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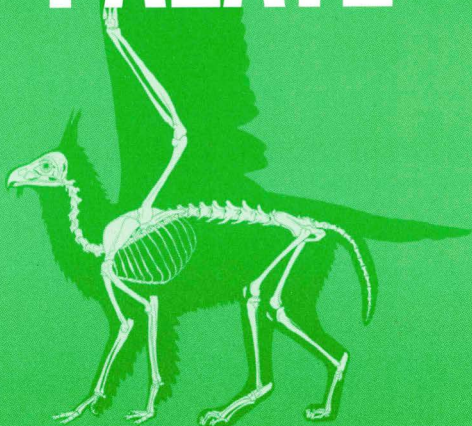
Harpur Palate, Volume 11 Number 2, Winter & Spring

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& SPRING**

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THE RELATIVE WEIGHT

ALBERT
ABONADO

I know better
than to say on a scale

of objects, my grandmother's weight
must fall somewhere

between a small bird
and a melon, which means

I think of her more
in terms of ounces,

so I don't ask anyone
how much fluid a woman

in her condition could possibly
contain when the nurse wheels her

into the bathroom, since I've already
taken into account the air

in her lungs among my
calculations, undecided

if mass has any relationship
to blindness,

which would then explain
why she didn't recognize

my mother, although I'm told
she still counts money

in her spare time, can provide
the latest exchange rate

if the amount of oxygen
she receives is consistent.

LETTER TO THE HAILSTONES STRIKING THE ROOF

**SANDY
ANDERSON**

You think I am listening to the tympani
of your fall, but I hear the whistle
of the passing train
and roll the silk scarf
of its sound between my fingers
like a rosary I don't own.
You think I cover my head
with my hands,
but I sidestep the small explosions
of you by seeing clearly the air
between me and beyond,
balancing on my own
imaginary tightrope.
When I pick you up
and cup you in my hand,
you are so fragile
you cease to exist,
roll through my fingers like water.

THREE DANCING GIRLS

NIN
ANDREWS

—for Emily Lisker

Every night after dance class, my sisters and I stayed up late, dreaming of the day we'd twirl on toe. We were natural performers, acrobats, ballerinas—all three of us, with long slender arms and legs. Or so we thought as we took turns, showing off our steps in a little circle of light cast by the moon in our attic room. We were so similar in mind and manner and moods back then, and in style and laughter and dance. Even our nail polish was the same color, not to mention our favorite shoes (black heels), our skirts (as swishy as sails), our taste in men (we liked the ones with square heads, though an occasional oval was fine, too). Soon we began to excel in class, and we also began to perform. The mornings after our recitals or shows, which were always followed by receptions, we would talk about the boys we met, our mouths full of laughter and apple flan.

Food was our code for some kind of romantic act, and sometimes for a specific man. A flirtation was Seven-Up or Coke, though Coke was far better than a clear pop and meant something exciting might happen soon. Pretzels and chips were holding hands. Kissing, Oreos. But after a while, we all

liked the same man. Payday, we called him, after the candy bar with peanuts and chewy caramel, a candy we could never get enough of. I think of him sometimes, his brown curls and freckles, his sneering grin. How he blushed when we teased him, how we kept spinning around and around him, stealing his wallet, his books, his cigarette lighter from the back pocket of his jeans. I remember the last night we danced, all three of us on a single stage in a park with a beautiful arboretum, and when Payday clapped, I felt for a moment we were kin to the birds. But that was the night Payday looped one of my sister's arms in his, and took her outside and did not come back in. The night when I felt the music inside me, the music that had always been a music of all three, suddenly slow and drift and sink to the ground, like a candy wrapper taken by a gust of wind.

THE REAL STORY OF SPIDERMAN

NIN
ANDREWS

You'll never believe me if I tell you the real story
of Spiderman. How he had the soul of Tinkerbelle.
But this was back in the days of the Baby Boomers,
when all the women on the planet drank the same Kool-Aid.
They ate food out of boxes and cans and plastic wrap
for the first time, and pretty soon, they started having babies
like popcorn. There weren't enough souls to go around.
There were rush shipments coming out of the sky day and night.
Too bad souls aren't something you can rush. Some were half-baked.
Some were half-animal, their arms like chicken wings,
their hands waving from their shoulder sockets.
Others were still talking to the gods about what sort of life
they should lead. Still others like Spiderman were men on the outside,
but girls and angels in their minds. Many of these looked feminine
with their delicate hands or mouths, so when people looked
at them, they thought woman or goddess instead of man.
But no such luck for Spiderman. He had the body of a Greek god,
the cock of a Celtic warrior. And the soul of a debutante.
Once his voice dropped, he started getting boners in class,
and Mary Jane would never leave him alone. Every day
after school she came knocking on his door, *Peter, are you home?*
He'd have to come down from his hammock on the ceiling
and slip out of his aunts pumps and pantyhose,

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stuff them in his pocket, before she waltzed right in.

One look at her, or one whiff, made him shrivel up fast.

I am not your man, he wanted to shout. *I'm Tinkerbelle in disguise.*

Instead he tried to be nice. After all, she did serve a purpose.

As long as she hung around, his aunt stopped pestering him
about finding a nice gal and settling down.

But pretty soon Mary Jane was driving him nuts.

He started climbing the walls and diving out of windows
and into the night, slipping into alleys and bars.

That's how he discovered other angels in disguise,

magic men and ladies like him

who moved as shadows through their secret lives.

YOU ARE A GIANT, YOU THINK

**MICHAEL
BACCAM**

First, there will be ants. They'll crawl on that half-peeled apple, the one you dropped, and use their pincers to carry off the pieces. And you'll just sit there. Unwilling to stand, to bother pushing yourself to your feet and bracing your leg with a hand. You'd let someone carry you if they would. Carry you everywhere. You'd point to the kitchen and your husband would put you on his back, take you to the fridge so you could grab a Popsicle or a Bud. There would be no shame living this way.

But now you aren't even the wife of a bad husband. You're worse. Thirty-six, sitting on this porch, waiting for your husband to ask you to come back. You're peeling apples in this old-people's town while your grandmother sleeps inside. She jerks in and out of consciousness, only waking long enough to suck drool back into her mouth. The television is too loud. Her face is blue-lit.

You remind yourself that she wasn't always like this. Once, she killed a snake for you. You were seven and in her yard, on crutches after the second operation to elongate your tibia, after the doctor cracked it into three pieces. You pushed yourself around, looking through the vegetable garden, and you saw it: a dark green coil with a yellow stripe down its back. You screamed and let go of the crutches, folded onto the dry, sandy dirt. And even though the snake moved away, you screamed louder. Then

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your grandmother came outside with a cleaver. She walked into that garden, pushing aside her mint and tomatoes, and stepped on the snake. She grabbed it by the tail and carried it to the sycamore, pinned her hand against the bark, against the snake, and swung the knife into the tree. It was simple, like cutting rope, and the tail-half of the body fell to the ground, briefly tightening into itself before dying. Your grandmother tossed the snake's head into the bushes and dropped the cleaver. She left it all there and carried you inside.

Later, you found the head and picked it up, considered its dead eyes. You took it with you, your small hand wrapped around its neck, and grabbed a rock from under the porch. Then you laid the snake on the ground, straightened its half-body, and smashed its head into the earth, swept dirt over it. After that, you went looking for snakes, a paring knife pressed between your hand and the crutch. You went looking, even though you never found them.

Now, you watch for ants. You can see their paths to the house, dotted lines leading to sandy mounds. And after the ants, there will be fruit flies, you tell yourself, then gnats, then cockroaches. They'll swarm the house, block the windows. You're sure of this.

But you won't stop them. For now, you buy two bags of apples and set yourself outside, on the porch, peeling. You'll make your grandmother a pie. For all you care you'll make a pie for every house on the block. And after it's dark, after the neighbors have dead-bolted their doors, you'll sneak up their walkways and leave a pie on each porch. That's what you'll do. Not even a word. Though maybe you'll pull the heads off their tulips or slide the welcome mats to the bottom of their porch steps. Maybe you will think this is exciting.

Inside, a man on the television says, "Three-hundred and seventy-five days of geese," and for a moment you stop peeling and look at the apples. These are ugly, you think. These are the ugliest apples you've ever seen. Too much green skin at the

crowns. Too many flat sides, blunt edges, bruises.

You put the knife down.

You aren't concentrating, just flicking the knife like a child whittling a stick. Slow down. Pick up the knife and start at the stem. Curl it around the apple so a coil grows toward the ground.

Think about the cash you stole from your husband. Five thousand and change, even though you didn't need it. This after you grew accustomed to him pulling his shoulder away when you settled into him on the couch, after months of him going to Cleveland for business and staying the whole weekend even if it was only a four-hour drive. After he'd come home late and sleep on the sofa, ignoring the sound of you running the shower to let him know you were still awake.

So you became used to sleeping alone, running a fan to replace your husband's breathing, pretending to not be afraid of the city. In bed, you thought of taking a pair of scissors to every piece of clothing he owned, thought of how you could break his arm with a hammer if you wanted. But all you did was leave – something neither of you ever thought could happen because what would you do anyway? Catch a train to Pittsburgh. To Florida. A bus to your grandmother's. Make some pies. Check the missing persons web sites and play out his words in your head, his pleas on the local news to help him find his wife. He'd hold a picture of you and him at that Fourth of July barbecue, the blue and silver Chicago skyline in the background, and he looks good in the photo, your husband, tall and broad, genuinely happy. You stand at his shoulder, sweaty and sunburned.

The news will say there is a 98% chance that you are dead.

You imagine that he will come to your grandmother's house to kill you. He will strangle you. He will bash in your temple with a can of Campbell's Chunky soup. He will hold your wrists down and tie you to your bed and start a fire underneath it. Then, he will turn himself in. Or he'll take you alive, tie you up and put you in the backseat as he drives the car off a bridge. His

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forehead will crack the windshield and the water will lift your body to the car roof until you both drown.

You're always disappointed at the end of your fantasies, so you start over, imagining new deaths. But they're all a joke. He doesn't care enough to do something like that. Any of that. Anyway, he expects you'll come back.

You will not go back.

And when a gnat settles in front of you on the white, paint-peeled bench, you will put the knife down again. You'll lean forward and press your finger to the gnat, to the bench, applying just enough pressure so it cannot crawl away. You'll press your finger to that gnat and think you feel every vibration of its wings, its legs, its body. You are a giant, you'll think. You are a whale. You'll push your finger forward, slowly, feeling the gnat's body roll. Back and forth. Until its legs are broken underneath, until the wings rub away, until the body vanishes.

You'll keep rubbing at that same stretch of wood, the paint splintering into your finger. But you will never finish those apples.

Instead, you'll sit and wait for the ants. They'll crowd every rug, your bedsheets, your grandmother's recliner. Your grandmother will be dead. Your pies will be too sweet. And the ants will crawl up your back, along your shoulder. You won't move. They'll pile on top of each other, swarm the porch, smother the walls. They'll carry this whole goddamn house away.

THE MISFORTUNE THAT SUMMER

**MATTHEW
BAKER**

I.

The hotel's pools are guests-only, yet the boy Gaspard Petit, who is not a guest, is here.

Easy enough, very simple, this sneaking-in-of-self! Almost daily the boy Gaspard comes padding across the hotel's cobblestone drive, comes into the hotel's revolving door. The door senses Gaspard's presence, spins—of its own accord!—until Gaspard's chamber empties into the hotel proper. *All the while clutching his inflatable duck* the boy Gaspard then steals across the lobby's marble floors, avoiding the glances of the porters parking their luggageless luggage carts, of the mustached concierge. Then, as if merely an unsupervised child-of-guests: down the spiral staircase! Out the glass doors at the hotel's rear! Down the cobblestone pathway, and through the metal gate looming between sugar palms above the hotel's pools! Gaspard wears pink-and-yellow swimming trunks, the lining of which is far too tight even for legs as skinny as Gaspard's. A size too small, like all else kept bunched in the boy Gaspard's dresser; outgrown by Gaspard years ago, yet still these trunks of pink-and-yellow must be worn.

How good in these preteen years to spend the afternoon swimming with other children! How good to spend it anywhere other than Gaspard's apartment, which is often parentless until

long after Gaspard has eaten his supper of microwaved oatmeal and grape jam knifed from a jar; parentless until long after the security lights in the parking lot below have come snapping on yellow (except that light nearest Gaspard's apartment, whose burnt-out bulb still has not been replaced); parentless sometimes until sunrise has sent the security lights snapping off again. How good—the best!—to find children-of-guests willing to play with the boy Gaspard, children-of-guests whose parents will gift him with sunscreen, with sandwiches, like one of their own. How good in these preteen years to sample other families, to wait for one that will keep him.

II.

Deck chairs shadowed by striped umbrellas.

A family claiming these chairs: a brother with blackish hair and blackish eyes, a tattoo of a rook needled into the skin of his hand, white swimming trunks knotted at his hips; a sister with blackish hair and lopsided shoulders, wearing a one-piece spotted with Mickey Mouse silhouettes; a sister with reddish hair and yellow braces bolted to her teeth, wearing a brown bikini. Teen, preteen, preteen, accompanied by towel-toting parents. The boy Gaspard stands to his ankles in the shallows, staring at the sisters, trying to gauge which of Gaspard's games they would be most likely to play: Squid Hunters? Castaway Wedding? We Are Mutant Humans with Feet Webbing and Fins? Yet then Gaspard notices *the tattooed brother staring back at him*.

Gaspard's heart begins beating fast enough for two Gaspards. The tattooed brother appears angry with him for staring at his sisters! The brother kicks his flip-flops under a deck chair, still staring at Gaspard.

Gaspard pretends to look at a pool attendant carrying an armful of wet towels, then a pregnant woman floating past on an inner tube. Gaspard does this so it will appear that the boy Gaspard has not been staring at just the sisters, but was taking turns staring at everyone.

Yet when Gaspard looks back at the tattooed brother, the brother stares at him still!

Gaspard bends to whisper in the ear of the duck Michel. Gaspard wears the inner tube of the inflatable duck now around his hips, this duck stolen months ago from the daughter of Japanese guests.

—It seems the fiend means us harm if we are to approach his sisters, says Michel.

The duck Michel wears black sunglasses and also is pink.

—I hate this brother, whispers Gaspard.

—We cannot risk a quarrel, says Michel. Away with us.

—But I wish to swim with those sisters.

The duck Michel stares at the boy Gaspard.

—And to eat the sandwiches brought by their parents, and to become their youngest son.

—I said away with us! shouts the duck Michel.

The boy Gaspard goes splashing into deeper water.

III.

Very desirable, the proximity of this five-star hotel to the boy Gaspard's apartment! For a boy with legs as long as Gaspard's, a mere half-hour march. And unlike all other hotels in this metropolis of Orlando, the other hotels where Gaspard has attempted to swim? Here, no plastic keycard needed for the opening-of-gate. No lifeguard patrolling the gurgling spas, the canals between the hotel's pools, the water slide flinging children into the shallows. The pool attendants too taken with the selling of their platters of frozen watermelon, frozen blackberries, rum-laced iced orange juices—too taken to bother with patrolling for non-guests such as this boy Gaspard!

These pools more home to Gaspard than the apartment where he and the duck Michel share a twin-sized bed. These pools more home to him even than the duplex in Marne-la-Vallée where Gaspard once lived when he was merely Michel-sized. Here, at the hotel, Gaspard's home is an island: three pools

shadowed by sugar palms, creek-sized canals connecting one to the other to the other to the one. Circled by these pools and canals, a concrete island of deck chairs and striped umbrellas and complimentary yellow towels. It is here Michel has raised this Gaspard, on the sandwich crusts and watermelon rinds of the mannerly and snot-nosed children-of-guests.

—Gaspard, says Michel.

From this Gaspard, nothing.

—Why do you sulk, Gaspard?

—You know very well I sulk over the sisters.

A stone bridge arching over the canal: guests with bright beach balls climbing the bridge's stairs, crossing from the concrete island back toward the hotel, only their above-the-waist parts visible over the bridge's stone sides. Foamy water spits from metal holes in the bridge's sides, fountain-like, into the canal below.

—There are many here who would adopt us into their playing. Many even today.

—But I have not chosen those others, says Gaspard.

—Why then these sisters?

—Because they are the most beautiful sisters who have ever existed. Because they have not even a glance of meanness between them, not even a mutter.

The flow of the canal bringing Gaspard and Michel drifting through the drape of foamy water into the bridge's underside. An echoing. Through another drape, back into the sun.

—You cannot always do the choosing.

—Have you already forgotten my father? says Gaspard. My mother? Only three days they are gone, and already you have forgotten their carelessness and stupor? Not I. I have had my fill of being chosen. My parents chose me, and nothing good has come of it.

—You have been getting careless. Caught climbing onto the roof of the bathhouse. Then yelled at for attempting to become the triplet of those twins. Then the macaroon incident—

—I have forgotten those others. I want only to be in the family of these sisters.

—If we are not careful, they will exile us from this place, and then where will we—

—I must make amends with their brother, says Gaspard, ignoring the duck Michel. Or destroy and supplant him.

The canal now emptying Gaspard and Michel into the pool with the water slide.

—Shall we tumble pell-mell down those tubes of yellow? says Gaspard.

—Nothing, says Michel, would please me more.

IV.

Yet even now waiting for them, at slide's end, an oddity: grandchildrenless grandparents, applauding each of the children cannonballing out of the tubes. A bald grandfather, a spectacled grandmother, holding hands in the shallows. Then taking their hands apart again for clapping.

Gaspard knows they are grandchildrenless because of this: these grandparents cheer all of the children alike, are privy to none of their names.

—Very good! shouts the grandfather when a boy in green swim trunks topples sideways out of the slide's end. Best splash yet!

—Well! shouts the grandmother when a girl in a striped one-piece faceplants into the shallows. Very brave!

These grandparents appear lonely for grandchildren—might perhaps even choose one from those here at the pools, perhaps even—yes!—this boy Gaspard.

Gaspard vows he shall give them proof of his worth.

Gaspard patters off along the poolside, leaving shadowy footprints behind him that shrink with the heat. Together the boy Gaspard and his duck Michel climb the concrete stairs leading toward the slide's top, even as children go shrieking through the winding tubes toward the bottom. A pool attendant mans the

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top, monitoring the line of children waiting to go down.

—You can't wear that flotation device going down the slide, says the pool attendant.

Gaspard pretends not to hear him.

—I said you can't wear that, kid. No flotation devices on the slide.

—He's not a device. He's a duck.

—Sure, okay, I see that. But still.

Gaspard squints at the pool attendant. He does not trust this freckly teen, with his acne and his slouching and his Mickey Mouse wristwatch.

—They always let me take him before.

—Rules are rules, kid. I can hold him if you want while you go down the slide.

Gaspard and his duck Michel climb back down the concrete stairs. The grandchildrenless grandparents applaud the boy in green swim trunks, who again has come toppling out of the slide's end. *Gaspard entrusts Michel to a bush near the stairs* and then angles Michel's head so that Michel will be able to see Gaspard's splash.

—Speak to no one, Michel, says Gaspard.

He patters up the stairs, the soles of his feet already dry, leaving footprints no longer.

—Ready? says the pool attendant.

Gaspard mutters a curse against the pool attendant and sits at the slide's top. Foamy water spurts from holes in the slide's sides. Gaspard's insides gurgle for sandwich. He feels happy to have grandchildrenless grandparents waiting for him, grandparents who will clap for his daring.

Gaspard then launches himself off into the tubes! The knobs of his elbows banging against the slide, the knuckles of his spine rattling across it, Gaspard careens this way and that, seeing above the sun in the sky wearing half a mask of a cloud, then the hotel's nine hundred windows reproducing the sky in rows of endless panels, then suddenly again the sky itself!

Arms wheeing, Gaspard slides sideways from the slide and
faceplants into the shallows.

V.

Upon surfacing, a general fête.

—Very good! the grandfather shouts. Best splash yet!

—What speed! the grandmother shouts.

—Thank you, sir, says Gaspard, bowing to each of them.

Thank you, madam.

Gaspard looks to see if Michel has noticed, but the duck
Michel is pretending not to look.

Gaspard gathers Michel from his perch atop the bush.

—If we could not go together, Michel says, then you should
not have gone at all.

VI. A Making Of Vows

Yet before Gaspard can bring Michel down to the grand-
parents and engage them in a tête-à-tête regarding their perhaps
keeping this boy-of-breathtaking-splashes and his duck-of-
decorum-and-politesse, out from the canal nearest the slide *come*
bobbing the tattooed brother and his preteen sisters on white
duckless inner tubes. Gaspard sees he has been a fool: he has
fallen for the wiles of these grandchildrenless grandparents—for-
gotten meanwhile of the sisters.

—I must go down the slide.

—Without me once more? Please, Gaspard. Please do not
leave me alone once again!

—But I must.

The duck Michel stares at Gaspard.

—You are worse than your father, says Michel.

Then to the boy Gaspard the duck Michel will say nothing
more.

Gaspard feels his cheeks tingling, as if suddenly sunburned.
The shame of it! Yet with Michel, Gaspard cannot seek to make
amends, because even now the sisters Gaspard loves are bobbing

by the slide's end, just beyond the grandchildrenless grandparents, in prime position for the viewing of Gaspard's splashing.

And as Gaspard scurries up the stairs, he vows that never again will he leave the duck Michel alone after this, and, as he reties his pink-and-yellow swimming trunks at the slide's top, he vows that he will not be like his father, who is always working for what he tells Gaspard will be *a better life for us* (Gaspard's pit-eyed mother repeating to Gaspard, as always, whatever his father has said, whatever his father has chosen for them to say, *a better life for us*, and then saying nothing more), two or three shifts a day at the Magic Kingdom—his father wearing suspenders and a striped shirt and selling tickets in the afternoon, then dancing in a bird costume in the evening's firework-splattered parades, then with Gaspard's mother spending nights in the streets of Fantasyland, of Tomorrowland, sweeping up the crumpled litter of the lifeless families who had come to pretend that they had some magic left to them still—working so just as they had in Marne-la-Vallée when Gaspard was young, at Paris' Disneyland, and as Gaspard peeks over the railing at the sisters on their inner tubes below, as he's given the nod from the freckly pool attendant, as he sits down in the spurting foam at the slide's top, Gaspard vows that even if for his own family nothing is ever any different or gets any better or only gets worse, he will change himself for the duck Michel and become a better boy.

Gaspard then launches himself into the tubes, his heart beating against his ribs in a wild frenzy over his daring!

At slide's end, a tipping backwards, Gaspard's derrière sticking out of the water, his legs flailing like a bird's feeling for something on which to alight, his head meanwhile underneath.

Upon surfacing, a fête as before.

—Very good! the grandfather shouts. Better even than your first!

Again a tingling-of-cheeks for the boy Gaspard: yet on this occasion caused not by shame, but by pride!

Yet beyond the grandchildrenless grandparents, on his

duckless inner tube, the tattooed brother laughs and laughs and laughs. And the sister of lopsided shoulders and the Mickey Mouse one-piece and the sister of reddish hair and yellows braces clapped onto her teeth stare at Gaspard *as if they would never consider playing with such a boy in all of the days of their living*. Then Gaspard sees the grandparents as the brother sees them: as silly old lardbottoms who would love even the most worthless of boys.

Before the sisters Gaspard loves bob off into the next canal, Gaspard feels he must make his faithfulness to them quite plain—his faithfulness to them and them alone.

—Perhaps you should go down the slide, Gaspard says to the grandparents, *a gleam of gold cunning in the brown of his eyes*.

—Oh, I don't think we'd fit, the grandmother says.

—No, Gaspard says, and then shouts, No you certainly wouldn't! and laughs and laughs and laughs, just as had the tattooed brother. Then with this Gaspard slaps a chop of poolwater into the grandmother's eyes!

—Hey, you, shouts the grandchildrenless grandfather, but Gaspard has already clawed himself out of the pool and wriggled into the inner tube of the duck Michel and gone flying down the poolside again leaving the shadowy footprints that shrink with the heat!

VII. Hidden Behind The Bathhouse With Its Roof Of White Thatch

—Michel the duck, née Komatsu, for your bravery when twice left alone on the bush, I bestow upon you a dozen fresh lungfuls of air. This as always through the plastic tube in your underside.

—To me this is acceptable, says Michel.

Then, hunched among the pipes and the wisping steam vents, from Gaspard this bestowing.

This duck Michel loved the chlorine-and-liquor taste of the poolwater; loved nesting among the shoes at the bottom of Gaspard's closet, where Gaspard's mother could not find him and toss him out onto balcony to dry; loved the clicking noises of the apartment's ceiling fan, which reminded him of beaks against beaks; loved the bobbing sensation when Gaspard would get to bobbing, the flying sensation when Gaspard would run along the poolside with Michel at his hips; loved Gaspard's hips, which were just the right size for a duck of his sort, and the freckles on Gaspard's shoulders, which reminded Michel of the spots on spotted eggs.

IX.

Gaspard stands wearing the tattooed brother's flip-flops, left here among the family's deck chairs. The parents sit beyond one of the pools at the hotel's outdoor café, feeding each other macaroons and hors d'oeuvres. The brother and his sisters bob somewhere along the canals on their duckless inner tubes—undoubtedly talking of things other than the boy Gaspard.

Gaspard wiggles his toes in the brother's flip-flops, allowing each toe to express its pleasure at being fitted as such in the dernier cri.

Then away with Gaspard! Still wearing the brother's flip-flops!

—Get the fuck out of my kicks.

Behind Gaspard, his white swimming trunks knotted at his hips, his blackish hair still dripping poolwater, the tattooed brother speaks. Fear now coming to the groin of the boy Gaspard. The tattooed brother speaking so quietly it is a sort of loudness.

—Take them off.

The sisters nowhere to be seen. Vis-à-vis with the brother, Gaspard sees now the brother will suffer no amends, wants only a general mêlée. Around his hips, the duck Michel tenses.

—They're not yours, Gaspard says. They're mine.

—You wear flip-flops twice the size of your feet?

The boy Gaspard considers this.

—Yes.

—I don't think so, says the tattooed brother.

From the brother, a faltering-of-fists, yet—it seems as much, as the brother now glances toward them—this only because of the many naïve toddlers here at the pools, staying here with their parents, come to visit the parks, the lot of them unexposed to bloodshed and other ordinary cruelties. Some sit in the shallows nearby, their swimsuits ballooning from the sogging of their diapers. Their parents stand ankle-deep, staring now at the tattooed brother and the boy Gaspard.

—What's going on here? a pool attendant asks, hefting her armful of wet towels.

—Nothing, says the boy Gaspard. Just playing a game with my brother.

Gaspard steps backward out of the flip-flops, staring at the tattooed one even still.

