

The
Louisville
Review

Volume 72
Fall 2012

The Louisville Review

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TLR publishes two volumes each year: spring and fall. Submissions of previously unpublished manuscripts are invited. Please submit online through our submissions manager: www.louisvillereview.org/submissions. Prose submissions should be double-spaced and page numbered. Poetry (up to 5 poems) need not be double-spaced; multiple poems should be submitted in one document. Drama should appear in standard format. Please include your name on every page. If you are submitting in more than one genre, please submit documents separately. We encourage you to include a cover letter in the comments section. Our editorial staff reads year around. Simultaneous submissions accepted. Payment is in copies. Email address: louisvillereview@spalding.edu. Children/teen (K-12) poetry and fiction must be accompanied by parental permission to publish if accepted. Reply time is up to 6 months.

This issue: \$8 ppd

Sample copy: \$5 ppd

Subscriptions: One year, \$14; two years, \$27; three years, \$40

Student subscription: One year, \$12; two years, \$20

Foreign subscribers, please add \$4/year for shipping.

The text and the cover printed by Thomson Shore of Dexter, Michigan.

Cover design by Jonathan Weinert. Cover picture from a painting by Peter Williams.

TLR gratefully acknowledges the support of the brief-residency Master of Fine Arts in Writing Program, Spalding University, 851 S. Fourth St., Louisville, KY 40203. Email mfa@spalding.edu for information about the MFA in Writing Program.

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Editor's Note

AUCTION!! *The Louisville Review* cover for this Fall 2012 issue features a *plein-air* painting by Peter Williams painted during a fund-raiser held in the peony garden of Spalding MFA alumna K. Shaver. In support of a city-wide effort to increase the number of college graduates, the Spalding MFA is emphasizing the value of the creative arts, particularly writing, in the classroom, from Kindergarten through college. Believing that "Good Writers Make Good Teachers," we have created a Spalding MFA in Writing Kentucky Teacher's Scholarship Fund. Artist Peter Williams has kindly donated the painting to be auctioned on eBay. Please go to www.spalding.edu/mfa for a link to the auction. Or simply send a donation to Spalding MFA Kentucky Teacher's Scholarship Fund to Bobbie Rafferty, Chief Development Officer, Spalding University, 845 S. Third Street, Louisville, KY, 40203, or visit www.spalding.edu/give.

We thank K. Shaver for hosting the launch event. We are grateful to alumna Nana Lampton for jump-starting the fund drive through a generous grant from Constellation Energy. We are also grateful to former Spalding trustee David Fannin and his wife, Lucille, for their lead gift, as well as to the many others who have also donated. The garden party featured talks by Spalding students and an alum who are also teachers in this area: alum Keith Nixon and students Candice Smith and Liz Morris.

We know that many teachers feel they have a story, or poems, or plays, or film scripts inside them. We believe that teachers actively engaged in writing bring a special enthusiasm to every kind of writing in the classroom. Our scholarship fund is designed to help teachers gain creative writing skills through studying in the Spalding University brief-residency Master of Fine Arts in Writing Program.

Such scholarship money can be used in our summer-abroad program. In summer 2013, the Spalding MFA residency will be held in Dublin and Galway, Ireland, with a special emphasis on playwriting and screenwriting, as well as the opportunity to study the writing of fiction, poetry, creative nonfiction, and writing for children and young adults. Residency dates are July 3-15, 2013. The enrollment deadline is February 1, 2013.

I'd like to thank the following guest editors for this issue of *The Louisville Review*:

ERIN KEANE is the author of *Death-Defying Acts* (WordFarm 2010) and *The Gravity Soundtrack* (WordFarm 2007), both short-

listed for ForeWord's poetry book of the year award. Recent poems, articles, essays, and short plays have appeared in *Salon.com*, *The Lumberyard*, *Sou'wester*, *Poems & Plays*, and *PANK*. A recipient of individual fellowships from the Kentucky Arts Council and the Kimmel Harding Nelson Center for the Arts, she teaches in the MFA program at National University. Keane also works as a cultural critic, appearing on the nationally-syndicated radio show *The Weekly Feed*, and as the arts and humanities critic and reporter for WFPL, Louisville's NPR station.

BETH NEWBERRY is a co-publisher of the online magazine, *The Hillville: Exploring the Urban Appalachian Connection* (www.thehillville.com). Her essay "Center of the Compass" (published in *The Louisville Review* in Spring 2010) was named as one of the "Notable Essays of 2012" by Robert Atwan, series editor of *The Best American Essay Series*. She is a graduate of the Spalding MFA in Writing program and has been published in *Writing by Ear: An Anthology of Writings about Music*, *Sojourners* magazine, and *Still: the journal of Appalachian Literature*, among others.

KIRA BOLENSKY is an award-winning playwright and writer who lives in Minneapolis. New work includes *Vasa Lisa*, produced by Ten Thousand Things Theater in 2012, *Why We Laugh: A Terezin Cabaret*, which premiered last summer in two international festivals; *Raskol* (commissioned and produced by Ten Thousand Things Theatre and featured on critics' end of year lists); *Cabinet of Wonders* (produced by Gas and Electric Arts, Philadelphia; Open Eye Figure Theatre, Minneapolis; 2010 Barrymore nomination for Best New Play); and *Modern House*, finalist for the Susan Smith Blackburne Prize). Her play *Lobster Alice* was a Kesselring Prize winner; *The Adventures of Herculina* received Honorable Mention/ Kesselring Prize. She is the author of three published books about architecture and design and is the co-author of the national bestseller, *The Not So Big House*. Her novella, "The Anarchists Float to St. Louis," won *Quarterly West's* 2009 novella contest.

LUKE WALLIN's story "Monster" appeared in *MMR 2011—Moon Milk Review's* anthology. To check out Luke's fiction and nonfiction books and read his story "Collecting Butterfish," visit lukewallin.com.

—Sena Jeter Naslund, Editor

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Britton Shurley

SUGGESTIONS FROM THE VIA NEGATIVA

*Beginning from what is furthest, we first remove from God
that which is without substance . . . we remove all bodily things,
for he is not and has not any of these.*

—The Cloud of Unknowing

Imagine God as your dying grandfather, and strap his old body
to a table. Rip the shirt from his chest with your hands.

Then cut the pants from his legs, with the buck-knife
kept by his bedside. After that, cut his hair. Cut the hair

from his head, the hair from his chest, that gray
cloud of hair from his crotch. Pluck each eye like the stone

from a peach. Carve the nose and ears from his face;
cut that now flacid tongue from his mouth. You must now begin

moving inward. Recall how he gutted a deer, and pry
his ribs wide with a crowbar. Take his lungs and then his heart.

Take his stomach, his bowels, his liver. Take his kidneys, his bile-
ridden spleen. You should now crack his skull with a hammer;

pick his brain like a nut from its shell. Know these things
you have taken decay. Leave a feast for the gathering crows.

Molly Curtis

FOXGLOVES

Digitalis means finger-like,
an indication of the flower's shape.

An extraction that stimulates
the heart. There is a thin skin that covers

your organs. The encasing of the heart
is *pericardium*. When flooded with fluid

beating against it is arduous.

My father said that dying was indeed tunnel-like.
But there is no bright light.
It is kaleidoscopic, this darkness.

A beating finally ceasing.
In a de Kooning painting
all colors beginning

in *burnt*: sienna, umber, orange
as in rust. Rustic meaning original

as in origins
as in return or
born in reverse.

Textural as sandstone
it spins like globes, like dervishes
slows and thickens.

To talk of wildflowers:
purple sugar bowl,

shooting star, balsamroot,

unusual bloom

spied beneath brittle branches felled,
unlikely in its whiteness.

Molly Curtis

ARTIFACTS II

In the game where we spin
a globe, eyes closed, to fingerprint
our destinations

you were always ending
up in the ocean.
Not one of those

small boys who tortures seagulls.
Long hair and woolen sweaters
and you were delicate.

The picture of you holding a baby
jackrabbit. I don't believe you saved it
from the jaws of a snake.

I never wanted to be a boy.
Not even when my brothers
put garter snakes in my hair.

In the first painting my father hung
we can barely make out the blackness
of a single ship

encircled by mist, poised
between blue-gray ocean
and gray-blue sky, drifting,

it always seemed to me
dangerously close
to the bruised shore.

When I was small I thought:
this is what dying looks like.
The cat hasn't been the same

since we pried her from the jaws
of my brother's wolf-dog.
In Saint Peter's Basilica

the popes recline
in glass coffins like Snow White
the white of candlewax

when the wick has burned
a hollow, when it glows dully
from the bottom but you cannot see

the flame. I loved her, even as she licked
the pinpricks of cat's blood
from her lovely white chin.

Her howling is a silken robe
and the downward gesture
of a sword that slices

from your carotid artery
diagonally
to your opposite hipbone.

John A. Nieves

COLOPHON: ELEGY IN FRAGMENTS

There are no more lip readers
at the diner tables, no more eyes
assigned the task of remembering.

The phones ring and erase us.
Cups have lost their strings.

If there are any watches left
to wind, I will find them.
I'll give what little life I can.

Old habits ritualize on bar stools.
Long names are shortened to fit into a sigh.

Speak of these things. Speak
to the washing machines, the old women
chewing Black Jack. Speak to the grass
and the memory of grass.

How do footprints unfurl
across these alleys?

I am counting the minutes until the month
goes rabbits, until one becomes when we are.

There's a dog snarling on a TV
and a possum playing dead on the street.

No one put cards in the spokes this year.
No one sent a postcard with a picture of a road.

This morning someone will press the underside

of a wrist to the forehead of a child, say
fever or no fever. Augury—the bones
can only reveal what is asked of them.

Shells of payphones line the night—
a graveyard for destination, angry fingers
of certainty raised against the horizon.

I will hum along to this time seeping
across the guardrails, the pigeon
feathers, the roadside monuments.

I still believe that cobwebs take
the best inventory of what goes
untouched. I see them moving
the corners closer.

Hugh Behm-Steinberg

SIMPLE MACHINES

Give me a lever, he says. Give me a firm spot, a pulley, a ship, a flawed and dark moon; between cat and bird is a small fluttering he says. He checks his mail, types with one finger. Now you play the structure, now you hold the book open to read. Look, I have invented skin, he says, a cup of milk, motorized breaths, nameless things, relations between nameless things, I give them names, by messing around, in questions, the ones I love, where you dance (it's ok to dance) with your eyes closed, eat oysters from a tin; it has massed up in me somehow. I can't explain it, I'm not an astronomer. The south sea, and the great lake. In wild fruit, in blots on the surface of the sun. In sweet damp ground. She is threading pipes behind brick walls, and the blue sky on its back. A mob of stars, tall flowers, you teach my hands how to move, I tell him. I move them away.

Then the cowbird that invents gravity to foil the cat. Or clutter and space. As a man he gets to be a failure, or he has to be reminded to eat. Look at the light through the window, that means it's noon. He keeps tying things to each other. His house is a ball of wire. Everything in knots, copper hair, these comparisons. Either it makes sense. Or he can't explain: it exists as someone calling him. He sleeps in a corner, bound up with the rest. Chair and cat and knife. A slice of breath. Holding it still as a kite or a sail, or a person who is sleeping, or a person who is not sleeping, or a person who is dead, or a person who is not dead, not dead yet.

Hugh Behm-Steinberg

HEAT

So the day is made of heat. As the truck waits in traffic. As the right arm is slower than the left. Because his heart is full of shame. Because he couldn't explain what happened. How it was some strange ballistics. Why he kept falling. Year after year. The engine turns over despite the weather. Despite the things they said. Though it remembers. And it's thinking. So boil it down. Grease and gasoline. The place you're coming from. The place you're coming to. How the land becomes drier as it slopes towards the mountains. What is left are the hours that stack. Who tell the wheels. Who tell the tires. Who caress the road with their secrets. Secrets made of heat.

Darren C. Demaree

WE DID OUR BEST TO BREATHE INTO IT

Lung punctured, we did our best to breathe
into the sheep's mouth, Emily even covered
the bloody hole from where the metal, shorn
from the fence post first stuck the animal,
stuck deep into the soft, red tissue, now unwilling
to expand the way it should. We did too much
for an animal we witnessed injured from our car,
did too much to bloody our clothes on Route 3,
while family waited for us to eat a holiday meal,
but we needed to save something then, needed
to put our mouths on something desperate,
fighting to survive with righteous intention. We,
yelling about sex, the having it, the not having it
enough, saw the spearing take the shoulder first,
then plunge deeper still, while Emily took the gravel
quickly and we burst from the car in shock.
The animal died before the farmer, the owner,
or the veterinarian could arrive, or pronounce hope
& I with my tongue warm from the expellant
of life looked at my lovely wife, her sweater torn
& I with my tongue, my tears only for the sheep,
asked her to hold me, despite my wavering hands.

Murray Silverstein

THE CONSTANT

Pulling weeds, after rain—the body of a woman
Is the body of a woman, but the speed of light,

Why in the famous equation must it be squared,
It's already the speed of light?—early spring,

Tossing my pile on the compost pile. We're hit
With a double whammy in this life, sex and other people,

But there's heat, that fertile almost-chocolate smell,
And twigs of cedar—twiglets—tangled in your hair.

In the land of the speed of light squared, m must long
To equal e . Or so a borrowed body thinks, hat askew,

Sun on neck, hummingbird at the fuchsia—suck away, pal.

Kathleen Hellen

—FOR THE ROSES

Tomatoes big as fists split skin, spill
into the heartless bushels. The splayed chard hides
its death-flower. Cabbage over-grows to choke a rabbit or a woman
in my husband's garden, in my father's garden before him.
You can't make soup from roses, he had said.

Now, a fresh intent. My heel to the bent
of shovel. The blade breaking clay along the wrecked
foundation. The first resistance.
When I said I would forgive it all,
the ground was shocked,
the patch so hard and untouched
lately where the worms turn up.
Who was it said that worms incite a fertile earth?
The deeper the cut, the more likely rock,
the digging long, as if to China, as if it were
that easy to connect.

These things take time, when trying.
The seeds that sink, removed from hip,
the good ones. The clean and freeze,
the smell of clay like things decayed,
rising to the nostrils. They wait for weeks
until the stone explodes, the sprout.
They push out of the black hole into morning.
I guard the tendrils. When they tremble into
something, when they bush
I want to love.

Kirsten M. Holt

WHEN YOU LOVE A BLACK-HAIRED GIRL

the ravens convene the sheets
are the parliament

of supple waves

could like the sea roll
with the tides of hips I have yet

to unfurl you your collar-

bones coral but I know
your shores your throat

what orb throbs inside

you like Eden like dark
a current on my lips

my lips they need

your oars your crests
but me a beach unwashed
teeth on my skin my pier
your bite your brine

O to be an apple on that Tree

to give me salted swells
give me tidal pressing

to damp our fingers
in still waters

would ravens wait
for us to spoil

O how a drowning bird sings

Kirsten M. Holt

WHAT THEY DON'T TELL YOU ABOUT SEPTEMBER

She slithers under your doorframes and suddenly it is Fall
and you're left with August
silt in your eyelids.

And your tedium is still
is perched wanton on the lips of jars, like lightning bugs,
unable to tether this inconstant summerling
unable still to collapse into the sugared mouth of autumn,
tormented like a caterpillar
between two bending blades of grass.

There is never enough wind to pretend the trees aren't dying

content in their slow perishing
like my grandfather
pricking his finger twice a day,
spots of red
on all his shirts, until there wasn't enough left
inside of him.

I thought we could leave our reverie at the bent knees of maples
let their sap coat us like small insects
ambered and static.

Each fall his blood thickens in me
and I beg the wind to distract him from his amber pacing through my
capillaries
but September lights the leaves on fire—
as she did the year she wrapped him between her legs
coaxed his ashes into a cypress urn—
she breathes her kindling until the trees are smoldering
all yellow and orange
all bloodshot and red with memory.

Nicole Robinson

TENDER, HOW

—for Joey Connelly

on my way to Kentucky a herd of deer
couldn't decide which way to move
in the cropped cornfield, statues
under sky, like you in your bleak borough

with the photo of the Ohio river, how it held
the waves standing on top of themselves
to remind you nothing drowns,
and nothing is always moving. Tenderness,

how she comes to us, chimes out
of our chest like warblers who wear colors
stringed with imaginable colors of red
so round. Before you let her inside
the pistol-whipped boy of you,
the alley of you, she curled, whispered
this is how we come into the world,
wrapped in our weakness. She came

to the dog who broke her back
and had to relearn to walk with that big dumb
smile, she came to the woman after suicide
failed, to your unlocked door, to me. Tender, how

we notice the pink curtains behind us,
the swollen streak of sun that pulls through
and wonder how anyone can blame anything
for living the only way it knows how.

Nicole Robinson

THE TRUTH ABOUT LOVE

—in response to W.H. Auden

It could be the pine grosbeak flicking its notes
to sound like B.B. King, or the gaze
of a child standing in a pleated
patch of sun. If you look inside
your apartment and cannot find it
split the walls open. You wouldn't be the first

to destroy for love. America roars it
with a flag, sends it to war.
Sometimes it swells in to the sweat
of sex, sometimes it's forced,
layered like silence, like leaves
in autumn. It will not stop

when you want it to be quiet. It will stagger,
sheaf, and alter everything.

Missy Brownson

FISH SEEKS BICYCLE

Take me for a spin,
shiny thing,
thing I want most
at this moment:
strong handlebars,
firm seat,
bumpy ride.
I thrill
at the thrum of your gilled grips,
the ching of your charming bell,
the ticking of queens in your spokes.
You make me dream fingers
and rings,
legs to loop around
your lanky frame,
a different way to breathe.
Watch me twitch,
watch me flop,
watch my unblinking eye watch
you whiz by,
the pinwheel whirr
the most you've said in weeks.
Watch my mouth open
and close, open
and close,
silent ma ma ma:
Ma, they've got it all wrong.
Ma, I can feel everything.

Kristina Bicher

DREAM OF A WORLD WITHOUT CHEERLEADERS

We are a circus family, the lot of us, a freak show,
the sullen brainy boy, the skinny girl with scabs, the stuttering

flutist, closet anarchist, idiot savant. We are bossy
and awkward, we mumble, sniff, we chortle, read

too much, think too much, have too much hair,
not enough hair, eat strange food, peel our skin. We are not

chosen for dodge ball or desert islands. We dream
in color, talk about dreams, dream of a world

without cheerleaders, contests of beauty or strength
or speed. We have struck an uneasy peace

with our bodies, with reality TV. We are lightly
mocked and mildly reviled. Still we persist, find others

like us and multiply, disperse our displeasingness
as amusement. We pronate and predicate,

pontify and ideate, do our small part to heave
this world forward. We are everything you hope

you are not—but to us, we are sufficient, kin,
each a praise to the other, each a proof.

Kristina Bicher

ONE WAY TO LOVE A POET

Lately I keep thinking
of Robert Lowell,
how he would call a thing out,
reveal the needle's point,
how he was jarring
and preppy and ultimately crazy
and then again not so.

I saw an old black & white
picture in the paper:
slicked hair, tortoise glasses,
tucked white polo shirt,
loose khakis rolled
like he was clamming,
not dissolving.

Then Elizabeth Bishop
and her pen
that could attenuate an ocean
and all of Lowell's love
she would never return
carried in a single line
about a wave going out.

I am thankful for architecture,
for those nineteenth century sanitariums,
their red and resolute mass,
the lintels, arches and towers
of brick and stone
that understood what pain needs,
how to hold aloft a flapping soul,
how to stitch up Lowell and all the other
wounded lions.

Terry Hermsen

SHE LIVES ABOVE THE BAKERY

For Joanna

Cloud cover. The always-sweatered mother
and her son, who pick up every Thursday
their two sacks of day-old rolls, at 9:15, the gravel
crackling to their steps along the alley,
comfort her. She lives alone. Smokes out on the fire escape,
counts—another comfort—the single row
of mismatched bricks, like a childhood’s
tilted and long cracked abacas.

The one backward-swung and dipping branch
of the awkward maple that frames her sill
makes a portal or a cup of some baptismal fount.
She’s tired of school, of standing so far from the world
she cannot knead its skin,
of filling up with eyes and words
like bubbles dancing in the dough.
She wants children—to plant some eyes herself

and watch them grow. No more Shakespeare.
No more charts to claim pretense. She wants
a field, a wedding ring, a hinge in a gate
to open like a lauded, ribboned hand. A staggered order
to keep a balance, like that river-line of mortar
in the patched and lovely old warehouse wall
that angles out away from plumb
and lets the rain drip down.

Jonathan H. Scott

DEATH BE NOT INCARNATE

Death be not incarnate. Be proud as you will
But not with puffed chest or fanned plumage.
Carry no sickle across the threshold, be no
Pestering crow. Death do not assume

A shadowy form. Do not even reek of anything—
Neither pleasant nor foul. Be terrifying
As you will, but be so invisibly. Silently.
Odorless as the soul. To come in the flesh

Would be obnoxiously rude. To mock the systems
Of solid biology. You are circulatory already,
Digestive enough as things are. Leave endocrine
And arteries alone. Leave us our defecations.

Breathe not icy breath. Whisper not dooms,
Tickling ears. Slink and steal, as you will—
Leave a wake of carnage but be not incarnate.
You have emissaries aplenty. Ambassadors

Wrought of real stuff. They are the flatline
On the vitals screen, the blooming celosia
On the shirt of the bullet-shot. They are the chalk
Outlines of defenestrated discontents,

They are cross and chair and needle.
So Death be proud—you've earned your laurel,
Outpaced our pumping organs. Only spare us
Your hooded robe. Leave us our carbon copies.

Jonathan H. Scott

AT LEAST THEY'RE NOT BARKING AT YOU

You still regret the white cliffs, Dover missed
For missing the bus. From the castle hill
You flew the best you could on eyes
Meant for ogling women.

You ogled women—Canterbury
Pop-rock-hip-hop-and-gygrant dancing ones—
From France. The yankee songs you left
Back in Alabama.

The Alabama where now you are this
Unkempt laze-monger cursing neighbor dogs.
Retriever—golden, Labrador—
Black, barking loosened hell.

What new hell is this? What bastard regret?
White cliffs and long-lashed women speaking French.
The beach suggested over beer.
Hung-over in Malden.

In Malden where the scraggled kitten nudged
Your shin and lunch was shit, you expected
To be wise by then or by now
At the very latest.

But lately, very often, nearly always
The dogs are wild with slather and slaver—
Ado for spandexed joggers juiced
From the sweat of doing.

Martha Greenwald

TORNADO WARNING/JOANN FABRIC & CRAFT

—*There is desire & there is experience*
says the sales manager, his speech mock
thespian beneath the siren-laced gales—

Swayed by last weekend's empowerment seminar,
he's just called Corporate to quit. Thus after Valentine
rush, farewell to the service alcove where we shelter;
farewell quilters, O exiles of the pattern workshop.
Watery Gregorian chants sound in the walls & wind

regurgitates up fountain pipes, yet the quilters
refuse to be comrades in fear; humorless, calmly
thumbing calico squares stacked on their laps.

A bully mother has sent me, again, to fetch supplies
for her holiday class party. In my basket—25 pairs
of Googly Eyes. All parents will receive awkward
crimson hearts that blink in surprise at our boredom.
The manager rests his head on bolts of jade toile,

already gone to study costume design, four cities away.
Unseasonal storms dare not upset this fabric's pastoral:
shepherds court maidens, lutes forgotten in the meadows.

