



*the* MEADOW

*the* MEADOW 2016

*the* MEADOW

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TRUCKEE MEADOWS COMMUNITY COLLEGE

*Reno, Nevada*

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# ALBANY

*Shane Jones*

*For Melanie and Julian*

1.

Tank climbed, naturally, as if walking through the field between here and the house, holding blue wildflowers as the ladder tilted over, seemingly balanced at the pinnacle by the other burial ladders similarly structured. He placed the wildflowers at the peak where there was a wooden panel. Climbing down he said that when he died he would like to be buried up there. To carry his dead body up the ladder (he emphasized dead) and place his naked body (he emphasized naked) on the panel. I opened my mouth a little and blinked. I tried not imagining his naked body on my shoulders, but it was impossible not to, so I hopelessly further imagined struggling to climb the ladder with my father's naked body draped over mine "fireman carry style," and in the image his body was more than double the size of my own, resembling a cow on a tiny trembling human, or a bug carrying a piece of bread toward his family up an insurmountable hill.

My family has always been obsessed with their bodies not touching the ground. Mom disliked her body touching the ground more than anyone else. She ate scrambled eggs in the trees. Thirty feet off the ground she'd sit on a tree limb in her gown and say we were so far below we were only heads, which made us stick our arms and legs out and wiggle until we became spiders. You look like spiders, she'd say. You are, without a doubt, spiders now.

But are we spiders? we'd say.

I have no children anymore, she'd say and sigh, just spiders.

Each rung of the burial ladders, carefully cut stretched ovals of knotted wood, was handmade by Tank. When finished the burial ladders would be even greater than our house with each section placed by his hands, and in his vision, his body would one day lie at the peak of his creation, an image of end-days perfection honored by the sun and invisible stars.

Tank said that when the sun strikes two, which it was now, the sun hit the wildflowers, and sometimes, if it was hot enough, the wildflowers burned. I didn't believe him. Sons, no matter what age, don't believe their fathers. My father once told my brother, Sam, that if he jumped from a specific tree branch he would break his ankle in two places, so Sam jumped and broke his ankle in three places. When we said he was wrong, going hahahahaha, Tank showed us a piece of paper where he had corrected himself, the paper dated that had crossed out "ankle broken in two places," and beneath it "ankle broken in three places."

Tank tested the sun on his forearm and nodded.

Me?

I don't see anyone else, he said.

Right, I said. It's just me. I'm going.

I didn't go. I stood trying to understand my surroundings, what I was doing here again, and then I climbed the burial ladder painted red, the "walking path" burial ladder Tank had previously named it, on another piece of paper. You shouldn't be scared of heights because it's only more air, I told myself while climbing, which was a saying I told myself when I was a child climbing the largest trees with Sam. It didn't necessarily help then, and it didn't help climbing the structure designed from the imagination of my father, but I kept telling myself the words until it became a mantra attempting, and failing, to block my other thoughts about falling.

Tank measured missing rungs and hammered future burial ladders as I climbed to the wildflowers to see if they would catch fire, thinking Mom wasn't scared of heights like I was looking at Tank becoming smaller below. The horse, a pet of my mother's who was named Horse, watched me from below as well, stomping in place, turning her head, wondering what I was doing on the burial ladder only Tank climbed with much greater ease. A horse was questioning my movements, I thought, even a horse thought I looked out of place in this world. I felt the air warming as I ascended. I was out of place in this world.

As a child we had weekly bonfires. At night the bonfire was larger than its reflection on the lake. I have no way to understand this besides my memory has been filled by my imagination, but it's true, it really did appear that way, so it was that way. Everyone came over from rainbow farm and spoke in what Sam and I referred to as "the adult language," mother sitting close to the fire, Tank telling her not to burn herself, mother telling him to please tell her what to do with her body, her body was his body. Sam would whisper in my ear, and I'd say to do the adult language, and he'd say she was the stronger one god damn it and for a while he called her the Minister of Magic (M.O.M). We never told her the name because it was our secret and we said it while running through the trees, spoke it to the birds and bugs in the endless woods in the adult language.

Two men from rainbow farm had children my age who said the Minister of Magic always looked sad, her eyes were always wet, and they were right, which was maybe why she loved bonfires so much, but I don't think my mother was always sad, she just had wet eyes. Can't a person just have wet eyes and not be sad and live their life?

The adults played a game called What Are You, where they asked questions like, What are you going to do before you die? and What are you guilty of? and What are you scared of? This last question I remember more than the others because even though the children weren't allowed to play, I said I was scared of mudpuppies and Sam shoved me into the edge of the lake where my shoes filled with water and mud. I thought,

inside my shoes filled with water and mud, would grow a swamp of teeth, so I took my shoes off. I never found any teeth. One of the adults from rainbow farm, I think his name was Tom but I'm not sure, the only thing I remember about him is that he fucked a sheep once, said he was scared of the government coming for his plants, and the other man from rainbow farm, I don't remember his name but he was sickly thin and didn't fuck sheep, said winter lasting longer than winter should last, and the first guy, Tom, agreed by nodding his head and sucking his lips into his face. Tank said he was scared of anything harming his family, that he had a repeating nightmare of our house disappearing, waking in bed but the house vanished around him besides a white outline of the structure.

Before it was her turn the Minister of Magic kept inching closer to the fire and we were watching her because it was her turn and I think everyone knew she was the most interesting person there so she was capable of the most interesting answer. I expected her to say she would be most scared of losing Horse, because back then, childhood me, always heard Tank joking that she loved the horse more than him, how she never named the horse because it was a horse of such stature that it didn't need a name even though Sam thought it was funny to refer to the horse as a cat, the pet we wanted. But she didn't say anything about Horse when it came her turn to answer in What Are You because what she said was Ground.

The Minister of Magic sat with her feet up, barefoot, too close to the fire for skin, and no one said anything to ground because the answer was too unique for them to process, I think, too difficult to respond to, so the next adult from rainbow farm said she was scared of nothing because it didn't make sense to be scared because it didn't do anything for a person. I'm not scared of nothing, she said. It was a waste of time to fear anything, she said, because what mattered was physical motion, work, and tactile accomplishment. I liked this answer. But as an adult, I realized people who say they are scared of nothing are scared of everything. That's why they are constantly moving. If they stop, the thoughts come out. That woman was terrified of her own voice.

I poked a finger into the wildflowers that weren't on fire. The petals were hot, but not hot enough to catch fire. Tank, far below, carried planks of wood as Horse walked in front of him, controlling, to his irritation, how fast he could walk.

Not hot enough, I said.

Just wait, he said.

The sun isn't that hot.

It is, said Tank. It's a big sun today.

What?

The sun, said Tank. The sun is big.

I couldn't understand what he was saying. It didn't make any sense to me. It felt unfair. It was unfair.

As I stepped down the ladder a gunshot fired and Horse entered the woods with my father following. I slipped, momentarily stepping into

the air, and as I grabbed the ladder with both hands I looked up to see the wildflowers colored orange in a multi-layered and holographic light. Tank was right, but I didn't want him to be right, maybe the orange color and layered holographic light was the sun shining through the petals, the vibration of the sky from the gunshot, so I climbed back up and watched the flames snake their way through the flowers, folding each petal into a brittle black that quickly crumbled to ash.

Another gunshot blasted. I walked toward the woods where Horse and Tank had entered, the trees a muddy yellow. The Minister of Magic said ground, she said ground. Another gunshot. I ran toward the shapes of Tank and Horse, my mother said ground, she was scared of the ground, then she made the decision to ascend into the clouds, to the bedroom after dinner, destroyed wood everywhere being replaced by new wood from my father always with a project, always needing to fix or improve a floor or a wall—well, if I don't fix it, it just won't get fixed—her limbs ascending his stairs, and then, it.

I wonder what transpired in her head before she entered the bedroom and she closed the door, smashed the vase, flowers pin-wheeling, she said ground, she said ground, what images flickered in her mind in those final minutes. Maybe it was a buzzing leading to the glass becoming part of her body.

I ran after Tank and Horse and wished for my brother. I wished to be in the trees and to be a child again. I think my energy days are behind me. I think the woods once held more color. Nothing makes sense in your present life when you reflect on your childhood, but the childhood makes sense. That's a good place to try and be.

When I entered the massive clearing of tree stumps once again, the construction of the burial ladders, Tank was petting Horse like nothing had happened. I couldn't believe it. I asked him about the woods and he had no idea what I was talking about, he had heard the gunshots, but that was regular, hunting season is year round, don't you remember the life? Not really, I said. I can't remember anything. He said I was tired, he had seen me run into the woods, told me to stop, but I kept running, no Dad ahead, no Horse, no Mom, just the deepening sun deepening with yellow. It was a big sun.

You're shaking, he said.

I'm not, I said.

My arms and hands and legs were shaking. It was only when I looked at my shaking body, recognized it was my body, each inch convulsing, that my shaking body stopped shaking. Hey, you stopped shaking, Tank said, Good for you, and said it was time to go. I agreed to go with him. He climbed the walking path burial ladder where the wildflowers were still on fire, said a prayer, drew the sky triangle, and blew the fire out like candles on a cake.

2.

Sam was missing. Two months ago he had walked into the woods. Rumors from the remaining inhabitants of rainbow farm and other random recluses who lived in the further woods, had reported seeing Sam to Tank who was hesitant to travel so far alone.

The day before Tank had told me over the phone, rather dramatically, that it was a matter of “brother rescuing brother,” but he would help where he could, which would be little to none because he didn’t feel comfortable with the responsibility. I didn’t exactly say I would help find Sam, it seemed like an impossible task, I just agreed to come home because Tank was very upset. But after the burial ladders I told myself I would consider finding him because everywhere I looked was empty space Sam should have been filling, that without him, my childhood environment was somehow exactly the same and also drastically, depressingly, different.

Following Tank to the lake, he said we’d leave first thing in the morning. It was too late to begin the search now. I said okay, sounds good, even though I didn’t mean it. Tank also said he had had a recurring dream for the past three nights and we needed to find him within 72 hours, before the end of the date 10/10, or an awful “happening” would take place. He phrased it that way, as, *the happening*, and when I said he was being dramatic again, what does that even mean, he said he wasn’t, that 10/10 had flashed inside the dream in neon blue letters on a window, and by the end of the dream the numbers had fallen apart to pixels that dripped down the glass and to a sidewalk where one person stood, a man, but only his legs and a taxi cab were visible. I think Tank saw my facial expression, which was a stunned, confused look, but he continued, saying the 72 hours came up later, in another dream, but the numbers were connected, he was sure of it. He had, in his mind, a kind of calculation and countdown to finding Sam, and I agreed by saying okay, sounds good, a second time, even though I still didn’t mean it and he hadn’t said another word.

The cow was on the lake and it was dead. Several times a year an animal walks onto the partially frozen lake near our house, the ice cracks, and the animal drowns. When Sam and I lived here we might be able to save the animal, which only happened once, but with Tank alone, he had no choice but to wait for help in removing it. From bloat, the water inside this dead cow had expanded this dead cow into three times the size of a normal cow and worse yet, instead of drowning and dying at the bottom of the lake, or from canoe waves ending near shore where Tank could break apart the body, this cow had death ballooned directly upward from where it had drowned downward sometime weeks or months ago, that is, this giant dead cow, comically bloated, was floating in the center of the lake, illuminated by the same sun that had ignited the wildflowers. I imagined the cow bursting into flames before we had the chance to

remove it.

Frogs had laid eggs in messed puddles of white foam on top of the water where my bare feet entered. I stepped on weeds and my toes sank in the mud. I thought about the possibility of a mudpuppy crawling over my foot, strange teeth. The cow looked larger as I sank lower, the water rising to my waist. Tank was at my side, ripples of water moving from him and colliding with the ripples I had created, creating a kind of super ripple that coated the lake.

She's floating because of air taken in before going under, said Tank, wading next to the dead cow. The air creates pockets in the body the water can't get to is why she's floating like this.

Depressing, I said.

I swam around the cow that was somehow lying on her back, legs aimed at the sky. The air felt warm because my body was freezing. I kicked my way around the cow. Tank was still talking on the other side of the cow even though I wasn't responding when he threw the rope over, saying that the reason a cow walks onto a frozen lake is dehydration, which in his passive aggressive way was him blaming rainbow farm, and the children I had played with who had grown into "weak arm" men, according to Tank.

Another rope came over the cow as he continued discussing the poor care rainbow farm showed its animals. For a cow to become distressed enough it leaves a grazing field, crosses a road, and walks onto a frozen lake for water is a crime, he said.

Dad, I said, okay.

Then he asked who was going under.

Going under?

One of us has to swim under with the rope and then we tie it off around the body, he said.

Okay, I said, not remembering this from my childhood because, most likely, it was performed by Sam, not me.

So I swam under the cow. Everything was a cloudy yellow with blurry strands of vertical green. I ran a hand over the cow's spine which was a hard, unbreakable feeling, and then I touched the skin outside the spine—short haired, silken, soft—and surprised myself how long I could hold my breath. I swam with both ropes in my hands, making sure the ropes ran across her body, taking the task seriously, this rescue of a dead cow, because, I think, I wanted to accomplish something before I considered the rescue of my brother, that accomplishing this smaller task would prove to myself and my father that I was capable of the larger task.

I thought I was aware of Tank's general location, but in closing my eyes and swatting my arms to my sides, flying upwards because I couldn't hold my breath any longer, I had somehow moved directly under his legs. I swam up between his legs, my right shoulder splitting him, forcing him to flop backwards, splashing in the water, not because of any kind of physical pain, but because my body was touching his body, between his legs.

Sorry, I said, didn't see you there.

Shit, he said. Just, shit.

Really sorry.

It's okay, he said. Here, give me a rope.

Here's the rope, I said, and handed him the rope with great care.

We swam back to the shore, each with a rope in our arms, yanking on the dead cow which budged and floated across the water. I couldn't believe how strong Tank was, even though he was called Tank. He breathed with his mouth closed. Living alone on fox creek farm had polished him hard even though he was aging, but not me, each kick with the rope in my hands felt like I was pulling a wall. Both calf muscles folded in when I tried one big kick to right myself, prove myself, to my father, to the cow, which was beginning to tilt and angle from Tank swimming ahead of me. I couldn't use my legs to hold me up so I fell under.

Tank swam toward me, his body a shadowy monster in the blurry green. I kept kicking my feet, or my mind was telling my legs to move, but when I looked down they weren't moving. My arms were rubber. I just couldn't get my body to do anything a body should do. At the top of the water the cow looked like a ship sailing across the water and the sky rippled in the breeze.

I swallowed gallons of water with Tank's arms hooking under me, then, his hands under my armpits. He positioned himself next to me so he could push off from the muddy bottom where my numb feet were. The muscles in my calves convulsed, and I tilted my toes toward my knees to try and stretch the muscle, but it didn't work. Tank held me, squatted, and pushed off. He kicked wildly, his legs wrapping around my body momentarily, his body squirming as he struggled with me weakly wadding my hands at my sides. The ropes were going under, which I imagine Tank saw, so he kicked even harder. His belly rubbed against my belly. We held each other, or, more precisely, my father held me.

When we broke the surface of the water I was so disoriented that Horse, at the edge of the lake, was meowing like a cat. I'll explain this later. The cow calmly floated passed us, headed toward the shore, and we watched it go. My eyes hurt like they were filled with blood. Later, after taking a shower I looked in the mirror and they were filled with blood. Grasses were waving all around the lake and in my vision they doubled and then they tripled. I waved back.

Tank asked if I was okay, and when I tried to speak, I vomited a steady stream of water.

You sure?

I vomited more water and as I did I told him I was fine, which was me choking and nodding.

Damn, you don't look so good.

I vomited the last of the water, my throat hurt, and I couldn't speak, so I nodded yes. And then I could speak.

At least I look better than that dead cow, I said.

My father looked at me, while we treaded water, in a way that made me think he was remembering when I was a child and he couldn't believe I had become this person, this adult. I can't even believe I've be-

come this person. I have no logical reason why I thought he was thinking this. His eyes were wide and loving, but his expression was indifferent. But his eyes. The contact with me there in the lake with the cow hitting the shore and Horse going wild, now sounding like a horse. I said I was ready to help find Sam, we needed to bring him home where he belonged, hopefully he wasn't too far gone, and Tank said okay, we will wake with the sun, a small sun, and the birds too.

3.

After walking for miles, Tank following the words of what rainbow farm and completely unreliable forest recluses had told him on Sam's whereabouts, the woods broke into a circular clearing. The entire forest floor was swept clean of brush and green. The dirt was hard-packed by footprints with a pathway designated by white rocks connecting a garbage pit, three tents, chopped firewood, tree branches built to hang clothes off, and a central living place—a white yurt.

Fear and excitement highlighted my body in a way that I thought I was completely naked and hit with the sun on every inch of my body. I had never seen a yurt before. That's not the reason why I felt this way. I was next to my brother but I couldn't see him. Tank appeared emotionless but his eyes were wet, and I wasn't sure he could handle the situation, but I told myself he was, not because he truly was, but to prepare myself in order to move forward and into the yurt, the rescue of my brother.

I made sure not to step on a leaf or stick as we approached, my eyes darting from my feet and to the yurt, back-and-forth, my breathing intense. It was at this moment my heart hurt again.

Like many people born in Albany I have a defect that prohibits me from being normal. It's my body. My chest formed with a protrusion of bone on the left side, directly over my heart, and I'm constantly worried something will happen to me, my heart, at any given time, even though I was told by seemingly uncaring doctors I have nothing to worry about. You should be good, said one of the doctors. But I have everything to worry about because it's my heart. When faced sideways, in front of a mirror, the bone is most visible and resembles a half circle or something birthing, a lemon or plume, from my chest. I believe, that when I stand at other angles, depending on how other people near me are standing, they can't tell I was born deformed, that I have a warped bone for a chest. That's why, in groups, I'm always moving, always asking if someone needs anything.

Tank crouched, bouncing a little, as he moved toward the yurt. I did an odd side-step, sliding my feet together, to which Tank looked at and appeared puzzled. Then I began to crouch too, stepping on the dirt in hyper-aware movements. Tank looked a little nuts. I looked a little nuts.

On the door hung gold necklaces. There were instructions written on the yurt in what appeared to be charcoal to place one's hand into the necklaces and to shake until someone answered. Tank nodded aggressively at me, a near head-butting motion. My heart was pounding so

hard in my chest I couldn't talk, I thought my bone was going to snap, so I nodded back with the same level of aggression and felt a little better. Then I placed my hand into the center of the necklaces and noticed my fingers were trembling.

Before returning home and searching for Sam I had moments, while sitting in an office cubicle, where I didn't necessarily miss my brother, but missed my brother as a child, and myself as a child. I would work myself up inside this nostalgia until completely depressed. I'd compose myself by looking out the bathroom windows because in my cubicle I had no windows, just carpeted walls the cleaning woman washed with a stiff mop, a task she called "the big momma dry rub special," which oddly, worked very well. Seeing the roofs of tall buildings from an even taller building in a seemingly never ending pattern of black, gray, and white, made me feel better.

Because I was so nervous I circled my hand in a timid way that didn't move the necklaces at all, Tank sighed, and then, I moved my hand in a violent, but comical way, nearly sending the necklaces from their hook. The chiming sent birds from branches, squirrels up trees, and a young woman appeared from an opening in the yurt. Her face was soft and lovely, heart shaped, like Mom's, or maybe I wanted to see her face in her face, I'm not sure, regardless, her appearance, even with pants with sequined flowers on the thighs, calmed us. The woman stepped back into the yurt and told us to come inside, she was making tea.

Quite the arm you have there, she said from inside the yurt.

Thanks, I said. You should see me pull a cow from a lake.

What's that?

I help cows, I said. It was a joke.

I was surprised how modern the yurt was. There was a leather couch and glass table, and wooden cabinets in a full kitchen, and hanging lamps, and a radio placed on a table as a kind of "entertainment area" circled in blankets, and even some pets: five or so kittens patiently sat next to little ceramic dishes at the far back wall of the yurt. Everywhere I looked candles burned on tables only wide enough for the candle itself.

We're looking for someone, I said. My brother, Sam. Is he here?

The woman crushed leaves with a spoon and then dropped the dust into a glass beaker. She said her name was Pyramid Flower, but to call her Goat, her recent studies required her to be named a different animal each season and this was the season of the goat.

Goat, I replied.

I am his father, said my father. I looked at my feet, wishing I could handle the situation alone, but he continued: I need to know where he is. He isn't right. Time is running out. We know he's here.

I thought briefly again on what *the happening* could be and imagined Sam burning acres of forest down, setting a world record for one-man arson.

Dramatic personality, said Goat. Capricorn?

He needs help, said Tank.

Can you help us? I asked while smiling. I was pleading with her,

through my eye contact with her, for her to understand the situation, my father, Tank.

Goat said Sam had left yesterday. He told her the reason for going even deeper into the woods, into areas with no name, was because Tank knew where he was, my brother had seen Charlie from rainbow farm obviously spying on him even though Charlie thought he was completely hidden, and my brother's devotion to sky law would be ruined by Father's arrival and disapproval. He had told Goat he didn't want to go back to fox creek farm ever again, and in hearing the news I selfishly wondered if Sam ever talked about me, us in the tree forts, playing in the hiding cabinets, swimming in the lake, the rope swing, anything to give me a further pull to find him, and eventually, reconnect the family.

Once, Sam and I ran in the tree forts until it was too dark to run back, but he told me it would be okay, just follow the sounds of his feet on the planks of wood, and if I was scared, to say the word ground and he'd slow down so I could rest my hands on his shoulders and we could keep running. I said ground a few seconds in, terrified I would fall into the darkness on either side of me, and for the rest of the way home I ran connected to my brother, our childhoods traveling through the woods of our childhood in what always felt like forever.

Goat brought the glass beaker to the center of the yurt and told us to shut up. Just kidding, she said. You can keep talking because I like words. Then she excused herself to feed the kittens. Tank stared into the bubbling liquid, tilting his head from side to side, while I listened to the clinking of dry cat food hitting the ceramic bowls and looked around the yurt, impressed by the design of my brother's doing, most likely, influenced by our father.

I could tell Tank was attracted to Goat because she looked exactly like the Minister of Magic from decades ago, from the pictures Father had hung in the bedroom, every inch of wall consumed by a picture, moving around the room by year from birth to the final picture, taken hours before she locked herself in the bathroom with the vase of flowers. That picture, I needed to see it and study it for signs of trouble, but remembering it in the yurt, I remembered it was a boring picture with the Minister of Magic outside digging holes where she had recently found shards of buried glass, Tank saying it was from the 1930's, most of it would stay buried, but she was worried the glass would cut our feet. He said it wouldn't cut our feet so she stopped. I clearly remember, the day after, cutting my feet.

Had she seen her reflection in the glass she had dug up, and had the image been so brutal, her age departed, that it sparked the idea of leaving, or was the ritual planned for weeks, months, maybe years, maybe even a childhood destiny to leave at that age, that future moment. Which means the Minister of Magic wasn't technically gone after she did what she did, but gone weeks, months, maybe years before, living a kind of half-life. But maybe, knowing she was going to do what she finally did, it allowed her to possess a sort of "heightened life" of compacted years, a sort of wild and blissful happiness running in the trees, knowing that fall-

ing wouldn't matter, knowing that moments held meaning until the date she had selected in her mind, some time, previously.

Goat told us to stick our tongues out and tilt our heads back which we didn't do. Tank said she had to answer four questions before we consumed the tea with her. When she looked at me I raised my eyebrows and smiled. Goat said it was a deal. Good, said Tank. Everyone seemed pleased.

The Four Questions:

- 1) How was Sam's health?
- 2) What direction did he walk?
- 3) Where did Goat come from?
- 4) How did she meet him?

Goat drank from the beaker and then sat back and into the blankets with her legs folded to the right, her body also leaning right, close to falling over, but somehow she stayed upright. She said she was a Russian art student, recently on leave to explore the architecture of American trees, explore sky landscapes—she mentioned her interest in sky law—and overall, to lose herself in a new environment before departing back to St. Petersburg where she would collect her illustrations and findings into her thesis. Tank narrowed his eyes. She had dreams of teaching art history, and also, dreams of practicing sky law, what Sam did, once back home. There, she said. One question down. We nodded. Tank narrowed his eyes even further.

Before the next question I caught my father staring at her breasts and felt embarrassed, not because he was a sexual predator, but because I had never thought of him ever before as a sexual being capable of the act. Sitting so close to Tank that our knees touched for the first time since the cow in the lake incident, and before that, since childhood, when the only way I could fall asleep was to have him lay next to me in bed, not talking, until I fell asleep, many times him falling asleep too and waking hours later, waking me, admiring his dark figure leaving my bedroom, I wondered, if Sam would even recognize me, and the only images of him I could recall was when we were children, before the Minister of Magic did what she did, which was the point of our separate adulthoods.

Goat said she met Sam in a landfill, picking garbage, which Tank said he didn't believe because it was impossible, and he laughed, but neither me nor Goat laughed. She said he was collecting materials for the yurt and she was collecting materials for an art project that was now outside the yurt at the bottom of the garbage pit, and she was impressed with Sam's knowledge of sky law and how he could name every tree. There, she said, another question down. Again, we both nodded. This time, she laughed.

Goat continued.

Sam was in good health, had grown a beard, was thin, had chipped a tooth jumping from one tree to another, but spent at least an hour per day doing pull-ups on tree branches and practicing climbing the most difficult trees. This image sent a jolt through my body and remembrance of him. She said he had brought with him a handgun, two knives, and several notebooks where he wrote his theories on sky law. She grabbed the glass beaker.

He didn't bring any food? asked Tank.

No, said Goat. It was apparent, from her facial expression, it was the first time she had realized that he didn't bring any food. He didn't, she said.

People can't live without food, I said.

That's true, she said.

I expected the tea to burn, but it was cool and thick, difficult to swallow, and an invisible wetness covered my legs. I thought I had pissed myself, and with both hands patted my crotch several times trying to feel the piss. I couldn't find any piss. Then, a warmth covered me from feet to chest. I made an odd groaning sound that I was aware of, how absurd it sounded, but couldn't control. I felt happy and alive. A yellow radiance spiraled outward in my vision, like everything turned up to a maximal brightness on the brink of blindness. Then the perspective of the room shifted and I saw myself, from the ceiling, at the door of the yurt as the childhood version of myself. I waved at myself.

He's probably fine, said Goat.

Most likely not, said Tank.

Maybe he brought some food with him you didn't know about, I said while looking at the ceiling.

I keep an inventory, said Goat. I know exactly how much food is in the yurt because I count the inventory six times daily.

Oh, I said.

I don't know how long Tank and I were out of our minds, but we accepted more of the tea from Goat, she answered more questions, and we spent what felt like hours, maybe days, which was impossible but felt true, moving our perspectives around the yurt and outside the yurt, several times myself becoming my father and able to feel his confusion toward me, who he had known as a baby and now saw aging toward his own age of sixty five. How strange to lose your hair, but then have your son lose his hair and be old enough, have him be old enough, to witness it, he thought.

When I returned to my thoughts I felt depressed because I was returning to my reality, something flat and strange without my mother or my brother. I would never have my mother back, and in this thought, realized finding Sam and re-connecting him to the family, to me, our childhood, was more important than anything else. Also, I didn't have anything else to do. Goat told us Sam had left behind a book he was writing, possibly it held answers, and she said we could have it if we had more tea, and before I could answer Tank had tilted his head back and

stuck out his tongue.

4.

Goat handed the book to my father who thanked her by hugging awkwardly. That is, Tank spent too long in the embrace, he was enjoying it too much, which was touching, Tank missed human contact, but after a while it became uncomfortable, and Goat had to do a “there-there” pat on his back, several times, before moving her hands between their chests and up to her face where she pretended to yawn.

Returning to the house, Tank told me to read each page of the book carefully no matter how difficult it may be. He didn’t want to know Sam’s mental state, knowing would upset him, he said, to read the book at night after he had gone to bed, before devising a plan on how to approach him and return him. I imagined *the happening* as Sam slipping and falling while chasing a rabbit from a tree fort, landing in a manner that didn’t, at first, seem too damaging, but causing internal bleeding that would cause him to pass, in his sleep, days later, while dreaming of food. The trip into the woods had bothered Tank severely, he had tried to help like he had said, but again, this was a matter of brother helping brother, and I had nothing else to do in my life, so he handed the responsibility of the rescue solely to me and I was glad to accept even though, I felt, he wasn’t entirely sure I could handle it alone.

That night I ate a sandwich with sliced apples and peanut butter, alone in the kitchen, before hearing a noise in the basement. I should mention, if I haven’t already, that our entire house was Tank’s creation and every crown molding, cabinet hinge, hardwood floor, copper faucet, and glass doorknob contained his creative touch, everything wood or glass or metal or stone, nothing plastic or composite, and the few visitors who had been allowed inside—once, a cyclist who cut his inner thigh on the bike’s chain-ring; once, a lost hunter who was malnourished and entire left arm was covered in spider bites; once, a political campaign volunteer who wedged his head in the door while yelling to vote for Yepsen—remarked that the house was like nothing they had ever seen, and they never had a chance to see the basement, my favorite place in the house.

The hiding cabinets were a series of cabinets, boxes really, running the perimeter of the basement floor, weaving into the work rooms of my father’s, moving under work tables and benches, all connecting and serving no purpose other than a play area for Sam and I. We each had five chances to open a hiding cabinet door to find the other. Crawling from one hiding cabinet to the other wasn’t allowed, even though Sam cheated on a regular basis, I think. I remember how my body felt inside one of the hiding cabinets, a fetal position against the shellacked oak, my entire body folded-up and still somehow comfortable, the dampness, the dark, my breath the only sound inside the hiding cabinet of number twenty one, always hiding cabinet number twenty one because it was my favorite number and still is.

When I entered the basement after hearing the noise I forgot about the noise and instead proceeded to the hiding cabinets in a sub-conscious way, number twenty one, and opened the door to be shocked that my body years ago had been small enough to cram inside. Now I could only fit part of my bent leg, and the feeling was that I had grown into something monstrous and ungrateful because I had once been so small and naïve, untouched by reality, and lucky enough to have played a game in something called the hiding cabinets because I had a mother who thought of this idea and I had a father who had created it.

Hello, I said in the basement. Dad?

I'm over here.

I'm coming over.

Tank was burning wildflowers in a corner of the basement because it was raining outside. He pointed to the vase he had placed in the fire, the smoke rising into a vent in the ceiling he had designed for such purpose. I said I was trying to eat dinner.

Have you begun?

I just started to eat, I said.

The book, he said.

Oh, I said. No. You told me to read at night.

Right, he said. I forgot. I have to show you the roof and the holes. It's important. Come on.

Now?

Do you have something else to do?

Yeah. Eating.

It will only take a minute, I promise.

Okay, I said.

On the roof he pointed to three holes of identical size, completely smashed through, revealing the attic of the house filled with the childhood toys of Sam and I, all of it visible when I lay down on the roof and craned my neck inside.

Stars, said Tank, and with his arms demonstrated three separate blazes from the sky crashing into the roof.

When I asked how, there would be evidence, he said there was evidence, and pulled a rock the size of my fist from his coat pocket. He said he found it in the attic after hearing the crashing and the rock was shaped like a star (it wasn't), and when he picked it up, it had glowed (doubtful).

You remember the story of the fixed stars?

I remember, I said.

This reminds me of that, he said. Maybe he isn't so crazy after all.

But it's not possible, I said. That story isn't real.

Who's to say what's real and what isn't?

The story of the fixed stars said certain stars in the sky, according to Sam at the age when he was known as the Mad Mouse, never moved until their light expired, and when the light did expire, the star fell from the sky. My brother told me if I ever found a fixed star in the woods

I would live a happy and peaceful life full of love and kindness, and I believed him, spending night after night in the black woods looking and listening for the hissing embers of a fallen star.

I said I was going back inside to finish my dinner. He asked what I was eating and I said a sandwich. He said that it sounded good, even though I didn't describe what I was eating.

My bedroom felt like it wasn't mine anymore, even though it hadn't changed since I was a child living here. My body was just too big for the space now, it was impossible my body ever fit here, I kept thinking. The images of myself as a child on the bed reading, on the floor coloring, in the closet building a fort, at the desk studying, in bed masturbating, on the floor playing guitar, on the floor with the kids from rainbow farm for my birthday sleepover where I was accidentally struck in the nose with the spine of a book—the pictures from the birthday party the following day show me with black circles under both eyes while smiling—these versions seemed to clog the room and make it difficult to find my current self, a grown man balding, who had to study his brother's writings, a brother who was living in the woods, hopefully, still alive.

I read the words of my brother, a brother I had once ran with in the surrounding trees, who I had lost and then found in the hiding cabinets, a brother I slept next to in the tents during the bonfire nights, a brother I had grown apart from, a brother who I realized, while reading, but was aware of before, I was jealous of because of his relationship with Mom, the way they would look at each other and laugh without speaking, or have story time alone in the woods in places I had never been, or when we both fell off our bikes while racing near the lake, both bikes hitting the ditch Tank never filled, it was the Minister of Magic who came to Sam first, checking his body, which had no signs of hurt, but my body did, both knees torn in several overlapping bloody X shapes, and my neck twisted in a way where I couldn't turn to the left without a high pitched squeal in my opposite ear. Mother always closer to brother, mother leaving by way of arm removal, and thinking this, reading the book, I realized also in the book could be a key to not only why Sam left, where he was, but a link to Mom, some answers, maybe, connecting all of us, the family, to help me better understand my own life, the way I was in the world, which was completely and utterly lost.

The book numbered two hundred pages with large blocks of text inconsistently separated by white space and no paragraph indentation. Some of the pages looked stained with pasta sauce or pizza. I read for two hours. I missed my brother while reading his theories on life above the ground, specifically, how he could create a civilization in the air not adhering to traditional laws. In the early pages he spoke briefly, and positively, about Mom, although I couldn't stop thinking about pizza, and how his trauma resulting from her death was obviously connected to his leaving for the woods, something he didn't connect and mention in these early pages. After his discussion about sky law, he talked about our father for a few pages and I imagined the three of us—me, father, and

brother—connected in a triangle, the family shape after Mom’s departure, which was drawn in the margins of the book on pages five, seven, and ten, and labeled accordingly with our names at the points.

The book stated, Sam’s words, that Tank’s goal was to keep us together on fox creek farm because he came from a family of never being together. His siblings—six brothers and one sister—were disconnected from my father because they decided to stay in Albany and do things like, most recently just before he left, attend a Caribbean pig roast. So now, the most important aspect of life was to keep a family together. But we weren’t together at all. We couldn’t be more separate than we currently were.

Tank’s greatest disappointment, this from Sam’s book in a section I read before passing out, was that he incorrectly judged his sister’s mind to be similar to his own. I read hoping for a mention of myself, or a hint to Sam’s location, but not once had he written my name or given clues to his whereabouts. I checked the time on my childhood alarm clock which somehow still worked and calculated the hours remaining, which could have been off by half a day or more, leading to 10/10, I wasn’t sure.

I learned, from the beginning of the book, it was impossible for Tank to stay in Albany, to stay connected with his family, he was too different, he was too special to be part of his family, he needed to begin his own family with children of a like-mind, my mother a woman with a sense of humor he sought out for years, a woman who was like his sister when she understood the absurdity of Albany, who he pulled from thousands in Albany, a woman who then left him with no explanation whatsoever by carving, this still Sam’s words, into the air before dropping the glass into her arms, her final words on why she couldn’t live anymore on fox creek farm, why she had to be the first to depart the earth. What those words were, according to my brother, was that she was infected with Albany, it had rooted inside her and spiraled her veins, that she could never cleanse herself of Albany no matter what her location. The same went for me. I was Albany. And reading these words, I realized that Sam wasn’t infected with Albany because he wasn’t born in Albany, and he had left for the deeper woods to ensure it would never reach him.

## 5.

I believed my parents never thought they would die because they never talked about dying. If I mentioned aging they would leave the house immediately, the Minister of Magic with Horse, Tank running to the lake, bodies free from the earth that would one day hold them. Before working in an office I never considered my own death, and then I worked in an office. I remember my mother in the tree forts, some of the kids from rainbow farm giving chase, her gown splitting into kites as she ran over sections of wood not yet railed by branches, the danger of running on these sections even too great for Sam who stood with everyone else watching her run through the woods seemingly floating on air, never once thinking that at any minute a wrong inch-over step would send her flailing below.

I asked her once if she was scared of falling and she said no, how could that happen if what to do was to run the way she does. The Minister of Magic was fearless, so when she took her own life I don't think any of us were too surprised, she just did what she had to do, mother smashing the vase, mother stomping on the flowers, mother, who said the day before that she was bored with everything walking.

Are you scared of anything at all?

Of losing my memory, she said.

That doesn't make sense.

Not that I can't remember the past, but that I can't imagine it. There's a difference, you'll see, but right now you're too young to understand, you have to reach a certain age. It's not scary at all.

That's kind of scary, I said.

Her ideas on memory I later learned were nothing new, mainly, that everything from my childhood in a later attempt to accurately remember it would become something else. When I became a certain age where I would be the kind of person who would sit in a room and reflect on his childhood, which sounded both awful and boring but she guaranteed would happen, the memories would be fragmented, and then recreated fully in a false, more positive, set of images. This was normal, she said, it was a kind of protection so people could move into the future easier knowing that the past was better than it really was. As a child, her words were an incentive for me to try and remember everything fully that gave me a certain unusual feeling, my clearest example of this being the green lights.

The house, for all its old fashioned renovations done by father, still relied on certain modern ways, namely, electricity and gas. It always appeared strange to see our father writing a check to these mysterious companies, we could see how much he hated the process in his hunched shoulders and carelessly scribbled signature, so when both the electricity and heat went out during a storm I would later learn had drowned significant areas south of us, namely southern Manhattan, some of Albany, and the roof started to collapse and the basement flooded, he refused to contact these companies to fix the problems, instead guiding us to the tree forts where we would live until the lights and heat returned and he could repair our home without risk of injury.

Both my mother and father had anticipated such a disaster, Tank had previously created an elaborate series of lanterns with green glass and white rope that the Minister of Magic knowingly strung though the forest, along the tree forts, her movements rehearsed and calculated even in the downpour of slanted rain, lightning and thunder slapping the tops of the trees back-and-forth as me and Sam stood below looking up and into the endless storm. They knew exactly what they were doing, and several times Tank said, after we questioned if this was necessary, that the house was too dangerous to stay inside of, the roof could cave in or an electrical spark could ignite a fire or hit us, so yes, it was necessary, the woods were safer.

For how dangerous the sky appeared, the moment was excit-

ing, the rain itself somehow warm. Sam and I did a kind of rain dance, not wishing for it to go away, but for it to continue. We had no idea that something terrible was happening anywhere else in the world. The Minister of Magic cheered us on and did her own shimmy up in the trees, hanging theatrically from a tree branch while singing a song that was beautiful and also something we had never heard before and resulted in us shrugging our shoulders. The sky was dark enough that the tops of the trees ghosted into the clouds, and the Minister of Magic exploded, momentarily, off and on, with the lightning.

