

Orca

The background of the cover is a dark, swirling pattern of fine lines and dots in various colors, including gold, green, pink, blue, and red. The lines are mostly curved and radiate from the center, creating a sense of motion and depth. The dots are scattered throughout, adding texture and vibrancy to the overall composition.

A LITERARY JOURNAL

SPRING 2022

Orca

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With a staff of ten readers and editors it can be difficult to come to consensus about which stories and essays are selected for publication in each issue. Add to that the task of ensuring we have a good representation of cultures and perspectives, and making sure that each staff member's tastes are represented, *and* that we keep to Orca's stated aesthetic, and you have a recipe for chaos. Were this a "real world" situation, the process might devolve into the kind of animosity we see every day in the media. And yet, looking at the table of contents for this issue, connections and commonalities appear as if by magic between and among the pieces, and somehow we wind up with what we intended from the start—a literary journal that intrigues without insulting, challenges without provoking, and maintains fealty to the best attributes of the old and the new forms of literature. We believe that's the beauty of art at its core—that it is essentially a forum for thoughtful discourse.

– Joe, Zac, Renee, Marci, David,
Ronak, K.A., Jacob, Liz, and Tommy

Editor's Note: We have not Americanized spellings and grammar native to other English-speaking countries, but have left them in their original form in order to fully convey the voices of our authors.

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About the Cover

Priya Rama is a self-described “Migraine Artist.” The term means exactly what it implies—Rama suffers from chronic migraine headaches, but rather than allowing this condition to incapacitate her, she has learned to channel the experience, translating her pain into expressions of art. The result is intensely personal paintings and other works that have been exhibited and honored in dozens of shows



Poesis

around the country over the last several years. The painting, “Stars in my Embrace,” graces our cover for the April issue.

“I think of myself as an abstract expressionist, with my paintings highlighting a spontaneous, intuitive and personal mark-making,” she says. “Even though I wouldn’t call my paintings portraits, all of my works are self-portraits in a way. My art is part of me and I am part of my art.”



Drawn In

that my mind can do more than just process pain—it can transform pain into beauty.”

Fifty of Rama’s early paintings have been published in both hardcover and paperback editions by Pocamug Press, in a book titled, *Migraine Visions: Transforming Pain Into Beauty*. Rama is affiliated with a wide variety of Ohio-based arts organizations.

Links:

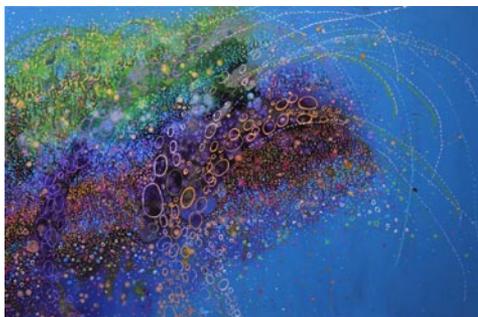
Priya Rama’s website: <https://priyarama.com/>

Priya’s work, along with that of many other artists, can be found at the Hayley Gallery <https://www.localohioart.com/>

Migraine Visions: Transforming Pain Into Beauty: <https://www.amazon.com/Migraine-Visions-Transforming-Pain-Beauty/dp/0998479071>

When a migraine comes on, eyes closed, Rama is able to “see”: “Colors and shapes flood my mind in fluid poetry. These mystical images recede, shift, radiate and pulse, becoming more vibrant and vivid as time goes on. Frequently, I paint through a migraine, trying to quickly tap into what I see. When I can’t, I am able to recall the imagery at a later time and commit that to canvas.”

It is a meditative and introspective process, in which the artist becomes one with her art. “My breathing slows down, my jaw unclenches, and my body slowly begins to relax. Often, completing a painting acts as a relief, and reminds me



A Glimpse...and the Sparks Flew

The Risk of Death from This Procedure is Minimal

ELIOT LI

Procedure: Cholecystostomy Placement

History: 45-year-old Asian Male post stroke, gallbladder inflammation.

Consent: Patient unresponsive, unable to give informed consent. Explained procedure to patient's next of kin, Flora Chung, wife. Discussed risks, including bleeding, infection, and death. Upon hearing the word "death," next of kin grabbed my hand and began to cry. She informed me her husband was at the dining table working through geometry proofs with their son when he suddenly slumped over. They'd celebrated their twentieth anniversary this past weekend in a B&B in Sausalito. She claimed all this doctor talk of death and disability made no sense. He'd been normal on Saturday, on the balcony pouring champagne, while she sat on his lap, wearing nothing but a blanket, while they watched the fog roll into the Bay. Attempted to redirect her, but she fell onto her knees and said she couldn't carry on if he died, she didn't even know where he kept the deeds to the house, didn't understand geometry, and oh fuck how could she raise Benjamin by herself? Explained the risk

of death from this procedure was minimal. Did not explain this was only my second time performing a cholecystostomy, the first being ten years ago while in medical school. Or that there were four more procedures after this one and the tech was giving me looks because we were already behind. Or that even if this procedure went well, Mr. Chung was already permanently disabled, would never again help Benjamin with homework, and would need high level assisted care because his stroke was catastrophic. I picked her up off the floor, and pointed to where she needed to sign. Informed consent obtained.

Technique: Patient sterilely prepped and draped. Endotracheal tube taped to patient's face. His unwashed hair musty and clumped together. His putrid smell. The same as what my father smelled like when he was in cardiac intensive care after his heart attack twenty-five years ago. My father's arm jerking with each breath of the ventilator. I was sixteen years old on November 13, 1996. The doctors scrambling, administering CPR. 11:07 p.m., the time of death. The machines turned off, the tubes pulled out. The purple tinged skin. My mother on her knees. I didn't feel anything. I didn't offer to help lift her up.

Her years of depression. Her phone calls, waking me up at night during finals week. *The toilet is leaking again, what do I do?* Stop calling! I don't know how to fix toilets.

The tech tapped my shoulder, gave me the scalpel. I couldn't remember. Which needle do I use? Which catheter? I placed the drain into the patient's gallbladder.

Patient tolerated the procedure without any apparent complication.

5

Disposition: Mr. Chung transferred back to the ICU in critical condition.

Addendum: In my office, slumped over, holding my phone, after searching through the contact list. They're paging me to Room 6 to start the next case.

I want to call my mother, but I can't remember her number.

Eliot Li

Divorce is Like Anything Else

SIAMAK VOSSOUGH

The first time my mother did not speak and introduce herself to another Iranian woman at Marshall's, it felt like something significant had shifted in our lives. We went to Marshall's at the end of every summer for back-to-school shopping. It seemed like there would always be another Iranian woman there. Sometimes she would be talking in Farsi to someone, but sometimes just from her appearance my mother would recognize her as Iranian, and say to her in Farsi, "Hello, are you Iranian?" It was an exciting moment for me. I would remember that we had something that could allow us to approach strangers with ease and joy. Whether or not I would ever be able to do it myself, I recognized it as a power.

6 The first time my mother *didn't* introduce herself to another Iranian woman at Marshall's, we both saw her. She was with her daughter, and they were discussing shoes. There was no way my mother could have missed her.

I waited until we got in the car to ask her about it. She had a wistful look, like she was remembering all those other times.

There are enough of us here now," she said. "I am afraid she will say, 'Okay, you are Iranian and I am Iranian. So what? There are many of us.'"

I didn't know why she had suddenly decided that there were

enough of us now that she couldn't introduce herself, and I asked her.

"I saw something in the Qasedak yesterday." The Qasedak was the local Iranian newsletter that my father helped put together. I used to look at it to see whose name I recognized in the ads. There would be Iranian dentists and real estate agents and auto mechanics in there. In their pictures they never smiled the way people did in American ads, and I always thought that was interesting and important.

"Mrs. Khajenouri's nephew had an ad in there," my mother said. "The lawyer. It said that he specializes in divorce law."

I was surprised too, though I didn't know why.

"I didn't know that there were enough of us here now that we were starting to get divorces. But he had an ad in there. He wouldn't have put an ad in if he didn't think he had an audience for it. There must be Iranians here now who are looking for divorce attorneys. I didn't know we had gotten there."

I wondered if Mrs. Khajenouri's nephew had smiled in his photo. That would have been as much of a surprise to me.

My parents always spoke of divorce like it was an American thing. Which was funny because at the same time they would also talk about how wrong it was that women in Iran didn't have the same rights toward divorce that men did.

"Maybe he is advertising to Americans," I said.

"Why would he put it in the Qasedak?" my mother said. "No, it means that there are enough of us now that some of us are divorcing. I didn't think we had gotten there yet, but I guess we have."

"What about Mr. and Mrs. Ganji?"

"How do you know about them?"

"I listen."

"They did not divorce. They spoke to some people in the community and Mrs. Ganji decided she could make peace with what he did."

"Aren't you always saying that women in Iran should have equal rights for divorce?"

“Of course,” my mother said. “But something happens when you see it in your own newsletter. When you see it *advertised*. Now it is something that anybody can look at in the Qasedak and think, hmm, should I consider that? I remember when our community was too small for something like that.”

I didn't think that Mrs. Khajenouri's nephew's ad marked a big change in the number of Iranians in Seattle. I still expected to be the only Iranian kid in my class again this year. Which was okay. Sometimes you go so long being the only one that you don't know what you would do if there was another one like you.

At home I asked my father for the latest issue of the Qasedak. I saw the ad with Mrs. Khajenouri's nephew and he wasn't smiling. It seemed like Iranians were always trying to show how capable they were in their business photos, and Americans how friendly.

It *was* a funny feeling looking at the ads. You see so many ads when you grow up in America that you end up thinking of ads as an American thing. There was something in the photos that was saying, Okay, we don't know exactly what it is to be here in America, but we know this: We know you may need to get your teeth cleaned, you may need to buy a house, you may need to get your car fixed. Let us start from there. Let us begin from the premise that any one of those things is a practical thing to do on your part, and perhaps enough practical and sensible acts strung together, day after day, can give you some kind of working understanding of what it is to live in America.

My father asked what I was looking at. I told him about my mother not introducing herself at Marshall's because of Mrs. Khajenouri's nephew's ad.

“Divorce is like anything else,” my father said. “It is a thing people need to get sometimes. Isn't it better to have an Iranian attorney in that case, for the sake of cultural understanding?”

“I know,” my mother said, hearing him from the living room. “I know divorce is like anything else. I just didn't think we were there yet.”

“Where did you think we were?” my father said.

“I thought we were somewhere where the newness of being here together was something that a husband and wife shared

together, and that it might be a positive factor in their relationship.”

“If a couple is not getting along, where they are is not going to make them stay together.”

“I didn’t say they should stay together. I said that it would be a factor. It is hard to divorce in a new country.”

“Well,” my father said, “*somebody* must be doing it.”

I looked at the photo. Mrs. Khajenouri’s nephew had the same expression as was in the other ads: Who knows what it means to be here in America now, but perhaps divorcing yourself from your current husband or wife can help. Perhaps it is exactly the kind of formal separation you need to begin to understand how to make a life here. I had to admit that it was hard to think that divorce was like anything else. My friend Jeff Easley’s parents had divorced and his father was now dating the mother of Leah Albright, a girl in our class. It was hard to think of Iranians like that.

“Anyway,” my father said. “What is the difference between Mrs. Khajenouri’s nephew and Dr. Tavakoli?”

Dr. Tavakoli was a psychologist who had a call-in show on the Iranian television channel. My parents watched him on Sundays sometimes.

“Dr. Tavakoli helps people figure out their problems so that they don’t *have* to divorce,” my mother said.

“Yes,” my father said, “and Mrs. Khajenouri’s nephew is saying, ‘Okay, in case that doesn’t work, perhaps this is the next step. Go to Dr. Tavakoli, talk to him about what is happening, let him tell you that the whole problem is because you are the third child in a family of eight, but in case that doesn’t work, here is another option.’”

“It is not the same at all,” my mother said. “Dr. Tavakoli is *building* something. He is doing what we all do when we come here. He is trying to *build* something.”

My father opened up the Qasedak.

“Here it says that if your car is having trouble, go and see Ali Ghaffari on Northeast 80th Avenue. Okay. Now suppose Mr. Ghaffari says, I am sorry, your car cannot be fixed. Take it to a junkyard. Should we tell an Iranian junk dealer that he cannot advertise in the Qasedak because he is not building something?”

“Do you know any Iranian junk dealers?”

“I might. I certainly won’t if they can’t advertise in the Qasedak.”

I liked the thought of an Iranian junk dealer. I couldn’t think of anything that could feel more like being part of a place than a junkyard. To be on the last end of things, the end of the line, to know that everything eventually landed on being broken-down and junked. That felt like really knowing about a place. To look at things and be able to see the life and meaning they once had—it would give you history in a place, your standing would go back in time.

The next time Mrs. Khajenouri was at our house, drinking tea with my mother, she mentioned that her nephew was doing very well in his new practice.

My mother was torn. She *did* still want any Iranian who became a lawyer or a doctor in America to become successful.

“That is wonderful,” she said sadly.

“He has many clients.”

“I am glad to hear it.”

“He has a theory,” Mrs. Khajenouri said. “He told me that he thinks Americans *want* to have a foreign-born attorney for divorce because it helps them remove themselves from the process. Psychologically. Divorce is a painful process.”

“Americans?” my mother said.

“Yes. I don’t know if it is true. I told him he shouldn’t minimize his own talents.”

“Of course not.”

10 “He has always been that way. I told him that nobody becomes a lawyer in America without being very capable.”

“That is true,” my mother said. “I didn’t know that his clients were Americans. I thought that since he put an ad in the Qasedak—”

“I made him do that. I wanted to have something to take with me when I go to Iran next, to show them that my nephew is a lawyer in America.”

After Mrs. Khajenouri left, my mother told my father why her nephew had placed the ad.

Divorce is Like Anything Else

“Divorce is like anything else,” my father said. “If somebody *did* see the ad and hire him for their divorce, we would have to consider that as the Qasedak having done a positive thing for the community.”

I knew he was right, but I was also excited that my mother would start introducing herself to people she saw who were Iranian again, because there was a power in that that I wanted to know, and so I considered the whole thing to be an even split in the end.

Birds

ANDREW CUSICK

She found it underneath the oak tree in the backyard. The tree was old and broken and half-dead and the bird was too. It might've been a robin or a cardinal or a jay—the girl was six years old and didn't know the difference.

“I found something,” she said.

She brought the bird inside and showed it to her mother. Her Mom wore beads in her hair and smoked Virginia Slims and drank lemon-lime seltzer and kept rosemary oil diffusers in every room of the ranch and sometimes she'd sit outside and read from a yellowed, withered paperback and other times she'd just sit in the air conditioning and stare at the blank TV set and not say much.

12 The mother took the bird in her hand and ran her fingers over maroon-soaked feathers and turned on the kitchen sink and brought a drop of cool water to the bird's mouth and the thing twitched a little and made a slight sound, no louder than a peep.

“She's really hurt,” the mother said.

“Can we help?”

“We can try.”

“Promise?”

“Promise. We'll give it some love. Even if it's the end.”

They set her in an old shoebox and layered it with Kleenex.

They guessed that the bird was confused and smashed itself into the tree—its head was crumpled and its eyes were glassy and unfocused. The girl thought that maybe the bird was just a baby and didn't know any better.

“Is it going to die?” the girl asked.

“Everything dies.”

“But today...”

The mom took the girl's head in her hands, whispered “*not today*” and brought more water to the creature's beak. The bird squeaked and fluttered for a second before going still. This repeated itself again and again. The two of them sat in that kitchen, gently rubbing the bird's stomach and dropping beads of water into its mouth. To the girl, it felt like hours, and there was even a part of her that was glad that the bird had gotten hurt, just so they could sit in that kitchen together.

Later that night, the mom made mussels and bread and told the girl to hide the bird before Dad came back. She said that Dad always wants a clean house and that a clean house was a sign of a good family and that work had been hard on him and that's why he'd been hard on them. The bird's movements were coming sporadically and its squeaks and squawks had all but faded.

“Where do I put it?” the girl asked.

“In the attic. Put it in the attic,” she answered desperately.

At dinner, the dad said the bread was too soft and that stale bread was better for soaking up the juices and that they should've gotten the bread a day earlier and then he put his fork down loudly and left. On his way out, he told the mom she looked good in that dress and that the Yankee game would be over in a few hours and that she should be up when it was. The girl went outside and sat in her dad's lap and watched him drink a Genesee and then another and talk about Torres being a wasted talent and how everybody like Torres was a waste. 13

Dad finished another and brought the girl inside and told her to go to bed. As she entered her room she heard a chirp from the attic above. The Dad heard it too.

“What's that?” he asked.

Andrew Cusick

Before she could answer, the mother stepped quickly out of the master bedroom and told the girl to go to sleep. She shut the girl into her own room before any objection could be raised.

Underneath the covers, moving chairs and slammed cabinets and a door opening and the anxious chaos of raised voices and her mother saying *please* and then it all turned to inaudible whispers. It was all but silent when the girl fell into a dream about flying and crashing and laying in the dirt waiting to die.

The next morning she saw the shoebox on the kitchen counter and found the bird inside, its neck snapped and twisted behind its body.

“I took care of it.”

Her father stood behind her, adjusting his tie and looking down, maybe in shame. The door to her parents’ bedroom was propped open and she could hear her mother from inside and what sounded like crying.

“It’ll be okay,” he said, shuffling out of the room with his head still down. “It didn’t hurt. I promise.”

She asked the father to bury it outside and he said that he didn’t have the time and while the girl went to her room to grab her schoolbooks, the bird ended up in the garbage with all the other things that got thrown away.

Inside her parents’ bedroom: her mother tracing eyeliner in front of the bathroom mirror.

“Mom, please.”

“I tried. But you know your father.”

“What happened?”

17 “I really tried honey,” she said. “I promise.”

The father entered the room.

“But it was hurt. It was alone. Who loved it at the end?”

Her mother eyed her husband for what felt like an eternity.

“Oh honey,” she said. “It was just a stupid bird. Your daddy did the right thing. It was doomed anyway.”

At school, her thoughts solely on the bird, any vague semblance of awareness it might have had in that final snap of how *alone* it truly was. The girl, nearly breathless, hunched over at the playground:

trying to save a caterpillar drowning in a puddle at recess, her classmates' mockery turning into confusion as her gasps turned to cries.

How many things had and always will have been breathed on and embraced for such brief flashes of time, little moments, taught just enough about love to know its absence?

The Magus

CATHERINE PARNELL

We all did it. We rowed, paddled, sometimes took the tin boat and motored over to Frawley's Island where we held steady in the deep lake waters in front of the cliff. We all did it, like those who came before us, and those who will come after us, and sometimes the connection between us and them took us back to the place where we were all children of the dawn, taking that leap. Only we knew where the leap from on high took us—deep into the blue bottle-green waters where the cormorants and loons dove, where the oldest fish fed, where the sun's citrine light turned the rocks to ivory. When Blake and Jamie took the tin boat one night at fishing time, we knew where they were headed, because they took towels and no fishing rods. Silly boys, as if they might fool us. We knew the pull, we still feel it, and so we imagined Jamie in the boat, the motor idling, as Blake dove off the side and swam to Frawley's Island, hoping, we know, that Old Man Frawley wouldn't see them. A distant childish prayer that was. And to hear Old Man Frawley later tell it, for he watched and didn't take off after the boys as was his way when trespassers touched any of his islands in the third bay, it was a sight. Old Man Frawley held back, we'll give him that. Because Blake was special, he charmed his way through scrapes and scrapes, even the time he smacked the doctor on the belly at the

regatta party he hosted, smacked him hard on his fat belly and said *So long fatso*. Blake, he always wound up with plasters and a scold, but the worry ran deep with all of us, because we wanted no harm to come to him. He was our good luck charm, the boy who got us through when times were thin, which he did when sweet little not-a-decade old Mary seized for three days in a row. Our Blake sat by her side as she wasted in our bay where she was born, and he slipped water between her lips, read her Kipling, sang ballads and bawdy songs to make her laugh, so her passing was light and clear, and our Blake was only nine. We knew he had a gift, a cross to carry but not bear because he did not know sorrow. Not yet. Old Man Frawley watched as Blake climbed the cliff, and gasped when the boy slipped at the ledge where the rattlesnakes are known to rest on sun-warmed rock, and the old man grabbed his binoculars for a better look and what he saw was Blake at the summit, stepping sure and solid on the outcropping. Blake, he said, stood up straight and tall and yelled *Watch me*, and he pushed off the rock into the air. He held there like an osprey, smooth and motionless, then bent and jackknifed thirty feet down to the water, and dove in, smooth as the slip of time, and as Old Man Frawley spoke it, we felt it, that draw to the deep where no sound other than the boil of your own blood percolates. The old man didn't mind saying his breath stopped, waiting for Blake to surface, waiting and waiting while his knuckles turned white and the pain went to his throat where words would not come, because our Blake seemed to be gone, taken by the gods of the great lake. Jamie stood in the boat, No, no Jamie, we cried, never stand in a boat, but Jamie stood and peered into the water where a slight ripple fluttered, then a great splash as Blake emerged, shaking like a dog after a stick, gulping bubbles and bleeding out his nose. But the miracle was what he had in his hands. Antlers, moose by the look of it, and how did he find a one who knew to hold your breath for a very long time brings you one step closer to the divine? Old Man Frawley puffed up with pride for our boy Blake, and those antlers took a place of pride at the makeshift library on the clubhouse dock, right there where legends of the bay grew, where the old steamer docked once a week and the sightseers gawked at the

17

antler's size, but we knew our Blake was magical, and when he came back some years later with his husband to nurse Old Man Frawley, who by then had the cancer, we judged nothing, for love is love is love, and Blake swam in the greens and blues of our bay, not asking us to watch him dive, but to dive with him.

The Mermaid Pool

CATE WEST

We set off late. It is already getting dark and I switch on the radio to bring the night to life. A ribbon of sunset flickers on the city orbital like a slow burning fuse, setting window panes alight. My Berlingo eats up the road and spits it out. It's a work-horse, that van, never once let me down. Haven't had a run in it for a while now. Driving feels good. The further we get from home, the narrower the roads become, until at last the verges brush us with soft, persistent fingers. The headlights carve a tunnel between them, its darkness framed by Queen Anne's lace and centrifuged by tiny insects.

She sighs.

'We won't get lost,' I say. 'We never do.'

'Because I pay attention.'

'I'm still hungry,' I say, reaching into the side pocket and pulling out a granola bar. 'You?'

The rain taps the windscreen like irritable fingers.

I rip off the top of the packet with my teeth and bite. Stale. Never mind. I flick through the stations.

'Christ, Al, turn it down.'

'Put on something else,' I suggest, and she does.

Olivia Rodrigo.

★

She's pretty. That goes without saying. All my girls are pretty. I've made sure of everything, this trip. Electric points for her straighteners, queen-sized bed, Michelin lunch, her favourite flowers. I've got something to say I've been stewing on for months.

Her profile's lit by the blue of her phone screen.

'We won't get lost,' I say. 'I promise. It'll be great. Maybe we'll even spot the mermaid. You never know!'

'Eyes on the road,' she says but not before I've caught her smiling. 'Al, for Christ's sake stop scratching.'

I am one of those people mosquitos love. I can never leave alone, worrying the lumps until they burst and the blood oozes. I know scratching makes things worse, but I just can't help myself.

I booked this trip. I talked her into it.

Suzy's one for cities, heels clipping along shining pavements, aperitifs, the kind of jazz that sounds like angry traffic.

What can I say? We can find ourselves liking things we didn't expect to.

At the glamp site I check in, unload our bags. Ian shows us where the firewood's stored. Our yurt's a long walk from the car park. As we follow the halo from his torch I hope Suzy is as excited as I am.

'Weather hasn't been kind,' Ian says. 'You'll have the place pretty much to yourself.'

20 Our yurt shines like a lantern. The bed's made up with a patchwork quilt, and there's a tea and coffee tray set ready for the morning. Just as promised, white hydrangeas are set out on every surface, with tea lights ready to be lit in little mirrored holders.

The place takes my breath away.

But when I shrug the rucksacks onto the floor, shake Ian's hand and say goodnight to him, I see that Suzy hasn't moved from the spot on the rug where she dropped her handbag.

'Come on,' I say. 'Let's go and find this mermaid.'

'Now?'

‘Why not? Then we can settle in, enjoy this place. Amazing, isn’t it?’

She looks around her as if she can’t believe her eyes.

‘Nothing much else going on, for sure.’

The sat nav takes us as far as a ride stop. The track continues, a footpath winding into the hillside and into the night. I park the van and Suzy climbs down, slams the passenger door. The sound must echo for miles. We stand in the lay-by waiting for our eyes adjust to the dark. You can see more than you think you will. Tree branches, the bloated outline of a takeaway carton caught in the hedge. A thick breeze has started blowing.

Suzy despises my van, but all the same I catch her glancing at it longingly in the beam of my head torch.

‘It’s just along the track.’

‘It’s pitch black.’

‘Where’s your sense of adventure, Suz? We’re nearly there.’

I adjust my head torch, turn it to night light, start walking, I know she’ll follow. The path’s level, easy, going. Before long a beam of light picks out my ankles. She’s right behind me.

It’s peaceful, walking on a summer evening.

She needs to give me time.

I like the things men like—cargo pants, the outdoors, scratching, Vans, and beer.

Liking those things never held a man back, did it?

There are options. Many, many options.

I’m choosing.

We have to talk, that’s all.

Maybe the rain fell heavier in the hills. In any case, the path is slippery. I slow to allow my boots traction, and Suzy’s gripping onto the waistband of my jeans.

‘City girl,’ I say, and for a moment we are laughing.

Like the old days.

The leaves around us rustle in the wind.

★

As the path veers uphill we fall quiet, concentrating on keeping our footing. If the gods look down now all they'll see are two points of light creeping along a vast darkness.

The gods play games. I hope they have their eyes shut. I hope I can smuggle this one past them.

My map showed the pool half a mile north of the lay-by. Not far, as the crow flies. But we are not crows. Suzy stumbles on a rock and clutches me tighter, her nails digging in. Rocks and thistles and tussocks, all these bumps on the path seem to grow to three times their daylight size and before long we are limping, almost at a standstill.

Even so, by the time we catch the glimmer below us we are both out of breath.

'It's very small,' she says. 'Al, are you *sure* this is the place?'

I look down at the sliver of light dancing high in the hills. I guess it has to be.

Now we are stationary she's taken her hands off me. The pool lies directly below, perpendicular, as if we could take one step into the night and plummet, into the pool, through it, crossing its silver membrane into the heart of the hills where watery caverns are sleeping, full of the ocean's ancient wonders, mermaids and selkies and sirens and fish that sing. If only we could join hands and jump, we'd be weightless in wind and water, leaving this grubby world behind us.

And if the gods were kind, they'd change us into lapwings, or watersnakes. Right now.

'Al, we'll break our necks on this hillside. Can we go back now? Please?'

I'd planned it. Salt water cradling us, me and her. My diary said the moon would be full. The cloud bloat's hiding it, but there's still time. This place blesses lovers who swim by moonlight, whoever they may be.

The drop looks steeper than I'd imagined. The pool looks small and very far away. Half a mile for the crows, miles down a mountain for Suzy and me, and Suzy's only wearing Converse, which is as casual as she'll go.

I pat my pocket, feeling for the ring box.

Still there, waiting its moment.

'Okay, Suze. We'll come back when it's light.'

'You know if we drive through the night we could be home by morning.'

'Home? I booked the yurt.'

'I hate the fucking yurt. I've seen it, I tried it. I fucking hate it.'

