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 Submissions of previously unpublished manuscripts are invited.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.

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Dear Readers throughout Kentucky and Beyond,

I know you will enjoy this issue of *The Louisville Review* featuring Frank X Walker, current Kentucky Poet Laureate. TLR and Spalding University are particularly proud of Poet Laureate Frank X Walker because he is a graduate of the Spalding University low-residency MFA in Writing; in fact, he was one of the writers in our charter class in fall 2001. Frank is now Associate Professor at the University of Kentucky and the recipient of many national prizes and honors. (Please see his bio in the Contributor’s Notes.)

In this issue, we are proud to include the work of three of Frank’s teachers while at Spalding: Molly Peacock, a former president of the American Poetry Society; Greg Pape, recent poet laureate of Montana; and Jeanie Thompson, executive director of the Alabama Writer’s Forum.

This issue also showcases work in each of our six areas of concentration, written by some of our alums who reside in Kentucky: in writing for children and young adults, Katie Fraser Carpenter; in screenwriting, Ron Schildknecht; in playwriting, Lee Anne Fahey; in creative nonfiction, Bill Goodman; in poetry, Joel W. Nelson, Katy Yocom, Ellyn Lichvar, and Katerina Stoykova-Klemer; in fiction, Gayle Hanratty. In fiction, we also include the work of faculty member Kirby Gann, who lives in Louisville.

The Spalding MFA is the first MFA in Writing to be offered by any college or university in Kentucky, and it offers more areas of concentration in which students may write (including cross-genre work) than any other MFA in Writing program. With a faculty of some 38 publishing writers, the Spalding low-residency MFA provides a low faculty-student ratio of 1:4. The curriculum allows students to attend ten-day residencies as suits their own schedules, in fall, spring, or summer, and choose the length of their independent study with a mentor (six months or nine months). The Spalding low-residency MFA in Writing conducts summer residencies abroad involving ten-day stays in such great cities as Paris, London, Buenos Aires, Barcelona, Rome, Prague, and Berlin. In summer 2015, the program travels to Greece. The Spalding low-residency program attracts students and faculty.
from all over the U.S. and some foreign countries. Wherever you live, if you are interested in earning an MFA in Writing, please contact us by email at mfa@spalding.edu or by phone at (502) 873-4400 or (800) 896-8941, ext. 4400.

While Frank X Walker is the first African-American Kentucky poet laureate, he is not the first Spalding writer to occupy that position, which was most recently held by Maureen Morehead, a Spalding poetry faculty member, and by myself, a fiction writer as well as the Spalding low-residency MFA program director.

Before introducing and offering my thanks to the guest editors for this issue of TLR, I also proudly announce a new title in our Fleur-de-Lis book publication series, a transporting novel that evokes the world of Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*: MFA Administrative Director Karen Mann’s *The Woman of La Mancha*. I also proudly note that the recent Fleur-de-Lis book *City of Brotherly Love*, by Ned Bachus, won the gold medal of the Independent Publishers Book Award.

My sincere thanks to the guest editors of this issue of TLR:

**Dianne Aprile** is the author of essays, memoir, poetry, and non-fiction narratives of varying lengths, from flash to book-length. She is also editor of anthologies, including *The Book*, a collaborative work of text and image, which comes out later this year. Her most recent publication was an essay on silence, which can be read or listened to at thisibelieve.org. A former jazz-club co-owner and award-winning newspaper journalist, Dianne lives in Seattle, where she leads workshops at Richard Hugo House and Eastside Writes. Since 2001, she has taught creative nonfiction in Spalding’s low-residency MFA in Writing program.

**Gabriel Jason Dean** was awarded the 2014 Hodder Fellowship from Princeton University. His play *Javaaneh (In Bloom)* received the Kennedy Center’s Paula Vogel Prize and is under a Broadway option with Davenport Theatrical. His play for children, *The Transition of Doodle Pequeño*, received the 2013 American Alliance for Theatre & Education Distinguished Play Award and the 2011 New England Theatre Conference Aurand Harris Award and was selected for the 2012 Kennedy Center New Visions/New Voices Conference, Theatre for Young Audiences Award. He received the Essential Theatre New Play Prize and Austin’s 2013 B. Iden Payne Award for Best Original Script and Best Comedy for *Qualities of Starlight*. His play *Pigskin*...
won the Samuel French Off-Off Broadway Festival. Gabriel teaches in the Spalding low-residency MFA in Writing Program. He is Visiting Writer in Residence at Muhlenberg College and a core writer at The Playwrights’ Center in Minneapolis. His website is GabrielJasonDean.net.

Shane McCrae is the author of Mule, Blood, Forgiveness Forgiveness (forthcoming from Factory Hollow Press), and three chapbooks—most recently, Nonfiction. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in The Best American Poetry, The American Poetry Review, Fence, Pleiades, LIT, and elsewhere, and he has received a Whiting Writer’s Award and a fellowship from the NEA. He teaches at Oberlin College and in the low-residency MFA program at Spalding University.


Katy Yocom’s fiction, poetry, and essays have appeared in publications including The Louisville Review, New Southerner, Open 24 Hrs, Louisville Magazine, and LEO Weekly. She is at work on a novel. She received a Pushcart Prize nomination for her short story “Sea of Tranquility.” For her fiction, she has received grants from the Elizabeth George Foundation, the Kentucky Foundation for Women, and the Kentucky Arts Council; she is also the recipient of writers’ residencies at ISLAND Hill House (Michigan), the Kimmel Harding Nelson Center for the Arts (Nebraska), Hopscotch House (Kentucky), and the Mary Anderson Center (Indiana). She is a regular contributor to Food & Dining Magazine. She is Associate Administrative Director of Spalding’s low-residency MFA in Writing Program and is a graduate of the program.

—Sena Jeter Naslund, Editor
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thanks for the tug at my heart string
and each beat that skipped
every time you were close enough
to be touched or touch but didn’t.
thanks for the light that came on
and the sirens and storm warnings
after the tequila flavored kiss
and the inhibitions that took flight
joining the flock of sky gods
just outside our windows.
thanks for the music in your voice
and the hopscotch in your throat
when you laugh out loud,
wrestle with your own breath
or sing my name whole.
thanks for the bounty of memories
and dreams that open like doors
and windows every time I close
my eyes and smile up at you
transporting me directly into
your arms and hands and lips
erasing the miles and hours
and days and minutes and seconds.
thank you for this hunger, this ache,
these empty hands, and these dreams
of a bountiful harvest.
I imagine us not emailing these love poems between us but sitting together in a temple made of old typewriters, books and stained glass when ready, we poets would leave the pews of our regular lives join one of two lines, file up towards the podium, towards Mama, Lucille Clifton or Phillis Wheatley to receive Communion, in couplets which by this time has been blessed and turned into the Body of a poem like children we will open our mouths allowing these orisha to place potential for new poems on the tips of our tongues then we will proceed back to our pews where we will make the sign of the acrostic before kneeling into our words to pray
Frank X Walker

**RESERVED SEATING**

this is the polite section
pure buttermilk until I arrive
*these* seats are not for sale

the length of a whip
from the end zone, the sideline,
the long jump pit

close enough
to see beads of sweat
and smell fear
but far enough away
to not get any on them

in these comfortable seats
they only stand for the anthem
and My Old Kentucky Home
nobody yells or screams at referees

nobody moves when I attempt
to walk down the aisle

they all check their tickets
as if needing to confirm
that these aren’t the cheap seats

they steal glances sideways
and clear their throats
and wait for the explanation
I refuse to give

I pretend disinterest
pretend I don’t hear
when they forget they aren’t alone
pretend I don’t notice
how they glare
at the undisciplined bodies
wearing the other color
or how quiet and mean they get
when their boys aren’t winning.
Frank X Walker

THE PERIQUE
(THE MOST STRONGLY FLAVORED OF ALL TOBACCOS)

for wanda marie

when her husband threw his back out
—the day before the big move
my sister grabbed the other end
of the mattress and everything else
I coaxed from the back of the truck
with the dexterity of a tobacco cutter
doing the work of two

ignoring my caution and her fatigue
she reminded me she was made of the old stuff
—the same stuff as our mother
and almost all the Warners born and raised
in the burley fields of Washington county

her nostrils flared and I saw it, burning slow
her scowl, a cellulose filter, squinting to adjust
her own tar and nicotine just like the night
she stood toe to toe with mamma

defiant, obstinate, declaring herself grown
—too grown for any more ass whuppings,
refusing to duck or flinch each attempt
to beat her back into a little girl’s box

when that last slap struck something iron
her nostrils were the only evidence
of the size of the bellows she held in check

flat on her back, beneath undefended flailing
she shot me a look that made me throw my arms
around mamma’s exhausted limbs and anemic
tongue lashing, fall backwards, beg her to stop
and pretend       I was holding       the victor
Frank X Walker

**ANOTHER HOMAGE . . .**

*After Lucille Clifton*

all praises to anything traditionally built
—a diamond-studded crown should be so wide

no such thing as a skinny rocking chair
or a skinny and comfortable porch or bed

no place else has enough lap room for children
or a hungry man

any tea kettle, mason jar, hand-stitched quilt, garden
or heavenly body worth its salt

smiles wide like you and your hips
—who else God gone keep an ocean?
Michael Fulop

**THE PINK ANIMAL**

She is three years old.
At the playground our daughter tells us:
One day I will be a pink animal
and you will be a purple animal
and you will be a yellow animal.
And then we can go in the forest
and be with the other animals.
Michael Fulop

ISABEL AT THE MUSEUM

My furious daughter
sat down on the floor of the museum.
She was four years old.
She sat at the foot of The Thinker.
I asked her,
what do you think the man is thinking about?
She said,
he is thinking of a little girl named Isabel.
I asked her,
and what are you so angry about?
She said,
I am angry about everything that is too big.
And
I am angry about everything that is too small.
POEM FOR LUIS MELÉNDEZ

And the figs: fleshy,  
Kinked, curved, taper  
To ducts where the wasp enters.

The bottle  
Burns with sanctified light,  
And it holds the red blood of time  
And the sky-sun in accretion-ascension.

The bread is split  
As thighs are split  
On beaches in Tel Aviv  
Between black bikinis  
And crushed orange ice.

The knife is true, whole—  
A turkey’s neck stiffened—  
And the flesh spills, spills  
And gathers, stiffening to a lock of hair.

We’re willing to kill  
For such tear-flecked,  
Impossibly fleshy,  
Black and purple figs.
Robert Fernandez

CHILDREN OF MORNING

Byron with a blond strand dangling from his teeth, lost on the wind
and spiraling down the stones of Milan! For Augusta, and even the
son of the morning is jealous. Lucrezia Borgia’s blond hair tangled
in his club foot, Byron makes off with a strand of Lucrezia’s blond
hair. At the Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Byron threads a strand of
Lucrezia’s hair through his hang-nailed cock and pistil. For the son
of the morning, Byron eats a strand of Lucrezia’s billowy blond
tresses. At the Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Byron sits down to a meal
of undulant blond meat. Holiday! Holiday! A posse of blond kites!
Lucrezia’s nakedness lies flat along rugged coastline, her bare legs
sunning on hare-brown shore. A strand of Lucrezia’s blond hair
tangles around his blond heart; a blond dragon tangles a strand of
Lucrezia’s hair. Byron, strand of the Borgia’s hair dancing, spins
between his Gryfon toes and teeth.
Joel W. Nelson

THE BODY WASHER

She wears the clothes of a dead woman—a black robe and a faded head scarf.

“They’re almost too fancy,” she says without glancing from the bullet wound.

“I try to stay simple. I don’t care too much about things.” Her days are spent alone with malformed babies, headless professors, and faceless wives of diplomats.

“Everything has its time,” she says as she cuts a girl’s clothing away, carefully keeping the Awrah hidden under a sheet. She dips her hand into a bucket and begins to wash—first the head, then the body.

“When you understand the unknown, you can no longer call it your enemy—the same bath, the same bowl.”
Okla Elliott

Blackened

We entered the ice-coffined city later than General Paulus had planned, and found deserted houses, the 122mm machine guns unmanned.

Winter had killed many of us and blackened others’ feet with frostbite, flesh rotting to ulcerous bone. All through the city, night climbed from the ground—or so it seemed—shadows lengthening under trees and around corners, wretched air rising from the sewers, strengthening our sense of dread. We huddled in the garden and slept under a death-black sky spitting black sleet. In the distance, tanks rolled like slow thunder on their hulking way to Stalingrad. Defeat the name, you defeat the man, Herr Chancellor Schrank insisted, and many of us believed him. So we marched, afraid and cold, carried trunk after trunk of supplies to reinforce our troops, even as our feet froze blackly in our boots.
Okla Elliott

Nikola Tesla’s Dream of a Death Ray Powered by the Forgotten Wishes of Angels

He worked alone with X-rays, hour on hour, forgot to sleep for days and then collapsed. 10,000 planes flew mute and languid through pink Serbian clouds. A black ray swept across their path, and they vanished as souls floated Northwest toward oblivion. The angels laughed at Tesla lying cold. His want to wake was strange, he thought, in dream lucid as if he had consumed two pots of strong tea rapidly. This new invention would dog him, just now when he had no time for death rays. What would power it?, he wondered, as he swam the pond behind his father’s parish where he preached a god so strange as to conceive of matter, force, currents, gravity, and microwaves. Wishes of angels. This would be the power source for his death ray. Forgotten ones, the most deadly.

He woke
    and lifted himself.
Saliva stuck
to his dry lips.
    He cringed, remembering
angels, and dipped his hands and dunked his head into the washbasin.
    Drops scuttled down
his spine—
    as he saw planes in flames, smelled death.
Jesse DeLong

FROM ECHOES, THUS

[ECHOES, THUS]

a voice, or should,
or further than this one,
which sounds coming out
from under
the bridge’s barricade
of light a little like my
trebled throat a hundred
years from now: bird shit, straw & insect
bits cemented into cables wires. To fossilize:

all there is of ghost. And so too
long we
speak our names into these spaces. Too long
to know for sure. Will we
regenerate. What is a space: something waiting to be

again. That which was
will always be again. That which
was is coming out scattered. Coming
out for sure for sure for sure for sure for sure for sure
Jesse DeLong

[Remainders]

No horizon: returning
to the stomach of Seoul
from beneath it—odor
of the sewer gurgling
up, piss-water warm, saliva, desire
when there was none to be had.
(The final undivided part. A trace.
What it means to endure
suffering &
then.) Sun, one completely loses, if anything
can be said to be

lost, a sense of proximity
over sand points, pine trees like splintered
matchsticks,
the fucking moon, applewood

(Remainders: to come out of suffering—to come
through a journey together.) burning

so good the beef
brisket. There: fog of exhaust, fake exhaustion,

weather balloons, bus tires. Still, something left—
how there is a certain way to be

remembered—on a screeching street

where a Korean man who smelled like pig
intestines sold, guess what?, boiled pig intestines.
We were sure it tasted bad, but ate it for the photo. The sky was sheened the color of its grease-water.

The clouds were lumps of it, floating.

Someone screamed like a hawk from the other side of a passing truck.
Jesse DeLong

[The motion or course of something: not the light in the trees, but the shadows of them on your window blinds: what this means to you as movement]

To become piled up by wind or water to float or be driven a current: echoes, thus: further than this one which sounds as you drift over the knuckles of someone you used to know or love like sevenhundred hungry heavy bees Which sounds like a fan rattling a busted blade Which sounds as you once did like light diminishing in a room where a cloud covers the sun the bare feet in the grass outside the window of a basement apartment a woman wearing an acid-washed jean jacket lighting a cigarette on the street You move away in a bus Home is the last place you feel like unraveling like a sink drain gurgling & hair plugged mineral buildup waking falling asleep dreaming of seven-hundred hungry heavy people There’s no such thing as time Only dimensions The spaces you occupy before another dead
ray of sunlight flares over a windrow of leaves & your skin sheds invisibly on the street What it means—to sweep to be swept up to move.
John Blair

PITY ME, O MAN

Pity me, O man,
for all the ways I’m owned,
for all the spaces

eager for my hours
and fenestrations, that fit
my honest liquids

like a cheek or skull
or empty hand wrapped along
my slight-fingered lies

and passions. Pity
me my unmarked graces, burnt
dry like lees inside

a tender bottle
of who’s afraid, corked tight as
a tooth with goodbye,

goodbye. O my sweet
conspiracy, pity me
my lovelies, my

feral hands that tear
you mango-open, hollow
pulp around the seed.
John Blair

SECOND THE MAN

So first the faithful dog will go. . .
–Zbigniew Herbert

I told my god I
loved her, hallowed in the grass,
I told my god I

was a special dog,
spaniel of buried things
and pessimal names.

My god, my god, my
bones are like wax and I am
poured out like water:

Deliver my life
from the sword, my precious life
from the power of

the dogs. I bow to
Jofi, dog of Freud, sitter
of Shiva, licker

of rain, eater of
flies, lonely one who waited
for the fragile girls

to speak their withered
hearts, the brittle airs
whining in their hair.

I make a knee to
Toto, basket-borne and bred
for worrying the meat
and mettle from bones,
ward and glam and Anubis
of grass and rampant poppy.

Christopher, patron
saint of cynocephaly,
dog-headed traveler

of the world’s morose
ways, dwell agape in my
best-known heart, where worms

and blindest love lie--
Regarde St Christophe et
va-t-en rassuré,

suffer my begger’s
lies and howling compulsions,
Protector Noster,

carry me like Christ
across the Roman waters,
hound of your kenning,

your Laika of soft
barking, cold stray bindled
and missiled into

airless soviet
glory for the greater good
of every man I

stand in hard place of,
like the good, good boy
you always knew I could be.
Roy Bentley

**Whatever Else, This Memory Resembles a Dance**

My earliest recollection of my grandmother Potter involves a warning. It was about certain terpsichorean behavior: *No Dancing on the Sabbath.* This would’ve been before we moved to the brick house in Kettering. I only know it stuck and became That Which Is Older Than Memory, a word-for-word Eleventh Commandment she authored then forgot. It was as if we were together in a House of Ten Thousand Candles, she and I, and she’d issued an exhortation to steer clear of matches, then was jolted by a love of fire and brightness. Maybe I made it up. Either way, I’d say to her *Granny, remember when I was a small boy*

*and you told me never to dance on Sundays?* She’d say, “No, Roy, I don’t remember that.” If forgetting is older than history, older than original sin, then so is making shit up. Meaning, I can’t say for sure. Maybe a doctrine against dance never actually issued from her mouth, though it’s exactly the kind of directive she was inclined to spew forth. My mother challenges a memory I have of Sonny and Bobby Osborne playing music in our house on Comanche. In those days, she worked with the guitar player’s girlfriend May. May lived with us in the house on that low hill. My parents had just divorced, and Benny Birchfield had dragged the bluegrass duo from Kentucky to Ohio. I remember Granny coming out of her bedroom in a housecoat. She was in a huff. I recall her telling them *Quiet down!* and hearing *Sorry, Miss Potter.*

But if Groucho Marx didn’t have a duck that dropped from the ceiling with the secret word, then I didn’t hear a prohibition against Sabbath dancing and the Osborne Brothers and Benny Birchfield never played in our kitchen, my Granny waiting in the anarchy of light at the edges of seeing, standing like God (no fan of banjo and Appalachian fiddle) or Moses in the doorway. About to call it a night and throw them out.
Natalie Price

GARDEN PARTY

Ladies with long lacy gowns sip tea under their Chinese silk umbrellas, daintily touching cups as they drink tinkling sounds from the glass like tiny pealing bells.

These ladies walk through the garden, dresses and frills following behind, as they ride over pebbles and moss, stopping to smell the rainbow of petals, picking as they walk, gathering a bouquet of color.

The dresses floating over the boardwalk, the river trickling under it running over stones and sticks. Dragonflies flit with fluttering wings in the background of the water, the current sounding like a small sigh.
Aaron Crippen

UMBRA URBANA

In the neon sky season
    she carries umbrellas,
    at garden, to the courts,
    by the villa;
to pyramid and ziggurat,
    mosque and parking garage.
She unfolds her ribs: scent of
    juniper,

    blue fog of berries, escapes.
Miss Orange, unafraid,
    fills our alleys with spores.
Jittery cats
retract their claws. Bit mice scamper
    on peach little hands through
pungent tomato vines seeded
    by birds. Weeds

    push up sand at the bases
    of walls. While in her breast
    a wild wisteria
    runs tendrils out
haywire and ties itself in knots.
    “A life without questions . . .”
she said to me once. Nothing
    will be still.

Sometimes the most sanguine smile
    opens in pale olive
    skin behind a slow-
drawn scalpel and
you have to smile back. Some days love
    draws you down in a gut; you’re not
young anymore, thank goodness . . . I
    have shadowed
her raincoated shoulders past ivy-choked warehouses
down to the beach and watched her amble the abandoned boardwalk, sometimes sit on a bench looking out toward the gulf. As the sun drops to the water

the fleshy bathers darken to silhouettes and red stars metastasize beyond them on the waves.
I love a woman who’s sick. No hugging can hold her. She keeps falling inward no matter how hard she

tries to surrender her body to us, just as it is, and stay here with it. Hard stars in the milk duct. They scoop like warm balls of sherbet the whole thing out. I keep on walking. There’s only so far I can go.
Aaron Crippen

HEY TODD, LICK IT

I’m not gonna go in a fuckin time machine. The other-century mutants will not be wasted by me in the nick of a timely fashion. She will not appear at the window holding a candle in the night as I walk to a taxi. My parents will still do the nasty the same as before. I will not view with incredulity the ocean of beer. The apes will take over; I’m kind of glad. George Washington will remain lost in the department store. He will still unfold like a starfish into the pricker bush—the leaves are shaped like foxes. Remember when I punched Dad in the balls coz Mom told me to? The little kid with the thing will still have that pathetic Christmas—nothing’s gonna happen. The guy in a tweed jacket will not pull that fateful penny from his pocket, thereby dispelling the dream of his soulmate. Someone will still try to shove a rock up the kid’s butt. (A smooth one.) The captain will not debate the scientist over a game of chess with a black hole out the window. The pawn will not be sacrificed with needless zeal only as prelude to a diversion. I will still get down on one knee. She will not wake up at the bottom of the stairs after a tremendous bump on the head. I can’t because I just know that whenever there’s one of those situations where people die by spears I would be one of the ones. I only expected to be rich coz they told me to. He will not look at the open duffel bag in the bathtub and say “I’d rather not.” I will not tell her. I will die. I will have no idea of any of it.
Andrew Payton

TRANSATLANTIC PASSAGE

In 1832, cholera crossed the Atlantic to walk New York streets—streets ripe with offal and bedpan. The churchyards filled so quickly fathers dumped children in the Hudson. Hours before I crossed Atlantic, British police foiled a terrorist plot to sink ten airliners mid-ocean with liquid explosives. My mother begged me to stay home—she packed a book and snacks in a clear gallon bag.

Unclaimed luggage dizzies on a carousel: car circles a parking garage. Papers of the time blamed the immigrant—conflicted sick and sin—prayed the holy would be spared and God’s justice rain the foul out of tenement apartments. Old World sin crowded on the decks of merchant clippers unloading a shipment of ghosts. Bows aimed westward: sometimes we never arrive—we pack for short trips to take the long one.
Drew Pomeroy

My Favorite Ghost

He hardly sleeps now roaming the house

and I swear
he’s your whole face—

his green-brass eyes
half there

almost yours—
you’re holding him

a doll at the sink
or in that chair.
Drew Pomeroy

A Place to Sleep

You said love was just like touching

a moth’s wing

and when you left
I left just

enough

room to give
you room

to come back

but you came back
someone else

someone I can’t

remember

I’m slowly but still building

a white fence
with your bones.
Brandon Rushton

**SPRING CLEANING**

It is always most often something like this:

Almost like what you might have said about box fans, a dresser opening its own drawer, find there:
four dollars in coins, ammunition

for fish in a fountain.

(wet towel on the hall tree)

Inside your fist a place to water the plants with a hangnail.
It is the small sneeze. A sort of season.

Post storm: there seems to be more to power lines than jump roping.

Who said rain? It isn’t really a far drive
to one of these oceans.
A back window. A scrapyard.

All of these elegies containing rust.
The way we worked the backend of the bumper loose.

This is all so much crushed red pepper.

At a pull off, it costs two coins to look
through the binoculars and see

the picture I hold

in my head

is about gauze, the sore underneath
your head turned from the ointment.

I finally take down the poster

that helped hide the hole
you punched in the bedroom wall.
Jessica Pace

TWO BLACK VULTURES

I thought about what would happen to us the day we were leaving for the South.
That morning
I went running through Char Creek falling out of the woods along a strip of sidewalk parallel to the houses.
Their rooftops jutted like shoulder blades brown and sinister in French medieval fashion.
I stopped because I felt the nearness of something, the existence of an observant creature in my poor, stupid human vicinity, and looked upward to a fading rooftop.
At its peak were two black vultures, one who perched there and one who danced.
The second spread its wings—not like other birds do—but rather they raised and jutted like a fan.
The little stooped and hooded beast did a European gutter dance, turning back and forth in the shape of a clock setting the time of my death.
It was the ugliest thing I’ve ever seen.
And I thought for sure we’d been warned.

The next day Dave killed himself.
Helen Tzagoloff

SUMMER PASTORAL

Here is the sun fluorescing orange through the slits in the window blinds.

Here is heat and humidity settling on the green Egyptian cotton sheets.

The tepid overnight water runs down the sink until clear and cool

poured over the ground oily Columbian coffee beans.

The giant-sized pink Peonies, shipped refrigerated thousands of miles,

bought yesterday afternoon have wilted. A natural process, but why

couldn’t they have lasted a few days? When asked if she knew what her roommate

in the hospital had, my mother said that she had what she had. I thought she didn’t know.
Simon Perchik

EXCEPT FOR THE NEW SUIT

Except for the new suit
the boy in the photograph
is starting to wave again

though you dust its frame
half sweetened wood, half
no longer exhausted

drawing sap and the rag damp
from brooding—you spray
then wipe, ready this wall

the way each small stone
is rinsed side to side as the river
that carries off one shore

the other each year heavier
holding you from behind
screeching across, wet with saliva

with nothing in writing
or a button you can open
for its scent and mist.
Gabriel Jason Dean

SHADOW

When I lost you the first time, the time you retreated to the roof and slept for days above my bed (I could hear you snoring), I wept silently like a thistle discovering thorns. That time, Dad knocked you out of me with a switch, leaving purple tiger claws in your place. The next time was first love. She was pregnant with trees and our tongues were on fire. You weren’t welcome in the gray of the bleachers where I was an upright cobra. Instead, you danced with a girl named Pebbles who wore a girdle that made her hips feel fake. Pride sent you packing. I was too much for your complaining. That was a long stint. You haunted cities and took correspondence courses in dead languages, learned to decline round and funny words. I can’t blame you for leaving. I was Evangelical at the time. I would’ve worn you like a cape. Then we had the good years, those years of kites and orange juice. It was good to live sans irony. Remember how we painted the walls red in our new house? Oh, we were rascals, weren’t we? Expectant of our friends’ admiration,
god, I bet we were intolerable!  
We threw parties just so we could sing.  
Today I saw your suitcase in the kitchen.  
It looked so old with its silly metal  
pop-up latches and patent leather  
that needed a shine. Were you warning  
me of winter? I’m accustomed  
to the seasons and wish you wouldn’t  
underestimate my intelligence.  
I have money for a sunlamp  
if that will make you happy. Just ask.
Gabriel Jason Dean

THE SPARROW & THE SNOW FOX

My hands are tired of being gerunds. Instead of your body, I imagine a Doritos commercial. I feel lazy about this. When I describe your hips as ecological, you cry. I thought it was a charming phrase. We made a mess of our monsters—my sparrow suspended in formaldehyde, your stuffed, abominable snow fox. Meanwhile, there’s a cherry soda taste to your legs. Clammy towels lie like mountains beside my bed. One per push. Tenderly annaled these ten years. I’m still afraid of children, unless they wear uniforms. After all, God murders children, by & by. You get wet when I whisper about angels. Ghosts make you cum. Departing is our habit. Clutching a sizeable gasp, we shudder like cold crows. My sparrow is pecking the glass again. Your fox grinds his stony teeth. Please don’t tell me what to do.
Elizabeth Stainton Walker

CLEANING OUT YOUR OFFICE

One by one,  
I peeled off the postcards  
taped to the filing cabinet

and gathered the photographs  
with brown, curling edges. I found  
an insurance card to a car you don’t own

and a box of love letters  
to people that were never me.  
I considered returning

your overdue library books and wondered  
if you would ever come back  
for your coffee mug.
Jon Stapnes

NORTH RIDGE

As if near a lover’s leap, he suddenly chills and draws rein. He asks why the lines lie so tight in the terrain. Why teeth overlap like shingles on his arms. Not his worst night, Not the worms, not gravel slipped into his back. It isn’t the fevered thoughts of the sick but something fakirs concede: Everything travels through us, however slowly, miles and miles of everything: the bloom and glint of love, numbing doubts, crackling nights, our thirsty waves, the small hours spent apart from blame, our mouths graphed in the shadows, Even our private mounds of wrath. Now his bowl of milk is receding in twilight and age creeps through the meadows. The wind’s turning, the world’s flying south, woolgathering snatches a last few remnants caught on shieling-walls—Here and there if all else fails.
B.J. Best

BAGPIPES

every saturday morning, some neighbor
on the opposite shore beats
his bag of bleating sheep
until they bleed out their wheedles,
until they blow out their bones.
he slides the stoppers
and breathes heat into the bladder,
so out squeezes this damnable wind.
thus, he bludgeons
the blueness; thus, he murders
the morning; thus, he’s a butcher
hanging the entrails of music
on a rusty claw of air.
Sean Patrick Hill

MACHADO IN THE PYRENEES

Half the time the pass is snowbound.

Men who talk to themselves, said Machado, hope to talk to God someday.

When I finally force the tangle of mountain mahogany, into the canyon’s upper reach

a raven, leaping from a string of barbed wire, leads me on.
The Yangtze River was once a theory of color, eager, rushing yellowish to a peagreen soup of sea. A nimble settlement sprang up where the different colors met and mixed. According to the river’s valley, the first Chinese had tongues the length of mountain streams to lick the snowflakes out of their eyelashes. They loved the math in the waters; their language was constructed of this love. Nevertheless, they told their ghost stories by batting their eyes. Pileous, broad, unabashed, their mouths saw clear to the Americas. Seemed like everybody was headed to the Americas to eat turquoise and grow straight hair. The Peking men were the first to up and leave behind the very nascent winds, which doesn’t explain the great wall that meanders through and divides the mountains, or how the mountains are all the same species. But, it was a time when women delighted in the quiver of a good man’s larynx, as he swallowed or sang. Not like postmodern humans, these first Chinese were careful in how they amused themselves. A team of researchers at the Fudan University in Shanghai say, above all, we humans owe migrations to amnesia, and amnesia to death, and death to natural selection.
Makalani Bandele

ZEN, AND GROOVE THEORY WITH ERIC DOLPHY

how the hawk takes to circling higher and higher.
other less specific birds fly around the redtailed one.
day after day, the central question—where’s the melody?
seems like nobody finds my mind where it goes. a buddy told me to practice with a metronome,
but then i wanted to get a little ahead of it sometimes,
and just a bit behind it others. i hear wrens outside nesting. where can i get a metronome that works like that? to have the heart and the tools
to scout groove out.
the heart is the embouchure the long journey through the silence blows out of.
a few of the tools: scales, chords, licks, migratory bird calls, songs (standards and originals), and the sounds the wind carries. as difficult as it is to come back, not being missed makes it all the more fumes and blur and cut teeth.
boy, forget a metronome, you swinging. everything can happen from one phrase to the next, according to the teacher. i keep the image in my throat. it’s about doing more listening than playing as you’re
playing. what it prove? that it aint now, but it’s gonna be some shit behind this.
Fires burn in old wine bottles lying in the weeds
at the side of the road. Fallen stars.
Sundown spreading molten waves, or is it blood and bruises,
in the Arizona clouds. Mountains
that seemed to define the far edge of the world in the morning
are pressing in, turning me one way
and another even as they fade and sky mutes and cools
to twilight.

Tired of driving, but it’s tiredness I could push through,
could drive until dawn if I had to,
could go on over the dark White Mountains, cross the plateau,
burn through Painted Desert, wind
my way through the stone maze and into the salt laden heart
of Utah if I had to,
but I have an appointment at Fort Apache.

When I arrive after dark Mrs. Keesay shows me my room
in the boys’ dorm, once the barracks
of the cavalry whose job it was to try to tame the Apache.
Mrs. Keesay, whose great grandfather,
Alchesay, was a legendary scout, opens the door to a room
with seventeen beds, usually reserved,
she says, for the visiting team, but tonight and the rest of the week
it’s all mine to share with the ghosts of the frontier.

Before I fall asleep I might remember stories I read,
how the young Apache
named Gokhlayeh, One-who-yawns, lost his mother, his wife,
and his three young children
to a bloody ambush by Mexican soldiers. Driven mad by grief
and desire for revenge
One-who-yawns became Geronimo. Geronimo, Chato, Loco,
three Apache chiefs
who survived the wars were all sent off to prison in Florida.
In old age Geronimo
tended a melon patch in Oklahoma.

Twenty-five years ago, lying in one of those seventeen beds, I don’t know
what I was thinking when I wrote in my journal the first few lines of this poem,
but next morning from the dorm window at Fort Apache
on a rise a mile or so outside Whiteriver, Arizona I could see an air strip with a faded orange wind-sock
and past that a mill and stack yard where the graded corpses of ponderosa pines steamed in the sunrise.

Each weekday morning Apache mill workers ran to the end of the air strip and back.
Some raced, some jogged, some plodded along in the dust behind the pack dying for a smoke.
The school, too, was run on a military model. The common crime, AWOL, got you hours,
punishing time on a work detail. You could scour toilet bowls, peel potatoes, scrub blood
from linoleum in the dark basement where Saturday night lovers huddled and fights flared.

After classes with sons of many tribes, descendants of warriors,
Chiricahua, Mescalero, Shoshone, Paiute, Hualapai, boys, sixth, seventh, and eighth-graders from as far away as Fairbanks, as close as Whiteriver,
from Warm Springs, Gallup, Supai, I played basketball on the hard courts in front of the dorm.

In the middle of a game of twenty-one with Darrin, Tyrone, and Fred, five foot four,
Mescalero Apache, whose play was fierce and driven,
all our fine dry ego feathers
were caught off guard by a hard rain so shirts, skins, and stern
game-faces dripped, fires cooled,
and laughter slowed the game down, but made it better.

To bring some poetry into the mix was my job, to help
with reading, writing,
and the affirmative action of imagination. We started
with exercises from Kenneth Koch’s
*Wishes, Lies, & Dreams*. We wrote letters home and letters
to ourselves, and moved on to origin stories.

Edi from Yakima, MVP on her fast-pitch softball team,
also on probation
for robbery and breaking and entering, wrote:

*The earth was created by God. Many years ago
there was another world, Then one of the big
green stars fell from the sky. Every body
ran around and screamed. The mountains now
are big department stores. The bumps on the ground
are people. The star covered everything except
a “lady and man.” They ran into each other
fell in love and had babies for the world.

Note: I think there were alot of worlds before
but stars keep falling.

Tonight under stars wherever and whoever we are
I call the roll again to hear the names—

Jennifer James, Lorna Conger, Eliza Brown, Tim Escalanti,
Harlan Wilder, Roy Lewis, Raymond Valencia, Delton Soos,
Elwood Honeycot, Ralph Jackson, Weldon Jones, Ernestine Stevens,
Marsha Watahomigie, Lonnie Manakaja, Johnny Chiago,
Fred Washington, Darrin and Tyrone Tewee,
Reno Kane.
Katy Yocom

TO THE WAY I WALK

O Hips, I haven’t always loved
the way you do what you want.
If it were up to me,
you wouldn’t be so flamboyant,
but you? You choose to sashay.

People stop me on the street
to comment on your swing.
*Bring that bouncy walk over here,*
a woman told me last week,
as if I were the one in charge.
*You’re hypermobile,* the yoga teacher says,
a warning disguised as a promise.
What nobody claims is: It don’t mean a thing.

But I forgive you, hips. I’ve come to love you
like twin daughters. I want to look after you,
because you? you swinging, bouncing, sashaying hips,
you peripatetic pelvis, you ebullient ass?
O sweet thing, O honey chile, it worries me
you don’t protect yourself the way you should.
Ellyn Lichvar

FAMILY TREE

It was like finding
shed antlers,
finding out

what happened to her.
You know it happens,
as melting snow

happens, as the grass
begins to show,
the green slow into

the white, then
only the green.
You know where

to find them
once it’s happened, how
to tiptoe into the woods,

how to turn back
what you turn over—but
you never really see

it, never hear
the brittle whisper
as they fall from the head.

He took her in the bed
of his truck,
hard metal axles,

sway bars
grinding. And he left her,
white teenage belly
upturned, too
cold to blossom but starting
to open anyway.

And when the baby
came, she was alone.
Quiet as the forest

before the tiptoes come,
before the leaves
are shuffled, before

the hand and fingers
come to touch and poke
what was made

then left behind.
Adam Day

STRAPPING

I was the theatre
of a fairyland
restored to life.
When the waltz ended,
the two soldiers
disengaged themselves.
And each of those two
halves of a solemn
and dizzy block
hesitated, and happy
to be escaping
from invisibility,
went off, downcast,
toward some girl
for the next waltz.
Katerina Stoykova-Klemer

* * *

One day I got so mad,  
I almost hit my mother.

She leaned back cornered to the wall,  
eyes wide with surprise

and fear. I was, in fact,  
much stronger. After her

three years of growing cancer,  
liver bulging like a baby bump,

there was no doubt  
who would be the winner.

I can’t remember what she’d said  
to make me flip,

but I cannot forget  
helping her lie back in bed

after that.
When Mom died
and I left for America,
he lived alone
for thirteen years.

Then he bought
a little yellow canary

_to make noise at home_.
The bird died as soon as

my father began adoring it.
_That’s it!_ He told me

over the phone.
_No more living things._
Jeanie Thompson

**THE EXQUISITE INSTRUMENT THAT WILL MAKE AN EAR**

*Central Hotel, Glasgow, December 23, 1936*

This morning I woke, positive I had seen Teacher, dreamed she was driving with Polly and me through a countryside resembling our home at South Arcan with heather-plumed hills and hawthorn-bloom rolling from hedge to hedge.