Tank instructed her to retie certain lanterns that appeared wobbly, and after she had done so, Sam and I, still in the soaking rain, the thunder and lightning beginning to quiet, he filled buckets with candles wrapped in plastic bags, each bag also holding matches, everything prepared, dry. These buckets were hoisted up in another mastered performance, the Minister of Magic able to light each candle while holding it inside its own bag, then moving in a manner where the bag matched up to the door of the lantern before being placed inside with minimal rain striking it. I remember this as a magical display, and wonder, if my memory is making it greater, that in the reality there was yelling, candles dropped, wrists singed, but I'm not sure it matters, because what I remember is the dark outline of the plastic bag, the Minister of Magic's wet hands moving forward, and then the lantern blooming with green light.

The lighting of the lanterns took hours, but when it was finished long curved ropes of green light knitted the trees together and we had a place to live. When I climbed into the most well covered tree fort, the appearance of the lanterns shifted, and I swore the ropes, the lights, spelled out a word, maybe carefully designed by the Minister of Magic, but I don't want to write about it here because it's too sad. I walked from tree fort to tree fort, moments of heavy rain and cracks of thunder still random and jarring, the letters morphing into whatever my imagination wanted them to be, a word or phrase more positive containing the future.

The storm left, but the rain, light and misty, stayed for hours while we lived in the trees, each of us responsible for a section of lanterns to stay lit, entire towns and cities to the south of us on the local news showing blocks of unpowered black cityscape, and then us, never shown, not even known, in our tree forts, the green lights guiding our feet.

The storm brought us closer together because it was a tragedy, forced from our home, the space of the driest tree forts small and cramped, and also, it allowed for a kind of excitability because it was so terrifying. In a sense, it made each of us feel alive because we were, however partially or fully, aware of our mortality during the storm. We huddled close to each other and talked more than I can remember the family ever talking before, and laughing so much at one given time besides some of the bonfire nights. We were surviving something we couldn't exactly name, but knew was something larger than us, a storm like no other, and we were doing it together in our own, original way. Our feet touched as the rain dripped through the roof of the tree fort.

My biggest fear was that Sam or I would slip on a wet plank of

wood and kick one of the lanterns, potentially lighting an entire tree on fire, the flames spreading. But the Minister of Magic said this was impossible because the storm—she called it The Buffalo Storm because one black storm cloud that seemed to stay directly above us resembled a buffalo—had soaked every inch of forest, impossible that a flame could catch and cause damage.

During a game of tag, my mother versus my brother and I, where we couldn't get anywhere near her, she was too fast, it was her, mother, who while turning a corner in the trees, knocked, with her arm, one of the lanterns from the rope. Sam and I watched as my mother scaled down one of the trees in a move we had never dreamed of doing before: she didn't use a ladder, she just hugged the tree and in a motion both smooth and comical, hugged the tree, then glided down it, her face pulled as far away as possible from the shedding bark. At the bottom she ran over to the lantern where the candle had tipped out and lit a patch of leaves, the fire spreading outward in a circle, everything else wet and dark, the rain still a mist. What the Minister of Magic did, in a way that wasn't panicked or scared, was remove her gown and begin smothering the fire out, patch by patch, moving around the fire in tighter circles until she sat in the middle of the smoldering leaves, her hands pressed downward on the last finger of flame.

We promised we would never tell our father what had happened, although I've always thought either Sam said something to him or he already knew of the fire. But it was a secret between us and the memory of it I replay in my head so I won't forget it.

After the lights came back on in the house, Tank announcing it because he had spent more time than anyone else watching the dark windows for light, we returned home to a disaster—part of the roof missing, the basement flooded—but the heat was on, and immediately Tank began repairing the roof, and I wondered if leaving the house during the storm wasn't for our safety, but because he wanted these new projects to work on, to distract him, from his life, and if that was the real reason, I now understood it.

I helped the Minister of Magic take down the lanterns. I asked her if she thought the fire was going to burn down the entire forest and she said no. She showed me how to wrap the white ropes around my forearm and how to place the lanterns carefully into burlap sacks. I felt very adult doing this task with my mother, almost "too adult," and thought my father should be the one helping her, and in the thought, if I remember correctly, felt I had taken on the role of a husband, which is hard to describe, and embarrassing, but the task with just us out in the woods collecting the green lights and the ropes made me imagine the future me, which was, in a sense, my father, helping out his wife. I took this feeling further and thought how if I was going to become a husband one day, then I would most likely become a father as well, that the three stages—child, father, and son—were, in a sense, not only three stages of life, but would happen simultaneously, in a future time. I wondered how it would

feel, and how it would even be possible to navigate such a life, and this was one of many times that I felt so alive that I became extremely terrified because I was so aware of my consciousness, which also meant, even though I didn't realize it then, that I was aware that I would one day not have that consciousness.

Where the storm had brought us closer together, the afterward clearing—days of blue skies and no wind—sent us into our own spaces, for example, Tank spent his time either above us (fixing the roof) or below us (de-flooding the basement), Sam ran back in the trees, the Minister of Magic to her room, and myself, sort of wandering between the places, not willing to dedicate myself to one area or one task that would define me. I continued to replay the storm in my head, the fire, and the following clean-up with my mother, for weeks, and wondered how much my memory was already altering and shifting. I thought maybe if I would think something completely exaggerated, for example, my mother literally flying from tree to tree, that maybe my memory would lessen it, and just place her in the trees, singing and holding onto a tree with half her body, right arm and right leg outstretched and into the air.

As we walked back home with the green lights and white ropes I asked her again if she was scared, this time, referring to the fire she had started during the storm and this time she said yes, that she was terrified, was more scared than any other time in her life. It was exactly the answer I had originally wanted from her.

Really? I asked.

Not really, she said.

## 6.

In the morning I tried to remember what I had read, the pages concerning sky law, the history of Tank and Albany, the final note about Mom, how Sam believed she had written, in the air, with the glass, her final words. Still, no information on his whereabouts or mention of our childhood. I was frustrated and exhausted. Half my apple and peanut butter sandwich was on the floor and I considered taking a bite because I was starving. I'm also a shameless pig if people aren't watching. But instead I imagined *the happening* as Sam on the local news naked and screaming, not part of a story about him, but rather, a story about nature hiking, the health benefits of a ten mile hike through upstate New York, my brother just caught in the background and becoming an online meme within seconds, shared by millions.

Unable to continue because I couldn't look at Sam's handwriting without the words blurring, I saw Tank in the field outside my bedroom window running through a field, something I don't remember him ever doing in my childhood. He ran across an imaginary line, at a distance, from one side of my window to the other side of the window, sprinting so fast he fell only to stand and run even faster, a younger father inside the current father pushing him further than his body could go, hands clawing the field, hands digging holes in the field, hands planting something

with legs I couldn't fully make out, so I walked out into the field and met Tank who was working his way around the perimeter of the farm with what I realized were the stink traps, used before I was born, to keep out intruders.

The way the stink traps worked: take any drowned animals from the lake, any dead animals from the woods, and stuff them inside each other, creating several types of animal in one animal. It was a sight that repelled any intruder, and if it didn't physically repel the intruder, the smell alone would keep them from crossing, this idea wholly my father's, this idea nourished by my mother who loved the stink traps, this idea still carried out by my father who I ran with around the farm, the sun bright, the lake a steel roof, Tank carrying a sack filled with creation animals he buried in the ground every twenty feet or so. What would he do with the cow? What nightmare creature would that resemble?

With Sam out there in the woods, the police may ask questions, and we need to be prepared, said Tank.

Prepared for what? I asked.

The future, he said.

But I don't have a future, I said.

I know, he said.

Hearing this reminded me of the time Sam and I walked deeper into the woods than ever before, him urging me on, me terrified at the silence of the woods, until we entered an area of tents where a man we later named No Home Joe lived and I became even more terrified. No Home Joe said he was from Albany, but he was living in the woods to avoid the police because he was making wine. He showed us three tents filled with buckets of wine. I remember thinking how No Home Joe could strangle us, one hand for each of our throats, but my brother just laughed through the entire conversation, and I realized later that he had admired No Home Joe, and the layout of where we had previously met Goat, at the yurt, was identical to the layout of when we had found No Home Joe.

Thanks for the hiding cabinets, I said.

Tank disappeared into the woods. For a while it was just me standing in the field between the house and the lake, everything quiet in a peaceful but troubling way because there was empty space filling with my thoughts. I mumbled "Albany" while looking at my hands. I wanted nightfall so I could continue on my brother's book and figure out his whereabouts. If I could accomplish anything in my life it would be to rescue him I had decided. It was a story I could finish. Horse drank from the lake, and again she looked at me in a way that made me feel ashamed, that I was a man who had nothing better to do but watch a horse drink water from a lake, which was true, so her look of disgust was warranted.

Tank returned holding a squirrel by the tail. He smashed the squirrel on a rock and then began packing the loose animal skin and feathers and organs of other animals inside the squirrel through the mouth. It took longer than I thought, me just standing in the sunshine while Tank stuffed and crammed and poked all the little bits inside this

squirrel who grew into something much larger, maybe the biggest dead squirrel in the entire forest, maybe, the world.

Bingo, said Tank, and walked toward the house.

I stayed outside, and laying down to look at clouds, fell asleep in the sun.

When I walked back to the house Tank was attempting, and failing, to install a window near the front door of the house, his arms spread wide as possible holding the window twice as tall as himself. Tank in staggering steps—backward, side-to-side, forward—trying to place the window in the hole in the house, where the previous window had cracked and been removed.

Each time he tried to put the window in it bumped against the house, the opening appeared to be correctly sized, and was, knowing my father, but didn't allow the window with a yellow and black logo, *PELLA*, stuck to the center, to settle for some unknown reason, and my father said a different swear word—shit, fuck, piss, christ—for every missed attempt. How my father could take the cow from the lake, could build the burial ladders, the basement worshiping center, but not install a window, I couldn't understand, and I moved in to help support the window and guide it into its home within the home. But it still wouldn't fit and soon we were both swearing, or I was working off my Tank's swearing, where I would match a shit for a fuck, or a god damn it with a jesus christ, a motherfucker for an asshole, the curses more violent as we struggled with the window. When I hit the frame hard against the house, much harder than any previous, I said dick-fucker, seemingly at the window itself, and Tank just stared at me, and this ended the swearing.

After we found the correct angle and the window settled into place, my father told me to hold on with two hands—he emphasized two hands—and he ran into the house and came around on the other side where I could view Tank through the window as he did something I had no idea how to do which was hammer nails at a severe angle then shoot sealant in a controlled and smooth manner around the perimeter of the window. The two of us were silent, each viewing the other, through the glass.

I had planned to tell him about what I had read, but the window business had thrown me off, and what happened next made me forget completely: Tank walking from the window to get more nails from the garage, and returning in a near run, most likely afraid I couldn't handle holding the window, Tank fell down the three stairs leading to the window, as if the stairs didn't exist, his hands disturbingly grabbing for the floor while in mid-air. This I viewed from the other side of the window and I wanted to help, but couldn't, because of the possibility that letting go of the window would lead to the window falling inward and killing Tank before I got there. I didn't want to kill my father with a Pella window.

I'm good, he said, from the floor.

Are you sure? I said into the glass.

I think so, he said. I think I'm all good.

I asked if I should let go of the window and come in and help him and he said no, the window was only being held by a half dozen nails, which seemed like plenty, I didn't even consider the sealant, but I said okay, and stood, stupidly, holding the window while Tank laid crumpled on the floor, one hand on his right ankle. I replayed his fall as if the window was a screen and what I had viewed, was replaying, wasn't part of reality, but a video of my father running over a three-step staircase as if it didn't exist, the video being viewed by millions of other sons and fathers. At one point I moved both my hands a quarter inch from the window and sure enough, it stayed, but when he began to move, coming up to one knee, I put my hands back on the window.

Through each replay a different version of myself had a different reaction, for example, the younger son version laughed because it was funny to see your father become humbled and angry. Tank hitting his head on a cabinet door my brother had swung open or struck in the crotch with a broom wielded by me was funny at a young age, but the present version of me was more like my father at the age where the childhood version of me laughed, and the present version of my father, in visible pain and hidden embarrassment, was a version who was fragile and human, and I felt connected to him because of this realization. I wanted to be close to my father, but I had to hold the window.

I've never wanted to believe Tank could die, not that he ever considered it or discussed it, but through the window I understood it, and felt a physical knifing in my chest. I whispered *get up Dad* and after saying it became more upset, if a little embarrassed at my sentimentality. Ever since the yurt I hadn't been myself, whoever that was, a question I had become plagued by since returning home. I also realized, not for the first time, but somehow aided by the window as a screen, a tool I used to outside-view what had happened, that I would in some way, or already had, become my father. It was simple: I would age and lose my hair and fall down a staircase.

Eventually Tank stood, limped a few steps, and finished the window, which was only three more nails. We didn't speak even though I knew he could see I had been emotional, or at least that's how I viewed him viewing me through the window, a version of his son who had left home to try a life he himself had hated in Albany, only to return home where I nearly drowned in the lake, and had, to this point, been unable to locate his other son. The family was a mess.

What's in the book?

Well, I said, there's a lot, but I have a lead.

You'll figure it out. I have so much to do around here anyways, if I don't do it, no one will.

You could always take a break, I said.

I can't.

But Dad, you can.

Nah, not really.

I realized then that he had been constantly thinking about my brother but was occupying himself with these tasks—the burial ladders,

the cow rescue, the basement worship, showing me the holes in the roof, the stink traps, installing the window—so he remained composed and calm on the outside, but he truly felt like time was running out and was a disaster, internally. Everything we had done together, since I returned home, was a distraction to keep him from thinking about my brother. Like most people, he had to keep moving so he wouldn't turn inward, and I understood this, even though I resented it, even though I wanted to believe I wasn't like this.

7.

When we were children my brother and I ran through the woods, in the trees, and what happened once, in our imaginations, what happened was, we were being chased by the people from the outside, the people in uniforms from Albany had come for us and I could barely keep up with my brother because he was fast, his legs connected with planks of tree fort taking me great leaps. We pretended to duck bullets and we said, You can't make the family be the way you want the family to be, and I slipped on a narrow piece of wood of my design, my body twisting in the air, hands trying to grab onto any nearby tree, of which there were none, as my body descended into a crush of leaves.

Brother jumped down, and what happened here, what he did, was grab me and run into a kind of enclosure against a rock formation, everything green, everything damp, and what my brother did, what he was doing, was still pretending we were escaping the outside forces, that I hadn't fallen by mistake, my shin cracked, but I had been shot, he was riding the nightmare fantasy out by sheltering me, holding me under the everything green and everything damp, aiding my mystery wounds by tearing his shirt into ribbons and wrapping my left bicep and right shin, telling me it would be okay, the outsiders couldn't destroy us because we had each other, and I remember randomly, and embarrassingly, moving my mouth toward his mouth. The moment was so powerful that what I did that night, and for the next month, was sit in my room with this memory, retracing every detail, every touch of brother, every line of tangled limbs, every leaf, every crack in the rock, every curve of shoulder, and I drew it, carved it, repeatedly into my brain, engraved it there so I wouldn't forget how it happened and how it felt.

Because we were so isolated on fox creek farm, dozens of miles from Albany, the fears of outsiders coming in to alter our way of life was normal. Sometimes my brother would run through the house saying the outsiders sat perched in the trees, they had guns aimed at every window in the house, and we'd run to the basement and whisper our last words to each other in the hiding cabinets while I additionally imagined a translucent red dot hovering over my forehead, an image I had read about in my brother's mystery novels, but didn't exactly understand how it worked besides that it was connected with an instant fatality.

Other times Tank led the game, which was more a drill. He had complex diagrams of how each of us would leave the house, depend-

ing where we were when the outsiders came in, and my brother and I laughed at the work he had put into these procedures. Each diagram was its own octopus of routes and escape ways with the same end result, that no matter how we left the house or woods—by window, roof, on a ladder, from the lake, in mid-air, etc—we were to meet at a specific tree fort in the woods and stay there until we were together and the outsiders had left. For years I secretly wished for the game to become the drill, even going so far as wishing for another Buffalo Storm to attack the house and send us back to the trees and the green lights. It happened once, even if for a faulty reason, and I remember it clearly, which may not be correct.

Sam had told Tank that he had seen a man just outside the house and when my father asked if it was the hunter, my brother said no, he was sure it wasn't the hunter, but someone else. Tank did an outside sweep of the house while my brother and I, standing shoulder-to-shoulder, looked out a window until moving to the next, following the movements of Tank who occasionally looked up at us and waved. I had no idea where the Minister of Magic was. I can't place her in this moment in the memory. We waited until Tank came back in the house and said he couldn't be sure, there were fresh footprints outside the home and also a tire track in the mud, so he ordered us to the trees, the drill being expertly executed, and that's when the Minister of Magic walked from the house holding several bags crammed full of food and clothes, her movements calm and smooth, leaving the house like any other time she left the house, much to the amusement of my father, who although was angered by her non-rush, couldn't contain his love for her.

We stayed in the trees for half the day, Tank keeping an eye on the house in a kind of house worship for movement. The time in the trees allowed my brother and I to carry on the fantasy of the outsiders coming in and destroying the utopia our family had created, which in turn allowed me to reflect on the family and our ways, namely, that an entire community of people were living different lives miles away in Albany, in New York, but they were no better off than us, on fox creek farm and isolated. Everyone had their problems with their immediate surroundings and, most likely, projected themselves into other realities to deal with their present. I tried not to reflect too much, which I later realized was my family history that was rooted inside me, instead concentrating on my brother running ahead of me over the planks of wood, telling me to hurry up, bullets fly faster than birds, so come on, let's go.

Something I never questioned during or after these games with my brother was that he was never hit by the bullets, only me. I was the one, time and time again, who suffered blown-out knees, V-cut neck wounds from grazing shots, deep tissue legs hits that made me limp over the bridges and balconies, but he was never, in my recollection, ever hit, and I think this pertained to his idea that he was somehow immortal, the Mad Mouse, Wildcat, and much like our parents, who never meditated or considered their own death even after one of them or distant relatives were gone. Whereas I was sprayed from head-to-toe by an outsider's machine gun, my brother jumped from side to side, ducked up and down,

and amazingly, frustratingly, avoiding every bullet. I died cold in the trees, coughed blood into the clouds, ran my half-fingers down the bark of a nearby tree, and was soothed, rescued, brought back to life by my brother. The fact that he had gone deeper into his mind, into sky law and the deeper woods as an adult who thought this way, made my possible rescue of him even more daunting, and seemingly impossible.

Shortly before returning home, the outsider seen by my father from a specific tree—it was the mountain biker with the gashed thigh who had collapsed near the house, invisible laying in the field for hours but then he had gathered the strength to crawl to the front door—I decided to stay down after being struck in the back of the skull by a bullet, that is, instead of my brother saving me with shirt bandages, mock-mouth-to-mouth, and life potions carefully poured down my cradled head, I stayed still on my back with my mouth and eyes open, concentrating on tree branches oddly framing the sky. Let me clarify: I stayed dead for way longer than I should have. My brother laughed, made fun of me, said to come on, the game was over, and then he sat on his heels and stared at me. The silence was difficult. He looked me up and down and studied my face. Then he tested my breath by placing his ear over my mouth, and I held everything in. I could see him becoming more and more concerned until he began shaking me, screaming at me to wake up. He panicked, jumping up and down on the plank of wood I was dead on. He squeezed my left eye a little, and it was hard not to flinch, but I held my frozen pose. My brother began crying, saying he was sorry, looking over my body for actual wounds, surely something must have struck me during the game, maybe a tree branch had pierced my heart through my back. I thought, for a moment, maybe he was trying to fool me, but he wasn't, he was truly crying and giving me a sort of eulogy. He slapped my stomach and I didn't budge. I didn't wake up until he walked away and couldn't hear me when I said Wait, come back.

8.

After installing the window I told Tank, rather bluntly, that I hadn't figured out Sam's location. I said I would stay up all night, and stop reading when finished, to give me eight hours to do nothing but read and finish the book. He shrugged, which was his way of saying okay without showing emotion, before asking what was wrong with my face, why was it so depressed looking. Nothing, I said, that's just me, that's just what my face looks like when I'm not thinking anything. Looks frozen, he said. It's just normal, I said. It's just my normal face.

For the rest of the day I retraced the lines in the trees I once ran over with my brother. The memories were difficult to process because they felt so distant, and also, the Minister of Magic had told us that as we grew older our memories would shift and alter. So I tried to remember us climbing trees, finger shooting each other, running from the outsiders, daring the other to jump to the forest floor below, come on, let's see who will climb the highest and let's see who will fall the fastest, land the hard-

est. I tried to remember hiding under piles of leaves so deep we couldn't breathe. I tried to remember my brother throwing me to the ground and me laughing, bones unbreakable. I can't imagine taking those hits now, what parts of me would crack and crumble. I tried to remember how time didn't exist as a child, only enough daylight to keep playing, the idea of a calendar only useful for holidays. I wasn't sure if what I was remembering from my childhood was true or not and I didn't care. I just wanted it to feel safe so I could hide inside of it.

Waiting for the dark, I remembered fractal childhood memories, my mind no doubt mending them and breaking them off into positive pieces that were then forced back through my imagination, until I came to the burial ladders where Horse was with Tank nowhere near. It wasn't unusual for Horse to wander around fox creek farm by himself, but at this instance, for some reason, I thought it was. Horse has always been a part of our family, and I'm not sure my father even knows Horse's true age. A horse who will outlive the sun, my brother once said during dinner. A horse I thought maybe, just maybe, would know where my brother was, that after absorbing his words I could walk with Horse through the woods and meet him in the trees, in the world he was living. A horse I could use to convince my brother to come back to the farm before he pushed his life too far into the unknown and illegal. I realized this plan was completely impossible and I felt foolish for even thinking of it. Horse gave me another look that I didn't like. A horse who liked to judge people.

In the woods I saw the hunter, who had always lived in the woods. He was never much trouble, and was possibly the only outsider immune to the stink traps. Tank said he killed animals for us. I was never scared of him, even as a child, and had always thought of him as a kind of protector against some greater evil none of us understood. I have a story about the hunter I've never told anyone before. When I was little and playing in the woods, I saw the hunter aim his gun at a deer that had walked onto the frozen lake. There was nothing I could do. I remember crouching in the cold brush of the woods and filling with fear. The hunter walked toward the deer with his gun aimed. But what I soon realized was that he wasn't aiming at the deer, but above, at the sky, he was firing his gun to scare the deer off the frozen lake.

Once it was night again I read non-stop from my brother's book, drinking a dozen cups of tea in the process.

Everything on fox creek farm, this brother's words, has become stagnant, a trap, a lie, a path to oblivion, and to change this way of life, to change what our family has preached for years, is to leave it. Albany would come in and destroy everything, this the Minister of Magic knew, this I know now, still brother's words, that Mom left the earth the only way she knew how, by showing the sky her arms and in return the sky accepting her, but what she had wrong was to change the path, to enter a new existence, was to re-start your life in an area of forest undisturbed by men, only nature present, to write the scripture on sky law and do nothing but live in a way honoring sky law, body and mind as one respecting balancing act, everything else trivial, to enter through these tunnels

of thought and come out and into the true way, the sky law way, which in simplest definition is that everything above the ground was a place of freedom, laws lie rooted to the ground, not the air. The higher my brother could build a way of life in the trees, the closer he could achieve his reality, the closer he could get to our mother, the closer he could become something reborn and unblemished. He sounded a little nuts.

Toward the end of the book were eight paragraphs concerning us, as children. One memory I had forgotten about he wrote about in great detail, when, while wrestling on his bed, I accidentally pushed him off the bookshelf that functioned as a headboard and he hit the closet door. When I say I accidentally pushed him I mean that I pushed him hard off the bed so I could win. He remembered how I held him and told him to be quiet, don't tell Mom and Dad, where does it hurt, I would give him "special prize" if he didn't tell. Special prize never existed but was always offered during times like this. I apologized and kissed his head even though the bruise appeared above his right eye.

Another section discussed how he regretted being the aggressive brother, the Mad Mouse, Wildcat, taking away attention away from me, who he considered the more sensitive, and interesting, brother. Another section described us reading together under a blanket fort with flashlights. Another section said if one of us became a father, one day, he hoped it would be me. Another section was a drawing in purple ink, me on brother's shoulders, somehow tall enough to stand in the middle of the lake, which in his drawing resembled more of a river, and he had labeled it, "The Mohawk River." Another section was a triangle, alone on one full page, and the points were labeled me, then Sam, then Tank at the top. Another section said he missed running in the trees, the sap on his fingers, the escape from the outsiders, and how he knew I was faking my death that one time, even though I still didn't believe him, there was no way because I had seen his real tears.

I read until morning, a new day, sometimes re-reading certain pages dozens of times for clues. I knew I had to stop reading, but the problem was, there was no way with these words of my brother, his message toward the end of my reading more extreme than anything I had read prior, his words detailing how he would defend himself at all costs if anyone, including family, came near his location, that any interruption into his desire to enter the new life by way of sky law would end in physical harm, an elimination of the body that dared to enter into what my brother wrote numerous times in the margins with blue ink and deemed, *the circle*, that if anyone, this on the last page, entered *the circle*, he would be forced to remove them from it by way of death. I realized, reading the final sentences that he had most likely left the book with Goat on purpose for my father or myself as a kind of warning, which made me question if anything I had previously read, about us, what he missed, was even true. It could have all been a lie.

I pretended to sleep while looking at the sun. All day I ignored Tank with the exception of one brief conversation.

The entire book could be a lie, I said.

Everything is a lie, he said.

Everything?

Not everything. But eventually, yeah, eventually everything becomes a lie.

I planned the best time to leave the house without him noticing. Eventually, I crept out of the house, ran across the field, and entered the sun-setting woods.

9.

I had no idea what I was doing back at the yurt but I was back at the yurt. It had made sense to return, ask more questions, but with Goat's puzzled facial expression, pitying even, myself not sure what to do with my body standing inside the yurt with nothing to do or say, I understood I was completely unprepared to ask her more questions besides if my brother had another book, perhaps stating his exact location? I hadn't thought things through, instead I had given into my excitability, and ridiculous notion that I could figure this whole thing out by myself and rescue my brother.

After consuming more of her crushed leaves turned to tea, I tested Goat by saying out loud, somewhat quietly, *the circle*, in hopes it would spark an opening to my brother's whereabouts. There was no way she didn't know where he went, that if he lived with her, made love to her (seemed possible) and confessed to her his thoughts on the future, he would have said something, given the slightest detail, on where he went. But our conversation kept stalling, and in the silence I averted my eyes toward the kitchen where there was a drawing of a triangle and I said *the circle* again in a manner that was both meditative and inquisitive, my hope that Goat wouldn't be able to decipher what I was doing, but she ignored me saying *the circle* in a way that made me question if I had even said the words at all, forcing me to say them louder and concentrate on the movement of my lips, at one point placing my fingers on my throat to make sure the words were exiting, which they were, just not registering with Goat who, maybe, was saving the scene for later amusement. I briefly imagined a group of Russian art students taking turns, charades style, imitating me, oafish American, saying *the circle*, which to them, was completely meaningless. Or maybe she had previously consumed so much of her tea that she couldn't hear certain letters or words. Anything, at the time, I deemed possible.

Give me a clue, I said.

I don't think that's a good idea, she said. I don't think that's what he would want.

What does it matter?

Oh, she said. I don't know.

How do you expect him to survive without food?

She didn't say anything for a while, the fact that he didn't have food, to continue living, seemed to resonate inside her, and I took note.

Please, I said, making sure to make eye contact, which like all

social interactions I've had in my life, was difficult.

Goat told me we had to go on an adventure, into Albany. I laughed. I thought it was a joke, but she said no, that after the adventure she would tell me how to find my brother. Another game and another deal. I had no other choice but to say okay. At the conclusion I would get my answer. I had more of the tea by chugging my entire cup and Goat opened her mouth while she widened her eyes.

I never asked what we were doing, never bringing up the fact that by walking it would take us hours to reach Albany, going along because my mind was concentrating on the fact that any movement with Goat was good movement leading toward the location of my brother. What had to be hours, felt like minutes, and the next thing I could understand, my head warm and messed up, the next thing I could process besides a smearing of trees, Goat at one point scaring off the hunter by acting like a wild bear, at one point squatting and pissing, I think, was being seated inside a restaurant, Bombers, one I vaguely remembered eating at with my co-workers while trying to make modern living work for me, the office job days, in Albany. Like the smearing of the trees while running, my reality was becoming smeared, and I later reflected on this, imagined it, as a child, for some reason diaper-less, sitting on a large white canvas, using finger paints after consuming seven to ten peanut butter cups, of which streaks of chocolate were on her face and chest and also, in the painting.

What are we doing?

Eating, she said. Do you like food?

I like food, I said.

I promise, she said, this is good food. I can't come here alone, it's too dangerous with all these men, that's why I need you. This is my favorite place in the world.

On the wall a banner read: FUN FACT: WHALE VEINS ARE SO LARGE A SMALL CHILD CAN SWIM IN THEIR VEINS and below the word "veins" someone had written "fuck whales."

Are you being sarcastic? I asked.

Yes, she said.

That's funny, I said. I think they once found rats in the kitchen or something, there was a story about it.

Thank you, she said. Being sarcastic means you're intelligent.

My father says it means you're an asshole.

That too, she said. But smart.

I could tell the waiter could tell something was wrong, and this understanding worked its way around the restaurant and across the table to Goat who was asking for several types of drinks, mocking their absurd pictures and names, which she showed me by standing, walking three feet to my chair, pointing, and what could only be described as a child's enthusiasm, saying each of the names as the waiter stood motionless and visibly agitated, looking off into the middle distance. I had trouble concentrating on my menu to begin with, and with Goat placing her menu over my menu, layering the two, my vision wobbled with party

colors.

Black Angus, I said to the waiter, never once looking at the food items on the menu, and was relieved when the waiter came to life.

That's my favorite thing to eat on the entire menu, he said. It was a bestseller for three years. It's won awards at several Albany food festivals.

That's nice to hear, I said.

After eating black angus, served in a burrito format, and Goat finished a chicken dish I never saw her order, she asked if he would die in the woods and I said yes, of course, that as we spoke he was probably experiencing the *cold night death cramps*, a term I surprised myself by creating on the spot. I had a history of lying while in Albany, it's just what you do when you live in Albany, but never while back home, Tank could read lies very well, so as children we never did, or, we'd at least pretend to lie, that is, say a lie and then immediately after recognizing what he recognized, in his facial expression, say we were just kidding. But in Albany, I lied constantly, and never consciously, the lies became part of my daily vocabulary while working the office life, the lies never anything major, just a way to continue on, for example, when my boss talked about basketball, he loved the Knicks while I hadn't watched a full game ever, would say something like, "Can you believe Melo last night?" and I'd instantly answer, "that shot" while smiling and shaking my head in disbelief. If the conversation became too specific for my generic answers, which it rarely, if ever, did, I'd resort back to saying something like, "It all falls on Melo's shoulders," while narrowing my eyes, or, "I wonder how Melo feels in the locker room after that game," which would have the effect of taking an axe to a water main, my boss's monologue typically seven to eight minutes long, after which, he'd be exhausted and return to his office at the far end of the hall. Being back in Albany, made me think more of Albany, if I wanted to or not.

My father rarely talked about his extended family from Albany, but I do remember him discussing his sister, who he adored, and tried to get to leave Albany, a city of sad fools, he once said, a city of people who not only had given up, but had never attempted to accomplish anything in their life but simply to exist and wander, which was enough for them, and these people would outlive the few who had "creative intelligence," a term once said by my father, which my father thought he always had from a young age, fighting with his family during gatherings with relatives who only came together for holidays and birthdays, who never talked in between, who never showed love to one another, but who came together because of obligation, duty, and tradition. Decades stacked upon decades of guilt to come together for the sole reason to come together, nothing in between, nothing profound or any truth spoken. Sometimes, when the relatives entered the house with greetings my father would kiss them on the lips just to see their reaction.

This way of life Tank hated and rebelled against, this he saw as something to depart from, to create his own belief system and move to fox

creek farm with his family, severing the guilt, leaving the duty and obligation to his brothers who never questioned their steps forward in life, never questioned parents who abused them over the years with ridiculous theories on life, namely that one simply must do and honor the family system by simply coming together on holidays, independent thought and someone like Tank, with his type of mind, a mind capable of building dream structures, a mind of creative intelligence, the term repeated throughout the pages in my brother's book, a mind like no other that he passed to my brother, more triangles in the margins, didn't truly belong in a place like Albany where new thoughts were crushed and forgotten, no link to success.

He had talked, when I was a baby, about his sister coming to fox creek farm, for her to leave Albany forever. Because to leave Albany would be to leave the dulling population, and to leave Albany was to begin to enter your true self, that the woods, air, sky, lake, was pure being, a new life, to come sister, please, don't let Albany destroy you like it has destroyed everyone else, as it destroyed my father's brothers who embraced law enforcement, tax accounting, and never needed office jobs. Brothers who responded yes to every call for family parties by my father's parents who shoveled their anxiety onto their children, Tank knowing, and predicting, that his brothers would then have their own families in Albany, their own children racked with fear, and continue the tradition of no true love or belief system besides hugging everyone on a holiday or birthday, everyone discussing People Magazine, how to cook turkey meatballs, everyone on Xanax or sneaking vodka in Pepsi cans, everyone far past denial, everyone going along with a nothing plan, everyone prepared to die in Albany, spending hours upon hours existing in a half-life, never questioning it, maybe, enjoying it.

Goat didn't respond to what I had said, most likely sworn to some oath by my brother, or maybe a family system of Russian word keeping, but I could tell, as her high wore off, the idea of him suffering was troubling her, breaking her ideals down, and because of this I also understood she cared for him greatly, maybe even loved him, and I imagined her pregnant, and my brother as a father, the family line continuing, an idea as exciting as it was terrifying.

I'm sure my brother told you about our mother, I continued, and then excused myself to the bathroom to allow the words to fester inside Goat.

I felt sick because of what I was doing, and wondered if this version of me wasn't exclusively brought on by the tea, but by my environment, Albany, and standing at the urinal while watching an advertisement for a sixty ounce birthday margarita and enchilada platter, I told myself, yes.

Goat was visibly upset when I returned to the table. At this point I was sober, disgusted at my surroundings and fearful on how we arrived at Bombers in the first place. She said a deal was a deal and she told me he was a mile north of the yurt, that every fifty feet or so he had tied a blue ribbon to a tree branch and it was easy to follow but I would have to

wait until daylight to see them.

Is there enough time left? she asked.

I don't know, I said.

You don't know?

I think so, I said. I mean, yes, there's enough time left. Could one person drink a sixty ounce margarita?

No, she said. That's something to do with friends.

That makes sense, I said. That goes along with an enchilada platter.

Before leaving the restaurant, and Goat leaving what appeared to be a fifty percent tip in a combination of American and Russian currency piled into a little mound, I ran into four former co-workers in the waiting area of the restaurant.

When I worked in an office, in Albany, I developed a move for these situations, an avoidance tactic involving taking out my phone, holding it near my chest, and narrowing my eyes at the phone while raising my other hand and placing one finger against my temple, as if I couldn't believe the news I had just received. I'd walk faster than normal doing this move, the entire act must have looked a bit insane, or maybe I appeared just near-sighted and odd, but it always worked, it always allowed me to blow through huddles of co-workers out at bars, break-room stop-and-chats, end of the day parking lot gatherings, supermarket surprises, but now, I didn't have the phone, had donated it to a group called Hope House, who helped children in Arbor Hill, in Albany, who I guess needed cell phones, before my return home.

I was sweating with Goat against my arm. I told myself while looking at my feet, to come on, think, develop a plan.

What I did, before entering the circle of people waiting for a table, my ex-coworkers ready with greetings, was nod consistently while smiling, Goat not saying a word, and then, I turned my head and laughed in Goat's face while still walking, pulling her along, the idea being that the laughter couldn't be broken by a greeting, and the laughter and my steps would carry Goat and I back onto the street, never interrupted by Steve, Adam, or Melanie, who was a woman I had dated while living in Albany and the true, single reason, I didn't want to be stopped.

The plan didn't work. Goat had the kind of reaction any one would have had if someone turned and without reason laughed into their ear. She shoved me away, forcing my body to turn and be confronted with my ex-coworkers who smiled except Melanie who asked what had happened to me.

I'm good, I said.

You disappeared, said Steve. Poof! He raised piano fingers into the air.

I did?

Yeah, said Steve. You did.

My brother is missing.

Is he okay? asked Steve. Do people just disappear around here?

*Yeesh.*

What a world, said Vincent. But I guess everyone has things to work on.

Sometimes they disappear, I said. It's a long story. Are you guys here for the enchilada platter?

No, said Steve. We're not here for the enchilada platter, we're here for the birthday margarita. Because it's my birthday.

I thought about sprinting to the bathroom and forcing myself to cry, an action I could never bring myself to actually do, but had always liked the idea of being able to do, because I couldn't stop thinking about my brother becoming my mother. It seemed so obvious it was going to happen, yet maybe, if I rescued him from the deeper woods soon enough I could alter his future. I could bring the family back together again, what remained, and it would make everyone, and everything, a little bit happier.

The conversation continued only for a few more minutes, but in those few minutes I shocked myself by returning to my Albany self where I laughed at things Frank said that weren't funny, smiled at Melanie in a non-genuine way as if the smile was my default face, and nodded at every word spoken even though I wasn't listening to what anyone was saying. My voice became a foreign tone of rehashed office stories and small-talk cliché and it felt normal and good. Goat looked like she was going to vomit, either because of the food she had consumed, the departure of tea in her bloodstream, or most likely, the fake, or was it real, version of myself she was witnessing. I rubbed her back and surprised myself again, going even further into my role, by introducing Goat as my wife, saying she wasn't feeling well because she was pregnant and we needed to get going, a perfect excuse to leave the circle, to please excuse us, it was nice seeing everyone, have a good weekend, I heard the weather was going to be perfect, but really, we need to get going.

It's going to rain, said Steve, visibly confused. Ninety percent chance according to my phone. Unless the phone updated? And now it says it won't rain?

Happy birthday, I said. How old are you?

Steve was busy looking at his phone and Vincent said Steve was either forty or fifty, he couldn't remember.

After I dropped Goat back at the yurt, I remembered Tank telling a story around the bonfire about how he traveled to New York with a girl he was dating years before my mother, who lived on the lower east side, and every person the girl introduced Tank to asked why he lived in Albany. When he said it's where he grew up, the man or woman on the other side of the conversation would either smile in a pitying way or say how much they hated Albany. What a shithole, they'd say. Why was the weather so bad there? If Tank tried to explain the weather was nearly identical, the two cities were a two hour train ride apart, two hours is basically the same weather, it was met with disbelief and more disgust that anyone would chose to live in Albany. Later in the conversation they

would ask what the weather was like in Albany, in a joking fashion, and he'd decrease the temperature by ten degrees in order to continue past the conversation, and enter other conversations he wanted no part of because where he lived, what he was connected to, was what these people considered to be a shithole, meaning, in a sense, he was a shithole.

But the real reason I remember this story was because it's the only story I can remember of Tank showing emotion. Not in the telling of the story, but how at one meeting, at a bar on the lower east side, with the girl, he answered the Where Are You From Question, and the two women he was being introduced to, two women who reminded him somehow of his mother and sister, but these women worked at a fashion magazine, were influential and social higher ups in New York, burst into laughter, almost spitting on my father, then apologized when my father, uncontrollably, began crying and excused himself to the bathroom.

