HARPUR PALATE

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BINGHAMTON UNIVERSITY

HARPUR PALATE

SUMMER & FALL

BINGHAMTON, NEW YORK

Vol 15 No 1

"The older veterans are drunk and stumbling. They fall in the snow and pick each other up. They're going to a parade or coming from a parade. No one knows."

—Carrie Messenger, "My Soviet Shadow"

Summer & Fall 15.1

HARPUR PALATE

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

JOHN GARDNER MEMORIAL PRIZE IN FICTION WINNER

60	Hourglass	Sam Keck Scott

CREATIVE NONFICTION SELECTIONS

7	Silence and Surrender	Marilee Robin Burton
40	My Soviet Shadow	Carrie Messenger
90	Vegetable Psychology, Lovesick Astrology	Elizabeth Zaleski

FICTION SELECTIONS

12	Climate Change	Kerry Donoghue
68	Guadalupe	Zach VandeZande

POETRY SELECTIONS

1	Battle Lines	Aimée Baker
3	Fourteen Pounds	Aimée Baker
5	My Step-Father Shows Me How to Clean an Abalone	Garrett Bryant
10	Your Mother, My Mother All Once Removed	Laurin DeChae
27	Desert Solstice	Trina Gaynon
29	Walt Whitman	Jasper Haze
30	Kurt Vonnegut Narrates My Dream About Natural Selection	Zebulon Huset

32	Newly Strange	Gwendolyn Jensen
33	Another Wild Animal	Brad Johnson
34	Tips from the Morton Salt Girl	Rhonda Lott
35	The Racoon in My Ceiling	Rhonda Lott
36	Suicide Watch I	Andrew McFadyen-Ketchum
38	Suicide Watch II	Andrew McFadyen-Ketchum
54	Found Poem	Jane Molinary
57	Why My Daughter Thought I Was Having a Stroke - Why I Knew It Was the Vicodin	Robert Nazarene
58	Birthday Poem	Adam Scheffler
81	Skinny Dipping with St. Anthony	Karen J. Weyant
83	Malibu	Tony Whedon
84	On and On (and Off Again)	Tony Whedon
86	Requiem for a Doll	Ellie White
87	Curatives	David Winter
89	Thoreau	Margaret Young

XI	Contributors
XX	Friends of *Harpur Palate*
XXI	Submission Guidelines
XXIII	The *Harpur Palate* Prize in Creative Nonfiction
XXIV	The Milton Kessler Memorial Prize in Poetry
XXV	The John Gardner Memorial Prize in Fiction
XXVI	Subscription Information
XXVII	Advertisements

VII

BATTLE LINES

AIMÉE BAKER

(unidentified woman discovered March 1, 1992 in Bitter Creek, Wyoming)

I once kissed
the ruby flesh
of a hummingbird
held against
a rest stop sign

on a day before I left
my body in ice
at the curve
of a prairie road.

In this life
our blood
is where we make
a fist against
anger.

We tattoo roses
to our chests,
memorials to love

and lost fortunes.

What we sell
is ourselves
to the fluttering
of breath,

when the darkness
is a memory of miles
drifting past windows
of light.

We lose markers
to tell us who we are,
where we are from,
because it is everything
that matters.

Out here, our children
are being eaten by wolves.

Do you hear them?

FOURTEEN POUNDS

AIMÉE BAKER

(unidentified woman discovered September 30, 1952 near Black Hawk, Colorado)

My soul weighs
no more than twenty-one grams,
a weight that forgets
how it feels to touch one lip
against another,

and the burden of the body
it leaves behind.

And what remains:
the heaviness of blood
spread thin across the gulch.
Dark hair matted
on a stretch of skin.

Charcoaled bone wedged
deep in the scorched earth.
The gasoline burn of the felled
log. The morning dew
sequined on a web
of gristle.

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Did you know a magpie's heart
weighs 9.3 ounces?
But what does that say
about how its voice sounds
calling across the divide.

MY STEP-FATHER SHOWS ME HOW TO CLEAN AN ABALONE

GARRETT BRYANT

he sets the abalone shell-side down
on the table—slick

with mucus, the mantle striped
black, gray—fleshy
tendrils flitter like millipede legs

my step-father grabs the ab iron—2 inches
flattened metal a foot long—

you slip the edge between the mantle and shell

he says *and you give a couple shoves*—he thrusts
the iron hard, once

twice—*until it* *sticks*—

he slides the iron, circling—*then, you twist it*

like this—the edge of the shell—*til it*

pops—a loud, sucking-pop
and the meat, the animal, begins slipping
out of the shell—*grab the guts*

like this *and yank em off—*

he hands me the body, still
alive—about the weight of a pineapple in my palms

this is called the cap—he points to the white hump
recently connected to the shell—
it's the filet mignon of the ocean—

he turns it over—*this is the foot, vital*
to its survival, that holds onto
its surroundings, its home—rocks,
other abalones—how often we unfasten

ourselves from what we are—*you can tell how healthy it is*
by how well it holds on—

pearl and turquiose in the soft afternoon
the abalone's shell, empty on the table, glistens

SILENCE AND SURRENDER

MARILEE ROBIN BURTON

I want one of the Mars One Mission Design-winning t-shirts with its steadfast rocket encircled by a planet whose lower half is Earth blue and upper, Mars red. The rocket's main body standing firm on the blue while its tip sprouts branches and leaves like a tree blossoming into a red sky above. The full half-and-half planet, a metaphysical globe, floating in black space with naught else in view but two small, red moons. I covet the colorful beauty of the t-shirt with its theme of expedition into the unknown, but find it seems to be permanently out of stock, unavailable, elusive, beyond reach, leaving empty space in its wake, a kind of solar systematic metaphor.

Despite overreaching ardor for the alluring shirt, it is nearly inconceivable for me to imagine embarking on the Mars One Mission itself. Being so inspired as to want to leave Earth forever (which more than 200,000 people from around the world volunteered to be considered for). To travel for nearly a year to reach the distant planet so many millions of miles away. To stay there permanently with less than a handful of other people (and no dogs) to have as friends, companions, coworkers for a lifetime. To explore alone forever. Yet, I do. I do imagine it.

I imagine standing on that distant planet, one of Earth's nearest neighbors, some 142 million miles away from home. Standing there and looking out into space, where somewhere so far away, my home and all that I know would appear to be but a dot. Standing there, my feet planted on that planet whose atmosphere is thin enough to cause my blood to boil if I were to walk on its rocky surface unprotected, not to mention that I

would also be disturbed by the extreme cold (average daily temps minus 81° Fahrenheit—and that's average), plus, the sun's killer radiation—undeflected by the thin atmosphere—would also be harmful. So, I imagine myself standing on that distant planet, some 142 million miles away, a planet half the size of Earth, where extinct volcanoes tower three times higher than Mount Everest, where canyons plunge four times the depth of the Grand Canyon, where solar caps display frozen carbon dioxide, I imagine standing on the red soil of that planet sporting a fashionable and utilitarian protective spacesuit, which would not be unduly heavy as gravity is far less there than here and would carry only one-third its earthly weight. (Plus, I would weigh far less too, and would no longer have to diet.) So, no sweat.

I imagine standing there on that rocky, red surface and staring out into a pink sky, a pink sky that at sunset would turn surprisingly, in that world, blue. Standing there, staring out into space, searching for sight of my home, of Earth far beyond both my vision and reach, staring still beyond the sun's set (a sun appearing much smaller in that sky, 50 million miles farther away from Mars than it is from Earth), into the dark as two small moons come into view, one circling every seven hours, the other every thirty, and if my stay there were too long (like say, 50 million years), the larger, closer moon might crash the planet as its minimal distance away (only 3,000 miles) shortens by six feet every century, orbiting ever nearer. These two moons, Fear and Panic, named for the two sons (or was it two dogs? or maybe two horses? there's some dispute). Well then, these two moons, Fear and Panic, named for two beings of some kind belonging to or related to the Roman god of war, would appear so much smaller there than our own moon does here, are so much smaller, twinkling in that nighttime sky as stars only.

Do they carry their named essence? Would I feel it? Would I feel fear and panic? So far from home. From everything I'd ever known. Everyone. Remote, removed, far-flung, outlying, beyond the boonies. Alone. Even a satellite call to my mother (if she were still alive) would carry a 24-minute delay. Making conversation somewhat tedious and distant. How did my own grandparents feel, I wonder, when they left Russia never to see or speak with their families ever again? Perhaps it was the promise of a new life that supported them through the lifetime separation. Perhaps if I chose (and were chosen)

for the Mars One Mission, I would be supported by the adventure of it all. The thrill of delving into the unknown. The exploration and discovery. The science. The dream. Being a pioneer. Making history. Perhaps these would be the greater gain. Would weight the balance.

Still. Could they appease the near-infinite distance? Or would loneliness burgeon? Would fear take hold? Would I be regretful? Or, would spiritual awe, silence, and surrender take my hand as I traveled a mission to explore and colonize the red planet with only but a few others, for a lifetime, traversing in sparse company that new land. (We'd have to be good at getting along with others, as well as enjoy the opportunity to embrace quiet time). High priorities, these, in choice of mission candidates: "emotional and psychological stability supported by personal drive and motivation along with capacity for self-reflection." Which I would have to have, would have no other choice, could make no change or alteration, because I could never return, never come back, never come home, never talk to my mother again (if she were alive) without time delay. It would be a one-way trip.

So there I would stay, 142 million miles away (on average—for it could be as close as 33 million miles or as far as 249 million miles, what with elliptical orbits and all) in that strange, distant land it would take seven months traveling tens of thousands of miles per hour to reach after seven years of training and from where, once there, there would be no possibility, ever, for return. I imagine myself there, alone with small company. All else forsaken. Possibilities unknown. My only choice, silence and surrender, my new destiny in this strange, foreign, faraway land.

Though I cannot lie—even on this planet, on my street, in my home, my man beside me in bed, my dogs both so near, often, I feel like that here.

I wonder, will the elusive Mars One t-shirt ever be within my reach?

YOUR MOTHER, MY MOTHER ALL ONCE REMOVED

LAURIN DECHAE

Your mother was once lightning jarred and once
She shook whole houses in her quake and beat
The livelong day into its resting place.
My mother merely years above me now
That day when she ate daisies fresh. You want
To know the once when I began belief?
Your mother thunder shaking houses loose.
My mother right before she died I prayed
And prayed and prayed she wouldn't suffer long.
I prayed for her, for father too—that this
Quietus not be made more succulent,
Some meat that's beaten to tender and rare.
Your mother is the moment of flash flood.
My mother running out of time and me
And all of us. Your mother doesn't miss
Me when I'm gone. What is it to be missed?
My father used to set out fruit—apples,
And oranges—halved, laid out on tissue,
In front of pictures of my mother's face,
So she might not go hungry. He'd still take
Her with him everywhere, set her a place
To eat then wonder where she'd gone. She waved
Magician-less and run out of the spark.

She left him in a lonely never known
Before. They say that if the woman dies
Before the man he won't last longer than
five years without her. I know I must go
Second. Your grandfather just wouldn't survive.

CLIMATE CHANGE

KERRY DONOGHUE

Saturday, June 14

When you were little, a Saturday drive to the zoo usually clocked in at two excruciating hours. But today, with you strapped in an ambulance, it's a four-hour ordeal.

"Is it nice out?" you ask from the stretcher.

"Just about there," Eustace, your wife, calls from the front seat.

The ambulance strains up the long driveway, past the zoo, to the backlot of the animal hospital. This is the second time Dr. Ramirez has sent you here to be weighed since his office scales max out at 300 pounds. You imagine all four Goodyears popping like roundnose bullets.

"And no polar bears today, right?"

"I promise," Eustace says. "Just in and out. Then we'll celebrate the good news."

Last month, while flipping through the mail, you noticed a flyer from the World Wildlife Fund. On it, a polar bear clung to a small ice chunk under the headline: *My home is melting.* That damn bear is all you think about these days.

The ambulance doors open with a searing kick of sunshine, a harsh reminder that you can't handle any wattage stronger than the bulbs in your living room. You used to be the guy sporting brand new Oakleys every summer, an expert boatsman dodging mosquito squalls on the annual bass fishing trip. But you haven't walked unassisted since the accident two years ago. How could you? At your last weigh-in, you'd tottered in at 507 pounds.

Six paramedics shuffle into position: one at your head, two gripping either side of the stretcher, one avoiding the split skin on the soles of your feet, and two more anxious outside the doors in case you torpedo forward. You feel bad for these men, pinioned to the Missouri humidity by your giant body.

"Ready?" They squat as low as adult men can. "Lift."

If you haven't lost seventy-five pounds by now, Dr. Ramirez can't sign off on your gastric bypass next week. And you're serious about dropping the 174 pounds you've packed on since getting T-boned. Sure, you were never a tiny guy—your enthusiasm for proper crispy snoot sandwiches in St. Louis guaranteed that—but back then, your weight was always a big-boned 238.

Still, it was surprisingly easy to get this huge. The first fifty pounds settled in when you were laid up in the hospital bed the doctor had installed in the living room. For six slow months, you lay in front of the TV, waiting for bones to set and sutures to heal, a process that left you doughy and reeking. And that was fine—you and Eustace were so grateful you hadn't died, you'd even clasped hands with that weird hospital chaplain and prayed together.

But by the time Dr. Ramirez approved your bed exercises, guilt had already started contaminating you and Eustace. With you bedridden and unable to work, she shouldered all the grocery shopping and cooking, the housecleaning, the neverending medication pick-ups, the car insurance and medical bill battles. You had become accustomed to whiling away the boredom with pre-made snacks from grocery outlets, cheap treats that kept you distracted while she fretted about your daily care. Eventually, your mouth just grew used to the sense of duty and accomplishment associated with finishing a box of chocolate Krispy Kremes, the ease of dunking tortilla chips in queso fundido, all the wonderful foods you could balance on your chest between bites. Before you knew it, you needed two male nurses under your shoulders in order to stand up. The rest of the weight simply piled on, something you hardly noticed, like Parmesan melting on spaghetti.

"Grab it," the guy near your head says. But it's too late. The sheet across your waist slips away and exposes the crusty lymphedema on your

left shin, as pitted as a moldy orange peel.

Eustace yanks the sheet back over your waist. "No one saw anything."

Ron and the other veterinary technicians have already propped open both doors for your gurney. At least they're not snickering like that jerk from your first weigh-in.

"Hi, Ron," you say. "This better be the last time I see you."

"I hope so too, pal."

A shriek—from a rhino? a gorilla?—swells down the hall as they wheel you into the cool concrete room. Half of it is caged off with those stalls you saw on field trips to the farm, while a scratched steel scale dominates the rest. It reeks of stomped grass and hooves. Over the past three months, you've been vigilant about your exercises, rolling your legs inward to remind your quads they still have a purpose, pointing and flexing your toes to reinvigorate your dissolved calf muscles. You're lighter, you can feel it.

"All right, load him up."

A musky undercurrent eddies toward the scale, along with the stinging realization that you haven't had a bowel movement this week, even though you've been choking down bowls of steamed spinach during dinner. Is this one more diabetes complication? Entire afternoons have been lost scouring the Internet about dialysis and blindness and amputation. Without the surgery, you'll be fused to that bed forever.

"Eustace!"

"What, honey?"

At thirty-seven, she's way too young to be caught in the crossfire of obligation and frustration. You've watched her become quite knowledgeable about the contents of your bedpan, swabbing washcloths between your layers and smelling fungal odors that no amount of Nystatin can cover up, her face looking more pummeled each month. If only you could treat her to a cruise in the Bahamas to thank her for stepping into this role of caregiver forty years too early. Eustace would love doing her crosswords on the sand, taking breaks to paddleboard across the jade-colored waves, her hair sun-blasted blonde. But if she goes on vacation, there won't be anyone to wash you.

"Will you hold my hand?" you ask.

She pats your wrist and crosses her fingers. "Four thirty-two."

Should you ask about getting to a toilet? You imagine having to squat over an outdoor pit like the elephants. But now you're on the scale and the technicians have stepped away, leaving you heaped in front of everyone, anxious and tangled in your white sheets like a fallen emperor. The numbers fly: 193, 247, 313.

"Good drive up?" Ron asks.

"Slow." Your stomach gurgles. All these people as witness. One of them could easily put this on YouTube.

"June's been hotter than blazes this year."

Sweat pours down from your armpits. "Never felt one like this before."

"Hope it doesn't keep up. Can't imagine we'd make it through." Ron studies the scale. "Okay, looks like we're at four twenty-one."

Exhaling, you pump your fist and then realize that new shrieking sound is not a hyena, but your wife weeping as she delivers hugs to everyone around you.

Sunday, June 15

The surgery date is now on the kitchen calendar lassoed in red ink: June 19. This Thursday, at eleven in the morning, Dr. Ramirez will partition off the worst part of you. For now, though, it's time to make up for the two years spent acting like the whole world was your trough. You've promised Eustace that you'll be good—all dino kale, fourteen glasses of water, no more Squirt—but it's hard monitoring every single thing that goes down the hatch. What about celebrating the time you broke off one corner of the butter cake instead of eating the entire pan? People always discount your brain because of your girth. But tonight, you'll prove you've finally changed.

