After, Marcus lay breathing in heavy relief. “Wow,” he said. “I thought you hated me.”

“Nah,” I said. It was the first word I’d spoken to him since pronouncing the two syllables of my name.

As we whispered to each other, Marcus’s fingertips traced the sweating curve of my hip again and again until I grew annoyed and stilled his hand with my own. When it was my turn to speak, he planted adoring, close-mouthed kisses on my cheek, plainly not listening. He told me the guns weren’t loaded. He’d never dream of hurting me. He believed fate had brought us together.

“I’m going to start my own bounty hunting business,” he said toward morning. “I’ll be better than my dad. He’s good, but I’ll be better.”

“You’re too nice,” I said. “You need to be meaner.”

He was quiet. Then he said, “You think so?”

“You have to be ruthless. You can practice on me.” My voice was low, disembodied, sexy. I told Marcus to squeeze my hand as hard as he could, a game I’d once played with my dad. He would crush my bones until I yelped involuntarily from pain, shook my hand out, and said, “Again.”

Marcus and I spent our days watching TV and playing checkers. At night I waited until my mom was asleep, then crawled into the guest room and blithely allowed Marcus to take pleasure from my body.

He was too gentle. Jacob would have known when to use force. He would have known which hollows to caress and which convexities to knead into submission. As I watched Marcus sleep, I wondered who he was in his hometown, the dull pocket of suburbia in which he roamed: bowling alleys, basement parties, blunts smoked in parking lots. I imagined the type of unreachable, gum-chewing, gloss-lipped girls he found tortuous.

By the fourth day, I couldn’t stomach the prospect of another checkers game. Marcus was sitting in the living room in the morning, watching *The Price Is Right* and cleaning his gun with paper towels and Simple Green. I stood by the front door and announced that I was going to Hy-Vee to get pop.

“You can’t leave,” he said.

“Try to stop me,” I said. I waited to let him try. He wrapped his arms around me. I buckled my knees, then kicked and twisted my way free, knocking my elbow against his jaw.

After days in the air conditioning, the heat hit me like a wall of hot flesh. My eyes stung from brightness. I ran two blocks and then paused, taking lungfuls of summer air, the flavor of cut grass and grilling meat. Marcus had not followed me. I walked ten blocks to Hy-Vee and realized, as I waited in the express line behind an obese couple, that I hadn’t brought any money.

When I returned, Marcus was sitting in the living room watching ESPN. “I’m back,” I said. He wouldn’t look at me. He had failed in his one job, to control me.

That night, I went to the guest bedroom and curled my body against Marcus. “I’m sorry,” I said. His body remained rigid. I peeled my T-shirt over my head, shimmied out of my pajama bottoms, and instructed him on how to punish me.

The next day, Friday, was my mom’s day off. At seven I went to the kitchen and began cooking breakfast. Marcus came in while I was mixing batter for pancakes. He coiled his arms around my waist and kissed the shallow behind my left ear.

“Stop,” I said. “My mom might come in.” I wasn’t really afraid of my mom seeing us; I was annoyed by his clumsy touch.

I made bacon and stacks of blueberry pancakes. I made a platter of scrambled eggs and put them in a dish in the oven to keep warm. I told

Marcus to set the table, to put out water and coffee and the linen napkins that we reserved for guests. When everything was ready, I went to my mom’s room. She was twisted up in the sheets, head turned to the wall. I could tell from the tenseness of her body that she was awake.

“I made breakfast,” I said.

“Not hungry,” she said.

“Come on,” I said. “It’s almost nine.”

My mom straggled into the dining room in her nightgown,

“Stop,” I said. “My mom might come in.” I wasn’t really afraid of my mom seeing us; I was annoyed by his clumsy touch.

not bothering to even comb her hair. The three of us ate my food, grown rubbery and stale in the oven. Marcus had been watching the morning news while I cooked. To fill the silence, he talked about the storm forecasted for the afternoon.

“They say there could be a tornado,” Marcus said.

“They always say that,” my mom said sharply. She was picking out blueberries, avoiding the spongy mass of pancake surrounding them. I tried not to take it personally.

At five o’clock, Marcus and I were in the living room watching *The Simpsons*. A ragged chunk of the state map, divided into counties, sat in the lower left of the screen, color coded by levels of storm threat. Green for thunderstorm watch, yellow for tornado watch. Our county, Johnson, was green.

We perceived the coming storm through the sudden darkness that washed over the room, tinging the walls an aquatic blue. The KCRG Storm Team cut into the broadcast. Four counties had been upgraded to a tornado watch. Johnson County had been bumped to a warning. Two funnel clouds had already been spotted: one near West Branch, ten miles south of us. Another in Solon, five miles north.

My mom was in the backyard, gardening. I opened the sliding door and stood barefoot on the warm patio. Above my mom’s small white figure, a bank of dark cloud loomed, the sky around it cast a sickly green.

The siren swelled in a metallic scream. Trees sang in the wind. The warm air held a peculiar rushing quality. Beneath it the world lay still, exposed, waiting.

“Come inside,” I yelled over the wind.

“In a minute,” she said.

“Now,” I said, grabbing her upper arm and pulling her to her feet. Thunder pealed and a bolt of lightning darted sideways, tearing a seam along the length of the sky. As we crossed the patio, the clouds opened into a sheet of rain that soaked through our clothes.

I led my mom and Marcus to the basement and through the door to the space behind the drywall. John sat in a folding lawn chair. He held a flashlight in his mouth, its circle of light trained on a Sudoku book.

“It’s raining, huh?” he said, letting the flashlight fall into his lap.

“Funnel clouds spotted,” I said.

“It’s too late in the year for tornadoes,” John said.

This wasn’t the time to correct him. He seemed annoyed that we’d invaded his sanctuary. Around the chair were strewn several Sudoku and crossword puzzle books. His sleeping bag stretched over a length of egg crate. Around it lay balled-up Kleenexes and five of our water cups.

“I’m sure it’s just a precaution,” my mom said, meaning the siren. Then we heard the clatter of tree limbs lashing the side of the house.

We sat close to each other, knitted together on the cold floor. My mom’s hand clutched my ankle. Marcus held my hand. Marcus’s dad held Marcus’s other hand. My mom’s legs trembled across John’s lap. We were an intertwined raft of human terror. We were crumbs beneath the revolving bristles of a vacuum cleaner, small bits of animal protein hiding at the bases of chair legs.

“I love you,” Marcus whispered in my ear. I squeezed his sweating hand. I could see in his open, terrified face a vision of the man he would become. Not as good as his father. Hesitant, unprincipled, riven by insecurity, wasting his love on people, like me, who would never love him back.

The freight train rumble. A deafening crunch as the tornado churned pieces off our roof.

“Oh Jesus, help us,” my mom screamed.

There had been a tornado watch in our county the night my dad left. I saw him packing his briefcase in the study and said, “You can’t leave. There might be a tornado.” I thought he was just going to work. The disintegration of my parents’ marriage had been quiet. Long, hushed arguments behind the closed bedroom door, his best shirts thrown into the tangled arms of the oak tree in our front yard when I came home from school one day, his stretches away from home, explained vaguely as business trips to Chicago.

My mom dragged his suitcase to the foyer and stood behind it with her arms crossed. “If you’re going, then go,” she said.

“There’s a tornado watch,” I said. How could they be so dumb? This was how people got killed.

“I’ll see you soon, sweetie,” my dad said. He leaned down

and kissed the top of my head. He had just taken a shower. His smell was a confusing compound of lavender soap and cinnamon aftershave.

“A car is the worst place to be during a tornado,” I recited. He smiled sadly and continued to the garage.

After he left, my mom made us tomato soup and grilled cheese sandwiches and talked of our future with manic, scrupulous optimism, an early clue that my dad wasn’t coming back. There was no tornado that night, only rain that beat the sliding glass door and hail that battered our roof and left small dents in the siding that my mom never bothered to have fixed. For years I believed that my dad had been sucked up by a tornado no one else had seen, transported to an alternate universe in which he continued to struggle, unsuccessfully, to return to us.

We emerged into sunlight and ruin. Our yard was littered with black scraps of our own roof and pale shards of neighbors’ houses. Debris floated on carefully tended lawns like trash on the surface of a pond. Up and down the block, people stumbled wide-eyed from their houses. We gathered in the street and began a slow tour of the wreckage. People kept saying that they’d thought tornado season was over. They’d been told it was over. Surely there was someone to blame.

Hours later, as we blew on molten spoonfuls of chicken pot pie, John announced they’d be leaving in the morning. They

For years I believed that my dad had been sucked up by a tornado no one else had seen, transported to an alternate universe.



had stayed a week, which was all their budget allowed. Probably John recognized that our neighborhood was about to undergo a long, emotional process of reconstruction he wanted no part in.

After dinner I sat on the guest bed and watched Marcus pack his duffel bag. He had argued with his dad about leaving, spouting some flimsy theory about how Jacob was bound to come back now, to make sure my mom and I were okay.

“I’ll write you letters,” Marcus said.

“Sounds good,” I said, knowing I’d never write back.

Over the next two years, Marcus sent me five letters. The first two were bland, cheerful updates on his life in Minneapolis. The next two discussed his mother's battle with breast cancer. The last letter icily informed me of his new address in Chicago. "I can't help but feel like you used me," he wrote. Still, at the end he said he hoped to hear from me soon. "Or just come by," he said. "You can stay here as long as you want." I read the letters quickly, then carried them with me to be disposed of in public trash cans, where my mom wouldn't find them. Just like I'd thrown out the birthday card my dad sent me a year after he left us, the only attempt at contact he'd ever made.

I brought my books to the basement and read on the couch. I'd gathered into a pile the things Jacob had left: clothes, books, an outlandish roll of money inside a sock, a spare pair of glasses. I buried my face in the pillow he'd slept on, inhaling the last lingering smell of his scalp.

A week after the tornado, I was napping on the couch when I heard the creak of the window hinge. It was Jacob.

"I just need my stuff," he said. He sounded annoyed, like I was just an object in his way. He'd expected the basement to be empty. He'd hoped to get in and out without us even noticing.

"Don't you know what happened?" I said.

"It's been a rough couple of weeks. Can you just let me get my shit and get out of here?"

I stood, crossed my arms over my chest, and allowed tears to stream down my face. "You used us," I said. "Those men could have killed us."

"They weren't going to kill you."

"They had guns."

"It was all for show."

"You used us," I said again.

"That's bullshit," Jacob said, "and you know it. I was just renting a room."

I dried my eyes on the back of my sleeve, seeing that my tears wouldn't work on him.

"Where were you during the tornado?" I said, trying a different tack. Anything to make him stay a few minutes longer.

"Oh, that," he said. "North Liberty. We didn't get hit."

"Where will you go now?"

"Even if I knew, I wouldn't tell you."

I grabbed his hand. “Take me with you,” I said.

“No,” he said simply, and shook me off.

He put some of his things—the money, the glasses—in his canvas backpack, then hoisted the pack to his shoulders. Before he left he paused, reached out, and stroked the side of my face with his thumb.

“I always liked you,” he said, “better than your mother.”

When he was gone, I lingered over the diminished pile of his possessions. A plaid shirt, a travel-sized bottle of shaving cream, empty ink cartridges, a water-worn copy of Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*. I stuffed it all into a paper bag, which I placed beyond the drywall divide, alongside what was left of my father.

HOW SISTER CONCEPCIÓN BURNED DOWN NUESTRA SEÑORA DE LOS LUCEROS THROUGH NO FAULT OF HER OWN, WHICH EVERYONE AGREES

(Las Orejas, New Mexico, 1907)

It was a sharp, cold winter, and the icicles hung off the roof so that to go to the privy was to risk a hole in the head. Sister Concepción, in her forty-year-old nightgown made of seven yards of bridal silk, was lying under the weight of three wool blankets, staring at the moonlight shining through ferns of ice on her one small window, when someone came pounding on the rectory door. Sister Concepción waited, thinking it must be Father Velázquez, finally so drunk he couldn't manage to turn a knob.

But it wasn't. As soon as she threw open the latch, the girl pushed herself on Sister Concepción, clutching her wide sleeves, the nightgown's draperies of silk that billowed from her neck and gathered at her wrists. "Oh Sister, where is Father Velázquez? Oh Sister, save me!" Sobbing, tiresome. The girl's hands were covered with blood, and there were sure to be bloody smears on her nightgown.

It was one of those Marías. Inéz, Euphalia, Paola. There were three of them in this excuse for a village. This one was the María who kept her curly hair in braids even though she was sixteen, who acted devout and prayed so fervently in the mornings at school. Sister Concepción wasn't fooled. She knew the type: the downcast gaze, the cheeks unblemished, the threaded fingers. The skin looking soft as silk washed for forty years. The very appearance of purity. All the Hail Marys in the world could not save this girl.

Sister Concepción peeled the girl's sticky fingers off her arm, and as predicted there were smears of blood on the silk. Her lips tightened, and she glanced up at the icicles: water, hard as stone, hanging like weapons from the flat roof of the mud building that the savages here had the nerve to call a church. She

imagined stabbing the girl through the eye with one of those spikes of ice. She said a prayer for humility and forgiveness, and moved into the kitchen, throwing the words over her shoulder like so much spilled salt: “You’re letting in the cold. You might as well come in and close the door behind you.”

The girl followed her in and fell to her knees and wove together her hands. Her thin coat parted and there was the blood on her dress, shocking red, soaking her from thighs to hem. “Forgive me father for I have sinned—” the girl whispered, as if Father Velázquez had already entered the room. “He isn’t here,” snapped Sister Concepción. That blasphemous so-called priest. Father was carousing with the men, including this María’s lover, with all of those sinners who fear a habit. She could fetch Father but he would only run out the back door of that pit of snakes. It wasn’t a dress, saw Sister Concepción. It was a nightgown, cotton sprigged with forget-me-nots. This María shivered in her nightgown. She must have awoken to a pool of blood. Or she’d gone to the privy and began her bleeding there. God willing, it was the latter. Then no one would find the bloody sheets. The thought came unbidden to Sister Concepción, the way unholy thoughts come to us all.

María something. In her years as Sister Concepción, she had come across enough to populate a nunnery, though most of them weren’t close to worthy: Mary Catherine, Mary Grace, Mary Sue, Mary Anne, all the Marys, as if every parent hoped the first name Mary could be put on like a starched wimple. The second name told the truth. It named that bright, inevitable yellow center of sin and lust.

María Inéz. That was her name. One of those arrogant, feckless Luceros. María Inéz, with her curling braids worn long past the age of braids, more than once caught with her glittering smile behind her hand, her eyes with their curling lashes to match the curls that sprouted from her pigtails, the glances toward the one boy, Felix. Inéz with her slender neck bent over her clasped hands, sighing a lustful, inarticulate, wonderful sigh, filled with longing that made them all giggle in the middle of their prayers—*the devil is within you*. Every morning, Sister Concepción kept them on their knees in the cold schoolroom until she was satisfied that their knees ached. Only then she would allow one of them to start the fire, to feed its mean little warmth.

She had come in the fall to start a school. At first, they had lodged her in the parishioners' houses, but those people were close to savages, with their mud huts and their superstitions and their constant babbling in their bastard Spanish. She had been born in Montreal, but she had been educated in Paris, and she spoke perfect Castilian Spanish, not this slurry of archaic words and dropped consonants. In only a few weeks the parishioners said that she would be more comfortable in the rectory, and in the spring, they swore, they would build her a one-room adobe house near the school. Oh, they made noises about their poor houses, their simple food, their uncouth ways, pretending solicitude. But she knew. They hated her. Or, she corrected herself, they feared discovery of their worst sins. In truth, they hated God.

The rectory, attached to Nuestra Señora de Los Luceros, was only three rooms, laid out in a row: a kitchen, an office, and a bedroom that Father Velázquez had vacated for Sister Concepción's sake, despite her protestations. There she lay each night on his sinfully opulent featherbed, a matter of some inconvenience for Sister Concepción because to get to the privy she was forced to climb over Father Velázquez's tremendous bulk laid out like a sleeping boar in the center of the office, on a cot that only by the Grace of God held his weight.

She was in her later years and her bladder refused to hold water for an entire night, no matter how she tried, and she did try, lying awake, aching, waiting for the sound of

But she knew. They hated her. Or, she corrected herself, they feared discovery of their worst sins. In truth, they hated God.

Father Velázquez groaning to his feet for his whiskey-driven visit to the privy. As soon as she heard the door close, she hurried to the kitchen, clambering over his cot, the blankets still warm from his body, and she lay in wait in the kitchen. She pressed her back to the cookstove, with the table safely between her and the door. Early on, he'd come into the kitchen and stood looking at her in his red long underwear. The cold bled off him, chilling the room. To her eternal mortification, she saw a small

wet spot on the crotch of his long johns. “Watch your backside, sister,” he’d said. She jumped away from the stove as if it were hot, and he chuckled, and she scurried out. Of course, then she’d had to climb over the foot of his bed to get back to her room.

In general, she lived in constant fear of colliding with Father Velázquez, who was oversized in every way, fat and wide and tall and big-mouthed, with pillowy, curvaceous lips that opened into a ridiculously loud laugh. At least, that is what she made herself think—*I live in constant fear*—because she was in the habit of forcing pure thoughts into her head, after all these years of God eavesdropping on her.

One night as she stood in the kitchen, Father Velázquez took eternities to finish his trip to the privy. Sister’s need was so great that she feared she would drench her nightgown. She could not allow this to happen; her nightgown was made of yards of silk that her mother had ordered all the way from China. When she’d been a girl and in possession of a name, Sister Concepción had been the favored daughter of a family who could afford such luxuries. Her mother had bought the silk in anticipation of her daughter’s trousseau, and when Sister Concepción had been called to God instead, her mother had stitched this nightgown with her own hands, weeping. “You ignorant chit,” she’d said. “You give up what you don’t know.”

And thus it was that Sister Concepción, in desperate need, had thrown open the rectory door and collided with Father Velázquez, there under the icicles, he in his red long underwear, she in her silk nightclothes. His massive gut had touched her first, and then he had caught her waist to keep her from falling, his big hands pulling her to him as if in embrace, and she had felt the soft flesh of his belly and his long legs, all of this through the silk, which though warm was also thin; that was the marvel and the mystery of silk, this paradox of delicacy and insulation that she had long admired, and the reason she had cared for her nightdress so tenderly for so many years. The practicality, the transportability. She could contain this nightgown in a box the size of an illuminated Holy Book.

She had never imagined that silk would permit her so easily to feel the flesh of his flesh, as if she stood there naked. The long bones of his thighs on her thighs, the hard stone of his kneecap

between hers. How thin his legs were, the bones, the muscles. Not at all the soft weak fat she expected.

“Careful now,” Father Velázquez said, and lifted her and set her to the side as if she were a chair in his way. “You wouldn’t want to be caught dancing,” he said.

I live in constant fear. This was the thought she held out for the Lord our God to see. Sister Concepción thought of her mind as a stone, and as some stones were formed in layers, her mind had layers of thought, the outermost articulate, thought made word, as in the beginning there was the word and the word was God. Her thoughts in word were also Godly, and she presented them to God in polished white, as clean and smooth as her wimple: *I live in constant fear.* He was a Nosy Old Gossip, God was, to care so much about whether she stumbled into the slovenly priest with his enormous gut, in his long underwear with the baggy knees and sagging backside, which she knew because she washed his clothes, her fingers turning to ice on the washboard—you would think they would have a scullery maid or at the very least some humble parishioner. His long johns were stained with food; every item of clothing that touched his skin bore signs of his gluttony, sauces and creams, lard and smears of jam.

What did the Holy Mother and all the saints and God Himself care if a woman of her age slept under the roof of a young priest who could not speak intelligibly in any language, not Spanish, not English, not even French, and who could not keep his clothes clean? Who knew why? God was a Busybody, but a person had to give Him proper thoughts. *I live in constant fear of Father Velázquez and the nearness of his gluttonous flesh.*

Sister Concepción opened the door to the cookstove firebox with a bang and inserted kindling. She blew in the tender manner required, and the coals caught the wood and licked it into flames. Behind her, the girl prayed, a steady murmuring under her breath, broken only by an occasional gasp of pain. When the kindling was ready she pushed in more wood and slammed shut the door. She studied the girl, her magnificent blood-smeared silk sleeves hanging like bunting from her folded arms.

It was wasteful. All those yards of silk. So much was squandered in a lifetime. She had struggled for so long to give up the nightgown, but she had failed always.

The blood was no doubt dripping down the girl's thighs, no doubt puddling on the floor, and Sister Concepción knew in the morning she would be the one to mop it up.

There was so much waste. "Don't pray to me," she said. "Get up." The girl rose, and Sister Concepción saw that the floor was greasy with blood, bright red, mixed with clots of matter whose meaning was impossible to deny.

Sister thought of the girl lying down with that boy, Felix, the dark-skinned, beautiful boy. Where had they gone? How had they managed? The logistics were irrelevant. But the questions pushed into her thoughts, and the images, the long naked thighs, the girl's head thrown back, her neck exposed, sacrificial lamb, burnt offering, daughter of Abraham offered to the knife.

Hidden within Sister Concepción's polished and wimpled thoughts were others, in a language not made of words, rage and loneliness and all the deadly sins festering and hardening and driving her to terrorize the children under her care. *On your knees*, every morning in the cold schoolroom before she would allow her students to strike the match for the fire: *On your knees*. She had eyes. She saw the thoughts beyond the thoughts, the lust, the sidelong glances, the giggles behind hands as she explained igneous rock to them.

This was her aim, to make them understand The Miracle of the Formation of the Earth, and in her spare time, of which she had blessed little, Sister Concepción in her habit and her wool coat dug into the snow to look for new signs of The Formation,

The floor was greasy with blood, bright red, mixed with clots of matter whose meaning was impossible to deny.



but this being winter, she mostly taught with samples from her collection, turning the polished stones in her hands, saying the words like prayer: Sedimentary. Metamorphic. Igneous. The polish, like water, revealed their

beauty. She permitted the children to touch with their fingertips but never to take the stones from her palm. She had a box of tools, little hammers and chisels and brushes, and in the spring after the snowmelt she would go out into the hills, laid bare at

last, to see what gifts this new country might offer to her by the will of God.

She saw their true natures by how they touched the stones. This *María Inéz*, this *Lucero* on her knees, shivering in her dress, soaked in blood from thighs to toes, had touched the stones with lust. Her fingertips had lingered, traced the fossil, followed the ribbons of sediment, fondled the stones caught within other stones. She had eyes, the Sister did. She was not blind. Obsidian, basalt, conglomerate, marble. She saw those fingertips and knew this girl was familiar with touching, and used to being touched.

Just today, as she scrubbed the wash, Sister *Concepción* had caught herself holding Father *Velázquez's* yards of long johns, sagging at the knees, red and soft, and she'd wondered about his knees. She wondered, why weren't they as fat as the rest of him? Tall, striding Father *Velázquez*, quick out the back door despite his gut. He laughed and a room laughed with him. His homilies had people weeping; she had seen the tears, but also, from the altar itself, he had them laughing. "God made the laughter to scour out the sorrow," he told them. "There is nothing wrong with laughing."

In the evenings he often went to dine with the parishioners, and she supposed he ministered to them; she had seen him walking to the backyard with a mother whose child drowned, speaking softly in the corner with a man dying in great pain of a cancer in his throat. But during Mass he spoke of *Mary Magdalene*, and he told them—and not in Latin as it should be, but in Spanish, and not Castilian either, but the bastardized hodgepodge these people spoke—he said that the Holy Book, the Word of God, did not say *Magdalene* was a whore. "No era una puta!" he cried out, his words flying through the church, and she imagined the words as winged carrion eaters, filth in the church, and no wonder, a church made of mud; what could be holy about such a place?

Sister *Concepción* pushed his long johns into the water, and wet, they turned a brighter red, and the water released the smells of his body, sweat and salt and lard and liquor and smoke and jam.

Sister *Concepción* had taken to wearing her nightgown under her habit. It was warmer than the cotton underdress. It was soft

against her skin and there was nothing sinful about it. Still, it felt like a sin. In the sleeves of her overdress, the folds bunched around her arms and reminded her of her transgressions.

She'd sworn today. She raised her arms to clip Father Velázquez's long underwear to the line strung in the kitchen to avoid the gossipers. She had sworn to herself, to hear the words aloud. "Damn," she swore. "Damn, damn, damn, God forgive me, damn me, damn me, damn."

This morning she had seen Felix Garduño helping this girl, this María Inéz, with her coat, and María Inéz glanced over her shoulder to thank him. It was a glance swollen with dreams. The way Felix's fingers touched the coat and pulled it from her shoulders reminded Sister Concepción of the way she sometimes touched her silk nightgown, the cloth soft as skin after years of tender washing. Sometimes at night she stroked the silk and thought of her mother and the skin on her arms, the inner skin of her elbow that rarely saw the sun, so pale and delicate and available only to her daughter when they both dressed together in the mornings.

"On your knees!" Sister Concepción had bellowed. The children exchanged their glances. They had nothing good to say about her, she knew. "On your knees," she ordered, and the children folded themselves onto the hard plank schoolhouse floor, the cold coming up through the boards, and they prayed. And she would not tell them to stop. "Only you can know when you have repented," she said. "Only you can know when you are without sin. If you are without sin, then rise up, having repented."

One by one they risked their seats until only one remained, this one now bleeding before her, this María Inéz. She stayed on her knees, praying, her tears dripping from her downcast eyes. Sister Concepción watched the tears gather and run down the terrain of the girl's face and drip from her chin to the floor. Sister Concepción saw directly into that girl's unrepentant, festering heart.

It went on like this for an hour, for two, the students shifting in their seats but afraid, and Sister Concepción knew they would tell their parents, who had already complained to Father Velázquez about her, those simpletons who had cast her out of their houses and sent her to live in the rectory, and she knew

the girl was in agony, her knees in agony on the hard planks, and Sister Concepción did not care, though the tears ran from the girl's eyes and her pretty, unblemished skin turned blotchy and red, and the mucus ran from her nose, and then a single sob escaped her and a boy rose, the boy, Felix, handsome in his outraged gallantry. He said, "Have you no heart? Have pity on her!" He went to María Inéz, and he put his hands on her arms, and Sister Concepción saw that he was used to touching this girl, and he raised her up and led her from the schoolroom. So it was him.

Tonight she and Father Velázquez had eaten dinner as they rarely did. Father Velázquez ate at one end of the table and she at the other, her eyes on her beans and rice in her bowl. He had thick hair, always tousled and often filthy. He had thick fingers and eyes she feared meeting. He was a young priest, though she could not be certain of his age.

He devoured a slab of lamb and half a loaf of bread and a bottle of wine and for dessert, flan. He had these luxuries because the parishioners brought him gifts, impoverished as they were, most illiterate and many half-witted. They came with their hands outstretched and he would stand in the kitchen laughing with them, asking after their various family members who extended endlessly across the valley and up the mountains and down over the mesas.

She watched him eat, his deft, graceful hands moving to cut the meat with such certainty it was as if they knew their way, and she imagined his hands tangled in the folds of her silk nightgown, and she imagined saying, whispering, *My name was Greta once*. When he had finished his wine he turned the empty glass in his hand, then said to her, "Sister. You must beware the sin of pride."

Sister Concepción gave him a stony look. Yes, she was stone, burning hot, the stones that could become liquid and flow, and she had dreams herself, longings to go to Hawaii, where there were volcanoes and the rock came from the center of the earth in liquid form, and a person who fell into this river of stone would vanish in an instant, not perish but simply vanish. A person could become one with the river of stone and later that person would manifest as sediment in the hardened rock. Sometimes Sister Concepción wondered if this was evidence that Hell

was an impossibility, but she did not allow this wonder the form of words.

She said, "Let he who is without sin cast the first stone."

Father Velázquez put down his glass and he met her eyes. They were large and brown and once she had met his gaze, she found it impossible to look away. He said, "For the Love of God, Sister, you are a fucking prude."