—I'm not his brother, the brother says.

X. What Occurs Once Gaspard Is Again In His Bare Feet

Along the bathhouse, someone has puked onto the concrete path.

From his perch atop the bridge, Gaspard stares at the janitor who has come to clean it: a man with a mop, wearing a gray button-up. Hairless arms, fat earlobes, jaw jutting out quite farther than his nose. The puke is the color of liquor, with what looks like lime pulp in among it.

Gaspard knows this janitor is the keeper of this hotel's paradise, just as Gaspard's father is the keeper of another. These keepers being paid to soak up anything hellish into their mops, then wring them out again into their buckets.

Gaspard feels as if he would like to shout at the man from where he is perched—yet he does not know what to shout.

XI.

In the canal winding through prickly shrubs and hunch-backed sugar palms, between the pool with the slide and the pool near the outdoor café.

Gaspard hides under one of the stone bridges, between its drapes of foamy water, gripping the wall with white-knuckled hands to resist the canal's flowing. Michel the duck snug at his hips. Gaspard's legs swaying underwater, toes unable to even graze the pool's bottom. *Gaspard here waiting to waylay the sisters upon their next passing-through.*

Yet this with only the soupçon of bravado left to him after his almost-mêlée with their brother.

The drape of water lifting, guests inner-tubed now drifting into the bridge's underside. An ambiguous family: on one tube, a saggy-faced man in gray swimming trunks and a white polo, with a horseshoe of black and silver hair, a glass of fizzy soda on the crest of his belly; in another, a woman in a yellow one-piece, wrinkles crouched at the corners of her eyes as if ready to spring at the rest of her face, bearing a lapful of papers covered in graphs and numbers; on the other, a shaggy-haired man in fat sunglasses, his skin tanned the color of an orange cat cap-à-pied, a glass of pale liquor on his tube, a cut of lime at its rim; none of them talking. Father, mother, wayward son? Brother, sister, wayward youngest brother? Cousin, cousin, cousin's wayward lover? For the boy Gaspard, impossible to tell. Gaspard sees the wayward one's arm is tattooed with a word, but all Gaspard can see of it is its end—its UTH. Perhaps the name of his mother, his sister, his lover—the woman in the yellow one-piece? RUTH? This wayward man the sort Gaspard has always imagined populates the casinos along the ocean where his parents spend their off days and sick days, the same ocean they'd gambled on in Portugal weekends they'd lived in Marne-la-Vallée, getting what pleasure they could from the slot machines with their coins, *as if*

pleasure.

—Hello, the wayward one says.

—Salut, Gaspard says.

—What? the wayward one says.

Like Gaspard's, the man's swimming trunks are ill-fitting, ill-colored, passé. As he drifts by, his foot jostles Michel, jostling Gaspard. The man's tube bobs clockwise, Gaspard seeing now just enough of the tattoo's first letter to make sense of it—an R, a RUTH, as he'd suspected.

Yet as the ambiguous family drifts back into the sun, the canal spins the man's tube so that his arm, before disappearing through the drape, shows Gaspard its tattoo in full: TRUTH.

The other drape then parting, in drifting the sisters upon their duckless inner tubes.

The sister of lopsided shoulders wiping the water from her eyes, then seeing Gaspard.

The sister of yellow braces then the same.

All ennui fluttering now from their faces, replaced by the birds of something uncertain.

And with this Gaspard thrusts himself from the pool's side and into the canal's flowing.

XII. A Disloyalty

—I like your duck, the sister of yellow braces says.

They float now from under the bridge, the drape of water knocking across their bodies, Gaspard's feet kicking happily underwater.

—Will you play a game with me? says Gaspard.

—What kind? the sister of lopsided shoulders says.

—I know a game of pretending-to-be-animals, says Gaspard. I know a game of pretending-to-be-grownups. I know a game of pretending-to-be-in-love.

The sisters consider this.

—But also after our game I should like to go with your

—For dinner? the sister of yellow braces says.

—Well, says Gaspard. And then also forever.

The duck Michel feeling limp at Gaspard's hips.

—What's wrong with your duck? says the sister of yellow braces.

The duck Michel's head then wilting onto the surface of the water and Gaspard feeling a sudden sinking-of-self. Gaspard struggling to stay afloat! The same Michel-around-waist that made it possible for him to float now making it impossible for him to swim.

—Hey, you're splashing me! says the sister of lopsided shoulders.

—Wait, says Gaspard, his arms slapping at the water, please wait—

The duck Michel now so lifeless that Gaspard dips underwater, mouth open! Comes hacking and sputtering back to the surface, then dips underwater once more! Still underwater, Gaspard fumbles at Michel's underside—finds the plastic tube undone!

Gaspard plugs the plastic tube to thwart further such leaking. Upon surfacing, Gaspard thrashes to the wall, gets his elbows onto it, inner-tubeless and unable to keep up with the sisters.

—Goodbye! the sister of yellow braces shouts as her tube hurries her away.

—But I'm coming with you! says Gaspard.

—But we're leaving!

The tubes taking the sisters from the canal, bestowing them now to the pool beyond. The sisters shouting to Gaspard their adieus.

—Goodbye, duck boy!

Gaspard saying nothing, only watching from the wall.

—

Hunched among the pipes and the wisping steam vents, from Gaspard a puffing-of-air into the duck Michel: yet on this occasion, for not an honoring, but an interrogation!

—What betrayal is this, duck Michel?

Michel the reinflated considers.

—Perhaps you failed to properly close my tube after giving me my prior lungfuls of air.

—Impossible, says Gaspard, panting from his puffing.

—Perhaps I want only your happiness but fear you will abandon me if you were to find a new family.

—So that is the reason! You fiend.

—Do not say such a thing if it is not meant.

—The sisters have left me—even now might be toweling their hair and gathering their flip-flops!

—Is a duck not enough for you?

—You fiend, says Gaspard. You fiend!

XIV. Feat Of Feats

Swiftly now, frantically, trickily especially: a pattering across the concrete island, flitting between deck chairs, between umbrellas, through man-made groves of sugar palms. The boy Gaspard comes upon the deck chairs of the family that is not his own, their towels and shirts still slung over their chairs. Gaspard thieves the brother's flip-flops, the duck Michel snug at his hips. Then away with Gaspard! If the sisters will not have him, then will he not make amends with the grandchildrenless grandparents, and be their grandson forever, fishing from the prow of his new grandfather's paint-chipped rowboat, nibbling on his new grandmother's almondy blanket still warm from the oven? *Yes, so it shall be, so away with him now to the pool with the slide.*

The grandparents at slide's end as always, alone with their clapping. Gaspard blasé at seeing the children-of-guests come knocking into the water, knowing his own splashing can once again win the grandparents' fondnesses, plotting even now to

regale them with feats a gogo.

A mob of teenage guests comes spilling through the pool's metal gate. Gaspard thinking, the more here to see it, the better. Gaspard entrusting his duck now to the bush near the stairs.

—Do you still hate me for my sinking of us? says Michel.

—I cannot, says Gaspard. You are the favorite creature of my knowing. But please do not ruin these hopefully grandparents for me.

Gaspard climbing the stairs now, sans Michel. His gait that of one who will not be defeated. A gleam of dark bravado in the brown of his eyes. Swimming trunks swishing at his thighs. Gaspard shoulders past the few children-of-guests waiting in line, sits at the slide's top, ignores the pool attendant saying, now hold on, kid, and crouches on the tattooed brother's flip-flops in the foamy water, *launching himself thus into the tubes, still crouching!*

A terror then. Flip-flops skimming back and forth across the slide's surface, knees wobbling from the keeping-upon-feet, hands hovering near his hips at the white strip of belly marked by the wearing-of-Michel, Gaspard tearing down the tubes with wind shrieking up at him, the pool attendant shouting from above, someone shouting something down below, and then Gaspard careening around a bend and seeing the slide's end, the sunny water there and the guests gathered about it, and Gaspard crouches deeper and then springs into the air, arms wing-like, knees tucked up at his sternum, shutting his eyes and waiting for the glory of the splashing.

Underwater, Gaspard unable to help himself from smiling, imagining his coming fête.

Yet, upon surfacing—a general nothing.

The grandparents looking not at Gaspard, but at the mob of slouchy teenagers in their multicolored swimsuits, talking to them as if they know them. Laughing with these teenage guests. *Referring to them by name.* Jeffrey, Andrew, Jonathan, Benj.

A sickening in Gaspard's belly. These grandparents posing

the shame of it!

Gaspard looking now to see if Michel at least has noticed Gaspard's feat upon the tubes.

Yet Michel's bush empty.

The duck Michel neither perched upon any other nearby bush, nor sitting overturned upon the poolside, nor floating upon the pool.

The sickening in Gaspard's belly now almost unknowable.

XV.

Gaspard does not want to be his father but already can feel himself becoming him. As he runs down the poolside, searching the waists of children-of-guests for the duck Michel, he feels himself as someone older, his cheeks now gaunt, his hair thinning into wisps, his teeth stained by the espresso and the wine he hasn't yet drunk. Gaspard's heart beating against his ribs in a wild frenzy over his carelessness as he looks for Michel, just as his father had run along the gates of the airport in the metropolis of Philadelphia after being sidetracked into a wine shop, this after his mother had entrusted Gaspard to their father while she napped at their gate, this on their move to Disney World; just as his father had run among the picnic tables and overflowing garbage cans of a playground when again he had lost the boy Gaspard; just as his father had run down the aisles of the grocery store nearest their apartment; just as his father had run down the cobblestone streets of Fantasyland the one time they had used their employee passes to take him into the park. This father who had brought them here to the metropolis of Orlando because he thought that here they could be different, that even if in Paris' Disneyland they kept him selling tickets and pushing brooms, that at Disney World he would become somebody, have his own office, write screenplays, buy a house along the ocean—would become somebody happier. This father who was always imagining himself somewhere else, meanwhile losing the boy

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—Michel, calls Gaspard, Michel! But Michel does not answer, as Gaspard knew he would not, as Gaspard knows that someone who is lost is unable to, because when you are lost you are somewhere the searchers are not, somewhere you cannot hear them. Gaspard has been lost enough times to know well the death-soon-or-worse feeling Michel must now be suffering.

Gaspard sees a spot of pink in one of the canals, an inner-tubed child-of-guests bobbing toward the drape of water blotting out the underside of a stone bridge. Gaspard flip-flopping now through the prickly shrubs along the canal's side, across the bark mulch, shouting for Michel. Gaspard leaps from the poolside into the canal! Comes sputtering to the surface! Shouts for Michel, wiping the water from his eyes!

Yet the pink inner tube disappearing even now through the drape of water is not Michel, instead a duckless inner tube, Gaspard seeing now that it is not even a Michel shade of pink. Gaspard swims to the wall, gets his elbows onto it, resting them near the spray of the drape.

—Hey.

Above Gaspard the duck Michel's beak poking over the bridge's side.

—Michel!

Then the face of the tattooed brother.

—Hey, kid. Throw me my flip-flops, motherfucker.

A kidnapping! Even worse than a lostness!

Gaspard's lungs empty of air. He cannot fill them up again, cannot breathe or even speak.

—I'm serious, my family's leaving, let's go, toss them up.

—Give me back my duck.

—Give me back my kicks.

—Fear nothing, Michel! Tonight we shall yet have our soirée.

Michel unable to answer. Impossible to tell from down below—perhaps gagged? Or simply too fearful to say even a word?

—I'm not kidding, kid. Don't make me come down there.

—I'm throwing them, you roué. Then will you throw Michel?

From this brother, nothing. Gaspard keeps an elbow on the side of the canal while tugging off the flip-flops of the tattooed brother. He grips a flip-flop, flings it up to him.

—Now my duck, then the other.

—No, now the other.

Gaspard flings it up. The brother steps into them.

—You're too young to be ogling, says the brother, and my sisters are too young to get ogled. If I had time to come down there, I'd beat you pink and purple.

Then the brother holds Michel to his lips—as if about to bestow upon Michel a lungful of air—and bites Michel's neck.

Then with his teeth tears a hole into the plastic skin of the duck Michel.

Michel goes limp, but this time the sort of limp from which there is no returning.

—You're lucky we're leaving, says the tattooed brother.

Then dumps the body of Michel onto the bridge and flip-flops away.

XVI.

Gaspard is found on the bridge by a pool attendant carrying an armful of wet towels. The boy Gaspard holding the dead body of the duck Michel, his shoulders shuddering, his lips at the plastic tube in Michel's underside, bestowing lungful after lungful of air that leak out of Michel back into the air of the metropolis.

—Come on, don't cry, says the pool attendant.

The pool attendant tries to take Michel from Gaspard, but Gaspard will not let go of him.

—Will you stop crying? the pool attendant says. Let's go find your parents. Where are you staying, kid? Do you remember where you're staying? What's the number of your room?

STORY

ELIZABETH
BARNETT

They're there
in the water,
swimming

around
each other.
They look

like you
expect, only
she's paler.

And so
you learn
that she was sick

again but now
is better.
You remember

before
there was a pond
here

the field
was whole
and sloped,

no ridge
to hide
a stranger.

LESSON

ELIZABETH
BARNETT

She doesn't know
what this is,

the cow lying down
in the woods.

That dead is not
run away

or sold.
That it grows

and bears,
and what it bears

is bone.

WOULD YOU

A. M.
BRANT

I want to talk about blood art and infomercials,
folk music, and did you know that rabbits scream?
Did you read about the 250 million butterflies that froze
to death in Mexico? I want to talk about harmonicas
and lotus birth, the way your teeth fit into your mouth.
Did you read how the Army has admitted to dumping
64 million pounds of nerve and mustard agents into the sea,
how hundreds of dolphins washed ashore in Virginia, in
New Jersey, with burns on their bodies. Can we talk about
silkworms and hand-woven baskets—that sunlight like a bruise
on your face. Did you read about the philosopher in St. Louis
who wants to genetically alter factory-farmed animals' pain

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receptors so they won't feel—easy as switching off a light.

I want to talk about blood and sperm and food banks, cat's cradle
and grandfather clocks, salt lamps, the Smith crater. Do you know
about Mercury or the growth direction of cowlicks? I want to talk
about how mastectomies are performed, how to gather from the garden.
Have you heard about the rainforests, all those trees, the air? What
causes a pupil to dilate? Do you know that mass fish and bird die-offs
are a regular occurrence? Almost every day, somewhere. I'm sorry
about before, after you said what you said and I said nothing. What about
doulas, jellyfish, the whales, their songs, the blood in their brains—from
the Navy, from the sound of sonar underwater. How to float. How to hold
your breath. Suicide is an option. Sudden infant death syndrome exists, and
birthmarks, and so many lights stay on all night.

MOTHER-FIRST ROOM

A. M.
BRANT

It was removed when—
it was falling from her,
forcing fallopian tubes
and bladder, like I
pulled placenta,
into air, into light.

camera obscura dark room
camera obscura dark room

I was the insect
in the amber, I
was the work—
the eyelids and kidneys
ankle bones and vulva.

camera obscura dark room
camera obscura dark room

I was not the sticky heat
not the blood warm seep
on her thighs. I was not
the empty. I was the result—
what was left what was left.

THE MORNING AFTER OUR LAST TRIP

**TAYLOR
COLLIER**

Because of a closed exit, we're stuck
in traffic, and of course, that's my fault
too. With coffee, I'm sipping my way out
of my hallucinations when I spot a man
standing shirtless in a clearing
in the woods, wearing jeans and
a trucker hat. He wields a round, plastic
tabletop, and setting it on its edge,
he spins it like a quarter. Each time
it falls, he props it back up and gives
her another twirl like he's trapped
in the wobble. And from the car,
I'm wondering why he's so close
to the highway. And why do I have
to see him now, when I can't really
trust anything I see? Understanding,
at that moment, how we all regret stupid.
I regret even being in that car with you.
Too busy watching that tabletop spin
like I could see our future in the whirl
of its twirl, the thud. But that's not the point.
Maybe it's just that I prefer to hallucinate
alone, cigarettes on the balcony, spinning
quarters and watching planes blink
in and out of the night.

MINOR THINGS

BY

ELI CONNAUGHTON

I needed a bra. The fact that no one would have identified my bare chest as female was irrelevant. It was middle school and being braless had become a hazard on par with rampant acne or a pronounced overbite.

"I went to pop her bra strap, and she's not wearing one," said Will Horton. Will had been standing behind me in the lunch line when I felt a pinch in the middle of my back. Now he was choking with laughter and his whitewashed skin had turned the color of a plum. Even the round lunch ladies chuckled as they slapped spoonfuls of shepherd's pie on our plastic trays.

"Screw you, Will." This was the only thing I could think of to say. I'd heard the comeback several times before, and liked

the way it felt in my mouth, powerful and mature.

"You better screw yourself," Will said. "Cause with those things no one else is going to."

I still don't think I fully understood what the term meant from an anatomical standpoint, but my ears burned with shame. I focused on pulling my lunch ticket from the pocket of my jeans and handing it to Miss Josie at the cash register.

"Don't you let no boy talk to you like that." She shook a finger in my face and then at Will behind me. "You better treat these girls with some respect."

I handed her my ticket and smiled at her, but she just shook her head as she placed my ticket into her drawer. Will followed me to the lunch table,

all the while informing those classmates who had not had the privilege of witnessing our encounter that I was without a bra. It was times like these when I hated myself most. The times when I could feel my throat swell and burn, when I knew I was weak.

It was January, and my father was still in the hospital, though out of intensive care. Because of this, I actually saw my mother a few afternoons a week. On these days, I liked to pretend my father was at work and that he was not lying in a bed with half of his skull removed. I had seen him on Christmas day and the way his head caved in on one side had made me wish I hadn't. A perky nurse had explained that his skull was in a refrigerator. "Isn't that neat?" she had said. I saw nothing neat about it. Sometimes before I went to sleep I could see it. A skull, dirty with dried blood and the fingerprints of doctors. It balanced precariously on a shelf amid soft drinks and yogurts and unidentified leftovers enclosed in styrofoam boxes.

When I got home, my mother was in the kitchen

washing dishes. Mary Kinsey, my three-year-old sister, was rummaging through a drawer of Tupperware. After a few post-school day pleasantries, I told my mother that I needed a bra.

She shut off the water and turned to face me. Her eyes briefly dipped to my chest. "Well, I guess we can talk about it."

"I'm almost thirteen," I said.

Mary Kinsey crammed a plastic bowl into the open trash compactor.

"Let's not do that, Mary Kinsey," my mother said, fishing the bowl from the trash. She turned the water on again and rinsed it. Her yellow gloves squeaked against the plastic.

"Can we go today?" I asked. It was Tuesday and the thought of three more full days of school without a bra was making me nauseous.

"No, Mary Kinsey! No, ma'am." My mother was across the kitchen in one step and she grabbed my sister's pudgy forearm just before she dumped a box of angel hair pasta on the floor. Mary Kinsey howled.

"Go to your room until you can be nice," my mother said. Mary Kinsey stared at her until

my mother growled, "NOW!"

My mother was petite and blonde and, at 39, she still looked like she had been plucked from the top of a cheer-leading pyramid. But she could instill fear, and so Mary Kinsey marched out of the kitchen and up the stairs, wailing but obedient.

"We are not going to the mall this afternoon."

I knew I should have dropped the subject. She was mad and tired, and I was making it worse. Instead I decided to play on her sympathy. "All of the other girls have bras and now everybody is making fun of me because I don't have one."

"Don't worry about them," she said. It was the speech she gave me when I told her that people clucked like chickens when I wore gym shorts or that the Jenkins twins could not look at me without commenting on the size of my nose.

She went on to explain how girls who already had boobs would one day have trouble keeping the weight off, while I would be able to eat whatever I wanted. But this provided no comfort. My own adulthood was as unfathomable to me as my

mother's childhood.

"You could just drop me off with a credit card," I said.

"I swear, Elizabeth." She had taken off her latex gloves and now smacked them against the counter. "Every time I turn around it's these kinds of pants or that kind of purse or earrings or God knows what else. Your father was in intensive care and you and your sisters still had a wonderful Christmas. And I haven't heard one thank you for any of it."

I looked down at the tiled floor and followed the lines of grout with my eyes. I waited for her to break the silence. "Go get your sister out of time out," she said, and I moved upstairs without a word.

Ashley Hudson and I had been best friends in fifth grade. She was a beautiful girl whose smooth olive skin, dark hair and full lips gave her an exotic quality made all the more pronounced by the fact that her parents were divorced. I loved her devotedly because she was mouthy and sarcastic and seemed not to care what anyone, including the teachers, thought of her. I was a skinny parasite,

feeding on her strength and self-confidence. In return for my idolatry, she hung out with me. We spent countless nights at each others' houses, swam, and played tennis together. We held contests to see who could eat her barbecue sandwich the fastest and spread glue on our hands to see who could peel away the largest continuous sheet after it dried.

Then in sixth grade I switched to public school, and she cut me off faster than a clump of split ends. She stopped speaking to me and the times when I saw her, at choir and ballet, she convinced the other girls in the class to ignore my presence as well. Her abandonment had left me anxious. It was like the earth had suddenly cracked open beneath my feet. Not understanding why she liked me in the first place made it impossible to fathom why she didn't.

And then a miracle happened. When the blood vessels in my father's brain exploded the following year, her stepfather was his neurologist. And so, either because of pity or a direct order from her mother, she had started to invite me

over again.

It never crossed my mind to say no. She never apologized and so I never forgave her. Instead I tried to squeeze myself back into the space I had occupied before. I listened to her stories of the previous year. Sixth grade had been a petrie dish for Ashley's more rebellious behavior. She told me that she had smoked cigarettes and drunk beer with an eighth grade boy. She had kissed this boy and had let him put his tongue in her mouth, and said that she liked it. I did not tell her that I too had kissed a boy, Greg Welch, but that when he had finally shoved his tongue through my closed lips I had been so startled that I bit him.

Ashley and I quickly fell into our roles of goddess and fanatic, and I tried my hand at smoking menthols. At first they made me feel dizzy and queasy, and Ashley laughed at me when I had to lay my head down on the cold dirt behind the sprawling holly bush in her back yard. But then it got better, and I found I enjoyed the sensation of the menthol and icy air entering my lungs. It made me feel clean inside.

The next three days at

school had been more of the same, with all of the boys pinching my spine in the middle of my back. The joke never seemed to get old to them and I did my best to ignore them. On Friday, I spent the night at Ashley's house, and as we changed out of our clothes and into pajamas, I noticed she was not wearing a bra either.

"Do you have a bra?" I asked the next morning, hoping we could commiserate. We had already watched two hours of cartoons and polished off an entire box of Lucky Charms. Now, we sat in her backyard with four cigarettes she had stolen from her mother's purse. It was overcast and smelled like snow, though living in the South, we knew the chances were small. Ashley lit a cigarette and handed it to me. I inhaled and felt the rush of the menthol and smoke in my chest. Ashley lit another one for herself and for a while we sat in relaxed silence.

"Sure," she said and put the cigarette to her lips. She inhaled deeply and I admired the beautiful curve of her lips. "Got it last year."

I wasn't sure how to

proceed. I didn't want to tell her I didn't have one. After our first falling out, it seemed that me not owning a bra was as good a reason as any for her to start hating me again. I was thankful for the cigarette as it allowed me to stall a moment. Ashley pulled her non-smoking hand into the sleeve of her hoodie sweatshirt and shivered. Suddenly, I knew what to say. "If I tell you something do you swear not to tell anyone?"

Ashley's eyes widened a bit. "I swear I won't say anything."

For the first time in our relationship I felt I was just as cool as she was. I blew smoke out of my mouth and it mixed with the steam of my breath. I could have been a dragon. "I gave my bra to Greg Welch."

I had not yet come up with any sort of rationale for this action, but fortunately I didn't need one. Ashley, having an older sister and experience with eighth grade boys, drew her own conclusions. "You let him touch your tits," she said, then whooped with laughter and rolled onto her back. She kicked her feet in little flutter kicks. "You are shitting me," she said over and over again.

Then she hoisted herself back to a seated position and brushed the pine needles from her hair. "That is awesome."

I would have corrected her, but to do so would have meant erasing the almost proud look on her face. "I mean, Greg Welch is cute. I would totally let him touch my tits."

The fact that neither of us had these tits meant nothing as we launched into a discussion of who we would and would not allow to touch them. After exhausting the lists of seventh grade males of Christ Church Episcopal School and Beck Middle School, I asked Ashley if I could borrow a bra to get me through the next week until my mother could get me a new one.

She assessed my chest as though inspecting a car door for scratches. "Mine would be too big for you," she said.

My father should have died. He should have been paralyzed on the left side. Ashley told me these things because her parents talked about them when her father came home from the hospital. He told Ashley's mother how much blood had flooded my father's brain and

how impossible it was that he lived. How impossible it was that he moved and thought and spoke. *He actually wrote down the word "Pepsi" for Christ's sake!* There would be damage, he told Ashley's mother, and only time would tell how much. Ashley heard them whispering in the kitchen.

Ashley told me these things as though she were passing along gossip about a mutual acquaintance. I listened, though the words meant nothing. I could not place this man—gaunt and scarred and frightened—in the spot he had once inhabited. My father was somewhere else. Not gone and not here.

I liked to think he was hiding somewhere in the house like he had always done when I was younger. He loved to scare us, and would hide in closets or behind walls or under beds so he could leap out and hear our squeals. My mother was seldom amused, but I loved it. I loved the way my heart pounded and my stomach seemed to explode into my arms and legs. But, more than anything, I loved my father's laughter. It's not as though he never laughed, but these particular episodes were

of their own kind. It was like he was possessed by something beyond himself. Maybe it was his own relief at not having to think for one moment about the concerns of his dental practice or any number of ways he was always trying to better himself—by running, by reading the Bible and teaching Sunday School, and going on marriage retreats with my mother. Whatever it was, I loved watching him crumble to the floor and roll around. I loved his tears and coughs and the way he would finally roll onto his back and close his eyes when it all subsided. “I got you good that time,” he would say. “You should have seen your face.”

By the end of our second cigarette, Ashley and I had formulated a plan to go to the mall. Ashley’s mother dropped us off in front of the Baskin Robbins at McAllister Square and gave us each five dollars for lunch, which we added to the small wads of allowance money we had stuffed in our pockets. The mall was full of young girls like us. Girls without drivers’ licenses or jobs or tits. Girls who lusted after jean jackets and hair

accessories the way boys must have over smuggled Playboys. Of course boys went to the mall too, mainly because they hoped to see their girlfriends there and make out with them on faux wooden benches in the semi-privacy of plastic ficus trees.

It felt good to be walking through the mall with Ashley. I felt safe. I could pretend that whoever was waving at her was waving at me. I could say things in the way she would say them and believe I was beautiful.