Martha Greenwald

SIR MAGIC LEAVING THE PLANETARIUM

Bowler atop fedora atop bowler
Atop fedora—he crams fifteen prop bins
Through the panel van’s rear doors
Yet his stacked hat trick stays stacked.

A real moon (harvest) squats over the loading dock,
So the brick wall pixelates with shadows of hats.
Fifteen years ago, all the birthday party mothers
Wanted him, despite his molting rabbit,

Despite their jumpy boys with repetitious coughs.
Would you do him? the women whispered, then loitered
By cupcake tables to swipe yellow frosting—
Him or the Blue’s Clues guy? Kevin Bacon or him?

Him or Harrison Ford? Tonight, supremely bored,
The kids dozed fidgety against tweed seats.
An acrid aura of hand gel hung beneath Saturn.
But the mothers in the back row sent texts,

Heads bowed over their cells, fingers
Pecking a practiced pointillism. So quiet,
He insisted he heard his father signal
Again from the black silk of that last fedora—

Frank Montesonti

AGENCY TO ACT RATIO

The captain of the dirigible is
obsessed with *agency*,

Agency—the *how*/the method of/the tool by which

the actor, the protagonist,
achieves the act.

For instance the wrench, or gun,
Or rope, is the *agency* of the murder.

This obsession is why the captain
created the dirigible, a *means*.

The protagonist
is obsessed with act, the thing that is done,
the thing that achieves

the purpose. The protagonist is obsessed
with love, the ultimate act.

The captain and protagonist know
their goals must be similar
because they are two versions
of the same person.

But each of them is blind to the other.

This I cannot quite figure out.
They meet in an old storeroom
in the Jewelry District of Los Angeles.

The captain spreads out
the map on the table. They both know the map.

It is the map of the city. When the captain points,
The protagonist creates the fire.

Frank Montesonti

THE AUTOMATON

The automaton sighs like a melancholy adolescent.

It lies on its bed reading a copy of *Nicomachean Ethics*.

Engineer, it's dangerous
compartmentalizing sadness
like this,

making of it things that almost live on their own.

The automaton always plays Wagner,
which annoys the captain.

Maybe he does have a loneliness that is not part comfort.
Looking through the telescope,
Florence is on fire.

The automaton returns to his taxidermy.
He stuffs owls with loose watch parts.
But there is a short supply. Every gear in this city is in use
to turn the briefest feelings:

the lever escapement, those ideas that appear
and vanish as quick as shadows.

Gears so small they become unnoticeable
A billion, billion turning in one person's face.
So that it doesn't look like machine;
It looks like someone you know.

Gears make the whole city move
slow. If you stand in one place long enough

the city leaves you.

Everything leaves you.

The automaton's experiments
in stereoscopy are sad.

The condensed vapor from his face drips
and smears the ink.

He can't get upset.
His soullessness is scary. The first image he creates
is a picture of himself with extended arms,

as if he were welcoming us in.

Marci Rae Johnson

SEPARATION: TIME TRAVEL

Closer to the speed of light
than I usually am, *one way*
travel into the future is
arguably possible, though
moving at the speed of light
actually takes you back in time.
Arrive before you start.
Which would also work.

Possible, but not probable.
More likely, the airplane's
cylindrical body. Taste of metal
in my mouth. Body and blood
shed. On TV not quite real, still
the plane looks like a bomb—
one way to make a change.

Another: moving between
different points in space,
not time. But space and time
cannot be separated. An hour
lost or gained. All machines

take us from something,
and towards another. Two observers
moving relative to each other.
Difference of elapsed time—his clock
ticking at a slower rate
her waving absently not looking back.
Husband and wife time dilation.

I cannot separate time and space.
Example: when I type letters to form
a word. Hit the send button.
Nothing can be erased.

Marci Rae Johnson

“FAILED ICARUS,” RON VILLANI 2011

acrylic on canvas

The sun has a woman’s curves where his hand caresses her: the only soft place. On his body the obvious ribs, his other hand a fist. He leans in. For a kiss? His shape suggests something more. But the heat might be too much—opens his mouth, turns his clenched teeth red. In the myth, he falls before he reaches her. Drowns. His defeat sure. But here the dark water’s distant. Perhaps another kind of hell, lacking a cool end. Instead, one black tear from his melting face, the flesh gray. Red. Still he won’t give up. *I’ve left everything for you.* My heart. The ground. The home I once knew.

L.S. McKee

SUNDAY MORNING, 1918

From the highest hill of the property,
the mountains resembled a man sunk heavy
in prayer: two slopes for muscled shoulders

and a point that rises between the way
a vertebrae of a neck lifts higher
than a bowed head. I was a connoisseur

of prayerful necks: fat lumping over tight
collars, red lines cracked like a river bed
in drought, pores gaping and crusted from sun.

There are prayers for everything. For nervous
brides and red-cheeked babies. For crops bent
like old men clutching at the gauntlet

of a kidney stone. Far across the ridge,
boys hum old songs into walls of earth.
My brother writes us letters from a hole.

In the valley, a bell clangs its tongue.
The dog runs nervous circles, knowing
soon I'll go. I call him over, and he works

his muzzle into my hand, his nose
a blind-man's cane. I imagine he knows
the wind's path over everything:

its course over artificial
ponds and wild rivers, over the muddied backs
of cattle and the grass licked raw:

I wonder if he can smell the hot metal

of a train's passing. The timbered knees of a bridge.
Magnolia blooms the size of a grown man's fist.

For a while he will follow when I take
the path down. Still, the bell rattles in the steeple.
Like a caged bird nodding at the sky.

L.S. McKee

PASSING BEEK-ELSLOO

Just tell the self to hold still.
A discarded bottle crashes to the back.
The driver lunges through a traffic circle,

why brake, why breathe?
Even the windmills, dull titans,
pump in the night.

The Dutch once drained this country,
draining a land into itself—
waters sucked back to reveal

soil dark as a wasp's head,
though on this bus-ride home,
this epic bus-ride home,

only the moon feels bounded and lush.
It gawks through the window
like an astonished eye,

or an eye, pearled over and blind,
searching for the one shape it would
recognize in the shadowed landscape.

I forgot to tell you this place
feels nothing like home,
that I wanted to be brave

and alone in the world,
in the old world with the bones
of saints encased like a Baptist's

dried flowers, with language wrecked
in my mouth, with an idea of what
I might come back to—

with where I'd never return
humming always inside—
now suddenly, the only place.

Tania Runyan

NEWNESS OF LIFE

—South African man wakes after 21 hours in morgue fridge

What cold salvation,
dragging fingernails
through the frost

of a half-dream
then waking
to a plastic cocoon.

The louder you scream
from your aluminum drawer
the more they believe

you're a ghost come
to haul them inside.
I feel your shivering

in my own bones,
stumble with you
into the vicious light.

Some burst alive
on the pyres of the Spirit.
Some blink open

slowly, alone, packed in ice:
How did I get here?
I never knew I was dead.

Tania Runyan

THE DAY IS AT HAND

“Shaving Day at the Monastery”
Eduard Gruntzer (1887)

They enter the room with bowed heads,
ready to consecrate their faces to God

and remove the shadows that draw
over their chins like the temple veil.

But as soon as the barber slathers
the first stoic jawbone, the abbot

crumples into laughter, and then they all
fall under the spell of those thick hands

spreading a Sistine ceiling of clouds,
the razor’s silvery pulse.

They look in the mirror with no worry
of vanity, even the nick at the throat

a tiny stigmata of joy. And oh,
that first hour when their hoods slip

across their skin like the breezes
on their boyhood faces

when they hiked the hillsides
and received their callings, or, perhaps,
the wind.

Colleen Abel

THE GREAT SUBCONSCIOUS

I exchange the cup of ice water
in your hand for a warm mug, switch

in secret salt with chili powder.
Backmask my name in all your records.

When we talk, tap my lips
with the pencil, a finger,

my glasses' long arm.
Maybe I will hum a rumba

as I pass in the hallway;
you will burn with the urge

to entrechat. I instill
the whisper into your lizard brain:

I will prime you like a bare wall,
rudder you, blind, to my side.

Caroline A. LeBlanc

HUNGRY GHOSTS

—India, Spring 2001

Each prayer I offer the Dark Mother
touches my head to the parched earth.
Babaji scolds at my back, Lower! Lower!

Prostrate yourself! Across the village
people sink into the Ganga's black
banks & marigold acres burn

off a pungent perfume. I gasp
inside Babaji's age-dark threshold.
He asks, *What do your ghosts want?*

Fiery saris sway. A village woman
sobs. Boney voices lift her away while
I watch English flames consume New France.

Common stories. Refugees corralled,
hunted, deported. My Acadians in exile.
Babaji claps, *What do your ghosts want?*

Cravings roll off my tongue.
"Butter, salt, flour . . . water.
Chocolate . . . Roses . . . red.

Hungry ghosts! Babaji mutters &
waves his sons into the marketplace.
Item by item, I trickle the scoured loot

into Kali Ma's lap. My body drops,
prostrate, full with desire, sharp &
rough as the gravel before Her altar.

Caroline A. LeBlanc

TEMPORAL ZONES

Where was your mother like? a woman asked me.

She was like the mid-Atlantic where nervous waves
battered boats and saltwater swelled wood.

She was like the St. Lawrence that winds into the heart
of Quebec, green and wild with wolves, beavers and bears.

She was like the tropics where orchids make vanilla,
and bright birds scold. Where vines spread and tangle.

She was like the North Pole, where the compass bounces
crazy-wild and points nowhere because it is home.

Andrew Najberg

GRANDFATHER.

When the professor tore the readout from the dot matrix printer—
it was old fashioned because he was old fashioned—
we knew we'd done it.

We had calculated the number of lemons
that mankind would probably consume
before the end of existence
under current parameters.
We could finally go home.

Last week it was the number of snail shells lying empty in English
garden beds,
before that the number of rain drops in a three hour storm.
We knew the world so well.

We tabulated the number of table legs ever wrought by carpenters
and the number of the same sawed and stained by furniture factories.
We even knew the number of tears it would take to fill the
pacific ocean
depending on whether the criers were infants, girls under 10,
professional football players or widows.

This is exactly how much you cried when your husband died, we
could tell them.

This is how many tears fell onto your husband's hand,
and this is how many milliseconds the warmth of those tears
forestalled the cooling of his skin.
Isn't this grand we said? Doesn't this help you with your grief,
Mrs. Najberg?

But she said she didn't want to know. Just shook her head and said
she didn't want to know.

There were still pills in a plastic cup on the corner of his dinner tray
next to the applesauce. The napkin, soiled, crumpled in a wet
little ball,
seemed like it wanted to soak in all the weight in the world, to draw
in her grief
and leave her clean.

Would you like to know how many of his cells are still alive?

But it's no use. She won't listen. Even as the nurses enter in
and the orderlies and the candy strippers and the doctors and
the morticians, all of them
absorbed in what must be done, what must be done,
and almost no one hears her whisper that she can't, she can't,
she can't.

Rob McAlister

23 CATS

—In Memory of Francis X. Profumo

Those 23 cats of yours, they had no manners.
They peed everywhere—and on each other.
The entire house reeked of cat piss.

Your voice was a cat claw that rasped dingy cupboards:
At times it was almost unbearable. But just when I thought
I could handle no more, your laugh turned aside any suffering.

It was never comfortable being with you, never easy.
The stench, the cold, the antebellum formality—it was all so alien.
Your clear blue eyes probed, reminded me of my obvious secret.

When they found you dead on your moth-eaten couch
A record of sacred music still spun on the turntable
And a cat was on your throat, purring.

Rob McAlister

OCCIPUT

Beneath the circular cut—straight through the hair line—
rests a face without a forehead,
a trace of pink masking blueblack lips.

A bone saw slices around the cranial vault;
thin mists of aerosolized tissue waft through the lab.
A chisel detaches the top third of her skull,
and the *dura mater*—the brain's tough covering, touches air.
After some scalpel work, the brain
slick and wet, glistens in light.

The anatomist continues his deconstruction,
probes down, down, down into the vault—
removes the brain and keeps dissecting,
until there is nowhere else to go
except through the occiput.

Philip F. Deaver

FAIRHOPE AND GRACE

Finally one morning my wife served me with divorce papers, and it was right when, during breakfast in a local place, Julwin's, I was mulling all that had happened and that I'd done, and, remembering from that calmer moment, I saw it clearly, saw myself doing all of it, ass over appetite down the slippery slope (I met some great people along the way, rocketing down with me), and I had the impulse to walk back to the cottage, I was borrowing a cottage in town, walk back to the cottage right then and email her, telling her it was not too late and I was sorry and I wanted her and I always had—baseball, and long after baseball but *because* of baseball, I'd been in a hormonal tsunami, what could I say but "I'm sorry"—well, it's not that simple either, don't think I think it is, at least on the forgiveness side, I know that, and so anyway I was thinking maybe I should go see her and not email her, she despised email, but right then, guess what, a deputy sheriff, in plain clothes and over the very plain clothes a green and brown jacket with an embroidered yellow sheriff's badge on the chest, walked into Julwin's, and caught up to me sitting there by myself under a loud, leaky air conditioner (the only spot available at the time I arrived), sitting there contemplating making a serious run at going back, and in a sort of leering, rumbling way he asked my name, and I said it, and out from a breast pocket came the white legal-sized envelope, handed to me by thick, blunt, gnarled fingers—must have been a catcher in another life, or a butcher. I also caught a flash of the coal black nine millimeter Glock he was wearing in a professional saddle-colored holster attached to his belt, very wannabe and 1990s, the sheriff's jacket just long enough and poofy enough at the waist to hide it if you snap the front but this guy didn't snap the front because he didn't *want* to hide his sidearm. This is a strange use of the Sheriff's Office, I thought. Why couldn't a postman deliver this, registered mail, or Pastor Fobbs from First Presbyterian? Why would it require an armed man to visit a citizen on business about his own marriage, about his own wife whom he's been with thirty-five years, thirty-one

of them married, and aren't things rough enough right now we have to do this theatrically like it was 1905 and I was Frank James?

I used to play second base for a professional team, an average career that ended with a mental breakdown and a torn ACL way back when when you tore an ACL you were pretty much toast. Early 1980s. Lifetime batting average .281, not bad, switch hitter, but I was a head-case in the field. So, retired, age thirty-seven. After retirement, we came to this town, with a big bank account and nice pension and my recent knee repair, and I was doing some hard work on psychological problems (that continued to grow considerably in the subsequent twenty-five year lull after we put down roots here). The embarrassment about the throwing issue never relented—I'm referring to my periodic mysterious loss of the ability to throw a ball within catching distance of a six foot five inch Gold Glove major league first baseman, which can be a detriment in a second baseman, and there was also a small anger management problem which landed me on the cover of *Sports Illustrated*, a great action photo of me in my last game ever, young, tanned, veins and arteries bulging in my face and neck, bumping Big Al Pateki who was working behind the plate that day, making him famous too and do you think he thanked me ever? So over the years people knew me fairly well here, yes as an old ball player—there were several of those around—but I was distinctive in that I was known as one of those problem players back in the day, but I was never a problem citizen of the community. I contributed considerably to the local economy over the years, contributed more than through taxes and my wife's charge card—donated and volunteered and gave inspirational talks to the Boy Scouts at their annual awards ceremony, also the Rotary and VFW. Sure I had difficulties, but they weren't common knowledge. It was an illusion but in some quarters I was semi-looked up to. So it was not just embarrassing but a revisitation of embarrassment in the breakfast place, this wet-lipped, zero eye-contact sheriff wanna-be serving me papers. I was 64! The restaurant was chock full of locals. Everybody went quiet. Suddenly we were a big production—want to make a giant fucking deal of it, bring in Eyewitness News out of Mobile, a whole crew, two cameras and a boom mic and a local former homecoming queen to do the post-game interview because I'm the only guy in this town to ever be divorced.

“Now Jimmy, how did you feel when the deputy handed you your divorce papers right here in Julwin’s in front of the whole community and there was a huge commotion and such?” “Well, I’ll tell you, Meagan, it’s no secret I’ve been in a slump lately and I was just glad to be there and be a meaningful part of the fans’ morning here in the breakfast place. I know they come to breakfast early of a Saturday morning hoping and, really, deserving to get a good show. We players, you know Meagan, are really, when it’s all said, we’re entertainers actually, and if I might, while you have me here, I’d like to give a big shout-out to Jesus for the gifts he’s bestowed on me that make it possible for me to be here, and to Max and my favorite waitress, Allie, and the whole staff of Julwin’s, Fairhope’s oldest continuous eating establishment.”

It would have made great video, a robust moment of public humiliation and glimpse into mental illness that, if televised, could have served for my wife as pay-backs for quite a few of my transgressions—we could almost call it even, and my wife could have watched it with her friends and become light-headed with what a retribution bull’s-eye it was. There was my confused look as I buttered my toast, deep in thought, and then I looked up at the deputy standing next to my table—I thought, gosh, an autograph while I’m eating? In the video, my wife would have spotted my mouth going dry and that old familiar set of three different expressions passing across my face in quick and predictable order like when I’m hitting lefty and sitting on a fast ball outside corner and instead I get a slider that at the last second comes in on my back elbow. Surprise, shock, and then that resigned “oh well” as I swing early hoping to foul it but instead go clean over the ball which pops into the catcher’s glove simultaneous to the ump’s signature call, “*Steeeeeeee-RIKE*,” with accompanying arm gesture that almost pulls him out of his steel-toed shoes. I was sitting in the auxiliary side of the restaurant, used for spillover when there’s a crowd, and there was a crowd, and, as referenced, it happened that I was under this leaky air conditioner. I’d moved to the open side of my booth, away from the wall, and periodically mopped the little puddle that would form on the seat where I’d just been sitting—had to mop it because the water would flow into the dent in the cushion my butt was making, not good. With the deputy there on my left, and me

looking up at him trying to imagine what this was—I mean, given a second I could easily figure it out but I was in that moment just before the realization—and I lost track of the dripping water project on my right and as I stared at him I felt my right cheek go cold and wet. This caused me to real fast slide out of the booth and stand up—“What the HELL!”—and when standing I was somewhat bigger than my friend the deputy, but I wasn’t looking at him, I was looking at the puddle in the seat of the booth, and suddenly and very professionally he gets my arm all bent up backwards and pushes my head down toward my plate with its half-eaten ham and egg omelette, hash browns and lightly buttered toast, a bowl of fruit, and a side of bacon, and starts to cuff me—over and over he’s saying in that commanding voice his trainers taught him, “Hold it, hold it, stand still, don’t move, spread your feet for me.” I said to him in a sort of whine like when you get picked off first base, “Stop it, look in my booth.” The breakfast place manager was there, and so was my favorite waitress who said to the deputy in a manner that seemed drawn from how people talk to cops on bad TV, “Please sir, the air conditioner leaks at this location and the subject’s ass got wet, see that?” and the manager says to me, “Sorry Jimmy,” indicating the air conditioner, and I said, “Jesus, Max, if the thing leaks why do you even have customers sit here?” and he said, “Sorry, there’s a lot of people today, very sorry,” and he said sorry a few more times, and the deputy got it that I wasn’t resisting whatever it was he was doing to me but I’m not sure he got it that if I really had been resisting he’d already have been unconscious on the breakfast place’s high traffic grease-spotted rug. When you stop to think about it, this may have been the first sign after all these years that the anger management stuff was working. I felt okay toward the guy, I seriously did; maybe this was a training run—Sheriff’s Office assigning him serving papers to the local old ball players, good basic citizens just trying to live the low-profile post-celebrity life, low likelihood of getting knocked cold especially if you catch them in public. Anyway he let me go, and my favorite waitress was there with a pile of napkins, and, released from the very effective arm hold, I was able to sop water up off my own seat, but right then another booth became available and the waitress and the manager, Max, apologetically moved the whole scenario, and Max asked my friend the deputy if he would like to have

a seat there also and would he like some coffee. “No sir,” he replied, “I just need the subject to sign this confirmation receipt and I’ll be getting on my way.” The deputy and the waitress watched the same shows on TV. “Who’s ‘the subject’?” I asked him not seriously. I took the paper. “Who does this go to?” I asked him. “The Judge,” he said, the word “judge” said ominously but with respect like how sometimes in some contexts “God” and “boss” can mean the same thing. I leaned over my new table and signed. “Can I write him a note, too?—is it a *him*, by the way?” “Of course,” the deputy said. “Yes, it’s a him, or yes, I can write him a note?” For a moment the two of us stood, motionless, seized up, while he thought through the authorized replies. We were like two wax statues standing there. Max, the manager, departed that whole side of the restaurant because, it being his establishment, this was stressful for him. I rephrased my question: “Can I write the judge a note?” “No,” the deputy replied and grabbed up the confirmation sheet with three carbons and turned to depart. “Thank you for your service,” I said to him. It was an applause-line but everyone in the place just stared at me. I asked my favorite waitress how I did grace-under-pressure-wise, but by then she too was headed the opposite direction. I left cash, tip and the uneaten food, and walked out the front door with him. He was walking ahead of me and didn’t want to talk. “Hey,” I said. No reply. “I was just wondering,” I said, “how come you didn’t do this over at the cottage where we had some privacy.” He stared at me, not quite *at me* but approximately. Really it was like he staring at a gnat somewhere in the space between us. “What do we need privacy for?” “I like that question. No, I really do.” He almost met my eyes when I said this. “Respect, that’s why,” I said. He turned robot-style and headed pretty fast down the street. “Plain old common respect. You ever been divorced?” I called after him. He climbed up in an old red Ford pickup, old but sharp-looking, jacked up, with a rack of spotlights on top like they aren’t supposed to use hunting deer. “It’s no picnic,” I vacantly called to him but he was windows up and rolling away. People along the pretty street watched for my next move. They couldn’t see who I was talking to, so I’m sure to them I seemed more like a dog barking.

Back at the cottage, I hurried and took my meds, then sat a while

by the cold empty fireplace and pouted, finally emailed her and told her what I'd been thinking before what happened happened, and then what happened. I wasn't angry—I've been on the slope for years, all *my* years really, so this was just the latest breaking news, the most recent broadside downward slippage, today's grim box scores in the context of a long season.