All the same, we return to the campsite. Glamp site. Suzy doesn't say one word all the way.

Ian's right, the weather has put people off. The cabins and tepees we pass are empty, there's only one distant fire. I'd stacked wood before we left and I light the fire pit to warm us, set out two deck chairs, and open the Captain Morgan. We sit silently, Suzy and I, Suzy swatting away imaginary mosquitos from the cloud of her beautiful hair, shuddering at owl calls.

Suzy watches the fire and I watch Suzy.

Sparks leap to their death on the damp grass.

When a bat swirls past, that is the finish. She stalks into the yurt clutching the rum bottle in one hand and her glass in the other. One by one she blows out all the candles.

I sit outside as long as I can bear to, as the evening cools down, listening to the hum of conversation from the other side of the site. They are laughing, the group in the distance. The wind brings the sound close and whisks it away. A couple stands up, silhouetted by the firelight, and begins dancing. 23

I squeeze my eyes shut and open again and they have gone.

I drain my glass and go in to look for my toothbrush.

Fumbling through my rucksack in the dark I find the rum bottle, rolling at her bedside, and I pick it up. I'm going to set it on

the table but on second thought I untwist the cap and take a swig. I reckon it will help me sleep. A swig becomes many. I drain it, and maybe open another. When I slip into bed next to Suzy, fully clothed, I can tell from her breathing that she's still angry.

Bed death, I think. All the same I brought her here, with this plan.

Outside in the darkness, something screams.

Inside it is worse.

When I wake I imagine I'm back in the flat, but only for a moment. The light's all wrong. This strange light points accusing fingers from all angles, confirming her side of the bed is empty. I find the quilt tangled on the floor, the contents of my rucksack strewn amongst it like soothsayers' entrails. She's impaled the coir matting with a note, using the skewer intended for marshmallows. It says she's managed to book the one only taxi in this godforsaken county to take her to the station. *And goodbye, ALICE.*

I guess I'll leave her to cool down.

I carefully pull out the skewer and push the coir fibres together best as I can. There's a small dent, a dimple. You can hardly tell.

I phone the restaurant, cancel our booking. I don't phone Suzy. Our rows are forest fires, a spark in the fuel load and off they go to flashover. Last night was possibly one of the worst. I can't remember. I roll my belongings tidily into my rucksack, clean underwear, a towel on top. I'm wearing my swimming gear, under my jeans.

27 I pick all the hydrangeas out of the vases and on my way out I pile them on top of the ashes in the fire pit.

At least there's no key to return.

Goodnight ladies, goodnight, sweet ladies.

Fuck that.

I follow the road into the hills, to the beginning of the track.

In daylight, the ground is easier to navigate. It's not long before I reach the point where we'd turned back, and as soon as I notice the glimmer of water below me I sit down and take a long drink

The Mermaid Pool

from my water bottle. The headache hasn't hit yet, maybe it never will, but the fogginess is beginning to lift.

It will hurt.

If I let it.

I begin walking again. The track is overgrown and rocky and there are points where I have to crouch and slither but I am glad to have nothing to think about except for handholds and footholds.

For a long time the pool doesn't seem to get any nearer but I keep going until I'm straddling the rusty wire fence by the pool, crossing the boggy grass to the very lip of it.

The Mermaid Pool looks tiny from above, but it's imposing when you reach it, an oval silver on the hillside, shivering in the wind. I'm glad to pull off my jeans and step in. As I walk the water reaches my ankles, shallow as the side of a coin, as if it's testing my commitment. I wade further until I feel my feet sink into softness. Deep, and not deep. It can be both. I look down at my calves, pale and sturdy, ringed in bright water. Around me the crowns of the hills and in front of me a shiver of water, ghost clouds scudding across it. I wade deeper, little by little, until I let go and swim. The water is a clear peat brown, the blood brown of a wound in water, body heat. They say it is fed by the Atlantic. They say the Celts worshipped here, and I can almost believe they did. I close my eyes and put my face right into the water, again and again, shaking the drops from my hair. I search for my mermaid, shining and dancing on the surface, hiding in the sedge, but I never see her. She's shy. Maybe I feel her in the softness of the weeds on my raw, painful skin, smell her in the blood tang of the water.

25

She's closer to me than Suzy is.

Maybe I'll take the ring from my pocket and offer it, a thrown-up flash of crystal and silver hanging on the mountain air before puncturing the silver and slipping down, down to delight her.

To be woman, to be man. To be neither, to be both. To swim in the water with a tail, to glide on the wind with wings.

What I have to choose, what I can choose, I will.

★

I don't know how long I stay in the water, but I hear the peewit and the curlew and maybe the shrill from a train. At last I get out, dripping like mercury, and lie myself flat on my towel to dry.

I know I'll never come here again. Words spoken in darkness have tarnished this place. No blessing. No bride.

I put my nails to my arm to scratch at it but the bites have scabbed hard, so many they feel like an armour of scales, so hard I can't break through them to the tender flesh, so hard I can't make myself bleed.

You might pity a mermaid for being other than a woman, a creature bound to water.

When you look at what she is not, you miss what she is.

The rest of us, bruised by life and god and each other—underneath our costumes, we come as ourselves.

There is no need to apologise for that.

Two and a Half

SID SIBO

Hummer Journal 2017: QCastillo. Photo 110: Rufous Band No. 27894 Male. Only 3.1 grams. Another underweight bird—

The dawn's tally of hummingbirds from my mist nets is entered on data sheets. I wrap up my scales, pliers, metal bands, all the tools of the trade, in reverse order of last night's unpacking. All summer alone in the mountain wilderness, I waited, content, for each new morning's brief captures, weighing and banding neotropical migrants. But today a strange eagerness pushes me down to Torrent Creek Road and its twelve miles to the Wind River, to catch the highway for our designated spot. Today, a weird dislocation rushes me toward our small crowd of seven other passionate researchers.

My life as a perpetual volunteer is...unfettered. For thirty-three years, I've lived with empty space around my sun-dark skin. The world has been enough.

I hike my last few miles out, unfamiliar loneliness growling in my gut. The sun's rising heat erases scents that morning's damp brought out—the rock aroma, and the peppery leaves of mule's ears under my battered hiking boots. Stark, shadowed escarpments contrast with dawn's citrine sunlight. Today, I am jealous even of the

dark metamorphic bedrock, spooning as it snuggles alongside glimmering quartz.

Hordes are gathering for the moment. Being with one's people feels somehow necessary. Because: this morning at 11:36, here in the narrow geographic band where the sun's total eclipse can be witnessed, that whole brilliant orb will go dark, offering a delicious paradox. The ever-present but seldom-perceptible solar corona will dance outside the obstructing—and revealing—moon.

It feels wrong to blast away from this glorious late-summer backcountry, but eclipse mania grips me. Or eclipse phobia. Strange things happen, we've all been told, during the sun's disappearance.

At the trailhead, RVs crowd the gravel around an outfitter's horse corrals, and people compare their protective eclipse glasses. Shrill energy reflects against all the sharp, shining metal. Bacon stench lifts from someone's propane stove. A middle-aged woman in madras shorts and oversized sunglasses waves me over.

"Well aren't you weighed down? You studying the eclipse? Tell us what you've been up to out there, and I'll get you some food."

My stomach convinces me to oblige, and I uncinch the bulky pack, shrug it off my shoulders. I confirm her accent with a quick glance at their camper plates. A test, then. "Working on a recently unfunded government climate study." I gauge the reaction as I steady a paper plate. I dig into salsa-drenched home fries, remembering blue-ribbon salsa from Texas.

"So who's funding it now?" A man in huge golf shoes hovers.

"It's Crowdsourced. Through the League of United Conservationists." LUC tries to be so mainstream, avoid the pointless politics.

28

"You mean, random people donate?" His wife hands me a plastic mug, and I grip it between my bare knees on the camp chair.

I nod. "Hummingbird research. No one wants to lose hummers." I turn to Golf-Man, trying to find the factoid that'll most impress him. "Their wings beat sixty times per *second*. Can you imagine that?"

"Nope, and don't care. What good's it do 'em?" He plops down across from me and chomps on a glazed apple fritter. So much for finding kindred spirits. A torn piece of napkin sticks on his lip.

“They manage a 7,800-mile circle between Mexico and Alaska every year.” I see the wife’s eyes widen, and think how far these two drove to be in on the big day. “About 157 million body-lengths of travel.” I hold my thumb and forefinger up in a three-inch spread. The calculations a person can make while waiting to net birds.

“Our hummingbirds go to Mexico?” Her eyebrows make one continuous line.

He stands up, shaking his head. “If they can’t stay in America, they don’t need my money.”

I know Spanish, Mixtec, English, and a bit of Shoshone, but body language is the easiest of all, so I stand up too, potatoes unfinished. Not worth a geography lesson about the countries currently counting the American continent as home. The truck is at the far side of the parking area, and their arguing voices follow me across crunching gravel. I heft my pack over the side, where it thunks on the ribbed metal bed, and I wince. Slow down, dammit—research instruments inside.

Hummer Journal 2017: QCastillo. Photo 111: right front headlight broken

When your truck is wearing an enviro-logo, it attracts a certain kind of attention. LUC uses a pale gold sun with red rays in slanted S forms, like native dancers. The group has grown in fame recently, and in enemies, obviously. I appreciate the half-assed nature of the assault, since they only took out one light. A subtle wink. A warning shot.

Below the trailhead, the difference in landscape is sudden and extreme. Wiry grass speckles the arid valley cupped within red sandstone cliffs. Sheared off the sidewalls, rectangular slabs of rock big as log trucks lean back on their right-angled elbows. Other than the creek-side green, a burnt yellow surrounds the two-track road, aiming for the highway that will connect me with the team. Small as a beetle from here, someone in a tall western hat rides along a curving ranch road, kicking up dust. I follow Torrent Creek down its now-gentle grade toward the Wind. Near Ring Lake, a sharp curve.

29

Hummer Journal 2017: QCastillo. Photo 112: back end of speeding truck I tried to avoid; Photo 113: Ford Ranger in ditch.

Best to document what I can. The clock on the dash shows almost nine already. I still might find someone to pull me out. The only traffic up this valley, though, is inbound, racing toward preferred eclipse viewing locations. Shasta, our team leader, gave everyone a SPOT device pre-programmed with three standard messages. I sigh, and slump against the truck's buried front end. My chapped lips taste of aloe from my burn salve. I could hit the message that would bring help, but everyone's eclipse experience would be ruined by needless rescue work. I press "Delayed, but okay."

Okay? Sure.

A collection of resort cabins across the lake has probably been booked for a year by travelers in the know. Strangers' voices combine in thrilled anticipation. Laughter carries too well over uninterrupted water, and feels personal. An inbound Camry with high school kids stacked high on each other's laps pulls up.

"Looks like you get to watch from here?"

"Good as anywhere, I imagine."

"Join us instead if you want." The smell of pot catches up with their stalled progress, and someone motions me toward the roof rack.

Not exactly the kind of camaraderie, nor the ride, I have in mind, and I wave them upstream. The Weed-kids bounce over rough washboards, squealing as body parts collide.

The truck can sit in the ditch until post-eclipse traffic reverses direction, like a tidal waterfall I knew once on the coast of Maine, near a puffin reintroduction site. Another latecomer rolls up. Inside
30 a roar and a dust cloud, a Harley stops and a well-leathered rider perches it on the kickstand. A second rider hangs a helmet on the handlebars. The dust settles enough to reveal a chunky man with a narrow horseshoe mustache and a woman with silver hair in a French braid. She unzips her jacket and tosses it over the bike's seat. He twines his thick fingers into hers and their arms swing together.

Mustache calls out. "The Apoc-Eclipse strikes already?"

I'd heard the term, of course. Watching them, I feel my stomach clench.

She lifts his fingers to her lips. “We’re hoping for better luck than you’ve got.” As their hands drop without separating, a trio of bangle bracelets on her bare arm clanks together. “It’s our first anniversary.”

“Congratulations.” What else is there to say? Not like there’s any room on the bike.

He looks me over, decides to wink. “The secret, my friend, is to keep things exciting.”

“Keep it exciting,” I agree, as if I have actual marriage experience. I’ve watched hummingbirds courting, the nose-dive at sixty feet per second, the upward reversal faster than bungee jumping. “Helps to remember she can always dump you.”

“Like your bike can.” She bumps his hip with hers, the silver buckles on their full-length black chaps making a tiny music. Her blue tank-top rides up, exposing a tattoo on her lower back.

“Is that a hummingbird?”

Mrs. Mustache lights up. “I *LOVE* hummingbirds. I hang a bunch of feeders on our porch to watch ’em.”

“Where do you live? When do they visit?” I check the colors on her tat, trying to identify the species.

“California coast. Northbound in really early spring. Soon as flowers blossom out.”

Mustache flips through pictures on his phone. “Last August, on our honeymoon, we stayed at this cabin in Colorado.” He steps beside me, adjusting the angle so I can see. “A guy said our hummingbirds fly south on this side of a big loop when the higher mountain flowers finally bloom.” On his tiny screen, a meadow—blue with penstemons—shivers in hummingbirds.

“So it coulda been our own birds, spring and fall!” Her arm brushes against mine as she hugs him to her hip. “I hope we see some today.”

A sadness that has nothing to do with LUC’s useless truck weighs down my tongue. “Except,” I say, “times change.”

Mustache checks his phone. “Holy shit, almost 9:30. Sorry we can’t help. Mechanic in Tukadika.” His thumb points downstream. “Only about twenty miles.” They cuddle back onto the bike and rocket away.

Despite their unexpected enthusiasm for birds, encounters are worse than solitude. I grab a water bottle and my field journal and slip down to a lakeside cottonwood. Its broad roots form a small couch and its trunk a rough backrest. The lake has chewed the loose soil, so I sit a few feet above the water's surface, legs swinging in emptiness. I had taped a poet's ode to hummingbirds on the inside cover of my journal.

*Never certain
whether I'm the
hummingbird
or the hunger,
the burrowing
or the blossom.*

Poets are lightweight companions, tucked between my backpack stove and sleeping bag. But no wonder I'm feeling at odds.

*The tiny
meteor of the heart*

bursts.

So generous of this Patrick Lawler, to share his own loneliness. A covey of chukars stutter-steps past, their masked faces an invitation to the carnival. They peck at small grass seeds in the dust, watching me. Disregarding me.

*Everything is
ready to be devoured.*

I tug a granola bar out of my cargo pocket. The crinkle of ripping paper interrupts the smooth blues rhythm of water lapping against exposed roots. My own discordance is joined by an osprey's ceaseless calling, as if a just-fledged youngster can't fly back to its nest. Honey glues toasted oats to broken almonds. I lick off my fingers.

My doodles are to entertain Shasta when she reviews everyone's notes this winter. I sip my water, stare in front of me. The creek's current is imperceptible here, though with a sassy tune it dashes around rocks over by the osprey nest. The backs of fish blend into the peach-colored lake bottom; my sketch shows only their rippled shadows.

Two and a Half

“What d’you think you’re doing?”

I hadn’t heard the rider’s approach, because a cow has no combustion engine. I stare at the stars-and-stripes saddle blanket, the cowboy’s matching dyed-leather boots. Only a scratched leather scabbard tilted off the cow’s saddle horn bears no decoration. It is all business, holding the polished wooden stock of a rifle.

“You can’t park here,” he insists. “Private property.”

From the top of a cow, his arrogant voice is ludicrous. She isn’t even a Longhorn, or something suitably western. She’s a brown dairy cow, past her prime, but her cream-colored muzzle shines like a *Got Milk?* poster. Her flaccid udder wags as she stomps an orange fly away.

“You gonna get moving, or what?”

His raspy voice jolts me toward conversation. “Sorry.” I set the journal on the ground. For the first time, I actually look at his face. “Someone in a hurry just ran me off the road. I’ll need a tow to get gone, I’m afraid.”

Suspicious, he scowls. His eyes are rheumy, one slightly off-kilter to the right. “Why’re you just sitting there, then?”

I could tell him how the truck had been vandalized already, how I didn’t want to leave any of LUC’s equipment in it unattended—especially with people like him wandering the road. “Someone’ll help after the eclipse is over.” I remain on the ground, leaning back on my palms, non-threatening. “I’d say most people are locked in to their spots for the next few hours.”

He looks toward the chunks of fallen cliff above us. He has business, clearly.

“You planning to be somewhere special for the action?” My sociable tone startles me. I really did want my people around, to share whatever the eclipse will bring. 33

“Not likely to tell *you*.” He urges the cow off the road onto a narrow path. I catch a look at his worn jean jacket from the back. Two double-barreled hand guns point out from a glaring Uncle Sam. *Homeland Security Starts with the Second Amendment*.

Saddle leather creaks, and cloven hooves shuffle away in soft sand. Good riddance. But my sigh drifts out.

They halt. The cow turns her head, and she blinks. The cowboy's shoulders rise with his rough breath, then fall. "Got a tow chain?"

I scramble to the truck's mounted toolbox, pop it open and lift a looped chain between my hands. Still a chance I'll make our rendezvous—I can almost taste brew from Shasta's promised pony keg. He reins the cow toward my ditch.

"Paintbrush here is stronger'n she looks."

As he dismounts, stiff, I pick up the tassel end of her tail, and stroke the point of a hip with it, avoiding the side with the rifle. "Paintbrush, is it?"

"For the state flower. She's no artist." He touches her neck, as if to assure her that lack of artistic talent is no deficiency.

I assess her light, probably custom-made saddle and can't see any point of attachment strong enough to hook tow chains. "But you think she's a weightlifter?"

He's busy braiding some lengths of weathered rope that had been tied under the cantle, and ignores me. In moments, he has a pulling yoke fashioned across her chest.

I still can't believe he's serious. "No teasin' the tourists, now."

He leans, in baggy jeans and half-tucked shirt, against the protruding fork of the saddle, scabbard sticking out under his elbow. "Is that the law?"

"I saw a sign that said so." I distill confidence into my voice, though my shoulders and my humor both lean toward pathetic, the sharp edge of the Ranger's smashed headlight just visible beyond him.

34 "I ain't crawling under your truck to hook those on." With a grizzled chin that's probably worked seventy years of chewing tobacco, he points at the chains in my arms.

What harm if it all falls apart? With the truck's front end sunk into soft hillside, I drag the chain under the rear axle and settle the hook over a suitable link. Crawling out backward, I stand, brushing off dirt, and glance in his direction. The rifle is free of the scabbard, and he's pointing it at me.

I freeze. The pewter feather hanging from my left earlobe, however, trembles.

He studies me. I can hear the filing cabinets in his brain clicking open, clanking shut. The long dark braid. The bits of jewelry. His left eye drifts, as men's eyes do, to my loose Hawaiian shirt, bold marigold, seaweed greens and close-mouthed macaws, giving away no secrets. Down to my brown thighs with their sun-bleached hair. I say nothing.

“Rattlesnake come out when you went under there.”

He shifts the muzzle toward my left, where I see the slight sidewinding track. I didn't know I'd lost enough elevation to be in rattler country. My eyes lift back toward the gun.

“I figured I better not fire or you might hit your head on something.” He shoulders the rifle, and waits. For me to hook the chains to his cow?

“I, uh, appreciate your consideration.” My words swoosh out like an owl from a spruce tree.

He nods, replaces the rifle, his back to me again. The effect of Uncle Sam's pistols does little to warm my jittering fingers. I'm still pondering the other end of the tow chain.

When he turns around, he extends his right hand. “Nord Lewis.”

I try to force steadiness into my arm. “Quetzal Castillo, sir.” I keep my shoulders square even as I shrink a little to meet his stoop.

His dry lips crack wide. “Ethel. Same as my dearly departed wife.” He quickly brings his second hand over mine.

Less of a threat this way, I suppose. I could leave it be.

I extract my hand. “I'm sure Ethel was a wonderful woman, but it's actually Quetzal.”

He hesitates for a moment, shakes his head, then again finds a connection. “Kelso, right, sorry mate. Have to admit, it's not a regular name, now is it? Had a roomie back at Yale Forestry School was a Kelso.”

Yale? I try to picture him in his college days. Though the fresh face doesn't come clear, the chainsaw and logging boots are sharply in focus. The memory has distracted him from his confusion. I lift the tow chain again, a suggestion. “So, was it your roomie taught you to work oxen?” Poor Paintbrush. I bet her ears, at least, are stronger than Nord's.

Chastened back on task, he scrabbles around under the bitterbrush then sees something he likes closer to the lake. He points, already huffing for air. “That piece of driftwood, just off the damn currant.”

Paintbrush moos, a gentle hint.

I jump into action, and return with his stick. He twists driftwood onto curved braided yoke, over the top of her neck. Now what?

He hauls a last section of old rope out of his saddle bag. This one smells of cow piss, and the color isn’t reassuring. He motions me toward the cow’s rump. “Put your chain on the middle o’ that.”

I manage to loop the chain under the yellowed rope without touching it, and walk out so it’s equidistant from Paintbrush’s ears, directly behind her bony hocks.

“Wouldn’t hurt for you to push.” Nord tosses this observation over his shoulder as he reaches for her halter and tugs. “Step up now honey. C’mom.”

From the far side of the truck he can’t see my rolling eyes, but I heave against the hood anyway, digging my old boots into the dirt, legs tense and solid with the engine end’s weight, shoulders strained. I can feel the leaning, my longing, truck toward cow toward roadway back to my people under this strange eclipse light, beginning to make itself known. But all that leaning doesn’t add up to freedom.

I circle toward the tailgate to see if I can trench the tires a pathway. Paintbrush lurches onto her knees. The piss-weakened rope frays. The chain sails, and I duck, but the steel hook makes contact,

36 just above and behind my ear.

Well hello.

Two eyeballs on curving stems. Four-fingered hands wave, waver, in front of me. Six lines stripe. Rectangular bug.

What? Red boulder slab, etched. Wings—like ladders—held aloft. A meter high, on split rockface vertical. Three-toed feet. Questions count.

My feet frozen. Where? Cheek in dirt. Cactus spines my back.

Who is this bug? Stripes zig, zag near bug bottom. Conjured, dreamed, smoked?

Behind me—grumbling not-humming. Before my grounded face thrusts a face. Squint. “You listening yet?” he mutters. Mumble mumble. “No stopping blister rust now. Whitebark and limber pine practically gone.” His arms wave. “Keystone species, those pines—foundations of our forests.”

My head rolls. Side to soft sand side. Brain pain, sloshing.

“Ethel was born in 1945.” Tall hat to his chest. “Same year blister rust first spotted in limber pine. Limbers can live a thousand years. But you don’t see green needles now. Photosynthesis dies, this whole ecosystem goes on the fritz.”

Rain splatter from his face. Numbers. Count. Data data data. One plus one equals eleven. And change. He points at the sun.

Ow.

Cardboard curves over my ears. My eyes darken. A nibble gone from golden apple’s upper right.

Spittle on my lip. Bug-like. Unladylike. Heard that before. Ears don’t work. What mumble? Glasses slip.

His arms drift left, right. Sag. Sadness sags. His anger already dead. “Only skeletons standing everywhere.”

I brace. Forearms on earth. Fingers splay wide for balance. I hadn’t noticed. Missed forest for missing flowers. Withered Professor tilts. Ghost needles whisper from elegant skeletons. No needles shade lifted arms. Birds watch sky.

I want to argue. Professor’s tall hat mashed. Askew. Boots red-white-blue.

“You’re not from here, are you?” His voice accuses. Rifle within reach. 37

Breeze ruffles pewter feather. My cheek doesn’t move.

Another accusation, sad. “Blister rust is foreign too. Eurasian.”

I’m not Asian. Protest. Want to, but. No oomph for words. Tongue darts out, licks salt lips.

“These trees didn’t evolve with Eurasian fungus. It’s taking them all out. Foreigners’re taking all of us out. China and Japan own half of U.S. debt, and no one can even say how much Russia’s got.

Whitebark pines'll be gone soon. Twenty vertebrate species need whitebark seeds to get through winter. In snow country, nut fat's necessary."

Nuts. Who is this guy? Fat? Remember, skinny cow. Only a nutter'd ride a dairy cow. Under my head, sheepskin-lined jean jacket. Gift from Professor. Life my gentle school, not cruel. Rifle glimmers, babyshit brown.

"But." I stop. Study my first word. I'm listening. I lay back against jacket, on earth. Glasses drop, bridge my nose. Smell of cow. Darkened eyes rest on sun. Golden apple, hungry bug nibbling still.

Rumble. Not my stomach. Yale-man. Hail to all the King's men. Bet he knows how many presidents from his alma mater. Equals what percentage of total presidents. Data data. Grumble mumble. Sad man eaten by sadness. "Over 95% of large pines in the Greater Yellowstone have disappeared since 2009."

Angry, I tug off the glasses. In front of me, red rock's Bug Man. Bug eyes eager with Message. Not received. Cannot copy.

"But." I remember. "Warm winters," I say. His left eye darts toward me. I sit upright. Point him to rock face, bug face. "*Native* bark beetles—epidemic. Winter temps no longer limiting."

I pant from effort. Rufous hummingbirds pant, angry, when caught in mist net. I imagine skeletal trees festooned with rueful hummers. Too skinny to migrate. Mountain nectar fades before frantic wings arrive. Asynchronous. Time changes.

"But," the Professor's voice rises over a nervous squirrel, "beetles co-evolved with pines. Millennia they've lived together. Can you understand millennia? How long do you think since that rock slab
38 fell off that cliff? How long since someone pecked their drawings into it? Millennia, Kelso, and the pines lived. Today, they're dying."

"Quetzal."

"What's Ketsell?"

"I am."

"That doesn't help." He rubs the edge of his hat between his fingers. "What the hell are you?"

My head hurts. His anger hurts. "Quetzal's a bird." My voice cracks. I miss my flock.

“Kettle’s stirred?” Professor paces, crushing silver sage. Pungent. My stomach growls. “Beetles kill mature pine. But—”

“Exactly.” He stares at me. Filing cabinets clatter open, folders spill across the floor. “You’re smarter’n you look. Beetles never killed whole forests.” He steps away, puts space between us. Darkness drifts into that space, dusky midday.

“Numbers count.” I shiver. My head shakes, slow. “Overwintering beetles survive. Never before—”

“Before, beetles culled old-timers. Beetles opened landscapes up, like loggers do. Made room for seedlings. Now blister rust kills the young pines.”

I remember. Skinny adolescent trees glisten with sticky waterfalls of silver blood. No whitebark nuts, grizzlies hungry as hummers. Cold air shakes me. Glasses drop over my eyes. Sun almost gone. I throw the cardboard glasses on the ground, rub my arms.

“When it goes, I go.” Nord in eclipse glasses paces blind. Rubs his arms in the cold.

I push upright. Slow. “What?” Clark’s nutcrackers crack jokes no more. Unsettled, they roost, as if for night. My heart bumps my ribs.

“No sense staying here ’til Putin owns my daughter-in-law. No sense in this world at all.” He strokes a finger along the oiled stock of his rifle. “No life here without pines. Look at them. They know—death with dignity.” He stumbles away.

Incessant osprey a squealing tea kettle, pulls me upright. Light reflects—rich, strange, translucent. Reflecting crescents through currant leaves, in the space between branches. Every gap makes a mirror. Another thin crescent. Prescient. Precious—today is. Bite o’ life. Take one. 39

I stumble after him, just to argue. “You don’t know what happens next.” His sadness slumps me. But—the bug eyes have *something* to say. “It’s still a mystery.”

The temperature plummets, thrilling. He shivers, and crumples to the ground.

I fold down beside him. He can’t be sad today. I lift his shoulders into my lap. Warming us, his jacket spread wide.

