The
Louisville
Review

Special Kentucky Issue

2012
TLR publishes two volumes each year: spring and fall. Submissions of previously unpublished manuscripts are invited. Please submit online through our submissions manager: www.louisvillereview.org/submissions. Prose submissions should be double-spaced and page numbered. Poetry (up to 5 poems) need not be double-spaced; multiple poems should be submitted in one document. Drama should appear in standard format. Please include your name on every page. If you are submitting in more than one genre, please submit documents separately. We encourage you to include a cover letter in the comments section. Our editorial staff reads year around. Simultaneous submissions accepted. Payment is in copies. Email address: louisvillereview@spalding.edu. Children/teen (K-12) poetry and fiction must be accompanied by parental permission to publish if accepted. Reply time is up to 6 months.

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This Special Kentucky Issue of *The Louisville Review* celebrates the appointment by the governor of Kentucky of Maureen Morehead, featured on our cover and in the opening pages of the magazine, as Kentucky Poet Laureate 2011-2012. Maureen is a member of the poetry faculty of the Spalding University brief-residency Master of Fine Arts in Writing Program. During the period of her tenure as Kentucky Poet Laureate, Maureen travels throughout Kentucky giving presentations of her own poetry and promoting all the literary arts, as well as offering fresh encouragement to Kentucky readers and writers. Libraries, universities and colleges, writing conferences and clubs are invited to contact Maureen about a speaking engagement. Her poems have appeared widely in national journals and her books include *In a Yellow Room*, *Our Brothers' War*, *A Sense of Time Left*, *The Melancholy Teacher*, and the forthcoming *Late August Blues: The Daylily Poems*.

*The Louisville Review* and the Spalding brief-residency MFA in Writing Program congratulate Maureen on her appointment as Kentucky Poet Laureate. We are honored to have her among our distinguished poetry faculty. The year 2011-2012 celebrates the tenth anniversary of Kentucky's first MFA in Writing program.

This issue of *TLR* celebrates all Kentucky writing and features a sampling of work by many Kentucky writers. We encourage all writers throughout Kentucky to continue to send their work to regular issues of the magazine, now in its 36th year of continuous publication. I wish to thank especially our guests editors, who are themselves distinguished Kentucky Writers living in various locations and teaching at various institutions throughout the state.

**Amy Attaway** is a Louisville native, and she was thrilled to read the work of so many talented Kentucky writers in her stint as Guest Editor. Amy is the Associate Director of the Apprentice/Intern Company at Actors Theatre of Louisville, and Founder and Co-Artistic Director of Theatre [502]. Her work with both companies includes collaborations with playwrights and actors on new plays, commissions, and devised work. Recent directing credits are *The End*, 2011 Humana Festival of New American Plays; Marco Ramirez's *3:59am: a drag race for two actors*, 2009 Humana Festival; *Broadsword* (The-
atre [502]); *The Last Five Years* (Crossroads Repertory Theatre); *The Drunken City, Sailor’s Song, Impossible Marriage* (The Necessary Theatre). Amy is a graduate of the University of Evansville, and a proud member of Actors Equity and the League of Professional Theatre Women.

**Nancy Jensen**’s novel *The Sisters* (St. Martin’s Press, 2011) was selected by the Independent Booksellers Association as the #1 Indie Next Pick for December 2011 and included by *Kirkus Reviews* on its list for Best Fiction of 2011. She has been awarded an Artist Enrichment Grant from the Kentucky Foundation for Women and an Al Smith Fellowship from the Kentucky Arts Council. Her first book, *Window: Stories and Essays*, was published by Fleur-de-Lis Press in 2009. Nancy shares her Richmond, Kentucky home with eight rescued cats and her dog Gordy, who is her partner on a pet therapy team with Pawsibilities Unleashed of Kentucky.

**Frederick Smock** is associate professor of English at Bellarmine University. His books of essays include *Poetry & Compassion: Essays on Art & Craft* and *Pax Intrantibus: A Meditation on the Poetry of Thomas Merton*. He has also published four books of poems with Larkspur Press. He lives in Louisville with his wife Olga-Maria.

**Richard Taylor**, Keenan Visiting Writer at Transylvania University, is the author of two novels, seven collections of poetry, and several nonfiction books, mostly relating to Kentucky History. His most recent books are *Fading into Bolivia* (Accents Publications, 2011) and *Rare Bird: Sonnets on the Life of John James Audubon* (Larkspur Press, 2011). He is currently working on a series of poems relating to the life of emancipationist Cassius M. Clay. A former Kentucky poet laureate and the winner of two creative writing fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, he and his wife own Poor Richard’s Books in Frankfort, Kentucky.

—Sena Jeter Naslund, Editor
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Maureen Morehead

NOVEMBER

Tomorrow will be clear, 69 degrees
and I’ll take a walk through the woods
across the bridge over owl creek

along willow lake clean after days
of rain, past the giant pumpkins too soft
to carry, composting the garden now

for next year’s squashes, and the sad
sunflowers, the gray considerate soybeans
home to quail and busy goldfinches.

See the prairie of dry susans, tall blue-
stem, ironweed, white johnson grass,
the nests, airy mistletoe, ornaments

in the branches of the black walnuts.
I want to sleep finally with nothing on
my mind except the yellow cardigan

in the bottom drawer I’ll wear tomorrow
because that’s usually all you need when
November pretends it’s summer where

white iris sleep beside red chimneys
beside spent lilies beside dark hydrangeas,
arms of Russian sage. I might look pretty

good from a distance, happy, backlit,
happier even than the weather suggests I
should be. I plan to take a walk tomorrow.

Come with me.
Maureen Morehead

MARY TODD

(from Late August Blues: The Daylily Poems)

Hunters in Kentucky want to shoot sandhill cranes. We see them today as Audubon did nearly 200 years ago in their migration to Florida from Canada and the Great Lakes. Once I parked at the end of the lot and saw a flock of sandhills as I walked toward Wal-Mart to buy cereal and mayonnaise. I can see the nest of a red-tailed hawk in the branches of an old ash in my neighbor’s yard. Always it was Ellen’s voice on the kitchen phone, her arriving for Christmas with her little bag. Sometimes Mother took me with her Friday nights to the department stores in Jacksonville. Once she bought me a white blouse and a blackwatch plaid pleated skirt. Mother was thin, dark; she wore a red coat to church and black high heels. Creationists in our state plan to build an ark. I assume they’ll import Noah and his loyal wife, gather insects, reptiles, animals and birds. How will they lure the sandhill cranes? How will they lure the red-tailed hawks? And the pileated woodpeckers? And the goldfinches and purple martins and eager titmice and mocking birds? Will dogs that we love like people chase the heifers in? Will we walk like sheep into the ark ourselves? Will our
taxes go up or down? Will our schools flourish or fail? Have you seen a flock of sandhills grazing in a field of corn? Or a hundred eagles roosting in a tree? Or a housefinch at the thistle feeder? I bought a skirt the blue of autumn’s sky, a sweater the yellow of turning leaves. I followed a river everyday to school, graded thousands of essays and tests and taught the art of persuading someone to think about something the way you want them to. Officials say it’s a matter of conservation akin to hunting deer. Opponents can’t imagine the destruction of such a beautiful bird. Yes, I’ve watched many deer rooting for acorns beneath our first December snow: a silver buck and a little doe just yesterday came up from the golf course through the woods, then crossed the creek into our backyard. They were so close, in fact, we could have shot them if we’d tried.
It was raining, so I didn’t have the heart to stop at Kroger. The white plastic baskets of pink impatiens looked as sorry as I am.

It has been raining 40 days and 40 nights. The rain is oh so many tears. In Louisville, we have let the Ohio River spill itself into our streets. Through the window shade, the light of what has been a melancholy day is blurred; if one of us apologizes, let the other, without foresight or malice, forgive.

A fire starts in the old wiring of a house in the Highlands, two doors from Joan’s.

A tornado flattens a Missouri town. Plans for the end of the world come undone, though you could count the Missouri tornado and the fire that took the lives of three girls and the tsunami in Japan that made vulnerable a bevy of nuclear power plants and hurricane Katrina and the earthquake that tumbled Haiti as signs. I’m fascinated by this thing: the Rapture. I’d like to be lifted from this kitchen chair. Many times I’ve wished for a helicopter or an airplane, especially when there’s that dark, desert hurt:

a woman is unfaithful to her husband;
a man is unfaithful to his wife.  
It’s always a matter of trust. Then faith.

Wouldn’t it be nice if there were perfectly trusting, trustworthy human beings?  
Call them Adam and Eve. Or Ann and John.

Or Mary and Dave. Say each says, for richer for poorer; in sickness and in health; because some years it will rain 40 days, 40 nights,

and one of us will be standing in the rain on a mountain in Wyoming, sad and sorry, sorry for what was falling down is fallen down. Say, I shall bring you an umbrella.  
Say, I have always loved you. Say, there was once a young woman with brown hair:

say, wanted; say, want. Say, I have loved you all my life until death do us part.  
In sickness and in health I shall love you.
Maureen Morehead

COMFORT IN WORDS

the voice is lilac on the telephone  
*song of the bleeding throat*  
Latin *fortis* strong  

*song of the warbling thrush*  
solitary and bereaved  
oh: to soothe, give solace: oh  

O stepping into grief  
O can’t we erase that day  
O blazing blazing smokebush  

in my own front yard  
one blackeyed susan one sky  
the rush of purple sage  

a thrush is a songbird  
a disease of the throat  
*to comfort* is to make well  

to quiet a fear  
lighten a burden  
mitigate divert ease  

to encourage  
enliven free gladden  
hearten  

*  

the singer’s song was hushed  
by a gunshot to the head  
the day a great wind
took out the trees  
in bowling green kentucky  
and in cherokee park  

I saw the black sky  

take off the roofs  
in indian hills  
tumble down houses  

hills in western Kentucky  
and grocery stores  
collapsed and people  

died, but some were lucky  
that cruel April afternoon  
the sky was black  

in Bowling Green.  

*

another man  
we barely knew  
we loved departed  

(and a man  
we know  
intimately)  

sing on you cheerless grackle  
sing on prodigious dandelion  
and oh that sad lilac voice on the telephone  

we were stunned  
and a full two years
of meaning

to make grief lighter
to lift up a voice
to make glad your song as

a sun a lily a soapbox
a white star of morning
then in the schoolyard

a man
we barely knew
we loved departing

*

bird lilac star
star bird lilac
lilac star bird

*for six years they’ve been
saying there will be a cure
for six years they’ve

been saying
we are working hard
to find a cure

the brain is a bleeding heart
the brain is a new frontier
the brain is how awful

it was we saw his blood
upon her pink clothing; we tried
to comfort her: console

a more formal word is console
meaning *inspiring with hope*: is yet a common prayer a feathered thing a hop hoping grasshoper: to make grief or distress seem lighter to assuage to fix

* 

she loved him with all her heart she loved him beyond love but he departed anyway

* 

sing on sing on bring it on song of the lilac call of the warbling ostensible poet whose presence is a comfort to her whose forgiveness affords her great comfort whose recovery is comfort to everyone to ease to restore a cheerful outlook *six years* is the promise promise? promise: we’re counting.
Maureen Morehead

DECEMBER

Yes, there were hundreds of goldfinches eating the faces of the small sunflowers weeks before they bowed their darkened heads like miniature water spigots along my beaten pathway. We are between snows. Deer forage in the empty cornfield; someone has left the red gate open, so it’s easy for a man collecting cans tossed from the road that runs next to the blue windows of Central State Hospital and along Willow Lake at the far north end of the trail to get in here. For the first time, I see mallards among the geese and miss the box turtles sunning on branches atop the shallow water. The man collecting cans scares me a little. Usually it’s thin women with big dogs or children on their bicycles or a husband and wife, one or both of them talking on their cell phones. I know that the beak of a goldfinch is adapted to consume seedheads and that its agile pink feet grip the stems of sunflowers, alder, and birch trees. I know
its sister is the less spectacular house finch who can, nevertheless, eat thistle upside-down from my special backyard feeder. I can hear, because there is no foliage for muffling, a train far down Park Road now. This trail is lonelier today than I am used to. Red weeds hide me from no one. Thanks to you who thought of sunflowers!
Kathleen Driskell

AMERICAN BISON

The operator thinks I’m nuts when I ring 911
to report them grazing in my suburban back yard;
she’s musing about which agency to call,

I hear her flipping through pages, says she
has to check with her supervisor, says
she’ll phone me back in a few.

The He-Bison, taller than my old Volvo,
looks as if he’s not going anywhere; he’s shaggy
and obtuse, a dull fellow methodically chewing

a sprig torn from my azalea bush, my blossoms
grinding into a foamy pink slather between his teeth,
enormous, flat, yellow. If I had a good arm, I could toss

a ring and hoop his rough horn from my window, but
he doesn’t even turn to look when I crank it open
and yell Shoo! You-hoo! Buffalo! Shoo! He’s oblivious.

He’s king after all, but my shouting has given the poor she-bison
a start. Nervous Nelly. She jumps to the side, in three
dainty hops; when she stops, she turns rigid

as the already taxi-dermied, perfectly poised,
as if on display upon my clipped lawn. She merely
needs a price tag pinned to her silly little ear.

Her only movement, panic nickering around
the edge of her eyes. Then, her face slackens.
Her shoulders lose their tension, her nubby horns
droop. It’s as if just then she’s realized—
and in that instant regretted—how placidly she followed him
through the farmer’s jolly green field, and through

the broken fence. Big dumb bull, his eyes now
drugged with chewing pleasure. Then her face
seems to turn to disgust. And I wonder if she sees

what I see: from his wet sloppy snout, great
strands of snot blow loopily through
the warm spring breeze like a wild trapeze.

The she-bison, in my yard with her indolent fellow, quieter
now, as she sees her choices more clearly, either this,
or back to the Bison Farm, a twenty-mile trot down

Highway 60. She’s hesitant, hedging, mulling it all
over when I receive the call that tells me to watch for
the truck, the warden, the anesthesizing dart.
ON CLEAVING

All summer I watched for him for I knew he was out there, just inside the rimming of woods that ran all around. Wild boy, his feral curls stiff and ashy with dirt, he pedaled past at least once a day on his rickety rusting bicycle, grocery bags dangling from crooked handlebars, his filthy sleeping bag tied to the rear fender. One neighbor said she saw him washing dishes at the Waffle House near the exit ramp. Another called the cops, but no one ever found out what he was hiding from or why. I tried to stay alert, but he always approached quietly, giving me a start when I was out front pulling weeds near the picket gate. Each time he appeared, my heart revved up in faster time, my eyes anxiously searching for my small children nearby, digging happily in the dirt with old spoons. All summer, he must have lain in the wood, awkwardly tending his fugitive camp, trying to slow his own heart leaping up with each odd birdcall or snap in the woods, near the highway. In the night, I’d wander from window to window, watching, making sure his flame had not caught hold of the horizon.

I looked for danger, instead of worrying over him like a good mother, instead of extending him any kindness, if only in my mind. So many ways my children have cleaved my heart tenderly toward the world; yet how many ways they’ve turned my grizzly core against it.
Rebecca Gayle Howell

A BRIEF ATLAS FOR LEAVE-TAKING

The tree of knowledge
of touch and age

grows in the perfect orchard
of your lungs

And loneliness
like black snakes dropping

like roads
dropping from every limb
Rebecca Gayle Howell

A Brief Atlas for Return

The foresworn field,
this dust of your dust,

let it become to you
just as it is for them

and their giant eyes,
this jersey herd born

into an earth ignited,
seeing all as tinder,

all as ember shine

Your eyes a light-letting
of all you witness—

fescue, axe, the barbed-
wire fence rusted—

now: suns to you
now: flax, wheat

If you do this,
if you open your eyes,

when they come
you will be lost,

sitting in this center
without the cover of trees,

days wet and natal
in that wide heat,

your sense and seed absent,
your drought throat—

Silence of their silence,
behold their approach

How they rend the soil
with their hooves

like bullocks who smell blood-
guilt seeped underneath and cannot leave

what was once abandoned
what we kill to forget

See how they circle you
Mother tongues

upon your forehead
your neck

your back and bold chest
anointing you

new and without scent
without name
Philip White

THE COMMON PIGEON

“Rock Dove” sounds better, but whatever
I name them I know we bring them with us,
weed birds inhabiting the ongoing rupture
we call home. Still, I like their dirty colors,
and together they make the mind I’ve watched
as it circulates in strong whiplashing gusts
from Sim’s Garage up Main to the viaduct,
then back over First Presbyterian to this stretch
of wire on the outskirts which they’ve picked
for reasons I can’t see. It’s fifteen degrees,
et early Sunday morning. Trenching through snow
for the hundredth time beneath their spot,
I try not to set them off. It seems good right now
to think of them up there looking out
into the cold wind coming over the empty
roads and fields of west Garrard County.
Philip White

IN THE FIELD

near Perryville

Late Afternoon meadowlarks and redwings
splutter off at my step; a veering bobolink twangs.
Now a catbird riffs an eighth-note motive stolen
from a wren, that seems like candor though it’s only
one sound keeping itself here in the fray, alive.
They can’t know how we’re changing them, the birds;
we barely do. They live in the cut, get by
while others more tuned to where they’ve been
fade to the fringes, or out. Could we fade?
Our humming traffic, talk? Our neighborhoods?
We’re too good at building in ruin to go easily:
quick power, pleasure—life, our life, at any price.
Far enough back, isn’t this hayfield also a place
where one of us raised a hand and the other died?
Jeff Worley

DUCK POEM

Hondas and Land Rovers and BMWs
   are idling
      in the unseasonal heat.

They’re stuck in the 5:00 rush behind
   this plodding brown-speckled
      mallard and nine ducklings

she pulls behind her with invisible
   thread across six lanes
      of Nicholasville Road.

What cells are firing in her brain,
   urging her to do this,
      the only pond for miles

recycling across the street
   in the Fayette Mall?
      And what fabulous stories

will these stalled-out husbands tell,
   half an hour late again,
      over the fading pot roast,

the limp string beans?
   One admits a lover he’s taken
      years to invent, happy hours

at the Rodehouse Inn,
   the life he’s been dreaming into place
      on the long rides home.

Packing a suitcase, he thinks
he would have confessed sooner
    if the ducks

hadn’t been so long in coming,
    obedient and oblivious
    in the fine April air,

opening a clear path at last.
WHY I DO NOT WRITE POEMS ABOUT THE MOON

Bianca Spriggs

The moon is nothing
but a great white carp
trapped in a dark tin of sky,
circled in on herself,
sucking her tail,
waiting to be fried.

She is a decanter
threatening to spill over,
drunk on her own ruddy spirit.
Swinging too low to the Earth,
she makes sloppy promises,
turns the tops of trees to rust.

One night she might ape
a blue specter’s half smile.
The next, a halo with its center
inked out by shadow.

Whatever her caper,
she proves a selfish player,
lingering at dawn,
well beyond her curtain call.
SWEATSHIRT

Don Boes

Nobody clears the sidewalks.
Credit card offers stack up
in front of the slot.
When I wear my brother’s sweatshirt,
the raggedy one with the trout,
I remember how he loved to fish
even though he never fished
after he discovered drinking
and lost his job at the restaurant
and stopped wearing the shirt.
Shoveling snow reminds me
of headlights teasing
a motel room curtain
and slush the color
of compromised teeth
and the feral cat I let sleep
in the backseat of my car.
My brother was younger and taller
and probably smarter than me
although I had the better jump shot.
On the bus to school
he would polish off his homework
while I grappled with long division
at the kitchen table, chewing raw potatoes
my mother was chopping for dinner,
listening to the AM radio,
the songs loud but the commercials louder.
He never knew what he wanted
but now that he’s dead
he has everything he needs.
The sun shows up to sabotage
the afternoon gloom
and throw some light
against the cave wall. 
The driveway is beginning 
to be negotiable. The dripping starts.
Old dogs
bark at walls
known for years,
get lost
in kitchen corners,
pace in the night,
nails clicking
hardwood floors.
They sleep hard
in deafness:
under beds,
in sun-warmed grass,
by the stove.

Old dogs
eat slowly,
with loose teeth
and bad breath,
but fiercely,
as if they may
never eat again.
They snarl at pups,
who belly-up to play,
and they no longer
wag their tails
when you approach.
Their muzzles gray.

You carry them,
weight concentrated
in a faraway
cataract stare,
into the yard
which has become a foreign county.

You carry them, bodies trembling, first up and later down the stairs, night and day. And then you put them down.
Katerina Stoykova-Klemer

CREATIVE SPURT

By now the moon has shrunk back
to a dark comma in the sky,
and I have stopped writing.

Two weeks of rubbing pen and paper
like a cicada its front legs, and erupting
in some language I no longer use

for thinking. They say the tongue
you become a poet in is the one
which can never tell a lie.

If it leaves me now, who will miss it?
How could I live with it, without it?
Frederick Smock

KøBENHAVN

June nights, June nights,
the sun lifting as if into darkness,
briefly, then returning by two
or three in the morning,

so much light to give,
so much light for the tulips
and strawberries, for the houses
painted rose and ochre,

light for the city buses and
the trains, the dewy spider-web
in the casement, light for the dream
of you and me, and cricket-song

calling us to crisp sheets,
light for the old woman at Tivoli
standing alone, watching
the pantomimes, her quietly

shining face, so much light like
flowers left on everyone’s doorstep…
Sherry Chandler

**DRY OCTOBER**

The ground is hard with drought. The shovel cannot bite. The posthole digger bounces, rattles the dried-out leaves. A foot down, the soil is gray. We find no forgiving softness.

We bury the cat shallow, cover the grave with planks, weight them with a rusty cylinder head. The sun’s last rose fades west. The moon is humpbacked. We crunch back to the house.
George Ella Lyon

POSSIBILITIES

It’s so so windy. I’m going to go take a walk around the pond, maybe across the road, past the cul-de-sac, up the wooden steps onto the boardwalk and thus to the beach.

Around the pond, maybe across the road I might see the living-green gold-banded stripe that yesterday slithered from asphalt onto grass.

Past the cul-de-sac, up the wooden steps I might meet my older self, white-haired, helped by two daughters and a three-pronged cane

onto the boardwalk and thus to the beach or maybe my own mother, borne back from the other side of time’s waves breaking forever.
Dan Howell

O Didelphis Marsupialis

I assume that whatever
food it snatches up in avid
nibbles from backyard grass
must be tasty enough to fortify
the odd nonchalance. Approaching,
I’m almost unnerved (rabies?)
by the slight regard for my presence—
the head tilting my way
a little, its eyes not on me
but aware of me, as if my being
anything more than peripheral
affronts a conviction of safety
in tooth and claw, and fakery,
eons informing that slow-lifting
paw with what appears to be
reluctance to run. But
however friendly my intent,
I know I loom enough
to threaten, ghostly
weaponry filling my hands—great
predator, against whose reign
little life in all the world
contends for long, for whom
the planet itself is prey.

The opossum
bares its needle teeth and turns away.
Its retreat, slow and waddling, becomes
a kind of grace bestowed on me
as I regret the distance from another
animal that never chose us
(as dogs did), those animals
we never tried to tend and find
hard to reassure (I won’t
hurt you.) So I’m grateful
for the way this one lingers before
casually disappearing in overgrown lemon balm.
David Cazden

AFTERGLOW

Spices trickle from our hands,
basil and crushed thyme.

A dash of turmeric
tints our wrists,

stains the counter top yellow,
the color of August sun.

I watch you stir
food in a dime store pan:

dented and thin
as a rainy day,

it’s all we have.
For we’re just learning
to cook, how to rub herbs
the right way

so their essences linger
in the sauté steam,

how to peel the hoods
off almonds after blanching,

then cut a pear’s
flushed cheek

with the smallest knife
in the drawer.
We clean in the kitchen light, 
getting ready for bed.

Garlic clings 
to the fingertips,

onion wisps 
to our hair.

We’re ready for the bread and milk, 
the flour and egg. Dessert

is the cinnamon and clove 
of our skin.
AVOCADO

Out of the compost heap, out of the heat of decay, a tree not used to these mild regions.

It has not seen those nineteenth century pictures of the world where cow and lamb lie under an apple tree, while jaguar and constrictor contend for a place in the jungle shade.

It does not know Kentucky is no place to set down roots, unfurl leaves, let its fruit fill-out, fall to ground, and ripen in the dirt.

This bin of earth and rotting food, of worm and mushroom, centipede and the flurry of flies is not the apocalypse, but the false promise welcoming all wayward children to the world’s undoing that follows the first frost.
Dianne Aprile

FAMILY ROAD TRIP, SUMMER 1953

At four, I feared highway tunnels, black as cold coffee and ominous, carved into earth for us to plow our Chevy through. Ponderous, they opened to darkness—like the swinging door of a woodstove; deep as the stove’s hollow, its blackened chambers.

If a horn blows in a tunnel, my brother warned, its walls collapse. One hand shading his eyes, taut awning against the California sun, he cupped the other to his lips and, knowing better, spat four words into my ear: We! All! Will! Die!

That summer we rode tunnels hip to hip within a sleek sedan, my shoulders stiff, his hand hovering above the horn. We lived! But even now, knowing what I know of how a burrow holds the world at bay, and having packed away my fear of dark places, I still can’t shake my brother’s warning. It smolders, charred wood in an ashy cavern.

One random act, ill-timed; a world falling apart.
Leatha Kendrick

MOURNING DOVE

All morning the dove has called—five notes, six notes, three—
her steady two-note plaint, quiet as a nun.

My tumbled bed remembers mornings
when the layered air held nothing
more urgent than her spare notes.
My spine then, flexible as the long
boughs of maple. A time when

even limbs, knotted and imperfect,
stirred as if I peered down a well of sky and
days fell through the sieve of leaves and light,
pulling hours into their center.

Love, when you wake, let your palm
bless my loose belly, your breath
find my temple

in the silence between two
simple notes.
Jane Gentry

MY TIN EAR

Faint now the song the furnace sings.  
I barely hear the clap of my neighbor’s  
screen door. Just the tag end  
of my friend’s compliment as I walk  
away. Distant the door chime  
when my good ear lies  
on my pillow. The rumble  
and horn of the two a.m. train  
only brushes the skin of my sleep.  
All but inaudible  
the headlong chorus of robins  
in the May dawn. So begins  
a great silence.
REMAINS OF TWO FIGURES, LADY CHAPEL DOOR, GLASTONBURY ABBEY

With their long, soft dresses, they look feminine, but what are women doing here? There are no others, not even Mary, unless you count angels, which are neither.

They must be, surely, the prodigal son and his father, but they seem the same age.

They lean toward each other, touch heads. What one is, the other is too.

Whoever, they cleave to each other, find joy; you can see it in the way stone turns soft, the way the tendrils beside them become wings.

Surely they are angels, surely.

Lovers! Someone says, when I show the photo.
Cate Whetzel

Hanging the Bayeux Tapestry

From its plastic pouch, we tugged free
what looked to be a panoramic postcard,
a souvenir of Queen Matilda’s commissioned
embroidery—the Norman conquest cast
in russet and sea green, gold and olive yarn.
It multiplied in our hands, unfolded
and unfurled by the accordion fold, until
it was too long to hold and hung down
like an oversized flag to trap our feet. Panel
by panel I taped it up below the dining room’s
crown molding. You wrapped four walls
in storytelling: Edward’s crown suspended
over Harold; a priest raising his hand
to a woman’s face; Halley’s comet a-bloom
in the sky, appearing in wool like a Medieval
doom-thistle; while long boats and a line
of horsemen ride into the Battle of Hastings
banners aloft, Latin script on both sides.
Harold is slain—an arrow through the eye.

The battle rages. 1066. We care less for William,
due to impose French upon the Saxons,
to belittle their language with polysyllables
and govern the country in an alien tongue.
You pity the housecarls, Saxon soldiers loyal
to their fallen king; I pity every Elfrida and Rowena
whose marriage portion just flatlined
under the new regime. Whose future husbands
will laugh at their attempts to pronounce
the dominant vowel sounds. It’s beautiful, though,
this tapestry, wherever it was made,
and by whom. Monks illuminate men and lions
in the pages of the gospel, and Robin Hood
will arrive in the next centuries, clad in green leather like your favorite book’s cover. Don’t worry; history is just a word and a memory. I come from Normans, too.
Matthew Haughton

LEVELS AND CURRENTS

Going over the Kentucky River,
I caught sight
of two boys below,
wading in the high brown water.
Jesus, I thought.
They shouldn’t be out there.
Perhaps I was thinking,
too far
from my own memory.
There were days
when getting lost made
for tight breaths,
back when I was small
and willing
to risk filthy water
for a coolness on my skin.
If their time for wandering
became mine,
I’d do the same—
having found
that softer earth of riverside.
I remind myself,
there are dogs
so thirsty
in this back-country,
they’d lick rain off a stone.
Charlie Hughes

STATUS REPORT

The TV reports Atlanta
with twenty inches—in the suburbs,
jon boats pluck
grandmothers from front porches.

Here, the rain has fallen
gently and sporadically
since gray daybreak.

Water drips from the leaves
and the eaves
then pools before washing
across the driveway.

Somewhere
the robins
have taken refuge.

The brown metal roof
of the workshop cupola
glistens
in the tree-filtered light.

The gray tomcat
sleeps
beneath the red pickup.

My toes dig
into the carpet’s
deep shag.

I have never
been more alive.
Carrie Green

TRANSPLANTING

--DeLand, Florida, 1889

The young plants pulled from the nursery bed are more tender than seedlings or flower buds. No matter the gardener’s skill, the spade’s edge ravages roots, leaving jagged ends that he must trim before the sun sucks the water out, before the wind strikes the bruised threads. He needs a thin gruel of muck, a blanket of damp moss to trick the plant’s clock. The holes he digs are not as deep as graves, nor will they wait as long. He must shave the hardening soil back to wet. The grove’s staked rows are straighter than a cemetery’s. This is the gardener’s work: to empty the earth so he may fill it with his own trees.
P O E M  F O R  A P R I L  S N O W

Up in the air, a gust hoisted a piece of paper
with the poem on it that this poem wants
to be just like, because it has heard me murmuring,
in my disturbed sleep, about the great poem the wind
ripped away from me. All I remember about that poem
are the words “April Snow.” I don’t remember even
that much, but this poem heard me murmuring
those words like a dying man muttering “Rosebud,”
which is what I might name my sled if an April snow
were to appear outside my window, where right now
there’s only sunlight glistening on my neighbor’s roof,
a bird I don’t know the name of, and a girl I don’t know
the name of riding a bike I don’t know the name of, though
I’ve decided to call the bike Huffy and the girl I’ve decided
to call April Snow. April Snow, eat lots of Sweet Tarts
before your metabolism slows and the world tells you to hate
your body. Eating Sweet Tarts will help you understand
this world, which is sweet and tart, often at the same time,
safely dangerous like the park where your Huffy is
carrying you. You will drift in and out of so many places,
if you’re like me. I named you after a spring snowstorm
that surprised me ten years ago in Denver, which I visited
without checking with the weatherman. Even if you check
with the weatherman, April Snow, you might get caught
in an April snow. Weatherperson, I mean. I mean you
could be the one everyone turns to for help making plans,
but they might not appreciate hearing the truth:
that life is uncertain. Try to enjoy the tarts as well
as the sweets. Watch out for cars whose drivers aren’t
watching out, April Snow, and for strangers in the park
with hands full of Sweet Tarts. Climb onto the ledge,
the ledge may whisper at some point in your life, like
a serpent wrapped around a tree with Sweet Tarts dangling
irresistibly from its branches. The park is haunted but only because it’s full of people who are haunted. You pedaled away while I wrote this poem, and now there’s a white squirrel rooted to the spot where I first saw you. This poem tells me that you haven’t gone anywhere, that you’ve turned into that white squirrel. That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you, what this poem has been trying to tell me. The world moves fast from nice calm sky to ice storm, however reassured you and I might be by rhymes like “girl” and “squirrel.”
sidney bechet bought an old, beat-up soprano saxophone, when it is difficult enough to play one in tune. he was gallant like that; when he was want, he planted petite fleur in quiet imaginations. similar to the way he might enter a blossom, wrap himself in the bouquet, buzz his malediction, and retreat to paris, a pilgrim sets out on a journey to find his holy place, an ice cube wanders discursively along an aqueous path till it has fully realized new liquid form; this i am sure of, if only because i am a b7 minor, sanctum, and slowly melting. what line is not after another? what note either in a lucent solo? railroad tracks run from east coast to west coast and back, the train takes the tramp wherever she wants to go. at some point she will find herself along the banks of the ohio in a river city looking for lost treasure—a gold medal tossed into the great waterway by an ex-patriot. the lilies in this city have no sweet odor for they are made iron, and rust with time. the meter also changes—it is in the variation of timing and stress that a feel is created that gets the whole storyville jumping. and while the cathouse wholly throbs with vice, poets make the polite music of the middle class. you can make poetry whorish, but you can’t make it unpopular. a breeze stumbles in on this gruesome scene and pets the wilting yellow iris in a vase. she is a flower of basin street, her occupation is to be known, and known well. why do we try so hard to be beautiful, when we already are? he was rough, and before she knew it was all over, her little flower was gone.
Sue Terry Driskell

Strange Trek

I’m across the river in Indiana
walking along a narrow mountain trail
and suddenly come across a busy scene—

women stacking large pots in a roomy kiln
built into the hillside—beautiful bulbous pots,
    and willowy tall ones
etched with long-necked water birds
    or mountain laurel

—the kiln, so far, only half full
and I know, had I dry-ware of my own,
    I’d want to fire it here,
so I ask: What kind of pots do you make?
    Porcelain, they say,

the three of them immaculate in pastel dresses,
lined up to wave goodbye.