In the afternoon, I slouched over to the Boat Club to work on my sailboat. The day before when I had it out, not sailing, just motoring up Mobile Bay and thinking, I noticed it was taking on water—it's a beauty, this boat, but it's an old thing—and most of us when we get that age, we've already sunk. I doubt I'd have been too surprised if all of a sudden all sixty feet of it went straight down on the keel in the mud—water's only about ten feet deep in the bay other than the ship channel, and the boat draws six feet, so you could say in a way it was sunk already and hadn't even sunk yet. I knew to stay out there a ways where it was deep enough, but according to the depth finder it was almost never deep enough. Her documented name was "Harmony," but in recent years I'd been calling her "Money" for short. I arrived at the Boat Club around eleven. The Club, like all "clubs," had a nice bar and I sat at it and had a beer and a bacon, lettuce and tomato sandwich, took some deep breaths, and stared out the window at the water. Breakfast had been a bust—I was thinking maybe I should have just come out to the Boat Club in the first place. From where I was standing I couldn't see my boat which meant it was in the workshop space, and the harbor guys were using their big rig to drop some other boats into the water for the weekend. After a few moments I noticed my phone vibrating in my pocket, short blips like a text message. It was her. She was brief. "do not email me ever again. you're going down." Nice, honey, was my first thought. Good to hear from you. I texted her back, "okay. am at club. come by for pleasant chat." I asked for a box for the sandwich and went out to the boat. I planned to get down below decks and see what gives and if it wasn't too horrific maybe settle in to fix it. The Club had pumped it out and put it in what they call "dry dock." It was on blocks in a professional way, and propped up on jack stands. The keel was protected and it was stable and I could walk around on the deck and eat my sandwich or go down in the belly and work on stuff with great intensity and concentration without wor-

rying that it would fall over on the workshop floor while I was in it, which in the best of outcomes would have been noisy. It was an actual yacht that would sleep eight, and its main mast (there were two) was a single beautiful piece of wood cut from a forest in Oregon, so the papers say. I think that mast was part of what sold me. I had the option of having the Club do this repair, but my mentor Bob Rose when I bought the boat years ago—I call him my mentor because he’s a boat man, a sailor, and a craftsman on boats—Bob befriended me back when we bought our house in town and we’d talk sometimes, and he oriented me on town history and his take on local politics, and next thing I knew he’d convinced me to make a purchase of this boat he happened to know about, which a friend of his owned who couldn’t use it anymore because he’d recently fallen over dead in church at the age of 92. It seemed back then like a good idea to buy it—“Harmony,” yes, there was an element of shimmering destiny in it, and my wife had liked the idea as well. Bob was always coming by while I was working on it and had words of wisdom for me about sailing and owning a yacht and et cetera. He would say things like, “You are now on a great adventure. You’re a capable guy—this will absorb you. Don’t be afraid, just dig in, fix her up, you got a good deal, she’s a beauty, have some fun.” That’s a sort of summary of all the encouraging things he said around that time, including at the time of purchase, and what I learned was that the adventure was not sailing but the never-ending toil of keeping the poor thing even remotely sea-worthy. Sixty feet is way too big for me, but such a vessel gives many true boat men pleasure. There was nothing in my recorded life that gave evidence of a willingness, let alone an ability, to fix anything made of wood, nor did I have the *tools*, even if “tools” is defined in the broadest sense. I did have a long rap sheet of attacking jobs and projects in what a normal person might term reverse order, which my psychiatrist diagnosed as a mixed dominance issue that was why, as a young fella, I could hit equally well from both sides of the plate and why, in certain phases of my career, mainly the pivotal retirement-forcing last one, I lost the ability to throw accurately to first base followed closely on by confusion about which hand to throw with just prior to losing the ability to throw at all. It is in my opinion this mixed-dominance hell made of me in adult life not a do-it-your-selfer but rather a walk-about kind

of bored rich guy always happy to pay to get a thing fixed so I could enjoy it.

Imagine, I was, as referenced, 37—that's old on a major league ball diamond but I discovered it was rather young in the real world, and my wife back then was 29, and boredom, I don't care what you say, for a couple of people like us in a small town, just isn't good when one of you is on the slope anyway. I decided to throw myself into this boat thing, to learn about how boats were made, fittings, and types of rigging, and then of course I needed to know all about the big engine that was down in there as an option to the sails if needed. I far preferred motoring around the bay, far from everything and everybody, and sometimes maybe dropping anchor and my wife and I sitting there in a couple of deckchairs having a bottle of wine, watching the sun set and then watching the unbelievable starry sky begin to sparkle. Because really with the sails flying you need a crew of three minimum on a vessel like this and one of them was not going to be my wife up there in her two piece with pink sun visor getting sunburned and breaking her nails.

So about one in the afternoon (where was the time going?—great meds, that's where), my ball cap on backwards, wearing safety goggles, earplugs, and gloves, I was below decks, unable to really stand up, bent in fact like a paperclip in semi-darkness cutting some rotten wood out of an area just forward of the stern and to the rear of the engine, using a hand saw I happened to have in my truck, and then for the big piece, the actual shaft log, I had another saw I was going to use that was a chain saw I borrowed from my mentor Bob Rose eight years ago, and this saw, this saw I had a lot of questions about because this was a serious gas powered chain saw that I was about to employ down there in close quarters in the semi dark. I believe this was the very "big machinery" I wasn't supposed to operate while on this particular medication. Anyway, the minor stuff was seven boards in the hull that I took a length of five feet out of (hand saw), but the shaft log, as I say, was a serious piece of a hardwood tree for which the handsaw was unsuited. I hadn't thought of my wife or the scene at breakfast for about three hours, and so owning a boat could be said to have been working for me in a therapeutic manner, transferring my frustration to a bull-moose do-it-yourself project operating a chain

saw in tight quarters in the dark. I'm not meaning to say once in a while she didn't slip through my mind, and I'd be remembering something really fine that happened and then it would hit me that we're over, she's gone, and I'd check my phone and see if she was calling or texting, she wasn't, and then I might start to obsess again but the task at hand would re-engage me exactly as advertised. Now I was going to go at the big piece with the chain saw, and I'd just fired the thing up and, earplugs or not, still the noise was so loud that it would have caused panic in a lesser man. I could tell I was going to have no trouble concentrating. Then suddenly a shadow formed behind me, making it even harder for me to see—was it her, taking me up on the invite for a nice chat? Then I realized it was Bob Rose, himself, looking in on my progress, what a guy. He was standing up on the deck, and I could see the tip of one shoe, brown and white expensive leather saddle shoe, couldn't be anybody else. I shut down his chain saw and hid it next to the engine back in the shadows. "Hey, Robert," I said to him, "I think I'm in over my head, man." "Jimmy, your wife phoned and she's all pissed off." "She phoned you?" "Figured I'd know where you was." "Anyway," I said, "glad you came by—how are ya? Want to buy a sailboat?" "She says you two are splitting." "Is that a no?" He didn't seem to laugh though I wasn't sure because I couldn't see him. "What the hell are you doing down there?" "Fixing my boat, why, because it don't float." Bob wasn't a man for humor. "Do I hear my old saw down there?" I brought the saw back out from the shadows and set it plain sight. "Oh hell yes it is. Remember when I . . . ?" I went to the steps, climbed up onto the deck, shook his hand. "Whyn't you go down there and take a look. It's trouble, tell you that much." Bob climbed down the steps. "Dark down here!" he said disappearing into the back. I heard him mumbling to himself. Then he stumbled on something, and the boat shook. "Goddamn fuck," he said, not too loud. Then he was back at the steps, slowly climbing back up. He'd got one knee wet in a puddle when he tripped, but it was all good. "That's a pretty big hole you sawed. But I think the leak's coming down from the deck, not up through the hull. Seventy-five years of rain water, a tiny leak in the deck or some shit," he said. And then he was back by the helm looking to see if he could spot a soft place in the deck. He brushed at his wet knee. "I swear. Need to string up a

lamp under there, so you can see before you saw your ass off.” Then he was not very spryly climbing over the gunwale and down a set of stairs on wheels like used to be used for boarding airliners only smaller. When it was on blocks like this, hard to believe but the actual deck was about eight feet off the workshop’s concrete floor. He went in a room at the back and came out with a light inside a kind of wire cage on an orange extension cord, plugged the cord in, brought the lamp up to me. “Take this down there and see if that’s better. See how this works?” It had a hook on top. “Just hang it on something, can you do that?” Bob was good. Suddenly his phone was ringing. He snapped it open. “Hello, this is Robert Rose.” The voice on the other end sounded like static. Bob said, “Yeah, he’s right here—wanna talk at him?” I held up my fingers making a cross like how you try to scare off vampires though it never works. He handed the phone to me. “Hi.” “Hi,” she said. “Whassup?” I asked. “I’ve got my lawyer here, and she needs to ask you some questions.” “Well, I’m not available at this time. Tell her that, would you please?” “She says yes you are.” I hung up Bob’s phone.

It was much better down there with the light. But with the good light, I could see almost too much and started thinking I needed to replace more hull. In fact, I started worrying about the whole boat. Truth was, I didn’t want to do a lot of work. I didn’t want to get online and read all the forum chatter about replacing shaft logs and deck boards and seals. I mean, all these guys online were real sailors, with all kinds of boats, and they were having a terrible time making this repair to the shaft log. Now Bob was on the outside tapping on the hull with a rubber hammer. Where the hell did he get a rubber hammer, the perfect tool for tapping on the hull. That’s what I mean about tools. He handed the hammer through the hole I’d already sawed, told me to tap around and see if anything sounded soft. “Where the hell did you get the rubber hammer?” I asked him.

The next issue was the replacement wood. Bob reminded me of a guy I hadn’t seen in a long time, an old sailor named Pete Padilla who lived damned near to Point Clear, in the woods along the eastern bay shore. Pete had a whole sawmill operation at his place. After I surgically extracted the shaft log using the giant and terrifyingly loud chain saw, I would have to acquire the replacement wood, up in Daphne—

I'd go for cypress but in my book treated pine would be fine, I just wanted to get done—and of course I'd have to write down the specifications for cutting all the wood, and Pete most likely could do it in half an hour. Joke. Nothing takes half an hour. Bob told me, "You better find some old growth cypress because the new growth shit is shit and also Pete doesn't like cutting treated pine." I thanked Bob for coming by. "What'd you do to get your wife mad?" he called back to me as he walked out with his bowlegged, old guy strut. "Oh you know," I said. He said, "Same old stuff, right?" Now he was standing in the tall workshop doorway. He said, "You two're pretty old to be splittin' up, ya think? Is this old shit back to haunt or something?" I thought a moment. And then I thought another moment. "You know, Bob," I said to him, "I replaced a lot of this deck just eight or so years ago. Remember, which is how I came to acquire your saw? How's a slow leak rot the shaft-log in that length of time?" "Oh yeah, it's an adventure all right. 'Kay, look, I'll call ol' Pete Padilla for you, clear the trail, call you back to confirm. Keep the phone on. You'll have this thing back in the water end of this week." "It is the end of this week!" I said. "Whatever," my mentor Bob Rose muttered and then exited in his really fine saddle shoes, tan double-knit pants with one wet knee, and golf cap. He was a portly 73, the boat was 80. He called back to me one more thing from around the corner, that he'd look in again later to check on progress and get his saw back, and he said meantime I better have a meaningful talk with my spouse.

It wasn't long and my cell rang. I picked up and the nice lady was talking before I said my normal telephone greeting. "Hello, James, this is Carlotta Stowbanger, your wife's attorney at law. I just wanted to let you know we have a hearing before the Judge on Monday morning at nine o'clock. Furthermore, due to the situation, I will be billing you my hourly fee and you'll in addition also be accountable for all court costs incurred during the pending next six or so months of my stomping your rich, philandering ass into submission to my and your wife's considerable financial gain. She's sitting right here, by the way, which is how I am able to utilize her phone to call you. What's more, you will also be paying me on an hourly basis for every time you and your attorney, should you choose to afford one, hang up on me

and also when you don't and every which way in between. Email to follow with my contact info and how to make out the checks. Is that abundantly clear?"

"Hi," I said, and quietly snapped my phone shut.

What's the American population these days? I forget. When I was in baseball, we experienced a shortage of bats. Ash and hickory were preferred, and it wasn't long before the old growth was gone and we had to make up some crappola about how maple was the new best wood for bats, and if that had been true and maple had even come close to being satisfactory as a baseball bat instead of being too heavy and exploding on contact with a fast ball, there wouldn't be any old growth maple left either. So it seemed the world was out of real actual cypress. Daphne's famous lumber yard had cypress that the guy told me wasn't your granddaddy's cypress and he recommended treated pine instead, not because it was better but because that was really all he had that was semi-fit for my needs. I bought a couple of center cuts of treated pine, and set off for Pete Padilla's homey little spread down by Point Clear. Bob Rose had greased the wheel for me, calling ahead and asking Pete if he'd handle it and he said he would. I knew him from a long time ago, I forget how, and more recently sat on some local boards and committees with his wife, whose name was really Berniece but who was known to all locally as Priscilla because it rhymed with Padilla if you said Padilla like Southerners do. They were authentic old hippies, these two, just over seventy years old. Priscilla was drop dead beautiful still, and so calm and wise. Quite a few years ago Pete's name popped up in the local *Fairhope Courier*. The story went that he went down to visit an old pal of his whose house was on the Gulf south of Foley to make a purchase of some weed, and just Pete's luck he was standing there when floodlights came on and he was in the middle of drug sting. Three years he was locked up. Now listen there was not one lick of sense in putting that man in a prison for three years, and that was probably the case with fifty percent of that prison's population. Anyway, Priscilla lived out in the trees in their house and calmly waited for his return. He served every second of his penance and came home. The place was kept up and Priscilla never missed a beat with her service in the community,

and the next day after he was home Pete resumed his very quiet life of racing his sailboat and operating a custom sawmill. I could hear my phone ring even over third gear. “Pete says he’ll do it,” Bob Rose told me, and I said, “Treated pine?” because I already had it in the back of my pickup, and Bob said, “Yeah, well, take him a six pack of Corona when you go, that’s my advice,” so at the 7/11 south of Fairhope I bought a twelve pack in bottles and half an hour later I was driving up the long lane to his house.

The house was bigger than I was aware, and very nicely kept, and the old hippie stereotype I had in my mind sort of dropped off right then. Just beyond the house there was a set of wooden steps down to his boat dock. I didn’t see his boat anywhere, kind of wanted to, but maybe he didn’t have it out yet after winter. The forest around his place was live oak and pine trees, and there were flowers all around, spring in full bloom. I didn’t see his car anywhere. I opened a beer and sat there and drank it. This was a long day. Beer was good. I had another. After fifteen minutes, I climbed out of the truck, and right then he stepped onto the front porch and gave me a wave. He had some work gloves in his hand. It took two trips for us to get all the wood back to his wood cutting operation in an old garage that was partly a barn behind his house and behind a new garage he’d built. The first task with the saw was to reduce the raw wood I’d brought into actual board-shaped boards, and then to mill them tongue and groove. These would replace the rotted parts of the hull and two pieces that needed to be fit into the deck right under the helm. The bigger task was about to begin, the cutting of the shaft log, the big piece that had to be perfect. I showed him the shaft log I’d cut out of the boat, and he knew exactly what to do. He liked my boat, he told me—my mentor Bob Rose had told him all about it, and both of them knew boats and really appreciated the old ones. As we were carrying the wood from my truck, I asked Pete where Priscilla was, and he said she’d be along soon, that she’d gone to town. He was a man of few words. A lot of sailors are. As he got ready with the shaft log, measuring and scoping it out, I walked back to the truck and got the beer, brought it to the barn. I offered him one. “I think we better wait until Prisc gets back,” he said. “Ah,” I said, and jammed our two beers back into the carton. I stood around and helped all I could which was

not one bit. He was methodical, a master craftsman for sure. He had big silver eyebrows, wild, a good straight look in the eye like my old manager Whitey Herzog, and the strong, straight solid back and tanned arms of a blacksmith. As he worked, he had a serious look on his face, something on his mind maybe. “Problem with treated pine,” he said, “is there’s arsenic in it. Leaches into the water. After the BP spill, you might think ‘hell with it,’ but that’s not what I think. Do no harm’s what I think.” I, of course, had not given treated pine a second thought up in Daphne. He kept working. Over the whine of the saw, he said, “I’m cutting it for ya, but just sayin’.” I nodded to him in a special way to try to seem like I had ideals and principles, too. After a while he called to me over the saw, “How long you known Rose?” “Bob Rose? ’Bout twenty-seven years off and on.” I said it proudly, assuming he and Bob were friends. “You played ball, right?” “Yeah.” We were shouting over the sound of the saw. “Majors?” “Yeah, for a few years.” “How many?” “Close to ten.” “What position?” “Second.” “You like Bob?” “Yeah. He gives me some good advice, on the boat mainly.” The saw stopped. Peter raised his safety goggles. “He’s a dick, actually,” he said. I stayed quiet. More was coming. “When he called to get me to do this, and I was telling him about treated pine and all that, he said well, you know, that this fella I got for you, he’s a dull boy, a washed up old baseball player, zero in the character department but plenty of cash. What else did he say—oh yeah and he said that you’re weird and lazy.” I thought about that for a few moments, staring at Pete—it all seemed true enough. My eyes started watering. Pete straightened up and looked at me. “I don’t believe any of it, just so you know. You and Prisc worked together some and she told me you’re a good guy—that’s good enough for me. But if Bob was your friend, he wouldn’t have said that to me.” I may have nodded agreement. Mostly I stood there frozen. Pete said, “I asked Bob, I said, ‘Did you say that to his face or is it some more of your behind-the-back crap you’re always pulling?’ He didn’t answer.” What I really wanted to do then, I kind of wanted to just pay Pete and get out of there, but I continued to listen to him. “So just be careful,” Pete said. “Bob’s a dick and we all know it.” Pete went back to the saw. He didn’t need my help, so I took a short walk, back to their garden, down the tall wood steps to their dock, stood there a while. I wondered why I was

like I was.

I was back in the saw barn with Pete when Priscilla pulled up in their old pewter-gray, partially repainted sky-blue Volvo station wagon circa 1989. She pulled past my truck and well into the back yard where the grass didn't appear to have been driven on much. Pete took off his gloves. "She's been to the vet," he said. "We're gonna hafta take a break." He walked out into the waning sunlight and met her in the yard. She was upset. I heard her tell him, "Peter, our poor Grace is no more." Come to find out, she'd taken their sick dog, that hadn't been able to stand since two days ago, to be put down, and Pete would have gone with her but my mentor the dick Bob Rose had phoned him about cutting some wood for me and said I had a lot of cash. Out there under a big old live oak, Peter held his wife for a few minutes and they were talking but I couldn't hear, and just the tableau itself, the two of them having been through all they'd been through together, just the bit I knew about, it was beautiful how close they were, and it made me sick and weak to think of all I'd squandered in my own life. I didn't belong out there at Pete and Priscilla's house, didn't belong anywhere really, anymore, but I helped them bury the dog.

Melissa Pheterson

SWEETBREADS

As Melanie sucked salsa from her fingers, her husband said: “Just be yourself.” She knew he meant: “Your old self.”

Melanie had logged a full day of work, plus Pregnancy Pilates, and had only just gotten home at eight to quickly shower and eat the tacos Jordan had made. He kept a Moleskine binder filled with recipes copied in his wobbly longhand on the granite counter in their kitchen, the ink splotted from soy sauce and tomato juice. With paternity leave approaching, he reasoned, he might as well practice his penmanship. (The phrase had made her mother laugh.)

“We don’t have to be the first ones there,” Jordan said as she scrubbed bits of sautéed onion from the prongs of her ring. “But we don’t want to miss the cake or anything.” (*You’d think this party was a wedding*, her mother would have said.)

In a way, she was relieved that Jordan’s anxieties were focused on something outside their marriage. He’d quit law to return to academia, but grilled her over any topic that surfaced in their small talk. Before she’d even gotten pregnant, he had argued against the ritual circumcision for newborn Jewish boys. “You’d agree to genital mutilation,” he’d thundered, “just because some cult of ancient goat-fuckers said so?” Lately he had challenged her when she spoke of staying home with the baby, dipping into their savings: “You’d eat Ramen when you’re sixty-five?” Instead of answering, Melanie usually smiled with gritted teeth. “Let him rant,” her mother had said. Argument, she knew, was like sex for him; afterward he was mellow and sweet, his energy spent. To his friends, to strangers, to professors, and even his parents, he was deferential and mild—nervous about saying the right thing, wearing the right clothes, getting places on time, starting his dissertation. And so, on this frigid February night, they made haste to celebrate with Anna, a German Lit grad student who’d been dating Jordan’s friend Luke since last semester.

Melanie reached for Jordan’s arm as they climbed the steep concrete stairs to the door.

“It’s quiet,” she said, as he rang the bell.

After a long pause, Anna opened the door. She was wrapped in a green towel, one foot rubbing the other ankle. Another towel, a faded orange, scalloped her head. Her skin was blotchy, her eyes blood-shot. Jordan checked the Breitling watch for which Melanie had bartered, in Italian, on their honeymoon. It was 9:40. The party had been called for 9; yet here stood Anna alone, wearing only towels and tears, makeup unapplied, house empty, sniffing.

Melanie felt a wash of relief. Maybe they could go home.

“Did we get the wrong night?” asked Jordan.

“No,” Anna said, in her starched Welsh accent. “Your timing is perfect. Luke’s timing, however, is not.”

“Oh, no. Did he break up with you?” Jordan asked. “Today?”

“Tuesday, actually.” She pulled the edge of the towel higher above her breasts. “But it was one of those, you know, ‘let’s redefine our relationship’ talks. Not a break-up, precisely. And then today he posted something to Facebook about rooting for some Welsh soccer team.”

“And?” Jordan nudged.

“Naturally, I thought he was referring to me. But now I’m not sure. And I can’t pretend I’m not dying inside.”

“Did you cancel the party?” Melanie asked.

“No. I’m sure people will start trickling in eventually.”

“But don’t you need to—” Melanie began. She was salivating for dessert. Jordan held up his hand and began to softly hum, a tic he produced whenever his wife said something that embarrassed him.

“Close the door,” Melanie said, “so you shouldn’t get a chill.” The very words, spoken so often by her grandmother, soothed her like a mug of hot milk.

Jordan obeyed. “Did you e-mail him?”

She nodded, digging her nails into her other fist.

“He said—” She hiccupped. “He said he’d try to stop by later.” She pulled off her orange towel, shook her limp ash-blonde hair. “Come in. I’m just about to bake the cake, actually.”

“We can help,” Jordan assured her. “I know some great recipes. One of them is like a flourless torte-type thing.” A ginger cat shot down the stairs, and Melanie shrank toward the door, grabbing Jordan’s wrist.

“Babe, it’s fine,” Jordan said. To Anna he said, “Her parents put this crazy idea in her head that cats are bad for the baby.” To Melanie: “The doctor said that’s a myth. I was there.”

“I know,” Melanie said, willing her shoulders to shrug, wishing he hadn’t squired her to the appointment.

“It’s fine, I’ll put her upstairs,” Anna said, gathering the cat against her towel.

Melanie tapped the rose-gold face of Jordan’s watch. “It’s almost ten! This isn’t, like, a toga party, right?” She looked down at her white blouse and brown corduroys, part of her “working-mother” maternity wardrobe. She and Jordan had also seen novelty tees at the store (“Downloading . . .”), and Melanie had jokingly tried on one that read, “HE did this to me!” standing in the mirror so the sequined arrow accused her husband.

“This is Yale, not Animal House,” said Jordan. “I’m sure she’ll get dressed soon.”

“Because her friends might be stopping by soon . . .”

“Babe, if she’s not worried, you shouldn’t be.” He rubbed her belly. “You stress about everything. You have to relax.” They had argued just that morning about whether she “stomped around” the apartment (Jordan’s take) or whether she was merely “rushing out to work” (her defense). “Bull-crap; you stomp,” he’d said, from bed. “You stomp around like you’re mad at me. I was up reading till three a.m. last night.” He’d pounded the copy of *The Federalist Papers* on the mahogany night table.

