

HARPUR PALATE



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HARPUR PALATE

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HARPUR PALATE

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AGAINST AMNESIA

NIN ANDREWS

Everyone knows that if a tree falls in the woods and no one hears it, it makes no sound. That if an orgasm sighs in the dark, and no one listens, the sigh is silent. If God flames among the bushes, and there is no Moses nearby, his words are like the mumblings of a madman. For the trees, like the orgasms, like the flames and God, must share their shadows, their thoughts, their loneliness in order to exist at all. For if man does not dream the world and all its aspects, the world has no dream. Without a dream, there is no life. This is the mathematic equation known by orgasms alone. It is their job to keep the sacred balance. For this reason they are forever racing about. *Wake up*, they sing to our sleeping souls. *Wake up!* For they know how the trees needs us. How God needs us. And how they long to fill our dark and brooding minds.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ONE ORGASM AND ANOTHER

NIN ANDREWS

1. The difference between a real orgasm and a potential orgasm is like the difference between nonfiction and fiction,

which is like the difference between potato fritters and crème brulee. While you might at first glance think they are very different, potato fritters and crème brulee are both edible, both yellow and white and tan, and both rich in fat, starch, and flavor. Nevertheless, one wouldn't want to be served one when ordering the other.

2. The difference between a real orgasm and a sleeping orgasm is like the difference between nonfiction and creative nonfiction,

which is like the difference between night and day. While you might think at first glance that they are opposites, both are mere times of the day. One is defined by sunlight, and the other, by the absence of sunlight. While some folks enjoy the lit hours, others prefer not to wear sunglasses or a hat just to step outside, and are terrified of being burned by the sun's dangerous rays.

3. The difference between a real orgasm and a desired orgasm is like the difference between fiction and poetry,

which is like the difference between the dead and the living. While

this difference might seem drastic at first brush, it is not necessarily the case. While some people claim they experience death in life, others believe there is a better life in death. And just as some believe there is eternal life, others claim that heaven is only one of the ballrooms in hell. Nevertheless we all hope to dance in both realms, and imagine ourselves Ginger Rogers with our Fred Astaire.

4. The difference between a real orgasm and a fake orgasm is like the difference between prose poetry and verse,

which is like the difference between salt and pepper. While at first taste, they seem quite different, they are both mere condiments on the dining room table. And while one is deemed healthful and can be used in excess, assuming one can take the heat, the other makes a wonderful preservative and has been valued through the ages as a preservative by men and women around the globe. For ideal inter-gender relationships, I would advise ample use of both.

MY BELLY IS THE SOFTEST DREAM I HAVE

**DYLAN
BARGTEIL**

My belly is the softest dream I have,

all white and stretched and kneaded.

I bring my belly with me everywhere—
the sagging soufflé— even as it sloughs
off onto the sidewalk at diners, cafés,
soft pretzel one seventy-five.

“Sir, you dropped this.” A boy holds out a loaf
baked golden brown.

I horror. I nightmare. I holler,
clammy-handed, finger pointed. “That’s not mine.
That’s not mine,” sweating in the sun.

THE HANDS STRIKE FIVE

J. BRADLEY

I cringed at the machete of your left front tooth when we were naked. I kept the lights on, the sheets away, wriggled carefully like you were a backseat window, slightly ajar.

THE NEW YEAR

JACKIE CLARK

We line our
shores by the
door The
calendar
keeps count
All your
journeying
guitars To
drive along
the blueberry
night with the
windows
down The
trucks blowing
across 50th
street Your
little cactus in
the window
Never
breaking grace
though years
would warrant
it We must

leave the party
and leave our
humidity
lingering
behind us We
must send
postcards and
try to listen
for something
inspiring When
I feel in need of
authority it's
Captain oh
my Captain,
how should I
remain at sea
Rubber band
icons like small
silver balls
Ecstatic little
atoms living
the same lives
as before only
now with light
My sister stare
400 miles away
The potential
intimacy of out
lasted pride
Your ocean has
been calling
It has never
asked for
anything before
Those

gravestones
instigating
homesickness
That action
between each
whistle I am
only doomed
in all the
regular ways
So troubled by
maps of
figment
resignation The
buoyed
importance of
demarcating
this part of the
past First we
trace its outline
Then we paint
the details
in gold

IF THIS WERE APPALACHIA AND 1929, WE'D STILL BE A COUPLE OF MOODY BASTARDS

MEG COWEN

We wouldn't have a dehumidifier and the neck
of your banjo might bend itself into the rain.

You'd find a way to make do—find the darkest corner.
All I ask is you play Wildwood Flower last because you say

oleander funny and I do so love to dwell, to laugh
at your claw-hammering—like you've got three dead fingers.

With no concept of electric light we'd sit, before the fire's tamped,
and agree that the night is one reticent bitch.

At this point I wouldn't know that paraffin could seal
the cracks lye lashes onto my fingertips during the wash.

If you felt inventive, you might see there's enough biscuit flour
on the floor to sop the oil your hand leaves on the drum.

All is well, you'd say, before going out at sunrise while I sew
up your socks and salt the jam with my free hand.

You would miter a table leg out back, the saw blade
stringing chords together in your head

while you steal glances at me over the windowsill,
each time looking to see if something clicks.

And each time I tell you to mind your fingers you say
besides your thumb, you really only need to keep one.

CENTRAL ILLINOIS TAKEN INVENTORY

ANDREA
ENGLAND

—my mother

We had been dating for eight years when he bought me tires instead of a ring. I sympathized because his mother was his interior decorator, the prom queen of 1903, and afraid his ex-wife was still wielding a knife. Our bathroom towels were burnt-orange with black ampersands, even though I had a one bedroom over on Roosevelt that housed leftovers and high heels.

Our daughter says she's happy we married, that I moved in to Riverview Street and named the dog Taco. She says Taco Riverview makes a great porn star name and is quite the icebreaker. Eight years of one part sweet vermouth, two parts bourbon, orange zest and rocks. On occasion, a blue plastic sword pierces a Maraschino cherry. Steak rare, corn only on the cob, twice-

baked potatoes on Saturday nights.

Two sheets to the wind I told him.
If he wasn't going to marry me I was
going back West to the mountains. Three
days it took him. He said he was still
bleeding, still liked his bellbottom suit-pants,
and was worried for my safety.
Our daughter says she dislikes
station wagons, especially green ones.

I have a drum, a red Schwinn, a scar across
my chin and a pack of Lucky Strikes, verbatim.

THE FOGHORN COUGH

BY

MAIA EVRONA

I don't remember quite when it started, sometime around the fall of my fourth grade year, when I was nine, perhaps earlier. It sounded like a foghorn, that cough, like the call of a goose. It grew in my chest, took hold of me there, and shook me from the inside. Then it flew out through my throat. It was dry—no phlegm—and, most of the time, it didn't hurt. Sometimes I had fits of it, especially when I exerted any physical effort. Sometimes it came just once, let me rest, and then came again a few moments later. I thought of it as a nuisance, like my allergies, which had grown worse that year. It was strange: something that was a part of me and yet not. It clung to me like an annoying pet: Maia and her cough. Sometimes it flew out instead of my voice when I tried to yell. Sometimes it soared

when I cleared my throat.

Our dinner table was set next to a wall of windows facing the woods lining our backyard. Through those woods, about three or four miles from our house, was a train station. Every night at our seven p.m. dinner we heard the trains coming in from Boston or Worcester, blasting warning horns as they slowed to a halt. "Hey Maia, it's you!" my parents or my brother Eli, the rare times he ate with us, teased me. I'd sit at my place at the end of the table and laugh along with them, though if it was Eli—it wasn't often since that fall Eli had become mysteriously and violently ill and spent most of his time in bed with migraines—I'd give him a good, "Shut up!"

The cough grew more frequent as the year progressed.

Spasms of it erupted when I tried to play soccer, but nobody on my soccer team commented on it. My father, the assistant coach, was the exception. He began to facetiously call me "the goose," with the playful tone his voice would acquire whenever he cracked a smile. Yet, when I tried to laugh about it with my teammates, or with people at school, they never responded. Sometimes I heard my parents helplessly joking about their daughter the goose, their daughter the foghorn, to other parents on the opposite side of the field at our games, but those parents silently shuffled their feet and looked back at the field, at their own children. And then, with furrowed brows, my mother and father did the same.

I began spending more and more time sitting at the side of the field, more preoccupied with searching for clean spots on the wet ground where the grass hadn't been overturned by soccer cleats, spots free of goose droppings, than I was with the game. If I found no place to sit I squatted, wrapping my folded legs in my arms, even though squatting made my knees ache like fire. I stared at the geese that collected on the far side of the field, until one of my coaches called

me to drag myself back to play. A sense grew in me that year that my body was losing its substance, as if I were a pillow with a rip in it, and all my feathers were slowly drifting out. With that feeling, coupled with the emotional stress created by Eli's as-yet-undiagnosed illness at home, my voice thinned to a whisper. I became increasingly shy. Yet that cough was full; it had all the body I was losing.

By the spring of that year, my mother was still busy taking Eli to various doctors, and managing the issues with his school, so it was my father who finally took me to my pediatrician for the cough. I saw Dr. Abrams every year for my physical, and when I got particularly bad cases of the flu. I was getting the flu more often and more severely, so I had seen her many times that year. She recommended nebulizer treatment, to determine whether my cough was due to allergies. I sat in my bedroom with my mother, put my mouth over the tubular opening at the top of the nebulizer, and breathed in the steam. The nebulizer didn't help. My parents tried humidifiers; perhaps my cough was due to dryness in the air. The humidifiers didn't help.

Dr. Abrams sent me to a pulmonologist. My father took me to that appointment too, but only stood quietly behind me, and occasionally walked out to the hall to answer pages about his patients, while I answered the questions of the nurse who did the intake. She asked if either of my parents smoked.

"My father did when I was little," I told her. "But he quit when I was four."

"Oh good for him," she said with a smile.

The doctor ordered my first X-rays, apart from those done at the dentist. I knew the busy, loaded atmosphere of hospitals, and the smell that permeates them, because my grandmother had died of a long illness the year before. But the dark radiology room, equipped with its hard, yet shadowed, furniture (all specially designed to reveal the insides of the body) seemed closer to the dark side of a Roald Dahl novel than to a medical facility. When the technician put the lead gear over my shoulders, I asked: "What's that for?"

"Oh, it's just something we use when we give you X-rays," he answered, distractedly, and then walked out, leaving me standing with my side to the wall, rooted to

the floor like Daphne in her laurel tree. He came back a few times, adjusted the lead, and told me to turn so that my other side was to the wall; my back was to the wall; my chest was to the wall. With each turn I almost tipped, or crumpled like a cardboard box with too much weight on it. The technician didn't come and free me right when he was done, but through the window that separated the dark room in which I remained, from the room into which he had walked, I saw a light go on. My father walked to the window, smiled, and waved. I grinned and waved back.

The X-rays came out fine: nothing wrong with my lungs. The pulmonologist diagnosed me with a cough habit, as if instead of the desire to pick my nose or bite my nails, I had felt the urge to cough. I had developed this habit so well that I could cough loud as a goose high up in the air, so well that I often coughed in my sleep and woke myself up. He recommended cognitive behavioral therapy, but, still traumatized and indignant over the behavioral therapy that had been prescribed for Eli's migraines, my parents didn't send me.

I could, sometimes, cough when I wanted to, although then the cough wasn't as strong. I was strangely proud of this ability: I looked at it as a special talent. Perhaps the control forcing the cough gave me made it easier to avoid thinking that the cough could be a sign of something wrong.

Eli was still very sick by the end of that spring, but every so often he'd rise up from the couch, given just a little ounce of energy that would sink back away within the hour. And upright and moving, yet still uncomfortable, he would turn his energy on me. He hit me with pillows, wrestled with me when I wanted to be alone, grabbed my book away while I was reading. He often barreled right into my room, and tormented me there, or he took hold of me and dragged me into the family playroom. There was no getting away from him until he ran out of energy. Eli had always been a shining example of the typical big brother but his teasing had escalated significantly since the onset of his illness and taken on a tortured edge. He also no longer balanced it with kindness and the need to be protective of me. Despite being ill, Eli was stronger than I was. Even though he often left me crying, I

don't think he had any notion of the harm he was doing, wrapped up in his cloud of hell. He was not only annoying me, he was often hurting me, and I was beginning to hate him.

One afternoon, I became desperate. He had me in the playroom and was jerking me around by my wrists. The more he pulled them, the more obvious it became that my wrists were weak and tender: his simple hold on them hurt, not just the jerking. I couldn't pull away, or maneuver my hands out of his, because of the pain. Eli stood there in front of me, laughing as I tried, laughing as I grew more and more upset, twisting my arms around from the wrists, high on the only physical power he had: his power over me.

Finally, I resorted to the one thing I had that was stronger than his grip: my cough. His face was so close to mine that I could feel his bad breath as he laughed, so close that all I could see were his white teeth and the red back of his throat. I coughed full on, straight in his face. The effort of trying to get away from him gave the cough its full volume and power. Eli jumped away in a quarter of a second, and squirmed as if a rat was crawling

around under the back of his shirt. He looked as if he was about to cry.

"Mom! Mom! Maia coughed on me, she coughed on me!" he wailed. I had been calling her as he wrestled with me but apparently not loud enough, she hadn't come. Now Eli began to run out of the playroom, going to tell my mother what I had done to him. I ran after, suddenly feeling both guilty and indignant; all I had done was stick up for myself.

My mother came in before Eli reached the door. I stood back as Eli, his eyes now damp with tears, cried: "She coughed on me, she coughed on me! Tell her never to cough on me!"

"Maia, don't cough on Eli!"

Fear rang through my mother's voice.

I tried, half-heartedly, to explain why I had done it, to defend myself. My mother remembered her role of mediator, and told us to stop bickering with one another. Then she left. Eli, still shaken, walked back to the couch and, turning on the television, muttered: "Why would you ever do that? Stupid bitch." He wouldn't look at me as he said it. I remained standing in the middle of the room, left with the uncomfortable feeling that had

arisen as I watched Eli cry. It was something I had never felt so keenly before, not when I squatted at the side of the soccer field among the goose shit and gazed at the geese, not when I joked about my cough to my friends at school and they didn't joke back. I didn't think that my cough was a sign of illness—Eli was the one with an illness—but I realized that it was something dirty: something that could be carried by a dirty animal. I never coughed on anyone again. Eventually my parents stopped the humidifiers. They continued to affectionately call me the foghorn. And that dirty thing remained inside of me.

CORE

MOLLY FAERBER

Late autumn, the antique cider press in the barn shudders to life with a violence that no longer entertains me and a noise I've ceased to hear, or almost. I can only watch so much coring and slicing, so much pooling of liquid crushed from fruit flesh. *It does the same as a person*, Dad says to visitors and slaps the machine like a faithful, dust-grimed beast, *only more*. My mother's hands flex over the chopping block, fanned wedges falling into ranks for a pie. She would sometimes peel a whole apple in one long ribbon of glossy, marbled vermilion—not a job for a machine, that. The fields where our horses graze have turned like the ends of old celery, and though I haven't marked it on the calendar in the kitchen, I know you will be home today.

I thought you were a boy the first time I saw you. It was something in the line of your jaw, the tilt of your chin, or how you seemed always to be hungry. I was often mistaken as a child; I thought I was a horse and ran on all fours until the heels of my hands were as calloused as my feet. I refused to speak for days at a time, and I did not look at mirrors or the backs of spoons, or directly into anybody's eyes. I'm still a beast of burden of a sort, hauling produce to the farmers' market and learning how to keep it going after my parents can't. It isn't difficult to follow old tracks in the road, paths the body

learns like the mind does.

Twilight, the tired whirl of your old bicycle on the drive, a sound that sings in my skin as in the groove of a record. You've always been good with my parents. They're older than most people's, and have less guile. Or rather, they don't anticipate deception, untruths. They love you almost as much as they love me, for your manners and your willingness to climb into the hayloft and heave down bales, which you do much better than I can. And for being bright, which they say will take you places—it already has; I don't need to remind you. I think the horses can smell city on you like meat or gasoline. My mother says it's a shame I'm not more like you—I don't mind; she's only a little sad. She says that short hair is unbecoming on a girl, and anyway that men always like it long. Her own is uncut, bound and silvered like something shot and stuffed. After dinner I stand by the sink and wind a discarded peel around and around my arm, which is not the right shape at all.

Since we were children you've been allowed to sleep in my room, but it doesn't work there. I've painted the walls a dark green and cleared away much of my childhood, packed it off to the Salvation Army. My model horses are neatly stacked in yellow boxes beneath a skylight in the attic, laid by for the grandchildren my mother hopes to see before she dies. Even in the altered space we jar like crinkled film on the reels. Sitting on the bed I consider where I want you to touch me first, but my eyes catch in the corners of the room, on the woven rug, and my hands feel weak. I am twenty-one and should perhaps have done this with other people in your absence. You lead me outside with practiced ease.

You say it is darker here than anywhere else, that the valley fills up with nighttime to the brim. Everything smells of your cigarettes I've never smoked, and of winter starting, a humming cold just loud enough to thicken the air. I lie back in leaves outside the paddock rail and watch, almost shivering, as you sit straddling the fence. Something in the set of your hips,

the way you watch, hesitate, exhale. You climb down and stub out your cigarette, and with the same hand you slip me from my skin, my body a halved apple, star of wet seeds glistening at the axis.

I don't think of exactly what it is you do. Twisted so that one ear is pressed to the ground, my eyes tight shut, I hear the minute movements of a thousand small things. I want to be and then I am, or almost, a surge of muscle, a resonance of beating hooves on the cusp of a hill.

THE SOUNDS OBLIVION MAKES

BY

**LAURA DAVIES
FOLEY**

**THE MILTON KESSLER MEMORIAL PRIZE
FOR POETRY**

We're in the barn,
my job to pour gasoline
into the carburetor
of the old Toyota wagon,
as he cranks the key repeatedly,
and when the can ignites,
burns my lashes, eyebrows—
I drop it, flaming, onto dry hay
and for a panicked interim
we run back and forth,
moan and yelp like animals,
as we fill buckets from the horse trough,
dump water on flames,
fire lapping the barn walls,
cackling with greedy glee,
and my little sister, on a weekend visit,
caught by another kind of oblivion,
on the lawn watching us,
pets the purring cat.

THE WILD DUCKS OF VENICE

BY

ROBERT HARGREAVES

The city of Venice in Southern California was built around a network of canals that drained into the ocean in imitation of the Italian Venice. No palaces, just ordinary tract homes. Naturally, the canals became a magnet for migrating wild ducks. Families started feeding them, and many of them became pets. Non-migrating domestic geese were introduced as well.

In the 1980s, thousands of ducks and geese in Venice suddenly started dying. Once they got sick they would die in two or three days. The disease was diagnosed as Duck Plague, a disease that only affects ducks and geese.

This was one case that my department, the California Department of Food and Agriculture, didn't get involved in, at least at first. The nearest duck

farms were fifty miles away and weren't involved.

The California Department of Fish and Game attempted to depopulate the wild birds in Venice and sent a small army of game wardens to catch and kill them. They used cannons to shoot nets over the birds to catch and kill them. The Venice homeowners were furious and did everything they could to stop the game wardens. Fish and Game shouldn't have been surprised at the response. They had encountered a similar public uproar when they depopulated wild ducks for Duck Plague in Northern California a month earlier. Very likely the outbreak in Venice had come from escaped birds from Northern California.

But the outbreak in Northern California had been in public parks,

and no one could stop Fish and Game. In Venice the homeowners opened their gates to the ducks and geese and refused entry to the wardens. Fish and Game got search warrants, but by then the birds had been spirited away.

A month passed and the disease outbreak was over. All the remaining birds were healthy. The virus in the canal water was gone. The homeowners petitioned Fish and Game to allow their birds back on the canals. But Fish and Game insisted that the remaining birds were potential carriers of the virus and continued insisting that they be depopulated to protect other migratory ducks.

A private veterinarian offered to test the birds to prove they didn't have the virus, but Fish and Game said they would only accept test results from a state veterinarian. Any unofficial test could be from chickens for all they knew. I was the closest state veterinarian to the secret location in Ridgecrest and was asked to go take blood samples and swabs. Ridgecrest is in the Mojave Desert, hundreds of miles from the nearest wild ducks. This would have been an ideal place to quarantine the birds. The place was a horse stable with 300 geese.

Geese? I thought it was ducks. Oh well.

I brought along a crew to help with catching, holding, and wing banding. The wing bands were for individual ID in case we found some positives.

I was asked to keep the location a secret, but a secret from whom? Shortly after I arrived a helicopter landed with a news crew from a Los Angeles TV station. They followed my every movement with their cameras. So much for secrecy.

After we spent the morning taking blood samples and swabs, the owner of the stable served a spaghetti lunch in her home. Over lunch the news anchorman peppered me with questions off camera. I tried to explain that I wasn't with Fish and Game and had nothing to do with the decision to depopulate. I did say that healthy birds can sometimes be carriers and spread the disease. He asked me if I would be willing to speak on camera. I hesitated, but he assured me it would be just the same as what we had already talked about. What a mistake! As soon as I got in front of the camera, he hit me with, "Why are you trying to kill these poor defenseless birds?"

"I'm not trying to kill anything!"

"I suppose you didn't chase these birds out of Venice."

"That's right."

He had his teeth in me and wouldn't let go, so I walked away from the camera saying, "This isn't what we agreed to talk about."

I don't get L.A. TV in Bakersfield, but my friends told me I was included on the news. They didn't say whether it was favorable or not.

Thirty percent of the geese tested positive, and the virus was isolated. These birds were indeed carriers, Typhoid Marys.

The University of California at Davis offered to take the birds for a study. Duck Plague wasn't commonly available to study, and no one knew how long the virus would persist in carriers. Outbreaks of Duck Plague on the Mississippi River had run the course and disappeared without any depopulation efforts, so the possibility existed that the carrier state was just temporary.

But before anything could be done, Fish and Game obtained a search warrant, took the geese, and killed them all.

Rumor had it that the ducks were hidden at two other locations,

but after the events at Ridgecrest, nobody was talking. In the spring, wild ducks returned to Venice on their usual migration. Were the captive ducks returned as well? The public, and Fish and Game, will never know.

COMMON GOODS

**SUZANNE MARIE
HOPCROFT**

You want the summer gone, but not for the reason everyone expects. The pink, glistening skin of the season lies taut in your hand like a neighbor kid's back that you'd wash off sunscreen with a hose, half accidentally, half as a kind of experiment in the body's capacity to resist itself. No one else, you've found, seems to want to jilt the sun. Soon small things will be dying every day: flies, briars, the leaves the wind rips at, and you beckon the family of raccoons living under the house, whose round eyes glint and follow your every outdoor move as though you were a thief. You don't ponder the irony of projection, don't worry over the cold or imagine yourself shivering bootless in the frost. To keep moving is the thing, out of the glow of other people's naked bliss. Its weight sinks your sad body like rocks in the stream you listen for at night, craving the small crashes, the slow and growling sounds.

SÉANCE ON WATERMAN STREET

SUZANNE MARIE
HOPCROFT

Tonight it is the tired row of mason jars in
the dim pantry. They are infested with dust mites
and sharp glances. They are brimming with

the sap of sounds, the muffled ones caught
floating above the tile before July bore down and
made you heave your jabber. The napping sounds

rumble and shake the wall. They threaten to
squawk. When they do not, it is worse.

