

Orca

A LITERARY JOURNAL



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THE LITERARY ISSUE

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Five years ago, Zac and I sat at a table in a local library with a group of people interested in starting a writers' group. We had not met before. At some point in the conversation I mentioned I was thinking about starting a new literary journal, having had some experience with a few others several years before. He asked if he could be involved. The writing group soon fizzled, but the journal idea gained traction. We kicked around a few names, and were amazed to discover that *Orca* had never been used for a project like this. Our own resident apex predators, symbols of intelligence and killer instinct? It seemed to be a good omen.

Five years and now fifteen issues later we are still at it. Perhaps the greatest testament to our efforts is that so many writers want to be part of the team. From experienced writers to interns, our *Orca* pod grows and wanes, as most journal staffs do. Some of our readers have gone on to very successful writing careers. All have become colleagues and friends, even though we are spread over several countries and two continents. There's something about publishing a journal that goes beyond the reading and deciding, the intense discussions about merit and style. It's not the ego that can come with publishing, and it's certainly not the money ('cause there ain't much). I think maybe it's the joy of having a small group of people who interact every day to share their love of creation and expression, a quality we don't see often these days.

Reason enough to keep doing it.

— Joe Ponepinto

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About the Cover Artist

Cover artist Jordan Ressia shares his art through both painting and performance. As a theater actor, he is currently in three shows, as well as children's theatre. But offstage he works alone in his loft workshop, expressing his artistic vision using acrylic paint applied with a spatula.

The result are artworks with unique textures that “give more body to the painting,” he says. “I have to leave control aside a little, since irregular spots appear when using them.” His paintings have led to shows in bars and coffee shop shows in his home city of Bahía Blanca, Argentina. He also has an ongoing collaboration with the Musa winery which has given him space to show his work as well as host “art & wine” events. His work also features on Musa labels. Other shows have been held in cultural centers and theatres, the most recent of which was a show covering the theme of “childhood” in the gallery at the Universidad Nacional del Sur.

Some of his artistic influences are well-known painters: Velazquez, Van Gogh, Picasso. Other artists whose work he admires: Agnes Cécile (Italian), Jenny Saville (English), Paula Bonet (Spanish), Guillermo Lorca (Chilean). Perhaps that's why he says he does not have a definitive style. He uses his painting to “channel not only emotions, but also to heal personal issues. Give me that space so I



Jordan Ressia

can reflect everything I feel, whether it's good, bad, sad, cheerful."

One ongoing theme in his work, however, is a focus on animals, particularly foxes. "Since I was very little I have had a kind of attraction not only for their aesthetics but also for their behavior. A colorful fact to add is that I spent many years in scouting, and during my time in the scout troop I belonged to the fox patrol." Samples of his work in foxes follow. He also highlighted two other important works. She: "This work is very special to me because it contains the memories of a love and the pain of no longer sharing it. Tomorrow: "Sharing moments with someone can be very important," he says. This work was based on a photograph. By translating it to painting Jordan created the "added bonus of what was felt and always will be felt."

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More about Jordan Ressia on Instagram: @jordan_ressia
behance site: <https://www.behance.net/jordanress83cb>. Additional examples of Ressia's work are on the following pages.

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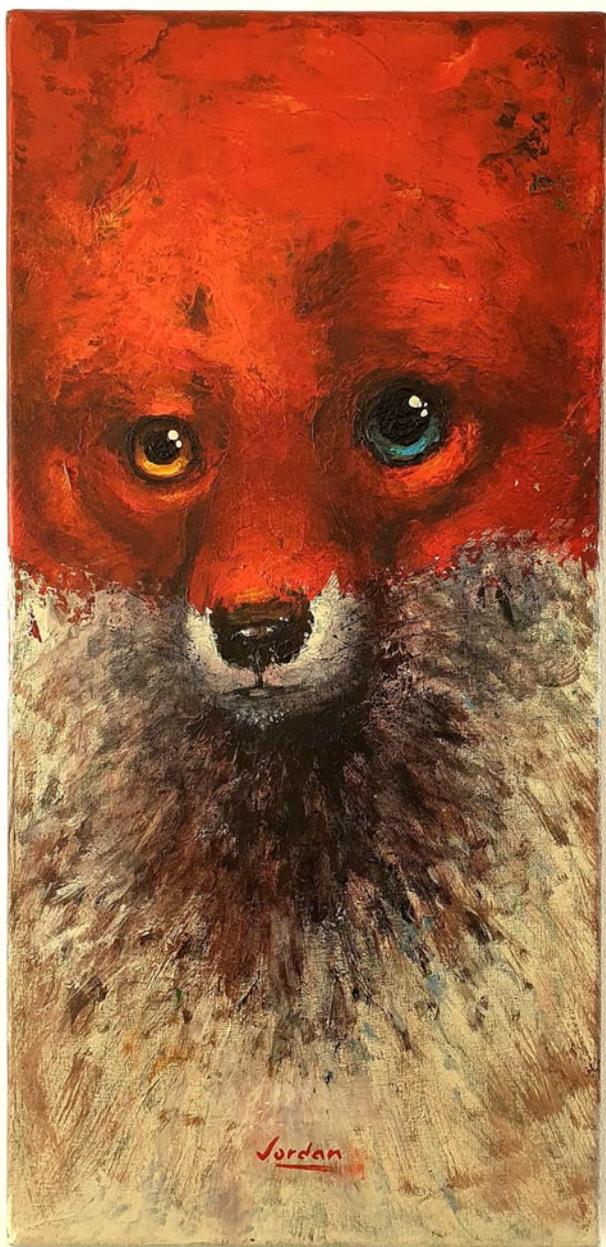
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About the Cover Artist



About the Cover Artist



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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.

The Throw Home

SIAMAK VOSSOUGH

The other parents didn't understand it. All they knew was that Danny's father sat by himself silently, and Coach Deal never stopped talking to Danny on the field. It didn't make any sense. They knew shortstop was an important position, but Coach Deal had something to say for every batter. It was true that Danny was the star of the team. He covered ground like he and the ball were old friends, like the ball went looking for his glove each time. But it was so strange—Coach Deal talking the whole game and his father sitting there quietly.

Maybe he didn't know much about baseball. It was hard to imagine about anybody in Sila, but he didn't ease into a Saturday afternoon like the other fathers. Nobody said anything about it though because Danny was too good.

They all looked for the father's reaction when Danny made the play that everybody ended up remembering all season. It was against Henwood. They had a man on third when the batter hit a dribbler to short. The runner should have gone, but he was scared of Danny's arm and hesitated. Danny charged it and barehanded the ball. He looked for all the world like he was going to throw to first, but he switched his arm angle and threw to the catcher. The runner had wanted to make up for his mistake and was making a dash for home.

He was going too fast to even get caught up in a rundown. The catcher took three steps and tagged him out.

Grown men looked around Washburn Park so that they would not forget where they had been when they had seen it. Several could only laugh. You needed to use your eyes to see things. That was the presumption they had always worked under, but Danny called it into question.

When they did look over at his father, they saw him smile and clap. Coach Deal went wild, attaboying Danny through the rest of the inning.

When the father saw the play, he forgot about Coach Deal for a moment. It was very brief, because he knew what Coach Deal's whooping and hollering was trying to do. It was trying to claim Danny, to say that what he had just done was on the side of the town and the life of the town, which included the police department, where Coach Deal was Sergeant Deal, and if that police department had come to the father's house a few weeks ago with ten men and guns drawn in the middle of the night, because they knew the father was driving out to Colby on Sundays to stand on the corner and say the police there shouldn't have killed the Black young man who played trombone, and if they had terrified the mother bad enough that she couldn't come to watch Danny play, and if they had just walked away afterwards, saying it must have been a miscommunication, if all that, then Coach Deal was still going to act as though what the boy could do was on *his* side, because it was baseball, it was Washburn Park, it was all the things the town was made of. He was going to be as loud as he wanted. He'd picked a night that Danny would be away with the travel team. He knew they wouldn't tell him because the boy loved the game and they loved the boy.

The father watched the game quietly because it took everything he had not to think that Coach Deal was right. Coach Deal's voice rang out in the afternoon like a natural part of spring. What other spring did the father have? What other spring than Washburn Park and the sound of the train going by and the little kids climbing on the boulders beyond the left field line? But the young man in

Colby wasn't going to have any springs, in Colby or anywhere else, and the father felt that his own spring was dead if he pretended otherwise.

"Here we go, Danny!"

It started up again when Danny was at bat. Coach Deal called out his name and took on a look of seriousness as though he was the one at the plate himself. The father was not going to compete with him. It was Coach Deal's setting. The whole town was his setting, really. Which was why he had to sit by himself to watch Danny. But what Danny could do wasn't his setting, however much Coach Deal yelled out his name. It wasn't the father's setting either. That was the thing. What it was was the chance that the young man in Colby had had to live. That's what it really was. It wasn't either of theirs. What Danny could do on the field was why he would be driving to Colby tomorrow to stand on the corner again with his sign.

Danny took two pitches, a ball and a strike, fouled one off, then sent the next pitch over the centerfielder's head. The father saw the kids on the boulder stop what they were doing to watch Danny run the bases for a triple.

You could watch him run and think that it was all going to be all right, you could tell yourself that maybe it *had* been a miscommunication, because it looked like it could be your town when Danny ran.

The father didn't know if they were doing that over in Colby too, if they were trying to scare the people who came and stood on the corner. He didn't know if he would tell them. They weren't exactly friends. They didn't know how to come together for a thing like that and be friends. They were too lost. They came for an hour or two on Sunday and went home.

Danny tagged up on a fly ball to centerfield and ran home easily. He may have slid just so the centerfielder wouldn't feel bad.

Coach Deal slapped him on the back and patted him on the head. Each touch made the father sink lower in his seat.

There wasn't anything to do about it. Coach Deal was going to coach the team for summer ball too. Nothing was going to happen

to the cops who'd killed the young man in Colby. They would still have spring afternoons. They could look at them as theirs. The father would keep driving to Colby on Sundays through the summer, for as long as the other folks were standing on the corner. He wasn't doing it with the hope that anything would happen to the cops. He was doing it because it was a decent place to go.

You couldn't tell Coach Deal that it wasn't just Danny that wasn't on his side. It was easy to see with Danny, but he wasn't the only thing. The whole game wasn't on his side, and the grass, the actual grass, which was not just baseball grass, the grass and the trees and the sky, which were all things a young man lost when he died, none of that was on his side, but you couldn't tell Coach Deal that when his voice rang out across the grass like a natural part of spring.

I'll take that other spring, the father thought. I'll take the one that the young man lost, whether or not I know what it was. I'll take it without knowing anything about what spring was to him. And I'll tell Danny that he's a part of that one, that everything he can do on the field is a part of that one. I'll tell him some day and he'll know what I mean.

It eased the feeling of watching Coach Deal claim the boy to know that someday Danny would know what the father meant. He watched his son back in the field and he saw Danny's understanding of that in the boy's body. The father saw it in every play the boy made the rest of the game.

12 The mother came to pick them up after the game. They didn't know how long she was going to be able to make excuses, but it made her sick to see Coach Deal near Danny. It sent her back to the night they'd come to the house. She had not been herself since. The father hadn't said anything to her about coming to the game, and she hadn't said anything to him about driving out to Colby, but they didn't know how long they could go on.

"Coach Deal asked about summer ball," Danny said as he got in the car.

"What did he say?" the father said.

"He said we have to get the form in by next week."

The father checked his pocket.

“I’ll be right back.”

He got out of the car. Then he turned and came back.

“Danny made a hell of a throw home,” he turned to Danny. “You should tell your mother about that one.” The father walked back to the field.

Coach Deal was carrying the bats to his car. The town was still his. It would have been his if they’d lost, but it was certainly his when they won.

That was my son, the father thought. That was my son out there on the field, and you can put him in your uniform, but what he can do out there is not yours. It is his own. You don’t know. You think I want to say it is mine. It is not mine. The young man in Colby is not going to have any springs, and what Danny can do out there is not mine.

Coach Deal smiled and greeted him.

“Hell of a play by your son.”

“I have a letter,” the father said. He took the letter from his pocket. “It is from an organization in Boston. They’ll pay for Danny’s summer ball, but the money will take a few weeks.”

Coach Deal did not look at the letter.

“That’s all right,” he said.

The sky was turning pink as the men who played in the softball beer league were arriving at the field. The father had once been one of them. It had been a nice thing to do on a Saturday, when Danny had been little and he could come and watch the father play. It didn’t matter now. You didn’t know that you were saying goodbye to certain memories when you drove to Colby to stand on the corner and say that the police should not have shot the young man. But you were. It was possible that there were more of them he didn’t know yet that he’d have to say goodbye to. 13

“Do you want to know how it works?” the father said.

“What’s that?”

“The organization in Boston.”

Coach Deal wanted to say no, but he could not. The throw home was too fresh in his memory.

“People all over the country write to them,” the father said.

Siamak Vossoughi

“They write to them and say, I tried to do something. Maybe it was the police coming to their house or maybe they got fired or maybe they had to leave town. They all say the same thing: I tried to do something, but never mind about me. Maybe they scared me enough and maybe they didn’t. Either way, never mind about me. I don’t need anything. Just let my kid keep doing the thing they love to do. Doesn’t matter what it is. Could be baseball, could be violin lessons. That’s how it works. They’re going to send the money for summer ball. It’s just going to take a couple of weeks.”

“You’re going to drive out to Colby tomorrow, aren’t you?” Coach Deal said.

“Yes,” the father said.

“You’re lucky your son can make a throw like that.”

The father laughed. He looked at the beer league players. They were greeting each other and horsing around. They were all right.

“I don’t feel lucky,” the father said. “I don’t feel lucky at all.”

“You’re lucky all right. If I had a boy like that, I’d know what to do.”

“What if you had a boy like the young man in Colby?”

“Go the hell home, Paul. Go on home before I start getting irritated.”

“You don’t ever think we would tell Danny about that night, do you?”

“You won’t. I know you won’t.”

147 “Maybe we won’t. Maybe we won’t ever tell him. But that doesn’t mean that throw he made is on your side. It doesn’t mean that triple he hit is on your side. What’s crazy about it—do you know what’s crazy about it? There’s not a single part of the whole game that’s on your side. I watched the whole thing. I sat right there and watched the whole thing. You can shout all you want. Doesn’t matter. You can yell all you want. I watched the whole thing. I watched the whole game and there wasn’t a single thing that any one of those boys did out there that’s on your side. I thought it was just Danny. I thought it was just Danny because I know him so well and I know who he is, but it turned out it was all of them. Even the Henwood boys. I can’t make sense of it for you. Every one of them

was doing something out there that was on the side of me driving out to Coby and *not* on the side of Danny's mother being too scared to come watch him play. You're going to have to make sense of it. You're going to have to figure it out."

"Go the hell home."

"All right. A couple of weeks, Coach Deal. The money's on its way. Look for the Boston postmark."

"I don't know anything about Boston. I was born and raised here."

"I know, Coach. Me too. That's the funny part."

It *was* the funny part. The father looked at the beer league players and he knew that some of them had played for Coach Deal as boys, and he knew what kind of feeling it gave them to see him now, like the game and the life of the town gave some shape to their lives, and it was a shape they could love on a Saturday afternoon at Washburn Park, and it made him very happy to know that none of that made what he'd said any less true.

*Off Hungry Junction,
Kittitas County*

CORINNE HUGHES

I don't want to let her pose for the scoundrel with her joy-drunk grin that splits the day in half.

She won't hook her arm on the cattle gate, falling back into laughter, the wind bends her knees.

16 She is what I pull down into sediment incoherent, the gravel drive dissolves under into a channel tucked by the old pasture, speckled and mottled, oh just as it was, the same colors as her knitted scarf dirtied by the mud, rusted rainbows in arcs, the fragrance cow dung, backroad oil, timothy hay. My palms gather stones to sharp and bleed—the flora to stuff into her mouth, the dregs of glaciers. Yes, she is choking and no, I will not let her go. I want to taste every grain of the old earth, basalt and sand, hold blades of grass on my tongue and swallow in textured gulps, fold the katydid in my jaws, tiny spines scrape my taste buds like nettle, if I could inhale roaring gusts.

Voice of Love

CORINNE HUGHES

the young crack open the holes in their bodies
at appalling levels of yearning to shake up existence

life, how the singer craves the listener, who craves the song,
the song at once nascent and immortal, cyclical and observed as
dependent and independent, a crux, a cairn, a coup de grace, a
headstone that reads we *are* here, no, we *were* here, no, we *will be*
here, no, we *were never* here, no

Painted Animals

HANNAH CAJANDIG-TAYLOR

—After John Edgar Wideman’s “Stories”

The International Union for Conservation declared the Spix’s Macaw *extinct in the wild* twenty years ago. What ornithologist spent weeks bug-bitten in the Amazon swamps, recording field notes on foliage & absent birdsong. What compelled them to choose this life. Does the macaw know this. Can a culled bird sense the Aegean Blue of her feathers gleaming in the 5 o’clock glow. Is she aware of the golden hour. The nuances of parakeets & warblers. How does a macaw squawk when no one is listening. Does it matter. How do they know the difference between lost & living discreetly. Does the macaw pray for her mother at moonrise. Does she know she’s blue. Who stays up at night reaching for satellites, mourns the macaw like an unheld children’s kite ripped from the sky forever. When I wander through the pet store downtown, among the bulbous-eyed goldfish & feathered things with claws, I stop to stare at a fleet of mice. There must be thousands of them.

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Previously Published in Trampset

The Pervert

HALINA DURAJ

Alice woke beside Ben from a dream in which she'd been dressing a deer—something she'd never done in waking life. But in the dream she knew exactly what to do, and she knew that the deer was Wendy—from-clinical-trials, even though it was also just a deer. She didn't dream about Wendy often these days, especially not here in southern France for Ben's sabbatical, but when she did, there was nothing to do but get up and get busy. Besides, there was plenty to do. Their guests would arrive that evening, and Ben wanted to make paella.