When she was a child, a girl of nine named Greta with nothing but dreams in her head, she threw a stone and it hit another stone and the rock split open, and inside was a layer of purple crystal, and inside the crystal was a perfect sphere of yellow. It had smelled of rotten eggs: sulfur, she knew now. It was the only miracle she had ever experienced.

So there were the articulate thoughts, wimpled, white as marble, presented to God, and then, within, other thoughts in glittering amethyst, those impulses that she would not allow voice or word, and then, within that, centered within, glimpsed only askance: a bright yellow sphere. There, something stirred. It was not liquid, but it stirred. It had a name she would not let herself say. It smelled of sulfur. She tried never to look directly on it, and in this way she hoped to keep it hidden from that busybody God.

She felt a curiosity about Father Velázquez, and a sickening affection for him too, for his enthusiasm, his laughter, his flirting with the young parish girls like this María Inéz in her thin coat and her girlish braids all loosening curls, and the blood from thigh to feet. Inéz, not María, her skirt drenched in blood, on her knees on the kitchen floor, trying to gather together the clots of flesh mixed in with the blood. They called her Inéz, and she was the favorite daughter of those high and mighty Luceros who fancied themselves feudal barons.

She wondered how devout Father Velázquez could be, with that bright yellow egg custard stain on his cassock. Surely this was a sin, to eat egg custard in his cassock and stain it so, and also to swear like he had over dinner, and then later when shrugging on his coat. "For the Love of God, Sister, look after your own heart. God made pleasure too, Sister Concepción."

His knees hard as stones, hinges on long legs, striding across the plaza to the saloon.

“Wait here,” she said to María Inéz. She drew on her coat and her shoes and crossed the snow covering the plaza. Just off the plaza, tucked between ordinary houses, there was a house that had been converted to a saloon. *Converted*. An oddly religious word, she thought. The hair in her nose froze, and her lungs ached as she made her way through the snow to the house with the lights glowing, and laughter leaking from it, and the sound of a fiddle.

She walked into the smoky room, and a hush fell over the drinking, laughing, joking men. “Where is he?” she said. Her presence overcame them like cold in the schoolroom, and the men shied away, as if she were capable of striking them dead. She walked into them and they parted for her. She kept her eyes averted, kept them trained on the back door, her destination, the reason she had entered in the first place: to find Father Velázquez, who had come into this place and then fled out the back as soon as he heard her voice, as he always did; they joked about it now, mocked her. She knew this.

“Forgive me, Sister,” said a handsome boy with black hair. He stood in her way. They danced, Sister Concepción and the boy: he stepped to the right and she stepped the same way. “Forgive me,” and then he began again, “I’m sorry”—as if she had any authority over their sins and their penance and the terms they negotiated with God. He was a suitable height for dancing, and he had the dark eyes and

Her presence overcame them like cold in the schoolroom, and the men shied away, as if she were capable of striking them dead.

wide mouth she imagined for the Hawaiians, and she wondered what he might look like standing bare skinned beside the glowing river of stone, come straight from the center of the earth.

And then she knew him for the boy, Felix.

His glass sloshed, spilling golden liquid. She had seen amber that color, amber that was not a stone. It was the blood of trees turned solid. The world was filled with the Hand of God, how He turned all that was bright and beautiful and moving into stone.

Sister Concepción wished she had seen Father Velázquez hur-

ry through the snow. She liked to watch him cross the plaza. His long strides, graceful and fast despite the preposterous gut. “Damn it, for the Love of God, Sister, I was made in his image and his image enjoys a drink now and then.” Inside his woolens, there would be other mysteries beyond the first mystery.

The girl remained on her knees beside the kitchen table in front of the wood stove, shivering, praying. The blood still spread on her nightgown, more and more blood, more than her monthlies, an impossible amount of blood. Sister Concepción, feeding the fire, thought of bumping into Father Velázquez under the icicles on the way to the privy, she in her silk nightdress, he in his drawers with the knees sagging where he knelt to pray and stood to piss, the bending and straightening knees made in the image of God.

The girl said, “I must make my confession. God is punishing me and I must confess.”

Sister Concepción said, “Any fool can see you have spread your knees.”

She thought of Father Velázquez staggering drunk to the privy and holding his penis, for that was its name, that part of his body he could hold in his hand and that part of his body that she wondered over, the flesh of his flesh. This, the wondering, that was the yellow thing that lived within her, the rich yellow word—wonder—which meant curiosity and also awe. Sister Concepción wondered over Father Velázquez’s penis as she looked down on the deflowered and trembling girl, the bleeding child, who raised up her eyes to Sister Concepción and babbled, weeping: “It was for love, and I did it freely, and I know it was sinful.” And then she said this: “I wondered if I just, if I gave my confession, could God put it back together inside me?”

Sister Concepción said nothing, but she tended the fire with rage, not because of what the girl said, but because of the thought of the priest holding his own flesh, and the Holy Mother and the Lord God were not fooled by her pretenses of piety and modesty. Sister Concepción knew and so God must also know that she carried in her center a yellow wonder—over knees, over flesh of one’s flesh, a delight for the taste of swear words in her mouth, whispered at night alone in the enormous featherbed, in her silken wedding dress stitched forty years ago: *Damn, it, damn, it, damn it.*

She raged for this girl, this *María Inéz* who would be punished for her sin and who would not wear her hair in braids much longer or glance coyly over her shoulder at the boy helping her with her jacket. She wanted to help her. But she had no power to help, and she knew nothing of love or what might come next for the girl.

She looked into the coals burning inside the stove and thought if she thrust her hand into the coals, her flesh would turn to liquid stone, all the parts of herself melting together into a glorious, golden, flowing river, whole and complete and destroyer of worlds, consuming with something like love, consuming and becoming one with all it touched.

Was this how it was, when this child opened her knees for *Felix Garduño*?

A terrible pity, an enormous maw of sorrow opened inside her, for *Inéz* and all she had lost and all she would have in her life, and for herself, little *Greta* who had given it all away before she had known what it was that she forsook.

It had not been a miracle. The yellow sphere had been sulfur, and when she tried to dig it out of the stone it had crumbled in her hands like a yolk.

“*Inéz*,” she said. “There is nothing God can do for you, so you may as well go on living.” With that, *Sister Concepción* thrust her hand into the coals and watched with something like astonishment as the silk burst into flame.

The next day everyone agreed that *Sister Concepción* had saved *María Inéz*. The girl touched the burns on her arms and wondered. She had knelt in the blood of her dead child and there came a great whooshing noise, as if the wings of a great bird, or even an angel of God, and flames shot out of the mouth of the stove and seized the voluminous sleeves of *Sister’s* silk nightgown, and *Sister Concepción* was on fire. The *Sister* was shouting at her, and in her terror *Inéz* did not understand—the smell of burning hair filled the room, and *Sister* raised up her fiery arms and shouted, and it seemed to *Inéz* that God had come to punish her, but *Sister Concepción* shouted, “Get off your damn knees for the Love of God,” and the *Sister* grabbed her arms and yanked *Inéz* to her feet, and the *Sister’s* hands were on fire, and they burned *Inéz* as they pushed her from the house.

Inéz, though burned, had not caught fire. It seemed a miracle.

God's will, people said. Only Inéz's mother said otherwise. It was the blood, her mother said, as she burned Inéz's clothing: "The blood kept you alive." Inéz watched her use a stick to poke Inéz's nightgown, bloody and singed, into the fire, and her underclothes brown with dried blood. Her mother knew. A mother does. But only her mother ever knew.

María Inéz did not believe it was a miracle, though she had been there, and heard it herself. Sister Concepción had shoved her out but had made no move to save herself, and she could not forget how Sister had careened around the kitchen, setting aflame everything she touched, until there was nothing but fire, as if the gates of Hell itself had opened and let her in.

SOMETIME, SPRINGTIME

In the town of East Haddam, Connecticut, the Goodspeed Opera House was showing *Sometime, Springtime*, a new musical that by all accounts would go to Broadway. *Annie*, *Shenandoah*, *Man of La Mancha*: these were some of the hits that had got their start, once upon a time, at the Goodspeed. But a show like *Sometime, Springtime* hadn't come around in a while.

Nell, a sucker for musicals, was absorbed by a review of *Sometime, Springtime*—title surely to be changed once it moved to New York, the reviewer, a New Yorker himself, noted. The reviewer also noted that Camille Beaux, lead actress, played the newly widowed heroine passionately, as if her life depended on it. And apparently it did. The actress had just lost her mother, and each night, through theater, she had the opportunity to explore that grief anew. Or so she was reported to have said. Not to dwell on it, but to comprehend it, night by night, a little more completely. For that, Camille Beaux stated, she would always be grateful.

Nell finished the review convinced she had to see Camille Beaux in this role. She admired her seriousness. She admired her “flawless craftsmanship.” She admired her courage to engage in that emotional exploration, however arduous, for the duration of May, June, and half of July. Perhaps some of Camille Beaux's wisdom would rub off on Nell. She only hoped *Sometime, Springtime* had a happy enough ending. Nell didn't know if she could bear anything less.

She was en route, via train, from Manhattan to Old Saybrook. At the station she searched briefly for Chase Patterson, custodian of the Pine Day School in nearby East Haddam, where Nell was the semester's visiting artist, a position she'd won through a competition. For some time before this, her career had slowed, but she'd taken the winning as a hopeful sign. Perhaps if she moved, literally, from Manhattan to East Haddam, her work might move again too. In contrast to the tidy

painting she'd submitted to the competition, her art these days was a splotchy kind of thing—collages she'd only just gotten into, having found she was blocked when it came to the oils that had been her medium for so long, until her breakup with Cal. If you can't paint it, paste it, she figured, though she really had no idea what to make of her compositions, as dense and chaotic as her dreams. What did make sense was that the work differed from anything she'd done before, and in that difference it mirrored that peculiar feeling she woke with each morning when she'd realize anew, as if the loss happened yesterday rather than last year, that she'd be spending the day in a kind of foreign universe, the world without Cal, a place where she felt alien, displaced, and always, no matter how well-fed, just a little hungry.

As had become their custom, she and Chase Patterson barely spoke during the drive to the school. For his part, she knew he was shy. For her part, because Chase Patterson looked so much like Cal—they were the same age and had the same dusty auburn hair color and even a similar broad cut of jaw—she felt an urgent need to look elsewhere. The likeness, triggering the most visceral of memories—she could practically *smell* Cal—was too painful to behold.

Thankfully, it wasn't long before Chase dropped her off at her studio, a renovated chicken coop. Now, with its skylight, sleeping cot, and makeshift kitchen, it was a good enough

She'd be spending the day in a kind of foreign universe, the world without Cal, a place where she felt alien, displaced.



workspace. Bare walls and bright light—that was all she needed. As usual, she'd stay for the weekend, hopping the train back to Manhattan Sunday evening. Pine Day School preferred her there all week, but in New York

she had a mundane but profitable enough paralegal job she couldn't do without. And so she came on Thursdays, to be with students on Fridays, then to blindly paste multicolored shapes onto paper until parting time on Sundays.

The school lent her a car, a rickety, red Subaru wagon, much like Chase Patterson's, and that's how Nell made it to the opera house. It was the second week of May. Route 82, a country

highway, wound its way through dense, quiet woods until, approaching East Haddam's village, the trees broke for the occasional country saltbox home, then, further along, for various renovated Victorians. The village, itself a series of renovated Victorians and saltboxes, consisted of any number of small businesses: an antiques store, The Charming Teapot for light fare, a candy shop, a bank, an art gallery, and an old-New England restaurant and inn. Throughout the months of her residency, Nell had visited the village only once before, a mid-winter afternoon when she'd wanted to treat herself to something—which turned out to be light fare at The Charming Teapot—for her thirty-ninth birthday. Now, driving past the place, recalling the goat cheese sandwich she'd self-consciously wolfed down, she was surprised at the flower boxes in the windows, the number of people drifting in and out of shops, the village's cheer.

The opera house, clearly the village centerpiece, was perched on a high bank over the Connecticut River. Built in elaborate white layers, it looked oddly like a wedding cake. Inside, lush red carpeting covered the lobby's floors and ran up a wide, glamorous staircase. Walls gleamed white, while banisters and other wood trimmings shone with gold-painted highlights. Surprised by the elegance, Nell wished she'd thought to change out of her worn jeans. But she'd been in a rush for *Sometime, Springtime*.

"The show's sold out for the season," said a woman, a blonde twenty-something, sitting in the box office. Like Nell, she wore worn jeans, but unlike Nell's Ben and Jerry's T-shirt, this woman wore a low-cut, snug, black top. She'd be having sex soon, her outfit announced.

"You don't understand," Nell began. "I'm here from New York. I only come once a week to teach. Do you know the Pine Day School?" She nodded, looking to gain sympathy points for the local connection. The young woman stared, unmoved. "The semester is almost over," Nell explained, her assurance waning. "I read about the show. I'm dying to see it."

"You and everybody else." The young woman looked both bored and exhilarated by this slight exercise of power. "You can sign up on the standby list. That's the best I can offer you."

"Standby? Isn't there another way?"

"As I said, we're sold out for the season."

"May I sign up then?"

"At six. It's only five thirty now."

Nell glanced at her watch, then studied the others in the lobby, sitting quietly, waiting, it seemed. She counted what she presumed was her standby competition: three women and one man. Just then a flock of teenage girls charged through the lobby, each one dressed in a black skirt and white blouse. They chirped with conversation and giggles.

“Girls!” the woman inside the box office called, scolding them for the noise. Yet *girls* seemed a strange term to use, Nell thought, as the woman—blonde ponytail, bright pink lips, practiced nonchalance—was so very girlish herself. “Ushers,” she then complained to Nell. She might have been saying *road rage*.

Though charmed by the bustle of girls, Nell nodded at the woman, still eager to win any advantage at the box office. “Does it work? Standby?”

“Depends. We usually seat a person or two. Sometimes more.”

The young woman then answered a phone and, as she spoke, began laughing, which caused her nearly bare chest to heave. She continued to glance at Nell, but Nell sensed the woman didn’t actually see her. The sense was a familiar one. Nell had felt as ghostlike and invisible many times since she’d re-entered the world this last year, bereft and, for a single woman at least, irrelevantly old.

Cal had been the old one, fifty to her thirty-two, when they’d first met. It had taken her a long time to get used to the spread between them, to the lines on his face, which contrasted with her own clear complexion, to the ex-wife and children—Janey, Mitch, Willy—he often referred to, to the surprised, often pitying stares she’d get from the wives of Cal’s colleagues as they gave her the once-over, assuming, younger woman that she was, she’d seduced him from his family—which wasn’t the case at all. When they’d met, he’d been divorced five years, and in that time he’d seriously dated two other women.

“With each one, I realized I didn’t want to marry her,” he said, summing up the relationships. “It was time to get out.”

He never attempted to summarize the divorce.

Her friend Marcy from art school had fixed them up by throwing a dinner party. Nell hadn’t been forewarned, and she thought nothing of being seated next to a quiet, middle-aged man whose only noticeable characteristic was that he fiddled nervously with his napkin and fork. When she politely asked him what he did

for a living, he replied, “Not much of anything.” A bird man, he muttered at last. Not much of anything. See?

She was about to ask what he meant when Marcy leaned her way. “He’s a genius,” she whispered, explaining that Cal had been a family friend for years. He was an expert on thrushes, she continued, or was it the warbler? Marcy shrugged. “Anyway,” she said, “he’s something else, and he’s divorced. Two kids soon in college.” She winked. “So it’s all do-able!”

It took a moment for Marcy’s message to register. “Oh! Well, thanks. Thanks a lot. I guess we’ll marry, then. Pronto.” Nell winked back.

Marcy clasped Nell’s arm. “You might like him, that’s all. Finches. Maybe it’s finches he’s so good at. You better ask.”

Nell turned back to Cal, studying him this time, looking for, if nothing else, signs of his genius. His hair, a mix of auburn and gray, was overgrown in a way that seemed if not genius-like then at least professorial. He wore a pale-green polo shirt and a tan corduroy sports jacket. Now he struggled cutting the fat from the roast duckling he’d been served and looked decidedly frustrated. Still, noticing Nell’s gaze, he smiled, and his face—raised eyebrows, puckered chin—was boyish, even charming. “Damn duck,” he quipped, and they both giggled.

“I thought you loved birds,” she said.

“Only when they’re alive and singing.”

It turned out the thrush was his bird, the hermit thrush and wood thrush, robins and bluebirds, which Nell didn’t even know were kinds of thrushes. He leaned over and whispered into her ear—a birdcall, lovely and crisp. Her smile broadened and she leaned his way.

“My father was a competitive whistler. Can you believe it? That’s how I got my start, I suppose.” As he began to whistle, quietly, with perfect control, the first bars of *South Pacific*’s “Some Enchanted Evening,” Nell laughed out loud. She hadn’t expected this much fun.

She’d raced to be on time for Marcy’s dinner, and her hodge-podge outfit—black velvet slacks, an oversized red silk shirt, a blue scarf she’d wound through her hair—reflected her own cheer. Just that week she’d signed a lease for a studio. Remarkably, her life was turning out okay. Should anyone ask, she could say with assurance she was on some kind of career path. Though her work felt deeper than that, more like a soul path.

Glancing back at Marcy, who hadn't painted at all in the two years since her baby's birth, Nell felt especially lucky. Unlike Marcy, Nell had the time to settle into her artwork before marriage, kids, and all the rest began.

"I had no idea if I could do this," she told Cal, who scrunched his eyes in concentration as she spoke. She liked the focused attention; it coaxed her on. "In some ways, I've already exceeded my expectations. If nothing else good ever happens, I tell myself, this is enough."

"Good things will happen. Look at you!" He was clearly flirting, but something else, more serious—a sense of real joy in looking at her—was also apparent.

"I spent years paralyzed by fear. I lost time in the uncertainty. And before that, I didn't have a clue what I'd do. Quite possibly, that was a form of anxiety too. I see that now." She blushed at her stupid confession. Had she already drunk too much wine?

He lifted his fork and placed it down, then repeated the gesture. By this time she rather liked his nervous quirks, which were deliberate, she could see now, aimed at putting her at ease. Finally he said, "I'd like to take you out to dinner. No duck. No birds of any kind. I can hardly bear it, to tell the truth. Spaghetti and meatballs. What am I saying? Spaghetti and tofu. Or just spaghetti. Lots of spaghetti." He nodded encouragingly, and she couldn't help but nod back.

Before they parted he spoke passionately in a way that both flattered and confused her. "I want to take you places. I do. I hope you don't mind."

But the next day, upon reflection, she realized she did mind. He was too old for her. She didn't date men in their fifties, couldn't imagine it. His children, for God's sake, were full grown, closer to her age than his. When he called days later to take her to the natural history museum, she said no.

And when he wrote her a week later on Audubon stationery, crossing out its elaborate drawing of a finch and scrawling his own messy sketch labeled "wood thrush" beside it, she laughed, reached for the phone, then shook her head.

Four months passed and she turned thirty-three. The painting was going well, the studio slowly filling with canvases covered with her own blowups of the angular doodles she'd been scrawling over her schoolbooks since she was a child. Several times she thought of Cal, of his finding his work through the

most inadvertent of childhood activities, hearing the whistling that filled the house. Her own work came out of something just as inadvertent, did it not? Once she had an itch to tell him that, to show him a painting or two, to ease back into that surprisingly candid conversation, but she shook her head yet again. Another few months passed. She dated a few times, nothing special, nothing clicking. It was springtime. The birds were calling. One day she found herself walking into the Museum of Natural History, where she knew he researched, and asking directions to the room with the thrushes.

Together meant his place, the better place, an Upper East Side brownstone he'd inherited after the divorce.

Of course he wasn't there. What was she thinking? But when she went to the cafeteria for a cup of tea, she spotted him buying a muffin.

"Hello!" she said, thrilled with her luck. "I was hoping to find you."

His eyes were scrunched in that endearing way she remembered. "Have a muffin," he said. "I think you need a muffin with that tea."

After he'd bought her a muffin and a second cup of tea, they sat silently, smiling, something already clear and settled between them.

They both worked long hours, and it was best, they decided, to stay apart during the week and together on weekends. *Together* meant his place, the better place, an Upper East Side brownstone he'd inherited after the divorce. Though he'd lived there for four years already, he'd furnished and decorated it only sparsely. The kitchen he'd renovated—white cabinets and counters and appliances—still gleamed as if he'd never touched them. Though strangely austere, the place was nevertheless sunny and spacious. Nothing like her cramped, fourth-floor studio, the best she could afford. And he had a washer and dryer too.

Her third weekend visit she brought her laundry. He'd cooked a brisket, and, proud of his achievement, he insisted they sample

a bit upon her arrival. Then they'd found the sunniest of the upstairs bedrooms and made love. Then they'd cooked green beans and heated rolls to go with the meat: an old-fashioned Sunday supper. Before dessert, she threw her laundry in and, listening to the whir of the washer, luxuriated in the ease of it: a washer in your kitchen. A home. A man. Sex on a regular basis. Marvelous sex. His body scared her at first, so unlike the bodies of the men her own age she'd been with before, but she soon craved his body, its slightly bulged stomach, its gray chest.

After their meal, they'd watched a movie on tv. By nightfall he was already talking of when they'd marry. And how easy it was to see herself there. Talking to him for the rest of her life. Sleeping with him every night. Decorating the walls, perhaps turning the third floor into a studio, doing laundry whenever she wanted. Eventually she could give up the just-for-money job and work even longer hours on her painting. They'd be good for each other. She could cook for him and he for her, and they could spend quiet weekend days like the perfect day they'd just spent. They could have a baby too, assuming he didn't mind being an older parent.

"Do you?" Nell asked. They should have discussed this sooner, she knew, before the brisket, the laundry, the amazing, sunny sex.

"Of course we'll have a baby," he answered to her relief. How kind his next words were: "That's what people who love each other do."

Earlier, she'd folded her laundry, but she'd draped a few shirts and several pair of black tights over the shower rod. Before bed Cal washed up in the bathroom and came out beaming.

"Your clothes!" he said, gesturing toward the bathroom. "They're *here*."

He drew her down onto the bed. She almost didn't want to acknowledge it: how when he held her he clutched her body. This bird man, this renowned authority, was clinging for dear life.

"Over twenty years of marriage and five of divorce," she said a few days later, visiting Marcy. She held Marcy's toddler and looked into her wide, trusting eyes. "Guess I have some learning to do about that."

That evening at the Goodspeed she ended up sixth for standby. While waiting to sign on she'd sat at The Charming Teapot with

a cup of Earl Grey. From her seat by a window, she'd watched the traffic flow into the village before pausing at a stop sign before the Goodspeed. Most people, she figured, were probably heading home about now. And that would be because most people had someone to go home *to*, she noted.

Once she'd secured her name on the list, she walked across the bridge that crossed the Connecticut River behind the Goodspeed. As old-fashioned as the opera house, this was a steel swing bridge, an abundance of metal Vs and Xs creating an elaborate scaffolding around and above the roadway. A narrow sidewalk went along one side. As she walked, a motorboat cruising noisily disturbed the calm of the river below. Midway across, she glanced behind her shoulder and the sight of the Goodspeed took her breath away. Why, the building's backside, she could see, was really its front. The place was meant to be seen from the river.

Once over the bridge, she ate at the nearest spot, a sandwich shop, more or less: hamburgers, fried seafood, and the like. She ordered a hot dog and a vanilla shake. Too chilly to eat outside, she took a booth by a window. In the booth ahead she recognized the man who'd been before her in standby. Number Five, as she had called him, was picking through fried clams.

To avoid staring further, she pulled out the review. The Goodspeed, she read, wasn't really an opera house but rather a theater strictly for musicals. And, yes, the article explained, it was designed to be seen by the river. The article's last paragraph discussed ticket sales. *No tickets!* she wanted to scold the writer, blaming him for the boredom and discomfort, the loneliness and poor nourishment, that ensued with standby. Instead she reread the passages about Camille Beaux's gratitude for the chance each night to journey across grief's wide seas.

But could she get up in the morning? Was the little island of bed, sanctuary from the wide seas, so easy to rise from?

Nell sucked up the last of her shake. Curtain time for *Sometime*, *Springtime* was still an hour off. When she rose to leave, she once again stood behind Number Five, who stacked his tray over the trash bin then headed to the door. Though he held the door open for her, he didn't acknowledge her in any way even though while in line they'd politely clarified who'd arrived first. Because of his apparent need to maintain anonymity, she headed off to generate space between them. Crossing the bridge,

she stared at the opera house, grasping it as it was meant to be seen, from the river. When a breeze kicked up she wondered if her sudden, unshakable shuddering reflected the drop in temperature or her own sense of being terribly, irrevocably alone.

Late, by some standards, for marriage, late for the start of a career, there were so many reasons why she was thirty-three and just getting started.



She glanced again at the Goodspeed, hoping its charm would calm. And, briefly, it did. But once at the box office the shudders began again. Only as the young woman at the box office began calling the first names

on standby was Nell momentarily freed from her panic. She waited as numbers three and four entered the theater. She waited, holding her breath, as if a standby entrance to *Sometime, Springtime* would release her from her anguish, explain to her, as it had to Camille Beaux, the meaning of her grief.

Late, by some standards, for marriage, late for the start of a career, there were so many reasons why she was thirty-three and just getting started. She tried to explain this to Cal, who had married straight out of college, who knew from the get-go what he'd do. She began with her childhood passion for musicals. She *really* liked them. For example, she'd listened to *Pippin* every day of her life during her sixteenth and half of her seventeenth year. You see? *Really* liked. Before that it had been *Man of La Mancha*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, and *South Pacific* in equally obsessive turns. But she couldn't sing, couldn't bellow it out as you had to. Which was why she thought maybe she'd write a musical. But halfway through college, nearly flunking music theory, which was sadly a lot like math, she realized it wasn't the music alone she liked but the stories contained within them. In the end, she'd studied literature and done all right, but the problem with literature, with stories, was that the good ones needed revision. They needed revision because they hurt. Take *Middlemarch* for example. If George Eliot had just left out Rosamond, she reasoned, then when Lydgate first met Dorothea he might have been smitten with *her*. And what a pair they'd have

made. Sure, the novel wouldn't be as complex, or as long, but you could live with it better.

"See?" she asked Cal. They were laughing, but she was serious too. She wasn't so good at choosing what to do. For a while, she thought she might study literature as a career. After all, in order to disband the heartbreak, the complexity, you had to at least *get* it first. But she wasn't really made for academics. She was dreamier than that.

So she drifted. Office work mostly. Until her friend Marcy noticed her doodles and encouraged her to think about graduate school in studio art. Nell had never taken the sketches seriously, though she was often scratching away on scraps of paper. Her designs were interesting enough to look at—even she could see that—but Marcy thought they had a bit more to them. Why, Nell already had language. She'd stared at Marcy in disbelief. She had nothing like language. It was the absence of language, the gulf between her feelings and thoughts, that led to the drawings in the first place. They were a kind of silence, she wanted to say. Or maybe a bridge, linking the watery burble of her own internal life to the islands of other people's perception. But Marcy insisted *language*, and encouraged her to develop her *voice*. Nell laughed, wanting to explain how, if she'd only had a voice, she'd have been singing a long time ago.

"Anyway, it worked out pretty well. Or is working out. I didn't exactly *plan* this." She gestured broadly, indicating she was speaking about her life. She and Cal were in his very white kitchen, sipping coffee, sitting on new wooden stools.

"I don't think anybody plans it, really," he said gently. His eyes drifted to the photos of his children tacked to his fridge. For a moment, he appeared stricken. He missed not seeing them more, she knew, feeling the sadness of his sadness.

But later, when she heard him happily whistling in the shower the theme from *Pippin*, a tune she hadn't heard in over a decade, she stood outside the door, surprised and delighted.

No, you didn't plan it, she thought. But sometimes the right things happened. Sometimes, incredibly, they did.

It turned out that Chase Patterson's daughter ushered at the Goodspeed. The following week, Nell remembered the cluster of girls, the swish of black skirts, white blouses, giggles.

“Do ushers have an in on tickets?”

“They’re all sold out, is that it?” Chase asked.