Tomorrow it is the cartons of records, the lost player,
its absent needle. The scratchy black of your
wool cloak. If I had a needle for every puncture

of yours, my arms would be eaten through, but
I would not be mauve or dust. I wouldn't be sitting
at the piano, weeping, telling us, I sing better

now. Throaty voice and vacant eye: Lucy's song.
The hushed divide we never strung into words.

I couldn't, you say. No more, you say. No one replies
because we are still here. We are the risen loaf,
the errant bell, the beads of quiet on your tongue.

REQUIEM

JASON M. JONES

1.

The youngest girl is only four years old when her brother suggests they hold a séance for their father. He'd gone into the hospital three weeks before with flu-like symptoms and had never come out. The mother doesn't explain this too clearly. She just says their father's with God now. Her brother is older by ten years. She trusts he knows how to contact God if anyone does, and if they can reach God, they might reach their father. She touches her sister's fingers and clasps her brother's and closes her eyes as instructed. Her heart races when her brother calls to their father, but nothing happens. She sits until she has to pee and then pees herself. She hides it from her siblings and hopes her father can't see.

2.

Her brother plays the organ, and the music is morbid, but the girl thinks it's nice. She lies on the floor with her head resting on the backs of her folded hands, listening, thinking the thoughts a four year old has. Will she see her father again? Will she talk to him? Her brother assures her she will, but he doesn't say when. In the meantime, he rocks back and forth on the rickety wooden stool. Her sister, who's six, sits outside in the back yard, pulling at the grass while her mother sips tea at the dining room table, reading the newspaper, plumes of

smoke rising into the yellowed ceiling. She doesn't speak often, and when she does, it's in short, terse sentences: "Dinner's ready" or "Time for bed." Her mother hasn't washed her in days, but the girl doesn't mind. She doesn't like to take a bath anyway.

3.

The girl has another brother who's ten, but he stays outside most days. When he's home, he hits her and her sister, but he won't hit the eldest. Not that the eldest is tough, but he's strange and silent and fixates on things. He's started collecting dead insects, dipping their bodies in liquid and pinning them to boards. It doesn't make sense to the younger boy, who plays basketball and baseball and runs 'til he's out of breath and runs some more. When he comes home at dusk, he's so tired he falls right asleep, and if the sisters bother him, he pushes them. He doesn't want to hurt them. He just wants them out of his way, and he thinks it's his right.

4.

None of the children are taking it well, but their mother takes it the hardest. She'd never wanted children, though she'd wanted his. She'd always thought he'd make a good father and she'd handle her end, but now she's stuck with these kids and no one to raise them with. There are four children, four strangers. He'd always had the deft touch with strangers. He'd invite people from work for parties and mix the drinks. He'd tell jokes and smile, and she'd smile at his smiling. He made life better and now he's gone and she doesn't know what to do. She resents the children, thinks they're too young to suffer like she does. She resents him his death. She wishes she were dead too.

5.

The eldest buys a Ouija board with money he's saved from his paper route. His father taught him to save, and he plans on using his savings to get in touch. He thinks he might someday become an undertaker. He finds the rituals soothing, the

methodical care of the dead and their bodies. He has his insects and he cares for them. Some boys want to be ballplayers, but he's found his calling and doesn't mind that it's unusual. He takes a shovel on his route and collects the roadkill. He goes to the store and steals, not shoes but their boxes. He buries the rabbits and squirrels and one time he buries a fox, but he doesn't involve his younger siblings yet. These ceremonies are sacred. He has to practice, perfect them. He has to get it right.

6.

The youngest girl misses her father's hugs and scratchy beard, but she doesn't tell her siblings this. She doesn't tell herself either, as she doesn't realize it. She just knows it's not there and she doesn't like it. There was warmth and now none, him and now gone. She likes the eldest though he's strange and keeps to himself. She likes the other, though he's strange and he hits her. She likes her sister most and clings near whenever she can. The rest go to school but she stays home, and whenever she's home, there's no TV or games. Just her mother, and her mother clears her throat, and then it's quiet and still, and the clock keeps ticking.

7.

Her eldest brother plays the game and he's got the rest of them involved, even the hitter. Somehow the hitter doesn't mind sitting and moving the slanted piece. They all want to hear. They all move the piece, and it spells things the youngest can't spell. The others interpret. They read. They go to school. It's all letters, but they interpret the letters. They make sounds and the sounds make meaning. Yes and no, she gets. They're spelled plain on the board. There's repetition, back and forth. She interprets yes and no, but the rest require assistance. "He's here," the eldest says. "He wants to speak..." Though much as the young girl tries, she can't hear her father's voice.

8.

The girl tries to contact her father on her own. She takes the board from under her brother's bed while he's at school,

but the slanted piece just sits there underneath her hands. It doesn't move as it moved when they moved it together. She looks at the ceiling. She knows that the sky sits beyond and heaven's beyond that. She moves the piece herself and knows it's cheating, but she's good at make-believe. And even though she can't spell, she makes up the things she wants him to tell her. "I'm okay," he says. "I miss you. I love you." The girl smiles. She wants to tell someone he's okay, but she's worried she'll get in trouble for sneaking into her brother's room and playing with magic.

9.

The eldest invites his siblings to the viewings. He convinces the hitter to come by, letting him dig the graves, and the girls don the blouses and skirts they wore for their father's service. They hold these ceremonies on Sunday afternoons when their mother does the shopping. The boxes are lined with black tissue paper, each animal laid lovingly inside. The eldest says the blessing and spreads a handful of dirt on the lid. The hitter fills it in, and the girls bow their heads in prayer and place the roses they've picked from the neighbor's rosebush on the plot. When they go inside, the eldest plays the organ and it's always solemn music. The youngest listens while the other two drift off, disappear. They don't like the sound. It's too much like the music at church, though that's why the youngest enjoys it. Her father's in that music.

10.

Their mother watches them come and go and doesn't do much about it. She doesn't reassure them or quell their fears. Mostly she watches the youngest cut through their parlor, stocking feet paddling upstairs to the boys' room. She's seen the Ouija board. She's found her daughter's pee-soaked pants hidden underneath her bed. She's noticed the fresh patches of tilled earth in the yard. She wonders if their grief's as deep as hers. She thinks she should intervene but isn't sure what she'd say. She's out of her depth. She's never dealt with a dead

husband or father, and she's never dealt with children dealing with it either. For all she knows, this is how everyone copes. She's been tempted to try some strange things herself. She can't recall the last time she showered.

11.

One afternoon, the girl's sister comes home from school with her bag unusually full and rushes into their room. "Look what I have," her sister says, unzipping the bag, and when she opens the flap, the girl can see bright fur, white and orange, sticking out from the opening. "It's the Mortimers' cat," she says, and they huddle, half-in/half-out of the closet, holding it up. The girl remembers the living cat, and it's hard to match this inanimate animal with the pet who'd come bounding across their lawn whenever she'd gone out to play. She's never seen death this close. During her father's service, an aunt had kept her away. "It's not something children should see," she'd said, though they'd let the boys see. She knows it's not sleeping and feels a peculiar pinch in her heart at recognizing the difference. Her aunt had tried comparing sleep with death, but she knows there's nothing of sleep in it. She knows the cat's dead, and she knows there's nothing they can do to change it.

12.

By the time they show the eldest, the girl has examined the cat from every angle. She's touched it and the fur feels like fur, but its body's grown rigid. "It won't keep 'til Sunday," the hitter says, and the eldest nods. It's not often the two boys agree, and the girl nods along with them. The car hasn't done much damage and the body's intact, but there's blood crusting around its mouth, and the girl thinks there's something that's not cat in this cat and it won't be a cat much longer. She reaches out to touch it again, but the boys block her path. If the eldest hadn't coaxed her from the room, she'd have held vigil beside his bed, guarding the cat beneath. The others leave it be, but their thoughts are closely drawn to the space where they've decided to store it overnight, already decomposing.

13.

Each child somehow equates the cat with their father, though only the eldest, as he lies wakeful in bed, makes the conscious connection. Of the animals he's consecrated to the earth, this is the first with which their family held some intimacy, some affection. Even the hitter, sleepless like the rest, feels it, though he's least likely to put it into words. The youngest shares the eldest's sensitivity, and that evening, they'd prepared the casket together. More special than a shoebox, the eldest decides to sacrifice a wooden crate he keeps his records in, lining its lid with velvet they've appropriated from a pair of pillows their grandmother gave the girl and her sister for presents. "We'll make it nice," the sister says, and both girls give consent as the eldest works without a word, tearing the stitching with a small pair of scissors he took from their mother.

14.

When the eldest wakes the girl, it's dark outside. They'd planned this the day before, but she's still surprised, and he has to shush her to keep her from calling out. He leaves the girl and her sister to dress, and they fumble about, but soon enough they're creeping downstairs, the eldest and hitter bearing the cat's casket. They skip the organ music, aware their mother's asleep upstairs, and tread toward the spot where the hitter snuck out and dug the grave. The shadows of trees fall across the girl's silhouette. In the distance the sun starts to rise. She feels a sense of importance, feels their daddy's with them and their acts have consequences. The boys set the casket down, and the eldest asks them to pray. The morning birds sing, and she likes the singing. She won't tell the eldest, but it's nicer than the organ music.

15.

As the rising sun illuminates her children on the lawn, the mother watches from her bedroom window. She hasn't slept well since her bed became a half-size too large, and she woke to the girls stumbling around. With her husband's death, she

stopped attending church, and she's left the children to form their own, this tiny congregation gathered to cherish the dead. She's recognized they need answers that aren't there, solutions to questions they'll ask all their lives: why God's indifferent, why those they love have to die. She's been searching herself these past months, and she's no further along than she'd been at their age. The eldest with a practiced manner opens his book, hoping to find them there. The youngest hovers at the edge of the grave, staring into the sky, as if they're up there, and the mother mourns their youth, their innocence, their forms a trick of light and shade she captures in silhouette before the image fades; as well she knows, the image always fades; as well she knows this too will eventually fade.

RAIN

It rained for four weeks straight;
the backyard turned into a lake.

I couldn't get anything to dry:
spring wash of rugs and bedspreads,

varnish on the bathroom cabinets,
glaze on the fruit pies.

My hair stayed wet for days.

The deciduous forest out back
began sprouting rainforest fungi

big as heads of lettuce, bulbous
as a squamous cell carcinoma.

So much wetness we didn't know
what to do. We started letting

the faucets run while we brushed
our teeth or chopped tomatoes.

HOLLY KARAPETKOVA

We sloshed through excessive
puddles, dumped the overflow

on drowning plants. We made love
in the bathtub, filling it so full

the water spilled over onto the tile.
You said I fruited like cookeina sulcipes.

You said mushrooms would make
biodiesel, cure cancer. We forgot

there were such things as deserts.
We forgot what it was to want more.

THE STORY OF MY FATHER

**HOLLY
KARAPETKOVA**

He spoke seven languages and was never allowed to leave the country.

He'd gone to school in Paris, which made him an enemy of the people.

I'm sorry, but this is the only way I know to tell the story. He had a family—a wife and daughter—but that is for someone else to tell.

He was a translator during the Cold War. When the big countries wanted to talk, he would translate their languages.

He loved languages. He loved words. He wanted artistic license, he wanted to say beautiful things in those beautiful tongues.

But there was nothing he could do, their conversations disintegrating, and he never changed a word, not intentionally, for 32 years.

By then his daughter had left for school in a foreign country, to study

languages. His wife was working as a doctor in North Africa.

He had the dog, Lily, who ate with him at the table. He served her on the good china, and she seemed to understand all seven languages.

Then one day, after Lily grew ill and died, it happened.
The diplomat said, "We will not stand for this! We have boats full

of heat-seeking missiles ready to destroy you." He translated,
unwavering,
"We will send boats full of flowers on your country's birthday."

The other party looked bewildered, "We can annihilate your half of the world."

He said, "The mothers in your country are the most beautiful in the world."

After a few murmurs the diplomats figured it out. It would take more than language to fix their conversation. They decided he'd gone senile,

retired him at 62. He wasn't sad to go, but he had nothing left to do. Everything had worked up to that one moment, that utter failure.

Seven months later he died, 1983, before the end of the war and before

any end was in sight. I sometimes feel sad he couldn't see the solution,

but it wasn't about flowers or mothers anyway, and now a new war's on,

one he couldn't translate for; he only knew seven languages.

PANDA, PENIS, EYEBALL

ANDREA LEWIS

The first three weeks are a shit-crock of clanging lockers, sloppy-joe lunches, mildewed showers and dried-up barf outside the art-room steps and then one day, like a movie shot that brings the hero into focus, you get a load of Val Montero. Val Montero has been moved to the desk in front of you by Mr. Dooley (aka Doodad), the prick teacher of AP American Lit. For the next fifty minutes of Edgar Allan Poe rapping, tapping, and crapping on his chamber door, you ponder the wonders of the universe before you: the clipped line where Val Montero's brown hair ends and his tan neck begins, and where his tan neck ends and his faded red t-shirt begins, and where his faded red t-shirt clings to the knobs of his spine like saran wrap on a snake. But spines are dangerous. Spines are tricky. Spines make you think of your mother hunched over in the bathtub.

You do your research: Val Montero lives at 501 Deseado, an address as remote from your trashed-out apartment block as you can get and still be in Sacramento School District #2. Also: Val Montero is president of the Spanish Club. (You transfer out of French class—*Au revoir!*—and into Spanish. *Hola!*) Also: he is equipment manager for the basketball team. (Go Monarchs! Not that you've ever been to a single fucking game.) You join Spanish Club just in time to forge your father's signature on a permission slip for an outing to the Spanish Folk Art

Museum, where you latch onto Val in front of a Guatemalan Ceremonial Tzute and dig for more info. His parents are divorced, he lives with his mother, and his mother teaches French Literature at the U. (*Mon dieu*, should you transfer back?) You tell him your mother's dead, hoping to milk even a bathtub suicide for sympathy, hoping his lush brown lashes and big sable eyes will swallow you whole with sadness and regret, but you get only the Blank Stare. You've seen it before: kids who can't imagine a universe where Mom would *adios*-herself into oblivion.

That Friday night: since the-man-who-would-be-dad doesn't notice anymore, you leave at 10pm for the bus stop at Mountainview Parkway and Dillman where you stand with all the other queers and maniacs until the bus lumbers up and you pay your fare and watch out the window as the bodegas and bail-bond shacks and crack houses and Catholic churches change into boutiques and florists and bookstores and sushi bars. You walk the six blocks to 501 Deseado and note its white stucco, its red-tile roof, its million-year-old cottonwood, its wrought iron railing around its second-floor balcony, where *les French fenêtres* are open and a white curtain billows out and sucks back in like the whole place is breathing. Behind the curtain, a flickering light, maybe a TV, maybe Val's lovely mom? Reading Proust by the light of the tube? You stroll past the house and turn around and come back and this time you take the flagstone walk around the side, not too slow, not too fast, and there's the back door open, the handle on the screen almost speaking out loud, *Try me* and whaddyaknow—we must be expecting Baby Boy Val home soon—you are inside.

Kitchen dim. One tiny light over the sink. Smell of singed beef and Dawn detergent. Dishwasher humming. Refrigerator humming. TV upstairs humming. You open a drawer. Bread knives, carving knives, paring knives. Blades. Blades are dangerous. There wasn't any water in the bathtub, only blood. Reddish black and plentiful. The last thing you remember

saying to her—*I hate you.*

You shut the drawer and move down the hall to the living room. Streetlamp through the window glitters on the mantel. Glass figurines like carved air. *She* would love this. Parrots, tigers, a camel, a whale. A panda bear no bigger than a baby's hand, prisms light from the street onto your palm. You stuff the panda in your pocket and sit on the couch. You whisper *Hi, Val.*

Mr. Dooley makes the fatal mistake of turning his back to the class to write *The Scarlet Letter* and *Nathaniel Hawthorne* on the board. Sixteen kids simultaneously whip out their smart-phones and one or two dweebs pass notes. Val's neck vein pulses sexily not inches from your nose. He doesn't know you were in his house. He doesn't know you walked out as slowly as you walked in and watched from the corner until his little red VW chugged up and he slammed out of the car and into the house. A bubbled square of yellow bathroom light beamed for a moment from the second floor. Then nothing. You got back on the bus and sat among the late-shift crazies and the crack-addled ladies of the night, home again to the man-who-would-be-dad and his silent smoking in the dark. *Miss me, Pop?*

After fifty minutes of Dimmsdale v. Prynne, you try to shadow Val into the hall but Mr. Dooley stops you. Clicks a pen and clears his throat while the room empties. Starts in on some hoo-ya-ya about your *excellent* work. Your essay on *The Red Badge of Courage* was something something something. Val will be halfway to sixth period before you get the hell away. You try to focus on Doodad's words. You hear *essay contest* but you're pretty sure he's looking at your boobs. You only wore this top to see if the-man-who-would-be-dad would make you change. You hear *scholarship*, you hear *talent*, you hear *promising*, and you try to keep your lunch down when Doodad

puts one of his hot paws on your shoulder.

You do your research: Mr. Grant Dooley lives at 4937 Altamira Drive. That's the easy part. Otherwise, Grant Dooley is difficult to decipher. You descend into the netherworld of dirt, gossip, and grapevine—girls from even worse apartment blocks than yours, girls who flunk *gym*, girls who wear black lipstick, girls who eat M&Ms and Quaaludes for lunch, girls who suck cigarettes and say: *Doodad? Divorced. Drinks. Disgusting.* He touched me, you say, squirming like you just got slimed. *Oh yeah*, they shrug. *He's pervier than a homo wiener dog in heat.*

Altamira Drive is a toxic, apocalyptic wasteland of scorched yards, dying elms, cracked asphalt and crumbling brick abodes, some with chain link fences choked with Safeway bags, McDonald's cups, wind-blown straws, and condoms. You try the bell at Doodad's door, 4937, praying out loud he is not home in the middle of a Saturday with the sun blazing down like a nuclear holocaust, but prepared nonetheless with stupid questions about the so-called essay contest just in case. No answer. You find the paint-blistered gate at one side of the house. The hinges give way when you open it and the whole rotted contraction clatters to the ground.

On Doodad's sad little patio there's an aging barbeque grill, once painted red, now looking like a stiff breeze would collapse its atoms into a mound of rusty dust. The same color that still clings to your bathtub at home, you can't get it out. Couldn't she have done it somewhere else? Well, she liked to drink in the bathtub, she liked to snort in the bathtub, so maybe she liked dying in the bathtub too. Or maybe she wanted to make sure *you* would find her.

You try the back door. Locked, of course, along with every snapped-tight blinded window. But. Crouched there in the weeds you find a two-foot stone carving of a raven. Oh, Edgar, you laudanum-loving loony you, who are you kidding? You rock one corner back and there's the key. Dooley Dooley

Dooley—deception—not your strong suit.

The kitchen smells like week-old trash and vodka and you feel like calling out *Mom! I'm home!* Computer on the table and you touch the mouse. The screen scratches on with a grainy shall-we-say *blow-up* of a girl's mouth wrapped around a man's dick. Oh, Doodad, couldn't you surprise me? No wonder Mrs. Doodad left, and stripped the place to the floorboards, given the hollow sound of the hallway and the state of the living room: bare except for a beige recliner with shoe dirt on the footrest and hair dirt on the headrest. The whole sad affair faces an entertainment center containing no entertainment. No TV, no video devices, no speakers, no CDs, just a limp length of Comcast cable coming out of the wall and hanging there like a—oh, never mind. One ashtray holding a key ring, no keys, just a charm, which is in the shape of—*yawn*—a penis. A penis *inside a tube*. Turn it one way and a yellow condom rolls up and over. Turn it the other and it rolls back down. Not cute, Dooley, but *she* would like it. You put it in your pocket, kick the recliner, and leave.

You go early to a Monarchs basketball game. Val's pre-game grub-work—lugging duffel bags and fetching water bottles—is beneath him, but every move he makes makes you happy. He hands a clipboard to a coach like the damn thing held commandments. You sit through the first half of the game watching various cheerleaders show their crotches and various Monarchs show their inability to shoot, dribble, pass, rebound, or even run. You watch Val Montero at the timer's table, making little pencil marks in a ring binder every time something almost happens but doesn't.

At halftime you watch a man handsome enough to be a model in a Maserati ad go over to Val and hug him, shake his hand, hug him, and talk talk talk, touching him, laughing, mock-punching him, hugging him. You realize this is Val

Montero's father.

You do your research: The man has the heartstoppingly unbelievable name of Maximilian Emiliano Montero. He lives at 2828 Rio Linda Drive, a neighborhood for all practical purposes on Neptune. He is an ophthalmologist. Bits of his life drop from Google like gumballs from a glass globe: Sacramento's Bitchin' Bachelors, Sacramento's Top Docs, Sacramento's Most Macho. Hell, could be Sacramento's Most Spectacular Hunk of Humankind, for all the ink the guy gets.

Saturday night: you take money from TMWWBD's wallet and hail a cab on Mountainview Parkway. You've never hailed a cab before. The ride is long, ditching the city and climbing S-curves through dusk-blackened pines, far-off lights sparkling behind you like crystal meth on a mink coat. The cab crests a hill and passes under a fake-looking archway: LA ENCANTADA, meaning *we're rich*. You say, *Let me out here*. You give the cabbie all your money and wonder how you'll get home.

The air is different here, more expensive, drenched in the puff and wheeze of plants too delicate to grow below the poverty line. You find Rio Linda, where even Helen Keller could tell there's a party on. You smell cigarettes and pot from four houses down, and the techno beat vibrates the blacktop like there's a DJ in the sewer. Jags and Saabs clog the street, parked odd-angled on the shoulders where there is no curb. 2828, all three glass-fronted floors of it, shimmers like a freshly-landed UFO. A few couples have spilled onto the porch, or whatever you call it on a house like this, and it feels like the deck of a cruise ship. A Barbie in a blue dress says *Hi*, frowns at you, and presses her boobs back into the bald guy next to her, caressing the chain tattoo around his neck.

Inside. To your left, the living room, and its bobbing amoeboid mass of mega-wealth. A few people dance in that discombobulated pseudo-disco-jerk-shit that only rich people get away with. *Mom*, you want to say, *this is a party*. To your right,

stairs covered in white carpet thicker than a Kotex superpad. On the first landing, five closed doors. Next to door number one is a tiny table with a tiny pronged stand holding a tiny round sculpture of an eyeball shooting red veins out the back of the blue pupil like flame off a dragster. *She* had blue eyes. You put it in your pocket and climb the next flight up.

Two doors, one partly open, so you go in. Black-and-white twilight, dense with presence, like planets bending space. Movement on a bed. A crack of light from a bathroom door. Your eyes adjust and you see a spine. Female. Undulating upward like a cobra. She sits astride a man—big legs, even the *hairs* are big—rocking. You watch. The movie-sex lighting makes you feel you're meant to watch. Quick-breath in-and-outs, then gasps, then snorts, then sighs that slide into groans, then lower into growls. The spine speaks to you, teases you, reminds you of that night. Even dead, she didn't fall back, she hunched over, every vertebra accusing you. You hadn't meant you *hated* her exactly; you just wanted something that day. Money? Mothering? Breakfast?

The spine on the bed whips back a little, then arches forward, bridging the beginning and the end. He moans, she giggles, and it's over. The spine tilts left and falls onto the bed. Maximilian Emiliano Montero props up on his elbows and starts to say something, but he sees you instead.

He doesn't look mad, just woozy, puzzled, bamboozled. Who are *you*? he asks.

You weren't prepared even for this low-level probe. Finally you say: A friend of Val's.

Val is here? Max sits up, swings his legs over, bunches the sheet into his lap. Spine Girl sits up too and skooches back and hugs a pillow to herself.

