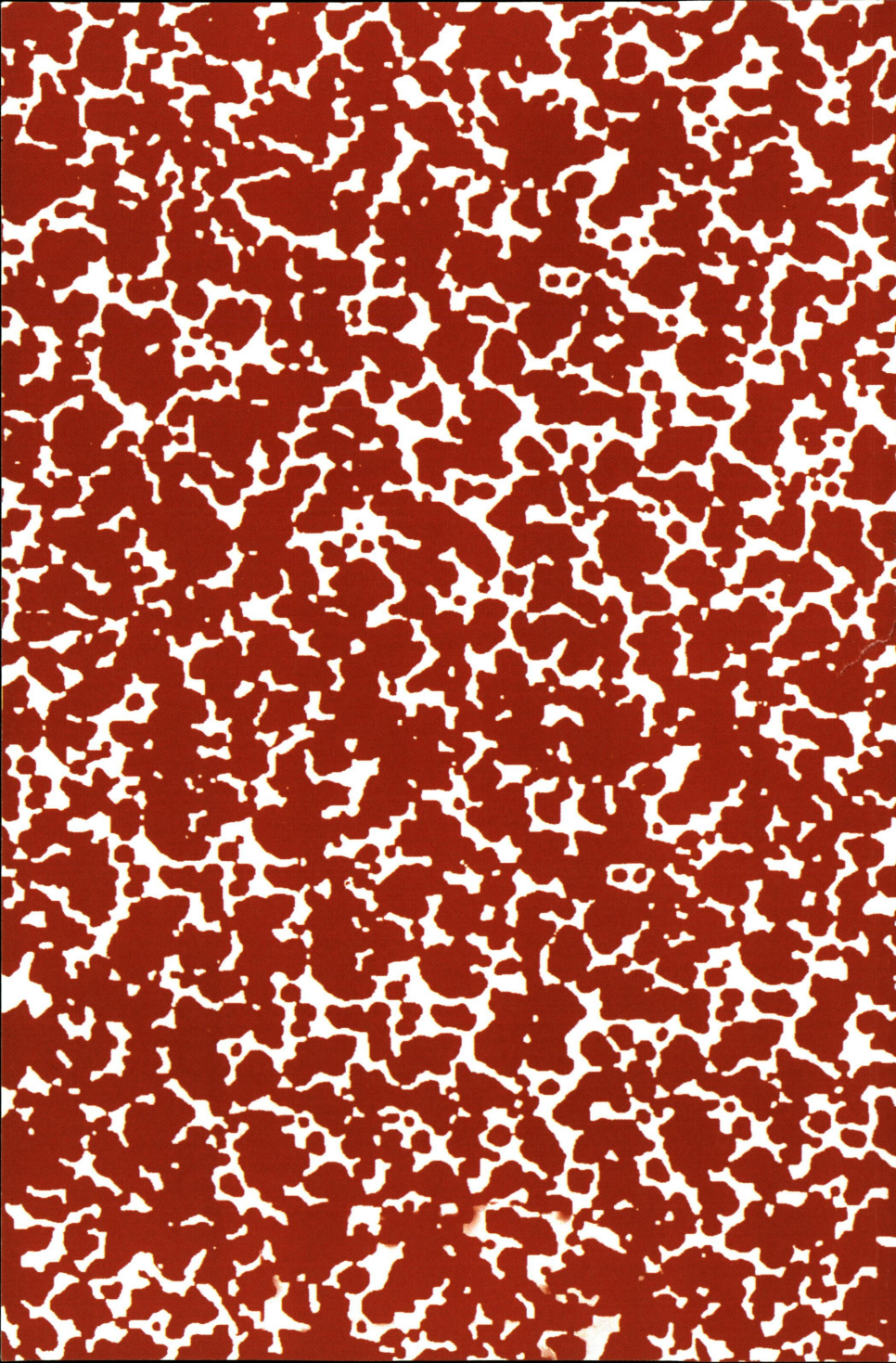


# HARPUR PALATE



**Vol.13 No.1**







**BINGHAMTON  
UNIVERSITY**

# **HARPUR PALATE**

**SUMMER & FALL**

**BINGHAMTON,  
NEW YORK**

**Vol.13 No.1**



**"THE WILDERNESS ROSE UP TO IT,  
AND SPRAWLED AROUND, NO LONGER WILD."**

—Wallace Stevens, "Anecdote of the Jar"

**Country Living Issue 13.1**



# HARPUR PALATE

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# THE ESSENTIALS

## LAURI ANDERSON ALFORD

The summer of the dust storms was the summer Claudia stopped eating. She sat in a rocker by the window with her feet tucked under her body, her knee as sharp as the pointy end of a heart. Outside, dirt swirled in red gusts, rocking our trailer and sending our mutt scrambling under its rusty skirt. I tried everything. I brought her tangerines from a highway stand and Hershey bars from the 7-Eleven on the corner. I crossed the field that separated our park from the gated subdivision to the north and brought her fallen pecans in the pouch I made of my shirt. Still, she wouldn't eat. All night the windows rattled in their frames, and in the morning when I woke, my sheets were gritty, and Claudia was still asleep in her chair.

My father stayed away. He picked up extra shifts at the rig and worked long into the night, sometimes sleeping in the cab of his truck. When he came home, it was only to shower and shave and leave a stack of bills for food and rent and electric. I was supposed to be in summer school, having "stupendously" failed the seventh grade, in the words of my guidance counselor, Mrs. Loveless. But I couldn't ever make myself stay past ten o'clock. Every morning, when they herded us into the giant cafeteria and made us scribble into a packet of worksheets, I stayed for half an hour and then slipped my packet into the waistband of my jeans and pretended to go to the bathroom.

Then I rode my bike home. I never got caught. None of the teachers wanted to be there, either.

Once, when I was supposed to be at school, I saw my father take his hat in his hands and kneel before Claudia, laying his head in her lap. She ran her hands over his bald spot and bent to kiss it. Then he rose to leave again. In the kitchen, I caught him by the arm. "I've been writing that letter," I said. In truth, I'd finished it and was keeping it in the top drawer of my nightstand. I'd started it out, To the Parent or Guardian of Claudia Reynolds, which is how all my letters from school came. I'd even found an address on an old greeting card in Claudia's dresser.

*Dear Claudia, the card read, Try to be good to yourself. Love, Mother and Daddy.*

My father turned slowly, seeming to notice me for the first time in weeks. "Why aren't you in school?"

"Her people should know she's sick," I said. "They don't even know about the baby."

He dropped his head. "Give her a couple more weeks." He moved toward the door and paused, his hand on the knob. "And don't let her hear you call it that. It wasn't a baby yet." When he reached his truck, he climbed inside and then rolled down the window. "School tomorrow!" he shouted at me across the dead yard. I gave him the thumbs-up sign, but both of us knew he wouldn't be around in the morning to make me go.

The summer itself seemed to dry up and crack open. On the news, grassfires swept through the fields east of town. The reporter at the edge of the screen gripped her microphone while her hair swirled upward in a giant wave. Smoke drifted through the park, and I stuffed towels around the doors and windows. Still, the house filled with a smell like burning. Sometimes, I heard a knocking like someone was at the door, but it was only the wind. Still, I couldn't shake the idea that it was trying to get in, that if I let it, it



would rush across the threshold, ghosting our curtains and sweeping Claudia's collection of souvenir shot glasses from its shelf.

If Claudia moved from her chair, it must have been while I slept. Sometimes I'd find her wet footprints on the bathroom rug or her shucked underwear in the corner. Otherwise, she sat and rocked. I knew what it meant. Maybe not that day, but one day, she would disappear, having shriveled and dried out, turned to dust and slipped through the cracks in the linoleum. Or maybe she would just walk out the door. It didn't matter how. Eventually she would become like everything else: lost in the wind.

\*

Houston was where we found Claudia. Then, my father was working offshore, twenty days on, twenty days off. I was eleven, old enough to take care of myself. During his twenty-on, I stayed in our apartment on the outskirts of the city with the upstairs landlady looking in. I tried to go to school, really I did. But I'd never been very good at it. I never had the right hair or the right clothes. I got distracted easily, and some things it didn't make any sense to learn. What I wanted to learn was how to balance a checkbook or clean an oven or how to know which switch to flip on the breaker. Our downstairs neighbor got cable for free from a secret box. I wanted to know where did he get that box, and what happened if anybody found out. What we learned instead were protons and acid rain and does your subject agree with your verb. But then Claudia came along, and she seemed to have most of the answers I needed, aside from the cleaning ones. She said we weren't the kind of people who stooped, so she used some of her trust fund money to hire a maid. But when Claudia wasn't looking, I asked the maid to show me how to clean an oven anyway. If I've learned one lesson from school, it's that good things don't last. For

example: real soda in the vending machine. For example: Old Yeller. For example: the ozone.

My father met Claudia at a bar, a dive, she would sometimes say, though I got the feeling it was only a dive to her. She was a college girl, twenty-two, just finished her junior year and itching to do some real living, is what she said. The night they met was the first night of my father's twenty-off. She drove him home in her shiny white car and never really left.

Used to, Claudia would teach me things. The Essentials, she called them. How to paint the nails on your right hand. How to pretend to take a shot. How to shave your legs at the sink. She taught me all the names of the characters on *The Young and The Restless* and the words to her sorority's loyalty pledge. School, she said, was peripheral. "I've been going to school my whole life, and look . . ." She raised her arms to the room. "Here I am in the same place as you."

The next week, she pretended to be my mother and signed me out of school for good. "Home school," she said. "There's something I can get my head around." After that, I had daily lessons in Restaurant Etiquette (Wear something dangerous. Then it won't matter which fork you use.) and Body Hair Maintenance (You *pluck* a chicken. Ladies *tweeze*.) and once a week, a quiz over sexy movie men (The answer was always Johnny Depp.). There were shorter seminars, too: Retail 101, Drink Mixology, and, of course, Dancing.

In the living room, with all the furniture pushed against the walls, I learned to waltz and two-step and jitterbug. Claudia, her pajama pants hiked up around her knees, demonstrated the electric slide and then pulled me in to join. Later, I wouldn't remember the steps, which way to turn, how long to pause. Only this: Claudia's hand on my shoulder, her hips grazing mine, the way she laughed and spun and clapped her hands when the song ended, how she held me to her, and I could feel her heart beneath her clothes and skin and ribs.



Technically, I wasn't old enough to have a job, but the lady who ran the park's laundromat—her name was Peg—said I had an old soul and was it okay if she paid me in cash, and then she handed me the key to the closet that held the soap and softener. Every afternoon, I walked past the row of trailers and the rusted playground equipment to the laundromat, the only building in the park that wasn't on wheels. It was built from cinder blocks that had been painted a deep forest green, but for some time, the paint had been peeling away in patches to reveal the concrete blocks beneath, giving it the look of camouflage.

Whenever I opened the door, I felt like I used to when Claudia would call to me from the bathtub to fetch her another wine cooler—the rush of wet air, the smell of something getting clean. On days when the wind sent our trashcans careening down the road and loosened the stop sign from its stake, when dirt took the paint off cars and tumbleweeds collected on our porch, the laundromat was balmy and still. Sometimes, looking out at the entrance to the park and the road beyond, I felt like I was part of two worlds at once—the dried-up one where Claudia and my father lived, and the one where the air was heavy and sweet and the machines drowned out the wind.

Once a week, Peg came in to collect the quarters from the machines and counted out my share, sliding them to me across the counter. Most days, she left me alone. I didn't mind. There wasn't much to keep track of. I Windexed the front windows and cleaned out the lint traps and made sure no one sat on the washers, but mostly I helped Carl, the maintenance man, water his plants.

In another life, Carl said, he'd owned a nursery specializing in rare plants, which he sold to rich people, I assumed, people with money to spend on something that would eventually die. But Carl said he made good money, and he liked working with his hands, the sun on his back, that good kind of

sweat at his collar. He didn't have a wife or kids; he didn't have a big house or a fancy car, but he had a little money saved, and he had the nursery. That was, until he went to prison for killing his brother Dusty with a gardener's spade to the jugular.

It didn't matter that Carl thought Dusty was an intruder, or that Dusty was so tweaked out on meth, he thought Carl was growing psychedelics in the greenhouse. It didn't matter that Carl was working late, paying bills, or that the news had been reporting a rash of break-ins, to lock your doors, set your alarms. It didn't matter that Dusty ate every single one of Carl's organic chanterelles and was in the process of spraying the rest of the plants with urine. What matters is that Carl caught a stranger in the beam of his flashlight.

Carl said not to tell anybody about Dusty and the greenhouse, that when people found out they treated him differently, like he was some kind of murderer. I asked him why he'd decided to tell me of all people, and he said, "Because you're a good listener." Although it might have been because I didn't have anyone to tell besides Claudia, and she wasn't exactly up to having conversations.

Claudia and I hadn't spoken in weeks, and I worried about her all the time. If my mother were here, she would gather Claudia up—no backtalking—and sit her down at the kitchen table with a bowl of oatmeal and wouldn't let her leave until she'd eaten at least half. But if my mother were here, then Claudia wouldn't be, and so I felt bad about wishing for her when it meant we'd have never met Claudia, who was nothing like a mother, but something like a friend.

\*

Before here was Houston, and before Houston was Mobile, and before that, Tallahassee. Before Tallahassee was my mother and a house with a backyard and days and days of no lumps and then finally a day with one—in her left breast, the size of



a cashew. After she died, we moved away from the house that smelled too much like her and my father took a job off-shore and I started signing my own field-trip releases. Once, I made an A on spelling test. Once, I placed first in a field-day race.

But with Claudia everything was different.

The day we left Houston was the day after Claudia found out she was pregnant. They were up all night, Claudia and my dad, arguing about what to do. She wanted to get married. She wanted my father to find another job that didn't take him away so often or for so long. My father must have wanted those same things, too—at least a little—because he didn't put up much of a fight. By morning, when they stepped from their room, Claudia's cheeks were rosy and my father had a smile on his face, though his eyes seemed different. His pupils darted around the room like the birds I'd seen caught inside Wal-Mart, cutting and diving through the rafters as if there was no place safe to land.

That day, we loaded our few belongings into the back of my dad's truck and set off across the state chasing a lead he had on a job, a rig in West Texas, a sub-lease on a trailer. Claudia and I followed behind my father's truck in her shiny white car, and I felt like we were outlaws, but the good kind, running toward something instead of away.

Claudia was so excited about the baby, she didn't seem to mind that the trailer was small and dirty and old or that the yard was tree-less and yellow. She just went to work on the baby's room, using her trust-fund money to fix it up with pink paint and expensive bedding. She told me it was a girl, even though she wasn't yet showing, and we flipped through a baby name book together. *Sarah, Allison, Rebecca*. Those names were too common. Claudia wanted a name with flair, something to make people look twice, something French maybe. *Genevieve, Estrella, Nicolette*. I wanted whatever Claudia wanted, and for a little while everything seemed like it was going to be okay. We swept the dirt out of the trailer and

stocked the refrigerator with healthy stuff no one wanted to eat and Claudia bought a patio set for the carport.

But then the wind started, slow at first, just enough to make a mess of your hair and send your skirt flying up. But it got worse. On accident, we left the baby name book outside, and the wind carried it off. I found pages all over the park—*Brittany, Beatrice, Belle*—stuck to the fence and wrapped around the rusted monkey bars. The next week the lady at the bank said Claudia's trust fund had been suspended, the funds frozen. I woke not long after that to find the chairs from the patio set in the next yard over. I went scrambling to get them back, and that's when I heard Claudia shrieking from inside the trailer.

The door to the bathroom was locked. She wouldn't let me inside. "Call you father," was all she would say. "Call him now."

When he finally showed up and Claudia let him inside, I tried hard to listen to what they were saying, but all I could hear was my father's murmurings and Claudia's sharp sobs. He carried her from the bathroom and buckled her into his truck and drove away. When they returned the next morning, Claudia was wearing a hospital gown, and my father set her up in a chair by the window, which is where she stayed. Outside, the sky looked like it was boiling.

\*

Mid-afternoon when things were slow at the laundromat, I'd join Carl in his little makeshift office, and he'd tell me stories about all the things his brother Dusty had ever stolen from him. So far I'd counted two bicycles, a car, a set of golf clubs, a fiancé, and a little abandoned Labrador mix Carl had fed with a bottle until Dusty saw it. According to Carl, there was just something about Dusty, something sad and a little lost. "People were drawn to him," Carl said. "They were always trying to make him happy." The dog went willingly. And maybe the girl,



too.

If his mood was right, Carl would tell me about the night Dusty died. Once, when we were under a tornado watch, and the noon sky turned black and the wind shook the power lines until the lights went out, we huddled in the doorway of Carl's office. The dryers had stopped humming and the laundromat was eerily quiet, except for the low roar of the wind. I tried not to think about Claudia in our trailer, how I imagined she wouldn't move from the window even if the roof were tearing away. I could tell Carl was scared, too, because he started talking, and he didn't stop until the lights came back on, and the machines remembered their turning. In the dark, he told me about that night, how in one second, the man in his flashlight's beam was a stranger, and in the next, it was Dusty, except that his throat was carved out. Carl told me about the blood, which I didn't like to think about, but which was everywhere: all over the floor, all over Carl, splattered all over the tall glass of the greenhouse.

Once Carl realized what he'd done, he took off. He drove until his car ran out of gas and then laid out for two days in somebody's sunflower field where the blooms were as big as his head. I thought about this a lot: the blooms, how they must have looked like a thousand upturned faces. This is something Claudia would have liked to hear about, how he slept on the ground between their stalks and how he felt like they were guarding him, that somehow they knew that Carl was only trying to protect his life's work. But maybe I was wrong. Maybe Claudia wouldn't care.

Finally, half eaten alive by mosquitoes and hunger and guilt, he stumbled back to his greenhouse expecting to walk into a crime scene with caution tape and a chalked outline, but everything was quiet. The police had come and gone. Someone had washed away the blood.

Carl knelt where Dusty's body had been. He knew he should say a prayer, and he was thinking of what to say, how

he was sorry and angry and embarrassed, how Dusty deserved better, even if he was a fool, but from somewhere in the back of the greenhouse, he heard a noise, footsteps. When he turned, he saw a woman. Her face was streaked with mascara. Her hair was falling from its bun. They stared at each other, and Carl was aware for the first time of his blood-stained clothes.

"Peg," he said. He'd only met her once—Peg swallowed in lace up to her chin, Dusty swaying so bad through the ceremony that Carl had to hold him upright, had to show him which finger the ring went on.

Peg turned her face away. "He wasn't a good man," she said, "but that doesn't mean he deserved it."

Carl didn't know what to say. He watched Peg go, and then he sat for a while in the steamy greenhouse. When morning came, Carl did the only thing he could: he went to the police station and turned himself in. Then, he spent the next ten years writing Peg a letter a day and feeling terrible about what he'd done. Once he was free, he went to see her where she was living in Dusty's old trailer, and when she came to the door in a housedress with no bra underneath and her hair—the same hair but with a little gray mixed in—curling at her temples, Carl could see he'd always loved Peg, and he told her that flat out, him standing on her front steps, her with a dishtowel thrown over her shoulder.

"What did she say?" is what I always asked Carl at this point in the story. Carl would take off his baseball cap and run his hand across his sweaty bald spot. If he'd already opened a beer, he'd take a long drink, and I'd count the times his Adam's apple bobbed up and down.

"I forgot," he always said after a good long time. "You tell the rest." And so I told him what Peg had told me, that she'd taken a cigarette from the pocket of her housedress and took her time lighting it while Carl waited for an answer. She took three long drags, blowing the smoke over Carl's head, and then



stubbed out her cigarette on the doorframe and tossed the butt into the yard. Then, she opened the door a little wider and—this was my favorite part—she snapped her fingers twice and told him to “get on up” before she changed her mind. As Carl hurried past, she gave his rump a little pat.

That’s how Carl ended up in the park living the life Dusty left behind. He sat in Dusty’s old recliner and slept in Dusty’s old bed and found that Dusty’s old clothes fit him just fine. He got Dusty’s old job at the laundromat, and once he discovered the conditions were right—how the air was moist from the washers and warm from the dryers, how the light tunneled in through the big front windows—he brought in some shelves and set up a miniature greenhouse in the vestibule where he kept his tools and extra parts.

On days when things were slow, Carl taught me about plants. I learned how aloe helps with itch and how marigold leaves can cure stomach cramps. I learned that rosewater trickled into the ear can cure infection and that anise, crushed and stewed, can stimulate the appetite. When I heard this, I told Carl about Claudia, and he fixed up some dried blossoms to steep in hot water.

“It won’t work right away,” he said. “But give her some time.”

My father had told me this, too, to give her some time, but what he and Carl didn’t understand was that Claudia didn’t have a lot of time. She was *dying*. Not all at once like Dusty, but a little bit every day, and I wasn’t willing to watch that happen. Maybe I’d seen it before with my mother. Maybe I’d watched her waste away from the sickness and the drugs and the terrible hospital food while my father was gone, working or hiding or whatever he wanted to call it, just like he was doing now. Maybe it was me alone who sat beside her stroking her hair until I realized her chest had stopped moving up and down. I didn’t like to think about it, but sometimes it came over

me, and later I'd realize I had been standing still as a statue in the laundromat with a ball of lint in my hand, looking straight at Carl, but seeing instead my mother in her hospital bed in the moment before the nurses came in, when I could still pretend it hadn't happened yet.

At home, I steeped the leaves and set the mug on the windowsill next to Claudia, the steam making a wet circle on the glass. I held my breath while she brought the mug to her lips.

*Dear Claudia*, the card had said, *Try to be good to yourself.*

She paused. She sniffed and made a sour face. "Smells like cat piss," she said and set the mug back down.

\*

When my father was away, and Claudia was sleeping, I sometimes passed my evenings with Carl and Peg. They had a big TV and brand-name chips and a huge sofa in the shape of a U that took up most of the living room. Sometimes I'd fall asleep watching Animal Planet or some other channel we didn't get at home, and I'd wake up alone on the sofa, Carl and Peg having gone off to their bedroom. Usually I snuck out, locking the door behind me and hurrying across the park to our trailer, but once, when it was extra late and I was the kind of tired that makes your legs not work, I decided to stay. No one would miss me anyway. I turned the volume low on the TV and snuggled down into the sofa and tried to sleep, but it wasn't long before I heard noises coming from Carl and Peg's room.