Alice dressed without waking Ben, made coffee, and went to the Saturday market. It was held in the town square; the castle wall bordered one side, and storefronts behind arched colonnades bordered the others. At the fish stand, a throng of customers pressed toward a glass case filled with fish and seafood on crushed ice. Alice stood next to a tall, blond man in a V-necked sweater and khaki shorts. He was coldly, symmetrically beautiful, like the actors cast as Nazi officers in World War II movies. He wore shiny leather loafers without socks and held his phone out slightly in front of his stomach. Smiling, he aimed it at the woman crouching in front of him, rearranging the vegetables and paper-wrapped parcels in a wicker basket at her feet. The intimacy in his smile suggested to

Alice that the man knew this woman, his wife perhaps, or his lover, though it was an odd moment in which to photograph someone. The bent woman's shirt rode up in back and her pants slipped low on her hips, revealing the tiny white triangle of her thong. In the breeze, the pink satin tag fluttered against her tailbone. The man held the phone out for longer than you'd need for a photograph. Alice glanced at the man's phone screen; she was close enough to recognize the red button of the video feature at the bottom of the screen.

The woman straightened, tugged her shirt down, and hoisted the basket onto her arm. Then she merged with the crowd and wove her way among the rows of booths. She did not acknowledge the man in any way. She did not know him, Alice realized.

Alice stared at the man, hard, until he glanced at her. When their eyes met, he looked away, but did not stop smiling. Go ahead, Alice thought, *look* at me. But he did not.

Alice plunged into the crowd of the market square, looking for a blonde braid. She moved and nudged and searched, finally spotting the braid in question at the cheese stand. Breathless, she squeezed her way beside the woman. "Excusez-moi," she said, then didn't know how to proceed. The woman looked at her with the polite, shuttered face of the French—it always made Alice feel boring until proven interesting. She knew her French was not good enough. She tried anyway: "An homme a faisait un cinéma de vos pantalons."

20 The woman raised her eyebrows, flared her nostrils. The cheese vendor smiled, looked at Alice, shook his head, then said something to the woman so rapidly Alice couldn't understand. But she understood the Frenchwoman's reply, accompanied by a short laugh and a shrug: "Les Américains, non?"

Alice's cheeks burned. "Pardonnez-moi," she whispered, and slipped back into the slow river of the market crowd. She had visited this cheese stand many times—the tiny rounds of herbed chèvre were divine. Now, she vowed never to go back. Not even for the chèvre. She worked her way back to the fish stand, glancing around for the pervert as she moved. She did not know what she would say to him, if anything.

She bought mussels and clams and left the market. She walked along the ring road, under the sycamores. She knew a shortcut but didn't take it. She didn't particularly want to get back to the apartment. The mussels and clams might begin to spoil, but Alice didn't care. So what if she got the shits, she thought, as long as everyone else at dinner got them, too.

Alice had never been inside the town's castle—it had been under renovation since they'd arrived, but its spires and turrets were visible from Alice and Ben's terrace, and it always impressed their guests.

Guests were something they nearly always had this spring in southern France. Everyone from everywhere had promised to visit, as if Ben and Alice had gone to France to open a special, private bed-and-breakfast just for their vacationing friends. Alice and Ben weren't on vacation, though. Not exactly. Ben had a semester's sabbatical from his research position at the university, and he was trying to finish his second book, a compendium of the latest treatments for cystitis. Alice was a freelance graphic designer, work she could do from anywhere, as long as they had a robust internet connection.

But Ben's med-school friends Ivy and Sergei were honeymooning in Paris, for Christ's sake. It would be rude not to host them, if they wanted to come. Alice had asked Ben: wasn't it strange to want to visit another couple on your *honeymoon*?

"I don't know," Ben had said. "Getting married in your fifties isn't like getting married in your twenties, is it? When you've been living together for a decade anyway?"

Alice and Ben hadn't had a honeymoon. He'd been in med school, and then there was his Ph.D. program and the fellowships and all the loans. They'd taken a long weekend in New York City after the wedding in her parents' backyard, upstate, and promised themselves that every vacation they took, the rest of their lives, would make up for it.

One of the reasons Ben and Alice had come to France was that their marriage counselor had suggested a change of scene. They'd begun seeing her three years earlier, after Ben's month-long affair

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with Wendy. Their counselor was concerned they weren't having enough sex, even for a couple in their fifties, married for decades, no children by choice. Go somewhere romantic, Fritzi had said. Sure, France, why not? (Alice had always wanted to go.) Shake things up, Fritzi told them. She flung her arms overhead, and her loose underarm flesh jiggled.

Ben and Alice had had no more sex thus far in France than they'd had in Bloomington. Alice usually fell asleep on the couch after dinner and went up to bed while Ben plunked away on his laptop. She woke before he did, and drank her coffee alone on the terrace, watching hot air balloons pass over town.

The balloons came all day, every few hours, from dawn to sunset, taking tourists on champagne-caviar rides in the sky. Sometimes they floated so low over the town's tawny rooftops and castle spires that Alice could hear the hiss and shoom of the gas jets, the tourists laughing and exclaiming; so low she could see that the baskets really were just baskets of woven wicker like the laundry hamper in their bathroom. One morning a balloon came down so low it passed just along Ben and Alice's terrace—Alice had been sunbathing in her practical one-piece swimsuit on the mesh chaise longue, and she had made eye contact with one of its passengers—a woman around her own age, holding a champagne glass in one hand and a strawberry in the other. They had both simply stared at one another—dumbstruck by the strange context. If the balloon had paused, Alice could have climbed over the potted rosemary plants lining the low wall of her terrace and stepped right into the basket. But it floated on, its passengers chatting, until it disappeared behind the corner of the building. Alice was glad she hadn't been sunbathing topless, though she'd never been inclined.

In a little cobblestoned street off the town square, Alice stopped at the window of a hat shop. Giant cartwheel hats hung at various lengths, creating a multi-colored arc of circles, all suspended from the ceiling. It was a stunning display, and Alice wanted to take a picture. She might refer to it in her work—recently she'd been designing ads for biotech companies, and their marketing directors favored bright colors and basic shapes. She dug in her purse for her

phone and then caught her reflection in the window: a middle-aged woman with frowsy hair, a calf-length cornflower-blue sundress, modestly cut, a panier of white-wrapped parcels on her arm. She looked—boring.

Inside the store, a Cleopatra-eyed shopgirl with long black hair and bangs cut straight across her eyebrows, looked up from her seat behind the counter, uttered a tight-lipped “Bonjour,” and disappeared into the back so quickly it seemed as if she expected Alice to take over the register for her. Alice found a table piled with the hats from the window and tried on the red one. It was as big as a bicycle wheel, the brim so wide and low it obscured her face. It was a day-at-the-races hat, an over-the-top hat. It was ridiculous. Where would she wear it back home? Or here, for that matter. She checked the tag. It cost as much as a nice meal for her and Ben at one of the fancier local places. With a bottle of wine. A good wine. And dessert.

She didn't need it. She loved it.

The girl took so long to emerge from the back that Alice considered just walking out of the store with it. But she didn't steal. She'd go in the back to find the girl; she'd leave money and a note on the counter. Or she'd come back later. She didn't want to come back later. She wanted the hat now. Just as Alice approached the doorway to the back of the shop, the girl appeared, smelling of cigarettes. Alice paid for the hat and wore it out of the store.

It was unnerving not to see beyond a few feet in front of her, with such a broad brim, but Alice also relished feeling hidden, anonymous. When she passed along the castle walls, and saw a large wooden door, usually shut, now slightly ajar, she paused. The workmen must have left this door unlocked when they left for the weekend.

She put on the cartwheel hat and pushed open the door. It took her into a courtyard, with a fine sand-colored gravel underfoot and ancient-seeming stone planters of dirt. Clear plastic tarps shrouded topiaries and shrubs. Scaffolding scaled the walls of a stately but rather ordinary building—ordinary in a run-of-the-mill French villa way—a peeling beige façade, faded apricot shutters on long windows, narrow stone steps to a narrow door. A glassed-in sunroom protruded from the face of the building.

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From here, Alice could not see the spires and turrets that so impressed their guests. This seemed like a servants' entrance or a delivery entrance. She had heard that the castle had become a school for many decades—part of the reason it had fallen into disrepair—and that was exactly what it looked like: a stately French boarding school, not the realm of princes and princesses or even dukes and duchesses. She slipped through the door to the street and left it as she'd found it—slightly ajar.

Further down the block, past the castle wall, the shops started up again. Alice lifted the brim of her hat occasionally to see her reflection in a window. In one shop, her reflection mingled with an array of skinned rabbit carcasses hanging by their hind legs from a dowel. Alice remembered her dream and studied the striated carcasses for several moments. In another storefront, she encountered her reflection superimposed on a blonde man in a V-necked sweater, seated at a table with an espresso, swiping the screen of his phone.

Alice had passed the café many times on errands and jogs and evening walks with Ben. It opened onto a tiny plaza with a fountain; Ben and Alice sometimes bought gelato from a shop down the block and sat on the broad edge of the fountain to eat from their cups with tiny spoons.

She recognized the pervert at first by the color of his sweater—that wine-blood red. He splayed his legs in a casual, unselfconscious way: one leg slightly bent, the other extended. His basket of produce sat on the floor, the tip of white paper-wrapped fish stand purchase poking out from between celery stalks, a cluster of radishes, a bunch of dirt-encrusted beets.

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Alice entered and sat down at a table near his. She placed her hat on her table; it nearly covered it. The café was shabbier than the other cafés in town. It had wobbly tables and white plastic stacking chairs. The floors were brown and beige linoleum, the walls were mirrored, except the back wall, which had the few requisite and clichéd vintage French café posters—Le Chat Noir, Le Moulin Rouge—one on either side of a door marked “W.C.”

A waiter not at all disguising his deep desire to be elsewhere

asked Alice for her order. She asked for an espresso and pastis with water. Then, hands beneath the table, she tugged off her wedding band and slipped it into her purse.

She stared at the pervert until he looked at her with an expression she couldn't quite decipher—mouth turned down, eyebrows raised. It could have meant, “So what if I did?” or “Why not?”

“*Excusez-moi*, monsieur, do you speak English?” Alice said. Two rows of tables separated them, with only one other customer, a white-haired man with glasses low on his nose, reading *Le Figaro*.

The pervert said yes, he spoke English. He said it with a smile that indicated he'd perhaps been about to say something to Alice himself and was pleasantly surprised she'd spoken first. His English was accented, though not with French. Something Scandinavian. Maybe German.

“I couldn't help noticing your phone,” Alice said. She put her own phone on the table. At the Verizon store, before they left for France, she'd traded her glitchy iPhone 7 in for the same model, only new. She laughed when the young, highly tattooed sales kid tried to sell her a 14. Don't waste your time, she said, and he didn't.

Now, she asked the pervert, “Is that the 14? I've been thinking of getting it.” She would let him bring up the fish stand—or not.

“It is, madame,” he said. “And I like it very much. The camera is superior quality.” He smiled. His teeth were stained yellow, as if he'd been a smoker for a long time, but it also gave him a wolfish quality. Alice found herself slightly, unsettlingly attracted to him.

The waiter waited for Alice to move her hat to an adjoining table, set Alice's espresso in front of her, then returned with the glass of pastis and a carafe of water. She nodded her thanks.

“Would you mind if I looked at it? I wanted to try it out before I got it, but you know how they are in the stores—you don't get to play with the phone much before you decide.”

“May I join you?” he asked, rising slightly from his chair.

“Of course!” Alice caught the waiter's eye and asked for another glass for the pastis. The man sat in the chair opposite hers and placed the phone on the table between them. It was in a dark gray rubberized case, the kind intended to let you drop the phone off a skyscraper.

The man tapped his code into the screen, then pushed it toward her. “Try it yourself. Perhaps there’s something you’d like to photograph?”

“Oh, there is,” she said. Was she imagining that he’d glanced at her breasts? Her dress wasn’t revealing but it did have a sweetheart neckline. When she leaned forward a bit, it could be suggestive. When the waiter set the glass on the table, she nudged it toward the man.

“Jens,” the man said. “I’m Jens. I saw you at the market. But you did not have the hat.” He smiled.

“Alice—un,” Alice said. “Alison.” It was a lame pseudonym but he didn’t seem to notice her hesitation. “Yes. I see you got your fish.”

“You disappeared—I thought perhaps you disapproved of my...cinema.” He smiled.

“Au contraire,” she said, smiling back. “I found it rather...erotic. I actually ran after your movie star to suggest the three of us have a ménage a trois.”

“You joke,” Jens said.

“Yes.”

“You do not approve.”

“Let me put it this way,” she said, looking down and then up, and leaning forward a bit so her neckline dipped. “It’s not that I don’t approve. I just think a woman—a person—has a right to enjoy being photographed. I mean, some women might like it, might be flattered.”

“It is a lovely place, the market. Hard not to photograph it. You know. To enjoy later.” Beneath the table, Jens brushed her leg with

26 his.

Alice couldn’t help recoiling, just a little bit, but he didn’t seem to notice. She smiled warmly, to counteract her body’s reaction, just in case. He lifted his glass to toast. Alice lifted hers, and they clinked.

She leaned her elbows onto the table. She knew the motion emphasized her breasts, even pushing a little cleavage up into the neckline of her sundress. Alice was fifty-ish, with everything that entailed—sunspots on the skin over her breastbone, lines in her neck and across her forehead and around her eyes—but one thing

she knew she still had was good breasts. She always had. Not too big, not too small. Firm and pert. Better than Wendy's—Ben had told her so. She made him swear to it with his hand on his mother's death certificate.

The pervert took a long look. Alice made sure her legs were out of reach of his, tucked hard under her chair, but she let him look at her breasts. Jens looked up at Alice's face and then again at her cleavage. She knew that trick—a test. If she didn't protest now, she wouldn't protest a more active advance later. She gave a small, cool smile.

She picked up his phone, tapped the camera icon, and then reversed its view so that she saw her own neckline as if in a mirror. She took a picture. She passed the phone back to him.

Jens flushed as he stared at the screen. He shifted in his seat and took a sip of his drink.

“I'm going to try a few more,” she said, plucking his phone back from his hands. She smiled. “In the restroom.” He started in his seat, as if he were going to join her. “Alone,” she said. He nodded, smiling in a way that told her he was getting hard, right there under the table. She stood up. Alice thought he understood her plan: that she was going to the bathroom to make him a gift, a gift he thought he'd look at on a screen later, with her in his apartment, before he groped under her dress for the image's three-dimensional, warm-blooded counterpart.

She walked among the tables slowly and up the aisle with extra swing in her hips, so her dress would swish and sway around her knees. At the doorway to the restroom, she glanced back. Of course he was watching her, his legs splayed now at her table as they had been at his own, one hand in the pocket of his shorts, the other laid flat on the tabletop. When he saw her looking, he smiled and curled his index finger through the ear of her empty espresso cup. 27

In the bathroom, she scrolled through the camera roll and deleted the video of the golden-braided woman and her thong. Then she deleted the photo of her own cleavage. She swiped through earlier photos: a woman with short, dark hair and bright red lipstick gazing frankly into the camera; a child on a tricycle; the

dark-haired woman with same child on her lap, sitting at a picnic table; Jens with his arm around an old woman with curly white hair in a wheelchair; a woman in a slightly sheer dress, panty-lines visible, walking ahead on a city street; a pixie-haired blonde woman at a café table, looking down at her phone, her bra strip slipping down her arm; the dark-haired woman without make-up, her bare breasts spilling over her forearm tucked beneath them as if in support, her eyes closed and unpainted lips pursed.

Alice deleted all the photos of women taken from afar. She went into the “Deleted Items” folder and trashed everything in it. There was probably a way to recover these photos, but she’d make him work.

Alice hurried down the aisle between the wobbly table, worried that she’d been gone too long. But while Alice had been in the bathroom, two young women—late teens or early twenties—had come into the café, also with their market baskets, in flimsy spaghetti strap dresses and strappy sandals. Jens watched them, and even though Alice did not have children and neither she nor Ben had ever wanted them, she felt as if these two girls could have been her daughters. She wanted to run over to them and wrap their bare arms, their exposed clavicles, in angora blankets.

She had intended to lay the phone on Jens’s table, sweep up her panier, and say, “Thank you. I am going to meet my husband now.” Instead she swept her hat off the table, stepped over Jens’s outstretched leg, and ran out. She hurled his phone into the fountain at the center of the plaza and kept running.

28 She couldn’t go home—she didn’t want him to know where she lived. She clamped the hat between arm and ribs and sprinted with twists and turns at every corner, in case he tried to follow. She ran to the edge of town, looked over her shoulder, and let herself relax a bit. She walked the roads between the fields in a rough perimeter of the town. She checked frequently if Jens was following her but saw no one. She slipped back into town through a street that she knew would bring her to the castle’s side door. As she pushed it open, she remembered her groceries, still resting on the café floor.

“Oh fuck it,” she said. She took out her phone. She had several texts from Ben—reminders of paella ingredients, then some last-minute market requests: “More olives! From the good place!” And then: “Hey, where are you?” Then: “Why aren’t you responding? I tried calling.” Then: “I’m starting to worry!”

She responded: “Sorry! Didn’t hear it ring! Fish stand out of seafood. Went to Petit Casino for frozen stuff!” Alice had always loved the name of the grocery store down the street from their apartment—as if every trip to the market was a little exciting, a little bit dangerous: maybe she’d hit it big, maybe she’d lose everything.

Footsteps and voices on the sidewalk on the other side of the wall reminded her that if she’d found the castle yard, so could others. She looked around for where to hide. The urns were big but effective only for a passing glance—anyone with half a mind to search would catch her in a crouch. She climbed the steps to the door of the glassed-in porch. If the gate had been unlocked, perhaps...

But no. The workpeople had not been so irresponsible as that. She looked up. She saw three high specks—hot air balloons drifting. She wished one would dip low and whisk her away. Then she noticed the scaffolding. If any upper-story windows were open, she could crawl through them, hide in the castle.

She hid her hat behind a shrub, slung her purse across her chest, and began climbing. At first she was tentative and prepared to leap at the slightest sign of give, but the slender aluminum poles proved surprisingly sturdy. Soon she was climbing confidently—she kneeled on the first platform for a moment, then climbed to the second. None of the windows were open. She kept climbing. There were two more above her, and she climbed to the highest one. The windows there were locked as well. “Fuck,” she said aloud. “Fuck.”