With Eustace out running errands, you maneuver toward the kitchen on your motorized wheelchair. Nailed above the entryway is your prized possession: the mount of a fifty-nine pound flathead you'd caught nightfishing at the river three years ago. Mud-colored with whiskers six inches long, the catfish gapes from the wall, the shock of being caught imprinted in his expression. Never before have you felt so proud of yourself, so strong. You named him Steve.

"Things are changing around here, buddy," you say as you motor under him. "Wait until you get a load of the new me."

In the kitchen, you peer at the chicken you've been roasting, the carrots and onions and sweet potatoes bubbling in the pan. You take it out and grab a stick of margarine from the refrigerator, smearing the bird so it gleams. That'll keep the juices in tight. But maybe you should check to make sure. You run your finger along its heat-crinkled skin and can't help but twist off a greasy piece.

"Don't tell anyone."

Salt and melted butter—a comfort so primal that you stuff the chicken skin in even deeper, your knuckles knocking against your wisdom teeth, filling yourself so air can't ruin the ecstasy of this moment.

Maybe just one more bite, you think, and keep thinking, until the whole chicken is stripped to the pale white meat.

Eustace returns home and eyes the kitchen table: two goblets of cucumber water, a bowl of carrots, paper towels folded like fans. "What's all this?"

"Something to thank you for taking care of me."

She wraps her arms around your neck, avoiding the hump that's developed on your back. It's the first time she's hugged you in months. "And you took the skin off. I'm so proud of you."

"Thanks." Flushed, you carve the chicken.

She pours vinaigrette over her spinach salad, not even bothering to ration out her serving. "Maybe this is a good time to tell you I've been thinking of something important, too."

"Oh yeah? Are you extending your family leave?"

"No. But I stopped off at the disability office today."

"How come?"

"It's been two years—you know my leave runs out soon. But now that the surgery's happening, I can get back to work."

"So you do want to go back?"

"Of course. Don't you?"

Thinking back to your thirteen-hour days bent over in the sun as a cement mason, you realize you don't miss it at all.

She forks a tomato. "I think we should start interviewing nurses for you."

"But you already take care of me. No one else will know how to do it right." Before the accident, Eustace worked as a neonatal intensive care nurse and you didn't see each other as much. After her usual Wednesday night happy hours, she'd come home with salacious stories about which doctors were hooking up, which nurses were bulimic. This whole life outside you. Having her home has made things less lonely.

"We need the money and the insurance," she says.

"Well, we can talk about it."

"I set up two interviews for tomorrow afternoon."

A WhiteCastle Crave Case is the only thing that could calm you right now. "This is way too soon, Eustace. I can't believe you're doing this to me."

Eustace stops eating and stares you down. "Really? Are we going to play that game?"

"You tell me."

She flings her napkin on top of her dinner. "Eat your carrots."

Monday, June 16

It's too hot to sleep. Dinner was a bust, leaving things awkward with Eustace. And you've been up the entire night, fixating on worst-case scenarios: Eustace initiating an affair with one of the ortho surgeons. Or her slipping up after Trivia Night and kissing some lounge act in from Branson for the weekend. Losing her would hurt worse than getting T-boned, so you distract yourself by brainstorming ways to apologize. You glance at her. Since the accident, Eustace has been sleeping on the couch next to you in the living room. Maybe, if you scooch to the side of the bed and nudge her, she'll want to do it. It's been two years since you've been naked together, your longest dry spell yet. "We'd estimate a year recovery, but it could take longer," the doctors had said. And so, for the first time in your relationship, you both abstained.

Throughout these tough times, Eustace has maintained her skinny little figure. In fact, she's never weighed more than 132 pounds throughout your entire marriage. It's a discipline you should admire. But honestly, it's

irritating that she can inhale an entire order of toasted ravioli whenever she wants.

Other than that, though, you've been going through this together, each of you feeling cooped up and dealing with the mid-day crankies, avoiding chocolate, clipping new recipes that use quinoa. She hasn't had any extra time for her girlfriends or Zumba or getting her hair cut, which is even longer than normal now and cascades unruly down her back. It's a sexy new look for her. She's come through for you during this ordeal, despite everything. But what happens to you when she's back out there?

Stretching as far as you can, forearm aching with the effort, you poke her shoulder and then rest your palm against the cool bars of your bed. "Eustace?"

In sickness and in health, you'd whispered under the ivy trellis at your wedding. But after the accident and all the weight gain, things looked and smelled different. Like the chapped apron of skin she'll have to raise with her forearms in order to dig out your erection.

"Sweetie?"

Jolting awake, she reaches for the bedpan.

"No, I don't need to go," you say.

She falls back against her pillow. "Did you have a nightmare?"

"Yes." Able to reach her arm now, you rub the smooth divot of her elbow. "Know any way to fix it?"

"I'm still pissed about what you said earlier."

"I know, but maybe I can make it up to you. Besides, when was the last time we did it?" You know exactly when: three days before the accident, on the couch, during the fourth inning of the Cardinals game.

Her uncertainty hangs like a meat hook. "I don't know. It's been so long."

"I think I can do it if you help me."

"But I put lotion on my hands."

"Can you wash your hands?"

She sighs. "Hold on."

While you wait, you pray everything down there will cooperate. And smell okay.

Eustace returns and kneels at your side. She didn't use any mouthwash, but you push past the gluey stink of her breath, inching your fingers into her long brown hair, twisting the strands around your fingers. You shift your hand down and press against the front of her pajama bottoms. She's never been so quiet, but you still remember some of the moves she likes, and, after a while, she pulls down her pants. She's apparently stopped shaving. How long has that been going on?

You peek to see if she's pretending, but her eyes are shut and you pray she's envisioning Johnny Depp instead of her jiggling blob of a husband. This infidelity makes you soften, but she deserves the fantasy. Eustace tugs harder. Imagine yourself mustachioed, captain of a galleon you've overtaken, her perfect C-cups cresting in a corset dress. You paw inside her Wells Fargo T-shirt. That seems to help since she moans a little, hopefully not just for show, and leans to lift the apron of your stomach.

"Does that hurt?" she asks.

"No, but can you get your knee off my stomach?"

"Sorry."

"And watch my bad leg."

She's really dry, so she spits in her hand before mashing you back in, and you're Johnny Depp again, a pirate, a bad boy, tan, ripped, it's you she wants, you, your heart could just explode, and then there you are.

"I'm back, huh?" you wheeze.

Eustace pecks you on the cheek before hurrying to the shower, the moment a thin dribble down her thigh.

You are giddy. Sure, the sex this morning lacked the fire you'd had in the past, but it's a good reminder of the man who once went downtown on her in the mudroom during the ugly Christmas sweater party.

Now, with just three hours before the interviews, you're back on track pointing and flexing your toes the requisite thirty times during *Maury*. He's of course preparing to announce paternity results. One woman, one cross-eyed baby, five potential fathers. Two of them are brothers. Isn't it like announcing to the whole world that you're a big whore? It confuses you, but scares you, too. One of your greatest fears is that Eustace will invite a

film crew to shame you into losing weight on TV.

A girl, seventeen, wails as she discovers the young man hopping across the set is not her daughter's father.

"It's okay," she sobs. "I got ideas about who it could be."

"I'm heading out for a quick errand," Eustace says. "Are you good here?"

"Yeah." You smile at her, admiring her backside as she passes. "And so was this morning."

She grabs the car keys. "I'll be home for the interviews."

"Don't rush," you say, trying to sound casual.

In the hushing silence that follows, you consider the entry table photos: a black and white wedding shot of you dipping her on the dance floor. You weighed 224 on your wedding day. Another one, Eustace laughing in waders as she helps you hold up Steve. You stare at his smooth yellowed skin, the clear, round eyes, remembering how you'd felt hoisting him up in front of your buddies. In fact, you stare for so long, you almost don't realize Eustace has left without honking twice.

With only fifteen minutes before the first interview, Eustace still hasn't returned. Confident she must've come to her senses and canceled the meetings, you settle into your afternoon TV lineup.

"Hi, honey," she says, hurrying in from the back door. She's got a bounce in her step and a cropped hairdo. The curls are gone, all of them. Her hair barely skims her ears.

You mute the TV. "What have you done?"

"I needed a fresh start."

"It's awful."

"I like it." She fusses with it in the mirror, fluffing it so it looks fuller. "It feels more like me."

"You look totally different."

"You'll get used to it." The doorbell rings and she peeks through the front windows. "The first guy is here. Can you please be nice?"

You snap the sheets tighter around your body and focus on Steve.

Eustace returns with a young man—shaved head, at least two mermaid

tats, arms like fire hydrants.

"Hey," he says. "I'm Brian."

"Brian, you're jacked. How much can you bench?"

"Thanks. Probably about one twenty."

"So, with me over four hundred pounds, there's no way you'd be able to lift me if I fell?"

Brian glances at Eustace. "Well, I was under the impression that the position is for a bed-bound patient?"

"If you do your job right, I won't be forever."

Eustace blushes. "I'm sorry, Brian. What my husband is trying to say is that—"

"Wait a second. If Brian here doesn't understand English, we have a bigger problem."

"I clearly understand English, sir, but—"

"You're just dumb then?"

Brian stands to shake Eustace's hand. "Ma'am, I'm sorry, but this isn't the right fit for me."

You smile. One down.

"Let me walk you out," she says. When they reach the living room, her voice drops. "It's just that he's in a tough spot and feeling vulnerable right now."

"I'm fat," you yell, "but my ears aren't. Stop talking about me like I don't exist."

The front door shuts and you brace yourself for a lecture. Instead, Eustace walks in with a stout woman.

"Hi there," she says. "I'm Rosabelle."

"Super. Regale us with something fascinating about yourself, Rosabelle."

Eustace glares at you.

Rosabelle smiles. "I'm originally from Arkansas. Moved out here three years ago since the burbs have a good job market for my profession."

"Because of all the fatsos?"

"I'm trained to help the morbidly obese live a more comfortable lifestyle."

"Of course," you say. "And what if that person is not morbidly obese but happily so?"

"I haven't found that to be true in anyone who's bed-bound."

You instantly hate her face.

"What sorts of clients have you cared for in the past?" Eustace asks.

"Truthfully, older women," she says. "But I've made real connections with many of my former patients. Sometimes people just need emotional support to achieve a physical goal."

"That's lovely," Eustace says.

"No, it's not. I'm a man."

"And what about you?" Rosabelle asks. "How did you get in this predicament?"

"Car accident." Eustace is spinning away in Rosabelle's allure. You can't lose her. "I got T-boned by my wife on her way home from work one night."

Eustace drops her head into her hands. You've never said it out loud before, but it's the truth. You'd had a few with Ren and Davey at the bar. Mostly light beers, though, so you were fine to drive. Maybe a little buzzed, but nothing unsafe. It was almost midnight in June, the road still slick with oil and the lingering puddles of the thunderstorm, but you'd gunned it to make the light. Eustace happened to be the first car in the turn lane, hurrying home after a long shift at work. Your yellow had turned red as you barreled through the intersection. Eustace was just as quick on her green.

"An accident." Eustace dabs her eyes with a sleeve.

Rosabelle nods. "I'm sure."

"Well, you've made my wife cry, so it looks like we're done here." You extend your hand, feeling dirty that you sold out your wife. But at least it worked. Besides, nothing has happened to Eustace after the accident—it's not like she got fat. You can always apologize to her later. "Thank you for your time today. Eustace will see you out."

Rosabelle stands, but studies you. "No matter who you select as your caretaker, I hope you get assistance with your self-loathing."

"You're hired," Eustace says.

You flap your arms. "What? No! I don't like her."

"Everything she said is true," Eustace says. "I can't be your caretaker forever. I need to have my own life again. Maybe I'm making it worse for you."

"But I need you here, Eustace."

Eustace shakes her head. "Rosabelle, can you start tomorrow morning at eight?"

"I think that could be worked out."

A steaming beef burrito floats across the television screen, all cheddar cheese and sour cream, only two dollars. Defeated, you shut your eyes, pointing and flexing until the commercial is over, wishing you could still fit in the jeep.

Once Rosabelle got a grand tour of the house and finally left, Eustace iced you out, saying she was going on a walk. Something about needing to "clear the energy." Well, she's not the only one.

"I've been stuffed away in this house and invisible long enough," you say to Steve as you motor to the doorway. Eustace thinks she can just desert you after all she's put you through, but you're not that weak. Now, staring down the thirty-foot walkway, you're ready to take control. You heave your body off the wheelchair. You will get the mail.

Instead of your usual slippers, you managed to slide on your Velcro slip-ons with the help of Grandpa's old tortoise shell shoehorn. Each shoe is fifteen inches long, so if you put one in front of the other and employ positive visualization, you'll only have to move your feet twenty-one times to get to the mailbox.

After lodging a rolled up *Outdoor Life* magazine between the screen door and the lock, you step down onto the cracked concrete, shuffling off your first step. Breathy and soaked, you've made it eight steps out of the house on your own—remember that. Catch your breath, even though your thighs burn like you just hustled up the riverbank. Thighs ablaze. Left foot, right, kneecaps quaking, your muscles vaguely recalling the motion of walking.

"Enjoying the sun today?" your neighbor, Stan, hollers from his driveway as he soaps his Deville. You've seen him, a man in his seventies,

pumping his toothpick arms every morning during his pre-breakfast walk in light blue tear-away pants and a sleeveless Alice Cooper T-shirt.

You waggle your fingers in a sort of wave. By the time you touch the sun-warmed mailbox, sweat has waterfalled over the collar of your T-shirt.

"You doing okay?"

As your tongue lolls in your mouth, the oak trees spin to the left.

Squinting into the wide sky, you wonder if this is the great blue expanse you've heard about. You look for Grammy Louise or your cousin Rutherford who died of meningitis in the seventh grade.

"It's just a little fall. Everything's going to be a-okay." A trembling wrinkled hand blocks the sun and your view. "Can I help you up?"

You push against the gravel until you're upright, albeit winded. There's asphalt. Signs for Piccolo Court and Tenth Avenue—your street. People staring. Stan and a few neighbors come closer, their faces scrunched with worry, eyes like spotlights. Everyone is focused on you.

"We can call for help, sir," the widow from across the street says.

You sniff for gasoline first and then listen for an ambulance. Have you been hit or did you just fall? Hopefully you've been hit so you'd have an excuse to be splayed in the street. Flexing what's left of your weakened calf muscles, you check for sensation.

"Come on, now," Stan says. "Got to try."

"Am I okay? Tell me where I'm bleeding!" Pressing your chin and forehead, you study each finger for wounds.

"You seem all right," he says. "No blood. You just need to get up."

"It'll take me some time."

"Eddie, can you call for an ambulance?"

The question socks you into clarity. You imagine Eustace's beautiful face, her eyes elongated funhouse mirrors when she sees her fat pathetic husband beached in a gutter, so big that a Volkswagen has to swerve into a different lane just to drive around him. You imagine how you'd look on television right now—like a monstrous dollop of sweat pants and shame, you sad babyman. A wail sounds from your mouth, detonating so deep in you it's surprising. Someone rubs your back slowly, light circles that are warm,

reassuring. The attention makes you feel like a real person now, not just another fatso. Completely loved, you really let the tears fall.

"It's okay, honey."

"I'm embarrassed," you say.

"Don't be, you're with good people. Are you in pain?"

"Yes."

They coo over you, these kind people who rushed to your aid without any judgment, neighbors you've never even waved to before. Piled against the curb with gravel clinging to your palms, you relax into their love, all muddy and sweaty, just as Eustace dashes across the driveway.

"What happened, honey? Are you okay?"

Such relief. You bawl, and as your face purples and the hiccups sputter out, her long arms wrap around you, protecting you. For the moment, it's just you and her cocooned together, as it should be.

When they finally stuff you onto your wheelchair and guide you back inside the house, all the humiliation, rage, and vulnerability has emptied you out, cutting down to the raw edges of your hunger.

"Do we have any cookies?" you ask.

"C'mon, now's not the time."

"But I want some, Eustace."

"Stop it. You don't need them."

"Get them for me. I've been through enough." As you rattle the table, you overturn cooking magazines, knocking bariatric pamphlets and hospital forms to the floor.

Sighing, Eustace yanks down the pink and white frosted circus cookies she keeps stashed for herself in the top cupboard.

Each bite feels like a long hug.

Thursday, June 19

"Thanks anyway, Rosabelle." You hang up and lean back.

The Thursday morning light halves you, your shoulders cool in the darkness of dawn, your legs casting a fluorescent white glow as light sears through the living room window. Dust twirls, rising from the carpet, the

curtains, and your body, stale flakes that you've already breathed and processed countless times today, every day for the past two years. But after your fall the other day, you were able to persuade Eustace to roll your bed closer to the entryway, giving you a different outlook on the room. She'd even added two pillows. From your new dent in the mattress, you can see the calendar, a thick black X slashing the red circle around today's date.

"Eustace!" you call from your pillows.

"What?" she asks, leaning in from the kitchen, her hair frizzy from washing dishes.

"My leg. I can't move it."

"Did you try?"

"Yes," you lie. "But I need help."

She sighs. "Just give me five minutes to finish these pans."

You hear her banging the roasting pan in the sink while she scrubs, water splashing onto the floor and countertops, which she'll have to wipe down. Your leg feels like it's getting singed.

"Eustace, my leg is burning."

She hurls the pan in the sink and, hands soaked, comes over, grabbing behind your knee to adjust your leg. Soapy water spills down your thigh.

"There," she huffs. "You happy?"

