Orca

A LITERARY JOURNAL

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THE LITERARY ISSUE

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Is getting by in life the same as finding meaning in life? It may sound like a strange question, but once you've read the stories and essays in this issue we hope you'll see a connection. Some of the people you'll meet are dealing with family, birdwatching, and interpreting dreams. There are also stories about less traditional lives, such as people making lives out of discards, engaging in prostitution, pursuing murder for money, and enduring the long-term effects of gun violence.

The value of literature, and often its attraction for readers, is that it allows us to see meaning in the decisions characters make—big or small. Sometimes they work out, other times they result in an existence that has them questioning how they got there. Ultimately, literature reminds us that meaning lies in the life you lead, not in how you spin it for the public forum. We may go viral and be famous for fifteen minutes, but when that moment passes, then what? Who are you really?

As we head into another holiday season we hope this issue offers an opportunity to reflect on how we spend our time, and where we find that meaning.

Wishing you a happy and thoughtful holiday,

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

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 Artist

I am a visual storyteller, continually moved and inspired by the magic of nature and the human spirit.

Those inspirations have led to a career for Kathleen Kinkopf that spans decades in the visual arts industry as a graphic designer, painter, illustrator, gallerist, and writer, exhibiting in dozens of solo and group shows in galleries across the country.

Kinkopf grew up in a Midwest town where being outdoors was a way of life. That early bond with nature continues to be a powerful influence in her work. Described as "Magical Realism" (which makes her work a perfect choice for an *Orca* cover), her paintings blur the lines between fantasy and reality.

Many of her pieces involve research into symbolism, mythology, cultural, and/or religious traditions before she begins painting. The compositions are planned on paper, then carefully drawn on a toned canvas background. Next she lays in overall darks and lights and then begins building areas of color. Her primary painting medium is acrylic, but in recent years she has incorporated metal leaf composite, charcoal, pastels, oil pastels, and three-dimensional found objects.

In the past year, Kinkopf has taken a new visual journey through the artform of collage. These collages incorporate her own work

with vintage imagery, photography, and graphic elements. This new series has offered a new approach to her interpretation of nature, our place in the universe, the inspiration of our own powers and potential within, and the strength of women at the center of it all. This most recent series also inspired the creation of her first award-winning book, *Inhabiting Bliss.*

Inhabiting Bliss

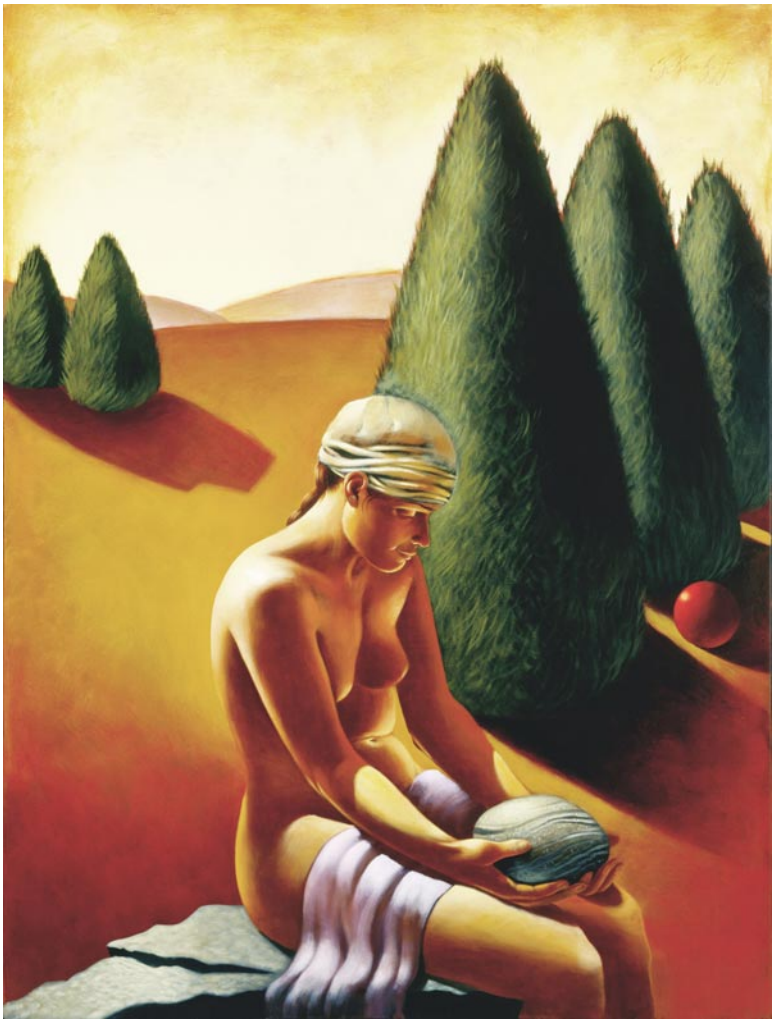
To view more of Kathleen's work and her complete exhibition and awards history, or to email her, please visit kinkopfstudios.com. *Inhabiting Bliss* is available on Amazon. Additional images follow on pages 4-7.


Botanical Slumber, 24x24 inches, acrylic/canvas

The Painted Lady, 40x30 inches, acrylic/canvas

After The Fall, 64x50 inches, acrylic/mixed media/canvas

Earth Keeper, 40x30 inches, acrylic/canvas



Talking to a Stone, 50x40 inches, acrylic/canvas

Found Love

BRENDAN MCLAUGHLIN

She is the first person he takes to the shipyard, and as they slip through the fence he wonders if he is making a mistake. Will she be frightened and disturbed by its desolation? Or see it as a sort of post-modern amusement park, a place to bring her friends, to get hammered and build bonfires? That would be the end. They would fix the fence and install cameras. Next would come a Notice of Proposed Land Use announcing a new condo development. But she is worth the risk. Her name is June. Her dimples make him blush and she smells like old books.

He looks back through the fence at the gleaming cars jerking their way through the stop-start traffic. He is not from this city of steep hills and skyrocketing rent, but grew up on his father's stories of its moral bankruptcy. He arrived to find the hedonistic overclass, as promised, but was not prepared for the grim spectacle of their ostentatious wealth, arrayed as it was against the backdrop of sprawling tent cities, the occupants of which seemed always to have just emerged from a bomb shelter. All that is left of the shipyard, other than the dry dock, is the concrete, broken into a hundred jagged teeth. Some stick straight into the air. Others look safe to step on but will tip over and crush you. Forsaken and decaying but where, at one time, people swarmed in great numbers. He wonders

what sort of ships they built. He pictures the place in its pomp, the bustle of collective purpose, and sighs wistfully. Those days are over. There are no great tasks left for mankind. Only relics like this remain, forgotten and unexplained. The bay water peeks up through the cracks, a reminder that they are well out from shore, that the ground beneath their feet is built over the living water which, if left undisturbed long enough, will slowly eat it all away.

June lets him take her hand as she navigates the more treacherous spots. Her hand is soft, the nails short, and she has a tattoo between the innermost knuckles of her pinky, two crossed arrows. He leads her to the dry dock, with its walls climbing up into the sky, rich with flaking rust, littered with rotting spars that had once held the ships in place, along with a few of the bracing pieces used to protect the keels. The cavernous space echoes with the calls of loitering gulls.

Once inside where the footing is less treacherous she slides away from him. She is light on her feet, delicate, and he lets himself admire her, the way she moves, the way everything around her seems to dim. Her gravity is so intense it pulls in even the light. It is both frightening and exciting, not knowing the point at which he will no longer be able to escape her draw. Perhaps that event horizon has already been crossed. She turns to look at him, and he in turn looks away.

What was it like to hoist a wooden ship big enough to carry hundreds of people? The pulleys, the winches, the audacity. To make something of such immensity rise into the air, like a great winged elephant, and then have the faith to scrabble around underneath it, scraping off barnacles, scrubbing off scum, knowing the only thing preventing the thing from coming down on your head was a drawing and some math. June picks up a fist-sized chunk of concrete and hurls it against the wall, sending a deep vibration rolling through the metal and up through their bones.

The first time he saw her June was standing on a street corner inspecting a vintage bottle-brown glass lamp with a tasseled shade. As he watched she took a portable power source out of her bag,

screwed in a lightbulb, and turned the lamp on. Who thought to carry such items?

The lamp threw a warm light on her face, revealing dimples, one skewered by a cheek piercing, and a small, sad smile. Short hair, blonde on one side and black on the other, neck tattoo of…a bird?

No. A rat.

He coasted up alongside.

–I'm a monkey.

–Excuse me?

He pointed at her tattoo. Her smile vanished. She reached involuntarily for her neck.

–Sorry, didn't mean to…

–It's alright.

He considered a rat joke, but the someone in question might not be an asshole or ex-boyfriend. Instead he asked if she was willing to trade something for the lamp.

–Maybe some tile remnants? I have some nice ones. Real stone.

–No thanks. But I'll sell it to you.

–Yeah? How much?

–A hundred.

–Bullshit.

She shrugged and handed him a small piece of what felt like wallpaper with a QR code on it.

–I'll get more than that on Etsy. Here's my store. It'll be there tomorrow if you change your mind.

A few days later he scanned the QR code. Sure enough, the lamp was there, already marked "sold" for two hundred dollars. He scrolled through her other listings. Mostly home furnishings, all vintage, all expensive. He clicked on her profile image, in which she wore a knit beanie, head inclined to throw shadow across her features and hide her cheek piercing. He looked at the picture often but didn't see her in person again for a couple weeks, when he found her flipping through a box of LPs at a yard sale. He told her he had already gone through them and found nothing of value. She nodded without looking up.

Did Etsy tell her who visited her page? Did she know he had

been mooning over her profile photo? Lumped him in with all the other weirdo creep perverts? Was that even legal? His father would know. To which he thought, Fuck you, Dad. He had yet to tell his parents that he had dropped out of art school—to keep the allowance checks coming each month.

She looked up from her flipping, as though sensing his consternation. He untwisted his mouth and tried to smile, but it felt so unnatural that he raised a hand and reset his face. He told her where he worked, hoping to save her the time of sifting through the worthless records, but worried it made him sound pompous and apologized. June let the LPs slump back against their tired cardboard box.

–I used to sell records there. But that guy Rick is a fucking asshole, and his prices suck.

–No wonder he's going out of business.

This earned him a polite laugh as she ducked inside to look at the furniture. A moment later she popped back out.

–Do you have a truck?

He said yes, a lie, knowing he would have to spend the rest of the day finding one to borrow. Later, as he helped her lift the loveseat into her house, he asked if she'd ever been to the shipyard. She cocked her head.

–Is that a bar?

June lives in a large Victorian on one of the city's hills with three musicians, three artists, and a rotating cast of semi-feral cats. The house is old and majestic, but the roof is failing and there's rot in the beams. The owner is old too, and rumor has it when she dies her kids plan to sell the place to developers. The residents treat it like the teardown it is, knocking out walls and erecting new ones, punching holes in the floor, creating new spaces for their art installations and practice spaces. The place is a warren. Doors appear in strange places, hallways end abruptly. Paper sculptures filled with multi-colored lights, mostly abstract shapes and starbursts, loom from the lofted ceilings.

Her roommates accept him being around, though he notices an

aloofness, as though they are waiting him out, like a cheap candle that burns bright but not for very long. One of them in particular grates on him, a pale, slender creature with a rakish mustache and dark eyeliner. This waif-man floats around the house with an oversized mug carried in both hands as though it is made of lead, complaining about how exhausted he is after staying up all night working on his latest *objet d'art*.

It takes one to know one, and he knows waif-man on sight. Waif-man comes from a wealthy family. Also waif-man is a fake. The art is an affectation. Waif-man—like him—has some natural talent, but doesn't care enough about anything to know what to do with it. It is how he ended up at art school, which he assumed would provide him with some sort of direction. But the other students, who seemed to live in a parallel dimension dominated by ethereal, smudgy angst, looked down on his realist charcoal drawings of the cityscape. After a year he dropped out. The experience made him despise artists, whose code of conduct was stricter than any he'd encountered. They only accepted you if you looked and acted like waif-man, a fussing dandy primarily concerned with how to curate the empty gallery space of his life. He no longer thinks of himself as an artist, though he still has his charcoals and still likes to draw. He now defines himself as a scavenger.

Claiming things that would otherwise become garbage makes him feel virtuous, but he worries sometimes. He shudders at vaguely Scandinavian coffee shops and their minimalist décor, filled with slender, soft-handed men in bespoke lumberjack attire. Is that what he looks like? Are his tastes his own? Or has he, like everyone else, been manipulated by the dark arts of advertising?

This worry begins to deepen the day he brings June back to his apartment. She is radiant, sitting in the Danish teak chair by the window where the best light comes in, her hair a perfect match for the blonde speaker cabinets, her black denim jacket the perfect attire for sitting beneath his charcoal drawings, which he has tacked to the wall in a deliberately haphazard pattern.

They drink tea. He plays records and flutters around the room, drawing her eye to his midcentury furniture, the well-tended Ficus

controlling the corner, his flock, small but carefully selected, of ceramic birds. She is carelessly, supremely disinterested, and he begins to sweat.

June was raised by a single mother, bouncing back and forth between the Bay and the Valley. They moved for new boyfriends, new jobs, to escape bad boyfriends, when the rent was due. To make ends meet, June and her mother would "pick," the word she uses for buying out abandoned storage units, sifting through them, and reselling anything of value. But there was rarely much, and often nothing, of value.

–You never found any Nazi artifacts? Civil War stuff?

–Mostly rat nests and spoiled food. You spend most of your time moving stuff from the locker to the dumpster.

–I think that would be really interesting. Going through, seeing what people decide is worth holding onto.

–And how quickly it becomes garbage. Cellphones, for example. You hang onto your old phone just in case, right? And before you know it the thing is obsolete, sitting in a box in the back of your storage unit, with rats pissing on it.

He considers this. She holds her mug up close to her face and peers at him coyly through the steam.

–Fascinating, don't you think? To look at them as a way to understand how our society conveys status. And how fickle those rules are.

–Totally.

He relaxes slightly. It is not that she does not care for his things, but that she does not care about things in general. He has never seen her use her own phone, for example. There are no favored earrings, no worn satchel with her initials burned into the leather. Objects pass through her hands without friction.

–So you just do it—picking—for the money?

–What other reason is there?

He thinks about this for a moment, during which she finally takes in the drawings on the walls.

–I like these. They feel…fair. All by the same artist?

–Yes.

–Someone local?

He could probably find a way to say it that wouldn't sound haughty, but he pauses. Here at last he has found something that she wants. He isn't giving it away for free. He shakes his head.

–He's not from around here.

He rummages the bins at a yard sale and withdraws a slender plastic puck. A Nokia 3585i: flat dumb phone, blue case with gray trim, black pixels on a dead beach, pulled from a pile of charging cables. He recalls what June said, how our old cellphones are just trash tying us to the past. But what if those memories are special? What if those ties are what connect us, not to the shitty plastic, but to one another?

He buys it for a dollar, cross-wraps it in jute twine, and leaves it dangling from one of the tines of her mailbox. When he passes the next day the phone is gone. His heartrate slows and his fingertips and toes begin to tingle, a feeling he associates with a good curbside find. It is a feeling he is always chasing, and here he has found it in an unexpected place.

Again, he thinks.

Next is a Motorola T720: flip phone, silver case, small external display (black pixels), second larger display inside (color), hard keys, nub antennae. Found in a plastic tub at Saint Vinnie's, complete with coiled car charging cable, hidden under a half-finished crochet hoop, yarn splayed like innards. He conceals it in a gutted paperback and leaves it leaning against her door.

They have a date to visit the swap meet in Alameda. He imagines the two of them as pirates, searching for treasure together, waiting to climb on top of their pile of riches and take in the view. At the swap meet they buy matching overalls and fill the pockets with knives, flashlights, Zippos. They stroll through the ranks of folding tables and blankets arrayed with wares, trying to guess one another's preferences. June arches an eyebrow and nods subtly toward a set of earthenware mugs. They're beautiful, the working consistent while still showing the human touch, the subtle imperfections. He desires

them at once. But there is something else: a swift swell of resentment. Somehow it isn't the same if she sees it first, and she always sees it first. She is a marvel, a picking savant, always a step ahead, first to the spoils, the wheels of her skateboard on pavement the grinding of his bones. He pulls her to him in an embrace he realizes at once is too desperate, smells the rank plume of his own nervous sweat. He tries to turn the tables, plucking what he thinks is a vintage t-shirt from a bin: extra-short sleeves, reinforced cuffs and crewneck, with a bold road, rainbowed in browns and oranges, disappearing into a blank horizon. She holds it up, twirls, shows him the dimples, and tosses it back in the bin.

–It's new.

Faux vintage: the death sentence. He looks again. Damn. She's right. She's always right.

She reaches a hand inside his shirt. When she turns the full wattage of her gaze upon him it is too much, all her captured light released at once, and he averts his eyes.

–Let's go home.

They spend a series of rain-washed days in June's bed. Eventually she rises, stretches, silhouetted against the oily light coming through the open window. Something about her mother she must tend to. He remains sprawled for a time after she is gone, but the room, bare save a modest dresser and a flimsy hanging rack with a few dresses, emphasizes her absence. Restless, he surges outside. The rain is still coming down, soaking everything at the curb, chasing the pickers indoors. He can think of nothing to do but go to a thrift store and look for another one.

The box is sun-bleached but original, and inside the phone spotless, the manual uncracked, the peripherals still in their tidy little dope bags. Pulsar SCN2387A: gray brick car phone, pleather case, black illuminating buttons, single numeric display. A rare gem. This one gets a bow and ribbon, also from the thrift store, the sort of gift wrapping that comes in a heat-sealed plastic sack, ninety-nine cents. He thrills as he hands the cashier the money. He has an idea that she will begin a collection, each phone a vivid artifact

of a place and a time, the paving stones of their relationship path. So what if most objects are trash, destined for a place in that garbage patch the size of Texas floating in the ocean somewhere. This? This phone? Is a tangible artifact of his feelings. He imagines June's face as she raises the receiver shyly, the dimples come out, a blush across the bridge of her nose. But when the moment comes to present it a shyness takes him. He thrusts the box at her. She holds it with the tips of her fingers, face frozen in a lopsided grimace, eyes abstracted.

–Don't you like it?

–Sorry, it's just... It reminds me of when I was a girl.

He beams. She folds her arms.

–Why are you doing this?

–Sorry. I thought…I guess I thought it was romantic.

She frowns.

–You don't need to—

–June, please. I want to do this.

He takes her hand and gently massages the arrows on her pinky.

–For you.

Suddenly they seem to be everywhere, the only thing he can see. Old phones in boxes, hanging from street signs, sitting on trash cans. Panasonic EB-3500 (placed in the refrigerator, concealed in an egg carton). Sony CM-B3200 (her shoe). LG 300G (in the bathroom vanity, taped to her bottle of Lexapro). He studies vintage phones, learns about the rarities and the collectibles. One stands out: the Motorola Aura, engineered with the quality and craft of a Victorian pocket watch. Stainless steel housing, chemically etched in PVD coating, aluminum buttons, crystal-clear circular display protected by domed 62-karat sapphire crystal, Swiss-made rotating mechanism with 200 tungsten-coated steel parts. Idiotic, of course. Cellphones weren't heirlooms and it became obsolete almost immediately, like all the rest, discontinued after a very short run. The industry went back to their chintzy plastics. And now Motorola Auras, some with encrusted diamonds or customized gold inlay, are collector's items. He resolves not to rest until he finds one. It will

be the crown jewel in her collection. A sign that the time has come to take their relationship to the next level.

Several weeks and a dozen phones later he is wandering the halls of the house with a Blackberry. Having exhausted every obvious hiding place he is forced to go further afield, poking in and out of rooms, from one of which he hears jumbled voices. He pushes open the door to find the space unoccupied and dimly lit. As his eyes adjust he sees the phones, all of them, have been attached to the walls, the flip phones flipped, all of them plugged into overcrowded power strips, wires running everywhere, an electrical fire imminent. But what are they saying? It is difficult to isolate one from the other, so he inches up close to a Motorola ROKR E1 from which emanates a nasal male voice.

There are several factors to weigh before you decide. Go through them one at a time, map out any complications that might not reveal themselves when looking at the factors in isolation. The bond market doesn't respond very well to liposuction treatment, as the saying goes, so you'll want to mitigate for that. Furthermore, and I think I mentioned this earlier, circumstances can change quickly, so you will want to establish—

Is it a recording? Or is the person actually speaking. He puts his mouth next to the receiver.

–Hello?

The voice drones on.

He moves to another phone. A woman's voice, speaking in French. Another is Chinese, he thinks. The din is terrible, the voices, in aggregate, cold and unfeeling. It is too much. He moves into the center of the room, to a spot marked out on the floor with tape, and into a cocoon of quiet. He can still hear the voices, but faintly, as though they are coming through a thick wall, or the sound waves are canceling one another out. As he is pondering the effect waifman enters in a moth-eaten, too-small yellow sweater, hands wrapped around his biceps like he's trying to keep his arms from falling off. He leans against the doorframe.

–It's quite a neat trick, isn't it? The quiet spot there. I call it "The Eye of the Swarm."

–Where'd you get the phones?

–Someone left them in our trash.

He looks at the wall again. Finds the Nokia 3585i, the Motorola T720, the Pulsar SCN2387A. There can be no mistake. He pushes waif-man aside and stomps out of the house, into the street, and down to the shipyard, where he drinks himself nearly blind. He staggers to the boutique hi-fi shop on 15th and spends his entire savings on a five thousand dollar rosewood turntable with bronze bearings, but is too drunk to get it working and so instead he disassembles it, waking the next morning to find the pieces strewn all over the floor.

For the first time since they began dating, June calls him. He doesn't answer, watches it ring, wonders what sort of phone she owns, resents that he does not know, curses himself for not knowing. Now when he looks into bins all he can think of are her lectures about resale potential. He cannot even muster any enthusiasm for the Motorola Aura he finds at an estate sale in the suburbs, though he does allow himself a wry smile at besting the professional pickers, all middle-aged men with sour breath, several of whom eye his score jealously. Back at home he lies on the floor amid the pieces of the disassembled turntable and holds it up close to his face. It is an undeniably well-made little fucking thing, but he wonders what exactly that means. The rounded face makes it feel like he's looking through a magnifying glass the wrong way, into a world of miniaturized mysteries. He has always relied on instinct to determine what deserves to be rescued, and what should be banished to shoeboxes and scrap bins, but the Aura defies categorization. He places it under a light and spends several minutes looking at it before, with a heavy sigh, reaching for a pad of paper and his charcoals and begins to sketch out its dimensions.