I knew sex when I heard it. Claudia and my father used to do it all the time when they thought I couldn't hear. Usually all it amounted to were several kinds of sighing and the creaking of the mattress. But that night at Carl and Peg's I heard something more than noises. I sat up on the sofa and craned my neck toward the bedroom. Carl was huffing like he was pushing a wheelbarrow up a steep hill, and Peg was saying



something, soft at first, but then louder and louder, as if she were hurling the words, as if they were dangerous. I should have gone, but I couldn't move. I crept down the hall. And then Peg's words became clearer. I laid my head on the floor, trying to see under the crack in the door. "Oh Dusty, oh Dusty!" she was saying. And then I heard Carl's voice in return, hard as gravel: "Say it, Peg. Tell me my name. Tell me!"

I scrambled out the door and across the park, dodging plastic water bottles and patio seat cushions the wind had picked up. The whole way there, I kept thinking someone else had been in the room with them, that Dusty wasn't dead at all, or worse, that he *was* dead, as in *he had been* dead and now was not. I kept imagining Dusty with his neck slit, angrier than ever, thumbing his lighter in the corner. But when I reached our trailer, I stopped to catch my breath and realized that it was impossible, that I'd only heard two voices in the room and both of them I recognized.

Our trailer's porch light was off and when I reached for the doorknob, I found that it was locked. I reached inside the collar of my T-shirt for the key I wore on a chain around my neck, but it was gone—the necklace and the key—probably lost in the creases of Carl and Peg's couch. Rain mixed with the dust in the air. Lightning lit the porch, and I could see the trailer's windows were streaked in mud. I raised my fist and knocked, gently at first and then louder as the wind grew stronger, pushing me into the porch rails. Finally, the porch light flickered on and the door swung open a few inches. I slipped through as I heard a tearing sound behind me. When I looked back, a three-foot section of the trailer's metal skirt was skittering end-over-end across our yard and into the darkness. I shut the door and flicked off the porch light. There, in the dark of the trailer, Claudia stood before me wearing just a T-shirt and underwear. Her knees were small and hard, like under-ripe fruit. A creased sheet of notebook paper dangled from her hand. It was my letter, the one I'd hidden in my night

stand.

*To the Parent or Guardian of Claudia Reynolds, I'd written.*

"Where have you been?" she asked, but that wasn't the question she wanted answered. Outside, the wind was like an animal, sick or hurt. It kept throwing itself at the trailer and then rising again, broken and scared. It was so loud it felt like it was in the room with us.

I kept hearing Peg's voice in my head, the hard "d" of Dusty, the slick lisp of the "s." I wanted Claudia to explain it to me like she'd explained French manicures and how to get out of a speeding ticket. Wasn't this essential knowledge, too—why you'd want someone you loved to be someone else? Something told me she knew the answer, but we were past all that. The look on her face said I was some kind of stranger; it said she didn't know me at all. In her hand, the letter was smudged with eraser marks from all the ways I'd tried to get it right.

"What else was I supposed to do? All you do is sit!" I hadn't meant to scream the last part, but that's how it came out, like I really was the stranger she saw in me. Claudia took a step back. All at once, outside, the wind seemed to stop. The room around us sounded hollow, as if the air had been sucked out. By the window, her rocking chair was moving, and we both turned to look at it. I knew then that she had been sitting there, waiting for me in the dark.

"You wrote to my *parents*?" Her voice was quieter now, but she said "parents" like it was a curse word, like it was something you could get slapped for saying. "Do you know what would happen if my parents came here? Do you have any idea?"

I shook my head and tried to focus on the wall behind her. It was too hard to watch the twisted shape of her mouth, the way her eyes had turned to black holes.

Claudia said her parents would take her away, back to Houston, back to the place she'd been living before she met my



father. "Do you even care what that place is like?" she wanted to know.

I thought at first she was talking about the sorority house, where all the girls walked around in their underwear and crooned Roy Orbison songs into their hairbrushes. I thought that was probably the best place for Claudia. That was where she belonged. But she wasn't talking about that place. I felt a tingling behind my eyes, and from the look on her face, I knew Claudia didn't want to say what came next.

She began folding and refolding my letter, making a tinier and tinier square until it became too small and thick to manipulate. She clenched it in her fist. "First they take away everything you need. Your curling iron, your razor, your makeup. Then they make you share a room with a stranger. Do you understand what I'm saying? A sick person!" She tapped her temple with her index finger. "Think about that. Think about waking up at night and seeing eyes in the dark. Sure, you can roll over. You can look at the wall, but they're still there. They don't ever blink." She stared off into space for a moment, and then she flinched as if she'd been hit. Something seemed to come over her, a kind of trembling. She crossed the space between us and pulled me to her. She had no breasts. There was only the bones of her chest against my face and the sharp edges of the folded letter pressing into my back. She rested her chin on the top of my head. She began to twist us slowly, first one way and then the other, as if we were doing some sad new kind of dance.

"I didn't know any better," she said. "I swallowed whatever they gave me. Swallow when you wake up, swallow at lunch, swallow before you go to bed. It's like your brain turns off. If you swallow, you're gone. You try to be you. You try to think your thoughts, but you can't remember how. It's like you never even existed." She began to sob. I wanted to push her away, but didn't know how without breaking her. "Why would they want that?" she was saying over and over again. "Why would

they want that? Why would they want that?" And then suddenly, she let go. She lifted my chin so that she could see into my face. Her cheeks were wet, but she had come back to herself. "Do you want that?" she asked me, her voice so low I could barely hear it. "Do you want me to be locked away?"

I didn't want that at all. I wanted the old Claudia back. I wanted to drink virgin daiquiris from mason jars and watch *The Young and the Restless* and paint the pink room back to its original beige. I wanted to pretend the whole thing had never happened. But now I was picturing strait jackets and three-inch needles. I imagined little red pills in plastic cups. She'd told us she was a sorority girl, but that was just something she'd said. Everything had been a lie. Nothing, including me, had ever been essential.

But what had made her do it? I could see why she'd hidden the truth in the beginning—she didn't know us. She didn't know how we'd take it. But later? After all those nights we spent dancing in the living room and naming the future out of a book. Why couldn't she have told me then?

"Well?" she asked.

"No. I want you to stay."

"Then, here." She handed me the folded-up letter. "Get rid of this."

Released from the pressure of her fist, it began to work itself open, but slowly.

\*

The next afternoon I found Carl behind the laundromat, squirting canned cheese onto crackers.

"Peg is looking for you," I said. I'd just come from inside, where Peg was doing the books, turning over every piece of paper in her office and slamming her desk drawers. I could tell something was on her mind, so I'd slipped out the backdoor.

Carl was wrestling a cracker from its cellophane sleeve.



"You look sad," I told him.

"Things with Peg," he said, "are getting complicated."

"Oh?" I was suddenly terrified he was going to tell me something I didn't want to hear. I took a cracker and stuffed it in my mouth, the crunching in my ears enough to drown out whatever he said next. But he only nodded and shook the can to get out the last bit of cheese, which he oozed onto the cracker in a yellow coil. We sat for a while finishing the crackers and then Carl held the cellophane between two fingers and let it go in the wind. It tumbled away, and in the distance, snagged in the snarly branches of a mesquite tree, it looked almost beautiful, a torn paper lantern.

"My mother died," I told him. "She was sick, and I held her hand." The words came out, and I didn't know why I'd said them.

The sun was sharp in the sky, and I could feel it on my shins and the tops of my feet. Carl dropped his head to stare at his hands. "You know, I thought I owed him something," he said, and I realized that he hadn't heard me, that he'd been thinking about something else. He looked up at me, but he wasn't seeing me at all. When he spoke again, his voice was on the edge of something. "When he died, I swore I'd make it right, but the truth is, I've been trying to make it right for years, and it won't ever be right. Not like this."

"Are you talking about Dusty?" I asked, but I already knew the answer.

From inside, Peg was screeching his name, but he didn't seem to hear her. I wanted to tell him that things with Peg would be all right, that people pretended to be other people all the time.

I opened my mouth to speak, but then I thought better of it. Maybe Carl and I weren't the kind of friends who offered each other advice. Maybe we weren't friends at all. After a while, he stood and dusted off his jeans. Before he left, he gripped my head in his hand and shook it back and forth, but

gently. I could guess what that meant. Then he slipped through the backdoor.

I sat for a while longer, thinking about everything: My mother and Claudia, Claudia and my father, Carl and Peg. The funny thing about pretending, I thought, was that we let each other do it. We even *wanted* to be fooled. The night before, I'd stood over the sink with a match in my hand and watched the letter I'd written shrivel into ash. Then Claudia had turned on the tap and we'd watched the drain swallow it. Satisfied, she'd gone back to her chair by the window. I guess she thought that was the end of it. I guess she thought we could go back to pretending everything was fine. But I could never forget what I'd written. I'd write that letter again and this time I'd send it. Claudia would probably hate me later. She'd probably never speak to me again, but if she couldn't be good to herself, at least I could be good to her.

\*

Long about October, the wind settled down and the cotton fields surrounding the park put out their white blooms. Claudia's parents showed up, having followed the directions I gave them, and when she saw them coming down the road, Claudia rose from her chair by the window and shrugged into some jeans and met them at the door. She didn't put up a fight and neither did my father, who watched the whole thing from the driver's seat of his truck. Even though I couldn't see his face, I knew he was relieved to see her go. He loved her, or once had, but it wasn't that strong kind of love, the kind Peg had for Dusty, the kind that could help you pretend the person you were with was the person you needed him to be.

Eventually, we left too, my dad and me. He found another

job on a rig in Wyoming, and we left everything we couldn't fit in the truck. On my way out for the last time, I closed the door to the pink room, and stood in the hall for a moment with my hand on the knob, imagining what the new tenants would think when they opened the door. Maybe they'd have a little girl of their own and set her down in the crib and finger each of the tiny dresses in the closet, amazed at their luck. Or maybe they would see that the tags were still on, that none of the tiny dresses had ever been worn, and then the pink room would make them sad in the way it had made Claudia sad. Maybe then they'd cross this ad off their list and keep looking, and for a long time our trailer would stay empty, a veil of dust covering everything we'd left behind.



# JOEL ALLEGRETTI

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# I LOST OUR BABY

**JENNIFER  
JACKSON BERRY**

I lost our baby in between the couch cushions,  
under the car seat, in the trunk.  
I lost our baby at Cedar Point; she was rolled up  
in a plastic money holder I wore around my neck.  
It looked like soap-on-a-rope & I left it  
on the back of the toilet after changing out of wet clothes.  
I lost our baby during a party;  
she was on top of the fridge, then she was gone.  
I lost our baby in the bottom of my purse  
& then when she rolled under the bed.  
I lost our baby when I moved from the third floor  
walk-up apartment. I lost our baby at a Goodwill  
drop off site in Bloomington, Indiana.  
I lost our baby when I was walking through the parking lot;  
my keychain broke & she slipped right off.  
I lost our baby in a friend's house fire.  
I lost our baby in the dorms  
when the girl across the hall borrowed her & never returned her.  
I lost our baby even though I wrote my name on her,  
with a cute little stamp of a teddy bear reading.  
*This baby belongs to Jennifer.* I lost our baby  
on trash day, on my birthday, on a Thursday.  
I lost our baby in dozens of pearls bouncing  
across linoleum tiles; I had her in my mouth  
& the thread snapped.



# FARMER'S BEES

KARINA  
BOROWICZ

A loud crack and then there's  
that crack again. No rhythm,  
no predicting the intervals  
as with a machine beat.  
This noise comes from a man's hand.

And as I pick the huge black fruit  
from a row of blueberry bushes  
across from the dairy farm,  
the stunning silence between each loud burst  
fills me with a cold dread  
that spills with each violent start.

I imagine them shooting the cows  
at the same time I tell myself  
that couldn't be. But there's something ugly  
in the air. Shaken, I watch the bees go about  
their business, our business, legs fattened  
and bright with hoards of pollen.

# GOD'S FARM

BY

## LAWRENCE CAMPBELL

When the family said grace, I kept one eye open so that I could observe everyone at the table and make sure I was doing things right. "Lord, we thank you for this wonderful weather," the father began. "And for bringing us these guests, and for giving us our health, and for the ability to do our work, and for this food." I kept my elbows on the table and my hands locked together, mouthing along with the prayer. "In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ"—I kept my lips still for that part—"Amen." *Amen*, I whispered, along with the rest of the family, and wondered how long I could keep pretending I was a Christian.

Two days earlier, I had driven from New Haven, Connecticut, to New Haven, Kentucky. I'd arrived a day early at my destination in the Shenandoah Valley, and decided

to kill time by visiting Kentucky's famous Bourbon Trail—assuming, since it was also part of The South, that it would be down the road. It turned out to be a 453-mile journey through a blizzard on Big Savage Mountain. After the storm, I stopped at a gas station in Lexington. Inside, a young girl was explaining to three older men why she hated babysitting. "I can't wait until I get my own kids," she said. "Then I can beat 'em." One of the men, slumped over the counter, raised his head slowly. "Until they get bigger'n you," he said. "Then they'll try'n beat you." That was when I began to feel out of place. "Well, I'd love to get me a pack of those Camels right there," I said, spontaneously adopting a ridiculous Southern accent. I paid for my cigarettes and started to walk out.

"Thank y'all," I said, which made no sense.

In Kentucky I visited the Heaven Hill Distillery and the Abbey of Gethsemani, which produces whiskey-soaked desserts. I bought a bottle of eighteen-year-old Elijah Craig at the distillery, and half of a fruitcake at the abbey. By evening, I was tired, homesick, and nearly too drunk to drive. I pulled out my phone and searched for a motel and a strip club, which felt like the right thing to do. I found a Motel 6 next to a Hustler Hollywood, and started heading that way. I imagined drinking myself into a stupor as fat Kentucky women peeled off their clothing. I quickly called my girlfriend. She was shocked and disgusted; she tried to persuade me not to go. I wasn't fully convinced until I walked to the club and realized it was a sex toy store, and closed.

At the motel, I ate the monks' fruitcake without utensils. It was spicy and moist, full of nuts and dried fruit, and it stuck to my fingers. I washed it down with the bourbon, drunk from a thin Motel 6 plastic cup. I stared at the cup, waiting for the bourbon to dissolve right through it. Occasionally I would lick my fingers and look out the window

at the red neon Hustler Hollywood sign.

When I arrived at the farm, run by an evangelical family, I met the other young men and women applying for the same farm job. I told them where I was from, and one of them shook his head. "I hope I never, never get a reason to go to New York." Another prospective worker agreed: "I'm happier out here in the sticks."

Work began at sunrise, with an hour to feed the animals before breakfast. I hauled two buckets of grain for the chickens and rabbits, and chatted with the farmer's son as I poured out the feed. He pulled one of the rabbits from its cage and tossed it in with another. They chased each other in tight circles until the first rabbit abruptly mounted the second. After several quick thrusts, the first rabbit fell over on its side, momentarily paralyzed. The son turned to me: "That was a successful breed." I went back to feeding the chickens and noticed a dead bird in the corner. I asked what I should do, and the son told me to feed it to the hogs.

I spent that afternoon with one of the farmhands laying hay for the cows, and bringing water to the



pigs. I told him about my visit to the monastery, and he seemed interested. He asked me what my religion was, and I said I was searching. He told me that his very closest friend was the Lord Jesus Christ. I thought to myself, *Well, my closest friend is Henry*, but all I said was, "You're lucky." When I left the farm, he handed me a small pamphlet. It was creased with use but still legible: "So You Want to Know God." I tossed it into my car with some sausage and a beef tongue, which thawed as I drove back north.

# ANIMAL TIME

CAROL V. DAVIS

I do better in animal time,  
a creeping dawn, slow ticking toward dusk.  
In the middle of the day on the Nebraska prairie,  
I'm unnerved by subdued sounds, as if listening  
through water, even the high-pitched drone of the  
cicadas faint; the blackbirds half-heartedly singing.  
As newlyweds, my parents drove cross country to  
Death Valley, last leg of their escape from New York,  
the thick soups of their immigrant mothers, generations  
of superstitions that squeezed them from all sides.  
They camped under stars that meant no harm.  
It was the silence that alerted them to danger.  
They climbed back into their tiny new car, locked  
its doors and blinked their eyes until daylight.

# QUAGMIRE

GARY FINCKE

Behind our house, a soft bog  
digested things that died there.  
I tested it with my shoes,  
expected hands upraised  
or at least a riot of worms.  
Our nervous dog skittered  
as if she anticipated births.  
In that quagmire smother  
was a sign of spring.  
The swamp, my father said,  
was spreading, bleeding out  
from the earth's black wound;  
our house lay downhill.  
Some nights I expected  
the gurgling of new voices  
thick with slime. Slipping  
under my door, they would  
bubble and multiply,  
rising, like ancestry,  
toward a common ceiling.



# WORKING THE ODDS

**MAUREEN  
TOLMAN  
FLANNERY**

*The government wagers 160 acres against \$18 that  
you'll starve before you can live five years on the land*  
—homesteader's letter

We stood on a bluff overlooking the river valley  
to select a plot of land where we could plant fantasies,  
imagine a farm fertile with the work of our hands.

Most of that first year was spent clearing.  
It took Elias and the boys days to saw through one trunk,  
and there were acres of wooded space.  
Massive hickory and oak—trees so magnificent  
I'd weep to see them crashing down  
with the sound of Armageddon  
and beasts leaping ahead through the underbrush.  
We left the crab apple trees, some hickory for nuts  
and a stand of oaks to shelter the cabin we meant to build.

We knew it would be hard going,  
but no one told us about the stones,  
embedded boulders we'd dig out and drag

till every bone beneath our flesh whimpered for rest.  
Together we cleared all the stones from a field,  
but still every year with the spring's thaw  
more rocks rose up from hell as if the devil himself  
were daring us to stay and make things grow.

Elias put in potatoes and squash, but the deer  
ate the greens just as they peeked above the furrows.  
A fine crop of corn was coming up one summer  
when hail stones big as walnuts  
knocked all the young ears clean off the stalks.  
We plowed them under and sewed buckwheat  
so as to have something to eat come the cold.

That next spring I was little help to Elias for clearing the fields.  
With child again, I hemorrhaged every time  
I tried to drag another stone to the wall.  
I lost that baby, a tiny girl who came before the river had  
swollen.

We buried her below the bluff near a dogwood bush  
that greets me each spring with the memory of it,  
blossoms as white as the swaddling we wrapped tight  
around all there was of her. I suppose expectations  
of happiness in this place went with that child  
into the hole Elias dug in the rich, black earth.

I took on a powerful craving for color and something fine.  
My niece from back East sent me a packet of hollyhock seeds.  
The hearty flowers took to our rocky soil.  
It gave us all great joy to see the red skirts  
dancing upside down in a summer wind.

We took to wondering if risking our small savings  
on the hope of proving up hadn't just been  
the twice-deceived folly of moon-eyed dreamers  
and if we shouldn't just give it all up and go home  
while we still had some pluck and hope of future left in us.



# ALONE IN THE BRIAR THICKET

J. BRUCE FULLER

1.

I screamed for hours.  
When my voice went numb  
I hung there sobbing  
and small birds came back  
to their nests.

I had woven myself in so carefully,  
and with the lost ball deftly retrieved  
turned to find myself caught.  
The deer thicket swallowed me  
beneath the thorn shadows.

2.

Papa showed me why  
they're called king snakes,  
under a pin oak  
on the banks of Woolen Lake,  
showed me how the rattlesnake  
half-hidden in the king's mouth,  
still shivered his rattles,  
still rustled the leaves.

3.

The baby rattlesnake would not eat.  
The jar where it was kept  
was full of dead shiners,  
a spot of blood near  
the end of its yellow tail  
where the rattle would have formed.  
Why he showed me this  
I am only beginning to understand.

4.

Somehow Papa heard me crying.

I glimpsed him through the trees  
running across the field.  
When he found me  
his touch was softer than usual,  
pulling my shirt free,  
twisting my ankles  
from the wiry brambles.

I could not walk  
I had hung there so long.  
He carried me to the house,  
my head against his chest.

# GOD IN THE SEASON OF BEES

J. P. GRASSER

"No trick dispels. Religion used to try,  
That vast moth-eaten musical brocade"

—"Aubade," Philip Larkin

My friend, who would later die  
from booze or stomach cancer, told stories.  
He had this trick  
he'd do, once we were  
half-drunk and good,  
where he'd go to the freezer  
and take out a cold-stunned bee.  
He never explained how he trapped  
them in the first place,  
but he'd freeze the things  
until they were unmoving and tie  
some dental floss or fishing line,  
anything invisible really,  
around their abdomens and grin  
as they'd resurrect from the cold  
and try to buzz around the room,  
caught in his make-shift harness,



just as helpless as before.  
The rot-gut had already started in Phil.  
But this trick never stopped  
being good. Each time he'd head  
for the freezer, we'd come close  
to the flame in his cheeks,  
waiting for the wings to flap,  
waiting for the small rebirth  
to unfold its natural light  
right in front of our eyes.

# THE LONG VALLEY

**GEORGE GUIDA**

Mobile homes and appaloosa mares.  
Everything's for sale in the valley.  
In a fishing town Laundromat,  
all the ways to sell yourself  
are posted on flyers with tear-off tabs.  
One confuses the next.  
Everything has a name in the valley.  
Every name names a name.

When no one buys the thing,  
the flyers yellow, the appaloosas roam  
the trailer parks. We roam  
this Indian valley like the lost  
pioneers we are. Down here,  
the brown corn stalks of fallow  
farms block out the sun,  
stop dials and smother cell phones.

We don't believe this could all be  
bought and sold, like dropping quarters  
into machines whose doors don't lock.  
Someone always slips in to steal  
the pillowcases you bought on sale.

Not everything in the valley  
has a price, so we do sixty-five  
on the two-lane route, to feel the Gs,

the curves and dips that seem to want  
you on earth. We didn't know  
the valley ended at a mining town  
with its tribe of hills, where the dead  
main street convinces you  
you came this far without cause.  
On the street an old folks' posse  
shuffles their way to the firehouse

ice cream social. They've lived alone  
in the valley's lifetime Saturday.  
If only you'd known them when,  
but then you'd be here too, forever  
wishing you'd learned decades ago  
that your money's no good here,  
at least for the things you need,  
that the valley has no gentle end.