“Hey Ash,” said some boys in front of the Chick-Fil-A.

She waved at them, so I did too.

“Dicks,” she said as we passed. She shoved her hands in the pockets of her sweatshirt. I envied the way her hair looked, messy and unbrushed in a loose ponytail. I had dressed up in my wide wale corduroys, penny loafers, and a turtleneck sprayed with tiny strawberries.

We walked through the wide wing of the mall, past the record store blaring *The Tide Is High*, past the women’s clothing shop with naked mannequins staring at us through the window. We entered Belk’s Department store, greeted by

the cosmetics counters that smelled of cinnamon and gardenia. The bored saleswomen with glossy pink smiles beckoned for makeovers.

The lingerie section was at the rear of the store. It was a sea of bras and panties. Lace, satin, cotton. Ashley grabbed an exceptionally large bra from the rack and held it up to her chest which could have fit in one cup. I followed, grabbing a similar size with fat straps and rows of hooks four deep. I put one of the cups on my head like a beanie. Ashley snorted with laughter.

"Can I help you ladies?"

A grandmotherly woman with a huge bosom appeared. Her thin lips puckered in disapproval, and I noticed that her red lipstick had seeped into the creases around her mouth. "I don't think that's your size," she said and gestured her gray pouf of hair toward the bra Ashley held.

I felt my face flush the way it always did when I was caught doing something I shouldn't have been. Not that making fun of oversized undergarments was any real crime. But I was always able to attach some degree of

guilt to my actions, and now I was sure that we had hurt this woman's feelings.

So when she led us to a display entitled MY FIRST BRA, I followed dutifully. The woman gestured to the rows of bras, which, in comparison to their more supportive counterparts, looked like they were made for little dolls. The cups were simply triangles of cotton attached to skinny straps. Some were white and others beige. "Now," she said, inspecting our chests through thick bifocals. She turned and flipped through a line of blue boxes that hung behind the displays. Her fat fingers agile and purposeful. She selected four boxes and handed two to me and two to Ashley. "Why don't we take these into the dressing room and get y'all fitted?"

"Yes, ma'am," I said. Being fitted was the least I could do.

"We're good," Ashley said. She was already halfway to the fitting rooms by the time I figured out that she had left me alone with the saleswoman. I ran after her.

"God," Ashley said when I caught up with her. "That woman's breath smelled like dog

puke."

We walked down the hallway to the last dressing room. "Dear Lord, please don't ever let us get that smelly and fat and old," Ashley said.

"Amen," I said. Of course, it was not a wish or a prayer because we knew we wouldn't. We entered the dressing room. The brown carpet had begun to unravel in places and the beige walls were stained. Even the light seemed worn out.

Ashley pulled her sweatshirt over her head, and I removed my turtleneck. I looked at our shirtless bodies in the mirror. Her skin was still somewhat tanned, even in the middle of January, and the nipples of her breasts were brown. I noticed they were larger than mine, rounder with the first lump of womanhood. Mine were pink and tiny. Pencil erasers balanced on puckered circles the size of dimes.

We each took a wrinkled bra from its box and shook it into its shape.

"Do it this way," Ashley demonstrated. She wrapped the bra around her waist with the hooks in the front. Then

she shimmyed it around and over her ribs, putting her arms through the straps at the end. I did the same, and Ashley and I assessed our bodies in the mirror.

"You seriously have no boobs," she said. It was a sad sight. Excess fabric puckered over my nipples and the straps sagged on my shoulders. "What did Greg say?"

For a moment I forgot my lie and thought she was asking about what he said when I bit his tongue that night: *Bitch*.

I shrugged. "I guess he liked them. Didn't say much one way or the other."

Ashley and I were quiet for a while. For the first time that week I felt excited and hopeful. I would have a bra strap to pop. I didn't know what it meant other than it was better than not having one. The fact that I didn't have the money for the bra was a detail I chose to deny.

It must have been around this point when Ashley and I made the decision to steal the bras. I don't remember saying anything about it. I don't remember either of us introducing the idea. We simply put our tops on over the bras.

"You girls need anything? Another size? Any adjusting?"

The saleswoman's voice sang over the door.

"No, ma'am," we sang back in unison. Our manners were perfect. Our mothers would have been proud.

Once out of their boxes, the bras were easy to steal. Mine was trickier since my cotton turtleneck was white and more form fitting than Ashley's sweatshirt. But I was not about to back down. The bra was my amulet, protecting me from consequence and future ridicule. I strode through the exit of the department store and out into the mall, amid squeaking shoes and babies crying in strollers and teens eating large triangles of pizza. I was sure that everyone saw me differently. I was no longer a scared girl but an outlaw with proper chest coverage. Ashley and I spent our five dollars on fries and a milkshake and laughed at the saleswoman, who had probably just now discovered that two bras were missing.

For a small time that afternoon, I was able to believe that maybe I did not need anyone to

get the things I wanted in life. Not Ashley, not my mother or father. I was metal. Strong and unfeeling. Back at Ashley's, I packed my suitcase more neatly that I usually did, and on the ride home I didn't feel any dread.

It was not until I was back in my house that I began to doubt. My mother wasn't home, but she would be back in the afternoon. A neighbor was on the telephone speaking in the same hushed tones that had become so familiar. At first I had struggled to hear what was being said. I had even picked up another telephone line to try and find some information. But even then, I had not known what was being said. Adulthood was like its own country with its own language that no matter how hard I studied, I could never quite understand.

I wore the bra until my mother came home. The moment I heard her car pull into the driveway, I wriggled out of it and shoved it between my mattress and box springs. At dinner, my mother told us how my father had lost his peripheral vision and depth perception, but that we were lucky. We needed

to say thank you to God every-day because, after a cerebral hemorrhage, things like loss of vision and his dental practice were minor things.

But that night I worried. I wondered how much retribution a stolen bra would exact? Because of what I had done, would my father die in the night? Surely God had seen me. I imagined Him sitting in white robes on a throne behind the mirror while I had put my shirt on over the bra. Some punishment would follow. But this is the magical thinking of adolescence. I believed that night, just as I would believe into my own adulthood, that even through my smallest thoughts or actions, I had the power to kill him or save him.

YOU DON'T EVEN DESERVE GUM

**JULIAN
DARRAGJATI**

In those days, before Communism collapsed, few families had relatives outside Albania. Mine was one. It was my mother's uncle. We'd always had to whisper when mentioning his name, but as the dictatorship dwindled, everybody started talking about his story. During obligatory service in his late teens in the sixties, Uncle Vangjel was stationed along the Greek border. While on guard duty one night, temptation gripped him and he crossed over. Escaped. Some thought he might be dead. Nearly thirty years passed before he contacted any of us again, first with letters from America, then with pictures of his wife and son. The only thing of Uncle Van's in those early photos was his hand creeping into the shot from the margins, holding his wife's hand. After three decades, Uncle Van still dreaded being identified, evading Communist reprisal even in America.

As the dictatorship dwindled still, Uncle Van's fears ebbed and soon he sent us more pictures. Himself in them now. We'd crowd around the photos to get a glimpse of him, our American kin, marveling at his height, at his gray hair, at his thick, silver-rimmed glasses. At his brow puckered in the look of a man dignified by dissension and exile.

Then, in the early summer of 1990, Uncle Van sent another letter that said his son, Frederik, would be coming to visit for one week. Albania was still just emerging from decades

We were elated.

Frederik would stay mostly with his uncles in another town, but also spent a night or two at his aunt's, my grandmother's. So a couple of days before he arrived, I went with my mother to visit her girlhood home and watched with glee the preparations her own mother and siblings made. Nana Daje, as it fell on me to call her, was always one of those hunched-up old women, a toothless bundle of traditional garb, something you might mistake for a pile of laundry, if not for the fly-swatter she held ominously over the flies at her feet. When I saw her this time, though, she'd somehow regained a full decade of youth. Her usually pale, gaunt cheeks glowed with hues of red and pink. Her eyes sparkled. Her frail, bony body trembled with fretful impatience as she waited for the day when her nephew was to arrive. At the same time she dreaded that the day was arriving too soon and the house wasn't yet ready. She bristled about with ferocious energy, ordering her four married sons and their wives and her unmarried daughter to paint the house room by room. Reshuffle the beds and the armoire and the dressers so that the nephew could have an empty room to himself. Redo the basement where they kept the pigs, and temporarily transport the pigs, and their awful stench, to a neighbor's basement.

It was a new house I found on that particular summer visit. Just as it was a new grandmother, new uncles, new wives of uncles, a new aunt. (The only thing missing was my maternal grandfather who'd been dead since my mother was five or six, so long ago we rarely spoke of him.) On everyone's tongue, the name *Frederik* rang with a kind of sweet tenderness of voice that some people used when talking about a saint, or about a deceased mother, or as other people did, about our late Guide, Enver Hoxha, the founder of the Albanian Communist

Party. I was soon instructed that I had to be careful how I pronounced the name Frederik. That I had to make sure my tongue did not roll out some harsh, offensive sound, but that I made an effort, to soften with my living breath, the many consonants in the name. His name was not to be spoken in or near the outhouse, in the midst of some vulgar conversation, or in any slanderous way. I was told, too, how to go on tiptoe when hugging him and offering him my cheeks to have them kissed. And everyone kept repeating, before he'd arrived, that Frederik was two meters tall, and handsome. That he was kind, decent. Though he was twenty and had never set foot in Albania, he spoke Albanian better than any of us. And that he loved each and all of us.

When he came at last, I remembered everything said about him and I trembled as I waited to shake his hand and offer him my cheeks to have them kissed. I was just a simple peasant boy, after all, and the line of cousins and family friends and curious bystanders was a kilometer long, with lots of hands to shake and lots more cheeks to kiss, there being two of each, that an hour passed before Frederik stood just four cheeks away.

The skin on my forehead went taut as though someone were pulling hard on my hair. Except, oddly, I felt no pain, only the tight pull. Though it was a hot summer day, I trembled as if from the cold, my fingers freezing. I jumped in place, jittery all over, and rubbed my numbed, icy hands or tugged at the arm of an older cousin standing next to me.

Soon Frederik was so close that when again I reached for my cousin's arm, it was too busy hugging him. He was tall, for sure; he had to bend in half to face my cousin. His smile was so serene. He was escorted by Nana Daje, who stuttered as she introduced the people, telling him now whose daughter my cousin was, before moving to me.

Here it was, my turn to meet our American cousin. What

did I do? First, I felt a violent urge to fling myself at him and hug him with all my might, so much I loved him suddenly. Then something beyond the limits of my pre-teen understanding, beyond my powers of self-control, something entirely alien and unfelt before, made me whirl and run off, cringing and crying as I went. I heard chuckles and imagined eyes watching me with astonishment. Later, I was told that everyone had turned to Frederik to see what he'd say or do, and Frederik had done what he'd been doing all morning: he had smiled serenely.

My mother had suffered my shameful act publicly. Her family asked her to run after me. Discipline was suggested. And eventually, my mother found me hiding under the canopies of straggling hedges at the foot of a hill about a hundred meters from the house.

"Come out, you brat," she said, her body bent forward, her hands on her knees, her furious face toward me. "Come out. I'm not mad."

"You'll beat me."

"I won't beat you, although God-knows you deserve it for what you have done. What is Frederik to think of you, disrespecting him like that? What is Uncle Van to think? Don't you want them to send you jeans or sneakers from America, or maybe a boombox?"

"I do," I cried. "I do, I do."

"Well, you don't even deserve gum for acting like that. Now come out of there."

A cold shiver ran through my skin at that, and I rubbed my hands with more intensity now, thinking of all the things I'd deprived myself of by running away. But how could I convey to my mother, or anyone, what I'd felt when I myself did not understand it.

"You'll beat me," I only repeated.

"I won't beat you."

"Will you swear it?"

My mother put her right hand to her heart. "I swear it," she said. "On my head, I won't touch you."

"No," I said. "Swear it on Frederik's head."

"How dare you?" she snapped. She crawled like a wild beast into the hedge and wheedled me out by my hair, my arms scraping against the thorny bushes. Once outside, she gave me ten bulky slaps with three sideburn pulls and four ear twists to cry about.

When the red prints from my mother's fingers faded from my cheeks, and when my tears dried from the overflow of emotions and from my mother's palms, I was brought to Frederik to resume our introduction. Then, I imagined, to be pardoned for my act. I awaited the verdict with the dignity of a martyr. Not because I was all that brave, I admit. But because I'd been tipped off by my cousins who, having sat in Frederik's presence for nearly an hour, swore on their own heads, as well as on the heads of their fathers and their mothers and every living kin, that Frederik radiated nothing but humility and kindness. Despite this reassurance, my heart still thumped away as I shook hands with my beloved cousin and waited. But there was no bad verdict. In fact, I didn't even have to go on tiptoes to be kissed. Instead, he leaned in. And nothing, absolutely nothing, would have prepared me for what happened next. Frederik pointed his finger at me, and, smiling with that kind of serenity that made people rub their eyes in disbelief, he said: "And you, I don't think I'm going to forget you."

All my cousins—all my young cousins, that is, all those who'd earlier tipped me off—grew jealous suddenly of the favor bestowed so unjustly on someone other than themselves. They launched into improper acts of their own. They picked their noses. They stood on their hands. They giggled as Frederik asked Nana Daje permission for everything he did except breathing. They got no favors in return only sharp looks and slap-threats from their mothers and fathers until someone was

made an example of and thrown out.

Meanwhile, I was invited to sit right next to Frederik from where I could enjoy everything that Frederik was enjoying. There was nothing Frederik wasn't enjoying. Or maybe nothing he was. Except probably having his face fanned by my uncles' wives who were using cute Japanese hand-fans Frederik had brought as gifts, taking turns as their hands got tired. Seated by his side, my shoulder brushing against his, I wallowed in the humility that pulsed like a living bubble around him, and I could feel my chest expand while my heart swelled. My eyes swelled, too, as I stared at all the delights on the *sofra* before me. There were *baklava*, *ravani*, *llokum*, *kadaif*, and *petulla* with bowls of honey here and there, Turkish sweets we had mastered from centuries under Ottoman rule.

Again I found myself rubbing my hands, but this time not from the cold or from any kind of anxiety. I was in a predicament, wavering between the desire to reach for something and the obligation to appear grateful for being where I was. But my stomach stormed, my fingers tingled, and my mouth salivated like a puppy's. I was probably wagging something, too, since I couldn't make myself sit still despite my mother's death stares.

Finally, tired of the salivating, I sent a brigade of five wiggling fingers toward a plate of *llokum*. I managed to get far, nearly touching one of the plates, when someone smacked my hand in midair. I didn't have to look to know it was my mother who never spared her palm in the name of proper manners. Nor her sharp voice that yelled: "Don't touch!"

All the sweets had been prepared for Frederik, of course. But since he wasn't eating them, nobody was either. So I was sure now that I'd blown it. Sure that was it. Any moment and my mother would lift me up by my ears or hair and fling me at the door. But I had underestimated my position, doubted the power of Frederik's presence. His arm went around my shoulders, embracing me to him. He looked at me with calm

amusement for a moment, then at my mother. Then he stretched out his hand toward the plate of *llokum*, and, looking up at Nana Daje, he said: "Dear Aunt, may I give him a bit of this?"

"But of course, Dear," Nana Daje told him.

Frederik picked up the plate and brought it toward me. I looked eagerly and expectantly up at him as he nodded at the plate and gestured for me to take a cube of *llokum*, which I did, smearing my fingers and lips with soft powdery sugar. It amused him, my bashful gorging, and he pointed now at the baklava. I nodded furiously. He looked up again at Nana Daje. "Dear Aunt," he said. "May I give him a bit of this here, too?"

"But of course, Heart," Nana Daje answered, chuckling nervously.

Frederik brought a plate of baklava toward me and I grabbed a moist, sticky diamond-cut piece and shoved it in my mouth, feeling a rush of sugar go to my head. He did the same with the *petulla*, first asking Nana Daje if he could give me some and Nana Daje saying, but of course, Dear, he could, and I grabbed a *petulla*, dipped it in honey and ate it all in one bite. Then came the *kadaif*, which I used a spoon for, then the *ravani* and the *llokum*. As if he had been the one eating, Frederik leaned over now and whispered to Nana Daje if he may use "the needed room," he called it. Nana Daje gestured frantically for her sons to get up immediately and escort Frederik to the needed outhouse.

With Frederik gone a moment, I found myself the center of attention, like I were the guest of honor and all those sweets had been put there for me. I could see all around me tongues licking lips, hands on the verge of movement, eyes begging me to share. Who to offer, who to deny? It was too much for me. So I pretended I didn't see anything. I only kept my eyes on the sweets before me, while I gorged and gorged and gorged some more.

Money for everything had been sent beforehand by Uncle Vangiel. After every expense was taken care of, there was hardly any left. The visit came to an end, too soon for us, and Frederik returned to America. His departure cast a somber gloom over all of us that he'd kissed, the places he'd touched. Nana Daje's house returned to its dismal ugliness, with its old, worn rugs on the floor and the furniture all where it had been before. The pigs were brought back to the basement one by one where they grumbled with hunger as always, their evil stench wafting up again through the spaces in the floor boards.

By the time my mother and I had to leave, return to our village by the Buna River, it was the old house once again. It was the old Nana Daje once again. The old uncle, the old aunts. The old me. Well, maybe we weren't our old selves again. Maybe something of our new selves had remained. It was there in the way we continued to speak about Frederik long after he had left, still careful about how we pronounced his name, although we had abbreviated it to Rik now; we'd earned the right. Over and over again, we reminisced about how Rik was two meters tall and therefore handsome, about how good-natured he was, about how divinely respectful, divinely humble, which no doubt he must owe to his being born in America. It was there in the way we clung to the gifts that Rik had brought us. The girls to their butterfly hairpins, the women to their Japanese fans with butterflies on them, the men to their watches, the boys to their jeans or sneakers.

There was a boombox, too, a gift for my grandmother's entire family and we all crowded around it now to record our voices, feeling surprised and a little disappointed afterward that our voices did not exactly correspond to the voices we heard in our own heads. Still, however, we decided to record a cassette and send it to Uncle Vangiel. In the cassette, we introduced ourselves one by one, and one by one we said a few words of thanks in our odd-sounding voices for the gifts Uncle had

Nana was the last to speak. With her hair so much as it took her at least seven tries before she could complete a sentence without breaking into sobs. By the seventh time she was still sobbing, but she managed to say the words she'd longed to say to her brother these past thirty years. About the anguish of having feared that he was dead, tempered only by that flicker of hope that perhaps he'd fled. What joy to know that he was alive and in America. What joy to receive pictures of him and of his family. What joy to have him send Frederick, whose love and kindness had touched us all.

And she thanked her brother, too, for her own little present that he'd gotten her. It was not a fan or a hairpin, but an ornamental piece. A small porcelain vase, about the size of her palm, glossy and pink, in the shape of a heart. Nana Daje held it to her breast as she said how beautiful it was, like a precious jewel she had found only after a long search. "How it's tormenting me, dear brother," she went on, trying to sneak a laugh between her sobs. "It's so beautiful and so fragile that I don't know where in the house to put it. On top of the TV it might be knocked over, I'm afraid. Next to the radio it is dark and hidden, and, in my room, it is likewise hidden. On the dinner table it does not belong." With that tone halfway between crying and laughing, Nana told her brother not to worry, assuring him she'd get her sons right away to carve a nook on the wall for it.

Nana was our link to America, our link to the world, and, as she spoke, a bundle of garb stirring with sobs, we clung to her and to our gifts. My uncles had the correct time on their wrists and frequently reported it, even when no one asked. My aunt made friends with the mirror and her hairpins. My mother and the wives of my uncles kept their faces cool with their new fans. My younger cousins paraded about with jeans or sneakers too small or too big for them. I hugged my own

gift, an official-size soccer ball I let no one play with, or even touch. As I held it in my arms, I let the thought of it settle on my care, I remembered that I'd received another gift. One no poor Albanian boy had ever received. I'd sat next to our American kin as his favorite. I'd felt firsthand what it meant to be born abroad, to know all that went with it. All the baklava and the *petulla*, the malleable *ravani* and the *llokum*. The sweetness of them was still in my mouth.

FIVE TATTOOS

JACLYN
DWYER

i.

On the subway, a stranger's rolled sleeve exposed
blue numbers folded into his wrinkled flesh,

digits inked in a child's scrawl—even the tattooists
trembled. My synapses returned to navigate the museum

in Prague, a labyrinthine display of arms hanging in frames.
Not a face, not a name, just a recorded voice,

"They were lucky to get tattooed. It meant work. It meant time."
As the stranger's unmarked limb moved to scratch an itch,

deep below the surface of the ink, the numbers
moved in waves across his skin. I heard my mother

at the beach, eyeing tramp stamps and Zodiac signs
as she threw her arms up to the heavens and asked,

"Why would anybody do this? Why?"

ii.

Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal, Vol. 11, Iss. 2 [2012], Art. 1

I saw Aunt Martha naked in the daylight. Obsessed
with the weight of her oblong breasts, like soft

aubergines, I missed the scattered constellations
inked onto her torso, spores blown from a breeding

dandelion, buried deep in the dermis, the seven sisters
on her stomach, Cassiopeia's chair on her chest.

The blue freckles forming a bull's eye to aim the radiation
and zap the broccoli florets blossoming in cramped bouquets

over her lungs, which became heavy balloons congested
with her own overgrown flesh. Her body needed to be weeded.

She was lucky to gain admission to Sloane Kettering, like getting in
to Harvard, Yale. Lucky to be admitted to the clinical trial.

Lucky they let her try twice.

iii.

Each time Uncle John quits smoking, he pastes a nicotine patch
over the image on his arm, a flimsy bandage covering the blood

red heart that bears her name on a rippling white ribbon: Linda,
the girl who wore his ring. Dragged drunk to the tattoo shop

by his buddies, he awoke from a dream, thinking he'd been shot.
Not nearly as drunk as the driver who hit her. Linda's brain

swelled like a can of compressed air pitched into a fire.
Her spinal cord severed mind from body, past from present,

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forming two distinct lives. He was lucky he'd stayed home that night.
Strapped into a chair, Linda doesn't know her own name.

He was lucky she'd shared my mother's name. "Oh, Linda
is my sister," he explained to the woman who became his wife.

"I got that for my sister," he says when he starts smoking again.

iv.

In 1858, Olive Oatman was the first tattooed lady, marked
by Mojaves and paraded on stage like a freak to sell her

autobiography. People came to see the story, to touch
the tinted flesh, lines down her chin like a ventriloquist doll.

They came to lift her dress, push up her sleeves and inspect
the tribal armbands. They came to ask, "Did they rape you?"

They came to tell her how lucky she was to be found alive
among them, how lucky to find a husband willing to marry.

A husband willing to censor even the houseguests,
to forbid any questions concerning his wife.

A husband willing to erase her past life, to invest
in heavy white makeup and a gaping fireplace,

wide enough to burn all the books he could buy.

In the dark medina, I paid a crouching woman to paint
my hands in henna. I thought the broken glass grouted
atop the tile walls would keep marauders out. Then, the heavy
limb, like an unrelenting rip current, dragged me to dark bottoms.

The paste flaked and crumbled in his hand, paint chips
falling to the earth like black seeds, before I broke free.

I could have been a miniature ship stuffed
into a stoppered bottle floating out to sea.

I could have been Jonah's wife, swallowed
inside the spare hump of a Bactrian camel.

You don't know how lucky you were. I forget
what might have been, how lucky I am

when the dead cells exfoliate, erasing the stain.

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RETURN TO NAM

**JACLYN
DWYER**

Thirty years after his discharge, he returned to Vietnam,
seeking solace in foreign leaves

and levees he hadn't noticed then. He said, "I don't remember
all of these ponds and lakes."

His guide replied, "That's because they weren't here back then."
Late adolescence left a pockmarked face.

It takes time to change a landscape, time to fill a hole with rain,
for the boys to find it

and pull the girls in squealing, to hold them writhing underwater
until they give up and play dead.

65 POUNDS OF HONEYCOMB

by
**BETH
EDWARDS**

**The Milt Kessler Memorial
Prize for Poetry**

∴ Harpur Palate, Volume 11 Number 2, Winter & Spring

Sixty-five pounds of honeycomb
my apartment manager tells me.
That's how many buckets
they carry from my walls
before I move in.
A friend tells me it's bad luck to kill bees.
She learns this after fogging her son's room.
Then comes the story,
how they are bitten by bats
and the many trips to and from the doctor
for rabies shots.
But bees have always brought me good luck.
The yellow gold liquid that pours through my walls
is not something I want to be rid of,
but something I want to live within
as if this apartment is my passage
into the waxy cells of the hive.
Dead bees lie on my back deck for weeks.
I think of what I know of them,
how a single bee cannot survive
apart from the hive. Isolate her
and however abundant the food
or favorable the temperature,
she will die in a few days
not of hunger or cold
but of loneliness.
How can I touch them,
how can I sweep them away?
How do you remain married to one person
when you're in love with someone else?
Questions surround me
as if words are lodged in the walls
in a kind of twisting thrum.
I tiptoe around, trying not to step on the bodies.

AFTER WORK

BRIAN
FANELLI

He walks the length
of old coal mining streets
under a star-washed dome
after another 12-hour shift with no overtime
pay, ears still ringing from the clanging
of factory machines he stood at all day
until his muscles burned.

His soot-crusted boot kicks the curb outside
the Rusty Nail Bar, where a woman
rejected him after she noticed
his grease-stained jeans and the smudges
his dirty calloused hands left on beer mugs.
Now he stumbles home and hopes
someone will uncurl his fists as he sleeps.

LOVE POEM WITH CALLOUSED HANDS

**ANTHONY
FRAME**

—for Holly

I'm reading the latest books by
my two favorite poets, arguing with myself
about whether they're any good. And I can't help
wishing you were here, love,

stroking my hair or kissing my neck
or reminding me that these men I'm reading
have no connection to the mother spirit.
Where were we, walking through

the art museum or stepping outside for a smoke
during intermission at the community theater,
when you first noticed my hands
had changed? The cuts and scabs

on my knuckles. The calluses spilling
down my fingers onto my palms.
It was dark outside, wasn't it,
the moon full and fogged by clouds,

your nose casting the softest silhouette
across your cheek, as if a spell
so I could know a god better named than Aphrodite.
Or maybe that's just the picture in my head.

