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Ross Talarico  
Palomar College, rtallarico@palomar.edu

Anne Stark  
Utah State University, anne.stark@usu.edu

Susan Evans  
East Tennessee State University, csevans0215@aol.com

Gary Pullman  
University of Nevada, Las Vegas; College of Southern Nevada, gary.pullman@unlv.edu

Andrew Madigan  
Al Ain City College

See next page for additional authors

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Robin Grove is a recent graduate of Barstow Community College with an AA in Social Science and is currently an undergraduate at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas majoring in Psychology. She has had a passion for photography most of her life. This photo was taken in Helendale, California in a small community called Silver Lakes.
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Managing Editor: Rebecca Colbert  
Contributing Editor: Susan Summers  
Nonfiction Editor: Sandra Hooven  
Fiction Editor: Rebecca Colbert  
Layout and Cover Design Editor: Andrew Bahlmann

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Contact information:

Susan Summers  
English Department  
University of Nevada Las Vegas  
PO Box 5011  
4505 Maryland Parkway  
Las Vegas, Nevada 89154-5011  
Phone: 702-895-4662  
E-mail: susan.summers@unlv.edu

Rebecca Colbert  
University of Nevada Las Vegas  
P.O. Box 5011  
4505 Maryland Parkway  
Las Vegas, Nevada 89154-5011  
E-mail: wordriver@unlv.edu

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Editor’s Note

The best part of publishing the Wordriver Literary Journal each year is soliciting submissions for the next volume. We look forward to reading new works from familiar authors and are excited to discover new voices from authors who work down the hall or across the ocean. Volume Five offers several of both. I am beyond pleased to present works from writers in disciplines outside of English Literature as well as international authors. The topics and themes in this volume speak to wide horizons and the myriad of ways we find a place to call home. From the poetry of Susan Evans which was inspired by her volunteer vacation at the Isle of Mull in Scotland to Jennie Evenson’s “A Muslim in Suburbia,” you will wonder at the many ways to find home. Is home the familiar, like “Barbecue with Kent” or is it family, like “Women of My Childhood” and “Bedtime Story”? Or does home become a place you can no longer return, a piece of music you cannot forget, the touch of a baby’s hand, a sister’s laugh, a foreign cousin or an empty beach? I hope you will find a home here with us. Our goal at Wordriver has always been to offer a forum for your voices and we continue to welcome you around our table. As always, we wish to thank Dr. Christopher C. Hudgins, Dean of Liberal Arts, and Dr. Richard Harp, Chair of UNLV’s Department of English for their continued indulgence and support of the journal. With Volume Five, we would like to add a special thanks to Professor Douglas Unger for encouraging the original vision of this journal with his belief in the valuable contributions of adjunct faculty. Many early morning emails and Sunday conversations between Susan Summers and Sandy Hooven keep Wordriver thriving. Finally, a big thanks is due to Andrew Bahlmann, recent Ph.D. graduate and Copy Editor at large for format and presentation. Look for us at http://wordriverreview.unlv.edu We hope you enjoy Volume Five.

Rebecca Colbert, Managing Editor
Spring 2013
Ross Talarico

Acceptance

Come, walk with me...
As we have done
or have meant to do
where our own words
again echo
along the vast margins
of diaries, where
half-uttered desires
might just as well
have been crossword puzzles,
you looking patiently
at the blank affection on my face.

We’ve come a long way
to end up here,
across from each other
at a kitchen table
made from some overgrown oak
that inhaled, calmly, beautifully,
the earth that surrounds us.
I try to pronounce the word love,
but I cough instead,
something deep and telling, the moment
that gives silence its due respect.

Come, walk...
Here we are, as close
as two people can be,
living a few scant miles
from the place of dreams,
leaning on the rusted fence
at the border of
life’s unfathomable dispute
between love and desolation.
Confessions

There is a blessing of sorts regarding our popular culture in the fact that the police don’t browse literary magazines to solve old crimes that have not only grown cold, but that have been celebrated in the quiet rectitude of poetry.

Myself, I’ve discovered a few thefts, a couple of rapes, some awe-inspiring assaults on human frailty, taunting of the elderly in back-alleys caught munching on universal scraps…

How many young were molested under the sad twilight shadows of willows leaving fingerprints on the flesh of romantic lingerings?

How many times has a breath exhaled at the end of a line, a pause, caesura, ellipsis, a mystery where the murderer himself totters between self-loathing and prayer?

I lean my elbows over the wood fence overlooking the grove in my backyard. A few avocado trees still stand amidst the piles of dead wood scattered about. No fruit in five years now; the old tractor mower, useless, rusted, sits on the rutted earth and in the faded photograph of the mid I sense that old inspiration of a rustic eternity. I’ve buried things here…

Below the oldest tree, a pet cat, the remains of a peacock who settled in, from nowhere, for almost a year before falling prey to a coyote at dusk, and several chicks and ducks caught in the sleek jaws of a bobcat.
And one evening, after a few beers and a couple of nostalgic phone calls to friends, those final assurances that something matters in this world, if not words and purposes, then at least kindness and good will, those transparent ingredients added to that stiff drink of literature… I buried the manuscript of my new and selected poems, thinking in such a delusional way that man’s most humane tool is a shovel after all… bones, words, images, the bright tail feathers of a peacock, the treasures we seek as affirmation.
Four Acts of Disappearance

1 Evaporation

I sleep with you at my back,
a reassuring wind.

In the morning
I place my arms in the sleeves
of the blue shirt, starched cuffs,
silk and sorrow.
Yesterday it hung on the line
and the sun held it
all day in the cradling breeze.

I can’t get it out of my mind,
entering the air like moisture...
each day coming back to you.

2 Where the Dream Ends

Letting go of the last branch
I make my way across
the stone ledge, each tentative step
a child’s ballet.

Of course every night
several of my lives drift to the
rocky bottom, each regret
a mid-air fall suspended in
spectacular memory.

This is my routine.
I awaken in a naked quiver
of moonlight, sitting at
the edge of a simple being,
still afraid to open my eyes.

So I huddle deep into
the slow heal of hundreds of bones;
with each succeeding
muffled scream
my strength comes back

until there in the muted contortion
of a yawn I
come clear like a negative
pulled slowly
from the murky waters
into the light of each day.

3 Regret

Sick of love poems
I turn on Sinatra and clean my gun.

I wipe the metal until
my reflection appears on the barrel;
singing along, the world
seems so mellow and restrained,
my aim meaningless.

It is my loneliness that makes me
happy; the crooner takes our sighs
and presents them, with
confidence and melody, back to
our breathless selves...
Each empty chamber is an excuse for faith.

So I sing to you.
I put my eye to the metal sight,
but you’re not there.

4 For the Stray Traveler

In the sacrifice intended for
the stray traveler,
I leave a dollar bill
in the half empty sugar bowl.
I leave an old jacket
on the coat rack in the lobby.

I leave the keys in my car.
Another great religious teacher comes along and tries to tell us to let go...
The books fall free from our arms; we remember a sentence, a phrase, a single word...

goodbye.

One by one substitutes replace the image you’ve left carefully unclear. Another coin slips between you and the rich earth.

What you leave behind are apologies for the directions you can’t give.

Where are you? Where have you been?
Ross Talarico

The Last Time I Was Happy

The cold water slipped past
the smooth pebbles
of the Adirondack stream as I stood
under one of the Blue Mountain peaks
and you reached out for my hand
as if to signal a day’s journey
or maybe a lifetime’s...
when the sun balanced so easily
on one’s shoulder
and the pine stood in utter defiance,
an eagle measuring the steady curve of the earth
and that persistent silence between us
permeated each thought
cushioned each word tumbling for years
through this life
of inarticulate and cherished redemption.
When I walked into my literature classroom in the BNR building, and set my books on the front desk, I found that there was something already written on the whiteboard in thick, black marker. The Biology and Natural Resources classroom was a bad fit for teaching literature because the front desk was set up for laboratory experiments with its porcelain sink and raised faucet plumbed into the laminate surface. Avoiding the faucet with my books and student essays, I positioned myself in the middle of the surface that was about rib high when I was wearing heels. Then I turned to the message on the board, which read:

1. **Mom -> baby touch**
2. **Trunk touch**
3. **Any duration counts**
4. **Onset: M trunk contacts baby body**
5. **Offset: M trunk leaves baby body**

I was about to embark on a discussion of Isak Dinesen in my non-majors comparative literature class (its theme: the winners and near-winners of the Nobel Prize in Literature), but I could not erase the whiteboard without first writing down the list. I knew that the class before mine had something to do with statistics, but the words on the board seemed specifically aimed at me.

Several days later, in a time of leisure, I meditated on this list scrawled on the back of my teaching notes. The words intrigued and seduced me. What does it all mean? I asked. I looked at the labels “Mom (capitalized)” and “baby (lower case)” in the first line and studied the relationship and the proximity between them, linked with the word, “touch.” Those were inarguably evocative words, especially written in a science classroom. The instructor of the class, and assumedly the writer of the message, did not use the more formal “mother,” but chose to use “Mom.” This may have been simply an attempt at shorthand, but it also showed a softness and vulnerability which I immediately linked to a new mother with baby-in-arms.

I decided that “Mom” was represented later in the list by the capital letter, “M.” “Mom/M” was the agent.
provocateur in this scenario, the subject of both the sentence and the action. In total, three distinct actions involved the subject “Mom”; the first included an arrow (verb not yet determined), the second, the action verb “contacts,” and the third, the action verb “leaves.” There was also the action verb, “touch” in the first item, but because of the placement of the arrow that separated Mom from baby, it was not clear whether the mother was touching the baby or the baby touching the mother. I satisfied myself thinking that in this first item, the identity of the subject of the action and the receiver did not matter. The action was reciprocal; both were touched. The arrow implied movement, first subject Mom moving toward second subject, baby.

I stared at the word “touch.” What is the root of “touch”? In the Oxford English Dictionary, I found that the etymology of the word “touch” runs through Middle English yet is not Germanic. I had previously thought it was Germanic because of the clipped sound of the word, but I was wrong. The root of “touch” is French, and before that, Latin: Tochier (Fr.) and toccare (L.). The original meaning of the word “touch” is to ring a bell. This is a fitting provenance for “touch,” because in this act of human intimacy, inner bells are run. In literature, we call this synesthesia, the mixing of the senses. Someone I love touches me and I hear the music of the spheres.

Then I considered the word “trunk,” from the second line. A trunk can be a portmanteau and it can be part of a tree or a car. It can also designate a body. It is an unusual word for a body. It is an old fashioned word, like torso. Nobody uses the word torso. You might see it used in an exercise video, where the abs and pecs are separate muscle groups to be found on the torso. But trunk? For body? Why not chest or breast? I asked. When items #1 and #2 in the diagram were taken alone, one could use the mathematical property of distribution and thus determine that “trunk” is a subset of “baby.” In literature we would call it a synecdoche, a substitution of a part of something as the whole. And, having been a mother, and having looked down over the newborn baby in my arms, there was sometimes not much more to him than his trunk, and in touching his trunk I was touching the bulk of him.

From there I came up with the idea that the diagram was referring to breastfeeding. I had to allow that the word breastfeeding was not mentioned anywhere in the diagram.
But using Aristotelian logic, I reasoned that since the action referred to some kind of intimate touching between mother and child, breastfeeding was a specific subset of that general class. When the “M trunk contacts the baby body,” I had no other explanation for it.

Next we have the “onset” and the “offset” of the action, the stages when the mother “contacts” and then “leaves” the baby trunk. When breastfeeding, the mother will position herself in a comfortable position with the baby, perhaps using the arm of a favorite chair as support of the embrace. She will then talk to the baby, sing, or even coo—this is part of the synesthesia of this experience, and it’s possible that smell is even more important than sound. Due to smell, I think the baby knows where his sustenance will come from even with his eyes closed. This all happens between contact and separation.

Next in the list was the strange Item #3: “Any duration counts.” What is this word, “count”? This, I concluded, was the most important word in the diagram. It is the scientific word, the word that indicates that something can be measured, and that some finding can be determined from the results. But what were these particular statisticians trying to determine? What outcome were they trying to find? My initial guess was that it had to do with the baby’s physical health or mental stability. But what if I was going in the wrong direction entirely? What if the subjects weren’t even human? There was nothing in the diagram suggesting the subjects were a human mother and child. What if the researchers were simply looking at the number of times an orangutan mother comes into contact with her offspring, or even a cage full of mice delivered of their litters finding their proper offspring? For example, if one baby orangutan gets touched twenty times more than her sister, is she a healthier orangutan? Is the number of touches significant? This hypothesis was possible. But even if one of these scenarios were the case, I reasoned, all research interfaces with the human. We draw back the curtain of the unknown thinking we might get to know ourselves better. Hoping perhaps to answer some universal question, such as why am I here, and in addition, why am I doing what I am doing right now?

My body bore three babies and I nursed all of them. In fact, I nursed them all for at least six months—the
recommended amount given by my OB-GYN at the time of the delivery of our first baby, a little boy. I did this nursing sometimes without much support. This was in the eighties and I was the oldest child, the trailblazer. It was sometimes hard to find a private place to nurse that was not the bathroom. On the one hand, all my siblings and I were bottlefed and we turned out just fine; on the other hand I was listening to the La Leche League. Through it all, my husband always encouraged me. 

With the latter two babies, and their nursing schedules, I was working, too. I taught two composition classes at a junior college near Hayward, while we were living in Berkeley. When I didn’t take the BART train, I was driving the Bay Area freeways to get to work. Sometimes on the freeway during rush hour traffic, the “call” to nurse would come. While I steered and braked through stop-and-go traffic, my other hand was holding an electric pump to my breast under my blouse. I was completely relaxed. I now realize that electronic breast pumping while driving is infinitely less safe than talking on a cellphone or even texting. Could I have gotten a ticket for it? (“Excuse me officer, I will get that registration paper as soon as I disengage this breast pump.” “Do that, ma’am.”) I shudder at the thought. But when you are young, safety is an abstract concept. It is one of life’s biggest ironies. So I would pump milk while driving. That pumped milk would go into the freezer when I got home, warmed up by babysitters when my husband and I could get a rare night out. It was money in the bank. And miraculously, when I did get home from work, and my baby wanted to nurse immediately, the supply would be there again. I knew a thing or two about baby touch.

But now my youngest son takes great pains to avoid my touch. He’s barely seventeen, and his body is coursing with hormones, my husband tells me. He is often angry at the world. The last time I was able to hug him with his approval, and not have to sneak a hug and risk his disdain, was when I received a birthday note from him stating that my gift was a week’s worth of hugs, at a maximum of one a day. I could take these hugs on every Wednesday for a month and a half, for instance, or I could take them one a day for a week. As I learned from taking the first hug, they would be the two-armed variety, the ones that compress your back and knock out some of the kinks in it. Therapeutic hugs. I tried to cajole, argue and
cheat for a few more hugs, but my son was a good record
keeper, so I got my seven hugs and no more. Since then I’ve
been stealing hugs.

Yesterday, I needed a needle threaded. I don’t see as
well as I used to, especially close up things, and so I employed
the closest person with the best eyesight to thread the needle
for me, and that was my youngest son. This wasn’t an easy
task for him. He’s done it for me before, and he knows the
routine, but the needle was very tiny and his fingers are
clumsy. As I stood over his shoulder watching him struggle, I
studied those hands that I now so seldom see. I marveled at the
size of the knuckles, the flatness and clarity of his nails. There
was still some pinkness in his skin that I could project back
from the days when he sat on my lap and we would play finger
games. This little piggy. Whoops Johnnie Johnnie. These were
the games my mother taught me. I wondered if he would
remember them when he was a father. I helped those hands
hold a miniature plastic bat; I squeezed them into mittens. I
took him to a dermatologist for years in attempts to get rid of
warts.

“Are all your warts gone?” I asked him as he pulled
the needle through. He answered immediately, “I think so,”
and surprised himself that he wasn’t more sullen. “Can I
look?” I asked. He brought his two hands toward me and I
grasped them and turned them over right in front of my face. It
was mano a mano contact. At that moment, holding my
teenage son’s hands in mine I thought again of the diagram on
the board and I said to myself softly, “Any duration counts.”

Three months after I wrote down that message, but
unfortunately for me, after the semester was over, I tried to
contact the instructor of the statistics class to find out what she
meant by those five provocative points. I located her name in
the course schedule and emailed her. I left a voice message
with a request to meet and talk about the class for an essay I
was working on. I never got an answer. I heard that she was on
sabbatical. In the end, I concluded that my methods were
unsatisfactory and I would never make a good researcher.
Still, I thought my statistical chances in the future were good
for getting more of those therapeutic bear hugs.
Susan Evans

Even the seagulls are defeated in flight

Even seagulls are defeated in flight
What can I do?
The top of my head goes spiraling and twirling down the wind tunnel
Of our granite dorms
And flows all the way to Norway
What can I do?
I wear thermal, fleece, a jacket, a hooded coat
I lower my head, brace against the blast
Clutch my coat around me, stagger
What can I do?
I am a hapless, Scottish Dorothy
A wingless, weirdish sea thing
A transplanted Tennessee twirly bird
Moor less, unanchored, weightless, free
The light from some invisible sun tilts the clouds over

Granite mountains, a sky of gray-blue oversees a land of
Nettles and brambles and ancient rocks
I watch the yellow green sword-like grass
Wave with the wind off the bay
I wave also and tremble and feel
Barren as the rocks, spread thin and alone
Up against granite walls opened and closed
I watch quietly as Scotland breathes into another night.
Bedtime Story

“Tell me a story, Grandpa, please.”
“It’s a little late for stories tonight, isn’t it, Jessie?”
I rolled my head on my pillow to look at the Smiling Sam alarm clock that Mom had purchased for my birthday last year, when I’d turned six and was soon to begin first grade, a present with which to mark the day I’d become a Big Boy.
“It’s only eight o’clock,” I replied, proud of the fact that I could tell time.

Grandpa sighed. It was a gentle sound, almost nothing more than a shrug of his shoulders. It was one of his patient sighs; Mom called them his “long-suffering sighs.”

He didn’t much like telling stories or tucking me in, for that matter. At his age, even the simplest chores were taxing, and he must conserve his strength. But, after Daddy was killed in the accident at the factory where he’d worked, Mom needed to work two jobs, and Grandpa, whose wife, my Grandma, had died a couple years before Daddy died, “helped out” by babysitting me on the nights that Mom worked, although I didn’t like the word ‘babysitting,’ since I’m a Big Boy now, and no baby. I think Grandpa felt sorry for me, though, because I didn’t have a daddy anymore and because I’d been bad sick for almost a year. For a while, it had been “touch and go” for me, Mom sometimes said, “and I wasn’t all the way out of the woods yet,” although I wasn’t sure what she meant. I just know that, sometimes, it was hard for me to breathe and, other times, it was hard for me to stay awake or to think at all, very clearly.

But, tonight, I felt strong and full of energy, and I wasn’t a bit sleepy.

“All right, Jessie. What will it be? The Brave Little Toaster? The Little Engine That Could? The Magic Crayon?”

“Something real,” I said. “Something true.”

“A bedtime story?”

I giggled, thinking grownups--especially old grownups, like my Grandpa--sure could be funny. “Of course, a bedtime story, Grandpa; I’m in bed.”

He smiled. “Should it be a funny story?”

“No.”

“A sad story?”

“No.”

“A story about knights and dragons?”
Outside, it was a windy, dark night, despite the full moon, because the sky was overcast. There was a thickness in the air, a heaviness, that promised rain, and, away in the distance, there were occasional flashes of lightning, followed by the faint rumble of thunder, as if God were clearing his voice. Wouldn’t it be something, I thought, to hear God say something?

The wind, rising, shook the house, moaning, as if it were a creature of the night itself, as full of misery and despair as it was of terror and dread. When it moaned that way, it was horrible, and the sound of that deep, disturbing groaning inspired my request for a particular type of tale.

“A scary story,” I said.
“At bedtime? You sure about that, Jessie?”
“Yes, Grandpa. Tell me a scary story.”
“Your mom will be madder than a hornet if you have bad dreams.”
“I won’t, Grandpa. I promise.”
“All right. Let me think.”

Maybe he thought he could out wait me, that I’d fall asleep before he had to tell the story. Most nights, I probably would have, but not tonight; tonight, I was wide awake and strong and not the least bit sleepy.

Finally, he said, “I’ll tell you a story about my own grandpa and me.”

“Is it a scary story?”
Grandpa shivered. “Oh, yes,” he assured me.
I grinned.
“You sure you want to hear it,” Grandpa asked, “right before you go to sleep?”
I nodded fervently.

Shaking his head, Grandpa looked at me as if he pitied my foolishness before, clearing his throat, he began.

At the time of the tale, he himself was a boy, just about my own age, he said, and he lived in a small house in the country, next to a deep forest. His nearest neighbors lived a mile away, over the hills. Back then, everybody called him Nathan. He didn’t have any grandchildren, or even any children, of course, because he was but a child himself.

He paused, looking at me, but not seeing me. He had a faraway look in his eyes, as if, in his mind, he were somewhere else, probably in the little house in the country, next to a deep forest.
“It was during the Depression,” he said, “when there wasn’t much money, but it was my birthday, and my Daddy--your great-granddaddy--had saved aside a nickel. That’s what a movie cost back in those days. And he gave me that nickel and told me to put it in my sock--the one without the hole in it--and to keep it there until I got to town and take it out only at the movie house, to buy my ticket.”

Grandpa looked strange in the moonlight, sitting in the hard, straight-back chair beside my bed, crickets chirping as he reminisced. I lay patient, waiting for the scary part, knowing that, sooner or later, it would come. Grandpa always told the kind of stories I wanted to hear, whether funny or sad or scary. He knew all kinds of stories. He knew a lot, he said, because he’d lived a lot. I had no idea how old Grandpa was, but he might have been a hundred. Sometimes, he looked tired, not just around the eyes, but all over, almost as if he were used up and it was an effort just for him to hold on and to go through the motions of living.

“The closest town was Myers’ Mills, and it was five miles away,” Grandpa said, speaking, it seemed, more to the air than to me. “I had to go alone, because Mom was taking care of her mother--your great-grandma--over in Wichita, and Dad was staying at his brother’s house, in Kansas City, where he’d gone looking for work. My Grandpa was babysitting me.”

“Just like you’re babysitting me, Grandpa!” I cried, thrilled by the coincidence.

“Just like,” Grandpa agreed. He stared for a moment into the darkness beyond the window, where the stars had begun to gather, as if to hear the story Grandpa was telling.

“So I had to walk into town by myself. There was a full moon, but, even so, the night was dark, boy, let me tell you!”

Whenever Grandpa said “boy, let me tell you,” I knew he meant it. I pictured the dark, empty road through the desolate countryside. “It must have been scary,” I said.

“Every step took forever, and there was the possibility of a monster’s attack every foot of the way. Anything might be hiding in the forest, waiting to ambush me as I passed its hiding place. There could be ghosts or werewolves or zombies. Or bears or cougars or wolves.”

I closed my eyes tightly, but opened them immediately. The room seemed to have shrunk, and all the
familiar things—my toys, the furniture, my clothes—looked strange. Grandpa looked different, too, with the faraway look in his eyes.

“I walked with my heart in my throat, straining to see and to hear, all the time knowing that there was some monster—some thing—waiting for me somewhere along that long, deserted road. Every stirring of the breeze was an invisible monster’s wings; every rustling leaf, a rasping of scales against scales; each vague shadow, the grotesque figure of a crouching beast. Let me tell you, it was a long, long walk, that five miles through the dark, but I wanted to see that movie.”

I wished I hadn’t asked for a scary story, but I had, and I had no choice, now, but to hear it all or be thought a chicken.

The movie, Grandpa said, was about a creature called a banshee that wailed, sounding terrifying, whenever someone was about to die. In the movie, the person who was near death could change places with someone else, if he could convince another person to die in his place. “It was about the scariest movie ever,” Grandpa assured me, “and it was on my mind when I walked home, alone,” from the movie house that night.”

I gulped, thinking The Brave Little Toaster sounded pretty good now. I should have picked it, I told myself, or even The Little Engine That Could, even though Mom has read that one to me a hundred times already.

“About a half mile from home, I came to this tree—a maple, maybe—it was too dark to be sure—and, as I passed it, a ghost rose up out of nowhere, white against the darkness and rustling like a sheet in the wind. There was a loud moaning sound, too, which was the banshee, announcing that it was my time to die. I ran all the rest of the way home, scared witless.

“I just knew I’d never make it home again, alive, but I did, and when I told Grandpa what had happened, he laughed loud and long before he explained that the ‘ghost’ I’d thought I’d seen was nothing more than the undersides of the leaves, which are lighter than their tops, blowing up in the wind; the rustling was the leaves themselves, he said, not a ghost; and the moaning ‘banshee’ was just the sound of the wind.”

I felt relieved. Old people are comforting. They know what’s really real. It was just the wind in the trees, I told myself, the wind and the leaves. I had to admit, though,
Grandpa’s story was scary, all right. I probably would have bad dreams.

“That’s a good story, Grandpa.”
“I’m not through yet, Jessie; there’s more.”
I gulped, waiting.
“I believed my grandpa about the wind blowing up the leaves. There was no ghost, I knew—but that moaning sound I’d heard? No wind could ever make such a sound. The moaning wasn’t the wind; it was the banshee, and it had predicted my death. I was a goner, I knew, and there was only one way, just one, that I could avoid that creature’s death sentence.”

I remembered what that one way was, but I knew that Grandpa was going to tell me, anyway. He had to. The guilt was still with him, all these years later, I could tell, as was the horror of that night, and he had to tell it all.

“I asked Grandpa if he’d trade places with me, go in my stead, and he chuckled and tousled my hair in his strong, old fingers, and said, ‘I reckon it’s closer my time than yours,’ and I knew he’d agreed, and I believed he’d keep his word when the awful moment came.

“I felt better,” Grandpa admitted, “for a time, because my Grandpa had agreed to go in my place, to die so that I could live, and I reasoned, in the naiveté and the ignorance of selfish youth, that he was old and worn out, while I was young and full of energy. It was right that I should live and that he should die, if one of us must lose our lives.”

Outside, the wind, which had calmed, rose again, shaking the house and moaning. I stared at Grandpa, this old, frail, wrinkled, white-haired man with the sagging skin marked with spots of age. He looked used up, I thought, but I was young, just a child, barely even a Big Boy, and lately, I had begun to feel stronger, too, and to have the energy to stay awake and to think clearly. I wasn’t “out of the woods” completely yet, but I was feeling better, and maybe I was getting well.

“I know better now, of course,” Grandpa said. “No matter how old a person becomes, whether six or a hundred, he doesn’t want to die. Nobody wants to die. My grandpa, I’m sure, didn’t want to die, any more than I did, all those long years ago. But he did. He gave me his tomorrows, all of them, and the cups of coffee he’d enjoy drinking, and the newspapers he’d like to read, and the walks he’d love to take,
and the flowers he’d take pleasure in smelling, and the stories he’d want to tell, and the talks he’d like to have with relatives and friends—all these things, and more, he gave up, for me.”

“He must have loved you, Grandpa” I said, tears in my eyes.

He nodded. “More than he loved his own life.”

Outside, the wind moaned so loudly that I knew it wasn’t just wind. It was a spirit. A banshee. And its moan wasn’t just a terrible, heart-rending expression of grief, but it was also the sound of my name; “Jess-sie,” it called, “Jess-sie,” over and over, plaintive, melancholic, and sad.

The banshee called to me, above the wind. I knew it, and, as I looked at Grandpa, I knew, by his face, that he knew, too.

“Don’t worry,” he said, patting my hand. “It’s my time, my time and my turn.”

He left me, after a while, the banshee-wind still calling my name.

I slept fitfully, dreaming of unspeakable things: a freshly dug grave, a headstone bearing my name, my mother in mourning, and me a frail, fresh-faced corpse that was now but food for worms.

When I woke in the morning, the storm had passed and the wind was gone, I hurried downstairs, to Grandpa’s bedroom.

True to his word, Grandpa was gone.
The Classics

He was 23 and still owned a skateboard, an S.E. Hinton novel whose broken spine flapped like a geriatric bird, and, deep within the landfill of his closet, an apple-shaped bong. These were not, however, the least useful remnants of childhood. The Citation for Excellence in Fatuity and Desuetude was awarded to a framed diploma, Bachelor of Arts in English Literature from the College of the Glorious Revolution, a small but venerable institution frolicking among the tidy forests and mosquito-infested swamps of the Tidewater Basin, in the southeast corner of the Commonwealth of Virginia.

At least once a day, he, Dave, would make eye contact with the diploma, secured uneasily, with a slender nail and bracket, to his bedroom wall, next to a gum-backed poster of a shirtless Flea from the Red Hot Chili Peppers. The diploma’s text was Latin, a language he did not have, and Dave found this fact meaningful in an indistinct yet profoundly disconcerting sense. What he did know was that his BA was nearly as useless as the kanji tattoo that had been inflicted upon his left forearm during Spring Break at South Padre Island the prenominate year and which did not mean “Zen,” as the body artist had claimed, but rather “foolish young shit,” according to the drunk Japanese salaryman he’d met in a Washington, DC sports bar the night before.

Of course, Dave reasoned, between shower and a shirt, in those enwombed moments of deodorizing and drying off, the Japanese guy could’ve been lying, or misinformed, or hard-of-seeing in that dim inebriate space. There are so many plausible explanations, and shit.

His liberal education had taught him this, if nothing else, to probe relentlessly like a child’s incorrigible tongue foraging in the ellipsis of a missing tooth, to question everything and believe nothing unless it was supported by cogent reasons and compelling evidence. He had become like Socrates in a baseball cap, adept at disassembling other people’s ideas but weak at formulating his own. This was his analogy, staring at a scruffy line-up of oxfords and chinos, calculating an outfit from the frayed integers of his wardrobe. Socrates with a hand-stamp, he thought. And look what happened to that guy…
Dave almost used an exclamation point here, and he almost laughed.

Uselessness. While Dave tried without success to delete the hand-stamp [*Tracks*], using spit and the knurled vinyl foxing of his Nike running shoe, the poor man’s dermabrasion, he considered: the inadequacy of his wardrobe [no suit and one tie, stained]; the paucity of his technical skills [he could (1) check email and (2) illegally download music but do very little else, which was like having the strength to wield a shovel but lacking any substantive experience with real-world digging]; the fact that he didn’t really know how to compose a CV or cover letter, which may have accounted for the mute, embarrassed look of his telephone; the one interview he’d managed to secure, with a minor state government agency, through the eager intervention of his father, who “knew a guy,” an eagerness only matched in intensity by Dave’s own trepidation in accepting such help because of the concomitant de facto admission that he couldn’t find work on his own, that he was still nothing more than a child, that he was a 98-pound weakling in the Oedipal Wars, who’d shat himself and withdrawn into Shell Shock after the first gunshot, which turned out to be a car backfiring, and other more humiliating existential actualities that he was unwilling to fully acknowledge. Uselessness.

The BA in English Literature, then, because it did not accessorize with an elegant résumé, confidence-exuding handshakes, a natty Hugo Boss in distressed charcoal, or textbook interpersonal skills, was like a beautiful actress braving the red carpet with no slinky gown, no sweeping updo, no heels, no face paint, no diamond-encrusted clutch, no platoon of yogis and public relators squatting, with miniaturized telecom devices, behind a ficus plant or *E!* personality, no poor-or-even-regular-person’s-annual-income of jewelry comped by the designer himself. Without all this bunting and confetti, the camouflage and diversionary tactics, she is exposed, warts and all, with the bad skin, ratty hair, exposed ribcage like a dead trout or pre-industrial percussive instrument. There is nothing to hide what she essentially is.

And Dave saw this in himself, the unflattering uselessness. Of course, it was not merely the non-practical-academic-discipline BA itself; a cumulative GPA of 1.96 did not help matters.
So Dave continued to dress, fully dry now, or rather he continued to think about dressing, though, as yet, there was no applied component to this theoretical exercise. He threw the towel with his left hand, aiming for the 45-pound bench press bar, laden with two 45-pound cast-iron weights, and it hovered across the room like a 6 year old, as ghost, trick-or-treating. He observed the towel find its mark, draping across the bar, weight and collar. He noted the undersized wooden bookcase; the soccer trophies; the swimming ribbons and medals; the brown suede shoes piously waiting outside the mosque of his closet doors; the grass-stained lacrosse gear; a wrinkled copy of Details, its cover savaged, splayed like a homicide victim across the crime scene of his taupe carpeting; and the single bed, festooned with baseball caps, a rusting lifeguard whistle, and three synthetic leis.

The items he was staring at, and choosing among, had clothed him at fraternity dances, college interviews, family weddings and funerals, all manner of formal and semi-formal occasions that seemed curiously unambiguated now. In fact, Dave realized, squinting into the hepatic darkness of his closet, these were my high school clothes. I’m a completely different guy now, but my costume hasn’t changed.

Bishop McNamara Preparatory School for Young Men
99% of Our Graduates Continue to University
30% Admitted to Ivy League/“Very Competitive” Institutions

He saw an image of himself at 17, dancing with a girl who was too short, hunched awkwardly, uncertain what stance to adopt, a Green Day ballad, played and heard without irony, banged out by an outfit of longhairs in sarcastic evening clothes, who did not bother to study or even, in most cases, to attend class because of the mistaken foreknowledge, which at the time had seemed a palpable reality, that fate had preordained rock-stardom, and who were now, because of this critical misprision, assistant night managers at local pizza franchises and small-time dealers and such.

Dave bathed in the cool waters of this murky Super-8 until it materialized into a giga-pixelated image of such startling lucidity that the big right toe of his consciousness was stung by the jellyfish of his erstwhile inexperience and vulnerability. This wasn’t so bad, really, and he didn’t make a
mad dash for shore until a school of piranha swam up and he
was forced to consider the possibility that he’d never truly
outgrown his cringe-provoking teenage gawkishness.

With an abrupt headshake, Dave returned to his
present tense. Some thoughts were better left unthunk. He
grabbed a pair of disheveled khakis, presumably unaware that
the bumbling protagonist of that short horror film had also
been wearing them.

The pants still fit, more or less, even though he’d
gained eight pounds, because he’d worn them baggier back
then, two years before. College was a neighboring state that
felt like a breakaway third-world republic where they spoke a
language that had no written cognate and where intricate folk
dancing was a revered aspect of daily life.

Shimmying into the khakis, it occurred to him that
his boxers wouldn’t peek out anymore.

But that’s okay, Dave thought, beginning to reassess the doctrine that exposed
underwear was de rigueur, which effected a nearly-
 imperceptible synaptic shift, which in turn caused something
lightweight and diaphanous, a fly’s wing, to make contact with
the underpopulated, deforested and, in all likelihood,
desertified hinterlands of his conscious awareness. These were
not thoughts Dave experienced, or even oblique image-
flickers, but rather fragmented, sub-momentary, eidetic events,
exiguous psychic drive-bys. diamond. ear. stud. still?

He selected the stained tie and, begrudgingly,
performed a half-Windsor, noosing it all the way up. A few
months before, still new to the job of Substitute Teacher, he’d
worn a navy blue v-neck sweater over a plain black t-shirt,
with the khakis and suede shoes, and had nearly been awarded
a detention from an enthusiastic teenage monitor, a pale young
man wearing a beard of acne, for loitering in the hallway
without a pass.

Dave regarded himself in the mirror. Yes, that’s
better. No one will mistake me for a student. A desk calendar
salesman from Toledo, maybe.

The hand-stamp was still an issue. He considered
leaving it there to curry favor with students. The colophon of
hip; the imprimatur of edge. Sure, I party, the black ink might
say, dismissively, without bothering to make eye contact. Even
on school nights. I’m so hungover right now, really.

The stamp was smudged, which seemed to recreate
the refracted effect of having looked at it, 8 hours ago, when
the ink was still legible and dark but which had, through the ametropic lens of insobriety, appeared otherwise.

He sauntered, mentally, through his father’s garage, trying to locate sandpaper.

Dave was at something very close to peace driving through the leafy subdivisions. He had skimmed dozens of Buddhist, Hindu and Buddho-Hindistic texts but had never enjoyed the transcendence they promised and proselytized.

The streets were wide and the speed limits moderate. Yellow metal diamonds and rectangles asked him to be cautious around children at play, especially the deaf. He considered, for perhaps the five-thousandth time, whether one particular sign was asking him to slow down because children were playing [How would the sign-maker know?] or alerting him to the fact that slow children were playing [ibid.].

He parked in the vast, right-angled lot at Braddock Senior High. The meticulous white lines, evenly spaced, described a geometry of loneliness.

He felt as if he were catching a flight.

He walked inside, past the trophy case, where, as ever, he looked for the photo of Karen Jiggets, whom he had briefly known in college, who smiled, each and every day, more than she should have given the helmet of dry, brittle hair that posed above her soccer uniform.

He found the amicable secretary, who wrapped her yogurt spoon inside half a napkin, who nibbled carrot sticks and cottage-cheese-freighted pineapple chunks, who wore white sneakers to work but was forced to hide them, like border-crossing foreign nationals, in a crinkly bag from Safeway or Giant.

He took his schedule and marched off toward first period.

In History, a tall solemn young man with a bright orange goatee that hung down to his sternum submitted a term paper on the subject of his genealogy. He read with pleasure and discomfort of the young man’s grandmother, an Irish prostitute.

“Well, who do you like?” “Metallica.” “They suck.”
“No they don’t. Who do you like?” “Emo.” “Emo?” “Yeah.”
“We HYW Which ones? Which bands in particular?” “You know, just emo. In general.” “Hey, sub? Mr. Dave?” “Yeah, what is it?”
“Well, who do you like?” Before he could answer, someone yelled

He listened to twelve different versions of this conversation, maybe more.

History II. A young man in khakis, desert boots, denim shirt and a loud unfashionable tie, who at first seemed to be mocking Dave, a sartorial parody of his own nascent adulthood, his own dress-up play, began to mutter and quietly twitch. Tourette’s, he realized, now interpreting the student’s wardrobe as a preemptive apology for his lurid involuntary outbursts.

