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Editor’s Note

The Louisville Review, as well as the whole of Spalding University, extends proud congratulations to Frank X. Walker, an alum from the poetry area of concentration in the Spalding University brief-residency Master of Fine Arts in Writing Program, on his appointment as Kentucky Poet Laureate. As a Poet Laureate, Frank joins MFA faculty members Maureen Morehead, former Kentucky Poet Laureate; Greg Pape, former Montana Poet Laureate; as well as MFA Program Director and fiction writer Sena Jeter Naslund, also a former Kentucky Poet Laureate.

This spring residency, The Louisville Review and the Spalding University MFA in Writing Program especially welcome our Diana M. Raab Distinguished Writer in Residence Tim O’Brien to our campus, May 23-24. In preparation for his visit, all our students and faculty have read The Things They Carried and will have the opportunity to attend an open-to-the-public presentation on May 23 at the Brown Hotel and to engage Mr. O’Brien in an MFA-only conversation on May 24. We are grateful to our alum Diana M. Raab for her generous gift to the MFA that makes this event possible. The broader Louisville writing community, as well as our students, faculty, and alums, are very excited about the visit of Tim O’Brien, made possible by Diana Raab’s generosity.

We welcome, with a wave of our cherry blossom cover, our many alums who are returning to campus for our annual spring Homecoming.

It’s not too early for prospective students and alums to consider planning ahead for the Summer 2014 residency, which will take the Spalding MFA in Writing Program to Prague, Leipzig, and Berlin. This summer, 2013, we’re off to Dublin and Galway.

On a personal note, I’d like to let everyone know of the upcoming publication date, Tuesday, September 17, 2013, for my newest novel, The Fountain of St. James Court; Or, Portrait of the Artist as an Old Woman. I’ll be announcing a tour schedule later, and of course I welcome all opportunities to talk to groups about my work and to sign books.

With my sincere thanks for their hard work, let me introduce the guest editors for this Spring 2013 issue of The Louisville Review:

Debra Kang Dean is the author of two full-length collections of poetry and a chapbook of poems. She has also published essays, most
recently in the expanded edition of *The Colors of Nature: Culture, Identity, and the Natural World* and in *Until Everything Is Continuous Again: American Poets on the Recent Work of W. S. Merwin*. “Learning from the Pine: Exploring Word, World, and Self through the Twelve-tone Renku” was accepted for inclusion in Milkweed Editions’ online teaching guide for *The Colors of Nature* and “Archaic Mysteries: An Appreciation of Robert Hayden and ‘The Night-Blooming Cereus’” has been accepted for inclusion in Love and Logic, a collection of essays on the life and work of Hayden. *Blue Sky with Koi*, a manuscript of poems, was a finalist for the Ciardi Prize in Poetry in 2012, and poems are forthcoming in an anthology of work by poets of Okinawan ancestry from Hawai‘i. She teaches in the brief-residency MFA in Writing Program at Spalding University and currently lives in Bloomington, Indiana, where she recently began teaching taiji.

**Silas House** is the author of five novels, one book of nonfiction, and three plays. His writing has been featured in *The New York Times, Newsday, Oxford American*, and many other publications. He is a commentator for NPR’s “All Things Considered.” He serves on the fiction faculty at Spalding University’s MFA in Writing and is the NEH Chair at Berea College. He lives in Berea, Kentucky.

**Diana M. Raab** graduated with the Spalding MFA in Writing Program’s inaugural class in 2003. She is the author of eight books of nonfiction and poetry and editor and compiler of the anthologies *Writers and Their Notebooks* and *Writers on the Edge*. Her writing is widely published in literary and trade publications. She is a regular blogger for The Huffington Post. [http://www.dianaraab.com](http://www.dianaraab.com)

**Charlie Schulman** is a playwright, screenwriter, and theater producer. His play *The Great Man* was a finalist for the 2013 Terrence McNally award. He produced his musical *The Fartiste* Off-Broadway in 2011.

**Betsy Woods** is weekly columnist and feature writer with The Times Picayune and teaches writing in New Orleans schools. She is a proud member of onepotatoten.blogspot.com, a collective of ten children’s writers and illustrators. Her work has appeared in *The Louisville Review, The New Orleans Review, Sophisticated Woman* magazine, *Alive Now, The Literary Trunk*, and *Citizens Together* magazine.

—Sena Jeter Naslund, Editor
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Framed now against the chalkboard, Death steps forward on his many possible legs. Despite his bad manners, he’s here to instruct.

He clears his throat, waves a pointer, first there, then there, while you slump deep in your chair like a worm

like that’s ever worked for anybody. It just makes you more conspicuous. Death, at last, but too soon, points at you

and it’s only then you try sitting upright. After our lives are over, Death says, we understand what it was we wanted.

How little we let ourselves know ourselves. How stupidly we strive for unrequited love. And more things of that unwelcome nature.

All I want to learn from you, you tell him, is how to escape this infernal classroom. He considers this a moment, then replies:

All he’s really here to teach is just that.
James Deahl

EMMA’S WORLD

A toppled sweetgum measures the pond’s edge, shattered branches reflected in its stagnant surface. An airless day of no sound, no hint of movement among tall grasses or the great tree’s debris.

Stones lie concealed by creepers and dogbane on the forest floor; they are the stones of forgiveness, the mineral murmur of lost prayers. Our angels fall asleep in their sycamores.

Any girl could go astray here in these hollows creeks carved—the silence between words an iron tongue locked in her body’s ossuary; her hands, like water, seeking their own level.
Chris Haven

**Bubble Screen**

I stand at the window looking down, my son tossing a football to himself.

My daughter is in the bath, splashing. I am attending her. I attend them both.

My son says someone is here, a car. I am on the second floor, he a story below.

I cannot see the car but I see the football. Through the screen I tell my son to come up.

My daughter is old enough not to drown in the tub. Probably nothing will happen.

Throughout the house hide gifts given to me, bulbous, tenuous, breakable, paint-globbed.

It’s hard to remember when these gifts were made and what it is I am supposed to give back.

My son makes it up the stairs and gives me the ball. I lift out the screen. Go back outside I tell him.

I don’t think this is a very good idea he says, and I say sometimes you have to do things like this.

There are three plastic men in the tub bobbing, at the mercy of the girl’s waves and their legless bodies.

A forty-year-old red maple defends the yard,
the opening large enough for only a flick.

The ball sails at a tilt, but spirals tight, down to the waiting arms of my son.

It’s time to drain the tub and negotiate the climb out, terrycloth the landing.

I stand in the breech. I could leap out the window. I could dive, pump the water from her lungs.

The catch is made not as pretty as any of us hoped but he turns and hustles toward the yard’s end zone.

Of course I checked to see if there was really a car. Of course I celebrated. I do, every fake touchdown.
Brooke Harris

MIDDLE FINGER

“It’s really bad to hold up your middle finger,” she boasts to the playground.

“Why, what’s it mean?” We ask, waiting for her fifth grade wisdom. “Well, it is really bad. If you hold up your middle finger, it means you don’t love God.”

In unison, we gasp. Perfect attendants at Sunday School, our eyes widen at the thought.

“Even worse,” she adds, her voice dripping with authority, she bends down low on the plastic-grooved platform. “If you do it more than 10 times, God won’t love you.”

Our round faces fall; no one dared raise a hand.

By the end of recess, the story spun into a clouded web. One little girl in pigtails got confused and held up her finger ten times! Then she burst into tears when she was told the correct version of the story. Fat Boy Chris offered the flip side: “If you point your middle finger down that means you hate the devil.”

The whistle blew and we all marched inside single file, middle fingers pointed...
downwards, pumping our fists up and down like a dance move, ten times each before crossing the threshold.
Liz Robbins

REBELLION AS ICE FLOE

Three teenage boys in NYC stole a woman’s purse and tried to make their getaway by jumping onto a five-by-four-foot slab of ice floating down the Hudson River. They were stranded on the ice until rescued by police helicopter.

Who among us cannot recall those years of barking dogs that only disobedience would silence, when risk immersion was a kind of tomato-soup-and-toasted-cheese-sandwich waiting beyond the blind blizzard of hormones and parental shoulds? A black pill in a bottle reading may contain cyanide swallowed whole and thoughtlessly. My parents tried. Church every weekend, Sunday School, the lasting lesson of the prodigal son (no matter what you do, you will be loved, you will be saved) becoming fact, becoming daughter. Something warm and staggered about the hunger that helped me lift the window screen, inch my body across the roof, stretch into the maple’s limbs, shimmy down, and hustle through the dark to my father’s car, cold in the driveway.

Even the planning before, an ecstasy: what waited beyond the yard’s split-rail fences? Starting the car, the taste of warm beer and strange boys’ tongues. Release’s erasure. How alone I was and fearless, sinking in deep autonomy’s needle. How little I knew, stuck in the reach-out-and-grab delirium, assuming a hard run would bring safety, not paralysis. Like when I backed down our driveway’s hill, only to stall at the bottom. Trying to turn an engine that never caught, then heaving my full weight against the back of the car, trying to push it back up. Finally red-faced, having to shake awake my father. His anger expected, but not his sigh of acceptance and later, his laughter. The true lesson of the prodigal dawning years after, what only the lucky get, seeing clear as for the first time so many good parents and kids around, and how it’s still a choice to save even our own.
Nancy Chen Long

CURRY

On my skin lingers
  the scent of coriander
and cardamom, ginger
  and fenugreek, a hint
of clove, perhaps cayenne.
My hands yellow
  with turmeric.

When I was nine, I mixed a similar
  concoction with rice vinegar,
boiled it down into a magic potion
  to douse on a patch
of wild cane. That Texas weed
  was supposed to sprout overnight
    like the fabled beanstalk—my ladder
to God, whom I called
  M81 at the time.

Now I boil the spice mix
  with coconut milk,
pour it over bean thread,
  what my mother calls dōng fēn,
winter powder, my Indian rendition
  a betrayal
of her prized recipe.

*

In the photograph, my mother
sits atop a black horse bareback,
snowcapped mountains
  behind her. She is younger
than I am now, barefoot,
her jeans thread-bare.

I imagine her a Sherpa,
or a distant descendant
of Empress Börte, instead of a barmaid
in British Columbia.

A small boy, beaming,
stands next to the horse,
clutching a curry comb.
In another photo,
he and my mother are combing
the horse, their backs
to the camera.

I imagine the two
are laughing—
a sound like
wind chimes,
soft in September,
that quiet time
just before the trees
drop their leaves.
But that was a time
before. A brother I never knew.

*

The mower drones in the background
as my oldest sister tends
our mother’s lawn.
The smell of cut grass
always reminds me
of Texas,
a hot green, weed smell.
   Out on the porch,
       my brother,
fawning all over
   our mother, clutches her
hand as if she were the one
drowning. He raves
about her prized dish,
   so much better than any
of her daughters’. My youngest
sister, threading
Buddhist prayer beads
   at the kitchen table,
   steals a sideways glance
at me. Our brother,
   ten years absent,
   reappears, seeking
ever more favor
from our mother,
   as if being the only son
among a pentacle of daughters
   were not favor enough.
Kristen M. Becht

I’M NOT TELLING, YET.

How can I describe to you, a feeling I do not understand? Depth overwhelming, never new. How can I describe to you, a spirit wrapped tight in a shoe? Sparse and Vast exist hand against hand; how can I describe to you, a state I would not wish you to understand?
Anthony James

Now I Lay Me Down

After a day
of tin soldiers battling
in the backyard grass
and big-eyed porcelain dolls
sipping tea on a sunny front porch
lace collars flapping in the breeze
after dessert plates
licked mercilessly clean
and miniature bodies
rising shiny from the tub
we padded sleepily to bed
the nightlight a gentle yellow blur
low along the dark bedroom wall
murmuring our evening prayers
on polished knees at bedside
hopping with a favorite stuffed critter
into the soft cozy landscape
of pillows and dreams
depth pinned to our pajama sleeve
like a mother’s note to the teacher
excusing us from tomorrow
John Bensko

**SOLITARY BARN**

Some forward looker
with wooden beams knew how thick
and dense they’d need to be.

Termites did not cut through.
The slipshod run of water
down the ways

of horses and cows
that channeled into rocks
and thereupon meandered

could not sweep away
the loft that hoards the bone-filled
pellets of owls. Need gathers dust.

Hay compresses to dirt.
Sticks and leaves fill
the stone trough desire.

When a farm runs out
the cause might be soil
gone thin, or more certain, a family.

*Why* never weathers.
Paint the tin. While it rusts,
it signals the stars.

Somewhere must have been a house,
at the distance of years taken
to grow a tree roof-high.
Replay

My grandfather, the doctor, shakes his nearly empty Coca-Cola at the TV.

Call those fouls both ways.

My father is dead but five days and I will go back to college tomorrow. A commercial on life insurance begins and words hang like a slo-mo replay:

She got those pills from my bag.

I squint at the screen, confused by she—this time my father used a gun.

She said, Don’t leave me in this pain.

My grandfather can fix many things. Once sewed a farmer’s hand on so well he only missed one tobacco season.

Our team scores, but my grandfather’s head bows as when he says grace. Every time I left she looked for more.

Got so bad after the kidney stones I sent your father away to school, just a little boy.

Never should have. Never should have left her that night. But what could I do? He asks as if I could speak referee.
The Louisville Review

Lowell Jaeger

THE COLD WAR AT HOME

*Ask that man to pass the potatoes,*
Mom said, elbowing me to get it done.
*Dad, I’d say, please pass the potatoes.*
My parents had stepped back from the brink
of a melt-down, closed their embassies
and retreated to their own sovereign soils.

I shared a border with both quarreling
nations, and the wall between them
ran right through me. *Pass the salt,*
Dad said. Mom stiffened and pretended
not to hear. So I passed the salt.
I passed the gravy. I sent my couriers
on their bicycles, pedaling as fast as they could.
I dug a bomb shelter in my head
and hunkered there, my transistor radio
pressed to my ear. So much static, so little
reliable news. Nikita and Ike slammed
doors. There was a button somewhere.

One wrong move and the planet could blow.
Chris Roush

THE GHOST SHIP

It is there,
among the other clutter;
a woman’s shoe-box-sized
button box, hinged lid warped
so that one edge
could tap out Morse code;
its silhouette, now, roughly resembles
a tired wooden rhinoceros.
A gift nearly eight decades old
from a young man to his fiancé,
paid for by six months
of saving nickels and pennies
earned at the (now collapsing)
dam-powered grist-mill
on the White River.

I was told it was majestic, once,
a fully-rigged (but oarless) Greek Trireme,
with slats of wood at either end to suggest
prow and stern,
before Great Aunt Jenny,
then younger than I ever imagined she could be,
took it up during one of her infamous tantrums
and smashed it, mast-first, against the wall,
the force shearing the rigging from the lid—
buttons showering everywhere
in a tinkling.
The scarred square hole
the only hint remaining
of that faded splendor.
Before it came to me,
when it still sat on its shelf
in my grandmother’s library,
I would sift my fingers through the buttons,
as if through water, reveling in the textures,
the chittery-clack of bone and brass,
braided leather, glass, antler,
pewter and silver, plastic and resin,
shell and pearl. I would imagine
Great-Granny at her sewing machine,
sifting through the buttons,
her wrinkled fingertips searching
for the right shade to match
Great-Pa’s new blazer,
or a new Sunday dress for herself.

It will stay there, on its shelf,
among the other clutter,
a remnant of family history,
dust settling through the scarred hole
and the gapped lid,
drowning the buttons.
Alison Hicks

THE HOSPITAL, THE SHIP

From his locker we bring out
his copy of Walden.
The words are code.

By then he understands,
it isn’t what he carries
as what’s in him.

I was scared, he says and grips my arm.

The test, to call a sequence of colors.
If he didn’t get them right,
casualties on all sides.

He strung a light,
read the works of Joseph Conrad,
to stay sane,
he told a friend years later:
I never thought the fucking war would end.
Jennifer Sperry Steinorth

RECOLLECTING THE PALMNICKEN MASSACRE, 1945

...a state archivist listened, then said he must be mistaken; no such event could have occurred and been erased from history.


*If you had a shorter tongue, you would be of greater value,*
says the curator’s husband to his soft-spoken wife because seven thousand dead are a great deal to manage. Besides,

*the beach is clear now—what is there to talk about?*
Just a pyramid of rocks, newly consecrated stones,
a cairn in this place whose name has changed thrice in sixty years—

they have called it Palmnicken, Kaliningrade, Yantarny.

*And why open wounds, he asks, it was so long ago—some stories—it’s best to leave them where they lie.*

Who can blame him? For 55 years the massacre slept in the depths of the Baltic Sea, only three people were left who could tell the story. A few more years and the coast might have washed itself clean. One of them, a German boy, not-quite soldier at fifteen, recalled the man-sized ice floes some of the children tried as boats, how he guarded the survivors ’til they could be shot. Seven thousand bodies are a great deal to manage. *Why open wounds?* he asks, but the mining has long been plentiful. Vast are the deposits of the precious we know as amber. In German they call it *bernstein,* the burning stone.

*It’s like gold*—one miner explains of the ancient fauna’s remains, what’s embalmed in the weep of conifers extinct those millions
of years ago—a price will be paid for the ochre glow—
the sepia-tinted windows. Seven thousand bodies are a good deal
to manage, even for that wind that nearly froze the Baltic Sea,

even with mining equipment, the heavy earth-moving machinery, 
brought by Nazis for mining efficiency in the 1930s. 
Earth there now is still extracted, loaded onto freight trains,

and shipped like traitors to commercial spray houses elsewhere—
where men with high-pressure hoses and waterproof jumpers
winnow the jewels from the blue earth like wheat from the chaff.

It must have been difficult to manage so many marching prisoners—
on the backside of the frontlines with their liberators advancing,
even with all their equipment, a few pieces of artillery,

even with the teeth of January scrubbing the brackish coast—
the wind can drown a cry more quickly than the sea will take
a body, but it’s slower than a bullet through a burlap coat.

Are there mollusks in these waters—mussels or shrimp?
How can we know, if we’ve never been there—their shells
like pearlescent ears collecting on the shore—

The curse of clam is what it keeps inside its helmet a lifetime,
the slipperiness of survival, only the dead get to give up
their ghosts. Biologists are thankful for the lives preserved in amber,

what they tell in their still, though slightly muffled way—
the colors that are visible, perfect antenna, all the delicate feet
that remain unbroken. How do we enter this water—as women,

as children—backing against the waves of a New Year’s history—
And does it matter how close we came to hearing

their testimonies—
Auschwitz liberated just a week before? How many times
must a life be erased before all trace disappears?
And still what may be found—years long after—
and rubbed to reveal some startling light. An old fisherman docking,

having lived there all his life, says *What marker? It’s unlikely
there were ever holocaust victims here.* Because seven thousand
dead
are a great deal to manage, but it’s only a drop in the bucket

from our unfathomable well. The curator looks at her husband
as she knits together her hands, *The only thing I remember is—
I was never allowed to play there, though it was the closest beach,

and it had the smoothest sand.*
Jennifer Whitaker

IN THE DICTIONARY OF BALLET TERMS,

there is a violence you can’t imagine.
At first, the words fluttered around Madame like moths, flimsy, ephemeral—

then written out on the chalkboard at the studio’s end

jeté frappé tombé battu

a daily allowance of words
turning over in our mouths like candy, now hard, now sweet.

With their meanings I picked the lock of ballet’s secrets:

to throw to strike to fall beaten

these words that told me back the story, making it beautiful—

so that I didn’t flinch when her cane crashed the downbeat on the wood floor, swollen and creaking in the heat,
our spines strung straight as a belt pulled taut
the salt striating our legs—

didn’t flinch after class in the changing room
damp and elegant as the inside of a lung
as I peeled off my slippers like a rough skin, stripped away the black leotard and peach tights for street clothes,
the other girls’ eyes lingering like cool cloths on the welts raised on my chest.

When I looked up through the clerestories
I saw the night sky already leading me like a girl into a fairytale wood,
already heard myself whispering along the path all my strange new words that spoke of home.
Eric Scott Sutherland

THE DEFINITION OF INSANITY

—places haunted
Now with whatever it was we left there
To find whatever it was we wanted.
—Joe Bolton, from “Woodshedding: Kentucky, 1980”

There he is again
hiding hands
in empty pockets.
His jaw juts out
as an under bite,
mouth turned
to permanent frown
like a horse shoe spilling its luck,
the weight pulling his head
toward the floor.

When he walks in
he immediately looks up
toward the glass top
of the rotunda,
five stories high,
where the world’s
largest ceiling clock
keeps time
while he’s busy
killing it,
a pendulum.

He’ll be back tomorrow
and the day after that
and the day
after that
and the
day
after that,
as if he expects
to see something new,
something he might have missed,
some miraculous light
shining down that wasn’t there
the day before
or
the day
before
or the
day before.
This image clearly persists: the neighbor’s dead dog in rigor mortis inching along with husks in the nullah; us on the bridge. You flung a pebble and it hit his bloated belly, then ricocheted into a bush. We returned possessing a strange matter, denser than faith, even if faith is no matter, into a forsaken home where the only light on would be His bared teeth, a necklace of blood on the wall. We wove into sleep playing the reel of the pebble, the leap. This, whelms faith, often more than that light, this. A bush—thickening across memory, across fires—into which a touch, a tiny part escaped.
Paul Scot August

ANYWHERE BUT HERE

In an induced coma, my father lies motionless in his hospital bed, the second surgery fixing what went wrong in the first. Sixteen breaths per minute, the ventilator fills his tired lungs, hissing like a Copperhead, while a tube removes a yellow liquid much too vile to contemplate. Last week he was worried that the morphine they injected into his IV tube would make him an addict, missing the irony when I asked to borrow some. But I can’t imagine what he’s thinking now, his eyes shut off to the son who stands next to his bed, squeezing his hand while looking out the window at the stand of bare trees and thin snow, thinking about where he’ll be going to next, another place that he’d rather be.
CROWNING

I’m novocained, but pain remains in the drill’s sound, its pressure. I prod my fingers into cool leather, moor my eyes to the ceiling’s poster (the seventh hole at Pebble Beach), sink into the plush green, the Pacific blue.

Before you died, the dentist always asked about you, marveled at your hole-in-one, laughed over new clubs to improve your game. He didn’t speak of you this time. The omission heavy as the hole in my tooth—a loss my tongue worries.

My gaze lapses to the dental chart I don’t want to see. Numbered teeth big as clenched fists, (molars, incisors, canines), the cross-section of labeled parts, enamel to roots single- or doubly-forked.

I try to hear the drill’s wail as a prayer that my number twenty (second bicuspid) doesn’t crack or my jaw unlatch as I sound the words in my head: dentin, cementum, pulp. How you must have ached for it to end, even as you grudged to leave this world.
**J.D. Isip**

**Chow Hall**

We drank four glasses of water per meal. Four. I never even thought it possible.

By comparison, it just really wasn’t all that bad and Marines and Army guys have it so much worse, and they’ll tell you so.

Rows of us, bald and scared, hunched over trays, Oliver Twist-like

I’m such a cliché. I joined the Air Force to get away because one more damn day of life as I was was not an option—*oh the heroic determination!*

Training Instructors—TIs—sat at the front in what was called the Snake Pit

If you did not finish your four glasses of water, and you were caught, some TI would roar, “Get yer ass on the floor and start pushing, airman!”

We secretly enjoyed this calculated humiliation—mostly because it wasn’t ours

Most of us made it through those few weeks. One poor bastard died, some freak meningitis thing. *Who knew?* No one remembers his name.

Every now and then, I feel the need to drink four glasses of water for my friends.

Each of them could not be more astonished by this ridiculous feat or the one where I spent four years not being gay. Four.
Elton Glaser

RENTED DAYS IN THE POCONOS

When I swim, my feet
Part the waterweeds like fish,
In the shallow end, the minnow end,
Lake of weak tea, and me to stir it.

Not far off, the ducks float
In a slow armada, some tilting themselves
Upsidedown to feed. A few
Walk across the sand with a sailor’s roll,
Shaking the wet from their wings.

The same sun that, at noon,
Tips each ripple with a diamond crest,
At evening splits the lake in two,
One side a drowsy pewter, the other
Green along the shore, where birch and oak
Preen their leaves in a glassy shimmer.

That rowboat with a broken oar
Rubbing against the dock—if I took it out,
At every stroke it would
Turn in circles, one lazy blade
Piercing the lake. It would turn
Like the calm hand of a clock, time
Winding down around me.

Already, cool air slips off the mountain,
The first thin touch of fall,
When only yesterday the lake lay idle,
Fat and sleek, the moon
Drifting over it, late summer
Warm with moths and stars, a night
Still to be naked in.
Margaret Mackinnon

LANDSCAPE AFTER THOMAS EAKINS

This pear tree looks silver in the morning. This summer hill above the river offers all consolations. Everything I’ve written seems transient before you. I imagine you now, wild hair awry, shaggy, wet from the shower you love to take outdoors. Rivulets trace the contours of your skin. How Eakins might have painted you— Here, descending to swim in some spot where the water spreads out wide and flat and green. I can see in his men the same planes— muscle, flesh shaped the way you are— the same tense insistence, the same languid ease. Eakins’ great friend Whitman wrote about how Little streams pass’d all over their bodies. These same clean lines of shoulder and of back, of belly, hip— soft black inks inscribed forever on my hands.
Jeffrey C. Alfier

THE BRILLIANT BLUSH OF ANCIENT COTTONWOODS

With ancient intent, a dozen horses
face each point of the compass
like lookouts posted against
the hunger of pumas. Scents
from their bodies rise so tidal
they soak the twilight hours
that catch you unaware.

At night, you listen for serpents
in arid slide through the held-breath
silence of windless underbrush.
A palomino’s pale frame dances
under the night-washed
yellow of palo verde blossoms.
She crosses to a cutbank, descends
the soft walls into Pantano Wash.

Building speed into a full run,
distance shades her flight
against the embankment
of the vanished river,
her hooves sparking stone
as if to thrust light into earth.
PANGAEA

Out on the veranda,
Thanksgiving Day,
Dad spreads the puzzle
and tessellates the streaks
of *cumulus virga*
above the windmills,
harvest time in Holland.

He makes no progress.
Puzzles are Mom’s thing,
like tidying messes.
Is it cloud or wing
or the sail of yacht?
Dad stares with malice
at a cardboard swatch.

It doesn’t quite fit—
Dad home before noon,
bent at the waist, the twist
about his mouth, the groan.
And where is Mother?
Did they fit together?
So he works the puzzle.

—Just as we’re doing now?—
my wise friend quipped.
—Yes—I laughed, thinking
how nicely fitted
Brazil once was to
Africa, and how
far they had drifted.
Albert DeGenova

What a Son Finds

inside his father’s black fisherman’s cap—
a jagged sweat line, dry salt; a wiry
white hair caught
in a seam; neatly folded, a yellowed
cocktail napkin carefully
fit inside the leather head band.
The son unfurls the brittle
paper, reads the familiar
blue felt-tip script—words
maybe overheard in
the chatter of a warm café, words
to begin or end a thought—
in the time of leather and wood,
the gospel smell of a book store. The son
cocks his father’s hat, napkin replaced,
creases the cracked brim, strides
into the October rain, and kicks
brown leaves into the wind.
Michael Derrick Hudson

ON THE TRAGEDY OF MY BEING FREAKISHLY TALL

They presumed you’d be great at this and that: topmost shelves, bent rims and a shattered backboard. Bigger than Abe Lincoln! How the girls all came up to your crotch for no apparent reason! You had it all but could never use it, like an impotent king’s droit du seigneur, forever lonesome but conspicuous, striding through a thousand acres of stumpy, tittering serfs. There’s high-water pants and nose bleed jokes, boats on your feet and pretty much your own weather. Trick knees, a bad back, podiatrists’ Christmas cards and that perpetual stoop. If nothing else, your skeleton ends up in medical school, a spooky Halloween dangler scarf-draped in a Harvard beanie with five or six obvious nicknames. Student endocrinologists scribble your long bones and pelvis with perpetual speculation: what else of you was so big?
Lynn Domina

THE WORK

For the man and his wife the Lord
made leather garments

–Gen. 3:21

i.

Adam Delves, the glazier
called this window, the man
sinewy, thoughtful,
his shovel angled, catching light.

He’s been cast out. Earth resists,
then surrenders to his strength. His gaze
measures straight furrows, new growth, this work
oddly satisfying.

ii.

God bends over cowskin, matching shoulder seams,
his thick fingers oddly awkward, the needle
he slivered from the cow’s rib
sharp against his skin, nearly too blunt
to pierce leather. God’s blood
constellates the garment, smears
its collar. The cow’s eyes
swelled only at the very end, when her fear
sank into knowledge. An idea
turns in God’s mind, beckoning, prismatic:
could he have created
disobedience in his own image?

iii.

Following vespers, the glazier loitered
at the transcept, watching light
descend through blue glass, lead strips binding
green and gold panes, earth and its vegetation,
watching Adam’s skin darken,
awed by Adam’s sin, grateful
that it has brought him
unfathomably here
to his work.
J. Camp Brown

MANDOLIN ORCHESTRA

Dirge-throated, the wind, like all lament, finds
the level ground endless, empties
there the grit of the mountain

from which it fell,
says the single note of slow-bowed violins
to the teary-eyed erudites: them leaky ashes, hands smooth as urns:

but no man tremolos: or trembles: in unison
:dough men die by de dozen: and a wind impeded scatters no man—

innards nor notions—across an unhindered Oklahoma.
The audience smirks and cackles. My head’s likewise—a stuffed rucksack

of dismal arias, blue note fermatas, an untethered bird’s eye.
But what comes out—a comedy.
Me—a dirty disparate! : You

wish you’s a two, but you a nothin—an empty mask, a grand pause before a grave fate. :

Let me rest then

where the wind,
sieved of its abundant dust
by the tree stand above me, ends.
Let the auditorium empty.
Sharon Goldberg

CAVING IN

Seven hours before the mine collapsed, Rafaela Gutierrez decided to leave her husband. She had a plan. After Manuel arrived home from his shift, tired and muddy and red with the mine’s dust, after she offered him a cold cerveza, after he showered and listened to the radio, after she served him his favorite grilled puerco with arroz, avocados, mangos, and beans, after he played with the children and she put them to bed, then she would sit opposite him at their kitchen table and tell him she knew about his latest puta. She’d packed her suitcases. She was taking the children and leaving him for good.