“You can’t yell at me when I’m carrying your child,” she’d said, keeping her voice low in deference to her fetus’s sprouting ears. “Surely you don’t want anything to happen to her?”

“Bull-crap again. We fought at Thanksgiving and *he* was fine.”

“So that makes it okay, I suppose?” she’d said, perching one slice of bread with peanut butter atop one slice with jelly. By the time she’d gotten to work, Jordan had already emailed her. He wanted to make sure she knew he wasn’t mad at her. He knew why she had stomped: she was tired from work and the pregnancy, and her mother was probably stressing her out about completing the registry at Buy Buy Baby. He reminded her that he loved her and was working hard to become a respected professor. She’d shifted in her chair, trying to bask in the

love pixelated on the screen, as the baby leaned into her bladder.

Anna came back downstairs in a long, red velvet dress, face still drawn and pale.

“I think I’m going to lie down,” said Melanie.

“Go ahead, babe,” said Jordan pleasantly. “Take a little nap. We’ll make the cake.”

“Are you hungry?” Anna asked. “I’ve got some sweetbreads in the freezer.”

“You mean pastry? I’d love that.” Melanie was relieved.

“She means sweetbreads—as in organ meats,” said Jordan. “*Verboten* for the baby.”

“Oh, well. That’s okay. I’ll wait.” She lowered herself onto a drab suede futon, next to a white Formica bookcase affixed to the wall. The case curved in a spiral, displaying Anna’s books in a whirligig of erudition. Melanie could never read words in German without her heart jerking slightly, her gut cramping. On one green spine, she read the gilded words: *Lieder des jungen Werthers*, and her mouth reflexively watered for a butterscotch candy. She got up and moved to a cracked black leather chair across the room, in case the bookcase should fall and send books flying. She didn’t want to get whacked in the head, not when she was five months pregnant.

Half-dozing, she heard Anna’s and Jordan’s voices waft in and out of her reverie. “He’s young and immature,” Jordan was saying soberly. “You guys became so serious, so fast, and maybe it scared him.” He paused, listening to something Anna mumbled. “No, I wouldn’t confront him,” he replied. “It’ll spoil the party and you don’t want to ruin your birthday.”

Melanie thought of Thanksgiving, the final time her parents and in-laws had been in the same room. She had only recently found out she was pregnant, and her parents had ordered her to order Jordan’s family to lock up their Persian cat, Cyrus, with whom she’d played with for hours some months before, laughing as he batted the drawstring of her yoga pants. True, she and Jordan had asked the obstetrician, who’d said cats were fine, as long as Melanie didn’t change the litter box; but the next week she had seen her doctor smoking a cigarette outside a bodega on Crown Street; and, well, you couldn’t be too careful. Cringing, cowering, Jordan had asked his parents to

put away the cat, on the pretext of his severe allergies. But Cyrus had sprung free from the basement, bounded upstairs and rubbed Melanie's legs under the table; and Melanie had run sobbing to the couch, flinging herself in her father's lap as Jordan hollered about her parents suffocating them with their neuroses, trying to control their marriage and the baby; and then her father had cursed out her husband and escorted Melanie outside into the stinging cold. She had spent the night in her childhood room, sobbing in her mother's arms, and praying that she wouldn't miscarry. "That goddamn cat," her mother had seethed. "Their own son can't even *breathe* around it, he has to drug himself with Claritin, and they don't even care." Her father had never apologized to Jordan; he'd only said to his daughter, "He'll understand when *he* has a daughter."

It was 11:30 when the timer rang, and guests were just starting to trickle in, though Luke wasn't among them. "Here, babe," said Jordan, carrying a red plastic plate with a slice of cake.

"I have to work tomorrow," she reminded him.

"I know. Let's just have cake, then we'll go. It means a lot to Anna that we're here. You always complain how you want to have friends."

"I do," she agreed, "but not after midnight." She took a bite of cake; it was surprisingly bitter, but she polished off the slice. "What's in this thing?"

"Cocoa. Eggs, obviously. Espresso."

"Espresso?"

"Relax, babe. Only a pinch."

"I'm not supposed to have caffeine!"

"Anjou's pregnant, and she's always—"

"Anjou's *foreign!*" she snapped, using the word as her mother did: a catch-all for behavior in which she would never engage. She grabbed her husband's hand and pressed it against her navel. "Feel, Jordan, the baby's going crazy."

"He always does this at night, babe. Relax."

Anna came over, twisting her hair into a bun. She sat stiffly on the cushion, then lowered her head and rubbed her nose on Melanie's shoulder. Melanie patted the bun, awkwardly. It was still damp. Jordan got up to use the toilet.

“What will I say to Luke when he comes?” Anna asked through the fabric of her friend’s blouse.

Jittery and trembling, feeling as though her very blood was aerating into bubbles, Melanie took Anna’s hand and stroked her wan and splotchy face. “Let’s go put on your makeup,” she said, riding this helium flight of energy. “And curl your hair. We’ll make him good and sorry he dumped you.” She sounded so very like her mother, and a secret thrill washed down her spine. The baby would be all right. Melanie vowed not to ingest any caffeine for a week. Not even chocolate.

Anna sighed through her nostrils, lips pursed.

As the baby rippled under her palm, Anna shivered. “*Your* life is exciting,” she said, rubbing Melanie’s belly. “What is it like to—” She paused. “To really *possess* someone? To have someone be a *part* of you?”

“Well . . .” Melanie stared at the bulge. “I don’t even know if it’s a boy or a girl.” Whenever her Pregnancy Pilates instructor urged the students to visualize the warm bath of love surrounding their babies, Melanie just giggled. “Give me a break,” she imagined Jordan saying. “The baby floats in its own fucking *urine*.”

Anna’s chin began to tremble.

“You really want to know what it’s like?” she asked, rolling her eyes, forcing a lilt into her voice and her lips into a smile. “Heartburn. Constipation.”

Anna sniffled, tried to smile, then began to nod rapidly.

“And, of course, sooner or later,” Melanie said, her eyes drifting to Anna’s bare feet, “excruciating pain. Don’t envy me.”

Alex Taylor

HE WILL GATHER TO US ORPHANS

The town appeared below him like a puddle of dirty water, the blank houses and faded storefronts standing mute in the early light. A few pigeons picked at the dust and dried manure in the street marked with wagon tracks. Somewhere a hammer rang against an anvil, but there was no other sound and nothing moved.

DeLaney dropped from his horse and moved back to the pack mule he'd been leading. Jawbone's body lay over the animal, and he checked the cinch ropes keeping the dead man in place. Blood had leaked down the mule's flank. DeLaney spat on a piece of boot cloth and polished the stain away as best he could, the mule shivering at his touch, and then he remounted his horse. The mule had thrown a shoe sometime during the night, and when they descended into the town, it was at a slow limping pace.

At the edge of town, he stopped again and pulled the white riding gloves from his hands and stuffed them into his vest pocket. He looked back briefly at the maw of hills he'd just come through, a country blacked by thick timber and that was now hemmed by a reddening sunrise and clouds unscrolling above the trees. It had been a long ride. Now the town appeared pitiful and dull before him, wet with morning, as if the entire village had drooled out of the hills.

DeLaney found a piece of horehound candy in his pocket and put it in his mouth. Then he rode on.

The main street was dry and cratered with hoof prints. Black dust rose about him as he rode between the weatherboard buildings. A few men stood outside the drygoods store drinking coffee from pewter cups. DeLaney nodded to them as he passed. One of them threw the dregs of his cup into the street, making a splash in the dust, but other than that they made no acknowledgment of his passing.

The last building on the street was the Booming Joy Hotel. The porch roof had fallen away and been swept into the alley where it lay in a tangle of cedarwood shingles and rotted chickenleg posts. A privy had been built beside the hotel's front door. Its smell was thick.

Soiled catalog pages blew from its entrance and the porch was wet in front of it.

DeLaney dismounted and hitched his horse and mule to the riding post in front of the inn. One of the catalog pages blew against his boot and he kicked it away. Then he pushed the long coarse locks of dark hair under his hat and climbed the steps and entered the door.

The lobby was dim and obscene. A row of crimson sofas stood along one wall and everywhere sat brass spittoons and the ceiling was mirrored. A painted nude hung in a gilt frame behind the reception desk. There was an odor of camphor and fever.

In this place, DeLaney was to meet his contact, a lawman from the town of Ceralvo by the name of Snell, but the lobby was empty. The plan was for Snell to give him a half cut of the bounty and then take custody of Jawbone's remains and transport them back to Ceralvo. The day before, Delaney had mailed one of Jawbone's ears to the Booming Joy as proof the outlaw was dead and that he'd soon be arriving. He'd mailed the ear in a snuff box. *Be ready*, read the enclosed note. Now he paced the lobby, his pale smooth hands folded before him, the weight of his Colt revolver making him list to one side. His boots made a thrumming sound against the rough wooden floor.

"Was you wanting a room?" a woman asked him.

He'd overlooked her. She stood behind the reception desk, plump in her mothly green petticoats, her face sweating. Her eyes were set in her face like rusty doubloons. A child of indeterminate sex sat on her hip, a filthy hand stuffed in its mouth. They both stared at him.

"I'm meeting someone here," said DeLaney. He crossed the lobby to the reception desk. "His name's Snell."

The woman shook her head. "There ain't nobody here. We're vacant," she said.

DeLaney put his hands on the desk, but the wood felt sticky and brittle and he took them away again.

"Maybe he's sent word then?"

"There ain't been no word," said the woman. She pushed the child higher on her hip. "You want a room?"

DeLaney pushed the candy to the corner of his mouth with his tongue. Its taste had turned mangy and he swallowed it.

"No. I think I'll just wait here in the lobby for him," he said.

The woman shook her head again. “We can’t allow that. Lobby’s for paying guests only,” she said.

DeLaney folded his hands at his back and looked at her. “Is that right?”

“Yes,” she said. “It is.”

DeLaney dropped his arms to his side and looked around the lobby. It was clotted with aged smoke and the varnish peeled from the walls and he groaned at the sight of it and at the thought of all the waiting he would have to do there.

He turned back to the woman. “Go ahead then,” he said. “Give me a room.”

The woman produced a tattered ledger with her free hand and laid it open on the desk.

“Just put you and your guest’s name down,” she said.

“Guest?”

“Yeah. We don’t let anybody stay here unless they’ve got somebody with them. You got a guest don’t you?”

DeLaney felt a sharp icy pain picking at the back of his eyeballs. He’d ridden too far for this.

“Yes,” he said. “I got a guest.”

He took a quill from the inkwell on the desk and scratched at the yellowed page of the ledger: *Orvince DeLaney and Jawbone Swift*. When he was finished, the woman closed the ledger and took a key from the wall behind her, moving slow as if she were grocery shopping and deciding on which apple to buy. The child squirmed on her hip. She swatted its thigh and a look of bewildered hurt rose on its face. DeLaney thought of his own daughter. She would turn three in November, though he had not seen her in over a year. She lived with her mother and stepfather in Louisville in a brownstone overlooking the Ohio. In his pocket was the letter he’d written to them the night before, and he felt for it. He could send it, but it was doubtful any reply would come. His wife was fixed in hatred toward him. Hatred for the long nights away, the constant parting, the never-there. He felt the letter and wished for a stamp. He’d used the last one to mail Jawbone’s ear.

“Two-oh-five,” the woman said, handing him the key. “Up them stairs.”

She nodded the way he was to go. He thanked her. The child continued staring at him, chewing its fist.

His room upstairs was a slovenly hold. It had the smell of aged meat. A cot slouched against one wall and there was a nightstand with a coal oil lamp and a luggage trunk of flaking leather under the window. The paisley rug under his feet felt spongy.

DeLaney took his hat off as if intending to preside over some somber occasion, but the draft in the room scraped through his hair, and he sat the hat back on his head. He went to the window. The street he'd come down lay below him, a gray avenue marred by travel. He saw that his horse and mule were being considered by a crowd of mostly gawking women. They were cluttered around his mount and chattering, and their skirts swept through the black street dust. The three men he'd passed earlier stood together in the street gesturing to him in the window.

"All Christ," he cursed, leaving the room.

When he came out onto the porch of the Booming Joy, the women ceased their talk, seizing up with sudden quiet like a pond of frogs. There were a half dozen of them. Most were of child bearing age, but a single crone stood in their midst, her face a sunken pit under the dingy brim of her bonnet, and when DeLaney stepped into the street she swung a brown creased hand at the body draped over his mule.

"Ain't this Jawbone Swift?" she asked.

"Yes," said DeLaney. "That's him."

"Appears he's lost a ear," said the crone.

"I'd say he's not missing it right now."

DeLaney touched the dusty lapel of his vest. His riding coat felt suddenly burdened with dirt, but he ignored the women and walked through them, their skirts parting stiffly as they made room.

He unlatched the saddlebags from his horse and slung them over his shoulder, his head cocked to the sound of the women gathered around him. He half expected to hear the clink of a derringer, or to be dropped by a claw hammer, but nothing happened. He cut the tethers binding Jawbone to the mule then pulled the body over his shoulder, grunting and struggling as if he were dressing himself with a heavy wet robe. Jawbone was a small man, starved to ribs and lean meat, and this helped. When he turned, the women had aligned themselves

on either side of the porch like a gauntlet. A churchy looking crowd, they stood silent.

“This man here is Jawbone Swift as y’all know,” said DeLaney. “I contracted out for his capture six weeks ago in the town of McQuady and from there I tracked him to Jugville. I tried taking him peaceably, but he wouldn’t have it. Which is the reason he’s in the shape he’s in now.”

DeLaney nodded once and then lurched up the porch steps and on into the lobby of the Booming Joy. The woman who’d given him the room was still behind the reception desk, but she’d stowed the child somewhere and was alone. When she saw him crossing the lobby with the body thrown over his shoulder, she called to him.

“Hey, what is that you got there?”

DeLaney didn’t break his stride. “This is my guest,” he said, taking the stairs two at a time.

Once in his room, DeLaney threw the body on the cot. A fine smoke of cottonsilt breathed up from the blankets. The dead man’s face held an expression both smirk and snarl, the look of a cretinous thief. DeLaney threw an empty pillowcase over his eyes. Then he unburdened himself of his saddlebags and they slumped at his feet and he took the white riding gloves from his vest and slipped his hands into them.

When he turned, the receptionist stood in the door. She had the child with her again, holding it by the hand.

“All Christ,” DeLaney said. He moved to shut the door, but both woman and child stepped fully into the room.

“Ain’t this a private room?” DeLaney said.

“Well, it ain’t paid for yet,” said the woman. She peeked over his shoulder. “Your friend there looks poorly. There’s a doctor in town if you need one.”

“I believe he’s beyond that need,” said DeLaney.

The woman stepped past him and lifted the pillowcase from the dead man’s face.

DeLaney’s saw how the dark of Jawbone’s hair favored the woman’s own black locks. Truly, they were similar in both size and color, thin frail things.

“This fella’s dead.” The woman looked at DeLaney. “He’s dead

as a drownt chicken, ain't he?"

"He ain't started to turn just yet," DeLaney said.

The woman turned back to the body, leaning down for a closer look. "One of his ears has fell off," she said. "Who is he?"

DeLaney wiped at the front of his vest, tended to his coat sleeves. "That's Jawbone Swift. I'd figure you'd know him. That brood out in the street seemed pretty familiar with his likes."

He pointed to the window and the woman crossed the floor to have a look.

"Them? That's the Lady's Church of the Wilderness Crying Committee. I suppose they would know him. Nothing stays hid from them for awful long."

She looked at DeLaney. Her hair was dark and pleated, and the look of it dripping down her pale neck struck him as something aching and tragic.

"I guess you're the one killed him?" she asked.

DeLaney nodded. "He has a five thousand dollar price on his hide. Otherwise, I wouldn't have bothered."

"Don't you sound proud." The woman crossed the room to sit on the luggage trunk, stowing the child between her legs. It picked the hem of her skirt up and stuffed it in its mouth.

"I ain't proud," said DeLaney. "I'm just giving you the reason why a dead man's laying on my cot."

"And ever bit of what you just said might be a lie," said the woman.

DeLaney took his hat off and slapped his thigh with it. "Don't you have some kind of job that needs tending to?" he said. "Go scrub some chamber pots. Hang some drapes. I'm sure you've got something better to do besides bothering me."

The woman pretended not to hear. She messed with the child's hair and looked around the room as if it were a train station, her body tensed as if expecting imminent travel. Between her legs, the child continued to teethe on her skirt.

"Look, I don't need you in here," said DeLaney. "They'll be another feller along shortly to collect the body. If that's what you're worried about then don't"

The woman spat on her palm and slicked the child's hair down.

When she took her hand away, it was streaked with filth.

“I can’t decide if you’re proud or just stupid,” she said, wiping her palm on her skirt. “You come riding through here with a fortune and don’t even try to hide it.”

DeLaney grunted. “Well, there weren’t no other way to do it. How many bounties have you collected?”

“From the looks it, only one less than you,” said the woman.

DeLaney shook his head. He paced the room for a spell then sat on the floor, his back to the wall and his legs stretched before him with his faded knobby boot toes pointing up. He moved his gun around for comfort so that the barrel of the Colt hung lewdly between his legs like the sex of some metallic studbeast. Trails and the long nightmiles of riding sank into him, and he felt sleep lapping at his eyes, but when he saw the woman and child watching him, he put away this weariness because there was no room for it now and only the labor of waiting remained.

“You think I done wrong stopping here,” he said, finally.

“I don’t think you done wrong yet. But you may have to do a sight of it before you get out of this place,” said the woman.

“This is the place I was told to come to,” said DeLaney. “I didn’t choose it.”

“Sure you did. You picked this place same as picking a shirt to put on in the morning.”

“Not me. I never done it.”

The woman sat the child on her knee and bounced it, coddling, making it giggle. Drool strings dripped from its chin. “There’s always some other folks to blame, ain’t there?” she said.

“Way I see it, ain’t nothing happened yet that needs blaming. I just come here to collect pay for a job,” DeLaney said.

“Then somewhere you made your call. It shows on you. Man of your kind, there ain’t a thing in his life that just happens to him. He ain’t never had to take nothing but his druthers.”

DeLaney waved her away, his bright gloves flashing in the dim room like doves thrashed from the darkness.

“How come you to wear them fancy gloves?” the woman asked. “All the rest of you looks like it was put together by dogs.”

DeLaney looked at his gloved hands where they’d fallen in his

lap. "I like to keep my hands in as good a shape as possible," he said.

"Why for?"

"Because I am vain."

"Naw. That ain't it. It has something to do with what you did before deciding to go out chasing after outlaws. What was you? A doctor? They're careful with their hands."

DeLaney looked at the woman. The morning light had turned a worn gray color and it seeped through the window and over her face, making her seem matronly, her cheeks softening between the black drapes of her hair.

"I used to play piano," said DeLaney. A note of shame rang in his voice when he said it, but he went on. "The money was never good. But I learned to tend to my fingers because for a while they were the only things I could count on."

His talk brought all the days of music back, and he thought of the nights when he would return from some dingy bar where he'd played piano for the drunken and woeful, his clothes smoldering and stale. Those nights, he pressed his hands softly into his wife's thighs and they were cold and white as soap.

"And you think maybe after this bounty hunting business is done you'll go back to playing?" asked the woman.

DeLaney shrugged. "It's what I hope to do."

"You might yet learn to hope for things simpler than going back to where you come from," said the woman. She gazed at the window, her chin resting in the child's hair. "I have."

DeLaney pushed himself up from the floor, swinging his gun belt around so the Colt lay against his thigh once again. He went to the window. The women were gone from the street. A few wagons crawled along, their wheels cracking the stiff dry dirt but the street seemed to exist as no more than a deadened trickle. Under a portico, a few men were repainting the window of a storefront and the light cutting through the glass made their faces shimmer. DeLaney's horse and mule stood where he'd left them, the jack favoring its bad hoof.

"I need to tend to my animals," he said. "Where's the farrier in this town?"

"That'd be Shim Daniels," said the woman. "He's over on McLeod

Street. He'll try and rob you blind if you don't watch him."

"Of course he will. I'd be mad if he didn't."

DeLaney opened the door to leave, but stopped. From downstairs, there came a shuffling in the lobby, and then the sound of several feet hurrying up the wooden steps and into the hallway. DeLaney looked at the woman, but her face was blank as a pail of milk.

He slammed the door and turned the lock, then drew his Colt.

"Get up off that trunk," he said, backing away from the door.

The woman stood. Cradling the child against her, she drifted to the wall. DeLaney moved quick, squatting beside the trunk and pushing it across the floor with his shoulder until it sat wedged flush against the door. Then he flattened himself against the far wall of the room.

The steps were hushed as they came down the hall. Whoever it was, they weren't wearing spurs.

There was a knock. DeLaney waved the woman over to him with the Colt and she came and stood beside him against the wall, hiding the child behind her thigh.

"DeLaney," a man said behind the door.

"Yeah," Delaney answered. "I'm here. Who we got out there?"

"It's Snell. Open her up."

DeLaney couldn't be sure. He'd only spoken with Snell through telegram and letter and now the knowledge of that folly spun in his gut. Not knowing a man's voice could get you killed in country dark as this. *You will know me by the things I wear*, Snell had written in his last letter to him. *I'll have Jawbone's ear on a string around my neck.*

"You got the ear?" Delaney asked.

"Yes. I got it," said the man.

"Let's see it then."

"Open the door and you will."

DeLaney shook his head. "No. You just slide it over the sill and I'll see it that way," he said.

Beyond the door was a whisper of cloth, scratches against the wood, then a small gray shape like an old wafer was pushed over the sill. DeLaney stepped forward and picked up the ear and dropped it in his vest pocket. Then he crept back to the wall, holding his Colt on the door.

“Who is it you got out there with you, Snell?” he said.

“Ain’t nobody else, DeLaney. It’s just me.”

“I don’t believe that. You best say who else is out there with you or I’m just gonna start shooting and not worry about who gets hit.”

There was a brief silence and it made the small murky room feel close and smothered. DeLaney cocked his pistol.

“Say it, Snell. Who’s with you?”

“Mr. DeLaney.” It was a woman’s voice, a powdery flutter. “This is Sister Derna Lewis. I speak for all of the Lady’s Church of the Wilderness Crying Committee when I ask you to open the door.”

“Why the hell should I do that?”

“There’s no need to blackguard. All we want from you is the body of Jawbone Swift.”

“What do you want him for?” DeLaney asked.

“He worth more to our cause than he is to yours,” said Derna Lewis. “We’ve got plans to build a proper church in this town with the bounty money. As it is, we’re forced to hold services in the tobacco warehouse. You should be glad to help a few Christians. It would be an act of noble charity.”

The child began to whimper then, and the receptionist covered its face with the hem of her skirt, but its crying grew louder and steady.

“Snell, what’s going on?” DeLaney asked. “Have you fell in with these women?”

“Not by any choice of mine,” said Snell. “They aim to have Jawbone, Delaney. You best give him over. His bounty ain’t worth this amount of trouble.”

“That don’t square with me,” said DeLaney. “I already earned that bounty with my own trouble. I’m set on claiming it.”

“That’s fine for you to talk that way, DeLaney. But right now, I’ve got a pistol at my back. I’d say the woman holding it don’t think it’s a clothes iron neither. Open up.”

DeLaney felt fear straddle him. The child’s voice had grown to a tenor of windy sorrows, its face brightening with tears.