The platform swayed a little under her weight, and her heart jackknifed, but she pressed her back against the stripped plaster of the castle wall, her legs straight out ahead of her, and her eyes up. The edge of the sloped roof was mere inches above her head. Here, she was level with treetops; through some gaps among the trees, she could even glimpse the streets below. She sensed she could be safe up here—Jens probably would not think to look up, and even if he

did, the platform would conceal her. She kept an eye out for wine-red sweaters, blond hair, but the only people she glimpsed were women, or were dark-haired, or, if blond, wore colors other than red.

She saw him. He was walking in the direction of the castle walls, looking all around, his hands in his pockets in an affectation of sauntering. No, he was hunting. Then a tree obscured him. Instinct pushed Alice to flatten herself. The platform was roomy—the length and width of a dining table meant for twelve, maybe more. She eased herself from sitting to lying, keeping one hand on the rough wall of the building and the other flat on the plywood. She gazed up. Clouds crossed over. After a while, more hot air balloons. She felt the sun on her ankles, her shins. Odd—she had just felt her heart slamming, and her mind told her she was still in danger—she'd angered an unpredictable, maybe predatory, man—but now her body felt more exhilarated than alarmed. She hiked her dress up. Sunshine kissed her knees, her thighs, her face.

She heard a text ding. She jerked. If the pervert came into the courtyard, her phone would give her up. She slid it from her purse, switched it to silent, and checked her texts. Ben: “Shit! They got here early. Where are you????”

She rested the phone on her stomach, pulled her skirt higher. The sun warmed the skin over her pubic bone through her lace underwear. She closed her eyes and listened to sounds from below: the distant murmur of village life—voices, a polite honk, dogs barking, laughter. She began to feel drowsy.

A while later, another ding: “I’m taking them out for a walk on the town. Something’s up—they’re being weird! When are you coming back???”

30

She opened the camera app and positioned the phone, camera in mirror mode, over her underwear. She was glad she'd worn the good lace ones today—purple with tiny yellow bows at the points of her hipbones. She snapped a photo and sent it to Ben.

She read “Delivered” in tiny blue letters beneath the photo. Then gray bubbles indicating he was writing something in response, but then—nothing. She waited.

She heard fluttering and flapping and then with a start that

made her jolt the platform, she saw two pigeons settle on the edge of the roof, a few feet above her ankles. The pigeons peered at her with their dark shiny eyes, their necks cocked. One of them cooed in a gurgly way. They seemed to be watching her to see what she'd do next. She laughed. "Perverts," she said.

Suddenly, Alice knew she wanted to get home before anyone else did. She wanted the place to herself, even if just for a few minutes. She straightened her dress, peered over the edge of the platform, and descended the scaffolding carefully. She opened the gate very slowly, peered out cautiously, and slipped out of the courtyard.

She passed the rabbit shop, then backtracked. Not only would she nix the paella, she decided, she'd try something new. Then, with a bag full of rabbit meat and the butcher's hand-scrawled instructions, she ducked into Petit Casino. When she pulled her wallet out of her purse, she remembered her wedding ring and slipped it on. The cashier frowned but said nothing. And everyone thought the French were so blasé about such things, she thought, smiling. Then she skulked the streets, keeping an eye out not only for the pervert, but also for her husband and friends.

She checked her texts in the stairwell of their building. From Ben:

"Where are you? WTF?"

And then: an eggplant emoji.

Alice smiled. Maybe they'd finally have some news for jiggly Fritzi after all.

She seared the rabbit meat in olive oil as Ben texted her updates from the town tour: While Sergei visited a café bathroom, a teary Ivy dished—she'd caught her new husband swiping this way and that on Tinder in their Paris hotel room, and when she confronted him, he dismissed it as "just an old habit," and "nothing to worry about." Ben was incensed on her behalf ("Just an old habit?! They've been together ten years!"), but also was trying to comfort her. He wasn't sure if they'd stay the week, or the night. Ivy was a *mess*, he wrote. And frankly, he'd never liked Sergei, never trusted him.

Alice wrote back occasionally, between chopping the herbs and

stirring a simmering broth. She felt sorry for Ivy, of course, and a little frisson of evil pleasure that Ben was getting a front-row seat to the kind of thing her own friends had talked her through, years ago. Ivy and Sergei would figure it out, or they wouldn't. Ben had already given them Fritzzi's number—maybe she could do video sessions with them in Des Moines, Ben wrote.

Alice responded with appropriate gusto—"No! He didn't!!"—but she felt pleasantly outside of the drama. Ivy was Ben's friend. She was mostly just relieved it wasn't her this time, her and Ben. Then she felt it—they'd gotten through it. Maybe Ben thought they'd gotten through it long ago, but Alice knew it was only now, only today, only relative to some other couple's crisis did she feel their solidity, their togetherness. Something might yet rend them but it wouldn't be what happened with Wendy. Alice poured herself another glass of wine. Then she turned up the radio—a local station that played Johnny Hallyday almost exclusively—and danced a little in the fragrant, steamy kitchen.

She took a tray loaded with plates, cutlery, wine, and wine glasses up to the terrace to set the table. When she passed through the bedroom, she saw her big red hat on the foot of her bed. She set the tray beside it and picked up the hat. She stepped onto the terrace with hat and wine. The late afternoon gilded everything—the terracotta pots of herbs, the tile-topped table where they'd eat as couples in an hour or two, the chaise longue where she sunned herself some mornings.

32 She stepped out of her dress, stripped off her bra and underwear and stretched out on the chaise. She set her wine on the floor of the terrace and covered her face with the hat. When a cool breeze stirred, or clouds crossed the sun, her nipples hardened and the flesh of her arms and thighs goose-pimpled. Then the sun warmed her again. Over and over, a cycle of quiet, periodic warming and cooling, warming and cooling. She could have lain there forever, she realized.

"Hello!" she heard Ben call up the stairs. "Hello, Alice! Are you up there? We're back!"

"Down in a sec!" she called, without opening her eyes. "Just getting dressed!"

But she wasn't going anywhere yet. She'd let Ben get curious first—what was taking her so long? She savored the last rays of the afternoon on her breasts, her belly. She smelled rosemary so pungent she could almost taste it. She sipped her wine—a tart rosé, perfectly chilled—beneath the brim of her hat. The castle flags fluttered and snapped. Then—gas jets shoomed, faintly at first, then louder. Alice smiled. She didn't move.

A man whistled and hooted from the sky above; women's voices laughed and shushed. Everyone's a pervert, Alice thought, and opened her legs wide.

Rite of Spring

STEVE McCORMOND

There were still patches of snow
 on the ground that April morning
 when my father set the field ablaze
 to burn the thatch. No permit
 or burn plan needed in those days,
 no spotters, firebreak or wetline,
 just an old man with a cigarette lighter
 and leaf rake. A fickle breeze picked up,
 turned and turned again, fire moving
 fast now, burning with the wind. It raced
 into the yard, headed for the barn.
 Jerrycans, quarts of oil, mixed gas
 for the mowers, paint and turpentine.
 My father outflanked, running
 back and forth with sloshing buckets
 of water from the tap at the house,
 using his soaked flannel shirt
 to beat and smother the flames
 that leapt, shingle to shingle, up
 the barn wall toward the gambrel roof.
 I'd risen early, gone fishing—four small

rainbow trout on a stick to show for it.
Walking home, I saw the smoke, started
to run. By the time I got there, the fire
was out. My father's face carbon-black,
streaked with rivulets of sweat, soot
trapped in every crack and crease,
the whites of his eyes mad and shining.
How it must have galled him, that side
of the barn forever marred by a foot-wide
ribbon of char from foundation to eave,
constant reminder of his reckless nature.
A boy's chore to mop up, walk the field
for hot spots, glowing filaments, boots
kicking up puffs of grey-black ash.
In a few weeks' time, brilliant green
will burst from scorched earth,
just the way he'd planned.

Black Pontiac

STEVE McCORMOND

For years, a small white cross marked the spot near the old dump where the driver left the highway in a rainstorm, the car skidding into the ditch and hitting a pole.

Volunteer firefighters used the jaws of life to remove the body from the wreckage. The boy's father had what was left of the family sedan brought home on the back of a flatbed.

The broken windshield, a drapery of cracks, flapped against the buckled engine bonnet as the truck travelled with its grim load, showering the pavement with kernels of glass.

36

He insisted that it be placed on the front lawn, a reminder to the young men in the village of how dark it gets. There it sat, leaking red transmission fluid and oil on the grass.

His wife could see it from the kitchen
window when she washed the dishes.
The youngest daughter had to walk by it
to catch the school bus in the morning.

Every year on the anniversary of the accident,
the subject was raised: maybe it's time
to haul the wreck to the junkyard, let it rust
in peace, but the father wouldn't hear of it.

Keep your grief close. Never let it out
of your sight. The daughter, asking to be excused,
withdrew to her room to seethe in the cavern
of her long black hair. Her mother cleared the table,

the sink filling with water as near to scalding as she could bear.

Considerations of a Quality

SHANE KILLORAN

One January, while spending a weekend in the Harz Mountains with my wife, I came across a small dark volume tucked between *Die Verwandlung* and *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* in the one small bookcase in the tea room of the local hotel. The book stood out to me as the cover had no title and the spine showed no legible name, but it was written in English and relatively short. After the dimly lit dinner that night I took it back to our room but never made any attempt to read it during our stay as we spent our time in the basement sauna or going for long walks through silent and dull, snow-dirtied streets. With no real qualms I took the book with me when we left the town, but promptly forgot all about it once I was back to the usual habits of my life.

38 Some number of years later, during a brief and joyful period when we lived again in my family's old home outside of Vancouver, I gave this book (along with some others) to a childhood friend of mine with whom I'd maintained a mild correspondence throughout my time in university and the subsequent years in Europe. I had flipped through the book again at one point and found the majority of its pages to be taken up by academic essays, translated into English, on the demise of the Epic as a literary form. The subject held no life for my mind, but I had for a time kept the book among

my collection due to a healthy and superficial attraction to the hue of unknown 19th century Russian scholars.

The friend to whom I later passed it on, Daniel Meyor, was a young man who I'd never gotten to know particularly well. He was one of those people you meet occasionally who seem to live in a separate world from the one that was chosen for you; a world that is not necessarily interesting or exciting (and certainly not exotic), but fundamentally other and for some reason unknowable behind the closed doors of its apartments and the open hours of its days. (As an aside I will say I have made several attempts, when finding myself acquainted with such people, to break into their mysterious lives but discovered quickly that spending time with them does not seem to help).

He was of medium height, occasionally funny, black-haired and dark-eyed and ugly. He never gave an especially strong impression of intelligence, but he did give one of being unathletic. It was never exactly clear why we stayed in contact over the years.

I gave him the book because he had for a brief time studied literature before switching to languages. He took the book and the others with casual neutrality, and I knew that he would read their every word attentively, with no reaction and with no effect, as such were the qualities of his character. That day I cut short our lunch together to run errands that took me into the city, and we didn't speak again for some time. I left Vancouver shortly after.

Two years later, while sitting on the late train home from a contemporary dance class I had begun to take weekly, I found to my surprise that Daniel had sent me an email. Before continuing with the events that follow, I will copy here the contents of this email exactly as it was sent (if they seem strangely formal, perhaps 39 they are, but it is also true that Daniel never wrote or said anything without a hint of formality).

John.

It is, I think, common as a child to believe that life is full of secrets. What comes after is we grow up and have our realizations. When we're smart we get honest with ourselves, we shake off what is ridiculous, we accept reality. Have you done this yet?

Shane Killoran

Say someone were to have done all that by the time they were seven-teen. That would be maybe faster than the average, perhaps uncommon, but not unheard of. Would you have advice for this young person? Would you have anything more to say to them?

Where I am, it is very cold today. I would like to go outside because it is sunny, but I haven't yet and I do not know if I will. Very few people walk past my window. I believe today there is something I should say to you: It turns out that life is full of secrets. They are not the kind that we dream of as children, they are even less the ones we dream of as men. I hope John that you do away with life's eidolons, you have after all, helped me do away with mine.

Daniel

As a helpful note, I will say right out that the reader would be mistaken if they thought that me receiving such an email was in any way a common or a familiar circumstance. I was excited to have gotten a message of this kind and had no idea what to make of it. I had the decency not to ask immediately for an explanation but I was struck by the tone. I do not believe anyone in my entire life has ever said anything to me in a similar fashion, before or since. The words felt direct, sincere, mysterious and seemingly important, like those in a story.

Unfortunately, Daniel was reported missing two months later and I never was able to discuss it with him.

90 When he wasn't found, Daniel's family did not have a funeral but they invited relatives and close friends to their home to share memories. By the time this day came, Daniel's body had been discovered on the beach at Point Roberts. He had tried to get into ocean swimming and drowned in the distance one early March morning while a man and a wife and two young sisters watched their dog play in the surf (this is according to an article published three days later, which didn't choose to describe the scene as poetically as they could have).

The day came for what then became a funeral. Being dropped off by an hour-long taxi from the airport, I arrived at the event

earlier than I was wanted. I knocked and was greeted by an aunt who welcomed me in and apologized with a glass of lemonade before disappearing back upstairs. I then waited for some time in an ultimately beige sitting room on a cold couch while occasional voices called to each other down deeper halls.

I was not uncomfortable. At some point the front door opened next to me and a young boy entered. Closing the door unceremoniously but delicately behind him, the boy sat on a small bench and leaned over to untie his black plastic cleats. He was skinny and pale with a shaved blonde head and plain green eyes, he wore gray baseball pants and a yellow and white jersey. Only after removing his shoes and sitting up did he notice me, at which point he sustained by force a toothless, cheekful smile and walked down the hall and up the stairs in his socks.

As soon as he disappeared Daniel's mother, whom I'd met only a few times in my life, appeared to greet me. The aunt returned as well and there followed some murmuring and glass-clinking and soft-sounded time passing. Eventually from a silence his mother suggested that I could, if I wanted, look at the guest-house in the backyard where Daniel had lived for the subsequent four years. They'd left his things as they had been.

Of course I did this and passed across a small lawn. Opening the windowed door I found his space ordinary with little decoration. There was a sitting area with a small attached kitchen and next to this was a bedroom. There was little to comment on, the main room contained a couch facing a thick TV next to a small eating table, the colors were mostly brown and dark blue. The door I entered from faced the house, and on the other side of the couch was a window to the yard. 41

On the sill of this window were four books. These were the only items in the room that actually seemed to belong to Daniel. The first was a catalog of the important dresses of the last century, the second an ecological narrative of each month of the year on the east coast of the US, the third a financially focused history of the Knights Templar, and the last was the Russian literary book I had given him. Through the window there I could see an old fence, a

small path leading along behind the neighbors into some thicket, ancient soggy chopped wood and a patch of brown lifelessness under a tall pine which got no sunlight for grass or play. The overwhelming emptiness of the scene surprised and depressed me, and I suddenly found myself completely void of any energy at all. A sad refrigerator hummed and birds called from the suburban quiet.

Eventually taking back again my book, I considered that I might read. Leaning there against the couch I did.

Around three hours later I finished and left the yard through the side path beside the house. While walking and remembering again words and thoughts in shades of black, a young girl rode by on her bike, pressing pedals to pass in dark air above an empty street.

Diary of a Murder

ARTHUR MANDAL

They were all written in exactly the same kind of folio: a green, plastic-looking leather cover, A4, soft beige, lined paper inside, each one exactly one inch thick. Stacks of them (she must have bought the whole lot in one go), numbered in shaky felt-tip at the bottom of each spine, filling up a whole sun-warmed, dusty-smelling loft. Energy of a different kind, pushed up into the roof, energy no loft insulation was ever going to get back.

Always the same diligent, carefully-printed script, letters so clear it was almost difficult to trust them—only their volume restored faith in their credibility. The inks varied—sometimes even green and red flashed up in front of him—but the calligraphy remained the same, thoughtful, earnest, perhaps slightly ill.

David was surprised how quickly he gave up. Barely an hour into the first volume, he stopped to brush his teeth, and then went straight to bed. He didn't even remember forgetting the book until the following morning.

Sometimes, in the middle of the day, he looked up at the ceiling, perhaps to follow a fly, or spot a zigzagging crack across the pure, white expanse of painted plaster, and for a moment he thought of all the energy above him. It made him dizzy to think of all the details recorded, the sense impressions, the memories, the highlights

and low points and epiphanies, and the looming possibility that no one was ever going to read them.

There were years in which he suddenly plunged into the middle of them and read random pages, sweating and coughing furiously, unnerved by something he could not articulate. She said she had murdered someone once, and she never lied, but David never got past the first volume. Something blocked him, not so much a fear of discovery, but an inertia of sorts.

When he moved house, he took the diaries with him. When he re-married, he was completely open about the literal baggage he brought with him. Mary never opened a page. They went straight into a basement, where David hoped humidity would take over a responsibility he had never asked for.

It felt misogynistic to refuse to read a woman's life, but that is exactly what he did. On three separate occasions he called the police and asked them to take the documents away, but nobody ever came.

Long Live the Little Knife

STEPHANIE YORKE

1 Let the women keep silent in the churches.
Has the saint issued a retraction?

Did he sit up and say, on second thought?

Paris used to be fun. Not anymore. These days we go to Paris first to get it out of the way.

I guess it is still fun to ride around Paris in a closed carriage, peeking unseen through the window to study the fashions. What will people in my city be wearing in five years, seven years? Let's see. But if I try to take a stroll in Paris in the afternoon, I'm confronted on the sidewalk. Emboldened strangers lock eyes with me to offer the insults they used to cough over their shoulders.

We do still cut a profit on performances in Paris, as there are still many who want to hear a real soprano. However, we increasingly have to deal with patrons who jeer *chapon, chapon* as soon as I take the stage. 75

The apostle sat up, dusted himself off, and said, memorandum.

Sacred productions, even operas: attendance declines. It isn't just the junior singers anymore who are having trouble finding work. Respected, established altos and sopranos have begun to get nervous; many have left France.

Where to migrate, though. When in doubt, there's always Italy.