Take two. How did this happen?

“Nord, look. Over the water. A bat?”

Fish ripples reaching out, reach us. Otherwise, silence. Nord doesn't see. His nut-brown rifle darkens and disappears, like white-bark cones. Gone.

“Stars—Nord, do you see them?”

He doesn't move. My arms warm him, circle him. His large-print watch shows 11:36. Tree time, rock time. Slow mo. “Don't go.” I whisper, cold under the missing sun.

Chorused cheers cross the lake. A small, quick movement. On Nord's gray flannel, a hummingbird drops.

Rufous, bright eyes closed. I fear he's dead.

But, a breath. Rufous soft in day's dark. Starred skies open. The hummer has landed, not fallen. Breathing, living, feisty hummer. On Nord's unmoved heart.

In black lake, invisible moon reveals a bright corona. Improbable isn't impossible.

“Nord.” I'm still whispering. “Nord, don't move. There's a hummingbird resting on your chest.” I lean in. Nord's chest lifts quiet hummer toward black sun. A breath. Bronze feathers touch my cheek.

The hummer's gamble pays. A pair to draw to, this sun-and-moon. Mine is a hummer heart. Throbbing. Nord's mistaken mission thwarted by bold bird.

Two breaths. Together. Two and a half paused minutes. Twenty-four-hundred hummer heartbeats, plus two-hundred-times-two human heartbeats combine. My ears thumping. Our strange closeness enough to last another lifetime. The moon moves, one second, two, three. I touch the twitched smile on old man lips. One planet. Two osprey whistles. Three breaths, rising. Cowboy, hummer and me, under a live tree. This counts.

Overhead, a nutcracker shuffles. Black eyes crack open. Nuts, we are all nuts. I shift, steadying Nord's shoulders. Thin light brightens. Hummingbird orange as rock lichen. Likin' life. Say it—love.

“Nord?”

“Yeah?” His voice skinny as his cow.

“Why’s there a bird on your chest?” Flirt in air.

“‘S a mystery to me.”

Dive.

And the sun is back to beetled. Under its quick rays, hummer blushes. Soft crescents emerge again through pine needle gaps. Needles green in lake-strange light.

His knobby fingers lace with mine. Nord’s eyes invisible behind dark glasses. I pull him up against my chest. We are brothers, millennia old. His sigh quavers out.

Photosynthesis makes its mundane magic, and shaky, I inhale the thrill. Hummer ruffles, fires up, whirring. A rufous flash hides in the sun’s flare. Alive, and homeward, Mexico-bound. In nutcracker’s harsh voice, hunger calls from the tree overhead.

Moo. Paintbrush welcomes a new day. Her teeth crop thin grass blades, a reassuring rhythm.

My lips are close to his ears, my voice low. “How about a hot chocolate?” I look past his cow for the truck, my backpack and stove.

No answer. No breath. No question.

My bare eyes burn. They fill lake deep. The earth tilts, as always, on its axis, and brash ospreys wrestle, flying by.

The Patrick Lawler poem excerpts are included with permission.

*The Peculiar Perils (and
Excitements) of Living in One
Language and Writing in Another*

ADITYA GAUTAM

First things first: when I talk about the language in which we live, I mean to talk about the nebulous linguistic soup in our heads in which our thoughts are first formed and take definite shapes. This language, or a mixture of languages, is often our mother-tongue, the one in which people talk around us most often, the first language we learn to speak, and grow up speaking. It is, barring exceptional circumstances, the language in which a person would instinctively swear if a stiletto-wearing lady stepped on his toes. In most cases, it would also be the language in which one writes.

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And yet, there are those, like me, who choose to write in a different language.

In recent years, I have begun to wonder why this is so, why I write in English instead of Hindi, my mother-tongue and the primary constituent of the linguistic ocean all around me. As a result of these musings, I have realized that the reasons behind this choice are many, some of them complex, others more complex, some rooted in the uniqueness of India's linguistic landscape, some in my individual person, and many in the overlapping area between these two.

One of the reasons, I believe, is what Geetanjali Shree, an internationally acclaimed Hindi writer, describes as the “classic colonial condition”. Put simply, it is the tendency of former British colonies, India among them, to hold the English language in higher esteem than their own language, the tendency to treat it as a metric of intelligence or sophistication.

In India, for instance, it is not uncommon for someone whose spoken English is not very good to be branded a *ganwaar*, an uncouth or provincial person, and good English speaking skills are a prerequisite to get into a decent college or land a decent job. There is a thriving industry of coaching institutes that help people cultivate the perfect American or British accents and parents are willing to lose a limb to get their kids into English-medium schools. These schools insist that the students only speak in English on their premises and stock their libraries exclusively with English literature. So the English language continues to bask here in a glow of class-climbing, caste-escaping aspirations, and promises its devotees an entry pass to the “equal-opportunity” club.

At this point, if you are beginning to imagine some sort of pitched struggle between a global and a native language, please don't. The reality, as usual, is much more nuanced than it looks.

For one thing, unlike most other countries, India doesn't have a national language that is spoken and understood by a vast majority. Instead, we have more than 1900 languages and dialects spoken all over the country by a population of more than a billion people. *Kos-kos par badle paani, chaar kos par baani*, goes a popular saying, flaunting, with very little exaggeration, the change in the taste of water and the language spoken every couple of miles in India. Even when I call Hindi my mother-tongue, I refer to one of the many Hindis (it has forty-eight officially recognized dialects) mixed with Urdu, English, and a little bit of Farsi, which is spoken in my hometown.

In this poetically insane medley, English acts as a linguistic glue of sorts.

As one of the two official languages of India, along with Hindi, it is the language of our higher education, the national media houses, the higher bureaucracy, and the judiciary. It may not be the

mother tongue of most people in India, nor the language in which they live, but it is certainly our language of necessity and convenience, the one that people from opposite ends of the country use to communicate with each other.

As a kid growing up in a small religious town (only a few dozen miles from Rishikesh, where the Beatles famously found their *nirvana*), my school's bookshelf suffered acutely from a case of the "classic colonial condition". For me, therefore, English became the language of stories that could instantaneously transport me to places real and more-than-real, away from boredom. The heroes of my childhood were the characters created by Enid Blyton, J.K. Rowling, C.S. Lewis, Mark Twain, instead of the Indian folk heroes whose stories reached me only on the nights, usually at family weddings, when some old relative was feeling particularly sleepless.

At some point during these early years when my ravenous hunger for stories lost a millionth part of its intensity, a part of my reading self began to conceive of someone, a real person, creating the worlds I visited between the covers of books. Naturally, I longed, in a vague sort of way, to be that person. I longed, therefore, to be Blyton, Rowling, Lewis, and Twain. All of whom, incidentally, wrote in English.

No big surprise then that I made the same choice. We write what we read, after all, to tweak Ludwig Feuerbach's famous phrase a little. In the beginning, at least.

I think now, with a lingering sense of loss, of the first story I ever wrote.

47 I must have been ten or eleven years old because vampires were still cool back then, courtesy of the *Twilight* book series. As were the werewolves, of course. Both featured in my story, with all their tropes intact. That might have still turned out okay, except for the fact that all my characters sounded more or less alike, and there was little by way of originality in plot or structure. More importantly, even though I had intended to set this story in my hometown, the only resemblance between the real and fictional town turned out to be a shared name. The story's town felt more like the kind of countryside towns and villages where Enid Blyton usually set her

The Peculiar Perils (and Excitements) of Living in One Language and Writing in Another

Famous Five novels; my characters had Earl Grey tea in the evening, unlike the people of my hometown who have always been happy with their regular ginger-and-cardamom *chai*. They called each other “dear” and insisted on having some Scotch before going to bed.

Aspects of this experience may be common to most writers who dip their toes into fictional waters at a tender age, and like many of them who stick to writing for the sheer joy of it (despite the voice in their heads telling them what abject failures they are at it), the plots and structures of my stories also got better with time. Some things, however, remained as unresolved as for that very first story—a sense of missing crucial details in my characters and their settings. The world of my fiction, rendered in the English language, was too *clean*, too well-organized. Despite honest plots, it fell short of reflecting the messy, noisy, crowded world I lived in, the world whose stories I wanted to tell.

For as long as I have been writing, I have carried this feeling of losing essential details, the feeling of writing against an invisible filter between the world of my stories and myself. It has taken me a fair amount of time to be able to articulate this, and only recently have I have begun to understand that the nature of this perceived filter is that of translational loss.

Translation, the way I understand it, is an alchemical process. The translator does not merely transport some stories from foreign languages to our language, he actually teleports an alien world to ours while balancing the two paradoxical goals of preserving this alienness in all its strange beauty and making it possible for us to comprehend this beauty. When I write in English, I do something similar. Only, instead of someone else’s literature, I am translating the language of my being, and when I try to replace this language with another, I can preserve my plot but many other less tangible things are lost. This happens because language is not merely a mode of communicating the story to the readers. It pervades everything from the personalities of our characters to the architecture of our narratives. The way a typical man from the state of Uttar Pradesh in India speaks, for example, when translated to the Queen’s English would

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lose almost all its character, all its spice. The abuses with which he peppers each sentence, the obsequious way in which he deals with his boss, the way he is with his wife in bed, all of it, when passed through a filter of “clean” English would turn drab and ill-fitting.

The key to avoiding this, for me, has been the recognition that my in-head process of translation needs not to replace one language with another but to weave together both of them. Some things will still be lost, since there is no such thing as lossless translation, but it is the kind of loss with which I can make my peace because the product of this combinational translation is neither inferior nor superior to the original.

It is its own independent, beautiful thing—an alien world superimposed on the familiar, neither native nor foreign. To be able to do this, what we need, paradoxically enough, is to actively stop thinking about language and declare our allegiance first and foremost to our stories and their characters. When we do that, we are able to transcend translation, wrap up the languages in one another, and use them in a way that is most honest to our stories.

Salman Rushdie, for example, does this in many of his novels by interlacing English with HUG-ME (Rushdie’s acronym for the mix of Hindi, Urdu, Gujarati, Marathi, and English that is the language of Mumbai, the language he grew up with) because that is the language of his characters and the places where they live. ‘But what is so precious’, says a character in *Midnight’s Children*, ‘to need all this writing-*shiting*?’ The word “*shiting*” here referring to a typical Indian mannerism of highlighting an English word of a sentence by succeeding it with a rhyming word that is by itself nonsensical.

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By attempting to put my understanding of this pre-writing translation to practice, I have also realized that the self-assurance needed to construct my own frame of translation can only come from trusting my readers. Trusting them to take the language and understand it by the context of the story. Trusting them to not balk at the first thing they find foreign and have to Google. Trusting them, instead, to love that foreignness and the literary engagement it provides them.

The Peculiar Perils (and Excitements) of Living in One Language and Writing in Another

Rushdie, after all, trusted his readers to not confuse “shiting” with “shitting”.

All said and done, I know that like most things about fiction writing, there is no right or wrong way of walking back and forth on the tightrope bridge between languages. No formula that I can apply to the language of my experience and memory for translating it to the language of the words on my paper, and no precedents I can blindly follow. Every other writer who has done this has done it by finding a way of using languages that was best-suited to their unique voice and identity, and I will have to do the same.

Meanwhile, the excitements of living in one language and writing in another continue to lie in the perils of doing so, and in the peculiar, sometimes beautiful results that come up as I try to merge the two. And what about the days when the perils feel like too high a price for the excitements, and I find myself wondering if it would not be better to give up all these linguistic nuances and fully embrace a language once and for all? Well, on those days I try to remember an interesting anecdote that Arundhati Roy, a master tightrope walker herself, recounted in her *W. G. Sebald Lecture on Literary Translation*.

A few weeks after the release of her Booker-winning novel, *The God of Small Things*, a rather hostile member of the audience asked Roy a question during a book reading: “Has any writer ever written a masterpiece in an alien language? In a language other than his mother tongue?”

“Nabokov”, she replied, and sent the man storming out of the hall.

Seen or Not Seen or a Combination of Both

MARK GOZONSKY

Directions: During this semester, have you felt seen, not seen, or a combination of seen and not seen at school? Write a multi-paragraph narrative of at least 250 words, using your choice of first person (“I”) or third-person (a made-up name that isn’t easily identified as you.)

Mr. C felt quite seen indeed at school during fall semester 2021, except for this one thing.

For example, there he was yesterday taking his lunchtime walk around the upper yard to fend off Type 1 Diabetes, when some student sitting with her pals on the grass near-ish the rose bushes happily yelled out, “Mr. C!” and gave a resoundingly enthusiastic
78 both thumbs up.

Both thumbs! What was that even about?

Had she noticed that he was wearing the exact same fit as the day before?

If so, this was amazingly validating because he had deliberately gone with the same fit on back-to-back days to show continuity during these troubled times. Heavy cotton white t-shirt, quality white cotton dress shirt, thick gray cords and the black Hush Puppies loafers so cozy and reassuring and sturdy, they are the MVP of COVID.

Not the exact same shirts both days, because: keep it fresh. Mr. C is blessed to have several white shirts.

Oh, and the black baseball cap, because shoes match the hat.

Shoes match the hat is one of the guiding principles of Mr. C's life, one of the many guiding principles he has learned from playing tennis for these many years at Ardelia Park in unincorporated LA County south of Slauson and just north of Inglewood. Another guiding principle he learned at Ardelia is the chin nod, which is how you acknowledge people as you walk the world.

Chin up, then right back down.

That's all that needs to be said. You could be crossing paths with the baddest mamma-jamma EVER and the chin nod would make everyone feel recognized and respected so they could keep on walking the world. Mr. C is an active chin nodder as he circumnavigates the yard, getting his steps in. Here a nod, there a nod, everywhere a nod-nod. Every so often, a student will wave and he'll wave back, not a huge upper-body-as-rainbow wave, even though that may be his first impulse. It would be too much. A twinkling of the fingers. Twinkling is fine but he prefers the nod as it is so concise.

Two thumbs up, though. Mr. C appreciated the enthusiasm in the very map pin of his soul. Yet it was still a lot to process. Aren't we supposed to keep it cool? The affection between teacher & student? I'm pretty sure we're supposed to keep it, like, way cool.

It's all good, though. Mr. C did not even see who this student was, which is much better. He has lost his glasses again. Where are they? Are they up on the brim of his baseball cap? No. Is he wearing them? No. Then where are they? He doesn't know. That's why they're lost! But probably not permanently. Probably they'll turn up. Mr. C has faith. 49

Meanwhile, it might not even have been a student but rather an angel checking in to help him keep on trucking through the last couple of weeks before winter vacation when everybody is like oh please, please, please, let it just be vacation already.

It will be.

Soon enough.

You don't want to rush because then you get to the end too soon.

Mark Grogan

★

The point being, Mr. C feels seen in terms of *los estudiantes*. The other teachers though. We must tread carefully in this part of the conversation as Mr. C is a big believer in the united front. Just as you wouldn't encourage your offspring to play mommy off daddy nor daddy off mommy, so too do you not want to be dissing the other teachers *en frente de los estudiantes* because that is inviting chaos.

And let's be clear.

Chaos is not invited.

This is not to say that chaos won't crash the party. Chaos WILL crash the party. You don't have to encourage it, though. That's why Mr. C is not about to start dissing the other teachers. However, it does burn that during Professional Development this semester, they've been doing tours of classrooms that show exceptional student interaction and oh my gosh what an Oscar snub: Mr. C's classroom—which in his opinion is student interaction—y as all get-out—has not been included on any tour.

Even though Mr. C's classroom highlights student-made stick figure statues, posed doing what students then wrote about doing in their college application essays, such as showing leadership and creativity and resilience, etc. These stick figures are made of pipe cleaners and are among the most likeable and admirable things Mr. C has ever seen.

50 Have you seen the trombonist? The skier? The somersaulter? The many *readers* holding their pipe cleaner *books*? The only rule was the stick figures had to be able to stand up by themselves. The classroom is festooned with slightly wobbly but upright figurines of the student body at collective peak admirability. So how come tour busses of teachers aren't scheduled throughout the day for visits to Mr. C's classroom?

Instead of answering that, I will instead say that his classroom also includes many dragon kites students made at the start of the year as a getting-to-know-you and in tacit support of Asian folklore during these troubled times. There are also essays students wrote about whether taping bags of corn chips such as Fritos and Takis to

Seen or Not Seen or a Combination of Both

the whiteboard is art + why or why not & what in any case would make it better art.

All of this seems very student-involve-y to Mr. C and he thinks it might be of use to other teachers for stealing ideas, which he is all in favor of. He tells himself he doesn't care, which is an unfortunate example of Mr. C lying to himself because if you've been reading this then you know, he does care. A lot. But whatever, it's bad to get everything you want and Mr. C has plenty of white shirts. He should take comfort from that, and he does, literally.

Plus, instead of sulking he is going to do something constructive, right now, which is to write an email inviting the other teachers to visit his room... or—wait!—stop the presses—it's Opposite Day—he's *not* going to do that. Because he asked his wife first, "Should I invite the other teachers to come look at my room?" and she said, "What do you care what they think?"

Yeah! You tell 'em, Mr. C's wife. What *does* he care what the other teachers think? Hah! I don't know. Let me think about it. Okay, he is a little bit sad that other teachers don't come into his room and ooh and ahh about how student interactive-y it is and then copy him.

But these are troubled times. Chaos has crashed the party, eaten almost all the snacks and done weird stuff on the furniture, so everything is at best awkward. It is not a good time in human history to be blaming people and especially not teachers, who already get blamed plenty.

So instead, Mr. C stayed after school to see the student Winter Dance Recital because two of his students asked if he was going and he is fond both of those students and hopes for them to feel seen. 51

P.S.: Did he like it? Heck yeah. He sat with two of his teacher friends and they chatted happily together about how much energy it takes to be a teacher. Yes, he *does* have teacher friends, probably about a dozen. That's a lot. Not all the teachers at his school are...ha! Almost had me there. The dancers started by dancing up a storm to one of his favorite numbers, "Boogie Wonderland" by KC and the Sunshine Band. They continued dancing up a storm

Mark Gopznsky

throughout the evening, and even performed “Steam Heat” from *The Pajama Game*, which is one of his wife’s favorite numbers. Sometimes she sings and dances to it, spontaneously, in their kitchen.

Everyone Is Dead

STEVE FOX

Everyone is dead.

It's like a plot-twist for Sampo Andersen right as the story begins. All Sampo Andersen has to do is take his dog home from work. But when he and his somethingdoodle, Gleason, walk a few blocks from the 1950s Mid-Century Modern office building, Sampo Andersen finds himself very alone, staring down at a dead crow on the concrete sidewalk beside a colorful mosaic.

"Everyone is dead," he says to Gleason. Sampo Andersen smiles. Gleason looks around but does not respond. Sampo Andersen doesn't expect his dog to respond, but it would be nice if sometimes he did. Everyone is dead, he murmurs again in his head. "Including this crow," he says aloud. Gleason sniffs at the gleaming crow sprawled in the middle of the sidewalk. Sampo Andersen tugs his leash. 53

The crow calls to mind a game Sampo Andersen once played as a kid: Everyone Is Dead. It's a simple game of make-believe. If no one is around, and all is quiet, then it must logically follow that everyone is dead. The absence of everyone equals the existence of no one. Fun times, for a little boy, to go out on corpse patrol to seek out and recover elusive cadavers tucked away in

city parks or beneath the floorboards of the Hausers' living room or stacked in neat cords at the Soylent Green plant down by the river. Any time no one was ever around equaled the game being suddenly afoot.

Sampo Andersen looks behind him past the basswood blossoms toward his office building, now out of sight beyond the humped street. He thinks of Yvette, the therapist in the office next door to his. She slipped a letter beneath Sampo Andersen's door, a letter which he nearly stepped on while walking out to use the restroom down the corridor.

Dear neighbor, the letter read. After months of sharing the same quiet office corridor, Yvette has yet to address Sampo Andersen by his given name. *This isn't a dog-park or puppy playground. If you are unable to control your animal, you must leave it at home.*

Sampo Andersen stopped reading in the middle of the next paragraph, which rolled on to the next page. The letter continued for another page after that, all single spaced. He set the letter on his desk and left with Gleason.

Yvette doesn't seem like a very nice person for a therapist. But what Sampo Andersen knows of her, he only knows in passing. He attributes some of this non-niceness to her profession of re-assembling people back into being people again. He's seen the dark green pockets beneath Yvette's bleary eyes. He's heard her clients' sobs push through his walls. Hers is not easy work.

Sampo Andersen's work isn't exactly easy, either. Easy is how you describe other people's work.

57 No one really knows what it is exactly that Sampo Andersen does, but it's very demanding and very stressful. Remote mathy visualization involving data algorithms to predict fast-moving imaginary supply-chain management targets in an isolated environment, Sampo Andersen's place in the machinery of this industry figures as just one star in one constellation of one galaxy of separate yet united-by-the-magic-of-the-Internet co-collaborators. Meetings with distant colleagues take place mere feet in front of him through Sampo Andersen's high-resolution computer monitors. Reprimands and deadlines, too. Each co-worker blinks infinitely distant from

their remarkable proximity, each their own star, each right in Sampo Andersen's face in on-demand convenience.

"You need thick skin for this job," his boss-in-another-time-zone sighs, wagging his head magnanimously through a pixel-perfect display. "You do, Samp. Ya just do."

Sampo Andersen's boss calls Sampo Andersen "Samp" for short. His boss's regular uttering of one needing thick skin for this hitting-of-fast-moving-imaginary-targets-and-getting-yelled-at-from-afar thing implies to Sampo Andersen that his boss feels that he himself is in possession of thick skin. Sampo Andersen disagrees. In Sampo Andersen's opinion, his boss does not have thick skin because in Sampo Andersen's opinion, his boss has no skin at all. Sampo Andersen's boss has scales.

A thin black line of ants advances in a spiral on the sidewalk behind Sampo Andersen and the dead crow at his feet and Gleason at his side. The thin black line swells, coils, and breathes in living ant art created courtesy of the woman who resides in the house in front of the sidewalk. Tight lawn edging frames each concrete sidewalk section into an individual canvas, which the woman, whose name Sampo Andersen can never remember—Rhonda?—hoses down and scrubs daily with a stout broom. As the day warms and the concrete dries, the woman draws shapes onto the cement squares by dispensing honey from squeeze bottles. Within the shapes of these lines, she applies syrup and molasses with broad brush strokes. The ants rise up from their small earthen mounds and come down from the trees with the rising sun and gleaming, heating slabs. The sticky honey stains the brown ants black.

The intricate outline of her honey opus, the woman's *opus ex mel*, jumps to life and quivers with pulsating throngs of ants. The syrup- and molasses-filled outlines draw different colored species of ants, along with flying insects varying in coloration from bluish greens to burnt orange and muted fuchsias to create panels and spangles of contrasting hues: the leaves of a plant, the petals of a flower, the thorax of a bee, an impenetrable eyeball iris. Other images ranging from ornamental filigrees and sine waves to familiar renderings in the abstract like Kokopelli or today's Wheel of

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Dharma. All arranged daily by his neighbor and sort-of friend whose name Sampo Andersen can never remember. Joyce? The loops tighten and throb with ants. Gail? Sampo Andersen's dog pulls at the leash.

The battered crow lies fused to the concrete beside the Wheel of Dharma. An alien wheel. A large stenciled design made up of minute and hungry Earth ants, etched into the sidewalk like the vast Peruvian hillside desert carvings visible in their entirety only from high above the Earth's surface. The carvings that space aliens came down to Earth to help the Inca create. This occurred right around the same time they also helped the Egyptians and Maya build their pyramids and sphinxes and other massive structures. Then the space aliens left, their work here on Earth completed, never to come back except for that one time when they aided Michelangelo with some scaffolding ideas for his Sistine Chapel proposal. That took a while. This stenciling here resembles one of those alien-aided desert drawings, except that it fits within a sidewalk square and it is rendered with shimmering ants pulled involuntarily to honey and molasses.

The woman's yellow Minimal Traditional home is clutched in weathered cedar siding and peeling white trim. Inside, through a living room window framed by kelly green shutters, the walls of the dark interior throb a frosted twitching blue from the owner's high-definition television set. The owner sits on the front steps and flicks cigarette ashes into an empty beer bottle to her right, and drinks from a half-full brown beer bottle on her left. A pair of eyes the color of ice shavings flash at Sampo Andersen above small dark pockets, crescented symmetrically on each side of her nose.

56 Sampo sighs. The name of the not-nice therapist next door he can remember, this pleasant but odd woman's name he cannot. Her short brownish-blond hair is wet and pressed into her scalp and drips onto her shoulders. A gray t-shirt and a pair of faded purple shorts hang loosely over her slack skin randomly tattooed green and blue. She smiles a tinged black. Her tongue is gray, the skin on her face flakes white from dryness and day-old makeup. One half of her face is lit up in bright sunlight, the other half stippled with small squares of leafy shade.

“Hello, Gleason!” the woman calls. The woman greets Sampo Andersen, too. She always remembers their names, and always calls Gleason’s name first. Gleason is cuter. She smiles black and drinks wet beer and wipes her face with the back of a hand and wipes the hand on the fabric of her faded purple shorts. The fabric darkens and she inhales deeply from the end of a cigarette.

Sampo Andersen nods to her, tilts his head to the crow.

“Damnedest thing,” the woman says, blowing smoke. Brenda? “Fell straight down outta the sky and hit right there, *thwap*. About twenny minutes ago.” She sniffs and belches. “Barely missed my Dharma.”

Sampo Andersen glances from the crow to the wheel breathing with ant life. The wheel throbs and churns like a gear in a machine. The woman coughs and turns her head to look up and down the street.

Sampo Andersen breathes and looks up and down the street, too. Everyone is dead. Except for them. The woman shakes her head. “*Thwap*,” she says again.

Sampo Andersen stares at the crow. Gleason strains at the leash and sniffs and pants. Sampo Andersen looks up for a place whence the crow may have fallen. There is none. The crow fell straight down from the middle of the wide blue sky. Sampo Andersen looks at the crow again. Gleaming black wings. Bent neck. Bulging dead eyes. The flies haven’t noticed yet, but a blue jay has. A large jay has been cawing in alarm now, Sampo Andersen realizes, since he and Gleason rounded the corner by the burl oak at Don and Ron’s a hundred feet away. It seems all Sampo Andersen can hear now is the hollering of that bird.

“We should call the DNR,” Sampo Andersen says to the familiar but unnamed woman. His good friend Jared Kemp has a masterful way of asking people for their name once forgotten. Almost makes it seem like a strength of character. Uses it to his advantage in a way that always eludes Sampo Andersen. He looks at the woman again. 57

“DNR used to wanna know bout dead crows,” he says.

“The DNR?” the woman says, and draws in more air through her cigarette and sighs and swallows beer. “Do not resuscitate?”

Sampo Andersen looks at the dead crow and laughs.

“No,” he says, and laughs again. “Department of Natural Resources. You know. Parks and rivers and lakes and such. Fish and deer and...” Sampo Andersen senses his mind wandering off. “Puma,” he says with a smile. “And they may wanna know... about this crow.”

“Huh,” the woman says, and flicks ashes at the bottle. “No shit.”

“Ja,” Sampo Andersen says. “West Nile virus.”

“West Nile?” She pulls at her cigarette again. “This part of the state? Yer sure?”

“Yup. The virus has been encroaching on the upper Midwest. They used to ask people to report dead crows. Cuz they die right away.”

“Huh.” She shakes her head slowly. “Canary in a coal mine,” the woman murmurs. “Well,” she says, leaning back on her hands and straightening her torso. “I can’t call cuz I gotta leave for the airport.”