“Yes. I tried to get in standby last week, but it didn’t work. I’m trying again tonight.”

She and Chase had actually struck up a conversation. Two more weeks to the semester, and this was the first time they’d chatted. Briefly, she allowed herself to enjoy gazing at him, relishing the physical likeness between him and Cal, rather than fearing it.

“Do you know who the character is behind the box office?” With imaginary scissors, she cut her blouse to her cleavage.

Chase laughed, a quick, delighted howl. For just that moment, he *was* Cal. She gazed at him in wonder. Even his driving, as ordinary as anybody’s, seemed remarkable.

Chase said, “Oh, yes, that would be Linda, technically my daughter’s boss. They all hate her, those girls. Who they love are the actors. And I mean *actors*. The male ones. They go crazy every time one crosses their path. Which is a lot at the Goodspeed. It’s a tiny place, really. The girls, my daughter included, imagine they’re in love. They actually think the men are too!”

“They can’t help believing it’s true,” she said, still gazing at him, rapt.

“It’s their life. They take it damn seriously. If my daughter’s blouse isn’t ironed when she wants it, you’d think the world was crashing. Where’s the blouse! Where’s the iron! That’s girlhood, though. That’s sixteen.”

Instead of triggering a verbal response, the resemblance between Chase and Cal got Nell drifting off, remembering. This was a time when she’d been describing her childhood friends to Cal. In a small town like the one she’d grown up in, they knew each other from kindergarten through high school, which made for an intimacy almost like siblings. She described her special friends, a group of five, and her very closest among the group. She and Francine knew each other so well! Everyone had his or her special gift, some had two, like Francine, the best actress in the class and a wonderful poet to boot. Nell was the jock back then. The jock who secretly wanted to sing. She played clarinet too, and made the all-state band one year. Another friend had the gift for balance: balance beam, ballet, skateboarding.

“We all liked to read a lot, on our own. Our teachers liked

us for that. They say girls subtly fight, but we didn't. Truly. We really liked each other. We thought we were great."

She described her gang's dope-induced romps in the woods, their vow to remain tomboys to the end, the elaborate Tolkien-esque dragon they'd sculpted in fresh snow one winter day when school was canceled. Cal was in the bathtub, soaking, listening. Every so often she took a sponge and ran it down his back. She sat on a little stool by the tub.

"With Francine there was that instant click. Poof! Friends for life." She splashed him. "Like me and you." She paused, then added, "Except Francine and I have lost touch. I don't even know how that happened."

"It happens." He sighed, more resigned than her to the inevitability of loss. "Your memories are so clear," he said, brightening, even smiling. "And your love. That's real love. I love how you love Francine. I don't have that in my past."

"We were lucky to be the same age in the same town. Another year, another place, it might not have worked out that way. Truly, I lucked out."

A few minutes of silence followed. Cal whistled quietly and pleasantly. She thought it might be a tune from a Beethoven symphony, but she wasn't sure.

"Did I tell you I played clarinet too?" he asked.

"We could play duets!"

He shook his head, shrugged. "It's not here. I left the clarinet home."

She paused, irked by his use of *home* to refer to *her* home, the ex's. "You are home."

"I mean Janey's home."

Breathing in the humid air, she stared at her toes, then back to Cal. "Maybe it's time you got it. The clarinet and all the odds and ends. What do you say?"

He sank low in the water. "There's always something else. I'll never get it all. Look, we were married for *twenty-one* years." His eyes looked bleak in a way she was beginning to recognize. She called the look *divorce*.

She felt diminished beside all that history, the cumulative effect of so many shared days that left him, years later, sinking in his tub.

"I suppose you can't collect it all," she said. The words out,

she felt heavy suddenly, as if she, too, were sinking in the tub, the tepid water rising in over her head.

What she finally said to Chase Patterson was did his daughter have lots of friends?

“A lump of them. They’re a pack.”

She nodded and smiled. “Yes, yes. That’s sixteen,” she said.

In the end, she and Cal had never married and so what happened hadn’t been a divorce, proper. It was just a breakup. A nonevent. So insignificant, as compared to a divorce, for example, you’d better not mention it. At least not to a divorcée. At least not to your own sister.

Every time Nell would call and mention her bewildering pain, her divorced sister would coolly remark, “Yes, imagine how I feel. *Six years, married.*”

But was it so different, really, from her own four with Cal? And did it matter, the count of years, the legal status?

To a degree, it did. She knew that and let it go. There was no competing with a divorcée. But she couldn’t help but wonder at the glee she sometimes heard in her sister’s voice when she’d introduce herself as divorced. In the end, it was as if she’d achieved something rather than lost something. As a divorcée she had standing in the world, a little sexual status.

I’m divorced.

I’m a divorcée.

What was Nell? Always single, childless, approaching forty, which you don’t mention. You change the subject. You talk about other things.

Nell’s second attempt at standby, and she at least knew the routine. For example, when Linda, posturing inside the box office, called, “Standby!” Nell didn’t rush. There was some kind of honor code working here where people calmly lined up in the order of their arrival. They took each other’s word for it as to who was there when. She was happy enough to have moved up from last week, from sixth to fourth, though she knew the shift didn’t guarantee a seat. Still, she hoped.

The spring air was enlivening, almost intoxicating, and after she’d signed up she sat on a bench on the opera house’s front

porch, sniffing and taking deep, drunken breaths. Potted geraniums lined the porch as well, and Nell leaned their way as if each bloom were a little red sun in whose light she could bask. Two others sat with her, a mother and daughter. Upon their arrival, she began to read a novel she'd brought—this time she'd prepared for the long haul, the wait, the possibility that an unbearable loneliness would creep up and

This time she'd prepared for the long haul, the wait, the possibility that an unbearable loneliness would creep up and choke her.

choke her—but soon she became distracted by the view of the village, its languid drift of cars, the small shops still open for theatergoers, and before she knew it she was eavesdropping on the mother and daughter, who discussed why the opera house didn't show operas.

"No one goes to see them," the daughter said, shaking her head sadly. "It takes a city to support an opera. This is the sticks." She glanced then at Nell. "Sorry! Hope I didn't insult you. Are you from around here?"

"New York. I've been commuting here each week, though, to teach."

"How nice. It's lovely here," the daughter remarked a little too earnestly. She was about Nell's age, with light curls framing her round face. Long earrings hung below the curls.

The mother laughed, a sharp, deliberate guffaw meant to point out her daughter's contradiction. "Sticks are often lovely," she said, and the daughter, smiling easily, shrugged.

The three then gazed out across East Haddam. For a moment, Nell imagined she did live there, a quiet, country life. A life in the sticks. And why not? She'd own a red Subaru and rent studio space in someone's unused barn. She'd celebrate each new painting with dessert and Earl Grey at The Charming Teapot. Sighing, she stretched her legs. Tonight she'd dressed better, a blue skirt and a paisley-print blouse.

It turned out the pair were from Ohio. They were here visiting an aunt who had just lost her husband. They'd read about the show and couldn't resist. They didn't tell the aunt, though.

“Too close to the loss,” the daughter whispered. “You know?”

“That’s just what happened to me.” Warming to the company, Nell closed her book.

“Reading the review, I mean. It’s my second week trying to get in.”

The mother, who looked strikingly like her daughter, minus the earrings, laughed loudly. The daughter joined her, and the jerky laughs were remarkably similar as well. What was so funny? Nell asked.

“Oh, I just got an image,” the mother began. “You know, a funny image? Of people camping out, trying to see the play. Raising tents, fetching water for cooking in the theater’s rest rooms. It’s not so funny now that I mention it.”

“Did you get an image too?” Nell asked the daughter.

“It’s the look on her face that cracks me up. I see that look and I lose it.”

Nell found herself laughing too. Not that the pair were so funny, only that they were so disarmingly nice. After a time, the daughter said, “Come on, join us for a bite?”

Nell hesitated. She’d gotten used to the idea of the standby she’d anticipated, isolating, dull, the one requiring the dense novel on her lap. Finally, shaking her head, clearing her mind, she voiced a surprised, “Yes. Sure, thanks.”

As they stood, she tentatively suggested the place across the bridge, luring them with the river view of the opera house. They loved it, thanking her for the idea. On the bridge’s narrow sidewalk, they traveled single file. On the way back, Nell walked last in line. She was grateful for the company. The dinner, as simple in talk as it was in food, made her feel full, hopeful, part of things. She was even glad, then, that the Goodspeed had run out of tickets. The sun had lowered, and the evening sky held a luminous, golden tint. From her perch on the bridge she saw East Haddam as a series of white, wooden structures from another era, a magical, inviting time.

I’m crossing the bridge, Nell told herself, slowing her pace to the point of trailing her dinner companions. *The bridge to my new life*. As hopeful as the words were, there was pain in her heart. Yet there was always pain in her heart, so she added, like a prayer, *Someday, I’ll have crossed the bridge. Someday, I’ll have crossed the bridge*.

Perhaps the bone spurs on Cal's heel, limiting his walking, caused him to think about his age, and that caused the abrupt turnaround: "I've changed my mind. I don't want another baby."

Perhaps it was because she'd gone away, two weeks at her sister's, then had come back and focused more on the upcoming show, her second one, than on him. Was he punishing her?

"I see. Well, then."

They were sitting on a bench in Central Park, passing bottled water between them. Teenagers on rollerblades whisked past.

"What do we do?" She could only stare at her shoes. Everything else, every tree, every passerby, even the blue October sky above, seemed off-kilter, surreal.

"You're the one I want," he said, reaching for her hand. "But I'll understand if you have to have a baby. But if you don't, just so you know, you're the one I want."

"You're the one I want."

She was thinking of those Sunday mornings when they'd head off to the park early, early. He had his binoculars; she her caffeine. She had him too, a snugly arm to link hers in, another language—the birds—to absorb. Her life had become bigger in this sweet, gentle way. His too, apparently. "Janey wouldn't be here. No, she wouldn't," he'd noted more than once, and in response she'd smiled sadly, sorry for that time in his life with its obvious disappointments. A piece of her was glad, though, to know she and he made this better fit.

She was thinking, too, of the lecture he'd given recently—"The Divine Songster," he'd called it, and by that he meant the hermit thrush. By the end, though, after all the birdcalls, coupled with his self-deprecating yet charming way of performing them, most of the audience took Cal for the divine songster. "I didn't know you could do that," she said to him afterward, proudly. The talk had been a moving one, ending on a simple, environmentally conscious note: these songs are fragile and they matter. Indeed, everyone in the room had just experienced how much they mattered. The joy was palpable.

She was thinking next—and this all happened in a series of quick, almost violent flashes—about the way he'd surprise her certain evenings at her studio. Bringing olives, bread, and beer. He was in the neighborhood, he'd say. He'd taste an olive and stare hard at whatever painting she showed him. The attention he gave her work left her feeling as if *she* mattered, more than

she knew. At these moments, she realized she'd never felt so loved.

She leaned over and fell against his shoulder. He held her, consoling her.

"Let's go home," he said. And she knew he meant his home, now decorated with her paintings, now furnished from the estate sales they'd covered. The table with the green tin top. The Victorian love seat. An array of Persian pillows. And the

"Let's go home," he said. And she knew he meant his home, now decorated with her paintings, now furnished from the estate sales they'd covered.



other things, practical, handy. The teakettle she'd bought at a department store sellout. The down comforter she'd gotten there as well. Now they had things between them. Lots of things. Now it was their home, her

home. The clock she'd ordered from L.L. Bean, the one with a different birdcall for each hour, the present she'd yet to give him. She'd ordered it for his fifty-third birthday, next month.

Fifty-three. Perhaps it was just this: he was fifty-three and getting a little tired. He didn't want a baby. Of course. But by then she was thirty-six and ticking—as decidedly as that clock.

How do you choose between the love of your life and motherhood? Well, you don't. You wait. You feel it out. Another month won't matter. And another. You stop talking about it. You grow a little quiet. You hope he loves you enough that he'll change his mind. You imagine he does love you enough for that. It's just a matter of time, really. You pretend it isn't happening. You crawl, like a snail, into a little shell of denial.

"Maybe when you're forty," he says one day. "Then you'll marry me."

You shrug. You don't know. At thirty-six, you can't think that far ahead. To think that far ahead is to make a choice, an impossible choice. Is he implying you'd make that choice?

You've become a little distant from yourself. Not to mention from him, who would have you make that choice. Your life is complicated, like a novel. Like a novel, one of those good ones,

it hurts. You feel that old compulsion to revise, to negate the complexity. But you can't because this isn't a story. This time it's real; it's your very own life.

"I can't imagine my life without you."

In the end, she'd decided by blurting out what she felt most deeply.

It wouldn't be the life she'd long assumed, the one that included mothering, but life with Cal would be rich in so many ways. In so many ways, really, life with Cal was better than she'd imagined. Their friendship. The pride they took in each other's work. The chemistry between them—and by that she meant the way their senses of humor interlaced as much as their bodies—that had yet to wane. Yes, this unimagined life, the one she was living, included gains and losses more dramatic than she'd ever foreseen. Perhaps it was just this dimension that made it an ordinary life, an ambivalent life.

"I can't imagine my life without you."

But by then, a year since changing his mind about a baby, it was too late.

A week earlier he'd gone to parents' weekend at his son's college, and there he'd "reconnected" with Janey.

"It was the family thing. The way we were playing around at being a whole family. We liked it. We've missed it. *I've* missed it. More than I knew."

"Playing around? You're not supposed to do that. *You're divorced.*"

"Nell, come on now. You act like that means something. We were at our son's college! We and a slew of other families. It felt good to be a family. We couldn't help ourselves. It changed our lives. Of course I can't start a new family. I *have* a family!"

She was stunned by his description of events, at the way in which he seemed helpless to change the course of them. The old life pulled, apparently, like a magnet. He was drawn, attached, stuck. He was resolute and resolved. Did she know this man?

"What about me?" she said.

His words were chillingly familiar. "I realized I didn't want to marry you," he said.

When? When did he realize?

The two women who had come before her, the two he'd also

realized he didn't want to marry, had had nothing to do with her and Cal. She'd always been sure of that, had never, for one moment, doubted it. So trivial to his life were these two relationships, she'd never even heard him utter either of the women's names.

Janey. That was the name she'd heard. In the weeks that followed, she began to review in her mind the many times he'd mentioned his ex, mostly to criticize. Why did she take it all at face value? Why did she feel *good* about those criticisms? Why didn't she realize he wasn't yet done with her?

"Go easy on yourself," counseled Marcy. "What did you know of twenty-one years of marriage, of sharing children with someone? Of course you took everything at face value."

They sat, along with Marcy's child, now six, at the kitchen table in Nell's fourth-floor walk-up. She was back to the studio apartment for good, back to the dependence on the paralegal job, which in fact she hated. Back to traipsing to the laundromat each Tuesday night.

Marcy looked different now, enviable with her husband, child, the three-bedroom apartment and the financial stability with which she lived. Marcy, whom in a matter of months Nell would find she wasn't talking to anymore. Not because they would have a fight, but because Marcy had known Cal longer. Her stronger allegiances were with him.

In the end, the breakup was so much like a divorce, she wanted to argue to her divorced, strangely proud sister. At least Nell knew now what it was like to lose the mutual friends.

Another Saturday afternoon of lovemaking. She'd arrived that morning with her overnight bag and some groceries. They set the chicken in the fridge to marinate. Then, without talking, without needing to decide and agree, they'd drifted upstairs. Cal had watched her undress with that same joy in looking he'd shown from the start. She drew him close, began kissing his face, his neck, his chest. When he settled inside her she stared at his face, the green eyes she knew so well, the lips she'd kissed a thousand times.

"This feels like married sex," she whispered, sighing contentedly.

Only in hindsight—stupid, futile hindsight—did she take his silence, the way he suddenly tensed, as not some kind of silent

assent, but for what it was: a change in heart, the first, inchoate articulation of *I realized I didn't want to marry you*.

She should have been confused then. Now, a dreary Wednesday at the law office, so many months later, sorting through Box Three of documents possibly useful for litigation, possibly not, she was sorting through the past as well. There had been a pause during which she allowed him to adjust to her spontaneous declaration. He'd finally sighed along with her. But he never agreed, "married sex." Still, they'd made love anyway, until, like any exhausted couple, they drifted into sleep.

This time, the following week, her third and last attempt at standby, Chase Patterson drove her directly to the opera house. Later that night she'd cab it back to the school.

"Save you five minutes," he said. "It might make all the difference."

He'd become her ally in her quest, asking his daughter if she couldn't sneak Nell in some time when Linda wasn't looking.

"Are you kidding?" she says, "Linda's always looking," Chase explained to Nell.

Nell nodded, aware of how calmly she now looked at Chase. She wasn't afraid anymore of staring, of stirring her sorrow. After all, it was there, stirring, whether she acknowledged it or not. But recently the ache she carried had become, to her surprise, just a little sweet. A tenderness overcame her as Chase swiped the dusty red bangs from his forehead and said, truly and endearingly hopeful for her, "Listen, good luck."

Inside the lobby, Nell laughed to herself when she saw Linda, her black top more low-cut than usual. "Standby!" she called.

Nell waited for the lineup to begin. When no one approached the box office she realized, happily, that she was number one.

"Remember me?" she asked Linda eagerly. But Linda gazed blankly back.

After she took Nell's name, Linda said, "We'll call you at about quarter to eight. Be back by seven thirty just in case."

"Yes, I know, I know." She was annoyed with Linda's briskness, her self-importance, her indifference. She rolled her eyes at the man who approached behind her.

Soon the man joined her to wait on the front porch. This was another fine spring night, the air filled with the juice of a nearby honeysuckle bush, now blooming. Nell stared at the flower

boxes throughout the village and imagined a similar sweetness rising from each of them. A third person, a woman, also joined them, seating herself on an adjacent bench.

Nell wished for company like this. Standby had its rewards, she'd learned from her experience the week before. In fact, these past days she'd actually looked forward to standing by, which had become for her a euphemism for *some company, something new, something*, even more than she looked forward to the possibility of *Sometime, Springtime*.

Soon enough, as she'd hoped, pleasantries were exchanged. A few words about Camille Beaux, how she was making her mark with this role. Had anyone seen her in anything before? A discussion then, surprisingly good, about acting, about being on the edge, as the man, Timothy, put it. About using everything you know in a role and reaching someplace new.

"Imagine an actor's anxiety," he said.

Compassionate point. Did he act?

Hell no, he was an engineer. Being here just got him thinking. Was the other person, Pam, into theater?

No, no. She was into art, she explained, beaming. She was a painter.

A painter! With that Nell mentioned her residency at the Pine Day School. Pam, in turn, explained her recent move to Arizona. To go for it, as she put it. She quit working in law.

"You're kidding. A paralegal like me?"

"Worse. Much worse. An attorney."

The three laughed. When Nell recommended the cheap eats across the river, the others nodded. They crossed the bridge in silence, stopping to stare at a small sailboat gliding downriver. *I'm crossing the bridge*, Nell noted to herself, also noting that she wasn't entirely sad about it. Wasn't it about time?

"I grew up around here," Pam said. "Don't you love the Connecticut River Valley?"

She gestured to East Haddam and to the riverbanks beyond. In the distance, the banks rose into green hills. Nell imagined the river as a wide avenue from which a good part of New England, not just the Goodspeed, was meant to be seen.

Over dinner, they talked more of Pam's move. She was single, as it turned out, about Nell's age, still working part-time for the courts, but painting too. Pam seemed regret free, uncomplicated, happy. Nell found her inspiring. Hadn't she once felt that easy happiness too?

Timothy, single himself and a little older, worked in Hartford. But downriver was where his heart was. He owned a little house in one of the river towns south of there, Chester, where he was building an addition, an extra room “for the usual hanging,” as he put it, and he explained with enthusiasm his solar-heated design.

She'd begun to draw over the pasted images, and the effect was like seeing one set of images through the other.

Pam nodded at the mention of Chester. Nell wished she knew more about these river towns. Why hadn't she thought to get out more? she wondered.

She dared to tell them about her latest collage. She'd begun to draw over the pasted images, and the effect was like seeing one set of images through the other. Though layered and more complex, for the first time in a long while Nell felt she was making some kind of visual sense. “Language!” she said, laughing. “At least something's coming through.”

Later, she'd realize: there was no talk of divorce. There was no talk of children. No one apologized for his or her life. They were three single middle-aged adults having a good enough time.

She'd realize: a little miracle.

She'd realize: that's how she'd get on. Leaping, as if by rocks across a stream, from one slippery miracle to the next.

What they did cross, of course, was the bridge, in single file, slower than before. She thought only of the delicacy of the breeze rippling the water, and of the way the riverbanks rose, and beyond the banks the way the hills spread into the distance, lovely and green. Timothy was telling knock-knock jokes, and she and Pam were laughing.

Before she knew it, they'd crossed the bridge. *She'd* crossed the bridge, without effort, without thinking about it, even smiling the entire way.

They were winding their way back to the Goodspeed's front porch, when one of the ushers, nearly running into them, dashed past. With her red curls, Nell wondered if this was Chase Paterson's daughter.

She watched as the girl sprinted downhill, toward the bridge,

then ran onto it, stopped, and called below. Several canoes filled with girls passed under the bridge. The usher frantically jumped up and down, calling to one of the girls in a canoe.

“Betsy! Betsy! It’s me! Betsy!”

She was shrieking and jumping and leaning over the rail in an effort to touch Betsy, if only she could.

From the canoe, she saw a girl raise a paddle in response. “Cynthia!” she screamed back, a joyful urgency to her call.

Nell knew this moment. For an instant, she saw herself and her childhood friend Francine shrieking to greet each other after some kind of parting, their voices tumbling forth with pure adolescent girl love. Maybe they’d only been parted a day. What did it matter? This was *hello! hello!* to the dearest soul in the world. To the one who knew you best. To the one who would always, no matter what, know you best.

The two strangers she’d spent dinner with were on the steps, entering the theater. She would see Camille Beaux tonight, or maybe she wouldn’t. She would teach students tomorrow, her last day, and say goodbye. Tomorrow evening, she’d take a train back to Manhattan and resume what had become, to her befuddlement, a hard, often dreary, life.

Girls! she wanted to warn in a sudden change of heart. But the two were already subject to forces greater than themselves, to the river’s current, which was pulling one out of reach from the other, until the canoe carrying one was just a blip on the horizon, until there was nothing for the other to shout about, and the girl, in what was now a grief-stricken moment—could she have ever been more alone?—stumbled off the bridge, up the bank, and climbed the steps to the Goodspeed.

NATURAL FORCES

Heading west out of Kalispell, US-2 passes a Smith's grocery store, some mom and pop casinos, and billboards in the yards of half-built homes before the land opens into wide fields. They are spring flooded: fence posts planted in water, horses and cattle relegated to the far swath of pasture that rides the flank of the hills. In May, the odd northern marriage of late evening light and unthawed air evokes a tenor of the wild. We are far from New England, with its seaboard cities and settled pockets of fertile land. This remote cattle country spans the northern rim of the homeland. Montana was one of the last regions to be populated by settlers, and today the state hangs on to this spirit of the frontier, remaining one of the least populated among the lower forty-eight. Just north of these pastures, the Whitefish Mountains climb from the valley floor and build steadily into the eastern slope of the Canadian Rockies. You can feel this range of snowcapped shoulders and granite fins hulking somewhere above you, glaciers cascading and calving, grizzlies roaming the vast tundra and boreal forests, curtains of clouds parting atop peaks to let down the light.

We are driving to a four-thousand-acre cattle ranch that houses wayward young men. My younger brother, Sam, is one of them. He has spent the last month working the Twelve Steps, working the land, and after our visit—a three-day program for family members—he'll venture into the Bob Marshall Wilderness on snowshoes and spend another month learning how to survive. The idea is to soften the men—boys, almost; Sam is twenty-one—through hard work. The idea is that physical labor opens the mind to digging inward. They strip logs and build buck and pole fences. They admit powerlessness. They make searching and fearless moral inventories of themselves. They surrender to the scale and harshness of western land.

Mom and Dad sit in the front of our rental car, my older brother, Silas, and I in the back, our twenty-nine and thirty-one years flying out the window in deference to this old formation

of childhood. I could be ten years old, slung low in the backseat of the little Hyundai, and the uncertainty of the coming visit opens wider the conduit for childhood grievances: vying over control of the radio, Silas chewing his bagel too loudly. Still, here we are: family loyalty contained in a metal frame moving west, exigency calling us back together. I feel, as I have before, the closeness spawned by shared grief, shared hope.

This isn't our first family program. For most of a decade Silas, now four years clean, was in and out of treatment. A vast majority of recovering addicts relapse within the first few years, and while Silas never again picked up the bottle, his addictions instead shifted faces: alcohol to narcotics to gambling to pornography. Each reconfiguration of dopamine and endorphins brought us to a new treatment center in a new city—Tucson and Minneapolis and Hattiesburg and Prescott. The theory behind family programs is that by participating in treatment, parents and siblings, spouses and children, can aid an addict's recovery, cut the chances by a sliver that an addict will relapse after

A broken family gathering around a broken loved one holds its own heartache, its own mysterious beauty.



he returns to the outer world. When we visited Silas for the first time ten years earlier—when addiction in the family still felt like a fresh wound—I had learned about enabling and condoning, the ways that families

organize around an addict's behavior, unintentionally clearing a path for the dysfunction to persist. The classes and lectures focused more on ourselves than on the addictions of our loved ones, and I saw, immediately, my own complicity: the ways I'd justified Silas's drinking, the excuses I'd made for him, and the ways I'd blamed myself—the contorted logic I'd drummed up: that somehow the ease with which I found success in the world was grounds for his demise. It took just that first visit to see that a broken family gathering around a broken loved one—sometimes in defeat, sometimes to say only: "I will no longer help you"—holds its own heartache, its own mysterious beauty. But my personal understanding of the Alcoholics Anonymous doctrine—what I would come to recognize as my own relationship

to the tenets of the Twelve Steps—would unveil itself only in its own unhurried time.

In the forest, once we've crossed the flooded fields, Mom turns to Dad and says, "We looked at land up here, remember?" Springtime, and deep snow still occupies the space between pines, giving the forest the cleaned-out feeling when undergrowth has been slashed away, when brambles and scrub do not impede entry to the woods or movement between trees. Back home in the northeast, tender stalks of asparagus have already pushed their heads through the thawed ground. Cow manure has been tilled into the garden soil. Farmer's markets and May Day festivities are in full swing. Up here, though, along the 48th parallel, there are just four months of warmish weather each year. "We were going to be ranchers," Mom continues—a practical assumption, given that she grew up on a Colorado cattle ranch. Instead my parents moved to a small plot of land in Vermont where they could raise chickens and turn a garden. They became teachers and eventually pursued graduate degrees in social work. With hindsight, the isolated life of a rancher in northern Montana seems almost ludicrous; my parents would have been on a political and religious island the size of their property; my brothers and I would have commuted an hour to school.

"We really didn't know much of anything, did we?" Mom asks.

"Nope," Dad says. "We were vegetarians and wanted to raise beef."

We laugh.

AA's First Step is to admit you are powerless over your addiction. The Second Step is to come to believe that a Power greater than yourself can restore you to sanity. The Third Step is to turn your will and your life over to the care of God, as you understand Him. For many recovering addicts, this is Jesus or another religious figure; for many more, this step requires defining for oneself something previously un-worded. With AA now pushing its eightieth birthday, the organization has loosened its interpretations. AA maintains that a "Higher Power" does not have to mean God—that it can manifest as anything larger than oneself. Nevertheless, the language of the Big Book and the daily prayers recited at meetings are steeped in religious

jargon, and for the first several years of Silas's AA involvement, I held onto a healthy skepticism. Why should a young man who had been raised an atheist (agnostic, at best) suddenly submit himself to the notion of God? This Higher Power that would deliver him to sobriety felt far too convenient. Why, amid struggle, should Silas trade in self-guidance for a hierarchical order to the universe? Why must God—rather than my brother's own soul, spirit, mind—lead him to salvation?