And I go on my way,
thinking how they are unlike potters I once knew:

    no fingernails wheel-worn to a nub,
    no grungy jeans smeared with dry clay,

nor eyes red from staring in the kiln’s orange bung-hole,
watching for the last cone to fall.
It was like cheating,
slipping the trout I’d pulled
from the overstocked, man-
made lake off my hook.
I could have just as easily
reached in with my hand
and plucked him up.
He slid easily from my fingers
into the white bucket of water
resting at my feet.
I watched him swim
in slow, tight circles
and thought of my grandfather.

I’d been thinking about Grandpa
the whole time really—learning
to cast my rod in his backyard
before our first camping trip,
getting it caught on the Magnolia
leaf just out of my reach;
crying the first time he made me
bait my own hook—killing
a worm was not as proud a moment
as killing the bluegill later on.

I reached in and stroked the back
of the golden trout and it splashed.
In two months we will decide
to have a baby, I could have told him.
It will be a boy. He will have
a bad heart. He will need surgery.

I should have poured him, water
and all, right back in. I should have
apologized to my grandfather
for cheating, to my future son
for eating something born to die.
A GENUINE SPACE

This morning I open the curtain to write about the sun,
a need, perhaps, to touch the earth from above.
Or I want to let in more beauty.

Instead, a flea crawls my ankle.
You did not want another child,
so the cat, then the dog, then the larger dog.
Now the flea. (Dependents multiply in this way.)

You say I am good at ridding myself of things,
so I drown it.

I like to think the drain leads to the underworld.
One good rain could carry us all down.
It troubles me when I think about my brother Sonny and the race we’ll run as competing brothers till we’re dead, that I’m still so comforted by the phrase from Plato’s Symposium where the demigoddess of Socrates’ own invention, Diotima, says to Socrates, “Who, when he thinks of Homer and Hesiod and other great poets, would not rather have their children than ordinary human ones? Who would not emulate them in the creation of children such as theirs, which have preserved their memory and given them everlasting glory?”

I lace up my running shoes in the kitchen of Sonny’s new house in the Louisville Highlands. Following five months of phone calls and e-mails between Louisville and Los Angeles—admonitions to step up the training, the co-creation of outlandish race-day scenarios, several self-deprecation contests—we’re preparing to run in the Kentucky Derby Festival’s thirteen mile mini-marathon.

It’s a beautiful, cool late April morning, and as Sonny drives us to Cherokee Park where the race will begin and end, I tell him only Kentucky in the spring could produce such a morning. It’s so much sleepier, I tell him, than an L.A. morning where the crackling electricity from all that self-conscious hipness, all those dreams, living and dead, form currents, eddies, and back currents that buzz and tumble just under the surface of the L.A. air.

Sonny listens and nods. I try to read his face for some sign of resistance or judgment and decide I’ve detected neither. When we pass a certain tree-lined avenue, he says, “That’s where I turn to drive in to the hospital.”

For a time, in silence, I watch shadow-bathed neighborhoods pass out the window of his Explorer and smile to myself as I recall a joke from our Louisville school days. When spring break was approaching and someone asked where you were going and you weren’t going anywhere, you’d tell them you were going to L.A. Then you’d pause a moment while they pondered how cool that was going to be for you before you admitted that L.A. was “Louisville area.”

Sonny is a doctor, like our father—or, will be soon. He’s a month
away from completing medical school at the University of Louisville and set to begin a residency in the fall, in obstetrics, the same specialty as our father. Sonny is now, and has always been, solid, steady, sanguine. Those three s’s cover him as well as any other words I would choose if I were writing him into one of my scripts. Right now, for instance, he’s good-naturedly, without a word of reproach or derision, letting someone in a blue Volkswagen Bug back into a parking place he has every right to expect should be ours. Sonny’s wife Jan, if I were limited to three words: pretty, sharp, blonde. She’s from a respected family in town. I dated Jan’s sister relatively seriously before I decided I could do better. Jan is an attorney and pregnant with our parents’ first grandchild.

My girlfriend of two weeks, L.A. girl, is asleep back at Sonny and Jan’s house. Last night I noted, with a secret unsurprised pleasure, how far she outshone Jan (despite the celebrated glow of pregnancy) in sheer physical attractiveness when they were standing next to each other at the airport and sitting next to one another at the restaurant last night. It seemed to me that L.A. girl’s radiance visibly distressed both Jan and Sonny, and my parents too, and something about this distress pleased me. I don’t know why, though I think it has to do with the narrative I clutch that says I’ve moved on to better things, that I’m playing in a bigger league, while they have stayed home and must content themselves with lesser fruits.

As Sonny finds a place to park, I experience a vision of running to the finish line at the end of this race under the pleasant gaze of L.A. girl, who will come with Jan and our parents to greet us there.

Near the starting line, the runners bunch up—some stretching, others leaping in place, some others making last second dashes to a row of Port-A-Lettes. It feels good to stand next to Sonny before the race—comfortable and safe. I’m aware of how well we know one another, how much I love and trust him. For a few moments I’m surprised to feel almost giddy, nearly teary-eyed with brotherly affection. A fluttering in the chest. Maybe it’s because I don’t have any good friends in L.A., no one I really trust, no one who knows me so well as my brother. We chuckle at some of the other runners—a few of them bulging in loud, tight lycra, some pretender to the throne in a gor-
geous mullet. We discover, communicate, agree upon, and understand what’s ridiculous around us with a minimum of nods and glances, and it feels good to learn this brotherly channel is still live and open for easy transmission, even if we don’t always keep in touch as well as we could.

As the starting moment arrives, we slip in a few last self-deprecating jokes about our lack of preparedness for the distance, Sonny, perhaps, when I’ll look back on it later, making fewer jokes than me. We both renew a previous vow to finish the thirteen miles in two hours or less and to never walk.

A gunshot gives us our cue and, along with the crowd—all of us with numbers on paper tied to our chests and backs with elastic string—we begin to walk, walk more quickly, then start to trot, beginning the race the way I imagine we will run it for its duration—at an easy, comfortable pace, side by side, as brothers, together. When the time comes, I expect I might have to slow down to let Sonny keep up with me so we can finish the race properly. I clown around a little once we’re finally able to jog. In those first moments I pretend to be a ridiculously-vigorous character about to break into a sprint, someone who thinks he can get away with a raging, dead-on run for the entire race. Sonny laughs.

When I was ten and Sonny was eight we rode our bikes up and down the driveway of a two story brick Georgian on a street called Holly Lane pretending to be jockeys aboard derby hopefuls. It was the morning of May 7, 1978—Kentucky Derby Day. His bike with the banana seat and curved handlebars festooned with plastic streamers was Affirmed. My yellow one speed with ten speed handlebars mounted backwards so they looked like a ram’s horns was Alydar.

The previous day our parents had had us paged in our classrooms at Anchorage Public School. They’d rescued us from the flies-buzzing-in-and-out-of-the-open-windows doldrums of a spring school day, and took us to see the fillies run in the Oaks. Memories of our day at the races still flashing like slides in a Viewfinder through our minds, we rode up and down the driveway remembering the horses’ strange names; the grown-up pleasure and magic, monopoly-money feeling and occasional payoff of the two dollar bets our parents placed
for us; the sound of the hooves pounding the dirt when they came down the stretch and everyone shouting and whipping the railings with rolled-up programs. Our voices were still scratchy from cheering for our picks. We were sure we wanted to grow up to be jockeys and only dimly aware that this was genetically out of the question, that, given our parents’ heights, we would have been better off practicing to play ball for the Wildcats or Cardinals.

We rode up and down the long driveway. When we pedaled up the small hill, the horses were approaching the gate, and I set the stage for the race to come. When we were at the top of the hill, we turned around and paused facing the house—the horses in the gate. Sonny looked up to me for the signal. “And they’re…” I said, letting my arm hang in the air a moment. He mounted up. “Off!” I said and brought down my arm.

We sped down the hill toward the house, under the branches of walnuts and catalpas. I made the call, inventing the names of the other horses as we went: Fastrunner takes the early lead; Lightening’s between horses; Stewball’s gaining ground on the outside; Peanut Butter’s in last. And down the stretch they come! It’s Alydar by a nose. But…wait folks…what’s this? Here comes Affirmed. He’s making a move. Affirmed’s coming from behind. He’s flying down the stretch, folks! He’s passing Fastrunner, who’s worn out, and Stewball, who’s fading, and now he’s even…”—I put on my brakes and let Sonny pass me—“…going right by Alydar. Yes! Affirmed wins! Affirmed by two lengths! What a race! And the crowd goes wild—Aaaaahhhhh. Sonny smiled, and I was glad I’d let him win.

In our next race I knew he’d lose. I knew I’d turn it on at the end, and my bike (with a Tony Dorsett football card snapping against the spokes) would rattle past his and Alydar would win by twenty lengths as I made the call, win going away, the way I wanted Alydar to win in the real Derby when it was run later in the afternoon, the way I always won in any competition between Sonny and me—the way I had won the city swimming championships when he was lucky to come in fifth in the qualifying heat, the way I had won the basketball MVP award at the Y.M.C.A., and the best defensive player trophy for the fall soccer team, the way I always made better grades than he did and did better on the achievement tests, the way I always beat him at everything and
always would.

Late that afternoon our parents called us in from our imaginary riding to watch the real Derby. I have since learned, in studying what happened in the course of the Triple Crown that year and in looking at the races building up to it that even before the Derby, Affirmed and Alydar had established a rivalry. The chestnuts—Alydar a burnt auburn, Affirmed a rusty red—had met six times as two year olds, Affirmed winning the Youthful, Hopeful Futurity, and Laurel Futurity; Alydar winning the Great American and the Champagne.

Alydar was a slight favorite, though both horses were heavily favored over the rest of the field. Alydar went off at 6-5 that afternoon, largely because he was taken up by the Kentuckians in the crowd after coming off of a thirteen length win in the Bluegrass Stakes. Affirmed had taken the California route, winning the San Felipe and Santa Anita Derbies. His odds were 9-5.

We assembled in the living room to watch the race, still charged by the memory of the wonderful time we’d had at the Oaks the day before. We sang *My Old Kentucky Home* as the camera panned over the men in coats and ties, some with roses in their lapels, and the women in extravagant hats, tears streaking some of their faces as they sang, “Weep no more, my lady.” While the horses made their way to the gate our parents good-naturedly stoked our rivalry. “Whataya say, gentlemen?” our father asked, and Sonny and I shouted in unison: “Alydar, Alydar!” “Affirmed, Affirmed!” and jumped around him so exuberantly we spilled his julep. He and our mother were pleased, I think, that Sonny and I had taken to racing like good Kentucky boys ought to, that we had made these picks on our own, safe as they were, and that we could recite some of the horses’ statistics.

There was (and is before every Derby) a stretched-out, held-breath moment that has captured my attention more and more in recent years—it can’t last more than a second—when all the horses are loaded up but the gate has yet to open and hundreds of thousands of people collectively hold their breath. And wait. Then the bell rings and the gates click, and they burst out and start to run before the suddenly-roaring crowd and the race takes on its inevitable definition.

I tried to zero in on Alydar. As expected, Affirmed, the speed horse, made his move in the middle of the first stretch. Alydar, also
according to expectations, stayed back, a true stalker, and picked up speed late, charging up when Jose Valasquez gave him the signal to challenge Affirmed and the young Steve Cauthen. Although Alydar gamely challenged, Affirmed held him off at the end to win by a length and a half.

Our living room was electric in the aftermath of the race. I was stunned my horse had lost to Sonny’s. I didn’t see how it was possible. It didn’t jibe with my conception of the way the universe worked. I was the oldest, he was the youngest. I won, he lost. This was the way of the invisible order. Our parents patted Sonny on the back. Father ruffed his hair and congratulated him. Sonny beamed and basked in the attention.

“Just wait till the Preakness,” I said, as if I’d laid down a threat, sealing it with a frown. Our parents, both a little red-faced from their juleps, looked at each other and had a laugh at the horse-racing monsters they were creating. Sonny kept smiling.

Sonny and I run comfortably beside one another as the runners begin to spread out. We pass one of my former high-school basketball teammates who’s already huffy and red-faced. He’s developed a ruddy thickness and a healthy paunch in the years since I last saw him. I remember him hungry-looking, hollow-cheeked and rail thin, a lazy boy with no vertical leap, but a deadly long range set-shot. The guy seems surprised to see me but is already struggling a bit, not in a mood to talk. We grunt at one another and both try to smile as Sonny and I pass him. A few strides later I remember his name—Jay Jones, and old coach Garner saying, “If you don’t learn to stand there and take a charge like a man, Jones, I’ll knock you flat myself!”

We reach a hill which is longer than I want it to be, a curvy, dappled road stretching up between thick elms interspersed with only-just-blooming redbuds and dogwoods. Already, only a mile or two into the race, my body feels heavy, as if it isn’t working properly—a locomotive held together by duct tape. Some people who I think have no business passing us, do so with apparent ease—a pudgy-looking, middle-aged woman with a blue and white bandana around her forehead and a shambling, slide-footed gate. A man who looks mentally challenged slobbers encouragement as he goes on by, easy as you
Halfway up the hill Sonny says, “I think I’m gonna pick up the pace a little.”

Pick up the pace a little. I suppress a wince and begin to ask him to keep to the current pace, at least till the end of the hill, but I can’t imagine these words coming out of my mouth. There are some things an older brother has a very difficult time bringing himself to say to a younger brother. I briefly consider telling Sonny I agree, and heartily, that we *should* speed up, of course we should, that I’ve only been trudging at this slow pace for his benefit, and backing up this statement with immediate, decisive action. This is what I would like to say, but I also can’t imagine going any faster. In the end, I manage a nod—*go ahead, pick up the pace, fine*—not speaking, in part, because I don’t want to reveal the degree to which I’m out of breath.

Sonny puts a few feet of distance between us immediately. He passes the middle-aged woman and the man who offered encouragement, and after a time I lose sight of him behind the foliage of the next curve. When I round it, I see him again, through spread-out groups of runners, about fifty yards ahead of me, further widening the distance between us. When I see how far he’s already gone, a jolt of panic ignites from chest to fingertips, and I decide I can’t let him widen his lead, that I need to catch him now or forfeit any opportunity of ever catching him.

I pick up my pace. Keeping my eyes on his number—2310—I start passing people myself, slowly reeling in numbers, trying to ignore how heavy my body feels, how much I’m having to will myself along, more aware than I want to be of the toll it’s taking, the lactic acid scalding in my legs, my desire for more air with each breath, as I chug up the incline. As the burning increases, so does my anger at Sonny. I thought there was a tacit agreement between us that we would run and finish the race together. This was part of the brotherly channel between us.

Since I know I have to catch him and because I question how much energy I have to help me to do so, I make the decision to use my anger and frustration at Sonny’s decision as fuel to help me run faster. To begin with, I think about the way my parents react so favorably to Sonny’s current place in life—upcoming completion of medical
school, marriage, a grandchild on the way—and the way they send out subtly disapproving vibes in reaction to my lukewarm-to-cold success in screenwriting; occasional borrowing of money; a string of girlfriends of which L.A. girl is the latest, none of whom has matched up, in their estimation, despite LA girl’s obvious in-person allure, to Jan. I think of all the baby questions my parents lavished on Jan and Sonny in the restaurant the night before as L.A. girl, whom they hadn’t yet figured out how to talk to, shot me glances that I imagined were meant to communicate our solidarity in a common cause against such showy cooing over a baby that hadn’t been born. Twice I saw L.A. girl looking off into the distance in a yawning sort of way, the food on her plate scarcely touched. As I run, I remember how my parents leaned in over Jan’s stomach, goo-gooing when they rarely even bothered to ask anymore what was happening with me out in L.A. I think how an old friend of the family’s whom I hadn’t seen in years stopped by our table and remember the way his eyes lit up when he heard about Sonny’s life, and, briefly, when he first met L.A. girl, and how they glazed over when he heard what I was doing.

When I’ve tapped the energy from the anger these thoughts produce, I change the channel and begin tapping into the deep reserves of rage I feel over Hollywood’s failure to recognize first my acting ability and then my screenwriting. I’ve written three screenplays since I made the transition from starving actor to starving screenwriter—this, once I decided that all the people all of my life who’d told me I had the looks and the je ne sais quoi to knock Hollywood a yard or two to the side had been sorely mistaken. All three of my scripts were fondled for a time by hot young producers while I prayed please god, with no results, each time. One was optioned (it was never picked up) and I’m still scrimping by on the proceeds from that sale. This is standard rage-inducing material for me. Many a night back in L.A., I’ve railed at the injustice of my failure, punched holes in my walls, kicked the refrigerator grill, sending my cat, Orson Welles, into hiding for days. It works like a dream, stokes a fire in my gut that helps me run.

I inject the psychically-potent brew of frustration and anger (just as I used the anger I felt about my falling stock in the family and community) to close the gap between Sonny and me. Ridiculous as it may sound, I’ve got myself so worked up I’m conscious of my feet
pounding the concrete and its connection to the earth. I’m punishing the earth. I want it to feel me down to its molten bowels: blood rushing, heart pounding, my breath as loud as my angry thoughts.

It works!

Numbers pass by, and I reel ‘em in. But I need more, so I think about all the Hollywood hacks with half my talent who have vacation houses on the Mediterranean and compare their homes with my shared, six-hundred-fifty square foot converted retail space in the wrong part of Hollywood. I think about all the auditions I lost for reasons that still bewilder me to all the people who started out with me, some of whom have gotten parts in sitcoms and films, who now have condos in Malibu and have bought new cars with their residuals, who invite me to parties at their new pads and tell me to stick with it as if they’ve paid dues I haven’t. I think of the disappointment on people’s faces, the visible drop, between learning I’m a screenwriter and learning I’ve had nothing produced, how there is a moment when I can see them calculating my worth as a human being, thinking—Ah, so you wait tables.

Sonny’s ten feet away, number bobbing. I feel the blood in my face. Taste adrenaline. Going in for the kill. I inject more. I think of a particularly talentless writer exactly my age who commands six to seven figures for high concepts shoe-horned into predictable plots carried out (he’s had two films produced and is about to sell a third) by plastic characters performing incredible tasks while mouthing eyeroll-inducing dialogue. I think of the ambitious strivings in the films I’ve written and the way I’m being made, through the cruel vicissitudes of the universe, to suffer and the way this makes me, in the eyes of the world, an insufferable cliché and I rankle. Angry fuel to help me close the gap.

But instead of coming along beside Sonny, when I’m close enough to reach out my arm and touch him, I settle back into the perfect distance for passing. I decide I’ll perch at this distance for the duration of the race, never letting him see I’m there, watching his dark hair bob with his steady pace (so typically steady, so typically Sonny) the whole way, until the final hundred yards or so, when I’ll make a decision about what to do. At that time, I’ll either come alongside him wearing an expression of good-natured big-brotherly rebuke, one that will say you actually thought you could beat me? so we can fin-
ish side by side, or I’ll give him the victory, making it very clear he’s benefiting from my benevolence, in plain sight of my parents and his wife, and L.A. girl. Or, at the perfect moment, I’ll use everything I have left, the power of the rightness of a bigger brother beating a little brother, coming from behind like Alydar, to sprint by and beat him handily like I used to beat him at everything, *everything*—Horse, 21, one-on-one; Twister; checkers; chess; Sorry; Monopoly; Scrabble; Pick-Up-Pairs; getting into a good college; attracting women—going away at the wire.

Two weeks after the ’78 Derby, we all gathered in the living room to watch the second leg of the Triple Crown—the Preakness. I’d been watching the newspapers, reading all the build-up articles. I was certain Alydar and I would have our revenge. Once again, after the singing of *Maryland, My Maryland* and that moment of pure anticipation when all the horses were loaded up and ready to run, they broke from the gate, and, once again, Affirmed took the lead, prompting me to say something I’d heard my father say on our day at the Oaks when the expected horses, many of whom would inevitably fade, jumped out front in the very beginning and tried to steal a race they didn’t deserve. It is also the phrase I would later apply to the crop of actors and screenwriters with whom I associated when they’d gotten a part or sold a script. And also the phrase that passed my lips when I learned that Sonny had been accepted to medical school: “Cheap early speed.”

Alydar began his move on the backstretch, a thrilling thing to see, when Valasquez let him go and he started reeling in horses. My heart leaped in my chest. Here it is, I thought, he won’t lose this one. He caught up with Affirmed. For a time they ran side by side, dueling one another all the way down the stretch. But in the end, once again, Affirmed managed to fight off Alydar’s furious charge to win by a neck.

“Just wait till the Belmont,” I said, exasperation crinkling my voice, at which my parents laughed through expressions of mild concern—surprised at how quickly and the degree of seriousness with which I’d adopted the sport. Sonny smiled and smiled.

The run to catch up with Sonny taxes me more than I expect. His steady pace bewilders me. How could he be running so steadily, so
fast? I wonder for a moment if he’s miscalculated the distance. Then it occurs to me that all of his pre-race self-deprecation was a sham, that all the time he’d been training hard for this race even as he insisted several times he wasn’t ready, that he was too busy with school. I settle into the certainty that all the while he’s been anticipating this opportunity to beat me. Even though, as far as I can tell, he’s oblivious to the fact that I’m running behind him and I’m not aware of having slowed down, the gap between us widens. Again, I summon an injection of rage, really getting into it now, scraping the bottom of the barrel—Since when did I ever lose to him, I will not take a back seat to him in anything, and when I’m a star, a celebrated Auteur, when my movies are made and I’ve completed the successful transition from writer to writer-actor-director, he will be known to millions of people only as my little brother, if that! Who remembers Shakespeare’s or Faulkner’s, who can name any member of Stanley Kubrick’s or Terrence Malick’s or Orson Welles’s family members—to help me once again establish the five-foot distance.

But again, once I’ve re-established a good passing distance, the lactic acid sets in and burns and once more the gap widens, so I have to inject even more, what little’s left, to help me reel him back in. Again, for a minute or so, I gain and maintain the perfect passing distance, but again, though I’m certain he’s still oblivious that I’m so close and sure I haven’t slowed down, the gap between us widens.

This time there’s nothing left. I watch his number and the back of his head bobbing above the other runners. Receding. It happens so gradually it’s like watching some light thing like the blade of a knife, dropped into deep water, glinting to oblivion. The number on his back grows smaller and smaller, the number of runners between him and me larger and larger until I’ve lost him completely.

When he is out of sight, a numbness, not unpleasant, and similar to the feeling that follows my binges of rage back in L.A, floods through me from the chest out until it has taken me over. It is something like the strange pleasure of drifting off to sleep at night when you’re utterly exhausted and nothing but sleep and your gratefulness for it seems to matter. There is something in the feeling, too, of the resignation an animal lower on the food chain must experience when it knows it’s caught, can feel its jugular tearing, and realizes there is
nothing to do but succumb. I complete the race in this manner—unde-
done, numb, allowing myself to feel what it is to be utterly defeated—
dumbly placing my feet in front of each other, uncaring, staggering
on with scarcely a thought about what I’m doing, people who have no
business whatsoever passing me, streaming right on by, left and right.

There was only a five horse field in the Belmont. None of the other
three horses posed much of a challenge to the favorites. As they lis-
tened to Sinatra’s *New York, New York*, everyone in the crowd and
watching on television knew it was going to be a two horse race and
most of them hoped to see a Triple Crown winner.

After the first half mile of the mile and a half distance, Affirmed
and Alydar were first and second as expected, Affirmed ahead by one
length. By the end of the mile, the two horses were running together,
for several glorious seconds, trading the lead with each stride. Af-
hides, jockeys’ arms waving whips, dirt flying. I was certain the
longer distance favored Alydar, that he would earn me some of my
dignity back, that the forces of the cosmos would renew the previ-
sous order. I knew Affirmed would crack and fade. They were almost
inseparable as they came to the home stretch. For a moment, Alydar
took the lead and looked as though he might keep it. I leaped up and
threw my hands in the air, willing him to win with everything I had,
certain fate would give me the day, but Affirmed rallied and came on
to win by a head.

I collapsed to the floor, sunk my face in the carpet, beat it with
my fists till all the strength drained from my arms, and lay completely
still, feeling the loss so acutely that it was as if the stuff of loss itself
were oozing up into my body out of an abyss whose maw began under
our living room. Above me, all around me, I heard and felt my parents
dancing with Sonny around the living room, celebrating Affirmed’s
Triple Crown victory, such a rare thing, something that has not been
repeated yet since then, all of them jazzed by the excitement of it, at
having witnessed history, Sonny giggling.

Some time later, my mother tapped me on the shoulder. “Come
on, Brian. Get up. I know you’re a boy with big feelings and ideas
about yourself, but this is starting to get ridiculous.”
A crowd has assembled at the end of the race to cheer on the finishers. I distinguish Sonny, my parents, and Jan, from the rest. They’re in the front row to see me come in. Jan has their lab, Keeper, on a leash. One of Sonny’s arms rests jauntily on one of Jan’s shoulders. L.A. girl stands beside them, almost as tall as my father. She is thin and striking, green eyes obscured by dark sunglasses. Jan, Sonny, and both my parents cheer me on as I pass. L.A. girl does not cheer or clap. I stay stony-faced and look straight ahead as I jog by. An announcer calls out the times. I’m coming in well beyond the two hour mark. Shame burns my throat, and I wonder how long ago Sonny finished. I manage a weak sprint to the end where someone hands me a cup of water, and I walk a short distance before bending over, heaving.

“Good job, Brian, we did it,” I hear Sonny say a short time later.

When I unbend myself, I see that he’s red-faced and smiling, offering his hand. I decide his eyes are glimmering in triumph. “Congratulations,” I say and briefly accept his hand.

“To you, too,” he says.

“Right,” I say without any emotion, from the new place of peaceful resignation.

Sonny frowns, almost imperceptibly—a smaller version of his smile.

Our parents and Jan come over with the dog. “You did it. Way to go,” my Mom says, a hint of sharp appraisal in her eyes. L.A. girl stands silently behind them. Jan and my parents part and wait to see what she will have to say to me, what comfort she might offer, what insight she might give them into what’s between us. In this, L.A. girl does not oblige them, or perhaps she does. She smiles a small, superior smile that suggests another part of her is mountain biking in Topenga Canyon or strolling Venice Beach and which makes me wonder why she’s here now and what we are to each other out there.

“Let’s get a picture of the conquering heroes,” our Dad says, something I hear in his voice also saying to me, I’m so glad the best man, my favorite son, has won today. “Jan, why don’t you and Keeper get in there, too,” he says.

On the drive home with Sonny, Jan, and L.A. girl, the dog’s nose in
my lap, I answer the few questions they put directly to me about the end of my race as best and briefly as I can as I note the passing scenery, especially attuned to all the things that have changed since I moved away—new strip malls and clusters of McMansions where fields had been—Louisville trying to catch up with L.A., I think, while L.A.’s busy gaining on hell. I half listen as Sonny starts telling some hospital tales—the one about the Oxycontin fiend who admitted himself on a clearly-bogus complaint who Sonny found having sex with his girlfriend in a hospital bed and another he’s already told me and that my parents tell to anyone who’ll listen about a live infant Sonny pulled, in a caesarian, from its dead mother in the aftermath of a car crash he happened upon after rounds at the V.A. hospital. He had his picture in the paper holding the infant he saved and the infant’s older brother. The boys’ aunt, who took them in, named the infant Sonny.

Sonny’s just beginning a new one about which Jan has reminded him (are they trying to impress L.A. girl?) when I say very quietly, “Okay. We get it—Sonny the hero.” A wave of regret swoons into my chest at how soon the space of blissful resignation has been filled with unrest.

There is a pause during which Sonny and I share a glance in the rearview mirror. He looks concerned, but I think I also see some smugness in the corners of his eyes.

Jan huffs and says, “That’s not the point, Brian.”

“What is the point, Jan?” I ask.

“We’re family? We talk to each other, tell stories.”

“I know some other kinds of stories about Sonny,” I say, “that might provide some balance.”

“Oh no, here we go,” says Sonny and smiles at L.A. girl in the rearview mirror.

Jan looks at him and looks away, as if to say don’t humor him.

“Once upon a time, there were two brothers who agreed to run in a half marathon together. One of these brothers thought they would run and finish the run together. And the other one, either forgot about that, or betrayed the first brother’s trust on purpose to pull ahead and beat him by several miles.”

“I didn’t think it was a race. Did you, Sonny?” Jan asks.

“No, uh-uh,” Sonny says and frowns his small smile again in the
“Why’d you think it was a race, Brian?” Jan asks.

Exactly, I think—good question. Let’s press Sonny on this—L.A. girl, your cue. But I don’t answer Jan or press Sonny on this question. I look out the window at the passing chains, and no-one, least of all L.A. girl, says anything else the rest of the way back to Sonny and Jan’s house.

After dinner that night at our parents’ house, Father, Sonny, and Jan talk inside about recent advancements in non-invasive surgery, L.A. girl hovering like a disembodied figure, a beautiful wraith, in the background, listening to their conversation but not saying anything I can hear from my seat on the front porch beside my mother. For a while mother tries to convince me to stay home, change the flight and go to the Oaks and the Derby in a week, regardless of whether L.A. girl can stay or not. Then out of nowhere she brings up the Affirmed Alydar rivalry. She says, “You know, Brian, the progeny of Alydar have done better than Affirmed’s,” and mentions some of their names as if she thinks they will offer me consolation: Miss Oceana, Criminal Type, Strike the Gold, Alysheba, Easy Goer. “His legacy will live on, past Affirmed’s, in these horses and their offspring,” she says and gives me a buck-up look.

The first time she told me this was a little over a year ago, in the car on the way home from Sonny and Jan’s rehearsal dinner at the Kentucky Derby Museum. Earlier that night I’d clinked my wine glass with a fork, stood as best man before the assembled, and begun my toast by saying, “If you know anything about which horses Sonny and I chose for the ’78 Triple Crown races, I’m sure it didn’t come as a surprise when Sonny passed up his older brother to get married first.”

Though I appreciate the spirit with which my mother intended it when she said it in the car that night and what she means to suggest by saying it now, it frustrates me that she thinks I require this sort of comforting. I decide it only highlights the extent to which things have deteriorated for me in the family, the degree to which my early promise has faded. It bothers me even more that some latent, infantile part of me wants to nuzzle into the small comfort the phrase offers, to
accept the way it expands the time frame of our impact on the world
to include the time after our deaths. I consider reminding her about
the circumstances surrounding Alydar’s death, his leg broken under
shady circumstances, the once grand, financially-troubled Calumet
Farm collecting the insurance. By contrast, I might remind her, Af-
affirmed was euthanized at the happy old horse age of twenty-six.

Sonny and Jan come out onto the porch, followed by the dog and
our father, then L.A. girl, who fails to look at me. We’re flying back
to L.A. in the morning. Time with the family is rarer and rarer, and,
feeling as I do now, I’m not sure when or even if I’ll be back—unless
something changes that will allow me to return with more leverage,
with a feeling of my power and true worth in the world. I do my best
to spread a cheerful veneer over my lingering gloom, wondering at
how the peaceful surrender I’d felt watching Sonny slowly recede
in the race is already giving way. When our father says for the first
time since I’ve been home, “So, Brian, tell us how things’re going
out there in la la land?” I tell all of them the central concept behind
the new script I’ve begun working on and that I have high hopes for
its success. But as I describe my project in the most positive possible
light, I read deep disappointment in my father’s cramped smile, the
pained wrinkles around his eyes: fuck up, no count, cheap early speed
with this one. Upon seeing his expression and feeling, simultaneously,
the lack of anything I can say to L.A. girl, some quip to confirm any
hope for our future, I tell myself you’re alone and you don’t need him,
or her—or any of them.

Later in the evening, my effort to be civil reaches its ne plus ultra
when on the reconciliatory prompting of Jan herself and the rest of
the family, I place a hand on Jan’s tight, warm belly, fingers spread,
to feel for a kick and think I feel one—swift, sudden, strong—three
drum beats in quick succession which nearly unhinge me. I feel mo-
mentarily lightheaded and close to tears. Following the moment I
make eye contact with my mother, who smiles as if she’s seen and
understood the effect the kicking has had on me, hard as I’m trying to
hide it, and then with L.A. girl, who looks either angelic and curious
or lost in thoughts about things she must do when she gets back to
L.A. and her real life resumes. I rein the feeling in for the rest of the
evening, taking care not to reveal the inner churn, but even as I make
nice in this and other ways, four words from my mother’s phrase keep suggesting and repeating themselves without my having done anything to summon them.

These words continue to repeat as Sonny, in his spotless white doctor’s coat, drives me through another cool, beautiful morning seemingly devoid of the subterranean L.A. electricity, to the airport where we say our good-byes, and he says, with no hint of challenge or triumph, that we should do it again next year and, looking at L.A. girl, says it was a pleasure to meet her and he hopes she’ll come back, too, at which she smiles the dazzling open-mouthed, white-toothed smile that was always so ready in L.A. for the first time since she’s been in Louisville. Matching his earnest tone and looking for the most miniscule of fissures in his polished facade, I agree that we should, we should all do it again next year.

When L.A. girl (who I will never see again after I drop her off at her apartment overlooking one of the canals of Venice Beach, though she will invite me inside one last time before I go) and I are walking through the concourse and when I’m settled into my seat on the plane back to L.A. the four words continue to whisper through my mind as they will continue to whisper, tiny hopeful hoofbeats, as I sit behind my desk to face the blinking cursor at the end of my next screenplay, which is meagerer-than-I-remembered but still promising, still potentially great, still filled with the possibility that drew me to it. With enough work, it may be worthy of a Homer or a Hesiod. I will add to it the best words I can find, one after another, to try to make something that will come to life and live and last like the children of the greatest poets, which children go on to engender beautiful children in the souls of others. *The progeny of Alydar; the progeny of Alydar.*
The Fishing Trip

My father shot himself early last June while we were fishing at the small lake up in Anderson County where we always went. I heard Dad rummaging in his large old tan and brown plastic tackle box, and told him it was time for us to go. He answered to me from thirty feet or so around the lake’s bank. I turned, and he squeezed the trigger of the snub-nosed handgun pressed at his temple.