Tank never said why he cried, he always disliked Albany, wanted to leave when the idea first crossed his mind as a child, but what I realized, what he must have realized, crying in the bar, which I imagined as damp and candle lit but also as an exciting place to be, was that to those outside of Albany he was defined by his non-choice to be raised there, to exist there, that he was marked with Albany forever, that Albany, like everyone in my family besides my brother, had Albany inside of them, and the only way to change his past was to create the future.

10.

The following day I packed a bag with fresh clothes for the journey, the rescue of my brother. I hadn't slept. Tank said he would wait inside the house until I returned with my brother, an image I hadn't fully processed, the two of us, what, walking hand-in-hand back to the house? An image absurd in the fact that my brother, from what I had read in his book, would never listen to what I had to say. I thought about *the circle* and envisioned myself viewing myself from a perched tree behind my brother's shoulder, me smiling and waving as I walked forward saying hello, still waving, incessantly waving into a hail of bullets.

Before leaving I gave Tank a hug. He smelled like window sealant and burning flowers. I felt emotional enough to cry for the first time in years even though I knew I wouldn't, and that knowledge made me feel even more emotional, so emotional I really thought I would cry in my father's arms, but my overall thinking made me think how ridiculous I was being and ultimately led to my family's foundation of detachment so I didn't shed one tear, and because of that, felt oddly ashamed, a different, more lonely level of being emotional. Tank wished me luck while in the embrace and all I could think about was the burning flowers on the burial ladders and him falling down the stairs.

I separated myself from Tank who said, See you tomorrow, which didn't surprise me for his assumption I would spend the night in the woods somewhere, a survival move I was incapable of, but reminded me, from tone, lack of emotion, my mother's wake when we said our

goodbyes, her arms wrapped in heaven cloths. Tank was the last to say goodbye, my brother and I along with those from rainbow farm, Horse, the only others present and stepping back to give him room, Tank kneeling and talking to the Minister of Magic like she wasn't dead, just talking to her about his day, what he was planning to fix around the house, her bedroom door hadn't been closing properly, Tank holding her hand and saying to her, See you tomorrow, a phrase that in its cool delivery seemed, in retrospect, both hilarious and sad.

The first blue ribbon was fifty feet or so behind the yurt. I was careful not to make too much noise. I made a lot of noise. The trees had few leaves making it easy to see a far distance, but I couldn't find the second blue ribbon and thought maybe Goat had created it, was so gone on the tea that she didn't relay a fact to me, only an image that had flashed in her head of a path through the trees decorated with blue ribbons leading to *the circle* with my brother living in the trees preaching sky law. I stood looking at individual trees, scanning their branches for a blue ribbon.

The second blue ribbon was hanging from a barren tree branch a hundred feet away. I couldn't believe it and I felt excited, if a little scared that it was really happening. After the second blue ribbon my vision locked-in to plucking the blue ribbons from the rows of trees lit by the sun. It was as if I could only see the blue ribbons and nothing else. I located half a dozen of them in a butterfly shape fifty, a hundred, two hundred feet in the distance, suspended in the air and fluttering in the wind, they looked like little kites or the bottom of a torn dress, and I covered a great deal of ground in a short amount of time.

Following the blue ribbons had a meditative effect and I thought about my childhood, specifically the time my brother cut his foot in the lake. We had been taking turns jumping from rocks on the shore and my brother landed on the edge of a rock and split his foot between two toes. Later, he said it wasn't a rock he had landed on, but a mudpuppy, they had teeth, and I believed him. I didn't sleep for three days. On the shore he told me to look at his foot. It didn't look so bad until I separated his big toe from his next toe and an arc of blood sprayed far enough to hit the lake. When he asked if there was blood I thought he was joking, and then realized he had his head back on the grass, that he didn't see the blood because he was looking at the clouds, even mumbling that some of the clouds looked like animals—deer, chicken, cow, buffalo—so I used my towel to wrap his foot and said it wasn't bad and helped him walk to the house where I told the Minister of Magic not to open his toes too far, don't let him see, it was awful and we'd need to go to the hospital.

After the last blue ribbon I saw a clearing in the distance, bridges and houses built high and into the trees.

Another memory of my brother: him leaping from one tree fort to the other over a space too large for anyone besides my brother to make.

I moved from the final line of trees and into the clearing.

Another memory: the weird and exciting feeling of being in his

bedroom when he wasn't in his bedroom; seeing his head-form in his pillow when his head wasn't there, and then, laying in his bed, pushing my head into his pillow, if only for a few minutes.

Above me was an endless series of wooden ladders, ramps and bridges, circular forts constructed crudely around the trees. Wet clothes hung from a horizontal branch supported by chopped trees and were the only identifiers of my brother who I called for and received no answer. A nest of birds unraveled from the roof of one of the circular forts and scattered across a three cloud sky.

Several trees had triangles carved into them while other trees had circles, and again I imagined a hail of bullets, this time, in slow motion, striking me down from an unknown angle because I had entered *the circle*. I repeated the phrase *real bullets* several times.

I called his name while looking into his kingdom of tree forts, hopping to spot, through the cracks in the floorboards, a foot or sleeping body.

I walked back and stood where I had entered and called his name again, but still no answer, just more birds exiting nearby trees, chipmunks and squirrels running along and into places where I could no longer see them.

A deer drank from a stream.

I waited.

Tank once told me that when Sam was born he came out laughing, but when I was born I came out peeing, until I cried, until Sam burped and I laughed. I don't remember my first year of life, but Tank said that anytime I would cry the only person who could calm me down was Sam who could burp on command. The first year of my life was basically me crying, him burping, and then me laughing.

The bottom of two feet, like dark clouds, moved across the floor to one of the tree houses.

Sam? I said. Hey.

I stood under the feet twenty feet or so above me.

It's me, I said, quietly, foolishly, to myself. I wasn't sure what else to say.

Go away, said a voice.

We're worried, I said.

Who isn't, said the voice.

The feet moved from the tree house and onto a wooden bridge that connected to a tree with a ladder built down it. The wooden bridge creaked and swayed as the body walked across.

Hi, I said. It's me.

I had no idea what I was doing but I was doing it. When I said "it's me" it didn't feel like me but someone else speaking for me. For some reason I've always thought my voice doesn't match the voice in my head and it's probably why I speak very little to people's faces. It has nothing to do with them and everything to do with me. I just got the wrong voice.

My brother wore a t-shirt with a monster truck, BIGFOOT, on it and jeans with both knees ripped. He held a gun and looked how I

imagined someone gone from his childhood mind and living in the woods would look like, which was horrendous. I wasn't sure he recognized who I was so I said my name again and stating—not wanting to get shot by his own brother—that I was there to help as I tried to find the old version of him before me. My hands were in the air like a prisoner and trembling, which they stopped doing once I looked at them and told myself they were my hands.

Some people, I said, have so many friends they share a sixty ounce margarita and an enchilada platter.

Everyone knows that, he said.

It's very Albany, I said.

I'm not leaving, he said.

I kept thinking *the circle* over and over again, wondering what environment I could exist in, Albany or fox creek farm, which one was “more real,” and thinking this, I realized my brother was waving the gun.

Why would you want to come here? I said.

Jesus Christ. I didn't want to come here, I had to come here.

Listen, I said. Just, listen.

Yeah?

It's me, I said. Shane.

I know, he said. It doesn't matter anymore.

We stood silent. For the first time since arriving I was truly scared for my life. I told myself to come up with a plan, anything, to get him to come back to fox creek farm. If I could lie in Albany, I could access that version of myself here, in the woods, close to the farm and home. I had never once thought, previously, that the Albany version of myself would be useful, for anything, but in this situation I needed the Albany version of myself more than anything else in order to bring the family together and move on with life.

Bye, he said.

Wait, I said.

I knew the way to get him to respond would be to create something so extraordinary that he would be forced to respond emotionally, even if that response was a fired bullet. If he knew my name, knew who I was, I just needed to make him react emotionally, to pull him from his mental thoughts, and then, pull him toward me and home. I had come up with lies during my trip into Albany, with Goat, so I told myself I could lie again with great ease, that it would be easy to access the other half of myself, the Albany me.

Terrible news, I said.

He lowered the gun.

For a moment I didn't say anything, still constructing the lie. I bit my bottom lip and clenched my fists.

I told him Tank had attempted suicide. But was still alive, that he was wounded badly and his arms were infected and he needed help, had wished for us to be together. I said these words so convincingly even I was moved, eyes going wet imagining our father bed-ridden (which he would never allow, would stay on his feet until the end) pleading to go get

brother, arms blood soaked, he needed brother to hear his final words, and then I imagined what was mostly likely the reality, Tank working in the basement or unclogging a toilet, while whistling and content to be working, content to be doing anything besides residing with his internal thoughts.

I had no idea how, if my brother decided to come home, I would handle telling a completely confused Tank what was going on when we arrived, but imagined myself sprinting the last quarter mile or so, joking it was a race to see who, he or I, could touch the house first, hopefully able to rush into the house and tell Tank what I had told Sam to get him to follow.

I'm still not going, he said. I belong here. You read the book.

There's the discussion of money, I lied.

He climbed the ladder on the tree and disappeared back into the structure.

I couldn't return home without my brother because what would that make me? What would I do with my time if I couldn't be defined as the son who saved the other son? At least then I could continue living my days as successful, someone who had accomplished not his own goals, but his father's, and in that glow I could live some kind of meaningful existence, but not bringing him home would be a total loss, a future life soon to be present and unlivable, I thought.

Think of it this way, I said. With money you could build something like rainbow farm. It would be yours. I'd help, I said, lying more and feeling comfortable with the lies. I think I liked lying.

Trees don't need money, he said.

Unless they have kids, I said.

I watched again the black clouds of his feet move around the fort above me.

Just come back to see Tank, I said. He really needs you.

Wait right there, he said.

Okay.

Hold on, he said.

I'm waiting, I said. I'm waiting for you to come back with me.

Sam appeared on the wooden bridge a few minutes later, this time wearing a white dress shirt and carrying several duffel bags each seemingly partially filled. He said he would go, but would return to this life and I said Okay, thank you, just come home and tend to Dad and take the farm and everyone will have some sense of closure. He nodded, looked wild even dressed, but we walked together, and soon we were back through the woods, retracing the blue ribbons on the trees half-way until he broke off, saying he knew a short cut, he had had a falling out with Goat, no reason to go near the yurt, she threw things like lit candles when she was mad, and I said Okay, worried that my plan to run the last quarter mile to explain to Tank that he wasn't dying would be unsuccessful.

At a clearing past the final trees, the sun slicing the tops of the trees in a golden and heavenly way and into the clearing, I predicted the clearing to be part of the land owned by rainbow farm, and as we moved closer, I realized I was right, so I said to my brother we should race, like we did as children, to which he responded we never once raced as children. We only ran for fun, no competition, there was the outsiders game but that was it, and I said Perfect, as long as I can touch the house first, and he said, Why would you want to do that. His voice sounded the way a voice sounds when it isn't used on a regular basis, an effect I knew well, while living in Albany, my office life.

Once, I didn't talk for a week, smashed silent by my inability to live the office life but unwilling to admit defeat and return home and when I did speak, to answer a question about the tardiness of my bi-weekly time-sheets, the voice, my voice exiting my body, was half-formed and comically distorted. The receptionist asked if I was all right and I said yes, I was all right as anyone else, to which she said, what the hell does that supposed to mean, and I said sorry about the time sheet, it won't happen again, and while saying the words, I knew it would happen again, many times, which it did. I just couldn't get my timesheets together when trying to live a normal life.

I attempted to beat my not talking record once, but was stopped three days in because a co-worker, who was leaving after working several months in the office adjacent to mine, was being transferred to another office, in another building. He walked through my office, stopping at each person's cubicle to shake hands and say how he was leaving for another job, a promotion of sorts, and that it had been a pleasure working with each of us. When the co-worker walked into my cubicle, a move only my boss performed on a weekly basis, I recognized the co-worker only from the bathroom where I ignored him, had never had a conversation with him before, but I smiled while shaking his hand and said, Good luck on your new position, to which he said that he liked working with me, although we had never once worked on a project before. After he left the office, Vincent, from his cubicle, said he didn't even know "that guy's" name and I laughed, and someone said that they thought his name was John, or Jake, maybe Eric, he had the hair and face of an Eric, no one was sure, and I said very loudly that it had been a pleasure working with him which got everyone laughing even more.

Sam hadn't properly used his legs, only in a vertical sense, in quite some time, whereas I had been helping Tank rescue cows from lakes, install windows, climb burial ladders, and walk endless miles with a woman named Goat, so I was much faster. I ran.

I entered the house first, not sure where Sam was, I hadn't heard or seen him running, and I thought maybe my trick was really his trick, that he had waited for me to take off running, him unable to contain his laughter at the edge of the woods before I was a good distance away and he could turn and walk back to his sky law ways and a completely new location, which I would never be able to find.

Tank stood in the living room, seemingly doing nothing but holding a framed picture of the family, the four of us sitting near the lake, and I startled him and he dropped the framed picture, the glass not shattering but sending a memory wave of mother through my body as if it did shatter, she said ground, and Tank didn't move to pick up the glass at all instead asking where was Sam, where was my brother, that's his name, Sam, you were suppose to bring him back, and I could barely speak because I was out of breath, but I told him he had tried to commit suicide, failed, and was suffering a terrible infection, and when Tank asked again where he was, how bad was the infection, why was everyone in the family trying to leave him, I said no, not Sam, you Dad, you tried to kill yourself, you have the infection in your arms. By this time he was totally confused and became more so when Sam came into the house. The two of them looked over each other's arms, and found them together, no harm.

I can explain, I said, still out of breath.

I didn't kill myself, said Tank.

For a while I didn't say anything. I stared wide-eyed through Tank hoping he would understand how I had tricked Sam to coming back home, but before anyone said anything, Sam made a move for the door. Tank's feet shuffled toward him in a lightning fast move, and we both grabbed Sam, and it was then that Tank understood what I had previously said, that the way to get Sam to come back to fox creek farm was a lie, a move he disapproved of on moral reasons but a necessary one to have Sam's body here with him, a body he was wrestling to the floor, Tank saying to calm down, just calm down Sam, enough, calm the fuck down, which, in my experience, saying *calm the fuck down* is the least effective thing to say to a person who needs to calm down, and it didn't work on the floor, and Tank, like needing help on the window now darkening with oncoming night, gave me a look, and acting like someone I didn't understand at all, I found myself grabbing Sam's legs, even punching his thigh several times, very weakly, as Tank lifted his twisting torso and we carried him upstairs, Tank easily controlling Sam's temper tantrum and me, struggling to keep his legs pinned together, his jeans shifting down and around his knees that I tried to pull back up while simultaneously keeping his legs together.

After the door closed to his bedroom, and Tank had locked it, the lock from the outside, a creation he anticipated using after my return home at the request to rescue my brother, my brother smashed his body several times against the door before stopping. Tank nodded and waved for me to come downstairs. I followed, thinking I heard Sam crying in his room, but when I asked Tank if he heard Sam crying, he said no, absolutely not, and I thought what I had heard must have been what I heard as a child when Sam had chicken pox and spent nights with the Minister of Magic in the room he was now trapped in as an adult.

He'll calm down, said Tank. Give him the night to come to his senses and you'll see the old Sam in the morning. Everything he did in the woods won't seem real.

But who's to say what's real and what isn't? I asked.

He didn't respond.

I don't feel very good, I said.

Are you sick?

No, I don't think so. Just, all this. I'm glad it's over.

Thank you, said Tank.

That means a lot, I said. Thank you too. So that's it?

What do you mean?

Well, Sam is back, what you asked me to come home for, so, what do I do now?

I don't know, said my father. What do you want to do?

I don't know.

You don't know what you want to do with your life?

Not really.

How many times can a person start their life over before their life is only beginnings? And doesn't that mean their entire life is also just endings? Was my life just starts and stops—from home to Albany to back home to rescuing Sam—and now what? Time was unfolding before me and it didn't include me. I hate time because you can't control time. I immediately began to think of other cities to escape to, a new life, and I became depressed because if I couldn't make my life in Albany I couldn't make my life anywhere. I lay down on the couch and tried to sleep, tried to leave my current state no matter how brief. I thought how Lark Street, a street in Albany near my office, was labeled, "The Upstate Greenwich Village," and recalled my first visit to Lark Street, my first memory of Albany, where my girlfriend was sexually harassed by men in cargo pants, on Lark Street, outside a café called The Daily Grind and I was humbled because I didn't say anything back, and my girlfriend didn't say anything to me the entire walk to the car, and we didn't say anything to each other the entire drive back home or the rest of the night besides Goodnight, I love you.

I would be unsuccessful at living in another city without a doubt. Any other city would be much larger and complicated and intimidating, so that left me with the idea of moving to a smaller place, more rural, but that would be too similar to fox creek farm, my father's creation, not mine, and I couldn't do that because I would just be recreating what he had done before my current age. I was stuck, and I needed to sleep, and Tank said Wake up, snap out of it, someone's knocking on the door.

What? I said. What is this?

The door, he said. Someone is at the door.

I don't get it, I said.

The god damn door, he said. Someone is at the god damn door.

I thought Sam had escaped out his bedroom window and had fallen and broken a limb and had crawled the perimeter of the house and was back to the front of the house needing our help. Tank had other ideas, holding a rifle in each hand, impossible for him to accurately fire either weapon if he needed to, which he didn't, because when I walked to the door and opened the door, not even realizing I had my other hand

clenched in a fist as if I could strike down an intruder, who could possibly be knocking at this time of night—my parents never allowed unwanted visitors and would scream when the phone rang as if 6:30 p.m. was a sacred hour or comparable to 2 a.m.—who could it be but Sam and his broken legs.

Opening the door I began to close the door. My father asked who it was by raising his guns. I signaled to him it was okay even though it wasn't because I couldn't believe who was on the other side and I thought I had gone mad, a thought that was awful and then comforting because at least then, in madness, I would have a defined state. I told him to put the guns down. I composed myself. I thought maybe this was *the happening* because there was no other explanation. I opened the door and knowingly smiled and widened my eyes and I held this pose while saying Hello three times.

She asked if she could come inside.

Yes, of course, I said, what are you doing here? Did you drink the birthday margarita and eat the enchilada platter?

11.

Once inside she didn't speak and neither did I, and in the silence my fear wasn't because Tank was pacing around, but Sam was locked inside the bedroom, not pounding on the door anymore, which, later on, I realized was a good thing, him coming to his senses, but I looked at the door as if to silence him if he did decide to speak, as if I contained the power to do so before looking back down and at my father and explaining that this was Melanie, a co-worker—I didn't want to tell him everything—I had worked with during my office job in Albany and he said, rather bluntly, The one you failed at, before stating he would be outside at the burial ladders.

Melanie sat in the living room on one of the couches, her posture unbelievably straight, hands in lap, eyes seemingly not blinking. The news must be bad, I thought, a death, a criminal matter, devastation in Albany, she wasn't visiting because I acted oddly at the restaurant with Goat and left so abruptly from the crowd of people that she wanted to talk in private, now that she knew I was back home, a place I had told her in great detail about before, no, not at all, she was here for some terrible reason and I began scanning everything I could have done wrong during my office job days while making tea for Melanie who I hadn't even asked if she wanted.

So, how are you? I asked.

There were a few things her visit could have been, I thought while making tea, the first being she had suffered a death in her family, or our boss had killed himself, maybe jumped from the office window and impaled himself on that Alexander Calder sculpture, and she didn't have anyone to talk to because everyone in the office was impossible to talk to when it didn't come to food, or maybe I owed the office a time sheet, maybe my flagrant personal use of the office computers equaled stealing

money, directly, from the office, and I owed tens of thousands of dollars. This last one seemed the most possible, no one but Melanie would have come and talked to me because Melanie was the only one to talk to me, intimately, in the office when I worked in the office.

Okay, she said. Okay.

Before returning home, our lunches together in the break room had moved to dinners at The Wine Bar, El Mariachi's, The Daily Grind, Vann's, mostly restaurants on Lark Street, Central Ave, Washington Ave, then dinners at her place, then mine, until near the end, before my firing, she had moved into my place on State Street, within walking distance of Lark Street, because her lease was expiring, Melanie unaware I would soon be unemployed and unable to function like a normal human being, long days doing nothing but walking inside the apartment, mostly just moving one item from one room to another room, which is what living people do inside their homes, working on writing, and endless hours preparing dinner that we would eat in minutes. Being back home, in a different environment, resulted in me being unable to remember these days with any detail whatsoever, but I felt I had some grasp on the major images and moved them around accordingly.

But that wasn't it either, unfortunately, because when I sat down on the couch, two cups of hot tea neither of us wanted, I could see a kind of pleading for compassion on what she was about to say in the expression of her face, a face I had previously referred to as "timeless," a comment she liked very much, and a comment I had repeated after getting my haircut, on Lark Street, by a friend of Melanie's who had originally made the comment. He also named several actresses from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century who were also "timeless" and who I had never heard of before, to which I had responded, Zelda Fitzgerald, she was interesting. She was mentally insane and a gold digger, said Melanie's friend.

She first asked about Goat, if we were in love, and I laughed and said no, she was Sam's ex-girlfriend, or wife, or something, I had rescued him from a life in the trees and she lived in a yurt where I had done some tea, that's why, along with not wanting to talk to Steve and the others, I had acted so bizarre in the restaurant. She accepted this, nodding and sniffing, and I was relieved given how strange it sounded once I had said it aloud.

Tell me, I said, and touched her knee. I was acting like the Albany version of myself again. I was becoming Albany. Let's talk about this. I'm here for you. You can tell me anything, I said.

She told me in a blunt fashion, the only way possible to deliver such news, but the news didn't register until Tank came back inside the house and saw my appearance, asked what was wrong, what had happened, and I said Nothing, in a weird mumble of non-letters, more like a frog croak. Melanie told him the news and he didn't act surprised. I had sped the words *I'm pregnant* through my head, possibly a thousand times, sitting on the couch, watching the steam rise from the tea I wouldn't drink.

I'd be lying if I said I hadn't thought of this situation before, living

with Melanie in Albany. It was always a possibility she would get pregnant. I was at what many considered a good age to father a child, and often found myself imagining raising a little girl or little boy in Albany and then, and only then, having a purpose, even if I didn't want to be a father, or worse, contained no suitable qualities to raise another human, because I could always tell people I was a father and this would define me in the present and carry me through and into the future. If you're a person who doesn't really do anything, but you have at least one child, you can always make a joke and say that you're a parent and people will nod in an understanding way, because having a child means it's what you do and are, if you want to think that way, which is okay, and understandable to most people. But now, it was actually happening, in reality, not in a past fantasy or unreality, and I could begin to see the future, which now included me.

Melanie said she wasn't going to tell me about the child until she saw me with Goat, this news further confusing Tank, Melanie telling me, even though her words were muddled by my swirling thoughts, sweaty face, throbbing heart, that she decided to tell me after seeing me and knowing I was back on the farm, that the encounter had sprung the confession from her and was why she was here with the news of my impending fatherhood.

You were in Albany? Tank asked, visibly confused.

Yeah, I said. I ate black angus.

Why?

It was part of finding Sam and completing the story.

Melanie asked if I was okay.

I think I'm okay.

I've been worried about you these past few months, your memory.

I'm okay, I said. It was served in a burrito format.

I further processed the news without looking at a human face; instead I concentrated on the steam twisting from the tea cup. Melanie was still talking, and although I couldn't understand everything she was saying, what did stand out was that it was my choice if I wanted to be part of the child's life or not, specifically, that I would have to move back to Albany, there was no way she would travel to fox creek farm on even a weekly basis, and I would have to understand, completely, that I would have to be present and aware when raising the child, in the day-to-day life of a father.

For the next few hours I stayed on the couch while, amazingly, Tank and Melanie conversed in the kitchen. They were working out the details of my future without me. It sounded like they got along better than Melanie and I had got along while living together. Now faced with becoming a father—fear, depression, anger, sadness—made a chaos sweep through my body, but the emotion stronger than all was a kind of excitement because now I had something, no matter how insane and foolish I thought it was to be a father in the current world, that could, and would, define me. It would move me from one reality and to another and I would

embrace it.

It would also, I thought while sitting on the couch staring at the tea now lacking steam, help to define my past because I would see myself in the child, witness his or her development, maybe even get a chance to see my father interact with my child, which, in return, would be me viewing myself, as a child, interacting with my father. The more I thought about the various dimensions and possibilities the more excited I became, and the more Melanie and Tank discussed our future. To raise a child was the only thing to do given my current situation at home, which was meaningless and directionless after bringing Sam home.

What I thought would be the first obstacle proved to be nothing at all, for I assumed Tank would disagree with my decision to raise the child in Albany, but Melanie convinced him otherwise, stating how I would need a steady income fox creek farm didn't allow. She said it wouldn't be permanent, that she planned to eventually move to a bigger, more intelligent city, most likely New York, specifically Brooklyn where she had stayed with a few friends for several weeks and fallen in love with Prospect Heights, a place with some sense of culture, diversity, and art, how Albany was no place for a family—Tank nodded incessantly—and that she still had her office job, the one I was fired from, and because of her situation and several other co-workers leaving and a new boss replacing my old boss, nearly positive was Melanie after talking with the new boss, a mother whose husband had recently left her, that I could come back to my old job where I would work at a decreased salary and function, for the most part, as a new employee.

What? I said.

Yes, said Melanie.

That's not possible, I said.

I wouldn't be here if it wasn't possible.

That's true, I said. Can I name the baby Julian?

Probably not, she said.

Besides, said Melanie, she would leave work for months to raise the baby, a partially paid maternity leave, she explained, and even though she could live on savings combined with the maternity leave it would be difficult, this the new boss understood and had offered my re-employment as a solution. I too, said Melanie, would receive the partial paternity leave if I began work next week and continued to do so for a minimum of eight weeks.

Okay, I said, but neither Tank nor Melanie acknowledged me.

You need to come, said Melanie, away from this.

Okay, I said again. Okay.

None of this exists anymore, she said.

It never did, I said.

By this time Tank was on Melanie's side and said I needed to go, it would be a way of starting over and addressing my previous embarrassing inadequacy as an office worker. I accepted his words and I allowed Melanie to pull me away from my childhood home. What made him think I could succeed as a father in Albany when I couldn't function as a single

man in Albany, I'm not sure, but I believed it too, rode on the air of positive energy inside the house with my father, pregnant Melanie, rescued brother, and I was ready to attempt another form of reality, this time, as a father, living in Albany and growing a family, in Albany.

# POSTCARD FOUND ON THE SIDE OF THE ROAD

*Michael Minassian*

Tire tracks and insect guts  
darken the photo on reverse

of a roadhouse painted red—  
a neon guitar and bottle of beer

on the roof, and on the backside  
in the space for an address:

two words: “You bastard”  
then a street and city name

and the only message, somewhat  
smeared by tears or whiskey:

“You know who this is....”

# BONES IN JUAREZ

*Sean Prentiss*

Bones and I sit at a rickety table set upon Juarez's red brick zocolo. I pull  
slugs  
from my fifth Tecate. Bones drinks her Sol and shows off the belts she bought  
for her brothers—gaudy buckles with scorpions glassed inside. *Salude*,

I tap my beer against hers, *to Mexico and a week of us*. The waiter brings  
another  
round as Bones talks about shanty towns, cheap beer, last night's titty bar—  
this is her first time in Mexico. She runs her fingers up my thigh and mentions  
nothing,

nothing about how three months ago she asked me to marry, me never  
answering.

I say nothing either since we're so far gone with booze and years of failure and  
a sun  
that doesn't shine like this where either of us is from. All I have left to hope for  
is that this love—hers and mine—is enough to last until she flies home,  
leaving me

to the red rocks and sunsets that smear against the Albuquerque pollution.  
And here,  
everything glares desperate like the Rio Grande—drying and muddied, like  
Juarez—  
those zinc roofed buildings, like the Chihuahua desert—blank and barren.

I find her free hand and hold it—shaken and scared and without answers.

We know well this game and know that after another round, or two, or three,  
we'll wake up hung over and bankrupt and alone and somehow in separate  
cities  
in America. Each of us only knowing how to fall.

# WINTER BIRTH

*Sean Prentiss*

Since his grandfather's day, the barn has leaned toward the stonerow  
and the silo stands as brittle as September corn.  
Climbing rung by rung he wonders how far till heaven.

His son, with muddied cuffs, buckets slop over a wide-board pen  
and imagines next year, a blue ribbon in his bedroom—  
his next best pig sold to slaughter.

The father, while driving Gravel Hill, whispers at Crane's farm—*Foreclosed*,  
a word children should never understand. The boy asks about the rusting  
tractor, the bald tires gathering flies. The father shrugs, points out a crow.

Forty years of muck to the top of his boots, a counter of bills, and animals  
still birthed, yet his stalk-thin boy still dreams beneath his dead mother's quilt  
of helping his father birth those difficult winter calves.

# POULTRY ROUP PILLS, PRICE 50C A BOX

*Amelia Pease*

I sit up all night with her  
gray sheets clutched, fistful  
    in my hand as she shifts,  
    body burning with cold.

Wake up curled and stiff  
near her shoulder, forehead fogging up her hair  
breathing against the turpentine headboard  
the blanket trembles, she was never quite beautiful.

    Gray light on the quilt  
    and on the skinny nightstand  
where brown bottles cluster  
with hand-stamped labels bleeding ink  
silver spoon showing bronze beside them,  
still sticky with syrup.

    We would be American Gothic  
    and not satire but artist's intent.

It never was meant to be thought of as ugly at all,  
just real, real as the hens' got roup, my wife—  
I sold the cure for the syrup to bring her fever down  
    and a trio of my laying hens  
    for the doctor's visit.

The cold comes seeping through the window panes  
thicker than any doctor's tonic. She'll get better,  
enough to sit up in bed and laugh  
and I'll spend the day typing letters in the next room  
    gray letters on white,  
    birdseed and cracked corn.

Nights, while she sleeps, I slip into my boots  
and my brown jacket, stir the stove-coals in the dark—  
Fingers fumbling, rough and wintered, for matches  
as I stumble through the door over frozen grass  
    to the hen house. I'll apologize  
    as I drip iodine down their throats,  
croon as I hold them, shoulders shaking. Boots sinking  
on damp ground. Thirty orange-rimmed pupils  
waxing in sudden lantern-light: the only witness to tears.  
With the corner of my sleeve I wipe the roup  
    creamy and mucous  
    from beneath their eyes.

# GALA, OR: MERCY KILLING PET CHICKEN AS THE CHILDREN WATCH THROUGH BLINDS

*Amelia Pease*

In the morning we find her  
huddled, a lump of feathers  
by the glass door, pink  
bulb bulging under her tail, viscera  
face drawn, gray, hanging  
by the way the other hens sidle  
past her, their necks bending  
like rubber, we know

the house breathes inwards  
as the shade pull pantomimes  
the swinging motion required  
it is only a matter of ending  
a misery, no-one  
can put your insides back in  
for long, double yolks  
are killers

she sees us coming  
our low voices  
and deliberate movements  
giving intent away  
as well as any rusted cleaver

she animates, flees  
her intestines  
now a limp banner behind  
as she pelts across the yard  
screeching in rapid  
clucking terror  
because she knows  
she doesn't want to die  
like *that*

don't look in the green bin  
by the side of the house  
I did, I found a creature there  
on a bed of coiled  
pink intestines

# BLESS THE CHILD

*Ruth Holzer*

Through windows blurred by rain and tears,  
the Brooklyn brownstones seemed to waver  
as I toiled in your kitchen over rice,  
red beans, pig knuckles and snouts.

I was grateful just to scrub your socks  
into a foamy stew of black and blue.  
You didn't know very much, but  
you knew I had nothing of my own.

# SONORAN VALLEY REDEMPTION

*Jeffrey Alfier*

We hauled those boulders out of arid playa, needing ground to build stables to board stallions. A rattler froze our steps till it met the blunt edge of Pablo's spade. His faults are legion, that flunked soul. When his will shatters like the flask his boot hides, we pull him back from the brink, bad wine and red eyes of an angry wife. He knows horses, good reefer peddled under tables in El Salto. When we sent him to Nogales for mares, he went cunning to auctions, drove hard miles through valleys till his eyes shone with agave wine and ballads from more than one bar in Naco, but our trailer bright with fresh horses, alfalfa bales stolen at night from fields.

Listen: if we don't build stalls soon, fetch a fair price for lumber in this rain-clean wind, our tune will sour. Look away mere seconds and we could be gone, this ground fossiled back to greasewood and coachwhip, knowing we're beat. But we've got Pablo's faith and enough of our own to endure storms that runnel down the earth.

Monsoons soak this valley hard. Let arroyos flood. Men will claim this desert's Eden redeemed, wolves and eagles drifting north from Mexico over borders dissolved by illegal feet. Mesquite and coyotes know better. Know these rains cease in sere wind, whipping dust devils that scour cutbanks. So we let horizons fix our stares till deer jump through driftwood we gathered for twilight fires, till we peddle luck and horses through August drought, a prayer that wind will cool, our gains will go unnumbered, hope not turning to bone on some nameless, vanished river.

# TAKING THE 10AM AWAY FROM HERE

*Tobi Alfier*

They walked parallel roads to the station  
as storm-soaked poplars pealed chimes  
of drops in the end-of-summer wind.

He kicked gravel and stone, whistled  
softly. She bent for a dandelion, a stray iris,  
twisted the stems into bracelets.

His damp eyes shone  
like the oil slicks from ships  
wrecked against the breakwater.

Hers saw nothing but tracks curve  
away between them.  
Someday he had to return—

she would tack her heart to that hope,  
to the music all small towns let us carry  
until they snatch it back as we pass through.

He'd lived here long enough to know  
it was time to leave. She'd lived here  
long enough to know it was time

to let him. Gusts lifted dirt, silenced  
them. Everywhere, loosestrife  
rippled through the grass.

# MIGRATION

*Courtney Cliften*

She pulled into the parking lot and shut off the car  
Before reaching into the brown leather suitcase  
From the back seat, trading her boots for slippers.  
A large mass of brown hair was knotted  
Into a bun on the top of her head like an abandoned nest.  
Pieces of feathery hair hanging down around her face, fluttering  
In the winter's breeze and pecking at her rosy cheeks.  
She walked up to the counter of the 7/11  
With a can of Red Bull and sunflower seeds.

As she pushed a handful of quarters toward the register,  
The sleeves of her sweater were pulled down past  
her fingers, making her hands look webbed.  
The cashier wore a nametag that read Raven  
As she blew a large pink bubble and smacked  
Her teeth together. *You look like you been driving  
A while now, where ya headed, honey?*

As she looks out the store window at the piles of snow  
And her foggy windshield, she remembers the way her tires  
Spun out on a sheet of ice as she left Jay's house.  
Taking one last look at him standing on the front porch  
In his camouflage coat and waders, he held his hunting  
Rifle in one hand as he used the other to flip her the bird.  
She reached for the receipt, careful not to let the sweater  
Slide up, revealing her black and blue wrists.  
She smiled at Raven, remembering the question.  
*South, I guess.*

# REFLECTIONS OF WINTER

*Ciara Shuttleworth*

I am brittle, windswept, rattling against the glass  
and glowing. There will be no more sunshine or moonlight  
this year, only the clumsy gray clouds gathering  
like herd animals. It's a small town—  
someone is always creating a shaky past. Someone is always  
getting drunk and falling down. I'm falling into the mirror  
to feel more solid, here beneath candlelight, beneath  
bonfire-lit night, beneath and above fluttering neon,  
wet sidewalks I walk to the post office to mail you postcards  
with pictures of Siberia, a place I'll never visit, as I write you  
letters in the Pacific Coast sand, as I stand  
at the mirror in darkness to see what in me  
still glows. And what does: cheekbones, hipbones, hands.

# MEDITATION IN A COLD FRONT

*Jerry Mathes II*

A fall wind knocked the leaves out of the trees.  
One of those days you look up and see the gibbous  
moon shining beyond the clouds, but realize  
it's the sun blunted by the storm like the years  
in your bones.

The rake scratches wet leaves and dry leaves.  
Remember those cold fall rains when you worked  
in the north. The scattered sleet and snow gathering  
around you in the forests, water logging your boots  
you'd later hang on the drier in the bunk house.  
The steam rose off your flesh like the smoke  
of a warming fire.

You know the desert winter from your childhood.  
Like some genetic memory of a life you didn't lead.  
How these drops of water falling from the sky  
are not the same rain nor the same sky, but  
made of the same stuff.

# MY BIRTH AS $f(x)$

*Matthew Baker*

I was born to the faux fur of backseats  
as water slapped the windshield.  
I was born too early and too fast.  
In theory, I was born of love,  
though it looked more like plates  
falling from a balcony, shattering  
and glittering like scales from a glass alligator.  
I was born to a family of teeth, and the gums  
of ourselves held each of us a-gap.  
I was born in the same place  
my mother was: a bed of steel  
and grime, coats of black, smoke  
becoming the shape of men.  
I was born next to a lake made of geese.  
When I was born, the bells rang at the cathedral  
mixing with the steam from sewer vents in spring.  
I was born pushing at the halogen bulb on the ceiling  
of a nursery as if I wanted to touch the sun.  
I was blue. I was swaddled. I  
was born already moving toward the end  
of a tunnel, holding my breath like I was still submerged.  
I was born not knowing when to speak  
like trying to fill the few silent feet between  
driver and passenger.  
But I was an afterthought,  
as if sprouted from the droppings of a bird  
between slabs of sidewalk.  
My twinkle in the eyes was a stolen piece of pie,  
fat hands uninhibited, taken from someone else's sky.  
I stole the opportunity, the whole genetic opera.  
My head was as round as a gourd.  
When I was born, it wasn't I who cried.  
I was born, and then I moved.

# FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF THE HIGH DESERT

*Virag Nikolics*

Washoe means the people from here  
as in the Great Basin  
I am not from here  
yes, my accent is from there  
Uprooted my mouth has traveled like a gipsy  
Even coyotes howl distinctively

Wild Mustangs gather  
at Little Washoe Lake  
one herd moves another out  
Tamed I observe these beasts,  
hooves unmarked by humans,  
as they brush past blooming sagebrush  
pollinating the desert

Gregarious house finches  
flock about like gusts of wind  
feeding on conifers  
plucking plump berries of firethorn  
What called them together?

At 1300 meters above sea level  
water boils at 95 Celsius instead of a 100  
tea cools before it's had a chance  
and the sun screams ultraviolet  
melodies into your subconscious until  
your voice begins humming along

Recipe for high altitude baking:  
fire up the oven to a new height  
adjust liquids and dry matter like a chemist  
but don't expect to be an expert  
let the dough rise  
dare to burn your memories

The only small pets you may leave outside  
for the night are your children's stuffed animals  
Coyotes can jump six-foot fences  
Coyotes will not let their pups go hungry  
the drought has made them thirsty

In this xeric environment  
bamboo cracks            skin scales        lips chap        eyes sting  
frogs nestle  
against the damp wooden rim of our vegetable patch  
Moisture mends in tough conditions  
there are survivors  
there will be

# EARTHQUAKES

*Troy Cavins*

A mile below the surface of the Earth,  
we go through explosives like toilet paper  
in Sani Huts outside the Comstock chili cook off.