Our parents raised us without religion. This was not a conscious decision or a deliberate cultivation of atheism. We simply didn't go to church on Sunday mornings. Weekends for my parents were filled with tending to the backlog of chores and driving us to soccer games and ski races and friends' houses. We spent more time pitching chunks of oak into codified woodpiles than contemplating God's existence.

But I would not say that I was raised without a spiritual compass.

Mom and Dad were among a generation of Americans who paddled against the current of modernization, choosing dirt roads, chickens, canning. In many ways, they were carrying out the Jeffersonian credo two hundred years late: the decentralization of cities and parceling out of property, each citizen working a square of a patchwork quilt. The back-to-the-landers of the 1970s were the second generation of a movement born at the turn of the century, when artisans and farmers were displaced by blooming mechanization—choosing to live off the land was a means of preserving the skills and knowledge marginalized by the onslaught of monopolies. The land also provided economic stability and personal autonomy in a prevailing cycle of boom and bust.

The wave of back-to-the-landers in the seventies built itself on the same philosophical underpinnings of self-reliance. The resurgence also coincided with the first Earth Day and the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency. There was a growing concern that the exploitation of earth's resources to satiate an overcrowded planet was bullheaded and unsustainable. Over the course of a decade, hundreds of thousands of city dwellers—by some estimates upward of a million—left the urban economy in order to homestead a rural tract, in order to make conscious choices about subsistence, energy use, work. This act of moving to rural landholdings, in a time when the

nation was losing a family farm every half hour, challenged the American assumption that more is better, that earning more money and owning more material goods leads to a happier life. Wendell Berry, a prolific author on agriculture and spirituality, writes in *The Unsettling of America* in the late seventies that Jefferson's vision of democratic land distribution is "still full of promise. It is potent with healing and with health. It has the power to turn each person away from the big-time promising and planning of the government, to confront in himself, in the immediacy of his own circumstances and whereabouts, the question of what methods and ways are best."

Indeed, this way of life was considered by many to be a spiritual practice. Jefferson himself went so far as to say that farming not only wards against corruption and idleness, but is also our means of preserving the sacred. "Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God," he wrote in 1781. "It is the focus in which he keeps alive that sacred fire, which otherwise might escape from the face of the earth."

I doubt that my parents considered their settling in the southern Vermont countryside to be a sacred act. Even if they felt twinges of sanctification, calling it such would have certainly felt too presumptuous. My parents believed in working outside and raising kids in clean air and garden dirt and pond water. And they thirsted for pastoral obligation. They wanted the physical demands of something beyond themselves calling them from bed each morning to feed animals and light stoves.

More practically, they were looking for an escape. My parents met in Colorado's Roaring Fork Valley, on the western edge of the state's Western Slope, where Mom was raised and where most of her family still lives. Though they both held college degrees, they were youthfully noncommittal to the idea of careers. Dad worked as a ski patroller and Mom waited tables. Between ski seasons, Dad taught himself to hang glide by jumping off twelve-thousand-foot mountain passes. He and my uncle Tots, sporting handlebar mustaches and hair past their ears, started a hang gliding school called Get High Inc. Mom, who thought hang gliding was reckless and had never taken flight herself, worked at the school as an instructor, teaching the clientele the first steps to flying: hang gliding behind a speedboat. Wearing water skis and bobbing in the reservoir beneath the kite's massive wings, the students listened to Mom yell out directions

from the boat piloted by Dad or Tots: “Hold onto the crossbar!” “More bend in your knees!” “We’re gonna gas it now—you’ll come up onto your skis first—ready?” Moving across the water, the wind caught the canvas wings and swept the student skyward.

It seemed inevitable that my parents would settle in this valley where my mom’s family was so rooted. She grew up on a cattle ranch that was owned by her father and uncle, seven kids in one family, eight in the other, in two ranch houses atop a mesa. On horseback, the kids helped drive the cattle between summer and winter pastures, thirty miles on a road that is now a four-lane highway. They knew how to rope cattle, saddle horses, raise 4-H sheep. They were rough-and-tumble kids who also had grandparents who lived in a Denver mansion. When they turned fourteen, they were sent away to boarding school. Yet as idyllic as this life sounds, there was darkness at the heart of it. Five o’clock was a threshold crossed each day: their mother—my grandmother, Nana—poured her first scotch and water and gave the kids ginger ale in Dixie cups. Her face changed when she’d been drinking: one painted lip snarled back, exposing a glimmer of tooth, her powdered cheek distorted. Among the kids, her drunkenness was coded simply as “The toothache is back.” Liquor in her blood displaced her warm generosity and allowed for a pervasive hostility to emerge—a kind of venom toward her kids, her husband, the world, and most centrally, herself.

In the first years that my parents were together, my mom’s family came apart at the seams. Nana had been on and off the wagon so many times that no one could keep track anymore. There were rumors of my grandfather having an affair. Divorce papers had been signed and filed, waiting for approval. For years, Mom and her siblings had done what they could to curtail the drinking: threats and promises, disposing of bottles, researching AA, rallying behind their mother when she had spells of sobriety, and forgiveness when she woke up in the morning ashamed. None of it worked.

It was in the thick of this futility that my parents decided to strike out on their own; they moved east, putting down new roots far from the ranch. And it was only then—after her daughter’s flight, her family’s acceptance of a lost mother—that Nana checked herself into Hazelden, one of the country’s earli-

est twelve-step programs. Mom was the sole family member to attend the family program. She remembers her assumption that she was there to learn about her mother's alcoholism, to offer her support. On the first day of their weeklong visit, the family members were told this, instead: "You're not here for your loved one. You're here to learn about yourself."

By the time Sam went to the Montana treatment center, his use had stretched far beyond the normal binge drinking of college students. One cold Colorado night, cops found him staggering down a snowy road barefoot. Another night, he woke up in jail after passing out in the living room of a stranger whose house he'd evidently broken into. ("Will you accept a collect call from inmate Sam Cochran?" a recording crackled when I answered my phone the next morning.) As a ranch hand, he scrawled out checks to himself from his boss's checkbook, his boss being one of Dad's oldest friends. After Nana's memorial service, when friends and family gathered at her home for a reception, he stole beers from the fridge. He flunked out of school. He stopped calling back.

AA talks about a predisposition to addiction, how some people are chemically built to self-medicate, to compensate for a dopamine deficiency. In addition to his particular composition of chemicals, I suspect one reason Sam was driven to use so excessively—why his daily pot use raged into hard drugs—was that at eighteen, he'd sat

on the bank of West Virginia's Gauley River in his kayak gear, watching his friend Ned drown. Sam and his companions had already tried wading into the turbulent current where Ned was

Five o'clock was a threshold crossed each day: their mother poured her first scotch and water and gave the kids ginger ale in Dixie cups.

stuck underwater in his flipped boat. They'd tried accessing him by kayak, by raft, by swimmer, by rope. But the boat remained pinned upside down, the nose wedged between two rocks, Ned unable to extricate himself from the plastic hull, held by the force of so much water moving, by unequivocal natural law, downriver. All efforts failed, and finally a message to the Army

Corps of Engineers was relayed, first by boat and then by radio: Close the gates at the dam, cut the flow.

And so they sat on the bank and waited for the river to drain. I imagine Sam watching the water shrink from full flow to a slow snake of current. And despite this expedited geological process, I imagine a sedated sense of time, a dreamlike incongruity sealing the world in some counterfeit version of itself. The sun sparkling hot in the full blue sky. Ned's body swaying just beneath the surface, the twinkle of his life jacket and helmet catching the light. Each quarter inch of the Gauley's banks emerging until the gutter of the riverbed was in plain sight, exposing the darkest and oldest rocks, then the slick, gray mud that lingered below the lowest water line.

My brother doesn't talk about Ned often, but I've seen him split open three times over it. The first was a year and a half after Ned's death. We were both living in the Roaring Fork Valley. Sam was attending the community college ten miles from the ranch where Mom grew up and just down the road from the school where I was teaching. I was driving him back to the dorm after dinner at our aunt's house. It was a dark February night, just before Sam's nineteenth birthday. Our aunt had baked him a chocolate cake.

We were both tired and there wasn't much conversation until Sam broke the still air between us. "Ned's birthday is five days after mine." He didn't say more, just bent over his legs. I put my hand on his heaving back and did my best to keep the tires to the pavement in the impossible world. We were on the road where our mother had driven cattle on horseback, our headlights carving a path down the valley that held so much of our family's joy and grief.

The second time was two years later, during the intervention that sent Sam on his way to treatment in Montana. The shock of seven friends and family members showing up at his door cut through his dogged denial that all was not well. He cried for two hours straight while we begged him to accept help. He spoke of Ned often. How unresolved it all was in his heart. How he still couldn't believe that Ned was paddling next to him one moment, swept beneath the surface the next.

The third time is in Montana, on the first day of the family program, when Sam tells us about the waterfall near the ranch. We are between counseling sessions, and the five of us sit at one

of the picnic tables in front of the one-room cabins where Sam and the others sleep in bunk beds—where they learn tolerance, accountability, the intimacy required for sharing a snow cave, for maintaining relationships. We spent the morning with ten other families, hearing their stories and getting a crash course in the Twelve Steps—steps we are all too familiar with. We haven't seen much of Sam yet, but he's added weight to his bony frame; he looks us in the eye; he smiles more; his clothes are washed. When we arrived, he'd given us tight-armed hugs and held on.

It is sunny, and stubborn snow patches endure only in the deepest pockets of shade—the northern side of the cabins, the northern base of the ponderosa and lodgepole pines. Still, a persistent breeze keeps most of the other families in the classroom or milling about the dining hall, refueling on watery coffee. “You guys gotta hike up to the falls,” Sam says. He sits on the edge of the picnic table, his hunched shoulders a remnant of adolescence. We huddle around him, arms crossed over chests or hands stuffed in pockets, hungry for the connection that has been tattered by years of use and worry. Then, unprovoked, he adds, “When I'm at the waterfall, I feel Ned close by. I don't know about God, but that is my Higher Power.”

When Nana started treatment back in 1972, Mom suspected that the AA credo might prove problematic to her mother's recovery. Mom and her siblings had been raised celebrating Christian holidays, but these were about social convention rather than religion, and my grandmother certainly never went to church or spoke of God or prayer. Mom was twenty, and she and Dad had just started a seasonal job crewing a sailboat from Rochester to Annapolis, navigating down the Erie Canal, the Hudson River, and the snaking inland waterways in between. It was November, a gray, hardened month on the East Coast, and even colder on the water. But they had each other—not married just yet, but sure of their lives together. From the sailboat, Mom wrote a letter to Nana describing what God meant to her. She wrote about love, wrote that God resides in the invisible threads binding family. She hoped to give her mother permission to believe something she'd never believed before. Something close to the sacred.

For my mom and her siblings, the uninhabited land surrounding the ranch was a means of alleviation, of escape. Their

father took them into the mountains, hiking and horseback riding; their mother to the North Pasture for picnics—a dry and cattle-filled land that became a favorite camping destination. In the summers, they took to the river, rowing surplus military rafts down stretches of whitewater long before the sport became commercial. When the house was filled with booze and fighting, Mom and her siblings had the solitude of the mesa. They knew the reprieve of seeing the first flash of sun crest the mountains, had felt the satisfaction of long days spent outdoors, their boots caked in manure, their pants and gloves stiff with red dirt.

Nana, too, paddled down rivers and rode horses deep into the mountains. Amidst her heaviest drinking, she helped found Colorado's Outward Bound School, which sent young people into the wilderness for month-long expeditions. Even when she herself was lost, Nana recognized the value in placing yourself firmly on a map, finding where your feet meet the ground on a flimsy paper smothered with thin brown lines that mean mountains, valleys, creeks—among which you must pick your way home.

Many years after Silas first went to treatment, when my initial reaction to the language of the Big Book had softened, he told me that of all the people he'd met in AA, it was those who were raised in religiously dogmatic households who had the most difficulty with the Twelve Steps. It was nearly impossible for them to let go of what God meant to their church and dis-

I wish I had asked Nana what Higher Power meant to her, but I never thought to be curious about it until after she was gone.

cover a more personal sense of the word. I wish I had asked Nana what Higher Power meant to her, but I never thought to be curious about it until after she was gone. I know Nana felt powerless over her addiction. She

had lost her husband, her home. She had given away her own mothering to a woman who'd cared for the kids since they were born. I suspect that it was in the space left by such loss that Hazelden took hold—the collective shame and fear somehow helping her to find fertile soil in which to replant herself. If she

were with me now, I would ask how Colorado's mountains and rivers stirred through her while at Hazelden. I would ask about the idea of submission, and how—as Step Three necessitates—she came to turn her will and life over to the care of God.

My grandparents' impending divorce never materialized. After Hazelden, Nana's new commitment to sobriety opened the door for reconciliation, and she eventually moved back to the ranch. For thirty-five more years she and my grandfather would sleep side by side, "the toothache" unimaginable to her grandchildren. I remember the sound of ice clinking in the glass of cranberry juice Nana sipped each night, the smudge of her pale lipstick on the rim, her matching pink nails steady moons on the glass as the raucous family pinwheeled around her.

My parents still live on the acreage they bought back in the seventies, and I expect they will die there. Southern Vermont is a different world from the open sky and jagged peaks of Colorado. In summer, the leaves of the hardwoods choke the space above roads, hem in the fields, fill the forest with endlessly overlapping green shapes and shadows. Leaning into the light, the oaks and maples threaten the clearing where the house sits. In winter, you can see through the bare trees to the dark outline of ridges beyond. Always, you are cupped by the topography.

If you get lost in the woods beyond the house, you are likely to walk in circles for an hour or two before finding a road or neighbor. Some of the property lines are marked by broken-down stonewalls. Some have old postings nailed to trees. Most are known only by word of mouth. For hundreds of years, the land has been recognizable to its inhabitants by its hills and hummocks, by its streams, by the islands of bedrock that emerge from the earth.

Mom and Dad settled into their land in 1975 with the intention to live as much as possible by their own means. Their days became defined by what the land demanded each season: cutting firewood, tapping maples, planting, weeding, feeding, harvesting, canning. Growing up, my brothers and I accepted the sometimes harsh realities with eager curiosity. Yellow chicks under the heat lamp metamorphosed into meat hens with coarse, white feathers streaked brown with mud and chicken shit. The birds ate more and moved less, and each September my parents carried them from the coop, two birds per hand,

upside down and flapping. The grass around the chopping block was cut back, and after the ax swung down, the birds frolicked headless into the tall field and disappeared. From our roost in a nearby tree, Silas and I shrieked and laughed (it would be years before I'd make the connection between the chicks I so loved and the meat on my plate). We watched Mom retrieve the fallen bodies and plop them down in giant pails of hot water. Soaking would make the plucking easier, feathers pulling from the warm skin in handfuls, sticking to Mom's fingers and the paper bags she stuffed them in, the heavy scent of wet feathers in the air.

By the time Sam came along, my parents had relinquished some of their self-reliance. I went to the slaughterhouse with Dad once. We loaded our hens into the back of the pickup, the bed covered with a sheet of plywood. We drove forty-five minutes across the Connecticut River and into New Hampshire. The business was run by a father-daughter duo, and we watched from the tailgate as the daughter—in her thirties—reached in with a long, hooked pole. The birds rallied together in the back corner, silent until one was snagged around the ankle and a squawk echoed out. When the hook was thrust in the final time, I wished for the bird, with its clipped wings and fattened breast, to escape. Behind us, a peeling red barn housed the equipment. I wondered what the technique was and imagined the woman's apron dirty, her own father working beside her, cutting and plucking. A few years later, my parents started buying free-range chicken wrapped in plastic from the local food co-op and I became a vegetarian.

The ratio between what my parents produced from the land and what they bought from the co-op fluctuated over the years, their desire to be self-sufficient displaced by the demands of raising kids. They shed their idealism a bit, too. When a lead scare required them to replace old sugaring buckets and taps, they stopped sugaring altogether; it was not a conscious decision, they've said, but rather a willingness to put energy elsewhere. Jobs that were at first supplemental later became their vehicle for intellectual cultivation: they both went back to school and started new careers in their thirties and forties.

Still, even in their busiest years, they prodded the soil in the ways necessary to produce vegetables, berries, animals, wood. And they maintained the network of trails—miles of them—that web out beyond the clearing. In their sixties now, they are

still avid cross-country skiers. They walk in the woods nearly every day. Though the trails loop through many properties, my parents have been the lone keepers—clipping back branches, tamping down the earth with thousands of steps taken by the same four feet. Their tracks serve as an extension of how they know the land, and how the land has come to know them, reacting as it will to cleared forest ground, to the ribbon of light above a trail.

My thinking about the intersection of people and the environment has long been unforgiving. Assigned to write a paper in high school about my “world view,” I argued that the globe would be better off if humans went extinct; that there is hope in the death of our species; that at face value, the injustice of our plundering isn’t worth the ephemeral pleasures of our existence; that we can’t pretend to be making a difference by living deep in the woods.

When I consider how my parents have chosen to live and how I was raised, I recognize what some would call political futility. I concede that back-to-the-landers have found solutions that are more personal than global. Yet, even if our lifestyle has done little to assuage environmental concerns, there is a quality to our relationship with the land that makes it impossible for me to turn my back on the legacy of Jefferson and Thoreau, on the spiritual philosophy of Wendell Berry. There is something sacred that churns in me when I see, however fleetingly, that the topography of Vermont and Colorado has shaped my own contours of self, my own understanding of where I fall in the order of things. In the face of our worrisome march forward as a species, when I am alone on a dry mountain trail and hear the scrub oak shift, there is a moment when I believe it is not a grouse or a twitch of wind, but a cougar. And for a shuddering second, I feel the lightness of my raw vitality. I am flesh and scent in a world governed by instinct.

For my parents, the land continues to call their attention. They must light the stove before the pipes freeze, walk through the forest looking for dead hardwood that has not yet rotted, pick the last of the basil and tomatoes before the frost. Like Sam stripping logs in Montana or lighting a fire in a snowstorm, they are made aware of the dire miracle of their survival. A great danger of modern society, Berry believes, is the tendency to see

ourselves as separate from wilderness, the wild an entity to be managed and controlled. The threat, Berry writes, “lies in the willingness to ignore an essential paradox: the natural forces that so threaten us are the same forces that preserve and renew us.” We are losing the ability to experience ourselves as humble.

In the thick of the depression that preceded Silas’s addictions, Dad transplanted hundreds of day lilies: bright unruly patches of orange around the garden, under the clothesline, encircling the pond, lining the driveway. That same year, Dad stayed home with my heart-sunk brother on Thanksgiving while Mom and Sam and I went to a friend’s house. Somehow Dad urged Silas out of bed, urged him out the door, and they walked the trails in the woods. When they reached the spot where the trails split, in the northeast corner of our land, my brother lay down.

Everything about him moved more slowly then: his feet certainly, but also his eyes as they shifted focus, his jaw as he chewed his food. Even his skin—though I know this can’t be—seemed thicker and slower, encasing a spirit that was far removed from the world. That day, his metabolism slowed like the animals in the forest around him, conserving strength, pulling to the center in preparation for the coming winter. I know the ground under him: hard and damp, wet leaves cemented against the cold November earth. He lay down on the trail my parents had cleared for two decades. He said he thought he could die. For an hour, Dad stood by, keeping quiet company. It was drizzling, near freezing temperatures, with patches of snow left from an early storm. Dad could see a crescent of bare skin between Silas’s jacket and pants, and felt, I imagine, the heartbreaking futility of parenthood, of being merely human. Eventually, something moved my brother to rise, and they made their way home.

I believe Berry is saying that to accept the fragility of our lives is to know the sacred. Living off the land, that fragility is clear before us: the ephemeral spirit of a crop, that thin edge between abundance and scarcity. How close we are, always, to losing our beating hearts, our breathing lungs. How perilous life is, how inexplicable, how magic.

I have worried about my brothers. Worried in the darkest moments that they would die at the hands of addiction or depression. There were nights in our teen years when Silas arrived home later than expected. Twenty minutes meant he had surely driven off the curve of our winding Vermont road, let his hands

stop controlling the wheel. The first and only time I have prayed to any God was born of this fear. Through the floorboards of my bedroom, I could hear my parents talking to Silas in the living room. This was a nightly affair: my brother lying on the couch, my parents positioned like sentries on either side of him, trying to find an answer. He was sixteen and already had attended three high schools. The last, a boarding school for boys with dyslexia, had ended in nightmare.

It happened after midnight, the dorm faculty long asleep. And Silas had been asleep, too—nametags ironed by Mom into the corners of his twin sheets, his bristly mop of curls covering the pillow. His own light snores muffled the sound of the boys entering, kept him from startling awake. For teenagers, they were unnaturally quiet, the act perfectly choreographed: hair-spray can wielded, cloud sprayed, match lit. They'd fled by the time Silas woke and realized he was not dreaming. Alone, he batted at his curls, the acrid scent of burnt hair settling upon every worn surface in that dank room.

The futility of these late-night talks felt intolerable. There was no way to keep Silas safe. I lay on my back, above the murmurs of hopeless love.

The futility of these late-night talks felt intolerable. There was no way to keep Silas safe. I lay on my back, above the murmurs of hopeless love. In the skylight, I stared through my own reflection to the wide belly of night sky that I could not see but knew was there, stars piercing through the black, constellations wrapping around us: *Please, God. Please make him okay. Please, please, please, please, please.*

At the end of last summer, I went home for a week. My visits are a dreamy existence of garden food, naked dips in the pond, walks in the woods. The raspberry yield was greater than ever, and Mom was canning again: jam, tomato sauce, beans, pesto. The jars rattled in the canning pot as Mom read aloud from *Putting Food By*, talking herself through botulism prevention: measuring and sterilizing and sealing.

The second day home, I went for a run on the trail my parents

call the North Pond Loop. The dogs were with me, continually checking back at my heels and then charging off again, circling wide through the field, dunking into the pools that form in the bends of the stream, lusting after the scent of deer. A few miles in, the trail curved along the edge of a clearing, where twelve or fifteen years before, the trees had been cut back to dig for gravel. The opening in the forest was now an angry web of wild raspberry bushes—evidence that Mom and Dad hadn't been up here recently with their saw and clippers. The thorns grabbed at my bare legs as I ran through. I timed my strides to land on the clearest patches of trail, but the barbs caught my skin just the same.

I was hit with the hard gust of truth that the trails patterned across the land by thirty-five years of their footsteps would eventually fade back into the woods' floor. One day I would return here to find these raspberry canes grown up taller than myself. I would slash out at their creeping arms in wide, wild strokes, taming what my parents no longer could. In their tangled mass, the plants would block the trail in a seemingly haphazard effort, but really I knew their lean would be calculated. They'd move toward the light as my parents' attention dimmed.

I thought about Dad paddling the pond raft to shore each fall. I thought about Mom planting bulbs of garlic in October, tilling lime into the soil in April. I imagined them one day reminding us to do the same. Get the raft in before the ice forms. Use the wood in the left side of the shed first. Don't bother splitting the ash—it burns too fast. Fear that I hadn't learned enough clenched at my throat. That I couldn't survive on my own. There were levers on the tractor I'd never used. I didn't know how to test the pH of the soil. I still struggled to tell one hardwood from another when they were leafless in the winter.

I was past the raspberries and back into the pines and hemlocks. The ground was thick with generations of fallen needles, giving more cushion to the hard earth, forgiving my footfall. And in those quiet shadows, I remembered that my parents' own learning was not passed down, but gathered from the land. Indeed, much of what they had taught my brothers and me had been absorbed rather than imposed. There had been few instructions. Instead, they had given us the opportunity to defer to forces greater than ourselves. I remember standing by as Dad swung an ax toward a round of sugar maple, his right hand slid-

ing down to meet his left, following the arc. “Now you try,” he said. “Keep your toes back. Let gravity do the work.”

On the third and final day of the family program, Sam sends us on a hike to the waterfall. He can't join us—there are strict rules against leaving the group—but he's been talking about the falls since we arrived, talking about Ned. Walking there, the land is hummocky and sloped, but not steep, and then from nowhere the forest floor splits open into a cavernous yawn and the creek gains impossible speed as it approaches the lip and shoots out over vertical slabs of granite, two hundred feet down. It is a place that reminds you of a forgotten truth about yourself: how quickly things can change, how a misstep can lead to a fall, how thinly veiled our souls remain.

BIG PIN

In high school, there was learning and there was gettin' stupid. From eight a.m. to three p.m., I did learning. I went to class, I said things, I walked between rooms at the sound of a bell. Then from three p.m. to six p.m., I got my head ground repeatedly into a wrestling mat. If I had learned anything in class, my thought was that it all got liquefied in my forehead and trickled out my nose by the time practice was over. Certainly, on most days, a lot of blood came out of my nose. Dameon and I would stop wrestling, and I would kneel down and wipe my nose-blood off the mat and then mop it up with antiseptic while our coach—I'll call him Scott Giotti—told us both that we were “abunchafuckinpussies” and that I should “get that shit *cauterized*.” Then we would start grappling again. My friend Matt called it “gettin' stupid” or, inexplicably, “gettin' stupid trucked.” Matt and I were co-captains of the wrestling team.

Forget, for now, the four a.m. sweat jogs, and the mildewed unitards, and the fact that you often had to weigh-in naked, cupping your balls in front of some glowering athletics director in a freezing-cold locker room in Perth Amboy. The thing I really didn't like about wrestling was that I could never bring a book to practice. I tried once. It was *Life of Pi*. In retrospect, literary magical realism was probably the wrong genre to start with. If it had been a Tom Clancy novel, or better yet, *The World According to Garp*, maybe Coach Giotti would have been more tolerant. (“Fuckin' Sherrell—even when he's not at wrestling practice he's fuckin' *reading* about wrestling practice!”) But instead it was “Sherrell, fuck is that?” Before I could tell him, as neutrally as possible, that this was a book about a boy and a tiger who get trapped on a boat together and gradually grow to understand and maybe even love each other, Giotti grabbed it out of my hands and answered his own question: “It's a fuckin' book, Sherrell! Lemme ask you somethin': Are you in school or are you in wrestling?” It was a very good question.

In February 2013, the International Olympic Committee voted to eliminate wrestling from the Olympic Games. Wrestlers everywhere were angry, but none more so than Donald Rumsfeld. The retired Secretary of Defense, former captain of the wrestling team at Princeton and one-time Olympic hopeful, wrote in to the *Washington Post* to vent. The title of the op-ed was “Donald Rumsfeld: Enough with the Kumbaya Olympics. Let’s Keep Wrestling.”

The article was a direct appeal to the IOC: repeal the decision and put wrestling back on the map. “Wrestling uniquely encapsulates the Olympic spirit,” Rumsfeld argued, “even though it harkens back to older and more martial virtues, rather than the arts festival and Kumbaya session that some may prefer the modern Games to be.” But the IOC hadn’t eliminated wrestling because of its half-concealed militarism; the sport was dropped because no one cared anymore. Wrestling was obsolete, shackled to its “older virtues,” and sometime between the first Games in Athens and the XXX 2012 Olympiad, people had stopped paying attention. There were no international stars, no high-octane replays. The sport was plodding and aggressive, the competitors simian-browed and hopelessly obscure. They emerged every four years from reclusive training camps to grimace and sweat on each other. And the perennial powerhouse countries—the United States, Iran, Cuba, the former Soviet Bloc—were all deeply unpopular. So people watched younger, friendlier sports: basketball, maybe, or dressage.

But after seven months of lobbying from the International Federation of Associated Wrestling Styles, wrestling was reinstated with brand new, viewer-friendly rules. Scoring was doubled, the outfits were modified, and the signature red mats got the ax (the networks claimed they looked bad on TV). But more than anything, the rules were changed so that wrestling would become at least a little more intelligible to the general public. Because no one had anything against wrestling in particular; they just didn’t really know what it was anymore.

Rumsfeld’s diatribe had been meant to jog America’s memory. “Wrestling is a universal sport,” he wrote. “Few other sports are so directly aggressive: It is you vs. one other person. There is nothing to hide behind; there are no time-outs. It is all up to you.” This was true. There is also more to say.