From the Golden Gallon out on Highway 61, I called the state police. A trooper I used to play softball with was the first at the scene. He identified the pistol; a .38 Smith, he called it. The coroner’s report said the weapon had been loaded with only one round.

I live on Clinch Avenue a couple of blocks off Cumberland. The neighborhood is eroded but stable, and is on the fringe of the university, where I will teach a few more weeks. The afternoon Mom received the death certificate, I had stopped by to see how she was doing, though she deflected my concern. The coroner’s report incensed my mother, who would not acknowledge the suicide. “I will not tolerate this hatefulness,” she said. I don’t know if she meant Dad’s behavior or the coroner’s. Both, I suspect. She complained but the coroner, citing my statement to the police, refused to call my father’s death accidental. Mom threatened legal action. After meeting with me, the attorney she tried to talk into suing the coroner refused the case.

Mom wasn’t satisfied, but she dropped the issue. Never one to linger over anything, she had quickly grown impatient with mourning rites. Two days after Dad’s funeral Mom had told my older brother John and his family to go home to Colorado Springs. John was as fidgety as his young daughter, and their constant restlessness annoyed Mom. No one had to encourage my sister’s departure. The morning after the funeral Beverly, also older than I but younger than John, left for Atlanta. “Then, I don’t know,” she’d said. “Depends on which flight I decide to connect with.”

Any unsuspecting mourners at Dad’s funeral probably believed he slipped peacefully away in the twilight of a long, prosperous life. That...
was how Mom planned the service. “I was married to him,” Mom said to John and me. “I’ll bury him.” She told the minister, “His place in eternity is assured. Preach like it.” The pastor, a roundish, thoughtful man still new to the Methodist church where my parents attended irregularly, wisely declined to inquire after the particular location of Dad’s final rest.

The florid service dragged on too long. I diverted my attention to the simple beauty of the oak pews. Lightly stained to bring out their marvelous grain, years of use had given the benches a warm, encouraging patina. The church was not full, and I enjoyed the deep blond luster of the pews I could see when I turned slightly in my seat.

Our family didn’t require many places, and I sat next to Terri and our two girls at the front of the sanctuary. While the minister spoke, Mom worked at the crease of her handsomely embroidered handkerchief. Beverly, stunning in a sleek black linen dress that she wore with no jewelry and was hardly mournful despite its color, attracted unrestrained scrutiny, even from the minister. Tall and lean and graying classically at the temples, John could’ve been the picture of the responsible elder son tragically but maturely assuming his role as head of the family.

Unfortunately, he had really worked himself into a state over Mom’s plans for the service.

“It’s tacky,” he had griped.

“You’re not supposed to say it,” I had said, “if you can’t say something nice.” My falsetto mimicked the prissy voice I remembered John using when I was a preschooler. He frequently repeated that rule, a favorite of Mom’s, to Beverly, and after I discovered how much any kind of coarse talk seemed to aggravate him, to me. John didn’t miss my jab, and returned a look of pained disappointment that I let pass. Instead of appearing dignified in his grief, John seemed merely agitated and unreliable. No telling how he might have acted if he had known then what he learned a few weeks later, that Dad had named me executor of his estate. During the sermon John clasped his wife Gloria’s hand tightly enough to bruise it. I saw Gloria cry during the service, but I think it was because of her hand, and she was the only adult who did.
John and I didn’t get any help with Mom from Beverly who finally flew in from Boston just before the funeral. She claimed difficulty in getting an earlier flight. John and I didn’t argue with the dubious excuse; Knoxville is not the easiest destination on the route map. But two days’ worth of schedule trouble seemed a reach, even for Beverly.

“The airlines are supposed to help out when there’s a death in the family,” John sniffed after Beverly breezed in.

I said, “I guess you have to tell them there’s been a death.”

I was ambivalent about Beverly’s late arrival. It was fine with me that she hadn’t shown up until we were practically on our way to the service. She would’ve disputed the arrangements in her witless, insensitive manner, and that would’ve made Mom more intractable. But if Beverly had arrived at a respectable time, she would’ve gaily accepted much of the attention from well-wishers that John and I had to endure. None of the somber comments spoken over protracted handshakes would’ve knocked the wind out of her, not like Lew Minton’s recollection did me. It’s not helpful to hear some things.

Lew and I were standing away from the closed casket. A lush, fairly new wine and navy Persian runner dominated the tidy, narrow parlor in the funeral home. The neutral tones of the Victorian sofa and the several firm wingback chairs did not relieve the impression that, despite the indirect glow of the torchiere floor lamps in the corners, the room absorbed rather than cast light. Lew was wrestling with the memory of his business partner and pal since high school.

“We had some good times, Robbie, your Dad and me, good times,” Lew said. “Playing ball, the shop.”

Dad and Lew had owned a machine shop since 1966. When they bought the small shop it was unremarkable. Over the years they had kept it small.

After rambling over some half-forgotten thoughts, Lew said, “We used to have some great poker parties, the boys at the shop.”

I smiled. Mom never approved of those parties. With an impressive display of disgust she once warned me that they involved “juvenile drinking games” around which an occasional hand of poker was dealt.

“Your dad, he never drank when we played cards,” Lew said. “Tom Miller paid attention, played to win, but he was no gambler.
Always quit when he fell behind. ‘Let me lose big money,’ he always said, ‘you can just put a gun to my head.’” His words tumbled out before he could filter them, and he gripped my shoulders, an awful look of sadness and anger on his face.

It was dark when I finished giving statements and got home from the lake. Our old white frame house was chilly, like Terri preferred, and calm on the first floor, except for the central air’s faint whirrr. I didn’t hear the truck traffic on I-40 another few blocks north, like I sometimes could at night.

Our girls, Colby and Layne, were asleep in the room they shared at the top of the stairs. Terri chose their names. I flipped on the hall light so I could look in without waking them. Nine-year-old Colby, nearest the door, had barely disturbed her covers while hot-natured Layne, six, had wriggled out from under hers. I crossed the room, sidestepping the indistinct shapes of various toys left where they had been dropped. I unknotted Layne’s sheet and light blanket and pulled them up over her, and brushed a kiss across her forehead. I touched Colby’s leg on my way out.

In our bedroom the large multi-bulbed ceiling light that Terri liked was on. I heard Terri humming in the shower in the master bath. I squinted in the brilliant reflection from the alabaster walls and matching coverlet and carpet and the white lacquered dressing table, bureau and night stands. There are no unpainted wood or reflective metal surfaces in the room, not even the doorknobs. The bright overhead fixture overwhelms shadows, and only the differences in the textures of the furnishings interrupt the room’s seamlessness. Terri adapted this decorating scheme after one she saw at some home interiors expo. Terri works on a consulting basis for the owner of a large local interior design firm, and I like it better when she spends someone else’s money.

I stepped out of my deck shoes, and nudged them under the chest. The upper of the right shoe was separating from the sole along the instep, and the lace was broken. Sitting down on the foot of the bed, I started pulling off my shirt, but fell back as I lifted it over my head. I was there with my shirt up over my face, the satiny spread cold on my sticky back, when Terri emerged from the bathroom.
She startled me. “Look at your legs. You shouldn’t have worn those cut-offs.”

“That’s what Dad said.”

“Well, you and Tom were out too long.”

I stayed down on the bed, but pulled my shirt down so I could see her. She was toweling the ringlets of her shoulder-length auburn hair.

“I called.”

She stopped drying her hair and peeked at me from under the thick towel. “We got pizza for supper, and went to the mall.”

“Dad is dead. He shot himself.” How else was I to say it? I forced myself up. “Mom doesn’t know yet. Got to go tell her. Call John and Bev.” John would demand every detail, and thinking about trying to track down Bev at night made me numb. John wouldn’t have any idea how to contact her.

“I keep seeing these faces, Robbie,” Dad said. He was slouched in the lawn chair he carried fishing, feet propped up on his tackle box. The interwoven plastic strips that formed the chair’s seat and back were thready and needed reweaving. His fishing rod was anchored at his crotch in the cross-strips and rested on the front edge of the chair’s frame.

“Faces?”

“Yeah. In the mirror when I shave, on the rug when I’m on the toilet. Used to enjoy a good crap. Could be alone. Not anymore. Too many people.”

“Faces on the bathroom rug. Sounds a little schizo to me.” I played along, expecting a punch line.

“Yeah, and when I look in the mirror, behind me, in that jungle wallpaper. But when I turn around, I can’t see them. The angle’s gone.” I knew the paper, a lot of dense brown and green foliage in its pattern.

“See whom, exactly?”

“Oh, that’s good, doctor, good. Good question. Get in my head.” He pushed his dirty Yankees cap, another standard fishing trip accessory, off his brow. Its crisp interlocking NY had faded gray. “Thought your degree was English.”

“You brought it up.” I finished retrieving my line. When the last of
The fluorescent yellow float bumped against the guide at the tip of the rod. The hook jumped and snagged on the rod’s thin shaft. I jigged the rod to dislodge the hook, and reset the reel for another cast.

“What you using for bait? That’s your third or fourth cast in ten minutes.” That was his ritual comment on all our fishing trips. He thought my fishing style was poor.

“Nothing. Just casting. Aiming for a spot out there.” I pointed with my chin to the middle of the lake, my obligatory response. My style could not accurately be called fishing. I cast the line smoothly. Casting was the best part of fishing for me, had been even as a boy. I loved the frantic high wheeee of the reel as the sinkers pulled the line free, the fluid descending arc it described as the weight lost momentum. I’d never cared for delicately dropping the line into the felled limbs and weeds along the edge where Dad had taught me the crappie and small mouth bass circled. I’d never developed a proper fisherman’s patience.

“When you gonna wash that hat?” I added, casting my line again. “Don’t change the subject.”

He pursed his lips, considering. He took a long time adjusting the drag on his reel. “Joe Del Rio, from Johnson City, has a real high-tech shop. S.O.B. stole our best customer.”

I watched my float a minute, considering his dismal tone. “I don’t know much about business, but it’s just one customer.”

“You’re right, you don’t know much about business,” he said, gnawing lightly on his lip. “Said our best customer, not just one.”

When he didn’t continue, I asked, “How bad is it?”

He talked to the water. “Joe’s okay, farmed some work to us before. Good guy, runs a good shop. It was our own fault. Haven’t kept pace like we should’ve.”

“How bad?”

“The face on the bath mat is Carl Glover.”

Dad and Lew had worked for Carl Glover; they bought the shop from his widow. I never really knew Glover, but I remember Dad’s frustrated complaints about him to Mom. He’d said Glover was cheap and spiteful and didn’t play straight.

“I’m sitting on the toilet, and rub my foot across the rug. You ever
notice how the nap makes patterns?” I nodded. “I see Carl’s face in the nap, every time.” Dad looked at me. “You know Carl died right on the shop floor? Had a heart attack.”

I shrugged. “I was a kid. I kind of remember.”

“He did. We let him. Just watched.” His tone was dull. “None of us batted an eye. We waited until after he’d quit breathing to call the ambulance. Afraid somebody’d save him.” He gripped the fishing rod. “He leers up at me from the rug, laughing like the devil.” Dad leered himself.

I pulled my head away from his crazy grin. A line as vivid as if some unseen hand had slashed a marker across the air separated us. What hasty calculations of opportunity would allow a group to stand aside and watch a man die, I wondered then. Now I wonder if they’re different from the impulse that causes someone to kill himself? Dad had been propelled across some brink I didn’t see.

Before he told me he and Lew were going to lose the shop, before he said they’d used up their reserves trying to keep the business alive, he said he’d kept it from Mom. “Your mother, she always wanted me to expand. ‘Branch out,’ she said, ‘manage an enterprise,’” he said bitterly. “But me and Lew, we’re just regular guys. If we could just work the lathe, the grinder. All these years, I couldn’t make her see. I spent all my time trying to make her happy, and she spent all her time trying to make her happy.”

I only examined the crank on my reel.

After awhile he asked, “What’re you going to do?”

“Don’t know anymore than the last time you asked. I get another year here,” I said. “I can look while I’m still teaching. Probably find something at a smaller school.” I frowned. “It’d help if I could publish something.”

“I don’t get this tenure thing. You’re a professor—” He corrected himself when I started to interrupt. “OK, an assistant professor, but they want you to be a writer. Why don’t you get a job with rules you can follow.” I had heard this before and knew what was coming. “Get a re—”

“Get a real job? No thanks. It’s what I do. Good or bad,” I added sourly, “like running a lathe.”

“Low blow. I just mean there are other jobs. Maybe call John.”
“I don’t think so.”
“Y’all aren’t close—”
“You noticed.”
“He might be able to help.”
“I’ll find something.”

I propped the cork butt of my rod against my leg just above the ragged seam of my cut-offs. My legs were bright pink and stung, and Dad attempted a lame joke about my wearing shorts. The dry weeds and sharp grasses around me were tamped down from my pacing the area during the afternoon. I squinted out at my line, following the sagging hair-thin spiral to the float that marked my hook. The infrequent puffs of hot breeze were too light to ripple the glassy surface, and the float barely bobbed. I began reeling in the line again.

“How are you and Terri?”
“Good.”

Dad nodded. “If I could do it over, I wouldn’t get married.” My throat closed and he raised a commanding hand before I could say anything. “Don’t take that wrong. I’m proud of you. Even Beverly. I just didn’t have the energy for it all. I tried to give you more than I had. Should’ve settled for better instead of bigger.”

“It was good,” I offered.

He smiled sadly. “Learned with Johnny. Probably too hard on him. Too easy on Beverly, but I doubt it would’ve mattered if we’d been tougher. Then you came along. Had a chance to do it right with you. But you were always so cool, everything below the surface, even as a baby, hardly ever cried. Never could tell what mattered to you. Always wanted you to get mad, get it outside, say something.”

For a moment I stood there like Silas Marner, cataleptic. “Why?”
“Right,” Dad said. “‘Why?’ That’s your approach, son, back away. You can’t always walk away. Take some risks. Not like me. You’ve still got it all ahead of you. Fight for something.”

“Who are you, the One-Minute Manager?”
“I read the book.”

That surprised me. “Well, maybe it’s better to walk away, sometimes, than be told to leave,” I said with a voice steadier than I felt.

His eyes widened, as if seeing an unexpected sight, then he said, “You’ll need to help with your mother and all. I need to be able to
“Sure, yeah,” I said, not really hearing.
“I know I can count on you.”
I didn’t know what he was talking about, but didn’t ask, and that was all we said. We fished awhile longer.

Mom never asked if I could’ve stopped Dad. He and Lew had depleted their cash reserves, but Dad had life insurance and hadn’t touched the pension plan he’d had the sense to set up, so Mom was secure. When Lew sold the shop to Joe Del Rio, who wanted to expand into the Knoxville area, Mom realized a modest windfall.

At Christmas John sent a card with a preprinted signature but no note, and Beverly called from Stowe where she was skiing with a CPA from Baltimore. “I’d never talked to an accountant before,” she explained. “Now I know why.” That’s been the only contact among us.

A few weeks are left in Spring quarter, then my contract expires. I got a letter last week from a journal. A paper I wrote about the uses of landscaping in nineteenth century American literature has been accepted and will appear in one of next year’s issues. The journal isn’t prestigious, it’s barely mid-tier, but it is refereed. Timing is everything. I have an offer from Hanover College, a small school in Southern Indiana. I vowed when I finished my Ph.D. at I.U. that I’d never set foot in Indiana again, but I’m considering it. Or maybe I’ll get a real job.

Mom had me deal with the authorities. Pretty quickly the police returned Dad’s wallet, watch and wedding ring, which I gave to Mom and she kept, and his fishing tackle and Yankees cap, which she told me to take. She also told me to keep the black-and-green marble and small chunk of quartz, gifts at some time from Colby and Layne, that Dad carried in his left pants pocket.

And I have the pistol, too. Once foul play was ruled out the gun was included with Dad’s effects. But I didn’t tell Mom. It feels significant in my hand. I can raise it to my eye and sight down the short barrel along a line that connects me to Dad. I store it with Colby’s marble and Layne’s quartz in a custom velvet-lined case I bought at a gun shop in Oak Ridge. The case is in a plain brown bag behind some papers in the second drawer of my file cabinet where Terri doesn’t look and the girls can’t reach.
I handled the legal matters for Mom and tried to see after things, but I don’t know what Dad expected from me. Maybe not enough. I’m not sure I was really any particular help to him.

I don’t think I could’ve stopped him.

It was getting late, and I said, “One more cast and we got to go.” Dad was in his tackle box, and answered, “Not me, son.” I had drawn back my arm, ready to cast my line again. I wasn’t far away, and turned to him as I swept the rod forward and released the line without looking. It was a strong, smooth cast. He had taken off his Yankees cap. I saw the regret, or maybe hope, in his eyes the instant before he pulled the trigger. Splintered bone and blood and brain sprayed on the water behind him like someone had tossed a handful of pebbles onto the surface.

I don’t hear the echo of the shot anymore, but all the time I hear distinctly a softer, almost simultaneous sound: the sploosh of my baitless hook landing out on the lake.

I rushed to Dad, but not until I looked back at my settling line, checking the distance of the cast before dropping the rod, which fell in at the water’s edge like he did.
Peter Crume

Bull’s Luck

Could be it was the kind of thing a fellow will do when he gets to be a certain age and starts to wonder what next. Then again, maybe making things just runs in Ed’s blood. His family, the Bulls, practically built this town. When you look at old photographs in the city museum, the kind that are grainy and have turned brown, you see Bulls in old-fashioned ties and hats or holding parasols. They go back generations, with the usual success, scandal, and eccentricity attached to such longevity. Maybe it’s just as simple, though, as being named Ed Bull, just like his father and his father’s father, back and back to the beginning. It’s likely the Bulls didn’t have an Adam and Eve but rather Ed and Eve, and being the latest in such a long line gives a fellow a lot to live up to, and sometimes a lot to overcome. Anyway, there must have been some kind of logic in what Ed got up to, but even now I can’t find it. But I’ll tell you what I saw, and see what you make of it.

Ed Bull’s people still own a lot of property around the city. One of their holdings used to be an old bank downtown. Its assets were swallowed up by a bigger bank, so the building is just standing there like a husk. Once it was so modern that now it’s a relic. When it was built, everyone thought jet packs and hover-cars were just over the horizon (personally, as an optimist, I’m still hoping to see that). With its long horizontal lines and aluminum gables, it could have been the first bank on the moon. Even today, it sticks out from all those refurbished Victorian storefronts around it, the kind they don’t let just anyone tear down today. The empty bank is like a falcon in a tree full of owls.

It’s kind of low and streamlined, except where the front windows point up like a colonnade of glass rockets. And then there’s the color of the building, which never originated in God’s own spectrum, being an aquamarine that shimmers when the sun hits it a certain way. There’s brushed metal around the edges, trimming the glass and spelling out the bank’s name: The People’s Second Bank. I suppose the first now belongs to posterity. If memory serves, number two had the first drive-through service in town, a natural destination for those long
angular cars with tail-fins that may well have been designed by the same fellow who drew up the bank.

Well, the People’s Second has been in disuse for the last fifteen years, because most of the people moved from the center of town and started using the small branch banks that sprouted up at every intersection. But the building hung around. My theory is that no one wanted to tear down the future, even if that future is now almost five decades on. It’s become something of a landmark, but nobody knew what to do with it until Ed Bull turned forty-three and decided he needed a change.

The next thing I heard, he aired it out and moved in. There wasn’t any furniture left, but the president’s office had a small bathroom from the days when the higher-ups got those little perquisites, and Ed put a hotplate at the third teller’s window so he could cook up a can of chili when he got hungry. He went around town and turned up some appropriate furniture, low couches and chairs and kidney-shaped tables with hollow boomerangs for legs. None of us gave much thought as to what Ed was doing. Lots of people take up hobbies at that age, be they model trains or fondue-cookery or whatnot. At night you could see the lights from inside cutting diagonally onto the small patch of grass out to the sidewalk. There’d be Ed inside, sitting on one of those angular chairs and reading, maybe smoking a pipe. There wasn’t any reason to think he wasn’t the happiest guy in the county.

But he didn’t stop at fixing up the bank. The next project was a set of stairs. Most people would have hired a contractor, but maybe he didn’t care to, taking his pleasure in the doing rather than the planning. Ed went to the lumber supply place and bought a bunch of planking and two-by-fours and had it all dropped off in a corner of the parking lot behind the bank. And he set up back there with a power saw and commenced to cutting up all the wood. Tom Axton stopped by one day while Ed was sawing away, and later told me all about it.

“G’morning, Ed.”
“Hello, Tom.”
“Got a new project?”
“Yep.”
“What d’you aim to build?”
“A set of stairs.”
Tom looked at the planking. “Say, what are you going to do with these stairs?”

“What do you mean?”

Tom gestured toward the People’s Second. “I just see the one story here, Ed. These stairs, what are you going to attach them to?”

Ed shook his head and measured another plank. “Don’t know just yet. What do you think I should do with ‘em?”

“Well, Ed, I couldn’t say. They’re your stairs. But I’ve never seen a set of stairs that didn’t take you somewhere.”

Ed slipped his goggles back over his eyes. “I guess I’ll figure it out as I go.”

Tom shook his head as he told me this story. “I never thought Ed Bull was stupid,” he said, “but I’m beginning to wonder if he isn’t crazy.”

“I agree it’s a strange thing,” I said. “But it’s his parking lot and his wood. If he wants to build a stairway to nowhere, that’s his right.”

“Sure is,” said Tom. “I hope he remembers to put in a railing. It’d be a shame if he fell off before he got finished.”

After talking to Tom, I got Ed on the brain, and a couple days later decided to go have a look for myself. Ed was in the parking lot, hammering down a fresh plank. The uppermost step was about level with the bank’s roof. I looked up the stairs. What I know about carpentry could fill a thimble—twenty years on I still get some ribbing from the boys about the toothbrush holder I made at summer camp for Aunt Lindy—but from the look of things, Ed was learning as he went. The edges of the step-planks were rough and ragged, and in a couple of places there were gaps where the wood was held together only by the extra nail or three that Ed had driven home for insurance against the thing coming apart. On the first four or five steps there were words scrawled in black marker, well nigh illegible. I guessed some kids had come through in the night and contributed to Ed’s project.

“John Henry, put your hammer down!” I called. Ed turned and peered down at me, and I threw him a salute. Ed came down the stairs, stepping carefully as a colt that just discovered he had legs. He’d begun work on a railing, but it didn’t yet reach up to the top step. I put my foot on the first step as Ed descended. Ugly it was, but it felt solid enough under my shoe.
“Pete.”
“Ed.” We shook hands. “Keeping busy?”
Ed looked up, squinting a little. “It’s going. I’m finally getting some height. Running low on wood, though. I’ve got an order in.”
“So, what is it?”
Ed shrugged. “Pretty much what you see.”
“Fair enough.” I rapped the railing with my knuckles. “How high you planning to go?”
Ed shrugged and looked a little sheepish. “Can’t say. I guess I’ll know when I’m done.”
I pointed at the black scrawls on the first couple of steps. “Looks like you had some visitors.”
Ed followed my finger. “Uh huh. They came last night.”
“What’s it say?”
“I don’t know. Looks like gibberish to me. ‘Stop me before I thrill again,’ whatever that means. The rest are pretty much nonsense, too. I should put up a gate to keep ‘em out.”
“Might not be a bad idea,” I said. Ed opened a cooler by the saw-horse and dug out a couple of beers. He passed me one and we drank in silence for some moments, regarding the stairs. Ed drained his bottle and let out a soft belch.
“Say,” he said, “I could use some help. This thing is getting pretty tall now, and I need an extra set of hands to get the supports in place. You have the summer free, don’t you? Want to volunteer?”
I surprised myself when I said, “Sure, I’ll help you out.” Why not? I’m a middle-school French teacher, so I didn’t have any place I needed to be until the fall. And the truth was, I was kind of curious how high these stairs might go. I could see the project through, unless Ed decided he wasn’t ever going to stop.
So I signed on. I rolled in most days about nine, and we’d saw and haul and hammer until late afternoon. The stairway really grew.
Ed put up a barrier, but every morning there were fresh messages on the planks we’d nailed down the day before. Artwork, too, some of it cartoony and interesting. It was a shame to have to step on it to get where we were going, but Ed didn’t care much about that. He worried about someone falling off the top, so every day before knocking off he hammered a plank across the uppermost railings.
After we got the stairs about thirty feet up, to keep the whole thing stable we put down a landing and started building in the other direction. If you stood across the street from the bank, you saw the stairs rising up behind it. Someone from the newspaper noticed, and she came by one morning before I got there. She asked Ed the same questions that Tom and I had, but she didn’t stop there. She was looking for a hook to her story, and she found it when Ed explained straight-faced that all the graffiti was his own, a running tally of all his bad choices and missed opportunities, written in code legible only to himself. A work of penance and expiation. For dramatic effect, he hung his head a little, like he’d been caught drinking milk from the carton in a stranger’s refrigerator. As far as the reporter was concerned, her story was now wrapped with a giant bow. She tried to decipher some of the more gnomic statements, and Ed talked mysterious nonsense about the twilight struggle between heart and mind. She wrote it all down, snapped a couple of photos, and the next morning word of Ed’s project was all over town. Given how high the stairs had gotten, it seemed pretty obvious to me that something strange was happening behind the bank, but I guess the passers-by kept their eyes too close to the ground to see it for themselves until it turned up on page A-6. But that story must’ve hit a nerve, because people started coming down to the bank to look at the stairs and read Ed’s “confessions.”

Ed met them all courteously. He told them sure, look all you want, but don’t climb the stairs, please. So they’d come over and peer up and if it was someone who knew something about construction, maybe he’d rap a plank with his knuckles or give the railing a shake. And they’d always crane their necks trying to decipher the hieroglyphic graffiti, but there wasn’t much luck in that, since what they were close enough to see was pretty much worn away by our feet going up and down.

No one cared that they couldn’t make out what Ed supposedly confessed to. The important thing was that he was saying something, even if they didn’t know what. People came every day to see for themselves. It looked to me like they all thought Ed was making an important statement. And if you believed all that nonsense he palmed off on the reporter, it was a reasonable assumption. After all, he lived in an abandoned bank and had set to building stairs that weren’t go-
ing anywhere. Plus, he’s a Bull, and maybe they thought that gave his actions some extra, secret weight. But I was around him daily for several weeks, and he acted pretty normal. He whistled off-tune, or turned the radio to the baseball game, and he was always generous about opening the cooler and passing over another beer. And he was patient with all the visitors, no matter how many times he was asked What It All Meant.

Pretty soon it wasn’t just your regular folks but ministers and psychologists and art professors from the college stopping by. Ed was glad to share his time with them—after all, he had nothing but time—but eventually he got tired of going up and down whenever someone new showed up, being that the stairs were getting pretty high. After a while he quit descending to greet them and just gave a friendly wave with his hammer and let them look around to their hearts’ content, so long as they didn’t actually try to climb up. I suppose his silence, which was a matter of convenience rather than conviction, made him all the more enigmatic to his visitors.

Sometimes Ed and I would take a break and sit on the upper steps, beer in hand, and we’d watch the people walking around below. Once Ed asked me why I thought they were interested.

“Couldn’t say,” I said, prying the top from the bottle. “An explanation, I suppose. They want to know what it means.”

“I don’t know what to tell them,” said Ed. “It’s just something I feel like doing.”

I took a long pull from the bottle and smacked my lips. Ed always did buy good beer. “Maybe you should have said that from the start, instead of all that gibberish you spouted to the paper,” I said. “The way it is now, you’ve got ‘em chasing their tails.”

“Yeah.” Ed shook his head. “I know. I really should have kept my mouth shut, but you should have seen that reporter. Nice kid. Earnest. She kept nodding and scribbling on her pad and making little sounds, and I fed her more and more horse****. I thought she’d finally put down her pen and say ‘Give me a break,’ but she took down everything I said.” Ed sighed. “Well, now the mole’s loose in the garden. I wouldn’t’ve told her anything if I thought it would turn out like this.”

I’d gotten to where I never noticed the graffiti anymore. I was more preoccupied with the height of the thing. The stairs were so tall
that we built a second landing and switched back to the original di-
rection, and had rigged a block-and-tackle to haul up nails and tools.
But, like Ed, I was amazed by how seriously everyone took the whole
thing. I mean, we’d put up a lot of steps, and even the most compi-
lcated of men couldn’t have that many things on his conscience.

But they kept coming. Ed fielded a number of requests from peo-
ple who wanted to reserve a step or two to unburden themselves of
some problem or another. Someone even came by to suggest that Ed
sell the individual steps to raise money for charity. Ed’s response was
always a polite and firm no. He had an eye on liability, since the steps
were getting pretty high. Besides, this was his project, and however
it was going to turn out—on this point I still had no idea—I guess he
wanted to be able to look back and say, “Yes, I made that with my
own two hands,” though maybe he’d throw a little credit my way.
Not that I needed it, but I had come to take a personal interest in the
whole thing.

Some people just wouldn’t take Ed at his word, though, and snuck
into the parking lot after he’d gone to bed. They carried paint or pens
up the steps and said what they had to say. The next day, we’d see
notices about all manner of human guilt, burdens of theft and violence
and jealousy. I thought these confessions were the real deal. So did
Ed. The morning after the first non-graffiti graffiti appeared, we had
a talk.

“This is taking on a life of its own,” said Ed. “Look at this stuff.
We might know some of these people.”

“Yep. As long as it’s here, they’re going to climb those stairs and
have their say. Maybe you should think about winding it up.”

“Maybe you’re right,” said Ed. “But I’m not done.”

We both looked up. The stairs towered over us; if you were on the
top step and the whole thing caught fire, you’d need a cherry-picker
to haul you down.

“How much higher are you going to go?”

“I’ll know when I get there.”

The city had its own ideas about Ed’s project. In its view, the
stairs weren’t art or spiritual release so much as a community hazard.
Ed got a letter telling him to cease and desist immediately, as the stairs
violated some ordinance no one ever heard of until it was invoked. Ed
called his lawyer, Billy Maple, who came down to the bank a couple hours later.

The first thing Billy said was, “Mind if I climb up?”

Ed stepped aside. “Be my guest.”

Billy took off his jacket and ascended to the top, and spent some time braced on the safety rail and looking out over the city. He came back down shaking his head. “Some view,” he said.

“Yep.”

“It reminds me of an old joke. Jesus has just gone up on the cross. He calls out, ‘Simon, come to me.’ Simon tries to get through but the Roman soldiers throw him back into the crowd. So Jesus says again, ‘Simon, come here.’ Simon tries again, but the Romans knock him down. But Jesus just keeps saying, ‘Simon, come to me,’ and finally Simon breaks through and kneels in the dust and looks up. ‘Yes, Lord?’ he says. And Jesus tells him, ‘I can see your house from here.’ Billy began to laugh, and Ed and I joined in. After a moment, Billy wiped his eyes and helped himself to a beer from the cooler.

He took a long pull and wiped his mouth. “You have a problem, Ed. Your project here, it has to go.”

“I’ve never even heard of that ordinance,” said Ed.

“It’s pretty obscure. So far as I can tell, it’s really geared for people who live on golf-courses and put up chicken-coops in their yards. It gets used maybe once a year. But this year you’re that once, Ed. And if you don’t take it down, the city’s going to come and do it for you.”

“But there’s no zoning law against it, is there?”

“No. On the other hand, there’s no zoning law that permits it, either. You’re already on thin ice, living in the bank, which definitely isn’t residential. I made a couple calls and the city is willing to look the other way. Call it Bull’s Luck. But I can’t fix this.” Billy tapped the railing with his bottle, now empty, and helped himself to another.

“Here’s what they’ll say: the stairs are made of wood, so they’re a fire hazard. And they aren’t secured to anything, so a good stiff wind’ll knock them over, putting property and lives at risk. Plus, this parking lot is unsecured, and anyone can get up ’em when your back is turned. Look at ’em.” Billy pointed his bottle to a corner of the parking lot. Three people stood in a cluster, shielding their eyes against the sun.
and staring up at the stairs. “Right now you’re liable for whatever happens here, and I doubt your pockets are so deep that you can absorb a dozen lawsuits, especially if children and their fragile bones get involved.”

Ed mulled this over. “What if I just keep going?”

Billy said, “What they’ll do is come and tear it down, and you’ll be fined, plus any charges for removal.” Billy looked at his watch. “Okay, boys. I have a meeting.” He set down his bottle and slipped on his jacket. “Ed, be sensible here. Take it down. You’re setting yourself up for a world of trouble. Bones, Ed. Spinal cords. Think about it.” Billy thanked Ed for the beer and drove away.

I turned to Ed, who was scuffing the ground with his boot and looking thoughtful. I said, “You’re going to let it ride, aren’t you?”

“I think I will,” said Ed, flipping his hammer end-to-end. And that was that. We kept going, climbing up and up. If Ed was worried about the city coming and taking down the whole thing, he never said. But I thought about it a lot, and the higher we got, the more I felt like we were attached to some giant, invisible rubber band, and one day it was going to snap and bring everything—the stairs, Ed, myself—tumbling back to Earth.

And that’s almost what happened. I wasn’t there to see it, though. I was out of commission, laid up at home with a simple-tit sprained ankle. I’d come down the last flight of the stairway and the heel of my boot caught the edge of a step. Down I went like a rag-doll, but it could have been a lot worse. I lost some skin on my hands and chin, and the ankle hurt like hell, but at least it wasn’t broken, and Ed fixed me up with his doctor, who was generous with the painkillers.

So I was propped up on a couch and kind of spacey when the phone rang. It was Tom, yelling in my ear.

“Jesus-Pete-turn-on-your-TV-right-now!”

“Okay,” I grinned into the phone. “What channel?”

“Eighteen!”

“Right-o,” I said, and reached for the remote.