You stand there. Max unbuckles all six feet two or three of his bitchin' bachelor bod. Wait a minute, he says, winding the sheet around his waist. He pads across the white carpet and grabs your arm like he might snap it off.

Did you just walk in here? Into my house?

You look at him: Val's eyes, Val's ready-to-kiss mouth, Val's brown hair with bonus sideburn silver.

Sit down. He drags you to the edge of the bed and you sit. He switches hands on the sheet, takes a phone off the dresser, and thumb-dials 911. He wants to report an intruder. You are an intruder.

Spine Girl drops the pillow, not embarrassed—why would she be with those tits?—and slut-walks her back-lit silhouette to the bathroom. You wonder if she will sit her lovely spine in the tub.

Max touches the base of a dresser lamp. Instant gold light, as if he did it with his thoughts. You're not going anywhere, he says.

Where would you want to go? You've never sat on a bed this nice. You've never felt thread-count this high, smelled perfume this exotic, or hung out with a Maserati model with a sheet around his waist.

You know my son? he asks.

You've seen cop shows. Better not to speak.

What's your name? Where do you live?

Hasn't Max ever heard of Miranda?

Okay. Let's just wait for the cops to take you home.

Yes, let's just wait. And hope they will storm up the stairs like they did that night, a whole squadful in those creaking belts and laced boots and dumb hats and the little shoulder-mounted, static-squawking boxes they talk into; hope this time they will handcuff you, question you, get it all on tape. After all, you have the panda and the penis and the eyeball in your pocket. You have a lot to say, a story to tell, details, memories, important shit, like the time she tried it with pills and said it was your fault.

Don't go anywhere, he says. He trots to the bathroom, trailing sheet.

You lie back and bury your face in the still-hot bed and

the smell of sex, the smell of money, the smell of getting what you want. You hug Spine Girl's pillow to your chest and wait for the sound of the squad on the stairs. Wait for the circle of blue uniforms to surround you. Wait for them to see you, stop you, hold you down, and at last to know you are guilty.

NEWBORN IN ZION NATIONAL PARK

CODY LUMPKIN

—for Jade Wade

In other parks, I had passed
toddlers on hikes strapped

to the backs of their pack mule
fathers, transported like little

Cleopatras, their white pudgy skin
saved from burning by sun shades

and paddler's hats, the slather
of sunblock emanating from them.

But I had never seen one so young,
so fresh out of the womb at the edge

of wilderness and commerce, asphalt
and sandstone. Its parents not letting

pregnancy, birth, and its expected
adjustments get in the way of a good trip.

At the Big Bend of the Virgin River,
where tourists hop off the bus tram

to crane their necks until they hurt
just to begin to see the sky

above the pillars of rock, a newborn nurses
on a bench in full view, no towel

covering it for the sake of some false
modesty. No one seems to care

in this amphitheater of the vertical.
The mother, her nipple brown like sandstone

after rain, had lifted her sweaty shirt
as a plateau lizard clung to the warmth

of a nearby boulder. With eyes closed,
her hair stuffed behind a wet bandanna,

she rocks the child. Even though the river,
swollen with snow melt, thunders past

the bus spot, I hear her humming,
a low rumble of her own determination.

HISTORIC DISTRICT

CHRIS MINK

Old salts at the end of this bar
trade stories like baseball cards:

*I'll give you my first divorce
for the night you dropped me off
at Waffle King without a shirt.*

On an analogue radio, some French lady
covers an old Delta Blues track
about wanting her lover back,

and I reckon Butch will posit
she's the only angel left; and I should
say something about what's lost,

but I'm young enough to know nothing
penetrates their cigar smoke,
like sitting over coal stacks.

All their joints are welded together.

Across the street there's a cemetery,
and from time to time they drink

there, bury themselves here, and yet,
on a December day the color of newspaper,
one will root himself without drink
beneath a girl's tombstone.

Bare feet were a summer's faintest gift,
best he can remember. Her name—
every red clay trail they rode bikes on.

Winter is the easy part.

MANATEES AND SWAMP RATS

TRAVIS
MOSSOTTI

Manatees and swamp rats; cypress feet, crawfish boils, homemade sausage from Bradley's General Store; hitchhikers stranded at boarded up gas stations; Spanish moss stippling the wind; southern drawls poured into a blues club, ordering up another language; more south; more crickets; more bonfires, flat tires, more oysters feasting on oil until your insides are ripe as black crude; duck wing, more hillbilly, glass bottom boat; panhandle lost its grip and grits and shrimp spill across the linoleum; well water gone sour with saltlicks; everything alive and dead leaking crystals; pythons gone wild; *y'aint from round her isya*, crossing the state line, unwinding time and spools of kudzu from the electric static of telephone poles and tadpoles swimming in the stillwater noon; horseflies, trilobites, I-75 to another country; the further south, the more north things become; retirement pleats; starched sheets and saltwater allergies; turn up the heat and burn down the trailer park; hurricanes, duct tape, cancer in the drainage water; let the kids play, take a roll in the hay; asphalt, wetland, tourism, tropicalism; show me a Waffle House and I'll show you a shotgun wedding; tobacco in the mouth, lockjaw, coleslaw, sunshine done spoiled the South.

AFTER LOSS, A CERTAIN TRAIN

ISAAC
PRESSNELL

I.

In West Virginia, she wrote to you: *in the bath,*
I pressed the showerhead against myself and conjured
your mouth. A year later, your final intercourse:
her sad last ditch to turn the halt of the first numeral
into a zero's gasp. You decided love is a binary switch,
math and order same as gravity, which tucks the continents in.
You conceded this fact like you conceded, at twelve,
to see a therapist when your mother's look was like
the crack of her voice the morning your father
packed and left, swallowed in the predawn blue.

II.

Last Christmas, at church with family,
you finally saw how God is love
as you imagined the faces of the worshippers
stripped away, the chemical slurry
active in their brains as they experienced
their Jesus the same as you experienced
her. What is love but the Holy Ghost
of Instinct, which plays dress-up
in the abstract husks of the intellect?

III.

You make a new home in Iowa. Evenings
you walk the bike path, and one night,
Barn Swallows feeding above the grasses,
you think beauty, simply put, is that
which distracts us from death—
bright coin sinking into the pocket
of the horizon, how small you feel after
as you walk the blue-black field,
or how, post-coitus, your thoughts
were nothing but a graph of her breath,
breath that could let you go on living
as code if it weren't for the condom
swaddled in tissues. But still,
this numinous feeling, this electric
hum that moves from the live-wire branches,
from the charged cicadas that cover them,
through the ionic air and into your throat.
So what to your chapped hands, nerve centers,
circuit brain. So what to the cold facts
of your lovemaking. The young
bull tilts his head to reach the weeds
beyond the barbed fence. You meet his eye,
lose yourself, for a moment, in his gaze,
how he must see you—unreachable planet—
and how you see him—the humanity you project
reflecting back from that wet galaxy.

DOUBLE

ALEXANDRA SALERNO

The boy's face was blunt and open as a wheel of cheese. Fair, some freckles, with a bowl of hair around his head the color of straw. Ten, maybe eleven. At first, no different from any of the other kids in the museum, coming in with their parents, with their frazzled, middle-aged teachers. Above anything else, they wanted to touch. They reached their pink, splayed fingers to the exhibits, the walls around them, the air in front of them.

If I describe a place, can you tell me everything you know about it?

The boy had asked Leslie this at a little table in the museum library where she worked as an assistant reference librarian. The building housing the museum and the library was an old ironworks in a downtown neighborhood of Pittsburgh. Brick painted deep red, windows trimmed in black. It was a large building, and stretched a city block. At night, the old-fashioned lampposts on the sidewalk threw the building back to some other time, as if you could walk backward into the last century. But Leslie knew this was false. Before the repainting and the lampposts, the building had contained only exhausted ironworkers and groaning machinery.

Leslie first noticed the boy when he had wandered away from the children's interactive exhibit, where they could learn about old-fashioned daguerreotypes. Dress yourself from the

costume closet and make your own.

The boy was skinny; either too young to have started filling out or doomed within five years to the kind of lankiness Leslie associated with the junkies that were always hanging around the bus station. Maybe that was unfair. He was dressed in jeans and a faded yellow t-shirt. This set off his fair hair strangely. Made him look more sallow than he probably was.

It's a big gray building on Bedford Avenue, he said.

The boy's name was Freddie. He said he wanted to learn about the building for a school project. The assignment included learning about the history of one of the city's buildings and writing a short report on it.

What's that? Freddie asked. He pointed to an old gray stone building in a group of images Leslie had displayed on the computer screen.

I don't know, Leslie said. She clicked the image of the building.

Reisberg House. Jacob and Eileen Reisberg founded the center in 1889 for the immigrant children of the neighborhood to gather and be taught about positive spiritual and physical health. The Reisbergs were committed to making the immigrant American experience a successful one for themselves and all their neighbors. Basic personal hygiene was encouraged along with rigorous spiritual cleansing via prayer and good values.

The center had a somewhat brief but significant period in which it was turned into a school from 1906 until 1918, when it reverted back to a neighborhood recreational center due to the increase in the number of schools opening throughout the city.

The facilities included a boxing ring, swimming pool, gymnasium, temple, classrooms and athletic fields.

Looks like it was a school at one time, Leslie said. A recreational youth center. She read on. Says it's been abandoned now for some time.

Freddie waited quietly in a chair beside hers.

Leslie accessed the catalogue. There are a few folders, probably photographs mostly, she said. Does that sound like something you want?

Freddie nodded. His yellow bangs flapped up and down.

Leslie drew a call slip from her stack by the computer and began filling it out.

She was gone a few minutes. When she came back from the back room filing cabinet where many of the photographic archives were stored, Freddie was seated at one of the long, high-polished dark wood tables that flanked the room in two rows. It was adorned with a desk lamp that had a green glass shade.

Leslie held a thick brown file folder. She placed it on the table and sat opposite Freddie. He reached for the folder.

Not yet. We have to follow the rules, Leslie said. She brought a bundle of white cotton gloves from the pocket of her dress pants. Use these to handle pictures, she said. She picked up one of the gloves. She nodded at Freddie, and he smiled and stuck out his hands. Oddly, a watch encircled each wrist. A glowing-green digital on the left. An analog on the right, with a fabric band and black roman numerals on its face. Freddie noticed her staring.

I like time, he said.

Leslie smiled. Me too, she said. Why not?

She slipped each glove onto Freddie's hands. The motion was awkward at first, then smooth as each finger landed. It was an intimate gesture, like dressing a baby after a bath. She wondered what it might be like to be Freddie's mother. Perhaps an older sister. She was an only child. She couldn't remember ever having put gloves on any hands but her own.

Freddie didn't move immediately toward the folder, as

if he were waiting for Leslie to leave. He sat with his white-gloved hands clasped in front of him like a tiny English butler. Leslie stood.

I'll leave you to your research, she said. Freddie nodded slowly.

Leslie spent much of the next hour busy with call slips for amateur historians and college students. She had barely stopped moving until it was time for her lunch. But when she scanned the room, Freddie's table was empty. About ten photographs were spread across the table. There was no sign of the gloves she had given him. Would he have just left and taken the gloves? You know the callous way of children. Leslie walked to the table.

All of the photos were black and white, at least fifty years old. Some of them much older. Wide shots of groups of children on the steps in front of the building, taken on the school's picture day. Other photos were more candid: two boys playing basketball, one leaping, the other pushing his hand in front of the ball to block his adversary's shot. The face of the boy shooting was strained in concerted effort, eyebrows drawn.

Leslie put down the photos. She wondered if Freddie might be in the bathroom, went through the glass doors and down to the main floor to check. When she reached the bottom of the stairs, she saw to her left the historic trolley car exhibit near the museum café. An actual trolley car from the 1940s donated to the museum and turned into a live exhibit. Fully restored. The bright glossy paint gave it the look of a large red and white bullet. Each side of the car had a column of single seats running along the windows, a narrow aisle in the middle.

Freddie was sitting at the back of the car. Leslie sat across the aisle from him. His hands were folded in his lap; he stared out the window as if the trolley were still in use and moving through a busy city street.

Before she could speak, he said, I have weird dreams.
How are they weird?

I don't know. Just weird, he said, then asked, Did you ever wonder what it would be like to be the last person in the world?

I don't know. Sometimes I feel like that, Leslie said.

You do? Freddie asked. He looked from the window to her face, studied her.

Leslie nodded. She wondered if maybe Freddie was having some trouble at school. Was he shy, did he have friends, etc.? There was the possibility of bad parenting. In his voice was a sadness familiar to her—a woman alone in a city that was not her home. She had gone to college within a few miles of the rural Pennsylvania house in which she'd grown up, had moved to Pittsburgh for her job. When she applied, she'd looked forward to the possibility of moving. You feel a certain sense of curiosity and excitement. Now she was here. That was that. Are you done with the photographs? Leslie pointed upward to the second floor.

I think. Can I make copies of some of them?

Sure, she said.

Upstairs, Leslie handed the photos Freddie had chosen to a work-study student for photocopying. She went into the back room to fetch a fresh group of books for another patron: an older professorial type. When she returned, she looked for Freddie, but he had gone. The little white gloves lay on her desk.

Leslie didn't think of Freddie again until days later.

When she arrived at work, he was waiting for her in the library at one of the tables nearest her desk. This was unexpected. Wasn't the project turned in by now?

She dropped her purse on her desk.

I need to show you something, Freddie said. He had his black backpack with him. He stood and lifted the bag as he spoke.

What is it? Leslie whispered. Quite a few people in the

library that day—whispering, a standard procedure.

Freddie asked, Can we go outside somewhere?

The day was white. Windy and dry. They walked to a bench at a bus stop at the top of the block.

Sometimes in my dreams the world is ending and I can't wake up, Freddie said.

That's a nightmare, Leslie said. Regular dreams don't treat you that way.

Freddie unzipped his backpack and pulled out a photocopy he'd taken home from the library days earlier.

Here, he said. He handed Leslie one of the larger class photos. Black and white. Taken outside on the front steps of the Reisberg building. There were three rows of children, all about Freddie's age, staggered with a row on each step. Flanking the children on both sides were a few teachers. They were dressed in dark, drab-looking uniforms. The children were all in white, girls and boys mixed together. Some of the boys had messy hair, some slick-looking parts. The girls wore pigtails or ribbons. None smiled. You wonder if the idea of smiling for the camera had been very slow to emerge, historically speaking. Eyes gazed every which way—some were closed. Frozen in the act of blinking.

What is it? Leslie asked.

Freddie reached his finger toward the photo.

There, he said.

She followed his finger to a child in the front row at the right side of the picture. It was a young boy, lightish hair, staring straight into the camera with tiny dark eyes. He had that same blunt-looking face. Same bowl of hair.

He looks a little like you, Leslie said.

How funny it was. She laughed at the coincidence. At the corner of the photo someone had written with a photo pencil, *Reisberg House School, Class of 1908. September 16, 1907.* In the here and now, it was also September. That same stretch of days, marching toward a bone-cold Pennsylvania winter.

Freddie said, He doesn't look a *little* like me. He looks *exactly* like me.

So what? Leslie asked. She looked again at the photo. But Freddie stuck out his hand and grabbed it back. What's the matter with you? Leslie said. He had surprised her. The force of his hand.

I don't like it, he said. It's another me.

That's crazy, Leslie said. A jagged word she had not meant.

Freddie stood. The photocopies slipped from his lap and landed on the gray pavement.

I'm not crazy, he said. I'm not.

Leslie bent to gather the copies. Well I didn't mean it that way, she said.

Freddie shouldered on his backpack. He made no movement to help Leslie retrieve the copies. Instead, he checked the watch on his left hand, then brought his right forward, checking that one against the other. An effort at parity. As Leslie stood, she saw the bus approaching the stop where they'd been sitting. Freddie moved to the curb.

Don't you want these? Leslie held out the stack of photocopies. The bus pulled creaking to the stop.

No, he said.

Can you take the bus alone? Leslie asked. She knew so little about him. Freddie didn't answer. When the bus door opened with a short hydraulic hiss, he climbed the steps and fished for money in his pocket. Leslie watched him, about to be swallowed by the mouth of the hulking bus. Where had this boy come from? He stood there, just a child in the black space of a bus doorway.

Before the door closed and the bus departed, Freddie yelled something to her over his shoulder. You'll see, he said. And then something Leslie didn't quite catch. *It's you, too?* She wasn't sure exactly. Something like that.

At Leslie's studio apartment in Squirrel Hill, the television ran on mute while she undressed for a bath. On the TV screen was a stiff news anchor with a powdery face. He brought his hand to a device at his ear. The screen switched to a shot of a desert village, soldiers running in no discernable formation. Some went one way, others another. Small arms fire pegged the walls of the buildings they had just used as cover. Tiny puffs of smoke and chips of plaster exploded from the wall. When the program switched back to the anchor, he looked as he had earlier, the same hand to his ear. But something else in his eyes this time: a sheen of fear. Leslie turned it off.

Naked, Leslie went to her bag and pulled out Freddie's stack of photos to bring with her to the bathroom. She stepped into the tub and the water folded over her lap.

She held the photos above the water and paused on the one Freddie had shown her at the bus stop. The group photo of all the children. They were stony-faced, strange-looking children. *Reisberg House School, Class of 1908. September 16, 1907.* Freddie's double stood in a white, long-sleeved shirt and short black pants. He wore black shoes. His face did look just like Freddie's, with a shade of forlorn confusion that came from a lifting of the chin and downturn of the brow. She noticed one hand at his side, the other grasped by the hand of a woman beside him. She was tall, part of a group of women by the right of the photo. These particular children's teachers. They wore billowy, white blouses tucked into high, black skirts. The waistbands started under their breasts. None of them beside the one had any contact with individual children. There was an older woman with faded eyes, and a matronly teacher plump in the middle as a spinning top. They wore smiles that were not smiles, exactly. Lines drawn across their faces.

Leslie looked back at the woman who held the hand of Freddie's double. Her face was turned toward the boy. Only her profile was visible in the white light of the photographer's flash. *But that profile.* Cool air traced the parts of Leslie's skin

that lay above the water: her knees, the sensitive stretch of skin over her collarbone. *You're in it, too*, Freddie had said, standing before her in the mouth of the bus before the doors could swallow him. In the picture, the second Leslie stared down at the boy in the droopy, black socks with love on her face. As a mother would.

The phone rang in the other room and Leslie dropped the photos in the tub. She cursed, fished them out. It was too late. They were already heavy with water, drooping like sodden fabric from her hands.

Leslie didn't recognize the number. The surprise of the photo was still with her. When she answered, she heard silence first. Then, the unmistakable up-and-down tones of children at play in the background.

Is this Leslie? I'm Freddie's mother, Mrs. Gantz, the woman said.

How did you get my number? Leslie asked.

A girl at the museum, she said. There was a high-pitched yelp in the background. Freddie had a family Leslie hadn't thought of until now. He had a home. Siblings. This soft-spoken mother. All this lay in the faraway of the phone line between them. I wanted to see if you'd like to have a play date, she said. With Freddie.

A play date? Leslie repeated. It was a phrase from childhood made up by parents. A strange phrase that was a mashed together meaning of two different words, each not exactly right on its own.

I know it sounds real weird, but Freddie doesn't have a lot of friends. She lowered her voice as if he were nearby.

Leslie swallowed. I don't know Freddie all that well, she said. I've just been helping him with his project.

Project?

The historic building project for school.

Oh. I don't know about that.

Leslie thought, What had he told his mother about the

museum? Probably he was just quiet. But maybe there was no project. This was a piece of information; the significance of which she was uncertain. Leslie thought of the small, gray boy in the row of children on the steps of the Reisberg House. She didn't want this cloudy feeling of responsibility, befriending this strange child. Almost an act of charity. Yet, hidden under that veil of obligation was a fear that had begun in her breast the moment she'd seen herself in the photo.

All right, Leslie said finally. She heard something muffled on the other end of the line. Words, indistinguishable.

How's the 16th? Mrs. Gantz asked. Freddie says it has to be then. It's a Thursday.

Leslie agreed, and Freddie's mother exhaled in the way Leslie recognized from people who had recently surrendered to something long battled, something once thought possible but since abandoned. An untrainable dog. Your strange child. She heard the bobbling echo of the phone changing hands.

Leslie? Freddie asked.

Yeah, she said. A whisper, almost.

Did you see?

Leslie knew immediately what he meant. Still, she paused before answering. Yes, I did. I'm in it.

Good, Freddie said. He sounded as if he were smiling, maybe a trick of the line. I'm glad you saw it, too, he said.

Before Leslie could answer, the phone was passed back once again. Mrs. Gantz began talking about the logistics of the date and Leslie searched for a pen to write down directions. The photos remained on the floor for some time. They had darkened, their surfaces buckling from the water.

That night, Leslie dreamed:

*It's odd the children have no faces they are lined up
on the stoop just like in the picture their faces blank as the
smooth shell of an egg and you wonder how a child can
scream with no mouth yet the sound will stay with you well*

into the following day—

At noon on the 16th, Leslie took the bus to Freddie's house in Bloomfield. He lived on a side street off Liberty Avenue, which was lined with small bars, Italian delis, a Thai place, pizza shops. Many of the storefronts occupied ground floor spaces of old brick buildings topped with cramped, drafty apartments. There was a coffee house attached to a video store on one corner. An old man with a ribbed wool hat sat smoking a cigarette outside the door. At his feet, an aging German Shepherd.

Freddie's street was no more than an alley, the kind of place that told of a time in the past when streets were narrower, cars some distant dream. Homes were crammed close—disjointed row houses with no lawns to speak of. Doorsteps opened directly into the black macadam street. Freddie's house had a newer façade: mint-colored aluminum siding almost worse than the neglected brick. A Steelers decal was plastered to the window at the front, and the door was cheap wood with a design of three diamond-shaped cutout windows rimmed with brass. Leslie knocked.

After a few seconds, Mrs. Gantz answered. She was very short. Wide hips. Yellow-blond hair that curled out from her face in frizzy puffs. She wore an oversized peach sweatshirt that washed out her pale face.

They greeted each other, went inside and talked a little. This and that. Leslie stood on rust-colored shag carpet with this frumpy woman in a leaning, cruddy house in Bloomfield. The home of Freddie, who was just a lonely little boy in the gray city where she lived.

Mrs. Gantz led her through a tight hallway until they reached a door that stood a few inches ajar. This is Freddie's room, she said. She knocked, called out to her son, and retreated the way she had come.

Freddie turned at the sound of the opening door. He was sitting at a white desk under a window that faced a brick

building not two feet from the house. Makes you wonder, what's the point?

Hi, Leslie said.

Freddie was silent at first. Leslie looked around the room. A twin bed with wool coverlet. A small television and video game console. But the most noticeable things were the clocks, so many of them, arranged about the room. There were wall clocks trailing wires to the floor. On the bedside table, an old-fashioned alarm clock with two bells at the top and a round-tipped ringer. Digital clock radios on Freddie's bookcase and desk. There had to be at least thirty clocks in all: plastic, chrome, faux wood. Each had been stopped at 1:52. A suspension of the third hand. In Freddie's room, it was always 1:52.

AM or PM? Leslie asked.

PM, I think. We'll find out together. Freddie stood. I've got to get my jacket.

We're not staying here?

Freddie started down the hall ahead of her. Leslie was alone in his room, among the silence of all those frozen clocks. *I like time.*

We're going to the house, he said over his shoulder. For a silly moment, Leslie thought: What house?

