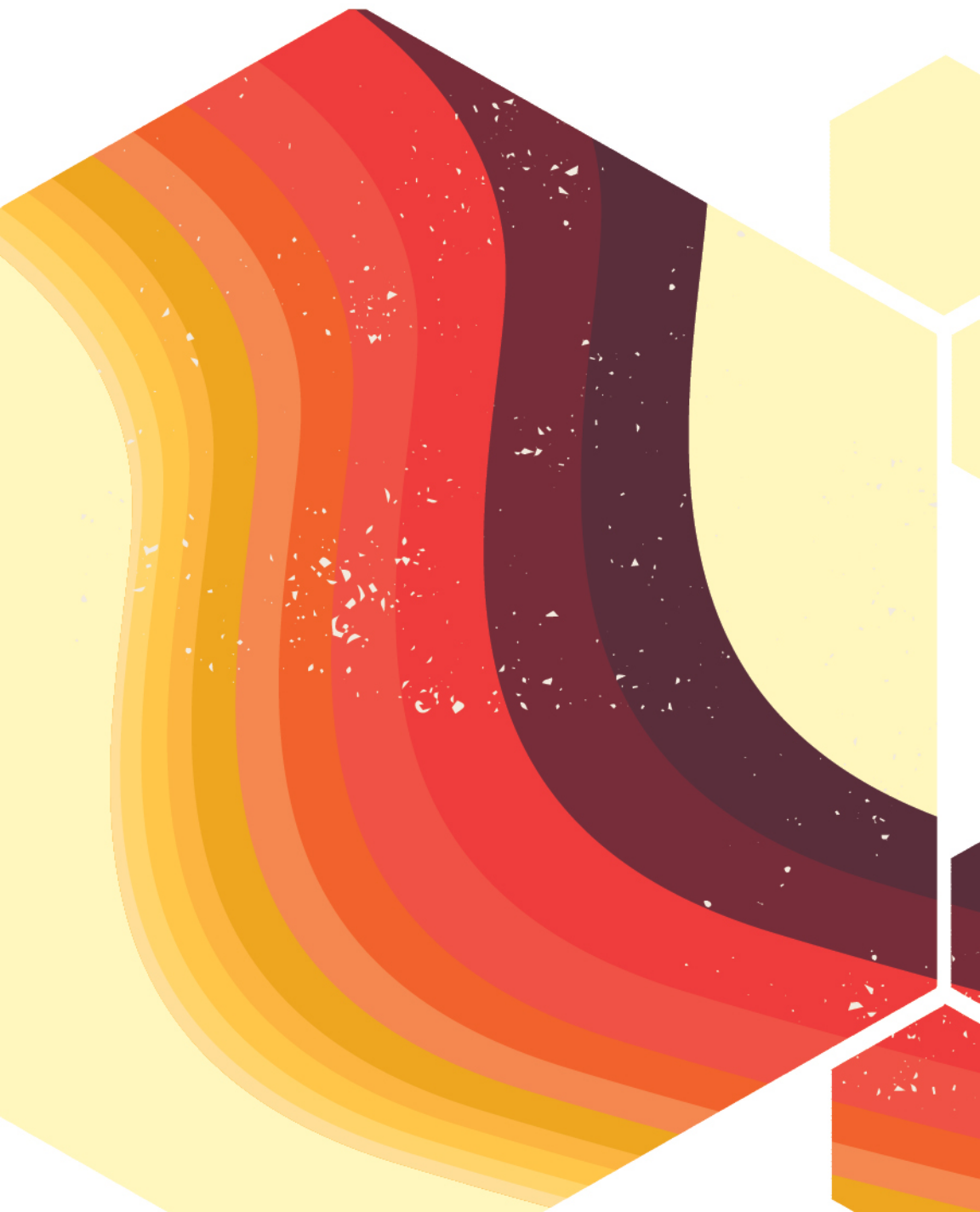


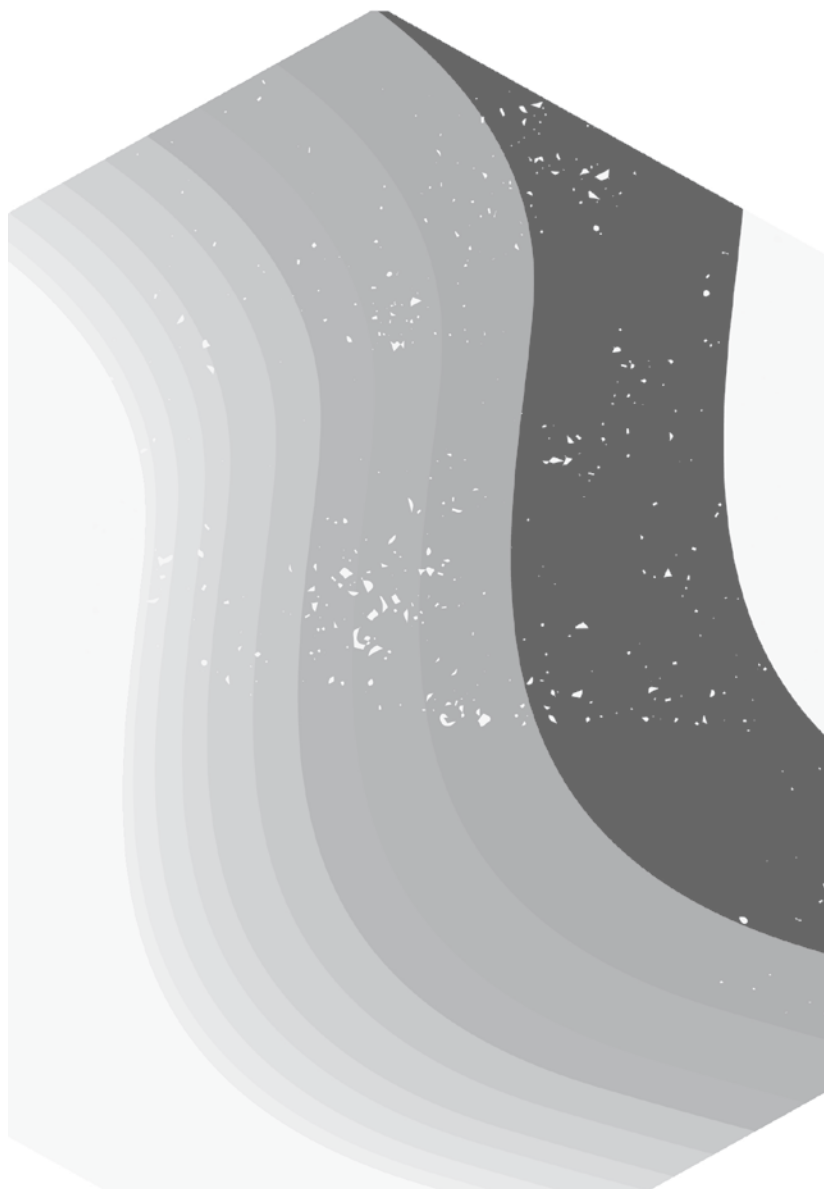
SIXFOLD

FICTION SUMMER 2020



SIXFOLD

FICTION SUMMER 2020



SIXFOLD

WWW.SIXFOLD.ORG

Sixfold is a collaborative, democratic, completely writer-voted journal. The writers who upload their manuscripts vote to select the prize-winning manuscripts and the short stories and poetry published in each issue. All participating writers' equally weighted votes act as the editor, instead of the usual editorial decision-making organization of one or a few judges, editors, or select editorial board.

Each issue is free to read online, to download as PDF and as an e-book for iPhone, Android, Kindle, Nook, and others. Paperback book is available at production cost including shipping.

© The Authors. No part of this document may be reproduced or transmitted without the written permission of the author.

Cover Art from Vecteezy.com

SIXFOLD

FICTION SUMMER 2020
CONTENTS

Robert Maynor	
The Intimidator	5
Jennifer Hanno	
The Quickening	20
Daniel Gorman	
Pincushion	34
Bethany Nuckolls	
Hot Days Are for Listening	44
Audrey Kalman	
Unobserved Absences	49
Benjamin Keyworth	
The Ties That Bind	61
Peter Beynon	
The Spirit of Sagaponack	68
Darius Degher	
War Story	82
K. L. Perry	
Like That	94
Lenore Gusch	
The Rotation of Planets	107
Elizabeth Edelglass	
First They Came for the Torahs	116
Robyn Blocker	
The Crowned	128
Contributor Notes	140

Robert Maynor

The Intimidator

Memorial Day weekend, Daddy and me were floating the pond where Pop used to take us. Since he died, the land was sold, and a neighborhood built. They converted the pond to retain runoff. Installed a fountain and treated it with chlorine that killed all the fish. We were sitting in our john boat. Daddy shirtless, wearing his Earnhardt hat, black with a number three stitched on the front, salt stains around the edge from sweat. Me in my cutoff Wranglers. Just watching our corks bob and pretending we thought they might go under.

“Pass me one of them beers, Jacob,” Daddy said. I stood up off the cooler I was sitting on and the boat shifted slightly beneath me. I lifted the lid, pulled out a can, and handed it to him.

He grunted thanks and cracked it open. The weather was hot. Sweat welled in the creases of my knees, ran down the back of my neck. Behind us, the fountain was spitting up buckets of water, making a racket. Daddy paddled us real slow along the bank with one arm. I reeled in my line and checked the cricket. It was still hooked there, all soggy and still.

“Go ahead and put you a fresh one on,” Daddy said.

I pulled another cricket from the plastic cage and threaded it on my hook, little spindly legs kicking. Casted my line back out. As we came around the last pine trees on the corner, the bank cleared, and I could see the big colorful houses standing with their backs to us. Amazing how fast they slapped those things up. Pop had only been dead two years.

A prop plane buzzed overhead. I looked to the sky and saw it flying over the pond, trailing a banner with a glass bottle Coke painted on it, advertising the race, the Coca-Cola 600.

“Who’s going to win it?” Daddy asked.

“I don’t know. Labonte. Gordon maybe.”

Daddy snorted. “Wouldn’t bet on that. Earnhardt loves Charlotte.” He took up his paddle and eased us further down the bank.

Three hours and we hadn’t caught a thing. I didn’t even

want to go, but Daddy insisted. So we packed up the gear and drove four hours to bake in a neighborhood pond, probably didn't have a single fish in the whole thing. We must've passed two dozen just like it on our way.

The pond was different when Pop was alive. Just a little overgrown fishing hole in the woods. We'd catch bream until our stringer nearly popped, then drive back to the house and fry them on Pop's stove, watching the race on his bunny-ear television sitting right there on the kitchen table. Every Memorial Day.

He was a pioneer of racing himself, Pop was. Ran on tracks from Kannapolis to Brunswick with Ralph Earnhardt and Cotton Owens. When he got older, he built hot-rods in his barn and grew cantaloupes big as outboard motors.

My cork popped the surface. I pulled on my rod and the line gave a little bit, like it might be a fish, so I hauled it up to the edge of the boat. Daddy reached over the side. "Sons-of-bitches," he said. He lifted a water-logged skateboard out of the water, tape peeling of the deck. He unhooked it from my line, reared back, and slung it up on the hill. It skidded across somebody's cement patio and banged against their back door. A man wearing glasses and bedroom shoes with tall white socks came shuffling out of the house. He looked down at the skateboard like it was a dead mole some cat had left there, then he looked at us. "What is this?"

"You tell me," Daddy hollered back.

The man cupped his hands around his eyes. "You folks live here?"

"Sure don't."

The man dropped his hands and put them in his pockets. "Well, technically, only residents have access to the pond."

Daddy stood up and the boat rocked. His hairy chest was sunburned almost purple, glistening with sweat. "Says who, exactly?"

"The covenant, sir."

"Look here," Daddy said. "I'll come up there and you can try to make me leave." He spat into the water. "See how that goes."

The man made a kind of pitiful, resigned motion with his hand and went inside.

Daddy sat down. “How about another one of them beers, boy?”

When we got home that night, Momma was gone. She and Daddy had gotten in one of their big fights before we left, cussing and screaming. She said she was leaving, but I didn’t think she really would. She always said that. But that time she meant it. Packed up everything. The TV, the pictures, the plates. Took it all and hauled ass. I couldn’t believe it, that she’d finally manned up.

Daddy came behind me into the house. When he saw everything missing, he just laughed. It made my whole body hurt.

Mister Paul came over with a case of Miller Light and a short-neck bottle of Evan Williams. He was Daddy’s oldest and only friend. They stood in the yard all night, listening to the race on the truck radio. Kenseth won. I stayed inside. Thought about crying but didn’t really need to.

With Momma gone, our old house changed. It withered up and croaked. The rugs went unbeaten, the sink filled with mold, the counters disappeared beneath fried chicken boxes and beer cans and gas station soda cups. I tried to straighten up, but it didn’t do any good. It was like Daddy was dirtying it on purpose, and he sank right into the filth. He didn’t even seem real anymore, didn’t seem human. Like there wasn’t even no skin on his bones but leather. And no heart and no blood and no guts, just rubber hoses and motor oil and steel.

He started working later at the factory, coming home after dark every night. The house stayed shady, just a lamp on where I was doing homework. One night, Daddy found his old stereo and a shoebox of cassettes in the back of his closet. Tom Petty, The Allman Brothers, Lynyrd Skynyrd. We set it up in the living room and he told me about all the albums, when he’d gotten them, which songs were best.

Every night after work, he’d come in and sit down on the hearth and struggle out of his boots like they were glued to his feet. Undo the straps of his overalls. Drink Miller Light and dip snuff. We’d just sit there and listen to the music

together, tapping our feet on the dusty rug.

In August, me and Daddy hauled a flatbed trailer up to Pop's old house. Didn't even drive by the pond. We had to be sneaky about the whole operation. Apparently, Pop had gotten backed up on his loans and taxes. The bank wouldn't let us touch any of his stuff when he died.

He'd been working on a '55 Ford. Sanding the body, replacing the drivetrain. He took things slow. Made sure everything was perfect. Daddy parked the truck and trailer behind the barn so nobody could see it from the road and we went inside. It smelled like sulfur, rotten wood. Daddy flicked on his flashlight. The car didn't look too fancy. No paint, rust holes patched with Bondo. But you could tell Pop had put a lot of work into it, sanding the fenders, straightening the bumper, cleaning the eggcrate grille. Just the being of it was impressive, the lasting through everything, old and wore-out as it was. Daddy turned his Earnhardt hat backwards and popped the hood. He didn't care about the looks, only the way it ran.

"Gonna need a new motor," he said. "Pop didn't make it that far. I can't build them like him. Might know where I can find an old Y-block, though." He let the hood fall shut. "I'll need help. You up for it?"

"I'll try."

He cuffed me on the shoulder. We pushed the car out of the barn and onto the trailer. Waited until dark to leave.

We didn't talk much on the way home, just listened to the race. They were running in Indianapolis. Labonte won, but it seemed for a while that Earnhardt had a chance. That was part of his magic, why Daddy and so many other people loved him. You could never count him out. Even when his car wasn't as good as the others, or he got caught up in the back of the pack, there was always the chance he would muscle his way to the front, bumping and bruising. Sometimes just threatening. His Goodwrench Chevy was painted black, seemed to always have scrapes down the side, rubber marks across the numbers. He wore dark, mirrored sunglasses behind his helmet. They called him the Intimidator.

We spent most of the late summer and early fall tearing the old motor out of the Ford in the shed behind our house, just piddling on nights and weekends. I helped how I could, handing Daddy tools and stuff, but mostly I was useless, and mostly it was boring, but I did it anyway because it felt good to work together, pass things back and forth between our hands.

In October, Daddy found a new motor at a junk yard in Bowman. Brought it home in a wooden crate one night after work. Mister Paul was in the passenger seat. I guess he helped Daddy load it.

Mister Paul started coming over more regular, always wearing his nasty Mossy Oak jacket, his eyes all beady and red. He didn't know much about cars, not like Daddy, so mostly he just drank Miller Light and talked shit and did the jobs that used to be mine.

I quit helping so much and started doing my homework out there on a folding chair, not paying them much attention. One night I had a bunch of math problems I was trying to finish. My teacher told me she thought I might be a good fit for honors the next year, so I was trying real hard, but they kept interrupting me.

"Bring me that seven-sixteenths socket," Daddy said from under the hood of the Ford.

I was only half-listening. I got up and grabbed a wrench and took it to him.

He shook his head. "The socket son. The fucking socket."

I put the wrench in my pocket and went back to the toolbox for the socket. I gave it to Daddy and went back to my homework.

Little while later, Mister Paul started hollering for me, only he was calling me Nancy instead of Jacob to aggravate me. "Nancy," he said. "Put your book down for a minute, smooth out your dress, and come hold this flashlight for me."

I couldn't stand when he talked to me like that. I didn't like him much anyway. But I got up and took the flashlight so he would shut up. He showed me where to point it and crawled under the car.

"Hold it still, would you?" He fiddled with something, then got up and took the flashlight. "Thank you, ma'am," he said.

I went back to my homework. Couple minutes later, he was calling again. I ignored him. He kept on.

“Nancy. Nancy, I’m talking to you.”

I acted like I couldn’t hear him, like I was real focused, but I couldn’t pay attention at all. It felt like my ass was on fire. I saw something shiny and looked up. It was a beer can flying. It hit me in the face, on the bone right over my eye. I jumped off the chair and rubbed where it hurt. My notebook flew off my lap and landed in a pan of oil. The pages soaked up the grease and faded straight to black. Mister Paul stood there, laughing out of his stupid drunken face.

I pulled the wrench from my pocket and threw it at him as hard as I could. I didn’t even think about it, just did it. As soon as it left my hand, I knew I shouldn’t have done it, but it was too late, and I didn’t really care.

He ducked out of the way and the wrench banged against the wall of the shed. He started laughing even harder. “Jesus Christ, that would’ve knocked me cold.”

“Fucking asshole,” I said.

Daddy came up beside me, gritting his teeth. He grabbed me by the nap of my shirt and pushed me out from the shed. Once we’d walked completely out of the light, he slung me face-first onto the ground. I turned over onto my back and he jumped on top of me, pressing his forearms into the notches of my shoulders, pinning me down. He put his face right up close to mine, the bill of his Earnhardt hat almost touching my forehead. His breath smelled like stale beer and wintergreen snuff.

“What’s wrong with you?”

“Me? It was him.”

He head-butted me so hard my eyes jarred with white light. He sat up and spat to the right of me. I started crying a little bit. “Candy-ass,” he said. “You ain’t a man, so don’t act like one.” He stood up and straightened his hat. “And don’t make me speak to you again.”

I stayed in the yard until my head quit hurting and I felt like my face wouldn’t show I’d been crying. Went back to the shed and Mister Paul sneered at me. Daddy cut his eyes at him and he quit real quick. I picked up my notebook and tried to wipe off some of the oil with a rag, but it was ruined.

The next morning at school, the teacher came around and checked our homework. I showed her my notebook and tried to explain. She just wrote down a zero and kept on down the line.

After that, I quit helping with the Ford altogether. I stayed inside and studied, listened to the old cassettes by myself. Him and Mister Paul could have it.

On Sundays, me and Daddy went down to Henry's Grocery, ate cheeseburgers and watched the race, but even that, it was like we were watching against each other, not with. Daddy only cared about Earnhardt, and a little bit about his son. Junior was running his first full season in the Winston Cup Series, but he didn't have the same aggressive style as his dad. None of the young drivers did, there was too much money invested in the cars, too much danger.

The worst, in Daddy's mind, was Gordon. He drove the rainbow-colored Dupont Chevrolet. He'd won two or three championships and wasn't even thirty years old. Gordon was my favorite.

"I don't know how you can pull for him," Daddy said, sitting at a narrow wooden table in Henry's behind an empty burger basket and a can of Miller Light. "From California, look at him. Won't even use his bumper. You just like the pretty colors on his car."

"Pop said he was good."

"Pop hated that faggot."

"Still said he was good."

Racing was the only thing Daddy let me argue with him about, so I just saved it all up till Sunday. The truth was I didn't care. I thought it was kind of pointless. I only kept up with it at all because he did.

Labonte won the championship and Earnhardt came in second. Daddy said NASCAR cheated. Momma still wasn't home. I only talked to her a couple times on the phone, and mostly I couldn't understand her because she was crying, and I'd just get irritated and say I had to go. I mean, why was she crying? She was the one that left.

Thanksgiving and Christmas were the worst. Daddy and me

tried to cook turkeys. The first one was raw and the second so dry you couldn't swallow. Him and Mister Paul finished putting the new motor in the Ford. He came in and asked me if I wanted to ride with them the first time they took it for a drive, but I said no.

Just before New Year's, Daddy came home from work with a twenty-four-inch TV he got used from the pawn shop. I was on the floor, doing homework and listening to the Lynyrd Skynyrd cassette. *The Ballad of Curtis Loew* was my favorite song. He propped the TV up on the bureau right where our old one had been before Momma left.

"Turn that damn noise off," he said. "I'm tired of hearing the same song over and over again."

"Do what?" I didn't understand. He loved Lynyrd Skynyrd.

"Turn it off. I'm tired of hearing it."

I pushed the stop button. He tuned the TV to the news and sat down in his recliner. "What you think?"

I didn't answer him. I sat there for a minute, pretending to watch until my chest swelled up so tight I couldn't take it. I loved listening to those old cassettes together. I unplugged the stereo and carried it to my bedroom without saying anything. He laughed one of his low, growling alligator laughs that made the hair on my neck stand up. Stayed there sprawled out on his recliner, staring at the box, spitting dark tobacco juice into an empty Miller Light can until he finally wore down and fell asleep.

The next night was the same thing, and again after. It became his habit. News at six, some stupid sitcom reruns, supper, news again at ten, then asleep before twelve. Every now and then I'd try to sneak a few songs out of the stereo, think maybe I could lure him into listening, but he'd always holler about turning it off before long.

I started calling Momma more often. One time I asked her what it would take for her to come home and she said that wasn't her home anymore. I stopped calling very much at all after that.

In late January, it snowed. Started early in the afternoon, while me and Daddy were out chopping wood. The forecasters all said it was coming, we wanted to be ready. It was just flurries at first, then harder and harder as the night wore on.

I'd never seen snow stick before. But when I woke up the next morning, the ground was thick with it, the trees all sagging. Ice hung from the eaves of the roof, the power lines. The electricity was out for two days, no work and no school.

Daddy was so happy. I'd never seen him like that. We bundled up in zoot suits, knit hats and gloves. We went outside and played for hours. Built two huge snowmen in the yard must've been six feet tall, the bodies and heads so big we had to heft them together. We used snuff cans for eyes and old shotgun shells for mouths and Daddy even found a hickory branch and gave his snowman a dick. We made angels and traipsed through the woods, just looking. It was like a dream, like everything was different.

When it got dark, we went inside and built a fire in the hearth. Heated snow in a pot and made hot-chocolate with some old packs we found in the back of the kitchen cabinet. Slept beside each other atop a pallet by the fireplace, covered with every blanket we could find.

The snow melted, and the power came back on. The school reopened and Daddy went back to work. But even then, things weren't the same as they were before. We'd caught a glimpse of our world made different.

By the Daytona 500, the first and biggest race of the new season, the weather was starting to warm. The purple coneflowers were blooming on the roadsides and in the fields.

I was truly excited about racing for the first time. Not so much for the sport itself but to spend Sundays with Daddy again, watching and talking. Some kind of normal, at least for us.

Instead of going to Henry's, we went to Food Lion and got the stuff to make our own burgers with thick slices of onion and chili from a can. We watched at home on our new-old TV with a freshness and intensity I'd never had before and haven't since. Every lap was a building of momentum, every pit-stop its own little drama.

With ten laps left, the Intimidator was running third. His son, Junior, was one spot ahead of him. Waltrip was in the lead.

"Earnhardt's going to do it again," Daddy said. "Just bidding

his time.”

“What about Junior?”

“What about him?”

“You think Earnhardt will beat his own son? Put him in the wall?”

Daddy didn’t say anything. We watched silently, him in his recliner and me on the floor, propped up on my elbow. Five laps left and the leaders were the same. Marlin was behind Earnhardt in his silver Dodge, trying to pass. He went inside, but Earnhardt cut him off. Went to the high side, but Earnhardt slammed the door. Waltrip and Junior pulled away.

“You’re right,” Daddy said. “You see him? He’s blocking. He don’t want to win. He wants Junior to take it home.”

I tried to think about how that must feel, driving two-hundred miles-per-hour on an asphalt track. Fighting for a lead in front of thousands of people, screaming. Looking in the rearview mirror and seeing your father, fending off a pack of cars. The sound of the souped-up engine, the sweat sticking to your spine.

“Bastard’s got a heart after all,” Daddy said. “Watch him.”

Waltrip and Junior pulled further away. Earnhardt was all over the track, choking the drivers behind him. The flagman dropped the white flag. One to go. The camera locked in on Waltrip and Junior.

“Do it if you’re gonna do it, Junior,” Daddy said. He was leaned forward in his recliner, his Earnhardt hat pulled down low over his eyes. “Do it, boy.” His voice got steadily louder. “Don’t waste your old man’s driving.” He was screaming. “Do it.”

Waltrip and Junior rounded the last turn and went down the backstretch in single file, so close together and synchronized they could’ve been connected by a short link of chain.

“Awwwh!” the commentator shouted. “Big wreck behind them.” The camera cut to the collision. Earnhardt had gotten bumped from behind. He shot up the track and ran straight into the concrete barrier, then skidded back down through the pack of cars to the green grass of the infield.

“Holy shit,” Daddy said.

The camera cut back to the leaders. Waltrip drove on,

crossed the finish line, won without a hitch. Junior finished right behind him. He never even tried to pass. The camera cut to Waltrip's pit-crew, slapping hands and celebrating.

"I hope Earnhardt's okay," the commentator said. "I guess he's alright, isn't he?"

The screen cut to a replay of the wreck and nobody spoke.

"Christ," Daddy said. "That's ugly." He got up and turned off the TV. Pulled on his boots. "He's going to be sore in the morning."

"You think he's okay, though?"

"Shit, he's been in twenty wrecks worse than that. Come on. Let's ride down to Henry's and get me some beer."

We went outside and I had to squint because the sun was so bright and I'd been inside so long, looking at the screen. I walked toward Daddy's truck, but he went to the shed, where the Ford was parked. "We'll take the hot-rod," he said.

I still hadn't forgiven him for all that with Mister Paul. "I'm good."

"Come on," he said. "Please. Just let me show you how it runs."

I went over and climbed reluctantly in the passenger seat, all the cloth just about rotted out. Daddy turned the key and the motor growled a little but didn't start.

"That's not good," I said.

Daddy cut his eyes at me and grinned. He tried it again, easing on the throttle, and the engine cranked. I could smell the gasoline burning. Daddy put it in gear and pulled out of the shed. I rolled my window down and felt the breeze on my neck. When we got to the end of the driveway, he cut the wheel toward Henry's and stood on the gas. The tires spun on the gravel till they caught on the pavement. The car lunged forward on the highway. Picked up speed. The trees blurred as we passed them. I tightened up my legs and clung to the bottom of my seat. It was the fastest I'd ever been and I could still feel the car accelerating. I looked at Daddy and he was just staring straight ahead, one hand on the wheel, teeth gritted like he was studying the road. "Fast enough for you?"

"Uh-huh."

"Think Pop would be proud?"

"Yeah."

Daddy turned from the road and looked at me. I was sitting stiff as a mannequin, holding on for life. He let off the accelerator. “I do too.”

I loosened my grip on the seat.

At Henry’s, Daddy bought a twelve-pack of Miller Light and two cans of snuff. I got a glass bottle Coke. He drove home slow, both of us sipping.

At the house, he backed the Ford under the shed and we went inside. He put the case of beer in the fridge, took the last swig from his open can, and left the empty on the counter.

I turned on the TV. It was the same channel we left it on. The screen showed a press conference, a fat man in a gray suit talking from behind a podium. “This is one of the hardest announcements I have ever had to make,” the man said. “We’ve lost maybe the best racecar driver of all time.”

“Daddy,” I said. “Come in here.”

“We’ve lost a dear friend. We’ve lost a father. We’ve lost Dale Earnhardt.”

I heard something behind me, so I turned around. Daddy was standing with an unopened can of Miller Light in one hand. In the other, he held his Earnhardt hat over his heart. His face was red and tears were running down it. I couldn’t believe it. I’d never seen him cry. Not when Pop died, not when Momma left. Never hardly saw him feel anything at all but angry. It made me sick. After everything, that was what hurt him.

“You got to be shitting me,” I said.

“He was my hero, son.”

I turned around and went to my room. Put the Lynyrd Skynyrd cassette in the stereo and turned it up as loud as it would go.

The next evening, Momma came over with an aluminum pan of red rice and sausage, like it was someone we knew who died. I was in the yard, rigging a minnow trap to set in the ditch. It was the first time I’d seen her since she left. I probably should have been glad to see her, but I didn’t feel that way exactly.

She looked younger climbing out of her car, somehow

healthier. She sat the pan of rice on her hood and came over to me. I wanted her to hug me, but when she did, it made my skin itchy. Her hair smelled like I remembered.

“I missed you, baby.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Daddy’s inside.”

She got the pan off her hood and went in the house. I walked down the driveway to the deep part of the ditch and set my trap. I sat above the hole and tore pieces of grass from the ground. Tossed them in the water. When I checked the trap, I had a few minnows, all silvery and flipping, but I just dumped them back in the water and went home.