On the screen was the People’s Second. There were the stairs, and a fire truck, the big kind, with lots of extension ladders. Some cops and a few men in suits were nearby, huddled in consultation, and a group of firemen was busy putting down a giant cushion, like
the kinds used by stuntmen when they fall backwards off bridges. The news camera pointed toward the sky, to the top of the stairs, and there stood Ed. He looked awfully small up there and seemed to be wrestling with some kind of apparatus, but from that distance it was hard to tell. His clothes whipped from the propeller wash of a police chopper hovering nearby.

The reporter on the scene gave a breathless summary of what Ed had been up to and how the city felt about it. Quite a little crowd had gathered on the edges of the parking lot, and the reporter approached a few of them for their reactions, which ran the predictable gamut from support of Ed’s freedom of expression to advocacy of his being locked away for his own good.

A cop called up to Ed through his bullhorn and told him to come down the stairs immediately. Ed yelled something in reply, but you couldn’t hear what he said. The cop repeated the order, and again Ed yelled back. The cop shook his head and walked over to the fellows in the suits, one of whom motioned to the big red truck, which rumbled slowly forward. The cameraman didn’t know where to point his lens, and it bounced between Ed and the firefighters and the cops and the city officials and the reporter, who had to be restrained from climbing the stairs to nab an interview.

A second helicopter showed up. I guess it was the news, because now there was a close-up of Ed from above. He was busy fiddling with some tubing. It looked like he was assembling something, but then the camera-shot switched back to ground-view. The fellow with the bullhorn was back at it—maybe they all thought Ed was some kind of suicide-candidate, which was understandable considering how high up he’d got, since the only climbers you generally see are getting paid to scale scaffolding like monkeys or hang off Jefferson’s nose on Mount Rushmore. But I’d been around Ed for a few weeks now, and he wasn’t any more ready to die than I was. Whatever this project was—and the jury was still out on that question—Ed wasn’t sunk in depression. If the city was set on taking it down, then I’d bet Ed had other reasons for staying so long on the top step.

Not that the uniforms on the ground saw it that way. A fellow standing probably ten stories off the ground, with only a two-by-four to keep him from tumbling to the earth, looks like certain death to the
people paid to ensure the commonweal. And of course the camera loves a standoff. So, what with all the uniforms and the reporter on the scene, on TV it seemed inevitable that Ed was going to do something drastic.

The TV switched back to the bird’s-eye view, and now I saw what Ed was up to. He was going to jump, but he didn’t plan on landing. His back had sprouted a pair of purple-and-orange wings, their bones made of that tubing I mentioned. Now the camera stayed fixed on him, and the hubbub at ground-level rose as people began to figure out that Ed’s grand exit was going to take him away from the ground and not otherwise. Ed pried off the safety board, bent his knees, and then gave one hard push and separated from the stairs. He dropped quickly, and I sat up in my chair yelling “Get up, get up!” and some people in the crowd ducked and cried out when it looked like Ed hadn’t started high enough, but he bought some luck and something invisible caught those nylon wings, and suddenly he swooped up and glided over everyone in a long, slow arc toward the clouds, and then he leveled out and skimmed away, the choppers in slow pursuit.

Of course the fire department wasted no time in disassembling the stairs with axes and chainsaws. In the meantime, the helicopters trailed Ed to the old Hensley farm out Seneca Road, where he landed twenty yards from a cluster of grazing Herefords. They took him into custody—once he got those wings off he just held out his wrists and smiled a little sheepishly—but there wasn’t much they could do with him, since by then the stairs were half dismantled and Ed hadn’t killed anyone or himself. Besides, he was a Bull. The city drove him downtown and slapped a fine on him for third-degree Public Mischief, just to say it had done something, and tacked on a bill for the manpower tied up in the standoff. He was out in two hours.

A few days later, once all the fuss and furor died down, Ed came over to the house to check on me. He brought the cooler and some of that good beer. We sat on the porch and watched the afternoon wind down. I asked him if he could tell me what it was all about—the stairs and graffiti and the hang-glider and all.

Ed studied the bottle for a while. Finally he said, “I can’t,” and reached into the cooler for a fresh one.

I’ve been nibbling at it from time to time, but I still haven’t put it
together. And if Ed can’t help me, it looks like I’m stuck, so if you ever figure it out, let me know. What I am sure of, though, is that they’ll put his picture up in the city museum, alongside all the other historic Bulls. I hope they use one where he has the purple-and-orange wings.
Julie Hensley

DRY RIVER

Lincoln followed a girl to the town of Garrison. Really she was a woman—four full years older than Lincoln, who was 22 that August—but he could not yet fathom that the world through which he moved might be adulthood. The girl, whose name was Cora, had magnificent breasts and only slightly crooked teeth. Her short, wispy hair changed colors every few weeks in a way that left Lincoln breathless. She was from the south, well from Virginia, and that meant she had a kind of accent that she could turn on for antique dealers and waiters and state troopers.

They met in an empty McDonald’s in St. Paul where Lincoln was eating 39 cent cheeseburgers and studying for his Ancient Civilizations midterm. Cora sat in the booth behind him working her way through an order of large French fries and a Diet Coke. Before each sip, she would rattle the ice around in the cup a few times, and Lincoln, who had been growing more and more annoyed, finally turned around to say something. They didn’t fall in love immediately, but they fell in love. Cora cooked all her dinners in a ceramic crock pot, and by the end of January, Lincoln spent each evening on her sofa, forking mushy vegetables into his mouth and watching an endless string of sitcoms (she thought Lincoln a dead ringer Michael J. Fox from Family Ties), just for the chance to work his way into the embroidered kimono she always wore.

Cora had been to graduate school in the Midwest, and what she said she really wanted to be was a writer. Not a junior copywriter at Bergman and Horwitz, the advertising agency where she worked in Minneapolis, but a poet. She composed poems about cottonwoods and prairie chickens and apples ripening—long, serious poems in sprawling free verse—which she recorded in a little leather journal. She would have Lincoln read them back to her while she painted her toenails on the coffee table. She wouldn’t look at him as he read but would pretend, instead, to concentrate on the nail polish. He loved the loopy, feminine curve of her handwriting and the way something dark seemed to hover just behind the pastoral scenes. She had lost her
father in some kind of accident when she was a girl, and that loss—
Lincoln was certain of this—was what these lines were really about.
He measured his tone and inflection carefully, wanting to please her
with her own words, but she always took the book from him as soon
as he had finished. “That one’s crap,” she’d say shuddering dramati-
cally. “I should’ve never let you read it.”

They had some fights—incredible fights, really—with screaming
and “fuck this” and “fuck that,” and, sometimes, with a broken glass
and, always, with Cora running out of her apartment. Lincoln was
never really sure what these fights were about, but he ran after her. He
would find her, hunched over and glaring, at the bus stop or seated on a
swing in the park. They had make up sex in amazing places: ATM ves-
tibules, the bathroom of their favorite bar, the amphitheater in the park.

When Lincoln completed his history degree at Concordia in May,
Cora announced plans to move back to Virginia where she was go-
ing to take a public relations position under the mayor of a town not
far from where she grew up. There were several fights about whether
Lincoln should go with her. In what Lincoln thought was true dramat-
ic form, Cora thought it would make more sense to go alone. “There’s
really nothing there for you,” she told him. “In fact there’s really noth-
ing there at all. It’s boring beyond belief.” She thought they should
wait and see what happened.

In the end, Lincoln followed her. Well, actually, he drove the U-
haul truck, and she followed behind in her Ford Tempo. He bought
a set of walkie talkies as a surprise, and every so often, she would
buzz him. “Lincoln, sweetie,” she would turn the accent on across the
static. “Can we pull over at the next exit? I have to use the little girl’s
room.”

Garrison was a medium-sized town. It was a college town and
a farming town, but most of all it was a Christian town. When he
and Cora drove through the rolling fields that connected Garrison to
Interstate 81, Lincoln was sufficiently awed. The wrought iron gates
of Mount Solon College were ornately twisted into the shape of de-
scending doves, and they were mounted on a brick base. From there
a low wall snaked around the perimeter of the entire campus. It was,
Lincoln decided, as he heaved the moving van into third gear, not the
sort of wall built for security, or even for privacy. Yellow and orange
day lilies swayed on the other side. Why, he asked Cora, when they
were stretching their limbs in the parking lot of Penny Lane Apart-
ments, had she not stayed and attended graduate school here.

“It’s a Christian school,” she told him, and when he reminded her
that she was a Christian, she said, “Not enough.”

Although there had come a time, back in Minnesota, when Lin-
coln had left a toothbrush and some clothes at Cora’s apartment, this
was the first time he had ever really lived outside his parent’s home.
When they began making phone calls to apartment hunters, Cora had
suggested they find something small, even a studio, but Lincoln had
finally convinced her they should sign a lease on a renovated town-
house at the edge of town. It was statelier than he had imagined, with
green shutters and geraniums by the door.

He began to unpack immediately, and it thrilled him to see his
history books next to Cora’s literature anthologies on the shelves that
were built into the living room wall, their shoes together in a heap on
the closet floor. He loved the way his desk, the same desk on which he
had studied back in high school, looked here in their spare bedroom.
He loved the high ceilings and tall windows, the shady courtyard with
the picnic table and grill.

They arrived in early August, and Lincoln—with a history degree
and no education training—took the only job he could find. One eve-
ning while he and Cora were lined up for custard-style cones in front
of Bert’s Dairy Bar, Lincoln overheard some parents commenting that
a local private school still had several teaching positions left unfilled.
Three days later he was able to sign a nine month contract at Spring
Creek Christian Academy. Classes didn’t commence until after Labor
Day, and by that time Cora had left their apartment and moved into
a bungalow that the mayor had rented and furnished for her on the
other side of Wildwood Park. She told him quietly and apologetically
that she was leaving, reminded him that she had tried, for his sake, to
come here alone. They carried her things out to her car together. He
wanted her to scream, to storm out so that he could chase her.

Each morning, Lincoln walked to school along the flood mound,
an artificial ridge that Garrison had raised in the late twenties after
Dry River flooded and destroyed part of the town. Now the hill was smooth and grassy, and the crest—where the people of Garrison had taken to jogging and walking their dogs—was slowly flattening out with time and weather. On one side rose Victorian houses and squat cottages with stone steps and bright shutters, not unlike the one Cora lived in now. There was Sullivan Street, lined with mossy brick sidewalks and shaded by sugar maples, and just beyond that the austere brick buildings of Mount Solon. On the other side half a mile of farm land, mostly corn and alfalfa, stretched toward the river. Then, just before Spring Creek Christian Academy, the swath of land on the far side of the mound narrowed into a sparse forest of thick hardwoods.

The river continued on toward the new part of town, where there were fast food restaurants and a shopping mall, but here on the outskirts of it all, Lincoln was able to lull himself into a kind of content, which despite his loneliness, or perhaps because of it, he was able to foster into hope. As he walked, he sipped coffee from a plastic mug, and he took note of things around him that he would like to tell Cora about, things that made him think about her poems: the black snake sunning himself on the edge of the cornfield; the way one or two old men were always casting their lines into the riffles where the old bridge had collapsed; the pile of waxy poplar leaves left in the school yard, the surface of each leaf punched by some girl’s fingers to form a smiling cat face.

Each evening after dinner, Lincoln walked to the house that the mayor had arranged for Cora and stood for a little while on the sidewalk across from Wildwood Park. He never knocked or peered into the Dutch windows. He didn’t want to see her and the mayor in the midst of anything that would make it more difficult to take her back later. Once in a while, Lincoln recorded the things he had noticed that day on yellow legal paper, which he tucked beneath the windshield wiper of Cora’s car.

On Tuesday and Thursday mornings, when Spring Creek did not hold early chapel, the day still commenced with the voice of the principal, Rev. Jonas Baxter, reminding everyone to pick up the order forms and “sell, sell, sell” those ceramic Christmas ornaments for the fall fund-raiser. The reverend started and finished with prayer, and he filled in some of the time in between with a daily Bible verse. These
lines were non-offensive and vaguely hopeful (“Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see, Hebrews 11:1.”), and if he found them appropriate, Lincoln sometimes recorded them at the bottom of the note before he pinned it to Cora’s car.

Lincoln, who had muddled his way through English and barely passed his required mathematics courses, had to teach all subjects to the only sixth grade class at Spring Creek. He was an acceptable teacher. That is what Rev. Baxter wrote when he came to observe him during the second week of school. He wrote that Lincoln’s attire was professional in appearance, with his belt matching his shoes; that he knew most of his students by name; that he seemed to be selecting appropriate worksheets from *A Christian Curriculum for Grades Six and Seven*; and that he was, overall, an acceptable teacher.

The day before the observation Lincoln pleaded with his students, “The love of my life has left me for a married man, and my position here is essential to winning her back.” They stared at him with mild amusement. After school they played Asteroids or Missile Command in the back room of Boberia’s Pizza, and during recess a gaggle of them always gathered around Jennifer, who snuck glossy covered romance novels from a box in her grandmother’s garage. They knew something about desperation, something about passion. And so, that is the way it went until the second month of school when something happened that changed everything.

Lincoln sat eating his dinner and flipping through a book that he had come across in the school library. The book was about the history of the Brethren religion and its role in the settlement of Garrison, and Lincoln, a sucker for history’s ridiculous details, was growing truly interested when the telephone rang. He pushed aside his box of fried chicken and faced the phone. His parents called on Saturday afternoons.

He wiped the grease from his mouth with a paper napkin and picked up the receiver. “Hello.” His heart was pounding from somewhere down in his belly.

“Mr. Erdrich?” This was not the sultry fake accent that had been playing through Lincoln’s mind for weeks. “This is Jonas Baxter. I’m
terribly sorry to phone you at home, but we have a bit of an emergency. One of your students failed to return home after school today. Mark Lively was in attendance today, was he not?"

“Mark Lively?” Lincoln knew that in his class there were at least two Marks. He couldn’t picture either of their faces, yet he felt fairly certain that one of them played soccer on a community league and sometimes wore his uniform to school.

“His younger brothers walked with him to school,” explained Baxter. “And they waited for Mark, as they always do, to walk home this afternoon, but he never appeared, and now the boys’ parents are starting to panic. Was Mark in your class today?”

Lincoln had not taken attendance, not once since Baxter’s visit. He had planned on filling in his grade book later, fudging everything at the end of the semester, even using different colored ink pens the way he had in the weekly journal entries required as part of his freshman English class back at Concordia. “I’m not sure,” said Mark. “I’ll have to check my book tomorrow.”

“Well, I guess that’s all you can do,” said Baxter.

“You know, I have a feeling he probably just ditched school with a friend,” said Lincoln. “He’s probably been smoking all afternoon behind the IGA. He’ll show up within the hour like nothing happened.”

Baxter sighed heavily into the phone, and Lincoln wasn’t sure if the man was more disappointed by his inability to resolve the situation or by the prospect of one of Spring Creek’s flock hiding out behind a dumpster and sharing a stolen pack of cigarettes. “You get there as early as you can.”

The next morning emergency vehicles had smashed a trail of flattened cornstalks through the fields. Two police cars were parked just shy of the water’s edge, and they had turned up a wake of black mud. The early arrivals, mostly country children whose parents brought them by car from Shelby or Whitetail Gap, stood around on top of the flood mound. Lincoln told them to go inside.

“We’re allowed to play out here,” one of them said. “It’s intramurals.”

“You don’t look like you’re playing.” Lincoln’s voice, louder and an octave higher than usual, surprised even him. “Either stay on the
black top and play some kind of ball, or go into the cafeteria and draw.”

Lincoln found one of his students, Andy, amidst the dispersing crowd and asked him if Mark Lively was in school yesterday. The kid eyed Lincoln suspiciously and shook his head.

Rev. Baxter had already assumed the smooth and consoling demeanor of a eulogizer. His entire head moved in a subtle rhythmic motion as he spoke. He told Lincoln that early that morning fishermen had found a backpack and the detachable hood from a nylon jacket, along with various other personal items that Mark’s parents had identified as their son’s, scattered along the bank and caught in the roots of an overturned tree downstream from the school. “So far,” Baxter said, “There is no body.”

The search and rescue team came out from Garrison, and they dragged the river bottom. Their yellow boats moved in long arcs across the deep and slow moving stretch of water above Wildwood Dam. They sent divers in below the old bridge and into the places water pooled dark below the rapids. Rev. Baxter led a chain of around-the-clock prayer for the next 48 hours. Students from the college stood in a line and fanned across the cornfield and then through woods north of town, moving across the ground like a beaded string.

Finally, the town of Garrison admitted what everyone knew to be true. They held a memorial service in Spring Creek Church of the Brethren, the chapel adjacent to the school. The mayor himself led the mourners in a prayer, which turned into an oration on the duty of the people of Garrison to protect the innocence of children everywhere. It was the first time Lincoln had gotten a good look at the mayor, who was younger than he expected, though not as good looking. He couldn’t spot Cora anywhere among the man’s suited enclave as it pressed out of the sanctuary. Throughout the boy’s disappearance, which was heavily televised on the local news, Lincoln had been waiting for her to call. He walked by her house most evenings, but he could no longer bring himself to record all the events and observations of his days. Leaving such thoughts folded on her windshield would have left him feeling a little too out of control.

The family asked that, instead of arrangements of cut flowers, friends bring potted mums. They planted some of them on either side.
of the steps leading up to the main entrance of the school, and the oth-
ers they placed in a flower bed with a plaque engraved with Mark’s
name and the verse, “Let the little children come to me, and do not
stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.”

After that the days passed with a certain level of normalcy. The col-
lege lost its homecoming game, and the town tapped the trees and
hung buckets for the annual Sugar Maple Festival. The world outside
continued, and it’s true there were further-reaching losses: That au-
tumn in China a group of student protestors were massacred in Ti-
ananmen Square. The kids at Mount Solon gathered on the steps of
the college library, lit candles and sang “Imagine” and “Give Peace a
Chance.” But still Lincoln heard talk.

“The loss of her oldest,” the guidance counselor said one morning
as she poured coffee for the choir teacher in the lounge, “And she just
had her tubes tied last year.”

Roy, the janitor was the brother-in-law of one of the fishermen
who found Mark’s belongings, and he recounted the scene over and
over in mounting gothic detail for the women who worked in the caf-
across the rocks.”

The most disconcerting gossip came from the children them-
selves. When he headed into the boy’s restroom to hustle along the
stragglers who were playing in the sinks, Lincoln heard their voices,
hushed and echoing off the tiled walls. “Lucy Breeden was with him.
He told me they were going down there to do it.”

The gossip sent Lincoln’s mind reeling. He had viewed the elev-
en-year-olds with whom he spent seven hours each day as children.
Mark Lively was tall for his age. He was an athlete and a bit of a smart
aleck. He had a miniature pincher dog named Gumby, and he had read
all the books in a young Christian horror series called Spinetinglers.
Lincoln had encountered such details only after the boy’s disappear-
ance, and they had, admittedly, surprised him. Might Mark Lively
have been sneaking down to the river bank for an early morning ro-
mantic rendezvous?

There was a game that Cora used to play. Lincoln had always
called it the “what if” game, and he hated it. Something, anything—
a toilet paper commercial or a lady squeezing honeydew melons in the produce aisle—would trigger an emotional response that would start the questions. “What if I couldn’t have any babies, would we adopt? What if I wanted my own baby, would we pay for fertility treatments? What if they didn’t work because really the problem was you, and we were all out of money? What if I got pregnant from donated sperm? Would you still want the baby? Would we tell the child the truth? When would we finally come clean?” It could go on all day, and almost always what started in hypothetical fun ended in a real argument.

Lucy, whom he watched closely, was reclusive, but he couldn’t tell if her isolation was self-imposed, if she scorned the other children or they scorned her. In some ways she reminded him of Cora. She had short dark hair, and a look that bordered haughty. He would catch her staring out the window for long stretches of time, but he couldn’t bring himself to reprimand her.

Every day Lincoln thought up a new possibility. What if Mark and Lucy had gone down to the river to smoke pot? Lincoln couldn’t remember when he had first smoked pot, but he was sure it wasn’t until high school. Eleven years old was young, yes, but drugs were a growing threat. The majority of the business at both PTA meetings Lincoln had attended centered on the drugs circulating in the public school system and how it was the duty of every parent, every faculty member, every citizen of Garrison to keep them out of these walls.

What if Mark was secretly depressed and had weighed the pockets of his windbreaker down with the smooth stones that lined the river bank and jumped into the deep pool on the far side of the bridge. What if he had changed his mind but become caught on something. Dry River was deep in places. Its path carved in and out of underwater limestone caverns.

Lincoln considered mentioning some of the gossip to Rev. Baxter, but it would, he finally decided, be unwise to give such talk credence.

Suddenly Lincoln wanted to know his students. He wanted to see past their sneers, past the standard navy pants and white oxford shirts (the breast pocket of each stamped with the Spring Creek logo, the sil-
houette of a church next to a leafy sugar maple). So he put away *A Christian Curriculum for Grades Six and Seven*, and began thinking about a special project for History and English. First he brought in the writings of Captain John Smith, Samuel Sewall’s witchcraft tales, and Mary Rowlandson’s captivity narratives.

“This is too hard!” His students complained mercilessly. “We can’t read this stuff. My Dad doesn’t even know these words. He says half of them aren’t in the dictionary.” Lincoln, admitting that he had been a little overzealous, decided he would have to forego Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, Margaret Fuller, Frederick Douglass, and Harriet A. Jacobs.

Although Lincoln’s concentration had been in ancient cultures—Mesopotamian, Assyrian, Egyptian—and he had memorized long sequences of rulers and monuments and movements, timelines which began with Menses’ unification of Upper and Lower Egypt and ended with Nekhtnebf’s clash with Alexander the Great—his passion was American revisionist history. He loved the scholars who revealed heroes for what they really were, the ones who depicted the colonists responsible for the Boston Tea Party as a bunch of drunken red-necks, Molly Pitcher as prostitute. He claimed to believe in the gossip of history, but, in truth, he read a lot of pop-culture biographies and trashy check-out magazines.

Lincoln decided to read to his class from the autobiography of Bill Veeck, the man who at various points in his career had owned the Cleveland, Indians; the St Louis, Browns; and the Chicago, White Sox. Veeck, who was probably the greatest promotional genius baseball has ever seen, was, in Lincoln’s opinion, fascinating and completely irreverent. The book, which was titled *Veeck as in Wreck*, had been reprinted after the man’s death in ‘86.

Lincoln purchased a box of baseball cards from the IGA, and when he began handing out packs the kids looked at him, confused. “Well, come on,” he said, sitting down in the front of the room and opening the book. “Get over here, and tear into them. Let’s see what you’ve got.” He began to read, and they gathered around him in a half circle, squirming a little and comparing cards. He read for three hours, breaking only for lunch, glossing over some of the racier parts. They laughed at all of Veeck’s promotional pranks, the way Lincoln
had known they would—the exploding scoreboards; the 3’7” midget he brought to the plate for the Brown’s; the “Grandstand Managers’ Day,” in which the fans determined the team’s strategy by holding up large placards marked “YES” on one side and “NO” on the other—and they grew quiet during the part when Veeck was diagnosed with cancer and moved to New York to paint and meditate and await what he thought was his impending death. Once he’d finished the book, Lincoln instructed the kids to compose their own autobiographies, complete with pictures.

“Wait a minute,” one student raised his hand. “You want us to write everything we’ve ever done?”

“Veeck doesn’t include every detail from every minute of every day,” said Lincoln. “He’s obviously decided what’s most important, what he wants people to remember.”

“How long does it have to be?” It was Jennifer, the girl with all the smut novels.

“I can’t decide that for you,” he said. “It all depends on how much you have to say. Your story should build toward something, though. For Veeck,” Lincoln held up the book, “the culmination was getting a second chance at life.”

“We don’t have anything like that.” A couple of them started to groan.

“That guy had like a peg leg and was practically resurrected, like Jesus or something.” Andy, one of the clowns of the class hopped around, imitating Veeck’s amputation. “I never even broke a bone.”

“Look guys,” Lincoln sighed, “For Veeck, I think his accomplishments show creativity and an open mind. He signed the American League’s first black player and its oldest rookie. I’d say he’s also selected events that illustrate his work ethic and the way he learned to deal with pressure and get along with people. What do your actions and accomplishments say about you?” Lincoln wasn’t sure they understood, but he liked seeing them so agitated.

The Sugar Maple Festival ran the third weekend in November. The weather did turn decidedly colder, but nothing like the people of Garrison made it out to be. In Minnesota, Lincoln’s parents told him, they had already had three substantial snows. Bundled up in winter
coats, scarves wrapped around their necks, and hoods pulled tight, his students looked like cartoon versions of themselves. Most of the kids walked in the company of a friend, a good ten paces behind or in front of their parents. Sullivan Street was closed to traffic, and vendors set up booths that spilled over onto the college mall. There was kettle popcorn and candy apples and BBQ turkey legs. Artists laid out beaded necklaces and watercolors of the Blue Ridge Mountains. They smiled at him and asked where he was from. How, Lincoln wondered, could they still recognize him as an outsider?

A fortune teller was reading palms out of a family-sized Coleman tent, and Lincoln peeked inside just for fun. The girl who couldn’t have been more than 17 or 18 sat on a folding chair in front of a collapsible card table. She had thin, reddish-blond hair that hung past her shoulders. The ends were wild and ragged. “She needs a good trim,” that’s what Cora would have said. That’s what Cora said about most women with long hair.

“Come on in,” the girl at the table motioned toward an empty lawn chair. “There’s no line.” In the corner a space heater glowed orange.

“How much?” asked Lincoln as he sat down.

“How much?” she asked, and Lincoln nodded, smiling. “For you,” She tilted her head and looked at him. She was heavily freckled. “Nine bucks.”

Lincoln laughed. “What?” she said. “That’s a tremendous value. It means your fortune will be good. I charge more for the scary ones.”

He pulled a ten from his wallet, and she took his hand. Her nails were bitten low, and the tips of her fingers felt like cold water on his palm. He thought about how it was with that sort of touch, the slighter it was the more you felt it. There was a girl before Cora, someone he remembered from high school who used to lean in and brush her eyelashes against his neck.

The girl’s fingers only fluttered over his palm for a moment, and then she held onto his wrist and leaned toward him. “Someone,” she said, “Someone you know extraordinarily well is going to make a decision that will bring you much joy.” The heater buzzed in the corner. “I don’t know anyone very well.”

“Well,” she said, folding the money and pushing it into her coat
pocket, “Perhaps you’ll get to know this person better.” Lincoln laughed and thanked the girl, but he thought about what she had said as he headed back into the crowd.

The highlight of the festival was the maple syrup, made from local trees and sold in tins depicting the college bell tower, framed by snow-covered tree tops. Lincoln bought a tin for his mother and a tin for his Aunt Mare. He would take them when he visited at Christmas.

The local churches ran non-stop all-you-can-eat pancake breakfasts out of their fellowship halls. Lincoln made his way through the crowd to Spring Creek Church of the Brethren. As he waited in line with his Styrofoam plate, he happened to look up and see Lucy Breeden. She was wearing a wool coat, plaid with gold buttons and holding the hand of a man Lincoln presumed to be her father. They paused at one of the trash cans to dump their plates. When they turned to go, Lincoln saw Lucy recognize him, smile, and give a little half wave.

Lincoln spent Thanksgiving in Virginia. He didn’t really have enough money to fly back to St. Paul—he’d been paying the full rent on an apartment he’d originally planned to share—and, truth be told, he had not been completely honest with his parents. They knew that he and Cora were having some problems but assumed it was nothing that could not be worked out in time.

For his holiday meal, Lincoln took a taxi to Showalter’s Mennonite Family Restaurant, a little place just before the interstate. The Mennonite faith ruled the surrounding countryside the same way the Brethren faith ruled Garrison. The parking lot had posts where customers of the old order could hitch their teams, and a few buggies were already parked out front when Lincoln stepped out of the taxi. The horses snaked their heads and stamped their hind legs, rattling their harnesses.

It was a good thing Lincoln had come early because at half past twelve a hoard of families descended on the place. The line twisted out of the lobby and around the building. Women wearing prayer bonnets bustled in and out of the kitchen with trays of apple cobbler and shoofly pie. Lincoln found a quiet corner table and began working his way through his students’ autobiographies.
Most of the kids had secured the pages in report binders or spiral-bound notebooks and decorated them with drawings and photographs. It seemed his students couldn’t sustain a long narrative, so each page stood alone like a kind of poem. One girl, Ruth, had begun her own story with that of the Garden of Eden. There were all-star baseball picks, litters of kittens, high scores at Asteroids, births of siblings, prizes in costume contests.

Even if he hadn’t been looking for it, Lucy’s autobiography would have stood out. She had penned her stories on stiff, vanilla-colored paper. The pages were folded and hand-sewn, then bound with a wallpaper sample. She began with the story of her birth, which was also the story of her mother’s death, and ended with the death of her classmate. In between these tragedies was the pith of Lucy’s life: a father who traveled, a nanny named Ruby, swim meets and summers in the Outer Banks, her own rows in the family garden, and a photography award in the juvenile category at the Rockingham County fair.

She told about how she had walked down to the river with Mark several times in the weeks before his death, how he had been teaching her how to skip rocks. “He had a secret hoard of stones,” she wrote, “tiny, flat ones that he piled inside a rusty barrel near the old bridge.” There was no reticent confession, and Lincoln hadn’t really expected one. Mark’s death had made everyone very sad, Lucy said, but her father was letting her return to her old school in Shelby after Christmas, and now he was home nearly every weekend. Her father always said that God never takes away people or things that we love without sending others, so she was sure he would send someone to help Mark’s family. It was, and Lincoln suddenly wanted to believe this too, guaranteed.

That night he dreamed he saw Lucy running along the flood mound, the dry cornstalks rattling below her. The sky stretched dark and starless, and the moon that rose behind her was ringed with haze, as before the first snow. It was a vesperal moon, chanting to the rhythm of her footfall, bathing the school yard in an eerie, expectant light.

When Lincoln awoke, he didn’t make breakfast or turn on the television. He dug through a box that Cora had left on the floor of the hall closet until he found her special résumé paper. He sat down in front
of the coffee table and started writing. He wrote about the summer his family had rented a cottage on Lake Superior, about the gulls and the rocks that were worn smooth as shells. He wrote about the times his father used to take him to see the Northstars play in the Met Center and how they would stand next to the glass to watch the Zamboni go by. He listed all the songs he had learned to play on the trombone during high school. He wrote about the time he and Pam Bridges had gone to Tony’s in their formal wear and shared a fourteen inch sub before the senior prom. He wrote about the Fig Newtons his mother would put in his book bag each morning before he caught the transit for Concordia.

He wrote that he fell in love, for a while, with a girl who chewed ice and rattled her diet soda, and he described how Garrison looked below him when they came up over the hill, shaded and secret and almost too perfect. I lost the girl, Lincoln wrote, and one student, but twenty-three others will be back from break this Monday.

Lincoln stood for a while on the sidewalk across from Wildwood Park, holding the pages he had written. The shaded patches of Cora’s lawn were still gray with frost. He could see a miniature version of himself, distorted and reflected in the Dutch windows. He imagined Cora coming out and picking each of his notes off her car as if they were flyers for some on-going pizza promotion. He could see her tossing them down, see each manifesto wilting curbside with the cigarette butts and rotten leaves. He put his list back in his coat pocket. Behind him the surface of Dry River had frozen into a slick skim of ice, but, underneath, water was still trickling through. The sound of it rose like bells off the dam, and when he stepped backwards off the sidewalk, he had the sense that things in front of him were moving away, downstream.
Кирби Ганн

**The Varieties of Method (5)**

Not real often but sometimes I like to get high alone. At night, alone, not doing anything else and I’m not going to call anyone or get in the car to wake up a girlfriend because I’m lonesome or whatever, just alone in my room with the window open, preferably on cold winter air but any time of year will do, and with the porch light below my window lending the only light to my room. The type of light is important; smoking up in a bright room just isn’t the same. Dad has his martinis and Mom her librium and klonopin and I don’t think my choosing a bowl that I don’t even smoke every night, not even once a week unless I happen to have a whole lot of pot on me, which isn’t often, in fact it’s almost never that there’s more than a dime in my sock drawer and even less in my purse, I don’t think it’s any different than what either of my parents do to relax. I’m not a wake’n’bake kind of girl. I’m not high all the time or let it run my life and I don’t even really do any other drugs, don’t even like to drink, particularly—maybe the occasional pop of X on nights with my friends clubbing back at school.

But late when I’m alone and it’s so quiet in our neighborhood and my parents are asleep, I like it like nothing else. I like how good pot, when you are alone and in this certain frame of mind that seems to come only late at night and seems to open you to certain avenues of thought you don’t have otherwise, and somehow having the room dark except for that soft porch light outside encourages this, I like how you kind of slide into self-conversation about your place in your life, where you are and where you’re going, the kind of questions you tend not to ask yourself otherwise without getting all anxious. I look over the tree and I think, Where are you going, Shady Beck? What will you do, little girl? Like it allows you—allows me—to just barely touch on some special knowledge or insight into secrets you might be keeping even from yourself. Maybe it’s only that you’re relaxed and it’s quiet with that feeling that the world is asleep and soon you will be too but not quite yet. A sort of meditation-slash-prayer routine.
And you’re high. Talking about this to my girlfriends back at school we decided it must be like what Indians used to do, maybe. I call these little sessions my dream routines, and often that’s just how it feels, like I’m dreaming and I am awake in it and it’s good and as I look through the window at the darkness out there—there are only a few distant house lights visible, mostly it’s trees—I can get filled with such an overwhelming love of life and the world even as I realize I don’t understand any of it.