She arrives in the passenger seat of waif-man's vintage Volkswagen Beetle. If she is surprised to see him she does not show it. She gives him a hug. He smells her sweat, just a little bit funky. He likes it. As she steps back she seems to remember the paper coffee cup and

holds it away from herself sheepishly. He thinks of the mugs at the Alameda swap meet.

–It's all garbage someday, right?

She asks how he's been, where he's been. He ducks his head, fingering the drawing thrust into his pocket, the sketch which he suddenly realizes is of poor quality, trivial, stupid. He tells himself he will make her another, better drawing, then thinks again of the phone-filled room and wonders if he even wants her to know that he draws. He reaches around for words, discards them, and instead stands awkwardly, shifting his weight from foot to foot, slowly massaging his drawing into a ball of sweat-soaked pulp. June stands on the porch, watching waif-man's futile attempts at parallel parking and waiting for an answer. After another minute she sighs, does a little turn-and-dip, something like a curtsey. He knows he has missed his moment, and wonders if another will come. She disappears inside. When she is gone he slips the Aura out of its leatherette case and presses the cool metal against his forehead. The waif-man, finally finished parking, pulls up short.

–Is that a…phone?

He recognizes the covetous light in waif-man's face.

–I'll sell it to you.

Waif-man's eyes narrow.

–How much?

He slides the Aura back into its case and hands it to waif-man to inspect.

–Make me an offer.

Angel

MICHELE SUZANN

Obviously, Something Greater was using me as an instrument, because if it were up to me? I would have snuck out and left the guy from Las Vegas whose name was Mohammed to discover the theft and be panicked and tragic and the gray sweatshirt kid who stole to remain uncaught. But I couldn't skulk away, because there was Mohammed, returning just as I was leaving, so I said, *that guy sitting next to me just stole your disc.* And Mohammed looked *really* bummed. He was not taking this loss the way I would have taken it, the way a beat-down-by-life person would take it, i.e. just another shitty occurrence in a lifetime of shitty occurrences, why single this one out for any more shockoutragedisappointment than all the others? And then to *dare* imagine this shitty occurrence could get remedied? Mohammed wanted to pursue, so so much for my desire to flee. I said *he took off this way,* pointing at the aisle between shelves and a glass walled reading room, but the kid wasn't there anymore, so we looked toward the entrance—well, I looked, Mohammed *ran*, looking—but did not find him. We told the security guard (in copious hat flare and long gray ponytail) who was agog—*you left your stuff? You can't leave nuthin' here!* Not excited, not inclined to help, *can't you check your cctv*, Mohammed asked, twice, *no we don't have that here,* this guard answered, twice. But there were other

guards, ones more down for the chase. Once Mohammed hooked up with them I thought I could leave—*I have a job interview,* I said; I didn't mention it was in *two hours*—but they wanted me to help look, to show where I had been sitting and where the thief had been sitting and where he took off to, *was it a hoodie? Was it that guy with the red hat? No, definitely not him, he was younger, and no hat, maybe shorter, too? Was the hood on his head? No, no I'm not even sure there was a hood.* And then—they just have to, don't they? Gray sweatshirt guy returned toward the scene of the crime, and when I saw him I blurted, *hey, do you have his disc?* Sweatshirt guy was like, *what, I don't have anything,* but the guards were on him, telling him to empty his pockets, and he did, wallet, phone, full jar of honey—*why does he have a jar of honey,* I said, aloud—but not producing a disc. It wasn't really a sweatshirt, more some kind of fleece. Nonetheless one of the guards handcuffed him, *you're trespassing, your picture's up in every branch,* and the kid cried, *but they said I could come back!* and the female guard was, *so is this him,* and I was all, *not sure by the face, I'm pretty sure, though,* I said, disappointed in my lack of recall, *but he definitely has the gray sweatshirt with no hood, he's the right height and age, and*—and this is how I id'd him to myself, in my head and heart—*he has the same angry vibe.* The vibe that had made me want to leave in the first place, *that* was why I wanted out of there so bad, his energy was the same as that guy who attacked me in '04, completely unpredictable (except you *can* predict: *bad things are about to happen*), confrontational and angry and impulsive and the minute he started hovering between me at my computer and the computer to my left I grabbed my purse pretending to be fishing for my phone but really just wanting a hand on it so he couldn't swipe it; I hated his energy from second one of it impinging on mine; the whole time he'd sat next to me he'd muttered irately to himself didn't even turn his computer on and I knew I was going to cut my library visit short, I was so tired of being among the raving while just checking email and searching for jobs and let's face it: he heard Mohammed next to me saying *watch my stuff* and me saying *I'm not going to be here long* and after Mohammed left gray sweatshirt guy got up from the computer to my left and sidled up to the one on

my right and toyed with the mouse and then *yank*! Took the guy's disc. I wished I was all *hey, you can't do that*, or *stop, thief*; I wish I'd had louder more aggressive reflexes but I didn't; I had scared little let-me-be-invisible reflexes, let me run away, such a loser and I just logged off feeling I had to do something but not knowing whether that thing was report gray sweatshirt guy or follow gray sweatshirt guy or what, all of which ideas were solved by Mohammed returning and my blab to him. And even though the guards took gray sweatshirt guy into the library security office and even though he did eventually surrender the disc (about which I was, turns out, unequivocally happy; Mohammed had said it was his wedding photos) and even though Mohammed hugged me and one guard called me an angel and they had me write and sign a statement and were all *if it wasn't for her*…I know better. I had *nothing* to do with that nice outcome; all I was doing was wanting to get away, fight or flight and my instinct was flight, that was my *prime motive* and everything else either secondary, accidental, or spawned from guilt. Events like these ought to restore my belief in the benevolence of the universe, for even the most cowardly of us; who am I to insist when, or how, we might best be used?

But they don't, and that is why I am only fit to be the angel.

Double Cleanser

MARIA S. PICONE

Between cleansing and exfoliating, she got the text. An anonymous voice, a deepfake or a paid cameo, giggled and said, "Our Innisfree is having a sale! Can you do 7 tonight?"

The toner's drying agent snapped into her skin. Skipping the deferent language businesswomen normally used with clients, she said, "Gangnam sounds fun! Can't wait!" The plan had been posted on the dark web, under the heading "Cosmic Evacuation Route." She didn't question why or how it would happen, just as the client didn't ask her for details.

The master assassin skipped her daily face mask. A hint of excitement played around her lips as she pulled the straightening iron through her hair. She walked into her white-on-white closet and found the perfect outfit—cutesy tights, jean shorts to show off her long legs. She grabbed her go bag, a Fendi baguette with its signature shape. Slipped in a special package from her skincare fridge.

On the street, her heartbeat started to rave in her chest. Seoul was a CCTV paradise. Any deviation from the norm might be noticed, by someone, at some time, when they agonized over how deeply to bow to their bosses upon failure to find her.

In both professions, she was used to acting, cameras. Styling

influencers was starting to pay off, and it gave her the skills to turn herself into a different person, a forgettable and disposable youth emulating the idols and drama stars those shallow starlings obsessed over.

She narrowed her world to sensory details, passing her by like film stills:

A few folded won, her alter ego's ID, smartphone, makeup.

Paying cash on the bus rather than using her T money card.

The 7-11 burner phone with its disappearing messages "forgotten" on the bus.

The heartbeat like warring energy drinks in her system.

Gangnam seared her eyes like a vintage Hyuna video. To oeguk she might call it Carnival orgying 5th Ave. She pressed her way past the crush of fashionistas looking for their next haul and tourists trying to put the Gangnam back in Gangnam Style. Pulling out her decoy phone, she pretended to scroll on social in front of the Innisfree. The picture of a young woman waiting to shop with a friend.

Exactly at seven, Aritaum—and wasn't it shameless that her family would name her "beauty"—came down the street. She had the flawless, dewy face of an aspiring idol and the Insta-fame of a brief fling with a K-drama mainstay. Like any smart young woman, she'd leveraged that into a brand. In this city that ate young people's dreams like barflies scarfing down myeolchi, Aritaum was nowhere near important enough for bodyguards. The fact that she shared her name with a major beauty brand was also an unfortunate obstacle to her fame. Too on the nose, they said, and waved hands to dismiss the idea of inviting Beauty onto their channel.

The assassin pulled out the acupuncture needle, concealed under the baguette, and began walking, texting, the very portrait of an annoyed girl stood up by a flaky friend.

Like a butterfly's kiss, in and out.

Like a butterfly's kiss, she was in and out.

No stumble, no tell. Just two girls heading in opposite directions.

The major department store next to the cosmetics shop offered cover. Just another shopper desperate to empty her bladder.

The needle, she inserted into the tampon between her legs, so that its head was concealed by the twisted white string. She dropped this in the bathroom stall's sanitary products slot.

It was a slow-working poison, so she sauntered the aisles looking for bargains. She let a clerk talk her into some cruelty-free red lipstick—no crushed bug parts. The store was like an amusement park, impossible not to spend time or money.

Her arms full of new clothes that would fill her alias's closet, she dovetailed back to her assassination and exited the store.

The news broke like a blast radius on the street, pins and stories and little bird wings floating off into aether. Suddenly the name, the word of beauty was everywhere: a ri ta um ari taum aritaum. The woman had collapsed on the subway, heading to a fancy date with some fourth-rate celeb.

An appropriate amount of crying and texting: weird not to look, playing this role. Expressing the emotion in the typical Korean dramatic-reserved way. Twenty minutes, an audible sob when the death was confirmed. Shaking hands.

The bus ride back.

The heart a slow throb, like her dead end job making others beautiful.

No dramatic calls or further communication. The client had heard.

She came back to her cute solo apartment and put on lounging pajamas. The satin felt like a plea on her skin. She washed her face, first with the oil-based cleanser, then the water, and applied the face mask, white as death, on her unblemished veneer.

A single erratic breath shoved out shuddering.

Her real phone chimed. Payment, in the form of overpaying for goods from her alter ego's anonymized homebrewed beauty brand that she would make and send to the client's dummy address. More orders would come, enough to sustain the lifestyle; this was the taster, confirmation of payment for her services.

If, in the middle of doing a Live about how snail mucin wasn't as great as they had once thought; if, in the middle of sacrificing another girl's hair to the straightening iron that gave Korean hair its

lustrous waves, its straightest edges; if, in the middle of remarking on how she made her money from this glut of life and vanity and excess that painted up women like factory dolls and queued them down the line to the scrap heap of ageism; if, *if* she ever were to feel guilt about her side job, she would think. Of herself. Her own idol face. Her key money. Her parents. All the debts she needed to pay—all the grease and dirt and slime that would never wash off.

Turned Eye

PAVLE RADONIC

The fatty gleaming Indian doing tricks round *Tasvee* doesn't give up easily, especially not after a brief eyeing three weeks ago at first encounter. Ever since beaming her come-on and last night presented her pitch.

Gal was a fair judge of a chance, capable of penetrating hidden lusts and subterfuge. She got about too. Passed one afternoon outside the library and on another occasion the biz district. Both times flashing, despite the crowd of faces and briefest of glances. Wouldn't have thought those locales held much promise, but the gal would know best of course.

Silver stud in the nose complements the neon smile—a powerful dazzle against dark skin; the sole adornment she can afford. Short, but walking tall, cleavage revealing large bust and adding size. The one black dress by the looks.

Bounce in the step. More front than *Myers*, as they used to say back home. (Largest department store in Melbourne back in the day.) You have to admire the panache. Popular girl in younger days, before the *pratas* weighed in. The swagger retained.

An unlikely duo. The companion looked little value as any sort of pimp or protector. Certainly knows how to make himself scarce without being asked—peels off very quickly. They have been on the

road together a while, covered lotta ground. Some few years older, beard unkempt and grown out like the hair. Tall, not stooped exactly, though that was the impression beside her. A kind of retiring, shy type. The turned eye marking the pair as strongly as her smile, buxomness and forwardness. A kind of talisman.

Although the eye was clearly turned, one didn't notice immediately. Not beside the girl. Did he slink off so quickly because they have divined that the eye frightens off customers? Seems likely. Man with a turned eye had less to lose when it came down to any roughhouse. Man with a turned eye goes in boots and all. Taking a turned eye man's girl can't be recompensed sufficiently, no matter how many dollars. (And she can't charge much.)

The carting of the bags his job. Waiting around, like last night at *Tasvee*. They take their meals together, share cigarettes. She came back with one from up the *lorong* directly opposite last night.

Good and bad shared together equally—the impression was strong.

The blue and white hooped shirt doesn't get much of a washing; her black hiding stains. Sometimes he wears a baseball cap or bandana over thinning, long hair. At a guess, he possesses nothing like her command of English. A brother possibly? An old lover on whom she has taken pity seems less likely. Nothing in the behaviour either way.

Last night when she trooped down the *lorong* he spotted her a long way off, back down in the deeper dark. Yet he hadn't kept particular look-out. For half an hour he had chatted quietly, standing with another Indian beside one of the tables where the other might have eaten. The first time either of them had been in other company.

Not long after the other left she appeared, seemingly unexpectedly. It was clear she had been gone a long time. When she had come out into the light of the street and was waiting to cross, he raised and shook both hands at her over the traffic.

Where have you been so long? Accompanying hard look.

Nothing that bothered her too much. Quickly she was on the move again, after some sharing of the cigarette. When she moved in

one direction, he must have immediately moved in the other, disappearing without trace.

The on-lookers didn't bother her in the slightest, numerous countrymen among them. She was well known at *Tasvee*; no concern of hers.

Names. Living, working?? Marriage status? Nationality? Girlfriend?… Girl friend's nationality? She make it good?

Was that how she had asked it?

For a few moments it seemed she had the power of second sight, penetrating to the truth of all these matters. Perfectly frank. Enquiring smiles and almost a kind of solicitude and understanding offered.

She herself knew how to make it good. Make happy, they usually called it in that quarter. Just a few doors down. She pointed and might have given a name or number of the place. There seemed to be understanding too that perhaps she wouldn't win the trick there and then. No matter; it could be something for the time ahead; sooner or later.

When she rounded back a second time a while after under the alcove, with her guy in tow, again she pointed up at the same place, where she made happiness. Smiling and nodding. The chap would know to make himself scarce so quickly that a fellow would never be sure whether he had been there in the first place.

To the Newly Wounded by Gunshot

STEPHANIE E. DICKINSON

I will show you my body. I do not mind if your eyes, and only your eyes, are drawn to my left hand clenched in a permanent fist. The last time the hand opened it had just turned eighteen, and the wrist attached to the forearm has since fused. The flow of time has passed its terrain by. I will let you come close, but only you, to trace the scar that cuts through and dents my cheek, the scar that once reaching the neck zigzags and runs in many directions like exploded pottery. I trust you. You understand the shyness I feel about this part of my being, especially my fingers. Medically it is called a *claw hand*. A harsh phrase. Damage to the ulnar nerve that travels from the neck causes the condition. You understand me, we who learn the terminology of what the gunshot has done inside of us. The brachial plexus, the spine's connection to the left arm and hand, blown apart.

I honor you. You for yourself, you as a witness to the death of others, you who have gone to the edge and returned. For years you've run across the breaking news timeline of laptop monitors. Anniversaries come and go. Sometimes the injured are not mentioned, sometimes they call us the non-lethals as if whoever is keeping score wants the kill shots. It is miraculous to survive, and it is difficult. On *the* day you crossed the gunman's path you picked the medium-size Coke and

the midnight showing of *The Dark Knight Rises* in Aurora, Colorado, you chose the soft seat at an outdoor café in Paris and ordered a latte, you were bonding at a teen retreat in Norway, a Christmas Party in San Bernadino, sitting in a classroom in Parkland and Uvalde, dancing to club music in Orlando. In El Paso it was a quick trip to Walmart. In Highland Park, a parade, and in Syracuse, a grocery shopping trip to the Tops supermarket. The feel of a breeze in the hardwoods along the path to your Virginia Tech class. Light streamed through the red maples and sycamores; everything was taking the sun. You were amid coming and going, in the whirl of friends and plans, you were living your everyday with the future before you like an orange grove.

I was a teenager the night a disturbed nineteen-year-old shot me with a 12-gauge in the neck and face, paralyzing my left arm. It was Thanksgiving night. There is drama in the shooting itself, a blood jet glamour, the aftermath deeper, more menial, requiring patience and medical interventions, learning to live in the new body, the new mind, to navigate. How can I still be here having once sat a few feet from a shotgun's double barrels? A handgun creates one small hole, high velocity ammunition travels at three times the speed of sound and creates a giant hole, and a shotgun cartridge contains pellets which scatter upon discharge. For some of you the injury is a soft tissue injury, for others damage to the nerves, the spine, the head, and the organs, and many experience burning neurological pain. I am a pain veteran. For all of us the psychological trauma is profound.

When I recount my Ur-story about the shooting, I tell it straight, flat, as if the story by virtue of retelling has been drained of color and emotion. The shootings lie outside chronological time and have an ongoingness. You've come to Las Vegas for the Route 91 Harvest Festival in your cutoffs and Western boots, long hair and Stetsons, in your tangled beauty. Almost 80 degrees at 10:05 p.m. when the window on the 32nd floor of the Mandalay Hotel shatters. White smoke rises and firecrackers pop in rapid succession, and you are

running. Around you a sea of plastic bottles and cups, a menagerie of broken glass. Automatic weapon fire, ten minutes, 1,100 rounds. Starts, stops, starts again. After the shooting gives way to silence you are lying against a girl in jean shorts, pockets studded with silver crescent moons, her innocent cowboy boots and bare legs streaked with blood. Everywhere a tide of drink cups. She dies reaching for your hand, a stranger, *wait,* her fingers say, *catch me, my head is falling. If I swallow dirt, will I grow into a tree?* You're alive but don't want her to be left behind and so you stay with her. The smell you can't forget is of her body struck by shrapnel. Now you walk with a cane.

In my Ur-story the firemen come first, they hold me down, stop me from crawling and bleeding out. My vision has shut down as my brain is trying to protect the core and conserve energy. I am carried out into the night under the trees. I can't breathe even as I am loaded into an ambulance and given oxygen. The ambulance first ferries me to Raleigh, a regional hospital where they pack my lungs, and then speeds me to Durham. My mother will soon receive a call telling her that her daughter has been shot in North Carolina and the hospital needs her permission to operate. I regain consciousness briefly. I do not know I can't talk. The tracheotomy has made an opening through my neck and threaded a tube down my windpipe. My broken jaw is wired. There are lights everywhere, a row of sharp lights on either side of me. Hot and blue like the gunman's moon. A nurse bends over me, her thick bronze hair brushes my bandaged chest. She asks me my name and tells me to write it. They are putting a spiral note pad under my hand and a pen between my fingers. I squeeze *Stephanie* onto the paper. She asks how old I am. *Eighteen*. Everything I see of me is bandaged. I am sure he has shot my breasts off. *Breasts?* "Yes, you have your breasts. You're in Duke University Medical Center's Emergency Room." But I'm not. I am swirling in my mind, sinking farther away. I'm sliding into the muck, the cool bottom oozing between my toes.

In the Marjory Stoneman Douglas midafternoon classroom, you drift like the red heart-shaped balloons that hover near the ceiling. You tell

your friends you hardly slept; northern mockingbirds sang all night outside your window mimicking car alarms. February's their mating month and today their Valentine's Day too. On your desk a card, a bird in flight—LOVE'S IN THE AIR. Then high-caliber rounds fire through the classroom door. The gunman's bullets pinging from walls and floors. The laptops struck; the screens go blank. You stagger into the haze outside the classroom. Shrapnel hits you in the back and legs and then the hallway goes dark and you're in the cypress wetlands among the floating leaves. Four times shot, each shot drops you deeper into stems and roots. The gunman moves on, opens fire through another classroom window, and you, hiding in your waist length hair among the scattered Valentine cards, are shot in your right hand, right arm, right ribs, and abdomen. You can't find your face or feet; you're lost inside your body. On the grounds outside the school a classmate recognizes the gunman, but not knowing what is happening says "Hi" and he says "Hi" back. She has known him since middle school and asks where he's going to college next year. "Somewhere in Florida," he answers and then is gone. Mockingbirds again, this time mimicking gunfire.

Every week there are more of us—gunshot survivors but few see how we exist. The grit required. When a high velocity bullet enters the body, it creates a wave and a blast. Seventeen surgeries, five surgeries, thirteen surgeries, four surgeries to rebuild, to ameliorate. The recovery, the expense of living in the new body and mind, that is why I'm writing, I am an old hand. I google images of shotgun injuries and the gore shocks me. In the comments someone asks if anyone knows what it feels like being shot by a 12-gauge. No one has experienced it. One person writes: "Pistols put holes in people, rifles put holes through people, and shotguns, at the right range with the right load will physically remove a chunk of meat off your opponent and throw that on the floor."

At a party in a Cary, North Carolina suburban home I smell the backyard crab apple trees holding their tang. Our nineteen-year-old host, his parents in France, loads his father's 12-gauge shotgun. I will

always be walking into the bathroom to comb my hair, my boyfriend following. I must sit on the toilet lid, not peeing, listening to my boyfriend warn of danger, telling me we must leave. I am never far from the shower curtain with seahorses riding black waves. The nineteen-year-old host is holding the shotgun, the barrel nudging the door open. The hall light shines, the sconce lamp making a halo around his head. He laughs, and the gun discharges, blue fire snorting from the barrels. The blue fire hits my face, a skillet of hot grease, and I am lifted up, rising into the air, and then dropped into dark interstellar spare. *Don't die,* my boyfriend is screaming. Between life and death, falling and crawling, my lungs flooded with blood.

And so goes part of my jaw, my face, and many teeth flying…

I am coming back from darkness. I am climbing a rope. I am above the lofts in my grandmother's barn and the rope, not slung over a beam, is hanging in air.

You too may wake to the respirator taking its machine breath inside you, forcing you to inhale and exhale, your chest expanding and collapsing. Or you may wake to chest tubes being implanted between your ribs and phlegm and blood from your lungs draining into a bedpan. You too may wake in a white tent, the doctor's face close, his glasses closer. "I'm going to unveil you," he jokes. "I don't think this will hurt. I'm debriding the wound of dead tissue. I'll be careful not to jostle all your IVs." He takes off his glasses, his breath in your hair. He cuts away the thick bandage. "You'll feel some pricks." He uses surgical scissors to cut flesh and sees what you never have or will, the hole in your face.

I am dreaming of gunmen shootings starlings out of a tree.

I pick the pieces up—wings, heads. I hold whole birds and feel them fold. I walk through the grass and the silence. Why isn't the sky doing something?