Momma was sitting on the front steps, smoking a cigarette. Her face looked shiny. I sat down next to her.

“I talked to your Daddy,” she said.

“Yeah.”

“We needed to figure some things out.”

“Okay.”

“I’m sorry I left you,” she said. “But I didn’t know how else to do it. I should’ve told you. I probably should’ve brung you with me. If I was to do it again now, I’d do it differently. But I had no idea, baby.” She took one last drag of her cigarette and put it out on the wood of the steps. “I just knew I had to get away. And I knew that no matter how he was to me, your Daddy loved you, and he would take care of you.”

“Okay,” I said.

“But I’ve got some things straight now. I got a job, a little trailer.”

“That’s nice,” I said. Though truthfully, I didn’t like the thought of it, my Momma living in some place I hadn’t even seen, that she might not ever be coming back home.

“It is,” she said. “I never had nothing of my very own my whole life. Except for you.”

“I’m not yours,” I said. “I’m mine.”

“You know what I mean. It’s something I earned. Not something your Daddy gave me. But that ain’t what I want to say. I just don’t know how to start.”

The door creaked open and Daddy came out on the porch with his Earnhardt hat on. He stood behind us and didn’t say anything. Momma looked up at him, grinned strangely, and looked back at me.

“What I want to say is, now that I’m getting things straight, a steady place and a steady job and all that, I think you could come live with me.” She looked down at the steps. “If you want to.”

I studied her for a second, then looked at Daddy. He was staring across the yard. “This what you want?” I asked.

“No hard feelings either way,” he said. “I promise.” It was his voice, but the words seemed wrong.

“We just want you to be happy,” Momma said. “We all three deserve to be happy.”

I felt something small but strong welling inside of me. “You expect me to tell you now?”

“Well, I kind of figured you would,” Momma said.

I got so mad my eyes couldn’t focus. “Ain’t ever had a choice before. It’s been nine months. I’m sure it’s been hard on you, but not only you. Just come in here with some food and expect me to come live with you, like a stray dog?”

Momma looked at me with her mouth open a little bit, like she was surprised, like she didn’t know me.

“That ain’t how it works.”

“Forget it,” Daddy said.

“Yeah. Seems like that’s always what y’all want. Me to forget. But I don’t.”

Daddy touched Momma’s shoulder. “We’re all just kind of shook up. Why don’t you go home. We’ll call you when we’re ready.”

She nodded. I didn’t mean to upset her, but it didn’t bother me that I did, because what I said was true and they needed to hear it, both of them. Momma stood and walked shakily to her car, pulling another cigarette from her pack. She got in and cranked the engine. Daddy sat down beside me.

“You going to sling me down the stairs when she leaves?” I asked. “Climb on top of me and head-butt me, tell me I ain’t a man?”

“No,” Daddy said real quiet.

“I didn’t choose none of this. Y’all did. So don’t act like I got a say now. This is my home. It just is.”

“I told her that.”

We were quiet and the only sound in the world was the grinding of Momma’s tires on the gravel as she drove away.

I looked at Daddy sitting there beside me, slumped over like he was tired. He was gritting his teeth, working the muscles in his jaw. The salt ring on his Earnhardt hat was clear in the dim evening light, that circle made from sweat, from wearing the same hat every day—summer and winter, working at the factory, fishing, tinkering with the hot-rod—it didn't matter.

“I'm not choosing you,” I said. “So don't get confused.”

“I understand.”

“But I'm sorry about Earnhardt anyway.”

“Yeah,” Daddy said. “I'm sorry too.” He put his hand on my knee and patted it almost gently.

Jennifer Hanno

The Quickening

It was one of those small envelopes, not the long official looking ones. It had a stamp in one corner, but the only other writing was in the center. Three even lines of blue ink. That was all.

It seemed a small enough thing really and right up until its arrival, everything had gone pretty well. By then, it had been almost a month since that day they arrived at the Conroy's farm, looking for a place that would take both of them. The men over at the Feed Mill told them about the old lady who ran the farm with her herdsman and said she might be hiring. That same day, he followed his father up the steps to the farmhouse.

It was a small house, sitting solidly on Tug Hill, tilting its chin proudly over the valley below. Tucker peered through his hair and smudged glasses to examine the woman who opened the door. Though he stood on the step below his father, he had a clear view of her over his father's shoulder. She was little and wrinkled and her eyes were watery blue. His father got right to the point.

"I heard you don't got no Mexicans here and so I thought I'd see if you was hiring. Goddamned Mexicans—they probably ain't even in this country legal, anyhow. Can't even speak English, can't understand a thing you tell em."

Tucker had begun working on a fingernail, gnawing it down as was his tendency, when he glanced up and saw she was staring right at him.

"He still in school?" she asked.

"Tucker, here? Yeah, he just turned sixteen." Wayne Olmstead glanced at his son with a wry smile before he turned back to the old lady and winked. "Dumber'n shit, but tougher than a two-dollar steak."

Her eyebrows narrowed and her lips pinched in. Just when Tucker thought she was going to send them on their way, she said she'd give it a try. As if in response, a high-pitched bark came from the pickup and his father remembered.

“Oh, yeah. My boy’s got a little mutt they give him at the last place. We’ll keep him out of the way so he won’t be no trouble. I’ll make sure of it.”

A wave of relief swept over Tucker when she gave them a curt nod. When they climbed back into the truck, the small dog leapt into Tucker’s lap and his father playfully swiped the boy’s baseball cap off his head. Tucker went to grab it back, but his father held it just out of his reach.

“You need a haircut,” he said. He was wearing that lopsided smile, the one he pulled out when things seemed hopeful.

And, in fact, things were hopeful for near to a whole month. Tucker saw him drink nothing but beer that whole time, and only after work was done. But like barbed wire on a pasture fence, a thing stretched to its limit is going to break sooner or later. He noticed the first signs of it the day the letter came.

He’d been on his way out to the barn to start milking when he saw Mrs. Conroy coming back from the mailbox, walking straight toward him. He made to hurry into the barn, but she called out to him and he had to stop. Of course, he thought it was about the mailbox. He could see it out by road and it was leaning considerably to the left. This was because his father clocked it with his pickup when he took the turn too tight the night before. He expected the old lady was going to yell about it, but instead she handed him a letter.

“For you,” she said.

He was so surprised, he hesitated before taking it from her. He’d never really known a letter to come to him personally.

After all, who would send a letter to a boy who could not read?

This was the question on his mind as he made his way to the barn for the 3 o’clock milking. When he got there, his father was beating on 134. Tucker transferred his chew to the other cheek and stood aside, watching the cow continue to turn back and his father continue to beat her with a flat board. Tucker could’ve told him that 134 only liked the middle slot and won’t go into the parlor first; actually, she liked to follow 254 and that was the real problem. He waited until the pulsing of the vacuum pump was silenced by the clash of wood on steel. When his father finally hurled the board across the parlor and stomped away, Tucker stepped in and

guided 134 backwards. 254 was waiting and she lumbered her way into the spot she was used to. 134 followed, the wild panic in her eyes fading to relief.

A waning vibration lingered in the air. Tucker turned the radio up to get rid of it and ran his hand softly over the cow's full udder before he hooked her up. The soft swoosh of the valves took over and a soft calm descended over cow and man.

They weren't stupid, he knew. Cows, that is. After all, there were one hundred and fifty spots out in the free stall barn, and 134 could find her spot every time. If it was taken, she'd just stand there and stare, wouldn't even eat if she couldn't get into that spot. But, what was wrong in knowing where you belonged and in following what always took you there? Years later, he would understand that wasn't what made you dumb. But right then, he breathed in the familiar smell of cow and hay and milk. With a sweep of his tongue, he transferred his chew to the other side and settled in, soothed by the rhythmic hum of the machines, soft and predictable, like a heartbeat you just expect will be there.

Flies hovered and tails flicked them away and all fell into the pattern he knew. That is, except for the letter. He felt it in his chest pocket every time the machines pulsed. He figured it was likely from school. He'd stopped going a few weeks back and had no intention of returning. Not after that last day when he'd come in late and that Goddamn Simmons kid was sitting in his seat in the back row so he had to maneuver his large body between the desks to the only empty seat there was. Bodies leaned away from him as he made his way to the empty desk and, too late, he remembered he'd forgotten to hose his boots off when he left the barn that morning. It seemed to take forever for him to reach the empty seat and heave himself down into it. The desk shook as his knees hit it.

"Glad you could join us this morning, Tucker."

He remembered the heat of his face. He hated being late, he hated being looked at, but most of all, he hated the fact that that Simmons kid took his seat and now he had no choice but to take the seat right in front of Natalie Sanderson. She was probably looking at him, he thought, probably staring at the back of his head. He should've showered, but it was already so late when he got out of the barn. He pictured silage dust in

his ears and along the side of his neck. His hand started on its way up to wipe away what he could.

That's when he became aware that everyone was looking at him.

"What?" He remembered to grin and struggled to keep it in place.

"Tucker, start us off by reading paragraph one."

For a brief moment, he dropped his head and considered the options, but he knew there was only one and he yielded to it. With force, he swept the book and paper off his desk and into the soundless air.

"Fuck you." He made sure to say it clearly and loud enough.

The room fell silent. He could feel the eyes of others on him, but he kept his own eyes hard and cold and boring into the teacher. She was nearly shaking; she was so mad, she couldn't even talk for second. But after a bit, she found her voice.

"Get out."

And so, he did. After two weeks, the school sent a Guidance Counselor out to the farm to talk to his father. Tucker saw the car pull in and intercepted him on the small porch. Mr. Gunderson was a short man and a stupid one because as soon as he stepped out of his car, he put his foot directly into a pile of cow shit. His face twisted in disgust as he struggled for a minute to wipe it off on the grass, then he pulled out a smile and climbed the steps to the porch. Tucker drew himself up to his full height and puffed his chest out, all the while worrying, worrying he was going to have to let him inside.

But Mr. Gunderson had a nervous smile and shit on his shoes and no desire to go any further. Instead, he told Tucker they wanted him back at school and Tucker said he'd come on Monday.

It was, of course, a lie.

Anyway, he didn't know why the school would send a letter to *him*. Such letters he was supposed to hand over to his father, he knew, but after milking he found his father in no mood for letters.

For one thing, his father was watching NASCAR and bothering him during a race was unwise. Especially when the remains of a six pack rested at his side and corpses of crushed cans littered the floor at his feet. Sitting the way he

was, sunken into the couch like that, his father looked small somehow and Tucker wondered if the man was shrinking.

But it turned out he wasn't.

"You shut that lower gate this time?" he said. His father did not even glance up at him; his eyes were glued tight to the television screen.

Tucker said he did.

"You run the washer so it's set up for tomorrow?"

Tucker nodded.

"Milk out that fresh cow in the back pen?"

Tucker was midway through the task of taking off his boots and he froze at this. Then, he began to put them back on.

His father snorted and fumbled with another can, his glassy eyes on the track in front of him and the cars that raced in circles of fury.

"Boy could fuck up a mother's love," he muttered. The fingers then found the tab and the hiss split the air.

Later that night, Tucker laid on the mattress on the floor of his room and looked at the letter again. He got thinking maybe the school had called up Social Services and the letter was from them. He felt a wave of panic, but then reasoned they wouldn't send the letter to him and also he was older now and they couldn't so easily make him live where they said to. Besides, his father had gotten him out each time.

"Where I go, you go," he'd say. It was the drinking that made him mean and restless, but in the end, he was his father.

No, this was different. This was a real letter. With handwriting on it.

But from who? The writing looked *girly* to him, but he didn't know many girls. As unlikely as it was, he entertained the possibility that it was from Natalie Sanderson. In Animal Science, she had smiled at him when they had to work together on a lab where they had to identify fish. He generally used group work time to get some shut eye, but this time there were pictures of fish and he pointed to each with a casual finger and identified them in a voice that he hoped sounded like he didn't care.

It was not often that he knew what others did not.

Thoughts of Natalie always tugged at a part of him he did not understand. His mind tentatively pawed around the edges

of this need, but then, his mother came into his mind and he winced at the intrusion. For a long time after she had left, he would lay in bed and think of her. His father didn't like to talk of her and had burned up all the pictures with his lighter one drunken night. Tucker had all but forgotten her face, but the smell of cigarettes still brought her to his mind.

Startled, he had a thought. What if the handwriting was hers? What if she was trying to reach him? One possibility bled into the next until his mind was tripping over them.

He was not used to possibilities.

He let his mind wander back to Natalie. He'd seen her at the fair with her fag boyfriend, Craig Reynolds. They'd been over at the dart booth where Reynolds tried to win her one of those stuffed dogs, but every dart he threw hung limp in the board. As he dozed, Tucker imagined himself back there, winning the biggest prize for her. A big, blue stuffed dog.

And so it was not surprising that he fell into a deep sleep where he dreamed he was at the fair and a heifer was missing and he searched fruitlessly through the stalls and out onto the midway. His search became frantic; he looked everywhere even, ridiculously, in the trash. There, his eyes caught sight of something else. Amidst the wrappers and plastic cups, he saw the blue fur of the stuffed toy he had won earlier. He went to move some garbage to be sure and that is when he saw his letter there, soiled and ripped and almost lost to him forever.

Dawn found him staring up at his ceiling, stiff with fear. Though his eyes were open, he was dreaming of dogs and letters. Things discarded.

In the morning, his father was in no condition so Tucker took his shift, which would have been fine except that he had to work with John, the herdsman. John, who had thick hands and a short temper.

As soon as he was alone, Tucker hurried through milking so he could get back to his letter. All the while he had been working, it had been on his mind and he felt anxious about it. But there it was, right under his mattress where he had put it the night before. He felt oddly reassured by its presence and examined it once again.

He liked to think about what it might say. A love letter

was quite a stretch but he liked to think it anyway. Then, he entertained the thought that he had won some kind of contest that he didn't even know he'd entered. Or possibly it could be from some relative he did not even know he had. Maybe it was someone trying to find him. He felt like the part of his brain had just woken up and was filling up with things he'd never thought before. It was a good place he'd discovered, right there on the edge of what might be.

Of course, there was no guarantee that the letter would contain good things, but once he found that line of thinking, he preferred it. Often, the thought of his mother wiggled its way in. By now, she was little more than a distant memory to him, and he doubted she would she recognize him now that he was a man.

He was barely sixteen, but he knew what it was to be a man; he'd learned early. It meant doing what needed doing without crying about it. And without hesitating, that was very important. It was in that moment of hesitation that the line was drawn between a man and an almost man.

His father had taught him that.

The next morning started out good as he set about feeding the calves. New calves always made Tucker's heart go soft, but it was held in check by the knowledge that the bottle he held would likely be its last meal. They only kept the bull calves for less than a week; then the white truck would come and carry them off to the Sale Barn. This one had grown strong in only a few days and Tucker had to hold the bottle firmly as the calf rutted against it with impatience. Tucker had named him Veal Parmesan and he ran his hand across its glistening coat before he left it to its fate.

And walked directly into his own.

"You," John pointed at Tucker as soon as he saw him and motioned him over. "You and me got to talk."

As soon as he crossed the doorway, Tucker felt the walls of the small office close in around him. He was keenly aware that Mrs. Conroy was there, but he kept his eyes hard on John. He didn't know what it was about, but in his experience it was better to be pissed off than pissed on. So he told John he had taken nothing and didn't like being accused of it.

John's eyes narrowed.

"No one said nothing about you stealing anything." The Herdsman walked slowly around the desk and sat down, his eyes never leaving Tucker. "Yet."

John was a big man, but Tucker had a good three inches on him and he reached for all of it, as animals do when threatened. When they're getting ready.

"I left a huge note in the milkhouse telling you we treated that white cow and not to milk her into the tank. So you tell me how it is we got a call this morning from the Co-op telling us our milk was contaminated? Seems they had to dump the entire tank."

Tucker kept his eyes hard but confusion flickered through him. He tried to think back. There *was* writing on the board that day, but he'd left that day in a hurry. In a hurry to get back to his letter. His mind was never good at holding two things in it at one time.

"That's four thousand gallons of milk." John said when Tucker did not answer, "That's \$7,500 you cost us."

John paused to let the numbers sink in. The heavy silence spread through the small room, but Tucker did not look away.

"I didn't see no note," he said finally.

"Didn't see no note? Didn't *see* it?" John took a piece of paper out of his back pocket, unfolded it and held it up for Tucker. In fact, Tucker did remember seeing the stark white paper with the black writing the day before.

"You telling me you didn't see this? You must be blind then, cuz it was stuck right on the board where only a fool could miss it," John's eyes flashed with anger. Tucker kept his eyes on the paper while his mind tried to form a defense.

"Why didn't you just put a mark on her like you usually do?" he asked John.

"Why didn't I . . . ? *Why?*" The vein in John's neck pulsed. "Because I left a *note* the size of *Kansas* on the board!"

Tucker began a reply, but then thought better of it. He wanted this job.

"I didn't leave a mark on her cause I said it *right here*," John shook the paper at him, "Can't you read?"

The question hovered in the stale air, but Tucker understood it did not require an answer. It was just something you said to

people when they did something stupid. He waited for more, but the silence that followed made it clear to him that he was expected to say something.

“I didn’t see no note,” he said again.

John ran his hand slowly over his face before he spoke again.

“Look, Tucker, you are good with the cows and always here when you’re supposed to be, but this is the third time I had to talk to you about reading what’s on the board. And this time, you cost us a whole tank of milk because you were too goddamn lazy to do what you were told . . . I won’t tell you again. Next time, you’re done.”

By the time John finished speaking, he was standing in front of him. He was standing too close, but Tucker kept his large feet planted and firm. When John shoved the crumpled paper into his chest, Tucker made no move to take it and so it fell to the ground as John stalked out the door.

Mrs. Conroy stayed for a moment and he sensed she had something to say, too, but he didn’t look at her. Finally, she left him to himself.

His eyes were still on the words that laid there at his feet, screaming up at him. With slow deliberation, he covered them with his work boot, silencing them.

Boots could do that. Silence things.

There was bound to be consequences, he knew that. He’d screwed up and there’d be a price to pay, but the direction of meanness is always hard to tell.

As soon as the machines shut down, he heard the whining and knew right away something was wrong. His father always hated whining, just hated it, so Tucker hurried to stop the sound. But by the time he got there, the small dog lie on its side, shaking.

He was still tied to the tool bench where Tucker had left him, but all around him lay the broken bottles, their edges jagged and fatal. One had clearly found the animal’s left eye. A large flap of skin, laced in fur, hung limply off the small dog’s face and Tucker did not know what to do with it. He knew it was useless, but he tried to put it back, holding it there as if it would reattach.

But Tucker knew it was not the bottles, but the boot that did the real damage. He ran his hand gently over the small dog's side, but the animal whimpered pitifully under the soft touch and Tucker understood that gentleness would only add to his pain. It was like that sometimes. Sometimes, you just can't put the skin back.

The small dog licked his hand, very softly, and that decided it.

He weakened just before he fired. Later, he would remember how his hand had moved without his permission, jerking and straying from the target. The misfired shot blew the ear right off the small dog and it landed against the wall.

But he was a man and he moved closer and finished.

It all came down to the hesitation. He would never regret the fatal shot, but he would never forgive himself for that ear.

After he buried the small dog, he had walked back to the house, his rifle in hand with something cold building inside him. But his father was nowhere to be seen. He stayed gone for four days.

It was for the best. Tucker worked most of the time he was gone. He finished his chores in a fury of efficiency and looked for more to do. He left himself no time for grief or anger or thinking, at all. At night he fell exhausted into his bed, folding and unfolding the letter until the creases grew thin and sleep overtook him. Come daytime, he'd work even harder, moving shit from one pile to another, switching cows out, and hurling bales down from the loft with such force that Mrs. Conroy made him stop and sent him to the Feed Mill on an errand.

Gradually, his anger began to fade into fear and then panic. Maybe his father was gone for good. It gnawed at him all the while he drove Mrs. Conroy's truck to the Mill and that's when he came to his decision. He'd left the letter on his bed, but he knew it was time to stop this foolishness. It was time to stop being a baby about it and either find out what the letter said or throw it away. Time to stop all this useless dreaming and find his way back to what he knew.

As if to confirm he'd made the right choice, he pulled into the farm and saw his father's truck in the drive. His heart leapt and he quickened his stride.

He found his father sitting at the kitchen table, a bottle on

the table in front of him, right next to a torn envelope. The letter itself was in his hands.

A relentless rush of blood coursed through him.

“That’s mine,” he said. He felt his fingers curl into a tight fist.

“This? This changes nothing,” his father said. His voice dropped low, the way it did when he got serious. Tucker planted his feet. He would be ready this time. But, instead his father drained what was left in the bottle and when he was done, he set the bottle down hard on the table. His eyes were not on Tucker, but were looking out the window.

“We’re getting out of this shit hole. We’re leaving tomorrow.”

His father raised a cigarette to his lips and Tucker heard the click of the lighter. His eyes dropped to the letter that lay on the table in front of his father. He didn’t like that it was so close to the lighter. After a moment, his eyes raised to meet his father’s.

“Where I go, you go,” he said and he brushed passed him on his way out the door.

Tucker heard the rev of the pick up and watched from the window as his father peeled out of the drive, reckless and wild, the mailbox helpless beneath his tires.

It took a moment for him to calm down enough to release his hands from the fists they’d curled into. After a bit, Tucker went out the back way, his insides so torn and raw that he almost missed what his father had left for him by the back door.

Not more than ten weeks old, he was. His coat black and shiny, his tail wagging fast and hard.

The cows fidgeted and shuffled under the touch of his angry hands, but he couldn’t help it. His father had no right to open that letter. He had no right to read the words that weren’t meant for him. Those words, whatever they were, didn’t concern him. But, why did they make his father so mad?

While the machines did their work, Tucker took the letter out of the envelope and laid it flat on the cart, smoothing out the wrinkles. Countless times he’d wondered how words could come so easy to some and not come at all to others.

John’s voice interrupted his thoughts.

“Mrs. Conroy says to stop up to the house when you’re done. She got your check for you.”

And so, after milking, he climbed her porch steps for the second time, this time his small dog at his heels. He figured she’d come to the door like before, but instead she called for him to come in, so he tied the dog to the railing and entered the house for the first time.

“Have a seat,” she said, motioning for him to sit at the kitchen table with her.

He shrugged and tugged at his clothes, then worried he should have taken his boots off and left them by the door. Immediately, he felt too large in the small room. He’d never been in the house before and the kitchen was small and warm, all red and white with yellow curtains. It was a cheerful room, he thought, with tea cups and other breakable things. It was a dangerous room for someone like him. He saw no need to sit down to get his check but when he did, his knees shook the table and the tea cup clanked against the saucer it sat on.

“I have an offer for you,” she said. “Your father, he’s going to need to be moving on. But John tells me you are good with the cows and I’d like you to stay. Just you. Not him.”

He blinked in confusion. Stay without his father?

“If you decide to stay with us, there’s some paperwork. You’re sixteen, so you can be declared independent. I took the liberty of filling out what I could, but it’ll need your signature. This is what it looks like.”

He watched her old hands move the pen across the paper and time seemed to stop for a moment, as if to wait for him to catch up. He watched it unfold as if it was happening outside him and he could do nothing to stop it.

He could only stare in cold amazement at the familiar blue ink in front of him.

It was her. In an instant, he saw the error of all he’d dreamed up, the error of dreaming at all because it was no mother, no lover, just a crazy old lady with a pen. His mind and heart raced against each other, chasing something or being chased, he did not know and it didn’t matter because he wanted only to go back to yesterday. A heat he had never known was building inside of him, taking him over. His fists clenched in rage and for the first time, he understood what made you so mad you

wanted to hit something, to break something, to show the world you weren't powerless. He understood his father.

He took the letter out of his pocket and held it up and he saw recognition flash in her eyes. His hands were shaking, but she did not look afraid.

"Oh, that? That's an application for the BOCES Herd Management program. They were looking for young people like you. I volunteer on the Board there and so I send out the mailings. Are you interested in applying?" her voice grew softer. "I could help you fill it out if you want."

Shaking the table between them, he shot to his feet, ready to fight though he did not know what to fight and what he was fighting for. Mrs. Conroy sat quietly at the table. Slowly, he understood she wasn't looking at him, but at something behind him.

His father stood in the doorway, his eyes red and glassy and looking not at his son but at the old lady. The silence fell heavy on the room.

"Came for my check."

His father had been drinking and he was clumsy and bold as he moved toward them, but this could be deceptive. Tucker knew the quickness of the man and did not hesitate. Instinct moved him in front of the old lady. It was only then that his mind stumbled over the realization that his father was not a big man.

"Come outside a minute," his father said.

Tucker followed his father out to the porch, relieved to leave the things behind him still intact. His father had left a bottle on the porch railing and he took a swig before he spoke.

"Got a job over to St. Lawrence County," he said and Tucker nodded in agreement. They'd worked there before.

"They only got room for one."

Tucker opened his mouth to protest, but his father held his hand up and took another drink before he spoke again.

"Sometimes, you just got to look out for yourself."

The small dog let out a whine just then and his father looked down at the animal. Then, he did something unusual. He reached down to scrub behind the dog's ears. He ran his hand over his sleek head and down its back in one long graceful and tender motion. He gave his son a nod without

quite meeting his eyes. And then, he was gone.

It was a long time Tucker stood on that porch. He stood there in disbelief and fear and anger and grief and something else he could not identify.

It would be years later when he'd come to recognize it as gratitude.

Daniel Gorman

Pincushion

When Sandi and I were young, she would push my wheelchair down to the base of the water tower, where Mrs. Lowry's double-wide marked the southern boundary of the trailer park. The tower's rusty legs framed our play area like the four corners of a house, and in our imaginations it was the closest thing we had to our "own place." We would play a game Sandi called "Pincushion" where she would prick the tips of her fingers with a pin until little red beads sprung up, both of us with our eyes squeezed tight in concentration, and then, breathlessly, she'd ask if I had felt it. Twins, she would always tell me, can feel each other's pain. I would smile to let her know that I could, though I had no fingers to feel with, because I believed everything my sister told me, and because above all else, I wanted her to be happy.

Our mother was Connie Sprague, a pugnacious weed of a woman who was fond of cigarettes with every meal and daily affirmations that if it weren't for us worthless kids, her ass wouldn't be so flat and our coward father wouldn't have run off and left her to rot in that stinkin' park. In the spring of 1972 she gave birth to twin girls who had been embroiled in a kind of civil war for blood flow in the womb. The casualties of our developmental hostilities were self-evident once our birthday arrived. Sandi was born healthy and hale, screaming in concert with our mother as she would for years and years to come. My father counted her fingers and toes and then left for a cigarette. Seven minutes later I slid out, a little pink bullet, with no arms to impede my progress into the world. My father wasn't there to do half as much counting, and he was gone for good by the time the rest of my myriad disabilities began to reveal themselves.

My mother loved blaming Sandi and me for her every misfortune, as though heaping blame on our narrow shoulders was cathartic in some way. She was a woman who believed the entire world had conspired to keep her landlocked in low-class misery, and that Sandi and I were the chief co-conspirators in this plot.

“Mom hates us,” Sandi would sometimes say, often with blood streaked on her fingertips, as if our little psychic game had inspired in her a kind of familial clairvoyance. If I had been born with the ability to speak, I would have reminded her that mom wasn’t always awful. She could be playful, even fun at times, like when we used to play *Star Search* in the living room, and she would sing Patsy Cline songs and pretend to be Ed McMahon for us. There was that one summer day when she dragged somebody’s old box spring into our yard and put on music and had a dance party with us girls. Sandi had laughed and smiled so much that afternoon. Connie Sprague had it in her to be kind, even loving, but those moments when they arrived were fleeting, and the spaces between were long and dark and unforgiving.

For a time I was enrolled in public school, participating in half-days in the same building as Sandi. Our mother lugged my chair in and out of the trunk of our rusted out Chevy Nova twice a day, always with some shopworn complaint about the effort and how ungrateful I was, which always amused me since I had little way of expressing gratitude, or ingratitude for that matter. In the afternoon Mom would head off to her job at Cowlings Chemical, where she’d been working since she was a teenager. Most days she’d leave me in front of the television. My favorite show was *People’s Court*, because when it came on it meant Sandi would be home any minute. I’d hear the bus downshift and then the door would burst open and she would fly right into the latest transgressions committed against her by Steve Bullock on the bus ride home. Steve was a freckled strap of leather that lived three trailers down from us, who was always the focus of my sister’s bubbling outrage. I think he was sweet on her even when they were youngsters. She’d tell me stories about her day while she cleaned and fed me and gave me my meds, and I would hang on her every word. As time went on, the anger that was etched as deeply into our mother as the green tattoos on her arms began to surface in Sandi. These feelings were coaxed into existence by the other girls, the ones I knew by their meanness if not by their faces. The ones who laughed at Sandi’s clothes and made her ashamed to be poor enough to be eligible for free lunch. I remembered all of her stories, because I lived

vicariously through her and on the bad days I wished I could experience even the cruelest indignities for her because she was beautiful and perfect, and I could not comprehend why anyone would direct an unkind word her way.

On weekends our mother wouldn't come home until the three channels we got signed off and went to static, and sometimes not until morning, and we would stay up and watch horror movies borrowed from our grease-monkey neighbor, Skeet. We would eat whipped cream right from the can, which she'd spray into my mouth, and then she would laugh at how ridiculous I looked and we would laugh until tears spilled from our eyes. It was easy to forget in those happy, late hours that in the morning, when Mom did come home, she would be the worst version of herself.