Or there always was. Italy has begun to cough certain insults over its shoulder. Though most of the audience in Italy remains appreciative: on Italian stages, during the curtain call, my director stands beside me to translate their praise. *Glory to the little knife, long live the little knife, well done, well done.* During my most recent tour, they still applauded with one accord. But between shows, when I was out walking, the one heckle. *Capone, capone*, softly intimated by a passerby.

Does it bear mentioning that this hurt my feelings. I guess I should have expected it. Whatever is in Paris will be everywhere in five years.

Everywhere, the newspaper-reading set convinced that women should sing our roles. These Gentle Readers muse to themselves. How could we have ever thought otherwise?

How could we have ever thought otherwise. Can a woman achieve purity of sound? Does she have the wind, the volume?

Recently a certain up-and-coming director invited me to sing lead. During our rehearsals, he was admonished by name in a weekly editorial.

I was subsequently dismissed from that production. The dress, which had been made to fit me, was altered. I was replaced by a woman soprano.

Her name is June.

2.

46 My niece knows she mustn't get those shoes dirty. She likes to make every landing a close call as she jumps over the mudpuddles that formed in last night's rain. Preposterous little creature, creating this difficulty for herself: working right at the edge of her ability when there's no need. Where the distance between puddles is too short to challenge her, she switches the position of her feet mid-leap to make the landing more difficult. Those shoes—no, those slippers, I think that footwear is mutable enough to be classified as an evening slipper—she knows she mustn't get her slippers dirty because she has been told, *careful with your new shoes, special for the big dinner.* Careful, special, mustn't. Imagine the consequences. Someone might raise their voice at you, preposterous little girl.

Long Live the Little Knife

Grandmother (my mum) really outdid herself in selecting my niece's outfit. The costly evening slippers are coordinated with a voluminous hair-ribbon, with both pieces set in relief by a simple dress and pinafore. I like the game of a pinafore very much: shaped like an apron, but made of fabric too valuable to perform the function of an apron, because the wearer can afford not to protect her dress with an inexpensive outer layer. If you're feeling especially cheeky, you can call the pinafore a garment of modesty.

Floof goes my niece's white pinafore over the mudpuddles. Up goes her lordly hair ribbon, a firmly-knotted double bow. Looks like mum tied that bow herself.

My mother's dress is a blanched shade of lilac, almost grey. It wouldn't be a good colour in daylight, but in this early twilight or under a burning chandelier or beside the dinner candles. Impeccable.

My niece is so focused on her leaps that she hasn't noticed us both watching her, until just now as Uncle's polished dinner boots come into her field of view. She looks up to where we two adults are standing, and we put our hands on our hips.

"She's growing like a weed."

"Yes. I think it's time to cancel dessert."

She is familiar with this bluff and does not react.

My niece swats at her arm: the evening sun gives way to the flies. I tink my glass with my hors d'oeuvre fork and lead my guests out of the back garden. Time to eat.

In the dining hall, the guests search for their placesettings, their names on tri-fold cards. Some struggle with the calligraphy; noted; I will not transact with this calligrapher again. Let's find our places, find our places. Are we all seated? A few stragglers. Egan, please stop talking to Lisente and take your seat. I think it, he hears me think it. He sits. Then the nanny-servant dashes in from wherever to sit beside my niece. There. Seated? Seated. And here come the table-servants with the first course on platters and in serving bowls.

I have built up a good coterie of dinner guests. Notice that I say coterie, not clique. While most of my guests are repeat guests,

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only a few feel secure in their position at my table. For most, the next invitation must be earned.

Oh god. We trialed the worst new guest a few dinners ago. I've already forgotten his stupid name, maybe my memory expunged it. What an inadmissible bore.

We'd invited this guy in as a replacement for Brucil and his new companion Marlette, who were too ill for dinner. Brucil is one of my most reliable attendees, and has declined my invitation only twice in seven years. I appreciate Brucil. I like it when invited guests reply promptly, and I like it when they reply yes, I will be there. I also feel that each guest in attendance should make a meaningful contribution to our merrymaking. After all, I show up to my party every time, and I consistently put in the effort to be a warm and welcoming host. You would never guess from my relaxed demeanour and apparent raucous energy that I have rehearsal early tomorrow morning, just like I had rehearsal early this morning. So you see, it's difficult for me to accept that you, Dinner Guest, have commitments that truly prohibit your showing up and being a good time.

Brucil's got new eyeglasses. They have thick ivory rims, which draw attention to his teeth; as he speaks and laughs, I feel like his teeth are galloping toward me across the table. He's a clotheshorse, so I must suppose these glasses are on their way into fashion. I'm not sure I like them, but I'll have to wait and let myself get used to seeing them on people before I pass judgement.

78 Besides Brucil, the other stalwart at my dinner parties is Egan. He is a deservedly well-regarded baritone, and we have often sung opposite one another. When I arrived in this city as a young singer, he gave me my first chance to make friends when he invited me to go boating with himself and four others. Before that outing, I'd never been in any boat smaller than a ferry. I spent my early childhood far inland, and, though I took my musical training in a town beside a bay dotted with rowboats, at that critical stage of my education days off were taken up by elective lessons to reinforce what I'd learned at lessons. Thus I had no previous experience of waterborne craft to help me guess why this boat moored to Egan's dock

had one very small paddle and a pole twice my height. Egan saw me trying to assess the small paddle, and he mimed erroneous paddling procedures while the other men tried not to laugh. Then he explained that the small oar was for minor course corrections. The boat would be propelled by pushing from the bottom of the canal with the long wooden pole.

The youngest fellow in our party, Egan's nephew, stood on the stern to pole us along. We four sat and drank pink wine and ate crustless asparagus sandwiches which the swans studied avariciously. We passed other floating picnics propelled by other nephews. Some of these well-dressed strangers would later hope to be my dinner guests, but at the time I was unsure of my demeanour and conscious of my manners and anxious because the water seemed to be climbing too high up the outside of the boat.

Three-quarters of an hour later, I'd begun to relax. Then we ran up against something underwater. I yelped, and they laughed: we'd only bumped against the weir that prevents picnic boats from floating on to where the canal joins the river. Egan's nephew got us turned around and headed back the other direction while my boatmates imitated my cry of distress. Egan could only take the joke so far due to the risk of straining his vocal cords, but the others were not singers and were free to do their best terrible falsettos. Once they'd made themselves hoarse, I asked, "is this what you're trying for?" and held a long cry-of-fear note. Then a swan honked. "Ah, here is my tenor come to save me."

So the running joke began. Egan invited me to his next dinner party. After pre-drinks (introductions, introductions: saying pleased to meet you while thinking to myself, you will remember the names, you stupid ass) we took our seats to be served our food. There at one extremity of the table was the baked head of the six-month lamb whose flanks we were about to drag through gravy. Egan's kitchen staff had placed savoury leaves to look like tears under the lamb's broiled eye. "I call it, the Sorrows of Young Wether," Egan explained.

"My heart is not easily moved," I countered, "yet I—I could almost weep."

After my blockbuster tour of *La clemenza*, I purchased my own big walled house between the other big walled houses along the canal. My first dinner party repartee to Egan involved roast quail and grapes and, to be honest, the joke didn't really land. Forgive me, I was finding my footing. Much better was the night my guests came into the dining chamber to find a pelt slung over my chair and a set of antlers mounted on the wall behind my seat. I explained that both pieces were imported from the Americas. They had come from a New World reindeer, and not just any deer: I asked my guests if they had ever heard of devil antlers.

In the intervening years, the running joke has had many instalments. I think Egan's parts have been better overall, though I wouldn't condemn my own. Last summer I let the joke go dormant, as I didn't want anything to overshadow the iguana. Most of my guests had never seen such a creature, or had only seen a dead one, stuffed. They were delighted by this fellow clinging on, putting picks in their shirtsleeves. Let me hold him, they said, it's my turn.

On the importer's advice I moved the iguana indoors in early autumn. We fed him leafy things and kept him in the warmest room of the house, but he still didn't survive. So I have decided to revive the running joke tonight as a replacement for the wonderful iguana. I told the table-servers in advance which succulent-looking dish to set beside Egan when they bring out the second course. The dish is placed just there, by his left hand, because although he tries to hide it, he is a southpaw, and will look to his left first and reach for that serving spoon. And, indeed: he scoops some onto his plate and takes a bite. Watch his expression go from *what* to *what in god's name*.

50 "Egan, is something wrong with the meat?" I ask from the head of the table, good and loud. The other guests go still as a frieze.

Then Egan knows the answer. "Boar taint. I think the issue here may be boar taint."

Some get the joke right away, and laugh. Others lag. What is boar taint, again? Oh yes, that's right. My mother sitting there by the candles in her blanched lilac dress understands right away, but she withholds her laugh until others are laughing. Then we all return to our meal. She takes up her fork.

Unless you made a conscious effort to study her, you'd never notice how skillful she is at pacing her bites. She has always chewed and swallowed just as the conversation returns to her, and this is regardless of the verbosity of her seat-mates. She can abide paragraph-talkers as readily as those who need question after question to nudge their answers out. Watch her load her fork tines, measuring each next mouthful to the gram so that she can chew and swallow without haste and be ready to ask her next question with an empty mouth. Her assiduous calculations run backward from the future: her interjection as she loads her fork will elicit a response long enough for her to chew her food so that she will have finished chewing before she must speak again. All as if unaware, as if by accident. When the servants come to clear the plates, she'll have eaten her fill, though she'll have left a few polite morsels uneaten to return to the kitchen as scrap.

When I was a child, she was firm about table manners. "It's not a race," she said. I guess I'd better clarify. She was firm about table manners when we had enough food to have meals per se. At times we were reduced to scarfing whatever we could as soon as we got it, and then she did not try to slow us down. She just stood over the table to stop us stealing from each other.

She hadn't grown up poor, herself. As she often said, "we had a connected chimney. My mother could play four instruments." Then a protracted fight between her father and her paternal uncle evolved into a falling-out between her father and her grandfather. "Spoilt windbag," my mother said of her father. I remember the sounds of her working, a slosh or a mallet strike as she adds, "He had it too good to know he had it good. He burned bridges as if that were his only source of heat. He got us disinherited. Disinherited means..." 51

Disinherited meant that she had to marry my father, whose whereabouts remain unknown. I don't have a distinct memory of his disappearance, as I was very little, and he was half-in, half-out for a long time before he left.

My mother was cook at a tavern. The tavern was near the only all-season road between the port city and the capital, and was one of three sensible places to stop if you wanted to divide the twenty-

hour journey into two days. The tavern she worked for was third in line for wagons travelling port-to-capital, and first in line capital-to-port. Wagoners coming from the port would choose her for a late supper knowing they had put more than half of their journey behind them, while those coming from the capital might stop for an early breakfast if they'd made poor time the day before. This meant long hours for Mum, who prepared those breakfasts and suppers to an exacting standard: "Keep in mind it's a lot of the same people travelling back and forth. If they get a good breakfast going one way, they're more likely to come back for supper going the other way, and if they get a good supper, well, you see how this works." She was a good cook, and, maybe more importantly, she was a good record-keeper. How much of what did we sell last year this time? She always had enough, but not too much, ingredient on hand. Lower overhead, lower prices. Patrons found the food even cheaper than they'd expected out in farm country. And the portions! Wagoners would press on near dusk, or rise before dawn, to do their eating at the best cheap tavern. My mother caused a profit to be made by the owners, and they spoke of their love.

Then came two wet summers in a row. What little harvest there was went to either the port or the capital, where food fetched higher prices. The all-season road that used to bring in tavern patrons now carried away the means of feeding them. Except for the mushrooms: damp weather meant more mushrooms, so my mother tried to fill out her menu with all things mushroom. The other cooks took the same approach, and of course local people were supplementing their diets by eating more mushrooms at home, so demand dogged supply.

52 One local forager, a jolly and forthright man who'd often sold to Mum for the tavern, died after a skirmish over a mushroom patch. Before he died, he lived for several days with a cavity in his skull, and told his children to tell everyone the name of the forager who'd struck him. The children complied with the demands of the ghost, and soon everyone knew the name. My mother didn't want to buy mushrooms from the other forager. She didn't want to.

During the first of the two wet summers, without knowing there would be two wet summers, my mother had to make deci-

sions. Her options were constrained by always having to convince the owners. "The best solution might have been to run the tavern at a loss for a little while, but I didn't have the say-so to do that." So, so, so. Increase prices, or decrease portions? She was always short of key ingredients. If she hadn't made such lovely meals before the shortages, the lack of this and that might not have had as much impact, but, as it was, patrons arrived with expectations which were not met: the favourite dish struck off the menu. Wagoners travelling port to capitol would lengthen their journey to eat at the third of the three taverns, or those going capitol to port would rise at daybreak to eat at the first, only to find themselves served less than before. Mum's last day as cook ended in a screaming match with the owners. By the end of the two wet summers, only one of the three taverns by the all-season road was still in operation: the mediocre one, which hadn't let anyone down.

The nanny-servant is prompting my niece to eat her meal. Although I'm too far away to hear, I can see the exasperated smile an adult puts on while using their bright voice to say *doesn't that look nice? Let's eat some bites*. My niece eats one bite, maybe two. She would rather watch the candle near her plate. The candle began its burning life as a winged cupidon with the wick at the crown of the head; it's burned down to the neck. Each time my niece eats some bites, the servant indulges her by discussing the candle, pointing and saying, *Now he can't talk. Soon he can't fly anymore*.

When I was your age, Kiddo, I was already a skillful egg thief. Mostly chicken eggs: how huge they were in my hand. I could feel the yolk moving under the shell, there was life there: my alive-life could detect the life-giving in the egg. Or so I remember. Maybe 53 they were just still warm from the chicken. Or maybe, as I slunk and then ran out of whatever neighbour's yard with my egg, my egg, I generated my own warmth, anticipating my mother's praise when I handed it over to her in the kitchen. *Good work*. She'd ask me which house I took it from, and remind my brother and I not to go back that way tomorrow.

The neighbours we took eggs from weren't near neighbours. My brother and I avoided the houses on our lane. We scouted hens

overland rather than by road or path, because adults travel by road and path, so a grown-up trying to figure out who'd raided their coop would assess the proximity of their neighbours along those lines, Mum explained. She taught my brother and I to be shrewd about dawn, and we knew at what degree of sunup—"and not a bit more, and don't get fooled on a cloudy day"—we had to make our way home. We'd been sternly instructed to vary the route we took back, as there was a great temptation to always take our favourite way through the woods on one gentleman's massive property. It felt safe, and we'd hit the motherload there once: a flock of escaped chickens.

A flock of escaped chickens was another scenario she'd coached us for. "Don't let yourself get so happy when you see something good that you don't think. Look around and check if anyone is watching, then stop, and think of your alibi. And I mean think through it, not just of it." Surrounded by delicious clucking chickens my brother crouched near the earth to think through his alibi. Then he stood, grabbed the nearest chicken, broke its neck, and gave it a couple extra pulls and twists so it would look like an animal's work. Mr Weasel, Mr Fox. I checked the crevasses at the base of the trees for eggs, and there were eggs, there were multiple eggs. I didn't let myself get too happy. "Don't get so caught up in what you're doing you forget what's going on around you. Keep track of who might be watching you and keep track of that sun the whole time then check again, because while you're so intent it might be getting light." We used my shirt to bundle the eggs up. My brother and I separated from one another to sneak home, as our cover stories were better with only the chicken (found dead) or only the eggs (searching out the rightful owner).

It had fallen to my brother to kill the chicken and carry the harder-to-justify poultry because he was older than me. He'd been the eldest sibling since the death of our big sister. Though he was given certain privileges at home, it was understood that these privileges were to offset what would be asked of him before it would be asked of the rest of us. First in line is first in line for everything.

Or would have been, all other factors being equal. But all other factors were not equal, because my brother wasn't musical at all. I inherited the perfect pitch that runs on Mum's side. I can still feel my follicles stir as she put her hand atop my head and ruffled my hair, "I thought my mother's gift was lost forever, until I had you." This was after my voice was conserved, that she took to ruffling my hair and praising me so. We'd relocated by then, and I was earning. I had become her favourite child, and she was very outright about my being her favourite. My younger siblings all knew who she liked best, and Mum made it clear that they simply had to accept it. I wasn't just the family breadwinner: I'd also become de facto first-born when my big brother ran away. After what happened to me, no one could convince him that he was in no danger himself. He was too close to tone deaf to understand that he truly could not sing.

He'd been silently outraged that bath day, when Mum informed him that I'd have the first bath rather than him. I remember her putting her finger in the basin and looking at me, trying to guess how hot I could stand it.

"Mum there's a lady here." I'd passed a stranger on the way in, and wondered why she wore three aprons layered on top of each other.

"Yes, I know."

Now Egan is saying that he can't tell for sure whether or not he likes the dessert, as his palate is "still all bad pig." He pretends to gag but withholds the sound effects, so that the disgusted face he makes to joke about disgust is not disgusting in and of itself, and doesn't put the other diners off their food. He narrows his eyes at the mounted antlers behind my chair. "This soft-spoken devil of ours." 55

The mounted antlers bring the conversation to the Americas. Brucil and Marlette have been deep in travelogues. The blinding sandstorms of the Appalachians, the latest Arctic expedition: they explain that they traded books back and forth as they read their way through a fever. They tell us of a sport called the blanket toss. Upon the hide of a bison cow Incas throw one another high in the air.

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What a fun idea. Brucil and Marlette stand. They take the deer hide from the back of my chair, telling everyone to get up, let's go, forget your dessert, abandon your sweet wine. "New World acrobats! To the garden!"

In the back garden, six guests step forward to grab the edges of the pelt. "Wait, wait, we want the smooth side." They turn it over.

Now, who to toss. "Not you, fatso." Maybe one of the women. No, they laugh, we're new to this. Let's start small.

My niece. They drop my niece onto the centre of the pelt. Ally-up. Ally-up. She's amused at first, rising less than a yard. Soon, though, she's going higher, her white petticoats flapping seagull-wild. She shoves her hand in her mouth like a baby. She doesn't have the wherewithal to cry out.

I step forward, toward the edge of the blanket and gesture, *gentle, gentle, down*. "Good practice. Now let's try a grown-up."

3.

It's freezing in here. Mr Melrose should be wearing a jacket, but Mr. Melrose does not have his jacket. His scarf disappeared a week ago, a few days earlier than usual.