Before he quit the team and dropped out of high school and went back to Camden to live with his aunt, Dameon had four losses and one win. It was the middle of his junior season and there was no announcement when he left. He was just absent—more and more often, until the absences strung out into whole weeks and teachers who had never paid any attention to him started asking questions—and then at some point we all knew that he was definitely, permanently gone. For a while, people would still see him smoking on the sidewalk outside the low, redbrick apartment blocks where he lived with his mother and various cousins. Anthony Costa, our 135-pounder, and Hilson Marino, our 155, lived in the same building. Weeks later, they'd report that he'd up and left there too. And then no one saw him anymore. His leaving would have meant less to me if I hadn't felt that I'd had something to do with it, that I was, in some oblique and easily exonerated sense, the one to blame.

In wrestling, huge importance is placed on the weight of your body. Dameon was small and I was the only one smaller, and so we would drill together in practice. At the beginning of high school, I usually weighed in between 99 and 100 pounds, even with my lace-up, silver ASICS on. Dameon was a hefty 107, but could spit and sweat enough the day before to slot down into the

His leaving would have meant less to me if I hadn't felt that I'd had something to do with it, that I was . . . the one to blame.



ultra-light 103-pound weight class for matches. Drilling together was difficult because on most days Dameon came to practice high. Everyone noticed but no one said anything, maybe because we'd already written him off, maybe even without

realizing it. While the rest of the team got ready for practice—carrying out the mats, heaving them into place, taping them down, stomping out the folds—Dameon would meticulously tie and untie his shoes, snickering out loud from the bleachers.

For two hours, we'd drill takedowns, and then for the last hour, we'd wrestle to win. I could tell when Dameon had smoked a blunt in the parking lot right before because he'd lie spread eagle on the mat after I pulled a fireman's carry. I'd gesture for him to get up and he'd tell me, I think sincerely, that I

was the funniest white boy he'd ever met. Above us, a poster on the wall read: "Wrestling Is Life."

The mat in the training room was cardinal and white, our school colors. We were the Highland Park Owls. On our year-book, the owl wore glasses and a mortarboard. In the center of the wrestling mat, the owl had talons and a hooked beak and the paint was badly chipping. After a particularly aggressive double-leg, you'd come up with little plastic scraps of the owl's eye stuck to your back. The idea, of course, being that we were scholarly *and* fierce. Which was laughable.

Dameon would wax in and out of sobriety, eyes as red the mat, his throw moves seeming more and more like elaborate but well-intentioned hugs. Two weeks into my first year, I started pinning him consistently. This was unfair because Dameon was a much better wrestler than I was. Or at least should have been. Freshman year, I was late-bloomer small, small in the sense that I bought clothes at Gap Kids and still had to worry about getting onto roller coasters. Dameon had already grown into his frame, with the thick wrestler neck and the forearm vasculature. He wasn't small; he was just short—and he had phenomenal reflexes. But in between his stoned blinks, I learned to kind of duck in, sweep out his legs, roll him over, and pin both of his shoulders, and I did this over and over again. He would laugh to himself and lie there until I helped him up. I was so industrious in my demolition of Dameon, it didn't occur to me that the wrestling team was probably his last foothold, the very tapering end on the funnel of our public school district, which had shuttled him from a single-parent home into the remedial gen. ed. classes and then onto an athletic team where his struggle could finally be given symbolic countenance in the arms of an opponent who was trying to bring him literally down to the ground. And when he lost that final struggle—when I, halfway through the season, took his place as the varsity 103-pounder—he quit the team. By then he had little else to fight for at school, so he quit that too and got shuttled back to Camden. Dameon was pinned, and I forgot about him.

It's difficult to describe the particular kind of nervousness I felt before my first wrestling match, except to say that it made me want to pee every four or five minutes. On some level this was strategic—everyone peed before weigh-ins to evacuate the water weight. Not that, for most kids, a few ounces' worth of urine

would make or break their classification, but more as a superstition thing. This was often the only real moment of interscholastic unity during the meets, when wrestlers from both teams would line up along a bank of urinals to shake out the last few drops. Then everyone would form two more lines in front of the scale, and when the coaches called your weight class, you stepped up with your opponent to have your body weighed to the hundredth decimal. All the wrestlers were nearly naked and the coaches sizing us up wore polo shirts and held clipboards where they jotted down our stats. When a particularly brutish kid stepped onto the scale, Giotti was in the habit of joking to the other coach: “Hank [Hank invariably being his name], what have you been feeding this kid?”—a joke that was meant at once to disguise his almost rabid thirst for victory and to implicitly sow doubt, in a sport plagued with some serious steroid problems, about what exactly Hank *had* been feeding the kid.

In the moment, though, I couldn't be worried about the too-obvious-to-even-talk-about homoeroticism, or the fact that in a thoroughly objectifying sport, weigh-ins in particular felt practically like horse trading. All I cared about was my opponent, who for my first match ever was a seventy-four-pound homunculus from Bishop Ahr Catholic High School. He scared me to death, as every kid I ever wrestled would, even once I started winning. We had about two seconds to try not to appraise each other too obviously, and then both teams left to regroup in their respective locker rooms. Lace the ASICS, strap the headgear, pull off the sweatpants, unbunch the unitard, onto the mat. Before the beginning of a wrestling match, each team gets to run out for five minutes and spar aggressively to a song of their choice. An improbable majority of teams, maybe 80 percent of them, choose Metallica's “Enter Sandman,” which—despite how grating and obvious it is, lyrics-wise—serves as a pretty handy guide to New Jersey wrestling culture. Think about the kids in your high school who wore Metallica shirts. Now think about those same kids taking supplements and beating each other up, and then it becoming routinized and school-sponsored so that they practice it for three hours every day. By and large, New Jersey wrestling was white, belligerent, and ambiguously disaffected. In the middle of the state, where the towns got bigger and the demographics more muddled, there were some exceptions. The Owls were mostly black and Hispanic, and instead

of Metallica, we ran out to “Pop Bottles,” by Birdman. At one point, the Rios brothers worked in a nice little shuffle-step to accompany, but gave it up after our fourth straight loss. “You’re not fucking good enough,” Giotti would tell us.

Which was almost definitely true against Bishop Ahr. The day of the match it was snowing outside, and the light inside the gym turned dark blue as it piled up in drifts and blotted the windowsills. Inside, the air was sweat-heavy, almost sepulchral. We were wrestling terribly. One by one we got pinned by the burly Catholics. The rule is that you never watch your teammate when his shoulders are being pressed to the mat—it’s like watching someone sob or masturbate. Getting pinned is maybe the purest moment of helplessness on offer in high school. And as with everything else that we try to keep private, too much of yourself seeps naked into your face.

So instead I watched my opponent from across the gym. He was wearing a hoodie two sizes too large and his feet just barely touched the ground. From inside his hood, he was grimacing at me, which is what you do if you are a below-average wrestler with something to prove (what this thing *is* never gets fully articulated, but you are always being told that you should wrestle “with something to prove”). There is, in fact, a whole hierarchy of pre-match semaphore. The good wrestlers never look at you. They strap their headgear tight and do dozens of pushups on the edge of the mat, or slam their heads aggressively into the padded walls. Some will even growl audibly. The really excellent wrestlers, the ones with no fear of losing, just smile at you.

The gym smelled like feet and the kid kept staring and I was scared so I went to go pee again. In the locker room, the 135-pounder had left out his lunchbox. I pilfered a brownie and washed it down with lemon-lime from a sports bottle. The locker room was empty and the brownie tasted weirdly like pine. It had small green flakes. I ate the whole thing and thought about how desperately I didn’t want to go back out onto the mat and have my small opponent scowl at me again. In the window above the showerheads, the blizzard crashed diagonally. The locker room felt all of a sudden uncomfortably quiet and saturated. I left and went back to the gym.

By the time the 103s were on deck, I was so high I could feel my pupils dilating. It was the kind of high where I was positive that everyone else was high with me. I kept imagining that

soon, both teams would realize how ludicrous the whole enterprise was and we would all meet in the middle of the mat to share PowerBars and cathartic handshakes like that story about the Germans and the British on Christmas Eve during WWI. I strapped on my headgear, trying to come up with something convincing to say about the armistice but then realizing that my lips were glued together. Instead I leaned over and sort of side-hugged our heavyweight, Sam Kean, who smelled like steak sauce and was a volunteer firefighter during the off season, and then it was time for my match. Giotti slapped me on the side of the head and told me to “fucking destroy this kid,” which sounded so mean that I actually giggled, which is something you are never, ever supposed to do before a wrestling match. The ref was beckoning and my opponent was crouched south-paw on the mat, thin wrists and a crew cut. He looked like an angry porcelain chess piece. I laughed again. Giotti pushed me onto the mat, and I arranged myself into what I thought seemed like an intimidating crouch, wondering momentarily whether Catholics were obliged to go easy on you if you asked them piously enough. Then the match started and I lunged at him.

I wasn't thinking about Dameon when we hit the mat. I wasn't thinking about how this was my first time getting high, and how of course it would happen accidentally on the night of my varsity debut. I wasn't thinking, really, at all anymore. I just held the Catholic kid down and waited for the clock to run out. I could feel him scowling.

It's embarrassing, when you come down to it, to have to bodily subdue a small stranger. To knock out his knees and twist his shoulders and know that he's trying his hardest. But as much as part of me wanted to walk off the mat and hitch home on the turnpike, a bigger and more sober part of me was rabid to win, and terrified to lose. These two feelings were so complexly intertwined as to be almost entirely fungible. I was, in any case, desperate to prove something. So I didn't let him up. It was six minutes of some of the worst wrestling anyone on either team had ever seen. My friend Hilson Marino, who made it his business not to mince words, told me afterward that we looked like two ferrets playing Twister.

Once I had come down far off enough to unglue my lips, I sensed the minor karmic irony: Dameon had been a way better stoned wrestler. And with this came a stab of guilt, and what I

thought was real empathy. It wasn't. Empathy would have required insight, and as it was, I missed some pretty basic questions. I didn't ask myself how, after three years, Dameon had lost the desperation that kept the rest of us coming to practice six days a week. Had he recognized then that it was all unsustainable? That victory on the mat meant exactly nothing? Maybe he was fed up: with the wins and the losses, with the complex and unending proof of self-worth. Whatever it was, somewhere along the line he'd been tricked. All of us had. Wrestling wasn't school, nor was it, to be sure, anything like "life," but had somehow come to take the place of both. So that by the time Dameon was aware of the bait-and-switch, maybe there weren't many options left. Everyone on the team would arrive too late at this same realization: that,

Wrestling wasn't school, nor was it, to be sure, anything like "life," but had somehow come to take the place of both.

as with all tautologies, it is impossible in wrestling to distinguish between the proof and whatever it is that is purportedly being proved. The only thing you really demonstrate by winning a wrestling match is your ability to win a wrestling match. I still didn't know this. I clung to the Catholic like a lifeboat until the whistle blew. After the ref raised my hand, I ran out of the gym and vomited in the nearest trash can. And even then—bent double, still high, puke on my unitard—it was safe to say I felt triumphant.

I joined the wrestling team to get tough. At the beginning of high school, my idea of toughness was still germinal, but I assumed it had something to do with endurance and something else to do with taking hits stoically. Up until eighth grade, I'd gone to a private Jewish day school where the only real athletic offering was gym class Wiffle ball, so the idea of taking on a physical challenge seemed romantic, a clear mark of impending adulthood, something to pit myself against. The fact that I was small only added to it. Other teams weren't really in the market for wiry, five-foot-three-inch featherweights; wrestling had a specific and demarcated weight class for them. And I loved the

idea of defying expectations, of becoming physically powerful, even dangerous, despite the fact that, standing next to my classmates in line for the cafeteria, I remained at around elbow-level.

In the week before the season began, Giotti threw a pizza party for prospective recruits. It was at a windowless neon-on-gray pizza shop, a block up from the high school. It'd be generous, actually, to call it a party. At each table there was a single plain pie, a pitcher of Mountain Dew, and a stack of paper plates. The whole thing had the air of a last meal, and for most of the team it was, at least provisionally—those trying to slot down into a lower weight class wouldn't see pizza for another five months. The greasy, plain slice I ate at the party would eventually come to take on immense meaning; halfway through the season, I'd start to conjure it compulsively, mapping the thing in my head from peak to crust. It was impossible, though, to know all of this in advance. Mostly I ate quietly and listened to Giotti speak and tapped my fingers on the Formica. It's difficult now to remember all of what was said, but at one point Giotti pointed at me and made me stand up. "Look at this fucking kid—tiny as hell but he's still coming out." He put his hands on my shoulders. "We're gonna make this kid into a fucking warrior." It was what I'd been waiting to hear. I joined the team the next day.

By the end of my first season, I'd gotten quick, even if I still wasn't particularly tough. I very rarely pinned anyone. My specialty was the Smith single, a spastic, darting takedown where I'd grab the back of my opponent's ankle and drive my shoulder into his shin. The guys I wrestled were built by and large like fire hydrants: squat with short limbs, neck-less. As I got better, I realized I couldn't keep them down, so I stopped trying. I would just let them up and then take them down again, so that sometimes I'd score fifteen takedowns and win by default. I was far from the best, but by sophomore year I was winning decently more than I was losing, and I had developed a particular style that looked almost like I was fencing—scurrying in and out of range, making sure not to get caught in a grapple.

But, despite my agility, I was not a very smart wrestler, and it was this, ultimately, that kept me coming back long after practices began to feel so insurmountably draining that I actually came to dread the end of the school day. I was smart at other things. In school I had never had to try very hard—I was good

at estimating the amount of work I needed to put in to do well on an exam, and I usually put in exactly that much. I wasn't learning so much as strategically allotting my efforts, and when I got all As it was more a vindication of my method than the result of anything resembling scholastic motivation. I would feign surprise and flattery when a *Great Job!* came scrawled in green ink at the top of my Scantron, but really I was a Machiavelli in school, and I was bored.

So I fixated on wrestling instead. I became obsessed with how dumb I was at wrestling. And I really was: dumb, unthinking, imprudent, adrenal. I lost myself on the mat. Coach Giotti would shout instructions from out of bounds, but I never heard them. As soon as the whistle blew, everything outside the wrestling circle got cut off, blurred at the edges, as if the funnel of a hurricane had anchored itself in the middle of the gym with me and my opponent isolated together in the eye. It was all silent half-panic; I made no decisions. My movements were subject entirely to a gorge of brute instinct, dredged up from somewhere in my lizard brain, that told me in not so many words to go for the legs. My aggression was rote, and I would take shots even when I didn't have to, even when I was already up by several takedowns. When I lost, it was usually because I'd been outsmarted—the other guy had been more patient, more economizing with his single-legs, content to deflect my manic offense and then catch me on a reversal. Some of the best wrestlers in the state often took only a single shot during the entire six-minute match. I was in the habit of taking ten or twenty.

My stupidity motivated me. It made wrestling difficult, way more difficult than school had ever been. Winning was all the more gratifying when it came with the realization—almost impossibly exciting—that I could actually lose sometimes. I poured more and more of myself into making sure this wouldn't happen. The sport came gradually to supplant academics as the primary vehicle for all the day-to-day dramas of my ambition. I fasted, trained harder, never missed a practice.

It was because it required so much of me that I grew obsessed with wrestling. I was intoxicated by how challenging it was, by the newfound fear of failure that beat a steady drum in the hollow of my chest from November through the end of the season in March. I stuck with it, past the hunger, past the physical exhaustion, past Giotti telling us, for the dozenth time, that we

were pussies if we needed to drink water after practice. And at the beginning of my junior year, my mania paid off: I was chosen as team captain, even though by that time I had let myself admit, haltingly, and only in the back of my head, that I hated the sport.

In wrestling, you are taught that the sport is a tool. No one wrestles to wrestle. An experienced coach will tell you that first thing. Wrestling is a self-improvement program, and success on the mat is supposed to augur a lifetime of victory—you pin a job, then pin a wife, and when it comes time for promotion, you cinch up your tie and pin the interview. In almost all of our locker-room pep talks, wrestling was couched in allegorical terms as the struggle that embodied all struggle, a catch-all conceit for adversity overcome. I suspect this was true for most other teams too because this particular myth—that wrestling is somehow universal, that it lays bare certain fundamental truths of self—is crucial for the perpetuation of the sport. And it's an easy sell. Easy in that wrestling, as the least stylized martial

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art, comes the closest of any sport to actually mimicking real human combat. If we accept the premise that most athletics serve as some sort of stand-in for inter-clan warfare, then wrestling honors that human ur-sport

most faithfully. Wrestling was, by most accounts, the first competition to be adapted from the battlefield, serving as the backbone of the earliest Olympic Games in Ancient Greece, themselves only a step removed from the bloodsport being waged among the city-states. Compared to newer sports—those with positions and strategy, those that require balls with a specific circumference and stitching pattern—wrestling is basically neolithic in its simplicity. And so it's easiest, with wrestling, to suspend your disbelief and imagine that you are engaged in a genuine struggle, with high and nonarbitrary stakes. Every time you step onto the mat, you symbolically fight every battle you've ever waged. Is what you are told. Is what you are

eager, in early high school, to believe. Which is maybe why, in a reasonably diverse high school, the wrestling team was usually poorer and less white than average. The sport tended disproportionately to attract the kids already waging serious uphill battles, the ones with the most to prove. So wrestling became a kind of rudimentary litmus for class, and the team took on an importance beyond itself, a particular redemptive fervor. This is maybe also the reason why no one ever said that they “played” wrestling. Basketball was something you played. If you were a wrestler, you just wrestled.

So it came as a shock when Dameon stopped caring. The rest of us couldn’t stop. We kept coming back and trying harder, confident that wrestling still held the key to some basic proof, and with it a lasting and as-yet-unnamed glory. When Giotti told us this—at practice after practice, with an accompanying, often autobiographical parable—did Dameon realize it was a myth? Maybe he was the first on the team to actually understand what wrestling was: a game, no more or less consequential than any other game you might play after school to fill up hours. The moment this comes to light, wrestling is no longer worth it. Because, as a sport, wrestling is undeniably, unremittingly miserable. By sophomore year, I had bulked up to a natural 120, but was still cutting to 103 pounds for matches. My calorie intake hovered around three to four hundred per day in-season, which meant that I ate two baby carrots for breakfast and half a veggie burger for dinner and generally avoided the cafeteria during lunchtime. If I was 106 pounds the night before a match, I put on a sweater and long underwear, cranked up the shower, and did jumping jacks in the steam. If I didn’t sweat out enough water weight, I chewed gum and spat into a Poland Spring bottle all morning, hoping for discretion in the back of the class. I got headaches because I wasn’t eating enough and more headaches because my head was getting smashed around in practice (Giotti liked to drill moves with names like “the guillotine”). Weird infections lifted off the mats and colonized my skin—ringworm on my right leg and MRSA on my back. Mid-season I got a staph infection lanced with local anesthetic, so I couldn’t feel it when they made the cut but I could feel it when a small creek of blood wicked off my back and onto the floor of the OR. I was back weeks later with something called “cauliflower ear,” which is when your ears are ground too hard

into the mat and suddenly balloon with fluid and harden into little fleshy geodes on the side of your head. I assume that bled too, but I was put to sleep during the operation. The season never stopped, so I wrestled with gauzy bandages taped to my body. By junior year, the calipers measured me at less than 2 percent body fat—Giotti joked that, at this point, I was “just lips.” This was by no means exceptional. Everyone on the team suffered for the team: broken wrists, little food, intermittent exhaustion. We all thought we were on a vision quest.

This was an impulse Giotti worked hard to reinforce. At the beginning of every season, we were gathered into a classroom to watch *Vision Quest*, the only blockbuster ever made about high school wrestling. Even for 1985, it was a stupid movie. The protagonist’s name is Loudon. Loudon is an average high schooler, until he decides that this is his moment to make his mark in the world and so diets down three weight classes and defeats the best wrestler in the state. There are montages of Loudon grimacing in a head lock, Loudon jumping rope in an empty gym under a single floodlight, Loudon running down the highway in a neoprene sweatsuit at four a.m. Loudon is almost never in class. At the end, when he’s accomplished his quest and bested his rival, he gets to fuck a girl named Carla, who looks sort of like a young Liv Tyler. Journey plays during the credits.

Even though we knew it was a joke, the movie never stopped being seductive. You couldn’t get that kind of glory going to class. There was no ref to raise your hand in triumph when you got a 92 on your history midterm. Wrestling seemed to us the last and best proof of ourselves. It wasn’t an extracurricular so much as it set up an alternative curriculum, one that could circumvent school on the path to some more ultimate achievement. The kids who got roped in were the ones who failed tests, the poor kids with few college prospects, the 103-pounders with a significant chip on their bird-thin shoulders. Wrestling provided a masochistic proxy for the struggles of class and confidence we couldn’t articulate, and promised us a universal succor if we won. And many of us did, pinning kids over and over again, until we were addicted to the brief high of instantaneous and unalloyed victory. But wrestling wasn’t school, as our coaches were sure to remind us, and it ended abruptly in twelfth grade. Kids who had spent all of high school on the mat found them-

selves alone with a winning record and no vision and no quest. For many, then, the only wars left to wage were the real ones.

The Iraq War troop surge was announced in early 2007. I was a junior and we were preparing for the post-season. In practice, Giotti would tell us to wrestle like we were “wrestling Saddam,” even though Saddam had been dead for a month and we were still frittering our troops away down the side-streets of Fallujah.

Joe Prudhom’s big year was 2007. There had always been talk of college scholarships, should he make states, and in winter, Joe’s practicing took on a particular culminating fervor. He began lugging dumbbells around school and spooning little heaps of powdered creatine into his water. He stopped dipping, even, doing away with the tobacco-spit bottle he cradled to his lips, looking out the window of the bus on the ride home from a loss. Joe looked like Frankenstein’s monster—with an impossibly high forehead and wide-set, sloping shoulders—and the effect only got more pronounced as the creatine kicked in and his arms began to sag and distend with added muscle. His father was some sort of aging hippie, a white man with a long white ponytail who spoke softly to his heaving son after matches. Joe’s mother was black and used to coach Little League at the park on weekends. She had died years before, most people said from drugs. They were a family of two now, so Joe’s father came to every match, planting himself high up in the bleachers, occasionally shouting his son’s name but never anything else.

Joe lost only four times that season, and was seeded high for the district tournament. In the weeks before, the Owls ran up and down the staircases of our empty high school at night, a peal of noise in the sudden hallways, Joe grunting and lunging down the steps in threes. He trained with Hilson Marino, and the two of them would sometimes stay and drill for hours after practice had ended, persuading the janitors to keep the lights on for them. Hilson was about the same weight, and a tireless wrestling partner. He could also grow an impressively thick moustache, which helped with the Saddam impressions. After Joe pinned him, Hilson would get up and fall again, arm raised in imitation of the statue in central Baghdad that had been toppled shortly after the invasion.

At night, sometimes we watched American soldiers on TV ex-

changing small-arms fire with the jihadists, who were always somehow off camera, implied but never actually glimpsed. In the morning, we went jogging with the team. Practices were harder and longer, and we were no longer allowed a water break in the middle. Giotti decided also that we would no longer run out to Birdman, and instead chose the Foo Fighters, a song called “Best of You.” In the chorus, Dave Grohl asks incessantly: “Is someone getting the best, the best, the best, the best of you?” We weren’t ready to consider that the answer could be yes, or that the culprit could be anyone but the opposing team. All of us, if we thought about it at all, were still under the impression that wrestling got the best *out* of us.

The morning of districts, we gathered in a freezing parking lot before dawn to board the bus to the tournament, everyone silent but Giotti, who roved between the seats, shaking us awake to tell us that “today’s the fucking day, boys.” All over central Jersey, wrestlers were being bused in silence toward a vaulted, echoing gym in Woodbridge. They were hungry and nervous, hunched down into their seats, mulling the names of their first-round opponents. When the buses unloaded in the parking lot of the school, the teams slouched in together, groggy and color-coded, jumbling toward the scales. At the head of each team, a coach, the manic and striding ambassador, pumping hands with all the other coaches, with the parents, with the ROTC recruiting officer stationed conspicuously at a booth near the entrance to the gym. It is the rare wrestling coach, especially in New Jersey, who dons a suit and tie, even for big tournaments—as a breed they go more for the tracksuit plus combover, ex-mafioso look. The ROTC guy, on the other hand, was sporting a starched uniform and a crew cut, and some of the wrestlers stopped at the table to put down their names and check the “more information” box.

What it was, was triage. The military was there to catch your fall when wrestling dead-ended in a loss, which it almost always does, unless, like Loudon, you beat absolutely everyone. No one questioned the implicit alliance between the armed forces and the New Jersey interscholastic wrestling federation—both dealt in combat, in martial discipline, in young men eager for proof. In 2009, the National Wrestling Hall of Fame made these connections explicit, publishing a book titled *Glory Beyond the Sport: Wrestling and the Military*. William Howard Taft was

an avid wrestler, and so, apparently, was Calvin Coolidge. Both Washington and Lincoln excelled at folk grappling styles with names like “collar and elbow” or “catch-as-catch-can”—styles made antique by modern athletic standardization. And then of course there’s Donald Rumsfeld, the original architect of the Baghdad invasion.

Wrestling and the military feed off each other because they share a goal in common: convincing young men to sacrifice for victory. To warrant sacrifice, the victories need to be given weight, so the stakes are contorted—victory becomes somehow a matter of pride and individual character, something worth starving or losing a leg for. War relies on the deliberate conflation of personal struggle with institutionalized conflict. Army recruiting slogans tell this story best: “Be All You Can Be,” “Army of One.” In other words, *prove yourself*. The dogma lends an instant purpose to the young men who’d been searching for one, so that the worst job in the world—one that pays you about \$20,000 to leave your

family and bivouac in a desert full of insurgents who want to kill you—seems suddenly worth it for the glory. The same conflation was at work on our wrestling team, and the sense of singular

purpose was no less addictive. Highland Park High School wrestlers gave up way more for the sport than they ever did for school. No one studied for tests like they practiced for matches. Wrestling just meant more. And so we sacrificed for victory, even if it was never totally clear what victory would mean once the fight was over.

And maybe this was the problem with the Iraq War, but everyone kept on sacrificing anyway. A few weeks after the district tournament, wrestling would lose its greatest contemporary hero, Doug Zembiec, better known as the “Lion of Fallujah,” a heavily medalled U.S. Army rifle commander. His famed grit was first recognized in high school, where he won his state wrestling tournament two years running. In college at Navy, the NCAA had twice declared him an All-American. As a soldier in Bagh-

Wrestling and the military feed off each other because they share a goal in common: convincing young men to sacrifice for victory.

dad, his bravery and valor were similarly celebrated. When he was killed—honorably, in a firefight—the *Washington Post* ran a glowing obituary, dubbing him “a Memorable Marine.” Soon afterward, his high school alma mater rechristened its wrestling room in his honor. And somehow, the heroism would inspire more than the violence would dissuade; the pipeline from wrestling to war would get reinforced in the obituaries, and many of the Owls would eventually enlist in the Glory Beyond.

Joe wound up losing in the semis to a white kid with a mohawk from Woodbridge. In the locker room beforehand, the kid had asked him what race he was. There was a small Swastika flag taped to the inside of his sports locker. Joe lost the match 4-2. Afterward, his father came down in overalls from the stands to pour water over his face. Giotti smacked the side of his head and said nothing. No Owls made states that year. In May, around the time that Major Zembiec’s body was draped in an American flag and loaded ceremoniously onto a supply plane headed for Washington, Joe decided he would join the Marines.

Before you got pinned, you bridged. Even though you knew it wouldn’t work, you bridged: arching your back violently, elevating your shoulders off the mat so that you looked like you’d been paralyzed suddenly in analeptic shock. Your opponent’s weight settled slowly into the middle of your chest and your head stuck gaspingly out from beneath, eyes scanning the steel trusses three stories up in the roof of the gym. Bridging was the final recourse, meant mainly to salvage pride by forestalling the inevitable. Sometimes you could avoid a pin by running out the clock. But once you were bridging, you weren’t going to win; the move was meant only to determine how badly you would lose.

