The Louisville Review

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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 Submissions of previously unpublished manuscripts are invited.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 4-6 months.

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

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Editor’s Note

When Karen Mann and I moved *The Louisville Review* and Fleur-de-Lis Press to Spalding University and undertook to create the first Master of Fine Arts in Writing Program in Kentucky, we dedicated ourselves to a new standard for graduate education in creative writing. We wanted this program to be paradise for its students and faculty. We wanted everyone to pledge allegiance to being both intellectually stimulating and emotionally supportive to one another. We wanted to foster a supportive atmosphere, not a competitive one. We wanted to create a home for the creative spirit. Now, on the Tenth Anniversary of the Spalding University brief-residency Master of Fine Arts in Writing Program, we renew our dedication and celebrate everyone who has helped to make this program a top program in the U. S.

The cover of this edition of *The Louisville Review* is part of our Tenth Anniversary Celebration of the Spalding University brief-residency MFA in Writing Program. Our students and faculty come from all parts of the United States and several foreign countries for our ten day residencies in Louisville or for our summer international residencies. All students in the program have gained editorial experience as first readers for manuscripts submitted to *TLR* from the entire United States and other countries. Faculty members of the MFA program often serve as a guest editor in their area of expertise for a particular number of the magazine. Work by Spalding students and faculty is sometimes included in these pages, and they submit material in the same fashion as other potential contributors.

As MFA Program Director and *TLR* Editor, along with Karen Mann, MFA Administrative Director and Managing Editor of *TLR* and Kathleen Driskell, MFA Associate Program Director and Associate Editor of *TLR*, I would like to thank Spalding University, especially President Tori Murden-McClure, Provost Randy Strickland, and Dean John James for their support of the innovative MFA in Writing Program on the occasion of its Tenth Birthday, as well as for their support of this magazine and its subsidiary the Fleur-de-Lis Press.

We invite all our readers to learn more about the Spalding MFA program through our web site spalding.edu/mfa and to read about and view pictures of our Tenth Anniversary Celebration spalding.edu/mfa10.

I also wish to thank the Guest Editors for this celebratory issue of *TLR*:

**Louella Bryant** is the author of the award winning books *While In Darkness There Is Light*, documenting young expatriates living in Australia during the Vietnam era, and *Full Bloom*, a collection of short stories In
addition to her work on the faculty of the Spalding University brief-residency MFA in Writing program, Louella mentors students at the New England Young Writers Conference at Bread Loaf and teaches creative writing and writing instruction courses in Vermont, where she lives with her husband Harrison Reynolds. Visit her website at http://louellabryant.com.

**CLAUDIA EMERSON**’s five books of poetry include *Late Wife*, winner of the Pulitzer Prize and, most recently, *Secure the Shadow*. Emerson has been awarded fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Library of Congress, and the Guggenheim Foundation. Former Poet Laureate of Virginia, she holds the Arrington Distinguished Chair in Poetry at the University Mary Washington, in Virginia.

**RACHEL M. HARPER**’s first novel, *Brass Ankle Blues* (Touchstone, 2006) was a finalist for the Borders Original Voices Award and selected by Target for their Breakout Books Program. She has received fellowships from Yaddo (2000, 2006) and the MacDowell Colony (2005) and has published both fiction and poetry in *The Carolina Quarterly, Chicago Review, African American Review*, and *Prairie Schooner*. In 2011, she was profiled by *The Root* as part of their city series on Los Angeles’ black literary giants. She recently adapted her second novel, *This Side of Providence*, into a television pilot and is currently at work on her third novel, *Motherland*. She lives in Los Angeles.

**ERIC SCHMIEDL** is a native of Cleveland, Ohio, and a graduate of Kent State University and the University of Hawai‘i. His plays have been produced by theatres including the Denver Center Theatre Company, The Cleveland Play House, Cleveland Public Theatre, the Idaho Shakespeare Festival, the Honolulu Theatre for Youth, and the Oregon Children’s Theatre. Eric is an Aurand Harris Fellow and is currently working on commissions for the Denver Center and The Cleveland Play House. He is a proud member of The Cleveland Play House’s Playwrights’ Unit and is on the faculty of the Spalding brief-residency MFA in Writing program.

**BETSY WOODS**, a Spalding MFA alum and guest editor for The Children’s Corner, is a writer and editor for NASA and interns at the Covenant House in New Orleans. Her short stories have appeared in *The New Orleans Review, The Louisville Review, The Literary Trunk*, and *Alive Now*. She is a contributing writer for *Sophisticated Woman* magazine, served as assistant editor for the organic farming magazine, *Acres U.S.A*, and was a columnist and feature writer for *The Times Picayune*. She teaches at The Writer’s Loft of Middle Tennessee State University.

—Sena Jeter Naslund, Editor
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Lisa Vinsant Connor

READING NERUDA FOR THE FIRST TIME

Tonight, my love, while you were gone,
I did not go to bed alone.

I opened slowly to him, this new amante,
this vineyard giant with hands
the size of mountains. Every
movement took me to a different country.
His tongue spoke a thousand languages.
He fed me sweet plums, his fingers
sweeter than the fruit.
He had a hundred hands,
each held a small bird, an emerald,
a cluster of grapes, an ocean.
My breasts to him were columbines,
my ears salty shells,
my lips roses,
my toes delicate daisies.
I was his fish in a turquoise sea,
flowering coral reaching toward light.
I was mist over the vineyards,
rising dew that melts into sky.
He spoke and caves sprouted diamonds,
fire danced on stone and shadows
called out, “Ven!”
His breath was heavy with musk,
moist and slow.
His rain was summer,
drenching and warm.
I was earth—thirsty, pulsing
and wanting more.

I still am, my dear,
come home.
PASSPORT DREAMS

In Antarctica the natives wore fur-lined parkas with sturdy zippers, tennis racket shoes and guns slung over their shoulders. “Why the guns?” I asked. “Yeti,” they answered in husky whispers. I looked down to see white fur covering my body. Had I killed the great legend or become the beast? They watched for the cold to seep from my bones. A small boy coughed. A gun was cocked. I felt the fur grow between my toes. “Wow,” I said, faking a shiver, “How about this weather?”

In Germany I took a lover. I know, I was supposed to do that in France, but I had a cold there and the wine made me sleepy. I liked his guttural ichs and funny shoes. I didn’t mind that he hadn’t showered in four days. Afterwards he liked to smoke. I pretended I was trying to quit. While he talked politics and soccer I daydreamed about us swimming naked in the Rhine.

Africa didn’t like me. Rhinos shouted. Elephants stampeded. Hippos wanted to swallow me whole. They would have, but Tarzan swept me away on a vine. We made love in a tree. His howl shook the jungle.
I wore his pet snake
like a corset.

England offered nothing but
rain, double-decker buses, and
Shakespeare’s empty house.
Bowler-hatted men in bars
enunciated every word
with precision.
Then Tarzan appeared.
We made love in the alley.
Big Ben drowned out my howls.
The English never noticed as they
plodded past the Palace at Westminster.

In Italy men with lascivious eyes
watched for rustling skirts
and redheads in cafés.
Their love was dark and selfish,
their sighs like steam.
The fettuccine was amazing, too.

In Spain, red capes hung
in windows of closed shops.
The men were gone looking for bulls.
The women gave me a flouncy peasant skirt
and we danced like confetti
on cobblestone streets.

I rode a rickshaw through China.
I carried bits of meat in my pockets.
Dogs loved me.
A woman selling tea
stopped me in the street.
“No thank you,” I said.
“But you’ve never tried,” she insisted,
holding out the steaming cup.
It burned my tongue and tasted like steel.
The dogs stopped following.
My clothes grew tight. Buttons popped.
Muscle arms bulked and flexed.
Monster feet dented the earth.
I stepped over The Wall and
pounded toward the sun.
I was a giant silhouette, a distorted shadow.
I walked straight off the edge into the fire.
I didn’t feel a thing.
Melva Sue Priddy

POCKETS

The outer curve of the hand, the cup of a quarter moon, a fish sliced open to gut, the bend in a woman’s back just below her waist before she pulls on her shift.

Colonial women at Blue Licks State Park wear layers of petticoats, linen and wool, with eight inch vertical slits, or a seam left undone, at hip level through which each one could get to her pocket which she had tied on before dressing alone. Might have a set. Invisible to the unknowing eye.

The eye glancing up or down, the dipping hand, a vaginal opening into any wound, or womb, flesh or tree gash mending, lips roll over to cover the edge.

Watching this woman reach inside her hidden pocket to pull out her accoutrements, sewing notions wrapped like jewelry, embroidered prettier than her outer garments so plain, gets to me. Unlike the possibility bags the children carry for play, unlike the men’s pouches with one or two compartments for necessities, hung in plain sight. I am mesmerized by her need for the beautiful, the useful, the womanly, in such a small space underneath every thing else.
Chris Mattingly

FIDDLE

—translated from the Anglo-Saxon

Stranger more beautiful things
Has no man seen than seeing
A tree a truck can drive through,
A sinkhole plain after rain,
Or river running up hill.
Still, nothing puzzled like this
Which one May morning
I heard sing. And singing
I imagined a mocking bird
Sing like a springtime creek
Over limestone gliding.
And when I saw it
I saw it was cradled
Within the hands of a man.
It was looking up
And lying on its back looked up
At its feet tucked under
The man’s chin.
When tickled,
Its neck & naked belly,
It commenced to laugh & cry.
At the same time
It laughed & cried
And the cries were muscadine high.
The laughs deep, well deep.
Chris Mattingly

BREAD DOUGH

—translated from the Anglo-Saxon

Back when I was a boy,
Back before my mother
Left me motherless,
I used to watch her work
And in that watch I learned
What it was for.
But I want to tell you
About the mornings
And what I witnessed
Sitting spirit like
In the kitchen corner
Slowly swelling until it rose
Like a baby with no bones.
It did not cry,
And it did not sing, as it sneaked
A peak from beneath
A cotton white work shirt.
Mama said
She was raising the dead.
Lynnell Edwards

B IS FOR BLIND

The fault is in the Quill; I have mended it and still it is very much inclined to make blindes.
–Letter, John Keats to Fanny Brawne, February 1820

O imperfect tool of the ball and the socket, screwed into darkness of blind alley, blind corner, over the shoulder of the blind spot winking out in the sun.

Is it blind faith in the blind hand of some game of chance or fate, the blind trust in a comrade or thief robbing you blind? Were you blind and now you see?

Consider Keats, bloom of blood in his chest widening like a dark pupil, staring into the mind’s blind eye, then dipping the pen that blots each letter’s balloon into blindness: but still

the bright star yet undimmed.
INSTRUCTIONS FOR MY SONS: ON FALLING ASLEEP WHILE READING HAWTHORNE

Practice was hard. And the ice bagged and strapped to your knee had finally numbed the pain.
The orange blanket was warm, the chair certain and snug as a cradle, the light soft over your shoulder—
the lines simply blurred when you turned the third page of “The Minister’s Black Veil.”
You were already wondering what it had to say to you anyway, and you let your eyes shutter a second,
then again, before your head snapped back, then again, then slumped, as the landscape of sorrow and judgment dimmed; church bells were muffled by a thumping heart, shush of prayer steady as breath.

I don’t know what you dream, this afternoon or ever, and what part Hawthorne plays in your escapes, what part champion fields. I do not know what you haven’t revealed and I will not wake you now. Finish the story later; there’ll be a reckoning we both know: the minister, the swollen joint, sweet veil of sleep on your unmarked brow.
Marcia Menter

DOWN THE LOVE HOLE

It’s not the region Alice tumbled toward
though the plummet is as sudden and absurd
and the projected landing hard.
I have plunged into the question you
refused to be the answer to.

No one enters this place by choice
yet I almost welcome the embrace
of the muffled sound of my own voice
crying over and over, Make me whole
in the slow undoing of free fall.
Peter Cooley

REMBRANDT’S “THE REST ON THE FLIGHT INTO EGYPT”

But I can see them now in my mind’s eye—
in his version they are light entirely,
figures all but indistinguishable
from the campfire whose burning like a match
flares with that first flash of a flame to air—

opening my book, it’s always here, waiting.

Yet since this is a painting with subject,
I have to keep in mind the green-dark shroud,
the still descending evening wraps me in
each time I try to resurrect the scene.

That fire where the three can find themselves,
it’s respite on a trip no one understands
except the child, sleeping as I speak

that fire from the beginning of the world—
Peter Cooley

REMBRANDT, “CHRIST CRUCIFIED BETWEEN TWO THIEVES,” DRY POINT, 1653

Since all I can command are the details
I try to focus there when I am lost
as I am now, at the crucifixion!
The crucifixion! When words leave my mouth

already I am overwhelmed with guilt
unnamable. I don’t know what to say.
I write ekphrastic poems to frame my lines.

I’m far from you, Rembrandt, putting this down
or am I? My memory’s imperfect
here at the Honda dealer’s waiting room,
television blaring, always in fear
as if this were a doctor’s waiting room
where soon I’ll hear some test’s blackest result—

Rembrandt, you can make light rise from dry point.
It’s not Christ I remember but this light
streaming down, the middle of the picture.
I fix on that. What more is there to say?
Tori Sharpe

The Zoo

The zoo is depression, you say. And I say, No, no it isn’t, thinking of the new elephant exhibit, huge and spread over acres, built to simulate a natural environment. Most are raised in captivity, I say, they wouldn’t survive in the wild, but you are lost in thought, you scoff and frown most of the day, through the camel ride (afterwards the man lets me feel its hump, softer than expected, a slight give to it, as if it were some other body part—a breast or ear—bendable, familiar), and even through the giraffe enclosure where I buy a $5 leaf of lettuce to hold out to a black and roving tongue: an offering.

My fingertips graze the tongue’s rough edges, the afternoon sun spreads heavy across the land, across the two of us moving along the ground, across the bush and shrubs, across the zoo’s new monorail gliding silent past orangutans, wallabies, kudu.

We are the children of those before us, all doing the best we can, whether kept or free. We can only ask forgiveness, can only feel the sun’s heat lap against our faces.
Allison Seay

THE SISTERS EXTINGUISHED

Before it was drained, the pool was a smooth yard,
shades of blue as the sea an acre deep.
Often did we stage our drowning and by turns
rescue one another, laughing in the well. Other times
we did not speak but swam underwater, a womb
quieting our unquiet minds.
It was the last summer we were young—artless, afloat,
our eyes like opals.
And then the world’s beautiful torture began—
the resurface, the sting, the coming
back gasping, mouth-high in love.
Allison Seay

TOWN OF THE END OF THE AFFAIR

Though there is some hatred like a bulb in the heart they undress but once more. Without speaking and without kissing.

An appalling kind of farewell, neither cherishing the other any longer.

The rooms empty of small things first—silverware, books, a mirror on an easel. Nail by nail from the wall. The radiators off.

Watermark on the ceiling, wind-beaten bluebottle in the sill. Spider and cricket shell.

The leaving has a fragrance she will spend her life remembering, trying to name exactly that last scent. Once beside the cypress at the edge of the cliff by the sea it was almost there. And almost again inside a yellow room inside an air-lit church inside a Greek city. Again on a market street when a brown-haired boy walked by with an ice bucket and in a hurry.

It has come to be like this: a desire for precision and sweetness, truth, fondness, attention, remembering carefully the one she barely starts to forget again, the one—didn’t she?—yes, she must have nearly loved him.
Folks from far-off places had no notion who she was. Some reckoned her a lunatic, most thought she was a man, and even kin didn’t dream any brand of well-bred lady could cook up such stories. Maybe a fanatic, the newspapers said. I’m not one to judge, but how she could sleep with all those evil beings in her mind—I read more than I let on—I’ll never know if I live to a hundred. I don’t like to brag on mine, but she was special from the starter’s pistol, those china eyes not missing a trick. I worked to fend off germs, bad influences, any routine poison, but she’d cut capers, sneak snuff, meddle. Mary Flannery had that curiosity and went through books like a hog through slop. Sorry. It’s the farmer in me, but she had an appetite for words and surprises. I like a mystery myself, but one with a culprit in the end, and he needs to get caught. Imagination like hers, I’ve always wondered if it sprouted from the lupus, mischief born of affliction, as the Bishop says about some heretics. Bless her heart, she had no use for the shoddy nor trash, but she showed them mercy, those genuine humdingers in her stories. “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” she’d cite. Sure, some of her devils favor me. So what? Her daddy was also quirky, starry, touched. I buried her next to Edward. I swan, she had his tongue, but she got my teeth. She’d snarl if you rubbed her wrong. Nowadays some pity her and say the illness kept her a hostage in my home, but I made sure her writing
work was not disturbed. I provided, never begrudged an hour nor a dollar. Her ideas gushed artesian. We had our spats, of course, piddling as anybody’s, matters of charities, symbolisms, race. We’re all equal sinners till we confess, ask forgiveness and learn how to give it. Pride, I reckon, was her sin. She knew she had a gift, but she was contrite and dedicated to God. Folks say I’m a miser widow myself, wringing dregs from every teat, but I gave that girl my all and prayed she might live to see eighty, marry smart and raise her own brood. Those sorry poults, chicks and biddies were her only babies. I never knew if owls would show up next. Peafowl! I’m still mortified when those fiends commence their cries, and I’ve a good mind to roast up the whole flock that gobbles every morsel of peace. In her memory I’ll hold off. Her pals claimed I’d rule any roost, a bitter old witch, but here’s the gospel: I consider myself lucky—if you have offspring you’ll understand—to have had her so long under my roof. And I’m looking out for her still, keeping letters under lock and key. The dead deserve their privacy. Now she’s with God, healed, limber, probably cutting a jitterbug with seraphim. Her stories, though, ought to be pondered by all, despite their freaks. She saw every soul as ripening for salvation. How that girl’s mind would flash, and when June fireflies spark out yonder at the sweet oleander, I imagine their lights are her words from beyond the grave. That’s just a fancy, but listen now at those birds, all screechy and peeved. Finally, I’ve come to admire the feathers and forgive the knaves their noise. I don’t even pester the hens with the hose. Reckon that means I’m the one she saved?
Molly Walker Talking

Don’t blame me, I never gave him that name, but I saw him once in a roadside meadow west of Lynchburg, and he was on the ground under an orphan apple tree, his two minions deft as chimps high in the branches plucking the new-ripe fruit and dropping the good ones into his soft hands. A cloudy-dark Sunday, us out joy-riding, my Enlo eased his heavy foot off the gas pedal, and we slowed but didn’t brake, not wanting to gawk but just to be sure we saw who we thought. He was in a suit Enlo called “cocoa” but I said “apple seed,” and you could hardly mistake him, jowly, a big grin, new sedan on the shoulder, a Cadillac as blue as the path to Heaven. Back then I believed he was not carving an empire nor was partial to pricey cars or shiny suits, just wanted to spread the Word dressed up out of respect for his holy message. “The Word will burn a sinner,” he said on TV. I sent my monthly checks from the egg money and stared at him, smiling back, but somewhere it went bad, him busy in unchristian fashion working out which group to hate in salvation’s name. Lord yes, I got cured of that habit some years back, but now I hear he’s dead, his heart given out after so much fried chicken and inspiration. The Lord had slow torture for him, long wait with a quick drop at the end, and it’s hard not to trust there was a purpose in the harm he caused, that some came sweet to the Spirit, no matter how steep the price, how angry the sermons or fiery the angel.
You know, I saw a star fall the night we got the news from Katie Couric, and everywhere you turned it was tributes and lamentation, headlines claiming the loss of His right hand, but I keep going back to a hefty man in a field, wild weeds up to his knees, his palms reaching for something coming from above. On tiptoe, he was shouting fiery advice at his helpers, his hair windblown, face bright red. Could be that’s how the prophets work, but how strange it would be apples, the story, I guess, circling back to bite its tail. Did he reckon that meager tree was the heart of the garden? When he bit hard into the apple he chose out as the very best, did he harvest that godly knowledge we’re all yearning for but fear? It’s hard to fashion facts to say he was either a good man or a mean one, but like my Enlo said, pushing his foot down on the gas pedal again, hurrying us to Amherst before the storm, “I got to hope he’ll find peace at the end, poor devil. You’d expect it’s nothing but a burden to walk the earth with that name.” Thunder then, hiss of lightning and fearsome rain.
Carrie Shipers

SAINT SISTER

She smells like lint and peanut butter, chews her hair into sticky ropes. In the morning, Mom has to make sure she’s really showered, not just wet her hair, sprayed my perfume. She gets straight As, says B is for Busty, Bimbo, Bitch. Even with earphones, I can hear her practice piano, the same song for hours, days. She wins against people twice her age, the judges, audience, in love from the first note, my parents beaming at their genius daughter. Ever since she disappeared—walking home from school because I forgot to pick her up—the girl on the posters, DVD my uncle made, seems like a stranger, her hair unchewed, back soldier-straight when she takes the stage. On the news, I have to say she’s my best friend even though she’s only twelve, that I miss her music, miss eating ice cream while we watch Oprah. My sister bites her nails and spits them on my bed. She steals from me, borrows jewelry she breaks or loses, cries because her wrists and fingers ache, because being perfect makes her tired. If we don’t look for who she really is, I’m afraid we’ll never find her.
INHERITANCE

The summer I turned forty
my father-in-law’s truck passed to me.
Deep blue, dull and rusted through
over wheel well and fender.

The cab reeked of Pall Malls, leaf gall, worn
leather gloves. And one day when I slowed
for a yellow light, I felt like God
pulled a dry rag through my body
and left me nothing but spirals of dust.

The consignment store across the road
sat boarded tight. All the tulips had lost their heads,
yellow foliage knotted near the ground.
Billboards promised falling
rates, declared *We Will Not Be Undersold.*

In the days that followed the service, his absence
was a name I couldn’t place. We drove out past the house
where he was born, mere stones. His schoolhouse
buried in a soy bean field, his church
burned open to the sky.