It feels like you're in a grease trap this far below.  
If I dropped TNT off the side of the metal gondola  
in the elevator shaft, confetti wouldn't take shape  
for a mile—rocket stone spray and blanched boulders.

At the bottom of the gondola shaft,  
explosives in the antediluvian Earth  
are like brilliant capstones in a wristwatch.

The prehistoric rotary runs like a diesel engine—  
tiny simmering detonations, and they're ticking.  
*Fire in the hole!* and the world's great belly  
gives a mighty hungry rumble of gauche protest.

Mines are brilliant capstones  
webbed into the Earth's asthenosphere  
with her own silver chains locked in the cosmos.

And we travel through,  
hammering inside her clockwork  
like Phineas Gage with a twelve-foot long  
iron mainspring key loaded with dynamite.

# OKLAHOMA DRIVERS ARE VERY UPSET

*Dinah Cox*

Julia's mother always told her not to play outside on Sunday mornings, and now Julia told her own daughter the same, but for different reasons. Back in the day, Julia's mother feared the prying eyes of the churchgoers and the shameful truth of the family's inadequate clothing, overalls mostly, long shirttails masquerading as dresses, lengths of rope cinched at the waist, not even a single scrap decent enough for services. Now, years later, Julia rejected religion but feared her own daughter would be kidnapped, shot by a sniper, hit by a drunk driver, smashed flat by the souped-up bicycle tires of some overzealous neighbor boy.

Julia's daughter was named Dawn, not for the sunrise but the dishwashing liquid. Her father was long gone: first he deserted them, then he was killed in a convenience store robbery in Oklahoma City—he had been the robber—but before all that, he had been the one to name the child, restless as he was, working nights as a dishwasher in the Waffle House just off I-35 and, unable to sleep in the unbearable brightness of day, watching with fervor the now-defunct soap operas and their advertisements meant for women.

But now the public safety director had come, walking, as he always did on Sundays at exactly 10:15 in the morning, in the long stretch of road visible from Julia's front window. Dawn was convinced he was her father.

"He even looks like me," she said. Dawn was nine going on ten, but she still believed in Santa and played with dolls. The neighbor girls did not like her.

"He looks nothing like you," Julia said. "He has his own family."

"They look like me too," she said. "I'm their long lost sister."

"They go to church," Julia said. "If you were in their family, you'd have to go, too."

"They'd let me stay home," Dawn said. "To watch over the aquarium."

"One doesn't need to *watch over* an aquarium," Julia said. "How do you know they have an aquarium?"

"I've looked in their window," Dawn said. "No one was home."

Julia wondered how Dawn had managed such an act of illegal bravery, especially since the public safety director and his family lived across town, further by several miles than Dawn was allowed to roam alone on her bike. She decided to let it pass and keep a closer eye on the girl; perhaps she needed more supervision after school. Julia worked every day until 5:30 at the Tag Agency, a terrible job she wished nothing more than to escape. She knew she was supposed to have ambitions, some imagined college degree that, eventually, would make her feel "fulfilled," but what she wanted more than anything else was to make more money. And to do something else, somewhere else, anything else, any-

where else, and with different people.

With some trepidation Julia decided to contact Addie, Dawn's grandmother, her ex's mother, a woman she never considered her mother-in-law since she and Dawn's father never were married. Still, Addie had a good job at the nursing home and so sent money every month, little more than pocket change, but it came in handy. She was quick with a wise crack and handy with tools. But she was unpredictable, too, what with the houseplants in the back of her beater car and overzealous commitment to her bowling league. And she had creepy friends, men from the oil fields Julia didn't want Dawn to meet, much less hang around with after school.

*I'll take her to the library*, Addie said via text message, not a very exciting way to hold a conversation.

Julia wrote back with explicit orders: Addie must take the girl directly from school to the library every day, Monday through Friday, without fail and without stopping anywhere else in between. Julia would arrive after work, pay Addie for her services, which made no sense, really, since the money Addie sent every month would mean more or less an even exchange. But Julia didn't want to feel like she owed anyone anything. And if the girl allowed it, Addie was to help Dawn select some age-appropriate books to check out and take home.

*Age appropriate?* Addie texted back. *That girl's a hundred years old if she's a day.* (Only Addie didn't use a question mark or apostrophes in her text message; she never did).

The first week at the library seemed to go fine. One day, when Julia arrived, she found the two of them leaned against oversized throw pillows in the corner, Dawn looking at a coffee table book about saltwater fish and Addie thumbing through a biography of the famous bowler, Walter Ray "Deadeye" Williams.

"Time to go home," Julia said. "We mustn't delay."

"Who says *mustn't*," Dawn said. "No one says *mustn't*."

"Fine," Julia said. "Home."

And here she felt as if she were calling a dog. One of the more unfortunate things about having a child was the way in which the child's very existence made you feel meaner, more demanding, more like a the president of some nineteenth-century women's club demanding morality not for the sake of the wellbeing of actual humans but for the sake of some elevated ideal. Plus, it was expensive.

"I'm checking this out," Julia said, gesturing to a glossy photo of a dottyback. "For Dad's aquarium."

"He's not your dad," Dawn said. "Your dad is dead."

"*Passed away*," Addie said. "Show some respect."

"My dad is the public safety director," Dawn said. "Not that old deadbeat." Then, turning to her grandmother: "Sorry, Addie."

Addie laughed, something Julia liked about her, that she laughed easily. "You're just like him," Addie said to the girl. "The deadbeat. Not the public safety director."

Dawn launched into one of the more common tantrums of early

adolescence: walking off ahead of everyone else and then pretending to be deaf and dumb. This lasted through the checking-out of *Aquarium Care for Beginners*, the ride home, and half of dinner. Somewhere between refusing to help load the dishwasher and checking the window for signs of pedestrians in the street, Dawn said she wanted a different life.

"Everyone does," Julia said, she thought, sensibly. "That's part of living."

"I've read about it," Dawn says. "You only need three hundred dollars."

Soon after she went back to refusing to speak, a position she maintained through the next morning—a Saturday—and into the afternoon. By dinnertime, though, she had begun to sing, a strange low-moaning dirge with a lullaby lilt.

*"Don't be scared because there might be scary sharks, there might be scary sharks, there might be scary sharks in ... your ... room."*

"Beautiful," Julia said. "You should join a choir."

"That song is not for you," Dawn said. She pointed to the windowpane, where Julia noticed a series of smudges leading like footprints to a barely balanced curtain rod. Walking in the dusty street was the public safety director, dressed in his usual corduroy slacks and cardigan sweater with elbow patches made of suede. He was tall and thin, his legs like the jointed legs of a spider, his gait deliberate and smooth. He was everywhere. You went to the grocery store, he was there among the cheeses, and not just the Kraft Velveeta bag-of-shredded-Jack cheeses but the specialty cheeses, the goudas and goat cheese and brie. You went to the post office; always he stepped in line behind you. At the voting booth, too, he was there, collecting signatures and passing out those stupid stickers with the American flag. For a while, Julia thought he might be stalking her, but after talking it over with her coworkers at the Tag Agency she realized he must have been stalking *everyone*, all the time, perhaps because he believed himself civic-minded, a permanent and ubiquitous fixture in the otherwise empty small town public square. And so it made perfect sense for Dawn to imagine him her father; he was like a television character come to life, perfect for the wandering mind of the weird, and Dawn was weird, stranger by far than Julia, something she had come to accept but did not like. Julia herself had been poor, but popular in high school, the kind of girl picked as a charity case not for homecoming queen but an honored member of the homecoming court. But she knew Dawn would not follow suit—she was a pretty girl, sure, but she was neither athletic nor sociable in an easy way. Dawn was difficult, deliberately so, and her future, Julia could tell, would be full of misadventure and loss.

That night, she read aloud to Dawn from *Aquarium Care for Beginners*, something she hadn't done for many years, and though they did not own an aquarium and the step-by-step instructions were not exactly riveting, Dawn seemed to enjoy herself in a way Julia hadn't seen since she was a toddler, and, just as Julia was closing the pages on tank selection and temperature control, the girl fell asleep.

Monday morning at the Tag Agency and Julia searched the com-

puter's database for the public safety director's date of birth. Normally she did not use the Tag Agency's computer to satisfy idle curiosity, but the public safety director seemed to her an interesting case, what with his graying hair and power walks gone mad. Just as she thought, he was 62, not yet retired and with something to prove about his ongoing vitality. For him, the morning constitutional was also the afternoon and evening constitutional, confirmation he didn't need a walking stick and fuel for speculation he was an amateur naturalist or astronomer, neither of which, Julia was quite sure, he actually was.

Why did he bother her so much? Dawn's ongoing fascination with him was reason enough, but there was something else, something until now unidentifiable but nonetheless palpable, something not quite sinister but possibly still suspect, something that made her wince with the knowledge of her own insignificance. She remembered him from childhood—he was everywhere then, too—and it seemed to her his notoriety was more or less unearned, old money that he was, sharing the last name of the town's nineteenth-century founder, though he was a well-known democrat—his wife spent part of each year out of town, volunteering at the Clinton Library—unusual enough in this part of the country. He had a thin, insincere smile, his ears forever flushed from the cold. And, most threatening of all, even while he lurked around every corner, he rarely spoke.

"He's menacing," Julia said to Addie one afternoon at the library. She'd waited until Dawn had excused herself to go to the restroom.

Addie was reading again, this time from a fat novel with palm fronds on the front. "That guy," Addie said. "You mean Where's Waldo?"

"I don't think his name is Waldo."

"It's John," Addie said. "Public Safety Director John. In school they used to call him Sofa Cushion."

"Why Sofa Cushion?"

"I don't know," Addie said. "Some story about a party at his house when his fancy-ass parents were out of town. You think Dawn's healthy crush on Old Sofa Cushion has gone a little too far?"

"She looks for him out the window," Julia said. "And she walks by their house when they're not at home."

Addie dismissed her out of hand, saying all kids had in their lives certain adults they held up as targets for unearned affection, symbolic fathers, surrogate mothers. She said it happened in books and on television all the time. "They're like shoes they're trying to grow into," she said. "Once the shoes fit, their feet start to get bigger and then they have to clip their toenails and start wearing thinner socks, and before you know it, they need new shoes all over again."

Julia said, "Dawn has big feet. I mean, *extra* big feet."

"That's just what I'm talking about," Addie said. "That's to your advantage."

Just then, Dawn emerged from the restroom and asked to check out a movie.

"It's the library," Julia said. "You're supposed to check out books."

“Not any more,” Dawn said. “Not these days.”

“But you like books.”

“Movies are like books,” Dawn said. “They’re the same size and everything.”

“Movies are much smaller,” Julia said. “This is a stupid conversation.”

“Suit yourself,” Dawn said. “The public safety director likes movies. His favorite movie is *Raging Bull*.”

“How do you know that,” Julia said. “Has he been speaking to you?”

“Profile page,” Dawn said. “Duh.”

A man’s voice, tinny and robotic, came on the PA system and announced the library would close in five minutes. Julia doubted herself more than most people did, something she usually considered a sign of her good character, but now she realized sending Dawn to the library every day had been a mistake. And Addie, she could tell, was not keeping a close enough eye. Twice when she’d arrived from the Tag Agency she’d seen Addie out in the parking lot, carrying a cup full of water to her unlocked car where the bromeliads were in bloom in the back window. And always she seemed to be talking or texting with some guy named Terry or TJ or Phil. When Julia asked her if these were members of her bowling league, Addie said Terry, TJ, and Phil all were the same person, a fact Julia did not find reassuring, made less so by the revelation he placed bets for Addie at the racetrack on the weekends. And Dawn’s obsession with the public safety director was getting worse, not better. Julia thought for sure there must have been some reason for it, some hidden part of the girl’s psyche, a malady that could be cured with a home remedy of good guesswork and surveillance. She allowed Dawn to check out the movie—some high school romance with kids in a convertible on the front—and went home to the same tasteless dinner they had most nights: macaroni and cheese with a side of iceberg lettuce and a single cherry tomato. She wanted something, anything at all, to shake up her routine, but she also wanted Dawn out of harm’s way, and even while she found herself wishing time would go by faster, so that Dawn would become a functional adult and do things like drive her own car and have her own job and pay her own bills, she also wished she was a baby again, small enough to fit in a bassinette and unable to climb out. But Dawn was a growing girl, wise—if knowing too much about evolutionary biology could be considered wise—beyond her years. Someday she’d go off to college. The empty nester’s life was alleged to spread slowly, like a river of sludge, into the emptiness left by the departing children, but Julia imagined herself free of worry and full of the joys that came from waking when you wanted to, having wine with breakfast if you wanted to, watching the world open up before you in all its authentic glory—no more bad reality shows, no more glittered socks in the laundry, and, best of all, no more talk of the public safety director and his perfect, vice-free family. On the way home from the library, Dawn stared at her phone and sometimes pecked away at it like one of Skinner’s pigeons pulling levers in a cage.

Now with Dawn safely installed in front of the TV, Julia walked down the block to pick up the mail. A couple of times a month she received a flier printed on grainy black-white stock, just a step above newsprint, always with the slogan "Oklahoma Drivers Are Very Upset" printed in large, block letters across the top. She didn't know why they were upset; she suspected their outrage had something to do with their insurance rates, but no matter: she never read the advertisement or paid much attention to it, really, beyond helping it on its journey to its final resting place: first, to the recycling bin, and then, knowing the nefarious ways in which waste management systems handled their affairs in her fair city, the recycling truck, the storage bins at the so-called convenience collection center, and finally, the landfill, the only mountain for miles. Sometimes, when she was behind the wheel of her own car she thought about all those Oklahoma drivers out there and how upset they must have been. It was upsetting, after all, to live in Oklahoma, to drive there. The public safety director, she knew, did not own a car, or if he did own one he never drove it, another reason to be upset. All over Oklahoma, the drivers were upset, and their rage, both justified and irrational, threatened to unleash its power over unsuspecting children, little weirdos like Dawn, unaware of the perils of the cold world of adults.

"I'm upset with you," Julia said the next time she caught Dawn gazing out the front window, doubtless hoping for some sign of her heroic public safety director. "Your mind is always somewhere else."

Dawn turned away from the sunlight streaming through the smudged glass. "You're one to talk," she said. "Cause your mind is totally gone."

If her mind was gone then so was her heart. She'd been aware of it for a while, like the slow loosening of a knot, the lack of interest, the slack-jawed stillness as in those television commercials for depression medication, only it was quiet, like the dead. The public safety director, like 70% of all white people in her town, undoubtedly took antidepressants, but Julia preferred wine and marijuana, after Dawn had gone to sleep of course, like you were supposed to make sure to say. "Go to bed," she said. "Maybe tomorrow we can go buy a saltwater aquarium."

"Lies," Dawn said. "All lies."

Julia considered it more of a supposition than a lie. Suppose they went to buy a saltwater aquarium. Suppose they found one on sale. Suppose they brought it home and scrubbed it out with a sponge. Could happen. Who knew?

"The public safety director never lies," Dawn said. "He took an oath."

"The public safety director is paid off by Big Oil," Julia said, not for the first time. "I didn't even vote for him. If you were old enough to vote, which you are not, you wouldn't have, either."

"He still won," Dawn said. "So, ha."

The next day at the library, there was, thankfully, no talk of the public safety director, and Julia, feeling magnanimous, helped Addie water the bromeliads in the back seat of her car. "Your visibility must be

limited,” she said. “Doesn’t that make you feel ... upset?”

“Only when the cops are around,” Addie said. “Sometimes in the rain.”

“I’m upset all the time,” Julia said. “And I never tell anyone about it.”

“You’re telling me right now,” Addie said. “Oh shit, this one’s leaking.”

And now Julia felt the same old reticence leaking in, the same turning away. If she heard one more person telling all the women in the world they needed therapy or yoga or some showdown with their unresolved feelings she thought she would pack her car full of her belongings, drop Dawn off with Addie, and drive until the dry land turned to sea.

“Never mind,” she said to Addie as they mopped up the excess water with paper napkins from Addie’s glove box. “I’m fine.”

“Sure you are,” Addie said. “Sure.”

Just then Dawn appeared in the doorway of the library. Stopping for a moment, framed by the building’s stone pillars, she looked not at Julia or Addie but past them, toward the traffic in the street. She was carrying a different school bag, one Julia didn’t recognize. And her hair was different, too, neater, somehow, and flatter. And she was wearing a dress, white with yellow sunflowers, she had not been wearing when she left for school that morning. Julia often did not keep up with occasions such as school picture day or play auditions or birthday parties of the rich and famous; maybe today had been one of those days. In any case, Dawn looked very grown up, almost as if she were playing dress-up, but successfully rather than in play. Julia turned to look at the traffic behind her. Already the roads were clearing out; people were home from work with their families. The town spread out before her like a lost lake, empty and abandoned. She wanted her daughter to be more like her, but she wasn’t.

“This library is stupid,” Dawn said, breathless from only a short walk across the parking lot. “I never want to come here again.”

“It’s the throw pillows,” Addie said. “They’re not very comfortable.”

“It’s not the throw pillows,” Dawn said. “It’s all their stupid *rules*.”

Julia knew immediately Dawn must have broken more than one of them.

“The rules are there for a reason,” Julia said, though she did not like hearing herself say such things. “Will you be welcomed back by the library staff?”

“What library staff?” Addie said. “They’re all a bunch of tight-assed absentees.”

Whatever had gone wrong in the library would blow over, but Dawn would still be her daughter, Addie still the girl’s grandmother, the Tag Agency still the Tag Agency, and the whole town still its same boring old outpost of unfulfilled dreams. Julia suddenly knew why the public safety director and Dawn’s interest in him bothered her so much: he stood for the long arm of the law keeping her there, stuck in so much small town gossip, mired in the mundane reality of missed opportuni-

ties and municipal codes. She decided right then she would spend the evening looking at graduate programs at universities out of state. She didn't know what she wanted to study—art, music, literature, she'd been interested in all of those, once—but it didn't matter; that letter of admission—probably they came by email these days—would be her ticket out of town.

That night at dinner—Addie volunteered to stop over and pay for a pizza—Dawn said today was her father's birthday. He was a Capricorn, Dawn said, just like Jesus Christ. Some time between the pizza's arrival and the spilled container of Parmesan cheese, Dawn realized she was talking not about the public safety director but her real father, Addie's long-dead son.

“Jesus didn't believe in astrology,” Addie said. “Show some respect.”

“Jesus believes in everything,” Dawn said. “Every thing and every one.”

“Where did you learn that?” Julia said. “Who told you that?”

“No one has to tell you,” Dawn said. “You just feel it. In your heart.”

Never before had Dawn shown any interest in religion; she'd done all that reading about evolutionary biology, for one thing, and even when a popular girl from school invited her to an Episcopalian service one Sunday, she not only refused the invitation but also wrote a letter to the editor of the school newspaper saying people should “keep their beliefs to themselves.” None of this freethinking had been at Julia's behest, though she liked to think she set a good example. Kids were capricious, Julia knew, but this latest turn of events was unexpected and abrupt.

“She'll get over it,” Addie said later that night, after Dawn had gone to bed. “Next week she'll like some boy band instead.”

“But Jesus,” Julia said. “The ultimate pop star.”

“Oh, he's old news,” Addie said, laughing. “Like age of the dinosaurs and shit.”

The night grew late, and Julia allowed Addie to talk her into opening a bottle of wine. Julia brought out the bong. The first bottle of wine became two, and Julia was opening a third when Addie fell asleep on the sofa. The TV blared into the open space of the living room, and Julia realized, too late, Addie must have been sleeping on top of the remote control. For a fleeting moment, she watched as Addie slept, her arms outstretched against the coffee table's edge, her long hair splayed against the cushions. Addie was still young—she'd had Dawn's father when she was still a teenager—and Julia considered, for a moment, the possibility Old Sofa Cushion Public Safety Director himself was not Dawn's father but her grandfather, that Dawn's father had been the product of some Saturday night gone wrong. But Addie had seemed uninterested in the public safety director, dismissive even, so Julia rejected the idea and decided to stow it away somewhere within the inner-reaches of her subconscious mind, somewhere she might retrieve it again someday, if she needed it. For now

she was glad for Addie, glad for willingness to buy pizza and wine, grateful for her control over the wayward Dawn. Julia did not have friends these days—only coworkers at the Tag Agency she considered tolerable for lunch dates, but otherwise too wrapped up in the various mundane activities of their own husbands and children—and Addie, she realized, had become her chief confidante.

“My plants,” Addie said the next morning in the driveway. “Now I’ll be a goddamn.”

“Don’t say *G-D*,” Dawn said from the porch. The school bus was running late. Julia stepped onto the driveway and saw the terrible truth: every last one of Addie’s plants, the ficus tree, pencil cactus, and bird of paradise all were gone, a dirty wet stain in the back window where the bromeliads had been. She tried to remember whether or not they’d left the car unlocked, but both Addie and Dawn had beat her to the punch and now were engaged in a pointless back-and-forth about which one of them had carried in the pizza the night before. At first, Julia suspected the culprit must have been Addie’s bookie, Terry or TJ or Phil, collecting on an old debt or just trying to terrorize Addie for the sake of his own jollies. But then she remembered the time she’d seen a text from Terry-TJ-Phil in which he had said, *I’ll buy you a watering can for your birthday*. But maybe Addie had hidden some pot plants somewhere in there, and the cops were after her, and they’d been the one to steal everything, to photograph it for evidence. The whole thing seemed so unreal and impossible she put aside her suspicions in favor of plain old, everyday fear.

“Get in the house,” she said to Dawn. She’d seen what you were supposed to do in a television commercial for a wireless home security system, something she’d never bothered to buy. “Go into your bedroom and shut the door. Take the pillow from your bed and get down on the floor.”

“This is stupid,” Dawn said. “The bus isn’t even here yet.”

“The bus can wait,” Julia said, realizing immediately the girl was right, her panic *was* stupid, and saying the bus could wait was stupid, too, because what would she tell the bus driver, that they’d had a crime committed in their driveway and Dawn would reappear for school just as soon as the culprits were caught and safely stowed away in jail?

“Well, somebody needs to check the car for fingerprints,” Addie said. “Or mitochondrial DNA.”

“This is a job for the public safety director,” Dawn said. “He handles stuff like this all the time.”

“No, he doesn’t,” Julia said.

“He’s the long arm of the law,” Dawn said. “He’s third in line for the throne.”

“What throne?” Julia said.

“There’s God and then Jesus,” Dawn said. “Then the public safety director.”

“So much you know,” Julia said, suddenly glad the girl never had attended an actual church service. “You’re forgetting Luke Skywalker and the Holy Spirit.”

“No one cares about my plants,” Addie said. “No one is talking enough about my missing plants.”

Far from being able to help them catch the plant thief, the public safety director, Julia suspected, might have been the culprit himself. Only how would he carry them? She realized then her paranoia was getting the best of her. Finally, the school bus came and picked up Dawn, who seemed, for once, glad to be going to school. Julia watched as Addie brought out the bottle of wine from the night before and poured it in some old Styrofoam cups she found on the floorboard of the now oxygen-deprived car. They sat on the edge of the porch, sipped the warm wine in the morning light, and said nothing for a while.

“I’ll bet it was that TJ,” Julia said after a while. “Really he’s pretty sketchy.”

“I’m broke,” Addie said. “Don’t get paid until next Tuesday.”

“So?”

“So I can’t call TJ until I get paid.”

Julia wondered aloud how Addie had been able to pay for the pizza, but Addie brushed her off with some elaborate explanation about a friend who did her laundry at Addie’s place and also worked, for a while, at Pizza Hut, and so still knew the manager and brought him free pints of ice cream from the Dairy Mart, where she worked now and also where Addie always stopped in for a cigarette on Wednesdays after work. How all this turned into free or discounted pizza Julia didn’t know, but she was sure in the small town scheme of things it all made sense, somehow. She thought of asking whether or not Addie, against her explicit wishes, had taken Dawn to this Dairy Mart, but decided to let it go. They resolved together not to call the cops but instead to take photos on their phones and check with the neighbors—the ones they could trust—for any eyewitness accounts. Julia called in sick to the Tag Agency, something she never did, even when she was contagious. Addie had the rare day off at the nursing home and so planned to spend the day helping out some other old person Julia had never heard of.

“Does he pay you?” Julia said.

“Yeah,” she said. “Just not regular.”

Julia understood such arrangements. “You ever want to leave this town,” she said. “I mean, for good?”

“Nowhere to go,” Addie said. “You know?”

“Yeah,” Julia said. “I think I might like to go to grad school.”

“Fancy,” Addie said. “I mean, good luck and all.”

“Yeah,” Julia said. The sun was higher in the sky now, and the concrete below them was beginning to warm. “Thanks, I guess.”

The next day at work, Julia checked the property tax transactions and hunting and fishing license records for every possible derivation of Terry, TJ, and Phil, the last name she knew more or less for certain as Phillips, since she’d checked Addie’s phone while she was asleep. Terrence Jason Phillips paid property taxes on a home of modest income for three years running and owned both a boat and an RV. And his driver’s license had expired six months ago. She knew she’d see his sorry ass in

there any day now for sure.

After lunch she took a phone call from the principal at Dawn's school. Dawn and another girl had been caught selling pencils at recess, which didn't sound like too big of a deal until she found out the girls had been telling everyone on the playground these were not just any ordinary pencils but relics from ancient Babylon where they'd been touched by Hammurabi himself. So far they'd collected seventy-eight dollars from their gullible classmates, a tribute, Julia thought, to their entrepreneurial skills. The principal stressed what he called extreme violations of the community code and insisted Dawn be sent home for the day to "think about her actions," something Julia was quite sure Dawn would not do. But she was glad to hear Dawn had a friend, at least, a partner in crime. She lied and told her boss at the Tag Agency Dawn had a dental emergency—why make it a medical emergency when you could make it a dental emergency—and knocked off early for the day.

Before leaving the Tag Agency, she stood in the crowded parking lot and squinted to see the screen on her phone. Already she'd been rejected from not just one or two but three graduate programs in art history—they'd all written to say she'd missed their application deadline by several months and would have to reapply next year. So she was not just stupid but illiterate too, unable to read simple guidelines as they appeared online. She put her phone on airplane mode and so would avoid seeing any more bad news before heading across town to the elementary school.

Driving, she watched the town's goings-on in their usual dolorous fits and starts: someone in scrubs catching a quick smoke outside the hospital's rusty ambulance doors, the business-casual crowd lining up outside the town's only food truck, farmers hauling hay. Thinking about the graduate school rejections had her almost in tears. And it was upsetting to live here, upsetting to have a daughter like Dawn, downright depressing to have a dull job at the most hated place in town. She was thinking about turning her phone back on and maybe texting Addie when she saw him, the public safety director, wearing one of his stupid collared shirts and a wrinkled blazer made of obvious synthetic fibers, his arms outstretched before him in exaggerated effort because he was carrying a large, potted bromeliad, its thick leaves and spiky flowers suddenly brilliant in the noonday sun. He was in a crosswalk, taking deliberate, halting steps, paying no obvious attention to the traffic whizzing around him. And though she easily might have missed him, might have considered the bromeliad a mere coincidence, she found herself speeding up when she saw him, her heartbeat thrumming in her ears and her heavy foot pressing down on the gas.

# (APOSTASY SHALL BE LAW)

*Christopher Muravez*

i am the third revelation of a theory that will devour  
a neighboring state's gall vomit or horse ride  
pell-mell into the sewage section shelves ayn rand lined  
to hunt down the priestly lactose intolerance  
the daydreamer slaughtered for its back-fat & retched  
a little lead death a little kentucky bourbon;  
or do you think churches burn wishing for a faggot  
hurricane to salivate their swollen bigot glands?

# HUNDRED YEAR FLOODPLAIN

*Merridawn Duckler*

The river rose and rose, the banks  
blank as the water line crept  
up where it had never been wet,  
surpassed and spread in dark pools  
or rain bowed from oils light  
and sunk. Our dreams were wringing,  
our thoughts like the wipers back and forth  
back and forth, criers hidden, the mark  
of the sky on all the clothes and lashes.  
And still the water rose, terribly steady  
under the sand bags and we woke to rivulets  
gush in the streets, spread like fingers,  
pouring on either side of a fist. The birds  
shuffled among the puddles, unsure where to fly  
and we shaded our eyes to watch them rise  
into the white flat cloud cover through a slit  
returning black from nowhere, flat as a cross.

# HEAVEN WAS APPARENTLY CAPTURED BY THE HUBBLE SPACE TELESCOPE

*Cody Trapanese*

You read, as you push your cart full of celery and almond milk,  
Towards the girl wearing a name tag reading, Hello, my name is.  
All the while, you walk from your nine to five, or from school to your Nova.  
You look at your boyfriend looking at you, starry eyed.  
You laugh, heaven must be missing an angel.  
Wherever heaven is. And wherever I am. This town.  
You glance over to see your boyfriend's celestial looks,  
And remember that Katy Perry song, inject me with your poison.  
Your Zenith, like that telescope, transports you  
To the other galaxy far away, as Star Wars begins.  
And for one moment, you wonder to yourself, about the five seconds,  
Of whatever this is we are given down here.  
Then all of a sudden, it all makes sense, staring at the ceiling,  
Putting Earl Grey's bag, into the boiling water.  
As you think to yourself, about the article you read earlier,  
Wondering why would God, let some scientists, look right into his heart.

# LIVING THE WIFE

*Hannah Waldman*

The soft skinned lady shed a tear:  
*Lately life has felt like cold bathwater.*  
Her alarm clock blaers its certainty while pleated  
blinds keep secrets from closet corners.  
*Oprah Winfrey, give me strength.*

Grey is in this season and she's got bags  
that match her eyes. She sends sky blue silks  
and dusk toned fabrics into circular patterns,  
refreshed with each spin, just to be worn.

Jade oven mitts cling to her hands  
while loaves of bread conspire against soft teeth.  
Wind up timers can be so short tempered,  
and bread only tastes good if it's kneaded  
enough. Steam arises with the doubt that she used  
enough sugar, and she begins to wonder  
if margarine is the root of her trust issues.

She plays hangman with four letter words  
against the restless, hourglass shadow on the wall  
then turns to search the room for an outlet, so business  
formal button ups can stiffen at her touch.

Hot skin and salty kisses or whispering  
through telephone wires would be nice  
every once in a Tuesday. *I like to feel things.*

*It's 6 o'clock and here's what's wrong,*  
said a man wearing static blush. *I'm stuck in a box,*  
*and I've never read any books on the topic.*

Moths flutter from book pages of love  
affairs doomed for failure, and she doubts  
the main character will even make it to the sequel.  
The crackle of the fire suggests a rapid plot change,  
but she places it back on the tarnished  
coffee table, atop the stain of a ring.

# NUDE MALE WITH ECHO #319

*Darren Demaree*

Hit the dead  
colors, the white without  
& the static black.

Let the rush of red,  
find the brim  
& let it shake the god

damn episodic people  
that move from room  
to room without

ever running away from  
or towards anything  
other than an opening.

The museums  
are so fucking cold  
because of these people.

# HELP WANTED

*Courtney Cliften*

I sit in the green velvet recliner while the Channel 4 newscaster predicts a chance of light showers through the rest of the week: hardly news for Seattle. I aim the remote toward the TV and click the picture off. Ellen sleeps on the couch, breathing heavily, and I head into the kitchen to make her a sandwich. As I pull the bread out of the cupboard, she lets out a loud snore causing her to wake. I open the can of tuna, and she calls from the living room, “You still here?”

“Yep. In the kitchen.”

I’ve been coming to Ellen’s house every day for five years. I needed some extra money for a new skateboard, and I’d seen something on Craigslist: HELP WANTED—*helping an old lady for money*, and a phone number. I called, then went over, and had enough money after one week with her. During that time, I helped her clean out all of her dead husband’s things from the house. She had a story for everything I placed into a box. I was emptying a drawer from his office when I came across a small leather book. There were two red bookmarks connected to the spine that fell through the pages and came out of the bottom, frayed. An elastic band wrapped tightly around the center of the book, holding it shut. Ellen grabbed my hand before I could add it to the box. She took it from me and loosened the elastic band to open the book. I could see neat markings filling the entire page in black ink. She brought the book close to her face and inhaled deeper than her lungs would regularly allow.

“Dale brought this everywhere,” she said. She flips through the book, touching each word and running her hands over the pages.

“What’d he write about?”

She continued staring at the pages until she got to one that interested her more than the others. “You ever tried to think of the name to some movie or book you once read, but it never comes into your mind?”

“Yeah.”

“But then all of a sudden, weeks later, when you’re washing the dishes or getting into bed or something, the name of the book just comes to you.” She stares at the page a while before continuing. “That’s the feeling he’d write.”

“What’s that one say?”

“Ellen Beasley.” After a while, she shut the book and put the elastic back in place. Dale’s journal was the only thing I didn’t pack into a box that week.

I pour some applesauce into a bowl and place it on the plate before moving her wheelchair up to the table. I fill two glasses with water and sit with her while she eats.

“How’s Payton doing? She hasn’t been around for a while.” She speaks with a mouth full of bread.

I begin sliding my glass between my two hands, leaving a trail of condensation on the wooden table. Ellen won’t be satisfied with a simple,

“good,” and she can read me well enough to know that things are, in fact, not good. “I don’t know. We’ve been spending a lot more time apart.”

“Well, do you miss her?”

“It’s not like I never see her anymore,” I pause and try to balance the glass at an angle without letting the water spill. “She’s just been doing her own thing a lot more lately.”

“I always thought her thing and your thing were the same thing.”

Me too. I think back and try to figure out when our things became different. She and I met when we were seven years old. She was from a rich family, the type that thought there was no other option than to send their five-year-old daughter to a private elementary school. I ended up there, solely due to circumstances that were less than ideal. My dad left my mom, and apparently felt guilty. Not guilty enough to stay, or stay in contact, but guilty enough to send checks every month that allowed me to pretend I fit in with the Mercedes-driving, Starbucks-drinking crowd. Between passing spelling tests and learning about the Declaration of Independence, Payton and I grew to like each other. She didn’t mind that my neighborhood didn’t put regulations on grass length, or that I didn’t take private tennis lessons five days a week. So, by the time we were in the eighth grade, I had mustered the courage to ask her out. I believe my exact words were, “Hey Payton, will you go out with me?” This didn’t mean anything substantial. I mean, how many times do you hear about middle school sweethearts? It basically just meant that we would find each other during the school dances and awkwardly sway for five minutes while Cyndi Lauper sang “Time After Time.”

“Maybe I’m just not her Dale anymore.” I say this knowing that with just the mention of his name, I will bring a smile to her face.

“Well, if you ever were her Dale, I can tell you one thing: everything is going to be just fine between the two of you.” Ellen took the last bite of her sandwich, leaving most of the crust and her napkin on the plate. “You should try to see her, or at least talk to her. I don’t know how you haven’t already had this conversation with her on The Facebook yet.”

“You can actually just call it Facebook.” I text Payton and tell her to meet me at the coffee shop in thirty minutes. I refill Ellen’s water, and start cleaning my cup in the sink. “Do you need anything else before I leave? I’ll be back tonight before you go to bed.”

She joins me at the counter. “No, you’re not going to spend the night putting an old lady to bed on a Friday.” She grabs the glass out of my hands and runs it under the warm water, “and look, I can even handle the dishes on my own.”

“Glad to know you appreciate my help.” I put my arm around her shoulders and squeeze her into my chest. “I’ll let you know how everything goes. See you tonight.”

She mumbles something about me getting a life as I grab my skateboard and head out into the brisk air. It has been sprinkling on and off all day, as the weatherman predicted. I spend the entire trip to the coffee shop contemplating the best way to greet Payton when I see her. Should I kiss her? What the hell is going on with me, of course I kiss my

girlfriend when I see her. In an attempt to spare my sanity, I continue skating in total brain silence. I arrive at the coffee shop and throw my wet hoodie on the floral couch. There is only one other person here, so I order a coffee—black—and put my headphones in. This used to be Payton's favorite place. Every day after school, we would walk here together. This yellow and orange couch became our regular spot. We used to do our homework here, and Payton was always trying to over-explain things to me, like she didn't think she made sense. Once, she said to me that if you know enough about somebody, it's impossible not to love them. The thing is, she couldn't just say that and let me understand. Instead, she continued on for a few minutes, every so often disclaiming her thoughts with a, "But that's just what I think," or an, "It's stupid, I know."

Just as I start to wonder where exactly to place the kiss when I see her, Payton comes rushing into the coffee shop, dramatically apologizing about traffic. She lets out a long sigh, perches herself on the couch, and turns toward me. "I hope tonight's the night."

"What do you mean?" So much for worrying about a greeting.

"The universe, Lucas. I told you. This month, with Venus in retrograde, it's good for money."

"Oh. Well, your parents give you a lot of money."

She laughs. "I'll get *more* when the planets align. Ryan thinks someone is going to die and I'll be in their will." I get her a drink as she continues speculating how she'll become rich—richer, by the end of the night. "What's your sign, again?" she says.

"I don't know. September 25th."

"Oh. Yeah. Totally forgot. Ryan drank dandelion tea for a whole month, and he says he can see auras now. But you need lilac." She says this with a sense of authority that's hard to recognize. I have no idea what lilac has to do with anything, but she no longer apologizes for her knowledge, no longer sees it as her fault if other people don't understand certain things. "Ryan is having a barbecue at his house tonight. Come with me?"

We sit in silence for a while as Payton checks out her reflection on the screen of her cellphone. She wears plum-colored lipstick that looks better on her pale skin than it does on the rim of her coffee cup. I finish my drink and pull out my wallet for a tip. "Want anything else?"

"No, we should get going. You'll come, right?"

"Okay." I hold the glass door open as she hurries out toward her car. She climbs into the driver side and I put my skateboard in the backseat. I take out two cigarettes, light them both, take a drag of both, and then hand her one. Payton refuses to take the first hit of a cigarette. It's really bad for you, she says.

It doesn't take long to get to Ryan's. When we turn onto his street, I see a huge path of cars lining the driveway. Ryan's house is one big window. The front door looks more like a safe than an entrance. As if Payton already has the combination, she turns the handle and lets herself in. At first glance, the house looks like a deserted granite wasteland. But through the huge wall, which is actually more of a window, I see thou-

sands of tiny spherical lights that are strung from the patio roof, flooding the entire back porch with an ethereal orange glow. I light up a cigarette and head to the steps leading down to the lawn as Payton joins her friends, Megan and Liz. I take a seat on the stoop and listen to the many different conversations going on around me. I hear about how Liz's father hangs out at the strip club on Wednesday nights. Andy's older brother sees him there almost every week. Jake probably isn't going to get the track scholarship that he already told everybody about, so he was probably just lying about it in the first place. Mason got caught having sex in his car with a forty-three year old woman. It was his mom's therapist.

Down on the lawn, the fire struggles under the constant threat of rain, but there are enough trees to provide a bit of protection. I grab a Coor's Light from the cooler. I wonder why, with all the trust funds and unlimited credit cards in the world, anyone would choose to fill a cooler with Coor's Light.

"Hey, Lucas." I turn around to a welcoming smile from Ryan: slightly drunk, but welcoming.