# NEIGHBORS

BY

JEAN HARPER

A new family moves in just down the road. A week or so after they arrive they hold a party. Cars and pickups park in their driveway, in the yard, along the side of the road. Maybe it's a moving-in celebration, maybe a family reunion. We have no idea. Things happen here. This is the country, Indiana, houses like ours and our neighbors' on five and six acre lots in between working farmland: wide fields of corn and beans, fenced pastures of cows and pigs for miles and miles. The neighbors' party lasts for three days and nights. Loud laughter and whoops during the day. Bonfires at night. Each afternoon, gunfire. Someone shooting at cans on a stump. We guess that. On the last night, after dark, after dozens of fireworks exploding high in the night sky, someone fires a gun over and over

into the black night. We stand inside our house and listen.

\*

Sometime after they move in, the neighbors paint an enormous American flag on the side of their garage. On weekends, the father mows the lawn with a new orange tractor pulling a bright red bush hog. He wears a straw hat, blue jeans, and always a white t-shirt. In the first weeks he raises one leather-gloved hand to wave at us when we drive past. We learn he's a pharmacist, works at the local hospital, Monday through Friday. Every weekday morning, his wife drives their four children to school in a green mini-van. We learn they go to a private school, one run by a large church. Each morning after

the family leaves and before the father heads to work, we hear a half dozen shots echoing across the quiet land. In the evening, when the light is fading, the sky turning gray, we hear the same.

\*

The year they move in is the year we have been building: a new barn, a fenced-in pasture, a riding arena. It's the year that everyone refinances, everyone has money to spend on a dream. This is mine: horses, at home. I have had a horse then for only a year, another dream that somehow came true. I barely know anything at all about horses, not then. Only that I want this gentle giant of a horse that I have come to love more than I might have imagined, I want him at home. That is true. Then there is the lie, the one my husband and I never acknowledge. We are building a barn so we will be building a barn, a project large enough to distract us from anything else: each other, our marriage, the past, and the future. That is the way things are, that is the way they were.

One night, a few weeks into the construction of barn and arena and pasture, we are eating a late

dinner on the back porch. It is a quiet night, birds twittering low in the trees, the dogs sleeping at our feet. The barn is half-built then, framed and trussed, the skeleton of a ship anchored at the back of our six acre lot. We are talking about the barn. There are innumerable details to keep us talking. The sun stretches low across the yard. My husband is finishing his second glass of wine, about to pour another. The bottle is in his hand and then he puts it down and stares across the yard.

"What the hell."

The neighbor is striding across our grassy lawn, up to our house. His head is bare. Then, he is standing at the back sliding glass door of the porch, staring at us. One of the dogs, then the other, begins to growl.

My husband is rising out of his chair. "Asshole," he says.

I know him. I put my hand on his arm, hush the dogs.

"Stay here," I say. "I'll talk to him."

He sits back down, pours the wine. "Good luck," he says.

In the back yard, the neighbor stands before me, tall and fleshy. His hair is receding. His thick glasses glint in the slant light of

the setting sun. He is angry. The fencing contractor has dislodged a surveyor's stake, then put it back, he saw it happen.

"That's against the law," he says.

"I'm sure it was an accident."

"It's against the law. It's illegal." His fists are jammed into his pockets, as though he is restraining himself.

I decide then, not knowing how this story will go, to give this man what I think he wants. "Show me what you saw," I say.

We walk back across the yard toward the half-finished fence and what will become the pasture. I remember now how strange that walk was: I am tiny next to this giant man, this grim and angry stranger in his coveralls and muddy boots. We walk in silence to the very back of the lot. When the neighbor points out the stake, I see that there is a clod of fresh dirt at the base of the wooden peg. There is only one hole in the ground. Nothing has happened. I cannot take this seriously, this angry man, angry about something that is nothing. Yet, I know enough about men like this to act as though I am taking things seriously. I offer to get a new survey, find someone who

will make sure the stake is where it is supposed to be.

"I'm not paying for it."

"Of course not," I say. I am already imagining how to explain all this to another angry man.

The neighbor stubs the toe of his boot into the ground by the surveyor's stake, tamping the loose dirt into place. He lets a heavy silence hang between us before he finally speaks. "I can let it go this time," he says.

Then he walks across the property line, back onto his land and up to his house, and I walk back to ours.

\*

The next day I hear hammering, a chainsaw, the noise of construction. I look out our bedroom window and see the neighbor at work on his land, as close to the edge of the property line and to our house as he can be. He is cutting down trees, making a long cleared strip of land at right angles to the road, there at the edge of his yard. The neighbor works every day, and I watch him. By the second day, at the head of the cleared strip, he has built a small wooden platform. By the fourth day, at the foot, there are



three bullseye targets backed with bales of straw. At the end of the week, there's no mistaking what he has built: a firing range.

Maybe the neighbor is writing a story with us as the enemy: educated liberals, middle-class white-collar professionals who have moved to the country for peace and quiet, two people with extra income at their disposal to do whatever they want. There we are, building that brand new barn, big and white and solid, a barn for a useless hobby of the rich and entitled: horses. He hates us. In his story he is the hero, the working man supporting four children and a wife on one income and his two bare hands, hands that can fix and build things, hands that know how to hold a gun. He can't stand us. If he wants to build a firing range on his own land, he will, and if he wants to shoot every day, he will, because this is his property, it's his right, it's there in the Constitution, go look it up.

Years later, years after I live far away from this place and this time, I will look at an image of the neighbor's land, and there it will be, that long narrow clearing, the just visible smudges on the image that must be the platform, those three battered targets. I will squint at the

image looking for him, imagining him, still there.

\*

One afternoon, I call the sheriff's office. A patient man lets me talk. I explain the situation: The gunfire. The shooting. The endless shooting. Hours of shooting.

"It's every day," I say.

"There's not much we can do about it."

"It's so loud the windows shake."

"I understand." The voice on the phone is careful, weary. He's heard this before. From people like me.

"I'm not exaggerating."

"Yes, ma'am."

I stand at a window that faces the neighbor's house. I can see his yard, his carefully mown lawn, the blank windows of his house. Right now, all is quiet. I want to know who this man is. He works at the hospital. He has four children. A wife. A flag on his garage, a house, two cars. All that tells me nothing. I only know one thing: he has guns, and he shoots them, and this changes everything.

I ask about a noise ordinance, about threats, harassment. I want to

know.

The man in the sheriff's office keeps his voice calm, soothing.

"Listen."

I am listening. Right now for gunfire. I want him to hear it. To hear the windows rattle. To feel the thud and boom of gunfire in his gut. The way we do.

"I'm listening," I say.

"Until a bullet hits your house," he says, "There's nothing I can do."

"Nothing."

"Yes, ma'am," he says. "Not a thing."

\*

By the end of the summer, the barn is finished, the horses home with us now. Two good horses. I want to make peace with the neighbor. I invite him and his wife and their children to come meet the horses. Do I call them on the phone? Do I walk over to their house? I have no memory of how this happens. I only remember the four children and their mother walking down the road to our house one Saturday afternoon, and then up our driveway. There are three boys and one girl, all I can only guess, under the age of seven or eight. The father is not

with them. I watch this small parade from our front window, then meet them in the yard.

"Thanks for coming," I say.

"Thank you for inviting us."

The mother is smaller than I am, a slight woman with short black hair. She and her children stand in a tight knot, uneasy, as though they are not supposed to be here. I lead them to the barn, and I am talking, too much, saying whatever I can think of. I am the only one talking. I keep talking and talking and I start to hear myself as though I am the mother and I am listening to me, this woman who is a little too proud of her horses and her barn and I want her to stop talking, I don't want to be here, not at all, but we have to go through what we started, there's no way out of it, and so we all walk together across the yard.

In the barn, both horses are in their stalls, quietly munching hay. The children and their mother stand in a small knot in the center aisle. I bring out a bag of carrots, hold it out to the children. "You can give the horses treats if you want to." I smile at them, trying, I am trying.

Not one of the children moves. They stand close to their mother, silent and serious. She doesn't



smile. "They don't know anything about horses," she says.

I try the girl. "Would you like to give a horse a treat?"

When she slowly nods her head yes, I show her how to hold out her palm, flat, the carrot on it like an offering on a platter. The horses, as if on cue, raise their heads, move to their stall doors, and lean out into the aisle.

"Like this," I say, and hold my hand out to my horse, Buddy. He stretches his velvet muzzle out to my palm, and delicately lips the carrot into his mouth, to crunch it. I hold out a carrot to the girl. "Want to try it?"

The girl warily places the carrot in her palm and extends her hand to the other horse. He takes it, and she can't help herself—she is a child after all—she giggles, then whispers: "It tickles."

The mother takes her hand then, and the hand of the smallest boy. Her face is stiff and unreadable. "Thank you," she says. "We need to go."

\*

A week later, Labor Day weekend, it rains for three days straight. The neighbors are having another

huge party. The rain has been so insistent that they have, for the most part, been kept indoors. But late on Sunday, the rain pauses for an hour or two. Just before dark, the neighbors and a dozen assorted men and women and children pour out of the house and begin to shoot off fireworks. They rise up in the sky, explode over the neighbors' yard and ours.

I am in the barn when the fireworks begin and the ashes are falling like hard rain on the roof. I go from one stall to the other. "It's all right, it's all right," I say again and again. The horses' eyes are huge, their ears flicking back and forth, listening to the barrage outside.

The next day, the rain begins and continues all day; it breaks off again, as if on schedule, late afternoon. The neighbors pour out of their house and begin to shoot. I usher the horses from the pasture into their stalls and carefully close the doors of the barn. The old horse, Freckles, lowers his head to eat his hay. My horse, Buddy, stands alert and listens. "I'm sorry," I say. We never should have built a barn here. Not here, not now, not with these neighbors. I walk back from the barn to the house, it is nearly



dark now, night settling in. Still shooting.

I yell at the neighbors: "Knock it off!"

They don't. My husband calls them on the phone and asks them to stop. They don't. We call the sheriff. A few hours after darkness has fallen, the shooting finally ceases.

\*

Sometime the next week, I am in my office at school. It is quiet, an ordinary mid-afternoon. Stacks of papers on my desk. A student who wants me to call her. She's pregnant, due in a month, needs help making it through my class. Another student, evicted, homeless, can he have an extension? And another, a girl I saw that morning, her face bruised and swollen: she's moving out, away from the boyfriend who did this, she won't be in class the rest of the week, is that okay?

That fall, I have been teaching for a half dozen years. The students in my classes have stories, so many stories. They write about themselves, their own lives, this frayed country, this Midwest, this Indiana. They want more, they want

something, it's there in their words on these pages, the ones on my desk where I sit, stacks of student papers before me, lists of things to do, lists punctuated by afterimages of fireworks, echoes of gunfire. So much to do. Start somewhere. Read a paper, write words of advice on it, do the next one.

I pick up a paper from the top of the stack.

Black marks on a white page.

I rub my eyes as though that will help. Black and white. That's all I see. I stare, and stare. I know these are words, sentences, paragraphs. I know there is meaning here. On this day, this afternoon, I can't find it. I simply can't read. Not a single word.

I push myself away from my desk. Get up. Walk down the hall. Breathe in, out.

\*

A few weeks later, on a Sunday evening, I sit at home, on the porch. I am watching the back yard, the leaves just beginning to turn. I have a book in my lap. I am reading. I am supposed to be reading. It is quiet. An afternoon stretches ahead.

Then, as if he knows, a shot rings out. And then another. More.

Sharp cracks and deep whumps. It goes on, and on. Gunfire. A half hour. Gunfire. Forty-five minutes. So close, the windows rattle and shake. So close, I feel the boom of guns in my chest. My husband calls the neighbors again, and this time no one answers. The shooting goes on.

"I've had it." My husband strides out of the house. I hear his truck start up, then gravel flying as he roars down the driveway. I wait. The shooting stops. I hear shouting. I imagine what will happen next—a fight, someone shoves someone, someone drops a gun, fires a gun, someone gets shot, someone gets killed. These things have happened before and they will happen again.

I get in my own truck, drive to the neighbors' house. My husband's truck is parked at the side of the road and he has one foot in it, and one foot on the road. He is screaming at the neighbor, yelling so loud he is spitting.

If I try to remember now what he said, I only remember it is pure fury. He screams in a raging voice I have heard before more than once but now it is not aimed at me. I want my husband to stop screaming, because there are the four children, standing behind their

father, tiny mouths open and they are children and they don't need to hear this. I can't help but wonder at their life: the parties, the guns, their father, this day, days like this. The mother stands behind her children, mute, as unsmiling and careful as she was when she came to the barn. And her life: what is her life?

Now my husband is screaming louder, and he is raging mad, screaming "Fuck" and "Fuck you" and "Asshole fucking *asshole*." Now I want him to keep screaming. Because there is the father, the neighbor, this man and his gun, standing in the middle of his yard and he is pumping his gun into the air, over his head. In his plaid flannel shirt and Carhaart overalls he's dressed for the part of the farmer, but now he is Rocky, he is John Wayne, he is an American. He bellows lines he must have heard in a movie, on the news, in another fight with someone else somewhere else: "Bring it on! Bring it *on!*"

Then I am yelling. I hear myself, as though this is not me standing in the road, words and words and words coming out of my mouth. Someone else is screaming. She calls this man obnoxious, inconsiderate, and stupid. She points out that his damn fireworks are illegal.



She does not bellow "fuck" the way her husband is still doing, on and on, but she does yell and scream. Now, I have no memory of the exact words that came from the person who was once me. Not anymore. But I do remember the neighbor's words, what he yells back at me, in a tone I haven't heard since grade school, the mocking singsong voice of the bully:

"We never cared about guns or fireworks until we got the horse, did we? Did we? *Did we?*"

\*

I begin to think the neighbor waits for the moment I go out to ride. When I tack up my horse, walk him to the riding arena and get on, at that moment I hear a gun go off. Once. Again. Then silence. Then another shot, maybe two, three. Silence again. Then gunfire again. There is no regular predictable pattern. Just pure quiet and then the shattering of it. My horse seems to grow used to the erratic gunshots and pays attention, not to them, but to me. I try to follow his lead. Ride. Just ride.

\*

One night in October, nine o'clock, dead dark, the shooting begins again. The windows of the house rattle, the boom and bang of the guns so insistent and deep, so loud I can feel it in my body, so loud I can hear nothing but gunfire. I should call the sheriff then. I do not. By then I am tired and afraid of this man, a fear that I know he wants to instill. I am a city girl in the country. I have no idea where I am sometimes. The barrage of gunfire continues. My husband sits at his desk, headphones on, grimly pretending he doesn't hear it. The dogs hide. I pace from room to room, wanting to do something, not knowing what to do. In desperation, I call another neighbor, one to the north.

"Can you hear that?"

"Yep. Sure can."

"What can we do?"

There is a slight pause. A low chuckle.

"Stay inside," he says.

The next morning, I go to the barn as usual at six to feed the horses, muck out their stalls. The entire world is still. The sky a deep dark black, illuminated with a million brilliant stars. A piece of moon hangs low on the horizon. The air is sharply cold and clear. The frozen



grass crunches under my feet, crisp with frozen dew. The world is so beautiful, so calm. In moments like this I think that over time I might learn to live next door to the man with the guns. I might adjust to the noise and the implied threat and the constant sneer. If things had gone on the same, that might have come to pass.

Is this where I write: *it got worse?*

It did.

\*

One day, early in November, I come home after a day of teaching just as it begins to rain. The old horse is in, but my horse is still out in the pasture.

"I tried to get him in," my husband says. "But he wouldn't come."

I go out, halter in hand. The rain is coming down harder now. I open the gate to the pasture. The horse is on the other side of the creek. He sees me. I call him. He lowers his head and does not move.

Something is very wrong. I go to him, and put the halter on. "Come on, Buddy." I tug. "Come on." He still doesn't budge. I tug again, cluck encouragingly. It is pouring down rain. My husband is in the

field with me now.

"What's wrong?"

"I don't know."

I realize now how little I knew about horses then. I have no business having a barn, a pasture, two horses in my care. I have no idea what I am doing. And my husband, the man who thought building this barn would keep us together forever, he knows even less.

Somehow, in that mud and rain, we get the horse to move. He is limping badly.

"Buddy, Buddy." I talk to him as we move slowly toward the barn.

Inside, I put him in his stall, throw a cooler over him, and feel up and down each of his legs. I know to search for heat. Heat means injury and pain and I find it: his right hind leg, just below the hock. Hot. Swollen. I cold hose him, give him some Bute, call the vet.

When the vet comes the next day, after we lunge the horse and watch him favor the sore leg, after the vet ultrasounds the leg and sees the bruised suspensory ligament, after she shows me how to wrap his legs, after she gives me enough Bute to last until the swelling goes down, and then gives instructions on his care—stall rest and hand-walking, maybe a month, maybe

longer—after we put the horse back into his stall, I ask: “How do you think he did this?”

“It’s hard to say,” she says. Maybe he was running and there was a hole in the pasture he stumbled in. Maybe he moved wrong and twisted his leg.

“Maybe something spooked him,” I say.

The vet shrugs. “Maybe.”

In my imagination, I see our neighbor, with his gun, at the property line. He won’t shoot a horse. He is just smart enough not to do that. He won’t even look directly at the pair of horses in the field. He will just wait. Wait while both horses get used to his presence. Wait while they move about the pasture, casually grazing. Wait until one horse moves close to his land. Wait. Watch the horizon. Wait. The horse is right there. Right now. Now. BAM BAM BAM. One horse bolts and gallops to the other side of the field. The other horse lifts his head and follows. Now both are running. BAM BAM BAM There is nowhere to run. BAM BAM. Now, one horse, my horse, falters and stumbles and comes up limping badly. He stops, lowers his head, defeated. In my imagination, only then does the neighbor put down his gun and

after he takes in the scene before him, remembering it all, only then does he walk away.

I wrap Buddy’s legs every night for six weeks. Unwrap them in the morning and let him and his companion out to stretch and move in the riding arena where I can watch them from the house. An hour, two hours. Then I put them back into the safety of their stalls. In the end, they will never go out in the pasture again. That is another story. In this story, I only imagine I will do this for as long as I have to, a month, even longer.

\*

One day in early December while Buddy is still lame and on stall rest, my husband stands in the living room, pulls up his pant leg and says, “Does my leg look funny to you?”

His leg —right or left I no longer remember—is swollen from knee to ankle. Purple in color. It looks like an oversized bruise.

“That,” I say, “looks bad.”

He will spend a week in the hospital on an intravenous drip of blood thinners working to loosen or lessen, I can never get the doctor to explain clearly which, a deep vein thrombosis in his leg, a blood clot



that has to be monitored in case it becomes dislodged and moves to his lungs where it will become a pulmonary embolism. A "P.E." I remember P.E. from an episode of *E.R.* a long time ago. One of the doctors gets stabbed, horribly attacked. Her throat is slashed. She almost dies. At the last moment, they find her, gasping for air. Emergency surgery, a tracheotomy, IV. She pulls through, is conscious enough that someone can tell her the details of her condition. It's bad. She can make it, they tell her, but there may be complications. She understands. She puts a finger over the trach so she can speak. Her words come out in a ragged whisper:

"P.E.?"

The doctor working on her, a colleague and a friend, nods, solemn. "P.E."

The young doctor holds her colleague's gaze. She knows. And then, she dies.

My husband does not die. He stays in the hospital for a week. I bring him books, the *New Yorker*. I visit twice a day, morning and evening. In between, I take care of the horses. Grade papers. Teach my classes. Let the dogs in and out. Listen for gunfire.

\*

I am visiting my husband in the hospital, maybe the day he will be discharged, maybe another day. I don't remember. I only remember that this is the day the doctor prescribes a new drug, something for blood pressure or clotting or not clotting. He gives the prescription to the nurse, so she can send the order down to the pharmacy; I idly wonder if our neighbor is working.

And then we wait.

My husband and I sit in his hospital room, and we chat carefully. I don't tell him I find the peace of him being here, and not at home, a kind of relief. The house in the country is calm: dogs, horses, me. I am physically tired. My body is sore. Yet my mind is clear. In the time my husband is not at home I sometimes think: I can do this alone. I even imagine, maybe, that if I were alone I could make peace with the neighbor. We might find a way to co-exist. I imagine many things. Living alone. Living with someone else. I don't say any of this. We talk about safe things. The dogs. The weather. The barn. Him.

It is on that visit that I see our neighbor, the man with the guns, in the hallway by my husband's room.



The neighbor is acting casual. He is acting as though he, a pharmacist who works in the basement, makes a habit of coming up to the patients' floor to see what needs to be seen. He is acting as though he hasn't just read a name on the order that came downstairs, that he didn't have a jolt of recognition, that he didn't invent a reason to come up to this floor to find the room where a man is lying in a bed, hooked up to an IV drip that might, possibly, be saving his life. He is acting as though he doesn't recognize my husband, or me, at the very moment when he pauses at the door and glances inside. It is just a suspension of time, a brief moment, as though he has turned into the wrong room, then caught himself and begun to turn away.

Yet a glimpse of his face reveals everything. When I see him at the door, his expression is not surprise or cruel pleasure, it is not even a face slightly off-kilter with ordinary spite. It is, rather, a mask of pure and shining hate. I will never forget this face, nor how it shifts, an infinitesimal change, and how then there is a smile, a little glow. Even as he is turning away, turning as if remembering he needs to say something important

to a nurse, even at that moment of stepping away from the door, the neighbor's face tells me what he is thinking: in this undeclared war between him and us, he has won.

I move to stand in the doorway of the hospital room. The neighbor makes conversation with the nurse. He knows I am watching him. He won't look at me. He finishes saying whatever he has invented to say and then, he doesn't go back the way he came, not past this doorway; instead, he ducks his head and strides down the hospital corridor through some windowless double doors that swing open before him, and then, blandly shudder shut.

# WINTER BURIAL

JOEANN HART

He met her at the gate with the cart  
and she covered the animal with a sheet.  
They pulled together to the place  
behind the barn.  
The ground was frozen.  
They laid their friend on the hard earth  
adjusting his head, his yellowed horns  
ridged with years.  
She tucked the sheet around him,  
collecting his dignity.  
It's a dirty business  
storing a body for the winter.  
They carried the black box  
and covered him.  
Stacking heavy stones on that  
against the predators.  
Snow was coming.  
They might not see the box for a long while.  
Say a prayer, he said.  
I have no words.  
Write a poem then, later.  
I don't write poetry, she said.  
You will, he said.