I accelerate with the green light, fight the turning
wheel, jagged ring of keys slapping the dash.
I have to guess what’s left in the tank,
all the gauges sprung and useless. Odd, this guilt
at drawing breath, the simple joy
in touching his daughter’s hip.

Our memories are a last cathedral,
this unwashed window through which he watched
the world’s slow crawl toward light.
Your mother gets it now, stage four
of ignorance is bliss. No one lies
around waiting for the death
of happiness. She’s seen the spots
on the x-rays, read the faces of the doctors
in the dark. But it’s her high school sweetheart blanketed
on the day bed who refuses both ice cream and sausages.

She sleeps until noon, good ear buried
in the pillow. I’ve made cheesy omelets
for the four of us, but the dog gets one.
Sitting up has become a room in hell.
He has the eyes of a dead fish, a rheumy drunk.
He’s late to the end of his own sentences.

Outside, daffodils bust through to light.
The dog’s nose is deep in the ditch.
Inside, he’s swallowed up in his clothes,
so I nail a new hole in his leather belt.
An Amish buggy clatters past, vibrant
brown sheen of a horse working hard.
That image is all he’s held down in a week,
sunlight on a sweaty flank, the world
disappearing in the mystery of dust.
Brent Fisk

AT DENTON’S DRIVE-IN

We scrunch in the hard plastic booth
waiting for pizzas. A teenage boy tosses
loose change to the floor and wolfs down his double
burger. My grandfather bends on one knee
and gathers the scattered pennies.

The heat lamp burns in the skin of my cheeks
as the jukebox skips a greasy beat.
Food falls from the mouths of the young boys laughing.
I try to pull in my hair, retract my timid feet.
Eyes closed, I hear our number come up,
feel the tremor of the nearby booth, shiver
of the bell above the door. My grandmother
will not lift her eyes from the menu,
folds her napkin until it can fold no more.
Billy Reynolds

**I STAND IN MY FATHER**

In north Alabama, in the bottom of my shoe,
in the shapes of light or small ugly rips
of shadow on the new carpet, in a gesture—
in clearing my throat—standing by that chair,
studying this bedroom, its small familiar dooms,
in the rear of the house, its slip of cool air,
moving toward the closet now, among the suits
and Sansabelt slacks, the plaids and the solids
brushing my eye, in the closet of my father's,
the gist of it, the bitter chill and spirit briefly,
in the polished surfaces, in the cherry wood
bureau and the course drawers, in all of that,
in my knees and shoulders, in my palms,
in my pocket, jingling the gold coins I stole
from his collection, in beautiful misspoken, in clumsy
heaven sudden and contained, in the name we share,
in the chambered pistol in the filing cabinet,
in the born and bred sight of two decades of solved
Jumble puzzles paper-clipped together,
standing there like being doused with a pail of cold water,
in the work tomorrow, in the money owed,
in the words, in the coming clean and the plumb,
in the quit and in the far clouds and in the redress,
I stand in my father, one foot in front of the other.
Judith Harris

MARRIAGE

For years, nothing
grew from the
barren soil around our house.

Then, the English ivy
and trumpet vines
crept over the locust,
and dug itself
into the mortar,
covering the windows
with vines, so dense
they blocked all light.

I complained to you
I felt like a prisoner,
so you tried
to cleave it back,
half-hung off the ledge
with your clippers,
forcing it off the façade
but the leaves fought back
within a week,
as if they knew
the first law of survival
is to cling, or die.
AFTER 14 YEARS I FIND THIS POEM

Winter comes in its heavy coat
garlanded by a band of splintered trees,
speckled wrens skating the ice,
while my daughter pulls up her hood
and ties the string, fleece scarf soaring,
wind shoving her forward into droves
of light and tufted leaves.
At four years old, she knows
the seasons tick like clocks
from summer to fall, from the goateed rose
to a snowdrift, flakes disappearing
up a magician’s sleeve.
Out she trudges in her furry boots,
dragging the sled by its lanyard rope,
wanting a hill with a steep enough slope
to climb her way up and slide back down
or close her eyes and fall back blind,
leaving her body to melt inside a grave
of snow, flying and descending
as if there were no ground.
Leslee Rene Wright

GESTALT

It’s possible to leave and to not be incurably sad. On school-bus days,

school-boys would slingshot
earthworms onto the rainy avenue;

it was possible to hear their wet relief
at being restored to home waters,

even if it meant a leisurely death.
The back roads took us past uneasy

feedlots, where cattle lunged at the gate
just before daybreak bleached them out

of existence. Looking at one meant
looking at all, their tidal heads

that lowered accordingly. It’s possible
they glimpsed sisterly trust in the way

we went dumb at their number,
our school-faces hazy behind glass and diesel.

Even now, it’s possible that all our elementary
parts slumber among them, the sturdy rain boots,
the swaddling mittens and scarves, all our very best

intentions, squirming with phantom life,
still trusting that we’ll clear the tedious route.
Peter Makuck

PETUNIAS ON THE DECK

They’re dying in the cold.
For days I’ve watched them
in a terra cotta pot
curling up their red and white capes,
nodding, defiantly opening
for a few hours in the afternoon,
as if, near this final freeze,
they could go on forever. Before he died,
I trimmed my father’s toenails
but in the process cut his toe,
made him see red,
list my history of fuck-ups,
and how his back door still needed fixing.
But before I could buy the new hinges
he was lying in a casket
below the tears of family and friends,
where I tried to fix things with a eulogy
that kept on breaking down.

Once on Bogue Banks,
in sunset light, we took our drinks
to a bench by the ocean,
listened to the light slap of waves,
and watched pelicans crash dive
into a school of bluefish,
coming up comically empty.
He looked at me and we laughed.
The sky was busy with clouds.
The water had a deep satin shine.
It was a pure now
full of gleam and color,
wordless and unfiltered
as this red clay pot
and the raw throbbing of petunias.
Peter Makuck

TOWHEES AND LATE LIGHT

You could almost miss them
on, among, or half under leaves
fallen from oleander and oak,
these quit-less hunters
of cutworms and bugs,
digging, kicking leaves
and wood chips a few feet out
onto our concrete drive,
sun low and close
to the tint of their rusty sides.

I think of you,
lost to death for a whole year now,
but still a presence
like this bright waver of light
reflected from the birdbath
onto the front room wall.
I’m watching the tremble
of light and your favorite birds.

To live for the eye,
you once said,
is to be on to something,
and you always were.

A sunshaft flares
across the drive, then dims.
The dark begins its slow descent,
but that light on the wall
still wavers, and will
even long after it’s gone.
Amy Eisner

IN THE HOUSE WHERE I BROUGHT ILLNESS

There was no food, that’s what I remember. Not much.
White carpet, white walls, harsh sun, a little grass.
Chain-link fence, no sidewalk. Bits of leftovers in the fridge:
once, there was more than enough. Once between hungers.
Where I was coming from, we were stocked
like a country house, you could flush the game.
Here every word was precious, the meals
were husked and shucked, and slowly by the river
rose a mountain of shell.

I had the baby with me in one of those contraptions
that pops right out of the car. I was late and exhausted
from the drive. I didn’t know he was sick when I set out
or what, in this hushed house, that meant. His snot ran clear
and gleaming, he was a purse, I didn’t look too close.

Except that I looked all the time, breathed and swallowed him,
was besotted, still am. If there was a time of plenty this was it
and he was going with me to the ends of the earth.
Sarah Kennedy

LOVE’S LABOURS

Forecasters claim that cuckoos are singing loud in the mountains these days—an omen of bad weather. Cuckoo—O word of fear unpleasing to a married ear: but not to mine, not these days. Days of the hook-up, of the Facebook liaison, my husband saying let’s start a new website, let’s call it Assbook, we know plenty of people to add. Tu-whit, tu-whoo, let any bird cry while we make love in the weekend dawn, new neighbor woman clucking on the phone: is she all right? She certainly is, says my love, winging my numbed limbs to bed’s edge where I sleep the sleep of the dead until I wake to the news of another fire, another day of mourning on TV. O dying note—that bird promises rain, not only the sorrow of the unloved or the droughty heart of betrayal. Who can care who’s in bed with whom when the world is burning up around us, when farmers keep selling off their acres for a song?
The rich they get richer, and everyone’s divorced anyway. Any melody from a throat opening in a springlike desire better than the chainsaws taking down the pileateds’ woods or the truck from the drillers pricking out another well for the mansion over the hill. Owl in the night trees, whinnying softly through the leaves of my dreams, swallow in the house through my open door, if it’s just one more petit mors that you predict, this morning, under the false-alarm clouds, I’ll take it.
Sarah Kennedy

WHAT I DID NOT SEE DRIVING FROM SWANSEA

Not the grave of Henry Vaughan, tombed
by the yew at the top of that
tourists’ churchyard,
not the sheela
on her half shell of museum
plinth in Llandrindod Wells.
And not
the ruined round foundation wall
of the tower at Dolforwyn
(where I stumbled over lovers
in the grass—a mirror to my
burning, illicit face [record
heat—my trespass]).
Not Dinas Bran,
where, from the top, the suicide
bridge that cuts through Llangollen was
visible as highlighter marked
on the map-sized town.
Nor was it
the “largest mill wheel in Wales,”
nor
the badger that slunk from the path,
my car's headlamps, one midnight.

No.

Just you—
    smile across a room or
    a body moving over mine—

though my mind's eye held you even
    as I watched the kites—
    they could not

be missed, wheeling outside my room—
    even as I studied the door

that opened and opened itself—
    though nothing (that I could see) came

through, and no one had stopped off there,
    at that roadside hotel, but me.
Jeff Hardin

I ONCE WAS LOST

I’m writing these long letters,
   as Rilke said I would,

but so far
   I’ve yet to send them—

unsure just who
   will pull close the lamp

and study the places
   I crossed out the words.

To breathe deeply in
   is a knowing

not easily known.
   Once or twice

it was a field of milkweed,
   another time Walden Pond

pulled from the crease
   of a thumb-worn page.

Sometimes,
   speaking before others,

I know I’m still
   that child

with rolled-up pant legs
   wading upstream
to watch minnows
dart out ahead

and then stop.
Like always,

I lose the thread
of what I’m looking for

as soon as I begin.
And then—

what else to call it—
I’m being led

so that anywhere I go
I’m found.
Jeff Hardin

Harvest

Over there
in the orchard unplanted,
I am already strolling in the days to come,
reaching up through
the twining limbs
to tug loose a pear and sample its juice.

The day settles in
to the hush-hush of rain
saying its slowness down the sycamore’s leaves.
And also
down through the years of a life
and down even further to the bedrock below.

I look again
to see the blooms as they’ll be
in five years, twenty years, a little past that.
And me as an old man
still hidden in limbs,
tasting the absence they trace on the air.
Jeff Hardin

EASILY CONVINCED

Certain mornings still down to a heartbeat, coffee steam, and listening—in nearby oak leaves tremors begin, sent from cracks forming in some Jericho wall.

Sweat on my skin cools me down to the core. I’m easily convinced a kingdom’s at hand. This thought that I am is prologue to more.

I came to where I am along a route I’d never find again. Up and down furrows my Papaw traced on fields—my feet still slide down a blade-turned earth.

Let it be known I pray for long life and wisdom and this boldness I feel in asking for such knows no shame, even if this day becomes my last.

My grandma, her last year, saw angels gathering around. With all I’ve seen, so easy to believe her, the unseen, too, teeming to tell its storehouse of miracles.
Ronald Wallace

AFTER THE SEIZURE

our sixteen-year-old cat, Mwezi,
spent one night lying in her own urine,
and then, gamely, the next day,
tried to re-learn how to walk,
with her back legs in stasis,
her front paws bent like knuckles,
the way an orangutan walks,
swaying from side to side.
It could have been funny, were she
a comedian mugging a drunk,
or a smart-ass imitating a monkey,
and if we were kids again,
and found such unfunny things funny.

We helped her to her food
and back to the heat duct that she’d
chosen for her last sleep. And there,
in the warmth of the artificial air,
snow falling fast outside—
a blizzard, as fate would have it,
shutting the whole town down—
we talked to her,
stroked her matted-up fur,
prodded a final purr from her,
as the lights and the furnace went out,
and no one made a fuss,
alone in the cold and the dark,
in a house that hardly knew us.
The Stream Empties Into a Field

She is pulled awake
in a strange bedroom.
It takes her a minute—
the house of her in-laws,
the hills of West Virginia.
A slice of moonlight across
the middle of the bed,
her husband asleep.
She makes her way down
the stairs, through the house,
out the kitchen door.

Flat slates cool under her feet,
she reaches the outhouse
straddling the creek, pulls
the light on. Three holes
in graduated sizes, wooden lids
in place. She sets aside the middle
one, centered over the running water,
and lifts her cotton gown.

In the glare of the bare electric bulb,
beneath outdated calendar photos—
kittens, chicks—she cramps
again. A tug: the unmooring.
Both her hands fly down
to stem the sluicing descent.
Fingers too slick, amber, red,
the liquid sack falling, fallen,
spirited away by the mountain
stream, dispassionate midwife.
David Eye

TARGETS

We had a dead man in the basement, taped to the cinderblock wall between two punching bags. White lines on a black silhouette like a map of the night sky. Punctures in tight constellations: House of Wound, House of Debilitate, House of Shoot-to-Kill.

Remember you taught me well. Concentric circles in a big black dot, yellowed papers stapled to a cardboard box. Rocks in the bottom to keep them upright in the field. Every year another caliber: .22, .38, .45. Bullseye. Bullseye.

I’m 45 and you shoot at me still. Letters fired off in your slanted hand aim to diminish, belittle, revile. I’m chasing the wrong scent. And the right scent?
The cleaning woman (who turned out not to be) you banged in the guest room? The well-oiled Colt in my mother’s hand, about to point at herself?

I remember how to inhale, hold, squeeze the trigger on the out-breath. And after, the pleasing tang of gunpowder in the waft of grey-blue smoke.
David Eye

CROSSING

Late the night my grandmother died, I dreamed
I walked beneath a pillowed sky alone
through wheat fields quilted white, the fences seams.
I headed for the woods instead of home.
The cold, the light, the late November snow
made ground and sky so bright they hurt my eyes.
Or was it something lost, I didn’t know,
but in the dream I cried, or tried to cry.
I knew I’d never make it to the woods—
I had to catch a boat back to a feast.
Many strangers. Tables laden with food.
I leaned from door to door but didn’t eat.
When I awoke, her absence was a wound
that grew inside my chest, and filled the room.
A Map of Texas

To unfold it, and hear
the soft, knife-like sound
of paper pulling itself apart.

To touch a town’s name, and have
my fingertip come up bloody,
red clay in the whorls
of my flesh as if carried there
by rivers, deposited in my skin,
the lovely, dirty crimson,
ingrained.

To spread my hand over it, lone
star above a treasure buried
in blueblack webs,
arteries, text.

To be shadow, to be
thunderhead, a torrent,
a flood, waiting, quivering
over Austin, San Marcos,
bruise-blue above
blue bonnets.

To blot out the sun
the stars at night
the big, the bright,
deep
in the heart of.
Catherine MacDonald

CHEVROLET IMPALA

1

Sleepless, my father roams the house, pausing in each of our rooms: two sturdy boys in pine bunks, three girls in parallel single beds, draped by Degas dancers: pale backs, arched feet, unwinding chignons. A girl’s nylon slip is a slick spill on cold linoleum between two beds. He stoops and folds it into the dresser-drawer’s narrow hold. Evenings, smoke curls from his cigars, lit with a silver lighter his father left years ago in the ashtray of the Chevrolet Impala. It sank on leaking tires in a Roxbury alley, its chassis silvering in snow, rusting in April’s humid breezes. Summer, its luster faded to citrine. Spiraling gingko leaves descended in fall.

2

A dumb-ass lobsterman from Prince Edward Island, my grandfather never drove his adopted city’s narrow streets, but anointed that Chevy’s interior with pipe smoke and the rattle of the Boston Globe, guarding it from vagrants, fools, and family while my father flew solo over Laos and the South China Sea. On tiptoe, we children inspected the car, our five faces flat in windows shut tight against us. Soon the family reunited, headed south, my father at the wheel again: past the Fens, through Providence, over the rocky Mystic and wide Delaware, the unresisting Eastern Shore, to kiss the smooth lip of the Chesapeake. Behind us, the old man, cast off in the city again.
There are no photos of my father
and his father, both seasick at the rail,
on the auto-ferry from Bar Harbor, Maine,
to Yarmouth, Nova Scotia. I’ve imagined these
travelers into this trip, scripted the dialog.
If the old man asks, How far left to go?
His son might answer, What else is owed?
Just this, I would tell them: sum and substance,
gist and core. On shore, I steer their silence
over island roads, bind them to cold ocean, join
them to no women, no children, to plow
sea fog, plant wasp husk, and reap stone.
All night, the Impala rolls with the waves, a deft
machine that knows no sleep, no sleep, no sleep.
Catherine MacDonald

“HOUSE-HUNTERS”

“Where are we? Whose house is this? And who is the sleeper?”
–Emerson at Longfellow’s funeral

Just before she drifts off, oxygen cannula delivering its sibilant flow, my mother observes that tonight’s young couple on our favorite show hasn’t the right energy for the hunt: she’s a whiner, he’s a lunk. It will elude them, she says, the sexy master suite, granite kitchen facing a fenced backyard perfect for two enviable dogs, stands-ins for children still to come. Will it be the ranch or the cape? Close-in or far out?

Round each cul-de-sac, they’ll wander: Can you see yourself here—rooted in place like a nerve or a nail?

Lately, my mother rarely leaves the house, so we spend the day on family photos: Easter and Christmas, baskets and bows, year after year her children in rows, crowding the stoop or circling the pine, elbow-to-elbow in a lengthening line. There are a few of her, too: sweeping a room or at the stove, one baby or another astride her hip, always a cigarette burning between her lips. At house number 3, I wake her.

It’s time to choose. She slips her glasses down her nose. Even a fool can see how this will go.
Claire McQuerry

GUARDIAN HOME FOR THE ELDERLY,
ALZHEIMER’S WING

—for Karla

Lil pets the milk-eyed lapdog, believes
he is the child she lost at first snowfall,
1939, storm dragging in across the Great Lakes.
Most days she cradles one naked doll
in each arm. That ghost light in the corridor;
her open mouth, like the hole
a man, in rage, once punched in the plaster.

This photograph now in Marguerite’s hands
(was it in her pocket a moment ago?),
a girl with carnations,
the brick walk of a model home.
Whose face and when? It was,
Molly recalls, the rummage store on McClintock,
how her mother fainted into a bin of furs:
the aunts fussing and clucking
and laughing too hard to breathe.

The women lay cards on the table,
no particular game, no memory of the meal
that wedges between their teeth.
Clarity, when it comes, is the voice that says
you are like that last piece of apple,
molared, always a little closer to the throat.
In another life, Rose says, I taught piano.

The Nurses whisper, cross the halls like sailboats.
Doris in 12B went quietly last night.
Today her children divide
valuables at her house in the suburbs,
dress each room up for sale.
A cactus blooms in the garden. The kitchen’s
all white tile, and the four-poster arranged
like a bed from a catalog, pillows full
and smooth as if no one had ever slept there.
CHEATING TIME

Jackie wanted to make it the honest way, but her sister Cassie’s letter was frantic: There was a lien on the house. She was driving a stolen truck. The power bill was overdue. Jackie’s first night out of New Mexico Women’s Correctional was not what she’d expected. Staring into the parched Espanola night from the cab of an 18-wheeler, the sage and brandy smell of a man named Ignacio on her skin—a man she’d never see again—Jackie realized there was nowhere to go but home to Hawthorne, Florida.

Folded inside her sock was the prison’s farewell gift—ten crisp twenties that clung to her damp ankle, a furrowed fifty she’d taken from sleeping Ignacio’s wallet. Behind her, the Greyhound’s air brakes moaned; the bus moved down the muddy St. Johns River for Interlachen, Palatka, Hastings, St. Augustine. Two years had passed since she’d seen her sister, the limestone roads and pricked pines. From across the street, Cassie came running. “Jackie, I missed you so much, I went out and bought myself a bottle of Heaven Scent.”

It took a minute, Jackie’s chin resting on her sister’s shoulder, before she recalled the blue-tinted perfume—bergamot, apple blossom, baby powder. She examined her sister’s tired denim dress.

“You been wearing my clothes, too?”

Cassie kissed her cheek. “Now that wouldn’t be respectful, would it?” She locked her arm around Jackie’s slim waist and led her down Johnson Street.

“You make it sound like I’ve been dead.” Though death, Jackie thought, was a good way to explain her years away. Now she was paroled. Reborn. At the empty lot on the corner, Old Man Caden’s son tended a fire of water oak limbs and amber Sweet gum leaves. He looked up at the sisters, stared Jackie right in the eye, then went back to work, rake tines grating the sidewalk’s crumbling concrete.

“He doesn’t even remember me,” Jackie said.

Ahead on the corner was their house, thick potato vines braiding the porch railings, their spent roots dropping down like testicles, the once-white house paint peeling in ragged scrolls. The tannic ditch...
water smelled of red wine.

“I’m tired,” Jackie said, wondering if Cassie had taken her sweaters, too. She wasn’t used to the humidity that gave the December air a bone chill and made frizzy red ringlets of her hair.

“I’d love to put a fire in the fireplace tonight.”

“You smell like Lysol, kid,” Cassie said. “Get a hot shower while we still have water.”

Cassie had set up the artificial Scotch pine like Jackie requested, but there were no ornaments, only snarled lights knotting the green torso. Jackie knelt at a cardboard box marked “CHRISTMAS.” As a kid, she’d marched felt-legged elves across the mantle. She remembered a cotton-ball Santa, and a Popsicle-stick Star of Bethlehem buried in yellow glitter.

“No time to waste.” Cassie snapped her fingers. “You read my letters. We need to catch folks while they got spending on their minds.”

Jackie shoved the ornament box under the tree, and took a sweatshirt hanging from the door hook. She looked for gloves, settled on an orange knit hunting cap.