I've witnessed his moulting process many times before in the lead-up to other performances. His rings always disappear first, followed by the brooches, then the handkerchief. Once the connotative items are gone, he begins to shed functional garments. Scarf, jacket, waistcoat.

56 Mr Melrose, do you visit the consignment shop? Why do you need money, why do you need it fast? Mr Melrose, what is your vice? My best guess is cockfighting, given his visual sensibilities: I think he could lay bet after bet on colour, rooster bloodying rooster. Or maybe he's just a shopaholic, buying nicer things than he should more often than he should and having to sell them at a loss. Whatever habit he has is not truly out of control. I've never heard anyone say he owes them money, and he retains his nice house. Also, when an opera goes to stage, Mr. Melrose attends each subsequent performance wearing more of his clothing, having, I assume, freed it from consignment with the previous night's proceeds. Once he

has his scarf and waistcoat back, he will join us singers for the nightly curtain calls to blush and bow before we all go to the back room to collect our cut of the profits. By closing night, he will have himself all together again, right down to the rings.

“You, you, you.” He yells. “You, more left. This one, you-you, right.” He has known June for two years, and he has known me for a decade. He and I have toured together extensively, we’ve spent a thousand hours in the same carriage. Yet at the moment he is too taken up with his idea to remember either of our names. You, you, you, you, you, you. His whole body yells: arms, eyebrows, small round gut shoved left by his abdominal muscles as he tells this you (Jane as Eurydice) to move that direction. “Hands, no! This this,” he rails. The dark circles under his eyes twist her hands into the position he wants. “Worry! Upset!”

He was very worried and upset this morning when he saw what they had in mind for Eurydice’s costume. They had it in mind because they had it around, leftover from a previous performance. Mr Melrose made cobra eyes at the dress and yelled “Picnic! Picnic!” to mean that Eurydice would look like a picnic blanket in this dress which incorporates both paisley and check. It is an eyesore; I’ve worn it in several other shows. As Mr Melrose prepared to bite the dress, the costume girl Ruella grabbed her measuring tape and stretched it in the air near June’s back to communicate that new costumes are as good as made, sir, this problem will be dealt with right away. Mr Melrose snorted diaphragmatically and said in not so many words that Eurydice needs a wicker basket to match her outfit. If there’s a picnic in Hades she must bring her girlfriends along.

His eyes (and eyebrows, and gut) jump from Jane-Eurydice to Me-Orpheus, and then back. His eyes stab us into place. “There, good.” Mr Melrose raises both hands, holding his palms flat. “This is what we’re doing here. Parity.” Parity, symmetry. He means symmetry. June and I stand at the same height, same breadth. Mr Melrose has decided to exploit that similarity rather than treat it as a problem to solve.

June is remarkably tall for a woman. Her natural bearing and manner convey a calm seriousness. She has good shoulders. If she

57

were to carry a heavy pail, it wouldn't slosh, and she could pour the water out in one smooth arc.

From the first time I saw her perform, June left a strong impression. She is often badly cast: until recently, most local directors who chose a woman to play a woman did so only because they wanted her to caper or prance pettily while she sang. June sings very well (for a woman), but there is not a capering or prancing bone in that regally long-boned body. She always gave it her best, though, and the next night she gave it her best again, again convincing all that she was a hyperactive virgin girl opposite the tenor or baritone who barely came past her shoulder. I was in the audience one night when an old man rose from his seat to holler *slut, slut*, while she was singing her best aria. She didn't flinch.

Oh—sweet mother of god. I saw June in another production of *Orfeo ed Eurydice*. It was the Vienna version of the score. They'd used a visiting alto for Orpheus, and he was only so-so. I don't know why they brought him in when we've got the inestimable Mip Zinccan right here in the city. Well. What else would you expect from that halfwit director whose name I have trained myself never to say because if I say that name anywhere near Mr Melrose we will be long waylaid while Mr Melrose itemises the eponymous other director's offences against the medium. The other director's underworld had glistening stalactites made to glisten with a coating of animal fat; I later overheard June quip that "it smelt like a tannery, I held my notes longer to delay breathing in. Let's say it was a stylized performance." Oh, it was a stylized performance all right. Gluck's entire project, his whole aim in his *Orfeo*, was to return a noble simplicity to opera; nevertheless, here the director decides, let's get sixty pounds of tallow to make a shiny rock cave, yes, and let's add a flashback dumbshow to see Eurydice struck by the viper, yes, let's have a string puppet snake bite the soprano mime.

Poor June almost made it work. She made it work better than I myself might have done.

Let me emphasize that I have nothing but admiration for June's commitment to her practice, and her professional forbearance. I have nothing against June as a human being.

Long Live the Little Knife

However.
She is a woman soprano; I am a soprano.
We live in the same small city.
My performances are well-attended; her performances are well-attended.
I have an established fan-base; her popularity grows.
I have a family to support. My mother, my niece, my half-fledged nephew, my frail sister

4.

Do unto others as they would do unto you.

This rule has a cousin: you may do unto others as has been done unto you.

Ruella had to wait ten days for the fabric she wanted. Then she sewed overnight. No more paisley for Eurydice, and my Orpheus gets a change of vest for his descent into the underworld.

I have this vest on for Ruella's inspection, and she finds a thread hanging out under the hem. Where are her scissors? She squints at her sewing table. She bends to squint around the floor. Where have her scissors wandered off to on their scissor-legs?

I would like to hand Ruella the penknife that is in my pocket. However, as I mentioned to her last week my ongoing frustration at having lost my penknife, I must keep my penknife hidden away and let shortsighted, exhausted Ruella hunt high and low.

June is late. I mean, she's early, just not as early as usual, and not as early as me. When she comes into the costume room, her posture is off: she inclines herself ever so slightly forward. Her arm and shoulder are in a fairly good position, down and back, but she is holding them that way. She would like to curl around the pain in her abdomen. 59

Let $T = 28$

That takes us through our performances, almost to closing night
How opportune

Ruella gives up and bites through the loose thread. Once June is also in her costume, we step out onto the stage where Mr Melrose is waiting to begin the rehearsal. June makes herself stand correctly,

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as if at ease. I make myself walk correctly: I have sciatica in my left hip, but no limp, because I refuse. I cross the stage, then cross the stage. I take up my lute, and Mr Melrose hollers “not like a grass tool.” He means, not like a scythe, don’t lift your lute up as if you were grabbing a scythe. “Better. Again.” I take up my lute, take up my lute.

It’s a longstanding tradition with Mr Melrose that, once in the course of rehearsals for each show, he surprises us by stopping work for the day to take us on an outing instead. Considerate and generous of him, yes, but also an assertion: clemency has to do with power, after all, and we know who has that here. When I take up my lute he stomps and says “coffee” instead of “again.” We all hustle back to the costume room so Ruella can help us switch into our street clothes.

Today, a real surprise added to the customary one: Mr Melrose asks Ruella if she would like to come along. She is aghast. Leave my sewing? June coaxes her. “Well, what more is there to finish? Join us.”

Ruella leaves with us through the opera house’s back door. Her neck turns, her head turns every which way. Someone needs to remind her that one should not look directly at the sun. Now she peers down the long narrow street. Can her eyes focus? It’s all much further off than her four walls. Her brain tries to stop sewing. “Where” wanders out of her mouth. She asks the air, “Can I try coffee too?”

“Yes, that’s where we’re going—you’ve not tried coffee?”

60 She has not. “Is it true your hair stands up?” she asks. We answer, “I don’t know, we’ll have to wait and see. “Is it true I will become addicted?” Some people do. Let’s go find out. “Does it really give you dysentery?”

There are two places to turn off this narrow street. We choose the bystreet with the steep grade, as it’s less crowded during the day than the other route. The other route is the one June takes after performances, late at night when her progress won’t be stayed by too many young connoisseurs who want to offer their compliments, or by the traditionalists who lean out their carriage windows to

censure her good and loud. The nights that I pass her in my carriage, I don't so much as wave. I tell my driver, "That is a colleague walking there. Slow down and give her a generous berth."

Why does she walk? One night after we'd sung together, I heard a tenor importune her as she set out, "My god, take a taxi." She made the excuse, "I have so much pent up energy after I perform, I won't sleep soundly if I do." Her walk home is uphill for twenty minutes, across the boulevard, and then downhill for half an hour before she comes to the switchback that connects her neighbourhood to the city proper. I could have safely guessed she lived down there, as there are few landlords this side who'd rent to a single woman, and she couldn't have enough money yet to buy. I had this surmise confirmed the night I looked out my carriage window and spotted her skirt and scarf disappearing down the switchback.

Ruella has begun to acclimate to her new environment when we reach the end of the narrow street and step out from between high buildings. The daylight flashes like gunpowder. The double boulevard is busy, even for midday: carriages, hired carriages, phaetons, carts, boys on horseback, boys on donkeys, pedestrians at the edge, all grudgingly deferring to each other on the basis of size.

We need to cross. We all hesitate except for June, who steps around the three of us to step into the fray. We follow close behind her.

Her judgement is good, in that she does not try to judge the right moment to step off the curb. On the boulevard any gap in traffic is filled as soon as it opens. The drivers do not stop unless you are already standing directly in their path. June maintains her pace as one who, belligerent in waking hours, has fallen into somnambulism. She's had plenty of practice with this crossing, as there is no sensible route down to her switchback which would allow her to avoid it.

After the boulevard, the property values drop right off. Here the first few clotheslines run window to window. The laundry becomes more concentrated and achieves a density that I think would delay drying as we near the coffee shop that admits women. Illegal, yes, but they've found a workaround: they are technically a coffee

merchant, not a coffee shop, and they charge for the seat rather than the drink itself. The coffee is provided as a sample in case the woman wants to buy some beans to consume decently at home.

We arrive and are seated. The woman table-server brings our samples. Ruella is on tenterhooks.

“Oh it’s hot!”

Yes, we explain. Near hot as tea.

“Oh! My hands!”

“That’s what they call the jitters.”

“You may be making it worse by thinking about it.”

As though the floor had hiccups, the wooden stairs from the basement creak until the shop owner emerges with a sack of beans. He sees me, and waves.

Mr Melrose asks, “Do they know you here?”

“Yes, I buy my beans here. Wonderful aren’t they. I take their coffee at home every morning.”

At home I could take or leave coffee; drinking as much as I buy would make me sick; some quiet nights I myself trowel the unused ground coffee into my back garden, to my roses’ great advantage. If I have noticed June at various points on her walking route, I have noticed her incidentally while buying the beans I am known to like so well from the only shop that offers them. Thus the shop owner, my kitchen staff, my coachman, and now Ruella and Mr Melrose can attest to the fact that I come to this neighbourhood for that purpose. Otherwise I would have no apparent reason to be so often near the switchback where I saw June’s skirt and scarf disappear.

62 5.

T in fact = 29.5, or thereabouts

On stage she makes herself immaculate

Only round back during the intermission

can one see

with her pain she would go

face down on the floor and scuttle like a crayfish.

As the intermission ends

I return myself to a mind of anguish

Long Live the Little Knife

Eurydice my beloved
Pain overcomes me. Won't you help me?
I am still beside you. Faithful as before.
And so on
until we're through.
Well done, well done,
June bears up and smiles.

In the back room we split the money. I tell my carriage driver, rush the whole sum over to my sister, who I've forgotten for many days. If I'm gone when you get back, I've gotten a lift.

Well-dressed, Mr Melrose rushes off to his next social engagement.

June and I find Ruella to switch out of our costumes.

I let June change first. She leaves by the back door.

I hold June's walking route vivid in my mind until, a suitable interval afterward, I follow.

In Betrayal of Pablo Neruda

SARAH DURRAND

I read Pablo Neruda awestruck,
I jaw dropped and glass shattered
at the bloody hibiscus thrusting,
the pulsing violent staking of claims.

I stare at you with a lead heart,
soul sobbing and stomach nauseated
that words fail in the barrel
of my smoking gun mouth.
I sputter and choke on bullets,
painstakingly mutter, “you are like a mountain”—

67 In betrayal of the poet.
For you're a black hole,
central and impossibly deep,
pulling me thoughtlessly, throbbing,
confident that the stars and suns
and my world will collapse for you,
my limbs flail, submissive to your keep.

If ever there were peace,
it was a quiet, soft, clear afternoon
on the shore of a teal lake.
But you ruin it when you tell me
I'm building a fairy home.
I bite my tongue and swallow my secrets.
I don't tell you I build delicate things
because I'm stuck in a dreamstate,
a lethal spider's silk,
in stagnation, afraid to snap—

I almost asphyxiate on the drive home
because, in truth,
I'd vomit bullets,
I'd swan-dive into the sun,
I'd pump a pinecone through my heart,
and I'd crush a hundred fairies
to know you'd make love to me in the dust.

Jourhatsu

CATHY ADAMS

Goku brought one suitcase with him. One side held two shirts, one pair of pants, socks, shorts, and some T-shirts. The other side held his books. His arms ached from the weight of it on the one kilometer walk from the train station. Most new arrivals came with boxes of belongings, but Goku had nothing else he wanted to bring. He left it all behind: video games, pictures, school mementos, and most painfully, his cell phone. Back in his parents' home on his carefully made bed the phone lay centered on his folded work shirt.

"Are you Kobayashi?"

"Yes. Goku Kobayashi."

66 "You're early." Venetia pushed a stray wisp of hair from her temple and her wristwatch. Goku smiled at the gesture. The last person he had known who wore a watch was his grandmother. He winced in bittersweet remembrance. "I was going to send Jobon to get you at the station in..." she looked at her watch once more, her lips silently calculating before saying, "...one and one-half hours."

Goku lowered his suitcase to the ground and bowed. "I took an earlier train."

Venetia picked up the basket she had been carrying. Red mustard leaves spilled over the sides. Goku's mouth watered at the thought of a home-cooked dinner. "Come with me. I'll show you

your room and we'll go over the rules." She stopped at the foot of the wooden stairs and turned her face thoughtfully to him once more. "The rules are important."

Goku's quarters were at the end of the third building. The pamphlet had featured a pond and bamboo garden, but the body of water before him was no more than five leaps across, and the color of the water was greenish-gold. On the far side was a stone bench walled in by lush bamboo. Beyond that, a cluster of trees hinted at autumn gold to come. He could already see himself walking through them.

Venetia placed her basket by the unlocked door and pushed it open. Leaving her shoes outside, she entered. Goku did the same and followed on silent feet. The tatami mat with dark blue bedding on the floor was as neatly made as the one he'd left behind. He sighed and felt his chest tighten.

"The number one rule is don't tell anyone who is here. The number two rule is don't ask anyone why they are here. Some will freely say, but some will not. Respect this." She crossed the wooden floor making gentle creaking sounds under the weight of her wide feet. Goku found the sound comforting. "Your closet is here," she said, gesturing toward an open space recessed in the wall. Three wooden hangers hung forlornly on a rod. "You can make your tea there." Under the east window, a squat, dark green kettle sat like a resting cat on a low table, the cord wrapped around its base. A single gray teacup had been placed next to it. The clay, thickly thrown, was the size of the palm of his hand. Goku found himself bowing not so much out of respect for Venetia but in relief. After a five-hour train trip, he wanted nothing more than to sit alone.

The dining hall was positioned to catch the morning sun on the right side and the dimming evening light on the left. Four residents were already seated at the end of the table, neither moving nor talking to one another, but one looked up and caught Goku's eye. The old man in a traditional jacket waved Goku over. He noticed one of the old man's sleeve cuffs had been repaired in sashiko stitches. Goku looked fondly at the white thread rimming the edge in tiny circles just as his mother had sewn and felt the first

wave of homesickness rise up in his belly. "Come and sit," said the old man. "You're new. I am Kaiyo. But that's not my real name." He laughed and waited for Goku to laugh with him, but he did not.

Goku thought about giving a false name as well, but when he opened his mouth, the only word that came out was, "Goku."

"Well, Goku," said Kaiyo, winking as he spoke the young man's name as if to acknowledge some private joke, "I've been here nine years. My plan was to stay one month and then move on to a big city, maybe Kumamoto or Oika. But," he held up his hands palms out, "Venetia is very good at what she does. No one here has been found. Not unless they want to be, that is."

"I do not want to be found," Goku insisted. The smell of steaming vegetables and pork coming from the kitchen made him lick his lips.

"Ha! Of course not! None of us wishes to be found." Kaiyo clapped his hands together in triumph. "You know why Venetia's service is the best. She is jouhatsu herself. Seventeen years. And you know Venetia is not her real name." He leaned in close. "They say," he looked around and lowered his voice, "she killed her husband." He nodded conspiratorially. "But who knows if that is true, eh?"

Goku gave a polite smile, but he was already looking around the room for another place to sit. All eight of the chairs were clustered around their table. He sighed.

"Do you want to know my story?" asked Kaiyo, raising his eyebrows.

Goku said only, "Number two rule."

68 Kaiyo flipped his hand dismissively. "If we were people who followed rules, we would not be here, eh? I had a wife. Three children. A job driving a truck. Left it all behind."

"Three children?" Goku repeated, astonished.

"Girls! Three girls. Aiiiieee!" He waved his hands in mock movie horror.

"And you never—"

"Not once," said Kaiyo. "I was tempted a few times in the beginning, but now." He held his palms up in the gesture once more. "I have a good job in town. I come here to my room each

night and it is quiet. Good food. A place to sleep. If I want someone to," he leaned in once more and made a little shake with his head, "to give me a little comfort, that can be bought easily. There's a place in town. I can show you if you like."

Goku made no response. Jobon, the old man who worked for Venetia, placed a large bowl of rice on the table and returned to the kitchen.

"What about you? Your escape?" asked Kaiyo.

Goku wanted to remind him of Rule Number One, but he had the feeling this man paid no attention to any rules. "My parents," Goku began. Kaiyo waited for him to complete the thought. Goku sat for several seconds, staring at the rice. "I did not get into college. I got a job in a shop. Selling ice cream."

Kaiyo's brows raised once more. "And that's it?"

"I did not like selling ice cream."

"And you did not try to get another job?"

"It would have been," Goku thought hard, "just...selling more ice cream."