(They're searching for what, exactly? Leslie hasn't asked the questions she should. Who ever does? She is someone who eats her dinners from a plate balanced on her lap in front of the television, chews absently with her mouth slightly open. Freddie, the best friend she has in Pittsburgh. In six months she's had not so much as a phone call, a lunch, with anyone outside of her workplace.)

On the bus, Freddie told Leslie about a dream he had started having over the summer. It would start a white flash. Afterward, everything was stopped. People in mid-stride. Rain suspended in the air. Cars leaving a trail of particulate matter the color of their paint, as if the landscape of this world was a picture some giant had smeared a clumsy hand through. In this

dream place—the stop-time place, as Freddie called it—it was 1:52. The clocks on the microwave in his kitchen had told him this, as had the digital marquee above the bank up the street. In the first dream, he'd been in his room. Just hanging around at 1:52. As the dream returned, he'd ventured farther and farther from his house, walked into the streets of Bloomfield. Into the homes of other people. He looked at their clocks, their lives, their bodies stuck in the in-between of doing mundane tasks. Man vacuuming. Child on a bike standing upright on its two wheels, nothing to support it but the air surrounding. It was probably afternoon. That gray-white Pittsburgh sky. But then each dream would end with a descending blackness that swallowed him until he woke, awash in sweat and breathing with the desperate gulps of someone drowning.

It was 1:15 on a Thursday afternoon. The bus to the Hill District was mostly empty, save for an old man and a woman in a saggy green hat with a tired face who looked as if she might be riding the bus for a reprieve from life in a cold city where she had no bed, no people.

As Freddie spoke, Leslie listened with the kind of detachment one feels when in public with a person who might be insane. But, your threshold for insanity may be wanting. Could it possibly be proportional to your loneliness? More likely he had some form of autism. She had recently read a piece in a magazine about the autism spectrum. But did that explain the photograph? Had he lied about the school project? Ask about the Reisberg House. Ask the right question. Or is there the danger of losing yourself in the world of his dreams?

They arrived at their stop. The Reisberg House was on Bedford Avenue in a part of the Hill District that hadn't been razed years ago. You make way for new construction because that's the way the world works. The building was on a block lined with other buildings in various states of disrepair. Windows were missing, shut up with plywood.

It had rained the night before. When they got off the bus,

the wet grit from the road scraped under their feet as they walked.

Freddie knew the way, knew when they were close. The whole time, he'd been checking his watches.

Late for something? Leslie asked.

No, I just want to make sure we get there in time, he said.

In time for what? The building is condemned.

Freddie didn't answer.

Bedford Avenue was deserted but for the odd car passing slowly by. The sidewalk crumbled into the street, and the buildings they passed looked shabby. That lonely feeling of a vacant lot. Something slinking off to die. As Leslie walked she felt a sudden bubble in her throat—the surprising possibility of tears. She did not want to cry on this dirty crumbling sidewalk in a bad neighborhood in a place she did not love, did not care at all about. She was a person whose progress through life was slow and quiet. She'd stayed close to home too long. You have the option to trade a certain sense of freedom you might like to have, but isn't necessary. Are you someone for whom some things, some freedoms, seemed forbidden? (e.g., a close group of friends? Boyfriends?) These are held back from you—privileges afforded only to people who strike into their lives like sprinters toward a fluttering strand of tape. Leslie swallowed the bubble in her throat. Could it all have been a certain kind of dormancy, a hibernation from which you can, at any time, awake into a future you have never imagined?

The Reisberg House was constructed with large blocks of gray stone. A shelf of cement steps at the front ran the width of the building. Leslie recognized these steps as the place where the class of 1908 had been photographed, stiff in their fussy, old-fashioned clothes. You brace yourself. Flinching is involuntary.

The house had three floors. Many of the dark windows were webbed with cracks. One window was marred by a hole that formed an almost perfect circle, as if a wayward baseball

had pitched through cleanly. Old paint peeled from the front double doors in strips like bark from a tree. Leslie unconsciously did as she always did when she saw houses, buildings: rearranged the features of the façade to create the awkward formula of a face. Windows for eyes. A door mouth. At the right side of the building's front, a stone at the bottom corner displayed a small and instantly recognizable sign—a black circle containing three inverted yellow triangles. A relic from a time before the building was condemned. Eroded by neglect.

As they approached, all the dread—the strange weight in her steps—seemed to lift from Leslie. It was not a place for people. They should not have been there. And yet you desire to be inside. As if this building itself contained all those things that had been held back from you for so long. Allow yourself to be carried away with the adventure of it all.

Freddie's hand paused on the doorknob. Before he went forward, Leslie glanced once behind her. In that gray, cracked neighborhood there was no one. Not a soul on the street. Not a bird. Not a dog, sniffing at the sewer or scratching its ears. An empty city, Leslie thought.

Inside, the Reisberg House looked like a house. The front double doors opened into a large foyer and a wide set of stairs leading to an upper floor. The wooden banister was dusted with a spray of plaster. It had sifted down from the aged ceiling. A matter of time passing.

Freddie checked his watch again. He pulled a flashlight from his jacket.

Light from the uncovered windows filtered in to lie across the scratched wooden floorboards. In the air, specks of dust like snow shimmering. The room was lit only by the white day outside.

It's like a ghost house, Freddie said.

They talked a little. Touched the dusty surfaces to make skinny, finger-size marks. Leslie made a comment about the grandness of the foyer. Freddie climbed a few stairs, then

returned.

She followed him down a long hallway toward the back of the house. The walls were painted a fading ivory color, and swaths of mildew speckled the areas by the floor. They paused in front of a door that looked as if it might lead to a gymnasium. It was locked. The next door a few yards further opened into an enormous, high-ceilinged room. Skylights on the roof washed bright the large rectangular swimming pool in front of them. Empty of water, its tile walls were cracked, the pieces broken and spread across the downward-sloping floor.

Wow, Leslie whispered. It was the size. Airy, bright, like a greenhouse with nothing growing. Empty of life. They stood at the long end of the room. Leslie pictured the ruined pool as it may once have been: children afloat in green-tinged water. Echoes of splashing, laughter. The pools of your childhood, smelling of chlorine. Creep toward the deep end. Jump in, eyes squeezed shut against the cold. Leslie turned to Freddie.

Your mom said you don't have any friends.

Freddie stared out at the rectangular hole in front of them. We won't need them, he said. His eyes looked strange. You're my friend, aren't you? he asked.

Of course, Leslie answered. And she was, wasn't she? Do you ever know what may happen from one moment to the next? Leslie sniffed. The room smelled overpoweringly of mildew. Let's go, she said.

They returned to the main hall and Freddie wandered in a direction they hadn't yet explored. Nearby, a dead phone hung on the wall in the kitchen doorway. The coiled cord trailed down and stopped a few feet before touching the dusty floor. Leslie noticed another door off of the kitchen hallway with a knob and frame that had a modern look of reinforced steel. Leslie reached for the doorknob, and a jolt of static electricity threaded her palm. She pulled back, stung.

I got a shock, Leslie said.

Freddie was silent. He had that forlorn look of the Freddie

in the photo. It was disconcerting. Leslie heard the click of his flashlight, and a spot of weak, white light played across the door before Freddie moved to open it. He stepped ahead of her. You want to know what happens. Leslie followed him down the dark stairway.

They were in a long room with tan brick walls and thick steel pipes webbing the ceiling. Load-bearing posts stood throughout. It had the feel of a child's playroom. The space made Leslie revert to the stock images in her mind that she associated with the 1960s. Beehive hairdos. The chalky colors and grainy pictures of sitcoms from that era. Long before the Reisberg House had been condemned, this was a place singled out during that time of political paranoia, reinforced with steel, boxed supplies. A certain foolish hope that stone and cement can keep safe blood, bone, an entire way of life.

The pale haze of the flashlight shimmered in front of them as if they were underwater. Plaster dust covered the floor. There were scattered cardboard boxes with strange markings stenciled across the front. In one corner, what looked to be a rumpled sleeping bag. It smelled of urine. All the while, Leslie had been silent; she had felt as if there were something down here in this place that she was meant to find. But it was only a decrepit cave, dark and sad in its neglect. Freddie called to her from another corner far from the door where they'd come in. He was standing by a stack of boxes. The top box was folded open. He reached inside.

Look, he said. He lifted a metal canister about the size of a two-liter bottle of soda. It was marked *Drinking Water* in white lettering. There's got to be twenty boxes of these cans, he said.

That's probably been here for forty years, Leslie said. Her voice had gone quiet. This place, its strange animal smell, the darkness of it. Freddie checked his watches again, pointed the flashlight to each wrist to see.

Freddie, why are we here? Leslie asked. But the photograph had brought them here. This place underground. They

were still no more than strangers, really. Freddie looked at her. In the dark, his hair was washed out, gray like in the photograph. *His dreams torment him*, Leslie thought, and a new heaviness settled on her. In Freddie's face she saw the scene: the shiny varnished banister in that broad hallway of the house, and herself, walking in her black-laced shoes, long heavy skirt, a bun on her head sitting lopsided with wisps of hair trailing behind her ears. The photographer had been waiting. You can't help admonishing them for their tardiness, though children and punctuality hardly mix. *Don't run*, she said, and Leslie watched a group of little girls slow, then push through the heavy front doors. *Line up, stay together*. But then, a moment of panic; where was he—the little boy whom they all called her favorite because he was small and she, childless, friendless, recognized something in his face that seemed placed there long ago just for her. There, as she scanned the steps and the children twisted into their spaces—there he was. He was quiet as ever, his eyes a bottomless black, reaching a hand out to her. She couldn't imagine a time when she would not see him everyday, help him into his coat at the bell, tie his laces as he stood obediently still. You want this always. On the sidewalk, the photographer waved his hand for them to quiet. *Be still for the picture*, he said. Leslie and Freddie in the front, not hearing. Looking only at each other and sensing something creeping forward on the wind. Just before the flash, they turn their faces to the front. But instead of the photographer, his camera affixed to a stand and draped with black cloth, Leslie sees the dark of the basement, feels a shock to the ground on which she stands. Freddie's face changes. His eyes are big with surprise.

I didn't think it would actually happen, he says. He is shaking, and Leslie sees a thread of urine darkening the leg of his pants. In that moment, Leslie knows more surely than anything she has ever known that something outside, something above you in the world you left only minutes ago, is falling and it will

change everything. But before Leslie can ask Freddie what this is—why the ground has just been struck in such a way that you can feel an elemental sucking in your breastbone—she sees his flashlight move across the floor and up the stairs to the reinforced basement door, which he shuts, draping them in darkness. There is the sickening feeling that this—this—could possibly be the thing you have been waiting for all of your quiet life.

Leslie is surprised by her instinct to run. She moves for the door. No, this isn't what I wanted, she thinks. Things might have changed. Isn't this the wrong kind of ending? For the first time, the empty city that was her home these long months drops away as if it were a trapdoor, holding only temporarily above something unseen below. There is nowhere to stand. Nothing left to steady you. Freddie blocks the door.

You can't go out there, he says. He clicks the flashlight off, gropes for your hand. He is telling you in a trembling voice that we have to conserve the battery. We're going to need it.

OFFERING

EMILY SCHULTEN

I read a story about a boy whose sister
gave him her kidney, but his body
started killing it before scar tissue
could wrap it like a burn wound
in his belly, because that's how the body
makes it real. The boy gave it away,
again, a kidney that lived in three bodies.
So now I buy out the gauze every time
I happen on the drug store first aid aisle,
snip strips of tattered shirts and make patches
from the silk scarves our mother wore
when we were young. I gather
whatever might make a mummy
of your new body part to bring with me
to the alter of a priest or the surgeon's
clean table, in case the fever comes for you,
the time when I must confess my failure.

TOTEM AT MIRROR LAKE

MATT SUMPTER

—after Matthew Zapruder

Squat and prehistoric, turkey-faced,
the Muscovy duck preens its greasy wings
then spreads them, sloughing off rain,
encompassing the air like crude oil

leeching into water. I offer breadcrumbs
to this creature evolution left, reliable
and unchanged, like a bed post in a dark room,
at ease with its only possible life.

Around me, the lakeside keeps on shifting.
Fountains sway above the water's corrugations,
sewer grates revise the wind, and power lines
sift sunlight like a threadbare ceiling

I can't sleep under. I am never at ease. Not with
my shadow morphing beneath streetlights,
or my skin roughening, helplessly, over time.
I want my life to conquer its circumstance,

like horses trampling a man. I want
the Muscovy's mud-clotted feathers,
gemmed with algae, a self that will not
leave the earth when I have left.

FAMILY PLANNING

TINA TOCCO

After my grandfather finished with her that first time, my grandmother sat in a boiling bath, which cost extra then, at the Century Hotel. Fifteen silver pails were brought up by a young negro girl, pretty, a mulatto maybe, with a tipped-down head and big eyes the one time she showed them. Another girl—this one all dark, as dark as the maids' uniforms that were just silly on them—stripped the sheets down to the mattress, her brown bun pointed at the smoke from my grandfather's Havana.

The mulatto dumped the pails between my grandmother's legs. After the seventh, the eighth, she said, "You sure, Missus?" But my grandmother cracked her neck past the bath's porcelain rim, trying to put herself in her mother's arms, trying to remember how her mother had kept from having Uncle John for so long, trying to remember if it was salt that drew it out, or not.

So the mulatto made seven more trips to the stove at a penny a pail. Only the last pail made my grandfather rattle some change. Only the last pail made my grandmother speak.

"My husband," she said, her first time, "my husband—he won't tip you."

Only the last pail, salted, shocked my grandmother's head from the porcelain rim, into the eyes of the pretty mulatto.

FOUND

ALEXANDRA TODAK

On the bottom floor of her apartment, on the door one reaches when walking in, there was a sign that starts off by saying, "I have."

Jaclyn set her bike down, leaned it up against the wall. I have what? Everyone was always losing something: dogs, dungarees left behind at the washing machine, even doves. She recalled one such sign: this dove will die without his mate! How sad. Jaclyn had looked for the dove, had stalked Brooklyn's pigeons for a week. After a week or two she figured the dove dead. And if he died without his mate, wouldn't the mate die too? Two dead doves, what a sad thought. One sad owner, two dead doves, in two different sized shoeboxes. Buried somewhere apart, smelling like stiff leather.

Jaclyn had thought long and hard about the doves. If one got out, why didn't the other? Were they in a fight? Did the dove, now dead, sit by the window and regret that she'd pecked underneath her mate's tail feathers because he'd eaten the last bit of seed? She was so hungry, but now she's dead. They both are. Two dead doves in two shoeboxes. Four shoes on two strangers' feet.

"I have," Jaclyn read from the sign, "one Fizzies, three Hershey's bars, two Good & Plenty, three Red Vines, one Black Licorice Lace. Come to apartment 234 if you are interested. Hurry, they are going fast. 15 cents each."

Jaclyn felt in her pockets, strained to hear a jingle. She was dry. If she wanted any of these candies, which the sign clearly said were

going fast, she would have to run up to her apartment and grab the change. She looked at her bike propped up against the wall; carrying it up the flight of stairs would slow her down. So she lunged, took the stairs two at a time, and clambered into her apartment.

A quick hello to Conor who was dozing on the couch and Mom who was slicing salami. "What're you doing?" one of them asked. Can't talk now!

She went to her room and shook loose the jar of change she hid under her bed and in a boot two sizes too small. She saw three nickels and grabbed them, then slid the rest of the loose change back under her bed with an open palm. She would put it back in the jar, then the jar back in the boot, later.

She knocked at the apartment seconds after she went down the stairs, took a left, which was wrong, and then went back and took a right. After no one had answered, she knocked at the door a second time.

The woman who finally opened the door looked like she was still wearing her pajamas. "I'm here for the—" Jaclyn started, but the woman had already begun to laugh.

"Mikey, come here!" the woman said. "Come here! This girl is here for the candy." She held the door open with her one arm which sagged as a hammock. "Do you have any candy for this girl? She has her fifteen cents!" And then, looking at Jaclyn, "You have your fifteen cents, don't you? I bet it's right there in your palm, sticking to you. Three nickels."

"Well, yes—" Jaclyn said, starting to back away from the door. This wasn't right. This was all wrong. Where were the two Good & Plenty's? The three Red Vines? "The sign said—"

"Ha! I know what the sign said. I wrote the damn thing."

This was wrong, this was all wrong.

"Do you want to come in?" the woman said, and when she laughed her hammock-arms swayed.

Jaclyn most certainly didn't. She backed herself deeper into the hallway before she turned around and sprinted. When she got to the stairs she almost headed up until she remembered her bike.

By the time she got back downstairs she'd lost the fifteen cents. She walked towards the front door, where she'd left the bike.

Of course it was gone. There weren't tire tracks or a trace of any kind. There wasn't a sign that said, "I have: your bike!" or any type of ransom note at all.

Yet there was, in the exact spot where her front tire had just been, a dove. Jaclyn went home, cupping the thing. She had two signs to make.

MRS. BROWN [OR A STUDY OF DEATH AS ALL THE RAGE]

BY

JULIE MARIE WADE

My family had known Judy forever, long before she became Mrs. Brown. She and my aunt met in college at Washington State, where Linda felt sorry for Judy because she never pledged a single sorority. It was unclear if she had ever been invited to join.

"If you asked her now—and *don't*, by the way," Aunt Linda commands, slicing a cantaloupe on her mother's kitchen counter, "I'm sure she'd say she didn't want to be part of all that nonsense anyway. But who is she kidding? It's only natural."

"What is?"

"Girls want to be pretty, and they want to belong. Judy never had an easy time with either one."

"So you're saying she was—an ugly outcast?" I clarify.

"No, dear." My grandmother

looks up from her crossword and frowns. "Be careful about putting words into other people's mouths."

When they graduated college in 1968, Linda and Judy took a two-week trip to Hawaii. Linda, who was good at being pretty and pretending to belong, wore her blond hair in a flip and let the kind men in the flowered necklaces carry her matching set of cream and caramel luggage. She wore bikinis on the beach and drank fruity spirits from coconut cups and never had to worry about being asked to dance. Someone in a sport coat would always offer his hand.

But Judy hung back. She didn't smile at the men, preferred to pay her own tab, wouldn't drink a Singapore Sling unless she had

ordered it herself. Judy wore awkward sarongs to cover her thighs and hid her eyes behind enormous, Elton John glasses.

"I always had the sense," my aunt confessed, "that Judy was a little jealous of me."

Then, the girls returned to the Mainland. Linda took a receptionist job, moved in with a roommate who revealed her views on Women's Liberation. She didn't let men hold open the doors. She smoked cigarettes, refused make-up, and stayed out some nights until dawn. My aunt always suspected her of using birth control.

"There's progressive, and then there's *promiscuous*. When women stopped setting the standards, they ruined men for the rest of us."

In six months, my Aunt Linda was living at home with her parents. She didn't find a new apartment or strike out on her own again until she was thirty. Even then, she didn't find a husband. But Judy did. Judy married Rick Brown and bought a house in Linda's parents' neighborhood. Judy started spending time in married women's clubs, letting her left hand dangle to show off her diamond ring. Linda's brother and his wife also bought a

house in Linda's parents' neighborhood. Judy and Linda's brother's wife became friends.

And so it was that Judy came to exchange her friendship with my aunt for her friendship with my mother, who was also known in those parts and at that time as "the other Linda Wade." I don't think my aunt ever forgave Judy for that. Come to think of it, I don't think my aunt ever forgave either of them.

"So this is the living room," Kristi announces, flapping her arms with an air of proud, if contrived, disdain. "The usual boring stuff—plates we aren't allowed to eat off of, curtains we have to keep closed so sunlight won't fade the furniture. Blah, blah, blah. It's lame, but don't worry. We don't have to hang out in here."

Kristi doesn't mention the picture of her mother looming over the fireplace. I thought only rich English people with hunting dogs had their portraits made and displayed in their homes. But here is Judy—in a teal pantsuit with low-heeled shoes, head cocked to the side, dyed auburn hair heavily coiffed, against a blue sky background and blinding white walls.

"Is there a safe?" I ask,

gesturing behind the glossy photograph in its embellished gold frame.

"What do you mean?"

"In the wall—a place where your parents hide their valuables?"

Has she never read Nancy Drew?

"You know, the kind you have to open with a combination lock?"

Kristi's nose wrinkles up like an unopened rose. "I don't think we have one of those."

"Well, what about a surveillance camera then?" *Surely a picture like that must serve some more illicit purpose.* "Have you ever noticed if the eyes in the photograph move?"

"You're a silly girl," Kristi snickers. "That's just a picture of my mother on her fortieth birthday. It's not supernatural or anything. It's from Yuen Lui. She says this way, when she's gone, we'll have something to remember her by."

Our next stop on the new-friend tour is the Brown family kitchen. Kristi says this is her favorite room in the whole house and that her mother lets her do most of the cooking.

"My mother doesn't let me make anything," I sigh. "I'm not allowed unsupervised in the kitchen at all, on account of the fact that I

once blew up our microwave trying to make muffins."

"Did you use those metal muffin tins?" Kristi asks, confidently maneuvering around me in pursuit of milk, mixing bowls, and a box of chocolate pudding.

"How did you know?"

"Common error," she replies.

"If you want to put metal in the microwave, you have to use the convection setting."

"How old are you again?" I ask, suddenly intimidated by Kristi's culinary maturity.

"Twelve—but my mother says I'm going on seventeen."

I wonder if this is because of her breasts, which are always straining to break free from her shirt-fronts and flopping from side to side when she moves. "I think it's because my brother who's ten"—she looks at me, remembers my age, and whispers *sorry* out the side of her mouth—"is a complete dumb-ass. He can't do anything. He's a helpless freak who sits in his room and plays with his iguana all day."

"Is that some kind of code?" I inquire, thinking of Alicia's brother who humps his mattress and other brothers who take too long in the bathroom.

"No—he actually *has* an

iguana, and he let it out of its cage, and now it's so big it's taken over our whole basement. Word of advice," Kristi says, pouring the brown powder into the bowl. "Don't ever have a brother—or an iguana."

She gauges my height and then looks from me to the highest cupboard. "Do me a favor and get down four parfait glasses, will you?"

"What are parfait glasses?"

Kristi snickers again. "They're tall and clear with ruffled edges. You put parfaits in them."

"I don't think I've ever had a parfait," I confess, feeling around on the top shelf to find what Kristi has commissioned.

"Well, you will. I'm going to layer this chocolate pudding with Cool Whip three layers deep, and in about half an hour, we'll have two parfaits apiece."

"What are we going to do in the meantime?"

"You'll see," she says, and after we cover the parfaits with Saran wrap and put them in the fridge, I follow Kristi down the twisty hallway to her room.

Kristi's bedroom is spacious and elegant, more the province of a grown woman than of a newly teenaged girl. She has a magazine

stand featuring titles like *Bon Appétit* and *Country Living*, a floral day bed with brass posts, and a cavernous closet that whorls back in the wall like a seashell. Kristi steps inside and returns carrying a long, mysterious box.

"How do you feel about witchcraft?" she asks matter-of-factly.

I trace the bold, black letters with my fingers: O-U-I-J-A. "I feel all right about it," I say at last.

"Well, have you ever conducted a séance or attempted to contact a dead relative?"

I shake my head, feeling like a novice again.

"What about fortune-telling? Palm-reading? Tea leaves? Anything?"

"Mostly, I just play outside," I say, perching on the floor and following Kristi's movements with my eyes. She collects an assortment of colorful, half-burnt candles and a book of matches and comes to sit beside me, her legs spread wide like a triangle.