The affair was Manuel’s fourth during their eight-year marriage: Eva, Sofia, Violetta, and now this one. Rafaela did not know the new puta’s name. She’d discovered the romance a week before on the day Manuel said he was working an extra shift because one of the men had the flu. That afternoon, her neighbor Consuela agreed to watch Ernesto and Elena so Rafaela could ride the bus downtown and shop without her kids running around the stores like crazy.

Rafaela ambled along Serrano Street, looking in windows, taking her time. Maybe she would stop for a café chico and a sopapilla. In a restaurant at the corner, through the window, she saw—how could it be?—Manuel and a woman. Again. Rafaela’s stomach lurched. The woman gazed at Manuel, her eyes dancing. Manuel grinned, his lips an invitation. He trailed his finger along the inside of the woman’s suntanned arm. Rafaela knew how it felt: tickling, tingling, titillating. Manuel had traced the same sensuous circles on her neck, her shoulders, her breasts, her thighs. The woman caressed a spot behind Manuel’s ear. He licked her fingertips. This was not their first liaison; it would certainly not be their last. Manuel had not changed as he’d promised. He had not learned anything, except that he could convince his wife to believe and trust him even though he was a liar.

In that instant, Rafaela’s love for Manuel evaporated like dew on a window. No! She would not be like her sister and stay forever
with a man who did not respect her or honor their marriage. Men are weak; Rafaela’s mother had warned her. Not all men, she hoped, but her husband, yes.

But Manuel did not come home the day Rafaela planned to leave him. She was angry as a yellow jacket. Did he go to see the puta? It proved she’d made the right decision. She scraped the food from her husband’s plate into the garbage. Later that night, when she heard a knock on the door, she thought Manuel was drunk and had lost his key. She flung the door open and a policeman stood there, grim and sober. He told her the news. A catastrophe. The mine had collapsed with twenty-eight men trapped 700 meters below the surface. For a moment Rafaela thought, if Manuel is dead, I’ll be done with him. Just like that. No confrontation. No explanation. No visitation. I’ll be the grieving widow and move away from Copiapó. But she did not wish the father of her children dead. She filled a sack with snacks, coats, and flashlights, gathered blankets, sleeping bags, and Manuel’s tent, woke the children, helped them dress, and they took a bus to the desolate moonscape of the Atacama Desert to wait.

Ten days later, Rafaela and the children still waited. Ernesto and Elena knew their papa was in the mine with many other papas. Sometimes they cried and Rafaela held them close. More and more people had arrived from nearby towns and faraway cities to hold vigil: wives, mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, cousins, children, friends—like a never-ending stream of fire ants—hauling chairs, pots, pans, stoves, firewood. Together they waited in the bleak, brown desert. They waited in the sweltering heat of day. They waited in the freezing cold of night. People from the government joined them—even the President who made a speech. Reporters from newspapers and radio and TV descended, hundreds of them from all over the world. The good-for-nothing big shots from the mining company showed up, too. Town officials raised a giant tent for shelter, another for meals. Rescue workers moved heavy machinery to the site to dig for the men. Percussion drills, with listening devices attached, bored through the hard, igneous rock searching for signs of life. No one knew if the men were alive or dead. Were they buried beneath a landslide of rocks, their
lungs suffocated and their bodies smashed? Could they, please God, have survived the quaking earth and clouds of dust? Everyone prayed. They prayed to Jesús and La Virgen and San Lorenzo, the patron saint of miners. They prayed in the morning and they prayed in the evening and they prayed at night. Fear crept through all of them.

On the eleventh day, Rafaela awoke, pushed aside the flap of her tent, and crawled outside. She gasped. Less than three meters from her, a reporter held a microphone in the face of a woman who gesticulated wildly. The puta. What was she doing here? Had she no common decency? ¡Nerviosa! Would the whole world now learn about her and Manuel? Rafaela seethed. She assessed the woman: long ringlets of black hair, lush lips, full breasts, big butt. Young. She was a beautiful woman, but the kind of beautiful woman who knew she was beautiful. Rafaela wished she could throw the puta down the mine shaft to die there with Manuel. She crawled back inside the tent and huddled under the blankets.

If Manuel was alive, she hoped he was suffering. She pictured him in his subterranean prison, the air wet and thick, the moisture leaching into his bones, the heat brutal, broiling, hot as an oven, hot as a steam room, hot as hell. A hell he deserved. No sunlight. No breeze. No trees. No beer. No cigarettes. No sex.

She imagined Manuel’s lean, sinewy body, now sweaty and sticky and stinking of fear. His face unshaven. His skin itching. His eyes bone dry and burning. His voice raspy. His throat parched from coughing and choking and breathing dust from the explosion. No way to tell when it was day, when it was night. Had he fallen to his knees on the damp ground and prayed for his life? Was he terrified he’d never hug his children again, never make love to his wife again, never screw his mistress again? Who did he think of more, that puta or her? Was he depressed? Did he have nightmares? Cry? Panic? Pee his pants? Go crazy with claustrophobia? Manuel knew the mines. He knew the dangers. He’d worked there since he was eighteen. But mining was a poor choice for a man so antsy, unsettled, and impulsive. He did not relish the underground as some of the men did—moles, he called them—who were born to burrow and drill and coax copper ore from the rich veins. Rafaela had begged him to quit his job before his
lungs were ruined. She’d begged him to leave when he told her the mine was weeping, a warning sign. But what else did he know how to do? Drive a taxi? Sell empanadas on the streets? He wasn’t trained to work in the vineyards where many of the men from town worked. She’d begged him to move to the coast, to La Serena where her mother lived, where she’d grown up, and look for work there. She’d begged him to leave the ugly city where it almost never rained and, when it did, the drainage system overflowed and the streets flooded. But Manuel had lived in Copiapó all his life. His family lived there. He refused to leave.

For two weeks, rescue crews drilled boreholes to search for the miners. On the eighteenth day, a miracle! One of the drills returned to the surface with a piece of paper secured to the tip with insulation tape. A message. “Estamos Bien en El Refugio, los 28.” The men were alive and well. All of them. The families wept. Hugged each other with joy and relief. Their prayers were answered. The men had survived by rationing emergency food—a teaspoon of tuna, a sip of milk, a bit of biscuit, a taste of peach—and sipping acrid water from the radiators of vehicles trapped with them. Their emergency shelter, their refuge, was a dark, dank, six-hundred-square foot pocket between buckling rock walls with moist, clammy clay packed in the grooves. Narrow tunnels led from the shelter allowing the men to walk and even run, but all exit routes were blocked by fallen rocks. More rocks could thunder down at any moment and bury them alive. The men had rigged up lighting using electricity from a truck. They’d organized, devised a survival plan, and mapped their space designating areas for working, relaxing, sleeping, washing, pissing, and shitting.

The men were alive, but it could take four months to get them out—if rescuers could even reach them. The families continued their vigil above ground and, down below, the miners prepared for liberation. Everything they needed to survive—food, medical supplies, bottled water, batteries, vitamins, lightweight clothes and waterproof shoes, notepads and pens, poles and canvases to assemble beds—was delivered to them in canisters winched down and up, up and down through the borehole.
Every day Manuel sent up a letter to Rafaela. Every day she wrote back. *I prayed to Jesús that we would be rescued,* he wrote. *I prayed for forgiveness for all my sins. I swore that I would be a good husband and father for the rest of my life. I love you.* Rafaela read his words, but she did not believe them. *The children miss you and send kisses,* she wrote. *We pray for you.* Psychologists screened the families’ letters. Nothing upsetting or worrisome, they said. Only words of encouragement and faith, good news, and jokes.

Rafaela waited in line for lunch in the canteen tent. A husky, purring voice from behind addressed her.

“Hola. ¿Como está? Who in your family are you here for?”

The puta.

Rafaela turned and smiled sweetly, like a desert lizard. “Mi esposo. And you?”

“Mi amante.” Her lover.

“Ahhhh.”

“I am so frightened for Manuelito. I love him so much. I miss him so much. We are going to get married.”

Rafaela’s stomach curdled. “Oh,” she said. “You are engaged.”

“Well, no, he hasn’t asked me yet. Officially. But I know he will. Especially now.”

So the stupid woman didn’t even know Manuel was married. “How long have you been together?” Rafaela said.

“Five months. He is my destiny!” The woman waxed on about Manuel, prattled like a child, talk, talk, talk, talk, talk. Now Rafaela hated him.

“I have to take food to my children,” she said.

“Of course. Oh, I’m Carlotta.”

Rafaela stared into the woman’s eyes. “And I am . . . Teresa.” She’d watched confrontations at the camp between wives and mistresses and wanted no part of it.

“Nice to meet you.” Carlotta grinned like the star of a tele-novela.
Rafaela remembered the first time she discovered Manuel had been unfaithful. Laundry day. As usual, his clothes lay on the bedroom floor in a pile where he’d left them. So much mess that man created! She gathered the clothes and sorted them by color. The darks: his work clothes from the mine, blue jeans, and Colo Colo football jerseys; the lights: underwear and t-shirts and dress shirts. In the light pile, she detected a whiff of sickly-sweet lavender. Odd. She lifted a long-sleeved, striped shirt and sniffed. Perfume. Not hers. She grabbed a t-shirt and sniffed again. The same perfume. Rafaela stood without moving, barely breathing. Then she attacked the pile. Inhaling armpits. Examining underpants. Searching collars. Emptying pockets. From a pair of khakis, she pulled two condom packets. Rafaela ran into the bathroom and vomited, the lavender smell lodged in her nostrils.

When Manuel came home from the mine that day, Rafaela confronted him. She cried and shrieked and asked him why, why, why did you screw another woman? I’m sorry, Manuel said. A terrible mistake. Never again. I swear. Please forgive me.

On a ridge overlooking the camp, the families erected twenty-eight Chilean flags, one representing each miner, each flag with two horizontal bands—one red, one white—and, in the upper left quadrant, a vibrant blue square surrounding a five-pointed white star. Rafaela had learned in school what the flag’s components meant. The white band was the snow in the Andes Mountains. Red, the blood of Chile’s native Araucanian Indians who died resisting Spanish invaders. Blue embodied the clear sky of Chile’s languid, balmy summers. And the white star echoed the Indians’ coat of arms on their battlefield banners.

For Rafaela, the star also symbolized the stars that glimmered over the ocean in La Serena where she swam as a child, where she pretended she was a mermaid, where she ran along the beach and fell and cut her chin on a rock, leaving a small scar that marked her face with the slightest imperfection. She thought the scar gave her character. Carlotta’s face, of course, was flawless.

Rafaela remembered the sunny La Serena day she met Manuel: Fiestas Patrias, at her neighbor’s barbecue. Juan had introduced her
to his “crazy cousin from Copiapó.” That evening, she and Manuel strolled along the esplanade hand-in-hand and he kissed her under the starlight. He pointed to the sky and said, “Pick a star, Rafaela. It will be our star.” She chose the one in the center of Orion’s belt. “Make a wish,” Manuel said. He looked into her eyes and smiled, his perfect white teeth twinkling in the dark. She wished that she and Manuel would be together forever. He kissed her again and she tasted their future.

Rafaela no longer wished upon stars.

Did Manuel, trapped now in the mine, yearn to see the stars? Did he think about their first journey on the beach, their lives so filled with possibility? Did he close his eyes and remember Orion? Did he smile with the memory? The men had asked for toothbrushes. For eighteen days, they were unable to clean their teeth. Perhaps Manuel had developed a gum infection or abscess. Perhaps his perfect white teeth would fall out.

Manuel wrote: My beloved Rafaela, nothing is more important than you and Ernesto and Elena. I am a different man. If I make it out, I will leave mining and look for other work. We will move to La Serena. Rafaela’s heart felt cold and Manuel’s words did not warm her.

After forty days, the camp was like a city, almost a carnival, with a thousand people holding vigil and a thousand more from the media and government. From nearby towns, people sent food, tents, portable toilets, a generator. Red, white, and blue balloons and banners with messages flew throughout the camp: “Courage Miners.” “Hope Can Move Mountains.” Pictures of the men were displayed on a big poster that reporters photographed with their cell phones and sent to newspapers and the Internet. Altars with lit candles and statuettes of La Virgen dotted the landscape. A statue of San Lorenzo guarded the mine’s entrance to keep the men safe. During the day, volunteers served hot lunches and, in the evening, they prepared barbecues. Clowns roamed the dusty roads and blew plastic horns and made the children laugh. The children drew pictures of Spiderman, Batman, vampires, and princesses and sent them to their papas. At night, the families huddled at bonfires, bundled in blankets, coats, and hats. They sipped
hot chocolate, sang songs, and told stories. On a small stage in front of the canteen tent, musicians played the charango and quena. Police officers guarded the camp and kept order. Rescue crews assembled equipment and formulated strategies to reach the miners. The families dared to be hopeful, dared to be optimistic.

Rafaela sat with her children at the bonfire, Ernesto on her lap, Elena cuddled beside her, blankets wrapped around their shoulders.

“Hola.” Carlotta again. The woman was everywhere. Two thousand people in the camp and Rafaela could not escape her. “Such wonderful news!” Carlotta said. “Manuelito will be rescued soon. And your husband, too, of course.”

“Of course,” Rafaela said.

The woman squeezed in next to her. “So these are your children. How old?”

“My daughter is seven. My son is five.” Rafaela pulled him closer.

“What a handsome boy.” Carlotta ruffled Ernesto’s hair.

Rafaela wanted to slap her. “Yes,” she said. “He looks like his father.” She searched for recognition in Carlotta’s face but saw none.

A man carrying a guitarrón chileno began to play and sing.

“I can’t wait to have children with Manuel,” Carlotta said.

Rafaela felt nauseous. She smelled lavender.

Manuel wanted more children, but after his second affair, after he’d sworn it was just sex and meant nothing to him, Rafaela secretly had her tubes tied. She would not risk having more children when she feared she would one day leave Manuel; divorce was legal now and she was glad. The next time she gave Manuel a haircut, she nicked his head on purpose and it bled. “Sorry,” she said. “Did I hurt you?”

Would one woman ever be enough for him? Rafaela thought about the man who had loved her in La Serena, the man she had bid good-bye to after she met Manuel. She daydreamed about Manuel’s friend Jose who was always so nice to her. She wondered about the boy who worked in the market who couldn’t be more than sixteen. She fantasized about flying to Argentina to learn the tango, even though she’d never been farther north than Santiago. She saved 200,000 pesos and
hid the money in a pillowcase; a woman should not be stuck without options. She longed to return to the coast. People who lived in the desert, she believed, turned dry and brittle like cacti.

Manuel wrote: *Rafaela, I remember like it was yesterday when I met you. Love at first sight. You were so beautiful and you are still beautiful. I see you and the children in my mind as if you were right here. You have given me so much.* Rafaela wrote: *You are strong and courageous. We are all united here in hope and faith.*

In the canteen tent, officials played a video the miners had recorded with a camera lowered through the borehole. It showed them shirtless, emaciated, with straggly beards, but smiling. They yelled ¡Viva Chile! Sang the national anthem. They asked for wine, cigarettes, razors, Bibles. They sent greetings to their families. Manuel said, “I am okay. I love you, Rafaela. Take care of the children.” Rafaela cried. She was grateful Manuel was alive. But she did not want to feel him tugging at her heart, pulling her back, only so he could cut her deeply again.

The morning line outside the port-a-lets was long. Rafaela rubbed her eyes as she waited to pee. She had not slept well.

“Buenos días, Teresa,” Carlotta mumbled behind her. She lacked her usual ebullience. Her hair was dirty and her eyes were red and swollen.

“¿Cómo está?” Rafaela said, but she didn’t give a damn how Carlotta was.

“I am in agony!” Carlotta said. “Manuelito has a wife! He has children. He said on the video that he loves her, but I don’t believe that. He said it just for show. Or for the children. I write to him every day, but he doesn’t write back. I don’t understand. We’re not allowed to upset the men so I don’t ask, Why haven’t you written? But I keep writing and say I love you and pray for you and I can’t wait to see you and he writes nothing. I love him so much it hurts like a fire burning inside my skin.” Carlotta began to weep and clutched Rafaela’s shoulders for comfort.

“Maybe he has changed his mind about you.” Rafaela jerked
from Carlotta’s grasp. “Maybe now he misses his wife and is sorry he cheated.”

“No!” Carlotta screamed. “He will leave his wife to marry me. I am his true love. He told me so. He said he’s never known a better lover than me.”

The port-a-let door opened and Rafaela stepped in. “Men say many things they don’t mean.” She shut the door.

The last time Manuel cheated, Rafaela packed her children and her clothes and her memories and they rode the bus to her mother’s house. After two months, after Rafaela refused his calls, Manuel drove his truck to La Serena and pleaded with her to come home. He missed her desperately. He loved only her. He swore he’d learned his lesson. He declared he was a changed man. He wept at her feet. He needed her. He vowed never, never again.

On day fifty-two, weeks before they thought it would be possible, the authorities announced that their third attempt to reach the miners had been successful and the rescue effort would begin, hopefully, in four days. A bullet-shaped, steel rescue capsule constructed by the Chilean Navy would ferry the men back to safety. The crowd cheered, wept, and danced with joy.

Each miner chose three people to meet him when he reached the surface; one to greet him as he emerged from the capsule and two more to join him at a waiting area. Manuel chose Rafaela to be the first and the children next, but she did not feel relieved or reassured. For all she knew, he had picked her for show, as Carlotta said. And even though he chose her now, in a week, in a month, in a year, he might seduce another woman; drink with her, dance with her, make love to her.

Later that day, Rafaela saw Carlotta in tears packing her clothes, her blankets, her pictures. She was leaving. Did Manuel finally write her a letter and say he was done with her? Or had she just given up? Carlotta glanced up and the two women locked eyes, but neither spoke. Rafaela almost pitied her. She remembered how it felt to fall in love with Manuel, her passion red as Carménère wine. She remembered the first time they made love, the taste of their tongues tick-
ling inside each other’s mouths. Her nails streaking down his chest. The bruise on her butt, there because Manuel clutched her so hard, so tight, moaning above her. She remembered the purple sunset they watched as they drifted off to sleep, legs entwined, holding each other captive. Would she ever feel that passion again?

The rescue team lowered the capsule into the hole. The family members waited and waited and waited, some silent, some whispering prayers, some giddy and unable to stay still, some anxious, afraid to be joyful lest they jinx the rescue. Rafaela felt as if she were watching herself from a distance, observing a woman who should be filled with gratitude and elation, knowing she would soon be reunited with her beloved. But she was not that woman. The world’s cameras would be focused on her; she owed her husband his hero’s welcome. Could she play the role? Manuel was a hero in the mine, but not to her. A hero? No. A liar. A cheat. A child. How would she react when she saw him for the first time in sixty-three days? With joy? Fury? Love? Hope? Disgust?

She picked at her fingernails. Rubbed the scar on her chin. Felt her armpits dampen. The doctors had warned the families the men would not be the same as they were before the cave in, even if they seemed to be the same. Days from now or weeks from now or maybe months from now, after life had returned to some kind of normal—if ever it would—Manuel might be lost in depression, suffer nightmares, contemplate suicide, feel paranoid and fragile and unable to sleep. He might be paralyzed by anxiety. Have trouble expressing affection or concentrating on work. He might require medication to get through the day or night. Rafaela knew Manuel would need her now more than ever.

The capsule emerged from the mine. A rescue worker wearing an orange jumpsuit helped the first miner climb out into fresh air. He wore a blue hardhat, green moisture-resistant coveralls, and sunglasses to protect his eyes from the first shock of sunlight. The man thrust both arms in the air and yelled, “¡Viva Chile!” The families cheered, screamed, cried. They waved flags, blew vuvuzelas, and released balloons. The man’s wife ran to him and they embraced, holding each other as if they might never let go. The rescue continued. After an-
other forty minutes, a second man reached the surface. He dropped to
his knees, pressed his palms together, and offered a prayer of thanks.
Then, the third man, the fourth, the fifth. Finally, the eleventh. Man-
uel. He stepped from the capsule into the light. Rafaela saw he was
skinny and pale, but still handsome. He grinned and raised his fist in
triumph. Rafaela did not move. She watched Manuel turn frightened
and confused as he searched for her. She saw his helplessness, his
desperation, his yearning, but she could not, would not forgive him.
Some things, she believed, you do not forgive. But she would give
him one last chance. She would not tell him she knew about Carlotta.
She would let him think, by the grace of God, he’d dodged that bullet.
But Rafaela knew it was by her grace.

She walked slowly toward her husband.
Amanda Jo Runyon

ALTAR CALL

“All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was.”

–Toni Morrison

Connie believes God lives in the river. She imagines Him floating, palms up, weaving His body through rocks and weeds. Untamed strands of hair float about His head, and His eyes are round and smooth as the pebbles that force their way into the mesh of her swimming shoes. She grips the frayed bamboo of the bench and leans across the canoe to look for His arms. The water is muddy, and she sees nothing but shapes of curious fish flocking to join His congregation. The boat shifts beneath her, sending a cool spray across her fingertips.

“Sit down before you tip us.” His voice sounds miles away, though Curtis sits in the front of the boat, so close to Connie she can see his muscles stretch and crease as he slices the water with his paddle. Her own paddle rests against her feet. He has taught her the rules, even the proper names of every stroke. The J-stroke pushes the stern away from the paddle, the Draw pulls them together. She remembers to sit up straight and where to place her thumbs, but she never manages more than a sloppy sweep stroke. Curtis says she is not strong enough and handles the paddles himself.

Connie gives up her watch for God and leans against the bench. Curtis throws a glance across his shoulder. His eyebrow is arched and his lips are straight. “And put your jacket on.”

She pulls a life jacket from beneath the cooler that is wedged between them in the boat. It is snug, and a pain shoots through her swollen breasts as she struggles to fasten the latch. “I think it’s broken,” she lies and tucks the straps beneath her shirt.

There has been no change in her stomach. No sudden weight gain, no tell tale bump above the button of her jeans. She has not even felt the tremors of nausea in the mornings. There has been only this feeling in her chest, a tenderness that makes her breath stick sharp in her
throat. She slides her hand under her shirt, pushes her skin to will a movement, some proof of life inside her gut. She feels nothing on her fingers but sweat and dirt. Connie lies back on the floor of the boat and rests her head against the bench. She briefly slips her arm back over the edge, rinsing the emptiness from her palm.

The sun tugs at the blood in her cheeks. She tilts her chin toward the clouds. The sky is quiet for the first time in days. All week the rain fell steady, leaving behind a greener, slippery grass and a shroud of humidity that clings to the skin like old guilt. A warm breeze strokes Connie’s cheek. She parts her lips and lets the thick, sweet air fill her mouth. She closes her eyes and the breathing of the river rocks her to sleep.

In her dream, Connie is running. Her sandals slide in loose, dark dirt. She clutches the stitch in her side as she bounces through a maze of pressed khaki pants and flowered skirts. Hands reach to her, tangle their fingers in her hair and pat her shoulders. Mouths whisper *bless this little family, Lord* above her head. She searches every face. Some are covered with hands that touch tissues to damp cheeks. Some squint into the sun and stretch their lips into weak smiles. None of them belong to Mama.

The crowd moves as a single wave of bodies, pushing Connie further along. They are heading down the steep bank behind the church. Connie runs ahead to reach the sandy path where the chilly ripples of Mercy Creek turn into the Big Sandy River. Mama is already there. Connie slows when she sees her standing at the edge of the water. Her round toed flats lay beside her, and the tips of her toes are buried in the mud. Her eyes are red. The blue green bruise that hugged her cheek this morning is gone, covered with makeup and fat auburn curls that cling there, stuck by sweat and tears. She reaches out for Connie.

“Where’s Daddy?” Connie breathes as she skids to a halt and pushes her face into Mama’s shirt.

“He’s here,” Mama whispers, “Right here with Uncle Daniel.”

Connie lifts her face. Daddy is in front of them. He, too, has taken off his shoes. Uncle Daniel holds to the fat part of his arm and leads him closer to the water. Uncle Daniel’s tie is unknotted and flies loose around his neck.
“What is he doing Mama? Why is he in the water?”

“Oh honey,” Mama says. She rubs circles into the small of Connie’s back. She bends close to her face and Connie sees the outline of the bruise beneath her hair. “Uncle Daniel is giving daddy back to God.”

Tears pool in the corner of Connie’s eyes. She remembers the crowd as suddenly their voices rise up at her back.

Are you washed in the blood of the lamb? Are you washed in the soul cleansing blood of the lamb?

They sing as the water creeps up on Daddy’s legs. It leaves dark rings around his thighs as he and Uncle Daniel walk further into the river.

Are your garments spotless, are they white as snow? Are you washed in the blood of the lamb?

The voices trail and Mama punctuates the song with a whispered amen and thank you, Jesus. She squeezes Connie’s shoulders.

Uncle Daniel’s voice rises alone above the crowd. “Brothers and sisters let us rejoice! Let us be thankful for this day that my brother, so lost in sin, has listened to that still small voice that’s been whispering in his ear. Let us praise God for never giving up on us no matter what, Amen?”

A dozen voices answer amen.

He places a hand on Daddy’s shoulder and shouts, “In obedience to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and upon your profession of faith, I baptize you, my brother, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.”

Connie holds her breath.

“Get up. I need some help. What’s wrong with you today, anyway?” Curtis is leaning in close to her face, the corner of his eyes drawn down and tight.

“I’m tired is all,” Connie says and scrambles from the floor of the canoe.

“Well, get up and grab your paddle. We’re almost at the rapids.”

Connie hates the rapids. Her only job is to hold the paddle, to be ready to slap clumsily at the water in case the waves prove too strong
for Curtis alone. He always handles it, but watches Connie with careful scrutiny, ready to bark orders for a firmer grasp or a more prepared stance.

“Snap out of it, Connie. Grab your paddle. Seriously, what is wrong?” He thrusts the paddle into her hands.

She decides not to tell him about the dream. He never asks about her father, and she doesn’t tell him about the night he left. How Uncle Daniel gave him back to God and he never came home. She decides not to tell him about Mama, either, or the pink plastic stick Mama found in the bottom of the bathroom sink. How she cried as hard as it had rained for the last three days and said her baby was gone forever, lost in sin.

Connie decides not to talk to Curtis at all. She wants to talk to God, to know Him, to put her head on His chest and float with Him to the place where she can be forgiven. She drops the paddle. She stands and grasps the sides of the canoe. Connie knows God lives in the river. She sees Him. Sees Him weaving His body through the rocks and leaves, His untamed hair floating about His head. She sees His arms. She knows He will take them both. She closes her eyes as she falls. She feels Him wrap His arms around her and hears a still small voice whisper, Amen.
C. Williams

COBRA GOD

The year I turned thirty-two, I lived alone on a parcel of abandoned property in East Africa with a small herd of pigs that had the useful nature to be smart and brave. This fortified solitude gave me courage to uphold my promise, to keep a respectful distance from other people, the real citizens of the world. I’d decided to never kill again, not even the smallest of things. I brought no weapons, no gun or knives. I came back open-handed to seek atonement and find a path to forgiveness. For a while, life was perfectly balanced in my self-exiled kingdom. I was blissful in the solitary court of my simple needs as I prepared myself for an inevitable reckoning.

Twenty-seven years ago, my father had this lodge built in a wide clearing atop four-foot poles on the basic premise that a building on stilts can keep out most small wildlife. In the jungle, there is always the issue of animals too hungry and curious to be afraid of man. For the most part, they’re harmless, but some are worth caution. Mostly, there was a concern about vipers.

As a little girl, I could easily walk under our three-room cabin. Its shade offered a playground in a cool arbor that seemed far from harm. I felt safe there, but I knew to listen for the soft rustle of bamboo leaves that warned of fresh, ink-black babies slithering from their nest. They were shiny and beautiful. The temptation to gather a handful of them, to weave them into my hair was primal and strong. Little white child, a longing Medusa, a head full of warning with a heart not yet willing to become a lump of stone.

Narrow plank steps with wide gaps and hemp rope edges discouraged creatures from ascending onto the porch, particularly cobras. They’d rather not encounter a human, much less bite one. Venom is precious, best saved for hunting. But once irritated they are aggressive, downright relentless snakes. Cobras are “snake eaters,” often feeding on the slower of their kind. Truth be told, they are cannibals.

By keeping the perimeter of the house open and trim, it gave them fair warning that I was afoot. There is no good in startling a cobra.
They will kill you. Surprise only works in jokes and war. Survival sees you coming.

Clearing the hut from the unchecked tangle of plant life took over two weeks. It was a daily battle. After returning home, I’d stumbled across the old machete my father kept to clear small trees and underbrush. I kept it sharp, poised for constant battle with the green arms of the jungle. The rainy season made it especially ravenous, but I have to say, nothing consumes a landscape like kudzu, a Japanese plant I had seen covering the American South. Cutting the vines from my lodge was a comforting chore, knowing I was far from the smothered woods in the Appalachian foothills of northern Alabama.