“Oh.”

“Ja. Pickin up my ma. Flyin in tuh-day,” she says.

Gleason strains at the leash for the dead crow. The dog whines. This whining makes Sampo Andersen think of the not-nice therapist next door at work, who explained how Gleason disrupts her trauma patients’ trauma therapy sessions. Their expensively schooled PTSD service dogs in particular. And a trauma patient cannot be having a PTSD dog required to listen to frequent barking from the poorly trained canine rabble next door.

58 Sampo Anderson is pretty sure he suffers from PTSD, too. Gleason is a comfort. Not a bona-fide PTSD service dog, but one who extends simple canine comfort to a frequently distraught human nonetheless. The therapist next door knows nothing of Sampo Andersen’s past. The powerful moments he recalls paralyze. The cruelty of wealthy adolescent jocks. The terror, humiliation, and outright physical pain of their locker-room torture tactics. And the joy of goading and cackling coaches.

A pair of cheerful Mormon missionaries canvasses homes on the next block. One raises his arms, shirt sleeves as white as a newborn cloud, to greet a face that’s appeared from behind a just-

opened door. Someone else who isn't dead. The Mormons aren't dead, either. They may never die. Sampo Andersen wonders what you call a group of Mormons. Gaggle of geese, pod of dolphins, skulk of foxes. He looks from the crow to the white-shirted Mormons again. A smile creases Sampo Andersen's right eye.

Sampo Andersen looks up at the woman with the dry skin and loose flesh and beer-bottle ashtray who's gotta go to the airport. The makeup packed into the grooved squint lines around her eyes reveals more than it conceals.

"Fine," Sampo Andersen says, "I'll call."

"The DNR," the woman says. She lifts her chin. Her nose brightens within a square of sunlight. She raises her cigarette hand.

"Ja," Sampo Andersen says. "The DNR. Sorta."

Sampo Andersen dials the non-emergency phone number for the local police department. A receptionist listens to Sampo Andersen and transfers him to County Dispatch. County Dispatch is an emergency number. "This isn't an emergency," Sampo Andersen starts to say, sensing it's too late. "I just—"

"Nine-one-one," Dispatch insists. "What is the nature of your emergency?"

Sampo Andersen sighs. "No emergency," he says, and looks up from the crow at the woman still seated on her steps. This woman whose name he can never remember, this woman who now allows him to forgive Yvette, the not-nice therapist in the office next door at work, for never bothering to learn or remember his. This woman with the skin that peels from her face in flakey square makeup chunks.

The flakey-makeup-lifting-and-peeling-from-her-cheeks-in-square-chunks-and-taking-flight thing is pretty weird. But nothing new. 59

"Just a dead crow," Sampo Andersen says. "Does the DNR still wanna know about these?"

"A dead crow," Dispatch asks.

"Ja. I was just tryin to get through to a DNR agent, so I called the non-emergency phone number here in town, and they routed me to you."

The woman with the beer bottle ashtray stands up and grunts and stretches her back and turns into her house. A trail of makeup flakes and cigarette ashes swirls within a current of air pushed from the door closing behind her. The bluish frosted glow inside drops from the walls. She's snapped off her enormous television set. The ant coils behind Sampo Andersen swell and sprawl in Sampo Andersen's direction. It's only a matter of time, Sampo Andersen thinks, until the ants abandon the sidewalk squirts for this crow's dead eyes.

Sampo Andersen and Dispatch are silent. Sampo Andersen can hear chatter in the background at County Dispatch. The chatter of non-non-emergency business: Burning buildings, exploding hearts, missing children, beaten wives, drowning drunks. Sampo Andersen shakes his head. He has a dead feathered reptile at his feet next to curvy spiraly sidewalk ant art.

A different woman, one who resembles Yvette, staggers into view from behind the burl oak at Don and Ron's place. She wears a Jell-O green jacket. Lengths of thin hair wander above her scalp within an electric breeze all its own. She appears to be breathing hard, but she is just far enough away that it's hard to tell for sure. Maybe it is Yvette. And that is simply how Yvette breathes when walking around out in the wild, away from the office building. But what would she be doing out here, anyway? Yvette doesn't live anywhere near here. Her steps are labored, uncertain, and deliberate. But there's more, and Sampo Andersen can sense something is very wrong.

60 "I..." he says, and turns for his neighbor, and a name to call her by. But the woman is behind a closed screen door inside her house. Sampo Andersen can't remember her name anyway. He only remembers Yvette's name because it's written on a name plate beside her door which he walks by several times a day.

"I'll connect you," Dispatch says, after what seems like five minutes but in truth is less than one second. "I'll connect you to a DNR agent's voicemail. Please leave a useful message—"

"Wait!" Sampo Andersen yelps. Yvette, closer now, is not Yvette. She's an Yvette-a-like who looks right through Sampo Andersen

with kaleidoscopey Mayan mural eyes. She takes another terrible stride. A stream of blood surges from her nose and her eyes curl white straight back into her head.

“Puppy,” she gasps, her voice an echoing whistle as though a hole has been pierced through her neck at the back of her mouth. “Puppy,” she breathes again. Air squeezed through a ready kettle’s spout. Her stride convulses and her legs accordion beneath her and twist like a bent drill bit. She hits the sidewalk. Sampo Andersen and Gleason yelp and jump back.

“Look, this is really weird,” Sampo Andersen blurts, his stomach curdled from the sound of the Yvette-a-like’s face splatting on cement. “But while calling you about a dead crow on this sidewalk, I—”

“You’re calling about a dead crow, correct?”

“Yes. But while—” Another attempt from Gleason to lunge at the bird.

“I can pass along your information to a DNR agent.”

“Okay. Thanks. But while calling you, this woman—”

“Name and phone number please.”

“But...” Sampo Andersen hesitates, but then quickly complies with Dispatch. The only movement from the Yvette-a-like has been the ooze of blood from her nose into a dark puddle.

“I... Ma’am!” he shouts to the woman on the sidewalk.

Sampo Andersen ventures a tentative step toward Yvette. The woman who isn’t, but who looks like Yvette. The treetops tilt and twist above. A sharp snapping sound that Sampo Andersen recognizes makes him stagger. It is the sound of the spinning Earth picking up and skipping from its axis. The flaky makeup lady whose name Sampo Andersen can never remember steps from her house. The screen door slaps hard against the threshold. She scratches at a cheek, releasing another light plume of particulate DNA, and looks at Sampo Andersen looking at the bleeding woman sprawled face down on the concrete two sidewalk sections away from the woman’s sidewalk ant art. She sniffs and wipes her mouth and tells Sampo Andersen she’s gotta go to the airport.

Sampo Andersen turns and blinks and nods. His breath is cold.

Gleason pulls in three separate directions, almost all at once: The Yvette-a-like, the flakey makeup woman, the dead crow. Sampo Andersen explains the situation to Dispatch. Dispatch is unfazed by the nature of one emergency occurring during the reporting of another. Yvette-a-like is breathing but she doesn't move, her frail hair clumped with sidewalk blood. The woman with the flaky makeup skin pulls away in her mid-1970s Monte Carlo. She's gotta go to the airport. A siren's shriek filters through neighborhood tree limbs. The incessant blue jay flees. Pulsating sidewalk ant art coils sprawl and widen like frayed rope.

"I'll now connect you," Dispatch says, "to a DNR agent's voice-mail box. Please leave a meaningful message, being sure to include your name and a reliable phone number you can be reached at. Thank you."

Her voice cuts out. A ringtone growls in Sampo Andersen's ear. An agent's voicemail greeting greets Sampo Andersen several growls later. He leaves a meaningful message, his name, and a reliable phone number he can be reached at.

EMTs arrive, revive, collect, and depart in the span of a single sentence. ER bound. Sharp sirens wail and Doppler away into diminished sighs. Sampo Andersen glances back at the dead crow, still splayed, head still cocked in an angle of disbelief, iridescent black feathers a glinting purplish bruise in the late sun. He and Gleason continue their walk. They step around more coils of quickening ants. Sampo Andersen guesses this piece of sidewalk ant art spans five or six yards. The neighborhood is quiet and empty again. Everyone is dead.

62

Almost.

Sampo Andersen sees a figure moving about in the next house. A person. A not-dead human person. He and Gleason slow their stride. Maybe it was just the curtains. Rustling on the other side of the mossy grass of the person's yard. A heady lightheadedness comes over Sampo Andersen at the thought of another person seeing what just happened here and not helping. He feels the same chill he feels when he talks to his boss. And he wonders about his boss, the reptilian-skinned man. What it's like to slither home, to shed that

skin. Pull out of that old husk. Then, all of a sudden, those fresh new scales all slick and glistening. The utter relief of release. Sampo Andersen straightens. Certain women in Sampo Andersen's friendship circle speak of pedicures in like tones. He wonders if Yvette, or the not-Yvette Yvette-alike, or even the alien-ant-art woman for that matter, ever gets her toes done.

The EMTs are long gone. Who was that woman? It wasn't Yvette, though it certainly looked like her. She's reached that magical invisible middle-age at which everyone who isn't dead becomes transparent and looks nearly exactly alike.

Sampo Andersen takes a breath, and nods. He will continue his walk, take his dog home, and that will be that. Gleason will reach adulthood. Gleason will woof less. And it will be good. Sampo Andersen looks at the house in which he saw movement. Not a person. Just the curtain moving in the breeze. So all is good and everyone is dead again.

Almost.

Sampo Andersen's phone rings. He turns from the non-person-curtain yard-moss to the sidewalk. The ants glisten and the sun slides across the thick blue sky. His phone rings again. Sampo Andersen breathes. His heady lightheadedness begins to pass. The number on the phone's clean display seems familiar enough, so Sampo Andersen answers. The caller identifies himself as a State of Wisconsin DNR agent. Sampo Andersen explains about the dead crow up the sidewalk from Don and Ron's.

"Oh," the agent says. "Ja," he says. He sounds disjointed. Sampo Andersen senses the DNR agent pat body parts for a pen. "Just throw it away, then."

"What?" Sampo Andersen scoffs. "I thought you wanted to know—"

"West Nile has been here a few years now. And so," he sighs, "we're no longer recordin dead crows."

"Oh."

"Ja. Prolly just died from some 'rodent control' program?" Sampo Andersen can hear the air quotes. "Got inta some poison by eatin something that got poisoned. Carrion or whatnot. Sad, really.

Looks like an easy meal... ends up bein deadly, though. So just sweep the thing up into a Target bag or whatever and jus throw it away, then.”

“Uh. Okay. I’ll tell the owner when I see her.”

Sampo Andersen senses the DNR agent shrug.

“The owner of the place the bird was found in frunna,” he says. “Thing died smack in the middle of the sidewalk.” Sampo Andersen glances around. “She had to go to the...”

Sampo Andersen’s eyelids become heavy and pull shut in one... two... three tugs. The trees rattle and release a strong breeze. Near an alley entrance, a plastic Target bag crackles and tumbles into view. His brain slides along, in and out of the Target bag that he wants to tell the DNR agent won’t work because it won’t fit over the dead crow because the crow is a crazy-smart-beautiful-winged-flying thing. Even dead, it, too, is a magnificent and breathtaking work of art.

The tilt of the sidewalk ant artist’s neck and dripping hair fade into view. Her shaved-ice eyes stare straight ahead, lost in thought, motoring down that highway. The dry skin on her face flaking and pulled out the driver’s-side window of that Monte Carlo. Sylvia? He’s completely out of guesses now. A decidedly introverted thinker, this woman.

Sampo Andersen stares at the sidewalk, the honey Dharma. Smells like summer cement and hot ants. Sampo Anderson doesn’t know what hot ants really smell like, but he knows what he thinks of when he thinks of the smell of hot ants. He sniffs again and stares at the charcoal crow and wonders if the manufacturers of Soylent Green ever made a Soylent Black. Everyone is dead.

67 Sampo Andersen hears the DNR agent speak. His toes want to reach out through his shoes to touch the moss. He wants to tell his slithering boss with his fresh new scales about the moss, too. About what he’s missing. The DNR agent says something else.

Sampo Andersen looks at the crow, the empty sidewalk, the cobalt sky, Gleason. And his plot, twisted from the very beginning of all of this, a bend in the arc of his life’s through-line careening here between the dead crow, the collapsed Yvette-a-like, and the

gleaming Wheel of Dharma, pulsating with infinite continuous cycles of life.

There is a satisfying click as his planet reattaches to its axis and begins to spin once again. Sampo Andersen looks up the sidewalk, down past the burl oak at Don and Ron's on the corner, and back. The murder of Mormons bisects a cross-street one block away and disappears from view around a house. Gleason whimpers. The Mormons are gone. All is good, and everyone is again dead.

Sampo Andersen squats beside the alien ant art. After a moment, he drags a fingertip through a cord of ants. Gleason whimpers. Sampo Andersen sticks the fingertip into his mouth. He smiles. Gleason tugs. The honey tastes like ants.

The Weight of Light Redux

DAVID LUNTZ

Uncle Kev is telling me about the connection between light and ethics.

“So, when God first creates light, God sees it as ‘good.’ Right? But, is it the light, or the act of creating it, or both that’s good?” he asks in his annoying way. He doesn’t expect me to answer. Anyway, I’m not in the mood for this. He’s just picked me up from school. Then he shifts into talking about ancient theories of “inner light.” Like how Heraclitus thought our souls aspire to “pure fire.” Because Uncle Kev will abuse any chance he has to talk about light and its history. I wish I could tell him to shut up but I’m too polite. I try to deflect and ask about his younger days when he was an amateur boxer and won the Derry Heavyweight title. Before he started sewing dresses, calling me “Kinch,” and painting his nails. Before he left the seminary, moved in with us, and made my education his life’s project. But he’s wise to my feint and says, “We’re going for a ride. Got us an appointment to watch the sun set.” Which is his way of saying: *we’re going to stay on topic.*

I’m young enough to appreciate the beauty of a sunset but not its sublimity. *That* I learn later comes with age and a certain ache after you start wondering how many you’ve got left. When we get to Keeley Bay, the sun is melting into the sea like a bubbling ball of

wax. The sky's a scream of velvet birds, suddenly startled, their tender gold breasts blinking like dying flames before being snuffed out by invisible fingers. Uncle Kev points to the shore and says: "Walk up to the water until you get to where the light, air, sea and sand meet. Try to find the line that keeps them from spilling over into each other." I did my best but I never found that line. Never have. Nature's too good a magician. Not from lack of trying, though, especially after Uncle Kev did his final disappearing act on us.

Later on, at college, I read about Milton's "darkness visible," which gave me a different kind of grief, because it implied a type of light that may have existed before created light. Things got worse when I realized God's own concealed light, as the Psalmist tells us, must have predated visible light. So...the wet gleam in Uncle Kev's eyes when he spoke about light and what I saw glancing off the glassy water of Keeley Bay that evening was *not* original light, as Uncle Kev had led me to believe? For a long time, it troubled me that he might have been wrong about this. At such moments, the weight of his absence became unbearable.

Now, many years later, I'm having an anniversary dinner with my wife and Uncle Kev decides to crash our date, because the waiter is lighting the candles the same way Uncle Kev used to light his prayer candles. Sometimes, I watched Uncle Kev from the shadow behind his door and wondered whether the space between his candles' flames and the air they fed on had any connection to that space between his prayers and the pangs that birthed them. Wondered also what kept them all from spilling over into each other. Then, I'm back there, in that shadow behind his door, in those car rides listening to him lecturing about light, thinking about *why* he really took me to Keeley Bay that day. Maybe it was never about finding that impossible line that separates air, sand, light, and water. Maybe he was trying to show me that happiness at root is elemental and only requires air, sand, light, and water. Something children understand. Because on that foundation, with some imagination, you can build something solid and lasting. Something that can take you through life with the right amount of smiling.

67

David County

Suddenly, I'm tasting tears on my tongue. My wife looks at me oddly, leans toward me, and says, "What's wrong?"

I say, "Nothing's wrong. It's all good," squeezing her hand.

Because, as I stare at the flames rippling in the wake of her voice, I finally have an answer to that question Uncle Kev asked all those years ago.

Last Dance With fancy Pants

DENNIS McFADDEN

Millie was obliged to her husband, sure—in sickness and in health, for better or for worse—but she'd been a caseworker for the county longer than she'd been a wife, and she was equally obliged to her clients. Teddy would need her care for years to come—till death did them part—since the accident seven months ago, but the need of her client, Flora Haskell, was immediate, and more dire. If it wasn't one damn thing it was another. She hated to admit it, but she'd been almost relieved when Sheriff Foulkrod had called, giving her a good excuse to take the afternoon off from Teddy. Needy Teddy. The sheriff told her Flora's husband had beaten her up, badly, again—could she go up and try to talk some sense into her, convince her to press charges this time, try to get it through her thick skull?

Thick skull for sure. Good thing. A thinner one might have shattered like an egg shell by now. Flora was bloody, black and blue, the sheriff said, but no broken bones so far as he could tell. She refused to go to the hospital. Casper, the culprit—her husband—was nowhere to be found, but then again what could they do if they found him? She wouldn't press charges.

“Where's Horace?” Millie wanted to know. “Is he there? Did he see it?”

“Horace?” said Sheriff Foulkrod.

“The kid. Horace, their kid.”

“They got a kid? Did I know they had a kid?”

“Jesus, Sheriff.”

“Jesus, Sheriff, and Joseph,” the sheriff said, chuckling.

Millie shook her head and ended the call. She wondered if she should call Dolly—her friend Dolly Craven—and see if she might want to spend some time with her husband while she drove up to the north of the county, to the place they called Stillville, up to the scene of the crime. Not that Teddy needed a baby sitter. It was just that they’d planned an outing, a picnic at the dam, maybe drown a few worms. She hated to leave him alone, again, and on a Sunday, a day they’d planned to spend together.

She set the phone back on the desk. The desk was in an alcove off the living room, the windows overlooking the road that ran down the hill in front of the house. Next to the house were the scraggly remains of an apple orchard, and there was an abandoned old barn out back—it had been a farm until a few years ago. Millie and Teddy could never have afforded the place, but they’d had to move out of their apartment in Hartsgrove—Teddy couldn’t do stairs now—and Pete Plyler had come to their rescue.

Pete owned the house, was letting them stay there, gratis, at least till Teddy’s disability came through. He’d had his crew build access ramps. How much of his generosity sprang from the goodness of his heart, how much from guilt, Millie couldn’t be sure, as Pete was the owner of the logging company where Teddy’d been working at the time of the accident. He’d been driving one of Pete’s logging trucks when it flipped on an icy curve in February.

Reaching for her car keys, a flash caught her eye. On the road out front, through the leaves of the foliage along the bank, something speeding down the road. Teddy?

She rushed outside, screen door slamming. “Teddy?”

Running down the drive she heard him shout, “GERONI-MOOOO!” When she got to the road she saw him, racing down the hill in his wheelchair, careening over the rugged, bumpy blacktop, his army helmet bouncing on his head. At the bottom, the

little bridge over the stream, he started up the other side, slowing quickly, spun his chair around, drifting back onto the bridge. Raising his arms in jubilation, he saw her standing, staring. Shouted “Geronimo!” one more time for good measure. “I greased the wheels!” he shouted. “Man! What a ride!”

Millie could only stare.

“Want to go for a spin?” he called.

“You trying to kill yourself?” she said.

He raised his arm, bent his elbow, pointed a finger straight down to the top of his helmet. A familiar, goofy pose he’d often taken on the dancefloor, back in his dancing days, pinning the top of his head, spinning around as if he were a turntable. Or a dervish. “Wore my helmet,” he said. “If I was trying to kill myself, would I wear my helmet?”

“Like that would help,” she said. “Scared the shit out of me.”

He pulled his helmet off, his black, curly hair plastered down with sweat, bulging eyes, bony cheeks, shiny chin. He’d lost so much weight. “Just trying to have a little fun.”

The fields by the road on this side of the creek, cleared for plowing at one time, were being reclaimed by the forest, thick saplings and brush and brambles. A curious doe poked her head up back at the edge of the woods to see what all the fuss was about. Millie and Teddy were a hundred yards apart, maybe more, he sitting on the bridge, she standing by the driveway looking down the road. They had to talk loud. “Grow up, Teddy,” she said, maybe a little louder than it needed to be.

“Why?” he said, in his indoor voice. But she heard him.

The question caught her flat-footed. She couldn’t think of an answer. The image in her mind of Flora Haskell, beaten to a pulp, intruded. 71

“Can you help me back up?” Teddy said.

“You got yourself down there,” she said. “You can get yourself back up.”

Heading out in her old DeSoto a few minutes later, she stopped beside him as he wheeled his chair up the hill, laboring hard, scrawny chest heaving, sweating like a blacksmith in July. His helmet

Dennis McFadden

on his lap sheltered his withered manhood—she couldn't help but think of that, his withered manhood. She told him where she was going, the emergency with Flora Haskell—she'd mentioned her before—how she had to go, to make sure Flora and her boy were all right.

He looked at her. Not a hint of resentment on his face, not for a second. Anyone but Teddy would have resented her not helping him back up the hill, resented her leaving him alone on a day promised to him.

The way he looked at her. If you took the delight from the look on his face, there'd be nothing left. Eyes that trusted her; eyes that didn't know any better. "Why am I so crazy about you?" he said. "What is it about love anyways?"

She had to think about it. What she thought of was Flora and Casper, and love and marriage. "I'll have to get back to you on that," she said.

It was over half an hour up to Dagus Mines, back roads all the way, and another fifteen minutes after that out to Stillville, the collection of makeshift shacks and shanties and would-be houses clustered by a sprawling slagheap. A passel of Haskells lived there, along with an in-bred assortment of McKennas and Allens and a few other intertwined families. The unofficial name, Stillville, had stuck, so-called for all the illegal stills that sprang up during the '30's, flourished through the war, and lingered even now, more than a year after the war was over.

72 She pulled into the weed-infested dirt yard in front of a dilapidated little house, traces of red paint peeling off the clapboards, tar shingles curling on the roof. A Payne County Sheriff's cruiser was parked by a lean-to that sheltered a tattered-tarp-covered assortment of implements. Rusty relics everywhere, a crop of ragweed growing from what was once an ice box, an old wood stove, the skeleton of an ancient John Deere. Inside, Sherm Bullers, a deputy, looked up from the comic book he was reading. He stood up, shuffling the comic book out of sight, but not before Millie caught a glimpse of Donald Duck.

“Millie Lockett,” he said, “I been waiting for you.” They’d worked together before. He was a big, beefy man, thick, black eyebrows, a deep rumble of a voice. “Sheriff wanted me to talk to you.”

“Good you had a little reading material to pass the time, Sherm.”

“Oh, this here? It was just setting here,” he said, tossing the comic on the table with a reddish frown. He glanced toward the bedroom door. “Sheriff said you could talk to her. Get her to press charges. I’d sorely love to get my hands on that fella.”

Flora’s voice from the next room, “I told you, Sherm, I ain’t pressing nothing,” sounded as though she was hissing through gritted teeth. Millie went in. Flora was curled on her side. The bed was bare, blood stains like rust on the mattress, spattered here and there.

Millie eased herself down beside Flora, trying not to jar the bed. “Good God,” she said. She touched her cheek, lightly. Flora’s hair was matted, crusty with dried blood, one eye swollen shut—the upper eye, the one closer to Millie—her swollen face random shades of purple, like an overripe plum ready to burst. Battered into a grotesque mask beyond reading, impossible to see fear on it, or dread, or sorrow. Certainly not anger. No rage. No reason. Resignation, maybe. Dumb acquiescence.

She clenched her other eye shut, a tear squeezing out.

Sherm in the doorway. “See, Millie?” he rumbled. “See what I mean?”

Flora looked up with a pleading eye. “Make him go away.”

Millie went back, nudged him into the living room. “She’s not going to press charges, Sherm, not right now anyways. Let me talk to her. It might be best if you just took off. I’ll let you know if she changes her mind.”

“What about Casper? I been hanging around in case he comes back.”

“You and Donald Duck going to beat the tar out of him?”

“Laugh if you want to, Millie.” Sherm might have been an oaf, but he was a sensitive oaf. “What if he comes back and starts beating up on her again?”

There was a shotgun on the wall. Millie nodded toward it. “See that? I sure as hell know how to use it, and I bet Flora does too.”

Sherm stared. At Millie, at the shotgun, back again. “But—”
“But what, Sherm?”

He drew his eyes away from the gun, back into Millie’s, first one eye then the other. Millie had a lazy eye, a lid that was always half-closed, and that seemed to throw Sherm—he never knew which eye to look into. A slow smile lifted his beefy cheeks. A twinkle in his brown eye behind which she could imagine him imagining a timely shotgun blast putting an end to Casper’s bullying days. “If you say so, Millie,” he said, hitching up his belt and holster.

“I say so, Sherm.”

“Bullers, over and out,” he said.

She watched him shamble across the yard and climb into his cruiser, watched it sink a good six inches when he did. She heard a light shuffle, Flora making her way to the window beside her. They watched him pull away. When he was out of sight, Millie said, “Okay, missus. You want to tell me why the hell you’re not pressing charges?”

Flora ignored the question, nodding toward the shotgun, a nod that hurt, made her wink and grimace. “It ain’t loaded,” she said. “I always make sure of that.”

“Maybe it ought to be,” said Millie.

“Casper don’t mean no harm. He just drinks himself stupid and don’t know what he’s doing. Like he ain’t himself at all, like he’s somebody else—like that Heckle and Jeckle fella.”

“You could just scare him off with it. Fire a warning shot.”

77 “And what if he takes it off me? Who knows what’d happen then?”

“You can’t go on like this, Flora. Some day he’s going to end up killing you. If you have him arrested it might put the fear of God into him.”

“He don’t believe in God.”

They stared out the window, at the long shadows of the hot September afternoon, at the empty road by the rotted stump where the cruiser had disappeared around the curve. From the corner of

her eye, she saw Flora trembling. She helped her to the sofa, sat her down, took her cigarettes out of her handbag, lit two Luckies. Handed one to Flora, watched her take a drag, wince in pain. “Where’s Horace? Did he see what happened?”

“He’s over at Ike McKenna’s place. Casper’s cousin.” Everyone in Stillville was related. “Maybe his uncle,” Flora said. “I ain’t sure which.”

“Good. So he wasn’t here.”

“I send him over there every time Casper’s fixing to go off on one of his toots. He loves it there. They always got bread and butter and grape jelly setting out on the table and he just eats and eats and eats.”

“We should get you to Doc Shaffer’s, see if you don’t need some stiches. That eye doesn’t look too good either. And we need to talk about what we’re going to do about you and Horace. How we’re going to keep you safe, if you’re not going to have that man arrested. We have places we can put you up, but... You know, Flora, you can’t just sit here and take it—you can’t just allow yourself to be abused like that.”

“He don’t mean nothing by it. He’s always so pitiful after.”

“That doesn’t help much, does it? The horse is already out of the barn by then. You’re already all beat up and bleeding. Look at you. Things are different nowadays, Flora. Women stand up for themselves. Women helped win the war.”

“So what do you want me to do? Shoot him down like a dog?”

Millie had to think about it. “I suppose not. I just hope he doesn’t shoot you. Have him arrested. Leave him. Do something. Stand up for yourself.”

“He’s Horace’s daddy, Millie.”

“I know that, Flora.”

“He’s always so sorry.” Flora stubbed out her cigarette. “Come with me—you can see for yourself.”

“Come where? You know where he’s at?”

“In the old smokehouse out back. Sleeping like a Mormon.”

“He’s been there this whole time? Why didn’t you say something?”

“Nobody ever asked me,” said Flora.