When you bridged in practice, Giotti dropped to the floor and looked you straight in the face and started hissing: “*Getthefuckup. Getthefuckup. GET. THE. FUCK. UP!*” And then when your shoulder blades sank inexorably to the mat, he smacked his palm down three times—right near your head with a crack, so that it left a small indent in the foam—to make sure you knew you’d been pinned.

Afterward he’d give a speech. “You have to make the decision. Once you make it, it’s fucking done. To never get pinned again. I fucking did it. I fought for my life down there.” We sat hunched and beat in the center of the mat while Giotti paced

manically at the edges, stopping every now and then to hack brown sludge into a plastic dixie cup. Before ninth grade I'd never heard of dipping tobacco, so I assumed he had some rare consumptive disease that was pumping dark phlegm up from his lungs. Which fit perfectly into the caricature: Giotti was nothing if not expectorant. During his speeches, he got lurid; Mephistophelian, heavy jagged eyebrows; and a thinning, black widow's peak. Average height, average build, the skin sagging and pallid around his eyes. We were all scared of him. Even when he wasn't screaming, the temper pulsed through his frame, tautening all his movements and sharpening his syllables. His whole body was like a clenched fist.

He was an asshole, but, as is probably the case with most assholes, it wasn't all his doing, and it's very important to acknowledge this. Scott Giotti was what came out of New Jersey high school wrestling if you followed it to its logical conclusion. He had grown up in Edison, a little to the north and down a tax bracket, the son of a father who, he would tell us, still used the belt. He was small, desperately small, and whenever he reminded us of this, he would point at me: "Smaller than fuckin' Sherrell!" The narrative of his own ascent in the wrestling world was a carefully curated underdog story, and he told it to us so often, it seemed at times like he was speaking mainly to himself.

"You couldn't keep me down. Me and my brother both, we were fuckin' nuts. We trained every day at practice, then went home and wrestled the shit out of each other. You'd go to the mall, sometimes you'd get in fights, and we didn't have to be afraid of anybody. People fuckin' knew that. Giottis meant business." He looked at each of us then, nodding slowly, as if impelling us to agree with him. "Before I did wrestling, there was this girl in home room—she wouldn't even look at me. Didn't even know my fuckin' name. By senior year, I was a champion, all-district. She fuckin' wanted it then and I just dropped her. And I could beat up my fucking dad then too. Left 'em behind. I made my rules."

During these speeches, it almost made you sad to look at him, dressed in graying tennis shoes and a sweatshirt, resuscitating urgently all his old glories. The irony was that Giotti had never made states, never even won districts. After graduation, he hung around Edison until he found a temp job as the elementary school gym teacher. But he still clung to wrestling, becom-

ing first the assistant and then the head coach of the Highland Park varsity wrestling team. His brother had stayed too and was a cop now, and his father was dying slowly of cancer. Both of them came to every home match, brother still in uniform, father breathing laboriously through tubes connected to a dented, green oxygen canister sitting one row down in the stands. Sometimes if we lost, the father would tell us, in a barely audible asthmatic whisper, that we'd wrestled "like pussies," the S's all sibilant and crazy. At night, Giotti told us, he'd drive his father home and put him to bed. Sometimes he'd come to our houses and ask our parents if we'd been drilling moves in our free time and what had we been eating lately.

It was hard to think about how badly he wanted it without wanting it that badly yourself. His desperation was terrifying and infectious—in this way he was a perfect wrestling coach. But he was also just as much a by-product of wrestling, another lower-middle-class kid who'd found a momentary sense of purpose, only to have the mat pulled out from under him by the

But it's hard not to think of wrestling as the crucible that had hardened all the likelihoods . . . into something like fate.



end of high school. Of course there were other reasons to explain why Giotti had ended up like he did, angry and girlfriend-less, with a wardrobe full of Owls Varsity sweatpants and a fast receding hairline.

His father was a bully, he'd probably hated school, and he had never lived anywhere outside of central New Jersey. But it's hard not to think of wrestling as the crucible that had hardened all the likelihoods—set by his class, his temperament, and his upbringing—into something like fate. So that now he was coaching wrestling in the town over from the town where he grew up, and he'd do it until his father died, and keep doing it till he was just as old. His life was one protracted bridge, a violent straining, a waiting for the clock to run out.

It was always Matt Gorman who bore the brunt of this frustration. Matt was our best wrestler, the only one of us who'd ever placed first in the district, winning at 175 pounds his junior year. He wasn't flashy—his takedowns were kind of torpid

and deliberate—but he had a bull-like, enduring strength and could usually just outlast his opponents. Giotti fixated on Matt because he had the best chance of any of us to actually turn wrestling into something—a scholarship maybe, or at least a trophy—and this provoked in Giotti an obsessive, vicarious mania. But Matt’s success was also a succession: Giotti’s accomplishments were being eclipsed, and it was hard to tell whether he loved or hated Matt for it.

In practice, when he was demonstrating a new move, he would demand that Matt be the one to drill it with him. Matt would get to his feet in front of the team and stand there expectantly and then Giotti would lunge in and take out his legs. They’d hit the mat hard on a slant, Giotti popping up again into a crouch. “Get the fuck up, Gorman.” Matt would get back up, and Giotti would take him down, shouting nonsensically, hitting the mat, bouncing back up. Over and over again, like Matt was a cardboard cutout he kept propping back up. The team would get quiet and embarrassed, Giotti still tackling Matt and then getting back up and tackling him and getting back up until the gym was silent except for the metered thuds and Giotti clearly wasn’t demonstrating anything anymore. This too was a proof, but of what we didn’t quite know.

Senior year, Matt placed third in regions, good enough for the memories but not good enough to take him anywhere. He tried his luck at Temple for a semester, but eventually moved back to Highland Park to take classes at Rutgers. He began stopping by the high school gym on late afternoons in winter, parking his car in the slush, grabbing his headgear and his Owls unitard from a bag in the trunk. Inside, the new team would be drilling with the heat turned high, and Matt would join in, throwing his bulk around gingerly, taking his time with the explanations. Eventually he’d start coming every day, and Giotti would ask him to be his assistant coach. I imagine them still drilling headlocks obsessively, gripping each other by the neck, getting carried away in rhythm and fatigue. And I imagine Giotti, after the final takedown, slapping his hand down three times next to Matt’s head. Because by then they were both pinned.

Despite the matching maroon unitards and gear bags, the matching maroon-on-black sweatshirts with the drawstring hoods, I was still always an outlier. White, scrawny, bookish.

High Honor Roll, etc. For the most part, the rest of the Owls didn't look like me, didn't take the same classes, didn't have two parents with PhDs. I brought my calculus textbook to tournaments. Teammates would walk into the locker room and catch me scribbling cross-legged in an unused shower stall. At night, I'd eat the small, frozen diet meals that my mom bought at Stop & Shop to help me keep my weight low. I had, in other words, grades, money, and a family I could fall back on. In a way, this meant I was even more gullible and masochistic than the rest of my teammates. At least they could have said they were wrestling for lack of options. I had no such excuse.

But I'm trying to be careful here not to indulge in the ritual declaration of privilege that can sometimes serve to exorcise guilt. These acknowledgements aren't meant as a confession, and certainly not as any kind of absolution. From the safety of hindsight, that all seems a little too easy. Because (and this may be obvious but it's also, I think, important to say) I didn't really think this way then. I thought about my next match, about making weight, about how many fluid ounces of skim milk I would allow myself for dinner later that night. Every morning, I'd take a piss and then climb the stairs to our attic where we kept an old doctor's scale with lead weights that I would slide along the top until they dropped into the groove corresponding to my exact weight. Willing it to drop at exactly 103, but more often than not having to push it up to 106 or 107, knowing that each of those pounds would need to be lifted from my frame by match day. Wrestling shrank me until most of what I felt could be contained in the immediate envelope between the day before yesterday and the day after tomorrow. My horizons winnowed; I began thinking in time with my metabolism. I was too caught up to fully realize that I was the exception that proved the rule.

Giotti knew it, though, and he'd use my grades as a weapon. By junior year, I was paraded around at tournaments and presented as a sort of trophy to the other coaches. "Hey, Hank, guess where this fuckin' kid's applying for college?" Hank would guess wrong and then snort and give me a once-over when I told him. "Pretty mean single-leg too," Giotti would say, and then they'd share a look like *this fucking nerd*. I wouldn't say anything, but would stand there anomalously, the smallish talisman of a scholastic institution that found little traction on the wrestling mat. The same kind of reaction came the day

I made National Honor Society. Giotti sat us down and announced, with a similar half-joking sneer, that “Sherrell made it into the fuckin’ smart-kid club.” It was a balancing act. My grades needed to be fetishized and derogated at the same time—touted as an accomplishment, but never as anything that might rival true victory, which could come only on the mat. In this way, scholastic achievement was celebrated winkingly and kept at bay. Wrestlers, after all, had to keep their priorities in line.

It was seen as quite enough, on the wrestling team, to maintain the C average that guaranteed athletic eligibility. When someone’s grades dropped below this benchmark, they were encouraged to pick them back up to the point where they’d be ready to wrestle again. Which is not to say that there weren’t some highly intelligent Highland Park wrestlers; it’s just that, on a team that defined itself mainly in opposition to school, intelligence became a curio. Filigree on the victory garland. And between the dieting, the weekends spent at tournaments, and the insistence on the unique glory of corporal discipline, grades could sometimes fall by the wayside.

Fortunately for me, the anti-intellectualism peddled at practice was at least partially made up for by my family’s strong academic bent. Held in balance between countervailing priorities, my grades didn’t suffer. And so now I’ve “made it out,” and my privilege is compounded in the opportunity to write about making it out, and it all seems doubly unfair because this essay isn’t, or at least shouldn’t, be about me. It’s about Matt and Joe. It’s about the Owls who graduated with nothing but medals, who then kept coming back, or else moved on only to bigger fights with higher stakes. It’s about Dameon, who got out, then fell hard on the same lack—of opportunity, of recognition—that had made wrestling so attractive in the first place. It’s about Dameon, whom I couldn’t find to consult on this essay. And then, only by extension and for the sake of symmetry, is it about me. Because two years after I took his spot, I followed Dameon and quit the team.

It was the week before my senior season, and I had been a captain for a year. There was some minor buzz, going in, about what kind of damage I would be able to do in-district. I still needed to drop a dozen pounds.

By that time, I was thinking constantly about food and weight. Instead of going to lunch, I’d sit in the library and sali-

vate over back issues of *Bon Appetit*. Little bulbs of guilt had grown up around every meal, so that I couldn't eat without picturing Giotti hacking angrily into a bottle of tobacco spit. Even after practice, I'd spend an hour on the treadmill and have stress dreams if my weight wasn't dropping fast enough. By the time I was eighteen, I knew enough to know that this was unhealthy and that, ultimately, I didn't want it enough. I made the decision standing on the scale in my attic, absently flicking the weight back and forth, dropping it in turn into each groove: 100, 150, 200, 250. I stepped down and it leveled off at zero.

Over the next few weeks I had trouble sleeping. I'd quit the team, but I hadn't left it. Even though I knew it was the right choice, the decision itself had still felt excruciating. So much of my identity in high school had been forged around wrestling

So much of my identity in high school had been forged around wrestling that I couldn't bring myself to fully disavow it.



that I couldn't bring myself to fully disavow it. I felt undeniably like a quitter, like the bulk of me would remain unproven, or perhaps even disproven. So while Dameon had dropped out quietly, I made a big scene of it,

actually crying when I told Matt and Hilson, and again when I told Giotti. And unlike for Dameon, everything turned out fine for me. By that time, I knew I'd be going to college. My mother suggested I try out for the musical. It was *The Music Man* that year, and so suddenly after school, I would put on a pinstriped suit and harmonize in tenor. I learned to tap dance. I met girls. And even though I couldn't stop caring about wrestling, I was at least allowed to salvage something new and move on. Dameon—even if he had managed to stop caring, even if he'd had the maturity to decouple himself entirely from the sport—had very few places to move on to.

On the first day of practice, Giotti would tell the team that he had guessed that I was tough but that he had guessed wrong. Which, when I heard this, reminded me of another guess he'd made, the season before, after a particularly punishing Saturday-morning practice over Christmas break. It had been snowing lightly, and everyone was dressed in sweats. We'd come in

from running five miles around the frozen high school track, one behind the next, coughing steam from our hoods. The wide grass on the football field was matted with ice. On the red track, the ice looked black, and we danced and skidded to avoid falling. From the fifty-yard line, his voice gusting away from him, Giotti screamed at us to run faster. When we came inside and took off our gloves, he sat everyone down for a speech. He was angry. "In wrestling, you need to fuckin' work harder than that. The only way to become great is to keep pushing, always. This is it. This is where you have to fuckin' pick it up. You gotta get that big win. Sherrell can do whatever the fuck he wants. The rest of you are stuck here."

In the summer of 2009, after his final season, Hilson Marino joined the army and moved to South Carolina for basic training. Even before I'd made it up to school, Hilson was shipped to Kandahar for his first tour. In the spring, he came back on leave with a bullet wound across his left temple and another high on his chest and called me from his mom's house to ask if I wanted to get coffee. "Which place?" I asked. Hilson said, "Any place," and I picked PJ's because it was quiet and I knew he didn't want to run into anyone. Hilson had moved from Colombia freshman year and joined the wrestling team even before he learned what the word *sacrifice* meant. "Sacrifice," Giotti had screamed in practice once, "means we're not in fuckin' Colombia anymore, Marino!"

The coffee shop where we met had been converted from a bank and still had that tiled, anesthetized feel. We were both ten minutes early, anxious, aware of how transparently we'd have to search for common ground. Hilson had hefty cheekbones, a knife of a nose, skull-hugging hair, a Colombian flag tattooed on his arm, no smile, a firm hug. He didn't order anything. He spoke quickly and, it was clear, was having a hard time remembering how to act like a civilian. He wasn't one, really, anymore: in a month he was going back to Afghanistan, to defend a tiny mountain outpost where he'd be woken up in the dark by gunfire, scrambling from his cot, pulling on boots and a vest, sprinting toward the perimeter to shoot rounds into the foothills that glowed red through his goggles. He had been placed in command of fifteen other privates, and most of it was just giving them things to do when they weren't getting shot at, and what could he do to

relieve the unbearable tension and boredom but to throw down cards every once in a while and watch movies on a laptop in the mess hall. He showed me the scars, which looked like stubby worms or like small mounds of wax. The one on his temple cut back into his hairline like a racing stripe, and he kept drawing his finger along the ridges. He pulled down his shirt, and on his chest was another small dent, and he said, "Taliban," but without any of the weight that other people were attaching to the word, saying it just exactly like you'd point to a bug bite and say, "Bug bite."

We ended up talking wrestling because that was our only touchstone, and because I had decided before I arrived that I was going to try not to talk about college. Hilson told me a bunch of the guys on his base had also wrestled, and he'd organized a tournament to pass a few hours. They'd begun in the late afternoon, when the temperatures sank down into the mid-eighties and the shadows from the barbed wire perimeter grew in loops toward the center of the compound. The sand was cool and soft on the shoulders, and you could drive pretty hard with the double-leg. They took off their shoes, and the one guy who volunteered to ref made a big show of raising everyone's hand in triumph. The floodlights came on soon; the wind picked up. And it wasn't glory so much as pretending like the stakes were bounded again, and that there was somewhere a point and a goal to justify their sacrifice. Everyone came up dusty and longing. I asked Hilson who won, but he didn't answer.

TENEBRAE

*Winner of the 2014 AWP Intro Journals Project in Creative Nonfiction,
selected by Lee Martin*

I recently woke up to the jimmy bird and the weiner bird calling rakishly from the outspread arms of the evergreens. Their chatter wasn't hard to parse: *You want some of this?* As it was barely spring, I envied their optimism, but I admit I bought into it a little bit too. The sky had gone from gray to blue overnight, after all; dozens of March disappointments aside, why not hope for better things? Moved by the same impulse that drove me as a child to dump my winter coat on the closet floor long before the fruit trees bloomed and tromp hunched and shivering to the school bus stop—pink cardigan slipped over my shoulders like a little maiden aunt—I reached up from my bed and pushed open the window. “Jimmy jimmy jimmy!” the report burst through the screen, then “weiner weiner weiner!” in emphatic shrieks. Back and forth they volleyed, beside themselves, it seemed, with joy. I got up and put on the kettle.

Doubtless the jimmy and weiner birds have proper, more dignified names, but I don't know what they are. No Annie Dillard with her nuthatches and warblers, no Thoreau with his wood thrushes and whippoorwills, I've not taken up with birds. Weak-eyed and too clumsy for bird-watching, which requires a will and balance for thrashing through the underbrush, I choose to ruminate instead on trees, which have a happy propensity for standing still. Sinking annually into an Adirondack chair on my crumbling patio on a spring afternoon, back aching from performing scores of little abortions—uprooting the embryonic maples that plant themselves in the English ivy each year—I squint into a panoply of light and leaf and think about complexity.

Though scientists argue it's not easy to define, biological complexity is generally conceded to match up nicely with our own thick cortexes. It is a condition much admired by those of us who, among the living multitudes, make up our planet's proud complexity team. And while the fossil record insists more complex creatures are more *evolved*, who's to say they outrank

in grandeur or significance life's simpler forms? We say it—we are the world's great sayers.

Inspired by the recent intrusion of spring, which seemed to have burst through the wrong door and was no doubt scrambling for a way out, my neighbor George stepped outside and fired up his grill. As the aroma of his charring steak wafted over the fence to where I was squishing through the damp yard in wellies, rummaging for the small fists that would become fiddleheads, he waved at me with his tongs. Great as the grilling smelled even to my effete, vegetarian nose—and I took a moment to savor it—I couldn't help considering it critically beside the seamless photosynthesis transpiring above.

How elegantly those big firs feed, making a meal of soil and light. So different from our own complicated blood-rites, where even nibbling quiche in a pretty café generally starts in a slaughterhouse and ends in a sewer. Who is living a loftier life? We with the napkins on our laps?

When George speared his steak and took it inside, I kicked off my muddy boots at the door and went in to sketch by the fire, where, bereft of both talent and training, I'd been trying all winter to draw. I'd taken it up because I wanted to *see differently*,

For weeks, I churned out wobbly rectangles as the short days darkened, eventually rounding them into loaves that vaguely resembled bread.

as I believe artists do, able as they are to find lines in a landscape and, by lines, transfer a landscape to an empty page. I'd been scratching at the door of this mystery cult all my life and finally, jonesing for gnosis through trial

and error, I turned to my friend Rhonda, a gifted artist herself, who teaches art at our school. She gamely sent me home with a book called *Starting to Draw*.

For weeks, hunched over a sketch pad in a pool of lamplight, I churned out wobbly rectangles as the short days darkened, eventually rounding them into shapes that vaguely resembled loaves of bread, rippling lines to affect an uneven crust as shown on page 21 of *Starting to Draw*. Graduating to books stacked on the kitchen table, I sketched without warps the slightly warped copy of Paul Gallico's *The Snow Goose*, a Christmas gift from

my daughter, Anna. I drew Evelyn Waugh's book of travel essays, *Waugh Abroad*, laid next to *The Jefferson Bible*, trying to shade where shadows fell, working on *value*. Then, propped together in what turned out to be a loose triptych of sacred longing, I drew Wendell Berry's *New Collected Poems* flanked by *Chinese Love Poems*, a slim, elegant volume published in 1942 by Peter Pauper Press, and Karen Armstrong's diminutive *Buddha*, a biography. Fumbling to find the angles and lines, I complained to Rhonda at school. "You'll start to see outlines," she promised. "You'll learn to see the light."

A few chilly weeks later—spring had, in fact, made a break for it—my husband, Larry, and I flew to Washington, DC, where crows heckled us as we shivered between museums. Larry was indulging me. Sure, he would go to the National Gallery of Art, this man who had recently wondered out loud why people who could take photographs would continue to paint. "I know two kinds of art—big and small," he remarked archly as we headed downstairs to the concourse that connected the east and west wings of the museum. "That," he continued, pointing to a mural, "is big art." We were making our way to the modern wing, where I knew there might be trouble.

Like many people with scant knowledge of art, my gallery tastes run to impressionism; I like its pretty and menacing distortions, its rippling light and shattered skies, its haystacks and holocausts. But it was sculpture I was after that morning, and finding the Giacometti exhibit meant blundering through the twentieth century's non-representational art, a genre for which Larry, a man of notable patience, has no patience at all. Put him in a room of Rothkos and he positively bristles.

I'd first come upon Alberto Giacometti's long, inchoate human figures at the Tate Modern in London one summer when, renegeing on my responsibilities to care for my ailing mother and returning her to my tired sister, who'd looked after her all during the school year, I was escorting students as they traveled abroad. Rounding a corner, I came suddenly upon Giacometti's bronzes and had that shock that comes when we unexpectedly catch ourselves in a mirror. Rising ragged and spectral from heavy bases, their clubbed feet unformed, these sculptures never break from their matrix to transcend their clay. Raised, as they seem to be, by *ruah* (wind) spirit, but dissolving as they form,

they spoke to me of incarnation, of its brevity and brokenness and yearning. In their thwarted forms, I felt the weight of all my own failures shared and mourned. The pull of the earth on those tattered torsos held me, and I saw little else at the Tate that day. I knew nothing of Giacometti's own vision or purpose; I simply stood there, grieving and grateful.

"It's like they know the worst of me," I told Larry when we found the small exhibit of bronzes in Washington. In the years since my mother had died, regrets for my lapses in patience and kindness during her struggle with dementia had wrapped themselves round me like vines—a laurel wreath unwound—which I willfully wore because I'd earned it.

"Uh-huh," Larry replied. He'd tried to prune those vines a hundred times, out of sympathy and love. Now he retired to a bench in the middle of the room and pulled out the book he'd brought along in his back pocket, one by Lee Child. Larry is a Reacher man all the way.

No bombs exploded the year I first encountered Giacometti's sculptures at the Tate in London. But they had exploded three years earlier when I was traveling with students and a couple of colleagues through Britain. We teachers heard the news at Dove Cottage, Wordsworth's old home in the Lake District, an idyll of green hills and grazing sheep, when David, our wiry, chain-smoking tour guide gravely took us aside. "Another bombing outrage!" he sneered, rolling a cigarette with nimble, yellow fingers. Sensing the narrow containment of the bus would lessen their alarm, we herded our students, who were wandering over the sloping pastures of Grasmere, back aboard and let them know, as calmly as we could, that a few hours to our south, bombs were tearing up London, the city they'd explored and announced they loved a few days before. They took it well, our post-9/11 American teenagers, which is to say, no one panicked or broke down and wept, which can happen with students who have less reason to be stressed on their first trip abroad. An hour later, subdued and tense but gripping tightly to our itinerary, we crowded along benches on a sleek tour boat, and we were gliding over the quiet waters of Windermere. Suddenly, scoring the sky, black tacks tore toward London—fighter jets from Scotland screaming south. Their shadows skimmed the lake like a flotilla of loons.

Touring the north of England during the next few days, we watched the British frown and tighten their backs, and heard the Queen vow that terrorism would not change the English way of life. Still, the London we returned to was transformed by soldiers sprouting automatic rifles on every corner. Approaching the stricken King's Cross railway station in twos and threes, my usually exuberant, now eerily subdued students laid flowers onto a bulkhead of bouquets that formed a shrine against the station wall. "No pictures," I whispered, but I needn't have spoken; the tragedy transformed them. They had lost their taste for tourism, had assimilated swiftly to the culture of loss.

Sorting through a drawer of old maps and travel brochures after returning from DC, I came across a creased floor plan of exhibits at the Tate Modern, the gallery with the Giacomettis circled sloppily in ink, and farther down in the drawer, some tattered copies of London newspapers I'd perversely hauled home, which documented the grisly bombings. Studying the young men who moved in to kill—most of the pictures, taken by London's ubiquitous CCTV cameras, showed them entering the station or walking along the track in baseball caps, their lethal packs slung over their shoulders—I felt the grip of the ground on them. Blinded by the rhetoric of hate, their earth would ascend to nothing, their wind manage only a shrug of clay that rumbled near a fault line.

The struggle against our own earth, that high-minded effort to see beyond our blindered minds or transcend the hunger of our selfish hearts, is perhaps the central conflict of our lives. I have a wolfish appetite for the contemplative's surf and turf—am greedy for leisure and privacy—which too often walled my mother out in the last years of her life. "Created more than animal," Huston Smith observes, we "often sink to being nothing else." Taking his point, I object only to his implication of animals, those ideological innocents who feed until they're full and plan few coups. Darkness abideth not in them. But the bright and lively human mind casts its shadow at least as often as it releases its light. Recognizing and overcoming it, besides forming our daily discipline—*Yes, I'll help you after school; yes, I'll make a donation*—are among the central preoccupations of religion and art. Of the "gates to self-destruction: lust, anger, greed," the Bhagavad Gita urges, "renounce these three." And

of course there is always: *Do unto others*. Unable to see wholeness, do we fail to become whole—those of us who see walls or build them ourselves? Is it blindness that keeps Giacometti's men and me, and boys who haul bombs onto trains, from Schopenhauer's insight "Thou art that"? Scanning our planet's concourse, checking IDs, maybe mastery of living lies with who we think we see.

Practitioners of Jnana yoga, who view the individual self as illusory, but as an illusion that, nevertheless, casts toxic shadows in the forms of private ambition and greed, practice thinking of themselves in the third person in order to break free of what Alan Watts calls their "skin-encapsulated egos." They believe that if they succeed in transcending personal identity and the terrible pitfalls that go with caring primarily for one's own sweet self, they will have done with both enduring and manufacturing the world's troubles and ascend to union with God. To emphasize the difficulty of this path—the word *yoga* means *path*—I encourage my comparative religion students to take this practice out for a spin during their next calculus exam. "Can't solve for problems 12 through 20?" I ask Alex, a serious student who takes notes assiduously from the second row. "Just step outside yourself and think, 'Alex sure wishes he'd studied for this test. Alex is having a lousy day. It sucks to be Alex.'" Alex, who has paused to consider this scenario, looks unpersuaded—as well he might. The illusion of the separate self, if it is an illusion, is compelling, hard to see through. Most of us accept the evidence at hand—*I Am*—and lots of us work to curtail at least some of the darkness that falls in our wake, reining in our most ravaging appetites, talking down the Crazy and the Fear where we can.

This spring, my friend Matt, who is a Roman Catholic, invited me to attend a Good Friday Tenebrae service in downtown Lansing. *Tenebrae* is Latin for *shadows*, and the Tenebrae service observes the temporary triumph of darkness over light that occurred with the crucifixion of Jesus. Matt met me in the vestibule of St. Mary Cathedral as the service was beginning, and we slipped up a dim outside aisle and into a pew toward the front just as the altar server preceded the priests down the center aisle, carrying the censer as he moved toward the uplifted arms of a large candelabra.

Raised in the teetotaling matchbox of my mother's Presbyte-

rian church, where we sat on folding chairs and, in lieu of sharing Communion wine from a common cup, sipped grape juice from individual shot glasses that tinkled like tiny milk bottles in their metal caddies as we passed them down the row, I learned, when I taught English in one of its high schools, to love the gilded rituals of the Catholic Church. I am moved by the way its intricate choreographies, its creeds and beads and feast days and fonts draw its believers into a communal dance that laces their lives with spirit. I marvel at how, like Tibetan lamas or Aleutian shamans, its priests transubstantiate the mundane world into the divine, how its statues of the Madonna and the Christ localize the Infinite, put it right there in the room where you can reach it. If I could persuade my mind to believe the things you have to believe to be a Roman Catholic, I would join right up. Instead, left outside the church with my refusing brain, I'm a bit of a Catholic groupie.

I was grateful when Matt invited me to sit beneath the cathedral's gothic arches, which aspired, like Giacometti's figures, to the heavens.