The ground opened in March,  
a sudden, violent thaw.  
They peeled away wet leaves made dark by time.  
The shovels cut through fibrous roots  
like matted fur.  
Runners hard as shins were severed.  
The water table was high.  
Life coursed beneath their feet.  
They removed the stones  
then the black box, letting it fall aside.  
The body was fresh  
as if they just found him in the barn,  
the morning sun a shaft of dusty light.  
Worn hooves and gloved hands met  
for the unseemly haul to the pit  
which swallowed him whole.  
Then relief. He was where he was meant to be.  
She tilted his horns to display his glory,  
and said a prayer.  
God.  
Nothing else came.

When the hole was filled  
they went to the shed for rakes  
to smooth over what'd been done.  
On return, a goat was standing on the grave  
staring down, comprehending,  
or not,  
as his friend got ready to do  
the hard work of becoming one  
with the land.



# ORNITHOLOGY

**PAUL HLAVA**

Blue jays sing on my windowsill  
each morning when I wake.  
I drive to work and robins flutter overhead.  
I can't get rid of these fucking birds.  
Maybe it's your cologne,  
the receptionist at the mill offered.  
That's a stupid idea, Charlene, I said.  
All day outside flocks squawked  
over a greasy French fry carton.  
The next day I stopped wearing cologne  
but a pregnant gull flew into my face,  
knocking loose a gold filling.  
I tongued it at work while that damned  
one-legged sparrow hopped in circles  
outside my window. At the end of the day  
Charlene and the shipping guy  
chirped behind my back.  
Above my driveway a flock of crows  
and their adopted cockatiel  
were already circling.  
You should try catching them  
and selling them on ebay, my neighbor said,  
wiping oil from his hands onto a rag.

You should try staying faithful to Linda  
at the next holiday party, Dan, I said.  
At the door was a package from Gloria.  
We hadn't spoken since last Thanksgiving  
when I called her a thirty-something  
who'll never have a lasting relationship  
until she moves from her parent's house.  
We'd had our tiffs but that night  
she threw her hands up and screeched  
like mad, stomping the ground  
in her black and red striped socks.  
Inside the package was a ten-pound bag of birdseed.  
I didn't know if it was an apology or threat  
but I threw a few handfuls in the backyard  
as I went out front and hosed  
the white pancakes of shit off my Subaru.  
I made a Tom Collins and stretched out  
on my recliner. The new lemon tree  
in the backyard was beginning to fall  
from the weight of perched ravens.  
Little fluorescent birds pecked at the ground in crowds  
like the moving lights of a distant carnival  
while big, dark colored birds  
swooped overhead picking them off.  
I watched until the sun set  
behind distant storm clouds,  
silhouetting their wide, muscled bodies  
against the housing development on the hill.  
Sometimes a clear and sunny sky  
masks the misery behind a spring day.  
I love it when the rain comes down hard.

# **ZEN WRENCH TROUBLESHOOTING**

**MICHAEL JONES**

Misuse begins with failure to give the wrench away.

Weigh the gap between the jaws: it should equal the jaws' weight.

Wait for the balance of gap and jaws to settle into your hand.

Hand the wrench to your task. This is the step that many miss.



## SUMMER GRASS, WINTER WORM

### CHRISTOPHER LINFORTH

In his office, Cheng sipped his cup of *yartsa gunbu* tea and then rubbed his left shin, hoping the ache would soon fade. He took a second gulp, replaced the cup in its saucer, and rested his elbows on the desk so his hands joined, though not in prayer, but as a base to support his fat chin. He stared at the thin pile of crime reports—the list of petty grievances reaffirming his long-held resentment serving as the chief of police in such a provincial town. He longed for a post east in Chongqing, where he had a brother, or if the Party were smiling, Quanzhou.

Inspector Lin Shu knocked on the half-open door and came in. He was a stocky man, his chest easily filling the jacket of his olive green uniform. His bony face was weather-beaten and his hands were rough from years in the fields. Cheng liked Lin Shu, who, as a local, was trusted by the farmers and yak herders that populated this section of the Tibetan Plateau.

“Outsiders struck in the fields again,” said Lin Shu.

Cheng sighed. He knew from experience this matter would take some time to resolve. He rose from his chair, grabbed his cup, and went to the window that overlooked a sprawl of old *siheyuan* courtyards. “Last night?” he asked wearily.

“On the widow Yu’s land.”

“That will make things difficult.” Yu was once married to

Lungtok, a popular man who fought decades before against the invading Chinese army. He had died prior to Cheng's appointment in the town. A newspaper obituary reported that his death had not been heroic—a simple heart attack one morning in the fields, while he was tending to his herd of yak. To counter the propaganda of the Party, the town whispered the legends of Lungtok's exploits. One, in particular, caught Cheng's attention. A baker in the square told him Lungtok had assisted the Dali Lama out of the country by digging a tunnel from his house into the fields, to where his retinue spirited him to India.

"You will visit her today?"

Cheng nodded. "If my leg holds up."

"The tea helps?"

"A little," he said, looking at the cup's murky contents.

*Yartsa gunbu* was the larvae of the ghost moth and was rumored to cure many ailments. He knew the moth laid its eggs in the grassy plains, leaving the hatched larvae to burrow into the dirt where often it was infected by fungal spores. Over time, the fungus subsumed the larvae, and forced a stroma to erupt out of the ground. The delicacy, often known as worms, was harvested locally and sold to the dealers who came from Lanzhou and paid several hundred *yuan* for a fist-sized clump.

Cheng drove his old sedan into the square. He sped past the concrete statue of Chairman Mao and the shiny Zongshen motorcycles leaning against it and took the new asphalt road to the grassy hills that rose out of the plateau. The steep incline caused his engine to stutter as the road wound around the hills. He wished he owned a Land Cruiser like his counterpart in Quanzhou and he often regarded it as a slight that he had not been issued one. The road curved around the fields and ended in a giant loop that acted as a turning circle. He parked next to a wooden gate and got out of his car. The steep hill worried him. His leg had been tender for months now—a dull ache flared in the bone when he placed too much pressure on



that side of his body. His doctor was unsure of the cause. Tests revealed little—although, Cheng was thankful bone cancer had been ruled out. In pain, he hiked the final *li* along a dirt path that curled around the hill and led to a large white farmhouse decorated with prayer flags.

A small boy opened the door and stared at Cheng for a moment. He sported a dollop of black hair cut in a bowl shape, and Cheng guessed the boy was around five-years-old. Before he could say a word the boy sprinted off, shouting something Cheng couldn't make out. He stepped inside to try and talk to the boy again, to explain why he shouldn't be afraid. The house smelled of boiled duck fat and Cheng heard the clang of cooking pots in the kitchen. Surveying the living room, he thought the furniture was in good shape—most of the farmers were herdsman and lived in yak-hair tents. Yu had done well. There were two *pegams* with hand-carved panels shaped in the lotus form and a row of silver-painted *thangka* boxes hemmed in by a side wall. He peered through the small glass panels of a gold floral shrine and saw the shelves were empty of Buddha statues. A black-and-white photograph tacked above the shrine caught his eye. A man he assumed to be Longtok knelt on the hillside, grinning as he pointed to something in the distance.

Yu appeared in the hallway. She had cragged pale skin and silver hair braided in a long ponytail. She wore a silk *chuba* and an amber bead necklace tight on her neck. Her eyes bunched as she studied Cheng and her hands began to shake. He tipped his cap, but she carried on shaking her hands, and he yanked his cap off and tucked it under his arm.

"*Tashi delek*," he said, offering his limited Tibetan.

"You're late," she noted, grazing past him and sitting down in a pine chair, the back panel decorated with a coral-red temple. "Twelve hours ago would have been useful."

"I only—"

She pointed a bony finger to the picture of Lungtok. "Punctual man. He saved many lives."



"I heard," he said.

Yu snorted as though she didn't believe him. She went to the kitchen and returned with a wicker basket. She picked out a worm and held it in the air. "It took all morning to find this." She brushed the dirt off the larva and thrust it toward Cheng. The larva half was colored a dull yellow, while the fungus was dark brown and shaped like a thin twig. "But only this one."

Cheng pocketed the worm. "I will add a patrol for tonight."

"And tomorrow? And the next day?"

"Resources are limited."

She spat: "Those are the words of a politician."

The small boy popped his head around the corner and Cheng waved to him.

"Silang," Yu shouted, drawing the boy in. He stood next to Yu, hands behind his back, and lowered his eyes. The sleeves of Silang's woolen *chuba* were frayed and speckled with mud. Yu spanked his rear and said, "Outside." Silang ran, crying.

Cheng hesitated to say anything. Lungtok had died at least eight or nine years ago and he wondered who Silang's father was.

Yu shook her head.

"Shall we go?" said Cheng.

Even though it was hot, Yu tied a brightly-colored *bang-dian* around her waist and put on a white cloth hat. Cheng found it curious that she wore the apron, that she carried on the tradition as if she were still married. Yu led Cheng to her yard where a flock of chickens pecked in the dirt and some tools were kept in a ramshackle pile. Yu stuck a trowel in her sash and guided him to the fields. The sweep of green land stretched to the line of angular hills on the horizon. They walked toward them and Yu shouted at Cheng to keep up. As she zigzagged through the long grass, she muttered that he was slowing her down. "You need to fix that leg," she scoffed. "Fat man." Yu flipped the brim of her hat, and knelt down to ferret through the grass for *yartsa gunbu*. She used the trowel

methodically to part the blades and nestle into the earth. He knew the thin brown stalks grew barely an inch out of the soil and were difficult to spot. Although he had never farmed, his family had owned a large garden that sprawled from the rear of their house and grew pak choi and sorghum.

Yu moved on, searching another area with wildflowers sprouting in large clumps. Cheng caught up to her and Yu cursed under her breath.

"Nothing," she said. "The men stole all the worms."

He studied the scene, hoping to find some evidence that this was the case. Although *yartsa gunbu* was valuable, it was also over-harvested. By uprooting all of the fungus, there were fewer spores to infect the larvae. He could not locate any freshly dug mounds and he crossed his arms, feeling defiant.

She glared at him and threw the trowel into the dirt near his feet. "This will be a bad season," she said.

Cheng could not disagree. The summer's end brought monsoons and a fusillade of extreme weather. Winter was nothing but sub-zero temperatures and cutting winds. He was not sure he could bear another one. "For all of us," he said.

Yu's brow creased as if she were surprised by his forthright words. "Send Lin Shu," she said. "He's a good man."

"Two policemen will come tonight," he replied, reaching for her trowel. He weighed the metal blade in his hand for a moment and then offered it to her. "They will be sufficient."

Returning to town, Cheng found a pilgrim truck parked on the edge of the square. Monks swaddled in vermillion robes were shifting small rolls of cloth off the bed of the truck. Over the years Cheng had witnessed an increase in monks passing through the town, selling rope incense and red clay burners to generate income for the monastery. Recently, the Party had passed a new tax penalizing the ground upon which a monastery was built. He wasn't sure how many months it would be until the monks began to protest in the streets and he would have to call in supplementary police from the other towns in



the province. After locking his car, he followed the monks over to the market on the far side of the square. He jostled through the stalls, nodding at vendors who recognized him, and bought a bag of raisins. He ate them for a while until he noticed several men he had not seen before. They were crowded in a circle around a cardboard box filled with worms. Cheng stood closer and watched as a gold-toothed man pointed to his hand smudged with numbers. The dealer wore a polo shirt and carried a cell phone. He laughed at the demands the seller was making and accused him of inserting lead wire into the worms to make them weigh more. Cheng sunk his hands in his pockets and walked away. The town had changed over the last few years as the price of *yartsa gunbu* had sharply increased in value and brought outsiders in. Tired, he went home and telephoned Lin Shu, ordering a patrol to guard Yu's land.

Cheng woke late the next morning and arrived at his office without having eaten breakfast. He slunk in his chair, feeling flustered, and leafed through the fresh paperwork stacked on his desk. The report detailed a series of car thefts and traffic accidents, and a stabbing at one of the bars flanking the square. "Drunks, no doubt," he said under his breath and tossed the sheet of paper. He lifted his calf onto the desk and rolled up his pant leg so that his shin was exposed. Running his fingers over the fine black hairs, he searched for the cause of the pain. He could not find any external clue and he sighed.

Lin Shu entered the office carrying two cups of green tea. He plunked one cup on Cheng's desk and drank from his own. A little embarrassed, Cheng swept his leg to the floor.

"The widow Yu reported thieves again," said Lin Shu.

"She probably saw the policeman and mistook them for criminals."

"She's not happy," he said.

"I doubt she's ever been."

Lin Shu stepped to the window and checked his reflection



in the glass. "You should have known her when Lungtok was alive," he said. "She was a different woman. Happy. Joyous."

"The past is a strange place."

Lin Shu smoothed down his jacket. "You're becoming a philosopher."

"I suppose."

"We were all yak herders then," said Lin Shu, turning to Cheng. "Yu fed us in the evenings: steaming hot *thenthuk* and a mound of flatbreads piled like rocks. It was a very different life."

Cheng could not quite picture Lin Shu's positive description of Yu. She had not offered him any hospitality—no noodle soup or freshly baked flatbread. He felt aggrieved in helping her. Yu, though, still had friends high up in the community and visiting her again would be the simplest of solutions. "I'll deal with her later," he said, and picked back up his paperwork. "Maybe this afternoon."

Cheng ate a late lunch of boiled mutton and greasy noodles and drank a large glass of dry *huangjiu*. He wiped the sweat from his brow with a napkin and noticed his cell phone was ringing. He did not recognize the number and he considered not answering it.

"*Wei?*" he said, after a moment.

"Lijun," the voice said. "Ministry of the Interior."

Worried the call concerned something serious, Cheng remained quiet. It was unusual for the Ministry to bypass the National Police Agency—that much he was aware of. Then he remembered he had submitted a transfer request some time ago and he wondered if the Ministry was now reviewing it.

"Yes."

"The increase in crime. Unacceptable," said Lijun.

Cheng listened as Lijun listed the crime rates and berated him after detailing each one. Lijun emphasized that Cheng was shaming the Party and then he hung up.

Cheng flipped his phone onto the table, closed his eyes and deliberated on what to do. When he reopened them, he refilled his glass with wine and drained it in one swallow. He knew to be offered the transfer he had to lower the rates. Hazy reasoning led him to start with the theft statistics. He drove to Yu's land slightly drunk and cursing his job. He parked his sedan at a crooked angle and slipped off his cap and rubbed his temples. A new slick of oily sweat coated his forehead and he wiped it away with his cuff. He thought of turning back, sending Lin Shu instead to deal with Yu. That would only make her madder, he sensed. He stepped out of the car and without shutting the door staggered toward the fields. Along the dirt path he saw Silang running through the long summer grass. He noticed Cheng and bolted over.

"Hello," said Silang.

"Your mother at the house?"

Silang shook his head, lending a light flop to his mound of hair. "In the back fields," he said.

"You need a haircut," said Cheng, mussing the boy's locks.

Silang stepped to the side. "I want it longer," he snapped.

"All right," said Cheng, beguiled by the boy.

Together they walked to the farmhouse. Silang moved in bursts, fast and then slow—sometimes circling Cheng as if he were his prey. "You're a strange one," he said to the boy. Silang reminded Cheng of his two nephews and how much he wanted to visit them again. His last trip to Chongqing had been almost a year ago. When he returned he had conceded to himself how little he understood the land here and how desperate he was to leave.

Farther along the path, Cheng noticed a smooth shard of gray trapped between the slopes of the hills and realized it was a lake. As he focused on the contours of the shoreline—trying to remember the lake's name—he felt a cramp in his calf and asked to stop for a moment.

"Are you hurt?" asked Silang.



"No, it's just my leg."

Silang pointed to the hill. "My father is over there."

Cheng was confused. He shaded his eyes, but he could not see anyone. "Over there?"

"Would you like to see?"

Cheng half-nodded. He was in no hurry to talk to Yu again and he was curious to meet Silang's father. His leg was a concern. He reached inside his pant pocket and brought out some pills his doctor had given him. He swallowed two of them and gestured for Silang to lead the way.

"Follow me," said Silang.

Silang sprinted and Cheng told him to slow down. Silang explained they needed to hurry, that the hills wouldn't be around forever. Cheng laughed and told Silang he was right, but that he was old. Silang stuck his fist out and his thumb up, and said, "*Yapodu*." Cheng liked the boy walking beside him and his constant neck craning to see if he was all right. He soon found, though, the steady incline of the hill deceptive, the air thin, and his lungs aching a little. Then a strong breeze washed over his face and he felt a rush of air inside of him. For a few strides he felt energized, like his old self. Then his leg began to twinge, the pain banding around the muscle as he climbed higher. He had doubts about what the doctor had told him, that he had been misdiagnosed. Cancer was infecting his leg.

Bending over, he rested his palms on his knees. He spat a glob of thick phlegm and watched the blooded mucus weigh down a blade of grass. When he straightened, up Silang snatched his hand and tugged hard.

"You're strong," said Cheng.

"I know," said Silang.

Cheng allowed the boy to pull him up the last part of the slope. The grass thinned to patches of pale green and gave way to stumps of knotted juniper and finally an ash-gray moss. A sharp wind whipped Cheng's cap off and blew it over the



top of the hill. Silang giggled and removed his left boot and threw it high into the air. As they watched the wad of tanned yak leather fall flat to the ground, the pain radiated through Cheng's leg and he felt as though he were going to faint. He collapsed onto one knee and cursed himself under his breath.

"Are you all right?" asked Silang.

Cheng clasped his fingers around his shin and said, "Help me sit."

Silang guided Cheng to the ground and he rested supine on the bare rock and looked at the brightness of the sky. A dusting of storm clouds massed on the horizon and he thought of the long hike down the hill. The wind dropped away and he saw Silang's legs running over to a small pile of rocks. For a short while he watched the boy and how he kept his hands tight by his sides and his head lowered. Then when Silang didn't move, Cheng sat up and saw the rocks were actually bones. He had heard of sky burial: the ritual dissection of a body laid out on a flat slice of stone. Several vertebrae were missing and also both femurs. Wolves and vultures, he guessed, had gnawed on the body after the ritual cleaving of the corpse. Full of curiosity at this discovery, he rose and hobbled over to Silang, to be sure what he was seeing. A dozen worms were arranged in a circle around Lungtok's sun-bleached remains.

"I remember him," said Silang.

Cheng knew that wasn't possible, that Lungtok was not Silang's father, and had died before he was born. He put his arm around Silang. "We all remember him," he said, and held the boy tighter. As Silang knelt and touched the skull with his fingers, Cheng looked down to the fields below and saw Yu lugging a spade up the hill.

## PETAL

### SARAH MARSHALL

Jestyn is canning plums—skins neatly peeled away and pitted halves rawed as scalping—when the pains come. Pulls herself upstairs to the bedroom and wedges a chair under the knob. Lies down on the sugar pine floor so as not to dirty the sheets. And goes to it.

She saw her sisters' children born and knows there is nothing to worry on; your body is big enough and you can stand the hurt. Her body she is worried about—she is 4'8" in her bare feet, and even fit to split weighs no more than a well-fed dog—but standing the hurt she is not. The baby's head presses, presses, presses, her own blood buzzing like a spring-time swarm, and she bites down on the skin of her wrist and presses back for a good long time before she knows she needs not strength but breaking, not to endure but to be pulled apart. She casts a blind hand out under the bed, sweeping over unswept grit until she touches the cool milk handle of a pocketknife and unclasps the blade, clumsy with pain so that her hand was already sliced and bleeding as she lays the sharpness into her softest skin and sets her child free.

The baby slides out. The mother falls back, and lies still until she knows it is time to pull herself forward and see what she has done. Eyes red as rubies and bulging out past the eyelids, barely contained and surely sightless. Hair normal.



Little tongue in its mouth normal. Mouth itself a forced-wide O and in it a full set of teeth. Feet and hands tiny, fingers fused closed. And the body: raw red past the red of bleeding, past the red of insides turned out. Red as roses in a child's story, and red only broken by diamonds of peeling white-as-snow skin. The babe is silent, even if she is not. It is a girl.

She named it Petal. It lived for an hour, moving its legs little and arms only upward, as if reaching. It did not struggle for air, did not seem in pain. It simply breathed in and breathed out and then did not breathe in again. When she knew it was dead for good, Jestyn wrapped the body in her ruined dress, carried it out to the wood behind the house, dug a hole as deep as she could in the place where the ground was softest.

No telling how long before she sees her again. The days crowd the corners of her eyes and the sky lays itself against the ground, and one day Jestyn goes out to the place in the wood where the salmonberries grow and finds a baby girl. Sitting on the mossy ground, eyes like the poisonous red fruit even a dumb Dogrib girl knows not to touch. Eyes on her mama before her mama sees her. Petal.

She does not hesitate. She is a mother, still—or must be now as she picks the baby up, carries her inside and searches for hurts that might have come to her in whatever place she has come from. There is nothing. Her whole body is a hurt, but she does not seem to feel it. She does not cry, does not make any noise at all, but watches Jestyn as she moves around the room, as she covers her own eyes and uncovers them again, then reaches out to stroke her cattail-white hair.

Jestyn takes her to bed and falls asleep, wakes and finds her gone. Every day after that she goes to wait in the woods, and sometimes her daughter comes to her, and sometimes she does not. She knows it would be foolish to ask for more.



Petal grows. Two years, three years, four years old. A perfect girl child, despite her hideousness. Jestyn keeps Puritan marshmallows in her apron pockets, hoping to coax her out with a treat. She does not keep sweets around for herself, but believes there are certain special things a girl deserves, and she is still a girl in the end.

Petal does not slowly learn the sounds of words, does not pick up their meaning in Jestyn's lap, but simply shows up one day full of talk and eager to set some of it loose.

Marsh mallow isn't really white, you know, she says, sitting down and cramming her mouth sweet-full.

Is that so?

Petal nods. They're not white, either.

They're white sometimes, says Jestyn, who truth be told cannot remember the last time she saw a marsh mallow growing up out of the ground.

Not the ones I've seen.

You haven't seen everything, Pet.

I've seen a lot.

A lot of marsh mallow?

A lot of *plenty*.

Come sit on mama's lap, Jestyn says, and Petal obliges: presses her flour-white head against her mother's skinny chest and lets herself be folded up. Jestyn tightens her grip and feels skin flaking away, lowers her head and kisses the places, blood-tasting, that have been uncovered.

It doesn't hurt, says Petal, muffled, as if anticipating her worry.

Does anything hurt?

She nods, but does not look up when she says, You do.

Only when Jestyn walks down to the garage and hears her husband talking to strangers—bargaining, bantering, buying and selling—does she remember why she followed him down from Great Slave Lake. It was that mouth he had used to kiss

the soles of her feet as they sat on the bed she shared with her four sisters, that mouth he had taken her whole hand into and, tongue working furiously as the fingers of a lockpick, loosed her wedding ring and displayed it between his teeth.