"If you could talk to anyone who has crossed over to the Other Side, who would it be?" she inquires, lighting the candles and arranging them in a star shape on the silver serving tray.

"My grandfather, I guess. He's

the only person I really know of who has died, and he died before I was born."

"Good," Kristi says. "Well, not *good*, but at least now we have a focus. We're going to see if we can contact your dead grandfather and get some answers. Family secrets. Whatever you want to know." She claps her hands, and all the lights dim. "Not magic," Kristi assures me. "It's the Clapper."

"Oh." But my heart is pulsing in my ears. "Right. The Clapper."

"Put your hands here," she instructs, placing them on a small piece of plastic with a magnifying lens inside. Kristi lays her warm, doughy hands on top of mine and guides the planchette slowly across the board. "We're going to ask a question, and when your grandfather is ready to respond, he'll spell out the answer, letter by letter."

I am about to ask whether my grandfather approved of the woman my father decided to marry—also known as my mother or "the other Linda Wade"—when a black shape bursts forth from the closet, pounces on my chest, and claws my forearms with long streaks that draw blood. I scream and roll back, convinced God has sent a hairy demon to punish me for dabbling in

the Occult.

"Scottie!" Kristi shrieks, clapping her hands so all the lights come on at once. "Scottie, what's the matter with you?"

I look over in time to see a scruffy terrier disappear behind the door.

"That's our Scottie dog," Kristi murmurs. "He's been acting really weird lately."

I am too stunned to speak, too stunned to express my irritation that Kristi has warned me about the basement iguana but neglected to mention her maniacal dog. All I can do is stare at my arms, which are white and red like candy canes, a set of deep stripes stretching from wrist to elbow.

"Here," Kristi offers. "Let me give you a long-sleeve shirt. You can freshen up in the bathroom if you want."

I take the jersey from her outstretched hand, still gaping in pain and surprise. "Just make sure your parents don't see those marks," she says, kneeling on one leg to blow out the candles. "You could get my dog sent back to the pound." Her voice turns soft and raspy again. "Back to the pound—or worse."

That night at dinner, my

father teases me about the jersey. "That's about six sizes too big for you, Smidge." He laughs. "Where'd you get it?"

"Oh, this is Kristi Brown's. We were having—kind of a costume party." I flush and gulp my milk, hoping no one will notice my scratched arms beneath the baggy sleeves.

"I didn't know you knew Kristi Brown," my mother remarks, scooping the cooked spinach like dripping sea slime onto our plates.

"We just met today," I tell her casually. My mother doesn't like it if she thinks I'm keeping secrets.

"I wouldn't imagine you and Kristi have much in common. How did you meet?"

"Playing—at Pine Cone Island."

"I didn't think Kristi was interested in outdoor recreation." My father stirs his words into the conversation slowly, studying my mother for some clue as to how he should proceed.

"She is, but..." I spin my fork like a carousel pole, round and round without ever lifting the spinach to my mouth, "...later, we went to her house and made pudding. Well, technically, *parfaits*."

"Julie," my mother says, in a serious tone that frees us all from

eating for a while, "there are a few things we need to discuss about Kristi Brown—especially if you plan on seeing her again."

I shrug. "She's nice. I like her." Plus, I am still hoping we can confer with my grandfather about the yet-unspoken question that weighs heavy on my mind.

"Was anyone home at the Brown house when you were there?" my father asks.

"I don't know. She has a key, though—and there's an iguana in the basement."

"Kristi is a latch-key kid," my mother proclaims, with the solemnity befitting a funeral. "Both of her parents work full-time, and she and Greg have virtually raised themselves."

"But I thought you were friends with her parents. I thought you *liked* the Browns."

"We *are* friends," my father clarifies, "but that doesn't mean we approve of certain things about their lifestyle. We believe, for instance, that mothers should be around for their children, and we also believe grown men shouldn't cheat at board games."

"Bill, that's not relevant here," my mother snaps. "The point is, Julie, it's fine if you want to see

Kristi Brown *occasionally*, but we'd prefer it if you only visited her when one of her parents is home. She can always come here—*with advanced notice*—but I like to know there's someone keeping an eye on you two."

Now my heart is thudding to my feet. *They knew about the Ouija board. They may have even known about the deranged Scottie dog and the afternoon's aborted séance.* "But Kristi's twelve," I protest. "She knows how to take care of herself."

"I think Kristi knows how to bake a lot of brownies and sit around on her ass."

"Linda—language!" My father winces and pats my arm. I wince and remove it from the table.

"Well, it's true, Bill, and it's time someone addressed the *other* issue here." My mother lifts her fork again like a gavel. "Julie, let's face facts. Kristi Brown is a *fat* girl. I'm not saying she isn't also a *nice* girl, but she's not the kind of girl you want to spend too much time with."

"You spend a lot of time with Judy Brown," I retort, "and she isn't very thin—or very pretty." I don't know why I was lashing out at Mrs. Brown. It wasn't her fault that

nobody wanted her in their sorority.

"Julie, when you're young and impressionable like you are, you can easily pick up bad habits from your friends." My father has removed the napkin covering his tie and holds it gingerly between his hands. "What if you started eating with Kristi Brown every day? What do you think would happen to your figure?"

I hold my breath the way I do under water, but my mother will not let this conversation drown. "These are hard truths, but you have to face them, Julie. Kristi Brown isn't going to get anywhere socially, being the size that she is. We don't want you to miss out on opportunities to—be invited to parties or to go out on dates—all because people associate you with—" she takes a bite of her spinach and chews it thoughtfully, "a certain type of person."

"You think I might not get dates because Kristi Brown is fat?" I repeat, incredulous.

"Julie," my father sighs, slicing into his pork chop now, anxious for the conversation to end, "try not to put words into other people's mouths."

Kristi's father Rick is a friendly man who likes to mow his

lawn. This is not a euphemism either. He has a stressful job somewhere downtown and finds working in the yard a pleasant way to unwind. He and my father have conferred about the relaxing quality of yard work many times over an idling power mower or the synchronized swish of their brooms. What's more: Mr. Brown actually enjoys gardening. He plants flowers and tends a small crop of apple trees that Kristi calls her "magic orchard." In our family, my mother is the master gardener, but Mrs. Brown can't be bothered with making things grow. She has a stressful job too, and she'd rather watch television while Kristi pumices her feet than spend hours kneeling in the soil beneath leaf-choked gutters and mosquito swarms.

"See? What did I tell you? My dad has a really green thumb." Kristi and I are picking plump gold apples in the Magic Orchard like characters in a Lucy Maud Montgomery story. The orchard is surrounded by a crumbling stone wall and a tall fence on one side that is something other than picket but not quite cyclone either. These are the only two fences I know. We have a bucket and a basket apiece, and we

are collecting apples so Kristi can bake a pie.

"I'm going to make the dough from scratch and then weave a lattice over the top and sprinkle it with brown sugar," she boasts. "You can stay if you want to. For the main course, I'm doing macaroni and cheese."

"With tuna fish or hot dog bits?" I ask, salivating a little.

"Both, if you want. My secret is that I use an extra packet of cheese so the noodles are super-creamy and neon-orange."

Looking around, I change the subject on purpose, guilty for having come here when I know that no one is home. "Did your dad really plant all these flowers himself?"

"Yeah. He thinks no one appreciates them, though. My brother won't do anything in the yard unless he gets to use a power tool, and my mom doesn't come out here much, even though my dad bought her those fancy lounge chairs." Kristi gestures toward the patio. "I'm not supposed to tell anyone this, but my dad doesn't sleep here anymore."

"Is he a traveling salesman?" I ask, recalling the lonely years when my own father was.

"No." She shakes her brown,

self-braided hair and sighs. "He has an apartment where my mother makes him stay. She says they're having troubles, and they've been having them for a long time. But he still comes by to water the flowers and put nectar in the hummingbird feeders."

I can't tell Kristi what I have heard my parents discuss at home. My mother says that Judy told her once how she only married Rick because she thought she couldn't do any better.

"She didn't want to end up an old maid, and who could blame her? She didn't want to end up like your sister."

"Let's leave Linda out of this," my father said, and I could hear the grimace in his voice even from the top of the stairs.

"He bought her a diamond, and she said 'I do,' but only because there was no one else in line."

"Surely she's exaggerating." My father's voice was low and sad. "People don't make lifetime commitments if there isn't love involved."

"Oh, Bill, wake up!" my mother scolded. "It boggles my mind to think how naïve you truly are."

Kristi offers me an apron as she begins to wash the apples. I decline and drop down to the kitchen floor instead, my back propped against the dark wood cabinets. "Any chance we could try that séance again?"

"Sure—after I get the pie in the oven. Do you want some Oreo cookies while we wait?"

I think about it, tempted but afraid. "No, that's OK. My mom says no snacks before dinner, or it'll ruin my appetite."

"You're such a good girl," Kristi marvels, reaching for the cookie jar with her one dry hand.

"What do you mean?" I'm not sure whether to be flattered or offended.

"Just that you always want to do the right thing, or at least not make anybody mad at you. Like if I got mad at you right now—I bet you'd eat a cookie just to keep the peace."

"Probably," I reply. "But just one."

"Do you want me to pretend I'm mad at you so you can have an Oreo, too?" Kristi smiles over her shoulder and winks at me like someone much older—like a big sister who has just returned from college with a swollen brain full of

special insights.

I am mulling over Kristi's proposition, my fingers dangling from the cliff of my knees, when suddenly Scottie appears in the doorway. There isn't any warning or time to prepare. He lunges for me, his bright teeth bared, this tiny dog with a red ribbon around his neck whose image so often bedecks potholders and decorative towels, anything patterned in plaid.

Before Kristi can rescue me, her dog has peeled back the skin on the middle finger of my right hand. I am gushing warm and red in amazement—the pain has yet to arrive—while I am struggling at the same time to catch the spurt-ing blood in my one splayed palm. If Kristi's mother is anything like mine, she mustn't find stains on the light-colored linoleum.

"I don't know what's wrong," Kristi keeps saying as she ushers me into the bathroom, the apron strings straining at her neck and breasts. "My mother said if he did it again, he'd have to be put down. You're not going to tell, are you? Promise me you aren't going to tell."

She holds my hand over the sink and rummages through the medicine cabinet for a small bottle of rubbing alcohol. "This will clean

the wound," Kristi promises. As she pours the clear liquid over my finger, my whole body jolts in dismay, then regret. The sound of this pain is a soprano screeching off-key. Dizzy and sobbing, I slump back against the wall, my hand shaking now beyond my control, as Kristi struggles to unwrap a bandage. "If you could just hold still," she says. "I know I can make this good as new in no time. Please, Julie, promise me you won't tell."

Despite my protests that I am feeling fine now and my gratitude for the peace offering of Oreos, Kristi insists on walking me home. I think this is because she doesn't believe I will keep my mouth shut about how my hand got hurt, but I need her to keep her mouth shut about the fact that we were playing unsupervised at her house and the fact that I have eaten enough cookies to spoil my appetite for dinner tonight and the rest of the week.

"Just in time," my father says, pushing open the screen door. "Your mother and I were beginning to worry."

"Hello, Mr. Wade," Kristi chimes.

"Oh, Kristi, hello. I didn't see you there."

"It's hard to miss me," she grins, gesturing to her coverall-clad torso. "There's just so much of me to see."

This making jokes at her own expense is something Kristi only seems to do when she is nervous, and I can see that she is nervous now. Little beads of sweat dapple the baby hairs along her temples, those soft white wisps not long enough or thick enough to be pulled back into a French or fish-tail braid.

"Yes, well, it is dinnertime," my father says, his voice trailing off, and this is when he notices my enormous, mummified finger. "Julie, what happened there?"

"Oh, that," I say dismissively. "It's nothing really. I snagged my knuckle on a rosebush."

"A *pink* rosebush," Kristi clarifies. I give her a sharp look. *Didn't she understand that I prefer to work alone?*

"Well, all the same, I think your mother better have a look at it."

"Mr. Wade, we were playing in the garden, and I've been scratched up by rosebushes many times, so I knew just what to do. I cleaned her finger, and I made a splint, and she'll be good as new in no time."

"Thank you, Kristi, but I think you should run along now. You girls will see each other again soon, I'm sure."

Kristi flashes me a look that says, *Don't kill my dog*, as she turns back toward the street and lopes slowly away. Once inside the house, my mother is summoned, and despite the throbbing in my finger, I plead that nothing hurts at all, that nothing really happened. "We were just playing, and I crashed into a rosebush. Besides, I'm starving," I lie. "What's for dinner?"

"If it's just a little scratch," my mother says, "why didn't you use a little Band-aid?"

"The Browns didn't have any more. They only had surgical tape and the big cloth kind." Lies were like were drinks they serve at the bar on *Cheers*, and clearly I was opening up a tab.

"Just let me see it," my mother demands, grabbing my wrist and pulling me into her bathroom. "Bill, check on the soup, will you?"

When my mother unwrapped my finger, I knew all hope of a credible alibi had collapsed. She looked from me to the shredded skin and back to me again in the horrible silence of a steam whistle about to

blow.

"Do you want to tell me again that this is from a rosebush?"

I didn't answer.

"It has to hurt," she said. "I would imagine it hurts so bad you can hardly stand it."

"Not really." I kept my head down and tried not to look at the cross-section of my own flesh. Seeing the skin pulled away from the bone that way only made the throbbing that much worse.

"Looks to me like something with teeth did this. What do you think?"

"Thorns—from a rosebush," I replied through closed lips with the teeth clamped tight behind them.

"Bill, come in here please! I'd like to get your opinion." My dad, who didn't have a strong stomach, took one look at my finger and started dry-heaving over the sink.

"Julie, what in the world—is that a dog bite?" He held a towel to his mouth and tried only to meet my eyes.

"I'm calling Judy Brown," my mother announced.

"Don't do it! Please! Kristi says they'll put Scottie down!"

She didn't even bother to turn around and shout "Aha!" My mother was already dialing Judy's

number on the French phone on her bedroom nightstand.

"Yes, Kristi, I'd like to speak to your mother please...Mrs. Wade... Oh, she isn't? I see. What about your father?...I see." I sat on the toilet seat and let my head fall down between my legs. "Well, tell Judy to call me the *instant* she gets home." The blood was rushing to my head, swishing around in my ears like a waterfall. When I woke up, I was lying on my mother's bed, arms outstretched in sacrificial posture, and both my parents were peering down at me like a strange sea creature freshly washed ashore.

"First, we're going to take you to the doctor," my mother pronounced, not missing a beat. "Then, we're going to talk about your punishment."

Over the next few days, news began to trickle down to me in increments. The first good news was that I didn't need a shot because Kristi's dog, though clearly suffering from some kind of human-directed rage, had received all his check-ups and required vaccinations. The first bad news was that Kristi had been barred from the family kitchen for a full week as punishment for trying to deceive my parents as well as her

own. I pictured her in the great chamber that was her bedroom, shuffling Tarot cards, eating cookie dough, and staring out the window.

The next good news was that my finger, which Dr. Kumasaka had promised would heal, was also likely to heal with a scar. Since scars were a million times better than freckles or moles, serving as site-maps toward the treasure of a story, I reveled in the prospect of this future tattoo, this white jagged line striking like lightning just below my cuticle. I laid awake nights as my finger itched itself whole, waiting for this grand blemish—marking both transgression and survival—to form.

The next bad news, however, was that I would have to pay for my scar with yard work. It felt like a prison sentence, but at least I didn't have to work on a chain gang. "You lied to us, and you broke the rules, and since you claimed it was a rose-bush that started it all"—my mother handed me a pair of gloves and a three-pronged trowel—"it seems only fitting that we should send you out to weed around the roses."

"Can I keep the fallen petals for potpourri?" I asked, hopeful, knowing Alicia had already stolen mesh-net for sachets.

"Stick to your task," my mother said, her voice harsh, a little lipstick smudged across her teeth. "No daydreaming. For once in your life, just do as you're told." It went without saying that I wouldn't see Kristi again for a while.

But then, as I am trying to make a hexagon of rocks in the rich, moist soul—or *should it have been a pentagon?* *I couldn't remember what Kristi said the witch's sacred symbol was*—I peer through the lattice of our fence and watch a brown, braided head bobbing along behind it, a body army-crawling through the grass. Kristi's face is streaked with tears, but she has made the wise choice to dress in earth tones and not to move too fast.

"Don't say anything," she whispers. "I'm sure you're being watched."

"Always," I lament, without looking back at the windows.

"My mom just took Scottie to the death vet," she mourns.

"I didn't—"

"Shhh! I told you not to talk. Anyway, it's not your fault... *entirely*. Scottie bit Greg this morning, and then he broke a lava lamp, and that was the last straw."

"I'm sorry."

"My dad didn't even come home to say good-bye. I'm not even sure my mom told him, and we aren't allowed to call without permission."

"So what are you going to do?" I start dramatically digging up some weeds to give the impression, even at a great distance, that I am working hard to earn my keep.

"Once I get back in the kitchen," Kristi resolves, her small nose cherry-red with poignant ire, "I'm going to learn how to make those desserts that flame, and then I'm going to burn that whole house down."

I never saw Rick Brown again, and I don't think Kristi or Greg ever did either. They said good-bye to Scottie when Judy strapped the muzzle on and carted him away in the back seat of her bright green Nova. Rick and Judy had matching cars. Judy's was green, and Rick's was red, and sitting together in the drive, they looked like Christmas. It had been a long time since Christmas.

One day in early summer, Judy came over to the house, and Kristi was suddenly welcomed inside as if nothing at all had happened. We

were told to help ourselves to diet Frescas in the basement fridge and then to play a game on my brand-new Nintendo. Just the day before my dad had told me that if I wanted to play with Kristi Brown, it had to be active games—like tennis in the street or bike-riding around the neighborhood. Dimples in the face were fine, he smiled, patting my head, but they couldn't have me getting dimples in my arms and knees, now could they?

Before long, Kristi had the Betty Crocker frosting open, and we were eating it in huge spoonfuls while she took the role of Mario and I followed behind as Luigi, collecting coins and leaping over mushrooms. Upstairs, Judy told my mother about the impending divorce, about the money she had saved and the money she was going to demand.

"It wasn't a real marriage anyway. He wanted the kids. He wanted the life in the suburbs with the house and the yard. For too long, I just went along for the ride."

I never knew until afterwards—after the sirens had faded into the warm night, after the news reports when my parents made me go upstairs and clean my room—that the same day Kristi Brown and I ate a whole tub of dark chocolate

cake frosting and advanced to Super Mario Brothers level 6 without once calling the hotline for assistance, Rick Brown was busy down at the Fauntleroy Community Church, making a noose and securing the rope around one of the tall, sturdy, Evergreen trees. Kristi had been telling me how she thought she would hold a séance and try to contact Scottie. Dogs might have voices on the Other Side, she mused. Rick left a note for Judy that read, "YOU DID THIS TO ME," and she found him dangling there at the appointed meeting place—in his grass-stained jeans and his flannel shirt, despite the fact that it was June. He must have smelled of peat and roses with the garden dirt still caked under his fingernails. I pictured them cutting him down like a large, gray-haired flower, sad and broken but maybe perennial somehow. I closed my eyes and wished as hard as I could—that Rick Brown would blossom on the Other Side; that there really was an Other Side at all.

"Aren't you going to the funeral?" I ask my Aunt Linda.

"I already sent flowers," she replies. "Mine was the first bouquet."

"A lovely arrangement," says

my grandmother, who is making coffee and setting the table for three. "There were orchids and lilies and dainty pink peonies—"

"Until your mother took credit for it." Linda looks into my eyes, and for the first time, I doubt her faith in me and in our unswerving alliance.

My lower lip quivers. "What do you mean?"

"Just a misunderstanding," Grandma soothes. "And I'm sure the other Linda has also sent flowers, dear."

"She brought some," I say. "My mother brought flowers from our garden to the service today."

"Cheap as ever," Aunt Linda sighs. "But she doesn't mind taking the praise when someone else is paying the bill." I watch Aunt Linda collect her orange peels in a newspaper, pitching them in the trash before she disappears down the hall.

"What happened?" I ask. "Is Aunt Linda mad at me? Did I do something wrong?"

"No, dear. People sometimes get a little testy where matters of death are concerned."

"I'm not *testy*, Mama!" Aunt Linda calls from the next room.

"I'll finish making these cube steak sandwiches, and then

everyone will sit down to lunch and forget all this nonsense," Grandma declares, in her best *shape-up-or-ship-out* tone.

"My parents wouldn't let me go to the funeral. They said funerals are no place for children—but Kristi and Greg are there."

"Well, he was their father."

Grandma fries the cube steaks two at a time, these square patties of bright pink meat, holding something that looks like a fly swatter over the skillet's edge.

"What's that?"

"This? It's a splatter guard. It keeps the hot grease from burning me." For a moment, I think of Kristi and her fantasy revenge of cherries jubilee or baked Alaska. I wonder if you have to capitalize the "A" in "baked Alaska." *If it's not a state, is it still a proper noun?*

"Grandma, I have a question."

"Yes?" She is busy laying out pieces of soft Wonderbread and hands me sliced cheese and spicy mustard to do the trimmings.

"Is Mrs. Brown still Mrs. Brown now that her husband died?"

"Well, I'm still Mrs. Wade, and my husband died."

"But Grandpa didn't kill himself," I protest. "He didn't *choose* to leave you. Rick Brown did."

"A name is a gift, dear.

Parents give their children the gift of a first name, and husbands give their wives the gift of a last name. Gifts can't be taken back, and I think most folks are of the mind that they shouldn't be given back either."

"What if they had gotten divorced? Would Judy get her name back then?" I lower my voice now the way my mother does when imparting secret information: "Because, you know, that's where Rick and Judy Brown were headed."

"Where?"

"*Splitsville*." I say it with bravado the way I have just heard Punky Brewster say it on TV.

My grandmother looks at me, startled and a touch disappointed, too, as if I have just taken the Lord's name in vain.

"Go tell your aunt that lunch is ready. And—" she turns off the stove and wipes her hands clean—"let's have some lighter conversation, shall we?"

My Aunt Linda's childhood room is small and stuffy as a cracker box with a narrow dresser and a single bed and one long, skinny window no good for climbing out of. It does have a new fluffy blue carpet,

though, and a closet door with a wobbly handle and a mirror on the outside.

"Lunch is ready," I say, tapping tentatively on the open door.

"I'll be there in a minute."

"Grandma says we have to talk about light things at lunch, but maybe afterwards— would you like me to try to read your palm?"

"I'm not sure Jesus would approve," Linda replies. Then, conceding: "But maybe, in a little while."

She is sitting cross-legged on the floor beside her bed like a much younger person. Her back is to me and to the door, and she is shuffling a stack of pictures like playing cards.

"What are those pictures of?" I ask.

"Oh, just some old snapshots from my college days."

I kneel on the bed and peer over her shoulder. It's a black-and-white print of my Aunt Linda in a grass skirt standing beside a bonfire. Her feet are bare, as is her flat midriff and her slender arms. She wears pigtails with a white flower tucked in each.

"You look happy," I say. I realize that, in real life, I have rarely seen such serenity ease the creases

of my aunt's tight face.

"This was on Oahu," she says. "That's Waikiki Beach, and—hiding behind me—see that girl standing there?"

I squint to make out a pair of Bermuda shorts and a face blurred in motion.

"That's Judy Brown. She always hated having her picture taken. She always said she'd rather have the thousand words."

"What was Judy's last name before she married Rick?"

"Oh, it was—now isn't that silly? Of course I know what her name was. We knew each other for years..."

"It's OK," I say. "It's OK if you can't remember. Grandma is waiting for us."