There is a point I’m getting to. My mother always chides me that I take forever to get to the point and then I never know how to end a story. So. I’ve never told anyone about this time not long ago when my little method did not produce a good result. I have this small TV in my room and I’d smoked up after watching Letterman, who I don’t care for much but this TV doesn’t have cable and there was nothing else on and even though he’s kind of a dick Letterman sometimes can make me laugh. I turned off the TV before the musical guest played, and opened the window and took two small hits off my pipe, it was this strong stuff Fleece had given me over a month before. Everything felt fine as I went into my little dream routine and there was no wind outside and I admired all the pines and the hemlock in our yard standing straight and strong like honorable dignified sentinels sworn to protect the house. I felt fine; excellent, even, but soon got sleepy too and so lay back on my bed with the window open and looked at the dim bluish rhomboid of porchlight on the ceiling and part of the wall and this is the last thing I remember.

Later I woke up in complete terror. The room was no longer my room and it was filled with this incredible dark, a dark like I’d never seen, like it wrapped me up in this mass of dark that light could never penetrate, and even more frightening was the realization that it was impossible to move my arms or legs. I’ve never felt such fear, and what made it worse was that I could not understand why I felt so afraid—I was safe at home in my own bed—it just seemed that the room had been taken over by this pure cancellation of life. Which I can only call evil, if that makes sense. Like if you think there are positive waves of energy then there would have to be the opposite of that, too. Absolute negative energy? And if that’s the case, then when our puny little human minds try to comprehend it, the only language
we can find to describe is EVIL. I can’t think of another way to characterize it.

It was so dark I couldn’t see the digital clock on the bed stand. I didn’t know how long I’d been asleep. But even though it felt like I couldn’t move my head, I lay in this position that allowed me to see the television set, and there the screen gave off this peculiar horrifying glow, soft and dim but perceptibly radiant. You know that glow that comes up immediately after you turn off a set? it was like that, except this glow was darkness, and it did not die down and instead grew forward and unfurled into the air like the way water spills into fabric—the glow being water and the air fabric—and this glow, it seemed to me, fed this heavy darkness that kept me paralyzed. No more light from the porch light; no discernible air; my room had become a coffin stuffed full with this black stuff, this evil stuff that seemed to want me. To want to erase me.

It gets stranger. Somehow, in my head, I connected this spreading darkness to David Letterman and his mocking sarcasm, as if the atmosphere he evoked had infiltrated my room and somehow opened a gate there to, I don’t know, Lucifer, and either he or some representative of his was making a play for me. I ask you not to laugh; this was realer than real. Now I am not a super-religious young woman but I did grow up going to church, and instinctively I started to pray. I started to pray almost manically, nothing formal in it, just started to repeat over and over that Jesus was our savior and he was my savior and I accepted him in my heart and therefore whatever that was streaming out of that television set for me had no claim, it could not touch me. This did not seem to work. I became even more terrified, terrified like you might be, say, strapped down naked on a table with a room full of men whom you can’t see except for the glint of light off their scalpels. Or more precisely like being tied down to railroad tracks and you can only watch the train’s spotlight grow as it speeds nearer and nearer, your head’s vibrating on the rail with the rhythm of the wheels churning closer and here comes the thundering noise.

The darkness itself was erased once my ceiling light came on. At that instant I found my limbs. I bolted upright; my feet slapped the floor; my mother stood in the doorway in her nightgown, dull-faced from sleep and half-inside the room, her hand on the light switch. You
were whimpering, she said. Bad dreams? I didn’t know how to answer her and said nothing. I looked at the television set. With the whole room bright again it looked just like a normal TV set.

She was still standing there in the doorway so I told her something like Yeah it must have been bad dreams and after flashing one of those “I worry about my little girl but I’m exhausted” faces (a face I have provoked often enough to recognize easily), she left me alone. But in fact the state of dreaming seemed the exact opposite of this experience. It did not feel like some weird post-hypnagogic state, either (though I considered this possibility and read up on it). I’m not an irrational girl and naturally despite the intensity of the terror I assumed the pot had something to do with what had happened. I tried to put the event behind me and stayed away from my little routine for a while but after a time, the strangest thing began to occur—it was almost like I wanted to experience that night again. Like I longed for it the more I thought about it. To be tempted toward that darkness again. As a way of understanding.

A bunch of weeks later I returned to the whole procedure with the greatest precision I could manage, tried to set it up exactly as it had gone down that night: smoked off a bowl, endured Letterman and his buddy Paul trade jibes, turned off the TV before the musical guest appeared. But I slept through the night undisturbed. Since then I’ve done this all kinds of times too many to count, trying to recapture the greatest terror I have ever experienced, practically making a ritual out of the steps I could remember, practically inviting that bad, evil glow to return to my room so that I might find what it meant, what it wanted from me and what I might find in it. Yet these nights at home disappear in the peaceful sleep of the oblivious.

That I don’t seem able to make this happen again leads me to believe that much more in the reality of that night, that it was not simply Fleece’s powerful reefer working on my subconscious in a negative fashion, but that Evil is real and perfectly capable of engaging you body and soul. And you can just bump into it, accidentally. As you can imagine, this has affected my outlook on life in a drastic way. Every so often I can be doing the most menial thing, driving alone or hanging with friends or standing in line at the kwik-stop, and my mind will picture this entire other galaxy surrounding ours like a vision out of
Milton or Blake or Dante, where there is a perpetual war going on, or at least a yin and yang push-pull conflagration, of Good vs. Evil, absolute energies we conceive of as demons and warrior angels going at it in this spinning tornadic vortex for the, what?, the souls of each of us? I guess. And we can step into that at any time, just by mistake, as it wanders about from one dimension to the next.

I find the whole thing very disconcerting. I don’t know how to figure the whole experience. Admitting this makes me feel kind of ignorant, superstitious and medieval, which I do not like. I mean this is not your typical thinking for a geology major. But it’s a gift, too, sort of, having undergone this weird vision or brief glimpse into what is actually going on out there, just out of our sight. And you either get what I’m saying or you don’t.
Lisa Williams

THE WOODPECKER’S TONGUE

Today I discovered a dead downy woodpecker at the base of the post where the suet feeder hangs. I believe it is the female who came daily to the feeder, stabbing the suet down to a misshapen nub of grease and seed in a few days. I would watch her from the window as I ate breakfast. She lay on the ground, a soft, rounded puff of black and white latticed feathers, an exact handful. But here’s the startlement: her beak was open and bloody, and a narrow bloody tongue trailed out of it onto the grass.

How had she died? A question, that mouth and throat.

I wanted to finger the beak—I was curious as to its sharp hard texture. But I don’t want to touch mysterious blood. So I picked up two sticks and—carefully holding one in each hand—balanced her body between them, then carried her to the bushes, where she still lies. It will be cold tonight and I doubt that her body will decompose soon. I like the idea that it will remain undisturbed, that the crazed summer ants can’t swarm over and devour it.

The sun smoldered high, white and disc-like in a slate horizon, cold February sun. I made my way through woods by the river and heard the staccato knock knock knock knock knock of another downy. Woodpeckers can be solitary, but they also travel and feed in twos. You’ll see them bristling through a forest: they flap in staggered stages, one flying and alighting, the other flying and alighting, and so on through the woods until they’ve finished their circuit of the tallest and oldest trees. They make a fracas with heavy wings and don’t care who hears them. I like this rhythmic, noisy partnership, and how they move through woods in syncopation, uneven metronomes.

A woodpecker’s hammering can be territorial (I’m “here here here”), or signal courtship, but most irregular knocking means they’re searching for food. They’ll pound a telephone pole or a tree for termites, carpenter ants, and wood-boring beetles, and have a strange way of doing it; beginning at the bottom of the trunk, moving straight up then out along the branches, sometimes hanging upside down. The stiff tail, pressed against trunk or branch as the bird climbs, secures
the weight of its bent body, like iron coat-tails. A circuit like this of one tree from bottom to top, then flap to another and start all over. Tiny, bristly feathers protect its nostrils from the dust of its drill. And its feet—instead of four toes splayed forward, like a hand, one toe is placed at a right angle to the two in front, while the fourth is rotated completely backwards for support during the bird’s vertical climbs. But perhaps most remarkable is the woodpecker’s tongue. Unusually long and slender, like the tongue of an anteater or toad, it can shoot out to one-third the bird’s body length and be quickly retracted because of strong thin tongue muscles that wrap from the back of the neck over the top of the head and down—or even in—to the nostrils. When wet with saliva, the tongue’s barbed end becomes sticky and can pluck bugs from a crack or a hole the bird has drilled or used as a sort of spear to lance, for example, a fat beetle on the surface of a trunk. Certain kinds of woodpeckers stick their tongues in sap leaks in trees, and may even get drunk on fermented sap. I never knew the tongue was something to notice until I saw it trailing out of a dead bird’s mouth.

I am thinking a lot about speech lately—and about words and who hears them, who does not. The tongue for me is such a symbol of communication—even if the mouth isn’t involved. What makes some of us hold our tongues, write things down?

Witches’ Brew

On the trail through fields I saw dead Goldenrod’s soft, delicate weed-blossoms, along with Witches Broom and shriveled Queen Anne’s Lace. Deep purple berries announced themselves here and there from dark, leafy brambles, like celestial bodies. Later, I thought then, I’ll look at the moon, stars, and planets—Venus, Mars, Saturn, and Jupiter—which the newspaper had told me were supposed to be intensely bright tonight. But now that it’s dark, a disappointing haze obscures their brilliance. Thoughts can burn like illuminated planets, and so can the simple recognition that you’re alive in thought. The details too are thrilling, but exhausting, and sometimes it can be almost a relief to feel a mist of tiredness or confusion settle down and muffle the glaring facets, like mist over foliage in a valley or across the stars.
A car swishes by on the distant highway. No wind. And then, gradually, I begin to hear small layers of sound: a rustle, not of wind, a few feet from my feet, a small chirrup in a bush, a contented settling-down sigh, a quick shift in grasses as of something startled, the drawn-out hiss of rubbing winter foliage. I am given the sense of things turning softly through the dead layers, yellow grass, and dry curled leaves, bodies nestling, bodies foraging. “In a field I am the absence of field,” wrote Mark Strand. The minute I enter a landscape, I have divided it. But not for long—“things move in to fill the spaces where my body’s been.” My presence had forced a gap in those shudderings, but then the noises started up again, small crisp notches in the apparent silence, under a swollen sky, digressive creepings, utterances like a lifted finger, a spread talon, a parted mouth.

Phantom Bridge

The area my house sits in is called Herrington Lake. It’s a region I like for its mix of palisades, cliffs, pastures, and Southern Appalachian forest, for its winds off the water and slapping sounds, for its songbirds, herons, and herds of deer. Along the sides of the water, limestone rises up to forests of cedar, maple, nut trees, birch, and pine, and forms a gnarled shelf for the mink, herons, kingfishers, turtles, and toads that hang around the water. It’s man-made, but there’s little about the lake that looks artificial, and the animals and fish that inhabit it now don’t know the difference. It’s not a perfect wilderness, but it will do.

I don’t like the motorboats skirring noisily up and down, but the lapping waves their movements make remind me of the water when I can’t see it because the fields have grown high. I like to walk down to the abandoned boathouse and sit as far down on its steps as I can manage without slipping on the slime that coats the last few. I sit there early in the morning, no one around, watching the limestone for mink and the surface for a flash of fish—most recently, one-as-yet unidentified with orange scales, and a large light-bodied fish, probably bass, whose eel-like length surprised me. This disclosure, this coming forward of what’s under, to break the surface, is what I wait for. What it gives me I don’t know—the sense that I am more solid than I know,
as the surface wavers and moves.

The water curves around and through the land here, forming a corridor that seems more river- than lake-like. When I talk to other people about the place, I call it “a river”; the word “lake” gives the sense of a placid, unmoving body, not accurate to me.

After I first bought the house, the first non-rental I had lived in since I was a kid, I looked up the history of the area: Almost 60 years ago investors, led by a Mr. L.B. Herrington, bought up thousands of acres of farmland, including homes, bridges, barns, roads, and an old mill, and flooded it all downstream. They probably cleared the land beforehand, but I can’t help imagining ghostly structures lingering underneath now; if you dove deep and could see, maybe you’d sense that you were swimming through the remnants of King’s Mill, or of the old bridge, “a fine example of wooden bridge construction,” according to one article from the time.

Teeth

This morning a redtailed hawk pumped to a cedar on the hill, midway up, landed. I watched, and it crept inside the cedar, escaping my glance it could not have glimpsed. This seemed almost shockingly intimate—as if my seeing had peeled away a secret. Unexpected warmth in the air means foraging, and now, as I walk, I see small bursts of cardinals, sparrows, jays, as if the woods had unfrozen and loosed beaks and wings. The ground has thawed a little, but not enough to be gooey—a pleasant crispness to the mixture of moss, cold mud, and dead, tamped-down weeds.

As I head toward the forest, a flock of three jays swoops overhead with creaking cries. The sound does not bother me today as it does sometimes on a Sunday, when the air is gray and one jay’s cry somehow stabs the spirit. I’ve tried to figure out why it does that: too much of an affirmation? Or too much for a day like today, like the one Dickinson describes, when “There’s a certain slant of light/winter afternoons, that oppresses like the heft/of cathedral tunes.” These three jays have different notes doing battle, with two standing out: *But but but; Maybe be be be.* “No contending in my head with yes,” I remember from Dante, as he’s just about to enter hell—the spirit’s *no*
to a violent swath of light, to the sun’s white-yellow slant on a winter
day, that somehow hurts. Dickinson got it right, that overlay of cold,
empty glare—like a light turned on, but the wrong kind of light, at the
wrong time, the wheel of the sun above us in our mood’s face. And
then the jay’s call: “Yes. See.” And some inner refusal: “No. I don’t
want to.” Maybe the fact that the sun’s so high over our heads adds
to the feeling. But today I don’t feel the No, and those jays can shriek
all they want.

Moss flames at spots on the path. How can it exist in winter, so
luminous, almost fluorescent, with gradations of dark and brilliant
green? It is walked over and it still persists, hardy, lush, in layers. If
you tear it up, it spores again and grows back. Your hands cannot tear
away its future. Each capsule of spores is edged by a fringe of wiry
notches like teeth at its opening, that protects the spores from harm,
holds them in, and controls how they are dispersed. If, say, the branch
on which the capsule sits is bent back by a hiking boot, it will spring
forward and expel its cloud of spores through the openings between
the teeth. And each spore is a single cell that, when it falls, will germi-
nate, sending out a slender stem like an arm, which then branches and
grows more capsules and spores. The moss we have here are hair-cap
mosses, but its cousins grow in water, sucking it up until it’s a bog that
can draw one to one’s death like quicksand, and hold one there. I think
of the body of a woman under eleven feet of peat moss in Ireland,
where she had lain for centuries; some of her dress still clung to her.

Today the river is strangely lit, an ethereal mud-doused green, an
algal green without the bulge of summer. The scene on the other side
is reflected: mound of bank, then trees lying horizontal, their top few
leaves wavering with a slight ripple, as if a finger were drawn over the
surface, twanging the mirrored branches.

Glow

I wake at 2:30 a.m. to see a small lump of light pricking through
blinds: the moon is a slice of orange with a visible, delineated rind;
out of its coarse, pocked flesh someone has taken a first bite. It’s more
incandescent than I’ve ever seen it, burning through the branches of
the black walnut tree and my shut eyelid, striking as a bare bulb. After
that, my mind continues to burn. I cannot tamp it out, and I do not sleep again, my brain an excited white heat. I think and I think. And then I write it down.

Birch Bells

Still February. When I go out to look the water appears perfectly useless, perfectly still. Under its surface the fish sleep in an icy detachment, their metabolisms slowed. There is little wind, the leaves are almost completely stripped, and dead goldenrod on dun stalks present small white bursts among winter browns. The stillness feels right, though I have loved the field’s noises.

In summer, leaves wave and billow in tiny scales, a society of bodies and voices, mellifluous, rousing, like a swelling waterskin. They comfort then more than anything, embrace you, motherly and abundant. “Green, I love you green,” wrote Lorca in his famous poem. In summer it almost seems that the green loves us too, that it might close in on us with soft gestures until we are dissolved. But dry leaves are the most distinctive instruments, like the leaves now, or in late fall or early winter, the voice of so many husks rubbing together, that surge of sound as the wind swells, snapping them to branches and back. This should be a dead sound, but I have never found it so. In winter, the remaining dead leaves show new strength. Their veins have grown hard and wiry, yet they still move, and their stems grip the branches with a near-death grip, the dried-out leaf-cling plucking and shuddering like out-of-tune strings. If you stand in the woods when the wind comes, the leaves raise their racket. You can hear the coppery, delicate, thin leaves of the beech trees, which cling all winter, as they rasp together with a tinny sound. Something about the rattle of dry leaves against the hard emptiness of winter makes me think of church bells.

Taller weeds in the field are bent with the weight of their own dried branches, heavy with themselves, their past season. What a relief it will be when the field springs to newness. A white-crowned sparrow ahead of me flits from one branch to another while I trail behind, as if, to paraphrase Robert Frost, the bird was afraid I was “out to get a tail feather.” I saw an old, weathered, unidentifiable tree, its
huge main branch broken and split from the trunk. It had torn a branch from another tree as it fell. Now the two trees grow together, more shadowy tangle than two separate growths, the taller tree spreading high above its broken limb. Soft wind rolls through the appendages, nubs, hanging leaves, the broken and split things, the delicate, dried tendrils, the tormenting briars and vines overtaking the field, since nothing’s truly vertical in this season of layerings and horizontals, where fronds bend from their dead weight; the briars then overtake them most easily, snag my coat when I pass.

Company

The shadow of one hanging branch dangling in wind against the pale bark of its tree startles me—I think at first that it’s an animal. Are we those animal selves, shadows, as Plato imagined, moving vaguely against an illuminated background? Or are we any shred of that illumination? It’s deceptive to think in the stark terms of dichotomies, yet alluring. We want the drama of all or none. I am all or I am nothing. I am presence or I am absence. Parmenides, the Greek poet-philosopher, wrote “only fools incapable of connected thought believe that Unbeing can come into being or that anything that IS can pass into nothingness . . . impossible transition from Isn’t to Is.” Anything other than the Whole filled up with being could not in fact be at all. Empedocles revised his view slightly; all that is, IS, in continuous interpenetration, through shifts and changes. But in either case there is no hollow, no empty space, and thus, no rupture or tear.

Nothing, as a concept fully realized, can kill, as I’ve learned. A friend’s moods moved between extremes of dark and light. During an “up” phase she was brimming: delighting in the world and what fills it, the splayed, intricately patterned branches of an old tree, the purple center of a white morning glory, the wind on skin. The people she met for the first time already pierced her with tenderness and admiration, beauty everywhere, in nature and in things made by human hands (one of the reasons, perhaps, she’d go on buying sprees—everything seemed wonderful to her—why not take it home?). The darkness that followed must have felt then like the absence of everything good, the lack of self, simple, cold, unrelenting, all that complexity, that bliss-
ful examination of detail, those breathless, sharp gusts of language and ideas, precise thinking, everything that defines the self when it was feeling good—bottomed out, like a drained river. No movement, nothing, just naked ground, and, underneath it, death.

Her view of the world was an extreme of shifting moods many of us try not to acknowledge. Somehow, we are able to find some middle ground—not to let the yes carry us to giddy extremes, and not to let the no bottom us out before our time. We have to rise, but keep steady, between the something in our minds and the nothing.

In the natural world, anyway, hollows appear to be filled: bodies and materials interpenetrate, blossom, expand, devour, shrink, swell, meet, struggle, fade, die, thrive. Places we thought no creature could survive—the underbelly of an iceberg, the scathing hot eruptions of the very bottom of the ocean closest to earth’s core—show bacteria and microorganisms thriving, weirdly suited to conditions scientists had thought would obliterate life. Redefinition is happening every minute, complicating things. It’s all shape-shifting, heat and energy pulsing through, in defiance of entropy. Like Ovid’s metamorphosing humans and Gods, one thing melds into and becomes another, in a web of constant change, as a spider devours its prey then becomes the prey. As far as I know, scientists still have not discovered pure Nothingness, and cannot even define it as what came before the Something of the universe’s expansion from infinitesimal to sublime. We can conceive of absolute nothingness, intellectually and emotionally, but we can’t really find it. So what’s behind what we have now? For centuries people envisioned this world as a sort of stage show behind which the Great God moves and controls everything—like the Wizard of Oz. I find it very hard to conceive of a universe that just is, form after form after form taking shape, ad infinitum. I liked thinking of there being nothing and then the Universe and then Us. It was far easier to conceive of some Great Sympathizer setting it all in motion. In the beginning, there was nothing, before God’s Mind... Now the challenge is to conceive of something that just IS. Matter, without consciousness, without reason, without end—a foreign concept, but it seems to be what we have here.

Of course, Parmenides and the others weren’t just referring to matter were they? And our whole history of human thought is con-
sumed with efforts to conceive a metaphysical whole. Nothingness then becomes Absence of Presence, of a God. It is our creation, and it means: a lack of “meaning,” of overarching idea. How gratifying it would be to have a sense of yourself as one among many making up the Great One! And yet, if I had to choose between that ultimate One-ness, and nature’s eternal shape-shifting, I must admit the latter stuns me blind. I care less for the metaphysical whole, so distracted am I by the void’s multitudinous details, exhausting as they may be sometimes. Together they make up something—not a wholeness, but company. When I walk in the forest or fields, the leaves and weeds are my company, the wind my conversation.

Masks

One of the meadows in back of the house is rimmed with tall trees that serve as a perfect stopping point for birds on their way to and from the river, about fifty feet away. It’s a favorite place for migrants. The meadow lies wide and golden with dead winter weeds bent down in clusters like trailing locks of hair. A hedge of bramble grows between the meadow at the side of the house and the one beyond with the one-stop trees. Today, I stood behind that hedge, crouched down, and watched a harbinger: the three tallest trees, their scraped scaly branches filled with a flock of cedar waxwings, about twenty-five in all. It was late morning and the light poured down, slanted full on their fronts. Their bellies were a peculiar rosy gold in the sun, and their exotic faces—black masked with white markings below the eyes, a smoothed and velvety tufted head, more angular, made me think of the golden bird in Yeats’ “Byzantium.” Waxwings’ markings are sharp and exact, like Kabuki face paint, and the black markings draw out the reds and golds of their feathers. The birds perched in these three trees’ upper branches glowed and kept still enough for me to look a long time at them, drinking them in, as they rested and chattered. Like gilded birds on a Christmas tree, a living ornament, without the holy rationale. They were delicately crafted, though no hand made them.

Early scientists believed the design of the world was too beautifully complex not to have been created by a God. Just as you cannot have a poem of great beauty without a writer of the poem—a
cause—you cannot have this world, the argument goes, with all its complexity and evidence of design, without a designer. It’s a powerful point, and it makes me think of the problems I have envisioning the universe’s something emerging from nothing. There was a something, a different something, before the tiny speck of matter expanded into our universe; and before that? Back and back and back it goes. At some point, did Nothing exist for no reason, just as Something does? I suspect not. Like Parmenides, I can’t conceive of what Isn’t giving birth to what IS. This may be simple-minded of me. Yet I am satisfied to see the cosmos like a bowl full of matter inside another bowl and another and another. The poem had a writer. Yet a cedar waxwing is also a poem, the delicate involutions of its blood through a complex network of veins and nerves that, under skin much like a lizard’s, is covered with glowing feathers. A poem, yes, but one without a moral or point. It is because it is. A tangle of matter and ideas in a brainless hollow. Unless you think of the filled hollow as a brain.

I have all the more admiration for nature making so many poems out of so much chaos, without so much as a single helping hand, into the pulsing, moving, refining of the forms through which energy moves and sags—it does so abstractly, without direction or clear intent.

Leap

(July)

It is summer, whole and hot, the deep center of things, “my fat terrestrial,” Wallace Stevens called her, sprawling, fleshy, odorous, content. She makes me eager and exhausted at the same time, a kind of “yes” of abundance, the weeds in the field as tall as I am, the hummingbirds feasting on mimosa blossoms like giant bees, and buzzing like them too. Cabbage moths, the white flutterers, are less common now; it’s the season of sulfurs, buttercup yellow, somehow like giddiness as they spiral from ground to mid-tree, never, or rarely, stopping, pale and effervescent, wings opening, again and again. The sky hung heavy and packed with clouds and diffused light, the signs of a forthcoming rain. Two beetles seemed to sleep soundly on the open
palm of a Queen Anne’s Lace blossom, their bodies not touching, in a spoon position. A deep summer green, their legs glittered with a tinge of copper, their antennae protruded like pitchforks, with three prongs at their tips, and their heads were tiny for their armor-plated bodies. A vulture roosted at the top of a telephone pole, as if it were going to hatch an egg, simply tucked in and surveying. Could it bring forth death, instead of life? Conjure it simply by waiting? A rufous-sided towhee appeared, black head, white belly, rust-colored markings on the sides, on the whole a sort of rumpled, rough-looking design on its feathers, as if it had been painted in blocks of colors, a la Mark Rothko—not the exquisite, oriental exactness of the cedar waxing’s markings. Yet its song was gorgeous, complex, unrefined.

A doe and her fawn make a daily trek from the fields across the street to my own acres of field and forest, crossing the yard as they do so. I saw them daily in early summer, the fawn bending its head determinedly yet gingerly down, as it splayed trembling legs to nurse under its mother’s belly, the doe tonguing her as it drank. A few weeks later, I saw the fawn, and something was wrong: it limped, it walked almost entirely on three legs, its injured limb hanging useless. I felt sure it would die soon—coyotes, or dogs, or a car would get it, or the mother would simply abandon what must hinder her. A month passed. And then today, I see the doe walk across the yard, and the fawn leaping toward her, on three legs. I look more closely. Now, the injured leg is only half a leg; but the fawn sprints and jumps agilely on the remaining three, while the half-leg pumps and flexes on its hinge, like a piston that propels the rest of the body. It lowers its muzzle under her belly and greedily nurses—and after a minute it raises its muzzle, white with milk froth. They seem to have survived. The leg does not appear to be infected. I will keep watching.

They must keep company with others, I thought; shortly after, another doe with two fawns appeared in the yard. Both fawns were small and very spirited; one of them actually practiced leaping in the yard, as colts will do, bounding in long graceful gazelle strides in a circle, for no reason but to try its legs.

I wonder about the three-legged fawn. If an animal is young enough, can it learn to walk just as comfortably on three as on four?

It was comforting tonight to hear the grunts of cows from a farm
in the distance. I don’t know what it is about that sound, but it always calms me, as if it were the murmur of some mom to her young—what can be wrong in the world if the cows are satisfied? Nothing better than the window open in summer, moon high and bright, crickets rustling, and the chorus of softly snorting cows. I couldn’t wish for anything else to read to, or write to, or in which to drift to sleep. If I am lucky, as night deepens a great-horned owl will kick in with its call—dactylic, full of woods, as if cool air lived in its throat, its soft hollow carried above ground, another tongue of sound making its way to where I am breathing.
Rebecca Gayle Howell

The Cost of Food

It’s 1986 and our restaurant is failing. Or at least my parents are. Their marriage, their bodies. Fourteen, fifteen-hour shifts. Concrete floors. My father knew his customers were working people, so he kept prices low. $3.50 for a Salisbury steak, two vegetables, some bread and a drink. $1.25 for a cheeseburger and fries. The construction crews would line around the building every morning for breakfast. But cheap food means cheap labor, and my parents were their own cheap labor. My mother in her support hose and red apron running the dining room until close. My father selling biscuits by dawn.

Hottie’s. Concrete floors, terrazo floors. Red vinyl booths, glass bricks, a red and white striped awning. We’d bought the old Moo Dairy Queen, 31W, the Dixie Highway, Hardin County, Kentucky. At one time it had been the cruise spot for Louisville kids coming south, but it was long derelict when we signed on the debt. The smell of sawdust in my mother’s clothes when she came home, she and my father worked for a year on the renovation. Is that the right word? My parents’ hope was to make the place what it once was, again. Renovation makes it sound new.

It wasn’t. Our restaurant was named for my father’s father, also a fry cook. The original Hottie’s Hamburgers had been up the road in Radcliff, a real sandwich stand that bragged 15 cent milkshakes. My granddad, a short man who smoked Lucky Strikes unfiltered, didn’t have any designs on social justice. He’d come up through work, a kid capping Coca-Cola bottles for the local factory. Whatever money he’d made, he’d made. For a while, he played pool for cash. For a while, he bought quarter horses and raced them. He was a man of venture.

My father was too sad for venture. He’d been an officer in the Marine Corps, a veteran of the Cuban Invasion, but he lived like a boy shamed by his mother. Watching him work—the refrigerator slamming, the flat top a tower of smoke, the knife. When he’d need something out of the walk-in, he’d run the stairs like he was training again, taking two and three at a time. I was ten standing in the doorframe in my own red apron, my mom teaching me how to serve. I couldn’t
keep up.

A man in that big of a hurry can be prone to nostalgia. The Dixie Highway had been one of the great drives of the National Auto Trail, the tangle of roads connecting this country before the Federal government interfered with orderly coordinates. The idea of the Dixie had been sold to the South by Carl Fisher, an investor from Indiana, a prophet of early twentieth century profiteering who would also bring us the Indianapolis Motor Speedway and, somehow, the city of Miami. Before Eisenhower or any of us, Fisher understood that our country wanted to know itself. We wanted to drive open air through particular towns. We wanted to stretch our legs and eat particular food. Modeled on the earlier success of his Lincoln Highway, an East-West access, The Dixie was the road that would cross the Mason-Dixon line and bring with it, in the words of one investor, “an invasion of...desirable people.” Governors signed on and municipals fought loudly in civic meetings for their place en route.

The news spread fast. In 1916 American Motorist magazine began running features on the road like it was a celebrity. “Every machine that travels over this highway is a messenger of good will and fellowship. Every rod of road that is built is another link in the chain binding together the North and the South. Every greeting exchanged along the way is as good as a pair of hands united in breaking down the barriers of isolation and insulation that have held back the progress of many a town and county.” Barely 50 years after General Lee’s surrender, the automobile would succeed where reconstruction had failed. Even now we see the rusted business signs that still stand for forgotten motor camps and cafés, families who wanted to come up out of poverty and took their chance.

The public eating experience was new then, and for the traveling middle class it was just as much an exoticism as the South itself. With few exceptions, the first restaurants had served the lower classes—immigrants, factory workers, the kitchen employees. The mid-to-late nineteenth century set the trend with its six-penny eating houses, where the hungry working poor could order an entrée of fried fish or roast pork or beefsteak, vegetable sides, and a slice of pie for a shilling. In urban areas diners would later emerge, modeled after the vendors who had sold sandwiches out of horse-drawn trolley cars
during factory lunch hours. The rural restaurant, slow to the game, resembled more these early six-penny spots, serving as much food as could be bought for cents on the dollar to those who longed to be full.

Hottie’s was a six-penny. And a hamburger joint. And a breakfast diner. And an ice-cream parlor. A true patriot, my father would come home after his long shift, open a can of Budweiser and listen to Peter Jennings while he read industry rags about how to make his business more efficient. We tried everything, at least once. 24 hours. A salad bar. Doughnuts. We wanted to come up out of poverty, and we took our chance. But the Dixie Highway had long passed its promises. Businesses that endured the Great Depression could not endure I-75. When the news of the superhighway came down to Corbin, even Harland Sanders sold off and made plans to live on his $105 Social Security check, his method of cooking chicken in cast iron skillets too slow for fast food. And that was 1956. Time had passed everyone but my father.

My mother can’t be blamed for knowing what year it was. During her supper shifts, she’d see the cars round Wendy’s drive-thru across the street, our customers lining up to pay more money for less nourishment. Carl Fisher was wrong. Americans would soon forget the need for particular towns and particular foods. The sight of Hitler’s Reichsautobahn, that symbol of the new Germany soaring above mud and struggle, would inspire more in us than a federal highway system. The lure of sameness—of closed car travel and piped-in climate. Drive-thrus and Holiday Inns.

My mother has no problem with Holiday Inns. She is the daughter of Perry County subsistence. Unlike so many mountain families of their generation, her father had rejected the shine of new industry and refused to build his family on the money offered by coal. He wanted them to live the old ways so he and my grandmother raised ten children by the only provider he trusted, his land. But my mother left her hollow when she was 15 years old and did not look back.

As Hottie’s battled Reaganomics, this country was becoming conditioned to cut-rate food. Those drive-thru lines my mother watched would only get longer. In the meanwhile, ours was a house divided. My father believed in good food the way he believed in America. The son of a fry cook who grew into a fry cook Marine, he thought a per-
son had the right to a dignified meal regardless of income or place or class. Semper Fi. All he had to do was work harder, faster, cook better. But my mother knew—you just can’t buy a thing for less than what it takes to produce that thing. Someone, somewhere, pays the cost.
The critical difference that I want to talk about is between an imposed economy, in which the land and people of an area are exploited by outside interests, and an economy genuinely local, which rises both from the local land and from the intelligence, skill, and stewardship of the local people.

Before the tobacco program was set up under the New Deal, the tobacco economy of most of Kentucky was imposed. It was controlled by and for the tobacco companies, and the growers had no power. On the market, they had no recourse but to accept the offered price, however low. Their efforts to increase income by increasing volume tended only to lower prices and increase costs, making them even poorer than before. In 1907, one of my grandfathers sold his tobacco crop and got nothing for it. It barely paid the commission on its own sale. In that year and others like it, my grandfather was one of many cruelly exploited farmers. Obviously, in such a predicament, people need to organize, limit production, and so enforce fair market prices—which, under the tobacco program, the growers were able to do. (This is similar to the achievement of the labor movement in industry.)

Now I want to make another point, less obvious maybe, but at least equally important. The tobacco-growing families who survived that long adversity of the market did so largely, I think, because they were living from their land. The old subsistence economy was still intact. Of the things they needed to live they produced much and bought little. This was the age-old economy of households and neighborhoods, founded upon vegetable gardens, home orchards, barnyard poultry flocks, family milk cows and meat hogs. This provisioning was supported in turn by a practical culture that—in contrast to the public immensity and private passivity of modern consumerism—was local, small in scale, highly adaptive, independent, and democratic.
By now, the local cultures of subsistence are either dying or dead. As a result, the people of the land and the land-use economies are more vulnerable and more dependent, more helpless, than they have ever been. But you can’t destroy the local economies and cultures of people without destroying at the same time the local landscapes.