The smokehouse was in bad disrepair. Rotting timbers, missing boards, a dirt floor dank and cold. The smell of mildew overpowered the lingering scent of smoke. Sprawled in a heap on the floor was Casper Haskell, open mouth drooling into the dirt, an arm folded beneath him like a broken wing. A shattered jug beside him, a stain on the earth around it giving off a sharp scent of raw potatoes. His reddish brown hair was long, stringy and tangled, his bony, lopsided face covered in dirt and whiskers. Flora had brought a glass of water. She nudged him with her foot.

Nudged him again harder. On the third nudge, his eyes peeled open. He tried to focus. Managed to roll over, prop himself up on his elbows. Millie saw the piss stain on his pants. She was fairly sure she could smell it too. Casper’s eyes finally alighted on Flora. “Florie?” he said. He spotted the glass in her hand. “You brung me some water?”

“I did,” she said, throwing the water in his face with a splash.

Mud ran down his cheeks. He gasped and sputtered. Wiping his eyes, he looked at his wife again, and he gasped again, even louder. “Oh my sweet chicken,” he said, his voice croaked and broke. “Did I do that to you?” great tears welling up in his eyes.

Flora knelt, and he crawled into her arms like whipped puppy. He curled up there, as close as he could get, sobbing muffled, slurred words. “I’m sorry, Florie, I’m so sorry, can you forgive me? Can you ever forgive me for what I done?”

Flora patted him, cooing. “There, there,” she cooed, rubbing her hand in little circles on his back, “there, there.”

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Millie knelt too, reaching over the wretched, seeping heap on Flora’s lap. She put a finger beneath Flora’s bruised chin, lifting it gently. Stared hard into her juking eyes.

“Are you shitting me?” Millie said. *What is it about love anyways?*

Millie gave up. She drove home. She had a few choice words for Casper Haskell before she left, but they failed to make a dent. She wasn’t even sure they were sinking in, or if that’s all they were doing, sinking in, like rocks to the bottom of a cesspool. By the dazed,

lizard-like look on his face, she might as well have been talking to a turtle.

She tried not to be like that, holier-than-thou. She tried to be empathetic. She tried, but it wasn't always easy.

What would she tell the sheriff? Bullers? What would she do about Flora and Horace? An image barged uninvited into her mind and she gagged just a little, the image of Casper and Flora kissing and making up. Or worse, kissing and making out. She tried not to be like that. There were poor people, there would always be poor people, people who lived in filth and squalor and chaos, not always through any fault of their own, but because they hadn't been blessed with the mental capacity to master the basic niceties of a decent, civilized life. That's why she was there. That's why society had invented government assistance, public welfare, to help those who couldn't help themselves. And if sometimes she felt like throttling some especially nasty, vicious son of a bitch—like maybe, say, a Casper Haskell—it was up to her to overcome her crude urges and do the right thing. That's how civilized folks behaved.

The devil of course was in the details. Who was to say what the right thing really was?

Not that the Haskells were her only concern. Far from it. She had other needy clients—Elsie Carpenter came to mind, her and her eight kids living in a drafty shack, slop buckets for toilets, and an oblivious, drunken husband whose head she'd like to immerse in one of those slop buckets till he stopped slithering.

There she went again. That was just the thing. She tried not to be like that. She couldn't always help it.

Whatever it was that was in her had been there for a long, long time. A favorite family legend was the time Millie, scarcely more than a toddler, was walking home from the playground with her Grandma Buzzard when she spied two dogs romping in a yard. Millie ran to join them, ignoring the cries of her grandma, who was hobbling along on her cane, trying to catch up. One of the dogs, a yippy little Jack Russell, was taken by surprise and bit her, a nasty wound, leaving a scar on her thigh for the rest of her life, a constant reminder. But Millie didn't scream or cry. She instantly set

upon the dog, grabbing its hind leg like a drumstick, and bit it back.

Grandma Buzzard was horrified, but, after the story had been retold, Millie was the apple of her daddy's eye. *Nipper*, he called her after that. Her mother, and her Grandma Buzzard, didn't think it was at all funny, though that failed to dampen the amusement of her daddy, or the delight of Millie.

Her daddy had no sons, but he didn't need any. Millie was tough enough. A few years after she bit the dog, he taught her to hunt. By the time she was twelve, she was bagging more squirrels and rabbits and grouse than he was—enough to make a papa proud. He was proud of his little *Nipper* right up to the day he died. Hunting with her in the woods, he apparently shot himself in the leg accidentally as he was climbing under a rail fence, and the wound gushed blood like an oil strike. Millie ran for help, but it came too late.

Driving south, leaving the slag heaps and abandoned strip mines behind, she crested a hill where the view was so pleasant—green pastures sweeping in every direction toward distant tree lines, serenely grazing cows casting long shadows in the afternoon sun—that it threatened to scrub all the squalor from her mind. Threaten as it might, it couldn't quite pull it off.

78 She thought of Teddy again, all alone at home. Any time she thought of needy now, which was often, given her job, Teddy seemed to come to mind as well. It hadn't always been that way. Only since February, since the accident. The first time she remembered him—it was in grade school, fifth or sixth grade—he'd been playing hide-and-seek. He and another kid, racing for the tree that was "home," had overshot, smacking their skulls together in a vicious collision. An ugly goose egg immediately blossomed on Teddy's forehead. What did Teddy do? He went right back to playing, albeit woozily—recess wasn't over yet.

A few years later, just after they'd installed parking meters on Main Street, she remembered Teddy racing down the sidewalk, leapfrogging over them one by one, as if they'd been put there just for him, his own personal playground. They were in high school by

then, and she watched in awe how he soared—the meters were chest-high—how effortless his flight. Sometime between the goose egg and the parking meters, he'd managed to wiggle into her hard Millie heart. No easy feat.

She tended to believe there was probably a God—she had only to look at the stars at night, or the view from the crest of the hill—but she tended just as much to believe that this God was not concerned in the least about her, or anyone else on the planet, any more than Millie was concerned about the ants she squashed by the sugar bowl, or the flies she swatted on the wall. Only Divine Indifference could explain why Teddy would end up in a wheelchair while much more deserving candidates, Casper Haskell, for example, or Luke Carpenter, kept right on waltzing through their drunken, wasted lives scot-free.

Divine Indifference: a fancy way of saying God didn't give a shit.

It would also explain why Teddy ending up in a wheelchair would leave Millie so needy herself. She had needs, physical needs, needs that went beyond affection and companionship and love. She and Teddy had had an active, joyful, sex life, that now was all but gone. A week ago he called her from the bedroom—she'd been in the kitchen, cleaning a couple of trout they'd caught for supper—and she'd found him sitting with a proud grin and an erection, an erection that was not nearly as proud as his grin. It tilted like the Leaning Tower of Pisa, and wilted soon after she touched it. He was crestfallen. No more so than her. She told him they made devices, ring devices, to help sustain hard-ons, but he was horrified, shocked, in awe—whether in disbelief that such things existed, or that his wife could know about them, Millie couldn't be sure. ↪

She'd gone seven months without. The longest she'd ever gone. When he was away at Fort Dix—he was in the army for only a little over a year before they discovered his heart murmur—she hadn't gone without. She had no moral qualms. Being in another man's bed could not touch the love she had for Teddy. For Millie, sex and love were like hunting and fishing—similar but distinctly different. She loved Teddy, not those other boys and men. Not that Teddy

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would understand that. He could never know. It would break Teddy's heart.

Arriving home she heard the guitar. She paused on the stoop to listen through the screen. Teddy was practicing. He'd always loved to play his guitar, but he hadn't touched it, so far as she knew, since the accident. A good sign, a sign of recovery? He'd been playing it for years, self-taught, compensating for a lack of skill with an abundance of enthusiasm. He entertained himself mostly, sometimes Millie, occasionally friends at bars and parties. She listened as he strummed and sang along: *Come and sit by my side if you love me. Do not hasten to bid me adieu. Just remember the Red River Valley, and the cowboy who loves you so true*, and she smiled, closing her eyes. For a moment, Flora was gone, Casper was gone, they were all gone, and Teddy was singing and strumming and beating on his old guitar, up on the stage at Earl Black's party last summer, warbling loudly, missing notes by a mile and not giving a damn, delirious with happiness, his damned *joie de vivre* infecting every soul in the crowd. And afterward his dancing, his silly spinning, kicking his heels, laughing, crazy happy.

Millie's eyes came open slowly, goose bumps vacating her skin, leaving a chill. Now, listening through the screen door, Teddy's singing was fragile, little more than a croaking whisper. His strumming was hit and miss, unsure of itself. She went inside, the screen door squawking, slamming, and found him by the big stone fireplace that smelled of sour ashes. The guitar looked as though it didn't fit on his lap, impeded by the arms of the wheelchair, and he was breathless from trying to sing. He looked away for a moment, almost as if ashamed. He put the guitar on the floor by the hearth with a hollow rattle and squeezed his knees, one in each hand, as if he could squeeze life back into them.

"Wanna dance, Fancy Pants?" he said, an old refrain, an old nickname from somewhere back in moonlit, beery, backseat midnights of sweating, laughing and lacy underpants.

"I think I'll sit this one out," she said.

"Hey," he said, "that's *my* line," and he snickered like a child.

★

Earl Black was having another get-together, a Harvest Hoedown, he was calling it. Teddy was pumped. He was a sociable fellow after all, an excitable boy, but he was nervous too. A lot of folks would be there, folks he hadn't seen since before the accident. He'd be showing off his new set of wheels, as he put it, for the first time.

"Should I bring my guitar?" he said.

"I don't know," said Millie. She capped her lipstick, winked at herself in the mirror, fluttering her lazy eyelid; it needed all the exercise it could get. Teddy sat in the bedroom doorway, an expectant look on his face. He'd been ready and waiting for fifteen minutes. "I can't tell you that, one way or the other," she said. "Really, you're the one who has to decide. I'm sure a lot of folks'd love to hear you playing and singing again. You just have to ask yourself if you feel like you're ready to get back up on that horse yet, ask yourself if you feel comfortable enough with where you are in your recovery to take that next step, and then go from there."

He mulled it over. "So, should I bring my guitar?" he said.

"Sure," Millie said, "why not?"

But they left the guitar on the back seat. When he saw all the cars and pickups parked helter-skelter across the barnyard at Earl Black's place, Teddy seemed to shrink a little. "I'd feel pretty stupid toting that thing in there," he said, and when she asked why, he said, "It's too big." She didn't ask what he meant by that. What he meant, whether he knew it or not, was that it was too big to hide behind.

A crisp fall evening. What remained of a harvest moon was a white smear in the sky behind a thin veil of clouds, the golden stalks of corn in the field beyond the cars turning shadowy and dark and a little bit sinister. She wheeled Teddy over the bumpy yard toward the barn where yellow light was spilling out, along with the chatter and thrum of voices nearly as loud as the music. Inside the wide doorway she stopped, resting her hands on his shoulders, squeezing. All the faces, familiar faces nearly all, turning, greeting, all the folks rushing over in welcome, so much happiness, so much stupid happiness, almost as if the war had just ended again.

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Millie wasn't fooled. She—alone, apparently—knew that the war would never end.

Even the music stopped, the accordion player, the banjo player, waving, the fiddler announcing the arrival of Teddy Lockett and his lovely wife, and Earl Black was there wielding jars of frothy beer. Millie's good friend, Dolly Craven, came for hugs, and Pete Plyler, their landlord, their benefactor, beamed benignly. "I hope you brought your guitar, Teddy!" called the fiddler from the stage. *Gee-tar*, he pronounced it.

The band commenced a lively tune and folks started dancing. Dolly took Teddy's hand, skipping around his wheelchair in time to the music. "I got the first dance with Twinkle-toes," she said.

Millie couldn't conceal a grimace. Pete gave his eyes a good roll for everyone to see. He was a tall, solid man, his dark, wavy hair combed back slickly, good-looking in a bullish sort of way, a way that was mitigated only slightly by his wire-rim glasses. He was dressed in well-pressed navy blue slacks, an ivory cowboy shirt with pearl snap buttons, and a string tie—maybe the only man there not decked out in denim and flannel. "Jesus, Dolly," he said. "What the hell's the matter with you?"

"What?" she said, stopping in mid-skip.

"If I gotta tell you what," Pete said, glancing around the circle of faces for affirmation. "Here the boy's all laid up in a wheelchair, and you—"

"I what? Hell, he's setting, he ain't dead!" She hopped on Teddy's lap.

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Teddy's smile could not have been broader. The scarecrow by the cornfield had more meat on its bones than Dolly, so there was no concern at all about the well-being of his lap. "Let's dance," she cried, and they laughed like kids, her and Teddy, and he headed out onto the floor, wheeling his chair in a herky-jerky, zig-zag, stuttering approximation of a dance of some sort, Dolly waving her arms in the air. Millie, Pete and his wife, Penny, who was quiet, sour and pretty, and half his age, stared after them. Dolly's husband had joined the cluster—Chester was an older man, pudgy and gray, who just happened to worship his wife. He stared too, but with a grin of

admiration, unlike the frowns of admonition on the pussies of Pete and his wife. Millie just shook her head.

A boy she knew to be Earl Black's youngest son came up and whispered in his father's ear. Earl looked at Millie with a frown. "You got a phone call," he said. "The sheriff?"

"You might want to take a spin on up here," Sheriff Foulkrod said. Millie was on the phone in Earl Black's kitchen. Through the window she watched the bright lights in the open door of the barn, watched the people laughing and drinking and dancing, oblivious. "Our girl Flora up and shot her husband."

"Is he hurt bad? Casper?" said Millie.

"She said something about you telling her she ought to use the shotgun. Ought to look out for herself, or some such a thing. Did you say something like that?"

"I just said she ought to stand up for herself. Scare him if she had to. Fire a warning shot, maybe."

"Well, that's what she did, all right. She took and fired a warning shot straight through his chest."

Her lip was ripped and her nose squashed like an acorn someone had ground into the dirt with his boot heel, but her eyes, despite the purple swelling creeping up on them, were wide and round as the eyes of a fawn. Flora was in the back seat of the sheriff's cruiser, the light on the roof flicking eerie blinks of black and red across the shabby premises. Casper was under a sheet on the gurney, not yet in the back of the meat wagon. Sheriff Foulkrod and his Deputy, Sherm Bullers, were talking to the coroner, a man named Snyder. Millie stood by the cruiser, talking to Flora. She told her the court would get her a lawyer. She said they ought to be able to make a good case for self-defense, justifiable homicide. Her doubts she kept to herself. Her hunch that the sons of bitches would lock her up and throw away the key.

"You oughta seen him juggle eggs," Flora said.

"Beg pardon," said Millie. "Eggs?"

"My Casper, he could juggle eggs like a magic man."

“A man of many talents.”

“He’d snatch ’em right out of the basket before I even cleaned ’em and start tossing ’em up in the air every which a way. I seen him juggle six at one time, and never once put a crack in any of ’em. It helped he had them big hands of his.” Her own hands were behind her back. She bobbed up toward the window like a trout on a line. “He tried eight one time but it didn’t end too good.”

“Where’s Horace?” Millie said. “Is he okay?”

Horace was at Ike McKenna’s again, just across the road. McKenna was standing on the porch that was little more than warped floorboards and a flimsy roof propped up by two-by-fours, a jug of hooch at his feet. Behind him light shone through a torn curtain. McKenna was a hairy man—a fur-bearing creature, was what came to Millie’s mind—greasy, cut from the same cloth as the late Casper Haskell, only he came in a larger size. His nose all but glowed and he swayed as he stood watching from a distance the flashing red light, the goings-on at his cousin’s. Or nephew’s.

“Excuse me,” Millie said. “Is the boy here? Horace?”

“What do you want to know for?” McKenna said. She couldn’t see his eyes in the dark, but she felt the meanness.

“I’m Millie Lockett. With county public welfare. We’ll take custody of Horace now his folks are gone.”

“You ain’t taking custody of nothing.” McKenna spat into the dirt by the porch, a juicy-sounding glob. “He’s kin. He’s staying put right where he’s at.”

“Did he see what happened?”

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“The boy ain’t blind. He seen his mama blow his pappy to kingdom come, if that’s what you mean. If I told that man once, I told him a thousand times that no-good little whore’d be the death of him.”

“Where’s your wife?” Millie said.

“Hell, I can’t keep track of that bitch neither.”

“You don’t suppose there’s a reason for that, do you? You don’t suppose she’d like to get as far away from a repulsive, drunken peckerhead like you as she can possibly get, do you?”

McKenna frowned as if trying to decipher a complex algebraic formula.

“Get the hell out of my way,” said Millie. “I want to see Horace.”

The boy was curled in a corner of the kitchen clutching a funny book, a chubby child with a speck of jelly on his cheek, staring at the floor. His face was red and strained, veins worming across his forehead. When Millie said his name he looked up and his expression changed as though someone were flipping a switch, from fear to wonder to relief all in a second or two, and the tears started flowing, a loud sob bursting out of him. Millie held out her arms and he came stumbling, running on fat little legs, falling into her embrace without grace. He sobbed and wailed.

McKenna came in. “Goddam crybaby,” he said. “I warned you once—knock it off or I’ll give you something to cry about. Men don’t go around sobbing like little titty babies!”

Millie disengaged from Horace, leaving him wailing into emptiness. She walked over, snatched McKenna’s jug out of his hand and shattered it against the cast iron stove, the contents splashing. “There,” Millie said. “Now *you* try not to cry, you ignorant asshole.”

She picked up Horace—no easy feat, the child weighed a ton—and hurried out, McKenna on her heels. By the flashing light of the cruiser, they yelled and argued, McKenna indignant and righteous. Flora looked up through the backseat window at Horace in Millie’s arms, but she couldn’t reach for him, her hands behind her back. Horace sobbed on, his face clenched shut. Millie couldn’t keep holding him, he was too heavy, so she opened the door and thrust him onto Flora’s lap. Flora tried to nuzzle him with her chin, and McKenna grabbed at him, but Bullers shoved McKenna who tumbled back to the seat of his pants in the mud, just as Snyder and his assistant started wheeling the gurney toward the meat wagon. For a moment everything stopped. Horace quit wailing, wiped his eyes, looked at the lumps in the sheet, what was left of his daddy.

In the end, the sheriff wouldn’t allow Millie take to Horace. He told her to contact Judge Henry in the morning; Family Court would have to decide. Millie told him to take the damn handcuffs off Flora Haskell—who did he think she was, Lizzie Borden?

She drove home. It was dark, the moon in hiding, and the road was rough and windy and when she came to the spot with the long, pretty view, there was nothing to see now but the darkness. She wondered if what she'd said to Flora that day a week ago had led to this. She wondered if her well-meaning words could have triggered the violent death of Casper Haskell.

She wondered if she gave a shit.

Teddy's guitar was still in the back seat. She headed for Earl Black's place. It was late, but Earl's parties tended to go well into the night. She was desperate for diversion, for something else, anything else, to fill her mind. Anything that wasn't red, like the blinking red light, the blood on the living room wall, the face of the fat child wailing.

The peaceful yellow light of the barn. It was quiet, the band gone, the radio on low in the corner, a county music station. A few stragglers remained. It was later than she thought. Teddy was gone, as were Dolly and Chester. Pete Plyler was there, waiting for her; his wife, Penny, was nowhere to be seen. He told her Dolly and Chester had left some time ago and they wanted Pete to tell her, in case she came back before going home, that they'd given Teddy a lift. Teddy's energy had faded fast after the pie incident, Pete told her, and he needed to go home.

"Pie incident?" Millie said.

"Miss Lamb brought him over a piece of cherry pie and he slapped it out of her hand. Then he ran over it with his wheelchair. Back and forth over it a bunch of times."

"Teddy? What the hell got into him?"

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"He was upset you left is what I figure. Maybe it was too soon to bring him out, Millie. He's gonna have a long ol' row to hoe to get back to his old self—if he ever does get that far. Some of those boys that came back from overseas in pieces aren't a whole hell of a lot worse off than what Teddy is, I'm afraid. It's like he's shell-shocked as bad as them. It's gonna take him a while yet. Maybe even longer than that, stuck in that wheelchair for the rest of his days. Useless below the waist."

Millie leveled her gaze at him. Pete's eyes, hazel, intense, hardly

disguised by his granny glasses, stared back unwavering. She was curious as to how he could present such a reasonable rationale for Teddy's behavior while completely overlooking any hint of his own culpability. It was his truck Teddy was driving. A lot of folks said if the truck hadn't been overloaded in the first damn place it probably would have negotiated that icy curve just fine.

Now was not the time to bring it up. It wasn't just the free rent. It was Flora's doe eyes and Horace's red face, it was the lumps that were Casper under the sheet, the blood on the wall. It was the useless below the waist, and Teddy's guitar alone in the backseat.

"You got any of that whiskey left?" she asked. Pete poured and they drank, sitting for a while in a brittle quiet.

Miss Lamb—Henrietta—was one of few stragglers remaining. She was dancing with Fred Shingledecker. Millie watched them for want of something to look at. Henrietta was a very large woman who taught at Coolbrook Township School, grades one through four all in a room, and she had done herself no favors by wearing a loud, flowered frock bedecked all over with bright blue, pink and green blossoms. Her brown hair was done up in a messy bun. She was obviously tipsy. As was Fred, a widowed farmer as skinny as Henrietta was fat, and half a head shorter to boot. They snuggled close, dancing slow to the cowboy tune on the radio, Fred wiggling his butt, flaunting some fancy moves, showing off, Henrietta doing her awkward best to follow his lead. Millie couldn't take her eyes off them, sensing a debacle waiting to happen.

"They ought to get a damn room," muttered Pete.

As they danced on, Fred waltzed Henrietta too close to the oversized tub of water used earlier for apple-bobbing, and Henrietta stumbled on one of his nifty moves. Fred reached as she lost her balance, but her windmilling arm smacked him in the face, knocking him halfway across the floor, as Henrietta, windmilling to the end, fell backwards into the tub with a raucous splash that flooded the floor with water and bounding apples. 87

It was all Millie and Pete could do to keep from laughing. To keep from more than laughing, to keep from howling like hyenas and falling out of their chairs clutching their ribs, rolling on the

floor, drunk with hilarity. The shrieks of the unfortunate Miss Lamb didn't help, wriggling from the tub, standing, dripping, drowned blossoms clinging to her enormous belly and bosom, her accusations hurled at Earl Black, who, on the verge of sympathy, reversed course and called her out, and Fred too, for being too damn shit-faced to notice a huge goddam tub of water right in the middle of the floor. Soon apples were being hurled along with accusations and recriminations.

Millie and Pete, responsible, mature adults, acted quickly to restore the peace, pacifying Earl, drying Miss Lamb (with a tablecloth Pete jerked with unfortunate results from beneath the bowls and platters on the food table by the stage), and helping poor Fred, still concussed from the wallop from Henrietta's windmilling arm, to hobble off the floor. Millie and Pete managed to ride it out with dignity and aplomb.

Until later. Later, when they were alone in Pete's pickup, when the whiskey was gone and the party was over, they surrendered to it, reliving the event in glorious, hilarious detail, clutching each other in laughter, and Millie gave in to it, letting it carry her away on wings of glee, letting it pop the enormous bubble of stress and tension in which she'd been trapped, freeing her, letting her fly, if only for a while.

She was known as a straight-shooter, Millie was, a no-nonsense young woman. She took pride in her reputation, in her blunt honesty. She'd always tried to tell the truth, always, never afraid to tell it like it is and let the chips fall where they may.

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She'd always told the truth, it seemed, to everyone but herself.

When she'd told herself she could cheat on Teddy with no regrets whatsoever, for example, told herself that sex and love were entirely different species, that hadn't exactly been the truth. Not the whole truth and nothing but the truth. So help her God.

When she got home and pulled into the driveway, the pre-dawn sky was creeping from black to a deep blue, growing lighter by the minute. Fingers of mist drifted up from the ragweed out toward the abandoned barn. She turned off the headlights. It was

lighter than she thought. She was thinking about the look on Pete's face as he came. The red, red look. The flush that took forever to go away.

She was so looking forward to getting into bed with Teddy, to holding him close, to warming his cold, skinny body. But when she got out of the car, as quietly as she could, easing the door shut, she saw him.

Outside in the early morning light, he was sitting in his wheelchair at the bottom of the ramp that Pete's crew had built for him. Wearing the same thin flannel shirt he'd worn to the party, despite the chill in the air. His face wearing none of its customary delight.

"Teddy?" she said.

He said, "Wanna go for a spin?" but he said it as if he were talking to an empty room. He started wheeling himself out toward the road.

"Where do you think you're going?" she said. He didn't answer. She followed. "Teddy—what do you think you're doing?"

In the middle of the road, he turned uphill. Slowly—it was steep—he pushed himself up the slope a few yards, then stopped and wheeled the chair around. He grasped the wheels tightly, maneuvering, positioning himself in the exact middle of the road.

"Teddy—you're not wearing your helmet." She said it in a soft sing-song.

"Geronimo," he said, neither sing nor song.

She moved to stand in front of him. "Stop," she said. He didn't answer, though he did look up, into her eyes for the first time since she'd got home, gazing at her with his lack of delight. "It's too dark," she said. "You can barely make out the bridge down there. What if you don't aim right? You can't steer that thing, you know, you won't be able to stop it once you get going good. If you go off the road, if you hit the bridge..."

"Move over, Fancy Pants," he said.

She moved, but not over. Stepping up, she climbed into his lap. She could feel his heart surge in his skinny chest. She put her arms around him, nestled his head against her. They stared down the hill

Dennis McFadden

together in the gloaming, the darkness melting around the shapes of the trees and the road and the bridge.

The chair lurched forward an inch or two, eager, straining to be let loose. He was losing his grip on the wheels.

“Why am I so crazy about you?” she said. “What is it about love anyways?”

Fledgling

ANDREA BISHOP

Awoman was pecked to death by her rooster.

Aunt Jenny said a rooster will fight until death to protect his hens since they pass along his genes. Threatened, he'll even attack humans that nourish and shelter him. My mom says don't believe everything she tells you. Says she has a history of weaving fact with fiction that makes it hard to pick apart the truth.

Aunt Jenny is dad's youngest sister. Mom calls her a wild child. Told me she used to live in a van.

My younger siblings are asleep, she in our bunkbed, he in the crib. As I tip-toe past, I see them curled into two tidy little bundles, each tucked inside their own matching yellow onesie. I'm in two-piece pyjamas, but my ankles stick out the bottoms, and my naked feet are cold where they contact the creaky hardwood floor. The adults are busy with the party downstairs. The stairway is technically off-limits, so I wait at the top, weighing my options about how best to get a bit of dessert. I'm not to be a sneaky little lady anymore. 91

Last fall, my aunt said females are pickier about choosing their mates than males are. Told me there are male worms that cement their sperm inside the female to prevent her from mating again. I told her my mom doesn't want me to talk about sex yet. She said

no, she wouldn't, would she. After the van, my aunt went back to school, and now she's an expert on reproductive animal behaviour. My mom says that's ironic.

Moving down three stairs and peering through the open kitchen door I spy a tempting carrot cake layered with buttery cream icing and topped with walnut sprinkles. It sits beside our wooden fruit bowl. A large bumpy apple, patchy with tough brown skin, looks out of place nestled in among miniature mandarins. The adults are out of sight in the dining room beyond, still preoccupied with dinner. Aunt Jenny's intermittent laughter rising above the din of voices fuels my courage. I scoot down another step.