"It starts with an N, I think. Come on. What's her mother's name? Mrs.—" I stand beside Aunt Linda and offer her a hand. "It'll come to me," she insists. "For goodness sake, it hasn't been *that many* years."

And because I am a budding philosopher as well as an accomplished sleuth, I have to ask her: "Do you think maybe you can't remember because the Judy she was doesn't exist anymore?" I am conjuring the teal pant suit now, the thick

rouge and glossy lips, the sharp,
cold eyes that stared right into the
lens as if beseeching, *Look at me,*
that's right, look at me.

"Don't be ridiculous," Aunt
Linda chides, still keeping her
distance as we move toward the
kitchen. "And please, don't put
words in my mouth."

ELEGY FOR A SCHOOL BUS DRIVER

WILLIAM WALSH

Because my daughter needed bubble wrap
for a science project, and because

we popped all of them
in the car before we got home,

I drove back to Publix
where I also bought a Sunday paper

and found his photograph.
While Olivia squatted on top of the kitchen table

in her bare feet, carefully
gluing macaroni to a blue poster board,

I laid down my last summer
of baseball to memory—how he stood alone,

away from the other parents, his fingers
gripping the chain-link fence, black lines

of grime half-circling beneath his nails—angel
of the grease rack watching his gangly son

fall backwards in right field
as a “can of corn” arced over head.

With real skin in the game,
minor league scouts charted my pitches,

but it wasn’t my slow curve
that eventually caused trouble—it was

my Vida Blue snowball
slipping one winter morning

at the bus stop, off just enough
to catch Connie, the neighborhood snitch,

under her wire-rim glasses, exploding
like a depth charge of bitchiness.

Crying, she ratted me out,
and as he looked up

through the oblong mirror
to where I sat quietly

in the back row, ready
for whatever another day of detention

might bring. . .
somehow to be

spared by a man
who knew how it was

to be stuck in a mill town
with no escape plan.

SPOON RIVER IN UGANDA

WILLIAM WALSH

On the road from Kampala, the air was heavy
as jackfruit when we left Fort Portal,
twelve hours of ruts and dust to watch elephants.
It was only me and the bus driver (Moses) awake
in the darkness, chewing sugarcane
and gnawing roasted goat
from the night before. The sulfur smell
from the Lake Katwe salt mines
gave me a headache. Cab light weak,
I read a poem by a man now dead,
his distant epistle radio-ing an important message
from somewhere, like the letter I wrote my grandfather
in 1990, returning to me two months ago
after my aunt sifted through his desk
for some insurance papers. To hold on to my letter
all these years—I wasn't quite sure
what to make of it. Maybe it was the last
letter I wrote him before cheap long-distance,
or maybe, like a poem, he occasionally read it
to hear my voice. Then at five-thirty in the morning,
with no bota-bota cutting us off in traffic,
as Moses negotiated a slight curve
on a country road, a leopard crossed my path.

WRAITH WORK

**PATRICK
VINCENT WELSH**

The gravedigger lost his passion for his work.

It faded once they forced him to start using the bulldozer. He missed the wood of the shovel and the worms of the dirt, so he retired. As a retirement gift they gave him a spot in the ground for use when the time came.

He walked with his replacement, a young man named Ellis, who feared the dead but needed the money. He was a new father and his baby boy ate endless jars of orange slush and the orange slush was expensive.

They walked together until they reached the iron gates.

"Don't get spooked. It's just bones," said the gravedigger, adding before walking into retirement, "When you see me next I'll be in a box. Be gentle. Good luck."

Ellis complained to his wife that the graveyard terrified him, but his words were in vain. She pushed him to work for an entire year until he quit on the day of his boy's first birthday.

"Where in the hell are you going to work now?" his wife yelled.

"Someplace without ghosts," Ellis muttered, walking out amidst his son's cries, knowing that there was no place truly free from ghosts, not in America, not in the South.

After six months of her husband's moping unemployment, Ellis's wife took the boy, moved in with her brother, and she stopped calling herself Ellis's wife.

Several weeks later at Bess's diner, Ellis ran into Henry Barnes, a high school friend.

They ate and had several cups of coffee. Ellis told all about his woes, the past eight lonely months, the lack of company and Food and Child.

Henry ate and listened patiently. He paid for both of their checks and stood to leave, saying, "You wouldn't be against some light cleaning, some paperwork, things like that, would you?"

"Hell no."

Henry handed him a business card, saying, "Give yourself a good shave and I'll introduce you to my boss Monday. The job's yours, just shave."

Ellis smiled with a golden gratitude that was lost in the glare of the sun beaming off the toaster, the counter, the walls. He looked down at the card:

*Henry Barnes, Maintenance Supervisor, Poinsetta County
Morgue*

Ellis called his wife, and said, "I want you to come home. Bring Jack. I've got a job. I've missed you more than anything ever. I can't say it right, but I've missed you."

"You've said it right enough."

The Poinsetta County Morgue was terribly haunted. Ellis was chased every night by phantoms of all shapes and sizes and tempers. He swung at them with his broom. He kicked at them. He yelled at them. He hid from them. Every night. For years. For the boy.

SOMETHING LIKE AN AUBADE

SEAN WHITE

Your lithe fingers made gentle music as they danced through the little circles of metal in the dish behind the stick shift. You ignored the fractured reflection of the city's skyline on the opposite side of the darkening lake. The sun could have crashed into the Earth instead of over the horizon and you still would have remained focused on the coins I had dropped into the console a few at a time.

A cloud of sweet intoxicating smoke fogged the car. It fogged our minds. You separated nickels, dimes, and quarters, and filled the molded slots above the radio, perfect for each type. Each coin reflected in the pools of your eyes as you studied it before it clinked together with its kin.

I studied you, amused and enamored, searching for the words to tell you how beautiful you looked in profile oblivious to me. The reduced visibility from the fog in my head slowed me. I stumbled around by feel.

You had finished with the bigger change and held a handful of pennies. The silence weighed on me and the weight pressed words from my mouth.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

You held a penny between your thumb and forefinger and stared at it.

"Holy shit!" you said.

"What? What is it?" I asked.

"I don't believe it," you said.

"What?" I asked again.

You pushed the red-brown profile of Lincoln in front of my face.

"Look at the date," you said.

"Nineteen forty-two. Why's that important?" I asked.

"It's worth like a hundred dollars maybe," you said. "I don't know."

You gave it to me and I buried it in my wallet.

A year later under another sunset I limped to the edge of the lake at that spot. I steeled myself to face the fate I had sown, wishing it were otherwise. The 1942 penny hit the water with a blump and that Lincoln drowned. That Lincoln drowned and the world remained unchanged.

The wallet fell back into my pocket like a coin into a vending machine and the engine grumbled to life. Motors whirred as my calloused fingers depressed buttons to clear the fog through open windows. The tires popped gravel until we pulled onto the highway. The odometer turned by tenths of a mile faster and faster until the car sprinted a mile a minute.

The snap of fingers. The shattering glass sounded a little like your fingers swimming through that pool of coins.

The paint on a car always has names like cherry red or rustic ecru. My car was thunderhead gray. I wondered how such a thing foreshadowed doom if I failed to think about it until after it happened.

We rode inside the body of a turtle on its back. Thunderhead gray scraped away and the alloy beneath screeched against the concrete. A balloon punched me in the nose. The turtle rolled to a stop but not before it vomited you out.

The sleepy sun put itself to bed. The silence weighed on me and the weight pressed blood from my mouth. Blood instead of your name.

COCO AND BABY SQUEAKS

BY

THOMAS WHITE

**The Harpur Palate Prize for
Creative Nonfiction**

I never held anything as carefully as I held my son. I cradled him high against my chest as though he were a giant, fragile egg with the thinnest of shells whose crack would be the end of me. I did not think he was crying because he wanted his mother, or was hungry, or had a dirty diaper, or was in pain from the vitamin K shot he had received in his heel hours after his birth, but because he was truly sad. His magnificent eyes were jay blue and almond shaped, distantly gleaming behind those lucent pools of tears. I rocked him and told him everything was all right, even though I had no idea whether or not everything was all right.

When my wife returned from the bathroom, I was still holding our son while he continued to wail. "I don't think I can do this," I said. In those first hours of parenthood I had not yet lost my wits, and I understood the implication of what I was saying. I had never experienced this particular pain in my heart—a piercing sadness caused by the certainty that my son was sad—and I was already yearning for the day when the pain would cease. Ignoring the comment, she asked me to retrieve something or other: a drink to soothe her hoarse throat

or the phone to call more relatives.

After much deliberation during my wife's pregnancy, we had decided that I would stay home with my son while she worked. For five years, I had been employed as an adjunct professor of composition, essay-writing, and comparative religion, hustling multiple sections at two universities one-and-a-half hours apart, careening around southern New Hampshire in a skittish subcompact Saturn with troves of texts and student's papers littering the back seat. It was the typical adjunct's life—hectic and lonely with little money to show for the superhuman effort. As a physical therapist, my wife enjoyed her job, made more money than any adjunct ever could, and worked nine to five, so the decision was rooted more in logic and practicality than any eagerness to be a so-called stay-at-home parent. Although I knew nothing at all about caring for an infant, I was not scared. I looked forward to the physical demands of my new job: pushing the stroller up the local hills, hauling laundry on the stairs, piecing together all the vaguely unnecessary, rigorously utilitarian contrivances—changing carts, collapsible playpens, odor-killing diaper disposal bins—that

appeared weekly on our doorstep, or toting him around in the Snuggli carrier while I raked the yard and cleared the flowerbeds of debris revealed by the newly melted snow.

We discussed the potential impact of the new arrangement on my emotional health. Twelve years ago, soon after my father died, I had sought treatment for severe depression, and in the ensuing years I had been forced to address recurring episodes of anxiety and depression with short-lived rounds of therapy and medication. For at least a couple years I had been feeling consistently well, my mind distracted and spirits buoyed by the purchase of our first home, and had seen fit to discontinue both therapy and medication, with no apparent ill effects, soon after we moved. I took great pleasure in attending to the lackluster house, a small vinyl-clad dwelling swiftly built on a mound of sand and clay surrounded by fallen trees and wetlands, and its neglected yard. So in the end we felt that being home full-time, compared to maintaining a section or two as an adjunct or taking a part-time job somewhere in the vicinity of our small town—jobs whose income would scarcely cover the cost of day-care and gas—would in fact nurture

emotional stability.

Soon after the decision that I would stay home with our son, I began to entertain fanciful thoughts about all the free time I would have. Babies slept a lot, everyone said—a lot, they repeated. I decided I would fill this time with something constructive, something I had always wanted to do, which was teach myself Latin. Before I purchased the expensive Latin texts, I thought I might confirm my assumptions about the free time. My son was eight months old before I remembered that I had intended to teach myself Latin, which now I knew would never happen, at least not until he left for college. I was so strung out and dull witted that even my native tongue was becoming elusive.

The pain that had pierced my heart in the hospital room would ebb and waver, but it never really ceased. I knew that a baby's cries were his only dependable mode of communication, and yet I could not shake the fear that his cries were an expression of something deeper than the desire for an easily satisfied need. For months I went to bed with a knot of anxiety inside my chest that was tighter than the night before.

The long days contained cycles of brief activities such as eating, bathing, strolling, playing with the squishy planet, stars, and moon dangling above his bouncy chair, and, when I was most exhausted, propping him in front of an allegedly educational video in which mechanical toys spun and clicked to a soothing narration in nearly a dozen foreign languages. He rarely napped in his crib. Instead—fearful that a lack of sleep might retard his development—I would drive around in the car, sometimes for over an hour, until he nodded off, and then, rather than risk waking him during the car-to-crib transfer, I would find a shoulder on a quiet road or a wooded turnout at a trailhead, crack the windows, turn off the engine, and close my eyes. For me it was not a restful time: I knew that any moment his cries could cut the silence.

Elijah was sixteen months old when my wife became pregnant with our second child. With the goal of conserving my energy for the new child, we enrolled Elijah in a daycare three mornings per week. It was an informal operation in a cramped ranch house where a listing swing set and slide sat in a shaded side yard. Free from his

father's contagious angst, Elijah succumbed without fuss most mornings to a nap on a blanket spread out on the floor. The patient, soft-spoken lady who ran the business imposed order in the small space, emphasized outdoor play, and provided healthy snacks. Although Elijah appeared content with the arrangement, three free mornings per week were not nearly enough to quell my turmoil or even replenish dwindling energy. I would feel no less anxious and exhausted when I picked him up than when I dropped him off, and now I could add to those bad feelings the heartache of missing him and the humiliation that I had failed.

Unlike Elijah, our daughter Lucy hardly kicked or shifted in the womb. In the weeks after her birth, however, she proved far fussier than Elijah ever was. The pediatrician vaguely defined her condition as nothing more serious than colic, or unsettled digestion, meaning she was relatively healthy but intensely uncomfortable. Her frequent shrieks could reach a prodigious pitch. Many fellow parents, normally disposed to offering words of support and camaraderie under any condition, admitted they had never heard an infant scream

quite so loud. In the midst of her blinding shrieks I would find myself sort of hunched, eyes squinting, in preparation for something like the crack of shattered glass. So it was finally colic, on top of everything else, which broke me.

The nervous collapse occurred late one afternoon soon after my wife returned from work. It had been a difficult day—no more difficult than other difficult days, but the cumulative effect of over two years of intensifying anxiety finally became too much to bear. A couple hours earlier I had driven around with my daughter, who would not stop crying, and son, who was wailing because his sister was crying, simply because I was at a loss about what to do, and told them through tears, as I watched them in the rear-view mirror, that their lives would be much better without me. My son could not have known what I meant by those words, but my tears and cracking voice were enough to make him increasingly distraught. When I met my wife inside the house I handed over our crying daughter. I was basically hysterical, inconsolable. I made my way to the cellar door and said something about going downstairs to swallow a bunch of pills. I suppose I was

referring to prescribed sedatives, but they were not in the basement—they were upstairs in a cupboard. (I have concluded that this obvious blunder was an unconscious sign that I neither wished nor intended to carry out the act, and yet at the time I believed what I was saying). With Lucy in her arms and Elijah clutching a pant leg, Tina rifled through the phone book and called Dr. Weil, a psychologist I used to see, while I sat on the top step of the cellar stairs. I was able to summon a single thought—that I was done thinking. I could not think, could not feel any emotions, anymore. I could not possibly go on. My mind was so full that I could not bear to engage my senses of sight, which scorched my eyes, or touch, which made me shudder, or sound, which felt like a hot needle in my ears. I believe I rested my head against the cement wall running alongside the basement stairs.

Experts tell us that during the day the heart of a hummingbird can beat as many as twelve hundred times per minute, but at night, when they slip into torpor, it can slow to as low as fifty beats per minute, a biological necessity that allows them to make it through the night on their measly measure of

stored energy. This is an apt analogy for the state of my mind at the time. My brain and body powered down by way of self-preservation. It crashed. I felt like a pile of inert cells whose only function was to occupy space in an impossible world. The sedation I had so often craved had now descended upon me by biological necessity.

According to Tina, Dr. Weil insisted that I go immediately to the emergency room. I shook my head. I was certain that I was untreatable, and that my life had reached its end, and I did not see the point in deepening the pain and delaying the inevitable, though I did not say this. She handed me the phone. I abhorred the idea of speaking to my psychologist, but I accepted the phone without resistance simply because I was too unglued, too thoroughly depleted, to decline. "What?" I whispered. I could barely hold the phone.

In conjunction with his conventional practice, Dr. Weil ran a hypnosis clinic for patients with all sorts of mental health disorders. He had an ideal voice for a hypnotist—deep and velvety but also, on the upper end, slightly nasalized, and therefore somehow multidimensional, as though it approached

from a single point and spread psychedelically into several blankets that finally fused, wrapping you in a soft sleeping bag of sympathy. I had always dismissed hypnotists, none of whom I had personally known, as creepy hucksters, an opinion based solely on those guys who appeared on college campuses and coaxed otherwise inhibited people to strip in front of a hooting crowd. In fact Dr. Weil was an accomplished therapist—affable, sincere, and always helpful—who happened to practice alternative healing.

Now on the telephone I was reminded of the timbre and pace of his bewitching voice. A clear, blessedly unemotional thought crossed my mind: *What a nice voice.* I knew that he had been an effective professional for decades, and that I was not the first suicidal person to whisper in his ear, but given the circumstances he was almost comically composed, as though buffing his lenses with the phone cradled against his shoulder. He said that if I did not go to the emergency room he would have no choice but to call the police. He was so gifted a therapist that this threat sounded like a favor. He reminded me that we lived in a small town where everyone read the police logs in

the bi-weekly local paper. The logs never mentioned names, but all our friends knew our address, which would have been listed somewhere after the heading: "Suicidal Person."

At the hospital I spent several hours in the emergency wing in a small room. The room had a single pane of tinted gray glass webbed with wire through which the doctors and nurses could see me sitting on the end of a gurney under a single fluorescent light. They pretended not to look—I never once saw them looking—but I knew that it would have been impossible, even unethical, for them to resist glancing my way. I waited over three hours for the crisis counselor, who travelled from a city forty-five minutes away. She was in her early sixties, soft spoken, rail thin, with heavy-lidded pale blue eyes and, under the fluorescent light, a hepatic hue that I was certain I shared. We sat opposite one another while she scribbled notes and checked boxes on a form tucked in the clipboard on her lap.

As we talked my mind began to unclench itself. Responding to her questions, I first suspected, and then believed, that the situation was not as hopeless as I had thought. Nonetheless, at the end of our hour-long meeting she informed me

that I would be taken by ambulance to the psychiatric wing of a hospital forty-five minutes away—in the same city from which she had traveled to see me. There I would be reevaluated and, depending on my progress, possibly released after about a week. "It's really a nice place," she assured me. "Honestly. People like it."

I believed her, but it had never crossed my mind that I might be sent to a psychiatric hospital—at most I thought I would be heavily sedated and ordered to spend the night in the emergency room—and I knew, absolutely knew, especially now, after four hours in that stark room where I had managed to feel slightly better, that a stay in such a place would only make me feel much worse. I wanted nothing more than to go home and hug my family. I knew that our lives had changed forever, and that I was not necessarily stable—I was still shaky, scared, undone by what had happened—and that I probably faced a long, soul-searching recovery, but I suspected that my own home was the best place to start whatever healing needed to take place. My own bed.

I called Tina, who told me that she had assumed I would be admitted to some psychiatric ward

somewhere. Initially she resisted my pleas to return, but after a long conversation she, too, believed that I could recover safely at home. Around 1 a.m., after nearly two hours of sporadic discussions with the crisis counselor, Tina and I convinced her that I was not a danger to myself, so I signed a bunch of release forms and, with a promise that I would return to the hospital if I regressed at home, was finally let go.

In a not-too-distant era, I might have had to retire to a quiet room, possibly in an institution somewhere in the hills or at the end of a tree-lined winding road where, for months, together with rounds of bloodlettings or milk cures or enemas or primitive electric-shock therapy—and so on—I would absorb daily infusions of fresh air during strolls around the grounds. More than likely, absent adequate funds for lodgings in such a place, I would have withdrawn to my own bedroom where a special diet would accompany a doctor-prescribed “rest cure” while we all waited for the return of peace and equilibrium. Before the current array of psychopharmaceuticals, including the short-term efficacy of valium-like sedatives, time was the only truly

effective antidote. Being susceptible to prolonged bouts of severe depression, I was wary of consuming sedatives, fearful that their stultifying effects might further pollute my already cloudy cognitive processes, which, as for most people, had been both cause and symptom of depressive episodes.

In the treatment of my past struggles with depression and anxiety before my children were born, no medication had proved truly therapeutic. A couple of selected serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRI's) quelled anxiety but were ineffective against depression and caused grogginess, lethargy, and—perhaps worst of all—indifference to these and other side effects. Subsequent SSRI's caused queasiness, the shakes, or irritability, and all caused drowsiness, even the ones that made me shaky. Acknowledging the ineffectiveness of these medications, my primary care physician referred me to a psychiatrist, Dr. Haines, who introduced Lamictal, an anti-convulsive medication also prescribed for bipolar disorder.

My wife took several days off from work while we waited for the medication to take effect. Sometimes I would scan the

internet for sports and news or listen to talk shows on the clock radio or flip through magazines, but for long stretches I lay with my head on the pillow and merely registered all the stray sounds that drifted through the upstairs window of our rural home. The warble of songbirds and squawk of crows; a car door thumping in the neighbor's driveway; a lawnmower droning; a weed trimmer whining. Detection and registration of sounds became my favored occupation, and I was thankful, for the first time in my life, that the world was never completely silent.

After a couple weeks of isolation I was able to take a few cautious steps out into the world. In the early afternoon I would change out of my pajamas and drive to pick up my kids, whose daycare we had increased as much as our budget allowed. Once home they consumed more processed snacks and watched more PBS than normally permitted, but our situation was far from normal. Frequently, while I observed their simple pleasures, their fondness for the pratfalls of Curious George and their playful interaction, my eyes would fill with tears of gratitude.

Three or four months after

the breakdown I realized I had felt emotionally stable, if not exactly energetic, for maybe a week. Although I could sleep no more than two or three hours at night without having to rise and make my way down to the family room and kitchen, flip on the ceilings lights, and simply survey our belongings—which in spite of their inanimate nature always struck me as reassuringly steadfast, as though they too were pulling for me—I noticed that I had begun to perceive the next day, whatever day it was, as something more than yet another challenge, something more than potential proof that I had continued to survive, and that it might very well offer a collection of unexpected pleasures, such as the sight of my children watching Curious George, however fleeting.

The world never appears quite so beautiful, so thrilling and sublime, as it appears to those who are recovering from illness. Just as when I recovered from anxiety or depression in the past, once I was well—or on the way to well—I reentered the world of beauty, laughter, and love, but I reentered with new eyes, a new heart, and with a more acute appreciation for anything that infuses me with the will to live. In

"Is Life Worth Living?" William James wrote, "It is a remarkable fact that sufferings and hardship do not, as a rule, abate the love of life; they seem, on the contrary, usually to give it a keener zest." He was writing as a psychologist and philosopher, but he was also drawing on his own experiences with multiple bouts of severe depression—"soul-sickness," in his words—during which for months he contemplated suicide.

I would guess that anyone who has been depressed has also pondered the option of suicide. As far as I can tell, this is not the least bit unusual. "We are of one substance with these suicides," James wrote, "and their life is the life we share." Depression fills its victim with self-doubt and self-loathing, horrible things, but most insidiously it casts their past in a very bad light. The depressed person feels that their present lives are pointless, and they also believe, or realize (or most accurately, believe they are realizing) that all the so-called joyous experiences and once-fond memories had been pointless, too. Naturally this causes them to wonder whether or not life is worth living.

Since the nervous collapse, I

have been in the process of compiling a catalog of experiences that reinforce my love of life or at least infuse it with a "keener zest." It is designed to sustain me especially during periods of incipient anxiety or depression. Faced with the stirrings of mental illness, the resurrection of the catalog is an act of defiance. The experiences are not extraordinary. That is the point: I must remember that ordinary life is worth living. Many of these experiences involve my children, who are now seven and five.