That was my last assignment. Eliminate a NASA physicist relaxing in his Guntersville Lake cabin, just south of the Huntsville Space Research Center. While working in his lab on the latest mission to Mars, he’d discovered a simple way to stabilize helium for use as fuel, a clean replacement for fossil fuels. Motors would only need a cheap part that installs for less than twenty dollars. It would save our planet. He was exuberant about his discovery, but powerful men were not. Fortunes are still to be had from oil and coal. He had to be stopped, so I was hired to do the job.

Intel was sloppy. His family wasn’t supposed to be there. They were scheduled to visit relatives in Iran, but I imagine it is difficult to travel abroad with infant twins.

The thing that struck me was the blanket of green that swaddled their cabin. It looked so safe, so quiet, like my own family abode in Africa that stood in one of the most remote places left on earth. It was a short trip to the Serengeti plains where humans took their first steps to stand, to see, to evolve. Home was a spot in the Great Rift Valley cradling the bones of our ancestors, dead asleep with our original secrets for over three million years.

The thick forest reached out for me each night to wrap me with a shroud of lush, emerald vines. In the evenings after supper, with my bourbon straight up, I listened to it grow under the darkest skies left on earth. No towns, no lights lie near.

Who knew this many stars were left in the heavens? Light years of future past, the star carbon of long gone family shining down at their kin. Alone is relative.
Once a month, a safari company ventured past on a nearby black market tourist route. Toyotas and Range Rovers, savannah savvy vehicles, it was a metal encased parade of wealthy men and their families. Groups bounced along an ancient wildlife trail with nothing more on their minds than prepared adventures and the sad trophies of animal corpses. What kind of person pays to shoot a giraffe? I would like nothing more than to kill these bastards. But I won’t. They’ll pass my shaded oasis and never think of me again. I will it so.

Sun-baked white men own the safari company, but local tribesmen guide the philistines to what should be sacred destinations. They do it for money and trade, stepping into the culture clash speeding their way. They betray their conscious, but what choice is left? The changed world has come and they stand armed only with original souls. The innocent heart is haunted by hope for the corrupt until at long last, they drink the same heady poison. I’d hoped to escape it, yet here it was… the elixir of greed.

The white aliens will not open their eyes to beauty, unless they can find a way to own or sell it. It is an awful sin. No one should see an elephant graveyard but elephants. No one should put them there but God and his pitiless bitch . . . Nature.

So for now, they carry the weight of the rich and temporary. Only the greedy, void of conscience and soul, can enjoy killing creatures for nothing more than sport. It is murder, but I let them pass. I can cast no stones.

They brought me basic supplies, including useless bug spray, malaria pills, and coffee to sustain my last tether to civilization. Even the locals were nervous getting off the dirt road to carefully step the nearly 100 yards to my door. Here, the forest, the snakes, and the fear grew thick. I counted on the cowardice of trespassers.

The routine was that a lone bearer, followed by an armed guard with a gun meant to kill elephants, would walk in my bundle while the rest of the group watched through tree-dappled light from the safety of the road. During the rainy season, it was a long wait from the time the two men disappeared into the green until they reappeared rushing from the tangle of plants, stumbling and leaping the last few yards. Now and then, the guard fired a shot into the path behind him, just in case a snake or other beast tailed them. The rifle would echo with a
gratifying thunder. Tourists applauded, thrilled with the gunplay.

After, in the silence, I could hear the cobras slipping back into the cover of the dense canopy, measuring and whispering the distance, planning a tighter attack. Their hissing was calm, almost conversational. There was no hurry, no rush in the game.

In drought season, the leaves were few and my hovel sat exposed, tourists stared in wonder at the sight of me in the distance waiting on the porch, several large hogs scratched and poked around the support poles like overgrown yard chickens. It was generally assumed that I was insane. I didn’t bother to try and assuage that perfect rumor.

I wanted nothing more than the delivery service of essential goods. They’d named their price and I’d agreed to pay the hefty cartage fee. No other humans cared to visit the woman who lived in such a place among restless spirits that roamed the thick landscape, patrolled by recent masters of the territory, King Cobras.

Some were over twenty feet long and about forty pounds of calculating muscle and poison. Adults could pull up about a third of their bodies and look you right in the face. By the time your mind made sense of this vision, you were good as dead. It was far safer to go hunt bull rhinos.

It’s said King Cobras look humans in the eye to search for snake killers. Many people believe the image of the slayer is fixed upon the pupil of the murdered snake like a snapshot of the guilty, a built-in mug shot. It is tradition to cut off the head of a cobra so none of its kin can seek revenge over time or distance. These serpents can live over twenty years and have excellent memories, so the mission never fades.

I terminated an embarrassing number of people in my young life, but only one cobra. It was an accident, but regrettable. A seventeen-year-old girl gets easily distracted doing mundane chores as I did, one afternoon cutting back brush. Using my dad’s machete, I’d practice throwing it at trees. I loved the satisfying “thunk” as it buried itself in the living wood. That day, my aim was bad and it bounced off the trunk into the undergrowth. When I went to retrieve it, there was a young King Cobra lying cut in half, slaughtered by the blade. And he had a friend. She had reared up twelve inches of her three-foot body, ready to strike, to kill the murderer. Me.
She’d not totally escaped injury. As she flared her brown neck, body tense and poised for my death, I saw that a chunk of the hood had been sliced away by the tossed machete. Blood ran down the shaft of her yellow body. She was not afraid.

Nor was I. Putting out my hands to the side, I moved slowly one way, then the other to keep the snake calm. This was the one good thing I’d learned from snake charmers, gutless wonders who mutilate snakes’ mouths so they are rendered harmless.

She turned with me, her eyes following my movements, hissing becoming more of a growl. With each pass, I backed away, just a bit . . . getting further and further away. When I was out of the strike range, she dropped to the floor of the jungle and slithered off, my face tattooed in her eyes.

College took me away from Africa and buried me deep in the states for an American education. That’s where my good grades got me scouted by the CIA. My recruiter convinced me I’d be part of a global agenda, some bit about saving the world. They taught me to lie, betray and kill without spiking my pulse rate. I learned fast and developed a sense of urgency. All the operations relied on a multi-tiered plan going off like clockwork, so I was always aware of the seconds counting down. I followed orders.

Then years went by. After so many good reasons, so many necessary missions, I did the terrible thing that sent me home. I needed an unmeasured moment to think.

Time was nowhere. No clocks were there to mark the hour, no checks on a calendar to tick off the days. This far below the equator, my sense of seasons was scrambled. It had been a while since I’d summered through Christmas. Though I suffered an occasional twinge of loss, the isolation failed in its effort to bring me to its loneliness. Instead were crushing memories pushing me up against my past sins and all their lingering phantoms.

I believe in ghosts. Not in the way one decides to have faith in the deeper mysteries or the good intent of invisible deities, but in the fact of them. I knew the depth of dark in shadows, the weight of the dread. To feel breath taken by those who live without air is the gravity stone of the haunted. I am that, so I believe.

Of course I was warned. In the village that was a day’s bone-
jarring jeep ride away from my old homestead, an elderly tribesman appeared outside the dusty window of my ancient Range Rover. I’d stopped for a brief rest and to lunch on the remainder of a ruining sandwich that lay in the damp canvas knapsack. He stood there, a shadow unfocused by the clouded glass, like a figure on a cave wall. I rolled down the window.

“Miss, you cannot go there. It belongs to them, now.”

“No, it’s mine, my family’s. I intend to live there.” He looked around nervously.

He whispered.

“It’s back to wild, miss. They’ll come to claim you. You’ll not be found,” he said.

“Who? I’ve left no trail. I’m already disappeared, gone.” I cranked the window back up a turn. “No one cares where I am, especially me.”

He put his hand in the closing gap.

“Miss, go home,” he said.

I smiled.

“I am.”

He traced his fingers down the side of the truck and began marking something on the door. I leaned my head out and witnessed him draw an odd shape in the dusty surface. Upside down, it was an even more garbled message, if indeed one at all. Obscure and foreboding, it hung in the film of dirt. He traced three squiggly horizontal lines on top of an ‘X’ hovering over three short vertical straight lines. I didn’t know if this was a damning omen or a protective charm.

“Good luck, miss,” he said, eyeing the small stock of juvenile swine in the trailer behind my vehicle. It was unclear if he understood their guardian stature or was just sizing them up for a roasting spit. I shoved the truck in gear and left far ahead of my scheduled layover. If someone was waiting on me, I’d learned it was best not to be late. It only gave them more time to plan and set a trap.

My parents called me Hannah, the pronounceable half of the scientific term for King Cobras, Ophiophagus Hannah, my mom’s favorite snake. It’s a name best suited for a gentle girl, but I shed that thin skin long ago. It’s quirky, like the huge man everyone calls “Tiny.” They never meant it to be ironic. They were serious people,
dedicated scientists in the field of zoology, to be precise, herpetology, the study of reptiles and for them, snakes. Black Mamba, Boomslang, Puff Adder . . . the more deadly the better. Their research went straight to the pharmaceutical companies that funded their work. Blinded by logic, my parents thought they were saving lives. Comforted by piles of cash, it’s what they had to believe. They dreamed their work would cure strokes and cancer. They died in a crosswalk in Mumbai, run down by a stolen taxi.

My childhood was filled with the cultures of South America, India and the massive continent of Africa. Mom and Dad drug me from dangerous jungles to deserts and every shore in search of reptiles that crawled on their bellies and hissed in prehistoric tongue of snakes. Where others saw nothing but black, dead eyes atop an unnerving rope of muscle and unpredictable moves, I recognized the gaze of a conscious intelligence. I longed to know what they had to say. Unfettered by a natural fear of the slithering devil who felled Eden, I took to them, loved them and was unafraid.

By six, I could milk the venom from the mouths of smaller vipers I sold to street shamans and medicine peddlers for cash. My parents didn’t think I needed much allowance, so this was a solution to get money for those common and secret things that children desire. It was easy for me, after years of living and breathing the same air as the scaled ones, I spoke snake.

It was during a high, holy day for Hindus that my love of them grew into respect. The tiny village we were visiting in South India was teeming with locals, visitors and traveling merchants. Against their orders to wait for them, I’d snuck out of the house past my napping parents to get an early start on the day’s celebration. Voices, the smell of food, the music of the day drifted in and took me. I couldn’t wait.

Outside, something was happening. People were gathered, standing thick around an open space in the market street. I couldn’t see what was causing all the excitement. I scrambled atop a crooked wall to hang with the other children who flocked there to escape the legs and bodies of the adults below. From there, perched above the crowd, I saw my first snake charmer.

He was a young man in a loosely-wound turban sitting on a rug in front of a lidded basket. He was swaying and chanting as if conjuring
a miracle. I knew enough Hindi to get that he was calling forth a snake god called Naga to arise and come forth, to be hypnotized by the love and devotion he was offering to the snake deity. A boy, a little older than me, was off to the side softly blowing on a wooden flute. It was a calm song, a tune meant to induce compliance and trance. The boy reached forward with a long stick and eased off the lid of the wicker basket.

Instinctively, I flinched. Somewhere in the primitive cave of my brain I knew what would rise up from the dark hold of twisted reeds. It was fear from a place so old that it came not from my mind, but from my cells, the Mitochondria Eve. I was instantly excited by the terror of my expectation. I could not move. Like frozen prey, I waited.

The boy played his monotonous notes. My heartbeat quickened.

So slow, so liquid smooth . . . a huge brown head, hood flared from its thick neck, began to rise from what seemed now an impossibly small container for the sinuous being that uncoiled up towards the bone white clouds and blue-eyed sky.

I believed I was in the presence of a god. I’d found my way. I claimed my true religion.

We left for Africa the next week and in one of my suitcases, camouflaged by knee socks, were six baby King Cobras, fangs and confidence in tact. The day we arrived, I hauled the bag into the dense forest and set them free. Here, they’d never lose their sting.

This is why I’d come home.

I had been away into the world for fifteen years and lost my trust that things work out for the best. Events unfold in the way they are planned by people in power, the ones the public never sees because you’re manipulated in just the right way to be upset over the wrong things. I know this because it is my work, to correct the competitive field as a “Corporate Leveler.”

It’s a world where public enemies are the best of friends in an alliance of secret gaming with the fate of the world. I looked into the blank eyes of those who hired me to execute whoever got in their way of their plans. No bright awareness looked back at me, no intelligence sought to connect. What I saw in its stead was a cunning, icy cleverness that only meant to win. And it could pay my price.
I’d come to my deadly work initially under the badge of honor and country, but it quickly evolved into deeper and darker deeds. I didn’t feel guilt over the tasks of my assignments; it was an understood part of the deal I’d made for the Greater Good. I’d fled here to try and sort out a simpler, livable truth. In the world of civilized nations, I’d come undone by the savage nature of men of greed. Especially, the one I had loved.

A false sense of security is essential if you are going to thrive. Staying alert and keeping sharp is what will actually keep you alive. First thing every morning in the jungle, I’d lay still, listen for wrong sounds from the birds and creatures that would hail my first warning. I wanted to live long enough to remember the good in me.

My first hour was spent in meditation in hopes of regaining my basic sympathetic rhythm with the true world. There is a heartbeat to the earth that we are born to know, we are a part of it and of its blood. As years go by, we lose eyes and ears to that pulse and become distracted by the noise of civilization.

We become deaf and blind to our nature. It’s self-preservation. Natural selection is not especially kind or favorable to humans. Everything in the world is killing and eating. Mostly, this is good for us as we live at the top of that food chain in polite society. Yet straight out of the cave, we waged a war against Mother Nature.

But then there are tigers. There are sharks. We need to feel above this, make ourselves feel safe from harm. This makes us easy pickings for the temptations and comforts of the world, no matter the cost of the charade.

More than spirit, staying in the physical body requires work. After meditations, I worked my body to the brink of collapse. Pull-ups from the rafters or limbs of overhanging trees. Push-ups with sandbags across my shoulders, made from burlap of old coffee sacks added to my diminishing body weight, the little fat I’d carried was stripped and replaced with muscle and sinew. I worked harder than ever, climbing trees, sit-ups with stones, balancing on a homemade slack line.

Each day before sunset, I locked up the pigs so they’d not follow me and I walked the trail from my house to the road. They whined and grunted their disappointment. Clarice was the worst; she always wanted to follow me everywhere. I’d named her after the resilient FBI
agent who looked Hannibal Lector in the eye and lived. This evening stroll was important. I did it aware of the snakes as they watched and sometimes slithered behind, zigzagging the path, waiting for fear. I gave them none. I was preparing for war. In the quiet, that was what I heard coming.

Pigs hate snakes. They’ll stomp them to death and eat them. It’s why they were here. They’d grown into 400-pound bodyguards with a passion for their work. The cobras understood this right away and stayed back from the lodge despite their curiosity. The cobras could not quite figure me out. They watched from the trees, in the cool shadows. I could see them thinking, calculating the risk to come closer through the army of swine.

Pigs think snakes are delicious and hoped they’d make a bad decision to cross the yard. I had learned from my work that it’s best to pit natural enemies against each other. You can go about your business in the world while they focus on their hatred of the other guy. I had a great respect for the cobras, but they needed to understand I expected the same in return. A small, uncomfortable threat can promote treaty whereas sword rattling provokes cannon fire. I whistled low, sharp notes as I walked. It kept the pigs agitated.

There were five of them, a boar and four sows. The day came when that arithmetic added up to a couple of litters of baby pigs that rooted around under the house. Gaps in the floorboards were just wide enough in places that I could lie on my stomach and watch them as they wiggled and grunted, hunting for grub worms. Finally I had something to laugh about. Somehow the silliness of their play made me feel safe, like my odds were improving.

I would’ve liked to think my pigs were concerned about my welfare, but the truth is, they were contemptuous companions. Considerably bigger and terrible actors, they seemed to believe themselves grander, the king and queens of the yard. They stuck close to home only because I’d rigged a rudimentary fencing of limbs and old cargo nets that I wove into the natural barricades in the forest to seem as if they were free to roam. They were content to forage in their confines because they did not think they were prisoners. I was the friendly, stupid human who tossed them scraps. The hogs were content because they felt in control of their world. They didn’t know they worked for me.
Late one evening, as I was doing my ritual walk along the path to the road, I heard a branch snap in the thick brush. My first thought was poachers, a vicious breed of humans who have lost all heart for the beings of the world and for a few dollars, will harvest animals for nothing more than a hide or horn. If there is a God, let poachers be amongst the first in hell. I would welcome an opportunity to send them there, but I’d taken an oath of non-violence. Besides, my machete was fifty yards away.

I backed into the cover of the trees, off my path and into the woods. Calling on my professional skill set, I focused on becoming invisible.

Crack! A bigger limb popped and my heart picked up its pace. If I had to, if I was lucky, I could break the necks of several men before they knew what was happening. I made up my mind that poachers were an exceptional reason to break my vow. These monsters weren’t off my plate. I’d take their heads and it wouldn’t count against my soul.

Looking deep into the shadows of trees and vines, I finally saw movement. Her caramel hair and sagging backbone rippled in the dappled light as the old lioness zigzagged through the growth. Her massive head swayed side to side as she looked over the forest floor. As she got closer, I saw that her eyes were clouded over with cataracts, one of the ironic gifts to go with the difficulty of aging. Nature has no heart.

This is what cats do. When they feel death searching for them, they go out to meet it head on. They prefer to die alone, away from friends and family so no one ever sees their demise. It is a point of self-respect and pride. I needed to leave before she knew I was there. This was the most private of moments, not to be witnessed.

I backed away carefully until she was out of sight. Just as I pivoted on my right foot to go forward, I heard a soft crunch. More of a mashing of thin, flexible shells and leaves. I knew what it was before I looked down. King Cobra eggs, the only snakes to build nest for their young. It takes hours of grueling work, gathering leaves and sticks with armless bodies, but they do it to protect their heirs, their kingdom.

My careless step had resulted in about a dozen dead. The parents
were gone, or I’d be. They leave just before their young emerge so they are not tempted to eat them. A few early hatchers disturbed by my crushing blow, slithered over my feet and away in a black shimmer of reed thin bodies. For the first time in my life, I felt a shiver from the sight of snakes. I’d broken a treaty by entering the forest, off my path into their territory. It was an accident, but would not be forgiven. It would be seen as an act of war.

Several days went by with no sign of cobras. I thought maybe I’d been wrong to assign human emotions to cold-blooded reptiles. My childhood affection for them was interfering with adult reason. Could be I’d been alone too long and was beginning to let any living thing near me become substitute for the humans I’d left behind. Apparently, I’d over-exaggerated the effects of destroying one of their nests. “Olly, olly oxen free.”

Then one of the baby pigs disappeared. Then another. The mother pigs looked for them everywhere. I did as well. Nothing. No trace. Walking the yard, I saw no disturbance of ground. I lay on my stomach and watched through the floor cracks in hopes of catching the kidnappers, but it remained a thin mystery. One by one, all the small pigs vanished like winked out stars.

If you’ve never heard a large hog scream, let me tell you it is an eerie, blood-freezing sound. I sat bolt upright clutching my machete and ran out onto the porch. At the foot of the snake-proof stairs lay my favorite pig, Clarice. She was dead, swollen beyond belief. The fang marks, quite a few of them, were obvious. Some of the other females were hovering over her, crying their haunted sounds of grief. A couple of the girls were running the borders of our encampment, looking for justice.

It may sound ridiculous to dig such a large hole for a hog you are not roasting, but by my rules, you bury your dead. She was friendliest of the herd, practically a pet. Besides, it was a way for me to work off my anger, show the other pigs I shared their loss and let the cobras wonder what I’d to do next. We’d lived in a tenuous harmony up till now. I wasn’t going to be run off by their attack. I would not let them scare me off my sanctuary. I’d faced bigger bullies. I would fight back.

As a darkening sky pushed towards the trees, I pulled down a
section of the fence, just large enough for an adult hog to squeeze through. The boar pretended not to notice and trotted under the house and lay down for the night. The girls stood there and stared at me, waiting for an order to pursue the enemy. They were a bristly and eager army.

“Ladies, do what needs to be done,” I said. Then stepped aside. After only a few moments of hesitation, they rushed past me and into the forest like a band of unleashed assassins. That was exactly what they were. I sat down on the porch with a glass of bourbon and my machete and waited.

Snorting grunts and pounding of hoofs just below woke me at dawn. Sleeping on the hard wooden porch was not my plan, but I’d passed out, a failed sentry guarding home base. It was hard to discern at first exactly what the pigs were eating on the ground. In her exuberance, one of them flung a piece through the air. To my horror, I realized it was part of a King Cobra torso, the approximate thickness of man’s forearm . . . a strong, muscular man. I’d not counted on a body.

“Stop . . . scram! Go! Shoo!” I yelled. I moved slowly down the stairs in contrast to the urgency in my voice. There could be more and they might be alive. As general of this gruesome event, I’d be the prime target.

Though in the midst of a celebratory frenzy, the girls paused long enough for me to reach the snake’s remains. She was a big one, a breeder.

“That’s enough. They’ve seen what you can do,” I said. I flipped the largest section onto my blade and held it up. The head was gone, stomped into the dirt. It was an act of pure personal revenge. “They’ll back off, relax.” I tossed the body to the pigs and they ran with it around and under the house.

Days went by. The safari company was late and I was running short on supplies, mainly food. The rainy season was closing in. Any day the torrents of rain would make hunting or foraging difficult to impossible without grave personal danger. I took stock.

“Oatmeal, peanut butter, three cans of beans and a tin of something with a ripped label, dried cranberries and . . .” I took a foil bag out of the cupboard and inspected its contents. “About a dozen more
cups of weak coffee.”

I could go a few more days, but then it would start to get serious. For all I knew, the safari company had changed routes to avoid fines and prosecution for their illegal hunts. I needed to go soon if I was to venture out in the Range Rover, a particularly tense chore in the threat of relentless downpours and oceans of mud, tire-eating, soul-sucking mud. At least the safari guys had radios and folks expecting them if they got stranded. No one would come looking for me.

There was also the slight chance that my disappearance had caused a ripple in the world I’d abandoned. My ex-boss might come looking for me. I had bet on our personal history that he’d let me go, move on and let it be assumed I was dead. He knew my past, helped to create my worst secrets. He trained me well. Once, he’d even loved me.

If I stayed, I’d have to hunt in the territory infested with deadly and angry snakes. I had to consider my options. They were grim.

On a gray morning with heavy clouds hanging over the lodge, I began hacking the rope off the steps. I figured if I had to go into the forest for food, I’d better be as snake proof as possible. I pulled on long pants and heavy hiking boots for protection. My thick, leather jacket lay tossed across the rail. The rope was damp from some initial showers, so it stayed flexible as I unwound it from the edge of the wood. Careful not to put the hemp around my legs too tight in case it started to dry out and shrink, I coiled it from ankles to knees. A length of duct tape secured it in place.

Word to the wise: never go anywhere without duct tape, it is the single most useful tool and weapon on the planet. This roll was a new design that featured a red background with yellow and black flames licking across the surface. I figured it only added to my warrior appearance. So I committed to the look, I wrapped both rope leggings completely in flaming red duct tape. I looked like a cheap superhero.

“Damn, this is bad ass, girls!” I said to the pigs that were sneaking curious looks from under the house. I got a few grunts I took as approval. I stood and walked down the stairs. The leggings were stiff, but effective protection. I hoped the vision of me was enough to put the cobras off their game. Maybe the snakes would now think I was the immortal . . . a goddess of death and blood. Far from my original
intent of no more violence, I had one message for them, “Don’t fuck with me, I will kill you.”

I needed fresh meat. With sharpened machete in hand, I walked down the path a ways and stepped into the forest.

The rains stayed in the heavens the rest of the day and night. My campfire lit up the arena of trees and growth around my lodge, its warm glow and crackling set the stage of a peaceful evening in the heart of the wilderness.

Skewered meat sizzled and dripped over the flames and indeed . . . smelled a lot like chicken. Since I felt a great deal of spiritual connection with large cobras, the most difficult part had been skinning and cleaning the snake. Shame and guilt were pushed under by my still seething anger over the killing of Clarice, as well as my desire not to starve to death alone in the jungle. In my profession, the first rule is to survive. When in extreme environments that stress the mind and body, protein is essential. Keep your body strong and emotions in check.

Firelight lit up the still faces of the pig colony that lay low and still under the house. They kept a watch on me as well as monitoring the edge of the clearing for night visitors. Their soft grunting was comforting as I pulled a piece of meat off the iron spit cantilevered over the fire.

I hesitated over the first bite. Emotions came up and threatened to ruin my dinner. It felt wrong, like I was eating one of my kind. I forced myself to make a show of tasting the caramelized meat because I was sure I was being watched from the branches and roots on the edge of the clearing. I had to terrify them if peace was to be reinstated. I could hear a soft rustling of leaves now and then, the snap of a delicate twig.

Then instinct took over. I consumed it with an honest, ravenous hunger. The predator in me had a voracious appetite for flesh, and it was delicious. If I could’ve seen the eyes of the snakes just beyond the circle of light, I’m guessing they would have been filled with both horror and recognition. For with that act, after these last two years of sharing space and almost three decades of a deep, soulful connection, finally . . . I was snake, I was cobra and most of all—I was cannibal.
On the evening of the third day after, I was reading in the comfortable leather chair my father had hauled down here from his gentlemen’s club in India. It was a source of connection for him to his fellow intellectuals who gathered there forming a kind of “wanderer’s think-tank”. They all lived off family money and research grants.

The light outside was courtesy of a golden sunset that popped out after a day of constant rain. Soon this habit would end and it would just be the rain.

Beside me on a crate was a short pour of the last of my bourbon in my father’s old tumbler. His trusty hand-cranked record player faithfully spun tunes from its small speaker as the old record popped, skipping over details of the music of Nina Simone. Her voice swam through the air to my heart, the lyrics of “I Put A Spell On You” hitting me hard as I rose to check the meal I’d made from the beans and the remains of my hunt.

I added a few sticks of wood in the fire of the small stove and stirred the stew. My appetite wasn’t what it had been, but I needed to eat. It was a struggle to wrap my head around the fact that I’d have to readjust to being cut off from my supply source. I had to get used to being totally on my own until the rains stopped. Then I could drive in and hopefully find a new delivery service.

Or maybe it was time to move on. I recalled enough remote places where I lived as a kid to be able to remain invisible the rest of my life. The village would be a tough trek in this weather, through lion country with no gun, but with a lot of luck I’d make it in a week or so. I could set the pigs loose and walk away, free.

As I gave the stew a final mix with the big camp spoon, I realized my body had fallen in step with the beat of the music. I was moving to Nina’s crooning about great loss, the road from love to hate. I danced over to the chair and picked up the glass with the last few sips of bourbon and took it with me as I slid my feet across the plank floor.

Her haunting voice spun me into some deeper fears of the effects of isolation. Would I come out of this more grounded, honor my sworn allegiance to good things in the world? Or would this be the end of hope for me, rejecting empathy as a weakness, realizing a final level of disconnect and blossoming into a complete sociopath. I could pick up where I left off. There are endless works of violence.
for money. Endless.

Standing about a foot away in front of the big side window, shutters wide open to watch the sunset, I tipped back the glass, closed my eyes and swallowed the last drop of bourbon. I made a wish for my destiny to be one I could accept, find some peace.

I opened my eyes.

The glass slipped from my hand and exploded into flying shards as it hit the floor. In front of me, just beyond thin glass window were three giant cobras, their bodies as thick as a fire hoses, watching my every move.

I stood frozen, hypnotized by their gaze as they stood, hoods expanded and swaying. Since they were staring me in the face, at least a good seven feet of them was vertical. Quickly, I made an estimate of their body length. They had to be north of twenty feet long. They could easily strike through the old thin glass and be done with me. A group of cobras is called a quiver, and I was shaking.

Taking in the image of them there, so close in front of me, I felt the chill of recognition. The largest snake, the one in the middle, had a piece missing from her catcher’s mitt-sized hood. She looked me dead in the eye, so close I could see myself reflected in her marble sized pupil. She knew me too. Fifteen years ago, she’d imprinted on my face. Hate is too warm a word to describe her stare.

I eased away from the window and reached for my machete, which was leaned against the stove. I bumped into the record player. The needle slid across the vinyl and came to abrupt halt. I scrambled to put it right, barely taking a glance away from the giant snakes fearing the music was the only thing keeping them calm.

In the silence however, they kept their beat. They looked like seahorses in a gentle ocean current, bobbing in the wind as they focused on me. All I could hear was my heart throwing itself against my chest. Blood raced through my veins, they floated in the window frame, keeping pace to my fear. Finally, I understood the music they moved to, the sound that drove them was the simplest metronome, the one that counts off the minutes of life. The snakes had synced with the beat of my heart.

For the first time in my life, I screamed. Not out of fear, it was a cry of war. It was a warning if they dared breech this house. I picked
up my machete and turned to see them duck away, one by one, and slip into the darkness.

The next couple of days and nights were sleepless. Each evening, just as the sun went down, I expected the snakes to come back. Nothing. Not a rustle. I failed to understand why the pigs had been so silent. I guessed even animals know when it’s best to keep your mouth shut. I stayed inside, machete close and watched it rain.

The sun woke me early. I’d passed out from lack of sleep in the chair where I’d drug it to a corner for a best defense position. I’d nailed the planks of the table across the window frame as a barrier. If the snakes managed to break the glass, at least I’d be across the room and have some small chance.

I made a cup of coffee from the last bit of it and decided to go check on the pigs, gather drinking water from the buckets I’d put out for rainwater. Carefully, I peeked out the front door in case the snakes had come up on the porch now that I’d removed the rope. A brittle screen door was all that lay between me and the hostile invaders.

I eased open the wooden plank door and the squeak of hinges seemed like a sonic boom. The porch appeared to be clear of cobras, so I pushed the door open a bit more and took a better look around. There were countless snake tracks in the mud, huge trails from thick reptilian bodies. Scattered around the yard, in the lace work of those tracks, were the bodies of my pigs. All of them.

That was when I saw him making his way down the path.