It was every sub’s worst nightmare, the relentless cursing student who could not be punished or controlled, who could not even be admonished, however gently, Dave guessed—he had attended a pre-deployment workshop on Special Needs and Disabilities, but had come equipped with the Washington Post crossword and two pencils rather than a willingness to learn.

The reality was pale, disappointing, anticlimactic. Kevin, the Eustace Tilley of Braddock Senior High, was quiet and respectful, slightly irritating at worst. He emitted an innocuous susurrus of grunts, inaudible white noise and the occasional muffled shit. The others didn’t seem to notice. He didn’t tell anyone to fuck off, not even the jock in the front row with his baseball hat backwards and mouth agape. Dave found this deeply unsatisfying.

In the staff lunchroom, which was as bright, clean and airy as the rest of Braddock Senior High, which made Dave think that a Pine Tree air freshener, not a steel-helmeted Trojan, should anthropomorphize the school, a male teacher, who wore jeans and sneakers, who teetered on the cusp of middle age like a child about to fall off a brick wall, who had very long hair and John Lennon glasses, held forth in the expansive mode of the office blowhard. At the same time, though, he was the cool teacher, and to an almost stereotypically implausible degree [Dave scanned the room, searching for an acoustic guitar and/or hacky sack]. It was disturbing, this man’s dual shtick.

“I’m telling you, man. None of these kids even cares! When did this happen? I’m so sick of it all. I mean, they don’t care about anything.”
“I sure don’t.” The office wag laughed, loudly, smiled at the other four teachers in the room, daring them not to laugh as well, and threw his face back into his innards-spilling Ham on Rye.

“I just want to quit. I really do. I’m serious.”
“You said the same thing last month,” the office cynic claimed, without removing his eyes from a non-specific electronic device. “Go already.”
“I will! I’m serious! I’m finally gonna do it, man. Move to Portugal and write that novel.”
The office cynic clucked/chuckled, ambiguously enough.

The nurturer, whose hairstyle looked like half a bagel, stroked the cool teacher’s/blowhard’s arm, even more earnestly and soothingly than normal. “We need you too much. You know that.” She gave the office cynic a serious eyebrow-furrowing.

“Hmff.” The cool teacher/blowhard fidgeted.
The nurturer touched his shoulder. Somewhere, a complex tea was steeping. “You’re too good a teacher for this. Stay, stay. It’s your vocation.”
“I know, I know.”
The sub approached the microwave oven, placed his sandwich on the rotating glass plate, and absentmindedly pushed buttons that were flat, conceptual, not really buttons at all.
He found a seat and began to read a book and eat his banana.
Perhaps because he’d been listening to the cool teacher/blowhard, who was almost certainly an English teacher, hold forth, Dave considered the word revision, which in the UK means “to study, especially in relation to major exams.” He mentally revised several of the impressions he’d made upon entering the staff lunchroom. The school mascot was wearing a Spartan not a Trojan helmet, said object was totemistic rather than anthropomorphic, the cool teacher’s/blowhard’s glasses were more Vladimir Ilyich Lenin than John Lennon.

“What’s that godawful stench?” the cynic asked.
“Do you shower, Simms?” the wag asked, referring to the cool teacher/blowhard. “Or do you just bathe in patchouli?”

With laughter that walked into the room even more quickly than she did, a woman with a big personality, who
liked to tell people that she had a big personality, click-clacked behind Dave with almost impressively volume and resonance. “Good one. So do ya, Simmsy?”

“I shower. Thanks for asking.”

“Something does reek, though.” The cynic pushed a button, with noticeable gusto, on his non-specific electronic device.

It does stink, Dave thought, eyes half-focused on the dense foliage of his text.

It was right about now that Dave remembered his slowly spinning sandwich [tomato, rocca, turkey and Emmental on a croissant], guessing that he’d inadvertently entered 3:00 instead of the more reasonable :30, and further remembered the bespoke dressing that he’d whipped up a few hours ago [olive oil, Dijon mustard, salt, pepper and generous portions of garlic].

As if simultaneously performing the functions of both theme music and deus ex machina, the microwave dinged, and everyone stopped speaking for a moment. They all watched the appliance with mute reverence, as if approaching the climax of a holiday pantomime, but no one went to claim the sandwich and thus admit to the pongish crime. Dave had discovered that he was himself the criminal he sought, but he was no Oedipus and there wasn’t a sharpened stick in sight.

“Maybe a bad choice,” someone said, eventually, breaking the silence.

It took Dave 15 seconds to sort out that he was the intended audience for these words. Big personality tapped the back cover of his book, with very red and very long fingernails.

He flipped to the front cover, as if having forgotten what he was reading. Lolita. He turned to face big personality, who’s dark brown hair was even bigger and more substantial. “Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

The cosine of her mid-length bob, he noted, hung to the asymptote of her shoulders. She stared at him without speaking for several moments before breaking into a great big belly-laugh and, as if to make this visually evident, grabbed her belly. “He guesses I’m right? Lolita? Gimme a break. They’ll have you arrested for messing around with the students.”
Walked away from the room, with a partial smile taped to his face, Dave could hear someone ask: “Who was that?”

As if in response, big personality said, “He guesses I’m right?” a chorus punctuated with another great big belly-laugh.

I’ll eat in the classroom from now on, Dave thought, invigilating his penultimate class. They scratched at a mindless worksheet while he mentally constructed a syllogism [Maj. Prem.: all work is boring; Min. Prem.: subbing is work; Conc.: subbing is boring], a process which, like a Killer Sudoku, was as comforting and soporific as Brown Bear had been 18-12 years earlier.

He closed his eyes and drifted along the James River of somnolence, on the birch-bark canoe of a hangover, into the recent-distant past.

The College of the Glorious Revolution. In Pilgrim garb, despite the fact that Virginia is not Massachusetts, the sons of gentlemen farmers smoke long handmade pipes in a cramped room above a Williamsburg inn. A soon-to-be president is milling about downstairs, happy drunk, pinching a busty stein-hoisting servant girl. Is it John Tyler?

Dave can hardly make out his features in the gray, smoky space. It’s like a KISS concert, he anachronistically muses. He was an unseen first-person observer, but now he is a third-person participant. He wears contemporary clothing but no shoes.

His course schedule has only two words: quadrivium and trivium. The news has spread quickly, like the smallpox outbreak that ravaged town 18 months ago. The new academic building has been completed by Sir Christopher Wren, the most highly regarded of English architects, who built St. Paul’s Cathedral and, after the Great Fire of 1666, practically everything else in London.

A man approaches. 6’3”. Strawberry-blonde hair. He lacks confidence but exudes a certain grace. “Wanna play Frisbee? Quarters? Hey, did you study for that Rhetoric exam?”

Is it Tom Jefferson? Dave wonders. But why would he be wearing my roommate’s lacrosse helmet and a Def Leopard t-shirt? Nothing makes sense anymore. Why am I here? What is it all about? Have I just been wasting my time?
The bell fustigates him to wakefulness.
“I’m out the do’,” a skinny boy with no chin says, impersonating someone. The others have already exited.
Dave checks his schedule. Latin V.
V?

Summer school? Did they take Latin I in eighth grade? Do they come from homes where Latin is spoken? Is it their first language?

As the last of these queries formulated itself along the gray bumpy ridges of his frontal lobe, or perhaps in Heschl’s gyrus—one, even one neuro-linguist, can’t be certain; there is a science to the brain, but we, even we specialists, are toddlers prodding it with sticks and rusty forks—Dave found himself in the relevant classroom wading in a clear, calm, pale-green sea of bespectacled, anemic, under- or overweight males with no muscle tone. For the second time that day, he discovered stereotypes where individual people should have been. This made him suspect the integrity of his own qualities, made him question whether he had a personality or simply a persona.

He considered the etymology of this last term, persona, which had existed in his own thoughts before its shadow-like representation in this text. Derived from Latin, meaning “mask.” Originally applied to theatrical masks.

The students looked up at him, as if in slow motion, but he could not locate the words of greeting with which to introduce himself, or perhaps he could locate the words but could not assemble them into syntactically meaningful units. What is certain, however, is that his momentary aphasia was the result of two holographic-seeming masks, one grinning, the other frowning, both rather theatrically; they danced around his head and darted toward his face. He was tempted to remove the red- and green-lenses 3-D glasses he was not wearing.

Dave shook his head violently to scatter the djinns of what he took to be either a quarter-life crisis or burgeoning alcoholism. “Hey.”

A Brillo-haired boy in the front row turned to his friend. “He used the vulgate! Do you not speak Latin, sir?”
“Sorry, no. Just a few words here and there.”
There was a low nervous muttering in what could have been any language.
“I apologize, sir.” Brillo appeared genuinely contrite.
“For being rude, I mean.”
“No sweat.”
“We just. We just didn’t expect somebody like you.”
“Who doesn’t speak Latin,” someone else said.
There were only 5 students in the classroom. Hardly a sea at all. Not even a pond. More of a puddle or spill.
A gangly boy in the front row—they all occupied the front row, it now occurred to Dave—raised his arm, with the help of his other arm.
“Yes?”
“What are your credentials, sir?”
Dave told them, shocked but a little delighted.
“You don’t have an MA, sir?” Gangly asked. “Are you sure?”
“I think I’d know.”
“Yeah, I guess you would, sir.” A red-faced boy with a too-tight Star Wars t-shirt looked downcast.
“I’m not here to teach you. You realize that, right?
Just continue with…whatever it was you were doing last time.”
“We’ve been working on The Iliad.” Brillo reached into his backpack for an electronic translator, or perhaps an authentic Federation phaser.
“Cool. Do that.”

With a prefix of shifty eyes adjoined to the root word of their actions, and a rather lengthy introductory clause of twitching and body scratching, the students began to reach for foreign versions of the classic that Dave knew well in his own language. Their texts were wanton with marginalia, profligate with underlining, licentious with highlighting, the pages gaudily bejeweled with colorful petroleum-based tags, the books themselves, having been inflated with place-markers and turned-down page ends, practically zaftig.
Why aren’t they translating a Latin text, he suddenly wondered, instead of a Greek text first kneaded and rolled into Latin?
The boys were thoroughly engaged in their work, silently curating the small joys of problem-solving. Dave smiled. No one stared out the window or at the clock or tapped his pencil or spoke out of turn or spat a spitball or cursed or farted or even paused for a moment. The room was so quiet he could hear their nervousness around girls, their fear of football...
players, but, because these boys were so polite, they played such insecurities with a mute.

And then it hit him. Eureka! he almost yelled, nearly forgetting the actual content of his epiphany because he was trying to remember the origin of the ur-Eureka moment. It was a Greek, right? A king? He was in the bathtub, that much I remember. I should ask these guys. They’d know.

In the rapidly morphing stream of his thoughts, the morphology he tacitly quipped, Eureka evolved into Euripides into the punch line of an old stupid joke that, he was relatively certain, was traditionally rendered in a Yiddish voice. You-rip-uh-dees? Then, you-pay-uh-for-dees! Maybe it was an Italian voice. As he tried to work it out, tried to focus his mental energies on this one specific task, Dave was sent off into a semantic spiral, an infinite regression of idle speculation, from which it was difficult to recover. Frontal lobotomy? I’d rather have a bottle in front of me. Working hard or hardly working?

Eureka. I’ve got it. A “quality of life” decision. I’ll only sub for Latin V classes from now on. Maybe Greek as well. Only the classics. These kids are great! They’ll never give me any trouble. Just look at them! They’ll sit here and work all year, translating Horace and Catullus and…Virgil into English, or from English back into Latin, or from English or Latin into Fortran, Vulcan, Elvish…

Dave watched, awestruck and slightly intimidated by the students’ industry and erudition. They seemed to know more than he, and to understand life better. He considered, shamefully, his own sloth and indirection. It should have been them, the students, pimply teenagers, but it was he. He was the palimpsest, easily erased and re-inscribed; he was the blank slate, the fresh-faced nothing. He gazed at the students again, thinking: They’ve already been composed, revised and edited with such meticulous care and attention to detail. They’re texts, meaningful texts. I’m a ragged page of erasings, rips and scribbles.

How do people get up, each and every day, shower, shave, eat half a grapefruit and go to work. Say hello to the cardboard cutout in the next cubicle, lick the boss’s ass, enjoy a two-week holiday at Myrtle Beach, with putt-putt and a mild sunburn? I’d kill myself if that was my life. But what will be my life?

Dave had no qualms about living in the basement of his parents’ spacious, comfortable 5-bedroom split-level
home. Except when he ran into someone from college, someone who was in law school or working as a stockbroker

[Qu. So, what are you up to these days? An. Not much, really. You know. I’m a sub. Living with my parents, hanging out with Randy. Re. Oh, cool...]. It was easy and rent-free, for now, though his father, the Admiral, had been eyeing him with increased frequency and import. Dave had never been a true man, not to the Admiral, not even when he was a starting midfielder for the varsity lacrosse team. He was a democrat, had no interest in serving in the armed forces, did not fish or hunt, could not build or repair things. Dave began to recoil in his father’s presence. His mother was much more supportive, on the surface, but he grew wary of her averted eyes, her conversational ellipses, the high-pitched vacuum of her voice.

How did people do it? Dave texted Randy. They would meet at Taco Laredo in the Springfield Mall. They would catch a movie, eat some tacos, drink cheap Tecate beer from plastic cups, and try to forget.

Randy was already there, seated, when Dave showed up. The chairs were molded, synthetic and bright red. Randy sat on one—slouched would be the better and more accurate verb. -Ed.—and his feet, shod in unlaced calfskin workboots, reclined on the chair opposite, his thick legs parallel to the functional, white, easy-wipe table.

“Hey.” After greeting Randy and nodding vaguely with his chin, Dave went straight to the counter, avoiding Randy himself, who was surrounded by empty cans of Tecate as if engaged in a dipsomaniacal chess match.

“Three tacos, please. No, four. And two Tecates.”

“Need a cup?”

“No.”

Dave turned to look at Randy, who seemed as at-home and organic in Taco Laredo as an elderly Italian man in a ribbed tank-top sitting, on a Brooklyn street corner, on an aluminum folding chair with nylon webbing. He fit so cleanly into this setting, in fact, that, if you listened closely, you might have heard a mechanical click when he inserted himself into the space.

“That’ll be $ ____.”

“Here, thanks.”

“Enjoy your meal, sir.”
“You, too,” Dave said, dumbly. He was pathologically unable to disengage the wheels of discourse from the runs of normative meaningless chit-chat at the critical wy e juncture where individualized, non-automated responses were required.

As he conveyed the red plastic tray, cratered with cigarette burns, to the table, Dave considered his mother. There had been a time, not too long ago, when, if he said he was going to miss dinner, she was disappointed, but now she only looked relieved. It had never occurred to him that his parents might actually want him to leave the house. Not simply because they wanted him to grow up, get a job, lead a happy, productive and statistically-average life, but simply because they no longer wanted to share space with him. He tried not to imagine what manner of sexual antics they would be free to pursue in his putative absence.

“Hey,” Randy said. He wore jeans, a black t-shirt, a billowing flannel workshirt and a baseball hat that said Fulton, NY Horseshoe Club. His hair had growing out, almost to the shoulders, and he sported a mustache that was almost unnaturally thick and glossy though Dave wasn’t sure whether it was intended to be sarcastic, so he withheld comment. Randy could be surprisingly touchy.

“Hey. Again.” Dave sat down.
“How’s subbing?”
“Good. How’s Pizza Hot.”
Dave always said it this way. Pizza Hot. Randy had a double-BA in Philosophy/Art History and worked as the assistant night manager for the aforementioned pizza delivery service, which was under litigation from the Pizza Hut Corporation for copyright infringement. Aside from the “vaguely similar and completely coincidental name” of the two establishments—according to Cyrus Smith, Pizza Hot owner and operator, in affidavit and sworn testimony—Pizza Hot featured specials, toppings, menus, tablecloths and wait staff uniforms that bore some resemblance to those of Pizza Hut. Moreover, the Pizza Hot logo, which was embossed on napkins, menus, uniforms, tri-fold brochures, glossy newspaper-inserted promos, ad infinitum, appeared, to some, to be an upside-down Pizza Hut logo.

Dave began to eat.
Randy went to the counter for more beer and Tex-Mex food.
He returned to the table.
They ate in silence.
Randy finished eating, chugged the remainder of one of the two Tecates he’d just bought, wiped his mouth with a waxy, anorexic, largely ineffective napkin, and stifled a belch with the back of his left hand. He sang [to the tune of “Copacabana”]: “At the Chandos, the Chandos Brown house / he distilled his own brandy / while parsing Tristram Shandy / At the Chandos, the Chandos Brown house / he wrote his doctoral thesis / on Joyce’s Ulysses…”

Neither Randy nor Dave were very familiar with “Copacabana,” so parodic versions of the song were rather tricky.

“I like the off-rhyme, ‘thesis-Ulysses.’ Genius.”
“Thanks, bro.”
“We are the Chandos Brown appreciation society,” Dave began, to the tune of “Village Green Preservation Society” [by the Kinks, title track of their 1968 concept album: while both young men knew this song, its lyrics and melody, quite well, with obsessive devotion in fact, the reader is, in all likelihood, not familiar with it, in which case how, with what cadence, will they read along in the tacit chamber orchestra of their minds?], “God save hoops ‘n sticks, naturalism and taxonomy” [And how to parse the lyrics, based as they are on in-jokes related to former, beloved professor, Dr. Michael Chandos Brown?].

“Nice one.”
“Thanks.”
“College,” Randy said, “is just a bunch of old guys talkin’ shit.”
“You don’t believe that for a second.”
“Sure I do.”
“Gross exaggeration.”
“Simple fact.”

Dave sipped his third Tecate thoughtfully, slightly upset. Randy, with eyes of barbicide blue, tapped his fingers against the table, and Dave listened to the resulting iambs and trochees, which seemed to mimic the rhythms of his own heartbeat, like an octogenarian couple who, after 60 years of marriage, have grown inseparable and non-disambiguated.
The meal, the beer, the conversation, the evening ended, but the substrate of suppressed tension, of course, did not. It never does, never will.

Dave, in his father’s car, wound through the quiet suburban streets in a darkness superintended by chirping crickets, over-lit 7/11’s, and pre-fab mini-mansions; late-model sedans, government haircuts and college applications slept soundly and dreamed of tie-clips and violent crime. Only the smell of chlorine, from community swimming pools, was out in the street, drifting through the cul-de-sacs and subdivisions, smoking French cigarettes and flaunting Home Owner’s Association bylaws, slouching and snarling against lampposts or sitting, with theatrical derring-do, on the hood of someone else’s car.

A Jandek CD was spinning, or whatever more passive verb could more truly describe the abstract, encrypted actions that produced this recorded sound. Dave depressed STOP and engaged the buttons that made all the windows go down. He could smell fresh-cut grass, McDonald’s fries, and the chemistry of entomological genocide.

Something burned in his febrile apostate’s heart, the desire to do something, to, to, to something. Education, or something else, had critically excised everything from his belief system. Logic 101 [Prof. Garretson, with the woefully stained Oxford shirts, BO, and psoriatic blossoms across his face and neck] had demonstrated the need for empirical evidence, a benchmark his values, attitudes and gods had been unable to reach.

Dave saw himself as a diploma-grasping freshly-minted graduate, as a freshman on the first day of college, as a 15-year-old high school student dreaming of cars and soccer victories. He’d been avoiding these guys for years, embarrassing old friends who’d tell people how you played with Star Wars action figures and wet your bed, but now he wanted them back. They could play Rummy 500 or throw the football around. They could go to Taco Laredo and not invite Randy.

At the stoplight, Dave closed his eyes and tightened his grip on the wheel, but his idiolect did not have the vocabulary or syntax to frame the relevant issues. Life, as he now saw it, was an error of refraction. As if in sympathy, the light changed to a green of unfocused shards and murky glimmers.
Dave recalled the nausea-inciting off-kilteredness of his hand-stamp, which still disfigured the veiny canvas of his hand. There was a woozy list to his stomach while he viewed the illegible hand-stamp of his life and its rapidly diminishing prospects. He thought of Socrates and the tabula rasa, the blank slate upon which the text of our lives is printed, and had only slender faith in this major premise.

Fate is our hand-stamp, Dave understood. He began to cultivate this minor faith. However, and there always is one, he wondered who was holding the ink pad, how much ink was left, and what it might say on the stamp, an object that could be purchased at any Office Superstore.
Route 66 Sunrise
(for Larry)

Gallup, New Mexico
the asshole of America/the world/the universe
termites munching away at institutions rotted to shells
houses of cards and personal fiefdoms;
like Africa

Frag the fucking senior officers because they’re the worst offenders
Pull a fuckin Col Nguyen Ngoc Loan on the College Deferments
and the conscientious objectors

Route 66 sunrise
Huevos Rancheros
Red~white~xmas
I love the smell of napalm in the morning

Willard: You know, someday this war's gonna end.
Kilgore (sadly): Yes, I know.
Suddenly he senses something—he stops—lifts his hand—then frantically licks his fingers and puts them up in the air.

Karma—or, as they called it in the 60s, the shit hitting the fan—
is a bitch, a beast;
to each his monster
The Darlings of Lisboa

Argos plays the accordion in Lisboa. Not a single place but first he plays for the workers near the government buildings. On warm mornings he will play as they file down the small sidewalk that runs along the offices and various department centers. Then he plays near the outdoor cafes located on the wide boulevard where the people sit for lunch or where they stand at the bakery counter sipping coffee and eating the small custard pies. At fourteen he still loves the music. The music resonates against his chest and fills him with vibration and rhythm which replaces the hunger his stomach will call his attention to when he stops his playing to move several blocks into the city near the monument and fountain. His fingers play the keys and often decide the music he makes. Traditional plaintive music, Sinatra, Les Miserables. He wanted to learn some German music but had no exposure to it though he kept his ears open whenever groups of them sat at tables. Occasionally they would burst into a verse but it would always break down into rolls of bear like laughter. Not enough for him to catch a melody before the sea breeze took it up and away.

His little nut brown Chihuahua sat on Argos’ shoulder and rested his forelegs on the accordion as Argos played. Pago knew his music well. Perched half on the shoulder his front legs on the accordion Pago had his seat and listened to all that Argos played. One particular song, “New York, New York”, always resulted in Pago licking Argos’ ear. Argos never understood why his little dog enjoyed this song above all others. There is no accounting for taste he had concluded. Whether Argos played this song well or his fingers merely accommodated the pattern Pago would find his ear and give a tender little lick. An Asian couple captivated by the little dog perched on his shoulder stood and listened to a traditional Portuguese medley. They were clearly amazed the dog could ride the accordion’s diaphragm and remain comfortably seated on Argos’ shoulder. They held pleasant smiles and gently swayed to the music. When he stopped the woman gave him a coin worth two euros while the man snapped a picture with his cellular phone.

Jorge, the guitar boy, was coming up from the cafes to the monument in the square. He had a beautiful voice and kept his guitar sound just enough below it so that everyone
could hear his range and feeling. On certain lively songs he used his foot to work a tambourine he positioned on the ground. It was time for Agros to go down the street to the cafes just relinquished by guitar boy. In the middle of the collection of eight or so eateries grouped equally on either side of the wide pedestrian boulevard Argos’ brother-in-law waited tables. As guitar boy put down his instrument case to open it and get his guitar Argos with Pago prancing along at his feet was walking passed. “How is the fishing today Pago? Anything yet this afternoon?”

“There are Germans.” Argos said. “Few of the English have left their hotels.”

“You will see some down at the cafes now that the morning tour buses have come back I think. Watching the people eat was making me very hungry. My stomach was singing louder than my mouth. It is a good thing it is time for me to work the monument. My stomach had its own song going on down there. Here at the monument it will be quiet so I can sing to the people.”

“There are Asians walking about and many in the cathedral. They will love your Elvis songs.”

“Music casts a wide net, eh Pago,” guitar boy said to the little dog. Pago had pranced over to the open guitar case and was smelling the interior with consummate care and complete absorption. He ignored the comment directed at him and returned to Argos’ feet to stand watchful and vigilant.

“Adeus,” said Argos.
“A paz agora,” said guitar boy.
Maurice, his brother-in-law, was setting tables. His back was to Argos. Pago ran around under whatever chairs and tables were empty looking for scraps of food that may have fallen to the sidewalk. Maurice did not turn to look at Argos but said, “The boss doesn’t want the dog under the tables.”

“What are bits of fish and bits of bread to the boss?”
Maurice turned to Argos, “I don’t know but the boss is the boss. He could make it difficult for you to play here.”
“He’s the third boss here since I began playing. Why should I worry? This one too will be gone.”
“You are young but I am surprised you haven’t learned there is always a boss.”
“And you are older and my brother-in-law and I am equally surprised you don’t know that there is no boss for an
accordion player. Pago, come.” He reached down, took the
dog in one hand and placed him on his shoulder. Then he
began to play a traditional song his sister had loved. One about
magpies and a king who believed women had hidden wings.
He knew Maurice disliked this song because it reminded him
of Carmen.

Carmen died of the breast cancer. Quickly, so quickly
everyone talked about the speed in which she died more so
than the fact she had died so young, at nineteen. Maurice
loved Carmen with such a love that her sickness and death had
been his sickness and death. Except for one important point.
He still lived and worked waiting tables while Carmen rested
below the earth and could not be seen again. During the time
of Carmen’s battle with her disease Maurice behaved very
badly. He wept uncontrollably at all times of the day or night.
These were inconsolable outbursts that began at the earliest
news of her disease when Carmen and the family nursed hope
she would survive because she was so young and this was a
fairly known or common cancer. Later Maurice had to stop his
work because his tears and howling utterances could not be
contained during the lunch or dinner hours. He himself began
to lose weight and color to the point he appeared to be far
closer to death than Carmen. Argos, his mother and father, in
fact his other brothers, aunts and uncles all came to resent this
form of grief Maurice displayed. Argos had seen that Carmen
and Maurice were in love in their marriage but it did not seem
to him they had dissolved their separate identities into a single
persona. They were charmed and gained energy from each
other certainly. But Carmen appeared to be Carmen and
Maurice, Maurice.

Once Argos brought Pago to his sister’s apartment on
the hills near the castle walls. It had been a cold morning and
Pago’s little body was twitching with shivers each time a cold
blow came up the avenue from the harbor. Carmen warmed
milk, poured it into a bowl and placed it on the tile floor of her
kitchen for Pago. She drew her cushioned chair up close to the
radiator and made Argos sit and rest while the warmth got to
his feet. She took scissors, her sewing kit and a cloth napkin to
the couch and began to produce a little robe or vest Pago could
wear in the custom of a tiny saddle blanket.

Maurice, rising from bed late as he always did
because of his hours at the café, went to the stove, poured
himself tea and sat close beside Carmen. He scratched his
head vigorously, yawned loudly and rested his arm across Carmen’s shoulder. She was drawn against him and said in a happy sing song voice, “I loved where you kissed me Maurice. Last night you kissed me in a very wonderful spot. I don’t think you have ever kissed me in that place before.”

“Stop, don’t. Don’t talk about it. If you do it will not be yours. You will give it up. If it was really special you must keep it to yourself and not talk it out.”

“But Maurice, it was so sweet; you were so sweet last night. I want you to know it. If you don’t know it pleases me you are not likely to do it again. After all, you have never kissed me there before, how do I get you to kiss me there again if I don’t tell you.”

“Because I know. I am the one who kissed you there.”

“Oh, I don’t believe you know the spot I am talking about.”

“I do.”

“Where then?”

“I kissed you on the crevice between your hips and your ribs.”

“Yes, it was exactly there, a lovely kiss and you must kiss me there more and more and more.”

“Ah, but you see, it isn’t special anymore. You have given it away. It has lost its moment. The kiss has become something else. It has become a request rather than just a pure thing.”

“No, silly, I disagree. I believe that the more you know about what makes me happy the more likely I will be happy. Because I know you Maurice and you love me.”

The tone was getting flat in their conversation. Pago left his bowl and ran to jump directly into Carmen’s lap. She squealed with joy and let the dog settle in. Pago circled once and sat looking up at Maurice from the folds of Carmen’s skirt. Pago looked at Maurice with eyelids half closed. A look of disdain. A look of patient wisdom beyond dog.

Carmen finished sewing a button to one edge of the ‘blanket’. Then she fitted the blanket on Pago’s back, pulled a wide cloth strap that had been sewn to the other edge of the blanket under Pago’s belly and buttoned it securely in place. The strap was wide so that it covered much of his chest just as the blanket covered much of his back. The dog’s hind and forelegs were free of it. Pago jumped to the floor and walked
about. He came over to Argos looking for approval. “Yes Pago, that is a beautiful coat on you. The fit is perfect. You are a very handsome dog and your new coat makes you look very smart.”

Argos stood and lifted his accordion. He strapped it to his back in the style of a backpack so he could more easily walk the distance down from Carmen’s apartment to the plaza below.

“Argos, don’t you agree with me?” Maurice asked in a conspiratorial air.

“I don’t know about these things really.”

“Of course you must, it is just a simple truth, would you agree?”

“I do agree that there are certain things, certain details about life that can be changed when talked about or painted or even sung about. Things that are not the same once we allow our mind to put expression to them.”

“Ah ha, you see Carmen.”

“But in the end I can’t agree with you completely because we were given a mind to do just that. If I am a painter and I capture a very beautiful sunset this beauty can be experienced over and over by many people. The same with music, if it had been experienced and never written what would Pago and I have for the tourists?”

Maurice, who had felt a rare sense of camaraderie with Argos when he began his answer, now confronted a feeling akin to betrayal. “You see, Carmen, how it is with your family. Whenever I am with your people I feel like I am a one-eyed man in the land of the blind.”

From the couch Carmen replied, “Well then, with your one good eye I want you to find that spot again tonight.”

For a half hour Argos played songs that he knew Carmen had enjoyed or ones he thought she liked. When finished, with Pago still on his shoulder, he quietly approached the people eating at the café tables. His technique was to come up to the table, stand a moment looking young and sad and vulnerable. His eyes wide, unblinking, the dog perched on his shoulder. He assumed a look very much like the dog’s. When his presence became a reality around the table there would be twin dignified yet sad faces staring at them and he would ask in a quiet voice, “Did you like the music? Haben Sie die Musik gemocht? Gostou da musica?” If anyone at the table
responded he knew he would be rewarded by a euro or so. If no one at the table acknowledged him he would move to the next table and “Did you like the music? Haben Sie die Musik gemocht? Gostou da musica?”

When he had finished with the ten tables that made up the outside business of Julianne’s Argos usually pocketed about 15 euros. As he began to leave for the café at the far end of the small clutch of restaurants in the boulevard Maurice left his station and joined Argos just out of ear shot of Julianne’s. “Argos, I know what you were doing. You were tearing at my heart with those songs. Carmen always asked you to play all of those. You have no need to be cruel. I’m doing the best I can, you know but it is not easy for me. You were her brother yes but I was her husband and my life was her life. You know this.”

“There was nothing to it Maurice. Nothing. Most of the time my fingers play what they want to play. I am not thinking of anything. I am listening along with everyone else.”

“So it is then. Listen. I am going to tell you something I have decided to do. I am going back to Barcelona. I can not breathe here anymore. I can not sleep. I can only eat a little and work. There is no life left for me. I am dead here. My uncle is opening a restaurant near the church of Saint James. He has asked me to be the manager and I said I will be that man in three weeks.”

“You will make a good manager, I am sure of it. You think things through. You are very thorough.”

“Thank you. And I agree. I have waited tables for a long time. This is a business I know and an opportunity to manage, this is something I will take. To Rinsco I am just a waiter. His best waiter but I will always be no more than a waiter to him. It is time for me to go home now, what do you say to that Argos?”

“What, to Barcelona?”

“Yes, of course Barcelona, that is what I am saying.”

“Oh, well, yes, Carmen, all of us would want you to be happy. There is no reason to turn your back on an opportunity like this.”

“I know, I know, and this city is only sadness to me now. We come to what I want to talk to you about. You are sixteen years old.”

“No, in fact I turn fifteen in two days.”
“Ah, well no matter. I will tell Rinsco you are sixteen and if you say so it will be so. Here it is, here is what I have in mind. I want you to take my position as waiter here. You will make much more money. It will be good for you and the family. Rinsco will agree, he listens to me and if he agrees he can be trusted. Over the next two weeks I can train you. The basics aren’t hard to learn and you being a young waiter, you will probably take home even more than I do.”

“I don’t know Maurice, I am a musician not a waiter.”

“That is what I mean, it is much harder to learn to play an instrument than to learn how to wait on tables but I make better money here at the table than you do playing through the city. Certainly more on a bad day than you do on your best day. And I want to leave knowing I’ve done something good. Something that will be of benefit to everyone, including you.”

“But I’m not sixteen.”

“You look sixteen. Seventeen if you say it. And you’ve learned that look which brings out the tips. I will teach you to wait on tables, the rest you already know.”

“And the boss?”

“I am his best man. He will listen to me and he will need a fine man, a skilled man right away with high season coming on. In two weeks I can make you the best waiter in all of Lisboa. I must get back. So, what do you say?”

“More money can be a good thing. And Pago loves dad as much as he does me.”

“Oh yes, life will be much easier for Pago, certainly. So then, what do you say? Carmen would want this for you I am sure and I would be relieved and happy that this job was going to someone that mattered.”

“I am a musician. I make music, that is what I do. I don’t know if I want to do what you do.”

“What, you don’t want to make more money? Soon you could be making more money than anyone your age in the entire city and working fewer hours than you do right now. Think about it. Come back later tonight and you can say, Maurice, thank you very much, this is a great idea and I will do it. Here take this. Who can think on an empty stomach?”

Argos took the brown paper bag Maurice handed him. He unrolled the top and looked inside.
“There is a sandwich with ham, roasted red pepper, a drizzle of olive oil and in the aluminum foil there is a sausage cut up for Pago and as you can see a bottled water. Go somewhere, eat, think, then tell me your answer. Rinsco will be in tonight and I can begin to get this plan in motion.”

Pago, perched on Argos’ shoulder was leaning in towards the bag smelling the contents. To maintain his balance yet still inspect the bag Pago was required to initiate a series of jerky pressings with his forelegs against Argos’ shoulder. The boy rolled up the top of the paper bag and said, “Yes I will go think this through. Thank you for the food, Maurice, I am sad to hear you are going to Barcelona but everyone will understand. If putting some distance between you and your sadness can help who can object to that?”

He walked a few blocks until the street became narrow and twisted up towards the castle and the apartment Carmen had lived in with Maurice. The street rose at a sharp incline. He let Pago down to walk beside him. His mind was turning. Wordless thinking, churning the opportunity and its consequences over in a nearly silent rhythm. Argos could not hear his mind but he could feel it at work.

After passing the church they reached a small park. The park offered a wide vista of the harbor below. It was on a bluff above the rooftops of the houses and apartments that stepped down the slope towards the water. Here at the edge of land before it dove quickly downwards were a few benches in the shade of a jaguamundo tree. The tree’s black trunk shot upwards, its roots gripping the park firmly to the edge. Its thick dark branches spread out above the benches. Clusters of small blue sky flowers bloomed on the smaller branches fingering out from the larger ones. Each cluster had a tuft of little green leaves and then this bouquet of light blue flowers. To Argos these were the most beautiful trees. The dark, heavy trunk and its branches that twisted and stretched out ended not in leaves but in bunches of flowers all a delicate blue. Delicate like a clear day.

He unstrapped his accordion and rested it against the wrought iron legs of the bench. Pago marshaled around the park area then returned to sit beside the accordion, as if guarding it, though his eyes were clearly on the brown paper bag on Argos’ lap. Maurice never gave Argos a lunch before this, never extended Pago a bit of meat or willingly allowed Pago to inspect below the café tables. Unraveling the
aluminum foil Argos saw enough chunks of sausage to equal Pago’s weight two times over. He took his own sandwich from the bag, unwrapped it and used the wrapper to store about half the sausage. This he put back in the bag. He placed the remainder, in its open foil, on the ground in front of Pago. Pago remained seated beside the accordion. His self appointed duty as guardian of the accordion was causing him great conflict now that a fist full of meat was placed below his nose. “Well, what are you waiting for? Go ahead. Eat. It is yours.”

Pago pounced.

Argos ate his ham and bread, sipped his bottled water.

He knew that an important opportunity had come his way. But. But, but, but. He would miss his music. Miss the freedom of playing what he wanted when he wanted and where he wanted. The feeling of the accordion vibrating through his chest. He would miss that too. He had done it for the money, yes, he played music for money. He was a man, yes, and a man must work and the more money a man can make with the work the better off he will be. It is an obvious fact in this life. It is not that he will make no music. Certainly at family gatherings and alone before or after work he can keep his playing alive. There will be a boss and he will be confined to one spot on the boulevard all day. It was at that moment, while eating his ham and peppers, he took a pencil from his pocket and began writing words to a song. Spurts of words, three four at a time. He wrote it on the paper bag. It was about a beautiful young woman who died too early in her life. Where she was buried a jaguamundo tree grew and for decades and decades people sat under its shade. Eventually a king decided he needed a larger table. His workmen felled the jaguamundo tree and from its dense dark wood they fashioned a large table engraved with scenes of Portuguese life. For five hundred years it has been said by everyone who has eaten from this table that the food never tasted better in their lives.

Argos never wrote words. He only played music. But he pushed these words out of him and onto the paper. He knew then what would come to be. During the next two weeks he would put the music to these words and then he would teach it to guitar boy and to the three Emanuel brothers who sang harmony and did what guitar boy and Argos did with the tourists. If they liked this song and sang it well then he would hear his music throughout the day and evening as he waited on
the people who came to sit at his café. If they did not like this song, if they would not add it to their play list for the tourists then Argos would not accept this job Maurice offered him. He would play his accordion and listen more closely to what his fingers had to say.
Tom McLaren

Evil faux-Buddhists

cnosticus in their utter conspicuousness
Wild Dogs manic depressants
scourge the American Southwest
North, South, East, and West of the Pecos

Richard Gere would be proud!