Nights of chain-smoking in dive bars and flirting with young, uninterested men sharpened my mother's antipathy for the life she had to a razor's edge, and her words for us on those mornings were unguarded and wielded with an intent to cut deep. She never attacked me quite like she did when she came home with eyes overexposed to the "What ifs" of her life, and I became less her daughter and more an anchor that kept her moored to her failings.

"The little medical malpractice lawsuit that got away, that's what you are."

When Mom was feeling particularly nasty, she would start ranting about how it was all Sandi's fault that I was the way I was, because we shared the same placenta and Sandi had taken the lion's share of blood that was pumped to us, and I ended up the way I did. "One test is all it would have taken," she would say, twisting and contorting my medical history into a more palatable one where the doctors could have, *should* have warned her about me. "But your coward of a father didn't want to risk it. Cared so much about you two, until you were born, then that all changed real quick. One look at you, Little Miss, and he was gone. But not before, no ma'am. He was afraid I'd miscarriage, even though that stupid doctor said the test only carried a one in five hundred chance of that even happening. Should have sued their asses off for not letting us know you were all fucked up. That money would have changed my life."

In her blackest moods, she would just stare at me and mutter, “Selective reduction” over and over again, until her thirst for petty vengeance had been quenched by the tears rolling down my face. When the malpractice talk would start up, Sandi would push me out of the house, our mother too hungover to venture out into the sun, and in the shade of the water tower she would hold my head in her hands and stare into my eyes.

“Twins are psychic,” she would say. “They can read each other’s minds. Talk to each other. It just takes practice.” Then she would put her index finger to her temple and strain hard enough for her face to turn the deep red of the summer’s first real sunburn. When she could hold it no longer, the air would burst from her with the sound of an untied balloon, and then she would fall across my lap, gasping for air, the tears in our eyes now disguised by laughter. She couldn’t know how hard I tried to reach her in those moments, to bridge that gap between our identical minds, find the plug in the switchboard that would allow me to let her know that I was okay, that everything would be okay, and that I didn’t resent her for what she did to me in the womb.

When my sister got old enough to notice boys, she also noticed the differences between herself and the girls in her class who got all of the attention. She would sit on her bed and carve big X’s into the faces of her classmates in a three-year-old yearbook, the only year Mom was able to afford one. She became sullen; she poured herself into chairs, slouched over homework, and adopted an air of indifference that in my adolescent naiveté looked incredibly cool. She didn’t tell me as much as she used to; our after school feeding and cleaning routine became a chore done mostly in silence. When she did talk, she would complain in ways that reminded me so much of our mother. Some nights when we were watching TV, I would look at her, sunk down into the couch, arms crossed over her thin chest, and watch as her eyes scanned the room with utter disdain, taking an inventory of water stains and ripped upholstery and reused paper plates, making a mental log of everything she hated about the place. Sometimes I would catch her looking at me, and when I smiled she would only look away.

By the time we were sixteen, Sandi had fully adopted our mother's tenacious cynicism for the world. She hated how poor we were. She hated that she had to share a room with me. Hated what the girls at school said about her. She was dating Steve Bullock and she hated him too, because he was a park kid like her, which meant she would never get the guys she wanted, and so she settled and was miserable for it. She wore her misery on fraying shirt sleeves, openly complaining about every aspect of life where she felt she'd been cheated. I never expected to be the subject of her loathing; we were twins, after all. I was wrong.

"I wish Mom had aborted you," she whispered to me one night, as we both lay in bed. "Then we wouldn't have to live in this shit hole."

I couldn't breathe. All of that hating had made convenient our mother's revisionist history, and perverted in Sandi's mind our origin story to one where Mom aborting me would have resulted in a successful medical malpractice, and with it untold riches. I'd never felt anything but unconditional love for my sister, and to be hated for the sin of living was beyond what I could understand or bear. I could barely see her through the tears standing in my eyes, but when I found hers in the dark, I sent a thought to her.

"Why do you hate me?"

She rolled over and faced the wall, as if she knew what I was trying to do. After that, she hardly acknowledged me, treating me like little more than needy furniture. She'd go out most nights when she was supposed to be staying with me. Sometimes she didn't even leave the TV on when she left. On those nights, if Mom didn't go out after work she would come home to find me in my chair, alone in the dark, sitting in my own filth. She'd spend the rest of the night stewing, and when Sandi would come home, her and Mom would scream for hours, until their anger was spent and all they had left was simmering contempt for each other, for their lives, for me. The burden of my existence was always at the center of their arguments. I felt like less a person than some broken object. My body had been a prison to me my whole life, but in that last year that Sandi lived with us I realized that in their eyes, I was the jailer, and they were serving the life sentences.

Sandi dropped out of school senior year and moved into a place the next town over with Steve. I didn't see her much after that. Mom only ever brought her up to complain about how she was never around to help with me anymore. Sometimes when Mom would take me shopping I would catch a glimpse of blonde hair much like my own, and my heart would race at the thought of seeing my sister again. It was never her, and she never visited. I hoped enough time away from Mom would soften the jagged edges around their relationship, and when I finally saw Sandi again, she'd be happy. Then Mom had her first heart attack, went on disability, and stayed home with me full-time, and that's how things were for a while.

Mom had her second heart attack the day after me and Sandi turned thirty-seven. We were still living in the park, in our fourth place by then, having moved around the property from trailer to trailer like white-trash hermit crabs. Mom was taking me to get my haircut and then out for a birthday dinner. I was in the car listening to one of the books on tape Mom was always getting for me. She had just put my chair in the trunk when I heard her collapse against the side of the car. She lay in the grass for twenty minutes until she was discovered by some boys on their way to do some creek fishing. By then I thought she was already dead.

I was left with a neighbor friend, Marsha. All day I wept, blaming myself for causing the heart attack, and hating myself for being unable to do anything except sit in that car and listen to my mother die in the weeds. I waited all day for the hospital to tell me that she'd died, surprised at how heartbroken the thought made me.

Mom was "touch and go" for a few weeks, and then one day the door opened and there she was. The heart attack had ruined her, devoured the last of her youth and turned her into a withered, ambulatory skeleton, her hair wispy and with more gray than before. On her arm, supporting her under the elbow, was Sandi. They were arguing loudly about some old grievance from when Sandi was a kid. My heart soared.

Years of hard living had given Sandi the same deeply-lined, weathered skin and brittle hair of our mother. She was too skinny and she'd lost a few teeth along the way, but it was still my sister in there, and I was thrilled to have her back. She'd

gotten a call from the hospital when Mom was admitted and had unwittingly become a caretaker.

“I went to the hospital thinking I’d be picking up a body,” she told me that first night, as she chain-smoked on the couch. “Figures she’d fight to stay alive just for one more opportunity to make my life hell, right?”

“You think the thought of you living under my roof again was what brought me back?” Mom shouted from her bed. Despite her frailty, she hadn’t lost her ability to shake the picture frames on the walls with her bellows. “If I knew you’d be the one taking care of me I’d have ran for the light at the end of the tunnel!” They sniped at each other this way, like they always did, but their words possessed none of the rancor from before. There was almost a tenderness to their insults.

Sandi talked with me late into the night that first night, as though nothing ugly had occurred between us all those years ago. She had become someone who communicated almost exclusively through complaints; in that way, and in countless others, she’d completed her evolution into our mother. Every story came tethered to some hardship she’d been forced to endure, always through no fault of her own. In me, she rediscovered the perfect conversationalist; someone who would listen to her spin her wearisome yarns and never interrupt. I learned of her marriage and divorce, of the nephew I had who lived two states away and who no longer talked to Sandi, and of how she was working at the same chemical plant that had burned away decades of our mother’s life. She was profoundly unhappy, and sharing that unhappiness was her greatest joy.

Sandi moved in with the intention of helping out until mom got back on her feet. “Once she’s back out in her field scaring the crows, I’m out of this shithole,” she was fond of saying, but then she’d fall asleep with Mom curled around her like a child and I knew differently. I had this dream that time would mend the old fences, and Sandi would become a permanent fixture in my life again. The doctors said to give mom a couple of months; I figured a lot of good could happen in that time. But just a week after Mom came home, an infection in her chest seized her heart and she died in the back seat of Sandi’s car.

If Sandi felt any despair, she suffocated it with feverish talk of suing the hospital for malpractice. The infection was preventable, she excitedly told me one night.

“The money we get from this settlement could change everything. I could hire someone on to take care of you, and we could finally get you out of this park!”

It was painful to watch her pin all of her hopes on that lawsuit—a variation on those old teenage fantasies where I was never born and Sandi got to live the life she deserved; reparations delivered with a death certificate. She contacted lawyers and would sit cross-legged like a teenager on mom’s bed, smoking and telling me all about malpractice cases that reached eight-figure payouts, and all I could think was how much she resembled Mom in those moments. I wondered if all families were so preoccupied with the potential wealth contained within their dead.

A few weeks after Mom’s funeral, the phone rang. I watched Sandi as her body stood in tense anticipation. Her back was to me, but I didn’t need to see her face to understand what it meant when she slumped against the door frame. She hung up, then she threw the phone into the wall and began pacing frantically back and forth, cursing and spitting like a wild animal. When she finally calmed down, she told me that the lawyer wouldn’t take the case.

“They said that the payout in a lawsuit like this wouldn’t be high enough to make it worthwhile.” She smoothed the covers on Mom’s bed with a surprising tenderness. “The asshole said that Mom wasn’t worth the effort. How could anyone say that about somebody else?”

Her face crumbled, and she fell onto the bed and allowed herself to mourn, whether for herself or mom I did not know. I reached out with my mind, tried to tell her that everything would be alright, that we still had each other. But she didn’t hear me.

The next night, Sandi woke me up with a question. “Was he right? That lawyer, about Mom. Was she really worthless?”

Her eyes were red-rimmed and puffy from crying. I tried to shake my head. I hoped she would understand, be reassured, and go back to sleep. Instead, Sandi put me in my chair and

pushed me out of the house without explanation. It was a warm night, with a pleasant breeze and a wide, clear sky full of stars. The peepers were chirping so loudly it was a wonder anyone could sleep. Sandi told me stories as she pushed me, about all the times Mom had given her hell when we were kids; there was warmth in her voice, a softness that hadn't been there before. She spoke of Mom like someone might of an old, well-traveled heirloom whose only remaining value was sentimental. Then the shadow of the water tower loomed over us, and I swallowed and blinked as I was set upon with a nervousness that I could not explain.

Sandi parked me in the long grass and walked around our old childhood place, picking at things on the ground or touching the nearby tower legs, which had gone dark red with rust. As she walked in and out of the shadows cast by those big metal legs, I saw her face shift from happiness to agony, as though some invisible force had reached inside of her and twisted her heart, again and again. She gasped and choked down a sob, then laughed, then fell to pieces again.

“Do you remember that game we used to play?” she said, suddenly kneeling before me. Her voice cracked a little. I nodded my head as best I could. She sniffed loudly and wiped fresh tears from her cheeks. “Pincushion, remember? Let’s play it now, okay?” A pained smile broke across her face as she unfolded an ugly pocket knife. I begged her with my mind to hear me, to hear me say that everything would be alright. I sniffed and smiled, raised my eyebrows, lolled my head. I beat against the impervious walls of my mind: *It will be alright*, I kept repeating, again and again. *Please, it will be alright*.

She closed her eyes and I held my breath. Air hissed through her teeth as she drew the blade across weary flesh. Fresh blood made a tapping sound on the grass. Sandi’s face relaxed; all the years of tension and misery that had made a home in her lined features melted away, and she was again the girl I remembered. Her red-rimmed eyes locked with mine, and she put a bloody index finger to her temple.

“*Do you feel that, Mandi?*” I heard her say, though I swear her mouth never moved. Then her eyes grew wide and she looked at me as though for the first time. “*You do, don’t you?*”

You always have.” She smiled.

Few people get the life they would choose for themselves. Sandi had tried to cast aside her hand-me-down destiny, only to realize she and Mom had been cut from the same cheap cloth. And maybe that was alright, because she wasn’t Connie Sprague, after all; she was my sister, and she was loved, and she finally understood. Every anguish she’d ever felt had driven a pin through my own heart, and now in that battered organ she could finally see my generous appraisal of her.

“We are all worth something,” I thought to her. Sandi wiped a tear from my cheek before she nestled her head in my lap.

“I love you, Mandi,” she said softly, almost as though she were going to sleep.

“Everything is going to be okay.” I thought. *“We are going to be okay.”*

“I know,” she said.

Bethany Nuckolls

Hot Days Are for Listening

There is nothing but talk in the village now. Buzzing talk like hornets. *Who did it? How dare they? Who could betray us like this?* There will be a trial at the *kgotla* tomorrow, even though there are still no suspects. No one has confessed and no one will. They are afraid to be outcasts in their own home, avoided and shunned. All anyone knows is that the new 55" high definition TV screen in the community hall is shattered. Mma Bogwasi found the stone that did it lying on the cement slab floor of the building. "Someone has hatred in their heart," she cries loudly, shuffling past each of our doorways in turn. "Oh Lord, forgive us!" I want to swat her words away from my ears. It is too hot today for loud talk.

I go to sit at the edge of the yard where I can hear the wind in the *motshaba* trees. When I feel the sand turning cooler beneath my feet, I perch myself on the large tire that encloses Mama's herb garden, daring the dusty rubber to scald the backs of my legs. Insects chirr their secret language in the nearby brush. I smile, thinking how there will be no more screaming football or slick politicians babbling from the TV with promises of more jobs and schools, like their mere words are diamonds spilling through the screen. Mama tells me I shouldn't sit so far from the house because up in the trees is where the leopards like to hide. I imagine they are sitting among the chattering leaves, looking down at me while I boldly raise my face to them, both of us enjoying the shade. Leopards don't watch TV. They prefer to watch children like me and think about eating them. I don't think they will eat me though. They like relaxing in the shade better.

The TV was a present from the Americans. They came to our village three times. That is two more times than all the other foreign visitors, so we knew they would eventually bring what we wanted. The elders ask for a TV every time foreigners visit our corner of the Okavango for safari . . . which is many more times than three. They said it would keep the young people from trouble like drinking and having sex. But I don't see how

having sex is any real trouble. My oldest sister is pregnant and she lets me touch her belly which sometimes jumps. I can see how a jumping belly could cause some trouble, but it keeps her from drinking, so I think it is better for her belly to jump than to be sick.

“Foufetse!” she calls me now, “Get some more water! Hurry!”

She never asks nicely, even though she is only four years my elder. But I am happy to hear her voice. Sometimes, if I sit too still in Mama’s garden, I become invisible, and all day people cannot see me. Even when they walk past on their way to the community hall, so close I can touch them, they do not see me. I worry that one day I will disappear for good. But my sister reappears me now with her barking demands: “Foufetse! Now! The baby is coming!”

It is the middle of the day, so the sand in the road burns my feet, encouraging me to shuffle faster with the full water bucket to the house. I stop in the cool outside the open doorway where the reeds from the roof overhang to form a moat of shadow. From inside, I can smell the gas that runs our small appliances and the mustiness of old clothes, waiting for washing day. “Sister?” I call into the darkness.

Mama steps outside and takes the water from me. “What took you so long?” she scolds before slipping back inside, not waiting for an answer. I hear my sister groan. I stand there for a moment, wishing I could watch. I wonder what it looks like for life to enter a newborn body and give it its first breath. I wonder, standing so close, if the curse I was born with might pass on to the new baby like lice.

I wander into the deserted *kgotla*—an assembly of empty plastic chairs, gritty with dirt and disuse, gathered beneath the acacia trees. Meetings have been few since the arrival of the TV. The elders congregate in the western-style community hall instead. It is hot inside because the roof is made of tin instead of thatch and there is no breeze. I do not know why they prefer it there. The TV talks over everyone, even the village chief. Chief Tshepo is often long-winded, but the TV is even longer and windier. It talks loud and fast, like it doesn’t need air to breathe. Sometimes it shouts “Goooooal!” and everybody in the hall shouts. Usually, though, everybody is

silent while the TV chatters on and on.

Since I am invisible again, I sit in one of the prohibited chairs and pretend that I am an elder. “A community is not a community without honor, and honor means we speak only what is truth!” I parrot Chief Tshepo. “So if you are truthful, speak! If not, hold your peace!” I wait, letting my words ring across the *kgotla*. “Who broke the TV?” I demand.

Someone laughs. It is a surprising sound. Usually I am alone here while the whole village is in the community hall. But now the TV is broken and there is laughter outside again. I smile at Mma Bogwasi. “I did not hear you arrive, Mma. Hurry, come join us. The meeting has already started.”

“You going to become the village chief one day, little Foufetse?” she asks, creaking heavily into the chair next to me. Normally, she would stand with the other women and the children during a meeting, but since it’s just the two of us, she makes herself comfortable.

“Yes,” I say, sitting up straight, “and when I am chief, I will ban TVs forever from the village.”

Mma Bogwasi’s voice turns serious. “Why would you say that, child? That TV has made people here very happy. A terrible shame someone went and broke it.”

“When everyone is watching in there,” I complain quietly, “the village stops breathing.” I don’t expect her to understand.

“You’re a strange one, Foufetse. God help your mother, raising a child like you. But I suppose you’re the only one here who isn’t all that upset about what happened, seeing as you never got to watch the TV in the first place.”

“The village dies,” I continue in a whisper, “and then I disappear. I am here, but no one sees me.”

“No one sees you?” Mma Bogwasi laughs again. “More like you can’t see nobody. The kudu doesn’t graze in peace just because it doesn’t see the lion hunting it.”

She’s tickled, like she thinks she’s taught me something I don’t already know. But I am eleven and I’ve learned many secrets that nobody thinks I can know, like how people turn their faces when speaking: the dominant elder facing the listener, the dutiful listener facing the ground. I turn my face to Mma Bogwasi now, showing that it is my turn to be listened to. “I know all about my curse,” I say. “My sister is having her

baby and Mama doesn't want me to hold him because she says I might trip over something and drop him. She doesn't see what I can do. I carry the water every day without spilling a drop, but Mama still doesn't see me."

Mma Bogwasi sighs. "Well, that sister of yours isn't having a baby just yet. I came up here from your Mama's house. That girl just wants some attention is all, imagining contractions. I tell you, everyone in the village is restless today. It's this heat."

Not the heat, I think. The broken TV.

When Mma Bogwasi leaves, I stay seated in the *kgotla*, the heart of the village, and listen to its rhythm. I've learned that hot days are best for sitting still and listening. Our neighbor rides by on his donkey and the smell of grass and manure tickles my nose. Young children shout in play. Dogs quarrel. I hear my mother scolding my younger brother. Someone crushes aluminum cans. Dried reeds whisper in deft, weather-worn hands. Skirts sigh against bare legs. A distant hippo bellows.

The village is restless, yes. But alive.

The next morning, everyone gathers in the *kgotla*. I sit in the sand with the other children, but it is difficult to sit still. I am anxious to know what will happen in the trial. Chief Tshepo opens the meeting with ceremony and gravity. No one is laughing in the *kgotla* today. A fly lands on my neck again and again and I swat at it. Mama toes me in the back to be still. This makes me happy. I am not entirely invisible today. Not yet. But when the village chief demands a confession, I feel myself start to disappear again. I know that Chief Tshepo's eyes are searching the crowd for the culprit. But he will never find me. He will not see me because he does not think that a blind child can hit their mark with a throwing stone. No one here knows how I practiced for days, out in the yard by the *motshaba* trees. I collected rocks and hung the water bucket as high as I could from a branch, then counted my paces back from the tree—the same width of the community hall. No one heard the ringing of the pail when I began to score. They were all huddled inside, listening to far-off strangers' gossip. I raised my arms to the cheering sun and quietly shouted, "Goooooal . . ."

“Do you think God will favor you if you keep quiet?” Chief Tshepo bellows. “You think your stomach will not sour when you next taste water, from holding your guilt inside?”

My sister groans suddenly. The women around her murmur.

I hear Chief Tshepo stand suddenly, and I know his muscles must be taught like a predator’s, his dangerous energy rippling through the *kgotla*. “Do you think you will be safe in childbirth? That your son or daughter will not be cursed with blindness when it is born, like Foufetse?”

“Enough of this,” Mma Bogwasi cries, the only woman bold enough to interrupt. “Her contractions are real enough this time. She needs to be brought back inside the house.”

There is a shuffle of hands and feet. My sister cries out again. She has stolen the show and now the trial must be put on hold. Around me, the village is stirring, murmuring, my sister’s name on their lips. I sense fear in their movements. I hear their heads turning every which way, looking, looking. But they are all blind. They are now the nervous kudu antelope who do not see the lion in their very midst. None of them can see what is so obvious . . . my sweating palms and my shaking knees as I stand and step into the center of the circle. How bad can it be, I wonder, to be shunned if you’re already unseen?

I speak in a loud, high voice that stills the *kgotla*. “It was I, Foufetse. The little cursed child. I threw the stone, and it was I who broke the TV.”

Now there is nothing to hear. Only the shiver of the acacia leaves. But I can feel it. The entire village . . . everyone is looking at me.

And I smile. I am no longer invisible.

Audrey Kalman

Unobserved Absences

The room contains a man and a telescope pointed through a curved rectangular opening at the northwest quadrant of the night sky.

The door opens. A head, capped in brilliant platinum hair cropped short over delicate ears, slides into the door's aperture like a moon emerging over the horizon. The head bears a mouth that says quietly, "Mr. Whitman? Are you going home soon?"

If the young graduate student had not noticed the observatory's open panel, if the door had not opened, he might have lingered all night. Processing, like a computer, except what he has seen—or, rather, not seen—does not compute.

"Yes," he says, because he is expected to. "Home."

Perhaps everything will make sense when he is in his familiar space with a glass of bourbon in his hand.

Earlier that evening, as he does on the fourth Friday of every month, as his wife used to do, Baird Whitman welcomed the children. Ranging from kindergarteners to nearly college-aged, they had arrived with their parents at dusk, bundled against the night chill. He wore what he always wore, what he had worn for years, the tan field coat Marie bought him many Christmases ago. In the dark, no one could see the grime staining the pockets or the frayed threads at the collar.

First in line was a little boy wearing a baseball cap. Baird brought the stool around for him. "You'll have to take your hat off," he said. "Gentle when you get close."

The boy leaned in to the eyepiece. "Wow!"

Baird's hand steadied the boy as he climbed down and a girl a few years older replaced him. She was taller and could reach the eyepiece from the second step. There was something familiar about the straight hair falling halfway down her back, the precise way she moved her head, the stillness she held while looking. She must be one of the regulars.

“That’s the Pleiades star cluster,” Baird said. “Sometimes people call it M45 or the Seven Sisters. Can you see the seven stars?”

“N’uh-uh,” she said. “I only see six.”

“The seventh one is hard to see. Sometimes your eyes have to adjust. Go around to the back of the line and you can look again after everyone’s had a turn.”

The girl shook her head. “There’s only six.”

The parents looked too, and, as always, seemed more interested than their kids. Many had known Marie when she was the one setting the sight and bringing the constellations into view. Baird still felt like an imposter, an amateur astronomer given the keys to the observatory out of deference to his dead wife’s former position as director of the university’s Space and Sky program. Now he was the one helping the little ones onto the stool and adjusting the telescope’s focus.

An hour later, after he’d shown a short film in the auditorium and the last family had drifted away across the parking lot, Baird went to take a final look at M45. He loved these hours after the children left. Marie’s presence seemed especially strong, as if he might turn and catch sight of her with her waist-length silvery gray hair, wearing the black pants and billowing top she had favored, looking like a figment of the night sky.

He brought his eye close to the lens. Damn. The last kid up, a rather brutish high-schooler who, Baird suspected, didn’t want to be there, must have knocked the scope out of alignment. No, the telescope hadn’t moved. He was looking at the M45 cluster, but something was missing. A rather big thing.

Alcyone. The largest star system, the one no one could miss.

The bourbon goes down like a river of fire. The first slug gives him the usual glorious, numbing jolt. After that, it’s no more than a drink, two inches in the straight-sided glass. Marie’s glass sits where she left it that night two years ago, across from his on the stained oak coffee table. Of course he’s cleaned the glass since. He rinses it every week to prevent it from getting dusty. It looks as if it’s waiting for her to skip in from the kitchen with the bottle of Maker’s Mark.

Marie would have an explanation. And not any old explanation. One that makes sense.

Baird takes the glass of bourbon out to the deck and tips his head back to look up. The redwoods crowd inward, allowing only a small window onto the sky where the Seven Sisters should hang. Indeed, there's the cluster. He can see it with his naked eye, though it's more visible if he doesn't look straight at it. From here, unmagnified, the group of stars looks as it always has. There is no indication that its star star is missing.

Well, maybe it's not missing. Experiment, he can hear Marie telling him. You want empirical evidence. Repeatable results.

He hasn't erected the telescope at home for more than a year, not since he's had unlimited access to the university's fancier Celestron. This model is less powerful but does a decent enough job of bringing the night sky into focus. He sets the half-finished bourbon on the deck railing and searches with the finder scope for Messier 45. He whispers the stars' names as he views them: Atlas, Electra, Merope, Taygeta, Pleione, and Maia, the name long-planned for the daughter they never had. But no Alcyone. Where the Pleiades' most brilliant astral sibling ought to be, he sees only the specks of dimmer, more distant stars.

Baird lunges away from the telescope, grabs the bourbon, and downs the remaining liquor in a single gulp.

Slurping straight from the kitchen faucet the next morning, Baird raises his eyes to see the telescope still on the deck, dew-covered and useless in the bright fog. What would Marie have said about his carelessness at leaving the sleek apparatus out to gather moisture? The hangover brought on by the two additional tumblers of bourbon he'd downed almost makes it possible to believe Marie might appear behind him, or that the previous night's follies were a bad dream.

Shit.

He Googles and finds that missing stars are not unheard of. A study proposed by astrophysicists at Cornell "defines the probability of observing a disappearing-object event in the last decade to less than one in one million." Unlikely, then, but not impossible. Still—this is not some obscure

star whose absence was discovered by comparing data sets. This is the main attraction, the star sister, visible even to elementary school children squinting through a smeary lens. Such attractions do not simply vanish. He searches again. His desperate strings of words—*Alcyone disappearance, latest astronomy news*—yield nothing.

He drinks coffee and takes three ibuprofen. He wants to check again, to train the telescope once more where Alcyone should be—*will* be, damn it—but dusk is nine hours away.

Marie would encourage him to get another opinion.

Baird parks behind the science building where he spent so many Saturday mornings in Marie's office, sunk in the sagging leather chair across from her desk while she graded papers. When she finished, they would visit the Farmer's Market set up in the main campus parking lot. She was the kind of person who would spend a half hour talking to the farmer while she picked out her bag of apples.

His footsteps echo in the hallway. He hasn't thought about which way he's going and his feet carry him toward Room 1751. As if Marie might be waiting there. Baird sees from afar that the tall oak veneer door is open. His heart quickens. In this new universe of disappearing stars, would it be possible for a person to reappear?

As he moves closer, he sees the open door is the adjacent one, 1753. Dr. Ed Martinez looks up as Baird hovers in the hall. "Come in, come in!"

"Am I interrupting?"

"No. I need a break. Catching up on the journals."

Baird sits in the swivel chair. "What's the latest?" The two men look at each other across the bleak metal desk. "From the journals, I mean."

"The rumors turned out to be true!" Ed grins, erasing decades from his wrinkled cheeks. "The latest from LIGO means we're looking at a whole new way of studying the universe. This fourth gravitational wave event—" He holds up his hands. "Sorry. I always forget this isn't your field of study."

The chair squeaks as Baird settles back. "I know what gravitational waves are."

Tiny ripples in the fabric of space-time. Predicted by Einstein, though not detected until recently at the Laser Interferometer Gravitational-Wave Observatory. *A disappearing star. Predicted by astronomers, though not detected until recently by Baird Whitman.*

The words Baird might have spoken die in his throat. What would Ed think of him, an amateur, making this ridiculous observation? Here in Ed's orderly office, what he's seen through his home telescope seems like exactly what it is, the foolish pursuit of a lonely old man, and the missing stars a figment of an aging widower's overactive imagination.

Ed's face transforms as if the room's light has dimmed. For a moment, Baird wonders if he's spoken the whole story aloud.

"I wanted to talk to you anyway." Ed picks up the miniature astrolabe from his desk and runs his thumb around the perimeter. Marie bought the replica of an ancient calculator for her colleague, spending hours scouring Etsy shops. "You know we've been immensely grateful for your help with the Friday program."

"I enjoy it."

Nothing in Ed's face is twinkly now. It's harsh as a distant planet's bleak moon. "The continuity has been great. But it must be hard for you, being reminded every month." Ed sets down the astrolabe and stares at it as if it will begin speaking in his stead. "The new department head wants the graduate students more involved. And since you're not, technically, an employee—"

Baird lets out a breath. This too, shall pass. Marie was fond of repeating this phrase she'd borrowed from her grandmother. She was right.

"I'm sure you understand." Ed's face has transmuted again.

Baird is not sure of anything. He does not understand anything.

"Do you mind doing the next one? Kimmie Cantwell will take over after that," Ed says.

Kimmie is the one with the short platinum hair, a ring through her nose, and a bruise-blue tattoo half showing from under her shirt sleeve. A look that would have shocked Baird if all the stereotypes he once held about scientists had

not vanished with Marie. Does Ed expect acknowledgment? Acceptance? Does he expect Baird to vanish without a word?