Kaiyo looked perturbed for the first time. The two men sat in silence waiting for Jobon to bring the pork and mustard greens. When Jobon finally arrived and placed the serving bowl on the table, Kaiyo dug in first and helped himself to a heaping portion. He slurped the steaming soup and smacked the pork bits loudly. Goku ate his food silently in small bites, looking down only at his bowl as his mother had taught him to do.

"So," Kaiyo gestured his chopsticks in a circle before poking them back into his bowl. "There was nothing else you wanted to do? Besides ice cream?"

Goku sucked away an errant mustard leaf from his teeth. "My uncle said I should become an accountant."

"Bah," said Kaiyo gesturing with his chopsticks again, but this time more fervently. "Numbers will make your eyes go bad."

"I do not like numbers." What he wanted to say was that he was not good at numbers. He frequently gave incorrect change at the ice cream shop. Sometimes it was because he was not interested in counting the coins, but sometimes it was because he simply wanted

to give people more money. He always miscounted children's change by giving them an extra yen or two.

"Maybe there is something else for you. Something much better than ice cream or numbers," said Kaiyo. He raised his bowl to his lips, drank the delicious dregs from the pork soup, and then placed the bowl back on the table. "No, what you need is something more like that." He tilted his head toward the table to his right in the corner of the room. All Goku could see was the back of someone hunched over, eating their dinner. He did not know what to say.

"She got here a few days before you," said Kaiyo. "Not very pretty, if you ask me, but then, those are the ones who are most anxious to be friends, if you know what I mean." His eyebrows rose in a conspiratorial way. Goku was sure he did not know at all what Kaiyo meant.

Sensing she was being talked about, or maybe because she heard them—Goku hoped not—the girl turned her face just far enough to reveal her profile. He dropped his eyes down to his bowl so fast he hardly glimpsed what she looked like. He saw only that her cheek was pale like a white water lily. She turned back to her bowl and once again became a hunched over, dark figure. Kaiyo talked on, but Goku heard little of what he said.

70 The next night she sat alone at the same table except she moved to the other side and faced outward. She ate her fish soup, sometimes picking up pieces of meat or sprouts between her chopsticks, as if inspecting it. She drank her tea, cupping both of her small hands around the teacup and raising it daintily to her mouth. Goku imagined her drinking clear water from her palms at the bank of a river. That was what Goku imagined as he watched her, sip after sip. Kaiyo sat next to him, again eating greedily and talking, but Goku felt little inclination to converse. The old man talked on and did not seem to notice. The days passed this way with the young woman extending neither a word to nor a glance at Goku.

Goku liked the nights best. He lay on his bed atop the cotton coverlet because the nights were unseasonably warm that first week.

No lights shone anywhere in the residence rooms. The only noise was a fly that lit on his teapot, then made its way in short flights from one object to another in Goku's quarters. He was not annoyed by the sound. He focused on its sporadic buzzing that broke the silence in random bursts.

Her room was four units to the left and one row behind. He lay there, wondering if she was sleeping or awake just as he was. He rarely saw her during the day. She disappeared after breakfast, and he liked keeping to himself anyway. He would talk to her, maybe tomorrow. After he talked to her, maybe he would also post a letter to his parents telling them he was alright. Maybe he would write that he was starting a new job. Or he was taking accounting classes and had a girlfriend. A dark, mysterious girlfriend. The thought made him temporarily forget about the fly until it landed on his hand. The room was too dark to see its eyes, but he could imagine them looking back at him in the dimness of his sleeping quarters, his own face a mosaic of images in the fly's 360-degree vision. He wished he could see that way, the way a fly sees, everything around him in one round worldwide view so no one would know what he was looking at in any given moment. "Are you escaping, too?" he whispered to the fly.

Over the next two weeks, Goku established a habit of sitting in the forest beyond the rear of Venetia's property. The place was a stranger's land, and he was drawn to its old growth trees slowly dropping their leaves. He sat on the ground under a *Betula ermanii* tree with two massive branches extending outward near the base like a weightlifter's arms. The pale, pinkish beige bark peeled from the trunk in satisfying sheets between Goku's fingers. He put his book down and pulled the bark in one spot until he made an opening exposing the raw flesh of the tree. Suddenly, he was deeply ashamed. He placed his palm over the torn spot and held it there for some time.

"Are you holding up the tree?" The voice was accompanied by the swish of feet through leaves.

"Uh." Goku looked up over his shoulder. She stood behind

him. Her long black coat hung to the tops of her ankle boots, and her hair was covered in a black scarf, a slender silhouette against the gray sky. "I damaged the tree," Goku confessed.

"Ah, I guess that makes you a criminal," she said.

"Venetia doesn't let criminals come here. It said so in the pamphlet."

"A person could write anything on their application. Did you? Write anything on your application?" She stepped to Goku's side and he could see her face clearly now. Framed in the black scarf, it was round and pale, like the moon surrounded in dark night.

"Nothing that wasn't true," said Goku.

"So, you're not a criminal?"

"No, I am not a criminal."

"Ha, a criminal would say that," she said.

Goku's hand was still on the tree trunk, and he felt more than ever that he, indeed, was a criminal. His shame deepened, and he had to look away from the young woman's face.

"Let's see it," she said.

Goku's stomach shook in dread. It was the same shaking he felt when his boss at the ice cream shop was angry with him.

Goku, the boy asked for a strawberry cone. Don't just stand there staring at the floor.

Goku, stop touching the spoons.

Goku, where is your mind?

"Take your hand away," she said, pointing at the tree. Her voice was not harsh, only curious.

72 Goku lowered his hand and together they stared at the white flesh of the trunk. "Look at that," she said. "So white. Like the tree bark is the flesh, and the wood is the bone." Without asking permission, the young woman sat down next to Goku. She was so close her knee touched his. He flinched and pulled away, but she didn't seem to notice.

"I am Toshiko." She smiled broadly. "And you are Goku."

He bit his lip and his hands trembled. He shoved them under his arms.

"The old man told me. Kaiyo."

Goku turned back to the tree. “No one seems to follow the rules here.”

Toshiko laughed and swiped at a bug that had lit on her neck. Tendrils of straight black hair spilled from the sides of her scarf wound loosely around her head. The sight of it made Goku think of an enormous, friendly spider. “I never follow rules. I guess that’s why I ended up here.”

“Why did you—” He caught himself, but she laughed harder.

“Ha, now look at who’s breaking the rules!” She pushed up from the ground and brushed off her skirt. “You came here to escape. We all did, so come with me. I want to show you something.” She put out her hand and Goku recoiled. “I don’t bite.”

Her hand dangled at his eye level. “I don’t touch,” he said.

“Okay.” Toshiko shrugged, dropped her hand, and began walking further into the woods. Goku tucked his book into his coat pocket and scrambled to his feet to follow. Toshiko’s long black coat flapped behind her as she hurried on.

They walked at least a kilometer, as best as Goku could measure from the time they spent moving. Without his cell phone to check the time, he was forced to count as he walked. The walk from his parents’ house to the ice cream shop where he worked was exactly one kilometer. That took twelve minutes, and Toshiko led him through the woods for approximately fifteen minutes. He was trying to calculate the relative speed of their walk, most certainly slowed from the high stepping over limbs and rocks, when she announced they had arrived.

After seeing nothing but his feet pushing forward over the terrain for the past quarter of an hour, Goku looked around him. The trees were now behind them, and they stood in an open spot on a hill. “See?” Toshiko pointed at the lake that extended as far as Goku could see. “Venetia’s place is not the escape. This is the escape. The final escape.”

The lake water looked cleaner than any of the water sources in his town. The late October light hit it making the wind-whipped white surface shimmer. Near the shore, dozens of ducks groomed themselves and poked their heads under water. Among the reeds

frogs leaped, occasionally croaking just loud enough for the two young people to hear. If Goku had found a place like this when he lived with his parents, he never would have gone to work at the ice cream shop. He would have hidden out here all day, sitting on a rock, watching.

“You can escape, too, if you want,” said Toshiko.

“I’ve already...I sent in my application. I paid for a month. I left my parents.” Goku stumbled over his words. He didn’t know what Toshika wanted him to say, and he felt the all-too-familiar bad feeling in his belly that came from knowing he was displeasing someone who had expectations of him that he couldn’t guess. He had felt that feeling in his belly almost every day for years at his parents’ home.

Goku, did you even try to study for the test? How could your scores be so low?

Don’t disappoint your mother, son. We just want you to try. What is the worst that could happen?

What’s wrong with you? Why do you sit so still for so long like that?

“I discovered this place last week,” said Toshiko. “I’ve been coming here every day since. It was my secret.” She took a few steps toward the water and stopped, flexing her hands in the small of her back. To Goku, she looked like a black insect, elegant with slender black wings. The thought made his head feel fuzzy, or maybe it was her face that made him feel that way. “Don’t tell anyone else. It can be our secret,” she added.

Goku thought he said *Okay*, agreeing not to tell, but he suddenly wasn’t sure if he’d actually said the word or imagined he’d said it.

“There’s the furthest rock out there. See it?” She pointed at a series of boulders extending from the shore in a jagged clustered trail across the water. The last boulder looked big enough for the two of them to sit together without touching. Goku was feeling something new for the first time since he could remember. He tried to put a name on it, something between exhilaration and terror.

She did not motion for him to follow or ask, but Goku obeyed her unspoken expectation. He counted the steps until the two of

them made it around the shoreline to where the boulders began. Three hundred and twelve steps. Toshiko hopped confidently onto each one until she reached the large boulder at the tip of the rock grouping where she sat down cross-legged, waiting for Goku to join her.

He folded his feet underneath his legs just the way Toshiko was sitting and positioned himself about twenty-four centimeters away. The rock was uncomfortable, but the view over the water made him forget the jagged edges pressing into his legs. Toshiko's coat spread out in an inky puddle around her, and the hem of the fabric nearly touched his fingers. He found himself leaning slightly toward her, and suddenly he spoke. "What were you escaping?" Goku's words made him jump. He had been thinking them, but they surprised him when escaped his tongue.

"I quit the business school my father chose for me. He was not pleased." She stopped. There was more, Goku could sense it. He waited for her words to bubble to her lips. That was the way it was with him whenever he tried to speak. The words would bubble to the surface if whoever was supposed to be listening would shut up and wait. If they would give him a chance to let them percolate and rise to his lips. He waited, and she spoke again. "There was a special person in my life. Our parents did not approve." Her face looked fragile, transparent even. "Our fathers said it was impossible. My father forbade it and said he would send me far away if necessary. So, I escaped."

Goku let her words hang in the quiet for a while longer before he spoke. "In school there was a girl I liked. I used to sit behind her so I could smell her hair." He shook his head. "She did not like it when I did that." He elected not to tell Toshiko about his suspension after the girl complained to the teacher about him. 75

Toshiko did not appear to be listening. Her eyes were still on the water. "She was special," she said quietly.

"Oh."

A frog leaped from its hiding place in the reeds and plopped in the water, landing on a muddy stone just under the surface. The frog's greenish-brown, glistening head poked above the water, and

his bulbous dark eyes turned their way. Goku was sure he was listening, and he took strange comfort in the thought that there were three of them now, hearing words in this brackish landscape. He wondered if there were others, listening. There must be birds, fish, salamanders, dragonflies, grasshoppers, tadpoles, all manner of water life surrounding them, hearing the secrets of this awkward, moon-faced girl.

“That is why I came here.” She leaned forward and looked down at the water. “It is deepest just out there. That will be my escape.”

Goku’s mouth fell open but he closed it quickly. “But, you brought me here. A secret.”

“I wanted someone to tell my parents why. I want them to hear it from someone who was with me at the end.” She stood up.

Goku’s stomach turned hard inside his body, and his ears filled with a strange hot wind that pushed all other sounds out. “I am a stranger. You can’t.”

Toshiko turned her head a little and looked directly at him. Goku almost felt as if a finger was touching his eye. “I’ve been watching you this week,” she said. “I chose you.”

Goku’s hands flew uselessly forward. “Please, don’t. Don’t ask me to do that.” And then he scrambled to his feet. “We both escaped. We are here now. No one is looking for us here. We can stay as long as we like. On this rock.” He wanted to say he was lonely, and she was the first friend he had made in a very long while. He wanted to talk to her. To listen. To tell her how he liked to draw animals and that he dreamed of owning a boat someday. He wanted to know what her hair smelled like.

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But he said none of these things. Pushing down the terrible dread of touching another person, he held out his hand. “Sit with me for a while, so that I am not afraid anymore.” Goku was astonished at his words. After a few moments, Toshiko lightly took hold of his fingers, and they sat down once again on the boulder. No one moved or said anything else. Goku sat so still next to Toshiko for so long, longer than he ever had in his life.

Living Like Oak

MEA ANDREWS

In China, trees suck
the soil dry, green leaves
shedding to the ground.
A scientist hooks IVs
to trunks, clear bags
barely visible.
My own roots once gasped,
veins unable to pound,
my heart a drumbeat borrowed.
Metal the size of my thumb
now ebbs my heart
into drumming.
I walk with my son
slowly, watching branches
gather around us like a crown.
No more running, no more
late-night fervor with my wife.
Only the steady pace
of trees, growing, shedding,
breathing in and out
like the slow, sonorous
breath of the earth.

O Holy Night

JOHN HONKALA

Brewer and Robbie drove down to Chicago from Green Bay on the day after Thanksgiving in a green 1994 Ford Ranger towing an Airstream trailer. They were not still drunk but they were pumping blood like shrews. Robbie rode shotgun and snorted ephedrine from the palm of his hand. “Blood,” he said, laughing, licking it. The windows were matted and foggy. They had a Ziploc of turkey and a coffee can full of gravy behind the seats. Brewer drank Sanka from a Styrofoam cup.

Outside Milwaukee it began to snow and the snow came down in euphuistic raids and whorled spasmodically around the windows of the cab. That was unsteady. Brewer felt it in his eyes, slow to focus, and wheeled to a stop under an overpass to check the tools in the bed and recinch the lines. He leaned on the truck and held his face away from the sleet but it wetted him just the same. His ears throbbed red then redder and he vomited into the snow. Sweat cold on his neck. A gray cortege of automobiles eased past and disappeared into the blizzard pushing two channels into the deepening snow. It moved southward, arcing out in migration. What’s two hours, he thought, breathing the damp exhaust. Robbie had come out too, without a coat, and he was a cannon:

“Fuck ’em all!

“Go, Pack!

“Breeewster!”

A catapult, fully munitioned.

“We’re good here, Robbie,” he said.

“Back on the horse, Brewster! This here pony is thirsty!”

The weather had been wrong. They said it would pass north. You could usually count on Channel 4. But here’s the driven snow.

Brewer put the truck in the line and let it general them southward. The salt trucks preened in the left lane, flinging salt crystals to their wakes, and he went after them and was pelted by them. The road was mostly straight and he meditated at the wheel.

They set down the trailer at the back of a vacant Meineke lot next to a bar on Irving Park and Brewer fell asleep gargling the cab’s fumey heat. When he awoke the storm had spun east and the sidewalks were filled with young couples and their dogs and their easy wealth. Every year it was the same and every year he felt like this: bleak. Robbie had unrolled the orange plastic fencing and run it around the perimeter, taut as a leash. The generator was running loudly behind the trailer and the bed was emptied, tools stacked against the trailer, snow swept, the blue metal of the truck bed varnished in dew. He was laying out green stands in symmetric rows, counting them aloud, pilled to his eyeballs.

Brewer sat straight in the seat and stretched his tingling fingers. He could hear the slush slopping on Irving Park, tires sluicing through the wet. They did not stop; they would be there until Christmas. He thought about the bottle of Crown in his bag and Robbie’s pills but he was just coming to and although he knew what lay ahead—a dull echo, a plainness—he thought he should feel it (that is, he thought maybe this bone-white sobriety might provide him with some sense of a baseline against which he could balance the wooliness he also knew was coming), at least from the start, so he stood out of the cab and went over to Robbie with his gloves on and got behind him where he could take the stands and set them in place and shout with him *And three feet and a tree teat! And three feet and a tree teat! And three feet and a tree teat!* until all the stands were in place and just-so for Ray and his delivery and the lot was maxi-

mized but no two trees would be too close to one another because we're not building a goddamn maze here are we?

They strung the lights next, Robbie's pupils big as grapes, and Robbie cut himself twice stringing them, bulbs popped suddenly in his fingers.

"Gloves," Brewer told him, holding the ladder. His body was coming back to him. He leaned hard against the ladder.

When they finished they had a garden. The lot had submitted. They had an orange corral, evenly lined, pathed, well-lit, a clean gift to these people, an assumption, bread when they wanted it.

Robbie's fart was pure gasoline when it came, completely ruining the scene.

"Carpet bomb," he said.

That was the first night and they lay on their beds eating the turkey.

"It always this noisy?" Robbie asked.

"Pretty much," Brewer told him. "Maybe lay off the tweaker stuff though."

Robbie laughed and showed him his molting teeth. His face was thin, skin vacuumed taut to his cheekbones, the dome of his skull rounded and overbalanced.

There was space to sleep two in the trailer and a small table, a sink, a microwave, a few cupboards, and a TV on a plywood shelf. It wasn't lived-in. They sat in that small space, brains *shzzzzzzzzing* like cicadas, the room stuck to their eyes, trying to say something.

"We can skim?" Robbie asked.

"There's no way to skim," Brewer said.

"We shoulda brought a trailer of extra trees."

Brewer thought that could have worked.

Shzzzzzzzzzz.

"Ray's a hawk."

"What's the fucking point then?"

Ray was paying them fifteen hundred apiece for five weeks, plus fifteen dollars a day for food.

"It's work." Brewer said. "I dunno."

"Shacked up like two buttfuckers in a parking lot. Fuck."

Brewer went to the window. Yellow and gray and white and wet.
“And we can’t even leave,” Robbie went on. “What the fuck?”
“We can leave one at a time,” Brewer told him. “Someone broke in in ’97.”

“I wonder who?” Robbie said.

“You can guess,” Brewer told him. He went back to his bed and undressed. “Mostly nice people at this one, though. They tip.”

Robbie put on his coat.

“I’m going for a walk,” he said.

Brewer lay down on his pillow.