She glowed with health and the joy of finding me so close to her. She looked and looked as if she could not have enough of looking about us. She gave me an exquisite instrument, saying, Listen, Helen, and this will be an ear for you. It will rain sounds upon your hand—song-birds, passing footsteps from afar, murmuring water you cannot reach. Another of your fetters will be broken.

A caress—and she was gone.
Molly Peacock

PAID LOVE

“But you paid her, didn’t you?”

_Certainly_, I say.

Isn’t love free?

“But you _paid_ her to listen for . . .”

One thousand two-hundred and ninety-four hours.

Say you’d been in a car accident, a virtual one, and a young surgeon began a series of procedures . . .

Some years you felt fixed—walking and running and swimming—but then a part of you, your femur or ulna or vertebrae, your pelvis, your wrist bone, your halux, your occipital nerve, your seventh facial nerve, would start to weaken or fray, and you’d have to go back to that office again (endure the surgeries, perform the post-op exercises religiously, you, who couldn’t believe you had to have another operation) because the injuries from that childhood smashup (a terrible accident affecting the mind) were so full of twists and torques, because the bones (minds have bones) grew after they were operated on, and the biology of human growth is as complicated as every light-year to Aldebaran, every hair on every bonobo, every pistil of every aquilegia, and you and the healer, call her an analyst, only understood a minim of it all, a jot.

Together this became a joint art: your job to feel your strength—
to stretch and hurl, then rest and curl,
—the analyst’s job to watch you heal.
“But you paid her, didn’t you?”
How that question endures.
Yes, because we live in an economy.
Because it didn’t start out as love . . .

Soon both analyst and patient
did the watching, one’s sightings in the telescope
the other’s findings from the microscope
giving a fascinated reverence
for how things are made.
Because the accident was a bad one,
because the files were thick,
because first there was a virtual wheelchair
and then an imagined cane, and now
the patient can do a yoga pose that neither
—years have gone by!—
would ever have dreamed of
—how about that!—
somewhere, as the analyst grew
into the profession and the patient grew
into her calling, the meshed process
became love.

“But it was paid love, wasn’t it?”
“We pay surgeons, don’t we?”
“But we don’t love them. Not like this.”
It is love like this because young
healers have a lot to learn, because accident
survivors have a rutted road, because,
if you live long enough all roads are such,
the 77 years to her brain hemorrhage,
and my 65 years to find an answer
finally, not requiring a 1,295th hour.
Where else in life is the necessity for payment so clear?
Call it making a living,
though now that it’s over
perhaps it’s the pure unpaid love you mean.
It’s the Sunday after Jen got hit by lightning and the burst capillaries in her chest makes it look like the lightning still runs beneath her skin. We sit in the living room in front of the air conditioner. She can’t wear a shirt or a bra since her whole body feels tender. The doctor said the scars would fade in a few days, but for now they look like thin, pink tree roots winding through her veins. The air conditioner rattles until I weigh it down with the largest book I can find, *Astrophysical Objectives of Optical Astrometry*. The house now bathed in the white noise of cool air.

I feed Laurie and put her to bed. She can get loud when she runs around, and Jen has a constant, buzzing headache. She asks for a bedtime story but I say maybe tomorrow. Laurie hasn’t talked about the strike since the hospital. I kiss her on her forehead and watch her small fingers grip her stuffed rabbit as I turn out the lights. They said she might have trouble with nightmares but when I check on her a few minutes later she’s fast asleep, peaceful.

In the living room Jen stares straight ahead. There’s something stoic about the way she sits, with her back so straight. Like a dancer, maybe, though Jen has never danced. At our wedding we swayed in place as I felt gropingly for her hip through the armor of tulle her mother had insisted on—nothing that could be defined as dancing.

Jen’s breasts look swollen with the scars stretched over them. They hang oblong and taut. She holds a bag of frozen peas at her chest, the condensation dripping down her stomach, the couch dark and wet under her.

“Want a towel?” I ask, and her eyes stare like I’d slapped her.

“I’m ok.”

We sit and we watch TV game shows. People win prizes when they wrangle the most expensive groceries into their cart. Usually I’d be sketching and she’d be reading. But now we watch Frank and Patty from Illinois find the golden wrapped hams in the freezer section and it seems they have the whole thing in the bag.

“I’m going to bed, hun.” Jen stands.

“I’ll come, too.”

“I’m ok,” she says again, and tries to bend over to give me a kiss. Her breasts hang like painful pendulums and I stare at her skin,
the woven scars. So close to the surface I can see their patterns, the way they curl from her shoulder down her arm, from her heart to her armpit. They’re scars thick as rope in some places, then thin as if traced by a razor—her heat-dried skin tightens as she bends. I’m too distracted by it to meet her halfway. I wait a moment too long to react. She gives up on the kiss and straightens.

“Good night,” she says.

Frank and Patty don’t win. They blame the unwieldy ham.

When I turn the TV off the house is dark except for the reading lamp where Jen had been sitting. Jen’s the morning person, ironically, considering she studies stars for a living. I’m the househusband and the night owl. I paint at night in the kitchen with the refrigerator door open because I love the light it gives. Still lifes of our family, the clues to our day, laid out in degrees of shadow—washed forks in the drying rack silhouetted against the kitchen window, books opened and forgotten on their spines, socks half balled from being stripped impatiently off five-year-old feet. Tonight, though, they don’t feel like clues. The house feels abandoned.

I go to check on Laurie in her room.

Laurie was there when Jen was struck. Jen was walking to the car from Laurie’s cancelled pee wee soccer game. The air was heavy but it hadn’t started raining yet. The lightning stuck a nearby pole. Laurie was in the car taking off her shoes. The rubber tires kept her safe. Jen could have died, but she didn’t, just left with the marks. Made from the impact, the doctor said, not the electricity. The impact of the lightning, running through the pole, then the ground, then the collapsible goalie post she was carrying, through her fingers, arms, chest, rupturing capillaries as it surged. A domino effect of bursting vessels. The impact made her shoes fly off.

I took Laurie to see a therapist at the hospital while Jen was getting another MRI. The therapist asked Laurie to describe what she’d seen. “Mom looked like the mermaid on the front of a boat,” she said. Laurie stood up and glued her legs together, stuck her chest out, her head back, her spine arching over the invisible bow of a ship. “See?” she said. I didn’t see, but I told her I did.

We had Laurie later than I wanted—we were always too broke, or always too busy—and now there’s nothing I regret more than waiting until we turned forty. We get tired and are too far removed from our own childhoods. It’s hard to dredge it back, sometimes. But there are
times Laurie seems much older than she is. She’s like her mom in those moments, quiet and strong and bright. And the way she sleeps—curled up on her side, arms around her knees—she does that like her mother, too.

The humidifier on Jen’s side of the bed makes the room feel smaller than it is. The doctor recommended we use it to keep the scar tissue hydrated and prevent it from becoming permanent. She’s naked and rather than her usual curled-up position she lies on top of the sheets, splayed like a starfish. I can see every imperfection, every scar slick in the blue light of the humidifier. The mole to the left of her bellybutton, the stretch marks running white down her lower stomach towards the thick thatch of hair between her legs, the dimples of cellulite rippling where her thighs meet the mattress. I remember watching my mother walk around the house when I was a kid with used coffee grounds held with Saran Wrap against her cellulite, praying the imperfections away as the brown juice dripped down her knees. Jen has never, would never—she has this dignity about her, even asleep.

I strip my pants off and lie next to her on my side, propping myself up with my elbow to take her in. The scars curl and wind in the wet blue light, her skin turned translucent, pallid. In the beginning they scared me. But now I want to run my hands down her shoulders and chest to see how the scars feel, if they’re raised, if they feel as electric as they look.

I love the way her chest moves. Her swollen body reminds me of her pregnant self. I miss feeling that close to her, when I would rest with my hand on her stomach, when she cut out caffeine so I cut out caffeine and we would fall asleep on the couch at nine. I miss—I miss the calm of that, the easy murmur of our lives.

In my dreams her scars are alive, they float through the steam. The pink curls brush my face, comforting, and are sweet in my mouth.

“Coffee,” she says when she wakes. If Jen has a need she makes it clear. It’s something I fell in love with early on. Flowers, she told me on our third date, not chocolate. She tells me if the dishwasher needs to be unloaded. She tells me what she wants for her birthday.

But it’s when Jen speaks about her work that her articulateness really dazzles me. I envy her when she speaks about stars. She engineers the correct phrases, elaborates on equations, cites sources. She is good at giving driving directions, too, provided you need to
know how to go from one nebula to the next.

The first time she tried to explain her work to me in detail we were twenty-five years old and on the roof of our first apartment. Not a roof deck but a roof, where we could sit on the black tar that rubbed off on our legs and our feet and stained the white tile floors when we came back through the kitchen window. We lived next door to a church, with bells that woke us up Sundays and drove us crazy. We went up there for her to wax poetic about astronomy and for me to sketch. And in the memory—the September sun hit the Boston skyline and painted hazy orange the stained glass of the church. Jen’s tar-stained legs glowed orange, too, and bruised with the shadows.

She borrowed my sketch pad and wrote $X, F(X), F(F(X)), F(F(F(X))), F(F(F(F(X))))$ with my charcoal pencil. See the way the clouds—she swept her hand. The clouds were pulled cotton across the sky. They’re fractals, she said, tapping the equation. The letters and parentheses meant nothing to me, which she must have read in my eyebrows.

She explained fractals again, about a year ago. It was Laurie’s fourth birthday, after we put Laurie to bed. Jen took a sewing needle, rested the tip against the surface of a glass slide and tapped it repeatedly, firmly, until cracks began to form. Then she placed the glass under the my-first-microscope we’d given to Laurie, focused in. I replaced her eye with mine.

A fractal, Jen murmured, and then upped the magnification. The jumble of cracks and fissures, like a clear kaleidoscope, came back into focus. You keep zooming in, you’ll see the same pattern. She did, I did. That’s a fractal. Has applications in all parts of human anatomy—DNA helixes, bronchial sacs—and outside the human body. Mountains, snowflakes, tree bark. Earthquakes, ocean waves, and lightning, she described. The bolt itself, but also where it strikes.

Where lightning strikes sand you find fulgerites, golden glass structures, fractals woven from 500 megajoules of energy.

Also clouds, she smiled, remember years ago when I tried to explain?

In the early morning half-light of our bedroom the humidifier’s basin has run dry and it sputters. She pulls the sheet up to her neck. “Coffee,” she repeats, “and can you make Laurie some eggs?”
I wade through memories in front of the stove. Fractals. They had some part in her breakthrough on exoplanets though I’m still not sure exactly how. It had to do with mapping the Basin of Attraction, the pattern of one planet’s orbit over millions of years. Somehow she applied the theory to exoplanets and won the Annie J. Cannon Award and the Newton Lacy Pierce Prize. I remember the term—*Basin of Attraction*—because it sounded so sexy when Jen said it from a podium.

“Coffee,” I say when she comes into the kitchen, and I set a cup down at the table. She’s wearing a giant black t-shirt and moves tenderly to keep the cotton from rubbing against her skin.

“Good morning, alligator,” she says to Laurie, a joke since Laurie can never seem to get right the *see you later alligator, in a while crocodile* ritual. This time Jen doesn’t try to bend down for a kiss. She sits in front of the mug, spine ramrod to avoid the wooden chair back, and takes a sip with her eyes closed. The curls of her lightning scar past the sleeve of her shirt, nearly down to her elbow—

“Jen,” I say, leaving the stove, bringing my hand to hover above her arm, “are these fractals? The scarring?” The air around her skin is hot. She’d told me that a bolt of lighting is a fractal, that fulgerites in the sand are, too. Where it strikes sand, where it strikes flesh.

“Yeah,” she says, “I think they are.”

I turn off the stove. The eggs are sticking. I forgot to use butter. I scrape the egg I can salvage out of the pan with a spatula, and when I turn again Laurie is arching her back, legs stuck together, head thrown.

“I want to be a mermaid when I grow up,” she’s telling Jen.

“That’s nice,” Jen says. She doesn’t know about the therapist, about Laurie’s reenactment of the lightning strike. “I wonder what kind of pension you’d get as a mermaid,” she smiles. She’s always liked telling grown-up jokes to kids.

“Laurie,” I say, “how did you sleep last night?”

“I don’t remember,” she says, “how did you sleep last night?”

“Just fine,” I say. “No bad dreams?”

“I’m gonna watch TV,” she says. She has these twig legs in pink striped pajama leggings and she runs out of the room on them. Her legs look about the width of my wrist, and I wonder how they even hold her up. I hear the electric ping of the ancient TV starting up in the living room.

“What was that all about?” Jen says.
“It’s nothing. How are you feeling?” She shifts in her chair.
“Fine,” she says, tugging at the t-shirt. “I hate wearing this.”
“You’re as beautiful as the night we met,” I say.
“Thanks,” she says, still pulling at the fabric, “I’m going to need a refill on the pain meds soon. Could you stop by the pharmacy later?”

We met in college. I went to MassArt and she went to MIT, introduced by my friend who was dating her roommate. The friend and the roommate have long since broken up. But right from the beginning Jen and I had this straightforward love, worn in and comfortable. Jen wore no makeup except Chapstick and kept her hair in a thick ponytail down her back. She was in the middle of her thesis project on free-floating planets, planets unbound by the gravity of their suns and roaming through galaxies alone.

We met when we were only twenty-one. We’ve had it easy, we really have. We work partly because we have so much history. She knows what I went through during my mother’s chemo, my mother’s death. And I understand what she’s moving towards and what she hopes to discover. She gets my past, I understand her future.

The night I met Jen, I remember asking her, *If they could send you to a free-floating planet tomorrow, would you go?* Jen stared at me, and I realized how pretentious it was even as I said it. But she didn’t laugh at me.

No, she answered.

Why?

*Because life is one big science experiment,* she said.

There’d be nothing left to do if it were all figured out.

We always had it all figured out, the two of us. Neither of us have ever had our heart broken. *That’s a handicap,* my mom told me after I’d proposed. My mom was an artist, too. A dancer. *Never having your heart broken will make your art hollow.* I was hurt when she said it, but turns out she was right. I mostly paint commissioned portraits now. Pieces for mantelpieces—girl with bow smiling, boy and girl with dog by a rosebush. There’s a market for these, a nostalgic niche market of rich people with too many mantels and too few images of themselves. A way for me to paint and pay the bills. Fractal art, the same on every level.

We always had it all figured out, the two of us, until we had Laurie.
The day passes mostly like the last but for Jen’s crying. A leaky faucet, a constant stream. It starts after breakfast, seemingly at random, and she stems the flow with paper towels. I want to sit and rub her back softly with the flat of my hand, something reassuring, but she can’t be touched. I persuade her to move to the couch where at least she can be comfortable. Laurie is in there sitting cross-legged in front of cartoons.

“I had a bad dream about a person with two eyes,” Laurie says as we walk into the room. She is sitting a foot or two in front of the entertainment unit, and her blond ringlets are whirled into a rat’s nest.

“That’s a normal number of eyes, baby,” Jen says. The tears are still running, individual tears that roll smoothly and drip off her chin. “The medicine,” she reminds me, “the prescription slip’s on the counter.” The sky is dimming outside and the television is lighting the room. The air conditioner is still running smoothly—the house is an ice box. I find the prescription in the kitchen and open the refrigerator, looking for nothing in particular.

I turn and I watch my girls through the kitchen doorway. The frozen peas are lying forgotten on the couch cushions bathed in the fridge light, long yellow shadows, and the moving blue from the television screen. Jen is staring straight ahead, towards the kitchen, but not at me. Her jaw is working like it does when she’s staring at a spreadsheet.

Laurie is moving her hand in front of the television screen, twirling her fingers like she’s clearing out cobwebs. Twisting her wrists in this deliberate way, careful and smooth. The static, I realize. She’s sweeping her fingers against the static of the TV, entranced.

I go back into the living room. Jen shakes her head, rubs her eyes, stands and looks at me. She looks lost. I drop the prescription on the couch and pull her towards me, the embrace a whisper, barely touching. I close my eyes and try to picture my wife in Laurie’s mermaid stance, the electricity bursting through her, but I can’t. I try for what feels like the thousandth time to imagine what it would have been like to lose her, what it will be like one day, but my mind blanks.

Laurie is sitting with her back to the TV, now. She’s cradling one of her hands in the other like a doll. She stares up at us. I can feel the heat of Jen’s skin through her t-shirt. Her tears are soaking through my shirt to my shoulder. I just can’t imagine what it would have been like to lose her, what it will be like.

But Laurie can.
Megan E. Calhoun

**Do You Know How Big the Moon Is?**

My husband comes home from work today to find me in the coat closet again. “Jesus, Margot, you’re going to give me a heart attack doing that.” He hands me his dry umbrella, which I lean in the corner of the closet with five others that look just like it. “If you were at all considerate, you’d pick a closet no one uses—what about the one on the patio with all of our old camping gear and the potting soil in it?”

“But then I would have to come out to tell you where I was so you wouldn’t be worried, and the point of hiding in a closet is to not have to come out until you’re good and ready.”

“Well, why are we in here today?”

He says “we” accusingly, as if he too is in the closet, as if I am forcing him to be in here with me. It’s the way school principals and condescending doctors talk: *What were we doing Mrs. Flanagan that we glued our head to a piece of cardboard?*”

“I feel old.”

“This isn’t about the crow’s feet again, is it? I’ve told you that they’re barely noticeable.”

“No. It’s on the inside.”

“What’s on the inside?”

“My feeling of being old.”

“Like your organs are rotting?”

“Like my inner child is.”

“Well, based on your closet-hiding propensities, I can gladly inform you that your outer child seems to be alive and well.” With that he shuts the closet door and I am thrown into darkness. I can feel the sleeve of a fur coat I inherited from a dead aunt resting on top of my head, and I imagine it is the hand of a motherly figure giving me comfort.

*It’s okay, dear*, the motherly figure says. *There are worse things in this world than the death of an inner child.*

“What could possibly be worse than the death of an inner child?”

*Have you ever had mildew so deep in the grouting of your shower that no amount of scrubbing can get rid of it? And every time you take a shower, there it is, staring you in the face—this evil, black disease*
eating away at what you’re trying to build for yourself, reminding you that in some ways you will always be a failure.

My husband opens the closet door again and I blink up at him in the light. “Where are the children, dear?” he says.

For some reason, I am struck by the word dear because it doesn’t seem to fit, and I think perhaps it should be deer instead. I picture myself as a deer, a doe, sitting here on my closet floor, maybe nibbling on the button of my husband’s good wool coat—because really, deer don’t know any better, and no one would expect them to or think they were crazy for it. No one would tell them to move to the patio closet with the potting soil. I picture our three children as deer too, long-legged fawns who frolic in sun-dappled meadows and eat leaves instead of candied cereal for breakfast. But then I think of the long stretch of highway by our house, which is constantly strewn with the corpses of deer, their necks twisted in impossible positions, their intestines smeared for several yards down the center lane, and no one to even pick them up and give them a proper burial, no one to plant little white wooden crosses to mark the place at the roadside where they died, no one to bring them flowers, no one to miss them.

“They’re down the street at the Brenners’, building snowmen.”

“It’s August.”

“August doesn’t stop children from building snowmen, only adults.” The door is shut once more. “At least the shower grout doesn’t have mildew in it,” I say.

At dinner, neither of us mentions the closet incident. My husband carefully arranges the food on his plate so that his chicken isn’t touching his peas, aren’t touching his noodles, aren’t touching his chicken—everything in its place, keep your hands to yourself, thank you. It’s like he imagines Tyson and the Jolly Green Giant and the No Yolks are some of the volatile chemicals he works with at his lab; if they mix—boom. But whenever I tease him about it, he’ll say something like, “I don’t tell you how to pluck your eyebrows.”

Our youngest child, Maggie, imitates her father in all respects, this being no exception, but she doesn’t have the same methodology behind it, the same fear, the same madness. For her, it is a game, one made all the more delightful because of its strangeness.

“How did the snowmen turn out?” I ask. One of the peas balanced precariously on the tip of my husband’s fork rolls off and bounces
back onto his plate, coming to rest against a drumstick. He tenses for
a moment but says nothing and then picks up the pea and disposes of
it in the kitchen trash. Maggie takes one of the peas off her plate and
throws it away as well.

“I made a snow dragon, and it ate everyone else’s snowmen,”
says Caleb, the oldest at seven.

“He didn’t eat my snowwoman,” says Deirdre, who has just
turned five. “She turned herself into a butterfly and flew away before
your dragon could eat her.”

“He ate her anyway because dragons can fly too.”

“He did not!”

“My snowman was the size of the moon.” This comes from
Maggie, who has finished eating all of her peas and has moved on to
the chicken—she’ll save her noodles for last, just the way her father
does.

“Do you know how big the moon is?” my husband asks her.

“It’s almost as big as our house!”

“You know, Margot,” he says to me, “since you spend all day with
them in the summer, you could maybe try and teach them some things
so they go back to school prepared.”

“Maggie’s only three. She’s too young to go to school. And she’s
too young to know the size of the moon. In fact, I don’t even know
how big the moon is. Do you know how big the moon is?”

“It’s about three thousand four hundred and seventy-six kilometers
in diameter.”

“Do you see that, kids?” I say, “If you eat all of your peas,
someday you’ll grow up to be as smart as your father.”

Lying in bed with the covers pulled up to my chin, I can hear my
husband trimming his toenails in the adjoining bathroom. Clip . . .
Clip . . . Clip. “Do you remember how magical everything seemed
when you were a kid?” I say.

“What was that, dear?” Clip . . . Clip . . . Clip.

“I mean, do you remember how fantastic summer felt? It was a
feeling, a magical feeling. Sometimes, even now, a certain smell—
that of a field just after a storm, or the sun beating down on freshly cut
grass, or a warm breeze carrying dandelion fluff—can trigger it, that
feeling. Only it’s not really the feeling at all; it’s just the memory of
the feeling, a ghost of the real thing.”
“I can’t hear you very well in here, hon. Were you talking to me?”
“No. Just thinking out loud, I guess.”
My husband flips off the light in the bathroom and slides into his side of the bed. “You’ve probably just been spending too much time with the kids. Changing too many diapers.”
“None of our kids wear diapers.”
“You know what I mean—figurative diapers.”
I don’t tell him that this was something I had noticed before the children, when I was still working for the city’s department of water, testing the toxicity of creeks, and rivers, and lakes, and even before that, when I was in college and selling my plasma for drinking money. I just wasn’t ready to admit it then; I was still hoping that it would pass. Diapers, I know, are a much more reassuring theory. Someday, when the children are grown, and they ask if they were responsible for the death of my inner child, I’ll tell them that they were not, but for now I let it go.
“Listen,” he says, “I’ve got some vacation time coming up. Maybe we’ll leave the kids with your mother and go away for a week together next month. Would you like that?”
“Sure.”
He turns off the lamp beside the bed and we become two disembodied voices groping for each other in the dark. “I make you happy, don’t I?” says his voice.
“Of course you do,” says mine.

The blue plastic baby pool is perhaps a little too small for all four of us to be in at once, but my children don’t protest when I join them. Despite the fact I have only just filled the pool a couple of hours earlier with icy water from the garden hose, it has become as warm as a bath from baking in the afternoon sun. An oil slick of SPF-50 casts a rainbow-colored sheen on the water, and a few dead gnats float on the surface like marine-life casualties. I know we are killing the grass. Deirdre and Caleb are concentrating on making tidal waves that wash over the side while Maggie gives the red-headed doll she calls Baby a bath.

I close my eyes and take in the sounds of my children playing—the sounds I made myself as a child—but everything comes across as tinny and distant, like a bad recording playing over a phonograph. A mosquito bites me on the temple and I realize I forgot to buy the pork chops I’m supposed to be making for dinner.
It is only four—early enough to run to the store and be back in time to have it ready for dinner. I leave Caleb and Deirdre to play in the pool with the promise of Mrs. Rosenbaum, the next-door neighbor, to keep an eye on them, but take Maggie with me because I once saw a poster that read an infant can drown in an inch of water. Maggie is no longer an infant, but there are a good six inches of water in the pool.

Walking into the IGA, I regret my decision to just throw a blue sundress overtop of my swimsuit instead of changing out of it. The dress is now clinging to the parts of my body covered by the wet suit so that there are perfect impressions of my ass and breasts on it, and when the automatic doors swish open and the first blast of air conditioning slams into me, my nipples stand at attention—the centerpieces of my humiliation. Two old women with dyed orange hair try to avoid making eye contact with me as they brush past to leave, and when they glance down at my daughter—still clinging to Baby, who is leaking dirty pool water from some inner region all over the floor—pity flashes across their faces as if they are looking at a doomed thing.

I wait behind five other people at the meat counter while Maggie plays with the eggs. She opens each carton, selects an egg, holds it up to the light, taps it with her finger, presses it to her ear like a conch shell, and then pronounces whether there is a chicken living inside. “Nope, no chicken in here.”

The woman behind me in line says, “Is that your child?”
“Nope, no chicken in here.”
“Yes, she is.”
“Nope, no chicken in here.”
“Do you think you should be letting her play with the eggs like that?”
“Nope, no chicken in here.”
“She’s not hurting anything.”
“Nope, no chicken in here.”
“It just seems a little unsanitary.”
“Nope, no chicken in here.”
“Why? You don’t eat the shells, do you?”
“Nope, no chicken in here.”
“Well, no, but—”
“Nope, no chicken in here.”
“Then what’s so unsanitary about it?”
“Nope, no chicken in here.”
“What if she breaks one?”
“Nope, no chicken in here.”
“Then I will buy the carton. She’s only a child.”
“Nope, no chicken here.”
“But you’re not.”

Maggie is on her fourth carton of eggs, and I am next in line, when the store manager appears from out of aisle eleven and points a finger at Maggie. “Whose little girl is this?”
I am forced to say, “She’s mine.”

“Look, lady, she can’t be handling the eggs like that. She can’t be touching the food. You can’t just let her run around the store doing whatever she wants. There are regulations. There are health concerns. If you can’t control her, I will have to ask you to leave.”

I am trying to gently pry Maggie’s fingers from around the last egg without breaking it, but she is grasping it with a willful determination, saying, “But, Mommy, I think there might be a chicken in here.” Her eyes have started to well with tears because even at three she can tell that this is not a battle she’s going to win. I hoist her up onto my hip and finally manage to free the egg from her tiny fingers.

But if anything, the store manager is looking angrier instead of mollified, like it is taking every ounce of his strength not to reach out and shake me by the shoulders. And he is standing so close that I can smell his breath—peppermint gum over whiskey—and see the lines on his face and the gray hairs sprouting from his temples, and the way the fluorescent lights from the dairy case are reflected in the bald circle of skin on top his head. And I can see in his eyes that it was never his intention to end up the manager of the IGA, that he used to go to sleep at night as a child on the top bunk of a bed he shared with his little brother staring at a poster tacked to his ceiling of Babe Ruth, that he was the star player on his high school’s varsity team and could hit a ball out of the park as easily as look at it, that all of the girls had been attracted to him not only because of his talent and good looks but because he had the air about him of someone who would be something big someday, that one of these girls had been especially pretty and sweet and he had made love to her in center field on a moonless night, that when she found out she was pregnant a month later he had “done the honorable thing” and married her the day after they graduated, that two more children weren’t long following and
before he knew it he lived in a blue house on a street with dozens of other houses that looked just like it except in varying shades, working days at the IGA and nights at a factory south of town, and the closest he came to baseball anymore was through a seventeen-inch screen in the den, and when he looks at this woman standing before him, so careless and unrestrained, and her little curly-haired daughter, he sees his own wife and daughter and all the reasons he never got to be the next Babe Ruth, and what he wants more than anything else right now is to slap both our faces until we understand what we have done, but he can’t because he needs this job, as lousy as it is, and there aren’t many options open for a man in his position, so he will just go back into his tiny office with the two-way mirrors that look out onto the store and take a pull off a bottle of Wild Turkey he keeps stashed behind the phonebooks in the bottom drawer of his cheap metal desk and pretend that everything will look better tomorrow.

I want to tell him that I’m not the reason he’s stuck in this town with two bad jobs and a mortgage it doesn’t look like he will ever be able to pay off, that my daughter isn’t why he will never hit a ball over a fence again or hear the cheering of a crowd in his ears and know that it was all for him, and that even if everything had gone just as he had wanted it to, he would still be as miserable as he is right now, wishing that he had married that pretty girl from high school—what was her name?—who had made love to him in center field on a moonless night, because that was the happiest he had ever been or would ever be. And I want to say, “Can’t you see that someday, my little girl will be all grown up and as old and cranky as you or I, walking around like a zombie in a life she no longer recognizes as her own, but that right now, right this minute, right as she was holding those eggs to her ear, she was happy and the world was nothing but sweet possibility? Why can’t you just let her have that, for as long as it will last?”

Instead, I say nothing and when he turns his back on me and starts to walk away, I take the egg I pried from my youngest child’s fingers and throw it at the back of his balding head.

I run the two blocks home with Maggie still on my hip, all the while expecting a cop car to pull up next to me and arrest me for assaulting the store manager. When I make it back to the house, I wait, listening over my own gasping breath, for sirens, but there is nothing, and I don’t know whether I feel relieved or disappointed. Maggie’s face
is flushed with exhilaration, and worry starts to set in with me about what she will tell her father. What will I tell him?

I walk around back and see that the blue plastic baby pool is all but empty now, most of the water having been sloshed onto the lawn, and that Mrs. Rosenbaum has stuffed Deirdre and Caleb with the fresh-picked strawberries from her garden. Their lips are rimmed with red, and happiness is like a candle that burns behind their eyes. Maggie wiggles to be free of my hip and when I let her go she rolls onto the ground beside her brother and sister. They lie woozy on the lawn, drunk off strawberries and sunshine, watching the clouds pass by overhead and popping the heads off dandelions. A jumbo jet flies over and all of them wave.

I lie down next to Deirdre and look up into the sky. I want so much to see what they see, smell what they smell, feel what they feel, but I no longer expect it to happen. The grass under my neck starts to itch and there are ants and bugs for which I do not know the names crawling over my legs. I worry that our house is too close to the power lines, and only now does it occur to me that I never did get the pork chops for dinner.

I hear my husband’s car pull into the drive and the driver’s side door slam as he gets out. A short time later, I hear the screen door off the porch slide open and shut and then instead of a cumulus cloud, I am looking up into his inverted face, which from this angle slightly resembles a dinner roll.

“Well,” he says, looking down at me, “I’m glad to see you’re feeling better.”
Ed Taylor

No Fault

what sticks to memory, often,
are those odd little fragments
that have no beginning and no end

—Tim O’Brien

He woke me up, he thought, but I wasn’t asleep. I never was then, just quiet.
Come on, he said in the cold dark, the radiators weak against the air, and I said, why.
Just come on, he said, and I heard him smiling as he left the room and snicked shut the door.
Okay. Whatev. I pulled my hair back—your hair would be so pretty pulled up, will you please just try a high ponytail, my mom and my sister said to death.
I heard the wooden stairs. I followed, past my sister in ear buds and Mom talking to the TV. He yanked on the front door and went through so fast it was like a hole he fell into. I made sure the door clicked shut behind me because even the cat wanted to be somewhere else.
We walked down the cleared sidewalk, gray snow on either side like the parted Red Sea. I only know about that because of World Civ, which should’ve been history but turned out to be religion. He didn’t say anything yet, and I wasn’t going to. But I did: so is this some kind of rite of passage thing, a teachable moment.
No, he said.
We passed the Catholic nunnery. Once when I walked past there two men in black suits were pushing a silver gurney with a long flat black plastic bag on it toward a plain white van—no windows.
Okay, he said, when we stopped in the middle of the little league field. During the summer you could hear the national anthem drifting from there at nine a.m. every Saturday. It reminded me of the blessing before Thanksgiving dinner, but I’m not sure why.
He screwed a cardboard tube into the ground, and flicked a lighter at something, which sparked. Get back, he said, and he meant it.
We stood and watched the thing flare up; it hissed and popped. I guess it was a Roman candle but I’m hazy on pyrotechnics. Because of the clouds, it was like fire in a tent. But okay, the burning clear orange-white woke me up.

Make your own stars, he said.

Is that it.

Yeah, he said.

Is this about you and mom.

He didn’t say anything. Then he did: high ponytail. I heard the smile.

I slapped his arm and he laughed and I started walking, but slowly, waiting while my eyes adjusted again to the dark.
Margaret Hayertz

**YOU ARE KOLKATA GOING**

I show my ticket to the man who sold it to me, ask him what my seat number is, and which coach. He looks at me, then begins helping the man behind me, who elbows me out of the way. I go to the next ticket booth: same thing. So I find the platform and go around asking my question to people. I know the answer is simple, written in Hindi somewhere on the ticket.

The most frequent answer to my question is, “Yes.” Or an embarrassed laugh that means no English, or else a stare that slides right through me. That second nature, multipurpose stare that can be used for beggars, trash piles, people peeing or shitting into a gutter, and nearby strangers behaving unsavorily. One man tells me I have to wait two, three weeks. Then get ticket. When the train wobbles in, I show my ticket to a man wearing a lanyard who says, “Yes, it is here.” I think he gestures for me to cram into the mob trying to get into the nearest coach.

In my attempt to board, I am pushed steadily from behind. A grandmother in front of me grabs my elbow precisely with the tips of her fingers and yanks me aside, so her daughters can ease ahead. When I finally make it on, I see why my ticket didn’t show a seat number.

It’s because no one keeps track. Of the seats. They don’t keep track as they sell these cheap seats. They just sell them and sell them. And sell. Them.

Benches made for three people are pressing five to six. A man is lying down with his head underneath a seat and his legs bent upward. In the luggage racks above, there are people. Four or five to a rack, depending on how many bags of rice are already up there. The aisles are filled with people standing. There is nowhere to go, but more are pushing to get in. The train starts moving, and somehow room is made. People coalesce into eaves and crannies of the suffocating coach.

Just nine hours to go.

I stand pressed. I look at my own faintness and claustrophobia as if from a distance. This train car feels like a joke: it’s impossible. A
wonder of the world. At the next stop, some girls get on, singing. The crowd magically parts a thin stream of space for them, the way it did a few minutes ago for a chaat wala. The girls clap rectangular wooden castanets and sing a high-pitched, gypsy-sounding song. No one gives them money. I want to reach into my pocket, but I’m packed in too tight. Besides, a foreigner should never reveal even one rupee in an enclosed space. Anjali, a woman I met in Benares, pleaded with me to be careful on the train. “In my family,” she told me disapprovingly, “you would not be allowed to travel until you have a husband.” My friend Laxmi told me that one night, she was sleeping on the train and woke up with the feeling of being stared at. The man in the bunk across from her was masturbating to her sleeping figure.

I’ve never even heard a story about a coach this crowded.

The closest I’ve come are stories of stampedes in train stations, of minor car accidents that compel drivers on the road to pull over and beat the man who seems guilty of the wreck, for more and more bystanders to join that mob.

The potential for violence in this train car of maybe 200 tired, uncomfortable people is visceral. I imagine giving the gypsy girls money: The crowd shifts, just barely—but it becomes a mob, taking the money from my fingers, many hands jamming into my side and my belly, searching for my pockets, in my pockets, breaking my clothes. I stop before I imagine getting crushed to the floor.

The song has long ended. The gypsy girls snap their castanets at one young man, then another. Still, no. I tell myself, There’s a whole train up ahead, and other trains, too: plenty of cars—they will get some money today.

A few stops later, a family in a luggage rack climbs down. With slow grace, like a monkey, a man swings from another luggage rack into the empty spot. A second man follows. They see me and motion for me to climb up—quickly, there’s space!

I don’t know if it’s wise, but I do. There’s not even room to sit with my legs crossed. The rack is made of generously spaced metal bars. But what was I going to do, stand for nine hours? My knees press to my chest in the heat of all these people which has risen to the arched ceiling of the train.

Soon I am friends with the men who invited me up here. They share
their food, I share my water, and they try to teach me some Hindi. “You are this train,” Santosh, the man next to me, keeps explaining. “You are Kolkata going.” The other man, a friend he made on the train, keeps an arm slung around Santosh’s shoulder, and Santosh holds his hand.

The family in the luggage rack across from us is young. They are husband, wife, daughter. They have commandeered enough space that the mother lies on her side (knees bent against luggage). The daughter leans on her mother’s stomach, and the husband sits half a foot away. The mother has laid a thin, decorative cloth over the metal bars and occasionally straightens it.

Mother and daughter stare at me, but when I smile at them, the mother’s expression doesn’t change. The daughter’s face lights up—she giggles and buries her face in her mother’s sari. Somehow, it is impossible to make eye contact with the mother, even though she is still staring right at me.

I’m probably being rude, I think, and I turn back to Santosh. “Aap kahan jana hain?” I try. He repeats my words to his friend and laughs, I think, approvingly.

Despite all the people in this coach, it doesn’t smell like sweat. Just dirt, chai, and papri chaat.

“Where are you traveling to?” I ask Santosh in English.

He is going to Andhra Pradesh. He works in Uttar Pradesh, but his family is in the south. “Thirty-hour journey,” he tells me. He gestures toward the family across from us and tells me they’re going to Odisha, almost as far away. I look at the woman for signs of whether she finds this journey daunting. Her horizontal body remains almost motionless. To me, she betrays nothing.

Life for this family is, I realize, this train car. They are rarely not this crowded in. I am filled with admiration, a warm bubble that expands and pops in my chest.

“You are this train,” Santosh is telling me again, and I nod.

Separating each luggage rack from the one behind it is nothing but a simple wire mesh. The young men behind me are making fun of me, asking me questions in Hindi and snickering. I’ve put a notebook between my back and the mesh to protect my body, and I ignore them as best I can. When I look past the family across from us, I don’t see any women, but at least fifty men and boys up in these rafters. And
there are so many men behind me, too. I feel scared, and grateful that I ended up in this safe luggage rack.

When claustrophobia or fear threatens to overcome me, I meditate. The sway of the train and the two radios playing, plus a grandfather singing, and so much of humanity all in one place—the mix feels good with mind focused and eyes closed. This is just a point in space; it is every point in space. It is the random center of something. Ribbons of color spin behind my eyes. Somehow, even with my eyes closed I can feel the altitude. Swaying beautifully.