Baird gives the slightest of nods and steers the conversation back to where it began. “Tell me more about the fourth gravitational wave.”

Can something disappear if it never existed in the first place?

Baird has a complete and specific picture of Maia in his mind. He’s spent so long desiring a daughter that he can call her up anytime he wants, almost more easily than he conjures Marie. Maia at seven, that age before cynicism begins, when children are still amenable to the suggestions of their elders. A small, squirmy body and a smile missing teeth. It’s Marie’s face, smoothed and rounded.

He talks to Maia sometimes. He finds it easier than talking to Marie, who had a complicated relationship with conversation.

“Your sister is missing,” he says aloud to Maia the next night, out on the deck.

In fact, it’s worse than that. Atlas has disappeared, too. Atlas, next in line after Alcyone in brightness.

This truth seems to call for more bourbon but the bottle is empty.

“Where did she go?”

No one answers.

The rain wakes Baird after midnight. He sits, heart pounding, until he remembers that, despite the bourbon, enough of his faculties remained intact so he remembered to bring the scope inside.

The weather report predicts cloud cover for the next five days. Are the stars disappearing at the rate of one a day? So far he has a sample size of two, Alcyone and Atlas. If they’re going in order of decreasing brightness, Electra will be next, and Maia after that. If the clouds remain for their predicted duration, he may never see any of them again.

You old fool, Marie would have said. Always so concerned with your own little sphere. We are all stardust! Doesn’t it interest you one bit that you’re observing something never

before seen? You should take notes.

Baird flips on the lamp. On Marie's side of the bed is a nightstand with a drawer, where she kept all kinds of things. Scraps of paper, the home blood pressure monitor the doctor insisted she begin using, half-consumed tubes of hand lotion. He opens the drawer and scrabbles around among the contents. He retrieves a four-by-six-inch spiral-bound notebook with a cover patterned with cartoonish flowers. He opens it gingerly, unsure if Marie ever used it. The first page is blank, so he begins there.

It was their tenth wedding anniversary. They had finished dinner at the Brazilian restaurant Marie loved so much. For someone so small, she certainly could eat. She had a particular fondness for those parts and pieces of animals that made stealthy deposits to the insides of unsuspecting arteries. Skirt steak, bacon, short ribs.

"If you tune in," Marie said, "you can hear what the universe is saying to you."

Baird would have snorted and laughed off anyone else who said such a thing. But his wife was a bona fide expert, a Ph.D. in cosmology who made the universe her life's work, not some new-agey type blathering about forces and energies. Then he realized she *was* joking. He pushed their plates aside and reached for Marie's hands across the table.

"I'm not good at tuning in," he said. "Can you translate?"

She made a serious face and did something in the back of her throat so her voice sounded like a door creaking open. "Marie and Baird. I am the universe. I see you are bound together, although the time you have spent committed to one another is less than the blink of a blink of a blink for me. Ten years! A few billion might impress me. Still—in human terms, it's notable. Lots of people don't make it that far."

"Thank you, universe, I'm glad you're impressed."

"There is one thing. I can understand how the idea of procreation might appeal to you. It appeals to me. Nothing I love more than spawning a galaxy. But I don't need to partner up with another universe to make that happen. You—you need each other. And I can see this procreation business has been eating you up." Marie took a sip of water to soothe the

universe's throat. "I'm telling you, it ain't never gonna happen. So here's some advice. Given how little time you humans have, relatively speaking, I suggest you focus on something else."

The waiter came by then to collect the plates and clean the table with a little metal-edged crumb sweeper. Their hands slipped apart. The waiter handed them dessert menus.

Baird bit down on his lower lip. "I thought that's what you wanted." Was he speaking to Marie or to the universe?

"I did. I do. I mean—" This was Marie answering him, in her small, normal voice. "I think it's time to move on. We aren't made of money, you know."

Baird felt her words as a punch to the gut. He'd taken on editing projects outside of the ad agency job to cover the in vitro treatments. An egg donor would be the next step, the infertility doctor had told them, a more expensive option. But Baird was willing to do whatever was required.

"Honestly?" Marie made the word into a question. "I don't have it in me. There's so much research I want to do. Without a kid, we'll be able to travel. I can apply for that fellowship in Chile." She turned over the dessert menu and scanned the after-dinner drinks list. "They've got *cachaça*." She slipped back into the universe voice. "The night is young, oh celebrants!"

Baird didn't feel much like celebrating anymore but what the universe wanted, it appeared, the universe got.

Day 1, he writes on the notebook page, *observed absence of Alcyone from the M45 cluster*.

Is this an observable fact, or a fault in the observer?

One of three things can happen. When he next looks, more stars will be gone, the same number will be gone, or the missing ones will have returned.

"Too many words," Marie said once.

"How about no words, then?"

And he became silent, in that moment and in many others to come.

He turns the page.

Day 2. Disappearance of Atlas. He notes the passive construction, how he has, in true scientific notation, removed himself from the record of the observation.

Sometimes the absence of Marie is so palpable it's as if he's fallen into negative space.

A faint shadow shows behind the page he's written on. Had Marie used this notebook? Baird holds the paper up to the lamplight. He doesn't want to turn the page any more than he wants to set up the scope again to see what may have happened to the Seven Sisters.

But he does.

Near the end of the cross-country trip that was serving as their honeymoon, they had ditched the tent and slept rough on the gray sand, curled in their sleeping bags outside Elko, Nevada among rocks and cacti. Probably there were scorpions but she didn't care. Marie with hair even then down to her ass but no gray in it yet, wide eyes that Baird could get lost in the way she could get lost in the stars. Marie with her notebooks. There were notebooks everywhere, cheap ones she bought at the drugstore, filled with observations and equations. Some of it he could understand, like the date and the simple statements about what quadrant of the sky she was observing. Other notations made no sense to him but he found them beautiful nonetheless.

Even here in the desert she had a notebook. She wrote in it after they made love, shimmying out of his sleeping bag into hers and shining her head lamp down on the paper.

"Cataloging my prowess?" he asked.

She slapped his shoulder, a love tap, as if to say of course not, but she didn't actually say that so he continued wondering.

That was the first time he got up the nerve to look in one of her notebooks. Sure enough, she hadn't written a word about him. It was all stars and rotational angles and cloud cover. But his looking became a thing. The next time he peeked, a few weeks later, she had written about him, or rather, to him. A sentence for his eyes: "Honey, we're running low on eggs. Pick some up later?" How had she known he would look? Another path formed, tying their hearts together. Her writing, his reading, a tricky role reversal since he was the one who earned a living from words.

He asked her once, after the habit had gone on for decades, if she really didn't mind him looking.

She shook her head. “No, of course not. I’m an open book. Ha ha!”

But all that was yet to come. What they had that night in Elko was velvet air and condensing dew, the shuffle of the desert wind, the distant hoot of coyotes. And the sky. Baird lay on his back with a towel folded under his head for a pillow and followed Marie’s voice as she took him on a tour of the night’s treasure.

“And there’s Algol.” Moving her finger down.

Every star had a story.

He knew that the light from the stars they saw now had traveled further than any human could wrap his mind around. He had learned from his one required science course for non-science majors that the star whose light they saw might well be dead by now. Marie disabused him of that notion. Sure, it was possible, especially for some of the stars visible through the university’s strong telescope. Less likely for those they could see with their eyes alone. But he hung onto the idea that the scattering of light across the sky was a time-shifted map, an indication of the distance between reality and human perception.

Here was the starlight, come to dazzle his eyes and give Marie something to study.

It came to him that they were complete opposites, his young wife and he. She turned her gaze outward to these pinches of light from enormous burning suns while his turned to constellations within. He marveled again at how they had come together, his preoccupation and hers, his inner and her outer, in their skins and flesh and couplings, so they made one coherent whole.

“Look, there’s Cassiopeia,” she said, and indeed, there she was.

“Unrivaled in beauty.” Baird took the notebook from Marie’s hands, drew her close across the chilly fabric of their sleeping bags, and kissed her.

For the next three weeks, the Celestron remains in its case and the new bottle of bourbon unopened in its cabinet. Marie’s notebook stays put in the bedside drawer.

Now Baird is back at the observatory, welcoming the eager

families as if having a chance to say goodbye makes loss any easier.

“Mr. Whitman! Mr. Whitman!” A girl wearing a puffy parka with a fur-fringed hood runs up to him. He recognizes her as the one who noted the absence of the first star last month.

A woman arrives behind the girl. “Don’t bother Mr. Whitman while he’s setting up.”

Baird makes a final adjustment and aims the telescope at Taurus. The old, reliable bull. “It’s okay. I’m done.”

The girl looks up at him, her face half in shadow. She’s got her hands behind her back.

“Go on, show him,” says the woman who must be her mother.

Baird squints at the piece of paper the girl holds out.

“It’s the Seven Sisters,” the girl says.

“She used the chart from the book you told us about,” her mother adds. “She spent a long time getting the distances right.”

He studies the various-sized circles, perfectly spaced.

“I used a protector to make the circles.”

Baird laughs. “You mean a *protractor*.”

The girl giggles.

“It’s very accomplished. You could have a job as a star charter.” He hands the paper back.

The girl shakes her head. “I made it for you. Mom said you aren’t being our teacher anymore after today.”

“Thank you.”

Later, at home, he studies the drawing. He’s not sure how old the girl is but she has, indeed, faithfully measured the distances and labeled the clusters. And they are all there, each accounted for, each in its rightful place.

He notices a signature at the bottom right, written in the wavering loops of someone just learning to sign her name.

Maia.

“Oh!” He tilts the drawing toward the light. When he leans closer, the letters resolve themselves into different forms.

Nara.

And now he’s laughing, a gale of sound that echoes in the empty kitchen. His laughter goes on longer than it should until it morphs into sobbing mixed with the sound of star-

names and people-names, the best he can come up with to call back the things he's lost.

Baird meets Kimmie in the graduate students' office. He feels safer here than in the observatory where the Celestron CGX-L 1400 betrayed him.

She spares him explaining his presence. "I heard about Friday stargazing. We'll miss you."

"Thanks. I'll miss it—you—too." He tugs on the collar of the new field coat, the corduroy still stiff from the factory. "But that's not what I wanted to talk to you about."

Kimmie runs a hand through her spiky hair. "Is everything okay?"

He has come to tell her no, everything is not okay. Everything is very much not okay. I am dying inside, the universe is dying, someone is messing with us, we're all going to die. He has come to open the notebook he's stowed in the interior pocket of the field jacket and show her how messed up everything is, to share the notes he took as the Seven Sisters dwindled to less than half of their former self, a barren constellation that looked nothing like sisters and nothing like seven. He has come to tell her of the solitary funerals he held after every disappearance, late into the night with the bottle of bourbon balanced on the deck railing. He has come to tell her of the notes Marie—or someone, or something—leaves in the notebook alongside his, the sane and steady commentary the only thing keeping him from running screaming into the night.

Baird draws the room's stuffy air into his lungs. "Oh sure. I wanted to let you know I'll be gone for a bit. I'm planning a road trip. Camping in the Nevada desert—just me and the stars."

"That sounds amazing. Cold this time of year, though." Kimmie rests her elbows on the arms of the chair. "Can we count on you as a Friday night guest when you get back?"

The thought fills him with dread. But what can he say? Marie would remind him of commitment, of obligation, of the way a constellation is born not of a singular star but of clusters, groups, each one with its place and its role.

"Of course," he says.

Benjamin Keyworth

The Ties That Bind

The old man sits beneath the courthouse steps and weaves bands of colour.

Around him the city moves, its people leaves of well-dressed detritus. They blow past him in their hundreds. Men in fitted suits, short hair on sides and long on top, big voices, big gestures and a constant paranoid glance. Pencil-skirted women whose heels tick-tap across the ground, bright as birds of paradise and just as calculated in their beauty. Visitors in fashionably-torn shorts and namebrand singlets, stark for their indifference, pointing at buildings, laughing, their conversation light and cheap. The police in their vests and uniforms, weapons forgotten and holstered, who level him suspicious glares as they pass to testimony and back.

The old man sees it all, and none of it.

He is a weathered, wizened creature. Hooked nose, bald crown, skin like sandalwood. He wears the same brown raincoat every day, long past his knees, its cuffs and tail in tatters, the colour indistinguishable, assimilated with years of stains and dirt. He cares little for its condition, notices less beyond his work, the patterned knots his calloused hands weave from coloured plastic strands. They are pretty, barely; the type of thing you might hang from the zipper of your bag if it was made by your beloved child. But these were not. They belong to a silent, leather-dyed outsider, his back hunched perilously beneath his coat, his thin neck jutting lower than his spine. Oddly broad, lumpy and alien; a bleary-eyed vulture who has forgotten how to fly.

His world is a three-block radius and his life is a three-spoked wheel. There is the making of the coloured braids, the brightly knotted plastic, friendship bracelets or boondoggles, whatever they're called. There is the selling of the coloured bands, a process which involves no more advertisement or persuasion than standing on a corner and holding the creations aloft until a guilty-cashed passer-by takes pity on his condition or effort or time. Then, finally, there is the

writing—the recording of endless notes in cramped, illegible scrawl, pages and pages of A4 notebooks packed tight with code and stored in his nest for indeterminate purpose and time. This, above all, is most important; it is, he is certain, the only thing standing between him and certain doom.

Morning comes, the rivers of rush hour. The old man sits at the mouth of the tunnel, the train station exit, weaving with barely a suspicious glance. Completed bracelets dangle from his shopping bag, the invitation unspoken and ever-present; few pay it heed, his wares and presence a fixture for the dailies. Eventually, one of them stops—a young man, handsome and respectable, dark hair and straight teeth. Indistinguishable from the rest.

“Hello there,” the stranger says, “I’m Hassan.” A pause. No response. The stranger points to the knotted bands. “What’re you making? Can I buy one? How much?”

The old man shrugs. Such questions are irrelevant—he’ll only limit himself by answering. Surely enough, after a moment of silence the stranger hands him ten dollars in exchange for a single braid. The money leaves the stranger’s felt coat and enters the old man’s tattered one without incident or thanks.

“Well then,” smiles the stranger, pocketing the knotted plastic, “I’ll be seeing you. Have a good day.”

The old man says nothing, his eyes already returned to his work.

Avermillion sunrise today, auspicious, full of meaning. The old man takes careful note of it in his minute handwriting, the cheap BIC pen scratching hieroglyphs barely distinguishable as words. There’s an answer here, he’s certain; essential, unspoken. The back of his neck prickles and he can feel it—he’s the only one who knows the truth. The only one safe to tell.

It’s a warm day outside, even in the courthouse shadow. The old man peers intently at the people passing by, suspicious of their intentions, seeing instinctively where they fit. After an hour there are fewer of them and he relaxes, if only slightly—shuffles to the convenience store, trades a coin for a cup

of coffee. The staff know not to hassle him; he is a human hedgehog, harmless if left alone. The other customers pass him nervous looks, but the old man doesn't notice. This is just how people look at him these days.

Afternoon, and the day's patterns are recorded. His hands turn to weaving, and as the city exhales its workforce he's approached by a familiar face. The stranger, the same one from yesterday, greeting over at him with a nod and a smile. He hands him another ten dollars as he passes, without even wanting a bracelet in return, and the old man receives it without worry or complaint. Some of them are just like that. He waits until the human tides have receded and wanders to the supermarket for a mandarin and a bag of crisps.

Grey skies and battering rain, and the man sits well in cover. There's a wool jumper beneath his jacket, and the city rarely gets truly cold. Today is a day for weaving and watching—far too dangerous to write, though he doesn't let his trepidation show. They're somehow more dangerous in the rain, he knows; it's counterintuitive. The clouds cast shadows, blocking the connection to the sky. He keeps his eyes focussed on his work. The more they know he knows, the more danger he'll be in.

Less people today but the stranger still comes. He brings with him a second cup of coffee, which the old man accepts without thanks. The froth trickles bitter and creamy down his throat. This is, as they say, the good stuff.

The stranger stops to chat a while, asking polite questions, saying pleasant nothing. The old man does not respond, merely continues weaving, his shoulders hunched and his eyes downcast. Their conversation lapses into silence. The stranger's dark eyes gaze at him, though the old man barely feels their touch. He's watching for far more dangerous things than this one, this kindly regular pawn. The stranger stands beside the old man's chosen bench for a while longer, then trades him more money for another band. The transaction is background noise, a distraction—the old man's eyes flick warily. The stranger leaves, and his absence is barely felt.

Grey rain brings opaque tidings.

Overcast today, but with patches of blue spackled through the white. That's good, the old man knows, as his eyes follow a police van. Three tourists have already stopped to buy braids from him this morning. Serendipity. A ventilation day.

The stranger comes by and stops to talk to him, as is his fashion now, their routine. The old man doesn't mind. He's harmless, this one; always smiling, always kind. There is an inherent fidelity to him, a familiarity, an ease. He sometimes asks what the old man is writing, but he doesn't want to burden the stranger with such knowledge—better to keep those ill-fated auspices to himself. He feels protective of him, in a strange way; this kindvoiced stranger with his neat felt coat and combed black hair. So little he knows, so little he understands, yet he remains optimistic, as the old man once was, long ago, before his mind grew warm with knowing.

Before. A far distant memory, long banished from the old man's mind. He remembers pieces, the important bits, the strands he gathered together and braided into a single vibrant knot. The rest? It seems so irrelevant. He repulses, magnetically, from examining it. Grey and blurry fragments of a life devoid of meaning, from before he descended into truth. It's faded now, the thoughts of it, as withered and hunched as he is. Yet he can't quite shake the feeling that maybe there's something still in there. Maybe something that he missed.

"I'll see you tomorrow," says the stranger, seeing his eyes turn distant. The old man just grunts, his hands no longer moving as he swims in greywater memory, wading through inkscratched thought.

“Why don't you come and stay at my place?” Five days of rain now, dull winter, and reluctantly the stranger's suggestion has some merit. Even beneath his many layers the old man can feel the chill's taunt tendrils snaking their way through seams and holes. The sandwich in his hand is as good as any, another gift from the stranger, delivered like clockwork. It is not the kindness that concerns him, nor the unfamiliarity—he picked this place merely for its conjunction, a thoroughfare with stoops and shops and

shelter. It's the twists of destiny he's worried about; what if fate requires him to be here? But the patterns of cars driving past declare no certain duty to hold to, and the rain is cruel and apathetic in its bite. He lets the stranger have a small and silent nod, and the young man goes to bring his station wagon round. The old man loads his bags into the back and shuffles into the passenger seat. They're off. They drive in soft warm silence out of the city and into wide suburbia, between pale faced houses and weeping trees.

The stranger's home is kindly, as the old man expected it to be. A picket fence around a small garden, azalea bushes and apricot trees. A two-car garage and three steps to a doormat, then inside and into a narrow hallway trimmed with stairs. The stranger leads him along the floorboards and up into a bathroom, where he provides a hot shower and fresh clothes while the old man's own are washed. The weaver accepts it all with equanimity, taking it like he would a coffee or apple or spare coin. He steps naked into the standing tub, the hot water unnerving in its pleasantries, and scrubs with rigour and practice. There is much to be cleaned and muscle memory to draw upon, even if it's too distant to remember when it was forgotten. The old man emerges from the shower fresh and unaffected, and dries himself on the towel the stranger left behind.

They share a meal together, just the two of them in the stranger's dining room. Geometric patterned plates rest atop a thin white tablecloth, their colours warmed by amber lights. The meal is hot and hearty, roast lamb and chickpeas and jewelled rice, the old man's favourite, now that he remembers. He picks at it with satisfaction, pleased with the situation inside and out. Cold water too, then hot tea. He sips it, his mind drifting while the young stranger talks.

There is a bed made up for him, an empty, quiet room of soft white sheets and moonlight. He climbs into it and turns to sleep without hesitation, unthreatened by the strangeness or the change—there is comfort and there is warmth, and it has been many, many years since his life was last his own. Maybe it will be some time before they think to look here; maybe, as the stranger suggests, he might just stay a while.

It is pleasant days that follow, whispering raindrops and buttermilk sunrise. The old man sits a lot now, claims a leather recliner in the stranger's study, his fingers still braiding coloured knots—force of habit perhaps, for he has no present need of money. The stranger provides him meals and cares for him, gives him tea and blankets and light, empty notebooks and un-holed socks. He says things too, the stranger, many things, warm words that slip easily through the old man's mind. He talks of places and of people—of other strangers and their distant lives. The old man knows them not, but neither does he mind.

Then comes an odd day. The stranger calls the old man by a name, a kind name that he hasn't heard in many ages; a name that catches in the old man's throat, though he can't remember why. A strand of recognition flits, a syllable sitting not quite right—floating around him like a dandelion, slipping through his grasp. He thinks of consulting his journals but can't remember where it might have been put. This strange, familiar word. Sad; or bad; or Dad.

One of those.

The night is blue and moonless when the old man wakes and knows it's time to go. The realisation isn't dramatic but it's certain; as tight and sure as knotted metal, a calm encircling rope. He gathers his things in patient silence and re-dons his tattered coat—the pockets full of braided plastic, the familiar weight of knots. His footsteps make barely a sound as he treads down the staircase, across the hallway to the door. He passes a picture, a photograph, the old man and the stranger, both younger, both smiling. Taken long ago perhaps—but it swirls the old man's suspicions and coats them solid around his heart.

He leaves without word or notice, stepping out into the sleeping streets, the silent starlit sky. The old man shuffles ever onward, his shoulders hunched, his eyes down, never looking up, never looking back. Somehow, he knows where he's going. Somehow, this is what he must do.

The old man sits beneath the courthouse steps and weaves bands of colour. The city moves around him, its people

going about their lives. Businessmen and women, children and tourists, police in their uniforms and barristers in their robes. Some glance at him and some ignore him and the old man sees and disregards it all. He is a weathered, wizened creature, a fixture between the flotsam, and his tattered brown raincoat is the same today as it ever was. His hands weave patterned knots from coloured plastic strands, the type oft made by children, and his back hunches higher than his eyes.

Morning spreads, the flow of rush hour. The old man sits at the mouth of the train tunnel, weaving without a glance at the faceless figures passing by. Eventually, one of them stops—a young man, handsome and respectable, dark hair and straight teeth. Indistinguishable from the rest.

“Hello there,” he says. The old man glances up at him and sees a small, sad smile. “I’m Hassan.”

Peter Beynon

The Spirit of Sagaponack

Off the Maryland coast three hundred miles south of here, Hurricane Kimberly spins like the blade of a saw. The storm's kittenish name belies her ferocity: the Weather Channel says she is already a Category One and will likely get stronger traveling up the eastern seaboard. A brittle blonde onscreen lays out various paths the storm could take, as if she were sketching a fraying rope or the tail of a comet. In his apartment fifty miles south from mine, my son is tracking the storm too: "Look at that, Mom. It's getting ugly out there."

"The Hamptons are going to get hammered!" I say. And together we laugh, neither of us dwelling on the fact that, if Long Island gets hit, those of us in Ossining and Inwood will suffer too. We keep our phones pressed to our ears and watch in morbid rapture. We imagine Kimberly roaring up to the island before dawn to smash a modest cottage into kindling and sweep it out to sea.

On another mid-September night, this one in the 1970s, lightning struck a Sagaponack farm. By the time the fire department arrived, a greenhouse and a small barn had been destroyed, and flames were roasting a quarter acre of potatoes. The next day, men returned to the hissing fields to cart away charred timbers and the carcass of an old tractor; only the footings of the buildings remained to sit undisturbed for decades. Now the stones support a house by Maarten van der Platt, a former darling of American architecture and, I must admit, of mine.

When we married nearly twenty-five years ago, he was still Martin Platt. He remodeled his name, then the house, as he garnered more attention, more commissions, more money. While the zoning board required that Martin stay within the footprints of the original structures, he could connect the buildings, provided that the addition not be visible from the road. Fine by him; within a week, he'd modified the plans.

I had plans, too. Because writing books seemed more

gratifying than merely cataloguing and shelving them, I was drafting a memoir pairing family anecdotes and recipes. One night, with little Jacob finally asleep, I sat down with some pasta puttanesca. Though I'd long tinkered with a recipe from a back issue of *Gourmet*, the magazine's was better than any variation I'd come up with. So be it; the fun part was imagining ways to incorporate it into my book. I pictured myself as a girl in a kitchen with, say, the Sicilian coast or a Tuscan olive grove visible outside. I imagined some benevolent relative guiding me as my knife turned a pile of anchovies into savory paste. I was devising possible names for this mentor when I heard the apartment door slam. In the kitchen doorway, Martin stood there, silent, taking in the spattered stovetop, the pasta, and my notes before turning to me. I glanced at my list. "Which sounds better—'Uncle Tito' or 'Aunt Lucia'?"

Martin smirked. "So you're an Italian now?"

I could easily have said, "You're a Jersey boy, not a scion of Dutch aristocrats; can't I reinvent myself too?" But, as he took away my notes and my plate, I said only, "I'm still eating!" Martin swept away invisible crumbs and unrolled one of his drawings. I immediately recognized the floor plan: two parallel rectangles, like an equal sign, split up into spaces for cooking, entertaining, and sleeping. However, there was something new.

"What's that?"

"It's our summer place, of course."

Did he think I was stupid? "Yes, I know, but they're connected now."

Martin pointed out the new covered passageway that would allow us to move easily between one wing and the other. "It's also additional living space open to . . ." He traced a languid arabesque with his fingers, as if to conjure the necessary words. "It will be open to those tonic ocean breezes."

"A porch? Sounds wonderful."

He glanced again at my list, then at me, and shook his head. "Not a porch, Helen—a *piazza*." He gave the drawing a quarter turn. "Know what else I like about the new plan?" He tapped the page emphatically. "It forms an 'H.'"

"Martin, I don't—"

“An ‘H,’” he said, “for ‘Casa Helena.’”

Now I look back and laugh. Casa Helena! Piazza! Tonic breezes! Such grandiose language for shacks that housed pitchforks and a battered John Deere. But Martin’s theatrical hyperbole seduces clients with deep pockets and shallow self-worth, and on that winter night I fell for it too. He unfurled another meticulous drawing: he’d designed a built-in bookshelf for the porch that would stand just outside the kitchen door. I could put my herbs on top, he said, and my books inside. Sliding panels of cedar, cunningly pierced with a fretsaw and chisel, would conceal the books. How lovely. Never did our apartment, one we’d felt so lucky to find, seem so shabby. I looked again at the floor plan: “H” for home, for haven, for happiness. I kissed Martin, settled into his embrace, and said, “We’ll have a marvelous life out there.”

Eighteen months later, with construction complete, it seemed that we would. The sky sheltered a house that was airy and bright. I’d sit on the porch with Jacob and read to him, sing to him, mesmerize him with soap bubbles that streamed, tremulous and iridescent, from a plastic wand. He cried when they popped until I took his hand and helped him pop one himself. We made a game of it. Sometimes, while he napped, I’d sit on the porch to watch the clouds tear themselves apart, read a book plucked from those marvelous shelves, or tinker with my draft. Those days were the best. Then, of course, on the weekends Martin would take the train out to join us in that house. (*My* house, I should say: though I hastily relinquished any legal claims to it as we negotiated our divorce, the house, even now, is indelibly mine.) The porch, or “piazza,” if you must, was a passageway between the public rooms and the private. When, after a few happy summers, it became something else—a no-man’s-land between Martin’s quarters and mine—I left.

Did leaving that house liberate me or thwart me? I don’t know; I can’t tell. Looking back at the years that followed, I picture myself standing at a threshold, eager to cross, only for the door to slam in my face, again and again. A book no one would publish, a husband indifferent to a failing marriage, my once-athletic body slumping into middle age—everything and everyone seemed to disappoint me. And then there

was my beautiful child who, in spite of his charisma and intelligence, became a moody and directionless young man. An army of teachers, physicians, coaches, and psychologists failed, time after time, to guide him. So did Martin. When trouble assailed my son, I alone offered lasting support. Now, because of me, Jacob is back in school and back on track.

As for the cottage in Sagaponack, I'd forgotten about it, really; why hold on to the past? But one quiet afternoon a month ago, I was shelf-reading in the periodicals section of the library, where a patron flipped through one of those frivolous interior design magazines. I saw my house in its glossy pages. I ripped the magazine out of her hands ("This item hasn't been properly catalogued") and ran to the break room. I pored over the photos, read the simpering prose, and seethed:

"The floor plan forms a capital 'I,'" van der Platt says. The celebrated architect turns to his wife, chef and author Ingrid Sørensen, and grasps her hand. "'I' for 'Ingrid'; it's as if this house were destined to be yours!"—from Olivia Paine-Goodman, "An 'I' for Beauty: A Power Couple's Hamptons Retreat"; *Charrette & Atelier*, May 2021

When I awaken on the sofa two hours later, the living room is still awash in the colors of the Weather Channel. However, it's not the broadcast but the garage door opening one flight below that's roused me: Simon, my downstairs neighbor and landlord, has come home. I reach over to the side table to turn off the lamp; it's practically a reflex now. In the doldrums of winter, Simon would look for my shifting silhouette on the window shades. He'd interpret it, sometimes accurately, as a tacit invitation to stop by and share some wine and, if I chose, my bed. But my appetite for his company quickly waned. I am happy, truly, to see that this morose and bony Scot has summoned the decency to leave me alone.