Maybe it was bright—bright and orange
and perfect, the wind calm as it held
us together, the sun too lazy
to make us sweat. Or was it snowing

as we were trying to find the car
after the poetry reading where I bought
one of these books? And all our old friends
were following us for tea and you—

you said I could always drink tea no matter
the state of my hands. Maybe I'm just
lonely, wasting my lunch hour inside this truck,
here in the parking lot of one of the thousands

of restaurants laid down in our city
like the brown and orange and red leaves of fall.
I see the hungry come and go—
some ask for a cigarette, for spare change—

some carry their paper sacks of hamburgers
like a badge, as important and carefully
chosen as their *Support our Troops* and
I Love Dachshunds bumper stickers. None of them

remind me of you. How did we lose
the fire Prometheus so cleverly stole?
Not you love, not me—us,
this whole modernized species,

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desperate to force our fingerprints everywhere,
among our stars, inside our pets—soon,
I'm sure, the trees will be monitored
by barcodes—all so we can have more time

to show off our satin dresses and golf club ties,
to show our skin is nothing like the bark peeling off the trees.
It's why I can't read only one book
at a time, why I can't finish any

of the books I leave behind in my work truck.
And maybe that's why I don't sit
at a desk anymore, why I abandoned
my degrees and all those vengeful gods I'd built

in my own image. Of course, we both know it was one
of those quiet nights alone, your legs
stretched out over my lap like a blanket, the cat
asleep on your legs, the evening news on the TV.

If amid buying houses and cars and dreams—
if we find we've no time to walk along our river,
don't worry, love. I've stolen a fire.
It's burning my hands as I carefully carry it home to you.

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his eyes egging me on.

I need to know what he sees in his mornings,
while washing shaving cream off his face,
his eyes in the mirror, his window naked.

I slide off my shirt, my heart's flag,

expose my arms too small even for kindling.
The song peaks, a guitar crashes into a drum set.

I hurl my shirt into the air, into the river,

where it drifts away beneath the waves.

Tonight, we're patriots of the planet.

Pyrotechnics light the Ohio sky.
The moon writes lyrics on our bared chests.

SURF

PAUL
FRENCH

He nuzzles her lobes and makes slender talk.
His hand skims lint off her thigh and wheels

around to the cleft of puckered fat and presses in,
poised claw-like, the fingers biting into cotton pants,

into the cushion of her, and he lifts
her onto the laundromat counter

and, sucking her skin, says something
muffled in the bubble they've made

so I don't hear and she wheezes a shuffling
laugh knowing that I'm feet and miles away,

twisting the sound of the wad rolling
into a plump boat churning waves,

when dense sex nudges me, inseminated
into memories of beaches, waterparks,

wave-pools and the machine-tide where
I bobbed and watched people mouth

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each other while their bellied children
lapped the pool rims—the mashed

murmured padding. He whispers to her
over the machine-noise, groping

while their children chime around them.
One is quiet, watching the clothes.

FOOD FROM PARADISE

JUDY
HALEBSKY

—From the Hashish Fudge recipe in *The Alice B. Toklas Cookbook*, which anyone could whip up on a rainy day.

crush with mortar and pestle:

black peppercorn, nutmeg, cinnamon sticks, coriander

Toklas advises cannabis for a lady's bridge club
or a meeting of the DAR

Stein advises against punctuation because you are too smart
to need it

chop and mix together:

pitted dates, dried figs, shelled almonds

the cannabis should be picked after it has gone to seed
but while it is still green, like the draft or drunk driving,
timing matters

to buy the ingredients get an expensive car. not a black BMW 7
Series, but a Saab or a Volvo, or a Mercedes (again, not black). get
a man, a white man, between the ages of 20-45. drive through the

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or blue. pull over when a stranger standing on the street waves
directly at you

it causes paranoia. the driving. the fishbowl. the leaving your
neighborhood. the spirits from the border crossings, the spirits who
have died protecting turf, running underground tunnels
in airplanes, in boats, in swallowed capsules, by semiautomatics
by dehydration, by airless trucks
they will haunt you
we will call this a flashback
it will give you *caché*

you can talk about it at parties, not in Oakland but across the
bridge in Noe Valley in the Marina. they will think you are hard
core not sorry, they will not think you are sorry. you will not be
sorry. you will be at a job on Monday, the car, the man, the
weekend, behind you

STANDING ROOM ONLY

JERMAINE
HARMON

—for Aviva Bumgardner

1.

I saw my grandmother
in you. She, too, wears
her Sunday best to every
occasion, and says inappropriate
things to unfamiliar people. Costume
furs and a bottle of Elizabeth's
diamonds are her favorites.

2.

When you spoke to her
I saw a recognizable
melancholy in her eyes. The black
of the tunnel matched perfectly
the black of your voice. This black
has played us both. Dusted everything
with an ambiguity marked with a certain scent,
bananas going bad, or
hummingbird must.

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I hear a baby cry. She spits
a mutual foreign language
into the condensed car air.
She passes out her crying
while looking for her father
in the faces of men rushing
to empty seats. I've done this.

TOWARD THE EASTERN SEABOARD

ADAM
HOULE

The town where our parents moved us
fringed a tall and darksome city.

Not the town they promised.
My sisters and I grew furious.

We grew like thistle in the steady north's
shade. We stole and shattered glass

at every chance, slammed our father's
three-pound sledge on Mason jars

we cradled from off the pantry shelves.
When our mother's back was turned

from her work at the stainless double sinks,
and the high-set kitchen window framed

our legs shredding air past the swings,
we practiced the middle finger,

that singular piston rising.
Rage our new order. Our eyes shone

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like polished steel, flecks of metal
spreading. We learned to bristle

like wild dogs, cleaved little spirits
of coal, of indomitable industry.

TRADES

**GINA
KEICHER**

We hear wind and get sick of it. So we talk and tell stories of fish with parking garages built into the curvature of their jaws, our place in the far-off future. Then, we grow tired of the too-far-off future, so we go out in the storm. I make a boat from sticks and say, "Hey, get in this boat made of sticks," and you say, "Okay," and do that. When the wind comes, you say, "I didn't bring other clothes." The boat breaks and there is not much else to do. "We can trade," I say. We take our clothes off to exchange. Instead of dressing, we navigate the latitudinous option of each other's skin. Afterwards, you try to put on my clothes. They are too small. Yours don't fit me any better. We wear sand abrasions on our knees and shins. We wear what happens to our backs when we lay ourselves in the sand. Tomorrow, we will build another boat, weather permitting.

THE FUNERAL

VICTORIA
KELLY

On the night of your uncle's funeral, your mother tells you how the priest drove the wrong way to the cemetery, while both Aunt Sofia and the hearse turned right instead of left, and when they finally met at the gravesite, the priest got out of the car and started yelling at Aunt Sofia, waving his hands and saying, *Why didn't you follow me*, because he was embarrassed, and Aunt Sofia cried and said something in her Hungarian English, and later your father went up to the priest and told him he should be ashamed, she was a woman at her husband's funeral—and when it is all over, across the country, you say the rosary for your uncle at your desk on base, and your work spread out in front of you, and your hands run over the beads and over the papers but instead of Mary's face all you can see is the priest, waving his arms in the cemetery, and your uncle, how he would have laughed if he had been there.

A DAY IN THE LIFE

DAVID
LEHMAN

Nick noticed the girl of his dreams and tapped her on the shoulder. "You're so Hollywood," she said, mistaking him for somebody else.

He wore a blue blazer, khaki trousers, a dark blue cotton shirt with red pinstripes and a button-down collar, a solid red tie bottoming in a straight edge rather than a V, and horn-rimmed glasses. She wore a denim skirt designed to look less expensive than it was, an open-necked white blouse, and sunglasses like one-way mirrors. She drove a sporty little citrine-yellow convertible, manual transmission.

He quoted Shelley. "If Shelly Winters comes, can spring be far behind?" She quoted Marilyn. "You know, when it gets hot like this, you know what I do? I keep my undies in the ice box."

She always hung up without saying goodbye. That was one of her attractions. "And this," she said, guiding the hand that fed her, "is my coffin. Would you like to sleep inside? Yes oh yes, yes."

"And that," she said, pointing at his holster, "contains your crozier, oh my bishop!" And she knelt and kissed his ring.

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They met at a Wall Street hangout on a Friday evening. She motioned him over. He leaned forward. She whispered huskily: "Sell in May and go away."

Oh, she was shameless. The sirens in the background were her idea, and so was the wax in his ears, and so were the guns and nurses, and nuns and hearses, and puns and curses that materialized out of nowhere. It was an experience Nick would never forget.

CRITICISM IS DEATH

DAVID
LEHMAN

—Nijinsky, February 27, 1919

1.

The gunman
in the gas mask
doesn't ask.

His task:
to shoot cast lead
into the newly dead.

2.

According to the lone
assassin theory,
the critic is the one
at the book depository

with the gun
who says he's
only a "patsy"
in the conspiracy.

If "criticism is death,"
a triple ring of flames,
the dancer
in his sleep

must answer
with a leap
beyond the flames.
And if God is breath,

the blaze will spread
in wind and no rain
to the parchment of the brain
where the living meet the dead.

THUNDER IN UMBRIA

DAVID
LEHMAN

I'm in a hammock in Umbria and I've decided
that every day I spend some time in the hammock
is a victory for humanity. The ominous rumble
of thunder like the noise of an elevated train
is what I hear yet there's no rain, the sun
continues to shine on the cypresses of Civitella
on Stacey walking this way from the castle
with a lunch bucket and Diego climbing up the hill.

LOVE POEM

**MICHAEL O.
MARBERRY**

To stumble home drunk-drunk stupendous
from a shit-bird bar in Tuscaloosa. To trot
ten sozzled laps around a cruiser, believe
the booze has cured my hoodoo. To grope
myself like a man watching a woman watch
children at a park, recklessly. Darling, I am
a stupor, and my life is missing its Homeric
parallels. Darling, I am writing and revising
you. I write:

*O, tight-tireless and hedonist hoochie! O, girl
of right mind and body and so much hot-hot,
you're one to make the weather sweat bejesus!*

You'll write:

*O, boy! O, pull me apart like a fresh biscuit
my love, my bigbang chronotope!*

I am afraid,
and the world is sad and somewhat terrible,
and I want to come in the cunts of women
who love me, and I do not want to know if
there's no saint to pray for the sin inside us.

MISSOULA IN THE MOONLIGHT

KEVIN
MCCOY

They played that song
Missoula in the Moonlight

The wise guy plays his cards
under the frozen tracks
and calls for cheap booze
to thaw his fingers

The poor explorer shakes off the ice
from these drastic roads
that stretch and tense muscle
to build strong resistance

The wise guy and the poor explorer
share the bottle and drink to
their spiteful destiny approaching
like the freight leaving Salt Lake

The conductor swings the baton
in rolling arcs of meter
brittle cymbals crash
and the wise guy falls down drunk

They played that song
Missoula in the Moonlight

**A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR—
PLEASE DO NOT SEND
US ANY POEMS WITH EXCESSIVE
USE OF THE WORD “I”**

**KEVIN
MCCOY**

I sell cars & furniture at crazy discounts
I bend backwards & provide the sharp edge of the angle
I am flattened to be the shaft of the spear worn smooth by
many hands
I revolve around the sun
I piss in the phone booth outside the pub
I run too quickly & I am injured too soon
I see the chance & I blow it
I never vote socialist
I am abandoned
I am the nation limp with hunger
I am the hand on the sidewalks waiting
I am wrong & I am powerful
I move with a force of torrent winds
I cry with Porter Wagoner at the Grand Ole Opry
I sink into bottomless murk
I fish the great river
I call the troops to action
I stop short of the finish line
I wait for others to pass
I break the string while bending the note
I scream at the police as they approach the barricade
I demand justice for causes I choose

I bought two tickets but can't sell the second
I opened for Zappa back in '74
I am betrayed by those I trust most
&
I am beaten badly in the final round

THE STRONGEST THING IN THE WORLD

CHRISTIAN
MICHENER

After tilting the empty ladle back upright, Nikola followed Petek around the furnace, leaving the slag for the others coming on turn. They couldn't hear each other over the roar of the hearth and cranes and strippers and dinky cars crashing along the rails. Nikola looked up at the sky through the windows and roof vents far above him and tried to figure out how much time he had left. Back home, maybe elsewhere in this country too, you could follow the sun and read the clouds and know the seasons from the trees and be able to get home for supper when the day told you to. But here time wasn't cut right. It was always dark—the lowering clouds, the long winter, above all the smoke from the mills and factories. The rhythms of sleep and seeding and harvesting and birth had been flattened under the weight of the steel they poured into ingots. To Nikola the mill was a monster propagating itself: steel making steel for more machines to make more machines.

"Don't be a jackass," Petek had said when Nikola had told him this. "It's for the railroads."

Nikola was relieved to see Petek waving goodbye to Riley. It was over, quitting time. "Don't be late," Riley said, as he did every day. It was one of the first English phrases Nikola had come to understand.

Across the yard the men stood in a long line, waiting for

their pay. You could feel the tension among them. Few understood the sliding scale that had led to fights between them and the superintendents, threats, stories in the papers of bombs being thrown and houses smashed with rocks. But they stood there dreaming, twelve of the best hours of the month, when their pay was new, all there, dreams of a bed set, shoes for the kids, relishing the taste of beer at the saloons.

The line shuffled along quickly. Men grabbed their pay, stepped aside, counted their money. Nikola stood behind Petek when he asked for both of their envelopes. Petek stuffed his under his arm and took a few bills out of Nikola's and handed the rest over to him. "For Berta," he said, as he did every payday. "Room and board."

"I can pay her on my own," Nikola said. "I'm good for my word."

"I promised her," he said.

"So did I," Nikola said. They had this fight every payday. It was thanks to Petek, a fellow villager from Czeke, that Nikola had come over several months before. He had moved in with Petek and his wife Berta, and each payday Petek took out the money himself for Nikola's board. Nikola looked at the numbers scrawled on the envelope and peeked inside at the bills. The older men mistrusted it, wanting metal they could weigh in their hands, the heft of real coin. Last week he had sat down at Petek's kitchen table and had tried to figure out the mathematics of his pay, the tonnage rates and his share of the pay out, minus the money Petek took for Berta and a fee—a bribe—he paid to Riley for hiring him. "I pay a man to work for him?" Nikola had asked.

"I pay a man for you to work," Petek said.

Nikola thought he had figured it out, but when he checked his math he didn't come up with the same numbers the next time. Now he stuffed his new envelope into his pocket and stepped in beside Petek as they headed for the opening in the fence built years ago to keep the strikers out. Nikola would

have to move on soon. He owed Petek but felt he had paid his dues. Of course he said this every payday. Move to where? He was alone here in the country, except for Petek and his family and his cousin Andris, who treated him worse than the Americans. The men were spreading out before them now, passing through the fence, like debris on an ocean washing out to the horizon. Outside the gates, a huddle of women had assembled, wives making sure they got the money before the men drank it all away. "Berta would never embarrass me like that," Petek said. One man handed his envelope over and waited until his wife gave him a few dollars. Another couple wandered off, side by side, the wife yelling at the man while he stared straight ahead, ignoring her.

Wordlessly Nikola and Petek turned toward 8th, skirting the beggars who had assembled there for payday. After his first pay, Nikola had started to give them money when Petek knocked his hand away. "They make more than you do," he had said.

Nikola could already taste the sweet burning of the whiskey he liked. Petek preferred beer, lots of it. A few evenings before, after Éva had helped her mother take the drunken Petek to bed, she had come back into the kitchen. "What does it taste like?" Éva had asked, leaning in close to Nikola. He could feel the heat of her body. It seemed to have a shape of its own, the shape of her young woman's hips and breasts and arms. At work, above the molten steel, the heat had no shape—it was everywhere, relentless. Éva lowered her mouth toward his and he stuck out his tongue while she sucked on it, then pulled away quickly when they heard Berta coming back down the stairs. They had never touched before that and they stared stunned at each other until Berta came noisily into the kitchen.

This morning Éva had been making the lunches and handed him his pail. She ran a finger around her lips. She knew it was payday. "Save some for me," she had whispered.

—

Nikola felt himself coming out of sleep. He could hear Berta scraping the coal stove in the kitchen. One of the men he shared the room with was seated on his cot, pulling on his pants. Nikola kicked away his covers and felt in the dark for his own clothes. This was the worst time of day, when he wondered if he could go through it again. One morning he actually cried, silently, while the other men shuffled out of the room for breakfast. One of them, a fellow villager from Czeke named David, had paused at the door but had been too embarrassed to comfort him. Once at work it was OK, the way the fear and power of the place overwhelmed you, drove away the distraction that could kill you. He had seen it happen—explosions, acid, crushed to death by a falling ladle chain or ingot. Sometimes work made Nikola feel powerful, godlike, turning the earth to fire and the fire into steel. But here alone, in the cold morning, there was no fire, only him in the dark.

In the kitchen Berta didn't turn to greet him as he made his way out to the privy in the courtyard. He and Petek had stumbled home late the night before. Nikola had insisted on only one drink, then had a second one after an hour of Petek's teasing. By the time they left Petek could barely stand. He ranted all the way home, cursing Roosevelt, the mill, the boarders in his house, Berta, women. "And my daughter, she'll be the same, I'm sure," Petek had said. "Don't you think? Like Berta. Like all women. The good and the bad of it. You want the good, you have to take the bad. You want what they have, you have to take what they give." He stopped and spit into the gutter and held himself bent over, breathing hard, as if rambling on had exhausted him.

Berta had been standing inside the door when they tumbled in, her arms folded across her chest. Éva was sitting at the table, sewing. She didn't look up. "Take him upstairs," Berta told Nikola.

"I'm hungry," Petek bellowed.

"Go on, Nikola," she said.

"You come, too," Petek yelled to his wife. He looked over at his daughter. "You stay here," he said to her. "Come on, Berta."

"Go on, you pig, get out of here," Berta said.

"Oh, I'm the man when it comes time to work but not anytime else, eh? That how it works?"

After Nikola had helped Petek into his bed, he had come back downstairs. Éva was gone. Berta put a piece of pork and potatoes on the table. "It's cold," she said. "Are you drunk, too?" Nikola shook his head and sat down to eat. After he finished he went across the courtyard for a game of cards. In the middle of a hand of ferbli he heard shouts and curses from outside. On payday there were always commotions—people screaming, fighting, laughing, chasing each other. Once a troupe had come in to set up cockfights. But this time he recognized Petek's voice. He headed into the courtyard with the others and saw him holding Berta's head down by her hair and swinging his fist at her. It struck wherever it landed—the side of her head, her shoulders, her back when she tried to turn away. Éva rushed out of the house and grabbed her father's arm and he threw her aside. Nikola rushed toward them but others got there first, pulling them apart. "Stupid bitch," Petek yelled.

The women took Berta away, huddled around her, while the men tried to calm Petek down. By tomorrow most of them wouldn't remember it, or wouldn't remember which couple had been fighting. Nikola watched Petek shake off the other men and stomp back into his kitchen. Éva, leaning against the house, refused to look at him. He started toward her but she whirled away and ran inside, the kitchen door slamming closed behind her.

At St. John's on Sunday, Nikola stayed in the back. He was exhausted, with only three hours of sleep, but he couldn't bear wasting his one full day off this month as he switched to night

turn. Two weeks from now he would pay the price, shifting over to the day turn by working 24 hours straight. He could see Petek, Berta, and Ēva among the crowd, up close to the altar. Ēva's white scarf floated like a flower in a puddle, bobbing in the dark water of the heads of the others, brighter even than the gold of the icons, dimmed in the smoky shadows on the walls.

It made Nikola sad to come here, to the church, to hear familiar chants and prayers, so much like home. Just outside, the scarred hillside of the town, the stunted trees, the dark, brooding sky, mocked his memories of the pastures and hills where he had grown up. Everyone said it, all the time, the longing for another world, the old world, though their talk always ended the same. "But what would you do?" they'd say. "There was nothing back there." They were right. Just memories, Nikola thought, good and bad, mostly bad. A familiar place to suffer, cold and hunger. Plus there were odd success stories, like his mother's young cousin, who had come here and opened a dance studio. Nikola had written to him on his way here, but Andris hadn't come to get him at the station. Since then they had met up once or twice in town, but they had little in common. "Send Andris my love," his mother would always write.

Outside the church Nikola started up the hill toward the city center. Ēva had said she wanted to talk to him. As he climbed he ran his tongue around his mouth, remembering her sucking on it in her kitchen. Beneath him the hill dropped away into the town's brown carapace of roofs and roads, and then before the river, merging with the smoke, splayed the long flat black torso of the steelworks. People were emerging between the towers of St. Mary Magdalene's, spreading out through the park across from the church, and Nikola walked among them, looking for Ēva. He found a family picnicking and realized he had brought no food. He bought a pickle and some cheese from them but said no thank you when they invited him to sit and join them. Then he saw Ēva making her way across

the park with another woman. As they got closer he realized they had already met and he wished he hadn't come.

"You remember Ms. Hentfield?" Éva asked.

"Of course," Nikola said, lifting his hat. Riley had told the crew they weren't to talk to her. When Nikola first met her, in Petek's kitchen, she had said she was part of a study of the steel mills and the towns around them and the city of Pittsburgh. "To see how everyone lives," was how Éva had translated it. But some of the men seemed to think Ms. Hentfield was a spy for the company. They gave the same advice as Riley, but for different reasons. "You talk, you'll walk," they said. "You'll never work again."

"She was wondering if you would answer some questions about work at the mill," Éva said.

"My English is not good enough," Nikola said.

Ms. Hentfield watched the two of them talk, smiling back at them. Nikola could not afford to lose his job. He'd be blackballed up and down the valley. And if Petek found out? Ms. Hentfield had come into their kitchen to talk to Berta about how much everything cost. Éva, with the English she learned in school, had translated. Berta kept a notebook of expenses, food and gas and rent, and how much she charged the boarders, and Ms. Hentfield had written out copies of it while Éva explained each of the women to the other. When Petek came in, he was furious, scattering the papers all over the floor. He told Ms. Hentfield to get out and never come back. Nikola knew that Berta now snuck her ledger out of the house and met up with Ms. Hentfield somewhere in town.

Éva grabbed Nikola's forearm as it hung low above the hand holding his hat. "I told her you would speak to her," Éva said. Her hand seared him through his Sunday coat. He saw the family from whom he had bought lunch across the field, the children running in some game while the parents watched them. "Go through those trees," he said to Éva, nodding to the oaks behind her. "I'll come around and find you."

In some ways Nikola liked the night turn better. Making steel was about dark metal and fire, steam and smoke, a kind of hell, and night was closer to hell than day. Hell had no time but if it did it would be night, always night. Steel should be made in darkness, lit only by its own making. At night the furnaces felt to Nikola like a powerful secret that only the few like him could possess, kept away from the dreamers in their beds in town. He had wanted to say all of this to Éva, but he had been afraid of what she would think, of how his thoughts would get lost as they went over into English and then into Ms. Hentfield's looping script. She would be writing, writing, but what? What did it say? What kind of fool would he look like?

Instead he answered all her questions as briefly as he could. He tried not to make it sound bad, just in case she was a spy. One night he had seen three men from the adjoining furnace beating a drunk in an alley. Petek had stopped him from stepping in. Nikola knew the man on the ground, bent over the bar every night. The story was he got paid by the company, to sit and listen, to come up with names, anarchists and union agitators, whiners, bad-mouths.

Nikola and Éva and Ms. Hentfield had sat on the grass in the shade of the trees. Harder to be seen there, but the grass was wet, the air cold in the early spring. Nikola had explained about the twelve-hour shifts, the twenty-four hour turn when he switched from day to night. When asked if he understood the wage scale, he said yes, because he remembered once he did, the night he figured out his pay. About his living arrangements he said that Berta was very fair, always did what she promised. "Of course Berta is Éva's mother," he said, making them all smile. What did he do for recreation? He had to stop to think about that one. He had wandered once into the library and asked for a book in Hungarian but couldn't read it. When he had brought it home and showed it to Éva, blushing at his ignorance, she had laughed. "It's Lithuanian," she had said. "No

wonder you can't read it! There was the nickelodeon, especially the 5 cent nights, and he liked cards and to listen to old songs.

The more they talked, the less worried Nikola had become. But he also grew more confused. What was the point of this, taking down his days? "What are you going to do with all this?" he asked.

"They're doing research," Éva answered, without even translating. She seemed to understand the purpose, and believe in it too. She was defying her own father in being here. There were others like Ms. Hentfield. Nikola had seen a photographer in the courtyard once, and had stepped back into Berta's kitchen not to be seen.

When they were finished, Ms. Hentfield shook his hand, said something to Éva and then walked away down the hill. They watched her figure grow smaller. When Nikola reached out and put his hand on Éva's back, she didn't move. Slowly he moved his hand to her elbow and led her into the grove and pushed her up against one of the trees and lowered his face as she raised hers. It was as hard to breathe as above the molten steel, where there was no air. At last she pulled away and put her head against his chest. After a minute she slid out from under his arms, shook her fists happily at him, under a smile he laughed at, and then ran away. Since Ms. Hentfield had left, she hadn't said a word.

Nikola asked Riley how much more he owed him. "Owe me for what?" Riley yelled. You weren't supposed to talk about the bribes to get on the mill shifts, certainly not in the yard, but Nikola didn't know what else to do. Petek was still taking money out of each of his paydays to pay Riley.

"Do I owe you any money?" Nikola asked, trying again.

Instead of yelling at him, Riley's face relaxed. He licked his lips and shook his head. "No, you stupid hunky," he said, "you don't owe me any money." He patted him on the back. "You're

a good worker, Nicholas," he said, tapping a finger on his own head now, "but your upstairs is pretty empty."

Nikola laughed, not because it was funny, but because he understood what Riley was saying. On the next payday, when Petek asked the clerk for their envelopes, Nikola yelled over his shoulder, "I will get my own."

"Just give me both," Petek said to the clerk.

"I will get my own," Nikola said again.

The clerk handed Petek his envelope and then held Nikola's out uncertainly. Nikola stepped around Petek and took it himself and put it in his pocket without looking at it and started his way out of the yard as Petek stepped in beside him. "I need your board," he said.

"Berta asked me to bring it to her," Nikola said. His legs felt stiff, from the twelve-hour turn and the fear of what Petek might do. The man was drunk more and more now. Even in the morning Nikola could smell it on him. Berta had told him not to give any money to her husband.

"It's my house," Petek said.

"I will pay. I always pay," Nikola said.

Petek turned in a flash and took up a handful of Nikola's collar and began pushing him backward until Nikola caught himself enough to push back. Petek held Nikola's chin thrust upward. "Damn right you'll pay. You'll pay all right," he said. "I'll make you pay for everything." His face was brick red, with specks of spit on his lip. He seemed to have no idea what he was saying. Other men had slowed near them but didn't step in. "Let's go, Petek," one of them finally yelled. With one final push Petek let Nikola go and started off with two others toward the gate. Nikola walked behind them but instead of going to 8th with Petek he wandered up the hill. Soon he passed his cousin's dance studio. Through the windows he could see figures moving around inside, and he headed through the door and up the stairs. Andris was moving gracefully around the floor with an older woman, dressed in a large

white skirt and a small hat that trailed a curling white feather like a cat's tail. Two other women sat primly off to the side, watching and smiling. The dancing woman saw Nikola first and faltered, and when Andris asked what was wrong, she pointed across the room. "You are interrupting a lesson!" Andris cried.