The walk was unmistakable, the swagger of an untouchable. He was carrying a small messenger bag slung across his tan, safari shirt, sleeves rolled up past his elbows in the heat. He carried nothing more than necessary, a meal could last him for days. The training kicks in and the hunger, the thirst takes a backseat to the mission. He was unwavering in duty, he was set to task.

But so were the three. Behind him, the trio of cobras was weaving behind him as though braiding the path together, zipping up all escape. If he had seen them, he showed no sign of it. This was a vision that would stop the heart of most men, yet he seemed unfazed as if he were the one to have issued their marching orders.

He was the last person I’d expected to see here, but yet, I’d been waiting for this day. My machete leaned against the doorframe, only
a foot from my hand.

I know he did not levitate up the steps, but there was no sound, no footfall. Then he was there, facing me through the fragile screen.

“Nice outfit,” I said. “It suits you.”

He looked down at his clothes, adjusted the bag.

“It’s been a while, two years? You look tired.” He peered past me into the mess of the house. He laughed and I felt the chill.

“What do you want?”

I shifted my weight so that my hand inched closer to the piece of curved steel that waited for my touch. He was fast, but I remember being quicker. For now, he was still.

“A glass of water,” he lied.

Something in the bag moved.
Mark Beaver

THE UGLIES

The other day I rowed in my boat a free, even lovely young lady, and, as I plied the oars, she sat in the stern, and there was nothing but she between me and the sky.

—Henry David Thoreau, in his journal, 19 June, 1840

The particulars don’t matter much—a blonde girl, a broken heart—the important thing to know is that I concluded my freshman year of college by vowing revenge on Society. As I rumbled toward my hometown in my ratty Camaro, my radio picking up static and only myself for conversation, I managed to convince all interested parties that a general conspiracy was at work. Society with a capital S was out to get me. It was 1987, so by Society, I suppose I meant the usual suspects: the media, Reagan, sorority girls. And of course college radio generally, and The Violent Femmes especially. All of which had set up residence inside the blonde girl’s head and twisted her wires.

Only the vacuous state of Society could account for why I was schlepping a broken heart back to my hometown—where, once I arrived, a downright listless agenda awaited me. I saw myself scooping ice cream at the Baskin-Robbins, shooting shit with old high school buddies under the lights in the Kroger parking lot, and breathing the stifling air in my old bedroom at my parents’ house. I might as well be 17 again. Rolling by starlit fields with cows standing knee-deep in mist, I pictured up ahead the dark cloud surely settling over suburbia and forecasted the next three months of my misbegotten life. By the time I hit I-75 and started that last leg of the ride from Statesboro toward Atlanta, I was in a seriously bad way.

Without any prospects for the foreseeable future, I staked claim to my old room. It was pretty much the same as I had left it the September before—with Prince posters on the wall and a Nerf hoop over the door—as though my folks had suspected I wasn’t yet mature enough to vacate the premises for good. But to remind myself that this arrangement was temporary, only a brief layover, I disassembled the
bed frame and stored it in the closet. On the rare occasion when I would actually spend a night here, I would throw the mattress on the floor and sleep wherever it landed. Otherwise, I would prop it against the wall to create space for whatever illegal, incendiary, and insurrectionary act I would soon commit in that room. But after much rumination, I came to a conclusion: it’s hard to trigger a revolution from your old bedroom in your parents’ house.

As summer began and I considered the possibilities, I watched reruns of Sanford and Son, Welcome Back Kotter, and Family Feud. I read Ecclesiastes. At least twice a day, I listened to Prince’s 1999. Occasionally I ventured out into the real world, to Blockbuster or maybe the mall, where I’d meet a girl who’d promise to call but then apparently lose my number. I hardly called it coincidence. I had a Truth that Society simply was not ready for. It was too deep. The zeitgeist had to change.

On a whim, I bought a spiral-bound notebook at Wal-Mart for seventy-nine cents and started belching my thoughts into a long, stream-of-consciousness piece of writing that eerily resembled a manifesto. I filled up journals. Ink pens ran dry. My overarching thesis went something like this: I’m getting hosed. Self-pity was off the charts.

This particular brand of therapy was not helping. My indignation was giving out. I was grousing in the mirror, but nobody was listening. Sure, I had wedged my mattress against the wall, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that I needed even more space. I needed to clear my head.

So with time on my hands and nobody begging me for company, I formulated a plan: I would go camping. If my car—a prune juice-colored Camaro that sucked gas and overheated in the drive-through at Taco Bell—could get me there, I’d pitch a tent somewhere in the north Georgia mountains.

I had been raised an evangelical boy. I knew about Jesus’ trip into the wilderness.

I raided my closet for the few essentials to take along, a couple of T-shirts, shorts, socks, some underwear. A new writing tablet, a pack of cheap pens, my Walkman. And there, in a stack of books wedged into the corner, was one more item I threw into my backpack as an afterthought—an item that would turn out to be nothing less than my
salvation during that scorching summer of my youth: a dog-eared copy of *Walden*.

Henry David Thoreau was a homely guy. Actually, by most accounts, *homely* might be a polite description of his appearance. His fellow writer and Concord, Massachusetts neighbor, Nathaniel Hawthorne, was more to the point: “Henry is ugly as sin,” he claimed. Then he apologetically added, “But his ugliness is of an honest and agreeable fashion, and becomes him much better than beauty.”

When first introduced to Thoreau during freshman year, I realized that was what I needed—someone who could make ugly fashionable. The professor who acquainted me with *Walden* was a spiffy-looking chap, and seemed happy and normal, so he presented Thoreau’s masterpiece with remote indifference, as though it were beneath him. His was a survey course, and he had dipped into Romanticism more out of obligation than interest, as if to say, *Here’s this Thoreau guy who sat whining in the woods for two years . . . Any questions?* Getting thrown into *Walden* without proper guidance can be a bit like getting airdropped into a dense forest without a map; but something about Thoreau’s voice appealed to someone like me. One day that professor muttered something about Thoreau being an iconoclast, and I cared enough to go look up the word. Never mind that Thoreau died over a century before I was born; or that this Georgia boy had never been anywhere near New England; or that I couldn’t decipher any of his references to Greek mythology. Thoreau and I both had come by our ugliness honestly, so a kinship developed between us, two homely guys in a world full of beautiful faces.

Thoreau famously went to the woods because he “wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if [he] could not learn what it had to teach.” I went to the woods because there was a shortage of mirrors there.

A little known fact: despite his highfalutin talk about living deliberately, Thoreau went to the woods in search of a cure for the uglies, too.

The story is that in his youth, Thoreau took a shot at love. We think of him as the confirmed bachelor whose only bride was Mother Nature. We see him as the recluse who was too drunk on solitude to
flirt with romance. The kind of crusty stag who would proudly declare he was alone, but never lonely.

But before he journeyed away to Walden Pond, Thoreau proposed to Ellen Sewell, a striking young woman who apparently could make enough peace with his appearance to entertain thoughts of matrimony. History doesn’t know much about Ellen Sewell, except that, like so many nineteenth-century women, her betrothal would be entirely determined and arranged by her father. In Thoreau’s case, Daddy said “no.” To his mind, this Thoreau kid had very little to recommend him. He had squandered his Harvard education. He possessed no discernible profession. His pockets were empty. And if those were not deal breakers, there was the ugly thing, too. So Thoreau took his broken heart into the wilderness and spent two years waiting for it to scab over. Prior to departing, he had scribbled in his journal, “I want to go soon and live away by the pond, where I shall hear only the wind whispering among the reeds. It will be a success if I shall leave myself behind.” Poor Henry, though, that ugly self of his was with him every step of the way. Case in point: the final draft of Walden contains the pronoun “I” almost three thousand times. In the first chapter he even confesses: “I should not talk so much about myself if there were anybody else whom I knew as well.”

There in the woods he built his own cabin by hand, chose Independence Day to begin sleeping under its roof, and spent his evenings reading and scribbling in a journal that, by the time of his death at age forty-four, would span over seven thousand pages. Surely throughout his lifetime he thought of Ellen Sewell, and wondered what might have been.

But nowhere in those reams of paper does her name appear.

I couldn’t have constructed a cabin out of Lincoln Logs, but I could pitch a tent. I arrived late in the evening, secured a campsite right next to a busy stream gurgling so loudly that it drowned out almost any other sound. I worked up a sweat rushing to assemble my tent before dark, and afterward rinsed my face in the stream before turning in for the night. I was drying my hands on my shirt when I noticed that, in the coldest depths of the stream, somebody had sunk a six-pack of Dr. Pepper.
Suspicious, I investigated.

If I had climbed through the dense wall of thicket separating me from the next camp site to find a pair of snuggling young lovers basking in the glow of a dancing fire, I verily believe I would have pulled up stakes, flung my stuff in the trunk, and left a scrap of exhaust black enough to shroud the woods for days. But a sliver of grace was meted out my way. What I saw was this: a pup tent; a campfire; and a lone man lounging in a folding chair, a baseball cap pulled low over his eyes, a hotdog roasting on a straightened clothes hanger.

He waved. I nodded.

We were neighbors all that week, separated only by a noisy stream and a stand of trees. Had one of us crossed that barrier to pay a visit to the other, we might have split that six-pack and shared some good conversations. As it went, we kept to our respective sides.

I don’t know whether he ever read Walden, or if he even knew Thoreau’s name, but that guy and I, we had a tacit understanding. Curing the uglies is solitary work.

I’d like to boast how I lived off the land that summer, hooking trout in roaring rivers and frying them over a spitting campfire. Or that, Thoreau-style, I planted a few rows of beans and reaped the harvest. But the truth is, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, Cheetos, and two-liter Cokes got me through each day. I grew my hair long. Personal hygiene became hit-or-miss. Bad poetry filled my writing tablet. During the day, I moped along miles of hiking trails; in the evening, I lit a lantern, pulled out my copy of Walden so tattered that I kept it bound with a rubber band, and read Thoreau’s words. The sky dimmed, the woods grew dark and snug, and insects commenced singing in cadence. Night fell. I tried not to think about the blonde girl, just as, in his cabin by the pond, Thoreau probably tried to forget Ellen Sewell.

Some nights, I experienced something akin to success. With the tune of that trickling stream filling my consciousness, I slipped into a deep sleep that would last until the morning sun warmed the walls of my tent and woke me. Other nights, though, sleep was slow in coming, every otherwise benign sound in the woods portended something evil, and I saw myself for what I was: a miserable nineteen-year-old
boy carrying his heart around in his hands and foolishly looking for inspiration in the words of a very old book.

Eventually, Thoreau and I emerged from the woods. For his part, Thoreau said he left because he had “several more lives to live, and could not spare any more time for that one.” It’s a nice explanation, and probably a truthful one, but I like to think that after two years of feeling ugly, puttering through the forest and refusing to write Ellen Sewell’s name, our hero departed because he finally had created a type of beauty that arises only from ugliness. When he walked out of the woods that day in 1847, he was likely still “ugly as sin,” but he probably didn’t feel ugly, because under his arm he was toting a beautiful stack of papers he soon would call *Walden*. This I know: If Thoreau had been a good-looking guy, if he had possessed a career, some land, a pocketful of money—if he had married Ellen Sewell—the world he left behind would have been a much uglier place.

I wish I could say I also exited the woods with some life-changing insight. That, like Thoreau, I could proclaim “the sun is but a morning star,” or some such philosophy. But mostly I left because Fall semester would soon be starting, I was sick of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, and I needed a haircut. Now I was, as Thoreau put it, a “sojourner in civilized life again.” But I wallowed in a blanket of anti-social behavior. I was held together only by string, a couple of straight pins, and spit—and I knew it. I made it my mission to challenge the world to find the tiniest shred of beauty in me.

I skipped the haircut, as well as shaving and, okay, occasionally baths too. I grew a raggedy ponytail and a splotchy beard, and topped off my sartorial train wreck with a mildewed fedora that my grandfather had thrown away a few months before he died. I resumed my standoff with Society. I wrote sanctimonious diatribes to the editor of the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, using the media to rail against the evils of the media, congratulating myself on my clever use of irony. I informed my dad what a sucker he was for voting for Reagan. I sat in the back row of all my classes with a perpetual scowl on my face, seizing every opportunity to spout off psychosexual interpretations of the literature that would make the sorority girls with ribbons in their hair squirm in their desks. I wore headphones around campus and lis-
tened to music as far away from the radio as possible, pretending, for example, to really dig John Coltrane’s *A Love Supreme*. Sometimes on weekends the few guys whom I still called friends asked me to join them at parties, but after two or three refusals, they quit asking. It was a lot of work convincing the world I did not give a damn.

The redemption, for me at least, came one night when the blonde girl called. I had not spoken with her in three months, since that evening she told me that we were over, and I ended up riding the back roads along the county line, too shell-shocked to even turn on the radio, until daylight the next morning. Now she was sorry. Now she was crawling back. She said she did not know what she had, etcetera. She was saying all the things you wanted her to say when she’s done you dirty. She had a box full of my belongings, the debris of love gone wrong, and at the very least she wanted to see me and return what was rightfully mine. Maybe we could talk, she suggested.

But, our breakup had been during the cruel winter, and since then I had spent too many nights sitting alone in my tent. I knew the definition of iconoclast, I had filled a tablet with bad poetry, and I had read Thoreau until *Walden* came apart in my hands.

So finally, sensing our conversation about to take another bad turn, the blonde girl cleared her throat and expelled a long pent-up sigh. There was a pause. Then: “Goodbye, “ she said, and added my name.

And I said, only, “Goodbye.”
Christine Fadden

GOODBYE, VACATIONLAND

Our accommodations were fancy by archaeological standards: not the usual motel or tent. We had a real house, where we would sleep like babies after twelve-hour days walking in the wind and sun, cutting our way through vines and branches, lifting our legs over underbrush like mounting a horse a thousand times an hour, and setting our feet down with a hyper-awareness of those damned sinkholes—just the size of a boot (ankle breakers) or a baby pool (journey to the center of the earth).

These were the stressors of a day’s work in Hawai’i, out past Hana, Maui.

After work, pau hana. Back to the house with the feral cats, poisonous centipedes, and self-strangling gardens. Cold beer, shower off dirty sunblock, suck papayas on the porch. Cook, read, and hit the sack despite knowing that waking up before the sun in six hours means another ride through the Hawaiian dawn in the back of the Jeep—intestines, spleen, kidneys, liver, all slamming against the stomach so there is no question of eating breakfast before arriving on site.

We brought our coffee in mugs, water in jugs. Once we got there, we peed and pooped just off-site. The ride shook everything out of us, but also kept us silent. In the pre-dawn past-Hana-side of Maui, far from Hasegawa’s, the dust rose under our tires as we passed the handmade beware of baby pigs crossing sign or the lone Hawaiian child walking down from where the school bus could not go. These were our roads because nobody else was on them.

They were roads emergency vehicles could not navigate.

We bounced past green-leaf-swallowed houses to the in-between places. Tourists did not blaze down Haleakala on bikes alongside us. They did not worm in and out through the ruins of the cliff-side stone church, which stood untended in an unholy wind, with a wild donkey chomping the weeds around the gravestones.

Conrad had driven us to this church. We were ahead of schedule on mapping and could not resist the broken walls of the place.

“The ground in Ireland,” I told Tim, “is the exact opposite of the
Tim stomped his boots in the hard dust. The workday had not even begun and the wind was not letting up. Despite wearing a ponytail, my hair blew around my head like wild snakes. Conrad was eating a peach, studying the gravestones.

“There’s no sponge to the earth here,” Tim said. “My feet ache.”

We were in our twenties. We were too young for aching feet. I lifted a boot to my knee, studying the tears in it. The sole was slashed as if it had been a target in the knife-throwing tent at the circus. I imagined what a weird act that would be.

“These are mainland boots if I ever saw ‘em,” I said.

Tim’s boots were in no better condition.

“They didn’t tell us about the spiders the size of baseballs either,” he said.

The wild donkey followed Conrad at a distance. Their profiles were the same: drooped necks and long, bobbing heads. Conrad was dealing with his ex-wife and the credit card bills she had racked up just prior to leaving him.

Tim tossed me a peach.

“The fruit here is too soft,” I said.

Tim frowned. He knew the beauty of the islands could only go so far for me now, knowing what I knew after having worked on the Chinatown project, in downtown Honolulu. After having asked my pit partner, Joan, “What’s with Sandy? How come she never joins us for pau hana?”

“Her sister was killed on the Big Island last year,” Joan told me.

“Surfing?” I said.

“Riding her bike. Some local guys ran her over and raped her. Threw lava rocks at her. Shoved lantana inside her.”

Joan dumped a bucket of dirt into my screen.

“They’re still out there.”

For days after, I watched Sandy at lunch, leaning against the work shed that we all sat in over sandwiches. Before, all I knew was that Sandy Ireland was a North Shore big wave warrior. I admired her. Now, all I could see was a force pulling her under.

Maybe she had seen me watching her.

One day, a few of us went off site for lunch and she blurted out
over ramen, “My sister was killed because she was white.”
And then, she said with less force, “Whenever the wind blows, I think it’s her.”
The Chinatown site had been backfilled, and I was on a whole different island, but I couldn’t shake what I had heard.
Conrad was in the Jeep, starting the engine.
“Let’s rally,” he yelled.
I tried to rein in my hair for the remainder of the commute.
“Jesus,” Tim said. “Look behind you.”
Past the church’s decrepit stonewall and tumbled archway, a double rainbow glowed over the Pacific Ocean.

Humans, especially ancient humans long extinct, tend to settle near water and where it is flat. Steep slopes make for difficult construction and bundles roll down hill if you drop them.
“We’re not going to find a thing up here,” I yelled.
Conrad was twenty meters downslope from me. Tim was twenty up. I was having my period and having enough of this survey, on slopes that were making my legs ache. We had been walking at exactly the same angle for days. The sun beat down on our heads and the wind was relentless. I slashed at the soft grass with my machete thinking this was not the archaeology I had dreamt of. It beat sitting in the lab back in Honolulu, brushing dust off cow bones, but there was no sense walking this ground. Nobody had ever corralled pigs or sacrificed humans to the gods here.
“Let’s break!” Conrad called. He walked towards me and we walked up towards Tim. The three of us marched further up the volcano to where the grass ended and slabs of rock lay pitted and horizontal, or shot up vertical like cracked thrones.
Sitting with Tim and Conrad on a hot slab of lava, high above the rough and narrow road, I watched the grass we’d been walking through ripple in the wind like a golden sea.
I took a deep breath and lay my whole body belly down on the rock, letting its collected heat work into my cramping pelvis. I found a spot to rest my cheek and squinted so that the tips of the grass met the blue of the sky and there was no Pacific, no lava. I could have been in Kansas. I could have been Dorothy.
I felt sad. There was always the wind. Tim had been nudging me to camp again, but ever since the Chinatown project and the story of Sandy’s sister, I could no longer sleep in a tent on the beach in Hawai‘i. Everyone who had been on the islands longer than us knew the story. The more I heard, the more I wondered how Sandy could get out of bed, walk, dig holes in the ground, eat noodles, stop picturing her sister riding her bike that day—tires catching gravel.

One of the last times we camped, Tim was already snoring when I heard locals setting up to night fish and said, “Let’s pack up. I’ll pay for the hotel room.”

My first project on Maui had been Alelele with Kim, a woman so pale, she put the P in SPF. As our little prop plane hovered over Maui, we squealed. The island floated like a giant green monster’s fist clenching a huge blue marble. Hundred-foot waterfalls graced each nook and cranny.

We took the hairpin Hana Road to our jobsite. The Pacific crashed below sheer driver-side cliffs. Waterfalls splashed down sheer passenger-side volcanic walls. During heavy rains, Hana Road washes out, sweeping away whoever happens to be driving along.

Kim and I mapped all day—walls, platforms, and pits. We finished when the valley walls closed to a narrow V. In the V, a fifty-foot waterfall fell.

“This is no nine to five,” I said.

Out of the valley, pau hana, Kim and I sat where Alelele Stream met the Pacific Ocean. Big black beach stones ground under our feet like marbles in a giant’s pocket. All we could do was take in calories, squint at the sun, and yell over and over at the rough sea, “Alelele, Alelele!” like the wind had our tongues.

Those were the Indiana Jones’ days, when we wove ti leaves into long braids and wrapped them around our heads.

This time, far past Hana with Tim and Conrad, the Nature Girl in me was beginning to tire. I had never wanted to go looking for bones, and menstruating women are not allowed to work with burials in Hawai‘i, but I did it because the entry to the sinkhole was too tight for the guys. I strapped one headlamp to my hardhat and a spare around my bicep.
slithered along cool small pebbles. The air underground was mineral. After twenty feet of belly crawling, I found two skulls. They were facing one another, as if they were heads still attached to bodies sitting on a beach blanket conversing, but at the same time keeping an eye on their children at play in the surf.

“Sorry to disturb you,” I said, lowering my light to search the space around them. There was nothing, so I backed out, using the toes and heels of my boots like rearview feelers.

Conrad noted “Two skulls,” plus coordinates from his compass.

“When we get back to the lab,” I said. “I’m signing off bones.”

Joan and I had shared a two-by-two meter square pit for four weeks on the Chinatown dig. We were about 1.5 meters in the ground and had found, mostly, glass bottles. Joan was studying to be a masseuse but her boyfriend was uptight about men getting erections under the sheet.

“He wants me to quit,” Joan said.

I was screening, she was scraping in the pit.

“That’s bullshit,” I said.

I looked out across the site. Boys, men, boys, men. Me, Sandy, Joan. All of us were covered in a layer of dirt, sweat, and sunblock. The palm-side of the rings on our fingers were worn flat from years of running our hands over screens looking for shards, flakes, beads, and bone.

“I could just do feet,” Joan said.

Joan was a marathon runner and talked about feet all the time.

“Sandy’s sister,” I said. “What was her name?”

The emergency crews had waited too long to figure out how to move Dana Ireland’s body from the jungle to the hospital, her body with blood flooding her insides and at the same time, running away from her like molten lava.

A bleeding haoli, “So red we couldn’t even tell her hair was blonde,” the paramedics reported.

But local investigators did not pick up the evidence—the smashed bike she had been riding, and one shoe. The witness who had seen the men drive Dana down did not know they had crushed her pelvis then and there, but did see them throw her into their van and drive her
away down the road of lantana with thorns as strong as blades and
lava rock that slices the soles of your boots in four weeks. You fall,
you go down on a knee; the gash will require stitches.

After the Chinatown project ended, Joan and her boyfriend invited
Tim and me on a weekend kayak camping trip to some small islands
off Oahu.

Tim said yes for us. Tim said yes to everyone, and while exiting
one party or another, I’d said, “How can you stand talking to that
idiot?”

“I learn from everyone,” he said. “From people I don’t like, I
learn how not to be.”

“Life’s too short to hang out with people I don’t like.”

“You’re a pessimist.”

“You’re a phony.”

So we said yes to the kayaking trip even though the week prior
was the week Tim and I had been camping and I had heard the night
fisherman and gotten us the hotel room.

And still in that hotel bed, with the bathroom light on, I could
not sleep because I kept thinking of Sandy thinking about her sister
slowly dying, and how immediately following the accident, the police
had told her family it was a hit and run, and even when the truth came
out, officials would not help. Sandy’s sister had died on Christmas
Day and a candlelight vigil had been held on the first anniversary of
her death.

I thought of how someone I once met said, “Nothing bad happens
when a flame is burning,” and remembered hearing that when a
flame flickers, a spirit is present.

I spent a lot of time thinking about fire and wind in Hawai’i.

I spent a lot of time too, thinking about waves. Luckily, the day we set
out on our kayaking trip, they were small. Standing onshore, on the
windward coast of Oahu, I could see our destination about a mile out,
two mini islands, one single-humped, the other double, like camels. It
might have been illegal for us to camp on those islands—they were a
designated protected bird sanctuary—but we did it. The birds inhab-
ited the high rocks while we temporarily occupied a tiny strip of their
beach. The guys played with the kayaks in the surf. Joan and I pitched the tents and then walked the shallows all the way around the island where we camped. We studied sea urchins, skimming our hands along the surface of the water to make their needles dance. In my memories of that day, the birds were silent.

At the bonfire later, I told Tim, “I’ll never sleep.”
“We’re on an island of birds,” he said.

That night, the wind picked up and the birds began to cry as if in mourning. The rain fell like Greek Gods had come to pick a fight with the Hawaiian Gods and they’d torn the sky open in the scuffle.

Our tents started to fly—with us in them.

“You stay in here,” Tim said. “We need rocks to hold this sucker down.” He zipped away from me and I peered out; I wanted to see there was still beach beneath us. Joan screamed something I could not understand, but then I heard. She was telling me to look at the mainland, “The lights are going out!”

The thin strip of mainland went dark as if the plug on paradise was being pulled. Pop pop pop. The world went a black and white I had never seen before, or since. Lighting thrashed overhead. A weak beam shot from Tim’s flashlight, and then he was heaving small boulders through the tent door and telling me to set them in the corners. Our tent strained for hours in the wind and the white birds kept crying into the black. Now they were drenched; they were flightless.

And then we heard two small boats approaching. Locals. Guys. Tim said again, “Stay in here,” and was out of the tent fast, rallying Joan’s boyfriend. I could hear Joan thinking what I was thinking—Why would anyone be out on boats in the middle of a storm so strong it had cut power, this late at night, destination this desolate island? I cannot recall for the life of me what happened after I heard Tim, with his always-friendly and disarming laugh, give the guys the lighter they asked for. Did they build another fire? Smoke killer bud? Was I awake when Tim returned to the tent? I have no idea, I only know I was terrified, and I hate myself for that terror. I hate too that the fear is not isolated only to certain kind of men, nor only to men, but to any group of boys, any race, who give a woman or a girl a certain kind of look when she passes.

I do know that the four of us were up early, shaking things out,
laying things out on rocks that were already sizzling in the sun. I remember looking up at the birds. They were silent and dry, fluffy in the breeze, as if the storm had never happened.

“Now all I need is for my period to start,” Joan said. “I don’t have anything with me.”

I did a secret period prayer. Within an hour, she got it.

“We have to go,” she said.

Kayaking back to the mainland, I felt *sharks behind us, behind us; they can smell Joan’s blood*. Probably not. But one week later, a woman who had swum off that stretch of beach daily for five years was chewed in half.

Variety on the job is something I will always value, but no indoor job will ever provide the mix of awe and strain, thrill and exhaustion of archeology. The terrain on the Tim and Conrad project changed constantly, and so did the threats. One afternoon, Tim assumed his usual post-lunch bathroom break. He wandered off-site to “drop trou” and Conrad and I laughed about how every time Tim squatted, he would find another artifact, which meant we had to flag it and expand the project’s boundaries. It became a running joke, “When you poop, Tim, keep your eyes shut.”

Conrad was telling me some story, the fabled one of the archaeologist who licked coprolites (dried human feces found at digs) in order to determine what their producers’ diet had been before sending them to the lab. I heard that coprolites in a lab took on a fuller aroma than “normal feces” when the liquid used to dissolve them for study was applied, so what did saliva do?

“Same thing,” Conrad said. “Stanky-poo.”

Tim’s yelling and swearing broke up our odd conversation. He was running towards us with his pants still at his ankles, holding his boxers half up. He had squatted over a wasps’ nest. It was hard not to laugh, but I knew the sting of Hawaiian wasps was like no other. I’d had just one bite my wrist, and my forearm had swollen up for half a month.

But Tim walked it off. Then, we set to cruising through the remainder of the dry forest. Conrad was to my left side, Tim to the right, now only ten meters apart, tighter together in a tighter landscape. The
The wild boar trampled through.

“Wooh!” Conrad said. “Must be a mama!”

He called it a day. But that was no consolation, for the next day, after finishing that tract, we were to move into the sparse rocky buttes where the mountain goats jittered.

Most people come to Hawai’i to relax, but six days a week for weeks at a time, by 7:00 a.m. I was thinking, *I’m trying not to twist an ankle, split open a knee, get bit by a centipede, stung by wasps while squatting, run over by a boar, kicked by a goat, or eaten in half by Jaws.*

And then, one morning, bullets started whizzing over our heads. We looked upslope. Five locals stood frozen at the sides of their trucks with their rifles hitched up on their thighs like out of some Western.

Hawai’i is not the American West though.

We stood frozen with our clipboards.

Conrad yelled, “We have a permit.”

They yelled, “You come up.”

We archaeologists walked over the bones of Hawaiian kings and queens, and the wind blew. My knees were trembling. The sun was too bright. It felt impossible to lift my feet. It was like walking through molten lava, but the land was as dry as broken mountain goat bones.

They were ranch hands; they hadn’t been told we would walk their land. Seems it was all just a lack of communication, like with the 9 to 5ers.

But it was nothing like that at all.

After years of court hassles and police cover-ups, of plain old-fashioned mishandling of evidence, of the installation of solar-powered emergency phones and the purchase of a rescue helicopter to service the remote area of the Big Island where Dana Ireland was run down,
three local men were found guilty. I was living in Europe when a friend of mine in the States called and said, “What was the last name of that girl you told me about in Hawai’i? The story is on TV. America’s Most Wanted. They nailed those guys.”

I remembered then, in France, where I was married to a man who would never think of camping, how Sandy had told me in those months after her sister’s death, that her family was shunning TV producers who were hounding them. I remembered Sandy telling me her family wanted to hire hit men and then move to Australia, disappear.

In the seven years it took the legal system to put those men on trial, they say other women in the area were beaten and raped, or went missing. For all those years, they say, everyone knew the guilty, but everyone was scared.

Sandy’s family did not hire hit men. Her parents fought from their home base in Virginia and took multiple trips back to the Big Island. They recounted for officials numerous times what had happened to their youngest daughter, after she left the house they had rented in Vacationland, to go for a bike ride. They got new laws established regarding the statutes of limitations for rapists.