What we Kentuckians for the Commonwealth are talking about inescapably, all the time, is the terrifying disease of land-destruction—or, in fact, world-destruction. So far, by way of our political leaders, we have attempted mostly to deal with the symptoms: climate change, pollution, poverty, low income, poor education, bad health, etc. But if you don’t cure the disease, the symptoms get worse, which worsens the disease.

Because of the loss of governmental protections such as the tobacco program and the weakening of the labor movement, we now have imposed economies on all rural landscapes, farmed or forested or mined, and all are being destroyed. Destruction by surface mining is faster, but eventually—at present rates of erosion, chemical poisoning, destructive logging, “development,” etc.—all the land will be destroyed. The land and the people, in an imposed economy, are treated merely as “resources” to be exploited and used up. The land, as Wes Jackson has repeatedly said, becomes as exhaustible—as nonrenewable, contrary to its nature—as petroleum.

We are dealing here with what seems to be a law: You cannot divide the land from the people, or detach the people from the land, without the gravest injury to both. To be preserved in human use, the land must be inhabited by people who are attached to it culturally and economically, who know how to care properly for it while they use it, and who want and are willing to care for it because they understand their dependence on it.

Now we are coming into the neighborhood of that ever more popular word “sustainability.” We have got to be careful, because we Americans haven’t sustained very much for very long. To mean anything, sustainability must be defined as a set of local economic practices worked out in keeping with ecological standards, the health of local ecosystems, and the needs of the local people.

I can’t discuss these issues with people in eastern Kentucky without recognizing that I am to a considerable extent an outsider. My
part of the state is in several ways different from their part. And yet we are joined politically and by gravity. I lived beside the Kentucky River, not far from its mouth, and I know that this river is suffering. It is in bad health because of bad economic practices from the headwaters all the way down. And so I need to be in conversation with my upstream neighbors about our political and economic health, which is to say the health of our river. I would say to my upstream neighbors what I would say to my neighbors downstream and to my own family: We need to think again about our dependence on the great corporations and their global economy. We need to ask carefully and earnestly what that so-called economy is extracting from our land, our ecosystems and watersheds, our neighbors, our families, and our own souls—only to pay us at last the nothing that my grandfather received for his 1907 tobacco crop.

And so up and down the Kentucky River and along the other rivers rising in the Appalachian coal lands, collecting in their courses the runoff of agricultural and industrial chemicals and the discharge of urban sewage, we need to be thinking of local economies that would be both ecologically sound and supportive of the local people. Here I can do no better than to align my remarks with the thinking of the exemplary patriot and citizen, Judy Bonds of West Virginia: her fierce opposition to the imposed economy and the abuses of coal companies, her loyal harking back to the old subsistence economies, and her plea for economic diversification to provide to people working in the strip mines economic choices “to where they don’t have to destroy their own homes in order to live there.”

“Subsistence” is a word fallen into disfavor. We have been taught to scorn subsistence economies as “backward” or “underdeveloped.” But I’m trying to think of a subsistence economy as the most secure life-support system, both natural and cultural, comprised of the local soil, the local ecosystem, and the skills of the local people. I want to understand what it means for a human community to depend so far as possible upon its home landscape—how, for instance, such local dependence would make for a measure of independence and protection from outside forces of exploitation. I’m remembering the Old Testament scholar Ellen Davis’s argument that the local knowledge and domestic skills of the virtuous woman of Proverbs 31 were protections
against exploitation by the imperial economy of her time.

When the coal economy has ended, eastern Kentucky, like other regions at the end of industrial exploitation and exhaustion, will be dependent on what will remain of the local landscape and on the intelligence and capability of the local people. After coal, the great resource of the region will be the forest. To make the fullest sense of our resistance to the coal industry’s abuses of land and people, we have to begin now to think more carefully than before of the forest: of its present and future health, of the best ways of caring for it and using it, and of the development of local forest economies. By local forest economy, I mean the whole set of skills and enterprises by which local people and local woodlands can be mutually sustaining: the work of care and maintenance; the harvesting of timber, fuel, food, and other forest products; properly scaled manufacturing enterprises—sawmills, for example, and furniture factories—to add value to the produce of the forest; and the many other employments that will be needed to support the forest economy. This would mean local work for local people. It would also mean the strongest local support for the best care and the best use of the forest.

We are again in the neighborhood of that word “sustainability,” which is now attaching itself also to forestry. The official forces of forestry in Kentucky are now having a good deal to say in favor of sustainable forestry and the standards and principles of forest sustainability, but this official language at present is so vague as to be useless. To make sense under the heading of forest sustainability, it is necessary to study examples such as the Menominee Forest in Wisconsin and the Pioneer Forest in Missouri that have thrived and even prospered in use for a long time.

Here I want to speak a little of the work of Jason Rutledge of southwestern Virginia. For many years Jason has been practicing and teaching a way of forestry that seems to me to earn honestly the adjective “sustainable.” This involves the use of horses for draft power in the woods, and a method of logging known as “worst-first, single-tree selection.” This means, in practice, that every fifteen or twenty years, the forester removes from the forest the trees of the worst quality, causing the least possible disturbance to the terrain and the smallest possible openings in the canopy. The result is that the forest remains
ecologically intact, therefore continuously productive, and that the quality and value of the timber stand increases with each harvest. This clearly makes better sense than “high-grading,” which takes out only the best trees, and clear cutting, which takes them all. This sort of care and selectivity in logging is eased by the use of horses, which keeps operating expenses low, in contrast to the use of heavy machinery, which is expensive and thus places an emphasis hard to resist upon volume. Horse-logging, moreover, is affordable to local entrepreneurs working on a small scale, and thus tends to localize the forest economy, whereas machine logging siphons money out of the local community.

Most of the land of eastern Kentucky is best suited to forestry, and it is best protected by its native forest. But some of the land can be farmed: arable valley bottoms, and gentler slopes suitable for pasture; I’m not talking about the famous “flat land” made by surface mining. And here I want to invoke again the principle of local subsistence. All over our state we need to be organizing local food economies to enable local people to be fed so far as possible from local farms and gardens. No food should be exported until local needs have been met.

To meet local needs, agriculture will have to diversify, which will require the work of more people, on the land and also in processing, marketing, and distribution. This, as opposed to “bringing in industry,” is the right kind of “job creation.” I can report, for everybody’s encouragement, that the City of Louisville, with the help and participation of surrounding counties, is now well started in the development of its own local food economy on the principle of cooperation and mutual support between producers and consumers. This effort, so far, seems to me to have been in every way admirable, another good example.

Eastern Kentucky’s best advantage in agriculture is its tradition of home gardening. I never visit that part of the state in the growing season without admiring and envying the gardens, which are invariably earlier and more abounding than ours at home. The gardeners of those gardens, their skills, and their tradition, are an asset and a resource of the greatest promise.

Now I’ll bring this talk to a neighborly stop. I think a good rule for any region is to pay only limited and very critical attention to anybody from somewhere else.
Dorset was my fifteenth address in ten years, the latest in a series of picturesque but untenable arrangements for living: an abandoned coast guard barracks, almost two hundred years old, facing the English Channel. I’d been there for only a few weeks when a terrific two-day storm swept the pebbles out to sea, leaving the shingle bare. The postman reported that someone had found a sealed bottle of what turned out to be perfectly drinkable whiskey at low tide. Then came news of a Napoleonic button, a Roman coin. I only found some shards of china, myself, nothing to brag about.

The next morning was clear, with a high clean sky. I was hanging laundry on the line at the end of the back garden, looking to the north over hedge-rimmed sheep pastures and grain fields rising gently, then steeply, to the high ridge, about three miles away. In the early sun, the rugged features of the crest stood out in high relief. My eyes kept returning to one particular upheaval, two concentric circles, it looked like, with some odd outlying hills scattered around. I’d been studying my guidebooks, so I knew what I was looking at—tumuli. An Iron Age fort.

The fields—tiny by American standards, divided, subdivided, tended, I knew, for many centuries—rose to the high pocked ridge. And the world suddenly blazed up with what I’m forced now, for want of a better word, to call history. Every century is here. Someone has always been here. This is a clumsy translation, after the fact, of my one and only visionary experience. I was just looking. But what I was seeing was continuous human presence, in this one place, since humans had been present at all. I left the laundry in the basket, zipped my jacket, and climbed the stile in the stone wall, into the lowest field. I started upward, keeping to the public footpath. My feet, shod in my American Red Wings, were coming down, I felt, in the exact places
where human feet had been walking for—well, forever. The track remained. The fields remained. The fort remained.

To understand how this idea took hold of me, you have to know not only that I’d moved around more than your average person by then, but also that I’d spent my childhood and adolescence in a place where, as far as I knew, there was no such thing as a century, though some previous senior class of Winter Haven High School had painted murals up the central staircase depicting Florida’s alleged history. The events chosen for illustration were rendered slightly ersatz by a gloss of self-promotion, of advertising for the tourist industry. We had panels showing Ponce de Leon in his nutty Spanish mail looking for the Fountain of Youth, which we’d already heard enough about to last a lifetime; Florida Under Five Flags, whatever we were supposed to make of that; brave Osceola, but he had nothing to do with me.

What had to do with me was the panel showing the white pioneers, for my own Grandmother and Grandfather Taylor, as soon as they were married, had come from Woodford County and Frankfort, Kentucky, in an early corporate relocation, to homestead on the shores of Tampa Bay in 1903. The panel of the coming of the railroad to Central Florida I could also relate to, since the trains still whistled purposefully into town at midnight and two AM, knocking us out of our beds, living as we did a block from the tracks. The last mural depicted the happy ending, the golden age of industry and tourism: triumphant-looking people (all white—this was the 1950s) hauling oranges, mining phosphate, waterskiing.

A very short story. Even if you started with Ponce de León—and no one did, of course—you were only talking about four hundred years. As for the time before the Spaniards—well, that time just didn’t come up. If any human being had moved through the Ridgeland of central Florida during the days when that hill fort in Dorset was under construction, the idea would have been news to me. I was a girl given to earnest speculation, but I’d never speculated about the first person to catch a wide-mouthed bass in one of Winter Haven’s famous hundred lakes. The most I’d ever wondered about were Howard and Martha and Maude and Alfred, for whom these lakes had been named, whenever they’d been named. Maybe in the 1920’s. Before they were named—by the Chamber of Commerce, I supposed, probably for some leading citizens, bankers or citrus people or something—as far
as I knew, those lakes had sat there unnamed, unfished, unseen by any human eyes, through all the years.

Whatever a phrase like “through all the years” meant to me. Something about the natural world, the stars, the old alligator eyes looking out at the same thing in the same way, forever. “From age to age the same,” as we sang in the First Presbyterian Church. Something about God and changelessness.

After changelessness came the railroad, and Grandmother and Grandfather Taylor.

What I’m trying to convey and to understand here isn’t my lack of historical information but my lack of historical curiosity. If I had been forced to imagine an early human being, someone who could talk and think, fishing from a dugout canoe in the lakes where I canoed and swam and fished and skied, I suppose I would have come up with a Seminole, because Seminoles were still visible, selling beaded purses and hand-woven rugs from huts along U.S. 27. My father pulled over once to take my picture with a Seminole chief in a feather headdress for fifty cents, but I wouldn’t get out of the car. It was too embarrassing. I was about eleven. I think I knew that the Seminoles hadn’t been in Florida all that long themselves. I didn’t know where they’d come from, but I knew by then where most of them had gone. I’d heard of the Trail of Tears. I’d given it some agonized thought. But I’d also imagined being a pioneer woman, the one I’d seen in the movies, lying awake at night listening for the terrible war whoop at the window. I knew then, or shortly thereafter, in college, that way back before Columbus, there’d been mound builders in the Panhandle and along the coasts. But you might as well have told me that there had been pyramid-builders in Egypt. There were no mounds in the central part of the state. No artifacts that I’d ever heard of. If anyone had lived in central Florida back then, or even traveled through, they’d disappeared, as far as I knew, without a trace.

It’s true that I grew up in a world unusually devoid of historical texture. But I’m afraid the refusal of my imagination also had something to do with my sense that Florida’s early history had nothing to do with me, wouldn’t have told me anything about where I came from, about my ancestors. At the word Indian, a curtain seemed to descend. My imagination seemed not to be able to go behind it. Indians wove
cloth. They hunted bison. They sent smoke signals. They passed the peace pipe and buried the hatchet. They did their war dance around the fire. They stole through the night, they called to each other in sounds like birds, and then—watch out. Stock images of Indian life, gathered here and there, mainly from the movies, arose like a fortress I couldn’t see behind to real lives. Indians were Other. My sense of separation from, difference from, the American aboriginals was so complete, so finished, final, that I would now offer up my own washed-white-as-snow child’s imagination as the true historical artifact of that place, at that time. I walked around Lake Howard every morning on my way to school without the faintest inclination to believe that someone might have walked exactly where I was walking, long before my time, or my people’s time. I never wondered what the lakeside looked like back before Lake Howard Drive was built, in the 1920’s, and lakefront lots were sold (by whom? who first owned them? how did they get them?) to people who cleared them and made smooth lawns with gardenia and azalea and hibiscus bushes leading down to wooden docks. My time was the only time there was. What came before this clearing was an impenetrable, mosquito-infested thicket, full of rattlers and gators.

I thought that history meant following your own ancestors back across the ocean to their first home.

Which happened to be, on my father’s side, the land where I climbed seriously now, up the scooped-out face of the ridge, until at last I crossed the high road that ran just below the crest. I followed the short approach to the fort. I was alone up there, that weekday morning in late October, except for some cattle grazing the worn-down humps of ground that had once been the unscaleable earthen circular walls of the fort. I found the entrance in the outer wall, to the west, in the inner wall, to the north. I entered as the people of the tribe would have entered when the alarm went up, driving their sheep before them.

Just inside the inner gate a platform of earth rose, two feet high. I stood up on it, clear of the crest, and a sharp wind from the north almost knocked me down. I could see, for the first time since I’d come here, northwards, as well as back toward the sea. Big granite outcroppings were strewn down both slopes. The place, as soon as I entered it, turned forbidding. It was abruptly clear that you’d never have chosen to live up here unless you’d been desperate, unless your life depended
on it. I realized that the platform I stood upon was probably the base of a palisade where warriors had stood, armed with slingshots, spears, whatever weapons they commanded, in the event the invaders should breach the first gate.

_Tumuli_ was right, I thought. As in tumult. I’d started up the slope overcome by the idea of the continuity of human history in this place, but now I was receiving a definite message about mayhem, invasion, serious business, blood. The ridge enclosed, to the south—the side I was beginning to know a little—a gentle, peaceful-seeming countryside, its several compact villages and two towns, its river, its low road and its high road, and then the quiet curve of Lyme Bay, all the way to Portland Bill. But England’s green and pleasant land stopped somewhere short of the violent crest of this ridge, it seemed.

I prowled around for a while, then found a flat rock out of the wind. I lay down on it and closed my eyes. In that sheltered warmth, with the wind above me, I was conscious of my breath, of my life, right then. A deep stillness overcame me. I felt as if I were floating, pleasantly drifting, propelled and supported by the current of my own breathing. And I remember thinking sleepily that the earth around that place must be all full of bones.

_Full of bones. Bones of old breathers._ I think I fell asleep. But then I woke and stood, and it seemed to me that I could see the life going on below me, at that very moment, in the village I was coming to know. The men in their checked wool jackets and caps pedaled home from the fields for dinner. The district nurse careened around the curves in her old blue Anglia. Mr. Cobb turned the sign in the window and tuned in “The World at Noon.”

I saw that everyone down there, living and breathing at that moment, was borne along on the deeper current of human time. _History is a river of breath_, I told myself. I could practically see it flowing.

I saw the coastguard cottage where I was living, a patch of yellow at the very edge of Lyme Bay. A blue tractor far down in a field turned the rich black soil for the winter planting.

But I was still under a kind of spell—I seemed to be seeing with the eyes of someone who had been leaning out over that ledge through weathers and wars for a hundred centuries, watching as the world down there filled up with human designs. People passed on old tracks
through the forest, and then the forest drew back. Smoke rose from mud hovels, then from stone farmhouses. Villages formed, went up in flames, formed again. The Romans ascended this ridge, took the fort in an hour, held it for a century, then were overrun themselves. Saxon farmers carved terraces into the hills for planting, the monks brought stone blocks in ox carts up Chapel Hill to build St. Catherine’s Chapel. Its light shone out to sea, to guide the ships. The monastery in the valley was laid waste, and cottages rose, built from the rubble—gargoyles, carved Norman lintels, fragments of British saints incorporated haphazardly into the masonry. Things changed—but not beyond recognition. The people who had built this fort could come back and know where they were. I saw the long desperate hungry greedy fight for land, and for power. Settlement, destruction, taking, taking back. And yet, though much was lost, something always survived to go on, pretty much the way it had before. The black and white cattle grazed on for centuries, the boats went out to sea, the fields were opened to receive the seed, the sheep were shorn. Nothing was wholly lost, nothing entirely erased, nothing entirely forgotten. In the history of this place, things just accumulated, the place held its whole history, layer on layer. Bloodline braided with bloodline, through unbroken generations, and reached backward. A place could endure and not lose what had gone before as though it had never been. It was quite a revelation, for a girl from Florida.

Looking down from that fort, I understood for the first time not only that I came from a country where the generations had been broken, but that that condition was the place’s main fact, one nobody seemed to notice. I understood that something of importance had been lost. From almost any vantage point in America, if I looked down as I was looking down from that fort, I would have seen four or two or one hundred years of my ancestors’ habitation of America and behind that a dim shape, or none at all. An erasure.

I am looking out now, as I write these words in Kentucky, on such a view. I see fence rails, maple woods dropping to a little run, a facing slope of cedar trees, the great ash tree, thick with incipient bloom, a distant black barn, a herd of Charolais steers strung out along a line of hay.

Five years (yes, and five more addresses) after I stood within the
walls of that Iron Age fort in England, I came to rest, at last, in the ten-
ant house of a ridgy, beautiful farm in north central Kentucky belong-
ing to my friends Susan and Dick Richards. I came to it late and more
or less by accident—it might have been anywhere at all. But I’ve been
here now getting on toward thirty-five years. I would venture to say
this place is my home. It has my life.

History here, what I have of it, begins really on the other side of
the facing gentle hill, in a pretty hollow (I can’t see it from here, but
it’s often in my thoughts) where a one-room house slowly leans and
disintegrates, clumps of layered wallpaper still clinging to the boards.
I don’t know what happened to the people who lived in this house, but
they left this trace of their having been here. When it’s gone, which
may be soon (it’s leaning more each year), a line of old-fashioned
daffodils will remain, a rock-lined spring. I can imagine their lives—
what they laughed at, how they danced, what they ate and how they
cooked it. My life is continuous with that past. It probably goes back
a hundred and fifty years. Mrs. Dunn, when she was alive, told me
that they were a family with three girls about her own age. “They kept
that little old cabin so nice you’d think it was the finest place in the
county,” she told me. If I dug down far enough in the deed books (the
dead books, I almost wrote), I could learn their names, perhaps.

But there are other names I can never learn, names not only of
particular men and women, but of families, whole tribes and nations,
lost forever.

I walk along the tractor-wide paths that Dick has mown through
all the woods and beside the streams and along the crests of the hills
of this farm, and sometimes I look down at the path, remembering that
morning in Dorset. And who was the first one here, I want to know.

But to ask that question on this continent is to enter the struck-
dumb silence at the heart of America, to enter not history but mystery.
When I follow the path it only goes back a little way before it meets
the great interruption, the closed door in the American imagination,
where the deep, archetypal, sacred memory of the life that this land
sustained over thousands of years is—not.

Once in a while, out of the great silence that is our national myth,
if we have one, a word or two, almost decipherable, almost breaks
through, trying to say what happened.
No one reading this—unless you happen to claim a little Indian blood—goes back, in America, much more than 300 years. Regardless of how we got here, we are almost all latecomers. Immigrants. Well, there are latecomers everywhere; that’s how the world got populated. What makes our situation peculiar is that, before we arrived, a full, complex history of civilization was on this land for somewhere between 12,000 and 30,000 years. It has all but vanished. It does not touch our lives at any point, and we are scarcely aware that it doesn’t. Sometimes I suffer a spasm of wishful thinking, when it seems to me that a different American history was almost within our grasp, that with one or two lucky breaks, one or two more fair, open-spirited leaders (for there were a few, I have been glad to learn), America might have been a far different country. We Europeans might have absorbed the earlier civilization, let ourselves learn something from it.

But no. The ruthlessness of the European taking of this continent, the powerlessness of the native American to stop it, were perhaps already inevitable five thousand years earlier, at that hill fort in Dorset. The people who sheltered there were already the product of a history and body of experience quite different from that of their American contemporaries. We know where the Trail of Tears ended. But where did it begin?

We *homo sapiens* all started out, it now seems clear, in Africa, about 200,000 years ago. As our warm first country became more populated, we tended to find new places to survive by hunting and gathering. But our outward migration was confined to other tropical places until the invention of fire allowed us to survive in the temperate zones of Europe and Asia. Over tens of thousands of years, we filled up the land we could get to on foot. Some of us eventually crossed the land bridge that connected Siberia to Alaska, but Alaska was the true end of that particular road. The narrow coast of tundra was blocked to the south by a massive ice sheet that extended all the way to the Great Plains, to the north by a polar sea. Sometime around thirteen thousand years ago, the sea broke through the land bridge, forming what we now call the Bering Strait, and the Old World was separated from the New.

Those who happened to have been hunting on the New World side were stranded, trapped for the next thousand years or so. But eventu-
ally, the ice sheet began to melt, and a narrow causeway opened up, to all that lay south of that polar coast. Imagine what it must have meant to them, a people living so long in frozen tundra that the idea of green, of warmth, must have disappeared even from their dreams, now released—once through the icy corridor—into unending forests where no human had ever been before. Only animals. There was enough of everything for everybody. During that journey (it took them at least a thousand more years to reach Kentucky) into ever more hospitable, fruitful, easier, sunnier climates, the earth must have seemed miraculous to them. And maybe familiar—the mother they’d lost so many cold ages before that they thought they didn’t remember her.

During this same time, necessity had become Europe’s mother. We spent our time fending off, pushing or being pushed, experiencing ever greater population pressures, fiercer competition for territory and game. Once we had iron, we moved up rapidly through the technologies, inventing this and that. We divorced ourselves from nature. We had to. Our survival depended upon controlling nature. Our myth was of the expulsion from the Garden. Once we were assured that the earth was not flat, once land had been found across the great seas, some of us crossed the water, because there was not enough to go around where we were. Eventually, we confronted Eden, but it didn’t look like Eden to us. Our idea of Eden by then was of tamed wilderness, under our competent control. We arrived in Eden with all our puritan virtues at the ready. And all our inventions.

So a highly technological society met a Stone Age culture. A people who dreamt of paradise when they died met a people who thought that paradise was where they already were. A civilization based on land ownership, on wealth, on military prowess, met a civilization where—as one Indian chief explained—it would have been as strange to think of owning the sky as to think of owning the land. The first response of indigenous people in New England and Virginia to white settlers was singularly without defense. Welcoming, in fact. There was enough for everyone, until it became clear that there would be enough for everybody but them.

The land became real estate. Daniel Boone was a surveyor. So was my great-great-grandfather. What they were doing was turning the wilderness into property, parceling it out. Many European immi-
grants came asking simply for enough of it to make a small farm that they and their families could work. But some were interested in labor-intensive crops that required huge tracts and free labor. They returned to the mother country of us all and ripped people away from the oldest continuous culture on earth to make our Eden for us, to be fruitful and multiply and increase our capital holdings. All we required the Indians to do for us, on the other hand, was to quit reminding us. Disappear.

So the Indians were history.

No, they were prehistory. Non-history. We killed a lot of them, either directly or by infecting them with diseases against which they had no defenses, and sent most of the survivors out of our sight. They were obstructions in the path of Manifest Destiny. We had the guns and the whiskey. We had the technology and the deeply engrained will to own. There was never any real contest.

They were easy to erase. For all the time they’d been here, they had made little mark on the land—they believed, most of them, in making no mark—just the temple mounds and the burial mounds, a few great centers, now in ruins, the cliff dwellings, the caves, some petroglyphs and sculptures and totem poles, some stone tools. They took what they needed, no more. They took what was offered. What offered itself. Mostly, they had no written language. Just stories. Just memories, handed down, and we killed many of the rememberers. Now memory is just shards—gourd bowls, spoons made of tortoise shells, killed pots, skeletons flexed or laid out straight in their shallow pit graves, shell necklaces, projectile points that scarcely changed over thousands of years, tools made of stone or pottery.

We pretty much wiped out twelve thousand years. We gave ourselves a clean slate.

The clean slate was the imagination of a girl walking around Lake Howard, in central Florida, in the 1950s, connected to her world only by the slender thread of her immediate senses and associations. The lake smelled good, the orange blossoms smelled good, the morning sun shone on the lake soft and gray, the mockingbird called out ahead in its frantic way.

Long before, the early people of her own ancestry—English and Bohemian—had no doubt made their myths as all early people did.
who lived for centuries close to home, out of the unchanging world that surrounded them, out of the springs and forests and caves and animals and weathers of their familiar world. “It is always possible to be oriented,” wrote Mircea Eliade,”in a world that has a sacred history, a world in which every prominent feature has a mythical event.” There was a time in her own ancestry, as in everyone’s, when the whole earth had been sacred, and all of human life a religious ceremony. But this early world began to change a little. People moved a little. And then they moved a lot. Some of them had twenty addresses in ten years.

And then there was another event of surpassing strangeness that occurred in Europe, about 1,500 years ago. This girl’s ancestors were moved to disclaim, suppress, burn at the stake, force underground whatever survived of their own mythology in favor of another, whose sacred places were foreign and faraway, with olive trees and deserts. The little town of Bethlehem, the Sea of Galilee, Golgotha would become the sacred places that held her people’s lives and imaginations, and her people would hardly a one of them ever lay eyes on these places. The ordinary, familiar world that surrounded them lost its magic, its power, its holiness, became the vale of tears, the place they were just passing through, on their way to glory.

When this girl’s ancestors confronted, upon arrival on the new continent, a people for whom everything we had suppressed was sacred, it was too late; it would have been too strange, too frightening, too foreign for us to go back to that old way of living with the earth. We were too advanced. We called the people we encountered here savages, heathens, so that it would be all right if we got them out of the way.

Still, some of the words of some of the speeches they made to white leaders are matters of record. Here are the words of a Duwanish chief of the Pacific Northwest: “Every part of this earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every clearing and humming insect is holy to the memory and experience of my people.”

I peer through a display window at the University of Kentucky’s anthropology museum at an ornate pipe of polished green stone, shaped like a crouching frog, at a mask of unidentifiable feathers. At a
pottery owl, gray, about eighteen inches high, with a perfectly round, smooth body and a glorious fantastical head, essence of owl, at once comical and austere, magical.

Who made that owl? I want to know who made it. And why. Was the maker a great artisan among the tribe? Or just someone who loved owls? That, at least—the object is full of love, familiarity, attention paid to owls. And was it a man or woman who made it? Someone in the Archaic or Woodland culture, as these periods are designated here in Kentucky—the owl is dated before 1200 AD. Was it just for fun? Or for some important occasion, a gift to some high person? Or some loved person, who loved owls? Did the owl have special significance that made it a fitting gift to bury with someone, to help that person into another life? The owl was found not far from where I live. Somewhere near Elkhorn Creek.

I study the diorama: there they are, pounding their corn in shallow bowls in front of their round thatched huts, scraping their deerskins. But where is the one who made that owl? I want to see that one. I choose that one for my own ancestor.

Forget it. That is the thing that did not happen. I have no connection to those people or to their ways of living, their long knowledge of the land I call home.

I don’t know what it was like to live in a world that stayed unchanged long enough to accumulate its mythic, holy attributes. I don’t suppose I’ll ever know. But, look, I’ve been in this one place for nearly thirty-five years. And because I’ve walked this farm most days in most weathers since I first lived here, I feel I’ve begun to accumulate something I never had before—I grieved for it, but couldn’t have named it: a rudimentary instinct, a familiarity with the weather and the light and what grows here and what lives here, a past that pertains to one place. I don’t know what passes for a mystical event these days, but this is the ridge I walked carrying the body of my dog Gus, to bury him deep in the woods beneath cedar boughs and stones. Here is the pond that dried up the summer after my dog Onion died, who loved to swim there, snapping her jaws like a crocodile. This is the bank where Sue and Anna and I found trout lilies, rue anemones, and bleeding hearts growing all mixed together, and the pile of rocks where Jim and I sat watching the fox watch us. This is the plum
tree ridge, this is the little meadow, appearing for no reason in the middle of the woods. This is the field where I walked praying, when my mother died, for a sign that her life continued somehow, that death was not the end of her, and the deer appeared and turned around and looked at me for several seconds before she sailed slowly over the fence and the woods absorbed her.

I don’t know if this is how a sacred attachment to the earth begins. It’s what I have, what living in this place in Kentucky has given me. It’s more than I had any reason to hope for.

So I suppose I’ll keep walking.

Going out into the fields along the bottom path by the creek, I meet my younger self, returning. I see that the self I was then is gone. Absorbed, each daily reality, like rain into the path, and the self I am as I walk along it today is going to slip into that well of prior walks also. Thus I meet my older self as well, my future self, the one who is going to have forgotten this one particular day when, as on a thousand others, I walked the old wagon track that goes up a wooded hill and through a gate to the high barn, following the ridge of a long field which steeply falls on the right to the creek bottom.

Sometimes I just plod along, sunk in myself, rehearsing my little dramas, not seeing, putting one foot in front of the other, getting my exercise. But sometimes I shake myself off, have no self that is not the memory of the walnut losing its leaves under the gray October sky, the yellowing walnuts in the tall grass beneath, no self that is not my expectation of the same seasons coming around, wetter or dryer, colder or hotter, earlier or later, forever, in this one place. I’ve been here long enough to know what to expect, as each season gives its signs.

Knowing what to expect, I expect, naturally, my death. My death meets me. It nods and says hello to me. I say hello back. It remarks, in its matter-of-fact way, that the body I am so attached to, the body that moves so substantially through the air today, as though it had a form that held it apart from all other things, will be dust on these fields. I know how the dust of my body will fly backwards on the crest of the wind, then settle and disappear and become a part of everything else, because I’ve studied the wood ashes I scatter from the bucket as I’m walking in winter. I know about disappearance. I look at my living dog, my alert golden dog, running ahead of me after the squirrel he
never catches, or on the perfect point he inherited from some pure ancestor. I’ve seen him leaping through the tall grass of his eventual cemetery. He doesn’t seem to care; no more do I.

The path I walk is the path of least resistance. It must have been the way through forever. Perhaps a mastodon walked along here once. I imagine a regular parade: turtle, turkey, skunk, gray fox, red fox, wolf. Possum, squirrel, beaver, raccoon, white-tailed deer. Mammoth, elk, bison. Sometimes I feel this place in Kentucky thick with the lives of what used to be here. Herds of buffalo, wood pigeons in such numbers once that they blackened the sun. The path ran through wild cherry trees six feet across, never-once-cut forests of oak and hickory, locust and poplar, grandparents of the trees that are here today. Chestnut, elm, and ash, gone now, or going. One day, some human walked here, moving silently, swiftly, as someone told me when I was a child the Indians walked, covering great distances, putting the toe down first then the heel, moving along the old first paths, close to home, home passing between the sole of the foot and the earth. And nothing was abstract to this walker.

Then he was gone, and his children were gone and their children’s children were never born. This is an American place, and it is dense with absence.

I’m on the path instead of him. This is what happened, in America.

When it hears me knocking around on the porch of the falling-down cabin, the owl fumbles up out of the old stone chimney. I step back, startled, as it flaps across and settles on a dead locust limb, high up, to smooth itself out. It looks at me once, blinks. For the moment of my seeing, the cedar trees on the hillside hold still, like the last breaths of many old breathers. The silence is clean. It lifts up free, for one moment, of history. It is just the ancient silence, the silence that was always here. It doesn’t separate us. It connects us. It wraps around us—the owl, the old owl-lover, and me.

Then the owl turns its head, dismissing me, and negligently, in its own good time, it lifts off, sails away.
Clint Morehead

HOUSE CALL

Hazard’s Riverside Cemetery rests in the valley directly across Highway 72 and one hundred feet below the house in which I am staying. I have a green canvas folding chair, recently bought in Louisville, and each evening I unfold the chair, position it on a worn patch of concrete, rest my back against the house, and study, occasionally distracted by cars entering and leaving the cemetery below. Two weeks I have been staying here, and the brightly colored nylon flowers propped against the gravestones have yet to fade. This cemetery, remote as it is, seems busy. Cars pull in, advance slowly down the single lane that weaves through the gravestones, so slowly it appears the cars themselves are affected by the solemnity of the place. Gently coasting down the asphalt, bowing through the soft undulations nearest the entrance and eventually disappearing, they give themselves to gravity.

It is beautiful, this cemetery, nestled in the elbow of an Eastern Kentucky mountain. Yesterday I watched two women working among the gravestones. A golden retriever watched them too, resting his head on one of the concrete markers beside the road. This cemetery is an island of order in a sea of vacant, boarded-up houses and run down trailers. Separating the two is an airy chain-linked fence. Beside the fence is an abandoned auto dealership with two rusted cars, both devoured by thick vines of kudzu that extend into the fence, curl in and out of its diamond-shaped fenestrations, but mysteriously stop there.