Cassie was a professional scammer. Once their father joked that Cassie was born with such a sweet talk that a man would believe she could siphon humidity from the Florida air. Cassie was successful because it came naturally to her, and she always stuck with a plan which was to make deals far from home, offer quick false fixes for a few bucks, then move on.

For years, she’d made her best cash during hurricane season. Before the storms began June 1, she measured for protective shutters that were never created or delivered. When the season ended in November, she accessed damage, ran roofing scams and water quality scares promising fancy water filters. In 2007, all the good storms stopped, and Cassie changed gears. The letters she sent Jackie in the New Mexico prison had lists of invasive non-native plants and animals that could never be fully eradicated: Asian swamp eel, hydriilla, Japanese climbing fern, water hyacinth, Brazilian pepper plants, Monk Parakeets, Wild Hogs, European starlings. The way Cassie told it to Jackie—there were always new ways for cheating. And, delivered sincerely, any dishonest sales person could wrangle a few bucks from a good story.
Cassie diagnosed problems, whether homeowners had them or not, and if they didn’t, she saw to it they acquired one. She set up a greenhouse out back of the house, and nurtured exotic seedlings that had only one goal in life and that was to root deep and kill out native species.

Jackie had always stayed out of Cassie’s business. She’d found her hard luck the usual way—with a man she thought she’d loved. In prison, Jackie couldn’t think about the big money Cassie’s scams might bring. She had no use for dreams. She became obsessed with words Cassie had written on the pages. From behind bars, the lists of plants and animals read like poems.

“What did you decide?” Jackie asked.

“Trust me,” Cassie said. She was the business woman, said the tone in her voice. She clasped Jackie’s hand, inspected her fingers. “Let’s talk about your letters. All fancy with typing. Show off, you.”

Jackie and her cellmate Quinta Levoy took secretary courses at the prison, and Jackie caught on to typing. Quinta was dreadful, but a good sport. “Go, little mama, go,” Quinta would say to Jackie. “There’s fire in your fingers.” Jackie blew through quick brown foxes jumping over fences. She imagined black letters searing crisp white paper.

Once, Quinta suggested Jackie take up piano on the outside, as if typed words on another instrument could become music. Jackie imagined a jazz of minor notes, cars shifting gears, acorns popping tin rooftops. In the black of her prison cell, Jackie declared that one day she’d make her living with typing. A good reliable boring job. Recording important notes. She yearned for the predictable to ground her. This was how they spoke at night when Quinta combed out her hair and said prayers.

“About your cozy fire,” Cassie said, pointing to the plywood panel blocking the chimney opening. “Coons. Had one in here last night with his nose inside the Fruit Loops. Welcome home, Sis.”

Cassie let her drive. Jackie figured the generosity stemmed from what could happen if they got caught in the stolen Chevrolet Custom Deluxe. The mustard paint was an attention-grabber, and the cranky beast was slow. “Somebody’s bound to recognize this thing,” Jackie
said, grinding the gears into third.

“You always were the worry wart.”

Driving, once Jackie became reacquainted with it, helped her think. Cassie mentioned she’d switched tags from a junk yard car. “That’ll buy time.”

“How much time do we need?” Jackie asked. She understood time more than anyone. She’d learned to tally hours, weeks, years. But all Cassie said was, “Enough,” and when she grinned, her taut lips made Jackie’s hands sweat.

This was North Central Florida’s lake country. The two-lane road cradled wide lakes, one after the next. Sparkling surfaces glared and winked at them from between cypress trees and shoreline bulrush. There were pairs of identical lakes, at least six called Twin Lakes; misshapen kidney lakes named for old men settlers—large and small versions of themselves—Big Fillmore, Little Fillmore, Big Macintyre, Little Macintyre.

A month ago, Cassie drove out here to Interlachen in the dark with mayonnaise jars of white flies she’d babied in a makeshift greenhouse. She plundered yards and unleashed the pests on heirloom fuchsia azaleas; hibiscus bushes the size of cedar trees, golden mums in verdigris urns, Boston ferns fluming from hanging peat baskets. Then, she’d made the first official visit informing folks of a white fly epidemic. “This may well be the worst of its kind in decades. We’ll monitor it,” she told the homeowners. “If the flies don’t go away, I’ll offer you my father’s secret formula. At a bargain.”

So this trip with Jackie was actually Cassie’s third time back. At a red-brick rancher with three or more acres separating it from the next house, a kind-faced widow wearing gardening gloves and khaki pants met them in the drive. She was fit to be tied. White flies suffocated her garden with hideous powdery webs. She pointed to a pot of shriveled, shrouded yellow and purple pansies.

“Here I am,” Cassie said. “A woman of my word. I said I’d check back if they weren’t better.” She acted as if she didn’t care a hoot about money, that the health of these variegated annuals were all that mattered in the world. “My revolutionary spray,” Cassie held up an old Formula 409 bottle, the label scraped off. She doused the giant
yellow-veined leaves of a Pothos vine that plaited the porch beams.

“Not only are they not better,” Cassie said. “The white flies have spread.” She pointed to the low-slug palms that rose no taller than her hips. They resembled marching green snails. She nudged Jackie.

“Your poor Sago’s,” Jackie said, taking the cue. She avoided eye contact with the old woman for fear she’d read deceit off her like a book.

Cassie bent, inspecting the pert, healthy fronds. “They are no doubt the carriers. We can’t salvage them. I’m so sorry.”

The woman put a gloved finger to her lips. “My,” she said. “They look just fine to me.”

“We’ll dig them up,” Cassie said, “Otherwise; the flies will tunnel and kill your azaleas, then your grass. At least now the webbing’s contained on the exterior leaves.”

Jackie shoveled; Cassie sprayed diluted Heaven Scent and cayenne pepper on the leaves. Jackie sneezed. She wondered where Cassie had heard words like revolutionary, exterior, salvage.

The woman squinted. “Dear, dear,” she said. She was so appreciative the guilt made Jackie want to run, but Cassie clutched her elbow. Jackie stared at the ground.

“Well, of course,” the woman said. “Please. Take them off my hands. I’ll pay you good.”

Back in the truck, Cassie counted the money.

“You get a kick out of doing people in, don’t you?” Jackie said.

“Hell yeah, I do.”

“Well, I don’t,” Jackie said. She had a headache. In the confines of the old truck, the perfume smelled of ripe pears and moth balls. She rolled down the window. How in the world had she worn Heaven Scent all those years?

“Slow down,” Cassie said. “Watch the speed limit,” but Jackie felt she was driving in slow motion. At a sign marked “Gainesville 12 Miles,” Cassie directed her to a gravel one-lane road.

Cassie rubbed Jackie’s neck. “I make it look easy, don’t I, sis?”

Jackie thought about how Cassie roped people in with sweet talk so fast they didn’t know what hit them. “You sure are a pro. I can’t lie.”

“Sis, it comes with practice.”
In the way the oak leaves along the road were dusted with ghostly limestone sand, Jackie assumed it hadn’t rained for months, but the air was sated with moisture. “Nobody ever called you on something?” Jackie asked.

Cassie counted the cash again. She put it inside an envelope, hid it under her seat. “They’re not all gullible. I learned to tell which ones look like they could catch a girl in a lie and which ones couldn’t.”

“You make it sound like you can see it in their eyes.”

“It’s because I can, sister. I sure can.” Cassie sounded so serious, so confident Jackie figured that was how she never got caught—she simply believed she couldn’t be.

The road was narrow here. A lake’s glaring surface squinted and accused them through a congested stand of camphor trees. “Turn,” Cassie directed. The tires crackled over bristling fallen tree limbs and acorns. “We’re almost here.”

“Where is here?” Jackie asked. She dodged potholes and a stray dog. Shovels and buckets rattled from the truck bed. The chassis trembled beneath them. Sweat beaded on Jackie’s forehead. “The power steering’s shot. You’d think somebody be grateful you took this off their hands.”

“Keep driving,” Cassie said. “It’s up ahead.”

Jackie needed to know exactly where they were, but she stayed quiet. Cassie wouldn’t understand. Instead, Jackie tried to remember the cell she shared with Quinta, how over time the coarse green frayed sheets eventually felt soft against her face. How the setting sun through the tiny window turned Quinta’s black hair bronze. That was the hardest part of freedom—leaving the comfort of knowing what would happen day in and day out. Here on the outside there was no predicting the next hour. Right now, at this moment in December 2008, Jackie didn’t know where she was. Sleep would come hard without Quinta’s melodic sleep talking. *Mis hijos, mis florecitos.* Jackie would even miss Quinta’s haunted *pendejo* cries at the man who’d put her there. Suddenly, Jackie regretted never knowing what Quinta had been dreaming about all those nights.

“I wish I spoke Spanish,” she said.

“Like hell you do,” Cassie said. “Now look, you’ve gone and missed our turn.”
At the end of the long limestone one-lane road, Cassie pointed toward a lake with shallow weedy banks, concrete block houses, and clapboard cabins on stilts with long spindly piers.

“Little Maul,” she said.

Cassie nodded up the path at a man leaning on a walker, the kind Jackie remembered their father used in his last years, his palms gripping the rails in a death clinch. This man was weak and thin and grateful to see them. Cassie pulled on a sweater and white galoshes. At the shore, she knelt and reached with her left hand up to her elbows. She extracted a dribbling purple plant, its roots still clawing the sandy bottom.

“Beautiful,” Jackie said.

The old man pounded the sand with the walker. “This shit? Beautiful?”

Cassie looked embarrassed. She pinched Jackie’s elbow hard and whispered, “Keep your mouth shut, will you?”

Cassie turned sweetly to the old man. He’d hobbled closer. “My sister, Mr. Cecil, doesn’t know what she’s talking about. This is water hyacinth,” Cassie said, talking to Jackie like she was a first grader. “Grows so fast it just about doubles every 12 days.”

“Look over there,” he pointed. Six-foot wide mats drifted toward them, then blew back with the breeze.

“New recruits,” Cassie said.

“God damn things block the sunlight. Crowds out all the other good plants,” Mr. Cecil said.

Then, Cassie turned to Jackie, and the tone in her voice was irritating as hell. She spoke like she was some smart scientist. “Water hyacinth uses up most of the available oxygen in water, killing the fish.” She looked up to the old man, “But don’t you worry about it, Mr. Cecil. We’re here. Stand back now; watch that leg of yours.”

“How do you get rid of it?” Jackie asked. They were at the truck bed, out of earshot. Cassie let down the tailgate, and seized a kettle of kerosene. “We’re going to set it on fire?”

“You can’t ever get rid of it, sis, but we’ll say we can. I been farming these plants for months, and that old man is paying me to get rid of my own handiwork. Don’t spoil this.” Cassie looked up the
bank. Mr. Cecil was anchored there on the shore by the hunched-railed walker. Jackie saw something in Cassie’s expression that contained both evil and weariness. Jackie wondered how long her sister could work this business of cheating.

With white boots up to her knees, Cassie looked like a go-go dancer wading in the lake. She drizzled kerosene on the purple blooms. It seemed such a shame to Jackie. The flowers looked so dainty and harmless.

“How long will it take?” Mr. Cecil called. He’d abandoned the walker for a cane. Jackie asked him if he needed help. He took her arm to steady himself.

“After it’s all burnt out?” Cassie said. “A week. Maybe two.”

“Just in time for crappie season. I need my fishing back,” he said to Jackie. She could smell the cigarettes on him, and it made her want one something fierce. “Fishing’s all I got since my wife’s gone and passed. I like to sit up on the dock and rest this ole leg and fish. Sometimes I take a little boat out.” He touched Jackie’s arm. “We never did have kids.”

She looked at him, and said, “I’m sorry.”

“At some point a man learns to let go of his regrets,” he said. “This here lake’s my life now.”

Jackie thought of the fish without oxygen. Their slow, innocent movement beneath the surface. The old man’s gimp leg. This infernal loneliness. Cassie climbed out of the water, and they inhaled the kerosene as it swirled in orange trails on the surface. She lit matches, tossed them out. Slowly the flower island roared into a blue bonfire.

This was the warmest Jackie had felt all day; something finally had heated up inside her. They all watched until the hyacinth was completely engulfed, and Mr. Cecil grasped her hand and she felt so relieved to be out of prison and back here that she gave his hand a squeeze, and then when the fire began to fade, Jackie eased Mr. Cecil into a wicker chaise. He got out his wallet and separated bills, licking his index finger and thumb. He kissed Cassie’s forehead and thanked her. He whispered to Jackie for them to come fish with him some day. Jackie kissed his oily head and told him she would, though she knew that they’d never be back here again.

Jackie drove around to the other side of the lake. The old man’s
crippled figure hunched in the distance. “I don’t know why he couldn’t just light his own fire?” she asked.

“He wanted to do it hisself. It took months for him to understand how dangerous for a cripple to be climbing in the water with fire. I told him he’d light hisself on fire and then what good would it do him to be a floating dead man. The best part is he doesn’t have anybody. I’ve been his family. A shame I won’t see him again. I got attached.”

Jackie imagined how Mr. Cecil would feel when those purple flowers bloomed. She hoped he didn’t hate her; she hoped he could forgive her. The thought of his simple wish made Jackie want Cassie to hurt like that just to see what it was like. “Seems like a man that old would know better by now than to believe in a cheat like you.”

Cassie just smiled, and Jackie knew Cassie had it in her to go on lying and thieving forever.

On the far end of the lake, lily pads coasted in patches so thick you could walk on them. “See them?” Cassie said.

White lilies opened into delicate palms, the white fingers curling skyward. Jackie was afraid to confess she thought them stunning. Perhaps she’d lost the ability to differentiate what was pretty and what wasn’t. “I see them.”

“That’s our next project. Course we can’t come back here, but there’s plenty to go around. We’ll get us a hand till. Then we’ll go telling people how invasive the stuff is, how it will fill up the whole lake. How it will take over the world.”

Jackie was catching on to Cassie’s work now. “But it really won’t?”

Cassie laughed so hard she snorted through her nose. “No!” she said.

Jackie waited for her to finish the story. “We’ll grind them up and those little legs will multiply and shoot down to the bottom of the lake and root. Just like a star fish. You heard the story Daddy told of them crabbers thinking star fish were menace—pulling off legs, thinking they’d killed them?” She paused to catch her breath again. “The starfish had the last laugh. They just grew a leg back in its place and that new leg made a new starfish! Same here. We’ll till up the lilies and they’ll multiply. I feel like I’ve got some great part in the world now, like I’m spreading my own seeds.”
In all, they pocketed two hundred bucks. Cassie knew a Tallahassee nursery that would give a hundred a piece for those sago palms. Cassie let Jackie off at Tim’s Fast Nickel in Micanopy. She’d stalk the streets for new places to release flies, then when it got good and dark, she’d come for her, and they’d creep through lawns to liberate them. Cassie drove off giddy and whistling.

At Tim’s Fast Nickel, Jackie bought a double cone of Rocky Road and Mississippi Mud. She walked down the lanes of antique shops and used record stores. She stared at her reflection and wondered when her eyes had grown dark like her sister’s. She rested on a bench and watched Christmas shoppers maneuver bags. The sun was setting, melting the Spanish moss in the water oaks a mournful tangerine. Here she was in the wide open. She could do anything. She could buy another double cone of ice cream. Pistachio, superman, lime sherbet. This was how it felt to be alive. She wished Quinta was here. She’d type a letter for her soon.

Cassie screeched to the curb, pressed on the horn. “Hurry!” she called. “They’re on to us.”

They sped down lake roads, branches scuffing metal. The Sagos slid from their pots. A stolen hand tiller bounced between the shovels. Jackie’s hands shook so she gripped the door handle. She watched the rear view for blue lights. She’d been out two days. She couldn’t lose her freedom now.

“I think I heard a siren,” Jackie said. They neared Hawthorne Road, and a deer leaped from the tangly brush. Jackie screamed. Cassie slowed, then drove off the road, ploughed a plot of weeds and saplings. The Custom Deluxe lounged half in and out of the woods. Cassie stretched over Jackie for the Pall Malls in the glove compartment.

“What the hell are you doing?” Jackie said. She listened for a siren.

“Got a secret, Jack.” Cassie lit a cigarette. “I was lying back there. Nobody’s after us.”

“I’m getting out,” Jackie said. The door caught on a cedar bough. She squeezed past it.

“I was only joking,” Cassie said. “We got work to do, flies to let go.”
“Damn you,” Jackie yelled. The night was cloudy, the moonlight muted and soft. Jackie ran.

“We got devastation to cultivate,” Cassie called.

There she was with those big words again, Jackie thought. She squatted to catch her breath. Devastation. Cultivate. If she went any further all crazy without direction she’d be lost. Cassie called again, her voice all sing-song. Proof, Jackie thought, she’d never seen life through razor wire. Quinta’s voice was far away. Jackie tried to conjure it. Go, little mama, go. Typing music and playing words? Could they ever be the same? Maybe the things she and Quinta had said in their cell were only meant to move them through darkness.

The truck started up. Jackie turned back; she punctured through spider web traps. Cassie was capable of leaving her. Her own sister would do that. Jackie wanted freedom even if it meant cheating people. But she wouldn’t do it forever, not like Cassie. She wrestled the cloying string from her hair, brushed off its plump maker, a banana spider that pinched the soft skin of her hand. Jackie remembered a time when they were kids and she and Cassie set up target practice in the piney woods. They’d shot those fat yellow and black-spotted spider bodies full of bb’s, an act that Jackie now remembered as both barbaric and gratifying.


The engine revved in response; headlights punctured the weeds and flamed a white path to the truck.
Our deployment was to last six months, and even that seemed like too long. Six months of riding around in a Hum-vee with sand smacking your face like desert hail. Of smelling your own stench because a stick of deodorant would melt just sitting there in your room. We made makeshift cozies by wrapping wet socks around water bottles. You’d get a couple extra hours that way, before the water was too hot to drink. One day Reid dumped a bottle on his head after it had been sitting out too long in the sun. He shrieked like a girl and we all just sat there and laughed. But we never left a bottle naked after that.

Our main duty was to repair the Baghdad airport, but we had other jobs. Each day I’d wake up at 7:30, head to the chow hall and take a Hum-vee to the projects. Sometimes we would build bypasses around bridges blown up by the insurgents. Sometimes we would clear land to make way for new buildings. But pretty much every day from eight to five, I would run equipment. I didn’t mind the work so much—it made the time go by.

At night we would drink liquor—Smirnoff, Cuervo, Jack Daniels. Straight from the airport, duty free. After a few rounds someone would deal a hand of poker. I lost a little money that way, but I wasn’t as bad as some of the other guys. One guy lost over $6,000. At the end of a losing streak he’d throw his chips at the wall. We all got a kick out of it. But then you couldn’t give him too much shit for staying in because we all did it. He was a half-ass poker player, but then half the game is just luck. It could have happened to any of us.

An M203 is a beautiful piece of weaponry. A 40 mm grenade launcher attached to the barrel of an M16A, 5.56 mm rifle. It’s a lightweight, compact, breech loading, pump action, single shot launcher, 11.79 pounds.

Standing on a street corner with one in your hands, no one messed with you. When the German embassy got car-bombed in Baghdad, I was sent to stand guard. For eight hours I stood there holding that shiny black machine and no one so much as glanced at me. It was like
I was holding Medusa in my arms. People walked past, averting their eyes, as if to glimpse the gun was to glimpse their own death.

Now and then Reid would hook us up with hash or pills. It was crazy how easy it was to get prescription drugs over there. You could get the translator to pick them up from some civilian on the street. We’d lie in our bunks and I’d think about Sara, unable to move a limb.

Sara was a good girl. We’d been together for two years. But before I got sent off, I was thinking about ending it with her. We were starting college; we’d both only dated a couple people. But then she cried and I said I’m sorry, I’m sorry. I love you. Then, when I got activated, I said we should break up for sure. She was in college; she shouldn’t waste six months of her life just sitting around for me. And she said she would wait. She wanted to wait. And what would she do if I died?

The months went by and she wrote me almost every day. I wrote almost as often. When I got back, we would move in together. What the hell, we might even get married. She moved out of her apartment and found a place for us. I sent her a check to help out with the security deposit and first couple of months’ rent.

They said we’d be home by Thanksgiving for sure. When October hit, we all started running harder, lifting more. Reid bought a new guitar online so it would be waiting for him when we got back. I counted down the number of trips I’d have to make to the chow hall until I’d get that plate of mashed potatoes and gravy. My mom made the best mashed potatoes, like clouds on a fork.

Then one evening after we were all done for the night, they lined us up in formation and we got it. An extension—a month before we were scheduled to go home.

That night I lay in bed and washed a pill down with warm water. It was gritty-sweet with Gatorade powder and clung to the roof of my mouth. I swallowed hard and let the numbness pass through my body until there was nothing left, and I was asleep.

After the extension, no one listened to a word they said. They’d gotten our hopes up and wouldn’t let us go. At first they’d said it was six-month tours, then a year rolled by, still no word on how much longer we would be there.
Finally they gave us a tentative date to move to Kuwait, but nothing was for sure. That’s how it was in the military—everything always up in the air. They blocked out a timeframe of a couple weeks. Between x and y, they said, we will move to Kuwait. I wasn’t gonna bank on it though, cause I knew I’d just get that much more pissed off when the time came and we weren’t on the plane.

Then it happened, just like that. They gave us a definite date. We packed everything in the deuce-and-a-halves and headed out. In Kuwait, we loaded our equipment on huge Navy boats headed for the U.S. It would go by boat to Ft. Leonard Wood, then by train to South Dakota. Packed in heavy boxes were the two marble columns I’d taken from one of Saddam’s blown up palaces. They weighed about fifty pounds each and it was hell dragging them in my duffel bags, but I had to have them. My other prize was a pair of wooden plates I’d found in the same place. The plates matched up and made a weird design, like a horseshoe with a Celtic-looking weaving in center. When I found them, I just stood there staring at them for a minute. Then an Iraqi came up to me and asked if I wanted them. I pointed at the design and asked him what it meant.