Evil faux-Buddhists
blaspheming the Five Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path
with every thought, word, and deed
Buddhism not about peace, but
consolidating personal power bases, gaining material good $
and punishing enemies, rivals like Mafia Dons
and pulling the wool over the eyes of uneducated Indians
who couldn’t know any better

Evil faux-Buddhists
eating veggie whoppers at the Burger King in Flagstaff
Xiao Long: A meat eating monk? You need a lesson too!

Evil faux-Buddhists
pearly whites barbie doll wanna-looks, fishnet stockings
putrid black vaginas not even a mother could love
only 10 minutes: the old In Out (Burgers)
running away as fast as their little legs would carry them
Alex DeLarge: I’ve just come to read the meter

Evil faux-Buddhists
meditating not to Nirvana
unenlightened—getting out of bed wheelchair and off life support
only to attack more qualified subordinates with kartikas
Aztec sacrificing hot entrails to their own ugly Will to Power

Siddhartha would weep like Christ at the side of dead Lazarus!

Evil faux-Buddhists
going up to the mountain with all the knives
and going to the wok and deep fat fried

I thought this was a religion of peace
Outside, Watching

Mrs. Phillips is easy to see through the front window. The moon shines blue across her nightgown which is flapping in the breeze. Nothing hides her screams. No cars rattling by, no kids hollering across yards, not even the usual sound of crickets twisting the air. Just 20 acres of pure country silence, and she is tearing it to pieces. "You son of a bitch! Who gave you the right? The bastard that you are! I never want to see your God damn face again --" She yells at an empty gravel road. No one beside her except her shadow, which has lain down on the grass, as if it were too tired. With fists full of cloth, she twists the nightgown at her hips, pushing the knuckles deeper and deeper into her groin.

The madness continues. She works her head back and forth screaming beneath the layers of hair whipping her cheeks and neck. Beside her the shadow of a girl moves along the grass, stopping inches from the chaos. Tonight Sally waits for a moment, mesmerized by the demon that has seized her mother at this blue hour. Sally and I both watch, unable to move our eyes. A gust of wind pummels the grass, sending Mrs. Phillips’ nightgown flying around her waist. The spell breaks and Sally reaches for her mother’s hands. Mrs. Phillips trails a little behind, like a resistant child who’s exhausted herself on a tantrum.

The next morning, I nose out the front window, peering across the road at my neighbor’s yard. Mrs. Phillips is tending her impatiens. After a moment she stands, and walks inside, not a trace of memory crossing her face.

This Sunday morning is gray in Sacred Heart, Kentucky. The church seven miles away, rings its bells at eight am sharp and whispers across our fields. Sunday mornings are still on the farm. Even the chickens know these are sacred hours.

In church, Mrs. Phillips is not easy to see from our seat on the third row. She and Irving, with their two youngest daughters, sit near the middle of the sanctuary. I make sure to turn around during “meet and greet” and look in their direction. When their mother is healthy the girls sit close to her. Alice, the youngest, huddles beneath Mrs. Phillips’ arm, her tongue poking through her lips as she scribbles something on the offertory envelopes. Sally sits close to her mother’s
arm, her young body melting into woman lines, and her wavy brown hair in wisps around her neck.

“It’s a shame a family as lovely as Irving and the girls would have to suffer a mother and wife like Mrs. Phillips.” The warm breath against my neck sucks in deep, and I turn around so that my head is next to Mrs. Jenkins’ face. She shakes her head and pulls the hymnal off the shelf in time for singing. “Don’t know why she insists on coming to Church,” she whispers and I watch her lips moving like a synched bag.

Before turning around I take one last look at Sally, Alice’s older sister. She’s fourteen and “built for farm work,” Eli used to say. But I think her ankles are too thin. I watch her hold the hymn book loose in one hand, her big brown eyes wondering across the sanctuary. For a second she looks at me and smiles, but I’m too embarrassed to hold her gaze.

Later that afternoon, Mrs. Jenkins comes out to the farm for a cup of coffee. We carry on the conversation she started in service. “I must see a boy ‘round Sally’s waist near every week!” She blows on her drink and then sips the cup like it’s about to fall from her fingers. I rock further back and let my eyes look where they want. I see the fine lines in her face, and then the line of green across our lawn. In June, the sun will grow hot and the grass will stiffen into straw gold, but that is still a few weeks away. Today the sun has caressed the gently sloping hills into a brilliant shine.

“I don’t think I’ve met a spunkier child,” I offer up. “Yes, that’s so,” she chuckles. “Child has light in her eyes to spare. Let her just smile at you and you can’t help but grin!”

“She showed me that smile this morning” I say pushing myself to the edge of the chair. I blush remembering the way Sally caught me staring at her.

“Well, sure is a shame. That’s for sure.” I don’t need to look up to see that Mrs. Jenkins’ eyes are pointing across the lawn at Reetha Phillips’ impatiens.

**

One Sunday, I turn around and Mrs. Phillips isn’t in church, only Sally and Alice. During communion I look backwards, and see Irving slip in late. He walks in a man unsettled, his hair disheveled and stubble covering his chin. Mrs. Jenkins puts her face down by mine during prayer and whispers, “Suppose she’s gotten so bad, even he can’t carry on
as normal.” The words sit like coals in my ears. We don’t have a chance to greet Irving and the girls afterwards. They are gone before the preacher gives benediction, slipped out like the thin silhouette of a family.

A week passes and there is no sound from Mrs. Phillips. Everything else goes on as normal. At dawn Irving leaves for the fields and a few hours later I see the girls catch the bus for school. The day wears on in silence until 4:30 when the girls return from school. Until then, nothing. Mrs. Phillips does not check on her flowers, she does not sweep her porch, and she does not leave the house for afternoon walks.

Three weeks go by before I hear anything from the Phillips household, and it is Sally screaming my name from across the yard. I run out but before I have a chance to say anything she has me by the wrist, dragging me toward her house. The pulling is hard and I am surprised at the strength in her hands. The closer we get to her house the weaker my knees feel. There is no time to think. No time to ask her what she’s doing, just the sensation of being pulled irresistibly into the chaos of the Phillips’ home.

Before I realize how quickly she is taking me, we are inside the doorway and further into that house then I’ve ever been. Automatically, I resist, trying to pull myself backwards. “Please! My sister,” she says and disappears into the living room. From the shadow of the living room I hear a whimpering. I approach slowly, feeling the weight of my body with every step. Circling the couch I come upon Alice, her arms wrapped around her head.

“What on earth?” Alice’s whimpers grow into gaspy chokes, which follow into hard sobbing.

“Some kids followed us off the bus,” Sally says, her cheeks turning red. “When they thought I wasn’t looking they threw a rock at Alice’s head.”

“It – wassa – big -- one,” Alice sobs so hard she nearly gives herself the hiccups. The blood from her head is all over her sleeve and the couch. I pull her arm away and try to peel her hair from her forehead before the blood dries. My god, they got you good.

“Oh I hate them I just hate them I want to kill them all!” Sally paces furiously, her arms locked at her side, her hands in fists. She walks to the edge of the couch and kicks it.

“Go get some water and a cloth,” I say and turn to Alice. “Why would anyone throw a rock at your head?”
“They – said, my mumom was – crazy,” Alice gasps. No words came to my mind. The thoughts stick to my tongue, and I am left with nothing to offer this small child with a bleeding head. That word has been hot in my own mouth. Sally brings me the washcloth and I start cleaning Alice’s head, but the bleeding won’t stop and I can see she needs stitches. I stumble and spin for a moment, unsure of what to do. Where is Irving? Where is Reetha? How do I get this child to the hospital? I need something to wrap her head.

For the first time, I look around Reetha’s home. It isn’t beautiful, but it’s clean, everything neatly tucked into corners and scantily placed on shelves. The curtains are a heavy green cloth, but nicely dusted. Across the floor is a simple rug with no design, but it looks to be shaken and cleaned. A couch and a sitting chair are the only furniture in the room, both facing the fireplace. As I turn about the room, a question forms, but with one look at Alice small and fragile as a bird the words fall off my lips.

Suddenly, Irving is standing in the door watching me, his face visibly struck by my presence. I explain that Alice needs stitches. His simple reply, “Alright,” and with that I am escorted out the door and across the yard. I watch from my doorstep as Irving lifts Alice in his arms and places her in his Chevrolet touring car.

**

On August 4th, two months later, I watched as Irving drives his Chevrolet up to the house, the curtains pinned around the windows. A few minutes later Mrs. Phillips steps out of the passenger seat as Irving pulls a small bag from the back. With the other arm, he escorts his wife towards their door.

The next day in town, Mrs. Jenkins’ whispers in the grocery store, “I heard she ran off to Florida.” “Florida?” “Ran away looking for her eldest daughter, Helma.” Mrs. Jenkins pulls a potato from the top of its pile. “Found her, I guess, but Helma couldn’t stand her for more than two months and sent her back here to Kentucky.” I watch as Mrs. Jenkins wipes a smudge of dirt across her cheek.

**

Mrs. Phillips is the only Christian woman in Sacred Heart who has divorced from her husband and that is why the Lord is taking her mind. He is taking her mind because she
was once married to John Rose, but is now married to Irving Phillips. But the good Lord waited until Mrs. John Rose had found and married Irving Phillips. He waited until she had given birth to five children. Waited even until the eldest two children had gone to college. The Lord waited until Mrs. Phillips was wearing out into the middle years, before he began breaking the woven strands of her mind. He waited so long that we began to think He had forgotten, or that perhaps leaving your husband was a small sin.

But then He moved, and death was His choice.

He moved with Laura, the third child, whose stomach swelled as if there was a baby. Her cheeks grew red and she lay on her bed day and night, unable to sleep, unable to move. Mrs. Phillips despaired, and the doctors knew nothing of her sickness. Instead, they left her to pain until finally she died. When they cut her open, the doctors could only shake their head and say there had been an infection around her intestines, like a poison filling her belly.

At first, we saw this as tragedy and the women of Sacred Heart made movements to comfort Mrs. Phillips, until someone sent whispers across our town and into our homes. “God’s clock keeps perfect time.” And we suddenly understood. Could suddenly see why this had happened. With knowing looks and nods full of pity we withdrew back to our living rooms, back to our casual grocery store talks. “Leave God to His business,” we said. “Leave God to His business.”

In the Fall Sacred Heart drowns. The summer wears out into rain, and there is no saving the Radio Station, the School House, or the homes on lower ground. Storms fill up the sky nearly every week and open their guts on our fields and towns. The air carries with it the cool threat of winter a few months away, but for these days it is warm enough to sit with a blanket and watch the rain come down.

Tonight the storm has come hard and beats on the roof even into the early morning hours. Perhaps because of the noise, or more likely because of my own restless body, I can’t sleep. When this happens I warm a glass of milk and sit by the window until I feel my mind wander and my eyes close. I am sitting on my chair, the warm mug cradled in both hands, but instead of watching the sky I am watching the Phillips’ yard.

I see Mrs. Phillips standing outside, the rain beating her nightie into wet folds around her breasts and hips. She is
Facing the doorway were I see two smaller bodies. Sally and Alice follow her. They tread to the shed ten feet away where Mrs. Phillips opens the doors. In a few moments, the girls are pushing boxes, a wheelbarrow, and other objects out its doors. Some boxes are obviously too much for Alice, so Sally gets behind and pushes while Alice drags from the front.

Between flashes of lighting I watch the girls empty the shed bit by bit. Mrs. Phillips hands them a broom and a dustpan and points inside the doors. The rain begins coming down harder and I move closer to the glass squinting. In one movement they are inside and Mrs. Phillips has closed the doors to the shed and locked them inside. She moves about the yard pushing boxes here and there.

I stand up, stepping and then standing still. My mind can not think of what to do. Where is Irving? I move awkwardly to the hallway and grab my raincoat thinking only of the mud and my feet. Just as I open the door I see Irving running across the yard. He pushes Mrs. Phillips aside and I can hear a faint yell below the pounding of the rain, “Where are they?” Mrs. Phillips stands blunt and uncomprehending. Finally, she collapses on the ground balling like a child in mud and tears. Irving runs to the shed, hurries the lock, and opens the door. I quickly shut the door and run back to the window. The girls pour onto their father grabbing his shoulders and arms, their shoulders jerking with sobs. I do not wait to see what becomes of Mrs. Phillips. Suddenly my stomach turns sour and I run to the kitchen sink.

**

Today is my sweeping day. I’m outside sweeping the porch, chasing the orange and red leaves from the corners. Cold air crawls onto my skirt, and I know it won’t be long until winter. From the corner of my eye I see a body crossing the street. With all my might I pray it isn’t who I think. But it is. Mrs. Phillips stands at my porch, a smile across her face and a baking dish in her hands. I hardly know what to say to her so I keep my head down and my broom working.

“Hello Ida!” she says and invites herself up. I just keep sweeping, hoping she’ll understand that there is nothing in my mouth to say to her. “My, this is a nice porch,” she says looking across to the fields. “You must see a lot of things from here.” My stomach turns hard and I look up. From this close I can see her face. Feels like the first time in a while, and all I can look at is her temple with its fine purple veins like
decorations. She turns aside and moves a bit. Her hair is swept onto her head and small strands caress her cheeks. “I brought you this pie, but if you don’t want it the pigs—”

“No, I’ll take it,” I say annoyed that she would give anything baked to pigs. “She hands me the dish and when I take it our hands touch. Her hands are cold and I can’t help but look down at them, clean and smooth. In that moment I see us as children. Me standing close, her facing the fields. As a girl, I would have loved Reetha Phillips. I would have followed her everywhere; would have done my hair just like hers. I can take this for just so long before my mind blurs and I turn quickly to put the pie inside the kitchen. When I come back she is halfway across the road.

“Reetha,” I say across the porch.
She turns to look at me and raises her voice, “Thank you!” And I’m confused by this kind gesture, confused by her “thank you.” It’s not until I’m inside putting my broom away that I remember Alice, her head bandaged like a bird.

Mrs. Phillips broke on the first day of snow.
I was in town buying groceries. The day had been sharp with cold, the dry cold that cuts through your clothes to the skin. I was asking the clerk for flour when I heard a whisper from someone standing at the window, “Look outside.”

There across the street, walking out of the police station was the shredded figure of a woman wrapped in a ratty blanket. A policeman had her by the arm and was carefully leading her bare feet over the gravel toward a police car. I did not see who it was because I was not looking at her face. Instead, my eyes were fixed to her white fleshy thighs moving backwards and forwards below a blanket, which barely covered her private parts.

I could not help my feet, they moved below me, taking me outside the store and into the street. I didn’t feel the cold, only felt myself shivering as if I was the one naked beneath the blanket, with my shoulders left uncovered and my hair spilling around my neck. Not until afterwards did I see all the other bodies drawn outside, scattered around the street like pennies, all of us watching unashamed. She lifted her head, shaking the hair from her face, and at that moment I knew her.

Mrs. Phillips had disappeared the night before, while we were sleeping. While we were sifting through rest Irving
was up and searching the street, the dark cold piercing his
body and forcing him back inside. I did not find out until later
that Mrs. Phillips had wandered off into the night walking all
of the five miles into town. When she reached Sacred Heart,
she carried nothing but her bra behind her.

Perhaps no one would have seen her. Perhaps she
would have carried on through town, completely unaware of
her poor shaking body, except that she collapsed. Her feet
simply refused to walk. When the neighbors found her they
refused to touch her. Refused to touch a “naked woman in the
street.” But for decency’s sake they threw a blanket over her
until the police came to get her.

So there we were, standing in the street, watching her
walk from the station to the car, totally unaware of our
presence, and somehow this gave us permission. Behind her a
figure shadowed the door. It was Irving. He stepped out of the
police station a man without secrets. It was obvious that he
had not made it to work that day. He was barely out of his
nightshirt, with pants on, and suspenders. He came quickly
behind Mrs. Phillips and wrapped his jacket around her legs,
moving the policeman aside and gently placing his wife in the
car.

To us he gave no attention, just placed his wife in the
seat and tucked the jacket around her body. When he stood up
he saw us but with out recognition. His face turned toward us,
but there was no response in his eyes. He simply looked, as if
we were the spectacle. Behind him Sally walked out of the
police station and for the first time I felt surprise. She walked
right up to her father with purpose as if to ask a question. But
when she reached him she found his mind turned out.
Following his eyes, she saw us standing about them like a
congregation with no preacher.

The order of events from this point blurs. There was
movement, mouths opened, eyes flashing, and screaming. I
saw only snippets of it, and when I think of it now, all I see are
lines of color. The picture comes together with Sally standing
in the middle of the street, or rather running but never quiet
reaching us, her face open and loud, her voice rising above the
snow falling now on her hair and her face. Her screams
reached us as through a pillow. “CAN’T YOU SEE HER
AREN’T YOU CLOSE ENOUGH CAN’T YOU SEE YOU
IDIOTS SHES NAKED DO YOU WANT TO TOUCH
HER.”
Sally’s head was flying from face to face her hair whipping about the air. We did not stop her because we could not feel her, could not touch what she was saying. We could only watch her hands gripping the creases of her dress and twisting her fists into her groin. We watched without sympathy her face twist into hotness which then poured into tears. “WHO DO YOU THINK YOU SEE YOU YOU WHO DO YOU THINK YOU’RE LOOKING AT TAKE YOUR ROTTEN FACES INSIDE AND LOOK IN YOUR OWN FILTHY MIRRORS.”

And with that Irving was behind her. His hands moving slowly toward her shoulders. He made no effort to stop her. He only watched us as he drew close to her, his face fixed as if he were really looking over us. Finally, he reached Sally and she collapsed into his arms, weeping so hard she could barely move. With one sweep Irving took her around the shoulders and the knees, picked her up, and carried her towards the police car.

The door closed and the three bodies sat close in the back, Sally shaking as if she would never quit, Irving with his arms around the women, and Mrs. Phillips as still as snow. Soon the police car was gone, and the street was left alone. All that was left behind were the flakes falling heavier, the stores standing quietly, not a thing out of place. Except for us.

We were still there. We were still outside, watching.
Imprints

The lights are not on where they usually are, the day has left few traces on the carpets, and the couch is looming large as a vehicle for rest – if too demanding by its number of cushions, too long in its insistence to carry me sideways. When you are away the geography beckons you and rearranges distances so objects are devoid of my habits, filled only with yours; not in crevasses, not in my longing, and not in the places where we play, no, this call for you, it emerges out of the things we two have touched.
Rites

An hour-long car ride
The trust of a sister
Conversations forgotten
The youngest of the uncles
A kitchen table silent as the house
as the family sleeps
Three chairs occupied
Each ten years apart
Dim lights
Closed doors, shadows outside and in corners;
Brothers reunited,

Words must be found, no barging in.

Two bottles of beer and a teasing refusal
The feeling of the table's tiles under my palms
my elbows
Everybody loves a question.

A shared will to receive and educate –
What do you mean you’ve never heard Pink Floyd?
The radio apparently doesn’t count.

A receptacle for others' memories revived and exchanged.

The fifteen minute instrumentals remain my favourites.
A Muslim in Suburbia

By now, we all know that the housing market in America collapsed. The problem was widespread—it affected almost everyone I know—but I doubt anyone was surprised to learn that the main targets of subprime lenders were minorities and immigrants. As the Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy at New York University reports, foreclosures in minority communities devastated whole neighborhoods. The number of affected families continues to rise.

This is where the story becomes personal. My husband and I recently sold our house in Ann Arbor, Michigan. It took us almost seven years due to the collapse of the American housing market. We did not end up in foreclosure, but we were close. The experience was a painful one—more so for husband than for me. As an immigrant, and as a Muslim, my husband was deeply attached to owning a house. It had a powerful symbolic value for him, one that I have only recently begun to understand.

This is not an essay about why the housing market collapsed, or even about being Muslim in a post-9/11 world. It is about becoming American. It is about how immigrant minorities create roots in a new country and look for the past in the strangest places. It is about what the collapse of the housing market means for the American dream.

What Does it Mean to be American?

My husband Attila came to America when he was 24. He did not mean to stay—he came for school and planned to go back to Istanbul as soon as he graduated with his Master’s degree at Ohio State. That was before he met me.

We worked part-time in the same office and talked periodically. I wasn’t sure if he was interested in me, but I was hoping he’d agree to go out on a date, so I decided to call him up and ask. He answered the phone, then paused.

“How did you get this number?”

“I looked it up in the phone book.”

He was deeply impressed—not just that I’d made the first move, but that I’d managed such an incredible feat. Almost no one could spell his last name, let alone look it up in a book. His name contained twelve letters, none of which make sense together. Clearly, this was more than a passing fancy.
And so it was. We got married and moved to Detroit. And we were happy. Or, at least I was happy. I enjoyed the freedom of renting an apartment. When something went wrong, it wasn’t our problem. If we decided to leave, it took nothing more than a quick letter stating our intentions to the landlord. But my husband wanted to buy a house. He wanted it with every fiber of his body. He scouted neighborhoods, and bought books on ‘making investments work for you,’ and insisted on spending our Saturdays perched in front of a loan officer. I dealt with this like any good wife—I said nothing openly critical, instead sticking to ciphers like "that's an interesting idea" and "we'll see." Owning property seemed like a burden to me, and I figured that he would realize, sooner or later, that since I had no plans of being helpful on this matter, he’d be better off forgetting the whole thing. But I underestimated his desire. A house seemed to mean the world to him, literally and metaphorically, so I reluctantly agreed to tag along as he found a suitable home, signed the papers, and packed our bags.

I thought for sure this was the end of his quest. As I watched him settle in, however, I noticed that he was restless. He did more scouting and bought more books—this time, on grass. By the end of the month, he had planned an elaborate weekend-long project to aerate the lawn with a special gadget he rented from the local hardware store; next, he planned to re-seed the grass with a new brand of Kentucky Green, designed especially for a mix of shady and sunny lawns. To my amazement, in fact, he spent the whole summer knee-deep in topsoil and fertilizer. From morning to night he was covered with dirt, digging up rogue dandelions and plowing exact edges along the sidewalk. He was utterly absorbed with every leafy detail of our lawn.

Naturally, I suspected he was going mad. I didn’t know what to do. Every attempt I made to discuss his growing obsession ended with him talking up new ideas for landscaping. The whole thing seemed to be getting out of hand—and none of it made sense to me—until one night early in the fall. Attila opened the door and had a five-minute conversation with a pizza delivery boy. He raced into the house glowing with pride, bursting at the seams to tell me the pizza boy had said we had a “nice lawn.” He couldn’t believe it! He danced around and gloated like he’d been presented the Academy Award.
At that moment, it finally dawned on me. I thought the house was the symbol of America that Attila had longed for. Unlike Istanbul, which featured sky-high condos and cramped streets, this country offered him a two-bedroom, cottage-style palace to call his own. But his version of the American Dream was about more than mere ownership. Attila wanted others to recognize his place here. The proof was in the perfectly grown, slender blades of grass. By offering his compliments on the lawn, the Pizza Boy had identified Attila as a successful member of the American suburban landscape—and in Attila’s mind, this meant he finally belonged.

Finding Roots
As much as Attila enjoyed owning a house and taking care of the lawn, the American Dream was never really about things for him. Yet, the material and immaterial have always been inextricably bound; we need one in order to find the other. As such, Attila needed the hard soil in his hands in order to feel grounded in his future as an American—and, as it turned out, to stay connected to his past in Turkey.

Sometime after the Pizza Boy incident, I finally wrangled an answer from Attila regarding his obsession with grassy landscapes.

“It’s the smell. I like the smell of the earth.”

I looked at him curiously. I wondered how a city-boy could have formed such an attachment to the smell of fresh-broken earth. He told me once that he’d never played soccer on real grass before he came to America. Almost everything he touched as a child was concrete or wood. Before I could ask him about this, he launched into a story about how he and his sister used to visit his grandfather every month when he was young. His grandfather owned a small farm outside the city, and as a special treat, he and his sister would help him tend the tomatoes, lettuce, and cucumbers, which more or less involved eating whatever looked good to them. It was a vision of Eden, as he explained it. No worries, no responsibilities—just family, fun, and delicious Turkish food cooked right off the vine.

And there he stopped. Maybe it wasn’t really about the garden or the sun-fresh food. It was about family. He lived in a new world where no one spoke his native language, no one knew his true history, and no one was related to him.
There was love and friendship in America, yes, but not family. Some days the lack of connection was so disorienting he thought he might slip off the edge of the planet and no one would know. But the earth—that smell reminded him of who he was. He was a human being. He belonged to the Earth. And this tiny square of dirt, it was his.

**Picket Fences**

Despite the fact that Attila had carved out a wonderful life for himself in America, his family in Turkey was less than impressed with the tangible indicators he had selected for his success. Why on earth would he spend his weekends working on the lawn? Couldn’t he afford to hire someone to do that for him? What kind of person goes to America so they can be poor? No matter how he tried to explain it, they simply could not understand.

“You must not be making enough money.” His father dug around in his wallet.

“I thought you had a good job,” his mother opined.

“Are you so hungry that you have to grow your own food?”

“We’re not hungry, Dad.”

“I’m sending you twenty dollars.”

In the Turkish mind, the only reason to work a plot of land was because you were too poor to go to the grocery store. And while most apartment buildings in Istanbul featured an assortment of fruit and nut trees, only children and beggars ate from them.

As if that weren’t confusing enough, Attila tried to make light of his recent battles over grass seeds with the squirrels. For some reason the squirrels found the new brand of Kentucky Green grass especially delicious, and Attila spent some part of every afternoon armed with the hose, trying to protect his seedlings.

“I thought you lived in a nice house,” his Dad said.

“I do.”

“Squirrels are the same as rats. All that education, and you bought a house with rats!”

“They’re not rats, Dad.”

“I’m sending you twenty dollars.”

After a brief moment of feeling gratified that I was not the only one baffled by his leafy dreams, I began to feel sorry for Attila. Cultural barriers had made it impossible for
his family to do anything but reject his new life in America. What’s more, they seemed to have collectively decided that he was definitely not modern.

Living in America was not, in their minds, the real prize. The real prize was modernity. This was an important distinction. In Turkey, America was equated with luxury and freedom. This was modernity. If you had enough money, you could live a thoroughly modern life in Turkey, complete with the luxuries they assumed all Americans enjoyed: MacDonalds, Levi’s, Coca Cola, and Harley Davidsons. In their minds, Attila had inexplicably chosen to abandon his family in favor of a back-woods farm-life in a far away land—a life devoid of brand names and status.

Status was, however, exactly what Attila was pursuing with his fresh-cut green grass. Not the Turkish version of status—the American one. Over the course of his time here, Attila had learned that one of the lasting symbols of Americana was the beautifully manicured house with a green lawn and a white picket fence. Acquiring this symbol of Americana was an attempt to mask ethnic and cultural difference—a project of increasing importance for a Muslim man like Attila in a post-9/11 American society.

When the neighbors first met Attila, their questions began with sheepish inquiries about camels, veils, and swords, but always moved on to why so many Muslims are terrorists. Like everyone else in the civilized world, Attila didn’t have any good answers for that question, but he did know how to talk about grass. So when the conversation shifted into unsafe territory, Attila would turn the topic to the nuisance of moles, or the value of organic pesticide, or the irritation of invasive mosses. The neighbors would then relax as they chatted over the fence, offering to swap lawn gadgets and clicking their tongues at the one house on the street that refused to mow until the dandelions were in full bloom. Attila’s studied interest in the minutiae of suburban life put the neighbors at ease. He would never be White or Christian, but he could be bourgeois—and that was almost as good as being American.

Frontiers

We moved to Los Angeles following a job, hoping to stay afloat as the economy dipped. We put our house on the market and moved into a cramped, big city apartment. Whenever he can, Attila spends his time by the beach, trying
to remember the smell of sea-foam that gathers in the harbors around the Bosphorus in Istanbul. I know he is trying to change, adapt, and go forward. But living in an apartment is not the same as owning your own land. For those minorities and immigrants who only ever had tangential access to the Great American Dream, a house could mean everything. Roots and soil could mean everything. And, at least for us, it is lost now.
Promised

In September 1908, Nasif Dukl-allah Mansour Bou Noffil and Victoria Loobis Simaan boarded the SS Constitution and came to the United States from Marjayoun, Lebanon. Their one passport and the ship’s manifest listed them as Nasik and Vectoria Mansour, siblings. My grandparents were not brother and sister. They were cousins, and at the time of their crossing, they were not yet married. He was 21 and she was 13. Alma and Kaiser Joseph would meet them in New York and accompany them to New Castle, Pennsylvania, where they would settle for a year or two before moving to Youngstown, Ohio permanently. Kaiser and Alma were my grandparents’ first friends in America.

When Victoria and Nasif boarded the Constitution, they had the clothes they were wearing and a leather satchel that contained their papers. Nasif wore their money around his neck, wrapped in a dirty rag, which had been rubbed with herbs, garlic, and lemon rind. They also brought bread, cheese, dried meat and fruit for the trip. They were careful to reserve a loaf of bread – insurance that they would not starve upon their arrival. My aunt, the youngest of Nasif and Victoria’s nine children still has the petrified remains of that loaf of bread. That loaf of bread and its rightful ownership, to this day, can spark the ugliest of fights between the 4 surviving Mansour siblings.

But before the trip, before the plans to emigrate were made, my great, great aunt began to sew a pale green dress, with lace, beads, and intricate stitching. My grandmother, only 12 years old worked on her doll’s dress, watched, and sometimes helped as her aunt and mother sewed and stitched the dress.

Victoria had met Nasif when 5 or six. He had sponsors in America, and a map of her future had already been laminated. One June day in 1908, Victoria dressed in the pale green dress, donned a new pair of cloth shoes, which were not to be worn outside of the house, and sat waiting for the arrival of Nasif and his sister, Hunnah.

Nasif and Hunnah arrived at Victoria’s home in late afternoon. No one spoke about Nasif and Victoria getting married. No plans for the trip to America were discussed. They talked about the weather. My great grandparents, along with Nasif, his sister, and Victoria passed an afternoon
exchanging pleasantries. They sat adjacent to each other, drank their tea, ate olives, dates, and cheese, and in early evening, before the meal was served, My great grand mother told Nasif and Victoria to go for a walk with Hunnah.

Once outside the house and walking up the path, Victoria looked up at Nasif. He caught her eye, and she smiled. He raised his hand and knocked her across the face and into a ditch behind some rocks. He called her dog, spit at her, and continued the walk with his sister. Victoria waited.

On the way back they didn’t stop. They didn’t help her to stand. She raised herself up and followed them to the house.

In the kitchen with her mother and aunt, Victoria cleaned off the dress as best she could, and donned a wrap to cover the tear in the delicate, beaded silk. She and her mother did not commiserate. My great grandmother offered Victoria no words of comfort or sympathy. She silently helped Victoria clean herself up, so that they could serve the meal.

My great grandparents, along with several other great, great aunts and uncles and cousins gathered for a meal that included meat that June evening. They ate and drank tea and had dessert and never once discussed a marriage between Nasif and Victoria. The evening ended with game of Bassra and no more was said. It was, however, understood that Victoria was now engaged and would be married upon her arrival in the US in November that same year.

After the birth of her 8th child, Dr. Fisher explained that the pain Victoria always felt in her chest and sides, especially during labor, was the result of broken ribs that had not healed properly.
A Reasonable Request

Nicolo DiDonato
42 Genoa Avenue
Worcester, MA 01605

June 27, 2012

Dr. Melinda Boone, Superintendent of Schools
20 Irving Street
Worcester, MA 01609

Dear Dr. Boone:

I am returning my daughter’s middle school diploma to you because you have misspelled her surname. Her last name is DiDonato, not Didonato.

It seems silly that I must bother the superintendent, a woman who oversees thirty-three elementary schools, four middle schools, seven high schools, and nine alternative schools in the second largest city in the Commonwealth with this problem, but my repeated requests to rectify this error have gone unheeded. I have pursued all other avenues and must bring this your attention, Dr. Boone. I understand this matter may seem trivial to you, but as a Worcester resident who contributes to your $186,600 annual salary, I must insist that you formally apologize to my daughter in writing for this oversight.

I have spoken to members of the administrative staff at my daughter’s middle school countless times over the last two years, and on each occasion, I was assured that the error would be corrected. But time and again, her progress reports were addressed to The Parents of Angela DiDonato. I then appealed to the Central Office on Irving Street, the building that houses you and other bureaucrats, and tried to determine if the error was originating from there. After putting me on hold for several minutes (perhaps to make fun of my inquiry?) and disconnecting me (on purpose?), Ms. Mercedes Ruiz informed me that employees in the Central Office did all of their typing in Caps Lock mode, so the D was definitely capital on their end. Ms. Ruiz referred me back to the middle school, and when I insisted that this course of action was unsatisfactory (after all, I was calling the Central Office
because the middle school staff members weren’t fixing the problem), Ms. Ruiz could hardly conceal her disdain for my persistence and replied, quite huffily, “Well, I don’t know what you want me to do about it Mr. Donato. I assure you that the error is not occurring here.”

I admit that when Ms. Ruiz butchered my name when she dropped the Di prefix, a slight that I to this day believe was intentional, I lost my temper and made some unsavory remarks about her Hispanic origins, but the dramatic flair with which she disconnected our call was a bit uncalled for. I am, after all, contributing to her salary, paying for the healthcare benefits that ensure that her sixteen children with sixteen different fathers will be immunized and remain healthy so that they, too, can bear and sire more children than they can afford to support. The way I see it, Ms. Ruiz should have treated me with a little more respect.

By now you must understand my dilemma. It is clear that the administrative staff at the John F. Kennedy Middle School, who no doubt have surnames like Smith and Anderson and Johnson, cannot be bothered with the capital D, do not understand the importance of it, because their names have never been regarded so carelessly. I am sure that Ms. Smith, Mr. Anderson and Mrs. Johnson think I should get over myself, be at one with the lower case d. Why insist on a capital? How important is it, really? It’s not as if it’s a misspelling, after all.

No es importante. Ya dejalo pasar.

Rest assured, this is misspelling, not a minor keystroke mishap. To properly record my daughter’s name using a computer keyboard, one must manipulate it as follows: shift+D, i-o shift+D-o-n-a-t-o. By failing to capitalize the D in her last name, the Worcester Public Schools has committed an egregious error. You may as well replace the third letter altogether, to something like DiXonato Dizonato.

Al contrario: es muy importante.

Perhaps you believe that I am overreacting. But if you had endured years of repeated mispronunciations and misspellings, you would be at your wit’s end, too. Imagine how you would have felt when, upon the conferral of your doctoral degree from The College of William and Mary, you discovered that your name appeared on that precious document as follows:

Melinda BoOne
Would you run off to the frame store with that diploma, spend hundreds of dollars to have it double matted, select a chunky mahogany frame for it so that you could hang it on your wall? Would you proudly display it in your office at home or on Irving Street?

I didn’t think so.

The Di prefix, meaning “of” or “from,” is essential in Italian surnames. In fact, there should really be an additional space between the Di and Donato: Di Donato. But that space was effectively discarded by officials when my ancestors (and those of the Di Antonios, the Di Buonos and the Di Verdis) first arrived on American soil at Ellis Island. Herded into examination rooms flooded with the aroma of urine and sweat, these men and women were treated like subhuman criminals as they underwent a six second medical examination. Those who bore chalk marks signifying possible illnesses detected over the course of the exam (G for goiter, S for senility, and — my favorite—X for suspected mental defect) tried to discreetly wipe the chalk residue from their clothes upon dismissal. Welcome to America, where you are stripped of your dignity and, for good measure, an essential space in your name.

Upon review of the list of graduates in the John F. Kennedy Eighth Grade Matriculation Ceremony program, I uncovered a disturbing contradiction in your transcription practices: while my daughter’s name appeared in the program as Angela Didonato, the surnames of Sophia DaSilva and Juan DeCarlos were properly capitalized. Why the inconsistency? Why are the surnames of the newly arrived immigrants from Brazil and Mexico, people who have yet to prove their worth in America, treated with more respect than the surnames of those who have been here for decades and boast a most impressive legacy? My ancestors did, after all, discover, name and build America.

Do you see the irony here? My daughter’s ancestors arrived here on Ellis Island legally. They did not travel the same paths as the DaSilvas or the DeCarloses. My descendants sponsored each other and worked here legitimately. They passed a literacy test, learned English and contributed to the building of America. They respected the system—they didn’t try to circumvent it. They were naturalized. They did not scurry across the border under the clandestine cover of night to take other people’s jobs, give
birth to children they can’t afford to support, collect welfare, sponge off the system, and avoid paying taxes. They’re not running guns and drugs over the border or driving down the value of real estate in the neighborhoods in which they live.

You know what I’m talking about, Dr. Boone. As an educator with numerous advanced degrees and certifications, you must on a daily basis contend with the disrespectful and mediocre set invading your school system, forcing you to lower your standards. Unlike my ancestors, who aspired to meet and exceed the goals of the educational system in their new native land, today’s immigrants believe that the system should be shaped and sculpted to meet their needs. They know how to make the system work for them. When, in heavy Spanish and Portuguese accents, they inform you that their surnames have been spelled wrong, or alert you of a missing tilde or accent, you apologize profusely and fix it.

Dr. Boone, I am tired. I want my daughter to be treated with respect, not passed over or forgotten. How have my people, who have been here over 50 years, become the disenfranchised? When did the capital D in my last name become a trivial afterthought?

I confess that the injustice of the lower case d has haunted me for years, and that the misspelling on my daughter’s diploma is a metaphorical culmination of my trials. Before this most recent incident, the lower case d has taunted me in the Verizon Superpages and my employer’s staff directory and e-mail distribution list. It mocks me daily in some form or another. Credit card offers. Interoffice mail envelopes. Sales promotions. All addressed to Nicolo Didonato.