"Hey man, thanks for having me over." I'm not even really sure if I was invited, but it seems the polite thing to say.

"Did you skate all the way over here?"

"I came with Payton."

"So how does that work? I mean, when you pick her up for a date, does she stand on the back, or do you make her walk beside you, or what?" His arms cross in front of his chest and he locks into my eyes with an interested stare as he awaits my response.

"It's not really a big deal."

"No, I know. It's just—I've been considering selling my Rover. It's giving off a bad vibe lately, and I want to keep an open mind for my next set of wheels. Just looking for some insight is all."

A bad vibe, in his opinion, is a justifiable reason to get rid of a car. "I've heard a lot about the Prius and good vibes, you know, nature, and all that."

"Sick man, well thanks, I'll look into it for sure." Ryan gives a lot of reassuring head nods, and if I hadn't known that he constantly referred to me as "the peasant," I might be fooled into thinking he actually likes me.

He leaves me with a light punch on the arm and a smile that can only come from a dentist's son. I head toward an empty spot by the fire. A few people are huddled together sitting cross-legged on the other side of the pit looking at the two white teacups sitting between them. The tops of their heads are almost touching as they try to get the best view of what's inside: wet, soggy tealeaves. Megan, Liz, and Payton all squeeze in with the group, creating a larger circle. Liz tells everybody to "take it seriously or else it's just not going to work," and Ryan joins the circle next to Payton. He grabs on to her shoulder as he lowers himself onto the grass. Their knees rest against each other's, and they sit there comfortably. Megan starts predicting Payton's fortune. She sees a bird heading toward the handle and has something to say about a journey. Megan squints her

eyes and takes a long look at the teacup.

“I have never seen such a clear anchor symbol before, Payt.”

“Looks more like a penis to me,” Chad says, and raises his hand for a high five. “What does a big ol’ penis mean, Megan? Payton gonna get lucky tonight or what?”

“Shut up, Chad,” Ryan stands up and crosses the circle until he is standing right above Chad. “Do you think you’re funny?”

“No, I’m just saying. If the tea leaves are saying Payton is giving it up tonight. I better make my move, right?”

“You might want to shut up now.” Ryan is yelling, but Chad quickly gets up from his position on the lawn, and the two are face-to-face. I put my cigarette out on my shoe and make my way past the crowd until I am standing right next to Ryan. Payton has her back to Chad and her hands on Ryan’s chest, begging him to calm down as a crowd of people forms a circle around them. I stare at my girlfriend. She is calm, careful, and doesn’t look at me once. Her voice is as quiet as the dim crackling of the fire as she speaks to Ryan. With both of her hands on his cheeks, she tells him to look at her. He resists. He tries to look behind her. At Chad. She says it again, and after only a moment of hesitation, I see the muscles in his shoulders relax, and his fists come unclenched, and he lowers his eyes to meet hers.

Even from the side, I can see the muscle in Payton’s cheek flex on one side. I know she is smiling with only one side of her face. It’s the same smile she gave me after I split my forehead open trying to climb over a fence. We had been walking past an abandoned old warehouse and there was a chain link fence around the overgrown lot. I told her I would check it out first to make sure it was safe, and on the way over, my pant got caught and I landed head first into a pile of weeds and rocks. She took me to her house and cleaned it before bandaging it. I kept telling her that nobody wanted a boyfriend who couldn’t even climb a fence. She assured me that a man splitting his head was her idea of a romantic time, and when I finally accepted that I was no less of a man for failing, she gave me that same half-smile.

They remain there, just looking at each other, while everybody else looks at them. She lowers her hands from his face and tells him it’s all right. She squeezes his arm and he nods his head, signaling that he won’t do anything stupid. Everyone is around us. Nobody else says a word—they just watch. I can’t tell, by their expressions, if they realize that Payton is falling in love with another man. I turn around, and the circle that has formed around the scene splits into a path as I walk through the group of strangers toward the side gate. As I unlatch the lock, everyone returns to conversation. I can’t understand anything they are saying, and I don’t try to. I open the back door of Payton’s car and grab my skateboard.

“Lucas, wait,” Payton closes the gate behind her and runs toward me. I don’t have time to decide if I want to talk or not. Payton makes the decision for me. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to cause a scene.”

“It’s not your fault. Chad’s an idiot.”

“Well, I know, but...” She sits down on the curb, and drops her head in her hands. “I’m sorry. Ryan just doesn’t like when people say stupid stuff like that.” She picks at her fingernails and chews on her lip.

“Yeah, I know. Me either.”

She’s still looking at the ground, “Ryan is just really passionate.” Loud laughter erupts from the party, and Payton looks over her shoulder, but turns back around when she notices me watching her.

“We don’t need to drag this out, Payt.” I try to sound comforting, but it comes out too bitter, and I wish I wouldn’t have said anything at all. “You should go back. I have to get going anyway. Ellen’s waiting for me.”

“I just don’t know when everything got so complicated.” She rests her head on my shoulder for a moment before standing up and, without a response, I let her leave.

I skate toward Cypress Street in the opposite direction. The concrete path from Ryan’s yard to Ellen’s house is smooth, but dampening as the rain begins to fall heavily. I approach the front stoop. For a moment, I consider what Payton might have to say about the significance of a full moon tonight, but I dismiss that thought as I head inside. I wanted answers from Payton tonight, but I’m just not ready to acknowledge that I got them.

“You better be a burglar,” Ellen says from her recliner as I lean my skateboard against the wall.

“Oh, shut up. Pretty sure doilies aren’t too high on a thief’s list.”

“They’re custom.” I catch a glimpse of her rolling her eyes as I help her adjust the chair into a sitting position, then fill a bucket with warm water from the bathroom sink. I add some soap until the bubbles and the familiar smell of lavender takes over, then I head back into the living room.

“So, what have you been doing since I left?”

“Just started a new book. It’s about a guy who falls in love with a young girl in a foreign country, even though they speak different languages.”

“Sounds complicated.”

“No, it’s so simple. That’s the thing.” She goes on to tell me about how the man in the book falls in love with the way the girl holds the balcony railing. I gently slide the sponge over her wrinkled hands, over the dark spots, the kind that appeared with time, but couldn’t be scrubbed off. Her fingers feel soft in mine, the muscles pulpous and yielding as though life had tenderized the meat in her hands over time. I focus my attention on the sponge as it travels up her arms and over her loose skin.

“Would you still want me over all the time if we couldn’t talk?”

I ask, as I spread water over the deep purple bruise by her armpit. Her hairless arm is also spotted with yellow, older bruises that have begun to heal underneath the flaky skin.

“Who says I even want you here now?”

She laughs dryly. She doesn’t care if I think she’s funny. She thinks she’s funny, and she has no problem laughing alone.

I renew the sponge in the soapy water and lift her cotton dress. The familiar veins form a blue pathway leading me up to her knees and around to the back as I lift her slender calf and run the sponge toward her upper thigh. Her pale skin is painted in goose bumps as I expose the sensitive skin between her legs. I am careful passing over the scar above her pelvis. I know it has been almost fifty years since her appendix ruptured, but I still feel the need to treat the scarred skin with sensitivity. “Are we going to talk about how it went today?” she says.

“No, I don’t think we need to.”

She doesn’t press me for more. I wash her entire body, then lightly pat her dry.

Her stiff skin remains clean, but too dry. On the way to the bathroom, I see the leather journal on the desk in the hallway. I open it to the bookmarked place—the page with black letters spelling out Ellen’s name. Dale’s handwriting is simple, precise, and bold. Underneath her name, he had sketched a picture of the two of them together. Ellen has a full head of hair, pinned up and out of her eyes by a pearl clip. She wears a long sleeve, lace dress, like a wedding gown. The sketch shows Ellen’s hand on Dale’s cheek as they look into each other’s eyes, and I don’t know how, but he just looks happy. I put the bookmark back in place, and I get the lotion from underneath the bathroom sink. When I get back into the living room, I pump a large amount into my hands, warming the liquid before touching it to her body. I move slowly, without pressing too hard. Once her entire body has been covered, I roll her wheelchair beside the recliner, asking if she’s ready to go to her room. When she nods her head, I place one arm underneath hers and around her back to her other side. My other arm slides underneath her knees. I make sure I have both legs securely in my grasp and lift her with ease, as she rests her thin head of hair on my shoulder. Her warm body presses against mine for only a couple of seconds while we hold each other between the two chairs.

# LOVEBIRDS

*Jeff Haynes*

Of course, we were in love.  
We were close together and twirling to no music.  
To passers-by, we looked insane.  
We didn't care. We danced our way off  
the edge of a mountain.  
On the way down, I thought,  
*This is how it's supposed to be.*  
The night: starless.  
The cold air ruddying our cheeks. My chest puffed up  
in imitation of the frat boys we saw  
squabbling outside Pluto's Head Shop.  
A passenger jet bleeped its lights overhead, and I remember thinking  
your face was never more beautiful  
than right before the bird flew into it.  
The black feathers floated down like shredded party streamers,  
and you kept mouthing the word *bittersweet*  
through a plume of white breath.  
*Yes, there are worse things than dying,* I thought,  
and flapped my hopeless arms,  
*but this is not one of them.*

# SUNDAY LUNCH

*Elena Gabriel*

I don't want to eat the eggs in front of me,  
Or to be sitting in this dingy restaurant,  
Stuck in these scratchy dress pants after  
Church. The heat could scorch me  
Like the toast on my plate, the generator  
Whining lukewarm air as my father sits  
Before me in silence. His fine graying hair  
Is slicked back and glinting under fluorescent  
Lights, when the creaking of the door  
Breaks our routine stillness. Two men step  
In, hands knotted together. A scowl  
Makes its way onto my father's lined mouth.  
*Faggots, disgusting. Like we want  
To see their act against God while we eat.*  
A grin manages to pinch the corners  
Of my mouth, *Good for them*, I murmur  
Between the eggs that find refuge  
In my mouth. He doesn't respond  
To my comment, staring down at his  
Crinkled all American strips of bacon  
As the hum of the restaurant continues.

# SUMMER

*Elena Gabriel*

When I saw you at our pin prick of a city's  
Crowded drive through, the summer baking  
Us in a mix of smoke and sweat as we stared  
Up at the reeling picture before us, I'd never  
Seen that kind of beauty. Curved like sloping  
Hills my family visits every winter, and cheeks  
Glowing red like McDonald's sign on nights  
When I've got gas to burn. And when I had  
You in the back seat of my Impala that night,  
I could fall in love with the way your mouth  
Moves when no words come out of it. Risky  
Thoughts whirl through your head in a dust  
Devil, ripping up the homes of the little  
People you talk about becoming and letting  
Them out. How you want to be a novelist,  
Vet, maybe a teacher. I stare as countless  
Ambitions tumble from your glossed lips  
With ease: I haven't got any people like that.

# WAIT

*Elena Gabriel*

On nights I waited for my mom to come home  
I peered into the dark blanketed trailer park.  
I rocked back and forth on the shaggy gray rug,  
Watching for my mother's illuminated figure.

As I peered into the dark blanketed trailer park,  
I ignored the boxed images playing beside me.  
Watching for my mother's illuminated figure,  
I'd remember the smell of her denim jacket.

I ignored the boxed images playing beside me,  
Listening to the glugs of the fish tank purring.  
I'd remember the smell of her denim jacket,  
Behind the screen of our sliding glass door.

Listening to the glugs of the fish tank purring,  
I stared at the swaying plants in the gusting wind.  
Behind the screen of our sliding glass door,  
I hunched my scraped knees to my chest.

I stared at the swaying plants in the gusting wind,  
Rocking back and forth on the shaggy gray rug.  
I hunched my scraped knees to my chest,  
On nights I waited for my mom to come home.

# A NIGHT OUT, COMPLETE WITH SILVER LININGS

*Bob Hicok*

I miss being sad  
enough that a single lily  
out of place—such as growing  
from a snowbank or the tip  
of my penis—had the potential  
to remind me it was early, like not even  
the end of the world yet, plenty of time  
to wash my hair and pick out  
a suit to wear to digging a trench  
for whatever trenchy purpose. It's not

that I don't get sad now—or it is  
that I do, if you prefer a more positive  
perspective—but you never know how good  
depression treats you until it's gone  
and there's no reason to take your meds  
other than your love of squiggles. Like

there was this one time I tried to kill myself  
but missed my head and shot the air—man  
that was funny—I laughed and threw the gun  
into a river, not a very good game of catch  
but an excellent first step toward drawing breath  
with a pen, not a pencil. Whatever doesn't kill me

is probably wearing mittens. I'm here now

with you is all that matters, the two of us  
about to finish our Mai Tais and walk  
arm-in-arm down the street with some  
or all of us naked in our love  
of stars we can't see but know  
are there, the road to optimism is paved  
with tarmac or concrete like all the rest,  
you were expecting what—roses, kittens?

# CARE AND FEEDING

*Bob Hicok*

He saw it on TV. People climbing ice  
using crampons and axes. He looked everywhere  
in the house for crampons and axes  
but got no closer than forks. He duct taped  
two forks to his feet, held two in his hands  
and tried to climb a wall. Just then,  
his mother came home. She worked  
for a very large manufacturer  
of very small sensations, such as the feeling  
you get that you're being watched  
in your car while picking your nose.  
There he was, the incarnation of her spirit  
smiling at her, his red hair sticking up  
like it wanted to burn higher. She looked  
at the passel of scrapes and dents  
in the drywall, and without saying a word,  
got a chair, placed it beside him, stood on it  
and reached down to help him climb.  
*Harder*, she said, *kick harder*, and explained,  
when his foot finally punched all  
the way through, *That's called a foothold.*

# BEYOND THE HORIZON

*Alisha Bingham*

The clouds, an angry grey,  
drop rain on the earth.  
A pain pulses in my head.  
My cold heart fills with icicles,  
goosebumps on my pale skin.  
My blind eyes see nothing but blurry colors.  
She, just a fragment of my imagination,  
leaves footprints in the mud.  
Half asleep, but wide awake,  
I look over a cliff imagining, what?  
If I hit her with a rock,  
would she feel my hurt?  
No, because sea glass is nothing  
but polished fragments of what was.  
The soft brush of her lips  
I want to be real, but then again,  
I just want to die to see if I become a ghost.

# ANOTHER FIRST DATE

*Hannah Little*

It's the first sundress of the season  
and my pale legs beam in the sunlight  
broken nose now barely visible  
and the scars on my neck shallow white.

I walk along Laura Mills Park  
to my first date since the engagement  
with the Marine ended in late autumn.  
He hated dresses that exposed my skin  
so I smile as I adjust my straps.

Your figure looms over the lace bench  
sighing in the marble gazebo's shade.  
Your eyes trace my neck and stop there  
as you crush the daisies in your grip.

The heat pulls up your red flannel's sleeves  
revealing purple roses and scripture falling  
down your arms in tattoos and scars, recounting  
damaged poets that touched you. Your beard sways  
in the warm breeze, so pleasantly unfamiliar.

I wince as I listen to your deep, booming voice  
and imagine your tone rising and demanding  
but it never does. Your massive arm reaches  
around me and I gasp as your fingers brush  
against the scars above my collar bone.

I lower my eyes to the needlepoint pattern  
on my dress as my shoulders come up  
and my breath is lost. You adjust your hand  
whispering, *It's okay. I won't touch you there.*

You delicately set the tattered white daisies  
into my shaking palm, and your dark ginger eyes  
meet mine. I lace my fingers through yours  
and I thank you for understanding.

# OKAY, MAYBE A CEMETERY WASN'T THE BEST PLACE TO DO THAT AND OTHER REFLECTIONS UPON LOSING MY VIRGINITY

*Scott Rose*

Upon returning to my resting heart rate,  
I thought I would feel different somehow.  
Not just high on prolactin, but transformed.  
Now more of a man, and the unadulterated  
masculinity that radiated from my body that night  
would be seen for miles as airplanes were misdirected  
and birds began to chirp only hours  
after they settled in for the night.

Wait, was I supposed to say the perfect  
thing into your ear at the perfect moment  
with a breathy, romantic sigh  
instead of carnal grunts and painful moans  
and the pfffts as I spit into your ear  
when your hair slipped into my mouth?  
If I muttered *I love you* so that only you  
could hear, how could you be sure  
that it wouldn't become three hormonal  
words I would whisper to all the girls?

Maybe the whole thing was premature—  
and I should have released the spontaneous desire,  
opted for romance, brushing your hair behind your ear  
as we drove to Motel 6 for a king size bed,  
a room filled with candles burning lightly,  
and rose petals leading you to the altar  
where I could show you just how important  
you are to me. Instead, I gave you a cemetery  
parked next to someone's stiff grandpa  
who I hoped would understand and offer  
a high five from his afterlife of choice  
before the consummation of our fornication.

Shit, should I have given more compliments  
as I pulled up my pants? *That was amazing!*  
seemed too trite because until this night  
neither of us had any other means of comparison.  
To say nothing would surely be more painful  
than a hymen stretching—that moment we let go

of ourselves in front of God, the night sky,  
and the interior of my 1992 Nissan Altima.  
I was certain that the rite of passage  
of opening a condom wrapper with my teeth  
would make me feel different.  
But the masculinity that surges  
through my veins can't even be seen  
in my bathroom mirror.

# WHAT I WANTED TO SAY AT MY BEST FRIEND'S FUNERAL

*Scott Rose*

When our friends stop me with that sickening  
look behind their furrowed brows and pathetic frowns  
to ask me how I'm *holding up* when getting out of bed  
is the greatest success I will have all day,  
I have to close my eyes and take a long, deep breath.  
Behind a quiet smile, I clench my teeth hard,  
and I wonder if they will break the way yours did  
when you missed that fly ball and we lost the game.  
I want to scream into their faces until the vessels  
in my eyes burst—sclera now reminiscent of the blood  
diluted in your warm bathwater—while they vomit  
their arsenal of clichés all over the shirt you left  
at my house just two days before you died.

The picture frame next to my bed now mocks me  
with a photo of us, ignorant and laughing, as if to say,  
*Hey! Remember this? Remember the good times?*  
My heart beats quickly and my hands shake  
as your girlfriend who sobbed *I can't live without him*  
finds someone else after three months and never  
mentions you again *because it hurts too much*  
but mostly because her new boyfriend doesn't like  
the idea of her ever having loved before.  
On good days, I can think of your crooked smile  
and tell myself, *Hey man, he wouldn't want you this way*  
but most days, I don't even speak as your laugh  
echoes through my brain so loudly  
it makes me wish I'd never shared my lunch  
with you on that rainy day in first grade  
when you left your brown bag on the bus.  
These memories of you now taste bitter,  
like the outdated opiates you held in your hands,  
and I can't help but wonder if you're somehow still here,  
sharing your last moment with me,  
offering a gratuitous gift to your best friend  
to help me understand how you became the most selfish  
fucking bastard I've ever known.  
Your mother still calls to check in and to *thank me*  
before every goodbye for being there for her baby boy,  
but I can hear her voice always asking me why  
I didn't have the answers to questions  
no one knew you were asking.

And even at your funeral, just two days after your death,  
as I finish your eulogy and step down from the pulpit,  
I don't understand how I loved you so much  
but it wasn't enough to keep you here.  
And later, when I stop by to say hello or how much I miss  
you, I know that cold stone sticking out of the earth  
will feel nothing like your skin did.

# PLAY ME

*Lauren McKenzie Reed*

Sixteen-year-old me parks her car at the dock,  
the one where we'd throw rocks into the Chesapeake  
listening for the hard plop of thick marsh.

She's crying, then stopping, then crying harder  
for not knowing if you're worth all this,  
the fuss of breaking up.

She smokes a cigar and leans hard  
into the weathered railing,  
breathing deep, allowing anything to fill her  
in this moment that's not you.

Not too far from here,  
on a back road through Gosnold's Hope,  
we'd made love in that ugly yellow Toyota  
and listened to Neil Diamond on the radio,  
because she'd asked you to.

When the police car rode past, slow  
and deliberate, you laughed into her shoulder,  
kissed her sweetly on the mouth  
like all your lives you'd be hiding  
from the world within these moments.

Twenty-something-year-old me jumps  
down from your window,  
and leans up for one last kiss  
goodnight from the muddy flowerbed.

This won't last either  
but it's worth it, no matter  
the new tears and new ways  
she will learn to hate you.

Mistakes worth making  
might be worth making twice,  
and your new confidence  
and her new defiance both stem  
from a shared past. But she's running now,  
behind the house and down Fort Worth Street  
to her car, your shitty friends  
all wasted on your living room floor.  
Even though the disaster's coming  
neither of you seem to mind  
sneaking around like the careless  
teenagers you used to be.

# WHERE I LOVE YOU

*Ace Boggess*

Numb to night in the passenger seat  
of a black Ford Tempo,  
with a pinstripe passion red,  
on the long road to Calamity Café.

In a record store fumbling among incense packs &  
tee shirts swirling with faces of the dead:  
John, Jimi, Jerry—our names don't begin with J,  
so we'll never be famous, never die.

In a faux-Italian restaurant  
drinking instant cappuccino from our mugs  
while we wait for the pills to kick in.

Then, near Columbus,  
where Lux in vinyl sings your heart to misery,  
back to bruises, breath to desire. Also,

in the hospital's waiting room,  
the two of us holding hands  
while we compare the faces of our friends  
to animals: this one a lion, that a tired hound.

In your apartment with its  
mattress on the floor like a funeral barge,  
surrounded by candles &  
cats you put out before talking lust.

In the darkness to follow: what always follows.

In taverns & prisons.

In theaters where we watch the latest alien invasion  
action-packed thrilling comedy romance  
for those hours of escape  
although escape is never what we want.

# MAHUM

*Carrie Tolve*

This summer you corrected me for assuming  
your name was short for your father's.  
You told me it is Persian for moonlight.

You left a note in my mailbox some years ago  
on the morning of your first flight. In it you promised me  
all clothes, shoes and the few books, in your possession.

I no longer have the three sporadic emails of how  
it had not yet rained since you arrived  
in Pakistan and you were sick from the heat.

Sometimes, I sit in the bath, the water too warm  
and discoloring my legs and ass,  
but the window is open a crack above my head.

Black limbs hit out at the blue and a breeze, with  
the taste of summer time in it, attempts to dab at perspiration  
collecting in the curling hair at the crown of my head.

Spices your mother is cooking with, or perhaps you  
are cooking with, waft in under the curtain.  
Many of them, if not all, too spicy for me to eat.

Twelve years of sharing our lives and I've only just  
learned your name.

# A HUMMINGBIRD NAMED HAVOC

*Ha Kiet Chau*

Autumn nostalgia, jasmine tea and wanton soup,  
the slow, heavy aroma of time passing.

I once walked there, danced over  
a steel bridge, young. On a Macau hilltop,

flocks of hummingbirds soar, teaching  
me how to spread my arms.

You swooped in with birthmarks  
and scratches on your wings.

Your presence, complex as your riddle:  
what caused you to bleed so much?

For months, fiction and lies, ghazals  
and secrets fell like feathers and snow.

Our time was transient, ecstatic one minute,  
despondent the next. When you left, owls

nested in the sequoias. Reasons remained  
unknown and your silence in winter,

sunken and vast, cut open places that stung,  
triggered old wounds, taught me lesson

after lesson on self-worth. A deep gash,  
lullabies couldn't fill night's holes.

That spring, valleys quaked, islands flooded.  
I fell out of the saddest reverie—a ten story spiral

and amnesia came sudden like a seismic jolt.  
All traces of blue vanished from my eyes:

flecks of sky, cups of ocean, colorblind  
days, forgotten.

# EVERYTHING YOU ARE

*Annie Lampman*

Dogwoods, Chinook, the weavings of basalt,  
everything you are  
and more.

Swallows sweep current  
for fly and gnat—  
a goose cups low, winging water  
as the canyon wren sings,  
black-beaded eyes catching us,  
syringa sweetening the air,  
dove and killdeer calling  
as I hold you, tucked into your riverwet body,  
current swirling pollen  
fish muscling deep water,  
hackberry and meadowlark tangled together—  
this our river love, the song of our undoing.

# SONG FOR A BROTHER IN THE SILT

*C.C. Russell*

Portland, 2000  
Radio gutted, radio skinned.

She of the one-time dream  
saunters in,  
asks about Darren  
and the music  
of 1994.

I direct her  
to Metropolis.  
To a photo of your bleached  
face and the stone façade.

City.  
City boy.

You say you were hit on  
in the subway  
and lit on fire in the street.

Both left you hot  
and the same small sort  
of afraid.

# BARBIE QUEEN

*Joan Presley*

Three o'clock Saturday afternoon,  
banished to your room until dinner,  
Mom's *Sick of looking of at you*, again.  
You lean your elbows against the window,  
stare at the rain, and listen to the Beatles,  
low volume this time. Your sister begs,  
*Play Barbie Queen with me.*  
You hate Barbie, but say okay.

You land on Poindexter,  
the square your mother would love.  
He agrees to be your steady, if you  
will re-do your hair. *Look at his vomit-hair*,  
you yell, (quietly) as you move your marker  
towards the beauty parlor.

Your sister hooks up with Ken, the big cheat.  
*This time will be different*, she says  
wanting only to wear pink chiffon  
and arrive at the prom in his red! Corvette.

You choose the black strapless,  
going slutty, to irritate, get revenge  
on Poindexter, that bullshit about your hair.

The porch light bounces off his braces  
when you open the door. He mumbles *Sorry*  
towards your father,  
who might be a bit disappointed himself  
in the spanking new you.

Poindexter vanishes in the middle  
of a dance. You've won, not the game,  
but something fresh and devious.  
You get nowhere, ever, with this attitude,  
but you hone it anyway.

# BEFORE DIVORCE

*Logan Seidl*

There will be a day  
when everything I love  
will close for winter,

but until that day,

I want another flat  
room temperature Coke,

another disagreement  
over the thermostat,

another snow day.

May our electronic devices drown  
in the flood. May our power

never be restored,  
until we learn to speak

with thawed sentences.

Show me how to be-  
come a snow angel,

how to light the fireplace  
with my tongue,

how to sweep and mop the floor,  
where to hang the sign.

Then we will be ready  
for our final gift to each other:

a basket of small soaps and lotions  
to use on our next peril.

# THE BOWLING ALLEY

*Anette Swindle*

The falling pins slicing through loud prayers  
Of damnation so violently sprayed into the air.  
Blending with the stench of sore feet,  
Help sting my eyes that glare right through the wife.  
At the husband who taught me to lie,  
As he did to more than one household.  
Pretending to be faithful to his God,  
To his family, and to my mother.

The wife's foul description of the "whore,"  
Unfairly painting the frame of my absent mother,  
Begins to linger in the back of my throat.  
Like the sour aftertaste  
Of the ketchup coated chicken wings and stale fries.  
I begin to pray for the strength of his God.  
To not take that fourteen pound bowling ball  
And smash it across her face.

But he and his wife's image will stay intact,  
Like that 7/10 split at the end of the lane.  
Do I aim for the husband?  
With his sin forgiven by both women.  
Or the perfectly polished wife,  
Portraying the innocent victim.  
May my aim be just right,  
Knocking them both into the gutters.

# THE STAIN

*Mikaela Powell*

Her eyes mist over as they catch  
the glint of the dulled silver  
spike on his black leather jacket.  
Through the haze, his shadowy  
figure looms over her, sending tendrils  
of smoke to suffocate the bright  
shades of honey on the walls and ceiling,  
and turn them into the rusty auburn of dried  
blood. The smell of fresh varnish,  
transferred from cracking leather seats,  
hits and collides with ground coffee and sickly  
sweet brownies. The streaks of red and cream  
swirl before her as the room screams  
with whimpering shouts and crass chuckles.  
Espresso steams, making oppressive walls;  
a space no bigger than a squeaking  
seat and the black pool in her shaking hands  
that yearn to crush something darker.  
A splash of jet-black coffee  
lands on her white blouse.  
The stain will never leave.

## OBITUARY (8)

*Sara Sheiner*

He died with a grease pencil in his mouth, the message on the overhead light said *Now*. We found him sitting in the dentist's chair, sheets of x-rays on his chest. What straight teeth he had, so white, so shiny. The instrument fell from his mouth, eventually, cleanly. Now I play the game of lacking. I draw a line from each nipple to my navel & through my breastbone. I love the narrowing down, the pit. If I dig, eventually there is bone. If I open my mouth, eventually there are roots. He died before he could cut my gums open. He died before I exposed my teeth to the floor. Now I carry the pencil with me wherever I go. It is the rod, the weapon I use to carve. Though I live, no one can tell the difference.

# OBITUARY (31)

*Sara Sheiner*

His death was tripartite. His death occurred in three different ways at three different times, multiplied by as many threes as there were possible deaths. In the magic of paper cutouts, his death spread, replicated through my arms & my mother's arms & my sister's arms. In as far apart as our arms would go, in as far apart as we were from each other, his death spread. He died by so many threes we had to divide him by nines, we tried to separate him into groups of thirteen, thirty-three, ninety-nine, & we could, it was increasingly easy. We made so many piles of his death we could climb to the top of each & see very far away. Over the heads of all the piles of his death, we thought we could see a future where his death was not, we thought we could see the rising of three independent suns.

# NOTES ON THE KARMIC PHILOSOPHY OF CAUSE AND EFFECT

*Sara Sheiner*

I have this grand idea that what I do matters. I think if I do this, if I don't do that, the repercussions will be light on a windowsill, the house bug crawling on my pillowcase. I think if I stack the dishes without clanking, if I don't slam the door as mother continues to ask, imploring, then I won't have to worry anymore about making sure the fire in the pile of sticks has gone out. That the surest pin of flame will not set every blade of grass to burning, won't engulf my future and childhood homes (upon which my shortcomings depend) in riotous and fearful consumption. If I just get out of bed, maybe, if I write letters to my friends in that old hand they remember before I became whatever this is, if I could remember to say hello before demanding everything from each new person I meet, before I hide in the corner with tumblers and pinches of salt. If only looking into the mirror and knocking three times on the glass was ever the answer. If only I could ask you a question and you would tell me the truth as it will always be in any circumstance, under any type of sky or annihilation, even if it is you and me, even if it is just me, and you feel bad about the way I stay up all night, tying branches into a raft. All these large hands that float on the water are just leaves. All these candles threatening to tip over will turn that red river of pinot into something else entirely dangerous and real, yet we sit in chairs with our faces to the stars, and imagine the dew will save us. The dew will not save us. There was never a time in which the dew would save us. My feet are cold out here. There is no fire except for the one I keep at low ember just in case my children ever want to become my children. I keep these piles of planks divided by room and floor, name and place, hurt and wrong, though I build nothing. I am still enjoying how each nail slides out so nicely from the clean wood and leaves such perfect holes in which I continue to undo myself.

# DAFFODILS

*Emmalee Windle*

*for Mary Grace*

Of all that we were, I remember these:  
Santa Fe in the dry heat of August  
when we walked alone for a whole day  
unsupervised, trading sweaty nickels  
for handfuls of malachite, or Virginia Beach  
in a bedroom with sea green walls  
that looked black, eyes hovering  
like marbles, the moon dipping  
in and out of the still ocean.  
Do you remember?  
Running to the water and hiding  
our breasts in the waves,  
yellow flowers with wide petals,  
ripping their stems, green and smooth, open,  
those yellow flowers with wide petals,  
running our lips over their exposed bones to get the sweetness  
—some day much later  
my sister would say *daffodil* like  
a grownup had placed the word  
on her tongue—  
riding your bike blind, the skinned side  
of your thigh pushing out tiny globes of blood,  
the long flat stones in our yard lifted,  
the dirt tilled once more, a garden  
filled with cement, the skin of your stomach  
blue, stretched over a blooming seed,  
the long shuffling walk to a casket I imagined closing  
over and over,  
but a hand kept reaching out—  
returning barefoot and drunk to our backyard,  
blinded, searching for yellow,  
wondering what would be remembered in a few years,  
if I were enough in this moment to keep living.

Your daughter is in Sleeping Beauty sheets damp with night sweat  
dreaming of tomorrow when I promised  
we'd plant flowers  
the kind that come in plastic cartons  
already bloomed—  
dirt beneath her thin nails  
and pain she can't yet see  
poised at her wrist like a knife.

# ASHES

*Felicia Sanchez*

I don't drive Barbie's pink Corvette  
the one I wanted as a kid,  
and God doesn't answer  
my prayers like Sunday School  
teacher told me he would.  
I can't keep my eyes off  
of the ashes left unclaimed  
in the funeral home  
where they stay for months  
until the garbage man  
picks them up on Monday.  
I drive the same road to work,  
memorizing the patterns  
of the five stoplights on the way  
there. The same way I used  
to memorize my dance routines  
when I thought I was what Tchaikovsky  
envisioned when he composed Swan Lake.

# SNAP

*Tom Sanchez*

You were smarter than the rest  
Of your unit. Old enough that  
Those drunk boys that tattooed  
*Haji-Killer* on their calves  
Could use your wisdom.

This was not your rite of passage.  
You joined back up after twenty years  
Of tedious investment banking  
Because flying helicopters was exciting,  
And seemed more honorable  
Than buying a Porsche.

Now I give you dirty looks  
When you're driving and I catch  
You trying not to stare at the man  
In the Toyota next to us  
Wearing a beard and a turban.

You bury it when I'm around,  
And Dad, I get it. Well—No,  
I mean, I have a handful of friends  
Whom I would kill for, die  
For, and I'm grateful  
I haven't had to.  
But now

I want to turn every prayer rug  
You sent home  
To face east, and kneel,  
Just to see if you will snap,  
Just to see how deep it runs.

# SILENCE IS AN ANAGRAM

*Anirban Das*

(i)

On days when  
we are no longer willing  
to fight the urge of acceptance  
and the dogs across the street  
are unresponsive to cars and walking cadavers,

I stand on the window  
juggling our  
predictable conversations  
camouflaged by the back drop  
of insipid households  
which are pacified in the glare  
of 10 p.m. news  
or reality shows.

And my reality  
stands under a streetlight tonight;  
in a world which hangs so heavy  
and hollow like the countless  
wombs laden with the prospect of creation.

But we breathed so many elegies  
down each other's neck  
our bodies look like obituaries now,  
when splayed on a bed sheet;  
our pillows ossify into tombstones.

(ii)

Sunday breeze  
rattles the wind chime  
and you are brewing a maelstrom in your cup;  
you once said  
silence is an anagram-  
    it can be rearranged in many ways  
    without making a sound,

so we sleep quietly on weekends  
mourning the things we said,  
detesting the things we didn't.

This afternoon is clumsy,  
it holds us like your flimsy gown  
which keeps slipping off your shoulders frequently  
*(there's too much slack on our skin.)*

(iii)

On weekdays  
you inspect ideologies  
of heartbreaks and hedonism,

bending hypotheticals  
to fit our reality  
(you are only as decadent as your insecurities)  
but I have shed  
my symmetry long ago  
when the sky relinquished its shape.

So pull your dusk  
out of my hair,  
I am done playing  
the horizon for everything  
receding into the distance.

# WHEN THE RAIN REEKS OF HISTORY

*Anirban Das*

(i)

Sometimes I wonder how this city feels  
when the sun melts on the horizon  
and silhouettes of random couples  
fade under the tapestry of unruly traffic  
restless to reach home, as if home is the place to be.

And on the other end of the street there is you;  
standing under a lamppost with your share of madness  
carefully tucked in your bag  
right next to the assignments  
and that story  
which you were never quite inclined to finish,  
mostly because you were still a bit sceptical  
about the conclusion.

So on your way back in the cab  
you examine the passing landscapes  
and criticize modern architecture for its lack of affinity  
while the wind gets tangled in your hair  
just enough to remind you how  
some hearts function like doorknobs;  
you have to twist them a little before  
you could let someone in.

(ii)

Don't ask the night  
why it curls around like a question mark,  
right next to the urchin  
who's sprawled like a hyphen on most days  
waiting for his latter half of existence  
to combine with his current exigency of survival

because some poems,  
they breed in gutters and bloom in graveyards

much like the mornings,  
when you wake up like a creaking casket  
with someone no longer breathing inside you

and all the dead weight  
curls around the strands of your hair  
but you insist on leaving it open  
because there's a cemetery in your clavicle  
which you have to conceal.

(iii)

And tonight the rain reeks of history  
and each drop is re-enacting a sequence  
lost in time

the ones which formed  
a part of our curriculum  
which we chose to discard  
due to the insignificance of their implication  
when compared to math or science.

So you no longer squint your eyes  
or stretch your hand out  
to feel a few drops of nostalgia  
trickle down the creases of your palm  
because you can still feel the turbulence  
in your throat every time you say his name.

Sometimes I wonder how you feel  
when this city hides  
behind the symmetry of a suburban household  
as you close your curtains and your window  
becomes a cage for everything trapped outside.

# LEFORT FRACTURES IN THE PRESENT TENSE

*Robert Lee Kendrick*

Mid-day, but a scythe moon hangs  
over trees like the scar

                  crescents under my cheeks.  
A titanium lattice

links fragments of cheek, nose & jaw,  
                  but the brain has to bootstrap

                  this slow buffering stream of stop  
time frames—pine shadow streaks,

the creek's long single note  
                  of snowpack & rain, bed stones

                  bright with moss, oak pollen  
drizzle—small floods

of sense without sequence, leaks  
                  in the system. I trace fresh bark

                  on a storm ruptured branch,  
study how hickory

                  unfolds new symmetries.

# MY MOTHER'S CATHETER

*Cheyenne Dowd*

Propped against the pillows in bed,  
your brittle hair yellow like straw,  
green eyes muddy and distant.  
The long, thin tube of your heart catheter  
trailed down the length of your arm  
where I could see the blood  
against your weathered skin  
as the nurse had inserted it  
and showed me how to use it.  
Your misery plain on your face,  
skin taut with exhaustion,  
the sterile smell from the catheter  
and the rubbing alcohol and the drugs  
filling the room with the stench of illness.  
*I don't want it*, you protested feebly  
and my teenaged hands, white and unlined and clean,  
ignored your words and placed the tip of the needle  
against the long, clear tube; *You need it*,  
I answered softly as I pushed the plunger  
and watched the liquid run from the needle  
to the tube in your body. You moaned, recoiling  
from the cold as it penetrated blood  
and I watched, fascinated,  
as you fell asleep, wondering  
how much longer until you were dead,  
and I didn't have to carry the burden  
of your sickness anymore.

# WHEN THE MOON IS RIPE

*Matthew Woodman*

knock  
three  
times

counterclockwise

the night  
is a speakeasy  
our throats are

dry someone  
has amplified the heart  
slid the speakers

rabbit-ward even

the leaves thump and grind the night  
is a melon  
in which

we lose our

tongues our  
slippery selves

all we can do

is

moan

# UNCANNY VALLEY

*Oakley Merideth*

We

listen too closely—

sounds like

someone nourished to death

in another room

with fantasy peeling off

in thick ribbons

of drab wallpaper

all our mistakes

are gazeless

our glances feral

we're sorry to hear

we're sorry to notice

its as if

we listen too closely

\*

*Simon Perchik*

You can't hear it, the splash  
still weak from the cold  
though between your hands

an emptiness shows through  
as snow, no longer struggling  
lets it watch over you—a sky

could help you now  
cover your grave with a mist  
and this endless digging

not yet a flower for a stone  
that lies down inside  
scattered and you are here.