*You are this train.*

A singer enters our car. *Paan* has stained his teeth terra cotta. His song is as horrible as his teeth, I think, but Santosh is in a trance. Santosh’s eyes are closed and his head seems to have disconnected from his neck and is floating around in ecstasy. Others are craning to watch the singer. The train car has fallen silent except for the song.

This hasn’t happened on the other train journeys I’ve taken. Then, people usually ignored the performers. They didn’t share much food. Here, we are two hundred people. We are in one car. We are together.

Everyone pushes to give the singer money and I think of the girls—hours ago, when I first entered this coach completely baffled. I’d admired the girls, musical and assertive, their arms thin but wiry. As they snapped their castanets at people, I’d tried not to imagine certain things happening to them—stories I’d heard of fathers spilling hot oil or other tortures on their daughters when they didn’t bring home enough money.

Now, I keep my rupees in my pocket, even though every father and single man around us is giving money to the singer. I pretend to sleep. I feel a jabbing in my ribs—Santosh is elbowing me, gesturing for me to give. I do, because I am afraid of this train again. It is alive with potential for a riot. If one person turns against me . . . chain reaction.

It seems that either everyone gives money, or no one does. And you have a much better chance if you’re male.

I get down to go to the bathroom. Another wonder of this train car is, if you get up to go to the bathroom, you’re guaranteed to find the seat you left still empty.
To get my shoes, I have to disturb a gentleman reading a newspaper. *Delhi Gang-Rape: Police Drive Away Protesters from India Gate.* No doubt the article is written by a man who gives an impassioned cry for the protection of woman, that particularly dumb and fragile kind of child.

The impossibly dense mass of people finds a way to part for me. Of course, it’s not so wide a stream. I’m holding my breath and tensing my body, bracing to get groped.

But no one grabs my chest, or my ass. My clothes are Indian, they cover my body neckline to foot. But they are thin cotton, and when warm fingers slide across my hip, I wish I were wearing a sheet of armor. I can’t yell, “Shame on you, did you see what he just did?” like I’ve been taught to do because the fingers are on my hip. My ass is right next to it, folks. I know you can’t see it through these baggy clothes but you watch enough porn to know exactly where it is. Maybe it’s my imagination, although *how could it be,* although, *why would you stroke your fingertips along my hip?* Whatever is going on, I slap the hands away, one after another until I reach the bathroom. I take a quick peek in before opening the door all the way, and another peek behind me to make sure no one looks like they’re about to try to rape me.

According to my friend Neha, “The problem is that there are so few women in India. So many families abort female fetuses and abandon girl babies. The ones that survive are commodities.” I try to escape into the impersonal comfort of that as I pee: *It’s a national problem, not personal.*

Problems have solutions and those disembodied fingers didn’t mean to handle me, they just weren’t thinking about how I felt.

But of course I can’t convince myself.

Every time I hear a story of rape, my terrified mind starts trying to imagine what it was like for the woman—and I shut it down. I feel violated enough by the story; what else do I want? To remind myself that it didn’t actually happen to me, to process the story fully, or to show solidarity with the victim? I never go through with it. I either distract myself by inventing the hundredth means of escape, or I chicken out, or shame stops me and I remind myself to feel grateful that I’m safe. What do men think of when they hear the word *rape?*

The bathroom is surprisingly clean, considering how many people
have used it. It’s cleaner than some bathrooms in coaches I’ve been in that have seat numbers. I jump up and down to shake my body out, then I rush out, slapping the hands away until I make it back. I slip off my shoes. I climb back up into the luggage rack. I make my best attempt at sleep.

When I wake up, I stare hazily at the woman across from me and try to imagine what her life is like. I see that it’s not crowdedness that describes her life on trains and in her husband’s family home. It’s being outnumbered.

The train slows. I’ve been asking people if Kolkata is close. Yes, close, they say. And I repeat this precious, refreshing word. Pāsa, pāsa, pāsa.

“Is this Kolkata!” I try to ask the men around me, but it comes out like a hallelujah. “No, no,” they say.

“Kolkata? (Kolkata!” I say. “Where is Kolkata!”

An older gentleman taps his watch. “Four hours,” he says, and points to what the arrival time will be.

I can’t do it. We’ve landed in a strange city or town, but I can’t keep going.

Wait, I tell myself. You can hold on. It’s safer this way. You have a hotel reservation waiting for you. Otherwise, you’ll only have to get back on the train again.

But at the thought of having to part the seas to go to the bathroom again, the enveloping claustrophobia makes me release my leg towards the floor, towards escape. My toe touches someone’s head and I’ve just done one of the worst things I can do: touch the sacred with filth. The eyes of the woman across from me grow wide, she covers her mouth of scandalized giggles. A few men below begin to give me a surprisingly polite lecture.

“I’m getting off!” I yell in defense. “I’m getting off the train!” I gather my things frantically. We’ve already been stopped at the station a while, and I don’t know if I’ll have time to make it from the middle of this densely packed coach before the train starts moving. I might get stuck in all the people. I am jumping down from the luggage rack, and before I hit the floor, a man has climbed up and sits in the spot where I’d sat.

“Kolkata, no,” someone says to me as I reach behind a grandfather’s legs to grab my shoes, not wasting time to put them on.

“I know!” I say, and start pushing. “I’m getting off!” I yell, so
people don’t think I’m trying to force myself into a seat, so they will part and let me go.

“Wait!” the gentleman with the watch says behind me. I don’t turn around, but I have hardly gone two feet. Santosh reaches around and hands me my pen. “Thank you,” I say. “Thank you for everything.”

No one understands why I am leaving. They accept it.
Kirby Gann

ANYBODY BUT ME

I have spent long periods of my life wishing I was somebody else. I realize this speaks to nothing unique about me, though the way I went about it does feel kind of unusual. I built an entire metaphysics around the characters in comic books—admitting this now in the spirit of complete honesty—and though of course this isn’t particularly special, either, I should clarify further that it wasn’t the heroes I imagined being, but their meek alter-egos. The people they were in quote-unquote real life. Vast swaths of my time passed with me thinking like Peter Parker, who’s a guilt-plagued loser in all respects, yes, but one presented in a very sympathetic and empathic way; you can’t help but root for his success with Mary Jane or Gwen and to do well in school and please Aunt May and all. The weirdest part of this however is that what was most important to me was this sense of a sympathetic audience, the unseen and unheard horde of supporters who followed Parker as he went about his business, trying to get by. Like comic books were a window onto real people in another world, and we could witness their lives and pull for them and maybe they would have some sense of that, of our general good will, and it gave them confidence in their own possibilities and—just possibly—led a struggling kid like Peter Parker to feel less alone.

It’s not like I ever thought I actually possessed superpowers. But I did go around half-believing that I kept this amazing secret much like Parker had his, only I didn’t know exactly what my secret was—it was just the secret in my head, understand—and more important was this feeling that we existed in our own kind of comic-book world with invisible readers/viewers out there with access to my thoughts and anxieties who were rooting for me to succeed, The Boy Who Would Be Anybody Else.

This was my childhood. I had to figure out many things for myself. So I had Peter Parker (and Steve Rogers/Captain America, and Matt Murdock/Daredevil) for help, but also more immediate examples at hand, people in my honest world like Lucas Aubrey, a boy older than me by a few years, not many but this was that age when any difference in years might as well be measured metrically.
His little brother Charles was my best friend, and we practiced his walk, swayed our shoulders like his when we moved, lengthened our strides as each insisted the other one had it all wrong. We tried not to talk much, or with any excitement, to be cool, communicating by scowl and shrug and single syllables, a personal style at which I failed.

The difference between believing you’re in a comic book and believing you can be someone else from real life is, obviously, in real life you’re always getting reminded you are not this other person (whereas you can go with the world-as-comic-book paradigm a long time, ages even, since it’s narrated in your head and who’s to say we’re not in some sketched frame right now being followed by a powerless but sympathetic audience rooting for each of us to succeed?). Since you couldn’t be Lucas, it meant a lot when he let you near him, let you soak up how he did things. You felt chosen.

Like the time Charles and me were maybe fourteen—that would mean Lucas was like seventeen—and he had us and this other kid, Emmet Bell, we’re piled in his Mustang tearing up the two-lanes and I forget why we stopped in the parking lot of this strip mall but there we were —Lucas needed booze or smokes probably. We were sitting in a parking lot anyway, watching these other kids in a car a few spots over ignoring how they’ve parked beneath a bright overhead lamp where anybody can see them pouring liquor into plastic cups and passing them around to the guys in the back seat, mixing the drinks with cola it looked like. Clean-cut boys, each of whom surely honored their mothers and so on, and so already they sucked as far as we cared. Lucas stares at them with his hands tight on the steering wheel while me, Charles, and Bell got stupid pulling each other’s handle. Lucas doesn’t take his hands off the wheel, he doesn’t move his eyes off those kids in the other car. He says, Hey, and we shut up. Then he says, You gentlemen up for some fun? That’s what he called us whenever we were together, gentlemen—tho he said it gennilmen—one of his funny ways, like a joke and respect at the same time.

Lucas says, Check this out. From under his seat he pulls this fancy leather foldout wallet, and on one side there’s a police badge as real as day and on the other some kind of official-looking ID with his picture on it. Charles asks, Where’d that come from? but his brother’s look tells him to shut it. Lucas instructs him to get out and carry this mag flashlight so everyone can see it, and to stand there like he’s pissed—
but don’t get any closer than the hood of their car, they see your kid face they’ll never buy in.

We didn’t know what he planned to see but we rolled down our windows to watch. The boys didn’t even see Lucas coming they were so into that vodka. His big silver ring made a chilly tapping against the windshield—a Honda Prelude, I remember, and not my kind of auto but a fast one still and one I bet none of those kids inside had anything to do with the buying of.

A man cannot price the terror we saw in those faces! Lucas was just getting started. He flashes the badge and orders the driver out of the car and drops some line about how he and his juvie partner there have been casing this liquor store awhile. He has the driver hold up his cup and Lucas smells it, shoots a look to Charles—who’s doing his best to look jaded while struggling with a flashlight as long as his arm—and shakes his head. He tells everyone in the car to pass their cups to him and they do; they were those big red plastic cups you see at picnics, and he lines them up on the hood and starts in, asking what would they do if they were in his shoes, adding that it was his sworn duty to stamp out under age drinking and save lives. None of the kids have a real answer. He watches the driver pour out the cups onto the pavement.

Then he tells Charles to give him the flashlight, and frowns as he shines it over the interior.

What all you got there, you stocking up for a party or what?

He pulls out two grocery bags heavy with bottles, sets them on the hood. The driver’s looking off somewhere past the car with his hands plunged in five-pocket jeans and you can tell he wishes he could plausibly claim he has nothing to do with any of this. Lucas stares hard at the bags, gives a quick look inside. He stares hard at the driver, and his demeanor turns weary and disappointed; he tongues the back of his mouth at the boys inside sitting quiet with their best I’m-a-good-kid-please-don’t-tell-my-parents looks. He scratches the side of his head with the flashlight, thinking.

Tell you what I’m going to do . . . , he says after a long, Lucas-type silence.

He told them his shift was ending and he hated paperwork. He told them tonight they got off with a warning, but only if they swore never to return to that liquor store again, even once they were of age. And he sounded almost apologetic for having to confiscate the bags
of booze there, they must have cost a lot, but let that be a lesson.

And these kids, they fell for it. For ten, fifteen minutes there we couldn’t even recognize Lucas, this embodiment of Public Safety and Semper Vigilatus, the young undercover cop burdened by his own authority—qualities I wished for but knew I did not possess, my acceptance of which I hoped my “readers” would note and thus feel a large degree of empathy for me. And what loot! Gallons of good bourbon, vodka, and Cuervo—those boys were buying for some serious celebration.

Me and Charles and Emmet were extolling the awesomeness that was our Lucas, Emmet announcing we’d puke tonight for sure. Lucas wasn’t listening, he was watching the Prelude pull away, all cautious and slow and chagrined. Then he leers into the rearview and says, Wonder where that party is?

He guns that monster Mustang engine and before anyone says anything we’re up behind the Prelude at the stoplight. Charles leans out the window, hoisting a bottle of Old Forrester like a trophy in triumph, yelling, We’re gonna rip you mama’s boys! between blasts from the horn.

The Prelude spins off like they want a race—a big mistake with Lucas at the wheel. We’re flying in and out of traffic, and every now and then glimpse a concerned face peering through the rear windshield and I didn’t say as much to my friends but I felt the same, being a for-real pantywaist alter-ego of a superhero and one without any superpowers at that—and yet, believing at this age that not only was I like said alter-ego but actually was, with an invisible audience rooting for the good-guy sad-sack hero (me), et cetera, and that in every comic book no matter how daunting the circumstances the defeats were only fleeting, though real and affecting enough, still: fleeting and eventually overcome. Lucas drives right up onto their bumper, they take off again, and the whole time he’s telling us what’s going down inside their car and what’s going to happen next as if he had already read this story.

Gennilman, he said, These are kids that never hear the word No, not even from Mom and Dad, and we just humiliated them. Right now they’re scared. They don’t know how many of us are in this car or what we’ll do. So they’re going to lead us to their party where they’ll have numbers and they’re hoping to whup us there. So be ready. . . .

He never asked if we were down with that. And he was right with
what the other guys were doing; the Prelude stopped trying to shake us. They pulled into a subdivision of huge houses and sprawling treeless lawns and with those fake old-time gaslight lamps on the sidewalks. Street signs hung on black plaques like shop shingles. Soon we could see there was a party on somewhere, there were cars up and down both sides of the road, and the Prelude stopped before one glowing mansion and the kid jumps out in full sprint to the front door and Lucas says, *Here we go*—

The retribution we suffered was swift and complete. I went down easier than even I had expected, folded up at the first punch. Charles held his own for a minute or two, but Emmet bailed on sight, bolting a flat-foot skedaddle up the sidewalk as the house spilled an endless flood of boys. But it was Lucas we would remember the rest of our days, his crazy laughter as he pummeled two to the ground and then briefly held his own against three who wrestled him into the side of the car, taking punishment until it required only one boy to keep him there, standing him up while the others got their fill. I watched as the blows fell, my cheek smashed into wet grass and a knee pressed onto the back of my head. Then I closed my eyes and listened as Lucas, still laughing, still talking, coughed out *Is that all you got? C’mon, that all you got?*

This was me and who I was and I’ve no way to describe how it felt—only that we were each on his own and nobody was rooting for us, and we were not even rooting for one another. It’s this moment I think of when I see what I have become.
Gayle Hanratty

THE SCENT OF SASSAFRAS

Louis was already forty-eight years old when he touched down in our midst. Before that, his life had consisted entirely of work, church, the war and its remnants, maintaining the chalky matte finish on his ‘53 Dodge pick-up, and little else, unless you count the occasional date with one of Grove City’s few unmarried women.

Why, after all those years of bachelorhood, he decided to marry my mother, Sal Barkley, was a mystery to all who knew him. He had to have heard ‘the talk’ about her fiery temper, not to mention the fact that having been widowed six years earlier, she’d been left with three daughters to raise. There was even talk of that temper of hers contributing indirectly to her widowhood.

But, on a frigid February morning in 1955, Louis married her anyway. Penny was ten and Nicole was twelve at the time—not particularly the best ages for girls to welcome a new man into their lives. Nicole took every opening to tell him, “You are not my daddy.”

I’m Heddy, and I was five and a half at the time of the nuptials and hadn’t spent much time around men. After the honeymoon, when Louis moved in—not just into our house, but into the bedroom I had shared my whole life with my mother, I speculated warily as to what else I might lose—my preferred place at the supper table by the window, my station between mom and Penny in the pew; who knew?

Lucky for him, I was completely in awe of the oodles of tools, chests, hooks, ramps, creepers, and assorted liquids for powering, cleaning, and quieting engines that he had brought to this union; none of which could possibly have fit inside mom’s orderly female domicile.

In order to accommodate this influx of stuff, additional storage was needed. So, by the spring of 1956, mom and Louis had made up their minds to build a two-bay garage in the backyard of our white clapboard house on Magnolia Street. One side would be slated for sheltering her green Ford and the other for parking his two-toned pick-up, as well as for storing his trove of tools.

The project got rolling with the arrival of a gargantuan yellow bulldozer with the name Euclid inscribed on its side. The operator drove the growling mammoth onto the premises where it began
devouring the low hill at the end of the driveway, carving the footprint for a foundation. Penny, Nicole, and I watched the dozer heap its leftovers to the sides and back of the growing cavity, creating a mound that would eventually bound the garage on three sides.

When the driver motioned for me to join him on the seat of the overgrown tractor, I jumped at the chance. I looked around to make sure mom wasn’t there to stop me as Louis boosted me up. I waved to my sisters and Louis from my perch. I sat straight and tall like I was on a throne or the back of an elephant. Penny had gotten her camera from the house; she aimed the Brownie at me, taking a snapshot of this momentous (at least for me) event.

I breathed the scent of the red clay and exposed sassafras roots deep into my chest; I scanned the sky to find the sun, and took my own mental snapshots of the surroundings and of Louis’s face to remember that day forever.

So, I recall thinking, this is what it’s like to have a dad.

Mom and Louis both took off work the week of spring break to be with us and to begin construction on the garage. First thing Monday morning, I joined Nicole and Penny at the picnic table—lined up like birds on a wire—waiting for the production to begin. We watched for hours as Louis poured a narrow concrete foundation along all four sides of Euclid’s rectangle. We repeated this vigil two days later as Louis began to adhere row upon row of concrete blocks to the top of the stripe.

Mom watched with us, sipping her coffee. Even on her days off, her coffee cup was rimmed with the fragranace of her cardinal red lipstick. We asked her why Louis staggered the blocks instead of stacking one on top of the other. “It makes the wall stronger that way,” she said. Then, when Louis waved his newly adopted daughters over and handed each of us a triangular tool, my mother opened her mouth to put a stop to what she thought could only end badly, but went inside instead. Even Nicole grabbed a trowel.

“Just like icing a cake,” Louis instructed.

Penny and Nicole lasted about fifteen minutes before deciding to join our mom indoors. They still hadn’t decided if Louis suited them or not. Penny said he wasn’t anything like Poppy, our real dad.

Louis laid ten blocks to my one.

When the time came to put the shingles on the roof, Louis climbed up the wooden ladder, and I followed wearing a nail apron tied twice
around my waist. I scooted to the place he was working and began dispensing roofing nails three at a time—two for his mouth and one for the hammer.

“Sit still a minute,” Louis said. Then he edged behind me and nailed an eight-foot two-by-four to the roof.

“Shove your feet against that plank,” he said, pointing his hammer toward the wooden slat. “That way you won’t slide.”

I snugged my PF-Flyers tight to the board.

The only time I slipped was when mom shrieked out the window in a voice every bit as earsplitting as the twelve-o’clock whistle.

“For crying out loud,” she yelled. “Get Heddy off that roof before you kill her. Ivan Barkley’ll haunt us both if you let anything happen to her.”

I found the window that framed mom’s frantic face.

“Heddy’s fine. I made sure of it,” Louis said.

I shifted my eyes between them as they argued over my safety. Until Louis came along, I’d obeyed mom’s wishes almost faster than she could get them out of her mouth.

“I won’t be able to get a thing done until she’s off that roof. Now get her down.”

All he said was, “I won’t let her fall.”

I looked back at the window and she was gone. Every few minutes I’d check to see if the expression on his face had changed—to see if tolerance had turned to tedium.

Besides my grandmother, Mam, Louis was the only other adult I knew who seemed to enjoy the company of a kid. It made me wonder about Ivan Barkley, the poppy I’d never known. Would he have taken pleasure in my company the way Mam and Louis seemed to? My mother and my sisters had often lamented his passing and expressed sadness over my never having laid eyes on him. I tried to make myself feel sad about it too. I thought it might prove a useful exoneration sometime should I find myself in hot water. But, I couldn’t seem to muster the sorrow for it.

Penny and Nicole always referred to our real dad as Poppy, but I called him Ivan since that’s what mom called him. Ivan had died when he fell off the grain silo he was building. They had all lived in Louisville until Ivan died. Then, once I was born a few months later, mom moved all of us back to Grove City so she could get a job, and so Mam could help her with my sisters and me. All mom ever talked about was how much better everything had been in Louisville—the
people, the doctors, the houses, the movies, the stores—she had a long list.

Mom said that before Ivan died, without even knowing I was on the way, that he told her if they ever had another daughter that he’d like for her to be named Heddy—after his grandmother. I can live with ‘Heddy,’ and I’m very happy they didn’t go with the grandmother’s given name that was Hedwig—which sounds like some bug that lives in a person’s ear.

After we finished the roof, I helped him putty-in wavy glass panes for windows, and when the local quarry dumped three loads of gravel, it took all of us to rake it into the garage and all over the driveway. But the high point came when Louis attached a basketball hoop to the peak of the garage roof. I figured he had meant it as a surprise since he’d pulled the rusted iron halo and half-moon of plywood from beneath a tarp in the bed of his truck like he’d been hiding it.

When mom saw the ‘surprise,’ she pursed her lips in a way that usually meant she was displeased. “I don’t recall our discussing this,” she said. “I won’t have you turning all three of these girls into tomboys,” she said, cocking her eyes toward me. “Besides, you can’t bounce a ball on this gravel.” Hearing neither agreement nor argument, she flattened her palms to the small of her spine, leaned her head back, and examined the perfect blue spring sky. It seemed to me that she was getting the idea that the rhythm of her ironing, sweeping, and breathing would soon beat to the crunch and clunks of dribbles and shots.

Not a month after the rim had been mounted I was awakened in the middle of the night by a boing scrunch, boing scrunch scrunch, that was followed with hushed laughter and words I could barely make out. I pulled back the sheer curtain next to my bed and saw my mother aiming the basketball at the goal and Louis standing next to her, demonstrating the required arm and leg movements for shooting a free throw.

“Bend your knees,” he said as he poked at the back of her legs.

“Now cradle the ball in front of you with your left hand and push it toward the basket with the other.”

It was early Saturday morning and they’d been to a dance the night before at St. George’s Knights of Columbus hall.

_Boing scrunch._ “I can’t hit that dang hole,” she said as she stumbled slightly backwards, giggling. I thought about waking my sisters as I watched mom and Louis doubled over in laughter. I sat
back on my heels half pleased, half jealous, but completely astonished at seeing her seeming to have a good time.

“I don’t think you’ll make the team,” Louis said. Sal slapped at him in mock anger, and he put his arm around her waist and led her toward the house. It was a scene as foreign and unfamiliar as the ocean and palm trees I had eyed for hours on the picture postcards from our aunt in California.

Now with the garage finished and crowned by the hoop and backboard, it didn’t take long for the locals to chance dropping by with overheated motors and faltering engines. Maybe they saw Louis loitering outside more evenings than before or maybe they just mistook the garage’s purpose. Whatever the reason, Grove Citians began showing up with their mowers, cars, and pick-ups for Louis to fix. And much to my mother’s miff over the resulting clutter and mess, fix them he did—though only after having worked all day in another man’s garage. Since leaving the army, where he’d learned his trade, Louis had spent the intervening twenty-four years working as a mechanic at Cooper Motors.

It didn’t take a genius to realize that Louis was in his element when in communion with a motor. Even though he seldom had much to say, I could tell he was happy by the way he hummed, whistled, or manipulated his toothpick while he worked. His face and eyes looked calmer and steadier when he was gazing into an engine—a focus that made it seem like he could smell or hear or sense the cause of the trouble before he could actually see it. My hunch was confirmed on a sunny Saturday in 1960 when Daniel Vertrees showed up with his ’53 Mercury. I thought Louis was practically a magician the way he instantly uncovered the difficulty.

“It doesn’t want to start up in the mornings,” Vertrees explained, leaning his head out the car window. “Won’t turn over for almost five minutes, just keeps grinding.” He ran his finger in circles to indicate the repetition. “Think you can fix it?”

“Cut the engine,” Louis said, and he raised the Merc’s hood. When Daniel Vertrees tried to start it again, Louis leaned his head in close and listened to the err erring for a while then touched a wand-like screwdriver to some mysterious spot deep in the motor. “Try her now,” he said. The troubled vehicle started right up.

Louis wiped his hands and the screwdriver with a clean rag. “Probably the solenoid,” he said. “You’ll need a new one.”

I had seen Louis install these coils of wire, and he’d explained
how the solenoid had to do with magnets and electricity and getting current to the starter. But even after watching him secure it in place with pins and bolts, and connecting the wires to ones deep inside the motor, I still didn’t understand its workings. The beauty for me was not the precision of the engine or the smooth hum of a motor with all its cylinders snapping, it was the precision and hum of Louis making it all flow like 10w30 motor oil.

I was shooting baskets a day or two later when Daniel Vertrees strolled up the driveway. He put his cigarette between his lips and pouched his hands in front of his bushel-basket belly. I passed him the ball. He took a step closer and fired up a lead-footed jump shot, then two more. “Is she ready?” he asked Louis in a breathless wheeze, this time sinking his attempt.

Louis nodded, lit a Tareyton, and used it to point to the Merc’s wheels. “You’ve only got about another thousand miles on those tires,” he said. “Cooper’s putting their Goodyear’s half price on Saturday.”

Daniel Vertrees bounce-passed the basketball to me and stepped away from the imaginary foul line. “Thanks,” he said, resting his palms on his knees and sucking in big gulps of air. Finally, he caught his breath and was able to trawl a twenty out of his wallet.

“That oughtta cover it,” the magician said, stuffing the crisp bill in his pocket.

I was hoping that mom wasn’t watching because I knew she’d complain for half an hour about how little Mr. Vertrees had paid for the work. She always twisted her mouth into a sour look whenever she saw Louis accept whatever payment the customer offered. One day, to appease her, Louis agreed to draw up a menu of prices for the different services he provided to display or furnish folks when they first showed up. She even went to the trouble of typing and mimeographing copies for him. But the sheets wound up under a bevy of tools and used motor parts and never in the grip of a single patron. Mom was too neat and organized to appreciate the beauty and creativity of Louis’s ways. But she finally gave up, especially once Louis tendered the wad of cash he pocketed each week.

Mom never stayed around the garage long enough to see that there was perfection and proportion in Louis’s seeming disarray. If one looked closely, a pattern as natural and intuitive as Euclid’s golden ratio would begin to emerge; as a rag was never more than an arm’s length away, the tools used most often were alternately splayed
and spiraled atop the workbench, and the cost of the service provided always precisely paralleled that of the payment offered. Over the months and years, I became as familiar with the layout and location of the garage’s paraphernalia as Louis, and could even offer a bit of assistance.

If Louis said, “Hand me a three-quarter,” I could pick the wrench out of the red Craftsman drawer and slap it in his palm as crisply as the nurses on the Dr. Kildare Show handed him his scalpels. And on top of learning to tell if the stain on the driveway was caused by a transmission leak or an oil leak, I learned that it was okay to be on the quiet side—even if mom did call me bashful. After all, Louis was quiet and he seemed to get along in the world.

Though I couldn’t have spoken it then, at age ten or eleven, I’d already suspected that of all the tools in Louis’s chest, the most valuable was his peaceful heart. I knew this the same way I had sensed that the one-true-religion doctrine taught by the well-intentioned and pious nuns at St. George’s was not exactly the gospel truth; that neither the pagan babies for whom we were urged to pray, nor my Baptist cousins could possibly be sentenced to purgatory or damned to hell just for not being Catholic like me. When I mentioned my theory to Louis, he said he thought I might be right, but that it might be best if I kept it to myself.

Louis and I passed countless hours wordlessly puttering and pondering in our temple of tools. But then came the times when the quiet hum of activity would be replaced by snores and rumbles when Louis had, once again, fallen asleep. Ever since he’d come to live with us, I had noticed that he was prone to spontaneous napping, but it was sometime after my tenth birthday that I realized his catnaps had begun to increase.

I’d find him dead asleep, lying half under a Ford on Lazy Louie—the rolling board Louis used to scoot himself under cars—or nodding his head at the breakfast table with his hand still wrapped around his coffee cup. When I’d come upon him in this state, I’d drop a spoon in the sink, or a wrench on the ground, or I’d taunt our dog, Freckles, into barking. Louis would then break into a whistle or a sputter to let me know he’d come to, or to try and make me think he hadn’t been sleeping at all.

Neither downpours, July’s steamy heat, nor Louis’s impromptu naps could keep me away from the garage. A musty place already, the rain
and humidity intensified the smells and gave the air a slippery texture that slickened the garage’s trappings along with my own hair and hide. This atmosphere led to sleepy afternoons and evenings that seemed to stretch farther than the clock truly measured.

Only a dire need to use the bathroom would press either of us to venture indoors. But on each one’s return, a fresh refill of tea would be smuggled out. Were the day stormy and windy, we would often have to scoot our chairs a few feet deeper into our sanctuary to stay dry.

One particularly gray and drizzly Sunday afternoon in ‘61, I had slipped indoors to refill our glasses when I heard my mother, Penny and Nicole talking in the sewing room.

“It’s a shame she’s not a boy,” Penny said over the whirr of the Singer.

“I know what you mean,” my mother replied. “He’d worship the very ground a boy walked on.”

I squatted on my haunches to listen.

“She acts nearly like a boy now,” Nicole said. “Never washes her hair and smells like some pint-sized grease monkey.” All three of them started to laugh and I pulled a piece of hair under my nose like a mustache.

Here all along I’d thought Louis was okay with me the way I was. A twinge of something I didn’t understand pinched at my chest and made me want to cry. I thought about creeping into my mother’s bedroom and hiding her favorite cameo earrings like I’d done when she hadn’t let me keep Goldie. Mam had told me I could have the yellow kitten if it was okay with my mother. Mom never missed the cameo clip-ons, because I returned them to their rightful place the next day. But, for just a little while, it had made me feel satisfied and in-control to be the only one who’d known where her prized jewelry had been hidden. I wanted to feel that way now. But instead of stealing again, I slipped back outside to the solace of the garage and Louis.

“Where’s our drinks?” he asked. I slouched in my chair not answering and stared in the direction of the rain. Freckles jumped in my lap and Louis returned to the mower blade he was sharpening. I pulled my hair up on top of my head and slapped on the Cincinnati Reds baseball cap I kept in the garage, the same one that my mother had threatened to burn if she saw me wearing it again. I pulled the hem of my faded, over-sized T-shirt to my face and wiped my runny nose.
As Louis was honing the mower's blade to a knife edge, I blurted out over the harsh scrape of the grinder, “Bet you wish you’d married somebody who had a boy instead of all these girls?”

Louis slowly straightened his bent frame and unplugged the grinder. He sauntered over and sat his chair next to mine. I couldn’t see his face, but I knew his eyes would look tender. He picked up a rag and wiped the grass stains off his hands. Those hands of his that could fix just about anything always got my attention. Grime was permanently imbedded in his fingerprints and his palms were calloused and rough. He regularly trimmed his fingernails, but not short like most men’s, he left enough nail to assist with picking up slender gaskets and pins that often fell through a motor to the ground.

Then, in a voice as quiet as the rain, he asked, “What’s this? “Mom and them say you wish I was a boy. I heard them talking when I went in. Said you’d worship the very ground a boy walked on.” I bit back tears, not wanting to seem like a crybaby. I was content spending time with Louis and it about killed me to think mom and my sisters might be right. Freckles lapped at my salty fingers.

Louis took a long drag on his cigarette, brushed silvery dust off his shirt, and exhaled smoke into the clammy air. “You want me to worship you?” he asked, angling his head toward me.

“Noooo,” I said, meaning ‘yes.’

“To tell you the truth, I haven’t had the first thought about it—boy, girl—don’t seem to matter much to me. We do all right, don’t we squirt?” He snapped his rag at my chair.

I looked at his rugged and grooved face and thought about how he had never given any indication that I might come up lacking in the gender department or in any other area for that matter. I smiled at him and grabbed at the rag. “I guess so,” I said, and Louis returned to grinding the blade. I lifted that hat just enough to release my hair back down my spine.

It must have rained or stormed everyday that week, leaving the ground littered with twigs and leaves. By Saturday the weather had cleared, and it had cooled off a little. When I came outside that morning, I was surprised to see that all the cars and mowers had been picked up by their owners. The only vehicles around were his truck and her new blue Falcon.

“Let’s clean this place up,” Louis said, leaning against the garage doorframe with his arms folded.
He let me back the car and the truck onto the driveway to empty both garage bays. I lined up two chairs while Louis filled a Maxwell House coffee can with carburetor cleaner. He sat the can on the ground between the chairs and laid a couple work rags over its lip. I gathered the crescents, pliers, and ratchets that littered the surface of the spongy, grease-coated workbench. The wrenches were encrusted with a grainy, black muck that made the fractions engraved on their necks indecipherable. I dumped as many tools into the cleaner as the can would hold. I turned on the radio and Louis seated a toothpick between his teeth, as that always seemed to help him put off smoking.

We each pulled a single shank out of the fluid and scrubbed to the beat of Hank Williams’ *Jambalaya*.

*Goodbye Joe, we gotta go,*  
*Me Oh, My Oh*

“Why doesn’t the tea spill over my glass when the ice melts?” I asked, wiping at the jaws of a pair of pliers and watching my glass sweat in the languid August humidity.

“Fills up the same place as the cubes,” he answered, grabbing another tool.

I took a swig of my drink and stared at the glass. I felt like I was seeing it for the first time. I considered his answer, which seemed to make such perfect sense, and wondered why I hadn’t figured it out myself. I sat the glass in front of me and watched the cubes turn to water. I pulled out another wrench.

“What does it feel like to have a heart attack?” I asked, recalling an uncle’s recent mild coronary.

“Like a ton of bricks, right in the ticker,” he said, gazing at his grime-free wrench as if he could see his reflection in it.

“What are you thinking about, Daddy?”

“What else?”

“I’m thinking there’s just enough yard mess from the storm to make a decent fire.”

*Son of gun, we’ll have big fun*  
*On the bayou*
The soaking and wiping and re-stowing took us until after three-thirty. And when I saw Louis grab a rake, I knew he was fixing to build the fire. I ran in the house and yelled to my mother and sisters, “Daddy’s raking up sticks for a fire. Want to have a roast?”

“This is sure to ruin our supper—eating at four o’clock,” Sal said as she lowered her skewered marshmallows and hot dog into the blaze. “But it’s a heck of a fine way to do it.” Her normal scowl had softened into a look as mellow as that of cat just awakened from its nap. What more could she ask for, I thought—a simple supper, no dishes to wash, no cars cluttering her driveway, and a clean garage.

As I stuffed three gooey white orbs in my mouth, I noticed mom looking at my hands that were every bit as grimy as Louis’s. Wrinkles deepened around her mouth and between her eyebrows, but she kept eating. It seemed like mom might have finally accepted the fact that dirt was not lethal. If it was, her second husband would certainly be dead by now.

The five of us sat around the fireplace full-belly satisfied until the only things left were embers and crickets. Mom, Penny, and Nicole tossed their paper plates into what was left of the fire and returned to the house to finish their Saturday routine—cleaning, sewing, baking, and ironing before Dick Clark and Perry Mason came on.

While Louis shoveled the ashes into a five-gallon bucket to cool, I scooped up the towels he’d placed in a pile for washing, the rags we used over and over to wipe our hands, tools, car parts, spills, and spits. It was most likely these rags that were the carriers of the ‘garage smell’ my mother and sisters liked to complain about.

After dumping the rags into the washer, I returned and found Louis sitting on a nail keg against a wall inside his orderly garage. He’d re-parked the cars in the bays and must have sat down to rest. As I got closer, I noticed his hands in his lap, they were barely holding on to his open billfold. Then the evenness of his breath and sagging head and shoulders told me he’d drifted off again. I looked at his pants and shirt, and like all his work clothes, they were vented with cigarette burns from all the times he’d fallen asleep smoking.

I figured he had been checking to see if he had enough cash for tomorrow morning’s collection plate when he’d dozed off. I started singing along with the radio as loud as I could.
“You think old Freck needs a bath while we’re at it?” Louis asked, clearing his throat and stuffing his wallet back in his hip pocket. I groaned, thinking I should’ve let him sleep, and began filling the metal washtub for the ensuing dog wash. I wouldn’t hear of, or read about narcolepsy until I was in college.

It wasn’t much later that fall that I ran inside the house, slamming the door as usual in hopes that it would wake him. I had raced inside ahead of my mother to make sure he hadn’t burnt another hole in the rug, scorched the tabletop with his cigarette, or left a pot of coffee to boil dry on the stove. Earlier in the day, I had ridden with my mother to take Nicole and Penny back to boarding school after a weekend visit. She insisted that they go to the expensive school even though she could scarcely afford it. It was where the ‘best’ families at St. George’s sent their girls for high school, including our Barkley cousins and the Coopers.

When I got to the living room, the World Series was on TV and a smoke cloud swarmed up from the chair and swirled in front of Louis’s gaping mouth.

“Wake up, Daddy,” I screamed, picking up his glass and tossing lukewarm tea in his lap. Louis jumped out of the chair, exposing a four-inch fissure seared into the pink flowered cushion, its edges were brown and ragged, and the beige cottony stuffing inside it smoldered and reeked.

“Did you get burned? I asked, setting the glass back on the coaster. I folded my arms across my chest, trying to hold back the churning terror.

He examined the thighs of his coveralls, “Only a little singed,” he said, and then hurried to the kitchen to get a towel.

I was fanning the smoke when my mother walked in.

“What’s that smell?” she asked. “What’ve you done?”

Louis showed Sal the damage. He apologized and promised, “I’ll get you a new one,” referring to the disfigured chair.

Mom’s mouth fell open. “You could’ve burnt down the house! Killed yourself!” Her eyes were fierce and angry in their glare. Her arm reached out and I gasped, thinking she was about to slap Louis’s
face. Instead she snatched the cushion off the chair and disappeared in the direction of the sewing room. I put my hands over my ears to muffle the house-jarring door slam I knew would follow.

“Guess I deserved that,” my father said with a frown, and then he collected his ashtray and glass and turned off the Reds and the Yankees as he ambled out of the room.

He sat down at the kitchen table where I was making baloney and Miracle Whip sandwiches. We ate silently focused on our plates and our concerns. I wished that Penny and Nicole were around to soothe mom’s nerves, as it was something I had never been able to do.

Louis stuffed a potato chip in his mouth and said, “I could use your help changing the wheels on Nelson’s mower when we’re done eating.” He said it as calmly as if the events of the last hour had never happened, then he bit into another chip.

I pulled the entire rim of crust off my bread and was molding it into letters and shapes on the Formica surface. “I sort of wish you’d quit smoking,” I said, intent on the shapes I’d drawn.