This visit, my aunt told me about the North American cowbird. Genus? *Molothrus*. Status? Pest. Around here anyway. It leaves its eggs in the nests of other, smaller, species. The strong cowbird nestlings ensure their survival by begging more vigorously for food. Sometimes the host kills the deviant egg, but usually they submit and raise the chick with their own. The momma cowbird keeps watch and may even destroy the nest if the host won't cooperate.

When I'm about to make my final move, my mom, followed by my dad, arrives in the kitchen. Neither sees me on the stairs.

Mom turns her chin toward my dad, shakes a finger at him, and says, "I will not tolerate it anymore. She's rude and insensitive. It upsets the kids and disturbs our guests. She—"

Dad is already shushing her as I enter, my heart throbbing, a sleepy look pasted on my face. I'm out of bed, so they stare at me, but their conversation stops.

92 Mom turns to me, begins, "You. Why I told you, young lady, absolutely no—"

My aunt slides into the doorway and, with a wink at me, interrupts my mom, "Let me handle this for you. You'll want to get back to your company."

Aunt Jenny leads me back upstairs. Tells me a bedtime story about the northern spotted owl. On the brink of extinction due to habitat decline, every owl is protected under the Endangered Species Act. Researchers have temporarily relocated a few precious chicks into conservation at a nearby zoo. They'll be returned to their

native environment once all preservation activities are complete and the ecosystem deemed suitable again. She thinks it won't be long now.

And that rooster? My aunt told me later it was only a peck. The woman's veins were weak, is all, and she bled out. The truth is, it's hens that will fight to the death to keep their chicks safe from harm. She said those are the facts.

Her comforting voice lulls me to sleep, but not before I hear her promise she'll save me a piece of cake.

Spot the Differences

KIMBERLY A. TURNER

I was nine when Pa went off to fight and thirteen when he returned. I said he was different when he came home, but Mama said, “Puberty tints everything crazy colors. He’s just fine.” Still, puberty or no, there was no denying that the liquor bottles had multiplied and Ma’s voice had grown softer around him. Her footsteps too.

Then there were the Polaroids—photos of everything on the farm—because, he said, “These instant ones don’t lie.” He didn’t trust the kid who ran the Kodak developing booth at the Chem-Mart, said he looked shifty. So we’d pass afternoons photographing the record player, the chickens, the metal weathervane, anything he thought had changed. The changes, he said, were subtle. “The things
97 most people miss are the ones you need to watch out for.”

None of it seemed exactly normal, but it didn’t seem like the weirdest thing in the world either. After all, Melanie’s mom threw up two chocolate cakes a day, and Chlorine’s parents thought Chlorine was a classy debutante name. So I followed him around, waiting for that crunchy clicking sound, the pop of the flash, that magical little rectangle. “Wave it around, Cassie,” he’d say.

If I was bored, or sick of the smell of his whiskey breath, I’d take the developing pictures into the bathroom and use the point of a

rat tail comb to press white spots into the photos as they developed—halos around cows' heads, lightning shooting out of the toaster, ghostly faces in the wallpaper pattern.

By the time I was caught, I had graduated to words: menacing things like “BEWARE” or rudimentary phrases I'd learned in Spanish class. “¡Hace mal tiempo!”

The day Mama caught me etching “GRUESOME” into an image of our kitchen tiles, she waited for Pa to leave then beat me with the broomstick until my arm started leaking blood, crying for all the world like she'd lost her only love. “Don't you...” Smack. “Ever, ever.” Sob. “Mess with...” Smack. “Your Pa's head...” Smack. “Again.”

“Ma, I'm bleeding!” I thought the broomstick might break in half.

She collapsed sobbing on the floor. “We got enough problems. Can't you see that?”

I didn't know what she meant but I never scratched the Polaroids again.

Pa decided it was the ChemMart photo clerk who was changing things around the farm. Maybe with help from the guy who helped service our tractors, but he was less sure about that. He gathered more and more photo evidence, started nailing pictures side by side into the wall and circling the differences with a fat black Sharpie that made the whole hall thick with the smell of ink. I'd always been real good at those Spot-The-Differences puzzles in the Sunday paper, but still I couldn't see what he meant by those circles.

I began to imagine the ChemMart boy creeping around the house at night, altering our little world like a whiff of heat moving sand around the desert. The mystery of it made me all tingly.

Chlorine told me he was called Henry, and the name sounded poetic in my ear. I scrawled it on my yellow spiral notebook, surrounded it with the hearts and flowers it deserved, practiced writing it in bubble letters. I could hear Pa hammering more Polaroids into the wall, smell the marker as it squeaked out its accusatory circles.

Kimberly A. Turner

Early one morning, when Mama thought I was out feeding the pigs, I lay on my bed letting Henry's name roam around my head, thinking of him being in my room while I slept, shifting the items on my desk ever so slightly, studying my belongings with his big brown eyes. My hand crept into my pajama bottoms and started moving in ways I was just learning. Imagining him tiptoeing through the living room in the dark, swapping the shades on the lamps, changing the way things were... My breathing got quick and shallow.

In the other room, I could hear Mama talking. "What if it's from nerve gas? I heard they used nerve gas over there."

My hand moved faster.

"It's not nerve gas," said Chlorine's mom.

I put the pillow over my face to muffle a moan, thinking of him leaning over me while I slept, taking off my necklace and replacing it with a slightly different one. Spot-The-Differences.

"How do you know?" I heard Mama ask through the wall.

My hand was soaked.

"Cause he'd be losing his hair." Nadine sounded exasperated. "And he'd have blisters on his balls. Does he have blisters on his balls?"

The images of my ChemMart dreamboat, they got all mixed up in talk of nerve gas and blisters, and no matter how much I tried to think of him—being stealthy, making things the same but different, watching me while I dreamt—I couldn't finish.

As I slipped on my jeans, I heard Mama tell Nadine, "I'm scared."

96

Pa had replaced all the marked-up photos in the hall with a single instant portrait of Henry. I took it as a warning shot and waited to be punished for cavorting with the enemy.

My face leaning in to kiss his two-dimensional lips, Henry didn't seem as appealing as he once did. He looked too pale, bored, certainly not the type to change someone's world in subtle-yet-important ways under cover of night. He sat stiffly on a wooden chair—exactly like the crappy one we used to milk cows out in the

barn. His head was cocked slightly to the side, and his warm brown eyes had turned cold, resting their blank gaze to the left of the lens. Even still, I couldn't resist pushing my glossed lips against the slick surface of the picture, just for a second.

First kisses shouldn't be so dull.

My punishment over Henry never came. By suppertime, the photo was gone. Pa said the wall—bare and riddled with nail holes—looked like the bullet-torn barracks overseas. He said all that was missing were the bloody body parts. He laughed, but it didn't seem funny to me. He didn't talk about the war much. I was glad for that.

Mama's eyes were wide red circles set deep into the dough of her face that night. Pa told her, "You really oughta go visit Nadine or something tonight. Cassie here, she's gonna help me fill in that hole out back. Looks like it's not a good place for a well after all." He chuckled. Mama's swollen eyes were humorless and glassy.

Pa and I went to the empty field near where some man had paid us to put up a billboard advertising his "World's Largest Guinea Pig" attraction 200 miles down the road. Underneath the cartoon rodent, it promised "Hot Boiled P-nuts, 3D Albino Bull Statue, BigFoot Bones + Much much More." Seemed an odd place to put a well.

With only the last quarter moon to light us, Pa disappeared in the shadow of the guinea pig sign.

"I can't see," I said. "Can't we do this tomorrow?"

He didn't answer, just reached out of the darkness and handed me a shovel.

97

Pa tried digging his strange rectangular wells all over the farm—down the gully by the creek, next to the windmill that'd rusted to a stop, even in the middle of a cornfield while the corn was at its highest—but I guess everything was dry that year except Mama's eyes because he always just filled the holes in again the next day. He also started drinking less, but she only cried more. She was spindly and pale, disappearing into the white of the walls when we weren't watching.

Kimberly A. Turner

“Your Mama’s just going through a time,” Pa explained as we shoveled dirt into a hole against the barn. “Try not to upset her too bad.”

I was a ghost haunting my own house that year, trying not to make Mama sad, trying not to get Pa on one of his rants about the people down at the farm supply store spying on us. I spent more time in town at Melanie and Chlorine’s houses.

“What if your Pa’s right?” Melanie asked me.

“About what?”

“Them farm store boys lookin’ at you.” She sat cross-legged on Chlorine’s bedroom floor, a bra she’d pinched from her mom’s drawer strapped around her flat chest. “The rolled-up socks or the toilet paper?” she asked, adjusting the cups and arching her back in time to the radio.

“Neither,” said Chlorine. “Unless you wanna look like you’ve got a rack made of lumpy rocks. Why would those boys be spyin’ on Cassie?”

“Why *wouldn’t* they?” I said. “Try a maxi pad. Those things are like pillows.”

Melanie nodded, wandered into Chlorine’s pink bathroom.

Chlorine picked up a bra, sitting the cup atop her blond curls at a jaunty angle like a beret. “Those boys are seniors and just about as likely to be lookin’ at you as Henry is to be breaking into your house at night.”

I could feel my face heat up. “He’s not,” I said.

“Oh, you figured that out, did you?” Chlorine fastened the bra clasps around her chin.

28 I nodded, but the truth is, I hadn’t figured anything out. It had been figured out for me. After the unsatisfying kiss I’d shared with Henry’s photo, I’d decided to confront him at the ChemMart, to taste his lips in three dimensions. I covered myself with Electric Strawberry body spray, slathered my lips in Dr. Pepper Lip Smacker, and put on my happy face t-shirt with the horizontal stripes, which I figured made me look both friendly and wider in the chest.

But when I asked to talk to him, the girl behind the counter squinted at me and said, “He’s gone.”

“When do you expect him back?” I asked.

“You oughta wanna talk to the sheriff about that,” she said, then walked away to restock the hay fever medicine.

It’s probably for the best. Pa would not have approved of that relationship.

“Henry’s not breaking in, but that doesn’t mean Pa’s not right about the seniors watching me,” I said. My mind had started figuring out which of my bedroom windows showcased my best angles, just in case.

“That’s creepy,” said Melanie, whose mom-bra looked even worse stuffed with maxi pads.

I wasn’t so sure.

When I changed into my pajamas that night, I left the curtains open and kept my good side—the one that didn’t show the scar on my chin—to the window facing the corn.

I slept and dreamt of seventeen-year-old boys with binoculars, leaning on the barn, whispering how beautiful I was. The sandy-haired one with the homemade spider tattoo stood and pulled down his overalls. The other boys stared at the oozing blistering mess where his willy should be. “Dude, what the hell?” said the one from the livestock department.

“Nerve gas,” he said.

I woke up wrapped in sheets doused in sweat and blood.

Mama was scrubbing at the sheet’s rusty spot with cold water and salt when Pa came in from the barn. “What’s that?” he asked.

“Nothing,” Mama whispered. “Cassie’s sheets.”

I stood nearby with what felt like a mattress strapped between my gangly legs, willing Pa to walk away. 99

“That blood?” He leaned into the washbasin, his face nearly touching the stain.

Mama nodded, scrubbed.

“Who did this?” His voice boomed.

Mama refused to look up. “Nobody. Just never you mind.”

His huge hand wrapped around the back of her delicate neck and shook her violently. “Was it that Henry boy?”

Kimberly A. Turner

“You know as well as me that it couldn’t possibly be him. Not anymore.” I caught a flash of anger that she buried immediately.

“Mind me. Who hurt my little girl?” His open palm connected with her jaw and she fell into a brittle pile of bones on the checkerboard floor.

“She’s not a little girl. She’s a woman, you fool.”

“I don’t like the secrets around here.” He glared at us both—her on the ground, me inching toward the door. “Until somebody tells me the truth about this blood,” he pulled out his pocketknife and sawed at the wet fiber, cutting around the stain, “it’s going to be right here.” He plucked a hammer from his tool belt and nailed the dripping scrap of blood-stained sheet to the kitchen wall.

Mama began to cry. Again. Pa went out to the tractor. I stared at the shapes on the sheet in shameful fascination, searching for pictures in the irregular shapes like I did with clouds when I was little: Sheep. Sock-filled bras. Giant guinea pigs. Blood.

The bathroom was where I first noticed the windows. They were nailed shut and blacked out with swirls of something that I hoped was dark shoe polish or paint. When I got closer, I could smell that it was neither. Manure. The wide fingerprints that had smeared it around the locks couldn’t have belonged to anyone but Pa.

The next day, the living room windows were blacked out the same way. The day after that, my bedroom, then the kitchen. Same dark spiral pattern, same rancid smell. Room after room, until the whole house reeked like a barn.

100 We fell into darkness, even by day. I wasn’t allowed to go see Chlorine and Melanie anymore. I stopped bothering with lip gloss. We’d flip on lights and Pa would scream, “They can see us! Are you trying to get us killed?”

Mama cooked supper like everything was normal, the blue flame of the gas stove providing the only light. I hated the darkness, but it was a relief not to have to look into her pained eyes. The food was bland and undercooked. We chewed with our mouths open. Because it didn’t matter.

Without the sun to mark our days, we set alarms to go to bed

and alarms to wake up. After a while, it seemed like too much trouble. There's no telling how long that lasted.

I whispered to Mama, "What is wrong with him? Why?"

She pressed my face against her neck and said, "I don't know, baby. I think Pa's just tired. Try not to upset him."

The crook of her neck smelled like fear, but she was trying to hide it, so I just hugged her back. I sat on her lap in the rocking chair and hugged her as hard as I could. It felt like her bones would break but still I squeezed. Her tears ran over my forehead, but I pretended not to feel them.

Pa spent most days sitting on the hope chest with a machete resting across his knees. By day, there was just enough light to see the faint shine of metal across his lap. He chanted military rhymes and whispered things that turned my stomach into a hard fist.

It was nighttime when he said, "Cassie. Cassie, come here." I guided myself through the darkness and into the bedroom, following the wall with my fingertips.

"Cassie, the wells are all open now," he said, "and they're all so angry." I kept my fingernails pressed into the doorframe. "But punkin, there's no food left, and we'll die in here unless we get some. I need you to try. I think they'll forgive you."

My eyes strained for his silhouette. His voice sounded closer than before. "I'm sorry if I'm wrong," he said. "But if they'll forgive anyone, I think it's you. At the end, Henry told me you were friends. That'll help. Will you try for the barn? For food?"

I wondered when he'd met Henry, and how much Pa knew. "I...I don't understand, I think." I shook my head in the blackness.

I didn't understand much anymore. I'd lost track of the days. There was only the hunger, the stench, Pa's screaming, Mama's nervous whispers. My notebooks full of stupid bubble letters and hearts seemed like preposterous teenage bullshit from another life.

Mama coughed behind me, but I still jerked when her hand brushed my shoulder. "Your Pa wants you to go to the barn and bring back some milk and eggs," she said, gripping my arm hard as she continued, "You should do that."

Pa pushed the handle of the machete into my hand. "Put them

back into the holes if you have to,” he said. “But don’t fall in. You remember where all the wells we filled in are?”

I nodded, realized he couldn’t see me, said, “Yes, Pa.”

Before I left, Mama pulled me into her, tracing the links of my necklace with her lips. “I tried,” she said. She was crying again. More than I wanted sunlight, I wanted her not to cry anymore. We were all so tired. “I’m sorry,” she said. I shrugged her off, pushed her away.

“I’ll be right back,” I promised.

She lowered her voice. Even with her lips on my earlobe I could barely hear her say, “No. Go to Chlorine’s. Stay for three days, then bring back help for your Pa. They’re not wells.”

“Why three da—” I began. She slapped me hard then sobbed harder. “Listen to what I say, girl.”

Outside, the fresh air smelled like Fourth of July watermelon, birthday cake, and Christmas trees all at once. My eyes squinted against the nearly full moon. I wanted to spin, scream, sprint across the field, but it all went to my head.

Pa was right: All the wells we’d dug were scooped out. There were big rectangular holes everywhere. Dizzy and confused, I thought I saw Henry next to the barn, but when I called out to him, only the crickets answered.

I sidestepped a mound of dirt next to the barn and pried the door open with the machete. The inside of my mouth filled with the sour taste of decay; the moonlight revealed piles of starved chickens and dead calves. The sulfur smell of rotting eggs and the moist sound of a rat’s teeth gnawing through a cow’s udder pushed vomit up from my stomach and onto the sawdust floor.

I stayed away for three nights like Mama said, but I didn’t go to Chlorine’s. What would I have said? She was decades younger than me now and I had no words left for her.

I walked into town and talked to the sheriff. He served with Pa in the war so I figured I could trust him. I said we needed some help at the farm, that things seemed real messed up. I said Pa wasn’t himself and we were pretty scared.

He told me he was short a man and dealing with a whole mess of missing persons cases in town. Said I should give Pa a break 'cause he'd been through a lot. Then he sent me away.

There was an orchard down the road from our farm and the rest of the three days were spent laying under a peach tree, breathing in its sweetness and finding shapes in the clouds. Binoculars. Flashbulbs. Henry's face. Mama's mashed potatoes.

I was smiling for the first time in weeks, and my skirt was doubled over and filled with fresh fruit when I stepped through the door. "Mama?" I called.

I walked into a painful wall of stench. The manure coating the windows was mixed with something much worse now, something that reminded me of the chunks of fur-covered rotting flesh in the barn, of my sweat-soaked, blood-stained sheet.

"Up here." Pa's voice.

My feet followed the sound of Pa's heavy breathing through the darkness, up the stairs and into their bedroom. The window had been shattered, and even though he'd tried to cover it with a pillowcase, some light squeezed its way past. He sat on the hope chest, machete across his lap, right where I'd left him. The bed was pushed to the corner of the room.

My eyes adjusted to the dim light. I was confused. "Where's Mama?"

"She had to go away for a while." He sounded like he had been crying but that couldn't be, because he'd never cried before, ever. His machete looked different, shiny in a different way than before. It was wet. My focus struggled. The floorboards and far wall were speckled with dark blotches and lines leading to a huge dark spot in the center of the room where the bed had been.

What looked like maybe a rope dangled from the rafter above the stain. I wanted to see better. And I didn't.

"Where? Where did she go?" My voice sounded more like Mama than me, and that scared me worse.

"Everything's okay, baby girl," he whispered. "I just need you to help me fill one more well."

The peaches dropped from my skirt, their soft skin denting on the hardwood.

Autoritratto

MILES WHITE

“**T**omorrow,” he said. “God, I can hardly think about it.”

But it was the only thing he had thought about for weeks. It was all he had talked about for days.

Adam bent over the sink, polishing the dishes to a shine, and he started one last time from the beginning. “The thing is,” he said, “Mister Craddock is just—*enormous*. It’s hard to describe. Maybe the greatest salesman in the Midwest. Any businessman in the city would kill for five minutes with him. But I get an *hour*—!”

Dawn at the dining table nodded in time. “Incredible,” she said.

“Do you remember—” Now Adam’s excitement was mounting, and he was struggling to follow the script. “Dad’s sixtieth birthday, there at the firm, and they brought in the cake, and then they brought in the plaque, because in a month he’d be thirty years with the company and they thought it’d be good to roll both of those into one, and everyone said, *Mister Pedersen, Mister Pedersen, it’s always an honor, Mister Pedersen, it’s such a pleasure, Mister*—Do you remember?”

Dawn nodded in time. “I remember.” At least—Adam had retold the story so often that she *felt* like she remembered. It didn’t matter, really.

“That’s how Dad talks to Mister Craddock.” Adam towed off the wineglasses, wide-eyed. “Been in the business thirty years but still talks to Mister Craddock like an intern. I can’t imagine how hard he had to work to get me an hour—an *hour!*” He turned toward Dawn and then turned back again, and there was a strange light in his eyes. “But then—I mean of course Panatronics is the exact thing he needs. Everyone knows that the AGC offices are still stuck in the nineties—” Adam paused dramatically.

“The *nineties!*” It was surprising the first time. By this point it was just odd.

But Adam nodded, like always: “There’s been a paradigm shift but they’re still holding on to the same software, and you’d think it’d be holding them back, but goddamn if Mister Craddock doesn’t know how to stretch a system. He makes moves like a lion, Dawn, it’s incredible. If he had Panatronics, though, the things he could do—and he *knows it!*—” He was speeding up now, whipping the towel around, and he began to pace, tracing a nervous line back and forth across the kitchen, shaking in excitement. “He has to know it, or he wouldn’t have taken the appointment. He wants to take the next step and he wants us to be a part of it! He wants—did you know that sixty percent of all passenger aircraft in the Western Hemisphere use AGC components? In the eighties it was barely five percent, but he signed on in eighty-seven and by ninety-five he’d brought that up to thirty already—”

Dawn knew it was time to nod again, but instead she cut in, asking, “What do all those numbers have to do with Panatronics, again?”

Adam made an expansive gesture with the towel and yelled, *105* “*Sales!*” which meant that he had no idea, but the momentum was carrying him, and he sailed right over the first Gulf War and the slow encroachment into Eastern Europe, which usually took five minutes by itself, and crash-landed in his own good fortune: “Maybe the greatest salesman in the Midwest and he wants to know he can leverage Panatronics to transform his accounts, and if this goes well we might be able to transition into operations for manufacturing, the software is *ready* but we’ve never had a fair chance, and, and—”

And Adam stopped short, drawn taut like a live wire, speechless for the first time in days.

Dawn waited for him to come to. A minute ticked by. Finally she called out, “Adam?”

“Dawn?”

“Are you all right?”

“I’m fine. I’m fine.”

“You barely ate any—”

“It was delicious. I had a late lunch.” He came back to the dining table and sat down. He twined his fingers into hers. He was trembling just slightly; he was looking just past her. “And you? Are you all right?”

“Yes,” she said, and she almost said more—she almost knew how to say it—but Adam nodded. He pulled away and rose to his feet and went back to his pacing.

“Five years,” he said. “Five years with Panatronics, and it might just pay off here. God, I hope it does—but I think it might work. I have a good shot. He’ll like me well enough. Won’t he?”

“Who cares what he thinks?” said Dawn. “I like you.”

Adam paused, one last time, in the doorway of the second bedroom, where—for now—he and Dawn kept their study. The evening sun came in low through the window and pulled shadows out from his thin cheeks. He stood still, like a woodcut in the doorway, and he considered it.

“Yes,” he said. “Yes, and you are a blessing.”

And he closed the door to the study, and the latch of the lock clicked.

106

Five years with Panatronics, and it might finally pay off.

Every time Adam went out on business it took him a little longer to come home. He might walk through the door and not come down for hours. He kept counting his moves. He kept smothering his moods under that wide-eyed salesman’s grin. When the buzz of business wore off he’d crumple like a bag in the wind, and in the morning he would awaken as though from a fugue.

It wasn’t that Dawn missed him, exactly—he was never gone

for too long, and he was happy to wash dishes and sleep in the same bed and ask, distractedly, about her day. But the kisses had grown cooler, and the long conversations about the future had grown curt. That last was the worst part. Adam had been such a practical dreamer, but he had had a way of making little things seem grand. It was what made him such a salesman.

Panatronics was someone else's fever dream, an echo of the dotcom boom. Five years ago Alexios Panagiotidis had carved an enormous digital Prometheus from raw code and caffeine and persuaded Adam Pedersen that it could make sparks, and so Adam spent years of his life making the case to any local businessman who'd listen. He'd been up and down the Mississippi, chasing someone else's dream.

Perhaps Panatronics was the biggest independent resource planning operation in the Midwest, or perhaps it had bled money for five years. Either option was equally likely. Whatever the truth was, Adam brought a paycheck home every month and dreamt the same dream every night. Dawn had given up asking.

In truth, she didn't really know what Panatronics was *for*, and deep in her heart she knew Adam didn't either, but he and Alexios went on, and on, and on, until somehow Adam's father had pulled an enormous favor and won him the audience with Julian Craddock, a man she'd never heard of a month ago but whose name she would never forget.

Adam fell into obsession. He pored over interviews; he reread memoirs; he held forth at restaurants; he shook his own hands alone in elevators, testing his own grip. Sometimes the Craddock sale was the break he'd been waiting for, the chance to send Panatronics to new heights. Other times it was the first real test of the product and its market appeal. Occasionally—deep into the night, after three glasses of Cabernet—Mister Craddock was the company's last, greatest hope. Maybe all three were true. Maybe all of them were exaggerations. It was so hard to tell.

Adam had never been tender, but there had been a time when he was attentive.

Dawn lingered by the study in her bedclothes, listening through

the door as he practiced: working the room, running the script, pausing for questions. “Panatronics is the future,” he said, “and it could be *your* future. A quantum leap in digital resource planning, operating on a lightweight bed of code—”

She mouthed the words back to him from the other side: “—hand-built by the best engineers in the business, stress-tested against the latest models in financial and economic analysis, and, critically—”

“—recoded and retuned to your exact specifications...” His voice trailed off. “Maybe I should cut *hand-built*. It’s a mixed metaphor. He’ll notice.”

Dawn sighed. He’d come back to her in a little while. Things would be better soon, or at least they would be different.

She would wait. She went to bed waiting.

In the morning he was already gone. The study was empty. There were new dishes in the drying rack; there was a quarter-pot left in the coffeemaker. He had left a note on the counter. *I’ll call on the way home. I love you.*

Next to the note there was a week-old newspaper, with the reference: *Julian Craddock: How We Got Here. B3.*

Dawn opened the paper and Craddock loomed out from the page. Adam was right—he was so much larger than life. Even in his gray age he towered over his desk. The newsprint tiptoed around his shoulders.

108 The story went on at length about Craddock’s time at AGC—how he had met Joshua Archer and Michael Gavrilovic when they were still working out of a garage; how his shrewdness and cunning had catapulted his colleagues into lucrative defense contracts; how he had led them safely from the end of the Cold War through the eruptions in the Gulf and at last into the calm waters of consumer aircraft; how Archer and Gavrilovic, speechless with gratitude, had immortalized Craddock in the company name, second only to themselves. The paper was covered in red ink—phrases underlined, pull-quotes circled, footnotes scribbled through the margins in Adam’s handwriting. An entire paragraph about a lawsuit in the early aughts had been scratched out. Next to the photograph, in the

negative space between the desk and the text, he had scrawled one of his favorite Craddock quotes: *The Cutting Edge Is Only As Sharp As The Blade Is Bright.*

Dawn glazed over it all. Craddock belittled explanation. All the words were so small beside him.

In the meantime there were other things.

Dawn made herself breakfast; she made herself lunch. She tidied the kitchen and called her sisters on the phone. She made arrangements with her obstetrician. She sipped tea and watched the squirrels in the birdbath. The clouds gathered and gave way without rain.

As the afternoon passed, the sun came low, until finally the study filled with light, and Dawn stepped gently into it, closing the door behind her. She took the two mirrors her mother had given her and set them on the desk. She opened the little locked cabinet where her materials lay hidden: drugstore pens, brushes filched from her father's house, notepads stolen from hotel nightstands and waiting rooms, the backs of business cards.

She took the pens and paper up from the cabinet and laid them down on the desk.

Dawn kept a secret scrapbook in the cabinet for days like this, and she had already filled it halfway with little drawings. Sometimes she drew still-lives, or sketched scenes from the newspapers, but today she wanted to draw herself: the mole on her cheek, the faded-out scar from childhood cycling, the ghost crease between her brows even now, the curve of her chin in afternoon shade, the hesitant slope of her nose, the way the little darkness played within and beneath her eyes.

She sat at the desk and gazed gently at the mirrors. Her double and triple looked back at her.

She turned, and her reflections turned together, and Dawn watched the sunlight break against the first gentle folds of her middle age, and it filled her with wonder. She sighed, and the reflections sighed together.

She took a notepad and began to sketch.