I have only looked up the story online four times. First, back in 1992, while working in Hawai’i, when just a few sketchy early-Internet facts and photographs had been posted. Then, I looked when my friend called me in France.

Three years ago, I Googled Dana Ireland when I started to write this story, and just once more recently, during the revision, when I was asking myself, “Why dig this up?”

The thing is, I can’t bury it. I often think of Sandy’s anger that day in Chinatown, the anger that broke the aura of still-shocked-sorrow that surrounded her all other days. I think of what I read she said about her little sister—that she was very shy and had come to live with Sandy in Hawai’i, to break out of her shell.

I think of Sandy’s boyfriend, a big wave surf photographer. I used to picture Sandy riding an eight-footer, and him snapping away. I don’t know that they ever did this. They did get married. Sandy told me on a dig we did months after Chinatown, that she did not believe marriage was necessary, but after Dana’s murder, she wanted to give her parents a sense of normalcy.
I think of Dana’s boyfriend, a boy who watched his girl pedal away from him Christmas Day on her beach cruiser, wearing her cute shorts, and him thinking, “Don’t wipe out on the way home and scratch up those beautiful legs.”

I think of all that I loved about Hawai’i, the beauty there that was incomparable, and the adventures I shared with Tim.

I think more than ten years have passed, and then I gasp—No, more than twenty. I realize for the first time ever that Dana Ireland would be my age now, and I think of her, like a sister, whenever the wind blows.
Sarah Gauch

THE BEST PEOPLE

It’s a brutally hot summer day in Cairo, like landing on planet sun, heat radiating from the asphalt streets, the tall balconied buildings. And polluted, with dust and dirt that leaves an adhesive film of grit on my skin. I’m waiting to cross Adly Street downtown with its barricaded Jewish synagogue and shrill, honking cars when a creaking, wobbly something sneaks up behind me. I jerk around to see what it is. Two ragged donkeys with calloused sores across their backs pull up, behind them a lop-sided cart with cracked, sun-bleached boards and rusted nails. Its wheels, more metal rim than rubber. Up front sits a bearded man in a stained gallabeya and ripped sandals.

An acrid, decomposing stench surrounds the cart, so foul that I not only smell it, I can taste it. I grimace, despite myself. The overpowering odor seems to settle on 100-degree Adly Street like a cloud of deadly chemical gas.

I look closer. The cart is filled with garbage, but not fresh, just-thrown-out American garbage, of plastic milk containers, tuna cans and old newspapers. No, this refuse is darker, blacker, more putrid.

Then I hear something inside the cart, rustling around. What is it? I think, disgusted, but also intensely curious. A dog? A cat? Some of Cairo’s big, black-and-gray crows? I look closer. And that’s when I see, in amongst the festering, soggy garbage, two little girls. One, perhaps eight years old with stubby, matted braids. The other, probably four, with a wild mane of tangled hair. They are the same color as the garbage, their heads, clothes, hands, legs, plastered with dirt, Cairo dirt. The girls are laughing, as if deranged, picking and tunneling through the waste, like Cairo’s oven heat is slowly simmering the girls and garbage into an oozing, black stew.

I gasp. My stomach clenches. I’ve never seen anything like this before. It is so other worldly, so third-worldly, that I just want to flee, to escape this country, its unmanageable filth and poverty, its outrageous depravity. I want to go home.

As I watch, the cart crosses the street, slowly nosing into the on-
coming traffic and forcing the speeding cars to jolt to a stop, the drivers, flailing their arms: “Yalla! Hosh! Come on! Move!”

Seemingly unaffected, the donkeys and cart toddle slowly across the square. Once on the other side, the driver lets out a guttural, inhuman groan, hitting the larger donkey with a thick stick. The animals’ knitting-needle legs break into a trot and slowly the cart disappears down the street.

It’s early fall, 1989 and I have arrived for the first time in Egypt just a couple months earlier, a young twenty-nine-year-old journalist, naïve and wide-eyed, overwhelmed, sometimes disgusted, yes, often uncomfortable (the heat, the dust, a cramped apartment with a peeping Tom next door), but also fascinated and consumed. I’ve come with the help of a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit organization, the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations that organizes several programs—for young journalists, high school and university students, university professors—that parachute Americans into the Arab world so they can, hopefully, better understand this misunderstood, often distrusted and feared region.

The National Council assigned me to a local business magazine for three months, which now that the three months are up, I’m ambitiously struggling to extricate myself from in order to become a full-fledged, self-supporting, freelance journalist of American newspapers and magazines. As I struggle to get a few good clips in order to land a decent newspaper job back home, the wonderfully international Christian Science Monitor signs off on a story about these people I saw on Adly Street that unseemly hot day. They are Cairo’s Zabbaleen or garbage people and I’ll write about how the government, fearing the Zabbaleen and their dilapidated carts scare off the country’s tourists—and their foreign currency, is forcing these people to replace their donkey carts with trucks in order to modernize them, to make them sleeker, cleaner, less repulsive.

But a truck is exorbitantly expensive for these formerly landless Christian peasants, who came to Cairo decades ago from Egypt’s rural south, penniless, illiterate and unemployed. They number 20,000, I soon learn, and collect sixty percent of Cairo’s 7,000 tons of daily waste, making them indispensable to a government that can’t seem
to prevent spontaneous, sprawling garbage dumps from growing throughout the city, even in its tonier neighborhoods, like Zamalek and Garden City.

Deeply curious—and nervous—I visit the Zabbaleen’s slum neighborhood with Mounir, an endearingly earnest Egyptian man with glasses, who works for an environmental development company that, along with several Christian charitable organizations, assists the Zabbaleen. We drive in Mounir’s rickety Volkswagen, my stomach clenched, like the day I saw those little girls in that donkey cart. I’ve heard about the unbearable stench I’ll encounter in this Zabbaleen neighborhood of many dotted throughout Cairo, from friends who have worked here for various international development organizations. I mainly fear the dead, bloated donkeys they’ve promised I’ll see, belly-up and decomposing in the sun. I’m not sure I can take it. I don’t like anything to do with death, blood or guts, never have. I always cover my eyes during violent movie scenes, sometimes yelping like a Yorkshire Terrier. And I haven’t once—not once—watched my own blood drawn.

We drive onto a highway, beneath jagged, sandy-brown mountains, a U-turn, a right and then up a crumbly dirt road. And that’s when we see it: the explosion of garbage. It’s everywhere, streaming from rickety, exposed-brick homes, flowing down hillsides, piled two stories high, the whole squalid slum, oozing waste; like a garbage dump was simply relocated atop the buildings and people—or vice versa. The rutted, muddy paths are barely wide enough to fit Mounir’s tiny Volkswagen, pigs munch away in thick, black mud-filled pens with the sour, pungent smell of rancid cheese everywhere, penetrating and inescapable.

I am shocked. I am numb. I walk zombie-like, while Mounir happily greets young men with disheveled hair and shoeless kids with snot running from their noses into their mouths. At one home, a man in an incongruously cheerful, blue gallabeya, greets us before beckoning us into his dark doorway. Inside is a rolling sea of refuse, covering the entire two-car-garage-sized floor. Smack in the middle sits his wife in a colorful head scarf, tied up and around her head, elbow-deep in garbage. She looks up, smiles and then quickly gets back to picking through the trash, ignoring us, as if she’s a busy cashier at the local
Mounir explains that the woman is sorting the garbage into plastics, glass, metals, cloth and paper for recycling. “They give whatever is left to their pigs,” he says, smiling.

I smile warily back, staring at the knee-deep pile of bottles, papers, rags, food, an anonymous black mush—and that woman sitting absurdly contented in the midst of it. But I’m also oddly mesmerized by the whole scene, the way the grotesque is mesmerizing—a three-headed dog, the world’s fattest woman, the man with the most clothespins on his face—freak shows at the county fair.

We walk back to the street and the dreaded hot afternoon sun. There are no sidewalks, just dirt paths and rubble. Since there is no drainage or gutters in this unplanned, squatter community, the path is thick with deep, quick-sand-like mud, encasing my skimpy black loafers and making me pine for my L.L. Bean boots from college with thick rubber soles and calf-length leather uppers. We trudge past more alleyways of garbage, past closet-sized grocery stores with corn oil and rice and shoeless, bare-bottomed children with mangled hair, yelling “hello, mister,” as I pass.

We finally arrive at a sort of lean-to with a roof and two walls and what looks like a hand-soldered garbage dumpster underneath. It’s filled with toffee-colored water. Nearby are the ubiquitous mounds of garbage, but more homogeneous this time: muddy plastic water bottles, plastic yogurt and heavy cream containers. Two young men empty a huge bag of plastic containers into the dumpster and then flip on a motor to make the water swirl, jostling and jiggling the bottles inside to wash them.

Nearby is another machine with a man feeding it the now-clean plastic water bottles, yogurt and heavy cream containers. The machine ejects plastic, many-colored chips that shoot into a box below.

We walk back to the sidewalk-less, dirt street, precariously crossing the rutted, muddy road. We pass more heaps of garbage, more rickety houses, more dirt-encrusted toddlers in splotched shirts to finally arrive at a small, dingy room, completely open to the street. Inside is a thin man with a scrappy beard.

He proudly places a bunch of plastic, black chips, similar to the rainbow-colored chips we’d just seen, in a tray at the end of a long
metal machine. We wait as he pushes a thick lever down, lifts it and pulls from the mold a still-hot black clothes hanger, the very kind that’s for sale in Zamalek’s Sunny Supermarket, a dust-encrusted 7-Eleven-sized grocery store where I do all my shopping. The man puts the hanger on a thin, fraying rope tied across the ceiling, along-side around fifty other newly minted, black clothes hangers.

“What do you think of these recycling machines?” reporterly me asks, my pen poised.

“*Ilhumdulillah*. Thanks to God. They are good, very good,” he says, a toothless grin lighting his face. “Before these machines I just collected garbage. Now I have my workshop.” He mentions his workshop with such pride, like it’s the only thing he owns in the world—and, I realize, maybe it is.

I figure him for a middle-aged man, although Egypt’s poor are often decades younger than they look. He has cigarette-stained teeth, unkempt black hair, soiled, over-sized pants that he’s tied tightly with a belt. But as he speaks, about his recycling machine and how he can now feed his nine children, aged one to seventeen years old, I begin to see beyond this man’s brown teeth and overgrown beard, his wrinkled pants and broken rubber sandals. I begin to see how proud he is in his work, his machine and the fraying line of brand new clothes hangers.

As Mounir and I continue around the Zabbaleen settlement, he explains how these people not only crush plastics, but also grind cloth into cotton stuffing; flatten, clean and re-make cans and press and bale paper before sending it to recycling factories. Whatever garbage their pigs can’t eat is disposed of in a newly built composting plant.

As we walk, I think, okay, the Zabbaleen’s neighborhood is not beautiful. No tree-lined streets with neat sidewalks or parks with baseball diamonds here. It stinks, no question. I even spotted a rotting pig lying in the road—no donkeys, though. The sight of the kids, dirty and shoeless is distressing. And it can’t be sanitary for the women to endlessly sit and sort through garbage. But the Zabbaleen’s neighborhood isn’t straight out of a horror film either. It’s not *The Night of the Living Dead* with wild-eyed zombies walking around eating each other—a movie I saw at the age of ten, giving me nightmares for years.

In fact, as I walk around this community with Mounir, the fields
of waste, the garbage-filled homes, the rutted, dirt roads, the smells, all move to the periphery of my vision. Instead, what I begin to see more and more clearly is the sorted garbage in big white bags, the cleaning bin with jostling, bobbing plastic bottles and yogurt containers, the plastic granulator and the clothes-hanger machine. I see men and women, even children, working, busy, directed. And I realize that the Zabbaleen’s story isn’t about dirt, stench and poverty, about an oppressed and mistreated people, shoved aside and living in squalor. No, the Zabbaleen’s story is one of hope and survival. It is about a group of people who moved from Egypt’s harsh countryside to Cairo with nothing, who settled and found a living, a productive life for themselves.

It’s about people making a commodity out of nothing, turning water to wine, garbage to gold. To the Zabbaleen, waste isn’t putrid and disgusting, something to stuff into bins and quickly throw out the back door. No, they treasure and fight over it—the refuse of wealthy neighborhoods like Zamalek or Garden City being much more valuable than that of slums like in Imbaba or Shoubra. Each day, with their kids, they wind their donkey carts—now trucks and a few carts—through Cairo’s vehicle-jammed roads, climb the delinquent back stairs of four-, five-, ten-story buildings, go from filthy back door to filthy back door, big, flimsy baskets on their backs and for a mere nine dollars per household, per month, collect the garbage, the goods, heaping monstrous bags of waste onto their carts and trucks, dumping it in their homes, sorting and recycling it. Almost nothing is actually disposed of. What an environmental bonanza.

Of course, I’m not the first to come across the Zabbaleen—although the world was just discovering them when I first visited in 1989. Since then, international organizations and national and city governments across the globe—the Ford Foundation, the United Nations, the city of Dubai, environmentalists, development experts, community activists, have hailed the Zabbaleen’s recycling system as one of the world’s most innovative and efficient models of solid waste disposal. The Zabbaleen have been applauded at international conferences, featured in award-winning documentaries and imitated in developing and developed cities, in Manila, Mumbai and Los Angeles.
But this is not my point. My point is that when I first came to Egypt, I was an outsider looking in, like many tourists who come for a week, a month, one year. I watched. I gawked. I was entertained—and shocked by the people around me, the fleeting acquaintance on the street, in the *souk*, the post office clerk, fruit seller, the two Zabbaleen girls in the cart of garbage, the Zabbaleen wife sorting elbow-deep through garbage. They were the “other,” exotic, strange, nonsensical, even grotesque, one-dimensional cardboard cutouts, stereotypes. Not always, but generally. Egypt never ceased to entertain and shock—with its colorful aggressive hustlers at the pyramids, its gregarious taxi drivers, just as I, the foreigner, I am sure at times entertained them.

Then, I married a Lebanese man. The year was 1994. He was growing olive trees, hundreds, thousands of olive trees, and later wine grapes and organic fruits and vegetables in Egypt’s vast Sahara desert. I had a son and stopped working temporarily. And this infant son was more colicky than any colicky child I had seen in my lifetime. I was left walking this child, shrieking, his pained face, crumpled like a cabbage, for hours and hours around my lonely, dark, somewhat threadbare Cairo apartment. Hundreds of acres of olive groves were not something my husband could just pick up like a computer and relocate or “work out of home” with. So, I was pretty much stuck in this Cairo, this Egypt, for what seemed to me in those days like a lifetime, an endless, open-ended sojourn.

I was miserable and that’s when my relationship with the fleeting acquaintance on the street began to deteriorate—the *boab* next door, the car parker, the bank teller or taxi driver—even the nanny, who wasn’t doing everything exactly right and had just been caught with a sheet of aluminum paper, three lemons and a jar of tomato paste secreted away in her purse. I was profoundly unhappy and these people, this one-dimensional “other,” were the perfect targets for my wrath, easy to criticize, scoff at and blame from my sunless, isolated apartment, three high-ceilinged floors above street level. They were no longer entertaining, exotic, strange or even entertainingly grotesque. They were the enemy, bent on making my uncomfortable, unpleasantly strange, foreign life even more so. I was often angry and embittered. I demonized them, not all the time, but too often.
Luckily, my son grew up and my daughter too (born four years later) and the heavy clouds parted and Cairo’s bright, glorious sun rose again, shining its rays down on my shaded, threadbare flat, which we luckily moved out of and into a lighter, more spacious 1930s Italianate apartment with lovely, albeit pockmarked, century-old tiles on the floors, the same high ceilings above, a glimpse of the Nile from one balcony over the thick branches of a bauhinia tree and a squat, overcrowded, but widely coveted garage.

My lengthy journey over the years of rediscovering or, if I was honest with myself, discovering in the first place, the people here, their humanity, a genuine empathy for the sometimes just strangers that surrounded me corresponded, not surprisingly, with my life trajectory. It all began with the lows—the trials of early motherhood, two lengthy bouts of chronic fatigue, a slew of chronic sports injuries (from high-impact yoga, beginner’s tennis), the loneliness and frustration of living far from home. But these lows, although unbearable, hateful at the time, led me eventually to an enlightened Egyptian homoeopathist, a wise and guiding Trager practitioner, meditation, The Power of Now. Greater understanding, contentment. Eventually, I put aside journalism, its nerve-wracking deadlines, to write creatively, miraculously full time. Eventually I accepted Egypt as home.

I remember the day my new, healthier relationship with these people, those arbitrary strangers and acquaintances that crossed my path, became clear to me. I was walking on Shagaret el Dor Street in the eclectic Cairo neighborhood of Zamalek with its rundown mansions, glitzy high-rises, even dilapidated hovels, where I still live. It was around four p.m., in the winter—the sun had just set—the air chilly. A man was walking towards me. He was middle aged, medium height, medium build, not handsome, not ugly either—but this is irrelevant. Maybe he was a government employee. An engineer. Or a teacher. His pants were belted too tight and too high, like middle-class Egyptian men tend to do. His shirt, tucked snugly, conscientiously into his pants. He was walking quickly and I remember looking him square in the face without really meaning to. And noticing suddenly his eyes that looked—what? Vulnerable. Not determined or mean or confident or busy, but vulnerable. His brow, creased, not in an urgent way, but in a settled way, like this look of worry, the thick furrows
on his forehead spent a fair amount of time there. A visceral wave of emotion welled up in my gut, similar to my feeling years earlier upon meeting the Zabbal with nine children, who recycled plastics to make clothes-hangers. I found myself suddenly wondering, no, worrying, at some deep level. Did this man have a job? A decent job with a decent wage? A livable apartment? Did he have a wife? Children? Family around him?

Egypt’s eighteen-day revolution left, not only me, but the whole world embracing the hundreds, thousands, a millioneya of brave, boundless people of every age, class and religion in Cairo’s Tahrir Square, chanting, singing, debating and urgently demanding their democratic rights and freedom. A few weeks after former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak resigned on February 11, 2011, and Egypt’s streets exploded in ecstatic, pride-filled celebration, my husband, kids and I were driving home from the Fayoum Oasis, about sixty miles southwest of Cairo. We stopped at a small baqal, a closet-sized grocery on the side of the road with chipped wood shelves stuffed with corn oil, bars of soap, vats of pickling olives, yogurt and white cheese. While my husband waited in the car, my teenage son, my daughter and I walked up to a young couple behind the counter. The young woman, her hair covered in a loose cotton veil, kept looking and giggling at us, whispering coquettishly to her husband, a handsome young man in a neat white gallabeya and headscarf.

The man eyed us shyly. “Where are you from?” he finally asked in Arabic.

I pointed to my children. “They’re Lebanese-American,” I responded in the Egyptian Arabic I had perfected over the years. “Wa ana Amerikeyya. And I’m American.”

He stood for a minute, as if processing this information and finally blurted out, “Ahsan nas. The best people.”

In the past, expat friends and I would joke that Egyptians always said that, no matter where the foreigner came from—Kazakhstan, Burma, or Mongolia. I usually just thanked them. I am afraid in my less understanding, more demonizing days I may have rudely rolled my eyes. The interchange was just so typical, so cliché that it seemed disingenuous, although I now know that it was merely considered a
polite response to a normal everyday question.

This time, still filled with the euphoria of revolution, I stood for a minute, curiously speechless. “No,” I finally said, “Egyptians are the best people.” I smiled, knowing at some deep, heartfelt and heartening place that it was exactly the way I felt and exactly the right thing to say.

“Allah yekhalleeky, God be with you,” the young grocer said, smiling widely back and handing me our plastic bag of water, Tuc crackers and Chiclets spearmint gum. Then my children and I climbed into our Kia and we headed home to Cairo.
Marcia Meier

JASMINE GHOSTS

(excerpt from forthcoming memoir, Sweeping Down the Sky)

My mother and I are sitting at the dining room table. It is morning. Bright sun flows through the open window behind her. The smell of jasmine sweetens the air. She has eaten her oatmeal, which I made for her. She has her numerous pills in her little green dish next to her glass of water, and she is taking them one by one. Her playing cards sit off to the side, ready for her morning hand of solitaire.

“What do you remember about that day,” I ask her, “that day I was hit by the car?”

It has been forty-three years since that morning. Now, she is seventy-nine and struggles with arthritis and other pains. I am at pains to make her happy. We sit at the table in silence. She frowns.

I plead again, “Mom, can you tell me what you remember about that morning?”

I am trying to write about the accident and those early years of surgeries and hurt. But I have no recollection of that morning. My older sister, Cherie, who was ten at the time, remembers some of it, and we have talked at length. But Mom is reluctant to talk.

“I don’t remember much,” she says, haltingly.

“It’s important to me, Mom.”

She looks down at her cards.

“I was on the phone with Mimi,” [my grandmother] she says, “sitting in the front hall. I heard yelling outside, and Cherie ran in screaming.”

She hesitates.

“I went in the ambulance with you to the hospital. I don’t remember much else. I think I was in shock.”

My mother and I have lived together for six years. When we moved in together, I believed she was lonely in the wake of my father’s death, and that she would welcome the company of my husband, our young daughter, and me.
At first it seemed to be true. But the longer we lived together, the more I noticed she was exceptionally quiet with me, and garrulous when my sisters visited. Now we sit in quiet tension; me yearning for words from her, and she reluctant to talk.

I ask if she remembers which direction I was walking when I crossed the street. I always believed I was coming back toward the house.

“No, you were walking the other direction, over to visit your friend who lived across the street.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes,” she says.

I’m still not certain. Something deep inside tells me I was hit from the right side, which would mean I was coming home. I can feel it in my right shoulder, the way it refuses to relax into the ground when I am lying in savasana at the end of a yoga session. Or the way it reflexively hunches up when I am feeling threatened. I don’t know why this detail matters to me. Perhaps because I do not know where I am headed these days, so confirming a small piece of the past—a past that is rife with hurt and sorrow—will help me right the compass.

I feel as if I am flowing in a vast river without a paddle to steer the craft away from the rocks and trees along the shore. I veer toward them, and somehow—at the last possible second—my trajectory shifts and the waters carry me away from the danger. Over and over my life has done this, racing toward the rocks, then careening back to calmer waters mid-stream. I can’t seem to find the rudder.

Sitting with my mother, her beautiful face only slightly lined even at nearly eighty, I consider the silence between us. Did she blame me? Did she harbor resentment through the years over the tectonic quake I caused in her life? The hardship I created for the family, for her?

We think we know our moms. In our childish narcissism, we assume our parents weren’t around before us, didn’t have lives, loves, dreams beyond us. We have trouble imagining even that they were just two once, the initial relationship that led to the family—and, ultimately, our own existence. Anything that pre-dated our arrival is a blank slate, and much of our early life is remembered only as events that held us at the center.

So how do I encounter the mother I had no awareness of, the
woman who met and fell in love with the man I knew as my father, chose to marry him and raise a family? What of her friends? Those she confided in? Those she sought out when tragedy struck? What secrets did she entrust with them? What dreams deferred? What jealousies and regrets? What heartaches?

When my older sister burst into the house and screamed that I had been hit by a car, how did she react, my mother? What was she thinking? As a mother now, I can almost feel the constriction in my chest, the sudden fevered beat of her heart, the stab of terror. My mother had already lost two sons before I was nearly killed. Two boys in infancy, two losses so deep and wounding she pushed them down to somewhere deep inside her and never spoke about them. She buried her feelings with those two babies in the cemetery in my hometown in Michigan, and never visited them again. At least not outside of her own grief, never expressed.

Once, I asked her about the babies. All she said was, “I never got to mourn them.”

What did she mean? Was it acknowledgement of those buried feelings? Or did she mean she was somehow prevented from mourning her lost sons? They would have been my older brothers. Would they have been protective and caring? Or combative and competitive, like my younger brother? Would they have been tall and handsome, like my dad? What color were their eyes, their hair? Only a few photos remain of the one who lived eight months. He looks exactly like the pictures of my younger brother at six months, only more like my dad around his eyes. There are no images of the other; she was pregnant with him when she was seriously injured in a car accident. She hemorrhaged through the rest of the pregnancy, and he died hours after birth.

I wondered if my mother dwelled upon these things when she was alone with her thoughts. Did she consider how things might have been different if those babies had lived? If I had not walked into the crosswalk with my bike on that lovely summer morning in 1961? If the man in the sedan who pulled forward and hit me had not been blind in his left eye? If he had seen the tiny five-year-old pushing her two-wheeler across the intersection?

Would my parents’ lives have been easier? Or just different?
Would other strife take the place of the difficulties they experienced? Don’t we all face hardship?

My mother’s key to survival was to deny her feelings. She modeled it well, and I did the same for most of my early adulthood. Denied the fear, the deep anger and hurt, of fifteen years of surgeries, hospitalizations, taunts from schoolmates, the nuns’ frequent punishments for acting out, the shame of sitting—once again—in a darkened classroom cloakroom in disgrace.

Now, I try to pry the feelings from her. Perhaps I should let it be, let her feelings stay deeply buried, where they are safe and cannot bring her pain. But I cannot leave my own alone. Cannot leave behind the ghosts, reminding me I need to heal. I need to know. I need to understand.

My mother will not be complicit. She dismisses the conversation with a terse, “I don’t remember.”

I gaze past her at the jasmine blooming on the fence, breathe in its exquisite scent, stand and take her bowl to the sink.

I am on my own.
Claudia Geagan

EXPOSURE

My suntanned, Elvis-haired Dad stands behind me in the plate glass mirror of my own master bath. He is handsome in a white broadcloth shirt and his dark-framed 1960s glasses shield his hazel eyes. He appears to be in his mid-forties, the age at which I remember him best, which makes us the same age in the mirror. I smell tobacco and Lifebuoy soap and the particular scent that is his alone. His physical nearness makes me as edgy as it ever did.

I’m dressed in a glen-plaid suit and need to leave for work, but Dad, wielding a blow dryer and a huge round brush, insists on styling my hair. It’s 1991, and Dad died a year ago at the age of seventy-five, but this feels real. I have no inkling I’m dreaming.

Dad wasn’t a hairdresser. When I was a child, he was Director of Personnel for the Gibson Greeting Card Company in Cincinnati. In those days, he sat me on a discarded Formica table in the basement and cut my hair. Old photos testify to his first class handiwork with my pale curls, but the cutting never went well—my wiggly fault. When he raised his barber shears, I’d flinch. “Hold your damn head still.” He’d push my head to the angle he wanted, and I’d grit my teeth. He never accidentally cut me, and I didn’t care how my hair looked. Still, I didn’t like to be close to Dad.

Dad sang us lullabies to my sister and me, and carried blankets to the park so we could lie on our backs to watch the fireworks, but he lived on a fault line above a burbling emotional volcano, and if I got too close, I could feel the heat. Even over something as simple as a haircut, I tried to create distance between us.

At least a decade before Dad appeared in the bathroom mirror, I’d moved beyond the impact of his erratic personality and stepped into a better life. On the night he showed up in my dream, I was a happily married woman with a successful career in finance. Dad and I had lived at least a thousand miles apart for twenty-five years. We spoke
warmly but never intimately. I’d flown to his funeral in 1990 with kind words on my lips and coolness in my heart. Dad, as I chose to think of him, if I chose to think of him, was a bright, artistic, anxiety-laden guy who’d made a good living for our family.

Christmas Eve 1955, I was eleven and helping Dad trim our tree. My job was to fish the ornaments from the box, his to hang them on the boughs. I was flattered to be asked to help, felt like we were collaborating on an important project, the way Nancy Drew and her father might have done it.

“What color ball do you want?” I asked.
“Blue.”
I dug a blue one out of the box and handed it over. “What color do you want now?”
“Red.”
Then I grew impatient and reached into the box without being asked. “Here are two gold balls.” I held them out in my hands.
“I don’t want gold,” he fired back. “And quit calling them balls.”
“Why?”
“Because, goddam it,” he slapped the air with the back of his hand as though he would have liked to slap me, “it sounds like what hangs on me.”

I did not know the slang term, but understood, and I scurried to the kitchen to help Mom.

During my freshman year in high school, Dad’s new job negotiating union contracts for Safeway Stores took us to Pasadena, California where we lived in a rosy beige bungalow with bougainvillea on the roof and a pool in the backyard. Dad acquired an MG he was proud of and a George Hamilton tan that meant even more to him. His tan was total—head to toe.

On weekends in Pasadena, when the weather permitted, which it often did, Dad, now in his mid-forties, cleaned the pool or tended the lemon trees and gardenia bushes around its edges in a leopard print bikini. He wore his suit rolled so low that he appeared naked from behind and only minimally covered in the front. When he lay on his stomach to sunbathe he spread a beach towel on the decking, placed
one of the colorful lanai pillows Mom had sewn under his head and removed the bikini altogether.

Mom, wearing an old cotton housecoat would say, “You girls need to stay in your rooms or go to your friends. Dad needs a little privacy.” Then she’d savage the carpet with the vacuum cleaner and refuse to look up. Mom found a job as a salesgirl at the fashionable Bullock’s Pasadena. At work, she seemed happy.

To tan his front side, Dad liked to recline in a canvas butterfly chair—nude—legs apart, running his oiled fingers through his dark curly head of hair, his face turned toward the sun. When the neighbors complained about his indecent exposure, he mocked them as small-minded and nosey.

I hung out at my girlfriend’s house or the public library where I loved the oak tables piled with heavy green volumes of the Reader’s Guide to Periodical Literature. I loved the smell of wood and paper. At home, I hid between the end of my bedroom dresser and the wall to read “Marjorie Morningstar” a tale about a girl, not much older than I, who rowed across the lake from her summer camp and into a torrid affair. I could barely comprehend such a girl. I wasn’t so much exploring literature as hiding. I didn’t want to spark Dad’s anger, and I didn’t want to deal with his nudity.

