

.: Harpur Palate, Volume 14 Issue 1, Summer & Fall 2014

HARPUR PALATE



Vol.14 No.1



Published by The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB), 2014

∴ Harpur Palate, Volume 14 Issue 1, Summer & Fall 2014

**BINGHAMTON
UNIVERSITY**

HARPUR PALATE

SUMMER & FALL

**BINGHAMTON,
NEW YORK**

Vol. 14 No. 1

Published by The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB) 2014



“There was a time when I told the rest of this story differently.”

—Anna Gates Ha, “The Abalone Diver”

Summer & Fall 14.1

HARPUR PALATE

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ISSN NO. 1532-904610

Harpur Palate is published bi-annually by the Department of English at Binghamton University, PO Box 6000, Binghamton, NY 13902. Visit our website at: harpurpalate.binghamton.edu

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Typeset in Harpur Palate Franklin Gothic, ITC Clearface, and Monotype Palatin.

Printed by Yurchak Printing, Inc.

Cover art by Meredith Britt, "The Horses Return to Vaughn."

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THE FIRST CALL

JULIE BABCOCK

There is more than one world. In one, a husband and wife do not part. They return from work together. Imagine February snow lands in her hair and his hand reaches toward her and melts it. See their breath frame a nearing house.

In another world, she pushes police from her kitchen and locks the door. She must stop this world. She must build more walls.

She kneels and her body becomes the floor. Her heart becomes stone. Her fingers become the phone and she presses them to make the first call to God.

No, she begins, even before he answers.

BASIL, LEMONS, AND BLOOD

KASHANA CAULEY

The break-ins started at the end of March. Snow gave way to mud that should have preserved the intruder's tracks. Everyone heard him. No one saw him. Our neighbors' jewelry and televisions vanished into the ether. I lay awake with my nose buried in my sleeping husband's neck, smelling cedar and seeing the intruder's future entrance, the crack at our front door when he split the lock, my husband subduing him with clenched fists.

One night in bed my husband's throat shifted. His eyes opened. His chin shook. The other economics professor had reported to work late that afternoon with a slashed cheek and a wired-shut jaw. He awoke the night before to the rustling noise of the intruder searching his kitchen cabinets. The umbrella he snatched from his bedroom closet landed uselessly on the intruder's cheek. I shrank into myself at the news, crunched up my arms and legs, let my thoughts turn black.

My husband refused to buy a gun. He believed in our security system and door locks. He won battles with reason and logic, not brute force. The intruder robbed his way through town toward our house. The night air grew warm and damp. I awoke trembling from dreams where my husband failed to deter the intruder with graphs, charts, chalked-up blackboard numbers. My exhaustion populated our bedroom with intruders, masked and not, poised to strike, already leaning over our bed, one hand on my throat.

After pleading proved fruitless I turned the change in our coffee tin into bills and met a man on a farm road twenty miles from town to jam cash in his hand and accept a paper bag that I cradled like a baby on the

way back to my car. I hunched below dashboard level so no one could see me peek at what I'd bought. I put the gun on my left palm and resisted both urges: to throw it out the window, to puke. I put it on my right palm. I could breathe. I could shoot. All I had to do was aim and pull the trigger. I ran my tongue up the barrel and felt the cool certainty of a plan spreading across my fingers, leaking into my chest.

At home I put the gun in a dumped-out bag of flour and watched its plastic fade behind a layer of flour dust that rose up like smoke. My husband said he saw something new in my face. I pretended my newfound gun-owning confidence was an extra layer of mascara. He never said why his default cedar scent had started to fade into basil.

I waited seven days to move a rocking chair from the living room to our wrap-around porch and another three to sit facing the woods once a week from sunset to sunrise with the gun in my right dress pocket. On the first night's watch, the whippoorwills hurled their call from my left ear to my right and every pair of leaves brushing against each other became someone tiptoeing up to me. My husband yelled through the window that I should come inside and go to bed for the first couple of hours. After that I ignored his snoring.

I spent two nights a week on the porch. Three. The night noises shifted toward static from threat. The gun shed some of its psychic weight and became a natural extension of my arm. Maple and birch leaves turned from yellow to forest green and grew dense enough to obscure what slid between tree trunks in the dark. The woods embraced spring. My husband shrank from it. He padded outside in his slippers and stroked my hair each morning instead of taking a shift on the watch. When I didn't move he gave me a disdainful head shake and then a sigh. He graded papers in his office and started sleeping there more often than not. I smelled more basil on his neck, his chest, his hair. Our secrets soured our milk and wilted our greens, making dinners insufferable affairs better conducted alone. I tucked beef jerky in my left dress pocket instead of wasting time with food that required plates.

The intruder advanced one ranch closer to us every night. I spent all my nights outside. In late April I added a pair of binoculars to my porch

kit. In the first week of May I aimed them between the trees and caught a man swaying in circles, his skinny legs slow-dancing in the dark. Every cell in my body stood at attention. I put my hand on the gun and dug my feet down into the porch planks. His footsteps came in over the wind. I stood and aimed. He refused to move beyond the tree line. I sat and waited. I eyed him again. He'd lost his human form and become a half-downed tree branch two-stepping with the breeze.

That night the intruder robbed no one, but for the next three nights he hit two houses apiece, a schedule that meant he'd come to see me on night four.

I shed my cardigan to spend the night's watch in one of my absent husband's tight white ribbed undershirts with my hair pulled back, the best male costume I could construct on short notice. The sky turned orange, then pink, then blue. Every tree branch grew human arms, each shadow a loping stride. When the porch creaked, footsteps crept up behind my chair that dissipated when I turned my head. The wind detonated through my ears.

Just before sunrise the intruder rose from the forest to approach the porch. When he cleared the tree line a light burst into my throat that I choked down like cough syrup in order to focus. He walked. I stood and aimed. For one long second before I fired, our movements matched. His arms floated up and in front like mine. His stride widened to match my standing stance. He took the step that forced us to come together. I closed my eyes and squeezed my finger. The shot that linked us sounded like the world's loudest slammed door. I ran behind my house. My whole body vibrated with the shot's dying echo.

When the volume returned to normal my binoculars revealed a man lying face-down in the dirt. I stroked the cell phone resting in my left dress pocket, ready to pull it out and dial 911, but I didn't. He stayed down for a safe amount of time. I walked over to see whom I'd hit. He smelled like basil, lemons, and blood. A pink smear of blush marred his shirt pocket. I dropped to my knees in the dirt, found his pulse and exhaled until my lungs burned. But when the ambulance arrived, the blush stain kept me from jumping in back. No one's things disappeared that night. Yet I didn't feel

any safer.

I have moved my standoff from the porch to my bed, where I lie with my back to him on the rare nights he's there. His right arm is wrapped in a sling that he rubs against the sheets as if doing so will start a fire. His right pointer and middle fingers, both broken, are tied to plastic splints that he taps on the bed frame to keep me awake. I find it more useful to address him with silence than words. He returns the favor when he comes home instead of staying with the baker's daughter, who puts basil in her breads, lemon in her tarts, and something bitter in the wind that floats from her bakery to our house.

INVASION

**BRANDON
COURTNEY**

This grief isn't mine
alone: the fall
after returning

from war,
asleep beside my wife,
a bat

appeared suddenly
in our room—
stalked

mosquitoes,
while sulphur moths
knocked

against the bulb's
remaining flicker—
it circled

and circled and fed
until landing
on our north wall,
trembling.

Courtney

6

All the soldier does
after war is done
with violence:

I crushed
the black bruise
of its body
with my hands

before my wife could
open the window
or find a broom.

After, I washed
my hands
then fed

on my wife's fingers
and breasts,
swallowing

her breath
until she, too, fell,
saying to me:

with you
I have never felt
so safe,

saying to herself:
I no longer know you;
I've never been
so afraid.

ON SEEING MY EX-WIFE AT THE FARMERS' MARKET

**BRANDON
COURTNEY**

Bent over wooden crates,
your hands dipped
into a season

of Arkansas Blacks,
Autumn Golds, you finger
the bruises

where the pulp has gone
mealy, press
where its flesh

hurts the most.
You've never touched me
like the apples

you're holding now,
never lifted any part of me
to your nose, your lips,

and inhaled as wholly,
deeply, as you do
with the Asian pears;
the white onions'

Courtney

8

tunics look like your wedding
gown's tattered neckline.

Darling, the red bell

pepper you're palming
looks like the ghost
of a heart. I made a room,

once, in those very hands.

In the end,
don't we learn by touching

the skin, don't most things
breathe

through the smallest
of openings?

Everything you taught

me about leaving
tells me to distrust
the sudden stillness

of the soft-edged
pomegranate
and its hundred hearts within.

WEIGHTS AND MEASURES

**BRANDON
COURTNEY**

—BAGHDAD, IRAQ (CNN): “American and British soldiers report orders given to add weight to coffins in order to disguise high rates of blast injuries and amputations.”

One granite slab for every limb blown
into reddening horizon,
every misplaced bootfall.
Two dozen pumice stones for every finger
sheared during interrogation;
a thousand grains of sanded alabaster
for every pliered tooth.
Three rocks of obsidian for every hand
that cut the bomb's trigger wire.
Four reed of limestone for every soldier
oiled into Baghdad dunes.
Five stones of basalt for every Blackwater
driver and Halliburton boy who rolled
over buried incendiaries.
Six fistfuls of Desert Rose for every jarhead
measured for prosthetics.
Seven gross of gritsone, basanite, and quartz
for every amputated leg, phantom
by improvised devices.

Courtney

10

Hundredweight of flint for every match
struck against skin.

Mudstones and sandbags, as many as you can
carry, as many as your able arms allow.

I WAS HUNGRY FOR THE SECRETS OF THE SADISTIC FISH

after a line by Philip Lamantia

RAY GONZALEZ

The unwritten poem is the truth.
Water in the brain and not in the eyes.
Time is the lemon slice in the cup of hot tea.
Closer to happiness means farther from the myth.
“And the great danger to the poem is the poetic,”
Vicente Huidobro gurgling in the aquarium.
The unwritten poem is the refusing sunflower.
The wings of the white falcon spreading over the tree.
What is done and what is told before hunger sets in.
Each kind of love invents the hard boiled egg.
There must be a postcard of all this.
The Allman Brothers blasting out of the speakers.
The heart is plugged in.
The unwritten poem was investigated for non-disclosure.
Gods are named and gods are allowed to come in.
Stories are wounded and words are whipped.
Pancho Villa used 20 carrier pigeons to send
messages to his revolutionary army.
Pomegranate aura is sustained in time of war.
Let the achiever come in.
A tiny ball of gold hidden in the fresh loaf of bread.
The black butterfly in the backyard coming to life.
The unwritten poem is the unthinkable.
The holy looped angel and the antlers on the wall.

Primal color is resurrection and so is the failed ancestor.

This weeps from afar.

Create unrest so the family archival photos turn yellow.

This weeps toward the veil of a god you won't share.

THE ABALONE DIVER

ANNA GATES HA

I'm not sure how it went down or what excuses my father gave her. It was still early in the summer, 1993, the year Beth Hart appeared ten times on *Star Search*. I came home in the afternoon. The school term was over, and I must have been swimming at the community pool with my brother and friends because I can remember my hair dripping down my back and onto the linoleum. Cold little splashes around my bare feet.

My mother was in the kitchen, packing knives in bubble wrap and duct tape. She wasn't about to have us stuck in the house, she said, with all of his stuff missing from the drawers and medicine cabinets. She told us we were moving to the coast, to a small, northern town I'd never heard of—Caspar. Our uncle owned a cabin there that he'd let us use. She'd already boxed up the majority of my room.

The television was the last thing we packed. Ellis and I spent the remaining minutes in our empty, childhood home watching Beth Hart sing-scream into a microphone, her hair scrunched with gel or sweat, her lips painted dark brown, not quite black, but still dangerous. Powerful. The judges gave her four stars, and my mother unplugged the TV during a commercial, telling Ellis to find room for it in the bed of the truck.

It was hard not to hate her. And I'd like to think that maybe she understood that then. I thought my mother must have done something—something monstrous—to make him leave us. I wanted her to admit to it. The night we drove away from our house, our lives crammed into one trailer and one truck, I told her so. I was screaming, slamming my palm

against the window. She didn't cry. In fact, I never saw her cry over my father. She lit a cigarette, cracked her window, and told me to stop acting so cliché.

Back then, I wanted to be famous. I wanted darkness and a single spotlight. It wasn't just a want, it was inevitable. I could feel my blood reaching out, destined to be known. I figured that it was just a matter of time, and I longed for it the way other children longed to be firemen or doctors. I imagined myself participating in interviews when I looked in the bathroom mirror. *Like most mothers, she tried to dash my dreams*, I would say. *But now look at me.*

Caspar was not the kind of place you went to get famous. Caspar was a place where people went to disappear. It was a town proud of its rusted lawn art and weather-beaten houses—everything encased by forests on the east side and cliffs falling off into the Pacific on the west. A hundred years ago, it was a popular logging town. The rest of my family seemed ready, eager even, to find themselves in this forgotten place. My mother started to write a novel. She spent her days asleep and her nights in front of a typewriter with the door closed. Ellis had his new driver's license and the truck, which he took out for long periods of time without telling anyone. But I wanted to be seen.

I guess that's why I started hanging out with Miguel. A week after we moved, I met him on Caspar Beach, and he offered me a piece of raw abalone. The meat was thick and pink, and it jiggled in his sandy hand like Jell-O.

"No thanks," I said.

"Scared?" he said.

The ocean was only a few blocks and a short dirt path away from our new house. I had walked down there because I planned to write a chain letter to my friends back in Stockton, and I wanted to have something good to tell them. A beach was something, at least. It was glamorous. Important. *Like Malibu*, I planned to say. *There might even be celebrities here.* But instead, I found the beach dark, the water frigid, and the sand covered with dark brown seaweed that smelled like dead fish. Where the dirt path met

the sand, there was a black and yellow sign, warning swimmers about great whites. There were no famous sunbathers with tropical drinks in their hands. There was only Miguel, sitting with a bag full of shells and a little knife by his side. I must have been feeling brave that day. I must have felt above the quaintness that permeated the town. I sat down next to him like I knew him. He didn't seem to mind.

Miguel crammed the little slice of meat into his mouth and smiled at me while he chewed. I could hear the crunch of sand between his teeth. I thought he looked about the same age as me, thirteen. He was dressed in jersey shorts and the top half of a wetsuit. He had a diamond earring in each of his ears and a little smudge of downy hair underneath his nose. As he swallowed the meat, he ran the back of his hand over his mouth and budding mustache.

"How'd you get those," I asked, motioning to the bag of shells. There were only four or five, but they were massive. The size of my face. Miguel tossed the empty shell in his hand out in front of him. Its inside was smooth and iridescent, like a flattened-out pearl.

"The ocean," he said, narrowing his eyes. I couldn't tell if he was making fun of me or not. Waves crashed onto the sand a few yards in front of us. I wanted to ask him if he was afraid, but thought better of it. I didn't want him attributing that fear to me instead.

"What's the knife for?"

"To pop 'em off the rocks," he said. "And for protection." He stabbed the knife into the air, ninja-style.

Then he stood up and pulled a sweatshirt over his head, pocketed the knife, and slung the bag of shells over his shoulder. He stood there for a second, looking out into the ocean, then stooped over, picked up the empty, glimmering shell, and threw it in my lap.

"Welcome to the neighborhood," he said.

I didn't know how Miguel knew that we were neighbors. I had never seen him before. His words made me think that he'd been looking at me, spying on me, and this made my stomach jittery with the possibility. I started to return the favor, keeping an eye on the house to our left, where he lived.

The house was even smaller than ours. A dozen or so young men lived there too, and as far as I could tell, there were no women. I had a hard time imagining how (and why) all those men, plus one boy, could fit inside the house.

"Cannabis farmers," Ellis told me. "They have farms all over these forests."

"Don't talk like that in front of Mira," my mother said. She poured herself a cup of coffee and wrapped her hands around it. She'd taken to wearing sweats and knitted sweaters, her hair in desperate need of a tint.

"What's cannabis?" I asked.

"Weed," Ellis said. He pinched his pointer finger and thumb together and kissed it with his lips. I laughed and brought my own fingers to my mouth, mimicking Ellis's pouted lips and half-opened eyes.

"Mira," my mother said. "Stop it."

The mornings were the only times I ever really saw my mother and brother. After my mother had her coffee, and Ellis had his scrambled eggs and sports drink, they wandered off. Nights were great because I had the TV all to myself. Eventually, I moved it into my room, laying it on a blanket and dragging it down the hall. When *Star Search* was on, I forgot all about my mother and brother, and even my father, wherever he was. It was a show that negated the past. It didn't matter what the contestants' real lives were like. It only mattered that they could sing. It only mattered that they could win. I borrowed my mother's duct tape and made a silver star, just like the one on the show's stage, on my bedroom floor.

But the days were different, and I loathed daytime programming—soap operas and talk shows that exposed their guests' ugly secrets. Paternity tests and sex changes. So I started going to the beach during the day to watch Miguel dive for abalone.

"Who are all those men you live with?" I asked him one day.

He shrugged. His catch of the day was spread out in front of us. After a while, I started to like the salty, squishy fish that he pulled out of the ocean. Some days, he'd only get one or two or none at all, but today he had at least half a dozen. I sat with a shell balanced on my kneecaps, scooping the meat into my mouth.

"A couple are my uncles," he said. "Some cousins. Some are just random dudes."

"Where are your parents?" I asked.

"Where's your dad?" he said.

It was my turn to shrug my shoulders now. My father had called the house a couple days ago, the first time since we'd moved. He called with a skimpy apology, and then he promised that we could spend the next summer with him, if we wanted. Ellis told him to go fuck himself. I asked him if he was serious about next summer, and he said, *Sure, of course*, as if he hadn't expected me to want to come. As if he had expected me to take my mother's side. But he wouldn't tell me where I'd be spending my summers with him. *We'll figure that out when the time comes*, he said. "Tokyo," I told Miguel. "Or else London. He travels a lot for his job. It's hard to keep track sometimes."

"He leave your mom for someone hotter or something?" he said.

I sucked in air too quickly at the question, and a little piece of fish caught itself in my windpipe. I coughed it up. It landed in my palm with a mess of foaming spit. I thought I might start to cry if Miguel said anything else, so I laughed at him instead.

"No," I said. "He would never leave us."

Miguel didn't laugh back at me. Instead, he said, "Right. Of course."

Then he took my hand and rubbed the spit and fish chunk off into the sand. I'd never held a boy's hand before. And even though I knew it wasn't like that—he was just cleaning my hand—my heartbeat quickened when his fingertips touched my skin.

"You should learn how to chew before you swallow," he said.

I used to practice singing too, of course. We all wanted to sing back then—every girl I knew. I guess we thought it was a way out of our lives, plus everyone would want to be you if you could sing on television. If some girl from the Midwest with a decent voice could get famous, then we all could. There was something about Beth Hart, though. Every week, she came on, and every week she sang as if she were fighting someone. As if the microphone were some guy who left her all alone and she wasn't going to

take it anymore. She kept winning, and as I watched her each week, it was like I was getting closer and closer to being on that stage.

I couldn't bring myself to talk about singing with Miguel, though. He was different. Not at all like my friends from back home—who had, by this time, dwindled down to a few girls that would still call me back. He wasn't even like any of the boys I knew. He was scrappy. Eternally covered in sea salt. And I didn't think he'd get it.

"What do you do with them?" I asked him one day, turning an empty shell in my hands. It was a bright day, unusually warm. When he'd gotten out of the water and found me half asleep and sunbathing on the beach, he had shaken his head and laughed. Then he stood above me and shook his head some more, so that little droplets of water and sand rained down on my face. It was rare for the sunshine to break through the fog like that, and this indulgence made us giddy.

"Save them," Miguel said.

"For what?"

"I don't know," he said, turning toward me. "Got any ideas?"

"Maybe," I said.

I made him show me later that day. A small part of me hoped he was saving them for me, even though I knew that wasn't realistic. He had the abalone shells heaped up next to a big redwood in the forest behind his house. It looked like a shrine or a memorial that you'd see on the side of the road where there'd been a car accident. The shells glowed neon in the setting sun.

"How many are there?" I asked.

He wasn't sure. We tallied the whole pile, which was about as half as tall as I was. We counted 154. Probably it was illegal to have that many. But Miguel said the farmers weren't too worried about having illegal things in the forest.

Later, we brought the uneaten abalone to the farmers, who barbequed the meat and ate them with a bottle of tequila. Miguel snuck us a Budweiser each. After I drank mine, I started humming a little bit, quietly at first, and not quite forming any words. My skin felt tingly from the beer, the way it does when someone whispers in your ear. The forest was black in front of

us, and the farmers were loud and laughing behind us. I sang a few bars. I can't remember the exact song anymore. Quite possibly, it was about love. When I finished the verse, I got shy and stopped. I asked Miguel for another beer. He smiled at me then.

"You have a real pretty voice," he said.

The next day, he showed up with two bananas and a McDonald's bag. "Mira, that boy is here," my mother had yelled through my closed bedroom door. I was still in my nightshirt when I opened the front door and saw him standing on our porch, the fast food bag hanging from his fist.

"Come on," he said, grinning and lifting his chin in a quick jerk that made his adam's apple bulge. "I want to show you something."

"Let me put on some clothes," I said.

"Or not."

"Shut up," I said, crossing my arms over my chest. "I'll be fast."

We were quiet as we moved through the redwoods—through the giants—but everything felt loud: the leaves beneath our feet, the birds above our heads. I'd never been this far into the forest before. As the terrain started to incline, I could feel myself sweat. Damp hands. Cheeks blushed. Little flickers of sunlight bounced through the boughs.

When the ground beneath us finally plateaued, I realized that we were at the cannabis farm. The plants gave off a sticky-sweet odor, each one at least a foot taller than me. Miguel stopped in front of me, between the neat rows of plants, took off his shirt and tied it around his head. I'd seen him without his shirt almost every day that summer, but it was different this time, his skin smooth and flush instead of prickled with a salty cold. "Hot," he said.

I wasn't sure if it was a statement or a question, but in response, I peeled off my own moist shirt. I could feel my skin beating beneath my thin, cotton bra. I could feel his eyes. He smiled, and I didn't know what I was supposed to do next. As I dropped my shirt to the ground, a loud noise came from behind the plants, like plastic buckets cracking, and a man in a dirty shirt and jeans stumbled out between us.

"The fuck?" he said, looking at Miguel and then at me. He started to

laugh when he saw me, my tiny breasts barely covered, then he turned to Miguel and said something I couldn't understand.

I grabbed my shirt, threw it over my head, and ran home, praying that everything in this town would just disappear. Including me.

I can't remember if he called my name or not. If he told me to wait, or if he just watched me run away from him.

There was a time when I told the rest of this story differently. A time when I said that I had been there the day that Miguel died. In some versions, I said that I had been in the water with him when the shark came, that he saw it coming and dangled the abalone sack in front of it to distract it from my own legs. Once, I told a therapist that I'd been waiting on the beach, unaware. I didn't know anything had happened, I said, until Miguel started dragging himself out of the water, a thick line of blood trailing behind him where his leg should have been.

It was the beginning of September, but school hadn't started yet. Our mother was in Stockton, taking care of some issues, as she called them, which Ellis and I both assumed meant our father. But we never said it. She'd left a twenty on the counter with a note that said we should buy ourselves pizza for dinner.

"I might be back late tonight," Ellis said, as he cooked me eggs on the stove. "So just go ahead and order without me."

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"Just driving around," he said.

"Where?"

"You going to be down at the beach with that crush of yours?" He piled the eggs onto my plate and winked.

"He's not my crush," I said, remembering the farmer and my little-girl bra.

After Ellis left, I wandered around the house, in and out of each room. I opened my mother's closet and contemplated wearing one of her dresses. Dresses she hadn't worn since we moved. I opened her drawers and ran my fingers over her cupped, lace bras. I held one to my chest in the mirror, turning to get a glimpse of my fake-grownup silhouette.

The pages of her novel were stacked high on her desk, and a little pink quartz sat on top of them like a talisman. Under the pink rock was the title page—a nearly blank sheet with *Avicenna* written in small type in the center.