Before long she emptied her mind of Adam and his absence and

his worries, and soon all that remained was the work: testing the grain of the paper with her thumbs, watching the wet ink wink in the light and then dry, waiting as clouds interrupted the sun, measuring the gaps between features with her fingertips. She finished one sketch and at once she began another—she listened for the friction as she pulled blank sheets from the notepad. She rose, and rose again, and again, from the papers' white, like an evening shadow.

Adam did not call.

Hours vanished between the sheets of notepads, under the layers of ink, into the grooves of her ballpoint outlines. The sun came lower and lower, and the shadows cast longer and longer, and she sketched, and she sketched, and sometimes she crumpled the page when the image had gone wrong, and sometimes she lifted it gingerly from before her and laid it to the side, like a precious treasure.

Finally she drew away from the pages and laid down her tools, and saw her own faces look back at her.

She turned to the mirrors again, but the light had shifted. The reflections had changed, and new shadows dwelt in them.

She looked down at the portraits again and they seemed unfamiliar, like each one was a different subject, captured in a different moment, in a different mood, in a different quality of light. There were resemblances—to one another, to herself—but they were strange.

Yet none of them were strangers. She recognized them all, and for a moment—in that deepening sunset—they seemed less like portraits than *people*, people with wants and secrets and dreams, and the simplest and most familiar of these was the way each wanted, in her own way, to be loved.

Dawn picked out her favorite—the ink lay heavy in its eyes, like a cloud—and took it up into her hands and looked, longing. She whispered to the dark eyes: “You *are* loved.” And she touched the cheek, tenderly. “*I* love you,” she said, and she drank in the sound of the words.

She signed each one—*Dawn Pedersen*—and then, almost as a secret, she singled out the favorite and added her father's family name, and her mother's—*Abrams Jackson*.

She laid the portraits into the secret scrapbook; she gathered the tools into neat little bundles. She took them all, the pens and brushes and unused papers, and placed them all inside the cabinet.

Dawn dreamt, sometimes, that one day she would forget to lock the scrapbook away, and Adam, coming into the study, would find it on the desk; he would open it and see dozens of sketches, tracing back months—apples, peaches, grapes, plucked flowers, little still-lives of pebbles and coins.

Dawn, he would say, *I had no idea*.

She would blush; she would lead him to the bedroom, where she had lain years of scrapbooks in her sock drawer; she would bring him to her father's house, to the attic, to the box where her mother had packed all of her childhood sketchbooks.

He would take her hands and kiss them, gently. *All of these years*, he would say, *and I had no idea*.

She turned the key in the cabinet; she hid the key back in the jewelry box.

I should have asked, he would say. *I should have told everyone*.

Adam did not call. Dawn made herself dinner.

In the late evening she heard the lock turn in the front door; she heard the door open and close. She went up to the foyer. Adam was there. His tie was loose and he held his briefcase limp in his left hand. He stood still, like a pendulum, in the center of the room, staring into the air.

“Adam?”

But Adam stood still. Dawn stepped closer in.

“Adam?”

But Adam stood still. Dawn reached out to him, gently, laying a hand on his shoulder.

“Adam.”

He turned to her at last, slowly, returning from the middle distance, focusing on his wife. “Dawn.”

“The sale,” she said. “Mister Craddock. How did it go?”

And Adam smiled. “Julian,” he said, gently, and his eyes filled

with wonder. "Julian," he said. He began to laugh and then to cry. "Julian!"

And suddenly he reached out; his taut frame snapped and he fell about Dawn in an embrace, weeping, laughing, holding her close.

There I Will Take Your Hand

NANCY LUDMERER

A matinee at the Met, followed by dinner. A grandfather's dream. Sixth row balcony, unobstructed view. *Don Giovanni*. Five minutes to curtain, the seat next to me still empty. Then, a soft commotion at the aisle; even softer apologies to the people she disturbs to get there. "I'm sorry I'm late." Lorna says. "Believe it or not, I'm coming from the office." After she settles in, she reports what the usher said: the last-minute substitute for Zerlina is better than the original.

The chandeliers begin their slow ascent. "A gift from your cursed *Vienna*. Isn't that what you always say about the chandeliers, Grandpa?"

"Indeed." During intermission, we find a good spot to people-watch, a ledge for me to lean on. I unwrap four Lorna Doone cookies. Same as when she was ten, we eat them with milk pilfered from the coffee station. "Is it wrong Grandpa," she asked at ten (such a serious child!), "to take the milk when we haven't bought coffee?" I told her that in Vienna, they served coffee during the interval to everyone; in summer, ice cream.

"Dinner tonight will be unusual," Lorna warns. "All seven species of trees, from figs to olives. For the holiday." What holiday? But I don't ask. Then it's the second act and the final scene: sinful *Don Giovanni* consumed in flames.

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“That’s one weird opera.” Lorna’s studio apartment is nearby, but even the six-block walk exhausts me. “The music is beautiful, but the story? I get why you didn’t take me as a kid.”

What operas *did* I take her to as a child? *The Magic Flute*, for sure. *Hansel and Gretel*? A kiddie version of *Barber of Seville*? It’s been twenty years.

“Did you see *Don Giovanni* when you lived in Vienna, Grandpa? With your parents?”

“I’m not sure,” I say. “It’s one of my favorites.”

“I know you saw *Fidelio* and *Fledermaus*. You always mentioned them.” She takes my coat, fusses in the kitchenette, arranges two place settings on the bridge table. Meanwhile, Simone—my cat for a decade, before Assisted Living made me give her up—is going crazy, circling my legs, meowing, then purring nonstop.

“Forget me, forget Mozart, you’re all about Simone, Grandpa.”

My daughter Helene once said, in front of Lorna, that I shouldn’t make things up. “You were six when you left Vienna on Kindertransport. You didn’t go to operas. Why do you tell Lorna such things?” I didn’t deny what Helene said; but didn’t admit it either. Lorna said, “I believe Grandpa. You weren’t there, mom, you don’t know.”

Lorna gives me a printed menu she prepared at her office. It describes the seven species and their significance, along with the bill of fare: mushroom barley soup, olive bread, salad with grapes, fig gelato. At the top: *Grandpa and Lorna’s Tu B’Shvat Dinner. That holiday. The birthday of the trees.* Obscure; nearly forgotten. I’m impressed Lorna knows about it.

117 She serves me pomegranate juice, symbolizing majesty. “What do you think?”

“Nothing a little wodka can’t fix.”

She grins, pours a jigger. The alcohol loosens my tongue. Or perhaps it’s the CD she puts on. *La Ci Darem La Mano*. Out of context, the Don’s attempted seduction of Zerlina falls away. The music is pure longing. Anticipating loss for what isn’t going to happen.

“What does the song mean, again?”

There I Will Take Your Hand

“The first line means *there I will take your hand.*”

That’s the line, I want to say. The rest doesn’t matter. I am eighty-eight years old. “I must tell you something. Before I forget. It’s about my sister. She was four years older.” Lorna’s face is rapt, like she doesn’t want to miss a word. “They took *her* to the opera. Not me. I was too little. After they got home, she would come to my room and tell me everything.”

Lorna turns off the CD. “That’s better.” She asks if Helene knows I had a sister. I shake my head. She says: “Don’t cry.”

“That’s what *she* said. My sister. She was supposed to go on Kindertransport, but got a cough or a sore throat, something, enough to make them reject her. My parents had nothing left. They made me go instead. Simone said: *Don’t cry, Abilah, I’ll come find you. You’ll look up, and I’ll be there, reaching for your hand. I promise.*”

“*Simone*, Grandpa? Her name was *Simone*?”

The cat is at the window, bristling at a pigeon through fogged glass. Indifferent to the sound of her name.

Yes, I tell my granddaughter.

Simone.

Jahrzeit

NANCY LUDMERER

The sun is blinding so I put on my shades. Alma shifts in her chair. By now, I know what the shifting means. You can't wear sunglasses during therapy. Maybe if you're a sullen teenage girl, dragged in by a desperate mother: top girl student, refusing to attend her graduation. But not that same daughter forty years later, a year after her mother's death.

"Let me pull the blind." Alma leaves her yellow notepad uncovered. With my sunglasses off, I can't not look. I have a wandering eye. This got me in trouble in school. I didn't look at my neighbor's work to copy it; always, my pen was down. My classmates didn't understand. Elliot covered his paper. Gail yelled, "Cathy is copying!" That was worse than getting sent to the principal, worse than my mother's distress when the principal telephoned her. *Top girl student, copying?*

On her pad, Alma has scrawled *Kathi S.; aversion to tapping, Yarzite*. After a year, she still misspells my name. If I mention it, she'll know I looked. Besides, what's the big deal? She misspelled *Jahrzeit*, too. That's different, of course. A Yiddish word. Alma isn't Jewish. And Jewish or not Jewish, who knows how to spell *Jahrzeit*?

I clear my throat—my *shtick* like chair-shifting is hers. "Maybe I should do tapping." A way to distract myself from the clandestine viewing of her notes, from her mistakes, from my own.

I hate tapping. Hate its pseudoscientific nomenclature: *Emotional Freedom Technique*. Hate the jargon about ephemeral energy patterns you're supposed to create, or maybe destroy.

Hate the mantra you recite as you tap different pathways in your body. The mantra is personal. It always makes me feel worse. *A fraud*. "Even though my mother suffered a painful death, I deeply and completely accept myself." Talk about bullshit. If that were true, would I be in Alma's office every Friday? For months I've obsessed over the things I should have attended to but didn't: *Her allergy to morphine. Her doctor's mistakes. Her fear.*

Alma knows I abhor tapping. She doesn't want to go there. "It's a year since your mother died, isn't it?"

Her death. "See you tomorrow," I said the night before. By then Mom was nearly gone, her breathing slowed, the monitors off. *Silence*. I could have stayed; she would have stayed if our roles were reversed. Instead, I told her I'd be back at eight. The next morning, she died at 8:01. Creeping like a snail, like the reluctant schoolboy in Jaques's "ages of man," I arrived at 8:13.

Sometimes Alma uses a different technique, a nameless one. She shares her own guilt about her husband's death two years before. The first time, I wondered what happened to the silent, poker-faced shrink, like the man my mother took me to see when I was sixteen. But Alma's strategy is strangely comforting. Her *what if's* rival mine. *What if I had refused his last intubation? What if I hadn't taken the subway that morning? What if I had yelled at Dr. Lee instead of being so polite?* Our second-guessing tropes are like echoes in a cave.

Now she asks: "What's that word you used last week? The Yiddish one?" I know the word she means. I saw it, misspelled, in her notes. 117

"Yahrzeit. Time of year. The anniversary of the death." Am I telling her anything she doesn't know? I reach in my bag and retrieve the squat white candle in a glass cup. "I'll light it tonight. It burns twenty-four hours. Tomorrow in synagogue, they'll call me up to chant the memorial prayer, say her name. Every year on her Yahrzeit. They knew her there."

Alma nods, jots something down. I lean forward but can't read it.

Nancy Ludmerer

When she looks up her eyes are glassy. “We have nothing like that. First year, nothing. Second year, nothing. Smoke and ashes. Then nothing.”

She begins crying full on, shielding her eyes, her head bowed.

I stand up, then sit down. Going to her would be crazy. “I’m tapping,” I say loudly. I omit the mantra, start right in. I use karate chops: first my forehead, then my cheek, then my chin. I don’t know if she hears me; her head is still down. When I get to my chest, I go for it. It’s more than mere tapping, more like the *mea culpas* we do on Yom Kippur. I feel better, pounding my heart. The only sound in the room.

“Quit tapping,” she says, so I stop.

We stare at each other in the silence. We rest.

The Most Righteous Adulterer in Vilna

JACOB M. APPEL

They had been joking about refugees for nearly a year before they moved into the convent. Mitch had raised a raft of serious objections—about lead paint in the window wells, about asbestos and drafts, about management of the Ursuline burial ground beyond the carriage house. Then there was the matter of the six-hour drive from Manhattan. Not exactly the Berkshires or the Hamptons. But when he understood that Bev's heart remained dead set on the property, notwithstanding all the expenditures of energy and capital that would entail, he quipped, over maple pancakes at their bed and breakfast in North Flodden, "Aren't you afraid we'll be overrun by migrants? Or fugitives? Just because it's Canada doesn't mean we should let our guard down. It *is* the longest undefended border in the world." That was his way of conceding that her quest for novelty had once again eclipsed his conservative, securities attorney instincts, that they would tender the highest bid at the estate sale, which turned out to be the only bid, and spend their forties summering in Vermont's Northeast Kingdom. Now ten months had passed, the boys were ensconced at Androscoggin, and after a spring of overpaying contractors and bantering about asylum-seeking lumberjacks, mostly him bantering and Bev rolling her eyes, they'd

finally unpacked the cars—they'd driven tandem—and settled onto the deck for gin rickeys.

"I can't believe we're finally here," said Bev. The setting sun, an opulent orange, glimmered off the balsam firs and the streaks of silver in her hair. Like veins of ore, she'd said, when defending her decision not to dye. "It's so alive, Mitch. It *smells* so alive. Makes me want to drive into town and buy a tent so we can sleep outdoors."

"I'm sure the bears would love that," said Mitch. Besides, who could afford a tent with this mortgage? But he didn't want to argue, so he checked himself. "I can't help thinking about the nuns. All those young women and no sex. I wonder if they measure celibacy in 'nun-years' the way they measure smoking in 'pack-years.' We'll have to make up for them, I suppose."

The nuns had occupied the convent since the 1880s; in their heyday, they'd numbered in the dozens, raising goats and rabbits, selling eggs, later tending to a herd of alpacas. Sister Birgitta had been the last of the lot—still gardening at ninety-one, but largely dependent on weekly food drops from the parish in Flodden Center. Renovating the structure into a livable modern home had required all but divine intervention.

"Do you ever get the sense you're being ignored?" asked Mitch.

"I could just curl up right here on this chair and doze off," said Bev.

"In that case, I'm going to head up to the attic and make sure Hawley's men hauled off that loom and those mattresses."

"Have fun. If I'm napping, don't wake me."

"What if I find Anne Frank?" asked Mitch.

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His grandfather had escaped from Sobibor, while his granduncles had not been so lucky, which Mitch felt justified his outlandish jabs at humor. His wife said nothing; she had already rolled onto her side.

"Okay, turn your back, but these old places are full of surprises." He reached for the bottle of gin. "And I'm taking this with me in case Anne wants a drink."

Hawley's men had been under the supervision of the caretaker, Waite, a laconic Yankee who'd looked after the grounds since the

pontificate of John XXIII, but he'd been laid up with pneumonia at North Country Regional for nearly two weeks, so it did not surprise Mitch to find the loom and mattresses mouldering in the dim heat alongside bound stacks of *St. Anthony Messenger* and *National Geographic*. One cover memorialized Dian Fossey; another depicted Hillary and Norgay atop Everest. In the morning, he'd have to speak directly to Enoch Hawley, which was a bit like arguing with a barn door, or the corpse of President Coolidge, but what else could be done? Mitch took a swig from the gin bottle. He'd already turned back toward the stairs when a peculiar noise pierced the shadows. He spun around as the distinctive sound repeated itself three times in succession: the unmistakable staccato of a human sneeze.

The sound arose from the far wall—behind an Adirondack cabinet in which Waite stored varnish and turpentine and brushed nickel fittings. Mitch couldn't exactly say he was surprised: He'd heard too many tales of squatting hobos and truants hiding inside mangers. Rather, he was irked. "The gig is up" he shouted, his adrenaline surging. "You'd better come out now before I call the authorities." He searched for a weapon, but all he found was the handle of a whisk broom.

His ultimatum drew no response. He set down the Tanqueray bottle and pushed aside the wooden cabinet, revealing an aperture in the masonry. About the size of a manhole, its edges jagged as canine teeth. Easier to block the defect with a bureau, of course, than to disclose it in the bill of sale. Again, not a surprise. Waite was probably in cahoots with the estate agent.

Mitch thrust the broom handle into the cavity, and when it met no resistance, he followed with his head. Even with the aid of the light on his phone, he couldn't pierce the darkness, so against all good judgment, he squeezed his torso through the gap in the stonework. That was when he saw them: The old man on his knees, praying, rocking with his fringed shawl at his lips; the wife, pinched and depleted, her head wrapped in a colorless *shimata*. And the girl—the girl. She looked roughly twenty-five, maybe a few years more, the age Anne Frank might have been had she spent another decade

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stuck inside a garret. Her eyes had sunk into their sockets, her hair gone to string. But even then—and there was no getting around it—she was exquisitely beautiful. Mitch lowered the broom handle.

“Who in hell’s name are you?” he demanded.

“You know who we are, you bastard,” snapped the girl. “Just get it over with.”

Her English was more stilted than broken—as though she’d learned it from a foreign service manual—and inflected with the cadence of the shtetl. His own mother’s aunt had married a survivor who spoke like that. A cabbie. They guy had once shown Mitch his tattoo.

“Get *what* over with?”

“Sick, that’s what you are. Does it make you feel important to toy with us?”

The wife had started to sob. “Please, Mirele,” she said. “Don’t make things worse—”

They stood in silence for several seconds, illuminated only by his phone. The old man had stopped praying, but remained on his knees. Murder lurked within the girl’s eyes.

“Maybe the American sister sent him,” said the wife. “Or Herr Waite.”

“Don’t be a fool, Mama. He didn’t know we were here.”

Mitch regretted leaving the Tanqueray behind.

“Okay, let’s take a step back for a moment,” he said. “My name is Mitchell Aaronson. My wife, who is sleeping downstairs on the veranda, is Beverly Aaronson. I’m an attorney with Cravath; she runs the visual arts program at Sarah Lawrence. We bought this place from the Society of Sisters last August because my better half wanted something more rustic than Amagansett or Martha’s Vineyard. So that’s us. Upper East Side. Squash at the Athletic Club. Trying out the empty nest while our boys are away at summer camp.” He paused—as if unsettled by his own autobiography. “Now, for the love of God, *who are you?*”

The girl glowered at him—but when he said nothing more, her lips lost their tension, and to his amazement, slowly curled into a smile. Then she was laughing. Hard—to the point of losing her

breath. And he couldn't help himself from grinning.

"It's all right," gasped the girl between fits of mirth. "Oh, Mama! He's just a lunatic."

Over the ensuing hours, the Kovners related a tale that rang as farfetched to Mitch—preposterous, really—as his had to them. Mirele did most of the talking. The girl explained that she'd been an architecture student at the Albertina in Königsberg before the war, and even Mitch had the sense not to ask which war. Her mother interjected frequently to clarify or correct minor points—how many days they'd hidden in Insterburg on their retreat toward Russia, that her brother's son, who'd gone missing in Aliten, was a full corporal, not merely a lance corporal. Also remarks in a language that Mitch assumed was Yiddish. The father, Mendel, once a prosperous leather goods merchant, said little. Slowly, Mitch came to understand their purported life in the attic, which they calculated had lasted almost nine years. "June 22, 1950," the girl declared with confidence. The American sister, as they called Birgitta, had supplied their provisions for the better part of a decade, and when she took ill, "Herr Waite" had filled in. Most implausibly, they believed the convent to be located on the outskirts of Vilna. And that the Germans didn't interfere with an American nun made perfect sense to them, because as far as they knew, the United States had resisted entering the war. They even studied English daily in the desperate hope that the Wehrmacht might mistake them for neutral non-combatants and "repatriate" them.

"What about Pearl Harbor?" interjected Mitch. "You can't be serious."

"Pearl who?" asked the girl, wary.

He panned his light across the tiny chamber: the sawhorse table, the mismatched chairs, the pallet beside the potbelly stove that sufficed for Mirele's mattress. Beyond that, the even smaller bedroom with the exposed sink and cast-iron tub—the latter hand-installed by Herr Waite. Nothing of this could possibly be... Yet there they were! Like those Japanese holdouts who periodically popped up in caves on Guam and the Solomon Islands thinking

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Jacob M. Appel

Tojo still ruled Japan. On several occasions, he interrupted the girl's story to suggest they were no longer in danger—that the Germans had been defeated—but she eyed him as though he were a madman.

“So are you going to turn us in?” demanded the girl.

“To whom?” he asked. Then, at the periphery of the light, his glance caught the girl's right fist, partially concealed in the lap of her dress; her fingers gripped a claw hammer. “Of course, I'm not going to turn you in. I'm going to see about rustling you up some food.”

“*Rustle up?*” she inquired. “That is to steal cattle, no?”

“That too,” he said. “It's an expression.”

He rose from his chair and inched toward the gap in the plaster. The girl watched him with intensity, with a focus he'd never before encountered. “I'll be back soon.”

“See, he is a righteous man,” said the old man. “Again, we are blessed.”

He punctuated his words with a sneeze. One mystery solved.

“*Gesundheit,*” said Mitch.

“Knock three times,” warned Mirele. “Otherwise we'll think you're the Germans and we'll escape out the roof hatch. We won't get very far, but we'll try... We almost fled earlier—on account of you—”

“What stopped you?” Mitch asked.

“I don't know,” said the girl. “An instinct.”

She smiled—and Mitch felt as though *he* had been blessed.

“And we didn't hear boots,” added the girl, suddenly serious again. “Or dogs.”

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That led to an unexpected burst of tears from the mother: They had heard both boots and dogs one afternoon the previous week, but the girl's father had been suffering an attack of gout, and his toes couldn't bear pressure, so they'd been unable to bolt. Hawley's sons and their otiose St. Bernard, thought Mitch. So they *had* stopped by to take a look at the loom.

Bev was still snoozing on the deck when Mitch returned from the attic. The sun had fallen below the balsam firs, which towered like

palisades beyond the orbs of the post lanterns. Sounds feral and avian rose from the undergrowth. On the garden stairs, the LED lights—overpriced and superfluous—blinked intermittently, presumably a loose cable, their flicker signaling for the attention of black bears and bobcats. Mitch considered waking his wife, but he was in no mood to explain that they were harboring the last Jews of Vilna. Deep down, as irrational as he realized it sounded, he feared that if he revealed his discovery, he'd return to find only cobwebs and sawdust. On the other hand, he didn't want to deceive his wife about the food. "Once you lie to your spouse once," he'd been warned by the taxi-driving great-uncle, "You're forever tangled in a web." He had been seven years old then; Uncle Max had likely been quoting. But now Mitch was forty-two, so he scooped up his wife's body in both arms and carried her into the den, where he set her tenderly upon their new leather sofa—another excess—and tucked an afghan around her shoulders. She hardly stirred. Six hours on backcountry roads and two cocktails had sapped her.

Thirty minutes later, Mitch knocked three times and entered the secret annex with a bag of apples, a dozen bagels and two boxes of Kellogg's corn flakes. Also a thermos of coffee and a six pack of Diet Coke. His options had been limited: In the kitchen, he'd left behind the honey-glazed ham their nearest neighbors had dropped off that afternoon to welcome them and the take-out chicken wings they'd picked up at a pit-stop in Burlington, fearful the Kovners might yet follow Jewish dietary restrictions. (The next morning, Mitch told himself, he would do better—he'd drive to the Northland Co-op, buy them supplies for the week and replenish his own larder before his wife even woke up.) But the Kovners must have been famished; they devoured the food without any questions, not even regarding the American brands and English-language labels.

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"I have brought something else too," he said.

The trio watched ravenously as he reached into his travel bag, but he could see the disappointment on their faces when he produced no additional foodstuff. "I will bring more to eat in the morning," he promised. "When the stores are open. But I also wanted to show you this..."

Jacob M. Appel

He set his trove on the pine-board tabletop: that morning's *New York Times*, its twenty-first-century date clearly printed on the folio; a battery-powered clock radio he relied on for emergencies; an e-book reader opened to the first page of Shirer's *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*. The girl and her mother examined the items closely. Mendel Kovner appeared far less concerned. He wasn't as old as Mitch had first suspected, he realized, merely a middle-aged man beset with bushy gray eyebrows and stooped shoulders.

"We thank you for what you have done for us, for what you are doing," said Kovner. "Did I not tell you, Fruma Feige? We have been blessed with the most righteous man in Vilna."

"Thanks for the kind words," said Mitch, "but I'm really not."

"The most righteous *gentile* in Vilna," said Kovner. "And humble too. Despite all the risks he takes for us." His daughter attempted to show him the newspaper, but he waved it away. "Tell me, Lawyer Aaronson, is there any news from the city?"

The city? Manhattan? Burlington? In Flodden, all the talk was cost overruns on the Sugar Maple Ski Life and a proposed ordinance banning skinny-dipping in Crawford's Hole. But here was Kovner asking about roundups, about the Red Army and Sevastopol. What could he say to a man who refused to read the news in front of his own eyes?

"Please, Mr. Kovner," said Mitch. "Will you at least look at what I've brought? Here's a tablet computer, a cell phone. And listen..."

He flipped on the radio, scrolled through the dial: baseball scores, "Hey Jude," tax tips.

126 "English, see. Every station," Mitch said—speaking to Mirele as much as to her father. "Look at these devices, Mr. Kovner, and tell me you still believe it's 1950."

The man shrugged. "What is there to believe or not believe? I have faith in a Lord, omniscient and omnipotent, who created the entire world, heaven and firmament, in six days," he said. "I cannot explain how or why. So if that same God chooses to create a few contraptions I can't understand, who am I to believe or not believe? I say it is 1950. You say it is *not* 1950. So I should risk *my* life and the lives of *my* wife and *my* daughter on *your* say-so? A man who

calls himself a lawyer, an advocate, but dresses in the shirtsleeves and trousers of a common laborer. You may be a madman, my friend, but I am not.”

At daybreak the next morning—5:15 a.m. at their latitude—Mitch climbed bleary-eyed into the Beamer and followed SR 77 through East Flodden and Snipe and Sucram Falls, where he turned onto the mountain shortcut that led to North Country Regional Hospital. If anyone could shed light on his predicament, the man was Waite. It was worth trying. Although the caretaker was just as likely to offer some noncommittal phrase like “You don’t say” or “You reckon?” and change the subject to septic drainage. On his most talkative days, the fellow proved about as verbose as a cigar store Indian. But Mitch found him even less inclined to chatter on this occasion, because—and somehow he’d known before he’d even inquired at the nursing station—Caleb Waite had passed away overnight in his sleep. On a different day, Mitch might have asked the female doctor, who looked about the age of his own boys, how they could possibly tell. But that morning, he sought to learn whether the deceased had listed any next of kin. Maybe, and it was a long shot, Waite had mentioned something to someone.

She glanced at the chart. “Birgitta Quist,” she said. “I believe she was a nun.”

“And then there were none,” said Mitch.

“What’s that?”

“Nothing. Yes, she was an Ursuline nun. She’s deceased—”

He didn’t give the young doctor time for any further inquiries. Thirty minutes later, he was on the checkout line at the Northland Co-op, laden with sacks of fresh greens and wedges of organic cheese, and by the time Bev stumbled into the dining room for breakfast, swaddled in her threadbare purple bathrobe, he had bacon on the griddle and the Kovners well-provisioned. The family had returned the radio and tablet with indifference, but kept the *Times* to paper over a draft. He offered Bev a cup of coffee, watching as she doused it in honey.

“Aren’t you the early bird?” she said.

“That’s what they do up here, isn’t it? I drove out to check up on Mr. Waite—”

Bev nodded absentmindedly. “Run into any of your fugitives on the way? Bonnie and Clyde? Or Butch Cassidy and a chain gang?”

The joke no longer struck Mitch as funny. “Waite’s dead,” he said.

His wife set down her coffee mug. “Is he really?”