"It's me, Nikola," he said.

"I don't care if you're the King of Prussia," Andris said. "You can't interrupt me." He excused himself from the woman and hurried across the floor.

"I want to buy some dance lessons," Nikola said. "For two of us."

"There are no times available," he said.

Nikola tapped his pocket, where the envelope was. "I have money," Nikola said. "I will pay like everybody else."

"You will not pay like everybody else," Andris said, pushing him backward. "There are no times available. Please, stop interrupting us." As soon as Nikola was in the hall, Andris shut the door on him. Nikola could hear him say something, and then a burst of laughter from the ladies.

The courtyard was brighter than usual when Nikola entered, the late spring sun higher in the sky. It did little to lift the sting he felt in his heart, the humiliation from his cousin, his own family ashamed of him. Pots and pans rattled from the kitchens, and a little girl stared at him while she pumped water into a bucket. A boarder from another house, late for his shift at the mill, came running out of the house lifting up one of his suspenders. As soon as Nikola got in the kitchen, he took out his envelope and counted out money for Berta. "This is what you've been giving Petek?" she asked. He had tried to figure it out on the way home and thought he had gotten it right. "It was for Riley, too," he said.

Berta stared at Nikola. "It wouldn't surprise me that blood-sucking Irishman took your money," she said. "But your own people?"

"Riley says I owe him nothing," Nikola said.

"You haven't for a long time," Berta said.

They both stared at the money on the table and seemed to think the same thing. It should all be his, money back for what Petek had been stealing.

"Take it," Berta finally said.

Nikola shook his head and started out of the room, but Berta called him back. She scooped up some of the bills but left others on the table. "I won't take what's not mine," she said. "I have pride, too." She nodded to a pot on the stove. "That water's warm," she said. "There's more on the porch. You should wash." She was taking down her ledger from the cabinet where she kept her accounts. "Éva went to the store," she said without looking back. "She should be home soon."

A few hours into his turn Nikola was working by himself under the ladles. He didn't mind the molten metal underneath him in the channels or molds or at his legs from the open hearths. But he hated the machines above him, the cranes and hooks, the cars on their ramps. He feared being crushed from what he couldn't see.

Petek should have been there with him. Always two. That was the rule. No man alone for safety. But Riley had sent Petek home. Too drunk to work. No one had protested, though it left the crew a man short.

When Nikola got home that night, only the other boarders were in the house, all seated around the kitchen table. "Berta's across the way," David said.

"What's wrong?" Nikola said.

"Nothing," he said. "Though Petek's in jail."

"Now he has to pay room and board," one of the men said, and they all laughed.

Petek had left the mill and headed straight to the saloon. Nikola could picture the rest of the story, a fight or falling down drunk in the street. He sat down and took his own plate

for the meal when Éva came in the door. "Ms. Hentfield's here," she said.

"Who's that?" David said.

"She said she'd like to ask you some more questions," Éva said to Nikola.

"She shouldn't be here," Nikola said. The other boarders looked at him warily. They knew now who she was. Why was Éva putting him on the spot like this? "Your father doesn't approve," he said.

"Are you afraid of him?" Éva said sarcastically. "And haven't you heard? He isn't here at the moment."

Where had this spite come from? Nikola sat back in his chair as Éva's cheek and mouth shuddered, then she turned and ran out of the house.

"You better make sure she's all right," David said.

Nikola checked in a few of the other houses, but no one had seen Éva. He was heading across the courtyard to another house when he ran into Ms. Hentfield. "Where is Éva?" he said.

She started to answer him but he could follow nothing of what she said and grew furious, as strangely angry as Éva herself had been a moment ago. In her arms Ms. Hentfield held a pile of papers, and Nikola could see charts with numbers on them; expenses or populations or family sizes, he had no idea. Numbers and graphs and boxes. He snatched the papers away and shook them at her. "This is us?" he yelled. "What language is this?"

Ms. Hentfield held her arms up, shrugging, confused about what had set him off, what he was saying. She didn't yell back or try to grab her papers. Finally she said something softly, and reached out her free hand. Nikola's shoulders collapsed, and he gave the papers back. People had collected at the doors and were staring at them. "Where is Éva?" he said again.

A little girl standing by the edge of the courtyard pointed down the alley. "She went out to the street," she said.

Nikola went with his instincts and started up the hill. The

light was coming on now, no time for a young woman to be out. Within twenty minutes he spotted a white figure coming back down the street and stopped. Éva's arms were folded across her chest. She came right up to him and stepped inside the arm he held out for her. "We must tell my father," she said.

Nikola knew she was talking about them. "There's no reason not to," he said, and he led her back down the street.

The night had drawn full dark by the time they went down the alley, past the back door of the stables and into the courtyard. The smell of the horses and privies and garlic and cabbage and flour and gas got trapped here, and Nikola held his breath each time he walked through. In the courtyard odd shapes of light fell onto the ground and against the walls of the houses from the gas lamps and coal stoves and candles. It was like a ghostly silent echo of the mills, with the dancing of diminished fires on the soft dirt.

Nikola was holding Éva's hand as he pulled open the kitchen door and saw Petek sitting at the table, glaring at them. He looked grey, heavier after only one day. Who had gone to get him out? As Petek stood up and started toward them, Nikola felt Éva try to move forward, to get between him and her father, but Nikola held her back. He braced for the punch, but Petek stopped, snorted, and spat at the floor between their feet. Without another word he turned and went up to bed.

The next morning Nikola walked to the mill alone. He said no special goodbye to Éva, only what the others did, to Berta, too. Riley was laughing when they arrived, joking with some Welshman, a foreman on another crew.

The first pour came earlier than Nikola had expected, but maybe time was only moving faster. He watched the furnace bleed and the molten metal, like a long, venomous flower, bloom into the runners on its way to the ladles. He was turning to work it down over the molds when he suddenly felt himself

tumbling toward the fires, toward his death, and he screamed out in terror. The fear shot up through him, indistinguishable from the heat. But not tumbling, pushed. A man on top of him, Petek, his breath foul as new-made metal. He had meant to push Nikola right into the steaming slag left at the bottom, but in his clumsiness had fallen and was now scrabbling wildly on top of him, trying to keep Nikola from standing and at the same time pushing him toward the channels. Nikola, stronger, younger, wormed his way out, and managed to get both of his legs against Petek's side. One push. One push and Petek would tumble over and be done. Nobody would see. Another accident, a tragedy, surely what Petek had intended all along for Nikola. The others were intent on the ladle and the pours.

But Nikola held back. Soon men were running over, grabbing the two of them, pulling them apart, Riley stomping in behind them, furious, red as a pepper. "Everybody back to work!" he yelled, and they started off, drifting back. "Not you," he said to Nikola. "You're done."

Nikola protested, following Riley the whole way around the side of the furnace. From deep across the yard a train engine crashed into something left on the tracks and men started yelling at each other. "He tried to kill me," Nikola said.

"Drunken hunkies," Riley said.

"I'm not leaving," Nikola said, fighting with his English.

"You're not?"

"I'm staying," he said. "I worked fair." He could see two mill guards making their way across the ground toward them.

"Get out."

"Kill me," Nikola said, though he had no idea what it was supposed to mean. It was something between a curse and a threat. It wouldn't even have made sense in Hungarian.

By now the guards had arrived and Petek had made his way around the furnace, too. Riley nodded toward Petek. "Throw the drunk out," he said to the guards. He grabbed Nikola by the elbow and pulled him over to another furnace

After a while Riley thrust Nikola forward. "Work here," he said. "Any mistakes and I'll kill you." As he spoke a worker from the other crew walked past them, heading to where Nikola had been. A trade then.

"Thank you," Nikola said to Riley.

But at the end of the day Riley took him aside outside the gates. "That's a new job," he said. Nikola blinked back at him, confused by what the man meant. "Bring your money tomorrow," he said. "And don't stare at me like that."

"You cannot buy my face," Nikola said.

Riley shook his head. "Mother of God," he said, "you people never make any sense."

The whiskey at Toohey's tasted sweeter than usual, maybe because of how horrible the day had been. The bartender asked if he wanted another but Nikola said no. Maybe this is what had happened to Petek. You don't tumble into a hole but bit by bit, day by day, you step down into one you dig yourself. To walk up is too hard but you have to keep moving so you go further down instead, end up like Petek.

Nikola had to figure out where to go. He'd wait till dark and then sneak back to the courtyard and try to get Éva's attention to get his things. And then what? He'd ask Andris, he'd have to. He knew no one else. When he got to the studio he could see Andris's back to the windows as he stood there clapping, giving instructions to someone beyond Nikola's view. At one point Andris turned and glanced down. He looked surprised, then curled up his face and flicked his wrists, shooing Nikola away, like he was a bothersome fly, an annoying child. Then he turned back around and started clapping again, to music Nikola couldn't hear.

Nikola turned and marched up the street, desperate now, unsure where to go, but as he turned the corner, he saw Éva, stepping down laughing out of the doors of a hotel a block

away, while behind her, laughing too, came a man in a suit. Nikola was too surprised to move. Éva saw him then, as did the man, and Nikola turned and hurried away. He felt like he had on his first hour at the mill, at the disbelief at what life held in store for him. "Nikola," he heard from behind him. "Nikola, wait!"

He walked faster but Éva caught up with him and grabbed his arm and turned him around. As she did he saw over her shoulder that the man in the suit was with another man, and with them both was Ms. Hentfield. "I work for them now," Éva said. "I translate for them." Nikola was stunned to see her left eye shrunk inside the swelling of a blue and black bruise. He lifted his hand to touch it. "Don't," she said, and grabbed his wrist. She cupped both her hands around his and brought them to her lips. "Here," she said.

The next day at the mill Nikola waited for the pour at the door of the hearth. He wondered if Petek was at the old furnace across the way, if he had managed to get his job back. He hoped so, for Berta's sake. They would need the money. But if they crossed paths in the yard . . . how could he not hit him after what he had done to Éva?

The night before Nikola had spent the night on the floor of the photographer's room. Nikola had asked him to take his and Éva's picture, and he took out some coins and offered to pay for the photo right then.

"No, Nikola, I can't, please," Éva said, turning his face toward her with her hand so that he saw her eye. "Not like this."

"Then you," he said, nodding to the artist. "You can draw us."

"Of course," the man said.

"No, Nikola, please," Éva said.

"It'll be fun," Ms. Hentfield said. "Come on, Éva."

With his finger, Nikola drew a circle around his eye. "Not

The artist nodded. "Not that," he said.

Nikola could feel the body of heat emanating from Éva's side as the two of them sat stiffly beside each other on two chairs, staring straight ahead. Soon she pressed through that heat, leaning her shoulder against his. After a few minutes he lifted his hand and lay it on her thigh, and she put her hand on top of his. All the while the artist's face didn't change. He glanced at them, sketched, glanced up again. When he was done he handed the picture to Éva while Nikola looked over her shoulder. It was done in pencil, and its shades of grey and black and white space made them look fierce and strong. Nikola was surprised at how old he looked, pleased at how Éva's eyes lit up on the page as they did when he looked at her, before her father had hit her, had swollen her one eye shut.

Nikola reached into his pocket and held out his money to the man. The artist shook his head. "It's a gift. To Éva," he said.

Nikola put the coins down on the table. "I want it to be a gift from me," he said.

Everyone stared at the money a moment. "All right, then," the man said. "I'll take your money. It will be your gift." Even as he said it Nikola knew that the coins were not enough, nothing compared to what the man would normally charge, and he felt a small bloom of humiliation course through him. As if she knew it, Éva took his arm and squeezed.

Nikola felt the first hard thrusts of the pour as the hearth slid open. He had to forget the night before, the humiliation and the promise of his and Éva's picture, clear his head of everything before the danger of the molten metal leaking out. After their picture he had gone back to the house to get what was his. Petek was seated in the kitchen, unshaven, his face sallow and sweating. Nikola, his stomach in knots, had walked in without a word and went straight past him. When he came back Petek hadn't moved, and Nikola stopped at the door. "I

won't make you pay me back for what you stole," Nikola said, "but if you hurt her again, I will make you pay."

Petek scoffed at him. "You think I'm scared of you?" he said. "I've eaten people twice your size for breakfast."

"I don't care what you think," Nikola said. "I'm just telling you I'm not scared of you."

Let it go, Nikola told himself—Petek's final curse, following him across the empty courtyard, even the soft glow of Éva's upturned cheek in the picture. He had to look ahead now. Only last week two men had been killed on the far side of the yard when acid poured on the metal had exploded. Now the head of the orange sluggish liquid blossomed into the space before him and began to slide toward the ladle. Carefully, Nikola watched it descend into the bowl, watched the heaving black slag bubble to the surface and over the lip. A false move, and it could kill him. Had he fallen in when Petek had pushed him, they might not have even found his bones. How had such fire ever made him think of Éva? But if he were careful he could make it do what he wanted. With such fire he could transform the crude, dusty rock ripped from the heart of the earth into the strongest thing in the world.

EARTH LIKE AN OPEN MOUTH

**JESSE
MINKERT**

The name of the town doesn't matter:
street signs, landmarks,
places where the tourists
stand to take pictures
to post on their network pages.
"Here is how so-and-so looked
before the crows
picked out his eyes."

WILD LIFE

BY

LISA NIKOLIDAKIS

Just after noon on June 16th, 1986, my reward for a year of good grades and being through with elementary school arrived in the mail. The sheer size of the package, though it was mostly stuffed with Styrofoam peanuts, signaled that my attention to grades, my constant adherence to the rules and assignments, had paid off. My closest (and only) friend, Crystal, had longed for a new Huffy bike—a red number with a white basket—but she'd pulled a "C" in English and a "C+" in Social Studies. Secretly, I was a little glad, since she'd knocked my choice of gifts, claiming that it was one of the three times in the whole year when I could get whatever I wanted, and I shouldn't waste it on more "schooly stuff." There's your "C"

in English. Anyway, I scored a much coveted plastic, kelly green file box with the words "Illustrated Wildlife Treasury" on the front and my first set of 20 glossy cards, a different animal on each. I set right out to filing them alphabetically, aardwolf to zorille, though later, as more cards arrived, I arranged them by zoological classification. This was easier than it sounds since there was a legend on the front of each card, a black outline that indicated which phylum each creature was a member of. A silhouetted snake or udders made all the difference between reptilia and mammalia.

Later that day, the five members of my family rode in two cars up the balmy New Jersey Turnpike to JFK to pick up the newest arrivals from

Greece. Normally, I'm terrible with dates, but it was my brother's seventh birthday, and Mike was particularly sore at it being overshadowed both by my package ("Not fair!") and our trip ("Totally not fair!"), a fit that had earned him shotgun. My father and *yia-yia*, his mother, led the way up the Turnpike in his new-smelling Buick—a car he'd bought himself as a Valentine's gift for my mother four months earlier—and I sat in the back of my mom's beat-up Ford, alternating between learning that the hippopotamus kills more people than lions in Africa and kicking Mike's seat periodically. The acoustics of our Ford's backfiring resonated over both sides of the Verrazano, echoing between Brooklyn and Staten Island, and we sat idle and stifled in air-conditionless traffic, windows up, dense plumes of exhaust circling us.

I was certain I'd recognize them, though I'd only seen pictures that were old enough to have peeled at their edges, pictures that showed the boys, Nick and George, standing on a dirt road, hand-in-hand, squinting into the sun. Picking them out was tough work at the

international gate, as everyone around—the hugging, shrieking crowd—had dark hair, a tan, and sputtered out loud, rolling sentences in a variety of foreign tongues, their meshing making them indistinguishable from one another. But when my father jumped up and nearly knocked a woman over with his embrace, I knew who my family was. His sister, Helena, was a rougher version of him, squarer and more angular, and she flashed a smoker's smile at us, her canine teeth prominent and pointed, all of them yellowed as tea. And though I knew I should, I couldn't return the gesture. I stared wide-eyed at her and the two creatures behind her, brothers who had spent sixteen claustrophobic hours likely tormenting each other and passengers alike. They were exchanging punches in the shoulder, their misbehavior ignored in the shadow of a reunion seventeen years in the making. The older boy, Nick, wore a black tee shirt with a flag of Greece on it, and the red, imitation-leather jacket Michael Jackson had made so popular through his "Thriller" video. He was missing one of his front teeth. George stood behind

him, his cheeks puffed like a harvesting chipmunk's, his mouth surrounded by a sticky blue goo as if a lollipop had gotten the better of his coordination. Neither of them spoke English. Helena walked over to me with a slight limp, bent at the waist, her face inches from mine, and said, "Yassou." I said hello back, and the second I spoke, she embraced me roughly and shifted her weight from side to side. She smelled both of mothballs and meatballs.

The Greeks, to my relief, piled into the Buick while their luggage filled both trunks and stacked up in our backseat, cocooning me to a small fort that prevented much conversation. I must have dozed off because I awoke first to my mother's horn, then to her cursing. I tunneled my head through the baggage to get a glimpse of what was happening, and she laid on the horn again and flashed her high beams.

"Son of a bitch. Can't they see that sign said Connecticut?"

—

The only other Greek families I knew were from the school where I took biweekly classes in language and religion at the

St. Thomas Orthodox Church, though it was really an indoctrination into Greek nationalism. According to my soft-back, typoriddled textbook, Greece had won every war it fought and was solely responsible for art, philosophy, and civilization's basic existence. Aesop and mythology were presented as straightforward facts, and some variation of *E Ellada einai to lambroto ethnos ton cosmos* ran through every chapter. This was the singular lesson we were to take away: *Greece is the most glorious nation in the world*. But as the other kids I took classes with all lived in the wealthy area near the church (and we lived in a distant WASPy suburb where I desperately reminded people I was half Irish), I never actually saw any of them outside of class. My knowledge was based solely on what happened in my family, and I was pretty sure that once a Greek made the labored trek to America, you never knew how long he'd stay. My *yia-yia*, terrified, left her dirt-road village and boarded her first airplane to visit her only son. She left behind her two grown daughters and their children as well as the duty, the

weighted responsibility, of going without food so that her children might eat. When she made it to our home, though the visit was only supposed to last five weeks, she stayed for five years. Helena and her sons were supposed to spend the summer—just about two months—and after three weeks of living with them, I couldn't wait for August and prayed their stay didn't become permanent, too. Mike moved into my room with me, Helena bunked with my *yia-yia* in the basement, and the cousins hijacked my brother's room. And though I wanted my own space back, displacement wasn't the worst of it. My summer, my last summer before the frightening ordeal that was sure to be 6th grade, my last summer scavenging through the woods with Crystal in search of creepy-crawlies, had been claimed by Greece, and I could feel the blue and white flag protruding from the center of my forehead, waving at everyone who passed by.

—

"I don't think you should come over," I said. I meant it.

"C'mon. My mom told me to get out and play. What are you doing?" Crystal's mom

never let her stay inside if the sun was shining, and by the beginning of July, Jersey was all sun.

"I gotta hang out with my cousins." I had done my best to make sure they hadn't met yet. Pitiful excuses. The dentist. A family trip to Gettysburg (why would Greeks go to Gettysburg?). Once I told her I'd gotten grounded for stealing change for penny candy. A fake kleptomaniac's impulse. That one actually impressed her.

"Well, I'm comin'. Got nowhere else to go. Maybe they can help dig for bugs or something." She sounded bright, her voice draped in the light that appeared in it every time she had an idea that made less work for her.

The new summer rule in my house was, "go play with your cousins." That was it, every day. The adults—who didn't seem to work during that time—lounged around the kitchen table and cooked, laughed, smoked, and drank Greek coffee after which my grandmother would read the markings in the cups for fortunes. But what no one else seemed to see—not even my prognosticating

yia-yia—was that my cousins were bad. Not just weird, as I'd originally feared, but rotten in the way that boys who curse and grab their private parts are. Boys who make you feel ashamed without your understanding why. George alone was docile enough, but when he paired with Nick, who was rotten all by himself, they morphed into something that hunted in packs or prides, like orcas or hyenas. They teased and taunted in Greek, circled, never relenting, even after tears and pleadings, and then moved in for the kill, whatever their kill of choice might be on that given day. Regularly, they'd team together and hover close by, pointing at me while whispering and laughing. They'd kidnap Barbie dolls for a day or two, only to put them back where they found them, decapitated or dismembered. They'd whoop and holler while pointing at my chest or crotch, pinching my ass as they ran circles around me. But when faced with their mother or my father, they oozed angelic charm, false as a nun on a stripper's pole. They both made me want a locked bathroom and a hot shower.

Crystal's family seemed as peculiar as mine when I first met her, and perhaps that's why our friendship sparked. While I had to deal with a father who ate fish eyes and had a gold tooth, hers had pork rinds by the case stowed away in the basement—a junk food bomb shelter—and would remove his teeth to suck on the fried, BBQ-flavored flesh bits while he listened to "All My Exes Live In Texas." My house had religious icons all over it—ruddy, earth-toned saints like Basil the Great and Athanasios peering, judging, staring hard from every room and hallway—while Crystal's mother showed everyone who came in her picture of a tree with Jesus' face in it. Though I could never see it, I smiled at her every time she stopped me to show me her dendrite savior again. My *yia-yia* was the kind of woman neighborhood children mythologized and feared; she lived permanently in black, her black hair pulled tightly back in a bun, and her face was framed with black glasses, breadbox shoes supporting her stout frame. Truth be told, she looked a bit like a man. Then again, Crystal's mom had a moustache.

My grandma was, indeed, strange, and though she didn't adapt to American life entirely, I never really had to worry about her. She occupied her time reading the Bible or watching television that upset her as she didn't understand that the actors who got injured or died were faking it. When she did move, typically to the kitchen to get some chicken baking or potatoes peeled, she hobbled on crutches. But no one ever came into my house; there was no need for it. I didn't have a pool or video game console. The pantry had no Doritos or soda, and kids just don't go to houses that serve *taramasalada* and *dolmades* after school, homes that feature Greek radio blasting instead of cartoons. The last time Crystal was there—inside the house itself—was the previous summer. We'd wandered to the basement after an exhausting bike race in search of popsicles, but when we opened the industrial-sized freezer, a perk my father had brought home from one of his many diner jobs, a full, intact goat head stared back at us. Later, Crystal accused me of trying to scare her on purpose, though I'd argued, pleaded my

way back into that friendship that had I known, I wouldn't have screamed just as loud as she did. But now, almost a year later, everything Greek was coming out, spreading like a virus or spider veins throughout the neighborhood—the neighborhood that I'd soon be riding a bus through, searching for a seat, a friend, anyone who had not learned of my Greek weirdness.

One day, when my mother came home from her shift at the diner, she found the kitchen sink overflowing with suds and the tree in the front yard draped with large, white, women's panties and brassieres—a sea of cotton, lingerie lanterns drying in the breeze for the neighbors to snicker and point at. Another time, Helena went for a walk through our neighborhood and began cooking when she returned—an activity that almost never ceased during her stay. Later that night, when she served dinner, a vegetable dish called *horta*, it turned out to be brimming with ingredients she'd found scattered throughout the woods, roadsides, and overgrown fields. *Horticulture*. Weed and grass stew.

As I waited for Crystal, I filed my new cards, the next set of twenty critters I'd never heard of before. The angwantibo, an equatorial African caterpillar hunter, and the kookaburra, a bird that bids the sun goodnight by sounding hysterical laughter, were my latest favorites. It was the first time in my life that trips to the mailbox had become something other than a chore, a walk my parents didn't feel like taking. I had never gotten mail other than birthday cards, but now, at least on Fridays, I was a real resident, a person of importance. I filed away my anole and Siberian tiger, and paused to read the back of the barnacle card. Its catchphrase was "Just one home for a lifetime." I wondered what the Greek word for this was.

Crystal scratched at the screen of my bedroom window, and when I moved the curtain aside, I saw her perched on her bike, her long, brown hair reflecting the sun, one hand over her eyes to shield her from it as she tried to peer in to the darkness of my room. She had long ceased knocking on the front door, and the

sign of my only real friend, made me genuinely happy. I tried to escape without my cousins, rushing past the laughing adults, making no eye contact, but just as I opened the front door and felt the July heat attack the coolness of my skin, my father said, "Take your cousins with you." Not a request, no "please," just a command. I turned to look at them, their bodies splayed out on the couch like melted plastic, a pair of protozoa or jellyfish. My aunt spoke to them in Greek, and together we went out front. My brother was lucky enough to be napping.

"So whatcha wanna do?" Crystal always spoke first, and she spoke often. If the art of conversation had been left up to me, we'd have spent most days staring or reading. She eyed my circling cousins, probably because they hooted and yawped as they threw small sticks and handfuls of earth at one another, but she didn't look entirely fazed. Her family was large—twenty-two first cousins—so she was no stranger to the antics of ten- and thirteen-year old boys.

George,” I pointed. The boys stood there, quiet for a second, then began chasing each other around the yard again. I hoped they’d amuse one another long enough for me and her to disappear into the woods.

“Wanna go down to the creek and look for that monster again?” she asked. Weeks earlier, we’d discovered a creature, we were sure, that had never been photographed by man.

I lowered my voice to a whisper. “Maybe we could ditch them,” nodding at the boys, a conspiratorial move they picked up on like bees or dogs sensing fear.

Nick eyed me and, in a taunting singsong that indicated the opposite, said, “*Oh, then tha halasoume tin parea sas.*” Don’t worry. We won’t spoil your party.

—

I’d spent so much time in the woods that, many years later, as a drunk and stoned sixteen-year-old, I could navigate them in the dark, even when chased by cops. At nine (almost ten!), my awareness of the landscapes’ nuances was just as seasoned. Crystal and I led

the way with Nick and George following, and we meandered through the trees, their sparseness for the first fifty yards providing partial views of the surrounding homes, though once the path forked and we moved to the right, it might as well have been the Black Forest. The trees, mostly tall, sharp-barked pines and deciduous maples, canopied our bodies, an umbrella of shelter, relief from the summer heat. As a two-hundred acre plot of undeveloped land, The Woods, which went by no other name, were rife with animals that had nowhere else to live in a suburb otherwise booming with industrial growth and construction. Squirrels, rabbits, frogs, salamanders, and insects were the most abundant creatures, and we took pride in finding as many as we could on any given trek.