DeLaney found another piece of horehound candy in his vest and passed it to the woman.

“Give him this and pray he shuts up,” he said, turning the Colt

on her.

The woman's face turned cloudy and thunderous. "What are you going to do?" she asked. "Shoot him if he can't be quiet?"

"First I'll shoot him. So you can see it. Then I'll put a plug in you," he said.

The woman's face neared him, her breath touching his nose. "I think I've cleaned your kind out of the spittoons downstairs. You're no better than that."

DeLaney put the Colt to the white of her neck. "Cuss me all you like," he said. "It won't stall me."

The woman fixed her eyes on him, holding his gaze for a time, and then she slowly turned to the window.

Those in the hallway heard something drop behind the door. As if someone had shrugged a heavy coat off their shoulder and let it fall to the floor. Then there was a sound of hasps being loosened, the creak of brass hinges. The women chirped among themselves. When they asked Snell what he thought he'd heard, he only shrugged.

"Mr. DeLaney," said Derna Lewis, her mouth close to the door. "Do you aim to be a peaceable Christian in this matter? Or should we show you what we are capable of?"

From the room came a hurried bustling, this the only answer. Then the latch clicked over and those in the hallway backed away, the women brandishing quirts, pistols, and hymnals, all of them intending injury.

"I'm going to be a Christian," DeLaney said. "Don't shoot."

The door opened and the women schooled into the room. On the cot lay a body dressed in awkward clothes that didn't seem to fit. Beside the door sat the old clothing trunk. The hem of a green petticoat leaked from under the lid. DeLaney stood against the wall, his gloved hands folded in front of him. A dirty-mouthed child squatted at his feet.

"Where's Miz Emberson?" asked Derna Lewis.

DeLaney shook his head. "Who?"

"Miz Gail Emberson. She's the clerk for this hotel. Not a Christian of any sort, but where is she?"

"Ma'am, I ain't laid eyes on that woman since I paid for my room," said DeLaney.

The women stood gazing blankly. Beyond them, Snell stood in the hall, his face ashy and trembling.

“Then how is her child standing with you?” asked Derna Lewis. She nodded at the toddler crouching toadish at DeLaney’s feet.

“She asked me to watch him for a spell,” said DeLaney. “Said she had errands to run.”

Derna Lewis fumbled with the lace collar of her dress. “Errands,” she grunted. “I expect she did. Sir, that woman is a whore and the child is proof of her sin. But I suppose your kind doesn’t think it strange that there are women of Miz Emberson’s like in the world, that she would just leave her child in the care of a stranger while she went to turn a dollar? That doesn’t strike you odd at all, does it, Mr. DeLaney?”

DeLaney wiped his hands together. “I can’t say as I’ve really thought on it too awful hard, ma’am,” he said.

Derna Lewis grunted again. “No,” she said. “I don’t suppose you would.” She stepped to the cot and looked on the thing lying there. It wore a pillowcase over its head, and a man’s shirt and riding breeches made up the rest of its outfit.

“This is Jawbone Swift?” asked Derna Lewis.

“What’s left of him,” said Delaney.

The crone from the street skittered into the room, her head bobbing eagerly. “That’s him,” she screeched. “That’s Jawbone Swift. I’d know him anywhere just by his clothes.”

Derna nodded. She flicked her pale hands at the cot and the rest of the women moved forward, taking up the body and bearing it out of the room, lurching with the weight, their stony faces showing no concern.

“Mr. DeLaney, you are not a spiritual man. I can tell that,” said Derna Lewis. “But you’ve done a right deed today. Maybe God smiles on your kind as well.”

DeLaney nodded and Derna left the room in a swirling of skirts and musky air. When she was gone, Snell stepped into the room, twisting the brim of his hat in his hands.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “They had me soon as I rode into town yesterday. I guess my lip got to drifting and I made it known what my business was. But you saw how it was with them. Those bitches are

crazy.” He stammered a bit and then placed the hat back on his head. “They took your money off me, Delaney. I had to give it to them. They would’ve killed me otherwise.”

DeLaney spat on the floor.

“Where’s your horse, Snell?” he asked.

“In the alley. Where I left him anyway. I expect they ain’t watered or fed him neither.”

DeLaney spat again. He nodded and took the child by the hand and nodded at the trunk in the corner.

“Take that up and follow me,” he said.

“Why?” Snell asked. “What you aim to do with it?”

“It’s got some cargo I need,” said DeLaney. “Don’t ask no more questions and I might decide not to bury your ass for getting me in this trouble.”

Snell moved to the trunk. When he tried to lift it, he seemed surprised by the weight and groaned and then stood back up, sweat brightening his face.

“Hell, DeLaney,” he said. “You’ll have to help. I can’t lift it. What you got in there anyway?”

DeLaney moved to one end of the trunk and took up the handle. “Cargo,” he said. “Heave your side.”

They struggled and grunted and came down the steps of the Booming Joy, the rope handles of the trunk burning their palms and the sweat from their brows splashing the floorboards at their feet. The child, ghostly and pale, followed them.

Out in the street, both men moved together, stopping to rest on the stoop of the hotel. Then they gathered the trunk and again fraggled their way to the alley where they hefted the load onto Snell’s roan gelding, cinching it down with hemp ropes, the horse sidling, its hooves scraping in the dust. Then Snell led the horse into the street with its cargo, following DeLaney and the child to a riding hitch where his mount and pack mule waited. DeLaney mounted his own horse then pulled the child up, stowing it in front of him. It gripped the saddle horn and gurgled.

“You take my mule,” DeLaney said. “He needs shoeing, but I think you can manage that expense.”

“Where are you bound?” Snell asked.

“Ceralvo,” DeLaney said, tying the roan’s lead rope to his saddle. “There’s business still waiting for me in that town. I’ll leave your horse there.”

He turned in the street and rode out at a meager trot, the horses’ hooves chipping at the stiff black road dirt. Snell watched him recede to a dark speck until he was not there at all. He watched for a long time. Then, at his back, he heard the brushy approach of skirts, the easy slide of slippers over porch boards, a soft hissing sound, and when he turned the women were there, their hatchet faces lean and cruel, and he felt their breath on his skin as they circled him.

Four miles out of town, DeLaney came to a creek. He stopped and watered the horses there, squatting in the sand as they lapped. The child sat in the saddle like a stone frog, mute and still.

When the horses were finished, DeLaney moved to them and opened the trunk. He pushed the green petticoats and black and white checkered stockings away until the bunched face of a corpse stared at him. It wasn’t the woman. Its hair was a greasy black and it lacked an ear. And its blue dead eyes gleamed in the scant failing light of the day.

He shut the trunk and moved to the child. He found another piece of horehound candy at the bottom of his vest pocket and gave it to the child and it grinned and suckled, and DeLaney thought of his own daughter, so far and driven so distant from him by the conspiring travel he’d chosen. She will be three this November, he thought, watching the dim eyes of the child as they stared down at him where he stood in the creek, the water sliding over his boots. He put his hand under its chin and stroked the downy hairs along its jaw.

“You need to get fed,” he said. “We get to Ceralvo and I’ll fix you up with some oatmeal. How’d that be?”

The child gurgled and smiled, drooling over its gray limp lips.

“Yeah,” said DeLaney. “That’ll be fine, won’t it?”

He took the letter to his wife from his pocket. The envelope crinkled in his hands. He held it to the fading sun and then, softly, he let it drop into the creek and watched as the current took it away.

And, after that, there was only the noise of waters flowing on to fill the world and their sound was loud and ruinous as the breaking of stones.

Ellen Hagan

BIRTH

If it hadn't been full-on August, and then turned so abruptly into September, and the baby had been the only thing on your mind, and you had taken the customary tour of Beth Israel Hospital on 17th Street and 1st Avenue, you would have declined their services. You would have seen the torn through, discarded magazines from 2009 with their overdone, outdated celebrities, and their out of style frocks and hairdos.

You would have seen stained armchairs, everything old, the bathroom's broken tiles, yellowed posters of cats and babies. It was not the place you imagined giving birth. Not the gleaming, glisten of some super fly, sleek waiting room, and fashion from 2010. It was not up to date. Nothing was up to date. And this was New York City. Your birth was supposed to be glamorous, with shiny accoutrements, and a glistening shower with high-end toiletries. *What happened*, you think, as you make your way into your flimsy gown.

In the hospital, waiting to be sliced opened and halved, David photographs you, your raspberry lip balm, mascara, silver hoop earrings, your wide smile and the containers of Avant Gauze that you both get a kick out of. *So punk rock*, you think, and are glad you live in this place. You look glowing still, alive, awake. Having given in to this—city, grit and your mother saying—you're the one who wanted to live, fall in love, give birth in that godforsaken city. *So fuck it* you think. Might as well be bejeweled when they lift your daughter from you.

And you are. And they do. In the surgery room the doors close making everything cold, sterile, but David is in scrubs beside you, holding you. And the doctors—the ones you adore—talk about the chilly weather and you close your eyes, body numb from your ribs down until you hear the girl who could not be anyone else's girl but yours. And you are not upset that they clean and wrap her body before handing

her to her father. Then to you. Because when she sees you and your wet eyes and cheeks too, she licks the salt right from your face. And you know you could not ever be any other place than this one.

fetal position—think birth—think primary colors
the primary. primal of it all.

you pulled, taut jawed, hairbone. clavicle, your
far-toed foot dangling into the thin, cleaned air.

your wings fire made, spell of you. way your arms
span. spin out from your delirious body.

body crouched—is a palette, is a bank of things
the clanging of a pinball machine—not

broken, not slate, not ashen, or ash
not made of dust. internal color-struggled out

what it takes. where the body might, could
live, where the muscle could tear, fold, be un-

loosened. where the tendon, hamstring
achilles, where the heel could sprain, stretch

along the places where the body can. where it
do. reside and bend. come on.

the body it does come back. come
on. come on.

This is where you birthed a girl. And don't ever not call it birth. You did. You were there. All of you. You birthed her. You did. This is the corridor you walked down at Beth Israel Hospital on the corner of 17th and 1st, after a C-section—no wheelchair and your mother and father-in-law helping you down the ramp. This is your husband hailing a cab and your suspension of disbelief and your swollen, swollen

breasts and your *fuck you* to the woman from the Upper Breast Side who assured you your new bra would fit. *Fuck you*. This is the street you came home to: corner of Fort Washington and 177th. The place you brought your four-day old daughter home in a yellow Hybrid taxi cab. This is you in disbelief that you have a child, and she is yours. Because you are unsure of everything, and now, now that she is here you are sure you need to know more than you do. All you want—ever—is to protect her and build a net, buoy around her and scavenge the world, internet, the streets for her. Dodge the shit on the street, and god, there is so much shit on the street, and protect her from everything, people, herself, all the damage she could inflict.

All you know is that she is everything, and that everything scares the shit out of you. And too, the world, you think, seems to be falling apart and you are trying to hold on—but—you found a water bug in her bedroom this morning and you are not sure if you and New York are even in love anymore and you feel sometimes like nothing is enough and you feel unkempt, and your clothes (all of them) are bad, and your haircut is like Jane Fonda's, and Jane Fonda is not the young starlet you were hoping you would resemble. And you are 33. And the year is 2012. You watch the news in the middle of every night. In Israel and Iran, they prepare bomb shelters and gas masks. In Wyoming, on an Indian Reservation the size of Delaware and Rhode Island combined, a girl, 14, is dragged-dead by her brother and cousin. And I am thinking of ways to protect you, and I am thinking of ways to protect all the girls who are not my daughters. I am thinking of them too.

because you were pulled from me
because I love a scar that lasts
because I did not use Shea butter or Vaseline
because I understand what it is to be cut- incision-ed & bloody
someone else's hands inside abdomen
abdomen cut open, muscles sliced
because I was numb from the ribs down
because you have a set of ribs too & already
such lungs, lungs little one.

because I have nursed you from breasts
because you have breasts and will bleed
some day. hymen broken. you have a hymen
the tissue of a thing. bladder and gall.
the force of you pulled out.

because you licked my face. puppy. cub.
fish, little lobster clawed and twine.

because to have a daughter
is to always feel sliced in two anyway.

Sophia Efthimiadou

THE SPEECH

“I lost your father again,” my mother called to say on the mild winter morning of the day before my father’s seventieth birthday. I had flown in from New York a few days earlier, for the occasion, and I was staying at my parents’ house. Not yet adjusted to the time difference, I’d slept till noon. In the kitchen, next to a breakfast that was no longer warm, I had found a note from my mother saying that she had accompanied my father to the warm-water lake, a few kilometers north of Athens, where he took his weekly swim. “He has been out there swimming for two hours now, and I can’t even see his stupid head in the horizon anymore.”

An avid swimmer, my father is capable of disappearing for hours on end when in the water, be it salt water or sweet. Under normal circumstances this was not cause for alarm, but on the eve of my father’s seventieth-birthday bash, the possibility of an accident was something that my mother would not tolerate—there were too many guests and too many hors d’oeuvres at stake.

“Don’t worry,” I tried to reassure her, “He’s probably chasing his bathing suit again.”

That was what my father would do when he was as far out in the open as possible. He’d remove his bathing suit and play a game of catch with himself: toss the bathing suit, swim to it, toss the bathing suit, swim to it, toss the bathing suit . . .

“He is crazy!” my mother panted as she paced up and down the lake’s rim. “All my life I’ve spent with a crazy person. When he dies I’ll send that bald head of his to the scientists at Harvard, maybe they can tell me what the hell is in there. Doesn’t he understand that we have a party tomorrow? But no. He’ll do what he wants.”

“I am sure he—” but before I could finish my sentence she said, “Oh, never mind, I see him,” and hung up.

I was glad that my father had not drowned, but the relief was bittersweet. Not that I wished him harm. But it would take extraordinary circumstances for tomorrow’s celebration to be cancelled, so that I

wouldn't have to give the speech I had yet to write.

The idea had been my brother's. A newly successful hedge fund manager, he had enough money to waste on this lavish party that over a hundred family members and friends were planning to attend. My mother booked the restaurant, ordered the flowers, found a band and a video crew. All I had to do was show up, and as my mother put it: "say a few words." It was the least I could do, she said, and someone had to say *something*.

In my family, I was the designated toaster. My mother could never do it. Her children were the only crowd she had ever addressed in her life—and that was when she called us to the dinner table. As for my brother, despite his recent money flaunting, he had never been comfortable in the limelight. He'd lose his voice and start fiddling with his hair compulsively.

So there was no question that I, the girl, the daughter, the one who was destined to take care of her parents eventually—because that's what daughters were for—I was the one who would praise him. I'd have to stand up, call the crowd's attention, share a story that demonstrated what a wonderful father he had been, tear up, make at least one more person tear up with me, raise my glass to his direction, and proudly smile as the applause erupted. How hard could it be? After all, it was commonly suspected, though never acknowledged, that I had a way with words. And it was true: when it came to my father, I never had trouble finding the right words. What I had trouble with was finding any nice ones.

I looked for a notepad and a pen in my father's study and sat at his desk. I could start with a quote, something French. Everyone knew he was a Francophile. Voltaire, perhaps?

1994

"Of course I know what you do when you go to that fast food place! You and that Lolita friend of yours, Christina. You go there to sell yourself like a harlot!"

My father's fist fell hard on the table and pieces of the kiwi he was chewing exploded out of his mouth. The conversation had somehow escalated to this, though it had started out calmly enough, with

Voltaire.

“That’s right!” I yelled back, trying to wiggle out of my mother’s grip. With uncharacteristic bravado she had placed herself between us. “I do sell myself and I like it. And I’m not even that expensive, I’ll do it for a Kid’s Meal.”

The truth was I was only fourteen and a virgin at the time, and excluding my few attempts to acquire a smoking habit, not much of a rebel. My friend Christina and I would go to a Wendy’s restaurant every Friday night to have a cheeseburger. Sometimes we’d meet with older boys there, boys who attended the area’s public school and rode motorbikes, and we’d flirt with them. Well, Christina would. I’d mostly bite my Coke’s straw and listen. I was always home by my nine o’clock curfew, and with not much of a story to tell.

My father and I would never discuss my social life, or life in general, or things that my father was incapable of discussing, such as the everyday things that normal people talked about. He was only interested in encyclopedic knowledge and considered himself a Renaissance man. He believed that when one had questions one should seek answers, not opinions.

I had been reading Voltaire’s *Candide* for a French exam and thought it a good topic to discuss with my father. He admired Voltaire, I knew, because Voltaire was French and a philosopher—both attributes he respected. Experience should have taught me that I would never manage to impress him, but some lessons we don’t want to learn. So I joined him for breakfast determined to finally have my brilliance recognized by him, and between bites of scrambled eggs I began to analyze Voltaire’s thesis on the human condition.

“Ah yes, Voltaire and I have many things in common,” he said. I took a breath and was ready to continue, but my father cut me off to quote his own favorite Voltaire passage instead, which wasn’t even from *Candide*. Wounded, I told him that I wasn’t interested, and got up to leave the table. Retaliating, he accused me of never wanting to learn anything, and predicted that with this attitude I’d end up spending the rest of my life with Christina at Wendy’s, chasing boys. To which I replied, “Like you know what we do when we go to Wendy’s!”

That was when he called me a prostitute.

He had always been harsh in his criticism, but that day I decided he had gone too far.

“I hate you!” I yelled and swung a condemning finger at him.

“*Πάταζον μεν, άκουσον δε!*” he yelled back.

“I don’t know what that means!”

“It’s Themistocles,” he spat. “You never did learn your Ancient Greek.”

I screamed all the way up to my room. My mother ran after me, and banged on my locked door wildly. I refused to let her in because I was convinced that I was having a nervous breakdown, and when people in movies had nervous breakdowns they always locked their doors and played loud music. So I turned the radio on, but instead of a music program I stumbled upon a religious one, and the room filled with the monotonous voice of a man reading from the Bible. I cried and cried and my mother banged and banged, and the man on the radio talked about salvation and that only made me cry more. Round and round the room I went, muttering words such as “injustice,” and “mercilessness.” Then my swollen eyes fell on a bottle of suntan lotion on the shelf. I opened it and sniffed it and the smell took me back to happier times, reminiscences of the optimism that only comes with summer.

“Open this door immediately!” my mother cried, “I can’t deal with two crazy people in this house, your father is enough!”

I emptied the suntan lotion on the hardwood floor and smeared it everywhere. I then lay on it, tucking my hands under my cheek. There I stayed for a good long while.

“She’s fine, she’s just rolling on some cream on the floor,” I heard my brother say. I opened my eyes and saw him standing right above my head.

“Next time you have a dramatic meltdown try locking the window too, genius,” he said, as he walked out on the balcony that our rooms shared.

I decided against opening the speech with a Voltaire quote on aging. I’d go with Georges Clemenceau.

It wasn’t just the time difference that had made me fly in from New York a week before his birthday. I had hoped that spending a few

days in my childhood bedroom would inspire me, bring back happy memories. The words would come to me, I kept thinking, once I saw my father. Jet-lagged and frustrated, I stayed awake till the wee hours. I'd get up when the house was completely dark, walk around as if to haunt it. In the living room, I'd look at pictures. Why was this speech so damn hard to write?

My father taught me to love books, I wrote on my third sleepless night. Ever since I was a little girl, he . . .

I stopped. He hadn't taught me to love books. He had taught me that he loved books more than anything else, myself included.

He was a book collector and when I was growing up he'd drag us along with him to excursions in France, where he'd visit his antique book dealers. Every August we'd pack the car and drive from Athens to the port of Patras, spend two days and two nights on a boat to the Italian city of Ancona, all four of us sharing one tiny cabin, then drive to Nice, and from there to Paris. It was a lot of highway, a lot of waiting around, and a lot of things I was not allowed to touch. The only thing I looked forward to was the food, not because it was good but because I was hungry—my father never allowed snacks in the car, he despised crumbs. I was too young for the names of the cities we drove past to have any meaning, but I could tell where we were from the food stop: roasted chicken outside Monaco, entrecote in Geneva, lasagna near Orleans.

My mother and brother had little interest in my father's precious books, so when he needed an audience, he'd turn to me. He would excitably show me his new purchases, turning the pages slowly, carefully caressing the paper, looking for signatures and special printing numbers on the copyright page. Barely taller than the tables the books were laid on, I was fascinated by my father's ritual and observed him silently. I did not care to understand why the books were valuable. It was the only activity that would bring my father and I together, an experience we could share. Some of the books he bought were erotica, forbidden the time they were published and therefore rare. He believed that art was all-age appropriate and the thought of shielding my innocent eyes from the daring drawings never crossed his mind. When I inquired what it was I was looking at, he would answer me

impatiently: “It’s not about what the people in the pictures are *doing*, it’s about the colors.” His main dealer, Bernard, would throw in gifts with each purchase.

“He gave me Apollinaire’s entire collection,” he’d tell me, eyes twinkling, like I knew who Apollinaire was. “The gravures in this one are by Picasso.” I memorized the title of the book: *The Eleven Thousand Rods*.

One day, when we were back home in Athens, I snuck into his study and took the book down from the shelf, opened it to a random page. I did not quite understand what I was reading but it had something to do with people defecating on each other. I closed it and put it back on the shelf, deciding I was not ready for literature.

“You should read and read a lot. One day you will have forgotten everything you’ve ever read, but it won’t matter. What you will have gained is a substance,” my father used to preach. “And substance is the most important thing. Just look at me. A very successful civil engineer and I can recite entire poems at will. Name a poem and I’ll recite it. Go on, name one. No? I will recite Kipling’s *If* then,” and off he’d go, always emphasizing the last line: *And—which is more—you’ll be a Man, my son!*

The summer before I entered the third grade my father had my room remodeled. He had the bright orange cupboards painted white and ordered a custom-made bookcase made of walnut and black leather, filled the shelves with the volumes of Encyclopedia Britannica and history books. It came with a matching desk that was so big I could lie on it and spread my arms and legs to make an X. It was slightly defective. Its legs were too thin to support the heavy top and the desk wobbled at the slightest of touches, but my father said it would do. Above my bed he hung a drypoint he had no room for in the living room. It depicted a hawk flying out of an exploding skull. I stood next to my father, clutching my plush Big Bird doll, as he admired the result.

“This is all for you,” he said, “You’re ready for a real education now.”

When twenty-plus years later, age 30, I announced to my parents I was going to pursue a graduate degree in New York, my mother

wasn't as supportive. "Studying, studying, studying," she said. "Men don't like women to be that smart, you're never going to get married. You're just like your father. He's ruined you. What good did all that education do him?"

My father believed that my mother's brain only stored the wrong type of information—gossip, TV shows, recipes, parenting. His mind, on the other hand, focused on the "important things." As a result, they never had anything to talk about. She developed her own routine: a movie once a week, a women's-only yoga class where she met widows and divorcees who were equally lonely, even though, as she said, they had an excuse whereas she still had a husband. Once a week, she'd go to her favorite coffee shop for a solitary cup of hot chocolate. She'd sit there, spooning the whipped cream and thinking about her life. She blamed my father for my being so far away from her. "If you were here, we'd be drinking hot chocolate together. Your father and his ambition to educate you. And now America has eaten my daughter. What did he gain from all this, I ask him, what? He sits there alone in his study all day, like the old man his is, and that's where he'll die."