“We open at three tomorrow,” he told him. “Be back by two.”

Robbie farted again, gloriously, a bleating atonal symphony several measures long, time signature unknown.

The trees came the next day, wrapped and compressed and piled on the back of a flatbed. Robbie came up the street and got to work bodying them to the stands. Brewer went through after him with a utility knife and with a gutting motion freed them stump to crown and tore the plastic netting off. His head was again clear and the air was piney around him and he thought of his mom in Green Bay and her dog and a pot roast and the plastic pinwheels that spun in the flowerbeds outside her trailer. Ray pulled into the lot as the last tree came off the truck.

“That’s seventy-five in total,” he told Brewer, walking with him to the trailer. He handed him the lockbox. “See you Wednesday.”

Robbie watched the sedan drive away and drank from a flask. “Fuck that guy.”

Brewer went into the trailer and stashed the lockbox under his bed. He poured an Old Style into his coffee mug and took an ephedrine from Robbie’s bag. He crushed the pill on the counter and snorted it in two gulping grunts, then went out to the generator and powered the lot. The sun was already hidden by the three-flats and the maples across the street, yellow light pooling in the low empty spaces. Robbie had the string lights plugged in and a plywood sign out by the sidewalk: XMAS TREES FOR SALE. WREATHS.

81

The couples and their dogs wandered in and moved through the trees. They were mostly young, builders, fat with desire and plans. They rotated the trees in their stands and sniffed the needles and sighed. Robbie revved the chainsaw and called them *sir* and *ma'am* and tied the trees to the roofs of their cars and loitered for tips. They shook his hand and said things like "This is perfect" and "Wisconsin has the best trees!" Someone offered a flask and Robbie poured a third of it into his throat and everyone laughed.

"How we drink at home," he told them, collecting their money.

The ephedrine made Brewer restless, made him feel like his hair was growing, and he drank another Old Style in the trailer to dull it. He counted the drawer. Robbie found him in the Frasier's.

"What the fuck, man?"

"I'm tired."

"This place is packed. I'm doing everything."

Robbie handed him the flask.

"No, I'm fine," he said.

"Well wake up," Robbie said.

"I'm never awake," Brewer said.

Robbie went back through the trees to a woman with an umbrella and a Corgi. Brewer watched him go and felt in his pocket for his cigarettes. They weren't there. Jesus, they weren't there.

It rained steadily the next two days and the rain came down in heavy sideways heaves, decelerating in the wind then volleying forth in hailing rushes. Brewer and Robbie stayed in the trailer, smoking out a lee'd window, playing War and reading the *Reader* personals.

82

From time to time Brewer moved a curtain to survey the lot but no one came. The rain tacked the window and dragged smearingly, distortingly, downward. If he'd stayed long enough, he might have seen the brief colorings of people animating and flashing in and out of the downpour, scuttering from roof to overhang. Even at home they'd be hiding like rats in a storm like this. Robbie crushed up a pile of the ephedrine by gathering the pills in a sandwich bag and malleting them with the bottle of Crown. Brewer watched him and felt sick and low and righteous and he vowed not to touch the stuff

again, at least not in Chicago. A light turned on. It beamed terrifically, got right through his skin and inside of him just before he slept. He dreamed he was at war, in a trench, and it was raining and grenades rolled into the trench like pachinko balls, one after another, and he fell on every one of them, went grenade to grenade, felt each one detonate in his chest, quieting them one by one until he awoke the next morning on the floor using a flannel shirt for a pillow and he took the beer that Robbie offered. (You can imagine this, the suddenness of conviction, how it unlashes itself in the night and seeps away, how it does not loom although it should. It should press on us like a penny in a shoe.)

The rain was gone but the wind stayed. In the afternoon, the neighbors were back turning the trees. The screaming throes of the chainsaw. Some birds.

“This place could use some music,” Robbie said. “Some Christmas tunes.”

He sang one.

It’s a miracle, Brewer thought. Everything’s a miracle.

Robbie took the clipboard and sat on the bed and composed a letter. He never said to whom. It took him four hours to write it and when he was done he folded it into a small square and sealed it in one of the envelopes Brewer used for the drops. As far as Brewer knew, there was no one back home. Neither of them had girlfriends. Robbie lived in a rented house with four other men, all of whom had at an early age forfeited any claim they might have had to a life lived without great and nearly continuous privation. As far as Brewer was concerned, they’d wanted that and still did. They’d chosen to shack up with each other and Satan among them. There can be no misunderstanding this basic fact, that it’s what they wanted, sin for sin’s sake and the bloodrushed and fractured days that came with it. Brewer lived less than a mile from their Devil’s Lair but he actively avoided it and only hung out with Robbie on neutral ground, preferably without any of his roommates around.

Brewer had a sister who lived in Eau Claire with her husband and kids. He’d see them on Christmas Day at his mom’s and he’d

drink half his beers in the shed where they couldn't count them. They were good people. Good, decent people who got their kids to school every day and bought them new shoes every August. If there were leftover wreaths he'd try to bring them one.

Robbie sent the letter later that week. The moon was yellow and clear in the sky when he went out and when he returned it was snowing big ashy flakes and there was a line forming behind Brewer as he worked the chainsaw on the trees so that they could drink again.

"It's almost full," one of them said.

"Waning though," said another.

"Are you sure?" asked a third one.

A fourth one said, "It's waxing."

"No one cares," said another.

"It's done," said Robbie.

Brewer gave away the next tree for free and added money from his own pocket to the drawer.

Merry Christmas.

Then there were nights when Robbie wandered the neighborhood and Brewer went into the bar next door, taking with him the lockbox key. The bartenders were friendly and they gave him shots and asked him about Green Bay and the trailer and the lot. "Just a shitty microwave and a dorm fridge," he told each of them on different nights. He paged through the *Reader*, mostly the classifieds and the apartment listings. There was a two-bedroom down the street for eleven hundred, heat included. He didn't know how people lived here. There were so many of them and it was so loud.

867 Everyone was something or someone—an Indian, a gay, a bassist, a stock broker. What was he? A Wisconsinite. Something worse, someone else's beast of burden, too dumb for a real job, too drunk and poor. They all seemed to fit here, to know where to go in a room, to talk about streets like they were reading directly from a map. Things that shouldn't matter. They talked to him like he was their friend. The bartenders had a beer and a shot on the bar before he got his coat off. The ashtray in front of him never had more than two butts in it. Forget it, he thought. Take what they give you.

O Holy Night

What they gave him was booze and the phone. One of the bartenders, Annie, gave him the keys to her apartment above the bar so he could shower. She poured him a shot of Old Grandad and laid her keys on the bar and he went out the front door and then into the door next door and up the stairs to her home, where a tabby sat batting its tail on a dining room table. There was a towel and a washcloth in a neat pile on the couch and everywhere plants and the radiators hissed and there was a sweetness in the air and such a completeness to the room that he felt compelled to remain in it as long as he possibly could. He sat in an armchair and ran his hands along its corduroy armrests. Her books were there, clean-lined on a walnut-veneered shelf, her CDs, afghans, a thin purple tapestry hung above the couch, seductive as a matador's cape, a soundless Wurlitzer in the corner, the soundless cat on the table. The cars down on Irving beamed by indifferently, a blank thrum beyond the bay window, dim passings that registered as one thing, the street itself.

There was a jigsaw puzzle on the coffee table, half-complete, two continents of flowers blooming toward the center. The box stood upright behind it, printed with a lush French Quarter balcony scene, not a scene from this world. He got on his knees and stirred the loose pieces. They fit together easily, as if it were the most natural thing to marry them together, and shortly he was back on the line, standing at the conveyer, hands moving at pace. The continents merged and filled with wrought iron and ivy and rhododendrons. He saw the particular blues, the grays and reds of the pieces, and he saw them all at once and it was easy. He hit play on the CD player and let it play Annie's music. The radiators never stopped their noise. The pleasure of a room, the edges of life rounded off, denned against it, unalert. 85

There were two pieces missing. He shook the box and patted the rug and ran his hands under the furniture. He opened the magazines and rooted in the cushions. He shook the box again. The glass table beneath the blank spaces refracted what wasn't there and the holes loomed clear and frustrating. It wasn't a puzzle at all but a defective facsimile of the painting on the box, a glitch.

What could he do?

The cat finally came over.

“Where’d you hide ’em?” he asked the tabby.

The cat said *meow*.

After an hour he knew that he should return to the bar. He wetted his hair in the kitchen sink and washed his arms and face with the bar of soap on the counter and dried himself with the bath towel. He went down the hall to hang the towel on the bathroom doorknob and meant to leave exactly then but her room was across the hall and he could see that her bed was stacked with square piles of folded laundry and again he felt compelled to stay there. It was only a moment—less than a minute—before he was done and he stepped into the exterior hall wearing a pair of her yellow cotton panties, his own BVDs stashed in the kangaroo pocket of his hoodie. On the sidewalk he felt like he could not move, did not want to move. The hairs on his body swayed like cilia. He could feel the elastic close around his legs and waist. He went into the bar, light of body, and sat on a stool and drank his beer but he was anywhere but there, floating, as he was, like a filament across an iris, borne over those people.

The next afternoon Brewer was awakened first by the sound of rain shelling the aluminum roof of the trailer then later, as the last sunlight de-lined, by song. Robbie’s bag hung off his bunk, spilling over in a miasmatic pile on the floor. Brewer pulled the blanket up to his eyes and lay there listening soupily to voices that seemed at once inside the trailer and also far, far away, somewhere in the past. He recognized the song, “Silent Night,” with its line about quaking shepherds. What were they scared of? The baby Jesus? They were being saved. Imagine that, a savior born right there in your lifetime.

86

And also: what the hell is going on out there? He pulled his hoodie over his head and went to the door. A half-circle of young people stood around the trailer. The snow was gone, melted by the rain, and they stood in shallow puddles and clumps of wet pine needles serenading what could have been an empty trailer for all they knew. He opened the door and moved down to the single step.

They were not good singers. A couple of them had it—he

O Holy Night

could hear their exacting voices angling out of the mush—but on the whole they sounded like old Lutherans, slow and strained and clipped, although they managed, by some force of goodwill, to sound lovely and sincere. Robbie came by and stood in the center, conducting. It was amazing the bullshit he got away with down here. Brewer put his hands together in thanks when the song wound down but they moved almost immediately into “We Wish You A Merry Christmas.”

He lit a cigarette and when he looked up Ray was standing behind them with a new lockbox, already in that first moment overly impatient, disdain compressing his face to half its size. Well fuck you, Ray, he thought, and he stepped down onto the concrete and lifted Robbie’s arms higher and swung them faster. Robbie sang a verse. The carolers sang louder.

“Let’s have one for Ol’ Tannenbaum,” he said when they were done, lifting a Frasier Fir from its stand and handing it to Robbie, who got it spinning like a dreidel. The song wasn’t in their books and they lost it after the first verse.

They left after that one and Robbie followed them at length.

“How does Robbie know these people?” Ray asked Brewer.

“I dunno. He knows everybody.”

“You’re supposed to be on the lot.”

Brewer gave him the lockbox. Ray set it on the hood of his car and counted the money.

“Here we are. The lot’s good. We’re selling trees.”

Ray checked his notes and licked his thumb and shuffled the cash.

“It’s all there, Ray. We’re selling trees.”

“Are you?” Ray asked.

Brewer didn’t answer.

“You’re making friends, though,” he said, resetting the springs. “And you’re four dollars short.”

Brewer paid him out of pocket and took the new lockbox.

“Thanks, Ray,” he said.

Ray drove away, the certain rev of his engine leaving into the traffic, elided, and Brewer heard the carolers start up again down the street, their sweetness.

Brewer tried to stay out of the bar. Tried to skip the pills. It was one or the other. The lot shut down at nine and didn't open again until three. After two weeks the trailer had begun to feel vulnerable, an easy target while he sat there unawares with no weapon, one exit. The TV got two or three stations that ran garbage shows and he'd read the one magazine he had with him three times front-to-back. Plus, the generator kicked on and off all night long. Robbie was in and out but mostly out, wound up and wet, stalking the neighborhoods. He'd come in with a lit cigarette and scrounge in his laundry for a bit, drink a beer sitting on the counter with his feet up on the bench, tell Brewer about the people he'd seen, the little Mexican ladies selling tamales out of coolers in Albany Park, the Indians on Wilson sleeping it off on the steps of some giant gray-columned building in the trees, the black gangs in Uptown.

"There's some crazy, fucked-up shit down here, Brewster."

Brewer would close his eyes.

"Like seriously fucked up. Like I got prostitutes trying to trade me for pills. One of 'em just flashed me when I walked by, like flashed me one single titty. She's dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt. Just flashes me. One side only.

"And boots on the cars. Have you seen these things? Poor bastards. They're all over. I come out to one of those things in the morning I'm not having a good day.

"And saving spots. Have you seen this? They shovel out six inches of snow and put lawn chairs out there to save 'em. I bet people are slashing tires. Like all the time."

88 Robbie lived in squalor. The Devil's Lair had roaches and black toilets. Brewer got a bloody nose once back when he was still hanging out there and Robbie couldn't find anything but a sock to give him to stop it.

"Nothing but gray snow down here. Nice enough people but goddamn if they ain't stacked on top of each other like groceries."

If he went into the bar he had to see Annie. She wore all black every night. Yellow didn't seem to fit. When she talked to him he looked at his beer. And she talked to him a lot, at least a lot for her. She was cool with most of the crowd, kept them in drinks, but not

a lot of chatter. One time her boyfriend came in and sat at the end of the bar reading a novel about sport fishing. He coddled a single beer the entire night and then left before Brewer. Kissed Annie right on the mouth over the bar. "He's alright," she told him after he left.

He sensed that she liked him. When she wasn't busy she came down and leaned against the back bar and asked him about his life and the lot. Were there any women, what did he do in the summer, those kinds of things. Sometimes it felt like an interview, like he was the subject of something. He'd heard that bartenders do that, study the regulars, save them up for stories.

If he had ephedrine in him he smoked more and talked more. If he didn't he got drunker.

"I have a good mother," he told her. "And I'm trying."

He couldn't remember if that was something he read somewhere or if someone had said it on the news. "I'll probably take night classes," he told her. "I can't keep coming here. No offense."

There was an atlas behind the bar and she liked to open it to a random page and read the city names aloud.

"Never been," he'd say after each one.

"Me neither," she'd say.

One night when she was putting up stools in the front window she called him over.

"Look at the moon," she said.

"Never been," he said.

"Me neither," she said.

It was a beautiful moon, steely, austere, a real good destination.

He knocked over a stool.

"I'm sorry," he said

89

It rained again, cold and hard, and cars and busses blew by in it, deaf to it. No one came into the lot. Robbie stayed in the trailer drinking and playing Solitaire. Brewer sat by the window in case anybody showed up. One year he'd mounted a bell on a post with a "Ring For Service" sign but Ray had seen it and made him take it down. That was during the years he was down here solo and when there was weather he had to eat pills by the handful and drink

John Honkala

a pot of coffee to keep from nodding off in the trailer. The coffee pot was gone now too. At nine he went out into the rain to close the gate and kill the lights. Cabs were letting out in front of the bar. Light reflecting like spilled gold leaf in the puddles.

Brewer went into the bar. Annie was bartending.

“I forgot to mention. You finished the puzzle.”

“Not technically,” he said.

“Oh, the pieces,” she said.

“Yeah,” he said.

“Carl stole them. The cat.”

The bar was mostly empty and quiet except for the low music and he wished she'd go away.

“I should've asked,” he said.

She poured a shot for herself and held it up to him to cheers.

“No. It needed to be done,” she said, and they drank.

He went outside and stood on the sidewalk watching the lot. It was never really dark in the city. The shadows were gray and orange. Robbie was asleep or gone and the bulk of the trailer lay like a faint shoulder in the lot.

Brewer went back to his beer. Three kids stood around his stool waiting for drinks and he stood back until Annie brought them their pitcher.

“Are you with the band?” one of them asked. Brewer looked around. There was no stage. He shook his head and took the stool when they went to the back.

“Band?” he asked Annie.

“I don't know,” she said.

90 He watched them take their glasses to a table and fill them half-full of foam. They wore ballcaps and collared shirts. They laughed together.

“Was it supposed to be funny?” he asked her.

Annie shrugged. “Unknown.”

“How do you even know what to say to people? I mean—what was that?”

“They don't talk to me like that.”

“Cause you're a woman.”

“Cause I pour the drinks.”

Brewer pulled the cellophane from the top of a new softpack and laid it in the ashtray.

“Okay. So they talk on your terms?”

“Correct.”

She opened a box of plastic straws, pausing midway.

“No,” she said. “That’s not correct. I talk to them on my terms. Big difference. Otherwise I don’t talk. They can talk all night. You know how many boxes of straws we have back here? I can stack these all day long.”

Brewer lit a cigarette and stared at the bottles behind the bar. Annie went to the sink and washed glasses two at a time.

“Halfway there,” he told her when she returned. “Thirty-four trees left.”

“And then back home?” she asked.

“Yeah, back home.” He nosed the cigarette into the ashtray. “Unless Ray has extra trees somewhere.”

One year he sold his last tree on December 21st and Ray showed up that afternoon with fifteen more from another lot. Brewer was taking down the lights when he pulled in with them. “Two more days,” he told Brewer and Brewer had to stack them all in the truck bed two days later and bring them back up to Wisconsin because they were all crooked and full of bare spots and no one was buying trees anymore anyway. That was the year Robbie and his friends got busted for fighting dogs behind Rick’s Bar and had to spend Christmas Eve in jail. Brewer bailed Robbie out on Christmas Day and dropped him at the Devil’s Lair. “Can you fucking believe it, Brewer?” Robbie asked him. “They’re dogs!”

91

The rain had let up and people were coming in again. An hour later, all the stools were taken and the tables were full of young people chewing the air. Brewer stayed put on his stool. He had nothing to read and the bar was full of strangers so he smoked cigarette after cigarette and unblackened his fingernails in the low candlelight. Halfway there was something. That much closer to rolling the place up and taking it back to Green Bay. His mom had said it’d snowed at home, maybe eight inches. It would be clean and

white and quiet and in the morning the metal scrape of shovels on concrete. Robbie was selling them quickly, faster than Brewer ever had. He fast-talked and let his accent do half the work. Tree authority and charity case. A lot of them bought it. If they sold them too fast Ray would for sure have another load in the lot day of. Too slow and he'd threaten to dip into their cut. Best, Brewer thought, just to monitor the situation and see where the inventory was the week before Christmas.