# WE HAVE TO TALK, OR, THE BOY WHO COULDN'T EAT AND NEVER HAD TO

*Jan Hill*

Very early in my life  
it was too late.

When I resurrect, I am halved, listening  
to the way my father's mouth moves when nothing is coming out.

Look closely, the television is on mute.  
See how we've always danced to no music?

Look closely, under your covers there is a forest.  
See how my father holds what is too dangerous to say?

We fell the way we lived:  
silent prayer lethal.

But I do not like being taken apart,  
I like words that ache.

When I say I'm starving  
you say there are different ways to spell *eating*.

Which is to say: if you swallow the right pill  
this poem never happened.

# A THREADBARE TUNE

*Jacqueline Stephens*

There was a girl who spoke Dragonfly,  
which is like singing,  
which is like Bird.

Colors ribboned from her mouth  
her open mouth  
the boy flies into.

\*\*\*

Once, an Old Woman stopped her,  
adorned her  
with a feather necklace

a bracelet of conch shell,  
anointed her with myrrh, aloe, and cassia,  
and kissed her on her ear.

\*\*\*

One year, she was given a box,  
rosewood with shells inlaid,  
a puzzle to open.

She wondered if it was broken,  
if she worked the puzzle,  
would it bloom?

\*\*\*

Let the moon hang,  
a silver earring.  
Let her lie

in a hammock between two maples.  
Let her sleep on air.  
Let those clear gems fall.

# SHOULD YOU BREAK A MIRROR: THREE APPROACHES

*Devon Miller-Duggan*

1.

You threw it at an opposite brick wall.  
You could step carefully over to  
the resulting archipelago of fracture and similitude.

If barefoot, approach as if the floor  
were a wounded cat;  
if slipped, as if circling an adversary.

Should enough pieces land face-up, you could meditate  
on just your cheekbone (left) or shoulder (right), half-eye (right)  
or the hugeness of a knee relative to your head.

There'd be some peace in that (the knee, whole)  
—having a part that bends take up more landscape  
than your head, just once.

2.

If the mirror's one of what you get to keep  
on the desert island, smash the thing right off  
to make a set of knives, a range of needles.

You could learn to wrap one knife-end in fibrous twine.  
For needles, wrap your fingers.  
Keep the biggest shard for signaling.

It could double as a mirror  
should you need to see your face,  
should you care.

3.

If instead you pound the mirrored wall  
with your naked fist,  
your rag-wrapped fist, your gloved fist,

you'd give yourself a million lines to trace  
or leave, or follow into parts you couldn't separate before,  
couldn't turn from.

# UNTIL SPLIT

*Lisa Roullard*

1.

When it's time to shed its exoskeleton,  
the rose tarantula accelerates  
its heartbeat

until its exoskeleton splits.  
(Under the abdomen, trace of noise.)  
The rose must pull its complete body

through the slight break.  
What was under becomes new,  
is sensitive and tender.

If this is your spider, grown  
some and taxed past tired,  
don't handle for at least a week.

Don't feed for a few days.  
Crickets could injure the skin,  
even with their thin, bent legs.

2.

When the Camaro struck, was it time  
to change my skin? To break  
from the tough I thought I was

to become soft again?  
It's true I looked both ways, stepped  
off the curb, hard and certain, into

a February spiked with sun.  
To my left, the sound of speeding.  
I gather facts head-on

so I turned: bumper to shins, forehead  
to windshield. Backpack and  
high-tops. I sped up. I blurred.

The EMT leaned down from the sky.  
He checked my fingers for crimped rings,  
slit my broken-in 501s,

right leg, then left, to learn the fate  
of my shins. *Contusion*, he said,  
but was a little wrong. I was more

than bruised skin. My right leg  
bore a ragged, ruddy bloom.  
Opening enough to re-begin.

# THE SPIDER

*Mark Brazaitis*

*Winner of the 2016 Novella Contest*

She glides onto the trail as if to time her appearance with his. She was running in the university's botanical gardens, flush and fragrant with early-autumn roses, and the path she followed winds down the hillside and spills onto the trail beside the Sky River. David meets her here as if in a dream. He was thinking of his life of twenty years ago, when he lived in Guatemala, next door to Lucia Caal. Now here she is—or might be.

The woman is about the age Lucia would be, two years younger than his forty years. She has the same black hair exploding with curls and the same lips, as slim and red as rose petals. When she says hello to him, the two syllables of the word contain the same music as Lucia's "hola," which was how she greeted him, preferring it to the more formal "Buenos días" or "Buenas tardes" or "Buenas noches."

The woman has gold-tan skin, perhaps a shade lighter or a shade darker than Lucia's; he thinks she has more freckles than Lucia did, although, because he has no photograph of Lucia, he cannot be sure. She is Lucia's five-feet, two inches, and has the same long strides, which Lucia employed as she walked late afternoons, after school, from her bus stop to her house.

When the woman pulls ahead of him, he is relieved to think she will soon outrace him. But she doesn't. She remains so near he could touch her shoulder or the ends of her hair.

Upon their arrival for their mission in the mountainous Guatemalan town with the Maya name, David and his partner, Ted, who was from Idaho, arranged to eat breakfast and dinner next door at Lucia's house. Lucia's mother, a thin woman whose lips, although the same shape as Lucia's, were cracked and faded in color, made simple but satisfying meals of eggs and beans and tortillas and chicken and whatever vegetables and fruits were freshest at the market. The family had a cow in its courtyard, and at breakfast, Lucia's mother served them the cow's milk, boiled twice and sweetened with sugar.

Ted was asthmatic and, as he himself acknowledged, fat. His asthma was exacerbated by the altitude and the hills he had to climb in order to knock on doors. Even with his breathing troubles, however, he never failed to fill the air with his words. He talked as if to be silent, even for a minute, might kill him. David didn't mind Ted or his garrulousness. Ted was friendly and deferential, and he had tried to please David from the start. Most of all, he was unthreatening; his pig-like cheeks, his squatness, and his anxiety offered, or so David liked to think, a favorable contrast with David's handsomeness, height, and calm.

Ted had other problems, or perhaps the same problems magnified by darkness; David was aware of them only because, late at night in the

room next to his, he often heard Ted weeping. One morning, David woke to find Ted's two enormous suitcases—in one, he'd brought sixteen jars of peanut butter from the States—packed.

"I'm going home," Ted said needlessly. His suitcases told his story.

David felt a rush of unease. He didn't want to be left alone in this strange town, in this strange country, without company. Perhaps Ted recognized his disquiet: "You'll have a new partner soon."

"Sure," David said. "No problem."

"And Lucia's someone you can talk to—about anything."

Even with his fumbling Spanish, Ted had been more forthcoming with Lucia about his life and dreams and fears than he'd been with David. At times over breakfast and dinner, David had felt like an eavesdropper on Ted's confessions. David had never been forthcoming about himself to anyone. It wasn't in his nature. But the thought of speaking with Lucia in the manner Ted had made David feel happy.

He shook hands with Ted and wished him a good trip home. For a moment, they stood in the hallway of the block house they shared. It wasn't much of a home: two bedrooms, a dining room, a kitchen, a bathroom, and a small courtyard, the tops of its walls lined with broken glass to deter thieves. They had done nothing to decorate it. The house said: We are only passing through.

David said, "I better go. I have people to talk with."

"Of course," Ted said.

When David returned to the house before dinner, Ted was gone.

Despite his work as a missionary and the conviction it required, David couldn't have said who he was. He knew how he wanted people to see him: as handsome, as smart, as funny, as superior. His church encouraged this latter ambition. If he wasn't the bearer of a superior way of knowing God, what was he offering the people whose doors he knocked on? He wasn't delivering them food or medicine or books or anything else to make their lives better.

At dinner the night Ted left, Lucia was disappointed. "Why did he have to go?" she asked.

David said, "He was lonely, I guess."

"He misses his family."

"Maybe."

"He misses his wife."

"He doesn't have a—"

"His *wives*."

She gave him a teasing smile, and he smiled back. After a week of their company, she had joked with him and Ted about polygamy. They had gently suggested she was thinking of a misconception associated with a different religion, one whose missionaries also worked in Guatemala. Despite this, she proved knowledgeable about their faith; she even knew more about the history of the United States, at least as it related to Guatemala, than they did.

"He will find a wife easily," Lucia said.

“Ted?” he said, laughing. “He would be lucky to—.”

But David saw she wasn't joking. Was she speaking ruefully, as if she'd hoped she and Ted could have become a pair? “You liked him,” he said.

“Of course I did,” she said. When she caught his look, she blushed and waved her hand. “He is a friend. I am sad to see him leave.”

“I'm sure you have a boyfriend.” He wasn't supposed to speak to Guatemalans about their romantic lives unless their romantic lives could benefit from a closer relationship with God. “I'm sorry,” he said, gazing down at his plate, which held a cauliflower cooked in egg batter. “This isn't something I should—.”

“I don't believe in boyfriends,” she said.

“You don't?” He felt oddly pained by her statement, as if it were aimed at him.

“Some of my friends—I saw how quickly they lost themselves. They were good and talented students. But now they're mothers, spending their days hauling corn to the molino and sweeping the dirt off their dirt floors.”

He wondered if he should defend her friends. In deciding to become mothers, they had chosen a sacred obligation.

But she continued, “I love my friends and their babies. But sometimes it feels like we were walking a path together and now I'm walking alone.”

Lucia's mother came into the room and spoke to her in quick words he didn't understand. Lucia said, “Con permiso,” and left the room as her mother cleaned up his dishes.

The next morning at breakfast, David noticed that Lucia or her mother had put a cushion on his chair. David recognized the hardness of his seat only now, when it was soft.

All of the furniture in the dining room was made of mahogany, the use of which, as Lucia had explained to him and Ted, was, because of its rareness, now restricted. “It is like our national bird,” she'd said. “But unlike a quetzal, a mahogany table can live in captivity.”

Breakfast was eggs, beans with cream, a cup of warm milk, and a refresco. As he ate, Lucia stood in the entranceway in front of him, under an archway painted with roses. She wore a red shirt beneath a green blouse, and he thought first of Christmas. But her clothing might have been a costume of a quetzal, two of which he'd seen in the biotopo in Purrulhá an hour south. The bird had green wings and a red breast.

He shared his observation with her. She laughed. “With the dreams I have to go to college in the capital,” she said, “my parents worry I'm a bird.”

Her expression softened, saddened. “Probably I won't be able to go. Probably I'll remain here.”

“Why would you have to?”

“The usual,” she said. She rubbed her thumb and index finger together.

“Money,” David said redundantly.

Lucia asked him what he planned to do with his day, and, echoing her words, he said, “The usual.”

“Knock on doors,” she said, “and hope they open to God.”

He wondered if she was teasing him. But she wasn’t smiling. She said, “I don’t recognize God in any priest’s or preacher’s words.”

“What do you mean?” he said.

“God is a father,” she said, “but he is like any father who sends his children into the world. He cannot do much to help them.”

The window behind David opened onto the town’s main street. A bus rumbled past, its motor sounding like a strangled voice.

“God is helpless?” he asked.

“God created the world and everything and everyone in it,” she said. “But when His children feel pain, He cannot ease it. When there is cruelty, He cannot stop it.”

Lucia’s father was Maya, her mother *ladina*. Lucia occasionally wore a *güipil* and *corte* in the colors of the region, although usually she wore Western-style clothing. Ted used to tease her about her choice in dress, saying, “You haven’t decided which look suits you best, the ancient or the modern.” David recognized more than a fashion choice in her clothes, however. He saw her hoping to bridge her parents’ cultures.

Her conception of God, however, seemed like nothing out of either tradition. “You see God as powerless because you don’t know Him,” he told her.

“And you do,” she said.

It was a statement, but he answered as if she’d asked a question: “Of course I know Him,” he said with confidence. “I wouldn’t be here to introduce people to God if I didn’t know Him.”

He half expected her to laugh. He wondered if it wouldn’t be inappropriate to do so. He feared his confidence wasn’t warranted. He feared to what extent he was pretending to know and believe anything.

He said, “We don’t need to talk about God.”

“It’s your job,” she said. Her smile was gentle.

“I don’t have to work here,” he said, gesturing around the room and smiling back at her.

He drank his *refresco*. Her mother never remembered that he didn’t drink coffee, but Lucia did and always exchanged his coffee for the smoothie-like drink, in which pulp from whatever fruit it was made from—mango, banana, a black melon whose Maya name he couldn’t pronounce—floated at the top.

“So what should we talk about?” Lucia said.

“Sports,” he joked. He’d spoken about sports with men in town. He didn’t expect Lucia to do anything but laugh. But she told him how, until she was fourteen and turned her ankle, she played soccer with the boys in her school. After her injury, she wasn’t as good, she said. She played a little basketball now, but she preferred soccer.

When she asked him what sport he played, he said, “I’m not sup-

posed to play anything here.”

“Why?”

“My work. I’m supposed to be thinking about God.”

“I’m sure even God doesn’t think about Himself all the time,” she said.

He told her the owner of the house he was renting had furnished it with a net, two ping-pong paddles, and several balls. “I could bring them over,” he said. “We could play.”

He thought he might have overstepped a boundary because she frowned. He contemplated how he could retract his comment.

“I’ve never played,” she said. “I might be no good.” Her face brightened. “But I would like to try.”

The following morning, a Saturday, David brought his ping-pong equipment to Lucia’s house. After breakfast, he set it up on the table he’d eaten on. Fittingly, Lucia had covered it with a green tablecloth.

She was a quick learner. In less than half an hour, she was volleying with him with no difficulty. He suggested a game, and although he won, it was not without effort. In the end, her face was flushed with exertion. He gazed at the rose circles on her brown-gold cheeks and wanted to touch them like he might a petal.

“Another game?” he suggested.

She said she had schoolwork to do. “And dishes to do,” she said. “And laundry to do.”

He thought to say, I’ll help you, but he knew this would have been an odd offer. No man in Guatemala was expected to do dishes or laundry. He’d never done them back home.

He thanked her for the breakfast. She said, “De nada,” and opened the front door for him.

When he returned to his house, he knew he should leave immediately. Saturdays were good days to speak with people, especially the men in town, who would be at home instead of at work. But he sat cross-legged in his courtyard, where rose bushes grew in a bed enclosed by bricks against the far wall.

All of the young men in his group had been warned against having romantic relationships. (It must have been assumed that the women in his group wouldn’t be tempted by the natives.) The young men had been told to fulfill their commitment to the church and return home to—what were the words their leader had used?—“the women you are supposed to marry.”

He would become engaged when he returned. This was understood, although he and Abigail, who was studying to become an elementary-school teacher at the same university he attended, had never spoken about marriage. They had met at the end of high school. His oldest brother, who was old enough to be his father, was friends with her father. He had arranged their first date, held at an old-fashioned diner in the town they lived in. They’d had milkshakes. He’d left a tip in quarters and nickels.

David liked her, and she him, and people said they looked perfect together. She had the same color hair he did, the same blue-gray eyes. For the first few months they dated, he wanted to kiss her all the time, and sometimes he did kiss her. But in the weeks before he left for Guatemala, he didn't kiss her as frequently. When one afternoon she asked him why, he was surprised. He didn't think she'd noticed. He said he was worried about his mission.

They wrote each other twice a week. He carried her photograph in his wallet, and if he hadn't looked at it recently, he thought, it was only because it might make him lonelier.

If he felt anything for Lucia, he decided, it was because Abigail was far away and Lucia was next door.

Every morning, David expected to hear a knock on his door heralding the arrival of his new Ted.

He might once have looked forward to the knock. But when another morning arrived and he heard no knock, he was glad. He rose from his bed, dressed, and walked to the pila at the back of his courtyard. He looked into the mirror above it. He straightened his tie and patted down his hair. He told himself he wanted to look presentable to the people he would speak with today. At breakfast, only Lucia's mother was present, and he patted his hair, his tie, his sport coat, as if to console them.

When, soon afterward, he left his house for his day's work, his eyes sought Lucia, who sometimes stood at her front window. When he didn't see her, he waited, but she didn't appear.

He proceeded with his day, most of it spent in the living room of Doña Luz, who, with a smile, claimed to have been born "a few minutes after the Creation." It was raining, and water dripped from the ceiling into three blue palanganas on the living-room floor. The sound the water made was, David thought, a little like the sounds of a marimba, which were supposed to be cheerful but which David found unsettlingly sad.

When she was in elementary school, in the 1940s, Doña Luz said, her teacher told the class about the Guatemalan president's promise to give every family in the country a house, four cuerdas of land, and a train-car full of bananas.

"We would have believed him about the house and the land," Doña Luz said, "but when he mentioned the bananas, we knew he was lying."

"Why?" David asked.

"All the bananas go to your country."

He failed to convert her.

Every weekday afternoon around five o'clock, a public bus dropped Lucia off at the corner below both of their houses on her return from colegio in the large town to the north. When her bus came, David was often sitting on his front stoop. It was pleasant to sit outside, even in the light afternoon rain, what people in town called chipi-chipi. On an afternoon several days after their ping-pong game, he even remained

outside when the rain came harder and thicker because, he told himself, he was too tired to go inside, undress, rinse off in the shower. When the bus came, the passengers it expelled raced to wherever they were going. He had never seen anyone in Guatemala use an umbrella.

Lucia didn't run. In her school uniform, a white blouse and a blue skirt, she strolled as if she were walking on a beach. She stopped when she saw him. She always did, always briefly, to say hello. Afterwards, she would continue to her house and open her door and step inside. She never looked back at him, although he always watched to see if she would. Today, however, she sat beside him, the rain pushing her black hair over her eyes and nose and mouth. She thrust her hair back, and her eyes became, as if from a lightning flash, luminous.

"You'll get wet," he said.

"Too late," she said, and laughed.

He wondered what to say next. He worried she would leave. But a minute passed, and the rain eased up, and she didn't leave.

At last, she said, "People call this a sad town, especially when it rains. But when it rains, I think it is its most beautiful."

He would never have thought so if she hadn't said it. But her words made it true: this street, washed of its trash; these block houses, their blues and pinks and greens faded into a soothing, impressionistic blur; the mountains around them, their pine trees misted over and filled now with the sounds of a thousand birds.

"You're right," he said. "It's beautiful."

As he spoke, he had a disquieting sensation he was saying goodbye to it. Instead of receiving a new partner, he might be assigned to join someone in a new town. "I'll remember this forever," he said.

"You will?" she asked doubtfully.

"Of course," he said.

She looked at him. He expected more of her skepticism. But she smiled. "Me alegro," she said, and she did seem glad.

The same night, he couldn't sleep. He'd wanted to think of Abigail and how her lips tasted of toothpaste but he thought of Lucia and her rain-soaked hair. He flipped and flopped in his bed. At last, he gave up. It was past midnight. He stepped into his courtyard. The rain had stopped hours before. The sky had cleared, and the half moon was so bright it might as well have been full. He sat with his back against the wall his courtyard shared with Lucia's. Ten minutes passed and he was about to return to bed when he heard voices from next door.

"You can't sleep?" This was Lucia, in a near whisper.

"I'm wondering about Alvaro." Her father's voice was a deep purr. "I'm wondering if he's looking at the same moon I see."

"Of course he is."

"If he's alive to see it."

"He's alive."

"How do you know?"

"I feel it. I feel him."

Because their voices were soft, and because the night hosted other sounds (dog barks, the chattering of nocturnal insects, the whoosh of wind in the avocado tree behind their houses), David didn't understand everything they said. He heard "army" and "mountains" and "medicine." He heard "march." The night sounds diminished.

"I wish he'd come home," Lucia said.

"But it isn't over."

"What?"

"The war."

"I know," Lucia said.

There was a silence. Lucia had told David her brother was in the States. When he'd asked where, she said New Jersey, but she couldn't remember the town.

So he's in the army, David thought. The war wasn't something Guatemalans ever spoke about with him or even, he gathered, with each other.

Lucia's father mentioned the Spider, the retired general who lived on his coffee plantation three kilometers south of town. Ted had learned the story of the general's nickname. It derived from a torture technique he'd supposedly employed on a guerrilla leader. David told Ted he didn't believe it, although only because he couldn't imagine anyone being so cruel.

"People say the Spider is immortal," Lucia said.

"They say the Spider is the war," her father said. "And because the war is immortal, or seems so, they might be right."

"No," Lucia said. "There is an end to everything."

"I fear I will never see Alvaro again."

"You will see him, papá."

"In dreams. I see him often in dreams."

David heard the sound of their bodies meeting in an embrace. Afterwards, they must have returned to their house because silence returned.

The next morning, as usual, David ate breakfast at Lucia's house. After drinking two glasses of refresco, he asked to use the bathroom. It was at the back of the house. On his return, he stopped at the open door of Lucia's bedroom. It was as small as a cell and had only a bed, a desk, and a chair. On the walls were two posters, both of a Soviet figure skater in a red dress. Although she had won a medal in the recent Winter Olympics, he had forgotten her name.

When he turned to go, he bumped into Lucia. He blushed and thought to apologize. Instead, he said, "So you like skating." He was surprised he knew the word in Spanish.

"An American friend of mine, a Peace Corps volunteer, gave me the posters before she left. She is from Minnesota and was here a short time. She missed skating."

"No ice rink in town?" he joked.

She smiled. "Nor in the entire country."

He looked again at her room, at her bed. It was covered by a white wool blanket with a pattern of blue horses. He imagined her in the bed. He imagined himself in the bed with her. He imagined how warm it would be, how her hair would smell. He imagined—it was a brief thought, like a star shooting across the sky—his head on her chest, her heartbeat filling his ear.

“You haven’t finished breakfast,” she said.

He returned to the front room. When he was done eating, he agreed to another glass of refresco. After she brought it to him, he asked her about the dance the town was holding the next evening in connection with its feria, which would begin three days later. She looked back to the interior of the house, as if to see whether her mother or father might be coming.

“I’ll go,” she said. “But I won’t dance. I like the music.”

“Why won’t you dance?”

“I don’t have a novio.”

“Do you need a novio to dance?”

He thought she might be blushing.

“And,” she said, “I don’t like any of the muchachos in town. I don’t care to dance with them.”

“What about the muchachos at your school?”

“Nor them,” she said. But she wasn’t looking at him when she spoke and he thought she might be lying. He felt his heart pound; he felt jealousy rise in him. It was stupid to feel jealous. He could be gone tomorrow, stationed on the other side of the country. He had a girlfriend, someone he would marry and with whom he would have a family. His future was written and it was a good story.

“Are you sure?” he asked nevertheless.

She looked at him with either mock or true sternness. “We talked about this,” she said. “Remember?” She smiled. “Why are you so interested in the subject?”

“I’m not,” he protested. “It isn’t my business.”

“You don’t dance,” she said.

“I *can* dance,” he said. “But my religion prohibits it.”

“How do you know you can dance if you have never danced?”

“Because a few times...” He hesitated, wondering if she would think less of him if he completed his sentence. “Well, a few times, I’ve danced.”

“So perhaps there’s a chance you will dance tomorrow night,” she said. Before she collected his plate and glass and left the room, she smiled at him.

He returned to his house, feeling something he knew he shouldn’t.

The next evening, David told himself he would go to bed early. He hadn’t been sleeping well, and this would be a good chance to catch up. He showered. He brushed his teeth. He put on his blue cotton pajamas and slipped into bed. He could hear people out on the street. He won-

dered if they were going to the dance. He heard a boy's voice and a girl's giggles. He heard a dog bark, whimper, bark again.

He thought of Abigail. She's beautiful, he told himself. When this is over, he thought, I will be with her and we will be happy. He tried to picture her face. He tried to remember touching her where he wasn't supposed to touch her but where she'd allowed him to touch her anyway. Remembering this used to thrill him.

He heard the same dog, or a different dog, bark. He heard two men in the street, their voices loud and deep. He heard a girl laugh. He remembered Lucia's figure-skating posters. He still couldn't think of the Russian skater's name. He thought of Lucia as she'd been in the rain.

He threw off his blanket and stood. He removed his pajamas and dressed in black slacks and a yellow polo shirt. He walked to his courtyard and combed his hair in front of the mirror above his pila. Some days he wished he were taller and had thicker hair. Some days he wished his nose were smaller and slimmer. But gazing at himself now, he decided he was handsome. No, it wasn't him deciding. It was as if the mirror, a distant cousin, perhaps, of the mirror in *Snow White*, was telling him so. He smiled and dazzled the glass.

After he paid his ten quetzales and stepped into the dark gimnasio with its swirling white lights, he saw Lucia, in a blue dress, dancing with the principal of El Instituto Básico. With his leather jacket, his pale skin, and his fancy haircut (he was said to visit a barber in the capital), Don Angél looked less Guatemalan and more Italian. His Spanish was different than the slow, verb-tense-challenged Spanish David was accustomed to hearing around town. He spoke quickly and exuberantly, and he frequently used words David didn't understand.

When David had gone to the principal's house to speak with him about God, Don Angél, standing in his doorway, had put up his right hand. He dipped his mouth to David's ear. "The rumors you hear about me?" he whispered. "All true. Am I sinning? Yes. Do I care? No." At the time, David didn't know what rumors he was referring to. But after he asked Lucia, she told him about the principal's mistress in the town fifteen kilometers west. The principal didn't do much to hide his affair, she said. His mistress could often be found, helmetless, her long hair flying, on the back of his motorcycle.

When the song finished, Lucia walked to the side of the gimnasio, its walls made of concrete block. David approached her. He was going to say something accusatory, question how she could dance with someone she'd condemned. But when she turned and saw him, her smile came quick and radiant and he forgot his words. He smiled back. Their eyes held. Blushing, she looked away and up; his eyes followed. High on the walls were windows as long and thin as knife slices. Nevertheless, they were filled with stars.

"I thought you weren't going to dance," he said.

"When your former principal asks you," she said, "it is only polite to say yes."

"He isn't a good person," he said.

“He isn’t faithful to his wife,” she said. “Every year, he buys notebooks and pencils for the poor indigena children in his school who cannot afford them.”

David didn’t know what to make of this information. “You’re a good dancer,” he said.

“I am below average. But thank you.”

At the far end of the gimnasio, the band played. Its members wore lime green suits. The band was called Rana—Frog—and every so often during their Caribbean-influenced songs, the singer shouted the band’s name.

“Do you like the music?” Lucia asked him.

“Yes,” David said, although if he didn’t have to yell above the beat, he might have offered a qualification about the band’s weird tendency to advertise itself mid-song. “Do you?” he asked her.

She shrugged and said something he didn’t hear. He asked her to repeat it.

“I said I like my brother’s songs better.”

“Your brother is a musician?”

“A guitarist,” she said. “Flamenco.”

“Where is he again?” he asked, although of course he knew. He didn’t know why he’d asked. Perhaps he wanted to see if she trusted him enough to tell him the truth.

“He’s in los estados.”

She’d lied again, and he felt disappointed. But he reminded himself of the stakes. If people who despised the army knew about her brother, they might target Lucia and her family. He hoped a day would come when she would confide in him.

“Do you want an agua mineral?” she said, nodding toward a table with soda bottles and chips. Behind it was Doña Josefina, who owned the town’s largest tienda. David had brought only the ten quetzales he needed to pay the admission price to the dance. “Vamanos,” Lucia said, stepping toward Doña Josefina.

“Let’s dance,” he said. He’d said this to save himself from having to admit he had no money.

Lucia stopped, turned toward him. He couldn’t decide whether her expression showed contentment or confusion.

He was about to withdraw his request, remind her he didn’t dance. But he felt her hand in his. “All right,” she said.

“All right,” he repeated. When his voice quivered, he wasn’t certain whether it was from doubt about what he was doing or pleasure. They stepped into the swirling bodies. He didn’t notice a single awkward dancer. They were all magnificent. He was about to show them incompetence.

Rana finished its song. The singer said, “Let’s slow this down,” and the Caribbean music became something soft, languid, and dreamy, half madrigal, half lullaby. The dance floor, or what amounted to it, cleared save for David and Lucia and Don Angél and his wife or mistress or perhaps a woman who fit neither category.

“When I said I can dance,” David told Lucia, “I should have said I

can dance, but not well.”

“It’s easy,” she said. “Balanceese.”

He didn’t understand the last word. She demonstrated, swaying.

“Right,” he said. He held her waist tentatively. She moved into his body and he felt her warmth and smelled her hair. They rocked. I must be the worst dancer in the entire town, he thought. Or the entire universe.

“You’re trembling,” she said.

“I don’t want to step on your feet.”

“Step on them,” she said. “I’m not wearing glass slippers.” She laughed.

Soon, because of Lucia, who gracefully followed his awkward steps, their dance became easier and more fluid.

“Rana!” the singer shouted into the middle of his band’s soft, languid music.

“How do you say it in your language?” Lucia asked. “Frog?”

“Right,” he said. “Kiss one and it becomes a prince.”

“I wonder,” she said. She looked up at him before returning her head to his shoulder.

When David caught the principal’s eye, Don Angél winked at him. Only minutes before, David was ready to condemn the man. Now he wanted to throw his arm around his shoulder and say, with a bravado he’d never used before, “Qué tal, vos?”

He and Lucia danced to three fast songs and another slow song before Lucia looked at her watch and said she had to go home.

“I’ll walk you,” he said.

“My father is waiting outside,” she said.

“Oh,” he said, failing, he was sure, to hide his disappointment.

She glanced at him. She was sweating, her hair damp across her forehead.

“I will see you at breakfast tomorrow,” she said.

“Okay,” he said. He touched her shoulder, squeezed it too hard in farewell. She winced.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“It’s not made of glass either,” she said, smiling her forgiveness.

“Good night.” She walked toward the door. He wondered if she would look back. But she didn’t.

In bed, as he fought toward sleep, he tried to focus on what he should find unpleasant about Lucia: how she’d danced with the principal and even smiled when she did; how she’d sweated; how, as they’d said goodbye, she’d smelled less of whatever fruit scented her shampoo and more of the earth. But none of this conjured in him anything but longing. Restless, he stepped out of bed and into his courtyard.

A spider had built a web on one of his rose bushes. It had trapped three insects and was winding its thread around one. In the moonlight, the spider glowed a radiant silver. Its body, the size of a baby’s fingerprint, was sturdy, its legs long and efficient. It stilled its struggling victim in seconds. The spider seemed to look out at David, as if to invite something. David spotted a tiny white, winged insect—a moth, he supposed—

on one of the rose petals. He plucked it off and tossed it into the spider's web. The spider abandoned the insect it had tied up and bolted toward the thrashing moth, which, David saw, was larger and prettier than he'd thought, with a brilliant, moon-colored luminescence. It might have been a butterfly. The spider restrained it with his thin, indomitable thread. In seconds, the butterfly, suffocated in gossamer, was still.

Remembering the former general and his gray house on the highway, David felt a mixture of queasiness and repulsion undercut, troublingly, by satisfaction and pleasure. He turned from the spider and stepped to the wall adjacent to Lucia's courtyard. He wondered if he would hear her and her father talking. But all he heard was humming so soft it might have been his imagination. It was music: the slow song Rana had played.

His new partner stood at his front door the next morning. Rich claimed to have sent David a telegram from the capital to alert him of his arrival. David hated him immediately. Rich was David except taller, blonder, and more muscular. He looked like a swimmer. His torso seemed to extend to the sky. He'd arrived in town on the first bus from the capital, and because he didn't want to wake up David, he'd eaten by himself next door.

"Lucky us," he said.

"What do you mean?" David said.

"Lucia," he said. He licked his lips—or perhaps David imagined he did. "Put her in real clothes, give her a decent haircut, and—wow."

The words David wanted to speak in reply were: *She's perfect the way she is*. But he swallowed them. They would have revealed too much. "I haven't noticed," he said.

Rich cocked his eyebrow at him. Perhaps he thought David was gay.

"Do you want to make yourself at home?" David asked. "I'll go eat."

"I have only the one suitcase," he said, nodding down to what was between his feet. "Home is wherever I open it." He smiled. "I'll sit with you at breakfast."

Rich slipped his suitcase in the front door and the two of them walked over to Lucia's house. She was surprised—and happy, David thought—to see Rich back. When she turned to David, her smile was softer. He felt a heaviness inside him spiked with an emotion he couldn't identify. It was more potent than jealousy.

He and Rich sat down and Lucia left to bring his breakfast. "Let me explain the routine here," David said. But before he could continue, Rich said, "Who owns the silver house on the highway?"

"People here call it gray," David corrected.

"Silver. Gray. Who owns it?"

David explained about the Spider.

"You ever tried to convert him?" Rich asked.

"Are you kidding?"

Rich smiled. "Let's go today."

"He isn't in town."

"How do you know?"

"His helicopter isn't on the roof."

Rich grinned again. "When we see the helicopter land, we'll head straight to the silver house."

David shrugged.

Lucia came with his eggs and beans and tortillas, his milk and refresco.

"Do you have any pastries?" Rich said. Rich's Spanish was perfect, fluid, without an accent. It sounded like the Spanish spoken in Spain. Later, Rich would tell him he'd lived in Madrid for three years beginning when he was ten years old. His father, high in the church, had overseen missionaries in the country.

Lucia said, "We have pan dulce."

"Sweet bread from sweet hands," he said. "I would love some."

Lucia blushed and turned and retrieved two pieces of sweet bread. Rich thanked her and she left the room again. Rich offered David a piece but he refused. He didn't want anything from Rich.

"I shouldn't flirt with her," he said. "It's always a heartbreak when I leave."

"How long have you been in the country?"

"Nine months." His last assignment was in the jungles of the Peten, he said. "Sounds harder than it was. I lived in a room in a hotel near Tikal."

"The Maya ruins?"

Rich nodded.

"You and your partner?"

Rich shook his head. "He didn't think the Castillo de Los Mayas—part of the Hilton chain, by the way—was an appropriate domicile given the work we were doing. So he stayed in our hut with its outhouse and mosquito netting."

"What happened to him?"

"Malaria."

"Oh."

"I spent seven-eighths of my time at the hotel bar, talking up the tourists. Converted an average of three a night."

David laughed.

"You don't believe me?" Rich said. "It's the truth. Of course most of them were drunk, so I'm not sure how much credit I deserve." He patted David on the shoulder. "We'll have fun together. And we'll save our share of souls. Sober souls."

The next morning, they walked two hours to a village whose name, in the local Maya language, was God's Eye. David chose a distant village on purpose. He wanted Rich to collapse with exhaustion, require medical care in the capital, never come back—or at least seek more comfortable lodgings in the big town thirty kilometers north. But Rich

didn't seem bothered by the long walk, much of it straight up a mountain shrouded in clouds. He talked the entire time, in easy breaths. He told David about his life back in the States. He attended a university in the same state David did (Rich's had the superior reputation), and although his grades were fine, he didn't enjoy his classes. He was glad his studies had been interrupted by his mission. "I needed a break," he said.

This isn't supposed to be a break, David wanted to say.

Rich admitted he was something of a "black sheep" when it came to their faith. "It's not like I don't believe," he said. "I do. I mean—with certain qualifications. But it's a question of how important it is to me. When I'm done with college, when I'm on my own and I don't need my father's financial support, I could see myself stepping away from the church. You know—admiring it from a distance." He laughed.

When David thought of words to condemn him, he realized they were the same words he spoke to himself when he had similar doubts about his faith.

"Every so often, I have a drink," Rich said. "Every so often, I have what you might call a dalliance." He shrugged. "You'll see me do it here, I'm sure. If you're a bastard, you'll turn me in. But I'll deny it all—and I'll win. I can be very persuasive." He smacked David on the shoulder as if he was wishing him congratulations.

They reached the top of the mountain, now clear of clouds. The village was a quarter of a mile down the hill on the other side. David saw boys playing soccer in a field beside the adobe schoolhouse. He placed his foot on the downward slope of the switchback.

"Wait," Rich said. "Let me enjoy the view."

Waves of progressively smaller mountains rolled in front of them all the way to the Pacific Ocean. "Wouldn't it be sweet to be with a girl up here?" Rich said. "I mean, not that I don't like you. But—man—it's like we walked up to heaven."

He removed his jacket, his tie, his white shirt.

"What are you doing?" David asked, startled but amused.

"I'm saluting my maker." He spread his arms over his head and gazed at the sky. "This is your universe, God!" he shouted. "This is your glory!"

In the village below, the soccer game stopped. Shielding their eyes from the sun, boys looked up at them. "You have an audience," David said.

Instead of cowering and covering up, Rich waved. The boys waved back.

"Let's go," Rich said. After restoring his clothes to his body, he led the way down the mountain.

They arrived at the adobe schoolhouse. It was recess, and the schoolteacher was the only occupant of the building.

Rich played soccer with the boys as David spoke with the schoolteacher, with whom he had spoken twice before. Several times from his seat next to the teacher's desk, David heard his partner shout instructions to his teammates. Twice, he heard Rich celebrate goals his team

had scored.

The teacher's name was Romario. He was thirty years old and had the worn face and stick-thin body of someone who'd suffered. He'd lost his faith, he'd told David, when the woman he was going to marry died in a bus crash. The bus driver, who may have been a guerrilla, had attempted to speed past an army checkpoint. He'd lost control and had careened off a mountain. A witness said a soldier had shot out the bus's back left tire.

If David could convert the schoolteacher, he'd thought, others might follow. Work on the leaders of the community, he'd been taught. If they convert, they will bring their people. But the last time David visited the village, he learned that Romario was far from a community leader. He lived in a rented house in a town an hour-and-a-half walk down the mountain, a commute he made every school day. He confessed that he didn't know the parents of his students at all.

Nevertheless, David persisted with him, although he didn't know why. Perhaps he sensed in the schoolteacher's loneliness some of his own.

As usual, David spread his literature on the schoolteacher's desk. As usual, Romario glanced at it before gazing out the window at the back of the building. The view was the same as from the top of the mountain. The schoolhouse smelled of blackboard chalk and mold.

"I'm thinking I might go to the States," Romario said.

David grew guarded, prepared to deflect the schoolteacher's request for his help with a visa or a place to stay in Chicago or Trenton, both popular destinations for Guatemalan immigrants. But a request wasn't forthcoming. For a long time, there was only silence.

"I thought if I left my town, I could forget her," he said. "So I moved across the country, from Quetzaltenango. My family thought I was crazy. They were right, but only if they thought I was crazy to believe I could escape her ghost."

"How long ago was this?"

"Five years."

"You're young," David said, employing words an older person might have spoken. "You can't change what happened. But with God's grace, you have an entire lifetime left."

"This country is doomed to sorrow. I think of all the villages like this one, where simple people love in the simple and complicated ways people do—with all their hearts. And one day, soldiers or, on a rarer day, guerrillas, come—and they kill or disappear whomever they want. What happens to all this love? For those left behind, it becomes an eternal scar on the heart."

David invoked God's love, its healing power.

"Yes, of course," Romario mumbled.

David sighed. He'd wasted his time. A few minutes later, he excused himself. The teacher looked at him as if he'd forgotten his presence. "Of course," he said.

When David walked outside, Rich and the soccer players were

gone. Romario, who'd followed him, looked at his watch. He tapped it with his index finger. "It stopped," he said. He glanced at the sky. "It's close enough to noon," he said. "My day is done." He offered his hand, and David shook it. David wished him a good trip back to his house. Romario thanked him and headed down the mountain.