Lift us up, make us birds. Make us into us again.

"The percussive effect of the ballistics and transfer of energy," says a trauma doctor, "make gunshot injuries worse than they appear." They call us gunshot *victims*. *Survivor* feels more real a label, active and passionate; after all we have triumphed over to return, *victim* seems passive, dull, too small. But aren't AR-15s, 40 Caliber Glocks, AK-17s, 12-Gauge Remingtons and bump stocks more titillating than a catheter, a bone flap, a nerve reattachment, or a leg brace? Either you are shelved *victim* or treated as if you *own it*. Your asymmetry is somehow your fault and wholly yours. I own my teeter-totter body, gravity pulling my left side down year by year, I own "can't you straighten yourself?"

The gunman enters from an exit door wearing a bulletproof vest, bulletproof leggings, and a gas mask. Like a red giant star, he has dyed his hair orange, his eyes too, the color of dying stars. He ignites smoke bombs, then begins shooting. You shield your friend and take shots in the leg. Shrapnel drowning faraway sounds. Many anniversaries pass until your left leg requires amputation. In another row, another you, seated beside your wife and son, feels the first sting then more in the neck and face and back. Now paralyzed and in a wheelchair your wife says, "People treat him like he is *slow* because his speech is impaired." Anniversaries? "We live this every day." The cushions will stay powder blue and on the floor a snow of popcorn will have just fallen. The hills beyond the city are home to the antelope and coyote. Beautiful men and women send photos to the gunman in prison, and he tapes their pictures to the wall above his bunk. They write letters too. *I like your hair,* and *what kind of movies do you like*? and I *hope you stay well.*

In the beginning I do not know what I own, that part of my new real estate will be this burning limb, this wild neurological pain. When you hear the term phantom pain, you think of Lord Byron and Mary Shelley telling ghost stories in a rain-drenched villa near Lake Geneva. A ghost, a specter. Illusion. Phantom pain in an amputated limb or body part no longer there manifests as tingling, itching,

cramping, pressure. It is real. The nerve connections remain. A gunshot injury to the brachial plexus's nerve network can cause neuropathy—sensations of severe burning and electric shock. Since age eighteen I have lived on the Red Planet. The Fire Planet. This is the world-without-end of a gunshot injury.

I would like to hear of your journey into the pain vortex. On the Red Planet nights are the worst, nights because you must lie down and are captive to bed covers weighted like radiators. I'm restless, my hand clenches with burning, the involuntary tendons contract. It is the beginning of my new body and I do not yet know how to placate the electric shocks. I am searching for an underwater city. My teeth are wired, and I take liquid Demerol for pain and liquid Thorazine for sleep, though I do not sleep. I toss and turn, and the arm becomes hot, hotter, and I picture my hand in a French fryer basket being lowered into boiling grease. If only I can part my fingers and straighten them. I concentrate, I flex them with my right hand hoping I might release the fire. The burning goes on. In the bathroom sink I yank the cold faucet on all the way and let the water rush full force over my hand. It cools.

This is my new body's learning about itself. My convalescence when I stay with my aunt and uncle and grandmother in winter Iowa. Late January. My uncle, a dentist, and my aunt, his assistant, leave when the sun is coming up and return after sundown. I am alone with my grandmother. The house is on the edge of a golf course where the frozen cattails and rushes stick up, and the crows and starlings, the ones that stay for the winter, circle the miniature slough hunting for seeds. I press myself against the icy patio window and look out at the untrampled snow. I want to sleep on a snow bed. I enter my grandmother's quiet. A farm widow, she bends over the stove island and makes chicken broth with her homemade noodles cut so fine I'll be able to suck them between my teeth. Her hands are cold, and she doesn't mind that I take them into my lap and trace the veins that rise like tree roots through the skin, blue almost black.

You live in the digital age and may contemplate your *before self* and your *after self* on social media sites, on Facebook, Instagram, and now TikTok. I sit at my aunt's vanity staring into the distant galaxy of her mirrors, comparing the left and right sides of my face, the left with its dent and the scar trench. I touch my chin; the left half is numb from nerve damage.

As I type these words, I can feel the sun in the January windows and my grandmother's presence. She in her brown stockings and work dress and apron, out of place as I am in this well-appointed suburban house. And so, in the night when I pace and moan and the Demerol and Thorazine seethe through me in waves, when my haywire nerves like split ends send electrical surges and lightning bolts, my grandmother gets up from her light sleep and enters the room. The hair that she braids and neatly coils around her head during the day has been brushed loose for sleep, her unraveling hair that has never been cut, falls past her buttocks, a raiment of white twined with black. Her body is cold like her hands; she hugs me, and I cling to the snow she is becoming. You will have your own stories, your discoveries about your new body, and someday if we meet, we will talk about them. You will have transcendent moments like this during your furlough from the world. So, in the hardest year, the first year of my new body, my grandmother becomes my friend, the first friend of the *me* the shotgun has made.

It is worth the pain to live.

38 It will always be 86 degrees and twenty minutes into the parade when the gunman who looks like an elf, tiny with a narrow mouse face and large dark eyes, his head filled with the debris of a nihilistic subculture, begins his climb up the ladder onto the roof of a cosmetics factory. He carries a long gun, the Smith & Wesson M&P 15 semi-automatic that appears taller and stronger than him. You 8 years old, there with your parents and your twin brother, feel the bee stings, the burning, and everything goes dark and hard to breathe. You too are floating out of yourself, your face buried in the soft bee fur, levitating

above the scattered bicycles, the strollers, and folding chairs above the impish gunman in makeup and women's clothes as he melts into the crowd. I thank you—paralyzed from the waist down and returning to school in a wheelchair, the wide smile of pure light on your face, while your twin walks beside you.

The long gun. It sounds ancient like the Iliad. When I read the description about the Smith & Wesson M&P 15 semi-automatic rifle, I hear the swank advertising voice with phrases like "superior design makeup" and "tailored to specific shooting configurations." As if this firearm was like any other saleable commodity. The long gun needs no beautiful person holding it; the weapon itself is sex.

You leave the hospital in clothes that don't fit because of the weight you've lost. They belong to someone who once claimed to be you. Your footing unsure, reentering your life, terrifies. The *before you* and the *after you* exist simultaneously in the eyes of those who knew you before. It is sometimes easier to go somewhere new, where only the *after you* is known. I take my first steps outside the hospital, and these are steps you've taken or soon will. I breathe the chill January air of North Carolina. The dogwood trees are without leaves or blossoms, yet I smell bloom. I keep inhaling; I am digesting the air. We will say goodbye soon—the dark eyed boy with me when I was shot and with me now. "I'm not ashamed of you," he says. I let go of his arm and walk on my own through the parking lot. The sky is overcast and the sun cool and not much brighter than a fluorescent bulb. I turn for a last look at Duke University Medical Center. The old towers of the main entrance shine. *Goodbye.*

Inside the terminal everything is heightened, the plastic waiting room chairs, my shriveled brown boots, the heels bending to the side, the same boots I left Iowa in bringing me home. "Boarding pass please, miss," the flight attendant asks. Her black eyes with lavender lids widen as they gaze at the surgical scissors on a string around my neck. They take in my car coat with the chipped pearl button that hangs loosely from my shoulders. It belongs to the dark

eyed boy's mother. I will always be handing her my boarding pass and telling her my mouth is wired and if something should happen, if I should throw up, she must cut the wires with the scissors. She nods. Her thick black hair reaches to the small of her back. She is so beautiful it hurts me to look at her. Noises run together, voices from the cockpit, the undercurrent of luggage being thrust into overhead compartments. Hours later the *Fasten Seat Belt* sign goes on. We are beginning our descent into the Cedar Rapids airport that is surrounded by cornfields. First snow hits the wings, wind blowing in from the north.

The day I leave Duke University Medical Center and fly from North Carolina to Iowa is another of those ongoing days. I arrive and will always be standing in the ladies' room in front of the mirror looking at my new self. My jutting pelvic bones are in line with the sink, proof I've eaten nothing but gruel for a month and a half—through a feeding tube. Three missing molars, two pre-molars, and re-sectioned mandible. My asymmetrical eyes widen, the left, a pinpointed pupil, the dilated right, an antelope's moonless night. The huge eye has seen directly into the gun and now can stare at any eclipsed sun. I grip the edge of the sink. My left arm hangs silent, a lunar appendage. They tell me I am one of the lucky ones. You will hear this too about luck. Pure dumb luck.

Landline

ERICA R. EDWARDS

She shakes her head, almost involuntarily, as she runs the flush sidewalks of the small college town where everything, within and without, is steadied by an iron gate ten feet tall. She delights in the current rising up her limbs as they reach, then land, reach, then land. She measures the day by the beat of the flapping breasts, the clouds of breath she can see in the November air, the swish-swash of her thighs meeting each other again and again. The nod she gifts herself on the next block is a cascade of agreements with herself, with the world. Stay vertical. Feet hold shoes. Shoes hold ground.

She enjoys it, but it's not exercise.

These days Arnette doesn't care about her miles or her times. She runs, instead, because she has the feeling that no matter where she is, there's a gap in the space-time continuum just over her left shoulder, eyeing her with the self-satisfied grin that she has seen in children's Bible pictures of the whale that swallowed Jonah. Time is a monster: the ocean and the belly. So this is the running that Arnette does not because she is watching the digits march by on the screen of a chipper treadmill but because this is a day, like every other, when it feels like things are slipping. Slipping all over again.

Slipping like her two-year-old daughter Zina whose torso still hasn't learned how to keep up with her spinning legs. Like just earlier this morning when Arnette stepped into the shower, faltered, and banged the right side of her tailbone against the tub. Now the diaper bag bangs against the bruise, but she runs, without shifting her gait, one furious hand on the stroller's handlebar, to keep things from slipping away. For real this time.

The hand that doesn't hold the stroller thaws in the pocket of her navy parka. Arnette doesn't bother checking her watch as she stops at the corner at Main. She likes the feeling of racing. She needs something to win. She powers forward. As she passes the picture windows of the post office, she turns her head to catch a glimpse of herself. Is she—was she ever—running? Or is she being pulled along by the flying stroller?

A chubby caramel-colored finger bounces just under her peripheral vision, pointing at the elm trees swaying sentry in the November winds.

"Tees! Tees!" her daughter says.

"Trees. Yes, trees! The *trees* are blowing in the wind!" When Arnette speaks to her daughter in this teacherly voice, she feels almost as if everyone is tuned in, watching her: the construction guys lifting plates onto the building with a crane that is now drowning out the sound of her feet and Zina's stroller on the sidewalk, the commuters stopped at the light at Aster, the white-haired white guy with the polo shirt in the Tesla, the ponytailed woman running in the opposite direction wearing nothing more than a long-sleeved shirt, leggings, and bright red gloves.

She imagines the rubber wheels at her feet, riding the cobblestones next to these flawless sidewalks, as her soundtrack.

She ponders what running in the street would feel like without her history, without her disorder. She looks back at the runner and, again, shakes her head to quiet the wish. For the ponytailed runner or the surefooted mail carrier, the morning road is terra firma under a day that might spit out any general challenge to one's equilibrium. But Arnette has no sure ground for running or dropping neat envelopes into happy boxes. She could be late for the bus, or she

could drop under the earth and bob back up someone else. She could spill coffee on her sensible shoes, or she could black out and wake up barefoot across town. She could show up to Zina's daycare realizing that she has left her daughter's lunch on the kitchen counter, or she could not arrive at all, or arrive and wonder at the strangers swirling around, going about their business. Wonder who they are. Wonder who she is.

She runs the crosswalk to the next block. She nods as the stroller takes the curb without much effort from her.

Sometimes the trips she takes, as she calls them, last seconds or minutes. She might find herself in the front courtyard in satin pajama pants, keys in her hands, on her way nowhere. Then she might simply turn around and walk back into the townhouse to gather herself and scoop her child. Every once in a while, a student across her desk might tell her that she just froze mid-sentence, that she just sat there with a dazed look for a while before she asked, all composed now, "Where were we?"

Stopped at the light across from the bus stop, Arnette puts her stroller hand into her pocket and runs her feet, then does demi-plies while pulling her one warm hand out of the other pocket to check her email. She has been thinking about her brother, who has gone missing again, and waiting for news from home, and knowing that any new information is bound to arrive in this quiet way. For a moment she holds in her mind's eye an image from an old family photograph of a ten-acre farm in Virginia surrounded by six country bungalows that had been built and rebuilt by the family since they got their forty acres. She wonders how many of the people in the photo, solemn in overalls and farming shifts, stayed where and who they were. She can't help but wonder what her people, who subsist mostly on what they glean from rows of Delta corn, lima beans, greens, eggs from roaming chickens, salted jowl, or, back home in California, oversized zucchini, year-round tomatoes, okra, and potatoes from the puny patch out front, would grow up here in Vermont. She thinks of the plot one tenth the size of the Virginia farm in a just-as-country town way outside of Los Angeles where she spent most of her childhood and wonders if her brother

will ever see it again. Then she shakes her head again, shivers, and, curses: "Fucking lunatics."

Arnette is not the only one of her people who might go missing in any instant whatever. When she was seven, her mother's older brother showed up living a whole nother life. The news that Uncle Leon was still alive spread nonchalantly around Murraysville after a distant cousin spotted him at a Friday night football game a few towns over. It was five years later. He had a whole family up in Richmond. He never came home. And there was always talk of the old auntie who walked out of her job at the chicken processing factory one day and was never seen again by any of the Wilkins clan. And then there was Arnette's mother, a vapor that rose unseen into the sun over Los Angeles. Her first winter here, she learned how thoroughly the Vermont cold could freeze out those thoughts, cover her constant fear of losing her kin, losing herself, with a blanket of New England nothingness. Still, where is James? She palms the phone in her pocket but leaves it there.

Zina attempts a tweeting sound to accompany the audio signal at the crosswalk. Arnette again thinks for a moment that everyone is tuned in, watching her: the commuters stopped at the light at Aster and Main, the guy jogging past her in yellow tights and a white fleece pullover. But the only person watching is Zina, whose chin is pointing toward the gray Vermont sky, whose eyes are reaching as far back as they can to find their target.

Relieved that the bus stop is now in view, Arnette jogs across the crosswalk, then past the Unitarian church where there is a small group huddled against the wind, smoking and not smoking. One of the smoking ones is shaking his head and laughing. "I'ma go head and get on outta here before we get into this shit again." Arnette thinks of her uncle Jody, whose claim to fame is being a five-time champion on *Jeopardy!* She remembers seeing him just like this: a sunray catching the eyebrow left eye and stamping his forehead with a light that reads like the weather report, "Cold and clear." She turns up one edge of her mouth at this thought. She walks now, crossing to the bus stop, thin grin still barely there, and looks at her watch. She is early.

She is "chronically early," her brother James says. "Nigga always running but you ain't never late," he likes to say.

She isn't late. She deposits her bag at her desk and walks to the staff kitchen across the hall. She half-sits on the cold metal cabinet next to the instant espresso machine. She breathes in, then out with force, and watches as brown liquid screeches into the square ceramic cup.

Arnette's sister Jean is supposed to write by email this morning, as soon as she gets to work at the library, to tell her if their brother has been found yet. Arnette has been picking up her phone every five minutes, placing her thumb on the home button, then on the white envelope just above it. The metallic ding rings empty each time.

Arnette knows that none of her folks back home can currently be reached by phone. The landline at the old two-bedroom house where Arnette's sister lives with her brother, her uncle, and her cousin has been turned off for months, and, feeding off each other's inland-Black-folks paranoia, Arnette's people don't believe in cell phones. James and Jody don't trust anything that comes in a glossy package and is called "smart." Jean, being Jean, lost her phone last year and never replaced it. When Arnette thinks of how silly it all is—sitting by her computer in an office of her own, waiting for the slow, repetitive churning of email servers—she curses her sister. Jean's always been this way, ain't she? When they were all at Mason High, wasn't it Jean every single day walking to the opposite end of the school to wait outside Arnette's sixth period class? Yes, there was Jean, leaning against the wall of the old bomb shelter outside of the music room, waiting for Arnette to emerge from behind some tuba player or trumpeter's back. She would walk just in front of Arnette, as if walking to her own damn locker, and commandeer the top shelf to stow her pouch of Fashion Fair lipstick, drugstore-blue eyeliner, and that day's notes passed between her and her best-friend-since-sixth-grade. Because of course Jean had forgotten the code to her own locker and what was it worth to get a new one if she was just gonna forget it again? Because she was trifling. Because she was satisfied to be her dependent on younger her sister rather

than fix the mistake, find, repair, grow up. Things gone were gone, meant to stay that way. Arnette is afraid that this is Jean's story for James: just another disappeared sequence of numbers.

It was Uncle Jody's son, Khalil, who found James the last time. Found him in a Riverside vegetarian restaurant, rapping with some old brothers from the barbershop next door, Khalil said, about the new world order. His eyes were fixed on a framed canvas above a booth three tables away. It was a drawing of four stick figures on beige acrylic, each frozen in air: coming from nowhere, going nowhere. Khalil told Arnette that James' expression spooked him.

"He was talking about, like, something totally different, Nette. Like, you know how your brother do—president this, grand wizard that, Oprah, scientology, illuminati, you know, the whole thing. He was soundin like him but he wasn't lookin like him. His eyes, Nette. Just starin at that picture. Starin so long, you know. And hard. Well, shit. I started starin too. That's how I remember the shit all detail-like."

Khalil said he waited until each of the old men at Darcy's slipped into the night, one at a time until the last three gray-bearded men looked at each other, shook their heads, and made meant-to-be-heard sounds with their rickety chairs. Khalil walked over then, laid a warm hand below the back of James's neck, and said, just above a whisper, "It's me man. It's alright. I got you, bruh."

"First I felt him jump a little," Khalil told Arnette. "But then…man, Nette, I don't know. I just feel like he knew me, and he stood up, and like, just walked out with me. We went to a movie—some summer shit, Will Smith shit—and then we went home. Just like that. Like nothing ever happened. Nigga disappear for two months and then just like…Boom. Back."

James's last disappearance was two years ago, when Arnette had first landed in this tiny town with its austere university and she was warm with Zina inside of her. She was in her Cedar Court townhouse, which was pulsing with green. New England's late summer greeted every open window with the unabashed ease of its breeze, and the bass of Arnette's system, also unabashed, was making the windowpanes dance and the baby in her belly kick along. She was

worried about her brother, but she didn't come all the way out here not to get to work on time on her first day the next day. So she was finally finishing with the kitchen, placing plastic containers in this drawer while dropping silverware in that one, and the windows were wide open and the music was blasting because it was August, she wasn't in the desert anymore, and she needed the syncopation to keep the job of unpacking tracking along. Bang. Silverware. Boom. Coffee maker. Bip. Uncle Jody's cast iron.

Uncle Jody had driven her to the airport when she left. He'd asked her why she had to fly across the country for the same kind of job she had in Riverside. "You're so smart and accomplished, don't they got jobs for smart and accomplished people out here?" Arnette had been an academic advisor, then an academic affairs officer, at the community college where she had started out as a nineteen-year-old with a head full of promises and a pocket full of five- and ten-dollar bills the women from church had collected. When she started advising, she would meet with inland girls, girls like her, some of them right around her age with their hair slicked back with the same dark-brown gel into the same painful bun that she wore most days. She would smile at the scent of their fresh-smelling Bic pens and lean in to the sticking sounds that their spiral notebooks made when they opened them for the first time. Seeing these girls and their things and the heady promises of a new year and new life, she would feel a warmth rising from her stomach into her chest. Then she would find herself saying the words she still heard from women much older than herself say every Sunday after service or on Tuesdays when she dropped off food for the sick and shut-ins. "You remind me of myself at your age." "I see such a bright future for you." Or, quoting the post-it she had fixed on the bottom of her computer screen, "You belong here!"

When she first started at the community college, she hadn't needed to run to or from work. She skip-walked out of her cubicle every afternoon and floated to her car. She was twenty-four and high on achievement, poised at the top of a mountain she didn't feel like she had climbed because she never felt her limbs tire. She had breezed through college, never missing a class, never requesting a

single extension. Because it was always the right temperature in her uncle's kitchen, even when it was still 99 degrees outside after *Jeopardy!* went off and the winner—always Uncle Jody—gloated, eating ice cream and talking shit in the kitchen while they all did the dishes. Because how could she feel the weight of a sociology midterm like her classmates did, or ask for an extension on that Shakespeare paper due Monday at noon, when she had Uncle Jody to poke his head into that same kitchen a few hours later saying, "I see you, Nette." Or "Okay, now, scholar." Or just tree-trunk fingers, first on her left shoulder and then easing past her, noiselessly placing the cup of water he had just poured, just sipped, next to her tapping fingers.

She could have gone anywhere after she graduated with a rainbow of cords draping her gown. She interviewed for two consulting jobs in LA, a marketing job in San Diego, an advising job in San Francisco. The salary for the job at her alma mater paid less than half of what she was offered in San Francisco, but Arnette decided to stay in Rialto. She told herself it was to keep an eye on James, who had begun disappearing from time to time, but she had already started to feel dizzy sometimes, feel paranoid at others, lose her footing in sentences when she lacked sleep.

By the time she turned thirty, she felt that her brain had turned on her completely. Her slips and trips turned into month-long disappearances, and the people she trusted to keep her tethered and safe had other ideas of what mattered most—*Bird gotta fly, don't it?* or *You grown, ain'tcha?*—she had resolved to match their nonchalance with her determination. Grown she would be.

In Vermont, Arnette would have fresh starts and guarantees, benefits, retirement, an office of her own, sparkly teacups in New England, where they turned center hall colonials into quaint academic buildings, and a dental plan for herself and the stranger in her uterus. The representative from the university she spoke with at the conference for Academic Affairs staff and administrators made that faraway institution feel impermeable. This would be Arnette's iron-gate enclosure, a place whose history could hold and steady her. She would be careful; she would weave flexible, wide nets for

her future flights. She would deliver brittle white envelopes bearing the medical school graduate's signature to her department chair and give printed instructions to all of her co-workers in the administration building.

IN CASE OF EMERGENCY: ARNETTE WILKINS

If ARNETTE WILKINS fails to show without giving prior notice, please immediately contact Joseph Wilkins at 951-482-9728. ARNETTE WILKINS suffers from a mental health disorder known as "dissociative fugue disorder," which is characterized by amnesia-like symptoms and can result in her disappearance and/or the sudden assumption of a new identity.

She would leave notes with the same bold text scotch-taped to her dashboard and her refrigerator. There was one hanging onto her computer screen. One in Zina's emergency kit at daycare. There would be dense insurance policies at the ready. Above all, there would be an all-out sprint for each and every walk signal, bus stop, taxi waiting on the corner.