People like to blame the computers for this lapse, but I know better. Every keystroke can be traced back to a human being. I recognize what many would call a peccadillo as a serious inversion of values, a harbinger of the inevitable decline of America.

Of course, my wife and I assume that this is one of many diplomas that our daughter will earn. We expect Angela and her two younger siblings to graduate from high school and college, unlike many of those who were in attendance at the Eight Grade Matriculation Ceremony last Tuesday, hooting and hollering as if their child had accomplished something significant. In our family (which consists of two married parents and three children living under one roof—a dying
breed—) we aspire to more prestigious degrees (possessing five post graduate degrees between the two of us). We do not, like those who were in attendance the other day at the graduation ceremony, view eighth grade graduation as a milestone. We hold ourselves to higher standards—the standards of our forefathers, who came to this country to find a better life and, in the process of doing so, created an extraordinary country.

Therefore, Dr. Boone, I am not requesting that you reprint my daughter’s diploma. No, you can discard it altogether. I do, however, expect you to compose a formal letter of apology addressed to my daughter, expressing on behalf of the entire Worcester Public School system your sincere regret for treating her so disrespectfully. By my calculations, this will take you no more than a half hour to craft, or one sixteenth of your work day. And as a Worcester resident who contributes to your annual $186,600 salary, I must insist that you compose this letter in a most expeditious fashion.

Yours truly,

Nicolo DiDonato
Caitlin only asked me to be there because of death. Her mother had passed away some years ago and she needed someone extra in the birthing room. But I had reservations. She’d be naked. There’d be blood. This was more than I really ever wanted to know about her, no matter how much I loved her as a friend.

“You’re not freaked out, are you?” Caitlin drummed her bony fingers on her belly, watching intently as I took a sip of coffee.

Caitlin was the skinniest and fiercest woman I had ever met. We’d bonded at the wine and cheese party for incoming doctoral students. Both of us were kids with a taste for government-issued Velveeta and vulgar language, but it was Caitlin who told Christopher LuValle to fuck off when he laughed at my inexperience with Brie. Over the course of the program, Caitlin took the opportunity to terrify everyone in the department, treating academic debates as rugby matches and winning every fellowship she applied for, just to prove a point.

“What about Thomas?” I asked.

“He’ll probably faint.”

Her husband Thomas was a nice enough, but he was frail and gray, with all the macho charm of a wet squirrel. He had an unfortunate phobia that prohibited the mention of blood or any part of the circulatory system.

“I don’t want to end up fucking alone in there.”

“Right.”

“So you’ll be there?” She heaved herself forward to grab her water.

I didn’t really know what to expect in a birthing room apart from what I’d seen on television, and it wasn’t appealing. A few days later, I mentioned Caitlin’s request to my friend Julia. Julia had the unnerving tendency of making weird sex-noises whenever she talked of beauty. “Hmmm,” she said, shaking her angel-fine blond mane. “I saw my sister give birth last year and it was exquisite.”

I stared at her. Horrified.

“The placenta was rippled with shades of purple and deep blood red,” she continued, “and it shimmered like a rainbow. I remember touching it and—”
I put my hand up to stop Julia. I wasn’t ready for
birth, let alone a complex discussion of the afterbirth.

What bothered me most was her tone. Each word
rumbled with the resonance of awe, as if to say, all women
want to do this. It’s easy. It’s natural.

“It’s like trying to get a watermelon through your
nostril,” I said.

“Hmmm,” she cooed. “But you seem so Mother
Earth.” She mimed the exaggerated size of my large breasts.

“How will my boobs help Caitlin give birth?”

Julia batted her eyelashes at me. “I’m sure you’ll be
fine,” she said as she gave me a quick pat on the back and
sauntered away.

In the weeks that followed, I avoided the subject with
Caitlin, turning her attention instead to the serious debate over
names. She took this as a sign that I’d agreed to be there in the
birth room. When she called the Sunday afternoon she went
into labor, she didn’t even bother to say what she was calling
about. “We’re leaving now.” The phone dropped from her
mouth. “Thomas! We’re picking her up in—shit,” she panted,
“ten minutes.”

Thomas stopped at the emergency entrance and I
went help pry Caitlin out of the front seat. She was immense:
pink and swollen from head to toe, wearing an old housedress
with her hiking boots, unlaced and without socks. “My bag,”
she yelped, hunching over the guardrail. All her immensity
disappeared from behind. The back of her housedress fell
slack atop her two spindly legs, white almost to the point of
translucency and scarred with blood-blue veins. She’d started
to sob.

I rooted around in the back seat for her bag and when
I turned around, she was gone. I peered through turning glass
doors to see her wheelchair disappear around a corner; then
hustled past a woman with a cane. By the time I got there she
was already in the bed. A flurry of nurses and residents were
poking Caitlin with needles and calipers and gluing a monitor
to her belly with some kind of duct tape. Her legs began to
shake uncontrollably. I was riveted to the ground, thinking I
should try and help somehow, but before I could move a nurse
moved in to stuff a pillow between her knees.

“You need to start breathing, honey. Mm-kay?” The
nurse didn’t even offer a smile before she bustled away.
The crowd of doctors and residents started to move my way. “Excuse me,” the nurse said. “Move over here.” Without seeming to move an inch, I was transported close to the bed.

Caitlin clawed at my arm. “They won’t tell me anything. Is everything going okay? Where is Thomas?”

“Um…” I looked up for Thomas. Thomas was stopped dead at the door. The doctor had a long, sharpened yardstick. “I’m going to puncture the amniotic sac.”

Thomas’ face turned as gray as his beard. The bed underneath Caitlin pooled with red mucus and the smell of blood filled the room. He gave me a half-hearted thumb’s up as he edged his way along the wall to the Lazy Boy chair and with one long, slow motion, draped himself across the cushions. Out cold.

“Fuck!”

The shout rang out in the birth room. The nurses stopped to stare at me. It was a full minute before I realized it was my voice. “Suck! Suck—it—in—to push—”

“Would you like to sit down?” The doctor showed me a chair.

“I’m fine,” I said.

Caitlin raised her head. “She’s fine.”

“We’re fine.”

Caitlin squeezed my hand like she meant to break some bones. The nurse broke her hold, shoved me to the side, and wrapped Caitlin’s arm around her, then started purring, “push, dear, push.”

I watched Jack be born that day. I couldn’t see much, with doctor and the nurses in the way. They were busy for a long time after, cleaning and swaddling and pulling tubes out of Caitlin’s arms. Her skin was bluish-gray and covered with sticky red spots from the medical tape. She lay unmoving, entombed in blankets. Finally, a nurse called to the half-conscious Thomas, then gave up and turned to me. I stepped forward.

“Here,” she said, and shoved the baby into my arms. I’d imagined that moment. It was supposed to be beautiful, ringed with angel song and light, like on TV. Jack blinked slowly and peered up at me, his neck still crusted with dried blood.

“Time,” the nurse said. I looked up.
She was speaking to another nurse. “He took his first breath at 12:16.” She marked it down, recording his birth date in the past tense. *He was born,* I thought, like the opening of his epitaph. This was his first breath. But there would be a last.

Jack and I stared at each other for a long while as the nurses circled Caitlin like satellites. His head jerked from side to side and his twisted legs shook. He was small, thin, and frail—like all of us had been at the beginning—and would be, again, at the end. In that slow moment, death started to have definable features for me, delicate and smooth as a baby’s cheek. We were all on a single trajectory, and it moved toward an unknown expiration—to be duly recorded, marked down, filed, and etched in stone. First breath, last breath.

Jack let loose a wail. Caitlin’s eyes flew open. “Is he all right?”

I pulled the baby close.

“No,” I said. “He’s perfect.”
Ben’s Poem

Last night I put my son in jail. I made him two grilled cheese sandwiches, careful
to toast the bread evenly, to make sure the cheese was melted,
oozing from the crust.
He tore the corners off anyway, but he ate. I wasn’t sure he
would.
He gets nervous at small things: school mornings, an
unexpected guest, family
plans he always forgets.

But on the way there he was composed. A tall fifteen-year-old
boy-man, facing
the first of his punishments for the beer he didn’t quite steal,
although he meant to,
and that is enough with the law. A felony burglary wrought in
details of intent:
an empty guitar case, a six-pack of Red Stripe placed by the
butter…but then he walked out and drove home carefully,
both hands on the wheel, not yet licensed, not yet of age.

At least we live close by, Steve says as we walked him to jail,
like a first day
of kindergarten. Steve says, remember, we’re just down the
street. I tear up again, thinking of him there, alone in a cell for
two days—two days! He asks if he will have to change
clothes, underwear too? And it is almost more than I can
bear—his vulnerability. His pale, translucent skin exposed. No
way to cover him.

When we get to the parking lot, Steve stops him and pulls him
into a hug, says he loves him, that it will be okay. He is taller
than Steve, but so thin and young still. We go in
and behind glass they process his paperwork. He sits, studying
his hands. He picks
at his thumbs when he is nervous, worrying the skin until it is
tender and torn.

I want to still his hands, hold him, but the doors open and an
officer, black gloves on, comes in to search our son and take
him away. He turns him around, spreads his legs, pats him
down. He handcuffs him, and before I can say anything,
guides him through doors I cannot pass, where I know they will strip him naked, where he will be alone.

I imagine him huddled, pulling on their boxers and jumpsuit, and I feel panicked. I need to make sure they do it right, to see they don’t harm him in any way. I need to check the cell, make sure the mattress is clean, make sure he is warm enough; I need to see that he eats a bit, that he doesn’t pick himself until he bleeds, that he sleeps without fear.

What must he feel like behind those doors? Does he feel abandoned? Does he feel alone? Is he afraid? Does he want to call out, does he call for us to rescue him? I want to knock the doors down at the thought, break him out. All those years of keeping them safe—our children. Protecting them, even from themselves.

At home I tell myself it’s not a big deal. He’s fine, we say, it will be good for him, teach him a lesson. He’s nearly a man now. But all I want to do is hold him, kiss his forehead, stroke his hair, tell him it’s alright—everything will be okay, but I’m not sure it is.

I’m not sure it will be. I transport myself curled next to him and hope he can feel me.

I say “I love you” and hope he can hear.

The next day when I drive by and see an EMT truck with its lights on parked near the jail doors, I call to make sure he is safe, unharmed, and the woman who answers is—what? Bemused? Guarded? “He’s fine,” she says, clipped. But how can she know? How can she know anything? He’s my son, I say. He’s my son. And that should explain everything.
My Sister

I get so sick of people being in my business. I mean, how do they know what’s in a person’s head? Inside your head is your business. My father was in business. He worked in sales for many years, but then my mother got agitated that he was never home, so he started working out of the basement, where it was cold and dark. When we were little girls, Terry told me that there were dead bodies down there. I refused to go down there to get stuff out of the canning room for Mom. Chicken soup in a can smells like a wet dog. Nothing in the can smells very good and no one ever leaves you alone in there, either.

Like that one time, I was in the can minding my own business when Mom started pounding on the door. “Open the door. Open this door right now.” I bet she felt pretty stupid when I did finally open the door with my pants around my ankles. It wasn’t like I was doing anything. I just wanted some time alone. Terry spent hours in there doing her hair and make-up, and I wasn’t allowed to disturb her precious time. I guess since I didn’t wear make-up, I didn’t deserve time alone. But then the whole bit about the razor blades came up again, and for a hundred and fifty-six years after that, I wasn’t allowed to be alone in the bathroom with her precious jars of cream, and shampoo, and make-up, and water. Heaven forbid I ran the water. “The sewage department isn’t poor, you know.” Neither were we.

My mouth is always so dry. When I was ten, Mom took Terry and me to Mosquito Lake. There weren’t any mosquitoes there, so I thought that that was a stupid name, but no one wanted to talk about it. We always had to be where Mom could see us because one time, I pushed Terry off the slide. She knew how to swim, I didn’t. Mom didn’t trust me, though, so she would make up excuses why we had to be in her sight. She’d say stupid things like, “What if you get molested?” I might get gunned down by the CIA, but she never worries about that. Only Terry. I never was molested, so to speak, but dad had this goofy friend named Mr. Rose, who always wanted us to go for a ride and get some ice cream with him. I complained of an allergy to milk. Poor Terry.

Going for a ride now is not an option. Even if it were, I’d have to wait until quarter of the hour. That must be the moment of Zen around here. Quarter-of-the-Hour: that’s when
you get your poison, that’s when you can smoke, that’s when you can go for a walk. I never go for walks here because there are so many flowers. Just the other day, I remarked to the gardenias that they had no right to be so poisonous, but smell so sweet. It’s confusing. Like saccharin. Tastes sweet. Gives you cancer. Beside there are tiny microphones in the flowers. That way if you talk about what’s going on, they can hear you. I told Terry what was wrong, and she said something so sweet that I couldn’t help but feel better. She was better than me, though, and liked it. That’s kind of like poison, but it doesn’t kill you as quickly.

Poison bottles don’t really have skulls or crossbones on them. Only in the cartoons. People in the cartoons get bludgeoned, but then sit right up with bandages on their heads. They’re always okay. They won’t remove my bandages yet, because they think I’ll freak. Some girl named Kim LoPresta called Terry a freak, so I waited until Physics class. She sat in front of me, so I reached in my purse, pulled out a pair of scissors, and cut off her pony tail. It was fabulous. She didn’t even feel it. She walked around all morning feeling like her superior, non-freak self. Ha! I wondered if like Sampson, she’d lose power. She still got elected homecoming queen. Pity votes. They kicked me out for a term, and when I got back, everyone called me Edward Scissorhands.

Terry should have been the homecoming queen, but she got disqualified because of me. Then I really felt like shit, and no matter how short I cut my own hair, I didn’t feel better. That movie Edward Scissorhands made me feel bad. Like it stole all my feelings. You shouldn’t be allowed to steal people’s feelings, but it always happens. According to Mom, Chip Bankes stole Terry’s heart. I corrected her. “Not her heart, Mom, just her cherry.” She slapped me.

Shit-for-Brains writes down everything I say, like they’re his thoughts to be written and recorded, but they’re not. They’re mine. I told him he shouldn’t steal my feelings because they’re all I have, and that loving and hating someone all at the same time isn’t easy, but it’s all I know, and that’s why I’m sick. He gave me new poison. It’s called Mellaril, and it makes me constipated, so I cheat it most of the time. The gargoyle who doles out the poison has the fattest cheeks, and not just on her face. Sometimes, I picture myself pricking her with a pin. She swirls around the room like a deflated balloon, landing ever so gently on the coffee table. She refers...
to herself as my guardian angel, but I know that really, Terry is my guardian angel. She always was. And I’m not stupid, for chrissakes. Other people are. They say shit to me like, “Twins must have a very special bond.” No, really? How do they think I got here in the first place? Fucking idiots.

Jokes piss me off. It’s always some moron, who’s laughing at his own joke, and saying, “Do you get it, do you get it?” I get it. It just isn’t funny. Terry and I had this game. We made up jokes that weren’t really jokes, like Terry would ask me, “What did the bear say to the transistor radio…? Let’s take a shower to see if it’s raining.” We’d fall on the ground laughing, ‘til tears ran down our faces. We did that to Pat Gibbons. It was perfectly delicious. I totally reeled him in, and then when he started laughing, too, I said with a perfectly straight face, “Terry and I made that up. It’s not even a joke. We just wanted to see how desperate you are to fit in.” It was a moment of heaven. For once, that little prick felt what it was like to have his insides showing on the outside. Smug little asshole.

Mom thinks I’m stupid. She always has. Like whenever it was my turn to do the dishes, she stood over me and told me how much soap, and how much water, and that the soap has to go in first or there won’t be any bubbles, but not too hot, or I’d burn myself, and be sure to use Brillo on the pans, but not on the Teflon ones. For Chrissakes! The dishes weren’t going to spontaneously self-combust if I didn’t get the soap and water equation right.

Soap and water are big for Mom. She used to grab a handful of my hair and say, “Soap and water are the two cheapest things on the market.” Nana told me to wash it only every other day. That the natural oils would make it silky. Why was she so mean? Chip Bankes liked my hair. He said I was beautiful. Terry and I had the same hair, but Mom never noticed that. With me, it was, “It’s in your eyes, it’s in your face, it’s too unruly, get a barrette and some VO5, let me fix you. You look like a little Ubangie. You’d think hair determines a person’s self worth, but I know better. It’s skin color. “You’re so dark, just like your grandmother. Lying in the sun will only make you darker. You’re too dark.” Lighter skin isn’t going to help when my brain is muddled. Terry was the light one. “You don’t really look like twins. Well, actually, your faces are the same, but SHE’S DARKER. It’s like I was a fucking Darth Vader lookalike. Darker. “You don’t look like
twins, you don’t act like twins.” Blah blah blah blah. She was my twin. She is my twin. Don’t people get it? I’m no less of a person without her. I might be better off, but not less of a person.

Less is more. The more people there are, the more air they soak up, the more that the room gets filled with words that don’t mean a goddamn thing. Like, “Suicide is the coward’s way out,” or “Suicide is so selfish.”

How the fuck would they know? When no one worries about my self but me, and let’s everyone else’s SELVES touch me where I shouldn’t be touched, what else should I be but selfish? It’s my life, and I don’t want it anymore.

More is more. Especially when you want more potatoes, but Kitchen Lady only offers you more corn. I hate corn, and it’s the only other edible thing on the plate. The “pork chop” was nothing more than seared flesh. My flesh, burnt to a crisp. And yet I’m still here, even though they tried to make me eat my own burnt flesh. Even if they were boxed potatoes, I would still have liked more.

What I really want is to sleep. I’ve never been good at sleeping. Sleeping or crying. Terry cried when I told her that I wanted to kill myself because of her. I got that ache in my throat, but the tears wouldn’t come. That night I slept like a baby and Terry got to watch the walls ‘til dawn. She used to nod off at the drop of a hat. Until then. Chip Bankes bought her this big, floppy purple hat at a fair. He won it for her. She thought it was stupid looking, so I started wearing it. Chip told me I looked like a black-haired Janis Joplin. Janis had it all going on. Knew about brain pain. Offed herself right the first time. The doctors wouldn’t let me go to the funeral. Said it would be too traumatic. Like setting yourself and your other half on fire isn’t. It wasn’t like she could be shown, but I needed to see her. It isn’t fair for her to be cold and alone without me.

We agreed that we’d marry twin brothers. She’d name her daughter Emily and I’d name mine Terry so that they would be sisters just like us. And then even through them, we’d never be apart. Abortion just isn’t that big a deal. If Mom had listened to her gut and just had one, none of this would have happened. But instead she had the big wedding, with two “premie” twins seven months later. Terry was a total trooper about the whole thing, until it was over. I didn’t think
she’d be able to go through with it, but she did. Said it just felt like bad cramps. She took some Motrin, and moved right on. But then I’d find dog-eared catalogues of baby clothes and magazines with new mother articles. She stopped eating, sleeping, and just about everything else. She wondered if the baby would have looked more like me, or her, or Chip. I guess that’s normal.

Shit-for-Brains says that normal is “feeling good about oneself.” How can I possibly feel good? My intestines are growing on the outside now that all my skin is gone. Everyone can see what I eat or drink or feel. Milk does a body good. Great, but what if your mind is fried? I hate ice cream. Every time Mr. Rose came back with ice cream, Terry threw up. I knew what was going on, but Mom said I was evil-minded. I worked at the Golden Dragon when I was in high school. Fr. Rogers and Sister Marilyn used to come in for dinner and hold hands. I knew they were having an affair, but Mom insisted that I was evil-minded. If I’m evil, what the hell were they? They’re the ones who pretended to be good. Suicide is a cardinal sin. At least that’s what the penguins taught us.

Terry taught me how to ride my bike. I left my training wheels on until I was 10 or 11. Terry got mad that Pat Gibbons gave me shit about it, so she taught me to ride. And to do my hair. When we were freshman in high school, Poppy told us that if we grew our hair so long that we could sit on it, he’d buy us a car. That’s when Mom took the shears to my hair. My hair, not Terry’s. Nana never forgave her for that. She told dad that Mom only put on a good front until she roped Dad into a wedding. Dad used to throw that in her face whenever they had a fight over Poppy coming by “unannounced.” I mean really, who were we that he needed to be announced or invited. He just wanted to see us. She hates him because he’s dark, too.

If she hates dark people, why did she marry dad? I mean he’s not dark, but his parents are. She had to know that there was a chance her children might not look Scandinavian, for chrissakes. One time, I found a love letter to Mom from some other guy. I showed it to Terry. We felt so bad for Daddy. The guy said he’d have married her and raised the twins as his, and no one had to know. When she caught us reading the letter, she slapped me so hard across the face that my nose bled. I remember watching the blood drip onto my
shorts and t-shirt. They were lavender with green flowers. It was a matching set that Nana had gotten for me and Terry. Mom said I looked like a little DP in that outfit. It made me feel really bad.

Chip made me feel things that I didn’t necessarily want to feel. Shouldn’t have felt. No one will ever convince me that Father Smolinksi didn’t get his rocks off watching all those pretty girls in swimsuits. Swim coach, my ass. He was a pervert. Confession is bullshit, anyway. When Mom thought I actually might die, and brought a priest in to give me “last rights,” I apparently told him that I didn’t believe that the things I did or felt were wrong, even if the church says they are. I refused to confess or be blessed. I knew it was a trick. They wanted to see if I was paying attention. Confession only really works if you feel sorry. I feel sorry now. I miss her, and she’s burning a second time, but now in hell because suicide is a cardinal sin. I just wanted to stop the pain. Hers and mine, I guess.

It’s not exactly like I went into our room, and said, “Hey sissy, whaddya say we take a bunch of Xanax out of Mom’s closet, go into the shed with some matches and gasoline, and have a fuck-you bonfire?” It wasn’t like that. The abortion and all the shit from school put her over. She’d never not fit in before. She couldn’t deal with it. And fitting in was just as hard for me. I thought that people wanted to hang out with me or read my poetry so that they could make fun of me. I had no idea that they thought I was cool. Chip said he wanted me first, but that a fourteen-carat bitch like me is too hard to approach, so he went after Terry instead.

Bother rhymes with father but not with other. Orange doesn’t rhyme with anything, and it’s supposedly an inflammatory color. No hint of orange anywhere in this joint. It totally freaks people out when I smoke. It isn’t as if I did this to myself with cigarettes. I love it when people ask me what happened. If I don’t like them, I say that I have a penchant for matches, and they’d better watch out. These dumb motherfuckers are worried about matches when I can’t even have shoelaces. Logic would tell you that the shoelaces would break before my neck, but noooooo. Gay, foam slippers it is. At least for now. Nana had these slippers that she used to let me wear when I slept over there. They were black velvet with rhinestones on the toes. They made me feel special, and when I think about it, I feel like I actually might cry.
Why did that stupid sonofabitch have to find us? Not even a good fence could have made him a good neighbor. No matter what we were doing, he was always in our business. If I was watering the garden, he’d poke his head out the window, “You watering the garden?” No, I’m trying to attract aliens. Dad would light the grill, and within seconds, there he was. “You having a barbeque?” No fuckstick, it’s an ancient Arabic ritual where we light a grill, throw meat on it, and dance in a circle. He just couldn’t keep his hands to himself could he? He probably thought we were changing into our bathing suits in there, and came to cop a gander. I hate him. I was so close.

I took a class on death and dying. Sister Regina got a fucking woody every time she picked up that Kübler-Ross book. Yeah, I’ll bet she knew all about denial. I mean why would anyone take a life-long vow of celibacy? Maybe Mr. Rose was friends with her father, too. I mean, sex isn’t easy. Not the first time, anyway. Chip and I had stayed up all night reading e.e.cummings and listening to Roxy Music. He told me he was in love with me, and having sex just seemed right. It hurt, but it still felt right. For a while, anyway. He told me that Terry hated sex. She never complained, but she never got into it the way I did, so he said he quit trying after a while.

I hate vegetable soup, so as a kid, I used to give it up for Lent. It was more penance for Mom than me, because she used to give up yelling for Lent. Yelling. What kind of person gives up yelling for Lent? Shit-for-Brains says that she was trying her best to “adopt a healthier approach to anger.” Explain this to me, okay? What does she have to be so angry about? She’s beautiful and blonde charming with her whole southern belle thing. Men love her, women love her. Dad loves her, even though she treats him like shit. Her life is a piece of cake and she’s angry?

If anyone should be angry, it’s me. I can’t even watch television in peace because the doctors and nurses watch you from inside the set. There’s a camera behind the screen that records what you say, when you laugh, what you think, how you look, what you feel. Want to know how I feel? Sick. My blood doesn’t flow where it’s supposed to, and it’s wrong to break your promises. I promised her that I’d stop sleeping with Chip, but I didn’t. And then she had to go and get herself knocked up by him, to make sure that he’d leave us both alone. I hated her for it. I was glad that she hurt. Glad that for once, the glass slipper was in shards.
Maureen Foster

the twirling bride on the beach

i was an art history major
in love with the pre-raphaelites
i saw in him poetry darkness magic and
married him

the police were called but i did not press charges for
the lawyer said it would ruin his life
the night before the wedding
my aunt left my bridal veil on a lampshade and it
burst into flames

i was in my free-wheelin' 20s in the
free-wheelin' 70s
i wore black pantaloons with white polka dots
matching halter top with a
red rose in the bodice to
marry my drug dealer
a merchant of whatever you desire
close personal friends with led zeppelin
his own drug of choice was remy martin
a bottle a day

when he was 13 he built in the family attic
a miniworld with minitrains
which irritated his unemployed stepfather
who in a drunken rage
ripped it up

did you know that when cirrhosis is finished with
you
you hemorrhage from the esophagus
he threw up a bucket of blood and was
dead by morning
i scattered his ashes off the hilltop
at our house in sun valley
the grey dust took flight on a
gust
of wind
and the little chunks of his bones startled me

i left my third marriage after 23 years
Maureen Foster

drove 400 miles to rent a studio apartment in berkeley
turned the shiny new key in the front door
to find my pain waiting for me in
the living room
it had beat me there from LA
it must have done 90 all the way
and not stopped for gas

in the spring
a friend who had left her marriage of three decades
invited me out for champagne on my birthday
in sausalito a table by the water
near the new townhouse she shared with
her new husband
she was smiling again had lost weight
even felt pity for her philandering ex
and told me she had cried for two years
that meant i had sixteen months to go

i don't believe in failed marriages
how can it be a failure when
a son and a daughter each smarter wiser
more beautiful than i
    resonate and rage it on this
    planet that is so badly blue and needs them
    so badly

i am sitting in a bar facing a panorama of
sky
sea and
beach
reading student essays
it's important to choose exactly the right drink for
reading student essays

manhattan is my cocktail of choice
but whisky turns me into dorothy parker
and they all get Fs

i love the fruity stella but it makes me
too mellow and they all get As

i find a mid-range chardonnay is the
Maureen Foster

perfect balance
not the $6 one because i will feel deprived
not the sonoma cutrer because
its exquisite complexity
distracts from the task at hand

but today it's not the oak and the
fruity bouquet
that distract
but the twirling bride on the beach
in her wedding gown and bare feet
she has strayed from the
   orderly rows of empty and waiting
   folding chairs on the sand
   festooned with garlands of ribbon and
   hibiscus

   has left behind the
   expensive photographer
   and even her tuxedoed
   husband-to-be

to hoist up her countless layers
of frothy gauze
and frolic in the surf

   splashing and spinning
   winking in the sun
   which by the time
   she has said her vows
   will set the sky and sea ablaze
   in fuchsia
   before it fades to mauve
   then a bittersweet grey
   then black
   studded with
   random and unpredictable

stars
.

wordriver literary review 93
transit of venus

coffee in its filter nest
  fragrant and
  free-trade

i stand waiting at my old stove
for the water to boil

there's a sliver of light on the linoleum
a scrap of paper
i kneel down and reach for it
and my hand closes around
nothing
but a sliver of light from the window
on my wrist
like a kiss
thus spake the prophet before her descent into the subway

the most beautiful woman in los angeles
  is a man

the tallest skyscraper in manhattan
  is a phantom

the brightest star in the cosmos is
  the dying one

the worst chest pain is the love of a man
  who wont’ be mine

the most magnificent computer is the one
  inside my head

the most brilliant movie in the world is
  the dream you had last night

the happiest person on Earth
  is a dolphin

the most splendid reality of my life
  is my fantasy
horror vacui

you had surprisingly little to do
with the experience i’ve had with
you

thank you for the spark
that i fed and fanned into the
conflagration you see today

a glimpse of your heart
your silhouette in the dark
all that i needed for what now
consumes me

this world of
us that feeds on your
absence
birthed by what you gave
thrives on what you
withhold

nature abhors a vacuum

with nothing i have
everything
Dream Jobs

the painter

A mute and mentally challenged painter has been kept in captivity in a garage. Her captor takes her paintings one by one and sells them. There is a notebook on a shelf inside the house where this information is kept. It looks like a flight chart with lines trailing all around the country.

By spying through the garage window, I could tell that even after all these years the woman still hated to be separated from her paintings. I observed her captor trying to take her latest work away and her making frantic signs as though she was not yet finished. After he went back inside, she tried to hide it behind some old tins.

Yes, I rescued her eventually, along with her painting, along with the notebook, which contained snapshots of all her past creations. She simply could not put it down, tracing her fingernail over and over the lines on the graph.

housebreaker

I was a housebreaker, but definitely in the wrong place at the wrong time, a neighborhood get-together. All the residents were paying visits to one another. It took me awhile to catch on to this and to realize that the sooner I left, the better. I escaped onto a back porch, trying hard to conceal a couple of small items I had stolen. I was greeted immediately by an elderly lady who said, Oh, do you live here? I was just admiring your flowers.

She painfully bent over to smell a rosebush near the porch, then asked me to show her around. So I started to take her into “my” home. From within came a friendly greeting: Hello, who’s there?

He’ll show you around, I said, and fled quickly.

beach clean-up

I am cleaning up a beach area, hosing off tables and umbrellas even though other workers stationed there do next to nothing. I am told by the manager, whom we all call “Mother,” to find a rake, which I do. It isn’t the best tool for the job because a fine mesh covers the sand. Only later, after scraping against the surface with the rake and accomplishing nothing, do I find another tool with plastic teeth like something used for cat litter. It pushes the sand back through
the holes in the mesh. But then I press too hard and crack the handle. I am wearing sunglasses and a floppy hat: my late teen self. Next to the beach is a DJ stand where partiers wait impatiently for us to ready the area.

drifter

My partner and I were Depression-Era drifters traveling from town to town looking for any work we could find. We stopped at an open pit area, where our job was to get a box 1’ by 6”, fold it, label it with a number, then take it to the pit to fill with dirt.

Once filled, each box became a brick in a wall designed to keep unwanted immigrants out. We decided to quit once we discovered this wall: twelve feet high, three feet thick, decorated with a large skull.

angel in the house

Babysitting a young nephew. He was a toddler and acting up, apparently because he no longer fit well into his pants. So we went searching for another pair.

Then I was trying to finish reading some essays by Virginia Woolf and needed to find a quiet place. A crowd of people were hanging out in the kitchen. I took my book, spotted a bottle of gin, and thought I would sneak both back to my room. But en route, there were so many stray dishes and glasses lying around that I couldn’t help becoming the Angel in the House and clearing them.

preacher

I am a black preacher-civil rights leader dressed in a dark coat and a wide-brimmed hat. Coming out of an assembly, I lose sight of my driver. So I begin to walk the few miles home.

It is a drizzly day, and I pause at a diner for shelter. There, I am accosted by a man wielding a knife who is on the verge of slashing me in the face. But the proprietress opens fire with a shotgun and the man’s head explodes over my clothes.

midnight snack

I was trying to decide if my daughter was old enough to be left home alone. I had to leave for work the next morning
at 5:00. I thought yes, she should be good to sleep in. Her sitter would arrive a couple of hours later.

But then she came out of her room for a midnight snack—a whole apple, tortilla chips, and an unwrapped brick of cheese that she intended to microwave all at the same time—and I wasn’t so sure.

not dressed

I arrive at my job as a factory janitor. The day shift still hasn’t left; the place is full of workers in a festive mood, singing and playing guitar. In one area is a line of short Hispanic ladies being judged in a beauty contest. A gruff foreman approaches and warns me I am improperly dressed for my shift. I tell him I have a change in the duffel bag I carry and proceed to get ready. Then I am handed a pay envelope with little doughnut stickers glued onto it to reflect all the bonus hours I have worked. But I have never been paid, and most of the rings have fallen off.

poor prof

Only a poor professor, I found myself on the verge of being driven to prostitution to pay for an operation for a friend. When a student heard of this, he wrote me a check for $15,560 to cover all costs. In return, I took a vow of chastity and swore to become a monk. Twenty years later, I had many followers. Some even tried to buy me out of my vow!

man of the world

I was an Irish Man of the World, which is to say, rather a free spirit. As I was just explaining to a lady of my acquaintance, my parents always advised me to take advantage of my opportunities. But being rather neglectful, they failed to warn that half the opportunities to come one’s way were bad.

So fortunes were made and lost, and I visited and left places rather quickly, until one day I found myself in the former Yugoslavia.

I was taking my evening nap when up an embankment straggled a father and son, freshly escaped from a prison camp, and on their last legs.

They led me to an old vehicle abandoned nearby with the tires shot out, under which they had
stowed two bicycles. How I missed the bikes myself I
do not know.

They climbed aboard to make their break for
the border, but the son could barely stand, let alone
balance on two wheels.

So I hit upon the expedient of riding
alongside and holding him up. Until his father too
dropped out of the race and urged me on ahead,
thinking a foreign escort was his son’s best chance.

Sad to say, we left him there and continued
on to the border, where a train was scheduled to
depart.

As things stood, my finances were rather
limited, but I offered the station lady the bikes, a
handful of coin, and a wink, proudly flashing my
Irish passport and lamenting the present state of the
economy. Then just for leavening, slipping in a
reference to my mother, declaring that her last wish
was to behold him, her poor deaf-mute grandchild,
and to clasp him in her arms just once before she
died.

So we did end up on that train, where I met
the lady of my acquaintance, an American social
worker, who informed me she would take steps
toward the family’s reunification.

Meantime, I could leave the poor boy in her
charge—look at him, wasn’t he hungry, and
communicating perfectly well with that plate of
potatoes and eggs.
Pathetic thing

Pathetic thing, you thief.
You think you have me trapped.
You think you’ve broken me, here, in this dreadful dungeon.
Just you, a pathetic wooden door.

You do not know that I hear the cries of eagles
as they soar powerfully
to lush green fields
at the very peaks of thunderous mountains.
I have dreamed of lounging on their backs,
reclining in their soft feathers
as they easily steal me away from you.

They will be my friends, the mountain birds,
and we will laugh together in your face,
pathetic wooden door,
while we carve our names into your rotting brown skin,
and while we burn you with searing flames.
Nasif

The eyes, gouged free, stared blankly at the washer, dryer, ceiling, and door. Some ears, severed clean, lay on a plate. Nasif had lined eight lambs’ heads and their wrested parts on the sink board in the basement and began to prep them for cooking. The fleece crackled as he lit match after match to singe it away, and after burning through an entire box of matches on the first head, he headed for the garage in search of a blowtorch. He returned with a small one, just like the one I now use to caramelize sugar on crème brulee.

The acrid stench of burnt flesh, fleece, and bleach wafted out the door and into the driveway. It stayed in my clothes, and then in my nostrils. I sat in the stairwell, revolted but riveted. I was 8 years old, and my grandfather was a tremendous source of curiosity for me: the foods he ate, the stoic demeanor, the fact that he didn’t speak English.

Nasif carved away the noses and lined them in the upturned lid of the white porcelain pot simmering on the stove. He rinsed dung from the stomach linings, pouring the bucket of waste down the commode that he then doused with bleach. He reserved the eyes, ears, and noses to add to the broth that was peppered with celery, onions, bay leaves, and carrots. I knew that the lamb and rice that we would have for dinner would be stewed on that broth, then stuffed into the stomach lining and baked with chicken pieces and brains. Nasif always saved the brains for himself.

Tha’a ya bintie (come, little one). I took the four steps into the basement. I had been watching from the landing as Nasif worked the lambs’ heads and the stomach linings.

He cradled one of the heads in the fold of my arm. He put a small paring knife in my other hand and guided it to slice away the ear that had just been singed bare. I gagged as the knife sliced through the cartilage. A hot sticky hand slapped me on the back of the head, “Inte hamarra?” Are you a jackass? My hair stuck where he hit me. Nasif grabbed the head from me, leaving a trail of goo on my sleeve. He shoved me toward the stairs. I returned to the top step, gagging again and again, bile thick in my throat and nostrils.

He deftly carved away the other ear and nose, and then repeated with the remaining heads, tossing each of them into the bucket. When he finished, he dropped each of the heads into the boiling mixture on the stove. I was surprised
that they all fit, but once they’d been plucked, singed, and
carved clean, they were surprisingly small. He then slid the
eyes, ears, and noses into the pot, adding cinnamon sticks and
parsley.

He looked over at me, curled his lip, and growled. I
bolted up the stairs, into the kitchen and to the safety of my
grandmother. Nasif retreated to his back room, where he drank
Arak and read poetry until dinner.
The Haircut

Leo hated the morning routine. After drying his showered body, he patted his hair with a towel, wiping surface drops of water. Reaching in the bathroom draw, he took out a wide-tooth comb and formed a part just above his left ear, layering the long, soaked strands over his glistening pate, and pressed down on the straight edge of the comb against his flattened hair. Grimacing at the furrows between strands, Leo rubbed his head, briskly re-styled the disconnect hairs with the boar bristles of his Mason Pearson brush, and spread scented extra-hold spray in a circle motion. Later, he walked briskly through the front door, unbothered by the wind that fluttered the flag at the back porch of the apartment house.