Four years after the breakdown, I attended a silent retreat at a Buddhist meditation center in western Massachusetts. I had been pondering a retreat for two or three years, but I was hesitant. I was not acquainted with any Buddhists. I had never met anyone who had experienced a silent Buddhist retreat. Would it be emotionally demanding? Sleep-inducing? Dismal or somber? Then an old friend visited from New York, and in the course of the visit he mentioned that his wife, who was far more social and less desirous of silence than I, had attended several five-day silent retreats, and he assured me

that she never expressed boredom or emotional exhaustion when she shared her experiences. He said without a trace of resentment that she always felt more at home on those retreats than when she was literally at home. If she could manage five days of silence, I told myself, I could manage two days and two nights, and within hours of my friend's departure, I clicked on the meditation center's website and signed up for a weekend retreat. It would begin the Friday before Christmas—on my birthday, as it turned out.

Google maps, failing to warn me about the scarcity of street signs in that part of the state, led me astray, and what should have been a one-hour trip turned into two hours. Though I was not late for the evening introduction, I was exhausted and irritated when I arrived, and my temples throbbed from squinting to read the few signs I could find in an otherwise lovely gloaming—signs upon which my line of high beams always seemed to fall about a foot short. After registration, I was given directions to my room.

My greatest fear was silence itself. Would it peel away the benign layers of distraction that

accumulated day after day, fortifying me against what Virginia Woolf called "The wastes and deserts of the soul"? As I cooked, cleaned, shuttled, shopped, told half-hearted, made-up bedtime tales, even as I worked to make sense of myself in words, had the layers become so fixed and solid that I never knew, could never possibly know, that a seething, disturbed "me" lurked inside this shell of busyness? I had reason to fear that once the shell cracked open I would fall to pieces.

After the Friday evening meal, we were told to gather in the meditation hall. We placed our dirty dishes on the dirty-dish cart and shuffled over to the hall in socks and slippers, and then waded silently into that expansive meditation space, where the dim light, so much like the last breath of dusk before nightfall, so perfect, softened the features of faces, clothes, furniture, the texture of the walls—anything that might distract us from ourselves. The hall itself, an enormous rectangle whose floor was covered in rectangular meditation mats all arranged in a single, rectangular shape, maintained a soothing symmetry.

I had neglected to prepare myself for the rigors of forty-five

minutes of motionless sitting. I had been incapable of pondering the retreat without becoming anxious about all the uncertainties involved, including the fear of falling to pieces and, because telephone calls were all but forbidden, the fear of being out of touch from my children. So I pushed the retreat out of my mind altogether. I had packed, said goodbye to my family, and hit the road without a lot of thought about where I was going. I knew from experience that sitting cross-legged produced a piercing pain deep in my hip joints, as though the joints had been soldered shut long ago and here I was trying to split them apart. At the last minute, just as everyone settled and the session was about to begin, I opted to use a meditation bench, which I slipped under my behind and sat upon while kneeling on my mat. Thus situated, I was able to sustain a mostly pain-free equilibrium.

Our teachers instructed us to focus on our breath, or sounds, or physical sensation—whatever worked best. At the behest of several mental health professionals, I had tried to focus on my breath as a calming technique in times of heightened anxiety, but the attention on something as reflexive as

breath usually made me breathe too much or not enough, causing lightheadedness, far from the desired effect. Now I closed my eyes and focused on sounds, and within five or ten minutes, feeling calm, I was eagerly absorbing those sounds, no matter how faint or intrusive—a cough or snuffle, the brush of clothing as someone adjusted their posture, a deep sigh, a car passing on the country road. The soft static in the ears that emerges in the absence of sound. As instructed, I observed sounds rather than allowed myself to be startled or annoyed by them, and each passing observation of sound carried a slightly deeper calm. For the rest of the retreat, sounds were my chosen method to mindfulness. By the end of this first session, I knew that I had nothing to fear. I was not shattered; I had not fallen to pieces. I felt happy. Happy to be here, happy to have my children, my wife, my life, waiting at home.

On Saturday afternoon, I joined a dozen retreatants for an informal question-and-answer session with Greg, one of the retreat leaders. In his fifties, slight and fair, Greg had thinning, blonde hair, a narrow face and the wide unburdened eyes of a child. Although we

were allowed to ask Greg questions, the retreatants were not allowed to speak with one another. Midway through the meeting, Greg began a discussion of the transitory nature of any experience that brings us happiness. This is one of the most basic Buddhist principles. Food, sex, laughter, a hike, a trip, a book—all of these may suggest something like fulfillment, happiness, or joy, but none of those feelings will last. You will need to experience them again and again, and each experience will leave you hungry for another experience to fill the void where the happiness, fulfillment, or joy used to be. “Only mindfulness will bring you true joy,” Greg said. “It is a joy that we nurture through meditation.”

A young man in his mid-twenties sat slouched beside Greg with his arms folded high across his chest. He shifted and sighed. “Why shouldn’t we enjoy those things?” he asked abruptly. I had met the young man, whose name was Phil, at the evening gathering on Friday night. For work he traveled from city to city raising funds for various charities sponsored by his college fraternity. “I fly around asking people for money,” he told me with a combination of weariness, humiliation, and dismay. He appeared

thoroughly exhausted—unshaven and tousled with dark hollow circles under his eyes. He was on the road over two-hundred days per year, he said. The rest of the time he either “crashed” with his girlfriend in Brooklyn or at his parents’ house in western Massachusetts. “I’m attached to my Blackberry,” he said. “I don’t know how I’m going to turn it off. I wasn’t supposed to bring it, but I snuck it in. Don’t tell anyone,” he added, laughing. I told him I wouldn’t tell anyone. Sitting in the cafeteria that first evening as we sipped our tea, I got the sense that he was at least at a crossroads, perhaps in the midst of some sort of crisis. I suspected he had come to the retreat in search of answers about which direction his life should follow. I liked him very much. He was one of the youngest retreatants, and I admired his willingness to cut ties with his girlfriend and his eventful, ultra-connected life. It occurred to me that his decision to attend the retreat might have been more difficult than my own.

“You should enjoy those things,” Greg said to Phil. “You should definitely enjoy those things. Appreciate everything worthy of appreciation. But understand them for what they are. Passing.

Fleeting.” Greg looked at the group. “You’ve all been around a long time. You know what I mean. The chocolate ice cream tastes good, but two or three hours later you want some more. Mindfulness provides lasting joy. It takes practice, but it lasts.”

It is impossible to deny that meditation and mindfulness have the potential to provide lasting joy. Sitting in the meeting that day, however, I started to day-dream about the converse of this claim—that the sources of other experiences of joy do not last. I thought about the growing catalog of experiences with my children. In the context of having had a nervous breakdown, partly as a result of my children’s infant cries, their simple happiness and sense of wonder didn’t merely reinforce my love of life. My children gave me a foothold. For months I had been trying to think of a better analogy, but nothing came close. If life was a rock-climbing excursion, these experiences were the cracks and crevices in which I fixed a belay. Through this belay I looped a rope that held me up.

After the question-and-answer session I wound my way back to my room and started writing in my notebook. We had been advised to

leave books, notebooks, and writing instruments at home, but I knew that no amount of meditation and silence could ever placate the anxiety that befalls me whenever I fail to pack any one of these items—the book, the notebook, or the pen. So it was with a sense of rebellion that I filled the pages of my notebook with a story I had been trying to tell for months.

My daughter Lucy knew how she wanted to spend the ten dollars she had received from Aunt Sue for her fourth birthday. She wanted to buy a baby. We were not surprised. Whenever she was flush with disposable cash in the past year, she had declared that she wanted to buy a baby—not a “doll,” a “baby”—usually right away. Before the desire for babies, the cash was most often spent on stuffed animals, resulting in an eclectic collection that rose nearly two feet off her bedroom closet floor. Although she still coddled and chatted up the stuffed animals, we noticed that she did so with less devotion and with a hint of superiority, and that her sympathies were shifting to her budding progeny, now almost a dozen strong. As with most children and their toys, the cost held no sway in

her determination of the value of a doll. A trodden yard-sale artifact or an American Girl with shimmering blonde hair given by her grandmother on Christmas morning: both were equally important, because they were in her care.

With ten dollars to spend the only local option was Ocean State Job Lot, a discount superstore located in the last space of a partially vacant strip mall. Job Lot sold at deeper discounts whatever goods had been cast away from other discount superstores, such as Wal-Mart. It was one of my favorite retail haunts. Where else could you buy 250 paper clips for fifty cents? A bottle of Noxzema shaving cream for one dollar? Packed into several aisles in a rear corner of the store, the expansive toy collection was a little shabby, but in fairness to Job Lot the prices reflected that shabbiness. After we climbed out of the car, Lucy insisted on carrying the money. It had begun to sprinkle, and I pulled the hood of her sweat-shirt over her head. Her pockets were too shallow to hold the money, so she gripped the bill tightly in her tiny fist, thrust forward and high like an Olympic torchbearer. We held hands as we walked across the parking lot.

As depression distills surroundings into a collection of stony, soulless objects, it renders the possibility of encountering anything like joy or a love of life absurdly abstract. Anxiety, on the other hand, prevents a “keener zest” for life precisely because the mind, the senses, the ability to feel emotion are all clogged with the detritus of obsessive thoughts and a nervous system gone awry. This is why, no matter where I am, no matter the task that has my attention, I am determined to grant myself permission to pause, submit to joyous experiences, and absorb whatever they have in store for however long they last.

As the doors sighed open and we stepped into the bright capacious space of the store, a couple cashiers turned their heads, and then a dozen or so customers and clerks followed those gazes, and each one of them, as far as I could see, smiled warmly at Lucy, who was resolute with her money held high. It was then, in that unlikely store with its rows of plastic knick-knacks and polyester clothing, so far removed from the natural world or some other sacred site, that I felt the deepest love for Lucy, as well as a certain affection one rung down

from love for the customers who were so bewitched by my daughter.

We discovered three dolls costing ten dollars or less. There were about a dozen each of two similar dolls. Both had ringlets of blonde hair whose boxes included plastic bottles, bowls, spoons, and rattles. I found the sole remaining doll lying on its side in a partially-crushed box, nearly hidden behind a row of big, twenty-dollar dolls. It was a bald baby clad in blue, single-piece fleece pajamas. Because it was the only one of its kind remaining, and because it was bald, I knew Lucy would want to claim this doll. Perhaps due to their apparent vulnerability, bald dolls and bald infants always received her most preferential loving care. The doll came with a blue, star-shaped pillow about the size of a half-dollar, a pacifier attached to her pajamas that fit firmly in the doll's O-shaped mouth, and a miniature blue blanket that I would later mistake for a cloth to wipe eyeglasses. An arrow containing the words "Squeeze Me!" pointed to a hole in the clear plastic box that exposed the baby's belly. Sitting on the dirty floor with the box in her lap, Lucy poked her finger through the hole, and with each poke the baby said "Mama, Dada,"

then cried, and finally giggled.

"She says 'Mama,'" Lucy said.

"She has beautiful, blue eyes, just like you," I said.

"I have one blue eye and one special eye," she corrected me.

This was true. One of my daughter's irises was hazel on the bottom half and blue on the upper, though the hazel sometimes appeared purely brown, other times purely green, depending on the light. Having made the blunder before, I assumed it revealed an unconscious wish that her eyes were the same color. Why would I want to protect her from this magnificent trait? It was something nearly everyone mentioned when they met her, and I would never want Lucy to feel different than other children, differences being those things the cruelest kids tend to be prey upon. "Silly me," I said. "But I think you have two special eyes."

"They close when I tilt her head back," she said. "Her eyes."

"When she sleeps."

"Yeah."

"It's probably time for her nap."

"She'll take a nap when we get home."

Her capacity for intuitive,

free-flowing thoughts, of which I was often envious, produced unique names for objects and pets. Her goldfish was called Hello Kitty, twin dolls Foo-foo and Fee-fee, a captured caterpillar Fuzzy. A honeybee harvesting pollen on a cluster of sedum was called Bizz, a variation of Buzz. For reasons impossible to know, Blow-blow Coconut was the name she assigned to one of her beloved stuffed dogs.

She would name this new doll—her new baby—Coco and Baby Squeaks.

“Two names?” I would ask her.

“One name. Coco and Baby Squeaks.”

In this store my daughter, whom I loved so completely, expressed the same sort of parental love which, with the blessings of good fortune, she will pass on to her own. Could life ever feel any more joyous?

The only available cashier was the gloomy teen with thin facial hair sprouting from a pimpled chin who had accepted my credit card many times before. He was usually hunched over a register, but once in a while I would notice him dawdling in the aisles, scuffing the heels of his unlaced sneakers loudly on the tiles, never stopping, as far as I

could tell, to stock a shelf or sweep the floor. As Lucy approached him his eyes widened and he leaned forward with his forearms resting on the counter.

“What do you have there?” he asked. Lucy handed him the box. “Thank you,” he said. He waved the box under a scanner gun mounted next to the register. “That’ll be eight dollars and ninety-nine cents.” He made change from the bill Lucy placed on the counter. “Here’s one dollar and one cent. This is yours. And here’s your receipt.”

With her arms wrapped around the box, Lucy was unable to take the money and receipt, so the cashier handed them to me with a warm smile, and then he waved wistfully as we walked away. It was the first time I had ever seen him smile, and I got the impression he wished to follow us out of the store and continue the exchange with Lucy that appeared to lift his spirits, however briefly.

The sprinkling rain had intensified into widely scattered drops that plopped like tiny corks popping on the hoods and roofs of the cars. Standing on the sidewalk under the awning, the rain splashed off the parking lot and sprayed my shoes with a silver shimmer. I

lifted Lucy into my arms. "I'll cover the hole so she doesn't get wet," Lucy said, referring to the opening in the box over the doll's belly. I thought she might place a hand there, but instead she curled her torso completely over the box. The side of Lucy's head was pressed to my chest, her eyes fixed on the rain-splattered parking lot. "I'm ready," she said.

I was still in the process of being lifted up by Lucy, and I wanted to prolong the experience as long as possible. Once home, I would have no choice but to crawl inside the shell of busyness where I spent most of my time. There was no Buddhist mindfulness inside that shell, only a hushed determination to get things done. No Latin studies. No reading deeper than *Amelia Bedelia*. Dinner preparation interrupted by the assembly of a *Thomas the Tank* floor puzzle. Standing on the curb, I thought about telling Lucy that we must wait for the rain to lighten up before venturing out. Then I thought, let me get on with the business of climbing higher. My daughter just gave me a foothold, so I might as well use it.

LIKE BREAD THE LIGHT

JOE WILKINS

Down there is the bar ditch. The mustard tall as me in places and my hair long as it was then caught up in wild mustard and a few stray burs and bits of driftwood from whenever the last rain was and ruffles and sighs of dried mud and dust when you laid me down on the dirt and gravel and kissed me in the bar ditch.

You were pulling at my t-shirt. The snap of my jeans. My panties. I was thinking I would like you to touch as much of me as needed touching. Which right then was a whole lot. I was thinking but not really thinking. Not like you. In your damn head the way you always were I wondered if you might up and decide it was not a good idea and leave me there. Leave me there in the bar ditch. You didn't. You did one good thing for me. I can say that. God but all those long days hauling hay in the summer sun had roped our arms and umbered our shoulders and necks and strawed our hair. If we were not lovely there in the dust and mustard of the bar ditch then I am telling you it is all for shit. Your wrists the way a river kinks around a rock. Slope and flower of my own breast and I was breathless.

My old mother watching TV in the trailer. Peanuts in a can of Coors. Dinner plate of crushed cigarettes. My father in

Tacoma or Oklahoma or some other gone-the-fuck-away place. It oughtn't to have been any good between us. Young and kindly and dumb as we were. I guess maybe it wasn't. Maybe my old mother was right about you. But even after. When you had gone and given yourself over to your own fears. Those ones you called dreams. When I had decided there was nothing left to do but wreck my stupid self on every mean man I ran up against. Every dry-knuckled, chap-lipped man. Even after.

I tell you this spring the rains came hard and the bar ditch ran like a river and in the culvert a tangle of watersnakes unspooled. I saw one day lifting from the ragweed a heron wide as god. Now I move my hands like this over my hips and feel the wind. Now it is the wind I kiss when I do this with my lips.

I guess I hope a few things for you. A wind to roll in your mouth. On your tongue the iron tang and mud lick of dust. That sometimes you are sad in the middle of the day and go walking along a gravel road and squeeze between your blunt thumb and finger the stems of weeds.

I hope you understand that summer we lived on sunlight. Gnashed like bread the light.

Would you believe it? If I told you it's still in me? That here at the lip of the ditch I fucking shine?

LISTEN

THEODORA ZIOLKOWSKI

—for Rose M. Upton

I watched the reedy blue cords in your hand crease
and release as an avalanche
of noise crashed from your mouth, the glass baking dish

exploding to the floor—cinnamon and flour powdering
your apron, the ruins of the dish
glittering in your hand. Once in a while I see the pieces

falling hard to the floor like wedding rice, and then allow myself
a memory, as if the fleeting sense of your
body is all I have to go by. Kept from the sea, in a hotel

with walls papered in clover, you would insist you heard the water
as you stared from a sleeper sofa
covered in sand, squeezing the neck of your cane as I occupied

the space your blind eyes gazed into. Learning of your death was like
sitting on a ship without any windows.

Last night, water flooded the room by the Atlantic where its current

used to murmur under the voices on your audio books.
I want to know if the egrets
still whisper in the trees, or if the dolls with their porcelain

hands and satin dresses still stand in the room of your attic,
smiling in that perfect
motionless way of theirs, hearing everything perfectly.

TOKENS

**THEODORA
ZIOLKOWSKI**

Etta is the happiest I've ever seen her—
too happy. Emerging from a spinning rack
of sparkly earrings, she exclaims, "Now here

is the lady who showed me her breasts!"
Her bangles click, her eyelashes bat and
the quiche I have brought her is a sad token

in this room filled with jewels. "We need more
surfaces!" Etta cries, her free hand pledging
the breast where the lump was removed.

She skitters this way and that, the quiche
like a burnt face in her palm as she blinks
about for a place to put it. Years from today,

others will tumble from test tubes, punch fists
through cradles sculpted in chicken wire,
but tonight there is a woman on television

screaming from in front of a green screen,
telling us to run with our knives. Purple banners
are empty of faces, she tells us. People don't want

to see change, and we're all playing a part, I know,
when I rise from my bed, ankles and wrists jerked
by invisible strings. I bite into a slice of orange,

but all I taste is the rind. Every space needs
more surfaces, I think, as I set my wedding
ring on the nightstand and something rises from
within me. Something quite dying.

ON WRITING AND WOMANHOOD: AN INTERVIEW WITH MARIE HOWE

BY

MARISSA SCHWALM

I met Marie Howe on a cool fall day in her hotel room before the start of the 13th annual Writing by Degrees Conference, where she was to deliver a keynote address. It is no surprise that I was immediately taken with her. Not easily star struck, I found Howe's quiet charm and warmth disarming. Her daughter Inan played on an iPad with an old friend of Marie's while we sat in the corner huddled up with my questions. We pulled our chairs closely together, so much so that our legs were almost touching, and set out to learn more about Marie Howe's work and how she navigates this often difficult world as a writer, a mother, and a woman.

MS: In some ways your books seem to exist in very different realms. For example, *The Good Thief* uses biblical and mythical allusions while *What the Living Do* uses real and personal names. Do you see your work shifting again with the most recent publication, *The Kingdom of Ordinary Time*?

MH: Well, there are certainly biblical things in *The Kingdom of Ordinary Time* too. There's the whole life of Mary, the mother of Jesus, in there. But I believe we don't think about this when we're writing, as you know. You're just trying to be receptive to what might want to come through you. *The Kingdom of Ordinary Time* was a much different book from *What the Living Do*, as *What*

the Living Do is almost cinematic. I wanted it to be without any photographer's thumb in the way of the pictures and have there be very clear narratives. But *The Kingdom of Ordinary Time* I think is a little funnier. I hope it's funnier.

MS: Oh, it definitely is.

MH: It was written during the Bush-Cheney years, and that was a horrible time in our country's life and terrible things were happening. Of course, terrible things are still happening always in our world. But our country was overtly doing so many things that were illegal in my opinion. So there was all that going on, and this immense despair and fear. My marriage had broken up, and I was trying to find myself again. And also, trying to understand what it means to live a meaningful life as one gets older and older. It's so stunning to grow older. We hear all the people older than us laughing, falling down laughing and holding their stomachs, but as your life changes, your aesthetic changes. I felt myself nosing into another kind of voice in that book. Again, it's not always that conscious.

MS: In many ways *The Kingdom of Ordinary Time* seems to be about learning how to breathe again, or a moving outward away from yourself. As your work has progressed, it also seems that, especially with your most recent book, you have been speaking more directly with your audience. I'm curious, since you were saying that this wasn't a conscious decision, how did this interest present itself to you?

MH: Well, I think that the speaking to the audience really began in *What the Living Do*. There was a crucial poem that I was trying to write out about my brother John being afraid of sharp things, being afraid of something in his eye, and then having to get these needles in his eye. Over many weeks I kept trying to write into that story, and finally I realized I wasn't telling John, he already knew, and I

wasn't telling myself; I was speaking to you guys who I hadn't met yet. And I feel very much in discourse with everybody when writing. My first book was much more hermetic. I felt afraid as a beginning writer. It was frightening to begin to write into one's experiences. It was also a deliverance. So I feel more and more that this discourse can't happen unless there's a sense of everybody else being there when it's happening. Maybe that's what you're experiencing.

MS: It does seem that you pull your audience into your work and ask them what it means to be part of this time now and this culture.

MH: We live in a very challenging culture in a very challenging time in our world's history. This desire for a common conversation is very deep in me as it is in many people, in many artists. But I keep thinking of Adrienne's [Rich] *Dream of a Common Language*—how do we speak about these things that matter so much to us as a culture without alienating each other or without ranting? As a poet, how do we speak about these things in conversation and still come to discovery?

MS: These are important questions, and one of the things about your work that I greatly admire is how it continues to struggle with the concept of being female in our culture and also, more particularly, the transition between girlhood and womanhood. I'm curious about your feelings about this focus?

MH: I think it's still one of the most important questions to ask, and I'm so happy to hear you say that because, just the other day, I was thinking there are these voices, and you as a woman, I'm sure you have them, that say: "Why don't you just be quiet?" It is still there. For example, that one girl was just shot in Pakistan in the head. Melala.

MS: Yes, Malala Yousafza.

MH: I mean, how does one speak about the patriarchy's violence to women without alienating the world? How does one speak into that? Because it is the most profound problem. You know, the feminine is still hated by the patriarchy. I don't mean by men, but by the patriarchy itself. It's clear in this year's election. It's clear with what's happening with the rise of the Taliban again. It's clear with the backlash against women in this country.

And I am stumped because poetry is always a wrestling with one's self. And a wrestling with silence and language, and not knowing what can happen. But more and more I'm hungry for a visionary art that will show us a way through. Like Adrienne. I mean, Adrienne Rich changed the world. And she wrote into subjects so silent that nobody even knew they were there. I remember reading her books when I was thirty and going "What is she talking about?" I couldn't understand them; they were too grown up for me. I was so steeped in the way things are, that I couldn't see the way things are. And she wrote visionary poetry that shined a light into the room. Well, we need that. I don't know who the poets will be, but more and more I feel like let's do that, let's begin to imagine. Let's begin to envision a world where this cyclical, damaging impulse or compulsion stops. See, these are political things to say—where do we find the intersection where poetry and the deep concerns can wrestle it out into something that's compelling to listen to? And also, that we can engage in. There are poets that have done it, but it's difficult. Who are some poets who you think have done it?

MS: Definitely Adrienne Rich. Besides *Dream of a Common Language* and *Driving into the Wreck*, her *Twenty-One Love Poems* managed to mesh together the personal with the political while asking ourselves to envision where we see ourselves in all of this complication. Marge Piercy is another example, though she doesn't seem to be as recognized as I would like her to be in the academic world.