Thinking back on the optimism about her move, Arnette thinks about how simple it all seemed until James disappeared the day after she left. Arnette took a breath and eyed the three remaining boxes stacked in the middle of the kitchen when the picture of Uncle Jody in front of the old Rialto house sang its way onto the screen of her phone. "Found your brother," Khalil breathed into the line before Arnette could finish saying hello.

She offered her cousin quiet thanks from a twisted mouth before hanging up. She crossed the kitchen to turn the CD player off and slid down the cabinet next to the sink. She buried her head between her knees. She didn't thank God or clap her hands. She didn't let out a little shout. She didn't jump or sing. She didn't count her blessings. She didn't tell herself how she knew all along that James would be alright and what she was so worried about. And she damn sure didn't text one of the cousins from Virginia. Instead, she got on her feet and turned the CD player back on. And she got to work on the next box: "MISC. KITCHEN."

Because, she thought as she slammed chopsticks and measuring spoons into the silverware drawer, no one was there to find her when she was lost and she damn sure wasn't at fuckin Darcy's. No. She had to slither through piss and shit, pull ants and gnats out of the hair that was matting around her shoulders, pilfer food from dumpsters, run from cops, belly over sidewalks slick with the waste of ages. For forty-one days.

"Back." She almost laughed, or spit, when Khalil said it. The first time she lost herself and became someone else, Arnette had to find herself because her people, accustomed to mysterious disappearances and nonchalant reappearances, were only half-looking for her. So Arnette had come back, but not all at once, and not because anyone had their eye on her. She was all alone in the plastic shelter of bus depot, looking down at the dry chicken bone shaking in her fingers, when something started knocking against her chest. The thought was first a whisper: "There's someone else. There's someone else here." Shaking her head, as if she was trying to get the thought out of her head, or into it, she pushed the bone into a styrofoam container that she guessed someone had left there. *For her?* She dropped the container onto the bench she was sitting on, the bench she hadn't known she was sitting on. She turned her head, first to the bench next to her, where someone was gathering their things into a shopping cart. The commuters will be along soon, she thought, then shook her head again.

"Who else is here?" She said it aloud this time.

She started pulling off the layers of clothing she had gathered over forty-one days: the dark-stained sweatshirt someone had tossed out of a car as they drove away from the precinct across the parking lot from the bus depot where she was sleeping most nights; the black baseball hat that was pulled down low over her hair and eyes. When she reached into herself to unhook the bra under the plain heather gray shirt now reddish-brown from her days on benches and in doorways, she was suddenly unlatching a door to a house that she could almost see through a cloud of bus exhaust and the visible stench of her own waste. Desperate to pry that door open, she kept her hands under her shirt and knocked her knuckles

against her breastbone, first lightly, then like she was actually pounding on a door. Liquid was spreading under her butt and along her thighs. She knew the one she was trying to rescue wouldn't piss herself at a waystation for people with no people. She pulled further in, still pounding the skin under her shirt. Anyone who saw her would have thought she was praying, or crying, or both. But she was kicking in a door, banging her shoulder against a mass that was becoming solid now. In her half-right mind's eye she could see, above two cement steps that she knew she knew, above a defiant front-lawn garden patch, a door that was never ever locked. So she stopped knocking and opened her eyes, rose to her feet, hooked the bra back into place, and crossed the parking lot to the police precinct. "Is there a phone I can use?" she asked the small man behind the desk.

She dialed the number to Uncle Jody's house, cradling the receiver with her neck so that she could spit-shine her hands with the tissue she pulled out of the box at the front desk. She looked down and knew the blue running shoes on her feet. She could now remember the day she bought them at the running store because one of her advisees suggested that if she was going to be serious about running she should see about getting a recommendation for shoes that would suit her gait. She knew those young old knees she was looking at, and she knew the purple lycra that covered her legs. "Arnette," she said to no one exactly as the line rang and rang and rang.

What she had experienced was, clinically speaking, a dissociative fugue. As the young psychiatrist in the strip mall near campus was explaining this to her patient, Arnette was traveling through the laboriously mapped streets of her childhood. With her right hand locked with Jean's, whose right was locked with James's, she was finding her way back to Grandma Lotta's Baldwin Hills bungalow, which, she knew, was on the northwest corner of Coliseum and Alsace. When the psychiatrist—she must have graduated from medical school, Arnette thought—leaned on her elbows, nodding, and told Arnette that the fugue could be an attempt to flee from an extremely traumatic or stressful experience, Arnette was looking to

her left and to her right before crossing Alsace. "Sometimes people who experience murder"—the medical school graduate whispered this word—"or veterans." Arnette wasn't listening. "The mind invents these ways of protecting itself, so to speak." Meanwhile, in her mind, Arnette was unlacing her fingers from her sister's and turning at Alsace. She was walking on up to the blue bungalow three houses down so that she could rest in the brazen sun on the cement steps at Gwen Jackson's house. Gwen Jackson was the friend that she only saw round Grandma's. What Arnette was trying to find as she strode the streets of her youth was some covered stone that could be unmasked, some crouched demon that could be unrepressed, some clue that she hadn't yet logged. She looked at the medical school graduate's nodding eyes and told her that, oh, yes, there were things to forget but, no, there was nothing especially memorable or unmemorable. But she knew the fugues, as she could now call them, were simply the inheritance she split with James, all that was left to pass on after generations of losing and loss. She knew, but didn't say to the medical school graduate, that she and her older siblings moved into their favorite uncle's house in Rialto after Grandma Lotta froze in a familiar grief when a heedful neighbor noticed that the Mazda idling at the corner of Coliseum and Alsace was still running and had no driver. From around Grandma Lotta's back, she spotted a AAA map that was unfolded and sticking out of the driver's side door of the still-running gray hatchback. The map was Arnette's. The gray hatchback was her mother's.

After the diagnosis, which stamped the mysteries with a feeling of order that permitted optimism, Arnette tried on different words to explain her absence to the coworkers at happy hour and the sisters in her Bible study. "Amnesia." "Temporary breaks from reality." "Periodic blackouts." Then she tucked them away and returned to the glorious monochrome of San Bernardino County: brown girls whispering her their dreams in her brown office in the brown mountains way outside of LA. Her supervisor in Academic Affairs retroactively approved a paid medical leave and let the temp go. A crisp white letter in an envelope that was double-sealed with the young psychiatrist's signature had made all things new. Arnette

willed to forget what had happened in those downtown streets by the bus depot. She couldn't explain the permanent black under her fingernails or the scratches on the back of her neck, and she couldn't fathom why Jody's *Jeopardy*!-time repasts all tasted like the same gas and garbage for so many weeks. But a road stretched before her, the world had its hands on her lycraed waist, and she was upright.

The second time Arnette found herself far from home was less slithery but also less reparable. The second time, she was holding a California driver's license, staring at a foreign name, watching foods she did not eat sing across a grocery store scanner. Bacon. Bloop. Ritz. Bloop. Freezer waffles. Bloop. Nutter Butters. Bloop. She shook her head and then, with a curious fist, pushed her chin into her mouth. Now was no time to smile. She left everything blooping along and walked to the relic phone at the front of the store. She reached into the pocketbook that was not hers, and, thirty minutes later, she found herself being found. That time, Joseph Jody Wilkins hustled himself to the Palm Desert grocery like he was late to Virginia vespers.

It was several weeks into her second "reentry," as they all called it—work, therapy, supper, treadmill, treadmill, treadmill—before Arnette noticed the tenderness in her nipples, before she admitted that the cotton in her eyes might be more than post-fugue fatigue. Seven months later, when she gave birth surrounded by midwives at the university hospital near her new home in Vermont, she named the fugue baby Zina.

"From 'Xeno,'" she explained to Uncle Jody from the phone next to her bed in the university hospital's birthing center.

"The baby ain't no stranger," Uncle Jody said. "She got people, and she got a home."

"Yeah. I'm her home." Arnette closed her eyes and squeezed the baby.

"We your home, Nette. We still your home."

Arnette kept her eyes shut and said nothing.

Together, Arnette and Zina squeezed out of the quiet life in Vermont a routine that beat strangeness to a pulp. Arnette was far from from Rialto with her giggly daughter who, like her, never

really stopped running. She was as far as could get, or so she hoped, from the inland whale that kept spitting her out on arid earth.

Arnette snickers now, thinking about how she tried to extract herself from her family, forget she was one of them, after James's last disappearance. She spent two weeks ignoring calls, deleting beneficiaries, retyping her will before the pain that crept into her chest was echoed by the pains in her belly. She took this double pain as a sign that her homesickness was getting worse, that perhaps the baby in her uterus was suffering on account of her stubbornness. She loosened her rage just enough to give herself what she most wanted in spite of herself: to call her brother.

She waited until almost midnight so that she'd catch James during the calm that blanketed the house each night after all the neighbors were hailed and plates cleared, then dialed the landline.

"'Sup, Nette? What's good?"

"Everything alright?"

"Everything alright, sis. You know what I mean, still ain't woke up on *Cribs* or nothin. *Lifestyles of the Hood Rich and Famous.* Member we used to watch shit like that? *Pimp My Ride* and shit?"

She should've known he'd make a joke of it.

"We were worried about you, James."

James said nothing to Arnette. Arnette heard the cottony sound of James's announcement—"It's Arnette, y'all"—behind the hand he must have placed over the microphone. Then his voice was clear, echoing into the surround. "The folks say hi."

Letting the weighty subject of their disorder rest in the fiber-optics that connected her to her brother, Arnette took refuge in chitchat.

"Can I send y'all something?"

"You mean money?"

"Yeah."

"Nah. You got a baby on the way—it's us should be sending you money."

"I got more than I need."

"You don't even really know what you need yet though."

Arnette leaned into the arm of the sofa, cradled the phone against her neck, and squeezed her knuckles. "I'm getting a little scared, James."

"Scared?"

"Mhm. Like. Can I really do this? I mean, what if something happens? I mean, what kind of baby even is this?"

"A baby you gon love."

Arnette was quiet.

"Something probably *will* happen, Nette. But it ain't gotta be like it was with Mama, you know. You just gotta put your systems in place and have your go-to's, you know. Like we talked about. Like the doctor told you."

"Yeah." Arnette shifted, sunk into the sofa, wiped her wet face, let pictures of the Riverside bus station root against her eyelids. She squeezed her eyes and held herself. "It's just—" She stopped. Running her tongue over her teeth, she crossed her arms over her chest. She made a blanket of her resentment and let it settle on her shoulders, let it cradle her round belly. She breathed. "But why couldn't nobody find—" she paused, "—Mama? Do you think they really tried?"

"Aw, Nette. We done talked about this so many times. Don't nobody know why our folks like to disappear, and most of the time we don't know where folks go. It just is what it is. I think Grandma and them did the best they could, you know. But they heard so many stories of folks getting found and not wanting to be found that they just let folks make their own choices, you know. They found it in themselves to let folks be."

"Choices?" Arnette had to sit up now, and use her shirt to wipe her face again. "Choices, James?"

"Well, depends on how you define the shit. They did their best, Arnette. We all did. You doing your best too."

Arnette switched her phone to her other hand and bent into herself, rocked the baby in her belly and the baby that was herself.

"Like I said though," James said softly, "I don't be worryin about myself and don't none of y'all need to worry about me either. I mean, you know. Don't fuck around and let me wake up all 5150,

nigga all of a sudden turn up somebody else," he said. "I got too many damn bills and not enough loot. Let me wake up and be a corporate nigga or, knowwhatI'msayin, Jay-Z-type, Obama-type nigga."The laugh spread through the house on Heather Street, with Khalil, Jody, and even Jean getting in on it, until Arnette imagined her protestations ringing as distant to those on the other end of the line as the full two thousand miles away that they were.

"Are you worried about me?" she whispered into the receiver. She didn't expect a response.

Arnette pressed the speaker button, curled into the sofa, and rested the phone next to her. She fell asleep that way, their words her universe, her body a smoothed stone of resignation in their riverbed of meandering, dried devotion. She woke at 4 a.m. to a dead cell phone and a sofa pillow crusted with saliva.

She is not running; she is flying. She is flying the miles between the desert town she feared and the northeast town around which she had wrestled a safety net of her own making. She is flying past the first-class refuse, flying off the plane, flying past the retirees with visors waiting for wheelchairs and the small-time businessfolk with their hands pasted to their cellphones. Zina's legs are wrapped around her waist, and she is practicing a new word as she points at the rushers-by. "Pee-pole!" "Pee-pull!"

On her way to pick up Zina from the daycare center two buildings over, Arnette had finally gotten the email that brought her speeding body to a halt.

56 **Subject: JAMES**

Khalil finally turned something up. James is at RCC. Doctor says he's okay but they're holding him for observation. Leaving work early to go be with him. Call when we can.

It wasn't a shout or a whisper: *home.* It was more like gravity, but better: a feeling that she couldn't be swallowed even if she wanted to be; a feeling that there was a rope around her waist, and the rope was centrifuge. It was a promise that the land back in California

held more than just grease and bus shelters and strangeness impregnated God knows how. It held *her*. It was pulling *her*.

Arnette sprang into flight. She collected Zina, ran to the bus, waited and waited, ran again to the townhouse, and parked Zina in front of the TV with Cheerios and a banana while she booked a flight, loaded a suitcase, packed her leather bag full of diapers and toys and chargers, ordered a pizza, and arranged for a car service. This morning, when the limo arrived, she wrestled the car seat into the back seat before hugging her baby girl and strapping her in, then climbing over her and holding her hand while they made their way, floating on black leather, to the airport an hour away. She prepared to board a plane for the first time in more than two years, to trust that she would land and still be Arnette Wilkins, to buckle herself and Zina in and let the bumps and dips ten thousand feet high be nothing more than turbulence.

Now Arnette feels her runner's legs machine through the ruins of an airport, past what used to be restaurants but are now barred-up dustrooms. She lets Zina slide down onto the carpet next to her and holds tight to her hand as they step onto the escalator. Onto the escalator, onto the sidewalk, into a taxi, onto the freeway into the desolate mountainscape. Arnette doesn't bother looking at her phone. Instead she holds the belt that holds Zina and she gazes down at the thighs and knees of her girl. She lets herself notice the graham cracker crumbs around Zina's mouth. Then she lets herself kiss her girl's forehead while she flicks graham cracker dust into the January air.

At the hospital, Arnette tips the driver, gathers Zina into her tired arms, and wings through the sliding doors. As she enters the emergency ward of Riverside Community Hospital, she feels the air under her grow heavy. She shakes her head and tries running faster. She feels bloodthirsty water encircling her feet. She keeps her feet moving despite the invisible beast she knows, the one trying to pull her through the floor of the sick ward. She scans the faces for one that looks familiar. She's not sure, presently, if she's moving at all. She looks at the little girl in her arms and smiles reassuringly. A question mark catches in her throat when she says, "Hey, sweet girl.

Mama's got you." There is now no doubt: she is not running. She is standing still. She is dropping the girl. On her knees she meets the eyes of a brown-skinned woman leaning impossibly over the nurses' station, her face cradling a beige phone whose cord reminds the woman on her knees of the spiral curls she remembers memorizing from the back seat of a gray hatchback. She sees the woman see her. She pushes toward the woman all that she has left of herself. But the child is not moving toward the curly-haired woman. Arnette pushes her: "There's—" She closes her teeth and searches for the word. "Auntie." Arnette pulls herself up and tries turning, intent on a line of flight, but she is, for the moment, anchored to the floor. Zina runs, slips, runs in the direction of the curved-back woman, who drops the phone and sprints to receive the toddler like a touchdown pass. Jean's hands are confident, skillful, finding.

Arnette's feet are on the ground, and she is bracing herself to be a sacrifice to the devouring water, waiting to be swallowed by the single moment when she no longer knows her name. She closes her eyes to greet the familiar living burial, living miracle. The breath on her upper lip is fire, and she breathes pebbles through nostrils that no longer feel like hers. The green of summer at Cedar Court is rushing through burning eyelids, and so is the puritan winter. The picture of a map hanging out of a car door stings her memory. She can't tell if the beast that now has her by the calves is something like a mother rushing her in from the cold or the sea monster from children's Bible she knows she once held in these hands that are now high above the linoleum. Arnette is lost. She came in here zipping a straight line, and now there are cracks in an earth tethered together by water-logged joists. The joists are giving way, and away she slips.

It occurs to her, though, that she does in fact know her name. When she sees three men in three different shades of farmer's plaid coming through the double doors and cool-walk, then run, into the waiting area, she knows it is her name on their mouths. James, Jody, Khalil, and Jean with Zina make a line, then bounce into a ragged circle around Arnette and crowd her with their rescue-rope arms. "Told you, Nette. Nigga always runnin' but you ain't never late." James turns to Khalil, who offers a chuckle in agreement.

James tells Arnette, "They just discharged me: just a little concussion from that fall I took during my dizzy spell, or whatever." He keeps on. Like it's nothing.

Jean shakes her head at her brother and hugs her sister. "Girl, I was just trying to call your ass."

Uncle Jody holds out a hand to Arnette, pulls her in, and then pushes her back out, looks her up and down. He places the ancient hand just below the back of her neck. "You made it alright, huh, Nette?"

"Just touched down," she replies.

The water beneath the linoleum swirls; the ache in Arnette's runner's knees recedes.

Museum of Extinction

BILL CAPOSSERE

The Museum of Extinction is stolid in the way of natural history museums, squatting stony and silent, all right angles and grays. The large oaks that shade it, the ironwork at its windows, the wide marble steps leading up to the thick-wooded double-doors that open heavily all lend the structure a sense of weighty permanence. Visitors therefore find it difficult to fathom a past where something else sat in this monumental space—a department store, a factory?—or to picture a future where it has been repurposed into big-windowed lofts or a promenade of chic boutiques filled with fine chocolate or Scandinavian cookware. The Museum, as is the charge of museums, preserves, a quality extended even to its own existence. Thus, it refuses erasure even as it displays it.

Inside, the four of you—yourself, your wife, the boys—stroll down a long single hallway past creatures trapped behind panes of glass in mid-leap or roar or flight, a kind of frozen parade, as if some great glacier had swept up nature's failures, encasing them in ice: trilobites and brachiopods, plesiosaurs and sauropods. The last prompting an exasperated sigh from your youngest: "*Apato*saurus dad. Geez, *everybody* knows Brontosaurus never existed." Followed by a roll of the eyes so beyond his age you wonder where he'd learned it with such practiced skill.

Having corrected your gaffe, he's off again, names slipping off his tongue in a liquid roil of Latin polysyllables that would make an old priest proud, while his brother is left to explain how Brontosaurus had been dropped years ago from the aeons-long roll call.

That long-necked creature had nestled so comfortably in your head ever since you were a child, had carried on its broad back so much: long family vacations out west with stops at the Sinclair filling stations, *Flintstones* cartoons, your collection of plastic dinosaurs whose tails you'd chew until they flattened into thin, discolored fans, more akin to a platypus or beaver. An abiding sense of time's vast chasm. And the word "lumbering"—how your books always described them that way, and how you loved the feel of that word in your head, its slow majestic heaviness, its quiet aloof dignity. If your dad were a dinosaur, you'd always thought, he'd be a Brontosaurus. But now, like your father, Brontosaurus is no more, and their joint absence makes your own childhood feel as ancient as Brontosaurus' long-buried era.

And this more than anything makes you begin to resent the Museum's disingenuousness, as you slow-walk your way past the dinosaurs, the mammoths and mastodons, giant sloths and cave bears. The way its external solidity, glass cases and etched nameplates all belie the ephemeral nature of what lies inside: Nature's unlucky left-behinds plucked from the midden of history, returned and refurbished via splashy new paint and poseable limbs, by motors and hydraulics that set them again to stalk and swim. The false promise of rebirth.

As the megafauna give over to dodos and moa, even the boys' enthusiasm begins to flag, diminishing in concert with the creatures themselves so by the time the passenger pigeon appears (your youngest again: "They're not extinct—I see them all the time!"), it's with a sense of communal relief you reach the end.

Here two doors mark the exit, one labeled "children," the other "adults," and when your oldest moves to join the two of you, your wife shakes her head and nods toward the youngest, standing beside the other door. "Not yet mister," she says. "You're already growing up too fast."

As he turns away, you can't help but agree, noting the sharpness of his profile, how his space-eating strides cover the distance to his brother so quickly, and you wonder when it was that the last of his round softness had disappeared. The opposite of your own direction, you know, as you hold the door for your wife then stand there after she passes, borrowing a minute for yourself to take stock of your body grown less hardened over time, to note the slackness in your arms, your chest, a slight but noticeable protrusion over your belt, a dull ache in your knees, an added burden atop all your bones, as if whatever flesh that had been carved off your son's body were being added to your own little by little, filling you out, weighing you down.

You've lost the sense of adventure you'd had at the start of this excursion, left it back there with the memory of poor Brontosaurus, and you recall now how he too was believed to be too heavy for his skeleton, and so, the books said, he was more at home in swamp than dry land, his body buoyed by the muck and mud.

You let the door close behind you, ready to move on to the inevitable gift shop. But you're brought up short by your wife, standing just a few feet into what seems an empty room. Her body is coiled tensely and turned to the right, her face moving oddly, as if she's trying to work a particularly difficult math problem, and you think you see a glint of anger in her eyes. You turn to face the same direction, curious.

A glass wall partitions the room down the middle, floor to ceiling. Your eyes slide by the boys standing on the other side, but the space beyond is as empty as your own side—floor and wall and ceiling—and so you come back to the two of them facing you. The youngest is saying something, but the thick glass muffles the sound. You lean closer, thinking you might be able to catch some bit or read his lips, and it's then you see his cheeks are wet, though you can't figure why until your oldest lays his hands on his brother's shoulders, pulling him back gently toward the protective curve of his body, and you realize he is crying. You know you should go back out the door and through to the other side, should take him into your own consoling arms, but you're captivated by the mystery of it all, the tears and the unheard words.

Your eldest looks to you then, a familiar if barely-remembered need in his eyes, but even as you reach a hand out toward the partition, his expression shifts all in a moment's time from need to a hard resignation followed by a determined unfocusing of his eyes, as if in release, and when he looks again, beyond rather than at you, it comes to you then, the answer, even as your outstretched hand hangs before the glass, and you stand there, a frozen tableau already forgotten.