It was story that I knew well—a bedtime tale that our mother used to tell Ellis and me every night, for years, when we were little. I grew up with the main character, *Avicenna*, a dove-girl with wings like a warrior.

It had been years since I'd heard the story, and as I sat there with the pages, I lost myself in my mother's voice, muted but somehow more vivid on the page. More like how I wanted her to be. I ended up on the floor on my elbows, the pages underneath my chin. It was a cloudy day with no shadows, so I barely noticed as the room dimmed, darker and darker, into evening. By the time I had to turn on a lamp, I'd forgotten all about the beach and little pieces of raw flesh.

Miguel was dead by the time the paramedics got him to the hospital, so there probably wasn't anything I could have done. But that's not the kind of thing you want to live with. Not knowing.

That day he died, I didn't know it. I didn't have a bad feeling in my gut. I didn't run to the beach with a tourniquet. I didn't go knocking on the farmers' door, asking if they knew where Miguel was. (Although, these are all things that I've told people, at one point or another.) After I spent the afternoon reading my mother's novel, I watched the *Star Search* finals. Beth sat in the middle of the star on stage and sang softer than I'd ever heard her. I felt a part of something, watching her. A part of something real. I knew that she was wearing makeup, that there was special lighting, and that Ed McMahon was paid to say the things he said. But I didn't care. In that moment, it was real. I spent the rest of the night sitting in my duct-tape star, singing to the moon outside my window.

It wasn't until the next morning, Ellis running through the front door and into my room, that I knew anything had happened. He sat on the edge of my bed and put his hand on my shoulder. He'd been driving on the highway, past the hospital, and saw a line of news vans and a crowd of people. He'd gotten out and talked to some of them.

"Shark attack," they told him.

The news reporters had gotten a hold of Miguel's name from the hospital staff, and they were broadcasting it out to the world.

"I'm so sorry, Mira," Ellis said. But I didn't believe him. Not at first. It sounded like a movie to me.

The farmers had a funeral for Miguel the Saturday after he died at the closest Catholic Church, which was in Mendocino. My mother went with me. She wore a nice black dress and curled her hair in soft waves that framed her face. It was strange to have her there, so close. It was cold inside the church, and I had to sit on top of my hands to keep them warm.

The pews were packed with people mourning a child that none of them knew. They whispered to each other about the details. "The kid abalone diver," they called him.

The news stations were there too. They lined up along the street in their white vans, microphones and paper coffee cups in their hands. Miguel was famous now, all over the nightly news. Strangers whispered his name in the grocery store, and once, I woke up to find his face staring out at me from the front page of the newspaper. The farmers didn't want to talk about Miguel's death. They didn't have any comment about abalone diving or the safety of Pacific waters. They packed up and left town a few days after the funeral, afraid, I assume, that the media attention would somehow expose their illegal farms, tucked far and deep in the forest.

When the funeral service was over, my mother and I walked out to the bluffs that overlooked the water. A few reporters tried to stop us, but my mother drew me closer and put her hand up to their cameras. "I'm sorry," she said. I wasn't sure if she was talking to the reporters or to me.

"It's okay to cry, you know," she told me when we reached the bluffs. She was bent over the edge of the cliff, looking down at the crashing waves.

"What's the point?" I asked, even though I could feel the sobs bubbling into a knot in my throat. I wanted to fight with her. I wanted her to give me a reason. A reason why she never cried over my father and why I should start now over a dead boy.

"I don't know," she said, like a sigh. "Maybe there isn't one."

Then she got her keys out of her purse and tapped them at her side

three times, like she was getting cold or tired, or both. "Come on," she said. "Let's go home." She turned around and started walking toward the car, her heels tilting unsteadily on the pebble pathway.

I started to follow her, and I really meant to. I meant to get into the car and buckle my seatbelt and go home. I even thought about going out to the redwood tree behind Miguel's house and spreading his abalone shells out on the ground—I could spell his name, or arrange them like wings and lie between them. I imagined the sun bouncing off their green and pink insides. But instead, I walked past the crowded parking lot, back toward the church. I walked to where the white vans were parked and to a reporter in a tight blazer and pencil-cut skirt. Her hair was unnaturally shiny, like doll hair.

"I knew him," I said. But she didn't turn around, and I almost left right then. It was windy, and she probably didn't hear me. But I thought that maybe she did hear me, and that she didn't care that I knew him. I thought knowing him wasn't enough. So I said, a little louder this time, "I was there when the abalone diver died."

The reporter turned then and looked at me for a second or two, her eyebrows wrinkled together.

"Miguel was my best friend," I told her. "The only friend I have here." I pulled a strand of loose hair behind my ear. "Had here, I mean."

There were a lot of quick movements and a sense of panic as the woman grabbed her cameraman. She applied more lipstick and put down her microphone to adjust a spotlight. The man seemed to buckle under the weight of the camera. His belly shook like raw fish as he adjusted it on his shoulder. Finally, the reporter bent down in front of me and smoothed the front of my dress. She smelled sweet, like lilies and fresh plastic.

"Now just tell that camera exactly what you just told me," she said, smiling. "Do you think you can do that?"

"Okay," I said. And I did. It was just like how I'd imagined, and the story came out of me as if I'd rehearsed it, as if there were cue cards with big block letters next to the cameraman.

"I was so scared," I said, "but he was so brave."

Even though I was talking about Miguel, I started thinking about my

father. I imagined the camera pixelating my image, transporting it through thousands of miles of wires. I wondered if it'd ever reach him.

"I didn't think he was going to die," I heard myself say. "I didn't believe it."

The knot in my throat finally made itself known. And by the time my mother walked up to us, ready to pull me away and into to the car, the reporter was down on one knee, bringing my crying face into her shoulder with one hand and holding the microphone in front of us with the other.

TO MY HUSBAND'S OLD GIRLFRIEND WHOSE PHOTOGRAPH I SLIDE INTO AN ALBUM

LANDON HOULE

You're not as pretty as I thought you'd be.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not here to insult. I'm just here to tell the truth, and the truth is your ugliness is a matter of my own insecurities more than your shortcomings. See, I thought I'd seen you, there in the mirror, that Valentine's Day I tried to wear a teddy. Jesus, the rolls and the folds and the creases. That cheap lace rubbed and scratched and when I practiced being seductive, it looked more like a one-person wave from one hand to the other. And I could have sworn you were there, could have sworn you were behind me, long and beautiful. Naked.

It was you who gave me the idea. You who told me to just take it off. Didn't I feel sexier without it? And of course I did. Of course I could imagine a better body when clothes weren't there to tell me otherwise. *See?* you said, right as a mother. No, right as an older, cooler girlfriend. Not my husband's but mine. You were all mine.

I think you should know he doesn't call you a girlfriend. He says instead that you were a sister of a guy he used to know. Don't misunderstand. I'm not here to cause trouble.

In the photograph, you're in your pajamas. I never imagined you as a woman who wore pajamas. An imported silk robe maybe, but not those worn-out pants. Not that thermal top. There you are, though, and your long, long hair—I got that right, at least—is in braids, and he tells me they made you tie something in them. *Bells?* he says, but he really can't remember. Whatever it was, they got you to walk around, twirling your hair, and

this is what you're doing in the picture, in your pajamas, your eyes half-closed and drunk from the camera's flash.

They shouldn't have treated you this way, like a dog doing tricks, playing at its own death.

My husband probably took this picture, but I wish it had been me. I wish I was the one behind the camera. I wouldn't have made you do anything. I would have warned you. I would have made sure your eyes were open, and if it were me doing the talking, I would say exactly who you were. I wouldn't spare his feelings. I wouldn't lie about how much I loved you.

SELF-PORTRAIT IN ACCIDENT, MARYLAND

ROCHELLE HURT

Nothing can be left to luck for us.
In a town like this, one only slips
 into love as into a noose—my mother's
breakneck marriages warned me. Fools,
 we built a home here anyway,
settling on the shifting dunes of youth.
 Nightly, the river sneaks from its bed
just to crawl beneath our sheets
 and touch us like a tender drunk.
Black water cradles our porcelain heads.
 Every morning we walk a tightrope
from the bedroom to the kitchen,
 each year the twine a little thinner.
Over burnt waffles, we weep
 into the electrical outlets, driven
in our fear of loneliness to kiss
 the wall's slicked socket-lips.
In our worst storms, instinct points
 our fingers like weathervanes
toward lightning. Some evenings,
 our bones break in place
of bread at the dinner table.
 The dunes around us collapse

in the greedy hands of the river.

We reconsider each other.

Our voices rise as the sky falls

and rights itself all night

in the frame of our picture window.

How can we leave if the world

outside is just a shoddy cardboard prop?

My mother's old foible

becomes a fable when I find a lesson

in the slack of the softest rope,

our love a rough tongue at my neck

and you like a stool beneath me:

it's not an accident—this perpetual itch

in my clumsy foot to kick.

REVERSE VOYAGE

MAJOR JACKSON

1

My midway journey, my emancipated eyes
like runaways, exposed, and the row homes stacked again,
colorless, drab LEGO blocks, I come
back to unlit alleys, avenues in sheathes of grit
and utility wires like veins stitched to power supplies
buzzing above a different kind of hum.
Just when my seeing was rectifying into
something faultless, extraordinary as a cat's refuge
beneath a parked car, they change the silence
into something oblique, hidden deep inside
the ventricle caves of a city's chambers, charred:
nail salons, check cashing stores, pawn shops.
How characteristic of them to greet me though,
the old folk, in such a way: magisterial.

2

The corner store with its faded graffiti lines,
finally whitewashed, nearly expunged,
doubtless like its author save for his palimpsest,

and yet, behind a first floor window, a young boy bends
over an old encyclopedia, a remarkable script,
a genuine compendium that shows his people's Africa
like a sculpted mask for tourists in an open-market
which he slowly turns contemplating skin,
the color of almonds, and other such beauties.

3

Human strength never before seen kept those
mystical relations alive until they touched themselves
again, revived albeit injured, but no less rich.
Even here, all's remixed. In Fairmount Park,
a posse plays the same din, but with fresher strains
of freedom. This shall never pass. That is the message,
always, of its august chorus lines, a rangy dignity,
the message, too, of what one refuses to never forget
about this place: a grandmother, a domestic worker,
Mrs. Pearl thirty years boarding SEPTA early mornings.
I think of her, clutching a tan purse, statelier than these lines.

4

So memory vacates oblivion—these connecting
columns of bricks, and wires, and me, its last deportee
which the blood forever sings no matter morning
finches and bluejays that skitter my sight in a valley
far away from these pigeons who hop and settle off electric
wires near street gutters to peck heads at one crumb
or another, where local inhabitants, too, study skies
with a certainty affixed to rooftops and flashing
underbelly green & red lights going elsewhere.

5

The city's skyscrapers tower over a retired janitor
and his wife, locked in a grid of streets and their
still-standing three story on a strip of mostly weed-laden lots,
like a tore up mouth, where their minds recall,
for sixty years, just where to lay a hand on a railing
& then the stairs that not long ago led up to you or me.
Return to us, say the white marbled steps, and boarded up
doorways, and the basement windows spilling
out debris and rusted springs—you've become all there is
to become: the mocking, blissful smile of an addict
who's half here, nods off on a stoop in a miniskirt,
understanding too well, the perpetual voyager, then suddenly
jolts up to greet a sparkling, lustful car slowing to a stop
while her daughter upstairs puts both hands under her chin
amused for years, watching an endless stream of images.

6

And always, I call a taxi or pack my rental,
and inaudibly say no, recalling the days
my eyes rarely veered away from a book,
even while walking, one day from elementary school
when a boy with dirty socks and face, lunged
a fist in my stomach like a question mark.
I was already awake, a surfeit of ambition struck:
to roam like decomposing clouds and roll deep,
reforming constantly and away, above
sooted, blackened streets, above sunlit ruins
and piles of crumbled rubble.
My eyes went elsewhere, open and determined.

That was childhood, something
that often ended in fear or a throwdown
in the dusty streets and its shadows,
and now find myself pulsing
between two mountain ranges,
passing through maple, beech, and tamarack,
as cold winds pour through
branches, knocking lines
of snow into cloud bursts of sparkle
in late winter morning light.

FISH TALE

M. P. JONES IV

My brother died with a trunk full of fish

and beer bottles crashing together—
in the Mother's Day darkness—

I am endlessly returning

as if to a worn photograph,
a lure drifting along the lake's rim
in Vermont,
a place I've never seen, and so

can only imagine some dim shore growing certain
in torn threads of afternoon light.

I go back to those improbable stories

he would tell, eyes alight with the consuming
fire of beer and bourbon,

like the one where he is driving through the desert
all night,
just driving through the sand, until finally he stops
at noon—perhaps in Arizona,
perhaps nowhere at all—

on a waterless sea of solid glass,
supposedly the wake of some explosives test.

Walking over the burnt sand-lake's surface, breaking apart
frozen waves and currents
beneath his boots,
crumbling like a hopeless metaphor for certainty.

I listen as he wavers—wanting only to fix some narrative
over the near end—
recounting as his slurring sways,
circling to the moment just before the hooks are set,

before the surface quivers,
the bottles break,
and everything is finished.

And everything *is* finished:
the bottles break
before the surface quivers,

circling to the moment just before the hooks are set,
recounting as his slurring sways

over the near end,

I listen as he wavers, wanting only to fix some narrative.

Crumbling. Like some hopeless metaphor for certainty,
beneath his boots,
frozen waves and currents.

Walking over the burnt sand-lake's surface, breaking apart—
supposedly the wake of some explosives test—

on a waterless sea of solid glass.
Perhaps nowhere at all

at noon, perhaps in Arizona,
just driving through the sand, until finally he stops
all night.

Like the one where he is driving through the desert
fire of beer and bourbon.

He would tell, eyes alight with the consuming.

I go back to those improbable stories
in torn threads of afternoon light,

can only imagine some dim shore growing certain—
a place I've never seen—and so,

in Vermont,
a lure drifting along the lake's rim
as if to a worn photograph—
I am endlessly returning

in the Mother's Day darkness
and beer bottles crashing together.

My brother died with a trunk full of fish.

TO THE LIQUOR STORE WITH HAYDEN CARRUTH

M. P. JONES IV

Even at your age, you are as thirsty
as Li Po at sunset, picturing endless herons
with the lake's *orange tongues leaping in the corner,*

so we make way, with *the winter of illness ending,*
down main street,
suffering through what was left

of that pitiful hangover, the dreadful *crescent tipped beyond*
the dark tree-burst of morning. The Oldsmobile

that burns oil and rocks violently
like a *cat that starts to throw up,*
back and forth, *convulsing and gagging—*

you think *Chicago was bleak, God knows,*
but sweet, well, what is this cow town,
anonymous as its barren azaleas,
before the students crawl out from beneath
their drowsy squalor? Hayden, you wince
a devil grin as we take the corner sharply—
past where *Omar and Tu Fu were drinking vodka*

*and warm beer—eyes glowing hellfire, you struggle
like Ahab with the broken heater's knob.*

Coins drip from your pockets like coils of wire, the bloom
of *that empty treble roll* unfurling on the seasick floorboard
as you growl *I can afford awful. But, at least I can
afford it* and mumble something about
the five stages of death as we slide into the parking space.

Italicized words are from Carruth's Scrambled Eggs & Whiskey.

SWAILING

DEVIN LATHAM

The poets tell me I'm in fire season. I build fires in the night, at daybreak, at noon. I like to sweat. I'd sweat out every ounce of liquid in my body given the chance. I've got fire in my thighs, in my mouth, in my belly. I lie on my back, on my knees, on my face and burn until I'm put out. I'd burn myself up if I could.

Fifty acres of woods and a long overgrown farm sat in Bibb County, Alabama with no company but a train that ran by and a great-grandson who piddled around for answers. Jim called this land the Old Place.

The brush pile sat at the edge of a clearing beside the old house Jim's great-grandparents had lived in. The house leaned forward like it'd been waiting on somebody to

come home too long. The front door rested swung open against the outside wood wall. Most of the windowpanes were broken, but the porch still stood and wrapped around the old house.

I wanted to burn the brush pile. Adding to it, I drug saplings from under the surrounding woods while Jim shouldered the fallen trunks of sweetgums and pines. We made the pile twenty feet tall and forty feet around. There was an old mattress halfway down buried beneath branches—the floral fabric peaked through. Someone had dumped it by the gate. I wanted to burn it, too.

Jim poured diesel around the edges to make it all catch. He threw in a lit chunk of kindling, and the dry wood caught with a quick roar, burning tall and toxic.

Between the wall of summer
and the wall of the fire, sweat
rolled down both sides of my body.
I watched sweat run down his
red-brown face off the tip of his
nose into his black beard down the
length of his neck to soak into his
shirt. I wanted to taste his sweat,
to run my tongue down his salty
stomach.

That night, we watched
from his campsite as the brush
pile smoldered to scattered ash,
smoking under a clear night half
moon.

Fire is a chemical process
dependent on oxygen and energy.
When heat cannot release faster
than it is created, fire catches. This
is combustion.

Fire's burning is called
oxidation. The oxygen atoms
combine with hydrogen and carbon
atoms in the atmosphere, exhaling
water vapor, carbon dioxide, and
fuel particles. This is smoke.

Wood burns fast; therefore,
energy is released fast. This is heat.

Jim taught me how to find kindling,
the heartwood of resinous pines—
graying chunks of knotted wood
hidden under leaves and rotted

stumps. Daddy broke the jagged
wood in half, showing me the
orange, oily center. Jim taught me
how to snap the kindling, how to
smell the sweet pine middle, how to
place the lit pine within the deep,
dry branches to start a fire.

Matter is neither created nor
destroyed, but rearranged.

Growing up in our half-finished
log cabin, we never had central
heat and air. During the Alabama
summers, our air conditioning was
provided by window units scattered
throughout the house. I had one
in my bedroom above where I
slept. Mine was old so it repeatedly
froze up and thawed out, dripping
water on my head. Momma put
peach filters in the great room
unit and vanilla filters in the one
in the kitchen. Daddy said he liked
window units better so I decided I
did, too.

During the winter, our heat
was a wood-burning stove that sat
in the back of the kitchen. The
gray, metal rectangle connected to
a wall with a thick black pipe where
the smoke was exhausted. Daddy
said to never touch the pipe. But
once, I accidentally brushed my

thigh against the pipe and jerked back, watching the skin redden and pucker to a blister.

Daddy yanked the stove door open to shove oak logs inside. Four or five logs could fit at once. The house usually fogged over, smoke clouds clinging to the ceiling. The alarms took turns going off, and one of us kids would grab a kitchen table chair and a potholder. The alarm stopped and started again until Momma opened the back door. Daddy opened the kitchen and living room windows, letting the smoke seep out of the house. Momma said this defeated the purpose and this was why normal people had central heat and air.

We all smelled like smoke—our clothes, our hair, our beds. At 111 degrees, our skin feels pain. At 118 degrees, we receive a first-degree burn. At 131, second, and at 140, the skin becomes numb. At 162 degrees, skin is instantly destroyed.

The following Christmas, five of us sat around Jim's campfire at varying distances, depending on how thick our layers were. The train track ran parallel to the property line of his campsite. When we were quiet,

we could hear cars drive by on the road out past the gate.

Jim invited a few friends he went to graduate school with to go camping at the Old Place. One of Jim's friends was much closer to my age. His name was Michael, and he was tall with sweet eyes.

It fell below freezing after sundown, and the men built a massive fire in the pit. They piled up oak logs, then oak stumps, building the fire until it was too hot to sit close to. We all scooted our chairs back, trying not to spill our coffee mugs of whiskey. The stump's burning roar muddled the passing train's stumble to a metal clink. Train lights threw shadows through the woods toward us.

Jim wouldn't come near me that night. He wanted it to seem like he was sad about his divorce, like we were just friends. Tired of following him around the big fire, I sat back down in a plastic lawn chair as close to the fire as I could stand. I wanted to feel the heat in my bones; I wanted to be hot.

I watched his friend Michael across the pit. He sat on a concrete bench that happened to be in the shape of Alabama, watching the fire he helped build. He resembled a

bear with wavy hair, a thick beard, and broad, round shoulders. I wondered what it would be like to be with someone young like me.

Late into the night with the chill coating my back and the whiskey in my head, I stared into the fire's heart—the embers glowed orange under the flames—imagining what it would be to touch the pulsing center, to step into the heart of the fire, to feel that necessary energy.

"What would happen if I walked into the middle of that fire?" I interrupted them. They all agreed I would die. I knew I would die. I wanted to know how fast.

During the summers, Daddy built bonfires down by the pond. Momma and Daddy made me drag up limbs from behind the house that were knocked down by the year's storms. My brother and sister were too young to work, so they played in the grass. Daddy stacked all the limbs and branches into a burnable pile.

He poured gasoline over the top of the brush pile. Daddy told us all to step back, and I ran straight to the pond, waiting by the water. He lit a paper match and Momma

told him to be careful. We all watched him throw the match into the gasoline soaked wood.

As soon as the lit match hit the wood, the gasoline combusted with a loud, strong exhale. The heat was instant. I made my way up the hill, approaching the fire's heat.

Daddy got fold-out chairs to sit in and beers for him and Momma. I was too young to know how good a beer was once the sky got dark and sleep was hard to find. They had each other, but they usually didn't sleep in the same bed.

My baby sister sat in my lap, and I propped my cheek on her head. Our faces reflected the red glow as we memorized the flames.

Dark sank over our heads, and the branches and limbs crackled to ash. These were the special nights Momma and Daddy got along and lightening bugs joined us by the fire.

A week before the camping trip, Jim and I went to the Old Place to straighten up the campsite. Jim wanted to use his blower to blow the leaves in front of the wood stack.

"It's outside. There's supposed to be leaves on the ground. Are you gonna sweep the dirt, too?" I

thought everything he wanted to do that day was stupid. I felt an anger toward him that I couldn't get rid of.

"No, I just want to clear this area 'cause we're gonna chop wood over here, and I want it to look nice."

We cleared Quikrete bags off the industrial tables so we'd be able to set out our food, whiskey, and coffee. We straightened up the lumber. Over the summer, he started building a cabin. The four corners stood with boards around the base. All summer we'd come out here to build, bushhog, and fuck because we couldn't be seen in town. But he stopped working on it after his wife filed for divorce and I moved for graduate school.

"I want to move these over to the firewood." He pointed to the segments of an oak tree we had stacked the summer before and then pointed to the firewood across the camp where he had just blown.

"Why?" I looked at him like he was stupid.

"Because I want them over there. If we decide to split them for the fire, it'll be a lot easier to move them now than in the dark when we're all out here." He was frustrated with me. I wanted him

to get angry. I was angry. I'd been angry at him for so long, and it was like he was oblivious, like there wasn't enough space for me to feel things while he had so many things to feel.

"If you don't want to work, if you think everything I'm doing is stupid, then why don't you leave, why don't you go back to your uncle's house or go to Starbucks and write on your laptop so I can actually get some work done." And like that he combusted, all the stress from his divorce, from not having any money, from me being ten hours away, ignited. I was holding the handles of the wheelbarrow, and he swung his right hand back and hit the wheelbarrow out of my hands. It clanked against a root at my feet. He yelled while stomping around the camp throwing what he could, knocking down pieces of a shed propped up against a pine. He screamed and he paced and he kept screaming.

I picked up the wheelbarrow and started doing my own work. He tried to knock the wheelbarrow over again and told me to leave, but I ignored him and kept working. We didn't talk for about an hour.

Later, I apologized for acting like a “shithead,” and he apologized for getting mad. Actually, I don’t remember if he apologized for getting mad, but it sounds nice. Rather, I think he talked about my young age and bad attitude and about all his stress that I knew so well. I felt like I was getting a divorce, too.

I told him to burn the pieces to the shed that used to sit behind his old house before the divorce. They were already lying on the ground from when he knocked them over. He didn’t want to before the yelling, but afterwards, after we made up inside the frame of the cabin, he let me throw the shed walls on the fire. We left before dark, and I know he watched the wood burn in his rearview mirror.

Pyromania: the chronic need to start fires.

Pyrophobia: the hatred and irrational fear of fire.

Pyrophilia: the strong sexual desire to watch fires.