“That’s the word on the street,” said Mitch. “Poor fellow. Anyway, I’ve also decided not to have Hawley clear out the attic after all. He’ll just make a mess of things.”

“Are you feeling all right?” Bev asked. “You’re not coming down with something, are you? Yesterday, you were telling me all those mattresses are an inferno just waiting to happen. What was it you called them—our very own Triangle Shirtwaist Factory? And isn’t that loom a hazardous nuisance or an annoying hazard or whatever?”

She leaned over his plate and felt his forehead with the back of her hand.

“I was surprised how much space there is up there. I’m not too worried.”

“Well, I am,” she said. “Last thing I need is *you* down with pneumonia. Or some rare contagious disease. You have been checking for ticks, haven’t you?”

128 He should have been grateful for her solicitousness, he realized—even if she were also half-joking. Instead, he felt restless. Almost resentful. How had his life devolved into squash matches at the Athletic Club and scouring his pant legs to ward off infectious vectors?

“Any interest in going back into town and exploring the farmer’s market?” she asked. “I wouldn’t mind taking a few photos of that old couple who bake the Anadama bread.”

“No, thanks. You’re on your own,” said Mitch. “I have some memos from the firm to review.” Which was an outright lie. Yet once he’d said it, there was no taking it back.

As a hot June melted into a torrid July, his routine continued with a veneer of normality. He closeted himself in the study each morning with paperwork from his firm, an endless reel of underwriting commitments and private equity agreements; on Tuesdays and Fridays, he conferenced into the securities division's conclave. Letters from the boys arrived—Leo's barebones, Asher's baroque with detail. His parents phoned on Sunday afternoons, Bev's mother like clockwork after breakfast each morning. Then there was the business of dry rot in the former carriage house, which his wife hoped to convert into a darkroom, and the location of their well head, too close to the public road, which apparently violated a rarely-enforced village ordinance. At the rate he was shelling out for repairs, Hawley's men would soon be able to purchase a convent of their own. But what could be done? He'd been raised to cut margins, not splice rafters.

Every evening, he dined with Bev. They frequented the Italian Bistro on Main Street in East Flodden and an oyster joint on a lake outside Sucram Falls, and one night, on the recommendation of the village librarian, they drove out to a rustic inn near Goffsboro for fresh venison, but often they grilled salmon or chicken on the deck, and turned in early. Bev appeared rather content in their new environs; she'd befriended her share of the downtown merchants—how could he have expected otherwise—and passed her afternoons photographing their customers or, when the whim struck her, roaming orchard lanes and mud alleys armed with her Pentax K-1. She never begrudged Mitch his time “alone” at the house. And yet something was different between them now, something profoundly off, even if she didn't see it. He knew the only way forward for them was if he were to make a full confession and beg forgiveness—only, from an outside perspective, his lapses looked far from egregious. He was helping a family of refugees, shielding them from a danger that—to them—seemed all too real. What had he even done wrong?

What he had been doing was visiting the attic far more than necessary. On the pretext of improving their English, he passed hours with the mother and daughter, introducing them to American colloquialisms and the slang of the past seventy years. They

might not accept the reality of the moon landing, and had never heard of Woodstock, but they could describe astronauts as “badass” and knew that “outta sight” music was impressive. Mendel Kovner took little interest in the lessons, preferring to read Talmudic commentaries in the adjoining room. “I know enough of your language,” he said to Mitch, “to know I’ll never know enough of it.” Sometimes, Fruma Feige retreated to her bed to nurse her shingles, leaving Mitch alone with the girl. And these were the hours that weighed most upon Mitch’s conscience, although he did nothing more flirtatious than defining the word “yo-yo” or using “copacetic” in a sentence. But she was twenty-eight, he discovered, and his feelings ran deeper than they ought.

“What do you do when you’re not here?” asked the girl. “Please be truthful. We know you are not a lawyer...”

“And how do you know that?”

She shook her head, but playfully. “If you are a lawyer, why aren’t you in court? And who are your clients?”

“My clients? Do you mean other than seventeen firms in the Fortune 500. My deals are on the front page of the *Wall Street Journal*, the business section of the *Times*. Just last week the Colgate-Palmolive takeover—” But he caught himself when he saw that she’d squeezed shut her eyes, placed her fingers in her ears. She didn’t believe him; mostly likely, she didn’t understand what he was talking about. He gently drew her hands away from her ears, an act that seemed suddenly intimate. She opened her eyes. “I’m a potato farmer,” he said. “My late aunt, Sister Birgitta, invited me to visit from North Dakota, in America, to teach basic gardening skills to the nuns—and when the war broke out, I felt it was my duty to stay and assist them.”

“A potato farmer,” echoed Mirele. She sounded delighted.

“What is so good about a potato farmer?”

“That’s badass. Outta sight,” she replied, matter-of-fact, as though he’d revealed himself to be a rock star spying undercover. “You can never have too many potatoes.”

“Of course, not,” agreed Mitch—with a sudden urge to kiss her.

“And honestly, that means you’re not a scholar.” She lowered her voice. “Papa is something of a scholar. I love him dearly, but that’s more than enough big thinkers for one family.”

Family, she’d said—as though *he* were part of it. And this was the first indication Mitch received that his feelings were mutually held.

One lie led to another. Mendel Kovner’s curiosity for news from Vilna proved insatiable. So each afternoon, after brushing up his history with a cursory skim of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Mitch narrated developments on the Eastern Front: the siege of Stalingrad, Operation Seydlitz, offensives by Marshal Zhukov in the Rzhev and Vyazma districts. Also local items: a fire at a munitions factory, unrest among the rail workers, recurring anecdotes about an escaped hog on Mickiewicz Prospekt. All nonsense. But the stories rang true to Mitch, almost more plausible than the leveraged buyouts that occupied his mornings or the “poetry” that Bev found in the humdrum lives of their rural neighbors. He gave up entirely on persuading the Kovners that the twenty-first century had arrived—telling himself it was a fool’s errand, but also fearful, if he did convince them, that his afternoons with the girl might end. Besides, he found that he enjoyed being another person—at least, part of the time. That after fifteen years as Mitchell Aaronson of Carnegie Hill, of Cravath Swaine & Moore, no Kiplinger’s profile felt as rewarding as the romance of farming potatoes. He settled for installing an air-conditioner in the attic, a vintage Worthington that he ordered over eBay, which he foisted upon the Kovners as state-of-the-art off the black market in St. Petersburg.

The girl had grand plans for when the war ended: To emigrate to Palestine, where she hoped to build skyscrapers to rival the PAST building in Warsaw and Genoa’s Piacentini Tower. She had already designed many of the blueprints in her head: the massing, the fenestration, even the ornamentation of the facades. That she still clung to these dreams after a decade trapped inside a garret awed Mitch, but also cast a shadow over his own modest ambitions. And his wife’s. Bev fancied herself a bohemian, an iconoclast who chose a

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restored convent in Vermont over a beach house in Quogue, but at the end of the day, she was just a Brearley girl with an expensive camera. Not that there was anything so wrong with that—that’s why Mitch had courted her in college, why he’d driven from Yale to Vassar every weekend for a year—but it now seemed so parochial, so small. By early August, as their return to Manhattan inched closer, Mitch could no longer imagine afternoons without the girl’s mispronunciations and bouts of fierce indignation. He took to calling her “firecracker,” although she was more fierce than fiery. She was, in short, everything that his wife thought she was and would never be. And then there was the problem of who would look after the Kovners once he departed—of how to keep them in food through the winter.

“I can’t tell you how glad I am to have found you,” he said one afternoon.

“Me too,” said Mirele. “And that I didn’t hit you with the hammer.”

“If something were to happen,” he said. “If I had to leave—”

He did not know how to continue. He had never even kissed this girl. And he was a married man. *Happily*, more or less. For all he knew, the Kovners were his own relatives, or their ghosts, somehow come to haunt him in his prosperity: He couldn’t recall much about his grandfather’s brothers, but he vaguely remembered hearing of someone named Mendel. Or possibly Menachem.

“We know the risks you take,” said the girl. “We are appreciative.”

“It’s not just that,” he stammered. “What I’m trying to say is, I think you’re a rather remarkable person... Not like anyone I know... Like anyone I have ever met—”

His confession ended there. He had two boys at Androskoggin. What else could he possibly say?

They sat face to face in silence, her bony, delicate hands outstretched on the tabletop as though inviting him to grasp them, to draw them to his lips. The air conditioner hummed and gurgled. Outside, the patter of an afternoon thunderstorm reverberated against the sandstone roof like a barrage of coins.

A sneeze disturbed the silence, startling Mitch.

“In our tradition, the suitor requests permission of the bride’s father,” said Mendel Kovner. “And, for that father, it is not always an easy decision.”

“I didn’t—” stammered Mitch.

“I ask myself: Am I to bless my daughter’s betrothal to a gentile?” continued Mendel. He spoke softly, carefully, as though he’d chewed the words many times in his head. “Ten years ago, I would have said no, most certainly not. But ten years ago... Let us just say that much has changed. Under the circumstances, maybe this is God’s will...”

“That is your blessing, Papa?” asked the girl.

Mendel Kovner nodded. “Yes, child, that is my blessing.”

“Thank you,” said the girl. She did not run toward her father and embrace him—this was not a movie. Rather, she remained seated, betraying little emotion, but her deep-set eyes glowed with joy. Mendel offered Mitch his hand, then slapped him on the shoulder. Soon the mother joined the celebration, braving the outer chamber despite her neuropathy.

“But wait,” objected Mitch. “There is no rabbi.”

“You must yield up your *goyish* notions about our people,” said Mendel. “One does not need a rabbi for a wedding. You will give my daughter a token and we will draw up a *ketubah*. A marriage contract. Under the circumstances, I believe we may forgo the witnesses.” This last concession he uttered with hesitation, looking to his wife for objection, but she kissed her daughter atop the head and paid him no heed. “The token may be almost anything. As long as it is valued at more than a *shava peruta*.”

Mitch hoped a *shava peruta* might prove out of his price range, especially with the mortgage on the convent, but Mendel added. “A copper coin. A penny... Traditionally, of course, one uses a ring, but that is not required. It can be a cup, a candlestick, a sack of potatoes. *Anything*. Truly, whatever you have in your pockets at the moment will suffice...”

The girl waited. Hopeful. She seemed to expect that he would hand over his trinket now, or that he had his gift stored up for the occasion.

“It’s late. I should go,” Mitch said. “I will come back tomorrow. I must purchase a ring.”

The girl said nothing, but he sensed her disappointment. Maybe she suspected that something was amiss, her natural inclination toward skepticism getting the better of her. Or, most likely, she was just tired of waiting and feared the countless calamities that might strike between one afternoon and the next.

“It is possible I can return later tonight,” he said. “I will try.”

And then he fled through the aperture as though escaping a fire.

That evening, Bev had made reservations at Winslow’s on the Mountain, a free-range steakhouse in Shopesbury renowned for its panoramic views of the sunset. She did the driving, taking the switchbacks a bit too fast. Dense thickets of beech and red oak shot by, the rush of air through the open windows muting hits by John Denver and Janis Ian and Peter, Paul & Mary. Mitch was in no mood to talk—what he needed was time to think—but her music peeved him. It seemed so false, so nostalgic for something she’d never been part of. Yet he knew he was being unfair, that he had no legitimate grievance with his wife. If he had a gripe with anybody, his blame out to be directed inward. Maybe, if he laid all of his cards on the table, even at this late juncture, she’d forgive him. And maybe she’d see a way out of his predicament. Bev was good at that. When Asher had brought home an injured chipmunk he’d found in Central Park, and the creature had bitten the neighbors’ *au pair*, hadn’t Bev made peace for the price of the medical bills? And wasn’t her job on the co-op board, and on the faculty grievance committee at Sarah Lawrence, mediating these sorts of problems? ¹³⁴ Okay, maybe not exactly problems *like his*, but misunderstandings between well-intentioned people. So he knew she’d be able to help him escape his engagement—only, deep down, he wasn’t certain whether he wanted that. By the time they rounded the final bend into Shopesbury, he felt queasy.

The restaurant was packed when they arrived. Fortunately, while roving the countryside, Bev had befriended the proprietor’s sister—a gallery owner in Sucram Notch—and soon they occupied

a window table tucked into a secluded alcove. Once they were seated, the server lit the candle on their table, explaining that it was paraffin-free with a cotton wick. “Beeswax produced by local bees,” she added. “I’ve worked the beehives myself.” She’d also visited the spring that produced the sparkling water and personally planted some of the watercress in the walnut-and-watercress salad. “Or at least on the same farm,” she added. “But *last* summer. I guess it isn’t the exact same watercress, you know... And may I recommend, on the specials menus, the farm raised Pacific geoduck—

“Because you hunted the ducks yourself,” interjected Mitch.

“They’re clams,” said the waitress. “Not ducks.”

“Could have fooled me,” said Mitch.

When the waitress had left with their drink order, Bev said, “Did you have to do that?”

“It could have been worse,” he answered. “They could be serving spotted dick.”

Mitch realized he was being antagonistic. Unnecessarily. “Or whore’s eggs.”

“You’re in a pretty mood, aren’t you?” said Bev. “And I was going to pay you a compliment, but now I’m not so sure.”

Mitch toyed with his napkin ring and waited.

“I was photographing the antique show in East Flodden this afternoon and who wanders in but Harmon Bigelow. Do you remember Harmon?” asked Bev.

Harmon Bigelow! Did he remember Harmon Bigelow? That was a name he literally hadn’t heard in a half a lifetime, a fraternity brother from Columbia who’d been dating Bev when they had first met. It had taken months of determination to pry her away.

“Beak-nosed twerp. Dumb as a brick,” offered Mitch. “Escorted you to a few dances, right?”

“I was going to marry him,” said Bev.

“That too.”

“Well, I ran into him today. He’s a thoracic surgeon at Mass General, recently widowed. Older woman—sarcoma. But he looks great: Competes in triathlons, full head of hair. We spent nearly an hour together reminiscing.”

Mitch didn't like where this was going. "And?"

"And all the while I was talking to Harmon, I was thinking how glad I am that I'm married to you and not to him," said Bev. "That was, until your comment about the duck." She flashed a smile and reached across the table, hooking her fingers into his. "It's like the opposite of a song from the '70s: It's so good to be married to the right man when the wrong man comes along."

He knew she was right, of course. That *she* was the present, the future—that Mirele Kovner was the past, as much the past as Harmon Bigelow...or Anne Frank.

"Are you all right, Mitch?" she asked. "You look preoccupied."

This was the moment to tell her. But somehow saying anything felt like a betrayal—as much as if he'd turned the Kovners over to the authorities they so feared.

"It's nothing," he said. "The firm. I've got to talk to someone later—a client—and tell her something that she won't want to hear."

The clock was approaching midnight when Mitch finally braved the attic stairs. His wife had turned in after a nightcap, but he'd paced the deck for hours, trying to find the right words. The alternative was bigamy—and, even under the circumstances, he doubted Mendel Kovner could find an exception for that in his Talmudic code. But they were waiting up for him, he knew, or at least the girl would be, and he owed her a definitive answer. When he finally heaved aside the Adirondack cabinet and squeezed through the aperture, he found Mirele seated at the table, as he had expected. Just as he'd left her. Her auburn hair hung loose, her cheeks a bit fuller than in June, her eyes intense, almost savagely so, but as stunning as ever. "You came back," she said.

"Did you think I wouldn't?"

"I wasn't sure," she said. "Papa said you would, but Mama—"

"You get your suspicious genes from your mother, I see."

"Suspicious genes?"

Mitch knew he was starting down the wrong track. "An expression," he said.

"Oh, like badass. Or groovy."

“Kind of. Not exactly. But I do have something serious I want to discuss with you—”

His tone must have given him away. The girl looked down at her hands. “It is all right,” she said. “Go. Just go.”

“Don’t be mad. *Please*,” said Mitch. “It’s a complicated situation—”

The girl stood up. “Situations are only as complicated as you make them. As you want them to be,” she said. “But this won’t be forever. It won’t. And when we’re in the Mandate—when I’m an architect and my buildings tower over the world—then...then—”

And for the first time since he’d met her, the girl was crying. Silent sobs, her head turned away, yet unmistakably tears. He wanted to comfort her, to hold her, though he feared this was no longer his place. Before he knew his own mind, the first barks fractured his ambivalence. They were a rumble, at the outset, more like the roll of a distant thunder. But the sound was distinctive, a collective growl, nothing like the Hawleys’ St. Bernard, and it cascaded toward them. Rapidly, rising toward a crescendo. Then he heard boots on the deck, shouting. In an instant, the girl wiped her eyes and sprung to action.

“Mama! Papa! They’re coming,” she cried. “Quick! Hurry!”

Less than a minute later, she’d changed into men’s clothes and slung a knapsack over her shoulder. The elderly Kovners, fully dressed, emerged from the bedchamber. Mitch watched, lead-legged, as the girl used a metal pole to dislodge a hatch in the ceiling. A sliver of moonlit sky frowned upon them. Cool night air seeped into the garret. First the father, then the mother, scaled the rope ladder to the roof. He was amazed at their agility, at their speed.

Then the girl followed her parents. Mitch hoped she might look back—even once—but she did not. Mitch feared their odds were long, maybe even hopeless, that beyond the skylight lay the summer of 1950, or some parallel analog, in which German soldiers prowled the Lithuanian countryside hunting for Jews. So different from the universe he knew. Heavy footsteps drummed the stairs, pummeled the cedar boards of the attic. The rope ladder dangled in the darkness. Mitch stepped onto the first rung and climbed.

Contributors



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Photo credit Belle Ancell.



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Andrew Cusick lives and teaches on the Jersey Shore. He's been published before in *The Hunger*, *Sky Island Journal*, *trampset*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, *Blood Lotus*, and *Underground Voices*. You can find him running on the boardwalk, surfing poorly, or hanging out with his wife and two kids. He's currently at work on what will hopefully be his debut novel. Follow him @acusick7.

Steve Fox's work has appeared in or has been recognized by *Narrative Magazine*, *CutBank*, *Whitefish Review*, *New Ohio Review*, *The Masters Review*, *The Iowa Review*, *Writer's Digest*, and others. Steve is the winner of the Rick Bass/Montana Prize for Fiction. His debut story collection, *Sometimes Creek*, is forthcoming from Cornerstone Press in 2023. Steve lives in Wisconsin with his wife, three boys, and one dog. <https://stevefoxwrites.com> and @stevefoxwrites on Twitter and Instagram.



Aditya Gautam is an internationally published writer from India. A speculative short story by him was included in the *Best Asian Fiction Anthology, 2018* by Kitaab, Singapore. Most recently, his work has appeared in the September, 2021 issue of *Carmina* literary journal. His debut novel, *A Dream of Duplicity*, will be published by Aesthetic Press, USA in March 2022. His non-fiction writing can be accessed at <https://adityagautamwrites.com/>.

Mark Gozonsky's work has appeared frequently in *The Sun*. His work is anthologized in *Best American Sports Writing 2020* and forthcoming in a writing textbook from Norton.



Eliot Li lives in California. His work appears or is forthcoming in *Pithead Chapel*, *Smokelong Quarterly*, *Atticus Review*, *Cleaver*, *The Pinch*, *Bending Genres*, and others. He's on twitter @EliotLi2, and has a low-fi website at <https://eliotli.com/>. 139



Nancy Ludmerer has fiction in *Kenyon Review*, *Cimarron Review*, *Electric Literature*, *Best Small Fictions* (a *River Styx* prizewinner), *Litro*, and elsewhere. Her stories have won prizes from *Masters Review*, *Carve*, *Pulp Literature*, *Orison Books*, and others. Her short memoir, *Kritios Boy* (Literal Latte), received recognition in *Best American Essays 2014*. In 2021, Nancy was a Peter Taylor Fellow with the *Kenyon Review* workshops. She lives in NYC with her husband Malcolm and cat Joey. Twitter: @nludmerer

David Luntz has work forthcoming in *Vestal Review*. Poems and short fiction have appeared recently in *Best Small Fictions* (2021), *trampset*, *X-R-A-Y Lit*, *Orca Lit*, *Lumiere Review*, *Litro*, and *Abyss & Apex*.



Dennis McFadden lives and writes in a cedar-shingled cottage called Summerhill in the woods of upstate New York. His collection, *Jimtown Road*, won the 2016 *Press 53* Award for Short Fiction, and his novel, *Old Grimes Is Dead*, has just been published. His short stories have appeared in many publications, including *New England Review*, *The Missouri Review*, *The Sewanee Review* and *The Best American Mystery Stories*. He was recently awarded a Fellowship at MacDowell Colony.

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Catherine Parnell, co-founder of Birch Bark Editing and *MicroLit Almanac*, is a writer, editor, and educator. Her publications include the memoir *The Kingdom of His Will*, as well as stories, interviews and essays in *West Trade Review*, *Tenderly*, *Cleaver*, *Free State Review*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *The Rumpus*, *The Southampton Review*, *The Baltimore Review*, and others. Her website: <http://catherineparnell.com/>. Follow her on Twitter at @catparnell.



Living and writing on the west slope of the Rocky Mountains, sid sibo recently won the Neltje Blanchan Memorial Writing Award and an Honorable Mention in the Rick DeMarinis Short Story contest. Publications include *Best Small Fictions 2022*, *Fourth River*, *Orca*, *Cutthroat*, *Brilliant Flash Fiction* and more. A day job in environmental analysis seeds a variety of creative work. Occasional blog posts can be found at <https://sibomountain.net/blog>.



Kimberly A. Turner is an Atlanta-based writer and editor who is currently finishing her YA horror novel. She served as an editor and staff writer at *Atlanta Magazine*, earned Folio: Eddie Awards for her work as founding editor of *Denton County* magazine, and has written features for dozens of print and online publications in the U.S. and Australia. In her spare time, she is also a beekeeper, DJ, and cat aficionado.

Siamak Vossoughi is an Iranian-American writer living in Seattle. He has had stories published in *Kenyon Review*, *Missouri Review*, *Bennington Review*, *Columbia Journal*, *Gulf Coast*, and *Orca*. He is the author of two short story collections, *Better Than War* and *A Sense of the Whole*.



Cate West graduated with an MA in Creative Writing from Manchester Metropolitan University in 2019. Currently writing her debut novel, Cate teaches Creative Writing, and is passionate about outsider narratives. She is a member of Writing West Midlands' Room 204. Recent publications include stories with *Nightjar Press*, *Lunate*, *Janus Literary* (*Best Small Fictions 2022*), *A Coup of Owls*, *Last Girls Club* and *The Amphibian*. She was shortlisted for the Dinesh Allirajah Prize for Short Fiction, 2022. Twitter @c8west.

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Miles White is a Midwestern poet and performer based in Chicago. His work has appeared in *Euphony Journal* (for whom he also wrote reviews), *Local Honey | Midwest*, and the *Broadkill Review*.

The Orcans

Publisher/Senior Editor Joe Ponepinto is the author of the novels *Mr. Neutron* and *Curtain Calls*, as well as dozens of short stories published in the U.S., Europe, and Australia. His major literary influences include Zadie Smith (whose novels somehow convinced him he could become a writer), Jorge Luis Borges, Roberto Bolaño, James Joyce, Bernard Malamud, Ted Chiang, Yasunari Kawabata, Margaret Atwood, Tobias Wolff, and dozens of others. Best book on writing: *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain*, by George Saunders.

Publisher/Senior Editor Zachary Kellian, a widely published author of flash fiction and short stories, is finishing up his first novel. He is also the co-host of the podcast *Literary Guise*, encouraging men to use literature as a way to discuss their thoughts and emotions. His major literary influences include Dylan Thomas, Toni Morrison, Cormac McCarthy, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Yukio Mishima, Anne Proulx, and John O'Brien. You can find him online at zacharykellian.com

Editor Renee Jackson is a multi-disciplinary artist currently splitting time between the U.S. and Argentina. She has a passion for new work and a background in theatre where she has had the pleasure of

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assisting in the literary development and staging of several plays including *(Non)Fiction* (Jillian Leff), *The Wildling* (CJ Chapman), *Minotaur* (Teagan Walsh-Davis), and *Gothic Arch* (Jeffrey Fiske). Renee's literary influences include Samuel Beckett, Sylvia Plath, Denis Johnson, Albert Camus, Dylan Thomas, John Donne, and Paula Vogel.

Readers

David Anderson is a writer of short fiction. While primarily focusing on short stories, his interest in flash fiction sparked while studying at Hugo House in Seattle. A recent finalist in a national flash fiction competition, he continues to study and challenge himself within a small group of emerging writers. David has also been a panelist at Pacific Northwest Writers Conference and Emerald City Comic Con.

Jacob Laba is a young writer currently living in El Cerrito, California. His focus is chiefly that of short stories which tend to settle in the realms of fabulation and the literary allegory. His literary interests are far and wide, but some of his major influences include Italo Calvino (and other members of Oulipo), Jorge Luis Borges, Edgar Allan Poe, Franz Kafka, Isabel Allende (as well as a great deal of other Latin American magical realists), Ali Smith, and Julio Cortázar.

¹⁴⁷ **Ronak Patel** is a first generation Indian-American writer, researcher, and educator. His research interests include racism in education and the model minority myth. He has published reports and data narratives for non-profits, school districts, and state agencies in Washington and Hawaii. Ronak's fiction explores narratives of the South Asian American experience and his literary influences include Juhmpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai, T.C. Boyle, Michael Chabon, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Arundhati Roy, John Cheever, and Viet Thanh Nguyen.

Marci Pliskin is a Seattle-based writer. Her work has appeared in *The Cottonwood Journal* (University of Kansas) and *Orca, A Literary Journal*. She has written for MSNBC. She was a 2019 New Millennium Writer's Finalist in Non-Fiction. Some of her major literary influences include Alice Munro, George Saunders, Lorrie Moore, Sam Lypsite, Kimberly King Parsons and Annie Proulx.

Liz Rosen is a short story writer whose work has appeared in *Litro*, *Ascent*, *Pithead Chapel*, *Sanitarium*, *Best Short Stories of the Saturday Evening Post*, and others. Her fiction has been nominated for Pushcart Awards twice, and her story "Tracks" was the 2021 first prize winner of the *Writer's Digest Annual Competition* in the literary/mainstream category. She is a former writer for Nickelodeon TV; Associate Producer of primetime news; academic whose area of specialty was apocalyptic storytelling; and Non-Fiction Editor for *Ducts.org*. She is currently obsessed with ghost-hunting shows and has an excellent "Did you hear that!?"

K.A. Tate is a tech turned fiction writer living in the Northern Shenandoah Valley with two great partners who are quiet when she's writing and the same number of parrots who are not. Her work is focused in rural Appalachia where she was raised. She has her MFA from West Virginia Wesleyan and has so far been published in *BULL* with other publications upcoming. Her biggest literary influences include Stephen King, Otessa Moshfegh, Alice Munro, Shirley Jackson, Larry Brown, and Ludmilla Petrushevskaya. She has a website where she writes about craft for people who don't know they're writers yet at katatewriting.com.

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Orca

A LITERARY JOURNAL

Orca is short stories, flash fiction, and nonfiction. We are a literary journal and we believe in the literary style of writing.

We still believe writing can be fun, too.

Orca is published four times a year. The April and October issues contain literary work, some of which includes speculative elements. January and July are our designated literary-speculative issues.

All the work we publish comes through the Submittable.com submission portal.

Work published in *Orca* may be nominated for anthologies such as *Best American Short Stories*, *Best Small Fictions*, the Pushcart Prize, and others. In our first year one of our stories was selected for *Best Canadian Short Stories of 2020*. In 2021 three stories were selected for *Best Small Fictions*. 147

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