Leo worked at DeMarco Insurance processing applications, billing and claims. Once inside the glass-front insurance office, Leo walked to his desk—a dented metal square stacked with forms on each corner, the center taken up by a computer and small monitor. After quickly eating lunch, Leo went to the barber shop on the next street. For years, he’d gone midday to the same place for a haircut and to the stooped man at the far chair. When he looked around, he couldn’t find his favorite barber and turned to leave.

“He’s going to be out for a while. Had prostate surgery. Billy’s filling in; he’s almost done,” the barber nearest the door said, pointing. He added, “He’s real good. Right, Billy?”

Leo looked toward the distant chair and saw a young man awkwardly shifting from one foot to the other, a comb shaking in his hand, cutting the side hairs of an old man. Leo stared at him, focusing on the youthful barber’s plume of black hair brushed into a cone from each side and glistening with cream. His smock was pale green, pressed and unstained. When Leo sat in the metal chair, the substitute barber unfurled a cape and placed it over Leo’s chest. On top of the long counter, long black combs were immersed in a blue liquid, and bottles of gel and spray were in an even line; a triangular mirror filled the wall. Turning the chair away from the mirror, the barber waved scissors over Leo’s head and snipped at the edges of hair.

“Just a trim,” Leo said.

The barber nodded and pushed a comb through Leo’s locks, the teeth catching in the adhesive hair spray. Leo looked
at the framed license and noticed that the issuance date was three months ago.

Picking up a plastic water bottle, the barber sprayed a mist on Leo’s head, saturating to the scalp, after which he lifted the sopped strands and cut in a straight line. Clumps of hair fell and stuck to the glossy floor. Leo felt the cold scissor blades against his ear and wispy hair-ends slide down his neck. Straining to see from the corner of his eye, he shifted the moveable chair to the left by pushing his leg against the metallic side, and, for a moment, saw the long strands from the side straight up, and the wet, naked top of his head. The barber nudged the chair back around with his hip and trimmed around the edges of Leo’s hair with electric shears, catching neck stubble in the gyrating teeth. Leo winced and turned to his head unconsciously.

The young barber snapped, “Don’t move!”

Stepping back and holding the scissors, the barber scanned his work, cut more in spots for several minutes, and released gusts of warm air from a whirring hair dryer. He combed from the thick part, and raked strands across the moist dome. The barber slowly swung the chair around and Leo’s eyes widened as he looked at himself. The long hairs from the left side pushed to their length didn’t reach to the tussock of hair on the right side of his head—a space of bare skin separated the stretched strands and the side tuft.

Leo sat rigid in the chair, his hand gripping the sides of the chair. Then, he patted the top of his head and felt the sheared edges of his hair.

“I can fix it,” the barber said, raising his arms and showing the half-moon stain on the upper sleeves. He moved to the side of Leo’s head where the space had formed. Lifting up a rim of hair above Leo’s right ear, he stretched the strands to cover the exposed skin forming a small wedge where the hairs extended from each side of Leo’s head met. The older barber came over, and, as if the long strands were strips of rubber not fully extended, pulled with the narrow teeth of a comb but failed to bridge the gap any further.

Leo stared at both of them, took the cape from around his neck, tossed it on the chair and stormed out leaving the exact amount of the haircut on the tray near the register. Inside his car, he tilted the rear view mirror to look closer at the top of his head, pushed on the clipped hairs and ran his index finger down the bald strip. As he sat, he saw the mage of his
father, an intense man with a halo of hair that barely extended upward past his ears. He envisioned his father in the fedora that he took off slowly when he went inside, or sitting in the recliner chair, his bald pate glistening with reflected light from the curved lamp above his head. He recalled his mother repeatedly calling her husband, “bald bastard,” and mocking his baldness, one time spitefully spraying his head with furniture polish as he sat reading while she cleaned. Lifting the plank of his hair, Leo looked in the mirror, feeling as if the space was as noticeable as an unhealed wound. He knew when he returned to work, there would be the ridicule, the giggles and whispers as they stared at the line of exposed scalp, while he sat with his head down, avoiding the glances, suppressing the blush of shame and anger. It wouldn’t end that day, or when the hair grew back across; they’d always made fun of his hair, calling it a combover. Buoyed by a new purpose, they would come up with names and buy him mocking gifts for the holiday grab bag.

Looking through the windshield, he saw the car in front with an unfaded sticker, Hair Cutting and Styling Institute, on the back bumper. Leo got out of his car and opened his trunk to take out his tire iron. Walking to the other car, he bent over and looked at himself in the car’s side view mirror. Washed of hair spray, the flat of hair lifted up, exposing the top of his bald head. He struck the mirror with the tire iron and his adhering likeness shattered, sending fragments of the image of his shorn hair flying, and the destroyed reflection lay scattered on the blacktop.
The Peanut Butter Table

Keith shuffled through the cafeteria line. Orange juice, green grapes, a corn dog. The lunch lady scanned his card, and he stuck it back in his pocket, never looking her in the eye. He headed for the table in the middle of the room, one of the few that were unoccupied. He felt like everyone was watching him. They probably were.

After all, he was the new kid at school. Tall for his age, and lanky with orange hair and freckles, he was hard to miss in his plain white t-shirt and jeans that were just a little too short. While everyone in third grade was nice to him, most of his classmates wore collared shirts with polo players or sailboats stitched on the chest. It was still early in the school year, but he had not managed to strike up a real friendship yet.

He slumped into his seat with a sigh and started his usual lunch routine — a few quick bites of one item, then another. He chugged his juice as fast as he could, finished the grapes and took a few bites of his corn dog. Although Keith didn’t eat much for breakfast and was usually starving by lunch, he was more interested in getting outside, shooting basketball in the courtyard, and pretending he belonged at Brookfield Academy.

He looked down for his napkin because his mom always told him to mind his manners at school, even when no one was around. When he looked up, Harrison was standing in front of him.

“Hey Carrot Top, your head is on fire,” he laughed. Keith just looked at him. “You freckles make you look ugly.” Keith was four inches taller than Harrison, but gave up a good 30 pounds. It crossed his mind to punch Harrison, a kid who fit the perfect description of a storybook troll, on advice from his dad. “I’ve seen that tub of lard,” Keith’s dad had told him one afternoon. “If he gets in your face, pop him one and take off. He’ll never catch you. Just like no one can catch you on the soccer field. Or you could throw him a biscuit.” Keith’s dad joked a lot, so Keith never knew whether to take the advice or not.

Instead, Keith didn’t say a word; he just walked on past Harrison and headed towards his teacher, Mrs. Wilkins, to see if he could go outside. He could get a ball if he was quick. He walked up to where she was sitting with all the other third and fourth grade teachers.
“Well, hey Keith, you ate your lunch awfully fast,” she said.

“Mrs. Wilkins, is it okay if I go ahead to the courtyard? I want to play basketball.”

“You go ahead, buddy. Come on back in when the first bell rings.”

“Thank you.”

As Keith started to walk away, he noticed a table by the window he hadn’t seen before. It was farther away from the other tables, with what seemed like a buffer around it. The sophomore who had been assigned as his “Big Buddy” — a school policy to give each younger child a built-in new friend — was sitting there with a bunch of kids from several grades and they were all laughing and having a good time. There was a sign on the table.

“Uh, Mrs. Wilkins? What does that sign on Chuck’s table say?”

“That’s the Peanut Butter Table, Keith. Everyone who brings their lunch, if it has any kind of peanut product in it, they get to sit there. That way their food won’t be near the children with peanut allergies. Do you know what a peanut allergy is?”

“Yes ma’am. My uncle has one. If he eats peanut butter, he will get shocked or throw up and then he’ll die or something. Unless he has an epi-pen.”

Mrs. Wilkins forced back a smile. “That’s right. Probably something like that. You can go out and play now if you want.” She looked back at the table filled with her co-workers. They were all smiling.

“Margaret, you’ve got a smart one there,” said Mrs. Jones.

“And that red hair and freckles, he is adorable,” said Mrs. Webb.

“He’s a special one, ladies, that’s for sure,” said Mrs. Wilkins.

***

That night after supper and chores and homework, as Keith and his younger brother Asher got ready for bed, his mom asked about his day.

“It was fine,” he said. “Can I carry my lunch tomorrow?”

“Sure baby, but all we have is peanut butter.”
“That’s what I want, a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.”

“Okay,” his mom said. “Was the lunchroom food not good?”

“No, it’s fine. I just haven’t had peanut butter and jelly in a while.” He heard his parents talking about money one night when they didn’t know he was just around the corner in the living room. His dad had not worked in a while. “Plus, it might save us some money. That’s why you carry your lunch, right?”

“That’s right, baby,” his mom said. She kissed him and his brother good night, turned off the light and started out of the room. She wiped a tear as she shut the bedroom door, and she realized her children were taking the lifestyle changes much better than their parents.

***

The next day at lunch, Keith walked past the lunch line carrying his small insulated lunch bag. He walked past Harrison’s table, and Harrison pointed to his hair.

Keith wasn’t sure what he’d say when he got to the Peanut Butter Table. Would they have a seat for him? Would they send him away?

“Hey, it’s my man Keith,” Chuck said loudly. “Grab a chair, dude. Everybody, this is Keith. He’s my Little Buddy. He’s cool.”

The kids with their mouths full nodded, while the others set off a chorus of “Heys.” Keith took out his sandwich and nipped a couple of bites. He wasn’t that hungry; he felt good. The conversation at the table picked back up where it left off, small groups at the long table carrying on talk about everything from TV to superheroes to classes. It was like a club.

Another of the older kids — one Keith recognized as another one of the varsity soccer players — noticed Keith hadn’t spoken. Ryan looked down at Keith, nodded and said, “Hey Keith, we were just talking about Star Wars. Who is your favorite character?”

He smiled. Star Wars was his favorite movie. How did they know? “I’d have to say Ben Kenobi,” he said. “Good choice, man.”

From that moment on, Keith never felt outside the group. Conversation came easy. Within days, he started
making friends in class. The highlight of every day was time at The Peanut Butter Table.

***

After two weeks, Keith noticed he started to feel strange right after lunch.

He stomach started hurting, and he felt as though he had to go to the bathroom just after getting back to Mrs. Wilkins’ classroom. He felt really sleepy and had a hard time paying attention. Maybe it was the warm weather, the eating, the basketball and excitement. It was like the feeling he sometimes got right before soccer games.

Soccer was how he had managed to be at this school. That and his grades. He played city league soccer, and after the first season, he suddenly realized he possessed size and physical skills that others on his team and in his league did not have. One day, after he scored four goals in a half — two after his dad moved him to defense — a slim man in sunglasses and a royal blue windsuit and soccer shoes walked up to his dad.

He heard the man ask his dad about “the redheaded kid,” say something about an academy, and ask something about age and grades. Keith heard his dad say the familiar words “can’t afford,” but then the man said something about tests, scholarships, and college. The next Monday, Keith and his dad went to visit the man at the most beautiful school Keith had ever seen. It didn’t even look like a school. The Monday after that, the man came to Keith’s house, smiling, and met with his parents in the living room. He had some papers. When he left, Keith’s parents called him into the living room and they seemed really happy. They told Keith he’d be going to a new school soon.

That was good news. At his old school, the watch his grandmother had given him was stolen, there were fights most days, and some kid had to leave one day after he pulled his pants down in front of a bunch of girls. His parents seemed upset that he never had homework.

It turned out the man in the windsuit was Coach Keane. He had a strange accent, but he was like a celebrity. He had played professional soccer, and now he had won 10 straight state championships and 15 altogether. There were tons of trophies in the case in the school lobby. Coach Keane told Keith he would play on a special team that would ride a bus every Saturday to cities all over the state to play soccer, and that he had to do really good in school to keep playing. He
told him he could be as good as Chuck one day. He was a nice man, and Keith loved to hear him talk.

***

One day, Keith got tired of peanut butter. He went through the line and got some grapes and orange juice, and hoped he still had some money on his lunch card. He did. He went on to the Peanut Butter Table and hoped no one noticed. No one mentioned it, and Keith was relieved.

After lunch, he realized that he didn’t feel bad. His stomach didn’t hurt and he didn’t feel sleepy. He wondered if maybe it was the peanut butter that made him feel strange sometimes. He knew he needed to tell his mom that night, but maybe he’d put it off and make sure first. Keith also needed to find out if he could stay at the table if he no longer brought peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.

***

On the way to the cafeteria the next day, Keith and his new friend Matthew started talking about the Legos they had seen advertised on television. Matthew was planning on getting the whole set for his birthday, and wanted to know if Kent wanted to come to his party. They could figure the whole thing out at The Peanut Butter Table.

Keith had not been eating any of his peanut butter and jelly sandwich at lunch the last couple of weeks, taking care to stuff it down in some napkins before he threw it away. He lived off some crackers from home and fruit he bought at school. He had managed to sneak a $20 bill out of his birthday stash, and he took it to Mrs. Atkins at the front desk and said it was from his mom, to please put it on his lunch card. He hoped she would not call his mom at the insurance office where she worked answering phones. She had drawn houses for an architect before Keith was born, he’d heard her say once. She loved art, but didn’t draw much anymore. Keith’s dad put on the same suit everyday, dropped him off at school and then went to places looking for jobs. He had worked for a bank when Keith was in second grade, but that bank didn’t have an office anymore.

When he got to the lunch room, Keith reached in his bag, behind his sandwich and felt around for his card. He panicked as his hand dug around in the bag. It wasn’t there. It had been there this morning just before recess; Keith had checked a couple of times.
Suddenly, he realized how hungry he was. Mrs. Wilkins had worked on math and the class spent a long time doing word problems and different types of worksheets. He walked through the line with Matthew, eyeing the spaghetti, but saying nothing. It would be okay to eat peanut butter one day. They sat down and started talking about Legos, and Nintendo games and the best birthday parties they had ever been to. When it was time to go, Keith looked down and realized he had eaten his whole sandwich. He felt warm. As the table started to clear, Harrison walked by.

“Heeyyyy Matthew, still wetting the bed?” Harrison asked and then laughed.

“Shut up Harrison, I don’t wet the bed.”

“Are you going to cry like a baby, Matthew? Is Carrot Top going to wipe your tears? Then you can have a wet shirt and wet pants.” Harrison laughed again. “By the way, Carrot Top, thanks for lunch. I bought everybody at my table cookies.”

Keith’s throat felt weird. The bell rang and Harrison ran off. When he got to the door he looked back at Keith and Matthew and waved. The boys had no idea why, and then he waved Keith’s lunch card in the air and threw it in the trash.

Keith tried to drink some water from the fountain in the hallway. He felt dizzy.

“Keith, you okay?” Matthew asked.

“Bathroom.”

“Do you want me to get Mrs. Wilkins?”

Keith’s throat was closing. He could barely talk, he felt as though someone was sitting on his chest. “Okay.” Matthew was already gone.

Keith tried to make it to a stall, but the room had started to move. He fell to one knee, and then all the way down onto his rear end. He could feel himself slipping, and then he felt the cold, damp tile of the bathroom floor against his face. His face tingled. There were footsteps; he saw lots of shoes scuffling at the door. He heard Matthew and Mrs. Wilkins and another lady. Someone grabbed him and called his name and then he felt a pinprick in his leg. Keith was thirsty, and felt as though he could sleep for a long time. He hoped his mom and dad would be there when he woke up.
First, we tried to remember—at the high school basketball game, we sat in the top row and felt awkward, watching people who no longer seemed very familiar, in their matching blue T-shirts, screaming about something that no longer seemed important. Then, we tried to seem sophisticated—for half an hour, we sat in uncomfortable cafe chairs as an angry woman with very short hair sang cover songs originally recorded by bands whose names we’d never heard. We declined the waitress’ offer of free refills and made for the parking lot.

“What now?” Evan asked.
“Club?” Jason asked. He leaned on the fender of his powder blue, rust-pocked 1985 Cadillac. He’d stayed in town to play basketball at the community college; the rest of us were home on our first Christmas break from far-flung universities.

“Why not?” Keith said. “You driving?”
Evan smirked and glanced at his dad’s sleek black SUV. “I’ll drive,” he said.
“I’ve ridden with you before,” I said. “Veto.”
In what I later labeled as a terrible decision, I opened the shotgun door and got into Jason’s ride. The others followed.

We were a couple miles onto the road when Jason glanced at the other two guys in the rearview and announced, “Quick detour. I told Bo he could come.”
“He’s still alive?” Evan asked. “How?”
Jason dimmed the headlights before we pulled up to a house that seemed to be rotting on its own frame, lilting leftward. Jason left the motor running and ran up to a window, tapped three times. Then he turned and waved us over.
“What’s he want?” Keith asked.
“Let’s just get this over with,” Evan said, and we got out.

We stepped through a minefield of obstacles left to rust in the high grass: broken tricycles, car parts, miscellaneous broken objects. Bo Jenkins sat on the floor with a flashlight in his hand. When he saw us all lined up to watch, he grinned, leaned forward and jerked hard on his own foot, dislocating his ankle so he could slip off his court-issued electronic monitoring device. Keith turned away and I thought
he was going to puke: he’d busted his own ankle a year earlier in the homecoming football game, one of those moments where all the mothers up in the bleachers hug each other and the cheerleaders come onto the field to kneel around the hurt guy and pray, then he gives a big cliché thumbs-up when they cart him out of the stadium.

Bo chucked the anklet onto his bed, shoved his foot back into place with well-practiced ease, and jumped through the window. His ankle must not have been completely back into its socket, though, because he sort of bounced and landed in a crumpled ball on the grass.

“Help him out,” Jason said. “For God’s sake—he’s got a broken back.”

“What the hell?” Evan asked. “Seriously?”

I took one arm and Evan held the other. Bo dragged his legs; he kicked them every now and again to act like he was trying to participate, but all it did was make things harder. This was just like him.

“Dude cracked me with a pipe last week,” Bo said. “I didn’t steal that much.”

Evan smirked. We put Bo in the back and resumed our spots. Jason waited a couple blocks before turning the lights back on, then peeled out and flew toward the interstate, toward the city, toward the club. It was half past midnight.

As we waited in line, a thin crop of snow swirled its way down toward us. I presented my ID first and took a big black X stamp on my hand, forked over the ten dollar cover charge and walked into the humid, pulsing room, Tupac blaring on the subs while the deejay shouted at everyone to hit the floor. Evan paid his cover, then Keith, then we waited. And waited. Between the pulses of strobe lights, Bo’s arms waved angrily, and Jason pointed in bouncer’s face.

“Unbelievable,” Keith said, and we walked back toward the turnstile.

“What the hell?” Evan asked.

“Dude’s got no ID, a bald, fat bouncer shouted, and pointed at Bo, his arm only half-extended so that his muscle flexed and showed off a lopsided ring of barbed wire that wrapped his bicep. “No ID, no admission.”

“That’s our driver,” Keith yelled over the music, and pointed at Jason.

“He’s welcome,” the bouncer said, “But the other jackass stays out.”
“Can we—” Keith started, but the bouncer shut him down: “No refunds.”

“Screw both of ‘em,” Evan said. He threw up his hands and walked into the club.

“But our ride—” Keith shouted after him.

Evan pivoted, took one step back and said, “Maybe next time you’ll ride with me. Jason pulled this crap all the time. Did you expect he’d change?” Evan stormed toward the dance floor and disappeared into a crush of writhing bodies and short skirts. Things hadn’t changed. Jason was irresponsible, Keith the peacekeeper, Evan wore his temper on a ledge, and I found myself stuck once more in a place I didn’t really want to inhabit, wondering just how I’d gotten there.

I walked to the kiosk, where two cops had joined in. I grabbed Jason’s shoulder. “Get Bo out of here, or he goes to jail and we’ll all be screwed. There’s a Waffle House three blocks away. We’ll meet you there when we’re done.”

Jason opened his mouth to argue. I pointed an index finger into his sternum.

“You brought him,” I said. “You brought him.” Jason pulled Bo out into the cold. The snow was coming down harder, and I wondered for a moment if I’d done the right thing. But he had to grow up sometime, I reasoned, and there was no better time than the present. In my mind, I wiped my hands clean and decided to make what I could of the remaining evening—to try and have some fun with old friends.

Keith and I walked into the sweaty mob on the beer-slick dance floor. We found Evan surrounded by a group of girls who looked twelve and smelled drunk. “Fake ID, much?” Keith shouted into my ear, and I laughed. In someone’s mind, the laugh must’ve looked like a come-hither smile, because a pudgy redhead in a glittery tube top dislodged herself from Evan and began to grind her against my thigh. Through the loudspeakers, Jay-Z gave his approval: “Uh-huh, uh-huh, uh-huh,” he said over a mid-speed beat, but I wasn’t fond. That kid had no business in such a place, let alone acting like that. I leaned toward her, and she cocked her head so I could talk right into her ear—she was probably expecting me to ask if she wanted a drink. Instead, I shouted, “What are you doing here? This is awful!”

“What?” she shouted. The smell of vodka poured from her mouth as she spoke. I shook my head. “Never mind.”
She shrugged and turned back toward Evan, went on with her thrusts and gyrations. A brunette made a move toward me, but I turned to fetch a Coke from the bar. Keith followed me and stopped me before I spent any money. “This is lame,” he said. Let’s get E and ditch this place. I’m tired, anyway.”

We went back into the fray and peeled the teenagers off Evan. One of the girls pulled something out of her bra and handed it to him before he followed us out the front door.

“Holy God,” he said when we got out under the streetlight. He laughed: “She made a business card. That is awesome.” He showed it to us: sure enough, her name, and address, email address, cell phone, landline, and a description: “5’6” blonde, curvy with glasses and dolphin tattoo on the left shoulder blade.”

We hiked to the Waffle house, our sweat meeting the cold and sending up a cloud of steam as we walked.

They got up from their booth when they saw us coming and made for the car—probably stiffed the waitress, but no one asked.

“No ladies?” Bo asked.

“Here you go.” Evan handed off the business card.

“Jodie?” Bo asked. “Met her last month, but I lost her info. Thanks!” We buckled up, and Jason swerved out of the lot.

He blared the stereo—KISS 102 FM, home of the hits! the deejay kept announcing overtop jangly bubblegum songs. I was beat from traveling, from the nonstop bustle of shopping and Mom’s holiday schedule. My head throbbed, and I wanted to be home. I said this out loud, but no one heard it over the music.

***

It didn’t surprise me when Jason failed to slow or flip on his turn signal as we approached the lot where out cars waited—I expected we were in for another last-second swerve. But he passed the lot altogether, never even let up. The dashboard clock said 3:14. Keith and I looked at each other, and our eyes said, “Damn.”

Jason switched off the music. “Change of plans, ladies,” he said.

“Here’s the story,” Bo said, and he leaned forward with intensity, but then he clutched his back, winced, and
leaned against the seat. The simple thought of Bo developing (let alone issuing) a plan terrified me. “We found this dude with a ridiculous Christmas display in his yard—blinking reindeer and elves and Santas and wise men and stars and lights all over the place. You name it, it’s there. We’re stealing Santa.”

Jason jumped in: “More specifically, you two are.” He looked at Keith and me. “The fast jocks.”

Keith was a seventh-string outfielder for his college’s lousy baseball team, and I ran track in high school until I blew out half the tendons in my left knee during a race. How that qualified either of us as fast or a jock was beyond me. And how that suited us for nighttime larceny was even less clear.

He drove slowly past the yard, and they were right: it would’ve won awards for awful. I had qualms about this—serious ones. Stealing, for starters, but more specifically, stealing something associated with Christmas seemed particularly vulgar. And being directed by these two—having ceded complete power to them by the simple act of getting into Jason’s car. It all felt foul. Felt gross down in the pit of my stomach. I looked at Keith and could tell he felt about the same, but neither of us would speak up because there was no use. We were at the mercy of a junkie with a broken back, and our old friend who we’d left at home to fall under the influence of a junkie with a broken back.

“We’re going to slow down this time,” Bo said. “You two jump out, steal the thing, and we’ll turn around and pick you up in a minute. Simple.” Ten seconds later, John let off the gas pedal, coasted in front of the gleaming lawn, and Keith unhitched the door. I followed him out onto the road.

“This is asinine,” he hissed. “How are we even going to fit the damn thing in that car?”

“Who knows,” I said. “Let’s just get it—let them figure out what to do.”

“Do you smell smoke?” he asked. “Like a cigarette?”

“Probably our clothes from the club. How trashy was that place?”

We were on the lawn by this point, frozen grass blades crunching under our feet. I reached Santa and lifted, and it didn’t budge. I leaned forward, felt around on the grass—it was staked solid to the ground.

“It’s attached!” I whispered. “Grab a reindeer or something and let’s just get.”
“This one’s stuck, too,” he said.
I reached for Frosty. “They all are.”
That’s when we heard the shotgun click.

We froze, and I saw a figure stand on the porch—a
tall man with the glowing end of a cigarette hanging from his
mouth and the silhouette of a Santa hat on his head. I bolted
first, and heard Keith’s footsteps close behind. We heard a
shot, and I clenched my eyes, waiting for pain—none came. I
opened them and looked to my left, then my right. The head of
an illuminated snowman—not five feet from me—had been
blown clear off. All the sudden, the lights went out, and the
glowing effigies of Christmas went utterly dark. Another
click. I stood still, listened for Keith, but heard nothing. I
hissed his name—silence.

I turned for him, but couldn’t see him anywhere. I
swiveled my head around, examining what looked quite like a
cemetery in that degree of dimness, I focused toward the
grass, looking for Keith’s body strewn amongst the shadows
and human-sized ornaments. Just shapes, and none of them
looked like Keith, none seemed to be breathing, moving.
Another shot. Another click. I ran. I ran away from Jake’s
headlights, and I ran away from the lights that tore from that
crazy man’s driveway. I ran through fields and yards and cul
de sacs—I ran away from every porch light and streetlight, but
more importantly, I turned from every headlight, unsure
whether it would belong to Jason’s car or the shooter’s.
Unsure which one would be worse to encounter. I buckled my
knee twice on uneven surfaces, turned my ankle in some sort
of hole, tripped twice, ran myself to an exhausted coughing fit
before I crouched against a tree, tried to control my breathing
and bring my pulse down to a normal pace. It took quite some
time—I stayed there, breathing hard, sweating, shivering, for
what seemed like an epoch. I don’t think my heart rate ever
did get back down to normal. All night, I leaned against that
tree, my body shivering and my mind full of plastic lawn
bodies and headlights crossing the county, searching. When
Light came, I hiked back to the road and followed a sidewalk
that seemed increasingly familiar. I’d been less than half a
mile from my car, from warmth, from a quick drive to the
safety of home.

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“Where the hell did you go?” Keith asked when I
called the next morning. He’d passed me by while my eyes
were closed, waiting for the bullet that never struck anyone. He rolled his gimpy old ankle leaping into Jason’s car, but got no sleep, wondering what happened to me.

“You want to know something funny?”
I said nothing, but he seemed bent on telling me anyway.

“After that nut tore off following you, we pulled up to his lawn, headlights on and everything, and Bo just walked out and stole the damn Santa. Kicked it in the head twice, and the stakes came right up, no problem. He took it home, put his ankle monitor on it.”

“That’s about how it goes,” I said.
“Hey, he asked—when you coming back?”
“That’s a good question.”
“I mean, we should get together again, right?”
“Right,” I said, without asking who he meant by we, without asking whether that really seemed like a good idea to him, or if it was just a convenient appendix for the conversation.

“Right,” he echoed, and his tone sounded as hollow as mine had just felt.

Five days later, when I made the evening drive back toward Bloomington, I left the highway at sundown and took the empty back roads, still skittish of headlights behind me, still afraid of what might follow me as I drove faster than ever away from home.

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The following year, I brought home with me an internal list of what I would say when they called, excuses I would make. “No—I’ve got homework,” I would tell them. “Big project.” Or that I’d made the track team as a walk-on and needed to work out and sleep early (they’d never check up on me, I figured, to ensure I was telling the truth). Or, if the truth struck me as the best course, I could’ve simply said I was done with the childish antics, that I was an adult with a future and I needed to act like it, and that they should follow suit, Jason and Bo in particular. All through the second half of December and through the first days of January, right up until the frigid afternoon when I loaded up the car for the return trip to campus, I kept my cell phone in my pocket and charged up, so that I could answer a call that would never come.
Legacy

My mother was a great storyteller, often telling me other people’s lives, and her own, but always imbuing them with a fairy tale quality. I lived in those stories. How could I not? One, that of Jack and Miss Buffalo, was especially compelling. Miss Buffalo and Jack’s wife remained nameless, Jack the star, initiating the affair and, soon after, severing sexual ties with his wife, telling her simply that he had lost his “manhood”. His wife, my mother’s aunt, was satisfied to have a mate who kept her well. And, she was matronly, after all, so wasn’t there good reason for Jack to wander in the direction of the beauty queen? A beauty queen who owned and ran a dress shop. In those days that was quite exotic. The affair lasted for 17 years, long-distance though it was, he living in Boston, she in Buffalo, all the time Jack the devoted husband even when his wife became ill. A “respectable” year after her death, Jack and Miss Buffalo married, she warmly accepted into the family even though they had known about the affair for years. That’s all I know, except that they lived happily ever after, both remaining beautiful for me, frozen in time, for their marriage ends the story.

And then there’s dashing, refined, college-educated Sam, my great uncle, who, unlike Jack, was someone I knew. How I adored him, although from a distance, for he was only on the outskirts of my life. There was a profound decency about him, those smiling yet sad pale blue eyes, I think. His wife, Ray, was a character, her feistiness, humor, loud, gravelly voice, and nervous twitches endlessly fascinating to me. As the story goes, he frequently traveled to Brazil on business, and, though he wanted her to, Ray refused to accompany him. Too uncomfortable and inconvenient, she said. So, after a while, he stopped asking, and after a while began a second, simultaneous long-term relationship with a Brazilian woman, with whom he had a child and for whom he took financial responsibility. Unbelievably and romantically (It was told by my mother after all.) both women died within weeks of each other, Sam following close behind.

There’s a photo of a handsome, movie-star handsome, soldier hanging above my crib, pipe in mouth, slightly crooked, tentative smile, eyes warm, concerned, and sympathetic. I kiss him every morning when I awake and every night before lying down to sleep. This was our
relationship for my first two years, distantly intimate. This was my father. The man who inserted himself into the idyll of my life with my mother (for I gather from her telling that she and I were each other’s universes), the still striking lieutenant, one pants leg folded to the knee, crutches for support, was someone other. This new father required something of me as I did of him, and we both forever failed to deliver. So, in a way, I retained the photo-father—the man and I settled into a distantly intimate, if more complicated and complex relationship.

I come upon my mother and father kissing in the hallway of our little suburban cape, a frequent occurrence though photo-like, a little off, detached from the real, distinct from the flatness of our post-war lives—children, dogs, men off at the office, their homemaker wives (then housewives) trying to keep the peace—yet so clearly a part of it. It’s the kissing, the intimacy, that sets it apart; at the same time, though, there’s a falseness to it, only an appearance of intimacy, that makes it of a piece, for it was all about appearance then. And, now, my mother and I, a girl of eight, at the kitchen table, she telling me yet again their love story: how she, the awkward 18-year-old, fell (for the first and only time) for the 25-year-old sophisticate, the lady’s man, “love’em and leave’em” the neighbors said. But, he was not to leave HER. Impossible to know what he felt, why he chose her; the story was only about my mother and what she was drawn to—his larger-than-lifeness, his desirability to so many pretty women, and his spurning of them for her. How the story crescendos as I devour the now familiar details of his yet further elevation, for he’s become the war hero, the lieutenant who lost a leg to save a life and cleverly kept himself alive overnight until other heroes came to save his. Then the homecoming; the picture darkens and the story of my mother’s grand romance ends.

There’s a shot of us in his car in the dark; the decadence of the passion, the intimacy of it, and the unabashedness were emblematic of us, and, emblematic of me, as it turns out. His name will be Alex, and this is the image that first comes to mind when I think of him. The full-out lovemaking in his car, preceded by drinking, soulfully sensual kissing, and unselfconscious touching in a dimly lit bar, stands out for its exhibitionism and its truth. We were only what we were in those moments, and my apparent wantonness felt
Delightfully right. The particulars of the sex, strangely, are irrelevant here since, in fact, that’s what we seemed to be about. Looking back, though, I see it was so much more complicated, for the dense layers that comprised our seemingly partial relationship—one steamy night and one lunch a week, and, later, visits in my office or his, but only during the semester, his marriage, of course, taking precedence—gave me a sense of the warm security I’d always lacked. I’d become acceptable to someone, as I was, with all the facets of my interior (an interior whose uniqueness was not yet in my awareness) and the physical appearance I had come to feel most comfortable with. I was acknowledged as a whole, and the whole excited and absorbed another. It was the start of my life, really, as a totality.

Alex unsettled me. He first approached me in my office at the university with a “Hello” that was both intimate and urgent. I felt myself redden. Then, suddenly, a brief goodbye and a rushed invitation to drop by his office for coffee before class some time since he had noticed I was teaching just down the hall. But, I could never manage to summon the courage and took a route to class that allowed me to avoid passing his office. He would appear, though, suddenly, for his approach was never apparent. Once, there was a hand, a strong large hand, on my shoulder. Another time, he was there to light my cigarette as I fumbled for my matches. My response was always cool, indifferent. He would say things like, “We should go for a drink some time,” or “Let’s have lunch.” Frankly, I was becoming afraid of him, of the intensity, both his and mine, that was in the air each time we met.

But it did begin, after a month or so, and it didn’t surprise. And, it felt as though this was where I had always been heading. We had our dark spots. I can see Alex sitting in my office, shifting in his chair, wetting his lips, eyes not fixing on me, as he awaits the usual verbal battering. He wants to respond differently, hoping he will be able to tell me what he knows I want to hear—more time together, sometimes my apartment. I don’t demand much because I don’t want much really. That would diminish the fantasy and move us past what was to remain our beginning. And, at the moment, his words don’t give me much, more of the same, in fact—the weekly lunch, the steamy nights, and the office visits. Over time, I gained in practical terms some of what I’d wanted. What I
Deborah Stark

most wanted, though, was what we’d always had. So, here I am, still, a quarter of a century later, ever in that long-ago beginning played out mostly in cars and offices, darkness enfolded in snatched time filled with an interweaving of lovemaking and talk, always intense, but warm and loving, too—complete, for me complete.

Yes, mother was a great storyteller.
Women of My Childhood

I remember a dream I had one night about my two daughters and me in a big city with dark, shadowed tornado clouds sucking people up, just like the Armageddon. Naked, I grabbed my clothes and hurried the girls to safety in an underground cave only to discover we were trapped with people from a cult. I pulled on my clothes and frantically searched for a way out, but cult members surrounded us. They transported us to a monolithic, abandoned skyscraper. At the first chance, I gripped hold of the girls’ hands and ran through empty rooms, down long corridors, past broken windows until I stumbled across a peddle-cart large enough for all of us. As our legs worked furiously, pedaling for safety, we escaped, and I woke up.

As I analyzed my dream, I viewed my nakedness as lack of defense and lack of safety. The shadows symbolized power, an oppressive, unseen force—an unknown but dangerous threat. Then, my maternal instinct kicked in, and I saved my girls by rushing into the cave I thought safe, but again, not so, only controlling and prodding. I faced this new problem and escaped. As a mother, I have always tried to provide a safe haven for my girls; after the dream, I realized that I felt defenseless and powerless against events in my life. To create this protective place, I had to investigate my past and examine lessons learned. Delving into my childhood helped me re-evaluate my family patterns. Too busy with her own issues, my mother did not protect me or teach me to protect. In fact, at times, I felt I had to protect her and my siblings by taking on the role of the child-parent. Yet, I didn’t know what to do.

Not until well into my thirties did I understand that the legacy from the women of my childhood included lessons married to compelling sins, values taken to extremes that didn’t work. Entrenched into the family psyche, these lessons became a millstone that weighted down the women across the generations.

I am the daughter of Barbara, the daughter of Bonnie, the daughter of Ivy. I am of their bodies, their busy hands, their hurried feet—a web of proud heritage and also of blood bonds and unstated inheritances difficult to unravel.
I’ll Do It Myself

The earliest female influence I remember, besides my own mother, is from my Grandma Bonnie Jean Volesky, part Bohemian and part German-Irish. Her family migrated to Kansas in the latter part of the seventeenth-century for land and opportunities unavailable in the Old Country. First and second generation homesteaders, they bought land cheaply when America expanded in the “go West” mentality.

One of the earliest memories I have is of Grandma Bonnie reading to me. Her brown hair, blue Keds shoes and bright, gap-toothed smile greeted me with love as I snuggled on her lap, comforted and safe, listening to Little Red Hen, Little Red Riding Hood and The Little Engine that Could. Only recently have I started to pursue not only what I learned from Grandma Bonnie but also what she learned from the women of her childhood. The attitudes passed down from her and even from her mom, Great-grandma Ivy and her mother-in-law, Great-great-grandma Myrtle began with hard work and self-reliance. Education, or schooling, and learning from life were also important.

Grandma Bonnie often joked that the difference between her family, the Volesky’s, and her husband’s, the Cunninghams, was that if it looked like rain, the Cunninghams would pull the farm equipment into the barn to oil the gears and sharpen the blades, while the Volesky’s would jump into the wagon and hurry to town for the Friday night dance before the roads muddied. But in truth, her family had just as much devotion to hard work, even at the cost of self.

At nine years old, Grandma Bonnie attended high school with her older sister. Her hair in curls, she lived in a house in town with her sister to go to school, graduating high school at age thirteen and K-State at age seventeen, setting a record for the youngest student in the history of the school to graduate. I remember her soft and hearty breadsticks fresh from the oven, family dinners of fresh garden corn-on-the-cob and tomatoes on Grandma’s prized apple dinnerware with the real silverware in her dining room and homemade vanilla ice cream on the back porch.