The sheets, damp with dishwater, feel cool against the sweaty width of your legs. Heaped atop the pillows, your wife within eyesight, you stare at Steve. Under his wide, watchful eye, you smile and take a long sip from your Coke.

DESERT SOLSTICE

TRINA GAYNON

—St. Jerome Reading
Giovanni Bellini
Ashmolean Museum, Oxford

Once again you've read
through the dinner hour,
not much in your larder

anyway. Your supply
of candles runs low.
Stacks of books never will.

Just another page,
a few more minutes
in the sun—the stone bench

you sit on still warm,
your bare feet stretched out
to soak up heat from sand.

The lectern your book
rests on tilts to keep
pages free from shadows.

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The cave that shelters
you while you sleep stays
cool, inhospitable

to old bones and lean
flesh. Closed, that book will
will be a banked fire, hold

back the chill. Eyes tired,
your lion never
strays far, remains on guard.

WALT WHITMAN

JASPER HAZE

came to me in a dream and said, *Friend,*
remember, the world is yours: an oak tree
will undress in your mouth, if you ask of it,
then wrapped his lush beard around me
like a fine fox-stole.

KURT VONNEGUT NARRATES MY DREAM ABOUT NATURAL SELECTION

ZEBULON HUSET

The bluefish had always been crafty.
It's how they got by. In flickers.
They stalked while others hunted in rows.
They ate when others starved.
One bluefish noticed dangerous tidepools
forming around their hiding prey.
By morning, the rotted, sun-cooked
baitfish trapped in the shallow pool
returned to the ocean, were inedible.
But bluefish were bigger, stronger.
So a bold bluefish made a go of it.
His rotted, sun-cooked corpse
was inedible by morning. So it goes.

Bluefish began lurking near the rocks
which formed the tidepools with exits:
divots or cracks where the water drains,
but only to a point, as the tide
pulls its silk cloth slowly back,
leaving rotted fish, inedible by morning.
One bluefish found he could push himself
across the rock a little, holding his breath.
He ate more than any other bluefish.

He had strength to mate more,
to defend his females more fiercely.
He did not starve, and nor would his children
who also had strong fins and lungs,
as their children would have. So it goes.

NEWLY STRANGE

GWENDOLYN JENSEN

(a triolet)

Bring me my bow, my burning thirst
Newly strange in bed alone
Coyotes roam this urban world
Bring me my bow, my burning thirst
The choice the chance the hindered words
And on the streets wild turkeys roam
Bring me my bow, my burning thirst
Newly strange in bed alone

ANOTHER WILD ANIMAL

BRAD JOHNSON

No one wants to read a straight
man's writing on women my second
wave feminist mother tells me.
No matter the intent she says *it all*
reads like misogyny yet what can
one do but question the significance
of the vagina when living with wife
and daughter, when both father
and brother are practicing OBGYNs?

The mohel held my hand that held
the blade that circumcised my son
and now I'm learning things I didn't
know about the penis: foreskin
treatment, scrotum care, the need
to cover when changing diapers
to prevent urine spraying everywhere.

In the backyard my daughter waters
her strawberries with my mother
but when she drops the garden hose
it kicks in squirts across the grass,
ducking from their grabbing hands
like some wild animal showing
its teeth, refusing domestication.

THE RACCOON IN MY CEILING

RHONDA LOTT

If she lives to hunt for flesh another year,
I hope she finds a way to pay for
scratching up the rafters. In my head,
she's drunk on some red berry she fermented.

I hope she finds a way to pay for
the black liner she took from her mother,
but she's drunk on some red berry she fermented
and only dens with girls who strut and wear

the black lines they took from their mothers.
She never sleeps when others lie in bed
and always dens with girls who strut and wear
the tile so thin, they may break through the grid.

She never sleeps when lovers lie in bed,
and I don't either, so I'll still hear her
(if I live to hunt for flesh another year)
scratching up the rafters in my head.

TIPS FROM THE MORTON SALT GIRL

After her 100th anniversary makeover

RHONDA LOTT

Haven't changed your clothes since 1968?
If your mod, black bob still glows, glossy
as The Beatles' *White Album* on vinyl,
this year, bleach your 'do to match your dress,
and you'll stay abloom, ablaze like an acid
buttercup. Want to prove you're still worth it
in a time when Roman soldiers no longer risk
their lives for a *salarium*, a salary of salt?
Don't worry. Once you live through a hundred
years of wars, you, too, will spill a flurry
of gems with each lockstep. There's still a place
for you just behind the tips of tongues
and in America's high-pressured hearts.
Bad luck comes in blizzards? Remember
every flake remains a single grain. *When it rains,*
it pours means no matter the weather,
your salt will flow freely from the box. *Sweet*
is not a compliment. Always watch your feet.

SUICIDE WATCH I

ANDREW MCFADYEN-KETCHUM

i.

I kicked at pebbles on the shoulder of the highway,
tested the wind's direction with a finger. The winds
that came spoke of hoarfrost and fields, commerce
rumbling by on I-40, the streetlamps burning
their fishhook of light before the red-brick Victorian—
its locked double doors, its hundred shuttered eyes.
Not a family member, not a lover, no guests welcome
past visiting hours, I watched the night watchman doze
in his A-frame of spit cups and *Hustlers,* I observed
the roosting of birds, the library of stars adrift against
the trees that lined the county road where I drafted
my path over the high outer wall and through the just-
mown grass, the method by which I'd scale the sanitarium,
tap a finger on her window, whisper, *Mary, let me in.*

ii.

I still don't know why I've put her in this house
for the somewhat-less-than-sane where they kept her
a mere 24 hours, a two-hour's drive from her bedroom
where she hid herself the year before she died.

That December home from college, I'd park
across the street from her house, warm my hands
by the heat of my Sentra's 4-cylinders and wait to catch
a glimpse of Mary in her window. More than a decade
I've been writing these verses. Still I have no answer.
She spent just a year in college. She climbed
the mountains of Nepal, helped raise schools for the poor.
In the one picture I've kept, she smiles at the camera.
Sometimes a fly lands on the glass of the frame.
Sometimes it looks as if she's blinking.

iii.

And what would you do differently? she asks, sights trained
through the passenger window on that glowing square
of light that could be the window of the imagined sanitarium,
could be the window of her bedroom on Willis Ave. She's
blue-eyed here. The breeze is honeysuckle and sex. And even
though she knows I've no answers, knows when I say nothing
I say everything, she places a finger to my lips to freeze me
in that game of *What Ifs* I've been playing since college
then departs to follow that brick path back to herself
from the mailbox to the stoop, up the sanitarium walls
and through her house's archway into that white
hospital room while I'm stuck here, eyeing that figure
lighting the window. Is that a chest x-ray or the moon?
Is that the girl I once loved, the girl we thought we knew?

SUICIDE WATCH II

ANDREW MCFADYEN-KETCHUM

Who's to say a starspent sky didn't warp or flex above the foothills that night? Or that any kind of light at all broke free of the clouds to knife its gloom across the snow-banked rooftops and empty lots of Blacksburg, Virginia's 3 a.m.? All I know for sure is the clamor the cordless made from my desk and the gin-and-tonic headache I woke to, my sister's voice like static.

This was in my final semester of college, hawking Rolling Rocks and hoagies to Engineering Professors and to the ROTC at a deli not a block from the power plant. On Fridays I'd kneel in rubber gloves to cleanse the massive industry of Steakumms and Kraft powdered alfredo for an extra under-the table five. Then I'd clock out to fight the gales of wind that gathered speed between the dormitories and halls before finding my seat around the conference table of amateur theorists.

But I have no idea what 3 a.m. this was or whether the westerlies howled or bayed as my sister's words caromed the complicated wound of my ear. All I know for sure is how slowly the receiver fell from my hand, the dent it left in the hardwood, the lights in the hallway snapping to life, my foggy-eyed roommates emerging from their bedrooms.

Who knows what else happened that day? I've read a platoon of American boys led a night raid on Kabul and came back men. I've no doubt the

thermometers ruptured at the county airport with cold. Somewhere, certainly, God made another of his billion daily revisions of the world.

But what did any of that matter anymore? The only thing I could see was Mary. The ledge. All that snow. The only thing visible was her mother clenching the bed sheets in her sleep, her father holding his head in his impossible hands. The phone call I had to make.

MY SOVIET SHADOW

CARRIE MESSENGER

We don't talk about our days in Soviet television. It brings up too many questions. It dates us to the Cold War, now quaint. We don't talk about it with each other, but sometimes at parties we will tell the story of our days of Soviet fame: how we were selected by Yuri and Professor Weil to travel to Moscow for *Obraz!*, the teenage game show of literary analysis; how we lived with our Soviet counterparts and their families, an unusual cultural exchange for that winter of 1990; how we went up against *Obraz!'s* all-star Soviet team in a grueling studio day competing over *War and Peace* and *Huckleberry Finn.*

Before we left for Moscow that February, we were told we were paired by our personalities. It's part of the gimmick: that the Americans and Russians be different, yet alike. *Obraz* means *image* in Russian, and the teenagers together will have to build an image in the mind. Yuri will be able to show Natasha and Becky Thatcher teaching each other to dance waltzes and hoe-downs, Pierre and Huck fishing on a raft while Jim and Andrei look on, trading stories and talking philosophy.

We are shown the footage of the inspiration for the Soviet/American literary analysis battle while we are being recruited. Yuri and Professor Weil came up with the idea of the American/Soviet face-off when Professor Weil, head of Northwestern's Slavic department, appears as a guest judge on *Obraz!* Professor Weil, a bear of a man with a gravelly voice, who likes nothing better than singing Kalinka with his students as loud as possible, the kind of professor who always wears bow-ties, asks innocently, "Wouldn't

it be wonderful in the spirit of glasnost if an American team could compete with these soulful Soviet teenagers?"

Yuri grabs Professor Weil's hand and shakes it, then and there. "Dearest Professor Weil, consider it done. Go back to Chicago and bring back your team! We at *Obraz!* await you." They end in a rousing chorus of Kalinka, Professor Weil's arms around the necks of the Russian teenagers. Yuri is a showman, wiry, jittery, complete with floppy mustache. We think he can't be too important in Soviet television's hierarchy, or he wouldn't be assigned to *Obraz!*, but we're missing just how popular a game show of literary analysis could be.

Yuri gets Ostankino, Soviet TV's major channel, to partially fund our trip. Professor Weil goes back to Chicago and runs out of time. Instead of recruiting an all-star American team, an all-star Chicago team, he falls back on our high school, Evanston Township High School, right in Northwestern's backyard. E.T.H.S. will take on the Soviets. To try out for the team, we read *Crime and Punishment*, write essays, and answer sample questions out loud in front of Professor Weil. Only nerds try out. Only the most literary nerds are selected. Conveniently for Yuri and Professor Weil, the team has some diversity worthy of an American team—my friend Tara is black, my friend Chenel has a black mom and white dad, and they are both brilliant and big readers. Tara and Chenel are the kind of friends I dreamed about when I was in grade school, back when my best friends were books. The remaining five members of the team, myself included, are white.

We are not diverse when it comes to class. Although Evanston has mansions on the lake where some of America's richest people live, and many of the kids in my elementary school got free lunches, we chosen nerds are in a narrow tax bracket—middle class comfortable with parents making sacrifices so we can go to the colleges of our choice. We always do the reading. There are other nerds who also always do the reading, but whose parents can't afford a ticket to Moscow. They don't get to go. When we are first recruited, we are told, all expenses will be paid. Which expenses will be paid keep changing, and kids keep dropping out.

Professor Weil tells me that Tanya is just like me, my Russian spitting image, my doppelganger, my shadow. I'll love her. Tanya gets fan-mail from

all over the Soviet Union, Yuri says. There's a twenty-three year old man in Siberia who wants to marry her. Tanya is his favorite. She's the youngest on the Russian team, but the best at literary analysis because she is so soulful, he says. He shows me a tape of her. She purses her lips before she answers each question. Her mouth never falls into a smile. Professor Weil translates her answer for me. They are grim, the answers of a sad, old person. She doesn't look like a teenager. She's tiny, not like a child but a miniature adult. She's not wearing the red Young Pioneer scarf I imagined, but a skirt and blazer that don't match. When she's done with her questions, the team leader pats her on the head. Professor Weil startles her with a bear hug.

I am horrified. This is how people see me, what I must look like in person, what I will look like on camera. Professor Weil has tried to stress that they have matched us up by personalities, but with the shrewdness of teenagers, of nerdy teenagers, of teenagers who read too much, with bad skin, bad posture, a vocabulary we can't quite pronounce and a book in one hand, our fingers still marking the page where we've left off, we know it's not just the personalities Yuri is going for. These Russians are our essences, what we would be if you strip away our accessories, our slang, our pop music, our jeans, our ironies. They are what we most fear. We are shadows of them. We feel like the copies.

I am not Professor Weil's favorite American. I ask too many questions. When we discuss *War and Peace,* I play devil's advocate, root for Masha or one of the other minor characters. I'll argue that Mark Twain is a much better writer than Tolstoy and refuse to entertain the idea that because I can't read Tolstoy in the original, who am I to judge? But he has seen something in me that is like Tanya, the pet, this serious, solemn girl who does look like me.

Moscow, the night before the taping, at Ilya's party. The only time in Moscow when the two teams socialize together without Yuri or Professor Weil around. It's the first event (1) that is "not on the agenda." It's casual, unofficial. Tanya's coming down with a cold and her parents don't want us to go, but Tanya begs and says, "But we must go! Must!" and then starts in

on her mother in Russian.

At the party, Ilya's mother keeps kissing Scott and Ilya on the cheek, calling them both her boys. Scott's Ilya is a ladies' man who can't stop quoting Shakespeare. Scott and Ilya both have dome-like foreheads, making their faces look skeletal, above all drawing attention to their massive brains. At E.T.H.S., Scott is the king of the nerds. He can't talk to people below a certain level of intelligence. He tolerates our team, but barely. The Russian girls love Scott. They admire his forehead, his thick glasses, they follow him around the long dining room table at Ilya's place. I think to myself, Ilya's got a dining room. They must be part of the nomenklatura, ahead of even Tanya's family who has a three-bedroom apartment, but no dining room. I'm keeping track of the distribution of wealth, and size of apartments is the only reliable indicator I've found.

Sasha asks us if Scott has a girlfriend, while Tanya and Anya giggle. We think the Russian girls are being silly, but later, when I reread my diary, I find pages on Ilya, lists of his favorite lines from Shakespeare, his answers to the questions I asked him about Gorbachev, Yeltsin and Tolstoy's attitude toward fate. The evidence is in: I must have been as dazzled by Ilya as Tanya was by Scott.

The night of the party coincides with Soviet Army Day, February 23. Ilya takes us out on the balcony to watch the fireworks. Ilya's mother asks, "Are you cold? Are you cold?" She makes Ilya bring us out coats. Everyone asks us if we're cold. They can't seem to figure out that we're from outside Chicago, that Moscow cold is nothing that we can't handle. It is cold, though, the kind of cold that hurts your nostrils when you breathe. The streets are full of men in uniform, the Soviet army overcoats that Chenel and I find gorgeous. I've never liked American uniforms. Maybe it's that the Soviet uniforms look lost in time, circa World War II, and the boys that wear them turn into old movie stars, Cary Grants, Gary Coopers, and Jimmy Stewarts all. The uniformed men stream down the street. The older veterans are

(1) Outside of a spontaneous snowball fight in the Tula Kremlin (Yuri and Professor Weil were prominent targets, although they both seemed to enjoy it until Yuri tapped his watch and told us it was time to go).

drunk and stumbling. They fall in the snow and pick each other up. They're going to a parade or coming from a parade. No one knows.

The fireworks start, red stars shooting over the Kremlin. Ilya asks me, "How do you call them? In English?"

I tell him dreamily, "Pyrotechnics." Chenel jabs me in the ribs and I blurt out, "Fireworks. I mean fireworks."

"Pyrotechnics? Like the Greek?" Ilya says. I nod. In Moscow, I can't seem to control my vocabulary. I hear myself starting to sound like Tanya's schoolbook English. Tanya likes to call things "cozy" and high praise for people is to call them "pleasant company."

Ilya's mother makes us come back inside. She's serving bliny stuffed with cheese and jam and sugary tea. "Are you hungry?" always closely follows, "Are you cold?" A classmate of Ilya's plays "House of The Rising Sun" on the guitar while we eat. I'm the only American who knows the lyrics. Ilya punches me in the arm to show me he's impressed. I must be blushing. I hope people will think I'm flushed from the tea. I wonder if the Russians know it's about a brothel. Maybe they do; maybe it's used to teach about the sexist capitalist horrors of the United States.

Scott slips Ilya a tape and they put on Sting's "Russians" (2). The Americans look horrified; the Russians look moved. Scott smiles and his eyebrows raise over the rims of his glasses. He's the puppetmaster here, watching what happens when you provoke the two teams. Ilya asks, "When you first heard this song, did you think we loved our children?" We squirm.

"Of course," I say.

"Of course," Chenel echoes. "Of course Russians love their children, too. Everyone loves their children."

Chenel hisses quickly to me, so fast that Anya and Tanya can't follow her, "Isn't this in poor taste?"

Tanya only likes classical music anyway, and she looks up as the song

(2) One of the particular ironies of this song being played was that one of our E.T.H.S. teammates, Scott's academic rival, Alex Teller, was the grandson of Edward Teller, father of the H-bomb. "How can I save my baby boy/ From Oppenheimer's deadly toy," indeed.

trails off into the Prokofiev theme Sting borrowed to make the atmosphere Russian. She cocks her head at us and asks, "What is your favorite piece by Prokofiev?"