Although I sometimes blinked my eyes pretending he wasn’t there, I knew he was intelligent and in my opinion the only person in my life capable of discussing some of my more abstract (and adolescent) thoughts. I was lonely for him.

Late one Saturday morning, Dad pushed my bedroom door all the way open. Still in my pajamas, I was sitting in the middle of my unmade bed struggling with Caesar’s second sentence regarding the Gallic Wars. The teacher had translated the first one.

“What are you doing in here?” He sounded as if he had caught me doing something wrong.

“My Latin homework.” I hoped that would please him. “This sentence says, ‘These all language, institutions, laws among themselves, they differ.’ They talked like that.”

I had pondered how language and thinking worked together and, how, even though I could translate the Latin words, I failed to find the meaning. So I asked Dad, “Can you imagine if you thought like that?
With the verbs always at the end?

He walked to the edge of my bed and curled his lip, tilted his head back to examine me through his bifocals. “You gonna spend the day sitting around or are you gonna come outside and get some sun? Dry up some of those pimples.”

It seemed he cared only how I looked, believing I should look like the film actresses whose glamour made him drool, perhaps Grace Kelly with a touch of Marilyn Monroe for spice, but not “like your mother.” Once, as Mother walked by us, her soft buttocks swaying from side to side, he remarked, “A man is a much better looking creature than a woman,” he turned to look at me directly, “cleaner and more taut.”

Dad did his best to make me look his definition of “good.” Together we shopped for colorful spike heels from Bakers and on his own he bought me an itsy-bitsy red and white polka dot bikini. Bullock’s Pasadena oozed mid-century chic, and when Dad glided through the doors toward the art deco veneers of the elevators, he absorbed its aura. He would sit outside the dressing room in a French modern chair and wait for me to model in front of the three-way mirror, always buying what looked pretty, caring little for what was practical, much less appropriate. For a few hours on a Saturday afternoon we could both relish the allure of that carefully-crafted world.

I came home after school one day during my senior year in high school to a genuine silver fox stole flowing out of a handsome gift box—a little something from Dad for when young men might take me to dinner at the Huntington Hotel or a house party in Beverly Hills. A year later when I was a student at Southern Cal, the formals and the house parties happened, and the stole felt like wings—maybe Dad thought it would fly me into a shimmering version of a life he would have preferred.

In high school, Dad hated all the boys my sister and I knew—the standard-issue boys who took us to drive-in movies or for a cruise down Colorado Blvd. instead of, say, to Grauman’s Chinese Theater or Lawry’s Prime Rib. One night Dad and I bellowed at each other as I tried to explain that I wasn’t failing as a young woman because these boys never took me dancing in nightclubs. “They have no money,” I screamed. “They’re in high school!”
One-and-all, the boys hated Dad, the less polite calling him a “fag” behind his back.

“He is not. He’s my father.” No boys pushed the conversation further.

“Fag?” I knew what the word meant and that it was an ugly taunt. Yes, Dad’s chums were women. Yes, he disliked team sports and liked to shop with his daughters, but as far as I was concerned that was all to the good. If only he could have stayed clothed and calmed down. A doctor prescribed Milltown, a popular tranquilizer, but his volubility only increased, especially around anything that hinted of sex. Dad screamed for an hour one night when he caught me kissing a boy. Kissing—lights on, clothes on, no hands where they did not belong.

At the very end of my senior year, arriving home from school before anyone else, I made a rare effort to help Mom with the housework. I unclipped the dried laundry from the line in the utility yard, carefully folded my Dad’s blue flannel pajamas and went to lay them in their proper place in his drawer. There sat a spiral bound album of snapshots, all of Dad, out by our pool, some in his leopard skin bikini, some without it, some with it pulled down and used as a sling. In some he was notably aroused, but it was the truculent, defiant look on his face, finger tips resting against his hip bones, and the various poses of his feet—girly fashion model, tough guy gun slinger—that I found as disconcerting as the explicit sexuality. I was shocked, but not shaken. I assumed Mom had taken the pictures. I laid Dad’s pajamas over the album.

Two years later, when my younger sister was a senior in high school and I was away at college, she came home with her date, Paul, fifteen minutes past curfew. As they walked past the camellias and the sweet night-blooming jasmine, she saw Dad through the picture window. She said Dad was lying on the couch in the dark, smoking. When he jumped up and strode toward the door, she realized he was naked.

“Oh, my God, no,” she thought.

Then Dad jerked the front door open and banged the screen out with his left hand. He held it there. With a cigarette clenched between his fingers, he jabbed his right hand at Paul. “How the hell do you
think you can get away with bringing my daughter home past midnight? What the hell have you been doing?” Dad shook with anger and leaned over the threshold toward eighteen-year-old Paul.

Today, my sister quips, “There was Dad, yelling his head off—Mr. Wiener and the Ball Brothers dancing in the air.”

In the dream, Dad has a hunk of my hair looking like he just removed a huge sixties-style roller. My patience is at an end, and I bat at him with my hands. “Stop.” I grab for the brush. “You’re making a mess.” He looks miserable and defeated, and I wish I had contained myself.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “I meant well.”

I opened my eyes feeling as though I had awakened from a long, childlike sleep. My husband breathed peacefully, moonlight flitting across his back. I peered into the dark, empty bathroom. Strange. I do not believe in visitations.

Dad had been dead for over a decade when my mother gave up her house, an act that caused me, at the age of fifty-eight, to go through his papers. I found the usual detritus of memory plus two sealed copy-paper boxes that housed Dad’s collection of Play Girl magazines and other pictures of naked men. “Did you know about these, Mom?” I asked, holding the lid away.

Mom stuck her nose in the box. “I always thought he was a little light in the loafers,” she said and shuffled off to another room.

My husband was helping with the chores so I asked him, “Would a heterosexual man have these pictures?”

“No.” he said. “Give ’em to me to recycle. We can’t put this in the estate sale.”

Deeper into Dad’s files, I found a 1930s photo of a young blonde man and a few clippings about the same man from a newspaper—mementos. I never asked Mom about them.

For most of my life I had not seriously considered that Dad might be gay, not even when he quizzed twenty-year-old me about my new husband.

“Does he have a fuzzy butt?” Dad asked.

“Yes,” I answered, caught off guard.
“Men all have fuzzy butts.” He smiled coyly, and although he still stood there, the film editor in my brain dissolved him from the scene.

I understand now that Dad was born sixty years before homosexuals began to lead even moderately open lives, that he could not face himself, much less the world around him. He would have lost everything. How bereft of honesty his existence must have been. How resentful and anxious and lonely.

A few years after Mom died, I visited both my parents’ graves where a brass plaque says, “Husband, 1914–1990” and next to it, “Wife, 1923–2003.” I wanted to tell him I understood that he was a captive in his own life, that no matter how much discomfort he inflicted on his family, his own must have been worse, and that I knew he meant well. I could have lain down on the grass and wept.

Forgiveness is an intimate act.
Emily Eddins

NEWS JUNKIE

Wolf Blitzer screams at me. His urgent voice wails like a siren through our sparsely furnished living room. Bored and on baby duty in our corporate apartment, I watch CNN around the clock. If I stare at the screen long enough, I see every news program at least three times. Test me: I can repeat each broadcast word for word and lip-synch to every reporter.

I dislike Wolf for a couple of reasons. The first is that there’s just something weird about him. Don’t you find it odd that he also actually resembles a wolf? Were his parents joking or just prescient when they named him? It’s not his fault, but he gets on my nerves. We spend too much time together. He is on TV so often that he must actually live at CNN. I bet he sleeps in a Wolf-sized, custom-made dog bed under the news desk. Since he doesn’t have the kind of hair you have to brush (because it is wolf fur), he sleeps in his suit and pops straight up when his shift starts so he can immediately deliver all of the world’s bad news (just like he did yesterday, and just like he will again tomorrow).

The second and the main reason that I dislike Wolf is that he reminds me too much of myself. He spends his whole day panicking about terrorists, anthrax, and snipers. Hmmm. Sounds familiar. As I lie wide-eyed, staring at the ceiling at three a.m., I imagine Wolf climbing into his little bed, closing his little wolf eyelids, and drifting off to sleep. I am jealous. I have not slept the night through since we moved to Washington, D.C. a month earlier, on the one-year anniversary of 9/11. Unfortunately not all of my insomnia can be blamed on my six-month-old son waking up at two a.m. to scream at me, Wolf Blitzer-style. (Is it because he hears Wolf all day long that he has adopted an almost identical, piercing timbre?) No, it has more to do with the fact that Washington, D.C. is a war zone. Outside of my bedroom window, missile launchers wait expectantly on the sidewalk. Soldiers patrol the streets with big, scary guns. And as if that wasn’t enough to rattle me, Wolf reports that someone is driving around the city in a white box truck, shooting people at random.

“A sniper!” he bellows. “Targeting innocent people.”
I live right in the middle of a giant bull’s-eye, a feeling I can’t seem to shake even when I am safely locked in my apartment (which is most of the time). My baby, Wilson, sleeps all day long, and I do not know enough about being a mother yet to realize that I can actually wake him up and take him out. So Wolf and I sit around and feed off of each other. He needs an audience, and I need noise. Even if nothing is happening in my apartment, somewhere in the world, life is interesting and scary. I can’t change the channel because I need the adrenaline rush twenty-four-hour news provides.

On bad days I am trapped in the apartment with CNN until around four p.m. because I haven’t gotten my act together quickly enough to get Wilson out of the apartment before he needs another nap. If he sleeps too long, I pace the apartment in loops, willing him to rouse himself. We don’t have much furniture, so I walk in a big circle, cruising from room to room. I stop to check my email account. Sadly, I actually have time to read the long chains of joke emails that my (also bored) mother sends me. I crack open a can of soda. I gaze out the large, industrial windows into the gray October skyline. It is not even winter yet, but outside it is as dreary as a corpse. We will be in this town, in this apartment, until March—a sentence that feels too long to bear.

On good days I get out before ten in the morning, and Wilson and I walk around town for a little while before I have to bring him back up to our seventh-floor apartment for his nap. My morning mission is to try to find an adult to talk to: someone, anyone. It could be a dry cleaner or the clerk at the drugstore; I don’t mind. I don’t have any actual friends in D.C. because we are only here for a few months. It seems like a waste of time to put effort into finding people I actually relate to, only to leave them. So I rely on the kindness of strangers to get me by. The employees at Safeway are paid to be friendly, so sometimes I go grocery shopping for friends, lingering to chat with the produce stocker or the cashier.

“How you doing today, Emily?” the doorman asks as Wilson and I leave the apartment building on one of our little jaunts.

“Just fine, thank you!” He cheers me up because he is one of the few people in D.C. who knows my name. “How are you, Mega?” I cheer him up because I know his name too. “What’s up with all the
policemen parked outside?” I ask.

“We are now at Code Orange,” he cautions.

“Oh! Is that because of the sniper, the impending dirty bomb, or the anthrax alert?” I laugh nervously. Wilson looks up at me and smiles innocently. If he understood what we were talking about, he would be crying his head off. I consider going back upstairs for a second but decide to take my chances against the sniper. After all, he could aim and miss, but if I don’t get out of the building, cabin fever will definitely kill me.

I head for the drugstore. Maybe Rita, the cashier, will be there today. She’s always up for a conversation. I am on a mission to buy duct tape because the Department of Homeland Security has warned me I will need to tape up our apartment windows in the event of a dirty bomb explosion. I envision my darling baby son gagging on nuclear fallout and decide to take his advice.

“Hi there,” Rita exclaims as I walk into the drugstore.

“How are you, Rita?” I ask, with a little too much enthusiasm. She’s practically my best friend. She’s looking frail and seems a little smaller than usual. Perhaps the weight of my social desperation is crushing her.

“I’ve got the gout!” she confides.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” I console. I am not exactly sure what the gout is, but it sounds medieval and like it may involve pus, so I don’t question her further. “I’m here for some duct tape,” I change the subject.

“Oh God! That Tom Ridge,” she complains. “We’re completely sold out.”

“Sold out!” My heart hammers in my chest. I have left it too late, and now Wilson will die a horrific and painful death, developing radioactive thyroid tumors and slowly wasting away in my arms.

“How about packing tape?” I ask Rita, praying she’ll say that it will definitely prevent radioactive particles from seeping into our apartment.

“Well, I guess that might work,” she says. “It’s thick!”

I clear the shelf, buying ten rolls and leaving none for my negligent but mentally stable neighbors, who are clearly not worried about death by fallout.

“The others will have to use Scotch tape!” I announce recklessly,
only half-joking.

“People sure are crazy!” Rita proclaims.

I am not sure if that remark is pointed at me, at the terrorists, or at Tom Ridge. Are we all becoming equally crazy? I take my tape up to the counter, stick my tail between my legs, and race Wilson home. Scanning the street for white box trucks, I breathe a sigh of relief as I enter my building. We will live to see another day.

“I can’t wait to get the hell out of here!” I announce to Mega on the way inside.

“Yes, ma’am,” he answers. They have trained the doormen to be agreeable, and this is his standard response to everything.

If I said, “I hope you kissed your wife this morning because this building could be blown up today,” he would reply, “Yes, ma’am.”

When my husband, Lance, walks in the door that night, I am ecstatic that the sniper did not kill him on the way home.

“You’re alive!” I scream, pouncing on him.

“Well, you are easy to please!” he chuckles.

He does not seem to realize that he has cheated death, for now. But if the sniper doesn’t slay him, the corporate world eventually might. He looks so tired—the long commutes, the business travel, the interminable evenings at the office are wearing him down.

“I can’t wait to get out of here,” he says quietly. “Everything will be better in California.”

In a few months we are moving to a little ski town in the mountains of Northern California. I know that life will be safer and more simple there for all of us, most importantly, for Wilson. I want him to grow up knowing his neighbors, not fearing that someone is going to shoot him while he is walking to school or bomb his home one random afternoon.

I can’t wait to live in a small town that Osama Bin Laden has never heard of. Who would set off a dirty bomb in a town with a population of 14,000? In Truckee? There are no high rises for planes to crash into, and the only public transportation to target is a little van that shuttles residents to the ski slopes. We will be safe there, I just know it.

I put the TV on mute. Wolf Blitzer mouths something and looks invigorated. It’s as if the constant stream of adrenaline the terrorist
threats supply makes him a little high and he likes it. I suspect that I, too, am addicted to the drama of it all. The buzz of fear I feel when I see a new video released by Al Qaeda. The bearded men in their turbans talking about how happy they will be when they kill us all, about how we should watch our backs because they are planning something even bigger and more horrible than 9/11. They want to scare me. And it works.

To the terrorists I am a target. To CNN I am a target of a different sort: a viewer. The anchors and the terrorists have a symbiotic relationship. If the terrorists did not have a twenty-four-hour simulcast megaphone, their ability to frighten would be drastically reduced. If the anchors didn’t have frightening news to report, their audience would be greatly reduced.

I vow to keep the TV turned off tomorrow. I am going to tune out the noise: the anchor chatter, the terrorist chatter, all of it. No matter how bored, how desperate I become, I am going to quit CNN and fear, cold turkey. Maybe I will run over to Rite-Aid and check on Rita’s gout. Now that’s scary.
Tommy Trull

Kids Are Hell

(The afterlife, though it feels something like an upscale retirement community. DAD is at the podium, mid-speech.)

DAD: (extremely jovial) Well, well, well. “Afterlife Community President.” Can’t believe I’m standing here, but hey—we did it. I gotta tell you, I was real nervous about joining this community. I mean—you all know how it is—you get so attached to how things go on earth that they drag you away kicking and screaming, but then you actually get up here and it’s like—’Why was I so attached to that shithole, huh?’ Am I right? Oh, this is fun. Anywho, I wanna thank each and every one of you for voting me president of this prestigious afterlife community. I promise to do a good job. Maybe I mentioned this once or twice in my campaign, but back on earth—I used to be a king. Darn good one, too. All right, first order of business, as promised, I will move Meatloaf Tuesday back to Monday where it belongs, and—

(SON enters, grinning excitedly, maybe carrying a fencing sword.)

SON: Dad!
DAD: Hamlet? What—what are you doing here?
SON: I did it!
DAD: Did what?
SON: C’mon. You know.
DAD: Seriously, I don’t. What did you do?
SON: I avenged your death!

(An awkward moment.)

DAD: (to the ‘community’) Excuse me, I need to have a quick word with my . . . (pulls SON aside) You did what now?
SON: Don’t you remember? You showed up at the castle? (an
impression)’ Avenge my foul and most unnatural murder!’
‘MARK ME!’
DAD: Oh, Jesus Christ.
SON: Doncha remember?
DAD: Vaguely. Look, son, I was having a really hard time then, suffering from some real bouts of depression and pain, I mean, I was in hell, it’s miserable there. It was more the ‘Ow, I’m in hell’ speaking than anything else.
SON: Well, I got ’im. Got ’im real good. It was awesome.
DAD: So Claudius is dead, huh?
SON: Yep.
DAD: Is he . . . here?
SON: Naw.
DAD: Thank God.
SON: He’s in hell. (giggles) You shoulda seen his face.
DAD: All right, well let’s, uh . . . let’s keep this whole ‘avenge my death’ thing to ourselves, huh?
SON: Oh.
DAD: No no, hey, I’m proud of you, it’s just . . . I got a real good thing going here, and—they elected me president—
SON: That’s great, Daddy!

(SON goes in for a bear hug.)

DAD: And that’s—oh, love you too, son—that’s a little tight –okay. It’s just that the whole . . . mmmuuurder thing is kinda sorta frowned upon up here in heaven. You’ll see. Wait. How did you get in here?
SON: Oh, that! Yeah, I died.
DAD: Did Claudius kill you?
SON: Not exactly, Laertes did. He’s dead, too.
DAD: Claudius, Laertes, and you? All dead?
SON: Yep. And Mom.
DAD: Jesus.
SON: Also Polonius.
DAD: You killed Polonius.
SON: Stabbed him hard, too. He was all like, ‘O, I am slain!’
DAD: So that’s five people dead.
SON: Yep.
DAD: This is bad, son.
DAD: I thought you liked her.
SON: Oh, she was great. But I had to pretend not to like her in order to kill Claudius, and she got real, like, gonzo mad at me, especially after, you know, I was all like, ‘STAB!’ with her dad, and so she jumped in the river and didn’t bother swimming.
DAD: You had to pretend not to like her in order to kill Claudius.
SON: Yeah, I had a plan.
DAD: Sounds like it.
SON: This place is awesome.
DAD: Yeah, it’s—let me get this straight. I came to you, and remember, I wasn’t feeling so hot, and suggested that you could possibly right certain wrongs—
SON: You were all like ‘MURDER MOST FOUL’ but with a ghost face.
DAD: Okay, okay . . . but so I tell you this, I suggest that possibly you kill one specific person, and you—
SON: I put on a play.
DAD: A play.
SON: Yep.

(A pause, as though DAD has just gotten his first headache in the afterlife.)

DAD: Okay, here’s what we’re going to do. We’re gonna take this whole idea, this whole ‘Hamlet’s killing people because Daddy told him to,’ and we’re gonna shake it out of our heads.
SON: Shake it out?
DAD: We’re gonna shake it out of our heads.
SON: Like this?

(SON demonstrates gleefully.)

DAD: Yep, just like that. And if anyone asks about this, we don’t
know what they’re talking about.
SON: We don’t know nothing!
DAD: That’s right, not a single thing. Now, let me show you around
the place, introduce you to a few—

(The ADMINISTRATOR comes in with her clipboard.)

ADMIN: Mr. Hamlet? A word please.
DAD: (the jig is up) Sure. Junior, why don’t you go find something
to do.
SON: You got it, Dad. (winks) I don’t know nothin’.
DAD: Good boy.
ADMIN: Mr. Hamlet, I think we have a serious problem.
DAD: Do we?
ADMIN: Yes, we do. I have word from Up Above that your funding
has been cut and you can no longer stay here.
DAD: My funding? And why, why is that?
ADMIN: Perhaps you can tell me.
SON: (cheerfully volunteering) I don’t know nothin’!
DAD: I haven’t the foggiest.
ADMIN: Really. No recollection of doing any moonlighting down on
Earth? Perhaps at a certain Castle Elsinore?
DAD: Oh, that! I might have showed my face around there once or
twice, just to check in on things. I used to be king there, you
know.
ADMIN: Yes, I remember from your constant campaign ads. And so
that’s all you did? Showed your face around there once or twice?
DAD: Sure. That a crime?
ADMIN: Technically, yes. Article 2 of the Afterworld Constitution
expressly forbids earthly visits from spectral figures, as I’m sure
you’re aware.
DAD: Yeah, but isn’t that one of those, uh, ‘more honored in the
breach than the observance’ kind of things? I mean, I’m sure a
lovely lookin’ lady like yourself has made her share of midnight
visits, am I right?
ADMIN: You are implying . . . ?
DAD: Nothing.
ADMIN: Mr. Hamlet.
DAD: Call me Ham.
ADMIN: No. While it is true that many of our residents do violate Article 2 by making the occasional harmless visit to their terrestrial homeland, we do tend to look the other way so long as they are harmless. But. When a resident violates Section B of Article 2, we have a very serious problem on our hands.
DAD: Article 2 Section B? What’s that?
ADMIN: 2B states that ‘When a supernatural appearance results in a death, the supernatural party must assume full culpability.’
DAD: Full culpability? So what are we saying here?
ADMIN: It’s a simple question. What do we have here? A 2B or not 2B?
SON: Ooh, I know this one!
DAD: Shut it. It’s a . . . it’s a not 2B. Obviously.
ADMIN: There is still the matter of the eight deaths that Up Above has connected to your appearance.
DAD: Eight? (to SON) You only told me about the six in the house.
ADMIN: There was also a Mr. Guildenstern and a Mr. Rosencrantz.
DAD: (to SON) Who the hell are Rosenbloom and Guildenkraft?
SON: Oh, them! That was this whole crazy thing. I was on a pirate ship!
ADMIN: This is your boy?
DAD: Yes, it’s all his fault. Not the brightest bulb in the patch.
ADMIN: Well, he’s a boy. How old is he, 16?
DAD: He’s 30.
ADMIN: (quiet disbelief) He’s 30?
DAD: So you can see my problem. Look—you gotta cut me a break.
I love this place. And they all love me, too, ask ’em. Go on, ask ’em!
ADMIN: I am well aware that you are very popular with the other residents. I admit that I find you somewhat charming myself.
DAD: Don’t make me beg here.
ADMIN: (sighs) Will take some doing, but I might be able to convince Up Above to grant you clemency—
DAD: Oh, thank you—
ADMIN: If—and this is a big if—you can provide a solid character
reference for yourself. And let me stop you there, the boy definitely won’t count.

DAD: You got it.
ADMIN: I’m gonna go try to pull some strings. Make it a good one.
DAD: You’re a goddess.

(ADMIN leaves.)

DAD: Character reference, character reference. Who can I call, who can I—you said Claudius is in hell, right?
SON: Yeppers.
DAD: That’s too bad, he owes me big. What about Polonius?
SON: In hell. He was spyin’ when I kilt him.
DAD: Ophelia? I mean, she’s young, but—
SON: Nope, in hell. S-U-I-S-I-D-E.
DAD: (a moment to parse) C-I-D-E.
SON: Eye dee ee.
DAD: What?
SON: You said to say ‘eye dee ee,’ I was just doing what you told me—
DAD: No—never mind. So who does that leave, it leaves Laertes and—
SON: (overjoyed) Mommy!

(DAD turns to see that MOM has entered, and is giving him a cool look.)

DAD: Gertrude.
MOM: Hamlet Senior.
DAD: It’s good to see you.
MOM: I understand I have you to thank for all this.
DAD: Well, truth be told, it kind of blew up in my face—
MOM: Of course it did, this is the whole Norway disaster all over again! What were you thinking, giving such a big task to Hamlet?
DAD: No—never mind. So who does that leave, it leaves Laertes and—
SON: (overjoyed) Mommy!

(DAD turns to see that MOM has entered, and is giving him a cool look.)

DAD: Gertrude.
MOM: Hamlet Senior.
DAD: It’s good to see you.
MOM: I understand I have you to thank for all this.
DAD: Well, truth be told, it kind of blew up in my face—
MOM: Of course it did, this is the whole Norway disaster all over again! What were you thinking, giving such a big task to Hamlet?
DAD: It was a simple task, ‘avenge my death’!
MOM: He needs clear instructions! You know how prone the boy is
to spacing out at the slightest provocation! If you want him to do anything for you, you have to give him a clear, numbered list of tasks in an explicit order.

DAD: He doesn’t get this from my side of the family, I’ll tell you that! Ask your boyfriend Claudius.

MOM: I will, just as soon as he’s finished getting spooned by the devil.

DAD: Which I am sure reminds him of you.

MOM: Do we have to do this in front of the kid?

DAD: Look. Gertrude. I’m sorry about how things worked out. Really. But I need you, baby. I need you bad. See, they’re gonna send me away because of this whole nutso business, and I just need you to say a good word for me. Be my character reference. Okay? Just tell ‘em I’m not so bad, can you do that for me, baby? Please?

MOM: I understand they’ve made you president here.

DAD: Yes! That’s true.

MOM: I want to be vice president.

DAD: But you’ll be the First Lady.

MOM: Vice president or no deal.

DAD: Okay. Done.

(An ANGRY WOMAN stands up in the audience.)

WOMAN: Hey! You’re making her vice president? So I licked your weenie in a supply closet for nothing?

MOM: Oh, Hamlet, you didn’t!

DAD: I can explain—

(The ADMIN returns.)

ADMIN: All right, it took some doing, but I think we’re all clear here—oh! Hello! And you are?

MOM: His character reference.

DAD: Please God no—

MOM: He’s a rotten piece of shit and he belongs in hell.

(MOM sticks her tongue out at DAD.)
ADMIN: (sighs) Why don’t I ever just go with my first instinct. All right, sir. Out you go.
DAD: Wait! This isn’t fair! I—
ADMIN: Nope, nope. Out. This is a decent place. Off to hell with you.

(DAD realizes his fate, and heads toward the door. He stops by his SON.)

DAD: Boy . . . here’s what I want you to do. Avenge my second death! Avenge me!

(DAD exits, chased out by the ADMIN. SON stands.)

SON: (solemnly) I know my fate. ‘Ere the next morning breaks, even if I must o’erturn hell itself to do so, I will avenge my—

(ADMIN returns and pulls two sock puppets from her coat.)

ADMIN: (cheerfully) Residents, we have a special treat for you!
SON: Ooh! Puppets!

(SON collapses cross-legged on the floor and watches happily.)

END OF PLAY
Stephanie Keys

HOW THE MOON FELL IN LOVE

CHARACTERS:
DIANA (NICKNAMED BIRDY): 30s, quirky, stubborn
JOHNNY MOON: 30s, distant, brooding

PLACE: A moonlit lake in the woods.

TIME: Present. A late night in August.

SETTING: Johnny is elevated as if in a tree. He can be standing on a ladder, or on the top of cubes, e.g. Birdy at some point will be sitting as if on the end of a pier dangling her feet in the lake. A cube can be used for the pier or the arm of a couch.

ACT I

Scene 1

(Johnny is perched in a tree. Birdy enters looking for him.)

BIRDY: Why are you hidin’ in the tree branches again, Johnny Moon?
JOHNNY: How is it you found me if I’m hidin’?
BIRDY: I can always find the moon, peekin’ through the trees or re-clinin’ on the hilltops waiting to stage another night. Looks like a pretty one. Not a cloud in the sky.
JOHNNY: Don’t be fooled by that.
BIRDY: All eyes are on you tonight. You are gonna be bright and full not like other times when you are part shadow and part light or shy as a baby’s smile.

(A lone coyote laments.)

JOHNNY: (listening) Hear that? That ole coyote knows what’s in
store for the night, deep in his throat he knows. You better go back before the night—

BIRDY: He’s just showin’ off for a girl. (beat) Mind if I stay the night with you the way a friend does, a lady friend?

JOHNNY: We’ve been over and over this, Birdy. I’m not giving my heart away tonight or any other full moon night, not to you, not to anybody.

BIRDY: I’ll leave you alone for eternity if you let me spend this one night just us talkin’ about love and its possibilities. Just talkin’.

Breaks my heart to see you so closed off to it.

JOHNNY: I know why the hell you’ve been nicknamed Birdy. You just peck and peck and peck until you wear a person down.

BIRDY: Please Johnny?

JOHNNY: I’m gonna shortcut this, someone who sees so much sorrow and hatred can’t love.

BIRDY: What you see isn’t who you are.

JOHNNY: You pass by Becky Robert’s house on the way here?

BIRDY: Yes.

JOHNNY: Did you find her wishin’ on the moon through her girly pink curtains?

BIRDY: Her light was on.

JOHNNY: What you don’t know is that she’s wishin’ that Franklin comes back from war. And that poor boy, lit by the same moon thousands of miles away is dead on the ground. The news hasn’t reached Becky yet and when it does she’ll curse the moon and everything about it for not bringing her Franklin back.

BIRDY: Sad as that is Becky will also remember the moon the night—

JOHNNY: The moon also saw the drunk driver that scared your daddy’s car off the road killing everybody you loved in an instant, and you lying on the road not knowing what was ahead—

BIRDY: (determined overlap) The moon sees all matter of things—a first kiss, a girl who gazes skyward and dreams beyond hand-me-down coveralls and a world the size of a cornfield. The moon offers promise and hope.

JOHNNY: What happens to those poor hopeful hearts at sun-up or a week later or when someone lets them down?