“Allah, Allah,” he’d said, and turned the plates upside down. I’m pretty sure the guy was bullshitting.

Sara kept the place spotless. I set my duffel bag on the floor, a disruption of the keen order of things.

“Did you just paint the walls?” I asked.

“No,” Sara said. “They came like that.”

I could almost smell the paint just looking at them.

The poster of my old dream car hung above the couch, and the dream catcher she’d given me last Christmas was hanging from the ceiling. The place seemed roomy enough, but it had a way of making you feel strange and small inside it.

Sit,” she said. “I’ll grab you a beer.”

She disappeared through a doorway draped with strings of wooden beads. The beads clinked against each other and the walls and for minutes they would not stop.

She came out with two beers and sat down next to me. There was a self-assuredness in the way she held herself, an ease with which she moved, that hadn’t been there before. She took a long sip and licked
her lips without noticing I was watching.

“Do you want the tour?”

I raised my beer. “After this.”

“Cheers. Anyway the bedroom’s over there.” She pointed to a
door. “And there’s a washer and dryer downstairs. And those boxes
you sent are over there.” She waved at the corner. “I haven’t opened
them.”

She asked me what was in them and I asked for a hammer. She
ran into the kitchen and came out with one. I started pulling the nails
out of the wooden box. I collected them all in a neat pile, then pulled
the lid off. Inside a bundle of sweatshirts and towels were the wooden
plates. I pulled them out gently and set them on the floor. I liked the
way they felt. They were smooth and solid.

Sara was wearing a top that tied around the neck and showed off
her naked shoulders. She stood over me, tracing her

finger along the

lip of her bottle.

Her green eyes looked brown in the dim lamplight. She sat down
next to me and ran her finger along the engraved wood. “What was it
like?” she asked.

I’d known it was coming but I hadn’t prepared an answer. “What
do you want to know?”

“Everything. I want to know what it was really like.”

“It was hot,” I said. I took a drink.

“How hot?”

“I imagine someone blasting a hairdryer at you and throwing sand
in your face.”

She frowned. “I’m serious.”

“Me too.” She walked over to the couch and sat down, so I
followed her.

A photograph I’d sent was on the table. It was a snapshot of me
beside a tree. I’d spent three days carving a heart and I love Sara into
it.

“What did you do all that time?”

“This, mostly.” I raised my beer.

“What else?”

“Whiskey, tequila.” I took a swig.

I didn’t know what she was getting at. I could have said I thought
about her. But she already knew that.

Sara looked down at her skirt, traced her finger along a seam. “I just wish you’d tell me.”

She had this milky skin you always wanted to touch. And her nose had these tiny freckles. I ran my hand along her cheek. God, I loved that face. I looked at her and tried to gauge how much she’d changed. For the first time, I noticed the small gold stud in her nose. I couldn’t remember if it had always been there or not.

“When did you get that?” I touched it with my fingertip.

“I don’t remember. It was a few months ago.”

I wondered what else she’d failed to tell me. My eyes wandered down her body, her slender neck and tan shoulders. I imagined a tattoo low on her hip, with some other guy’s name on it.

She rested her head against my chest and I put my arm around her. We sat like that for awhile. “You can talk to me about it. Anytime,” she said. “I’m here.” She leaned in until her lips brushed against mine. I didn’t kiss her. I could feel the distance between us, invisible and gaping.

When we’d drank all the alcohol, I made a beer run. It was a nice night, and a few kids were out riding their bikes.

At the register the cashier asked to see my ID. I handed it to her and she checked it twice, making sure the face was me. My twenty-first birthday had passed months ago. The guys busted into my room wearing Halloween masks and tightie-whities and howling “Happy Birthday.” It was the only thing they could come up with at the time and I knew it was pathetic. Still, as I’d sat there and smoked my joint, for a minute I forgot where I was. It was just like high school again, when Reid would do anything for a cheap laugh, and everyone would do anything Reid did.

Outside, a man was squatting on the sidewalk, scratching the ears of his black lab. He watched me walk out the door and I gave him a nod.

He didn’t nod back, he just kept his eyes on me. “I was just like you once,” he said.

I stopped then and studied him. He was probably in his thirties, and his elongated face had the same sharp curves as the dog at his
side. His hair, tucked beneath a black bandana, hung in two clumps. He stroked the dog’s face and it lifted its muzzle toward me.

“I know how it is,” he said, pointing at my Army t-shirt.

He was wearing a grubby T-shirt and jeans. I debated whether or not to believe him. Those clothes were probably the only thing he owned—that and whatever was in the pack on the ground next to him. He’d probably been a bum all his life, didn’t know the first thing about war.

I started to walk off, but when I’d gone a few steps he shouted after me, “Right now you’re still trying to pick up the pieces.”

My curiosity took over and I stopped. “What pieces?”

“You know, the pieces,” he said. “Of your life.”

I walked away wondering, who did this guy think he was? Giving me advice like a goddamn homeless prophet.

“Come, Sadie! Let’s go!” the man said. He grabbed his pack and broke into a jog as he crossed the street. The dog followed at his heels, tail wagging.

I watched them for a moment, their two shadows joined in the moonlight. I walked across the street to the field where we used to play soccer after school. I thought of Sara, her long blonde hair blowing across her face, how I always looked to make sure she was watching, and how she always was. I remembered all the nights we’d spent camping with Reid, and how those times seemed so far gone, and nothing would be the same.

I closed my eyes and collapsed onto my knees in the grass. It was soft and moist and sparkled in the glow of the streetlamp. I plucked a stiff blade and curled it around my fingertip. In the darkness, a drop of dew trickled across my palm. It spread along the lines of my skin, and I felt nothing but fear and regret.
SHHHHHH . . . DON’T DISTURB THE CRAZY PEOPLE

I

Myrna, I need you to talk during Group today. You’ve been here a week now and you haven’t said a word. Nurse Zenia wants to hear your voice. // You can’t hear me but my name is Ishmael and you are the Daughter of Cain, body scarred with the marks of 666 fire breathing dragons. Sadly, my voice has floated far, far away inside the belly of a big, gray beast. I was supposed to go to Nineveh but I went to Tarshish instead by way of the Mediterranean Sea. God is not pleased with me (or you) which is why even if I could make the long journey back, it is best that I stay lost out in isolation—floating, drowning, dying inside of a blubbering mass of charred whale meat.

II

Abram, you need a bath. Some of the other patients are complaining about your odor. Come and let me take you to the male showers. // So they can fuck with me? I hear them talking, thinking on how they gone lay me down in there while that nasty water drizzles over my face. Then they say they gone spew more water on my naked, hairless chest ‘fore they try to suckle the water away. That wetness is gone seep way down ‘til it dribbles all over my private parts, inside and out. Then they gone start filling me up with some Judas bits of Silver in an effort to buy me, silencing my voice so I can’t scream. I ain’t gone lay still for that shit no more, Nurse Zenia. Uh uhhhhhh. NO MORE. The Great book says there is some kinda balm of Gilead for everyone. That’s a lie, Nurse Zenia. There ain’t no balm. No balm at all.

III

LeChelle, would you like to introduce yourself to . . . // Hey. My name’s L-E-C-H-E-L-E. I am not like the rest of you motherfuckers. I am beautiful and smart and held together with some shit that’s stronger
than Superglue. I have two children. Their names are G-O-L-D-E-N and C-H-I-N-A-D-O-L-L. I do not know where they are at the moment but I am sure that wherever they are, they are looking beautiful and smart and tightly glued together—just like me. Next time I see them I will slap them high fives, cornrow their heads and bake them a Red Velvet cake for their birthdays. I will kiss them and love on them and treat them like the prodigal daughters that they are. I will not scold them or . . . LeChelle, honey. You need to try and remember what we talked about. It’s about the girls. They’re dead, sweetie. Dead for over thirty-six years now, and I need you to remember that. Remember how a long time ago, the police found them hang . . . Hanging out somewhere on the town—looking beautiful and smart and tightly glued together. Like me. Their mama. Their Ma... Their M-O-T-H...

IV

The only thing separating me from them is that I am on the opposite side of the desk with the keys and the meds. // Another year and a half. Luther told me if I could just hang in there for one more year and a half he would set me free. I got a plan, Z. Just need you to not lose faith. I’m gonna make us rich. I swear ’fore God I am. Their stories are swallowing me up, Luther. I don’t know how long... Shit. Can’t you just be patient? Chicks is always whining ’bout shit. Give me a little more time dammit. THE ONLY THING SEPARATING ME FROM THEM IS . . . Zenia, I’m going to prescribe you Seroquel to take in the morning and Xanax, Trazadone and Neurontin to take before you go to bed. The babies are drowning. Bad men are trying to F-U-C-K them. Are you ok? Maybe you need a break. It’s ok if you do—need a break that is. Not everyone is cut out for the psych ward. THE ONLY THING SEPARATING ME . . . He’s gone . . . Luther . . . THE ONLY THING . . . Luther, come back. I need your help...the babies are swinging from trees and the bad men are trying to fuck them. HE STOLE MY MONEY AND FLEW. Luther . . . Luther . . . Lu . . . Six month medical leave. Time for you to regroup. Gather your thoughts. Luuuuthrrrrrrrrr... THE ONLY THING SEPARATING ME . . . me . . . me . . .
His mother keeps a shrine in front of the register with three ruby plastic
Buddhas cross-legged in a half circle. She puts a fresh tangerine in the
middle once in a while and burns incense. A long time ago she folded
a dollar bill into a fan and wedged it between the arms and body of the
fattest Buddha. Dust settles down into its accordion folds like dirty
snow, in fuzzy gray pearls. Everything else spic and span in the salon
but hidden corners like these. Xuan thinks if it were to be unwedged,
unfolded, this dollar, it might crack at the seams.

The first time he smoked, Xuan saw massive Pterodactyl-looking
birds with wings like bent music stands looping around the room, red
sparks trailing in their wake. The second time, the asphalt under his
feet wobbled like Jell-O whenever he looked away from it and he felt
liquid. That was it. No third time. He’ll drink apple pucker or Jager
with Joe and Fredo, but no more weed. But he loves being with Joan
while she’s high. She gets wild. She will practice her belly dancing,
pull her shirt up and tie it at the level of her third rib, roll-roll-pop her
hips and swish her arms by her sides like a pantomime of treading
water. When she’s really blazed she’ll sing. She’ll ask him to play, and
he strums the best chords he knows behind her. She dances her voice
up and down them, dropping her pitch so low once in a while that it
turns into growling more than singing. She is great, he thinks. Her
hair is reflective as a mirror, a sheet of gold silk. It’s natural, her hair,
not like the women who come to his mother’s salon where they both
work and have their heads tin-foiled and painted all different blonde
strips and chunks. When Joan dances and sings she flips it over both
shoulders so it lies shining down her chest. Xuan plays guitar and
thinks how beautiful she is, how no one is more beautiful than she is.

He strings these moments together and saves them up for when
he’s struggling to get to sleep at night.

He talks to Joan in a way he’s never talked to anyone. Fredo and Joe
are his boys, but it’s not like they sit around talking. They jam, they
play. But he and Joan talk. Joan loves to ask questions. Do you think there’s a heaven. Do you think there’s a God. Do you ever think about your ancestors. What do you think it would feel like to fly. If you had to lose a sense, what would it be. Sight or hearing. If a tree falls in the forest does it make noise. This kind of thing they talk about. She stares into his eyes when he answers, and if he doesn’t give a good enough answer she’s disappointed. Her eyes are blue. “You are like California white girl,” his mother said when he brought Joan in to ask her for a job, amused, “like white-white,” she went on, acknowledging an attribute, something to be admired. Joan had laughed but Xuan was mortified. His mother’s ideas about California girls come mostly from the products she orders by the case: highlights and lowlights, from the “California Dreamin” poster of the lacquered Banana Boat bikini woman she framed and hung in the tanning room. His mom calls Joan California-Joan even though Joan is from Minneapolis, and has never been outside Minnesota except for one trip to New York City for a school trip to see The Lion King. And Xuan knows that the main reason Joan liked him and not Fredo or Joe or anyone else is that she thought his Asianness was exotic. Just his eyes and hair and guitar are enough to keep her into him when she might not be anymore if he didn’t have these things.

All the things under the sun they talk about, and he has never told Joan about his mom trying to kill herself when she was going out with Mr. Lopez. She doesn’t even know they ever went out. This would trip her out. He doesn’t know exactly why he hasn’t. Maybe because everything else they talk about together feels like an escape—things they will do, places they will go, how they feel about stuff which is not anchored anywhere. Hypothetical questions and grand plans. He’s felt like it would change things to tell Joan something so true. She would try to say what she thought was the right thing. And then he’s afraid she’d say the wrong thing: would try to comfort him or something, and he doesn’t want to have to figure out the right thing to say to her right thing. He doesn’t want to have to act sad or act scared or act anything. He doesn’t want her to look at him differently, like he is heavier and more loaded or more dangerous. Or weak. He doesn’t want to tell her this thing that is so close to his insides, this thing that keeps him awake at night, listening, wary and scared, to his mother’s
movements through their apartment.

Mr. Lopez teaches gym at their school and E.S.O.L. night classes for parents. This is where his mom met him. His mom learned her first English on the phrases tapes for Vietnamese going to work in American nail places. Hello. Thank you. How are you. Twenty dollars. Ten. Five. Pretty. No charge tips. Acrylics. Gels. Scrub.

He does not remember moving here. He was only three. He knows because his mother tells people the story all the time. How she did not know any English and came here with him from Vietnam with nothing and before you know it, look what is hers. She opens her arms to gesture at the salon around her when she tells people this. Opens her arms and looks left and looks right, like look at all this. Look at all this that is mine. Almost as a dare, like, look at this and try to tell me it isn’t. It. Is. Mine. There’s aggressiveness in the way she holds out her arms at this point in the story, the cocksure way guys at Xuan’s and Joan’s school come together to fight, bumping chests, arms out: what? what? what are you going to do? Her customers know to look appropriately impressed. To ooh and aah. To remark upon the nice new chairs, the big plasma TV mounted on the wall. To ask how the waxing room is coming along, even if they are regulars and have had this back-and-forth with her before and know the waxing room is not going to be done anytime soon.

If he ever met his father, he often thinks (particularly in moments when he hates his mother), they wouldn’t speak the same language. The choppy nasal clucking of Vietnamese drones past him. He only hears it anymore when his aunt calls on Sundays.

When things are tough he thinks of the life he could be living there—and imagines it like something he could step into right off the plane. Call his Aunt Mae and go over and slip into the way his life would have been if his mom had not moved him here. He thinks of it like a shirt he could put on, button it up and wear it.

He digs for memories. He does not know if this one is a memory or an invention he’s constructed from the old photo in the top drawer of his mom’s nightstand: blades of grass and roping kiwi vines and Aunt Mae’s rear end in tan culottes bending over behind him, where she is picking fruit and he is propped up at the base of a tree, his face
smeared with pulp, a smooshed yellow kiwi in his hand, shiny clear juice oozing down from his palm, the split fruit dotting him with tiny black pinpricks. He can feel the juice beginning to dry at the edges and tighten his skin. You can’t see this in the photo, which makes him think it really happened, isn’t just a thing he’s built in his imagination.

He has another memory which feels even fuzzier: a dead chicken tucked upside down between a woman’s legs, her knuckly hands tearing out clumps of white feathers. He remembers the skin purplish and dimpled underneath, emerging slowly as the feathers were ripped away, a coarse blanket of lavanderish purple the color of a grape-flavored Now and Later.

He thinks he can feel himself being held on a bony hip in the heat of the sun, jostled through a press of people, the smell of fish in the sun.

He’s got handfuls of these memory fragments that don’t add up to any whole thing. Sometimes he dreams them into different orders and wakes up thinking he can remember what it was like to be in Vietnam, to be back home. But as the day gets on with itself he trusts his dreams less and shakes them off. He imagines maybe he’ll understand something true about the core of himself if he can find a real memory.

Whenever he plays guitar he closes his eyes and drains his brain and heart into his fingers, into the strings, pours and pushes it all out. Afterward it is a relief to be empty without needing to act like whatever he should feel, without needing to figure out what this should be.

Joan’s done this thing of what sounded like dumping him, but it was just a message on his voicemail, he hasn’t had a chance to talk to her yet. He’s thinking she could only do this because it was voicemail. He’s thinking she couldn’t say it to his face. With leaving a message like that she could maybe have been confused or something.

Leaving her messages is the easiest thing. It helps to pick up the phone and call her even though she doesn’t answer. Once he gets talking, he feels a little soothed. Until he remembers explicitly what’s happening and then he feels raw panic all over again and hangs up abruptly.

His mother likes to watch Joan squat in front of the salon blackboard
writing up specials. “That’s a keeper,” she’ll say, nodding her head over at Joan, her voice knowing. Nothing, he wants to say. You know nothing. It makes his skin crawl when his mother acts this way with him, because he knows she’s actually talking to him about her own love life. She’s trying to connect with him in some way, to tell him something. His mother looks at Joan in a covetous, lechy way when she says stuff like this, like a man, like she is trying to morph into a father in order to talk to him about things in the love and sex department.

Joan will throw herself at him and apologize and say she doesn’t know what she was thinking. He’ll flirt with the girls from school who come in for tanning. He’ll take their numbers and make her jealous. He’ll start talking to Whitney Hempel who is always asking him to play something on his guitar before the bell rings.

Joan will clean up the sweat prints their bodies make on the beds after they’re through. She will be jealous. This is his plan.

He sits at the closest table to the door at the Daily Grind Coffee Shop, two blocks from the bus stop, has cut school, can’t stand to see Joan or Fredo or Joe or anyone. If he doesn’t see them, some part of him is thinking, it’s not real. He stares at the tops of his hands resting on each of his knees. He turns them over and looks into his palms. Doesn’t push his hair out of his eyes. At a table in front of him is a white couple around his mother’s age, the man in nice pants and a tie, his sleeves rolled up, the woman in a skirt suit, jacket slung over the back of her chair. A satiny white tank top. Freckled shoulders. He stares at these shoulders. They are bare and shiny. The man and woman are each facing their own laptops. Xuan doesn’t ever see them speak to each other. Then the man gets up, stretches, and walks toward the bathroom. He reaches for the woman’s shoulder as he passes, squeezes it, his fingers hairy like a bear’s. She tilts her head toward his hand. Her cheek rests for a breath on the top of the man’s hairy bear hand. He walks away and she looks back into her computer, has a sip of her frozen coffee drink.

A lump pushes up Xuan’s throat. He feels like a punk, a baby, wanting to cry all the time. He thinks he’ll try waiting to call again
until after 3:30, when she’ll be walking home.

He calls again at 3:17, too soon, and hangs up when her voicemail clicks over. He feels panic, a nervous fury, every time he hears the ring click in that way it does right before it goes over to voicemail. He calls again and leaves another message. It is not helping him much anymore to leave messages.

He sits at this table, feet resting on his guitar case. He cups each elbow in his opposite hand and rocks himself. His hair falls in his face and peripherally he sees his bangs, shrinking his world like he’s in a tunnel and he squints and is comforted, holding everything off like this. He remembers the way the woman brushed her face against the man’s hand, closing her eyes. Xuan closes his eyes and rocks himself. Rock rock rock.

He is always wary at home. His mother tries to tease and joke him into smiling. She has never brought up what happened, and neither has he, but he feels like it’s all there is between them ever since.

For his fourteenth birthday, she gave him his guitar. He felt like to play it would be to tell her that what she did was fine, forgotten, everything fine. But he played it anyway, even though when he found it, he vowed he would leave it there to gather dust in the hallway, and a sickish guilt hung over him the first few months he was learning, and maybe still does.

To hide, to hide, to hide. To go far away, he is thinking, wanting, stretching his neck into this wanting, staring at the floor at his feet on his guitar case. Craving to be away from everything so hard that his eyes water, his mouth waters, like the feeling of escape could be so substantially good it could be eaten, could be nourishing.

He knows his mom looks girlish. She is small and she hitches her voice higher up. She fawns over people convincingly—men especially. She did over Mr. Lopez, he knows, because he saw it. But Joan has no mask to her, no fake posing, not really. What could it mean that Joan could see the real him, know the core of him, and throw it away? What could it mean? The end of the world, that’s what. The world crashing down around him in chunks. All of his memories of being
with her, the collection of moments he holds and rides through all the
time, they can’t be real. They change shape now; they clatter around
in his head and shrivel up, turn into mean pulsing things that make
him cringe with humiliation. When she’d looked at him it could not
have been with the rapt attention and love he’d thought, but maybe a
kind of curiosity. Something cold. Not so different from his mother
after all. Do Fredo and Joe know how fake she is? Does everyone in
the world know stuff he doesn’t, and he’s just an idiot?

This thought makes him yelp without meaning to.

The woman with the freckled shoulders turns her head a little but
not all the way, not enough to see him.

“Please X,” says Joan when he gets her on something like the
twentieth try. She was the first one to call him this, to call him X.
X marks the spot, X-Man, Fredo started calling him after he heard
Joan do it. “Stop calling,” she says. He is stunned and doesn’t say
anything. It’s like she is twenty steps ahead of him. Two days ago he
thought everything was great. “What?” he says. “What happened?”
His voice comes out froggy and hoarse. He has called so many times
and made her voicemail click over that now he’s jolted by her actual
voice. The calling itself had become a ritual. Even once it no longer
eased him, it was something to do with the next five minutes besides
wanting to die. “It’s not you, Xuan,” she says. Are you kidding? He
thinks without bothering to say it. His agony is seared through with a
hard new edge of rage. It’s not you? That’s all? She is talking to him
like she doesn’t know him, like three days ago they weren’t doing
it in the tanning room. It was just, what, Tuesday, Monday, Sunday;
Saturday, yes, exactly three days ago. “What isn’t me?” he says. “X,”
she says, her tone a little flat and tired, the same tone she uses to talk
to her mom. He hears her Basement Bangla album in the background,
the one she belly dances to. He wonders suddenly if there’s anyone
else there and just as suddenly feels like he might retch, or faint, or
die. She sighs heavily. “I mean it’s got nothing to do with you. There’s
nothing wrong with you. You are awesome. You are so awesome. It’s
just getting real intense for me with us.”