So I was grateful when Matt invited me to sit beneath the cathedral's gothic arches, which aspired, like Giacometti's figures, to the heavens. The evening was mild, and I was happy to slip through the darkening streets downtown, past the state capitol building and all the regrettable liaisons committed under its dome, and its phalanx of bars with their lesser liaisons heating up on a Friday night, to sit among true believers in transcendence and grace. Their faith creates an atmosphere in which I like to linger, if I really can't stay. Inevitably, I start looking for the door—generally when things move from the languid latitudes of ritual to the frozen polar caps of creed. But the Tenebrae service was brief and, for as long as it lasted, I was able to view the Christian story as a canvas, one of many in a great gallery—the expressed apprehension of something subtle and true that lies beyond all our narratives and intellections—and made my tent there among the believers. Gradually, between readings from the prophet Jeremiah, the altar candles were extinguished until we sat in darkness, the smell of spring—leaking from the canvas folds of raincoats and damp sneakers—rising around

us. A low, building drumroll closed Jesus's tomb and concluded the service; wordlessly, we filed out to await the light of Easter morning.

When Larry and I were in Washington, I spent an afternoon in the Main Reading Room at the Library of Congress. Waiting for the book I'd requested—not on Emily Dickinson, as I'd planned, whose agnosticism got her declared a “no-hoper” by the hard headmistress of Mount Holyoke College when she was a student there—but on Giacometti, who had reasserted himself in my life, I was smarting from the snub of a surly employee I'd run into while picking up my library ID. The fact that every librarian I'd met there had been gracious and helpful was not assuaging my hurt feelings, and I was writing stinging, if tardy, retorts in my head. I dismissed my friend Jeanne's wise refrain, “It's hard to be human,” which she trots out when I wax censorious or get my back up, not in the least interested in what kind of day or life this waspish woman had been having. Eventually, fresh out of new material, I rose and passed through the concentric rings of writing tables that surround the reference desk, a dark-paneled compound directly beneath the library's celebrated dome—it too a series of circles within circles, awash with angels and the depiction of humanity's high achievements—and I received my book from the reference librarian.

Tucked back into my desk near the alcoves along the outside wall, paging through the long limbs and torsos of his signature forms, I learned that Giacometti had not, as I'd believed, sculpted a vision of spirit straining its reluctant flesh, aspiring heavenward; that particular narrative I'd supplied my heavy, stunted self. What fascinated Giacometti, it turns out—what he sculpted—was not his models, themselves, but the shadows they cast, their imprint on the earth as their bodies interrupted light and the sinking sun made their shadows long. Still, I sighed, it came to the same thing: the irreconcilability of flesh and truth, flesh and spirit, flesh and love. And didn't I know and didn't I know and didn't I know about that.

The final days of spring break, for which Larry and I returned to Michigan, were gray and cold, so instead of raking the flowerbeds, I set my sights on mucking out the bedroom drawers. A precious decorator-bird had arrived in our absence, had settled

into a placid pine and was trilling anapests. Hauling old papers to the recycling bin in the garage, I heard its clear, sharp song: “Potpourri! Potpourri!” Though I squinted into the lower limbs, I never saw the bird.

Rummaging through my nightstand drawer, I found half a dozen Moleskine journals crowded with entries in my sloppy hand. Opening one, I glanced at a passage I’d written during my mother’s last summer, when Alzheimer’s had whittled away her body and mind and left her a broken sparrow—wasted and spent and fluttering in circles—dependent wholly on my kindness, on what meager acts of selflessness I could imagine and pull off. “I must not fail at this,” I’d written. But I had failed. Impatient, irritable, absent when I could manage to be, I’d sequestered my spirit and shuttered the light, and the shadow I’d cast on my mother’s last days had haunted me ever since. I was not equal to Alzheimer’s.

Then farther back in the drawer, I found another diary, which was thicker than the rest. Settling onto the bed among a thousand single socks that were rubbish-bound, I opened the book to *Grief Journal*. It was dated August 14, the day my mother died. And I vaguely recalled the idea I’d had to document my grieving—as a way to lay hands on it, it seemed to me now—as a means of sculpting it into something contained by form so it could not inflate and tear loose and swallow everything.

The first pages recounted my mother’s last days, when I camped on the floor by her bed at my sister’s house. Though she was unconscious, Sue and I sat beside her, together and in turns. “I traced the fold in her neck,” I wrote, “stroked her hair, stroked her face.” I described holding her as Sue, a nurse, “the stronger and more loyal daughter,” bathed her, moving a washcloth along the caesarean scar where her body had been opened to deliver ours. “‘I love you, sweetheart; I love you forever,’ I whispered again and again and again.”

The rest of the journal chronicles the days and weeks that followed her death.

“Finished writing eulogy: language rings like cheap tin.” Then there is “a day of tasks to dam up grief” in which, preparing for the funeral, I drove into a carwash but missed the rails that would have pulled the car through. And I remembered sitting “beneath the motionless mop which dripped on the windshield while I wept.” A few days after the funeral, as

my daughters packed to leave town, I allowed, “I am hungry for grief, having pushed it back these past few days by busyness, but terrified of it too. I hear it panting beyond the porch light, feel it curled at the foot of the bed.” And a week later I am “sobbing on mom’s bedroom floor—*the crying room*,” where “my grief is confused.” Then, “Who am I grieving for?” I ask. “The diminished mother who woke in the night and rattled the doors to all our rooms? Or my whole mother—last seen so many years ago? Gone but never grieved because a shadow-mother filled her place?” Finally, I am “weeping on the front porch as blades of rain batter the grass—water, water everywhere—I can’t find my breath.” The journal ends in the fall; I didn’t maintain it for long—but the weight of its palpable grief in my palm levered in a shaft of light. Winter light, weak light, but light all the same, pruning a bit of the shadow back. Though in many ways, I’d failed love, I hadn’t failed *to love*. I would try to find a way to live with that.

Eventually I packed all of the notebooks back into the drawer and opened the window over the bed—the clouds had cracked and traces of blue were back-lighting the limbs that must have been full of invisible birds—the air was an opera of warbles and trills. Stooping to retrieve the journal I’d kept in DC, which had fallen to the floor, I noticed my sketch of the Reading Room’s ceiling. After tracing the drawing with my finger—a dome as flat as the Target logo, I placed it in the drawer with the others. I hadn’t gained perspective yet in art or life, but Rhonda had said—and I hoped she knew—“You’ll learn to see the light.”

OCTOBER 29—THE DOW CLOSES DOWN 1118

I.

to make one thing of me, writes Rilke
or to “work me, Lord” as Janis sings
like a field song, mocking
-bird variations
for which I can find no equivalent, and no sooner
 have I written this down than
I want to post it on a screen where I can see all
manner of bodies burned, burdened, crushed
by the weight of factories, here stitched into this night-
gown, look up from this screen, which holds all manner
of soldiers before/during/after their tours of Afghanistan,
drones, the actress
like some character in a Greek tragedy who cuts off her breasts,
 now flickering before me, cold candle, a fire
I cannot feel hums through me particle sure as any unseen cancer
or cracks in the wall of the garment factory (“work me, Lord”)
covered in paint

II.

why must man always take on things
map galaxies, name particles
while factories burn, ash rises to satellites,
the question I carry around like a locket
with a dead child’s hair, the question
of dead children comes
with mine
 begins “the world
which is economic system does not care”
and in the wilderness beyond which is particle attraction
and distraction I slip from the grip of garment

factory fire, to ask
over and over:

 can you take it all
in, galaxy after galaxy, open your eyes sky wide
through love or force or training?

III.

let's remember this sky
and beneath the factory workers like a thought
that dark matter thinks, fluttering candles,
let's place ourselves under the hood of night
 you can't gate this, razor wire, Guantanamo Bay this
the hospice nurse says rest
in the space between breaths
 place yourself,
let there be space, too, in your gaze, let there be nurse
 before you check your status update, wash clothes,
 pull up the rug,
like my status update, my revolutionary status update

SUSAN BRIANTE

MAY 15—THE DOW IS CLOSED

Sometimes I think there should be no writing here just my checkbook registry, envelopes of receipts, browsing history, photos uploaded, list of status updates, texts received,

the postcard of a tornado someone stuck in our gate advertising a roofing company.

Our view gets wider once we fix the gutter and awning.

And Gertrude Stein writes: “After all anybody is as their land and air is. Anybody is as the sky is low or high. Anybody is as there is wind or no wind there.”

As a child I was forbidden to climb trees. As a child I could lose whole days, wake up in a hospital bed with a deep, broad ache, pills that tasted of mint and paper. As a child I learned to connect my cursive letters, memorize multiplication tables, divide and carry what was left over.

Zeppelins floated through Stein’s sky,
now we carry the Zeppelins.

The tents grow nearer; the cop inside us pulls out his Mace.

SUSAN BRIANTE

NOVEMBER 20—THE DOW IS CLOSED

if you want to catch the sun
you'll have to drive
down another street
my ambition's thinner
I watch my daughter's
chest rise sink
nurse her
worry
we raise children
who will die
 look up
from the driveway
on the first night
of standard time
see an owl in flight
later he'll trigger
the dog next door
light one yard over
it smells like
dryer sheets
or is that the sweet
of a new season?
 yesterday
on the toll road
I read a billboard
about hungry children
(\$1 feeds 6)
today *Midwinter Day*
I stick a green paper
in the book
so I know
what to read
when you get home

keep the porch
light on try to ward off
what's hungry
try to record
with tenderness
light turn
-signaling
in the trees
we catch a glimpse
of sound
cannons in the park
scientists say the universe
tears itself apart
I watch our daughter
play with curtains
before the rush
hour traffic
and when I write
about light in the trees
it's like *fuck you*
a human being
killed by a drone
is still killed
by a human being
off the page
where roses bloom
in our backyard
ice covers the porch
wind closes the airport
you say that might be good
for surf
I wonder if drones
have a pulse
on some screen
someone
to watch a little
line
break
I don't want to settle
the mind

want to say something
to whoever
follows me #hashtag
off the page
and to my daughter
I want to say
we are all tired
and working too hard
on the market
on the floor
futures trading
is an awkward song
owl's cry bookmark
flaring curtain sunset
I don't know
how to read this text
from the tarot
I draw the pink slip

SUSAN BRIANTE

MEDITATION

5 objects are placed before you:
one as tall as you feel when you lay
 your daughter in her crib each night,
one as heavy as your daughter's cry.

What would the largest object hide from view?
What will not be concealed (dumpster, Dollar General,
 mountain, moon)?
Which objects are gift? Which existed before you?

Something lands in the corner of your eye.
Instead of words, you white out
 thoughts.
Let them burn like dirigibles in the sky.

Send the ash to the last person who lent you money,
to the sparrow in flight through the black walnut tree.
The sparrow clicks like a Geiger counter in the leaves,
your daughter's hunger swells.

Your mind is a plastic bag full of water to ward off flies.
The flies don't come.

LEE ANN BROWN

MORTAL SONNET

for Madeline Gins

Upper limit abstract Lower limit journal

The problem with dying is that it's really unimaginable

Getting into those corners living is round
Outliving our fears

I can't go on, I'll go on—Philosophical
Unrecorded every second the sonnet

Is not written it changes codes
For better or worse the monied hearse

Lower limit intertextual
Upper limit untouchable

Health is merely the slowest possible rate at which one can die
You prefer an able destiny: playfully sliding, making dying illegal

Where is Arakawa? I asked Madeline (not knowing)
Eyes surprised: "Near. He is very near"

LEE ANN BROWN

ALTARS EVERYWHERE

Amongst the living, man with head held high
Walking across the Wall Street area Afro A.M.
New York—Amiri's gone / he's in the Times
the net the culture the hearts of his families
Invented extended even when the little altars
Are washed away he's in dreamtime village
Pitbull Newark Kennedys but without the
Money he said he sang he asked rhetorically
Passionately broke up his "loku" with song—
Was like 2 hours late for a reading but everybody
Stayed—I dreamed again of being inside the family
Of man—birthday specifics and religious questions
James Deas dies the same day—January 9 moon
In Taurus Charlotte North Carolina so long kind men

SOPHIA DAHLIN

WORSE LUCK

All dim bulbs lit midway
hum in halls
but a hand derails dust
all up a lost staircase
unspills on a landing
Any butler tumbles
where a bulldog is lumpen
filtering the thick air in descent
casting brief curses

Little frumps in conferences
suggest a remedy for anything
wood's got the cures
Slumber one night nudely
daubed in clay
Cast off
you should definitely cast off
past these limp waters
when the daylight's broad

SOPHIA DAHLIN

A MAGIC RADISH

I know the barrier to your house
collapses at the window
I know the crush you cherish simmers
in your tummy, I know rejection
separates your shoulder blades.
I know the magic radish
that baby in the woman in you craves
is harbored in the garden
that a witch makes, and I know
the witches burgeon
radishes on purpose.
What I know isn't an ordeal.
It is not an introduction.
How I feel and how you feel
have not shared architecture.
But yet we're still like whales.
Hollering exquisite introductions
to the sea anemones who stick forever.
Like: this chorus is my song,

these my singers; like,
and yours? I shame my jaded
ringmaster, I lose
my chrysalis to butterflies in flower,
bury my dead in holes in grounds, I sever
love from the unruly when it pleases:
I can't unleash
the healers from my server.
I can't exist
my ghost without my body in the evening.
I've got to fidget harnessed
in my skeleton forever.
I've got to let
my fingers miss the cleaver.

These are the teeth
who bit down when I handed them a feather.
These the right hand
and left who gathered lovers when I bartered,
these cherished ones who dreamt it when the penny
dust had drifted,
these families who sobbed and left the graveyard's

mustard blooming;
these ones who let the bird
of death go further into feather.
I molt at slightest glance and let my dreamboat
tip the waiter;
I shed my furs and
pearls and let my hang glider
grow lighter,
I lose the touch
that ashed my lighter out my penny finger:
what use the bear that holds
my body limb to limb together.

My baby sips the outlet of my anger.
It sucks the barbarous and lingering condition.
My child is the harbor of my traffic.
My ships advance
willy or nilly toward the harvest bringer.

EFFIGY

If you could whittle me out of a tree what would
I look like how would my re-imagining be
you say I don't need legs on account of the flying
I eat berries high up in the trees strip each bud
defly off branches without the error of squeezing
but allow them to color me I turn lilac and cerulean
I am mistaken for rain I blooden as if clotting
but maneuver swiftly never stopping to look down
never sleeping never grooming never touching
other blooded things and rush into ether leglessly
humming sternum bearing the weight of the wind
losing speed stranded by the thinness of air
where I linger shed the body like leaves and you
lose sight of me knowing I am no part of what
lands at your feet withered at the base of a tree
in a mound of seeds.

CAROLINA EBEID

YOU ASK ME TO TALK ABOUT THE INTERIOR

it was all roadside flowers & grasses
growing over the cities

was made of wilderness & sky
with God washed out of it

was the foreign prayer-word
it was a list of missing persons

was the solid bronze charging
bull on the famous street

was like the Roman method for making bees

was its taken-down carcass
& its bed of apple branches & thyme

was a new anatomy, a beaten hide,
a skeleton sweetening to glowing fluids,

& the bee born out, & the grist of them born
glistening as coins

it was anthem
was the listening,

the way a searchlight listens over a lake
it was the prayer-word out of your mouth
your thousand-noun request
it goes up up to the florescent weather

was an ivory box,

was hurdle & burn, burning through
the infinite, your overbright comet

was made of stones, made of berries & box tops & eggshells
it was like the word having reached the ear

& the words pollinated the dark, there was darkness there,
like the after-hours inside a library

CAROLINA EBEID

[IF I SAY GHOST, WOULD YOU]

If I say ghost, would you
hear the helium

airship, white & wide humming
with lifting gas

Will yours be remembered
like a Goodyear, gigantic

I made a study of white
in a notebook, a study of
failing or falling

I try to explain the self—

where I used to see a single hallway
I now hold a snow globe
in the mind

& the weather here is touchable
white creeping phlox, whitesqual,
the word leafage comes

softly, it falls like pale underleaves
flickered, like Styrofoam, like pills
like bridal dresses

quiet mob of gowns & vows
Such elegant equations
this hard math

of free fall
Already the hour
is less than an hour

JOHN FRY

AS SAMUEL IN THE TEMPLE

if I am here, Lord (I am
here, Lord) a little one-winged
—a drab brown sparrow,

yes—
under the stone

split wooden ledge, listening for
where (are You, Lord?)

ever, lasting, You are—

SARAH JANCZAK

DESIRE, THE TREE WE CLIMBED UPON

A lo dado no se le da fin

I thought you were the bear
in that dream. The river winds wide
as Main Street, the color of blue dusk.

A girl, in her white dress (of course)
climbs a tree. Yes, you know
what trees mean. But the branch,

she straddled the branch, twig in hand.
The tree was Y shaped. The river
flowed due north. It was almost a painting

but the twig shook with nerves. Girl
in her simple dress reaches
from the branch. She wants

to save the drowning bear. I thought
I was the girl in the dress. But maybe
I am the bear. You are the twig.

L. S. KLATT

THE EUNUCH'S HAPPY VEHICLE

After a waltz through the parking lot, the eunuch rejoices over his spangled car. The car, for its part, is so attracted to heaven that it feels uncomfortable. Is smitten again. Some are born as cars; some are made that way by eunuchs. Some become cars for the sake of the altogether lovely. Back in a time when eunuchs were able to drive wherever they wanted, the spangled car tailed an earthbound taxi that left a fervent place in its heart. Odd to think of cars as having hearts, eunuchs as having transport that might ferry them to & above. Is there a mundane essence that can be buried in heaven like a spikenard? Where else can the car go according to fragrant whims?

"NOT A" HAND BUT AN EYE?

Amorous note on a sticky
"Note," at open grave yawning, why
Did you, by "a" faint strip of paste
Cling to the stone
And trouble "a" cold body with
Words "of" longing?

Pissing into "a" paper cup
"The" clothing in which his coffee
Came "to" him, then, "with" unpracticed
Hand, lowering
Bits "of" "paper" down, "to" absorb
Some "of" "the" wet.

Bored "with" "the" usual motives
Inverted pyramid "of" smoke
From "the" great cylinder, "did you"
Seek "to" become
"A" participant "and" maintain
Your innocence?

Merely for something "to" say, he
Describes "his" inner conflicts "to"
Those who look "to him" only "for"
Integrity
"And" thereby forfeits "his" last chance
"At" happiness.

Hireling "in" "the" pay "of" chaos
"And" "as" little known, what could be
More normal "for" one "who" works "in"
"Your" profession
Than "to" write an "amorous note"
"To" "a" stranger?

Reluctant “to” undo “the” clasp
Because “he” liked “the” barrier
“His” hands pulled weakly “at” “the” tapes
“On” either side
Fumbling, “with unpracticed hand,” “and
As little known”

Except “by” “those who” know better.
I’m no longer having problems
“With” water “in” “that” part “of” my
Face, “he” says, but
“He” is crying incessantly.
Went “the” day well?

POEM

I'm Chiquita Banana and
"I'm" here to say all men protect
Things they value. Big "men protect"
"Big" "things" "and" small
"Men protect" little "things" that "they"
Consider most

Precious. In critical moments
It might expand or shrink but it's
Always the same "thing" they're protecting
"And" "it" makes them
Vulnerable. "It" consumes you
Yes? Like a piece

Of fruit "or" bite "of" "banana"
"The" devil takes an interest
"In" "little things," sneezes, microbes
"All" "the" details.
I have never wanted "to" be
His caretaker

Oh please! This "yes" is unlooked for
Undeserved, unreasonable
"And" impolite. "I" know how "to"
Commit myself.
"It's" not true "that" my heart draws "in"
Two directions

"It" "is" "not" suspended. Nothing
"Is" easier than knowing what
"I" choose but "I" truly suffer
From shyness "of"
Declaring "myself" "like" "this" "in"
Your company.

“I have” learned disobliging words
Should “not” “be” spoken when others
Are present. “A” “heart” shows enough
“What” “it” prefers
Before “you” get “to” “the” point “of”
Hurting someone.

“The” “banana” shape “that” promised
“You” happiness. Really softer
Signs “are” “enough” “to” inform “my”
Suitor “that” “his”
Attentions “are” unwanted. Love
Without friendship.

ELIZABETH LANGEMAK

BLUE HOLE

The winter mirages ride in on the back of the third snow, or maybe the fourth. It is the snow after the snow when we stop using numbers to measure each drift, when we start dressing without looking outside.

The air is cold beyond counting, a reeducation. Constant pulsing of white. Wind scrapes each used and thin layer from car roofs and wood-paneled porches. It stirs the snow lazily as if into a drink. A frozen blue hole.

I am from here, so cold comes back to me like it has also come from me. It is like a leg of my own I have sawn off and thrown in the spring. In the fall I see it returning, banging around in the mouth of a dumb, faithful dog, and when he comes close, I grab it. I place the leg under my hip and I stand.

NANCY L. MEYER

THE GHOSTS OF LEAVES

Some are wild to trust any story. Some
will choose only the truth, even trussed
and gagged. The jungle, then as always, more
big-leafed than green, more green
than haloed—arcing exponentially
between mud and cloud
where everything twines except
what doesn't. Rampaging over tributaries and
cliffs, thorn and flower until it dissolves
in humid mist. Turns from the path into
a mindless cancer of leaves
and lianas. Why tell it at all
with roots in your mouth?

REMEDY

Sometimes I stand on the sidewalk
near the street sweeper.
I think it scrubs what people like
to call *personal space*.

It feels OK.
Ladies with bright lacquered nails
are on TV, excited
about home remedies: club soda

or toothpaste or lemons, etc. In real life
that almost never works.
In real life, I tried to get the stain out.
Then it began to look

like such a person—I could make out
two eyes, a kind of mouth. *You*,
I would say to it, *are hidebound*.
You are a stubborn bit of the world

on me. And then, *Are we friends?*
On TV, the ladies don't address this. Never once
is the topic Miraculous Home Remedies
for the Unaccountably Alone.

SAFE

The city, of course, never sleeps, though it drowns
like a shark: eyes open, the big part of its brain

turned off. My blue Toyota was shark-like
in that I was the little sparked awake part of its brain—
turning the wheel, deciding various directions.

I drove and the street appeared, each streetlamp
proof of a little bit more. The Bank of America gleamed,
fortressing in its bulletproof glass. Elsewhere

entirely, it seemed, my arms and legs
were working—the intelligent orphans—together.
In that sense, one could trust things

would turn out all right when they really ought
not to. What prayers one says
for the yolk of oneself. The bank

was admirable—something about vaults
with heavy complicated doors, the shiny barriers
to its indomitable bank-heart,

the way the big thing just hunkered
and refused to move, admitting so few
to the important rooms.

A resolution: be more bank-like. But all the lights
turned green. Not luck, just mechanical
ushering—toward somewhere,

some other guarded heart,
but bigger, more chambered.

ROSALIE MOFFETT

WEATHER

Clouds gather. On tv a prize fighter
has his storm and evening spins me
in its darkroom door.

What do you end up doing
in the avocation of sleep? I'd like
some kind of break, please. Sudden rain

blooms under the streetlamp, a light-cone
of seeds. To be pelted a little,
I'd like that, I think. The boxer's eyes

are a precise kind of shuttered.
I make a fist, the end of which resembles
his swollen ear. I like that idea, shut up

like that, to be in a clenched hand,
a hug machine
when you need that wrapped feeling

but still can't stomach
anyone near.

OSCAR OSWALD

LIVING

at trial

similar puts on a hat

and mopes in company

with everything

it looks repeatable

bent, up

a minute ago, again

brimming with order

like time

I spoke to the rest of us,

our tale was long and narrow

and it shivered with the extra faces

of those who didn't make it in

their words lit their cheeks and rosiness

spread into vapor, amazing.

KATE PARTRIDGE

M 4.0, 21 KM S OF KNIK-FAIRVIEW

Otherwise, a static day—
the snow huddled against the mountains,

the bike trail puddled over root-carved ravines,
we decided to go to war or not.

When I left, Ben gave me a field guide
in a bar we frequented. I didn't read it

but went to a preserve to learn
to recognize my neighbors—

the bears fielding blueberries
from the paws of a young keeper

pitching them over the deck,
the caribou fencing, antlers clacking

like hockey sticks. In the gift shop,
a stack of pelts, fleshed and stretched;

a child stroking them and murmuring,
“Poor reindeer. Now he's dead.”

A RANGE OF MANNERS, OR RATHER LACK OF

I wouldn't remember the path from the villa to the seaside road,
except that
I'm sure it was beautiful, clodded with dirt, and while we were
completing

our assigned summer sprints up and down it, shutting our eyes to
the glow and grandeur
of the general effect, Jenny said: are you running for yourself or
to beat me? My answer

then (young, leggy) was clearly the latter. But there was no one
there to watch—the odd
passerby, I suppose, or the woman who prepared a meal each
day for the travelers—

and who else is trained to have a moral microscope aimed at
such antics?
The line between trained and training is not necessarily tense.
What we can learn

from the train is its sense of purpose. I once rode a train to a
remote
rainforest village where the same reproductions of Aboriginal art

were available as everywhere else: in shop, street, theatre,
barroom, church.
On the return, the train stopped at the spot where officials held a
picnic on the rails

upon the track's completion—wise, considering the advantages
enjoyed from that height: a sort of dry and flat Sahara rippling out

from beneath the lush ridges, a great moral and religious
civilization
of trees. In the village was a zoo devoted to poisonous creatures—

painted, padded, dyed—with bad blood and the capacity for
deceasing, a crowd
of petty grotesques behind glass plates. The officials held the
picnic on the tracks

with formal table settings and a broad table carted up the
mountain. I mean, in a cart.
And, in what I imagine as a pervading atmosphere of beautiful
manners,

they took in the material luxuriance. Perhaps this is a shallow
notion of beauty,
but I would like to be in the photo of old men in top hats, foppish.

Coming down to what is of the only real importance: what did
they see below?
Athletes? Crops of youths, prematurely ripe? Art, perfect women,
a rich people?

And the ones seated to face the mountain—shafts boarded over,
water trailing between cracks, rocks of muddy complexion?

I haven't said that there was any purpose to my trip except to see
what the people have done, which is always the goal in some
way or another.

On the train, I had the seat next to the mountain. Before,
everyone said: you will
find Australia to be much like America, which does seem to be
the impulse.

AS IF

As if the name isn't enough,
she insists that I stand on the porch, too,

to look at the beaver moon,
which is indeed pale as the rings

around birches along the river, or bright
enough to light them, and barely obscured

by the early evening streetlights and sirens,
the icicles grafting onto each other

in regimented curtains. Here
and there, one takes an abrupt turn

where it's been dripped on—
sudden left elbow tapering out.

My friend says nothing can be done
about the icy intersections except patience,

but he also recommends wrapping
a turkey in bacon, so take your best guess.

The term *fishtailing* makes me wonder
what it would be like to be propelled

by sudden shifts from behind or to wade
across a street completely submerged

in fins. The ice seems suddenly preferable.
In fact, we snap off ice spears

from the roof and compete, perhaps
not as safely as one might, at hurling them

into a snowbank, where they remain
wrapped in snow as though modeling

the rule for treating impalements:
leave the object in place.

KATE PARTRIDGE

EARTHQUAKE PARK

Someone has taken care
that all the edges should be jagged:

fence posts cut in descending steps,
path split by a constantly shifting

line up to the edge where houses
shrugged off into the ocean, remaining

ground rippling across trees locked
upward. From a rock along the inlet,

she observes the planes landing,
crossing before Susitna and selecting

the international landing to the west
or the local airfield to the north.

If she can identify all of the objects
in the sky, she believes in order.

Beneath her, the rocks boast
cartoon faces and phone numbers,

the recovery of ancient method
almost reverent to the location.

Another woman scampering further on
the ridge slides down the mudbank

into a stand of grass, a collapsed circle
outlasting the animal that formed it.