I sat on a broken chunk of aggregate concrete somebody had dumped in a heap at the Old Place. Jim and a friend had carried each

chunk up to his camp and stacked the fire pit.

It was summer, I hadn’t left for school yet, and Jim was still married. The cicadas were on for the night. The train rushed by every hour—two long lights slipping between pines and hardwoods. I wondered how many fires the train saw like ours along the tracks of Alabama.

The fire burned in the pit, but the dark sat around us like walls. I could barely make out Jim’s face as he leaned back in the lawn chair propped on a platform that used to be a ramp to a shed behind his house back before he cheated on his wife, back when they still had a good marriage, when they were still trying, back before he drank Jack Daniels every night, before the tornado came through Birmingham and tore the shed down.

In the field below the campsite, the tin roof of the old house held the white stain of the moon. The moon rose up above the tree line, tracking across the night sky. The farther the moon traveled the sooner we had to leave.

I looked back at the house, thinking of the time I had lain on the dusty front porch with my head

on my arms, gazing down the length of the sagging pinewood. I had imagined babies—brown, happy babies—our babies—stumble around the corner of the porch toward me.

“I want to live out here forever,” I told Jim across the fire.

I stood up from the cement circle and went to him. I knelt before him on the old shed ramp and put my head in his lap, smelling his jeans, rubbing my face against the worn denim.

“Don’t say it unless you mean it,” he told me as he rubbed the back of my neck.

He smelled like sweat and cigarettes. I pulled his jeans down to the tops of his boots. He rolled down my pants and turned me around, facing the fire, bringing me onto his thighs. He took off my shirt, and the orange glow reflected off my white skin. His hands looked nearly black against my breast. A lightless train rumbled by, covering the sound of our breathing.

We moved to the leaves of the forest floor. On our knees, my elbows and hands sank into the cool dirt, and I felt real and necessary.

fire breathers, fire eaters, ring of

fire, lake of fire, fiery pits of Hell, fire and brimstone, getting fired, Hellfire!, Shitfire!, spitfire, fired up, fire power, firearms, gunfire, firing squad, fireworks, fire hazard, ceasefire, fireball, Chicago fire, death by fire, baptism by fire, fire pit, fireplace, firebrand, light a fire under my ass, fireman, fire truck, fire alarm, firestorm, lightening fire, brush fire, wild fire, forest fire, coal fire, wood fire, Frost’s fire, bonfire, campfire, fire one up, fireflies, friendly fire, fire watcher, fire sex, fire cleanse, candle fire, London’s fire, fire bellied road, fire bird, fire clan, firewalkers, fire totem, fire in the sky, fire in my thighs, fire nights, fire mornings, fire smoke, fire swell, fire squelch, fire scream, fire please, fire oh my god, fire fall

Later that Christmas camping night, Jim and I crawled into his small tent. I was glad to be close to him, and he held me against him, and then he kissed me. But this was some kind of affirmation that I wasn’t sure about, that I had needed earlier. I never wanted to be Jim’s secret. I thought about Michael in the tent next to ours and wondered if he heard us and what he thought about us together, me

being so much younger than Jim and Jim being so recently divorced.

The next morning at 5:00 a.m., I was colder than I've ever been. It was well below freezing, and my face ached. I couldn't sleep anymore because I had to pee.

Jim lay next to me, but he was zipped away asleep in his sleeping bag. I found my boots and pulled them on, wishing I'd never taken them off.

Outside, it was black. It might as well have been night. This wasn't morning. I walked into the very edge of the woods because no one else was awake, and it's true everything looks different in the dark. I pulled my pants down and sat back gripping the small pine's trunk through my gloves.

Our fire from the night before was only dark embers and ash. I found the hoe we had used as a rake and poker, stoking the embers awake. I pushed and pushed at the ashes until a small flame popped up. I ran to the woodpile and gathered up a few logs. I stacked the wood over the flame, waiting for fire to catch. The logs started to crackle. I carried more wood. When Jim woke up, I knew he would be proud of me; I just wanted him to

be proud of me.

When a human spontaneously combusts into flames, the torso and head char beyond recognition while the legs and arms remain unharmed. The body burns like an inside-out candle, the skin being the wick and the insides being the wax.

To combust a body needs two things: a lot of heat and a flammable substance. Normally, the human body contains neither.

One theory to human combustion is that methane builds up in the intestines and is ignited by enzymes. Another theory is the build-up of static inside the body, and another is that combustion occurs from an external geomagnetic force exerted on the body.

Most scientists don't believe in human combustion. I guess I can believe in human combustion since I'm not a scientist, but I'm having a hard time of believing in things these days.

When I was sixteen, I read a question-and-answer book a man had with God. Throughout the book, the author asked God questions, and God answered in a

different font.

One question the man asked was how to find God when it felt like God was unreachable and silent. God said to meditate and one way to do that was by staring at a candle flame. So I sat on a thin rug on my bedroom floor and stared at a Yankee vanilla flame. My bedroom was dark except my Christmas lights strung around the ceiling. It wasn't Christmas. I just liked the light's red glow. I stared for as long as I could without feeling stupid, waiting and watching the flame shake with each of my breaths. But God never spoke, and I wore the flame's imprint on the back of my eyelids for the rest of the night.

When a candle is lit, the wax travels to the top of the wick, and it vaporizes. The heated vapor oxidizes which creates more oxidizing vapor, making the fire hotter, building and sustaining the fire upon itself.

When Jim and I met, he was married, but not happily of course. However, still dutifully in the most practical and social ways. When his wife got home, he needed to be home or at least be on his way home, which gave us an hour gap

between when I got off work to when she got off work.

Jim would meet me at my apartment. I'd walk in, dump my purse, lunch Tupperware, and books on the kitchen counter, and walk to my bedroom where I knew he was. And after about an hour, he'd get dressed.

He'd walk away from the bed across the wood floor to the front door, turn the loose knob, remember to unlock the deadbolt, turn the knob again, and open the door. Then he might walk back across the living room to kiss me as I sat on the corner of my bed where I could see through the living room to the door. Part of me wanted to push him out the door to get the leaving part over with, tell him that walking back and forth didn't make it any better. And another part of me wanted to plaster my body to his to prevent him from ever leaving again. I knew the leaving was hard for him too, but it was hard to feel bad for him because he was the one doing all the leaving.

Then, he might say something like "he was doing the best he could," and I never did say anything in response to that except

something stupid like “I love you.” Once the door shut behind him, he might open it back again to say “I love you” one more time, but that was usually it. At first, the leaving was easy, but then something happened, or maybe it was that the leaving kept happening. Suddenly, it all looked hopeless, that I would live my life in that one hour.

I sat on my bed raw and sticky, listening to his steps down the carpeted stairs to the first floor, to the slam of the wrought iron door that led outside. This was when I knew he was gone, but I’d still wait to hear the roar of his truck pass below my window to the street. My apartment and I would sit for a strange and silent moment not quite sure what to think or how to feel. At first, I felt nothing—neither happy nor sad, but then the sun would go down. I’d get up and go to the bathroom and pour a glass of wine.

I’d light candles around the living room and drink more wine. I told myself the candles made things better, made my apartment better after he left. After finishing the bottle, I’d study the wave and ebb of each flame like I was waiting on God to say something.

Once fire burns down to the nerves, the feeling—the pain—subsides and vanishes. When skin is severely burned, the body directs all fluid to the afflicted area. The damaged skin and vessels are unable to retain the fluid. Therefore, the body’s fluid leaks out, leading to shock, and then, to death.

Your palm is 1% of your body. If 25% or more of your body is severely burned, this fluid shift will begin.

I became sort-of friends with a woman, Anna, Jim had slept with many years before. That fact didn’t seem to hinder our friendship, being more like something we had in common.

Over Christmas break, Anna and I decided to meet at a favorite bar in Birmingham. She drank white wine, and I drank Long Islands because I’ve always been amazed at how they can make all that alcohol taste so good and how drunk all that alcohol can make me. Across from one another at a small, round table, we both texted Jim, begging him to join us. He was busy packing for the camping trip the next day. I invited her to camp too,

knowing that she wouldn't.

Later, Jim showed up and drank Jack and Coke while I got drunker than I realized and continued to drink more. Anna and I sat moved to one side of the table while Jim sat on the other. She held my hand, and I sat close to her, practically in her lap. I wasn't attracted to her, but we had an intimacy that we automatically shared through Jim. We both knew what his dick felt like in our mouths. We both knew how he smelled. We both loved him, and in that way, we shared a love that bled over onto one another whether we wanted it to or not. She held my hand hard and insistent, rubbing the back of it, daring me to forget she was there. This was under the table and not for Jim's entertainment like the rest of it seemed to be. I felt comforted by her slender, cold hands and her floral smell.

I didn't want sex. I wanted comfort.

An hour later, we went to her house to see her cats and new furniture. My stomach started to hurt. I walked outside quietly and puked under a tree. Jim didn't want to have sex with her. I didn't want

to have sex with her. But here we were, her leading him around her house making God knows what kind of innuendos while I sat under her tree next to my vomit that I was too drunk to even smell.

Jim came out and told me to get in his truck. I remember flashes of sitting in Jim's passenger seat huddled over, vomiting into my own jeaned thigh, dry heaving as he drove me to my uncle's house where I was staying.

Crying and mumbling, I crashed through my uncle's house, who spends most of his time past four o'clock drunk.

"What's wrong? Are you hurt?" he asked me. I held my stomach, and he bathed me and washed my blue jeans. He's a kind man, and I believe he was glad to finally not be the one who needed cleaning up.

The next morning, Jim told me I acted like a child and one of these days I'd learn and I guzzled it down like water and he had a lot of work in preparation for the camping trip and he shouldn't have come out last night and there was puke in his truck and this wasn't the first time I'd done that. It was the third time I puked in his truck.

The other times were near the end of summer when I'd drink the leaving away sometimes overdoing it and puking before he was even gone.

I wanted to tell him it was his fault that he made me drink like that, but he didn't make me drink anymore than he made me do anything else. That Christmas, he asked me to lie down in the backseat of his truck when we drove by his old house and his ex wife was home, he asked me to hide in his closet when someone came to visit. And I hid. I needed self-respect and was waiting on him to find it for me like a Daddy would.

More than 100,000 wildfires clear four to five million U.S. acres a year. Wildfires can travel at fourteen miles per hour, consuming trees, animals, homes, towns, people.

Wildfires are difficult to control. Therefore, we suppress them and prevent them. But wildfires are necessary to restore nutrients to soil for seedlings, to thin crowded forests and overgrowth. Wildfires remove diseased plants and harmful insects.

Wildfires cleanse the land.

Daddy was a forester and it was his job to manage his clients' land. He started, controlled, and put out pine plantation burns. These burns were supposed to mimic the natural fires that would push through forests. I could always tell when he'd burned all day because he came home, his skin covered in a layer of soot, and his boots stained black. Daddy said the wind had to be just right or the fire wouldn't travel enough or worse, the fire would travel too fast.

When we drove past the plantations because it was always me and Daddy together, I could smell the burnt resinous pinewood before I saw the blackened trunks and ashed, clean gaps.

When I was young and I didn't know, I asked Daddy, "Does the fire kill the trees?" He answered that pines needed fire, that the strong pines would survive, that they needed room to grow.

After everyone else left the camping trip, I sat on the dirt below Jim and held his thighs, saying, "I want to be a better woman for you."

He said he wanted to believe me, but people say a lot of things

they don't mean or things they want to mean. I swore I meant it.

But what I really meant was that I just wanted to be better. I didn't want to be angry and drunk all the time. Sometimes, I hated him for leaving me, for being so sad about his divorce, for being his secret. I hated myself for letting him.

I picked up a stick and sifted through the ashes, trying to define what I was to Jim, what he was to me. There were two broken glass bottles. I looked for the beer cans, plastic forks, and foil we'd all thrown in the fire, but the pieces of melted glass were the only thing that hadn't burnt down to ash, the only thing left to identify.

The feed sack burn pile sat right off the gravel drive by the barn. Daddy and I burned the paper sacks every evening after feeding time year-round, but when I think of the gray ash circle surrounded by yellow grass, I think of summer. We stacked feed sacks that smelled like molasses and alfalfa inside the circle.

Daddy placed a match under the sacks, and he and I watched the paper burn. Paper sacks burn tall and quick.

The goats picked over their

food with happy, full bellies while the fat sun dropped behind the trees. The bats came out in dark circles above the barn, followed by the lightening bugs. When the sunsets were exceptional and the sacks were ashes, Daddy and I walked up to the back porch to watch the last sun slip through the pines. He always asked Momma to come look, but she wouldn't. I'm not sure if he asked to be nice or because he really did want her to stand by him, stand in my spot like she should have. She wasn't my real mother. Daddy married her when I was six. Pink and orange stretched and spilled behind the backyard pines. I got used to standing next to Daddy, but many years later I'd leave home and wouldn't have a place anymore. It hurt like a breakup. Jim filled some of that space for me, and we both knew it, but it came like a package. It wasn't something I could extract. It was all melted together, pooled like cooled wax. The air held smoke while the sun set like it does every evening, like the way we can't help but keep on.

BLOOD TRAIL

**KEITH
LESMEISTER**

They stood at the edge of the forest, where it opened onto a strip of prairie grass. Just beyond the grass was a terraced cornfield, working its way upward to a gravel road about a quarter mile away.

The snow had started around noon. Wet, heavy flakes. Eli raised his shotgun and brought the butt firmly against his shoulder. He rested his cheek against the walnut stock and looked into the scope. "I can't make out any snowflakes," he said, lowering and raising his gun, trying to locate the flakes, first against the sky, and then the trees. "I can't dial in."

"You obviously need some work with that scope," his dad said. "The way you botched that shot."

It had been a long shot, around a hundred yards, and the only reason he'd taken it was because his dad could see the deer. Had he missed, Eli would not have cared, and they wouldn't be in the position of having to track a wounded animal.

The deer was, according to his dad, "a big mama doe, with tons of good meat on her." She'd walked the edge of the tree line before stopping, turning broadside, and then walking toward the cornfield. Two smaller deer had lagged behind. He wouldn't have had a closer shot so, sitting against a tree, he had rested the slug-gun on his knee, drawn in a deep breath, found the crosshairs in his scope, and set his sight on the deer's front quarters—heart and lung area. He followed the deer with the crosshairs: a fat, old deer, whose coat had turned a thick, rough winter brown. He'd let half his breath out, relaxed his arms, and squeezed the trigger. Just as his father

had taught him while using a pellet gun. He couldn't shoot without hearing his dad's words: "Squeeze the trigger. Don't pull, squeeze."

Blood had gushed at the initial area of contact. "Dark blood," his dad said. "Probably a brisket shot." His dad looked at him. "Not good for tracking. Won't be a ton of blood."

Now they would have to wait, let the deer run and settle in, and then start tracking.

"General rule," his dad said, "is an hour."

"I don't think we need to wait that long," Eli said.

His dad shook his head. "You didn't get a good shot. She took off pretty hard after you fired. She'll need a while to stiffen up."

They stood there for another minute, looking around, the snow collecting on their blaze orange vests and stocking caps. "Let's sit for a while," his dad said. "See if another one strolls through."

It was early December, the temperature just below freezing. The sky, a soft gray. They sat on either side of an oak tree. Eli watched squirrels scurry around in the newly settled snow, gathering and gnawing on nuts. The trees, bare. Their uppermost branches knuckling together in the breeze, creaking.

After a while, Eli dozed off, his shotgun resting on his legs. He woke up to the turn of his dad's thermos cap. His dad poured a cup of coffee, his back still resting against the tree, still scanning for movement in the woods. "I'll take some if you have more," Eli whispered. The smell of the coffee created a longing for warmth and home. Eli had always liked the idea of hunting more than the hunting itself. The coffee served as a reminder of the lazy morning he'd wanted. He didn't want to be out here. And with every passing hour he had to remind himself that their hunting excursion happened one weekend a year.

Eli stood while his father poured another cup. "Now don't get too ambitious," his dad said. "We'll slow-hunt for a while, walk nice and easy, see if we can nab another deer."

"We'll be tracking on someone else's property," Eli said. "We're supposed to unload our guns if we do that."

"Don't be an asshole," his dad said. "You see any houses? No one'll notice."

"They'll hear us if you shoot."

"Or if *you* shoot."

"I'm not shooting," Eli said. "I already have a deer."

"You don't have shit," his dad said. "Your goddamn deer is wounded."

His dad handed him a cup of coffee.

"What about the snow?" Eli said, after a sip.

"What about it?" his dad said.

"It'll be tough to track."

"The blood will show through," his dad said. "And the snow won't collect as well in the woods. That deer's bedded in there somewhere."

At first the tracking was easy. The deer had been on a dead sprint before ducking into the woods and disappearing into a steep ravine. Eli and his dad walked up to the barbed wire fence. He realized, then, that he'd shot it on someone else's property. Why didn't he notice this at the time he shot? The distance must've thrown him off. If his dad noticed this, he didn't say anything.

They followed small drops of blood to the edge of the forest where the deer had disappeared, eraser-sized droplets every few feet. The woods on this property were dense. Mostly buckthorn and briar patches that caught against their Carhartt pants, sometimes going right through.

While Eli kept his shotgun slung over his shoulder, his dad kept his in ready position: left hand on the forestock, right hand on the handle, finger on the trigger. His dad's was a semi-automatic slug gun. Black composite with open sights. He didn't have a rifled barrel like Eli's, but what he lost in accuracy, he gained in the number of shots—five total.

Eli had bought his single-shot gun because the saleswoman owned the same one and he thought this might impress her. But when he went to ask her out after making the purchase, she hemmed and hawed, and said, it's not a good time. Still, Eli liked the distance and accuracy, and the scope. Up until today, all the deer he'd shot had dropped upon impact. "I get neck

shots," Eli had bragged to his friends. "They crumple and fold on the spot." And while this was sometimes true, he was never really proud of these confessions. It was just something he said while giving away venison neatly wrapped in white freezer paper, permanent marker scribbled on the outside to indicate the cut of meat. He could never eat the deer. Not after having shot it, and watching it writhe, its dying legs rustling up leaves or snow, its back buckling before the tongue goes limp, slipping out of its mouth. After that, Eli couldn't bear the thought of forking the flesh into his mouth.

Halfway down the ravine, five deer spooked and ran up the other side. Eli's dad shot three times. The report left Eli's ears ringing. "Fuck," his dad said. "I didn't see them 'til it was too late. Too far of a shot."

Tracking another deer, especially this far from the truck, would only have complicated their situation, so he was glad his father had missed. The two kept walking down the slope, at an angle, occasionally holding onto saplings to keep their balance.

It was completely still at the bottom of the ravine. Eli pointed to oval-shaped areas of leaves and twigs that had not been exposed to the snow. "Here's where they were bedding down."

"Do you still have the trail?" his dad said. "Any blood?"

"Barely," Eli said. "But she couldn't have gone much farther."

"They usually take the easiest path when they're injured" his dad said. "I'd be surprised if she ran back up the hill."

Down here there was less underbrush. There were more fallen trees, but this wasn't as bad as wading through thorn bushes. Eli trudged along next to his father who was still hunting, searching ahead, scanning for any movement. After about a half-mile, the blood had trickled to a small drop every ten feet or so.

His dad had been right. The deer hadn't moved uphill. She'd stayed on the bottom, bobbing and weaving her way through downed logs and brush. They paused for a minute while his dad tied his boot, then he reached into his vest pocket and pulled out a flask and a pack of Winstons. "Usually don't smoke or drink unless we're celebrating. But what the hell."

It would be getting dark soon and Eli wanted his dad to give up. Leave the deer. Come back and search in the morning. But even that idea wasn't

appealing. To hell with the deer.

But despite his father's hunting infringements—trespassing, loaded guns on someone else's land—his dad would not stop searching for the wounded animal. Eli accepted a pull from the flask.

"Bushmills," his dad said. "Damn good, huh?"

"Not bad."

They lit cigarettes. "We might not be giving it enough time to bed down and stiffen up," his dad said.

"It hasn't bedded down yet," Eli said. "We would've seen the spot."

"That's what I mean," his dad said.

"Maybe we should call it a day."

His father took another pull of whiskey. "And come back tomorrow?"

"I guess," Eli said.

"You guess?" his dad said. "I guess you don't want to help put food on the table. I guess someone else taught you how to hunt. You can't just give up." It was a comment his dad made every hunting season: "Putting food on the table." Eli knew it was all bullshit. They weren't starving. They were never starving. His dad just liked to hunt.

"Fine," Eli said. "Let's come back tomorrow."

"No," his dad said. "We're gonna keep going."

They pushed along, climbing over logs, backing their way through thorn bushes, and came to an area that was completely open. "I bet it's a food plot," his dad said. "Look there." He pointed to what looked like a tree house perched on long wooden poles supported with two-by-sixes hammered into an X. "Whoever built this deer-stand is pretty serious about their hunting." His dad reached to the ground and picked at brown plants. It was a mixture of beans, sorghum, corn, and alfalfa.

They moved away from the food plot, and came to a dry creek bed. As Eli stepped down into it his father raised his gun and fired a shot. And fired again.

"Shit," his dad said. "Fucking deer surprised me."

"You hit it?" Eli said.

"I don't know," his dad said. "It kept running."

Eli stomped up and out of the creek bed and started walking up the ravine. He wanted to show his frustration without getting into a yelling match, but halfway up the hill, he looked back to see about his dad and found him walking up the hill in the opposite direction. "Why the fuck did you take that shot?" Eli yelled. His voice echoed through the ravine. The volume surprised him.

"We're legal 'til a half-hour after sunset," his dad said.

"We're on someone else's property," Eli said. His dad didn't reply. Eli was about to start walking again but he thought he heard a faint noise. The wheeze of a small engine?

His dad kept walking.

"Dad," Eli said. "Do you hear that? I think there're four-wheelers up there. We need to climb out of here."

"They can come down here if they wanna talk," his dad said. "I'm tracking a deer."

"It's dark out," he said. "You're not tracking shit. And you just shot at a fucking deer on their property."

"That was your deer."

"You don't know that."

"They don't either," his dad said.

"You can explain that to whoever the hell is up there."

His dad walked up the hill, his shotgun flung over his shoulder, and he emerged from the woods and into a field where three men wearing camo jackets sat on four-wheelers. The men were focused on his father, not looking in his direction. Eli crouched behind a tree and took off his blaze-orange hat. One of the men, fully bearded, got off his four-wheeler and he started pointing at Eli's dad. His dad knew how to handle these situations. He'd been in the military: he could take orders; he could give orders.

His dad took off his hat and wiped his brow, never once looking over in Eli's direction. He could hear his dad say "my son" and "wounded deer" and "I'm really sorry." Pretty soon, after they'd talked for a bit more, he heard the men laughing.

The snow was coming, a bit faster now. It was dark but the snow

made it light enough to see.

His dad had rested his gun against an elm. He was standing tall, talking with his hands, explaining. When Eli thought the situation was under control, he came out from behind the tree. But instead of walking over to his dad's defense, he stood there for another minute, trying to figure out what he wanted to say.

PURITAN ROOTS

ROB MACDONALD

I've been suffering
from the Y2K bug
since the late '90s,
when suffering was
falling out of fashion
and all of the worst
walls had already
fallen. The world is
supposedly getting
smaller each year,
which explains all
of the low ceilings
in the downtown lofts.
This, in turn, explains
the rise in concussions,
which explains why
the bar isn't set
so high at the finest
academic institutions.
If our undergrads
are underprepared
and overindulgent,
that explains why

the stock futures are
falling faster each year,
like the prices of
memory sticks, which
it doesn't, unless you
study all night, unless
you connect events
to sensory cues
like the dumplings
that accompany
my fuzzy memory
of our first date,
Boston, so salty,
or all the blood
in the steaks of our
second date—who can
say how long ago we
met?—which makes me
wonder how long
we've been suffering.