She is full of shit. He knows she is full of shit even though
he doesn’t know what her real reason is for breaking up. He is so
incredibly pissed off, not so much that she is dumping him, but that she is full of shit and won’t tell him why.

He slams down the receiver. This gets the attention of the man with a beard going in all different directions who’s been checking for coins in the meter machine. He’s sitting on a dismantled and spread cardboard box, counting coins in his upturned palm. The man looks up at Xuan and laughs uproariously, like Xuan is the funniest thing he’s ever seen. Somehow this eases Xuan a little. He feels like a spectacle, and it’s a weird relief to be treated like what he feels like, to have both things match, inside and outside.

He won’t kill himself. It would be so easy though. He wouldn’t back out of it like his mother, stunned looking face like she’d wandered into the wrong room and seen something she shouldn’t have. Getting out of it as easy as pulling her head out of the stove where she’d been kneeling. She’d tried to play it off when she glanced over and saw him. She closed the stove door and walked to the sink and turned on the water and stood there with her back to him, the plastic bags tangled in tree branches outside the kitchen window like white faces coming up to kiss the reflection of her own. He had turned around and walked back to his room.

If he were to kill himself, he would do it for real, no bullshit.

He walks up the street to Cut Rate Liquors. He’s never been in before. Usually Fredo goes in for them; with his patchy beard and mustache he can pass for older. But Xuan is alone now, and with no reason to haunt the Grind tethered to the payphone now that he’s talked to Joan. He keeps having this odd twitchy impulse to call her again, because it’s all he’s been doing all day, but now there’s nothing to say, no next step anymore, no hope for anything. The bell bangs and clanks against the Plexiglas door when he comes in, but the woman leaning against the counter with her back to the door doesn’t look up. He stands behind her to wait his turn. The man behind the counter has his safety cage door open to watch the woman scratch off a Lotto ticket. He twirls the cap of a blue pen in his mouth, spitting it out once in a while to chew the other end. He is Viet, Xuan knows from looking at him, from the way he leans, from the way he chews his pen cap. The
man and woman do not speak. The woman’s braids dangle and sway from her scalp as she scratches her ticket, extensions dangling by a few threads of her own hair. They hang, dozens of tiny braids, and Xuan waits for them to fall to the counter, waits for them to swing one too many times, like the tab on a can of soda. ABCDEF and the letter it breaks on is your lucky letter, and fall, detach. When’s the last time he thought of breaking off the tab of a soda for its letter? Not since he was a kid, like, forever ago. It’s quiet. Her arm stops moving. Her tiny braids stop swinging. She stares down at the card. “Damn,” she says, with feeling. The man behind the counter shakes his head heavily and tosses his pen cap in a trashcan somewhere behind the counter. He looks up at Xuan. The woman looks too. Still leaning at the counter. If he were to squint his eyes he could fool himself into thinking it was her hair, that those long straight dark ropes were her own hair, and weren’t dangling by strands, barely holding on.

“Can I get a pint of apple pucker,” says Xuan. The woman looks amused.

“You old enough, kiddo?” says the man, speaking with Xuan’s mother’s accent.

He swings the safety cage door farther open so that he can lean his upper body from it and peer down at Xuan.

“I’m twenty-two,” says Xuan, making a show of reaching for his wallet, all a bluff, like he’s got ID to prove it. He doesn’t even have a wallet. He uses a hidden pocket in his guitar case to hold stuff.

The man swipes his hand through the air and grunts, like to say, forget it, leave your wallet. The woman pulls her braids behind her head so that they are behind her, running down her back. She smooths over the sides of her head with her palms. She is old, older than his mother, but she moves and carries herself like she is special, beautiful, like her extensions are meant to look exactly like they do, tired as they are.

The man, who is examining Xuan like he’s making to name all of his parts, to figure him out, asks him in Vietnamese where he is from.

Xuan shakes his head like he doesn’t understand, though he does. Sometimes he will listen to the entire Sunday conversation his mother has on the telephone with his aunt and he understands all of it. Sometimes he will watch her pacing the salon when it’s dead and hear her thoughts in Vietnamese, fast and furious and worried about money. He has the unsettling understanding when he reads her mind.
like this that he knows her better than he thinks, that life is not such a mystery, that there is no one to blame for things, that things are just the way they are.

He says it again in English when Xuan does not answer.

“I’m from here,” says Xuan.

The man nods but makes a skeptical face and makes quick, knowing eye contact with the woman. Then he turns, pulls a pint of pucker from the shelf behind him, slips it into a white plastic bag and twists the handles around its neck, slides it across the counter to Xuan. He shakes his head and waves his hands away from him when Xuan puts five dollars in the money slot to pay. The cuffs of his shirt are frayed at the edges of the wrists, glossy from ironing. He keeps waving at Xuan’s money. Won’t look at it.

“What?” says Xuan. “What do you mean?” He is panicked. Just wants to get out of here. Wants to pay and get out. And stop being looked at. Wants to pay and get out and stop being looked at and drink this whole bottle of Apple Pucker by himself even though he does not even like drinking all that much, it’s just all he can think of to do. Something to get to the end of and then he’ll figure out what to do after the end of that.

The man doesn’t say anything. He winks and smiles and shakes his head and waves his hands at Xuan’s money like he is shooing it back to where it came from. The woman puts her hand on her hip, smiles at Xuan tenderly.

This is too much.

Xuan is crying. To his horror, he is crying, big, sudden, gulping heaves, and he can’t stop.

The woman walks over and reaches her hands to Xuan’s guitar, looking into Xuan’s face for permission to take it. She takes the guitar out of his hands and puts it down on the floor by the counter. She opens her arms and folds him up in them; he is stiff at first but then gives up and collapses. He sobbs into her shoulder. He feels pats on his back: short, firm, comforting pats, and he realizes that the man has come from behind the counter and is patting him. He feels their four hands on him at once and it feels like they are reinforcing him, like they are molding him back together, patting and squeezing him like clay. He cries and cries until he is crying not because of everything
else, not because of Joan, not because of his terror that his mother will kill herself one day, that maybe he will too, but from the relief of being able to cry, and be held and patted through it. He feels close and safe to these people he doesn’t know at all.

He hears the bell clink against the door behind him, knows someone else has come in, but the hands don’t leave him. They hold him. He closes his eyes. No one moves. No one moves. No one moves.
That voice. It was deep and warm and sunny and Southern, drawn out and twisty-bent mellow-sweet at the ends like hot taffy on the pull. It was the sound of going home, and it seemed like everybody who ever heard it loved it. Everybody except for him.

Jimmy Dean, Country Music Hall of Famer, couldn’t stand the sound of his own voice. “Sounds like I’m garglin’ a mouthful of peanut butter,” he once told me. Though I was talking to him on the phone at the time, I imagined a smile on his face; his voice had a big hearty laugh lurking just behind it, threatening to explode. But he swore it was true: He cringed at the sound of his own voice, never listened to his own music.

To a lifelong Jimmy Dean fan like me, the idea that anyone, even Dean himself, would willfully not listen to the man’s music made absolutely no sense, but no matter. Dean could say what he wanted. Truth is, I never cared about the words he spoke so much as the rich, liquid swell that bore them my way. He could have been speaking Greek or reciting pi 51 places to the right of the decimal point or reading the NASDAQ or yodeling. What mattered as I listened to him talking on the phone was that voice. It was real, it was live and it was just for me. I wanted it never to stop.

It did stop, of course. In the summer of 2010, more than eight decades after a scrubbed-up OB-GYN in Texas heard Dean summon that voice for the very first time, squalling a dissonant C-chord at the top of his newborn lungs, Jimmy fell silent. While watching television and eating a snack at home in his beloved Henrico County, Virginia, he died in his favorite chair.

What was Dean’s last song and when did he sing it? I couldn’t say. But I still hear him, and not because I kept any of his old records or even a turntable on which to play them; those are long gone, like so much else in my life. When that voice comes to me now, in my middle
years, it comes to me unplugged and unbidden, from a place in the heart, and it sings of time. In my head I heard Dean after my mother died. I heard him after my father died. I heard him again this year, after my sister died. And I hear him every Christmas.

“Ba bum ba bum bum,” he says. “Ba bum ba bum bum.”

The story of how Dean’s voice insinuated itself into my life so inextricably involves a song of his I grew to love and that phone conversation the two of us once had. I remember the way his words sounded coming over the line long distance, from his Virginia to my Kentucky. It was 1997. Dean phoned me one March afternoon after reading some newspaper columns I had written. In the columns I had written about Dean’s music and expressed my abiding love for one album in particular: Jimmy Dean’s Christmas Card.

As a boy I had grown to love that album. It spent all day every day, early November through mid-January, sandwiched in the thick stack of holiday records be-spindled precariously above the turntable inside the left end of my parents’ long, brown Magnavox entertainment console. The console had a television in the middle, but it was seldom used, and never during the Christmas season. The dark convex screen was lit only by the reflections of Christmas tree lights. The holidays were for music and music only: Nat King Cole, Gene Autry, the Royal Guardsmen, Elvis—and Jimmy Dean.

And so the record player in the console went dutifully about its work, dropping and starting each new album in the rotation with a great commotion of mechanical whirring and clunking. Then the needle swung over and settled onto the grooved vinyl and for a few seconds there was, depending on whether my sister or I had used that record album for a Frisbee, either a scratchy hiss or an exquisite hush punctuated by the occasional pop. And then, when the suspense was nearly too great, the music began.

Looking back now, I can’t say for certain why my favorite song on Dean’s Christmas album was “My Christmas Room,” but there it was and there it is. So often did I listen to it, the song burned a groove in my brain.
If I owned a great big house,
I’d have a Christmas room.
When things about me all went wrong,
I’d find Christmas still in bloom.

When I grew older and had children of my own, I sang that song at bedtime to the children of my first marriage and then I sang it to the children of my second marriage. Like me, all of them know the lyrics by heart.

In the intervening years, when I had nobody to sing the song to, something strange happened: I felt an odd yearning. I missed the song. I missed Jimmy Dean. But the record I had listened to as a child was long gone, who knew where. So I set about trying to find a copy. I wanted the whole album, but short of that I would settle for the song about the Christmas room. Finding neither, I wrote about my quest in a newspaper column, hoping readers might know where to find a copy of Jimmy Dean’s Christmas Card. And I mailed copies of the column to Jimmy Dean Foods in Cordova, Tennessee, where they came to rest on the desk of Dean’s executive assistant, Mary Moore.

By then, of course, Dean wasn’t much of a musician anymore. He was primarily a businessman, known to a younger generation only as the front man for Jimmy Dean’s Sausage. (“Saw-sudge is a great deal lahke lahfe,” he drawled in one commercial. “Ya git out of it whut ya put into it.”) That was okay with Dean. He didn’t like the recording studio—never had. He didn’t really miss making records. But when Moore forwarded my columns to him, it was Jimmy Dean the Singer who rang my office phone a few days later.

“I loved ‘My Christmas Room,’” I told Dean.

“Sweet song,” he said. “That’s what it’s all about, you know.”

But then he told me he hadn’t listened to the song since he recorded it thirty years prior—because of the little matter of his hating the sound of his own voice and all.
I asked Dean if he missed singing. He told me that just because he didn’t record anymore didn’t mean he never sang. He had sung to his children just as I had sung to mine, he said. His daughter Connie used to sing with him in the car:

*Take me along if you love me,*  
*Take me along.*  
*Take me along with you.*

“Ba bum ba bum bum,” Dean sang to me over the phone.

“That’s the part she liked best,” he explained. “Ba bum ba bum bum.”

As we talked, I wondered if Dean, perched up there in his Chaffin’s Bluff house overlooking the James River just outside Richmond, Virginia, had managed to find for himself the sort of inner peace he sings about in “My Christmas Room.” He answered the question before I could ask it.

“Sometimes,” he told me, “I sit out on the back porch on spring afternoons with a glass of merlot and watch the sun dip down behind the James River. And I know that I ain’t mad at nooooo-body.”

I told Dean that day how glad I was he was happy. I said his music had brought much happiness to me. And before I knew it the words I had wanted to hear all along began tumbling from his lips, just for me.

“If I owned a great big house,” Dean sang over the phone, “I’d have a Christmas room. When things about me all went wrong, I’d find Christmas still in bloom.”

And then, politely, with music in his voice, he excused himself. He had to go now, he said. He was scheduled for a long-overdue haircut. Ba bum ba bum bum.
Sheep Snot and Other Recipes from My Dad

Sheep Snot:
1 large bowl of off-brand cottage cheese.
½ of a white onion, chopped.

Directions: Mix onions into the bowl of cottage cheese. Salt and pepper to taste. Adding Tabasco sauce helps the flavor. Although if you add Tabasco you must be willing to make jokes about how the sheep have sinus infections. Eat at night after you come home late from the law office.

From the age of three until I left for college, I was plagued by insomnia. I walked the halls of the house—a tiny ghost listening to her siblings breathe deeply in their sleep. My mom would often wake up to my shadow standing in her doorway. More than once she screamed. I soon learned how to make my own pallet on the floor next to her side of the bed. My mom soon learned to step over me as she got out of bed. I never slept on my father’s side. I was afraid he’d be mad.

My parents bought me a nightlight and encouraged me to read when I couldn’t sleep. But I didn’t stop wandering. I needed to listen to everyone breathe. Sometime, when I was eleven, I began discovering my dad in the kitchen late at night. He was working late and often didn’t come home until we were all asleep. I’d find him in the dark kitchen, still in his suit, holding a bowl of ice cream. Usually, I ran back to my room until I heard his footsteps creaking past my bedroom, then I would lay awake, glaring at the dark, listening for his snore, before I would roam the halls again.

One night, he called out to me. “Boo,” he said softly using my nickname. I came to him, afraid of being in trouble, afraid because he was breathing fast. He stood up and grabbed another spoon and together we finished off the carton of ice cream. “Don’t tell anyone,” he said. “This is our secret.”

A few weeks later, when again the orbits of our nighttime
wanderings collided, I found my father in the kitchen eating out of a bowl. This time, instead of running, I approached him, thinking it was ice cream, hoping we could share.

“What’s that?” I whispered.

“Sheep snot,” he said.

“My dad picked up a bottle of Tabasco and shook small red droplets into the bowl. I could just begin to see them in the milky dawn light.

“See,” he said. “The sheep has a sinus infection. Want a bite?”

I didn’t. He finished his sheep snot and tucked me into bed. A week later, I lay in bed reading, waiting to hear the sounds of sleep before I could make my rounds, when I heard my dad come home. He wasn’t soft and quiet. His footsteps were heavy. He slammed his briefcase down on the floor. I heard my sister Jessie stirring awake. Soon, lights filtered down the hall. My parents were yelling. I heard everything and understood nothing. My mother was crying now and then the door slammed. My father left.

*The Perfect Peanut Butter and Jelly Sandwich:*

1 jar of strawberry jelly, although grape will do in a pinch.
1 jar of peanut butter, crunchy is best.
1 bag of white bread, although you shouldn’t tell your mother that your dad gave you white bread.

Lay out all the pieces of bread in two even rows. Spread the first row with peanut butter. Not too thick. Spread the other row with jelly; thick enough for the bread to bruise with the strawberry juice. Match the peanut butter slices with the jelly slices. Then cut the sandwiches into quarters. Stack the little squares on a large plate like a pyramid. Serve with Pepsi and tell the children not to tell their mother you are letting them drink Pepsi.

My father was gone for three weeks and one day he returned. The day he came back, my mom dressed me in a nice dress and helped me curl my hair: “Stand by the door and wait for your father,” she instructed.
“When he comes to the door, tell him how much you miss him and how much you want him back.”

I remember waiting outside, looking up the crushed gravel driveway, hoping the summer Texas wind didn’t ruin my hair. I was seven. I was a good girl. I did what I was told and my father came back. But he didn’t eat Sheep Snot or ice cream late at night. He stayed in bed with mom.

A few weeks after mom did my hair and I told daddy I loved him, so he would come back, my mom took a trip. She left a list of instructions with my dad and showed me and my sister Jessie how to make Hamburger Helper, in case dad forgot to cook. But he didn’t forget. Every morning mom was gone we had cereal. But for lunch and dinner we ate peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, cut into small squares and stacked high on a plate.

At first we gobbled them down. We were elated. No more goulash. No more broccoli. No more “eat your squash before you can eat dessert.” But there was no dessert, just Pepsi and stacks and stacks of little peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. On the third day, during lunch, my sister Becky said, “Is there anything else to eat?” No one said anything. At dinner, baby Cathy started crying and Zach refused to eat.

“Daddy,” Jessie said softly. “I can make some Hamburger Helper.” He glowered at her and left the table. The next day, I made Hamburger Helper for lunch, dad ate a huge bowl by himself in the living room. On the fifth day, mom came home and we cried and told her we were hungry, but we didn’t tell her about the white bread or the Pepsi.

\textit{Cleveland Nachos:}

1 bowl full of crunchy Cheetos.
1 large spoonful of French onion dip.
A large helping of leftover taco meat. May substitute with refried beans.

Mix ingredients together and microwave on high for 2 minutes until the meat sizzles.

When I came home from college my sophomore year, my mom made me cook. “It’s so nice to have you back,” she said as we drove to the
Super Wal-Mart to pick up some groceries. “What do you want to make for us?”

“Top ramen?”

“I was thinking a nice pork tenderloin with potatoes. But it’s up to you of course, but I do have the pork marinating at home. Now what do you want to make for dessert?”

I stayed silent.

My mom had vowed not to cook for a whole year. It started like this. She asked my younger brother what he liked to eat, more than anything and he said “corn dogs.” That and she found my dad’s Twinkie stash. So, after twenty-two years of grinding wheat to make her own bread, natural peanut butter from the local co-op and milk straight from the cow, she quit cooking. During lunch the kitchen was a Darwinian experiment in survival. My siblings rooting through the fridge, coming to blows over the choicest leftovers—a KFC chicken leg, half a bag of chips, a hunk of cheddar cheese. Through this chaos, my dad walked in and took the Cheetos from my sister, poured them in a bowl and slathered them with leftover taco meat and French onion dip. I made a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

“That’s disgusting!” I said, cutting my sandwich into quarters.

“Brain food,” my dad said smiling as a glob of French onion dip stuck to his beard.

For the rest of the summer, until I went back to school, I made dinner every night. The day before I left, my mom told me what my dad had said when she announced she wasn’t cooking.

“Can you believe that?” She said. She was sewing a quilt, jabbing a long needle through layers of fabric and batting. “After twenty-two years of cooking all this wonderful healthy food he says, ‘Good. That means I can eat more McDonalds!’”

Energy Bars:

Buy a large box of the cheapest energy bars you can find at Sam’s. Eat them for every meal, even when your wife fusses that you have an eating disorder and your kids ask if you are okay.
The summer of the accident, my dad stopped eating. Becky and Cathy, then 21 and 18, were driving up from Florida to visit me in Iowa. They tried to pass a semi on a two-lane road. They hit a Suburban head on. Becky spent two weeks in the hospital and two more months in a neck and back brace. Cathy spent four weeks in the hospital and three more months learning how to walk again.

My husband and I ate the lasagnas our friends brought to our house. Three years later, I still haven’t made lasagna. When friends have children or surgery, I make Taco casserole or a sausage ziti bake. My mom made French onion soup with large pieces of crusty bread and crisp green salads. My dad ate only energy bars. “Food is sustenance,” he said. “It shouldn’t be more than that.” We couldn’t even tempt him with a Big Mac.

When Cathy learned to walk again and no longer cried when she saw the patchwork of scars that covered her legs, she went home. That’s when my dad began biking. He would ride 70 miles in a day, often staying overnight, camping in a small tent, covered with a blanket that looked like tin foil, eating only energy bars.

The next summer, he had lost over 80 pounds. He’d brag about this at the dinner table. His plate empty, everyone else’s full. I told him I was worried and he asked me to go on a biking trip with him. I packed a cooler full of hot dogs, meat, beer, corn and potatoes. Our first night at camp, I cooked chicken, sweet corn and baked potatoes over the fire. He ate everything and drank three of the beers. The next day for lunch we stopped at a café and ate tuna sandwiches. For dinner we had hamburgers and more beer. When our stomachs were full he told me he wanted to leave my mom.

*Bachelor Chow:*
1 can of sardines
Half a box of wheat thins
1 can of V8

Put the sardines on the crackers and eat. Wash them down with a can of V8. Laugh when you call your daughter from your new apartment and tell her how happy you are.
When my dad called me, I could hear a woman’s voice in the background. “She’s just a friend,” he said. But I hadn’t asked him anything. He was living in the lower level of a house owned by an older couple. They’d advertised on Craigslist. I told my dad he would probably be serial killed in his sleep. He told me he would die happy. I let the comment slide.

I had just returned from 10 days in Israel eating lamb, hummus and salads with garlic, tomato and fresh olive oil; indulging in breakfasts of thick syrupy coffee, coarse bread and dates.

“Are you cooking?” I asked my dad.

“No. Food is sustenance. I figure if I eat sardines, wheat thins and V8, I’ll get all the basics and lose all that weight.”

That was the only time I cried.

Four months later, my dad moved back in with my mom. I learned about the move on Facebook and I didn’t bother calling. By then I was eating the food of pregnancy cravings—ham sandwiches, egg rolls and fried eggs and sausage. My mom called to tell me, “We are eating tomato pie, with a fresh salad and an herb-infused vinaigrette for dinner.” The description made my stomach roll with nausea and I sucked on a ginger Altoid to calm my stomach and finish the conversation.