A family story has her walking miles across town to check on me when I was a toddler. One birthday she presented me with a purse, thrilling me as I opened it to discover treasures such as a coin purse, a brush and comb, a handheld mirror and Chap Stick. That was the last present she gave me.
After college, she worked as a bilingual secretary for an oil company. She continued various secretarial positions after marrying and having children, not wanting to merely be a homemaker. In 1978, she worked as a business manager at her husband’s farm supply company. She began writing reviews to her youngest son in letters sent to him in New York City where she referenced herself by signing Bea A. Critic. When he returned home to the Midwest to stage manage at a local dinner theater, she wrote reviews that were eventually published in the *Kansas City Star*. With this validation, she returned to school at UMC for her Master’s degree in journalism. Her other son moved back to work in the family business, and she ended up with two bosses (a husband and a son). She felt demoted and left out of decisions, yet piled with work, as they expanded the business. Concurrently, her husband, Grandpa Bruce, was diagnosed with heart disease, and she began cooking all of his meals, even so far as to prepare homemade, low-sodium ketchup from garden tomatoes.

Ultimately, she left the family business to return to school, despite her husband’s objections. The accumulation of these stresses weighed on her. Several months later, Bonnie Jean Volesky Cunningham gave a presentation in class. After she sat back down, she slumped over and collapsed on the desk. In class, she had died of a brain aneurysm at age fifty. I was almost nine years old, and my mom was in her thirties, close to my current age, when her mother died.

This is my legacy. It’s what I know. Do, do, do. Rush, rush, rush. Hurry, hurry, hurry. Scurry like a gray rat trapped in a steel cage, running the same wheel over and over again, going nowhere but unable to jump off. I want to stop, I’m scared to stop but I don’t know how to stop, stop, stop. Be, be, be.

I had a bookshelf of “books to read,” a container of library “fun” books to read, a stack of school books to read, a bag of my sister’s books to read, several piles of papers to go through, a bunch of email messages to read, closets to sort, rooms to clean, vitamins to take, new weight loss gimmicks to try, a shelf of exercise and dance videos to use and so on. Some of these activities never go away. I’d pondered for years, “I just need to finish these projects and then I can start my ‘real’ life, the life I’ve always wanted.” I dreamed of
taking swing dance, swimming with dolphins and hiking a mountain once I caught up with all the piles. I wanted to take care of myself and then take time for my writing. Some of my difficulties included the piles that accumulated, and many other problems occurred from being a ‘working, home-schooling’ mother pursuing a graduate degree. I also played the tune of “I’ll write and do all the other things I want once my kids grow up.” I did all of us a disservice with such thinking. All that taught my daughters to do was jump into the rat cage and run the wheel until death.

Looking back, these few lines sum up my mom’s ancestors (Mom learned it from Grandma Bonnie who learned it from her mother and so on): So the Little Red Hen said once more, “I will then,” and she did. Feeling that she might have known all the time that she would have to do it all herself...And she did.

And they did. And I did.
Women deserve more, I deserve more, and so do my daughters.

People Leave

Around age sixteen, I learned about the biological family I didn’t remember. It saddens me that I cannot remember any time with my Grandma Betty, my birth dad’s mother, though I understand that I regularly visited her the first year or two of my life. A full-blooded Cherokee, she raised two boys as a single mother, while she managed and owned her own restaurant. When my parents divorced, I lost both my birth dad and my Grandma Betty, and the sense of abandonment, the sudden void of their presence in my life, created loss of self within.

A few weeks after the discovery of a new family I didn’t know, I walked with my mom up the gravel road and told her that I’d dreamed about Uncle Bob, her brother, ill in the hospital the day before she received the call that he had been hospitalized for surgery. My dream had come true.

“Your Grandma Betty and her mom used to have vision dreams,” Mom said. She elaborated about their connection to the spirit world.

In that moment, everything felt right. Like my female ancestors on Grandma Betty’s side, I, too, have had vision dreams that sometimes foretell the future. I, too, had always
cared about the animal world and the spiritual world. I felt connected to women I didn’t even know.

“Don’t give in to that, though.” Mom stopped and turned to me. “Vision dreams are from the devil. You don’t want to let demons in.”

Snap—Mom won the tug of war, pulling me further from those ancestors, from spirit, from myself. I felt lost. I was lost.

You Won’t Do That to Me!

The Grandmas Crawford, Great-Grandma Bessie and Grandma Juanita, taught me contradictory lessons about personal attitudes, forgiveness and acceptance.

Dad Newton’s ancestors came to America from Ireland during the potato famine, first settling in Tennessee and then moving to Missouri in 1853. My Grandpa still lives in the house his grandfather built in 1893. His father, Homer, was born there the next year, and twenty-five years later, in the same house, Homer and Bessie delivered Newton Ulysses Crawford, Sr. The Crawfords also built the house where I grew up. Ninety-year-old Grandpa Crawford still owns over three hundred acres where the two houses sit side-by-side on a hill.

My Great-grandma Bessie Crawford lived to be ninety-four years old. Until the day she broke her hip and landed in the hospital, she lived alone in a small, white house in town. She took care of herself, walking over a mile to the grocery store, pulling her small cart behind her.

During junior high, I walked to Grandma Bessie’s house in town after school if I had a volleyball game. She fed me canned corn and fried bologna sandwiches, cutting slits around the slice of bologna, and putting it between two pieces of white bread spread with Miracle Whip. After eating together, I walked back to school for my game, and Mom came to watch. I remember these forbidden visits with gratitude. For those few hours in Grandma Bessie’s small house, I felt safe and loved—free.

Tears slid rapidly down my cheeks, as I stood beside her casket. She wasn’t here anymore. The figure lying there, unsmiling and pale, empty, did not even look like Grandma Bessie. Was she happy now? Perhaps a little sad for us because we missed her so much? I stepped forward and
touched the edge of the cold, hard, wooden casket. I looked, but what I saw then was Grandma Bessie with her white hair, glasses, long-sleeved flowing dress (I never saw her wear any other style), slightly powdered, wrinkled face, and painted, light red smiling lips, sitting in a lawn chair at our family reunion. Surrounded by green grass, her whole body smiled.

Grandma Bessie taught me the importance of a positive, giving attitude towards others and life. She taught me that forgiveness and activity improved the quality of her longevity. She taught me to value family connections.

At Great-grandma Bessie’s funeral, Grandma Juanita sat proud and straight amidst her husband’s family who had lived in South Central Missouri for over a hundred years. But, to buy the family farm at the price the widowed Bessie needed, Grandpa Crawford had to re-enlist in the navy for an extra ten years. Grandma Juanita had grown up in the area as well and dreamed of living near her family again rather than traveling the world as a Naval engineer’s wife. She never forgave her mother-in-law for the extra years at sea, and for the thirty years since, she had forbidden her husband from any contact with his family. Grandpa Crawford visited his mom and sisters surreptitiously, but somehow, Grandma Juanita always knew, becoming blue with rage and prostrate with self-induced illness.

Many times the Crawford family tried to reconcile with her, but she forbade any contact or even the slightest mention. Yet, there she sat at Grandma Bessie’s funeral. In a way, I admired her courage and stubbornness. But I was angry with her. I didn’t understand how she dared come to this funeral. She had deliberately chosen her isolation, surrounding herself with bitter and unforgiving anger.

Lisa, one of Newton’s first cousins, went up to shake hands with Grandma Juanita and thank her for coming, demonstrating the graciousness learned from Grandma Bessie. I remembered the first and only time Lisa met Grandma Juanita before that day—a warm, humid summer day. Lisa and her husband gave my sister and me a ride home after our visit to Grandpa Bruce and Grandma Helen who became a surrogate grandma after her marriage to Grandpa Bruce. We listened to Bob Marley and B. B. King and talked about summer and reunions. Our enjoyable trip came to an abrupt halt when we pulled into the long drive, the beginning of Crawford property. Grandma Juanita stood outside the house.
with her arms crossed and her jaw set. She marched in front of the car, blocking the way, forcing Lisa to stop short. Grandma Juanita stomped to the window and yelled, “This is my property. You can’t come here. Come on, girls, and get out.” She opened the back door and hauled us out. “Get your stuff and let’s go.” Mom later told me that Grandma Juanita had been waiting all day, watching the road, ready to pounce.

Grandma Juanita died at eighty-seven without finding peace. As her health and mind deteriorated, she cried and ranted, terrified of death. She begged Grandpa to die with her, not wanting to suffer loneliness after over fifty years of marriage.

Despite these concrete lessons of her bitterness, I also learned from the warmth and love she extended to those she chose to welcome. Thus, I wrote a Eulogy, which I read at her funeral:

“Grand” in “Grandma” says it all, and you lived up to that name—a grand lady in our lives. With your make up, red lipstick and curly black hair you were always perfectly attired. But that couldn’t compare with your kiss and your smile. You welcomed us to your home with Oreo cookies and open arms, smelling of Lady Esther cold cream and Red Door perfume. We kissed your cheek and ate your Fruit Loops, toasted cheese sandwiches, pickles and Doritos.

Your whisper, your mantra, the way you lived your life with us, can be summed up with five little words to those you cared about, Welcome, welcome to this house.

We loved playing Marble game and eating your homemade cherry pie. Fresh summer tomatoes ripened in the window while we frolicked at the picnics in your front lawn. We loved watching movies with you, sneaking treats from your cupboard or playing Rook, knowing your secret—hold on to that Rook card. Welcome, welcome to this house.

We took off our shoes to walk through your clean, spotless house as you shared snacks with us. A house that you filled with memories, people and love. Welcome, welcome to this house. We love you, Grandma. We’ll miss you. With love, Rachel and Your Grandchildren.

We followed the hearse to the cemetery where the adults placed red roses on her casket. Her great granddaughters carried a rose home, and every time we pass the cemetery on the way to the Crawford farm, Laina, my youngest daughter, says, “Great is there.” Even though
Grandma Juanita wasn’t a blood relation, I grew up next door to her, the grandma we ran to for treats and hugs.

I knew I didn’t want to come to the end of my life fearing death because I hadn’t lived as my true self, because I hadn’t learned to forgive. I didn’t want the isolation of her bitterness.

Work for Love

The lessons from my grandmothers were easier to comprehend, while the ones from my mother were complicated. So much of my past is a blank slate to me, yet pain from my childhood lingers. Confronting the pain was crucial, but how could I confront what I could not see? The issues with Newton’s anger were real, and the cost to me loomed loud. However, my mother’s influence was concurrently powerful and confusing, an unseen presence; yet, the imprint of her religion seared me. Until I focused our relationship, her subliminal judgments gnawed at me. One afternoon a few years ago, I tried hypnosis to see if any childhood memories lurked. When the hypnotist’s soft voice asked me to revisit a particular day as a young child, all I could see was white, a blinding haze of white.

I grew up in the big white house on the hill, right next to Grandma and Grandpa Crawford. Two white houses sat on the hill facing one another like two giants lobbying for position and power. With both houses built by dad’s great grandfather, the land has remained in the Crawford family for a century. Grandma and Grandpa Crawford lived in the first house—the one originally built on that spot and rooted deeply in family history. Uprooted, we moved the second house a couple of miles to the Crawford land, the house placed with determination on that hill. My family lived in the second house.

Both houses looked out to the same land; both houses slept under the same Ozark sky deep in the Bible belt. Yet the outlooks were worlds apart.

Fields of hay turned into a golden haven of peace and happiness for children and dogs or into a yellowish pattern of sweat, toil, and muscle for men under the blaring sunlight of summer afternoons. Forests of trees, brush, berries and wildlife turned into a green and brown hideout while children played hide and seek or into a backbreaking job of cutting wood for winter cold. Rivers and creeks, filled with sand,
rocks, tadpoles, turtles, fish, snakes and crawdads, turned into a blissful swimming hole for those hot summer days or into a dangerously shallow pain. Ponds, glittering with ice in the winter months, turned into a fun game of ice skating or into a breaking of life. Gardens, overflowing with green, moist vegetables and colorful beds of beautiful flowers, turned into a scrumptious meal or a battleground of weeds against seeds.

Overlooking both white houses, the same sky painted pictures of white, fluffy clouds, of red, blue, orange, pink and purple sunsets or of gray, black, dark storms. Three hundred, twenty acres of an Angus beef farm. It was a child’s heaven. And, it was a child’s hell.

In my memory, I pause at the bottom of the basement stairs. Lights blaze. In an old T-shirt and shorts, I stare straight ahead at the light switch before turning to my left. In the large, open room with concrete walls and floor sits three beds covered with hand stitched quilts, a mishmash of dressers, one wooden desk with a chair and two throw rugs. This is my bedroom that I share with three other sisters. In actuality, it’s a corner of the unfinished basement.

I look to the right where the washer and dryer sit beside the table that holds clean, folded clothing. Next to the washer, the deep freezer hums. Dad’s hand-built wooden bench and weights pile next to the concrete wall. The far corner houses the wood stacked directly across from the burning, burbling furnace. Before the gray floor-to-ceiling furnace stands the bucket of ashes, piles of discarded newspapers and long, iron poker. I imagine walking around the corner where the bookcase Uncle David built houses a set of *The Book of Knowledge* and numerous children’s books. At the end of that wall a door opens into the root cellar lined with rows and rows of canned green beans, salsa, okra and pickles along with bunches of ripe onions and musky, large Yukon potatoes.

My sisters slumber in their beds. Mom has already bade us good night and gone to bed. I’m fourteen. Since I stayed up late to finish reading a book, probably a Dickens, Bronte or Fitzgerald novel, I have to turn off the lights. I’ve already turned down the quilt on the empty bed that stands waiting. If I run fast enough, the demons under the bed won’t get me. Demons won’t have a chance to posses me, even though I sinned today. I smarted off to Mom and burned the
peas at dinner. *I'm sorry, God. Please forgive me.* My lips mumble my prayer, my plea.

The furnace pops. I glare at the three-pronged light switch and inhale. Exhale. I flip off the right one. Black falls beside me. I slap the left toggle. Blackness surrounds me on both sides. The center light still shines. I glance behind me to the left. Shadows float in our bedroom. My teeth grind together under the onslaught of anxiety as fear chokes me. I suck in a deep breath. *Please, God. Please help me. I promise to try harder.* My body braces ready to run. I slam my hand onto the switch and plunge into darkness. I fly through the room, smacking my bare feet on the cement floor, dive into the center of the bed and roll onto my back, pulling the covers over my head. No part of my body nears the edge. My sides heave as I struggle to catch my breath.

I made it. In my mind, the demons can’t get me as long as I stay in the middle of the bed hidden in a cave of covers. *Thank you, God. Thank you so much. I’ll do better tomorrow,* I vow.

So much of the truth of that time appears in a sequence of dreams I had once I began to remember and process my childhood. One night a baby magically appeared in my arms. In the dream, the neglected baby had super intelligence and adult knowledge in her eyes. I immediately tried to breastfeed her, and, like Lexi in reality as an infant, it took awhile for the dream baby to latch on because she didn’t know how to allow someone to care for, nurture or feed her. When she finally nursed, Mom came into the room and cheerfully announced, “It’s a good thing we weren’t trying to be beautiful because we’re in tattered old robes.” I looked in a mirror and said, “No. I have on a satin Victoria Secret robe, and I’m beautiful right now.”

Today, I interpret the dream as about rage I didn’t know how to feel. My anger is about what I lost: space and safety. I needed to trust my instincts and nurture my inner self. I already had everything I needed to take care of myself.

In another dream, unknown beings chased me and other people into hiding. If captured, we had to work in a cave. Two of the men with me were superheroes/villains: one a Slasher who could transform into a hulk of a man with a saw blade protruding from his chest and back. I was hiding and escaped.
Then, my dream blurred into me as a writer writing a story about these men. Me as a director of a play produced in a small town. Slasher cut people into many pieces with his blade to save them. Then, he somehow miraculously put the pieces back together; even me, cut into pieces and later fixed.

Finally, there was me watching the end of the play where the good guys won. Me getting into a car with my mom driving. She drove by my daughter on the sidewalk, and when Lexi wouldn’t move fast enough for Mom or instantly obey, Mom cheerily said we’d come back for her later and drove away, leaving her own granddaughter alone on the streets. Me in the passenger seat pleading for her to go back.

Then, I woke up.

What is the truth about me, my mother and that white house? I decided to reread my old journals in hopes of discovering something useful, a treasure hunt for lost memories. When I looked through a box in the garage filled with old journals, the first two I found were from high school. The small red spiral-bound notebook opens like this:

My Journal  Rachel Crawford  
May 27, 1986  age 15

So mom wants us to keep a journal. That’s okay with me so long as no one reads it. It’s a good idea. I wanted to before but I never could keep it up. This summer we have to keep a journal, write a book, run, learn vocabulary words and do push ups and sit ups every day. Mom’s babysitting the McClouds so I’ll have to do a lot more work. I have driver’s ed in the morning for the rest of the week and then in the afternoons drive. I drive for the first time Thursday! Oh yeah, we’re also reading Pilgrim’s Progress every day. I’ll write about this weekend tomorrow.

For awhile I wrote every day. When I began daily journal writing again at age sixteen, I started talking to my diary as a person. “Well it has been awhile hasn’t it! I’m soo sorry I’ve been soo busy!” I filled up the little red notebook
and bought a blue loose leaf notebook. Sad to finish one diary, I wanted one that would last for a long time. At seventeen, I read *Anne of Green Gables* and wrote in my diary:

**January 5, 1988**

You’ll never guess what I’m thinking now. I’m in the “depths of despair” as Anne would say. I’ve just gotten in trouble for letting clothes get too dry in the dryer. Amazing, right?! NO! I always get in trouble and in all ways!! Right now, I wish I wasn’t me! Everything’s awful! I never do anything right! I’m ugly! I’m stupid! Everyone has a best friend, everyone, but me that is!!! Lots of girls have a boyfriend or at least boys like them. No boys like me—and Joe does not count!!! Life is definitely not fair!!!

At the end of 4th hour, Mr. Adams passed out our finals saying, “I curved it. The highest was 140. Divide your score by that.” Guess what I got. Right. 100% 140 out of 140. Everyone was mad at me. Oh well.

I just decided that I’m going to talk to you, I’m going to start writing “Dear” and “Yours truly” and stuff like that. It makes it seem more personal. Like maybe a good friend. Since I don’t have a best friend, will you be my best friend. Thank you! We can share all my troubles, joys, griefs and happiness together! Yours truly, in the Depths of Despair and Agony, Rachel.

The next day, I penned, “My Dearest Friend” before writing:

Well, last night I realized that I do have a best friend! Jesus will always be a best friend! I have you now, also. I just wish, oh I wish that I had a (human) best friend, too! Oh well.
I think, if you don’t mind, I will call you “Anne”. I’ve named you after Anne of Green Gables. I would like to be like her and have her personality and imagination. Affectionately yours, Rachel.

The following day, I start writing “Dearest Anne” and continued for two and a half years, throughout my high school years, overfilling the blue notebook. Over and over again, I thanked her for listening to me and acknowledged her as the only one who ever listened.

Around my sixteenth birthday, my life experienced more turmoil. I had recently discovered Newton wasn’t my birth dad. I had another father out there somewhere, but I didn’t talk about this revelation or even write one word about it in my diary. Maybe Mom felt guilty about my situation, and she stood up to Newton to overrule his objection to my going on a trip with Grandpa Bruce and Grandma Helen. So, I disobeyed Newton to travel with my grandparents to the Grand Canyon, the California coast (my first view of the ocean) and Mexico and returned to find Dad Newton in the hospital, delirious with Rocky Mountain Spotted Tick Fever.

Instead of writing about all of that in my diary, I wrote about going to a party in Mansfield with Mom and Dad and how I babysat while they hung out with friends. Yet, I didn’t write about the fight Mom and Dad had in the ugly black clunker on the way home—a conversation I still remembered vividly. Mom berated Dad for having a drink at the party. Dad declared that he was a free man who would drink whenever he wanted. That was the night that changed everything. As an adult, I understood Mom’s concern because she had lived in an alcoholic home as a young girl. However, before that night, I didn’t remember much alcohol in our family. I’d heard stories about walking around as a toddler tipping drinks of beer at parties. When I was young, Mom and Dad partied, drank and experimented with drugs. Since I was around nine, though, they hadn’t because Dad got “saved” and pulled Mom with him. Soon, Dad became the skeptical atheist while Mom became more and more a fundamentalist Christian.

They became two parts of a tree pulling further and further from each other every day until only a twisted, gnarled
mess remained. Dad turned to intellect and studies while Mom embraced promises of happiness and peace in heaven. Her life was a cross to bear, so she could enter heaven a saint. The war between them escalated; the battlefield littered with kids as casualties. The closer she clung to God, the further Dad ran.

My journal also tells me about a time when I ran away from my mother and that white house. After reading about it, I remembered that day more clearly.

“You never listen to me. I’m tired of cleaning,” I said.

Mom didn’t respond.

“I hate this house. I hate you,” I screamed at her.

“Then, leave.” She snapped back before picking up a crying baby.

Dad wasn’t home, and words finally erupted from my mouth. “I’m running away.” I stomped out, slamming the door for good measure. Not knowing what else to do, I ran away from home in the pouring April rain with only the clothes on my back. At first, I ran and hurried, carried along by the adrenaline of anger, stress and tension. Soon, I plodded along the gravel road, kicking up mud, glancing behind me. She’ll come get me. She’ll miss me. She’ll at least need my help. Confident I wouldn’t travel far, I walked, sometimes jogged, up hills, around curves, over a bridge and all the way to the black top.

A runaway teenager, angry and confused, I sat in the newly green, damp grass at the side of the dirt road; a carpet of decayed oak leaves squished as I scooted back against the age old trunk. My heart flipped. She’s not coming. What am I going to do? Exhausted and sweaty under my sweatshirt despite the cool spring breeze and falling rain, miles away from home, I pondered my options.

Mom would say to turn to God, so I said a quick prayer. Dear Jesus, please forgive me. Please help me. Please, please, please let my family get along. I calmed, but how much stock could I put in a prayer I’d said a million times, a prayer unanswered for years?

I needed someone to talk to. Couldn’t talk to Jason, my recent boyfriend and long time best friend who had broken up with me right before Valentine’s Day. “You’re too intense,” Jason had said.
Couldn’t talk to my mom. Our big fight had led to my tiny rebellion.

Anne. I finally remembered Anne, my journal. She’d listen. She’d help, but she wasn’t here. I grabbed my lifeline, stood up and brushed soggy leaves off my drenched jeans. A shiver escaped. Twilight approached and the early spring air cooled considerably. I wouldn’t be able to walk home before dark. *Jason lives nearby. I’ll go to his house.*

Eight miles from my home, I arrived at my ex-boyfriend’s house soaked and chilled. Jason was surprised to see me and happy when his mom took over. Since the breakup, awkwardness sat between us. I’d lost much more than my first serious boyfriend. I’d lost a best friend. Beth called my mom to let her know I was safe while I changed clothes. She found a pair of sweats and shirt for me to wear while my clothes tumbled in the dryer. Then, Beth listened to my heartache about the breakup, my anger at Mom and my frustration with life. She agreed with me, wishing Jason and I were still together. “I’d love to have you as a daughter,” she said.

Why did I turn to this other woman for comfort? A woman from my mom’s church that I didn’t know well. Without knowing, I’d been looking for nurturing parents in every adult I’d met.

I was the baby bird flocking from person to person, crying, “Are you my mother? Are you my mother?”

Recently, I called my mom to ask what she remembered about the time I ran away. She said her life was so crazy back then that she couldn’t recall much of it. When I told her what I’d written in my journal, she agreed it sounded accurate. “I do remember thinking you would come after me,” I told her. “I couldn’t figure out why you didn’t come get me.”

“Can I please come get you right now? Please, please, please? I really will. I’ll come right now.”

I laughed.

She sighed. “I don’t know why I didn’t. I probably had a screaming baby or dinner to cook or something that demanded attention.”

After I hung up, I realized I appreciated her honesty and attempt to soothe, connect. As a mom myself, I can understand the busyness, the paradoxical choice that holds no real solution. Yet, I found myself angry that she didn’t value
me more, that she didn’t value herself, angry that I felt alone and unloved. Angry that, because she didn’t show me, teach me, I didn’t know for the longest time that I was enough—lovable, worthy.

I hadn’t wanted to see the truth because, growing up, Mom was the good guy and Dad the bad guy. As an adult, I know it’s not as simplistic as that; however, as a child, it was black and white. Mom portrayed it that way—Mom, the saint, and Dad, the devil. It appeared that way. After all, Dad was the one with the volatile temper, the rages and in-your-face demands. Mom’s shaming and blaming was often subtler and hidden behind The Bible. The ones from His Word like honor your parents, love your neighbor as yourself, don’t take God’s name in vain. And, the rules the church made up such as no dancing, no sexy clothes and definitely no worldly music. As a good little Christian girl, I didn’t want to see anything wrong with Mom. I tried to reconcile what The Bible said with what people did, with all the rules based in fear, but it didn’t work.

The truth is Mom is a paradox. She read to us, cooked healthy meals, went to every sports or school event, prepared special holidays for us, baked cookies with us, played cards and games with us, took us on walks in nature, swam in the river with us. In those moments we were special and loved. She stayed home to take care of us and did so much for us. Yet, she didn’t listen to or see us. Partly she didn’t have time because she kept having babies. Partly she didn’t see who we were; instead, expecting us to be who she wanted. She didn’t protect us from Dad’s anger or from her own critical judgments, and she didn’t teach us how to protect ourselves. She didn’t even show us we were worth protecting. But, I couldn’t see any of that. I couldn’t see beyond her self-sacrifice for us, beyond her religious cloak of self-righteousness. All I knew was I didn’t want to be like her, and I didn’t want my kids to have a childhood like mine.

November 2000 would be one of the last Thanksgiving dinners my eighty-some-year old Grandma Juanita would make for us before retiring the task to Mom. That holiday, Grandma Juanita’s house smelled of cinnamon, ginger and warm yeast, and kids ran in and out of the country kitchen, hoping to snitch a taste. A pot clanged against the sink as Grandpa carved the large turkey.
Dressed for dinner in our new clothes, we’d walked across the yards, passing the apple trees and mulching gardens, to Grandma and Grandpa Crawford’s house. Grandma fit all twenty of us in her kitchen, the grown ups and older kids at the main table and the younger kids at a card table set up in the corner. The table brimmed with food. Every year, for as long as I could remember, Grandma Juanita toiled for an entire week to prepare our special holiday dinners. Every year, even though married for seven years, I returned with my husband and children to join in. Every year, Grandma made turkey, homemade rolls, real mashed potatoes, corn, green beans, crab salad, lettuce salad, stuffing, cranberry sauce, sweet potatoes with brown sugar and marshmallows, pink stuff, a relish plate and milk or wine. As if that wasn’t enough, we had chocolate pies and pumpkin pies with whipped cream for dessert.

When my daughters were young, I wanted to protect them. As they matured, I wanted to teach them to protect themselves, to sift through buckets of sand for gold. I wanted them to have relationships with their grandmas because I had so many positive memories with mine. However, I didn’t want my daughters to take on the sins, the negative lessons, and detach from themselves. I didn’t want my mother to pass along to my daughters the parts of herself that she didn’t understand, didn’t acknowledge, and I didn’t want to pass those along to my daughters either.

I wondered how to balance their need for time with grandmas with the need for protection from these sins while finding my own way. My daughters had been visiting their paternal grandparents who lived nearby, spending the night once a week. As my daughters grew, these visits petered out, down to once every few months. I asked Lexi why she didn’t want to go more often, and she said, “I can’t be myself around them. I have to contain myself.” At thirteen, Lexi had confidence in herself and strength to set boundaries. I was proud of her yet felt some nostalgia for what could have been, what could be: happy summers at the farm with Granny, fun concerts with Grandma. Still, I knew I must observe reality of my family’s situation for my own sanity and the selves of my daughters.

“Time to eat!” Grandpa Crawford hollered, and we scrambled for a place at the main table. Sonny sat down by my husband.
“Can you move, Son? I’d like to sit by Matt.”
“No. I’m already here.”
“Sonny, I’d like to sit by my husband.”
“Find somewhere else. I’m not moving.”
“What’s going on here?” Newton asked.
“I wanted to sit by Matt.”
Newton shot a glare my way. “Quit causing trouble, Rachel Jane, and find a seat now. You always have to make a big deal about everything. Why don’t you think of someone besides yourself for a change?”
Effectively silenced, I shuffled over to the last empty chair and sat down. As usual, Matt went along with the situation. It wasn’t safe for me to express my anger. Newton’s explosive, uncontrollable rage and Grandma Crawford’s blue bitterness were the only angers allowed in those two white houses. Meekness, submission, obedience and silence were the only options I knew. There I sat at a table filled with mouth-watering delights—I was the dog begging for scraps of kindness, love, connection and acceptance.
Mom prayed, and everyone dug in. My stomach clenched; I took several deep breaths before reaching for the potatoes.
I’m not doing this anymore, I thought. This is the last holiday I’m going to share with them.

My relationship with my mom and that white house is still unresolved, messy. I’ve wanted to show her who I am, yet I’ve feared her disapproving judgments and criticism. What I know must happen is for me to resolve my relationship with my internalized mother. It’s time to let Mom be who she is, snide remarks and all. And for me to be myself regardless of her comments, her disregard for anything that makes her uncomfortable. I want to enjoy what she has to offer, her love, her concern, and let the rest fall away. I also want to continue developing a positive, open, honest relationship with my daughters and teaching them the skills to handle their own issues and conflicts as they grow older. What became turmoil for me, I want to be challenges they resolve.
Since that Thanksgiving dinner almost a decade ago, I have refused to return to the white house for holiday celebrations because I resolved to stop working for love. My family didn’t accept these decisions to remain separate, and
they have used guilt and manipulation to try to convince me to change my mind every holiday.

I desire connection and love with my family, but now I know it must begin with self love and acceptance. I believe in a loving spirit/universe. We all want to know we’re not alone, and that begins with knowing and being comfortable with self. With time and attention, I birthed my own inner child. All the processing, not giving up, standing up for myself was getting back to the core of who I am, diving back into self, an unknown territory. I dreamed of water so often because of the scariness of the dive back into the core self. I’d covered it up with fat to not have to deal with the core. I didn’t have to be completely remade; I’m not a different person.

My mom is who she is. I’m not her, yet I am a part of her. Even if her lessons were what not to do, she loves me the way she knows how. My girls are their own person and part of me and part of her; they are like the Alice in Wonderland looking glass—they are the girl I wish I could have been, they are living the childhood I wish I could have lived, they have the mom, the home, the house I wish I could have had. Yet, I will not live vicariously through them the way Grandma Bonnie lived vicariously through her daughter, through my mom, Barbara, nor will I stifle their innate selves the way my mom did with her daughter, with me, Rachel. I must make a new lesson plan, one that includes protection, respect, self-esteem and owning authority, for Alexia and Alaina, my daughters, and the daughters to come.

I am the daughter of Barbara, the daughter of Bonnie, the daughter of Ivy.
A cobalt blue backdrop sharpens
two paintings by Martin Wong, hones
their foreground figures (perhaps to recall
Byzantine icon paintings or the stained glass earthy-
saints of Chartres), and inches me forward. The worlds
on the wall, extending over the frame, depict
startling trinities: gazing children, Oriental-ornate-

helmeted maidens, and an oddball dragon whose outrageous
color and size take over the scene. In “Chinese Dragon,”
the sight of that yang-creature’s bulbous, black-
outlined eyes, as he peers at his huge, baroquely-
carved snout, stiffens the hair on my arms. My internal
imp says the dragon is silly

yet sage. A pair of Chinatown-clad Chinese-
American children occupy an inset in the painting’s
lower right, and face the picture-
maker in the manner of a fifties photograph (when
children might have refused to smile
at the photographer’s boxy machine). The little boy’s eyes

emit apprehension (indigestion, contempt,
patience?) as he stands beneath the shoulder-
enclosing arm of the girl. Her mouth
is open in the universal unself-
conscious stare of youth encountering something new

they’re not sure they like. Why
are these kids, the solely earth-bound characters here,
not flashy, why drab daguerrotype-
tinted yet deliberately painted (against
the domination of cobalt blue)? Is it youth’s

lack of ego that lures the grown-up’s mind to travel
back there? In “Chinese New Year,”
another child (Wong as a boy re-
portrayed from a photograph), sits center-stage-front
with his back to us, tiny (yet the image of self-
faith)—a birdwatching cat. The child’s rapt
gaze (that I imagine) on the color-raucous parade
intrigues me as much as the fantasy-glory that snared me first. All these mysteries (that refuse to be solved) dare me to venture beyond a straight-on gaze.

Checking the display hall (in case I’m noticed), I slip to the painting’s side in order to sight down its front to gain proof that the dozens of darkrimmed-orbs-masquerading-as-eyes are three-dimensionally elevated above the painting’s surface, above the costly, centuries-old, sapphire brash-splash—and I’m overjoyed

I’ve been tricked, elated to defy the laws of perspective. Hardly rougher than a snapshot’s slick veneer, the illusion of touchable image touches me, raising my hackles. The anchor

is not the mirror image snapped and fixed by an admixture of painted women, inscrutable children, and gargoyle-like zany-clowns backdropped

by a nightdream-bold reflection of ocean and sky—the bright-bright blue of the royal (electric when placed alongside a fake photo of sober-faced children). A fifties kid,

if truth be told, would have paid a scapegoated rebel’s price to resist any cameraman’s smile-for-me-honey.

That’s why, taught by Wong, I see painting’s substitute (or would-be replacement) as common delusion—the lie-without-the-body that photography is.
Homeless-Type Taps On the Door
(for composition specialists)

The jolt the word’s intrusion packs,
staring me down from its out-of-context haunts (a page of freshman-comp type-print having nothing to do with this mysterious stranger—
aquatinted), reminds me of other jarrings stumbled on after
the perpetrator has fled. These discombobulations, wordless but rich, contain accumulated night-frights: In the wee hours,
a living room lamp’s come on by itself and I can’t say why. That same night, something has lifted a bag of trash out of its zone before
I can tote it to the curb. Mystery,
trickery expect surrender to such mean meanderings from the familiar. I’m just a slave to the plodding prose that won’t distinguish definite from defiant, aquatint from acquaint. It’s easy to blame that single-choice automaton, the computer’s spell-checker (heartbreaker of those trying to flee the low-light confines of only two routes). No, there’s a salvation about that screwball aquatinted (accident few hard-cover lexicons ever welcomed home): its random insinuation through a hazy expanse,
ambushing the placid sleeper awake
in its greenish-blue-tinged way—
a way wayward word-spirit at play.
Mornings, I wait for city transportation within a semicircle of three evergreens. That ritual done, it’s all lowpoint. Ivy-halled-hailing ego-mails overrun faster than I can flick them from the screen. Through evening paperwork, the memory pesters (as welcome as news of a Canadian woods with gears so stripped it’s ceased to emit oxygen and started giving off CO2). Surrounding my house, electrical wiring is *it*—transformers (like winter forest in rigor mortis) exclamation-point the view. Who gave head-located, grid-fixated suits-in-charge leeway to stroll past reflecting pools (quickly perusing within) while underlings do their betters’ dirty work—creosote-pole the innocent Earth? Cyber-fiends peddle paper-saving as power-glitches merge into flatline. My kind drum our fingers as the celebrated machine churns slower than next year’s will. It’s one way to live. Still, what will the morning trees say (as they telepathize from that other world beyond the primal scream and silence both)? Here, no one’s head is stuck up where it fails to hear the first pond-peepers or leaves that whisper at point-oh-oh
three miles per hour (a soon-to-be forgotten art).

My fifties-kid book about Peter Pan, the Lost Boys, and an Indian tribe shows

a stand of evergreens behaving
like trees are supposed to—ego-less, composed. In the story’s

next frame, a spruce
reaches out of itself with Disney-cartooned dark-complexioned hands

cocked to choke the story’s children (as would all the great outdoors on a red-alert day). Role-

reversal shocks the child-reader. It’s not nature’s place to hold the mirror up to our mugs.
Normal’s North

Hell’s metaphorical other-side-of-the-climate-coin resembles the January sidewalks along West North Street in Normal, Illinois. The squared, steel-and-glass-stark bus stop stalls beckon shuddering fares-in-waiting like freestanding cells-of-last-resort within the gale-blasted, open-air prison-at-large. Where North slides into Beaufort, concrete squeezes out nature like a man who sits on a crowded seat with his knees spread wide. In front of a shop, the occasional petite-tree pops up. Vaster white-out resides on a Rocky Mountain’s shaded north slope—lost-plane junkyard. But North Street has a sole gleaming spot—the Art Deco art theater’s oval, scarlet-and-green, neon-shooting sign. Otherwise, curvaceous glamour (if it ever habitated here) long ago skipped town. No,

Ansel Adams would not have disembarked at the Amtrak station, whose platform contains no vantage-point for a safe-from-a-distance, snow-topped-Grand-Teton-type, saving-grace backdrop. I cling to the tonal warmth of Mother Murphy’s music store from which emerge raucous rhythm and blues and Billie Holiday songs oozed between the sidewalk’s crusts of ice. I know a budding photographer, caught in a bone-chilled funk over love-gone-to-slush. He’s been confined in North Normal all his life. Trial-laden as cycloped Odin (hanging in a tree, waiting for redemption), the photography buff rages to flee this town for the city, where it’s tropical and giddy. 

Lucky me: No matter the temperature’s degree of stuck, I, zoned out the length of Normal’s drawn-out winter, curl up like a kid,

hot-bricked in bed by the melodies swimming in my head. Godspeed my jailed-by-frigid-Normal, fed-up friend. An artist-of-the-eye-alone can pine too long
in pale Valhalla—on those east-west, boot-slipping streets named North
where the drifting won’t die.
Strange Attractors

I hear the metronomic knocks, noisy enough to grate at 3AM, the scratch of claws. Early in the siege,

I hammer the baseboard beneath the kitchen shelves, its favorite spot, hear it skitter off, I hope, down the back alley of its own making and outdoors. Soon it learns (or whatever an altered m. o. means for this low-ordered creature) that it is safe from my tool. The exterminator suspects a gerbil. We never find the body, but my formerly quiet neighbor takes to verbal barrage with me as target, his soapbox the narrow hallway outside my door. Randomly

as I come and go, he (drunk and peepholing), gutturals from behind his door bitch, fatass bitch, and various pig-sty grunts. Before this episode, young-man neighbors have scoped. Stirred by floorboards shifting above their heads (is the back-and-forth movement ironing, dancing, or restless desire for them?), they’ve rushed upstairs at ungodly hours, cajoling with excuses to get inside. Their whimper unnerve all sensitive souls. My landlady fails to evict the bad-actor who hog-cacophonies from behind his door. I want to erect a warning a la my good father’s NO TRESPASSING sign, posted after
he stopped hunting game. But why undergo the strain? Countless systems are forever bumping against others they’re not related to.