My phone buzzes: Jacob says that Kimberly no longer has the island in her sights. Though she still petulantly flings wind and rain for miles around, she has lessened in might and pivoted east, soon to trouble only the blank face of the

open sea. At the foot of the screen, the chyron lists canceled evacuations and diminished storm surges. The meteorologists, their banter notwithstanding, are clearly disappointed. They cut to Rehoboth Beach in Delaware for an update. In the glare of the camera, a reporter sways and shouts: “We’re not out of the woods yet!” But behind him a woman and her dog amble by and unwittingly expose the manufactured drama on the screen.

So van der Prat’s dodged another bullet. If I didn’t laugh, I’d weep and break things.

Jacob is philosophical: “Well, that’s that, Mom.”

“Goddamn it. Fucking Kimberly.”

Jacob says nothing. On the television an SUV zooms towards the camera as the sun rises; it gives me an idea. I have a car, too; I have a destination, too. Even though Kimberly failed us, I tell Jacob, we can take on some of the work she chose to abandon. I lay out an ingenious Plan B that we can execute well before dawn.

He is so quiet that at first I think I’ve lost the connection.

“So . . . is that really your plan?”

I laugh. “It’s *our* plan.”

He lapses into silence again. Then he reminds me to be discreet: “Leave a message at the library; just say you’re sick.” He pauses again. “And open the garage door manually—no sense in waking the landlord.”

Jacob, it seems, has thought of everything. “My little criminal,” I say. He laughs, good-natured as always. I tell him I’ll pick him up at his place in ninety minutes.

“Maybe even less than that, Mom. Who drives to Inwood at this time of night?” Clever boy.

I run around the apartment, grabbing anything and everything that might come in handy: an army blanket from the closet, rubber gloves by the kitchen sink, the toolbox underneath. It’s intoxicating, the chance to be in control. I slip into the garage and stash everything in the back of the car. Hanging on the pegboard are crowbars, hammers, gardening shears, and a saw like a harp with fangs. So many choices! I take a sledgehammer and then the saw. It’s like plucking chocolates from a box. I hear footsteps. There, at the door between the garage and his kitchen, is Simon. “Greetings,

Helen.” I bristle: why can’t he leave me be? But when he gestures at the tool in my hand, his words are kind: “Careful, now; that bow saw is sharp.” He doesn’t ask what I’m doing or where I’m headed; he doesn’t scold me for taking his saw. He simply watches as I put it in the car, says, “Safe travels, love,” and goes back inside.

When I am about to close the hatch, I hesitate: something is wrong with this picture. I fetch the putty knife from the toolbox and scrape the Bard College decal off the rear window. It would crush Jacob to see it. Besides, if they let him back in, we can simply get another one. Half a mile from my apartment, as I head south, heavy rains start to fall.

When my son was a bitter middle-schooler, he’d refer to his father as “van der Fat” (Martin’s always loved a good meal), “van der Plotz,” and “van der Putz.” Then there was the day I picked Jacob up after a weekend in Sagaponack. The visit had been so unpleasant that he begged me for sole custody: “I’ve had it with van der Shit.”

“Stop!”

Jacob crossed his arms, ignored his tears, and set his jaw. He refused to make even a hollow apology. However, because he needed to know I’d always be in his corner, I chose my words with care: “Van der Shit’ is—well, forgive me, darling, but it’s not particularly clever. It lacks bite.” I paused to form a more precise assessment. “It lacks a sufficiently melodious echo of the actual name.”

Jacob looked up, his eyes bright. “How about ‘van der Prat’?” We laughed and laughed, and van der Prat it is, to this day.

Now, however, whenever we talk about his father, he modulates the heat in his voice, in spite of the long list of grievances we’ve compiled over the years. Most recently? Though Martin had dutifully paid for Jacob’s freshman year at Bard, community college was another matter: “This time, the tuition’s coming out of your pocket.” Imagine saying that to your child! When I brought it up again just before classes began a few weeks ago, Jacob said, “Enough, already, Mom; I took care of it.”

“How?”

“How do you think? I work.”

“You’re not slaving away in the archives again, are you?”

Jacob laughed. “No.”

Something like relief flooded through me. “Good. That’s good.” After Jacob’s junior year in high school, Martin offered him a summer job, calling it, with his usual blithe inaccuracy, an “apprenticeship.” Three mornings a week, our son knotted a tie and took the train into the city. Before Martin moved the firm into more modest quarters, Jacob used a scanner, digital camera, and acid-free folders to catalogue sketches, renderings, budgets, invoices—all from the rising days of Martin’s career. But Jacob got paid next to nothing, and, aside from lunch one afternoon at some gloomy club on the Upper East Side, he had scant contact with his father. Who could blame him for quitting before Independence Day? In spite of the example his father sets, our son is becoming a responsible and clear-sighted young man.

I pull up in front of Alcindor Convenience, quiet at this dark hour. Ruy, the owners’ son, lives with Jacob two flights above. (The boys are classmates at Jacob’s new school; I picture them side by side on the bus, calculus textbooks open on their laps.) A rangy young man in the doorway pockets a glowing phone, sprints over to the car, and slides into the passenger seat. He kisses me on the cheek and yawns. “Hey, Mom.”

“Hello, honey.” Like a seasoned housebreaker, Jacob is in black from head to toe. “I see you’ve dressed for success.” He doesn’t quite get what I mean. “No one will see you in the dark,” I explain. “Nice to know someone’s thinking ahead.”

Jacob taps his temple and says in a goofy voice, “I’m educamated!”

As we head for the expressway into the Bronx, we zip past bodegas, apartment houses, and churches. The clouds loose another downpour; my wipers can barely keep pace. A soothing murmur on NPR says falling trees have felled power lines outside Philadelphia; there are spotty blackouts throughout the Northeast. “If Sagaponack’s in the dark, all the better,” I say. Jacob doesn’t reply; he’s fallen asleep. I press the accelerator. Slick pavement hisses beneath the tires. The sledgehammer, saw, and toolbox chatter in the back.

Just past Ronkonkoma, I step out of a 7-Eleven, coffee in hand. The storm hasn't made much difference here: the rain has stopped, the air is fresh, and the lights of the store shine bright. Jacob is filling the tank.

"Honey, you didn't have to do that." He shrugs. I put my cup on the roof of the car and reach into my purse.

"Mom, please."

"You're already doing me a favor. You don't have to pay for gas, too." Before he can reply, a cheesy ring tone fills the air: Vivaldi's "Inverno," as played by microchip symphony. Jacob scrambles to silence his phone. "It's all right, darling," I say. "See what your father wants."

He nods and walks away; I take over at the pump. When we entertained friends in Sagaponack, Martin would complain genially about the Long Island Expressway—the traffic, the tedium, the charmless towns where, he'd say, convenience stores were "thick as ticks on a dog." I cringe thinking of his snobbery now.

At the edge of the parking lot, Jacob yells into his phone: "I said I'll take care of this!"

When he returns to the car, I ask, "Your father called at three in the morning to pick a fight?"

Jacob doesn't reply at first. Then he simply says, "It's not three where he is." After much prodding, Jacob reveals that Martin is out west—"Montana, Idaho—somewhere like that"—to meet with a new client, "some rancher with money to burn."

Another fancy house? Good for Martin, I guess. Then something occurs to me: "When's the last time you were in Sagaponack?"

"Mom—"

"I'm just curious."

Jacob sighs. "Two weeks ago." The day after Labor Day, he and Ruy drove out to close up the house for the season. They tossed out trash left by slovenly summer renters, cleaned out the gutters, and blinded the windows with plywood.

"Doesn't your father have people to do these things?"

"He fired them. I don't know why."

"I do. You're cheap labor."

"That's not fair!"

“Really? What princely sum does he pay you?”

“Tuition money!”

Jacob pulls his hat low and crosses his arms. In profile, he looks like his father—at least, like the lean and hungry Martin of years ago. I start the car, and we head off in silence.

When I was a college sophomore, I worked as a life model. Atop my platform, I was exposed, scrutinized by everyone scribbling away on limp newsprint. However, I was also essentially invisible. With the professor’s encouragement, the students saw not a naked twenty-year-old but a study in light and shade, a composition of angles and curves, a problem set of contrasting textures. I was more challenging to render but no more vividly individual than, say, a bowl of pears slumping into fragrant rot. One afternoon in the library, I tried to chat with a student from the class. This weaselly nonentity looked at me as if he’d never seen me before. When he realized who I was, I cut the conversation short and walked away.

After that, I was determined to make myself a more distinct presence in the studio. At break time, the professor would extend a hand to help me down from the platform. (He made me feel like a real partner.) Instead of fussing with hair ravaged by chlorine from the college pool or flipping open a textbook, I made my rounds. I’d don a seersucker robe as if it were velvet and ermine, and peruse my likenesses in soft pencil, charcoal, India ink. The students fell silent as I approached, each of them, it seemed, as eager for my approval as for the professor’s. I was no longer something; I was somebody.

On the day that, for better and for worse, changed my life forever, I lingered by the easel of a nearly mute freshman. My torso, my arms, my strong shoulders—his drawing merely gestured at them in broad lines that sprinted across the page. But my right foot? Its wrinkled sole, the pads of my toes descending in size like measuring spoons, the smudges of pigment from the studio floor? All this was rendered with marvelous, obsessive fidelity in three colors of Conté crayon.

“It’s lovely.”

To say any more would have violated the unwritten etiquette

of the studio—I was a pear in a bowl, after all, not a fellow artist—but for him those words were enough. He tucked his chin into his chest and mumbled, “Thank you.”

“Five minutes, Helen,” the professor said.

Had my life followed a different path, I suppose this nameless boy might have been the one I fell in love with and married. Now I can barely picture him. I walked on to the next easel, then the next. Another artist—slender, confident, his russet hair curly as pencil shavings—smiled at me. He tapped his signature on the sheet: Martin. “That’s me,” he said, “and this? This is you.”

He stepped aside. Martin had filled the page with the cascade of hair I’d loosed from its braid; he’d caught the arch of my brow, the slope of my nose, my hint of a smile. It was not a dispassionate study in anatomy; I felt seen. I turned to him, my face alight. “Yes,” I said, “it’s me.”

The clouds have fled by the time we reach Sagaponack. The homes and shops are mostly dark. But less than a mile from the house, lights from the back of a truck pick out a strange sight: an ancient maple has keeled over, a bride fainting at the altar. Behind a moat of traffic cones, a man in a hard hat brings a chainsaw to roaring life and starts cutting. Jacob stirs.

I turn down a side street and roll down my window. It’s so quiet that I can hear the throb of generators; the lights they power betray the presence of houses that privet hides by day. During our last summer here, Jacob would play with the boy from the caretaker’s cottage next door; his parents gardened and cleaned for an unfathomably wealthy couple we would never meet. Their house, bristling with chimneys like acupuncture needles, loomed at the end of a driveway paved in broken seashells.

Martin was more eager to imitate the aesthetic of our aloof neighbors’ home than its practical features; there have never been any generators or security lights to lift Casa Helena out of the dark. When I pull in, I hear the snap of shell under the tires. The headlights reveal cedar shingles, fresh white woodwork, and the panels the boys fitted over the windows. “Honey?”

Jacob awakens, stretches, and peers through the windshield. “I love this place.”

“Darling, you do remember why we’re here?” As his smile fades, something—guilt? pleasure? who can say?—blooms inside me. “Besides, mawkishness doesn’t suit you.” I kill the headlights; the house vanishes.

I pop the hatch, pocket a screwdriver, and don my yellow gloves. And there’s the sledgehammer that knocked about as I drove. But I lose my grip wrestling it out of the car; its head smashes into the shells at my feet. Dragging it carves a tortuous path in my wake. “Here, Jacob; I have something for you.”

He doesn’t respond. He stands in front of a dark house backlit by stars. When he speaks, his voice is soft: “Dad was going to stain the siding deep red, but changed his mind.” Jacob laughs a bit. “He said, ‘This place is for people, not livestock.’”

(“Dad”? Not “van der Prat”?)

Then the air abruptly brightens: the lamps flanking the steps to the porch come on, and lights from the caretaker’s house next door peek through the hedges. “Power’s back,” Jacob says. He turns to look at me, then notices the sledgehammer. He takes it; of course he can wield it much more effectively than I. But he says, “We won’t be needing this,” and heads back to the car.

Though the house is modest in scale, it is rich in detail. Note the porch bookshelf’s sliding doors: intricate curves cut into each panel turn cedar into lace. As the proud mistress of the house explains, “When the doors are shut, these cut-outs look like random shapes. But slide one over the other—*et voilà!*” The overlapping perforations create an image: cascading hair, an arched brow, the hint of a smile on the face of a mysterious beauty. Who is she? we ask van der Platt. The architect shrugs. “The spirit of Sagaponack, I suppose.”—Paine-Goodman, “An ‘I’ for Beauty”

I run back to the car and grab the hatch so Jacob can't close it. He eyes my rubber gloves. "What are you wearing those for?"

Is he serious? Does he not remember the details of my plan? "So I don't leave any fucking fingerprints!"

"Mom, Mom—"

"I thought you were here to help. I thought we were going to accomplish something!" I push him away, grab the saw, and stomp back to the house. My voice bounces off the shingles. "Did you see that ridiculous article? 'I' for 'Ingrid'? This is the 'Casa Helena'! He built it for us, he built it for me! Does he think he can forget all that?" I pause on the steps. Jacob still stands by the open hatch of the SUV. "Let's go, Jacob. Chop chop!"

He shuts the hatch and walks up to me. He strikes a mulish pose, crossing his arms and glaring. "They're selling this place."

"What are you talking about?"

"Dad told me about the story. You know why he let them print it? Because he wants to sell." Half the people in those magazines, he explains, just want to show off, but the others plan to put their houses on the market. A four-color spread in *Charrette & Atelier* will raise the profile of the property and thus the price it will command. "It happened when Dad was starting out. He remodeled some swanky duplex on the East Side, and as soon as the magazine ran a feature on it, the owners sold it and made a mint." ("Swanky"? "Made a mint"? He sounds like Martin.) "I think Dad really needs the money."

Suddenly weary, I ask a question I should have thought to ask hours ago: "Jacob, why are you here?" He hangs his head and mumbles.

"Honey, I'm sorry. What did you—"

"For protection!"

"Well, that's very sweet of you, but I don't think—"

"The house!" He sighs and looks away. "I'm here to protect the house."

Rage boils up inside me. This isn't Jacob's fight; how dare Martin put him in the middle. Over my son's shoulder, the horizon is aflame; I'm running out of time. But when I turn back to the house, I'm startled to see smooth wood where my

face should be: a sheet of plywood covers the sliding doors of the bookshelf. I can't help shouting: "That's not supposed to be there!" I struggle to pry it off with my screwdriver.

"Mom, wait!"

I'm merely chipping the edges; the panel doesn't budge. Why didn't I grab Simon's crowbar when I had the chance? "Damn it!" I slump to the floor of the porch and start to cry. Jacob stares at me.

"There's something behind here."

"Mom, no."

"There is, there is! I need to see it!" I swipe at my tears. "Please, honey. It's important."

He seems about to object, but then nods, almost imperceptibly. He picks up my screwdriver and moves methodically around the edges of the plywood, dropping screws one by one into his pocket, like loose change. Then he extends a hand to help me up. "Ready?"

He lifts the sheet away at last and puzzles over the shapes cut into the doors.

"You don't remember them? Not even from the archives?"

He shakes his head.

"Lovely, aren't they? Lovely, but not practical; they don't keep the rain out." I slide one panel over the other: *et voilà*, I think. We gaze at the face before us. "Say hello to your mother, Jacob."

"What do you mean?"

I tell him about the day his father and I met. I tell him about Martin's drawing that, so many years later, would be given new life on the porch of this fussy little house in the Hamptons. I tell him about the traitorous lies in the article. Jacob listens intently, tracing the curves cut into the doors. "That isn't Ingrid," I say, "and it sure isn't the goddamn Spirit of Sagaponack."

Jacob puts his arm around my shoulders. "I'm really sorry, Mom." He is so strong, so kind; how could his father have pushed away such a loving child? Some raucous bird splinters the silence: morning is here. As if a signal has been given, Jacob picks up the saw and, resolute once more, heads for the car. That's that, I think; we're finished. I can't tell whether I am disappointed or relieved.

But then he's back with the blanket, the putty knife, and hammer. "Come on, Mom. There is something you can help me do." We spread the blanket on the floorboards in front of the shelf. It takes us just minutes to ease off the molding and free the intricate doors. We cradle them in the blanket and struggle, just a bit, to stow them in the car. Jacob catches my eye and smiles, and I smile back. As we drive away, the boxy house quickly disappears from view, and blue shadows burn off in the sun.

Darius Degher

War Story

Spring, 1968

When my dad said he'd met Ezra Pound during the war, in a latrine, the strangeness of it didn't sink in. Why would it? I was eleven years old and knew almost nothing about World War II, let alone what a latrine was. I did know of Ezra Pound, though, because my fifth-grade teacher had just made us write something called Ezra Pound Couplets.

My dad was already over fifty then, when I asked him to tell me something about the war.

"Did you ever kill anybody?" I asked.

"Hell, I don't know, son."

"How can you not know if you killed somebody?" I wondered how you could possibly miss something like that.

His eyes, always chocolaty, smiled into mine as he put his arm around my opposite shoulder and gave me a gentle shake. He never answered my question. It was filed away in that shoebox in the garage, the same one that held his silver lieutenant's bar and Purple Heart. So was the mention of Ezra Pound. I was too young to even wonder why a famous poet and my dad would have been using the same toilet during the war. The teacher had insisted that our own Ezra Pound Couplets should feature "surprising intersections," and had spent a half hour explaining what that meant, but the surprise of this particular one wouldn't come clear for decades.

That night our attention shifted to the TV. The nightly news was becoming cluttered with the images and sounds of Vietnam. Helicopter whir, machine gun rattle, skinny brown children with blank stares. I could feel tension in the air. And it wasn't limited to the TV. When the wind was right, you could hear the faint wash of B-52s taking off from March Air Force Base on their flights across the Pacific. Not that I had consciously connected that sound to the images on the TV news.

At the dinner table, Mom sighed. "Dear God, they're dropping napalm again!"

“Screw Vietnam!” Danny said. “I’ll go to Canada.”

“No swearing in *this* house,” Mom intoned, as if *screw* was a swear word and swearing in other houses was permitted.

Dad said, “No one’s going to Vietnam, not my son anyway.”

Something seemed odd to me about this statement. Earlier, Dad had been on Danny about his long hair and about not asking your country what it can do for you but what you can do for it. Danny was now out of high school, and his future gaped before him, including the possibility of being drafted.

Dad was only five-seven, and he wasn’t exactly what you’d call stocky, but he had oversized features. His hands were vice-grips, his voice that stentorian bass in the barbershop quartet. You could, in fact, picture him as a Mediterranean fisherman, heaving nets under lateen sails like his grandfather.

He said, “It’s is an immoral war, and you’re not going, not if I can help it.”

Danny glanced at Mom and seemed unsure how seriously to take this. It wasn’t the kind of thing you heard parents say at the time. Her left eyebrow arched slightly, soon accompanied by one of her mysterious smiles.

After that, some evenings I’d see Dad making phone calls and taking notes. Since he was on the city council, he knew our congressman personally. He was also friends with our family doctor, the one who’d delivered me. A week later he was showing Danny a letter documenting his knee surgery from the year before, the doctor’s signature at the bottom. He’d torn the meniscus in his left knee playing fullback that season.

During the following months, Dad continued to grumble about Danny’s hair and the music he played. (He especially despised Country Joe’s “Fish Cheer.”) But he’d started speaking openly against the war. He also intervened in a protest downtown, where the police were threatening student demonstrators. That had even gotten his picture in the paper. As a result, at a barbecue the following week-end, our next-door neighbor Joe Culver spoke up.

“So, Johnny, I hear you’re a commie.”

To which Dad replied, “So, Joe, I hear you’re an imbecile.”

Danny’s friends seemed disoriented when they’d visit, as if they no longer knew how to relate to Dad, a parent who

understood their feelings about Vietnam being as anomalous as a gray-haired rock musician. It was as if my parents had descended from a spaceship, the only adults in the neighborhood willing to question the war. I even heard Mom defending Danny's pony-tail to the neighbor ladies: "Jesus had long hair, too, didn't he?"

Danny did eventually get called for a second medical exam. In anticipation of it, he'd found an application in the back pages of *Rolling Stone* and sent away for a certificate designating him a legal minister in the Universal Life Church. So, he could claim conscientious objector status if necessary. It wasn't necessary. Dad had kept his word. The congressman got another call, and Danny's medical records were sent out. In the end, he had to stay enrolled at City College instead of traveling, but his life remained pretty much the same. Then one day a letter arrived, and he came screaming into the kitchen. Fortunately, Mom was in the laundry room at the time.

"Fuck Vietnam—I'm 4F!"

Winter, 1998

Now Danny's got two sons of his own and a psychology practice in West L.A. He no longer has the pony-tail, but he's still got the same crooked smile, with that one really sharp incisor, and a cutting wit to match.

"What's up, kid bro? Still think poetry can solve the problems of the world?"

He's always loved to give me shit for writing poetry. Then he turns to his niece, my teenage daughter Delilah.

"Don't become a poet. Become a psychologist. We always know what people are thinking, especially teenagers."

We're all together again at the old house on the canyon, enacting the same Christmas rituals we did thirty years ago. Except we appreciate them more now, with our greater awareness of life's temporal limits.

Dad was at dialysis again today. After each session, his will to live seems to have ebbed away a little more, like a dropping tide. We'd all talked him into the dialysis. Julie, my wife, had said, "Do it for your grandchildren, John." Now, when we see him after the treatments, we're not so sure we did the

right thing. It's Christmas Day, though, and he hasn't had one in some forty-eight hours, so vestiges of his old spunk are present, like the thin ring of sunshine around a solar eclipse. He's just had us play "My Way" twice in a row, singing along with that twinkle in his eye and getting most of the words right. He's drinking eggnog, pooh-poohing Mom's warnings about his blood sugar. I've just persuaded him to speak into my video camera, on a mission to capture a piece of him for posterity. In truth, it wasn't hard—he's still got a hammy side. I ask him about the war, teasing.

"Hey, you never said if you killed anyone."

After all these years he still won't answer. But Julie detects something in his expression, a tiny crack in the wall of his life story. Over the years, we've wondered about his refusal to speak about his war experiences. Danny has also pried, using his shrink strategies, but to no avail.

"C'mon John, there's something you're leaving out."

She smiles but doesn't let up. "We're adults. I'm sure we can handle any surprises you may have for us."

Then, after meeting Mom's eyes, he does surprise us.

"OK, if you turn off that damned camera, I'll tell you a story. In truth, it's something I've been meaning to do for a long time."

I let the camera continue to run, and he doesn't seem to care or notice. Light shifts in the winter windows, chiaroscuro penumbras rising up behind us on the living room walls.

Spring, 1945

The stink of the latrine blended with the smoke of mess hall wood fires at the DTC, the Disciplinary Training Center. It had been pouring for days there, north of Pisa, and rain sloshed beneath his boots, creating the sludge he had to walk through wherever he went, the brown muck that found its way into the tent, even into his sleeping bag. No matter what he tried, he couldn't clear it away completely. Yes, there had been mud wherever they'd bivouacked in Northern Italy that spring, but this mud was different. It was the brown of chocolate chips, the consistency of sticky pudding. It stuck to his boots, even managed to find its way into his socks. He'd dreamt about it in a succession of nightmares, where it was

engulfing him, up to the level of his neck, slowly pulling him under. He could taste it, bitter as ash, when he'd jerk awake coughing.

As he sat there in the covered latrine, the mud of the dirt floor formed little ridges and troughs that guided the rainwater. With so much time on his hands, he sat there staring at those rivulets like it was some sort of recreational activity, guessing which direction the water would run.

"These rills beneath our boots do etch surprising intersections."

Ezra Pound had spoken. The engine of American Modernist poetry was musing on the mud, too.

Both men, squatting forward on a rough bench with circular holes cut into it, kept their eyes downward.

Dad knew nothing of Pound's poetry, or poetry at all for that matter. But he knew who Pound was—that he'd been arrested for broadcasting pro-Mussolini propaganda to U.S. service personnel on Italian radio.

Dad uttered a single, less poetic, word in response to the poet's symbolic observation.

"Traitor."

Pound spoke again, his goatee bobbing along with his measured cadence.

"I, my young friend, am a soldier of culture."

And he elaborated what sounded to Dad like some sort of economic theory, which included the terms "European cultural heritage," "money-lenders," and "artistic moral obligation." Then my father spat into the mud at Ezra Pound's feet.

One April afternoon five years earlier, Dad had surprised Mom in the kitchen of their Cleveland apartment.

"Betty, I enlisted today." He didn't need to explain that he'd done this of his own free will. No draft had been instituted. The United States wasn't yet sure it wanted anything to do with the mess in Europe. They'd only been married a year, but there he was explaining what he knew of his future furlough opportunities at Fort Bragg.

Mom leaned back against the Formica countertop, hazel eyes flashing both curiosity and anger.

“Jesus, Johnny, don’t you think maybe we should’ve discussed it first. “What about our plans for a home, a family?”

“Betty, we can’t just sit here and let this Hitler tear through Europe. I just did it. I realized it was something I needed to do.”

The truth is neither of them would ever be able to say why he’d done it. It may simply have been for the reason stated: to help stop Hitler. But life is rarely that straightforward; there’s usually a second and a third story in there as well. In Dad’s case, what might those other stories have been? Restlessness? Patriotism? A need to prove something to himself? His immigrant background driving him to validate his American worth? Who knows. I could privilege one over another for the sake of this story—but I’d rather let them all smudge together, like wet leaves on a busy sidewalk.

Whatever the reason, he’d soon found himself in boot camp and then in New Orleans for officers’ training school. They’d gotten Mom an apartment there, too, and she settled into life in the Crescent City, with the bedbugs and the chicory. But then Dad was crossing the Atlantic, to officers’ intelligence school in Northern England. Then London during the Blitzkrieg. Years later, eating fish and chips, he’d shake his head and wax nostalgic to us about the stoic Brits cracking wise on their way to the air-raid shelters. And then he was in Algiers and Tunis and beyond, pushing his platoon through mission after mission in the desert. That’s how he’d made first lieutenant, that single silver bar the pride of his uniform. In his eyes, it outshone all the other decorations pinned there, including the Purple Heart, with its accompanying scar on the right side of his ribcage.

Now—after five years of grit and pep talks to tired men and condolence letters and marches in the rain and shells exploding around them—here he was, with Ezra Pound, both prisoners at the DTC, which the U.S. Army had originally set up as a POW camp. He knew it well: he’d delivered German POWs here himself.

In his bunk, and everywhere else, he thought back on the order from Major McConnel, the order that had so completely scuttled his future plans.

“Lieutenant Cory: Mongiorgio Pass needs to be cleared. Your platoon will report for that detail tomorrow at 0500 hours.”

He knew Mongiorgio well. They’d already tried clearing it. It was treacherous, because you had to ford a rushing creek and then cross a ravine by way of a rope bridge that was in plain view of *gebirgsjäger*, the German mountain riflemen. In their last attempt at crossing it, his best corporal, Evers, had been hit by those snipers. He’d been right in the middle of the single-file line crossing the bridge. Bullets peppered him. As half the men on the bridge broke forward and half backward, the wooden slats rippled like a flying carpet, and Evers, perhaps already dead from the gunshot wounds, went over the side into the swollen river at the bottom of the ravine. His body, coated in mud, wasn’t recovered for five days. Of course, Dad had been the one, as always, who wrote the personal letter home, this time to Evers’ wife back in Akron. Over the previous two years, he’d heard so much about her that he knew exactly how to put things. He knew her favorite flower was the daisy and that the secret ingredient in her mashed potatoes was mayo. He knew her first concern would be for the welfare of her children, and he promised to do all he could to expedite the GI services she’d be entitled to.

He also knew the same German snipers were still burrowed in up there at Mongiorgio, sticking it out until the very end—the Armistice everyone was talking about and expecting, perhaps within days.

“Sir, may I speak frankly?”

McConnel nodded.

“Hitler’s dead. This thing is all but over. The champagne’s on ice, sir, just like in the Cardinals’ locker room during Game Six last year. I can’t risk my men again, not at this late stage of the game.”

“That’s the order, Cory. To hell with your baseball references. We’re at war. Dismissed.” And McConnel waited for him to salute and leave.

But Dad only needed a few seconds to mull the matter over, because he’d already mulled it to hell during the previous days. Sometimes in cold sweats. The truth is, he was done. His career as a soldier had ended when he saw Evers take

those bullets on the bridge. That was his own final bridge, too, his final military act.

“I can’t do it, sir. It’s a goddamned suicide mission. My men are depleted, especially after Evers. It’s too much to ask at this point, when there’s no strategic need. No, let the Jerries camp out up there till the end. It’s a matter of days, maybe even hours, until the Armistice. You and I both know that! And if you really want this to get ugly, I’ll take it up the ladder. You know Rasmussen will see it my way.”

And they both knew this might be true. It had been Colonel Rasmussen who’d pinned the Purple Heart onto Dad’s lapel and spoken to him so often of a career with the Army.

But Dad never got the chance to speak to Rasmussen. Instead, McConnell implemented his own punitive measures for willful insubordination. That night, Dad was driven north by jeep to the front, where he was forced to march in alone and camp for two nights in a position precisely halfway between the Axis and Allied lines. Though both sides knew the war was in its final days, the artillery units were still lobbing shells, if only for the sake of keeping up appearances.