"This one," Chenel offers. Chenel loves David Bowie and Prince.

"Who is your favorite composer?" Anya says to me, her chubby cheeks breaking into a smile at the sheer joy at the thought of classical music.

"Tchaikovsky," I answer confidently. Since I've been in Moscow, I've been asked this question every day, by Tanya, Tanya's family, her friends, and I've now got a solid answer that everyone likes because he's Russian. I only know the "1812 Overture" (Fourth of July picnics) and the "Nutcracker Suite" (Christmas matinees), but I'm getting good at bluffing. I can answer the question about who my favorite painter is much more easily: Chagall really is my favorite painter.

I have brought Tanya mix tapes I'd made for her of music I liked, Suzanne Vega, Laurie Anderson, the Pixies, the Talking Heads, Bruce Springsteen, Bob Dylan, Prince's "Purple Rain" (3). I wonder if anyone will ever listen to them. Where will they end up in Moscow? Handed around to other kids in her high school? Sold on the street at the value of a blank tape? Will Tanya use them to tape symphonies off the radio?

Sting's "Russians" trails off with its ticking clock that's supposed to mimic the atomic clock, the hands almost at midnight for most of our young lives. It competes against the antique clock with its hands sputtering out the minutes on the bookshelf in Ilya's dining room (more proof of how comfortable his family is). Ilya's mother looks startled at the double clocks, but goes on pouring tea. "Eat, eat!" she urges the Americans. There is an awkward silence after the atomic clock finishes up. Scott clicks off the tape, Sasha hanging on to his arm while Tara looks on disapprovingly. Ilya's friend starts strumming Russian folk songs.

Tanya says, "It's good Professor Weil isn't here, or next we'd have to

(3) Tanya gives me the Aquarium album *Equinox*. I think it is Soviet kitsch and use it for decoration in my dorm room. Once I finally start listening to it a decade later, it becomes my soundtrack for Cold War nostalgia.

sing Kalinka again." Chenel and I look at each other and decide whether it's okay to laugh or not. We risk laughter. Tanya looks pleased. She folds her arms over her thin pink blouse and nods. Her bun is coming undone and she looks almost young as her hair falls to frame her face, softening her cheekbones that can be as edgy as her attitude. She refused to bring a sweater to wear over the blouse when we left the house, even when her grandmother begged her.

We were told the Russians couldn't understand sarcasm. Tara was particularly annoyed. "What am I going to talk about if I can't make fun of things?" she demanded. "Are we all supposed to sit around saying, oh, isn't this nice, isn't that nice, oh that's great?" To our relief, we're beginning to understand our Russians don't just speak English, but the language of sarcasm, too. Sasha and Tara both roll their eyes behind Scott's back. Scott and Ilya wink at the Soviet and American girls, respectively.

Tanya keeps making everyone laugh in Russian, but tells me she can't translate it. It's the fundamental problem of my building a friendship with Tanya—our best selves are rooted in our languages. The part of ourselves we don't care about, the parts that say banal, everyday things about weather, asking and answering if we are cold, is what we have to offer each other. What we have to offer each other is kindness. I've never believed in kindness. All my interest is in wit. I can't understand why Tanya would like me if we can't follow each other into slang.

The Russians are much more physically affectionate than we are. Anya wants to hold Chenel's hand as they walk down the street. At the party, Scott and Ilya walk about with their arms around each other. Sasha and Tanya kiss each other in greetings. Maybe there is a reason that they are quick to find ways to express sarcasm physically as well? Sasha grabs Tara's hand to take her closer to the guitar. As Sasha pulls, Tara whispers to me, "Remind me when we're back in Evanston not to do this? Hold hands? Just think how fast we'd be slammed into a locker."

Tanya wraps her arm around my waist. She's listening, along with all the Russian girls and Ilya, to one of Ilya's friends from school talk to Scott. He's asking his most important questions, the ones he's always wanted to ask an American.

"What do you prefer on a girl, skirts or trousers?"
"Would you die for a girl?"
"If someone insulted you, how would you receive satisfaction?"

The next morning, we have to wake up early for the taping. It's still dark as we sit in the kitchen and Tanya's grandmother fills us up with tea. Tanya's grandmother is little like her, nimble as she darts about the kitchen. She doesn't speak English. Tanya tells me her grandmother grew up listening to operas through the stage door where her father worked and knows all the major Italian operas by heart. I think to myself, when in time are we talking about? It must be the 1920s or 1930s when Tanya's grandmother was a girl. Lenin days or Stalin days? How happy was her childhood? She has a china doll from back then, bigger than the size of a real baby, painted black and dressed in a striped gingham dress. The doll is called Tom, after *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. It sits on the shelf in the parlor, where I sleep. It's the first thing I see in the mornings. I am trying to connect it to a Soviet interpretation of *Huckleberry Finn*. Tanya told me she used to pretend that Tom was her baby brother. All of the Soviet all-stars are only children. No one can afford more.

We watch the sky turn from gray to blue above the apartment blocks in Tanya's neighborhood. As lovely as Tanya's apartment is on the inside, her building and the other buildings around the courtyard look to me like Chicago's housing projects, some kind of communist Cabrini-Green. Out the kitchen is a long angled highway leading to an old Moscow church, its onion domes glinting in the cold morning sun bouncing off the ice and snow.

Tanya's family is Jewish. She didn't tell me they were Jewish right away. It came up the third or the second day. She said, "We're Jews," and backed away from me, as if she was waiting for me to recoil.

When we were at the churches in Sigorsk, taking in the tourist sites on *Obraz!*'s agenda, Tanya told me how beautiful she thought the icons were, pointing out the one of Mary with three hands. "For saving more children," Tanya said. She told me about icons in Russian culture, about how important the image was. Obraz again. Icons were worshipped. I couldn't help but think about the Lenins we'd been passing all over town,

the massive statues out of scale to the city around them, the little busts available for tourists. His image was everywhere, in all sizes, as if he'd been miniaturized so he could fit everywhere, and blown up so that he could expand across the sky.

At Sigorsk, Tanya helped me light a candle in remembrance for my grandmother. She was slowly dying of cancer back in the States. Tanya, so close to her own grandmother, couldn't imagine anything worse. Tanya held my hand in its mitten the rest of the afternoon. She asked me to believe in the power of the icon, even if I wasn't Russian Orthodox, even if she wasn't Russian Orthodox. Tanya liked all aspects of Russian culture. All she wanted was to be seen as Russian first, Jewish second. Many of her family friends had already emigrated to Israel or the States. Tanya's father was an important mathematician—he could leave for Harvard, Oxford or the Sorbonne at any time. Her best friend from childhood lived in Philadelphia now. She asked me how far it was from Chicago.

Tanya never wanted to leave Moscow. She said, "It's not leaving Russia that I can't imagine. It's leaving *Russian*" (4).

Tanya's grandmother is hurrying us to our coats. Tanya's mother will take us over to the station. She checks to see our coats are properly buttoned, our hair wrapped up in the scarves, our scarves tucked in the collar of our coats. Tanya's grandmother kisses us goodbye and gives us a package of hard-boiled eggs in newspaper for lunch.

Tanya's mother bangs on the elevator doors until it opens. The cage doors close around us and we go down the fourteen flights. There is a sense of finality to it—at last, we're off to the literary battle. Everything looks like an old movie to me, the army uniforms, the Maltese Falcon elevators. The phones in Tanya's and Ilya's apartment are bright, candy colors, like the phones in a James Bond film from the 1960s. Nothing looks like 1990. It's like the whole city is trapped in amber, that the snow that falls

(4) She'll leave Russia but not the language. She'll teach Russian literature at Columbia University, find me through Google, and dance with Tara and Chenel at my wedding.

around us blurs all the years together.

Every day it keeps snowing. No one ever shovels the snow, and Moscow has no salt budget. It keeps piling up, raising the level of the sidewalks higher and higher, like the layers of an archaeological dig. I have to concentrate to keep from slipping. Everyone wears fur hats perched on their heads, as if everyone was walking around with their own little pet curled up to guard against the cold. Tanya's mother asks me if I'm cold.

We duck into the metro and go down the deep wormhole to the station platform. The escalator is so long I get dizzy. The station has elaborate mosaic tiles in abstract floral patterns. It looks like a museum. Like people's apartments in Moscow, it's beautiful on the inside. No one smiles on the metro. Tanya's mother tells me, "Remember, they're grumpy because their lives are hard." She works as a professional translator between French, English and Russian; she knows words like grumpy. Once we get to Ostankino, she kisses us both good-bye.

At wardrobe, Chenel, Tara and I are measured by bossy stout ladies with pins in their mouths. We're going to be dressed like Natasha Rostova at the ball. Empire waists, pink and blue sashes, little satin slippers for shoes. Our hair is done in ringlets. One of the ladies almost burns my ear with the curling iron.

The Russians dress first. Once they're done, they clap their hands together once they catch sight of each other in the mirror. Tanya covers her mouth in surprise and Sasha hugs her.

"We look like princesses," Tanya said, holding up the hem of the dress and turning her ankle so that she can see the slipper pointing out and different angles.

We think we look ridiculous until we see the boys walking down the hall. They're dressed in Russian army uniforms of the Napoleonic wars, holding their tall hats in their hands.

As we enter the studio, the lights are so bright we can't see straight. The backdrops are of a Russian country house, circa 1812. The twelve-piece band strikes up a waltz. Yuri leads the Soviets to the other side. They walk away confidently, in a straight line. They're pros at taping; they're the Soviet all-stars. We're given our headsets for the simultaneous translation.

The ringlets get in the way, as does Scott's grenadier mitre-cap. He puts it down across our table. It covers the paper we've been given to formulate our responses, and everyone yells at him to put it on the floor.

The games begin. Yuri smoothes his mustache. The questions come. Some are identification—minor characters from the novel, settings, references, tricky but nothing for people who've read it over and over as we have. Some of the questions are thematic. They take longer; we have to take turns answering them. The Soviets keep sending Tanya or Ilya to answer. We wonder if that's cheating. We're rotating our team more democratically.

The questions about Tolstoy's idiosyncratic ideas of history are hard, but we have been prepped well. Most of the judges seem willing to give us a chance, but there is one judge in particular, a Russian professor from Moscow State University, who seems horrified that Americans have invaded the sanctity of *Obraz!* He says, looking down his slender, pinched nose at us, over and over, in English so that the whir of the simultaneous translation in our ears goes quiet, "Once again American team refuses to understand suffering of Russian soul. No points."

Should we understand their suffering? Do we want to understand their suffering? They think suffering is beautiful; we think happiness is. Do they understand our suffering? I'm beginning to wonder how the Russians will understand Twain.

There is a dance competition, waltzing in partners. I watch while Ilya whirls around with Sasha, Scott with Tara. It shifts to some sort of minuet—everyone gives up but Tara and Sasha, who've both studied dance. They end with a bow and flourish. The Russians are ahead because of our failure to understand suffering, but we still have a chance to catch up until the food competition.

We are led blindfolded into a different studio.

The room is dark except for a spotlighted table heaped with food, American on the left and Russian on the right. At last, we think, the force-feeding the Russian mothers and grandmothers have been doing for two weeks will pay off. There's bliny, there's borscht, there's pelemeni. And caviar. And some elaborate salads, pickles, beets, salted fish, hard-boiled

eggs—we've never seen it before and have no idea what it's called. We lose points. The Russians have no problem identifying hamburgers, hot dogs, apple pie.

"Apple pie?" Tara says to me. "Apple *pie*? Like that's hard? Like the Russians don't have pie of their own? All they had to do was translate their word for pie into English. And *apple.*"

Back at wardrobe, we're stripped out of our Empire gear and decked out in a Mississippi River nightmare. Pink gingham, braids, and sunbonnets. They'd like us to go barefoot. Yuri assures us the floor of the studio has been swept clean for just this purpose. Tanya is particularly loath to give up being Natasha for Becky Thatcher.

The boys are wearing partially unraveling straw hats and overalls with patches. The patches are fresh. They are there not to cover holes, but to create the Huck image. Ilya chews a piece of straw. Scott decides to mirror him. The band is dressed in leather with cowboy hats. The women in the band are wearing leather skirts with squares cut out of the pattern. They've been given holes to approximate some kind of image of daring cowgirls. Chenel says, "Where did they get the idea that is ever okay fashion?"

The Russian judge with the attitude no longer cares if we don't understand suffering. He doesn't see Jim at the heart of the book. The band plays twangy bluegrass for the second dancing competition, the hoe-down. Nobody knows how to dance to it.

I want to talk about the end of Huckleberry Finn, about Huck's decision to light out to the territory. I'm at the age where I think heading off to the college (5) will be my way to light out. But being in Moscow makes me wonder if there is any territory to go to. Identification is easy—you learn new street names, new food. It's the big questions that follow you around, history, fate and suffering.

I'd like to talk about the terrible chapters of Tom Sawyer's return,

(5) After college, I will light out for the former Soviet Union, for the provinces of the Republic of Moldova. I won't tell my Moldovan friends that I went to Moscow as a guest of Soviet television. It will sound about as likely as a trip to Baba Yaga's chicken-leg house.

where he hijacks the book and prolongs Huck's decision and Jim's chance. Tom Sawyer showing up is one book visiting another, and it seems to fit after these days of imagining *War and Peace* and *Huckleberry Finn* together. Is there something to the fact that Tolstoy called his book, if you follow the more accurate translation, "War and the World," expanding his novel to include the war but everything else as well? Is that title a way to sum up the Cold War, too, and our small summit of literary analysis? Is Twain's title so clearly individualist, Huck Finn, that Jim's suffering doesn't matter, off the page, existing in the reader's imagination? Or are we supposed to take Huck so to heart that he becomes our Huckleberry friend, waiting around the bend, and we're supposed to know that he has the imagination, too, to think about Jim, to think about Jim so much he's willing to go to hell for him?

But what I'm called upon to do is to act as a lawyer for one of the scenes of frontier justice. Ilya is going to be the prosecutor; I'll be the defense. I could talk about the scene as a literary critic, talk about how Twain is full aware of the ambiguities, but I don't want to re-enact it, become part of lynching mentality, show off the thin veneer of American civilization for the Soviet public. I don't want to become that image of frontier justice, standing there holding my sunbonnet at the podium, banging the podium as I talk about needing to take the law into our own hands. But I do. I fall into it, under the lights. I even get into it, banging away. I can see myself, little, solemn, more like the Widow than Becky. I am not proud of myself, but then, I've already eaten Russian food in a taste-test for literary analysis, danced, dressed up like a doll, for literary analysis. None of this day of competition has been my finest hour.

I'm done, I sit back down, put the sunbonnet over my face to block the studio lights for a minute. The simultaneous translation informs me I get full points, which makes me feel worse.

(6) There is another literary battle, a trip to Chicago, filmed for local access cable. *The Great Gatsby* versus Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*. Gatsby the romanitc versus Bazarov the nihilist. Much discussion of the green light at the end of the dock and death by careless autopsy ensues.

The Russians win, 20-18 (6). Their suffering, and their complicated, root vegetable-based cuisine triumphs over our happiness and pie. We won't get any fan mail.

I catch Tanya's eyes across the studio. She is indignant for me. Her hands are balled into fists and her sunbonnet slumps to the floor. She's happy about the costumes, delighted about the costumes, thrilled about the costumes, but she's as uninterested as I am in re-enactment. It's time to mix things up, combine stories in new ways, build new images and icons, eat new food.

FOUND POEM

JANE MOLINARY

List Entitled Types of Bitches *Found on the Sidewalk Near Burgundy and Congress St. in New Orleans, Louisiana*

Using a butter knife to chip
a dried noodle off
of the inside of a bowl I felt
like one of those *can't clean their own dishes bitches.*

Couldn't help feeling
like a *whipped bitch* wondering
whether or not the bowl
was mine made me a *salty bitch,*
made me want a cup of coffee
in order to deal with the *dick*
riding bitch in me. The *instigatin',*
tricky bitch I tend
to turn into when
I come across those *bitches*
that be ignorin' you when they know
they can hear you.

I've never been a *waffle-*
makin' bitch in the mornings.

Never want to know or hear anything
from anybody 'cause in the mornings
the whole world to me is one
big *sloppy bitch.* The kinda *bitch*
who stares you in the face like
want to be jokin' bitches tend to do.

Since I'm a *coffee-drinkin' bitch,*
when I don't have it, faulty heaters,
dirty dishes, bounced checks, and refrigerators
all turn into *bitches that think*
they better than me.

Morning reminds me
that I'm a *daiquiri drinkin'*
in the afternoon bitch.
That I can be a *goofy bitch* blamin'
dirty bowls on other bitches,
criticizin' *slipper-wearin' bitches*
while I'm the *bitch wearin' shoes that be talkin'.*

I blow the air away
from my nose when I come
across *dirty sock wearin' bitches.*
Can't stand *bitches steppin'*
on my flip-flops on the sidewalk.

Such a *two-cent bitch.*

Been a *heinous bitch,* been a
white linen pants wearin' when they know they got their period bitch.