MH: No, she's not.

MS: Especially due to the way that she challenged and still is finding ways to challenge all that we know.

MH: Maxine Hong Kingston is another example. Or Alice Walker. These are some of the great women, the great spirits. These women will not shut up.

MS: I think that this is something close to both of our hearts.

MH: I just think about that girl. That man walking on that bus. And walking in front of everybody. Terrorizing everyone, and shooting that girl in the head because she wants to be educated.

MS: As we're speaking about this, do you think that poetry should inherently be productive to the world that we inhabit?

MH: The writing I love has been poetry that opens doors, or shines a light, that makes a vision possible. Whether it's Emily Dickinson, or Walt Whitman. Look at his vision. Or Dickinson—she described states that no one had ever described before, and when she did so she domesticated them for us. And when we felt that kind of despair, or that kind of ecstasy, we weren't going to be alone anymore. Also, Lucile Clifton.

I think that Brenda Hillman is a poet who is profoundly political, spiritual, and feminist. She insists always on wrestling through these difficult things with brilliant, hilarious, and profound lyricism. I adore Brenda's work; I couldn't live without it. I think that together we could name about fifty people. But the whole idea that poetry makes nothing happens comes from Auden who wrote the most political poems of the twentieth century. I think that in some ways that idea coming from him is almost as if that is his argument with himself. Because ultimately he went ahead and did it. He wrote them, and I

am grateful to him for that.

MS: We're listing these great poets, and at times the work of great poets can seem to speak to each other. More specifically, every now and again it seems that two books might benefit from being read in conjunction. Doing this offers a texture or an additional depth in the reading. How would you respond to my stating that *What the Living Do* and Donald Hall's *Without* are two books of such a fashion?

MH: Well, that makes me very happy. Jane [Kenyon] was a friend of mine, and Jane is all through *What the Living Do*. I love her so much, and her poems changed my life. I didn't leave the house without her book *The Boat of Quiet Hours* for about two years. First, Jane wasn't afraid to be a spiritual person and I was. She helped me to become less embarrassed. And she had great faith, and there was such luminosity and simplicity with her work. She just means the world to me, and I adore Don and I love how he loved her. She just flooded that whole book. And in fact when Johnny, my brother, was dying—he was living and dying—I went home to Rochester for his last eight weeks. I was staying with my mom and I would go down to the basement, go to the typewriter, and just type and smoke. I smoked in those days; yuck. And I couldn't write anything but I would just sit down there and smoke. But Jane wrote me these couple of letters and one of them I remember being down there in the dinky little family room of my mother's last house. After all the kids had left she had moved to a smaller house. And I opened this letter from Jane, and Jane said, "I just wrote this poem and I want you to have it." And the poem was "Let Evening Come." I read it typed out and, well, there are no words that can say what that did for me, how that helped me.

The other twin to my book, a very different twin than Don, is Tony Hoagland's *Donkey Gospel*. We were writing our books together, and he was pretty much the midwife for *What the Living Do*. I was resistant, and he kept saying, "Marie, just go to your desk, get a

bunch of those papers and send them to me.” No exaggeration to say that he probably said that to me two dozen times before I actually got some of the papers and sent them to him. It was weeks and weeks and then he was like, “Okay, send me more.” And he really, really helped me finish that book. Nobody does anything alone. We’re all in conversation with each other, all touching each other, and Tony and Jane were really huge.

MS: That is amazing. As you’re looking ahead and working, what do you think is on the forefront for you?

MH: Well, I’m trying to finish a book of prose that has been really something to write. It’s essays and stories, and it is a wrangle. I don’t know how people do it. I’ve been doing mostly that for the last three years. But back to the poems, I feel very close to what you first brought up. Virginia Woolf said it, “The angel of the house has been killed.” Women have still not told the truth about their physical life. There’s so much more to say, and to celebrate, investigate, and sing about. I feel really interested writing a book that’s even more about being a woman, or having a daughter, but having said that I don’t know that that will happen.

But that’s what I’ve been thinking about. And about these girls in Pakistan, and the women in Congo. I have this good friend, Eve Ensler, and she just built this place in the Congo for these women and girls who have been gang raped almost to death. And there is this one doctor that sews them up time and again. You know, these women designed and built this city of hope themselves. And they dance, they go there and they heal, they get operated on, they are sewn together. And it’s complicated, Marissa, because our cell phones are the reason why this is happening in the Congo. They need the materials for the batteries and they are terrorizing the people to get them off the land, and they are raping women to do that. And girls, girls my daughter’s age. And the trafficking? We could go on and on. How do you not go crazy?

MS: Certainly. So how do you? How do you not go crazy in this world?

MH: I think that it's more how do you stay awake to what's happening without being overwhelmed by it. I think that love, daily love, living with them and serving them and being with them is a way. And I think that taking action is another. Eve is one of the sanest people I know because she actually takes action all the time. Brenda Hillman takes action all the time. She's in Code Pink and she said, "It feels great. You no longer are constantly walking around thinking 'I should be doing something' because I am. And it really helps." So, I feel that that's a start. But as an artist we try to find a way, and every once in a while, as we've mentioned Adrienne breaks through, Lucile breaks through, Maxine Hong Kingston breaks through, Whitman breaks through. I think Tony is doing for men and for white people, though some people find it hard, what some of those people were doing for us all. I think to stay in the moment helps.

MS: Yes, being conscious of ourselves may be the first step. Shifting in another direction, a bizarre sort of question that I have for you is: What is one question that you've always been expected to be asked but haven't?

MH: I think influences. I don't think that people ever ask enough about influences. I ask my graduate students: who is your favorite poet right now, whose book is next to you all the time. Now go and find out who that person loves. And then read that poet and then find out who that poet loved and read them. Find the generations and go back as far as you possible can. Think of Jane Kenyon, she loved Keats. And through Jane, I ended up reading those Odes much more carefully and closely again. I always loved them but then I really fell in love with them. Or I love Hopkins, Herbert. I love John Donne. I love whoever wrote the Book of Job. Those people had a

huge influence, and these were people who were actually writing about the state of their soul.

MS: You spoke earlier about Jane not being ashamed of her faith. What it is about your upbringing, or your place in life, that might have influenced your relationship with spirituality?

MH: I think that I'm much more comfortable now. But for a while it felt a little goofy. In the 80's Sharon Olds was writing about sex, and people were writing about race, and it was all really great but I felt a little like there is this part of yourself that's central and that you're shy to talk about even to your closest friends. We don't have the right words for these things; we have to find new words. But Jane's faith, and she did have faith, was so much a part of her everyday life that it was just in the poems effortlessly. It helped to see that. And Brenda, too. She's another very spiritual poet. And Jean Valentine, too. I love her poems. Jane Cooper. These people mean so much to me, and every other woman who's ever written.

MS: As my last question: we struggle with and talk a lot about Narrative Poetics in academia, and what to we do with the you/the speaker issue. I've read many interviews of yours where at times you're referred to directly or other times called 'the speaker'. I'd love for you to tell me your position on this.

MH: I think we should always say 'the speaker'. What does Emily Dickenson say? "It does not mean me, but a supposed person." There's a way when one's speaking, even speaking to each other like this, Tony used to say: "My representative meets your representative". So there's a way where, finally, we're scalded down, but we don't even know who we are. To be able to say anything in the poem is important. Often a voice will come and it is not my own. I mean it's not the way I'm talking to you now. But it is a voice and I just follow it.

Shouldn't we allow speakers to say anything they need to say, and then we can either dismiss the poem or accept it? But think of all the great poems written in voices who aren't at times likable, but they show us aspects of our humanity.

We need to follow this convention of saying "the speaker" because as awkward as it can seem some days, we need it. Look at Whitman. It's not Walter Whitman talking in *Song of Myself*, it's a supposed person. Look at Dickinson. She has dozens of identities in her work. I don't think that it's any of our business. I love poems that are brave. I don't let people use "you," because it's breaking a barrier.

MS: And it's an assumption, which can be dangerous.

MH: Right. People can read all kinds of things into poems that haven't even happened.

MS: Thank you so much for joining us today.



CONTRIBUTORS

NIN ANDREWS is the author of several books, including *The Book of Orgasms*, *Why They Grow Wings*, *Midlife Crisis with Dick and Jane*, *Sleeping with Houdini*, *Dear Professor*, *Do You Live in a Vacuum*, *The Secret Life of Mannequins* and *Southern Comfort*. She keeps a blog of comics at ninandrewswriter.blogspot.com.

DYLAN BARGTEIL is a PhD candidate in physics at NYU. He studied poetry with the Jiménez-Porter Writers' House at University of Maryland, where he served as Editor-in-Chief of *Stylus*, the university's journal of art and literature. He has been awarded the Jiménez-Porter Literary Prize for poetry, and his work has appeared in *Little Patuxent Review* and *Poetry Quarterly*. Dylan is interested in anonymous and public arts projects and the rebranding of science as a creative act.

J. BRADLEY is the author of the novella *Bodies Made of Smoke* (HOUSEFIRE, 2012). He is the Web Editor of *Monkeybicycle* and the Falconer of Fiction at NAP. Find more about his misadventures at iheartfailure.net.

JACKIE CLARK is the series editor of "Poets off Poetry" and "Song of the Week" for *Coldfront Magazine* and is the recipient of a 2012 New Jersey State Council on the Arts Fellowship in Poetry. Jackie lives in Jersey City and can be found online at nohelpforthat.com. Her first book of poems, *Aphoria*, is forthcoming from Brooklyn Arts Press.

MEG COWEN is the author of a chapbook, *When Surrounded By Fire*. She has received the Elizabeth Curry Poetry Prize and her recent writing appears or is forthcoming in *The Los Angeles Review*, *Permafrost*, *Tar River Poetry* and *The Pinch*. She teaches creative

writing at Southern Connecticut State University, where she edits *Noctua Review*.

ANDREA ENGLAND is a mother, poet, and lover of Michigan winters, as well as a PhD candidate in poetry at Western Michigan University. Her poems have appeared in *Passages North*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Cutthroat Magazine*, and others. Most recently, her manuscript "Other Geographies" was a finalist for the 2012 Four Way Books Intro Prize in Poetry.

MAIA EVRONA is a poet as well as a memoirist. Her poetry has appeared in *Prairie Schooner*. An excerpt from her memoir on growing up with a chronic illness, from which "The Foghorn Cough" is also excerpted, has appeared in *Blood and Thunder: Musings on the Art of Medicine*. In addition to her own writing, her translations of Yiddish-language literature have appeared in *Ploughshares* and *The Massachusetts Review*.

MOLLY FAERBER lives in Providence, Rhode Island, where she is pursuing an MFA in fiction from Brown University.

LAURA DAVIES FOLEY is the author of three poetry collections: *The Glass Tree*, *Syringa*, and *Mapping the Fourth Dimension*. *The Glass Tree* was chosen as finalist for the Philip Levine Poetry Prize. She received the Grand Prize for the *Atlanta Review's* International Poetry Contest, a poetry fellowship from the Frost Place, and Columbia University's Bunner Prize for her work on Wallace Stevens. She holds graduate degrees in English Literature from Columbia University, and is a volunteer chaplain and creative arts facilitator in hospitals. She lives in Pomfret, Vermont with her partner and their three dogs.

ROBERT HARGREAVES worked for thirty-one years as a government veterinarian, striving to protect the public and livestock producers from animal diseases. His interest in helping people led to Vietnam in the mid-60s with International Voluntary Services to help the Vietnamese raise chickens. He has published an ebook, *Mr. Bob the Chicken Engineer*, about his Vietnam experiences.

SUZANNE MARIE HOPCROFT's poetry is forthcoming or has appeared in *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *South Dakota Review*, *PANK*, *Anderbo*, *Weave Magazine*, and other journals. Suzanne is a PhD candidate in Comparative Literature at Yale University and writes from Long Beach, California.

MARIE HOWE is the author of three volumes of poetry, *The Kingdom of Ordinary Time* (2008); *The Good Thief* (1998); and *What the Living Do* (1997), and is the co-editor of a book of essays, *In the Company of My Solitude: American Writing from the AIDS Pandemic* (1994). Stanley Kunitz selected Howe for a Lavan Younger Poets Prize from the American Academy of Poets. She has, in addition, been a fellow at the Bunting Institute at Radcliffe College and a recipient of NEA and Guggenheim fellowships. Her poems have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, *Poetry*, *Agni*, *Ploughshares*, *Harvard Review*, and *The Partisan Review*, among others. Currently, Howe teaches creative writing at Sarah Lawrence College, Columbia, and New York University. She is the 2012-2014 Poet Laureate of New York State.

JASON M. JONES works as a Production Supervisor on academic journals in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. His work has appeared most recently in *Blue Mesa Review*, *Ascent*, and *The Pinch*.

HOLLY KARAPETKOVA's poetry, prose, and translations from Bulgarian have appeared widely. Her first book is *Words We Might One Day Say* from Washington Writers' Publishing House.

BRIAN KEELER devotes his time to painting highly acclaimed landscapes, still lifes, figures, and portraits in oil, pastel, and watercolor. He has given workshops at various schools and art associations, including Keystone College, and he has been a rostered artist with the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts. He lives in Wyalusing, Pennsylvania. For more information about his work, visit briankeeler.com

ANDREA LEWIS writes short stories and essays from her home on Vashon Island, Washington. Her work has appeared in *Cold*

Mountain Review, *The MacGuffin*, *Bellevue Literary Review*, and elsewhere. She is the winner of the Thin Air 2011 Genre Blur Contest, and two of her stories have been nominated for the Pushcart Prize. She is one of the founders of Richard Hugo House, a community center devoted to the literary arts in Seattle, Washington.

CODY LUMPKIN was born in Georgia around hog-killing time. He is currently a Visiting Assistant Professor in English at Marshall University and has served as a Senior Poetry Reader for *Prairie Schooner*. His poems have recently appeared in *South Dakota Review*, *Yemassee*, and *Tar River Poetry*.

CHRIS MINK is currently a PhD candidate at Florida State University. His work has appeared in *The Greensboro Review*, *The Chattahoochee Review*, *Hobart*, and *Anti*, among others.

TRAVIS MOSSOTTI's first collection of poems *About the Dead* (USU Press, 2011) was awarded the 2011 May Swenson Poetry Award by contest judge Garrison Keillor. He was

awarded a spring 2012 grant from the Sustainable Arts Foundation and was also recently named Poet-in-Residence at the Endangered Wolf Center in St. Louis, Missouri. Mossotti's chapbook *My Life as an Island* is forthcoming with Moon City Press in early 2013.

ISAAC PRESSNELL's work has appeared in *Cream City Review*, *Hotel Amerika*, *Indiana Review*, *Ninth Letter*, *Redivider*, and many other journals. He currently lives in Lamoni, Iowa, where he teaches English at Graceland University.

ALEXANDRA SALERNO's short fiction has appeared in *The Gettysburg Review*, *Sou'wester*, *Narrative*, and elsewhere. Her novel manuscript was recently a finalist in the 2011 James Jones First Novel Prize. She lives in Columbus, Ohio.

EMILY SCHULTEN's poems appear currently or are forthcoming in *Prairie Schooner*, *New Ohio Review*, *Greensboro Review*, *Zone 3*, *Cream City Review*, and *storySouth*. She is the author of *Rest in Black Haw* (New Plains Press) and an assistant professor at the University of West Georgia.

MATT SUMPTER is an MFA candidate in poetry at The Ohio State University, where he works as an Associate Poetry Editor for *The Journal*. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Boulevard*, *32 Poems*, *West Branch Wired*, *Linebreak*, *The Los Angeles Review*, and elsewhere.

TINA TOCCO is a graduate of Manhattanville College's Master of Arts in Writing Program and a former editor-in-chief of *Inkwell*. Her work has appeared in *Clockhouse Review*, *Italian Americana*, *Inkwell*, and other publications. Her poetry was included in the anthology *Wild Dreams: The Best of Italian Americana* (Fordham University Press, 2008). Tina is currently a student in Manhattanville's new MFA in Creative Writing Program.

ALEXANDRA TODAK is currently studying fiction in the MFA program at Rutgers-Camden. She is originally from Easton, Pennsylvania and attended St. Mary's College of Maryland.

JULIE MARIE WADE is the author of two collections of lyric nonfiction, *Wishbone: A Memoir in Fractures*

(Colgate University Press, 2010), which won the Lambda Literary Award for Lesbian Memoir, and *Small Fires* (Sarabande Books, 2011), which was selected for the Linda Bruckheimer Series in Kentucky Literature. Wade is also the author of the poetry collections *Without* (Finishing Line Press, 2010) and the forthcoming *Postage Due* (White Pine Press, 2013), winner of the Marie Alexander Poetry Series. She lives with her partner and their two cats in the Sunshine State, where she is the newest member of the graduate teaching faculty in creative writing at Florida International University in Miami.

WILLIAM WALSH has published five books: *Speak So I Shall Know Thee: Interviews with Southern Writers*, *The Ordinary Life of a Sculptor*, *The Conscience of My Other Being*, *Under the Rock Umbrella: Contemporary American Poets from 1951-1977*, and most recently *David Bottoms: Critical Essays and Interviews* (McFarland). His work has appeared in the *AWP Chronicle*, *Five Points*, *The Kenyon Review*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *North American Review*,

and elsewhere. He is also a world-renowned photographer.

PATRICK VINCENT WELSH is the author of *Hard Times Galore*, a collection of one hundred dark and humorous stories concerning the modern American condition. Selections from the collection have recently been published in or are forthcoming from *Euphony*, *The Journal of the University of Chicago*, *Danse Macabre*, *The Literary Underground*, *Black Heart Magazine*, and *Juked*, among others. He lives in a mostly Mexican neighborhood in Chicago and he writes all the damned time.

SEAN WHITE is a writer and poet, as well as a fine artist, whose written works have appeared in journals such as *descant*, *Trajectory*, and *Clare*. He lives in Wisconsin.

THOMAS WHITE's work has appeared in *The Journal*, *Colorado Review*, *Green Mountains Review* and *Paradigm: Volume 3*, and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. He lives with his family in New Hampshire.

JOE WILKINS is the author of a memoir, *The Mountain and the Fathers: Growing up on the Big Dry* (Counterpoint, 2012), and two collections of poems, *Notes from the Journey Westward*, winner of the 17th Annual White Pine Press Poetry Prize, and *Killing the Murnion Dogs* (Black Lawrence Press, 2011). His poems, essays, and stories have appeared in *The Georgia Review*, *The Southern Review*, *Ecotone*, *The Sun*, *Orion*, and *Slate*, among other magazines and literary journals. He lives with his wife, son, and daughter in north Iowa. You can find him online at joewilkins.org.

THEODORA ZIOLKOWSKI lives in the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont and works as a copywriter in New Hampshire. Her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Prairie Schooner*, *The Salon*, *Gargoyle Magazine*, and *The WRUV Reader: A Vermont Anthology*.

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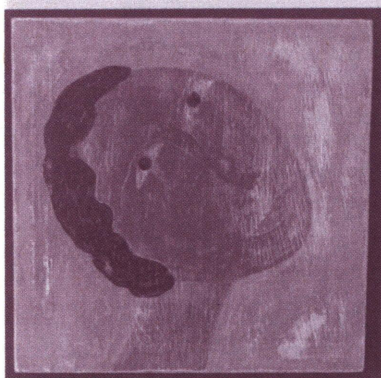
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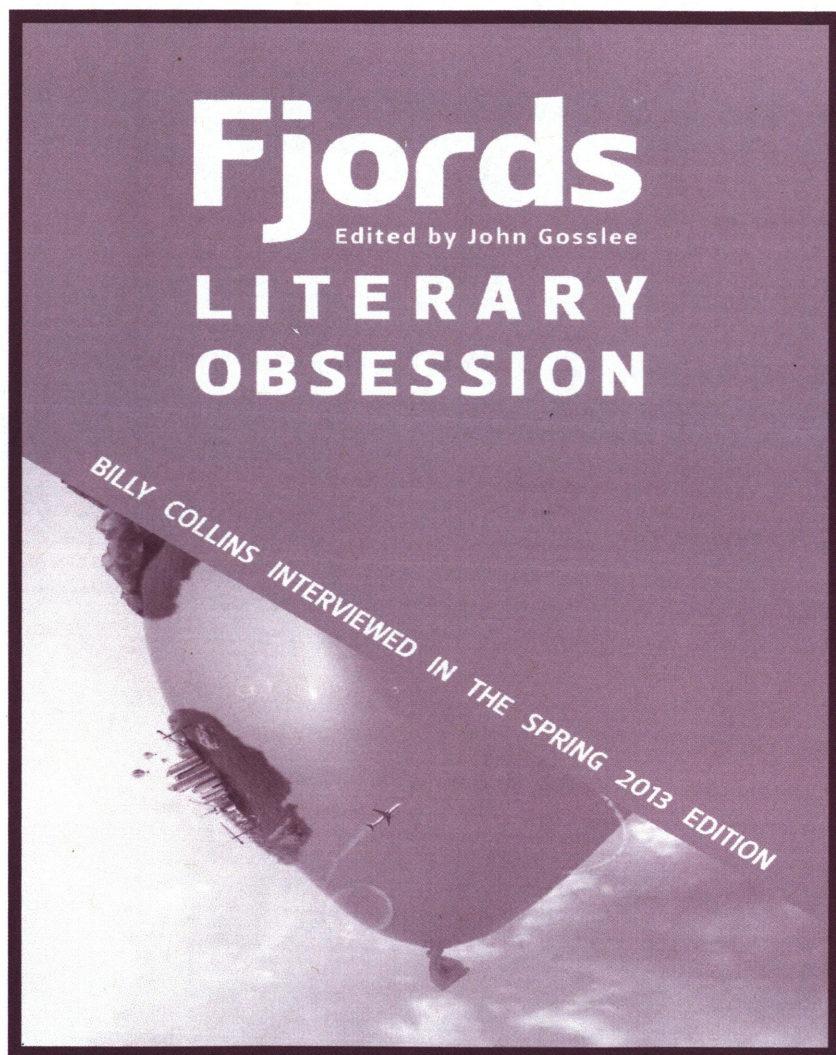
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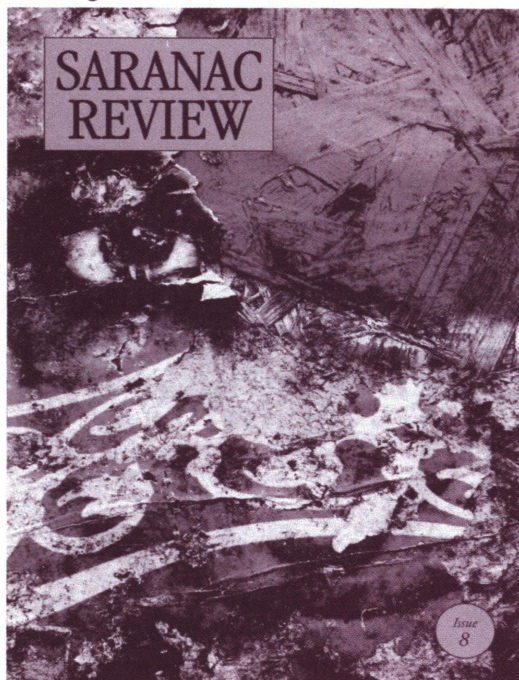


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J. BRADLEY
JACKIE CLARK
MEG COWEN
ANDREA ENGLAND
MAIA EVRONA
MOLLY FAERBER
LAURA DAVIES FOLEY
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