He downed the last of his tea and fished a toothpick out of his shirt pocket. “Did you happen to catch who won that ballgame?” Having gotten the answer I’d fully expected, I stood to clear the table to hide my sniffing and tears.

“I think the Reds were up. I’ll be out after I wash the dishes.”

When I ventured out to the garage, I saw a man I didn’t recognize standing with one foot on the bumper of Louis’s Dodge. He gestured toward an ancient brown and white saddle-oxford of a Chevrolet that was as rusty and hump-backed as Mam.

“She hasn’t got an ounce of pep,” the man was saying. “And she cuts out when I push on the gas to go up a hill.” I watched Louis raise the hood of the ailing metal geezer and work his magic by merely tightening down the spark plugs.

“Give her a try,” Louis said. The man started the old girl. “Now, gun it.” Then Louis advised the man to drive around town a couple times, making sure he took the hill on Main Street.

Within fifteen minutes the stranger was steering the antique between the two overgrown yews on either side of the driveway. He was grinning so big you’d have thought he was driving a brand new Cadillac. I had to stifle my own grin as the man shoved a handful of bills into Louis’s palm. I hoped mom was watching this time.

After the man left, I climbed onto the roof of the Dodge truck’s
cab, resting my legs on the windshield. Daddy squatted as effortlessly as Yogi Berra on the garage floor, changing the wheels on Nelson’s lawnmower. He could sit that way for an hour or more—flat footed—Chinese.

There was a cork board nailed above the workbench, and pinned to it were spare keys and notes and even a faded copy of the price list my mother had typed years before. Next to it was that snapshot of me sitting on Euclid when I was just five years old.

In the zigzag-edged photo, I was sitting aloft and gazing down at him—much like now. Those hands of his were resting on his hips and his head was arced back looking up at me on the seat of the dozer. Atop the truck, I closed my eyes and inhaled the root beer scent of sassafras and the cool dampness of freshly turned red clay. I could feel the sun’s warming rays even though today’s had already dissolved below the horizon. For the moment I was back there, innocent and protected.

My eyes resisted opening as my mind wanted to stay where it was, but a familiar rasp beckoned me from my fantasy. I slid on my rear down the windshield to the hood and kept sliding until my shoes caught the bumper. It was an easy step to the ground where, still in his baseball catcher’s squat, his snoring wheezed full-mouthed. I stared at the burning cigarette that had fallen from his yellow-stained fingers. Out of habit, my foot slid toward it to crush it, but halted mid-step. Instead, I bent down and tweezed my thumb and index finger on either side of the half-smoked butt and raised it to my lips. After two or three puffs, I dropped it and ground it out with my toe; then clamoring through a drawer of wrenches, I let a half-inch crescent clatter and rattle and clang.
Chervis Isom

THE SADDEST NOTE, NEW ORLEANS, 2004

Windows all afog, the streetcar screeched to a halt on the slick tracks. The doors swung open and we leaped aboard, relieved to get out of the rain. I dropped coins in the slot and, as the car jolted into motion, we lurched down the aisle.

Exhausted, my wife Martha dropped onto the bench seat, rivulets from her raincoat soaking into the tweedy fabric, scummy from dozens of wet riders throughout the day. A long walk in the rain on Magazine Street had worn us down as we visited shop after shop, even though we had stopped once for coffee and pastries and again for lunch. We had made our way over to St. Charles and caught the trolley toward downtown and our hotel. It was only the second day of our short vacation and already the rain had dampened not only our clothes but also our spirits.

It was then that we heard the sound, a protracted, mournful note, rising in intensity, then falling, sad and lonely as Taps when lights go out, but this was not Taps and though we were tired the day was not yet done.

A few seats behind us, a thin, young, black man sat, trumpet to his lips, head bowed, eyes closed against the world.

The note hung in the air, slowly intensified, then, dropping into a lower register, it withered into a ragged, lifeless plea, flickering weakly like a candle as it gutters out . . . then after a breath, began again a similar litany—a never ending cry of pain.

It was the sound an inarticulate child might have made if separated from its mother, the sound of despair as deep as a moonless night.

Was he stoned? Was he going home after having been fired from his job? Had his wife told him he was worthless and thrown him out? Did he have hungry children at home, and the banker had turned him down for a loan? It had been years before, but I too had felt that kind of despair.

As the note hovered around me, drawing me into myself, reminding me of the despair I too had felt, Miles Davis and his “Sketches of Spain” came to mind, the saddest sound I thought I’d ever heard drawn from a musical instrument.
The hair on my neck sprang up and a shiver vibrated down my spine. I hunched my shoulders, drawing my elbows into my ribs, against the autumn chill and the wilting note.

“Knock it off, you weirdo!”

The words snapped me to attention. A beefy middle aged man from the back of the car bolted to his feet, his face red and enraged.

One hand gripping the pole, the other clenched into a fist, crouching, legs spread, spoiling for a fight, he towered over the trumpeter.

“I said, knock it off. You got no right to blow that horn in here, disturbing the peace like this!”

The trumpet never wavered, though the wailing ceased for a moment. The trumpeter lifted his eyes, but they were fearless and flat and far away, lifeless and opaque. Then his eyelids slowly sank against the assailant as he resumed in a lower range his anguished moan.

I have never been one to leap into action. My nature has always been to think it through. I think humanity is made up of two kinds of folks—the Thinkers and the Doers. Whenever on those occasions I’ve decided that action was justified, the need had usually by then been met by someone else. So in that moment, as I dithered, my Martha leaped from her seat, brandishing her dripping umbrella like a sword.

“Get back to your seat, you idiot!”

She nailed him with her eyes, her umbrella cocked for action.

He glared as he retreated, but could not meet the unwavering gaze of the resolute school teacher.

Muttering, the beefy man dissolved into his seat and pulled his hat low over his eyes in embarrassment.

She abandoned the attacker to his own humiliation, then planted herself, a personification of primitive maternal instinct, beside the young man. I took my position beside her, to show my full support. The lightning coruscating from her golden warrior eyes challenged everyone . . . even me . . . as I dug deeper and deeper within myself.

I said nothing as we lurched along, our stop having long passed by.

Unperturbed, the trumpeter’s single note wailed and bent and broke and wailed again in unceasing pain . . .

In tandem with the screeching of the trolley on the tracks . . .

In tandem with the screeching in my heart.
Katie Fraser Carpenter

ZILLAH

Zillah’s story begins when she learns that her self-absorbed parents, both fixated on their academic careers, intend to leave the small West Kentucky town of Dunbar where they have lived for three months. Zillah, who has lived in fifteen places in her twelve years, is tired of moving and anxious to retain her position in the school as the library assistant. She rebels, and, convincing her parents she is staying with the neighbor whose dog she walks, moves into a storage closet in the school library, shifting boxes and piles of discarded books to create a hideaway just big enough for her sleeping bag, her clothes, a few groceries, and a row of stuffed animals. She lives there, undetected, for four months—although she has a few close calls.

The school building is more than a century old, and Zillah is captivated by the old school yearbooks she finds in her hideaway. She imagines the former students roaming the hallways at night; they begin to invade her dreams. She’s also fascinated by the massive World War II memorial on the school’s front lawn. A short story she writes about the people whose names are etched on the monument is the catalyst for a History Day project on the community’s response to World War II. As the project nears completion, Zillah’s dreams intensify; she is repeatedly visited by a student who attends the school in 1941.

In this excerpt, near the end of the middle grades novel, Zillah realizes a devastating truth.

27 The only way through is to go through

The most important email of Zillah’s life came at 9:30 on a Wednesday night, just before she went to bed. It was from Tim.

Zillah Marie Sullivan says hello. Actually, she says ‘Waaaaaa!’ Six pounds, four ounces. All ten fingers and all ten toes.

I hope you’re okay with the name.

Her new little niece was named Zillah. There truly was magic in the world. Yesterday there was one Zillah; now there were two. Maybe more, but these two were the only ones who mattered.
The next morning, before class, Zillah borrowed Sophie’s phone and called Tim’s number. Her heart was thumping madly, but he didn’t answer, and she nearly cried with disappointment. She left a message, and the phone rang almost immediately.

“I’m sorry,” Tim said. “We didn’t want everybody calling.”

“Is Deanna okay? Are you okay? What does the baby look like?”

Tim laughed. “We’re all fine. Deanna is fine—skinnier than she used to be. And the baby is beautiful. She looks just like her mama.”

Deanna wanted to talk to her. “Congratulations to you, too,” she said, her voice a little slurred, a little drowsy. “You’re an aunt now.”

Tim took the phone back.

“Only three weeks till the big performance?” he asked. “If the doctor says my girls can travel, we’ll be there.”

Later that afternoon, when she should have been in class, Zillah sat on the steps of the monument beside Ashleigh and leaned back, letting the sun play on her face. It was a beautiful blue-sky day with just enough of a breeze to make the leaves rustle and the newly-bloomed jonquils bob their heads.

She was an aunt. She was Aunt Zillah. The happiness felt like soda pop, bubbling in her stomach. “I’m an aunt,” she said to Ashleigh. “Aunt Zillah.”

“I know,” Ashleigh said. “You’ve only told me about twenty times already.”

And today, this magical day, she didn’t have to sit in the stuffy math class after lunch, listening to Mr. Miao mangle the English language. The reporter from the *Dunbar Herald* had asked to meet with them outside, by the monument.

The reporter, whose name was Seth, turned out to be Drew’s cousin and Sophie’s neighbor.

“Front page?” said Drew hopefully.

“Maybe. It’s a good feature,” the reporter said. “I’ll do my best. Pray for a slow news day. A traffic accident could kick it to the inside.”

He asked a few questions and wrote down the answers in a skinny spiral-bound notebook small enough to slip into his pocket. Zillah wanted one, and when she said so to Ashleigh, Seth overheard.

“You’re the writer, right?” he said. “I’ll bring you one.”

Drew gave long involved answers to every question, and the others, even Geordy, chimed in occasionally.
“You’re not fooling me,” Seth said. “I know you’re all just stalling so you can skip class.”

After the interview, he wanted them to stand by the monument for the photograph. Sophie took over. Not content with just telling people where to stand, she moved them here and there as if they were giant building blocks.

“You let her tell you what to do like that?” Seth asked Drew.

“It saves time,” Drew muttered.

Sophie put Geordy by the monument and arranged the others on the steps, like two sides of a triangle. Geordy wrapped his arms around the monument, as far as they would go, as if he was giving the big stone a bear hug.

“I love you, man,” he said, his voice gritty and deep. Seth laughed and snapped a photo.

“You know, the city council wants to move this thing out to the cemetery,” he told them.

“Not going to happen,” Drew said. “It belongs here.”

“Lookee there,” Geordy said to Seth, pointing to the list of names carved in the stone. “That’s my grandfather. George Colson, same as me.”

“Is that right?” said the reporter. “Well, that guy there above him is my great-uncle. Drew’s too.”

Zillah was taken aback. Drew’s great-uncle? On the monument? She turned around to look at Drew, who was right behind her, one step up.

“You’re uncle?” she said.

Drew laughed at her expression, a quick short laugh that sounded more confused than amused. “Yeah, he died in the Battle of the Bulge. You know that.”


“You never said he came from Dunbar,” Zillah persisted. She was trying to remember what she knew about Drew’s uncle.

“I didn’t? Well, duh. He did.”

“Hush,” Sophie said again. “Be still.” Zillah was supposed to look at the camera and smile.

Click. “Good one,” Seth said. “Let’s do it again.”

Zillah turned around again. “But there’s nobody named Mackenzie on the monument,” she said.

“Well, yeah,” Drew said. “He was my nana’s brother. That’s his
name, right here,” and he tapped the monument.

Click. The reporter took the shot again. “Let’s have more like that,” he said. “It’s relaxed. I like it better.”

Zillah knew the name Drew tapped, just as she knew all the others: A.J. Winstead. Private A.J. Winstead. But her mind was having trouble taking in this new information. Drew’s uncle should be named Drew Mackenzie.

“But you said you were named after him.”

“I am. The A’s for Andrew,” Drew said. “They called him Andy.”

Andy? She stared at Drew, but her vision wavered, and she felt as if she was looking through water. It was Andy she saw in front of her, not Drew, but so like Drew. The same wide mouth, the curly brown hair, the ears that stuck out a little too far.

No, no, no, how could that be? Not Andy. Not her Andy, not on the monument. Her head hurt, and it was hard to think. It was as if she was trying to push her thoughts through layers of that pink foam people used to use to insulate attics.

“I’m going to take a couple more shots,” Seth said. “Keep talking.”

“I’m sorry. I’ve got to go,” Zillah said. She jumped off the steps onto the grass, paying no attention to the calls that came after her, to Sophie’s irritated, “Zillah, get back here!” or to Ashleigh’s concerned, “Are you all right? Do you want me to go with you?”

“No,” Zillah said, throwing the word back quickly, over her shoulder. She crossed the parking lot without looking out for cars and ran inside, through the double doors, past the startled gaze of the security guard, up the stairs, and into the library. It seemed like it took forever to get to the Reader’s Corner. She picked up the 1941 yearbook, the last book published before the war, and turned each page, scanning every photo. He had to be in there somewhere. Her fingers were stiff, and she couldn’t turn some of the pages without swiping at them two or three times.

And there he was. She knew him the second she turned the page. The eighth grade class picture, the back row. She didn’t have to check the name under the photo to be sure. Andy Winstead was the boy she met, at night, in the school.

And he was going to die. She wouldn’t see him anymore. He was going to die a horrible, ugly, violent death in a stupid war in a faraway place, and she couldn’t stop it from happening. His little sister would
grow up, never knowing him, never seeing him again. She couldn’t bear it.

She sank to her knees, clutching the yearbook, awash in tears. Her heart felt sliced into sharp shards of glass that cut her torn and bloody on the inside. She didn’t see Ms. Dalhousie enter, didn’t hear the hard thump as the librarian dropped the books she carried on the floor, didn’t know Ms. Dalhousie was beside her until the librarian touched her shoulder.

“Zillah, sweetheart, whatever is the matter?”

Zillah turned her tear-stained face to Ms. Dalhousie. “They die,” she said, through tears. “The boys on the monument, they all died.”

Ms. Dalhousie might have thought that Zillah ought to know the soldiers died; she’d been reading books about World War II for months. But she didn’t say so. She put her arm around Zillah, led her to the couch, sat beside her, and gently pried the yearbook from her fingers.

“I know,” she said. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s not fair.”

“Oh, Zillah dearest, you’re saying what every mother, every sister, every sweetheart has ever said about soldiers gone off to war. No, it’s not fair. It’s awful. “

Ms. Dalhousie looked at the class picture on the yearbook page. “They look as if they could be attending classes today,” she said.

“I know,” Zillah said, gulping for enough breath to say the words, though she’d never thought so before. The girls had old-lady hairstyles and they wore old-lady dresses, and the boys somehow looked older than the boys she knew.

Except for Andy. The tears started afresh then and she bent over double, clutching her stomach. It hurt, oh it hurt; it hurt too much.

Mrs. Dalhousie stroked Zillah’s back. “What’s happened?” she asked. “You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to.”

Zillah struggled again to hold back her tears. “No, I want to,” she said. She pointed to Andy’s picture, swallowing the sobs that escaped her tentative control. “He’s Drew’s uncle,” she said. “His name’s on the monument.”

“Ah,” Ms. Dalhousie said. She put on her glasses to look closely at the photograph. “He does look like Drew, doesn’t he?” She closed the book and put it back on the display table, then leaned over to pick up the books she’d dropped on the floor.
“There’s a danger in books, you know,” she said, smoothing the pages of a book that had landed, face open, on the floor, “a danger in reading too much. It becomes too easy to ignore real life. When you read about war in a novel, it’s dramatic and exciting, and you forget the fact that truly terrible things happened to real people.”

She picked up the book in the Reader’s Corner about the weapons of war, the one with the photos of tanks and guns that Zillah had set aside for Drew, so many weeks before. “I hate these books,” she said, “but the boys love to look at them. They love to shoot each other with pretend guns and set off pretend bombs. But the books never show them what tanks and bombs and guns do to people.”

Zillah shuddered. “But what the soldiers did—didn’t they have to do it?”

“Are you asking me if it was right to go to war?” Ms. Dalhousie said. “I don’t know. Some people think World War II was a necessary war. Maybe it was, maybe it wasn’t—I really don’t know.”

She got up to fetch some tissues from the circulation desk.

Zillah blew her nose and wiped her eyes. “It hurts,” she said.

“I know. And somewhere deep inside it always will. People die before they’re ready, Zillah, in wars, in accidents, in horrible diseases. And the people they leave behind have to grieve, have to say their goodbyes, and then they have to let go, because you can’t live life with such grief.” She reached out and took Zillah’s hands in hers. “Acknowledge your grief, child, but then you must let it go.”

At the end of the day, Zillah put away the books and magazines, turned off the computers, and stacked chairs on top of the tables, just as she did every night. She finished her math homework in the hideaway while the custodian vacuumed, and then, back in the library, she pulled two of her favorite books off the shelves, the ones she liked the best of all the books she read as a child. She curled up on the couch and reread them both, one right after the next: *The Velveteen Rabbit* and *The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane*. Then she watched old TV comedies on Nickelodeon, staying up way past the time she usually went to bed.

She wanted nothing to do with war, nothing at all.

Finally, well past midnight, she switched off the TV, so tired that her head pounded with every step she took down the hall to the hideaway. She undressed and got into bed, taking Zubie with her, although she
usually left him on the shelf with the other stuffed animals. She tried to keep the yearbook picture of Andy out of her mind. She didn’t want to go to sleep; she feared the dreams that might come. But it was no better to stay awake. She couldn’t keep the thoughts from pushing their way in.

The only way to get through is to go through.

Zillah lies awake in bed. Her eyes are open but she sees only the black walls, the black ceiling of the hideaway. No light anywhere. It is no different when her eyes are closed. Then gray swirls and separates the blackness, like thunderclouds boiling before a storm. Her body feels the pressure, and the hairs on her arms stand on end.

She hears thunder. The sound of gunfire. A flash of lightning. The sky ignites, turns red. Trees are torn apart, their limbs scattered on the ground. Fallen soldiers lie sprawled in the mud and snow.

She walks the gray field under a flat gray sky. She can’t look at the bodies, but she must. She knows this is a dream, even as she dreams, but she has to be here. She has to find Andy.

She has to look at the soldiers’ faces. Some of them have no faces, only red gaping holes.

Inside her head, she screams and screams and screams.

There. It is him she is sure of it. He lies on his back in the snow, his head thrown up to expose his neck, his eyes wide open, but sightless. His face is unmarked, like a boy’s. He is a boy, a ninth grader. His eyes are open but they don’t see. She kneels beside him. She is not a ghost, oh no, she can’t be a ghost in this story. She has to fix it, to change the ending. She is another soldier sent to retrieve the corpses—no, not that. Another story. She is a girl from the village searching for her own. He, this American boy, is not her own but she knows he is alive. She needs her help she lifts his head he moans.

“Ah, you pretend death only,” the village girl says, in garbled English. “You hide so from the Nazis, you clever boy.”

She will take him home she will hide him bind his wounds he will live.

He will.

His eyes are open. Zillah falls into them but they are empty, like a gray field in winter. She is him she is the same. It is night, a moonlit bright night. He runs alongside other soldiers. She feels his fear. He shoots his weapon others fall he sees the bullets they fly slowly.
Suspended. She can’t hold them back. Metal enters flesh, rips it apart. She sees the wound, pink from cold, red from blood.

He falls.

He is a ghost.

No, he is dead. They are all dead on this field. She is the ghost. Their bodies are all around her.

The night is still, so very still.

Gently, she folds his arms on his chest. She pulls his coat to hide the wound. She removes the helmet and smoothes his hair. She closes his eyes. She kisses him.

Cold. His lips are cold. The night is very cold.

The moon fades away. Darkness is all around her. Still she sits, waiting for the mist that will take her back.

She is not sure when the blackness overhead becomes the ceiling of the hideaway instead of the night sky over Belgium.
I must start with the cat. The cat who (yes, who) last week tangled with a fox out by the woodpile. By the time I arrived on the scene, damage had been done. I gathered the hissing and snarling cat, fully puffed up for maximum effect, in my arms, shooed off the fox that was reluctant to give ground, and brought the cat in. Back on her feet, she hobbled to a safe corner with her left hind leg turned under her. Oh, oh, oh, Margot cried while the cat said nothing at all.

Somewhere between Margot’s empathetic cries and the cat’s silence, sits the question: How to know the pain felt by another? And what, if anything, can be done about it? In 1940, James D. Hardy, Harold C. Wolff and Helen Goodell, scientists at Cornell University, invented the dolorimeter, a device to indicate, if not pain itself, our measured responses to it. A person might be subjected to heat, pressure, electric shock, or blows from a blunt instrument while the dolorimeter recorded the intensity of each response. Though scientists had moved beyond the dolorimeter by the early 1950s, any interested person can purchase one at Amazon.com, but might find a cheaper buy on e-bay.

My brother, when he was around six or so, cut himself pretty severely in the ankle on a piece of broken bottle. It was a Sunday afternoon. My mom, dad and I were still at the dinner table—lunch was our big meal on Sundays, right after church. We could hear my brother’s wailing all the way in the back of the house. His crying went on and on. Little boys crying wolf was a favorite family motif. Finally, my mom said, “Go see what’s bothering him.” There he was—sitting on a stone wall all the way at the bottom of our hill, maybe a hundred yards away—bawling. And with blood running down his ankle into his shoe.

In the house I grew up in, pain was something best ignored. “Go ahead and cry,” our mother told us, “see if that changes anything.” Maybe she was right; maybe it didn’t.

If stoicism was advocated, it was also demonstrated. My father’s father was the model for all of us. He had died two weeks before I was born, and I know little of him: royal hussar in the Austrian-Hungarian
army, coal miner, patriarch of a family of eight. I do know this: out in the yard, cutting kindling, he chopped the tip of his finger off with an axe. He picked the tip up and threw it to the chickens before he went to the doctor. Another time, a piece of kindling flew up and hit him between the eyes, opening a big gash. My grandmother found him in front of a mirror with thread and a needle from her sewing basket trying to stitch himself up.

Pain might be sharp, cutting, lacerating. And with the right tools wrongly applied, perhaps all of these at once.

Once while skiing on the University trails, I had a collision on a blind corner. We ran into each other at a pretty good clip, and both fell backward from the contact. As he fell, the other guy’s ski pole swung up and clipped me right above the ear. I saw stars, and the blow opened up a half-inch cut, which like all scalp wounds began bleeding like crazy. I said, “That hurt.” Ashamed the moment the words came out of my mouth, I got up and skied on. My grandfather’s fingertip, by the way, could have been reattached, but that, too, seems to be part of the lesson: once pain is visited on you, get over it and move on.

Because pain was not an acceptable condition in our house, because it was not an acceptable topic of conversation, I have no way to explain it to myself or understand it. What is pain and what is discomfort? What is in our bodies and what is in our heads? The trivial annoyance of sitting in an airplane seat for the long transcontinental flight is grind enough if a person is six-six, but what’s the value of complaining? It won’t make the legroom any better, won’t make the seat back stop hitting me in the middle of my neck, won’t ease my bony rear.

The McGill Pain Questionnaire is one of the instruments, an instrument made of words, designed to supersede the dial on the dolorimeter. It offers a battery of choices for a person’s responses, each designed to name a variety of pain. As far as descriptions of the pain itself, the McGill Questionnaire offers mild, discomfort, distressing, horrible and excruciating. Never mind that of these words only excruciating has an immediate association with pain in my mind. I wonder if the frustratingly cramped airline seat is really only mild rather than discomfortable as I suggested earlier. And I am surprised that in somebody’s view, discomfort is a form of pain.

My dad home from the hospital after his first operation for lung cancer had to struggle up the stairs to my parents’ bedroom leaning
on my shoulder. He was tired; he was weak; the surgery had not gone as expected. When he got to the top of the stairs, he collapsed on the floor, and I did not know how to pick him up or help him up without hurting him more. It turns out there is a way to help a person back to his feet with the help of a straight back chair. I know that now. When we made it to the edge of the bed, he dropped more than sat down. He was breathing hard, wheezing, clearly in pain from his incision and maybe from the incisions inside that took part of one lung. Can a person feel pain in the lungs themselves? I don’t know. “I’ll bet you never thought you’d ever see your old dad like this,” he said. I struggled for something to say because he was right.

Pain is tender.

We might ask the cat, does your leg hurt, or is it just unable to move the way it used to? Are you in pain when you lie in your cat lounge or on the furniture, or is your rest easeful? If she could answer, would it change anything?

At the senior center my mom directed, she led an exercise program for the few willing. Sitting in chairs, the seniors threw their arms out in front of them and over their heads, kicked out their legs. “I know it hurts,” she hollered at them, “at our age something always hurts.”

The night before my dad’s second lung surgery, I had called him on the phone. “Are you sure you want to do this?” I asked him. “The man says it’s got to be done. It’s got to be done.” My dad was a man of his time and place, and doctor’s orders were received with a mixture of resignation and relief as if a person might pass the burden of suffering into the hands of that wise man.

Pain can be spreading.

While Dad had originally had part of the diseased lung removed, this time a different doctor took the whole thing. How it should have been done the first time, the surgeon confidently told my brother. And for a while it looked like he was right, but my dad developed aspiration pneumonia. For months he slipped between a bed on the floor and one in intensive care where he breathed with the help of a ventilator—the vent.

Kierkegaard might agree there is a distinction between depression and despair. Depression, even a morose Scandinavian might admit, is an illness with a cure. As a doctor friend told me, “We have drugs for that.” Despair, though, is a natural human condition because we of all the animals live with the knowledge of our mortality. Would this be a
kind of chronic pain? Healthy people mistrust the idea. People with chronic pain are shirkers, slackers, wimps. Maybe Kierkegaardian despair falls in the same category. Nothing wrong with you that a good kick in the ass won’t cure. I have that thought every time I watch an Ingmar Bergman movie.

Exposure to that kind of pain can be exhausting in itself. Suffocating.

When my mom fell and broke her leg, she scooted herself down the stairs on her rear and sat by the front door banging on the wall until her neighbor heard her. She seemed more chagrined at the way she did it (she fell backward off her bed where she was standing to change a light bulb), than in pain. But the break did hurt, and getting around on the leg hurt. The broken leg led to a knee replacement, and that hurt, too. A throbbing kind of pain. Despite her imprecations against whining, she did her share. But she got up and walked, first with a walker, then with a cane, then on her own. Nagging pain. And miserable, too.

Once I was driving along with a friend on the way to a day hike when the cell phone rang. It was my step-daughter calling to tell me she had suffered a second miscarriage. Would I tell her mom, because she felt she couldn’t? I tried to calm her as best I could from four thousand miles away at sixty miles per hour, then I called Margot. I tried to calm her, too, so that when she talked to her daughter she might help alleviate the pain rather than allow it to spiral down deeper. Now, my step-daughter is raising a lovely child. But has the pain from those miscarriages, the grief for children she will never get to see grow up, passed?

In the McGill Pain Questionnaire, temporal pain might be flickering, quivering, pulsing, throbbing, beating or pounding, each word associated with an ascending number. What Kierkegaard believed was despair described a necessary form of pain. Through our recognition of our inherent despair, we would seek strategies to confront it, to keep it under control; we would seek to lead meaningful lives. Heavy pain. However, the Questionnaire offers no menu of words for measuring the effects of enduring pain.

Some years after my dad’s death, I read an article suggesting that long-term use of a vent might cause patients to have horrendous nightmares or hallucinations. Once off the vent, many patients experience post-traumatic stress. Through all that long dark journey,
days beyond lost days, what had gone on up there in Dad’s head? And would that, too, be a kind of pain, the confusion of being seemingly lost forever in a trackless woods? Pain *terrifying* and *frightful*.

Even under heavy sedation, my dad tried to extubate himself from the vent every chance he could. One day we came into his room and found him in arm restraints. The vent—our family came to dread the word. We all made living wills. *Gnawing* pain.

When I crashed on my bicycle and broke my femur, shattered the trochanter, the bone at the top, the ball that goes into the socket to make the hip joint, I picked myself up and tried to get back on my bike. I had places to go and things to do and was already late. The next morning, Margot and I were to drive to Maine and get married there. But I couldn’t get my leg over the top tube of the bike, so I sat on a nearby bench and called Margot, asking her to come fetch me.

Using my bike as a cane, I walked to an intersection where she could pick me up. Once in the car, I told her I thought if we stopped at a drug store where I could buy some ibuprofen and a cane, I would be fine. She drove me to the emergency room instead where it turned out I needed a wheelchair to get myself inside. In the crowded ER, I managed to hobble to the intake desk where I was asked to rate my pain on a scale of one to ten. Feeling lucky, I said seven. Truly, this was merely *troublesome* pain.

When I watch her hobbling along, I ask myself if the cat feels pain when she is walking, if she feels pain when she is at ease? If her injuries cause constant pain or discomfort or if the nerves that control her tail and some of the muscles in her leg have simply been turned off?

Pain may be *bright* or *dull*.

When our mom’s respiration dropped below a certain level, a horn, a horn sounding very like the horn on a clown car, started honking at the nurses’ station around the corner. They ignored it knowing the vent—the vent, something she had explicitly told us she did not want—would take up the slack. They were right; the vent could keep pushing oxygen in, pulling carbon dioxide out for months, years. Despite the sedating meds, my mom’s frustrations came through. She would make a fist and pound it against the side of her bed. Her arms, too, were trapped in restraints. *Tugging* pain.

The cat seems to have lost much of her mischievous spirit. She no longer slips onto the kitchen table to lick the butter when we aren’t
looking. She has discontinued her nightly inspection of the kitchen counters as soon as we go to bed, her raid known to us not by the silent leap up to the three foot counter tops, but by the resounding thump when she lands back on the floor. She no longer stands on her hind legs at the foot of the bed to bop us with her paws, her act an insistence that breakfast be served. She spends more time sleeping, less time poking around where she doesn’t necessarily belong.

After my brother’s open heart surgery, he slipped into atrial fibrillation a time or two. The heart, which I’m told has no feeling, sent its irregular rhythm through his arteries. Did this hurt or did it just feel wrong? When he coughed in response to the excess pollen in the air, he grabbed a pillow and pushed it to his chest. Rather than sit by and watch him, I ran out to buy him tea and honey. I doubt if his pain was lessened when out of my sight. And I wonder if it is possible for pain to be caught like disease itself from others. Radiating pain?

We learned about my step-daughter’s first miscarriage by phone, on the road, at a gas station filling the tank. The connection was bad; we drove out of town until we came to an overlook, an arresting view under other circumstances. Margot did her best to ease her daughter’s pain, and I did my best to ease Margot’s. We drove on. Back on that stretch of road some years later, we found ourselves searching for the overlook. Surely the site should have been etched into our memories. But we couldn’t say for certain where it was we’d pulled off and made the call. Could it be that sometimes pain is fleeting?

At last, pain did defeat my mom. The carcinoid tumor in her intestine went undetected while it pumped out enzymes at irregular intervals that would double her over. Somewhere in the third round of tests to find the tumor, the tumor found itself by making a hole in her small intestine. She had submitted to yet another test the day before, had eaten a pleasant lunch afterward with the friend who’d driven her. The following morning, she told me over the phone that while her pain at that moment was pretty bad, roughly translated from our family lexicon as excruciating, she planned to take some pain medicine (she would have seen the medicine itself as an indication of surrender), and go to work. She wound up in the emergency room instead. Pain both searing and dreadful.

The cat stubbornly works at making her left leg behave. She walks several steps, gingerly putting weight on the damaged leg, then collapses into a sit. I am hesitant to call this effort an intentional
strategy on her part or even something more primitive such as will power, things we humans might attribute to our own efforts at rehabilitation. The cat probably just wants her leg to work like it did before.

When people ask me if it hurt to break my hip, I say some smart-assed thing. I say, it didn’t exactly feel good. Or, I wouldn’t stand in line to do it again.

My dad lived a little over a year after he finally got out of the hospital. His one remaining lung struggled to keep him going. When I had a cold, my head stuffed with snot, unable to sleep, I thought, this is what he must feel like on a good day. Along the line, his pain passed beyond tiring to exhausting.

The cat walks with a limp. But her normal gait returns to her in fits and starts. She will even run a few steps when the pantry door opens. So far though, she’s not assayed any of the galloping sprints through the house she was wont to undertake for no good reason we could discern.

When I pulled a muscle in my back, I wasn’t skiing or riding my bike, or rowing, or doing any of the things doctors sometimes tell guys my age they shouldn’t do, or shouldn’t do so much or so intensely. Instead, I did it pulling a duffle bag from behind the seat of my truck. I admit I was on my way to ski, and went ahead and skied anyway, thinking as I always do that I could stretch the muscle as I went, that I would push on through and the pain would go away.

Of the options from the McGill Questionnaire, I would describe my pain as flickering, jumping, and flashing. Piercing. It might be fearful or frightful. Cruel? A person might say so.

Certainly annoying and troublesome, and at times, unexpected, unpredictable at times, intense. Though none of those words explain why I threw my reading glasses against the wall. I was simply trying to make myself comfortable enough to read in bed. But I was thinking that this back damage, as yet undiagnosed, could signal the end of much of what I love most in life—the long solitary skis and bike rides, and just as importantly, the long complicated skeins of thought that result from these moving meditations. I rarely intend to go off in search of ideas, but somehow I find them out there. What if I couldn’t? Couldn’t go, couldn’t be who I always was?

I told myself as I lay waiting for my MRI that I could block the pain from my broken hip for long periods of time if I could just stay
focused. This much is true up to a point. A nurse came in and looked at my chart, looked at how I rated my pain, said, “That’s not right, I saw you when you were admitted, you’re a ten.” Eventually, fatigue comes into play, and no matter how tough, how fit a person may think he is, pain breaks through.

Life is pain, or at least leads to pain at some point or another. It’s a human situation. But it becomes suffering when we find ourselves unable to accept it. Did we really need Buddha to tell us that? My dad’s last bout with pneumonia killed him while he lay in the hospital declining to be put on the vent again. He was tired of suffering even if he was not tired of life. What else was he to do?

If my pain with the broken hip was as the nurse suggested a ten, I sometimes think, that wasn’t so bad. What else is there? More of the same until pain must come to an end: for my dad, stoic, almost cheerful; for my mom, her anger fighting to get past the fog of her medications; for my brother who successfully got through the pain of his operation. Because there will always be something more, more pain for Margot, for my step-daughter, for her husband and even for their toddler. For me.

Margot’s cry in response to the cat’s pain went straight from somewhere in her limbic brain to her vocal cords and out her mouth. It didn’t stop in her higher brain to shop for the right word, nor did it when she cried out in response to news of her daughter’s miscarriages, or to the death of our friend Missy. When we need them most, words fail us. The howls, yowls, whimpers, whines and moans we share with our fellow animals might be the truest responses to pain we can make. And I have to wonder if all our effort at putting language to pain is a foolish endeavor at best. From the toe carelessly stubbed in the dark to the wet blanket of despair draped over us, pain is real, knowable, yet unnamable in any sort of reliably transferable way. It’s ours and ours alone to feel and deal with as best we can.

I wonder if what Kierkegaard would say to me, say to us all, might be, if you’re so smart, so human, try to do something about it. Because those electro-chemical impulses that are so good at relaying the source and intensity of pain to our brains are very like the ones in our cerebral cortexes that try so hard to explain it. And yet. And yet, I come to this hard place again, and there is no getting past it.
Kelly Martineau

NOTES ON MACHINERY

how to be invincible /
motion, movement, architects, blueprints
-MC Geologic

Souvenir

In a museum of machines, I stood, fascinated, before the one that offered more than knowledge. As an eleven year-old visiting the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago with my grandparents, I had walked around large machinery—airplanes, excavators, tractors—and studied diagrams of how the constituent parts connected to power the machines. I had also entered strange worlds to view the workings from within: plunging deep into a coal mine, walking through an oversized model of the human heart, and peering into the tiny realms of the fairy castle and expansive model train.

But even more magical was the Mold-A-Rama, a souvenir machine at the terminus of the model railroad, where I stood transfixed studying the contrivance. For fifty cents, the machine would create, before my eyes, a three-inch, plastic steam locomotive. Above the sample engine on display, the name “Mold-A-Rama,” its alternating primary color letters lit from behind, glowed like the lights of a spaceship against a black background. From my perspective in the mid-eighties, the machine, conceived in the sixties, looked both old-fashioned and futuristic, contributing to my sense of time’s suspension.

Above the name, the sign read, “Now you can control the amazing.” I accepted two shiny quarters from my grandmother and, holding my breath, placed the coins, one after the other, into the slot. One ringing clink followed another as they dropped into the change vessel. The display’s glass top angled downward so that I could view the action. Four black hoses fed into two metal cubes with shapes carved into their opposing faces. The machine began to whir as hydraulic pistons moved the blocks toward one another to form one cube. The hoses strained, and then I smelled warm wax like the scent of crayons held tightly in my hand. After one minute, the pistons pulled the cubes apart to reveal a detailed black engine. A small arm emerged to push
the engine into a vessel into which I reached to retrieve the creation. In my palm, I cradled the train, its heat radiating into my skin.

**machinery, n**

*a. the components of a machine*

Machinery denotes the various parts of a single machine working in concert to accomplish the machine’s intended task.

**Initiation**

In my preadolescence, I developed an intense need to make things, focusing my attention on crafts because they were available. My mother had just remarried, and my step-grandmother taught me to bake cinnamon rolls and crochet afghans of colorful acrylic yarn. Perhaps I wanted to exert control at a time when I felt powerless to the changes within and around me. I crafted dollhouse furniture from household items—a sink made from an Elmer’s glue lid, beds of fabric-covered sponges, matchbox dressers. Ordinary items repurposed to a new miniature function. I also learned to cross stitch. When travelling over Aida cloth with my needle, I marked a trail of seemingly random x’s that only formed an image upon completion.

I was delighted by the prospect of creating what had not previously existed. To make a thing appear, a magic trick. In an interview about brain function on Nova’s web site, neuroscientist Dr. Rodolfo Llinás remarks, “All my life, even as a child, I have been amazed that you can think of something that doesn’t exist and then by using the motor system—painting, talking, constructing—you can make [it] be part of the external world.”