BIRDY: They march on.
JOHNNY: Have you? (beat) Tears at a soul to shine a light on all that—
BIRDY: You didn’t put that bullet in Franklin. You didn’t put that drunk in his pick-up and you didn’t put strife in this world. Mr. Moon I know what’s wrong with you in the love department. You are keepin’ your own heart under lock and key because you can’t stop people from being human.
JOHNNY: I don’t see you with no ring on your finger.
BIRDY: I haven’t been asked the right question by the right one—
JOHNNY: (evading) Jesus it’s hot tonight. You feelin’ it?
BIRDY: Love can bring on a sweat. Maybe you got it but you don’t know it.
JOHNNY: Why don’t you talk that Olaf boy into lovin’ you since you’re so crazy about love? Isn’t he always comin’ round your door at night with a bouquet of Queen Anne’s Lace he picked from the roadside? I’ve seen him there, night after night, goofy grin, hair slicked back.
BIRDY: (amused) He is so pale he looks blue in the moonlight ‘cept for where his freckles make small pictures on his nose and cheeks. Notice that?
JOHNNY: What I notice is when you’re talkin’ to him in your see-through dress with the yellow flowers—
BIRDY: You noticed my dress?
JOHNNY: I’ve seen you lookin’ kinda flirty like you care for him, that’s all I meant by that.
BIRDY: He is just another farm boy.
JOHNNY: I suppose you imagine your life to be grand, celestial even, Queen Birdy—
BIRDY: I’m not through imagin’ it yet. I just know what my heart is tellin’ me. It’s good things, Johnny Moon and most of it is all ‘bout you and me.
JOHNNY: You said it yourself. I am under lock and key.
BIRDY: Some part of you came unlocked when you saw a woman in a pretty dress.
JOHNNY: A woman who can’t see who she really is, a woman always afraid and balancing on the edge of something crazy and desperate. A woman who knows no one will ever love her the way she
needs to be loved so she’s tellin’ the moon her innermost thoughts and feelings.

BIRDY: That’s righteous cold, Johnny. But whatever you say to me, however hard you are on me I’m still gonna say it, I love you Johnny Moon like I never loved anybody or anything. I know I’m not pretty to look at and I talk too much. And once when Olaf took me bowling I got my bowlin’ shoes two sizes too small so he wouldn’t know I had big feet on top of the rest of my faults. But Johnny-

JOHNNY: Tell me those are not tears wellin’ up in your eyes. Come on, cheer up. This is exactly what I don’t like about love. Look what it’s doin’ to you. Tell me somethin’ ’bout yourself to calm back down, your favorite color or your real name for instance. I know it can’t be Birdy.

BIRDY: Kids. Said I was frog ugly and when teacher said it was bad to be mean to a girl with no family they disguised it like the poem. (reciting)

A frog is a silly bird
Him ain’t got no tail at all hardly
And when him jumps
Him don’t jump
Him flies

I am nothing but a silly bird to most people.

JOHNNY: Dumb scared kids actin’ like tragedy was contagious. Can’t take it too serious. And you don’t look nothin’ like a damned frog or a bird. In fact, you’re, you’re kind of, you’re okay in the looks department—so what is your real name?

(Birdy doesn’t respond.)

JOHNNY: Can’t be that bad, not like Hortense or Myrtle or Fatima.
BIRDY: Diana.
JOHNNY: Diana is nice, pretty even. Like the Goddess of the Moon. Diana.
BIRDY: Say it again?
JOHNNY: Diana. (awkward beat) I’m gotta finish up here now before the sun comes.
(Birdy sits on the end of the pier and splashes her feet in the water.)

BIRDY: You’re right about one thing.
JOHNNY: What’s that?
BIRDY: It most surely is warm on this August night.
JOHNNY: You’ll get no argument from me.
BIRDY: Warm enough to take a swim.
JOHNNY: A girl shouldn’t swim alone at night.
BIRDY: I’m never alone at night. I hear Mr. Bullfrog puffin’ up to ask a girl to the dance, there’s a symphony of crickets, one very persistent hoot owl on the prowl for a tiny mouse trembling behind a corn stalk and there you are, Johnny, full and bright, sitting on that still lake your fingers stretched out everywhere. Beckoning to me.

JOHNNY: Something could happen.

BIRDY: Something already has happened. Remember the last full moon when I swam out to where you were restin’ on the lake and you surrounded me in your cold embrace?

JOHNNY: Yes.

BIRDY: And how when I splashed you into a million mirrored pieces you came together again and let me float face up into your light where we both stayed ‘til the sun cancelled you out. I know you remember.

JOHNNY: It was one night.

BIRDY: There were others. Last winter when you were glistenin’ on the first snow weren’t you waitin’ for me in Lark’s Meadow?

JOHNNY: Well—

BIRDY: And when the lake freezes over?

JOHNNY: All right, all right! I do not know why I throw light on the lake and watch you skate in it corner to corner with your glossy hair, shiny blades, lake black as coal—

BIRDY: You’re guidin’ my way like a lover’s hand on the small of a woman’s back.

(beat)

BIRDY: Johnny?
JOHNNY: Big hotshot moon brought to his knees by somethin’ small and human.

BIRDY: If you’re talkin’ about what I think you are love isn’t small it’s the universe. Mr. Moon, I believe you are in love. And I’m gonna leave you with that for now. ’Cause I know you gotta think about it.

(Birdy starts to exit and stops.)

BIRDY: Just so you know, that night lying in the road listening to my family hurt and callin’ for help the moon in the sky was the only thing that made sense to me. And it still does.

(She returns to her exit.)

JOHNNY: Wait! First snow when I hear your horse steppin’ over downed trees I know he’s carryin’ you to me. And I think of how the snow looks in your hair and the one snowflake clinging to an eyelash and the snow angels you’re gonna make, limbs reaching out tryin’ to touch every part of me in the snow. And the nice things you say to me and all that time I’m wonderin’ what that feelin’ is and what I’m supposed to do with it.

BIRDY: You don’t do nothin’ with love, Johnny. It takes care of itself.

JOHNNY: I swear I will wrestle the sun every morning so I can last one more minute with you.

BIRDY: And I will swim in your light in that lake until the first frost.

JOHNNY: I do love you, Birdy. May the good Lord help me but I do love you.

BIRDY: Didn’t I tell you so?

(Birdy jumps from the pier to begin her swim.)

(Blackout)
Sam Zalutsky

HOW TO MAKE IT TO THE PROMISED LAND

A screenplay based on the short story by Ellen Umansky

FADE IN:
EXT. CAMP SHALOM BASKETBALL COURTS - MORNING

LIZZIE, 14, all freckles and rusted red hair, and KRON, 14, a pale, black clad Goth girl, brood in the corner, observing the cool boys, including JESSE, 14, a muscled meathead in baggy mesh shorts, who do mock lay-ups into a sagging basketball net, and a languid lip-glossed knot of girls where MAYA, 14, a sensitive hanger-on, braids the long, lush hair of JILL, 14, the popular girls’ alpha dog. Lizzie’s eyes finally fix on counselor RAFI, 21, an Israeli Johnny Depp, as he graces the other CAMPERS with his charm.

KRON: OK. Rafi’s hot. I can admit it.
LIZZIE: You can’t have a crush on him too.
KRON: Don’t underestimate me. I’m from the planet Lamu. We’re way too mature for crushes.
LIZZIE: Do you think he likes me?
KRON: Shut up.
LIZZIE: But he’s practically finished college already.
KRON: Whatever. I know a ton of girls who date guys in their 20s, even their 30s. It’s more common on Lamu, but it happens here too.
LIZZIE: Where’s your spaceship? I want to go to planet Lamu.

The COUNSELORS urge campers into a big circle. ORNA, 23, Lizzie and Kron’s prim observant counselor, who hides her limbs even in the desert heat, approaches.

KRON: Oh shit. The angel of death. Watch out.
ORNA: Kron. Lizzie. Join the rest of the circle please.
LIZZIE: Her name is Kron.
KRON: Oh goody! Color wars. For like the tenth year in a row.
ORN\A: Actually Kron, we’re doing something different this year. If
you’re not careful you might learn something.

_They reluctantly scoot in as BOBBY Z., 30s, more P.T. Barnum than_ camp director, lowers his head and raises his hand as he walks to the center of the court. _The Counselors immediately raise their hands in obedience. Quiet weaves through the group as Campers raise their hands, waiting for Bobby Z.’s word. He holds the silence as long as he can and finally lowers his arm. Everyone follows, waiting . . ._


_Everyone stares at Bobby Z. It can’t get any quieter now._

BOBBY Z.: (CONT’D) This is what happened to so many Jews of Europe. But what about the ones who got away?

_He searches their earnest young faces._

BOBBY Z.: (CONT’D) Today is November 1, 1940, and Camp Shalom is no longer in sunny Southern California but in Lodz, Poland, which was invaded by the Nazis two months ago.

_Campers scan each other’s faces for clues on how to react. Lizzie’s eyes snap back to Rafi, who hands out papers._

BOBBY Z.: (CONT’D) The synagogue has been desecrated by the Nazis and is off-limits. The kitchen is now SS headquarters. Do not go there. The Canyon Fire Road is the border. And the woods between the boys’ and girls’ bunks are now Central Europe. Two thirds of you are Polish Jews, living in the ghetto. The rest of you are SS guards. The challenge for the Jews is to escape deportation and make it to America. And the challenge for the SS guards, well, you know what that is.

KRON: This is fucked up.

ORN\A: Shh. Kron. It’s how we remember.
Maya WHIMPERS as Jill comforts her. Rafi hands Lizzie and Kron yellow felt stars, plastic beads, ID cards, and purple ink-smudged maps of “Lodz.”

LIZZIE: Am I supposed to thank you for this?
RAFI: No sweat, kiddo.

Rafi winks and smiles at her, his teeth sparkling white. Kron rolls her eyes. DAVID MARGOLIS, 14, the image of a young Torah scholar, bumps fists with his neighbor.

DAVID: Dude! I’m SS.
BOY 2: Yes! Me too.
BOBBY Z.: Jews, listen up. If you work together and help each other, you have a better chance of escaping.

Lizzie examines her ID: Her name is Anya Ossevsheva. Anya has a long aquiline nose, a hard unsmiling mouth, and long dark hair pulled back into a bun. She looks nothing like Lizzie.

LIZZIE: At least you don’t have four kids.

Bobby Z. CLAPS loudly. Orna SHUSHES. Rafi’s hand goes up.

BOBBY Z.: You must cross the Polish border by lunch time or else. Try the official routes first. Trade beads, acquire visas, masquerade as goyim, bribe guards. Use your ingenuity.
KRON: Or what? You’ll kill us?

David glares at Kron. Orna’s thin fingers squeeze Kron and Lizzie’s shoulders. Lizzie closes her eyes, trying to hide.
BOBBY Z.: Remember, Jews, you must wear your stars at all times. If you fail to do so, you will immediately be sent to jail and your chances of ever gaining your freedom will be severely limited.

KRON: Fascist.
ORN: Kron, that’s enough. Now put on your star.
KRON: You’re obviously SS too.

Lizzie GIGGLES. But when she looks around, everyone else is dead serious. They are putting on their stars.

BOBBY Z.: You should all really appreciate how lucky you are to be in America. For one day, just one day, we will pretend otherwise. Ready? We begin.


DAVID: Where’s your star, Jew?
LIZZIE: What?
DAVID: I need to see your ID. Now.
KRON: Leave us alone. (to Lizzie) Come on. I’ve got an idea.

Kron grabs her hand and they run through the trees to the

INT./EXT. KITCHEN.

Kron tries the screen door: Locked. She pops off the window screen as Lizzie looks around nervously.

KRON: Crawl in and get the door. I’ll keep watch.
LIZZIE: What if we get caught?
KRON: Hello. Who just saved you from the SS?
LIZZIE: This is a stupid idea.
KRON: It’s the best idea I’ve had all summer. Go. *Kron lifts Lizzie up. She crawls through the window as Kron keeps watch. Lizzie opens the door and they run in.*

LIZZIE: It’s like our own attic hideaway. You know Anne Frank survived years in the attic, barely talking above a whisper.
KRON: Good for Anne Frank.
LIZZIE: Do you think we can last the whole time?
KRON: Definitely. But we need to find supplies.

*They search the cupboards and drawers, discovering an industrial vat of chocolate pudding.*

KRON: *(CONT’D)* Yes! I love this stuff. We don’t have it on Lamu.
LIZZIE: Yeah. That’d get us through the war.

*Kron digs in with a big institutional soup ladle.*


*Lizzie hands a bottle to Kron. They drink straight from the bottle and gorge on pudding.*

LIZZIE: *(CONT’D)* Do you think the SS would drink the kosher wine they stole?
KRON: Probably. I would too. It’s good.

*LATER. SCREAMS pour in. Kron and Lizzie peek out the window: JEWS run around frantically to escape from the SS. A fight breaks out: Two BOYS against one. They push him down and pull him away by his arms and hair. It looks painful.*

LIZZIE: How are we supposed to remember something if we never knew it in the first place?
KRON: Yeah. Right.
LATER.

Lizzie stares out the window while Kron draws a spaceship with radiating spokes on her star.

LIZZIE: What is that?
KRON: The flag of Lamu.

Lizzie hands her star to Kron.

LIZZIE: Here. Do mine.
KRON: If they wanted to make sure the Holocaust never happens again, they’d be teaching us stuff so we don’t end up like they did.
LIZZIE: What kind of stuff?
KRON: Stuff so we could kick ass, so no one could push us around.

Lizzie practices some moves on Kron.

LIZZIE: Like Krav Maga. My mom learned it in the Israeli army. It’s fierce.
KRON: Stop it.

She high kicks near Kron’s head.

KRON: (CONT’D) Ouch! Stop.
LIZZIE: I didn’t touch you.
KRON: Yes you did. Stop.
LIZZIE: Whatever. Sorry.

Lizzie practices away from Kron, who keeps drawing.

LATER.

They both lie on the floor, staring at the ceiling, both wearing stars with the flag of Lamu. Dirty spoons, a jug of pudding, and empty wine bottles surround them. Lizzie examines her reflection in the bottom of a pan.
LIZZIE: I’m surprised they didn’t make me a Nazi. My mom says my nose is the only thing my dad ever gave me. A WASP’s nose.

*Kron gazes at Lizzie’s face.*

LIZZIE: (*CONT’D*) Are there Jews on planet Lamu? Jews who look like me?
KRON: Lamu does not host organized religions. We don’t believe in it.
LIZZIE: Cool. The more I stay here, the more I like Lamu.

*Suddenly Orna appears in the door.*

ORNA: What’s the matter girls? Afraid of being Jews?

*Lizzie and Kron snap to attention, their revelry broken.*

ORNA: (*CONT’D*) Avoiding the game and drinking? OK. That’s it. Game over. Let’s go.
LIZZIE The game’s over? We can go back to our bunk now?
ORNA: No, you’re going to tell Bobby Z. what you were doing. Get up.

*Lizzie jumps up as Karen stays prostrate on the linoleum.*

ORNA: (*CONT’D*) Kron, I’m serious! Get up. Now.

*Kron doesn’t respond. Orna nudges her with her foot and Kron’s eyes flutter open. She finally sits up.*

KRON: Oh . . .

*A pained smile crawls across her face until . . . OUT FLIES purple chocolate vomit in an elegant arc, covering Orna’s woven open-toed sandals.*

ORNA: Oh no. Karen. OK. Fine. I’ll take you to the nurse.
Lizzie sees her chance. She grabs her stomach.

LIZZIE: I don’t feel very good either. Last night’s chicken.
ORNIA: Don’t try it, Lizzie. I’ve had just about enough of you. Let’s go.

EXT. KITCHEN

Orna leads Kron and Lizzie out and across the lawn to the infirmary. Kron leans into Lizzie.

KRON: Meet me at the Canteen at noon.
LIZZIE: Got it.
ORNIA: What are you discussing?
LIZZIE: How to make sure this never happens again.
ORNIA: Not funny, Lizzie. Really not funny.

Kron and Lizzie smile at each other.

EXT. INFIRMARY

Orna nudges Kron inside as Lizzie looks for a way out.

ORNIA: (to Kron) When you’re feeling better, we’ll discuss today’s behavior.
LIZZIE: Orna, do I really have to see Bobby Z.? Can’t I play the game? Please?

Orna peers into Lizzie’s eyes. Is she serious?

LIZZIE: (CONT’D) I know I’ll learn a lot.
ORNIA: OK, go to the library, I mean the market. But I want to see you really participating.

Lizzie sprints away, smiling.
INT. LIBRARY—LATER.

Hot, damp bodies crowd the room, stepping over lumps of clothing, plastic beads, flip-flops, sports jerseys and baseball caps, and Barbies, swapping possessions. The kids have broken the rules. Nothing is not for sale. Lizzie sneaks in and watches intently.

JILL: A dozen beads for a pass.
BOY: Get your passage here.
BOY 2: MP3s for zlotys.

*Jill approaches Lizzie, fingerling her earrings.*

JILL: I could get you to America with those in no time.
LIZZIE: We’re in America.
JILL: Do you want a visa or not?
LIZZIE: They were my grandmother’s.
JILL: Fine. What do want for them?
LIZZIE: Isn’t there something else you want?
JILL: From you?

*Jill looks her up and down.*

LIZZIE: They’re all I have from her.
JILL: Then I guess you won’t make it out.


LIZZIE: What is that?
JILL: The SS. Another raid.
LIZZIE: I thought this was off limits?

*Jill just rolls her eyes as the BANGING continues.* They’re CHANTING: “Jews. Jews.” A shiver runs up Lizzie’s spine. A few Kids stand against the wall. Others grip the doors, trying to keep the SS out. Panic grows. At the other door, a small group of Boys plot their escape.
JILL: You want the visa?

_Suddenly the lights GO OUT. A SCREAM erupts. More POUNDING._

SS KIDS: Jews! Jews! Jews!

_Lizzie gives Jill the earrings._

LIZZIE: OK. Here. Give me my visa.

_But Jill pulls away from her._

VOICES: Jews! Jews! Come out, come out wherever you are. Jews! We’re coming for you.

LIZZIE: Jill. Give it to me.

_Suddenly, the Kids can’t hold on any longer. The doors FLY OPEN and a RUSH of Campers with BLACK ARMBANDS pour into the room, grabbing everyone they can. It’s a messy scrum. Lizzie hides behind stacked up bleachers, watching other kids being dragged away, SCREAMING. Jill makes a run for it into_ EXT. CAMP YARD

_Lizzie sprints out after her, pushing her way out into the sun, away from the grabbing hands of the SS._

SS KID: Get her! Get that kike Lizzie. She’s getting away!

_A line of SS BOYS, including David, chase Lizzie. One grabs or her, but she pushes him away until David KNOCKS her down. She claws and kicks at him desperately. The rest surround her, hovering menacingly._

LIZZIE: Stop it!
DAVID: What’s your problem?
LIZZIE: You’re hurting me.
DAVID: Get used to it. It’s the Holocaust.
LIZZIE: Leave me alone.

Lizzie KRAV MAGA CHOPS David’s shoulder. He rolls off in agony and she jumps up, shocked by her success. The other Boys back away. Lizzie runs in the other direction.

EXT. CAMP WOODS—MOMENTS LATER

Lizzie runs through the trees into no-man’s land. Finally when she’s safe, Lizzie stops and examines her ID: Anya.

LIZZIE: We made it.

She hears Orna stroll up behind her.

ORNIA: There you are. Did you get your papers to get out of Poland?
LIZZIE: If this is Poland, how come we’re not speaking Polish?
ORNIA: I knew it was too good to be true. Let’s go, Lizzie.

She nudges Lizzie forward.

EXT. LIZZIE’S TENT.

Lizzie sees Jill and Jesse in line at the “Passport Agency.”

LIZZIE: Maybe I can get a passport.

Orna follows her. Lizzie grabs at Jill’s ears.

LIZZIE: (CONT’D) Those are mine.
JILL: Don’t touch me.
JESSE: Leave her alone, freak.
LIZZIE: She stole them. They’re my grandmothers’.
JILL: You gave them to me.

Orna pulls Lizzie back.

ORNNA: That’s enough, Lizzie.
LIZZIE: But she took them.
ORNNA: Stop it. Now.

Orna nudges Lizzie into

INT. LIZZIE’S TENT.

Lizzie barely recognizes it with all the beds pushed against the wall. But her heart dances when she sees Rafi, sitting at the desk in charge of Passport Control. He’ll save her.

LIZZIE: It’s OK, Orna. You can go now.
ORNNA: You think I trust you after everything you’ve done?

Lizzie ignores her as Rafi waves Jill and Jesse forward. They hand him their papers with some bills underneath. His hands fly across a butcher paper ledger with names and columns of x’s and o’s until he finds their names. He flips through their IDs, stamps their passports, and returns their bills. They jump up and down.

JESSE: We did it!
JILL: Yes! We’re free!

They run out as Lizzie steps forward eagerly.

RAFI: Next.
LIZZIE: Hey.
RAFI: Hi there, kid.

This would be perfect except for Orna standing over her. Lizzie hands him her ID card, which he examines seriously.
LIZZIE: Things have gotten a little crazy.
RAFI: Yeah. They usually do during a war, don’t they? Anya. Wow. Married, with four kids.
LIZZIE: I’ve been busy.
RAFI: Clearly.

They LAUGH as he checks his lists. Lizzie can’t take her eyes off him, fingers, hair, eyes. She doesn’t hear him at first.

RAFI: (CONT’D) I can’t let you through.
LIZZIE: What?
RAFI: I can’t let you through. I can’t give you a stamp.
LIZZIE: What do you mean? Yes you can.
RAFI: Sorry. You’re not on the list.

He holds up his list. The kids behind her grow impatient, shuffling and sighing deeply.

LIZZIE: I don’t understand. Please.
RAFI: You’ll be fine, Anya. I’ll see you on the other side.

He shines those pearly whites at her. It’s just a game, but tears well up anyway. She doesn’t understand why she is getting so upset over a game. Her voice a pathetic whisper . . .

LIZZIE: But—
ORNAL: Lizzie. You heard what Rafi said. You’ll have to find another way. That’s the game. Now you might just understand how valuable freedom is.

Orna leads Lizzie outside to the

EXT. TENT AREA.

LIZZIE: Leave me alone, OK? I don’t need your help.

Hot tears streaming down her face, Lizzie pulls away violently from
Orna. Then she runs up the grassy hill.

ORNNA: Lizzie. Wait!

But Lizzie’s too fast. She sprints away, running up the

EXT. CAMP HILL.

Lizzie stops at the top of the hill to gaze at the blue green swells of ocean beyond the Pacific Coast Highway, taunting her, daring her to run away. Finally a moment of peace . . .

DAVID: (O.S.) Thought you could escape me, Jew.

Lizzie turns to see David standing behind her.

LIZZIE: Huh?
DAVID: Show me your papers, Jew.
LIZZIE: Why are you bothering me?
DAVID: Because I’m SS and you’re a Jew, Jew. ID. Now.

She can’t help but LAUGH.

DAVID: (CONT’D) Why are you laughing? Stop it. But she can’t. She can’t stop. He gets in her face.

DAVID: (CONT’D) Tell me dammit. Why are you laughing? I can make it really not funny.
LIZZIE: Because you’re such a Jew, David. You could never not be a Jew. You’re the biggest little Jew in the whole camp.
DAVID: Do you know who you’re talking to?
LIZZIE: Yeah. David Margolis.

He grabs her wrist roughly.

DAVID: No! I’m Friedrich Shumacher, Oberkommander of the 93rd regi

ment of the SS. Give me your ID. Now.
He’s not joking. She hands it to him.

DAVID: (CONT’D) Anya Ossevsheva, huh? Doesn’t look anything like you.
LIZZIE: Duh. Because it’s not me.
DAVID: So you’re carrying around counterfeit documentation. I’m taking you to jail. You need to learn to respect authority, Jew.

He pushes her forward violently. She winces in pain.

LIZZIE: Ouch.
DAVID: Let’s go. I’m sick of your games.

She stops suddenly.

LIZZIE: Wait. What if I have information on a fugitive?
DAVID: Fugitive. There aren’t many left. We’ve captured almost all of them.
LIZZIE: What about Kron?
DAVID: You have information on rebel Kron from Planet Lamu? Now that’s a different story. Where is she?
LIZZIE: If I tell you will you let me go?

He releases her wrists. Lizzie rubs the soreness out.

DAVID: So where is she? Tell me.
LIZZIE: She’ll be at the canteen. At noon.
DAVID: You’d better not be lying to me, Jew.
LIZZIE: I’m not. She’ll be there.

David runs off, whooping with glee. Lizzie watches him go then peers into Anya’s eyes. Suddenly she rips up her ID and star, watching the pieces flutter to the ground. She looks around. There is nothing left for her here. And then she runs off, never looking back.

FADE TO BLACK

THE END
Larry Brenner

FIRST BITE

A nice, quiet restaurant. Wanda and John are sitting across from each other at a table. It’s a romantic, candle-lit dinner, and it’s clear the two are enjoying each other’s company.

WANDA: You didn’t?
JOHN: No, I did. I swear.
WANDA: That is too funny.

(The two of them smile at each other for a moment.)

WANDA: So, look . . .
JOHN: Yeah?

(Wanda looks away.)

WANDA: I think things are going well.
JOHN: I think so too.
WANDA: So . . . and I apologize for being blunt . . . am I staying over at your place tonight?
JOHN: Wow.
WANDA: I mean, I don’t want to presume but . . .
JOHN: No, no, it’s fine. Better than fine. Great.
WANDA: You know, it’s just . . . I like to plan a little bit. Because, you know . . . I have commitments tomorrow.
JOHN: Planning is good.
WANDA: I’m sorry. I feel like such a . . .
JOHN: No, don’t be silly.
WANDA: It’s just I’ve never . . . you know?
JOHN: Wait . . . when you say never . . .
WANDA: Yeah.
JOHN: You’re a virgin?
JOHN: Then?
WANDA: I’ve just never been with a vampire before.

(A long pause.)

JOHN: Oh.
WANDA: Yeah.
JOHN: I didn’t realize you knew.
WANDA: I wasn’t sure exactly, until you freaked out when the waiter brought the garlic bread.
JOHN: I thought you said that wasn’t a big deal.
WANDA: It wasn’t a big deal. I’m just saying . . . most guys would have just said no thanks, instead of you know . . . screaming “take it away, take it away.”
JOHN: Sorry.
WANDA: Not a biggee. So how does this work?
JOHN: Huh.
WANDA: I mean . . . you’re planning on biting me right?
JOHN: Yeah.
WANDA: That kind of thing must complicate a relationship.
JOHN: It can, yeah.
WANDA: Can I ask you some questions? I just want to make sure we’re on the same page here.
JOHN: Go ahead.
WANDA: So . . . are you going to try to kill me?
JOHN: No. Why would you ask that . . . ?
WANDA: I think it’s extremely relevant.
JOHN: I’m not . . . I’m not some psycho killer or anything.
WANDA: That’s good.
JOHN: I like you. I wouldn’t want to hurt you.
WANDA: When you say you like me . . . do you mean “I’d like to have a fun evening with you,” or “I could see this being a long-term thing,” or “after tonight, you’re going to be my undead bride for all eternity?”
JOHN: Wow.
WANDA: Because I’m not ready to make that kind of commitment, but you know . . . I’m not looking for a fling either.
JOHN: Well, I would like to have a fun evening . . . but I think we might have something here . . .
WANDA: So, you could see this being a long-term thing?
JOHN: Yeah. Definitely.

(They both smile.)

WANDA: So . . . this is awkward . . . have you been tested?
JOHN: Tested.
WANDA: Because I’m not just being bitten by you, I’m being bitten by everyone you’ve ever bitten.
JOHN: I’m clean.
WANDA: You’re sure?
JOHN: I’m positive. Not positive in the I-test-positive-for . . . positive, as in certain. Clean. Uh, vampires don’t keep the blood of their past vict—dates in the system. After I bite you, you’re the only one in there. So I’m as clean as you are.
WANDA: Well, I’m clean.
JOHN: That’s good.
WANDA: After you drink my blood, is there going to be any intercourse?
JOHN: Wow.
WANDA: I mean, other than the whole dead thing, everything still works, right?
JOHN: Of course everything still works.
WANDA: You don’t need to get defensive about it.
JOHN: Why wouldn’t everything still work?
WANDA: Well, I know that, you know, an erection is caused by blood flowing . . .
JOHN: Wanda!
WANDA: They didn’t cover vampire sex in health class.
JOHN: Trust me. I have no problems in that department.

(A moment.)

WANDA: Cuddling’s just as good.
JOHN: Enough, already.
WANDA: Ok. Then while we’re on the subject . . . will you wear a condom?
JOHN: Will I . . . ?
WANDA: Yes. The C word.
JOHN: I really don’t like to . . .
WANDA: Ooh . . . not the right answer.
JOHN: Look . . . I don’t have bodily fluids to exchange with you. So no chance of disease. And I’m dead, so I can’t get you pregnant.
WANDA: That sounds like a line . . .
JOHN: I’m serious. So logically, there’s really no need for a . . .
WANDA: I’m sorry, but that would be a deal breaker for me.
JOHN: Ok, fine.
WANDA: You’ll wear one.
JOHN: Even though there’s absolutely no need for it . . .
WANDA: I would just feel more comfortable . . .
JOHN: It’s fine. I’ll wear one.
WANDA: Thank you.

(They sit in awkward silence for a moment.)