Though she wasn’t as invested in the “schooly stuff” as I was, Crystal’s philosophy was empirical, so she liked anything tangible, anything that had real-world context. Much better than slideshows or books, she said. And even my book smarts that had long since deemed me too geeky to be one of the “cool”

you appeared to me, she'd flip over logs and we'd study the breathing, pulsing microcosms beneath. While I loved the study of entomology, I never touched the bugs, but Crystal had no fear of picking up anything—a spider, a millipede. So while she handled the days' finds, I called out Latin names and classifications I'd long since memorized. The colorful and erratic flight of a *Danaus plexippus*, a Monarch butterfly, was enough to set us running and following, studying and singing, though never capturing or keeping. Mantises and stick bugs were the most coveted and rarely seen, and when I knew that stick bugs are actually called "phasmas" from the Greek word phantom and could grow up to twelve inches long, Crystal was pleased. Once, and only once, while sitting by the creek, a red fox—a *Vulpes vulpes*—approached for a drink of water, its pointed ears darkened at the tips, its tail so puffed, so much larger than its legs, that it looked accidental. It was less than ten feet from us. It may have been the only time Crystal had nothing to say.

The last time we'd seen the monster was a month earlier

when we were looking around by the cement drainage pipe that thrust a steady flow of cold water into the creek. It was the only portion of the snaking stream that was too deep to cross on foot without soaking to the waist, so a makeshift bridge had been erected—from the looks of it some time ago—out of misshapen wooden planks. We were dangling our torsos over the bridge's railing, peering down into the cavernous mouth of the pipe, when a set of gelatinous eyes blinked at us. It was as though we were looking at a close-up photograph, a purposefully microscoped object that was nearly impossible for our brains to process at first. It was blurry and distorted, a blob of malleable flesh with water streaming all around it. But as we stared, pointing at the amorphous monster, fantasizing about the dozens—the hundreds!—of undiscovered inhabitants dwelling in the drainpipe, it disappeared. It was our duty, as biologists of the woods, to find it again.

The monster wasn't there this time, so while Crystal and I threw stones into the rush of water and talked about how

crappy it was that my parents wouldn't let me go see *Stand by Me* with her because it was rated R, the boys wandered off out of sight but not sound. They were never out of sound, whether in my brother's room or the basement or the woods. They were the most audible pair I'd ever met, like twin lemurs who shrieked to announce their dominance.

"They're kinda weird, huh," Crystal noted. "Can you understand them?"

"Most of the time. Sometimes they talk too fast." I rebounded a rock off of a tree and into the stream, its ripples obscured by the current.

"When are they leaving?"

My thoughts exactly.

"Three weeks."

"Oh, you find out what bus you're riding?" The switch from Erial Elementary to Charles W. Lewis Middle School was on both our minds. Our fifth grade teacher, Miss Mink (who was in love with Robert Redford), had done a fine job of scaring us before the school year was out. Lots of talk of how small we were going to be next to the eighth graders who we'd have to share buses and hallways with.

Class changes. Locker rooms. Peer pressure. It was terrifying.

"42. You?"

"That sucks! I'm on 3."

We lived four streets apart and had walked to school together for four years, but there were enough preteens in my neighborhood to require half a dozen buses for the middle school. I had that movie image of a tiny, awkward girl stepping onto a bus for the first time, knowing no one, the chatter and liveliness silencing as everyone turned to stare and slide over to block any potential seats. Crystal was my reserve, my foolproof plan. Who would sit with the girl who lived in the house with the weird people? Who lived in *that* house.

"That's okay," she continued, never letting the reflective silence set in for too long. "I'm sure we'll have classes together. Hey, where'd the weirdoes go?"

She was right. Even though we hadn't seen them for some time, it was quiet except for the streaming water slapping the rocks and sticks that defined its perimeter. We both looked around, the water smacking beneath us, and in the distance heard the rising of a voice, the

presence of a symphony, the pounding of gorilla fists.

"*Na pethanis, kargioli!*" I pictured *Lord of the Flies*, an isolated leader covered in war paint. A move to the unholy.

"What was that? What did he say?" Crystal's eyes widened, and even though she spoke not a lick of Greek, she felt the weight of that cry in her gut and stood at attention, an alarm sounding to, beating against, her instinctual phobias.

I hesitated, only for a moment, the words ringing through the woods and my body, resonating, surely carrying over and through the history of the trees and all the creatures that inhabited the land.

"Run," I whispered. I still couldn't see my cousins, though I could hear their shoes rattling against the ground, the leaves and grass and flowers trampled beneath their approaching gait. I wanted to be a daddy long-legs, to abandon my leg, to leave it shaking and detached from my body as a distraction while I escaped.

Crystal stared at me.

"I'm serious. Run!" I said louder.

At full throttle, at Olympic speed, we plowed through the land, jumping fallen branches and large rocks as we sought the safety of public view, of civilized society. The words echoed in my head as the boys chased us through the woods, running, shouting no specifics. Just shouting.

Na pethanis. A command. A declarative statement. Die. *Kargioli.* I had no definition for it; it simply wasn't in my lexicon, but I knew it was bad. I'd heard it used only once when my father fought with a man outside of the church, red-faced and yelling something about politics or the economy. I remember hearing Ronald Reagan's name. I'd later learn it means mother-fucker. Die, motherfucker.

Crystal and I pressed on, not relaxing until our feet made contact with my front lawn, taking solace in knowing there were parents indoors, the lawn itself was home base. Gasping for air, we surveyed the mouth of the woods and saw nothing. Nick and George were nowhere in sight.

"Seriously," Crystal wheezed, "what did he yell?" We were both bent at the waist,

our hands firmly clutching our knees as our heads heaved with want of oxygen. She took out her inhaler and sucked in deeply.

"I'm not sure," I huffed. I couldn't tell her. I just couldn't. Her family's brand of American weird had enabled our friendship to exist, but this kind of Greek would end it all. Hers were quirky. Mine were dangerous.

We were sitting under the lone tree in my yard when the boys emerged, smiling. Nick nonchalantly asked where we'd gone. I told him he was crazy and to leave us alone. He continued smiling, partially toothless and broad, his chin jutting out, his brother standing in his shadow.

"Didn't mean to scare you," he said in Greek, still smiling. An outright lie.

Crystal stared back and forth between us, her posture erect and defensive.

Really, he insisted. *Let's make up.*

"*Filoi*," he asked as he extended his hand, still smiling. *Friends?*

I knew it had to be a trick. It always is, in every movie with

a scene featuring a bully, with a cafeteria of teenagers. Maybe I was just too pessimistic, but Nick had given me no reason to trust him in his stay with us. He might as well have had red-striped markings or a stinger protruding from his tailbone.

Crystal whispered, "What's going on? What's he saying?"

"He said he's sorry and wants to be friends. Didn't mean to scare us."

She answered in a grunt. "Uh-uh."

I agreed. Uh-uh.

Nick watched us discuss his proposition, his wide smile still affixed. I looked back at him and shook my head from side to side.

"*Ohi*," I said. Just one word: no. We were most certainly not friends.

He shrugged, as if it were no big deal, and really, it wasn't. In three more weeks he'd be back in Greece, surrounded either by equally mean-spirited friends or bullying his lack of them. But for now, he was in America, a land of no consequence.

"Okay," he said. But I didn't believe for one second that anything was okay. He wasn't

one off like that. His brother, George, still by his side, turned his back to us so he faced the street, and Nick followed with the same movement. I thought of *Ohi* Day, a holiday I'd learned about and celebrated that was spawned from Greece's refusal to allow axis forces to enter and occupy their land. Greek politicians had supposedly answered the Italians' war ultimatum with a single word: *ohi* No. Pure defiance in the face of potential danger. And now my cousins' backs signaled the same. He'd said okay, but what he'd meant was no. What he'd meant was war.

Crystal, still entirely perplexed by the events occurring before her, leaned into my shoulder and asked, "What are they doing?"

I didn't know how to answer that. I wasn't sure, though it soon became apparent.

Spinning on his heels, much like Michael Jackson (two of the only words he knew in English), Nick let out another sound I'd never heard before—a morphed bird call and primitive bellow—and threw the product

at us. A dead squirrel with blood leaking out of its head smacked me in the face, and in a motion of unthinking reaction, I batted it off of me and onto a screaming Crystal. As my hand touched it I could feel the warmth of its body, the coarseness of its fur. My focus shifted from the boys to Crystal, to my only friend who I'd just helped smack in the face with a dead, bloody squirrel. In that moment, all of my efforts to distance myself from the Greeks disappeared; I had accidentally joined my cousins' team. Before that, they were just the jerks who'd been in my house for a while, but after the squirrel, they exemplified what was wrong with me—a girl who'd exposed her best friend to a decapitated goat head, who'd now smacked her with a dead squirrel.

Crystal's eyes were watery with tears, and she began simultaneously shrieking, wheezing, and spitting violently at the ground. Blood had gotten in her mouth. I looked down at my hand and saw a fat, red smear across my palm. I swiped my forehead with the back of my wrist and found my face had blood on it, too,

screaked on like war paint. As I watched Crystal's fit, I began a torrent of cried apologies, a flood of *sorrysorrysorrysorrysorrow* for my betrayal that I couldn't get out fast enough. She continued spitting and wheezing, half gagging at the thought of the squirrel blood thickening in her mouth, on her tongue, and then looked directly into my eyes and spat on my sneakers. She grabbed her bike and tore up the street. The boys congratulated one another with a series of American high-fives.

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For the first time since they'd been with us, there were consequences for my cousins' behavior. My mother was disgusted. My *yia-yia* dragged the boys into the living room by their ears, one in each hand, no crutches necessary, and began yelling so loud and fast that I understood not a word of it. Helena was mortified by her children's behavior, actions that she explained away by citing the absence of their father, the disciplinarian. She was so embarrassed that she went for a long walk, a reaction my mother still recounts with disbelief. And though my father

followed tradition and didn't punish another man's children, he removed his belt to threaten them and then called their father. When Pete, who worked for the airline they'd flown in on, answered the call at midnight Greek time, I could hear his anger through the receiver. He immediately recalled his family and cut their trip short by almost three weeks.

Crystal never spoke to me after the incident, and I couldn't blame her. When we'd pass one another in the halls of Charles W. Lewis, she'd avert her eyes or take a sharp turn, even if it meant going in the opposite direction of her class. They'd separated the 6th graders by intelligence, a design that always seemed somewhat fascist to me in retrospect, but as a result, Crystal was in none of my classes, and I was thankful that there was no in-class contact to deal with, no problem in our last names coming so close alphabetically that she'd have no choice but to stare at the back of my head, myself surely feeling the dirty looks. I found myself at the front of the bus, sharing a seat with a new girl named Kristy who had blossomed prematurely

Crystal had hopes about that, but it prevented her from reaping the benefits of such development. We didn't speak for almost a month, but when we did, I discovered that she essentially had no family, and I envied her that. After school, on most days, I'd still retreat to the woods, usually by myself, though sometimes with my brother, in search of the monster. I wouldn't see another one until a Friday the following March when it came shrink-wrapped on a card, the word "bullfrog" printed in a bold block at the top. I stared at it incredulously for some time, then quietly filed it between the nearly extinct buffalo and the camel spider that screams and runs to safety after it attacks, envious that Crystal might spend the rest of her life believing that monsters really live in drainpipes.

SHELTER

**JAMES
O'BRIEN**

Our neighbors own two dogs, snaggletoothed Dalmatians who claw through our trash heap. We own a .22 caliber rifle. The rifle is nothing more than a bauble, really, meant for squirrels and small birds, raccoons maybe, and it fits in our hands like the air rifles we shot as kids. The bolt action clacks like it hasn't been greased in years and the sights guide us a little to the right.

We shoot after work, after we have spent the day moving brick and block in the heat. After our muscles ache in the smallest places. After the sweat has dried to a white crust on our cheeks. I went to community college before I worked brick. But education does not pay. But I miss things that do not pay, sometimes.

We own two trucks between us. One, my sallow-faced friend's, a purple jeep with rust around the tires and no canvas top. He got it for cheap at a wholesale auction. The other is mine. A little Toyota without a stereo. We rent this house together. Pool our pay. Split everything. We split so much we don't know what is ours and what is not. We do not care.

Afternoons, we snap open lawn chairs on our back porch and shoot into the woods for no reason. My sallow-faced friend just watches and drinks more than us. He sighs when he downs the liquor, like it is a slow relief. We array beer cans on stumps far off into the marsh. The reeds and seagrass bunch from still

water, and, in places, trees cluster and sway. Here and there broken cobwebs catch leaves and spin them endlessly. My friends' shots are forever going astray, a little to the right, the fault of the crooked sights, and the reward is nothing more than a pucker on the water, a lonesome echo.

I am the best shot. I can peg a beer can from about one hundred meters off, tear a hole right through its metal gut and leave it singing.

One cold afternoon we sit outside drinking Everclear, shooting the water, making the water jump, our shots cutting to the side, far off the mark. Leaves fall in the wind, whole torrents torn from the boughs. The water reflects the gray sky in a dull sheen, like unburnished metal. This is November on the Chesapeake, a cold November, tight in on itself, the tidal marshes frozen at their ragged edges. Ice sits in clear ridges along in the crumpled trash bags. We wear hats, thermal layers, gloves with the fingers clipped off, and we smoke cigarettes and drink until our words run together and the sun begins to fall.

The neighbors' dogs walk into our yard and tear into our trash heap. If they eat at the bags long enough they may swallow glass. This would be a slow death, a death cut from the inside out. My sallow-faced friend tells me I should shoot one, hang the thing up. I fire a round over the water. The dogs scamper off. We drink more and shoot more, let things flow until night falls.

Later, I pass out somewhere upstairs, near my bed, with my coat and gloves and hat still on. The heater does not work and our windows rattle at their poor fittings. A hollow space echoes where insulation should be. The thin carpet stretches in worn, tattered mats, stained brown or vomit red. The couches and the mattresses smell of old beer, body sweat. This is our home, this is where we live. It is a weak shelter, a poor shelter, a place the air bores through, a tattered plaster heap. Some nights, I wake with my breath diffusing in clouds above my face, the framework shaking below me, and I wish for a good shelter, a warm shelter, a still, quiet place. It is a small thing, shelter, a little thing.

But there are other nights I cannot sleep. Those nights I sit on the porch and drink liquor until my eyelids drop. When I have them, I bump painkillers to help me float away into the night. I hold the gun, the .22, sometimes, and press the muzzle to the roof of my mouth to see how it feels. I think of slamming a round in the chamber and nailing it to the back of my skull to end the thoughts of doing so.

Once or twice, when my skin feels like iron and my brain locks tight, I break a beer bottle to a sawtooth edge, white on the rim. I open my chest. My arms. My legs. I study my wounds. The muscle underneath. The blood pumping from oblong veins. They hold like pensive mouths. What they say I cannot know. I wonder how my bones might be. My lungs. Rotted through, maybe. Shredded and black. I wonder if I can cut to those darkened places between my organs. I wonder if I can dissect myself. See what is missing. I wonder.

One night, my friend finds me sitting with the gun roofed to my mouth, drinking on the porch, watching the blackened water. Substances churn through my veins. Alcohol and pills and nicotine. He asks me what I am doing. I tell him. He tells me he does the same things, sometimes. We drink until the light rises and we fall asleep, right in the same place where we spent the night. Some nights, nights when we both feel like we have eaten glass, we sit there and talk, the gun in the dark somewhere between us, both of us forgetting it together.

Months pass, then years.

My friends move. I move. I find a job elsewhere, a new place to live. There, the nights are calm, slow, and inside the rooms are warm and dry. I sleep better, I sleep more. At times, I feel like I have eaten glass, but long ago. Like my stomach is battered up in scars. But the pain is dull, now, old, commonplace in a domestic way. I drink less. I do not shoot a gun over the water. No dogs come to bark and tear at my trash. I put the waste bags in a dumpster, set it away from my home. My friend stays in the

same location, orbiting around the humid peninsula doing work here and there—masonry, construction, jobs with his hands. I leave and return, leave and return, more a guest with each visit. I sleep on sofas and floors, bundle my clothes as a pillow, use towels as blankets.

I work in an office stacked in paper. A medical office specializing in scar removal sits next door. Then some other business around a small lot. Insurance offices. Rental agencies. A landscaping firm. We have a kitchen with free coffee, to keep us busy. I like being busy. Being busy keeps me from thinking too much. And that is good. I wear khakis and polo shirts and shirts with buttons. On Fridays, I can wear jeans. The place smells like glue and ink. But it is well-built. Its outside is layered brick. Its inside is thick drywall. I sit next to a window that does not rattle. I can see bushes and snow and rain and light, all of it outside, like a postcard to a place I'll never go. I Xerox pages. Stack them. Bind them in plastic coils. Some are about construction. Some are about medicine. Some are about things I've never heard of. We do something for other companies, something I do not know, like an estranged limb. I never ask. The people who work here are fine. My boss tells me to call her by her first name.

On Wednesdays, we go to a bar decorated like a tropical island. Wood masks. Plastic palm trees. Tiki torches in the corners. Reggae music on the speakers. A small river runs behind the bar. Pines grow on its banks. At happy hour we can buy sweet rum drinks topped with pineapple or limes for two dollars. I buy one or two, now and then. My co-workers talk about nice things, simple things. Football. Cars. Weather. Girls they like. Men they don't. It's okay. They talk about those things and that is all. One time I drink three rum drinks and I remember what it is like to eat glass. I talk to my co-workers about what it feels like to be slashed up in the guts. To hurt. To never sleep. They look at me like I am an alien. Like I speak a strange language. I leave, a little drunk, and go home and try to sleep. I do not talk to them about eating glass. They are full things, unbroken

things, and they sit, pleasant like clear glasses full of water, light passing through.

I meet a woman one day when I drink coffee for lunch on the curb in front of my office. She speaks in a slow drawl. She wears makeup on her eyelids. Bright makeup. Her tan skin reminds me of dried oranges.

We talk for a little and she asks me what I do. I tell her I don't know. And I don't. She smiles through her whitened teeth and says, Well, I remove scars. She shakes her crazy hair. I smell alcohol and aerosol perfume. She says, I help people get ready to remove scars. I'm a medical receptionist.

We meet out there on lunch breaks for some time. Soon, we eat dinner. Then, we spend the nights together. Then she moves in.

She is a good woman. A nice woman. She is like the people at work. But the people at work care about nothing and she cares for me. I sometimes want to tell her about what it is like to feel like you've eaten glass. But I do not. She would understand. She would. But I do not want her to know. I do not want her to be a broken thing. Don't want her to be like us.

One night I wake in a sweat so wet I think I am drunk again. She reaches out to touch my shoulder. I stay like that. Watching the blank wall. Sweat running into my mouth. Waiting to sleep.

The next day I call into work and tell them I am sick, which I am. I am sick of pretending that I am normal, that I have not eaten glass. I want to go back, to see my friends. I tell my woman that I am leaving, just for a little, and that I need to go back, back to where I'm from. I do this at a pizza place in a stunted strip near the entrance to our apartment complex. She eats breadsticks and cheese sauce. She looks away when I tell her what I need to tell her. Then she says, Okay.

I take the car and cross the single bridge to the peninsula, a spindle of a rib bowing over blue water. The sun breaks on the tide, each distant wave like pages of books I've never read.

The medical records that detail the long damage to my liver. The white shoals foam on the darkened sand, frothed like spit. Empty as bubbles. My tires need realignment. I coast this way and that, over the lines, near the barricade, and then on through the pine-scented rural roads until I come to my old house.

Night has fallen and the bullfrogs croak in the dark. I smell resin and beer and the rot off the marsh. These old smells are new to me. I am a visitor. But I am welcome. I knock and my friend opens the door and we embrace, almost dually shocked. My friend has adopted a black and tan mutt with bat-like ears. He bought the dog for companionship, so he didn't feel alone. My sallow-faced friend snorts Oxycontin for that too, the loneliness. Just a little on the side. Here and there. When you mix it with liquor you get a good buzz. Real mellow, like the dog. The dog lives outside, responds only to the clatter of its dish bowl. I ask what the dog is named. My friend tells me he can't decide. When I try to pet it, the dog ducks and scampers, lowers itself to its haunches and vanishes into the wickerwork woods. I too leave, just the same, take off and return to my job and my comfortable home, and, when I pull back into the complex, right beside my woman's Celica, she is there, on our porch, and she waves and says, I'm so glad you're here.

I do not stay for long.

I work the week and don't pay much attention to anything. At home my woman asks me where I am. I tell her that I am nowhere, that I am here. She asks if we can go to a movie this weekend and I tell her I have plans. She asks, Plans for what? I tell her plans with my friends. That night in bed I think I may hear her crying, just a little, and the next day she is gone before I have woken. I walk around the empty house, sit on our soft couches, eat from the stoneware bowls, watch our neighbors jog on by, totally unconcerned.

I visit again that weekend, leaving my woman on the couch, watching a simple movie about teens in love. I wave goodbye and she waves back. I turn to the porch and our door, the keys

fully back, my bag in my hand, waiting for her to drop her arms open, telling me to come home soon. I wait for some time before I leave.

That night, my friend snorts heroin after his housemates have passed out. I ask how the dog is doing. My friend sits with his eyes unfocused and his mouth open, so I can just see the slit of his tongue. His neck sags. His eyes dilate as he stares down the ground. He focuses on things that I cannot see, do not want to see. I ask again. He tells me the dog is doing fine, just fine, that he does his own thing, and that everyone is okay with that. He feeds it every day or so.

When I return to my woman and my apartment and my job, my woman tells me that she needs me there. I ask her why that is. She says she just needs me. I do not need her, but I need her to need me. I do not tell her that. I want her to be happy.

Months pass. My woman grows her hair out so it bats her shoulders when she turns. She wears a nicotine patch on her arm. She has been talking about things I am not ready yet to talk about. She wants a child. I want one too, but not now. I do not tell her this. When she mentions a child I shrug and say that I'm childish enough. She grabbed me one time by the shoulders, stronger than I thought she was, and dug her nails into my skin, her white teeth so close to my face I thought I could see the nerves inside them. She said, You're done with all of that. She meant the childishness, the drinking and the snorting and the smoking. I want to agree, and part of me does.

Then, one night my phone buzzes its vibrate cycle. The number is not one I recognize. I ignore it. My woman asks me who it was and I tell her I don't know. I try to sleep again but the number nags me. Something familiar about it. The area code. The hour. I don't know. I turn in the sheets, half sleeping, the pale blue light and the low hum echoing through my skull.

It could be hours before I turn the thing back on. The sun has not yet risen and my woman snores lightly beside me. I

page through the missed calls and study the number again. The area code is that to the place I once lived long ago. I walk to the bathroom and listen to the message. Nothing. Shuffling. A click. Three or four seconds long. My woman finds me in the bathroom replaying the message, listening for something, a voice, a cue, a television program. Anything. She takes the phone from me and looks at the number and asks who it is. I do not tell her. But she knows. I know. She says, I told you you were done, and she walks back to the bed with her hair scraping her shoulders.

I copy the number down on my side with one of my woman's mascara pens, digging the tip in hard so the digits stay clear. I return to the bed and sit beside her and nudge her shoulder and say, Look.

I hold the phone out and delete the number. I tell her that I am done.

When the cell phone screen goes to black we can feel each other's breath.

I memorize the number before I shower it off. At work I search for it on the internet, hoping for an address, but I find nothing other than that it is a mobile number attached to the region I'd left. I dial it from my work phone. No answer. No message. I dial and dial and dial. I dial so much that the woman who works the desk beside mine throws a wad of paper at me and asks me if I plan on doing anything today. I don't. I take personal leave, claim that I'm sick. My boss says, You're sick a lot. I just nod and leave, my insides cinched, a tension mounting in my bones.

The drive does not take long. Maybe I am speeding. Maybe I just don't care. By afternoon I have crossed that bridge and descend into the swamplands I once called home. I trace the streets like I'd trace my woman's veins, winding the shortcuts, cutting through canebrakes and gravel roads. It all seems older than before, overgrown, and, when I come to the house where I once lived, my friend is not there, not even the housemates of

me that I knew at least by first name. A young woman wearing a man's tanktop answers the door and when I ask she tells me that no one by that name lives here anymore.

I leave, disoriented, begin driving north, hoping I can make it back before my woman gets home, hoping I do not have to lie. I stop for gas, and, palming my phone, I redial the number from which he called me. No answer. Then, as I am leaving, it chimes. An address. I know where this place is, and, checking it against my memory, I follow the old roads to this new place.

I find it. It is a ranch house long neglected and overgrown with vines and weeds and on the porch there sits a couch wilting in the middle like a carcass rotting into the ground. A number of seedlings sprout from its cushions. Beer bottles and trash and empty fast food bags litter the ground. But just as the old place, this house overlooks the water. It is no rare thing here. Water is everywhere.

Before I can knock, my friend answers the door. He looks older, leaner, and, somehow, disappointed to see me. He says, I was waiting for someone else. Got something on the way.

He is quiet for a moment, looking at me, his face screwed tight, and, after some silence, he relaxes, grabs me by the shoulder and leads me inside. It smells like people, old cigarette ash, long, long years of rot and dampness. Everything seems to be a little wet.

That night we drink, but not so much. We sip canned beer. Smoke light cigarettes. We need rest, quiet. We are scarred up boys, wrecked from the inside out. Our joints ache. Our ankles pop. Our callused hands knead our tanned cheeks. We do not want to be so tired. But we are. We have not rested for years. And we feel it. We have had enough fun, those long nights ago, and now, we need to think on it, alone together.

He has moved and the dog with him. He had forgotten to pay rent for a few months, just a few. He needed to avoid some people. Just for a while. He left most of his stuff at the old place, until things quiet down. He's with friends, now, younger people

whose faces look harder to me. He sleeps on a bed without sheets, spends his mornings waiting in line at a free clinic for methadone. He needs rides there. He lost his license to a DUI some months prior and sold his truck, a purple Jeep with rust around the tires, for legal expenses. His back troubles him, keeps him up at night. Some mornings, if he doesn't get to the methadone clinic, he shits himself at work.

We sit on the back porch facing the water. The marsh grass. The withered trees. All of it is skeletal, wet, glimmering in the cold spring. The tide presses in and out like a palm on a dying chest. My woman calls. I do not answer. I expect her to call again. I wait for a long time.

My friend talks about his joints, his hands, how they hurt, how they ache. Mine do too. They hurt when I drive a car, hurt when I sip coffee. He says he just hurts, all the time. How now, since quitting, all he can feel is pain, emptiness, like being gutted and spilled out. He thinks, sometimes, that there is nothing inside him. That it has all been ripped out.