I've been caught
too many times bein'

a *non-replacin' toilet paper bitch.*

Bitches know I've been an *awkward bitch.*
Mid-summer Mardi-Gras ain't got no
Friends talkin' to me bitch.
I've taken the baked goods that mornings have made
for me, picked at 'em and gave 'em back.

One *big, overly-sensitive*
bitch. I am the *bitch*
who's always tryin' to beat
the *bitch* out of me.

WHY MY DAUGHTER THOUGHT I WAS HAVING A STROKE

ROBERT NAZARENE

Goon napternoon,
Rabies
& Gelatin Men:

Welp kim
to toothnight's
reaming.

We ham
Aviary
spentshell

pope
tomb mincetroduce
U Tube.

So,
wimp out
furniture Abdul

it is my distink
ornery
to intropuke:

BIRTHDAY POEM

ADAM SCHEFFLER

Thank you, life, for the 23,000 breaths
I took yesterday, for the 206 bones
of my body, not a single one broken.
Thanks for my 13 major organs all healthy,
for a vision whose blur is correctable,
for ears only a little deaf thus far.
Thanks for my mysterious sturdy formation,
how cars, pens, books, shirts, roses all wear out
but my body repairs itself.
But thanks above all for my gondolier heart,
which when I awoke last night,
anxious and fearful, kept beating,
pushing the blood back,
drawing me toward dawn.

HOURGLASS

BY

SAM KECK SCOTT

THE JOHN GARDNER MEMORIAL PRIZE IN FICTION

He bit her finger almost clean off. Not the whole thing, just the top part, right below the nail. Tooth marks in the bone, that's what the nurses said. It was her ring finger. Left hand. That part was probably a coincidence though. He bit it while he was dying. Jessie's not mad about it. Hard to be mad at someone for what they did while they were dying. I'm mad though. Not about the biting, just the dying.

My brother Miles had the biggest heart in the whole world. Bigger than a giraffe's, and they're famous for how big their hearts are because they need to pump the blood all the way up those long necks. I've learned there are mysteries most everywhere. There's at least a hundred mysteries left squirming in the mud whenever the tide pulls out, and that's just at Isamiles Rocks. One of the greatest mysteries of them all though, and one the scientists and religious people would never even think to study, is how the biggest heart in the whole world could also be a broken heart. No, not broken like that. Jessie never would have let that happen. Broken like an engine. Like your favorite cup.

We don't talk about mom and dad. That's a rule. But I'll just say one thing: they left and never came back. Miles was fourteen. I was nine. How two people crummy and selfish as them could have made my brother and his bigger than a giraffe's heart is another one of the mysteries. It doesn't add up. The only part that makes any sense is the broken part. But I don't like thinking of my parents as having any of themselves in my brother's heart. Or mine either, come to think of it. But there I've gone breaking the rule even more.

We're lucky we lived near the sea, that's all I know. Shoot, we might've starved otherwise. Miss Kepler was generous enough to let us stay in one of her apartments for close to nothing, but that doesn't mean the apartment came with any food. Miles would take me down to Isamiles Rocks before they were even named that. We'd ride the Number 16 bus all the way until it turns around by the factories.

"Izzy, watch. See how the seagulls drop the shells from the sky to

get to the food inside?"

"Yeah."

"Well you're hungry, aren't you?"

"Yeah."

"Good enough for a pretty white bird like that it must be good enough for us."

Those first few months after we were on our own we ate mussels for dinner every night besides free dinner on Sundays at the Community Center. That was before Miles started working at Mayer's Market and could get us discounted groceries.

We didn't drop the shells from the sky like the birds do, we steamed 'em up, ate them with melted butter from the packets I'd slip into the sides of my boots during free dinner on Sundays. Miles showed me if you get a book that tells you when the tide is low it's as good as a restaurant menu, but free.

"You know what they call this place?"

"No."

"They call it Belcher's Break. Now that's not a very pretty name is it?"

"No."

"But it sure is a pretty place, don't you think?"

"Yeah."

"I think we should give it a new name. How about Izzy's Rocks?"

"But what about you? Why not Miles' Rocks?"

"No, that don't quite have the ring to it. I got it! Seeing as you and me are the only ones who seem to like it here, why don't we combine our names and call it Isamiles Rocks?"

Boy I showed him every last crooked tooth when he said that.

I'm no doctor, and honestly I never cared to know the nitty gritties, but it was something to do with a flap, or maybe a tube. Something pinched, too small. I don't know.

"Ticking time bomb," the doctors said.

"Be lucky to live past his teenage years."

Jessie once said they would have fixed a rich kid with the same problem. It makes me too mad to even think about it. So mad I could drop all the doctors in the world from the sky like the birds do with the shells. Crack 'em right open and see what the devil looks like without his mask on. I know it isn't their fault though, that's the trouble, nobody needs to take the blame 'cause they spread it all around so thin you can't even trace it back. One big invisible devil stretched all around this world like saran wrap on the leftovers.

I thought of Miles' life like an hourglass. You know those glass things full of sand? They look like they have on a belt too tight and are all skinny in the middle, and you flip 'em upside-down to let the sand pour through the skinny part? Like the one Mr. Tate has on his desk in the science room. Anyway, I'd lie in bed at night wondering how much sand Miles had left. Just a pinch or a whole big bunch? I guess we all have an hourglass attached to our lives, but it was different with Miles. I only have to worry about my sand running out if I get run over by a bus or something. Used to keep me up at night worrying about my brother's sand and wondering if there wasn't some way to sneak some more in there.

I wanted to hate Jessie when Miles first brought her around. She was so pretty and sweet I just wanted to knock the wind right out of her. But then I saw her toes. On each toenail she had painted these little skeletons, like the Day of the Dead ones they pin up all over school after Halloween. And she painted bright flowers coming through the eye sockets of the skulls, and skeletons riding bikes and skeletons climbing up ladders made of bones. They were all so small and intricate I thought she ought to be famous for it.

I didn't know how to keep my grubby hands nice enough to deserve it, but she painted my fingernails anyway with a whole different set of bones and skeletons and chili peppers and blue and red and yellow flowers. It took her a whole afternoon and she asked me all about

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myself while she did it. Jessie was fine by me after that.

Plus I could tell how much she loved Miles, even after he told her he was a ticking time bomb and couldn't run or play any sports. Jessie's the smartest girl I ever met for loving my brother the way she did.

"Billy Mark called me fat and ugly! You need to beat him up!" That's what I told Miles one day.

"Billy Mark? You mean that fat and ugly kid?"

"Yeah! You gotta do something, Miles. You gotta beat him up!"

"Well I ain't gonna do that, little star." Little star, that's what Miles always called me. I thought nicknames were supposed to simplify things, but little star has one more syllable than Izzy does and is a whole extra word longer. Another mystery.

"Why not? You can't let him get away with it!"

"I promise you, little star, he ain't getting away with it. As sure as I am that you are not fat or ugly, I'm sure that Billy Mark has had a rough go. You ever met his older brothers? They're like junkyard dogs been using that boy as a chew toy all his life. You may as well ask me to pour blue paint into the sky."

Miles had the biggest heart in the whole world.

It was two days before his twentieth birthday and I was so excited for him to prove those doctors wrong by getting past his teenage years. Maybe he'd live as long as a normal person if he could just get finished being a teenager already.

Jessie came over and made a lasagna. She was wearing a pink skirt and I remember having to question everything I had ever thought in my life when I caught myself wishing I had one just like it. We all sat down to eat in our small living room, me on the floor and Miles and Jessie on the couch.

"You know what I think we should all do tomorrow?" It was Miles that asked it.

"What?" I said through a mouthful of lasagna.

"I'd like to do something real special with my two favorite ladies,"

he said, flashing one of his famous twinkling smiles that looked sweeter than a stack of pancakes all covered in maple syrup with a big lump of butter sliding across the top like a runaway shopping cart. "Well, seeing that tomorrow's a Saturday, and the weather's been so fine."

But then he stopped talking and got this bunched up look on his face like he was expecting milk but got orange juice instead.

And then everything got about as awful as things can ever get.

Miles threw his plate up into the air acting like he had gotten struck by a bolt of lightning. Jessie reached out to grab his arm but he was up in a flash, twirling around the living room like a human tornado ripping the blinds off the window and slamming a hand through the cheap wall making it pour white dust like it was a bag of flour. Jessie was twirling around with him trying to tame him like a bull. I never moved, just sat cross-legged with that same mouthful of food, my eyes wide as the sky feeling the wind of the twister and afraid I might get kicked but I never could move.

And then he was down, on his back, his face was red in some spots, white in others, and the worst part was he looked scared. That's when he bit Jessie's finger. Left his proposal etched into her bone. His girl forever. And I never moved. And Jessie screamed but not because of the blood running down her hand. She pounded on his broken chest. Breathed into his mouth that was full of her own blood. She screamed. Pounded. Screamed again. The last grain of sand slipped through the glass shoot and there wasn't any amount of screaming and pounding Jessie could do to flip it back over again. Miles looked like he was sleeping with his eyes open. I never moved. Just looked away. Saw a flat lasagna noodle come unstuck from the ceiling and fall to the carpet like the birds dropping the shells to get to the food inside.

Next day I took the Number 16 down to Isamiles Rocks because I felt pretty sure that's where Miles wanted to take his two favorite ladies but never had the chance to say so. Jessie stayed behind because there were details to sort out, but she told me not to worry about that stuff. Plus she had that busted finger and an even worse busted heart. Not like

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an engine this time though, but it wasn't Miles' fault. He never woulda done it on purpose. Most people say they'd die for someone they love, but it wasn't like that with my brother. He would have lived for us if he could have. Lived forever if we asked him to.

I scampered down to the little beach between the rocks that are all purple and shiny with mussels, and boy it didn't take more than one glance at those rocks and that big blue ocean before it felt like someone grabbed ahold of my own heart and gave it a good squeeze. Wringed me out from the inside like a dishcloth holding all the tears in this world. Miles would have laughed.

"Why you bringing all that salt water to the ocean, little star?"

Like pouring blue paint into the sky, he woulda said.

GUADALUPE

ZACH VANDEZANDE

It would have been colder than this when my husband set out on the eight mile hike up to the top of Guadalupe Peak. There was very little actual climbing, just some scrabbling over rocks and trudging up stone-stepped switchbacks to get to the highest point in Texas. On the morning that he did the climb, a cold front swept in, leaving a damp chill in the air and a low cloud bank that obscured the peak. Once he was up there, he may not have even been able to see the view, which was supposed to be gorgeous, like a promise.

They said my husband disappeared, though I can't say that I believed them, at least not in the way they meant it. He was officially a missing person, but he felt more like a ghost, like the idea of himself.

I knew only that Mark came here on the last leg of the road trip he was on before he was supposed to head home. That was four months ago. I stood looking at the range, my hand shielding my eyes from the sun hung low over the mountains, unsure of which peak was actually highest, which I would end up on top of. It didn't much matter. It's nice, though, to know where you're going. A destination is better than a plan. I only wanted to follow him up there and back down again.

My sister, Gwen, had said it was a bad idea. She was two years older and thought this about everything.

"At least don't climb it alone, Shelly," she'd said.

"What about mountain lions?" she'd said.

"National parks are where transients sleep," she'd said.

On and on.

In my childhood, which ended on or near this mountain when my husband vanished without explanation, she was hard to ignore. Now that he was gone and I was left to sort through the mess, the tragedy of me as the person who was not missing, ignoring her was simpler.

I imagined he stood where I was, campsite seven, and looked over what he would climb in the morning. There was a message on his phone from me, but the reception was probably bad, and there would surely be a kind of desperation in my voice that kept him from wanting to listen to it. I'd supported him going on the trip alone. I thought it would be good for us. But his calls had grown more infrequent the further west he got, and they stopped altogether when he started heading back, trickling to the occasional picture or text. The last one was from here.

I have taken to picturing all of what he did, then doing it too. It's why I came. So: he closed his eyes and pointed himself into the breeze. I did the same, and tried to think what he was thinking. It felt to him for a second like he didn't exist, or: for a second, he didn't exist. He was practicing the act. There were children running behind him in the distance, the kind of kids you would expect at a minor national park like this—bored, overeager, but otherwise basically capital "G" Good Kids. Nothing like those shits at Carlsbad Caverns that we each had run across the day before, kids who couldn't even sit still to watch the bats.

When we opened our eyes, he and I, the sun was nearly gone between the two main peaks. I stretched my arms out as wide as I could and felt the muscles in my back tense. I thought of him fumbling around in his backpack and taking a swig from the bottle of whiskey he'd bought in a grocery store in New Mexico. The plastic bottle reminded him of mouthwash. They don't sell them that way in Houston, where we live, where the liquor laws are strict and Jesus still holds a pretty strong political sway. I thought of the sign a homeless man had held in Santa Fe that said, "Jesus wasn't black, but Judas, that's fine." My husband slugged down more whiskey. It had been in the sun, so it went down hot and stuck around.

There was something inside of my husband in all the time I knew him. It was the same thing that sent him out on a trip by himself, and it may

have been what caused him never to return. A nameless, twisting-from-the-light type of thing he didn't much like to articulate. Sometimes I would see him sitting in a darkened room, or staring out a window. When we were dating, I would ask him what was wrong, and he would say, of course, that nothing was wrong. But one time he said that language creates the thing it names, and so it was sometimes best to not say anything of what you were thinking. That's when I knew that he had a thing inside him, a thing I might have in me too. A thing I shouldn't name. Maybe all of us do.

I loved him anyhow. I loved him through the three years of our marriage, even as he got quieter, and spent more time inside of himself, and slept beside me less and less at night, choosing instead to stay up and read what he referred to as nothing on the Internet. He would say as much the next day, if I asked: *I was reading nothing. Like on purpose. I wanted to read something that didn't mean anything at all.*

I wasn't a fool. I knew I was being shut out of his inner life, and the silence that settled over us burned in me like held breath. I wanted to shake him awake, but I was afraid that I would find that he was awake, that this was who he was going to be from now on, and so I kept still and waited for him to come around.

The trip was a pilgrimage of sorts. He wanted to go out west, just for the sake of seeing it. I let him go because of the spark of determination in his voice when he talked about it, and because I liked the thought of him heading back to me. Then, of course, he never did.

I stood on top of the picnic table of campsite seven to watch the sun throw its pink across the sky, up over the ridgeline. In my mind, Mark did the same, pulling the hood of his old gray sweatshirt up over his head as he drank his whiskey and looked and looked. The wind bit at his knuckles and he bunched his sleeves over them. I was in shorts, a tank top, an old pair of running shoes, a bandana of his I'd found in a closet back home. It was the same red bandana everyone had.

Gwen called.

"Are you staying in a hotel tonight?" she said, not bothering to say hello. I'd only stayed in a hotel every few nights to save money. The rest of the trip I'd stayed at various campgrounds in a little two-person tent.

"No. Tomorrow I'm making the climb."

"Oh. Well, be careful."

"I will."

There was a pause. "Still nobody real on the sublet."

"It'll work out." I shuffled my feet and waited for the next thing.

"Shel."

"What?"

"You can come live with me. You don't have to do this. I'm on the other side of Houston, different highways, different stores, different restaurants—it's a whole different place."

"You're a good sister, Gwen. 'll talk to you tomorrow, okay?"

I hung up without hearing her say okay back, because I knew she wouldn't. She didn't like me moving to Las Cruces by myself to do the same job I didn't like in a town I didn't know. My husband clung to himself in the cold.

We each ate dinner out of the trunk of the car, separated by the months that had passed. He had chips and salsa, some trail mix he'd bought at the Buckee's, the hot stuff with the wasabi peas, a string cheese, an apple, a something, a something else. I had a peanut butter and honey sandwich I'd made. I sat on the bumper and chewed, nodded at a father and his young daughter who walked past to the bathrooms. It was a weekday, so the campgrounds were only lightly populated. The tent pads around number seven were all empty, but there were a few cars in the parking lot. I wondered if school had started up again yet in this part of Texas. This far into August it seemed likely.

In the very last bit of daylight, my husband took the picture and sent it to me along with the words, "Cell phone sucks. Still out here. Tomorrow I'll be somewhere up there." I didn't send a response. He probably assumed I thought he was lying about the reception, and in his mind that's what my response would have been if I had sent one. We had both been guilty on more occasions than can be counted of putting more stock into what we might have said than what we actually did say.

I held up my phone now and looked at his picture and my own view of the ridgeline. It was gorgeous. It was worth sharing. I could have said so.

Back in the tent, I turned on my little lantern. My husband would have set his tent up later, in full darkness—he was always a loose planner, he had a tendency to be caught unaware of a lack of daylight, a sudden cold front. It never seemed to bother him, but it made me feel too rigid, too easily annoyed. There was a flashlight at his feet as he tried to stomp a tent peg into the hard-packed dirt. He took a certain pleasure in swearing under his breath, but he smiled when the thing was done.

My sleep was fitful and broken by real and imagined coyotes. I think I had a dream of the bridge that crosses the Rio Grande Gorge north of Taos, or else I was just remembering two days before when I'd stood beside it eating a snow cone I bought out of a converted school bus. I had a picture from Mark with the caption *long way down.* He'd taken it not on the bridge, but below it. He'd crossed the fence line with the government warnings about rock slides and loose footing to take the picture. It was of his feet on the edge of a rock precipice that looked out onto the river hundreds of feet below.