When I was younger, my mother taught me to bake homemade bread and how to properly roll a pie dough. She showed me how to soak beans and stretch a pound of hamburger so it would last all week. When I got married she gave me The Gourmet Cookbook and The Joy of Cooking. But the recipes that haunt me are the ones my father taught me.
The Wet Spot

There’s a wet spot on the kitchen ceiling. It’s an inch from the massive Bedford stone fireplace that opens out in the center of this home and a foot from the skylight. It seems to me that all ceilings portend unknown threat. Some are mottled or cracked in the corners and down the walls while others are vast swaths of clean white separation—the first layer between us and what eventually becomes the outside.

This particular place, this wet spot, has been repaired, and still the paint peels like wood shavings arcing away from the ceiling. For a long while, a year, perhaps longer, I pretended it wasn’t a wet spot. I told myself that it was just an accident of primer and paint. I’d pull a chair over to the spot and press my hands against the gray beneath the thickly peeling paint, murmuring reassurances.

From where I sit now at my desk anchored in the corner of the room, I watch the January morning sun flicker through the wall-length window to my right. I follow the light’s reach across the kitchen to that spot; the thick paint curls out and down toward the floor; the effect is that of a strange profile—a man with a jutting and square chin, slightly round cheeks, and a large, plump forehead. He mocks me.

Waiting to Fuck Up

There are six of us living in this house with its peeling paint and streaky sunlight reaching through the pine trees in the back yard: My husband and I have four children, Erik is sixteen; his dark hair coils up with length and sweat. His eyes are deep-set and brown; he appears tired. Sydni is fifteen, born fifteen months after her brother. If I was hyper-vigilant with Eric, waking him to nurse, checking his fontanel for signs of dehydration, examining his bright yellow stools for traces of blood, the proximity of Sydni’s birth cured me of that impulse. Where Erik is dark and brooding, Sydni is light. Her hair is long, straight, the palest red with glints of gold. Her face is freckled;
her skin fair and soft.

Audrey is eight, blonde, and chubby. At birth, she had a perfectly round and bald little head; over the next few months, her hair came in thin, fine, and colorless, white almost. It would be two years before she had enough of those silky strands to pull into a ponytail that stood up on the top of her head. But now at eight, her hair is thick and coarse and dark blond, clumping together in tangles at the nape of her neck. Carter at five is a negative image of his brother, with long blonde hair and milky, almost translucent skin. He is our last because when he was only two months old, my husband went to the clinic one afternoon for that surgical snip that put forever the possibility of more babies out of my imagination.

My children opened up in me an indulgent belief that my every action carried with it great import. What I mean by this is that every day I could fuck up. That sore throat I treated with Cloret spray could be rheumatic fever in the making; that tick I’d found accidentally while tickling Sydni under her arms could be a carrier of Lyme disease; the funny-tasting chicken, the bologna I should have thrown out, the mud from the flower garden, all could break the barrier of my children’s tenuous health and ripple through small intestines—life-threatening microbes that would never be caught at our small rural hospital. My children introduced to me the dense and implacable landscape of fear.

I’m afraid of everything. I’m afraid of hormones swimming in my milk and Mad Cow Disease; “Girls Gone Wild,” and Pentecostal grandmothers preaching the preeminence of “Family;” Confederate flags on t-shirts, the insistence of war, nuclear weapons, and smallpox, anthrax, dirty bombs, and high-fructose corn syrup. I’m afraid of icy roads, tornadoes, lightning, and death, which I can assure you, is just around the corner for any of us, any time of the day or night. Life can be sucked away like a piece of lint. When I was a just kid, I was too afraid to say the bedtime prayer my mother taught me:

Now I lay me down to sleep
I pray the Lord my soul to keep.
If I should die before I wake,
I pray the Lord my soul to take.
Saying it out loud could make it come true, so I chanted instead: Please God, please, don’t let Mommy, Daddy, Carol, Mike, John, or me die tonight or any night. Amen—a talisman of words.

They All Go Away
Standing under the wet spot, I can see the barest imprint of fingers around its perimeter—mine perhaps, or Erik’s as it is his habit to leap vertically, slapping his hand on the ceiling. Coffee, I think, as the fickle sun threatens to move behind sudden clouds. I open the brown paper, five pound bag, and the Peruvian beans cascade into the grinder; as I turn the dial to grind enough bean for a full 12-cup pot of strong coffee, the sound of burrs gnashing beans to a coarse grind fills the silent house. When the water has boiled and is steeping in dark ground coffee fogging the thick glass of the French press, I lean against the cool green-tiled countertop and watch the coffee brew.

When the heavy scent of fresh coffee has permeated the air, I plunge the pot and pour the steamy brown froth into my tall, white mug topping it with half and half. The clock on the stove has moved fifteen minutes into the future which is quickly becoming the past; soon Carter will be out of school and the day will shorten as Audrey, and then Sydni, and finally Erik come through the front door—with each entry, the house sighs as one after another of my children reclaim their space.

Everything Is Suspect
I have always suspected that something is wrong with this house. We bought it for less than it was worth, and the agent, who was living here at the time, seemed too relieved to make the sale, ditching town within days of closing. The nagging notion that we have somehow been taken suffuses each necessary repair with hidden meaning. We’ve been here almost nine years, and when a faucet leaks or a dishwasher overflows thick suds onto the red floor, I see, instead, the ceiling caving in, the floorboards buckling, the foundation of the house sinking into the crawl space.

First it was the plumbing backed up in the kitchen and the bathroom only on rainy days. The first time I smelled sewer gas gurgling up from the drainpipe in the shower, I thought something
had died in the pipes, in the walls, a squirrel decaying in the attic, a raccoon caught in the crawlspace beneath the floors.

Then it was the ceiling in the nursery. It began to slough away, fine shavings at first that bloomed with the use of a vaporizer into a veiny map that peeled away like sunburn. I couldn’t keep from standing precariously on the rocking chair to pull at the most provocative flakes, as if I would find new skin, untouched and pink, beneath that first damaged layer.

The Story of a California Ranch

We live in a California Ranch. Mrs. Harris, the woman who first imagined these walls and windows, ceilings and roof, saw a similar home in the mid-1950s. She was leafing through a decorating magazine, licking her finger as she turned each glossy page, when she came upon her home-to-be, my home-to-be. I can imagine her there because I know her daughter Kate who is also my brother-in-law’s mother. I imagine Mrs. Harris in a chair with this magazine spread of the California Ranch house in her lap.

In the stillness of that one moment, before a light-filled window, Mrs. Harris knows what it will be to live in my house, and she folds the corner of the page, the page on which that house, that California Ranch becomes this home with its wall-spanning windows, its wood floors, its gorgeous light. The house she charged her husband to build, the house I live in today, is made for light. It’s a light-refracting, light-reflecting, light-imaging, light-imagining sort of building, a light-powerhouse.

My sister’s husband played in this house when the bathroom was pink, when the knotty-pine paneling of the kitchen was shiny, before it was painted a shade meant to hold the light, a shade between whole cream and pale butter, before the trim was pocked and scratched, when logs flamed in the fireplace and the huge flue sucked the smoke up and out of the center of the home. He played here when the kitchen floor was a brick linoleum that would later cause me to gasp when on my knees, I would peel back a corner of the more recently-laid white Berber carpeting to find what I thought for one glorious second was real brick, variegated and uneven and rough, until I felt the glue on the smooth surface.
My sister’s husband ran in the small sliver of a back yard that he remembers as a big space of grass and scrub cedars and pine trees, honeysuckle draping lazily in the branches growing up the trunks winding and unwinding with poison ivy vines and morning glories, bees humming in the heavy scent, damp and green. Sometimes my husband and I sit with my sister and her husband on the deck, and we drink red wine from goblets without stems.

**You Can’t Stop the Rain**

It begins to rain and the seeping sun turns ashy. I can see the barest drizzle sprinkled on the stained deck just outside the window. The wet spot menaces; even the chance of a downpour captures my decadent imagination, my morbid malingering. Holding the mug of coffee in my right hand, I drag the wooden chair over the laminate floor. Standing on the sturdy seat, I prod the spot, careful of the peeling paint. The wet spot is holding.

**A Dream of Water**

There are days I do not see it. I worry about meningitis or chopping onions finely enough they aren’t noticeable in potato soup, first-grade math homework and the influence of rap music on teenage girls.

But there are days when I can’t halt the incessant yammering, my unwavering fear of collapse, and it is then that I let go; I succumb to that glorious “what if,” and I imagine I hear a crack, the jumble of wood, plaster, and thick glass crashing to the floor. One of my gorgeously needy children is standing there waiting for dinner, face all aglow in the evening light. He’s waiting for nourishment, fidgeting with what he describes as hunger when the rumble begins. I don’t identify the noise. Sometimes I am rinsing a bowl. Other times I’m peeling an apple or shaving a carrot. Always I am at the sink. Always water runs down the drain, confusing my impressions of sound. Always I am slow on the take, realizing at the last moment that it’s the skylight, weakened by the wet spot, caving in, the glass hanging in the balance and then falling, shattering. I don’t know if the beautiful child moves in time. In that free fall instant, that second of recognition, I only know I have waited too long.
The Other Wet Spot

When I was younger, I always lay there, flat on my ass in the viscous soup. I was embarrassed to get up right after sex, to allow the milky drip as I rushed through the dark to the toilet. I thought it was somehow an insult to my lover that I didn’t want to lie in the puddle of his desire, unnatural to rise from lovemaking to drain, as it were, in the toilet, as if I weren’t a real woman who reveled in the earthiness of body liquor—the wet spot seemed to be a badge of honor. If I could fall asleep in that tacky sap, I was victor.

As I got older, I found it less necessary to prove myself by lying in the soppy splotch. In fact, I found it ridiculous to lie there, so I sneered at myself for doing so until finally, in the late 80s, condoms took care of it; the wet spot never even materialized unless someone was particularly inept at withdrawing, and then the spillage was a gaff. But once I found myself in a serious and long-term relationship, the wet spot reappeared like a soda stain on carpet. I took to bringing a towel to bed. I could slip it over the damp blotch; it was a rough compromise but worth it. The scratchy towel was an improvement over the slimy spot of union.

In 1990, my husband and I were married, and because I dislike birth control pills and he hates condoms, we used the withdrawal method, and this posed a new problem. The wet spot was right there on my tummy—a plash of sperm seeping into my belly button as I tried to fall asleep. My husband, who was likely to throw his leg over my middle, found that there’s nothing like a glob of cold wet sperm hanging on the knee to keep sleep at bay. He got the towel, wet it with warm water, and with a gentle flourish, he wiped the wet spot away.

We have a queen-sized bed now and a bedroom door that doesn’t lock. Over the years, the wet spot has become only something to get around, a reminder to me of imperfection’s residue. Many years ago, before children, before my husband, in the midst of a break-up that like a pebble in water, circled and circled out to dampen and weaken what I thought were supports, a friend told me, “You might never get over it, you just have to get around it.”

Eventually They All Come Home

In two hours, my children will begin their slow invasion of this house. Rain falls gently against the skylight to create an echo of soft taps in the quiet kitchen; I look to the wet spot. The room is saturated
with evasive southern light that leaks through the splotchy sky—it is an aspect of the window and its length that even the smallest fracture of light is magnified and dispersed. A chain of orange and red crystals hangs in the window and sparks the fractious glimmer of mid-morning sun seeping across the kitchen floor, the walls of creamy painted paneling, the stone bricks of the fireplace—the center of our home; open on three sides it is the focal point of living room, entry way, and kitchen—we have never used it.

Again, I drag my chair across the floor, but this time as I press my fingers against the spot, I am gentler—as if my fingers might somehow destroy the delicate balance that allows the ceiling to remain tight. And then I slowly step down to the floor, almost upsetting the narrow and misused chair in my descent. I grasp its high sturdy back tightly in both hands and carry it back to my desk.

And Then Someone Sees You
When I was twenty-eight, mother to only two children, and back in school studying for the first time in my life, a professor once called me out in class. She limped as she paced before the room of mostly college juniors, elementary education majors, young women, and me—older than my peers by about eight years. I sat there in the middle of the classroom; never in front row, never in the back row. The light that day was gray and cool. Not quite spring; clouds covered what would in only a week be full sun lighting up the daffodils opening yellow and white in the beds around Coleman Hall. But the light that day was gray, and I was wearing a flowy blue hippie-style dress that had buttons from the floor to the v-between my breasts.

The professor held a book, a picture book with no words. Her long gray hair bundled up into a bun sitting on her neck; her black-rimmed reading glasses low on her nose, her arms waving the hardcover children’s book, her speech jerky and excited. I was not listening to her; she was “flighty,” she was retiring, she was teaching children’s lit, a class I had taken because it “fit” into my schedule. And because I wasn’t listening, I do not know why she said what she said.

She stopped pacing, she stopped waving her arms, and she looked out to this disinterested group and said, “Maybe you feel like you are fooling everyone. That you have somehow always made good grades,
but that it’s not real because it hasn’t been hard.” She looked out the window into the vast late afternoon gray.

“I have always felt like that,” she said, “and it isn’t true. It is real, what you are doing here, and you haven’t fooled anyone, except perhaps yourself.”

That instructor with her low bun didn’t look at me, but somehow she saw me, sitting there, afraid all the time that the outside, my outside, would fail to keep my damp interior from spilling out.

What I know

(1) The body leaks. A good body is both moist and solid, but mostly moist.

(2) A supple mind is supple, we would suppose, not only because of strong muscle, but also lubrication, cholesterol and nerves.

(3) I have been using my children as measuring sticks of my failure. This is a narcissistic construct that disallows for their individual bodies, the wet and fertile messiness of blood and bone and cartilage, the spark of shooting neurons, the night rivers that run behind their eyes, the triumph and failure of their humanity.

When I assert that my children have allowed me an almost obdurate indulgence, I mean that their existence is not only a privilege, but one I have embraced with a willful insistence that I must somehow move them over the current of grief, the imminent decay that runs within us all.

(4) There will always be a wet spot.

You Can’t Stop the Rain—Still

This wet spot will eventually fail. In early spring, rain will pelt the house for three days. On the second day, the house will be depleted of sound—all four children in school. I will be typing, immersed in some continuation of thought, coffee cooling in the ceramic cup next to the computer, clouds muting but not extinguishing the gray light dispensed through the lengthy window, when I realize that I hear
something, a pecking almost, not entirely unlike the sound of my fingers on the keyboard, but slower. It will take me minutes to look up from the drama on the screen, to recognize that pecking as a steady chorus of dripping, to see the wet spot, brown with rainwater.

I will run then and slide in the rain puddling on the floor, seeping under the legs of the wood table. I will gather old towels first to sop up the unceasing drip of water, and then I will construct a circle of pails and plastic bowls surrounded by bunched-up towels fresh from the dryer smelling of soap and bleach to catch the overflow.
Robert Finch

4TH STREET RIFF: BROADWAY TO BRECKENRIDGE

The first sign one gets that one is truly in the South is in the row of little commercial shops just south of Broadway where, in the glass window of the All-State Insurance agency, one notices a small stone on whose face has been carved “The Lord is my Rock and Salvation.” The first sign that one gets that one is not in the South is when one encounters, on the west side of the Louisville Public Library, underneath the trees, as if he has been waiting for you, the tall, bronze figure of Lincoln, cast in 1922, the best one anywhere, better even than the one on the National Mall, imposing, larger than life, yet still of human scale, like the man himself, the statue itself having added to his myth when, during the Great Flood of 1937, the muddy waters of the swollen Ohio rose up over their banks and rolled southward down 4th Street, rising up over the bronze pedestal and halting, as if in homage, just at the base of the great man’s shoes, so that for while the figure of Lincoln appeared to be walking on the water. But this is the young Lincoln, still unbearded, still unknown, his thick wavy bronze hair in casual disarray, one large gentle hand crossed over the other, and on his face a look of deep pensive concern, not, however, the benign, fatherly look of concern of the face in the Lincoln Memorial, a face brooding over the fate of the country it has just saved, but the look of a young man anxious about his own future, his own hopes and ambitions, his life still up for grabs and self-determination, his future not yet grasped by the iron fist of Destiny.

Or perhaps, poor impecunious lawyer that he is, he is only looking across the street and wondering if he will ever be able to afford one of the “motorcars,” as they call them, in the showroom of Brown Brothers Cadillac. Brown Brothers, Louisville’s oldest car dealership, established in 1913, where over the decades the Fleetwoods, Devilles, Broughams, and now Escalades sit in the showroom on carpeted floors strewn with oriental rugs, surrounded by faux-Louis Quatorze tables and faux-Queen Anne chairs, with sconces on the oak columns and reproductions of Reynolds and Gainesboro on the walls; where white-sleeved and black-vested attendants move about the “motor
cars” like butlers and valets, ready to move anything that might inadvertently soil the carpets, although you have the feeling that it is you, rather than the automobiles, who are more likely to commit such an indiscretion. In fact, one has the distinct impression that one is visiting these “motorcars” in their living rooms, and that the message is that one will never enjoy, possess, or deserve such elegant surroundings or such solicitous attention as these driving machines do. And that, of course, is the point: to make you realize that the only way you will ever possess what the cars possess is to possess the car, or rather, to be possessed by it, to be swallowed up by it, to take up residence inside one of them, and thus experience vicariously, or at one remove, the status that confers on them such tasteful abundance, such deserving deference, such earned envy.

One sighs and exits the showroom in a blue study and proceeds to that curiously charming set of traffic signals at the intersection at 4th and York, where the direction of crossing on foot is indicated not only by green lights but by electronic bird calls emanating from opposite sides of the streets. The initial, descending note of the cardinal, Kentucky’s state bird, signals that it is safe to proceed across 4th, while the unmistakable two-note song of the cuckoo provides a similar signal for crossing York. A thoughtful municipal aid to the city’s blind citizens, one thinks; and then one thinks again; one allows oneself to suspect—baselessly, unfairly, mean-spiritedly, sadistically, perversely, perhaps, but irresistibly—that there is an ulterior, devilishly subversive capacity for dark slapstick in the design. One begins, against all conditioned humanistic impulses, to envision a visually-impaired pedestrian, probably one from out of town, with a passion for birdsong (but unfortunately, a passion not highly developed or discerning), who comes to the intersection one fine day in April or May, when the leaves of the ginkgos and the oaks are filling their new fans with the season’s liquor, and the male urban birds are filling the air with their territorial arias. And there, just as luck would have it, a real male cardinal alights on a branch just above the traffic signal across 4th Street, and begins singing at just the precise moment when, before the lights change, the artificial cardinal in the traffic signal just below him has ceased to sing and its mechanical cuckoo counterpart across York has not yet commenced its recorded song of safe passage,
and so the blind man, led by the true avian call, steps off the curb into the street just as the 4th Street bus comes along and squashes.

The 800 Building, Louisville’s early 1960s contribution to bad architecture. There it stands, a high rise apartment complex, a building from the opening credits of a Rock Hudson-Doris Day comedy, 27 stories of impressive ugliness: a wanabee Pan Am Building, its side wings slightly angled back, its external colored panels alternating between soiled cream and that turquoise that reminds you of all the awful, sterile, junior high schools you endured in your youth; with hundreds of toy-size concrete balconies projecting out of every unit’s orifice from front to back, side to side, top to bottom. It rises above the adjacent streets and nearby buildings like a cross between Godzilla and Robby the Robot, a testament to its misguided and misbegotten age, when buildings were built with its intended human occupants, at best, an afterthought, a pastel termite mound in which one imagines its denizens hooked by feeding tubes to their television sets which play, nonstop, reruns of, not even “I Love Lucy” and “The Honeymooners” but only “Leave It to Beaver,” “F-Troop,” and “Mayberry RFD.”

My God, one thinks, of office buildings, sports stadia, and other urban structures less than half the age of this one are regularly imploded to make way for new ones. Why hasn’t someone blown this monstrosity up, put it out of its doomed-from-the-start misery? And yet, even as one allows oneself these thoughts, even as one involuntarily imagines some architectural jihadist strapping plastic explosives to himself, entering the building, and, after carefully warning all the residents and staff to evacuate, detonating the explosives as he envisions his entrance into architecture paradise where he will eternally enjoy the pleasures of 67 residences designed by I.M. Pei, Le Corbusier, Gehry, Wright, Louis Sullivan, and Eero Saarinen—even as one indulges in this vision, one experiences a twinge of doubt and hesitation because one realizes that it is the very blatancy of its affront to taste that gives it value as warning, a cautionary object, a brick-and-mortar (or rather, glass-and-plastic-and-concrete) reminder and monument of the depths to which architectural design and public acceptance can sink.

On second thought, one thinks, rather than demolishing it, the 800 Building is something all architectural students should be required to visit and walk through, to absorb its negative lessons (the way that
German schoolchildren are required to visit and learn about Dachau and Auschwitz), and to be fined or even incarcerated if any should deny the truth or magnitude of its aesthetic horror.

Ah, but these reprehensible thoughts are stifled by the solemn and substantial bulks of the three limestone churches that line the block between York and Breckenridge. The First Unitarian, with its great front portals now permanently sealed behind glass, as if to suggest that, for Unitarians at least, salvation can come only through the back door, sporting its ever-changing marquee and banners that proclaim, this week, that “CIVIL MARRIAGE IS A CIVIL RIGHT” and celebrate the “BIRTHDAY OF THE SUFI MYSTIC RUMI.” Further down, and on the other side of the street and the other end of the ecclesiastical spectrum sits the Lampton Baptist Church with its great brick-red dome and Corinthian limestone pillars; and on its marquee, with its implied disapproval of the liberal Unitarian messages down the street, is its own unchanging Christian slogan, “OUR BUSINESS IS TO FEED SHEEP NOT ENTERTAIN GOATS,” though everyone knows it’s much harder to accomplish the latter. And caught between the two, like some neutral ecclesiastical buffer, the Calvary Episcopal Church, its marquee announcing only the most uncontroversial messages regarding the days and times of its services. Its only boast, in fact, cast on a bronze plaque in front of it, is that it possesses “one of only two cut-stone steeples in the United States”—a curious, modest, and even self-effacing claim, for the most natural response to this is not “Really?” but “Where’s the other one?”