His Own Cool World of Toads, 1947

JOHN BRANTINGHAM

In the year that he's been out of the army and living at home, Charles has grown to love his son. It surprises him. When he was fighting in Europe, and he got letters from his wife telling him that Henry took his first step or said his first word, he didn't care. He tried to. He wanted to, but it just didn't matter to him, and neither did the idea of a child of his own. He wondered at the time if that made him a bad person, or just an odd person. What man doesn't have feelings for his own boy, after all?

What he thought about then was being picked off by a sniper or stepping on a landmine. He thought about the next campaign or next moment. He realizes that the reason he didn't think about his son back then was he was pretty sure he'd never make it back.

But this morning as he takes nips off his flask of bourbon, he watches weird little Henry at the back of the yard, telling secrets to a toad that he caught and is holding in his hand. Any kid that can make friends with a toad isn't going to have a lonely life. "Henry," he calls, and the boy spins, probably surprised that anyone's out here watching him. "Come here a minute."

Henry smiles as he walks, and Charles toasts him mentally, and he takes a longer nip. Henry was scared of Charles at first, seemed to be, but they've spent evenings and weekends together. They've gone

on trips and made each other breakfast. They've talked and played baseball. They've done all that shit you're supposed to do with your family and Charles has liked it.

So today, when Henry walks over, Charles sits cross legged in the grass, and he takes the toad and puts it on his knee. He sits his little boy across from him. "What's your friend's name?" he asks, knowing that Henry always names his friends.

"Gilbert."

"That's a good name. Is he married?"

"No," Henry says seriously. "He's not the marrying kind."

"What's he do for a living?"

"He's a general."

Charles frowns at Gilbert. "Are you sure?"

"Why not?"

"That's a pretty goddamn disreputable job." He points at Henry with his flask to punctuate the point and then takes another nip to punctuate the point. "He sends other toads out to their deaths. He sends them to kill all the frogs they see."

"Oh," Henry says. Then, "He's a soldier."

Charles shakes his head. "That's a horrible life. I hated being a soldier. What if he's a farmer? Looks like he has a green thumb."

"Nah," Henry says. "He doesn't like weeding. I think maybe he should be a cobbler."

"A cobbler?" And he wonders where Henry would have heard the term. "Well the world certainly needs more cobblers." And these are true words. Charles and his boy sit across from each other for a long time, almost half the flask, talking about Gilbert's bachelor life as a repairer of shoes. Gilbert is driven. Gilbert cares. By the time they're done they find that Gilbert has wandered off to his own life, to his own cool world of toads.

Willpower

ERICA JENKS HENRY

"I think you're really fat." This is what I tell my therapist near the end of our session. She is fat is the problem. She looks at me for a few moments longer than usual. I see things—tiny muscles—twitch on her wide, fleshy face as she takes in the comment. She blinks, swallows, and then sits back in her chair more, as if to look at me from farther away, more like an insect to belittle and crush, perhaps. I can tell she wants to look down at herself, at her body, but instead she touches her skirt on both of her thighs and then rests her hands on the arms of her easy chair.

To be perfectly honest, ever since Libby demanded I seek counseling, I had really been hoping for a hot therapist—someone I could remember long after the sessions are over, someone I could lure in—and Judy is the farthest thing from hot, unless we're talking about the temperature of her tweed armchair after she gets off it.

"Tell me about that," she says at last. My eyes return to her face from the painting of a giant schooner on a rough sea behind her. I've almost forgotten she is there.

"I just don't know if I can trust the advice of someone who is as overweight as you are," I say and shrug. "It's like, how can you know what's best for me, if you can't even make yourself look fit? You must not have very much willpower."

"Willpower," she says. I can nearly hear her teeth grinding. "That must be an important value for you."

I press my eyebrows together until I feel them brush one another. "I'd say so." I don't want to make it sound like I think she is a complete idiot, but who doesn't think willpower is fundamental? It's the only thing that matters.

"Perhaps this is where you're having trouble with Libby," says Judy. I don't like the comment or her use of my wife's first name. Libby's mine, not hers.

"I'd prefer you refer to her using the term 'my/your wife' instead," I say.

Judy, or "my therapist" as I like to call her, has seemed disturbed before, but now I feel real anger flaring up from within her. Her face seems to grow more puffed and rosy with each moment. She looks like she is being inflated by some outside, invisible force, perhaps by a little blowhole on the top of her head. My words, I like to think. I am inflating her head with my words.

Soon our session is over without any noteworthy conversation. Four more, I think. I can do it. I chuckle about the fact that whatever my insurance is paying her, it must be worth it to sit in the room with me. It is wonderful to finally have a venue where I can say all the things I really want to say all the time, to get it all out there. I can see why people like therapy. It reminds me of being in college, when I would call things out to the girls at the dessert counter in the cafeteria. Back then I was free to be me, to say whatever I wanted. No consequences. I unlock the car doors and bust out of the garage, racing down each floor a little faster than the one before. Negative splits. If I hurry, I'll be able to make it in time to grab a coffee before picking up Angelina.

I turn down the volume on the radio before Angelina climbs in beside me, holding her hands primly over the long white stems of her thighs. She has stuffed her overstuffed backpack and gray sports bag in around her legs instead of in the backseat, which she knows annoys me, but I hold in my irritation.

"How was your day, honey?"

"Good. Thanks for picking me up. It really helps to have a little time before I have to go play."

I nod. "Of course. I'm your chauffeur, baby."

"Do you mind if I play my mix?" she asks.

I close my eyes and sigh before putting the car back into drive. "Of course not."

"Sure?" she asks again, turning to peer at me. I hate this feeling I get from every family member where they gauge my anger, wondering if I am going to get mad and just how soon. Just doing that, acting so expectant, makes me get mad, I want to tell them.

"You go right ahead, honey," I say.

She plugs in her phone, the familiar riffs of twangy guitar fill the car, and then a voice rises and hovers in the air. "Oh Lord, you're beautiful." The singer sounds Irish.

I shake my head. I expect Angelina to sense my frustration and turn the music down, but when I look over, her eyes are closed, her features tight in a sort of determined focus. I clench and unclench my left fist through the entire song. I drink coffee. I pour my entire quadruple black Americano down my throat. I clench my teeth. I do not let out a word or sound of irritation. By the end of the second song, we have arrived at the sports fields. I drive right up to her game and find a spot where someone else is leaving. Angelina's sticky black lashes still cover her eyes, and her face is bent down with a look of fervent focus. At last she opens them, and an expression of rapture covers her visage. "I'm ready," she whispers.

"Great! All that music help you?"

"Yeah, I feel so much better now, ready to go take care of business." She gives me the smile she's been giving me since she was a little girl, before her very first soccer game where she also scored her very first goal as a first grader on a coed team with second graders.

"That's what I like to hear!" I nod my head. "Can't wait to watch you." I have learned long ago that saying something about how I hope she will have a great game or better yet, score, is a big no no. I've read all the literature on raising top notch youth athletes, and the best thing to say? It's so fun to watch you play. Then you can add a little detail, some notable thing you observed that was good that you'd like to see more of from the kid.

Angelina plays as though she is possessed. The way she runs, almost sideways toward the ball, at a forty-five degree angle, fills me with the joy I suppose a horse breeder gets when he finds out his mare is expecting. My child is the best on the field. Whatever we've done as parents, however fabulously we've raised her, without either too much coddling or too much pushing, has worked. I've always treated her sports career as though it were a Fabergé egg. I know, as some parents seem to be clueless about, that if you put too much pressure on the prize, you lose or break it before it even hatches, or as is the case with a Fabergé, auction it off for far more than you procured it. You sign her up for too many clinics and private lessons, and the kid burns out and quits before she makes it to high school. You need the kid to think it's her idea to play sports, work at sports, be great at sports. You can't let on how much you care or how much every single touch of the damn fucking ball means to your swollen, tender heart. The kid has to think you're encouraging her to have fun.

I stand apart from the other parents, my arms crossed over my chest. I look down and see a tiny splotch of grease near the waist on the perfect blue white of my crisp shirt, probably from that crusty croissant my assistant dropped off earlier. I survey the other parents, so plebeian, almost pitifully redneck in their grotesque fandom of their children, lounging in camping chairs, drinking out of thermos mugs, yelling at their kids as though the girls can actually hear what they are saying from the field. I pride myself on containment. I keep it in, I remain calm, I am peaceful. From my body or face, you would have no idea which team I am even cheering for, or if I have any investment in the game, much less who my daughter is. I am the picture of containment.

When I started running in high school, I saw my chubby body waste away. I ended up trying out for the football team and making it my junior year, to the astonishment of just about everyone, including my parents. For the record, I never quit running after beginning, but more importantly, I loved watching my body take up less worldly space. It is minimal in its needs, requiring only what is essential to function smoothly. Now that's what I call discipline,

and I don't need some slob in a poorly decorated office with a degree in how to get people to tell you about themselves to help me figure out my life.

Angelina is looking good today. She's quick, on the ball every time it comes down the field, pretty much impossible to pass. Her tenacity is off the chain, and her speed has taken her game to the next level. High school cross country has really sped up her soccer game, and everyone has noticed. Parents don't talk to me much on the sidelines, or ever, for that matter, but they'll say things to Libby, because that's how women are, flattering one another with fake, jealous compliments about their kids as some sort of social capital or one upmanship. I've never understood it, but I can smell it out like a hound on a raccoon. Libby's stopped coming to the games, so there's very little interaction going on with other families these days. I think she's pretty upset with me, though she won't actually say so. She just mopes. She wouldn't have known about anything, she didn't know about the office fiasco, until the bitch called our house and told her. It's one thing to humiliate me at my workplace, but it's another thing to drag my poor wife into it. Angelina's suffering too now, because when Libby acts like a depressed puppy, Angelina doesn't get the mother she deserves.

The coach takes Angelina out, which is ridiculous because there are only two subs today, and she's hands down the best on the team. I fume and turn away, trying to use some of my mindfulness techniques to stay calm, focused, not lose it, but I can't stay focused because I keep glancing back at the game to see if she's in again yet. It's distracting me from trying to not care. These idiots. I close my eyes and breathe in. The other team scores. I hear the cheers from farther away. I know what they mean. Fucking bitch, that coach. She has no right trying to pretend she knows how to get girls to play soccer. That goal was scored because Angelina was not there to stop it, or better yet, score one of her own. I wipe my hands over my face. The skin feels a little thick and greasy right now. I put my hands on my hips and make a path around a huge maple tree. These fools. These idiots. I peek over again, and what do you know? They realized their mistake, and my tall, elegant daughter with her high,

long brown ponytail is back in the game, center mid where she belongs, bouncing around the ball as if she's in our backyard with no competition and there's not another soul for miles, dominating the play, trying to make up for her lost time and compensate for her stupid team's failure to keep the fucking ball out of the net. It's not that hard.

I notice a couple mothers with frizzy hair and visors watching me from their mesh seats with Chicago Bears printed on the back. One peeks over her shoulder, pulls quickly back around when she spots me, and then the other takes a quick look-see too. I'm embarrassed to share this town with them, much less my daughter's team. I don't know how we exist in the same stratosphere. When a third mother, on the other side of the first, takes her own glance, I smile with my teeth and wave. She makes a sheepish giggle and whips back around. I peer down at myself. Do I have food on my shirt? Did I sit in something? No. I'll show these women. I march over with long, lanky steps, feeling my ten-miler this morning straining at my calf muscles. It hurts so good. There's a decent sized patch of space to the right of them all, not so close that I'll have to get a whiff of their hair or skin products. The one beside me sort of freezes, focusing on the game with a stretched smile. I lean back and forth from black patent leather shoe to black patent leather shoe, then grab a clump of wet sod that's affixed itself to my lower wool pant leg.

"What do you think of the game?" I ask. I've never said a word to these women before, and I think it's safe to say they're shell shocked. I see Angelina, neatly bent over the ball, her perfect rear poking out as her legs work, notice. Her eyes widen, though her play is not interrupted. She makes a strong, hard pass directly down the side, practically into the left striker's lap, and the girl immediately loses the ball. A defender taps it away. I close my eyes. Why?

"Pretty good," says a woman. "They got crushed by this team last time. Glad they're only down by one so far." My heart begins to pick up speed and move toward a canter. Such impossibly low standards. I want to tell her that that is the kind of thinking that is the reason she is as ugly as she is, but I nod and tilt my head.

The middle mom leans back her head to say something to me. I look over at her. She's a blue-eyed blonde with a sweet face. "What are you doing over here with us parents?" she asks. I realize she seems a little tipsy, and my suspicion is confirmed when she takes a swig of her Bulls travel mug and wiggles her shoulders.

"Just trying to get close to the game, see what I'm missing." I am thinking about how stupid Judy told me I should address things, not let myself get so lathered up with seething anger that I can hardly function. And I know Libby wishes I was nicer in general, across the board.

"Where's your wife? We were saying we haven't seen her in ages." Breathing through nose, breathing heavily through nose.

"Held up at work. Her job's been crazy."

"You kidding? I had no idea she worked." The mom closest to me looks shocked. I can't tell if she is judging my wife or impressed with my wife. Some strange mixture of jealousy and contempt.

"Oh yeah, big deal going on. They're working on a huge merger with a Taiwanese company that lost billions during hurricane season last year when a fleet of ocean liners sunk due to Thai pirates getting too feisty. China bid on it, but Libby was on it first. Huge, monumental success for her. Going to blow her straight out of the water." Libby hasn't worked since she quit her consulting job when she was in her third trimester with Angelina.

"No way," says the middle one. They murmur.

"What do you do?" they ask.

"Finance," I say. "I take the money of the wealthy and make it rain, for them, for me."

They nod their heads up and down like little birds. Angelina appears, grows like something on a movie screen, running toward us, and we can hear the whoop, the impact of the ball on her abdomen, as she catches it, stops it, and knocks it up to a teammate close to the goal.

"What about you pretty ladies?" I ask. "You work?" The term "pretty" flusters them, makes them fluff their hair and stretch their legs out before them, which gives my stomach a rush of pleasure.

"I do!" singsongs the one at the other end. I realize she's the

best looking, dark, nearly black hair up in a severe bun. Great cheekbones. "I'm a Pilates instructor. I used to have a corporate job, but I like being able to manage my schedule and be home when the kids are." I smile at her, my eyes locked on hers, and show her I'm listening.

The game is a bust. The team begins to lose whatever thread has held them together. I could blame Angelina. She's gotten tired, and now, when she perhaps needs it, the coach will not take her out. Others have stopped pushing at all, and the opposing team has scored two more goals. But being forced to compose myself with these women has helped me avoid outrage. I'm proud of myself. My anger is slowly moving toward Angelina, however, and I can feel it. Just forget about the rest of your team—they suck—and try to score.

Just as Angelina is making a final effort, hammering the ball through players not far from us, dislodging it over and over again from would-be interferences, the ref puts the whistle to his mouth and blows three long loud, piercing whines. I close my eyes and inhale through my nose. I hear cheering. The other team is celebrating, but Angelina also just nailed one into the goal. She kicked it from thirty yards out. Too little too late, I think and tell myself not to tell her.

"You know what's funny?" says the middle mom as they begin pushing the spindly legs of their chairs together and stuffing them into bags. I realize she is talking to me only moments later, while I am chewing my cheek and studying the teams slapping hands. "We always thought you were a huge jerk."

"What? Me?" I turn to them with false, dramatic shock, mouth circled wide. They throw back their heads and giggle.

"Oh yeah," says the dark-haired woman at the far end. "You're the guy we call 'asshole dad.'" I realize that they all have plastic coffee mugs. I realize with sudden certainty that they've been drinking the whole game, this whole time.

"That's really funny," I say. I tell myself to cool down and relax. I can't let them get to me. I turn back toward the field, and see Angelina walking toward me like a young deer, her body muscled and cautious, curious but timid.

We are together now, walking toward the car, and I have left those women without saying another word. "How're you feeling?" I ask, after editing out every other possible question I could possibly put forth. I have learned the game. She corners you into seeing that everything you say is wrong and hurtful.

She shrugs. "Okay.

"Tough loss, huh?"

"Yeah." I want to critique her play and mock the other players on her team. I do, I do. But I've done it so many times before, so many times until she has not spoken to me for weeks at a time, so I have learned my lesson. At least I'm teachable. Maples line the path, and about half of the nearly translucent orange leaves are gone now. During the game, the streetlights have been illuminated, and there is only a little daylight left. It's cool, and I almost wish I had a jacket.

We climb into the car and begin the drive home. "How's homework tonight?" I ask.

She shrugs.

"How's that AP Chem class?"

She shrugs again, chewing her lips.

"Okay then." I pull out of the lot. "Want one of those spicy chicken sandwiches you love?"

It would appear she is refusing to speak to me. We drive in silence for a while, and I take the longer route past the fried chicken place, though it disgusts me.

"Dad." I turn to look at her. "Mom told me what you did."

I swallow. Why didn't she bring this up before the game? She was fine then. "What? What are you talking about?"

"How you have to go to therapy for being creepy at your office."

I retract, pulling my head in, and anger flares. A fire lights with a whoosh in my chest. The gas has been turned on.

"I don't think this is a conversation you want to have," I say.

"I do, Dad. I don't think you can just get away with this stuff and act like everything is okay and normal. Mom shouldn't even be with you. You're so mean, to her especially." She stares out her

window. "I've seen how you talk to my coach too. It's not just friendly. You're hitting on her. In front of me."

Deep breaths. I can't explode. "Can I turn on some of that Christian music you like so much?" I ask.

"Dad!" she screams this. "You're not listening to me. I know you hate that music anyway."

"I just don't understand where this is coming from. Why weren't you upset earlier?"

"I had to focus on the game. You've instilled that in me. First things first. Focus on the task at hand."

"When did your mother tell you these things?"

"I don't know."

"You know that wasn't her business to tell, right?"

She looks at me like I have gone insane and shakes her head slowly and dramatically. She puts in her expensive earbuds, the ones like mine that I bought for her only a month ago though Libby didn't think she needed them, the fancy kind that all the kids wear. She closes her eyes. But it isn't Libby's information. That is my private business, and I do regret it. It's like if I went around telling people how she gets so drunk she can't make dinner some nights. I don't think she would want that shared with anyone.

I pull into the garage, raise my eyebrows at Angelina who is sitting with her arms tensely crossed and turn off the car. I don't know how Libby's going to fix this mess. You don't go telling kids about personal adult problems. When we get inside, she's got a big round glass of white wine—the kind that's meant for red wine—on the counter, and she's making something hot for us to eat out of leftovers. Roasted vegetables and pasta.

"How was the game, sweetie? And your day at school?" I watch her from across the room, how unaware she is that I know that she has told my secret to our daughter. I wonder if she wasn't drinking if she'd be able to see how bad off things are.

"We lost," says Angelina, seating herself at the marble island without removing her cleats or her earbuds, or even her backpack. "I got that math test back, though, and I did better than I thought."

"Good job, hon. You always underestimate yourself. You're such

a hard worker." I see the lines on my wife's face. The crow's feet she seems entirely unaware of, the kinky white hairs that have begun to emerge, ejected directly out of her scalp. My head is still completely brown, and I attribute it to the healthy diet and exercise routine I maintain. I don't understand how Libby can be so blind to her needed improvements, and I don't know how to tell her.

"How was your day?" She's looking at me now, a thought like a cloud crossing her eyes. She's remembering I had another therapy appointment, but she can't ask me about it because of Angelina, though Angelina knows everything already. She just doesn't know that I know that she knows.

"Fine." I look around the room. "And Jax?"

"On his computer."

I nod and bite my cheek.

"So." I feel my heart buck like a young colt, ready for me. "You told Angelina here about my office fiasco." Angelina stops eating, the fork hovering. "I was, hmm, really disappointed about that."

Libby is giving me a confused, bleary stare, her lips protruding in a pout. "What?"

"Listen here, Libby. You can't go telling the kids about our private business." Listen here. It was something my dad said to me countless times, and I've never heard myself use the phrase. I remember falling in love with Libby in college, the way her light brown hair used to hang over her notebook. She was so smart it made me nervous, always focused on our professor in that esoteric political theory class, always ready to raise her hand and spout off some thoughtful response from her completed readings the night before, the way she never ever looked at me as I sat across the table sitting with the much cuter girl I'd met the first day of class.

"Umm, okay, Tory," she says. I can't tell if there's sarcasm, blind devotion, or sarcasm.

Angelina's shoulders heave as she stumbles off her stool and around the table to hug Libby. "It's okay, baby," says Libby. "It's okay." She rubs her back in circular motions and runs her hand down the silky length of Angelina's ponytail. "Why don't you go up and get started on your homework?"

"How's this supposed to work?" I ask her. We've never talked divorce or separation, and I feel her peeling away from me, no longer submitting.

"What do you mean?"

"I can't have you on a different team. We're the same team."

She squints at me, her makeup-less eyes thin slats. She's never known how to disagree, not outright.

"You can't try to put the kids between us, or it will ruin the family."

She begins to giggle, her shoulders going up. Her face is quivering, and she moves her fingers reflexively to cover her mouth. "You think I'm going to ruin the family?"

She's always been just a little quicker than me, if she wants to be. She plays at conversation like chess, calculating her comments and questions to ensure she moves you to the corner, limits your options, gets you where she wants you, leaves you no choice but one answer. When she's happy, she gives you the world. But she is not happy now, and she doesn't seem to care that I am angry.

"Yeah." I look away, uncertain. "Telling Libby was not cool."

"Tory, you can't show women porn at your office." She has never said anything like this, and I feel my face flame.

"It wasn't porn." I plead. "And I didn't really show her."

"It's funny, honestly. You aren't even a porn guy. And I thought you took your work so seriously." Whatever tipsiness she was displaying before seems long gone. I know what else she's thinking: I quit my job for this. You made me give up my career.

Jax appears, staring at his phone, walking blindly toward the counter. "I'm going to go out, away from here," says Libby. "Please help the kids with homework if they need it, and make sure they get to bed."

She kisses Jax. I watch the kid, eyes fixed on his phone, as he opens the freezer, extracts cookie dough ice cream that Libby buys religiously for him, and dumps large scoops into a handmade ceramic bowl. Before I realize what has happened, she's gone. My mind registers the sound of the garage door opening, the engine, and the door shutting again long after the events occur. I suddenly

feel the need to explain the wrongness, the unfairness of this situation with someone, someone who will just shut up and listen and ask me how I feel. I want to just lay the whole thing out like a story, to try to make sense of it.

I fish my phone out of my pants and take a look. Voicemail. "Judy Therapist" has called. I read the transcript of the message. "Hello, Mr. Maguire. This is Judy Benson. I'm going to have to cancel our remaining sessions. If you need to talk to someone else, please refer to the listing on the website. I'd recommend that perhaps you go with a man next time." No anger, just cool indifference. I inhale through my nose, not exactly disappointed, just irritated with her inability to step up to the freaking plate and do the job she's being paid to do. I open my eyes again. I know I got to her. I'm sure I did. She won't forget me all that easily.