That’s why the universe (like a wayward fauna-pest—its mouth rhythmically writhing) is chaos caught in a trap.
To and From the Auction

It was still Sunday morning dark when I poured coffee into the thermos and we started to drive north. Between sips, I ate a coffee brandy doughnut as I drove. Deanna dozed in the passenger seat as the sky lightened. Dawn officially opened somewhere around Brightonville, at first a pink sting swelling and then a blossoming of night’s bow. After almost two and a half hours, we parked along the edge of the road, our car tilting off toward the ditch. We walked past a row of cars, mostly trucks, parked along both sides. Deanna kicked some stray pieces of gravel from the shoulder into the bushes. I’m tired, she said, but I could tell she wasn’t all that tired. Wait ‘til we get us some egg saniches, I said. Nothing better than a buck-fifty egg sanich. I could tell Deanna was ready for the auction by the way she said, “sanich”, like she was already taking a bite of the grilled English muffin and the crispy bacon edges of the egg.

Even though it was only 7:35, the lower barn was already packed with people, its cement floor an unforgiving place to spend the next four hours, but it would be worth it, I hoped. I didn’t know exactly what I wanted to bid on, even after I’d scrolled through the grainy pictures of the lots on the website, but there was some strong feeling propelling me to attend. I’d attended a few other times before, but had never bought anything. Actually I’d never even bid on anything because the entire haphazard melee of the bidding intimidated me. Half the time I couldn’t even understand what the head-setted man sitting in the auctioneer’s seat was saying, let alone bolster myself for a bid, my timid hand inching up in a two-fingered flag. But oh, did I dream of bidding, a confident stream of wags and ticks and flicks and nods, all acknowledged immediately and effortlessly by the auctioneer.

Deanna, during the drive, had actually asked me, so you’re going to bid on something this time, really? I gripped the steering wheel harder, glaring at the road. Of course, I said, wanting it to sound off-handedly confident. Come on, really? Deanna had woken up a little more at the sight of my insecurity. It’s nothing to be ashamed of, she said, if you might be a little intimidated to bid at that auction – it’s a crazy place. I couldn’t admit this fear to Deanna, as we’d only begun dating a few months ago and I still held to my projection of bold manliness in her eyes, though I’m sure she saw right
through me on date one. But still, I had my pride. Deanna was
the kind of person who wouldn’t blink at bidding, and indeed
winning, exactly what she wanted. In fact, she’d bought
herself a lawn mower at the auction a few weeks ago, a real
prince of a machine for fifteen dollars. She cut her lawn last
week and it looked great, like a smooth cut skull. The early
morning auction had been my idea of a date, but so far, it was
Deanna who distinguished herself in the art of acquisition.
That would change today.

I milled about through the lots in the barn. The
bidding had not yet started, but would soon. I had a few
precious moments to get my bearings, find out what was
calling me today. Thankfully, Deanna was occupied at another
side of the barn, mulling through one of the furniture lots. I
shuffled by a box of old farm tools, a beautiful Remington
typewriter, a scarecrow wire skeleton – so many tempting
things, but none of them called to me.

Then I stubbed my foot on a box of books on the
floor. My first instinct was an expletive, as the stubbing really
hurt, and my second instinct was to hurl the box of books
across the barn in a fit of rage. But I restrained myself on my
second urge, and instead I bent down to examine the contents.
James Paterson, The Grapes of Wrath, The Prophet, Clive
Clussler. Ho hum. Nothing to see here. I dug a little deeper
and to my surprise I unearthed a beautiful cloth-bound edition
of Shirley Hazzard’s Glass Houses. I’d read all her other
books and thought she wrote perhaps the most beautiful
sentences in the English language. Glass Houses was the only
book of hers I hadn’t read and in fact, I didn’t even know it
existed. How had this little book escaped my awareness? I had
no idea, but now I knew of it. And my pounding heart told me
I really wanted to own it.

Three hours later, my limbs shaking from nerves, I
carried the box of books – Lot 410 – to the car as its new
owner. Of course I had built up the bidding process well
beyond reality. Though visibly sweating, I managed to shoot
up an arm and five second later, as I was the only bidder, I
owned the box of “some mystery books,” as the auctioneer
called them, for $3.75. It was all alarmingly easy and I felt
quite smug. The bidding was still in full swing, and in fact
wouldn’t probably stop for another several hours (they still
had to get through the Upper Barn). I heard the auctioneer’s
gravelly voice barking in the back of my head, but it was a
few moments before the fact registered that Deanna was locked in a bidding war over a barister’s bookcase, a real beauty of a piece, mahogany, each shelf with its own sliding glass door. The bids flew up like popcorn. I gasped. And then held my breath. Suddenly Deanna raised her hand and the auctioneer indicted she had bought the barister’s bookcase. For how much? I didn’t want to know.

On our drive south, my car weighed down to a dangerous sag with the bookshelf strapped to the roof, Deanna said she’d bought it so there could be a place to put my newly-bought books. Deanna worked at the fish market along the wharves, didn’t make all that much money, and thus a bookcase was a significant purchase for her. We don’t even live together, I said, a little befuddled. Well, she said, slowly drawing out a questioning smile, maybe we should.

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The apartment we rented together smelled faintly of bitters mixed with sawdust, not an unpleasant smell by any means, but certainly a distinctive one. We’d lucked into a deal of an apartment on the Hill, a turn of the century, high ceiling, intricate molding one-bedroom with a huge double parlor. However, between Deanna and me, we had hardly any furniture, our bed a mattress on the floor, no couch but one mostly uncomfortable armchair; we ate our meals on the foldout coffee table trays that had been my grandmother’s. We lived mostly in the middle of all our too many rooms because we’d piled and stacked our miscellany along the walls (no closets). The effect gave the apartment a fox den-like feel, like we were walking through tunnels to get from the kitchen to the dining room to the last room of the double parlor. Deanna called it our fall out shelter. I thought we were just waiting for one of us to appear on one of those game shows where, through some stroke of dumb luck that masks itself as skill or knowledge, we win a dining room furniture set or a living room furniture set or even a bedroom set. Of course I doubted we would actually like any furniture we’d win on a game show – too much like the showroom of a Lazy Boy factory or someplace like that – but we could sell all that stuff and go back to the auction and buy our real soul furniture.

The sole exception to our barren apartment was the barister’s bookcase that we’d placed in a spot of honor in the

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front parlors against the chimney where it could be easily seen. It was filled with the books I’d bought as Lot 410 and even though we had other piles of books scattered throughout the apartment, we decided that the contents of this bookcase would only ever be the books of Lot 410. We’d build the rest around it.

One day, not so long after we’d first moved in, I took the Shirley Hazzard book from the bookcase. I still hadn’t read it and was in fact a little scared to read it, as if reading it might break some kind of spell that the book had fortuitously placed on us. So in lieu of reading the book, I simply thumbed through it. As I did so, a piece of paper fluttered out to the floor, a square scrap of something handwritten on one side. I picked it up. It was a hand-drawn map of some sort. Upon examining it further, I noticed it was a map of our neighborhood on the Hill, and indeed an “X” sat where our apartment stood. The rest of the map detailed, to my surprise, a route north to the same auction where I’d bought the book. I didn’t recognize the handwriting and if it was Deanna’s, then she’d learned a way to write in a completely foreign script than her normally delicate curve. But I doubted this very much because the script was blunt and forceful, the markings having been made by some thick tip. Every turn on the map was accompanied by little notations – “Johnson’s Quarry” and “River Run Road” – even small roads whose names escaped us were all there in this rough scrawled detail. The map had no title or name on it or otherwise identifying marks, just the pure black lines. The most alarming aspect of the map was that, no matter how hard I tried to decipher the fact, I couldn’t tell if the map lead from our apartment to the auction or vice versa. After a while, this puzzled me so much that I could feel a vague but mounting panic start to rise within me. Deanna walked by, holding a cup of coffee. What’s wrong, she asked, taking a sip from her mug. Oh, nothing, I said, quickly stuffing the piece of paper back within the book and placing it back on the shelf. Nothing at all. Probably nothing whatsoever to worry about.
Barbecue with Kent

We pull into the restaurant parking lot on a late afternoon that looks more like a cold, bleak, Monday in February than a Friday afternoon in mid-September. However, as we step out of my Honda Civic, we are met by a combination of drizzling rain and mugginess — a feeling that a warm, wet blanket had been tossed around our necks. Summers in North Carolina do not yield easily to the next season.

The parking lot is a pockmarked jumble of black asphalt with utility poles located in the most awkward of places. I haven’t visited this joint in a long time, and I find myself wondering why anyone would place utility poles right in the middle of traffic lanes and parking spaces. Then I remember that this highway has changed and meandered a lot since its first day of business, shortly after the end of World War II. The restaurant itself still appears as it did when I was a child — a large, long, white building with a single sign mounted on the roof displaying the name of the original proprietor in blue-black letters: Parker’s Barbecue.

A funny thing about Parker’s is how the parking lot has its own neatly divided demographics. In front of the main entrance, where the dine-in area is located, the spaces are filled with minivans, station wagons, immaculate pickup trucks and long, American-made sedans — the crowd made up of retirees and middle-aged farmers, mostly. Those are the folks who roll in starting at 4:30 and thin out over the next two hours. The takeout parks, around to the side, are a bit more egalitarian: RVs, rust buckets, giant, muddy pickup trucks and small foreign-made hatchbacks — these drivers love the same food but lack either the means or the time to sit down for a meal inside.

The name Parker’s Barbecue says it all. For folks from eastern North Carolina, no other qualifier is needed. They know exactly what is cooked, served and packaged at a frenetic pace seven days a week, all day long — barbecue. Barbecue is not a verb, it is not a noun that needs an adjective denoting what animal (for the record, pig) the meat comes from, it is not an event. Its authenticity is regional, no different than gumbo is to Louisiana, brisket is to Texas, cheese steaks are to Philadelphia or bagels are to New York City.
Parker’s, on a blighted stretch of U.S. Highway 301 in Wilson, has changed little in the generations that have passed since it opened the doors, shortly after World War II. Despite living so close to such fine establishments, our family of five rarely dines on barbecue. I grew up on the stuff – finely chopped pork shoulder, seasoned with vinegar and crushed red pepper; finely-chopped slaw made with a heavy hand of celery salt, mustard and sugar; Brunswick stew; boiled white potatoes; cornbread sticks; and of course, hushpuppies. Fried chicken to rival the best anyone’s mama has put on the table, is usually a “side dish” as is barbecued chicken, cooked right alongside the pig over either charcoal or wood. The menu is as plain as the building. It should also be noted, from my personal experience, that the sweeter the ice tea is at a barbecue joint is directly related to how good the food will be. A person served unsweetened tea should place an appropriate amount of money on the table to cover the cost of the drinks and leave immediately. The tea at Parker’s is very sweet.

When I was a child in the late 1970s and early 1980s, we got most of our food off the family farm. For the occasional treat, and to give my mama a break from her usual routine of cooking three meals a day, my parents would take my brothers and sisters and me out for a family meal at Parker’s. We’d sit at long tables covered in white butcher’s paper, and eat food off brown plastic cafeteria-style plates loaded with barbecue, and the trimmings. My siblings always got a combination, with fried chicken and barbecue sharing the meat space on the plate, along with potatoes and slaw, the natural companion to pork. For me, barbecue was a delicacy, and I wasn’t about to sacrifice half my share for a drumstick; double slaw and bread was all I needed for accompaniment, until I got older and developed a taste for Brunswick stew. Daddy’s plate always seemed piled a little higher than the others, Mama’s a little more modest.

Young boys from the local high schools or Atlantic Christian College waited the tables. Each was decked out in a white shirt, white pants, a white apron and a white paper hat. Those boys practically ran from the kitchen to the tables, refilling drinks and doing all the bus work themselves, clattering red tumblers, trays, chicken bones, napkins and silverware into big plastic tubs. A generation ago, a single plate of more food than a normal adult should eat in one
sitting could be had for a few dollars, just right for my folk’s budget, which was strictly based on the cash in Daddy’s well-worn, black leather wallet.

My middle son, age six, loves to go places he’s never been, especially if those places are somehow connected to my childhood. As we found a parking space near the side entrance at Parker’s, between a well-worn dingy white Chevy custom van with blue pinstripes and a massive black Z-71 pickup truck, I told him we’d be getting takeout, having just come from a rain-shortened youth soccer practice.

He always peppers me with questions, and today was no different. This section of Wilson is long past its heyday, now that I-95 has supplanted the old highway as the major artery leading north-south, the halfway mark between New York and Florida. Highway 301 was once bustling with neon-lit motels, restaurants, gas stations and the city fairgrounds across the street. Today, it looks like 1962 just packed up one day and left. Kent wanted to know why everything looked so old and broken. The area is flat, and many of the pine trees that added life and color were thinned first by Hurricane Floyd back in 1999 and then by two rounds of tornado touchdowns in the past three years. It is hard to tell if some of the single-floor “motor courts” are still open. One is now occupied by a Chinese restaurant with no cars on the lot at the dinner hour, just a lonely red OPEN sign on the office door. Another seems to have a Mexican grocery and could possibly be apartments now, while the neighboring establishment that looks right out of a postcard from Highway 66, seems seedy-looking enough to be doing trade of a different kind. Almost all of the buildings need renovation or demolition, and are unlikely to get either.

We worked our way towards the takeout annex, which is tucked around the side of the restaurant, away from the high traffic goings-on at the front door to the dining area. Tall, skinny and athletic, my orange-haired boy — he doesn’t like to be called a redhead — usually sticks close to me, but he seemed tentative. The backside of Parker’s doesn’t have much curb appeal and old, run down storage buildings with flaking paint are surrounded by knee-high grass and weeds. Crates, pallets, delivery boxes and miscellaneous debris lay scattered in the back of the building. Kent asks if I am sure we’re going
the right way. We walk up an old-style ramp with indoor-outdoor carpeting, open the screen door and step back in time.

I guess my generation, the one they call X, started the breakup with restaurants like Parker’s. Diets have changed. Farmers and blue collar workers had long days of physical labor to help offset what would be considered a high-calorie, high-cholesterol lunch today. Travelers and buyers from what was once the world’s largest tobacco market knew the places they could count on for good, cheap food to get them through the day.

Maybe barbecue was the forerunner to today’s fast food, only it doesn’t come packed with artificial fillers and loaded with additives and preservatives.

Where there were once barbecue and hamburger places on every street corner of towns across the eastern part of the state, they’ve now been replaced with Mexican and Chinese restaurants. These places provide no healthier alternative for the 18-to-35-year-old working professionals, they are just trendier. There has been essentially a patron-cide for an entire segment of the population. General Tso’s chicken or Carnitas, I suspect, will keep heart bypass folks just as busy in the coming years as the places serving grilled pig meat doused with vinegar.

We walk across an old, but clean gray-painted concrete floor and stand in a line that is nearly ten deep with customers, cooled by a single, ancient ceiling fan. A few stray flies work the room. I groan to myself, fearing a long wait and a soon-to-be-impatient first grader. But two young men, probably still in their teens, work the register like pros. They turn their ears towards the customer, scribble orders on a stubbed order pad, ring up totals, collect cash, give change and pass the orders to a waiting crew member. Another dozen boys work like a well-greased machine in the background, tightly packing barbecue, vegetables and trimmings into plastic containers, and then double-bagging each order. McDonald’s wishes they could turn orders that fast. The workers still wear the white aprons, shirts and paper hats.

The line moves quickly and suddenly I realize I have no idea what I’m going to order and how much of it I need. The wall menu is the type you see at high school concession stands, featuring a soft drink company’s logo and sporting
blue plastic snap-on letters. I’m lost on quantities. Kent tells me to be sure to get him some cornsticks, he would really like one, he’s never had one, and by the way, what are they? He points out we should get chicken as well, as he watches a worker use metal tongs to dump large crispy wings and legs, one after another into a large bag, until it is almost full, then he tops it with cornsticks. Kent is practically licking his lips.

There is no place for debit cards in this world, so I check the cash in my wallet and order accordingly. My transaction and the filling of my order are almost instantaneous, and the bag is warm to the touch. We excuse ourselves through the mass of people who have entered the building since we arrived and emerge from the past to find the rain has stopped, and in its place a cool breeze greets us. Kent says he hopes I got enough food, he’s starving.

We spend most of the 30-minute, back roads drive home talking about what Parker’s was like when I was a kid. I told him about how his aunts and uncles, all a decade a more my senior, laughed and cut-up at the table, while his Mammy answered my endless questions, like I do for him now. I told him how good the food was then, and how we only went out to eat a few times a year and that it was usually a big deal, a much different lifestyle than his. He asked why we don’t ever go now, and that sometime, he’d like to go in and sit down like I used to do. I’m tempted to dig into the bag and fish out two cornsticks — which are cigar-shaped, thin strips of cornmeal, deep fried to a crispy crust — and pass one to Kent to try. I decided against it. The aroma of all the good things we’ll have for supper heightens our anticipation, and I wonder if my kids will enjoy the food the way I did at their age. My question is answered shortly after we walk into the kitchen at home. His older sister and younger brother meet us at the counter, my wife trailing behind, all drawn quickly to the aroma of grilled pork, pepper, cornsticks, chicken and stew.

We have plastic trays, but the not the generic variety of my childhood, these feature cartoon characters and superheroes. After bouncing impatiently in their chairs as the food is piled on, the next thirty minutes is silent except for the smacking and finger-licking and calls for more. The taste was just as I remembered it: the cool sweetness of the slaw a perfect counterpunch to the saltiness of the vinegar drenched meat; the tanginess of the rich, spicy, tomato-based Brunswick...
stew, made for dipping the crunchy slabs of cornmeal into. It took two more well-savored meals to clean up the leftover barbecue, slaw and Brunswick stew. The chicken and cornsticks never had a chance.

Food is a tie that binds us, and regional foods are at risk for losing their authenticity at the hands of a society demanding fast, bland, boring sameness. When locals who have moved away come back to visit, a barbecue place is one of their main priorities— either for a meal or to take some back home, to work those great memories back into their lives.

By contrast, we could have chopped pork just about anytime based on price and proximity and rarely do. I realized after that night of Parker’s that I have become one of the people I complain about — those who have abandoned the institutions that ought to be saved. Places like Parker’s, places with personalities, define and distinguish communities and regions. Hectic lifestyles and changing interests took us down other pathways, much the way childhood buddies drift apart. My complicity in abandoning an old family favorite, albeit unintentional, makes me feel somewhat hypocritical. After all, my future grandchildren ought not be deprived of a place so special and nostalgic in my memory, and now, just maybe, also in Kent’s.
Leon Fullbrook was a man used to surprises—the copper metallic of sun-baked birch bark, the symmetrical holes drilled by a sap-sucker’s staccato beak—but not this kind of surprise.

It was early March, black-capped chickadees calling their own name, Swainson’s thrushes trilling watery. Time again to trim unruly hedges, cut back dead wood, prune rose cane and privet. The southern wind had brought with it an invisible signal of growth, everything burgeoning under its touch. Within two days, buds had cracked open and suckers had surged, growing upward straight and unseemly from the branches of lilac, forsythia, willow, and flowering plum. Leon’s bonsai too had burst into growth and he’d been busy pinching new eruptions of green from branches long trained to be bare.

He unloaded tools out of his work truck—a 1970 4x4 half-ton Dodge “Power Wagon” that had been beat into the ground by zealous Idaho fire crews who didn’t care that Kelly humps were meant to keep vehicles off skid roads. Over the last few decades the truck had grown rusty on the edges, saggy in the middle, and weak in the u-joints—not unlike Leon himself, who at seventy was beginning to feel not exactly slow, but mellow. Content to spend long hours studying the ways his bonsai had matured into grace.

Burdened with the trimmer, intent on a trio of blue-rug junipers growing close into the apartment’s corner unit, Leon saw Jim, the apartment manager, walking toward him. Leon swore under his breath. It had taken him years to learn to deal with customers on his own. Isabelle had been the outgoing, gregarious one. People had responded to her red-headed good looks, her flashing green eyes. But that had been a long time ago. He’d always known Isabelle wasn’t the staying kind.

“Leon!” Jim boomed his name out. “I’ve been trying to get a hold of you.”

Even though Leon was a little hard of hearing—too many years of chainsaws and trimmers—he still found Jim’s voice grating.

Jim gestured at the junipers, shouted, “You hit those hard enough last time . . . what I really need you to do is trim up those goddamned birches. Your granddaughter wouldn’t do
it, told me they were fine. I’m telling you they’re not.
Something needs to be done about it.”

Jim left. Leon wiped his glasses off; they were a new
impatience—lenses always misted into a worse blur than his
eyesight. What was the use when they were as smeared as a
dirty windshield? He tucked them in his shirt pocket, and
examined the birches’ papery bark up close, checking for the
energetic beetle that had killed trees all over the island, but
Silva was right. The trees were in good health.

Even though Silva was only seventeen, she knew
what she was talking about. She’d always known what she
was talking about. At five, when Leon had first brought her to
Trawler to live with him—Isabelle’s granddaughter he’d never
met, never even known about—Silva had learned the Latin names of all Leon’s bonsai within months: *Lonicera elegans*,
twin-trunk honeysuckle; *Juniperus rigida*, windswept needle
juniper; *Thuja occidentalis*, slanting white cedar. Even then
she’d understood the way a tree could speak for your soul.
Despite her sorrow and loss, Leon had always known she was
the one who would stay.

The fog was peeling off the water in long wisps, the
sun haloed bright and blinding from the lower-
level apartment
windows as Leon went back to planning the best way to attack
the mess of juniper shrubs.

He didn’t look at the window next to him until he
primed his chainsaw. And then, there, just three feet from him,
behind the glare on glass, he saw a full length of bare skin, a
white gleaming of thigh and buttock, the dip and curve of
shoulders and breasts. A naked woman sleeping, body
showered in morning light, hair fanned and rippling, hair the
color of honeysuckle, the color of a smooth skinned madrone.
Isabelle’s hair.

Leon caught himself in mid-motion as the woman’s
chest rose and fell, her body settled deep into the blanket
underneath her. She twitched, kicked a foot out and there was
no denying the reality of that skin, those breasts. Leon felt a
current of connection as physical and real as his own
heartbeat. He held his breath, afraid the slightest move would
make her disappear. The sun’s sudden heat burned into his
side, the fecundity of exposed earth and some unseen fungus
rising and mingling with the fresh tang of unfurled willow
leaves. His fingers were numb where they gripped the saw’s
handle; the gallon gas jug in his other hand felt like a concrete block.

In moments of weakness he’d tried to recall Isabelle’s body, see her clearly in his head, but he’d never been able to bring back more than a quick flash—a smile, a fleeting gesture. Over the years even these had faded, but now, behind the window, it was as if she’d never left. He felt his throat swell, tears rise to his eyes.

“Isabelle?” he said, her name like water in his mouth—a sweet familiarity. He could suddenly remember the taste of her skin, the way her smell stayed in the back of his throat for hours, the soft resistance of her body under his. He could feel the heat rising in his groin at this offering—this fully fleshed offering like redemption.

She shifted, the sun bright along her jaw line. He see her face but it took several seconds for the transformation, the slow morphing, the recognition. It took him this long to see.

It was Silva.

The realization coursed through his limbs, radiating from his groin to his feet. His mouth went dry, his hands slack. In the window, reflected back to him, was his bearded old-man face, etched with desire. He back-stepped, tangling in willow branches. His heart beat hard in his chest, pulsing into his head like pain. A muted conversation punctuated by the high trill of a woman’s laugh made his body flush with heat, every fiber pulsating. Silva, naked in this place.

Dizzy and breathless, he went to his truck, knowing only that he must leave. In the birches, robins fluttered, their bright chests blinking lewd spots of color. Leon held the key on too long and the starter whirred and choked. He ground the shift and flicked the wipers instead of his blinker, blades squealing across the windshield. When he pulled into the street a woman in an Oldsmobile swerved around him, laying on her horn as she regained the lane.

He drove out of town, his arms tensed on the steering wheel, his tools shifting and bouncing as the truck’s back end skittered and bucked over the potted blacktop. He was trying to breathe, trying to think. What had he done?

He stopped at the farthest point of the island where bramble overran the shoulder gravel and rooted into cracked pavement, subsuming the road. He made his way down a wet dirt trail to a small pebble beach, seagulls bobbing on the water. He stood staring out, remembering Silva at five years
old, lithe and pale, perched on the shore, legs as long and thin
as a heron’s, like some shorebird herself, poising and waiting.
His heels sank into the pebbles, leaving divots that seeped
brown. He stripped down and waded into the icy gray water
grabbing handfuls of gravel and shell grit, scrubbing himself
down until his skin pulsed, until he was dripping and raw.
Water and grit ran rivulets down his face from his hair to his
beard, ran salty into his mouth.

Silvania August Moonbeam Merrigal. When Isabelle
had left, Leon hadn’t been able to find her; it was as if she’d
disappeared into thin air. Nothing for over twenty years, then a
phone call. Isabelle’s twenty-two year old daughter dead, her
five-year-old daughter left behind. They’d found the child’s
parents a hundred feet below the road in the river, still inside
their car, balanced on some boulders underwater, as if they’d
settled there by volition, as if they were enjoying the view.
Nobody could find any family to contact about the child,
except Leon. How they’d even found him, connecting him to
Isabelle, he would never know.

When he’d gone to pick the girl up, Isabelle’s
granddaughter, he hadn’t expected the uncanny resemblance.
Silva’s pale face, fern-green eyes, and copper hair an exact
replica of Isabelle. Over the years Leon had forgotten how
much they looked alike.

Leon wanted to tell her he knew what she was doing,
that it was a mistake, that she would regret it, that she was
always going to regret it. He wanted to tell her that if she left
him, it would break him in two. He’d barely survived Isabelle
leaving. He thought about going back to the apartment. He
could demand Silva home. It was his right. She had the beach,
the woods, the shore. He’d given her everything she needed.

Instead he drove downtown to the library and parked
at the corner he’d cordoned off with orange caution tape a few
days before, isolating the century-old big-leaf maple in the
back library lawn. The librarian, Mrs. Richardson, said she
could hear its branches scratching on the roof, said she feared
if a wind came up she would be smashed at her desk by its
massive limbs.

He geared up quickly, roping himself to the tree’s
trunk, concentrating on his spiked insteps and the
maneuvering of his lanyard. He didn’t trust machines with
their gears and hydraulics, didn’t like teetering out of a lift-
bucket like some foreign appendage. He climbed until he was
at the top of the tree, then sat on a thick, mossy upper branch. This high was transforming, the smallness of everything below, nothing substantial but bird nests. He was as high as the pointed church steeple a block to the right, the highest point in town, and beyond it, could see the lip of the shore, water and horizon blurring together. The sun filtered through delicate new leaves and he imagined what it felt like to lay naked and exposed, sun-warmed skin.

His body alive with longing and shame, he abruptly pulled up the chainsaw dangling several feet below, roped to his belt. He started the chainsaw and cracked it wide-open, holding it full-throttle as he made each cut, sawdust dusting his feet and legs. First he severed the small branches, then the larger. He worked fast, cutting freely through branch after branch, imagining the punk rot, the maple’s heart got soft and pithy and dark. He swung himself around the trunk on the ropes and kept cutting, the chainsaw throttling and throaty, spewing oil-rich smoke and chips in equal measure. Flies landed on his neck and wasps buzzed sluggish around his head. He roped and cut, swinging and lowering the largest branches down to the lawn like pendulums. He cut everything until he’d stripped the maple, every last vestige of growth fallen to the lawn below denting the soft grass. When he was finished and turned off his saw, Mrs. Richardson came out and walked mournfully around the severed wood, as if it were some fallen beast.

He drove away with his window down, the air peppering his face. The streetlights hummed and a hatch of gnats clouded the sudden light. He drove down the rolling streets, past the docks, the cannery, and farther until he found the dark turn to the cabin by habit, winding through the black trunks of trees, but Silva wasn’t home. He went to her room, pushed the door open slowly hoping somehow he would find her there, but her bed was smooth and empty.

In the kitchen he poured himself a whiskey and went outside. It was not something he allowed himself to do much—the whiskey. It was for the first sixty-degree day of spring, the summer solstice, October’s full moon, the first snow. But tonight he needed it. He sat drinking, watching bats and nighthawks come out for the hunt, watching moths beat themselves tattered against the porch light.

As Silva had grown, all they’d had to do was gesture, tilt a shoulder, flip a hand, and the other understood. They’d
walked through the beaches of tide-tumbled rocks, followed
heron tracks, observed the foraging of crabs. They explored
the shore woods that held the unspeakable stuff of divinity:
white clusters of wood nymph blooms, nests of junco and
wren, the bone-sharp droppings of owls. They rowed around
the island together, digging plants, collecting shells, scouting
for whale spouts and the smooth slip of seals—the sound of
the water, the oars creaking and dipping. These were his
favorite moments. It was the way Leon had always imagined it
could be. But now he could feel it. Silva was leaving him too.

He got up and walked around the cabin’s deck,
stopping at the honeysuckle bonsai. His muse. At sixteen he’d
gotten it from his mentor. Later, he’d carved its shape into
earrings for Isabelle, asking her to marry him, and still later,
on Trawler, he’d modeled it as his business logo. It had always
been at the start of everything.

The honeysuckle’s trunk was age-thick and fissured
into two shapes—a woman’s body wrapping into a man’s, her
long legs thrown over his and tapering off into a heap of moss.
Her breast a small knot in the upper trunk. The two lovers
leaned over the edge of the pot, the woman bent into the man,
their branches sweeping out behind him—as if blown for
years, they had succumbed to the way of the wind.

Leon had been that wind. Each day he had examined
the tree, his magnifying glasses perched on the end of his
nose, looking for the new buds, trying to see the future of each
nodule and root. He had articulated the lean of the trunk by
forcing the roots to grow away from the lee side. He had
clipped back leaf bud and left lead branches to grow until they
achieved the sweep he saw in his mind. The lovers had been
there from the beginning—their outlines alive in the bark, the
branches—all he’d had to do was bring them out.

Leon felt his heart beating into his throat as he looked
at the honeysuckle. He reached out his hand and touched a
finger to the trunk, ran it over the breast knot, the root that was
her leg, tracing the curve of her back, the indent of her side.
The bodies were alive and as soft as flesh to him, breathing
and pulsing with existence.

Once, inadvertently, he had seen Silva stepping out
of the tub—the air rushing out from the bathroom steaming
and warm, her hair dripping water as she toweled off—but he
had quickly looked away, convinced himself that he’d seen
nothing more than legs.
Sweat made its way through his grayed hair, pulling it dark and wet against his temples, until it trickled down his sideburns and dripped off the edge of his jaw. He pulled his hand back. It wasn’t right, he told himself, none of this was right.

In the kitchen, he poured another drink and downed it one swallow. He tried to shake it off, but he found his hands weak. He went outside, got the honeysuckle, then went to his workbench. He knew what he had to do. He sat there in his sweat-stiff jeans, sawdust chaffing his neck. He put the honeysuckle in front of him and turned on the lamp. He sat for a moment not moving, his hands spread on the bench’s top. Finally he chose a pair of clippers.

He held each branch delicately as he made the cuts. He closed his eyes and breathed in the coolness of night washing through open windows, the smell of wet dirt, the smell of severed growth, of fresh-cut wood. He concentrated, working methodically, twining branch over branch, pulling and arranging leaves and buds until he achieved a perfect wreath of green.

The truck cab was redolent with the smell of chainsaw gas and pitch. He drove to the Hedgewood Apartments, parked and got out, stumbling in the dark a few times. He wouldn’t let himself look at the window at first. He kept his back to it, poking at the junipers as if he were just there checking shrubs in the dark. He angled himself a little so he could look without seeming to, but the window was blank darkness. He walked to it quickly and leaned the wreath against the glass, then went to the willow and climbed to a high arched branch, settling himself in its crook. He could just make out the wreath tipped against glass. He rested his head back against the branch and watched. He was sure if he waited long enough she would come out, find the wreath. Understand.

Cars passed, their headlights swinging to the trees as they rounded the corner and went on. Down by the docks the lights of the cannery blinked on, off, and back on again for the late shift. A fog horn sounded distant.

The tree’s rough bark imprinted itself onto Leon’s hip and shoulder. His back had cramped, his body thrumming with aches, but he was determined to wait it out, see her find it. See the sacrifice he was willing to make in order to keep her, prove he cared, because he did. He always had. He hadn’t
shown Isabelle in time. He couldn’t make the same mistake with Silva.

Light came on behind a set of blinds next to Silva’s window, then the white blink of a porch light. He sat forward and watched, willing Silva to come out. A door opened and a woman came out and squatted, called _here kitty kitty_, her voice low and husky, blending with the sounds of the night. She held a plate. Leon watched her, his nerves thrilling each time she called the cat. A shaggy orange tom the size of a cocker spaniel came meowing into the porch light and rubbed against her legs. It licked the food she’d put down greedily. A man stepped out onto the upper-level apartment deck two apartments over and leaned against the rail. He was backlit, the orange of his cigarette glowing. Leon shrank back against the tree. The cat finished eating and licked the plate and the woman bent over and scratched its head before going back into her apartment.

First the man’s porch light went out, then the glow of the woman’s window. A lone car made its way down the street, blocking the sound, and then there was nothing but silence. The town clock donged a distant count. Leon had been there hours.

He was cold now, and so cramped he didn’t think he would make it back down the tree. He eased down, clambering for foothold and handholds, but his feet kept missing their mark, his fingers wouldn’t grip. At the last outcropping his shoe slipped and he fell the final several feet, landing on his back with a soft whoosh. He lay gasping, his head against the willow’s trunk, waiting for the dizziness to pass, waiting for the feeling to come back into his feet. When he pushed himself up he couldn’t stand straight. His chest hurt, his right arm was numb. The cat was growling somewhere past the junipers, the plate wafting up the fishy stink of his meal. Leon limped away from the tree, made his way back to his truck, drove home slow.

At the cabin he didn’t bother turning on any lights, didn’t undress, just lay in bed with the windows open, the night air moving over him, blowing the branches of the trees outside, cooling the sweat he was soaked in. He imagined Isabelle’s naked body, warm and voluptuous. He thought of Silva, sleeping alone wherever she’d gone.

His chest constricted tight, squeezing the breath out of him. He could feel his heart laboring in the cavity of his
Annie Lampman

chest—clutching, starting, clutching. He felt a spinning away, a slow release of breath and vision until all was left was the impression of texture under his hands mooring him to the bed, and he finally realized—it was him who was leaving. It was him who’d been leaving all along.

_Forgive me_, he whispered, listening to the hum of insects moving through the night, the lap tide on beach, nighthawks calling, herons leaving the imprints of tracks behind in the dark. _Forgive me_, he said, holding her name in his mouth like water.
after Li Bo

Deep in the forest’s moon
lonely path through firs,
lichens, and shadow lofty
rocks reaching toward dusk.
Remembering Li Bo
I raise my cup to his
wine-capering to Spring
and his leaps of joy
over sadness, even as gray
clouds ring the distant
mountain. Silent where
the night stars overhead
hear the giant firs rustling
asking: Are there better
worlds than these?
Crayola Dreams

Ultra Yellow:
Your hair drenched in
So. Calif. rain,
drops hovering from
a golden river.

Cerulean:
The sky, shivering
underside of black space,
sinister as happiness. An
invitation, still.

Magenta:
Purplish-ochre sunsets.
Our words racing like
gazelles overtaking themselves.

Gray:
It's all become clear
as smog, you said,
laughing. Our hands scooping
up dreams.

Flesh:
Blushed to peach. Arrows piercing
as easily as tears stain a pillow.
As snails crushed on a sidewalk.

Fun in the Sun:
That hawk circling overhead,
in its stained beak a small field mouse.
Time to part, you said.

Bittersweet:
Your tongue a fire of remembrance.
Shall I tell you more? You once
whispered tears to me.

Outrageous Orange:
Colors talking in riddles.
Mirror-laughing, knee-slapping
ironies. Love's never after.

Ed Higgins
Cotton Candy:
Your silken blouse in moonlite.
Waving summer-lit branches
in the avocado orchard.

Denim:
We laughed back then
through Calif. Disney air.
Whatever this is, you said.
my toenails stay Carnation Pink.
Anne Stark

The Exquisite Dove

Meryl glances at the communal clock that has birds on it but no numbers. The Torrance sunshine is streaming through the leafless oleander branches surrounding her apartment window. The oleander is dying all over the south valley from an unknown source—and some, like Meryl, think the cause to be Xylella fastidiosa, the bacteria that’s killing the California almonds. Outside the single-paned glass of the kitchen window, only a few green shoots remain among the brown.

For the past hour, while staring at the oleander, she has been pruning the nails of the otherwise smooth fingertips. There is nothing else on the woodblock table except her iPhone. From the phone to her ear runs the cord that connects her to the phonebook of Los Angeles County. She should have known her new telecommuting job would be humiliating, but the ad in the LATimes was persuasive: she could spend more time with her son while she supplemented her meager income as a biology lecturer at the underfunded El Camino College. It seems that on a bright winter morning, Southern California homeowners are not persuaded by the threat of global climate change to buy storm windows from a Seattle-based company. Today she feels like a hooker getting paid for just talking. That was until her twin sister’s call somehow breaks the company connection.