I ask him what made him quit, quit heroin, quit drinking so hard. He tells me. That one night his lips went blue. That his breath faltered. That his heart struggled to turn in its marrow cage. That the last thing he did when he called the ambulance was to finish his cigarette, to stub it out, so the house wouldn't burn down as he blacked out.

He eases the beer down his throat. His stomach bothers him, every day. He can't eat so much, hardly anything. He doesn't want to. He wants to sleep good sleep. Clean sleep. Sleep in a nice house with sheets on his bed and heat in the vents. He's cold, always, like he's been packed with snow. It's the methadone, he says, not the withdrawal, that leaves him feeling scraped out, empty. He's thin, now, and his skin sags as though deflated.

I ask about the dog. Its bowl sits under the porch, near the ash bucket and dented beer cans. The .22 sits there, too. A wilted box of cartridges near its warped butt. Rust collecting

around its small bore. The fittings slow, rusted, and the sights rent out. My friend tells me the black and tan dog is doing fine, just fine, and that he took it to a no-kill shelter up north before he sold the car, that he misses it. The dog, he says, is in a good place, a warm place, one better than this bow-roofed dump.

We sit quiet that night, not saying much, not having much to say. We take our time letting the night empty, letting it empty between us. I ask him if I can shoot the gun, shoot it out over the water, puncture the night with some sound. Even that lonesome echo. He says he doesn't give a shit, doesn't care. I can do what I want. I do nothing. I sit back on the deck and drink until my head heaves. I sleep on a couch beside an empty aquarium. I do not know if my friend sleeps or not. Late at night I hear a car pull up the drive, someone opening the front door, maybe my friend's voice, low.

Early in the morning I wake to the sound of him puking in the bathroom, coughing. The place smells of old sweat, the sick smell of vomit and diarrhea, ash. I check my cell phone to see if my woman has called again. She hasn't. Just the one call last night. No message. I'll get back to her, tell her where I've been, and, if she answers, she'll listen for a little, then tell me that we're still okay. But not now. I go out on the deck for some air. Under the verge, cornered upright, stands the .22 and a box of rounds. I grip the gun, chamber the rounds. I fire shots into the marsh, the sun just diffusing and the fog beginning to well at the reeds' feet. The lonesome pop echoing across the flat water, and the birds cawing, then falling serene. I do this for a while without knowing why. It is quiet. I hear my own heart, knocking unsteady in my chest. The bushes stir. A dog, bat-eared and mottled black and tan, creeps out from the woods. It's emaciated, swollen in strange ways, and its ribs run in ridges. I load a round. I train the sights on the dog, willing myself to pull the trigger.

**AUDIO CASSETTE
BOUGHT FROM
GOODWILL
MARKED “KELLY”**

**GLENN
SHAHEEN**

At first, static. Almost
two minutes. Then,
a cough. Gentle, as if
calmly getting someone's
attention. A moan—a woman—
and springs. The slide
of a metal chain across
the floor. A man's fast
breath. Woman begging
please...oh, please.
Some wet skin and
awkward rhythm. A pause.
Something wooden
is dropped. Then the rustle
of papers. Like applause.

JOE ADAMCZYK

MITCH SISSKIND

He was Joe Adamczyk and
Eve Grabuskawa was her name.
They owned a tavern called
Adamczyk & Eve's and they
called their sex life Grandma Fogarty.

Nights, as closing time approached,
Joe would say, "Eve, do you think
Grandma Fogarty could drop by?"
And Eve would often answer,
"I would not be a bit surprised."

Years passed in just this way.
Blatz, Schlitz, Pabst Blue Ribbon,
Heileman's Old Style Lager,
Old Milwaukee—ten thousand
beer glasses filled and emptied.

When pizza pies, as they were then known,
achieved popularity, Joe and Eve offered
the pies to customers and called them
Polish pizzas for a laugh. Beer sales
skyrocketed as pizza pies appeared.

Also available were White Owl cigars,
and Cubs' home runs were called
White Owl Wallops by Jack Brickhouse
on the TV set above the bar.
But the Cubs lost during the 1950s.

In those days some wrong ideas were held.
Around the time Kennedy was elected and
Eve Grabuskawa began her menopause,
Grandma Fogarty was told to take her leave.
Grandma Fogarty was sent on her way.

No more did Grandma Fogarty come calling
at all hours of the night like a will-o'-the-wisp
fluttering, flickering, and then fully ablaze.
As Eve and Joe's union passed twenty years,
Grandma Fogarty was nowhere to be found.

But is this not a familiar story as married
couples age and passion's flame sinks?
Let us turn to the much more novel story
of how Joe Adamczyk, the Chicago bartender,
transforming himself into a man of ideas.

No stale autodidact would he become,
but a thinker comfortable and at home
in a variety of disciplines, reading widely
in libraries, copying pages, memorizing
long passages, and making diagrams.

He would hardly sleep. He ate little and,
as was true of Edmund Burke,
anyone trapped under a tree with him
in a sudden rain would quickly see
that Joe Adamczyk was a first-rate mind.

with and his interests would encompass Gottlob Frege and Whitehead and also Alonzo Church and Church's dissertation awarded at Princeton in 1927 entitled *Alternative to Zermelo's Assumption*.

His transformation began inauspiciously, meandering for years like a stream. Paint-by-numbers was his first awakening: sunsets, views of old windmills, solitary reapers, the heads of noble steeds.

In faux-impressionist style these emerged from the confusing higgledy-piggledy of lines and numbers on canvas glued to cardboard. Joe could execute a large paint-by-numbers landscape in one day.

Somehow from his paintings a hunger for narrative gradually developed. He imagined stories of people who lived in his paint-by-numbers cabins with smoke curling from the chimneys.

Fascinated by the concept of man as a story telling animal, he began serious reading for the first time in his life. He read *The Caine Mutiny* by Herman Wouk and *Marjorie Morningstar*, also by Wouk.

He followed Wouk with the historical novels of Irving Stone: *Lust for Life*, *Men to Match My Mountains*, and *The Agony and The Ecstasy*. He read the best-selling *Magnificent Obsession* and *The Big Fisherman*, both by Lloyd C. Douglas.

He amused himself by considering life
as a stage play. Was it tragedy or farce?
He pondered the nature of storytelling,
then took the short leap, intellectually,
to viewing the world itself as a narrative.

Turning his attention to non-fiction,
in Volume Two of Will and Ariel Durant's
The Story of Civilization he discovered
the concept of *telos* in a discussion of
Greek philosophy and the work of Aristotle.

He gnawed the concept of *telos* like a dog
with a bone. He toyed with the caprice
that even mathematics might be teleological:
an unwinding tale with a start, a middle,
and perhaps an end returning to the beginning.

He grew careless of his tavern and
heedless of Eve Grabuskawa, still his wife.
He felt drawn to the used bookstores
and hole-in-the-wall coffee houses
near the University of Chicago.

The day came when without a word
Joe left Eve Grabuskawa and rented
a room on South Harper Avenue.
He immersed himself in the collegiate
ambience of the University of Chicago.

In a coffee house called the Pegasus
he saw a reproduction—displayed
with ironic intent—of the portrait
entitled *Arrangement in Grey and Black*,
also known as *Whistler's Mother*.

He was shocked, was set back on his heels
by the subject's strong resemblance
to Eve Grabuskawa. Had all those years
of marriage to Eve Grabuskawa been
a dour arrangement in grey and black?

It was the last time he ever thought
of Eve Grabuskawa, who evanesced
like the Cheshire Cat and even his
attraction to women in general
deliquesced like Frosty the Snowman.

Yet the Pegasus was known for pulchritude.
It was the era of girls in black turtlenecks
with love for jazz and folk music—
educated young women who watched
Italian films at the all-night Clark Theater.

There in the Pegasus one of those women
approached Joe, she stole up behind him,
and in a voice rich with a kind of sarcastic
academese she asked, "Have you read
The Dialogues of Alfred North Whitehead?"

Joe's look of baffled incomprehension
must have moved or amused her,
for she pressed a dog-eared paperback
into his hand: the 1956 Mentor Classics
Edition of Whitehead's *Dialogues*.

"Here, take my extra copy," she said,
slinking out of the Pegasus as Joe
glanced at the book's cover illustration
of Whitehead reading aloud from a
volume held in his liver-spotted hands.

..: Harpur Palate, Volume 11, Number 2, Winter & Spring

What a revelation *The Dialogues of Alfred North Whitehead* proved to be! That very night, like a magic carpet, the book whisked Joe from his bare room to Whitehead's home in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

There, close by Harvard Yard, a journalist named Lucien Price drew the eminent mathematician into conversation ranging across history, theology, philosophy, politics, education, and of course mathematics.

A truly fascinating man was Whitehead, in Joe's opinion, and a man full of surprises. He believed, for example, that mathematics beyond quadratic equations should remain the province of specialists—and Joe agreed.

As a teenager Joe was tortured by algebra at Archbishop Weber High School but he never needed algebra to run the tavern. His crank-operated adding machine lasted many years and did not even use electricity.

In fact—and here he imagined himself speaking to Alfred North Whitehead—Joe would extend Whitehead's thinking and require no math instruction at all past basic fractions and decimals.

All through the night he read, pondering, considering and re-considering, accepting many of Whitehead's ideas, questioning others, rejecting nothing out of hand though some passages caused him to stamp his foot.

Finally, as dawn broke over the university,
Joe sighed and shut the Mentor paperback.
He then noticed a name—Karen Schmolke—
lightly inscribed by some dying ballpoint
on the front cover of *The Dialogues*.

Schmolke, Schmolke... Joe stroked his chin
not an uncommon name on the Northwest Side
and here on the South Side more Schmolkes
might be found. Should he return the book?
“Schmolke” would be in the phone directory.

But no, by God. He would keep the book.
It was a gift. It was now his prized possession.
Phrases like, “In the nimbus of religious awe,”
which Whitehead used so gracefully,
made one forget he was a mathematician.

Joe’s studies went on. Months passed and
he spoke to no one. He ate tuna fish.
He ordered pizza pies. Physically
he diminished. Like a breeze in the trees
his sixtieth birthday came and went.

Yet he felt strong and growing stronger.
The Dialogues whetted his appetite
for more Whitehead. With difficulty,
sometimes pounding his head on the wall,
he read *Treatise on Universal Algebra*.

*The process of forming a synthesis between
A and B, and then to consider A and B united,
as a third thing, may be symbolized as AB.*
As Joe’s familiarity with Whitehead grew,
the significance of this proposition awed him.

How striking that even in the *Treatise*,
His earliest work, Whitehead referred to AB
as symbolic of process rather than product.
Yet the *Treatise* came thirty years before
Whitehead's greatest book, *Process and Reality*.

On and on he read. The vigor with which he
once devoured Sidney Sheldon's *Rage of Angels*
now energized his attack on Gottlob Frege's
Die Grundlagen der Arithmetik which he read
using Langensheidt's German-English dictionary.

For Joe, October of 1962 was noteworthy
not for the so-called Cuban missile crisis
but for his completion of Ernest Nagel's
Problems in the Logic of Explanation.
He found Nagel's easy style very appealing.

No sooner had he finished Nagel
than a still greater dreadnought hove
into view. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*
by Thomas Samuel Kuhn made Nagel
look like a Sunday school picnic.

One midnight—or was it noon? for night
and day were now indistinguishable—
Joe in his reading came upon a name
that, like no other, would inspire and
instruct him for many months to come.

The name was Alonzo Church. Who was
Church? Well-known, but not well-known.
Very well-known in the world of philosophical
mathematicians and mathematical philosophers
but unknown in most Chicago neighborhoods.

Something about Church captured Joe's fancy. Perhaps Church's theorem on the undecidability of first order logic (extending Godel's incompleteness proof of 1931) engaged Joe's sense of himself as an intellectual outsider.

Church—like Jack Brickhouse celebrating White Owl Wallops—was an appreciator of Godel, but his appreciation was such that Church's connoisseurship and Godel's creation actually fused. This was Joe's hope for himself.

He phoned for a pizza pie and took stock of his life. Whitehead, Nagel, Kuhn, Church—his understanding was real even if only he knew it. Just like the tree falling in the forest. Which still falls though no one hears.

His room—austere, ascetic—this was how Wittgenstein lived. Little furniture but the air abuzz with energy of intellect. He would die here. He would die happy. There was a knock on the door: the pizza.

He opened the door and it was one of those so-called deer in the headlights moments, but since that trope would not achieve currency for some years Joe thought of it differently. He thought he was fit to be tied.

Yes, he was fit to be tied. "Schmolke?" He inquired, diffidently. And then with much greater force: "Karen Schmolke! Delivering pizza?" He quoted Shakespeare: "Confusion hath made his masterpiece."

She was frightened. "You know my name?"
Then, laughter: "Are you psychic or what?"
"Here's your pie, cheese and pepperoni.
And yeah, I'm doing deliveries, man."
"Life takes dough just like pizza."

The pizza changed hands and Joe stared
blankly at the box as Karen Schmolke stated,
"Four ninety-five plus tip. Hey, are we old friends?"
"Wait a minute. I know you. I gave you
a book in the Pegasus coffee house."

"Yes, absolutely," Joe said and quoted Buddha:
"What you have given will always be yours."
He reached in his pocket, found a five,
then found another five and gave her both.
"I'm so grateful to you. Please come in."

She entered, saw his table piled high
with books and papers, his telephone
for ordering pizza, and in a corner
his mattress. "Nice place," she quipped,
but sarcasm was wasted on Joe Adamczyk.

Mole-like or like a digging aardvark
he was attacking a seemingly random
hodgepodge of books that in his own mind
was superbly organized, and from this
he soon retrieved Whitehead's *Dialogues*.

"Look familiar?" he said, grinning triumphantly.
Karen Schmolke nodded: "You read it?"
The question insulted Joe: "Of course."
But now her attention was drawn to a paper
on the card table. "Look! Alonzo Church!"

It was Church's June 1940 review of
Are There Extra-Syllogistic Forms of Reasoning?
by S.W. Hartman from the *Journal of Symbolic Logic*,
Joe obtained it from the John Crear Science Library
where zeal for learning won him borrowing privileges.

"I called him Uncle Alonzo," Karen Schmolke said.
"When Uncle Alonzo taught at the U of C,
he and my dad would sit at the kitchen table
working on the Entscheidungsproblem
and I drew pictures of them with mustaches."

"You knew Alonzo Church?" Joe urgently
demanded—and then, as if to answer himself,
he shouted, "You knew Alonzo Church!"
Recovering, he pointed out with reverence,
"Church was the teacher of Alan Turing."

"Yes, he was," said Karen Schmolke. "He also taught
Barkley Rosser, Raymond Smullyan, and don't forget
Isaac Malitz. Dad took me to Uncle Alonzo's lectures
but at ten or eleven years old I had no interest in the
philosophical underpinnings of arithmetic."

As she began a narrative of her undergraduate
years at Oberlin College, Joe Adamczyk with an
impatient wave, as if shooing away a horsefly,
cut her off and with fierce interest demanded,
"What kind of lecturer was Alonzo Church?"

"Well, he had a very careful, deliberate style,"
Karen Schmolke reminisced. "He would start
writing on the left side of the blackboard
in a large, clear, cursive hand..." She paused.
"Are you all right? Have some pizza."

"Pizza?" said Joe distractedly, for the word meant nothing to him now. With the clarity of inner vision he saw Alonzo Church at the blackboard, he saw Alonzo Church pacing around a lectern deep in thought.

And this girl Karen Schmolke! With her own ears she heard Alonzo Church lecture on the Church-Turing thesis, the Frege-Church ontology, the Church-Rosser theorem, and many similar matters. With her own ears!

For her part, Karen Schmolke just stared in quiet puzzlement at this peculiar man whose name she had still not learned, this odd duck who with his head cocked seemed to hear some far-off supernal music.

"Please try some pizza," she offered again, now more insistently—for Joe's face seemed to be changing, his expression deepening. What did he see? With his obvious interest in logic, she surmised it was some esoteric proof.

But no, it was Grandma Fogarty! Oh God, Grandma Fogarty had dropped by unexpectedly! Joe Adamczyk felt the presence of Grandma Fogarty and indeed he felt the presence of Grandma Fogarty more strongly than ever in his life before!

Turning his gaze toward Karen Schmolke, he wondered whether she might also sense the arrival of Grandma Fogarty. Gently, hesitantly, he reached toward Karen Schmolke. He caressed her cheek, then took her hand.

On the other hand, never had Karen Schmolke felt such...desire? Or was it desperate need? It was flattering, in a way. She smiled benignly. "It's okay," she said. "Just don't have a stroke."

Her acquiescence, her mercy, Joe chose to see as acceptance, as heartfelt assent when hand-in-hand they drew nigh the mattress. She wore no bra and this fact, to Joe Adamczyk, was a powerful expression of youth's *sans souci*.

But was there not also a *sans souci* of age? An insouciance, a devil may care perspective, a what-the-hell attitude, a damn-the-torpedoes point of view? Yes, yes, yes, goddamnit! And Joe embraced that *carpe diem* sensibility!

He gamahuched Karen Schmolke with startling enthusiasm. Cunt, slut and similar words eddied and swirled in his brain. Yet a *logos*, a *telos*, was also disclosing itself, cleverly interweaving his fucking with philosophy.

Through this most intimate touching of a woman who had seen Alonzo Church, Joe felt himself connected not just to Church but through Church to the realm of pure forms described by Pythagoras, Plato, and others.

Thought and feeling, cunt and consequentialism, mingled until an aphorism of Whitehead's emerged: "There are no whole truths. All truths are half-truths," the great man explained. That is: truth is never final, truth is ever on the way, always halfway there.

like Achilles' fabled pursuit of the tortoise
truth is a reality but a reality of process.

Truly Joe had been a bartender. Just as truly
he was one no longer. Who could aver that he
would not one day be President of Mexico?

Rising to his knees, he poised his swollen member
to enter Karen Schmolke. She arched her back
and her breasts like spring lambs leaped to meet him
until for at least a moment his ratiocinations quieted
and twice she nuzzled to one nut of Joe Adamczyk's.

I hope you have enjoyed this story of a man who
late in life undertook what Alfred North Whitehead
called *Adventures of Ideas* and then, to his surprise,
reignited his sexuality, which he called Grandma Fogarty.
and Eve Grabuskawa? Her story will be told, but not today.

WATCHING THE VILLAGE

EPHRAIM SCOTT
SOMMERS

It is my old man riding a magic carpet
home with six bottles of long-neck Pepsi in his mechanic hands.
It is a husband and wife not dueling over footstools

in the living room, no flying wrists of wineglasses.
And why so hard to be these people, so hard
to be with people, so hard to people

this sadness? A blue man will find
melancholy in a baseball diamond, in a Capri-Sun.
Why so hard, elbow by elbow, to wish people happiness?

The small town talks to people it sees
under the raised red truck,
under the teal-flame '57 Chevy.

From the top of the Robinson's mailbox,
a wooden magpie bobble-heads in the breeze.
I too have ignored this, the only bird in town

that shits a mouthful of candy corn if you spin
his head once to the left, if you hold out your hand,
if you laugh with him.

FIVE FEARS: A REFRAIN

BY

PETER STENSON

Wind

Here's what I picture—wind blowing and blowing with the force of capped volcanoes and sheets of aluminum siding peeling, and then trees, their tops umbrellas, their roots taking clumps of earth with them. Cars next. Maybe vans because of their blocky nature and then maybe little ones because they seem light and then maybe all of them, the freeway going from congested to uncongested with so much as a gust, and we're crashing into ditches and all I hear is shattering windshields or maybe those are breaking bones.

So it was windy the other day here in Northern Colorado. Our grill cover blew off, our trash cans over.

I told my wife I was scared.
She said, Can you not be such a pussy for once?

I said, Serious.
Can we not do this right now?

It just freaks me out.
Will you feed Sniffles? I have to go.

Okay.
She left.

I fed the cat and I wanted to go watch TV upstairs, but that seemed like a bad idea, being on the second story of our row house while it was so windy, and here are two things I know about myself and wind:

1) I was young and had a giant head and still played with Ninja Turtles so I couldn't have been but five. The sky turned green. I said it looked like Ecto-Cooler Hi-C. My brother

laughed. My mom made us go to the basement. She said a tornado was coming. It was close to dinnertime. This was before cell phones. We waited down there and listened to the radio and the announcer gave us updates on where it touched down, and softball-sized hail, and I could tell my mom was upset so I started to cry. She said, We're fine, we're fine. I didn't believe her because she didn't hug me back.

My older brother seemed to then understand why she was upset. He said, What about dad?

That's when she cried.

I pictured my father blown into a million pieces. I cried, but not any harder than I already was.

2) I was sixteen, camping at Harmony Park for some stupid bluegrass festival. We were into those things, my eighteen-year-old girlfriend, Caitlyn, and I. We thought we were hippies. I wore a patchwork skirt in those days.

So I didn't really give a fuck about the music and found a guy who was selling L and bought ten hits for two bucks apiece. He poured five drops from a Visine bottle into the

hook at the base of my thumb and wrist. I licked them like a kitten. Caitlyn said she only wanted three so I ate two more.

The show was boring and I yawned and was spun really bad and I kept flashing everyone my stupid small penis and this was great fun.

Then it got windy.

Still being spring in flat Minnesota, tornados were a possibility. The sky turned green. I asked if it really was green. Caitlyn said, Yes, isn't it magical? She was so fucking stupid. Then it got really windy and the trees shook and people cheered and I started to freak out and wanted to go to the car and she said that was the worst place to be and when the hail came, she held my hand and guided me to the tent.

The nylon walls sounded like doomed sailboats.

I just kept telling Caitlyn that I was sorry, I'm so fucking sorry.

Infidelity

Here's what I picture—everyone I've ever loved or cared about or known or passed on the street or seen on TV or heard of, all

or them are in one big room with couches and beds and red satin pillows with golden trim and they're listening to a mix of my favorite bands—Phish and Blackalicious and Neil Young and MF Doom—and they are fucking and getting fucked and licking and cumming and pissing and every single one of them, these ex's and my mom and dad and brother and friends and enemies and people I wish that I was, all are thinking the same thing—if Peter was here, he'd fucking ruin the whole thing.

So about a month ago, my best friend, Alex, was getting married in Montana. My wife couldn't go. The wedding was in the middle of nowhere and I'm not one for nature, mountains and rivers and the like, but it was pretty nonetheless. It was fun because Alex and another friend of ours, Casoli, a fat Italian pervert, just got to hang out for a few days.

The night of the rehearsal dinner, I met the maid of honor. She was pretty sexy in a didn't-have-time-to-blow-dry-my-hair kind of way and I'd entered the age where I noticed if women wear rings. She did. We talked

about how cute Alex and Nichole were and she smelled like patchouli.

The next night, at the wedding, she looked really good in her deep blue dress and her hair all done up. She said I looked handsome. I wondered if this meant she wanted to have sex. During dinner, she gave a satisfactory toast. Then it was my turn. I killed it. Everyone laughed and clapped and I felt good about life.

When it was time to dance, she came up to me. She put her hand on my back. She said, That was the best toast I've ever heard. Her hand stayed there.

I told her thanks, that hers was good too, and she kept my gaze, her hand just inching down my tux. And I knew that if I really wanted to, I could fuck this girl, that nobody would know, that she probably had just as much to lose as I did so she wouldn't say anything, and here are two things I know about myself and infidelity:

1) When I was seventeen, my fragile little world broke the fuck apart when I saw Caitlyn kissing another man. We were in San Francisco. Caitlyn was there just traveling between

semesters at U.W. I didn't know what I was doing. Both high school and my parents had recently said *thanks, but we've had enough*. We were at the Fillmore for a concert. The ball dropped. It was a new year. I wore a cape or maybe it was an American flag. I couldn't find Caitlyn. Even with the gram of molly I'd eaten, I still knew she was with Sean, her BFF from college at Madison. I knew they were fucking while I pretended to be in AA meetings back in St. Paul. The disco ball spun and it was diamonds and I saw them, their dreads different shades of the same brown. They kissed and it was magical, the desire and tenderness of Caitlyn's caresses.

First loves and we'd planned our kid's names and I'd pushed for Dresser for a boy and Portland for a girl and I wasn't doing well to start with, like just the day before I had locked myself out of the Econo-Lodge and broken in through the window and stripped to nothing and taken a piece of glass and sliced open my stomach and watched the blood drip down my thighs. I'd been trying to cut out my soul.

She was the only thing left, even if it wasn't love.

But I was kind of excited because it was finally a good enough excuse. I left the concert and found a bum named Tibbs and I used his needle, my first, and fell in love with the whirlpool that is heroin.

2) I was twenty and a few months sober and sitting in the Uptown Alano Club in St. Paul. Some chubby girl stared at me when I shared, week after week. Her name was Sarah. Her complexion was dark and so was her curly hair and one night after our meeting, she noticed me looking at the Star of David tattooed on her ring finger. She said it was a wedding ring.

You're married?

Yeah. Have a son, too.

Oh.

A month went by and it was still that stare and I wasn't fucking stupid, like I knew she was in love with me, and after one Tuesday night meeting, she asked if I wanted to grab something to eat. I said sure.

She drove me to the northern suburbs. I was quiet during the drive. She told me that she and her husband were pretty much over. I didn't know what

to say to that.

I sat on her microfiber couch while she went to retrieve her son from the babysitter down the hall. There were men's shoes and men's jeans all over the apartment. Dinner was a Tombstone pizza, pepperoni. She put her eighteen-month-old son down in the crib thing right next to the TV. We watched Def Comedy Jam and I pretended to think it was funny. Then it was the game of accidental touches—feet, shins, knees, shy pinkies.

And when our fingers finally hooked, I wanted it to mean love.

We kissed. Her breath smelled like hot lunch. Her kid started crying. Maybe he understood I wasn't daddy. Sarah wore Adidas tear-aways and I thought this was trashy and she didn't wear panties and I thought this was even trashier. Her son fucking howled. She kept saying things like *you should leave, I can't be doing this*. I thought it was just part of whatever trip she needed to spin for herself. Then it was tears but I didn't stop and it was all so sensual. I worried about neighbors thinking the child was being abused. She

stopped. She yelled at her son, one quick shout—stop. Then she hid her face in her hands. Her black curls shook. She punched her naked thighs, repeatedly. She said fuck. She got up and walked over to the crib. I looked at the wall above her curls. A picture of the three of them at some lake, husband and wife and baby, fishing poles in hands, smiles. Then I looked where she'd been sitting. The lips of her vagina left a perfect imprint on the couch.