And so, leaving behind these fantasies of historical destiny, vehicular privilege, tragic pedestrian irony, religious friction, and architectural revenge, we arrive at our last temptation at the corner of 4th and Brekinridge, where Art collides with Eros, where the Spalding Mansion and Presentation Academy sit brick cheek by brick jowl, so to speak, where graying scribblers and nubile teenagers in short, dark-blue, cheerleader skirts mix like oil and water, testing the mettle and moral authority of the poets and forcing them to reconsider the meaning of their dedication to form.
LOS CAMIONEROS: A PLAY IN ONE ACT

Characters:

Frank Dorado: Forty-something Mexican-American
TJ Hemmings: Jamaican-American, early thirties
Carla Dorado Perez: Frank’s Sister, late thirties

SCENE ONE

(A sparse warehouse in Galveston, Texas, furnished with a water cooler and a metal desk. The desk is cluttered with family snapshots. A sign on the door reads, “Dorado Trucking.”)

(As a radio plays soft rock, FRANK sits at the desk, rubbing his eyes. He slides on reading glasses and frets over a stack of receipts. He gives each sheet a cursory glance, then dismisses it.)

FRANK: Nada . . . Nada . . . Nada . . . Nada . . . (Frank’s cell phone rings. He shakes his head at the number, turns down the radio, and answers.) Frank here. I know. I know, Carla. Look, the money’s—correct. I’ll take care of it, Carla. Have I ever let you down—well, yeah, but that was different (laughs) Look, Hector will get his money, okay? The passengers? Yeah. Harlingen. I’ll handle it. This is what I do, right? I’ll handle it. Ciao. (He sorts the receipts with more desperation.) Nada. Nada. Nada. Nada. Na—

(A knock at door and TJ ducks into the office.)


TJ: Whoa, sorry. No comprende.
FRANK: No-no. I thought you were—never mind.
TJ: You speak English.
FRANK: This is America.
TJ: This is Texas.
FRANK: What do you need?
TJ: A Mister Frank. The girl in the front office said he was back here.
FRANK: And.
TJ: It’s about a job.
FRANK: Business is real slow . . .
TJ: This guy. This guy Jimmy. Up in Houston.
FRANK: . . . but I guess you can fill out an application.
TJ: Jimmy said I should see you.
FRANK: Jimmy in Houston.
TJ: He said you run a trucking business.
TJ: TJ. TJ Hemmings.
FRANK: You a driver, TJ?
FRANK: That’s a lot of country.
TJ: I haul dairy down here. Milk and cheese. Then watermelon and grapefruit back north.
FRANK: Well, TJ. Like I said, you can fill out an application.
TJ: Jimmy. He said he’s been doing special work for you.
FRANK: Special?
TJ: That’s what he said.
FRANK: All our cargo’s special, TJ. Special’s our, well, specialty. (a beat) But if I hear you right . . . (pulls the door closed) then you’re telling me you’re looking to haul border cargo.
TJ: Whatever. Can’t make money driving an empty truck.
FRANK: Bad year for watermelon, I guess.
FRANK (looks at the receipts): You and me both. You from New York City, TJ?
TJ: Albany. Upstate. Like I said, my regular load is cheese, man. Vermont Cheddar.
FRANK: New York born and raised?
TJ: Nah. We came over from Jamaica when I was a kid. Not Queens. Jamaica-Jamaica.
FRANK: You don’t talk like a Rasta.
TJ: Been here too long.
FRANK: Jamaica, mon. I always wanted to go there. The pretty girls . . . the ganja . . .
TJ: Nothin’ but trouble.
FRANK: The girls or the ganja?
TJ: I came here for work, man.
FRANK: That’s what this is.
TJ: A job interview?
FRANK: Something like that.
TJ: What you wanna know?
FRANK: Whatever I need to.
TJ: Alright. Know this. A few years back I did some time. Six months. No big deal.
FRANK: Maybe, maybe not. Wha’d you do?
TJ: I didn’t do nothing.
FRANK: Wha’d they say you did?
TJ: I used to supplement my income a little bit.
FRANK: Some of that cheddar fall off the truck and into your refrigerator?
TJ: Naw, man. I just used to, like, sell a little something to this guy in New Paltz.
FRANK: Something besides cheese, you mean.
TJ: This college town upstate. Man, these kids got money to burn. I mean, shit. You should see their cars. All these hippy kids. With dreadlocks. Like I’m back in Jamaica. But these kids are white, man. And driving Volvos and Mercedes. New ones. Got all this money and nothing to spend it on, except, you know, cheese. But I’m clean now, man. One hundred percent.
FRANK: I don’t hire choirboys here, TJ. I hire people I can trust.
TJ: I got you. (gestures toward the photos on the desk) Your family from Mexico?
FRANK: Guanajuato state.
TJ: You didn’t have to swim a river or nothin’ did you?
FRANK: Stayed dry as dirt. It used to be easy to get a visa. Especially for the arts. (a beat) When I was a kid my father was a famous musician in our town, a flamenco guitarist.

(fade up soft flamenco guitar music)

But he always said that if you wanted to make it, you had to play for the ladies in fur coats. So he’d bring my mamá and my sister and me up here, and he’d leave us in Houston. Then he’d pile into his cousin’s station wagon and they’d drive around trying to set up shows. Dallas . . . New Orleans . . . Chicago . . .

(pulls a bottle of tequila from his desk)

One day he left and never came back.

(gets two Dixie Cups from the water cooler)

My father said one day he’d play for presidents and kings.

(pours the tequila)

TJ: What happened to him?
FRANK: The point is, TJ, until the day he left, he worked to give me and my sister a better life. Like your parents, maybe.
TJ: That’s right.
FRANK: And that’s what we do at Dorado Trucking. We give people a chance at a new life. That’s the American dream, right TJ? A new life? (a beat) Presidents and kings. That’s what he said, but that’s not what he meant. He brought us up here to get us out of there. A new life. That was his dream.

(hands TJ a cup)

A toast to a man’s dreams, TJ.

(They raise the cups and drink, and the flamenco music fades. Frank
fills the cups again.)

Uno más?
TJ: I’m set.
FRANK: Come on, TJ. We’re celebrating.
TJ: Your father?
FRANK: Your new job.

(They shoot the tequila.)

I can tell you’re a good man, TJ. You just need a break. And like I said, that’s what we do here. What people do with that break is up to them.
TJ: How do I know this break won’t land me right back in jail?
FRANK: I’ll be honest. It’s not like the State Troopers and Homeland Security are gonna look the other way if they figure out what you’re hauling. But we got two things going for us on this job. One, you don’t gotta cross the border. You won’t even be leaving the state. And two is . . . I’ve never had anybody caught. Never. Hit the weigh stations, keep the speed limit, and when you get to the Sarita checkpoint, you just stay cool.

(Frank’s cell phone starts ringing.)

TJ: That’s easy to say from here.
FRANK: TJ, you’re Black, right? Everybody out there is looking for Brown, not Black. Why do you think I hired your boy, Jimmy? And you know the best way to stay cool? You tell ‘em the truth, TJ. And the truth is you got two tons of watermelon back there. Watermelon. That’s all.

(into phone)


(Frank walks over to TJ who is looking at the photos on the desk.)
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FRANK (continued): (into phone) So how many we talking about in Harlingen? We’re all set then, right? With Hector? We’re square? Okay. Ciao.

TJ (looking at a photo): That your wife?
FRANK: Sure seems like it sometimes…but no. That was my sister.
TJ: I mean in this picture.
FRANK (studies the photo): That was our tenth anniversary.
TJ: Where is this?
FRANK: The Festival. The Festival Cervantino. When the whole world comes to Guanajuato. Dancers, musicians, magicians. From South America. Europe. Japan. The streets are elbow to elbow. You can’t walk a block without somebody handing you a drink.

TJ: It’s nice, man. I like those trees, the way they’re cut like that. In right angles. Like squares. Square trees. Square branches.
FRANK: My father worked so hard to get us out of Guanajuato, and what do I do? I go back as a tourist. With a camera around my neck.

TJ: Your wife looks American.
FRANK: Vicki. She is…well, she was American. I wanted her to meet my grandmothers and aunts. All the relatives who couldn’t come to Houston for the wedding. And Vicki wanted to know the place. Really know it.

TJ (looking at other photos): These your kids?
FRANK: My sister’s kids. My nieces and nephews. Vicki. She died before we could—

TJ: Sorry. I . . .
FRANK (staring at the photo of Vicki): Did you say you’re a father?
TJ: Third one any day now. Wife’s about to explode. (a beat) But kids ain’t cheap, man.
FRANK: Harlingen to Houston pays one hundred a pop. That’s what Jimmy gets, and that’s what you’ll get.

TJ: How much do you get?
TJ: I’m taking all the risk.
TJ: Twenty-five hundred?
FRANK: Maybe more. But the point is—(a beat). Listen, TJ. You don’t have to do this. We can say goodbye right now. No hard feelings. Shake hands and walk away.
TJ: Hang on, Mr. Frank.
FRANK: I’ll just call Jimmy or one of my other guys. And you can head back to New York with your empty trailer, burning up all that gas, and explain to your wife and kids why you can’t make the mortgage this month. If that’s what you want, no problem.
TJ: That’s not what I want.
FRANK (takes out his wallet): It’s not what I want either. I want you to do right by your family. I know you do too.
TJ: Yeah. I do.
FRANK: That’s why you need to think of this as long-term arrangement.

(Frank wraps a fifty dollar bill around a business card and tucks it into TJ’s shirt pocket. TJ pats his chest and smiles.)

There’s a lot of work to be had here. But look, we don’t have to decide this now. You hungry?

(Cell phone rings.)

TJ: Your sister?
FRANK (turns off the phone): She can wait. Look. There’s this place a few blocks from here. The Golden Fox. It’s nice. Upscale, you know? Let’s you and me go over there. We’ll get a little carne
asada, eyeball some tail. . . .

TJ: Lunch in a strip club?
FRANK (puts his arm around TJ): Gentlemen’s club, TJ. Gentlemen’s club. First class. I’m one of the owners, so I make sure of it. Some of the ladies you meet in Harlingen tonight will end up dancing for me.

TJ (backs away): The job’s tonight?
FRANK: Forget the job, TJ.

(turns up the soft rock on the radio)

I got the best food in Texas and the most beautiful senioritas north of . . . Jamaica.

(shouts toward the front door)

Camille! I’m out to lunch. And hey, Camille? If Carla calls? Tell her I’ll call her—

(turns out the lights, and the two men walk out the door)

I don’t care what you tell her.

LIGHTS DOWN

(As the radio plays, lights go up to indicate NEXT DAY—MORNING. The song ends, and the station breaks in with a news theme.)

RADIO ANNOUNCER (V.O.): This is KHTN, the Great Voice of the Gulf Coast. News updates on the half-hour, lite rock and strong talk all day long. This is K. H. T. N. Houston.
NEWSWOMAN (V.O.): It’s 7:28AM in the KHTN newsroom, time for your 7:30 news update. Here’s what’s happening in Metro Houston at this hour: Truck Ride Turns Tragic. Good Morning. I’m Christine Morgan. Sad and tragic news from Victoria County as at least eighteen have been reported dead, trapped in the trailer of a semi-truck, the deadly result of a border crossing
gone horribly awry. Let’s go to KHTN’s own Steve Hernandez, reporting live on the scene.

REPORTER (V.O.): A horrific scene here in Victoria County. At least eighteen people are dead in what seems to be a case of illegal immigrant smuggling. I’m standing here in a truck stop along U.S. 77 just outside of Victoria, about 120 or so miles Southwest of Houston. The details are being released slowly, but here’s what we know at this hour. The Victoria County Sheriff’s Department and The Texas Highway Patrol are confirming that, overnight, as many as ninety people were crammed into the trailer of a semi, apparently bound for Houston, when eighteen passengers, including women and young children, were overcome by heat exhaustion and died tragically. Several more sustained serious injuries.

NEWSWOMAN (V.O.): Steve, what can you tell us about the victims? These are mostly Mexican immigrants or don’t we know yet?

REPORTER (V.O.): Officials say the victims’ families have not been contacted, so no names are being released at this point. They will confirm, however, that many of the victims are from the Mexican states of San Luis Potosi and Guanajuato. (a beat) One tragic irony here, Christine; officials are saying that this was apparently a refrigerated truck, but the cooling unit was either not working or simply not turned on. As for the driver, in a just-released statement, officials indicate the trailer is registered to a…Thomas Hemmings of Albany, New York. Several witnesses allegedly saw this Mr. Hemmings drop the trailer and his passengers at the “Speedy T” Truck Stop here on Route 77, and flee in the cab of the truck.

(Lights and radio begin to fade.)

REPORTER (V.O.)(continued): Officials refuse to speculate on his motive, but a statewide manhunt is currently in effect for Mr. Hemmings. Here with me is the spokesman.

(The radio broadcast cross-fades to sounds from the incident itself, before the media arrived. We hear tires squealing on gravel, the

BLACKOUT
END OF SCENE

(During the set change, we hear flamenco guitar music as photos are projected onto a screen. These could either be still photos from the tragedy or larger versions of the photos on Frank’s desk.)

SCENE TWO

(Lights up and the stage has been transformed into a Gentlemen’s Club. SL is the bar: stools in front and a TV behind. SR is a stripper pole. Next to the bar is a door with sign reading, “VIP Lounge - Members Only.”)

CARLA (offstage): Frank! What the fuck, Frank…

(ENTER CARLA)

    Frank! You better fucking be—Frank! (a beat) Ugh.

(She finds the TV remote behind the bar, and pushes several buttons, but the set won’t turn on.)

    This fucking place.

(She slams the remote to the counter, grabs a stool, and carries it behind the bar. Standing on it, she tries to turn on the TV manually, but there is no picture.)

    Jesus Christ.

(She looks toward the heavens and makes the sign of the cross. She pounds the TV with her fist.)
(ENTER FRANK from the VIP MEMBER door, dressed in the same clothes as yesterday.)

FRANK: The TV’s gotta be on channel three for the satellite to work.
CARLA (down from the stool): Your guy, Frank? Your fucking guy?
FRANK: But the dish was down last night, so you might have to switch over to cable.
CARLA: I’ll take care of it, Carla. This what I do, Carla. My guy, Carla, We’re fucked, Frank. We’re fucked.
FRANK: I’ve been awake for five minutes. How can I be fucked already?
CARLA: Have you seen the goddamn news?
FRANK: Christ, Carla. I haven’t taken a piss yet.
CARLA: Eighteen people, Frank. Eighteen of our people.
FRANK: I don’t know what day it is, Carla, so believe me when I tell you I have no idea what you’re talking about.
CARLA: Harlingen, asshole.
FRANK: I told you yesterday. I got a guy for that.
CARLA: Your guy. Your fucking guy. You know what your guy did?
FRANK: Can this wait ‘til I get a cup of coffee in me?
FRANK: What?
FRANK: Not funny, Carla.
CARLA (takes the TV remote from the bar): Let’s see if CNN is in on the joke.
FRANK: Bullshit.
CARLA: Eighteen people. Jesus Christ. (makes the sign of the cross)
FRANK: Where’s TJ?
CARLA: Your guy? They’re looking for him.
FRANK: Highway Patrol?
FRANK: We’re fucked.
CARLA: We’re not fucked, Frank. As long as you do what I say.
FRANK: Suffocated? Eighteen of our people? We’re fucked.
CARLA: And heat exhaustion. And no, we’re not.
FRANK: But the refrigeration unit.
CARLA: It wasn’t on.
FRANK: It wasn’t that hot last night.
CARLA: It was hot enough.
FRANK: But that trailer is a fifty-three-footer. Plenty of ventilation
for twenty-five people.
CARLA: A few more.
FRANK: An exhaust leak or something?
CARLA: There were more than twenty, Frank.
FRANK: What thirty? Thirty-five? There still should have been
enough room—
CARLA: Hector had a good month.
FRANK: The less I hear about your son-of-a-bitch ex-husband the
better.
CARLA: Hector had almost ninety at the house.
FRANK: Ninety people in that truck?
CARLA: I guess he and Hemmings worked out some kind of deal.
FRANK: Hector put ninety? In the truck? We gotta find TJ.
CARLA: No we don’t.
FRANK: We gotta find him before they do.
CARLA: Don’t be an idiot, Frank. Let them find him. I want them to
find him.
FRANK: They find him, they find us.
CARLA: Not necessarily. *(a beat)* He’ll say something, sure. He’ll
try to save himself. But there’s nothing tying him to us. Nothing.
And who’s gonna believe the guy who just left ninety people at a
goddamn truckstop to die?
FRANK: Look, Carla. TJ knows—
CARLA: They’ll be so happy they got him, they’ll piss themselves.
This is the INS’s wet dream. And CNN and Fox and everybody
else will be there to film the whole thing. TJ Hemmings, mass
murderer, handcuffed and led into the courthouse. The Feds, the
TV stations, they’ll be so busy congratulating each other, they
won’t have time to worry about whoever was paying the guy.
FRANK: Did Hector come up with this line of thinking?
CARLA: Besides, it was his goddamn truck, Frank. His truck. Does
it say Dorado Trucking anywhere on it? Or does it say something like, “I’m a Black junkie fuck trying to make a buck.” (a beat)

Anyway, you and me are getting out of here.
FRANK (takes a business card from his wallet): Read it.
CARLA: Dorado Trucking. I know what your business card says.
FRANK: I gave TJ one of these.
CARLA: Don’t mess with me, Frank. Even you’re not that stupid.
FRANK: He was getting nervous, so I went for the soft-sell. Gave him a little earnest money and told him to call me if he changed his mind. I never thought—
CARLA: Exactly.
FRANK: It’s a business card. People carry hundreds of them. A trucker carrying a trucking company’s card? Big deal.
CARLA: If he’s all itchy sitting here in the club, how’d you think he was gonna act at Sarita? And what if he got pulled over?
FRANK: I told him what to say if he got—
CARLA: It doesn’t matter. You’re an idiot, Frank. But it doesn’t matter. They’ll find the card, and then they’ll come looking for us. If nothing else, just to see if his story checks out. But, here’s the thing, big brother. You and I will be gone. We’re disappearing, Frank. Right now. We’re going to see Hector.
FRANK: We don’t need Hector’s help.
CARLA: That’s right. I forgot. You only need Hector when you need money.
FRANK: Last night made us even. It was supposed to anyway.
CARLA: Hector’s got family in Monterrey and Saltillo, and he’s got friends all over. Guatemala. Honduras.
FRANK: You want to leave everything?
CARLA: You got a better idea? Wait. Don’t. I’m done with your ideas.
FRANK: I can’t leave all this.
FRANK: Don’t talk about Vicki.
CARLA: So what’s left for you here, huh? A few tired strippers?
FRANK: I swear to God if you don’t shut up—
FRANK: Fuck you, Carla.
CARLA: We’ll get as far as Monterrey tonight. Then tomorrow, when
the INS is crawling all over your office, drinking your burnt
coffee and looking down Camille’s blouse, we’ll be headed for
Guanajuato. Headed for home.
FRANK: This is my home.
CARLA: Not anymore. You signed away the deed the minute you
gave that fucker your business card. We’re going back. That’s it.
FRANK (takes a long look around the bar): Guanajuato. Jesus.
CARLA: My kids miss you, Frank. When’s the last time you saw
them?
FRANK: Every day in the pictures on my desk.

(looks into beer sign mirror)

They won’t recognize me.

(takes a bottle of tequila off the shelf and pours two shots)

Where are they staying, anyway?

CARLA: Hector’s mom lives in Saltillo.
FRANK (hands Carla her shot): Do you miss him, Carla?
CARLA: We’re much better at business than we were at marriage.
FRANK (downs the tequila): I meant Papá. (a beat) I’ve still got that
guitar pick he gave me the day he left. The one that looks like the
inside of an oyster shell.
CARLA (drinks her shot): I’m sure you do.
FRANK: Did you keep yours?
CARLA: For about three weeks. Then one night I was sitting on the
curb in front of the house, waiting for that old station wagon to
come around the corner, and I don’t know. I guess I got tired of
waiting. I dug that pick out of my pocket, and I just chucked it.
As far as I could. Halfway across the street. (laughs) And I left it.
Right where it landed.
FRANK: He left us for us, Carla. And for Mamá. To give us a better
life.
CARLA: You’re still a child.
FRANK (Reaches for his wallet. He takes out a guitar pick wrapped
in cellophane): Take this.
CARLA (studies the pick): I didn’t want the one he gave me. Why would I want the one he gave you?
FRANK: He’s not giving this to you.

(The sound of tires on gravel from the parking lot.)

These guys circle around here all day. College kids who don’t have the guts to come in. Scared of girls.

(The sound of air brakes and a slamming door. Carla drops the guitar pick into her back pocket. Frank motions toward the VIP door. They are moving that way when TJ ENTERS. Frank and Carla speak simultaneously, leaving short pauses in which the other speaks.)

CARLA (rapid-fire):
How dare you, you junkie fuck!
How dare you leave those people to die?
Eighteen people! Eighteen of my people!
You got blood on your hands.
You did it, murderer. You did it.

FRANK (more deliberate):
TJ, what happened out there?
I don’t understand.
Jesus Christ.
Eighteen people.
TJ (softly): What does El Niño mean?
FRANK: What?
TJ: El Niño. It’s like a storm, right?
FRANK: Well, yeah, but—
CARLA: A child.
TJ: I remember all that rain out west.
TJ: Her voice. Screaming, “El Niño!” That was the last thing I heard.
FRANK: What are you—
TJ (suddenly furious): Little kids! Mothers and children and—whole
families? Packed in there? In my truck? In my truck! (he shoves Frank) You said this was no (shove) big (shove) deal. You said twenty-five people. Then motherfucking Hector—

CARLA: Out there on that road, it was you and your passengers. No Hector. No Frank. Just you and them.

TJ: You think I don’t know? You think it didn’t kill me to open the back of my truck and see that lady holding her limp little boy, yelling something about El Niño? You think that didn’t kill me? I am a father. A second son on the way.

CARLA: Those were my people. That was my family.