Kudzu is everywhere. Once, I imagine, perhaps not long after an oblivious state official examined delicate seedlings and deemed the exotic oriental plant a brilliant investment, the not so innocuous plants germinated, vicious tendrils exploding through the ground, consuming underbrush, trees, and wildflowers, leaving rotten skeletons heaped under their hungry tendrils. Kudzu has killed much of the state’s native roadside flora. But they haven’t touched this cemetery.

Along its backside beyond the fence, just before the terrain begins to rise, runs a railroad track upon which I have little doubt, moves hundreds, perhaps thousands of tons of coal each day. This coal has been dug from one or more of the local strip mines that are system-
atically disassembling these mountains, leaving each of their tops a flat and empty brown field. If you follow Highway 72 a couple more miles north, you will see one of these mines, and your heart will sink. If you travel south, you will come to a railroad crossing that lacks descending arms and flashing lights, so you must rely on the trains themselves to warn you of their approach. It is these trains with their aggressive whistles that fill the valley all day and deep into the night, reverberating from one mountain to the next until eventually there is silence.

It is difficult to travel this region without seeing everything that is no longer there.

Today we are making home-visits. Dr. Archana Kudrimati, who is overseeing my clerkship here, is a family physician who has been working in Hazard for the past year. She was trained in India and Louisville, and while in Louisville, received special training in the field of geriatric medicine. She, Dr. Mabel Gonzalez, a family practice resident, and I met at the clinic after lunch and prepared to set out into the mountains. As we climbed into a state-owned vehicle with our white coats in hand, I was ready to experience what few doctors do in the age of the high-rise, high-tech hospitals and immediate care clinics where patients are often seen in assembly-line style. In my mind, “home visits,” as they are now called, bring up images of the county doctor appearing at the door, stethoscope hanging from his neck, black polished leather bag in hand. In our case, though, the bag is blue nylon with a University of Kentucky logo, and it contains an electronic tympanic membrane thermometer, a blood pressure cuff, and reams of required paperwork. None of us fits the Marcus Welby stereotype of a physician either, as we are two women doctors, an Indian and a Cuban, and myself, a dangerously inexperienced medical student.

Several criteria qualify someone for a home-visit. The patient must be homebound to the extent that a trip to the clinic would require so much effort that the pain experienced en route would exceed that experienced at home, or one who has needed to use the healthcare system excessively, or one whose home situation, the doctor may feel, needs to be assessed. “We get to see how comfortable the patients are
in their own homes,” said Dr. Kudrimati. “We can see whether they are safe, whether they can take care of themselves, whether their family members take care of them or neglect them.”

Unfortunately, over the years, the home-visit has become nearly extinct. An article in the *New England Journal of Medicine* states that in 1993, physicians made only about 727,000 home-visits compared to 177 million office visits made that same year. Not surprisingly, we see such low numbers because the economics of the home-visit discourage them. In the amount of time a physician can see one patient at home, she can see at least five in the office. Also important diagnostic tests cannot be performed as efficiently outside a clinical setting. As a result, the purpose of the home-visit must be qualitative. It is an opportunity for the physician to become fully involved in the patient’s care. In the clinic it is often a nurse who takes a patient’s temperature and blood pressure, washes out the ears if they need cleaning, draws blood, cleans and dresses wounds, and ensures that the patient is comfortable. In the home-visit, these rudimentary tasks are performed by the physician, an intimacy with the patient not possible in an office.

Once we had latched our seatbelts and put the car into motion, our challenge was finding the house. We were on our way to see a woman—Marie, I’ll call her—who had been recently diagnosed with breast cancer. Before we left the clinic, Dr. Gonzalez had entered Marie’s address into Map Quest, hoping to get a concise set of directions. This computer program had obviously never construed a town like Hazard. For those of us accustomed to the clean geometrical grids that most cities are built upon, Hazard holds some surprises. Two-lane highways cut through the corrugated terrain like ribbons pulled tightly around the quilts that are the mountains. Hundreds of side-roads are wrinkles radiating outward, spread randomly in any direction, ending abruptly, twisting and rising and dropping at angles and grades that I never imagined a car could handle.

Valleys can be as narrow as a single creek, barely allowing room for a road. Cove-like indentations known locally as “hollers” press into the mountains, allowing space for a house or two, a barn, and perhaps a small field before constricting and ending suddenly and blindly in an uninhabitable thick-treed slope. After you’ve spent a few days
in Hazard, you realize that a key element to survival lies in one’s keen alertness to the land’s topography. Each mountain has its own road, or series of roads, which taken together, allow someone completely unfamiliar with the region, as I am, to start driving in one direction and to carefully find a way back simply by keeping the mountain close at one’s side.

We soon learned that the best, most reliable directions come from the locals themselves. A middle-aged woman we spotted leaning against a telephone pole in front of a McDonald’s directed us across a bridge into town, then across another bridge onto the bypass, KY-15, and then left onto James Street. We would miss this street twice, then Dr. Kudrimati would finally catch it, hidden in some trees, the street sign partially obscured by thick leaves.

The street itself sloped rudely down toward the river, passing one house and several trailers. The trailers were old and rusted, though I could tell people lived in them as potted plants and religious objects were propped against cinderblock foundations, and jump ropes and dusty toys were strewn atop the gravel. The houses had no numbers. As we continued, the pavement turned to gravel, and the gravel to dirt, and eventually, what remained of the road seemed to dead-end against an elevated railroad track. It was time again to ask someone, but we found no one in sight, and the three of us were hesitant to knock on doors. Dr. Gonzalez and I stepped out of the car. Almost magically, a teenager in a black t-shirt and jeans, hands in his pockets, appeared, kicking rocks down the railroad track. We called to him, asked if he knew where Marie lived, and he nodded, pointed toward the other side of the track, and said, “Come up here and I’ll show you.”

Dr. Kudrimati parked the car, gathered the blue bag, and joined us. The three of us, now white-coated, climbed up a moderate slope of loose rocks to the tracks. To the left a tunnel into the mountain came into view, and to the right, a trestle crossing the river. Everything that lay in front of us had no access by car, ambulance, or fire truck. No quick, easy escape. I remembered Dr. Gonzalez mentioning how Marie’s husband had said he had to carry her to their car. Now I understood.

Climbing over the black tar of the railroad ties, I was careful not
to smudge my dress shoes. What I needed were my hiking boots and blue jeans. A linear expanse of trailers similar to those I had seen earlier and houses, non-immune to time and weather, spread out below me. A muddy trail starting on the other side of the railroad track ran narrowly between a row of trailers and the river, brown and swollen from intense rains that had lasted all of yesterday and through the night. This is true poverty, I thought, and for the first time since I’d come to Hazard, I was outside, no longer protected by the thick windows of a car or the reassuring disconnect of a television screen. Perched above it all, I wondered who could live in such conditions. “Look down there,” the boy said, pointing ahead. “See ‘at trailer on the other side’a dat ol’ nasty tore-up house. That’s hers.” We thanked him and moved on.

Dr. Kudrimati quickly explained to me Marie’s medical history so I would be prepared by the time I met her. She was a sixty-seven-year-old white female with no past medical history because she had never seen a doctor. She had gone to the hospital because she was having trouble walking and was experiencing a severe cough. It turned out that she had an advanced stage of invasive ductal breast cancer that had already metastasized to her bones, and in particular, to her vertebrae, making it extremely painful for her to move around. The cancer had also caused a pleural effusion, fluid inside the thin membrane that lines the lungs, giving her respiratory problems. “When I saw her breast, I almost died,” said Dr. Gonzalez. “The cancer had completely torn apart her breast, inside and out. It was awful.”

When a doctor begins a home-visit, she starts collecting information even before she sees the patient. Certain questions pass through her mind. Is the home safe? Does anything look like it could cause a fall? Is it sanitary?

Marie lived in a house, not a trailer. A narrow porch with a low, sagging roof surrounded it. The paint that remained on the wood was flaking, and shingles that had dislodged from the roof lay on the ground, half covered by mud. Mops and brooms leaned against the house, as did some old wooden chairs, buckets, and sticks. The swollen North Fork charged heedlessly west, only about ten feet from the house and five feet below its bank. Dr. Kudrimati and I looked at each
other, and by the concerned expression on her face, I could tell what she was thinking. We both wondered how often it flooded.

We climbed the two steps to the porch, and I detected the unmistakable smell of urine. A small dog crept through the opened front door to inspect us. The ceilings of the porch and the living room were slightly higher than my head, and forced me to position my neck to one side in order to make it through the doorway without hitting the frame. The dog, who had planted himself conspicuously at the base of the frame, watched as each of us maneuvered around him. A woman sitting on the couch stood up and introduced herself to us as Marie’s niece. Marie was in the back and would be out soon. We told her niece we would wait outside.

Marie’s hair was the first thing I noticed as she stepped through the door. Unlike many cancer patients, she had a full head, revealing almost every shade of gray, some strands pale, others near-white, others charcoal, intermingling. This lovely hair cascaded down like water past Marie’s shoulders and curled up at the edges. She didn’t look sick to me, though I knew her healthy appearance belied the reality. Dr. Gonzalez had told me that Marie’s cancer was far too advanced for chemotherapy to benefit her. As a matter of fact, it would just make her more sick. So they had decided to treat her pain instead, which we learned upon asking, registered a 2 on the pain scale that day.

Dr. Gonzalez took Marie’s blood pressure and temperature with the instruments from the blue bag. For the pulse and respiratory rate, she placed a finger from one hand on Marie’s wrist and the other hand on her shoulder, first counting beats, then counting breaths, reporting them to me as I jotted them clumsily on a folded slip of paper. Dr. Kudrimati noted that her pulse and blood pressure were higher than they had been before. She later told us she thought Marie had been anxious about us seeing her house in disarray. Dr. Gonzalez wrote prescriptions for pain medications. Dr. Kudrimati, placing her left hand on Marie’s right shoulder, asked her if she felt comfortable and if there was anything else she wanted us to do for her. Marie slipped her a brief smile, reassuring Dr. Kudrimati that she need not worry. It was here that I understood, perhaps for the first time, the essence of a doctor.
Over the past couple years, I have occasionally wondered if there’s any difference between the terms physician and doctor. In this case, I think there is. Physician, to me, implies mechanism, industry, a machine for diagnosis—someone who has the credentials, who can diagnose an illness, treat it, stop, and move on. Physician derives from the Ancient Greek noun, physis, meaning “nature,” and would come to be used to describe a practitioner of physic, the science of treatment with drugs and medications. The physician’s goal, perhaps, is to treat and cure an individual. An individual, though often used to describe a person, can be anything consuming a fixed amount of space in the universe all the way down to the mind-numbingly infinitesimal atoms, quarks, and strings. The word individual lacks a spiritual dimension, and therefore, has a degree of detachment from what is truly human.

Physician, then, might not be the right word to describe a being who transcends the physical boundaries of nature. There are some instances when the physician is exemplary, showing grace and compassion, exhibiting a type of loving concern about the patient—a fellow person—to the extent that she, the physician, truly suffers along with the patient. Here, the physician dissolves and what we see is the apotheosis of doctor.

Doctor derives from the Latin verb, docere, which means “to teach.” The earliest use of the word, doctor, in written English, bears a religious connotation, meaning “Church father,” which comes from the Latin noun, spelled the same as it is in English, meaning “religious teacher.” Its stem comes from doct-, meaning “to make to appear right,” or more clearly, “to teach.” It was not until later, in the sixteenth century, that the word came to represent a medical professional. Today, our word doctor, and the role that such a person has, goes deeper than the physical. It connotes a spiritual intimacy between a healer and a patient. This type of intimacy can exist only between two people, not between two rocks or between a squirrel and a tree, or a person and a cell-phone. This intimacy is reserved only for people. A doctor knows the illness, has seen it in every light, understands its variability, all the things that were never taught in school. A doctor also understands the patient. She will sit down with the patient and listen, regardless of how long it takes. She will travel miles out of her way to make a single house call, to check in and say hello, know-
ing well that her presence alone may be therapy enough. Healing must occur on two levels: the physical and the spiritual; the doctor knows this and must consider both. Here, doctor deals with the person rather than an individual.

I have here in my hands a copy of the U.S. Census Bureau’s report for Hazard, Kentucky, from the year 2000. According to its data, somewhere upon the seven square miles of land that bear this town, live 4,806 people. Of those, 90.26 percent are white, 6.58 percent are African American, 2.06 percent are Asian, 0.46 percent are Hispanic and 0.8 percent identify themselves as multiracial. Slightly less than twenty-two percent are under the age of eighteen, while 17.7 percent are over the age of sixty-five. The average age of Hazard’s residents is thirty-nine years. For every one hundred females there are 85.6 males. Hazard has 1,946 “households” which contain 1,266 families: 30.2 percent contain children who are under the age of eighteen while 13.7 percent contain at least one person who is over the age of sixty-five. Forty-three percent contain married couples, 18.3 percent contain females with no husband present, 34.9 percent contain “non-families.”

Those places that are distant from our homes, where the residents do not share our own blood and where we have never walked against the motion of the rivers nor felt the air against the hairs on our skin, require more of us than may be possible. Several of Hazard’s residents told me they could not imagine themselves leaving the mountains for the city. The opposite, to my surprise, would prove true for me. Despite the beauty of the mountains and the kindness of the people, after a few weeks, I began to feel the mountains closing in, blocking the sun, darkening the sky, as if they were rejecting me. Two weeks into my stay, late in the night, I found myself startled awake, holding my breath, my heart pounding. In my dream, I lay in a bathtub as the water turned to dirt—from clear to murky yellow to brown and then black—the earth pouring in, carrying trees and mountains and coal, and before I could move, they had devoured me and had left me suffocating.

Just living, I think, we become the air we breathe. In the fleeting seconds before birth, our lungs are perfectly clear, pure, bathed in the warm amniotic fluid of our mothers. Then, as we cough into life,
the earth enters us. With each breath, tiny particles of dust from our world trap themselves deep within our airways, collect and coalesce, becoming millions of sandy dots that speckle the surfaces of our aging lungs. So we, decades from now, old as our grandparents, having refused to take in any more, will have been branded internally by the content of the air in which we’ve spent the better part of our lives. It is as if we sprout our own roots, sink our feet deep into the ground, become a permanent part of the place, as the place becomes a permanent part of us.

A native of Louisville, the dirt attached to my lungs has been kicked up by traffic and emissions from power plants. The lungs of Hazard’s residents are filled with the dust of coal mines and perhaps the minute shavings from old-growth hemlocks. Ironically, I never wanted to separate myself from the land. I spent years of my youth running around the woods behind my parents’ house in an attempt to reject the city and embrace its antithesis by surrounding myself in nature. But after time away, I needed movement and activity. I needed parks and safe roads to exercise. I needed to reintegrate into the realm of those I knew. Perhaps it is that our brains are set up differently, though not in the sense of function or capacity. The rough topography doesn’t bother these Kentuckians as it does me. They revel in the slow passage of time and are content with their lives as they are: calm and unchanging. Louisville, many of them told me, is too big, too loud, too fast. This they cannot tolerate. Distances in Hazard are shorter, families are bigger, but resources are scarcer.

I never thought I had any business going to Eastern Kentucky. I used to have some family in the region whom we would visit. But then, it was a quick drop in, a drive to some state parks, and a hasty return. I never saw enough or spent enough time there to understand it. The same may be true for many of us. We’ve heard fractured anecdotes of the deplorable conditions in which many people live and of the strip mines that are tearing apart the land, but we fail to ask questions. In fact, it is easy to ignore Eastern Kentucky, especially from the distance of Louisville. Between Louisville and Hazard lie 188.62 miles of interstate and state highways with an average travel time of 3 hours, 18 minutes, according to Map Quest. Louisville holds domain
mainly over the western and central parts of the state and the southern part of Indiana, an area that closely corresponds to the ‘viewing area’ of our local news stations and the coverage of The Courier-Journal. Eastern Kentucky, however, belongs to Lexington. In the mountains of Eastern Kentucky, Louisville is a dim star just below the unseeable horizon.

But for us to consider ourselves Kentuckians to the full degree, we must have an understanding of our entire state, those who live in it, and their needs. My time in Hazard has made it clear that Eastern Kentucky lacks many of the resources found elsewhere in the state and that that should not be tolerated. As far back as 1963 in his book Night Comes to the Cumberlands, Harry Caudill advocated help from the outside world for Kentucky’s Appalachia. He watched as his government sent millions of dollars abroad. “If the safety and peace of the American Republic require that we rescue Bolivia, Laos, Tunisia, the Congo, and Greece,” he wrote, “the same considerations must necessitate the succor of these islands of poverty in our own land.” The story remains true today. President Bush’s proposed budget for the Appalachian Regional Commission (a federal and state program established in response to Caudill’s book in 1965 to help Appalachia achieve economic autonomy) was expected to hold steady at $64.817 million in 2007. This budget includes all of Appalachia from Maine to Georgia. In 2003, by comparison, Bush proposed that $87 billion be allocated to military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The evening before I returned to Louisville, I armed myself with a camera and took a short walk along the asphalt paths of Riverside Cemetery. I planned on snapping a few shots of the decorated grave stones. Many people were in the cemetery that evening, some placing objects upon the gravestones, others picnicking and reflecting. As you walk though the cemetery and read the names, you realize there must be little movement in and out of the region. Family names become so ubiquitous that they are part of the local heritage. Combs is everywhere, and Caudill appears on nearly every billboard for lawyers, dentists, and people running for political positions.

As I rounded the loop toward the backside where the graves slope downward toward the river, a middle-aged man came walking
into view holding in his right hand a milk jug that looked as if it had been trapped under the blades of a lawnmower. He asked what I was photographing. We talked for some time, and as the light grew dim, he pointed out the solar-powered crosses and angels coming to life around us, taking on the neon incandescence of billboards. I asked him what he thought of the strip mines in the area, telling him that there had been a series of articles in Louisville’s *The Courier-Journal* denouncing practices of the mining industry in an attempt to incite regulations that would help preserve Eastern Kentucky’s environment. He said that with all the trains carrying coal out of the region day and night for so many years, “you’d of thought they’d have run out of the stuff by now.” He said the land where the hospital stood had been a strip mine only a few years earlier, as was an area just outside of town that is now covered with various strip malls, gas stations, and a Super Wal-Mart that claims to be the largest in Kentucky.

“The truth is,” he said, “the mining is all we’ve ever known, and without it, there wouldn’t be a Hazard at all.” He passed the jug between his hands. I could tell he was concerned about the future of his town.

Caudill knew that the plight that Appalachians find themselves in is not their doing, but born of an unkind history, of the harsh land and the crooked mining companies, of the politicians who turned their backs. In response to his book, people started noticing Appalachia and acknowledged that the region needed aid. Senator Robert F. Kennedy, in 1968, toured the region four years after President Lyndon Johnson declared his War on Poverty. This brought national exposure and some recognition of the problems the region faced. In 1999, President Clinton made Hazard his first stop on a nationwide poverty tour. He promised tax incentives and loan guarantees to lure businesses. And recently, presidential candidate John Edwards followed in Kennedy’s footsteps, bringing images of Appalachia, once again, to the front pages of the nation’s newspapers. Over the years, the region has improved slightly, but it remains in need. Health issues that the Appalachian Regional Commission and the Centers for Disease Control say still need to be addressed include access to quality health services, the prevention and treatment of diabetes and heart disease, perinatal care, programs to end substance abuse and tobacco use, and proper
education on cancer prevention and screening.

One day in the rural medicine clinic in Hazard, I sorted through the medical chart of a seventy-eight year-old patient. I needed both hands to carry it. Type 2 diabetes. Emphysema. Chronic back pain. Coronary artery disease. Dyslipidemia. Congestive heart failure. Chronic kidney disease. The list continued. Although the same list may be seen anywhere in America, one will come across it more frequently in Appalachia. Nearly 70 percent of the residents of Jefferson County, Kentucky, the Louisville metropolitan area, for example, are overweight or obese, well higher than the national average. The rate in Perry County is higher yet, at 76 percent. Up to 17 percent of the population of all Eastern Kentucky counties has type 2 diabetes, a devastating sequel of obesity, nearly twice as high as that found in the more urban portions of the state.

I do not know how to fix these problems. The University of Louisville sends students to rural Kentucky to educate them about the health needs of the state’s citizens, and, as a result of this program, I feel I am more aware of our state’s needs than before I went. As I watch my classmates making plans to volunteer handiwork and medical assistance to the Third World countries of Central America, Asia, and Africa, I realize now that sometimes we must turn our attention inward and not forget our own neighbors. What I learned during my brief stay in Hazard is that the residents of Eastern Kentucky carry a profound love for their towns, their families, the mountains, the hollers, and the valleys. I found this spirit in people holding tightly to the memories of the deceased. I also found this spirit in a courageous woman who had endured more adversity than I can possibly imagine. And the doctors who cared for her. I believe I found myself in Hazard to learn these things. May this knowledge make me a better Kentuckian and a doctor worthy of the word.
Felicity’s Family Tree

Characters
Felicity Green: A woman in her 80s, arthritic, nostalgic, very sure of herself
Myra Fields: A female social worker, any age, lives in the present, equally sure of herself

Time: The present

Place: The front room of a deteriorating apartment in a medium-sized town.

AT RISE: Felicity is in a nightgown and slippers. Seated before a coffee table, she is studying a photograph she’s removed from a shoe box and getting ready to place it in a scrapbook. She continues to find photographs in the box and place them into the scrapbook as she talks. She is not addressing the audience. She speaks to herself and the people in her photographs.

FELICITY: Uncle, let’s see ... Uncle Marion. That’s who you are! And I’ve got a page reserved for you right here. You’re the one who married...

Ah, yes, Charity! Here she is. So much younger than you, she was, because you were a widower. Yes—Great Uncle Marion and Great Aunt Charity Springer. You belong on the same page of the scrapbook. ... There!

Sometimes, I think this is too much work for an old lady like me, but then I remember I’m the only one who can do this—and someone should. Someone must!
I believe you were born in 1865, right at the end of the Civil War, weren’t you, Marion? And died in ... was in 1940? No—1943, right in the middle of another war.

I know I saw your son in here—in his Navy uniform, he was. I’ll find him for you. My second cousin Joe Springer. You can’t hide from us, Joe. Found you! ... My, you’re handsome. I wonder if I should put you with William and Harold over here on my Soldiers’ Wall. Would you like that, Joe?

*(FELICITY rises to go look at a group of photos of soldiers on a wall.)*

Or maybe I should find an attractive young woman for you …

*(FELICITY returns to her seat.)*

No, you died young; you should be with your parents. Yes, there you go, Joe with Marian and Charity.

If I knew when I was going to die, I’d try to make it come out even. I’d like to put the very last photo in and then—

*(The phone rings.)*

FELICITY (cont.): Maybe that’s David or Kendra.

Hello. ... Oh, Miss Fields. I thought it might be one of my children. ... You always want to see me. ...Now? ...What about next week? Any day but Tuesday. David may be in town on Tuesday. He’s going to take me to lunch at Vincenzo’s, can you believe it? ...Yes, and he said he’d take me shopping for a new dress to wear. ...What?...

Fine, come now. You always do what you want anyway…You’re parked right outside? Cell phones will be the death of civilization.

*(FELICITY returns to her chair and photographs.)*
MYRA (O.S.): (Knocking) Hello, Felicity! Hello! I’m here!
FELICITY: (Reluctantly leaves her work and opens the door) Such a surprise.
MYRA: May I come in?
FELICITY: You may come in, but if the phone rings, you’ll have to excuse me. David and Kendra are both likely to call on a Saturday. Say, Miss Fields, why are you out on a Saturday?
MYRA: Please call me Myra. You know I prefer it.
FELICITY: First names for family—speaking of which, look at this picture of my cousin Charlotte, will you? A handsome woman, she was. That’s a parasol in her hand.
MYRA: We need to talk.
FELICITY: I’m right in the middle of the Springer branch.
MYRA: This can’t wait!
FELICITY: Not that the branch is all that big ... Joe died at sea and his father didn’t last much longer. My Great Aunt Charity—she was much younger than Uncle Marion and remarried quickly—too quickly, some said. Aunt Charity’s second husband was a man she met at the polls—that’s why she kept this “I Like Ike” button in her jewelry box. Do you think you’ll ever slip up and tell me about your family, Miss Fields?
MYRA: I’m here about you, Felicity.
FELICITY: Families are the most interesting thing in the world.
MYRA: I’m on a tight schedule, so we better—
FELICITY: I’ve always assumed you have no husband or children, but, of course, you have parents—everyone does—even if they were horrible people who starved you and beat you—
MYRA: That’s a stupid thing to say—and I’ll have to put it in your case file.
FELICITY: So your parents weren’t cruel then. That’s good. ... Don’t you love this wide-brimmed hat?
MYRA: Put down that picture!
FELICITY: You really should write your memories, you know. Even if you have no children, there’s a nephew or a niece or a cousin who will appreciate it. I’d be glad to give you some pointers if you’d—
MYRA: Stop it!
FELICITY: Stop trying to get you to care about your family?
MYRA: I shouldn’t have yelled. I’m sorry. You always—
FELICITY: It’s hard to get these little black corners exactly where you want them. They have pre-glued ones now, but I’m used to the kind you lick. Some people recommend acid-free plastic for photogra—
MYRA: I came for a reason, Felicity.
FELICITY: There’s a reason for everything, I always say.
MYRA: This is impossible!
FELICITY: No, it’s easy. Look at Tillie Morton’s page. I put a photo in one corner, the obituary in another, and then I wrote a remembrance right on the same page. ... Don’t you love it?
MYRA: No.
FELICITY: I wrote how much I liked her lemon pudding, see? She always had us for Thanksgiving—until Keith stuck her in that nursing home. Aunt Tillie served lemon pudding for dessert. You probably have pumpkin pie for Thanksgiving dessert, don’t you, Miss Fields? ... Well, don’t you?
MYRA: Yes, Felicity, I do.
FELICITY: And that’s my point. No doubt there’s a special recipe or something unusual about your Thanksgiving. That’s what makes family family—more than blood.
MYRA: I’ve got an ambulance outside.
FELICITY: Feel free to leave if you’re in a hurry. I’m happy here with the Springer’s, and I’m expecting Kendra and David to call. Then there’s the Johnson branch to get to.

(Phone rings.)

FELICITY (cont.): What’d I tell you? ... Hello! ... Oh. (FELICITY hands the phone to MYRA) It’s for you. Who knows you’re here?
MYRA: Thank you. Excuse me for a minute.
FELICITY: I’ll just look out the window to see this ambulance of yours.
MYRA: I thought we agreed on 15 minutes. It’s barely been five. ... I need transportation, Steve. ... It won’t take long. ... Right.
FELICITY: In my day, single women needed a chaperone when they
rode in a car with a man.

MYRA: Men plural. Steve Lyons and George Ernst. And it’s 2011, in case you haven’t noticed…

FELICITY: George Ernst? My great-grandfather was named Ernest George. His picture is in here somewhere. Wait. ... There he is! Grandfather George grew up in Mississippi—in Oxford. Not during Faulkner’s time, but he was a learned man. A school teacher, and he played the clarinet. There’s a funny story about that clari—

MYRA: No more family stories, Felicity! *(MYRA knocks the tray, the scrapbook, and box of photographs to the floor.)*

FELICITY: Oh, my! *(FELICITY picks up items during the next several speeches)* Everyone—how do you say it?—“loses their cool,” sometimes, but you could apologize. You could help me pick up the photographs you knocked off the table. I don’t bend so well.

MYRA: Steve and George have a strait jacket with your name on it.

FELICITY: That’s not funny.

MYRA: Not a strait jacket literally.

FELICITY: As an old fashioned hostess, I’m going to ignore your tasteless joke and try to bring the conversation back to something decent. Perhaps the reason you’re not married is that you don’t know how to act in social situations. All you need to be conversational is something you care about: It doesn’t have to be family. It could be, I don’t know, fishing or baking bread or studying the stars. ... I don’t think you have a passion, Miss Fields, though based on your joke, maybe your family played tricks on April Fool’s Day. A little salt in the sugar bowl maybe?

MYRA: They’re going to knock on the door in .... *(consulting her watch)* exactly seven minutes. I hope you’ll go quietly.

FELICITY: I can’t leave.

MYRA: Mr. Boyle saw you rooting through his trash this morning—and in every other trash can between Oak and Hill.

FELICITY: I was looking for something.

MYRA: Or someone.

FELICITY: Marion Springer—and I was successful, so what business is it of Mr. Boyle’s? Or yours?

MYRA: You’ve been darting in traffic.

FELICITY: I haven’t “darted” in decades.
MYRA: It’s not appropriate to root through other people’s trash in your nightgown! It’s dangerous!
FELICITY: The rooting or the nightgown?
MYRA: You’re impossible!
FELICITY: I forgot it was Trash Day. I didn’t have time to dress.
MYRA: You asked a bus driver for a lift.
FELICITY: I was trying to beat the garbage men to the O’Connor’s trash.
MYRA: Your neighbor saw you, the bus driver saw you, your landlord saw you, and I have affidavits from all three of them.
FELICITY: Such a busy bee, you are.
MYRA: I’ve filled out a petition, but I don’t have to file it.
FELICITY: It’s Saturday, Miss Fields. You can’t file it.
MYRA: Emergency petitions can be filed every day of the week, every hour of the day.
FELICITY: 24/7?
MYRA: It’s your lucid moments that make this so difficult.
FELICITY: I have to finish the scrapbook. For Kendra and David.
MYRA: You have no children, Felicity.
FELICITY: I gave birth at St. Joseph’s on Eastern Parkway. It’s not there anymore, but they had a maternity ward, and that’s where I gave birth.
MYRA: You’ve never given birth. You’ve never been married.
FELICITY: My late husband and I—we adopted the children in Canada, but we always told them they were born at St. Joe’s.
MYRA: Adult Protective Services has options for people who are at risk. Will you cooperate, or do we have to talk to a judge?
FELICITY: You need a Mental Health Day, Miss Fields.
MYRA: The court will appoint an attorney for you.
FELICITY: My brother in Ohio is an attorney. I wonder if he can practice here.
MYRA: We have a special shelter. We’ll take a history, talk with you, run some tests, and then we’ll see what the best option is.
FELICITY: My family wouldn’t approve.
MYRA: You were an only child ... severely abused as an infant, in foster care by the age of four and never adopted. Parental rights were terminated and—
FELICITY: You have no right!
MYRA: You have no family!
FELICITY: I rescued them—*(FELICITY frantically begins gathering photos)* Uncle Tom, Aunt Isabel, my cousin Roger, Marion, Charity, Joe, all of them — I rescued them from trash cans and yard sales — their own families didn’t care about them. They literally got rid of them. They’re my family now. Mine, all mine! Nothing you can do will change that!

*(Knock at door)*

MYRA: Are you going to struggle or go voluntarily, Felicity?
FELICITY: *(Beat)* Voluntarily—but only if my family comes, too.
*(As lights go down, FELICITY is frantically gathering “her family.”)* Only if my family comes, too.

*(CURTAIN)*
Johnny Drago

BABY AND JENNIFER DEFY THE LAWS OF TIMESPACE AND ALL THAT THAT IMPLIES

Characters
Baby and Jennifer: newlyweds in their early 20’s.

Setting
The bedroom, morning. An exit.

At rise, BABY and JENNIFER lie in bed. He watches her sleep. After a few moments, the alarm goes off. He quickly silences it, then has an idea, then rushes out. A crash offstage.

JENNIFER: (waking) Baby? You alright?
BABY: (off) Huh?

(Another crash.)

JENNIFER: Baby, what are you doin’?
BABY: (off) What are you doin’?
JENNIFER: Sleepin’. (Another crash.) What are you doin’?
BABY: (off) Nothin’. Tinkerin’.
JENNIFER: Well, I hope you’re not breakin’ nothin’. Remember what happened to mama’s Ford Fiesta? Dang thing won’t run anymore ‘cept in reverse. And she’s plain sick of backin’ into the church parkin’ lot Sundays. (Another crash.) Baby? Baby, what are you tinkerin’ with?

(BABY enters briefly, excitedly.)

BABY: The laws of physics!

(He ducks back out.)
JENNIFER: Oh Baby, you better not. You flunked outta physics, remember?
BABY: (off) That was because Ms. Turner hated my brother and you know that.
JENNIFER: I know.
BABY: (off, struggling at something) Besides, that was different. That was all about ciphers and figures, whereas this is about ideas and connotations, nuances. A little more…almost there…easy does it…almost there! (Another loud crash, and then the sudden ringing of an alarm clock.) Eureka!
JENNIFER: Baby, what’s goin’ on in there?

(BABY enters, proudly holding the ringing clock.)

BABY: I’ve done it!
JENNIFER: Done what?
BABY: Hold on to your seat! This is gonna blow your mind to pieces! As of this moment, Jennifer Michaels, Tuesday, the third of June, at 10:34am, your husband, Baby Michaels: has stopped the flow of time!
JENNIFER: You what?
BABY: Stopped the unforgiving flow of time.
JENNIFER: You broke my clock? Mama got that at SuperSavers for us, Baby. That was an heirloom piece!
BABY: I didn’t break the clock, Jennifer. It stopped workin’ because it had no reason to. There’s nothin’ more for it to measure. It’s frozen.
JENNIFER: Frozen? Baby, are you feelin’ alright? I know it’s been a lot of excitement lately, but Baby, you’re talkin’ crazy.
BABY: Oh, am I? Am I? Well, why don’t you look out the window then and we’ll see who’s the one talkin’ crazy?

(She moves down to the window, looking out into the audience.)