It was now two days before the party. I took another blank piece of paper and walked to my big childhood desk. *I owe my father so much*, I wrote. I stopped. No. I crossed the words out. As I did, the desk shook, shook, shook. Twenty years and it still felt too big for me.

I started again. *I owe my father . . . I owe my father . . .* Money. That's what I owed him. Money had always been the foundation of our relationship: he'd give me money and I'd take it. It was his way of showing me he cared, but also a means of exercising power and control over me. His was a despotic kind of love. I would never have to worry about my education, he had told me, though that peace of mind had come with certain conditions. "You will study Economics and then you can become a writer for all I care, and starve to death, but at least you will have a strong foundation. You are young now and you confuse hobbies with work. But work, you are not meant to enjoy."

His advice had led me to four years of Econometrics. I learned all about price theory, I learned that supply makes its own demand, I

learned about things that were positively correlated, about things that were negatively correlated, and about things that were not supposed to be correlated at all—like me and Econometrics. After I completed my studies, I pursued a career of my choosing and ended up in publishing, but due to my background it was only business publishing that potential employers deemed suitable for me. And so I became a business book editor. I lived and breathed Finance but on the modest salary of book people. In other words, I had somehow managed to combine the worst of both worlds. Did I blame my father for this? Of course I did.

During my short career, there were a few times when I'd get passionate about my job and did it well. It was then that I'd giddily call my father to brag about my success. But he never quite understood what the function of an editor was. When I told him about a book I signed that became a hit, and got reviewed in *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times*, he asked me if my name appeared on the cover.

"No," I said, "the editor's name never appears on the cover, only the author's name does."

"Then what good is it to me?" he said, "What will I show people—someone else's book?"

It was well past midnight, the night before the party, and I had nothing. I looked at my notes: *swimming, books, money*. And the Georges Clemenceau quote I had found now seemed stupid.

"Oh, to be seventy again!" Clemenceau said on his 80th birthday." I read it to my brother over the phone to test his reaction.

"I don't get it," he said.

"I have nothing. Nothing!" I cried.

"I don't understand why you can't just lie," he said. "Just write something. Anyway, I'm going to bed," he yawned and hung up.

He was right, I thought, I'd have to lie. The speech people expected to hear could not be written otherwise. I was not that daughter and he was not that father—the supportive, best-friend kind of dad, who makes his little girl feel like she's the center of the universe. It was only farewells that my father and I did well.

"*Partir c'est mourir un peu*, as the French say," he'd tell me every

time I left for New York, “To leave is to die a little.”

But being apart worked for us. The prospect of extended togetherness was what we couldn’t handle, and our hellos were never as pleasant as our goodbyes. The first thing he had said to me when he greeted me at the airport this time was that I had put on weight.

“You have developed very big thighs,” he said, without offering to help me with the luggage, “Excessive weight is *vulgaire*. But at least wide hips are good for having babies.”

I crumpled the piece of paper into a small ball. “Screw it,” I said, “I’ll just thank everyone for coming, and tell them to bring out the cake.”

The band stopped playing and the lead singer announced that the honoree’s daughter would like to say a few words. I got up and started walking towards the center of the stage, shaking. I had hoped that the words would somehow come to me once I was there, once I had enough wine in my bloodstream. But I had spent the entire time greeting relatives and wiping their lipstick off my face and hadn’t had the chance to finish one drink.

I thanked the singer for handing me the microphone and turned to face the crowd. I smiled, waited for the applause to quiet down, and then looked at my father, who was looking at me. And I just stood there, in silence.

I could clearly see the effect that every second that passed had on my father’s face. His look had at first been hopeful, expectant. But my silence seemed to confirm a suspicion of his. He was nervous, I thought, powerless. I had seen that look before. “No one understands me!” he would sometimes say, usually at the end of one of our arguments. “Especially you! I have given you everything! But you are ungrateful, so ungrateful.”

I cleared my throat. Someone rested his fork on a plate and the sound emphasized the silence that had spread in the room.

“My father chases his bathing suit,” I heard my voice say, as if it belonged to someone else. There was laughter. “When the beach is too crowded and he fears he might actually lose it in his game of catch, and be forced to walk out of the water naked, he will find a rock

to swim to instead. It will be the most distant rock he can see. And he will swim to it, even if it takes him hours. To my mother's disappointment, he always comes back." There were more laughs, and I laughed too.

"I once asked him what he did when he reached the rock, and he said, 'I just touch it,' and I said, 'That's it?' and he said, 'Yes, but then I spot another rock, further away still, and swim to that one.' It took me a long time to understand what he meant, but I do today.

"My father has given me something that others only dream of having: a good education. He has given me the freedom to live how I want to live and where I want to live. He has given me the ability to count on myself, and that's no small thing. I know my brother feels the same way. But most importantly, and this perhaps he did without even knowing, he taught me to set goals in life. Those distant rocks, and swim to them. To reach them through hard work. To get there no matter how long it takes. And once I get there, to immediately set my eyes on a new rock, to never stop swimming. For that, I am grateful. And I know with certainty that, at the age of 70, my father still has many rocks left to swim to."

That was it. There was applause. My great-aunt, who was mostly deaf, was in tears. And I thought I saw my father's eyes glistening, but then I thought no way.

"Closer! Get closer to each other, please!" yelled the photographer later that night, as my father and I attempted an awkward hug.

"You are not bad with words," my father quietly said, "maybe you should consider exploring that sometime." He locked his fingers around my shoulder and smiled for the camera. "And make sure you suck in your stomach for the picture, this dress makes you look like you're pregnant."

Judy Sobeloff

LEARNING TO BREATHE, LEARNING TO SLEEP

It's 2:09 a.m. when a pirate lands amidships, startling me awake with his lusty cry. Climbing over my head, straddling it, he smears his runny nose against my eye, brushes one pajamaed foot against my cheek and pushes off. "Ha, ha, ha, ha," he croons, a cheerful little sing-song punctuated with an occasional bloodcurdling howl, lest I be lulled into complacency and let my thoughts drift to anything besides my breath. My nighttime job is not to sleep but to feign sleep, to breathe the deep breath of sleep so credibly I fool even myself.

If, as I've read, parenting is an 18-year Zen retreat, then I score high for hours spent meditating, focusing on my breathing in the dark while my one-year-old scales the various play-structure features of my body. My exhalations, I have read, are supposed to sound like rushing water, a long repeated *shhhh* gushing like a stream. Like a furnace, I'll go all night. *Shhhh, shhhh*, I remind myself, creeping to the bathroom, as if I might forget my purpose and burst into song. As morning approaches (the day-shift whistle blows around 4:00 a.m.), I renew my efforts, anything to extend minutes lying prone with eyes closed when toy trucks and board books aren't dropping on my head.

Nights and naptimes at our house offer a rich sonic landscape, dense and layered. I'm just the lead singer for our sleep-time band. One by one, in pursuit of sleep, we've added the following electronic accompaniments: ocean-sound machines and space heaters; cranked-up classical music (Albinoni's Trio Sonatas, in case anyone wants to try this at home); a ceiling fan, a box fan, the bathroom fan; and a baby monitor transmitting not only our three-and-a-half-year-old's waking screams and cries but all the cacophonous jungle ambiance of her bedroom down the hall. Often at night or naptime my husband and I imagine we hear crying when there is none.

When our daughter wakes, Fred groans and stumbles out to soothe her, falling asleep beside her for much of the rest of the night. Meanwhile, back on center stage, her little brother wakes to practice new words or pat my face or unscrew my eyes, perhaps to donate them

to science before my time. Under the new regime, we've decided I need to stop nursing him to sleep so that we can all get some sleep. While he is in fact sleeping longer now, when he wakes he sometimes screams and cries and bangs his head like a woodpecker on my chest, my head, the dresser beside our mattress on the floor, the wall.

As a seven or eight-year-old, I used to lie awake thinking I was too happy, and, feeling the need to correct for this, would imagine my father had been killed in "The War" until I made myself cry. As a mom, lying awake immersed in all the unsettled business that spills over into the too few hours allotted for sleep, I'm sucked into scenes more compelling than the blank screen of trying to fall asleep in our living, breathing bedroom.

When my physical therapist mentions a mantra she uses in martial arts, I immediately co-opt it for my sleep-inducing purposes: "Breathing in life from the earth, breathing out waste. Breathing in life from the cosmos, breathing out waste." Even when my inner voice starts overdosing on "breathing in waste," something about this mantra becomes essential to me, giving me a focus when I know no way to help my crying child, taking my mind away from its default replaying of social missteps and tasks undone or done. Incorporating the mantra into my Power Sleep repertoire, I breathe in life from the earth, shhhhhh breathe-out-waste hhhhhh. I breathe in life from the cosmos, shhhhhh breathe-out-waste hhhhhh.

I rely heavily on this when lying down with our daughter to help her nap, resisting my urge to narrate the events in question before the outcome is known: will she or won't she? She only sleeps at night if she has napped, and she fights napping long and hard, manipulating my arm and fingers in a fashion we call scrumpling. The nap is never a given. As soon as I close the book we've read and turn out my headlamp, the litany begins: "I'm not tired, I can't sleep, I can never sleep, I'm hungry, I want Poppa..." She throws everything she has at me, and I must, if she is to succumb, focus continuously on breathing in and out.

I spent months practicing focusing on my breathing in preparation for labor, holding ice cubes to my wrists to simulate the pain of contractions. The stakes seem higher now. Caving to the temptation to tune in to my inner sportscaster ("Now she's banging her feet against

the wall, now she's singing") or imagining myself telling my husband afterwards about the specific difficulties of this particular nap, fascinating as they are to me, is perilous. Doing so means losing hold of the one true tool I have: creating an invincible peace through my breathing which envelops the room.

So many times as I enter an experience—not just trying to get my children to sleep, but going down a water slide; swerving to avoid a head-on collision with a truck barreling toward us in our lane; waiting to see if the babysitter, who's late, is going to show—before the outcome is established, well before the outcome is even under way, I hear my inner voice narrating the events as they're happening, as if I'm telling the story later to my husband or a friend. "And then she . . . and then I . . . and then we . . ." As if the events are all over now, phew.

I'm starting to understand this impulse, which has been with me since adolescence, better now: to separate myself from the unfolding present moment, be it painful or pleasurable, so I can evaluate it from the safety of my living room, as it were. The same impulse, perhaps, is what lures me to writing, the opportunity to tell a story from a comfortable remove and simultaneously experience the movie surround-sound version in my head—all while being fully attentive to the task at hand. Narrating events provides a haven, perhaps an even more tempting refuge now, as I attempt to focus on and engage with my young children for hours at a stretch.

The moment I began narrating my experiences in my head was one of the pivotal moments of my life: the last day of ninth grade, when my mother picked me up at a friend's house after school and told me my father had died. He'd been ill the previous four and a half years, in and out of the hospital for the last six months with small setbacks and smaller recoveries, declining and rallying the way I now know people do when they're on their way to dying. He'd gone into a coma the night before while the rest of us slept, including the on-call nurse on duty with him in our living room. I was getting ready for school that morning, had just gotten out of the shower, when my mother called me to come into the living room to say goodbye. I kissed his

face, then stood aside wrapped in my towel while the ambulance men wheeled him with his eyes closed out the door. Despite this coma, despite my mother having told me and my sisters that he would die that summer, nothing prepared me for the shock of the moment that afternoon when she told me he had died.

I remember watching for her blue Oldsmobile through the thick bumpy glass of my friend's front door. The narration began as soon as she told me, my hand on the car door handle as I asked, "How's Daddy?" without taking the time to say "Hi, Mommy," as I slid into the passenger seat, as I buckled my seatbelt. By the time we pulled into our driveway ten minutes later, an endless tape loop had begun: "My father died today, my father died today, my father died today."

The next day my sisters and I lay on the living room rug while visitors sat on our couch and chairs. My English teacher brought me *The Yearling*, about the death of a boy's beloved deer, and took me to the grocery store where she offered to buy me a chocolate bar, which I declined, not allowed sweets. The contents of the tape loop altered only slightly when she suggested I amend the sentence to "My father died yesterday, my father died yesterday," and so on, as the days continued. Sometime later I began narrating the random daily events of my life, narrating whatever I was doing, so that in my mind I would be telling an anonymous someone about putting a lid on a pot as it happened, a barrier between myself and any potentially distressing or even mundane experience, a built-in delay to censor forbidden words and phrases. (Who was I telling, I wonder now: my dad?)

Three-going-on-four years ago, when our daughter, Jonna, was born, Fred and I left the main highway and set off on the attachment parenting path. Born in our bedroom in a tub of warm water, she slept cuddled between us, nursing as she pleased, until eventually she'd nap only with a parent in the bed and would sleep at night only with both parents in bed. When her brother, Benji, came along we welcomed him in with the rest of us, eager to assist the siblings in bonding and lovingly holding hands all night, as our attachment parenting field guides promised they would.

To a remarkable extent the kids behaved as planned, except for

the part where they each kept crying and waking the other one, dueling banjos all night long. A year later, when we got Jonna sleeping alone in her own bedroom (after a wild tour of transitional sleep pairings, bed varieties, and locations), I brought pen and paper to bed and discovered that, working together, even down the hall from one another, our tag-team wakers were waking us and each other 10-15 times a night.

We'd started down the attachment parenting path—baby wearing, night nursing, co-sleeping—out of love, because it felt right, but sometimes it feels like we've been bushwhacking ever since. While we haven't resorted to leaving Benji alone to Cry It Out, we've departed from our kinder, gentler stance, and rather than my nursing him six to eight times a night, we're letting him cry in our arms or our presence. Which can be brutal. Not to nurse my sobbing, howling tot, when I know that doing so would comfort him, would comfort all of us, immediately, feels like waging a battle for our family's literal survival, with no line of sight regarding which way to turn. In not nursing him back to sleep, in not sleeping snuggled against him, my face pressed into his hair, I'm depriving us both of a cherished connection, in hopes of a future in which he and the rest of us can not only exist but sleep and thrive. When he's crying and I'm holding out, moment by moment it feels impossible to say what is strength and what is weakness, to know what damage is being done or to whom. No sleep means no dreams, and anyone who thinks she or he has the answer has never been here.

Jonna was with us, standing right by the piano, when Benji was born in the living room. It took all of us working together to help him get out. "Push harder than you've ever pushed before," our midwife said, and when he finally did emerge, face up and at an angle, she said this was a position she'd never seen before. Sometimes Big Kid Jonna and I laugh together: "Do you think you could fit back inside me now?" I'm starting to understand how from the moment they took their very first breaths out in the world, my job as a mother is to gauge the necessary distance between them and me and adjust my position accordingly, to be there but not so close they aren't learning to do every single thing on their own.

Silly me. As a new parent, I had no idea that falling asleep was

such a complicated process that parents needed training manuals and support networks. I'm deeply touched when a friend, whose four-year-old still takes three-hour naps and whose baby has worked his way through a highly regimented sleeping-through-the-night protocol, offers to spend the night in our bedroom or to send her husband so they can support us in getting on track. While she's careful to emphasize the limits of her sleep-doula expertise, it seems that everywhere I turn someone has strong and conflicting convictions about children and sleep. "Crying children just need to be heard," my physical therapist tells me. "Your children are waking because of you," asserts her colleague upon working with me once.

As the summer ends, I take the kids to a swimming hole where Jonna wanders in a region she's named "Mudland" along the marshy shore. We have the place to ourselves. "I found a mermaid," she calls, "a very strange mermaid with hairs all over it!" Right away my narrator assumes duty up in the control tower, transmitting the dispatch for the folks back home: "Jonna found a mermaid!"

"Mom, come!" she beckons. "It's beautiful here!" But I'm so busy with my narration that by the time I reach her, the mermaids have already floated away. Later I'm back with Benji and the sand toys, updating my listeners on this disappointing turn of events, when Jonna invites me over to see a treasure. "It's a quiet baby mermaid, a newborn," she says, handing me what the uninitiated might see as a small raggedy stick. "It said it could live with us." I'm ecstatic that such a creature—who could be more present and engaged than a newborn baby mermaid?—would consider us worthy, and I try to focus on this mermaid the way I would on any other newborn. Later Jonna reports that the baby mermaid has changed its mind—was it something I narrated?—because it needs to live with its own Mommy and Poppa. Nonetheless, I feel hopeful again when she asks me to continue watching over it and assures me that "it can still come live with us at any time."

I ask her about the mermaids when we come back to the swimming hole with friends a week later, but she says they won't come out with so many people here. Meanwhile, Benji takes off running up an

embankment and onto a bridge. I give chase. We've stood here before: me right behind him, ready to grab but letting him stand on his own, me breathing in, breathing out, as he peers down at the river below. This time I scoop him up and bring him across into the woods on the other side. There's so much to show him here, so much for him to see for himself. I pull down a strand of grandfather's beard lichen from a dangling branch and hand it to him. "Moss," he repeats, "moss," a new word. I set him down a few feet away from me on a giant rotting log. He checks his balance before walking toward me, pieces of the log crumbling beneath his bare feet. Then he bends to pick up a piece of grandfather's beard he finds lying on the log. "Moss," he tells me, "moss," still walking toward me, still speaking in his clear, calm voice, and then he jumps into my waiting arms.

Julie Polter

CANDYLAND'S SECOND SHIFT

I am in the room where candy canes begin. It is called the cane kitchen, although it is not like any kitchen I've ever seen. I am very small, clenching someone's hand—maybe my mom's, maybe my teen-age sister's. My father, in his jeans and t-shirt, has led us through the factory to this spot, so it must be daytime—if it were night he would be dressed all in white, with black leather belt and black shoes, making candy canes himself.

In the factory, everything is clank and roar and rush and *bigness*: high, high ceilings; conveyor belts as wide as my bed that disappear into mysterious stainless steel tunnels; torrents of suckers pouring out of chutes, clattering like pebbles. In the cane kitchen, my cheeks burn and it is hard to breathe from the intense heat and the sting of peppermint. I jump and gasp at the sudden sharp hisses and thwacks as the men and machines do their work.

At a metal counter against one wall, a man with muscular arms and white terry cloth gloves leans hard into his work, flipping and stretching and rolling together slabs of semisolid candy the size of sofa cushions: One slab is white and shiny like the shoes and matching purse I wore at Easter. The other slab, smaller, is deep red with an unsettling resemblance to raw liver.

Outside the kitchen, a rope of candy twitches and slinks between long, parallel, gyrating stainless steel rollers that stretch out on an elevated track around a big room. The bright red and white strand gets skinnier and skinnier as it goes. Somewhere down the line, they tell me it will get chopped to cane-sized pieces, bent into a crook-shape. But right here the candy is a seemingly endless snake that's getting twitched and rolled out to nothingness. It is odd and beautiful and scary.

My dad sees this every night, but somehow he manages to not say a word about it.

My father made candy. This won points in the grade school social

scene. Everyone else's parents had the usual jobs—making auto parts, milking cows, doing turnpike maintenance, selling Avon, keeping house. My dad had a boy-that-must-be-nice job. The candyman. Mountains of treats stashed in every corner of the house! My classmates would get a bit starry-eyed, as if they already tasted that sugar high.

Some candy did come home to us: deformed canes sold at a discount to employees, the wild-colored sucker accident (a warped disk in torn shrink-wrap) that was smuggled out from the scrap bucket, a bag of chalky-orange circus peanuts left to go hard in the cupboard, surplus vanilla creme chocolates.

But a factory is a factory, not Candyland. My father wasn't an elf spinning sugar floss—he was a union man who happened to maneuver 100-pound blobs of hot candy instead of steel beams. He wore white tube socks like all the other working dads I knew. His might have psychedelic orange and hot-pink food-coloring stains on them, but after a shift they were still just dirty socks, tossed near (never quite in) the hamper.

The candy factory did mold our family's life in some ways: Dad farmed during the days, worked as a candy cane cook at night. He was asleep when I got on the school bus, gone before I got home. I knew him most of the time as phantom scents: the musty blend of grease, grass, and manure on his farm T-shirt and jeans piled on the floor. The mix of mint and sugar and perspiration that clung to his factory whites, wadded up in the laundry basket. The clean mist that lingered in the bathroom from his before-work shower—smelling of Zest soap, the Aqua Velva combed through his thin hair, maybe a touch of Old Spice.

On summer weekends, when he was out in the field all day, his black leather factory shoes sat in the bathroom closet. A stream of ants processed in lockstep to lose themselves in an ecstatic feeding frenzy at the sweet crust that clung to the soles.

We lived on “Spangler Candy Company time.” The candy plant was one of several good-sized factories in Bryan, a small town in northwest Ohio. To avoid traffic jams at the ends of shifts, some of the companies staggered their clocks by a few minutes in relation to the actual time. Our clocks at home were all set five minutes fast,

synchronized to the ones at the factory.

Dad started on second shift (roughly three p.m. to midnight) during the '50s. He stayed there until he retired more than thirty-five years later because the pay was a few cents higher an hour and he'd have the mornings for farming. When he had dairy cows for a few years in the 1950s and '60s, they were on my dad's schedule, milked at one a.m. and one p.m. My mother cooked the main meal of the day so he could eat it at two o'clock or so before going to work. She reheated it for my older siblings and me when we got home from school. It was a given that my dad wouldn't be at school programs or parent-teacher conferences, and that if the cows got out in the evenings we were on our own.

During the few hours a week he was at home with his immediate family, not working or asleep, my father hardly talked. I suppose he was shy, although when a neighbor guy would stop by, he'd spend an hour or more outside, both of them leaning against the car, talking with their hands shoved in their pockets. When we had extended family gatherings he'd chat with my uncles some, or just listen to the whole group, looking a little awkward. Even into his forties he was still farm-boy gawky. If he seemed to have any doubts about what to say in a situation involving his wife or children, he'd just grunt, and walk away.

Mom pretty much handled all practical aspects of our household aside from wage-earning and mowing the grass. She did the banking and taxes, and paid the bills. She grocery-shopped, cooked, sewed, cleaned, planted the garden, canned and froze the produce. She handed out allowances and was the one we heard it from when we got into trouble. The TV sitcom line, "Wait 'til your father gets home!" was utterly puzzling to me. Wait? Until midnight? Or Saturday? Or maybe summer vacation?

Once on a rainy Saturday morning when I was about eight, my mother was in town getting groceries. I wanted to ride my bike to a neighbor's house, something I knew my mom wouldn't allow because of the weather. So I decided to ask my Dad, figuring that if I didn't get back before Mom did, at least it couldn't be said that I hadn't asked first. He seemed befuddled to have one of his children asking

him permission to do something. This wasn't his job. "I guess so," he mumbled, with a shrug of his shoulders. My mother drove up just as I was pedaling away. She stopped the car and waved me back. Once we were inside, my father got as much of a talking-to as I did.

In lieu of words, my dad brought offerings from his shift-work world, carried in while we slept, waiting for us in the morning on the kitchen counter or out in the garage. Bonsai-twisted candy canes or a bag of rejected-for-retail chocolates. Mint green paychecks, with the company logo in the upper right-hand corner: a red "S" with a lip-licking smiley face in the lower curve. The large, white, rectangular aprons the cane cooks wore, for my mother to wash, fold in thirds or fourths lengthwise, and neatly roll.