I tried my hand at jewelry, collecting beads of plastic, wood, and glass. I enjoyed organizing the materials in a tackle case, the beads divided by color and material in tiny bags and boxes. I imagined necklaces, bracelets, and earrings in delightful combinations, but when I strung the beads onto metal wire, the results were as clumsy as the uncertain motion of my hands. A chasm existed between the blurry image in my mind and the disappointing results. I wondered for years how to make the leap.

**Tools**

In writing, transitions are key. I find this particularly true in the essay. Writer and teacher Priscilla Long considers transitions to be
“bridges,” connecting meaning across the space between sentences, paragraphs, and chapters. She also likens a transition to a railroad switch that “connects the track you’re moving off to the track you’re moving onto.” A simple machine that transfers momentum from one path to another, allowing the train to continue moving toward its destination.

In the brain, chemical synapses are the cellular junction at which neurons communicate. Within a synapse exists the synaptic cleft, a gap of twenty nanometers, across which neurotransmitters leap. A complex chemical process allows for the information transfer across this gap, enabling neurons to establish complete circuits in the human body.

machinery, n
b. a group of machines

In this sense, machinery is a collective term that groups mechanical tools according to industry. Examples include agricultural, printing, and injection machinery, the latter being the class of the Mold-A-Rama.

Personal Inventory

1. The Manual Transmission

I rode next to Phyllis, my parents’ friend, in her Datsun sports car on the way to my house. Maybe she picked me up from daycare; the reason is not important. What is key is the clarity of this memory when I was probably four: gliding down the street next to this smiling woman with the murmurous voice. How, as she steered and spoke to me, she deftly worked the gearshift to the rise and fall of the engine. How in that car that smelled like hot wax, the scent I would later learn was vinyl infused with cigarette smoke, I gained a sense of what it was to be a woman in control.

Now I am in the driver’s seat, where I savor the dance of driving, the coordination required to work the clutch, gas pedal, and gearshift. With my hand curved over the gearshift, I consider the brief moment of dis- and then re-engagement, the leap from one gear to the next as the engine shifts from soprano whine to tenor purr. Manually harnessing the machine to power my forward motion.

2. The Personal Typewriter
I sat at the desk with my fingers poised over the keys, waiting for my teacher in her round, red glasses to start the timer. In seventh grade, I was shy and physically awkward, rounding my body at the shoulders to try to disappear while wanting so desperately to be seen. But in typing class, faced with lines of meaningless text, I felt my body broaden. My fingers danced along the keyboard, confidently sliding into the concave curve of the rectangular keys. With each stroke, the corresponding letter struck the page with a pleasing tap like heels on a wooden floor. I loved the music of typing, the irregular clatter of keys atop the murmur of the machine. Evidence of the application of my force to the page.

This was 1989. My mother worked as an executive in downtown Dallas raising funds for community college scholarships. Typing class no longer held the stigma of training young women for careers as secretaries. I had no idea what I wanted to study or do as an adult. I liked the structure of school, the daily assignments and giant printed “A’s” for a job well done. At home, I had my crafts, but I lacked the vision to view that as a career.

I knew that the typewriter was key to my calling, not just for the ability to type papers and fill out forms. I sensed my future in the magic of my fingers dancing over the keyboard with its nonsensical layout. That my mind could learn the location of each letter to enable the fingers to hover and strike, a cadence of creation atop the hum of those heavy, molded machines.

3. The Sewing Machine

The old machine whirred as I guided the two pieces of lavender fabric in a straight line. The needle pierced the double layer, locking together the upper and lower threads to create a chain of stitches. I pressed the seams open as I learned in class and continued sewing the pieces toward a pair of ill-fitting shorts.

I was eleven years old, sitting at my grandmother’s dining table, its round wooden top covered by a vinyl tablecloth that gripped the underside of her New Home machine. In the same summer as our trip to the museum, I was taking lessons on a white Singer at a fabric store.

The classroom machine was much newer than my grandmother’s sinuous black New Home, its metal balance wheel worn dull from years of use. Smaller yet weighing more than the Singer, the New
Home was solid and steady like my grandmother. After working all day in the housewares department at Sears, she baked rich meals and cookies, the scent of her labors drifting to me at the table.

While she cooked, I stitched, as impressed by the made items as the feel of operating the machine. I felt significant as I used the machine to sew a garment from a single yard of cotton. The machine clunked and whirred as I pressed the foot pedal, the sharp smell of electric parts blending with the odor of oil that greased the workings. I thought of my grandfather’s tools in the garage workshop, how the sawdust flew off the freshly cut wood and floated into soft piles on the grease-stained concrete floor. With these tools, he made furniture, fixed the fence, and fashioned small parts for the house. I finished the seam and used the balance wheel to reverse, reinforcing the final stitches. Then I turned off the New Home and rested my hand on its black arm, feeling the residual warmth.

Brain Dance

Dr. Llinás describes neural communication as a “huge square dance,” with two groups of neurons meeting in various patterns. What keeps these groups in step is the neurons’ “intrinsic rhythm, a bit like a hum.” A functioning brain plays its own soundtrack.

The neural dance allows the mind to accomplish three basic functions. The first two—receiving information from the world and acting on it, human beings share with animals. What distinguishes us is the amazing ability to create, to bring forth from the mind into the world.

Rhythm

For a college course entitled, “Tragedy, Myth, and Meaning,” I kept a journal at the request of my professor, chasing my thoughts about dramas such as Death of a Salesman, Prometheus, and Frankenstein. My hurried blue scrawl evidenced the feverish thoughts provoked by these works, particularly Frankenstein. Although alarmed by the moral implications of Dr. Frankenstein’s attempt to create life, I was enraptured by his vision for creation. To build a figure by cutting into cadavers and stitching together the various parts. To build the machine that would harness electricity to bring this body to life.

My assignment was to develop an essay from the fabric of thoughts woven in my journal. I pored over my words and the primary
text, gathering ideas and quotes until I could carry the thread of my thought through to the end. From a handwritten outline, I began to type, filling out the vague ideas into sentences. Although the time chewing over a sentence seemed to stretch into hours, I could feel my mind reaching out beyond what had before been the edge of my world. I skipped along the surface tension of my ideas, propelled by one completed sentence into the semantic and philosophic challenge of the next. Silence followed by a clatter of keys. Sometimes at the end of a sentence, my fingers rebounded off the keys, so pleased with my ability to create.

machinery, *n*
¢. the workings or organization of a concept

Like machines with their careful arrangement of parts, conceptual ideas can also be considered to have internal organization. A structure. A pattern that, once uncovered, enables forward progress.

Voice

Do other people consider what constitutes their voice? As a small child, I liked to slow the sound in my throat, breaking it into individual components. Beginning with a ringing “ahhhh,” I decelerated first to a crackle whose vibration I could feel in the back of my throat. Finally, the sound separated into a series of clicks, between which I could hear the hiss of air flowing through my throat. These muffled staccato bursts were foreign sounds until I sped up, merging them back into the familiar hum of my voice.

Transistors

Driving is a conduit for vibrancy. From the moment I ease the car into movement, my body begins to pulse, and each shift reinforces the rhythm like a bass drum. My mind responds to this signal by reeling out, casting around for something on which to chew. When driving, my mind seems suddenly able to consider old territory anew, as if the resonance of my brain’s hum with that of the road provides a bridge between conception and creation.

To the brain, learning to type or drive a manual transmission is an achievement of repetition. With each shift or stroke, the impulses wear a path in the brain just as the hand dulls the top of the gearshift and the fingers the keys. I can isolate the most pleasurable moment of
these activities: when my arm moves toward the gearshift, my hand by instinct curling in anticipation. Or just before I place my hands on the keyboard, my fingertips poised above the concave keys. Like the moment of silence, of anticipation as I lower the needle to a record’s surface. Then, the sigh of connection, the circuit made complete as the hand meets machine.

When writing, some part of my brain is still occupied by the now automatic relationship between fingers and keys. I can remember learning to type in that junior high classroom. I can slow down my typing, think about what finger is required for each letter. The clatter slowed to a tap . . . tap . . . tap.

I consider the needle as it plunges into the fabric. When it rises, it brings up the lower thread. Down and up, down and up, down and up, each cycle makes a stitch atop the fabric and another below. The upper and lower threads lock in that meeting place, and, as the machine’s speed increases, create a uniform line of stitches. The seam is both the bridge and the evidence of the machine’s pass over the terrain.

Method

When brain cell rhythms slow, human consciousness disappears. This occurs daily during sleep. When the neuron dance slows to that level, Dr. Llinás says, “. . . the brain does not generate the functional state that is you. The you disappears.” I wonder if, conversely, the more I strive to make sense of the world and my role in it, exciting the cells to frenzy, do I become more myself?

My college essays were the first time that I was able to produce on paper the machine I designed in my mind. Through that semester of writing, I developed a process—jumping between outline, journal, and the primary text to stitch, with carefully crafted prose, the author’s words into the fabric of my personal essay.

But my current work lacks that narrow focus; I miss the clarity of the scribbled outline. Instead, I confront a collection of odd bits—quotes, images, memories, objects—that seem somehow related but have not yet revealed their connection. The first draft often consists of nebulous passages lacking a functional structure. I must begin to revise trusting that the process will be my map.

A few years ago, I began taking to those unwieldy drafts a pair of orange-handled scissors, a practice I continue today. After printing the essay, I cut out each section and place it on the floor according to
instinct. I physically move a section to another position to see how it plays with the ones before and after. What connections are forged, what leaps forward can be made. I add new material on post-it notes. I arrange, rearrange, then sit back to consider. My knees ache, but I persevere. Over and over, I seize and shift and stare until something sparks. Then the pathway appears, and the pieces seem to move themselves.

I am struck by people’s belief that writing is entirely a cerebral pursuit.

Circuitry

As an adult, I no longer possess the tiny wax train produced by the Mold-A-Rama. The souvenir may not have survived the summer. A few years ago, when I turned thirty, I revisited the museum and searched its many rooms and hallways for the machine. I wanted to feel again the wonder and the warmth of that newly made thing in my hand.

I didn’t find it. But its location is irrelevant. In my mind I still hear the hum of its machinery and see those intriguing words, spelled out in type: “Now you can control the amazing.”
Negotiation

Your fingernails are dirty and your clothes are stained with paint but that does not mean you are unprepared to meet with her right now. She pulls up the seat across from you and takes a breath as she sits—not a sigh, a breath, small but noticeable if you’re paying attention to that kind of thing, which you are. She puts her stuff down before saying anything, lays it out in a row between you two like a barricade: her purse, her travel mug, and a book. She’s brought a fucking book with her, which pisses you off until you notice it’s a big fat collection of essays by Joan Didion, the one you bought her for Christmas that first year. She says Hi and you say Hi and she says So and you say So and you know this tactic, declining-to-speak-first; the foreman at work used it on you last time you asked for a raise. It’s a little like chicken and a little like chess and you’re great at both of those, so you look around the coffee shop for something to concentrate on as you wait her out. A middle-aged guy sits alone at the table adjacent, staring into his coffee, and he looks up expectantly when the door to the place opens, but his face falls when he doesn’t recognize whoever walks in. How’s your mom she asks and you go Fine. Chemo starts next month. How’s your dad and she goes Good. Operation was yesterday. They think they got it all and you go Great and she goes So and there you sit. Talk to me she says, and you chew the skin on your thumb and say What about. She says I’m trying to be honest. I want this to work but I want to see how things are by which you know she means I want to see how you’ve changed, how much you’ve changed, whether you’ve changed which you can’t really fault her for, because that’s why you’re here too. Be honest with me she says even if it’s cutting, even if it’s something I might not want to hear.

Four years ago, you met. It was a weekday, so of course you were at AB&G with the guys, knocking off another shit day on the site, building of all things some new frat house for the rich-bitch kids at the U. You were in the middle of a joke, the one about the priest and the hobo, syllables away from the punch line, when she walked in with a couple of friends. She looked alien mixing with the working
crowd, and you wondered why, as a white-trash Jersey Rick Blaine
might have said, of all the shitty blue-collar bars in all the world,
an upper-crust girl like her had walked into yours. She looked
written, was the phrase in your head. Like the kind of girl you see in
movies and go, No one looks that good in real life. She looked like
the kind of girl your dad warned you about, the only piece of advice
you ever got from him. And then what were the odds, she ordered a
shot of whiskey, and when you heard her order you knew what Nick
Carraway meant when he said Daisy’s voice sounded full of money.
When you finally snapped out of it the guys were looking at you on
the edge of their seats and you realized you hadn’t finished your joke.
But instead of finishing you got up—who knows where these balls
were coming from, this was exactly not the kind of thing you’d ever
do—you beelined up to her, paid for her drink, and said Well hello
there stranger.

You light a cigarette. You know she hates that but she wants you to
be honest. I don’t think I was fair to you last time around you begin.
I thought you were perfect and she says Now you know I’m not and
you say Now I know you’re not. You’re selfish and callow and you
think you’re capricious when what you really are is spoiled. You give
yourself license to do whatever the hell you want. You expect her to
look away but to her credit she maintains eye contact and you think
maybe she means it when she says she wants you to be honest. What
if that hasn’t changed she asks and you say It hasn’t and she says So
what’s different and you say What’s different is that I’m those things
too, and at least I know it now. She closes her eyes and nods, like
No shit Sherlock, though she has the couth not to actually say that.
Instead she says There’s a good chance I’m not ready for this yet and
you say I’m not either and she looks at you like Well what’s the point
then, to which you say But who cares. I don’t care and you wouldn’t
be here if you did, either. You expect this logic to win her over—
it’s inarguable, isn’t it?—until she shrugs at you, says You’re more
selfish than I am. You’re ignoring what I’m saying. I think you have a
problem with women, you don’t think their needs outweigh yours and
you say I don’t have a problem with women, I have a problem with
you and she lets it drop but you aren’t ready to because how dare she,
My needs outweigh yours? She reaches across the barrier of purse-
mug-book for your hand and goes *You can be exhausting. Be clear with me. That’s why I’m here. What is it you want?*

Three years ago, you proposed. Not on your knee, not with a ring, not even consciously if you’re honest. Just out of the blue. But in a way that kind of made it almost more sincere than if you’d planned it out. Here’s how it happened: you’d both been drinking and she’d had a few more than you, which was the only time you could ever remember that happening. She’d spent so many nights taking care of you after your benders—placing cold washcloths to your head, or bringing you take-out to soak up the night—that it was nice to take care of her for once. You told her this as she nodded off: *It’s nice to take care of you.* Maybe she was drunk, or maybe her guard was up, because she just said *Huh* and you said *You okay* and she said *I love you too,* which was the first time either of you had said that. You said *We should get married,* and really it was just a way to one-up her, but after it came out it sounded right, in a way the words you say to people never sound right, and she said (eyes closed) *That would be nice,* and it felt official, even though—with her in that state—the gesture felt cowardly, like shouting threats to people from your passing car, and you knew she’d wake up the next day with no memory of the night before, just regret and a cramp and a headache so blinding she swore she’d never do it again.

*I want* you say as you put out your cigarette *I want to be who I am with you all the time.* And she says *I want you to be able to be that whether I’m around or not,* and you say *I’m fine without you,* really *I am,* *I’m just better when I’m with you,* and she says *I need you to understand that I’m a lot of things and that only one of them is your ex-girlfriend,* and that’s far from the most important. You nod and say *I want you to love me and to not have any doubts* and were this a few years ago you would have followed it with *Is that so much to ask,* but you’re getting older now and you know that, in fact, it is. *I can’t do that* she says and you say *I know,* *I’m just telling you what I want.* She says *I want to be able to doubt and not feel like a villain,* and she twiddles a faux-villainous mustache above her mouth and holds her coffee mug like a martini, pets an invisible cat. *I want you to trust that I’m a grown-up now* you say and she says *I want you to be a grown-
up now and you say I can do that, and she says I can, too, and as you shake on it you think If I get any more grown up at this point I’ll hang myself. It’s depressing.

Two years ago you stood in a room full of boxes, wondering when she’d acquired so much stuff, and how she’d managed to fit it all in your tiny shithole apartment. She asked whether you wanted to keep any of her books because they were too heavy to move, and you said No because and the end of the sentence was obviously they’ll remind me of you but instead you said I’ve read them all. Her phone rang, then, and to her credit she tried to let it go to voicemail, but in a weak moment you picked it up from the nightstand and saw his name on the screen, said Go ahead, answer it and her eyes said You sure? and you said Whatever, you’re his problem now, which you didn’t mean, only said it because it had been so long since you’d been in a position to hurt her, and now again you were. You wanted to provoke her, wanted her to fight back because arguing was the only language you knew anymore, and even if she said something nasty, at least she’d be speaking to you. She took the phone from your outstretched hand and said This’ll just be a minute and walked outside, closing the door before you could slam it. You locked her out—a pointless gesture, you knew she still had her key—but before you could even enjoy the temporary fuck-you of her trying the knob and noticing you’d done it, you heard the engine of her car start, the wheels crunching over pebbles as she backed out and drove unceremoniously, and irreversibly, away.

You’ve reached a point in the conversation where you both feel comfortable sitting in silence for a bit. She leafs through her book but doesn’t give it her full attention, just spreads out the pages like a Japanese fan. Whoever the middle-aged man has been waiting for still hasn’t shown up, but someone’s dog wanders over to his table, and when he notices it, the man smiles. The dog nuzzles his hand and the man is happy to pet it, happy to scratch its neck, happy to give it love. Something childlike enters into this man’s eyes and you want to point him out to her, to say Hey check it out and nod in his direction, but you don’t want the guy to feel like he’s an exhibit in a zoo, so you just stay quiet. He breaks off a piece of bacon from his sandwich
and holds it out for the dog to take. Just as the dog starts chewing, a woman behind him screams *Baxter! Baxter get over here* and marches over to leash Baxter up, then turns to the man and says *Please don’t feed my dog* and returns to her table before he can say *I’m sorry.*

One year ago you’d stopped speaking completely. Everything in the world felt so slippery, like walking through quicksand, that you took comfort in anything concrete, so you detailed your life in numbers: six nights a week getting sloppy-drunk, five drinks a night at least, four months since your last sober message on her voicemail, three months since your last drunken one, two packs of cigarettes a day, one girl a week you took home with you. The girls were the hardest statistic to keep track of, since they weren’t really different girls so much as a poorly-constructed mosaic making up scraps of her. A waitress with a beauty mark in the same spot next to her nose. A blonde with the same cat-green eyes. An undergrad wearing the blue sweater she’d had on when you first met. In your defense, it was getting easier not to think of her while you were in bed with these girls, and you’d even taken two or three of them on a few dates. You brought one home to meet your ma and your ma said *I like her, a local girl* and you said *Ma please* and she said *I’m just saying this one’s good, it’s important to know your place.* But during all of this, you didn’t kid yourself to think that anything was more than a distraction, a way to cope—*but what’s wrong with that,* you thought—and it was impossible not to realize she was probably doing the exact same thing at that moment, you had no idea whether she was still with him (but what difference did that make?), and when one of these girls laid you down in your drunken stupor and put a cold washcloth to your head and told you it was nice to take care of you, you felt so profoundly lonely that it was all you could do to keep from throwing up.

*Are we just lonely* she asks you, and for the first time in the negotiating process she’s thrown something at you for which you weren’t prepared, because honestly *Yes* is the answer—*but what’s wrong with that,* you think. People get together for much worse reasons. But she says it again, aims the question for some reason at the back cover of Didion’s book, at a sad-eyed black-and-white picture of the widowed author’s face, *Are we just so lonely that we’re coming back to each*
other to get rid of it? Are we that fucked up? And you go No and look behind you before you realize that you’re the one who said it. But it’s true, No you say again, I could be just as happy by myself. I don’t need to be with anyone. And she says Seriously and you go Yeah and she goes Well then what’s the point and you let that sit, stir the coffee with your pinkie, take out a cigarette but leave it unlit, roll it back and forth on the table like a kid making a snake out of Play-Doh. It’s true that I’d rather be with you than be alone you concede, but I’d rather be alone than be with anyone who isn’t you, and you say it not romantically but matter-of-factly, because it is a fact, a truth, probably the only true thing you know anymore at a time in your life when all the things you used to think were true are proving so oppressively false. And maybe she picks up on this truth-vibe, because she says Okay, say the worst thing you’ve done to me that I don’t know about, and you say No way am I falling for that, and she says Come on, come on and you say No and she says Do it and you say I have no idea if I ever loved you, and she says I cheated on you and you say I thought it had to be something I didn’t know about, and she looks down and says, Lots of times. But this does not stun you in the way it would have when you were younger, this does not break your heart or even mildly sprain it; it occurs to you that you actually meant the thing about not wanting to be with anyone who isn’t her, and you do after all love her and this (cheating) is after all what people do and you are after all just a poor boy from a poor town, living a life that until she showed up felt impoverished itself, so instead you just say I want you to stop doing that. She says Okay and I want you to stop drinking, and you say Well—we can talk about that.

One week ago she called, Just to say hi. You’d never been call-just-to-say-hi friends, or friends at all for that matter, but you were so grateful to hear her voice that you didn’t question it. She said she’d been thinking of you often lately and you said What about... and she said No, he’s gone and you said Why and she said You. You didn’t know whether their break-up had made her think of you or her thinking of you had broken them up, and this seemed an important distinction. But you got to talking casually and it was nice; you’d spent so much time trying to remember what she looked like that you’d forgotten to remember this, the most important thing, the ease with which you
spoke to each other, the only-her things she manages to say. *I wish we’d known each other when we were kids* she said and you said *You wouldn’t have liked me, I was weird* and she said *Me too!* which actually you knew already, she’d told you about the league of American Girl dolls she’d gather in her attic and boss around like an empress; you’d told her about the broken fridge in the alley behind your house you used to crawl into and sleep in to feel somehow less lonely. But you were talking again now and that’s what counted, that’s what made this all feel new, that’s what made you agree to meet a week later and see *how* and *how much* and *whether* you’d changed, the answer being *Not much*, which is why, a year from now, you’ll be standing in a room full of boxes again, she’ll be driving unceremoniously away, this time for good.

But for now you are here and she is here and peace talks are going well, and you have to admit you can’t remember ever feeling quite as happy as you do now, when she brushes back her hair, smiles at you, and says, *Well hello there stranger.*
R Dean Johnson

HOW TO WRITE A GREAT BASEBALL STORY

As I step back into the house from the garage, my son Boyd is waiting for me. He wonders why I’m bringing my old baseball glove inside. Glove equals ball and he knows not to play ball in the house, so what gives?

How do I explain to him that I’m trying, again, to write a baseball story and that I need the smell of the leather nearby, need to be able to bite the webbing the way I did when I was thirteen so the butterflies would go away?

“Da’s working,” I say at the door to my office, but the look on his face tells me this makes no sense. “Da’s writing,” I explain, and he knows with a father and mother who both teach creative writing, this trumps most everything. So he glances at the glove one more time before wandering off, headed for the living room and adventures that don’t involve me.

I know I can do this, write a great baseball story. I have several good starts sitting in a file on my laptop. I have the credentials—a few publications, an MFA, a tenure-track job at Eastern Kentucky University, and a lifetime batting average well above .500 in my softball league. And most importantly, I know what every good writer already knows, that the best baseball stories really aren’t about baseball.

Thousands of people write baseball stories every year, many of them get published, and most of them are bad—melodramatic moments with improbable success or heavy-hitting symbolism: “When he kisses home plate,” the writer might explain, “he’s really saying that he loves his family.” I get it. I’m afraid I’ll do it. And suddenly, I’m not typing. I’m staring blankly, shaking off signs, a tired, straining pitcher on the mound who needs a pep-talk because no one is warming up in the bullpen. “The plot will take care of itself,” I’ve told my intro level students again and again. “The details of your story will win the day.” I’ve drilled this lesson into them with exercises, consoled them with it when a great start has gone awry. It’s good advice, advice I pass on to them as it was passed on to me, and
it gets me out of my jam.

Boyd raps lightly on the door, a recently acquired skill even if he doesn’t wait for an answer, and his blonde head leans in. His eyes fix on the glove sitting next to my laptop. To him, it is gorgeous. He doesn’t know it’s too small to be a softball glove. Doesn’t know that the signature, Ron Guidry, is a lefty like his Da but was a pitcher, not an outfielder. I bought it in California when I was thirteen, half an hour before a ball game because I’d left the previous glove at the park and lost it. The shiny leather was stiff the entire game, like the binding of a new book, and in a rush to break it in every half-inning it never quite took the right shape, but money was tight and it was the glove I played with the rest of my teens before retiring it to occasional games of catch and letting it make a comeback when we moved to Kentucky.

“Boyd,” I say and the tone stops his step forward, eyes still on the glove and a grin on his face. “Da’s writing.”


My first ball game was at Anaheim Stadium—hardly one of the cathedrals of baseball. In the seventies, the California Angels were awful and the stadium scoreboard was a ridiculous, giant \( A \) that stood higher than the View Level roof. On the rare occasions the Angels won, the halo around the top of the Big \( A \) blinked throughout the night until daybreak (a fact I’d learn in high school when I started going to parties). On nights they lost, it stayed lit but did not blink. When Anaheim coaxed the Los Angeles Rams to town, they spent millions of dollars to enclose the stadium with more seats and moved the Big \( A \) out next to the freeway. Not long after the Rams left for St. Louis, the new scoreboard, a little \( A \) on the roof in left field, collapsed in an earthquake. When the Angels were sold to the Disney Corporation, they were renamed the Anaheim Angels (their third name after coming into the league as the Los Angeles Angels), the football seats were torn out, the stadium was reconfigured, and a state-of-the art scoreboard with no \( A \) was installed. Soon after winning their only World Series, Disney sold them and they were again renamed, this time the Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim. The stadium, in the city’s annoyance with the new owner, was renamed Angel Stadium of Anaheim.

The cliché, you can never go home, is played out constantly in
Anaheim, yet I’ve seen more ballgames there than anywhere else, sat everywhere in that stadium (even parts that are no longer there). In high school, Jim, Dave, Chris, and I would buy the cheapest seats in the house and then play two-on-two tag on the ramps and in the tunnels, never once sitting down for the game we’d paid for. In college, when Jim and I both reached twenty-one, we went to an afternoon game in July, bought cheap outfield seats and our first stadium beers. A few innings later, with nearly full, warm beers in our hands, we went back to the concession stand for ice cold Cokes.

Anaheim’s stadium (whatever its current name) does not have a grand history, does not have the ghosts the way Fenway and Wrigley do. The way even the New Yankee Stadium will relocate the ghosts from next door. How am I to tap into something that isn’t there when what I want in my baseball story, what I know will help make it a great story, is tradition, tradition as backstory.

To find tradition, my mind travels up the freeway to Dodger Stadium, to an organization with its origins in New York, a World Series rivalry with the Yankees, and a stadium that has become second-oldest (after Wrigley) in the National League. Because of my father, who grew up in Dayton, Ohio, I’ve always been a Cincinnati Reds fan. Years before interleague play, my only chance to catch the Reds was either to talk my dad into that congested drive north on Interstate 5, or to make the drive myself once I turned sixteen. I did both, several times, and when the St. Louis Cardinals were in town I’d go with my cousin, Jay, to see his favorite team.

There’s this popular misconception that people in LA show up in the third inning and leave in the seventh because they’re too distracted to get there on time and too fair-weather to stay until the bitter end if their team is down. Really, it’s just about getting through traffic. And while the fans may not deserve the scorn for showing up late, I can’t excuse them for leaving early. My grandfather Boyd (my son’s namesake) would sit on the front porch of his Dayton, Ohio home on hot August nights, listening to the Redlegs on the radio deep into the night when they were on a west coast swing. My father, a young man at the time, would lie in bed, drifting off to sleep to the sounds of the ballparks coming through the open window, echoes from far off San Francisco and LA, and his father would still be up before him the next day, dressed and off to his shift at the AC/Delco plant.
My cousin Jay and I always stayed to the end, even when our teams lost and we’d have half a stadium still there to jeer our hats as we walked to the parking lot. We usually saved one bag of peanuts to toss back and forth over and around the crowd filing out of the stadium after the game (a good way to avoid the jeering). We’d arrive at the car, the bag tattered and leaking shells, tail lights and exhaust fumes surrounding us, and pull a quarter from the ashtray. The time-killing game was simple: throw the quarter straight up in the air as high as you could, hope it caught enough light from the parking lamps on the way down to shimmer, and whoever caught it got a point. There were no infield fly rules or pitchers taking charge to say who gets it, so body-checking, hip checking, and outright assault was legal if it became clear that you couldn’t see the quarter coming down this time but your cousin could. We’d toss it up again and again until, without quite knowing when it happened, the parking lot would be empty, the stadium lights darkened down to a minimum for the grounds crew, and we’d hop in the car, sweaty and hungry for those tattered peanuts.

Boyd is in the hallway, pushing his toy shopping cart around, a low rumble on the hardwood floor accented by giggles. It makes me look to the door, x-ray vision, or maybe lasers, but I say nothing. These are good days for him, days before he learns that even wonderful things like baseball have a shameful history. For me, the lesson didn’t truly sink in until adulthood, until I was a graduate student at the University of Alabama and one of my professors introduced me to Oscar DePriest Tucker. Oscar, an Alabama native, had worked for Governor Guy Hunt and been a member of the Board of Trustees for Alabama A&M University, his alma mater. He invited me over to his home one afternoon, made me a peanut butter sandwich, and then sat across from me at his dining room table and told stories about the Negro League ball games he’d been to right here in Tuscaloosa. “When the [Birmingham Black] Barons came to town,” he told me, “it was SRO. Standing Room Only. It was like a holiday.” He’d seen so many of the greats barnstorm through Tuscaloosa to play the local team, the stands packed with whites and blacks sitting side-by-side.

In telling me about the time Piper Davis got so incensed at being called out at second that he kicked the umpire, Oscar suddenly recalled that he knew the plate umpire from that very game. “Isiah Lavender,” Oscar said, his eyes rolling up to the ceiling, the memory taking over
the room. “We called him Lasses because he was slow and smooth, like molasses.”

Oscar walked over to the telephone table in his living room to retrieve a tattered old phonebook the size of a credit card. “You should talk to him,” he said as he flipped through the pages. “His brother played for a few teams.”

I asked if the brothers still lived in Tuscaloosa and Oscar wasn’t sure because he hadn’t talked to them in ten years or so. But he dialed anyway and a moment later, the receiver balanced between his shoulder and ear, Oscar’s voice rose with joy, “Syrup, that you?” he said and I connected the dots, Molasses to Lasses, Lasses to Syrup. “It’s Oscar, Oscar Tucker.”

Two weeks later I met Oscar at the home of Syrup’s brother, George Otis “Big Train” Lavender. Train was seventy-four, a full head of hair not completely gray, and still over six feet tall with a slight bend in his back that made him stoop like he was ducking through a doorway. On the wall in the family room were pictures of Train, most of them not baseball: generations of family members posing with him, graduations, weddings, barbecues, and several from his years in the Marine Corps, fighting in the Pacific during World War II.

A notepad of questions in hand and tape recorder rolling, it was Train who asked the first question: “What’s a white boy from California care about the Negro Leagues for?”

It’s the best question on the tape. Either side. I’d known the name Jackie Robinson early on with all the Dodger games on local television, heard Vin Scully on the radio spinning tales about Satchell Paige. For years I’d seen the tape of Hank Aaron’s home run against the Dodgers and those two white guys in street clothes, all smiles, running up on each side of him as he rounds second. It always bothered me that Aaron looks annoyed and shrugs them off. It wasn’t until much later that I learned of all the hate mail Aaron received while chasing down the Babe, mail that grew more racist, more threatening, and more dangerous the closer Aaron got to immortality. Those two men slapping Hammerin’ Hank on the back weren’t just stealing a part of his moment, even if their intentions were pure, for all he knew they were a couple of those letter-writers come to do who-knows-what.

Slowly, with years of knowledge about baseball’s sins accumulating, it occurred to me that the game was bigger than any
one person, too big for the confines of one field, or one league, or one culture. I don’t know that I could have put it into words even if I’d known Train’s question was coming, but I knew it as assuredly as I know to score from second on a hit that reaches the outfield, and I stammered to tell Train, “I think the Negro Leagues are amazing. To be told you can’t be a part of something and then go on and do it on your own. To do it as good as the original. Or better. That’s so American. All those great players and stories…” my voice trails off on the tape because I’m afraid I’ll say too much and still, years later, certain I said too little.

I grew up middleclass in Orange County, California. The only time I was ever out of my comfort zone was baseball. In the all-star tournament every summer, we’d play teams from Santa Ana—Mexican-American kids who’d shout instructions to each other in Spanish—and teams from south Orange County with Asian-American kids who stood much taller, threw much harder than the stereotype we were expecting.

In 1981, playing for the East Anaheim thirteen-year-old all-star team, late in a one-run game, my coach put me in to pinch-run. I went on the first pitch, got a bad jump, slipped a bit, didn’t see the pitchout, and slid into a tag that beat me by two steps and a slide. I wanted to hate the Asian kid who threw me out. Wanted to hate the Asian pitcher who’d executed the play indifferently, so cold and precise. Mostly, though, I wanted to cry for letting my team down and feeling so much hate for the opposing team.

There is failure, and guilt, and regret in a great baseball story. Those “Say it ain’t so moments,” that can only happen off the field. I want to tell Train how even now, with many Negro League players properly enshrined in the Hall of Fame, it is not enough. Nothing can make up for what they were denied and the countless players we do not remember. Learning the stories, as much joy and triumph as there is, only deepens the guilt because the necessary casualty of integrating the Major Leagues was the slow, quiet death of the Negro Leagues.

So often, I tell my students, “You’ve got to know your characters better than your reader ever will. Know their past, and when you do, you’ll write them real and they’ll surprise you in good ways.”

My baseball backstory rounds out like this: though my parents
divorced when I was eight, the one place I could see them together was my Little League games. They’d show up separately but usually sit near each other. We’d stand around as a family after the games, talking to other families or coaches, coordinating schedules or reliving moments from the game. It was never a warm, fuzzy, made-for-TV moment, but it was them coming together and doing what they were both good at, being my parents—supportive after the bad days, excited after the good ones. My father could always pick out something good, especially when I was really young and struggled the most. “I was proud of you today,” he’d say with a frequency that never sounded canned or tired. “When you picked up that grounder and zipped it to the cutoff man, I told everyone in the stands, ‘That’s my boy.’”

That first year in Little League, nobody told me a lefty couldn’t play third-base. Being one of the better fielders, the coach put me there out of necessity. Immediately, Dave Chalk, the defensively solid infielder for the Angels, became my favorite player. Everything about him was perfect, from his name—the adult but not parental sounding, Dave; the baseball infused, Chalk—to his scandal-free, style-free, voice-free persona. He even choked up on the bat.

One Saturday during the season, with the Angels home for a night game, my father discovered that Dave Chalk and the Angels hottest young pitcher, Frank Tanana, were making appearances at two different McDonald’s. He said I should see them both, Chalk being my favorite, Tanana being a lefty like me, but he had to work. And so my mother took me.

We went to see Frank Tanana first, walking into the McDonald’s on time to find that Tanana was late. We waited, and waited, and as we were leaving for the other McDonald’s, so we wouldn’t get shut out, a blindingly white, convertible Mercedes-Benz flew into the parking lot, top down, the driver in sunglasses, scruffy face, mussy hair, and no shirt. Kids rushed outside, crowding around the car as Frank Tanana cut the engine, stood up on the seat and hopped out over the door and onto the asphalt. He reached into the back and pulled out a shirt, buttoning it up as a gallery of kids lead him inside the restaurant.

“Want to go back in?” my mother said.

I didn’t. Instead, we raced through the streets of Anaheim to the other McDonald’s. The restaurant was quiet, even for a Saturday afternoon, and I could not find Dave Chalk because there were no
crowds or line of kids. Then my mother pointed to a table near the back where two men in slacks, sport coats, and ties sat side-by-side. “Is that him?” my mother asked. And even without his hat and uniform, I recognized the steady, clean-shaven, serious eyes and neatly flat & parted hair of Dave Chalk. He looked like a younger version of my father, and when I asked for his autograph he asked me if I played ball. “I play third, like you,” I said and he was impressed, even interested, asking my team’s name and wishing me luck. His career would span nine years, three more teams, and slip away without much notice from anyone outside of his immediate family (though I noticed when he left the league after 1981, despite the fact my allegiances had moved on to Fred Lynn, a left-handed outfielder with a good glove).

As one of Boyd’s plastic balls rolls down the hallway, I’m at the door. He knows not to throw a ball in the house and he’s smart enough, already, to subvert this by rolling them. On screen, I have ballparks, characters, rituals, nicknames, writing advice, anecdotes and backstory, but no complete story. There’s plenty of daylight in the sky, though, still plenty of time as I pull the door open, the ball having gone past and no Boyd in sight. “Hey Pud,” I say, firm but not yelling, knowing he must be in earshot, knowing he’ll respond to the nonsensical nickname we gave him before he had words. He pads around the corner from his room, the sound of his feet in socks reaching me before I see his face, bright, as always, a grin even when he isn’t smiling. He stops there, a few feet away and I step fully into the hallway. “Boy-o,” I say, “Do you want to go outside and have a catch?”
“Grab that Baby Ruth box and run back into the store and get those ‘two for one’ Hershey deal sheets on my desk,” Dad muttered as he struggled to lift a case of drinking cups into the trunk of his leaf-green, two-door, 1954 Chevrolet Bel Air Sedan. The case fit easily in the massive trunk, which was strewn with an assortment of items to be delivered to customers: a case of kitchen matches, six cans of hairspray, two dozen cans of Van Camp’s Beanee Weenees, a hodgepodge of cigarettes cartons, two cans of Prince Albert Smoking tobacco, and a couple of tubes of Copenhagen moist snuff. Teenage boys in Cumberland County, Kentucky, put just a pinch of that stuff between their lip and gum, and old ladies out in the country dipped too! When I was about eight years old, the first and last time I tried it, I threw up all over my cousin Charlie.

It was the summer of 1958, just past six-thirty on Tuesday morning. An overnight rain had left the asphalt parking lot of the Goodman Candy Company with just enough moisture so that a faint mist curled up around the automobile as if it were going to jump in the car and ride down the road with us. And, since it was Tuesday, the destination was Burkesville and Eighty Eight, Summer Shade, Mud Lick, Marrowbone and all points, on paved and unpaved roads, in between.