Dad had had no choice that night. He dug a foxhole with his bare hands while in a prone position. It was foggy, which made the digging possible but also prevented him from seeing where the shells were coming from. He hunkered down in that hole, the artillery shells of both armies whistling overhead, some landing close enough to shower him with mud. Each ignition stabbed at his eyes, even when they were shut tight. The concussion of the detonations battered him against the sides of his hole. But the worst was the sound, even with his fingers plugging his ears. Both the German eighty-one millimeter mortars and his own army’s seventy-five millimeter mountain guns, it didn’t matter which. After each fusillade, a hush settled in, a hush that lasted until his hearing returned. The second night was just as bad.

In the end, he’d managed to keep alive until they signaled he could make a dash for the jeep, but his nerves were rattled. And he’d never completely regain the hearing in his left ear. This exercise was McConnell’s personal form of punishment. Such an improvised punishment, however, did not replace the very formal court martial for insubordination that was to

come. That had already been set in motion.

Mom was waiting for him when he arrived at Cleveland Union Terminal in August of 1945. On the way back to their apartment, Dad drove five blocks out of the way to avoid the victory parade on Superior Avenue. It wasn't that he didn't feel deserving. The Distinguished Service Cross and Purple Heart were sufficient evidence of his share of valor. Not to mention the engraved plaque his platoon had sent him after the court martial: *Lieutenant Johnny Cory: Leader of Men*. It's just that he wanted to forget the whole thing for a while.

"War? What war?" he said to Mom whenever she asked about it.

More than anything, in those months after returning home, he didn't want to have to talk war with people at all. And everyone, from the mailman to the bank teller, was talking war. The most bothersome were the men who took the deepest pride in their accomplishments, as if there'd been no pain, no fear, no loss, as if the experience had been one straight road without any curves or cross-streets. He knew the ones with their chests puffed out furthest were those who'd seen the least action, the ones who'd held desk jobs in London or Rome, the ones whose military accomplishments likely paled next to his own.

But he didn't talk about any of that, especially not with Mom's brothers, one of whom had also been decorated, having been at Iwo Jima. That famous photo of the Marines hoisting the flag stood on Grandma's mantle next to a painted ceramic figurine of the Mother Mary. Mom's brothers had never liked Dad anyway. They were Irish. He was Lebanese. For them, that was the whole story. Once Mom's younger brother Brendan made a comment about "sand niggers," and Dad bloodied his nose for him.

The uncles never uttered a word about Dad's military history. They didn't have to. It hung in the air like a foul fog halting conversational traffic, except that related to food, sports, or the weather. If it ever went beyond that, if innuendo reared its head, Mom's eyes would smolder, and her brothers would make nervous jokes about the evil eye. This would usually chill the conversation, returning it to the rating of

the chowder or stew before them. The uncles joked about the evil eye, but Mom's glare never lost its force.

It was around this time that Ezra Pound's trial appeared in the newspapers. Pound seemed oblivious as he denied that his radio broadcasts had been treasonous. Angry at first, Dad ended up smiling to himself about their meeting in the latrine. And one of Pound's explanations for the broadcasts did reverberate.

"I have not spoken with regard to *this* war, but in protest against a system which creates one war after another."

That statement found a corner of refuge in Dad's heart, and perhaps in his image of Pound as well, whose actions now seemed more like those of a loose cannon than those of a traitor. And he wondered if maybe this was how the uncles thought of *him*.

Life continued after the war. Danny was born, Dad found work, Mom made extra money as a hairdresser, and the nameless minor successes and failures grew together in the form of everyday life. As a child, though, Danny kept getting sick. First it was one cold after another, then some months later he contracted a case of rheumatic fever that wouldn't slacken its grip, and the health of his heart became jeopardized. He managed to get through that, too, but at a follow-up appointment, the family doctor surprised them with a question.

"Have you ever considered moving to a warmer climate? Someplace warmer and drier would do this boy a world of good."

Yes, Johnny Cory had been through some hard changes, but there was one other change he intended to make, in order to start fresh. When Dad's father had arrived at Ellis Island, one of those immigrant name surgeries had been performed. On his immigration papers, three letters of the Maronite name Khoury had been altered. The *k* had been Anglicized to a *c*, while the *h* and the *u* were completely displaced, left to sojourn alone in search of a home somewhere outside the melting pot. But these letters hadn't been forgotten by my grandfather. He often talked about the altered family name, and in his final days he'd let Dad know just how peacefully

he would rest if somehow *Cory* could become *Khoury* once again.

“John, promise me that one day you’ll make the family name whole again. Do it for your own son. And for me.”

So, on a spring day in 1949, Johnny Cory entered Cleveland City Hall and filled out the simple paperwork. When he left, he was John Khoury. Johnny Cory was no more. And that spelling change came with a fringe benefit. It further distanced the war history, allowed for the lifting of a persistent background weight. The sandbags holding back a once-rising river could now be removed. The waters threatening the family house could begin to recede. The front door could now be thrown wide open.

Without a government-guaranteed mortgage or the other benefits of the GI Bill, denied after the court martial, Dad had to work a little harder. But he was used to that. *When the going gets tough, the tough get going.* How many times had he used those words to spur on his platoon in North Africa and Italy? How many times would he intone them to my brother and me before difficult baseball games? So, John Khoury got going. One job led to another. There was a promotion. Less than a year later, when he requested it, the company offered him a new position out West, in a small Southern California town called Redlands, where orange blossom redolence would come to fill their evening air. Where I would be born. Where Cleveland, Ohio, would be forgotten more easily than anyone had ever imagined it could.

One bright day, Dad steered the blue and white Chevy Bel Air westward, and the family never looked back. In the early sixties, Mom did take me on a couple train trips back East to see the aunts and uncles. Dad, however, would never return to Cleveland again, not for family reunions, not for funerals.

Winter, 1998

When he finishes talking, we all just sit there, the lights twinkling on the Christmas tree. The stuffing warming in the kitchen. The aroma of roast turkey filling the air.

Then we bombard him with questions. Danny voices the one we’re all thinking.

“How the hell have you kept this secret all these years?”

Dad just shrugs, water welling in his eyes yet never developing into actual tears.

“I was ashamed.”

Again, there’s a lull before we protest with hugs and affirmation, assuring him that in the context of *our* times, *our* values, he’s more like a hero, a soldier of conscience who stood up to the overwhelming might of the American military. A man willing to pay the price for the sake of a higher law.

And then a tear does make its way onto his cheek, the first I’ve ever seen there.

“But this was 1945.”

I glance at Mom, her smile more mysterious than ever. Then we all spend the rest of the afternoon reflecting on our newfound family history. Danny seems uncharacteristically silent, but he does finally speak.

“The puzzle pieces are falling into place. I would’ve gone to Vietnam had it not been for Dad’s own war story.”

Faces all around the room glisten with the tinsel.

Spring, 2000

Now he’s gone, and I’m thinking about John Khoury’s life, each step and misstep a new start, a chance to wrest away his little wedge of history from the hands of less considerate historians. I decide to try and order his military records, hoping to freeze at least one facet of his story into “fact,” hoping to find documentation of his trial at least. It turns out that in 1973, just a few years after he’d helped Danny avoid Vietnam, his official military personnel files were destroyed in a great conflagration at the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis, along with 16-18 million other records. No official trace of his military service remains. He never knew this.

The weight of that irony, that history, continues to reverberate, even if it’s required thirty years of perspective to understand. It spreads out in reflections and refractions, bouncing back to meet itself and other stories at surprising intersections, perhaps becoming lodged in the personalities of Danny’s and my children and future grandchildren, in the legacies of what happened and what didn’t.

K. L. Perry

Like That

The first time I pick him up, the day I get my license, I back out of his driveway in the family car and roll straight into a tree. We both get out to take a look.

“Dude.” He says, looking at the tree shaped dent over the back fender.

“Oh, fuck” I say.

“Dude! That sucks.”

“Shit,” I say.

Then he laughs with that laugh he has, “You totally hit that tree. Dude!” he says it again.

I laugh too, then we get back in the car.

When he laughs like that he can make me do things; drive to the city to buy a bag of weed, or give him my last cigarette. He can make me blow off Jill from Honors Chemistry even though we have a test and I need her notes. He can make me skip the last class of the day to stand around the park and get high.

He doesn't like drinking. His mom is a drinker and this seems to have turned him from it. I like the feel of a good drunk and more than once have been known to carry a thermos of booze to school. Not to drink from, not then, but just to have for later. But we don't drink together, not ever.

I have this idea that if we both get drunk we might be more in our bodies, all loose jointed and needing to be touched. People slip and fall into each other when they're drunk; they need to be held up or held down or held back from something crazy. Just held. This is something I want from him. If liquor is in the mix, I think I might have a shot.

But he says “I hate women who drink.” So I stop being a woman who drinks, when I'm near him at least. And I agree that his mother is a disaster, even though she isn't a bit like me.

One night we go back to his house after the park. We are kind of coming down but still in that place where he's relaxed and being funny. The house is dark when we come inside and

he walks around turning on the lamps that still have bulbs, stepping around the piles of things stacked on the floor. It smells like cigarettes and dust, the air is thick with it in the dim yellow light.

His mom opens the door to her back bedroom. She stands in the doorway wearing a stained white nightgown, clutching a Big Gulp of vodka.

“Where have you been?” she says, tipping onto the door jamb.

“Go back in your room, Mom.”

“I mean it, what have you been doing?”

“Go. Now,” he points a finger back to her doorway. She looks for just a second like she wants to say something and then just kind of smirks and turns away.

“Fuck,” he says when the door closes. “Can you fucking believe that?” It puts him in a mood for the rest of the night, the kind where he just wants to listen to music on the couch and watch the television with the volume off.

His dad is a musician, floating somewhere in NYC with a new girlfriend. The two of them live off the alimony she gets from a famous singer who was once her husband. But his whole house looks like his dad still lives there; his dad’s music collection is still under the stereo, his empty terrarium is still in the living room, there are a bunch of his old coats still in the hall closet. His dad has been gone for more than a decade.

This all gives him a certain darkness, an edge. He wants to be a musician too, and he might be famous after all. He has a cultivated, timeless cool; like he could jump on stage any moment. People desire him. They are drawn to him. And out of all the people he could think is cool, he has singled me out. I will do anything I can to save the protective glow this gives me.

Last summer he had sex with a woman for the first time, an Asian woman from another town. And even though it happened just once, even though he doesn’t call her or see her and she probably doesn’t even know that all his friends call him Fish, he and his friends, Sean and Brian, bring her up all the time.

“Tell us again what she looks like.” Sean says.

“I don’t know,” Fish says. “Like, hot.”

“You need to say more about it than that. Details. Nice ass?” Brian is always looking at girls’ asses. I try to never turn my back to him.

“I guess, yeah.”

“Mouth? Like big puffy lips or like small and tight?”

“I don’t know, man, just hot. Like Asian hot,” he takes a drag from his cigarette then gives it a hard flick with his thumb.

“Asian hot?” I ask.

“You wouldn’t get it.” He turns to Sean, “Dude, you know what I mean?”

“Totally.”

I study all the Asian girls at school to see what they have in common. I can’t find it.

Sean and Brian haven’t even come close to losing their virginity. Sean is tall and gawky with a nose and teeth too big for his face. Brian is short and foreign looking with tight curly blond hair and pale, blotchy skin. They look to Fish to give them cues on how to act. That’s why they tolerate me. The three of us have a sort of truce held together by his approval.

I’m not hot or tight or fuckable. And because I am not those things, I am supposed to be like one of the guys. I am not supposed to have a crush on Fish so I tell myself I don’t. I am a hangout kind of girl.

Once, I lean over and wrap my fingers around his bicep. Like a joke.

“Don’t be like that,” he says.

“Like what?”

“Like that,” he says, and points his cigarette to where my hand touches his arm.

So, I don’t. Be like that. I keep a careful buffered distance between us both. I go out of my way to never touch him; not when we are passing joints, not when we are sitting and watching a movie, not when we say hello or goodbye.

And even though I think it’s not the whole truth, that he does like me like that, I go along with it. I pretend like I don’t feel the energy bursting between us. I pretend I don’t believe that he likes me best of all. It is not going to be like that.

That was the fall. Two things happen during the shitty slide into winter: he moves into the basement and then he gets a

girlfriend. Her name is Kathleen and she is nothing like what I expect. A good girl. A soccer player with strawberry blond hair and freckles. He brings it up over lunch, how they started hanging out, how they hooked up last week.

“You are totally going to corrupt her,” Sean says.

“I know, right?”

“No, I mean like, totally make her dirty.”

“In the best way though.”

“Right.”

As if on cue, Kathleen walks by with her group of bubblegum sweet girlfriends and gives him a shy smile. I feel my stomach hit the floor but I keep a flat look on my face. I chew the bite of donut in my mouth even though it tastes like cardboard and I can't swallow.

“You going to drink your chocolate milk?” Fish says when she's gone. I slide it over without looking.

I don't know how he dragged the furniture down to the basement by himself but it was somehow done in the space of one Saturday afternoon when his mom was out. It was mostly taken from the living room. There are shadows on the carpet where the furniture used to be, a checkerboard pattern of darker green exposed to the air for the first time in 20 years.

The only things left in the living room are a card table in front of the TV and a plain wooden chair. This is where his mom is sitting when I come over. She has seeped into the space he left, free from her bedroom and the need to avoid his judgement.

And for his part he has started to pretend that she isn't there at all.

“Just come right down.” he said, “Don't bother with the doorbell, I can't hear it anyway.”

“What about your mom? I don't want to freak her out when I come in.”

“You think she gives a shit?” This is what he told me on the phone, so it's what I do even though it feels weird to just walk in his house.

I pass by the living room on the way down and it seems true that his mom doesn't give a shit. She looks up at me then back to the puzzle laid out next to her ashtray. Her Big Gulp cup is sweating on a coaster and the television going at top volume.

She waves me towards the door in the kitchen that leads to the basement.

“Tell him he needs to come up if he wants dinner,” she says over the sound of a commercial.

Downstairs it smells like cinnamon and pumpkin. Sean steals scented candles from his mom and brings them over like an offering. They think that the smell of the candles hides the scent of weed. In addition to the candles, they have arranged a giant fan that points out a missing pane of glass in a subterranean window. It is supposed to suck out the smoke, but the whole place smells like a combination of Yankee Candle and a head shop.

Sean is sitting on the couch pulling a long tube from a three foot bong. When he sees me come down the stairs he blows a cloud of smoke straight to my face, more smoke than I would believe could fit in his lungs.

“Blow it to the fan, dude.” Fish jumps up from the couch and waves a guitar magazine in wide flapping motions, trying to get the smoke to go out the window. The scented candle flame is flickering in the wind and dropping big globs of wax on the coffee table.

“Sorry, man,” says Sean.

“What the fuck is on your face?” Fish says after he stops flapping and finally looks at me.

“Lipstick.” I bite back the urge to press my lips together, to take it back.

‘I hate girls with lipstick.’

“You can’t tell me what to do.”

He rolls his eyes. “Take it off. You look stupid.”

I pick up the roll of toilet paper he uses to mop up spills. I swipe my lips like it doesn’t matter, like I didn’t think about this a lot, and throw the wad in the overfilled can.

Sean passes the bong over to Brian who needs to stretch his short arm as long as it can go to have the lighter reach the bowl. He probably hates that bong.

I sit on the couch next to a stain. The stain is big and brown, something that spilled a long time ago. It never rubs off, but I avoid it anyway. The couch feels kind of damp, I can feel the moisture vaguely seeping into my jeans from the cushion.

Every move his mom makes upstairs comes through the

ceiling; her footsteps going from the kitchen to the back of the house, her chair creaking when she sits, the television blaring.

Over the couch is a poster of a giant brown tiger creeping through yellow grass.

“Why is it that tiger brown?”

“It’s orange.”

“It’s definitely brown.”

“Whatever,” Fish shrugs. “It’s just fucking old, that’s why.” This is the way he talks to me when Sean is around.

“Was it your dad’s?” I ask.

“Probably, I don’t know, it was upstairs in the crawlspace,” he says, then he and Sean look to opposite corners of the room, the way they always do when someone brings up a dad.

“Did you see Leah today?” Brian changes the subject.

“I know, right?” he says.

“I mean those fucking shorts, I totally saw ass cheek.”

“Ass cheek? Fuck!”

“Yeah, right where it hits the thigh.”

“Stop it, dude, I’m getting a boner.”

“I mean I think I saw just a whisper of snatch, like one hair.”

“Stop it, I mean it.”

“Can you just imagine that tight little snatch?”

“Fuck you man, if you make me hard I’m going to stick it up your ass.”

“You would love that wouldn’t you? Sticking it in my ass?”

“Fuck you.”

“Come on, I’m waiting,” and he bends over, shoves his ass in the air.

I use my thumb nail to pick at the wax that fell when he waved the magazine. One piece has dripped in the exact shape of the state of New Jersey. If he were alone I might point this out, but in front of Sean and Brian he would just get sarcastic, “Oh yeah, that’s special,” he would probably say.

I scrape the state of New Jersey into oblivion. I can feel my face starting to burn, wondering if I got all the lipstick off, if it is smeared across my face like a clown and they’ll make fun of me later. They don’t notice when I get up to go to the bathroom.

The basement bathroom is the size of a coat closet with

a squishy floor, a mildewed shower, and a little rectangle of mirror that only shows part of a person's face at a time. There isn't any toilet paper and the toilet itself is yellow with crusted old piss.

A brown hand towel with an embroidered butterfly floating near the hem is hanging on the rack over the sink. I wipe my lips with what I think is the cleanest edge, erase any expression, then thread the towel back through the bar.

Spring doesn't happen. Winter just gets wet and melts off the planet into mud and freezing rain and if there is that one day when the temperature is just right and the flowers start to pop and smell good, I don't notice.

During lunch Fish doesn't come out to smoke cigarettes anymore. He and Kathleen spend the time making out in the stairwell by the auditorium. It's dark there, unused, and full of couples clutching at each other.

It's just Sean and Brian with me outside now at lunch. We smoke and they talk, endlessly, about what they would do if they changed places with Fish, if they could have Kathleen.

"All that fucking hair. I just want to wrap it in my fingers."

"Like a handle, right?"

"Totally. I want to mess her up in the best kind of way, you know?"

"Oh, I know, dude, I know."

Kathleen is a fixture now on the couch in the basement in the place next to the stain. His place is next to her, his arm around her shoulder or putting his head in her lap, letting her touch his hair. When she's not there, he is sullen and impatient, like the light has gone out of the room. He doesn't do things just to make me laugh anymore.

I am supposed to be cool with this, so I try to get to know Kathleen, to be friends the way girls are supposed to be. She invites me over to her house to hang out. Her mom served us cut carrots and cookies on a plate. She had stuffed animals on her bed. She told me about camp. I want to kill her and be her at the same time.

Fish's mom didn't get fired from her job but she's been put on leave. There was a car accident on the way to work, a DUI, a trip to Human Resources and then she is always home, a gatekeeper to the downstairs even in the afternoon.

“How’s school?” his mom asks when I let myself in through the front door. “You like school, don’t you?”

This is probably the only thing Fish has ever told his mom about me so it’s what she has brought up the only other times we have talked.

“Fine.”

“Come in the kitchen. I need to feed the cat.”

I follow her there. The soles of my sneakers stick to the dirty linoleum, making kind of a sucking sound as I come in and stand by the wall. I notice she isn’t wearing shoes and her heels are cracked and black on the bottom.

She rummages in the cupboard and pulls out a can, dumps the new food on top of the old food in the dish and throws the spoon in the sink. The cat, as big and fat as a dog, walks along the wall and makes his way to the food. She leans against the counter and lights a cigarette that she pulls from the front of her robe.

“You apply to college?”

“Yeah.”

“Good for you,” she says, then takes a long drag and curls her lip to blow it to the ceiling. “I can’t figure out what you’re doing over here with these guys.” She tries to slide the pack of cigarettes back in her robe but misjudges the height of the pocket and it takes two attempts.

I don’t know what to say so I adjust the strap of my backpack over my shoulder and pretend I don’t notice that she’s soft around the edges, that she is drunk just a little. He is always saying terrible things about what she does when she drinks; how she yells at him and breaks things. But she just looks sad to me.

“I met his Dad in college, did you know that? True love for ever and ever.” She ashes into the sink with a flick of her thumb without taking her eyes off my face. I can feel her evaluating me, looking at me like I might explain something she doesn’t know about her son. I study the macramé planter over the sink.

“Alright. Go on down. You don’t need to be polite anymore.” She gives a nervous laugh.

And it was sad, right, because she didn’t seem like such a bad person just kind of stuck. I wish I knew what to say to

make her feel better, but her back is already turned and she's looking in the cupboard.

So I walk down the stairs and the first thing I see is the back of Fish's head pressing into Kathleen's face on the couch. Sean is sitting on a chair across the room looking at his phone, the bong in his hand, and he looks up with something like a sneer. I feel so small and alone and angry. I turn around and go back up. I walk out the door without saying a word and decide I will never come back. Fuck all of them.

There is a time when I think this will matter. My absence. That he might say that he misses me or wants to hang. That he will call and we will go to the park and laugh. But that time never comes. Instead there is a chill that blows so deeply between us that when we accidentally run in to each other in the Science hallway I can feel tingles up my spine when he gives me a sour look. He has decided to reject me with five times the intensity that I reject him.

I try not to cry about this. I cry about this.

In the summer I get a job working at the supermarket. I learn that foods have codes, I learn the difference between leeks and scallions, and I open a bank account to deposit my minimum wage paycheck into every week.

The other girls I work with are Latina from one town over. One tall, one short, they both wear thick make-up that is shiny and not the right colors; blues, purples and the wrong colors of beige. They look like clowns, but it has been so painstakingly and perfectly applied no one could accuse them of looking bad, not even the manager who watches us like a hawk in a way that he thinks looks protective but everyone knows is pervy.

"Oh, chica, you are working so hard," they say when I stock the shelves or carry something heavy.

"You are such a hard working chica!" Then they laugh and say something to each other in Spanish that my high school level classes are helpless to translate.

After work their boyfriends pick them up in small, loud cars. The boyfriends are short but look way older. They arrive in the parking lot ten minutes before the shift ends, cross their arms and wait for the girls to come out. I can hear the cars rumble for blocks as they drive away.

I steal cigarettes from the store as often as I can. I also take gum and cans of soda. I get good at doing this. I put everything I've stolen in my red backpack, next to my thermos of booze that is a mixture of all bottles in my parent's liquor cabinet, calibrated to look like nothing is missing.

Most nights I sit in the park and have some drinks and try to lean into a streetlight bright enough to read my book. I watch the smoke from my cigarette mix with the humid air. Some nights I walk around the neighborhoods and look at all the houses and imagine things about the people who live in them. I try to decide which homes are happy and which one I would most like to own.

One night I get to the park and find Sean sitting in the woodchips and Brian hanging from the monkey bars. I would have kept walking, found somewhere else to be, but they see me before I can turn away.

"Don't you want to say hi to your old friends?"

"Hey."

"You gonna come hang out with us? Come on, we know you've got something to drink in that bag."

We sit on the swings and drink from my thermos, passing it from person to person down the line. Eventually, Brian pulls some weed out of his pocket and we get high. I want to ask about Fish; where he is, what he's doing, but I don't want to show them I care.

Sean has some money and we go to buy snacks. The three of us walk the few blocks past the closed library and the police station to the convenience store. The bright light burns my eyes when we walk in. It smells like old microwave food and floor cleaner and the temperature is 30 degrees cooler than outside.

Sean pulls a giant coffee cake off the shelf and he walks around the aisles eating it with a plastic fork from the hot dog station.

"You no do that!" the lady behind the register shouts at him.

"What?" Sean says, spilling crumbs from his open mouth.

"You no eat in the store," she says.

"I'm going to pay."

"You no eat in the store!" She is short and has her black hair pulled up in a complicated bun held together with a shiny

plastic barrette. Under the uniform I can see a flowery kind of polyester shirt hugging her saggy bosom.

Sean laughs in her face. He goes to the register and throws down some money. "Here, take it." He always has cash. His grandparents are rich and load him with a big allowance, probably because they feel so bad about the situation with his father.

The clerk takes the money without counting it, "You go now. Bye, Bye. You go."

"Okay. We go now," Sean says. "Bye, bye." He drops the remaining part of the coffee cake face down on the floor. "Bye-Bye."

When we follow him out, Brian gives him a high five. "That was awesome, dude." Through the plate glass window I see the woman get a broom and dustpan and stoop down to clean up the mess, talking to herself. They watch her clean it up, too.

"That's right, get on your knees," says Sean through the window.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" I say.

They turn to look at me. "What?"

"I said that's totally fucking rude."

Sean turns halfway to meet me. Raises an eyebrow. "What do you care?" The two of them exchange a look, solidifying their allegiance.

I can feel the crack in the ground opening between us; Sean and Brian on one side and me on the other. It feels good. I haven't felt this way in a long time, like I'm on top of what happens next. It's the thing that made Fish like me, but also the thing he took away.

"She doesn't get paid for that."

"Oh, is she your friend?" Brian is standing a little behind and a little to the right of Sean, sneering and using him as a shield at the same time.

"I just think it's shitty to treat people like that."

"Yeah, and you know so much because you have so many friends?"

"You're an asshole," I say and hope my voice doesn't shake. He laughs. "That's the best you got?" Brian laughs too.

"Fuck this." I pull my backpack over my shoulder and walk

away from the parking lot.

“That’s right, keep walking. Why don’t you go somewhere to get that giant stick out of your ass? I don’t know why Fish even liked you.”

I turn around, I want to know what he meant.

“No, don’t stop. Keep going. You fat shit.”

I can hear them laughing as I walk down the street.

I can’t go back to the park. They might go back there, too. I start walking. Every once in a while I unscrew the lid and of my thermos and drink some more. I step away from the headlights and into the shadows whenever a car passes. I keep my head down. I finish the booze in the thermos and realize as I look down at my sneakers that they aren’t landing in the place I want them to go. I realize I’m actually pretty drunk.

But it feels good. It all feels good. I feel more like myself than I have in a long time. My feet take me to Fish’s house, all the way at the very edge of town. I’m ready to get in his face, to ask him what the fuck is wrong with him. To ask him what the fuck is wrong with me. I feel like he owes me an answer.

I stand at the end of his front walk and pull a piece of gum from my backpack to wipe away the taste of everything else.

The front porch is coated in a pile of leaves that blew in during the fall and no one bothered to sweep out. It smells earthy and humid. There is a wicker chair with half the seat rotted out and a pair of old sneakers underneath caked in mud. I have stood at this door so many times before that the feeling of familiarity washes over me.

I reach to open the door. The doorknob doesn’t spin. I try again. Locked. I rattle the door, wonder when they started locking it.

The light in the front hall switches on. Then the porch light. “Hello? Is someone there?”

It’s his mom. She slurs, garbling the breaks between the words like she’s talking underwater. Drunk. Which is kind of funny because I’m drunk, too. Only it occurs to me that she might not find it funny, that she might make a fuss over me or call my parents in some fit of caretaking that she has never had before. So I don’t answer even when she says it again.

“Is someone out there?” I hear her voice shaking like she’s

afraid. I imagine her cowering behind the door, waiting for it to be thrown open by whatever crazy person is trying to break into her house, waiting to be attacked. Or maybe she is just afraid of anyone at all coming inside and seeing her in her stained white nightgown, drunk and alone.

I wait for something to happen. I wrap my arms around my shoulders and feel what it feels like to hold my own skin. The door will open, or it won't. I hold on to myself and remember that I am still here, that I exist no matter what. Letting go of what happens in the world outside my own body will always be my greatest defense.

I start to feel dizzy so I slide down the door and lean against it, look up at the trees that hang over the street. There is a whole jungle in the tops of the trees, all the big ones connected in a giant canopy. The branches are thick and strong enough to live on, to crawl across and lie down. I close my eyes and remember that I don't have to be here. There will always be tomorrow, and cigarettes and books and the park.

The porch light turns off but the inside light stays on. I imagine his mom with her eye to the keyhole looking to see if someone is still there, not knowing how to tell.

Lenore Gusch

The Rotation of Planets

The window panes make a kaleidoscope; blue, orange, yellow, red, and sun shines through the panes that are clear glass in solid, square streams. This morning, I wake up sticky and warm, curled on the futon with the blankets kicked off. There's a hot box effect of sun in the room from the old, industrial windows.

My hair is curled with humidity and tangled from too many days without washing, a dirty auburn mess. I pull it back with my fingers and they get stuck half way through in nests at the nape of my neck. A notebook has fallen open beside the bed, next to my circled and highlighted collage of classifieds, my carton of Pall Malls, a half eaten sandwich from the bodega downstairs, the change that I'm saving in a mason jar, books. Most things remain exactly as they fell last night or last week. It's been eight years since I graduated from college, but the tight space makes it hard to lose the embarrassing, dorm room aesthetic. Evidence of Julie is scarce but still present. I uncover small artifacts of her under paperbacks and dirty laundry that startle me after years of living alone. A few of her paintings lean against the wall by the door.

The heat from the windows tells my brain that I'm sunburning, even though I'm not. I button a flannel over my small breasts, covering the freckles on the tops of my shoulders, throw a tapestry over the bare curtain rod, drowning myself in blue light, and lie back down on the futon on the floor, which is the primary living area in the cramped apartment.