Blackstone. Big as a picture book illustration of a man and near as old as her father, but a father's opposite. A husband stands between a girl and the wideness of the world, and a father pushes her out in it, gives her a heel of bread and a box of lard and her sister's half-split dress and tells her to walk around town until a rich man comes along and offers to mend it with money. A husband does not tell you that you're too old to grow thick at the family tit and too girl to work in the uranium mines like your brothers. A husband takes you to an inside, gentles the air that comes through the door and gives you your own daughters to be kind to, even if he asks you only for sons.

We need to fatten you up, Stone says one afternoon.  
That so.

I got coveralls weigh more than you do, Jes. You haint a flyweight bigger since I got you.

I thought you liked me little.

You can't be that little and make a whole baby. Eat. You fatten up you'll give me a baby in a year.

Jestyn eats. Jestyn eats slices of bread spread with oleo, oleo further whitened by sugar and then crushed between tongue and roof of mouth. Jestyn eats sugar by the spoonful—one in the morning and one before bed—and savors its sharpness, hard enough to cut before the heat of her body turns it tame. Jestyn stirs sugar into eggs, into glasses of warm sweet milk, into water. Jestyn eats the jars of clover honey Blackstone brings her from the garage, then sucks the honey from the frayed royal clover that grows in the yard. Jestyn eats raw rice and red plums and handfuls of sweet black dirt. Jestyn picks



bowlsful of chokeberries and mashes them with sugar until they are whiter than red, until she is sure sweetness will overtake the bitter. Jestyn eats.

But every time she begins to grow she is only left lighter a few weeks later, her baby leaving her at night, though she sleeps careful. She leaves the stains on her legs and hands until time wears them away, and it is only after she is clean and hopeless that Petal shows up again, rests her head on her mother's stomach and listens for the silence within.

Jestyn never tells Stone about her sisters and their children. Roana whose first boy was born eyeless, yes eyeless she said and no one believed her until they had all gathered around and pressed their fingers gently against his lids and felt the nothing pressing back until Roana pulled him away. His brain was normal, his body normal apart from the one thing forgot, and in that way he was better off than all her other children would be. Their father went off to the tavern and the brothers and sisters left and Roana stayed on the bed, rocking and singing until she believed she loved him, and Jestyn sat outside the window and listened to Roana's high green voice drift out: *I'll sing to him each spring to him and long for the day when I'll cling to him.* Nothing much to see anyhow, Roana said later, and it was easy to agree with that.

But his brothers, his cousins: there was no loving them. Not Ket's children, either, too small or too mangled or too turned around to even say boy or girl. One just a head and a mess of limbs, some moving and some already dead. It lived for a day and then they put it in the ground. Another perfectly formed but with no features on its face: mouth, nose, eyes, all gone. Stillborn as it should be, Ket said. After that she stopped eating, grew thin, talked about nothing but movie stars, and one day caught a bus to Toronto and left all her babies behind.

Petal has taken to crawling into bed with her. Only the nights



when Jestyn is alone, Stone gone off to work on his engines, or into town to lose himself in a softer body. Then she feels the sheet tightening over her, Pet's weight settling into the mattress, clammy arms settling around her and carbuncle eyes glowing near.

Petal makes up songs when Jestyn has swallowed too much hopelessness in the day, strokes her cheeks with chalky fingers and hums. Shh, shh. You're the mama. Don't be sad now. Don't be cry. When Jestyn stops crying, it is still the song she sings.

It is on one of these nights that Petal touches her mother's stomach and finds a hardness there, presses and cannot make it go away, and then silent as the cloudless night peels the sheets back, walks out of the bedroom and down the hall.

Jestyn waits to lose it, but it grows. She imagines blind babies, dead babies, babies rot-black in the womb. She tries to imagine something worse than worst can be, but can never quite convince herself that worst is in her reckoning, or that she has any right to not be surprised.

On September 7th, 70 AD—according to the encyclopedia that is the only book Stone keeps in the house—the Roman army plunders Jerusalem. On September 7th, 1695, the pirate Henry Every captures the Indian Grand Mughal ship *Ganj-i-Sawai*, making off with £50,000 worth of treasure. In 1864, Atlanta is evacuated on orders of General William Tecumseh Sherman. In 1921, the first Miss America Pageant is held in Atlantic City, the winner Miss Margaret Gorman of Washington, DC. In 1927, the first fully functioning prototype of the television set is built by its inventor, Philo Farnsworth. In 1936, the last known Tasmanian Tiger, a female named Benjamin, dies alone in her cage. In 1942, 8,700 Jews are sent to Belzec extermination camp.

On September 7th, 1948, a baby girl is born in the highest

room of a dirty white house in a dirty white town called Rose. She lives and dies in the breadth of a breath, and when she has gone for good her mother buries her. Still and all she is the only child the mother has to love for the next five years, and the only face, aside from her husband's, that she sees outside of dreaming. She has been the doted-on daughter for a full five years when, on September 7th, 1953, her mother gives birth to a baby boy: Aloysius Norther. Hair gold as a rich man's tooth, skin smooth and pale as soap. He cries strong as a lion, no slapping needed. He lives.

But there's something wrong with his *eyes*, Petal says, peering in at her baby brother as he sleeps later that day.

They're closed, Pet, Jestyn says as gently as she can. She does not know if her daughter is familiar with sleeping, if she has to close her own eyes at night, or even if she can.

No, says Petal, impatient. I mean his eyes when they're open.

What's the matter with them?

They don't have any colors in them, she says. Girl voice growing thick. He can't see.

You don't have to have color in your eyes to see things. And besides, they might change yet. Most babies are born with gray eyes, and then one day you look down and they're another color.

Petal leans against the bassinet, reaches one flaking finger down and rests it on her brother's forehead, and it is not the pressure that scares Jestyn but the idea that she might rub off somehow, leave a mark that will never come away. She snatches Petal's hand away and pulls it behind her back.

Petal turns to her, whiteless eyes narrowed to slits. To keep back the tears, Jestyn thinks, though later she will wonder if it is anger she has seen, for there is something stoic and pig iron-heavy in the little girl's voice, and she has never known her to cry before.

Did my eyes change? Petal asks.



Jestyn looks back at her son. What do you mean?

Did my eyes change, like the other baby's will? Did they used to be another color? Did they used to be like his?

Jestyn kneels and takes Petal in her arms, but the girl stays limp. No, Pet.

Why?

Because you're meant to look this way.

They said I look like a rabbit.

Who said?

But Petal is not listening. Head resting now in the crook of Jestyn's neck, her worm-warm hand working its way into her mother's dark hair. They said I looked like a red-eyed rabbit half dead by dogs. They said I looked like I was inside out. They said—

Shh, Jestyn interrupts, stroking the girl's back, thinking: Who would say such things? And how?

Petal twists Jestyn's hair around her fingers and presses her face against her mother's breast, those two red eyes burning into her, hot as anger fresh-skinned.

The next day, a birthday cake. Water, sugar, baking soda. A few small eggs, yolks summer sun-hard, from the chickens who have eluded coyotes and the restless jaws of Stone's dogs. Flour from the big white bag, a few minutes standing at the counter to sort the weevils out, watch them squirm in the glassy sunlight, lift one to lips without thinking and feel it struggle under the tongue. Bite down and swallow.

You have birthed a son, but already your milk is piss-thin and souring. Never could keep a child alive, could you? Meat growing rancid and the hunting trip coming, but when he is away how will you eat? You married so you would not chew the heel of your hand, the ends of your hair, the knotweed and yellowcress that grew by the side of the road. Now, surrounded by a sweeter green, you do not like to leave the house.

Another weevil. Pocket them behind your teeth and suck



their juices. Feel them wilt and wither. Can such a small thing even die?

Hands at your apron, face pressed against your hip. For the baby? Pet asks.

For you.

Lift her up. Let her hold the big spoon. Grease the pan with oleo and do not scold her for the flecks of her own dead whiteness she leaves behind. Slide the batter into the oven and let her stir the frosting too. When it is all done let her lick your smooth finger—who knows what the taste will be if she licks her own—and say, Sweets to the sweet. Ask her how she likes it. Ask her how it feels to be five.

I was five yesterday, she says, with all the obstinacy of a living child.

Say, That's right. You've had time to get used to it. So what do you think: you like it better than being four?

Petal shakes her head. I'm not getting any older.

I don't think you have a choice, Pet.

Yes I do.

How?

She has picked up the other weevils, and is crushing them between her fingertips, red on red.

Don't do that.

Why?

It's not nice.

You were eating them just now.

That's different. Eating is something I need to do. It's not nice to kill for no reason.

She turns away, drops the weevils' crushed bodies into the icing bowl and stirs the whole thing with her hands.

Pink, she says. For a girl. Then scoops a dollop onto her forefinger and licks away the icing, and a layer of skin.

The older you get, you say, the more girl you'll be.

No, says Petal, reaching back into the bowl. This is as girl as I'm getting. This is as old as I want.

You can't stop it.

I can do whatever I want, she says. I'll just stop getting bigger. That's all.

And so she does. From that day on, Petal does not grow an inch or gain an ounce. Ever her thin white hair does not grow longer. Jestyn plies her with food at first, food that would fatten even a real girl: thick mealy pancakes fried in bear grease, bread spread thick with oleo and gritty with sugar. Puritan marshmallows by the handful. Milk instead of water and cream instead of milk. She feeds Petal the things Stone buys for her, and more often than not forgets to feed herself. There is a clutch of tender green miner's lettuce that grows in the shadows beneath the porch, and in the morning she rises early and feeds herself leaf by leaf, biting down hard to feel the surge of its sun-thin juices, the taste of green. She does not give suck to Ally anymore, and has, for the first time that she can remember, nothing for which her thin body can be blamed. But Petal only wants one thing: to get between Jestyn and the baby, and if not to get back inside her mother than to get as close as she can. She climbs into the bed now more than ever, presses her angry hot body against her mother's thin skin, tugs at her nightgown in slow search for a way inside, and finally puts her thick hard lips to Jestyn's nipple. One night, Jestyn pushes her away.

You're too old for it, Pet.

I said I wouldn't get older.

You're already too old. You've been too old for a while.

I can go back.

Don't you want to be older?

No, she says. I want to be with you.

So you have spoiled her. Can you really be blamed? God gives you two children, one living and one dead. The live one will grow and change and learn and one day leave this place, and



the dead will do none of these things. The dead has only you, while the living can be seen and touched and loved by anyone—loved even more, for his boyness. So you give the dead extra, until your love starts to sour, and sleep lies thin on you at night, even when she is not beside you.

Petal has taken to pulling Ally out of his crib and dragging him down the stairs—his plum-plump body unsteady in her arms—then setting him down on the porch, sometimes staying with him, but mostly getting bored and wandering off. You move Ally into your room, but the dead girl with her silent tread will only wake you if she wants. She pulls white scales of skin loose from her face and arranges them on his forehead, his cheeks. She spits into his mouth. She lifts up his nightgown and pulls at his pizzle, says quieter than ever: Cry now, baby, crybaby, if you can.

Without a sound you get up and pull her from the bed, drag her downstairs and slap her hard. She does not cry but stands still, barefoot and burn-eyed, staring at you.

Do you want to be your own mother? you ask.

She says nothing.

Do you know where my mother was when I was your age?

She pulls out a strand of her thin white hair and watches it fall to the floor.

You take her to the kitchen table and feed her bread and lard until she vomits. She will grow big. She will grow bigger. She will grow.

She does not grow but hotter. Her hands and feet have always been swollen, tender, warm to the touch, but now as she holds her growing in it seems to try its hardest to push out through her skin. One day she takes your hand in hers and you feel as if you have plunged your fingers into a dog's mouth, even her nails tooth-sharp. Another day she stands by the bed as you are sleeping and presses a hand against the back of your neck, leaving a scald-red stain that lingers all day. The next



morning she does not even need to touch you to make you feel her presence. She holds her hands before your face, palms out and fingers spread wide. You dream of a hot poker pushed into your mouth, of the skin taken off your throat and tongue, of your lips sealed shut, and then your eyes and then the rest of you swallowed by your own flesh, like Ket's baby. When you wake up, Petal is gone, and does not come back the next day, or the next day. The bed stays cold.

Meanwhile, Aloysius grows. One day he opens his mouth to show a tooth pushing its way through the gum, translucent as your useless milk but strong enough. One day he will open his hand for you if you touch the backs of his fingers, and one day he will open and close it if you have something he wants. One day he will reach forward. One day he will lift his head from the ground, and all that effort only to look at you. One day you slide him onto your hip and take him out into the woods, to the place where his sister came to find you not so long ago, and where—somewhere in the ground, beneath the layers of white pine needles and insect carapaces and owl pellets and mulch—her body lies.

The trees are sweetening. You see barberries and bearberries bright and firm as a girl's nipples, chokeberries bitter enough for you to guiltlessly chew, raspberries still tart enough that when you place one on Ally's tongue he sucks, drools, closes his eyes, then spits out its pulpy remains and hands them back to you. You slip them into your mouth to sweeten away the choke juice, then kneel so you can reach the salmonberries warm with sun, pick a handful, and feed them one by one to your good boy.

You like that? you say.

He sucks, swallows.

That's the sweetest thing here, you know. Hold onto it, Ally. Hold onto it and remember it good.

The boy smiles at you. He has the gift of not-hearing that

only boys have. He wraps his hands in your hair and pulls it, hard, and you let your neck bend and press your forehead against the hot dome of his skull.

You think Petal might be waiting when you get back—jealous or angry or tired of being alone—but she is nowhere to be found, even after you put Ally down for his nap. It is hard to take yourself away from him, his warm breathing and cooing, the sounds of his body the sounds that milk makes. But it will be a long time before he opens his eyes, looks around the room and sees you are missing. It will be a long time before he wants you again.

You go downstairs and listen to the house settling around you. The newspaper taped to the windows is yellow as old bone, yellower still with the sun pressed against it. You stand for a long time in the center of the room, listening, half-hoping the baby will cry. You feel the grit beneath your feet, feel each grain of tracked-in dirt and know it must have once belonged somewhere, done something. A shard of flywing. A piece of claw. The dust of wood long rotted and the waste of all the animals that once lived near it. Powdery spores from childless ferns and chaff chewed over by field mice. A fragment of fine white hair.

The silence stretches wider and deeper, and you know you cannot outlast it. The trees sleep around you. Your husband is gone. Your body is empty. You have poured out all the goodness it can do. There will be no healthy girls, no growing daughters. You go out onto the porch, and wait for your Petal to return.

# **SHE FLED**

**MELANIE  
MCCABE**

She fled, on foot,

her baby in one arm, a brown grocery bag spilling clothes in the other. The screen door banged behind her and made all of us look up from kickball, through the gnats and wet August air to where she turned our street into a movie, the kind we'd never been allowed to see.

Before we could pivot, glance at each other, we heard the second slam, saw her husband standing on the stoop, hair frantic, a rifle with a telescopic sight clenched in one fist. She saw him, too, and made a sound that seemed less sob than moan,

tried to run faster, spilling colors from the bag she carried, leaving behind her a trail of tiny shirts, a flowered skirt, a pink brassiere. I want to say that he shot the gun—peered down that scope and fired—because in my memory, this is a story of a man who used all

the weaponry he had, but truth be told, he never had to pull that trigger. He covered the ground she'd gained in seconds, shook her hard by the arm that held the bag, which tore and spilled more colors, as well as the folded



squares of cotton diapers,

and then yanked her back down  
the street, she and the baby, both crying, her face gray,  
her son's purple. From start to finish, it took no more than  
two minutes, and then their door was closed, so we could only  
listen a long while to the hot

voices, noises, that escaped their open  
windows. The clothes stayed in the street until someone's  
mother gathered them and laid them, folded, on their steps,  
then turned and told all of us, firmly, *Go home*, and so  
we went. I wondered, after,

where that woman thought  
she had been going when she tore up the street to what seemed  
like nowhere, her neat house and yard behind her—  
if she thought then that she, too, was going home, instead of fleeing it.

# AT THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY SPAGHETTI DINNER

BETH  
MCDERMOTT

At the Historical Society Spaghetti Dinner,

I meet Lucy, who  
elects to document

barns approved  
for demolition: photo-

graphs that are keep-  
sakes—that's all.

She doesn't enter  
a barn, or take wood

cores with fifty to one  
hundred rings,

but leans out her  
car window before

the match is lit: *click*:  
then tags her photos

with neon post-  
its. Her *Gone* is not

a red-checked table-  
cloth that a photo-

grapher can burn  
away like fog; he

stands as close to the  
subject as possible,

narrowing the depth  
of field. Our district rep-

resentative is serving  
pasta; the police

chief is spooning  
sauce. I think of the

barn that Lucy missed:  
it burned down

while she was  
canning peaches.



# PINK REMNANT

BETH  
MCDERMOTT

Behind the row of swollen  
Scotch pine, a farmhouse.  
Blackbirds on the rooftop wait:  
any one is the snag-turned-

thread I let go of. I've heard  
that in winter, all it takes  
is one pipe—its slow  
frozen crackle. A steady

expanse at the expense  
of its container: a pyramidal  
shape that contorts and  
curtseys, or a pine that is not

harvested early. (If you do  
have a pipe freeze, do not use  
an open flame.) Christmas  
tree growers lop female

flowers off to retain shape.  
Before the row of swollen  
Scotch pine—leader after  
leader was apt to grow crooked—

this farm's toilet, cradled  
in a ditch. Candy pink in the coal-  
colored slush. Watch  
the garbage truck not take it.

# ON SCALPING

## TYLER MILLS

I question the pear tree my grandfather's ancestor moved,  
and a note in *Angell Genealogy* mentions "Thomas"  
digging the roots from a family orchard and walking two miles,  
the live trunk rolling over his spine while he staggered  
past foxes pausing in the dandelions then slinking out of sight.

This for the tree to be near a well. I think about leather seed-pouches.  
Beetle-shell bits pushed by thumb into a clump of soil.  
Then bright stalks curling & alive & sometimes grafted  
like the ancient Romans' pear trees they cultivated near the Coliseum—  
pears that last months and months: bitter, buttery, coarse,

right to their cores. Hydrangeas billow and snow the coppery skin  
in the fruit bowls of Renaissance still lifes.  
And my ancestor moved his tree to a well. Now the water table's infected:  
farms leach pesticides across upstate New York  
where corn manages to grow in the glacial rock-studded fields

during the sweatshirt, July-length summers.  
We grew raspberries in a wild bush next to the garage  
and picked bowls & bowls of warm & hairy berries,  
drowned the specks of flies out of each bubbled jewel in cold water,  
then froze them for winter. Winters blighted the colonist's pears



during the eighteenth century, which is why I question the pears my grandfather's ancestor moved, and a note in this book says the tree was planted in 1770—I was reading about the 1700s looking for the relative from Cooperstown who was scalped by a local tribe and lived. How did he live through it?

What did his scabbed forehead look like, how did the cold knife skim the skull, close enough to the worried tissues of the mind to know the wetness running from neck to eyebrows? I wanted to know: I discovered the French and British soldiers paid Indian tribes for bringing braids,

light-colored, and the soft feathers from a child's crown. As a war tactic, the officers paid different amounts per scalp. Officers paid more for children's skins. The man in my family was a child when this happened to him. My grandfather found an image once, told me our relative, an old man by then, wore a black fur hat.

I cannot find any record of him in these brown pages— but the writer of this book explains how the tree that produced two-thousand bushels of pears was expected to live *at least thirty years longer*. This in cursive seahorses. So it lived. And the writer was right. Thirty more years is a life.

# SAVING NAILS

THOMAS MOORE

I strip the porch roof, pick out the used  
nails, and toss the shingles down onto

a drop-cloth, remembering when I shingled  
my grandmother's roof fifty years ago:

the tar smell, the brackets, planks, and  
ladders all the same, but level now

with hemlock limbs instead of locust.  
I lug four shingles up the ladder, kneel

and drive the old nails home, slide  
another shingle into place, pound, toes

bent under, knees creaking. *Miserliness*,  
a friend jokes about the nails, but I call it

*caring*, thinking of the man who gave  
us this land on the cove, the house, the boat-

house full of boats. The only time I saw  
him he was at his work-bench, a rich

man straightening nails, moving from  
the *bent* can to the anvil to the *straight*.



# FISHING

KATIE DARBY  
MULLINS

My father wound his reel and flung a fish  
onto the banks beside the tackle box.  
Its gaping mouth punctured, a bloody kiss  
formed with a hook, my dad's eyes locked  
with mine. "We only fish for fun," he said,  
untangling jagged wire from its jaw,  
and I touched my old scars as he pulled a thread  
as delicate as stitches, no fear at all.  
I couldn't know that years from then I'd be  
reeling in a room that was my home--  
a man would say *I'm sorry* and leave me  
stunned, to pull the hook out on my own.

# MILLION-DOLLAR RAIN

ROBERT PEAKE

*—for E.K.*

It is hardly there at all,  
this feather-rain, suffusing  
the air with casual descent

pooling in crevices of husk  
and trickling down the yellow stem,  
dampening the topsoil sponge.

It is the antidote to drought, but also  
to floods of Biblical scale, this  
Providence and proof of tenderness—

each droplet a tiny silver dollar  
skating the side of a piggybank,  
reclaiming the mortgaged barn.

How strange to discover it here,  
leashing an eager Retriever for his  
pre-dawn hike through a London park,

four thousand miles and an ocean away  
from where the saying first took root  
in your keen farm-girl's mind.

Strange how what is hardly there  
is there all the more for its gentleness,  
dampening the head of your blonde companion,

who, when you unclip his collar, races  
as fast as ever through clay and mud  
toward doves he will never catch.

The neighbour dressed in misery still won't  
return your smile, unaware he's breathing  
money-mist, shaking gold-dust from his hair.

So you walk with this secret knowledge,  
burning like a gas lamp inside, while all around  
the land is soaking, gently, soaking.



# COUNTRY WALK

ROBERT PEAKE

Black pig in silhouette, ploughing a tea-saucer  
snout, the neck bends low like a martyr at the chop,  
but closer up, peering through wire via tiny black  
dots, she seems to know our voices by now, know  
that we bring blackberries to scatter in the mud.

Now the three sisters arrive in white satin,  
telling us off through their sculpted orange beaks,  
inspecting us sideways from each blue marble eye,  
long necks at the ready in serpentine curves  
the smallest concealing a splayed broken wing.