It was the same trip my dad had made every Tuesday for twenty-five years. On that particular morning, he seemed as anxious to get in the car and start as he had when he made the first trip to Cumberland County years ago. He knew that his customers, many of whom had become lifelong friends and almost family, would be eager to place orders, catch up on the news from Glasgow and exchange a tale or two with “the candy man.” He had become part of their families, he knew their children by name, he attended their funerals and he purchased raffle tickets from the local Lions Club. He had a connection to rural folk.

At one time, the family farm was the image people had of rural life in Kentucky. Small towns dotted the landscape and connected farms throughout the state, from the hilly terrain of eastern Kentucky to the undulating countryside of the central part of the state to the
fertile, rich river bottoms in the western counties. The family farm was more than plowed fields and livestock; generations born and raised on farms believed in traditional values and had a passionate attachment to the land. Kentucky poet, essayist, and author Wendell Berry has lived and farmed in Henry County for close to forty years. He writes often of “a sense of place.”

In an interview with Mother Earth News years ago, Berry said he’d like to get people back in touch with the realities of a farming life: “There’s a great argument going on today about whether or not the family farm is going to survive or should survive. The primary concern has to be with the cultural relation between people and land.” Berry added, “We need to be talking about family farmers who live on and care for small tracts of land out of the motivation that long association and deep knowledge can produce, people who know the difference between duty and love.”

My father was connected to the rural life by both—love and duty. His devotion took him to the rural parts of south central Kentucky to the farmers and proprietors of country stores. He also had a genuine love for the people and the places that had always been part of his life.

Country stores, which at one time were as common in rural Kentucky as chickens running free in the front yard, were a part of that sense of place. Today, country stores have all but disappeared, shuttered and boarded up. If you find a store at all in the countryside today, it’s often dressed up with neon lights flashing “Lottery Tickets Sold Here,” offering cardboard-tasting sandwiches, shrink-wrapped in shiny plastic pretending to be freshly made bologna or country ham sandwiches. They wouldn’t be at all like the sandwiches you could get at any number of real country stores in rural Kentucky not too long ago. My dad introduced me to these stores and sandwiches as a youngster.

I dashed back into the warehouse to pick up the samples and the Hershey sale sheet. I heard Dad exclaim, with mild aggravation, “Dad-gum-it, we’ve got to get on the road.” He knew we were staring at a thirteen-hour day. I hurried into his office through the sliding glass doors, which opened to a Taj Mahal of goods: tobacco products, household and restaurant supplies, beef jerky, and hot fudge sundae toppings: maraschino cherries, crushed peanuts, and milk chocolate syrup. My childhood friends (and later a high school girlfriend who had a sweet tooth) loved visiting the warehouse with me. Their fathers
had “normal” jobs, as lawyers, doctors, school teachers. When we were younger, heading on our bikes to the library or ball field for an afternoon game, we’d stop in at the warehouse for a quick hello and a treat, which Dad always had close by.

If the workers weren’t loading delivery trucks, we’d be granted floor privileges to wander the aisles. My buddies were mesmerized. Sugary candy, bubble gum, and lollipops danced in their heads, their eyes as big as saucers. We began a slow walk through temptation, where aisle after aisle was stacked to the roof waiting for a grubby little hand to touch a box of candy. Thirty-six-count bags of M&Ms, plain and peanut, PEZ, with its funny little figure-head dispenser that spit tiny pieces of tangy candy past the lips, Pixy Stixs, with a powdery sweetness that flooded the mouth—it was all there. If we were lucky, we might find a loose carton of caramel-covered Cracker Jacks popcorn, which every kid knew had a surprise—a spinning top or paper tattoo—waiting at the bottom of the box.

The multitude of candy bars stacked in tidy rows was enough to produce gallons of chocolate, caramel, nougat, and peanuts to fill a large swimming pool several times over, from Snickers, Reese’s Peanut Butter Cups, Junior Mints, Hershey’s, Milky Way to the Three Musketeers. Shelves were stocked with BB Bats, Banana Splits, Black Jack Gum, Charm Pops, Chuckles, Cherryheads, Certs, Goo Goos, Goobers, Gummy Bears, and Gummy Worms.

In another section, it was as if Mr. Peanut himself was walking down the row with us. There seemed to be no end in sight to the treats that appeared before us: peanut brittle, peanut butter bars, peanut butter kisses, clusters, patties, pecan pies, pralines, and pecan log rolls.

I was a popular kid and had a lot of friends. Now, I know why.

My sisters and I had grown up in our father’s company. Whiling away the hours, we roller-skated the smooth concrete floors until we were tired. Then we turned to a game of hide-and-seek among stacks of cardboard boxes and cartons that in one minute could be a secret fort and in the next be transformed into a magic castle high on a mountain top.

It was not a workplace for us. It was a mythical maze of secret doors and hidden passages, a place where we could watch Midnight, the warehouse’s resident cat, play with mice, and where, on a hot and humid July afternoon, we could sneak into the cooling room where chocolate bars were stored in the summer when the blazing Kentucky
sun transformed the metal building into a hothouse.

Since 1933, Goodman Candy Company had existed in three principal locations in the city of Glasgow. For a time, my father had a wood-frame storefront on South Race St., just off the town square, down the street from the Plaza Movie Theatre and next door to Lesseberry Building Supply.

When I was toddler, Dad would roust me out of bed at dawn to ride piggy-back to a nearby car dealership where he stored his 1940’s vintage station wagon, the company delivery van. He would pack and sort his supplies as he got ready for the day on the road. His second location and first real warehouse was a few streets to the south of that location, near the only school in town, the Baptist church, and the library. It was a concrete-block building, stretched long and narrow between Miller’s Dry Cleaning and a parking lot that backed up to Shorty’s DX Service Station. It had a garage-door entrance in back where the trucks could pull in for loading. Near the indoor driveway was a long wooden table—fifteen feet in length—where the cigarette stamping machine sat.

A small sticker that said “Candy is Delicious Food” invited guests into the showroom and office. A large roll-top oak desk dominated an area behind a narrow counter. The desk’s craftsmanship was topnotch. Twelve pigeon-hole compartments contained checks and paperwork. The desk had useful filing space and even a fake drawer, which opened to reveal additional storage labeled with tiny brass plates.

In a few years, with the business growing and the product line expanding, Dad had to relocate and construct a new office and warehouse south of town. He became one of the first businessmen to build on the highway bypass, in an expansive light blue corrugated aluminum structure with a much larger area for product display, offices, and storage. Despite a bigger store, my dad, who had nurtured the company’s growth through the Depression, World War II, and into the 1950’s, kept things the same.

I grabbed the samples Dad had sent me to retrieve and met him back in the parking lot.

“Come on, son, we’re a day late and a dollar short,” he said. “We’ve got to get a move on.”

Dad had on his uniform: dress pants, not jeans (I never saw him wear blue jeans), short-sleeved shirt and a tie (he wore a tie seven days a week), plastic pocket protector for pens and pencils, and his
ever-present felt fedora, purchased from Jolly’s Men’s Store on the square uptown. His brown working shoes were slightly worn but always polished.

If Dad was particular about his dress, he wasn’t about his car. His automobiles were rolling offices, stocked with order blanks, extra pens and samples. They also served as delivery vehicles when a customer needed something before the scheduled arrival of the warehouse truck. His autos were just, well, vehicles—something that would get him from one store to the next, across a shallow creek or up the steep grade to the Alpine Motel in Burkesville. His cars were nondescript, dull in color, and equipped with the bare essentials: manually operated windows, a spare tire, and an antenna—and a radio. He loved cruising along the highway after a hard day’s work listening to a Cincinnati Reds or St. Louis Cardinals baseball game. When announcers Jack Buck or Dizzy Dean were riding shotgun with him, it was even better.

He drove his cars until the wheels fell off. In one of them, an old dark green Chevrolet with tattered cloth seats and a back-seat window that wouldn’t roll up all the way, the heel of his shoes wore a hole the size of a silver dollar through the floor board just behind the accelerator. You could see the pavement through the hole and, when it rained, water splashed up through the opening, dampening Daddy’s cuff. He didn’t mind at all.

I climbed up into the dusty Bel Air, pushed a few boxes and papers out of the way and settled in for the road trip out Highway 90, southeast toward Burkesville and the Tennessee line.

“Don’t let me forget to get that case of cups out of the trunk this afternoon when we get to the Dairy Freeze. He thinks the entire student population at Cumberland County High School will stop by for a milkshake this afternoon and he’ll run out of cups before our truck gets here tomorrow,” Dad said.

“Yes sir,” I responded as I made an entry in the tiny notebook that fit in the back pocket of my jeans. (The son of the owner could get away with casual attire.)

Our first stop that morning was in Eighty Eight, a strangely named town in Kentucky. The New York Times reported it was named in 1860 by the community’s first postmaster, Dabnie Nunnally. He had little faith in the legibility of his handwriting and thought that using numbers would solve the problem. He reached into his pants pocket and came up with 88 cents.

One of Dad’s oldest and most loyal customers was Mr. Robert
Richardson, who had been a customer since Dad started his wholesale business. I grabbed a carton of hairspray out of the trunk, Dad hoisted his boxes of samples out of the back seat, balancing them under his left arm as he reached for his order pad with the other hand. Mr. Richardson greeted us with a grin.

“I see you brought along some good help,” he said, as he gave me an affectionate pat on the shoulder. “Good help is hard to find these days.”

“I need someone to help with the driving,” Dad responded.

Richardson’s store was similar to hundreds of country stores that were once part of the rural landscape. Most people went to town, Glasgow or Burkesville, periodically to buy supplies or find items that the country stores didn’t carry. But my dad remembers stories about how most of the inventory, like crackers, used to come in barrels and metal containers. At one time, coffee was shipped green and homemakers roasted it before it was ready to brew. Meats were packed in salt and had to be cured. A number of essentials, like milk and butter, weren’t available because there was no refrigeration. A gallon of kerosene cost a nickel. Corn meal, flour, sugar, salt, baking soda, baking powder, and hard candy would send a farmer to the store. But when you lived and worked in the country, you raised just about everything else for the family table. A few years later that began to change. Grocery store wholesalers offered boxed macaroni, canned salmon, and pizza supplies. Little Italy arrived in Mud Lick.

If there was no general store in an area, life could be difficult for farmers. Country stores provided small communities with goods and services such as newspapers from the city and a post office. The stores helped a community by attracting other businesses—auto and tractor repair, churches, and restaurants. General stores not only attracted people to the community, they became the center of social life. Farming was solitary work and the store gave people a chance to visit, catch up on the local gossip, and discuss weather and crops. Country store porches often had a bench or rocking chairs where customers could chat and pass the time.

When I traveled with Dad, he talked about what he remembered from growing up in the country. He spent summers on the farm and in the winter, he and his mother stayed with relatives so he could attend school.

On that morning, as we motored down the main highway, the road ahead seemed to disappear in the early morning haze. He looked at
me, the smoke curling from a newly lit Lucky Strike, fedora pulled low on his brow, and gave me a history lesson in Country Store 101.

“Early country stores were simple two-story wooden frame buildings, some never got painted. But they wanted to be noticed, so to make them look taller, some store owners attached a façade, or false front, to the top of the store,” he went on.

I savored learning this new word—façade—from him.

“And you know what? That’s why we say ‘puttin’ up a good front’ when someone thinks you’re acting a little different than usual. Somebody told me that a long time ago.”

I marveled over the things my dad knew.

Although Dad was courteous to every customer, he learned early on that time was money. Regardless of the kinship he might have with a store owner, he needed to get on his way. There were many stops to make before nightfall.

Some days we found ourselves off the main highway on a gravel road around noon with no decent lunch spot for miles. In small one-man repair garages or bait shops, I watched men open cans of Van Camp’s Beanie Weenies and spoon hot dogs and pork ‘n beans with one hand while fiddling with a cracked engine block with the other. Beans, a Butternut bar, and a Pepsi was lunch.

When I was twelve, a day as a junior traveling salesman had a way of wearing me out, but Dad never faltered or let on he was the least bit tired. We finished our rounds in Burkesville, made a few stops on the outskirts of town, turned that big Chevrolet around and headed for home. The route to Glasgow took us a different way, on another rural highway where we made additional stops. After a carton of chocolate milk and a candy bar to tide me over until suppertime, I got sleepy, bouncing around on a curvy road with an early evening summer breeze streaming in the window. Around four or five o’clock, after another stop or two—Dad said, “Why don’t you stay in the car, read your book. This won’t take long.”

I yawned, stretched out, and shut my eyes for a few minutes.

Heading home, the highway took us over small streams and bridges, winding its way by the edge of corn fields and dairy cows slowly making their way to the milking barn. There was often a farm tractor coming toward us. We regularly had to slow down so the farmer could swing the tractor wide to turn into the lane that headed home.

Dad’s muscular left arm, resting on the open window of the car
door, was tan up to the point where his sleeve touched the skin. I observed his "farmer’s wave" from my vantage point across the front seat. He never passed another vehicle without raising the first two fingers of his left hand and, ever so slightly, lifting the first and second digits a couple of inches, dipping them for an instant, and then bringing them back down again.

"Who was that?" I’d inquire.

"Oh, I don’t know. Just being friendly, I guess. Never hurts to be friendly," he’d reply.

I’m sorry to say that there was a time in my teenage years when I was embarrassed that Dad would wave at complete strangers.

There was a particular section of Highway 90 that seemed to characterize all that was simple and good about those trips. Although the road wound around hills and snaked back and forth between necessary country stores, there was one section just before Marrowbone that opened up to a broad, expansive, and verdant valley that had been sustained for decades by the crystal clear Beaver Creek. Driving southwest from Glasgow, you’d top a hill and be ushered slowly down the slope for a couple of miles before bottoming out in the village. No flashing caution lights, no sirens. Just schoolchildren, farmers, bankers, and ordinary folks going about their business.

"Have you given much thought about coming into the business when you get a little older? It’s not a bad life. You’re not going to get rich, but you’ll have enough to put food on the table," Dad would ask me with a laugh. "And you get Sundays off. I’m thinking about closing up on Saturdays at two. I got a call last night from Dusty Miller asking if I’d coach your Little League baseball team—what would you think about that?" He continued, "You know, this is hard work, but I like the people and I can tell they like you. You’ll be driving before too long. Someday you’ll make this trip on your own."

It would be a long time before I would make the trip on my own. The journey belonged to my father back then. But he was willing to share it with me.
Ruby C. Berryman

from *Fish on Friday*

Synopsis: In a Southern juke joint, a young girl experiences life through the tunes on the jukebox. A life lived on vinyl, join Lillie Ruth’s journey to see where the tunes take her on this musical adventure.

CAST
Lillie Ruth, 12-year old Black girl
Mama, 33 Female
Clyde, 41, Male
Watkins, 45, Male
Joe, 35, Male
Mattie, 35, Female
Junior, 29, Male
Mae Lynn, 29, Female
Skeet, 41, Male
Vanilla, 43, Male
Kojak, 39, Male

*Junior and Skeet can double as the paramedics.

SETTING: Various juke joints in the South, LILLIE RUTH’S home (also a juke joint)

TIME: 1975-1980

NOTES: The play goes back and forth between two styles. In the fugue moments, LILLIE RUTH narrates the actions of others. In other moments the interaction between the characters is played as normal.

A 12-year old Black girl stands over a dead man lying in the rain. She holds an umbrella to keep the water from the dead man’s face. A sign on the building flashes “Slim Jim’s”. A jukebox plays
“When a Man Loves a Woman” by Percy Sledge.

ACT I

LILLIE RUTH: This here is Lewis. He’s dead. Don’t matter though. Folks play this song when they’re in love and when they fall out. Miss Shirley fell out of love tonight. *(A woman peaks from the door.)* That’s mama. She’s just checking on me.

MAMA: You all right? I’m just checking on you.

LILLIE RUTH: I’m fine, Mama.

MAMA: Don’t let the cops run over Lewis.

LILLIE RUTH: Yes ma’am. *(MAMA closes the door.)* This here is Slim Jim’s. He ain’t too slim though. Never understood why grown folks call the fattest man in these parts Slim Jim.

*(A man and woman come out of Slim Jim’s with brown paper bags.)*

LILLIE RUTH: A lot of folks come here on Fridays.

JOE: We ought to wait a little longer. Lewis was my partner.

MATTIE: It’s taking the cops too damn long to get here. My fish is getting cold.

JOE: But you a witness.

MATTIE: I ain’t seen nothing.

*(They exit.)*

LILLIE RUTH: A good fish sandwich, cheap. That’s what brings them here on Fridays. Wasn’t so cheap for Lewis, though.

*(MAMA comes to the door with a plate. She looks across at Lewis’ body.)*

MAMA: Told that man not to come here tonight.

LILLIE RUTH: Mama tried to get him to eat at our house. She said: LILLIE RUTH & MAMA: Lewis, have some of this chicken with us.
LILLIE RUTH: I liked Lewis so I said, “Come on, Lewis. Eat with us.”
MAMA: But I knew he wouldn’t stay.
LILLIE RUTH: Everybody knows he was scared of his wife.
LILLIE RUTH & MAMA: Can’t keep Shirley waiting.
LILLIE RUTH: Lewis left and Mama said:
MAMA: Shirley’s gonna be the death of him.
LILLIE RUTH: When Mama says something like that it usually happens.
MAMA: Stabbed him just enough times to kill him.
LILLIE RUTH: But Mama said Shirley’s gonna say:
MAMA: It was self-defense. Right.
LILLIE RUTH: The way Mama heard it told was:
MAMA: Lewis was eating a fish sandwich and Shirley stabbed him from behind.
LILLIE RUTH: But I guess I’m just learning about these things. This is my first murder.

(Two paramedics take Lewis’ body away. LILLIE RUTH watches the blood run in the rain. MAMA comes to LILLIE RUTH with the plate of fish.)

MAMA: Slim Jim gave us some fish. I helped him in the kitchen. Nothing like a killing to make folks hungry.
LILLIE RUTH: Mama, do you think Miss Shirley is going to jail?
MAMA: For a little while.
LILLIE RUTH: I think she ought to get the electric chair.
MAMA: Ain’t like she killed no White man.

(MAMA exits.)

LILLIE RUTH: Well, if I suppose if I ever have to kill a Black man, I won’t be treated any worse than Miss Shirley.

(LILLIE RUTH exits.)

Slim Jim’s becomes a rural juke joint. A jukebox plays “Low Society” by Ray Charles.
(JUNIOR & MAE LYNN and VANILLA & SKEET drink and talk. JOE & MATTIE dance. CLYDE tends bar.)

(LILLIE RUTH enters unnoticed and stands by the door.)

LILLIE RUTH: This here is a country juke joint. Clyde’s place is not on the main road like Slim Jim’s. Police don’t bother none with this joint so Clyde sells as much corn liquor as he does fish.

CLYDE: Junior, here’s your gallon to go.

LILLIE RUTH: Now according to Mae Lynn, Junior is good at fixing things around the house but not drinking.

MAE LYNN: Junior, we don’t need no whole gallon.

LILLIE RUTH: Junior turns Miss Mae’s almond skin the color of prune juice when he drinks too much.

JUNIOR: Don’t you be telling me what I need. The fellas are coming over Saturday night.

(SKEET approaches JUNIOR with a joint.)

LILLIE RUTH: Now Skeet prefers smoking to drinking.

SKEET: Marijoowanna’s what you need. You can grow it at home. Quit giving all your money to Clyde.

MAE LYNN: My money.

(JUNIOR bristles.)

(JOE and MATTIE stop dancing and go to the bar.)

LILLIE RUTH: Junior’s been out of work for a while.

JUNIOR: You been digging those four inch heels into my balls since I lost my job. It’s getting old.

MAE LYNN: Tell me about it. It’s been three years since you bought your own whisky. What decent man can’t find work in three years?

(JUNIOR heads toward MAE LYNN. SKEET stops him.)

LILLIE RUTH: They’re starting up early tonight. I wonder what’s keeping Mama.
SKEET: Come on man. Help me out with this.

(SKEET guides JUNIOR past MAE. They stop at the door by LILLIE RUTH.)

SKEET: Hey there, Lil’ Miss, I know you ain’t here by yourself.

(MAMA enters.)

MAMA: No, she ain’t. Nice evening out there.

(SKEET stares at MAMA’s tits.)

SKEET: Nice in here, too.
MAMA: Hush your mouth, Skeet. I came for the fish. I don’t need your black ass wife Vanilla trying to cut me tonight.
LILLIE RUTH: Miss Vanilla is real nice until she isn’t. If you see a scar on woman’s face at Clyde’s, chances are it’s compliments of Miss Vanilla.
SKEET: She’s making sure you girls behave. Some of ya’ll come around for more than just fish.

(SKEET and JUNIOR exit.)

LILLIE RUTH: True. Mama is here for more than just the fish.
MAMA: (kisses Clyde) You’re looking rather smart tonight.
LILLIE RUTH: Now smart is the last word I’d pin on Clyde.
CLYDE: And you and your daughter looking like twins tonight.
LILLIE RUTH: Liar. Ever since I could remember, Mama’s been fifty pounds overweight. I love my mama but I’m thinking she don’t much look like a skinny twelve-year old. Mama lied back:

(MAMA sits at the bar. She fingers CLYDE’s fresh haircut.)

MAMA: New haircut suits you.

(LILLIE RUTH cringes.)

LILLIE RUTH: It’s that knob at his left temple. Mama’s always
trying to be nice about it. Pretending it’s not there. I asked Mama if he got that bullet in a war. She said she asked Clyde once but he was real sensitive about it:

CLYDE: Don’t start feeling fucking sorry for me. Nothing I can do about the damn thing sticking out.

JOE: Hey Clyde, me and Mattie want two more fish sandwiches.

CLYDE: Coming right up. Ursa, scoot on behind here and help me.

(MAMA goes behind the bar to fry fish.)

LILLIE RUTH: Miss Mattie loves herself some fish sandwiches. If Miss Mattie puts her stamp on a juke joint’s fish plate, they’ll sell out every Friday night.

MATTIE: Joe Lee I wanna dance.

JOE: (to CLYDE) Keep them sandwiches hot.

(JOE and MATTIE dance. MAE LYNN joins them.)

VANILLA: Mae Lynn you need to sit yo ass down before Junior spots it bumpin around without him.

MAE LYNN: Mattie don’t mind. Do you Mattie?

MATTIE: I ain’t minding but I ain’t Junior.

(Fish sizzles. JUNIOR enters and sees MAE LYNN dancing. He quickly covers the distance to her.)

JUNIOR: You can’t wait a minute for me?

JOE: Man, she just dancing with me and Mattie. She don’t mean no harm.

JUNIOR: You in charge of my woman too?

VANILLA: Ain’t no reason to jump on Joe. It’s yo woman can’t keep her ass in her seat.

(JUNIOR turns toward VANILLA. She flicks her blade open.)

VANILLA: I know you ain’t steppin’ to me Junior Wilson. I ain’t cut a man in a while. I’m about due.

LILLIE RUTH: When folks start cutting and shooting in here, they forget all about the children present. In situations like these, I
usually follow the animals. If the dog leaves, I go wherever they go. Problem is, Clyde won’t keep any dogs. Mama says he doesn’t want to feed them.

(CLYDE taps his pistol on the bar.)

CLYDE: Junior, we not fighting no women in here tonight.
LILLIE RUTH: The bathroom’s right by the door. The bathtub ought to be a little bullet proof. I’d head to the car but angry folks like to shoot holes in other folks’ cars.

(MAMA puts JOE and MATTIE’s wrapped fish sandwiches on the bar.)

MAMA: Joe, your sandwiches are ready. Won’t you and Mattie get on outta here.
MATTIE: Who you telling to go? This ain’t yo place.
LILLIE RUTH: Miss Mattie did not like Mama. Mama’s fish sandwiches are known across the Chatahoochie into Alabama but Miss Mattie won’t ever say nothing good about ‘em.

(A rifle shot is heard outside. Then another. The jukebox tune interrupts the silence: “Shotgun” by Jr. Walker and the All Stars. SKEET enters all smiles.)

SKEET: I got it. Nice fat doe running across the road into the woods. It’s your property Clyde so I’m gonna share it.
VANILLA: You know I don’t eat that gamey shit.

(SKEET notices the tension.)

SKEET: Looks like you about to carve up Junior.
VANILLA: Nah. He ain’t none too tasty. I was just showin’ him my blade.

(VANILLA glares at MAE LYNN.)

VANILLA: You want a closer look?
MAE LYNN: (frightened) I think we ought to go on home, Junior.
JUNIOR: I ain’t got my fish yet.
MATTIE: These just come out. You can take them.

(MATTIE looks at MAMA.)

MATTIE: We gonna stay a while longer.

(JUNIOR and MAE LYN exit.)

SKEET: How ‘bout a playing a round of spades, Joe?
JOE: Got my cards right here.

(JOE deals a hand to SKEET, MATTIE and VANILLA.)

LILLIE RUTH: Mama must have known that Mattie was cooking up some drama between swigs of corn liquor and bites of cornbread. So she said to Clyde:
MAMA: I’ll be taking Lillie Ruth on home, now. You welcome to stop by later.
MATTIE: There’s an invitation extended to half the town.
JOE: Mattie, shut it!
SKEET: Can’t be disparagin’ a man’s woman in his presence.
MATTIE: Then I wait till later.

(MAMA takes her pistol from her purse.)

MAMA: I ain’t got no silencer on this but it’ll sure shut you up, if you can’t keep quiet on your own.
CLYDE: Check your woman, Joe. Ursa, take your child on home.
LILLIE RUTH: This isn’t the first time I’ve been used as an excuse. And in a pinch...

(MAMA stops at the door by LILLIE RUTH. MAMA hands LILLIE RUTH the car keys.)

MAMA: You drive. That bitch’s gotten on my last nerve.

(MAMA exits.)
LILLIE RUTH: Now Mama hardly curses at all compared to the other juke joint women. But she just used the “B” word with some conviction so I am pretty sure that Miss Mattie is not gonna be invited to her next fish fry.

(LILLIE RUTH exits.)

(Clyde’s juke joint morphs into a large old house just outside of town. Two pool tables dominate the room. LILLIE RUTH enters through the screen door with her school books and puts them on the counter. She puts a quarter in the jukebox and plays “I’ve Got To Use My Imagination” by Gladys Knight and the Pips. She shoots pool while lip syncing the song.)

LILLIE RUTH: This house is large but Mama’s paycheck from cooking at the S&S cafeteria isn’t. My mom’s not cut out to sell Avon or Tupperware. Instead, she sells fish sandwiches, liquor and beer. She makes a lot more money but this is a house where the Avon lady never calls.
Andrew Hinderaker

from KINGSVILLE

Synopsis: The day after the Virginia Tech shooting, radio shows were flooded with calls from listeners, repeating the same argument, over and over: if the students had only been armed, the shooter would’ve been killed and no one else would have died. Kingsville dares to explore such a scenario. In a hypothetical America where children legally carry guns to class, one teacher must choose between opposing a policy he abhors and putting his own son at risk.

ACT TWO, SCENE ONE

(JUSTIN and MIKE, thirteen year-old eighth-graders, enter from opposite sides of the stage. Perhaps, as they enter, the words, “What They’ll Never Tell Anyone,” are projected somewhere on stage. Or perhaps they’re not necessary. Justin and Mike face out, addressing the audience directly.)

JUSTIN: I know it’s gonna sound super lame
MIKE: But I used to like school. My mom and dad didn’t get along
JUSTIN: They always made sure I did my work
MIKE: But I could go to school and get away from that
JUSTIN: So I was pretty good in class
MIKE: I was a little behind, but
JUSTIN: I won the spelling bee like three times
MIKE: I was on the basketball team, and I wasn’t like the best player but
JUSTIN AND MIKE: It was just fun, you know?
MIKE: Then I got to middle school
JUSTIN: And after everything happened
MIKE: And my dad took off
JUSTIN: And my dad started in on his mission or whatever
MIKE: And the other kids found out
JUSTIN: They started saying stuff
MIKE: Like “What’d you do to your dad to make him leave?”
JUSTIN: And it was like
MIKE: Whatever
JUSTIN: No big deal
MIKE: Didn’ bother me
JUSTIN: But they just kept at it
MIKE: Over and over
JUSTIN: All the time
MIKE: At lunch
JUSTIN: ‘Fore school
MIKE: After school
JUSTIN AND MIKE: And then they started following me home
MIKE: Sayin’ shit like
JUSTIN: “Is your dad at home?”
MIKE: “Why’re you goin’ home? There’s no one there.”
JUSTIN: “Maybe we’ll take you both out at the same time.”
MIKE: And it’s like
JUSTIN AND MIKE: I started hating going to school

(Beat)

JUSTIN: So I’d pretend I was sick
MIKE: Skip class
JUSTIN: Days I was there, I’d have a teacher drive me home.
MIKE: But like… ‘bout a year ago
JUSTIN: Few weeks ago
MIKE: I started going to the center
JUSTIN: I was in the locker room…

(Lights fade down on MIKE, so he’s barely lit.)

JUSTIN: And like, the locker room’s one of the only places in school teachers don’t go inside.

I guess, like, technically they can, but they’re all scared of bein’ called pervs, so none of ‘em go in there.

And I was like—it was after gym—and I always ran in there and changed super fast ‘cuz I didn’…”
‘Cuz whatever, I just don’t like changin’ in front of other people.

So I’m standin’ in front of my locker and I’m about to change and…

And I can feel there’s kids standin’ behind me, but whatever, they do that sometimes—like if I’m in the hallway talkin’ to a girl, they’ll come up behind me and if I turn to look at ‘em they shove me into a wall. But, it’s cool, ‘cuz if I keep my head down, they leave me alone.

So that’s what I’m doin’. I’m standin’ in front of my locker and keepin’ my head down and changin’ as fast as I can.

And then I hear someone go, “It’s clear.”

And my legs go out from under me, and I land right on my tailbone—and you know that feelin’ when you land right on it—it freakin’ kills—so I start rollin’ on the floor, but this kid gets on top of me and pins my arms with his legs.

And I look up and it’s this kid I used to play soccer with, and he’s like, “Stop movin’, bitch”—but my tailbone freakin’ kills, so I keep movin’ and that’s when my head bumps the…

There’s a kid behind me and he’s got a gun pressed against my head.

And the kid on top goes, “You gonna tell your dad about this?”

I start to shake my head no, but it bumps the gun so I stop, and the kid’s like, “I asked you a question,” and I start to say no, but he punches me in the gut and all the air inside me’s sucked out.

“You gonna tell your dad?” And I’m tryin’ to talk back, but nothin’ comes out and he punches me again.

“You gonna tell your dad?”
“You gonna tell your dad?”

“You gonna tell your dad?”

Then one of the other kids… one of ‘em who’s just watchin’, he’s like, “What’s his dad gonna do, anyway?”

And they all start laughin’.

And I’m tryin’ not to…

But my eyes are… I’m not cryin’ okay, they’re just getting’ a little blurry.

But one of the kids, he sees it and he’s like, “What are you, crying? Are you a fucking girl?” And the kid on top goes, “I guess we better check.”

(Beat)

I close my eyes.

But I can feel the gun, tugging at my shorts.

Then I feel ‘em start to slip down, and one of the kids goes, “Dude he’s got like no hair down there” and everyone’s laughin’ and my shorts are comin’ down and someone says, “Should I shoot it off?” and someone else goes, “Yeah, if you can find it” and finally I just go, DO IT.

Please.

Kill me.

(Lights fade to a dim on JUSTIN as they rise back up on MIKE.)

MIKE: When I go to the center, Wayne’s at the door.
And he asks why I want a gun.

And I almost tell him.

‘Cuz I’ve been thinkin’ ‘bout it for weeks.

It’s still dark when school starts, right, and they got the circuit box right there in the hallway.

So I’m gonna wait ‘til the bell rings, and everyone’s sittin’ in class.

And that’s when I hit the lights.

And everybody’s sittin’ there in the dark…

And I kick the door open, pick the first desk I see, and just start firin’.

Some of the kids dive behind their desks and some of ‘em start firin’ back but it’s too dark in there, so they got no idea I already left the room.

So they’re just firin’ at each other and all those assholes who were sayin’ that shit and all those teachers who just let it happen… they’re all just takin’ each other out.

(Beat)

So when Wayne asks what I want the gun for…

I’m just like, “In case I ever need it.”

(Lights up on JUSTIN. Wayne enters and moves toward JUSTIN.)

MIKE: And so he brings me into the range.

And he starts me out easy on a .22.
(WAYNE shows JUSTIN how to load the gun.)

MIKE: But he doesn’t let me touch it ‘til I can find the safety by feel.

(JUSTIN takes a try at loading the gun.)

MIKE: Then he lets me fire off a few rounds, and it’s okay, but it’s kinda like a cap gun.

(JUSTIN has some trouble.)

MIKE: But then he gives me the nine mill.

(WAYNE shows JUSTIN how to load it again.)

MIKE: And when I fire it off, it’s like . . . I mean I totally miss the target but it’s awesome.

(JUSTIN takes another try. Loads it successfully.)

MIKE: Wayne tells kids he only wants ‘em to have one gun and one box of ammo. (imitating WAYNE) “This is about protection.”

But it’s not like Wayne’s the only way to get a gun.

And he’s got no idea, that in less than a week, I’ve gotten a .45, a Sig 220, 2 TEC-9s, a twelve-gauge shot… and more than one box of ammo.

So I’m all set. I got everything I need.

‘Bout a week before I’m gonna do it, I’m sittin’ by myself at lunch, plannin’ it out.

(JUSTIN sets down the gun and walks toward MIKE.)

MIKE: And this skinny annoying kid from class, this nerd no one talks to, he sits down at my table and he’s like
JUSTIN: You don’t have a lunch.
MIKE: What?
JUSTIN: You don’t have a lunch.
MIKE: Fuck off.
JUSTIN: You’re not hungry?
MIKE: I’m busy. Fuck off.
JUSTIN: ‘Cuz you can have some of mine if you

(JUSTIN leaves.)

MIKE: So he takes off. Leaves me there to finish my plans.

But the little fuckin’ nerd leaves half his sandwich on the table in front of me.

Next day he packs a second lunch and leaves that on the table too.

Couple days after that, I’m finally like…

(MIKE looks at JUSTIN. JUSTIN looks back.)

MIKE: If you’re gonna bring another lunch, you might as well sit down.

(JUSTIN nods, smiles slightly.)

MIKE: After like another week, I know the plan’s off.

(JUSTIN returns to his action with WAYNE.)

MIKE: I mean I could tell him not to come to school that day, but what if he didn’t listen?

Didn’t really matter how many of those assholes took each other out. Somethin’ happened to him, it just…

It wasn’t worth it.
So I figured…

As long as we’re both gonna stick it out…

(JUSTIN raises his gun to fire.)

MIKE: He should learn how to use one too.

(Lights out.)
Mia McCullough

SHARP OBJECTS

PLACE: The house of a deceased mother, after the funeral.

SETTING: The study.

Cast of Characters:
NED, 26
AUDREY, 30
MAUREEN, 30-40

LIGHTS UP on the study. There is an oak desk by the windows, many bookcases, an arm chair and a rocking chair, which is oddly placed. A basket of knitting sits beside it. NED opens the door to the study and leads AUDREY in, holding her tightly by the elbow. MAUREEN whisks past them and surveys the room. NED and AUDREY are wearing black. MAUREEN is also in dark colors, but definitely dressed for work. Very sensible boots.

MAUREEN: Is this the only entrance to the room?
NED: Other than the windows.

(MAUREEN opens a closet door and peers inside. AUDREY pulls out of NED’s grasp.)

AUDREY: Let go of me.

(MAUREEN closes the closet door, searches the desk. She pulls out a letter opener and a pair of scissors and hands them to NED.)

MAUREEN: Here. And those knitting needles.
NED: Oh, right.

(NED picks up the whole knitting basket.)

AUDREY: This is ridiculous. I have to sit shiva in here? Alone?
NED: You’re not alone. You’re with...
MAUREEN & NED: Maureen.
NED: Sorry.
MAUREEN: It’s all right.
AUDREY: And stop introducing her as “my friend.” They know
she’s not my friend. (to Maureen) Not that you’re not very nice.
MAUREEN: It’s fine.
AUDREY: You didn’t even cover the mirrors.
NED: Excuse me for missing some details. I had to pull this all
together myself, you know. And I’m not Jewish anymore.
AUDREY: It doesn’t matter what you are. Your conversion is
probably what killed her.
NED: Stop it.
AUDREY: I want to go back out and sit with everyone else.
NED: It’s not a good idea.
AUDREY: I get one day, six hours, and you want to shut me in the
study? The scene of the crime?
NED: You were being disruptive.
AUDREY: I asked you where the dogs were!
NED: Will you keep your voice down? Can I get you something to
drink, Maureen? Tea?
MAUREEN: Sure. Thanks.
AUDREY: You’re not offering me tea?
NED: Would you like some?
AUDREY: Yes Ned, I’d like some tea. I’d like some crudite. I’d
like some pastry. Do you have any idea what the food is like in
that place?
NED: I’ll be back in a minute.

(NED exits.)

AUDREY: Asshole. Unbelievable.

(AUDREY sits in the rocker; MAUREEN in the arm chair.)

AUDREY CONT’D: This isn’t usually in here. Unless she . . . Maybe
she moved it in here. But it doesn’t seem . . . There would be
grooves don’t you think? It was in the living room, by the stereo.
Close enough that the ear phones would reach. She liked to keep
it to herself, her music. Brahms and Shostakovich. Knitting and listening to music.

(AUDREY mimes her mother’s memory: rocking, listening, knitting.)

AUDREY: She didn’t come in here.
MAUREEN: This is where you killed him?
AUDREY: What? No. Why would you think that?
MAUREEN: You said, “the scene of the crime.”
AUDREY: Oh. No. This is where dad would play sex games with us. I strangled him in the basement.

(Beat.)

MAUREEN: It’s hard for a teenage girl to strangle a grown man.
AUDREY: What are you insinuating?
MAUREEN: I’m not.
AUDREY: I did it. He let me do it. I mean he struggled for a few seconds and then he looked me in the eyes and he just . . . stopped.
MAUREEN: Your brother didn’t help?
AUDREY: He wasn’t home. He won’t even acknowledge . . . I think it’s why he became a Catholic. You people specialize in denial.
MAUREEN: You like to generalize, don’t you?

(Beat.)