“There’s a problem at Mom and Dad’s,” Mari Laura whispers without saying hello. “You know they’re out of town?”

"Yes, they’re in Palm Springs,” Meryl tells her. "Then you know that Uncle Victor and Aunt Minerva are staying at the house for a few days?” her sister continues. The background noise in the phone sounds to Meryl like the pickup without a muffler that goes by her window every morning at five-thirty. "I have reason to believe that Aunt Minerva’s self-medicating. She hasn’t been happy since they moved to Arizona. She doesn’t like Arizona much, and especially not Suncatcher.”

“I’ve heard she prefers Houston. Why are you whispering?”

“I’m not supposed to be on break right now. I’m hiding out in the supply room. They’re moving furniture in here.”
Meryl pulls her brown ponytail over her shoulder as her sister goes on breathlessly, “I called over to the house before I left for work, like Mom asked me to. Well, Aunt Minerva answers the phone, and when I ask, ‘who is this?’ she answers, ‘who is this?’ and I reply, ‘who is THIS?’ and she says, ‘well, who is THIS?’ You get what I’m saying? We went on like this for about five minutes."

"Why did you do that, Mari? Ask, ‘who is this’ when you knew it was Minerva?"

"I just wanted her to identify herself. I’m worried about the house." The buzz of cicadas, peacocks and road noise outside Meryl’s apartment churns in her head. "What could they possibly do to ruin the house?" she asks.

"I heard their dog in the background, Uncle Victor scolding him. And I’m positive they were not the guesthouse. I could hear the rumm of the new refrigerator. You know how Mom feels about animals. You need to go over there."

As soon as her sister says “animals,” Meryl thinks about the white carpeting. “Dove White,” her mother called it. But the two sisters share a secret name for the white carpet, a phrase they use only behind their mother’s back. They call it, “Exquisite Dove,” and they both understand the “exquisite” part to be sarcastic.

“Oh, the Exquisite Dove,” Meryl says, recalling their childhood pillow talks. “But Jack gets out of school at two. And I have calls to make.”

“You can get there and back by two. The traffic’s not bad right now. Everyone’s staying home because of the fundraiser at Pauley Pavilion. Just go take a peek. For Mom’s sake. You know how she and Dad deserve this vacation.”

“I know.” Meryl glances at the clock again, the long hand covering a new bluebird. The clinic where her sister works is less than fifteen minutes from their parents’ house in Sherman Oaks, and Meryl’s apartment is forty-five, not to mention the wrong direction on the 405. But because Mari Laura is her slightly younger twin, and her idol, really, whom she must protect at all costs, Meryl finds herself retreating to the position that her job is somehow less important than her sister’s, which in a way it is, even though she is currently “at work” all the same. “Okay, I’ll do it.”

“Gracias, sis, but before you go, listen…we had this lady come in asking for painkillers because her face was aching all over. She’d already taken Vicadin, but claimed it
Anne Stark

wasn’t working. We all think: psychosomatic. But guess what Dr. Morr diagnoses?

“I have no idea, Mari. You’re the nurse, not me.”

“Her teeth! She was brushing her teeth too hard! She thought she was dying…and it’ll only cost her a couple bucks for a new toothbrush.”

“Plus the office visit. Which I don’t imagine is cheap at the UCLA Plastic Surgery clinic.”

“Meryl, if you’re going to start in with all that Marxist crap—“ Meryl can hear high-pitched bells and elevated voices breaking into the background before Mari Laura changes directions. “Te amo mi hermano,” she says, also using their secret code.

“Love you too, brother—“ but her sister has already hung up.

She drives her Chevy Vega to her parents’ home located in a little enclave in the San Fernando Valley nestled in magnolia trees. There is a perfumy scent from all the lawn sprinklers spraying water on flowerbeds and shrubs. Despite all the verdant flora, she notices that the oleander plants are dying up at that end of the valley as well. Brown leaves that look so out-of-place amongst the jewel colors. She pulls into the circular cement turnout that leads to the main brick driveway. A large green truck with the label marked ChemCleen (she cringes at the two “e’s”) is parked on the brick sidewalk inside the wrought-iron gates. A long, black corrugated tube runs from the truck up the tile steps, through the arched stucco doorway and through the authentic Mission doors of her parents' house.

Her heart racing, she leaves the keys in the ignition as she races across the brick terraces. She pushes open one of the heavy wooden doors to their Spanish-style villa, and immediately the noise of heavy machinery overtakes her. After wiping her feet on the teak mat, she follows the tube and the racket through the house until she finds the source.

"Wha . . . ! Shut that thing off,” she yells, miming a throat cutting action to the elderly Asian man spraying foam upon the carpet in her parents' bedroom. It takes him more than a few seconds to get the message. As he stands up to address her, she realizes that he is about the same height as she is.
"Very sorry, miss." He brings up a hand to wipe his sweaty brow. "But I am already paid." He has short cropped hair and glasses.

"Paid by whom? The Morgans?"

"No, miss. Name start with “E,” if I am not mistaken.”

“That would be Evers, then. My uncle and aunt.”

“There was quite big accident by very little dog.”

"Ohmigosh," she murmurs as she clasps onto the marble dressing table. "What was the dog doing in here?"

"I cannot answer that, miss. The couple very worried about carpet; they pay me very large sum to clean this room. I finish with dining room already." Meryl looks toward the formal area surrounded by French windows, with the same white carpeting. "And so, where are the Everses? Did they tell you where they went?"

"They are gone, miss. In black Cadillac. They leave note with cell phone number." The man hands her a small scrap of paper with small, curly handwriting. No message, only the phone number, as the diligent man had correctly pointed out.

"Thank you, thank you." She gently touches his hairless arm which he immediately withdraws. "You can proceed. I’m sorry to disturb you."

"I finish soon," he says.

She staggers down the hall toward her old bedroom, and collapses on her unused flowery twin bed, her head in her hands. The phone rings. It’s her grandmother on the Evers’ side.

“Princess!” the older woman exclaims, immediately recognizing Meryl’s voice. “How are you, honey?”

“So-so, Gram,” she says. She describes the situation at her parents’ house, the carpet, the cleaner, and the note with the phone number on it. Even with the man’s vacuum assaulting her other ear, she can hear her grandmother’s low, guttural laugh. “That white carpeting,” the elderly woman says, “looks nice, but causes a lot of bellyache.” Meryl sucks in her reply, surprised to hear her grandmother taking sides with her uncle over her mother. “That little dog is worse,” she continues, “they treat it like a human.” Her grandmother’s voice has the lilt of a little boat in its slip. “I need to talk to your Uncle Victor, is he there?”
Anne Stark

“No, Gram. The man here says they left. Remember I told you about the cellphone number on the note? No other explanation was given.”

“Isn’t he going to visit me before they leave?”—Meryl can hear a little sad hiccup in her voice and then her strong sally—“The food here is just awful!” In the hallway, the older man is coiling up the vacuum hose. With relief, Meryl notices that he has little plastic booties over his black shoes. He sits down on the floor to remove them, and then he folds and sticks them in his pocket. He is such a small man compared to the pile of coiled hose beside him. It looks as if with a little bit of effort, the hose could suck him up in one piece.

“They love that dog more than they love me,” Meryl hears in her left ear.

“Gram, that is so untrue,”—now the carpet man is waving his arms at her—“but, I need to go deal with this. But I will call you back as soon as I get it settled, okay?”

“OK, princess. And come over to see me, right?”

“We’ll come tonight, Gram, all of us. You count on it,” she says, hanging up while she walks down the hallway to the bedroom.

“You need to put air on spot,” the man explains, making hand gestures in front of his face.

“I don’t think my parents own an electric fan. Do you have one?” She points in the direction of the ChemCleen truck.

“No,”—he follows her gaze—“maybe neighbors.” Meryl glances out the window at the succession of lush green yards, impenetrable as palaces. “I don’t live here anymore,” she tells him.

“Daughters,” he says, shaking his head. “Pain in ass.”

“What?” she exclaims. “You don’t know anything about me!”

He meets her eye, seeming to gain a little height in the process—“No. But you tell me you no trouble,”—he turns his head to one side as if he had trouble hearing.

Meryl immediately thinks about the measly apartment she currently shared with two older women, and Jack sleeping in the service alcove by the kitchen. The disappointed look in her parents’ eyes when she told them about the pregnancy, and the stoppage of the checks. The
pitiful telemarketing job that even now she was in the process of losing if she didn’t reconnect.

“You’re right,” she manages to blurt out. “But does it matter at all that I’m the first daughter?”

He shakes his head again. “First daughter, no excuses. She set example for the rest.”

“Thanks for your work here,” she tells him glumly. She holds out her hand.

As he explains to her—again—how he has already been paid, they hear a booming sound, like a jet breaking the sound barrier, coming from somewhere in the rear of the house. Meryl looks over for an explanation, but the man points toward his truck: everything he brought with him had already been removed from the house. They hurry back through the living room and notice a white oily imprint, like a Michelangelo dove caught in flight, on one of the French doors. “The Exquisite Dove!” Meryl thinks, feeling slightly delirious as she takes in the imprint, but peering past into the windowed side-porch, she sees a bird, mottled, possibly a flicker, flutter its wings frantically. The windows to the outside veranda were left open with no screening. In her head Meryl calculates Seattle Storm-window’s price for custom-made screens.

“I’ll take care of this,” she sputters. The Asian man, in stockingfeet, nods silently, his eyes on the bird. Past the engraved table and Steinway grand, they make their way to the front again. He gives her a long look and she thinks she sees sympathy in his eyes. After he drives off in his natural-gas-powered truck, she picks up the handset. She hits her sister’s cellphone number.

“You?” Mari Laura screams. “I’ve got five rooms full of patients!”

“And you’ve got to use your sick leave right now and take the afternoon off,” Meryl tells her, staring into a front yard that looks serene but is not. Everywhere around her there are natural forces living and dying in her midst. The flicker is flapping its wings in a circle on the zebra-print raffia rug, probably pooping on it as well. “We’ve got a situation here. Talk to Dr. Morr as soon as you can, and drive your car to Hawthorne to pick up Jack—that’ll be thirty minutes, and then the both of you head over here—forty-five minutes, if you leave now. But, on your way, pick up a cheap electric fan. Alright, not so cheap; it needs to function. We’ve got a carpet
to dry, furniture to move, and a trapped bird to tend to. Not to mention Gram, who is deeply unhappy.”

“Seriously?” her sister declares. “Well. And you cannot take care of it, yourself?” Her words start out as a statement and then turn into a question as Meryl hears doubt mount in her voice.

“Let’s just say it’s the price of being a twin,” Meryl tells her. “Even though you are the second daughter.”

“I don’t know what the hell you mean by that, but I guess it’ll be okay. Dr. Morr owes me one.” More bells sound in the background.

“Good”—Meryl pauses. “Bye.” She looks out at the flicker, who is on its side now and whose chest is heaving but is continuing to flap against the rug. Gotta save yourself, honey. She picks up the scrap of paper from Aunt Minerva and punches in the first three numbers. She imagines they have reached the I10 already, perhaps stopped at a Denny’s for their late morning coffee and placing an extra order of sausage for the dog. They would be arguing over the cholesterol intake of the sausage, Aunt Minerva recording it in a special embossed notebook. Meanwhile, the dog would have her head tweezed sideways in the long rectangular opening of the Cadillac’s window.

She pushes “end call.” Watching the wounded bird struggle to right itself, she dials her company hook-up number and resumes her spiel to those irritated Angelinos who will pick up.

“Mr. B___,” she says in her practiced voice, “Scientists predict La Niña to last at least another two years, and that situation will cause cold temperatures and months of fog in coastal communities…”

“I don’t believe you one bit, babe, but do you want to come over and show me?”

Click. Next call.

While she waits for her sister and Jack to arrive and tries to snag another live one on the line, she watches the flicker settle its wings, disengage its claws from the raffia rug, and fly out one of the open windows.
Geology and the English Language

Most people in the literary arts who regularly speak and even read English can agree the use of geologic metaphor in our language is in a very poor form. Oft-used geologic metaphors have been expended, eroded, if you will, denuded until meaning is buried under layers of sedimentary gibberish. Sentences are metamorphosed until they are less valuable than coprolites (fossilized feces with several uses in paleo-scatological studies).

This is why, I, Dr. Theodore Angeyser, a Distinguished Professor of Geology turned novelist, am held in such high regard. Those who read my first novel, Love in the Time of Continental Drift, or my second, Tectonic Plates of Hate, or my recent, semi-farical satire, Sublimations, Transtensions, and Monadanocks, understand I am no stranger to the geologic metaphor. My authority over such language is the very reason for my success.

In recent years, the casual promulgation of geologic language has given me a great figurative helio-pause. This landslide of metaphoric talus has become a mass-wasting of words. When used properly, as I frequently do, geologic language yields a beautiful effusion of glowing pahoehoe prose. Yet, it is typically used improperly, and the words fail violently—like a destructive pyroclastic flow of rhyolitic ash.

However, with a keen eye for detail, close attention to definition, and a PhD in one of the many earth sciences, it becomes possible to properly use geologic terminology. Now I will demonstrate examples of the poor form I have been discussing. By generating awareness of these avoidable mistakes, I believe one will become able to execute any geologic metaphor that’s been rattling around one's head ever since that visit to the natural history museum.

Economics:

“This bill represents a watershed moment in the seismic shifts our economy has suffered. Without it our financial institutions will surely be swept away by a great tidal wave of bad debt.”

Where to start? In geologic metaphor it’s important to never mix processes. How does one combine a geographically continuous drainage area with earthquakes, lunar-influenced marine manifestations, and economics?
Limit geologic metaphors to a single phenomenon. Never have an aged triolobite riding atop the proverbial crest of a tsunami. That’s just common sense.

Politics:

“Does selecting a running mate with such an eruptive personality erode the candidate's core message? This election may rupture the fault lines of bipartisanship and crystallize political polarization along the continental margins of these issues.”

Volcanism. Sedimentology. Tectonics? Mineral Precipitation? Oceanic-Continental Crustal Interfaces! Where will it end? One might ask the pundit, are they prepared for the back-swing of strike-slip motion a reader will experience from such an obfuscating statement?

Overheard Conversation:

“Yo, dig it. I’m with this fine little honey, up in her crib. When all of a sudden her fossilized Grannie comes home and gets all up in my grill, actin' like I gots to excavate myself from the house and deposit my ass in the nearest peaty bog of her choosing. Know what I’m saying?”

This was spoken by a former student of mine who was a friend of backwards caps and, apparently, the ladies. But he was not a friend of balanced, well-considered deployment of scientific knowledge in casual conversation.

Literature:

“He was a single vein of pure gold running through innocent layers of quartz. She was an undisturbed bed of shale laid down during the Devonian, lubricated by the hydrocarbons of lust, and sealed away from the degrading compounds of atmospheric oxygen. They were uplifted together, their passion folded and twisted by the great underlying structures of their lives.”

This last one is actually an early work of mine. Though not as tightly constructed as the later literary lava bombs I am known for regularly dropping, one can certainly see the skill that comes with a lifetime of research in the field.

Thus, please consider, when using geologic metaphor, one should not confuse explosive processes for effusive, igneous formations for metamorphic ones, stalactites for stalagmites, or normal faults for reverse hanging walls.
While the benefits of successful geologic metaphors are readily apparent, the results of failure are disastrous—not only for the sentence at hand but for the continuation of our entire society.

Any geologist can attest that the chemically-altered remains of anoxically-sequestered zooplankton cannot mix with water. Similarly, one cannot naively toss together complex geologic terminology and simply hope for the best. It took 4.6 billion years for these words to develop into their present form, but in only a short, careless time we will have sequestered them, like carbolic acid, to our deepest oceans, or melted them down like so many shrinking glaciers, or cracked them apart from the continuous freeze-thaw action of our own destructive ignorance. Instead, use them sparingly. Use them at our own risk.
Leatha Fields-Carey

This Is My Vanishing Point

The beach is deserted. The sun, veiled by cold clouds, shimmers grayly on the horizon. The carnival has shuttered for the season. The mother and the barefoot child hand in hand by the shore. The mother knows that the sea is pain. The only way to keep the child safe from it is to swallow it all, every briny drop.

This is my vanishing point.

Kneeling in the surf, she does the work of seven Chinese brothers, swallows the ocean at a draught, wincing at the shark’s tooth lacerations in her tongue, straining at the spines of the sea urchin.

Never mind the sailboats.

The child notices nothing, its attention drawn by the inverted W of the wings of a gull, winging its solitary way to everywhere and nowhere at once.
Red and White

A wintry wind awakened me in the middle of the night. It crept under the soft pink blanket and slapped me in the face. The matching rose-colored lace curtains beckoned me to the open window. I obeyed the command. The predawn sky was fading from ink to azure. The deep gray clouds on the horizon were a pregnant promise of snow. Stars like diamonds twinkled in the periwinkle sky. Then I looked down. I should not have looked down. Stretching away from me were perfect size seven bloody footprints against an otherwise blank white canvas. They were running away, disappearing into the first light of day.

My sister came to Syracuse, New York about a year after the rest of the family. We left her behind the ivory antiseptic walls of The New Mexico School for Girls. The last time I saw her, she was running behind the navy blue Cadillac Sedan De Ville. I watched her from the back seat as tears streamed down her face and mine, too.

"Why do we have to leave her?" I screamed. "She is my only sister."

"Hush, Maria Inez. It is for the best." My mother tried to explain.

"Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." My father preached.

I was only four. I did not understand.

The edifice was fear-inspiring. Trees, like armed soldiers guarded the drive. The chilling clank of metal locked the electrified gate behind us. Barbed wire adorned the twelve-foot fence. Night after night I dreamed of the blood red zebra stripes my sister had sliced up and down her arms. I did not understand.

Then one day she was home. Like magic, she appeared wearing an olive green double-breasted suit. Underneath her suit, she wore a ruffled blouse with green and white stripes. Her shoes were black patent leather Mary Jane's. Her stockings were white. Her hair was a shiny pressed pageboy. She was boss! She was mod! She was my only sister and she was home! Hallelujah!

“It’s my party and I’ll cry if I want to, cry if I want to, cry if I want to. You would cry too, if it happened to you," sang my sister, at the top of her lungs.
“It’s my Barbie and I'll cry if I want to, cry if I want to. You would cry too, if it happened to you.” I sang at the top of my lungs.


"Hang on sloopy, sloopy hang on... da-doo, da-doo, da-doo, da-doo-doo-doo-doo!” I echoed my sister. “Teach me how to Boogaloo. Teach me how to do the sloopy! Teach me how to dance the Watutsi! Show me how to Jerk!” I begged.

We danced and we sang. She took me for bike rides. We played dress-up. It was heavenly. My big sister was home for good. She would never leave me again. I would never have to be the only girl again.

A muted sound awakened me in the middle of the night. It crawled under my pink blanket and whispered in my ear, “Wake-up.”

"What are you doing?” I asked my sister.

"Shhsh! Be quiet! I am running away. Don't tell!” My beautiful, talented sister whispered. Tears immediately burned my eyes, “Don’t go!” I cried."I need you!”

"Shhhhhsh!” my sister warned, “I have to go away. I'll be back one day. Don't tell." She tossed the last comment over her shoulder, as she climbed out of the bedroom window. I ran to my parents' room. "Anne is running away! You have to stop her!” I cried, shaking daddy awake. He threw on his clothes and ran after her. He caught her and brought her home for me.

Then it began. The screams of my sister and my mother and the sound of the extension cord hitting flesh, terrified me. I thought daddy would kill them both and come after me. I cried alone in my bedroom.

“I am sorry, Anne. I am so sorry, I told on you. I will never do it again. I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'm sorry!” I repeated until, exhausted, I fell asleep.

A frigid wind awakened me. It ripped the pink blanket from my bed and punched me in the face. The matching rose-colored curtains ordered me to the open window. I wordlessly obeyed. Shivering, I closed the freezing glass. The night sky faded from ink to azure. The bottomless gray clouds on the horizon were a brutal warning. A lone star stood humbly in the sky. Then I looked down. I should not
have looked down. Stretching before me were perfect size seven bloody footprints in the snow. My sisters’ footsteps were running away, disappearing into the dawning light of day.

For many years, zebras with blood red stripes chased me across the snow. My bleeding legs left crimson footsteps in the snow. Night after night, the dream returned.
Maria Winfield

Basílica del Cobre

Gray blue rain chased us
Across emerald
Mountains green
Northwest of Santiago

Across emerald
Velvet grass growing
Northwest of Santiago
Goats spotted and donkey brown

Velvet grass growing
Whispering, blowing
Goats spotted and donkey brown
Day dreams, night prayers-sowing

Whispering, blowing
Hopeful lullabies
Day dreams, night prayers-sowing
We collected the broken glass

Hopeful lullabies
Etching echo valleys
We collected broken glass
Stained discarded colored shards

Etching echo valleys
Memories tomorrow
Stained discarded colored shards
Basílica del Cobre

Memories tomorrow
Through angelic eyes
Basílica del Cobre
Santiago de Cuba

Through angelic eyes
Stormy cloud reflections
Santiago de Cuba
Solo Sunday afternoon
Memories Sometimes

Sometimes memories
Of crying
Hang humid
In the air
Threatening a downpour
Stealing the breeze
Pulling moisture
From my pores
Pushing liquid
Through my eyes
I think I can
Remember crying
When they bombed Oklahoma
When American Churches nationwide
Grew flames
And harvested ashes
When a child-mother
Threw her baby into a
Tucson garbage can
And they nailed Jesus to the cross
Tears sweating
Humidity upon
The atmosphere
Seen by angels
Observed by God
As the moon
Invites the
Stars to join him
And darkness sings
A sleepy serenade
I can almost remember
Crying.
Not a Love Poem

This is definitely, not
A love poem
It isn’t even a poem
At all
It is just a bunch
Of words like green grapes
Stuck together
Tart not sweet
Words falling from
My mind onto this paper
Like windblown leaves
In autumn
    Because I am not
In love
And it is almost Valentine’s Day
And the one I don’t love
Doesn’t love me
So, I am not going
To write a poem
I am not going
To think about love
I am just going to laugh
Ha! Ha! Ha!
Hee, Hee!!!
In Cupid’s overly optimistic
Chubby cherubic face
And be beauteously satisfied
With not writing
A stupid
Love poem
So, there!
Valediction

I.
I am somewhere between crying sadly
Or screaming madly

Much closer to the
Meek end of Chesapeake Bay
Than the tempestuous
Atlantic Ocean
I dwell near
Placid shores of grief
Trained to
Understand anger as unbecoming
For a woman of my station

I am stationed somewhere between
Blackness and blueness
Upon a fluctuating
Permeable and malleable
Crescent without crescendo
Where I currently reside
But will not permanently abide
I hide

II.
I hide behind
I hide among words
My vocabulary expands
To camouflage my passion
Instead of sentimental responses
I use language as my disguise
I use my words to dam the tide
I hide

When I do not want my privacy
Publicized by a personal reaction
To a particular specificity
I bury
impetuousness
underneath
multi-syllabic lexemes

I firmly suffocate emotion
Beneath soft pillows
Of Latin root words
Greek nouns and verbs

III.
She is leaving me
And I realize
Just now

In this blurry-eyed
Moment when I can barely see
through my tears
To keep
Caressing the page
Caressing the page
With this turquoise pen
I understand my me
And the reason
I ran from writing
Ran from constant contact
With You Lord
Abba Father

It is because
I do not want to cry
I do not want to consider
Dementia or Alzheimer's
Or lonely days beyond the horizon
Floating on the ebbing tide
Of her brio

I do not want this
This choking sobbing
Suffocating sorrow
Missing her
Missing Mother in advance

IV.
There is only one place to bring this grief
I bring it to you
Abba Father
To your throne
I lay it down
I do not know what to do with all this grief
And so
I hide
Behind smiles
And solicitude
Behind tact
And tenderness
And vocabulary

And bring it to your throne
And lay it down

V.
There is a subtle shifting
A reaching up
A letting go
An idiosyncratic
Valediction
Mother, I Remember

I will remember for you, mother
That we always had each other
I will remember my verdant
Why-why not-where- are- we- now chant
even if you can't

And I will say petals pink
emerald grass...blue ink
I'll help you think
And answer merrily
confusion with clarity

I will remember in your story
manifestations of God's glory

It is my turn now
this is my solemn vow

I will remember for you
And I will remember you
Notes on the Staff

**Rebecca Colbert** (Managing Editor, Fiction Editor) has an MA from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas and an MLIS (Master of Library and Information Sciences) from the University of North Texas. She is currently employed as an Acquisitions Librarian with the Las Vegas Clark County Library District and teaches World Literature and Mythology in the Department of English at UNLV. (Nevada).

**Susan Summers** (Contributing Editor) serves as the UNLV Department of English Budget Technician. She is the past Executive Director of a Pediatric AIDS organization and served as the Nevada State Coordinator of The Adoption Exchange. (Nevada).

**Sandra Hooven** (Nonfiction Editor) received her MA from Cal Poly Pomona. Before coming to UNLV, she taught English at Mt. San Antonio College in Walnut, California. Currently she is teaching the 101 E/F sequence at UNLV. (Nevada).

**Andrew Bahlmann** (Layout and Cover Design Editor) is a recently minted PhD from UNLV. He has worked in various academic fields before writing his dissertation on the myth of the superhero. He is currently an instructor in the English department at UNLV.

Notes on the Reader

**Lollie Ragana** wrote, directed and produced television for thirteen years and is an accomplished playwright and award-winning stage director: Her publishing credits include *A Woman’s Europe, France Today*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *Santa Monica Outlook*, *LA West*, *Trojan Family*, *Mobius: A Journal for Social Change*, and *Myths of the World*, an audio book. She teaches English at California State University, Los Angeles, writing at UCLA Extension (The Writer’s Program and the Landscape Archaeology Program), and mythology at Antioch University.
Ross Talarico’s new novel, Sled Run, was recently published; Dr. Felicia Campbell did a panel on it at the Far West Popular Culture conference in February. About Sled Run, Italy’s internet t.v. program said "Ross Talarico's Sled Run rivals Dylan Thomas' A Child's Christmas in Wales, and Jean Sheperd's A Christmas Story as a classic Christmas story."

Anne Stark is in her 22nd year as a lecturer at Utah State University, having grown up in Southern California, and teaching for two years at Ohlone College in the Bay Area before moving with her husband and children to Northern Utah. Her latest piece of fiction won an Honorable Mention at Glimmer Train last July. It will come out in the next edition of Pear Noir. Anne is currently working on a novel set in Berkeley, CA, featuring characters in a clash of cultures while a crime is taking place.

Susan Evans is an English adjunct in the Department of Language and Literature at East Tennessee State University, in Johnson City, Tennessee. She holds a Master's degree in Public Administration from North Carolina State University in Raleigh, NC and a Bachelor's degree in English plus 18 graduate hours from East Tennessee State University. Her poems in this issue were written on a nine-week volunteer vacation that she spent on the Isle of Mull in Scotland in 2007 for the Iona Community.

Gary Pullman, M. A., BSEd., a graduate of Pittsburg State University, Pittsburg, Kansas, is a part-time instructor in the Department of English at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, where he teaches English Composition. He also teaches a variety of English courses as an adjunct instructor at the College of Southern Nevada. He has published several short stories.

Andrew Madigan has published in The Believer, The North American Review, Wordriver, The Iowa Review and other journals. He currently teaches creative writing at Al Ain City College in Al Ain, UAE.
**Tom McLaren** is an English/Communication instructor in the University of New Mexico system and is currently finishing his dissertation on American Avant-garde drama. He has traveled extensively and lived for several years in East Asia.

**Christin Taylor** is currently an adjunct in the English Department at Gettysburg College. Her first book, *Shipwrecked in Los Angeles: Clinging to Hope in a Life Adrift*, is forthcoming from Wesleyan Publishing House in March of 2013. Her work has also been published in the anthology *Just Moms: Conveying Justice in an Unjust World* from Barclay Press, Spring of 2010. Christin’s essays, articles and poetry have also been published online and in print journals.

**Jérôme Melançon** teaches at the University of Alberta, Augustana Campus, and lives near campus in Camrose (Canada). He is a full-time contract sessional lecturer in political studies, housed in the department of social science. He is the author of a book of poetry, *De perdre tes pas*, published with the Éditions des Plaines (Saint-Boniface, Manitoba, Canada). His academic work has been published notably in *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, *Radical Philosophy Review*, and in the book *Radiohead and Philosophy*. He obtained a Bachelor’s and a Master’s degree in philosophy from the University of Ottawa and a PhD in legal and political sciences from Université Paris Diderot (Paris 7).

**Jennie Evenson** received a Ph.D. in Renaissance literature from the University of Michigan in 2005 and an M.F.A. from UCLA’s School of Theater, Film and Television in 2008. At UCLA, she was awarded the Harmony Gold Screenwriting Prize and the Women In Film Eleanor Perry Writing Award and won top honors at the UCLA Showcase Screenwriting Contest. As a writer in LA, Jennie has worked with a variety of studios and production houses, from DreamWorks to Focus Features. Combining her love of Shakespeare and screenwriting, her book titled "Shakespeare for Screenwriters: Timeless Writing Tips from the Master of Drama" is forthcoming in spring 2013 from the leading publisher in screenwriting books, Michael Wiese Press (http://www.mwp.com/).
She teaches Shakespeare, composition, and film as an adjunct professor at Pepperdine University in Malibu, California.

**Judith Mansour** is a native of Youngstown, Ohio. She came to Cleveland by way of California, where she did her first tour of duty in graduate school in Clinical Psychology. Ultimately, she chose creativity over analysis and earned a Master of Arts in English/Creative Writing from Cleveland State University in 2003. She has worked in social services, academia, and arts/culture in Cleveland for 20 years. Literature and cooking share equal real estate in her yard of passions, and she believes that both words and food have the power to transform lives. Mansour is currently the Publisher for Fresh Water Cleveland and a sometimes adjunct at Cleveland State University.

**Mary DiDomenico** has been a visiting instructor of English working under a yearly contract at Assumption College since 2008, where she teaches composition, technical writing, and literature survey courses. Prior to that, she was an adjunct instructor at Quinsigamond Community College and Massachusetts Bay Community College. Mary has a Bachelor’s degree in journalism from the University of Massachusetts Amherst and a Master’s degree in English from the University of Massachusetts Boston. She lives in Worcester with her husband and three daughters.

**Annie Lampman** is a full-time adjunct lecturer in the English Department of University of Idaho. She graduated from the University of Idaho with an MFA in fiction (2009), and also has a B.A. in English/Creative Writing from LCSC (2006). Annie was awarded a Pushcart Prize special mention for her essay “A Story of Trees” and has also been awarded an Idaho Commission on the Arts writing grant. Her previous publications include: "A Story of Trees" (essay), Idaho Magazine Spotlight Series, January 2010; "Firewood: A Lesson in Self-Sufficiency" (essay), Idaho Magazine, October 2009; “Coyote” (poem), 2009 the Meadow 2009; “In the Valley of Yosemite” (short story), 2008, Copper Nickel 10 Women Writing the West. “The River’s Pull” (short-short) Talking River Review 2004; “Ingress” and “My Galapagos” (poems) Talking River Review 2004
Maureen Foster is the author of three novels; Beginners, Sparks, and HomeFront. Her essays, poetry, and short fiction have appeared in The Los Angeles Times, The Pacific Review, Word River, Crack the Spine, Burning Word, and many other publications. Maureen grew up in New York and presently lives in Santa Cruz, where she is a lecturer in film and in composition at the University of California.

M.V. Montgomery is a professor in the General Education Department at Life University in Atlanta. His fiction has recently appeared in The Quotable, The Northville Review, and Midwestern Gothic.

Rowan Johnson, originally from South Africa, holds a MA in Applied Linguistics and English Language Teaching from the University of Nottingham, England. He currently teaches at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga as a lecturer in the English department. He has published various forms of writing, including poetry and numerous magazine articles.

James Hanley has had articles published in occupational journals as a Human Resources professional and adjunct professor at the University of Maryland University College, but has concentrated more on fiction in recent years. His stories have been published in mainstream/literary periodicals and mystery magazines, including Center, South Dakota Review, Conch, Foliate Oak, River Review, Smokelong Quarterly, Cooweescoowee, Futures, Fresh Boiled Peanuts, MacGuffin, Wisconsin Review and others.

Michael K. Brantley is an adjunct English instructor at Campbell University in Buies Creek, NC. He has been a freelance writer and photographer for over 20 years, and his work has been published in national and regional magazines. His most pieces have appeared in Prime Number Magazine and The Cobalt Review. Michael is currently pursuing an MFA in Creative Writing at Queens University.

Brooks Rexroat lives in Cincinnati, Ohio, where he teaches as an adjunct instructor of English at Xavier University, University of Cincinnati Clermont College, and Northern Kentucky University. He holds a Master of Fine Arts degree in
creative writing from Southern Illinois University Carbondale, and a Bachelor of Art degree in print journalism from Morehead State University (Kentucky). His stories have appeared in such publications as Weave Magazine, The Montreal Review, The Cleveland Review, The Literary Bohemian, and Revolution House.

**Deborah Stark** received a BA in Linguistics and an MA in TESOL, both from the State University of New York at Stony Brook, and, since then, has taught part time mainly for the City University of New York at both Queens College in their various ESL programs and Queensborough Community College in their Basic Skills Department. While on hiatus in Prague, the Czech Republic a few years ago and doing some writing consulting, she began to focus on her own writing. Deborah is currently living in Manhattan and teaching part time at Queens College in The English Language Institute. Her story "Real" appeared in the debut issue of *wordriver*.

**Rachel Rinehart Johnson** writes narratives, poems, and children’s stories, and her work has appeared in publications such as *Florida Studies, Lumina, Rocking Chair Reading: Family Gatherings, New Madrid, Spirits, Big Pulp,* and *Country Extra*. She earned an MFA in creative non-fiction from Murray State University in Kentucky. Rachel and her two daughters reside in Florida, where she teaches composition, creative writing, and English as a second language as an adjunct Instructor at Brevard Community College and Florida Institute of Technology. Her other passions include nature, photography, and travel.

**Joan Crooks** teaches in the English Department at Illinois State University in Normal, Illinois, where she has been a full-time adjunct instructor for 15 years (and the proud member of a faculty union--IEA-NEA--since April of 2003). She currently lives in the topsoil-rich flatlands of central Illinois as opposed to the landscape of her childhood home, Wayne County (in Southern Illinois), which is rolling and woodsly.

**Jefferson Navicky**'s work has recently appeared in Horse Less Review, Interrobang, Smokelong Quarterly, Bombay Gin and The Belfast Poetry Festival. His plays have recently appeared in The Boston Theater.
Marathon and The Maine Playwrights Festival. He teaches English as an adjunct at Southern Maine Community College, and lives in Portland.

**Ed Higgins**’ poems and short fiction have appeared in various print and online journals. Most recently: Blue Print Review, Parody Poetry Journal, and Poetry Breakfast. He currently teaches literature half-time in the English department at George Fox University, south of Portland, OR.

**Mike Bezemek** holds an MFA in writing and a Bachelor’s degree in Geology. Those two disparate experiences conspired in the creation of his submission. Mike teaches freshman composition, fiction writing, screenwriting, research writing, and environmental writing at Washington University in St. Louis. He has work forthcoming in the August edition of *St. Louis Magazine*. Mike provided a description of the “Saint Francis River of Missouri” for the *River Gypsies Guide to North America* and his fiction was published in the 2006 and 2007 editions of *Susurrus Literary Journal*.

**Leatha Fields-Carey** has taught high school English in North Carolina for twenty years and has been an adjunct instructor for ENG 101 and ENG 102 at Campbell University in Buies Creek, North Carolina for the past three years. Previous publications include being a contributor to the 2010 book *Linguistics at School: Language Awareness in the Primary and Secondary Classroom* (Denham and Lobeck, eds.).

**Maria Winfield** is an adjunct professor at Bryant and Stratton College and Hampton University in Hampton, Virginia. She teaches in the Liberal Arts department of both institutions and has published approximately 20 pieces of poetry and prose in journals and magazines, most recently the American Anthropological Association (http://www.aaanet.org/cmtes/commissions/upload/05_Winfield.pdf) and Bravo Magazine (http://issuu.com/pauldarden/docs/bravosep2012webhr/3). She has a PhD in Language and Literacy Education from the University of Georgia; Master of Liberal Arts from the Bread Loaf School of English at Middlebury College in Vermont; Bachelor of Science in Education from Northern Arizona University, and an Associate’s Degree in Fine Arts from Merced College in Merced, California.
Submission Guidelines

*wordriver* is a literary journal dedicated to the poetry, short fiction, and creative nonfiction of adjunct, part-time and full-time instructors teaching under a semester or yearly contract in our universities, colleges, and community colleges worldwide. Graduate student teachers who have used up their teaching assistant time and are teaching with adjunct contracts for the remainder of their graduate program are also eligible.

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All submissions must be sent by e-mail as Word.docs. MS Word 2003 or earlier (no Vista or .pdf files PLEASE.) Times Roman typeface is preferable.

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List of Contributors

Mike Bezemek
Michael Brantley
Joan Crooks
Mary DiDomenico
Susan Evans
Jennie Evenson
Leatha Fields-Carey
Maureen Foster
James Hanley
Ed Higgins
Rachel Johnson
Rowan Johnson
Annie Lampman
Andrew Madigan
Judith Mansour
Tom McLaren
Jerome Melancon
M. V. Montgomery
Jefferson Navicky
Gary Pullman
Anne Stark
Deborah Stark
David Radford
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Christin Taylor
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Rebecca Colbert, Managing Editor, Fiction Editor
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Sandra Hooven, Non-Fiction Editor
Andy Bahlman, Copy Editor

Robin Grove, Front Photo
Katie Siefert, Back Cover
Katie Siefert, photographer
Picture of Mr. Foss, father of Richard Foss, one of our contributors for Vol. IV, reading wordriver. Katie is Richard’s niece.