TJ (sits at the bar): I’d drive back there right now if I could. That woman. Her baby. Goddamn it. But no way I’m going to jail again.

CARLA: You’re worried about prison? This is Texas, you asshole. When they catch you, you’re gonna fry ’til your black ass lights up Houston.


TJ: Hold on now. It was you who told me to think like I had nothing but watermelon back there.

FRANK: The refrigeration.

TJ: I turned it on.

CARLA: That’s not what CNN says.

TJ: That cooler was on. (softer) It was on. (softer) I know it was on. (stares into his lap)

CARLA: On. Off. You’re gonna fry either way. There’s only one thing this country hates more than us, and guess what? You’re it, motherfucker. Even if it wasn’t eighteen white cheerleaders you killed. And what . . . you got a little wife somewhere? Kids? They’re gonna watch you die. Just like all those Mexican families who are gathered around the TV right now, watching and worrying.

FRANK: Carla, where were they from?

CARLA: The big boot of Texas is gonna stomp your black ass. And as much as I’d love to stick around and watch . . . (She moves toward to VIP door exit.)

FRANK: Wait, Carla.

CARLA: The truck that every cop in the state is looking for is sitting
right outside? And you wanna wait? You can go down with him, but I’m going home, Frank. With or without you.

FRANK: Where were they from?
CARLA: Jesus, Frank. Who? The passengers?
FRANK: Guanajuato, mostly. Right? Home?
CARLA: They don’t fill out a questionnaire when they get to Harlingen. *a beat* Ponder these philosophical mysteries while we’re putting miles between us and this asshole.

FRANK: I’m not going.
CARLA: That’s the stupidest thing—
FRANK: You go. I’m gonna stay.
CARLA: Stay for what? To be next in line for the electric chair?
FRANK: I can’t go back to Guanajuato. Not anymore.
CARLA: Frank, shut up and get in the car.
CARLA: Oh, I’m leaving. For good. And I hope you come with me, but I’m not gonna waste time debating you.
FRANK: Stop talking and go.
CARLA: But you’ll—
FRANK: Fucking go already. Go home.
CARLA (holding up the guitar pick): Frank, take this back—
FRANK: Your cell phone. Don’t use it anymore. Throw it in the river. And credit cards. ATM cards. Video rental. Library card. Everything. Toss them all. You are 100 percent cash from now on. Get money from Hector. What about your car registration?
CARLA: Everything’s under Mamá’s name.
FRANK: Mamá?
FRANK: Go, Carla.

*(Carla looks at Frank and makes a quick sign of the cross. She exits through the VIP door. Frank sits at the bar next to TJ.*)
You gotta go too.

TJ: Those screams. All that pounding and noise. It’s like I dreamt it, you know? But it doesn’t even seem like it was me. Somebody else dropped that trailer. Somebody else opened the door and saw that woman and her baby. It was somebody else driving away.

*(kicks the barstool from under himself)*

I’m going back there. I’m gonna go back and see if I can help somehow—

FRANK: It’s done, TJ.
TJ: Let them holler at me. Or throw punches. Throw rocks. I don’t care.
FRANK: It’s done.
TJ: I just couldn’t get caught. Not this time. Not with the kid coming.
FRANK: Every cop in Texas is looking for you now.
TJ: You think they’re looking to hang somebody for this?
FRANK: I think you gotta get out of here.
TJ: Soon as I get out on the road in that truck, I’m a dead man.
FRANK: You’re a dead man sitting right here.
TJ: But as long as we’re together, you’re just as dead as me.
FRANK: Why’d you come back here, TJ?
TJ: To get my money. To get paid for the job. Hector said—
FRANK: Hector didn’t pay you?
TJ: Half. He paid me half. Said to see you for the rest. After the delivery.
FRANK: I’d pay you? With what?
TJ: He said you hired me, so you’d pay me. Hundred a head.

*(They sit in silence.)*

FRANK *(continued)*: You got pictures of your kids?
TJ: Come on. You don’t want to—
FRANK: Yeah, let me see.
(TJ opens his wallet and takes out the bills. He hands the wallet to Frank.)

FRANK (continued): When’s that baby boy due?
TJ: Any day.
FRANK (stands up and hands the wallet back to TJ): You gotta go, TJ.
TJ: Told you. I’m not going anywhere. If I go, you’re coming with me. I’m going down, you’re going down.
FRANK: You’re getting out of here, and you’re going right now. Without me.
TJ: How far you think I’m gonna get in that truck?
FRANK: I want you to take my car. It’s the gold Lincoln out back.
TJ: Take your car.
FRANK: And leave the truck right out front.
TJ: Leave the truck? They’ll be looking for the truck.
FRANK: They’re already looking for the truck, believe me. That’s why you gotta go. Right now.
TJ: What about you?
FRANK (drops the car keys on the bar): All yours.
TJ: You want me to drive your car back to New York?
FRANK: Go back to Jamaica if you want. Just get the fuck out—
TJ: Mr. Frank?
FRANK: Goddammit, TJ. You better go before I talk myself out of this. Now I’m sorry I don’t have the money to pay you, but then again you didn’t exactly finish the job. Go on. Get out.
TJ (takes the keys): Mr. Frank. That little boy. When I opened the back of the trailer—
FRANK (turns away and walks behind the bar): Go back to your family. To your wife and that new baby.
TJ: Mr. Frank?

(Frank ignores him.)

Car’s out back?

(TJ feels around in his pockets and exits through the VIP door.)
(Frank sits at the bar and pours a shot, and we hear the flamenco guitar.)

(He raises the glass.)

FRANK: To a man’s dreams.

(He downs the shot, pours another, raises the glass.)

To a better life.

(He tosses back the shot.)

To a better life.

(As the flamenco continues, Frank pours another drink and sips. After a long pause, the lights flash red, white, and blue. The sound of police sirens and car wheels on gravel drown out the music.)

BLACKOUT
END OF SCENE
END OF PLAY
NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

**Kim Bradley** teaches writing at Flagler College in St. Augustine, Florida, and her stories have appeared in *Kalliope, Gulfstreaming*, and *The Southern Indiana Review*.

**Lisa Vinsant Connor** is a professional photographer living in Nashville, Tennessee, with her husband and two children. After a ten-year stint as a stay-at-home mom, she has returned to Middle Tennessee State University to finish her M.A. in English. She is currently desperate in her attempts to escape to libraries and coffee shops to finish her thesis. This is her first publication.

**Peter Cooley** has published eight books of poetry, seven of them with Carnegie Mellon, the most recent of which is *Divine Margins*, 2009. He has just received an Atlas Grant from the state of Louisiana to work on his poems about post-Katrina New Orleans.

**Gregory Crosby**’s work has appeared in several journals, including *Court Green, Epiphany, Copper Nickel, Paradigm, Rattle, Jacket, Poem, Ophelia Street* and *Pearl*; his poem “The Long Shot” was included in the anthology *Literary Nevada: Writings from the Silver State* (University of Nevada Press). A recovering art critic, he teaches writing and literature at Lehman College in New York.

**Lynnell Edwards**’s most recent book of poetry is *Covet* (2011, Red Hen Press). Her short fiction and book reviews have appeared in literary journals such as *Pleiades, Connecticut Review, New Madrid*, and *The Hollins Critic*. She is associate professor of English at Spalding University and directs the InKY Reading Series in Louisville.

**Amy Eisner** teaches creative writing and literature at the Maryland Institute College of Art. She has poems appearing in *American Literary Review, poemmemoirstory, Spoon River Poetry Review*, and *Washington Square*.

**David Eye**’s poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Fearless Poetry Anthology* (vol. 2), *MOTIF 3: Work, roger, Stone Canoe* (vols. 1, 2, and 5), *Waccamaw*, and *Consequence Magazine*, where he was a 2009 finalist for the Consequence Prize in Poetry. David teaches composition and creative writing at Manhattan College in the Bronx.
ROBERT FINCH is the author of eight collections of essays and co-editor of The Norton Book of Nature Writing. His latest book is A Cape Cod Notebook, a collection of his award-winning radio broadcasts for NPR. He has taught creative nonfiction in the Spalding MFA in Writing program since 2002. He lives in Wellfleet, Massachusetts.

BRENT FISK is a writer from Bowling Green whose work has appeared in Prairie Schooner, Rattle, Southern Poetry Review and Cincinnati Review among other places. His first poetry manuscript, Knowhere, is out in the mail trying to bewitch a few publishers even now.


LIZ IVERSEN has taught writing at the Academy of Art University. Her journalism and fiction have appeared in SF Weekly, The Deli Magazine, and Kartika Review. She lives in San Francisco and is currently working on a novel.

ANGELA JACKSON-BROWN is a poet and writer residing in Indianapolis. She is an English professor at Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana, and a graduate of the Spalding University’s brief-residency MFA in Writing Program. Angela’s work has appeared in literary journals, such as: Pet Milk, New Southerner Literary Magazine and Muscadine Lines: A Southern Journal. She has presented her fiction and poetry at the 2009 Limestone Dust Poetry Festival and the 2009 Southern Women Writers Conference and she has been a guest on Accents: A Radio Show for Literature, Art and Culture on WRFL, 88.1 FM, Lexington, Kentucky and a featured reader at Carmichael’s Bookstore in Louisville. Angela’s short story “Something in the Wash” was awarded the 2009 fiction prize by New Southerner Literary Magazine and was nominated for a Pushcart Prize in fiction.

TAMAR JACOBS’s fiction has won the Katherine Anne Porter Prize. Her short stories have appeared in Hayden’s Ferry Review, South Jersey Underground, and The Dirty Napkin. She lives and teaches in Baltimore.
BRIDGETT JENSEN is a graduate of Spalding University’s MFA in Writing program. She lives and teaches in Olney, Illinois with her husband, their four children, two pugs, two cats, a rat, a hermit crab, and a large population of white squirrels.

ROB KAISER, director of the multimedia journalism program at Canisius College in Buffalo, New York, is an award-winning newspaper and magazine writer and editor whose work has appeared in the Los Angeles Times, The Washington Post, Chicago Tribune, Chicago Tribune Magazine and many other publications. His four-part Tribune series on the shooting death of a Chicago cop was anthologized in Best Newspaper Writing 2000. In 1996 the Kentucky Press Association named him best columnist in the state. After 25 years as a working journalist, Kaiser traded newsrooms for classrooms in August 2010, when he joined the Canisius faculty as an assistant professor of journalism. He lives with his wife, Laurie, and their two sons, Sawyer and Jacob, in the Buffalo suburb of Amherst, New York.

SARAH KENNEDY is the author of six books of poems, including Home Remedies (LSU), A Witch’s Dictionary (Elixir), Consider the Lilies (David Robert), Double Exposure (Cleveland State University Press), and Flow Blue (Elixir), and her seventh, The Gold Thread, is due out from Elixir Press in 2012. A professor at Mary Baldwin College in Staunton, Virginia, Sarah Kennedy has received grants from both the National Endowment for the Arts and the Virginia Commission for the Arts and is currently a contributing editor for West Branch and Shenandoah.

LYZ LENZ’s essays have been published in the Yellow Medicine Review; Guideposts, on Babble, AOL, MSNBC, and a host of other seedy websites. She lives on the web at LyzLenz.com and also in Iowa. She is currently working on a novel about cults, God, and fairy tales.

CATHERINE MACDONALD is the winner of the 2012 Miller Williams Arkansas Poetry Prize for her book Rousing the Machinery (forthcoming from the University of Arkansas Press). Her poems and criticism have been published in the Crab Orchard Review, Blackbird, Cortland Review, Southern Indiana Review, and other journals. She is also the author of the chapbook How to Leave Home (Finishing Line Press).

PETER MAKUCK’s Long Lens: New & Selected Poems was published in 2010 by BOA Editions, Ltd., and nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. His third collection of short stories, Family Matters, is forthcoming from Syracuse University Press. His poems and stories, essays and reviews have appeared

**Chris Mattingly,** of Louisville, is the author of the chapbooks *Ad Hoc* and *A Light for Your Beacon: Anglo-Saxon Adaptations,* both from Q Avenue Press. His work has most recently appeared in *Still, Lumberyard,* and *Forklift, Ohio.* Chris holds an MFA in Poetry from Spalding University.

**Claire McQuerry**’s poetry and nonfiction have appeared in journals such as *Los Angeles Review, Western Humanities Review, American Literary Review, Crab Orchard Review, Creative Nonfiction,* and others. Her full-length collection, *Lacemakers,* won the Crab Orchard Series in Poetry First book award. She is a PhD candidate at the University of Missouri.


**Melva Sue Priddy,** a native Kentuckian, is a graduate of Berea College, University of Kentucky, and Spalding’s MFA Program. She now writes, reads, quilts, gardens, dates her husband, and does rustic woodworking with drawing knives and carving tools, just for the fun of it. Her poetry appears in anthologies & journals such as *Motif 2 & 3, Blood Lotus* and *ABZ.*

**Billy Reynolds** was born and raised in Huntsville, Alabama (“The Rocket City”). His awards include scholarships in poetry from Sewanee and Bread Loaf writers’ conferences. His poems have been published in *Chariton Review, Hunger Mountain, Sewanee Theological Review,* and *The Cortland Review,* among others. Currently, he lives in Tifton, Georgia, where he serves as the head of the Department of Literature and Language at Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College.
ALLISON SEAY earned her MFA from University of North Carolina Greensboro, where she later served as associate editor of The Greensboro Review and assistant director of the writing program. Her work appears in such literary journals as Crazyhorse, The Southern Review, Pleiades, and Harvard Review. Her first full-length manuscript, To See the Queen, was a semi-finalist in this year’s Tupelo Press’s first/second book award. She lives in Richmond, Virginia.

TORI SHARPE is a doctoral fellow at The University of North Texas and the assistant poetry editor for The American Literary Review. Her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in reviews such as Plieades: A Journal of New Writing, Blackbird, and Tar River Poetry.

CARRIE SHIPERS’ poems have appeared in Connecticut Review, Crab Orchard Review, Hayden’s Ferry Review, Laurel Review, North American Review, and other journals. She is the author of two chapbooks, Ghost-Writing (Pudding House, 2007) and Rescue Conditions (Slipstream, 2008), and a full-length collection, Ordinary Mourning (ABZ, 2010).

R. T. SMITH is writer-in-residence at Washington and Lee University, where he has edited Shenandoah since 1995. His books of poems include Messenger (LSU) and Outlaw Style (Arkansas), both winners of the Library of Virginia Prize. His poems have been published in The Pushcart Prize, Best American Poetry, Atlantic Monthly and Virginia Quarterly Review. His fourth collection of stories, Sherburne, has just been released by Stephen F. Austin University Press. Smith has been awarded the Governor’s Award for the Arts by the Commonwealth of Virginia and lives in Rockbridge County.

RONALD WALLACE’s twelve books of poetry, fiction, and criticism include, most recently, Long for This World: New & Selected Poems, and For a Limited Time Only (poems), both from the University of Pittsburgh Press. He co-directs the creative writing program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and serves as poetry editor for the University of Wisconsin Press (Brittingham and Pollak Prize poetry series). He divides his time between Madison and a 40-acre farm in Bear Valley, Wisconsin.

LESLEE RENEE WRIGHT lives, teaches, and writes in Denver, Colorado. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in Moon Milk Review, Hayden’s Ferry Review, Cimarron Review, and others.
The
Children’s
Corner
Ranier Pasca

A Seed

I feel like I am a seed.
God said, “Look! I dropped a seed again.” I said, “Please go plant me!”
God went back to their garden and the seed grew into a green force.
Then, I dropped a seed like God.
The seed was a prayer. Then, the rain-cloud made the seed grow. The prayer grew into moonlight. Now, the moonlight shines from note to note.
Rainer Pasca

RUMI ON THE TABLE

I’m thinking of nothing.  
My head is empty like a garbage can.  
Oh, I can’t write this poem.  
Hey look, Rumi is on the table.  
Rumi, why don’t we make a poem?  
He’s purring!  
Awww, he is purring the poem.  
I love you, Rumi.  
You’re the king of gold.
ONE COOL CAT

In a shelter on 55th Avenue and Honeybloom Way,  
There was room filled with cats all lost and stray.  
Out of all of these cats there was a one named Red,  
He had no spots from his tail to his head.  
All of the other cats were covered with spots,  
But Red had no freckles, blots or even dots.  
The other cats made fun of Red,  
They’d harass and bully and mess up his bed.  
“Where are your spots?” Teased Timmy one day,  
“You don’t fit in here, you should just run away.”  
Red was alone, not one single friend,  
Red thought to himself “Why won’t this torture just end?”  
One night Red had a wonderful dream,  
He was covered in spots and seemed to glimmer and gleam.  
“That’s it!” he shouted “I know what I must do!  
I have an idea that will make me look brand new.”  
Red raced to the paint and grabbed brown and black,  
He then splashed paint all over his chest and his back.  
The other cats couldn’t believe what they saw,  
Red was covered with spots from his ears to his paw!  
He was no longer different fore he was covered in spots,  
Freckles and speckles and blots even dots!  
They rushed over to Red and they all started to play,  
But something went wrong later that day.  
While Red was playing and rolling around,  
His spots fell off of him and onto the ground.  
Red couldn’t believe what had just happened to him,  
All of his spots were gone, every single one of them.  
“Hey, those spots aren’t real!” shouted one cat named Tony,  
“You’re a fake, a big fat phony!”  
Red’s plan didn’t work now what could he do?  
He ran off all alone feeling sad and blue.  
Red thought to himself “I shouldn’t have even tried,
Now everyone’s mad at me because I had lied.”
The others ignored Red for what he had done,
He’d try to make friends, but still he had none.
“If only I had spots, I could fit right in,
But who am I kidding? I’ll never win.”
The following Tuesday was Adoption day,
“But no one will pick me,” Red would say.
“I’m weird, an outcast who would want me as their pet?”
But little did Red know he had nothing to sweat.
Early Tuesday morning, a girl came skipping by,
She stopped when she saw Red and with excitement, jumped
really high.
She burst into the room and raced by each cat,
And down next to Red that little girl sat.
She scratched Red on the top of his head,
“My name is Clara,” is what she said.
She played with Red and stayed by his side,
“I’d like to take you home,” she said, “Would you like to be mine?”
Red was ecstatic, he didn’t know what to say,
“Why would you want me anyway?”
Clara smiled and said “You don’t have spots like every other cat,
You’re different and unique and I really like that.”
Clara picked him because he was the best,
Red had outshined all of the rest.
Out of all of the cats she had picked Red,
Because she liked that he had no spots from his tail to his head.
So Red had learned a lesson that day,
Which is to love yourself in every way.
Morgan Lyons

**SPRING DAY OF NATURE**

Tulips bloom
Like garden crowns
Little gold finches
Dart in and out
Searching for seeds
Of the morning
sunflower

Red winged black birds
With painted wings
A splotch of red
And a stripe of yellow
Bolt in and out
Of their seed packed
Reed curtain
Morgan Lyons

AT THE BEACH

The Sand feels damp bellow my feet
   Waves roar in
Engulfing any daring person
   Who stands in its way
Gulls surf upon the waves
The beach freckled with sea shells
   And then woosh!
It all gets washed away
Morgan Lyons

MAGIC

I believe in Magic.
Magic is very special
Especially on Christmas Eve. Horses can talk
On Christmas Eve.
Maddie Swanborn

COMPONENTS OF DANCE

Expression. I choose.
Dance is an ominous forest, I can get lost, but I know I will always find my way.
It is a memory, a story I will be able to tell forever; exactly what I want it to be.
There is no one there to tell me how to be me.

I am I. Dance is an identity. Not something I’m born with, but something I choose to be.
My identity is the way I dance, and how I associate myself as a dancer.
I choose how I want my identity to be known.
It is mine.

Dance is artwork. Not Picasso, our paint is how we move.
I want people to be intrigued by the art of movement.
It is a picture. My picture.

When people watch, I want them to be able to feel the way I do:
unexplainable, at ease, lost.
They get a little glimpse of me, in my world.
No matter how I try to shake it off, I will always be me.

There is no denying it.
Dance is an inner quality, when I’m not dancing it is hidden,
unknown to strangers.
I cannot hide it, though I can choose when I want to express it.
Notes on Contributors to The Children’s Corner

CHELSEA CRIEZ was born on January 29, 1993, in the small town of Walnut Creek, California. She currently lives with her parents and siblings. Out of the three children in her family, she is the oldest and enjoys taking care of her younger brother Colin and younger sister Chloe. During Criez’s earlier years, she struggled with epilepsy, a seizure disorder. Although this disorder was difficult to deal with, Criez didn’t let this stop her. Criez wrote this poem because she knows what it feels like to be different and excluded. Instead of letting the disorder take over, she took control of what made her different and turned it into strength and dedication. Criez hopes to someday become a doctor who will help children who suffer from epilepsy, not only on a doctor-patient level, but on an understanding friend-to-friend relationship as well.

MORGAN LYONS, originally from Ireland, currently resides in the USA. She has been an avid reader and writer ever since she learned to do either. She is in the fifth grade. Some of the poems selected were written by her when she was seven. Her favorite things other than reading and writing are: cats, horses, crows, and Canadian geese; pasta and meatballs, especially when made by her dad; watching Gilmore Girls with her mom and riding her bike. She is very pleased to have her work selected and wishes to thank the editors for their interest in her work.

RAINER PASCA, five, lives in New York on the south shore of Long Island with his parents and little brother Atticus. He enjoys learning Spanish and ASL, swimming in hotel pools and is excited about mostly everything, especially people. He loves traveling and has been to 28 states, Canada and Spain. As a kindergartener, Rainer was awarded the Town of Islip Achievement Award for excellence in Social Studies and he has self-published a small book of his poems at the local Staples which he entitled Rooftops and War. Rainer is currently working on a second volume entitled In the Night.

MADDIE SWANBORN is twelve years old and lives in Seattle, Washington. She attends Seattle Girls School and is in the seventh grade. She loves to dance and takes classes of many styles, including ballet, tap and lyrical jazz. This is her second poem to be published.
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