AUDREY: Are you generalizing about my generalizing?
MAUREEN: You said several things in the car.
AUDREY: I did?
MAUREEN: “Asian people are terrible drivers,” “Black people don’t like dark chocolate,”
AUDREY: They don’t.
MAUREEN: “Jews thrive on disaster porn.”
AUDREY: If the shoe fits . . .
MAUREEN: Why do you think I’m Catholic?
AUDREY: Because your name is Maureen Donovan and you look like the poster child for the potato famine.

(NED ENTERS with two cups of tea.)
MAUREEN: Don’t hand her scalding hot liquid.

(Three beats.)

NED: I’ll set it on the desk. Did you need cream or sugar?
MAUREEN: This is fine.
AUDREY: She prefers cream and sugar. Because she’s Irish.
MAUREEN: I’m fifth generation American and I’m a Buddhist.
AUDREY: But you drink your tea with milk and sugar. I’ve seen you in the cafeteria.
NED: I’ve got to get back out there.
AUDREY: You didn’t answer my question.
NED: Did you ask me one?
AUDREY: The dogs. Where are the dogs? Did you take them in? Give them away?

(Beat/Pause. Whatever works.)

NED: I had them euthanized.
MAUREEN: Oh shit.
AUDREY: (standing) WHAT!?
NED: They were old.

(MAUREEN also stands.)

AUDREY: You killed Poppy and Munches?!
NED: No one was going to take them.
AUDREY: Why didn’t you take them?
NED: Kelsey doesn’t like dogs.
AUDREY: So you killed them?
NED: I didn’t take them out back and shoot them. Or strangle them. I had them put down. Peacefully.
AUDREY: They would have lived, what? Two, maybe three more years? Kelsey couldn’t suck it up?
NED: They were incontinent. They peed on everything. Did you notice I took the rugs up?
AUDREY: I can’t believe you. And to not even tell me.
NED: So we could argue? It wasn’t your decision. You couldn’t take
AUDREY: They were the only positive thing about living in this house.
NED: Please. They stood by and did nothing. Just like mom.
AUDREY: Oh my God! Oh. My God. (Pause. He can’t look at her. She softens.) What were the dogs supposed to do? Call DCFS?
NED: They watched. They sat in that corner and watched.

(NED points at the corner of the room. He pants like a stupid, happy dog, then turns abruptly and EXITS.)

AUDREY: Oh my God. He . . .

(AUDREY looks at MAUREEN and points at the door.)

MAUREEN: I have dogs. Two Westies.
AUDREY: I did it for him, you know. I mean, for me too, but he was littler. Do you have siblings? Younger siblings?
MAUREEN: Yes.
AUDREY: Of course you do. So you know what I mean. It’s our job. To protect them.
MAUREEN: Sure.
AUDREY: But he denied everything. “Daddy never touched us.” And he blames Mom for doing nothing! He told her nothing was happening! Everyone. She stopped coming to see me because I couldn’t “let go of the lie.” Do you know how hard it is to even . . . to even believe your own experience after a while? Not that hard, being in this room, though.

(AUDREY seethes for a few moments then begins yelling as loud as she can.)

AUDREY CONT’D: Ned killed the dogs! Ned killed Poppy and Munches. He’s a murderer! A selfish asshole! Ned killed the dogs.
MAUREEN: You shouldn’t—
NED: (Entering & whispering) Shut UP! Shut the fuck up! Can’t you stop her?
MAUREEN: From yelling?
NED: Can’t you control the situation?! You have a gun, don’t you?
MAUREEN: You want me to shoot her for yelling?
NED: I would like you to remove her. Take her back to the facility.
AUDREY: Where you have never once visited me.
NED: She is agitated, acting out.
MAUREEN: Fine. I’ll take her.

(MAUREEN tries to grasp AUDREY’s elbow but she pulls away.)

MAUREEN CONT’D: Hey now.

NED: Please. Do not make a scene.

(Pause. No one moves.)

AUDREY: Ok, you know what? You have a choice. Because the only way out of this room is through all those people out there.
NED: Can you take her out through the window?
MAUREEN: No.
AUDREY: You can tell me that you appreciate all that I’ve done for you, or you can refuse and I will make my exit from the premises as ugly as possible.
NED: I appreciate all you’ve done for me.
AUDREY: Oh no. No, no. Repeat after me:
NED: Christ, Audrey.
AUDREY: (yelling again) Ned killed the dogs! Ned killed the dogs because they watched him—
NED: Ok, ok, ok!
AUDREY: (normal volume) Thank you, Audrey, for killing Dad.

(She gestures that he should start talking.)

NED: Thank you, Audrey, for killing Dad.
AUDREY: I appreciate that you sacrificed your entire future so that I could have one.
NED: I appreciate that you sacrificed your entire future so that I could have one.
AUDREY: I was a scared, damaged kid,
NED: I was a scared, damaged kid,
AUDREY: and I didn’t want to relive the truth by saying it out loud.
NED: and I didn’t want to relive the truth by saying it out loud.
AUDREY: and I’m sorry that my silence hurt you.
NED: I’m sorry that my silence hurt you.
AUDREY: Thank you for spending your entire life locked away so
that I could have a normal life with my repressed, emaciated, dog-
hating wife.
NED: Thank you for spending your entire life locked away so that I
could have a normal life with Kelsey.
AUDREY: Please don’t have children. Ok. I’m done. I will leave
quietly. Good seeing you, Ned.

(She pats him on the face, which makes MAUREEN flinch, but not NED.)

AUDREY CONT’D: Shall we, Maureen?

(MAUREEN and AUDREY EXIT. NED looks around the room a
moment, then EXITS, closing the study door behind him.)

END OF PLAY.
SCARECROW

A field at dusk with everything turned grey. The barren furrows stretch all the way to the horizon like deep wounds in the earth. A man thin as a weather vane, clad in deeply soiled overalls and work boots, his hat sagging over a face likewise furrowed, stands looking around with disgust. He reaches down and pulls from the ground a feeble underdeveloped carrot and watches it crumble in his fist.

DANNY. A dark-skinned man enters the vista from way back, wearily lugging a wheelbarrow filled to brimming with clods of weeds and misshapen nubs of what appear to be his produce. He sets it down in abject misery.

DANNY: None of it. None of it come to nothin’.

(He looks at the THIN MAN like he expects some kind of reply. Some kind of repudiation. The THIN MAN only shakes his head.)

THIN MAN: It’s a thin harvest, Daniel.
DANNY: I did what I was supposed to. I set the rows apart like they said. I watered and weeded right on time. And look what I got.
THIN MAN: Damn shame.
DANNY: Carrots like dead baby fingers. Clay for broccoli.
Tomatoes lacking all life and juice. Fifty acres of laughable shit.
THIN MAN: Did you count the days between rain?
DANNY: Eighty-two. But c’mon, I got a good well and the pump’s worked like a mule for me. The water’s not the issue. I got plenty of water.
THIN MAN: Could be the water itself. I used the same water table and damned if it wasn’t tainted with arsenic and boron. Ruined my first crop. Gave it to the pigs for slop. Did you spray?
DANNY: We opted not to. We’re trying to go organic.
THIN MAN: Well, there you have it. Fool.
DANNY: I seen it work, though. There’s farms all around yielding
like crazy!

THIN MAN: Daniel, those amateurs are living on pipe dreams! They’re no match for this! It takes more than water and some overalls to make a farm.

DANNY: We gave ourselves to this. Cin and me, we put in all we had, and there’s nothing to show for it.

THIN MAN: Sin? What sin?

DANNY: Cinnamon. That’s my wife’s name.

THIN MAN: Well, that’s your problem right there. Any woman named for a spice is just begging for trouble.

DANNY: You don’t know her. She’s good. You can’t fault her for dreaming.

THIN MAN: The land doesn’t dream. It takes. It takes and takes and takes! What possessed you to take up this life, anyhow?

DANNY: I thought it was in my blood. Abuelito, my grandfather, he was a farmer. Like his abuelos before him, he grew alfalfa, sugar cane, corn all his life. Back when it mattered. Back when it was the thing to do. My dad used to take us to his pueblito in Mexico to see the old man. He’d throw off his old sweaty work hat and put on the clean felt one he kept for company. He’d take me to his lotes. Riding with him in his wagon drawn by that old smelly nag. His hands all glove-black and leathery. Walking through those long stalks waving in the hot breeze. He showed me his corn. Just pried it open and showed off those smiling kernels like they were his children.

THIN MAN: Children. Don’t talk to me about children.

DANNY: But my dad wanted no part of it. City life suited him. Ironic that the only work he could get when he got to this country was picking. That made him hate farming even more. He swore he’d keep me off the fields. Put me through school. BA in business. I work for an investment company. Or used to.

THIN MAN: Then what the hell are you doing here?

DANNY: I want it! That life in the corn. It skipped a generation but what the hell. I could try.

THIN MAN: Tryin’ is only half of it. Tryin’ don’t make it done. Now lookit where you are.

(The THIN MAN grabs a fistful of milky white clumps from the wheelbarrow and shows him of it.)
THIN MAN: Look. You know what these are?
DANNY: Mushrooms. They came up creekside by the cork oak.
THIN MAN: They’re Angels. Destroyin’ Angels. They mean business. Do you mean business, son?
DANNY: What are you getting at?
THIN MAN: Daniel, Daniel. You know what I’m gettin’ at. This is your third season, third try, third disaster. You’re about done. You’re all out of money, time, strength, tears and will. You’re fuck out of everything but . . .
DANNY: Family.
THIN MAN: Family? What good are they now? Except to remind you of your failure. Of how they didn’t get new clothes this year ‘cause you needed to pay your water bill.
DANNY: How did you know that?
THIN MAN: I know all about you, Daniel. Like I know the bank wants your deed for collateral. Like I know you’re at the end of your rope.
DANNY: I don’t know if I have a fourth year in me. But if I don’t try for my Abuelo—
THIN MAN: Your grandpa is lying broken under scrabble dirt cursing the day he picked up a hoe. Nothing to show for his labors but a lop-sided marker on a dry patch of dirt.
DANNY: Jesus! Is this it then? What am I gonna do? What the hell am I supposed to do!
THIN MAN: That’s the question, ain’t it? You come out here and find the actual fruits of your labor sere and sickly and your heart sinks like a dead sun inside you and all you see are the crows cawing over your head, and nobody in town can look you in the face ‘cause they know what a failure you been, even though you sprayed Alar and a whole mess of chemicals on every orchard and every furrow and the Mexican hands you hired took their shit in the ditches ‘cause you didn’t provide them toilets and it come out in the crop and soon everyone’s lawyered up and what’s the point of going on when the livestock you thought you’d grow into a herd are thinning by the day and your high school sweetheart and the three kids she gave you are looking at you askance and saying let’s cut our losses, Cooper, let’s move back to the city, Cooper, and then you find these Angels white and fleshy as God’s heralds
on earth and you know what you gotta do if you intend to keep what dignity you got left and it’s the one fruit you got, the pith of it sweetening your wrath, giving it deadly purpose. So you take the rifle from inside your house and walk out to the barn and in the dead of night shoot all your cows and horses. And then you go into your house at sunrise and cook up some eggs for your family and lace it with the angels you found and they eat it heartily and before anything else can happen you come out and harvest up a batch for yourself ‘cause it’s the one good thing you farmed and you didn’t even have a hand in it.

There’s the call. The long silent call of your Angel. Hear it?

(DANNY listens for a moment.)

DANNY: I guess I do.

(DANNY takes a mushroom from his wheelbarrow.)

DANNY: They’re not supposed to grow in these parts.
THIN MAN: One of those little miracles of need. Of course, I advise you not to take it. Unless you mean it. ‘Cause what else is there.
DANNY: Huh.

(DANNY and the THIN MAN stand there for a moment contemplating the white cap in his hand when a woman in a print shirt and torn jeans walks on. Hair like she just got up.)

CINNAMON: Danny. What are you doing?
DANNY: Just talkin’.
CINNAMON: I can see that.
DANNY: Marveling at the colossal waste of things.
CINNAMON: I can see that too.
DANNY: It’s no use, honey. We’re never gonna make it.
CINNAMON: We will. Just gotta try harder.
DANNY: Harder? Look at my hands.
CINNAMON: Lookit mine. Farming ain’t for pussies, baby.
DANNY: Three times, Cin.
THIN MAN: Three goddamned times.
CINNAMON: I know. But these things take a while. We knew that when we bought the parcel, didn’t we? It lay fallow for years, decades, for a reason. It was so poisoned with chemicals and foul water that nobody wanted it.

DANNY: Then why did we buy it?

CINNAMON: ‘Cause we know somethin’ they didn’t. It takes time to heal the land, to cleanse it and close up its wounds.

THIN MAN: Wounds. You don’t know wounds.

CINNAMON: It takes time to return the soil its nutrients. It’s been giving so much, it’s hardly got anything left to give. So maybe it’s our turn to give some back.

THIN MAN: What are you givin’ back? Your blood? Your life? The lives of your family?

DANNY: We’ve given enough already. I’m done giving.

CINNAMON: Look, I don’t like losing our savings and going into debt. I don’t like forgoing Christmas again this year. And I sure as hell don’t like living in that trailer while the contractor takes his sweet time on our house ‘cause we can’t pay him his due. But we knew this was coming. We took it on faith this was coming. Just like we take it on faith that it will pass. This will pass, Danny.

DANNY: Will it?

THIN MAN: Nope.

CINNAMON: Remember that night we finally called the realtor? How we sat up in bed all night and came up with that manifesto?

THIN MAN: Manifesto?

CINNAMON: We made a list of the crops we’d grow, the methods, the chickens and cows we’d raise, made plans for everything, even for the house we’d build and where the compost pile would live, where the bee hives would be kept, all that.

DANNY: Our farm manifesto.

CINNAMON: I still got it. I read last night it to remind me why we put up with this shit. It’s our bond with the land, Danny. Like a marriage contract. And you know what? We’re doing it. What we said we would do, we’re doing it.

DANNY: But what’s it doing for us?

CINNAMON: It’s given our baby a home. It’s given Chela a fresh new way of seeing things.

THIN MAN: Chela?

DANNY: Does she really likes it here?
CINNAMON: She crazy for this place. You know that.
DANNY: But none of these came up right.
CINNAMON: Look over there, Danny. Look. The artichokes are coming up just fine. The Yukon golds too.
DANNY/THIN MAN: They are?
CINNAMON: And the neighbors are buying up loads of our compost.
DANNY: That’s right. We do good compost. Awesome compost.
CINNAMON: And I got lavender coming up big over there. Give this good soil its due. It’s coming back.
DANNY: It is, inn’t it?
CINNAMON: Class One soil, honey.
THIN MAN: What about your funds drying up?
CINNAMON: And don’t fixate on the money. We’ll find some capital. We won’t starve.
DANNY: I’m just afraid that . . . that . . .
CINNAMON: Honey, every time we fail, we fail a little better. Sooner or later, we’ll break even. We’ll try again come Spring.
THIN MAN: I got no Spring. Spring never comes to me, only the dead Winter gales. And the cold earth beneath me.
DANNY: What was that man’s name? The prior owner? Cooper, wasn’t it? Poisoned his wife and kids and took out his Guernsey cows with a shotgun. They found him in the fields with the crows pecking at his eyes.
CINNAMON: That was forty years ago.

*(DANNY and THIN MAN exchange a look.)*

CINNAMON: Look. Danny. That was him. This is us. Just like there are grades of land, there are grades of people. Grades of character. Come and help Chela milk the cows. She can’t hardly get her fingers around those udders.

*(DANNY smiles.)*

CINNAMON: What’re these?
(CINNAMON sniffs the mushroom and almost takes a bite.)

DANNY: Don’t. They’re poison. I was clearing them out so Chela won’t get into them.
CINNAMON: Come on help then. Help her and I’ll make you some hearts. I’ll steam us some hearts and we’ll eat.
DANNY: Sounds good.

(DANNY wipes his hands and goes. CINNAMON and the THIN MAN stand looking out at the fields. Silence for a moment.)

THIN MAN: I wish you more luck than some got.
CINNAMON: What? What was that?
THIN MAN: Just the wind. Old weathervane creakin’ in the wind.

(She takes up the wheelbarrow and goes. The THIN MAN remains looking over the barren field at nothing.)

END.
Lee Anne Fahey

from The Mute Swan

Characters:
Tom: Producing Director for The Art Theatre, a regional theatre. Tom is in his mid-forties; charismatic, charming, and handsome.
Henry Blakemore: South African CEO of an international company and the president of the theatre’s board of directors. He is in his early fifties and wears British well-tailored clothes.
Lucy: Wife of Tom, actress and mother. A sensitive and gifted delicate beauty in her mid-thirties.
Peter: Handsome and charming actor in his late-thirties.
Justine: Brahmin Boston-bred sexy actress in her mid-thirties.
Charlie: Stage Manager’s voice off stage.

TIME: Present

SETTING: A city in Ohio

Act II Scene 1

AT RISE: Later the same day, early evening. We hear a big thunder clap. The clock now says 7pm. We see TOM and JUSTINE in the same position as Lucy and Peter were in at the top of Scene 3. They are making out. She is a handsome Boston Brahmin-type hot looking actress in her mid-thirties. She has one sexy high heel on and one off.

Lightning lights up the stage.

Justine’s panties are on the floor downstage as is her jacket. She is wearing a skirt and a vivid colored camisole that matches her panties. Her purse is by the front door sitting on a table. Her suitcase is out of view in the hallway.

TOM: You are one sexy gal. Ohhh.
(She kisses him, trying to arouse him again. Her shoeless foot is wrapped around his leg.)

TOM (cont.): You know, you’re becoming a big star. I can’t imagine you would really want to do this.

(Tom makes out with her.)

JUSTINE: Why not? With you directing me I do my best work . . .
TOM: You’re this director’s dream Masha, but you’re a tease, doll.
You are such a tease . . .
JUSTINE: Do you like this tease? Or is this tease better . . . ?
TOM: You don’t really want to do this play . . . You keep telling me you’re not coming back to regional theatre.
JUSTINE: I’m like Ann Whitfield in Shaw’s *Man and Superman* and you’re my Jack Tanner. I want you as the superman papa of my baby . . . you can’t refuse the sex . . .
TOM/JACK: I am in the grip of the life force. . . . And you do care for me.
JUSTINE/ANN: Now, Jack! Behave yourself.
TOM/JACK: Infamous, abandoned woman! Devil!
JUSTINE/ANN: Boa-constrictor! Elephant!
TOM/JACK: Hypocrite!
JUSTINE/ANN: I must be, for my future husband’s sake.”
TOM: Here, let me go.
JUSTINE: I do my best work with you as my director. I kept all my notes from our production of *Streetcar* two seasons ago. Presto! The Tony for Blanche! It was you . . . and me.
TOM: I’ve got a celebration about to happen. Look. See this! This clock was given to me by the director of the Kalich in Prague. We’ll use it in our production. This will be part of the Chekhovian legend in the theatre.

(Tom buttons his shirt, tucks it in, and zips his pants. He puts his belt back on.)

JUSTINE: I’m thrilled to be on the same page as Olga Knipper Chekhova. I thought this was all for me. Are you giving me a fete? I thought I was going to have you alone by myself for a
night to remember, before reality sets in. . . . What?

(Justine languishes on the sofa.)

TOM: Are you sure? . . . We have to . . . talk.
JUSTINE: I’m listening, and . . .
TOM: Now. Shhh! Quiet! I only have a few minutes. You’re my Masha . . .

(Tom turns on the light. He kisses her to shut her up.)

TOM (cont.): You are the perfect Masha. Remember, you will be Masha . . . If we do Three Sisters . . .
JUSTINE: If? Is there any doubt I wouldn’t do it with you? You directing me! . . . What?

(The doorknocker is thunking.)

TOM: Ahhh! Hopefully, that’s Peter. He said he would pick up the appetizers for me, because they weren’t ready earlier when I went by. Oh! Lucy’s back.
JUSTINE: Back! Now? Home?
TOM: Caught an earlier flight. Went for a run and to kiss the children goodnight at the neighbors’.

(The doorknocker thunks again.)

JUSTINE: Lucy! Here? No! No, no, no! Oh, my God. Tom! I’m out of here.

(Justine puts her shoe on and runs to get her purse and picks up her jacket. Her panties are still on the floor.)

JUSTINE (cont.): Where’s my purse? Where . . . ? Oh! The bathroom! Knock when it’s all clear.
TOM: Remember . . . you’re my Masha, no matter what . . .
JUSTINE: Yes . . . I am. You’re my Vershinin. In real life, you are Vershinin. But, I’ll settle for you being my personal Stanislavski. What else . . . what else is happening?
TOM: Go!

(Justine exits to go to the powder room.)

TOM: Coming!

(The banging is more insistent. Justine doesn’t hear Tom.)

TOM (cont.): I’ll explain later. Coming!

(Tom crosses to the door, turns the dead bolt, and opens the door.)

PETER: Delivery!
TOM: Hey, Pete, thanks. I’ll take this.

(Tom puts the cooler in the kitchen.)

PETER: I have one more cooler. I know it’s hot, but leave the door open and I’ll run.

(Peter goes to get the other cooler. He enters and closes the door with his foot as thunder sounds.)

TOM: Whew. It’s nasty out there. It’s not raining yet, though.

(Lightning.)

PETER: It looks green out there. I’ve got a pizza in the car for Jackson, you know, my son, and his buddy’s supper and I need to check in with them before I come over. They’re waiting for delivery.
TOM: Hey, no, stay a minute. I want to talk to you before tonight.
PETER: O.K.
TOM: It’s about Lucy.
PETER: I can’t.
TOM: What? You can’t what? I need you to do something. Tonight’s about our future in the theatre and you’re part of what will make this happen. Pizza can be re-heated. I’m having vodka. Want something?
PETER: I’m fine. I’ll wait.
TOM: Suit yourself. Your entire future’s on the line.
PETER: What future? We haven’t talked about the season and it’s about to start. Credit card life is getting dicey. What?
TOM: I just may have a terrific season lined up for you, and give you your breakthrough role. Convince Lucy tonight to stay in my marriage. She’s behaving very oddly and won’t commit to me or the theatre.
PETER: I can’t get in the middle of your business with Lucy.
TOM: No choice. Listen up. I know about you and Lucy. She always listens to you. No one knows this yet. I signed an agreement with Glendevon at three o’clock this afternoon to do *Three Sisters* in January. Blakemore says Lucy has to play Masha or it’s a “no go.”
PETER: I can’t imagine she’d turn Masha down. It’s been her dream role since I’ve been acting with her.
TOM: I’m telling you she’s out of control. My predictable Lucy is... not. And she cries at everything. You’re her old friend. Make her listen to reason. I’ll fix it so you have time with her alone tonight. I need her to stay... because of the children.
PETER: You’re directing cocktails?
TOM: There won’t be a season, or Vershinin, if you don’t persuade her. You’re an actor.
PETER: You don’t have a high opinion of actors do you?
TOM: Actors are pretty much victims and completely self centered. This is a great example. Your ego is talking instead of “Sure, boss, I’ll do it. Fait accompli!”
PETER: What if I say no?
TOM: Deliver your son’s pizza.

(Thunder. Pause.)

PETER: I’m not saying I won’t try to persuade Lucy to play Masha. Why are you being such a tough ass?
TOM: I’m relying on my one good friend, and you’re dicking around with me.
PETER: Ohhh. Back off. This is going somewhere else.
TOM: This will make all of our careers.
(Lightning.)

PETER: I’ll talk to Lucy. I’ll be back . . .

(Peter starts to leave.)

TOM: You need to work on Justine too.
PETER: What are you talking about?
TOM: She’s coming tonight. Make a “to do” over her. Get “lovey dovey.” Pay her major male attention.
PETER: We broke up. It’s over. Get real. Now you’re pimping?
TOM: The pizza’s getting cold.
PETER: I don’t think so.

(Pause. Thunder.)

PETER: It’s over ninety-five degrees out there. I’m being a jerk. What do you really want me to do?
TOM: We need Justine on my side and yours. She doesn’t like not being the alpha gal. She needs softening so she’ll play with us. You’re my guy. This production is our shooting star and Justine’s our ticket. One chance. This Chekhov.

(Lightning.)

PETER: Justine won’t play anything but Masha.
TOM: We mount it and with good reviews—it transfers to Broadway. Don’t say anything, but a New York producer is ready to move it. You help me. You get to play Vershinin.
PETER: If I don’t?
TOM: The producer wants a name opposite Justine . . . You’re Vershinin only if Lucy plays Masha . . . You were our best man. Help me keep my family.
PETER: That’s up to you.
TOM: Lucy’s pretty edgy and I’m trying to woo her so she’ll stay . . . I told you I need your help . . . I . . . I asked Lucy to play Masha . . . and Justine.
PETER: Are you out of your mind?
TOM: Shyyyy! I’ll fix it with Justine.
PETER: I hope I’m not around when Justine finds out you want Lucy and not her to play Masha!
TOM: So, what do you think?
PETER: About what?
TOM: Trying to keep my wife and have a sensational season. Fix it.
PETER: You’re orchestrating. Justine and I broke up.
TOM: I can fix that too. She’s coming, isn’t she?
PETER: You’re a director, not God.

(Pause.)

TOM: You owe me.
PETER: Owe you?
TOM: To be blunt: your career. I appreciate your help on this. You’ll have a great season. Watch. I’ll work on Justine to play Olga or Natasha. Her choice. You can help me there too. Maybe you and Justine . . . ?
PETER: Leave it.
TOM: Whatever you want, but help me.

(Thunder.)

PETER: O.K. Later.

(Peter starts for the door. As he is about to step on Justine’s panties he sees them.)

TOM: Thanks, old buddy.
PETER: You forgot something . . . on the floor.
TOM: Oh, man. It’s . . . I’ve been so upset with what’s been going on . . . I couldn’t help myself. A moment of weakness . . . an apprentice thing . . .

(Peter crosses to the door and opens it. There is LUCY, hot and disheveled. Tom is in a panic to pick up the panties and doesn’t know what to do with them. He stuffs them behind a pillow on the sofa. Peter sees him place them. Lucy is wearing running shorts, tee shirt, bandana, sneakers, and socks. She is also wearing FUNNY BUNNY the rabbit puppet and is holding BABY DOLL.)
LUCY: You startled me! Hi, Peter. Did I miss the party?
TOM: Hey, Luce! Hi! How was your run?
LUCY: I just walked. Too hot.

(Lightning.)

LUCY (cont.): The lightning is terrifying. Let me in!
PETER: Get in here! You’re on the street in the lightning?

(Peter and Lucy keep blocking each other like a comedy routine.)

LUCY: I made it to the O’Hara’s just in time. It’s scary out here.
PETER: Whoops! Sorry.
LUCY: Want to dance?

(Lucy and Peter keep stepping in each other’s way. He swings her into the house. Peter and Lucy laugh.)

PETER: Sorry. I’m just . . . I have a pizza for Jackson’s dinner in the car. I’ll be back.

(They laugh. Lucy enters and closes the door.)

TOM: You shower and change. I’ll go to the cellar and get some good wines. Go!

(Tom exits to the basement. Lucy tries to contain herself. She starts to sob. She hugs the toys and puts them down on the sofa. She gasps for air and makes herself stop crying. She hums and stops the sobs, while crossing to the powder room to blow her nose.)

LUCY: Ahhhhhhhhhhh!
JUSTINE: Hey! It’s me!
LUCY: Oh, my God! Justine! Ohhhh! You scared me! What the hell are you doing here? What are you doing? Why . . . are you . . . hiding? Hiding in the bathroom!
JUSTINE: The door was open and . . .
LUCY: Like Goldilocks you’re going to see which bed is the softest?
JUSTINE: Wha . . . Oh! Uh, hello. I didn’t know you were . . .
I’m . . . a little shocked . . . you’re in my house! . . . Half naked . . .!
Pass me the Kleenex box!
JUSTINE: Tom asked me . . . to come by . . . Here.
LUCY: Thank you. Uh, huh. . . . I’m home a day too early!
JUSTINE: He wants to talk to me.
LUCY: Yeah? Tom? He’s very gabby—in my bathroom? You can’t
talk on the phone? You’re having the actress/director meeting in
my powder room!

(Thunder.)

LUCY (cont.): Yow! Listen to that thunder . . . You brought the
storm.
JUSTINE: Business. On my way from the airport.
LUCY: Without me here, or the children? Or Dukie? We’ve been
around this block before.
JUSTINE: We need to move on. We’ve known each other since
before drama school.

(Lucy goes back to the door and looks out.)

LUCY: What the hell are you doing sneaking around!

(Lightning cracks.)

LUCY (cont.): Ohhh. Ooooh! I can’t believe this! You have the
nerves of a burglar. My . . . my instincts are screaming that
you’re betraying me. Again! I can trust you to lie!
JUSTINE: Calm down, Lucy. I told you I was sorry.

(Big thunder crash.)

LUCY: Ooooh! Zeus is getting mad too! Calm down? Sorry? I’m
supposed to be half way around the world!
(Lucy takes her inhaler, which was in her pocket.)

LUCY (cont.): Calm down . . . Ohhhhh. And you’re on the up and up. Don’t tell me how to feel, oldest, bestest friend. Careful, girlfriend.

(Lightning. The lights go on and off. The lights stay on.)

LUCY: No wonder I’m so restless.
JUSTINE: Lucy, I’m sorry for ever hurting you. Let’s be friends again. This storm’s frightening. That’s why I was in the bathroom. That’s where you go when there’s a severe storm. I was scared . . . Tell me about your big success. Did my Peter behave on tour? He said you were celebrated by the Moscow Art Theatre’s actors. And is this the famous clock the Prague theatre director gave Tom?
LUCY: To me, actually . . .
JUSTINE: Oh . . . Did you fall in love with him, or a handsome Russian? Lucy, you’re . . . radiant.
LUCY: Sucking up doesn’t suit you. My eyes and nose are red like Rudolph’s. So, Goldilocks, so how’s your summer? So how’s the tan coming along? I’m really pissed at you. Do you think I’m an idiot? I don’t believe your sweet talk.

(Thunder sounds in the distance.)

LUCY (cont.): You bring thunder storms. Straight from the airport?

(Lucy goes into the kitchen and pours wine. Justine follows.)

JUSTINE: Tom called me and told me to come by.
LUCY: “Told you,” and you skedaddled on the first jet? I thought the plan was to stay in Nantucket for all of August since Streetcar just closed.
JUSTINE: I’m going right back. I wanted to see Tom in person about this season. He’s changing the lineup, and I’m really thinking about coming back for one show. What do you think?

(Pause.)
LUCY: A lot. Ice?
JUSTINE: Not with Sancerre.
LUCY: O.K.

(Lucy hands her a glass of white Sancerre. Lucy puts ice and Pellegrino in hers.)

LUCY (cont.): Business over cocktails? I don’t . . . I don’t think I’m invited.
JUSTINE: Of course you are. To the work.

(Justine toasts and Lucy drinks. Lucy hums a little and picks up matches and lights a couple of candles on a side table and on the coffee table.)

LUCY: Why are you . . . here?
JUSTINE: Work. Don’t you worry, Lucy?
LUCY: About what?
JUSTINE: That your career is passing you by? Don’t you want to play hardball in New York and LA? Is there enough here for you? Tom is . . . Are you happy?
LUCY: Duke adores me. They loved me in Prague. They threw roses. You can’t imagine. Children and dogs love me, but men . . .
JUSTINE: You don’t look like yourself.
LUCY: Really?
JUSTINE: Well . . . different. Are you in love?
LUCY: So, I don’t resemble Dukie? That’s a relief. He doesn’t like competition.
JUSTINE: Was it the Russian actor that Peter kept talking about?
LUCY: Lucy, Lucy, you have a secret.
JUSTINE: Do you know what love is?
LUCY: Lucy, Lucy, pudding and pie. Have a secret and makes her cry. Come on! Tell!
JUSTINE: Business.
LUCY: More?
JUSTINE: Sure!
(Lucy pours Justine more wine.)

JUSTINE (cont.): Come sit. What do you think of the roles? Tom’s asked me to play Masha. Masha’s amazing, don’t you think? It would certainly be interesting to be sisters again. Oh, I don’t think I was supposed to talk about it. You do know about it . . . ?
LUCY: Yes, actually, I do. You’re here talking to me . . . about playing Masha.
JUSTINE: Yes.
LUCY: On my sofa.

(Lucy lights more candles on the coffee table.)

JUSTINE: Chekhov! It’s almost too good to be true. Masha’s one of my dream roles.
LUCY: Uh huh. You’re playing . . . Masha . . .
JUSTINE: To do Chekhov with Tom directing is an actor’s fantasy. Bruce said this production will get lots of press, and there’s already talk of moving it to Broadway. Fun? Huh?

(Lucy crosses to the kitchen and lights a lamp.)

LUCY: Oh, yeah.
JUSTINE: Someday I want a daughter coloring in my kitchen just like Rose.
LUCY: No! Rose isn’t part of this discussion! No! Do not . . . talk about Rose.

(Pause. We hear wind.)

JUSTINE: Do you miss it?

(Lucy pinches out the flames of a couple of the candles.)

LUCY: Miss what?
JUSTINE: Being the chosen one. Being the actress.
LUCY: I missed the children dreadfully and Duke. I don’t miss touring, or living in hotels.
JUSTINE: Don’t you want more? Can having a baby really make up for it? New York and LA are where it’s at. You can do good work here, but it’s a grind and you do five roles for every one you want to play.

LUCY: Regional theatre productions often become the New York/LA hot ticket.

JUSTINE: It doesn’t pay much and you rely on your husband. Not a good idea.

LUCY: Tell me about it.

JUSTINE: Tom said you’ve been painting and writing.

LUCY: Uh, huh. I’m a rebel . . . and you’ve been discussing me?

JUSTINE: I’ve been thinking about babies lately—for the first time . . . I really miss our friendship.

LUCY: I asked Tom to cast you and bring you here. You’re Rose’s godmother.

JUSTINE: I’m your friend. I miss you.

LUCY: You sleep with my husband! And now you’re taking Masha!

JUSTINE: I told you it was a mistake. Christian forgiveness?

LUCY: I need to wash all of this off.

JUSTINE: I’ll have another Sancerre.

LUCY: Help yourself. Help yourself. Why am I being so damn polite?

(Lucy goes up the stairs to shower and change.)

JUSTINE: Has Tom said if you’re going to be Olga or Natasha? Or are you doing something else? Where’s your big dog?

LUCY: Waiting to bite your butt! I’ve lost my manners. I’m losing it! Oh! Duke is the special guest at the neighbor’s sleepover.

(Lightning flashes. Thunder.)

JUSTINE: I forgot how pretty your home is. And the flowers . . . Birthday? Anniversary? Oscar nomination?

LUCY: Funeral?

(Lightning. Lucy exits. The lights flicker off and on. Justine walks around Lucy’s kitchen and pours herself a little more wine.)
Thunder sounds. Lightning flashes. Thunder sounds again. TOM enters."

TOM: Oooooh. It’s noisy!

(Tom bumps into Justine.)

TOM (cont.): Oh! Justine! I forgot.
JUSTINE: Tom!
TOM: I forgot to knock. No, really, I forgot!

(TOM enters carrying a wine caddy.)

TOM (cont.): We have to talk. This is between us only. Shhh! Listen up

(He touches her. She responds.)

TOM (cont.): I need you. Lucy is . . . really mentally incapable of performing right now. I’m caught in a bind. This production hinges on her being in it, and it’ll appear to look like it, because of Henry Blakemore’s stipulation. Shhhhh!! You’ll have to go along with what may feel like a train wreck about to happen, but trust me . . . I can’t do this without you.
JUSTINE: Wait. What are you saying? What! You mean I won’t be . . . Masha?
TOM: For the time being.
JUSTINE: I’m not Masha?
TOM: Listen . . . I . . .
JUSTINE: No! I’m not listening! What the hell does that mean? I’m Masha or I’m not Masha!
TOM: I’m your director. You’re my Masha. This is for us.
JUSTINE: How can you do this to me?
TOM: It’ll work.
JUSTINE: And . . . and if it doesn’t?

(Lightning flashes. Tom stands still and looks at Justine.)
Ron Schildknecht

from True Detective

Synopsis: In True Detective, hardened true crime magazine writer Art Crockett is forced to seek out his own stories when his employer stops the presses for good. He soon finds himself in the middle of an attempted murder case where the beautiful suspect, Elizabeth Darvas, answers only to a higher power. While grounded in the plot-driven form of crime detective fiction, True Detective extends beyond the expected tropes of the genre by posing larger questions about humanity, as Crockett must overcome his own bitterness to recognize the divinity manifested in front of him.

INT. MERCY HOSPITAL, LOBBY—DAY

In the main lobby of the hospital, Art Crockett settles in where he can see the elevator from a discreet distance. He checks a message on his phone.

REX LYONS (O.S.): (voice mail) Yeah Crockett, we ran the plates you called in and pulled up a Roy Gittes. The address is at Our Lady of Sorrows, so maybe he’s a priest? Keep me posted, “detective.”

(Crockett hangs up and settles in for the wait.)

INT. MERCY HOSPITAL, LOBBY—LATER

Crockett is sound asleep. The elevator DINGS to announce its arrival. The elevator door opens and Elisabeth Darvas steps out and heads out the door. Crockett wakes up in time to see a brown van drive away through the window. He races out the door.

EXT. HOSPITAL PARKING LOT—CONTINUOUS

By the time Crockett gets outside, the van is nowhere in sight. He

EXT. OUR LADY OF SORROWS CHURCH—NIGHT

Crockett pulls his car near the front of the church and gets out. The brown van is parked in front. The church, a basilica over one hundred years old, sits on a campus consisting of several buildings. Crockett pulls open the unlocked door and enters the sanctuary.

INT. OUR LADY OF SORROWS CHURCH—NIGHT

Once inside, Crockett sees Elisabeth kneeling at the front of the church, near the altar. He heads straight for her but is blocked by FATHER GITTES, sixties, short cropped hair.

FATHER GITTES: (softly) Can I help you?

(Crockett looks over in Elisabeth’s direction.)

FATHER GITTES (CONT’D): Mrs. DuPont has just been released from prison and is free on her own accord. She certainly doesn’t wish to speak to the press. She’s been through a lot. CROCKETT: I can just pray here, can’t I?

(Crockett moves towards the pew just ahead of him. Gittes grabs his arm.)

FATHER GITTES: Of course. I only ask that you respect the privacy of others while you are here. CROCKETT: Thank you, Father.