JENNIFER: What am I lookin’ at? What am I supposed to see?
BABY: Look closer, Jennifer. Look, the wind itself is stopped in place. JENNIFER: And them cars aren’t movin’, are they?
BABY: No, ma’am.
JENNIFER: And look, Mr. McNeil’s stuck outside, sneakin’ in his undershorts to get the paper! *(calling)* Peekaboo, Mr. McNeil! I see you!
BABY: He can’t hear you.
JENNIFER: He can’t?
BABY: Huh-uh. And even if he could, he couldn’t say anything back, frozen in time as he is.
JENNIFER: But we’re not stuck.
BABY: No, the rest of the world’s stuck. I left us unstuck.
JENNIFER: You did?
BABY: Uh-huh.
JENNIFER: But, what if I wanna be stuck, too, like the rest of ‘em? Or have everyone else be unstuck, too, like us?
BABY: Dang, Jennifer! This is my weddin’ present to you! Can’t you even be a little happy about it?
JENNIFER: I asked for them his and hers towels from SuperSavers.
BABY: Forget them his and hers towels, Jennifer. This is somethin’ real I’m givin’ you. Somethin’ that won’t get washed and dried and faded out. Somethin’ permanent.
JENNIFER: I don’t get it.
BABY: I been doin’ a lot of thinkin’, Jenn. A lot. All the time about various things. Like about how we stood there yesterday in front of our friends and our family and the employees and management of Ten Pin Alley, and I looked into your eyes and you looked into mine and how a thousand things raced through my head as we were sayin’ “I do.” A thousand things, Jennifer, like electrons in a lightnin’ storm. I mean, I promised forever to you, Jenn, and you promised it to me, too. And I been thinkin’ about all this mess with Charlie and my mom, and how they promised each other forever too, but where did it go? Where did their forever slip off to? They said they were in love, but it wore out. It wore out just like it seems to with everyone. Only I don’t want ours to wear out and slip off before forever happens.
JENNIFER: Oh, Baby. That ain’t gonna happen with us. We’re different, you and me.
BABY: We ain’t different, Jennifer. Not even a little bit. When that
alarm went off this morning, I looked over at you, and the light comin’ in through the window. I looked at my wife in all her mornin’ glory, and I got chills, I got fever, I got everything else all at once.

JENNIFER: You were just horny.
BABY: Not just that, Jennifer. It’s like that every time I see you. Every time I walk into a room and see you, or vice versa. Every time the phone rings and I see it’s you who’s callin’, I get that same feeling. I don’t want that to wear out, Jenn. Not like with everyone else. That’s when I figured I’d give the old laws of physics another looksee. It’s my gift to you. No thank you note required.

JENNIFER: You mean we can stay this way forever?
BABY: Forever, just like we promised.
JENNIFER: We never need to change? We never need to leave?
BABY: We’ll always be newlyweds with that feeling, pit of our stomachs.

JENNIFER: Do you think it’ll work?
BABY: You tell me. Is the feelin’ fadin’?
JENNIFER: No.
BABY: How ‘bout now?
JENNIFER: No.
BABY: Still got it?
JENNIFER: I do, Baby.
BABY: What about now?
JENNIFER: Still got it.
BABY: Do you feel—
JENNIFER: Baby, quit askin’! We been stuck like this for weeks now and you keep askin’ me the same questions over and over.
BABY: I was just checkin’.
JENNIFER: Well, quit checkin’. It’s annoyin’.
BABY: I’m sorry, Jenn.
JENNIFER: Stop apologizin’.
BABY: I’m sorry.
JENNIFER: Cut it out.
BABY: I’m sorry, Jennifer. I’m tryin’ to do right by you. I’m hopin’ you still feel the same love feelin’ I been feelin’ all this time.
JENNIFER: I still feel it, Baby.
BABY: Even after all these years we been married?
JENNIFER: I still feel it, Baby.
BABY: Every time I walk in the room?
JENNIFER: Every time, like the first time, like the thousandth time.
BABY: Like the millionth time?
JENNIFER: Yeah, Baby.
BABY: Me, too.
JENNIFER: Baby, if I were to tell you something, would you get mad?
BABY: I suppose it depends on the size of the something.
JENNIFER: Baby, I went out yesterday. Not yesterday, but today.
   No, decades ago. Or right now or whatever moment this is we’re stuck in. I went out and I walked up to Mr. McNeil, and I felt so sorry for him out there in his undershorts for all eternity. I leaned him back, and I dragged him inside the house. It was a small mercy, you know, Baby? I didn’t want him to be out there like that another hundred years. I dragged him inside the house and I sat him down on the sofa. Have you ever gone over there, Baby? When you helped him do the lawn? You ever go inside? A shrine, that place is. A monument in time, frozen. Pictures everywhere. Of Mr. McNeil and Mrs. McNeil. Happy, sad, annoyed. At home, on vacation. Old, young, in-between. All different pictures from a lifetime. With children, without. Dogs and cats. Everything. And propped up there on the tv, a little card from her funeral and the announcement clipped from the paper. She was gone, Baby, and the kids were grown up. But there he sat, with all that good stuff, all around him. All those memories crowdin’ in, like particles in the air. I sneaked back over here and tried not to tell you about it. I didn’t want to tell you anything about it. But I’ve been thinkin’ on it a thousand years now, Baby. If we wanna get to any of that good stuff, we gotta risk that feelin’.
BABY: Pit of our stomachs?
JENNIFER: Uh-huh.
BABY: I don’t wanna.
JENNIFER: (at the window) Just look out there, Baby. At the bougainvillea.
BABY: (looking) Uh-huh?
JENNIFER: You see the wind frozen? And the cars?
BABY: Uh-huh.
JENNIFER: You see that bumblebee, there? Just hoverin’.
BABY: Yeah.
JENNIFER: Poor thing got stuck, too, like the rest of everybody else.
   All he wants to do is make it to the flower and do his job. Instead,
   he’ll just hang there and hang there, until forever comes and goes
   again. He’ll never get to the flower like that.
BABY: (sadly) Uh-huh.
JENNIFER: He’ll never know what it’s like to be in love and then to
   not be in love and then to stay together and to fight for love and
   then to fall in love again and to laugh together over time and to
   forgive and to forget and to be held and to get on with life. To have babies, Baby. To be grandparents, Baby. To sit quietly on the couch ‘cause we got nothin’ left to say. To talk to each other with just our eyes. To talk to each other with just our ears. To talk to each other with just our hands. To talk to each other with just our memories.
BABY: (sadly) You want me to turn it back on?
JENNIFER: Yes, Baby.
BABY: Jenn? Will you kiss me first?
JENNIFER: Yes, Baby.

(With a smile, she kisses him. Simply, passionately.)

BABY: I’m gonna—hang on to that feelin’—long as I can.
JENNIFER: You do that, Baby.
BABY: The rest of my life.
JENNIFER: Me too.
BABY: You ready, Jenn?
JENNIFER: Uh-huh.
BABY: You sure?
JENNIFER: Uh-huh.
BABY: Okay. I’m gonna do it…

(He cringes with uncertainty, as his finger moves to depress a button on the clock.)
JENNIFER: Baby, wait.

(It's too late. The clock rings loudly. He looks at her, tries not to cry.)

BABY: I thought we could make it to forever.
JENNIFER: (attempting a smile) We can still try, can't we? (She notices something through the window.) Hey, look. That bumblebee's back at it again. Good luck, bumblebee.
BABY: (sadly) Good luck, bumblebee.
JENNIFER: Better cheer up, Baby. You gotta work in the mornin'.
    Don't wanna waste your day off mopin' around, now, do ya?
BABY: I don't guess so. I'm gonna go tinker a while.

(He begins to cross off, inconsolable.)

JENNIFER: Oh, Baby. Come over here and hold me tight, right this minute. Right this second. Right now, Baby. Come on over here.

    He goes to her, as the lights fade to black. She holds him. This is how the play ends.
Characters:
Howard
Snowball
Steve

Darkness. Jungle noises. Lights up on a living room. HOWARD, a Red Uakari monkey, sits at a small table, working on something. His wife, SNOWBALL, also a Red Uakari, sits apart, reading. Thomas Mann? Henry James? Both their faces are bright red. Conservative dress. Barefoot. As a rule, they sound human, but occasionally the odd monkey sound will emerge unconsciously. Like now, while they work and read.

HOWARD and SNOWBALL walk like monkeys. Otherwise, their gestures seem sometimes simian, sometimes human, sometimes an odd combination of the two.

After a bit, SNOWBALL, still reading, crosses to a table to get a banana and then returns to her chair. Engrossed in her book, she idly peels the banana. Maybe she eats it.

HOWARD: You know what chafes my ass?
SNOWBALL: No, Howard, I sure don’t.
SNOWBALL: Maybe it’s a phobia.
HOWARD: I’m not afraid of it. I hate it. On philosophical grounds.
SNOWBALL: Are you good at math?
HOWARD: No.
SNOWBALL: Well, we tend to fear what we don’t understand.
HOWARD: I don’t understand a goddamn thing about you, Snowball, but you don’t scare me.
SNOWBALL: Sure I do.
HOWARD: You confuse me.
SNOWBALL: That scares you.
HOWARD: Whatevs.
SNOWBALL: (pause) TURN OFF THE GODDAMN RADIO!
HOWARD: (he does so, jungle noises out) Dag. (pause, he works)
Hey, is that tube of glue over by the bananas?
SNOWBALL: I’m not glue monitor till Tuesday.
HOWARD: You were just over there.
SNOWBALL: Now I’m over here.
HOWARD: Could you look?
SNOWBALL: I’m reading.
HOWARD: Well, can you hold this in place while I look?
SNOWBALL: Then I’d have to stop reading.
HOWARD: Bring your book.
SNOWBALL: Fuck, Howard. (she crosses to him) What?
HOWARD: Just put a finger there. No, there. Thank you so much.
(SNOWBALL goes back to her chair, still reading) A train leaves Chicago at 7:53 a.m. Central Time heading east. Another train leaves New York at 4:47 p.m. Eastern Time heading west. Train A is going 74 miles an hour and Train B is going 61. Who gives a shit?
SNOWBALL: Not me.
SNOWBALL: What if we’re talking freight trains here?
HOWARD: And imaginary numbers. Who came up with that worthless shit?
SNOWBALL: Hitler.
HOWARD: I mean, for years you’re told there’s no square root of negative one and then all of a sudden you’re told there is. Some smug old lady math teacher smiles and goes “Yes, class, we call it i. It’s a little game we mathematicians play, a little mental exercise. And it has real applications you’ll learn about next year in Calculus.” What the fuck? I mean, first of all, fuck Calculus and second, what the fuck? There is no square root of a negative number. Some things are immutable. I wish I’d killed that bitch and eaten her eyes.
SNOWBALL: So you hate math because it's too precise and because it's not precise enough.
HOWARD: Maybe.
SNOWBALL: You embrace ambiguity while in the act of rejecting it.
HOWARD: Looks that way.
SNOWBALL: What the hell is that?
HOWARD: A paradox.
SNOWBALL: (indicating his work) No. That.
HOWARD: Scrapbook.
SNOWBALL: You’re scrapbooking?
HOWARD: It’s fun!
SNOWBALL: I want a divorce.
HOWARD: No you don’t.
SNOWBALL: Damn. I thought I did.

(STEVE enters. Also a Red Uakari, he’s disguised as a human. Pale face. Shoes. He mopes around the room, looking distractedly at this and that. His gait and gestures are essentially human, but the façade is a bit of a struggle. Like a right-handed person pretending to be left-handed.)

SNOWBALL (con’d):Hey, Steve.
HOWARD: Steve.
STEVE: Hey.
HOWARD: What’s up?
STEVE: Oh, you know. Nothing.
HOWARD: You seem a little down.
STEVE: I’m fine.
HOWARD: Distracted.
STEVE: I’m fine.
SNOWBALL: Leave him alone, Howard, he’s fine.
HOWARD: Why don’t you leave me alone, Snowball.
SNOWBALL: No problem there.
HOWARD: What’s wrong, Steve?
STEVE: Nothing. Just a little down is all.

(STEVE gives the stage a final pass and exits.)
HOWARD: He looks pale.
SNOWBALL: So he overdid the make-up.
HOWARD: What a lame idea.
SNOWBALL: Christ, Howard, we’ve been through this. If he wants to pass himself off as human, that’s his right.
HOWARD: Be who you are, that’s what I say.
SNOWBALL: Really? What are you? Besides an asshole?
SNOWBALL: Talk to him.
HOWARD: You talk to him.
SNOWBALL: He’s your brother.
HOWARD: Guys don’t talk to guys about heavy shit.
SNOWBALL: When have you talked to me about anything heavier than where’s the glue?
HOWARD: That math stuff was heavy.
SNOWBALL: That wasn’t communication, that was self-indulgence. It might as well have been a monologue in a damn play. (pause) Look, you’re right. He made a mistake. He was never going to pass, he was never going to fit in. And OK, maybe he’s hit a wall now. But at least he tried something. At least he took a shot at something riskier than scrapbooking.
HOWARD: (lovingly) You’re a slut.
SNOWBALL: (lovingly) Why state the obvious?

(STEVE enters, still moping, carrying a small towel. He sits on the floor and considers wiping off his white make-up. Hesitates. He utters a forced, half-hearted monkey sound)

SNOWBALL (con’d): How about a banana?
STEVE: Maybe later.
SNOWBALL: So did you have any luck? With humans?
STEVE: Humans.
SNOWBALL: So things went wrong.
STEVE: Things went too right. (pause) I’m in love.
SNOWBALL: Say that again.
STEVE: Yeah. With this woman. And this man.
SNOWBALL: You’re in love. With two humans. Of different genders.
STEVE: I know.
HOWARD: Would you consider this a paradox? Would you go so far as to call your feelings ambiguous?
STEVE: I hate it.
SNOWBALL: You’ve been in the field one week and you’re in love with two humans. I thought this was designed as an experiment. Paint your face, walk funny, take notes, come home, write it up.
STEVE: I experimented.
SNOWBALL: You seem to have misplaced your scientific detachment.
STEVE: Oops.
SNOWBALL: Christ. Tell us.
STEVE: It’s complicated.
HOWARD: Wipe that crap off your face first.

(STEVE’s speech elicits physical and vocal reactions from HOWARD and SNOWBALL. As his tale unfolds, they move from subdued confusion to agitation to full-blown insanity, accompanied in the end by maniacal monkey-shrieks as they fling furniture, props, and themselves around the room. STEVE speaks incrementally emotionally throughout.)

STEVE: No. OK so I meet this Rob dude in the art museum and tell him my name is Eric and I’m talking to him about nothing just flirting you know and I make this like backwards pass at the guy by pretending he pisses me off and somehow it works and all of a sudden we’re in his car and he’s driving me back to this apartment I’m sharing with this Lisa chick who I found on Craig’s list and who’s really a sweetheart but sort of bitchy so anyway I make him manicotti with homemade tomato sauce you know like made with real Roma tomatoes not from a can but from a garden and I guess he thought it tasted pretty good because the next thing I know we’re in bed and it’s awesome so next morning I make breakfast for him and this Lisa chick who came home God knows when 3 a.m. and we all sit and talk and it’s nice and Rob leaves for work and Lisa goes Can you drive me into the city so I don’t have to take the train and I’m like OK and so we’re driving in
singing along with this 70s station doing duets you know and I drop her off and Rob calls me actually calls me at noon to see if I’m OK if we’re OK and I say yes yes and we’re talking and he tells me his sister Olivia is a college professor and I should meet her because you know how I’m into film and well she’s into film and she’s teaching this course on film and I was like no way so I head over to the college and find her office and she’s in and I introduce myself but don’t mention Rob because I don’t know I just don’t and tell her my name is Michael and we’re talking and she’s going on and on about classic film and from out of nowhere I start telling her about us you know about the Red Uakari only I didn’t say I was a Red Uakari and I don’t know she gets turned on or whatnot and then I get turned on and all of a sudden we’re having sex on her desk so I see Rob that night and it’s awesome like before he’s so funny and kind and next day I drop by Olivia’s class and ask all these flirty questions and during the break I’m on the phone with Rob telling him I miss him and feeling more and more for him and then I’m in Olivia’s office making love and talking and making love again and feeling more and more for her and I get like way confused and take a walk to clear my head and I go back to my place and sleep for 18 hours or something and then today I wake up and I know I’ve got to get home (beginning to cry) so here I am with my family and the people who love me no matter what and I know I’m not human but I’m really really in love with both of them and I don’t have the slightest idea what I’m supposed to do next. (pause, everyone calms down) Was that banana a one-time offer? (SNOWBALL brings him a banana) No. Never mind. Sorry. Out of the mood. Got any Cheetos? (his tears return)

SNOWBALL: No, Steve, I’m sorry. (STEVE’s crying increases, but abates during the following; SNOWBALL crosses to HOWARD) Jesus, Howard, he’s turned.

HOWARD: He’s just confused.

SNOWBALL: He’s turned. He thinks he’s human.

HOWARD: Warped perception. I used to think I was happy.

SNOWBALL: Maybe he is human.

HOWARD: It’s been awhile since anybody’s pulled that off.
SNOWBALL: What is he?
HOWARD: He’s Steve.
HOWARD: Fine by me.
SNOWBALL: What happened to “be who you are”?
HOWARD: Who. Not what. He isn’t a what. He’s a who. Human, simian, what difference does it make?
SNOWBALL: I thought ambiguity pissed you off.
HOWARD: Mathematical ambiguity. Is Steve a number? Even you’re not a number, Snowball. I don’t know who the hell you are, but I know you’re not a number.
SNOWBALL: Jesus Christ, Howard, you are one inconsistent out-of-both-sides-of-your-mouth talking motherfucker.
HOWARD: I CHANGED MY MIND. THAT’S MY GODDAMN POINT! I CAN CHANGE MY MIND A THOUSAND TIMES IN THE SAME SENTENCE AND WHO ARE YOU TO TELL ME I CAN’T? MATH DOESN’T CHANGE ITS MIND! WE DO! YOU AND I DO! SO DOES STEVE!
SNOWBALL: HE’S HURTING!
HOWARD: Well, that comes with the territory, don’t it? He can label himself man, monkey, or toast-r-oven and he’s still gonna spend a good percentage of his waking hours in pain. Like everybody else.
SNOWBALL: If he knows what he is, he’ll suffer less.
STEVE: I’m hearing this, you know.
HOWARD: Look, Snowball, Steve’s my brother and I love him.
STEVE: I’m still here.
HOWARD: I love you, Steve. Hell, some days I love Snowball. You want me to vomit up some clichéd crap like “I just want you to be happy”? OK. (with great tenderness and sincerity) I want you to be happy, Steve. I really do. With all my heart. With all my heart. (pause) There. Everybody good with that Hallmark card? Everybody enjoying a nine-second state of bliss? Look, dude, here’s what I want. I want you to be. That’s it. That’ll have to do. It’s the best we can hope for and it’s by God pretty huge. Keep breathing. Be. Otherwise, you’re just an imaginary number. And that, my friend, ain’t dick.
STEVE: (pause) Can you guys do me a favor?
SNOWBALL: Anything.
HOWARD: Name it.
STEVE: I’ve got someone coming over. Can you pretend to be hu-
man?

(Silence)

HOWARD: Um. Our faces are red. And we don’t walk funny.
STEVE: I’m not saying paint your face. Just act less, well, monkey-
like. It’ll ease the shock when the truth comes out.
SNOWBALL: Or add to it.
STEVE: Please. Just for a little while. Please.
SNOWBALL: We don’t have any shoes.
STEVE: (opens a book bag and produces two pairs of shoes) Back-
ups.

(HOWARD and SNOWBALL manage to put on the shoes. They stand,
unsteady, and directed by STEVE briefly rehearse human move-
ment and gestures, gradually divesting themselves of monkey
sounds and mannerisms. Doorbell. All three face the front door)

STEVE (con’d): It’s open.
HOWARD: It’s open.
SNOWBALL: Is it?

They wait. Terrified, confident, excited, doubtful. All human.
Curtain.

End of play.
NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

DIANNE APRILE is the author of four books of nonfiction and editor of *A Landscape and Its Legacy: The Parklands of Floyds Fork*, out later this year. She is at work on a memoir, a portion of which was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. She is the recipient of a 2011 Hedgebrook Women Writers Residency and has been awarded Kentucky Arts Council fellowships and Kentucky Foundation for Women writing grants. Her work is published in anthologies; most recently a poem, “Sole Man,” appears in *Bigger than They Appear: Anthology of Very Short Poems* (Accent Publishing, 2011). A Louisville native, Dianne lives in Seattle with her husband, Ken Shapero, and teaches at Spalding’s brief-residency MFA in Writing program.

MAKALANI BANDELE is a Louisville, KY native. He is an ordained Baptist minister and pastored churches in North Carolina before becoming a writer, musician, and freelance instructor of Literature and Creative Writing. He holds degrees from University of Notre Dame and Shaw University-Divinity School. A member of the Affrilachian Poets since 2008, Makalani is the recipient of an Ernest Sandeen Poetry Prize, a Literary LEO 1st Prize in Poetry, and a fellowship from Cave Canem Foundation. His poetry has been anthologized in *My Brother’s Keeper* and *Storytellers*, and can be read in the pages of *Mythium Literary Magazine, Tidal Basin Review, Pluck! the Journal of Affrilachian Arts and Culture, Black Arts Quarterly, Platte Valley Review* and *Sou’wester*. Makalani has a self-published chapbook called the *Cadence of Echoes*, and *Hellfightin’,* published by Willow Books, is his first full-length volume of poetry.

WENDELL BERRY is an old Kentucky poet who will have a new collected poems from Counterpoint, he reckons, next year.

DON BOES has been a resident at the MacDowell Colony and the Ragdale Foundation. He appears in the anthology *What Comes Down To Us: 25 Contemporary Kentucky Poets* published by University of Kentucky Press. He teaches at Bluegrass Community and Technical College.


SHERRY CHANDLER is the author of *Weaving a New Eden*. Her work has received support from the Kentucky Arts Council and the Kentucky Foundation for Women. Her work appears most recently in *Calyx, The Cortland*
TAD CHITWOOD has been Artistic Director of The Necessary Theatre since 1994 and has acted in or directed over 50 of their productions. He was a founding member of The Boat House Troupe and has performed with the Kentucky Shakespeare Festival, Pleiades, Finnigan Productions, Latent Muse, Savage Rose Theatre, and NYC’s Riverside Shakespeare. A fairly recent convert to playwriting, his one-acts have been produced by Pet Fish, Finnigan, and Actors Theatre of Louisville’s Late Seating.

PETER CRUME lives in Louisville. A graduate of Centre College in Danville, he is currently enrolled in the Spalding M.F.A. program. When he isn’t writing, he is busy polishing his julep cups.

JOHNNY DRAGO’s plays have been produced by Actors Theatre of Louisville, the Bloomington Playwrights Project, the Barter Theatre, and the Process Theatre, among others, and have been finalists for Clubbed Thumb’s Biennial Commission and The National Ten-Minute Play Contest/Heideman Award. As New American Junk, he has written, directed, and performed in the Atlanta productions of Medea: A Tragedy, Billy Budd: A Portrait in Seamen, Little Fruitcake’s [Non-Specific Winter Holiday] Miracle, Attack of the 6-Foot Vagina, and Buckhead is Burning: A Psycho Serial Soap Opera Freakout Dinner Theater Experiment. He is currently at work on his first novel.

KATHLEEN DRISKEll’s most recent collection of poetry Seed Across Snow (Red Hen 2009) was listed as a bestseller by the Poetry Foundation. Her newest book publication is Peck and Pock: A Graphic Poem (Black Trestle Books 2012) and her work is forthcoming in Rattle and The Florida Review.


SCOTT ELLIOTT was born in Lexington and grew up in Louisville and in Seattle and on the Olympic Peninsula of Washington State. He is the author of the novels Coiled in the Heart (Bluehen/Putnam, 2003) and Temple Grove (anticipated from the University of Washington Press). He teaches at Whitman College in Walla Walla, Washington.

NANCY GALL-CLAYTON has been a Visiting Artist at Ohio State University and a Tennessee Williams Scholar at Sewanee Writers’ Conference. She won
the Streisand Festival of New Jewish Plays, the Eileen Heckart Drama Competition, the Heritage Festival Playwriting Contest. She has been a Finalist three times for Actors Theatre of Louisville’s Heideman Award. Her plays have been on stages across the country and in Australia and Canada. Motes Books included her *Just Taking Up Space* in its World Premieres from Horse Cave Theatre, and her shorts are in anthologies by Dramatic and Smith & Kraus. Nancy is a member of Dramatists Guild, the International Centre for Women Playwrights, and the Cherokee Roundtable.

**Kirby Gann** is the author of the novels *The Barbarian Parade* and *Our Napoleon in Rags*. He is also co-editor (with poet Kristin Herbert) of the anthology *A Fine Excess: Contemporary Literature at Play*, which was a finalist for the *ForeWord Magazine* Book of the Year Award (Anthologies). He is Managing Editor at Sarabande Books, and teaches in the brief-residency MFA in Writing Program at Spalding University. His new novel, *Ghosting*, will appear in April 2012.

**Jane Gentry**, Kentucky Poet Laureate from 2007-2009, grew up on a farm at Athens in Fayette County and now lives in Versailles. Her two full-length collections of poems, *A Garden in Kentucky* and *Portrait of the Artist as a White Pig*, were both published by LSU Press, in 1995 and 2006 respectively. Her poems have appeared widely in anthologies and literary journals. She teaches in the Honors Program and is an English Professor at the University of Kentucky, where she has won the Great Teacher Award.

**Carrie Green**’s poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *DIAGRAM*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Valparaiso Poetry Review*, *Sow’s Ear Poetry Review*, *The Pinch*, *Cave Wall* and other journals. The Kentucky Foundation for Women awarded her and the artist Lori Larusso an Artist Enrichment Grant to publish *It’s Not My Birthday, That’s Not My Cake*, a collaborative chapbook of poems and paintings. Born and raised in DeLand, Florida, Carrie currently lives in Lexington, Kentucky.

**Matthew Haughton** is the author of the chapbook *Bee-coursing Box* (Accents Publishing). His poetry has been twice nominated for the Pushcart Prize and most recently appeared in journals such as *Appalachian Journal*, *Now & Then*, *Still*, *New Southerner*, and *The James Dickey Review*. Haughton lives in Lexington, Kentucky.

**Julie Hensley** grew up on a sheep farm in the Shenandoah Valley, but now she makes her home in Kentucky with her husband (the writer R. Dean Johnson) and their two children. She is a core faculty member of the brief-residency MFA program at Eastern Kentucky University. Julie has won The Southern Women Writers Emerging Voice Award in both fiction (2005) and

**Dan Howell**’s collection of poems, *Lost Country* (Massachusetts), was short-listed for the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize in Poetry. Other awards include a Writing Fellowship (*Poetry*) at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, the Tom McAfee Discovery Award (*Missouri Review*), and a citation for Notable Essay in *Best American Essays*. Currently he teaches at the University of Kentucky.

**Rebecca Gayle Howell**’s poems and translations appear in such publications as *Ninth Letter, 32 Poems, Hayden’s Ferry Review*, and *Poetry Daily*. A recent fellow of the Fine Arts Work Center, she is the translator of Amal al-Jubouri’s *Hagar Before the Occupation/Hagar After the Occupation* (Alice James Books, 2011).

**Charlie Hughes** lives in Nicholasville, Kentucky. He is the author of two collections of poems, *Shifting for Myself* and *Body and Blood*, editor of *The Kentucky Literary Newsletter*, and owner/editor of Wind Publications.

**Tom C. Hunley**’s newest books are a textbook called *The Poetry Gymnasium: 94 Proven Exercises to Shape Your Best Verse* (McFarland 2012) and *The Shape that Spring Field Is In* (Imaginary Friend Press 2012), a chapbook written entirely in the voices of characters from *The Simpsons*. His work has recently appeared in *Five Points, North American Review, New Orleans Review, Diode Poetry Journal*, and in a previous issue of *The Louisville Review*. He divides his time between Kansas and Oz.

**Leatha Kendrick** is the author of three volumes of poetry. Her poems and essays appear widely in journals and anthologies. A workshop leader and mentor at The Carnegie Center for Literacy and Learning, she teaches poetry and life writing. She writes in and often of Kentucky, holding “dual citizenship” in Floyd and Fayette counties.

**Ellyn Lichvar**’s poems have appeared in *Poem, Blood Lotus, The Furnace Review, Silenced Press*, and others. She has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize, received an Artist Enrichment Grant from the Kentucky Foundation for Women, and holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Spalding University. She keeps warm in Louisville with the help of her son Otis and dogs Jovie and Woody.
George Ella Lyon’s poetry collections include Catalpa and Back (Wind Publications) and She Let Herself Go (forthcoming from LSU in 2012). Her work appears in many anthologies and is featured in the PBS series, The United States of Poetry. Lyon makes her living as a freelance writer and teacher based in Lexington.

Kelly Moffett is an Assistant Professor of English at Northern Kentucky University. Her work has appeared in journals such as Colorado Review, Rattle, and The Laurel Review, and her second poetry collection, When the God of Water enters your Basement, Bow, will be released Spring 2013 (Salmon Poetry).

Michael Moran is a retired psychiatrist who lives on a small farm in Franklin County, with his wife Vivian. His first collection of poems, The Fallen World, was published by Larkspur Press in 2008.

Clint Morehead, a graduate of the University of Louisville School of Medicine and Bellarmine University, is currently completing a fellowship in palliative care medicine. He received an Al Smith Fellowship in Creative Nonfiction from the Kentucky Arts Council in 2010, and his essay “The Cleverest Doctor” appears in Becoming a Doctor: From Student to Specialist, Doctor-Writers Share Their Experiences (Norton, 2010).

Elizabeth Oakes is the author of five books of poetry: her first, The Farmgirl Poems, won the 2004 Pearl Poetry Prize, and her fifth, Leave Here Knowing, is forthcoming from Wind. She and Jane Olmsted co-founded and co-edited the prize-winning Kentucky Feminist Writers Series. A former Shakespeare professor at Western Kentucky University, she now owns Ethereal Publications and blogs on Art and Writing from the Spiritual Imagination (ethereal-pub.com). A life-long Kentuckian, she lives in Bowling Green and Sedona, AZ, and is at work on a book tentatively titled Transcendent Retirement: A Book for Zoomers.

Jeremy Dae Paden was born in Italy and raised in Latin America. He teaches Spanish and Latin American literature at Transylvania University in Lexington, KY, where his wife and he spend their days chasing down two children. He is also a member of the Affrilachian Poets. His poems have appeared in The Atlanta Review, Borderlands: Texas Poetry Review, Tidal Basin Review, The Cortland Review, Nagautuck Review, pluck!, and Beloit Poetry Review, among other journals and anthologies.

Larry Pike’s writing has appeared in Wind, Inkwell, the MOTIF anthologies Writing by Ear and Come What May, the chapbook Absent Photographer, and other publications. Horse Cave Theatre (now Kentucky Repertory The-
LARRY WATKINS produced his play *Beating the Varsity* in 2000, and it was published in *World Premieres from Horse Cave Theatre* (MotesBooks, 2009). Larry won the Joy Bale Boone Poetry Award in 2003. He lives in Glasgow, Kentucky.

**Frederick Smock** is associate professor of English at Bellarmine University. His most recent book of poems is *The Deer at Gethsemani: Eclogues*, which has been nominated for the Weatherford Prize.

Affrilachian Poet and Cave Canem Fellow, **Bianca Spriggs**, is a multidisciplinary artist who lives and works in Lexington, Kentucky. Currently a doctoral student at the University of Kentucky, she holds degrees from Transylvania University and the University of Wisconsin. Named as one of the Top 30 Performance Poets by TheRoot.com, Bianca is a recipient of both an Artist Enrichment Grant and an Arts Meets Activism Grant from the Kentucky Foundation for Women. In partnership with the Kentucky Domestic Violence Association, she is the creator of “The Swallowtail Project” a creative writing workshop dedicated to the women inmates at the Federal Prison Camp, and the creator and Artistic Director of the Gypsy Poetry Slam featured annually at the Kentucky Women Writers Conference.

**Katerina Stoykova-Klemer**’s first poetry book, the bilingual *The Air around the Butterfly* (Fakel Express, 2009), won the 2010 Pencho’s Oak award, given annually to recognize literary contribution to contemporary Bulgarian culture. She is the author of the chapbook, *The Most* (Finishing Line Press, 2010) and *Indivisible Number* (Fakel Express, 2011, Bulgarian only). Katerina is the editor of the anthology *Bigger Than They Appear: Anthology of Very Short Poems*, (Accents Publishing, 2011).

**Mary Ann Taylor-Hall** is the author of two novels, *Come and Go, Molly Snow* and *At The Breakers*, and of a collection of poetry, *Dividing Ridge*. Her collection of stories *How She Knows What She Knows About YoYos* was a *Foreword Magazine* Book of the Year. She has received a grant from the Kentucky Arts Council and two grants from the National Endowment for the Arts. She lives on a farm in Harrison County.

**Cate Whetzel** is a cradle Louisvillian, and prefers Derby Day to Thanksgiving. She is a graduate of Kenyon College and Indiana University. Her poems and short shorts have appeared in *New South, Chiron Review, Salamander,* and *Damsel Fly Press*, with new work forthcoming from *Crazyhorse*. She taught for two years in Chicago’s elementary and middle schools as a poet in residence with The Poetry Center of Chicago, and currently teaches at a private high school in Michigan. She lives in Ferndale with her husband, poet Ben Debus, and their collection of paper.
**Philip White**’s poems have won a Pushcart Prize and have recently been published in *Ploughshares, Hudson Review, AGNI*, and elsewhere. His first book, *The Clearing*, won the Walt Macdonald award and was published in 2007. He teaches Shakespeare at Centre College.

**Lisa Williams** teaches at Centre College. Her books of poetry are *Woman Reading to the Sea* (2008) and *The Hammered Dulcimer* (1998).

**Jeff Worley**, a previous contributor to *The Louisville Review*, is now retired from UK and at large in Lexington. His latest books are *What Comes Down to Us: 25 Contemporary Kentucky Poets* (University Press of Kentucky), which he edited, and *Best to Keep Moving* (Larkspur Press, poems). His poems have appeared recently in *River Styx, The Atlanta Review, The Tampa Review, Poetry East*, and *The Texas Review*. 