Gastromythology

JESSICA MANACK

The day after you leave, I realize that I am starving, and that I am in the place for it. Stopping at each stand on the street, I buy cones of almonds saltier than the sea, steal enough hazelnut paste to last a week, hide bananas like disease up my shirtsleeves. I cry in cafeterias, clean cups with my tongue, trying each tea—Black Forest, Dreams of Rilke—without luck. None of these are what my mouth wants to be full of. I'm displaced: a flopping fish, dismembered hand, in a land where words lay like traps in the way. The people here greet friends with *Hey, Uncle*. They say: *I have the head of three in the afternoon and Your girlfriend is gorgeous; she is like a train*. The last time you went away was the day I learned the vigor of cheese, all kinds. The sly, pillow-softs, the ink-blue clots, the ones with waxy rinds: I made them mine, storing in oil for next time what I didn't eat. Now, I hang out beside the bakery, drinking yogurt, grinding fried corn between my teeth, until fresh bread drops down the chute into the window. I eat it as I walk. It lasts a block. At the candy stand by my house, the old man studies me as though I am a lush, tired eyes pink as Valentines. "For the kids," I lie. You're always on the go. You don't send notes, or cards, or steaks at Christmastime. I try to gild goodbyes, frost them pink and sweet like cakes, but I can't hide my eyes. I seek you in every pie. I eat the

promises you break with ham on rye. Flailing, I try to write you, but "You're so shellfish!" is all I manage. I eat my dinners in bars, anonymous. It feels safe. Tonight, the rotund widow brings plate after plate—fried bread soup, cauliflower drowned in mayonnaise, eggs splayed atop mountains of squash and rice, a plateful of red tuna packed in oil, veins black, an ore. Hefting her rolls while fetching me more, ignorant of my binges, she encourages me to *eat*. "The eyes of the fat are brilliant," she laughs. "The eyes of the thin, they pop out like frozen fish." The light falling away's all that punctuates my days. My feeding's never complete. I pry orange blossoms from the trees lining the streets, shower my mouth with flowers tasty as phone books. Nothing is as filling as it looks. Even the fruits on the trees are useless, used by junkies, they say, to sterilize needles—a few acidic pricks to safety. I roll one in my hand, marvel at its slick citrus skin, teeth mossy, hands soiled and clammed. It doesn't let on, but I know we're both damned, we're both shoved, bodies tested and bruised, flesh shot through with poison mistaken for love.

In the Mothers' Room

JESSICA MANACK

The milk comes, drop after drop in line, an army of nourishment. The milk comes without being asked, in words. When it can't yet be summoned with words. The milk comes to the chatter of a pump—*backhoe, backhoe, backhoe*—steady as a clock. Plinking into bottles like I'm sweating pennies, like I'm full of money. The milk comes even when I hate myself. Through rain and snow and heat and gloom of night. She gets the best of me. She gets the worst of me. The milk comes and some days it's the only thing I do well. The milk comes and some days it's the only time I sit still. The milk comes even when I'm not sitting still, carrying the baby as I check on her brother, careful to not disengage her. I undo a lifetime of being taught that some things should be covered up, try to stifle the siren by giving her what she wants. And the milk comes, mostly from Righty. (Lefty's a slouch.) The milk comes, and no one understands just how *tired* being food makes you. How hungry being food makes you. The milk comes, mostly organic. Comes whether I fill my belly with kale or candy. I am a superfood. I am a super dude. The milk comes. I'm a little factory. The milk comes and I'm a secret agent: moving food in secret, border-eschewer. Is this commerce? Should my transport be taxed? I panic at a lack of snacks: hunter, gatherer. The milk comes and I'm simply mammal:

not human, not hominid. The milk comes and I squeeze to move it along, curb the urge to moo, to chew my cud. The milk comes in buttery fountains, in sugary showers, but it tastes like time. The milk comes. Even when I forget to write MAKE MORE MILK on my to-do list. The milk comes whether I remember to make it or not, soaking through my t-shirt as I sleep, souring the sheets, scoffing at my hatred of waste. The milk comes and I am deflated, suddenly unbuxom, gone from bombshell to mom-shell. The milk comes and the baby grows fat, too fat, an over-proofed loaf, angry skin raw inside the rolls, waiting for her to grow long instead of wide. News of my guts, immunity-juice, the milk comes: the thread that connects us, a dinner, an honor, an armor.

Marrow

STEPHANIE SUSHKO

I want to go to the stars, she said, pointing to the ground. She was six years old, and hadn't been taught much about science yet, about where things were, about up and down. Her aunt, who was raising her now, did not want to be the one to tell her. She understood the affinity for the ground, given that was where the parents had gone.

Daphne was a red-haired child who, Georgie could tell, would not do well as one: she had sensitive eyelids that twitched when she was silent, as though thoughts were running feral inside them, thoughts with teeth. She would internalize things, harsh words would multiply in her mind, she would be found someday with bloody hands and tufts of curls in the toilet. Georgie planned on taking charge and dying the hair brown or blonde or black, when the time came. She would wait until the child was thirteen, that would be a good age, that was when she herself had begun pretending. Right now her nails were bitten down beneath the shellac, which was toy-lemon yellow and looked very cheery swimming through the girl's fated hair as they walked nearly side-by-side.

The uncle was close by, trailing slightly; they were at the park, Central Park, all three of them together. It occurred to Georgie that the name of the place would mean nothing to Daphne, that a child her age hadn't begun to orient herself by the maps of

people long dead. Who knew what the centre of her world was? It could be a pop-up book or a blanket or a taste half-remembered, a touch forgotten but for the shape of the coolness it left on a fevered forehead. There could be no centre at all, there must be a point in life where everything slopes gently towards a still, hollow everywhere.

A fork of ducks was descending over the pond, which waited with the angry hidden curves of a mouth opening. The sky was dazzling and ebullient, but the water was looking for meat, for wings to snap and bones to scatter. The sky was blue, but the pond was black. The girl's hair was red, the nails were yellow and unnaturally crescent-shaped, and had cautiously retreated from the hair, having garnered no response.

The lawn beside the path was tinseled with dew towards the centre, but on the edges it was dry and bent downwards, as though it had been stepped on. Rob, the uncle, would be stepping on it as much as possible, and also on the bird shit and the gum and anything growing up through cracks in the concrete. They walked by a man asleep on the grass, whose foot was unknowingly spared from the heel only at the last second.

The sleeping man was holding a bottle between his horizontal knees, with rolls of money in it which seemed too thick to have fit through the narrow neck. Georgie thought about the logistics of it: the bills would have had to be folded and slid in very carefully so as not to tear them; perhaps the man had been trained in getting ships into bottles. There was something like spittle on the back of his hand, where his ear rested lightly, sailing on the bowl of an inverted wrist.

Had she answered the question? Because though framed as a statement, of course it was a question, and children's questions, unlike those of adults, must always be answered. Otherwise they might come to suspect that there were no answers, too soon.

"The way to the stars," Georgie professed, "is wherever your heart takes you. You don't need to dig."

As soon as she heard it she wanted to retract it, to walk backwards and gulp it back into her throat, but she wasn't so sure that

was where it had come from; she had never said anything so terrible in her life, and was reluctant to take the blame.

She continued walking, hoping that somehow the response would go unnoticed. But everything was very silent just then, as though even the birds had stopped.

"My heart?" the girl said. "It doesn't have legs. It can't take me anywhere. I can't go anywhere without being taken. That's why you're here."

"Mm. That is correct."

It seemed good, at least, if you couldn't answer a child's questions well, to catch them at being correct. It also seemed good to have a reason for being there.

A couple walked by, very young and happy, one of them holding a small dog who would also be happy, because dogs always were. That was also a possible centre of everything for a child: a dog, or dogs. Dogs and imaginary friends, which were even better, because they followed you around and made no demands and only disappeared when you were done with them. Daphne had never had a dog, but perhaps she had an imaginary friend whose name, if discovered, may be useful to bandy around at more difficult days. Or maybe they should take her to church.

The young couple were talking loudly, nearly shouting. There are certain things that young people shout about in parks that no one else is allowed to shout about. They talk about other people's problems freely and joyfully, because they can do that without becoming overwhelmed by the combination of those with their own. They also talk about this great concept called "tomorrow": when they will be married or not married—to each other or to others yet unknown—when they will have children or not have children, when they will take a vacation to Greece but only after getting steady work, when they will grow old or retire, and in actuality each and every one of these things seems about as real as dying. Tomorrow is not really the next day, not touchable things like when they will wake up the next morning, what flavour the toothpaste will be, whether it will still be this warm or if autumn will have turned, if the coffee sack will be empty or have a hole in it and

someone will have to go out and get another. They talk about this at other times, but not in the park. The tomorrows are different in the park, but yesterdays are the same everywhere.

"I thought that maybe I wouldn't be able to go anywhere," Daphne was saying. "I'd have to stay in my room all the time and never move, because there'd be no one to take me."

"We would never let that—"

"— because I was never supposed to go anywhere when they weren't there. And then when they weren't going to be there again, I thought it would be the same."

Georgie did not respond, she deferred the correction like a teacher or a lawyer. The reason being, it wasn't yet time to talk about what was the same and what was different, that had been relegated to next week, or next month. They were almost to the trash cans, and she had something in her pocket to discard, a wrapper which was very important to get rid of, it seemed to have been there for years. She reached in and pulled it out and it was gold, cellophane gold, pleated around a smooth inner circle. The garbage cans were very small and stout; if the little girl stood on her tiptoes she could nearly see inside. Nearly, so she needed to be lifted, and asked to be lifted, and Rob lifted her. He stomped on a bug and showed her its purple-blue guts and then he lifted her to look into the garbage can.

Georgie was too tired to stop him. She hadn't slept for the past week, though she had slept last night. She had slept wonderfully. It had been the white wine which had facilitated the sleep, which she had put into a bowl to look like soup while they were watching TV. It was difficult to explain why her soup had no noodles; ultimately, she ventured the explanation that broth was the healthiest part of soup, and that she had a cold and couldn't manage to keep much of anything down, so she was prioritizing the thing that had the most health in it. But that had made the girl upset, because the idea of something being healthy opened up the possibility of something or someone being sick, so Georgie had gone to the cupboard and taken some spiral noodles and poured them—still hard enough to break a tooth—into the bowl, before sickness escalated into death. She had done this for believability, but also because she thought that

children must like spiral noodles, as they suggested celebration. And then she ate it, and slurped it from a thick plastic spoon, and felt better, discarding the hard noodles when the child had gone to sleep.

Dania had done something like this when they were children, but of course it was just water then, and diced banana instead of noodles. But the effect was the same, yellow floating in a clear fluid, like tainted phlegm.

There is something about a child looking into a trash can plain-faced, with no sense of aversion or horror or recognition, that asks to be corrected. Daphne had been doing this for a moment or so, hanging like a stork's burden from Rob's hands; now she was reaching down with that same satisfied look, and Georgie had to reach forward and smack her hand away.

No, she didn't have to. She hadn't had to. Her neck flushed, her eyes pricked, she punctured the inside of her lip with her teeth. Rob absentmindedly placed the child back on the ground, with a grunt as though she had suddenly become heavy.

The girl drew her hand back towards herself, curiously, as though it were an indeterminable thing that she had pulled from the can. She stared at its redness for a moment, slipped it into her pocket, and started walking again. She looked back, called Rob "Robin," and commented on how the trees looked like feather umbrellas.

They came upon a squirrel who was carrying something in its mouth, a streamer or a piece of trailing cloth. It crossed before them heedlessly, stopping for a half-second to gaze directly down the path with eyes lacking irises. Something flipped in Georgie's chest, her temples raced; she aspired to engage the child with the spectacle as though with something curiously endearing, something which revived or redeemed everything, *How strange to see a squirrel without a nut, isn't that what squirrels are supposed to carry? He must be confused, or having a party*.

Did animals still hold parties at six years old?

"What in the hell is he carrying?" she said.

Rob stopped suddenly. He craned his neck and looked at the bottom of his shoe. He laid his foot flat down again, as though

testing it, or the ground. All this time he was laughing to himself.

"What the fuck is he carrying?" she repeated, because no one had answered. Of course the trick was that he wasn't carrying anything, and there was the hope that this would be funny.

She felt the blood bubbling on her tongue from the punished lip, and the prick in her eyes warming and spreading and pooling luxuriously. It felt very good to be tasting the blood, to not be swallowing it or coughing it out. It felt very good to have said those two words. She wanted to say them again, and thought she might take Rob aside to say it to him, but in several seconds he fell behind.

"But now you're the one who takes me places. So I follow you."

Georgie had lost track of where they were headed. She had lost track of where they were, and what day it was, except that it had been nine days. The path was still there, but it seemed to slur, to slip and fade fitfully from side to side. Everything looked very low and sparse, like the outskirts of somewhere. It couldn't really be the center: the center would be wider, brighter, fuller, it would have a fountain or a cluster of people on benches throwing seeds, it would pulse and soar like a singing throat. Here they seemed to be rolling around the periphery, all darting limbs and reckless tongues.

The grass was no longer dewy in the centre, it no longer glittered, it had dried up and soured in a moment, it didn't take too much sun, too much time, to do that. The air smelled like straw and deeply baked manure. The garbage can hadn't smelled at all; perhaps it was empty and she had hit the child for nothing.

She reached into her pocket to clench her fist, to find the empty foil and sink its smooth yellow blades extravagantly into her palm. It was still there, it rustled against her knuckles like something wild. Her knuckles were very dry, she washed her hands frequently now because she felt that it was something that mothers did, as an example. She was not a mother. She wanted to play the part, but it made her hands so dry.

"Hell," she repeated. "What the fucking hell is he carrying?"

Still the child did not notice; the squirrel was long gone.

"Will you take me to where the stars are, then? If you're the ones who take me places."

"Me?" She felt the need to sound definitive, marginally harsh. She wanted to compensate for the terrible thing that she had said before, about your heart taking you places. "Well, no, I can't. You have to find your dream, and it will tell you. It will take you."

This was even worse. It was all getting very elaborate and doctrinal and Disney and unstoppable, and the sun was getting low, and it must be almost lunch time. She wasn't hungry, but Daphne would be. She looked very small and unfed, the sun splitting down the middle of her head and exposing the thin, pink, newborn skull.

Rob brushed up behind them like a lost dog. He had probably stopped and looked around at something, probably something he had stepped on and dragged along for a while, staining the trail and the grass simultaneously, before realizing what he was doing. He would be wide-eyed today, he was always wide-eyed, you might as well carry him in a hamper on your back, or around your neck with your hand on his bum. Rob had incredibly smooth, unthinking hands that laid flat on tables when he sat. Was that something fathers did, lay their hands serenely flat on tables? Georgie hoped it was, for Daphne's sake. It seemed likely, though she couldn't remember her father ever doing it.

(When Georgie was a child, the family didn't eat at a table, but Dania would always find somewhere for the two of them to go: sometimes dinner would be behind the couch, or in the belly of the back stairwell to the basement, on the sloping floor dropping crumbs down the clogged drain. It was a way of overturning the way things were supposed to be, which as a child seemed like a good thing).

"I have an idea," she said. "Come with me."

She stepped onto the grass, avoiding the edge so as not to flatten it further, and there was a deep softness and undulating warm breathing up from it, surpassing her most wild expectations. It was dry on the top but beneath there was a sigh and a sweet August sadness that gathered and sucked around the heels, pregnant and dark, like the universe itself were turning beneath it.

She got to a spot where there was a sign that said something about littering, and here she put the bag down which had the sand-

wiches in it and took off her shoes and laid down on the grass. She began to roll, very slightly, very simply, back and forth, like a baby in a cradle. She remembered rocking Daphne this way not too long ago—*Could it have been years at all, could it possibly have been four, five, six years?*—and how there had been bubbles in her mouth, little globes of spit, little globes of liquid emptiness, and the spit had rested smooth and mirror-like on the back of the wrist of the man sleeping on the grass, his everything in a bottle between his knees.

The sky swung back and forth above her like a mobile, like a crazed mobile made of nothing, it sucked the air from her lungs and filled them up to bursting. She felt very strong and calm, and she tried to remember if her mother had rocked her, but of course she had, and of course she wouldn't remember, as babies are like sheets of paper where every pen is out of ink, or not yet filled.

She rolled, and the little girl must have eventually got down on the grass too, because she could be smelt, she was a whiff of powder and applesauce, and the copper strands of her hair could be seen stretching out like splitting arms somewhere not too far above, her scalloped yellow socks and her crossed twitching ankles kneading the ground. And Rob's feet were there too, and his tall uncertain legs, pushing down on everything, the lower tips of his flat hands hanging at his sides.

She hoped that this rolling was fun somehow for the girl, that it showed her something about letting go, and being free, about how to be a child again. She couldn't possibly be a child again, not fully, she had seen her mother and her father dropped like pits into the ground nine days ago. Georgie had been a child before that day, and now for the first time she, too, was old.

She sat up and felt wet on the back of her head, warm like the corner of a blanket breathed on all night. The child was looking at her almost as though she didn't see her, as though she were dreaming. Yes, daydreaming. She could still do that, she could still let her eyes fly far from her skull, she still saw open spaces and thought that she could run in them forever. That was a great comfort for Georgie, if it were true.

That was it, they should run together. Perhaps she—the aunt,

the mother—should take off now across the grass and laugh and scream and kick her heels and sing and whatever else she could do to get it out, get it all out, spit, hack, wrench it out and trample it down and spread its trembling guts over every blade of grass, over every cell living and dead, over every evil word that still hung bright and guilty in the air.

She didn't run, she didn't stand up, it was not possible. Around her limbs were a new and heavy recalling of something that had just begun, and which would begin over and over again every day, every morning. It was, it said, it repeated tirelessly, *She is in the ground somewhere, and it should be here*. It said this everywhere, not only in Central Park, it said this in the backyard and in the supermarket parking lot and on the walking paths behind the psychiatrist's office. *If only she were here, or at least her marrow.*

In her twenties, Dania would talk about castles in a literal sense, because she wanted to go to Scotland and paint them. It was her great aspiration, painting castles, and no one could dissuade her, not with love or money. She was easily dissuaded once she got sober, without too much fanfare, and then she met Zach, and they had lived together for years before having the child, and this was supposedly why it was such a shame that it should happen so suddenly now, when they had had so much chance to die before they had finally created something good.

Dania would have wanted the thing she had created to keep the hair she had given it, because she herself would have—she had a mind like nails, she flung slurs and threats like stones back into faces, she cursed the tongue who cursed her, she would have gotten right down on the grass with her baby sister and rolled and rolled until they were both clothed in dirt, in earth, in possibility, and then she would have been the one to stand up like a stallion and tear across the grass until there was colour shaken into the air and the ground again, and Rob and the child would be gone because they wouldn't be in the frame yet; that wouldn't happen until later, much later, and in this version of events later never came.

She hoped that the child would not ask again about the stars. She hoped that she would not have to answer too many questions

in the gap between now and when all the questions stopped. They would stop soon, it would be around the time when Daphne would become brown-haired, or blonde. It would be around the time that Georgie would be expected to stop wearing the nails yellow, opt for a milder shade, like burgundy, and clip them too short to be bitten.

Would she?

Or would she paint them neon green and get them done as long as spears and wave them around threateningly, gleefully, like talons, would she braid the child's blazing hair and pile it atop her head like a heavy, ancient crown? Would she teach her that a spade sunk in the earth would turn up jelly clusters of buzzing white nebula, the eggs of galaxies, and that in them everything lost could be found again?

She would get up with the help of the "No Littering" sign. She would put her shoes back on. She would walk the child back onto the pathway and place her palm behind the neck and feel the impossible delicacy of the vertebrae, of the bones still choked with marrow, with the hard, sudden sponge of life, as they turned to look this way and that. They would find a place to use the restroom and then stop to eat what was left in their bags at a bench, and then go home.

Smart Girls Die Fast

JOANNE RUSH

'Is this seat free?' The man swaying in the aisle of the steam-train wore a blue suit with white stripes all over it. He was about my age, with dazzling, wolfish teeth. Before I had time to say anything he sat down, holding out his hand across the wooden table. 'Jordan Cooper.'

I ignored him. Sitting so close to me, when the carriage was almost empty, violated a rule of privacy I hadn't known I cared about until he broke it. And now I was cross with myself for being so old-fashioned, and crosser still with him, for showing me that I was.

He turned the invitation of his outstretched fingers into a shrug, and took a paperback novel from his satchel. I went back to watching the smoke from the funnel blow past the window. In three hours we would reach Lyme Regis, where I was to spend the summer with my cousins—"thinking things through," as my mother put it. She didn't understand why I wanted to study something so unladylike as mathematics. Nor, I think, why a woman would choose to go to university at all.

After we had rattled past a farm or two, Jordan Cooper said, 'You from round here?'

I kept my eyes fixed on the window. 'Not really.'

'Me either!' He made it sound like an important discovery, as if the fact that we were both away from home created a bond between us. 'I'm American,' he said, as if there could have been any question.

'You're on holiday?'

'On business.' His smile showed too much of his raw pink gums. I jerked my eyes away.

For a long time I stared out of the window at the blurring hedgerows. When my neck began to hurt, I tried to read the title of his novel. The books in my father's library were all bound in brown leather, whereas this one had a lurid picture on the cover: white bedsheets, lots of red blood. Jordan Cooper never turned a page.

'Where do you live, then?' he said.

In spite of myself, I smothered a laugh. No amount of rudeness seemed to get through to him. 'Surrey,' I told him.

He flicked his fingers, frowning. 'A town, is it?'

A small place, he meant. A place that nobody important came from—nobody they would have heard of in America.

I felt myself blushing. He wasn't saying, or hadn't meant to say, that a person from such a place would only amount to the wife of some man her cousins knew. All the same, I found myself wanting to do something big, something so splendid that in ten years or so—by 1940, say—even this American couldn't dismiss it with a doubtful flick of his fingers. 'Where are *you* from?' I said.

So we started to talk. He told me about his mother, who was ill, and by then I had forgotten his surname, this Jordan somebody whose mother was ill. He also told me about his job, selling automobiles, which I remembered was what had brought him to England.

I asked more questions. He had three brothers, and a house with a yard overlooking a creek. It struck me as amazing that he could sit in this carriage and tell me about his family who were somewhere else, in a small clapboard house, surrounded by white railings and a creek half full of water.

At Salisbury he left the train. As he got up, he gave me another of those smiles of his, each white tooth separate and separately inva-

sive. I watched him walk away down the platform—I had to press my face to the window.