In the dream I stood on the right side of the fence, watching nervously as he crossed the rocks. I called out to him about dropping his phone, but he just turned and smiled. If I were out there, I might feel an urge to jump. I wished for him not to feel the same. I wished he would sit down, would scoot away from the rock's edge, or even army crawl away, as low to the ground as possible. He stood there and waved and braced his lower back with his hands and stretched it out like he had been driving too long.

My waking thoughts of him in that moment would have been the same, more or less, except for the smile. When I kicked my way out of the sleeping bag and sat up in the tent, I didn't know which it was, dream or conscious imagination, which side of fitful sleep it had happened on. Mark slept like a child when he wanted to, a talent he'd gained in college when he spent a semester living in his Isuzu Trooper. I thought of what his dreams might have been. Playing fetch with a coyote, its tongue lolling while it stood and watched the stick in Mark's hand, tensed for the throw. A dream so sun-strewn and joyous that waking up might even hurt a little bit.

I went to the car at sunrise and emptied out the old backpack I'd been living out of into the trunk. I refilled it with bottled water, some sunscreen,

energy bars, and an emergency medical kit I'd bought that also held some weed, double-bagged in case I ran across a border checkpoint, which were creeping further into the Texas interior all the time. I checked the sun. Mark would be up by now, ready to go. I set out after him.

This early on a Wednesday, the campground felt empty and still, and the trail was lonely enough. Mark jumped up and down a few times in his hiking boots against the cold and exhaled hard to see his breath. I took off and re-tied the bandana around my forehead.

The first half mile or so was level, tromping through scrub and walking over the occasional ant pile or mound of rabbit pellets. A lot of the cacti looked stepped on or rotten. Some of them seemed burned. Getting the majesty of a place like this required a little distance. Still, it was nice. I felt a little closer to him, and he felt a little further away from that weight that had been pushing against his ribs, and we both got to let go of ourselves a little.

Of course I didn't know how he felt, but I thought I'd earned the right to speak for him in the silence he'd left me on the other side of.

Once the switchbacks began, things got tougher. The stones that had been set down as makeshift steps were poor footing, and a bit slick, and the old running shoes I'd put on weren't quite up to it. After twenty minutes or so of trudging up the steps, I had to take a break. The steps were a little much for how short my legs are. Mark called me Pocket Woman whenever I needed him to get the flour off the top shelf. He liked to pick me up from behind and yell too loud in my ear that he'd got me, too, the way people have been doing my whole life. You could say that I let him, that I ignored the cliché of it, and the memory of other lovers doing the same, and how it spoke to a language that was not ours but that belonged to a more universal experience and therefore one that maybe wasn't *real or authentic* in the way he liked to think we were. But the truth is none of that occurred to me until it had to. I didn't think of any of it until I had to start making sense of what had happened.

I thought of the wording of that. Making sense. It implied a kind of creation. I sat against a rock and ate some nuts out of my bag. If I found answers to what had happened, would they be found, or made? The

question was upsetting.

These switchbacks don't fuck around, Mark said. Or, *Can you imagine the motherfucker who placed all these rocks?* Or, *Why are we doing this shit again?* Some statement with a swear word in it that hinted at his own tiredness without admitting it. I drank my water and kept silent, looked at where I'd been. The sun was in the valley, and the cars were gleaming in it. The view of the parking lot from up here made me a little sad. It made me feel like a tourist. I was on the wrong side to view El Capitan—the most famous peak, but not the tallest. Seeing it might make me feel better, like one of the pioneers that used it as a marker.

We kept on. When he was happy, or trying to be happy, Mark would say things out loud that he liked. Here, he said *ponderosa pine,* a word he had read in the brochure. There were none around, though maybe the trees I could see further up the mountain were them. Here it was just pale limestone rocks, some scrub brush, an ocotillo poking out from a rock. I said "ocotillo" to no one.

Once this had all been underwater. Another fact found in a brochure. Mark would say, *That raises all kind of knotty philosophical problems. Like when did it become a mountain instead of an island? Like how can you tell? Like if it were underwater would it still be the highest point in Texas? And what would Texas be if it weren't Texas? If Houston were underwater, would it still be Houston? Or would it just be more Gulf of Mexico?* He was this kind of man.

The switchbacks were unkind and steep, and occasionally there would be a moment where the trail became unclear among the rocks. This was almost always when the trail bent around on itself to continue up. At one point I continued past it for a few dozen feet before coming to a sharp dropoff that ended twenty feet below, where the ground met the rock face but continued steeply down. I heard the bones in my leg snap, looking down there. I felt the dust kick up as I slipped and rolled, or Mark did, or the both of us at once. The trail cut into the face of the mountain hid this kind of fact from everyone. It gave the thrill without the pain, the wilderness stripped of its wild.

Here, then, was one possible explanation. Bad footing, a long fall,

rolling too far from the trail to be seen or helped. Mark used to chide me for always thinking the worst, even as he had to admit that sometimes there was good reason. For every unanswered text a car crash, an affair, a noose in the garage. He chides me still. I poured some water over the edge to hear it slap the ground before I turned and found where the trail picked up.

After another half hour or so, the trail crossed over the ridgeline and changed all at once, giving way to the pines and their shade and an earthy wet forest floor. It was easily ten degrees cooler or more, an alpine forest tucked away into the desert, just a little up and away. The trail leveled out into a gentle rise here. I took a picture, knowing it didn't capture anything of the feeling, but wanting to just the same. Mark didn't stop to photograph anything but was similarly struck by the strangeness of the change.

I said, almost reflexively, not knowing what I meant, "You are here." The stillness of me and of the air around me let me hear for the first time someone coming up the trail. I turned and waited.

It was a man in his late-fifties, wearing a yellow shirt and cargo shorts, walking the trail at a brisk pace with the help of aluminum climbing poles. I didn't like the idea of meeting someone else out here, but the look of him put me at ease. He had the body of a dad with grown children trying his best to be fit. He must have been gaining on me all morning. I held up a hand, gave a little bit of a wave. He nodded.

When he got closer to me, he said, "You're halfway."

"Looks like you're gonna beat me."

He stopped and tamped the ground with one of the poles, "Probably. But then I imagine I've done it more than you. I'm up this mountain most weekends."

"It's not the weekend." I thought of this man meeting Mark like this. Halfway.

"True. Thought I'd take a day off and come up when it's not so crowded. You meet a lot of good people, but sometimes you want the place to yourself."

I looked around. "Sorry."

He held up his hand, which was still looped through the hiking pole's strap. It swung free. "Don't be. This your first time?"

"Yeah."

"It's a good day for it. You'll see." He plucked a water bottle from his slim backpack and drank from it in one motion. His limbs were like stiff rope, but he was soft in the middle. The strap of his backpack ran under his belly. I decided I liked him.

He looked at me with a kind of expert's concern. "You set for water? I always bring a little extra in case. It'll be hot once you're above the tree line."

I jiggled my pack. "All good. Got water, and food, too, and sunscreen, and first aid, and a map, and a melon baller just in case."

He laughed and started past me up the trail. "If I find a melon, I'll leave it for you."

"Thanks," I called after him. After he was far enough that I felt alone, I started out again.

A little further up the mountain, Mark had to pee. He looked down the trail behind him and saw that there was no one, so he stepped off the path, hidden by a low-slung tree. Of course, before he finished someone walked by and caught him, and he suddenly felt exposed and stupid and crass.

Who was the person? It was a woman. Or it was a man. It was a person to serve as witness.

If it was a woman, she was a bit younger than him, with a goofy sun hat and hair drawn back in a ponytail, and he apologized sheepishly as he turned from her, and she laughed. If it was a woman he thought of me, and then he did not think of me, and the story tells itself from there. If it was a man it was that man, booking it on his hiking poles, and my husband laughed loudly and said *I thought I had a pretty good lead* and the man smiled and said *Nope* and then *I'll see you at the top* and pressed on.

It was nicer to think it was the man, so it must have been. The trees were thinning out the further up the trail I got, and I could see down into the valley below, which was more wooded and lush than the desert surrounding it. After a time, I was above the treeline, and the sun beat down on me like the man said. I came to a bridge that crossed a deep, green-gray wound in the mountain. Below, some trees had collapsed, either from rain

or drought or something else.

On the other side of the bridge a little off the trail was a rock about the size of a volleyball that was swarming with ladybugs. Hundreds of them, teeming and moving over each other. I sent a picture of it to Gwen with the caption: *Don't worry, I found what I was looking for!*

I squatted down to watch the ladybugs for a minute. I thought Gwen might text back. She probably found it annoying, my being glib again. When I didn't know what to say, I went with the joke, because at least a joke means something, which is to say that it means nothing, and by admitting that it means nothing it stands in place of something real. Gwen hated this about me, if only because Gwen didn't think of her life as a thing to be survived.

I know better, so I've been telling and laughing at jokes all summer. I've been practicing for when someone asks me where Mark is. I'll be ready to take it for what it is. I'll laugh in their faces and say, *Oh, how clever.*

We were close to the top, and the trail turned to switchbacks again, steeper this time and less defined. Mark looked out into the valley as low-slung clouds rolled into it. It's always so strange how solid clouds look, and then when you're in them they're the same as fog. The sun was burning my neck. I poured water over the bandana and put it back on.

The trail disappeared entirely a few hundred feet from the top, but it didn't matter. There was nowhere else to go. At one point I had to bend over and put my hands on the hot rock to get the rest of the way.

The peak appeared without ceremony. The man in yellow was sitting on some rocks a few yards away. He looked up and smiled at me. At the tallest point, a brushed metal obelisk jutted up out of the ground. I walked over to it and saw that it was brought to me by American Airlines. Mark hated this. Everyone hated this.

"There's a book to sign in that box by your feet," the man said. He was chewing on something. "But I mean, you should really take a look."

I did. In one direction, Texas sprawled out for miles and miles, cut into sections by freeway. A ridgeline far away had what looked like windmills. They were too far away to see if they were spinning or not. I thought of their red lights, if they were visible from here at night, blinking out of sync

with each other, seeming for all the world like they had something they were trying to say. In the other direction were mountains piled up next to each other. It was something to see.

I sat down with my back leaning against the hot metal.

"What do you think?" he said.

"It's nice."

"Yeah. Sometimes God gets it pretty right."

"I guess so."

We sat in silence a minute before he said, "What do you do?"

"Right now nothing. I start a teaching job next week in Las Cruces."

"High school?"

"College."

He smiled. "A professor. Do you like it?"

"It's a job," I said. I was stuck between being kind and wanting to be alone. Being up here with him felt a little like a performance. I added, "A good job, though. Rewarding, I guess."

He nodded. Mark was standing on the edge away from where I was. The clouds were hiding the valley below. I wanted to be there with him, not seeing.

The man took a long drink of water. "Are you gonna sign the book?" he said.

I shook my head. "No, not yet." He shrugged.

I thought of the weed in my bag. It felt like a cop out, so I left it alone. I knew that the edge that Mark stood on led back down the mountain. To jump would be to turn an ankle or scrape your hands and shins on the rock. Still, I was afraid for him. He had come this far. I was sure. Then the story kind of ended. And here I was, waiting for something else to happen. I thought of his name in the book and stood up.

It was an old metal box that latched, rusted and olive green. It was lighter than I thought it would be. I carried it over near to where the man was and sat down. He smiled at me.

Inside the box was a plain perfect-bound notebook and a pen. I ran my hand along the faux leather face of it. The pages were crinkled and weather-whipped. I flipped through them and saw the signatures and little

messages of strangers. If I were alone I would have cried holding it against me. Instead I let it sit in my lap and flipped to the first blank page. People put their names in this book, and sometimes they stayed. Meaning the names. Sometimes the name was all that was left. Sometimes the name was an answer, and all you had to do was flip back through to the day that the question was asked and see for yourself, but it could be a long walk down with that knowledge in your pocket, and a longer one if you came looking for it and it wasn't there after all.

I closed the book, but kept my page with a finger. I said, "Do you ever think about the word true?"

The man swallowed the last of his granola bar. "How do you mean?"

"Like, it can be a verb. You can true something. It means to make something the right shape. Or, like, something that rings true. It's not about it being right, it's just about beauty."

He smiled. "I can't say that I've ever thought of it that way. I'm an electrician." He said it like it explained everything.

"My husband climbed this mountain once." I felt out of breath from the saying, like I'd betrayed myself. I felt empty.

"Is that so?"

"No," I said. The windmills were moving. I could see that they were. "I don't know. But it's true."

He thought about this for a minute. "What do you mean?" he said. "Which is it?"

"You tell me. Or, actually, don't." I ran my fingernail up the side of the book's pages, felt the buzz of passing days, signatures.

He stared at me like I might be crazy. Finally he said, "Hey, you wanna see something?"

"Sure." He got up, and I followed, still holding the book in my hands. We walked a few dozen feet to a large flat rock near the edge facing the mountains.

"Look," he said, and pointed at our feet. I bent down. There was a spiral indentation in the rock, a little thing that started out as a tight loop before widening out. It was maybe three inches wide. I ran a finger over it.

"That's a fossil," he said. "Been here millions of years, back when this was a Permian reef. Neat, huh?"

It was. Such a small thing, and here it was, immutable. I looked away, out into Texas. I didn't care if he saw me cry, but I didn't want to be crying, either. After a minute, I wiped at my face, stood up, and looked at him square on.

"Thanks," I said. "Thanks for showing me that."

I waited for him to respond or ask if I was okay, but he didn't. He nodded and looked back toward his pack. He knew better than I did that some things can't be solved. I wanted to tell him then that my husband had disappeared, that there was no explanation, that he had climbed up this mountain and just kept climbing, that somehow that was what he needed, and he found it, and it was enough.

I didn't say any of that, though. I stuck out my hand. He took it, and I thanked him again, and he walked back to his gear and shouldered it. I raised my hand in a wave. He did the same, and I smiled the kind of smile that means a person did their absolute best to help.

When he was gone, I sat down, opened the book, and signed my name and then Mark's, so that in my mind he was not on the edge of something again. In my mind he did it, whatever it was he needed to do, and he's doing it still, and he carries on ahead of me. For a minute I could even believe it.

I put the book back in its box and carried it over to where it was. I knew I should start back, but I wanted to stay here for a bit longer and think about how I'd accomplished something instead of how I was only halfway. There was still the descent. There was still pain shooting up from my jellied muscles, there was still growing tired, too tired. There was still continuing mostly out of sheer momentum, out of not wanting to be where I was any more. There was still taking too long, longer than it took to get here. There was still the sunburn that would set in, there was still the picking, the rolling of the dead skin between fingertips while staring at boxes in my new living room. There was those boxes still being there at Thanksgiving, there was Gwen coming to visit, there was her opening the boxes and finding a place for everything. There was her placing one thing on the coffee table, one thing on a shelf, looking to me for approval, me not nodding, then me nodding, me not wanting to but nodding, me starting to feel a little okay.

SKINNY DIPPING WITH ST. ANTHONY

KAREN J. WEYANT

In those early August days, your mother prayed
for everything she could not find: car keys,
a matching sock, one pearl earring, your father's lost job.
When she wasn't looking, you too disappeared,

mostly at dusk, when it was easy to get lost
to the lure of our favorite swimming hole,
where we stripped to our t-shirt tan lines.
I was still mostly boy, chest flat, thin buds

of breasts little more than pinched skin.
Late bloomer, my mother once said,
although I didn't know yet what was going to blossom.
You were a scrawny stick with sharp collarbones

and skinny shoulders, a medal of a dead saint
resting on a rope around your neck.
We pushed through cattails and thin cobwebs
that formed in evening dew, flicked away

waterbugs that seemed to skate above the waves.
Even when our teeth chattered in the cool air
and our skin puckered from the pinch
of the water, you never wanted to venture

toward home. You knew what you would find:
your mother, standing on the back porch praying
to St. Anthony, calling for him so loudly
we both thought for sure that God had a new name.

MALIBU

TONY WHEDON

For Joss Whedon

I stayed that month with a cousin who wrote
for television. A big yellow house with
a guard dog that never stopped barking.
It's the blue I remember, an oil-slick blue
& its darkening shadow, on the quasi-horizon;
I was done with endless suffering: I'd
played so many years my rotator cuff
refused to heal. But I loved looking down
across a rooftop of palms to the swimmers
diving off the jetty. Success was a dying
cloud drifting east, resisting the gravity
& light that tether us to earth. I'd lived
in my cousin's shadow so many years
I wanted part of the action – a TV musical,
a permanent gig in a Late Night band.
Evening stars give way to a midnight moon.
Meanwhile, the dog whose name I forget
won't stop barking. I've locked out
my cousin, I hear him knocking at the door.

ON AND ON (AND OFF AGAIN)

TONY WHEDON

I put my horn down as the bass player completes
his chorus & wait for a last cadenza
that never comes. It's all stopped in mid-motion

& goes on & on, the tenor clicking his keys,
the drummer goosing his foot cymbal.

Someone in the parking lot's sniffing plastics.
Someone's in mid-kiss smoothing out
her yellow dress. The tune we're playing

carries us back to a greener time when
dreams were heartbreak, when words mattered:

I woke to a note on my pillow.
"Play 'I Should Care,'" it said, play
"Oh look at Me Now." The tenor picks up

where I left off, drifting into something
so sweet the girl in the yellow dress quits crying.

I like to think these thoughts that fail to make it
from my mouthpiece to the bell of my horn
have to do with wisdom; but I'm dripping sweat

I'm awash with hard-to-live-by illusions.
Most of us flame out before fifty

no faltering last chorus, no fading like smoke
into a photograph from the last century to mark
our passing. The lucky ones muster a lick

or two before the notes they play turn to dust.