FIRST SNOW AUBADE

**MICHELLE
MENTING**

Suncups pock the feeder now, and the birds
scratch seeds from flakes. Last night, we thought
we heard a loon lost in the middle of November.
How it must have fallen out of August and spent
the months of autumn concussed to finally wake
in this sudden preamble of winter. We were wrong,
of course. In this wind and forest of naked limbs,
words are sparse and the leaves rustle away any sense
in syntax. This is true: now is not the partnering time.
Why is it when the leaves color and break, we too
and we two part with our solitary migrations?
The temperature drops outside and inside, and further
inside the valves of our hearts solidify as if becoming
oak stems: so brittle each pump threatens to break
artery from organ. But this is wrong. We are healthy
but changing and mishear what we say, what goes on
around inside this house and outside above
the fingered limbs of oak and birch. We want to hear
a loon's tremolo, we want its weep and wail,
its calling to a mate. We want the longing to be real,
and a sound so sorrowful of yearning, it would weep
the frost far off the needles of pines and crack the rime
from the cattails in the wetlands (we once knew as mossy,

as warm and deep). We want, but even the effort of want
fails to surprise us into thawing. At dawn, on my walk
to feed the chickadees, I found two squirrels. Their heads
removed, and at the stumps of their necks, the reddest berries
of blood. And something stirred inside. Outside, beyond
the knotted fingers of forest, I saw a hawk lift off atop
the tallest pine. When its talons released the branch,
frost shattered and fell into flakes that waved and flashed
in the opening sun. With each flap of its wings
the sound wavered, created a false tremolo misheard
as wailing. And I was too slow to cover my ears
to block out that bird's call, its voice that spears
the morning fog, that marks the severance of warmth.

ROOMS ARE SUBJECT TO INSPECTION AT ANY GIVEN TIME

JOE NEAL

I stomped the snow off my boots and signed back in to the halfway house carrying two boxes of instant stuffing. The television in the common room showed the Thanksgiving parade to an empty couch. A sleepy looking Garfield was kept from floating away by a spread of cable tethers. Aside from the low chitchat of the parade commentators, the house was quiet. It would stay that way until the middle of the night. Someone on the floor above me had spent last night crying. I didn't knock on the ceiling. Without a baggie or bottle to fill the hole, there was little you could do sometimes but let a big wave crash. I watched the parade for a moment and went up to my room.

My pre-paid phone still had minutes, and I didn't like to use the one in the hallway. Some guys had nothing better to do than take note of your business. I dialed home, and the tone whirled in my ear. Outside, the snow had started to stick. An old woman across the street shoveled her sidewalk. Her head was wrapped in a clear plastic hood. I could hear the scrape of her shovel through the window.

"Yeah, hello. Who is this?"

"Hey, Dad," I said.

"Tim. Did something happen?"

"No, I'm fine. Is everyone coming over there today?"

"Yes, but—"

"I was thinking I could bring some stuffing."

"It's really not a good idea."

"I can make something else."

"You can stop that right now."

"I need you to see me like this. I don't even smoke."

"Is that right?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Sounds familiar is all."

"It's different this time."

"That too."

"If you really don't want me there."

"Timmy. How can I? How can I after that awful business?"

"My head is right."

"That awful business."

"Dad?"

"I'm here."

I pulled up the blinds and let them drop. The plastic tip on the end of the string snapped against the windowsill. Max, Dad's old beagle, barked on the other end of the phone.

"I have a job," I said.

"That right?"

"Just washing dishes, but it wears me out."

"Plenty of time to think, huh?"

"More than enough."

"That's good. Listen, the damn dog is going crazy." A motorized can opener throbbed in the background.

"You still there?" I asked.

"Not this time, okay? It's good you have a job. Maybe here soon."

"I understand."

"Alright, then."

"Alright."

A cube of butter melted in the boiling water. I added the powder from the pouches and doctored the mix with onions and mushrooms. While the stuffing was setting, I ironed my nice shirt and pants. After a splash of Brute, I signed out, carrying a casserole dish covered with aluminum foil. A couple guys were in the common room watching football, not talking to

each other.

The snow reflected in my headlight beams and blew across the state route like white sand. The heater was broken, and there was no radio. Answers had to be measured and honest. Eye contact should be made, but no jokes. Family members who have seen your mug shot don't want to hear about wild times. Positive and somber, that's what they expected. I took a breath and nodded, "Yes."

A doe jumped in front of the car. There was a single thump, and the doe went forward ten feet. The stuffing hit the dashboard and scattered on the floor.

The windshield wipers knocked left then right. There had been that instant of commotion, and now nothing. The engine idled in a low drum. Snowflakes tapped on the windows.

I parked on a patch of gravel and dialed the police with my pre-paid. White farm fields stretched out on either side of the road. My orange hazard lights flicked on and off. The doe was white from the streetlight then orange from the hazards. I watched for a while, and it occurred to me that a car might swerve around the doe and slide off the road.

The double yellow lines in the middle of the road were raised a little. I moved my dress shoe across to feel the difference between the road and the line. White specks landed in my eyes and melted. The longer hairs in the doe's fur lifted in the wind. It seemed the best way to drag it was by the hooves. I stepped closer and crushed a small pile of road salt.

The doe snapped its head up, and I fell back. I could see that its front legs were broken when it reached the side of the road. The back legs ran independently pushing the doe's front end across the snow. It stopped trying to run and bunched itself next to a tree. I got back in my car. There was just enough light to make out the doe's long neck and pointy ears batting away the falling snow.

A police cruiser parked behind me. The officer left the blue and red lights spinning. I stood next to him on the gravel. He held a large flashlight to his shoulder and shined it on the doe.

"You'd be surprised how much this happens," he said.

"That right?"

"It's hard to straight kill a deer with a car in a forty five zone. A truck or semi will do it."

He kept his eyes on me after I nodded.

"What's your name, son?" he asked, turning toward me.

"Tim Fairmont."

"From around here?"

"Close by."

"Close by, huh?"

"Yes, sir."

"Still using?"

"I'm sorry?"

"You don't remember me?"

"No, sir."

"But you know why I asked." The radio on his shoulder let out a call in a code of numbers.

"Yes, sir."

"That's good. I don't buy blackout stories. That's weakness. You're not weak, are you, boy?"

His leather belt crunched as he stepped closer. He pointed his flashlight to the hood of the cruiser.

"Sit, please."

The officer moved a penlight in front of my eyes. I could just see him back there in the dark, looking hard for any flicker.

Remember was all you did these days. The eight balls, the grocery store vodka, and the bouncer who wouldn't let you in the bar were all photographic. The blood and flesh on your keys you used to slash the bouncer were colorful and in focus. The hole wouldn't fill that night, and your animal crawled out.

You remembered the officer, his incredible strength and thick wrist in your throat as he pulled you away from the bouncer. You remembered how calm he was on the drive to the station, how he kept looking at you in the rearview mirror.

The officer clicked off the penlight and rested his hand on his gun. Snow was gathering on the plastic brim of his cap.

"He has a big scar, right here," the officer said and slid his gloved thumb from his cheekbone to his jaw. "He's retired police."

"I know."

"You know?"

"Yes, sir."

"You know what that means?"

"Yes, sir. I know all of it."

"All of it, huh?"

Another code of numbers came from his shoulder.

"Stay right here," he said and snapped open a leather strap on his holster.

The officer kept the flashlight at his shoulder and the gun to his side as he walked toward the doe. The doe pushed its front end to the edge of a field and stopped again. The beam from the flashlight traced up its hind legs and stopped on the head. The doe's black eyeball reflected the light for an instant, and then its head flipped back from the sledgehammer force of the bullet.

"Monroe to dispatch," the officer said into his shoulder.

"Go ahead," dispatch crackled.

"Get Pudge on the line. Tell him we need a pickup on Route 4, about two clicks before the overpass."

"Copy that."

I looked at the front of my car while the officer filled out paperwork. A clump of hairs stuck out of the grill. They were coarse and tough like the hairs of a broom. I threw them into the snow.

A diesel pickup truck with yellow flashing lights backed into the grass. Pudge looked like a professional wrestler. He talked to the officer, and then we all walked over to the doe. Pudge knelt down and put his hands on the doe's ribs.

"Probably too much blood in the muscle to use, but you want the meat? We can do it for you," Pudge said to me.

"Oh, no thank you."

He gathered the doe's legs, two in each hand, and hoisted it onto his truck bed. Its head bounced off the tailgate.

"Thanks, Pudge," the officer said.

"Y'all have a good night."

Pudge drove away. The officer handed me a piece of paper.

"You have a nice holiday, Tim Fairmont," he said and got back into the cruiser. The spinning lights went off. The officer turned onto the state route and sped away. I got in my car and watched the snow gather on the windshield. The flakes hit and slid down to the wipers making a little white pile. How sweet it would be right now: the quick snort, the drip, and a little vodka chaser to keep from getting too fast. You never lost the taste, the way it made you see the world, the harmony of all the functions coming together in the powder on the tip of a key. My pre-paid beeped. The battery was dying.

Relatives' cars lined the street and driveway. I pushed the casserole dish and spilled stuffing under the passenger seat. I stood in the street and tucked in my shirt. One of the doe's hairs had stuck to my coat. I swiped it to the ground and kicked snow on top.

Max barked when I came in the back door. I snapped my fingers and he put his nose on the carpet. Dad came back with a mouth full of food and a smile meant for someone else. He had put on weight in the stomach, but looked strong as ever. A glob of mashed potato was in the corner of his mouth.

"What did I tell you? Your cousins will be scared."

"Can I just say hi to everyone? I have to get back for curfew."

"Curfew?"

"We get more time on holidays."

"Damn it."

"Five minutes."

"Jesus," he said and finally wiped his mouth. "Real quick. Go easy, okay?"

"Sure."

We hugged and he patted my back.

"You're still my boy," he said when we let go. "You've just made it real hard."

"I know."

"You go in, and I'll make you a plate."

"Okay."

"You didn't make that stuffing?"

"I waited to the last minute. The store near me was out."

He slapped my back.

"You have to plan," he said.

Everyone was in the television room. The adults had trays and pillows on their laps. The kids were on the floor. Aunt Clara cried when we hugged. Harold gave me a strong handshake and said to keep my head up. The kids wouldn't look me in the eye. I went to hug Grandma Ruth and kicked over one of the kid's sodas. Someone gasped softly, and Ana June was down on the carpet in an instant with paper towels. I said I wasn't staying, and everyone was more relaxed in saying goodbye. Dad handed me a plate with aluminum foil crumpled over the edges.

"Never again like this," he said on our way to the back door.

"I understand."

"Drive safe," he said, and we shook hands.

I signed back in. The television was still on in the common room. I sat on the torn couch and watched the news. People all over town had volunteered to scoop food for the homeless. It was going to stop snowing tomorrow. You could see the green from the radar moving away from the county. I took the foil off the plate and worked it into a ball. I didn't feel like going upstairs for utensils, so I ate everything with my hands.

ABOUT DERRIDA, IF YOU'RE INTO THAT

**KATHRYN
NUERNBERGER**

Badgers remind me of the problem with metaphors and how everything is and isn't a metaphor, but in the end you have to pick a side or else. It's why I haven't yet written about when I was in Teach for America, which is a kind of Peace Corps for putting silvery-spoon *suma cum laudes* in inner city schools. And since Baton Rouge doesn't have an inner city, you can tell inner city is a metaphor for other things, and one of them is how I was proud of myself for being a white person in a room with black teenagers, and then I was ashamed to realize what I was, and then there were a lot of pencils and books and staplers and shoes being thrown and I was a rabbit, I guess. Even when I was pressing the buzzer to the principal's office or yelling "Listen, just listen!" or moving names on post-it notes down the consequences chart all the classroom management in-services said I needed while the students laughed that they were winning the game.

When a badger catches a baby rabbit from the nest you were just minutes ago cooing to have found, the screaming is so human anybody would cry and be afraid for themselves and realize you must not interrupt before it's finished. After they've formed a mating pair, badgers still bite each other to bleeding, jaw-locked over a scrap of prairie dog. When the mother is weaning she brings a carcass back to the burrow so she can cut at the faces of her pups as they try to eat.

My students were neither badgers nor prairie dogs. This is not meant to be a metaphor, but I know when I tell you some characters are white and some are black and there's correlative imagery about animals, metaphors will happen, and I don't know how to control the way they are received. Maybe that's the reason why when I was watching a nature documentary on PBS, it felt like that day the really huge girl in the back row whose name I don't remember anymore, even though she was the worst part of third period, stopped her loud chatter, the fuck-you-white-woman-trying-to-assert-your-authority-in-the-form-of-a-verb-conjugation-worksheet chatter, long enough to say, "If you teach us as *individuals*, then we'll listen." That was the thesis anyway of a much longer, self-important speech about how I didn't even know my students' names, much less what they needed to know to be adults in this neighborhood, and I had the gall to tell them to care about how to say *je m'appelle* and spend hours of their lives piddling with *être*. She was right on, except for how there were thirty-two students and one teacher, and she could only see herself in her desk, and I could only see myself in front of rows and rows of individuals who were sleeping or playing cards or calling me bitch and also I couldn't stop thinking that being from Fairfield or Dixie shouldn't mean no one teaches you how to condescend with a properly accented pronunciation of *croissant*.

That girl wasn't in my class anymore when I found out she was twenty and a junior and mother to a daughter who was already walking and talking. Badgers do almost nothing but dig, and they don't blink to grab a fresh-killed pheasant from right out of a bobcat's mouth. Because of the striped faces, they seem cute and loveable as a skunk, but if they are awake, they are hissing in a way that reminds me of my own lumbering toddler, who came a long time after Baton Rouge and made me feel sorry about everything I ever said to all the troubled or abused children I've known, which is getting to be really a lot now in this line of work, and I've never helped any of them yet. I think because there's no such thing as help. The high school was ringed by barbed wire and the windows were made of a plastic that eventually faded to a dingy yellow. When a kid broke a window, they put up a new piece of plastic. I had a key to the bathroom, but was forbidden to give it out and almost never did I give it out anyway.

Badgers are ruthless by design – their mothers work hard at making them so. With the kids I know it's different, because some of them are as tough as badgers and others are entirely something else, prairie dogs or pheasants or bobcats or rabbits, and by the time I have the metaphor straight, it's the last day of school and Josh – I still remember his name – is running down the hall hanging onto those pants I told him every day to pull up, and some kid I don't know and don't care about is chasing him. It's going to be a fight and Josh is going to be expelled this time, I guess. Probably not. Even when I beg them to expel kids, they don't do it. Probably I've just been looking for a fight this whole year and it's the last day and I want something to go my way, so I grab him under the armpits, and tell myself it's so he can't throw a punch. He's totally exposed, flailing and frantic like a pheasant, but that other kid stops at the sight of my teeth-bared face, then turns away down the stairs. For a long time I told this story like it was a moment I got right, but there is no right. There were other kids in the hallway and they were throwing free condoms from the clinic at each other. The bell rang. It was summer vacation. Cellophane packets fell in a glittering prophylactic rain. I bent to pick up my keys and one was stuck in my hair.

After ten years, it almost never comes up in conversation. I meet people and they wouldn't guess how much I love watching the kids ring up around a fight and some teacher has to push in there and grab someone out by the ear. It's exciting and violent. It's like one of those bushes of pink flowers blooming by the sign that warned bringing a gun into this school carries a penalty of five years hard labor. Every morning six buses line up in front of that sign and everyone who gets off the bus is wearing khaki pants and a red-collared shirt with a patch over the right breast of a roaring lion and the words "Capitol High." When the police came with their masks on, Derrida was one of the students on the roof throwing bricks. When the bobcat brought down the bird with a pounce and a swipe, he lowered his mouth to feed, but then the hissing badger shuffled up. He scorns the cat, makes him beg, makes him slink for the picked-over carcass of his own kill. Which one wouldn't I want to be?

MORE EXPERIMENTS WITH THE MYSTERIOUS PROPERTY OF ANIMAL MAGNETISM (1769)

**KATHRYN
NUERNBERGER**

Finding myself in a mesmeric orientation,
before me appeared Benjamin Franklin,
who magnetized his French paramours
at dinner parties as an amusing diversion
from his most serious studies of electricity
and the ethereal fire. I like thinking about
how he would have stood on tiptoe to kiss
their buzzing lips and everyone would gasp
and clap for the blue spark between them.
I believe in an honest and forthright manner,
a democracy of plain speech, so I have to
find a way to explain I don't care to have sex
anymore. Once I was a high school teacher
and there was a boy who everyday came in late,
who only came to school at all to sell drugs
out of his backpack, upon which he laid
his head like a pillow and closed his eyes
while I pointed at a chart diagramming
the anatomy of a sparrow. The vice principal
was watching and taking notes as I taught
this class, so I slid the bag from under
his cheek, as if not to wake him, wrapped
his fingers around a pen. I was trying

to be a gentle mother and also trying
to show I was in control of an unstable
situation. The boy, also trying to be
in control of himself, walked so slow
to my desk and we stood to watch him
push everything – binders, piles of ungraded
papers, a beaker of red pens to the floor.
He was so calm. *How do you like it when
I touch your things.* I do not like it. I live
in a house with many blue mason jars,
each containing a feather collection or starfish
collection or vertebrae collection, and also
there is a fully articulated fetal alligator skeleton.
Each window is pressed by the design
of a sweetgum branch, all the little orange
and red stars of its leaves, you can't see
the perfect geometry this close, just haphazard
parabolas, but beneath the foundation
the roots mirror the branching. I have
a chart of this to pull down. The view is flat
and so quiet on the inside. Have I been
forthright yet? What I want to know is
what happens if I decide to never have sex
again? Or more precisely, can I decide
to not have sex again and still be kind?
And be a joy to others? I should mention
I am a wife. I should mention I was told
my sole purpose is to be joy to others.
The sidewalks outside are very full of people
and when I look at them I feel hopeless.
Benjamin Franklin was so jolly with his kite
and his key and his scandalous electricity.
He was so in love with women and drink
and democracy. Before I was this way,

I was not a house, I was just a jar and what
I wanted was to be broken. A cool trick
you can do I once showed a class, is crank
a wheel covered in felt against another felt
wheel. Static bristles and sparks and makes
your hair stand on end. But hook it to
a leyden jar and the electricity fills up
in there, invisible as air. Becomes a glass
battery, until you too much the thing, then
wow! broken glass everywhere. I remember
wanting that. Do I have to always want that?
My house is blue and quiet. I can hardly
hear the squirrel in my sweetgum tree
dancing like a sunbeam to sing his riddles:
“A house full, a hole full, but you cannot
gather a bowl full.” The air of everywhere
is wet with electric fluid, you can’t even tell,
but pop, whiz, everywhere. “In this
field,” Ben says, “the soul has room
enough to expand, to display all of her
extravagances.” The sweetgum has 10,000
sticky, spiky seed balls. They start green
but grow black and fall for want of
a barren season. They look like sea urchins.
I call them tree urchins and think it’s
a funny joke. I don’t tell it to anyone,
as I am tired of being told what is not.
Such a secret, I know, is an extravagance,
and I like best how it’s an extravagance so
small you must keep it in a jar with others
of its kind for it to ever mean anything all.

CRAB SEASON

**MELISSA
OLIVEIRA**

I.

The season begins in May or June if you want them soft. We never did, though that is how most people seem to prefer them. For us, crab fishing was a late-summer affair: hard, blue-shelled crabs that I would dream of sometimes, so often did we talk about them.

On Friday evenings in late summer, we drove from Connecticut to Fall River. I loaded the backseat with books for the long drive. We picked up my grandparents and made a few more stops before leaving town: beer, cigarettes, enough scratch-off cards to last until Sunday night and, of course, a plastic bag bulging with raw chicken necks. These would serve as our offering to the crabs. Finally, we could leave the Fall River Flint to sweat beneath its statue of Prince

Henry the Navigator, and head south.

Within ten minutes, we passed back into that other New England: tidy gray-shingled saltbox houses, their white trim gleaming in the coastal light. On roads without lines bounded by sawgrass and sedge, the views opened up: here an inlet with white sailboats bobbing, there a dune-draped beach. We turned left when Gooseberry Point reached out straight ahead of us, with its sand trail that led to the two graffitied World War II watch towers guarding the end of the point. Finally, we arrived at Gooseberry Neck and the metal trailer my grandfather kept on a spit of sand between Buzzards Bay and a brackish tidewater marsh.

II.

In the few photos I have of my paternal grandfather, his wide, heart-shaped face is shiny and red, his black hair slicked back, neat and immovable. His dark eyes hold the expression of a naughty schoolboy who has gotten away with something. Indeed, my grandmother was fond of saying that he was the man who talked her into doing things she shouldn't do.

In these photos, I can sense something of the general mood of the moment in the faces of those who surround him. Often, he is the only person who looks as though he is having any fun. In one photo, I am a toddler and he leans over me, holding a pack of Marlboros. He has just placed a cigarette between my lips. I fumble at it with my fat hands, confusion written across my face. He laughs into the camera. My father does not. My mother, seated between them on the couch, is all thin darkness and shadowy bones: perhaps ninety pounds. Half of her face is visible above my head: her eyes are huge, dark, expansive. The flash renders her usually warm olive skin sallow. It looks as though you could

scratch it with your thumbnail and it would come off like candle wax. There are others, too. My father graduates from the Connecticut State Police Academy, and on the steps in front of the building, his smile is as staid as his father's grin is wide. In my parents' wedding photos, I notice him. His is the smile that appears hungry.

In yet another photo, my grandfather kneels beside me on beige sand. The tidewater marsh behind the trailer stretches in the background. I appear to be four or five, and I have collected an assortment of rocks and shells in a red bucket. I cannot tell now, from the photograph, what made the things I gathered that day noteworthy. I resent the distraction from my task, though: I am squinting, not smiling, and I keep my body stiff and somewhat distant. His right arm is around my shoulders, and he holds a beer in his left hand. He looks healthy, though, stout and sun-browned, but within two years of this photo he will experience the first of a series of massive strokes. Each one will leave him worse off than the last: first paralyzed on one side, then able to speak only with great

difficulty, then completely unable to walk without my grandmother's arm, a cane, a walker, at all. Eventually, he will lose both feet to gangrene. He will lose English to Portuguese, then Portuguese to rage-filled howls. He will cross over entirely into this terrifying, inexpressible rage: he will try to speak but then shake, break things, scream. He will become an angry toddler inhabiting the powerful body of a sixty-year-old welder and former middleweight boxer. Near the end, footless and incoherent, he will make his desires known by pulling himself out of his bed, dragging his disobedient body across the linoleum, and punching his convalescent home roommate. Eventually, the only nursing home that will have him is the one where my mother works, out of kindness to her and to our family.

"He always was the bad kid in the schoolyard," my father will say.

"When I was a fighter, they used to call me Joe Pawtucket," I remember my grandfather saying about his days as a middleweight boxer. "Canvas Joe, because I spent so much time on the mat." I turned away. Even then I hated the sickly sweet smell of alcohol filtered

through human skin or exhaled. It is the smell of grownups who have allowed themselves to reel out of control.

Yet in the second photo, the one taken at the trailer, his smile is not daring or reckless or mean. Behind us, the grasses that edge Gooseberry Neck are ruddy. The photo has aged in that particular way of old film that makes everything look like it is awash in autumn light, but it is also the season: he wears a red and black flannel shirt and I wear a white sweater, bell bottom jeans, red All-Stars. Everything, from the sky to the white rocks, has an amber cast. This is the palette of my earliest memories.

In my family, the dead are not left to rest quietly in their graves. They are exhumed, examined, forced to fit into molds that work for us. Relationships have been severed over this, but perfect evil and perfect goodness are too fragile. One holds these things close: any weakness in the memory of a person is taken as an indictment. My grandmother rose to sainthood almost as soon as she died. My grandfather, they say, ruined us all.

III.

By the sea, we are away from the endless reels of World War II actual film footage that played on his television and, I suspect, in his mind. For a time, we could all concentrate on other things. When there was no relief for him, there was no relief for us.

So, ankle-deep in mucky boots, we perched on upended plastic buckets in the tall grass that cut like razors. Mud sucked at our feet. We tied our lines around the chicken necks we brought, threw them in, and pinned the twine down with sharp wooden stakes. The tidal murk swallowed our lines, and when it was time we hauled them up again. The dirty Massachusetts tidewater heaved up the bright blue fruit—hissing, scurrying, living.

Even beyond drunk, my grandfather pointed out the needle-shaped aprons of the males and the bell-shaped aprons of the females. Some of these aprons burst with orange egg sponge, but even without this I learned to look for other markers. The ones with the red claws were females. He said they had painted nails, and he flung them back out across the

open water. *They need to make more for next year.* The spinning she-crabs disappeared again under the surface, trailing bubbles.