Occasionally I'd wake up in the middle of the night, blinking back sudden light, to find my dad standing by my bed, grinning and holding a wiry, panicked kitten that mewed and squirmed in his huge hands, just inches from my face. I have some dream-vague memory of another time that he came into a room with a squirming paper grocery sack in his hands. More kittens. My dad loved cats, as did his children, so co-workers knew he'd always take extra kittens off their hands.

Dad also filled our house with empty containers he'd salvage from the factory and repurpose. My bedside table was a cloth-draped fiberboard barrel that once held citric acid powder. A bigger fiberboard barrel in our attic held our off-season clothes. Our cats slept in straw-lined, straight-sided five-gallon plastic food-coloring jugs, with entryways cut in the side, that were tethered like giant birdhouses to the sturdy, horizontal branch of a mulberry tree out back. In my dad's shop, tractor parts were stored in large plastic jars that once held cherry flavoring. He brought home warehouse skids to stack firewood on and created sets of shallow drawers out of discarded plywood trays that had been used to "cure" marshmallow peanuts. In the flat drawers, not more than two inches deep, he stashed soil survey maps of the county, photographs he especially liked, favorite centerfolds, and clippings from the local paper (usually selections from the "On This Day 40 Years Ago" column).

My brothers and sister worked long summer days alongside my dad

in the fields. (I missed this rite of passage: I was ten years younger than my next sibling, and my dad had retired from most farm work by the time I was old enough to help.) They spent the better part of most summers baling hay, with my sister Judy driving the tractor, my brothers and father on the flatbed wagon catching and stacking bales. My sister attributes a partial hearing loss in one ear to all that time spent looking over her right shoulder to be sure she was keeping baler and wagon straight, leaving her left ear to funnel in most of the tractor engine's roar.

My father worked intensely. He brought the factory demands of speed and urgent repetition to the fields and barnyard. He drove himself hard, and everyone else was judged on his or her ability to keep up. Instructions were rare, explanations rarer, conversation almost nonexistent—just commands shouted over the cacophony of machinery. My dad was easily frustrated by equipment that wouldn't cooperate or offspring who didn't understand his cryptic directives. "Anybody should know that," he'd bark. Even the child who had never had a task demonstrated or explained to him. Practical knowledge came through sheer osmosis or fumbled trial and error.

My brother Dave says that we had to learn to read minds in our family, because most things weren't actually said.

One family story is about Dad losing it after a long battle to turn a stubborn bolt on a cultivator he was trying to fix. He finally brought the monkey wrench down so hard that it sheared the bolt clean off and walked away.

Despite the strength and temper he showed around the farm, I don't think any of us could imagine our father raising a hand toward us or getting in a physical fight with another person, unless it was to directly defend us from harm. His bluster wasn't swaggering or an assertion of dominance. It just seemed to be a shy man's inner rage, or force of habit for someone who'd never learned how to communicate things directly. When he'd sit on the back porch, petting and cooing at a kitten, it seemed obvious to me, in the best way, that he was not some typical macho man.

Despite his sometimes confounding shell, my dad did seem to have some true connections at the factory. He was friends with sweet, devout Virginia (originally from the mining town of Grundy, Virginia,

and one of a number of ridge- and holler-born Appalachians who had somehow ended up in our flat northern county, making candy). Another friend was Jackie. When she died of breast cancer in her early forties, my father was one of the pallbearers. He'd always say about her, "She was going to Europe on her vacation that June. But she didn't make it."

When I was a little girl we stopped once at the house of Dad's friend Dan Alvarez, who worked in the cane kitchen too. Dan and his wife originally were migrant farm workers, following the harvests up from the Texas border to Ohio to pick tomatoes for the Campbell soup cannery in Napoleon or cucumbers for the regional pickling plants. They'd settled in our area, and Dan got in at Spangler's. All I remember from the brief visit to their small house was climbing in and out of our pick-up truck bed with Dan's black-haired kids, playing without talking. Dad and Dan stood nearby, scuffing at pebbles in the driveway, murmuring to one another collegially, occasionally laughing.

But other people from work, usually women, existed to us only as names or maybe as the subject of an off-color anecdote. Some of these names had power, a negative charge: Hearing them, my mother's face would cloud and her lips tighten; the air would go leaden.

On random Sundays we'd take a drive together, my mom and dad and me (my siblings had all left home by then). We'd head down to the tractor supply store near Defiance, or Anderson's General Store (despite the quaint name, it was more like a Walmart). Other times we'd drive south of Bryan to the farmhouse near Sherwood where my Great Aunt Carrie lived. Mom, Dad, Carrie, and Carrie's daughter Gladys, who lived in a trailer behind the house, would sit in Carrie's dusty, old-fashioned parlor and talk. I'd wander around the yard, bored, trying to catch the half-wild cats that darted in and out of the tangle of hollyhocks beside the house. Cicadas would keener through the endless afternoon, never quite wearing it away.

No matter where we had gone on one of these Sunday outings, Dad took seemingly aimless detours on the way home, backroads off of backroads, just to point out the house where this person or that person from work—almost always a woman—lived. Sometimes my mother pretended not to listen to him; other times she snapped, "I

don't care who lives there," as we drove past.

"Why don't you?" my father quietly taunted.

"Why would I want to know where every woman who works at Spangler's lives?" Mom screamed back. "And why in the devil do you know?" He didn't reply. She would either yell about anything and everything—on the worst days in tears—the rest of the way home or look out the window in a swollen and pained silence. I lay down in the back seat and pressed my face against the cool, smooth upholstery and tried to daydream.

As each of my siblings—the oldest, Bob, then Judy, then Dave—started college, they dutifully began working summers in the candy factory. It was a perk of sorts, because you only could get summer work there if you had a relative who was a full-time employee. When they went to work in the factory, each in turn learned something they didn't know before.

Bob said that the women on night shift used to jokingly call Dad "Don Juan."

Dave discovered that my unassuming father was the record-holder in the informal competitions to see who could lift the most stacked starch trays (the wooden pallets in which marshmallow peanuts were molded). Dad's stack would have added up to a couple of hundred pounds.

Judy learned that she was packing bubble gum cigarettes alongside the woman with whom my father was having an affair.

My time at the candy factory didn't come until much later, of course. I filled out the application at the beginning of my first summer home from college. The call that I'd gotten a job on second shift came just a couple of days later. I grudgingly shopped for the required white clothing (I was overweight and white always made me feel like a jumbo marshmallow). I probably made it worse for myself by buying the cheapest stuff I could find—cotton pants that were a touch short for my long legs, poly-blend knit smocks, and cheap plastic all-white running shoes from K-mart. The company supplied the hairnets.

My mother had died from leukemia nine months past, just before my first classes at Ohio State. Even though the furniture was still

where Mom had left it, I was returning to a different house than I'd left. My father, familiar as my own hand and near-stranger all at once, seemed too desperately happy that I was back. I didn't know what to do with him or myself. Taking on a factory's steady, persistent routine came as a relief, even with my first-job nervousness.

My father, while still physically strong for his age, had grown paunchy and slower. He was a sucker cook now, because the intense heat and lifting of the cane kitchen was too hard on him. He still worked nights, even though he wasn't farming much anymore and with his seniority he could have switched to days. Whether it was the touch of extra pay or long habit, nights seemed to be what he wanted.

I worked various packing jobs in the plant, nowhere near the kitchens. So I only caught glimpses of my dad while we were at work. This was all to the good, because I was astonishingly, embarrassingly uncoordinated at packing candy canes. They came without ceasing down the conveyor belt, backing up in red and white log jams at the obstacle of my fumbling hands. They poured off the side of the belt and piled up at my feet. The shift supervisor, somewhat bemused, moved me from job to job. Some women on the lines tried to gently coach me, while others snapped at me to speed up or threw their hands up in frustration as they left on break. Canes that hit the floor became scrap; scrap was weighed at the end of every shift and too much would lower a line's incentive pay.

Sleep during my first several weeks on the job was haunted with endless "I Love Lucy" conveyor belt scenes and tidal waves of candy canes cascading out of the wall above my bed and burying me alive. Just before the wave overwhelmed me, I'd catch a glimpse of my father, looking very ashamed that I was his daughter.

Like many widowers, my father didn't last long with the business of living in solitude. Freda, a divorced woman who also worked second shift, had been coming round, visiting our house on weekends and on weekday mornings.

That summer Dad made a frequent point of telling me what a hard worker Freda's youngest daughter was.

"She even quit school so she could get a job," he'd say. He'd never lifted work above school before—I was the fourth of four kids

he'd sent to college. He had to know that even some factories required at least a G.E.D. and that even in our working-class area dropping out drastically limited options. I'd tell him so, wondering as I spoke when he had become anti-education. But his comments still held sway over me as I crushed candy under my feet and co-workers glared my way. Somehow, said a little voice in my head, being such a klutz is proof that you are lazy.

I had multiple scholarships, lived in the honors dorm, tested out of basic courses—the complete geek package. But for long weeks, I was sure that I was proving to my father that I was a total failure. Oh sure, I could do class work—but I couldn't do *real* work.

With almost inexpressible relief and triumph, I finally deciphered the movements needed to competently fill two 120-count boxes of penny candy canes a minute. The piles of canes around my feet disappeared. When the permanent packers no longer greeted my arrival at a line with a look of annoyance, I knew I was going to survive.

With mom gone, and me on my dad's schedule, I came closer to getting to know my father that summer than I ever had before. But I wouldn't say I particularly succeeded. Maybe I didn't try hard enough, or maybe he kept his true self buried deep enough that it'd take more than a summer on the same shift to uncover it.

When we came home at night, we would sit up watching TV. He didn't want to watch Letterman, so I often watched that in the living room, while he switched among channels out on the sun porch. PBS, cheap syndicated dramas, oddities when he could find them.

My dad wasn't a churchgoer, but he liked one strange TV evangelist out in California, Gene Scott, who did rambling scriptural interpretations instead of preaching, wore odd hats—including a pith helmet—and demanded donations. When Dad found Scott on in the middle of the night, he'd holler for me to come out and watch. It didn't seem like TV religion as much as performance art.

Scott had a studio band. One song they played was called "Kill a Pissant for Jesus." Usually Dad would laugh and laugh, but once he suddenly got serious and said, "Y'know, I like what this guy says." I didn't think to ask what part. It couldn't have been the fundraising requests—he'd always complained about ministers not having to work

for a living.

On nice nights Dad would start the gas grill out back and cook sausage patties under star light. We made sausage sandwiches with white bread and yellow mustard. I would sit beside Dad at the picnic table, and we'd stare at the latest batch of kittens scampering under our feet. He'd proffer little crumbs of meat to them on the tip of one of his thick, work-hardened fingers. They'd sniff with tiny pink triangle noses before grabbing the morsel with needle teeth. My dad would laugh when they tried to gnaw at his fingertip instead of sausage.

Unlike my siblings, I learned no interesting or shocking facts about my father's life while I worked at the factory. At most I filled in some of its rhythm and pattern. Clatter, endless clatter, of machines and belts, and of those hard candy suckers tumbling down metal chutes; the sharp hiss and suction of giant pressure cookers releasing their seals; a hum, low and primal, through walls and floors, inescapable.

All of the meaningless sounds blended together into a kind of silence. Somewhere in the middle of the endless repetition of the small movements, those fragments that form production, there was an empty place for solitary thoughts. Men and women ponder things while their hands fly, part of the automation.

I surmised the thoughts of the near-strangers around me as I pulled canes off the belt, or collected a stack of platter pops in my hand, clacking like big poker chips, and shoved their sticks into the little cardboard counter display base in front of me. I am pretty sure that the tiny, demure, middle-aged preacher's wife who packed penny candy canes said her prayers, and hoped her daughter's husband would get leave soon so they could come and visit.

The thin and hollow-cheeked mother of toddler twins hoped that maybe just once this summer the kids would sleep later than six a.m.

The handsome young man and the beautiful young woman with perfect, dewy makeup—who like me were working their college summer break—worried about how they were going to tell their parents that she was pregnant.

The thin shift foreman, who always had a red pack of Marlboros in his breast pocket, tried to sort out why the canes kept running un-

derweight on E-3, whether he should let the warehouse supervisor off the hook this time for coming to work with alcohol on his breath, and would tomorrow be the day that his wife finally came out with it and asked for a divorce?

I pulled these insights from the noisy air—from bits of overheard gossip, the furrowing of a brow, or a sidelong glance. I was usually right about what other people were thinking. Maybe we did learn to read minds in my family. Still, I am not exaggerating even a little bit when I say that I have no idea what my father thought or daydreamed about.

My father worked. That is what you were created to do. About that he was very clear. Between the farm and the factory, he put in sixteen- and eighteen-hour days for nearly forty years. Something drove him, something he craved more than family or talk. Sure, some of it was the duty to provide, but his immersion in work far outstripped our material needs. Maybe it was simply more comfortable there in the midst of the noise and clear-cut tasks of shiftwork and farming. Maybe the emotional demands of wife and family were too terrifying, too fraught with risk. Maybe he liked how with enough work, almost every day could be filled with daydreams and fantasies, a little flirting with the women on the line, an affair here or there, but no falling in too deep with any one person.

When he retired, my father struggled to find a replacement for the shift routine. He cleaned offices for a while and talked about becoming a grocery bagger, although he never did. He would go to visit his grown children for a day or two at most. He'd sit at my brother's kitchen table at Christmas and keep his coat on even though he was going to stay the night. He told meandering stories about people we didn't know. If we happened to say that we didn't know who so and so was, he'd blurt out, "Why don't you?" or "Anyone knows who that is!" instead of offering an identification. He picked fights about politics and awkwardly teased his granddaughters. He perpetually seemed unsure of what to do with himself.

He never smelled of mint anymore, just Zest and my stepmother's cigarettes.

He always brought gifts when he visited, random offerings that he plopped without explanation onto the kitchen table as soon as he

walked in the house: Some pecans or walnuts from the trees in his yard. A sack of mushy grocery-store apples. Bags of candy. Even in retirement, he kept track of the Spangler product line. He'd pull out a candy cane in some new-age color combo—rainbow, blue and white—and wave it rather triumphantly.

“Betcha don’t know what flavor this is,” he’d say.

Gay H. Hammond

from **THE RAVEN AND THE NIGHTINGALE**

Characters

HELEN, the former Queen of Sparta, a fabled beauty

CASSANDRA, also beautiful, but doomed as a princess and prophetess of Troy

CHARIOTEER, HOPLITE and other members of the CHORUS

Setting: In the chamber of Helen, at night, in a time far too close to the Fall of Troy.

From Act II, scene i:

HELEN: [*HELEN waits in an intimate stillness, readied for bed.*]

And here I sit. Alone.

Alone in a stranger's fortress, waiting like
the simplest virgin offered to a master
of sheep. I try, deny a woman's fate,
my mother's fate, the fate of these women of Troy.

But here I sit. And I am waiting. Alone.

CHORUS: [*whispering adulation, from the edges; HELEN listens curiously, unmoved.*]

Most blessed,

CHARIOTEER: most beautiful

CHORUS: most beautiful

CHARIOTEER: Most beautiful of queens,

HOPLITE: the prize

CHORUS: the prize—

HOPLITE: The prize of all men's conquest.

[*beat*]

HELEN: What use is that?

Swans mate for life. How lovely that would be.
Ironic, then, that Zeus, the god of—well,
we know what Zeus is god of, don't we? Once,
his godly playfulness took on the form
of a swan. A beautiful, wicked swan. A maid,
a lovely maid named Leda, met the swan.
And I was born. Leda was laid by a swan
and Leda then laid me. Ridiculous tale.
These gods. So whimsical. So cruel. When
my mother hears the sound of wings, her eyes
go blind with longing. In a trance she stands
and shivers, like a fever, and it passes.
And like a fever, when it passes she
is weak, confused. She never seems to know,
should she be filled with fear or longing? Should
she look at me with loathing or with pride?
Perhaps she shouldn't look at me.
At night, as a child, I fell asleep to the sound
of my mother weeping. I don't know if she
was sad. But tears have been my lullaby.
And other people's tears, they comfort me.

CASSANDRA: *[from the shadows]*

And there she lurks, the storied queen! If no
one looks upon her, does she disappear?
Our admiration feeds you and you wait,
a spider webbed in death before her meal.

HELEN: Unflattering to your brother, don't you think?

CASSANDRA: I do not deal in flattery.

HELEN: Naturally not.

[THEY are alone, and eye each other warily. There is a marked difference in their bearing: HELEN relies upon her stillness—her famed charisma, the sheer attraction of her fabled looks—like a cobra relies upon its victim's fear, to give her power over others; CASSANDRA inhabits the shadows, now used to being discounted and often pitied—there is something almost feral in her cramped movements, with flashes of both the savage and the princess.]

HELEN: Cassandra.

CASSANDRA: Helen.

HELEN: Let us say goodnight
and speak upon the morning—

CASSANDRA: No.

HELEN: My head
is aching, but tomorrow will be bright—

CASSANDRA: Oh, no.

HELEN: [*gently*]
I think it would be better. You
should listen now.

CASSANDRA: A storm is coming.

HELEN: Oh?
Are you a weather witch, as well?

CASSANDRA: As well
As what?

HELEN: Whatever you like. Forgive me, I—

CASSANDRA: You what?

HELEN: Oh, I am tired, dear—

CASSANDRA: [*a sudden, violent start*]
Just stop.

[*HELEN is still. Pause. HELEN sighs.*]

HELEN: Cassandra.

CASSANDRA: Helen.

HELEN: [*charmingly*]
Can we not be friends?

[*CASSANDRA laughs, genuinely.*]

I love your brother. Can we not be sisters?

CASSANDRA: [*bluntly*]
No.

HELEN: I love—

CASSANDRA: You love my brother, Paris?
Is it so wide a love as that you gave

your husband, Menelaus? Yes?

HELEN: My husband . . .

CASSANDRA: Yes? Remember him now, slut of Sparta,
for he is coming.

HELEN: No, he will not come.

His pride will keep him home. My name will not
be spoken.

CASSANDRA: Spoken? Cursed, screamed out and bloodied—

HELEN: You—

You do not know him.

CASSANDRA: I have seen him. I

have seen his ships covering the sea like death,
like rotted corpses of great leviathans.

They come for you. And Paris. And all of Troy.

HELEN: This is your madness speaking.

CASSANDRA: I am not mad.

HELEN: What else can name you? Crippled in your mind—

CASSANDRA: My mind, the burning torch of what will come—

I am not mad. Oh no, but tortured, branded—
the gods, the gods have branded me.

HELEN: [*pityingly*]

Of course

my Paris spoke of you—

CASSANDRA: They've branded me,

But you, oh you they have condemned!

HELEN: The poor

Cassandra, mad and claiming visions, all
the visions drenched in blood.

CASSANDRA: Because of you.

Now. Because of you.

HELEN: Your jealousy

reveals you. Lost in a sea of famous men,
there squats Cassandra, self-proclaimed seer.

[*SHE laughs a little, lightly.*]

I tried to offer friendship, well . . .

CASSANDRA: Yes, turn
away! Dismiss me. Think me nothing. I
have seen the death you bring us, fire, blood,
dishonor—

HELEN: No one believes you, sister—

CASSANDRA: Call
me not your sister—

HELEN: No one believes—

CASSANDRA: You do!

HELEN: *[overriding]*

And no one ever has.

CASSANDRA: Yet I will douse
tomorrow's flames alone. Tonight. Now.

HELEN: What delusion stirs you?

CASSANDRA: *[circling her]*

Only one. If I

should split your pretty head open like
the ripest plum and watch your blood run out
across the floor, a river of promise, of life
for me and mine, then I can sleep. At last.

HELEN: You think me a plum, soft and falling? I
was Queen of Sparta! Nothing there is soft.

CASSANDRA: Spartans die. And Spartan whores are never missed.

[pulling out a dagger]

HELEN: A grubby, puling Trojan princess thinks
to kill a daughter of Zeus?

CASSANDRA: My gift to Paris,
to Priam, to Hector and Troy.

HELEN: And my gift shall be
the ridding of this canker in their midst.
Do you see that, o Prophetess? See
the joy, the joy and blessed ease your family
feels when you are gone?

CASSANDRA: I am the stronger!

HELEN: Deluded yet again.

[a blow, startlingly savage]

Come kiss me, sweeting!

[another blow]

I'm sure we'll yet be friends.

[they fight fiercely and briefly, for HELEN is surprisingly strong and disarms CASSANDRA. Standing above her, her former distance vanished.]

Now slink away, you maddened rat, go back
to what dank hole you hide with your delusions!
Paris is mine. Troy is mine. And all
that I should wish for, though it were your thin,
unbending neck, it shall be mine! and not
enough, still not enough to pay for all
the sorrow I have held—

CASSANDRA: What sorrow, you?

Your face, your name, all famous from the hour
of your ill-fated birth!

HELEN: And think you that

cannot be cause for sorrow? You, with your
dark scurrings along the fringes of the gods,
you think you've felt the lashes of their will?
Their terrible, whimsical, life-destroying will?

CASSANDRA: The beautiful Helen! gifted with all men's passion—

HELEN: Oh, passion raped my mother: I was born
and violent wings still beat against my heart.

So that abduction birthed another—more!

I fear the footsteps in the shadows, in
the garden, in my room. You princess with
your vestal robes, your unimprinted skin!

My life will never be like yours.

CASSANDRA: Your life will ever cause the end of mine.

Of mine, my brothers', sisters', mother's, all!
How many bloody bodies can you hold,
o beautiful Helen, can you hold us all
inside your conscience? Wait, that's right—
You were in love. And what is death—for Troy—
against the power of love?

HELEN: Easy to mock

what you have never known. And never will.

CASSANDRA: I know the thrall of love, its drunken kiss . . .

A god once loved me; so he gifted me
with wondrous prophecy, the burning brand
of futures filled with pain across my eyes,
so I can hardly see the world wherein
I live, but only other worlds, the worlds
of black and red, of blades that lift against
the blue, blue sky and fall upon the necks
of all I love. A god once loved me so
he cursed me, so that others think me mad,
when all I want is their lives saved but all
my words are mad, so gifted by the god.
A god once loved me, so I owe my life—
this wondrous life—to him.

HELEN: And now to me, for I have let you live.

CASSANDRA: We all are dead if Helen lives.

HELEN: Then you

are dead. And I've no pity for you. Some
must live. And I prefer it to be me.

Henry Murray

DOG IS DEAD

DOG IS DEAD was first produced at Rogue Machine Theatre in Los Angeles, directed by John Perrin Flynn. It was also a finalist for the 2012 Heideman Award at Actors Theatre of Louisville.

Cast:

GIRL

MAN

WOMAN

HOMELESS PERSON

BOY

(Assorted passers-by if available)

A teen GIRL, red-eyed, sticky-haired, counter-culture waif-fashion du jour, sits on a sidewalk holding a leash. At the other end of the leash lies a dead dog: a large dog, a golden retriever or some kind of mastiff, maybe a standard poodle, whatever is available. She is texting furiously and every time she glances at the dog she starts to cry. Her verbalizations are not necessarily what she's texting, but maybe sometimes.

GIRL: No, idiot, I can't carry him.

[She texts. She waits for a response.]

I need you to come here!

[She texts. She waits for a response.]

Like, NOW!

[She texts. She waits for a response.]

How often do I ask you for anything?

[She texts. She waits for a response.]

Fuck.

[She texts. She waits for a response.]

Pretty fucking please?