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REQUIEM FOR A DOLL

ELLIE WHITE

May every dress be your favorite midnight
blue, every collar and cuff loose

as an old headband, each shoe nestled gently
with its mate. I wish you a house of fresh cedar,

a set of bone china and shelf upon shelf of lilac tea.
May every sugar lump be oversized, each spoon

fit especially for your hands, each cookie
and biscuit a different flavor of lemon.

May your hair never need brushing, your eyes
keep their starry gleam, your cheeks

be forever slightly flushed. I wish you a kindle
of soft-pawed kittens, a flight of Luna moths,

a pair of small warm hands
that will never set you down.

CURATIVES

DAVID WINTER

My brother has been sobering up a year
when I visit the first place he's paid rent

since illness dried him out. He stirs onion,
garlic, and ginger into a simmering curry

and lifts a ladle to his lips. Thicker strands
of sinew ripple in his back each time I visit,

the work of years spent swimming against
the current of his blood. A striper's needle-

thin rib catches between the calcified ridges
of his teeth, dances as he tongues it—then

grinds it to nothing. It seems impossible
that he wakes some mornings paralyzed

by microbes trying to mortar his spine
into an unbending tower. I used to take

so many pills my heart forgot its rhythm,
but I thought we had both settled down

until his ex- bragged that he had once,
in handcuffs, licked ex off the floor

of a jail-cell. We give our bodies so many
reasons to fight back, but no one knows

exactly what started his blood's war
against his spine. As he adds turmeric

and cumin to the curry, he tells me more
than I remember or believe about herbs'

curative properties. His doctor claims
a new serum might prevent spinal fusion

by killing white blood cells, or it might
just ravage his veins. It doesn't matter

what hope the doctor or I harbor
for that solution slim as a fishbone,

slim as the needle that put our cousin
in the ground last month. What matters—

what has to matter—is the work of his will
against the current, how he welcomes

the water coursing over his skin each day.

THOREAU

MARGARET YOUNG

Was an efficient man.
Instead of horses or the train
he rode his own canoe, carved
with a pencil sharpener,
keeping beat on a watermelon,
humming a Buddha hymn.

He never washed his beard
but used it to grow beans.
He loved his books, shared them
with mice, who had none of their own.

He used his ax for everything:
signing his manuscripts, tying his boots,
eating berries he'd picked that morning,
licked dark juice from the blade.

VEGETABLE PSYCHOLOGY, LOVESICK ASTROLOGY

ELIZABETH ZALESKI

The first time I ever saw my dad without hair was in a crowded restaurant, where the overhead lights played up all the subtle dents and ridges in his skull he'd never known were there. Two days earlier, he had shaved his head. All that thick, brown, respectable hair—gone. Now he was sitting across from my brother and me, studying the menu and trying to buy psychedelics. He leaned forward but didn't lower his voice: "Do you think you could get me some mushrooms?"

In some ways, this request was actually less surprising than if my dad had decided to order fried mushrooms for an appetizer, since he hadn't eaten anything resembling a vegetable since 1997, when I was thirteen years old. That was the last time he'd tried eating lettuce, and the first time I heard him say "fuck," as in, "I try to eat lettuce, but I just fucking *hate* it." Still, the question was out of character for my dad, who could barely drink alcohol and had never smoked marijuana.

My brother was in his second year of college; I had graduated a few months earlier. Mom and Dad had called each of us the night before and told us they were coming down to Columbus "just to visit." My parents have a tradition of taking their children out to the most impersonal places—a Chili's, a Damon's Grill, any chain restaurant with gigantic television screens and fried mozzarella sticks—and making dire announcements mid-meal (Mom: I found a lump in my breast, Dad: The dog is dead), so I was wary. A week before my sister's first wedding, Mom took my sister and me to Damon's and told us that she'd been having regular affairs with Dad's

consent since we were kids. I cried into my rib basket.

My parents had driven two hours to see us, and after I decided on the chicken fingers, I sat and waited. I assumed they were there to announce that they were finally splitting up. Their marriage had been floundering for years, and Dad's sudden interest in mushrooms had me picturing him in the deep end, down a few feet in the greenish murk, kicking. I figured tripping with Mom was either a desperate plan to reconnect or a last hurrah.

Maybe they'd finally exhausted all the legal possibilities for making each other interesting. Because my parents are honest, funny, and candid, but also because they have never fully understood that a child is something different from a friend, I know rather too much about those possibilities. When I was in high school, I had to make up elaborate lies to keep my friends out of the basement so they wouldn't see the giant sex swing crouched in the corner like half of an eight-foot spider.

"Big rats," I would tell my friends. "Sewage leak."

Mom had laughingly told me not long before the night at the restaurant that she used it now as a regular swing, *sans* sex. This was the same commitment to transparency that led my father to ask his son to buy him illegal drugs.

"Come on, it'll be fun," Dad said now, pressuring my brother like the bad kid in the black jeans in an after-school special.

"No," my brother said, like Nancy Reagan.

Because my brother was the youngest in the family, he had been spared the trip to Damon's the week before my sister's first wedding and thus knew very little about the constant blundering that constituted my parents' marriage. His "no" was offered out of plain old common sense, rather than against any misgivings he had about hallucination as marriage therapy.

"But you've both done them and had good experiences," Dad said.

I looked at him, this man who once cried at the sight of my baby picture suspended in a crocheted snowflake, and said, "But we're kids and don't have an anxiety disorder." This was not entirely true. I was actually twenty-three, not technically a kid at all anymore, and had a history of working myself into wheezing fits when I was upset and not adequately medicated.

"I'll just take a little," he offered.

"You'll just lose your mind," my brother said.

Mom wasn't saying anything, which was unsettling. Usually both she and Dad spent visits nearly breathless with mundane questions for us, but she just sat there, looking washed out.

"It's my life," Dad said, squaring his shoulders like he was about to leave his job on Wall Street to start up an animal shelter.

"I'm not going to get you mushrooms. You have no idea how bad you would freak out," my brother told him.

I nodded. I take a certain pride in knowing my family's genetic susceptibility to multiple cancers, suicide, heart attack, and killer allergies to bread. I tell the history well when the doctor asks, in precise and graphic detail, so that by the end I feel as if I'm a great survivor, that I've overcome terrible odds in order to sit on that examining table and take two deep breaths.

So of course I knew that my dad's side of the family often suffers from intense, specific, and not unbeautiful paranoias. My cousin Matt woke one day to find that he had lost his faith, not in God, but in gravity, convinced that it was subject to break down just like everything else on earth. He has since suffered, on debilitating occasions, from the fear that his feet will simply detach from the earth and his body will rise, up and up, at an unremarkable rate, into the sky forever.

And then there were my father's own existential woes, as when he swore at salads, or when he sometimes forgot to breathe while, driving home in his Ford Aspire from a day of designing software to make machines to make bearings to make windmills and spaceships and cars, he stumbled upon the concept of infinity, and couldn't make the universe stop expanding, no matter how hard he concentrated.

He'd been an engineer for over twenty-five years and developed a visceral relationship with numbers. During one of the first of the infinity episodes, he was hauled off in an ambulance, convinced he was dying.

When the food finally arrived, at least there was no lettuce. In addition to the French fries, Dad ate a burger topped with mayonnaise and cheese, though he was careful to order it backwards. He never asks for a burger with mayonnaise and cheese. Instead, he'll order one with a name

like "Garden Stacker" that comes with lettuce, mayonnaise, pickles, onions, tomato, and cheese, and then list what he would like to have removed. This way he seems finicky instead of unhealthy.

The hamburger's mass and flavor were an indulgence—he told me he'd been subsisting on oatmeal and tapioca pudding for weeks. Earlier in the evening, he'd pumped his fist triumphantly and told us that he was "in the 180s."

"But you're starving yourself."

He shrugged.

We all ate slowly, and too much. I waited patiently for the announcement, but suddenly there were empty plates and still no awkward revelation. There was only the cold, foreboding silence of my mother, and the ongoing mushroom conversation with my father.

Dad jabbed a French fry at his plate a few times while he considered his final words on the subject. "I don't know. But I'm getting old," he said. "I need to see some new things."

A few days later, I decided to drive up to my parent's house and spend the weekend. I figured by Sunday either Mom or Dad would tell me why they were acting so weirdly. Now it was Sunday, and it was dreary and rainy outside. The muddy creek at the bottom of the sloped front yard crept ever closer to the fence along the border. Valentine's Day was Wednesday, and Mom was making Reuben sandwiches. She wrapped them in tin foil and talked, downright bright-eyed, about what makes a classic Reuben. "Corned beef, sauerkraut, Swiss cheese, and thousand island dressing." She said the thousand island dressing was the secret, but she was fretting over not having rye bread.

I watched her as she clucked her tongue and muttered, "I just wish I had some rye bread. It's really not complete without the rye bread."

Mom hadn't made a hot sandwich since I was a kid, and the subtly layered sandwiches eating up the counter space in front of me were not sloppy joes or steak-ums. I thought about how unhappy she'd been in our company at dinner last week and how Dad was losing all that weight. I thought, "She's awful intent on that rye bread." Then, "She's having an affair."

It wasn't a shock. In fact, a part of me was relieved to know that the trouble I sensed was just an affair and not something more serious, like one of them carrying around a giant abdominal tumor. The other part was angry with Mom. I'd always sided with my dad in their fights—not because there was anything like a clear right or wrong in the bizarre world of my parents' half-open marriage (my father has been monogamous his whole life), but because Mom's actions had consequences that affected me directly, led to confusing handshakes with men I'd never met before and would never see again, while Dad's voyeurism and encouragement remained hidden behind bedroom doors and in corners of my brain I'd draped curtains over.

I wanted to have a conversation, to be clean and quick, and avoid the sniffling, aching mess this situation sometimes led to.

"Who are you cooking those sandwiches for?"

"A friend at work."

"Are you having an affair?"

"No," she said. She held the word for emphasis, making it clear that she wasn't surprised I asked.

I was fairly sure she was lying. After the dinner at Damon's and some therapy, I'd suggested to my parents that perhaps it would be healthier for us all if we imposed some boundaries on the type of information they shared with us kids. It was possible, I suggested, that knowing Mom could easily reach orgasm in any of the most popular sexual positions was not vital to my feeling close to her. None of us ever took this advice seriously, including me, but as a result of my having introduced the idea, Mom sometimes lied about her relationships with men other than my father, as if she'd suddenly, if only occasionally, adopted the position that I might be too vulnerable to know such things.

I thought back over the last few months and piled up evidence. There was the time over the summer that I had gone to get something out of her car at work and was surprised by a bottle of lube in the console. This was incriminating, since most of Mom's affairs started at work, but not conclusive, given my parents' kinkiness. Then there was her curious reaction over the Thanksgiving dinner she tried to save, also for "a friend at work," which

was prematurely devoured by the dog—I saw her snuffling over the ravages of turkey and mashed potatoes. There were the three prior affairs to consider, and now the six gleaming sandwiches she was wrapping, the foil making a racket.

"Can I have one?"

"Sure," she said.

I ate it and glared at her.

My dad is a brilliant man who makes the stupidest mistakes. One of his friends at work—a young guy working on his PhD—told him once that he'd given up on talking with the other PhDs there about his ideas. They didn't seem to have a clue, he said, while Dad followed along and gave useful advice with just his BS from nearly three decades ago. But at home with us, the sort of sound reasoning Dad's friend relies on occasionally goes missing, like the time he burned a pile of straw under a pine tree, because he said green things didn't burn. Seconds after the straw ignited, the flames rode up the trunk and the top of the tree exploded like God calling Moses. The fire was reaching for the house with red-orange hands.

My brother, who was twelve, disappeared. Then he burst out the front door and ran straight to the tree, heaving a single, full glass of water onto the inferno.

Dad told me later that he loved my brother for that moment, for believing he could save us all with his single cup, and no less for the slumped shoulders and disappointed exhale that followed as the flames continued to crackle and crawl. Mom screamed obscenities while I waved the cordless phone around offering to call the fire department. Dad eventually put it out with a hose, talking loudly about how we'd all overreacted.

I'm not sure if Dad tells that story at work, or if, like his basement tinkering with homemade perpetual motion machines—chimerical according to the first law of thermodynamics—he keeps it to himself in the company of fellow engineers.

I've seen all manner of things crash and burn in my father's path, only to hear him explain what just went wrong with an answer straight from a physics book. For example, I once dropped my cell phone from a

considerable height directly into a cup of water. Dad had heard of some trick for drying them out, and, remembering wrong, tried the microwave—fireworks and a melted screen. "Oh yeah," he said, unabashed. "Metal in microwaves." He went on to spell out the science behind the carnage in great detail. Then it occurred to him, quite joyfully: "Incubator! That's what you're supposed to use." Raised Catholic, his mistakes are brainless, his confessions elegant.

A few days after I'd asked my mom if she was having an affair, Valentine's Day came, and then went. No mushrooms were ingested, hallucinogenic or otherwise. Then Mom moved out, and into an apartment with her boyfriend. I did not know his name and did not seek it out. It was easier to call him "Asshole" or "Dickhead."

Meanwhile, Dad set up a telescope he had recently received for twenty-five years of service with his roller-bearing company. He read that Venus was looming large, but he couldn't find it.

In response to his phone call shortly after Mom moved out, I found myself home again, sitting across from him in the hot yellow light reflecting off the kitchen table. He sat with his palms facing up on the tabletop. He was assuring me that he wouldn't try to kill himself again and showed me a can of lentil soup to prove it. He pointed to the yellow ribbon printed on the label. "Look, a full serving of vegetables in every bowl."

He'd tried twice over the last three days, but he told me they were half-hearted attempts. The first time, he downed a handful of sleeping pills and then immediately realized he didn't actually want to die. What he really wanted was for Mom to stumble upon his dead body and feel very, very sorry for him—so he went to the kitchen, mixed a tablespoon of salt into a cup of tap water, drank it, and threw up all the pills.

Later, his emotions got all tangled up again and he forgot the difference he'd spotted between wanting to kill himself and wanting to make Mom feel guilty, so he worked up a numerical pattern, and then started all the engines in the garage. The pattern was this: ten times into the room, starting with ten breaths and increasing by ten each trip. He'd be dead far before he hit four hundred seventy.

He set about his task, plodding in and out of the garage, increasingly foggy-headed in the building carbon monoxide. Before long, like a referee of corporeality, the carbon monoxide detector at the far end of the house went off, the shrill, relentless chirp calling Dad's bluff. *Danger, danger!* it called, reminding him of the tag-along body he'd almost forgotten as his desperate mind flew outward like the cold cosmos and into that expansive plane of panic, pain, and despair. The little batteries powered an angry shout, which compressed his anxiety to the immediate problem of oxygen.

He was overcome with a profound sense of guilt for the life he had almost thrown away: that of Duncan, his dog, who would have been trapped in the house while the carbon monoxide continued to build up. Duncan, the clairvoyant, who months before had heroically devoured Asshole's turkey dinner. Dad threw open the windows and turned off the engines, worrying all the while that he was too late.

The first thing I told him was that I was sorry he had wanted to die. Then I told him to stop fucking around. I said, "You can't ever count on your rational mind calling you back from the brink of suicide." I said, "Truly suicidal thinking is madness, and you can't will away madness." I told him other things my therapists had told me when I talked about wanting to be dead. I told him to call me the next time he thought about offing himself.

Mom came over a few hours later because Dad had told her I was in town, and I'd stopped answering her calls. We sat in the downstairs living room and yelled at each other. I said something about being on suicide watch and got choked up.

"What?" she asked and looked at my dad.

"Yeah, I've been feeling pretty down," he said, looking at the floor.

"Are you stupid? The next time you think about killing yourself, you call me. You don't call your kids about that shit!" She started to cry then too.

After some more yelling she tried to leave, but her car got stuck in the snow at the bottom of the driveway. "Need a push," she huffed after tramping back up the slippery hill. Dad suited up and was marvelously happy to get her unstuck and back on her way to Dickhead.

Watching Dad lace up his boots and cover his shaved head with a

trapper hat, I wondered what would have bounded forth from the minds of my parents had they eaten mushrooms on Valentine's Day. Would the pictures on the wall have danced for them, the photos of their three children, their twelve brothers and sisters? Would their bodies have gained a new splendor and warmth in the vast, empty house? Or would the panic have set in as each registered the deep-set eyes, the bland raiment of skin that decorated the person across the room, and the terrible distance that grew between their inward rushing minds?

Late in the evening, I stepped out onto the second-story porch and saw Dad crouched awkwardly over his telescope. A gigantic yellow moon hung fat above the line of pine trees. His head was shining, reflecting the light from the moon, itself a reflection of light from the sun; his neck was twisted and he was shaking a bit with the earnestness of his gaze.

He must have had some cosmic light bulb aligned, because he didn't look back to see me planted in the shadows. Inside the tube, lenses were morphing the star through various stages of distortion, but if everything was twisted and turned as it should be, the star would appear bigger and clearer. There was a lesson for him in the telescope, one about distance and time and perspective. About patience and the remote glow that touched him. But these days more than ever he felt in his stomach and knew in his brain that the stars were fleeing from him. He had just nearly lost his mind in the increasing distances, almost been cut loose by a lull of lonely hours here on earth. He was peering through the tiny eyepiece, reaching out across the far-flung expanse that could blot out his significance so palpably that he sometimes had to call for an ambulance.