I knew too how to pick them up without getting bitten, though I wonder if I could do it now. I watched him in the kitchen, prying the aprons of the young males from their carapaces, and scooping out viscera with mechanical efficiency. They ate the garbage, the junk, the dead, the rotten things that lined the floor of Buzzards Bay. They all became red in the cooking pot. Later, seated at a table covered in newspapers, we would fall upon them. We dug out the meat with tiny picks, used nutcrackers to break the armor, and with our own soft mouths we sucked the sweet water from their claws.

IV.

Fact: You were in the 104th Division in 1945, the Timberwolves, and you traveled with a group of combat engineers. When you crossed the Rhine into Germany on canvas boats the engineers had put together, unseen enemies sent bullets splashing into the river around you.

Fact: You showed me the

photographs you took of what you found at the Nordhausen camp just after it was liberated. Liberation looked like this: grainy, vague, people's limbs and bodies stacked like denuded timber. Before you arrived, a US Air Force strike killed thousands of inmates, who the SS forced to stay inside the burning hangars. You found a dead city: thousands of corpses with a few people still living, here and there, existing among the dead. I was little when you first showed me these photos, and they seemed to me no different from the endless wartime newsreels in your apartment—the ones that made me seek out your welder's goggles and try to look through them—anything rather than sit with you in front of those ghostly images. Now, the weight of the photos falls on me: what it may have meant for you and, consequently, for us.

Fact: My father keeps these photographs in the drawer of his bedside stand, along with the Nazi mother's brooch you somehow acquired and the Purple Heart from his own war.

Fact: During much of the war, you worked as a welder in a shipyard in southeastern

Massachusetts. It was work that counted toward the war effort and exempted you from the draft, but you mocked the foreman, fired at him all of your acid wit, your sarcasm, your violence.

Fact: You were by then known for fighting, and had boxed in amateur and professional fights. You said you gave it all up because you didn't want those men, with their cauliflower ears and flat, busted noses, ruining your pretty face. Yet fighting was already by then a habit. You had been arrested for fighting but not convicted because you were friendly with the police. *That's just Joe Oliveira. Send him home to dry out.*

Fact: When the foreman at the shipyard threatened to fire you, you threw a punch that broke his nose. Later, you enlisted in the army before they could draft you.

Fact: My grandmother was pregnant with a little girl.

Fact: She was not yet your wife.

V.

My aunt holds this: that she was the unloved child of duty, the rope that tightened around your

neck. Once my grandmother died, my aunt said that my father was the favored one, the boy her father had actually wanted. He was the child of desire, she was the child of resentment.

My father tells a different story. When he was young, the family often moved throughout the northeast from town to town: Springfield, Agawam, Middletown, Fall River. They followed his father's work, leaving my grandfather's affairs in their wake. Yet the family ended up back in Fall River several times. My father was often the new kid at school, an experience which made him view a sense of place as a sacred thing for a child.

One day, when he was eleven, my father walked home from school. A group of boys followed him at a distance, a gap which began to close more quickly than was entirely comfortable. In the flash of self-preservation instinct that would serve my father much later in life as a police sergeant in Hartford, he became aware of danger. He glanced over his shoulder; the boys were bigger than he, more muscular. They taunted him. They had can openers

sharpened into makeshift shivs. My father ran.

When he arrived home, he slammed the door. He slumped in relief, sweaty, red-faced. He locked the door behind him, safe at last.

His father rose from his chair. "What are you running from?"

My father explained, "They are going to beat me. They have knives."

"No boy of mine runs away." Here, I imagine he took a drink, took a long drag on his cigarette. "You have a choice. You fight them, or you fight me."

My father weighed his options. He felt the open hand of his father once before, when he did not pay enough respect to one of his father's women. He unlocked the door and stepped outside.

We are still fighting your war, Joe Pawtucket.

VI.

If I ever cried about the beautiful blue crabs and their destruction, I don't remember it now. Their eyestalks regarded me with such naked hatred that it was difficult to find feeling for them. Even as a child, I understood that there was no space for my

sentiment. The feeling came later, all at once, after I moved away from home, married, made myself safe in my home, surrounded myself with sensible people. I grew strong in my own sense of order and logic.

Still, nearly thirty years later, I'd know anywhere the sound of their bright blue shells scraping the insides of plastic buckets, rounding each other for a fight. Their legs, of course, could find no purchase there except on each other's backs. My grandfather warned me that they could jump out like fleas, and they would. Coming close enough to peer into the buckets was enough for me, and even that small action sent the lot of them roiling, rearing at me, claws up, quick and ready to bite.

"They'll tear each other apart for a bit of raw chicken," he said, if I ever betrayed any feeling. "They deserve what's coming for them."

And it was true that at the end of the day, when the entire catch had been cleaned and processed, the white plastic buckets would need to be rinsed of swimming paddles, legs, broken shards of carapace, shattered claw points, barbs and eyestalks.

Yet sometimes I would find

him in the trailer, bleeding freely over the galley sink littered with tiny hearts and lungs, laughing, swearing.

"He got me," he'd say, with that same red-faced grin from the photos. "That son of a bitch actually got me that time."

PRACTICE SMILING

**WILLIAM
PALMER**

All day long, we can practice smiling.

*-Thich Nhat Hanh, *Being Peace**

I decide to start
with a small one

while buttering
a bran muffin

washing a blue glass
a white plate

I try to wear it
reading obits

Each day I loosen it
a little more

like a rope
braided to an anchor

of sorrow
that holds me in place

PORK

CALEB POWELL

The Koran, 2:173: “He only prohibits for you the eating of animals that die of themselves (without human interference), blood, the meat of pigs, and animals dedicated to other than God. If one is forced (to eat these), without being malicious or deliberate, he incurs no sin. God is Forgiver, Most Merciful.”

Ayesha: “I never eat marshmallows because they contain gelatin. Gelatin is made from the hooves of cows or pig.”

Ahmed Ahmed, Egyptian American comedian: “How do you know you’re a Muslim? When you drink, gamble, and have sex – but don’t eat pork.”

When I proposed to Ayesha I

hoped she shared the certainty we could overcome religious differences. A knights and princesses fairy tale of passionate and eternal love beckoned. She accepted.

Deuteronomy 14:8: “And the swine, because it divideth the hoof, yet cheweth not the cud, it is unclean unto you: ye shall not eat of their flesh, nor touch their dead carcass.”

We avoided discussions about compatible financial goals, children, location, lifestyle, and the ubiquitous mines planted between agnosticism and religion.

Dr. Zakir Naik, founder of the Mumbai-based Islamic Research Foundation (IRF): “The pig is the most shameless animal on the face

of the earth. It is the only animal that invites its friends to have sex with its mate. In America, most people consume pork. Many times after dance parties, they have swapping of wives; many say 'you sleep with my wife and I will sleep with your wife.' If you eat pigs then you behave like pigs."

Ayesha had never explicitly requested that I not eat pork in front of her, and I willfully abstained. When she was not around I compensated. Especially concerning pizza.

Woody Allen's *Stardust Memories*: "You want to do mankind a real service? Tell funnier jokes."

And if your jokes target the Jew, and if they're bleeping hilarious, you might get a call from a Hollywood entertainment attorney named Weinstein, and he'll ask if you're interested in writing a screenplay.

Sarah Silverman wrote, "Why didn't I choose to depict Mohammed having sex? The answer is simple. I don't want to get blown up by explosives. I am

afraid of angering Muslims; but not afraid of angering Jews and Christians, so I chose to depict the Judeo-Christian God."

My view of the cloven-hoofed mammal took that science, agriculture, and pharmaceuticals have solved many of the epidemiological and hygienic concerns. A vegetarian case on health or moral grounds might be worthy of polemics, but divine interventions I found problematic.

Bobby Henline: "What I want to do is to help more people than the guy who blew me up can hurt."

Henline survived an IED explosion in Iraq that saw four fellow soldiers killed. He suffered burns on 40% of his body, including on his face and head, and lost one hand and both ears. These days he works as a standup comedian.

Two weeks after I proposed, at a party, a plate of salami, cheese, and bread graced a table. I grabbed a toothpick, stabbed a few morsels, put them on my napkin, and chomped without immediate compunction. But I saw Ayesha

watching. Her reaction subtle. She became reticent. In a group she held her composure, but furtive and knowing glances, the expected flirtations, disappeared. I changed snacks.

Imam and a Priest—Priest asks, “Tell me, have you ever tried pork?”

Imam says, “Well, I have to admit—I was curious, and once I did have a bite. Or two.”

“What’d you think?”

“Pretty tasty, but I felt very guilty about it afterward. Very guilty.”

“Hmm. I see.”

Imam then asks, “What about you? You are celibate, correct?”

“Yes.”

“Have you ever, umm, you know?”

“Yes,” the Priest says, “I have sinned. I have had sex.”

Imam says, “It’s a lot better than pork, isn’t it?”

On the way home from the party she told me, “You ate sausage.”

“It was salami.”

“What’s the difference?”

Laurie Goodstein in the *New York*

Times: “As an observant Hindu, Brij Sharma considers cows sacred. He believes the gentle creatures are helpmates to human beings, and it would be as unthinkable for him to eat beef as it would for a cowboy in Montana to eat his own horse.”

Ayesha explained that *haram* and *halal*, the forbidden and permitted, had many interpretations. We enjoyed an active sex life. She had previous *haram* relationships. A divorcee and “Americanized” to a certain extent, Ayesha asked that I never again eat pig in her presence. I told her I would not.

Question: “What do you call a Muslim with a slab of ham on his head?”

Answer: “Ham’ad.”

Q: “What do you call a Muslim with two slabs on his head?”

A: “Mo’ham’ad.”

Before my employment in the United Arab Emirates I lived in a monastery in Thailand. Buddhists, of course, contemplate the ethics of food consumption and the humane slaughter of animals. Various schools have various opinions.

Buddhism universally prohibited eating tigers, crocodiles, elephants, and humans.

Every morning the monks went around a nearby village and collected alms. The locals presented gifts, including food, and the monks would give me a bowl, a combination of curry and fruit and vegetables and rice. Thousands of miles away from Ayesha, separated by time, surrounded by aphorisms of “right thought,” “all humanity suffers and suffering comes from desire,” and “pain is inevitable, suffering is optional,” I considered the disappearance and contradictory existence of true yet ephemeral love.

WHERE I AM AND WHERE I NEED TO GO

CASEY PYCIOR

See a lot of interesting things in my line of work. Some good: like earlier this spring when I showed up for a tow call and found a bride in her long white dress and the groom in his monkey suit standing next to the ditch where the bed of their bright red pick-up poked in the air, the long strings of beer cans dangling from the chrome bumper, the “Just Married” scrawled across the back glass barely visible at that angle.

Neither seemed upset. In fact, after I got their truck pulled out of the ditch and loaded on the wrecker, when the two of them climbed in the back-seat of my rig they couldn't keep their hands off each other, like they were in a limo, and I was the chauffeur. Before I knew it, in my rearview mirror I saw the gal working her dress up around her hips so she could straddle her new husband. I half-wished my truck had one of those partitions between the front and rear to give them some privacy, but I kind of wished I didn't have to keep an eye on the road, too. It was something, really, those two. Here they just wrecked their truck leaving their wedding, but it didn't seem to bother them one bit. Hell, my ex and I would've been at each other's throats, even back when we were young and hot for each other. I'll bet the old boy lost control of his truck because his bride couldn't keep her hands off his zipper.

And then there's the bad: like the call I went on a few weeks ago.

There was nothing special about the way the workday started—a couple fender benders in the morning, an illegally parked tow-away in Old Town around lunchtime, and a flat tire out on West Kellogg in the early

afternoon—but then the call before the call I mean to tell you about came in. Ernesto, a cop friend of mine, sent me a text about a breakdown in Eastborough. Protocol is for Ernesto to call it in and for the dispatcher to then call for a tow truck, so Ernesto doesn't get in touch with me directly unless he thinks there's an opportunity. Plus, Ernesto's a Wichita cop. Eastborough is a little village in the middle of Wichita and it has its own city hall and police force (all of three cruisers), and its residents are in a tax bracket I couldn't reach with a rocket ship. Let's just say I'm surprised they don't have gates at the entrance. The people in Eastborough don't drive cars that break down, or at least that's what I thought until I saw the orange and black '69 Camaro sitting on the side of the road, steam billowing out from under its hood.

Ernesto knew better than to stick around and was already gone when I pulled in front of the Camaro. Before I could get out of my truck, a kid, probably seventeen or eighteen, comes to my door. He's got sunglasses on and he's wearing khaki shorts, a yellow golf shirt, and flip-flops. He starts right in on me.

"You're late, you know that? I've been waiting, like, fifteen minutes."

With that, I decided to take my time. Dug around in my console, made like I was looking in the back seat for something, studied a blank form on my clipboard.

"Look, chief, I'm not messing around here. I just might have to make a call to your boss."

It wasn't the threat of calling my boss, it was the "chief" that did it. I do my best not to get into it with people like this, but this kid pissed me off. People like him think people like me don't have anything better to do than sit around waiting for their phone call, like we need them or something. From the looks of things, this kid needed me a whole helluva lot more than I needed him.

I got out of the truck faster than he expected, and he took a couple steps back and looked me over. I could see he hadn't expected me to be so big or to move so quick. It seemed the long hair and fu-manchu, tattoos, and shit-kicker boots made an impression on him. I still hadn't said anything.

After a long moment, the kid took off his sunglasses and said, "The car, all of a sudden it just started smoking." The kid was scared. It was probably Daddy's and he wasn't supposed to have it out. I decided to give the kid a quick test.

"Pop the hood and I'll take a look," I said. The kid opened the driver's door of the Camaro and reached under the dash. His eyes got a little bigger when he didn't find a hood release lever. Here this kid was driving a classic, and he didn't even know how to open the goddamn hood. I stuck my fingers in the front grille, found the lever, and popped it.

When the kid came around the front, he asked, "Well?"

Lots of people assume tow truck drivers are mechanics, and I suppose some of them are, but I'm not. However, even I could see all that had happened was the lower radiator hose had split, and the fan had thrown coolant onto the headers. As long as he'd shut it down soon enough, the car would be fine. A little part of me felt good for the kid—he hadn't done any major damage to his dad's car—but a much larger part thought, Fuck this little shit for getting to drive this car, and fuck his dad for not teaching him anything about it. Probably didn't even know anything about it himself. So, when I leaned in over the engine, the brown sugary smell of the steaming hot antifreeze rising to my nose, I paused just long enough to sell it. "I don't know, buddy, it doesn't look good."

"Oh, shit," he said. "Can you fix it?"

"Me? Hell no. This kind of work is above my pay grade. I mean, if it were just a belt or a hose, then maybe, but what we're dealing with here looks to be internal."

"Fuck. You've got to help me out, man. My dad can't know about this."

"I gotta guy that might be able to take a look at it. He usually only works by appointment, but he owes me one.."

"Please, man, what's it going to take?"

Bingo.

"My guy owes me, but I don't want to just give that favor up for nothing." The kid took out his wallet and handed me a hundred dollar bill quicker and easier than I had anticipated; it seemed he understood perfectly. If you had money, and he clearly did, you could buy your way out

of just about anything. Who am I to disrupt this system? I thought about pushing it, seeing as how easily he forked over the hundred, but I wasn't done with him just yet. There was still some money to be made. I folded the bill and put it in my pocket. "Let's get you hooked up."

The kid was quiet on the drive to Ray's shop. Ray's actually a good mechanic, but like me, he's not above taking advantage when the situation presents itself. And this was one of those situations. Ray and I don't do this a lot, but we've done it enough times to develop a kind of system. I'm sure he knew it was on when he saw me pull in with the Camaro, but I gave him a quick nod in the garage just to be sure. I left while Ray was giving the kid his spiel. I didn't know how much Ray would be able to get out of him, but Ray was good, so I knew it'd be a sizeable sum, forty percent of which was mine—my finder's fee. Even after kicking Ernesto a few bucks, I'd be in good shape.

I was riding pretty high leaving Ray's. A hundred dollars richer, and though I wasn't especially proud of screwing the kid over, I'd scored a few points for the working man. I was thinking about what I'd do with my extra hundred when the call, the one this story is really about, came in. I knew before I showed up that it probably wasn't going to be good because the dispatcher told me the highway patrolman that called it in said it was a multiple car accident. It happened north of town on 254, kinda out in the country. There's quite a bit of traffic out there, though—it runs between Wichita and El Dorado and lots of people take it to avoid the toll on the turnpike. It's a four-lane highway divided by a grassy median, but it's not an interstate so there aren't any exit ramps. Cars have to cross the opposite two lanes if they want to make a left turn down any of the side roads, and the speed limit is 70. When accidents happen out here, they're bad.

On my way to the scene, while I weaved my way through the traffic that had backed up a good quarter of a mile, I heard the Life Flight helicopter before I saw it lifting off the ground. One of those. When I finally got through the traffic, I couldn't actually see anything because the ambulance and police cars, their cherries burning, had blocked both eastbound lanes and one of the westbound ones. While I waited for one of the officers to clear a path around the blockade, I saw a man being loaded into the back of

an ambulance. He was strapped to a back-board and his head was secured in a brace, and an EMT was walking alongside the stretcher, squeezing one of those bags to keep his oxygen flowing. The officer waved me around, and at the back of another ambulance, two emergency workers were loading two black body bags. With close to half a million people in and around Wichita, there are plenty of wrecks, but with the way the city is laid out and the few highways, there just aren't that many fatality accidents. This wasn't the first time I'd seen this kind of thing, but it wasn't something I'd grown used to, either. I don't know how the cops and EMT's deal with it. Then I came upon the wreck, or at least its aftermath. It takes a lot for a couple of wrecked cars to get my attention, but let me tell you, this was something. It was no wonder people died.

I saw what used to be two vehicles, one angled across the two east-bound lanes, and one off in the grass in the median. As I pulled around the front of the vehicle in the highway, I could tell it was an SUV, but it was too smashed for me to recognize the make. From the way it looked, no one inside could have survived. The front half was basically gone from the firewall forward—the engine was sitting out in the middle of the highway in a pool of oil and coolant—and the right side was hit so hard and had caved in so much that the driver's side doors must have jammed because the roof was peeled back on the passenger's side where the firemen had used the Jaws of Life. I got out of my rig to lower the flatbed and hook up the winch and saw the blue oval on the center cap on one of the rear wheels. I figured it to be a Ford Escape. It was too small to be an Explorer. But it didn't matter anymore; the scrap yard wasn't picky.

After I'd secured the winch hooks to the frame and started dragging the Escape up the flatbed, the screeching metal piercing the quiet of the accident scene, something flashed in the backseat area and caught my eye, and I released the lever to stop the winch. The front of the Escape was up on the flatbed but the rear wheels were still on the ground, so I didn't have to climb up to see inside. As I approached the hole in the rear door where the side glass used to be, the silver backside of a Mylar balloon turned in the breeze, and on the front, in bold, blue letters, it said: "It's a Boy!" I leaned my head in. A twisted and broken car seat sat strapped in the center

of the backseat and next to it a fuzzy, stuffed, smiling blue bear with the string of the balloon tied around its paw. I'm a big man and I cast a pretty mean shadow, but I shit you not, it felt like my stomach dropped into my boots. I got lightheaded and had to grab ahold of the door to keep my feet. Though I didn't want to, I looked in the back again. The belts on the car seat harness had been cut, and I thought about the Life Flight. I looked again at the smiling bear, the car was smashed all to hell, yet here in the backseat sat a stuffed bear and a balloon that hadn't been touched. How the balloon didn't pop, I'll never know.

I went through the motions of securing the Escape to the flat bed, trying to keep my shit together, and it wasn't until I saw another wrecker pull up to tow away the other vehicle—a four-door Silverado with the front end crushed in bad—that I remembered the man I saw the EMTs working on. Based on the damage to the two vehicles, if I'd had to guess, I'd have said the man was the driver of the truck. It looked more survivable, but he was still a lucky sonofabitch. At least the ambulance he was riding in had its lights on.

I double checked to make sure the carcass of the Escape was secure before getting back in my rig. I weaved through the collection of police cars and emergency vehicles until my path cleared and the highway opened up before me. I headed back toward Wichita to the city impound lot, but I only made it a couple miles when I noticed in my upper side mirror the balloon dancing around in the back of the Escape. I flipped on my lights and pulled over to the shoulder. In my mirror I watched as the balloon whipped around in the air as cars passed. It jerked against the string so hard when a semi roared by I thought for sure the string would break free from the bear. When it was finally clear, I got out and hustled back to the flatbed and pulled myself up. I reached into the back of the Escape, careful not to cut myself, or the balloon, on the safety glass crumbles, and took the bear and balloon out. I carried it up to the front and put them gently on the passenger side of the bench seat. After what it had survived, I wouldn't have been able to stand seeing that balloon pop now. Or even worse, break loose from the bear and float away. Besides, they belonged to that little boy, and if he survived, then I wanted to return them to him.

On my way back to the city lot to drop off the Escape, I got a call from the dispatcher to pick up a car in the Delano district, but I begged off. I told her I wasn't feeling well, and it wasn't a lie. With the A/C blowing full blast on the drive back, the balloon twisted and bobbed around the cab of the truck, almost playfully, as if it understood its purpose, and there was that bear sitting next to me on the seat, still smiling as if nothing had happened. It got so I couldn't even look at it. I was half tempted to pull off somewhere and toss them in a dumpster or down a storm drain, just to be rid of them, but I knew deep down I couldn't.

After unloading the Escape, I stopped off for a twelve pack of High Life at the liquor store on the corner of Oliver and Lincoln just down the street from my house. I'm not a teetotaler by any stretch, and though I probably look like I'm the kind of guy who ties one on every night, I don't do that either. But after the day I'd had, the few stray beers in the fridge at home weren't going to cover it.

I'd already finished one beer by the time I pulled into my driveway. I tucked the opened box of beer under my arm and got out of my truck. I closed the door and watched as the balloon shifted on the displaced air in the cab of the truck. I made it inside my house without looking over my shoulder. Inside, I put the beer in the fridge next to a couple stragglers that I would have normally drunk first, but they were microbrew that Ernesto left the last time he was over, and I wanted something I could drink fast.

I took out another High Life and twisted off the top. After a long swallow, I had half the bottle finished. I sat on the couch and turned on the TV. I checked the four local news stations for coverage of the wreck. I finished my beer while jockeying between the channels. At the fridge getting a fresh one, I heard the anchorwoman say something about a wreck on 254. I hustled back into the living room, my new beer foaming over the lip of the bottle so that I had to suck hard on the suds to keep them from spilling on the carpet, just in time to see the stock accident footage—the road flares, the emergency vehicles, the backed-up traffic—and hear the off-screen reporter say: *"...three fatalities, two adults declared dead on the scene, and a infant that died at the hospital. The driver of the other vehicle suffered life-threatening injuries. He's currently listed in critical condition at Wesley.*

Police speculate that alcohol may have played a role in the accident. Gina Thompsen reporting from highway 254 in north Sedgwick county." I muted the TV and walked away.

The third beer went down even faster than the first two as I paced the house. Before I knew it, I was standing at my living room window looking out into the cab of my truck. At first it looked like the balloon was still, but the longer I looked at it, I noticed it was turning ever so slightly like it couldn't help moving.

I drank two more beers standing at the window before I finally went outside. When I opened the passenger side door it caused a kind of vacuum and sucked the balloon toward the open door. It pulled taut against the bear's wrist as if straining to break free. I gathered the bear in my arms and made sure to hold the string tight in my hand. When I got inside, I set the bear in the center of my kitchen table, and the balloon bobbed in the air a few times before settling into a calm listing from side to side as I drank my way deep into my twelve pack.

It had gotten dark outside without my noticing and I hadn't bothered to turn on any lights in the house. The TV was still on in the corner of the living room casting its flickering light against the wall in front of me. I looked at the bear and balloon and the shadows they cast on the wall. Then I saw my shadow, a dark, featureless mass. I reached for the bear and brought it to my face, my shadow mirroring my movements. I buried my face in the bear's fur and inhaled deeply. Whatever I was trying to smell was gone. All that was left was the acrid synthetic smell of the soft blue fur.