David found Rich inside a barn-like building with a rusted tin roof. In its pinpoint holes, David could see blue sky. The building served as the village's Catholic church. But the crucifix with its snow-white Jesus, which usually hung on the wall at the front of the building, had been pulled down and set in a corner like a hitchhiker on a forgotten road.

At the back of the building, thirty feet from David, Rich faced the five rows of benches, filled with the soccer players and their families, and spoke in slow, simple Spanish. Occasionally, he turned to a short boy with curly black hair in the front row, and the boy translated into the local Maya language. Rich asked his audience to clap. His audience clapped. He asked his audience to fall to its knees. His audience fell to its knees. He said, "Jesus is speaking to me now and he is therefore speaking to you. Jesus says, 'I love you.' Do you hear me?"

His audience answered yes.

"Jesus loves you. Do you love Jesus?"

"Yes!"

"Let me hear you: Do you love Jesus?"

"Yes!"

"The devil is deaf. Let's shout so loud even the devil hears us. Are you ready to say it? 'I love Jesus.' Repeat after me: I."

"I!"

"Love."

"Love!"

"Jesus."

"Jesus!"

"Are you prepared to enter our church, to be baptized in our sacred waters, to devote yourself to our teachings and laws, and to become one with God's divine love?"

"Yes!"

"Yes to all of what I said?"

"Yes!"

"Say it one more time!"

"Yes!"

"Say 'yes' so even the devil can hear you."

"Yes!"

Rich turned to the curly-haired boy. "Please bring the water." The boy sprinted into the dark corner opposite the corner with the crucifix. From it, he lugged a five-liter plastic container, which he placed at Rich's feet. The container, David saw, used to house pesticide. It was a common, albeit unhealthy, practice in the country to reuse pesticide containers as drinking vessels.

Rich asked his audience to line up. "But before you do, I want to give you a chance to leave," he said. "I want you to understand you have

the freedom to stay or go. You have the freedom to choose God's light or to remain in darkness." He paused. "I will turn around and give anyone who wishes to leave the chance. When I turn around again, we will begin our ceremony."

Rich turned around. David was sure half the people in the audience, entertained but unconvinced, would now retreat. But no one left. He found himself whispering, "It's all right if you go. God is elsewhere." But no one heard him.

When Rich turned around, he didn't seem surprised to find everyone in place. "My *compañero* will assist me in this sacred right of baptism," he said.

David thought he was speaking of the curly-haired boy. But Rich's eyes were fixed on him. When David remained standing in place, Rich motioned to him. David approached slowly. When, at last, David stepped up to his partner, Rich said, "What does it take to win your love?"

"You didn't ask all the interview questions," David whispered.

"We don't have a lifetime here."

"We could come back tomorrow," David said. "I talk to people at least three times before I move toward conversion."

"Good God," Rich said. "We aren't Jews. Will you pour the water as I pray?"

Dutifully, David poured water on every head in the church. The water smelled—and how couldn't it—of poison.

The next morning, after David said his prayers, he tapped on Rich's bedroom door. He thought his partner had slept late. When there was no answer, he tapped louder. Eventually, he opened the door. Rich's unmade bed was abandoned. David spoke Rich's name, and it echoed in all the rooms of the small house. But Rich was gone.

Perhaps he's like Ted, David thought hopefully. Perhaps he couldn't take it any longer.

But he knew this was a lie even before he stepped into Lucia's house. Rich, showered, shaved, and dressed in his sport coat and tie, was at the table, eating eggs and beans with cream. Lucia, in a white blouse and black skirt, stood in her usual spot under the archway painted with roses. From the courtyard, David heard the cow complain.

"Welcome, partner," Rich said.

"You aren't supposed to go places without me," David said with bitterness. "We're always supposed to be in sight of each other."

"Except when we're sleeping, in the shower, or on the toilet," Rich corrected. "I know, I know. But I was hungry. And—honestly—it's a silly rule. I call it Brother Babysitting Brother."

"It isn't silly," David said. "It keeps us safe. And if anyone were to accuse one of us of something, the other could..." But Rich interjected, his Spanish quick and, David suspected, full of derision—some kind of joke; Lucia, covering her mouth with her palm, laughed.

David shot her a look, but perhaps in anticipation of his remonstrations, she was looking elsewhere. In truth, he thought the rule was silly. He'd invoked it only because of why Rich had broken it: to be alone

with Lucia.

“Come on, partner,” Rich said, motioning him to the table, which, recently so familiar to David—the stains on its wood surface like countries he could name—now seemed strange. “Forgive?”

David nodded. He could do nothing else. He sat down, and Lucia brought him his plate of eggs and beans, his milk and refresco. He looked up at her but she refused to catch his eye. She’s in love with him, he thought. This was impossible, he argued with himself. She didn’t know Rich. But as he ate, the food tasting as bland as it had when he’d first come to town, he saw her glance at Rich several times. Each time, her eyes seemed to flare with curiosity and a shy eagerness.

When he and Rich were finished, they thanked Lucia and stepped outside. A few pickup trucks and mud-stained station wagons had pulled into town and were parked on the north side of the main street. “The circus is here,” Rich said.

“The feria,” David corrected.

“Five days of drinking and debauchery.”

“Yours?” David said.

Rich grinned. “And a big dance on the last day.”

David changed the subject: “We have work to do.”

David wanted to return to God’s Eye. He wanted to see how the people would react on seeing Rich again. He suspected they would see him differently in the light of a new day, like sober people with a hang-over.

Also, David wanted to speak with Romario again. He wanted to talk to the schoolteacher about Lucia, although he didn’t know what he wanted to ask, what advice he would seek.

But Rich didn’t want to return to the village. “Why mess with success?” he said. “Besides, I’m tired of walking. Let’s work in town.”

David said he’d visited every house.

“And converted...?” Rich asked.

David shrugged. Despite several long conversations, he hadn’t converted a single soul in town.

“Let’s revisit a few of the houses you tried,” Rich said. “I bet you softened them up. All we need is a closer.”

“We aren’t salesmen,” David said.

“No,” Rich said. “We are soul savers.”

David expected Rich to wink at him. But his expression was somber. His partner, David realized, wasn’t as predictable as he’d like to think.

They worked until lunch, converting two men and three women, all of whom David had spoken with fruitlessly before.

As they ate lunch in a comedor on the far side of town, Rich said, “You see? We’re a good team.”

David wanted to find insincerity in his face. But failing to find it made David like him no better.

At dinner, Lucia’s mother served them. Lucia, she explained, was

late coming back from school. But even before they'd finished their fried chicken and black beans, she returned. She stepped into the room to ask if they would like more to drink.

Rich had discarded his jacket, loosened his tie, and unbuttoned the top button of his dress shirt. His blond hair was askew, which didn't make him seem unruly but rakish. David, buttoned up in his sport coat and tie, was sweating, his hair plastered against the sides of his head. His face felt gritty from the dust of the unpaved streets they'd walked all day.

Rich told Lucia he would like another refresco. David was thirsty, but he hadn't touched his drink. Nor had he eaten much of his food. All afternoon, he had been hoping he and Rich would receive a telegram informing them of their next assignment. He didn't want to stay in this town if it meant watching Lucia fall in love with Rich. But when they'd returned to their house, he found under their door only a letter from Abigail. David hadn't read it before he and Rich walked over to Lucia's house. Now he couldn't remember where he'd put it.

When Lucia returned with Rich's second drink, with its swirling mango pulp, he said to her, "Have you thought about what I asked you this morning?"

Lucia glanced at David, as if to read his face. But he didn't know what she was looking for, what question she might have wanted answered. He tried to smile, but he felt tired and dirty and his lips failed to form more than a straight line.

"Don't think Dave here will be your knight in shining armor," Rich said, his grin large. "He told you he has a novia, didn't he? In fact, one of her letters arrived today."

David opened his mouth. But the protest he had in mind was a denial, and a denial would have been a lie. Nevertheless, he felt full of violence. It woke him from his lethargy; it made his dirtiness feel empowering, as if he might, in fact, be as savage as his appearance. But he couldn't unleash it on Rich. To strike his partner would be scandalous; it might mean excommunication. He felt his anger retreat to his heart.

David couldn't read Lucia's face because she'd turned from him. Over her shoulder, she said, "Okay. I will go to the dance with you."

After they returned to their house and were sitting at their dining room table, Rich said, "You're mad at me, aren't you?"

"For what?" David said.

They were supposedly writing in their prayer journals. But after five minutes, neither had moved his pen.

"For going to the dance."

"You aren't supposed to dance."

"You did."

David looked up at him. He was going to say, "Who told you?" But he knew.

"It doesn't mean it's right," David said.

"So you're mad at me for wanting to do what you did?"

Of course Rich knew why David was angry with him. It wasn't about him going to the dance but who he was taking. Rich was only pro-

voking him. David refused to be provoked. And he *did* have a girlfriend, a beautiful girlfriend who would become his wife. He should find her letter now, open it, read it fifty times, the way he used to with everything she wrote him.

“It’s nothing,” David said. “Forget it, okay?”

“Okay?” Rich nodded, smiled. When he nodded again, it was definite, like a hammer striking a nail. “Perfect.”

The feria came to life the next morning, although it wasn’t a vigorous or joyful life. Old women sat at the Loteria booth, covering the king and the blind man on their cards. At the coin toss, children literally threw away their money, ten centavos at a time, like senior citizens at Vegas slot machines. David knew these children. If they had anything to eat besides beans and eggs—at any meal—they were fortunate. The three cantinas in town apparently weren’t sufficient to meet demand because the feria had come with its own cantinas, half a dozen of them, housed in tents. Between their flaps, David saw men downing boh and whiskey in plastic cups.

David and Rich found the houses in town they visited unoccupied, their residents no doubt having left to roam the feria—or having fled town to avoid it. When there was, at last, someone home, it was a woman wrinkled so severely she might as well have been Methuselah’s mother. She bore so many crosses it was a wonder her overburdened neck hadn’t pulled her parallel to the ground. “No, gracias, gringos,” she said. “Soy catolica. I knew one of your brothers. He came to town twenty-two years ago. His name was Sam. Do you know him? No? He looked the same as you. Exactly the same. He raped my niece. Go home.”

At four o’clock, Rich threw up his hands and said, “The feria wins. We lose.” They walked toward their house. Crossing the town square, they saw, slumped against the wall of the municipalidad, six bolos sleeping off their drunks, their mouths open, literal fly catchers. The insects adorned their lips like cheap black jewels. Their faces wore the zombie-like yellow pallor of the forever inebriated.

Rich smacked David on the back. “I believe I spy a handful of potential converts.”

“What?” David said. “Those drunks?”

“If we can convert the souls of the dead, why shouldn’t we be able to convert the souls of the living dead?”

“It has never been church policy to...When the dead, particularly Jews, are baptized without the permission of their families, it’s never considered...”

But Rich, charging in front of him now, wasn’t listening. They reached the municipalidad. Rich stood over Don José, whom David had seen sober on occasion. He had been an industriales teacher in the town’s junior high before his addiction forced the principal to fire him. Don José’s right eye was swollen, as if it had been punched, although he’d probably only stumbled into something. He smelled of boh, the nauseatingly sweet kind. His clothes consisted of a blue dress shirt, women’s

designer jeans, and a pair of baby blue tennis shoes, his entire wardrobe doubtless donated by a visiting missionary group or purchased for five quetzales at Ropa Americana. His shirt and jeans were dotted with stains so dark they looked like bruises. His eyes were closed.

“Behold!” Rich said in a booming, theatrical voice. “I am the servant of your lord and savior. Awake!”

Don José cracked open first his left, then his right, eye. A second passed before his face flushed with fear. The emotion passed so quickly David wondered if Rich had noticed it. It was replaced by a placid, if cowering, blankness.

Rich said, “Are you ready to embrace your salvation?” His voice was even stronger and more commanding now.

Another second passed before Don José nodded.

“Sit up, my man. Sit up and let us tell you about the path to salvation.” Rich reached under Don José’s arms. David wondered if the old man—he thought of him as old, although he was probably forty—would recoil or strike Rich. But he allowed Rich to pull him into a position in which his tailbone and back were against the municipalidad’s red wall.

Rich crouched next to Don José before turning back to David. “Come,” Rich said, gesturing for David to crouch beside him. David wanted to run, but he obeyed.

They spoke to the old man. Occasionally, the old man nodded. Once he fell asleep, but Rich woke him.

“I believe you are ready,” Rich said. He picked up the old man’s two-liter insecticide bottle of boh and, intoning baptismal words, dumped its contents over his head. David thought it small consolation that there wasn’t much in the bottle.

On the morning of the feria’s fourth day, David and Rich stood in front of words spray-painted on the municipalidad: “Para el pueblo vivir, el ejercito debe morir.” *For the people to live, the army must die.* There was another slogan scrawled on the correos office: “El pueblo—sí. El ejercito—no.” The statue of the unnamed general in the small central park was drenched in red paint. On the pedestal below it were the words: “Los generales deben a sangrar.” *The generals must bleed.*

David and Rich lingered in front of each defacement. If the townspeople looked at the graffiti, it was swiftly. Clearly, they wanted nothing to do with it. Standing in front of the general’s statue, Rich said, “Darn. Someone beat us to it: He’s already been baptized.”

Even before he’d finished speaking, an olive green, canvas-covered truck pulled into the square. From the back, soldiers, wearing fatigues and holding rifles, jumped off. From where David was standing, he could see each of the soldiers clearly. They were all dark-skinned, young, unsmiling. There were maybe twenty of them, and now they huddled behind the truck. From the front of the truck stepped an officer, his uniform green and crisp, a silver pistol in the holster around his waist. He shouted an order and the soldiers, in pairs, spread like a firework, shooting all over town.

"I think we should go home," David said.

"Why?" Rich asked with surprise. "This is exciting."

"It's dangerous."

"Not for us," he said. He gestured toward a couple of approaching soldiers. "We're on the same team."

"What team?"

"Team anti-communism."

The soldiers, both short and stocky and the owners of haunted, Maya eyes, stopped next to them.

Rich gestured to the statue. "Qué desgracia," he said with an exaggerated shake of his head.

The soldiers said nothing; they didn't even nod. But they moved on.

Grinning, Rich whispered after them, "Viva la revolución," and laughed.

"You shouldn't joke," David said.

"If you can't laugh at genocide and state-sponsored terrorism, what can you laugh at?" Rich said.

"You shouldn't—" David began. But Rich slapped him on the shoulder.

"We're all going to die," Rich said. "Some of us will die in the Sweet Meadows Home for the Happily Aged in Key West and some of us will die in a ditch on the side of the Pan-American Highway. The moral: Carpe diem, baby!" He gestured toward one of the feria booths. "Do you want to play La Lotería?"

David was about to protest, but he understood Rich was joking again.

Instead of playing feria games or baptizing drunks, Rich insisted on visiting the residences of the most devoutly Catholic people in town, a trio of retired nuns who lived in rooms above Doña Josefina's tienda. They were holed up during the feria, Rich said, because they were terrified their souls would be tainted "by bolos and their boh, by Satan's music trickling from every booth, by gambling grandmothers and teenagers giving in to every temptation known to lust and hormones."

In the two-and-a-half hours they chatted with the sisters, Rich failed to save a single one of their souls. But David didn't find consolation in his partner's failure. Weeks before, he and Ted had tried to speak with the nuns. A door they'd had politely shut in their faces opened to Rich like a flower unfolding in spring.

On the morning of the feria's last day, the day of the dance, Rich, from his room, announced he would be skipping breakfast. David saw this as a rare chance to speak with Lucia privately. But next door, he discovered she had gone to a classmate's house. Her mother served David the usual beans and eggs, and he ate in silence. He felt more than disappointed; he felt cursed.

When David returned to his house, his partner was still in bed. David proposed hiking to Romario's town, where citizens had no feria

they were celebrating. The town was so distant he could imagine himself and Rich, on returning in the fading afternoon light, becoming lost in the mountains and failing to arrive in time for the end-of-the-feria dance. David wanted this outcome more than he'd wanted anything in a long time. But Rich would not comply. When he finally rose from bed, his hair spread like thick rays of the sun, his eyes dazed and dim, he said he wasn't feeling well.

"Your stomach?" David asked.

Rich shrugged.

"Headache?"

Rich shrugged again. He removed his foam mattress from his bed and brought it into the courtyard. The day was blue and full of light. "I think I'll meditate," he said. Instead, he lay shirtless and in pajama bottoms on his mattress in the middle of the courtyard. David might have called it sunbathing if Rich hadn't been lying in such a rigid, corpse-like position—his arms against his sides, his legs straight.

"Would you like me to find you something to eat next door?" David said. "I could ask Doña Amalia." He added, "Lucia isn't home." He regretted speaking her name.

"Don't tell me she ran away because she's scared to go to the dance with me."

David again wanted to upbraid him about going to the dance at all. Instead, he said, "Maybe you shouldn't go to the dance."

He expected Rich to scoff. Instead, he said, "Maybe so."

After a silence, Rich said, "You should go visit your friend, the schoolteacher."

"It wouldn't be right to leave you."

"I'll be fine," Rich said. "I bet I'll be exactly where I am now when you come back."

"It isn't right."

"Go," Rich said. "Please. If you go, I won't feel guilty about sunbathing in my birthday suit."

Was he joking? David wasn't sure.

If bad luck was his fate in the early morning, good luck was his gift now. As he stepped out of his front door, he saw Lucia approaching from his right. She wore blue slacks and a gray sweater a size too large. Her curly black hair poured from beneath a red bandana. He felt his heart do circus tricks. He couldn't have stopped himself from smiling if he'd tried. She smiled back.

"I missed you," he said. He had meant to finish the sentence with "at breakfast." But he'd spoken the complete truth, and to add anything to it would only be to diminish it.

"I haven't been gone so long, have I?" she said.

"Half the morning," he said.

She told him where she'd been.

"Where does she live?"

"At the end of the street." She lowered her eyes, and he thought: She isn't telling the truth. He noticed the mud on her boots. Boots. Why

was she wearing boots? She hadn't gone to a classmate's house, he suspected. Had she gone into the mountains? To do what? he wondered. To find her brother at his soldier's post? Or to hide from something or someone? He had a strange thought: She wrote the graffiti. Or she knows who did.

No, he told himself. Impossible. Her brother might have been one of the soldiers who had left town after painting over the graffiti and removing the red stain from the general's statue. Perhaps she'd gone to visit him before he'd left the area.

"You're going somewhere far?" she asked, nodding toward his heavy backpack. It contained several bottles of water and two dozen pamphlets he would distribute in Romario's town. He told her where he was going. He wanted to say, But I'll be back in time to dance with you.

"Rich isn't going with you?"

His partner's name on her lips—it was like she'd spat fire at him. But he had his revenge: "He isn't going to be able —."

But there was a sound as of the sky being sliced. They looked up. Presently, a helicopter hovered over them. It must have been several hundred feet from the ground, but they felt its furious wind and saw its grim pilot, dressed in camouflage. Even more distinct was the man sitting beside him, silver-haired and dressed entirely in black, including the black sunglasses a blind man might wear.

A moment later, the helicopter followed the town's main road as a car would before, at the intersection of the Pan-American Highway, soaring off to the south.

David and Lucia said nothing as the front door of David's house opened and Rich poked his head from it, a grin filling his face. "The Spider's home!" he announced.

When David turned to Lucia, she was gone.

The schoolteacher's town was farther than he'd thought. David had anticipated a walk of an hour-and-a-half beyond God's Eye. Romario, in fact, had said as much. But the schoolteacher must have known a quicker path. David zigzagged down the mountain. Even as he lightened his backpack by drinking his water, he felt sluggish and encumbered. He wondered if he had a fever or was coming down with a cold. But the chill he felt was likely the result of the overcast sky and the occasional chipi-chipi, pinpricks of rain on his neck and nose.

The town was as empty as God's Eye had been. David figured everyone in the village had gone to the feria. He couldn't imagine a similar excuse here. He had hoped to arrive in time to find a comedor open for lunch, but it had been too ambitious a plan. It was two-thirty. Siesta was practiced irregularly in the country, although, apparently, faithfully here.

The town, about twice size of the one in which he was living, followed the usual design. There was a central park with sporadic rose bushes and a pair of statues of long-dead generals. Around the park were a correos office, a municipalidad, and a Catholic church painted rose and white. Opposite the church, on the other side of the park, was an indoor

market, a concrete, cavernous block. When he stepped inside, he inhaled the smell of wilting herbs and past-their-prime chicken and beef. He felt nauseous, but the sensation passed.

Because of the absence of windows, and because of the weak fluorescent lights, and, most of all, because of his eye-lid drooping fatigue, he felt as if he were stepping into a dream. Stall after stall was empty, their produce housed in covered wicker baskets and burlap bags sealed with string. At the far end of the building, a light shone from within a wooden booth. Approaching, he saw, inside the booth, an old man leaning against a freezer. Packets of twenty-five-centavo jalapeño chips, hanging from the ceiling, streamed on either side of him. He had a thin, straight scar on his right cheek; it ran from below his eye to the far edge of his chin, the path a tear would follow.

“Buenos dias,” David said, although morning was long over.

But the man didn’t correct him. He repeated the greeting.

“Where is everyone?” David said.

The man shrugged. “I think there’s a feria.” He named a town to the south. “And it’s siesta.”

David nodded.

“You want the truth?”

“Yes,” David said automatically.

“The army’s in town.”

“Why?”

“The war.”

David nodded, knowing the man would not be more forthcoming. He asked about Romario, and the man gave him directions to his house.

But when David arrived at the schoolteacher’s house, two blocks from the market, he didn’t find him home. The house was made of wood and painted yellow. The boards had been inexpertly aligned, and between a break he could see into Romario’s bedroom. There was a bed, striped of sheets, and a table with a handful of books. David strained to read the titles but failed.

“You should have told me you were coming.”

David turned to find Romario behind him.

“I am about to leave,” the schoolteacher said.

“Where are you going?”

“The States.”

“Now?”

Romario looked at his watch. He shook it. It still wasn’t working. He looked at the sky. “The truck leaves in half an hour.”

“I should have telegraphed. But I didn’t know I would be coming until this morning.”

“I wish I could offer you coffee.”

“I don’t drink coffee.”

“Of course. How about an agua?”

“All the tiendas are closed.”

“It’s true,” he said. “Siesta.”

David told him what the old man in the market had said about

the army.

“Also true,” Romario said, “which is why we are leaving now instead of tomorrow or next week.”

He invited David inside. The place was dark. Romario explained that he’d had the electricity shut off; he lit a blue candle on his dining room table. A backpack the size of David’s rested in a corner. This was all Romario was bringing with him on his trip, he told David. They sat on knee-high wooden stools around the table. “I have water,” David said. “Would you like a drink?”

Romario thanked David as he handed him the last of his full bottles. They passed it between them like a flask.

“What is new with you, my friend?” Romario asked him.

He could have said, “Nothing.” But if he had said, “Nothing,” he shouldn’t have come. He said, “I think I’m in love.”

Romario smiled. “With whom?”

David told him about Lucia. After he’d finished, he expected Romario to make a joke, as other Guatemalan men David knew would have. But the schoolteacher nodded and said, “I’d say it’s definite. You are in love.” He smiled warmly and lifted the water bottle in a toast. He drank and passed the bottle to David, who drank too.

“But something is preventing the two of you from being together,” Romario said. “The differences in your religions?”

“No,” David said. “Yes.” He’d forgotten the expression to describe something in between no and yes. Was there such an expression? He explained about Abigail and his church’s prohibition against dating Guatemalans and the order, doubtless soon to come, which would send him to live elsewhere in the country.

“I see,” Romario said. He rubbed his eyes. “It isn’t easy. Perhaps it shouldn’t be, if it really matters.”

“What?” David asked. “Love?”

“Love and anything worthwhile. But I don’t know.” His doubt seemed genuine. “I have something for you.” He left the room and returned with the books from his bedroom. There were six of them. “The last of my collection,” he said. “These are the books I will have the hardest time saying goodbye to. It’s why I’ve held onto them right up until the end.”

“Why don’t you take them with you?”

“Across the Mexican desert?” He laughed. “I’d have to be a camel—or a fool.”

David could see they were all books of poems.

“Neruda,” Romario said. “The man knew love. And life.”

“Thank you.”

“Perhaps you will find your answer in them.”

Romario said he had to go. But he invited David to ride in the truck with him. They were heading north, he said. The truck could drop him at the intersection of the Pan-American Highway and his town’s main street.

It was an old pickup truck, and they rode in the back with ten

other men. When ahead of them on the highway they saw an army check-point, the truck turned around, pulled off onto a side road, and continued its trip over dirt roads.

“Sometimes it’s easy to avoid the army,” Romario said after they’d pulled back onto the Pan-American Highway. “But sometime its web is so big and so binding even Houdini in a rocket ship couldn’t escape.”

Periodically, the rain became fierce. David’s clothes were drenched. He had the luxury of being able to change them once he returned to his house. Romario would continue his journey soaked. He expressed his sympathy to the schoolteacher. “If rain is my only hardship,” he told David, “I will be the luckiest man alive.”

They reached David’s stop, and he climbed out of the truck, his shoes sinking into mud at the side of the road. David wanted to say he would write to Romario, but, with the schoolteacher’s destination uncertain, the words would have been ridiculous. Instead, the two men simply said goodbye.

From the Pan-American Highway, David walked to town in the dark. It had stopped raining. When he returned to his house, he unloaded Romario’s books on his bed. He was glad to see they hadn’t gotten wet. All but one was by Pablo Neruda. The exception was a chapbook of poems written by Romario himself. The paper was thick and smooth; he’d taken care to print it professionally. The book was entitled *El Corazón y El Invierno. The Heart and Winter*.

David looked at his watch. It was nine o’clock. The dance had started an hour ago. He wished he’d come home at midnight, when the dance would be over. He’d had nothing to eat since breakfast, but he’d stopped being hungry. If he concentrated on Romario’s poems, time would pass. Midnight would come soon enough. But he would turn off his light before Rich came home. He didn’t want to speak to his partner; he didn’t want to hear him say Lucia’s name or brag about what the two of them had done.

It would all be over soon anyway. Any day a telegram would arrive, ordering them to their next assignment. A week or two in their new site, and he would forget Lucia.

David decided he would translate the schoolteacher’s poems into English. This would help him hone his Spanish and forget what he wanted to forget. He picked up a piece of paper and a pencil from the table in the corner of his room. He sat on his bed and opened the schoolteacher’s book. Outside the window, he heard the popping sounds of a shooting game. He heard a bottle smash. He heard the ever-present, mournful feria music, which reminded him tonight, he didn’t know why, of birds fleeing a flaming field.

Although he’d planned to translate the poems in order, he soon found himself rendering into English only certain lines:

It used to be I would miss you  
the second you would leave.  
But now I miss you

the second before you leave.  
Soon, I will miss you  
as soon as I see you.  
In the beginning, the unbearable end.

When I see you, I want to say  
goodbye  
so I've said the worst I will ever say to you.  
With goodbye gone,  
you would still be in front of me  
and we would have other words  
to share.

Today I choose you.  
I choose you above the sky  
and above the mountains  
and above the river.  
I choose you above every flower  
and above every healing herb.  
I choose you above my fear  
of losing you.  
I choose you above the voices  
that say I shouldn't choose you.  
And if one of the voices is God's,  
I choose you anyway.

David put down the book. He stood up and paced his room, three quick steps in one direction, a pivot, three quick steps in the opposite direction. He looked at his watch. It was a little past ten. Romario's words seemed like an imperative: He would go to the dance. He would tell Lucia...what? Something. Something definitive. In order to avoid the winter of his heart, he would tell her...Yes, he would tell her he loved her. Rich was playing with her whereas he, David, was...

I choose you. I choose you. I choose you. He removed his still-damp clothes and dressed in black khakis and a new white short-sleeved shirt. If earlier in the day he had felt ill, he now felt revived and energetic. He burst out of his house and was half a block down his street before he remembered he had failed to close his front door. He rushed back, shut it, and returned to the night.

In the dark, whale-like body of the gimnasio, the music—horns, guitar, keyboard, the singer's voice, like a carnival barker's—swooshed around him as if rolling on water. At the front, beneath the small stage and the band, whose members wore yellow tuxedos, were dozens of dancers, a blur of bodies. In the kaleidoscopic jumble he recognized the principal, who was dancing with a heavysset woman in a pink dress. Even in the dark, David could see she was elaborately made up, her cheeks enflamed. She must, therefore, be the mistress, he concluded. But he didn't know.

He scanned the dancers for Lucia and Rich. He was relieved when he didn't see them. Perhaps Lucia had gone home early; perhaps Rich was wandering the streets in search of bolos to convert. Perhaps he hadn't gone to the dance at all, but had collapsed in his room, falling into an obliterating sleep. (David hadn't checked his partner's bedroom.)

Perhaps, David thought hopefully, everything I want will still be mine.

But as if even a little joy was too generous a gift, he spotted them. They were off to the left, near the front of the stage, dancing slowly—even more slowly, he decided, than the song merited. No, they seemed melted into each other. If his first impulse was to run toward them in desperation, to separate them, to speak to Lucia straight from Romario's poetry, his second impulse was to turn and head back into the night, to huddle in a dark corner with his loneliness like a bolo with a bottle. Instead, he remained standing, unable to save himself by going in either direction.

When the song ended, Rich and Lucia left the floor. David drew in a deep breath, dreading what would happen next. He noticed Rich grasp her hand. And when they moved to a deep corner of the gym—it was dark, and David couldn't see well—Rich dipped his head toward her lips. David felt a protest leave his mouth, "No" colliding with a strangled, self-pitying question. But amid the rejuvenated music, no one heard it. David turned and sprinted toward the door as if from a bomb about to explode. In his wake, he left surprised voices. Someone spoke his name.

He burst into the night, where he was greeted by a silent, soft rain. He ran down the town's main street in the opposite direction from his house. He ran until there were no longer houses beside the road but cornfields and cow pastures. He hated the world.

He returned to his house sometime after two in the morning. Even in the hallway, David could hear his partner snoring. David found the book of Romario's poems where he'd left it on his bed. He picked it up and flipped through its pages. If it was a holy book, he had lost his faith. He strode to his front door, opened it, and hurled the book into the field across the street.

He returned to his bedroom but couldn't sleep. He was assaulted by images of Lucia and Rich at the dance. He was haunted by his speculations about what they had shared before and after. He should have invited Lucia to the dance. He should have told her, days before, what he felt. He should have encouraged Ted to be stronger, to stay. If Ted had stayed, Rich never would have arrived.

He didn't know if he slept. He left his bed at six. Rich continued to snore. David hadn't changed out of his clothes, so he exchanged his short-sleeved shirt for a long-sleeved shirt and tie. He put on his jacket. He walked outside and marched past Lucia's house. He told himself he wasn't going to look at it. But of course he did, hoping stupidly to find her standing at her front window, beckoning to him. He saw her closed door, her empty window.

He walked in the direction he'd walked the night before. He thought he might walk all the way to the next town, but he soon grew

fatigued and turned down a side street and stopped at Comedor El Fin del Camino. The name—the end of the road—was, he supposed, intended literally. The road did, in fact, end a few steps beyond the comedor, supplanted by an explosion of pink bougainvillea.

He was the only customer. When the woman who ran the restaurant placed coffee in front of him, he didn't ask for it to be exchanged for a refresco. He drank it as he would water.

When he returned to his house, Rich was standing outside, dressed in his sport coat and tie, his hair slicked back, a grin on his face. "You just getting back to town?" he asked.

David didn't say anything.

"You ready for today?"

David might have nodded; he might have remained still.

"You know what we're doing today, don't you?" asked Rich.

David might have shaken his head.

"We're visiting the Spider."

This is crazy, David was going to say. But he'd said it several times, and now it was too late. He and Rich were standing in front of the black iron gates of the Spider's gray palace. Atop the iron was barbed wire. It seemed to extend to the sky. In the four corners of the yard were guard towers, although, in the gloom of mid-morning, David couldn't see if they were occupied. Somewhere in the distance, crows shrieked.

David turned to his partner. "What are you laughing about?"

"It's a haunted house," Rich said. "What movie are we in?"

"This is crazy." There it was—a fourth or fifth time.

"I told you: If we convert the Spider, we will be famous, loved, and honored. Your grandchildren will want to hear the story."

"We're more likely to be shot."

"Don't worry. He's one of us."

"What do you mean?"

"Stars and stripes, partner. CIA. Red, white, and true."

Rich buzzed the intercom. David expected a voice full of accusation. There was no voice at all. The gate shuddered as if shocked, and Rich pushed it open. "What do you know," he said. "Open sesame."

They walked up a long asphalt driveway. On either side, every ten feet, were eye-shaped objects. They could have been lights. They could have been cameras.

Before they walked up the steps to the iron door, Rich straightened his tie. His hands, David saw, were trembling. David touched his own tie, but instead of straightening it, he merely grabbed it as he might a rope. "This is crazy," Rich muttered. David expected his partner to flash a grin at him, acknowledgment of the words he'd borrowed. But Rich bit his lip and frowned.

The door opened. Two soldiers in camouflage, rifles slung across their chests, stood in front of them. They both wore red berets, which gave a French-artist's flourish to their otherwise menacing appearance. One of the soldiers said something in Spanish. David didn't catch it.

But when he saw Rich hold up his hands, he did the same. The soldiers patted them down. They were more thorough than the soldiers who sometimes stopped busses in order to search the male passengers. At one point, David saw Rich wince. But Rich made no joke or sarcastic comment. From the interior of the palace—David could think of the place in no other terms—came classical music. It might have been Vivaldi, its lightness unsettling.

A woman appeared. David would never have associated the Spider or his austere palace with a woman. Moreover, she was indigena—she wore a blue corte and a red-and-white güipil—although on second glance, David decided she didn't look indigena. Her skin was the color of weak tea and if her eyes weren't green, they were a luminous gray. She might have been the daughter of a German who had settled in the country after the Second World War. "Come this way," she said, motioning them forward.

"We don't have an appointment," Rich said.

"You are expected."

"How could we—?" But Rich said nothing more and shook his head as if the joke the two of them had been playing was now being played on them. They followed the young woman down a long hallway, its floors made of marble. Although their shoes were damp from the grass they'd walked on, they made soft clicking sounds, like children speaking the local Maya language.

Although the hallway continued, they turned right and into a room with a fireplace. The Spider sat in front of the blazing fire in an easy chair with a high back. The woman directed David and Rich to sit in small chairs to his right; Rich opted for the chair farthest from the Spider. David had expected the Spider to be dressed in a military uniform but he wore black loafers with black socks, black slacks, and a short-sleeve, black shirt with an insignia of a silver spider. The Spider had thick silver hair, combed straight back, and liver spots on both sides of his face. His eyes were large and faintly bulging, like a bullfrog's.

"Welcome, gentlemen." His words were in English. He didn't stand or offer his hand but turned to the woman and spoke to her in what might have been a Maya language. Or perhaps it was German. David scanned the room. He expected to see the heads of dead animals on the wall, tigers and lions and zebras the Spider might have shot on an African safari or in one of the canned huts rich Guatemalans liked. But the walls contained soft, impressionistic paintings—knockoffs of Matisse, perhaps, or perhaps, given the Spider's wealth, originals. Like the Vivaldi, the paintings seemed incongruous, too serene for the man's reputation.

After the woman left, the Spider turned to them, fixing them each with a smile. David might have called it warm if he could trust it. "It's David," he said to David. He turned to Rich. "And Richard? Or is it Dick?"

"Rich."

"So I am," the Spider said and laughed. "Have you come to convert me?" Although his voice was deep, it contained an appealing airiness.

"We're only here to talk," Rich said.

"About your religion?"

“Yes,” Rich said. His voice contained an edge of anxiety he had never before betrayed.

The Spider asked them where they were from in the States. When they told him, he said he had never been to Colorado. “Sadly,” he said, “I never learned to ski.” He knew, he said, about the state’s outstanding resorts.

“Where have you been in the States?” David asked.

The Spider smiled. “Everywhere,” he said, “but Colorado.” Although he was joking, it was nearly true, he said: He’d been to every state east of the Mississippi and half of the states west of the Mississippi. “Of course I spent a considerable amount of time in Georgia.”

“Why Georgia?” David asked.

“I like peaches,” the Spider said. “And it is the home of the School of the Americas.”

Rich turned to David, his look asking if he understood. David softly nodded. The School of the Americas was a military training camp with a fierce reputation.

“What do you think?” the Spider said.

“Of what?” Rich asked.

“Of Guatemala.”

When Rich didn’t reply, the Spider turned to David. He’d been asked this question often, and he gave his usual bland answer: The country is beautiful; the people are generous. His words sounded even less imaginative, and less true, in English than they did in Spanish.

The Spider, however, nodded as if this was the answer he’d wanted.

The woman in the corte and güipil returned with drinks. David had expected her to bring coffee. But she’d brought a pair of mango refrescos for him and Rich, placing them on the small tables on either side of their chairs. The Spider had a different drink. Perhaps it was vodka. Perhaps it was only water.

The Spider held up his drink. “To the two of you—my new American friends.” He lifted his glass. Evidently, he didn’t expect David or Rich to click their glasses against his. They all drank. David found the refresco sweet and delicious. Greedily, he downed half of it. Despite his breakfast on the far side of town, he was, he realized, still hungry from the day before.

“How do you find our situation?” the Spider asked.

“Excuse me?” Rich said, leaning forward.

The Spider said, “We are in what I am confident is the last phase of the war.”

“This is good,” Rich said. “But we aren’t supposed to—.”

The Spider interrupted: “You’re not supposed to talk about the war, I know. But it’s difficult to keep silent— isn’t it?—when the war is all around you, when only the other day guerrillas or their sympathizers sneaked into town and painted their silly propaganda?”

“A little graffiti,” Rich said.

“One word would have been too much.” Although the Spider

seemed on the edge of fury, he smiled. Illuminated by the fire, his teeth looked like flames.

David drank more of his refresco. It was nearly finished.

"I must say, it's a little insulting. Here I have my home—one of my homes—and under my nose, someone derides me with their slogans."

David said, "They weren't directed at you." Rich shot David a look, but David didn't understand what he'd said wrong.

The Spider had a sip of his drink. One of his back teeth gleamed with gold. "I shouldn't take any of it personally. After all, I'm retired. Out to pasture. Out of the game." He smiled again.

"It was the usual stuff," Rich said. "Communist nonsense."

"I understand their desperation. They believe—they deeply and honestly believe—in what they believe in, however fantastic and unrealistic and dangerous to the prosperity and freedom of our country." He leaned forward, smiling again. "I'll confess something if you promise you'll keep it to yourselves."

Rich and David nodded.

"As a young man, I admired Che Guevara and Fidel Castro. I was even in the army at the time, but of course to have said anything favorable about them would have been my death sentence. But the romance of the Cuban revolution? Irresistible." He grinned without teeth. "You understand, don't you?"

David nodded enthusiastically, thinking this was expected. Rich's head, he noticed, remained stone still.

The woman must have come with another refresco because when David reached for his glass, it was full. He drank, and the liquid soothed him. Relaxed, he smiled.

"Of course we have been cruel in the war," the Spider said. "We've had to be. You don't punish a misbehaving child with a pat on the back and a trip to Disneyland. And if at times we've tried to adopt gentler measures, your country reminds us how much we lose by leniency."