[She texts. She waits for a response.]

Right. Jerk!

[She texts. She waits for a response.]

Fuck you!

[She texts. She waits for a response.]

What do you think?

[She texts. She waits for a response.]

You know what? I am done with this!

[A MAN approaches and stands looking back and forth at her and the dog.]

I am done with you! Stupid prick!

[She texts. She waits for a response.]

Because I can't count on you.

[She texts. She waits for a response.]

YOU'RE AN ASSHOLE!

[She puts the phone in her pocket. She notices the MAN.]

What are you staring at!

MAN: I'm sorry . . .

GIRL: What do you think you're doing? You think I want to fuck somebody your age?

MAN: I wasn't . . .

GIRL: You can't hide it. Go drool at somebody else, fucker! What the fuck is wrong with your generation?

[The man starts to walk away but slows and turns back.]

GIRL: *[to herself]* Fuck my life.

MAN: Ummm. I'm sorry, but did your dog die?

GIRL: Ya think?

MAN: He has that look about him. Even from a distance.

GIRL: Maybe that's why he won't get up.

MAN: He doesn't seem to be breathing.

GIRL: *[tearing up]* No . . . he . . .

MAN: Do you live near here?

GIRL: Look, this is a real cell phone and I know how to use it.

[The man backs up a few steps.]

MAN: I mean, did he just . . . fall over?

GIRL: He just sat down.

MAN: He's a big dog.

GIRL: He whimpered and then he rolled on his side and stopped breathing.

MAN: I'm sorry. It's hard to lose a pet.

GIRL: This is so fucked up.

MAN: Did you call someone?

GIRL: My stupid fucking lame-ass boyfriend.

MAN: I see. Well . . .

[Her phone rings and she looks at it.]

GIRL: Shit.

[She answers it. The MAN stands there awkwardly.]

GIRL: What?!

[She listens.]

No, I didn't.

[She listens.]

No, I'm not.

[She listens.]

I said, I'm not.

[She listens.]

Because I can't.

[She covers the phone with her hand and looks at the MAN. At a loss, he takes a twenty out of his wallet, places it on the sidewalk and walks off.]

GIRL: If you see a kid in a blue shirt on a skateboard, ask him for a free blowjob.

[She watches him go. To the phone . . .]

Every word.

[She listens.]

Just a man.

[She listens.]

No, he is not here with me. And you do not get to tell me who to hang out with!

[She listens.]

None of your business.

[She listens.]

Because it isn't any of your business, it's my business.

[She listens.]

I'm not.

[She listens.]

I'm not!

[She listens.]

Because I am not moving to Texas.

[She listens.]

Because I'm not.

[She listens.]

Because it's like, full of redneck assholes.

[She listens.]

I am not moving to Texas, there is no reason for me to move to Texas and I am not doing it and that's final. And Grommet will not be moving to Texas with you either.

[She looks at the dog and starts crying.]

I'm happy here.

[She listens.]

I am happy. Listen: Ha, ha, ha, ho, ho, ho. That's me being happy.

[She listens.]

I am too old enough.

[She listens.]

I take care of myself now.

[She listens.]

I'm sure, like you really do.

[She listens.]

No, I'm not moving.

[She listens.]

Because I love him.

[A WOMAN approaches tentatively and stands there.]

You know what that word means? You remember love?

[She listens.]

When was the last time you loved someone?

[She listens.]

Right. Ha-ha.

[She listens.]

No.

[She listens.]

I am not packing because I am not going anywhere, I am staying right here.

[She listens.]

You can't make me!

[She hangs up the phone and stares at the WOMAN.]

GIRL: What's so funny?

WOMAN: I wasn't laughing.

GIRL: Then WHAT!

WOMAN: I was just wondering if you need help.

GIRL: I just want everyone to stop picking on me and just leave me the fuck alone!

WOMAN: That's easily done.

[The woman walks away and the girl looks at a text message on her phone.]

GIRL: Idiot. Yes, he's still dead.

[She texts. She waits for a response.]

You have to.

[She texts. She waits for a response.]

We have to bury him.

[She texts. She waits for a response.]

I'm not strong enough.

[She texts. She waits for a response.]

Idiot.

[She texts. She waits for a response.]

I can't believe this.

[She texts. She waits for a response.]

Don't bother.

[She texts. She waits for a response.]

Fuck you forever! I can't believe what an asshole you are!

[She texts. She waits for a response.]

No, fuck you!

[She texts. She waits for a response.]

You can't.

[She texts. She waits for a response.]

Because I'm dumping you.

[She texts. She waits for a response.]

Lose my number, loser.

[She texts. She waits for a response.]

Don't even try it. You won't find me.

[She texts. She waits for a response.]

Because I'm moving to Texas.

[She texts. She waits for a response.]

My Mom.

[She texts. She waits for a response.]

I doubt it.

[She texts. She waits for a response.]

A very big state.

[She texts. She waits for a response.]

You were never there for me anyway.

[She texts. She waits for a response.]

Fuck off and die!

[She puts down the phone and in a moment a HOMELESS PERSON approaches.]

HOMELESS PERSON: Dead?

[She stares at him.]

I know a good recipe.

[He chuckles.]

GIRL: Get out of here! What the fuck do you think you're doing? Get out of here before I call the cops! You stink, asshole! No wonder you're homeless! Don't even look back here. I'll kill you!

[He leaves. She stands and watches him into the distance. At some point he must look back because she gives him the finger. She looks at the dog and begins to cry softly, then louder, then softly again. She lies down against the dog's back and puts her arm around him, her head on his shoulder. She sniffles.]

A BOY in a blue shirt with a skateboard under one arm appears, stopping before he gets too close. He watches for a moment, then takes out his cell phone and begins to text. He sends.

She takes out her cell phone and begins to read a message. She raises her head and looks around. She sees the BOY.]

Constance Congdon

Po Mo HOME

CAST LIST:

CLYDE—forty something, nerdy, professorial type.

HALO—goth/punk female, age 20.

Two college students—same gender: *CHRIS, JULES*.

AN USHER—movie or play, young.

TIME: The present

PLACE: An arts center or department of art in a university.

[Two “rows” of chairs on stage facing outward, towards the audience and the lights are up—housetlights and stage lights. A very dorky middle-aged man, CLYDE, enters from SL, crosses to the chairs and finds a place to sit, makes himself comfortable. He stares out at the audience. After a beat, A young woman, HALO, very poth gunkish (goth plus punk—very tribal) enters from SR and finds herself a seat, then moves to sit next to CLYDE.

CLYDE freezes, but then moves to another chair in the second row. A SAME-GENDER COUPLE enters from SL and sits in the front row. They begin making out as soon as they get seated. Lights down on stage but still up in the house. At that moment, KIDS, CLYDE and HALO settle back and quietly stare at the audience.]

JULES [one member of the same-sex couple]: Do you have any of those . . . ?

[CHRIS, other member of the same-sex couple, reaches into a handbag or backpack, rummages around and finds two pieces of hard candy which they both unwrap slowly, as to not disturb any of the others. It doesn't work but they are oblivious to the fact. During this time, all the people onstage have continued to stare out at the audience.]

CHRIS: I have a very bad feeling about this.

JULES: It's very po-mo. Very, very, verrrrrry post, darling, modern.

CHRIS: We could go.

JULES: No, I have to write a paper on live performance.

CHRIS: And this is it? Boy, your paper is going to suck.

JULES: Thank you for the support. It's most appreciated. Oh, and fuck you.

CLYDE: Please be quiet over there. We're trying to watch!

CHRIS: Ooooooooooooo.

[Long beat]

CHRIS: Who wrote this piece of shit?

HALO: It's not written. It's not about writing. It's an installation!!

JULES: Well, that would explain its lack of plot.

[An USHER enters from SL, with a flashlight. She/he begins to look around, sees HALO, and crosses over to her.]

USHER: *[whispers loudly to HALO]* I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to leave.

HALO: Why? It's them! I'm not making the noise.

USHER: We've had a complaint.

HALO: From who? There are only four people here. And no one has left to go anywhere, especially to complain.

USHER: I have no idea what you are talking about.

CLYDE: She's with me.

USHER: What is she doing with you? You're old. Oh, I don't care. I'm going. I have Tai Chi in 20 minutes.

[She exits.]

[Beat]

JULES: That was weird.

CHRIS: D'oh! She's part of the installation. Now that's interesting.

[They sit and ponder that for a moment.]

JULES: No, it's not.

[THEY get up and exit.]

JULES: *[parting shot to CLYDE and HALO]* So long, suckers.

[They've gone.]

HALO: Why did you move when I sat next to you?

CLYDE: I was scared.

HALO: What? You scared of a girl?

CLYDE: Yes. All of them.

HALO: We should go somewhere.

CLYDE: We are somewhere. Very much somewhere. We're here.

HALO: Oh man, cut the Zen tofu spirituality refrigerator magnet wisdom! Please? Spare me all of the truth you find in fortune cookies. And the Kaballah. And the I Ching. And Dr. Fucking Phil and double fucking Oprah.

CLYDE: I wanted to come here.

HALO: A public place?

CLYDE: *[looking around]* Public?

HALO: You were afraid to be alone with me.

CLYDE: But we're alone now.

HALO: Are we?

[about the audience]

What about them?

CLYDE: They're holograms.

HALO: Well, then. What happens now?

CLYDE: We find some common ground and build a house on it.

HALO: See how together you are right now? Why did you freak out when I sat next to you?

CLYDE: I suddenly felt that I was an imposter.

HALO: Why didn't you just leave then?

CLYDE: Because it would have been stupid and tragic to . . . leave.

HALO: You did it before.

CLYDE: I'm the one who named you. "Halo."

HALO: Thank you, Daddy.

CLYDE: And your installation is . . . is . . .

HALO: —interesting.

CLYDE: How do you turn it off?

[Houselights go out.]

Oh. Nice.

Now how do we get out of here?

[Stagelights come on.]

HALO: Follow me. Dad.

[She takes a pen out of her pocket and draws an arrow pointing to the way out on the floor.]

CLYDE: That will leave a mark.

HALO: I hope so. We always want to be able to find the exit. For exits make other entrances possible.

CLYDE: Where did you get that one?

HALO: Tea bag.

CLYDE: It's a good one.

[They exit.]

Arwen Mitchell

from RPM (REVOLUTIONS PER MINUTE)

Three young people have descended, one by one, into a 60's-era basement. Mary attends to her traincase of magazines, Paul his battered guitar, and Peter, his notebook and pen, each in separate areas—a triumvirate.

A record has been playing on the little record console—as if it was playing on its own, though Peter had put it on earlier and went back upstairs to do something. It, preferably, is “And When I Die” sung by Peter, Paul and Mary. As it reaches the crescendo of the end, this little diorama of activity reaches its own crescendo—the three might be in their own worlds, but it’s all just warm-up; they know their drill. As the song ends Peter snaps into movement, turning off the player, and at this, the other two move front and center, Peter grabbing the other guitar off the bar.

They stand together, posture, and look to each other to start—the lights are low and they are central. Fingers snap and tap out beats on guitar bodies, they all go to start—start—and Peter breaks away from the group, eyeing the set-up with a critical eye.

PETER: Excellent, excellent. We’ve got that part down explicitly.
Mary, you—very intense, very dead-on. Keep it up. Yes. Paul.
Paul!

[Goes up to him and holds his face lightly.]

You have too much humor! I mean, humor—good; too much humor—are we funny? Is this comedy or is this folk artistry?

PAUL: Can it be . . . folkistry?

PETER: Never mind, never mind, it’s good. We’re coming along.
Three things to remember, but remember to keep the three in one—you see me?—three in one there are three things that we must do to keep the spirit of the movement alive by doing what we

are meant to do: refine our set, hone our skills and remember the issues at hand! Yes! Are you with me?

MARY: Sure thing, son.

PAUL: Yep, cat.

PETER: —as always, as always.

PAUL: And the one?

PETER: What?

PAUL: Three in one, cat.

PETER: Oh! Yes. It's almost inconsequential. Insubstantial. Mere.

MARY: Young man, it's hardly inconsequential.

PAUL: A gig's a gig.

MARY: And a first gig. Our first gig. I'm ready for a first gig—I think—we need it. We need to break into the scene. Get my limbs—our limbs—goin' on stage.

PAUL: Get the bassline slappin' . . .

MARY: Movin and a groovin' . . .

PETER: People! Of the commonality . . . ? What we have at hand here is what is so let us attend to that first, follow?

[The other two are used to this. Nod.]

Excellent—come.

[He points back to the center.]

Here—front and center, let's do this—

[He starts to clap.]

And a one, and a two

[The other two gear up as well, to start, and Peter abruptly interrupts them again.]

Hold. What is it we're doing here?

PAUL: Practicing for our gig—

PETER: Are we?

MARY: Sure thing.

PETER: Paul, I noted how you are handling your instrument. It is not acceptable in the ways of a folk artist to allow your instrument to—to—

MARY: It's barely hangin' in there, son.

PAUL: What exactly are the ways again, Pete? Oh tell us, tell us all.

[This is also part of the "routine." Paul and Mary instantly get into it.]

MARY: Tell us all Pete, again!

PAUL: Tell us all us all tell us all, one-e-and-a-two-e-and-a twofer, Peter, threefer, we-fur—

PETER: *[Good-naturedly]* Hey, hold on! Before you head into rock n' roll I'LL tell you again, you miscreant dilettantes of folkistry!

PAUL: Howzit go, Mary?

[Performance]

MARY: We take the why-o, Pete.

PETER: Why folk.

PAUL: Why not?

PETER: Because in a word: commonality.

PAUL: Together.

MARY: Forever.

PETER: But not just in word—

MARY: The world.

PETER: You got it. She's got it.

MARY: And howzit go, Paul?

PAUL: We take the where-o, Peter.

MARY: We take it to the streets.

PETER: The people.

PAUL: But first, a first gig.

PETER: That's the people, my brother. So you say that's the who-o, my brother?

PAUL: Nope. We's a trio.

PETER: Excellent! Excellent!

[Paul and Peter strum the guitars around in joyous cacophony, Mary

does a head toss.]

PAUL: But really—Peter—

PETER: Yes?

PAUL: You think we're ready?

MARY: What do you say, son? We're getting ready, what does it look?
Readiness—is a state of bein'.

PETER: Amen!

PAUL: No, really, I know we're gettin' ready, we've been doin' a plenty-a that, but is our state of bein' gonna grab us the bread?

MARY: What're you, a breadhead now?

PAUL: Well, you know, there's bread and there's bread.

PETER: Familiarize me.

PAUL: You don't wanna win the bread?

PETER: It's not our mode of primacy, no.

PAUL: Well, I look at it like this. We win the bread if we're good to win the bread.

[He makes money signs by rubbing his fingers together.]

By that I mean if we're good, we're good. The bread follows. See me?

MARY: Illuminate, son.

PAUL: If we're no good we're no go on dough!

[Strolls around fast, strumming.]

If we're no good, we're no good. No dough just means all we're doin' is bein', we won't be goin' nowhere. Catch?

PETER: So what's you're saying is you equate monetary success with artistic revelation and equanimity to and from the masses?

PAUL: You don't get me? Come on, you get me! I'm saying—

PETER: I hear what you're saying, I get you—we get you—clear as zirconia, my BROTHER, though from what I hear of what you say it's as if you speak merely of what is redundant!

[Makes an "end" signal.]

Break.

[Step back from posturing.]

What are the three?

Refine our set

Hone our skills

And remember the issues at hand!

When I speak of folk artistry I would think it speaks apparent that within such a linguistic framing it would resonate craftsmanship.

MARY: To put it more simply?

PETER: Yes.

MARY: Does this relate to the three?

PAUL: Speak plainly, cat!

MARY: To revise for the sake of simplification, son, I'd say you say that we here, three, do what we do not for bread, but instead, for the three.

PAUL: But—

MARY: But if we do what we do the way it's meant to be done it'll get done good, and the bread will follow.

PAUL: But—

[Beat]

We gotta practice!

PETER: That's one way to put it!

PAUL: We gotta play!

PETER: Of course we do! Serious play time is time best spent—

PAUL: We gotta roll with the style—

PETER: Another way to put it, Paul, but I would limit your usage of such phraseology. It could denote to our potential and soon-to-be-faithful fellowship of folkheads a cultural mode that is not in keeping with folk artistry.

PAUL: Folkistry.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

COLLEEN ABEL is a former Diane Middlebrook Poetry Fellow at UW-Madison's Institute for Creative Writing. Her work has appeared in numerous journals, including *The Southern Review*, *West Branch*, *Notre Dame Review*, *Mid-American Review*, *Rhino* and others. She is poetry editor at *Cream City Review* in Milwaukee. Her chapbook *Housewifery* is forthcoming this fall from Dancing Girl Press.

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KRISTINA BICHER lives in New York. Her poems have appeared in *Inkwell* (winner of the Elizabeth McCormack Poetry Prize), *Willow Review*, *The Green Hills Literary Lantern*, *Quiddity*, and others. She received a bachelors degree from Harvard University and a masters degree from Manhattanville College.

MISSY BROWNSON resides in Owensboro, Kentucky, where she is an adult educator by day and co-organizer/emcee of Third Tuesday Writers Coffeehouse by night. Her work has appeared in *The Lumberyard Magazine*, *Open 24 Hours* and *The Heartland Review*.

CONSTANCE CONGDON has been called "one of the best playwrights our country and our language has ever produced" by playwright Tony Kushner in Kushner's introduction to her collection *Tales of the Lost Formicans and Other Plays*. In addition to *Tales of the Lost Formicans*, which has had hundreds of productions worldwide, Congdon's plays include: *Casanova*, *Dog Opera*, both produced at the Public Theatre, *Losing Father's Body*, *Lips*, *Native American*, *The Children of the Elvi*, *A Mother*, starring Olympia Dukakis, new verse versions of Moliere's *Misanthrope and Tartuffe*, *Moontel Six*, *The Automata Pietà*, *Nightingales*. Congdon's *No Mercy*, and its companion piece, *One Day Earlier*, were part of the 2000 season devoted to Congdon at the Profile Theatre. *Paradise Street* received its premiere production in Los Angeles at The Attic Theater by the Title 3 Company, 2010. She just finished *Take Me to the River*, her play about the water crisis in the American west, commissioned by the Denver Theater Center. She has performed her solo piece *Is Sex Possible?* several places, most recently at Dixon Place in New York City and at the KO Festival in Amherst. Congdon teaches playwriting at Amherst College.

MOLLY CURTIS holds an MFA from The University of Montana, where she received a 2010 Academy of American Poets Prize. A chapbook of her poetry, *Mouths Full of Glass in the Abandoned Bathhouse*, was released by Zero Ducats Collective in 2009 and her poems have appeared in numerous journals, including *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Third Coast* and *apt*. She currently resides in Portland, Oregon.

PHILIP F. DEAVER is a short story writer from Illinois who has lived in central Florida for twenty-eight years. He has edited an anthology of creative nonfiction essays on baseball (*Scoring from Second: Writers on Baseball*, U. of Nebraska Press, 2007). He's won the Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction, had a story in the *O. Henry Prize Stories* anthology, been recognized in the *Pushcart Prize* and *Best American Short Stories*. His work has appeared in the *Missouri Review*, *The Southern Review*, *The Kenyon Review* and many others. He's a professor of English at Rollins College and teaches fiction in the Spalding University brief-residency MFA in Writing.

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MARTHA GREENWALD's first collection of poetry, *Other Prohibited Items*, was the winner of the *Mississippi Review* Poetry Series and was published in 2010. Her work has also appeared in such journals as *The Threepenny Review*, *Slate*, *Poetry*, *Best New Poets*, *The Sycamore Review*, and *Shenandoah*. She is working to complete *Shivah Bullies*, a memoir.

ELLEN HAGAN is a writer, performer, and educator. Her poetry and essays have appeared in literary journals, magazines, and anthologies, including her most recent publications in: *Spaces Between Us*: Third World Press, and *She Walks in Beauty*: Hyperion, edited by Caroline Kennedy. Her work has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 2004, and 2008. She has received grants from The Kentucky Governor's School for the Arts, The Kentucky Foundation for Women, and held residencies at The Hopscotch House and Louisiana ArtWorks. Ellen holds a MFA in Fiction from The New School University in New York. A proud Kentucky writer, she is member of the Affrilachian Poets, Conjwomen, and co-founder of the girlstory collective. Crowned, her debut collection of poems was published by Sawyer House Press in 2010.

GAY H. HAMMOND lives and works in Gainesville, Georgia, where she acts, directs and writes for The Gainesville Theatre Alliance. Additionally, she is the director of WonderQuest, a theatre for young audiences, and recipient of the 2009 Sara Spencer Award. She has written and produced almost 30 plays. Gay teaches theatre at Brenau University. She has two children—both professional actors—and a maddening Aire-dale Terrier named Hedda, who rules her life.

KATHLEEN HELLEN is a poet and the author of *The Girl Who Loved Mothra* (Finishing Line Press, 2010). Awards include the 2012 Washington Writers' Publishing House

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TERRY HERMSEN's most recent book, *The River's Daughter*, won the Ohio Poet of the Year Award in 2009. He teaches at Otterbein University, where he directs a program called "Reading the Earth: The Language of Nature" based at Cuyahoga National Park.

KIRSTEN HOLT's chapbook *Overwintered* was the winner of the 2010 Annual Chapbook Contest and is available from YellowJacketPress.org. She is managing editor of *The Florida Review*, and reader for *Sweet Lit*. Kirsten enjoys swing dancing, knitting, and the Oxford Comma.

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ARWEN MITCHELL teaches creative writing, literature, theatre, and the humanities at Robert Morris University in central Illinois. Her produced plays include *The Maybe Pile*, *RPM (Revolutions Per Minute)*, *I've Got Nothing to Do Today But Smile*, and

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HENRY MURRAY is the author of four full-length plays and a number of short plays including *Down For The Count* and *Dog Is Dead*, both finalists for The Heideman Award at Actors Theatre of Louisville. Henry's play, *Treefall*, published by Dramatists Play Service, was named one of the ten best plays of 2009 by the LA Weekly and has logged five productions nationally. Henry's play *Monkey Adored*, honored by a reading at the Kennedy Center's Page to Stage Festival and workshopped at DC's *The Inkwell*, premiered at Rogue Machine Theatre in 2011. Henry's newest play, *Three Views of the Same Object*, won the Woodward/Newman Drama Award for 2011/12 as well as the Holland New Voices Award.

ANDREW NAJBERG teaches creative writing and other courses at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. His chapbook *Easy to Lose* was published by Finishing Line Press, and his individual poems have appeared in *North American Review*, *Nashville Review*, *Artful Dodge*, *Yemassee*, *Bat City Review*, prior issues of *The Louisville Review*, and various other journals and anthologies.

JOHN A. NIEVES has poems forthcoming or recently published in journals such as: *Crazyhorse*, *Southern Review*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *New York Quarterly*, *Ninth Letter*, *Poetry Northwest*, and *Cincinnati Review*. He won the 2011 *Indiana Review* Poetry Prize and the 2010 Southeast Review AWP Short Poetry contest. He received his PhD in English from the University of Missouri in 2012.

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NICOLE ROBINSON is the Program and Outreach Coordinator for the Wick Poetry Center at Kent State University. She is the author of the chapbook *The Slop of Giving In*.

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