The Shetland can see us through a long shock  
of fringe, but decides that we aren't worth  
the long trip across the ankle-high heather,  
so she stands at ease on four pillars, swishing  
the ropes of her tail and grinding her teeth.

The berries have stained our hands to a bruise,  
but the pig in us keeps rooting our pockets for more.  
We see with a glassy-eyed clarity now the clouds  
gathering white in the Provia-toned blue, ourselves  
becoming a memory, formless shape in an unnamed field.

# THAT LANDSCAPE PAINTING IN YOUR BATHROOM

COLIN POPE

*—for Jennifer Wrisley, 1980-2010*

was one of the many sadnesses I inherited  
like sticky, foamy residue pushed onto the beach  
from the ocean of your life. Also, there was

a sack of scarves, a decorative lamp shaped like a star,  
and a miniature poodle who displays  
literally no compassion towards people, who won't lick  
or fawn or curl up in your lap  
when you're sitting on the toilet at 5am  
sobbing uncontrollably at a painting  
of which there must be 500,000 reproductions  
keeping watch over the lavatories of the universe  
like hidden cameras from the world of art.  
But it's a lovely idea of countryside,  
so lovely it's almost enough to make a person forget

that nature doesn't give a shit about anything,  
not slavery or Nazis or stockbrokers  
tossing themselves from the signposts of industry  
to land on the sheath of pavement below

and certainly it didn't care about your fragile,  
overburdened body, full of pain and terrible intention  
as you scaled the porch railing that night,  
tied the noose, and made no plans  
to ever touch the ground again. One wants to believe

in the sympathy of nature, how it dreams  
of lush grass that never needs rain, zebra  
sharing blueberries with lions, a lake  
of peppermint tea. But nature is a god  
who doesn't share. It hardens and stares,  
an ancient, mustachioed face behind glass  
swaying a bit on its bracket of rope  
in the unbelievable breeze it makes, like a joke.



# IN WHICH AN OLD WOMAN BAKES HER FUNERAL PIE

RACHEL  
RINEHART

Because when one dies the rest must eat,  
she administers pie like sweet medicine:

Lemon meringue—a child gone off the porch.  
Cherry for farm accidents, her husband's wedding band  
caught in the auger.

There is solace in lattice. She peels Jonathans and Winesaps  
for women ever-appled in childbirth.

When her time draws close, she chooses blueberries, blue as  
dish soap, the sheen of cattle flies,  
and china.

Blue as a daughter's dress, this darker fruition.  
Blue like blood pooling under her clavicle.

She pinches the last of her salt into crust and stumbles off.  
Behind her, the rest eat.

# TEARS SHED OVER WHITE CHICKENS

**RACHEL  
RINEHART**

Because yolk becomes chick becomes  
    slaughtering the broody hen  
        my father twines chickens  
on my mother's clothesline. Lip pouched with chaw,  
    he ends them,  
same as he blew Dewy away  
    after some windblown swans  
        landed in the corn shuck.

Now the new pup strains to bust  
    his chains, but a dog that's tasted blood  
        is a dog that must be shot. I clutch  
Clothespin Odessa, finger-named out of the Big Atlas,  
    shield our hot eyes and calico dresses  
from the everywhere feathers  
    and everywhere chickens  
        endless white on clotheslines.

# IMMOLATION

WESLEY  
ROTHMAN

That damn eagle snaps out Prometheus's liver for thieving fire  
every day. When I wake I place a hand on my own for receiving fire.

The tattoo parlor down on the corner is charred; everyone saw smoke  
as they drove to work. Though oil burns blackest, you never see the fire.

I'm working four jobs just to get a career. Some say *reputation*, others  
*who you know*. Some praise *luck*. After thirty years Dad's been fired.

Why is self-immolation defined by euphemism? *Voluntary sacrifice or  
denial*. No

mention of tongues. Malachi Ritscher lights up rush hour, even his fingers  
seethe fire.

Running the dark shore, agave thins us as we kick up sand curtains,  
consuming each other in Mexico as the border hills breathe fire.

Discover how to strike the flint just right. Sparks grow stronger:  
contractions as mother startles her child into life, matchfire.



The cold night of nature is a school of its own—moonlit desert shrubs, the  
hollow  
forest clearing—where I learned the word *bitchin'* and love songs by the  
campfire.

Memory gurgles like a pot of boiling water, founders like the phoenix,  
becoming fiction. It is itself and entirely not. It is called familiar fire.

Night fog weighs down the coast: thick wetness, into sand, asphalt,  
beading the glass of gaslamps, then searing for the lush liquid fire.

Closed casket, funerary urn, crypt, and catacomb: death has become a  
privacy.

How glorious to go down at the screaming sword tip, to rise bigly from the  
honest pyre.

From one Sunday to the next the old man's world grew stranger, more  
foreign,  
like the journey eastward, its architecture and languages—sharper and more  
fiery.

Invent a flaming metaphor. Not the sacred heart, renewal, or sex,  
but virus, thought, the wild attempts to articulate fear.

# GYPSY MOTH CATERPILLARS

DAVID RUTIEZER

*Chelmsford, MA*

We smashed them on the soles of our shoes.  
They crawled up and down our steep driveway  
leaving the gray-green smear of their feces.  
My mom forbade Grandpa his morning walk,  
sure he'd slip. All night we heard them  
leaf-munch like something out of Spielberg  
so smushing them served them right.  
We bet on the color of their guts— a pop  
of jewel green, ooze of ruby, splat of gray.  
Our dads taped adhesive to the tree trunks,  
but the lucky ones climbed over the stuck victims.  
Only when a lady visited the neighbors  
did we all look up with her  
at the July branches, bare as winter.

# DEAR ALDO LEOPOLD

**F. DANIEL  
RZICZNEK**

I spend my morning reading and  
at lunch find a tick in my shirt.

The weather is perverse:  
90° in May and strict about it.

A moth escapes from my armpit.  
Paradise turns out to be merciless—

a green, psychedelic brushfire  
bundled in layers of feather and leaf

in the heart of heart of hearts.



# EXCURSION

## LIZZY STAR

It was already the second week of November,  
which meant that we'd missed the colors  
and with them, most of New England's charm.  
But the landscape made up for its shortcomings—  
driving, you pointed out how the naked trees  
cast barcode shadows on the road.

The closer we got to winter, the more we seemed to indulge.  
All those dinners were turning us into strange, skinny kids with potbellies.  
In Vermont, we did it again with the cheddar—overindulged—  
bought packages of shapeless trim because that way  
we got more for our dollar. After dinner, and again for a few hours  
in the morning, we needed those rocking chairs out on the porch.  
Heavy, tired, pleased with ourselves—and the trees  
already bare. How nice the shadows, when the body  
has had its fill.

## UPDATE

### DAVID STEVENS

*—for Wayne LaPierre*

The Wind and the Sun disputed who was stronger. When a traveler appeared on the road, they agreed, "Whoever can make that traveler remove his cloak shall be the winner."

So the Sun retired behind a cloud, and the Wind began to blow. But the harder it blew the more the traveler pulled his cloak to his body.

The wind redoubled its efforts. It blew until it knocked the traveler off his feet, dribbling him against the road like a ball. Then it laced a finger of breeze beneath the cloak and started to lift. But the traveler caught the cloth and pulled it back, clamping the garment beneath his elbow.

The Wind lifted him again and smashed him into a tree, a dull thud of torso against trunk. For good measure it swung once more, making sure the traveler's head met wood, before laying him prone against the ground. Then, delicately, it laced a few tendrils under the cloak and drew it up.

The Sun came out. The traveler did not move. The Wind held the cloak suspended on air like an ancient shroud, like a frail exotic bird. "There," it said with obvious satisfaction. "There."

# OUR MOTHER, THE GHOST

J. A. TYLER

The drive from the shore is quiet. Barely perceptible sunlight trading places with the moon, a dim bulb behind clouds and drizzle. In this township, where it is always grey.

At home, we run upstairs to our room while Our Mother settles down at her sewing machine. She flicks on the tiny lamp and takes hold of new swaths of fabric. The whir of the machine fills the living room, making another dress she'll never wear.

Our Mother is a seamstress unlike all others. She can create a dress out of nothing. She can repair any clothes we tear or split. She can make a queen's wardrobe from scraps. Watching her behind the sewing machine, hands sliding through and under, the machine vibrating, it's like watching a baby being born.

Our Mother, creator.

\*

In our room we turn music up beyond the point of listening. We scream the lyrics like rock stars. We pretend guitars and drums. We smash and hail about our small space as if it is an arena filled with fans. We pull our faces in all directions, trying



to erase any trace of pirate or fisherman. We attempt to hide our sadness, putting it away behind our eyes, stacked in rubies, guarded by an ocean of boys being boys.

We try, but soon enough our guitars have become cutlasses, our drums the echoing fire of single-shot pistols. We are making one another walk the plank from the upper bunk, landing hard on the floor in a sea of dirty clothes. We are turning paper into telescopes, then unrolling them to make maps with treasure X's and palms. We fight other pirates already waiting there on the beach, stab our swords through their stomachs, dagger their throats, hold loaded pistols to their heads until the ones left row off in their jolly boats, back to their bigger buccaneer ship, to sail away from what is now rightfully ours.

We take off our shirts and draw skulls and crossbones on our biceps, other treasures on our backs and chests. We ink our bodies. We flex our muscles and show one another our teeth, coloring some in as if they are lost or silver. We marker beards on our faces. We draw wounds that would heal into livid scars. We forget to hide our piracy.

\*

Our Mother hears the music first, then our thudding and thumping. She'd believe we were only boys if she didn't know better. But soon enough the sounds are of slashing and stabbing, and pirate curses we don't even realize we are making. Our Mother, sewing the saddest garment: a blood red dress perfectly fit for a widow's frame.

She waits until the music has died out, until pirate sounds are all she hears, until quiet returns.

Our Mother takes the stairs slowly, afraid as always for what she'll see behind the door. With Our Father, Our Mother always seems to know what is coming, what is next. She brings new washcloths when the old ones have lost their cold. She refills his glass for exactly what he'll drink, fighting to keep

down even water when his land-sickness sets in. And she knows when he has taken all he can, when it is time to re-dress his body in pirate clothes, in the luminous and rugged fancy of a buccaneer setting sail. She knows where he wants his cutlass to ride, the pistol's sash, a dagger tucked away. And Our Mother, though she hopes as always, she knows a pirate is all Our Father will ever be.

\*

Our Father once tried to be a fisherman. We were on the way, boiling big in Our Mother's womb, and she was desperate to have a father for her sons. Our Father said he only wanted money to bring his sons up right, but Our Mother knew there was more than that in his heart.

They were on the shore, sitting in folding chairs they'd brought to where the gravel meets the water. They were holding hands, looking out to sea. Gulls were sounding above them.

Our Mother, if you ask her about that day, the day only a few weeks before we arrived, she'll explain that Our Father was trying his best, was doing as best he could, but behind all of his words about fish and nets and lines and bait, she would swear she saw rubies glittering. She could hear the clang of swords, the definite sound of pistol shots, the thudding explosion of cannon fire.

Our Mother, if you talk to her about what Our Father did, how he tried to be a fisherman instead of a pirate, she'll say this:

Our Father was a man of the cutlass. Our Father had piracy in his blood. Our Father's Father was a pirate. Our Father's Father's Father was a pirate. There was no way to escape such lineage. But Our Father, because he was a man trying to please Our Mother, trying to make a seamstress smile, he set sail, only weeks before his sons were born, to fish



out there in the sea, to become what he never dreamed he could.

Our Mother, if you ask her about it, this is all she knows: Our Father left the shore in a small boat, lined with nets and poles and hooks, but he returned with a leathern sack full of rubies, and the glimmer of other shores in his eyes, and not a single fish.

Our Father, if you ask him about it, those days when he left to fish but came back with treasure, he'll tell you an entirely different story.

\*

Upstairs, when she opens the door to our bedroom, she sees us there, pretending to be pirates. She sees our cardboard swords and construction paper maps, the tattoos we've drawn on each other. She sees the beards we've colored on our faces and, before our smiles fade at her face in the doorway, at being caught again doing what we shouldn't, she sees the blackened teeth we've made in each other's mouths.

The water she draws for our bath is scalding, but the greater burn comes from the fact that she doesn't say a word. We climb over the lip of the tub, having to strain to see it as only a bath and not a burning island's hot springs, but Our Mother's scrubbing helps. Washcloth in hand she shows us how strong she is, grinding at the black on our skin, our faces, the enamel of our teeth where the marker is hardest to remove.

Our skin is raw when she is done, red and abused, but none of our pirate ink remains. She still doesn't say a word though, only towels us off, one then the other, and hugs each together to her wet dress, which clings to her body as each of us boys do, admitting the sadness she knew was there all along. If she is crying for Our Father out to sea again, or us boys longing to be the very thing that is killing her, we



wouldn't be able to tell for all the steam and bath water running down her face and body. And if we were crying too, for Our Father gone or the great disappointment of Our Mother, that truth too would be hidden by this indoor rain.

We hug and cradle in Our Mother's arms as if there was a way to get back to her womb, to the warm wrap of what felt to us like the sea, but was safer than any piracy we have coming.

\*

In bed, Our Mother sings the song we love. It is a song she's been singing since we were born. It is about the sea and the bats at dusk, about the moon that clings to the backside of this township's clouds as the rain floats down. It is a song that puts us to dreaming.

Our Mother, she knows it is foolish to sing a song about the sea to boys who are longing for piracy, who are so sad for the constant and regurgitated loss of their father, but she has no choice. This is a song Our Mother's Mother sang to her, and Our Mother's Mother's Mother to her. Her lineage is as trapped as Our Father's.

She sings us this song then tucks the blankets around us, each one in a bunk stacked beneath another. She turns off the light and we hear evening rain on the roof. She leaves the door open a crack, enough space to let the hall light rain in on us too.

And Our Mother returns then to making her dress, the tiny light of her sewing machine burning long into the night, and us, above her, dreaming of becoming pirates, of finally setting sail from this township where it is always gray, where Our Father can't stand, where Our Mother is slowly becoming a ghost.

# HYDRAULIC ACTION

BY

AMELIA URRY

At dawn, I can hear the waves. They crash against the beach about a quarter mile out, but from here the sound is as measured and calm as the breath of the body lumped in the narrow twin bed next to mine. Lily is asleep. The other bodies in the crude wooden cabins arranged across the lawn are asleep, suspended in the interminable moment before the sun breaks over the horizon and plates the sea with silver. Then we will see the long lines of blinding whitewater unfolding matter-of-factly toward the beach, smashing boulders into pebbles in one sustained note of impact, drawing back with a hiss of release. Breathing endlessly in and out.

We are perched on the green point of Cape Breton Island in far north Nova Scotia, a few miles outside the closest town (pop. 48),

at the end of a rutted dirt road, right at the edge of the water. To the north is a large saltwater lagoon that feels the tides but not the surf. The Atlantic lies to the east and south, buffered by a strip of rocky beach that—except for two gaps where the sea pours back and forth—protects us from the waves.

Grandpa built this place when our parents were still surly teenagers, and kept building it the rest of his life. He designed the strange, octagonal cabins with their pleated roofs and enormous, un-openable windows, shingled them, painted them with whitewash and tar. The Main Cabin with its precarious water tower overlooking the whole point, the Boat House jutting on spindly struts over our little lakeside beach, the skeleton of Cove House-to-be rising from the long

grass at the edge of the lawn. He named it Limesean, the way old families used to name their grand houses and summer homes: Tara, Talland House. Our scruffy little piece of the earth.

The tiny handprints of grandchildren are pressed into the concrete foundations; traditions, also, set early. These sheets on that bed, this pillow. Norman comes by in the morning to drink his cup of coffee and talk over the headlines. When Grandpa makes jam, the kids stir.

We walk out to the Bench in the evening with Grandma, who smokes her cigarette and watches the sea. The sun sets behind us over a black line of pine trees and the bright reflection of the lake, but we stare out at the dark waves rippling out under the purpling sky. "One day this will be ocean-front property," she tells us, gesturing to the fringe of field sloping down to the Channel. "In a hundred years, it'll come all the way to our doorstep."

The landscapes I love were all made in collapse. The big red scarp by the beach on the long walk out to the Head was once a hill sloping smoothly down to the water. The Head itself, a grassy knob of stone

left jutting up from the sea, tethered to land only by a thin causeway that appears and disappears with the tide. Whole stands of pine trees canting down like broken bristles. The exposed roots like bleached bone, clutching at a retreating shoreline. The devastation of these things was perfect once; then it kept changing.

Year after year, the Gut is getting bigger. That vulnerable gap in the barrier beach slowly settles into a low, toothless grin where the waves come in now even at low tide, foam fizzling out among the pebbles where once the high humped back of the beach shuddered under the invisible pounding of the surf. On our side of the beach, the lake is filling in with sand. At low tide, the sand bar is so wide we can walk from the back door of the Boat House to within ten feet of the Island, where the Channel carves out the last thin line of resistance. Our feet don't even get wet.

When Grandpa was dying, we only have time to say "I love you" once, the last time we took him home from the hospital. The un-healable sore on his leg, the crooked joint of the finger reattached in childhood, the stump of a toe and a finger lost later, all these



merely gloss over a deeper degeneration as one by one his organs stopped. Afterward, Grandma sold their house but kept Limesean. The last time we were all up there together, we scattered his ashes over the berry fields with a soup spoon.

I invite Michael to Cape Breton our first summer. I am alone for two days before he arrives, the first time this place has ever felt lonely. So much has changed, but the insides stay largely the same: the white, porous bones scavenged from the high water line at the end of the harsh winters, arrayed along the walls of the Main Cabin, shoulder blades, jawbones, ribs, the wide-socketed skulls of birds. The whale vertebra rests by the back door, as large as a car tire. Old buoys and kites hang on the wall above the bookshelves, and in the corner an old babydoll spins lazily by her heel, wide-eyed and familiar as an old chandelier.

I take the kayak out onto the lake one afternoon, nervously. When I get far enough away from the house, it is just an empty box whose big windows flash, then disappear. I cannot tell which one of us has come unmoored. That night, I feel like the last person in the

world.

The next day I pick Michael up at the airport, and drive back too fast along the twisting roads. Our mailbox is long gone; now the turn-off for our driveway is marked by a large yellow sign advertising a German development company who last year plowed out a whole track of forest, built two houses on the opposite side of the spit, then seemed to vanish. I give it the *mal'occhio* my grandmother trained us to do when these signs first started appearing around here years ago.

Michael and I sleep in the Boat House, on the big bed my grandfather built. I leave the blinds open so that the sun will spill in when it comes up bright and unmediated over the Atlantic. He sleeps late and I read beside him until I grow bored, and wake him. In the light, I feel suddenly shy as I show him the small cabins, their splintered edges, the treasures laid along their shelves. We have spent the summer apart, but here it feels like more than that, like I have spent my entire life pacing this little corner of sea and land. "Is this where you used to sleep?" he asks me, leading me over to the little bed. "Did you used to look out this window?" I

watch the deep blue patch of sky in the window and hold him tightly as the story is rewritten in my head.

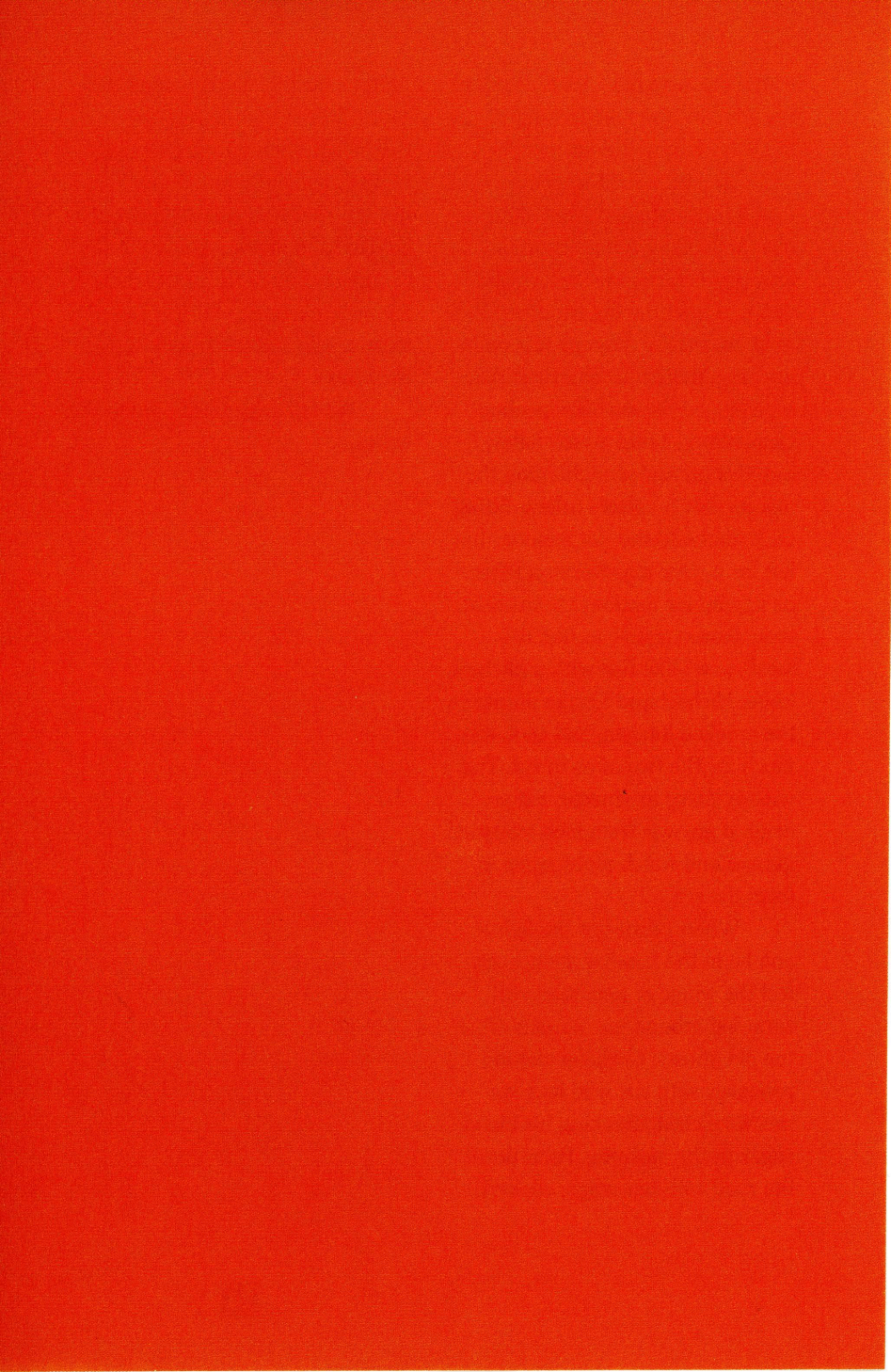
We stay naked whenever we can. It is an unusually hot summer, and anyway there is no one around to see us as we wave and dance behind the big windows. We read during the day, our feet up in my grandmother's chair or curled together on the daybeds, peeling clementines. I find myself following Michael and straightening the objects that he places askew, fitting each item into the slot memory has left for it. One day, Norman takes us jigging for mackerel in his boat, then shows us how to filet the small, jewel-like fish with a kitchen knife. Michael and I make dinner in the crooked kitchen, and cook too much for the two of us to eat. The wine is sharp as vinegar, but we drink it anyway from long-stemmed glasses and watch night creep in from the sea.