I hear the deadbolt to the studio click open. Julie is home from her early shift at the roastery down the block, returning, as usual, just as I'm waking up. I cringe a bit from wanting her and wanting her gone in equal degrees. She comes over to the bed, slings her leather bag to the floor. "Erin," she says, looking apologetic. "You're awake." She lies down with her head in my lap, layered skirts fanning around her, her familiar smell of coffee and jasmine, scents that will be tied

to her from now on, whether I love or hate her, for the rest of my life. Her hair falls around her face in loose black ringlets. She puts her hands over my cheeks and looks into my eyes. She looks lost, bereft. I smile a shrug of a smile. A smile that says everything is okay, even though nothing is okay. I run my fingers over her sharp, perfect collar bones, and she sits up, unbuttoning my flannel slowly, kissing my neck, kissing each of my closed eyelids.

Julie is twenty-two, from Connecticut, living in Brooklyn on her parents' money. She's the kind of girl who thinks it's *in* to be poor. Who *wants* to be poor. Who is embarrassed by her privilege and doesn't yet know that she can't escape her upbringing. That she can't fake it. When I first took her home with me, she stopped at the door of the warehouse and looked up the six floor mosaic of colored glass and graffiti, her eyes wide. She smiled all the way up the four flights of stairs that smell like piss and weed, mildew and cheap cigarettes. She said she never wanted to leave, and six months later, here she is. She had just graduated from NYU and told me she didn't have a new place to live yet and didn't know what she was going to do, so I took her in like a stray. Because of the nostalgia of being young and broke and moving to New York. Because of her luminous, curly hair. Because I was bored and had been alone for a long time.

Julie takes the tapestry off the window, and I'm naked again. Already, she has undone all of my progress for the morning. She traces one finger down the length of my body, and we fuck, sheets damp with sweat, our skin slipping and sticking in all the wrong places. A strange, rushed conciliation. She never opens her eyes.

I know that Julie does not love me. Nothing close. I'm just one part of her dream, which, still going nowhere, must be getting old. I have an apartment with factory windows and high ceilings where she can paint, easy drug connections, musicians and artists to be introduced to, and a willing body she can have whenever she wants. Some months, I can't pay rent and she can feel vicariously bohemian, supplementing me with her trust fund dollars. But her naivete radiates. She is so stupidly young and beautiful and tenacious that I keep letting her come back.

When we're finished, I put the tapestry back up on the window, pull on a pair of jeans and a sweatshirt, foregoing underwear and bra, and tie my hair up without combing it. Julie is curled up at the side of the bed, back to me, facing the wall, and I wonder if she feels that same hollow in her stomach as I do, the one that says no matter how close we come, we will never connect. That we could orbit each other forever but we will never collide.

"I have a sitting at the studio this afternoon," I say, and she doesn't say anything, just lies there, maybe pretending to be asleep. "Maybe I'll stay in the city before my shift. Have a few drinks. You going anywhere?" She stays silent, and I grab my bag and let the door slam shut as I leave.

It's hard for me to leave the sun and breeze of Brooklyn for the maze of shadows in the city, and I only do it because rent demands. The subway air is thick with the sick humidity of too many bodies, air so stale I think molecules of it linger from the year this tunnel was built. When I go down the stairs, I remember why people here are so insane, everyone scurrying underneath the city like ants. Somewhere down the platform, an old man is chanting, mantra-like, in a slow, deep voice that goes all the way down to my gut. "The train is coming. Stop your bullshitting and lolly-gagging around and get on the train," he says. "I have been here this entire time calling that train," and his conviction gives me an eerie feeling, like he alone is responsible for every train that comes down these tracks, and that he has been standing there, immemorial, waving the very first commuters of this line off into the darkness of the tunnel.

There's a sign across the way that says "Caution: Rodenticide" that I can't take my eyes off of, and right below it, a rat scampers underneath the electrified rails. Some kind of super rat that survived the poison, who will breed and eventually overtake the city. I hear the rumble and squeal of the coming train and watch the tips of shoes creep over the yellow line. I let myself melt into the crowd, am herded into a car, and find a seat. "This is a Manhattan bound L train" a soothing female voice announces, and then in a man's voice: "Stand clear of the closing doors, please." Directions always

in a woman's voice, instructions in a man's. I stare straight ahead at my discolored reflection in a Pepsi ad, and my eyes look like holes in my head, and everything in me shuts down until I make my stop.

The painting studio is quiet except for the rustle of charcoal on paper and the occasional scrape of a chair against the hardwood. I close my eyes and let my other senses take over. The room smells like dust and oils. Chemicals, mineral spirits, and potpourri. Yellowed pages of library books. Corners of an old, leaky ceiling, soaked and dried again. The warm air blowing from the vents is cool once it gets to me. It prickles against my bare skin, and I stay as still as I can. I try to settle into my body, envisioning the lines and folds from the inside, but see Julie instead, curled up next to the wall. I open my eyes and see twenty people staring at pieces of me. Painters trying to get gravity right in the way my hair falls over my shoulders. I imagine the other sides of the easels, all the different renditions of me that are not me.

If I were a romantic, I could say that art and beauty brought Julie and I together. We met in this room during her last semester of art school. She was one of those anonymous pairs of eyes. For some reason, she picked me out of all the other naked women that sit in front of this class.

It only took her two tries before I gave in. The first time, she came into the back where I was still getting dressed. I was just buttoning my jeans and I held my T-shirt over my chest. "Do your legs fall asleep, sitting up there like that?" she asked me.

"Yup, every time," I said. "And my back is killing me."

"Well, it doesn't show," she said, "while you're up there. You look peaceful. Hey, maybe this is weird, but I was wondering, would you like to go get some coffee this evening?" There was that school girl shrill and rush in her voice. The one that says, Christ, I've been working up the courage to say that for weeks. Her cheeks were flushed and she didn't break eye contact. She had a green headscarf on, brown canvas bag, long linen skirt that almost touched the floor. She reminded me too much of me when I was young, before I was out of school, back when

my edges were still soft. “You’re not my type,” I said, pulling my shirt on and grabbing my bag. I smiled at her as I left the room. I guess that wasn’t callous enough, because a few weeks later, she asked me again. She came into the back room as I was getting dressed again, and the first thing she said was, “You know, you’re not my type, either.” That was the line that worked on me. It was such an intriguingly bad idea that I couldn’t pass it up.

We rode into Brooklyn and went to this twenty-four hour diner, the kind where the cooks yell back and forth in five different languages and somehow understand each other, and the grilled cheese costs more than the hamburgers for reasons I didn’t want to think about. We had fresh donuts and bad, thick coffee, speculated about what the meat was made of and decided it was probably people. I admit, she amused me, and I liked looking at her there across the table. She told me about art school, that she was renting a room from a friend in Manhattan until she graduated. It was a two bedroom apartment in Murray Hill with exposed brick and a courtyard. “Sounds like a pretty beautiful apartment,” I said. “I hate it,” she said. “I feel like an asshole. I want the old, bombed out, eighties New York.”

Yeah great, I thought, getting mugged and stepping over junkies on the sidewalks, even though I knew what she meant. I knew what she was looking for. “You’d love my place then,” I said. “It’s full of roaches and mold.”

She said she hadn’t made many friends in her program and couldn’t connect with anyone in the city. “I feel like I don’t exist, or that they don’t exist. Like we’re ghosts walking past each other.” She said that she talked to me that first day because I stood out to her. I seemed *real*. I know it was rhetorical, but she sounded like she thought the people in Manhattan really were figments, inaccessible, revealing themselves to her from another plane. “You know, friendships, relationships, sex? I don’t know why we categorize these things, why we make all these rules. It’s just people wanting to connect. Any two people.” For a moment, I saw heartache, then she smiled, reached across the table, and wiped something off of my cheek. “Powdered sugar,” she said.

The third time we went out, she convinced me to take her

back to my place. I opened a bottle of red wine while she wandered in circles around my studio and looked out the windows. The only things visible in the darkness were the silhouettes of water towers over the adjacent warehouses. “Nice view,” she said, and I couldn’t tell if she was being sarcastic but was afraid she wasn’t. We sat on the couch, and every time I looked at her it seemed like she had moved closer without actually moving. It was just the angle of her body, her eyes that never left mine, the way she seemed frighteningly open. “This is exactly the kind of place I’ve always dreamed of living,” she said.

“You don’t want to live here,” I said. “You don’t want to stay in New York. It’ll wear you down.”

“You don’t seem worn down,” she said, and I just laughed, shaking my head, wanting to remind her of how little she knew me. She took my wine glass out of my hand, set it on the table, and I let her kiss me. “I’ve never slept with a woman before,” she said, which was no surprise to me at all.

I take responsibility for the rest. Red wine goes straight to my head, and there was no reason why not. You would think that people have instincts for sex, but everything was painfully awkward that first time, and afterwards I felt half used, half predatory. She stared at my body for a long time while we lay there, part fascination, admiration, something, and part scrutiny, like she was looking into a mirror. Like it was her own.

When today’s sitting ends, I pull my clothes on again, tie my hair back up. The teacher, a grey haired, puzzlingly conservative woman, hands me a fifty for my naked body. “Too bad I don’t have the tits to be a stripper,” I joke, and she scowls at me.

“If you were a stripper, you’d have to shave your armpits,” she says.

I make it down to the street, crawling as always with foot traffic and taxis. I try to guess who’s a tourist and who actually lives here, but everyone looks homogenous to me. I play a game sometimes where I try to pick out a local and ask them for directions. I’m usually wrong. The tourists always look flattered to pass as New Yorkers. Sometimes people ask

me if I'm visiting from Europe and I'm flattered by that, too, everyone relieved to be mistaken for someone else.

For a long time, I just walk through the Village, not wanting to go home, replaying the last argument Julie and I had. It had started when I got off the phone with Dominic, downstairs. He's a few years younger than I am and just as broke. He's my only friend in the building because, when he first moved in, he was too green to know that New Yorkers don't chat with their neighbors, and we happened to hit it off. Julie was sitting on the couch, bored. "There's an opening in Chelsea tonight that my friend from school is showing in," she said. "Do you want to go? There's free champagne. We can make out on the balcony."

"Why would I want to go to Chelsea?" I said.

Julie paused, frustrated, pressing her fingertips below her eyes. "Why do you live here?" she said finally.

Why do I live here? Because I can't, for the life of me, imagine living anywhere else. Because I moved here like Julie did, as a student, graduated, worked seven days a week in East Village diners because I had no skills, cried with exhaustion, hoped boundlessly, wandered the length of Riverside Park in the middle of the night in the snow when I had no one, ran out of money more times than I can count, watched friends get rich and stop speaking to me, watched friends nod off for the last time, watched neighborhoods I loved be dismantled and buildings catch fire. Because time kept passing. I struggled, settled, burned out, and kept going anyway before falling in love with Brooklyn. Because this city raised me as the person I am now, and I can't imagine it ever really letting me go.

"Do you want to go get a drink with some of your friends?" Julie said.

"Not really," I said.

"Why don't you want me to hang out with any of them?" Julie said.

"What are you talking about?" I said. "I just invited Dominic to come up for a drink."

"That's not the same," she said. "He lives downstairs and he's selling you weed. He comes over all the time. That's not the same at all."

"You don't get along with my friends." I put my hands on

her shoulders and gave her a playful shake. “I know you, and I know them, and there’s no point.” It’s the truth. The friends I have that I met when I moved here don’t want to put up with this bright-eyed, blundering child. My best friend and coworker, Mia, a crass, Puerto Rican goddess of the New York punk scene, calls Julie “the anklebiter.” It’s not Julie’s fault that she hasn’t yet been bludgeoned into pessimism (or as we call it, “realism”) by loss and failure and grief, or that she hasn’t known the city long enough to be disillusioned by its slow death and vanishing soul. What is refreshing about her is also cloying, so, I keep her separate from most of my people.

“I like them,” she said quietly. “I feel like you don’t want to be seen with me. I’m not punk enough, or whatever.”

The simplification exasperated me, but she wasn’t exactly wrong. “I don’t want to have this conversation again,” I said, and thankfully Dominic knocked at the door. Julie was the one to get up to answer it.

“Hey, Jules,” Dominic said, smiling wide when he saw her. “How goes?” He was in his usual paint smeared, baggy, thrift store clothes, looking like he hadn’t showered in a week, his face covered in black not-quite-beard, not-quite-stubble. He and Julie gave each other a sideways hug, then he flopped down next to me on the couch. He took a tiny bag out of his pocket and tossed it to me. I handed him twenty bucks and saluted him.

“I finished a new piece today,” Julie said to Dominic, and he got up to look. Painting is something they share. Her work is good. Mixed media numbers with intricate, black ink detailing that I’ve always admired. She actually has a chance.

I got up, lit a cigarette, cranked open one of the huge window panes, and watched them from across the room, blowing smoke out into the humid air. Dominic smiled a lot and looked at his feet, like a bashful puppy. Julie beamed at all of his compliments, and laughter burred easily from their mouths. Something in her posture changed. Her shoulders relaxed, her movements gained a natural flow. She looked different than she ever did with me. She looked comfortable, an openness that I hadn’t seen for a long time. They talked for a good while on the couch together, then Dominic said “Okay,

I'm out. I have to get to work early tomorrow."

"Ciao," I said, raising a hand, still staring at them from across the room, and he let himself out of my apartment. "Julie," I said when she sat back down, trying to remove any bitterness from my voice and leaving honesty, "what are you still doing with me?"

I open the door to the apartment, and it's dark inside. "Julie?" I whisper, thinking she might have gone to bed early. There is a dull, uninhabited silence. I switch the light on. The apartment is empty, and things look off, like someone's rearranged the furniture. Everything has been cleaned. Then it dawns on me, like something I had been expecting all along. I don't see any of Julie's things scattered around the apartment. Her paintings are gone from the corner of the room. I take a deep breath, let loss and relief flood in together. The relief of being released from someone's experiment and the fear of the vacuum to come, the void that will be left in my body when there is no one sharing my bed. But, her clothes are still there when I check the closet, her paintings stacked inside. Her toothbrush is on the sink. The room still smells of coffee and jasmine. I exhale. She has organized my things also. The piles beside the bed have been hidden away.

Going on a hunch, I call Dominic. "It's Erin," I say. "Is Julie over there?"

He sounds mortified. "She's here, sorry, don't worry." He's almost whispering. "She fell asleep on the couch and I didn't want to wake her up."

I smile, imagining her tiny self curled up on his brown, lumpy couch. "Don't wake her up," I tell him. "Let her stay. Tell her I'm going to go stay with Mia for a few days. We can talk tomorrow and figure things out." And gently, I push us out of orbit.

I lie down on the bed and look out the windows at the water towers, the sentinels of the neighborhood, my skyline. The bed is like a raft on the still pond of a clean, wooden floor. My arms and legs stretch out to the corners of the futon, and I fall asleep, open, skin uncovered.

Elizabeth Edelglass

First They Came for the Torahs

The Torahs were on the floor. Naked, covers torn, sacred scrolls unrolled, one unspooled and oddly twisted, parchment the color of flesh. Like a child, splayed across the synagogue's rust-colored carpet hinting of dried blood.

And shards of glass, one stained-glass window smashed. Abby knew those windows, from a lifetime of bored moments when she should've been praying. Red candlesticks, yellow flames. Now there was a hole. She could see through to the street—police cars, lights flashing.

The synagogue had been robbed. Had there been sirens in her Sammy's dreams? He'd awakened twice last night, crying, in his Batman pajamas. Sammy was in kindergarten down the hall, in the Jewish day school that now occupied the classrooms where once Abby had spent Sunday-school mornings failing to connect Adam and Noah to the weekly Torah portions old Rabbi Gotteskind used to chant from these very scrolls now on the floor. She and Doug had wanted something better for their children. *Learn to live as Jews*, they'd read in the day school brochure, *members of the global community*. Becka was down the hall, too, in third grade.

"In, and out," Judy Cohen whispered. They'd made it this far, to the sanctuary door, only because they were school parents. Nothing so flimsy as yellow crime-scene tape could keep mothers from the building where their children were supposed to be safe.

"For the silver," Judy Cohen said, still whispering, two policemen nearby shifting foot-to-foot, the creak of leather, the clank of metal.

No wonder the Torahs looked naked. Without their silver crowns, meant to exalt, their heavy breastplates, meant to protect. Even the *yads* were gone, slender silver pointers, each ending in a tiny finger no bigger than Sammy's on the day he was born—to guide the Torah reader, no human finger allowed to touch the sacred parchment.

"In and out," Judy Cohen repeated. September sun through

the gaping window raised a yeasty smell as she leaned in close, hot breath on Abby's ear. "I feel," she whispered, "almost raped."

Sammy was crazed in the car after school. "Police cars," he gushed from his safety seat in the back. "Sirens!"

"There weren't sirens," Becca said. She, too, sat in back, still protected in her booster until she turned nine, maybe longer if she didn't put on weight. *Don't rush her*, Doug always said, *keep her safe a little longer*.

"Were too!" Sammy poured out a story about sitting in a police car during recess, sounding the siren. "Whee-ooh-whee-ooh." He made the high-low sound infamous from black-and-white Gestapo films, as if he knew. Becca covered her ears.

"I'm the one who found it," Sammy said.

"Found what?" Had Abby been paying attention?

"The policeman said I shouldn't have touched it."

Abby slammed on her brakes as the school bus she'd been mindlessly following suddenly cranked out its stop sign and a couple of public-school kids scuttled safely across the street to their waiting mother.

"It was soooo heavy."

"Found *what*?"

Abby saw, in the rearview, Becca startle at the sharp report of her voice.

"The flashlight, silly," Sammy said. Becca let that go, no reprimand for calling Mommy silly. Abby searched Becca's face, had to force her eyes back to the curve of road where sometimes deer jumped out, the curve she sometimes took a little too fast, so her kids wouldn't see the occasional dead Bambi on the grassy verge.

At dinner, Doug couldn't stop talking about it. His patients had brought the news into his office. It always amazed Abby how people could talk with a dentist's hands in their mouths.

"It's a ring of thieves," he said. "We'll never see that silver again. Probably melted down already." Abby kicked him under the table. Her parents had occasionally spoken Yiddish

at the dinner table; she'd grown up thinking all parents had a secret code, so kids wouldn't hear anything personal, private, scary. Broken Yiddish, it turned out, not code after all, just a remnant of her grandparents' former lives.

A robbery, the evening news later confirmed, the kids safely in Becca's room playing Barbies. "Not a hate crime," declared the chief of police, his belly filling the TV screen, over a crawl announcing a car crash on the Jersey Turnpike, a car bomb in Iraq.

"Not a hate crime," Doug snorted. "Well that's a relief." In bed that night, he was strong, and maybe rougher than usual, in and out.

Shabbat that week was a makeshift affair, with a Torah borrowed from the shul cross-town and an olivewood *yad* from some congregant's trip to Israel. The Torah sat forlorn in the ark, without silver, which the cross-town shul had *not* loaned. As if the thieves might come back? *That horse is already out of the barn*, Abby's mother would've scoffed—her mother, who had no firsthand experience with horses, but *her* mother had talked, about life before America, before the camps, seemingly bucolic life, before.

While Cantor Ken davened *Shacharit*, Judy Cohen leaned forward, curls tickling Abby's cheek. "We're putting in a burglar alarm."

"We *have* an alarm," Abby said. "It didn't help." The boarded-up window glowered at her.

"At *home*," Judy said. "Who could feel safe anymore?" Her Zachary joined Sammy zipping Matchbox cars at Abby's feet, the tiny police car and ambulance Sammy'd chosen to bring today. Becca leaned into Abby's side, absorbed in reading Nancy Drew—the same Nancy who'd been solving cases since Abby was her age.

Rabbi Wolf held her baby while she chanted from the borrowed Torah, his dimpled finger pointing as if to follow the Hebrew words. *Parshat Shoftim*—Abby found the English translation in the Bible on her lap. A portion about justice, in which crimes must be investigated. As if God knew which words needed to be read this week.

The synagogue settled down, back to normal, new normal. First came the meetings. Ritual committee reporting to executive board, then full board, then an open meeting where congregants (doctors, teachers, plumbers) attempted to parse Talmudic text, while Rabbi Wolf attempted to maintain order. Psychiatrists Levine and Schwartz sparred over Talmudic requirement (Levine) or mere tradition (Schwartz) to fast after seeing a Torah touch the floor. Anyone who saw the Torahs *on* the floor (Levine), or who saw the Torahs *hit* the floor (Schwartz)? Rabbi Wolf said it was up to each individual's conscience, whether or not to observe a fast day in reverence for the Torahs. Then she laid her baby across her lap, in the obvious position, and psychiatrists Levine and Schwartz sat down.

Next, a Torah scribe was hired from Brooklyn to examine the Torahs, to decide if they were still kosher.

"Like food?" Sammy asked.

"Don't be ridiculous," Becka said, also getting back to normal. "Good enough to read, everything perfect, the parchment, the stitching, the letters." Becka was big on *perfect*, as hard on herself as on those around her.

"He has a beard," Sammy said. "Like Santa Claus."

"*Not* like Santa Claus," Becka said. She hadn't eaten lunch that day, in honor of the Torahs. But she was on her second after-school Oreo, possibly not entirely clear on what it meant to fast.

The scribe took one of the Torahs back to Brooklyn for repairs. Probably the one that had been twisted so oddly, maybe not a dead child after all, just a broken arm or leg, nothing that couldn't be fixed.

Meanwhile, the schoolchildren used the olivewood *yad* and the borrowed scroll for their Monday and Thursday Torah readings, a tradition meant to ensure that nobody went more than three days without hearing God's words.

On the Shabbat before Rosh Hashanah, Rabbi Wolf chanted from the borrowed Torah, Moses's last speech to the Jews. "You stand this day, all of you, before the Lord your God . . . even the stranger within your camp . . ."

All of you. In her sermon, Rabbi Wolf listed committees

forming to repair, replace, and rededicate. Committees that would need everyone to pitch in, shul and school alike, all devoted to shared use of, and love of, the Torahs.

Even the stranger within your camp. Rabbi Wolf preached loving our neighbors, not living in fear, as Abby stared through the clear glass that now replaced the board that had replaced the smashed stained-glass window. Maybe the fundraising committee could donate a portion of moneys raised for Torah repair to the refugee resettlement program in town, Rabbi Wolf suggested. Should the committee planning the Torah rededication invite the police, who'd increased patrols past the building, the priest and pastor who'd offered prayers?

Global community, Abby remembered from the day school brochure. She joined the Sisterhood committee to needlepoint new Torah covers and the PTO Touch-a-Truck fundraiser committee.

Sisterhood president Shelly Landsdorf painted templates for the Torah covers. Riotous colors. To distract the eye from what was gone, the silver? Abby took home the canvas painted with a golden shofar, the ram's horn calling all to pray, which seemed fitting after what the synagogue community had gone through. Abby hadn't needlepointed since she was twelve, when she'd helped her grandmother stitch a frenzy of pillows and antimacassars, those things meant to keep human hands from touching the sofa's arms, as if the plush American sofa had been as precious to her grandmother as the Torah.

"Doesn't the shofar remind you of that conch shell in *Lord of the Flies*?" Doug asked one night, Abby bent over her work—who knew golden thread was so kinky and fragile? "Didn't they kill one of those boys?" The shofar, a symbol of order and civilization, or the conch shell, a symbol of civilization run amok?

Doug was experimenting with dental tools and a wooden spindle to fashion another replacement *yad*. "Maybe I could silver this with dental amalgam," he said, sanding his decent replica of a pointer finger. "Don't worry, the mercury in amalgam is safe. I handle it every day. We put it in people's mouths, don't we?" Mercury? Abby had never thought to worry.

She ended up handing over the Torah cover to a more skilled

stitcher. And she arranged with Mort Lieberman to bring his excavators to Touch-a-Truck. But she “forgot” to phone the town about bringing rescue vehicles—hadn’t the kids seen enough police cars?

Before anyone figured out that Touch-a-Truck was only half-planned, the mosque in town burned to the ground. It was the fire chief on TV this time. “Cause yet to be determined,” he said, in full fire-chief regalia, above a crawl about a workplace shooting in Texas. “Maybe an electrical fire.” Maybe not a hate crime?

Abby should’ve known there was a mosque in town. Sammy’s favorite nurse at the pediatrician’s wore a headscarf. There was a man at the gas station with one of those crocheted caps that wasn’t a *kippah*. They had to pray somewhere. But Abby hadn’t known that somewhere was the abandoned bowling alley, an old building that surely could have faulty wiring.

The synagogue invited the mosque’s daycare center to share space. Sammy’s kindergarten moved in with the first grade, so the daycare toddlers could have the classroom with low shelves and its own tiny toilets.

“I’m in first grade now,” Sammy boasted at dinner.

“Are not,” Becka said.

“Eat your dinner,” Abby said, dishing out something called Tuna-Quinoa-Toss that she’d seen online, unlike anything her mother had ever served. Also mac and cheese for the kids, who were sure to object.

“I don’t see why,” Doug said, helping himself to mac and cheese.

“Because it’s healthy,” Abby said.

“No,” he said, “I mean their daycare in our kindergarten. We’re paying for that kindergarten. An arm and a leg.” So much for citizens of the world.

But when an email went out for congregants to donate cribs and strollers—the daycare had lost everything in the fire—he helped Abby schlep Sammy’s old crib to the shul. The daycare teacher wore skinny jeans and a silky headscarf. The children, some brown, some beige, some blond, cradled dolls and scooted cars, just like the Jewish children who’d inhabited this classroom last week. Some of the girls had

their heads covered, some not—subject of their own parents’ committees and debates?

When the bomb threat was phoned into the synagogue, nobody came on TV to say *cause unknown, not a hate crime*.

The children, Jews and not Jews, were evacuated to the public school, which sent buses, opened its gymnasium.

“Just like on TV,” Sammy said when Abby arrived at the gym. What had Doug been letting them watch on TV—one of his shoot-em-up movies . . . or the news? Abby had gotten *this* news when her phone had shrilled at the Stop & Shop, the school’s new emergency text chain. She’d abandoned her cart—let the ice cream melt.

“The door opens, and you climb up,” Sammy said. Oh, it was his first bus ride that he wanted to talk about.

“Of course you climb up,” Becka said. But that night, she was the one who couldn’t sleep, hovering at Abby’s bedside every hour to ask about bombs and firemen and shouldn’t she have a rope ladder under her bed, one of those safety tips she must’ve heard from Abby’s mother, until Abby finally gathered her in, lanky soccer-player limbs barely reminiscent of the soft infant body that used to curve against Abby’s breast.

“Maybe we should move them,” Doug whispered across the bed in the morning.

“It’s just Becka,” Abby whispered back. “Time to get up, anyway.”

“I don’t mean out of bed,” Doug said. “I mean out of that school. To public school. Where they’ll be safe.”

“Safe?” There were guns, sometimes, in public schools.

“Saf-er.”

Abby held Becka close, until she woke up enough to shrug Abby off.

“It’s that daycare,” Doug said later, leaning over the morning paper at the kitchen table.

“Huh?” Abby said, cutting carrots for lunchboxes, carrots that probably wouldn’t get eaten, but . . . food groups.

“I knew we shouldn’t have let them in,” Doug said. “Those kids from the daycare. *They* were the target of the bomb threat.”

“It says that in the paper?”

“They’re calling it a hate crime.”

Finally. But hate against whom?

“There’s a coupon for frozen turkeys at the Stop & Shop,” Doug said. Next week was Thanksgiving. Ha, Thanksgiving. “You should get one today.” He reached a hand to still her knife now in the peanut butter jar. “Take the kids.”

“It’s a school day.”

Then they argued over whether or not to keep the kids home from school—the way parents argue when their children are in the next room, yelling at each other in whispers and code.

“Math test,” Abby said, meaning Becca, today.

“Bomb.” Red blotches bloomed on Doug’s cheeks.

“They could get killed crossing the street,” Abby mouthed. Then she gave a spit against the evil eye that her words might’ve attracted—*pooh, pooh, pooh*—the way her grandmother would have done. Then, as if to make amends, “How long?”

“Forever.” Challenge, or submission? “Fuck school.” The cords of Doug’s neck bulged as if he were shouting.

“Fuck the news.” Abby grabbed the newspaper out from under him, crumpled it into the trash. Then she hollered for the kids to tie their shoes, get their backpacks. The argument wasn’t settled, just ended.

There was a police car at the end of the shul driveway for the rest of the week, although Judy Cohen said they just parked it there, empty, for show. Then on Saturday there was a policeman at the door, checking pocketbooks and tallis bags. No, not a policeman, Abby realized, as his grizzled head leaned forward to examine her ChapStick, crumpled tissues, Cheerio crumbs. Just a hired guard, an old man with a badge, maybe plastic, like Sammy’s Purim costume. Did he have a gun? A real, not plastic, gun?

Rabbi Wolf chanted the long *parshah* about Abraham and his sons, Isaac and Ishmael. In her sermon, she considered whether the call to sacrifice Isaac had been God’s punishment for Abraham expelling Ishmael into the desert. But then God sent an angel to bring water to Ishmael and promised to make of him a great nation. And hadn’t God also spared Isaac? Two great nations, Rabbi Wolf reminded, both descended from Abraham.

Then the swastikas appeared.

The secular New Year had passed, the repaired Torah returned from Brooklyn. Neither stained glass nor silver had yet been replaced, but the joyous colors of Shelley Landsdorf's Torah covers and the loving stitches of every Sisterhood finger deserved a celebration.