Gittes leaves him, and Crockett instinctively reaches for the holy water font near the entrance and makes the sign of the cross. It may have been fifteen years, but there are some things you don’t forget. He approaches the pews in the back and kneels. He bows his head but without taking his eyes off of Elisabeth ahead. She
is still immersed in prayer. Silence. Then, she stands up and exits the pew. She kneels, crosses, and heads in Crockett's direction. Crockett drops his head as she approaches.

CROCKETT’S POV: On the floor. He sees her walking past. Sound of footsteps continue. Then he hears nothing. A beat. Still nothing. Crockett turns his head behind him and sees Elisabeth looking right at him. Exhaustion is written all over her face.

ELISABETH: (matter of fact) Mr. Crockett. You’ve had quite a busy day, following me all over the city. You must have something very important to speak to me about.

(Getting up from the pew, Crockett recovers as best he can.)

CROCKETT: Mrs. DuPont.
ELISABETH: Please. Everyone calls me Elisabeth.
CROCKETT: Elisabeth, right. (abruptly improvising, badly) I’ll be honest. When I saw your husband bleeding to death—practically—in your arms with the gun right next to you, I thought, no way could she have done that. Then evidence starts turning up—prints, you know—and people start saying these things about you, so I think, maybe she did. Don’t get me wrong. If you did, I’m sure you had your reasons. Or maybe it was an accident.

ELISABETH: (starts to leave) Mr. Crockett—
CROCKETT: Wait, please.

(She stops.)

CROCKETT (CONT’D): I’m just an outsider looking in. But something happened—back at the hospital. I couldn’t see it, but you caused something to happen.
ELISABETH: (irritated) Mr. Crockett, I don’t know why this is even a matter that concerns you.

(She heads out the door. Crockett follows her outside.)

EXT. OUR LADY OF SORROWS CHURCH—NIGHT

The Louisville Review 207
(He catches up to her.)

CROCKETT: Look, for whatever reason—maybe you’d call it divine intervention—I got pulled into this thing. I had to start looking for answers. Now, I see that you could use some help. And maybe, just maybe, that’s me.

(She just looks straight at him. She smiles, softening a little.)


(a beat)

If you really want to help, let me introduce you to some people who need it more than me.

(Elisabeth leads him to the building next door.)

INT. MADONNA HOUSE SHELTER—NIGHT

(Dozens of WOMEN and CHILDREN mill about the shelter housing project. For a shelter, the facility is bright and airy.)

ELISABETH: (calling out) Man in the building!

(Crockett observes how the occupants are immediately drawn to Elisabeth. They greet her with warm affection. A LITTLE GIRL comes up to Elisabeth and gives her a big hug.)

LITTLE GIRL: Are you alright, Elisabeth? I missed you!
ELISABETH: And I missed you, my angel!

(Elisabeth pulls a glass ring out of her pocket and hands it to the girl. SISTER MARY ROSE, the shelter’s administrator, approaches Elisabeth, and also gives her a hug.)

SISTER MARY ROSE: Welcome back, Elisabeth. To say that you have been in our prayers is an understatement.
ELISABETH: Thank you, Sister.
SISTER MARY ROSE: And Louis?
ELISABETH: God and a marvelous team of doctors and nurses are looking after him.
SISTER MARY ROSE: You look exhausted, my dear. You must get some rest.
ELISABETH: Soon, I promise. How many do we have on the waiting list?
SISTER MARY ROSE: Sixteen women with twenty-two children total.
ELISABETH: We have to find more beds. Did the food donations come last week?
SISTER MARY ROSE: Yes, but not the full amount. (frowning) Bentley’s just dropped their sponsorship. It’s been a bit awkward with everything that’s been happening.
ELISABETH: (not deterred) I’ll talk to them. (to Crockett) This is Sister Mary Rose, the head administrator for the Madonna House. They provide temporary shelter for single women and their children. My neighbor—
CROCKETT: Crockett.

(As the two shake hands, Elisabeth sees JULIANA, a young Latina woman. In tears, Juliana holds a BABY in her arms. Elisabeth leaves Crockett and Sister Mary Rose to comfort her.)

CROCKETT (CONT’D): (to Sister Mary Rose) Nice place here.
SISTER MARY ROSE: (starts her usual pitch) Our goal is to provide an environment where families can regain their dignity and focus on goals like finding employment and affordable childcare. Then a place to live.
CROCKETT: (his cynicism takes over) Aren’t you afraid of enabling them? I mean they’ll never want to leave.
SISTER MARY ROSE: Mr. Crockett, these people have a storm in their lives right now. We’re here to help them weather that storm.

(She looks at Crockett hard, suspecting something.)

SISTER MARY ROSE (CONT’D): And what storm is in your life
right now?
CROCKETT: *(looking at Elisabeth)* So she’s a volunteer here?
SISTER MARY ROSE: You could say that. She founded it. She and Louis raised the money and oversaw the building renovation. This is the best one yet!
CROCKETT: *(genuinely surprised)* There are others?

(*Before Sister Mary Rose can respond, Elisabeth runs up to them.*)

ELISABETH: Excuse me, Sister. *(to Crockett)* I hate to bother you. You offered to help. Juliana’s brother is in trouble. Will you take me to him, please? In your car?
CROCKETT: I’m parked out front.
ELISABETH: Thank you. *(to Sister)* Sister.

(*Elisabeth starts towards the door. Sister grabs Crockett.*)

SISTER MARY ROSE: Mr. Crockett, she needs food—and rest. Please see that she gets home as soon as possible. With her husband in the hospital she needs somebody to look after her.
CROCKETT: I’ll do what I can.

(*Crockett tries to catch up with Elisabeth, who is already out the door.*)

SISTER MARY ROSE: Maybe her uncle can help.

INT. CROCKETT’S CAR—NIGHT

(*Sitting in Crockett’s car, Elisabeth tries regaining her strength through prayer.*)

CROCKETT: Where to?
ELISABETH: West forty-eighth and Ashland.
CROCKETT: *(processes this)* Wait, that’s Back of the Yards. You don’t want to go there.
ELISABETH: He’s in danger.
CROCKETT: I’m sure he is if he’s in that part of town. You look exhausted. Sister asked me to take you home.
ELISABETH: Please.
CROCKETT: Who is he?
ELISABETH: Tomas. He’s a twelve year old boy staying with relatives. He hasn’t been to school for over a month because he couldn’t cross a gang line. Yesterday he stood up to them—he crossed the street and went to school. They gave him a warning. He crossed the street again this morning. They said if he did it one more time—they’d kill him.
CROCKETT: Do you know this kid?

(She looks up at him for the first time.)

ELISABETH: And that should make a difference?
CROCKETT: You just can’t go around helping the whole world when you have problems of your own.
ELISABETH: Jesus didn’t say love the whole world. He said love one another. You said you cared for me.
CROCKETT: I did, yes.
ELISABETH: You can’t care for me and then feel nothing for someone else.

(Crockett has no idea what she’s talking about.)

EXT. HOUSE, BACK OF THE YARDS NEIGHBORHOOD—NIGHT

Rough neighborhood. Crockett pulls the car off the street near a rundown three-story house with dilapidated wood siding. The front window is boarded up. Four male GANG MEMBERS stand in the street, smoking cigarettes, roughhousing each other.

CROCKETT: This does not look good.
ELISABETH: They are all saints in disguise.
CROCKETT: What?

(Elisabeth gets out of the car and approaches the men. Crockett gets out of the car and stands by. The gang immediately puts up their guard. One of the men, DIEGO, takes a few steps towards her.)
DIEGO: What do you want?
ELISABETH: I want to see Tomas.
DIEGO: Tomas isn’t here.
ELISABETH: (summoning her courage) I know he is and you will get him for me.

(Diego is a little taken aback. He’s not used to somebody talking to him like that. Especially a pretty young woman.)

DIEGO: (smiling) Hey Ruben. The pretty lady wants us to bring out Tomas.

(The other gang members come a little closer to Elisabeth.)

RUBEN: Tomas is in detention right now, Diego.
ELISABETH: I really think you should let me see him.

(Crockett sees the tension building. He approaches cautiously. The gang interprets Crockett’s move as a threat and immediately draw weapons.)

DIEGO: What I think is that you and your asshole friend here need to get back in that piece of shit car and get out of here before somebody gets hurt.

(Elisabeth is undeterred. Her adrenaline and courage take over.)

ELISABETH: (forcefully) Tomas! Tomas! I’ve come to get you! Come out here!

(A very angry Diego cocks his weapon and points at Elisabeth.)

DIEGO: Shut the fuck up, bitch.
CROCKETT: Hey, take it easy!

(Diego switches his aim to Crockett.)

DIEGO: So you want some of this now?
CROCKETT: Hey!
(Crockett shows Diego his hands. No weapons.)

CROCKETT (CONT’D): (softly) She just wants the kid.
DIEGO: Well nobody is taking him! Got it?
TOMAS (O.S.): Here I am.

(All eyes go to TOMAS, twelve, standing behind the screen door. Elisabeth is the first to react.)

ELISABETH: Come to me, Tomas.

(The boy does not move.)

ELISABETH (CONT’D): Come, Tomas. They won’t hurt you.

(Tomas carefully opens the door. He carries his suitcase. Crockett looks over to Diego and Ruben, who appear ready to react. They both look over to Elisabeth. She shoots them back a look that somehow paralyzes them.)

ELISABETH (CONT’D): (looking at Diego and Ruben) They are not going to hurt you.

(A subtle smile emerges on her face. Tomas inches past the gang members towards Elisabeth. Diego wants to stop him but his body betrays him.)

ELISABETH (CONT’D): It’s okay.

(She stretches out her arms for him. Amazingly, Tomas reaches them. Elisabeth embraces him. Elisabeth then hands Tomas over to Crockett, who leads him away by the hand. Elisabeth turns to Diego.)

ELISABETH (CONT’D): (softly) We think that poverty is only being hungry, naked and homeless. The poverty of being unloved and uncared for is the most tragic of them all.
(With that, Elisabeth, Tomas and Crockett slowly walk away towards the car. They get inside and drive off. Diego and Ruben are left with a strange sense of confusion and powerlessness.)

EXT. TRAIN STATION—NIGHT

(Crockett stands by his parked car.)

CROCKETT’S POV: Elisabeth, kneeling down, talking to Tomas. With the intensity of the confrontation behind him, Tomas no longer has to wear his mask of bravery. He listens carefully, nodding his head yes several times. Elisabeth hands him an envelope. He nods his head. They say their good-byes and hug. Tomas departs with his suitcase and disappears into the station. Elisabeth heads back to Crockett, exhausted.

CROCKETT: Where’s he going?

(They get back in Crockett’s car.)

ELISABETH: A priest is going to take him to a shelter out of town for a few months. He’ll get stability back into his life, and once Juliana gets a place of her own, she’ll send for him.

INT. CROCKETT’S CAR—LATER

(Back on the road, Crockett looks over at Elisabeth. Her strength has left her and she has finally succumbed to sleep.)

EXT. ELISABETH’S HOUSE—LATER

(Crockett parks the car in front of Elisabeth’s house. He nudges her gently.)

CROCKETT: Hey.

(No response. From her purse he pulls out her house key. He gets out of the car, walks around and opens her car door. Putting his arms
underneath her, he carefully pulls her out and picks her up. He carries her up to the house and unlocks the door.)

INT. ELISABETH’S HOUSE—NIGHT

(Still carrying Elisabeth, Crockett looks over at the stairs. Going back there doesn’t seem like a good idea. He carries her to the couch and lays her down. She shows signs of life.)

ELISABETH: Will you please take me to the hos—
CROCKETT: Shhh. I promised Sister I’d make sure you got some rest. You can’t make a liar out of me.

(She settles down. Crockett covers her with a blanket.)

CROCKETT (CONT’D): Tomorrow, we eat.

(Crockett takes a hard look at the stairs blocked with crime scene tape. He glances at Elisabeth. Sound asleep. He walks past the tape and up the stairs.)
NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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CAILIN BARRETT-BRESSACK has previously had work featured in Necessary Fiction, eFiction Magazine, Sherman’s Travel, and This Magazine, among others. She graduated from Emerson College in 2012 with a Writing, Literature, and Publishing degree and the High Distinction in Fiction award for her graduating class. Cailin loves warm blankets, cold hearts, and hot dance moves. She resides in Harlem, New York, and works on biology and geology textbooks at an independent publisher.

ROY BENTLEY’s work has been recognized with fellowships from the NEA, the Florida Division of Cultural Affairs, and the Ohio Arts Council. Poems have appeared in The Southern Review, Shenandoah, Pleiades, Blackbird, North American Review, Prairie Schooner, and elsewhere. Books include Boy in a Boat (University of Alabama, 1986), Any One Man (Bottom Dog, 1992), and The Trouble with a Short Horse in Montana (White Pine, 2006). Starlight Taxi, his latest, won the 2012 Blue Lynx Prize in Poetry and has just been published by Lynx House Press.

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B.J. BEST is the author of three books of poetry: But Our Princess Is in Another Castle (Rose Metal Press, 2013), Birds of Wisconsin (New Rivers Press, 2010), and State Sonnets (sunnyoutside, 2009). I got off the train at Ash Lake, a verse novella, is forthcoming from sunnyoutside in 2014. He lives in Wisconsin.

JOHN BLAIR’s short story collection American Standard was the 2002 winner of the Drue Heinz Literature prize and was published by the University of Pittsburgh Press. He has also published two books of poetry, The Occasions of Paradise (University of Tampa Press, 2012) and The Green Girls (LSU
The Louisville Review 217


MEGAN E. CALHOUN is a freelance writer and editor whose fiction has appeared in Lullwater Review and Sententia. She is also currently a fiction editor for the literary magazine JMWW. She lives in Columbus, Ohio, with her family.

In a thirty-year career as a professional writer, KATIE FRASER CARPENTER has been involved in a number of fascinating projects, including excavating a 200-year old Revolutionary War fort, documenting the moonshine industry in western Kentucky, and living as a member of the family on an 1850s farm. Clients have included the National Boy Scout Museum, Kentucky Educational Television, and the Museum of the American Printing House for the Blind. Her writing credits include one non-fiction book, three Kentucky education textbooks, instructional materials and curriculum in use in Kentucky public schools on web and in print, articles in popular journals and scholarly journals, newspaper stories, playscripts, and video scripts.

AARON Crippen is a poet and translator whose awards include a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship and the PEN Texas Literary Award for Poetry. His poems have appeared in Beloit Poetry Journal, Barrelhouse, Cream City Review, and many other journals. He teaches English at Arizona State University. Umbra Urbana is the title of a painting by Graham Nickson.

ADAM DAY’s forthcoming volume of poetry is Winter Inventory (Sarabande). He is the recipient of a PSA Chapbook Fellowship for Badger, Apocrypha, and of a PEN Emerging Writers Award. His work has appeared in the Boston Review, Lana Turner, APR, Poetry London, AGNI, The Iowa Review, Poetry Ireland Review, Guernica, and elsewhere. He coordinates The Baltic Writing Residency in Latvia, Scotland, and Bernheim Arboretum & Research Forest.

GABRIEL JASON DEAN is a playwright/screenwriter and poet living in Brooklyn. He is the recipient of the 2014 Hodder Fellowship from Princeton University. His play Javaaneh (In Bloom) was a finalist for the 2014 Laurents / Hatcher Award, received the Kennedy Center’s Paula Vogel Prize, was Runner-Up for the New Dramatist’s Princess Grace Award, and is currently under a Broadway option with Davenport Theatrical. Another play, D’angelico is currently under option with Riovey Films. His play for children, The Transition of Doodle Pequeño, received the 2013 American Alliance for Theatre & Education Distinguished Play Award, the 2011 New England Theatre Conference Aurand Harris Award and was selected for the 2012 Kennedy Center New Visions / New Voices Conference, Theatre
for Young Audiences Award and was Runner-Up for the Harold & Mimi Steinberg National Playwriting Award. His scripts are published through Samuel French, Dramatic Publishing and Playscripts. His poems and fiction have appeared in *The Tower*, *Snake Nation Review*, *Melic Review*, *Creative Loafing* and *Eclectica Magazine*. Gabriel is on faculty at Spalding University, currently Visiting Writer in Residence at Muhlenberg College and a Core Writer at The Playwrights’ Center in Minneapolis. MFA: UT-Austin Michener Center for Writers. GabrielJasonDean.net

**Jesse DeLong** teaches at Southern University and graduated from the University of Alabama’s MFA program. These poems are from his manuscript *ScreeL*. Other work has appeared or is forthcoming from *Best New Poets 2011*, *Colorado Review*, *Mid-American Review*, *American Letters and Other Poems*, *Drunken Boat*, and elsewhere. His chapbook, *Tearings*, was released by Curly Head Press.

**Okla Elliott** is currently a PhD candidate at the University of Illinois where he works in the fields of comparative literature and trauma studies. He also holds an MFA from Ohio State University. His nonfiction, poetry, short fiction, and translations have appeared in *Another Chicago Magazine*, *Harvard Review*, *Indiana Review*, *The Literary Review*, *The Los Angeles Review*, *A Public Space*, and *Subtropics*, among others. He is the author of the fiction collection, *From the Crooked Timber* (Press 53, 2011). His poetry collection, *The Cartographer’s Ink*, is forthcoming in late 2014 from NYQ Books, and his novel, *The Doors You Mark Are Your Own* (co-authored with Raul Clement), is forthcoming in 2015 from Dark House Press.

**Lee Anne Fahey** trained as an actor at The Goodman School of Drama at the Art Institute of Chicago and worked professionally as an actress for over 20 years. In 2008 she earned her MFA in Playwriting from Spalding University in Louisville, Kentucky. At present, Ms. Fahey works as a Registered Drama Therapist at The Brook (a behavioral hospital) in Louisville. Her clients include children, seniors, active military, dual-diagnosed, and chemical dependent adults.


**Michael Fulop** has had poems published in *Atlanta Review*, *Green Mountains Review*, *The Hopkins Review*, *Poet Lore*, and others. He lives
slightly north of Baltimore with his wife and two children.

**Kirby Gann**’s most recent novel, *Ghosting* (2012), was named a Best Book of the Year by *Publishers Weekly* and *Shelf Unbound*, and a “Must Read” title on flavorwire.com; Editions du Seuil published a French edition in spring 2014. He lives in Louisville, Kentucky, where he is managing editor at Sarabande Books and on the fiction faculty at the brief-residency MFA in Writing Program at Spalding University.

**Bill Goodman** is the host and managing editor of *Kentucky Tonight* on KET. Additionally, he serves as host for *Education Matters* and *One to One with Bill Goodman*. He also writes the KET blog “Bill’s Eye.” A native of Glasgow, Kentucky, Goodman earned his MFA in creative nonfiction from Spalding University in November 2012. In April 2013, he was inducted into the Kentucky Journalism Hall of Fame. His collection of personal essays, titled *Beans, Biscuits, Family and Friends: Life Stories*, will be published in the spring of 2014. He lives in Lexington.

**Gayle Hanratty** is a short story writer who lives in the Clifton area of Louisville with her husband. Her stories have appeared in *Monkscript, The Louisville Review*, and she was the winner of a short story contest in the introductory issue of *Trajectory*. Hanratty is a graduate of the Spalding University MFA in Writing Program. In addition to writing, she creates terrariums in her basement studio known as forest floor terrariums.

**Margaret Hayertz** is from Portland, Oregon. She is a hunter-gatherer who has been published in *VoiceCatcher*. She is also co-founder of Palampore Writers, a not-for-profit organization that provides creative writing workshops in communities around the world. “You Are Kolkata Going” is an excerpt from her novel in progress.

**Sean Patrick Hill** has a chapbook, *Hibernaculum* (Slash Pine Press, 2013), as well as two books of poetry, *The Imagined Field* and *Interstitial*. He is an MFA graduate of Warren Wilson College, and has received awards and grants from the Vermont Studio Center, the Kentucky Arts Council, and the Elizabeth George Foundation. His poems have recently appeared in *Blackbird*, *Fourteen Hills*, *Smartish Pace*, and *Sixth Finch, Salt Hill, The Collagist*, and are forthcoming in *The Lumberyard*. He lives in Louisville, Kentucky.

**Andrew Hinderaker** is a Resident Playwright of Chicago Dramatists, an ensemble member of the Gift Theatre, and a three-time Jeff Award nominee for Best New Work. He has been called “a hugely exciting, risk-taking young writer whose stimulating work and palpable promise demand
attention” (Chris Jones, Chicago Tribune). He is the author of numerous plays, including Suicide, Incorporated, which premiered at the Gift in 2010 and was subsequently produced Off-Broadway at the Roundabout Theatre. Additional plays by Hinderaker, including Dirty, Kingsville, Colossal, and I Am Going to Change the World have been developed/produced by the Kennedy Center, Manhattan Theatre Club, Steppenwolf, the Olney Theatre Center, Mixed Blood, Victory Gardens, and numerous others. Hinderaker currently holds commissions from the Roundabout Theatre and Marc Platt Productions and recently completed his MFA in playwriting from the University of Texas at Austin.

Chervis Isom, a graduate of Birmingham-Southern College and Cumberland School of Law, is Senior Counsel at Baker, Donelson, Bearman, Caldwell & Berkowitz in Birmingham, Alabama where he has practiced law for forty-six years. He is the author of the recently published memoir, The Newspaper Boy: Coming of Age in Birmingham, Alabama During the Civil Rights Era. www.chervisisom.com.

R Dean Johnson teaches creative nonfiction in the Bluegrass Writers Studio, the low-residency MFA program at Eastern Kentucky University. His essays have appeared in Ascent, Natural Bridge, Slice, The Southern Review, and elsewhere. Originally from California, he now lives in Kentucky with his wife, the writer Julie Hensley, and makes the two-hour drive to Cincinnati several times each season to see the Reds.

Ellyn Lichvar is the assistant managing editor for The Louisville Review and Fleur-de-Lis Press. She received her MFA from Spalding University, where she currently works as an administrative assistant to the brief-residency MFA in Writing Program. Her work can be found in Blood Lotus, Poem, The Furnace Review, Silenced Press, and others.

Kelly Martineau’s essays have appeared in Front Porch, Quiddity, and Barely South Review. She is a 2013 Pushcart Prize Nominee and holds an MFA from Spalding University. She lives in Seattle with her husband and two daughters. More information is available at www.kellymartineau.com

Mia McCullough’s plays have been produced in Chicago at Stage Left Theatre, Steppenwolf Theatre Company, and Chicago Dramatists, as well as at many theatres around the country including The Old Globe in San Diego, Cincinnati Shakespeare Festival, Actor’s Express in Atlanta, and InterAct in Philadelphia. Her work has been published by Broadway Play Publishing, Smith & Kraus, and is included in the Chicago Dramatists anthology New Plays from Chicago. Mia teaches playwriting and screenwriting at Northwestern University as well as playwriting workshops in Chicago.
Public High Schools. “Sharp Objects” first appeared in American Theater Company’s 10x10 Festival in Chicago. She also dabbles in stand-up comedy. Find out more about her at www.miamccullough.net

Ted McLoof teaches fiction at the University of Arizona. His work has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize, the Best of the Net Award, and has appeared or is forthcoming in the Minnesota Review, Bellevue Literary Review, Gertrude, Monkeybicycle, Hobart, DIAGRAM, The Associative Press, The Kenyon Review, and elsewhere. He is staff writer and culture critic at Rookerville.

Joel W. Nelson has an MFA in Poetry from Spalding University. He spent most of his childhood in West Africa but currently lives in Louisville, Kentucky with his wife, Rachel, and son, Ezra.

Jessica Pace is a 24-year-old writer who lives in Nashville.

Greg Pape’s books include Border Crossings, Black Branches, Storm Pattern, Sunflower Facing the Sun, American Flamingo, Animal Time, and Four Swans. He has received the Discovery/The Nation Award, two National Endowment for the Arts Fellowships, the Pushcart Prize, the Edwin Ford Piper Prize (now the Iowa Prize), the Crab Orchard Open Competition Award, and the Richard Hugo Memorial Poetry Award. He teaches at the University of Montana and the brief-residency MFA program at Spalding University. He served as Montana Poet Laureate during 2007-2009.

Andrew Payton is a Maryland native and MFA candidate in Creative Writing and Environment at Iowa State University, where he has worked as the poetry editor of Flyway. His poetry has been published in Notre Dame Review, Fourth River, Natural Bridge, and elsewhere, and won the 2013 James Hearst Poetry Prize at North American Review. Find him at andrewdpayton.wordpress.com.

Widely anthologized, Molly Peacock’s poetry is included in The Oxford Book of American Poetry, as well as in leading literary journals such as the Times Literary Supplement and Poetry. She is the author of six volumes, including The Second Blush, and Cornucopia: New & Selected Poems both published by W.W. Norton and Company. Peacock’s latest book of nonfiction is The Paper Garden: An Artist Begins Her Life’s Work at 72.

Simon Perchik is an attorney whose poems have appeared in Partisan Review, The Nation, Poetry, The New Yorker, and elsewhere. His most recent collection is Almost Rain, published by River Otter Press (2013). For more information, including free e-books, his essay titled “Magic, Illusion and
Drew Pomeroy’s poems have been published in Sojourn, Wide Angle, and Word Hotel. A former native of Alabama, Drew now lives in Louisville, Kentucky, where he is pursuing his MFA in Poetry at Spalding University.

Natalie Price, 14 years-old, is a high school freshman at City High School in Grand Rapids, Michigan. She is an avid reader and writer and loves acting. She has recently been involved in the musical production of How to Succeed in Business without Really Trying at her high school. She hopes to realize a career in veterinary medicine and wants to continue writing poetry as well.

Brandon Rushton is an MFA candidate in poetry at the University of South Carolina, where he serves as the poetry editor for the literary journal Yemassee and teaches in the First Year English program. Recently nominated for Best New Poets 2013, shortlisted for a John Muir Wilderness Residency from the Colorado Art Ranch, he is a recipient of the Raymond Tyner Prize for Poetry. Born and raised in Michigan, he now lives and writes in Columbia, South Carolina. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in Southern Humanities Review, Permafrost, Moon City Review, Columbia College Literary Review, Menacing Hedge, and Apercus Quarterly.

Ron Schildknecht is an independent filmmaker, screenwriter and instructor working in his hometown of Louisville, Kentucky. His short films, The Legend of the Pope Lick Monster, My Porcelain Past, Borderlines, and Heavens Above, have been screened at numerous film festivals, and he is a recipient of the Al Smith Fellowship in Media Arts from the Kentucky Arts Council in 2004 and 1994. He received his MFA in Writing from Spalding University in 2012. He currently teaches screenwriting at Spalding University in their BFA program. True Detective is his second feature-length screenplay.

Octavio Solis is a playwright and director living in San Francisco. His numerous works have been produced across the country at theatres such as the California Shakespeare Theatre, Mark Taper Forum, Yale Repertory Theatre, the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, the Denver Center for the Performing Arts, the Dallas Theater Center, and the Magic Theatre in San Francisco. He has recently received a Fellowship from United States Artists and is presently working on commissions for the Magic Theatre SF and Yale Repertory Theatre. “Scarecrow” will premiere at the Berkeley Repertory Theatre in 2015 as part of 20-play cycle presently entitled “The Food Project.”

Frank Soos is the author of two volumes of short stories, Early Yet and Unified Field Theory (Winner of the Flannery O’Connor Award for Short Fiction), as well as one collection of essays, Bamboo Fly Rod Suite. His
most recent book *Double Moon* is a collaboration with his wife, the artist Margo Klass. He is retired from teaching English and creative writing at the University of Alaska.

**Jon Stapnes** received his MFA from the University of Virginia and is currently a Ph.D. candidate in the English Department at Duke University. He is working on a dissertation on aesthetics of emergence in contemporary urban Africa and a poetry manuscript titled *Clinical Ice*.

**Katerina Stoykova-Klemer** is the author of several poetry books in English and Bulgarian, most recently *The Porcupine of Mind* (Broadstone Books, 2012, in English) and *How God Punishes* (ICU, forthcoming, in Bulgarian). She hosts *Accents*—a radio show for literature, art and culture on WRFL in Lexington, Kentucky. In January 2010, Katerina launched the independent literary press Accents Publishing. Katerina co-wrote the independent feature film *Proud Citizen* and acted in the lead role.


**Jeanie Thompson**’s poetry collections and chapbooks include *Lotus and Psalm, How to Enter the River, Litany for a Vanishing Landscape, Ascent, Witness, White for Harvest: New and Selected Poems*, and *The Seasons Bear Us*. Jeanie holds the MFA from the University of Alabama, where she was founding editor of the literary journal *Black Warrior Review*. Twice awarded an Artist Fellowship in Literature from the Alabama State Council on the Arts for her poetry, Jeanie is founding director of the award-winning Alabama Writers’ Forum, a statewide literary arts organization in Montgomery.

**Helen Tzagoloff** has been published in anthologies and literary journals, recently in *Poet Lore, Poetry East, Slant*, and *Interpoezia: A Stranger at Home* anthology. She has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and was a first place winner of the Icarus International Literary Competition. A book of poems, *Listening to the Thunder*, has been published by Oliver Arts & Open Press. She has worked as a research scientist and patent attorney. She lives in New York City.
ELIZABETH STAINTON WALKER recently received her MA in English from the University of Arkansas. Her work has appeared in the Tulane Review and on the MonkeyBicycle website, among other places.


Katy Yocom’s fiction, poetry, and essays have appeared in The Louisville Review, New Southerner, Open 24 Hrs, Louisville Magazine, and LEO Weekly. She is at work on a novel. She received a Pushcart Prize nomination for her short story “Sea of Tranquility.” For her fiction, she has received grants from the Elizabeth George Foundation, the Kentucky Foundation for Women, and the Kentucky Arts Council; she is also the recipient of writers’ residencies at ISLAND Hill House (Michigan), the Kimmel Harding Nelson Center for the Arts (Nebraska), Hopscotch House (Kentucky), and the Mary Anderson Center (Indiana). She is a regular contributor to Food & Dining Magazine. She is the associate administrative director of Spalding University’s brief-residency MFA in Writing Program and is a graduate of the program.
The Children’s Corner
Amanda Silberling

SEDMRS

home is a distant wish on an island
with a name i cannot pronounce; the ships
that sail there have already swayed oceans
and won’t split seas for anyone but moses.
i tried to walk on water but my sneakers ran
away, barnacles grew on my toes,
and my footprints faded from the water’s surface.
you ask me about tempests, and i tell you
this is what happens when tides roll inward,
swallowing shells raw. this is how we
cool ourselves off on april days when
sweat drips toward the bread on our backs.
this is a new drop of wine on your plate.
Amanda Silberling

THE RISE AND FALL OF ROME

I always imagined birth to be something you did under fluorescent lights—my first sounds cried to a nurse paid overtime.

That morning, we awoke side by side and beside ourselves, stealing the vowels and consonants from each other’s lips. Together we sang sonatas, tossing away euphemisms, becoming uncovered.

I fell in love slowly and blindly with the way you reigned, the way you prospered, the way you gave us life. When you proposed, we were married in the Colosseum underneath Venus.

Last night, the storm struck hard. Stole the vowels and consonants from my lips. I couldn’t scream because your howls were bad enough for two.

I always imagined death to be something you did under fluorescent lights—my final words whispered to a nurse paid overtime.
Amanda Silberling

FLIGHT DELAY

Julie twirls her hair into a spiral staircase, porcelain toothcombs climbing steps to her scalp. When we were young, we dreamed of boarding planes with air cargo. Our parents imagined headlines: *Five-year-old girls fly inside suitcases to Morocco, become acquainted with stranger’s socks.*

Sam’s arms are shaded with sporadic blue streaks. Possible explanations:
1. Protruding veins
2. Bad tattoos
3. Former member of the Blue Man Group

Jared has a meeting with some corporation tomorrow morning at 7:00, at which time his wife will wake up beside a stock broker. He tells his son he is an old-fashioned man, pulls out a folded map, converts inches to miles— one inch for two hundred miles, two inches for one bruised cardiovascular organ.
i’m standing in line at the
bathroom and there
is a cleaning lady, slightly
overweight with curly dark
hair in wisps around a
plain, wrinkled face maybe
of hispanic descent and
she walks past us so one
by one we shuffle to
the side so she can
pass and she stops in front of me and
starts to stare so i turn
my eyes a little to the side like
i didn’t notice i’m just
here to use the bathroom and
wash my hands so i can eat the
pizza i just ordered outside and she
asks me where i’m from so i
smile a little and say oh, i’m
from LA and pretend like
i don’t know what she means but
she’s still staring and i see that
her dark eyes are a bit odd and i
get the feeling she might have
you know, a disability or
something and she’s still staring and
she’s too close so i
start to fidget to the side and she
asks me if i’m from
china so i tell her no, i said
i was from LA but i’m south
korean if that’s what she
meant and the other
people around me are fidgeting because
maybe it’s racist to think all
girls who look asian are chinese and
can’t be from LA and
years later my mom sat me on
her bed and told me i
can’t ever be a full
american because i’ll always
look asian to them and
i didn’t want to believe
her but maybe that
cleaning lady just said what
other people around me
were wondering subconsciously and
if i walked down the street no
one would know if i
could even speak english or
if i was chinese or japanese but i’m
actually south korean and

in korea i see a
white man talking to his white
friend on the subway and i
hear they’re lost and he looks
around, maybe for someone
to ask directions and
i’m sitting next to
them but his eyes pass over
me because my black
hair and eyes are just part
of the crowd and i’m
thinking i can
speak english and i’m
i’m from LA
Corporal Punishment

Esther Yoon

i saw the
large, square room and
the rows of desks in
perfect lines
the wooden floor and
the fluffs of dust between the planks
i saw the white slippers we
were supposed to wear inside and
how far away my seat
was from the old, green chalkboard
and the old lady in the front
face caked with white makeup and
frowning red lips
i saw the book of math
problems and
i can’t read the instructions but the
old lady is calling
us up one by one and
checking our answers but the thing is
i still can’t read the instructions and
the old lady takes out a
ruler and tells the first kid to stretch
out her hands and i
i stare at the ruler wondering
why she would need her hands and
she starts to smack her palms
counting out the numbers
i hear a slap for
each problem the girl got wrong and
i see her face crumple
and i think she’s going to cry
but her lip trembles as
she waits for the ruler to stop and
i see her red fingers pick up
her math book and walk back to
her seat and
i’m frozen
i feel my ears ringing with
the smacks of the ruler and i
see my fingers start to tremble and
my eyes are foggy and i
i can’t solve the problems and it’s
my turn soon but i don’t
i don’t know what to do and i
i want to cover my ears so i
can’t hear the slaps any more and
run out the door and go
home but it’s my first
day at my new school and i can’t
even budge from my seat as my heart
lungs feel sour and she
calls me up so my
legs carry me forward but
my ears won’t stop ringing and-

i couldn’t sleep that night and i
huddled on my bed in a
mountain of sheets and i
i shook under the moon’s
indifferent gaze and
heard the slap of the
ruler on hands and i
wanted to never go in that room
again but i
had to

now corporal punishment is
illegal in south korea
i wonder if she still has
the jar of rulers on her desk
Yasmin Belkhyr

SLICK, ACHING ROADS

The mint leaves mourn more than I do.

They limp, weep, choke,
like flowers or car engines
left on for too long.
The seat belt had always cut
my shoulder, the glow of night
always exposed shallow bone,
and you weren’t supposed to be driving.

I make tea hesitantly now:
boiling it over four, five times
before I can pour it. Not too much sugar.
Strain it twice. I drink it slowly.

The mint is flecked with black,
death crumpling sharply
in on its edges. My feet have melted
into the floor.
Look:

There are moths in the closets
and they swim through winter
sweaters and June coats.

In the morning, I will smother myself
in the remains. Sometimes I burn my right palm.
Sometimes my left too.

Humans are too often sorry for things they can’t control.
A FEW THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW

Whenever I pray, a dog somewhere dies.
My mother can’t look me in the eyes anymore.
I sleep with my contacts in
and I get sweats at night. I’ve gained six pounds since December
and I’ve lost four friends and two possible lovers. I bought two bamboo plants last week
and I’ve lied about six things since Wednesday,
(your haircut looks nice, I’ve watered the plants, I ate already, I’ve got a test tomorrow, this isn’t your shirt, I love you). Sometimes I think I’d be better off quiet.
I cheated on two math tests in the last year
and I want to learn how to stop bending.
Yasmin Belkhyr

THUMBELINA

We emptied the car of its innards: slashed seats and peeled leather paneling, gutted the radio and twisted off the steering wheel. We pulled the film from Dad’s tapes out of the sun roof like they were intestines. Our feet, slick with dew, crunched on the backs of crickets; the cicadas grit and grind- and spring arrived like disease, too quickly, overwhelming. But we are small people and like a hand around our throats, we remember winter long after she has gone. We left the skeleton on the front yard, let it rust on sporadic, balding grass with melted gravel clinging to the husks of its tires. It was a shell, hollow: trunk wide open like a gaping mouth. This was the month we molted. The month we shed. We carved animals into our teeth, our eyes bruised like peaches, knees and knuckles the color of bursting, ripe plums.
Notes on Contributors to the Children’s Corner

Yasmin Belkhyr is a writer. She was born in Salet, Morocco but currently lives and studies in Queens, New York. She very much likes dollar pizza, reading poetry and insulting hip bones. Her writing has been recognized by various organizations, such as the YoungArts Foundation, Princeton University, the President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, and the Norman Mailer Center. She’s read her poetry at private events at the Casita Maria Center in the Bronx, Two Moon Art House and Cafe in Brooklyn, and the Nuyorican Poets Cafe and the Lincoln Center in Manhattan. She is also the founder and editor-in-chief of Winter Tangerine Review, an independent, print literary journal. Most recently, she was nominated as a U.S Presidential Scholar in the Arts. When not editing, reading or writing, Yasmin pretends she can sing and gets lost navigating the NYC subway system. You can read her writing and daily angsty musings at wildflowerveins.tumblr.com.

Amanda Silberling is a two-time Foyle Young Poet of the Year and a Scholastic Gold Medalist in Poetry. Her recent work has appeared in The Fat City Review, Nostrovia Poetry, and The Los Angeles Times, among other places. She currently serves as the managing editor of Winter Tangerine Review and is a poetry reader for The Adroit Journal. Amanda is a seventeen-year-old from South Florida and will attend the University of Pennsylvania in the fall to study English and Creative Writing.

Esther Yoon is currently a senior at Yongsan International School in Seoul, South Korea. She grew up in Los Angeles and considers herself to be a Korean-American. She enjoys public speaking, debate, writing, and doing community service.
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