"Spare the rod, spoil the guerrilla," Rich said and gave an uncertain laugh. He had finished his drink. David wondered if Rich was feeling the same inexplicable and satisfying lightheartedness he was. Swiftly, the woman brought Rich another refresco.

The Spider stared at Rich, whose grin faded.

"You're clever," the Spider said. It was difficult to tell if he'd intended his remark as a compliment. "Some of my countrymen call you religious tourists and criticize the ways you amuse yourselves here."

"We're here to save souls," Rich said.

"Of course." The Spider leaned almost imperceptibly toward Rich. "But sometimes to dance?"

Rich said nothing. David wondered if he was blushing. It was strange: Rich was sitting next to him, but his face had become indistinct. In the fire's yellow light, his features seemed jumbled, like an abstract painting. But rather than be startled by his skewed perception, David found it amusing. Like being in a funhouse, he thought.

"God is love," the Spider said, his smile seeming genuine now,

“but sometimes it is more fun to love the god in young women.”

“He has a girlfriend,” David said. On the walk to the Spider’s palace, they’d said nothing about the dance. But they hadn’t needed to. David had seen everything the night before.

“Lucky you,” the Spider said.

“I’d hardly—” Rich paused. Quickly, he glanced at David, but David was enjoying his partner’s discomfort. After last night, he deserved it. Later this afternoon, Rich would visit Lucia, sit on her couch, hold her hand—or whatever the natural succession to their evening would be under Guatemala’s dating rules. Of course Rich didn’t care about rules. He would probably coerce her into sneaking at night into the sawmill on the back road to the Pan American Highway, the town’s equivalent of Lovers’ Lane.

Lucia wouldn’t resist him, he decided. Rich was impossible to resist. David wished—he desperately wished he had what Rich had, all of it: his charisma, his looks, his unselfconsciousness, his courage. Or he wished Lucia could see that what he had was better than what Rich had.

But it wasn’t better, he knew.

Another drink appeared on the table beside David, although he didn’t remember finishing his last drink. The woman had brought cookies and bread. Starving, he grabbed one of each. After he devoured them, he plucked two more goodies from the basket.

“Have you had success here in your work?” the Spider asked.

“Some,” Rich said.

“In town?”

“The villages,” David said. He turned to Rich. He thought he should pay Rich a compliment after he’d betrayed him by mentioning Lucia. “He’s a wonder worker.”

“The true success of your enterprise might be measured by who among your neighbors you have drawn to your side.”

“We have only the one house next to us,” David said. “There are only three people in it.”

“A small household by Guatemalan standards.”

“There’s a brother,” David amended, “but he’s in the army, off fighting the war.”

Rich gave him a peculiar look. David ignored it. He was feeling too good to think about what might be troubling his partner. He supposed his euphoria—this didn’t seem too strong a word—had all to do with his full belly, his quenched thirst.

“Funny,” the Spider said. “His father, an ex-employee of mine, swore his son was sweeping floors in a bank in New Jersey.”

Rich drew in a surprised breath, and the Spider glanced at him. To David, he said, “But I may have misunderstood him.”

The Spider peered at both of them. “It’s never a good idea to mix business and pleasure. You can become sloppy and careless, allowing your emotions to interfere with your duty—the heart believing it outranks the head.” If he smiled, it was slight. He continued, “To finish up our conversation on the war, there is in operation now a quiet amnesty. If the men and women who have been fighting the government and military lay down their arms,

return home, and pledge their devotion to peace—all will be forgiven.”

The Spider held up a hand. “Don’t think this is magnanimous. It saves us time, money, and unpleasantness. It’s easy, and we like easy. But it’s also good, and, yes, sometimes we like good.”

The Spider smiled again. “Perhaps you could help spread the word.”

“To whom?” David asked.

“Of course we will,” Rich cut in, and David again noticed the uneasiness in his voice.

“Spread the word far but also near,” the Spider said. “Up and down the mountains. Up and down the street. Even next door.”

He smiled. The gold glinted deep in his mouth. His teeth flamed. “Let’s discuss something happier. Sports? I don’t suppose you could tell me anything about the Atlanta Braves’ chances this year?”

Rich and David didn’t speak, having nothing to offer.

“As I mentioned, I lived in Georgia,” the Spider said. “I became a baseball fan.” He reached for a piece of sweet bread and nibbled it before returning it to his serving basket. “The Braves. Funny how we honor our native peoples. With tomahawk chops and whooping mascots with feathers in their hair.”

In a murmur David could barely hear above the crackling fire, Rich said, “With genocide disguised as civil war.”

“Excuse me?” said the Spider.

“With casinos,” Rich said, “with Columbus Day.”

“Indeed,” said the Spider.

For a moment, there was silence. The Vivaldi had been replaced by something dark and haunting. David thought it might be Mozart’s Requiem. But as if the music was a mistake, it stopped and Vivaldi played again.

“All right, gentlemen,” the Spider said. “I’m ready to listen to what you have to tell me about your faith.”

David glanced at Rich, who wouldn’t hold his gaze. “Well,” David began, but the Spider laughed and said, “Do you know something, gentlemen? We might be said to share a country—it’s your native land and a land dear to my heart.” He smiled. “But we definitely share a faith.”

“You —?” David asked.

“Of course.”

David grinned, a grin disproportionate to the Spider’s revelation, happily coincidental as it was. “Oh, man,” he said, “that is awesome.” David felt unlike himself: expansive, euphoric. A phrase from a documentary he’d seen on the 1960s, spoken by a long-haired denizen of Haight-Ashbury, came to mind: *I’m tripping*.

David downed the rest of what was in his glass.

“So you’ve accomplished nothing or everything by your visit today,” the Spider said. “Whatever the case, I thank you.”

David understood that their interview was over. Neither of them offered the Spider his hand and the Spider didn’t offer his. The woman escorted them out of the room with the blazing fire.

They ate lunch in the Spider's palace, on a glassed-in porch at the back. The view was of the vast coffee plantation the Spider owned. If David squinted, he could see, beyond the fence and far in the distance, indigena men, women, and children plucking coffee beans from bushes in the chipi-chipi.

Over lunch, Rich recovered a little of his bonhomie, but when David didn't laugh at his first couple of jokes, he fell silent. The food—chicken and rice with pieces of tomato and broccoli—was, surprisingly, average. They drank agua mineral. The radiant feeling David had felt in the Spider's study had faded to grogginess and regret, although about what he couldn't say. He felt a dull throbbing in his temples. As they stood to leave, David's head spun. He wondered if he might throw up.

"You okay?" Rich asked him.

"Sure," he said. "Fine."

"I wish I could say the same." He gripped the sides of his head.

After they were outside the Spider's gates, slogging through a hard rain, Rich turned to him. His hair was plastered down on his head, and David noticed how thin it was. He'll have a bald spot by the time he's thirty, David thought. He might once have celebrated this insight. But the animosity he'd felt toward Rich had faded into disgust at himself. In front of the Spider, he'd criticized his partner; he'd said something else he shouldn't have, although, in the brief moments of grace his headache allowed, he couldn't remember what. They'd gone to conquer the Spider, but even Rich had proved meek and childish in his presence.

"I didn't know Lucia had a brother," Rich said.

"Uh-huh."

"He's a soldier?"

"Yeah," David said, although, with a terrible and stinging suddenness, he realized he could be a guerrilla. If he was as smart as Lucia, he was probably high in the ranks—a captain, a colonel, a comandante.

My God, he thought. What did I tell the Spider? He couldn't remember his words.

Rich shook his head. "She's pretty quiet about it. I have a hard time seeing that family...And why would her father lie to the Spider? I mean..." He trailed off.

"What?" David asked.

"I don't know," Rich said. "If Lucia had been around in the sixties and living in the States, I could see her slipping carnations into the barrels of soldiers' rifles. If she and her family are on any side in the war, I bet it isn't the Spider's."

David didn't say anything.

"Maybe he was abducted, like half the soldiers in the army," Rich said. "Plucked from his bedroom as he was playing 'Peace Train' on his harmonica or from his high school as he was delivering a speech in praise of Gandhi."

David tried to shrug but failed. Every movement was painful.

"Do you know?" Rich asked. "Do you know if he was forced to join

the army?"

"I don't know," David said. He spoke out of fear and a rising self-hatred: "Why don't you ask her—you're her boyfriend."

"I'm not her boyfriend," Rich interjected.

"No?"

Rich shook his head. David wanted to press him, but this, he thought, is what Rich wanted. He would deny, deny, deny—and then, grinning, he would say, "Okay, it's true."

A few moments passed before Rich said, "I shouldn't be dancing with Guatemalan girls anyway." He spoke with a certain uneasiness, a mixture, it seemed, of regret and anxiety. David wondered if he and Lucia, after the dance, had gone to the sawmill. Had they? Had they made love? Screwed? Fucked? Had they fucked? Had they fucking fucked? Was Rich worried about having made her pregnant? David felt fury and jealousy rise in him, but they were overcome by the hellish pain of his headache and stomach. He slowed his walk.

"What's wrong?" Rich asked.

David rubbed his forehead. "My head. I feel sick."

"You know he spiked those refrescos."

"What?"

"The liquor was so refined it was almost tasteless, but—here's another confession—I have enough experience to tell when I'm drinking alcohol."

"Why would he spike our drinks?"

"For the hell of it. Or because he was hoping we'd say something stupid, something he could use. It was like we were his spies and didn't know it." He sighed. "Thank God we don't know jack. A couple of Bible-loving bumpkins are all we are. Right, partner?"

Was he being ironic? David felt a wave of nausea, this time independent of whatever had been troubling his stomach. Had he betrayed Lucia's brother? Had he betrayed Lucia?

"And of course he isn't a member of our church," Rich said.

"He isn't? But he told us he was."

"You believed him?"

"How do you know he isn't?"

"What's the phrase?" Rich said. "You can't bullshit a bullshitter? You can't lie to a liar? You can't prevaricate to a prevaricator?"

"But he —?"

"I didn't bring us to his house blind."

"So what is he?" David stopped, crouched, dropped to his knees. He tried to suppress what was threatening to leave his mouth, but his throat was like an insubstantial door he'd locked against an overpowering horror.

Even as David threw up, he heard Rich say, "What is he?" He laughed. The rain continued, relentless. "He's the devil."

When they returned home, they found a telegram under their door. It said, "I have heard reports of your excellent work. Congratula-

tions.” But this wasn’t important. The name of the sender was: Joseph Young. It was code. They were to leave their town immediately and go to the capital. They were to take everything they could pack.

David didn’t plan to say goodbye to Lucia. They’d had a friendship, nothing more. The telegram was, in fact, a relief. He would be spared the terrible sight of Rich and Lucia together; he would be spared the daily reminder of the terrible ache in his heart; he would be spared—he hoped—disquiet and distress over what he’d revealed to the Spider. But Rich, who didn’t believe they were in any danger— “We are Americans, as in whoever messes with us will have a nuclear bomb stuffed down his throat”—dallied as he collected his clothes off the line in the courtyard, squeezed the rainwater from them, and deposited them in a giant plastic bag. David, meanwhile, propelled by anxiety and impatience and dread, was done packing in ten minutes.

Because he didn’t want to listen to Rich moan about having to leave—he knew what Rich regretted about leaving: Lucia—he stepped outside. His timing was perfect or perfectly bad: Lucia, home early from school, was walking up the street. He thought of pretending he’d failed to see her. But the rain had stopped and the day had become inexplicably bright.

He didn’t expect her smile. It shocked him, and he was wildly grateful. She stepped over to him and spoke his name.

He said, “We’ve been ordered to leave.”

“What?” she said, her forehead wrinkling. He saw more than surprise in her face. He saw disappointment and worry and hurt. “Why?”

“We don’t know. It could be anything.”

“Did your partner do something wrong?”

“Rich?”

She bit her lip.

“What would he have done?” David asked.

She frowned. “What wouldn’t he have done?”

“What do you mean?”

“Didn’t he tell you? I asked him to tell you.”

“But I thought you and he...At the dance, I mean...You and he...”

“Did he tell you I hit him? Across the face?”

David expected her to say she was joking.

“His hands,” she said. “They wandered.”

“They did?”

She paused, and David heard birds, their voices resurrected after the rain. “I wouldn’t have minded,” she said, “if they had been different hands.” She stared into his eyes and he felt the distance between them dissolve. There were a thousand words he wanted to speak to her. He could only mumble, stupidly, “Mine?”

“Don’t be too happy,” she said, her lips turning up into a small smile. “I wouldn’t have permitted them to go everywhere.”

“I wanted to kiss you at the first dance,” he said.

"If you had, I wouldn't have hit you." She smiled again.

But her smile faded. "So you're leaving?"

He nodded.

"I guess I can tell you," she said.

"Tell me what?"

"Tell you I wish you had asked me to this last dance."

"But I— I didn't—." He wanted to say *I didn't know how you felt.*

*And I didn't have the courage.*

"It's okay," she said. "I know you have a novia. I know you aren't supposed to dance."

"It's true," he said. "Or it used to be. Before I met you. But everything is different now."

"I wish it would be."

"It is. It *is*." He spoke as forcefully as he could. He would have carved his conviction into the asphalt beneath them if it would have assured her of his feelings. "Lucia?" he said, and her eyes opened wide. Her mouth was open, too, and he noticed, and not for the first time but with renewed delight, how one of her top teeth overlapped, if only by millimeters, with the other.

"Yes?" she said.

David knew he should warn her about the Spider, about what the Spider might do with the information David had revealed. But the door to his house opened behind him and Rich stepped outside. "Time to fly, partner," he said. "Time to fly."

"I'll come back," David told Lucia. "I'll come back as soon as I can."

"But what if you can't?"

"I promise," he said.

"You promise?" she said. "You do?"

"Yes, I promise."

"I believe you," she said.

He reached for her hand, felt it press into his. He squeezed hard and she returned the pressure. He thought he might tell her he loved her, but she withdrew her hand, said goodbye, and walked to her door. He didn't expect her to turn around, but she did. She waved.

David was still waving back when Rich said, "I hear a bus."

It was nine o'clock the same night, and David, Rich, and forty-six of their fellow missionaries had gathered in the capital, in a ballroom of one of the country's most expensive hotels. They were told there were "military operations in progress" in the regions where they'd been living. By midnight, said their leader, who was dressed in a dark blue, pinstriped suit adorned with both U.S. and Guatemalan flag pins, they would all have new assignments around the capital or in "safe regions" in the south and east of the country.

Rich raised his hand. When he was called on, he rose. "Respectfully," he said, "when you say 'military operations,' do you mean massacres?"

If the room had been silent before, it was coffin-like now.

"I'm having trouble reading your name tag from here," the leader said. He had silver hair and a suntanned face and the kind of large, amphibian eyes one might turn from no matter what the intention of their gaze. David thought his features seemed familiar, and he realized why: He looked a little like the Spider. "Could you tell me who you are?"

Rich told him his name.

"Thank you, Richard. As you know—as you all know—we are not here to meddle in politics."

"What about murder?" Rich asked. "Should we meddle to prevent murder?"

Quiet. The room was dead quiet. David, sitting beside Rich, glanced at his partner. He expected to find him as he was at the Spider's doorstep, his bravado reduced to trembling. But he wasn't trembling. He stood as erect as a soldier. It was David whose hands were shaking.

"You would... You and I both would benefit from a private conversation," the leader said. "Let's plan to talk immediately after our meeting, shall we, Richard?"

Rich said nothing. If he nodded, David didn't see it. But he did sit down.

When the meeting was over, David approached the assistant leader, whose full head of black hair made him seem no older than thirty-five, although David knew he was a grandfather five times over. After David introduced himself—or reintroduced himself (they'd met months ago)—he asked if their reassignments were temporary, if there was a chance he might be allowed to return to the town he'd left.

"I would like to think the war will end soon," said the assistant leader. "But return? We are always mere visitors." He gazed at David with suspicion. His eyes were such a dark blue they might have been black. "Are we not?"

There was a right answer. David gave it.

By ten-thirty, they had their new assignments. David would be living in the east of the country, near an old port town. He would have a new partner, a scarecrow-thin, bespectacled boy from Ohio named Felix Hammersmith. David and Felix sat at a table beside the hotel's pool. They agreed they would catch the first bus the next day to their new site. It was to leave at 6:10 in the morning.

In the minutes before lights out (he and Felix were sharing a room), David searched the hotel for Rich. At one point he found himself in the hotel restaurant's kitchen, staggering past a stainless steel table that hosted the bloody carcass of an animal he couldn't identify. He never found Rich.

Felix's eagerness to begin their work was, David discovered in time, an act. He was terrified of everything: snakes, spiders, intestinal parasites. He was terrified that soldiers or guerrillas, in a case of mistaken identify, would break down their door and haul him off to be shot somewhere. He was homesick to the extreme, composing page after page

of letters to his three sisters. He believed fervently in his faith and in his God, but he had a difficult time articulating why anyone else should. In the home visits they made, people frequently offered him remedies to ailments he didn't have. Unlike Ted, Felix didn't have the courage to leave the country. Although David felt protective toward him, he also felt exasperated by him. To his surprise, he found himself wishing he was again partnered with Rich.

Felix never wanted David to leave him. On one occasion, after he'd discovered an unidentifiable bug in their shower stall and was beset with anxiety, he insisted that David stand with him in the bathroom as he showered. "I'm sorry," Felix said above the beating of the water. "I know this is above and beyond, but it's what brothers do for each other, isn't it? I'm sorry."

David thought every day of leaving their near-coastal town, which had the Caribbean humidity without the Caribbean Sea in which to relieve oneself of it, in order to return to Lucia. But he knew Felix would panic and probably report him if he so much as contemplated buying a bus ticket. Instead, he wrote her letters, one every day, each with an urgency greater than the previous.

*Please be careful, Lucia. I've heard how bad the war is in the north, and I want you to be safe.*

*I don't know your brother, but if he isn't in the States, he might be better off going.*

*I'm worried about you. I wish I could come see you now. If you can go somewhere else, somewhere safe, I think it would be best.*

*You could come here. There's a widow who rents rooms. I could help you with the rent and with food. I hope I'm worried for nothing.*

When, after two weeks, he heard nothing in reply, he sent her a telegram. When there was silence, he followed this up with another telegram and a third. He wondered if Lucia's father, concerned about what David's correspondence implied, might have destroyed his letters and telegrams. But he feared another explanation.

One morning before dawn, Felix woke up with pain in his abdomen. David was sure it was due to amebas. He suggested he go to the pharmacy around the corner and buy iodine pills. "But what if it's appendicitis?" Felix moaned.

David hadn't been sleeping well; he'd been waking up at dark hours of the night and pale hours of the morning and standing in his courtyard and imagining Lucia's voice falling over the wall. Irritated, he said, "I'm sure it isn't."

But when Felix threw up his breakfast, he decided to be more compassionate. "Let's go to the capital," he said. "Can you stand a bus or should I see about finding a ride?"

David was surprised when Felix agreed to the bus. David sent a telegram to the central office describing the situation.

Five-and-a-half hours later, they were in the best private hospital in the country, where the assistant to the leader, a woman who wore black, horned-rim glasses intended, he was sure, to disguise her beauty, met them. An hour later, Felix was in an operating room undergoing an

appendectomy.

During the operation, David and the assistant sat in the waiting room, which could have been a waiting room in the States. All but one of the magazines on the table in front of them was in English. The television on the far wall was showing a U.S. talk show.

"You look drained," the assistant said to him.

Because of the kindness in her tone, he thought to tell her about his courtyard vigils, his hope of hearing, from two hundred kilometers away, Lucia's voice on the air. But he knew such a confession would elicit from her only disapproval and perhaps expulsion from the country.

"I'm worried about Felix," he said.

"Of course," she said. "We all are."

She removed her glasses. He saw he'd been right: She was beautiful. But her beauty only reminded him of Lucia. He understood what he had to do.

"I've left work behind—people I promised to speak with tomorrow—people who are on the point of coming to our faith," he said.

The assistant nodded. "Can you contact them to explain about Felix?"

"They're in a village two hours outside of town, and the man who runs the correos office..." David paused. "I like him. But he drinks, and so he's unreliable." He pressed his lie: "If I sent telegrams, I would worry they would never reach their intended recipients. I don't want to betray my commitment to them, to lose my chance to win their souls."

"I understand," she said. She placed her glasses back on her nose. "I imagine it will be several days before Felix is out of the hospital. If you would like to return to your site tonight and come back here late tomorrow or early the next day, I or someone from the central office will stay with him."

David nodded. "I hate to leave my partner."

But five minutes later, he was free.

And thirty minutes later, he was on a bus to see Lucia.

He arrived at dusk. The trip had taken three times as long as it should have because his bus had been stopped twice by soldiers. On the second occasion, one of the men on his bus had been dragged into the soldiers' truck. The woman who'd been sitting next to the man—his wife or his girlfriend or perhaps his daughter—had screamed herself unconscious.

From the Pan-American Highway, in air thick with chipi-chipi, David sprinted to Lucia's house. He heard his name shouted several times from houses on the sides of the main road. He didn't stop to see who had called him.

He didn't notice his old house as he passed it. He raced up her stairs. He pounded on her front door. This hadn't been his intention, but, propelled by fear, he couldn't help his rudeness. The door quivered and opened on its own. He knew this was wrong. He stepped inside.

In the fading light, he beheld the emptiness. The front room,

where he and Ted and Rich had dined, was missing all of its furniture. He shouted Lucia's name. He shouted it again. He raced to the back of the house, to her bedroom. Her bed and desk and chair were gone. Only one of her figure-skating posters remained on the wall, although its right corner had come loose and was curled into the rest of the poster like a broken limb. In the right-hand corner, at the intersection of the walls and five feet from the floor, was an imperfect red moon of blood. Around it, like hideous stars, were dark crimson speckles.

The next time he spoke Lucia's name, he whispered.

He returned to the front room. He discovered, scattered in corners, his letters and telegrams; doubtless the man who ran the correos office had simply slipped them under the front door of the empty house, the gesture hopeless or foolishly hopeful. David heard his name spoken. He looked over at the doorway, where a boy he'd never seen stood. He might have been eight years old. His right kneecap shot through a tear in his jeans.

"Where is she?" David asked him, his voice hoarse and fractured.

"Soldiers came," the boy said.

The boy disappeared as David fell to the floor. Even as, on his knees, he cried as he never had before, with a despair from which he would never recover, he understood what his life would be. He would return to the States; he would marry Abigail; he would find a career and they would start a family. By all appearances, everything would be wonderful.

Eventually, he rose and found his way back to the street. No one was around. Even the dogs seemed to know better than to test the night. He heard the sky shudder. He looked up. Presently, a helicopter hovered above him. Against the gray-black sky, it looked like a dragonfly. A spotlight flashed down on him. He might have shouted something up into its beam; he might only have wanted to. The spotlight lingered, as if to sear him. Then, like a candle, it was extinguished and he was left in the dark.

# CONTRIBUTORS NOTES

**Jeffrey Alfier** won the 2014 Kithara Book Prize for his poetry collection, *Idyll for a Vanishing River*. He is also author of *The Wolf Yearling*, *The Storm Petrel*, and *The Red Stag at Carrbridge* (forthcoming). His work has appeared recently in *Southern Poetry Review*, *Hiram Poetry Review*, and *Poetry Ireland Review*.

**Tobi Alfier** is a five-time Pushcart nominee and Best of the Net nominee. Current chapbooks are *The Coincidence of Castles* (Glass Lyre Press), and *Romance and Rust* (Blue Horse Press). Her collection, *The Color of Forgiveness*, is available from Mojave River Press. She is co-edits *San Pedro River Review* ([www.sprreview.com](http://www.sprreview.com)).

**Matthew Baker** is an M.F.A. student at the University of Nevada, Reno. His work has previously been published in *NEAT*. He will cat or dog-sit for you. He also likes hummus.

**Alisha Bingham** is a student at Truckee Meadows Community College.

**Ace Boggess** is author of two books of poetry: *The Prisoners* (Brick Road, 2014) and *The Beautiful Girl Whose Wish Was Not Fulfilled* (Highwire, 2003). His writing has appeared in *Harvard Review*, *Mid-American Review*, *RATTLE*, *River Styx*, *North Dakota Quarterly* and other journals. He lives in Charleston, West Virginia.

**Mark Brazaitis** is the author of seven books, including *The River of Lost Voices: Stories from Guatemala*, winner of the 1998 Iowa Short Fiction Award, *The Incurables: Stories*, winner of the 2012 Richard Sullivan Prize and the 2013 Devil's Kitchen Reading Award in Prose, and *Julia & Rodrigo*, winner of the 2012 Gival Press Novel Award. His latest book, *Truth Poker: Stories*, won the 2014 Autumn House Press Fiction Competition. He wrote the script for the award-winning Peace Corps film *How Far Are You Willing to Go to Make a Difference?* Brazaitis' writing has been featured on the Diane Rehm Show and the Leonard Lopate Show as well as on public radio in Cleveland, Iowa City, New York City, and Pittsburgh. A former Peace Corps Volunteer and technical trainer, he is a professor of English and the director of the West Virginia Writers' Workshop at West Virginia University. To learn more about him, visit his website: [markbrazaitis.com](http://markbrazaitis.com).

**Troy Cavins** is a student at Truckee Meadows Community College and local guitarist and sushi chef. He plans to further his musical studies at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee in the fall of 2016.

**Ha Kiet Chau's** previous writings have appeared in *Sierra Nevada Review*, *New Madrid*, *Ploughshares*, *Thrush Poetry Journal*, and *Columbia*

*College Literary Review*, among others. She also received nominations for *Best New Poets* and *Best of the Net*. Her chapbook, *Woman Come Undone*, is available from Mouthfeel Press.

**Courtney Cliften** just graduated from Truckee Meadows Community College with an associates in English, and she is currently working toward a bachelor's degree in English Writing at University of Nevada, Reno. She has previously published poetry in *The Meadow*.

**Dinah Cox's** first book of stories *Remarkable* won the fourth annual BOA Short Fiction Prize and appeared in May from BOA Editions. Her stories have appeared or are forthcoming in *StoryQuarterly*, *Salt Hill*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Calyx*, *Superstition Review*, and elsewhere. She teaches in the English Department at Oklahoma State University where she's also an associate editor at *Cimarron Review*.

**Anirban Dam** is a 20 something Accounting and Finance post-graduate and is currently pursuing a course in Chartered Accountancy. Apart from crunching numbers and evading taxes (legally of course) he is a part-time writer who has always been inclined towards literature despite his academic background. He is an avid music listener and an audiophile who is obsessed with keeping his music library organized and up-to-date. Currently, located in his hometown Mumbai, India he has been writing poems under his pen name Memento-Mori on a renowned poetry site. His works have been previously featured in *Vine Leaves Literary Magazine*.

**Darren C. Demaree** is the author of five poetry collections, most recently *The Nineteen Steps Between Us* (2016, *After the Pause*). He is the Managing Editor of the *Best of the Net* Anthology. Currently, he lives in Columbus, Ohio with his wife and children.

**Cheyenne Dowd** is a writer and performer from Reno, Nevada. A current student at Truckee Meadows Community College, "My Mother's Catheter" is her first published work.

**Merridawn Duckler** has published poetry most recently in *Agave*, *Sugar House Review*, *Fifth Wednesday Journal*, and *Blast Furnace*. Her fellowships and awards include *Writers@Work*, NEA, Yaddo, Squaw Valley, SLS in St. Petersburg, Russia, merit scholarship to Southampton Poetry Conference with Billy Collins, and others.

**Elena Gabriel** is originally from West Wendover, Nevada, and now lives in Reno to attend college. She hopes to achieve a bachelors in English after four years, and eventually teach English overseas. She has written these poems with the general subject of youth in mind, and attempted to capture what she thinks other young adults feel during this period of life.

**Thomas Gillaspay** is a northern California photographer with an interest in urban minimalism. His photography has been featured in numerous magazines including the literary journals: *Compose*, *DMQ Review* and *Citron Review*. Further information and additional examples of his work is available at: [thomasmgillaspay.com](http://thomasmgillaspay.com).

**Jeff Haynes** is a recent graduate of the M.F.A. program at Virginia Tech. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in such journals as: *Yalobusha Review*, *Fourteen Hills*, *Poetry Fix*, and *Word Riot*. He lives in Madison, Wisconsin, works at a non-profit, and rides a bicycle.

**Ian Hill** was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin in 1992. He now lives in San Francisco where he tries to become comfortable with calling himself a “writer.”

**Bob Hicok** is the author of *Elegy Owed*, *This Clumsy Living*, *Insomnia Diary*, *Animal Soul* (a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award), *Plus Shipping*, and *The Legend of Light*. Hicok is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, two NEA Fellowships, the Rebekah Johnson Bobbitt National Poetry Prize from the Library of Congress, the Felix Pollak Prize, the Jerome J. Shestack Prize, and four Pushcart Prizes. His poems have appeared in five volumes of *Best American Poetry*.

**Ruth Holzer**'s poems have appeared previously in *The Meadow*, as well as in *California Quarterly*, *Freshwater*, *Connecticut River Review*, *Off the Coast* and *Southern Poetry Review*. Her chapbooks are *The First Hundred Years*, *The Solitude of Cities* and *A Woman Passing*. She has had work nominated several times for the Pushcart.

**Shane Jones** is the author of several books including the novels *Light Boxes* (Penguin 2010) *Daniel Fights a Hurricane* (Penguin 2012) and *Crystal Eaters* (Two Dollar Radio 2014). His work has appeared online in *BOMB*, *The Paris Review*, *The Believer*, *Quarterly West*, *VICE*, and *DIA-GRAM*. He lives in upstate New York.

**Robert Lee Kendrick** lives in Clemson, South Carolina. A previous contributor to *The Meadow*, he has also published, or has work forthcoming, in *Louisiana Literature*, *South Carolina Review*, *The James Dickey Review*, *Kestrel*, and *Main Street Rag*.

**Annie Lampman** lives in Moscow, Idaho with her husband, three sons, and a bevy of pets. Her essays, poetry, and fiction have recently been published or are forthcoming in: *The Massachusetts Review*; *TriQuarterly*; *Orion Magazine*; *High Desert Journal*; and the *Crab Creek Review*.

**Hannah Little** moved to Reno two years ago after living on a small ranch in Fallon, Nevada for the entirety of her childhood. Her writing focuses on her experiences living in Fallon, her family life, and her relationships. She

is currently working on her English degree at TMCC. She hopes to advance her career at the Macy's department store here in Reno.

**Jerry Mathes II** is the author of the North American Book Award winning, *Ahead of the Flaming Front: A Life on Fire*, about his experiences fighting wildfire, an essay collection, *Fever and Guts: A Symphony*, and *The Journal West: Poems*. His novella, "Still Life" won the 2015 Meadow Prize. He has won other awards and published poems, essays, and short stories, in journals such as *The Southern Review*, *Shenandoah*, *The Sun*, and *Narrative*.

**Oakley Merideth** is M.F.A. candidate at the University of Colorado, Boulder. He has been published previously in *The Meadow*, *Anamesa Review*, and *New Delta Review*, among other journals. He is currently working on his thesis, a collection of poems that seeks to combine the numinous with the somatic by way of lyric, prose, and occasional violence.

**Devon Miller-Duggan** teaches for the Department of English at the University of Delaware. She has had poems in *Rattle*, *Gargoyle*, *Christianity and Literature*, and *Kestrel*. Her first book, *Pinning the Bird to the Wall* appeared from Tres Chicas Books in 2008. A chapbook, *Neither Prayer, Nor Bird*, was published by Finishing Line Press in 2013.

**Michael Minassian** lives in San Antonio, Texas. His poems have appeared recently in such journals as *The Broken Plate*, *Exit 7*, *Iodine Poetry Journal*, *The Meadow*, and *Verse-Virtual*. He is also the writer/producer of the pod cast series *Eye On Literature* available on I-tunes. Amsterdam Press published a chapbook of poems entitled *The Arboriculturist* in 2010.

**Chris Muravez** wallows in the remnants of an ancient glacier patiently waiting for the next one, which should be along shortly.

**Virag Nikolics** grew up in Budapest, Hungary and spent the past 23 years in the San Francisco Bay Area and Davis, California before her recent move to Reno. She has a B.A. in Creative Writing and an M.A. in Education. While raising a family consumes her energies, Virag attempts to steal moments with poetry whenever she can. Her favorite themes are based in nature and cultures, examining our interconnectedness and diversity.

**Amelia Pease** is a fifth generation Nevadan. She draws inspiration from a deep love for chicken husbandry, a rural lifestyle, and a passion for long-distance hiking. This is her first publication.

**Simon Perchik** is an attorney whose poems have appeared in *Partisan Review*, *The Nation*, *The New Yorker*, and elsewhere. For more information, including free e-books, his essay titled "Magic, Illusion and Other Realities" and a complete bibliography, please visit his website at [www.simonperchik.com](http://www.simonperchik.com).

**Mikaela Powell** is a student at Truckee Meadows Community College.

**Sean Prentiss** is the author of the memoir, *Finding Abbey: a Search for Edward Abbey and His Hidden Desert Grave*, which won the 2015 National Outdoor Book Award for History/Biography. Prentiss is also the co-editor of *The Far Edges of the Fourth Genre: Explorations in Creative Nonfiction*, a creative nonfiction craft anthology. And he is the co-author of the forthcoming environmental writing textbook, *Environmental and Nature Writing: A Craft Guide and Anthology*. He lives on a small lake in northern Vermont and serves as an assistant professor at Norwich University.

**Joan Presley**, a retired public servant, is studying creative writing at Truckee Meadows Community College and the University of Nevada, Reno.

**Lauren McKenzie Reed** is currently living and working in Hong Kong. She received her M.F.A. in Creative Writing from West Virginia University, where she taught for six years. She also has an M.A. in TESOL, and in addition to teaching and publishing she has traveled, studied and worked in several other countries, including China, Ukraine, Mali, the United Kingdom and Germany.

**Scott Rose** is currently an English major at Truckee Meadows Community College with an emphasis in Spanish. He has plans to transfer to University of Nevada, Reno to double major in English and Spanish, with a minor in T.E.S.L. While understanding the power of language and how we communicate, he writes in hopes to continue to find his voice and to connect with others.

**Lisa Roullard** has appeared in *Brain, Child; New Orleans Review; Literal Latté*; and other magazines. Her work has also appeared on busses in Boise, Idaho, as part of Poetry in Motion. In 2013 she won the Utah Original Writing Competition for poetry. Currently she lives in Salt Lake City.

**C.C. Russell** lives in Wyoming with his wife and daughter. His writing has appeared in such places as the *New York Quarterly*, *Pearl*, and the *Cimarron Review*. He has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize, Best Small Fictions, and Best of the Net. He has held jobs in a wide range of vocations—everything from graveyard shift convenience store clerk to retail management with stops along the way as dive bar dj and swimming pool maintenance. He can be found on Twitter @ c\_c\_russell.

**Felicia Sanchez** is a student at Truckee Meadows Community College.

**Tom Sanchez** earned his A.A. in English from Truckee Meadows Community College, and he is currently working for a small geophysics firm.

**Logan Seidl** is a graduate from the University of Nevada, Reno. Recently, he has won the DQ Award in both fiction and poetry, and the James H. MacMillan Scholarship for poetry/fiction written about Nevada. His poetry has been published in: *Crack the Spine*, *Constellations volume 3 & 4*, and *The Meadow*.

**Sara Sheiner** is an M.F.A. poetry candidate at Virginia Tech. She has been the recipient of the 2014 Poetry Society of Virginia Prize, judged by Rachel Zucker, and the Emily Morrison Prize in Poetry, selected by Dorothea Lasky. Her work has recently appeared in *The Volta*. She lives in Blacksburg, VA, where she teaches composition, has been an editor for *The Minnesota Review*, and continues to be a poetry reader for *The Atlas Review*.

**Ciara Shuttleworth** was born in San Francisco and grew up in Nebraska, Nevada, and Washington state. Poetry publications include *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Confrontation*, *The New Yorker*, *Ploughshares*, and *The Southern Review*. Shuttleworth received an M.F.A. in poetry from University of Idaho and a B.F.A. in painting/drawing from San Francisco Art Institute. She was The Jack Kerouac Project of Orlando's 51st resident at Jack Kerouac House.

**Jacqueline Stephens** is a bit obsessed with Gerard Manley Hopkins. She recently converted to Orthodox Christianity. Currently, she resides in Central Georgia with her two daughters. She teaches at Middle Georgia State University.

**Anette Swindle** grew up in Reno, Nevada and as a woman of color, has faced many different obstacles being one of the only black kids growing up in a predominately white city. Her poems focus on topics such as: family/generations, beauty/body image, relationships, and finding ones' self.

**Carrie Tolve** lives in northern New Jersey. She is an avid baker and reader. Her work has been previously published in *Mock Orange Magazine*.

**Cody Trapanese** is a student at Truckee Meadows Community College.

**Hannah Waldman** is an aspiring writer furthering her education in Virginia. "Living the Wife" is her first published work.

**Emmalee Windle** is a recent graduate of Northwestern University where she earned a degree in education and social policy. Her passions include educational equity, scriptotherapy, and social justice through peace, poetry, and hip hop. Emmalee currently resides in Memphis, Tennessee where she teaches special education.

When **Matthew Woodman** isn't writing or teaching at California State University, Bakersfield, he's probably wandering the desert, looking for jackalope. Interested parties can read some of his work here: <http://matthewwoodman.com/publications/>.

# SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

Our submission period begins each year on September 1st and ends on February 1st.

Please note: We no longer accept email submissions. All submissions must be uploaded through our Submittable submission manager system at [themeadow.submittable.com/submit](http://themeadow.submittable.com/submit).

For general queries, please contact us at [meadow@tmcc.edu](mailto:meadow@tmcc.edu).

## **Submission Guidelines**

We welcome submissions of poetry, fiction, nonfiction, and cover artwork uploaded through our submission manager system.

All submissions must be accompanied by contact information (name, address, telephone and email) and a brief (less than 50 words) biography; include the title(s) of each piece submitted.

We do not accept previously published work, but we will consider simultaneous submissions and expect to be notified immediately of acceptance elsewhere.

We will accept up to six poems, photos or art pieces, or one work of prose (fiction or nonfiction) from each author or artist. Prose may not exceed 6,000 words.

Your name may not appear anywhere on the pieces submitted, as we read all submissions without names.

# the MEADOW

TMCC'S Literary & Arts Journal

September 1 - February 1

Fiction

Nonfiction

Poetry

Black & White Comics

Cover Artwork

Please read our past issues and our submission guidelines at:

[www.tmcc.edu/meadow](http://www.tmcc.edu/meadow)

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## Sierra Nevada Review

The *Sierra Nevada Review* is an annual literary magazine published in May featuring poetry and short fiction. Editors read manuscripts from September until March. The editorial staff changes on a yearly basis with the exception of an advisory editor.

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*Christopher Buckley*  
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# arroyo

Literary Review

ar·roy·o

noun [C]

1. (in the southwestern U.S.) a narrow channel in the ground that is usually dry but becomes a stream after heavy rain.

-The Cambridge Academic Content Dictionary



[arroyoliteraryreview.com](http://arroyoliteraryreview.com)

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