I woke up at the table with my head on the bear as a pillow, the balloon floating above my head like a thought bubble in the funny papers. It was still early—I hadn't overslept—and my neck was pinched tight and my brain felt loose in my head. I made a pot of coffee after I took a shower, and while I was waiting for it to finish brewing, a police siren blipped outside my house, and I knew it was Ernesto. He stopped by for coffee every now and then at the start of his shift. When I met him at the door, he said, "So?"

"So what?" I asked and stepped aside to let him in. Ernesto wasn't fat—stocky maybe—but at only five-six on a good day, and with the uniform,

Kevlar vest, and police belt, he looked thick. It didn't help that his uniform squeaked when he walked.

"What do you mean *so what?* That kid yesterday with the Camaro. Was I right?"

After the night I'd had, I'd completely forgotten about that kid. "Yeah, you were right."

"Ah-ha! Just leave it to the Mexican to sniff out the chump."

Ernesto is always saying shit like this, and it rarely makes any sense. He's Mexican, all right, dark skin, dark hair, dark eyes, the works. But even though he pronounces words like *tequila*, *guacamole*, and *jalapeño* with an accent, he doesn't speak a word of Spanish.

"So," Ernesto continued, "how much did we get him for?"

"Ray'll let me know the next couple days," I said and thought about the hundred the kid had given me. I probably should've split that with Ernesto, but money he didn't know about didn't really exist.

"I knew it the minute I saw that punk." The coffee maker beeped in the kitchen and Ernesto gestured toward it and I nodded. "Shit, man, you have a party last night?" he asked when he saw the beer bottles in the sink and the ones on the table. Before I could answer he said, "Who had a baby?"

I told Ernesto about the smashed up SUV and the bodies and the twisted and broken baby seat, and how I'd seen the paramedics working on the driver of the other vehicle. Ernesto said he'd heard that call go out over the radio at the end of his shift. I explained to him how the bear and balloon were unharmed, how I couldn't just leave them in the vehicle, and how I'd planned to return them, but the baby died. "Damn," Ernesto said. "Damn."

"I need you to look into this. Find out who the driver is." It wasn't until I said it that I realized I had to know more about the guy who'd been driving the truck. I needed to see what kind of man he was because it was clear I wasn't going to get over this anytime soon.

"You realize what you're asking me to do?"

This from the man who the day before helped me scam a rich kid, and who from time to time pockets the dime bags and half smoked joints he

confiscates from teenagers. I don't mean to make him out to be a bad guy, but I wasn't going to let him get high and mighty on me when I asked a favor of him.

"Yeah I do. I'm asking you to ask around, to punch some shit into a computer, whatever. And don't give me any shit about your job."

Ernesto finished his coffee in silence, and when he left he didn't say he'd look into the accident, but he didn't say he wouldn't, either. When I left for work I grabbed the bear and balloon off the table and carried them out to my truck.

The two rode shotgun with me until I towed a woman and her car from Towne East Mall to a mechanic downtown. When she climbed in the truck and saw the bear and balloon, she said, "Oh." When I brought them with me I hadn't thought about any people riding along. I grabbed them and placed them as gently as I could in the back seat. "Who had a baby?" the woman asked.

"My sister," I said.

"Congrats, Uncle," she said. "Is this your first nephew?"

I nodded. "I'm going to the hospital after work."

"You'll have so much fun being an uncle. You get to spoil 'em, get 'em all riled up and send 'em home to mom and dad." The woman laughed and went on to tell me all about her kids—she had three, two girls and boy—and I did my best to pay attention and act interested.

My ex and I had wanted kids, but hard as we tried we couldn't make it happen. We never went to the doctor or anything. I'm not even sure we knew there was such a thing as a fertility clinic back then. Hell, couldn't have afforded it anyhow.

While I waited for the guy in the office of the mechanic's shop to sign for the woman's car, I got a text from Ernesto: *Glenn Murphy. BAC. 19 1030 S. Capri Ln. Dont make me regret this.*

Early that afternoon after my last tow, I looked up Glenn Murphy's address on the GPS and was surprised to find he only lived a couple miles from me. I didn't know what to expect or what I was going to do when I got there,

but I had to see where he lived. Though I hadn't given it much thought, for some reason I'd expected him to live in a neighborhood like mine—full of houses that were built as temporary McConnell Air Force barracks during WWII, but later sold and converted into low-rent four-plexes. I pulled into the neighborhood and couldn't believe how normal it looked. All the plain brick ranch houses looked the same, like dozens of other post-war neighborhoods in Wichita, yet everything looked nicer than where I lived. When I turned down Capri Lane and the GPS voice told me my destination was on the right, I slowed as I passed the house. In the driveway a tall, thin brunette woman and a small boy were getting out of a beige sedan. The woman said something to the boy before going inside the house, leaving the boy alone in the yard. I looked again at the address above the garage to make sure it matched what Ernesto had given me. It did. I circled the block, and when I came back to the house, I didn't see the boy so I pulled to the curb. Though I'd had little idea what I was doing at the house or what I thought I'd find, it hadn't even occurred to me that Murphy might have a family. The version of him I'd formed in my mind couldn't live in that house or be a husband and a father. My head reeled with thoughts of the wreck, the little smashed SUV, the mangled car seat, and the Life Flight helicopter leaving the scene. I looked over my shoulder at the bear and balloon in the back seat, and when I turned back the little boy had stepped out from behind the large oak tree in the yard. He held a yellow toy dump truck and was staring at me.

I suppose a shrink might call what happened next a kind of temporary mental break or something, and I'm not entirely sure that didn't happen.

I rolled down my passenger side window. The little boy took a couple steps away from the tree, and now that I could see him better, I guessed him to be about six or so. He was a good-looking kid with dark hair and eyes, and I wondered if this was what Murphy looked like.

Because I didn't know what else to do, I waved at the boy. To my surprise he waved back and came up to my truck. "Cool truck you got there," I called through the window. The boy perked up when I mentioned his truck.

"It's a Tonka. My dad got it for me." The boy's voice was deeper and more assured than I expected.

"Mine's a Ford." I tapped hard on the dash with my hand. "Not a Tonka, but it gets the job done."

The boy looked at me and then at my rig for a moment. "What's it do?"

"Well," I said and took a quick look up and down the street. I was nervous. I didn't know what I was doing, but I knew people would be getting off work soon and my being there without a single dead car in sight probably didn't look good. I got out of my rig. "You wanna see how the bed raises up and down?" He nodded quickly. "There's a bunch of levers over here that work it," I said, but he didn't move.

"Okay," I said. "Stay clear." I raised the flatbed and extended it down to the street and then brought it back up. The boy's eyes went wide as he watched the hydraulics working. I kept an eye on the front window of the house. The curtains were open about halfway, but I didn't see any movement inside. "Pretty cool, huh?" I said after the flat bed was back in place.

The boy nodded again.

"My name's Howard," I said. "What's yours?"

The boy looked over his shoulder at his house as if he heard something, and I flinched and started to make for the cab, but he turned back to me and no one came out of the house.

"Alexander."

"Nice to meet you, Alexander." I knew even as I said that it sounded bad, but I had to ask, "Where's your mom and dad?"

"Mom's inside sleeping. Daddy's sick at the hospital."

"Oh," I said and thought about Murphy in his hospital bed and his kid standing here with me.

"What's that?" Alexander said and pointed into the cab of my truck. I got in and slid across and opened the passenger door for him to see. Alexander came and stood in the open space in front of the door.

"This here? It's a GPS computer to tell me where I am and where I need to go."

"Why do you need to know where you are?"

"I need to know where I am so I can know how to get where I'm going," I said and entered in my address. "See, here we are, and this dot

here is where I live. Now I know how to get home.” I waited a moment while Alexander looked at the GPS screen.

“Where’s the hospital?”

“It’s downtown,” I said and scrolled the GPS map to show him.

“Mom says I can’t see Daddy yet. He’s still too sick.” Alexander looked over his shoulder again and then pulled himself up onto the edge of the seat, his hand along the top and his knee on the seat for balance, to get a better look inside my truck. I thought for a moment about Murphy, still alive in his hospital bed, and about this neighborhood, and his house, and his wife and son, and all the other things he probably had that I didn’t and how he’d nearly pissed it away. Then I thought about the brand new family he’d killed and looked at Alexander right in front of me, clueless as to what his father had done. I realized then that I could grab him and be gone before anyone knew the difference. I saw how, with one simple decision, I could take something that Murphy didn’t deserve and ruin his life—or what was left of it. It’d ruin mine too, but at that moment I didn’t care. And I’d be lying if I said I didn’t, for that moment at least, seriously consider it until Alexander said, “You got a balloon.” When he said that, it took everything out of me, like a goddamn punch in the gut. He was just a little kid who thought his dad was sick in the hospital. This little glimpse of Murphy’s life had fucked me up so much I hadn’t even considered how this boy might feel or what it would’ve done to him if I’d taken him. I’d have been worse than Murphy.

I reached into the backseat and pulled the bear and balloon up to the front so Alexander could see them. He gently touched the bear’s fur and looked up at the balloon. “Can I—”

“They’re a friend of mine’s,” I said, and I looked up in time to see Alexander’s mother storming out the front door. She began screaming his name as she barreled across the yard, and he climbed off the seat and stepped a few feet away from the truck. For a split second I thought of getting the hell out of there as quickly as a could, but I was afraid she’d see the name of the towing company on the door. So instead, I tried to stay calm despite the watery feeling in my stomach. I slid across the seat and stepped out behind Alexander. His mother scooped him off the ground and held him

tight, backpedalling several steps. She looked like a woman who had just seen the rest of her life, nearly husbandless and now childless, flash before her eyes.

"Ma'am, I'm a friend of Glenn's," I said as evenly as I could, trying as much to calm myself as her. "We used to work together. I was just showing Alexander here my truck."

Her eyes were wide and searching my face, and she was squeezing Alexander so tightly the veins in her forearms bulged under her skin.

"I heard about the—" I started, but then looked at Alexander in his mother's arms, and continued, "what happened, and I just wanted to stop by and see if there was anything I could do."

"No," she said, breathing heavily. As she began to calm some now that Alexander was safely in her arms, I could see in her face how tired she was. She'd probably spent the last couple days in a hospital watching her husband cling to life. Under normal circumstances she would've been an attractive woman. Seeing her there holding her son, I felt sick to my stomach for what I'd almost done. "We're fine. Now leave us. *Please*."

"Okay," I said and raised my hands to show I meant no offense and walked around the front of my rig. She'd turned and was quickly walking toward the front door as if she thought I might chase them. "Take care of that one," I said before I got in. "He's a good kid."

As I drove away from Murphy's house, the weight of what had just happened, what I'd almost done, came down on me. The first chance I got, I pulled over my rig, opened my door, stuck my head out and retched.

I didn't follow what happened to Glenn Murphy. I assume that if he lived there was or would eventually be a trial of some sort, but I steered clear of all that. And if he died, well... For several weeks following my visit to his house, I expected a phone call from the police. I mean, I nearly kidnapped that child, or at least that's how I'm sure it looked. But I guess his wife believed I was a friend of Glenn's, or I'm sure I'd be answering to someone.

You might not believe this, but it's been almost a month and my balloon is still floating above my bear. The string's got a little slack in it, but it doesn't seem to be going anywhere.

ODE TO MY RIBCAGE

JANELLE RAINER

My fingers glaze over
the scaffolding
inside my chest

as I dress in the morning.
I imagine a collection
of moon-white branches,

perfectly arranged.
Each slender, stubborn bone
is a beautiful stranger.

Reminders of the raw story
beneath my skin.
Lungs flare and fade.

My heart hangs
like a lopsided sun.
Some day my body will fail

and these hooked wings
will crank open, revealing
a scalding light.

FIFTY SHADES OF GREY

JIM REESE

The woman next to me on a treadmill
is reading her new Kindle and the text has been
enlarged. I look over to try and figure out what has her
so engrossed. I read,

"Does this mean you're going to make love to me tonight, Christian?"

Holy shit. Did I just read that?

His mouth drops open slightly, but he recovers quickly.

"No, Anastasia, it doesn't. Firstly, I don't make love. I..."

I lose my footing. Damn. That's a good part.

*...and thirdly, you don't yet know what you're in for. You could still run
for the hills. Come, I want to show you my playroom."*

She sees me glancing at her tablet. She turns a bit red
in the face.

Good book? I ask.

*Oh, yes. A friend of mine just bought me this.
Easy on the eyes.*

I bet.

She continues her cardiovascular workout,
moving a bit faster now.

*Don't tell anyone but I downloaded Fifty Shades of Grey.
The first of a trilogy.
I've been going at it for three weeks, now.
I'm a slow reader.*

MAN'S FOUR BIGGEST FEARS

JIM REESE

Should be easy enough to answer. But, I'm only
one guy, with my own suspicions, concerns.
Who am I to say for sure?

I ask my father.

Google it, he tells me. And before I do he says,
Death, of course. Public speaking is probably another.
Scary-huh? He says, *Prison. That*
probably won't even make the top five.

I Google the question.

Because that seems far easier
than doing the non-anonymous survey myself.

1: *Inadequacy.*

2: *Inadequate size of penis.*

3: *Freedom.*

4: *Being broke.*

It continues:

5. *Being perceived as gay.*

6. *Dying alone.*

7. *Ending up with the wrong person.*

8. *Keeping the spark alive.*

Inevitably the fears revolve back to masculinity.
This doesn't surprise me. That cliché prison phrase,
Three hots and a cot is even more believable
than before.

POTATOES ARE IN THE DRYER

JIM REESE

The anonymous woman at our house
is dropping off a box of FFA potatoes—twenty six dollars
for about ninety russets.

*Guess where I put my potatoes, she says.
In the dryer. It's 50 degrees in there.*

In my mind I see her burrowing through a junk drawer
to find a thermometer that still works.

This junk drawer in the home of a family who is deeply apprehensive
with how hot or cold a room should be—how to appropriately insulate
and save—how to overheat and suffocate.

I imagine the anonymous woman placing the thermometer
in the dryer—waiting, re-checking again and again until
she is certain this is just as good as digging a big hole out back
or placing them in the cellar she no longer has.

*So are you trying to invent some kinda slow-cooker
or is this a new way to make mashed potatoes?*

The anonymous woman looks at me strangely,
but never tells me how incompetent she really thinks I am.

THE POSITIONAL PLAYER

**BY
JANET
SCHNEIDER**

**THE JOHN GARDNER MEMORIAL
PRIZE IN FICTION**

Jamal and Keith were chasing geese down by the tidal lake when Jamal saw the Warbergs get out of the car. He stopped short, causing Keith to bump into him.

"Hey, man," Keith said, grabbing Jamal's arm preventing him from falling forward into a large pile of goose poop. "What did you do that for?"

Jamal had not seen Sue Warberg in four years. Was that really her? Her walnut skin the same as his. Her face looked the same — no noticeable wrinkles but her hair was cropped short. He watched her put on rounded dark-rimmed sunglasses. Dan Warberg, emerging from the driver's side, was still mashed potato white but grayer and heavier.

"Nothing, bro," Jamal said, slipping behind the gnarly trunk of an oak tree. His heart pounded so strongly his taut chest muscles stretched. No way could the Warbergs see him here. Not dressed like this. Not with Keith. "Thought I knew someone."

"Who?" Keith looked around.

"You don't know them," Jamal said, grateful Keith stood with his back toward them.

"Then how come you do?" Keith said.

Jamal fixed his eyes on the five- or six-year-old boy who was now holding Mr. Warberg's hand. Which move should he make? Advance or retreat?

"Don't turn around," Jamal said, his voice low, despite the increasing distance between him and the Warbergs as they walked toward Oakland's Fairyland. "Remember when I was ten and Theresa and I lived with foster parents for nine months?"

"Yeah," Keith said. "When your mom was in rehab."

"Well, my—" Sorrow and resentment combined bubbled up in his throat. "Those are them. Walking away."

"The black lady and the white guy?" Keith said, still facing away. "With the Mexican-looking kid?"

Keith was right that boy didn't look like either of the Warbergs.

"What's she doing with a white guy?" Keith asked. "You going to say something to them?"

"No." Jamal pulled up his sweatshirt to wipe his forehead. "It's been four years. They won't recognize me."

"Well, c'mon." Keith moved away from Jamal. "You still want to go to Chinatown?"

Jamal watched the Warbergs approach the entrance to the amusement park.

"Let's go," Keith said, beckoning him. "You're the one who's starving."

Had the Warbergs adopted that kid after they hadn't been able to adopt Jamal and Theresa? Jamal clutched his abdomen as if an invisible fist had punched him.

"You ever been inside Fairyland?" Jamal asked.

"Nah," Keith said. "Never had enough money."

"Me neither," Jamal said. "Let's check it out."

"Are you kidding?" Keith laughed and crossed his arms over his stomach. "That place is for babies."

Jamal glared at Keith.

"You go, man." Keith scowled. "I'm outta here."

Keith shrugged and turned away. His long legs carried him in the opposite direction of the Warbergs.

Would they remember him, let alone recognize him? Jamal had been ten when he'd lived with Dan and Sue Warberg. He was now fourteen, 5'4", with stubble on his upper lip. Thankfully, his long sleeves covered up his bicep tattoo of a knight chess piece. Although not the most powerful figure, definitely the most attractive one. Usually proud of it, he now felt silly.

He drifted toward Fairyland's outskirts. He didn't have enough money for an admission ticket. Should he hang out and "accidentally" bump into them when they leave? That could be hours.

He looked inside through the wrought-iron fence posts. Excited children climbed in and out of a giant shoe sculpture. Near its toe a ceramic old lady stood with her hands in the air, frozen with panic. A large sculpture of a dangling spider frightened a little girl. The teacup ride went round and round.

He kept walking around the park until he saw a giant chessboard with a life-size statue of a blonde girl standing on a square. He craned his neck to get a better view of the red knight and locate his queen and king. But the train station, with passengers loaded into the train, partially blocked his view of the board. He found the Warbergs settling themselves into a little open-air car, their arms holding that kid tight.

Chess, a game he learned from Mr. Warberg, had taught him to plan moves and think strategically. He had wanted Jamal to control his impulses. At first, all Jamal had done was attack, attack, attack. That was the code of the streets. But no matter how many of Mr. Warberg's pieces Jamal wiped off the board, he always checkmated Jamal—until Jamal learned how to be a positional player. Over the nine months he lived with them, Jamal practiced tactics. He began to develop patience. He worked on increasing his patience all the time. "Once you touch the piece there's no going back," Mr. Warberg would say.

His stomach growled. He wasn't feeling all that patient now. Damn, after four years of thinking about the Warbergs, how come they just showed up at the lake on the same day and time as he? There was no way they thought about him as much as he thought about them. Could they possibly wish he still lived with them the way he did?

He needed a strategy. He'd use the library's computer to look up their address. See if they lived in the same place. Then he had to figure out what he wanted.

After Googling "Dan Warberg, Oakland," he found they still lived in the hills that overlooked the flatlanders. Only six miles from his crummy west Oakland neighborhood. But when he'd lived there it had seemed a world away. He had to see the house again, this place where he'd felt safe for the first time in his life.

The hills were steep. Neither he nor his three-gear bike were in the best shape. When he finally turned onto their street, he recognized the house. The two large bay windows. He stared at the house for a long while. Now he needed a way to say, "Hey, remember me?"

The Warbergs' car wasn't in the driveway. Nobody seen through

the windows. He would wait. He hid his bike behind some trees so he could squat in the neighbor's bushes. Jamal couldn't believe this was where he learned not only to play chess but also to ride a bike. Mrs. Warberg had even made sure Theresa and he finished their homework before they watched TV.

"Hey, kid," a male voice said. "What are you doing there?"

Blood rushed into Jamal's ears. It must look like he was up to no good. He wanted to say, "I used to live there" but his throat swelled shut. He stumbled as he stepped forward.

"Nothing, sir," Jamal croaked.

"Nothing?" The man held hedge trimmers. "Just sitting in my bushes?"

With trembling legs, Jamal grabbed his bike and moved toward the street. He avoided eye contact with the old geezer.

"How old are you, kid?" the man asked, pointing the closed blades at him like his grandmother did with her finger.

"Fourteen," Jamal whispered. How cowardly he sounded.

"Aren't you a little young to be staking out houses?" the man said, moving closer to him.

"I was biking," Jamal said, gaining some courage. "And needed to piss."

"So you picked my bushes?" The man stared at him, as if trying to figure out if Jamal was telling the truth. "Now, go on, get out of here." The man waved his hands at him, shooing. "If I see you again, I'm calling the police."

Jamal jumped on his bike and moved his legs up and down, barely able to keep his feet on the pedals.

"I have an alarm. It goes right to the police," the old geezer shouted from behind him. "So I wouldn't mess with my house."

Did the Warbergs have an alarm when he'd lived with them?

He raced down the hill. The sun was setting and the sparkling lights of the city twinkled. When he lived up there the view of the shimmering bay water and the two graceful bridges had made him feel that he lived on top of the world.

Maybe he should have said something when he first saw the Warbergs in the Fairyland parking lot. But he had been so shocked to run into them after all those years. And they had that new kid. No way to be cool with all that jealousy circulating through his body.

Jamal sat at a table near the counter watching Keith flip the pizza dough before he pressed it into the metal pan.

"You've been watching them for a whole year?" Keith's eyebrows formed a line. Jamal nodded his head.

"And they haven't seen you?" Keith reached for the tomato sauce. "And you've never been caught?"

"I've been lucky," Jamal said. "But it'd be easier if I could drive. Especially at night."

"You're a crazy man," Keith said. "Why you do that?"

How could he tell Keith that the Warbergs didn't draw the shades most nights so he watched them through their bay windows? The same big glass windows Theresa and he used to look out over everyone else. Over the year Jamal had discovered that Mrs. Warberg had been pregnant at Fairyland. He saw her grow bigger and finally one day he was hiding when she took the new baby, Kate, for a walk in the neighborhood.

Keith taught him to drive and let him borrow the car. Jamal drove up the hill. It was already dark. The fog had moved in, and the air had grown so misted that he was glad he could watch from inside the car. Mrs. Warberg placed cups next to Mr. Warberg and Charles (he had learned the kid's name), who were playing chess on the dining room table.

That should've been him! He wanted to drive right through that window, smash the glass, break the table in two, stop the game. Instead he careened down the hilly neighborhood's narrow streets. His car hit a pothole, flattening the front passenger-side tire. Jamal groaned. He needed to get out of there.

He had just finished fixing the flat when a police car passed him.

The officer watched Jamal place the tire iron back in the trunk. Jamal, sopping wet, climbed back into the driver's seat. He shivered from the cold moist air. The cop followed him all the way down the hill and finally left him when he drove onto the freeway entrance back to his part of town.

It was nearly 9:00 p.m. when he got home. His mother wasn't around. Theresa sat on the couch watching TV and smoking a cigarette. The way Theresa leaned pulled the couch's denim slipcover off, revealing the faded flower cushions beneath her.

Her hair was pulled back and held down with a bright orange scarf. She wore it like that when she didn't straighten it. Theresa picked up the remote and began channel surfing. Without cable, they didn't have many choices. No baby Dominic with her. Must have already put him to bed.

"I can't get a clear picture tonight." Her frustration seemed equal to his. She clicked the TV off.

Jamal walked into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator.

"Want a cold beer?" Theresa called out. "I got them out here."

Jamal could use a beer after cutting it close with that cop. If he drank one with her, he could make sure she didn't drink enough to put Dominic in danger. Neither of them did drugs after seeing what it did to their mother.

"How about me teaching you how to play chess?" Jamal said, coming out of the kitchen. Theresa hadn't been interested when Mr. Warberg had wanted to teach her. Maybe without TV, she'd be willing.

"How come you love that game?" Theresa asked.

"I love the strategy," Jamal said. "Every move has purpose. I plan ahead. Keeps me out of trouble." He was good at chess. Mr. Warberg had said so. He was the first adult that told him he was good at something. "I don't just retaliate like my friends do. I've learned to slow down and consider my options."

"That game's too slow for me," Theresa said.

"It may look slow." Jamal threw his shoulders back, "but being

a positional player makes my brain go a million miles a minute. I'm always thinking three or four moves ahead."