When I turn out the lights and lie in the familiar dark, I can feel the whole of Limesean still sprawled around me. It holds all of the old ghosts: Grandpa making pancakes with the wild blueberries we picked, checking his blood sugar in the morning. Pearl down the road with her maple cookies.

Jimmy's bucket of spit behind the couch. Eileen and Joanne stirring jellyfish soup under the jetty that washed away one winter. The now-toppled water tower making its crooked silhouette against the sky at sunset. The notch in the shoreline where a large whirlpool used to form, a wheel of foam spinning at the center.

We fall asleep listening to the waves.







# **CARMINE'S WAR**

**BY**

**JOHN VURRO**

**The John Gardner Memorial  
Prize for Fiction**



Carmine just wants to kill something. Bullseye a squirrel. Snapshot a gull. Blindside the stray that tips his trash cans. He pinches the oval bead tucked inside the rawhide pocket, hauls back and launches the fake stone from the terrace of his multi-family house like a hunter perched in his tree-hang. The shimmer of glass transforms into a flying saucer, slicing through the air at a thousand feet-per-second as an alien projectile, a dagger of light, a searing beam of heat, raining down from afar. He thinks, Zeus' lightning bolt. He thinks, Rambo's explosive arrow. He tucks himself behind a rainbow colored beach chair, an olive drab blanket draped over the seat, providing cover. The metal arms are deformed, curling upwards in rigor mortis from when his father hurled the chair off of the terrace. As if pitching yard furniture would clear him of cheating, delete the slip of paper. Bring Carmine's mother back home.

He needs ammo. So he slips open the storm door and sneaks across the living room, deep behind enemy lines. He tilts the plastic palm against the corner and plucks a handful of glass beads, reinforcements. Soon the cobalt-colored flowerpot will be empty. The pot has a fracture line that curls into a question mark and smells like cigarettes and potpourri. Once, months before his mother left, he found a package of EZ Widens stuffed into the beads. With every extraction he expects to find another package. All he finds are fewer beads. He clicks the glass stones together in his palm and says, "Here is your mission, if you choose to accept it."

As he marches back towards the terrace door, fully loaded, he transforms into a B47 cruising above flack-range, transporting his paratroopers into hostile territory. And it is hostile. A fist-shaped hole punctures the mirrored wall. Glass splinters from mugs and tumblers pockmark the kitchen tile. Feathers from gutted throw pillows blow along the floor. The coffee table is cracked in half. His mother's blouses hang from the blades of the ceiling fan. The phone is ripped from the wall.



His Nintendo is smashed into bits.

His father, like a dormant nuke, is sleeping on the loveseat. His right hand is wrapped in gauze. Carmine listens to him snore, deep guttural hisses that remind him of stretching duct tape. Alcohol radiates off of him. If he could, he'd line up in front of him and fire a bead into his gullet or solar-plexus. Then he'd accept his mission: Find His Mother. Tell her they're saved. But then he remembers how she chose something other than them, and his father drunk and snoring, had stayed. And a lousy parent is better than no parent at all. His father's stomach distends in rolling breaths. Maybe he's a mercenary? Maybe he's what his mother says he is?

A soldier never gets distracted. Carmine sees his father for what he is: propaganda. As if to prove him right, his father nuzzles deeper into the couch. He twists towards the cushion and knocks over an empty bottle of Wild Turkey with his wrapped hand. The bottle rolls underneath the cracked V of the coffee table. Carmine sticks the beads into his bomber jacket, mission complete.

Outside on the terrace the February air filets his chest like a fishing knife. He pulls the chair in front of him and fastens the blanket over his head with clothespins clamped along the windowsill. The wind hustles through the sides of his makeshift pillbox, numbing his ears. There are resources on the terrace to patch the hole, the rusted barbecue tank, a green tarp, a bag of charcoal, but he needs an escape route. He needs a line of sight. He takes off his jacket and tosses it at his feet, leaving him only in his blue thermal. He tucks his grandfather's WW2 dog-tags into his collar. The metal feels icy against his skin. But the elements are part of the battle. If his fingers burn with cold, he'll forget about his mother. If his eyes tear and nose run, it's almost like crying. Snipers bury their emotions. Soldiers focus on their mission. He wants to prepare. In eight years he'll be old enough to join the marines, like his grandfather.



“Progress report, 15:30 hours.”

He scans the landfill across the street from his house with a pair of binoculars he stole from his father’s closet, his first successful mission. The brown reeds and feathery cattails sway in the wind. Frozen puddles patch the ground. He spots tires and PVC pipe. He spots car bumpers, door-less refrigerators, sink basins, a lime hula hoop, unpaired shoes, curling irons. Sitting upright in the field is a barber’s chair. Beyond the landfills are the two smokestacks of the dump, their pulsing lights guiding the 747s towards JFK. The air is leaden with jet-fuel and the rubber smell of incinerating garbage. He pushes the blanket aside, for more range, and waits for signs of movement. The sky is red. The eyebrow-shaped clouds are blue with cold. His father’s Cougar is parked across the street. The driver side window is open. Last night his father cruised through Howard Beach, past PS 232, past Pizza City and the Bow Wow, past Charles Park. He sees his father donning his white sweats, a bottle of beer stuck between his legs as he patrols the neighborhood. But deep inside Carmine knows his father is looking for anyone except his mother.

That night, he awoke to the thunderclap of his mother as she screamed “I hate you,” over and over. His father’s “You think I care,” as he pile-driven the table. Carmine pulled the covers over his head, jammed his fingers into his ears and tried to think of anything besides the unraveling in the living room. As he listened to glass after glass break, his father’s potshots, “You throw like a girl,” he felt as if he were listening to a war. Every shattering object became the detonation of his family. He decided he’d learn how to survive. Like Rambo against the Vietnamese. Like the Wolverines against the Cubans and Russians. And as if to prove him right, the next morning his mother was MIA. He found a yellow piece of paper, torn in half, slipped underneath his door. On one side was a name scrawled in red ink, “Deana, call me.” On the other side of the paper, “He pushed me down the stairs. Be a



good little soldier. Hide this note,' in his mother's loopy script. He ran his fingers along the words, folded the paper in half, then in half again. He stuck the square into his mouth, chewed and swallowed.

"Spotted."

He unfastens the blanket and sticks a bead into the pocket. He braces his elbows against the metal railing, yanks the band and fires. The glass bullet zips towards the Cougar. The bead ricochets off the hubcap with a hollow clang. He holsters the slingshot between his belt and grabs his binoculars, scanning the field for a secondary target.

"The coast is clear." He drags the chair in front of him and salutes the incomplete squad, the soldier who had made the ultimate sacrifice. As a reward for their bravery, he polishes the beads with Windex and a yellow oil-cloth. He has other provisions inside his pillbox: a hotplate, a MagLight flashlight, his 1986 box-set of baseball cards, a sleeve of Ritz crackers, two pairs of socks, a canteen filled with Pepsi, a Rambo knife he bought at the Aqueduct Flea Market, sixteen bottle-rockets, a red balaclava, a compass and a blank gun.

But he's looking for his mother's pendant. The pendant is heart-shaped. In the center of the heart is a garnet stone, his birthstone. He found it in the hallway the morning his mother disappeared, the chain running down the steps like a Slinky. He bought the pendant at his school's Christmas fair. Now, he has the chain wrapped around his index finger, the hook-less end tucked into the coils. He picks the heart off of the chair and sticks it into his front pocket. When he shuts his eyes he sees the curl of his mother's smile as she opened the velvet box.

The storm door wheezes open. His father spits a moth-sized phlegm ball off of the terrace, then slivers the door, revealing half his face. "You hungry?"

"I'm okay." That was a lie. He was starving. Part of his regimen was to sustain on the barest minimum. He is allowed



six crackers a day, two for each meal. If he hits his target, he allows himself an extra cracker and a gulp from his canteen.

His father opens the door wider, exposing a tuft of armpit hair. He's wearing his red sweatpants. His hair is slicked back. Carmine can smell cologne and shaving lotion. He has a purple button-down slung over his shoulder. A cigarette dangles from his lips. "I'll leave you twenty bucks." His father watches the plumes of smoke rising from the stacks. Carmine waits for his father to ask him why he's dressed in only a thermal. Why all of his supplies are stuffed into his pillbox. He waits for his father to order him inside, like his mother would. He rubs his belly. "Anyway. Go downstairs and tell that grandmother you're sleeping there tonight."

"You have work?"

His father extends his foot and flicks a stick off the terrace. "What are you, a cop?"

He almost tells him he's a soldier, but says, "Are you looking for Mom?"

"She knows where we are." He touches the gauze. "I'm gone in twenty minutes." Carmine watches the red of his father's cigarette as he takes a long drag. He blows smoke out of his nose. "Tell her I'm working. Don't tell her, but if she asks. Say that." A wind catches the door and yanks his arm. He pulls the door closer. "And start cleaning up. Place looks like a shithole."

The storm door hisses shut. The lock clicks. His father knocks on the glass, waves, and then unfastens the lock. "Almost locked you out," his voice muffled.

Carmine would rather die of frostbite than go inside, but he says, "It's okay."

"Go tell that grandmother." He disappears.

The cattails sway as a gust of wind whistles in his ears. The sunset beyond the stacks reminds Carmine of lava, his world scorched with fire. A 747 roars over his house, its wheels extended. His father works nights as a baggage



thrower at JFK. On Sundays, his day off, Carmine's mother would wear her husband's orange headphones as she pushed the Electrolux through the apartment, calling herself a vacuum bag thrower. He tries to think of all the places his mother could've hidden. Soldiers never leave their people behind. Then something like anger pinches his insides, a hot poker of emotion, too much to bury. He grabs the slingshot and leans over the railing. He tucks a bead into the pocket and aims at his father's taillight. He hauls back and fires. The bead sails to the right, skipping into the reeds.

"Adjust your fire. Left 30 left 30. Set."

He tucks a bead into the pocket. He pulls back, but stops.

A squirrel is tightrope walking across the phone line. It takes three steps, then crouches lower and folds its tail over its head, shielding itself from the wind. Carmine admires the creature's winter coat of gray fur, the brown line streaking its back, a natural camouflage. The squirrel is midline. All of his training has come to this point. He reaches into his jeans, pulls out the bead he has polished the most and sticks it into the pocket. If his mother were here, she'd smack him. But she's not here. She's not going to be here.

The squirrel lies across the wire, sheltering itself from another gust. Carmine angles the slingshot sideways, so that the squirrel's body is encased inside the Y, then leads it four inches away from the squirrel's head, anticipating the bead to sail right. As he waits for the squirrel to stand, Carmine feels his heart pulsing in his neck. The wind slices across the terrace. The cold burns his face. Inside he knows his father is perking himself up in the bathroom. The sink is filled with globs of shaving cream and stubble. The cologne bottles are lined along the cabinet like trophies. He takes a deep breath and holds it. The squirrel pops up and skips across the wire.

He lets go.

The bead slices through the wind, whistling towards the wire. Carmine loses the glass stone in the fading sunlight. He



only hears a newborn whine as the squirrel snaps off the cable. The squirrel falls, motionless and heavy, cart-wheeling towards the ground, its arms and legs extended, until it smacks the manhole cover, its tiny body tucked into a ball.

“What the fuck are you doing?”

Now, his father is wearing a black long sleeve with silver buttons and white jeans. His shoes are polished, their pointy tips shine. The bandage is off. His knuckles are riddled with deep slits. Carmine hides the slingshot behind his back. As he stands in front of his father, he runs through backup procedures, precautions he should’ve made. He transforms into the soldier locked inside the tiger cage. His mother’s note nestled inside his belly. Secrets he’ll never tell. He waits for his backhand.

“I said, what are you doing?”

His father steps onto the terrace, leans against the window.

“Nothing.”

“I thought I told you to go downstairs. Hustle.”

Still undercover, Carmine says, “Yes sir.”

\*

As Carmine runs his fingers along the wood paneling, he pictures his mother unraveling down the hallway stairs, her body knocking against the metal railing, her fingernails digging into the balding carpet as she tries to right herself. But this time, he’s brave enough to charge out of his bedroom, block her escape. Leave with her. Do something. He stares up at the twist of stairs, as if scenarios could summon her back. When nothing happens, Carmine presses his ear against the door of his grandmother’s house. He hears the slap of cabinets, the clink of glasses, the yawp of the oven door. He needs to tell her something. But that’s later. He hops down the steps.

“Carmine?”



His grandmother is squared off in front of her door, holding a dish wrapped in tinfoil. She's wearing a red sweater and pine-colored pants, her hair dyed so black it casts purple shadows. He walks up the steps. As he gets closer he can smell garlic and oil. She extends the plate, says, "I cooked you something." He accepts her offer and leans against the banister. This is the first time he has seen his grandmother since his mother left him, which feels odd.

"So, how was school?" His grandmother winks. Her daughter, his mother, didn't finish high-school so Carmine guesses she doesn't care either way.

"Good." He peels back the tinfoil. Lemon chicken dusted with chopped parsley, red potatoes and broccoli spears with garlic cloves the size of quarters. She pulls on the doorknob, checking her door shut. "Have you heard from your mother?"

His stomach gurgles. He pushes his wrist into his gut.

She points upstairs, "You can tell me."

Her face contorts into a stiff smile, her eyes wide, revealing nothing. But Carmine senses she knows more about his mother than she's letting on. He decides she's a spy. He stiffens, aware of his body language, his facial expressions. He prepares for his interrogation.

"Tell you what, Grandma?"

She runs her finger along the side of the dish. "That nutjob's lucky I didn't call the cops."

Carmine shrugs. He knows his grandmother would rather see her daughter murdered than have the neighbors see a cop car pulled into her driveway. He touches the slingshot holstered between his belt, covers it with his thermal. "I was asleep, Grandma."

"Your father woke up the whole neighborhood."

"I sleep with his thrower headphones." She frowns, confused. "I mean, my Walkman."

"You'll go deaf."

He runs his finger along the banister pole. "I wish."



"What?"

"I said, I'll bring back your dish."

She glances up the stairs. "Where is the father?"

"Almighty?"

"You know what I mean." She sucks air between her teeth.

"Put the food in the fridge."

"Is this enough?"

"It's enough food for you." She points. "Carmine, don't be a traitor."

"A traitor?"

"Don't share my food with that animal. A father's nice, but it's the mother that matters." She nods slowly, as if her head is fastened into her neck with hinges. "Who cooks? Who cleans? Any idiot can punch a clock." She kisses his forehead. "If you talk to her, tell Mom to call me. Remember that plate's for you."

She hurries up the steps, cracks open the door and slips inside. He pinches the tinfoil around the plate, then presses his ear against the door. But all he hears is running water.

\*

The squirrel is still dead. Carmine wants to investigate, but he's too close to Second Priority. He places his grandmother's plate onto the stoop, then wrestles the wad of letters out of the mailbox. He flips past the ConEd bill, Chemical Bank, Diners Club, and a menu from Lucky Horse Kitchen until he finds the attendance letter. He runs his fingers along his address. By now, Ms. P has called his house. How would she know the phone is unplugged underneath the kitchen table? He folds the envelope and sticks it into his pocket. He places the rest of the letters, in the order he found them, back into the mailbox. Mission complete. He picks up the dish and scans for his neighbors. The only movement is the swaying reeds. He touches his slingshot, still holstered between his belt and pants,



then walks into the street.

The squirrel is curled on the manhole cover, a few feet away from the Cougar. He places the dish onto the street and touches the black fingers of the squirrel's front paws. Its white belly runs the length of its body. He can't find any blood, puncture points. Maybe the squirrel heard the whistling bead and slipped? He draws his slingshot and pushes the handle into its stomach. The squirrel feels softer than he expected, its body folding into the pressure of the handle. The wind blows waves through its tail. Carmine stares into its black eye and tries to think about how he feels, his first kill. He feels nothing. In the end, it's just a squirrel.

He hears a crash. He looks up and the beach chair tumbles into the railing. With every gust of wind the metal legs clang against the bars. If his father looks out the window, he'll see him. He sticks the slingshot into his belt, then lifts the squirrel by its tail. It hangs heavy from his pinched fingers. He peels the tinfoil back and lays the squirrel across the plate, curling the tail along the rim of the dish. He cinches the foil, already hearing the tumbling food, the shattering dish. He thinks, claymore. The plate feels heavy in his hands. As he walks into the house, his eyes adjusting to the dark hallway, his mother flashes in front of him. She is sitting on the steps, her leather pocketbook resting on her lap, mascara drizzling down her face, her arms outstretched, guilty she had left him. He's angry, but he still wants to apologize for not stopping his father, for living with him now, for only being eleven. He closes his eyes and counts to three. When he opens them, only the balding carpet is waiting for him.

As he presses his ear against his grandmother's door, the squirrel's tail slides out from underneath the plate. He stuffs the fur underneath the tinfoil and places the dish dead center, so when she hauls her laundry into the basement, she'll plant her foot flat onto the mine. She has picked her side. He wants to perch on the landing, wait for his grandmother's scream.



But then he remembers his father, his ransacked encampment.  
"If you need anything, let me know."

\*

"Where have you been?" His father slouches on the loveseat, his feet resting on the highest corner of the snapped coffee table. He flicks his cigarette into the mug resting on his thigh. The ashes hiss as they hit the liquid inside. Carmine smells cologne. And something else, like the crayons he sticks on the radiators at school. Now, his father is wearing a grey short sleeve shirt and stonewashed jeans. His shirt is unbuttoned, revealing his t-shirt and gold Christ's head. "Hello? Earth to Carmine?"

"Talking to Grandma."

His father digs between his front teeth with a matchbook cover, then drops it into the mug. "She talk about me?" Carmine knows this is a loaded question, more dangerous than his grandmother's prying. He sees his father springing off the couch, dragging him by his throat and pitching him down the stairs. Trapped inside his tumble Carmine can only shrug. "She's the problem. Fills your mother's stupid head." His father digs into his pocket and tosses crumbled bills onto the cushion. "I'm not the enemy, Carmine."

As Carmine walks across the living room towards the terrace door, his father's glare burns into his skin. He sees himself forever searching for the safest words, forever assessing the risk. He wants to run into his room, beat his pillow. Rage against this new life. But then his father has won. Then his training is for nothing.

"I'm going to get my stuff," Carmine says.

"I'm not stopping you."

"I know."

\*



His beach chair knocks against the barbeque. The blanket hugs the railing, its corners whipping between the bars. He places the chair in front of his provisions, then drapes the blanket over the seat and clamps it in place with clothesline pins.

Inside his pillbox the wind has subsided. The blanket smells moldy, like the basement he swiped it from. He counts the beads. Only the one is missing. On the other side of the wall, Carmine knows his father is rifling through the closet, searching for his red-leather trench. It's the jacket he picks for special occasions. Holidays. Funerals. Those few times he decides to enchant his mother to a movie. If Carmine concentrates, he can hear his father slap out the wrinkles. Stick his Chesterfield Kings into his left pocket, his Chiclets into his right. Tuck his Zippo into his inside pocket. All everyone wants to do is leave.

Carmine's fingers are numb from the cold. He folds the front of the blanket over, grabs his binoculars and scans his post. A stained napkin clings to the Cougar's front tire. The reeds sway. The smokestack lights pulse. He tosses his binoculars onto the seat. "Ah, there's nothing."

But there is something. A figure trudges out of the reeds. He's wearing a tan construction jacket. The chest pocket is torn, the bottom seam flapping like bicycle streamers. Above the pocket is the name Reggie in red script. As he walks up the grassy hill, his jeans collapse into large folds over laceless work boots. A gray hood covers his face. The reeds snap as he edges towards the Cougar. Carmine widens the spy-hole and grabs his binoculars. He spots a black beard, matted hair tangled with grass. Along his nose are purple boils the size of dimes. He has a red pillowcase draped over his shoulder. The case hangs heavy, lumpy bulges and sharp corners. He sees Reggie entrenched in the reeds, his bag loaded with M16s and munitions, claymores and grenades. He thinks, mercenary. He pulls his slingshot onto his lap and places two beads onto his



knee for quick loading.

Reggie drops his pillowcase and walks behind the trunk of the Cougar. He stares up at the terrace. Carmine wants to fasten the blanket, but he'll reveal his position. Inside, he hears the TV flip on, then switching voices as his father machine-guns through the channels. He taps a bead three times against his head and tucks it into the pocket.

Reggie reaches inside his coat and pulls out a pair of work gloves. He walks into the street and around to the driver side, his boots clapping with every step. He glances down the block, turns and leans through the open window. He sticks something into his jacket.

Carmine tells himself that he's safe inside his pillbox. He's armed. But his muscles feel heavy, his insides sinking. He blames the cold.

Reggie tosses papers out of the car. They catch the wind and flap down the street. He backs out of the window. He's holding his father's Mets cup. He dumps the change into the bag, then lobbs the cup into the reeds. Reggie glances up at the terrace. He bobs left, right. Carmine runs his finger along the Y of the slingshot, trying to ignite his tactical training. But he feels as if he's hiding underneath his comforter again, listening to his parents slice each other to ribbons.

"Please just go away."