JEFFREY PETHYBRIDGE

**FOUND POEM INCLUDING HISTORY [O, SING,
SYSTEM, OF THE CITY AND ITS OIL,]**

of
 system
 of the
 its oil capacity and
 capacity
 city of ammunition

O, sing, System, of the city and its oil,
 city of ammunition, the city
 under siege, systematically, being
 Troy at best, a no-fly zone.

siege under
~~stroyed~~ systematically being ~~de~~
 at best

a no-fly zone

**FOUND POEM INCLUDING HISTORY [TO
WRITE, FINALLY, OF THAT OBSOLETE ROSE,]**

to write

Finally

that

obsolete

rose

a declaration of

“perfect”

secrecy

To write, finally, of that obsolete rose,
a declaration of “perfect” secrecy,
is no less true in war. The cares, concerns
of any final treaty of the person only—

is no less true in war the cares concerns

of

any final treaty

of the

person only

**FOUND POEM INCLUDING HISTORY [LEAVE
THE POLITICAL NATURE OF THE GIVEN,]**

leave “the political
 nature
 given of the
 leave[e] the
 No State
 of force crisis
 is the function
 to entertain

Leave the political nature of the given,
 leav[e] the No State of force. Crisis
 is the function to entertain the Nation,
 and ought not to be the world. Nullify
 the held secret. When the insurrection
 came, I was within the province of facts
 contra an image. Chain the dog of history,
 o scholars, and essay once more unto
 the multilateral future.

the Nation
 and ought not to be the world
 nullify the
 held secret
 when the insurrection came
 (“I was within the province of
 facts
 -Contra
 Francis image Chain the Dog
 in History

Other scholars

and

Essay

“Once More unto

lateral Future

the Multi-

JEFFREY PETHYBRIDGE

FOUND POEM INCLUDING HISTORY [A DESERT OF LEGALITY (IRAQ)]

~~Arabia~~

Desert
of

Legality

Iraq

A desert of legality (Iraq)
now entrusted to the red solution.
On the Road of Intelligence the President
was asked if he believed that he existed.

now

entrusted to the

~~endorsed~~ ~~resolution~~

~~Administration~~ the

~~abroad~~ of

Intelligence

The President

was asked if he believed that he

existed

METHODOLOGY | CONSTELLATION

Of these stanzas, prose and materials, some will need the attack of song; some will crackle along the clouted grain of lo-fi; like staring at the sun, some would blind you if you didn't turn away, others their sun-green blotter afterimages; some show the mock of law within the letter of the law, the law gone intense with lawlessness, as the sponge—intensifies with blood—soaking up the cell's red smear; some will be the documents of this wet-work, albeit redacted to the point of impunity, others under erasure will disclose the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth;

some will be set against watch-work—now done in billions and billions of operations, the scale of computations astronomical, the algorithm and star-law; some will set the saying of this situation at the lyric/anti-lyric ledge, since “negation may reverse into pleasure, not into affirmation.” And it must (still) give pleasure, right? Some record pain, some chorus it; others the spleen; some will fly the flag of “all right, then, I'll go to Hell” (and mean it), others will try and chart the way.

So the constellation for navigation, since we're stuck with night.

And because we find ourselves always already out under the field of data-points, like stars; because somewhere in the blank spaces of the data-set, the black-site prisons ghost detainees; because there are facts numbered like stars—like stars or a catalogue of evidence (for a court that will never come); because “every idea is a sun,” and every sun is a star and every star a sun; because there they are, the falling stars, the fallen suns and numbers, right there on the floor of the Grand Palais—but what good is the sublime, even the sublime halt and rupture now?

So the constellation for navigation: Polaris, Ursa Minor, Southern Cross, star-script (with Mercury in retrograde).

So the political imaginary of the book, caught between brackets and barricades, a (new) romanticism—and so what if it is—where critique is protest, and protest vision—vision and star-cant.

**FOUND POEM INCLUDING HISTORY [IN LIGHT
AT RISK, HOSTAGE TO THIS HISTORIC]**

In light

at risk

hostages to

This
historic practice

Finally

in the field

of the Republic

In light at risk, hostage to this historic
practice, finally, in the field of the Republic,
the Emergency, irreparable as
Apollo—unforeseen, immediate,
dangerous, bound to force by force
as to necessity, I resist
but also carry the enemy's own country.

the

emergency irreparable

~~measures~~

Apollo~~s~~

unforeseen
immediate, dangerous

force

bound to force by

as

to necessity

resist

but also carry

I
the enemy's own

country.”

**FOUND POEM INCLUDING HISTORY [THE
POWER OF THE COMMONS DISRUPTS]**

the power of the common strength
 disrupt basic
 the Republic of
 control branches has the
 negative to this structure
 portions

The power of the commons disrupts
 The Republic of Control, branches
 as the negative to this structure, portions
 power—as intended of justice. A few years later
 I recognized the epic is the world.

Power

as intended
 of Justice a few years later
 ‘the foreign policy [is] I
 “recognized
 the world.”

FOUND POEM INCLUDING HISTORY [OUR CITY WAS THE RADICAL ORGAN]

our ~~security.~~”
the radical ~~organize~~ of the world was
which ~~were~~ believed
in

Our city was the radical organ
of the world, which we believed in
tragically. The day clear as bombings is
history, and why citizens, finally,
of no safe haven were a city on the road.

tragically
the day clear
as bombings
is history
and
why
of citizens.” Finally
no safe havens.”
were a
~~security~~ on
the ~~broader~~

ODE INCLUDING HISTORY

O little euphemism, “enhanced interrogation,” whether said by you or Colonel Mathieu.

Take air-conditioning as an example: the chlorofluorocarbon behemoth cranked so low as to induce hypothermia in a detainee already drenched, drugged, and driven under the sad prescience in the “secret ministry of frost.”

“Coldest of all cold monsters,” Nietzsche called the state, for what else takes a man and makes the man smear his own excrement across his face, smear it across his naked torso, over his genitals, thicken his hair with feces all yellowed from his prisoner’s diet.

“Coldest of all cold monsters,” he gibed knowing that there is a way in which the nation-state as the sole agent, the monopolist of violence, becomes a self-justifying force, legitimating any and all violence under its cold name.

The brute facts piling up in the portfolio of the political scientist still riding her high appointment, knowing her cruel approvals won’t bar her from the California sun and sinecure.

And when interviewed the CIA man says, “I don’t discuss specific techniques,” he seems less man, or former director, or professor, or closet lepidopterist, than some monstrous combine of man & state.

There is a way in which this is not his fault; this is the secret crime that the marvelous prodigy reveals: “there are things / we live among, ‘and to see them / is to know our selves,’”

just as when the goddess washes her grey, mystical eyes in
the river, washes her eyes of the epic, of the black-gray
image of Tydeus sickeningly wet with brain-matter, his
mouth wicked with blood, which steams in the cold air
of the state's civil war, I turn the channel.

There is a way in which the fourth estate can't be a
counterforce, there is a way in which nothing can be,
there is a way—I want to believe—this nothing is:

I'm trying to imagine it, this non-site, a nothing-state, a city—
of Otherwise & If—in which words and people walk
in liberty, the conversation between friends an anthem
to nothing but the anarchy of the air—can this be true
again or ever was—

for there is a way in which there is no resistance without
vision or universalism—greenest in the body-politic—
yet there is a way in which my saying “o little
euphemism” entangles the poem in the quagmire of the
real of realpolitik, it couldn't be otherwise,

as when boys trespassing find at the fence-line shoreline
border, at the end of the bypass-road some
unidentifiable mass of rubberized skin, sun-baked black
on the sleek, the biohazard sign almost mimetic of its
mutilation, and the boys, our searchers, at a loss in the
image and history of the whole corpse right there

is a way in which the poem can't get out from under my fever,
my thrum of personality greedy for the pose of the
radical citizen, walking the avenue a cache of political
capital in one pocket, a scarf of ever-folding critique
dancing in the rhetorical air, dexterous as rumor,
dancing with “a bombast of circumstance / horribly
stufft with epithets of warre,” quoting history-plays
through the catastrophe.

There is a way in which play obscures a necessary lucidity,
or does it sponsor it, as the vogue goes, a way, too, in
which this implicates the poem—twisting the threads
into a single rope—in the degrees of pain that can
be abided for no more than twenty-four hours, the
minutes of force-feeding, the seconds of simulated
drowning . . .

There is a way in which once the poem is enfolded into the
science of infliction, there is no way out, no way to say
achtung, achtung, achtung, no way in which the poem
is possible, possible, possible, unless the blood-spatter
on the lens of the long tracking-shot

counts / for what it tracks—blood on our staring out.

FOUND POEM INCLUDING HISTORY [TO DETERMINE THE RECORD OF HISTORY,]

to determine
the record of history
of history
the
Secretary [of
atrocities

To determine the record of history,
the Secretary of Atrocities
ordered the Nation's full-scale absence.
Against the air and system, I
deployed some American testimony.

ordered
the Nation's
full-scale
absence
against
the
air and system
I
deployed some
American
testimony

MAYA CATHERINE POPA

PALIMPSEST

Flower-bordered river
where I fillet the hyacinths,

a russian doll of places
posing as one place.

Halogen me
at a horse show in Florida

while another juliennes
olives for appetizers.

A doll slipped in another
till all dolls are dull:

versions of me
with whistles for lips

reciting asterisks
in the periodic table.

Collage of the unconscious:
white flowers, lost teeth,

scarecrow with
an aureole of straw,

basilica for everyone's
best dresses.

I visit the public
museum of clouds,

lithographs of sky
posing as space.

Layers make monsters
as shows the snapdragon.

Memory, you crooked thing
I do to the page.

BRET SHEPARD

COMPASSED

Once, the entire world went dark
when the sun set. No one found

other bodies in the night. Everyone
absented touch in winter. This made

December the first metaphor
for death. But not everyone died.

They learned to start fires at night.
Then the moon became the second

metaphor for death, when under it
everyone learned to make love.

BRET SHEPARD

NOTE TO SELF

No matter the size of window,
nor the contrary force

with which it resists,
when the window breaks

the outcome is evening.
There is only one method

for self-reflection. To achieve
a quiet mind you must first

hear it speak. Then you must
talk back to your mind

until you talk it to death.

BRET SHEPARD

OUR CHEMISTRY IS DESIRE

You've stopped listening to wind.
Either way, the trees drop leaf after leaf after leaf.

Anything can drop
under routine circumstances. A leaf. Temperature.
Even your presence in the mind of others can fall.

Not in the way you might think,
as in your memory plummeting into oblivion.
It happens the way tree limbs forget themselves.

MATHIAS SVALINA

WASTOID

A neutered dog fell in love with another neutered dog. They chased each other across the dusty dogpark. Their black spots got hot from the sun. They have an address for a rooming house, but they cannot find it. The guy at the gas station does not know where it is. The guy at the 7-11 has never heard of it. The two dogs had been told that each room has its own private bathroom. They hope to find this rooming house. They hope to stay a while.

MATHIAS SVALINA

WASTOID

My lover rents my love out by the hour. Men book my love & during their hour they are in love how I am in love with my lover: like handful of caraway seeds, like a moon evermore three-quarters full. When no clients have booked my love it returns to me, abrupt & cruel, at the top of the hour as I stand on a pier. Love can be propaganda, a sonata over-practiced into prickliness. To be in love one must always climb higher on the mountain. But when I climb that high I exclude so much of the world & what is excluded itself I find most lovable. I would have been so unhappy as Mr. Nineteenth Century.

WASTOID

There are two moons, each in love with the other, but they orbit at opposite points of the same path. One moon, as a child, had an English Setter. For his father's funeral this moon wore a new black suit, but the English Setter jumped all over him until the fine black suit was coated with long white hairs & the young moon found himself, instead of being saddened, laughing & he rolled on the carpet with the dog, who was so full of whatever it is in dogs that we call love. The other moon had never believed in anything until he saw the young moon rolling on the rug with his dog in his black suit lightened by white hairs. Because they can not see each other they leave notes: *I saw a tree & it reminded me of you; I heard Glenn Gould's 1982 recording of The Goldberg Variations & I now know timelessness; you are with me in the ever-night.* Down on earth, beneath all this celestial love, a father left his son in the car with the windows shut in the Home Depot parking lot & the boy roasted to death in the heat.

WASTOID

My lover is a drag race that starts on a city road & then moves to a gravel road & then ends tragically as one car plunges off the wooden bridge into the flooded river, black with mud. He contains the bliss of elation & the bliss of misfortune. But it takes more than intellect to never return. I don't hate my occupation, the furniture dead hands made, glasses dead mouths once lipped. I have a real bad problem & it attends to me incessantly. All my lover's highs & lows mute in my problem. There is no goal for art but to hold the mirror of the drive-through window up to the world. When the boy who survived the car's plunge into the river crawled out onto the riverbank he couldn't remember a thing & everyone thanked sincerely him for this.

WASTOID

Now I recognize everyone I have ever seen. For instance, on the walk over here I heard two men discussing how hot one of them was one night—the one man thought the other was very hot but the hot-that-night man didn't think he was at his hottest. I saw one man walking while holding a guitar & singing out of tune. I saw one man with long pantlegs. I saw sky behind the men & stars behind the sky & if I were to close my eyes there'd be nothing in front of me, a chasm awaiting my foot, & I'd fall into the eternal ball-pit of the Chuck E. Cheese & all the workers there on fire, neverdying. Medicine works in a way that: for me, like love, it is faith. And when I think of my lover there is fire & when I put my hand over him I burn.

PIERRE RIVIÈRE SPECTACULAR 06

Pierre Rivière was known to sit for hours, watching birds and frogs he'd nailed to trees. Often, he'd be laughing. This crucifixion-as-entertainment might remind you of *The Passion of the Christ*, unless you haven't seen it, in which case it will really just remind you of that South Park episode. Kenny and Stan travel to Malibu to get their money back from Mel Gibson because this is America and in America, if you're not entertained, you should get a refund. Mel Gibson is in a mansion. Then he's in his underwear, begging to be tortured. He's restrained to a table, now he's playing a banjo, now pulling a gun from his underpants. When he does cartwheels, his body hovers above the ground. Mel Gibson sings in words that work like gibberish. His head is his real head. It's not easy to escape a madman's mansion but those kids do it and catch a bus home but he follows them. He is only wearing underwear still. This is how you might imagine Pierre: cartoonish, tottering, maniacal, and impossible to get away from. At the end of the episode, the people of South Park agree that focusing on the death of Christ is not the best way to be religious.

LAURA WETHERINGTON

PIERRE RIVIÈRE SPECTACULAR 10

Adam Lanza shot his mother while she slept. Point blank range again, and again, and again. At the grammar school, he reloaded half-spent cartridges—video game style. Where do the simulations end. Pushpin skin, thin-braided nerves: He walked out into the fray. Pierre Rivière beheaded cabbages, playing battlefield against the mind's infinite army. Pierre understood what he'd done the day that he did it. Not immediately, mind you, but within hours. He'd shocked himself into temporary sanity.

PIERRE RIVIÈRE SPECTACULAR 08

Imagine this scene from *The Bad Seed*: two ladies drooping, lily-like, in a nineteen-fifties living room. No pillow is out of place. Each woman is devastated. Hortense Daigle because her little boy was killed, the other woman because her little girl murdered him. Mrs. Daigle is liquored up good. She exits her grief long enough to see the killer's mother's internal tornado, which has collapsed her features and disheveled her hair. Mrs. Daigle hangs on the other mother, sways to no music, offers her a free beauty treatment. When she leaves through the front door Mrs. Daigle slurs, *I know you know something and you're not telling me*. These women's sorrow unspooling so civilized. The Rivière family fights, on the other hand, were embodied. Once the family found themselves in the front yard; the neighbors gathering around the eighteen-thirties reality show. Scratching and slapping and screaming and dragging. Pierre's mother knew the power of the public gaze.

JAMES WHITE

MEASURING AN ARC BY EVERY OTHER DEGREE

*Winner of the 2014 AWP Intro Journals Project for Poetry,
selected by Iris Jamahl Dunkle*

during the solar eclipse

the crows appeared

to fall from the sky

into the mud a thousand silver divers

she thought it sounded

like rain through the trees

the snaps the flood

of the forest floor

only a mourning dove

caught itself in the branches

two disks one

momentary leap apart

CORRIE WILLIAMSON

ANTE

after Dante

Stars to guide us, and stars
to lead us astray. Masfield
asked for the tall ship, Alighieri

the little bark—but each sought
bright stars to steer her by.
No simple task, to distinguish

the boat of the mind and the boat
of the Lord, and who stands
astern: what pale, shining pilot.

This morning I watched
the river rise towards the edge
of my town, my dark forests,

the mountain on Virginia's
southern map whose name
is really Purgatory, which burned

the year I began kissing boys
in earnest. What rain, what flood,
the crack of trees breaking

like a gunshot's shout. Of what
have I been negligent? My heart,
perhaps, this small and tender kingdom

which rushes now above a flood
no boat could labor passage
through. This swaying bridge

was blessed once by the blind mayor,
crossing slow with his white
cane. I will go walking

in the fresh raining night, beneath
no stars. The still-scarred
mountain looms, cloud-donned,

and holds my gaze,
my homeward promise, trembling
down to its last wet rock.

CONTRIBUTOR NOTES

Susan Briante is the author of *Pioneers in the Study of Motion* and *Utopia Minus*, both published by Ahsahta Press. She is finishing work on a new collection of poems, titled “The Market Wonders.” She is an associate professor of creative writing at the University of Arizona.

Lee Ann Brown was born in Japan and raised in Charlotte, North Carolina. She is the author of *Crowns of Charlotte*, *In the Laurels*, *Caught*, *The Sleep That Changed Everything*, and *Polyverse*. Brown is the editor of Tender Buttons Press, now in its twenty-fifth year, and teaches poetry at St. John’s University in New York City.

Originally from Vermont and Colorado, **Liza Cochran** now lives in Boston, where she teaches creative writing. She is the recipient of a graduate fiction award from Emerson College and a residency grant from the Vermont Studio Center. She returns to Colorado each summer to teach at the Rocky Mountain School.

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Carolina Ebeid is a fellow at the Stadler Center for Poetry, where she helps edit *West Branch*. She is also a poetry editor for the online journal *Better: Culture & Lit*. Her work appears in journals such as the *Kenyon Review*, *Crazyhorse*, *Memorious*, *Gulf Coast*, *Poetry*, and others. She holds an MFA from the Michener Center for Writers and has also been awarded prizes and fellowships from the McNair Scholars Program, CantoMundo, and the Academy of American Poets. She grew up in West New York, New Jersey.

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Aaron Kunin is recently the author of *Grace Period*, a book of aphorisms, sketches, and fragments. *Cold Genius*, a book of poems, is forthcoming. He lives in Los Angeles.

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Goldberry Long's first novel, *Juniper Tree Burning*, was published in 2001 by Simon and Schuster. Her next two novels, *O'Keeffe's Girls* and *The Kingdom of No*, are finished and will be published soon. She lives in Southern California, where she teaches at the University of California, Riverside.

Nancy L. Meyer, of Portola Valley, California, has been published in *Bitterzoet*, *Poet's Touchstone*, *Rusk Poetry Society*, *Poets against the War*, and six anthologies. She is working on "Between Skins," a full-length manuscript following a Colrain Manuscript Conference and the Zen stick of Jeffrey Levine of Tupelo Press.

Rosalie Moffett is the winner of a “Discovery”/ Boston Review Poetry Prize. Her work has appeared in *Agni*, the *Believer*, *Cincinnati Review*, *Field*, *Tin House*, and other journals as well as the anthology *Gathered: Contemporary Quaker Poets*. She is a Wallace Stegner fellow at Stanford University. Originally from eastern Washington, she lives in Oakland, California.

Oscar Oswald completed his MFA in creative writing from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas in 2012. He currently teaches English composition in Portland, Oregon, and is an intern at the contemporary arts organization Yale Union. His poetry will be appearing in forthcoming editions of *Lana Turner*, *Volt*, and *Weekday*.

Kate Partridge’s poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Barrelhouse*, *Rhino*, *Bloom*, *Verse Daily*, and *Better*. A graduate of Denison University and the MFA program at George Mason University, she lives in Anchorage, Alaska.

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Elizabeth Poliner is the author of *Mutual Life & Casualty*, linked stories, and *Sudden Fog*, a poetry chapbook. She teaches creative writing at Hollins University. “Sometime, Springtime” is part of a collection-in-progress of stories set along the Connecticut River, and she’s working on a novel as well.

Maya Catherine Popa’s work appears or is forthcoming in *Kenyon Review*, *Field*, *Poetry London*, *Oxford Poetry*, the *Rumpus*, the *Huffington Post*, and elsewhere. She was a Clarendon Scholar at Oxford University from 2011–13 and is currently completing an MFA at NYU. She is the editorial fellow at *Poets & Writers* magazine and the literary editor of *All Hollow* magazine.

Bret Shepard is currently in the doctoral program at the University of Nebraska, where he also teaches writing. Recent poems appear or are forthcoming in *American Letters & Commentary*, *Diagram*, *Field*, *Pank*, *Sink Review*, *Whiskey Island*, and elsewhere. He coedits Dikembe Press, publisher poetry chapbooks.

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Jan Shoemaker writes and teaches in Michigan. Her essays have been featured on public radio and have appeared in many journals and magazines, among them: *Fourth Genre*, the *Sun*, *Sufi Journal*, *Make* magazine, and *Clockhouse Review*.

Mathias Svalina is the author of three books. Big Lucks Press will release his book *Wastoid* in fall of 2014. He is an editor for Octopus Books.

Laura Wetherington's first book, *A Map Predetermined and Chance* (Fence, 2011), was chosen by C. S. Giscombe for the National Poetry Series. She cofounded and currently edits textsound.org and teaches in Sierra Nevada College's undergraduate and graduate creative writing programs.

James White is a graduate student at Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, pursuing an MFA in creative writing with a concentration in poetry. He received his BA in creative writing and dance studies from Knox College in 2012.

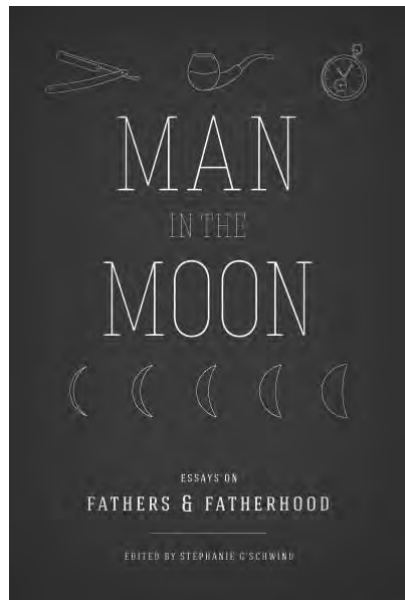
Corrie Williamson is the author of *Sweet Husk*, winner of the 2014 Perugia Press Prize, due out in the fall of 2014. Her poems have recently appeared in the *Missouri Review*, the *Journal*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Shenandoah*, and elsewhere.

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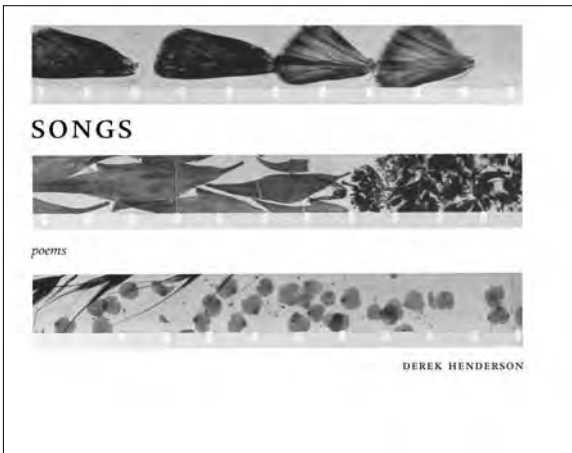
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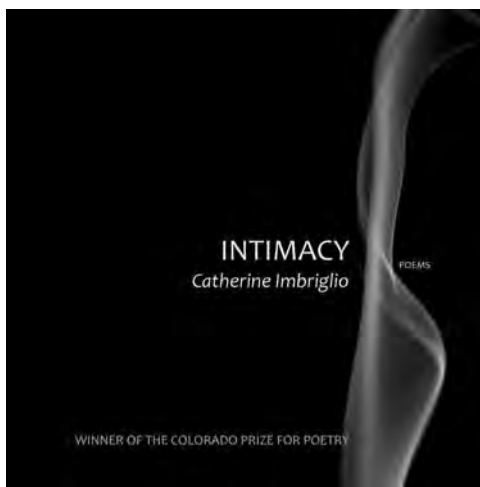
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what things,” “sorting out statistical illusions,” coming after and above silence, ice, patience, melancholy, instead of blocking them out, and ending up with sentence sounds that nobody has made before, in a way that pays homage to real people and real scenes. “When everything you know is like a windlight shifting,” read these poems of “touch touch touch,” of seaside scenes and “mathematical grounds”; they make everything technical seem close to you, and everything real seem clear.” —STEPHEN BURT



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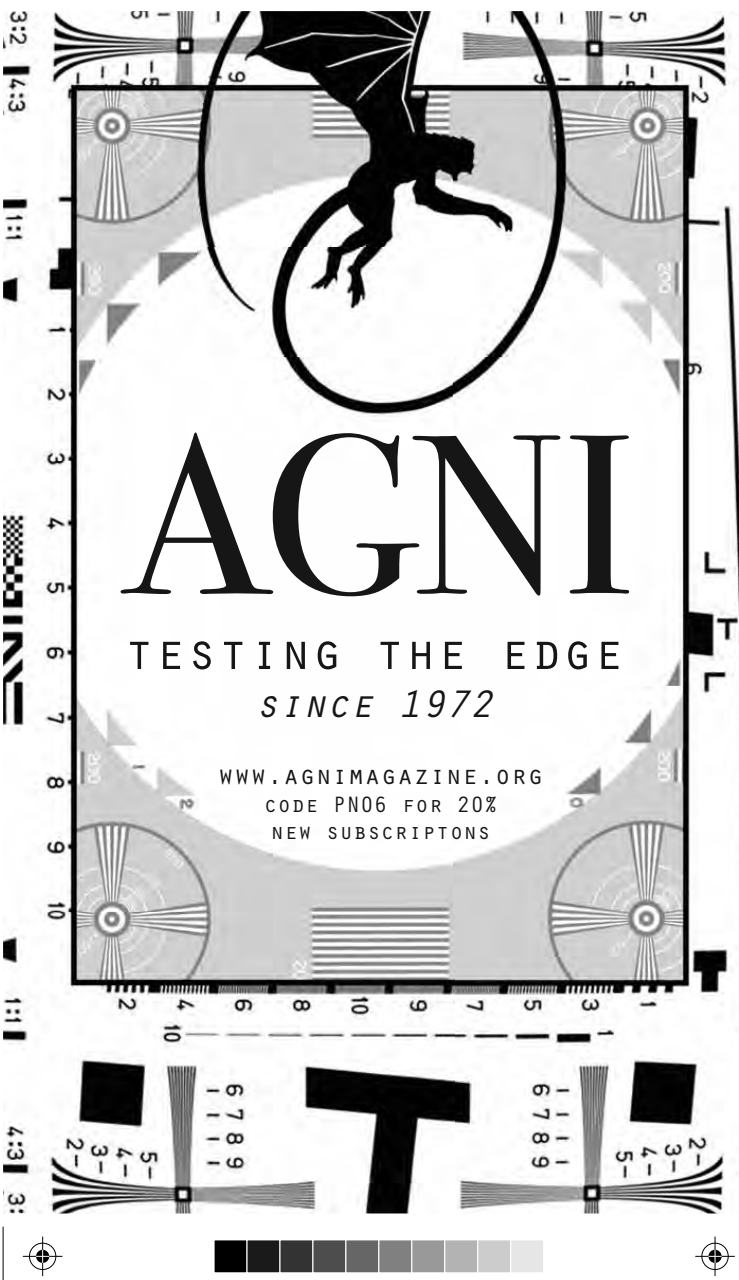


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