WANDA: It’s just . . . my last boyfriend was a werewolf, and we weren’t careful. Next thing I know, I’m at an STD clinic getting treated for lycanthropy.
JOHN: You have lycan—
WANDA: Had. All I can say is, thank god for penicillin and wolfsbane.
JOHN: Wow. I thought you said I was your first.
WANDA: Well, you’re my first vampire. But I’ve been with supernatural people before.
JOHN: People . . . so not just the werewolf, then.
WANDA: No.
JOHN: I’m sorry . . . did I touch a nerve?
WANDA: No, it’s fine . . . it’s just . . . it’s never worked out before.
JOHN: It never works out until it does.
WANDA: You don’t come with baggage, do you?
JOHN: I think everyone has some baggage.
WANDA: Yeah, but there’s baggage and then there’s . . . oh no.
JOHN: What?
WANDA: Um, my ex is here.
JOHN: The werewolf?
WANDA: No, not him.

(Ahemt, a mummy, comes slowly shambling over to the table. He’s wearing some clothes over the rags, but really, he isn’t fooling anyone. He speaks with an Arabic accent.)

AHMET: Wanda?
WANDA: Ahmet.
AHMET: What are the odds, huh?
WANDA: We’ve been over this before. You cannot keep following me.
AHMET: Wow. Wow. Someone’s a little full of herself.
WANDA: How many times . . . ?
AHMET: Look, it’s a coincidence.
WANDA: How many times, have you just happened to show up at a restaurant . . .
AHMET: Ok, get over yourself. I go out sometimes. I date.
WANDA: So, where’s your date tonight?
AHMET: She’s in the rest room.
WANDA: Really. Well, you have to bring her around and introduce me.
AHMET: It’s a first date. I don’t want her to think that I’m stuck on a psycho-ex.

(John stands up.)

JOHN: Ok, that’s enough.
AHMET: You keep out of this.
JOHN: The lady would like you to leave.
AHMET: She never said that. I didn’t hear her say that. Did you?
WANDA: It was implied by my tone and body language.
JOHN: So leave. Before I make you leave.

(Ahem shuffles toward John in a manner intended to be intimidating,
but comes off as comical shambling.)

AHMET: Yeah? You think you can take me? I’ve been hearing this crap for the past 3,300 some odd years. Everyone who said it? Dead.
WANDA: 3,300 years old and you’ve still got some major growing up to do.
AHMET: Yeah? You better watch it. Two words: mummy’s curse.
JOHN: Two words: open flame.

(John pulls the candle off of the table.)

AHMET: Hey man, be cool.
JOHN: Oh, I’m cool.
AHMET: No need for things to get ugly.
JOHN: I agree.
AHMET: So, I’ll just be going back to my table now. Wanda, you have my number. You know, if you want closure.

(Wanda shakes her head.)

AHMET: Whatever.

(Ahmet slowly shambles off. John sits back down.)

JOHN: Can you believe that guy?
WANDA: Give him a break . . . it ended badly.
JOHN: You were together for a while?
WANDA: In a lot of ways, we were very compatible . . . but I like to go out dancing sometimes, you know? And the age difference totally got in the way.
JOHN: That’s not going to be an issue for us? I mean, I don’t look it, but I am older.
WANDA: How much older?
JOHN: I was born in the sixties. Sired in the eighties.
WANDA: Then no worries. Besides, it’s not like you’re in an old man’s body . . . and you’re still vital.
JOHN: That I am.
WANDA: I hope he finds someone.
JOHN: That’s sweet of you, considering what an ass he’s being.
WANDA: He’s not so bad. This one time I was dating this demon from the eighth circle of hell, and when he found out I wasn’t a virgin, he totally lost it.
JOHN: You went out with a demon from the eighth circle of hell?
WANDA: No. We dated. Like three dates. Maybe four. And then he totally turned psycho on me. It was not a healthy relationship.
JOHN: He was a demon from hell.
WANDA: And you’re a vampire.
JOHN: Those are two different things.
WANDA: You’re a vampire, and you want to have a consensual relationship with a mortal woman. And, so yeah, the kind of girl who’s going to date a vampire is the sort of girl who’s going to date a demon. Where do you get off being so judgmental?
JOHN: You think he turned psycho on you when he found out you weren’t a virgin . . . what do you think would have happened if he thought you were?
WANDA: I don’t know.
JOHN: He would have tied you up on a satanic altar and slain you with a ritual dagger in an attempt to summon some cthulu-esque elder god to destroy the earth.
WANDA: Maybe.
JOHN: No maybe about it. You were lucky.
WANDA: You sound just like my father.
JOHN: Sorry.
WANDA: No, I’m sorry. You’re right. Dating a demon? Not the high point for me. I just get a little sensitive . . .
JOHN: Ok, so I have to ask . . . a werewolf, a mummy, a demon . . .
WANDA: You want the list?
JOHN: Kind of, yeah.
WANDA: One golem who wanted me to be the mommy he never had. One leprechaun with unresolved trust issues. One creature from the black lagoon who was a sweetheart, but the long distance killed the relationship. One vodoun zombie who wouldn’t marry me unless I converted, and one ghost . . . problems in the bedroom.
JOHN: That’s some list.
WANDA: Your turn. Quid pro quo.
JOHN: Ok . . . you want the list of who I’ve bitten, or who I’ve slept with.
WANDA: Both.
JOHN: Let’s just say a lot.
WANDA: I need a number.
JOHN: I’m not that great at math. I mean, a guy’s gotta eat you know . . . so every night . . .
WANDA: You’re telling me that you’ve bitten a girl every night since you became a vampire.
JOHN: Well, not just girls . . .
WANDA: Oh . . .
JOHN: Hey . . . it’s not like . . . you know, it’s how I eat. Some days you want hamburger, some days you want chicken.
WANDA: If we get in a relationship, I expect monogamy.
JOHN: Bedroom monogamy, or . . .
WANDA: You want to bite someone . . . you bite me.
JOHN: You’d be dead, if we did that. You’ve only got so much blood.
WANDA: Typical.

(Wanda grabs her purse.)

JOHN: Wait . . . where are you . . . ?
WANDA: No, I’m glad we got into this.
JOHN: Wanda . . . I really like you.
WANDA: Tonight. But tomorrow, you’ll have moved on.

(Wanda starts to walk away. John follows her from the table.)

JOHN: I haven’t ever been in a relationship.

(Wanda stops.)

WANDA: What?
JOHN: Not a real one. I was kind of hoping . . . you’d be the first.
(She walks back to the table.)

WANDA: Relationships are about trust, John.
JOHN: I know.
WANDA: And communication. Honest to goodness communication. That’s where things go wrong.
JOHN: I need to feed. But that doesn’t mean I’ll cheat on you.
WANDA: The bite of a vampire . . . it’s sexy. And it’s so easy for guys to get caught up in the moment.
JOHN: I’ve done that scene for decades now. It’s old. I’m . . . bored with it. I’m ready for something real.
WANDA: I want something real too. I want a partner.
JOHN: Yeah. Me too.

(The two of them kiss, slowly and gently. He puts his arms around her. They look at each other for a moment, and she turns around his arms still encircling her. She closes her eyes, tilts her head to the side, exposing her neck. He bares his fangs and gently bites down. She gasps.)

BLACKOUT
NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

JEFFREY C. ALFIER has work forthcoming in Poetry Ireland Review, South Carolina Review, and Tulane Review. His latest chapbook is The City Without Her (Kindred Spirit Press, 2012), and his first full-length book of poems, The Wolf Yearling, is forthcoming from Pecan Grove Press. He is the founder and co-editor of San Pedro River Review.

Poet PAUL SCOT AUGUST is originally from Chicago but has spent half his life now in Wisconsin. He has an MA in Creative Writing from UW-Milwaukee and works as a software developer. He is a former poetry editor of The Cream City Review and has been nominated twice for a Pushcart Prize and once for a Best of The Net award. His poetry has appeared in Mead: the Magazine of Literature & Libations, South Dakota Review, The Los Angeles Review, and elsewhere. He currently lives in the Milwaukee area with his two children.

MARK BEAVER’s work appears in Gulf Coast, Ninth Letter, North American Review, Memoir, and elsewhere. He recently completed a book-length memoir about growing up in the Bible Belt. He is a graduate of UNC Greensboro’s MFA program, and spends his days trying to convince high school students at The Lovett School in Atlanta that, despite Thoreau’s ugliness, Walden is beautiful.

KRISTEN M. BECHT grew up in the Louisville, Kentucky area. She has an MFA in Writing from Spalding University and currently lives in New Albany, Indiana with her partner, W.G. Rickel, a sculptor, and their cat, Bebe.

JOHN BENSKO’s three books of poetry include Green Soldiers (Yale), The Waterman’s Children (U Massachusetts), and The Iron City (U of Illinois). His story collection Sea Dogs is from Graywolf Press. He teaches in the U of Memphis MFA program.

LARRY BRENNER is an instructor at Spalding’s MFA program after graduating from the program in 2010. He is currently earning his PhD in Educational Theatre at NYU. In Fall 2010, Larry’s screenplay Bethlehem was one of the winners in the Final Draft Big Break Screenplay Competition, and is now being produced by Joe Roth Productions for Universal Studios. Larry’s stage play Saving Throw Versus Love was produced at part of the 2010 New York International Fringe Festival. It was then selected for the Fringe Encore Series, and is currently in contract with producers for an upcoming Off-Broadway run. Larry is a proud member of the Dramatists Guild of America and WGAEast.

J. CAMP BROWN plays bluegrass mandolin, sings high harmony, and studies Bill Monroe. His poetry has received a fellowship from the Arkansas Arts Council; it can be found in Nashville Review, Prick of the Spindle, and Juked. He lives in Fort Smith, Arkansas with his wife and sons.

AB Datta is a recent graduate of Bombay University. He lives in Bombay, India.
JAMES DEAHL was born in Pittsburgh in 1945, and grew up in that city as well as in and around the Laurel Highlands region of the Appalachian Mountains. He moved to Canada in 1970. He is the author of twenty-one literary titles, most recently: North Point, Rooms The Wind Makes, and North Of Belleville.

ALBERT DEGENOVA is the author of three books of poetry, The Blueing Hours and Back Beat and most recently Postcards to Jack. From 1978-1980 he was an editor of the Oyez Review; in June, 2000, he launched the literary/arts journal After Hours, for which he continues as publisher and editor. DeGenova received his MFA in Writing from Spalding University, Louisville. He is a blues saxophonist and one-time contributing editor to Down Beat magazine.


EMILY EDDINS has been a professional writer for twenty years. Her career includes time spent as a speechwriter, a journalist, a grant writer and an editor. The author holds a BA in English from Vanderbilt University, an MA in Liberal Studies from Georgetown University and she has studied creative writing at both Georgetown University and Stanford University. Her work has appeared in The Toad Suck Review, Riversedge, The Willow Review and other publications. Fun fact: she is named after Emily Dickinson!

CHRISTINE FADDEN’s work appears in Gulf Coast, Painted Bride Quarterly, Sou’wester, Joyland, PANK, Storyglossia, The Citron Review, and elsewhere. She is the recipient of the 2013 Wyoming Arts Council Blanchan Award, and has received fellowships from the Kimmel Harding Nelson Center for the Arts, Jentel Artist Residency Program, Brush Creek Foundation for the Arts, and Vermont Studio Center. She currently lives in Wyoming with five males (2 dogs, 2 cats, 1 human) and is working on a novel set in Ocean City, New Jersey. One day, she will have 2 horses.

SARAH GAUCH is a writer and 24-year resident of Cairo, Egypt. Her short stories and essays have appeared or are forthcoming in The Southampton Review, the International Herald Tribune, StoryQuarterly and Ascent magazine, among others. Before writing full-time she worked as a journalist, covering the Middle East for Newsweek, The New York Times, The Christian Science Monitor and other publications. She is presently at work on a memoir, weaving together her journalistic and personal experiences living in Egypt.

CLAUDIA GEAGAN has a degree in English and one in Finance. After a life in cities like Los Angeles and New York and a career involving spreadsheets and actuarial tables, she now lives and writes on a leafy mountainside in northwest South Carolina. Her work has recently appeared in Hippocampus Magazine.

KAREN L. GEORGE, author of Into the Heartland (Finishing Line Press, 2011), has work
forthcoming or published in Memoir, Cortland Review, Vestal Review, 94 Creations, and Barcelona Review. She has been awarded grants from The Kentucky Foundation for Women and The Kentucky Arts Council. She holds an MFA in Writing from Spalding University, and has taught fiction writing at The University of Cincinnati.

ELTON GLASER, a native of New Orleans, is Distinguished Professor Emeritus of English at the University of Akron, where he also directed the University of Akron Press and edited the Akron Series in Poetry. Glaser has published eight full-length collections of poetry, most recently The Law of Falling Bodies (Arkansas, 2013) and Translations from the Flesh (Pittsburgh, 2013). With William Greenway, he coedited I Have My Own Song for It: Modern Poems of Ohio (Akron, 2002). Among his awards are fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Ohio Arts Council, the Crab Orchard Poetry Award, and the Miller Williams Arkansas Poetry Prize. His poems have appeared in the 1995, 1997, and 2000 editions of The Best American Poetry.

SHARON GOLDBERG lives in the Seattle area and previously worked as an advertising copywriter in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Seattle. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in Under the Sun, The Chaffey Review, The Binnacle, The Feathered Flounder, three fiction anthologies, and elsewhere. Her story “Ghost” was a finalist in the Pacific Northwest Writers Association Literary Contest in 2011. “Caving In” was a finalist in 2012. Sharon is working on a short story collection.

BROOKE HARRIS is a Kentucky poet and dancer who calls Lexington home. Born of New York City parents and raised in North Carolina and Kentucky, she combines urban impulses with rural appreciations. With an unquenchable restlessness, Brooke has many hobbies, including Irish dance, cooking, graphic design, reading and photography.

CHRIS HAVEN’s poetry has appeared recently or is forthcoming in Nimrod, Minnesota Review, Sugar House Review, Versal, and Seneca Review. He teaches writing at Grand Valley State University in Michigan, where he edits Wake: Great Lakes Thought & Culture.

ALISON HICKS’ books include Kiss, a collection of poems, Falling Dreams, a chapbook, Love: A Story of Images, a novella, and Prompted, an anthology. She received the 2011 Philadelphia City Paper Poetry Prize, and has twice received fellowships from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts. Her work has appeared in Blood Lotus, Eclipse, Pearl, Permafrost, Quiddity, and Whiskey Island, among other journals. She leads community-based writing workshops under the name Greater Philadelphia Wordshop Studio (www.philawordshop.com).

MICHAEL DERRICK HUDSON lives in Fort Wayne, Indiana where he works at the Allen County Public Library for the Periodical Source Index (PERSI). His poems have appeared in Columbia, Georgia Review, Iowa Review, New Orleans Review, New Letters, and other journals. He won the River Styx 2009 International Poetry Contest, the Madison Review’s 2009 Phyllis Smart Young Prize, the 2010 New Ohio Review Prize for Poetry, and the 2011 Old Red Kimono Paris Lake contest. One of his poems
was recently nominated for a Pushcart Prize by *Greensboro Review*.

**J.D. Isip**’s academic writings, poetry, plays, and short stories have appeared (or will appear) in a number of publications including *The Atrium*, *Changing English*, *Teaching American Literature: A Journal of Theory and Practice*, *The Citron Review*, *Poetry Quarterly*, *Dash Literary Journal*, *Loch Raven Review*, and *The Copperfield Review*. He is a doctoral student in English at Texas A&M University-Commerce.

**Lowell Jaeger** is author of four collections of poems, most recently *Suddenly Out of a Long Sleep* (Arctos Press, 2009), and *WE* (Main Street Rag Publishing, 2010). He is founding editor of Many Voices Press and recently edited *New Poets of the American West*, an anthology of poets from western states. He is a graduate of the Iowa Writers Workshop, winner of the Grolier Poetry Peace Prize and recipient of fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Montana Arts Council. Most recently, Lowell was awarded the Montana Governor’s Humanities Award for his work in promoting civic discourse.

**Anthony James** is a first generation American born of Greek parents. An established film and television actor as well as an artist, James made his film debut in the 1967 Academy Award winning picture, *In the Heat of the Night*. He has appeared in more than twenty motion pictures and over a hundred television shows, including Clint Eastwood’s Academy Award winning *Unforgiven*. Anthony James has widely exhibited his artwork across the United States. He is represented by the Renjeau Gallery. ([www.renjeau.com](http://www.renjeau.com))

**Stephanie Keys**’ writing credits include an adaptation of Katherine Anne Porter’s, “The Fig Tree,” winner of the International Film Award for Best Children’s Film; *Mercy Killing*, winner of The Best New Play, Unicorn Theatre; and *The Annie Project*, finalist in the 8 Minute Madness Festival. She was head writer for a site-specific series of plays at the Westside Y. Two of her plays were previously published in *The Louisville Review*. She is currently a member of The Abingdon Theatre’s Writer’s Group and has had her work included in several of the Abingdon’s Benefit Challenge readings. She is the proud mother of Zoe Chaves. “How The Moon Fell In Love” was given a staged reading at the Abingdon Theatre and produced by the 8 Minute Madness Festival.

**Nancy Chen Long** lives with her woodsman husband and blue-eyed dog in a small cedar cabin hidden in the forests of south-central Indiana, right where the first wave of rolling hills flows out of the flatlands. Her most recent work has been (or will be) published in the *Roanoke Review*, *The New Sound Journal*, and *Adanna Literary Journal*.

**Margaret Mackinnon**’s work has appeared in *Poetry*, *Image*, *New England Review*, *Georgia Review*, and other publications. Her first book, *The Invented Child*, won the 2011 Gerald Cable Book Award and will be published in 2013 by Silverfish Review Press. She lives with her husband and daughter in Falls Church, Virginia.

**Marcia Meier** is an award-winning journalist, author, poet and director of the Summer Writing Institute at Antioch University, Santa Barbara. Her book, *Navigating the
Rough Waters of Today’s Publishing World, Critical Advice for Writers from Industry Insiders (Quill Driver Books, 2010) was named one of 2010’s best books for writers by The Writer magazine. She also wrote Santa Barbara, Paradise on the Pacific, a coffee table book published in 1996 by Longstreet Press in Atlanta. Meier has written for numerous publications, including the Los Angeles Times, The Writer magazine, The Huffington Post and Aol.com. She holds a bachelor’s degree in journalism and an MFA in creative writing from Antioch University Los Angeles.


Chris Roush completed his Bachelor’s degree in English from Indiana University in 2007 and has since worked at the IU Department of Folklore and Ethnomusicology. Though a long-time Bloomington resident, he is originally from a large family in rural Martin County, Indiana. His writing focuses on the bonds of family, place, and the passing on of knowledge, values, and memory through oral traditions and those “things” we like to call family heirlooms and antiques.

Amanda Jo Runyon’s work can be found in such journals as The Rectangle, Still: The Journal, and Open Mic. She is currently at work on a collection of short stories inspired by the oral history of her father’s family and other members of the Blackburn Settlement, a small eastern Kentucky community displaced by the creation of the Fishtrap Dam in the 1960s. She is an Instructor of Developmental English and Academic Team coach at her alma mater, the University of Pikeville. Amanda Jo lives in Draffin, Kentucky, with her husband, Ben, and three children, Corey, Adrianna, and Adam.

Jennifer Sperry Steinorth is a builder and designer living in northern, lower Michigan. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in Pleiades, Tar River, A River and Sound Review, The Southeast Review Online, Scintilla and elsewhere. Her chapbook Forking the Swift was published in 2010. She is currently pursuing an MFA at Warren Wilson.

Eric Scott Sutherland is a hawk watcher, Kentucky creek walker, the author of three chapbooks and the forthcoming full length collection, pendulum (2013). He is the creator and host of Holler Poets Series, a monthly celebration of literature and music since 2008. Eric makes his nest in Lexington.

Tommy Trull’s plays have been produced all over the country, including recent pro-
ductions in New York, Chicago, DC, and California. His play The 27 Club was published recently by NYTE, and his play Honeyboy was published by Southern Theatre magazine. He has won the Charles Getchell New Play Award (Southeastern Theatre Conference) and is the only playwright to have won the Mark Gilbert Award twice. His poems have appeared most recently in Border Crossing and South85 Journal. He received his MFA in Writing from Spalding University, is playwright-in-residence for North Carolina’s Fly-By-Night Theatre, and he teaches at Greensboro College and Guilford Technical Community College.

JAMES VALVIS is the author of How To Say Goodbye (Aortic Books, 2011). His poems or stories have appeared in journals such as Anderbo, Arts & Letters, LA Review, Nimrod, Rattle, River Styx, South Carolina Review, and many others. His poetry has been featured in Verse Daily and the Best American Poetry website. His fiction was chosen for the 2013 Sundress Best of the Net. A former US Army soldier, he lives near Seattle.

JENNIFER WHITAKER has published poems in numerous journals, including Beloit Poetry Journal, New England Review, New Orleans Review, and Four Way Review. She is an assistant poetry editor for storySouth and a contributing editor for Cave Wall. She lives in Greensboro, North Carolina, where she teaches poetry and is Assistant Director of the University Writing Center at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

C.WILLIAMS lives in Nashville, Tennessee working as a Production Designer, Art Director and Photographer for commercials, music videos, TV and film. In between visual projects she has written many drafts of a novel, completed two screenplays (one currently in production), and a tidy pile of short stories. Her essay, “The First Lunch” was published in the anthology MOTIF 2: Chance. “Cobra God” is her first piece of fiction to be published.

CATHERINE WOODARD worked to return Poetry in Motion to the New York City subways and is a board member of the Poetry Society of America. Her poems have appeared in Painted Bride Quarterly, Bellingham Review, RHINO, Poet Lore and other journals and can be found at www.catherinewoodard.com. She co-published Still Against War/Poems for Marie Ponsot and writes for The Best American Poetry blog. Woodard has been a fellow at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts and Hambidge Center for the Creative Arts and Sciences. She is a former newspaper and new media journalist and a past president of Artists Space for emerging visual artists. She lives and plays basketball in New York, New York.

SAM ZALUTSKY is currently in post-production on How To Make It To The Promised Land, for which he received a Jerome Foundation production grant. A new web-series, The Go-Getters, which he directs and produces, will be launched in May. His first feature film, You Belong To Me, was released in 2008. You can see more of his work at sazamproductions.com or follow him on twitter at twitter.com/zalutsky.
The
Children’s
Corner
Brian Gillespie

IF I HAD A PLACE

I want a place
A magical place
Where moon beams claw at oaks
And midnight hides behind crackling fog
Breezes bring news of ancient, rusty old days
And tell tales of wondrous autumn nights
Scents of cinnamon skip through the fresh air
As dawn approaches from the east
Memories of fireflies dance through the misty sky
Rain drops upon a dented old oak, it’s been battered, squashed
But it’s still standing
And that’s all that matters
I want to create a magical place
Where the blind can see
The deaf can hear
All are happy
Anything can happen
This is my place
My magical place
Anywhere I can see
To me
A book means
Brittle words of rust
And paper of leather
The strong smell of wisdom
Painting the air with dust

Ripple
The words feel alive again
They’re trying to get the feeling
Trying to be themselves

A book means adventure
Excitement
Joy
It means your great big soft couch
A warm blue blanket to curl and snuggle up under
That crispy smooth cocoa
The fireplace ablaze
Taking your mind off the bitterness
On the frosty winter nights
It’s what makes the upside down arc rise
Upon your mouth

A book means the flame that starts
A fire of tears
That gives you something
To rejoice about
**OLD BROWN DICTIONARY**

The wrinkles
Weave their way
Through the pages
Of our old dictionary
Making it seem delicate
Soft
But most of all
Friendly
Being old
Makes the dictionary fragile
Yet wise
This book is old
But the signs of this book
Being old
Make it look like
A new masterpiece
Trust me
This book
Will never look old

Brian Gillespie
Allison Hall

LEAVING

I hear your vindictive laugh,
My tears, dropping like rain,
Your words stab me,
Like a raven’s sharp beak,

Everyone who knows me,
Knows a different person,
I am four-dimensional,
Impossible and intricate.

My tears,
They got me this far,
Two years.
This is not a prophecy.

Now I’ve changed.
Look at me now.
Your words mean nothing.
I’ve changed.
Mackenzie A. Simper

Heralds of the Storm

Dark clouds
Shifting over mountaintops;
So ominous,
So quick.

A light drop
Against the windshield of a car;
Just one,
But telling of more to come.

A smell in the air;
Not like rain, not like sunshine,
But not in between either,
Something different entirely.

A crack of thunder
Is the final, but not the last
For there will be more to come
Until the storm has passed.
Ana Walker

STOP, RELAX, RUN

Spring, Hawaii, cushy sand, inspiring waves. I want to throw myself in and stay there until the sun dives under the horizon. In my 8 year-old mind I hope this trip here will be just a first, not a last.

Summer age 10, inside the owners house, 5 puppies, one me. One, chubby like a marshmallow wiggles into my lap. It looks like someone filled a water balloon with black paint and hurled it at his sand colored face.

Fall age 10, my stomach has jumped out of my body and ran out the door. I guess I’m going to this new school without it.

Winter age 11, same school, new house, new neighborhood. My new home, no this big cold house in an unfamiliar place is not home. Home is the house on 35th large yet cozy, pale blue yet as bright as the night. Home is hot cocoa after a day in the snow, home is a steaming tamale ready to be eaten, home is a warm fuzzy blanket to curl up in when you have the shivers. Home is bliss. This place is not home. Will it ever be?

Now, adjusted, sprightly, free. But don’t get too used to now, life never pauses.
Michael Hrejsa

ZERO DISTANCE, FULL OF LOVE

Our eyes gaze into the night, the stars reflecting upon our eyes,
Calm night surrounding us, nothing but the sounds of nature in our ear,
The awing figures of Orion and Virgo shining upon us from their infinite sky,
Let us sink down, deep into the core of the lovely Earth with no fear,
The blazing fire of nature’s heart beating through ours, in sync, all love
A living force that ignites our greatest desires and strongest banes,
What gives away into hurt and anguish, the flourish of obsidian doves,
Is life’s only worthy gamble, the reason to see through life’s pains,
And we stare down into the molten core of our existence,
Hearts lighted and melded, beings one and in unbreakable binds,
Back in the bright, black sky, each star separated by great distance,
With no matter, for it means nothing, as our souls have intertwined.

Clearing, laying upon the dewy grass with our bonded minds sure,
The soft glide of a soothed life ahead of us, pushed on by a begging allure.
Peter LaBerge

**Winter Barn**

It still stands, a patch of red, a bleeding stork. It still stands, starched stiff like a red pucker, a tongue to let speak the surrounding snowdrifts.

No disturbances. No footprints in the snow. No smoke, still. It stands, painfully ready to be used. The blushing shows through the snowy cover.

This was a landscape of past revelation, deepening haydrifts and smiling pumpkins. A flame of childhood sparked with the pony’s clop, the rider’s smile a lifeline lifted on and off the back.

Tonight: dead winter, seventeen below. Snow sneaks, the paint creaks. Worry boils water for tea on the stove while we gather like leaves on the back porch, in the dark in a winter-long wind, while the barn stands, its empty self a strain of broken blood.
Peter LaBerge

WHEN CASSIOPEIA MET CEPHEUS

when cassiopeia met cepheus
for drinks and whiskey shots under the sky
outside the bar they lit their cigs and drove
their car, two beams to warn the life ahead:
two teens down lexington could lose their minds,
and throw their shadows into each other’s
their hips mid-revolution weeping sweat
their love an elbowed imprint in the sheets
in evening the moon was a puppet held
up by phone lines reaching out from windows
her father’s milky cataract has shone
onto their bed, which both know has become
the only place for Cassiopeia
Peter LaBerge

Polaroid

Snap it like a bone, 
fresh and quick.

Have faith, the little square
swallows what we see.

You can melt it into vision 
with candlewick fingernails, just give it

Time. We’re running hot, and the bed
needs an oil change.

There are only so many ways to open
windows at night in August

And let the breeze tease 
fingers through our messy hair.

We unfold into each other like
illegible love notes that we were

Born to be. Free, free,
ever sleeping.
NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS TO THE CHILDREN’S CORNER

BRIAN GILLESPIE is a thirteen-year-old seventh grader at Oak Valley Middle School, though he wrote these pieces between the ages of nine and eleven. He loves to be outside under the San Diego sun swimming, cycling or playing soccer. He was born a natural writer, though his parents and teachers do try to take some credit!

ALLISON HALL is a student at the Seattle Girls’ School. She lives in Kirkland, Washington and enjoys reading and writing.

MICHAEL A. HREJSA is a drab one. Living in a quiet town in Indiana, he began to write while under the pressure of life and school. He adores both prose and poetry, finding their short and sweet structures extraordinary and powerful with ease. He idolizes the romantics from the 18th century and attempts to recapture their fascination with nature and people in an experimental, almost neo-gothic fashion.

PETER LABERGE is a high school senior at Greens Farms Academy in Westport, Connecticut. He is a 2013 YoungArts Winner for a Writing, and a proud alum of the Foyle Young Poets of the Year and National Scholastic Writing Awards. His recent work has appeared in The Apprentice Writer, The Claremont Review, Polyphony H.S., The Blue Pencil Online, Gargoyle Magazine, and The Yale Journal for Humanities in Medicine. His poem “Ode to a Snuggie” will appear in Rabbit Ears: TV Poems (Poets Wear Prada, 2013), alongside the work of Dorianne Laux, Tony Hoagland, and Annie Finch. Currently, Peter serves as the Founder/Editor-in-Chief of The Adroit Journal (www.adroit.co.nr). Next year, he will begin studies at the University of Pennsylvania, where he hopes to study creative writing as well as marketing and management.

MACKENZIE A. SIMPER is fourteen years old and enjoys reading, writing, running, and hiking with her Spanish Water Dog named Magic. Her work has been published in Navigating the Maze anthology, Creative Kids magazine, and The Newtowner.

ANA WALKER lives in her home in Seattle, Washington with two siblings, a dog, and her parents. She wrote her poem when she was eleven years old. Now thirteen years old, she still loves poetry, playing basketball, and hanging out with friends.
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