Reggie hunches over and spews a string of guttural hacks and wheezes. Thick globs of spit ooze from his mouth. He wipes his beard with his sleeve. As Reggie nosedives into the window, his jacket lifts, revealing the square blade of a meat-cleaver. Carmine jolts back from his spy hole. He slaps open the blanket and crawls towards the storm door. The grass carpet feels hard against his knees. He imagines Reggie scaling the side of the house, his fingers digging into the siding, shredding his flesh as he grips his throat and pitches him over the railing. The terrace seems to stretch. He knows if he glances at Reggie he'll freeze up, so he counts the bars of the railing. He kneels



in front of the storm-door, swings it wide and flops in front of the TV stand.

"Carmine, what the hell are you doing?"

"Outside."

"What about it?"

His mouth feels frozen. He bites his lip trying to unhinge them, "Your car."

"My car?" His father pops off the loveseat, slaps the curtains. "Motherfucker." He sprints down the hallway.

Carmine hears change spilling against the dresser, his father banging drawers. He falls into the TV cabinet. His ears are ringing. He tugs at his collar as his clothes constrict around him. Trying to ground himself, he touches his belt for his weapon. He left the slingshot on the terrace.

His father paces down the hallway. "Go to your room." He reaches behind him and pulls a small handgun, reminding Carmine of his toys.

"What are you going to do?"

"Fine, c'mon."

His father hauls him up by his thermal and drags Carmine onto the terrace. He flicks him to the side. Carmine tumbles into the chair, but twists around in enough time to watch his father lean over the railing, straighten his arm and aim at Reggie bent inside the car window.

At first, the pop reminds Carmine of the bead that ricocheted off his father's hubcap. But then he hears a twisting groan as Reggie tries to climb inside the car.

"You bleed on my upholstery and I'll shoot you again."

He wiggles his legs. "Don't shoot."

"Don't make me shoot."

A poinsettia shaped bloodstain blooms along his thigh. He spills backwards out of the Cougar and collapses onto his stomach. He shimmies underneath the car, his boots sticking out into the street. "Let them arrest me. Just call an ambulance."



"I'm coming down in ten minutes. If you're there I'm shooting you in the balls."

"I'm sorry."

His father sticks the pistol into his pants. "Yeah, I'm sorry." He points to Carmine, "He's sorry. My wife is sorry. We're all fucking sorry. Now crawl outta here. You degenerate."

Carmine shuts his eyes and swallows bile, afraid if he vomits his father will shoot him. When he feels it's safe to look, Reggie has disappeared, leaving only a slug-trail of blood, slinking towards the reeds. His father is staring at his pillbox.

"What, you build a fort?"

"Uh-huh."

"Well here, soldier." He holds out the gun, the handle facing him. "Go on. Take a look. It's only a .22." The pistol is the size of a wallet, but it feels heavier in his hand than he expected. The metal smells like polish, like one of his beads.

His father nudges his shoulder, "Our secret, right?"

"Who'd believe it?"

"Yeah. Well, anyway." He nudges Carmine's shoulder.

"Thanks for the head's up."

Carmine watches the cattails sway in the wind. He pictures his mother slipping the note underneath his door, then leaving the house at night. Hugging whatever clothes she could scrape together, a fleeing refugee.

He clasps his hands around the gun and prays his mother is happy and safe. No longer a part of this. Tomorrow he'll place a pair of his father's jeans in front of the reeds for Reggie, an apology. Then he'll clean the terrace. Bury the slingshot in the frozen ground. So if his mother steps back inside this house, he'll never have to explain what he saw his father do.

# WHY THERE ARE STILL GIRLS WHO WASH THEIR HAIR IN BEER

KAREN J.  
WEYANT

Foam spills like suds through their fingers.  
Streams of water splash, massage their scalps,

trickle down the napes of their necks. Yellow pools  
settle in the shallow hollows of their collarbones.

Beads stick to their shoulders, to the skin  
above their breasts. One girl says Straub's

makes her hair shiny, while another explains  
that with a mixture of Heineken and hairspray,

her hair will finally hold a curl. Still, one swears  
she uses Michelob because the man she's been seeing

for six months now, kisses her right temple,  
says she could be happy hour at Suzy's Bar & Grill.

Sometimes, when she's upset, she chews a strand like she did  
when she was a child. She wants to taste what he tastes.





## CONTRIBUTORS

ANDREW ALEXANDER, our cover artist, was born on September 11, 1978. He is a photographer from the Southside of Indianapolis who tends to let his camera tell a story from remnants left behind. He's attracted to the strange, yet beautiful patterns and shapes that naturally occur. Rust or patina on old metal. The swirls of moss. Peeling, chipping paint. The familiar lines and curves of an old vintage car or truck. Unique statues standing guard over weathered headstones. Driving the winding back roads, he is drawn to worn-down barns, windmills, and farms to capture their likeness before they vanish, making way for modern progress. Andrew lives with his wife Joy and their two children Casper and Sierra in Greenwood, IN. Andrew's work can be found at [offthebeatenpathphoto.net](http://offthebeatenpathphoto.net).

LAURI ANDERSON ALFORD's fiction has appeared in or is

forthcoming from *The Cincinnati Review*, *The Carolina Quarterly*, *Greensboro Review*, *Memorious*, *The Common*, and elsewhere. Her recent awards include the Tobias Wolff Award in Fiction, The Robert Watson Literary Prize, and a Tennessee Williams scholarship from the Sewanee Writers' Conference. She is also the Round Six winner of NPR's Three-Minute Fiction Contest. Visit her online at [www.lauriandersonalford.com](http://www.lauriandersonalford.com).

JOEL ALLEGRETTI is the author of four collections, most recently *Europa/Nippon/New York: Poems/Not-Poems* (Poets Wear Prada, 2012). His second book, *Father Silicon* (The Poet's Press, 2006), was selected by *The Kansas City Star* as one of 100 Noteworthy Books of 2006. His poetry has appeared in *Smartish Pace*, *The New York Quarterly*, *PANK* and many other national journals, as well as in *The Best American*

*Poetry* and journals published in Canada, the United Kingdom, and India.

JENNIFER JACKSON BERRY lives in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Recent work has appeared in *Jet Fuel Review*, *Mead: The Magazine of Literature and Libations*, and *The Chaffey Review*.

KARINA BOROWICZ's collection, *The Bees Are Waiting* (2012), was selected by Franz Wright for the Marick Press Poetry Prize and has been named a 2013 Must-Read by the Massachusetts Center for the Book. Her work has appeared widely in journals, including *AGNI*, *The Southern Review*, *Columbia Poetry Review*, and *Poetry Northwest*, and her translations have been featured in *Poetry Daily*.

LAWRENCE CAMPBELL grew up in New York City, and studied nonfiction writing and food history at Yale. He has farmed in Maine, Connecticut, Virginia, and Hawaii. He is currently teaching and gardening at a boarding school in Massachusetts.

CAROL V. DAVIS is the author of *Between Storms* (Truman State

University Press, 2012). She won the 2007 T.S. Eliot Prize for *Into the Arms of Pushkin: Poems of St. Petersburg, 2007*. Twice a Fulbright scholar in Russia, she was the 2008 poet-in-residence at Olivet College, Michigan and teaches at Santa Monica College, California. Her poetry has been read on NPR, Radio Russia, and at the Library of Congress. Her poems have been published in *Ploughshares*, *Prairie Schooner*, *North American Review*, *Mid-American Review*, *Bellingham Review*, *Verse Daily*, and Ted Kooser's *American Life in Poetry*.

GARY FINCKE's latest poetry collection, *The History of Permanence*, won the Stephen F. Austin Poetry Prize and was published in 2011. His newest book is a collection of stories, *The Proper Words for Sin* (2013), from West Virginia University. He is the Charles Degenstein Professor of Creative Writing at Susquehanna University.

MAUREEN TOLMAN FLANNERY's most recent volume of poems is *Tunnel into Morning*. Her other books include *Destiny Whispers to the Beloved*, *A Fine Line*, and the Pulitzer Prize-nominated *Ancestors in the Landscape*. Although she

grew up in a Wyoming sheep ranch family, Maureen and her actor husband Dan have raised their four children in Chicago. Her poems have appeared in fifty anthologies and two hundred literary reviews, including *Birmingham Poetry Review*, *Xavier Review*, *Calyx*, *Pedestal*, *Atlanta Review*, *Karamu*, *North American Review*, *Poetry East*, and *Santa Fe Literary Review*.

J. BRUCE FULLER is a Louisiana native. His chapbooks include *Notes to a Husband* (Imaginary Friend Press, 2013), *Lancelot* (Lazy Mouse Press, 2013), and *28 Blackbirds at the End of the World* (Bandersnatch Books, 2010), and he has had three limited edition broadsides published by Yellow Flag Press. His poems have appeared at *Crab Orchard Review*, *Pembroke Magazine*, *Yankee Pot Roast*, *The Louisiana Review*, *burntdistrict*, *The Lilliput Review*, and *The Dead Mule School of Southern Literature*, among others. He has twice been nominated for *Best of the Net*.

J. P. GRASSER is originally from Chevy Chase, Maryland. Grasser's work seeks to explore and render the diverse regions he has called home, most insistently his family's

fish hatchery in Brady, Nebraska. He holds a BA in English and a Certificate of Creative Writing from Sewanee: The University of the South. He is currently an MFA student in poetry in The Writing Seminars at Johns Hopkins University, where he also instructs an undergraduate course in literature and creative writing.

GEORGE GUIDA's five books include *The Pope Stories and Other Tales of Troubled Times* (2012) and three collections of poems: *Friars Club Conscience* (2013), *New York and Other Lovers* (2008), and *Low Italian* (2006). He is Professor in English at New York City College of Technology (CUNY), and serves as Poetry Editor of *2 BridgesReview*.

JEAN HARPER is the author of *Rose City: A Memoir of Work*. Her writing has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Iowa Review*, *North American Review*, *The Florida Review*, *Cimarron Review*, and other publications. Most recently, she received a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in Prose. She teaches at Indiana University East.



JOEANN HART, who lives in Gloucester, Massachusetts with a small collection of farm animals, is the author of the novels *Float* and *Addled*. This is her first published poem.

PAUL HLAVA is the recipient of the 2013 Poets House Fellowship, and was named a Best New Poet 2012. His poems have appeared in *Gulf Coast*, *Agriculture Reader*, *Tuesday*; *An Art Project*, the Wave Books tumblr, among others, and have been nominated for the Pushcart and Best of the Net. More information can be found at paulhlava.com

MICHAEL JONES teaches at Oakland High School in Oakland, California. He handles a wrench less wisely than a beginner; his poetry, however, is forthcoming in *Rhino*, *Tar River Poetry*, and *Beloit Poetry Journal*.

CHRISTOPHER LINFORTH has fiction published or forthcoming in *Gargoyle*, *Southern Humanities Review*, *Denver Quarterly*, and other magazines.

SARAH MARSHALL grew up in rural Oregon and earned an MFA in fiction at Portland State University, where she currently teaches. "Petal" is taken from a novel in stories about the Slaughter family of Rose, Oregon; other excerpts have recently appeared in *Flyway*, *Necessary Fiction*, and *The Collagist*.

MELANIE MCCABE is a high school English and creative writing teacher in Arlington, Virginia. Her first book, *History of the Body*, was recently published by David Robert Books. Her work has appeared several times on *Poetry Daily*, as well as in BEST NEW POETS 2010, *The Georgia Review*, *The Massachusetts Review*, *The Cincinnati Review*, *Bellingham Review*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Shenandoah*, and numerous other journals.

BETH MCDERMOTT is a PhD candidate in the Program for Writers at the University of Illinois at Chicago. She has been published in *KNOCK* magazine, and has poetry forthcoming in *DIAGRAM* journal.

TYLER MILLS is the author of *Tongue Lyre*, which won the 2011

Crab Orchard Series in Poetry First Book Award (SIU Press, 2013). Her poems have received magazine awards from the *Crab Orchard Review*, *Gulf Coast*, and *Third Coast*, and have appeared in *AGNI*, *Georgia Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *TriQuarterly Online*, and elsewhere. She received an MFA in creative writing from the University of Maryland and is currently pursuing a PhD in the Program for Writers at the University of Illinois-Chicago.

THOMAS R. MOORE's first book of poems, *The Bolt-Cutters*, was published by Fort Hemlock Press in November 2010 and was one of three Finalists in the 2011 Maine Writers and Publishers Competition. Two poems from *The Bolt-Cutters* were featured on Garrison Keillor's *Writer's Almanac* in January 2011, and two were 2012 Pushcart nominees. His poem "Chet Sawing" won First Prize the 2011 Maine Postmark Poetry Contest. He lives in Brooksville, Maine.

KATIE DARBY MULLINS is finishing her MFA at Spalding University and teaching creative writing at the University of Evansville. In addition to editing a recent rock 'n

roll crossover edition of the metrical poetry journal *Measure*, she's been published in journals like *Broad River Review*, *Big Lucks*, *The Evansville Review*, and *The Meadowland Review*. She's also the writer and founder of the music blog *Katie Darby Recommends*.

ROBERT PEAKE is an American poet living in England. His chapbook *The Silence Teacher* is now available from Poetry Salzburg.

COLIN POPE's poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Best New Poets 2012*, *Slate*, *The New York Quarterly*, *The Portland Review*, and *The Los Angeles Review*, among others. He was the 2011-12 Clark Writer-in-Residence at Texas State University, where he teaches in the English Department.

RACHEL RINEHART is originally from Chuckery, Ohio, and currently lives in Lake Charles, Louisiana, where she is an MFA candidate at McNeese State University. Her poems have been published in *Jelly Bucket* and *Quarterly West* and are forthcoming in *Third Coast*.

WESLEY ROTHMAN, Pushcart Prize nominee and finalist for the 49th Parallel Poetry Prize, has had poems and criticism in *Bellingham Review*, *Salamander*, *Rattle*, *The Rumpus*, *On the Seawall*, and *Paper Darts*, among others. He serves *Ploughshares* as senior poetry reader, and teaches writing and cultural literatures at Emerson College and the University of Massachusetts-Boston.

DAVID RUTIEZER, the grandchild of Jewish immigrants, was born May 2, 1968, and raised in Illinois and Massachusetts, the only child of a teacher mother and a computer programmer father. David sings and plays keyboard and ukulele for folks with Alzheimer's and for young children, and has taught Israeli and International folk dancing. He graduated in 2012 from the Rainier Writing Workshop MFA. David lives in Portland, Oregon, where he has volunteered for several community organizations, including Friends of William Stafford, Cascade Festival of African Films, and the Oregon Holocaust Memorial. You can read more about David at his website, [creativedavid.com](http://creativedavid.com).

F. DANIEL RZICZNEK's collections and chapbooks of poetry include *Vine River Hermitage* (Cooper Dillon Books, 2011), *Divination Machine* (Free Verse Editions/Parlor Press, 2009), *Neck of the World* (Utah State University Press, 2007), and *Cloud Tablets* (Kent State University Press, 2006). His individual poems have appeared in *Boston Review*, *The New Republic*, *Orion*, *Mississippi Review*, *Hotel Amerika*, *Shenandoah*, and *Notre Dame Review*. Also coeditor (with Gary L. McDowell) of *The Rose Metal Press Field Guide to Prose Poetry: Contemporary Poets in Discussion and Practice* (Rose Metal Press, 2010), Rzicznek teaches writing at Bowling Green State University in Bowling Green, Ohio.

LIZZY STAR grew up in Montclair, New Jersey, and is a graduate of Yale University, where she studied English and verse writing. Her poetry has been published in the *Yale Literary Magazine* and included in the *Bowwow* series at the Bowery Poetry Club, and she is a 2012 recipient of the Sitka Fellowship for young artists and thinkers. She has recently been



writing and farming on the Big Island of Hawaii and currently teaches English at a boarding school in Massachusetts.

J. DAVID STEVENS teaches creative writing at the University of Richmond. His story collection, *Mexico is Missing*, was published by Ohio State UP in 2006. More recent stories appear or are forthcoming in *The Paris Review*, *Gulf Coast*, *The Southern Review*, and *West Branch*.

J. A. TYLER lives in Colorado. The piece published here is part of a new novel. For more on his writing, visit: [www.chokeonthesewords.com](http://www.chokeonthesewords.com).

AMELIA URRY is a senior English major at Yale University. She writes poetry, nonfiction, and the occasional math textbook. Sometimes she designs the lighting for plays, which is almost as difficult and important as writing, and even less glamorous.

JOHN VURRO lives in New Jersey with his wife and family. Some of his other work has been published in *Evening Street Review* and is upcoming in *Our Stories*.

KAREN J. WEYANT's work has appeared in *Cave Wall*, *Conte*, *Copper Nickel*, *Spillway*, *The Sugar House Review* and *River Styx*. She is the author of two poetry chapbooks, *Stealing Dust* (Finishing Line Press, 2009) and *Wearing Heels in the Rust Belt* (Winner of Main Street Rag's 2011 Chapbook Contest). She lives and writes in Pennsylvania, but teaches at Jamestown Community College in Jamestown, New York.

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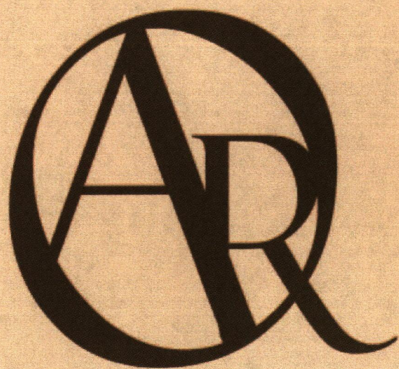
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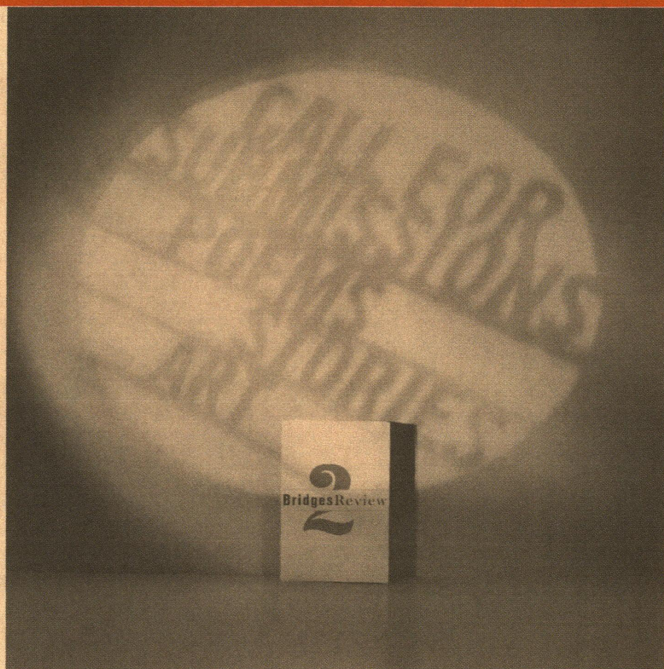
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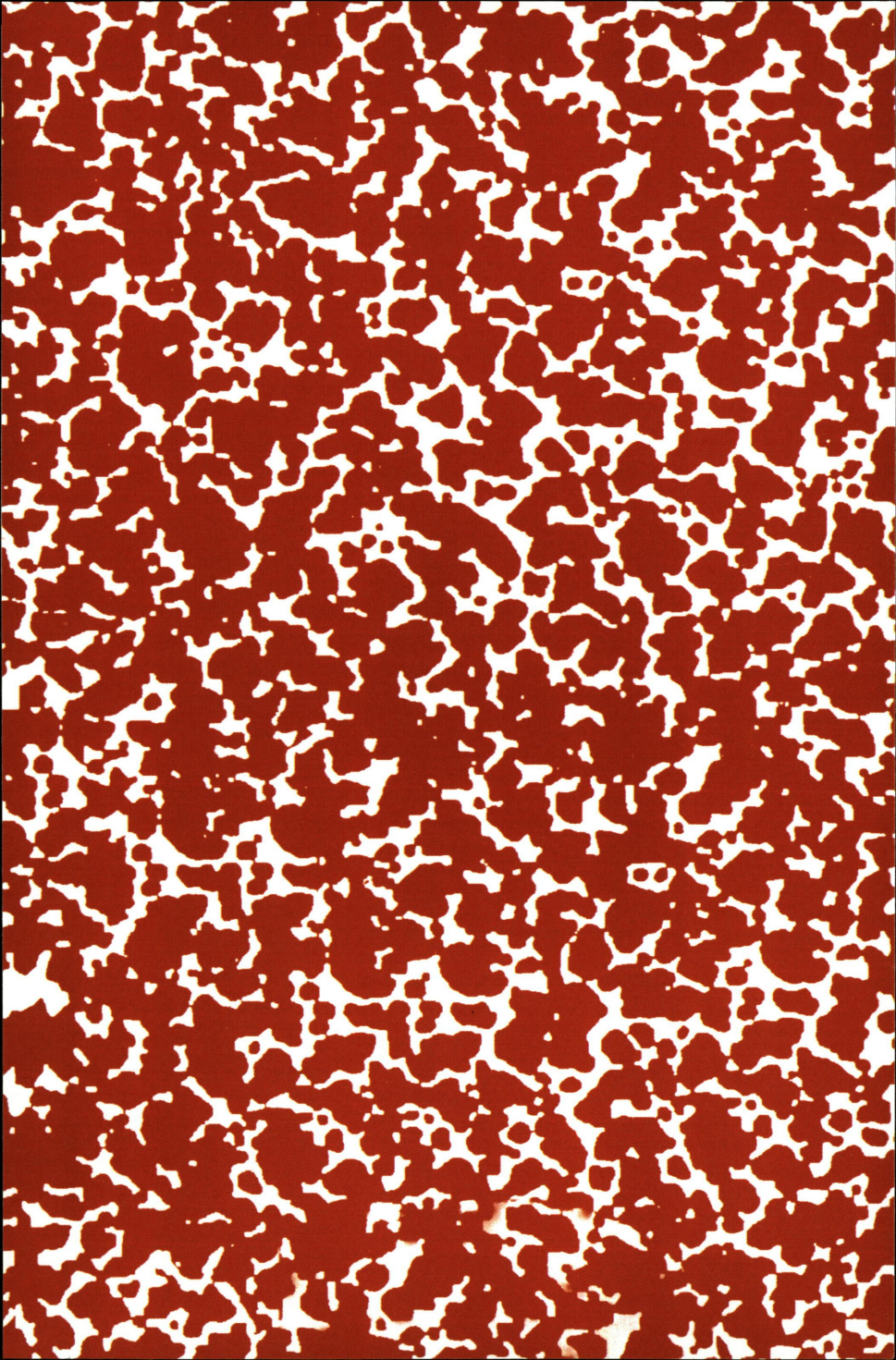
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