Maybe it was on Friday night, after Shabbat candles and chicken and baths, after Abby had helped the kids pick out clothes for the party in shul tomorrow, then loaded them into the car (in parkas, and also hats, they shouldn't catch their death of cold from wet hair) for one last drive past lingering Christmas lights, all the way to the house famous for coordinated music—tune your radio to 106.9 for a chorus of angels singing “Joy to the World.” Maybe then, Becka and Sammy's faces against the windows, their breath steaming the glass, Abby humming along to Christmas carols she'd learned in public-school glee club, maybe that's when the swastikas appeared.

Everyone saw, first thing Saturday morning, every congregant arriving, whether walking, as per ancient law, or driving (another debate from another, easier time).

“What's that?” Sammy pointed, as Doug pulled into the parking lot, fingers blanching white against the wheel.

Thick scars of paint. Bold black crosses, arms akimbo, as if beckoning, mocking, searing, scorching. On the brick walls. On the heavy metal fire doors meant to protect. On the clear glass that replaced the window smashed by so-called thieves.

And there was Mike, the janitor, with his mop and bucket, as if some kid had just thrown up in the social hall. His mop and bucket, surely useless against this overwhelming plague of black.

“They should never have reported it,” Doug said.

“You knew about this?” Abby used her whispered hiss, as if the children in the backseat couldn't hear. “And you didn't warn us?”

Doug was driving past empty parking spaces, almost as if he planned to circle around the building and keep going, out the exit, back home. Did *fuck school* also mean *fuck shul*?

“The rededication ceremony,” he said, finally selecting a spot out back, out of sight from the street. “It was in the paper

last week. As if we needed the publicity. Better nobody should know.”

Better nobody should know. Since when did *Doug* sound like Abby’s grandmother? Abby’s grandmother, who’d never talked to Abby about life in the camps. But she’d told Abby’s mother, when she was old enough to be warned.

The grizzled guard was back at the shul door, this time actually poking through Abby’s purse with a rubber-gloved finger. She had breath mints this week, and Tampax.

It was Abby’s mother who’d told Abby, when *she* was old enough. About what had happened to Abby’s grandmother, how she’d been treated, by guards with swastikas on their uniforms, and even by some people who’d called themselves doctors, with their fingers, and more, in and out.

The sanctuary was crowded for the celebration, with liquor in the hallway for congregants to toast *l’chaim*, to life. As if nothing had happened? Rabbi Wolf paraded the repaired Torah, in its golden-shofar cover, up and down the aisles, hugging it over her beating heart, the way Abby had always held her babies.

Then she delivered her sermon—the one she must’ve prepared last week, last night, before—about the Torah portion, *Vayigash*, Joseph and his brothers. *I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt.* The line everyone knew. But the next line: *And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves . . .* Yourselves, the brothers who had sold him into slavery. “The first recorded moment in history,” Rabbi Wolf said, “in which one human being forgives another.”

“Is it a flower?” Sammy distracted Abby from the rabbi’s message, pointing to slashes of black clearly visible through the not-stained-glass window. Hadn’t Abby just read something about people, somewhere, transforming swastikas into flowers? The kind of story you never used to read, before.

“It’s *not* a flower,” Becka sneered. Then, “Is it?” Today, she’d brought a book about fairies using magic to solve every problem, even less believable than Nancy Drew.

After the bomb threat, Abby had stumbled on a Facebook link to audio of the actual threatening phone call. A voice

calmly proclaiming that soon a lot of children would die. And here was Rabbi Wolf preaching forgiveness, while the sun shone upon the congregation through a swastika.

It wasn't until later, over Sisterhood salads and tiny plastic cups of schnapps and jelly cookies for the kids, that word began to spread. It started with the teenagers, hovering over their phones, irresistibly drawn to the shimmering screens, never mind Shabbat rules. Then parents, first chastising, then bending over the screens themselves, faces contorted, as if mirroring what they were seeing. Something worse than swastikas. Whispers through the crowd. Gunshots. Another shul. Somewhere else.

Doug had his phone out now, shaking his head in response to Abby's questioning eyes, nodding at the children, herding them towards the coatroom. How many dead, if Doug wouldn't speak in front of the children? Was Judy Cohen crying, as she knelt to zip her Zachary into his jacket, fingers struggling, hair falling in ropes over her face? Abby wanted to kneel with her, hug her, help her zip.

But Doug was tugging, and then they were out the door, into a throng of people. Strangers, brandishing sticks, clubs, rifles. Doug's arms reached out to Abby's, and they huddled around their children without need to discuss, like some practiced medieval battle formation.

It was only when Doug's fingers relaxed their grip that Abby realized what these strangers actually held in their hands—spray bottles and scrub brushes and rubber gloves—Mike in their midst, with his mop, pointing and organizing. An army of strong men with rags around their faces against the caustic burn of whatever they were spraying—to scrub away the black.

Then she saw there were men *and* women. Fluttering headscarves on some, knitted caps on others—at first unnoticed in the sea of face rags. Just as Abby hadn't really noticed these neighbors before . . . until the mosque burned down.

Beyond the army of scrubbers, the police were back, where just this morning the old man had stood. Although were these policemen? Not in their usual neighborly blue uniforms,

sometimes even with short sleeves, like the plaid shirts Abby's dad used to wear for backyard barbecues. These could've been soldiers on the TV news, in some faraway country, fighting one of too many faraway wars. They wore heavy helmets and bulky chest protectors and all sorts of equipment that Abby couldn't accurately name when Sammy asked, "What's that?"

"You can ask them," Doug said. But the policemen were busy, some chattering on their radios, others intent on scanning the street—eyes, hands, bodies at the ready.

"At Touch-a-Truck," Abby said. "You can ask them at Touch-a-Truck."

On Monday she would call the town, arrange for police cars to come to Touch-a-Truck. Burly policemen. And an ambulance. And a big red fire truck, with a couple of firemen who wouldn't be afraid of anything. All the rescue vehicles . . . and the rescuers. Sammy would climb inside, honk horns, sound sirens. With Judy Cohen's Zachary. And the daycare children—Abby would be sure they got fliers. Maybe Becka was still young enough to join in the fun. As if they were safe. As if their parents could protect them.

Robyn Blocker

The Crowned

The day I met the oracle was my 30th birthday, and an oracle, provider of answers, was what I needed more than anything. I guess that's why I decided that's what she was.

I was in my third month as an EFL teacher in a Taipei buxiban (say *boo-shee-bahn*), an after-school school that parents make their kids go to when their real school day is over. In our buxiban, they learned everything they'd learned before, only this time in English, and from people who might just have the bare minimum of teaching qualification, i.e. me. Most of my students would rather have been home by the time I greeted them for their lessons. This was fair. I would rather have been anywhere else than teaching them.

But there I was.

In the break between my two classes, I found a construction paper crown sitting on my backpack in the teacher's office. Across the front, in pastel balloon letters, it read "Happy Birthday Brian!" The band was covered in sprawling, spidery signatures. One was compact and adult: "Alice."

Alice Wu was a kindergarten teacher, and she was kind of cute and really nice. The fact that she had put together this crown for me gave me a rush of tranquil joy. I guess you could say she'd made me feel *special*. I put the crown on and snickered at my reflection in the window—a man who had only ever lived in his mom's guestroom or his dad's basement before moving to a hemisphere where girls didn't think that made you a loser. A man in his best shirt: a dingy, moob-accentuating polo bought for him by his mother in a previous decade. A man tall, fattish, and balding.

But youngish and crowned.

"I'm the king of the world," I said to the head elementary teacher, a Canadian guy named Levi.

"Of course you are," he replied, almost smiling. Then, putting on his Boss face, he shuffled and folded the newspaper he was reading. "So hey, buddy," he sighed, "I've got to ask. How's the new point/demerit system working?" Levi always

called me *buddy* or *big guy* when he was trying to help me not suck at my job. He did this so frequently that even my students had started calling me *buddy*.

I hedged. “Eh. To be determined. The kids are still getting used to it.”

Truth was: they’d have had a better chance to get used to it if I employed it more, but it was a black-and-white system that required me to allot points for behavior I deemed *good* and demerits for *bad*, and I had a hard time determining on the fly what was objectively bad and not just healthy, annoying youthful spirit. Was speaking Chinese in English class as bad as pushing in line? Should Timothy Chang get a demerit for bolting full speed down the hall and running smack-dab into the ass of T.A. Mary when it was either run or get tackled by (not so) little Bruce Li? Would it not show the boys there is no justice in this world if—as Levi had suggested—both Timothy and Bruce receive a demerit for this event? There *is* no justice, but should we not perhaps craft some semblance of it in the microculture of our buxiban—show the kids how things *should* be, so they have something to aim for? Or would that be so contrived as to render a teachable moment null?

“He really hurt me,” was T.A. Mary’s input. She meant emotionally. Upon rebounding from her gluteus, Timothy’s face had lit up like someone plugged him in, and he’d crowed “WOW, you have a BIG butt!”

“Bruce is a bullying asshole,” I’d countered.

“So is Timothy.” She was almost crying.

True enough. It was Timothy who’d started the class calling me *buddy*, but then again, did doing so not indicate he had a tremendous sense of irony and a healthy rebelliousness toward an inept authority figure?

I don’t know what to believe about anything. Never have. Nothing stays still long enough for me to see what it really is and what I ought to do about it. My inability to define and decide extended to everyone in my life, from my students to my girlfriend, Yun. Yesterday, I’d been doing my vacillating in a sample rocking chair in IKEA’s baby section, researching “abortion Taiwan” on my phone with the screen turned away from her. She wanted my opinion on our unborn child’s future bed. The Blåskrika convertible crib-with-changer or the Dröm Sött crib in white?

“It’s important to know what those names mean in English,” I’d told her. I was always saying absurd shit like that to Yun or throwing out words I knew were beyond the level of her basic English. She was my first girlfriend, and being inscrutable was the only way I could think of to make my personality attractive. Yun’s responses only encouraged me; she always pretended to understand. Like me, she had an inferiority complex. She’d never felt pretty, and her family was poor and came from a peasant town. Some people are proud of humble beginnings like that, but not her. She thought intelligence was all she had.

I tried not to look at her as she ran her fingers over the beds’ minimalist Scandinavian contours. Her maternalism repelled me. The doctor said she was only five weeks pregnant. Why was she shopping for a baby bed so early in gestation? She was neurotic, that was why. I didn’t need that kind of neurosis in my life for the next eighteen years; I had my own to deal with. Plus, as I reasoned, no woman and child needed a baby daddy as flaky and weak as me.

Baby daddy was as far as I’d gotten in referring to myself by what I was presently going to be. *Father* was too momentous a word, too archetypal for a dithering fuck-up. *Baby daddy*. Like I was some cracker on an afternoon talk show where Yun would scream at me and the audience chant, “Make him PAY! Make him PAY!”

Five weeks pregnant. Yelp said there was an OB-GYN clinic within walking distance of our apartment where a “very nice” doctor could do it for her. I wanted that for Yun—someone nice and gentle to erase me from her—when I disappeared.

Then guess what happened in that IKEA rocking chair: I blinked and wanted to be a father. Realizations—or what felt like them—came pouring in:

- The challenge would motivate me to be a better man. It would save me by making the world’s real right answers stand out.
- My kid could tell me what Grandpa, Yun’s severe, traditional father, was saying about me. (My guess: “He is asking why the hell you’ve never bothered to learn Chinese.” Answer: “Well, kiddo, it’s hard. All the words sound the same.”)

- Yun’s maternalism? Reassuring. Her neuroticism? My mistake; it was *pragmatism*. *Frugality*. The beds were on sale. Speaking of beds, the Blåskrika two-in-one was advertised as a space-saver, but I didn’t like the idea of the poopy situation being so close to the sleeping situation. But the other bed? According to Google, Dröm Sött meant “Sweet Dreams,” and I thought IKEA could have done better than an easy sleep cliché like that. You’ve got to have principles about where you put your money.

It was the bed problem that threw me. It zapped my confidence. I blinked again and fumbled my desire to father. I juggled this desire, dropped it, lunged for it as it disappeared through the cracks. Aching with its loss, I’d put my phone away and told Yun to leave the beds for another day and let’s go get some meatballs.

Now, in the teacher’s office, Levi was pointing an emphatic finger at me and saying, “Consistency. That’s your ticket, big guy. Lay out the consequences and follow through. Kids make a show of hating consequences, but they hate it more when there aren’t any. They’re the exact opposite of adults like that.”

Five minutes before my evening class started, I went to the door of Alice Wu’s classroom and looked through the glass. Elementary was only half through, but the kindergarten’s school day was over. Impossibly tiny people wearing even tinier backpacks waited, compliant and smiling, in a line in front of Alice, who stood with her back to the door, ready to lead them downstairs to the pick-up area. I was jealous. How could people be so small and eager to please?

I knocked on the glass. When Alice turned, I pointed to my crown and threw her a thumbs-up. She beamed and waved with both hands. Then she opened the door and, with big, exaggerated gestures, directed the tiny people in chanting, ‘Haaaappy Biiiiirthday, Teacher Briiiiiian!’

This all delayed her by thirty-five seconds. That’s accurate. I’ve replayed it my head a hundred times.

I was still wearing Alice's crown five minutes after *Happy Birthday, Teacher Brian*, when my evening students opened their phonics books for a lesson on the 'short I' sound. The sight of a crown on grumpy Teacher Brian's balding pate while he drew a cartoon pig on the board sent them into hysterics. I did look foolish, and I knew I should take it off for the benefit of their education if not my dignity, but its presence over my troubled brain was a novel element to the day that made life somehow less terrible. Nothing like a Zoloft or a few shots of whiskey, but better than nothing.

"Say 'pig,'" I told the kids.

"Peeg," they intoned.

I shook my head. "*Pig.*"

"*Peeg.*"

I nodded. "That's better."

With a magician's flourish, I gave the pig its curly tail. This went over so well that I added a fedora. The kids cracked up. It was their delight at this illustration that saved them from noticing—or maybe finding significant—the crash and thud on the street outside.

Once I got them working in groups, I ambled to the window and glanced down, keeping my movements languid and coincidental. Any sign there was something out there more riveting than phonics, and they'd be out of their seats, noses to the glass, faster than you can say "shitty classroom management." I first looked out toward a nearby construction site, but the action was happening further inward, near the front door of the buxiban. A crowd was running around, motioning to each other to stand back. In the spaces between their bodies, I got a clear look at a scene Biblical in its cruelty: a huge, gray slab broken in pieces on the cement and a woman lying face down between the two biggest chunks in a puddle of blood, her black hair fanned out around her head.

A groan formed in my throat. I turned it into a cough and looked away from the window—the kids must not look out there—but it was impossible to unsee the image. I could only impersonate the man I was before I'd looked outside, and I kept up the act even when an ashen-faced T.A. Mary rushed in and told the kids break had come early tonight. Just in time. An ambulance siren started to wail just as the last kid swept out.

“Keep them out of this room,” she whispered.

In the elementary common area, Levi waved me over to a quiet alcove near the elevator. “A tile fell off our building,” he said, tapping his upper lip, “and it hit Alice.” He swallowed and jerked his chin.

“Our Alice?” I asked. “*Kindergarten* Alice?”

He nodded and stared out at the kids, his shock and silence an ugly thing next to their joy. It was red bean soup today, their favorite snack. They flashed each other smiles, showed big gaps between new teeth still too big for their faces. I thought of buildings missing tiles, and blood and broken granite under a fan of black hair. Unequivocal things.

When I found my voice, I asked, “Well damn, man. Is she okay?” and Levi turned to me, his eyes bulging like a frog’s and sagging like a bloodhound’s. A man gone animal. I took a step away from that look.

Police cars and news vans choked the street in front of the buxiban, so the staff and I did a rushed exit out the backdoor like a bunch of sad celebrities. After a few stunned, despairing looks at each other, we parted wordlessly.

Alone in the bright night, I gulped and found my mouth dry and tasting of decay. I stopped at a 7-11 around the corner for a pack of gum. Last minute, I added a bottle of whiskey to the purchase and walked with it through side streets and night markets, ducking through bright lights thrown out by food stalls and lingering in residential shadows.

Suicidal ideation is no stranger to me, but tonight I was acting like Mr. Wants-to-Live. When cars rumbled by, I clutched at the walls of buildings, fingernails scraping grout as if seeking purchase. When there was an overhang, I lunged under it to avoid the edges of facades. You never knew; Alice sure hadn’t. Debris falls off buildings more often than it should in Taiwan. Warnings stuck to the sides of older structures tell you to beware of falling tiles. The signs show a cartoon man-in-danger running from a brick. The man-in-danger has the body shape of a vitamin capsule or a sausage: no neck, no distinguishable human parts besides grimace and briefcase. Weird juxtaposition of caricature and seriousness. They want the message to be clear without making the viewer

feel too targeted. *This building is the kind of building that shits bricks, not you're the kind of person who dies today.*

Alice, I thought. Alice, you were the kind of person who dies today.

A motor scooter trundling along beside me honked once, warning me of its presence, and again, inexplicably, I jumped and leaped to safety. Watching the taillights move away, I realized it wasn't that I wanted to live, I just didn't want to die slowly, didn't want time to psych myself into wanting life.

I squeezed into a narrow alley and snuggled up close to a selfish thought against the wall with the whiskey: There had been a granite ticket out of my troubles this evening, a guaranteed fast train to death, and I'd missed it. It had hit the wrong person. Then—less selfish—I asked myself what it would have taken for Alice to have not been present for the tile, to have been somewhere else entirely—already down the street, for instance. Why *Alice Wu*, why *then*?

I pictured her sprawled on the pavement in blood and did a mental rewind on the image. The blood retracted. Alice's head wound closed. She rose to her feet as the granite tile zipped back up the face of the building and snapped into place in the gap beneath the 4th floor AC unit. Alice then glided backwards through the front doors into the pick-up area, said goodbye to her tiny students, walked back up the stairs with them, and had them chant "Happy Birthday Teacher Brian" to *me* as they waited in a line in front of the door, ready to go downstairs.

When I subtracted my part in this history, the tile still dropped, but Alice had already walked away with her life.

I possibly cried. I may have said, "I'm so sorry," and if I did say this, I was talking to a lot of *you's*. No, I *definitely* cried, and I walked more and drank more. Did I fall asleep in an alley or did I just sit there for a while, butt against the wall? Don't know.

I do know I stumbled at last around the edge of a wall and faced the neon lights of a multi-floor McDonald's. *Eat, buddy*, I thought. *Smother the guilt, big guy*. Very drunk. Very. I entered, spoke, did something with money, and emerged from the glowing menu to find myself at a table between an old woman with a pile of papers and a flock of teenaged boys

in identical blue sweat suits hanging motionless over phones. I took a bite of burger, squeezed a paper napkin, turned on my phone. The screen lit up with text messages: one from my mom (“Happy birrrrrrthday, Jellybean!!!! Miss you!!!! So lonely here without you!!!”) and two from Yun (“Happy birthday!” “Where r you??”)

Oh God. Yun.

Leave tonight, I thought. *Buy a plane ticket or get yourself on standby*. Luggage was no issue. I would go back to my dad’s place and start over. No. My mom’s. She’d be easier to convince. Convince of what, I didn’t know.

From somewhere to my left, a voice began to speak in Chinese over an intercom. It reminded me of an airport, which reminded me I was leaving, which reminded me why. I’d caused the death of a good human being today, and now I was deserting my pregnant girlfriend.

No, no, no. I’d hit an impasse: I couldn’t stay in Taipei, but I also couldn’t leave. Not like this—not as broken as I was. Running away wasn’t starting over. Starting over was what you did when you’d finished sealing up your problems. You couldn’t start Round 2 until you’d learned something from Round 1. I had learned nothing. I had only accumulated more questions.

I closed my eyes and addressed all these questions—*literally figuratively* addressed them—and directed them toward their recipients.

- To Alice: Can you hear this? What is it like to be dead? Are you pissed at me?
- To Yun: Who do you imagine me to be? Would you blame yourself if I left?
- To my students: Will you remember me by the animals I draw and not the confusion and frustration I cause?
- To me: Do you have low self-esteem, or are you just honest with yourself? Are you selfish, or are you just making sure you don’t screw yourself over in case you DO have low self-esteem?

There was even one

- To my mom: Why did you ask ME whether you should divorce dad? Why would you do that to a nine-year-old?
- Too many questions. Too many cracks in me. If I knew the

right answers, I would know what actions to take. But the right answers were probably complex and unfixed, subject to the vagaries of human mood. Still, I couldn't help but feel that the *real* right answers were out there somewhere, hiding at the bottom of some opaque, scorching-hot stew of variables.

The phone fell from my hands; my forehead fell into them. Something tumbled from my head onto the table—the crown! I had forgotten I was wearing it. I had bumbled through town in a tragedy, costumed for comedy.

I should have been the object of attention at that moment, a drunk foreign loser frowning at his paper crown, but the blue-suited teen boys were taking furtive glances at the old woman on the other side of me. She was the intercom. I mean, there *was* no intercom. Do McDonalds even have intercoms?

What I had taken at first glance to be papers spread across her table were in fact squares of cardboard with Chinese written all over in black marker. And what I had taken to be your standard, basic old Taiwanese lady was a one-in-a-million old lady in a long, lace gown with a faded stain down the front.

Her hair spoke of her mental situation even more than her intercom voice and stained dress. It was matted and dreadlocked, and it towered—I shit you not—a foot and a half over her thin, wedge-shaped face, snapping eyes and spine held with military-grade straightness throughout every step in the ritual.

The ritual went like this: she would take a bite of chicken sandwich and lower it back to her table; chew, swallow, and lecture the room in her tinny intercom voice. Then she would pick up one cardboard square of words and hold it up at a 45-degree angle from her eyes with both hands. Meanwhile, she'd peer quizzically at the occupants of the neighboring tables, be ignored, shrug one shoulder ("your loss, not mine?") and place the cardboard back on the table in a reject pile. Repeat.

Schizophrenic, I thought, but no, that was only in the world that had no home for her to unload the plastic bags at her feet. This lady of the cardboards knew exactly what she was doing in the world inside her head. Whoever she thought she was—an oracle or a queen, a teacher or a priestess—she had

authority and answers, and I needed one of her cardboards. In the world on this side of her insanity, on this side of my intoxication, she and I were one glass wall away from each other. She could see me in my entirety, all my variables: my living, my dead and my unborn. I would learn something from her tonight.

When it came my turn for the oracle's offer, I put my hand out. She said something in Chinese through the intercom in her mouth. I took it as, *What will you give me in return for my wisdom?* I gave her my paper crown. She stared down at this offering and said something else, something I needed to mean, *This'll do. Tell me what you want to know.* I answered with the only Chinese sentence I knew how to say well: "*I don't know how to say it.*"

But as I spoke these words, a question rang out clear in my mind, a ludicrous question, a terrible question to be focusing on when consulting an oracle.

No matter. The oracle knew what I really wanted. That was an oracle's job.

She grunted and thumbed through her stack of cardboard sheets, peering into the depths of her wisdom. She pulled out one card, glared at it, and passed it to me.

With this cardboard in my hand, I walked through other alleys and parks and night markets and drank more whiskey. In each new environment, I'd stop, take out my phone, and hold it up to the words the oracle had written. Yun had once installed a free translation app for me. You point your camera at Chinese words, and, like magic, they shift to English on your screen. She'd said the sentences would come out gibberish, but a few relevant words would give me a clue as to overall meaning. She was right about the gibberish, but she hadn't known that nearly *all* the words—shoved into a computer as Chinese and regurgitated as English—would come out nonsense. And she hadn't known that, with every twitch of the hand, the shitty app shifts all the words into other words. I'm talking *pepper goblet dichotomy* morphs into *spittle recess blanket*. If you don't know the context, you can't even know which words are the relevant ones.

The oracle's answer was unreadable. *Yun*, I thought. *I need you.*

Selfish man. So selfish. Or was I only desperate? Isn't it impossible to truly be both in the same moment?

I came home just after dawn and crawled into bed beside Yun. She sniffed and frowned but then smiled with her eyes closed and patted my head. It made me sad for her that she wasn't going to put up a fight about her future baby daddy staying out all night and coming home stinking of alcohol.

Talking too fast, I told her I'd lived through a night of hell and needed her to translate a message I'd received from a homeless schizophrenic woman who had seen through my soul.

A pause. Then Yun turned, saw the cardboard, and held out her hand. "What is that?" she asked.

It made me sad for both of us that I wasn't trying to learn her language and that I was still talking to her in mine at speeds she couldn't follow and in words she couldn't yet recognize. My fear of being understood and found stupid and disappointing was suddenly wafting from me like a booze stench. She sensed it, I thought, but what made her pretend she didn't? Pity? Sympathy? Hopelessness? Or was it—surely it couldn't be—hope?

I explained the oracle's cardboard more appropriately, and Yun held it close to her face, half-blind without her glasses. At last, she said, "She say she no house and money, and this is very . . . uh . . . *difficult life* . . . so please reading story about she bad luck." She lowered the cardboard and explained, "I think she cannot inside the restaurant begging for the money, so she do like this."

I thought of the way the oracle had held each cardboard up in McDonald's and how no one had looked at her. Sad. But she wasn't an oracle. She'd been begging. *Begging*. I had been begging, too. And for some reason, I had received.

I stood up. "I have to go back out."

Yun's eyes suddenly showed their whites. In the moment before she forced her face back into its usual expression of composure, I glimpsed how much effort it must have taken her to wear this calmness on a daily basis.

"It's okay," I told her. I kissed her head. "I'll be back."

I walked along the road in front of our apartment, cars

zooming past, and thought about the woman with the cardboards. I had believed her to be magic, so how stupid that a question as mundane as *What crib should we get?* had jumped into my mind when prompted.

On second thought, not stupid: boring.

No, not boring: Responsible. Practical.

There they are, buddy, I thought. Good adjectives for you. You want them to be yours, and you need them, so just take them and put them on your head and accept the consequences.

I went to IKEA and found the baby section. I ran my hands over the Dröm Sött crib. I was warming to it. “Sweet dreams,” it meant. Blåskrika meant “blue jay.” A relevant cliché was luckier than a non sequitur. No child should dream their first dreams in a bird.

Contributor Notes

Peter Beynon is a high school teacher in upstate New York. He studied English literature at Hamilton College and the University of Virginia. Twitter: @aka_PeterBeynon.



Robyn Blocker grew up in the Dallas, Texas, area but has lived in Southeast Asia for nearly ten years. She is a writer and teacher and holds an MA in TESOL from Western Carolina University. Her fiction is forthcoming in *The Magnolia Review*.



Darius Degher's poems have appeared in numerous American and European literary magazines. His poetry collection *To See the Sound* was published in 2014. He is the founder-editor of the *Shipwrights Review*. He holds degrees from UCLA and Lancaster University, England. He is also a singer-songwriter and producer with many albums and songs released.



Elizabeth Edelglass is a fiction writer and book reviewer living in Connecticut. Her stories have recently appeared in *New Haven Review*, *Tablet*, *The Sunlight Press*, and *JewishFiction.Net*, as well as in four recent anthologies, including *The Bridport Prize Anthology 2018*. She has won the Reynolds Price Fiction Prize, the *Lilith* short story contest, the William Saroyan Centennial Prize, the Lawrence Foundation Prize from *Michigan Quarterly Review*, and a Connecticut Commission on the Arts fellowship.



Daniel Gorman is a teacher living in Albany, NY, who hopes to one day quit his day job and become a full-time writer. He has participated in the NYS Writer's Institute workshops for fiction and poetry, and frequently enters writing contests to stay sharp. His fiancée suggested he include in his bio that he loves dogs and is a big nerd. This is his first time being published.



Lenore Gusch is a high school teacher from Albuquerque, New Mexico. She has a bachelor's degree in creative writing and a master's of special education from the University of New Mexico. Her short fiction and poetry have appeared in *Redivider*, *Pilot Pocket Books*, *Sheepshead Review*, and *Writing Tomorrow*.



Jennifer Hanno is an English teacher and short-story writer from northern New York. Her work has been published in *Ploughshares*, *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, *Eclectica*, *COG*, *The Satirist*, and other journals. Her writing is often inspired by her experiences teaching and living in the North Country.



Audrey Kalman writes fiction with a dark edge about what goes awry when human connection is missing from our lives. Her book *Tiny Shoes Dancing and Other Stories* was shortlisted for the 2019 Rubery Book Award. She is the author of two novels and numerous short stories. In 2020, she was selected as one of 21 literary residents at the Shuffle Collective. She lives in northern California and is at work on another novel. Learn more at audreykalman.com.



Born and raised in Newcastle, Australia, **Benjamin Keyworth** graduated from the University of Sydney with a Bachelor of Laws in 2017 and currently works as a family law solicitor. An avid fan of the weird and wonderful, he has wanted to be a writer since he was five years old (before which he wanted to be a dinosaur).



Robert Maynor is from Wadmalaw Island, South Carolina. His stories have previously appeared in *Blood Orange Review*, *The Carolina Quarterly*, *BULL*, *Pithead Chapel*, and elsewhere. He is the recipient of the 2018 Larry Brown Short Story Award and the 2018 Coker Fellowship in Fiction from the South Carolina Academy of Authors.



A graduate of the Queens University MFA program in Charlotte, NC, **Bethany Nuckolls** spends most of her time traveling and teaching English as a Second Language to her global classroom. Her short stories have appeared in several publications, and she is now trying her hand at children's picture books. She also manages an Instagram for her two mischievous plushie sharks.



K. L. Perry lives with her family in the Outer Sunset of San Francisco.



She was named a finalist in the American Short(er) Fiction Contest 2019 and has received Honorable Mention in the Austin Chronicle Short Story Contest. Previous work has appeared in *The Sun*.