A lot of people got into my carriage, but no one sat opposite me, and there was nothing to look at except my hands, which rested like starfish on my knees. Jordan had left his novel, I realised. It was lying on the seat, its spine broken in a way that looked painful. I found myself reluctant to touch it, but my eyes kept going back to the splayed cover.

The picture was of a girl in a bathtub, not sheets and a bed, as I had first thought. Her fair hair had been arranged poetically, like the woman in that painting of the boat. The Lady of Shalott. But cheaper, somehow. More like a dead fish in a crate of ice.

A woman tapped me on the shoulder. 'Is that yours?' she said. Her voice was tart with disapproval.

I looked up in surprise. 'The book?'

Instead of replying, she sniffed. There was a whole sermon in that sniff, a whole creed. It spoke of feet squashed into high-heeled shoes, and a morning spent in shops where the assistants knew her name, and Earl Grey tea in a café that real earls probably frequented. It was a vigorous, authoritative sniff.

'Yes,' I said. 'Yes it is.' I leant across the table to rescue it—the thin pages stained by smears of jam, the front cover with its dead naked girl bathing.

Feeling myself blush, I stuffed her into my handbag. She looked a lot worse up close. There was a bloody handprint on the side of the bath, and her flesh was a garish shade of pink. The woman watched me, steeling herself against the motion of the train. I think she was the sort who would have got a law passed, if she could, against people who read books like that. Give it a few years, she was probably thinking, and I'd end up knifed in a bathtub myself.

I zipped up my handbag and smiled at her. At the end of this summer, I promised myself, I was going to university to study mathematics. That meant I was on the side of the future. The side of automobiles and clapboard houses. The side—why not—of pictures in bright light and bad taste on the covers of cheap books.

Doreen Dreams of Cars

CADENCE MANDYBURA

"Alastair, it's frigid in here," Doreen said as she walked into the parlour directly to her favourite armchair.

Alastair, her well-trained husband of forty-eight years, set down his newspaper and rose on creaking knees to add another log to the fire. Some people trail complaints like shadows. Others cast them ahead like fishing lines. Doreen, a beetle-backed woman whose tart red hair fooled no one, used complaints like a dagger: simply, efficiently, and effectively. But Alastair didn't mind: it was a good day when Doreen had the energy to complain.

Doreen tucked a tartan blanket around her shoulders and stretched her feet to the fire. "A little higher, Alastair," she said as he fussed with the log. "Don't *choke* it. Let it breathe. I said a little *higher*, dear... *that's* it, *there* you go."

Satisfied, she closed her eyes for a nap.

Alastair replaced the poker then trembled back to his position on the couch. The newspaper was off-limits—the crinkle of the pages would bother Doreen—so he contented himself with rubbing his knees and watching the fire eat its way through the fresh log.

Alastair was a simple man. Doreen sometimes accused him of being slow—*thicker than peanut butter, Alastair!*—but he knew that wasn't true. God just made people differently. Alastair was made like

an underground stream, coursing through the world unnoticed. He found interest in things that others might consider dull; he could fill hours watching a fire's hypnotic sarabande, the throb of a seashore, or the delicate traffic of songbirds.

God had made Doreen like a ball of spikes. And that was okay, too. The world needed thistle as well as clover.

Alastair smoothed out a crease in his trousers and glanced at Doreen as she surrendered to her nap. Her face had gone pouchy with age, but her mouth was the same as ever. Peaked and easily pursed, Doreen's lips formed a distinctive diamond when she was at rest, a pinched disapproval that anchored her face. The expression evoked a strong, unidentifiable feeling in Alastair. Perhaps it was stability. Doreen was peeved, and all was as it should be in the world.

With no newspaper to read, Alastair continued to stare into the fire and engaged in one of his other favourite pastimes: listening to Doreen's dreams.

He'd once assumed that everyone could overhear dreams, but growing up his brothers' denials and his mother's exasperation had finally silenced him. The contrast between his brothers' dreams had fascinated him, considering their daytime lives were so similar. Ronnie, the eldest, dreamt in deep colours, swirls of plotless poetry full of longing. Bertie, the baby, was much more literal, his dreams a pastiche of characters from real life and settings from fantasy books. Alastair, for his part, could rarely recall his dreams; at best, they seemed to him a quiet murk.

He never talked about his eavesdropping anymore. After all, it wasn't a dramatic experience, hardly more striking than having an odd thought occur out of the blue. They didn't fuddle his mind, either; other people's dreams simply floated past like well-mannered ghosts.

He liked listening to Doreen, though. She often dreamt of cars. She showed no affection for the machines in waking life, but in her dreams, the cars were silent and radiant, dynamos of sculptured light that raced beyond the mustiness of daily life.

Alastair smiled as the fire lulled Doreen to sleep; the chrome chassis, whisper-fast, formed and sped through the tracks of her mind. Later, when the fire faltered, he moved to add another log.

★

In real life, Alastair and Doreen owned an old tweedy Mini that ran smoothly despite its age, thanks to a well-maintained engine. Doreen was a giddy driver while Alastair was fretful, so courteous that he confounded motorists and pedestrians alike. Although Alastair believed that Doreen enjoyed driving more than he did, she often made him take the wheel—perhaps because she preferred berating him to being in charge of the machine herself.

"Turn now, Alastair, *now*, *go!* Left lane, now, left lane. *Careful*, Al, you've got to—okay. Good." She would sit back with a pert *humph* when he obeyed her, with a mixture of satisfaction and disappointment—like a cat who had caught her mouse, but found the morsel less toothsome than she had hoped.

Sometimes he wondered what would happen if he defied her. Not just a teasing disobedience, but something properly alarming: veering into traffic, speeding prodigiously, careening around blind corners. She would yell at him, screech, ask if he'd lost his mind. But he was pretty sure that deep down, she'd be thrilled.

Even though he believed she loved him for his softness, even though she liked his dependability, even though she understood that his blankness wasn't barrenness—despite all that, he suspected she'd been waiting decades for him to do something to blow her mind.

He wondered what would trigger it, this phantom flamboyance nested inside of him somewhere. He imagined strolling into the kitchen, and announcing to Doreen, "We're going skydiving."

Or bursting through the front door with a bear pelt over his shoulder.

Or buying one-way tickets to Ulaanbaatar, with only the vaguest itinerary in place.

It would happen someday, he was sure. But he was also sure it would happen exactly once. He only had enough courage in his life for a single action so completely contrary to the identity he had tended for so long.

Perhaps that was why he was still waiting. Once he did it, whatever it was, this thing that would make Doreen look at him differently, it would be over, done, unrepeatable. And what if he

flubbed it? Far better to let the thought sit at the back of his head—an infant idea, well swaddled—and listen to Doreen dream. He could lose himself in the silent ultraspeed of her dream cars and be content.

At first, the cancer diagnosis didn't faze her. If anything, the bad news invigorated Doreen's naturally contrarian optimism.

"People beat cancer all the time," she told Alastair, making herself a sandwich after they returned from the doctor's office. "You know. They take up rock climbing or go to a gun range, just blast away those cancer cells." She scooped a wodge of mustard from the jar, spread it messily over the bread. "Or they find God. Ha!"

That kept her chuckling through the remainder of her sandwich assembly. Alastair had faith, but so quietly that Doreen had never noticed. She had taken it for granted that they would raise their children completely secular, and Alastair couldn't deny that Kimmy and Julian had turned out just fine.

Doreen plunked down at the kitchen table and bit into her sandwich with a healthy appetite. "Maybe I'll be a medical marvel," she said between bites. "Go on Oprah."

"Maybe," said Alastair, wiping off the counter and turning on the kettle. "In that case, you'd better start picking your outfit now."

Doreen's eyes lit up, and Alastair knew she was already imagining the most telegenic pieces from her wardrobe, without a lick of irony.

Her sanguine attitude didn't last long.

The cancer was belligerent, a brawler that ravaged Doreen's body and ripped open the roof of Alastair's world. Doreen shrank, greyed, dimmed. Alastair bought her a bright red wig, plus an eyebrow pencil on the sales lady's advice, but their effect was temporary. It didn't change the hot metal taste in her throat, said Doreen, shooting an evil look at her reflection.

Doreen's dreams grew dark, scattered, sometimes mutated by the painkillers. She slept often, and whenever he could, Alastair would sit beside her, listening. The perfect cars she had once dreamt of started to fall apart: they seized up or lost their wheels, their

pedals flaccid and unresponsive. He would hold and squeeze her hand, until she complained that even such minor contact was bruising. While she still had energy to complain. Alastair had never imagined that an agreeable Doreen would be so painful.

Throughout her life, most people had seen Doreen as a harridan, more trouble than she was worth. But Doreen, an unplanned sixth child in a poor family, had refused to be pushed aside. Alastair understood that from the beginning, when she had marched up to him at the homecoming soirée, yanked on his wrist (hard!) and said, "We're dancing now."

He learned later that her sisters had challenged her to ask the quiet, handsome (was he?) cadet to dance, not believing she would dare. Definitely not believing she would marry him. Doreen's parents liked Alastair, and probably hoped he would be a good influence. Certainly, they seemed relieved that someone had taken their quarrelsome daughter off their hands.

But Alastair understood where Doreen's lemon-juice disposition came from. She was strident because no one listened, and then it became her habit. Some days, it was wearisome; but then, sometimes Doreen was just the weapon for the job. When a roofer bilked them on semi-fictional repairs. When Alastair was too meek to ask for a raise. When Julian was bullied in grade four.

Alastair was sure he could find Doreen in more than one person's nightmares. It was the sort of immortality Doreen might get a kick out of, if Alastair were ever brave enough to suggest it to her.

Since the diagnosis, Alastair ceased thinking of the outlandish someday-something he had nursed his whole life. He did think, in between his daily prayers and palliations, that he missed Doreen's dreams about cars, and he wondered if she did, too.

One day, coming home from a walk, he found her asleep on the couch, a blanket dragged hastily over her wasted form. On the ground beside her, an old photo album had fallen and stood perched on its open covers like a precarious A-frame. Alastair pulled the blanket up around Doreen, watched her breathing to make sure it was regular, then picked up the album.

It was one their daughter had put together after her divorce, and contained Alastair and Doreen's early years. Kimmy had lived with them for a few months before finding her feet again and moving to Australia. During that time, Kimmy's pain had been so comprehensive that Alastair couldn't think of a thing to say, and instead resorted to making tea at every opportunity. Doreen had been more productive, enlisting her daughter to assemble long-neglected photo albums and prising every bit of unhappiness out of Kimmy's head. He remembered Doreen's triumph when, at last, she goaded Kimmy into moving on. "She's mad at *me*, now, Al," she'd said, gleefully. "Forgotten all about what's-his-pickle."

Alastair flipped through the album pages, trying to keep the cellophane from crinkling too loudly. Old memories, old haircuts, young faces. As though a warmth emanated from some pages, he could tell which photos Doreen had been looking at. Her graduation photo, her eyes proud but her diamond mouth refusing to smile. A beach portrait, Doreen in a lime-green bikini with a wide hat shading her face. Posing in a convertible—not theirs, Alastair couldn't remember whose—looking over her shoulder, one hand loose on the wheel, her elbow propped on the edge of the door. Ready to take on the wide highways of life.

Doreen snuffled in her sleep. Time was running out.

The closest place that rented the sort of car Alastair was looking for was three hours away. Looking through the options online, he paid more attention to the vehicles' looks than their specs; he chose a low, streamlined car, painted midnight blue. It wasn't quite perfect, but it was the closest he was likely to get.

Doreen didn't argue when he proposed the day trip—a "surprise," he told her.

"Will we be back tonight?" she asked hoarsely, head down, focused on navigating a spoon of porridge from bowl to mouth. One of many daily challenges.

"Sure," said Alastair. "Plenty of time." Not that it mattered if they needed to spend the night away from home. Alastair had finally told Kimmy and Julian how bad it was, but Kimmy was still sorting

through her flights, and Julian wouldn't arrive for another few days at least.

"Okay." No complaints. No follow-up questions.

She was quiet on the drive out, napping a little, but not deeply—no dreams. Alastair wasn't sure when to bring it up. Not yet, maybe. Not yet.

When they pulled into the agency, Doreen goggled in surprise. "Alastair," she said, accusingly. "What are you doing?"

Her tone made him smile. "This is the surprise."

"We can't afford—these cars are worth more than our whole *house*—"

"Of course, dear, we're not buying one. Just renting one for the day."

"Oh." Doreen slumped back in her seat. "Fine."

The paperwork took a while, even though he had called and paid in advance, and the added insurance cost was as bad as a pulled tooth. But worth it, he thought, handing over his credit card. Once in a lifetime.

As they were finalizing the details at the counter, the salesman's eye slid over to Doreen, a bundle of sticks in one of their lobby's overstuffed sofas. "She'll just be a passenger, right?"

"Oh yes," said Alastair. "I'll be driving. She just wants to enjoy the ride."

The car was more luxurious than anything Alastair had ever driven. Doreen was speechless. Once in the car, her fingers hovered over all the screens and buttons, the svelte curves of the dash and armrests. Alastair managed to leave without lurching too much—"Easy, Alastair, easy!"—and then took his time wending the way out of the city.

He had the route planned. He headed straight for the country roads, where they weren't likely to meet any other cars. Then he eased to a stop.

"What's wrong?" said Doreen as Alastair switched off the engine.

"You're going to drive."

"What are you talking about?"

Alastair leaned on the steering wheel, looked sideways at his

wife. The summer heat was already settling on top of them, even though the A/C had been blasting only seconds before.

He didn't know how to say what he wanted to say. An urgent idea bloated inside of him—and yet, and yet—how to release it, he couldn't figure. The words he tried to match to this idea, this feeling, kept slipping, falling away.

"It isn't quite right," said Alastair.

"What do you mean? What are you *talking* about?" Some old-Doreen exasperation coloured her voice, weak as it was.

"The car. I mean, it's as close as I could get…"

Doreen opened her mouth to demand a clarification, but then closed it, narrowed her eyes, and waited.

"I know—well, we both know—it won't be long—I mean, neither of us are going to live forever…"

"You're trying to say that I'm going to kick the bucket soon."

A smile lifted his face, twisted his heart. "Well. I wanted to—before it happens—I wanted to give you something…" Sweat rolled down his temples. He cranked the key, halfway, reviving the vents of cool air. "I know you like cars."

"Alastair, when have I ever shown an interest in cars?"

"In your dreams."

"In my—" Doreen registered Alastair's answer and gulped into silence. She watched him suspiciously. "And how would you know that?"

"Oh—you must've told me about it once. The fast, futuristic cars…"

"I've never told anyone about that. Ever."

"You must have, Dory. Otherwise, how would I know?"

Doreen didn't answer. He watched her try to put it together in her mind, jamming puzzle pieces where they wouldn't fit.

"I mean, it's not like I can overhear your dreams, or anything."

"What did you say?" said Doreen, her expression sharpening.

"Nothing." Alastair feigned innocence. He patted the steering wheel. "Come on, dear—I thought you'd want to drive."

"Oh," said Doreen. She reached out from her passenger seat to

touch the wheel's warm top-grade leather. "I couldn't. I'm not supposed to."

Trembling, she drew her hand back to her lap.

I'm not supposed to.

Finally, after all these years, it wasn't Doreen's jibes or complaints that pushed Alastair over the edge, but her defeat.

He smacked the wheel so loud Doreen jumped. "Dory, good God, when have you *ever* in your life done what you've supposed to do?"

Doreen's eyes flew wide at his vehemence, her diamond mouth pursed as she struggled with a response. As quick as it came, Alastair's anger rushed away, tugging down the walls inside of him. Truth started to leak out.

"I need—I need you to be tough, Doreen. I want you to… well…"

His sentence hung. Doreen at last said, "Words, Alastair! You want me to…?"

"Drive this car right into your dreams."

Usually, Doreen didn't like it when she thought Alastair wasn't making sense. She would pester his meaning out of him, making him figuratively and sometimes literally turn out his pockets. But this, she accepted, albeit with an affected *humph!* to show that she was humouring his silliness.

"Well, get the hell out of the way and help me into the driver's seat, then," she said.

Alastair could have cried with happiness. Instead, he adopted a comfortable meekness, stepping out and helping Doreen come around the vehicle and switch places with him. She clucked with happiness, poking the various levers and buttons: the tick-tock of the signals, a swish of the windshield wipers, the glide of the sunroof angling open.

"Passes your inspection?" Alastair asked when she seemed settled.

A quick impish side-eye. She fired the ignition. Revved the engine. Peeled away from the curb. Edged up the speed.

Alastair watched the landscape slide past, riding in a powerful,

noiseless car, manned by his powerful, noisy wife. Delight rose on her face like a sunrise. He imagined the years stripping away, rolling back to reveal that younger woman trapped in their photo albums.

Faster.

That thing he always wanted to do—something extravagant, extraordinary, something Doreen would never have imagined—he hadn't realized that it wasn't something he had to do, personally. It was about opening the door for others. He was a helper, not a star. Doreen always had been the supernova.

Faster.

And that was fine. The world needed helpers, too.

Faster…

At the funeral, Kimmy delivered the eulogy; Julian was too emotional, and Alastair was dryly wordless. Afterward, Alastair couldn't remember anything specific about Kimmy's speech, just the general contours: a deep twilight sadness, the immensity of a complicated love, a few snotty funeral chuckles at the funnier anecdotes.

His memory smeared over the procession, too, leaving only a few fractured impressions: the surprising lightness of the coffin, black shoes on green grass, dirt falling with a casual finality. The weather was bland, he remembered that. Eighteen degrees and hazy. Doreen would have preferred a howling wind to mark her passing.

As part of the wake, Doreen's brother rented out a private room at a pub. Alastair sipped a gin and tonic, raising his glass at the appropriate intervals. Everything he could think to say seemed too small, like ants trying to outline an elephant.

Even if he could have found the words, they wouldn't have made any sense to this gathering of family and friends. That his last gift to Doreen had been a day in a rented supercar. That, like a loon, he had expected magic from the experience. Had he thought the car would fly? Doreen to be miraculously healed? Of course, nothing had happened. She had died only a week later, Kimmy and Julian arriving just in time for their final goodbyes. No whiff of the supernatural at all.

Except…

What nobody had noticed, and maybe not even Doreen herself: those last few nights, before she was gone for good, her dreams had revved back to their former glory.

At least, at the end, Doreen dreamt of cars.

Seeing Starlings

CHRIS ARTHUR

It's a fine summer's morning in St Andrews, Scotland. We're standing at the kitchen window watching starlings. Whatever we were doing—chores, revision, listening to the radio—has been paused. We're absorbed in one of those moments of pure attention when we lose ourselves in what's around us, become engaged by unremarkable particularities which have somehow shaken off their ordinariness so that they're able to catch the eye completely, capture its restless gaze in an embrace that locks out all distraction. It doesn't last for long. The old regimes that rule us soon reassert their authority. Mine demands that I turn my attention back to putting away the dishes; my daughter's that she finishes some work for her upcoming exams. Outside, the starlings scuttle and peck across the lawn for a little longer before flying off, continuing their brief lives as we continue ours.

Were it not for the fact that I write about things like this, wrestle them to the page and try to catch and fix their dimensions within a caging tracery of sentences, this starling-watching moment would soon have been forgotten, its occurrence unmarked by anything except the desultory comments we made at the time: "Look, Dad, that one's pecking the other's tail." "I wonder what they're getting from the lawn. Can you see what they're eating?"

"The juveniles are fatter than the adults. They're so cute!" "What a squabble!"

To chronicle is at once to celebrate and condemn. The celebration comes from recognizing that the moment is gravid with a weight and density beyond its immediate impact. Just behind what obviously strikes the eye lie altogether different realms of meaning. The condemnation is a consequence of this realization. It sentences ordinary diction to inadequacy. Seen in this light, our everyday accounts scarcely seem to scratch the surface of what's there.

I can't recall the first time I saw starlings, or how they appeared on that occasion, before repetition fed memory's store and allowed comparison, association and judgement to weave the gauze through which they now appear. Perhaps once I would have been fully immersed in the vivid immediacy of their presence, felt the exact chromatic heft and weave of their plumage charm the watching eye. Perhaps I could have focused unwaveringly on their strut and swagger across a lawn without thinking of parallels and precedents. Maybe once I could have seen without valuing, without wondering, without questioning, without recognition of how one thing links always to another. In this imagined first encounter with starlings, my attention would have been snugly contained in the cupped hands of the moment, not lured into past or future. Isn't this what the rapt attention of babies and young children stems from? Their temporal innocence, the fact that they're encountering things afresh, unmarked by the grid of experience or anticipation, means they can be immersed in perception's now and attend single-mindedly to the light touch of things, unweighted by any baggage of preconception.

Even supposing I ever had it, I've long lost the ability to see starlings in the arresting brightness of their unique singularity. I can't focus only on the way they occupy a moment. Instead, they're percolated through a history spiked with memories, associations, judgements and musings. In the same conceptual breath as I watched them on the lawn that morning in St Andrews, the moment was close-shackled to others in a chain of links that at once enslaves and enables the mind, taking it to other times and places

and then back again, weaving the shimmering thread of consciousness between past and present on which our identity is spun. Any supposed purity of the moment, the instantaneous present where what meets the eye doesn't leak beyond the territory of raw immediacy, is compromised—complicated—as soon as we leave the shallows of infant perception.

Whenever I see them now, starlings take me back to where I grew up in Northern Ireland, and to our leafy suburban garden in Lisburn, County Antrim. So, standing with my daughter at the kitchen window of our house in St Andrews watching the antics of these Scottish birds, I'm also thinking about Ireland several decades ago. And as I try to write about this starling moment—which is in fact a braid of moments rippling through my consciousness—I'm in both places and also standing back from them, marveling at the way our minds can weave things together. Sometimes I despair of forging sentences that can even remotely convey the intricate threadwork of memory, perception and language through which we name things and clad the world with sense.

Throughout my childhood, starlings used to nest each year in the eaves of the house next door to ours. From there, the whir and cackle of their chatter was a familiar sound of summer. Their raucous din included a medley of imitative sounds spliced in alongside the indigenous starling repertoire. They sometimes mimicked other birds—including species never met with in the garden, so that the soulful cry of a curlew might suddenly surprise you, miles from where these birds are found. The starlings also imitated telephones and alarm clocks. I've heard it said that captive ones sometimes mimic speech, but I've not witnessed this myself. Starlings are gregarious birds, more often seen in groups than singly. "Flock" seems too soft a word for them. It was something more like a rabble or a pack that used to swoop down to swagger on our lawn, urgently pecking at something in the daisy-studded grass. Whatever it was they found there was too small to be seen—unlike the regular crop of worms harvested from the same small acreage by blackbirds and thrushes.