Sexuality

Here's what I picture—I'm at the gym and I have had a good workout, maybe back and biceps, and I am in the steam room. It's late, fifteen minutes until the gym closes for the night. I'm not wearing a towel. Then the door opens and a plume of steam escapes and in walks an angel-faced boy, no older than twenty, and he has no hair anywhere and the thing I notice about him are his cheekbones, strong enough to build bridges with. And he sheds his towel. I think about leaving, tell myself the reason isn't the blood starting to fill my penis, but rather the

humidity, thick like first generation accents. And I can't stop it, my dick, and I lean forward to try to shroud this betraying part of me, and I'm telling myself that it doesn't mean anything and is a natural reaction and that it's a continuum, always in flux. Maybe this boy notices. Maybe he says, hey. Maybe that's all I need.

So at Casoli's wedding, just ten days after Alex's, this one in Louisiana, we all danced. We were all sober so this was nothing but discomfort but we tried. At some point, the other groomsmen and I formed a nice little circle, gyrating and grinding with one another. We thought this was so funny.

After that particular song, I drank a Diet Coke over by my wife. She used a straw with hers. She spoke with it still in her mouth—you're kind of a fag-got, aren't you?

I laughed and told her not to hate and pecked her cheek and this is the only fucking thing I know about myself and sexuality:

1) I have had five sexual experiences with men. These resulted in sucking two dicks, having mine sucked twice, and a

hand job. Three of these experiences were for money, a grand total of ninety dollars in my pocket. One of these was part of a threesome. One of these was molestation.

And I know that I only came from receiving the hand job, my first time whoring when I was seventeen. We were in the bushes of Port Townsend, Washington. He was handsome enough in a son-of-an-apple-picker kind of way. He assured me all he wanted to do was touch. His fingernails were long and yellow like eagle talons. I didn't come from any of the others because it was either me giving or me being too high or me being ten-years-old.

Relapse

Here's what I picture—a few years from now, I'm working some shitty job that I hate, selling insurance or something. Maybe we have a kid. I'm getting fatter. And maybe life is changing diapers and watching sitcoms and maybe we are out to eat and it's not a great place, maybe Olive Garden for our once-a-month date night. We spring for a babysitter. I see

The shitty house wine and it's been ten years of not drinking and I look around and it's drab couples having stilted conversation and then I realize this is us, and I say fuck it, one glass can't hurt. One glass can never hurt.

So a few weeks ago, I went to go see Phish. According to the sobriety calculator app on my iPhone, this was my first show in 7.27 years or 87.12 months or 2,652 days or 63,642 hours. I went alone. I was excited. I bought a Five Hour Energy at the gas station. This was to be my little secret, my little upper gift to myself.

I made my way to the front of the floor on Fishman's side. I started talking with an older guy, maybe forty, fat with a Jersey ponytail. We talked about hockey and what songs they would play that night. Then he pulled out a film canister and I watched him dip his finger into it and rub a white powder around his gums. It was too white for heroin, probably coke or molly. He offered it to me. I dipped my finger in the canister without even a second thought. And then I brought it to my mouth and the thoughts came like what the fuck are you doing

and Jesus Christ and I was afforded the briefest of pauses, this guy looking away, and I wiped the residue on my pants. A few seconds later, I put my finger in my mouth, just a few grains still clinging to my skin. It was molly and I wanted to ask for more and the lights dimmed and here are two things I know about myself and relapse:

1) Frank was my best friend and had red hair and an explosion of freckles and dated Bridget, the girl I was in love with. This was in my early twenties, the three of us sober and working at a travel agency in downtown Minneapolis.

I was pretty into AA then and my parents talked to me and shit was all second chances and then one afternoon Frank and I walked around downtown trying to feel cool. A brother stopped us. He told us a story about being on a run from St. Louis and needing a hundred dollars for a locksmith, that his keys were locked in his car right there, that he couldn't have the police impounding it because he had the good shit—*not that stomped on tar comin' from out west*—and that he'd make it so worth our while.

I felt nervous.

This man slipped two purple balloons out from between his gums and said, Here's two tenths, got more in the car, clean rigs too, Starbucks over there got lockable stalls, this shit will get you so fuckin' straight.

And it was that moment of being outside of yourself, seeing yourself having choices, the proverbial forked path, taking the same fucking route and knowing that nothing will be the same and you're fucking everything up, but maybe that's bullshit because I said okay and we walked to the ATM and I withdrew a hundred dollars. Frank spun his lip ring with his front teeth. I wasn't sure if this was nervousness or excitement. We went to Starbucks. We blasted our veins full of pure fucking love.

I stopped using two days later because I still lived in a sober house and had piss tests and I didn't even get sick.

Frank didn't.

Two weeks later, he didn't show up for work.

Then there was the day when I came into the office and logged onto my computer and

put on my headset and I saw my boss come over and I was thinking I'd fucked something up, sent somebody to LAX instead of LAS, but she just sat down next to me. She was crying. She told me Frank passed away.

I didn't know what to say and I felt like I was supposed to be crying too and I thought about Frank and his giggle and this is what I kept hearing inside my head. I couldn't figure out how to make this not my fault.

I got up.

My boss touched my arm.

I walked to the windows that overlooked the first floor.

I saw Bridget, Frank's girlfriend. She was chubby and beautiful with her crowded lower teeth and she sat at a desk. Three other women knelt at her side, rubbing her back. Bridget wasn't crying. She stared at her monitor. I wanted to say something, to go down there and tell her it was all my fault, my money that got Frank using again, that I was able to quit and he wasn't, that I had just wanted it to stop—the crippling refrain of you stupid fucking piece of shit—that Frank is dead because of this.

She didn't move.

This stillness was violent.

I knew she heard the same grade-schooler giggles. I wondered at what point they'd stop.

2) I was a little boy, eleven, and we were out in Wyoming at a dude ranch my parents owned. We sat in the hot tub, my brother and older cousin and myself. We smoked a joint. My cousin told us halfway through that it was laced with angel dust. The only thing I knew about angel dust was that Rodney King had taken it before he was beaten. We giggled.

I leaned back and watched the stars and I was higher than I'd ever been. The stars made the MTV logo. I told them this. I said, Serious, look. I pointed and they couldn't stop laughing. Then the MTV logo morphed into a pentagram. Like drawn perfectly into the sky and it pulsed and kept getting bigger and I understood in the very core of my preteen-self that I sided with the devil, that drugs were more powerful than God.

Being Average

Here's what I picture—I will be a less successful version of my

father. I won't be as smart, having received my education at a small university in Minnesota instead of Yale. I will never play professional hockey in Sweden like he did. I will flounder from job to job instead of sticking with something for thirty years. I will raise my children without as much love, always pushing them too hard to do what I could not. I will never publish a book. The only people who will know of me will be friends and family. I will wait for my father to die so I don't have to work and I will not be a good steward of the money, as he has instructed me since I was a boy, but instead, I will squander it on things to make myself feel like I matter. I will die of either lip cancer or lung cancer before I should and it will be a small enough service to be held in the church I grew up in.

So the other weekend, I was back in Minnesota for my grandfather's funeral. After the service, I talked with my brother. He said how the eulogy made him think about how he was living, his attention so focused on work, how his balance between family and career was completely skewed.

It made me think about
being famous, I said.

What?

Like everyone who would
be there, you know?

He laughed. He said, That's
kind of fucked up.

I didn't say anything, and
we ate cookies from a store-
bought tray, and I know two
things about myself and being
average:

1) My sponsor kept push-
ing stupid sayings like *the
miracle of the mundane, a
worker among workers, finding
acceptance in your allotment
in life*. I thought these sayings
were such bullshit. Like it was
just blatantly giving up on any
ambition. It was just a lie that
people who'd fucked up their
lives and marriages and careers
and who stumbled into the
rooms of Alcoholics Anonymous
told themselves to keep from
slitting their wrists. This wasn't
me. I told my sponsor this when
we went over my fear inventory
during my Fifth Step.

He talked about how my
character defects, the ones we'd
just highlighted in my resent-
ment inventory—rampant self-
pity, selfishness, being judgmental—were basically all about my

refusing to accept the sayings I
objected to.

I looked at him and his stu-
pid orange goatee and narrow-
set eyes. I said, But there can't
be anything wrong with want-
ing to be...

Better?

I don't know, I said.

Think about it, he said, the
source of everything, all of these
visions of grandeur, all of these
defects of character, boil down
to two things—the fear of not
getting what you want, or losing
something you have. Everything
in life revolves around those
simple things.

And I thought about it.
About my fears and how wind
was about dying and that was
really about both losing some-
thing I had or not getting what I
wanted, and the same with infi-
delity and sexuality and relapse
and being average, all of them.
About how I made every deci-
sion based on these two things.
How I was capable of hurting
anyone in my life to protect
myself from those fears. I hated
my sponsor for his wisdom and
I hated myself because it was
all so fucking clichéd—my fifth
step illuminating that my life
was the common tale of a rich

entitled fuck who can't get over having to keep a secret and the disdain for a loving father and a first love ending and the stasis of marriage and the fact that he is average, just fucking average, that he can't accept these things, I can't, the fact that this life will end without the fanfare I for some reason need, trumpets and tears and my work canonized, like all of this will give me the esteem that only drugs and budding love had once been able to coax me into believing I had.

2) Most nights, I masturbate in the bathroom of my study. I put the computer on the counter of the sink and stand over the toilet. Of course it's all so very sexy and I picture the girls in the video as people I know, and my wife is watching TV in the bedroom and Sniffles is clawing at the door and in those perfect moments when my abs tighten, I am not afraid of wind and I am so loyal and I am completely ignoring the cock in the porn and I am so much happier in sobriety and I will write a book beautiful enough to make somebody cry. And then at the moment of bliss, my lips curl to a grin, sometimes an

audible laugh even escapes, and the truest fucking voice inside of me says the same simple refrain—you deserved it, you will never be famous, you will give your life to heroin.

ALBATROSS

MOLLY SUTTON KIEFER

MILT KESSLER MEMORIAL PRIZE FOR POETRY FINALIST

This was seventh grade. Brad drew stick figures fucking in his math notebook and lewdly complimented the topographical changes beneath our shirts.

Boys will be boys. When one of us thought to complain, she was leered at, threatened with suspension. Anita Hill was laughed away too.

We kept a notebook, a quiet commotion.
It was our favorite science teacher who called us into the lab equipment closet, explained how Brad caught the notebook, was found dissecting its pages, a *Playboy* behind a textbook, a flashlight in his pants.
Yes, Mom. I've been studying for hours.

In eighth grade, I actually liked my school picture, for the first time. I'm wearing an eggplant wool turtleneck.

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feel pretty. My father says, *Your sister is cute but you are beautiful*, as if these words always belonged to us. Brad ruins it when he tells me he's been masturbating to his open yearbook.

I will resist the urge to bind my daughter's chest. My mother claims our breasts are our best inherited feature from her, but I always thought these weights more a curse. But then I show her the mermaids of Neptune, and she does not protest the impossibility of this spray.

It is then that I know what she meant by *best feature*—the gift of a towel nest, late at night, rocking with my daughter in my arms.

BAYOU

**SETH BRADY
TUCKER**

The nights we play hide and go seek cling
to the first whispers of the coming digital age,
our schoolrooms slowly filled with Apple
Ile computers; the obsolete manila computer
punch cards boxed and set to mold in the basement.
It is serious business, these hot summertime
games, charcoal drawn under eyes, parachute pants

jungle camouflage, long black shirts clinging
with sweat. Our hiding spots are indicators of age,
the less inventive kids sent home early for apple
pie, any finish outside the top three, hard to compute.
Susie calls fifty and my first choice is cemented
by Tyler, who usually takes his sweet dadgum time
getting settled, the second by Ari, who poops his pants,

the third an impossibility because of rattlesnake dens.
I sprint between ancient oak and cypress trees
to the creek bed boundary. Some hiding places
are discovered simply by braving what others cannot,
and it is with this in mind that I quiet my breathing,
and crawl into the dark iron culvert, wiggling through
sticks and mud and salamanders. It is tight, the feel
of my ribs pressed into the metal grooves of the pipe,

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and when I squirm around to get comfortable, I am stuck
sideways, cemented by the mud I have bored
through. It takes two hours for me to realize no one
will find me, and it is the dark and cold dawn that provides
the first of two final miracles. The morning sun sends
bright red fingers through the swamp to warm me

enough to convince me there is a god. By nighttime,
exhausted and hoarse from screaming for help,
I am just as sure there is no god, and as a hard rain
begins to fall, slowly filling the creek bed with water,
the second miracle: the ebony and crimson twilight
caressing the cypress trees, the last sweet whisper
of sympathy for boys too stupid to know when to quit.

GODOT'S UNDERPANTS

SETH BRADY
TUCKER

—for Jessica Anthony

Are in a terrific bunched
up mess. What's with the kid
botching the tuna casserole,
kicking the ash can onto the rug,

tooththing up his penis during
the blowjob? Godot's got deadlines,
goddamn it! So the kid says
he's sorry, like that, conveniently

forgetting he lost Godot's best
fucking boots just the week before.
The girl walks in like she is being
pushed from offstage, asks

where her panties are, no, the red
ones, and it is tempting to fuck
her right then, but rent is due
and there are people to kill

And the kid flops into the love seat, picks
at his anus, finds a burnt cigarette
hiding in the ashtray. Like Godot's

had his goddamn tuna casserole
already. And of course, there's
nothin' to be done, beyond slapping
that cigarette out of the kid's mouth.

GOD DOESN'T GO BY THAT NAME

**MARTY
WALSH**

When he sleep-walked
into the bathroom
to take a leak,
he found himself on
a subway platform
wearing nothing but boxers,
boxers and a T-shirt.

Passengers getting off
and onto trains stepped
around him, shivering
and not knowing which way
to turn. Even the turnstile
turned against him
when he tried to leave the station.

It was then that two angels
with shaved heads and wearing
granny glasses came to his rescue,
draped a saffron robe around him,
gave him a tambourine and the names
of God in a foreign sounding
glossolalia to chant. And just

as he was sitting up in bed
to go take a leak, a gruff, burly
security guard started poking
his chest with a stiff, stubby finger
and growling, "Piss off, bud,

we don't want you here. God
doesn't go by that name in these parts."

PAUSE BETWEEN ACTS

**CAROLYN
WATSON**

Henry Joseph Adams set the breakfast table for one. His wife and two daughters were in Calgary shopping for wedding dresses. The eldest girl was getting married in three weeks and the task of finding the perfect dress had reached a frenzied point. Whenever Suzanne mentioned it, which was often, her face grew red and she talked in a hurried, high-pitched voice. The trip to Calgary was a last-ditch attempt to save the bride's vocal chords. If the trio came back empty-handed, Suzanne's head would likely blow off her neck and that would be the end of the wedding plans.

Henry did not mind eating alone. He preferred silence to the hullabaloo of family meals, though in truth he avoided partaking in most discussions by keeping his mouth full of food. Whenever his wife and daughters pressed him for his opinion, he merely nodded and kept chewing. The scheme worked well for everyone. The women took his silence for acquiescence and Henry ate more than allowed.

Lately however, wedding preparations had dominated the women's every conversation and escape of any kind had proved impossible. The women prodded Henry with questions. They begged him for more money or worse, they assigned him jobs, which he did his best to avoid. To his annoyance, indigestion and post-meal payoffs had become regular occurrences.

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Extracting himself from the trip to Calgary had taken some cunning. On Friday morning, shortly before their scheduled departure, Henry had developed a sudden and inexplicable cough. He clutched his chest, let his eyes widen and collapsed into his favourite armchair. When his coughing fit subsided, he drew a ragged breath and wondered aloud how much longer he had to live. The women rewarded him with a short burst of angry concern and then hurried off to the airport without him. Henry had been feeling better ever since.

Without a hint of guilt, he bypassed his usual bowl of bran cereal in favour of a boiled egg, five strips of bacon and buttered toast. On impulse, and because his wife was not there to scold him, he added a sprinkling of salt. He had survived two heart attacks in as many years. He knew his time was limited and he took great pleasure in reminding his family of his fragile health. "I may not live to see the day you walk up the aisle," he told Suzanne. And to Jessica, "Take care of your mother while you're in Calgary. I won't be alive when you return."

His daughters despaired of such talk. They kissed his cheeks and made him promise to deposit the wedding money into their mother's bank account where it would not get lost in the distribution of his estate. His impending death put a skip in their step. Between them, his wife and daughters shared a quiet motto: Shop fast and charge everything while the old man is still around to pay for it.

Henry punctured the egg with his fork. He watched the yolk dribble down the side of the porcelain cup and pool in his saucer. He was, by his own admission, a closet gossip. He never spread rumours, nor did he admit to knowing any, but he took secret delight in hearing about other people's misfortunes. Suzanne, for example, had added three centimetres to her waistline since accepting the marriage proposal. She blamed stress. Jessica blamed the fiancée. Their mother blamed herself.

Henry turned the salt shaker upside down and gave his egg another vigorous dusting. He rather hoped he died before

Suzanne's wedding. The guest list was at 200 and climbing and she had chosen some absurd love song for the father/daughter dance. He did not particularly like Suzanne or, for that matter, Jessica. The girls had been seven and five when he married their mother. She was a young widow with a booming laugh and strong opinions. Henry was a lonely old man. People said they complimented each other. The wife's personality took over where the husband's fell short.

For the hell of it, Henry dumped a spoonful of sugar into his coffee. His wife strictly forbade caffeine so it was with a smile that he took a long sip. Perhaps a few jumping jacks after eating, he thought. Give the heart muscle a good workout. The women were due home late that afternoon. His body would be stiff by then. No chance of resuscitation.

He opened the classifieds and checked the obituaries. Two of his friends had died last summer, the lucky bastards. At their funerals, Henry had stared at their coffins with envy. "Soon," he told Jessica, "that will be me." And to Suzanne, "You should take notes, make it easier to plan mine." He had added a few surprises to his will, request for cremation being one of them. He had divided his money not quite equally between his wife, two daughters and the animal welfare group he had been secretly sending donations for years. How much money Suzanne received after paying off her wedding debts remained to be seen. Henry had half a mind to cut her off completely.

His eyes lit upon a name, his surname, at the top of the obituary page. ADAMS – Acacia Elsbeth.

There, that tugged at his heart.

She was gone.

And he was human after all.

He read it aloud, "Acacia Elsbeth Adams."

She had kept his name.

His breath caught in his throat and a sound came out. A single sob. He put his hand over his mouth to muffle it.

Acacia. Beautiful. Sweet. Cruel.

She would have laughed at the tears in his eyes. "Henry, you old softie. Why would you cry for me? We haven't seen each other in over four decades."

He pulled his hand away, called himself a fool. He tore the newspaper in half and threw the pieces on the floor. Still, the words were there. Acacia Elsbeth Adams. She'd kept his name.

Henry's mind drifted back forty years to the day she had ripped out his heart. He was reading a science fiction novel when she walked into the living room and dropped his packed suitcases on the floor. "Henry dear," she said, as he marked the page in his book. "I have decided to end our marriage." Just like that. The aliens had started to invade and his marriage was over.

She returned the ring and wished him well. "I called a taxi," she said, as she walked him to the door. "Good luck."

"Shall I get a divorce?" he said.

Acacia shrugged. "If you like."

She offered him her cheek and he kissed it, letting his lips linger on her skin. By the time he climbed into the taxi, he was a broken man.

For years, Henry had procrastinated making the separation legal. He thought, no, he desperately wished, that Acacia might reconsider and ask him to return. At night, he'd drive past her house, consider stopping and then chide himself for being so weak. Don't say it, he told himself. But the words, "I love you," inevitably slipped out as he drove away.

When he met the woman who became his second wife, he had finally admitted defeat. Quietly, he had had his lawyers draw up the divorce papers. He gave Acacia most of his money though she did not need it and as it turned out, did not want it. In the only correspondence he ever received from her, she simply wrote, "No thank you."

And yet, he had kept that slip of paper tucked in his wallet ever since.

Henry sat back, wove his fingers together and rested them

on his chest. From his seat, he could see into the dining room where Jessica and Suzanne stored the wedding decorations. For the first time, he registered an abundance of bells amongst the piles – accordion bells for the walls, crystal bells for the top of the cake, plastic bells for the flower arrangements, bell-shaped lights for the topiaries, and in a slim box, chocolate bells for the guests.

“Every time a bell rings,” he said, “an angel gets its wings.”

If the saying were true, the wedding would be a bloody massacre.

He found his coat and walking stick. Suzanne had left a note stuck on the refrigerator. *Call us if you go out. We have the cell.* She wants to know where to find the body, Henry thought. Ha! Let her look.

The day was warm, the city alive with the sound of lawn equipment. Henry made his way through the tree-lined streets, stopping at the corner store to purchase a bouquet of flowers and a bag of candy. He ate as he walked. “You are a junk food fiend,” his wife had often complained. “That kind of garbage paves the fastest road to the grave.”

Not fast enough, Henry thought. Acacia beat me to it.

West Elbertine Cemetery was a sprawling city of grave-stones, mausoleums and towering columbaria. Henry wandered from grave to grave, looking for fresh plots. He found a flat headstone and sat, resting the flowers on his knees. Azaleas and rhododendrons bloomed all around him, their pinks and purples so brilliant they hardly seemed real. He did not believe in ghosts, but he believed in life after death. He imagined heaven as a kind of resort where the day’s agenda might be golf, tennis, or swimming. He would dress better of course. Everyone would. And he would eat well too. He would drink beer again. God, how he missed beer. Best of all, he would have his thirty-year-old body and his invincible ten-year-old heart.

After he had been in heaven for a while and maybe won a

few games of tennis, he would seek out Acacia. She would be sitting on a bench in the rose garden, her eyes hidden behind enormous black sunglasses. She would smile when she saw him and offer her cheek. "Why?" he would ask, resisting the urge to kiss her. "What the hell was wrong with us?"

Acacia's answer would be cryptic, perhaps accompanied by a slight shrug, but the point would be made. Behind the dark glasses, he hoped a few tears might fall.

Henry rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands. He felt closer to her than he had in forty years. After all, she'd kept his name. Acacia Elsbeth Adams. "I loved you," he said.

Empty, he gazed at the surrounding headstones. When his eyes lit upon one in the shape of a bell, he remembered Suzanne, Jessica, and his wife. He glanced at his watch. They would be on their way home from the airport.

With a sigh, he dropped the bouquet, flung his walking stick to one side and got to his feet. Jumping jacks! Ten ought to do it.

PRAYING AT THE HOUR OF THE OX

ROBERT
WOOD

—After a print by Hokusai 1921

Say it is the second night
she nails a straw doll to the tall pine.

She is crowned with candles.
The mirror on her chest reflects his effigy.

Only the night wind vexes
her white gown, her blue sash.

Better for him her loose hair
were tangled on a pillow.

PIGS

**THEODORA
ZIOLKOWSKI**

—Kruswica, Poland

The Russians expected to be greeted *Give us wine. Give us meat* with wine, with meat. They barged in on my cousin's family, my Polish family in their Polish home in their brown and broken Polish city. From behind the couch my cousin had listened to them poking in the black garden, where on the ground, moldy peaches rolled in the rain.

They ate the pig before it finished cooking.
They lugged it into the room, swinging it
by the hooves and grunting it over the fire. From the spit,
the soldier cradled the body triumphant as Salome, its tongue
a beige flap, the apple corked in its mouth. Bloodied, still wet
from the rain, the pig squirmed into an infant squealing on the table.

My cousin Anna was a child when the pig was eaten,
still soft, still trembling in her father's house while bullets rang
into their walls.

Now, she clicks a flame to her cigarette
as I ask if there were other pigs in the garden, seeing
more swine and the guns and the wine. I look to her
for an answer, but she is coughing up smoke.

2012

THE
HARPUR
PALATE

VOLUME 11

THE HARPUR PALATE is a literary journal that publishes original fiction, poetry, and essays. The journal is published twice a year, in the fall and spring. The fall issue is published in November and the spring issue is published in May. The journal is published by the Harpur Palate Society, a student organization at Binghamton University. The journal is named after the Harpur Palate, a historic building on the Binghamton University campus.

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CHRISTIAN MICHLER's short stories have appeared in such journals as *Crazyhorse*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Folio*, *Bellingham Review*, and elsewhere, and his first collection, *Numerology*, was published by New Rivers Press in 2006. He has also published a number of essays on contemporary authors and a book of literary criticism on the novelist William Kennedy. Currently he is Professor of Literature and Creative Writing and Director of the Honors Program at Saint Mary's University of Minnesota.

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PETER STENSON is the author of "Shadows and Aphrodisiacs" (forthcoming from Crown in 2013). He has stories and essays published or forthcoming in *The Sun*, *Confrontation*, *Fugue*, *Post Road*, *The Pinch*, *Blue Mesa Review*, *Passages North*, *Fourteen Hills*, and *Upstreet*, among others. He has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. He is currently working on his MFA in fiction at Colorado State University. He can be reached through petercstenson.com.

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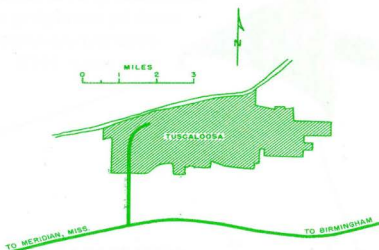
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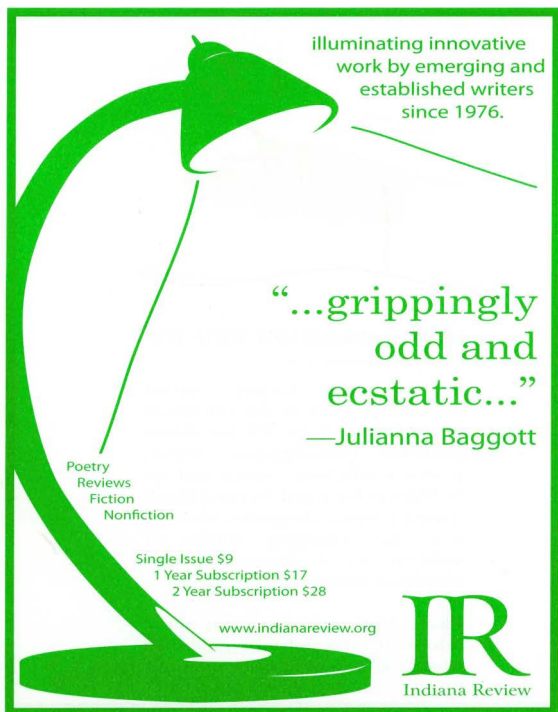
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- Submit one short story or essay, up to six poems, or as many as three short-shorts at a time.
- Include SASE and a brief cover letter with contact information.
- Simultaneous submissions are fine.
- Payment for accepted work is two copies of *Passages North*.

Send submissions to:

Passages North

Northern Michigan University

1401 Presque Isle Ave.

Marquette, MI 49855

For more information about *Passages North*, including contest information and online submissions, visit www.passagesnorth.com or email us at passages@nmu.edu

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