"Well, my brain doesn't move so quick these days. That baby waking up at all kinds of crazy hours," Theresa said, the corners of her mouth turned down. "Besides, you're so much smarter than me."

When Jamal first learned to play chess he had wanted to play the game all the time. Nearly drove Mr. Warberg nuts. When he returned to his old school Jamal found a math teacher willing to play, but back then he was too resentful to concentrate. Recently, Jamal found some old guys down at the community center but he continued to beat them all. Mr. Warberg had taught him well.

"That's not true," Jamal said, sitting down next to her. "You're just out of practice since you stopped going to school."

A cry interrupted them.

"There's Dominic now." Theresa turned her head. "Both school and chess going to have to wait." Theresa rose from the couch.

Jamal reached out to clasp her hand but she moved too fast. His hand swiped at the air before coming to rest at his side.

"Theresa, you ever heard of Fairyland?" Jamal said, following her into her room.

"What about it?" She shrugged, lifting Dominic out of his crib.

"Looked fun. Might take Dominic someday," Jamal said. "Saw the Warbergs there."

"Seriously?" Theresa reached for her pack of cigarettes on the dresser. "What were you doing there?"

"Let me take Dominic," Jamal said, stretching out his arms. "Keith and I were chilling in the park."

She handed him the baby. He sat down on her bed, lay back against the wall, and cradled Dominic in his arms.

"You ever think about what our lives would be like if they had adopted us, like they wanted to?" Jamal said.

"No, not really. Ain't nothing to think about." She turned toward him with one hand on her hip.

"You don't wonder," Jamal said, looking away from Dominic, who

had fallen back to sleep. "What if we had stayed living up there and gone to Redwood High instead of crummy Montgomery High?"

"Why do you think about that life when that's not what went down?" Theresa asked, lighting a cigarette.

"I know." Jamal shifted his weight, trying not to wake the baby. "But what if it had?"

"I probably wouldn't have Dominic." She stood up and glanced around the room. "Jamal, have you seen my jean jacket? I wonder if Mom took it." She rifled through her closet.

"When was the last time you saw Mom?" Jamal asked.

"Day before yesterday," Theresa said. "She said she was going to stay at Prince's house for a few days till the check comes." Theresa tapped the ashes of her burning cigarette and took a drag.

Their mom, so thin now, would swim in Theresa's jacket. But they did look alike. Seventeen years apart, just like Theresa and Dominic. Theresa used to be prettier before she got fat from the baby.

"How does this look?" Theresa was asking about the blouse she'd squeezed into.

"Where you going?" Jamal stared at her protruding belly. If she kept smoking and drinking beer she would look older than she was, like their mother did.

"That good, huh." Theresa frowned. "Okay, let me see if this top fits. Close your eyes."

Jamal pressed his lips onto Dominic's soft tummy while Theresa tried on another shirt. He thought about when they went to court so the Warbergs could become their legal guardians. They had both worn new clothes. Theresa had looked so pretty with red bows in her hair. His hair was real short and his shoes shined.

They had sat in the courtroom's first row, Mrs. Warberg between them. Mr. Warberg sat up at the table with the attorney. Jamal smiled, recalling how short his legs were back then, his heels making hollow sounds when they hit the wood panel that extended below the courtroom benches.

"There's Dad," Theresa squealed. "With Grandmamma." She

leaned over Mrs. Warberg and squeezed Jamal's thigh when their dad and grandmamma walked into the room. It had been two years since they last saw them. They were dressed up like they were going to church. The large bailiff blocked his dad from getting too close by stepping between them and the center aisle. Mrs. Warberg's frightened eyes looked at Mr. Warberg, who whispered to the lawyer. The judge seemed to stiffen and sniff the air as if she smelled trouble.

The proceedings began. Jamal had been bored and fidgety during all the talking. He didn't understand what the adults were saying when he heard his grandmamma's voice. Rising from her seat, pink church hat still on her head, she wagged her finger at the judge and declared, "No kids of my son going to be raised by an Oreo cookie and a white man." Someone had gasped. Both Theresa and Jamal had turned to Mrs. Warberg, who sat frozen.

"Look now, Jamal," Theresa said. She had on a longer but still too-tight shirt. "Why are you scrunching up your face like that?" Theresa put out her cigarette.

"Just thinking," Jamal stared at her. "Do you remember what you thought when you heard Dad say he wanted custody of us?"

"I remember the judge asking Dad to come forward," Theresa said. "When she asked him if he could take care of his kids, he said he could with his momma's help. And when the judge asked him where he had been the past few years, he told her he'd been in jail for drug dealing and looking for us ever since he got out." Theresa rolled her eyes and snorted through her nose. "Looking for us, yeah right."

Theresa bent over to collect all the clothes on the floor. She dumped the pile on her bed next to Jamal. She looked at Dominic.

"He asleep again, huh?" Theresa said. "Wanted to feed him before Tobias came by for him. I remember how I cried when the Warbergs brought over our stuff the next day. How they cried, too. I hated Dad for refusing to let them in to say goodbye. The neighbors staring at us hugging out on the front porch."

She wiped her eyes, grabbed her mascara, and started applying it. Jamal stared at Theresa's face in the mirror. Why doesn't she feel any

regret like he did?

"And that's that, kiddo." She turned to face him. "That was five years ago, and we are here and they are there. I got to get ready to go out."

"Where are you going?" Jamal asked. He stood. He surrounded Dominic with pillows and a blanket.

"A party. Tobias going to watch him." Theresa stepped past him and into the bathroom and shut the door.

"I know where the Warbergs live," Jamal said through the door. "And they have new kids."

Theresa opened the door, her eyebrows knitted together, her mouth open.

"New kids?" she asked. "Their kids or kids like us?"

"Charles is seven now and Kate, one. I think he was adopted and she's theirs." He scratched his head. "Sometimes I wonder how Charles likes that."

"Jamal, how come you know so much?" Theresa asked.

"I watch them," Jamal said.

"You what?" Theresa's eyes grew wide.

"Have been for over a year."

"And you never been caught?" Theresa narrowed her eyes.

"Once by a neighbor and almost when I got a flat in Keith's car. But I'm careful."

"Why?" Theresa lifted her shoulders. "What is the point of torturing yourself?"

"But that's just it." Jamal raised his voice. "They could've raised us but Grandmamma said no. She told the judge she and Dad would take care of us. And we haven't seen Dad in two years and Grandmamma in over a year. And Mom's practically living at Prince's."

"Well, Dad's in jail for robbing those people and Grandma's sick," Theresa said. "It's better that Mom be there than be here telling me to keep Dominic quiet and bumming cigarettes off me."

"But why didn't they want a better life for us?" Jamal's eyes filled with tears.

Theresa placed her hand on Jamal's shoulder.

"No one thinks somebody else can do better by their kids than they can." Theresa pulled Jamal close to her.

They both knew that wasn't always true.

"I really do have to go. Tobias will be here before I know it. And his time to watch him for two hours starts when he gets here, not when I leave." She released him and shut the bathroom door. As Jamal walked away he heard her say, "Jamal, don't go there anymore."

Once the Warbergs were out of view, Jamal got out of the car and walked around their house. He pressed his face against the windowpane of his old room, cupping his hands to block the glare. The bed and the desk were the same. There was a new dresser and a bookcase. The window rattled, without a lock to hold it in place.

Jamal slid the window up and climbed in. His legs trembled as if he were on a tight wire. He looked around the room, sat on the bed and picked up a stuffed animal. Charles had so many toys he'd never seen before. These could have been his. He clenched both his jaw and his fists. His eyes landed on the chess set on Charles' desk, set up and ready for play. That was the board he first learned to play on. He picked up a piece. When they were packing, Mr. Warberg had asked him if he wanted to take the set with him. He had said, "No. Keep it here." Jamal hadn't realized he'd never live in this house again.

Now looking back, he felt angry the hearing had just been a game to his father and Jamal had been played like a pawn. His dad hadn't really wanted him. He just used his advantage to stop the Warbergs from raising him.

He took one last look around and climbed back out the window. Safe in his car he promised himself that he would never do that again. He had seen all that he needed to.

But he did return. He had seen the nanny hide the key and so he used it, walking from room to room to see what had changed. And each time he entered the house, he stayed longer and longer. Jamal told himself this was okay. He never took anything and put things back where

he found them.

The Warbergs placed suitcases in their trunk. The nanny and the kids waved goodbye. Jamal returned the next day, waited for the nanny to go to the gym, and entered the house. He assembled Charles' Magformer XLCruiser and left it lying on the rug. He climbed onto Charles' bed, leaned back against the pillows, and played solitaire on Charles' iPad. He heard a footstep. He listened for a moment, heard nothing else, and returned to the game. He heard footsteps again and saw a shadow on the hallway wall through the doorframe. *What the hell?* The iPad slipped from his moist hands. He scrambled to his feet. A police officer entered the room, a gun pulled from his holster.

"Put your hands on top of your head," the cop said, moving toward him.

Jamal raised his arms. The way his heart pounded he bet the damned cop could hear it. As the cop frisked him, sweat poured from Jamal's shaking body. Should he try to explain that this was once his room and he was just playing with the toys? He remained silent.

Within seconds, Jamal was handcuffed, and the cop radioed. "Caught a kid in the bedroom. Bringing him out."

Jamal's legs felt like they had liquefied. It took all his strength to walk and not form a puddle on the ground. A second police officer read him his Miranda rights before placing him into the back seat of the patrol car. He took deep breaths. His cheeks burned.

"I didn't take anything," Jamal said from the backseat.

"Tell it to the probation officer when we get to Juvenile Hall," the officer said.

As they drove away, Jamal glanced down the side street and could just make out the front of Keith's parked car sticking out from behind a white pick up truck. That's where he should be. Foot on the accelerator, hands on the wheel, heading for home.

In a small windowless room with a round table Jamal thought about the past year and how his obsession with the Warbergs had created

a magnet's pull he couldn't overcome. He had convinced himself that he had it together. The truth was he had been out of control. Like his mother, he was an addict, only he was addicted to a different drug.

"I'm Officer Vargas," the probation officer said, shutting the door. He was a fat white guy in a regular suit. He leaned so close, Jamal could smell his minty breath.

"So you used to live in the Warbergs' house?" Officer Vargas said.

"Yes, sir," Jamal said. "I was playing in my old bedroom."

"How did you get in?" Officer Vargas asked.

"I used a key." Jamal's eyes blinked rapidly.

"That's strange. If they knew you were coming, why was their alarm on?" The officer scratched his head. "Did you have their permission? Or were you breaking and entering?"

"Don't I get to call someone?" Jamal asked.

"Well, you're going to be spending some time with us until the Warbergs get back. They need to confirm your story and decide if they want to press charges. We're trying to reach them now." The officer leaned back in his chair and folded his arms across his chest. "Besides kid, who can you call? The officer's eyes lit up.

He wasn't sure if Keith's phone was connected this week. And Theresa didn't even have a license. His mom would be of no help. Not really any choices.

"We've reached the Warbergs," another officer said, stepping into the room. "They are catching a red-eye and will be here first thing in the morning."

Jamal slouched. Morning? He breaths grew shallow at the thought of spending the night there and facing the Warbergs.

He would use the night to think strategically. Anticipate Mr. Warberg's moves. The Warbergs clearly had the advantage. He needed to mount a strong defense. He planned his moves: reassure them he meant no harm, make clear his desire, show remorse, try to gain their sympathy, apologize, convince them he'd never do it again. If all else failed, beg for mercy. Bile rose up his throat.

*

"The Warbergs are here," an unfamiliar officer said.

Jamal jumped from the sound of the male voice. There was drool on his cheek. He must have fallen asleep sitting up, leaning against the wall. His body tensed. At the sink he splashed cold water on his face. Since there was no towel, he wiped his face with his jacket. Without a mirror he didn't know what he looked like.

The officer unlocked the cell. He beckoned for Jamal to follow. He looked out the window of an open room. The sun hadn't even risen. The Warbergs must have come straight from the airport.

Dan and Sue Warberg sat on one side of a rectangular metal table. Mrs. Warberg's eyes were puffy. Mr. Warberg's skin was ashen, almost ghost-like. They both looked tired. If only he and Mr. Warberg were here to play chess. Their eyes grew wide at the sight of him. Mr. Warberg stood up. Mrs. Warberg jerked her neck back like a frightened horse. Jamal reminded himself that he had seen them over the past year but they had not seen him for five years. He was no longer that cute little boy. Jamal was practically a man, and probably scary to them.

"Hello, Jamal," Mr. Warberg said, extending his hand. The officer moved in close to prevent them from shaking hands.

"Hello, sir." Jamal noticed the lines on Mr. Warberg's face. Had they always been there or did they just form on the overnight plane ride?

"How's it worked out with your Dad?" Mr. Warberg said, locking eyes with him.

"It hasn't, sir," Jamal said, looking at one and then the other. "We're back with our mom." Both of the Warbergs' faces frowned.

"Sue and I hoped to see you again someday," Mr. Warberg said. "But never imagined it would be under these circumstances." With this opening banter Mr. Warberg had moved several pawns two squares forward.

So the Warbergs hadn't forgotten him. They had even wanted to see him. And Jamal, like a knight, leaped onto the board.

"I am sorry, sir," Jamal said. "About these circumstances." His

voice wobbled. "It wasn't like I was going to steal anything."

"Then, what were you planning?" Mr. Warberg asked. His unshaven face made him look mean.

"Just to see what I was missing." Jamal looked at Mrs. Warberg. Her head was down. He turned his head when he heard Mr. Warberg's voice.

"Had you been in the house before yesterday?" Mr. Warberg's face muscles stiffened, and he clenched his teeth. Like a rook, Mr. Warberg was straightforward and came at him at full speed.

"A few times, sir," Jamal said, his voice squeaky and high. "I know that was wrong. But I never took anything." He moved one square at a time.

Mr. Warberg slammed his fist on the table. Jamal jumped from the noise. Mrs. Warberg looked surprised as well. Jamal's Adam's apple throbbed. He felt defenseless.

"Were we ever home?" Mr. Warberg, looking scared, turned to his wife.

"No. Never," Jamal said. "I just wanted to look around. See the changes."

"So, you knew our schedule and entered when the house was empty?"

Jamal wasn't fending off these attacks very well. To stay in the game Jamal needed some offense. Could they understand his anger at being taken from them? They had been his chance at something better. Would they feel compassion?

"I would never hurt Mrs. Warberg, you, or the kids," Jamal said.

Mr. Warberg cringed at the mention of his kids. Like a bishop, no other could come to Jamal's defense.

"I am sorry if I scared you." Jamal couldn't bring his gaze to their faces. Sweat and chills alternated throughout his body. "I thought if I put everything back, there was no harm. I know that sounds stupid. I know I was stupid."

"Do you have any idea how we felt when the police called last night?" Mr. Warberg shouted. "We were across the country, away from

our children when we were told someone broke into our home.”

“I only wanted to be in my room again,” Jamal said. “Playing Charles’ chess set. I’ll never enter your house again, I promise.”

“Jamal,” Mrs. Warberg said, but her husband cut her off.

“Why didn’t you just knock on the door?” Mr. Warberg’s voice was firm. “Have us invite you in?”

Jamal looked at Mr. Warberg wide-eyed. He never imagined they would have invited him in.

“I was too scared,” Jamal said. “I thought you wouldn’t remember me. Or you’d tell me to go away.” There, he was completely exposed. He held his head in his hands.

“Of course we’d remember you,” Mrs. Warberg cut in. “How could you think we’d forget you and Theresa? We were so sorry things didn’t work out with us.”

She had tears in her eyes. Mrs. Warberg had shown her flexibility, the way a powerful queen could. But would she save him? Jamal had to appeal to her. Mrs. Warberg handed him a tissue.

“I wasn’t going to take anything, honest.” After wiping his eyes he continued, “I just wished things were different.”

“We believe you. That you didn’t take anything.” Mrs. Warberg reached out her hand. An officer stood. She withdrew it. “And we know you’d never harm us.”

“Thank you for believing me,” Jamal whispered.

“How did you get in?” Mr. Warberg said.

“Dan, he’s apologized.” Mrs. Warberg put her hand on her husband’s thigh. “That doesn’t matter. The alarm we installed worked like it was supposed to.”

Mr. Warberg brushed her hand aside and slid his chair away from her.

“Dan, I think we should take a break.” Mrs. Warberg rose from her seat. Mr. Warberg followed her to the door. What could Jamal say to save himself?

“Please, I need another chance.” Jamal clasped his hands in prayer position. “I don’t want a record. I’ve managed to stay out of trouble. I

promise I'll leave you alone."

"We'd like to give you another chance," Mrs. Warberg said, putting her hand on the door handle. "We need to talk with the officers. See what our options are."

Officer Vargas replaced the Warbergs. Were they willing to intervene once again? Give him another chance? One that his family couldn't take away.

Officer Vargas rose to a knock on the door. He returned a few minutes later. This was it. Jamal stood. His knees shook. He put his hands in his pockets so the officer wouldn't see them tremble.

"Kid, you're one lucky SOB," Officer Vargas said. "They aren't pressing charges. You're free to go."

"For real?" Jamal collapsed into the chair. Game over. The adrenaline drained from his body, leaving him spent. He wasn't sure he could walk out of there on his own.

"Can I give you a lift somewhere?" Officer Vargas asked.

"Could you drive me to my car? It's near the Warbergs."

"Sure," the officer said. "Let me get my things."

In the parking lot, Jamal walked with Officer Vargas toward the unmarked car. He saw the Warbergs in their car, but pretended not to.

"Jamal," Mr. Warberg called through the window.

Jamal looked up.

"Can we give you a lift home?" Mr. Warberg said.

Jamal looked at the officer, who shrugged.

"If you don't mind," Jamal said. "My car is up near your house."

"Stay out of trouble." Officer Vargas shook Jamal's hand. "Call me if you need anything."

"I will." Jamal slid into the back seat next to Kate's car seat. The Warbergs had looked so large when he sat in their backseat years ago. Now he was their size.

"I can't believe you're old enough to drive," Mrs. Warberg said.

"Yes, ma'am," Jamal said as they drove through downtown Oakland.

"Please, Jamal, don't call me ma'am or Mrs. Warberg. Call us Dan and Sue."

"Okay, ma'am," Jamal said. "I mean Sue."

They drove past Fairyland and the calm shiny lake. A plan started to form. He'd call Vargas, check out law enforcement. Figure it out.

Just as the car started to climb into the hills, the sun was coming over the ridge. They sat silently. Jamal's chest swelled when he saw Keith's car parked just where he left it. Jamal got out.

"Don't be a stranger, Jamal," Dan said. "You should come by to play chess."

"Here's our cell numbers," Sue said, writing on scrap paper.

"Thanks for the ride," Jamal said, stuffing the paper into his pocket. He wouldn't call. His addiction was broken and he had been given another chance. One he wouldn't waste. He slid into the driver's seat and headed down the hill, not once looking back.

ANOINTING OF THE SICK

EMILY SCHULTEN

The man who came was not clad in robes,
he was dressed in black and he stood over you.

You were getting smaller right in front of me—
hospital gowns have a way of shrinking people.

He made pictures on your forehead with olive oil
and prayed, signed crosses into your hands.

A ritual like our mother's, when we'd cough
late at night and she'd bring the thick syrup

and a spoon, press her backhand to our
foreheads, wipe the medicine from our chins.

Father asked you to confess all your wrongs,
recounted the passion, prepared you for health

or God. I made a point to hold your hand
after the priest left, to feel the slick blessing

and pull it away on my fingertips, take it
for myself, for my fear. In my room, I moved

my hands over my whole body before kneeling to pray.

I LIKE IT HERE IN AMERICA

M. A. VIZSOLYI

For Matthew Rohrer

we have bellies
consisting of a soft wind over water
& a money tree
grown so tall
we can no longer eat its fruit

though we can admire it
the way the light catches it
at dawn
while you & i
friend
sit with our coffees

i like it here in america

here
the birds innocently sing
doo-wop
music
which makes me happy

almost purely so

our rocks sneeze
occasional toxins

though it's not so bad

i like it here in america

i'm still allowed to smoke in my backyard
which is nice

& when i'm smoking
i'm allowed to enjoy the air
if i want to

up to me

& we have prettier things here than anywhere else

ourselves

look at how we look
at our screens
& get so much done

& our hate
our hate is more lovely
than moonlight over the Seine

now look to how we say good-bye
bow out

i like it here in america

perhaps
because i do not read the news

for obvious reasons
though
mostly because
it does not affect me

because i live in fantasy land

i like it here in america

we have the moon
which speaks only to us
showing off its bones
its perfect speech

it spoke to me
last night

it had the breath of a mother

did it speak to you?

BUNNY

STEVEN WARNER

I remember exactly how the bunny thing started because it was the first time I met John and it happened on New Year's Eve.

We were standing near a keg of beer. A lady started talking about boycotting fur coats and somehow that spun off into John telling us about the bunny.

John said he was standing on a tarmac at the DaNang airfield in 1968 with fifty other nineteen-year-old draftees who had been cramped in an American Airlines jet for twenty hours. They had just stepped out into 100-degree, slimy, humid air that stuck to them like sticky Jell-O and were breathing in for the first time the rotting garbage stink, unflushed toilet smell of Vietnam.

A Dachau-thin sergeant with hollow eyes was walking in and around their loose formation. He was holding a pink-nosed, white bunny that was mewling and writhing in his arms because the sergeant was not holding him gently. The sergeant said things were a lot worse in the Nam than they had been led to believe. He said the casualty figures were much higher than they had been told. He said the Army had been lying to the newspapers because it was the only way they could get stupid assholes like them to end up in this shit.

He told them to prepare immediately for a life that was totally different from anything they had ever known. They were going into a world where they could never relax, not even when they slept.

They would have to be on guard at all times. The sergeant tugged

harder on the bunny and it gave out a small yelp. They were going to see things they had never seen before. The life they knew was now dead and gone, and would be dead and gone for a year and one day, the day they returned home, if they were so lucky. And with that, the sergeant pulled and tore and ripped the bunny to pieces with his bare hands right there.

John said the rabbit screamed and his joints cracked like chicken bones and its guts splashed right out on the tarmac. The sergeant had blood all over him. Some of the soldiers puked.

The fur lady went ape shit. "Asshole! Why would you tell us that?" She stormed away.

John and I looked at each other.

He looked like a Santa Claus in training, a guy getting plump with a cherub face and a short brown beard that hadn't turned Santa white yet.

I think the reason John talked to me at the party—he was a bigwig in the PR department at a bank and I was a guy who stacked cans at night at Fazio's Supermarket—was because someone told him I was a Nam vet.

I lost my arm there. I can pick up a dime with my metal claw so I shouldn't be so ashamed of it. But I am. I never walk without a jacket or a sweater draped over it. I sit on the bus with my mechanical arm away from the aisle. When I'm talking to someone, I try to stand sort of sideways so my Captain Hook is not so visible.

Stacking cans kept me away from people and I didn't really mind that. I used my hook to reach the top shelves. It was good at that. While my metal hand stacked up cans of Popeye spinach, I sometimes thought about how it would be if I went to a club downtown. I am sitting by the bar and a woman comes up to buy a drink. She smiles at me and we talk. As I turn to her, she sees my claw, and, well, there it is.

I have a disability check from the government and my eleven-to-seven job at Fazio's. I've been working there for some time now. Only three of us work the night shift. We don't talk much, which is okay with me. I pull a cart that's as tall as I am loaded with cases of cans and then I stack them on the shelves, making sure they are perfectly aligned. No one sees my bad arm. I work away, humming every now and then to the crappy music the store keeps on throughout the night.

As I said, I keep my bad arm out of sight, but with John telling his bunny story and the way we were drinking, I had to do it. I held up a red plastic cup with my gleaming prosthesis and said what Nam grunts said when they saw shit happen: "There it is."

The phrase was used for a lot of things. When something unexpected happened we would say: There it is. Or, when something expected happened, we would say: There it is. When something inevitable happened: There it is.

We drank our beers. John and I were looking at each other. "It got blown off at Sumdumfucks, April 28, 1968."

We talked, sort of, but we didn't say anything more about the Nam because that's something you don't want to do when you're drinking.