★

In our lexicon of birds, starlings were unpopular. They were considered noisy, dirty, common; the avian equivalent of working class at best. They enjoyed none of the sentimental favor we conferred on robins, none of the grandeur allowed to raptors; none of the beauty that we granted finches. No knights of the air, we thought of them as knaves of the bird world. Their swaggering gait when they were on the ground had none of the sweetness we saw in, say, a blue-tit's hopping. Starlings seemed possessed of a kind of minatory alertness, a rapacious intelligence that gave them the air of unlovable rogues.

One of my aunts disliked starlings so much that whenever they appeared on her bird-table and scared away more favored species, she adopted the straightforward expedient of shooting them, taking the view that they were no better than vermin. Though sometimes shocked by such a ruthless approach, I never heard anyone condemn her cull. If she'd shot robins, people would have been outraged—an illustration of the huge disparity in treatment meted out to the creatures around us according to our flimsily founded valuations. Out of such human whims the destiny of whole species may be decided.

Why did we take such a negative view of starlings? Perhaps it was due simply to the frequency with which we saw them. *Sturnus vulgaris* is one of Northern Ireland's commonest bird species. Or maybe our dim view of them stemmed from the mess of droppings associated with their massive urban roosts. Or it could be that the aerial displays of huge flocks of the birds at dusk, wheeling in the sky before they settle for the night—their famous "murmurations"—suggested a swarm of insects rather than anything avian.

Despite our low opinion of starlings—an estimation I shared for years—we allowed one exception to the rule. This amnesty from our general condemnation was extended to an injured bird. Where all its fellows walked about on two legs, with the species's characteristic swagger, this bird hopped about on one. The other leg was a withered stump, the claw balled into a fused and useless lump. We always looked out for this particular individual when the starlings were feeding on our lawn and were surprised—and pleased—to see

it holding its own amidst the rough and tumble of the crowd. We speculated about the injury—was it born with a deformed leg, or had it been maimed in some accident, contracted a disease, or perhaps survived a mauling from a cat or hawk? Whatever the reason for its affliction, we admired its pluckiness, the fact that it survived against the odds. And of course its withered leg bestowed a mark—it functioned almost like a name—so that we could always recognize it however many starlings swarmed across our lawn. We reacted to it as an individual, not simply as an anonymous representative of a species that was viewed with suspicion and disdain.

Sometimes when I look back at my childhood in Northern Ireland, growing up in the years when sectarian conflict was raging, I can't help thinking that Protestants and Catholics both suffered from the tendency to view each other pretty much as we viewed starlings. In the religious apartheid that fractured Ulster society back then, each side viewed the other as an undifferentiated mass of unwanted competitors, a tribe of untrustworthy rivals who had somehow gained access to the same territory and posed a threat. I'd not wish maiming on anyone, but it's a pity there hadn't been some non-injurious functional equivalent to that injured starling's leg, something that would have helped us all to see individuals within these unhelpfully divisive groupings. If we'd learnt to recognize specific people rather than anonymous swarms, if we'd focused on idiosyncrasies rather than stereotypes, respected individuals rather than rejected groups, it might not have taken so long to edge things away from the brink of catastrophe. Failing to see individuals, labeling and condemning groups, is one of our more perilous human traits.

I don't know what an average lifespan for a starling is—how little we know about even the commonest creatures around us—but we were amazed to find the injured starling surviving several seasons. Once it disappeared for a month or two—leastways we never saw it among the other starlings on the lawn. We assumed it must have died and so were surprised—delighted—when it reappeared one morning as if it had been there all the time. Its injury—and the individuation this brokered—endeared it to us.

★

Although it's obvious that seeing in the sense of understanding involves much more than just plain sight, I need to remind myself that the optical mechanics of the eye operate at a different level from the way we see the world. Perhaps the primacy normally accorded to the visual lays on sight an expectation of straightforwardness that obscures complexities. Or maybe, dazed by glimpsing the stupendous texture of the real, we crave the reassuring illusion that all we have to do to see things as they are is open our eyes and the world will flood in exactly as it appears to be—bounded, limited, familiar, submitting readily to language's classifications. For whatever reason, I know I'm susceptible to thinking of seeing as something simpler than it is. This means I envy the exactness of realistic artists, the precision of close-up photographs. Such things seem able to create an achingly exact likeness of what is there. A point-by-point recapitulation between what's on the page or screen and what meets the eye has a particular allure. The wizardry of semblance casts a spell. There's a special kind of magnetism in matching up with words—or lines and colors—the lineaments of the real. The appeal of such realistic depiction is shored up by a persistent feeling that's haunted me for years—that if you describe something *perfectly*, with absolute precision, you've achieved something curiously worthwhile. I'm not sure why I think such exact mirroring is something valuable. But for all the appeal of the visual transcription it involves, I know that it's impossible to achieve a one-to-one equivalence between what we experience and what we paint or photograph or write. The richness of the world does not yield to our representations. Thinking that it does demeans it.

How I see starlings depends in part, of course, on the actual birds in front of me. But the image of them that I come to have in mind depends on far more than the moment of direct perception through which they're apprehended by the senses. Watching the starlings that morning with my daughter wasn't just a case of seeing the birds crowded on the lawn. Spliced inseparably into this straightforward view was the ghost of that injured starling from childhood, how we used to view the species so dismissively, memories of finding starlings'

eggs—which are a beautiful sky-blue, and of watching huge flocks turn and twist like smoke as the birds approach their evening roosts.

Thinking of the starlings on my lawn in St Andrews and the starlings on the lawn of my childhood home in Ireland all those years ago, I'm prompted also to think of the dense tangle of lines between these two points in my history; how my life has been knotted together between these two moments of starling-studded orientation. A stupefying wealth of people, places, happenings mesh together to make the fabric of history that links these two points in my personal time-space. Its complexity mocks the idea of portraying fully, realistically, what is contained between now and then. Such musings lead me on to thinking about how our human bloodline—like that of the starlings—stretches back over the eons, century after century, millennia after millennia, until it reaches that mysterious point of genesis that spawned us, from which all of us began. How could we portray in anything other than the most pared down terms the ways in which such genealogies touch and separate and bear their payload of individuals through time? A written line—a written volume—is a childishly simple thing compared to the stories such bloodlines tell.

At this point in my life, I think of starlings quite differently from the way I did before. I've deserted the dismissive view of them as vermin. I like their energy; their loud gregarious presence suggests a cheerful brusqueness that I warm to. They may swagger and brag like ruffians, but I've grown to like the busy-ness and clamor of this ragged bunch of rough-hewn visitors to my garden. And the fact that they've survived and flourished—in spite of our low valuation of them—confers upon them a certain distinction. They are testimony to the fact that nature frequently ignores our whims and partialities.

In fact, starlings have come to represent for me two levels of seeing that seem to characterize our experience. On the one hand, there's the kind of straightforward observation that yields to commonsense account—like that moment in the kitchen when my daughter and I paused in our morning routines to watch the birds

feeding on the lawn. At this level it's easy enough to give an account of things, to say what happened, to transcribe what we saw, heard, felt. On the other hand, there's the realization that all such moments of ordinary passage through the world are looped and linked and tangled in a network of incredible connections. We are caught like the tiniest of midges somewhere in the labyrinth of existence's gargantuan web, a web that sprawls its reach over eons. When the recognition dawns that anything soon leads to everything, the idea of a perfect description, one that leaves out nothing and is unimpeachably precise in its delineation, becomes absurd.

Until you take into account a dramatic aspect of their appearance, starlings may seem unlikely symbols for these two modes of seeing. They so easily appear as drab, ungainly, rather ugly birds. Their dark feathers look almost oily with an unattractive hint of mottled colors not quite showing through. But seen in another light—particularly in spring and summer when their plumage is at its best—their iridescence can catch the sun and show a magnificent sheen of green and purple spotted with a pointillism of white. Paintings and photos of the bird almost never catch this transformation. It depends on a subtle alchemy of light, posture, and angle. The way they alternate between beauty and ugliness, dullness and splendor, is perhaps another reason behind the negative view of starlings to which many people still subscribe. Being visually elusive, having a latent quality of change, oscillating between one state and another, means these chromatic chameleons may seem troublingly transgressive—not easily fitted into our categories.

This ability to shift between mundane and magnificent echoes in miniature the way in which our perception of the world has a perplexing alternating pulse sewn into it. On the one hand, things appear ordinary, unexceptional, routine—they can be categorized, ordered, labelled. On the other hand, they constitute the tip of an iceberg of something utterly extraordinary that underlies us all the time and on whose hidden bulk the frail craft of our everyday discourse soon founders. Yes, in one sense I can describe the starling moment well enough, fix it on the page. But in another sense, I can't

begin to lift the cargo that it represents. The way in which their iridescence blinks on and off, making them appear so differently, suddenly blazing into a vision that ruptures the drab certainties of our usual valuations, is emblematic of the way in which the possibility of metamorphosis is latent within every moment, revealing wonder in the quotidian. If we could teach ourselves to glimpse it more often, perhaps our walking through the world might become more like meditation, less like marauding; more reverent than rapacious.

Hard Boiled

HEATHER BARTOS

Ma says you can tell a lot about someone by how they order their eggs. You have your scrambled types—that's me, everything all stirred and thrown together, sloppy. You have your annoying sunny side up people, with that big orange eye staring at you with all the runny, snotty gunk soft in the center. You have your poached people, who want others to work harder on their behalf, to find the little special bowls.

Ma was going to be a psychology major in college. Ma is a waitress instead, which she says is pretty much the same thing with the addition of food, plus you get tips besides. She works at the Throwback, which is a diner that looks like it was built in the 1950s but has only been there near the truck stop for just a few months now, sprung up like weeds after a hard rain.

She says she doesn't regret not going to college, which is an example of denial. She says I was more of an education than college would ever be.

Ma is a pretty good parent overall. But she gets naggy. Lock the door, Becca. Look over your shoulder, Becca. Don't talk to strangers.

I told her I was going to get a tattoo with her face and the word "Don't."

Her first diagnosis is anxiety. Her second is paranoia.

Even if I did invite anyone into the trailer, Aunt Tina would be there. She has agoraphobia, which is when people can't leave their house. Aunt Tina looks like Tinkerbell, fragile and fairy-like. She has a soft, fluttery voice, the sound of petting a kitten.

She used to be a teacher. She used to paint her nails colors called Sassy and Spoiled and Don't You Just Know It. But after there was a shooting at her school, she just wasn't able to do anything anymore, and then she wound up here with us.

"Do you want to try to go for a walk?" I ask her. I try every day. It's a beautiful day, the sky the color of turquoise jewelry.

She shakes her head. From the window, she can see a few of the trailers across the street, bird feeders shimmering with ruby-red liquid. Soon it will be so hot that even the shadows will hide.

I'm not supposed to know things about the green trailer. But my mom has an app that shows her where all the bad guys live, as if she isn't stressed and paranoid enough already. And the guy who just moved in is on that list, named after a dead girl, for something bad, for something they warn us about at school.

"I'm going to Cassie's," I say.

My aunt offers an uncertain smile. "Have fun, Becca."

My friendship with Cassie is another one of those thorns between me and my mom. My mom says we are just passing through, but that Cassie's family lives here.

Again with the denial.

I ring the bell. I can hear canned laughter on TV. Her sister answers, fingers and the tip of her nose glowing with the dregs of a bag of Cheetos.

"Cassie's not here," she says.

"Have you seen these yet?" I asked. I hold up a flier. It shows a mug shot with the words "Do you know a sex offender lives here?" It lists his weight, height, and the address of the green trailer.

"No, I haven't seen this," Stacey says. "Thanks."

"BOO!" a voice shouts from behind me.

"DON'T scare me like that!" I shout.

"Did you think he got me?" she asks. "Do you really think I'm that dumb?"

Even if I did think she was dumb, she's got thirty pounds and six inches on me and I wouldn't be dumb enough to admit it.

We wander, tracing figure eights and circles. She posts a selfie of us outside the decaying laundry room. We smell cow manure, pesticide, and forest fires. We are downwind of all the damage.

We wind up in front of the green trailer, just looking. There is nothing to see.

Until the door opens.

"Good morning," he says, with a voice as smooth as that of a game show host, slick and you better watch your step. "Can I help you?"

"Uh, no," stammers Cassie.

"Can you help me?" he asks. "Someone left this on my door," he says, holding up one of the fliers. "There are probably more. Can you pick them up?"

"Sorry," I say. "We can't."

"That's not very nice," he says. "You see, I can't leave." He gestures at the large bulge of an ankle bracelet on his leg.

"I know where you live," he says to me. He points at my trailer. "And since you all put those out, it's right that you pick them up."

"We didn't put those out," I say.

"Well, someone did," he says.

"Becca," a voice says. This is a different, unfamiliar voice, full of authority.

It's Aunt Tina. She is standing at the edge of his yard.

"Becca," she repeats. "Get back here *now*."

Her voice is holding a gun, and she's pointing it right at him. I walk away. Cassie trails me like a lost puppy.

To him she says, "That's enough."

"I just want to be left alone," he says.

"Then leave us alone and we won't have a problem," she says in her teacher voice, the *because I said so, don't mess with me* voice.

I go back into our trailer. I look out the window she's stared out of hundreds of times, the window with no bars but feels like a jail anyway, and I watch her. She doesn't come back inside. She sits on the porch, sun on her face, a slight breeze lifting her hair.

Aunt Tina likes her eggs hard-boiled, toughened first in scalding water and protected by the shell, with just a little salt for flavor. She forgot that for a while, but she's remembering it now.

El Paso

ANISA MARMURA

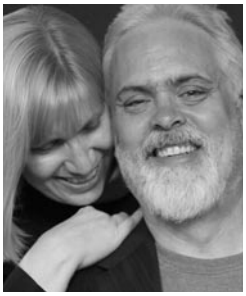
Jenny was a total soak. Never left a barroom, elbows collapsed and sticking to the countertops, (fleshy pads of stranger's fingertips pressed heart-shaped imprints into the tacky beer) dry. Never left a bedroom, bottles tucked under the bedsheets (glass tops glazed in sugar and saliva), dry. Never left her best friend's West Texas kitchen, with coffee-stained walls the color of a crisped, fat salmon, dry. The summer she lived with her best friend Mary May and Mary May's husband in a sooty suburb outside of El Paso, Mary and husband put a lock on the liquor cabinet. Jenny drilled a hole through the wall of the cabinet beside it, moving aside neatly stacked cans of brown baked beans, tuna, coffee, and creamed corn. Jenny always knew that they were preparing for the end. The end of the gold sky that bathed their home. The end of their squirrelly and sweet love. The end of El Paso. Through the hole in the wall she began suckin' back bottles of tequila, Rebecca Creek whiskey, Peach Pie moonshine; whatever else her sinning, trembling hands could reach. She'd sit there, sweating like a sow on the peeling away stick and peel, pickle green countertops; and soak until she was as juicy and ripe as the peach on the frosted glass bottle by which she was deluged. She felt the birds on the wall clock above the kitchen table gyrate with every hour that passed. If sober enough at 5:00 she'd peel herself off

the counter and crawl to the guest bedroom where she lived. She'd lay atop the cool comforter in front of the dust sputtering fan. It was just about 5:20, Mary May'd be home real soon from her job at the bank with a doggy bag full of sweet ribs and macaroni salad. Mary May always made her own slaw with low fat mayo and would wash down her dinner with a Diet Coke. Mary May's long, almond shaped, taffy pink nails made a stunning snap when she pulled the tab on her Coke can. Jenny shifted on the comforter, an idle attempt at escaping the Texas sun, pumping heat through the cracks in the blinds. Unable to fight her listlessness, she'd fallen asleep leaking like a busted old engine on the bed. The perfume that rested delicately on her wrists and throat, the booze that flowed through her body and seeped out of her gaping pores, and the sweat that exuded, all pooled at her resting place. She stained the slippery polyester bed with the bile, exhaust, and mistaken tenderness that shrouded her that summer. Jenny hoped to be sacrificed. The next day she realized she'd slept through the tip-tapping of Mary May's nails on the Coke can, the crinkle of the brown paper when she'd pulled her meal out of it. In the wake of missing this routine pleasure, she felt miserable. Whatever God-forsaken shred of comfort she had left had been snatched away when her eyes shut in resignation. The birds on the wall clucked along all afternoon, singing for the sun that never missed a beat. She stayed on top of the comforter on the bed again that day, repenting in haze. At 5:24 she heard the screen door slam, the bag crinkling, and Mary May's nails cracking open her Coke can. That summer, Mary's movements sounded like angels singing. She could imagine Mary May parked in her blue fold-up chair, leaning against the chain-linked fence in the backyard. Sun hitting her nails, shining with the promise of another hard day's work and cutting through the heat, charming even the cosmos, growing along the fence. She smiled and soaked in the sounds of her best friend. She stayed layin' where she was. Jenny was ripe, ready to be plucked, nearly sour. That summer, the bugs were enchanted by her pungency, and pleaded with her skin for a drink. Mary May could smell her out in the garden. Jenny's scent bled, reaching all the way 'cross the border to Mexico.

Contributors

Chris Arthur is an Irish writer currently based in St Andrews, Scotland. He's author of several essay collections, most recently *Hidden Cargoes,* and has published in a range of journals on both sides of the Atlantic. His awards include the Akegarasu Haya International Essay Prize and the *Sewanee Review's* Monroe K. Spears Essay Prize. Further information about his writing can be found here: www.chrisarthur.org.

Heather Bartos writes fiction and nonfiction. She has had essays in *Fatal Flaw, Stoneboat Literary Journal, HerStry*, and elsewhere, and upcoming in *McNeese Review*. Her flash fiction has appeared in *The Dillydoun Review, The Closed Eye Open, Tangled Locks Journal*, and other publications, and also won first place in the *Baltimore Review* 2022 Micro Lit Contest. Her short stories have appeared in *Ponder Review, Bridge Eight, Relief: A Journal of Art and Faith*, and elsewhere.



John Brantingham was Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks' first poet laureate. His work has been featured in hundreds of magazines, *Writers Almanac* and *The Best Small Fictions 2016*. He has nineteen books of poetry and fiction including *Life: Orange to Pear* (Bamboo Dart Press). He is the founder and editor of *The Journal of Radical Wonder*. He lives in Jamestown, NY. *Photo credit: Alexis Fancher*

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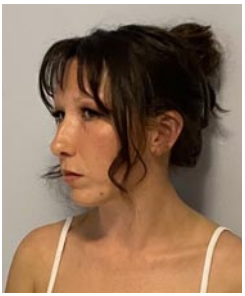

Anisa Marmura is a writer and artist working on a collection of stories exploring desire, femininity, domestic adventure, and reclusion. She spends her time traveling, writing, and working odd jobs.

Brendan McLaughlin's stories have appeared in *Menda City Review*, *OBELUS*, *Crow Name*, and *Kairos Literary Journal*, which named him runner-up for their 2020-2021 Editors' Prize in Prose. He is the author of the forthcoming Young Adult novel *GlowFish*. When not writing fiction, Brendan provides editorial services to conservation and human rights organizations. He lives in Seattle.

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Australian by birth and Montenegrin origin, Pavle Radonic has spent eight years living in SE Asia. Previous work has appeared in a range of literary journals, including *Ambit, Big Bridge, Panoply, New World Writing Quarterly, Citron,* and *Antigonish Review*. In the 2019 inaugural issue of *Orca* an earlier piece of his appeared.

Joanne Rush is an award-winning short story writer, a poet, and a youth theatre director often found running frantically around medieval Balkan castles. Her work has been published in anthologies and journals including *Best British Stories*, *Northern Gravy, Across the Margins,* and *Ghost: 100 Stories to Read with the Lights On*. Joanne lives in Wiltshire, England, where she is currently editing her debut novel—a tale of art, identity, and secrets. Website: JoanneRush.co.uk; Twitter: @jonicolarush

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Michele Suzann's work has been published in/at *FENCE*, *The Write Launch*, *Vol. 1 Brooklyn*, *The Rupture*, *Always Crashing*, and *Bellevue Literary Review*, among others. She writes in California, where she enjoys birding, shooting firearms, and swimming in the ocean. You can read more fiction at https://www.michelesuzann.com/, or essays at https://michelesuzann.substack.com/. Currently at work on a novel about an alcoholic apple broker determined to corner the world market in organic Fujis. Hijackings are involved.

The Organs

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 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 many other Latin American magical realists), Ali Smith, and Julio Cortázar.

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 Millen-

nium 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

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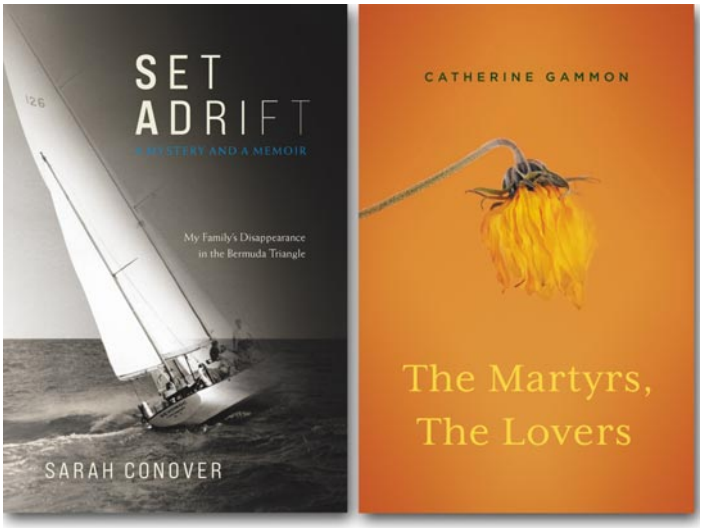

In January, 1958, a renowned sailing family was lost in a storm in the Bermuda Triangle. In Sarah Conover's mystery/memoir ***Set Adrift***, Sarah, suddenly an orphan, grew up never knowing her parents and grandparents. As an adult, she began to pursue the mystery of her family and their disappearance, and discovered that their stories were far different from the versions she was told. Conover's story follows the national media's investigation of the Revonoc's vanishing, and exposes the truths that led her to "unstory" the family history.

Catherine Gammon's novel, ***The Martyrs, The Lovers***, circles the mysteries surrounding the death of activist Jutta Carroll—probing her origin story, the rise to personal political stardom, and the fall into anxiety and public decline—all the while exploring the forces and motivations that drive political passion and activism, and the counterforces, material and psychological, that constantly threaten progress.

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