The bright moon seemed near enough to matter, and its light was reflecting from his blade-ridden head, from his shiny, complimentary telescope, from the window on the porch that reflected my own glowing outline. We stood apart, glowing in the same impossibly remote light. I was waiting for him to turn around and see it.

"So Damn Liberating" An Interview with Jesse Goolsby

by Barrett Bowlin

Way back in issue 9.1, Jesse Goolsby won the John Gardner Memorial Prize in Fiction for his short story, "Derrin of the North." Based on the outstanding writing alone, no one could have guessed that this was the first story Goolsby had ever published. Numerous fiction, poetry, and creative non-fiction publications later, Goolsby's debut novel, *I'd Walk with My Friends If I Could Find Them*, came out this past June from Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, and he's been busy on a bi-coastal book tour since then.

An Air Force officer and a PhD candidate at Florida State University, Jesse Goolsby has appeared in such excellent journals as *Narrative Magazine, Epoch, Alaska Quarterly Review, The Literary Review, Redivider, The Greensboro Review*, and, of course, *Harpur Palate*. He is also the recipient of the Richard Bausch Fiction Prize and the Holland & Knight Distinguished Fellowship from the Hambidge Center for Creative Arts & Sciences. He's been featured in *The Best American Mystery Stories*, and his prose has also been listed several times as a notable entry in The *Best American Short Stories* and *The Best American Essays* anthologies. In addition, he serves as a genre editor with both *The Southeast Review* and *War, Literature, and the Arts*. Running into him again at AWP 2015 was a true pleasure, and we were grateful for the chance to talk with him about his book and his career.

Barrett Bowlin: Which of the chapters did you build *I'd Walk with My Friends If I Could Find Them* around? What was the genesis, and what did that chapter look like before it became intertwined with the rest of the book?

Jesse Goolsby: The genesis: one day, six years ago, I was sitting in a conference room at the US Air Force Academy discussing literature and the emotional toll of war with some of my English department colleagues. We brought up the names of fellow service members, the complexities of battle, the simultaneous devastation and thrill, the borderlands of euphoria and fear. Someone invoked Tim O'Brien, another Joseph Heller and Dexter Filkins, and then one of my friends said, "You know, some folks come home and they don't know how to touch their kids. It's just too much after what they've seen." And that just floored me. I was a new father at the time, and besides the personal and believable horror that comment stirred, it also humbled me as a writer: how does someone, a character, get to a place where he or she is not sure how to touch his or her own children? What does that say about war, about that individual, about family, and the wide-ranging consequences of conflict?

The creative result of my initial investigation of those questions was a story called "Touch," now a chapter in my novel. While the story was edited to form the chapter, I hope it retains my wonder and curiosity of this possible result of war—the confusion of touch—for one of the protagonists, Armando Torres.

While that's the emotional genesis story, at the time, six years ago, I had no idea that I'd write a book. I was thrilled to have "Touch" published and to simply move on. However, when I realized that I wanted to write a novel, one of the things I was most interested in accomplishing was tracing a long arc of three soldiers' lives—and portions of the lives of the protagonists' families and friends—before, during, and after their service in Afghanistan. This long view was very important to me. "Touch," then, fell into place as a post-war chapter fairly seamlessly, but that specific chapter maintained an emotional heft that influenced my writing from the beginning to the end of *I'd Walk with My Friends If I Could Find Them.*

BB: Similarly, several of the chapters in the novel started off as short stories in various journals, e.g., "Neutral Drops" in *Northwind*, "Pollice Verso" in *The Literary Review*, "No Doorbell" in *Nashville Review*, etc. What was the thread that linked them together? What made them part of this larger scope you wanted to focus on in the book?

JG: The foundation for all of the chapters in the novel is the deep human yearning for connection. Regardless of character or specific setting, my focus was mining each and every character's desire for companionship and understanding. As such, I found that it didn't matter if a particular chapter or scene dealt with one of the main protagonists or a character occupying a more tangential role, I wanted always to tap into his or her specific longing.

And that leads to your great question about publishing some of the chapters as stories first, then reworking them into a slightly more traditional role as a chapter. One of my preferences I discovered while writing *I'd Walk with My Friends If I Could Find Them* was that, at least for this project, I wasn't all that interested in chapter-to-chapter transitions, that I relished the white space between episodes of tension. Because of this preference, I decided to try to place many of the chapters as stand alone stories first, not as an excerpt of a work in progress, but straight up stories. I found this forced me to really buckle down and fine-tune my world building and the establishment of stakes each and every time I entered a new chapter-story. Because I was aware of my desire for these stories to eventually morph into chapters I certainly kept some of the plot logistics and timelines in mind, but there were also many advantages of thinking of them, individually, as stories; most notably, the beautiful short fiction demands of immediate stakes.

Additionally, I fully admit that I was in need of some positive reinforcement as I started this book. At the beginning, I had no agent, editor, or contract. Like the vast majority of writers, it was just me, a blank Word document, and a healthy dose of consternation when the perfect words didn't come pouring out on time. Just on a personal level, I needed and greatly appreciated the validation and feedback that came with an acceptance from a literary journal, so much so—and my wife will attest to this—that I cried

with nearly every acceptance.

BB: Where much of the current fiction on the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq centers on the conflict abroad, most of your novel telescopes instead into the lives of the characters shortly before and years after their deployment. Do you consider your novel, then, to be "war fiction?" How do you see your work in terms of genre overall?

JG: I'm an equal opportunity genre lover. The most important distinction for me, and a mark of all of my favorite books, is a deep investigation of the "Who am I?" question. In my novel, it's not that my characters are soldiers or fathers or mothers or lovers or amputees or whole or Broncos fans or Metallica fans or city boys or country girls; it's that each character is some of these things and much, much more. Each life is a perfectly subjective, individual experience. And regardless of genre, the finest books investigate specific characters, their personal complexities and preferences, their dreams and failures. If grappling at that "Who am I?" question occurs in literature set on Jupiter, the battlefields of Afghanistan, in Toronto, 1600s Brazil, 2400s China, or anywhere else, I'm interested.

To that end, one of the things I've tried to accomplish with my novel is to cut through the expectations of a "war book," by which I mean that I wanted the book to encompass events far beyond physical, wartime danger. While I appreciate a well-rendered, intense combat scene as much as the next reader, I'm equally, if not more, interested in the specific, individual battle going on inside the man or woman firing that gun. Not only that, I'm interested in his or her spouse, kids, hometown, musical taste, reason for serving; namely, all the things that make up a life, because that gun firing in his or her hands is only one manifestation of who that person is, who he or she was, and what he or she will become.

This is to say that, concerning genre, I welcome any and all labels. But, to me, the creative lineage of my work belongs first and always, to that of identity and longing.

BB: *I'd Walk with My Friends If I Could Find Them* is very much a novel

about place, as well, enough so that the settings feel as much as characters as the people do. What are your connections to the cities and towns featured in the book: Colorado Springs; Chester, California; Knoxville; Rutherford, New Jersey?

JG: Chester, California, is my hometown, a place of about two thousand people nestled into the far northeast reaches of the state. It's a community based on the logging industry and, in the summer months, tourism centered around Lake Almanor and nearby Lassen Volcanic National Park. It's a place that's very dear to me. To have such a diverse natural landscape right out our front door was something I've always appreciated. This section of California is also a place that's been almost entirely neglected by literature of any kind. I admit I feel a rush of pride in bringing Chester to the page. I also confess a special delight in being an alumnus of a high school with the best mascot in the history of mascots: the Chester Volcanoes.

Concerning many of the other locations in the novel, as an active-duty Air Force officer, I move about every two to three years or so to a new assignment. It's equal parts exciting and frustrating, but one positive thing about moving that often is it allows my family and me to experience many different cities and local communities. That also makes it great for writing as I consider places I may know well to base scenes. Colorado Springs and Knoxville are both places I've lived and loved, and it made sense to err on the side of writing places I knew firsthand. In this regard, Rutherford, New Jersey, is the odd inclusion for a setting in the novel. I have passed through Rutherford, but I had no local knowledge of the place.

In selecting major settings for the novel, I did want a feeling of inclusiveness, or put another way, a span across America that felt organic to the story, but also holistic geographically. I had a lot of fun thinking about and incorporating places, not only the settings you mention, but also in locations like Chicago; Elko, Nevada; Andalusia, Alabama; Green River, Wyoming; Key West, Florida; Farmington, New Mexico. One of the key reasons for this is that I'm very interested in not only the proximity of violence in combat, but also the proximity of violence in our communities and the side streets of America. The variety of these locations really opened the doors to

the full spectrum of conflict both overseas and throughout our country.

BB: Tell us about some of the research you invested into the book. What was the most challenging component? Also, what was the most surprising thing you found in your research?

JG: My favorite part of the research dealt with how well—or poorly—I remembered the mid-1990s to the early 2000s, especially cultural references. I purposely didn't Google every fact because I thought I had this stuff down: music, movies, and other cultural phenomena from my teenage years to my early twenties, but wow, memory is a fickle thing. And I confess that after I turned in a first draft of my book, the copy editor gave me some extensive notes including these gems: "'I'll Make Love to You' by Boyz II Men released a year later," "Do you really think Drew Barrymore would be in this theater in 1995?" and "*Xena: Warrior Princess* runs from '95-'01." Reevaluating what I remembered about popular culture from my youth and what really happened, and when, was humbling and a little confusing. For example, I distinctly recall a spectacularly failed attempt at a kiss with a teenage crush in my dad's Toyota truck; I was sure as hell that went down to Boyz II Men's "On Bended Knee," and over the years if I've heard that song, it has transported me back to that horrible moment. I've lived with that memory for two decades, but alas, the song had yet to be recorded. Does that mean I've imagined that rejection all these years? Please tell me yes.

Much more serious and devastating in my research was learning about the severity and prevalence of sexual assault in our society, and specifically in the military. *I'd Walk with My Friends If I Could Find Them* takes this issue on and I wanted to be sure that I took the time to research and think deeply about the topic. As a service member myself, and someone passionate about sexual assault prevention and response, I thought I was aware of—and educated about—the issue at large. But after extensive research, I came to realize just how big the issue is, and how diverse the perpetrators and victims are, how the roadblocks in coming forward to report sexual assault are numerous, and how there is so much to be done, legally and

culturally, to prevent the crime and to help and support victims.

BB: Who are some of the writers and books that most influenced you as you wrote the novel? Who did you need to study in order to build the novel properly?

JG: My favorite book of the past ten years is Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, and there is no doubt that the snap shot and alternating point of view structure that beautiful book employs influenced my decision to follow a similar framework with *I'd Walk with My Friends if I Could Find Them*. Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* and Richard Ford's *Rock Springs* were also constant literary friends never far away from my writing space, largely because of their respective genius at showcasing human yearning.

I'm currently pursuing my PhD at Florida State University, and I feel privileged to study with many of my literary heroes, including the incredible Robert Olen Butler. Reading his book on writing fiction, *From Where You Dream*, and taking his class were creative game-changers for me. I say "game-changers" because I was searching for, and subsequently discovered, new pathways into the creative zone where I write my best.

I also owe much to the brilliant and recent work that also taps into questions of conflict, family, and identity. My favorites include Janet Burroway's *Losing Tim*, Michael Garriga's *The Book of Duels*, Jehanne Dubrow's *Stateside*, David Abrams's *Fobbit*, Ben Fountain's *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*, Katey Shultz's *Flashes of War*, Benjamin Busch's *Dust to Dust*, Siobhan Fallon's *You Know When the Men Are Gone*, Brian Turner's *Phantom Noise*, Donald Anderson's *Fire Road*, Lea Carpenter's *Eleven Days*, and the fantastic nonfiction work of essayist Brandon Lingle.

But what I needed most while writing this novel was my brilliant editor, Ben Hyman. It's funny now to think of all of the well-intentioned warnings I received from fellow authors about possible creative differences with editors. And I understand that many have had challenging issues when it comes to the author-editor relationship, but I say this with my heart on my sleeve: my novel exists only because of Ben's encouraging and smart guidance. May others be as fortunate.

BB: Lastly, looking back at "Derrin of the North," the first piece you published with *Harpur Palate*, how do you believe you've progressed as a writer since then? How have your obsessions changed?

JG: "Derrin of the North" was not only the first piece I published with *Harpur Palate*, but it was the first piece I published, ever. I received the acceptance call while I was visiting family in Salt Lake City, and after I hung up, I walked into the living room and wept in front of extended family I hadn't seen in years. It's been seven years since that phone call, and the two most important things in my development as a writer have been to remain an active reader and to believe in my voice; the former has been easy, the latter, much more difficult. Since that first *Harpur Palate* publication I've had years to read, and also, to listen carefully to feedback on my own work. I relish the moments when I'm reading and I'm just flat out jealous. Besides the appreciation of entering wonderful literature as a reader, thousands of writer-craft questions swirl: How is he or she pulling this off? What's new here? Why am I falling in love with this book? In my attempts to answer these questions, I'm really asking myself, "What kind of art do I want to create?" And although it isn't that articulate, I find myself most often answering, "The kick-ass kind."

My obsessions? Well, they continue to intensify because with each passing day, I seem more aware that I am mortal, and that my end will one day be a real event. I don't mean that in a depressing way at all. If anything, I'm more invigorated by this acceptance. I watch my healthy children play in the front yard and think, "My God, I have it good." So my personal obsessions for literature, music, sports, and Thai food deepen, and now is as good a time as ever to indulge. This type of urgency is great creatively. Sure, I have my periods of regret and laziness and doubt, but after giving myself a break, it's time to dive back in. This ties into the idea of believing in your voice. I find it invigorating that we each possess a unique creative perspective, and that no one else can write the story, essay, or poem that someone else will dream up. This knowledge is so damn liberating that even during those times when I'm staring at a blank document and nothing arrives at my fingertips, it's okay, because when something does, it will be my voice.

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GWENDOLYN JENSEN began writing poems when she retired in 2001 from the presidency of Wilson College (Chambersburg, Pennsylvania). The places where her work has appeared include the *Beloit Poetry Journal, the Harvard Review, Salamander, Sanskrit,* and *Measure.* Her first book, *Birthright* (Birch Brook Press, 2011), is a letterpress edition, now in its second printing. Her second book, *As if toward Beauty* (Birch Brook Press), was published in 2015. She lives in Cambridge., Massachusetts.

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RHONDA LOTT's work has appeared in many national and international publications, including *Hayden's Ferry Review, Southern*

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ADAM SCHEFFLER grew up in California, received his MFA in poetry from the Iowa Writers' Workshop, and is currently working on finishing his PhD in English at Harvard. His poems

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SAM KECK SCOTT is a biologist and fiction writer. Originally from the San Francisco Bay Area, he now lives in the mountains of Southern Oregon. His first novel, *Turning the Bones,* is currently shortlisted as one of ten finalists in the Columbus Creative Cooperative's Great Novel Contest 2015. "Hourglass" is his first published work.

ZACH VANDEZANDE is the author of *Apathy* and *Paying Rent* (Loose Teeth Press, 2008) and the forthcoming *Lesser American Boys* (Queen's Ferry Press, 2016). His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Gettysburg Review, Portland Review, Cutbank, Passages North, PRISM International, Atlas Review, Necessary Fiction, Crack the Spine, The Boiler, The Adroit Journal,* and elsewhere. He likes baking bread, hammocks, and people who bring their dogs.

KAREN J. WEYANT's work has been published in *The Barn Owl Review, Caesura, Cold Mountain Review, Poetry East, River Styx,* and *Whiskey Island.* Her most recent collection of poetry, *Wearing Heels in the Rust Belt* (Main Street Rag) was published in 2012. She teaches at Jamestown Community College in Jamestown, New York. In her spare time, she explores the Rust Belt regions of rural New York and Pennsylvania.

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DAVID WINTER wrote the chapbook ***Safe House*** (Thrush Press, 2013). His poetry has also appeared or is forthcoming in magazines such as ***Ninth Letter, Meridian, Atlanta Review, Four Way Review,*** and ***Forklift, Ohio.*** He is currently an MFA student at The Ohio State University, where he teaches creative writing and composition, and serves as a poetry editor for ***The Journal.*** You can visit him at davidwinter (dot) net.

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ELIZABETH ZALESKI attended The Ohio State University twice and studied creative writing half of those times. She grew up in Wayne County, OH, and has lived in Seattle, Tucson, Cincinnati, and Columbus. Of these, Tucson was the warmest. This is her first publication.

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As a nonprofit organization, we are grateful to our generous sponsors at Binghamton University for their support, and invite others to help us publish the best established and emerging voices:

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Harpur Palate has no restrictions on subject matter or form. Quite simply, send us your highest quality short stories, flash fiction, poetry, and creative nonfiction. Almost every literary magazine says this, but it bears repeating: please familiarize yourself with our publication before submitting.

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Essays in any style and form are welcome, provided they are no more than 8,000 words and previously unpublished. The fee is $15 for each entry of three poems and includes a one-year subscription to *Harpur Palate*. You may submit as many times as you wish, but no more than one piece per entry fee.

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Milton Kessler—poet and teacher—was a great friend and mentor to students in the Creative Writing program at Binghamton University. In honor of his dedication to the development of writers, *Harpur Palate* is pleased to announce the annual Milton Kessler Poetry Prize.

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