After the ball came down at Times Square, I ate some more crab dip and a couple of stuffed mushrooms. John was eating too and, with greasy fingers and mouths half-full mumbling, we exchanged phone numbers.

I left soon after.

It wasn't six in the morning and my phone is ringing with Kim, John's wife, at the other end.

She said the drinking at the party had set him off and he was throwing furniture, breaking things when they got home. He was sleeping now in the basement rec room, but she was afraid when he woke up he'd start tearing things apart again. "He said that you would understand. I know you don't know who we are, but could you come over? Please?"

I was still pretty high from New Year's Eve. He didn't live that far away. *Why not*, I figured.

Kim was at the door. She was still wearing the sequined thing she wore at the party. "He hasn't acted like this in years. Years! But he's been on the wagon for a long time and it was the drinking, and you, that set him off."

"I set him off?"

"You set him off."

"Why don't you call one of his friends. A work buddy."

"No way. He's never talked to them about Vietnam. And he can't be seen this way."

There was all kinds of stuff from the refrigerator on the floor in the kitchen. He had taken a Honey-Baked ham and thrown it against a wall. He had put his foot through the bottom of two rattan and chrome kitchen chairs. He had not kicked in the TV or destroyed the stereo speakers so I took that as a positive sign that he wasn't totally out of his mind.

The rec room was musty and cold. I took a Dr. Pepper from the downstairs fridge and sat down in the worn easy chair across from John. When I snapped open the can, he stirred, sat up, and rubbed his forehead.

"You want me to get you a pop?"

He took a deep breath. "There's a real good bottle of champagne I stashed for a special occasion. Get it for us. It's in the back."

I came back with a dark bottle of Dom Perignon.

"So what did you think of the party?" he asked as we messed with the bottle.

"Nice. Food was good."

"When you held up the beer, you did it to me, you fucking asshole." Grunts can call each other "fucking asshole." It's a weird term of endearment. "You remind me so much of Wally. His arm was shot off, it was hanging there, spurting blood, and before we could get a good tourniquet on he died."

The champagne was opened.

We drank the first glass as if it were beer, and then the asshole began to cry.

"We lost two guys from sniper fire from the ville. The LT told us to waste it. Roger shot the young woman and then the two kids. The old man watching could not have been her husband. Her husband was a Charlie. The old man knelt down and kept saying: "Ban toi. Ban toi. Ban toi" He was asking us to shoot him. Roger turned to me and said: "It's your turn now." We left the dead kids and woman in the hut before we set it afire.

John cried more.

I looked down at the floor. I felt totally out of place. I shouldn't be in this guy's basement when he's like this, is how I felt.

"It's over, John. It's over," I said.

John perked up. "I thought it was a great party. Roger is now a biggie

in the Boston police department.”

“I thought it was a great party.”

“How did you lose your arm?”

“A grenade landed right next to me. I grabbed it and flipped it away when it went off. It killed Bill. Blew his head up. If I had flipped it farther he might have lived.”

That’s how we met and how I know about the rabbit thing.

John and I became friends, sort of. I mean a bank vice-president spending time with a guy like me, neither of us being gay, is weird. We talked sports sometimes. He said he got inspiration from me.

I was grateful to have someone to talk to.

We met a few times for breakfast after I got out of Fazio’s in the morning. We didn’t talk about the Nam at all, except for a little. John said he never slept very deeply, never had, even before the Nam. Now, in his mind were memories that kept coming back in his half-awake dreams. “I drive Kim nuts sometimes because I’m mumbling and tossing.”

John said he’d put in a word for me at the bank, and sure enough, because of him and my claw, I totally met a bunch of the government’s hire-the-handicapped and challenged veteran standards, so the bank gave me a half-time job delivering the mail in the morning, no benefits. Still it paid better than the supermarket job even at half-time and I guess I like being around people, even though I’m a cripple.

One month the bank’s monthly newsletter asked the question: “What can we do to help you vent the everyday frustrations that come with your job?”

People wrote in the same old, same old trite bullshit they always write for a company newsletter. Seminars. Get to throw a pie in your boss’ face. Hug sessions. Supervisors walk down the hall in their underwear. Noon karaoke. The ideas were all politically correct, stale corporate crap.

John wrote: “Establish a bunny room. We each get one rabbit every sixty days. When we can’t take it anymore, we are given one half-hour in the bunny room with our rabbit. We are supplied with plastic coveralls, tools such as mallets, hammers and axes, and no questions asked.”

What made the idea so weird is that John, a biggie, second or third on

the pecking order in the PR department, suggested it.

Of course the bunny idea was never published. The newsletter people were part of the PR department—they were right across the hall—so John's suggestion never found its way into print. But it was such a great joke that everyone heard about it.

Someone would find a rabbit picture in a magazine and pin it up on the PR department bulletin board with a handwritten caption: "For you, John." People would pin up rabbit jokes like: "Why did the rabbit cross the road? To screw the chicken." For John's birthday, the department took up a collection and bought him a beautiful stuffed rabbit, a realistic white one with a pink nose, black button eyes and long bunny ears.

People came out of their cubicles and sang "Happy Birthday" in the hall before they gave John the rabbit. He kissed it, thanked everyone and then punted it like a football halfway down the hall. We all laughed our asses off.

When the bottom fell out of the economy and the bank started downsizing, I kept my job because I was part-time, no benefits.

But John and many others were axed.

Everyone had known about the coming cuts for some time. But how deep they were—PR was cut by two-thirds—stunned everyone. Thursday morning, people were called out, one by one into the manager's office and told about the counseling they would receive, if they wanted it, to get them ready to face that they were out of work in a rotten economy. They had to clear out their workstations by the end of the week.

I was pushing the cart through the PR department, the mail bag over my claw, when John stepped out of his office. He talked loudly so the people in the cubicles around us could hear. "This is my life they are messing with, big time." He was holding the big white bunny he had kept on his desk. He walked down the hall. "You want to know how I feel?" People were coming out to watch him. "You want to see how I feel?"

John let out a primal, animal yell that sounded like a man with his testicles in a vise and tore the bunny to pieces with a spectacular intensity. Cotton stuffing, rabbit ears, paws and tufts of white fur flew everywhere as John grunted, ripped and tore. A black button eye rolled across the floor.

Debbie, the redheaded secretary, also fired, grabbed the teddy bear on her desk. "Yeaaaaahuuugggyeaaa!" she yelled and tried to tear it apart. But she was only able to pull out one of its paws. She saw I was watching her so she tossed it to me. I put its head between my knees and got my iron arm out into it and pulled it so hard the place was sprayed with its sawdust stuffing.

Friday evening, after work, there was a goodbye party at the spaghetti house. John invited me to be his designated driver, which is something of a joke, but I said I would.

The cuts at the bank were more than just PR and Communications. There were people from Advertising and Human Resources and others were there too. We filled the whole bottom floor and the waiters moved the tables so that we could set up an area for the pile of goodbye gifts people had brought.

Everyone was asked to bring something funny, something that people would remember forever. As the gifts were opened, I saw: praying hand maracas, a *Dewey, Screwem & Howe* legal firm's t-shirt, a black velvet tapestry of Elvis walking his granddaughter down the church aisle to the waiting Michael Jackson, a hula girl with a plastic skirt to shake in the back window of a car, a beer can that played *Ave Maria*, a BAN BUMPER STICKERS bumper sticker, a palm-sized guitar that played loud Jimmy Hendrix music, an electronic turtle with red eyes that turned its head from side to side.

Debbie's boyfriend was a wannabe professional magician. He stepped out of the kitchen, complete with tuxedo, top hat, white gloves, and a magic cane.

He had John stand in the middle of the room.

The magician pulled golf balls from John's ears, and a fiery flash of flame from the front of his pants.

"And now, from all of your friends."

The magician took off his top hat, reached in, and handed John a real, live, pink-nosed bunny.

"When you get home, you do that sucker in," said Debbie, totally stewed and silly.

"When I get home?" John began to pull on the rabbit's legs and I swear it screamed as loud as a man who had just been set on fire. It began to wiggle and then sprayed pee on the magician.

People in the room started moving away fast. A couple of plates hit the ground and shattered.

John loosened his grip on the rabbit and it calmed down and began making loud mewling noises like a kitten.

Those who stayed at their table were quiet and big-eyed.

"Ha, hah, ha," said John, imitating with words the sound of laughing. "We're all being fired, hah, hah, ha. This is all so very funny, isn't it....Hah, hah, hah."

The bunny tried to jump and began to kick and squirm again.

"Don't do it! Don't do it!" John's wife said. "Please John, don't."

"I'm calling the police," said a waiter.

John started out of the restaurant, holding the rabbit. I followed him.

The spaghetti house is right next to an ancient cemetery that was already packed with dead people a hundred years ago. We stepped over a few gravestones before we stopped.

He turned to me. "What do you say?" He was holding the rabbit in such a way that I knew what he meant.

"John, look at your shirt. You got pee all over."

"Son of a bitch," he muttered.

"Give it to me. I'll do it."

I grabbed the rabbit and held it with my good hand while it kicked and peed yet again. I pulled its head back so that its belly was up and white.

I looked at John. He took a deep breath.

I put the bunny down and it hopped away and disappeared among the black obelisks, tiny monuments, and weather-beaten gravestones.

"There it is," I said.

BUILDING A TURTLE

**CHARLES
HARPER WEBB**

The fiberglass that veterinarians use to patch
real turtles dropped off cliffs,
hit by cars, or cracked by hammer-swinging boys,
makes a good shell. With enough skill,

you can carve a shell from wood, or sculpt one
out of stone. *Papier maché* spares the turtle
heavy lifting, but dissolves in rain.
Paint the shell as you see fit; carve it

with stars, diamonds, naked girls; it's *your*
turtle. Use braided wire, jointed dowels,
or rubber for the legs and tail. Glued-on
sunflower seeds make first-rate scales;

or try sequins, for a country-western feel.
Goose-neck lamp-metal works for turtles, too.
The tube holds batteries to light the eyes—
brown for female, orange for male. The head

can be wood, metal, or plastic, as long
as the beak takes an edge, and the jaw moves.
Screw or super-glue the head into the neck.
(A pink eraser-slice makes a good tongue.)

Fill the shell with something light—crumpled
newsprint, spun fiberglass—held in by soft
leather or plastic that mimics wrinkled skin.
Instilling life is trickier. Turtles struck

by lightning may “go Frankenstein.”
Jesus succeeded by commanding, “Crawl!”
(Try it yourself. You never know . . .)
The surest bet is to submerge your turtle

in water like what sloshed in ancient seas.
Cover with a dome that lets in sun
and cosmic rays. Wait in a comfortable place.
“Slow as a turtle,” people say.

SNAILS

**CHARLES
HARPER WEBB**

They glide out on morning's bay:
banded brown-and-yellow ships,
each riding its own fleshy wave.
Bend close, and you can hear mates

bellow, "Fizzen the mainstump!
Bedaff the grob! Put yer backs
into it, ya blungy sidesores!"
Hornpipes scree. Sailors' feet

slam oaken decks. Ant-sized
lookouts bawl, "Darcy blows!"
If I've slept well, and have nowhere
else to go, sometimes I'll shrink

and climb on board.
I'm the Captain, naturally—
sovereign-sent to find new
worlds, and found new colonies.

My men are scared, but place
their faith in me to steer us
out across the vast driveway,
our ship dragging its silver wake

from the land of agapanthus
and ice plant toward fabled
Rosegar-Den. There, flowers
huge as human heads spritz

perfume and cheer, waving
their pink, red, and gold petals
with pride, as—for us alone—
their harbor opens wide.

HORSE-DRIVEN MEN

**TANA JEAN
WELCH**

the runaway:

I can use my body to straddle
or save the universe,

to be a soft animal
for a man
or woman who knows how to touch and

travel the surface of my quiet skin, how to span
the bridge—

it's all right to miss my mother and I do
when I see the lemon tree
in the courtyard, when I pick one to slice through

I see sugar drops, but no ditch reeds,
no scorpions in sight. Once I

cried a thrum
of tears.

I surveyed the stars,
like when dad died: our backs to the grass, sucking on rum

Welch

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Lifesavers, Red Vines, my mother and I gazing at the lost centaur

who succumbed

to a brilliant loss of control

and scattered his armor from pole to pole.

"TO BREATHE WHAT SHE BREATHED ALL THE TIME"
AN INTERVIEW WITH
STEPHANIE POWELL WATTS

BY

MELANIE J. CORDOVA

Stephanie Powell Watts was the keynote speaker for the 14th annual *Writing By Degrees Graduate Creative Writing Conference*, reading from her excellent collection of short stories *We Are Taking Only What We Need*. I was struck by how warm and kind she was, and how thoughtfully she answered questions after her keynote speech. We are very grateful that she took the time to share her insight with us further.

MJC: Your collection *We Are Taking Only What We Need* is clearly grounded in place—"Highway 18" and three others even reference place in their titles—and I'm wondering if you set out to depict rural life in North Carolina or if that's simply what you found emerging as you wrote. How do you feel that your own location influenced your development as a writer?

SPW: I grew up in a rural setting for the most part. Being in a small place, relatively isolated from the the goings-on of town is a great laboratory for creativity, I think. When people have nothing to do they become desperate—for companionship, for connection, for amusement, for love, for an intricate little machine to occupy their watchmaker minds. I happen to be from a rural place, but kids in the seventies and eighties in Brooklyn created a whole different kind of music without instruments with turntables and the sounds they could produce from manipulating the speed of a record because they were alone and poor and bored. Having to amuse yourself can create great problems and great adventures. Those problems make good fiction. I

did not set out to write about rural North Carolina, but I found as I wrote one story after the other that this locale was preoccupying my thinking. You can't escape your place. Learning to shake hands with and be civil with your place is a first step to understanding its influence on you and your work. I may not love every aspect of where I'm from, but it is my home, love it all the time, or not.

MJC: Each story has a distinctive narrative pull. I'm curious how the audience figures in the equation of your story-building, and what sort of work or consideration you do to pull the audience into these lives.

SPW: Every writer wants an audience. I would argue that even if you are writing a diary or journal you are writing for the future you—a different audience—than the current you. But literary writers can't be too concerned about who will read the story and certainly not who will buy the story. Tastes change, old ideas become radical new ones, one kind of story hits big and suddenly there are a dozen stories just like it flooding the market. One of the hardest things to realize is you can't control any of that. You have to write the best story you know how to write, one that says something true about what it means to live. People respond to truth. I don't mean the answers to life's huge questions. I mean accuracy. The ways we look at a face we love, the things we hear when we are alone in the woods, the thoughts that occupy us in a hospital waiting room. If we tell the truth about what it is to try to make it and thrive in this world, we have done something large and significant. We have connected people to a humanity that they are looking to recover, a humanity that can be stripped by the mundane, tedious, and inconsequential. That's doing something worthwhile. I hope what I'm about to say isn't contradictory, but I am a firm believer that a writer should write to communicate with others. We want desperately to create a bridge to another person with the things we as writers create. If our work isn't clear enough, doesn't have anything startling and exciting to say about what it means to be alive, then it won't touch and inspire the reader; it won't be true.

MJC: So many of the stories in your collection are told from the point of view of girls or young women, and show the nature of growing up female in our culture. What attracts you to this perspective?

SPW: I am very interested in the lives of girls (adolescents and a little older) who are trying to define the terms of their lives. Before we create the terms of our lives, the boundaries, there are periods, moments that our lives are not cast and set. Whether we realize it or not at the time, these days are important ones that shape the days after. The women in my stories are smart but not educated, they are not rich and their choices in many ways are fewer by those limited means and opportunities. They know none of this. Do you remember when you were a kid and race didn't matter, you didn't know who was rich or poor or who lived in the good neighborhood? You see small children playing at a park together and the issues that are so divisive and crucial in our social lives are hardly acknowledged. Slowly the pernicious ideas that divide us and tell us that one group is better or luckier or more beautiful or smarter than another seep into our consciousness. Adolescence is a time when so many of life's road blocks matter but do not feel as important as they can be later in our lives. There is no Romeo and Juliet or a million other stories like it without the openness and sense of possibility that defines adolescence. I love thinking about situating my characters in that less restrictive—not more innocent—but less mentally-confined time.

MJC: Similarly, I'm curious about your choice to use the first-person perspective. Is that something that emerged naturally from the stories as you wrote them, or was it a struggle to decide which piece had the type of character to speak in first-person? For example, Sheila's third-person story in "Black Power" compared to Dee's in "If You Hit Randolph County, You've Gone Too Far."

SPW: I wrote most of these stories in the past six or seven years. I did not write them with a collection in mind, but after the fact I decided that they belong together. These stories are kind of a chorus of rural, poor black

women at the end of the twentieth century. I wanted the reader to be close to the protagonist, to breathe what she breathed all the time, and I thought that first-person narration would accomplish that. I wanted people to think that even though these protagonists might differ from them in significant social or cultural ways, they share with them the same selfish hearts, the same anxieties, the same hopefulness, the same desire to live well. I love first-person narrations. When we were all kids we heard stories from a storyteller that knew everything and understood everything. Once upon a time there was a narrator in our stories who knew who was evil or strong, and who had a tortured, but good heart. And that narrator gave us that information directly and without obfuscation. First-person narration gives us the best we can know about the inner workings of another human being's mind and heart. We know everything in the character's consciousness to the tune of the protagonist's own distinctive voice and cadence. It is the closest we can come to the fairytale narration that we all know by heart. Third-person gives us much more flexibility and movement in the storytelling. I will also use third-person narration in my stories, especially if I need more a landscape camera shot in the scenes I build with my characters.

MJC: The title of this collection has always fascinated me. I can see a way that characters in each story are taking according to their need—very literally in the case of Leslie of “Unassigned Territory,” and, obviously, with the title story. When you put together this collection, how did you decide that “We Are Taking Only What We Need” would be the glue that holds it together? In what way do characters like Portia and Cal in this story fly a banner characters in the other stories?

SPW: When people are desperate and fleeing they don't spend a lot of time figuring out what is valuable and what is expendable. They act quickly, but with clear minds and with their best instincts. They take what they need, nothing else. Because they have their needs taken care of, they can survive. The rest: the frills, the extras, the comforts can come later. All of my characters are desperate. They need connection and direction in the worst way. Like the fleeing person from the ruined house, they might make mistakes,

regret the thing left behind in haste, but keeping it moving means that you can't spend too much time in the even recent past.

MJC: In what tradition do you see yourself as an author, and could you point to specific influences you have had in your career, specifically related to *We Are Taking Only What We Need*? Who are you reading right now?

SPW: My influences are many and far-ranging, from Ellery Queen and Asimov to literary giants like Toni Morrison and Edward Jones. I can't tell you how important it is to read about people, circumstances and points of view that you recognize. You get permission to write about your people and circumstances from your point of view. You get a tickle in your brain that your own story might be worth telling. What a gift those writers (and many many others) have given to me. I am a female, African American, post-integrationist, southern, writer. I am proud of all those designations and all of the social and cultural issues that accompany those descriptions are the stuff of my writing. In other words, I am a writer in the new century.

MJC: Congratulations again on receiving the Whiting Writers' Award. It is well-deserved. As you are looking ahead, what is on the forefront for your work? How has this award influenced your writing life or the direction you'd like to take in the future?

SPW: My father worked in furniture factories when I was a kid. Often he worked two full-time jobs and half a day on Saturday. The week of July the 4th the factory was closed and my father got jobs landscaping, painting houses, doing whatever he needed to do to keep our lights on. The gift of that Whiting money means time and time is the most important commodity in the writer's life. With the flexibility the Whiting Foundation has given me I can do the kind of work my father always hoped I would be able to do. That's a big deal to me. I am working on a novel called *No One is Coming to Save Us*. I hope this title is not too depressing. I don't mean it to be. The characters come to the realization (or not) that they have to be piloting their own lives. The impossible is not going to happen; the jobs aren't coming

back, and neither are the dead. The story is a loose retelling of *The Great Gatsby* set in rural North Carolina in the beginning of the twenty-first century with poor black people. It is practically the same story as the original *Gatsby*.

Harpur Palate would like to extend many thanks to Stephanie Powell Watts for her time and generosity. We look forward to reading *No One is Coming to Save Us*.



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JANET SCHNEIDER writes during the winter in Berkeley, CA and in Charlevoix, Michigan all summer long. Her fiction and non-fiction work has appeared in *Traverse Magazine*, *Yourlifeisatrip.com*, and *Fishfoodandlavajjuice.com*. She received her MFA in fiction writing from Spalding University in Louisville, Kentucky. When she's not writing, she's riding her bike.

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With special thanks to Colleen Burke, Professor David Bartine, and Dean Susan Strehle.

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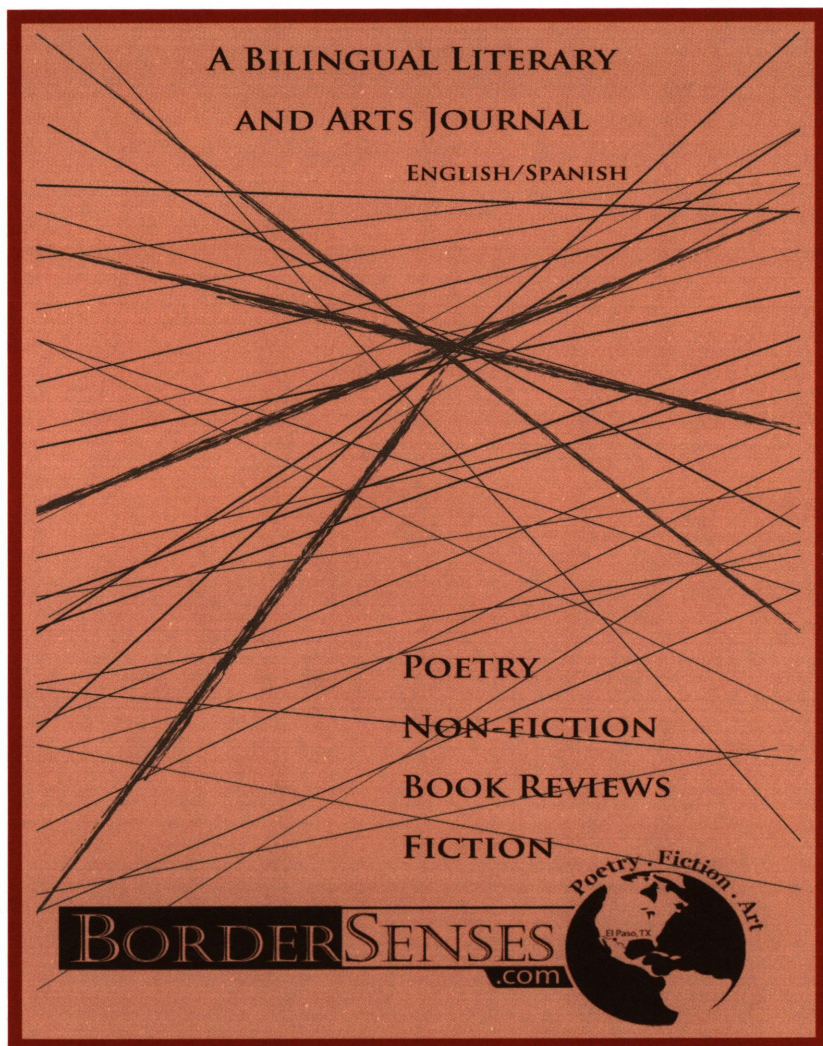


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The image is a vintage-style poster with a dark red border. Inside the border is a light brown background. At the top, a black horizontal bar contains the text "PUT ON YOUR SUNDAY BEST" in white, all-caps, sans-serif font. Below this is a portrait of a wolf's head, which is anthropomorphized by wearing a white dress shirt, a dark bow tie, and a dark tuxedo jacket. The wolf has grey and brown fur and is looking directly at the viewer. Below the portrait, the text "SUBMIT TO THE MISSISSIPPI REVIEW CONTEST" is written in a small, black, all-caps, sans-serif font. This is followed by two lines of text: "INFO AT MISSISSIPPIREVIEW.COM, MSREVIEW@USM.EDU" and "AND FIND US ON THE [FACEBOOK.COM/MSREVIEW](https://www.facebook.com/MSREVIEW)".

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