Annie poured him another shot and nodded at the door. "Your buddy's here."

Robbie came straight to Brewer and bear-hugged him from behind, lifting him a few inches off the stool.

"Brewster, everybody," he yelled.

"Robbie, what the hell?"

Robbie set him down and picked up Brewer's cigarette from the floor and took a drag.

"My your cigs are delicious."

The bar was two-deep now. No one turned at Robbie's outburst.

"You can't be here."

"I can't be here? You can't be here."

"Well, yeah," Brewer told him. "We both can't."

"Ray's in bed, Brewster. Forget him."

"I told you he's a hawk. He'll find out."

Robbie waved Annie over and ordered two beers, both for himself.

"And then what? Fire us? Who's gonna sell his precious trees?"

Brewer put the softpack in his pocket and stood.

92

"I don't know, Robbie, but I'm going back."

Robbie pushed one of his beers over to him.

"Oh, c'mon. Just stay."

He looked at Annie and she shrugged.

"I mean, he has a point," she said.

"The gate's locked. The trailer's locked. It'll be fine," Robbie said.

Annie poured more shots and Brewer sat again and Robbie pounded the bar.

"Okay, but no chanting," he said.

“Yes, sir,” Robbie said, saluting.

“And no Favre talk.”

“I can’t promise that,” Robbie said.

Fifteen minutes later Ray walked through the door. Robbie stopped his beer just short of his mouth. Brewer had his back to him.

“He’s fired,” he heard him say. He said *fired* like he was ripping it off a bone. “And if you don’t sell every single one of those trees you won’t see a red cent of your pay.”

Robbie took a swing at him. Ray sidestepped it. Brewer tackled Robbie and put him on the floor. Ray stood in the doorway.

“All of ’em.”

There was new snow in his hair and a purple vein in his forehead. Brewer held Robbie tight against him until Ray was gone.

“Jesus,” he heard Annie say. “You were right.”

He was right about a lot of things. You tell people you know something and it’s up to them whether or not they believe you.

Robbie was gone in the morning, and with him his duffel and sleeping bag. Brewer went out into the lot and shoveled the paths between the trees and down to the sidewalk. When he was finished, he laid out the wreaths on the folding table and unlocked the tool box with the chain saws and the gas cans and opened the gate.

At noon, Ray drove into the lot and stayed parked at the far end until two when he rolled down his window and whistled for Brewer.

“He’s gone then? Or is he still in there?” he asked.

“Gone, it seems,” Brewer said. As if he knew. The idea that Robbie was anywhere was absurd. 93

“He better not be back,” Ray said. “I’ll be watching.”

Brewer sat on the steps of the trailer and waited for customers or Robbie. The neighborhood came in turning and sniffing but Robbie never returned. Brewer saw him again only once, years later. He was coming out of his shift at the Pick ’n’ Save and Robbie was wandering the parking lot, going car to car. He had a circular saw in a plastic grocery bag that he was trying to sell.

“Is that you, Brewster?” he asked. “Goddamn, it is!”

He offered him the saw for ten dollars and Brewer bought it. The cord was cracked and dry-rotted. Robbie’s eyes were filmy and wet and yellow and there was dried blood on his jeans. A few weeks later his mom heard at church that Robbie had been kicked in the head by a horse and that he was hurt pretty badly and was laid up in an ICU somewhere. Brewer went to two hospitals but Robbie wasn’t at either of them so he gave up. It was more effort than Robbie would’ve put in so he let it be. A kick in the head. They have a saying about that.

It snowed again and the trees got so buried Brewer had to pull them from their stands and lay them against a bank at the end of the lot. He sold only two of them. Annie came over before her shift and offered him the keys again. He wanted to go back up but he knew he shouldn’t. Thou shalt not steal. He must have smelled awful.

He went back to the trailer for his duffel and went up. The puzzle was still on the table, still missing pieces. The radiators were on full bore and the windows in the front room were cracked. He didn’t sit but went straight to the bathroom and shed his clothes and stepped into the shower and got clean. He brought the yellow underpants in with him and washed them under the shower head, then wrung them out and hung them on the shower rod while he dressed and combed his hair. They were still damp when he finished. He found the hamper and buried them. On the stairs, going down again to the street, he felt the keys sharp against his leg in his jeans pocket, a rebuke and a temptation. He wondered how it could be both those things at once. He kept going though, descending to the street and into the bar. No one else was there, just him and Annie, candles trembling along the black bar, constellating the glassware on the rail.

In the morning, he took the lockbox next door and asked the manager to hold onto it for Ray. He went back to the lot and packed the bed of the truck and hitched the trailer. There were still thirty trees and a pile of wreaths. He wouldn’t see a red cent of his pay. The snow in the lot was beautiful, white and crusted and clean, the string lights sagging in unlit heavy parabolas. He locked the gate

behind him and motored the truck onto Irving Park and headed west to the highway to go north. He'd forgotten to toss the gravy can and the cab smelled rotten. He drove all the way to Wisconsin like that, in a rotten-smelling truck towing an Airstream, fits of nausea worming through him, asking over and over again, "Why don't I just throw it away?"

He kept one wreath for his mom. After he dropped the Airstream at the yard he drove over to her trailer but she wasn't home. He affixed it to the front door and left a note. *I'm home. Merry Christmas.* He straightened a Packers flag in an empty flower pot then drove back to his house and opened a beer and then thirteen more. His bed was big and quiet and he dreamed he was in the trailer and the carolers were outside singing. Their voices went up and down and up and down and he lay very still in his bunk with the blanket up to his eyes, poor and weak. *The hopes and fears of all the years...* Their voices grew louder, filled him. *...are met in thee tonight.* He slept for sixteen hours and when he awakened he could not remember what day it was, what town he was in, what song he was humming, or why, for the first time in years, there was blood in the tips of his fingers.

Biology Class

A year later Brewer sat at a small particle-board desk in a beige classroom. He had not yet seen Robbie for the last time. It was his first day of class and it was 7 p.m. and the professor was selecting names at random from her roll sheet and asking each student to tell her something about themselves. A gymnast. A polyglot. A champion bass fisher. A Buddhist. A mother of four.

95

Brewer raised his hand.

"Yes, Brewer?" the teacher asked.

"I'm forty-four," he said.

"Interesting," she said.

"It's the most interesting thing about me," Brewer said.

No one else said anything.

The moon was already out. A harvest moon. It was massive and heavy with blood.

John Honkala

He should have said: “Go to the window, you morons, and look at the moon. Do you see it there?”

He could have pointed.

“Do you see us up there, laying on it like leeches, feeding on it? We’re all stuck to it. It’s the only thing we can see.”

Sparrows

JANE HAHN

Rust
flowering on the window grate,
mold forming dark
constellations.

I press my face to your neck
and whisper, I think
I am ready to dance.

Dust motes slip
like birdsong into the carpet.
The sky, gray and still,
stands ajar beyond the window. Red
swirls spreading over fruit.

Your soft hand touches mine,
and you tug me, a murmured syllable,
into the rain.

Childhood

JANE HAHN

How many more sunsets will stain
the fibers of this white shirt into red wires, live
and listening to each excruciating syllable,
an incandescent ear.

Leave me to the washed-out sheet
of expressionless afternoon light,
homogeneous in its distribution.

Leave me to the gray tinge
of shallow waters, where the colorless fish do not blink
or smile, their voiceless mouths vague eternities
in the shrugging tide.

28

Ah, but even here, the great Eye opens—
The dark lid cracks, and in slow motion exposes
his crimson pupil, dilating
in hellish conflagration
across the blinding sea.

A red wall, it advances, swallowing.
The searing shallows wail, scarlet, with torment,
even those unspeaking scales ablaze
with iridescent agonies
I cannot help but hear.

The Owl Café

KATIE MORA

The owl's visage had been shoved up into the sky, its tufted ears traced in the same red neon as its eyes, the words *Owl Café* gleaming in blue on its breast. From there down it had flowed into a smooth, broad adobe curve, becoming a sphinx-like figure whose insides housed not limestone and riddles but vinyl booths and sunboiled families. He'd seen it through the tinted bus windows, at first only able to make out the neon swoops in the twilight but squinting until the silhouette of the owl's head came into focus. The windows of the bus had been closed, of course, painted shut all around, but he'd imagined the smell emanating from the place: hot cooking oil overtones, a beefy body with hints of chicken, end notes of cigarette smoke.

100

Three days later, when they'd decided he could use the phone, he called me and told me about it, hesitant to directly answer any of my questions but so enraptured by the Owl that his speech devolved into poetics. Over the din of the other inmates he gave me his garbled sermon, then asked if I would visit the Owl Café on his behalf and tell him what it was really like. Of course I agreed. A person asks you to experience something he cannot, of course you agree to it. But you make excuses as you are designed to do, and then you feel guilty and think about how your broken promise

makes him feel, but you can't understand why he's so fixated on this café in the first place, and what's he going to do if you don't, cut you off from his collect calls like he does all the time for no reason anyway, and so you don't go to the Owl Café. Or maybe you do. I don't know you at all. But I didn't.

I don't usually come down here, but there's a doctor they want me to see who's supposedly better than the ones I've been seeing. It's not clear what they mean by better. He orders all the same tests and has me fill out all the same forms, though he won't provide them for me. I have to print them out myself. I rate the same symptoms from 0 to 3, denied a middle option and forced into cautious exaggeration. They draw blood from the same vein.

But when I step out of the medical arts building I feel foggy in a different way. It's hotter down here somehow—I'm a hundred fifty miles closer to the equator but two thousand feet lower in elevation. Two thousand feet further from the sun or a hundred fifty miles nearer to it? The math gives me a headache. I'm three exits deep on the highway before I decide I'm too hazy to drive; I've gotten on the eastbound by accident. The people I cut off as I slide over to the offramp can think what they want about me.

I'm about to begin my westward backtrack when I see it. It's the ears that tip me off. Even from a distance the gentle points look odd among the flat-topped shopping plazas and gas stations. In the midday sun its neon highlights blend into everything else until I'm right up close. Then there they are, just as I'd been told: the ears and the eyes and the turquoise *Owl Café* sign, emblazoned in neat, slick half-cursive.

I wish I could say the sight of the place beckoned forth a torrent of memories both fond and fraught, or made me tremble with repressed sentiment. But I just thought, This is what he was so captivated by? This? It's a neat building, don't get me wrong, but there's only so much to it. And it's not even a café. It's a diner. But he was obsessed with it for months. Brought it up every time he called. The owl like a sphinx with the hungry families inside! Every time! Every conversation was a root-wrapped path that cost thirty cents a minute to walk and always, without fail, looped right back around to the Owl Café.

You know, it's funny. Now my life's looped right back around to it too.

What I'd tell him about it? Give me a minute.

It does look like a sphinx with an owl's head. I can't see the neon lit up 'cause it's daytime, but it's there. It's a diner, for god's sake, not a café. Pisses me off. There's vinyl booths just like you said. Mostly occupied. A jukebox. Can't hear it too well but I think it's playing Santana. Chrome barstools. Black and white tile floor. The burgers aren't bad. I shouldn't be eating red meat but I am. What are you gonna do about it? The meat's real juicy and they don't skimp on the green chiles. Yeah, you'd be all over the burgers. It doesn't smell like cigarettes in here. Just food. You haven't been able to smoke in restaurants in years. As I told you a hundred times. It's not shaped like an owl inside. You can't see the head or anything. It's pretty normal-shaped. Like a long rectangle with a curve on one corner. The adobe's only on the outside. None inside. No limestone either. There are riddles in here, though. You were wrong about the riddles.

Last Night at the Morrison Hotel

B. B. GARIN

Annie should've left the box in the car. There was no reason to bring it into the motel room. It wouldn't have gotten cold in the car. Now, she couldn't face the thought of sleeping while it watched from the chair by the TV. It felt like the nights she had made Nick sleep on the sofa for some minor infraction. And she wasn't mad at him, she didn't want him to think that. It wasn't Nick's fault he was dead.

Since she couldn't bring herself to touch the box of ashes again, she went out to the concrete balcony overlooking the parking lot. A tall man leaned on the paint flecked rail there, considering a cigarette in his bony fingers. If he had been a woman, Annie would've thought him anorexic. Because he was a man, she thought long drug abuse. Neither thought was charitable and Annie felt a wave of nausea. 103

Nick had always admired her charitable nature—the six bridesmaid's dresses she never found a disparaging word for, or her instance that all the service jobs she'd worked through college had been “good experience.”

“Smoking kills, you know,” she said, trying to be friendly now that she'd made horrible assumptions about this stranger who looked at her with dark, tired eyes.

“I know,” he laughed. “These aren’t even cool anymore.”

It did seem quaint. Annie couldn’t remember the last time she saw someone with a paper and tobacco cigarette. It was all e-things, lately.

“You’re right,” she said. “They’ll probably go the way of Radio Shack tomorrow.”

He laughed again. The cigarette flickered out. He hadn’t brought it to his lips and now he opened his fingers, letting it fall. It took a mesmerizingly long time to spiral to the pavement.

“Where are you headed?” Annie asked.

“New Orleans.” He pronounced it slow, like he’d only just remembered. She wondered if he was high. If she ought to go back in her room and lock the door.

“My car broke,” he said.

“That’s where I’m going.”

He raised his eyebrows and she felt an inexplicable urge to offer him a ride. Then she remembered her passenger seat was spoken for.

“Friends there? Family?”

She didn’t want to tell him she was alone, that no one knew where she had gone.

“My husband always wanted to go,” she said.

“Divorce trip, is it? Good for you. Screw him.”

She bit her lip and didn’t contradict him.

“Should’ve kept the ring,” he continued. “Could’ve thrown it in the gulf.”

She stretched out her left hand. She’d been driving with her arm out the window, and already the skin on her ring finger was darker. Her friends were shocked when she took the ring off before the funeral. But it hadn’t felt right; she wasn’t married anymore. She’d kept her vow to death do us part, and once it had, the little band of metal she’d worn for five years felt too tight. Maybe her fingers were swelling, maybe that was a symptom of grief.

She asked his name. Benjamin Jones, he told her in the same way he pronounced New Orleans; not quite an accent, not quite a statement.

“Why are you going to New Orleans, Benjamin?”

“Jones,” he nodded, like he had just decided that was his name. “I hear they still smoke real cigarettes there.”

“Everyone must stop here. I got the last room. The lady at the desk was so distracted she nearly forgot she had it.”

“There’s a barbecue festival,” he leveled a thumb over his shoulder. “Couple in there are cooks.”

She wondered why he wasn’t smoking outside his own door. He must’ve been smoking and walking, crossed paths with the barbecuers. He was bored and chatty, that was all.

But she turned quickly for the stairs. Perhaps, it was the vagueness in his eyes or the way he held himself slouched and still. Except for his fingers, tapping an absent rhythm on the rail.

Nick had always been a flurry of motion. He would’ve pelted down the rickety steps, stealing her hand, drawing her in his wake. She would’ve scrambled across the baking asphalt to keep pace. He wouldn’t have given her a chance to catch the stale oil in the air or the glass glittering like a broken star among browned weeds, as she crossed the road to a dog-eared convenience store.

Her first dates with Nick had a nostalgia about them that Annie fell in love with; a bowling alley, roller skating, an amusement park with ringing arcades and cotton candy. Later, she realized they were together a year before he sat down and simply shared a meal with her. That was the night he proposed.

He took her to a popular red sauce restaurant. Nothing fancy, but a step up from the taco drive thru. He ordered wine too, which he always said was a waste of money, so Annie suspected even before the waitress came with a lava cake and a cascade of giggles.

The diamond sparkled out of the gooey interior.

“You say you love chocolate more than anything.” Nick looked sheepish for the first and only time. “I thought I could be second?”

“Let’s see,” Annie slugged back the rest of the red wine, feeling it coat her teeth, knowing how bad all the photos taken by strangers at the surrounding tables would look. “Chocolate. You. Basset hounds. I could live with that order.”

They couldn’t get all the chocolate off. The ring stuck at her knuckle. But they received a complimentary bottle of champagne

and a girl on a blind date at the next table gave Annie a rose. Annie carefully dried the flower and kept it in a bud vase on her dresser for years. Until the vase broke.

She thought she had kept the flower, though she couldn't remember where. Nick would know. He had an odd memory for that sort of thing. But Nick was all boxed up. He wouldn't be reminding her of anything, anymore.

"Forget something, miss?"

Annie jumped. She had navigated blindly through the strained brightness of the convenience store, picking up a six-pack from behind a discount sticker and taking it to the sunburned man at the counter.

"Oh, no. That's all."

Annie fumbled in her pocket for a crushed-up bill, pulling out the motel keycard. The cashier eyed the number scrawled in permanent marker on the garish orange plastic.

"You staying across the street?"

Annie nodded, handing over the money.

"Must be full up," he said, punching the register with unsteady fingers.

"The barbeque festival."

"Yeah. Must be."

He gave the key another cross-eyed glance as he put the beer in a black plastic bag. An angry patch on the back of his head contrasted with his thin white hair, as if the ravaged skin were intent on burning everything away.

"Well, young thing like you, probably got plans for the night,"
106 he said.

"Actually," Annie tried to smile at him. "I've been driving all day. I'm dead tired."

His lips pinched. He seemed reluctant to hand over the bag. A teenaged couple came in, setting off the electric chime on the door, and the old man's fingers jerked loose.

As Annie left, she felt he was watching her, not the kids sneaking candy bars into their pockets, but she didn't want to turn around and find out.

Jones was still leaning on the balcony rail when she climbed back up. She noticed his restless fingers again, and his dated clothes; as if he'd been going for retro hip but instead of buying a new Ramones shirt from H&M, he'd picked up a beaten original at a garage sale.

"Don't you have another one?" Annie asked.

"Another what?" he blinked at her as if he'd forgotten who she was.

"Cigarette."

"No. I don't." His laugh was the liveliest thing about him.

Annie hesitated, the plastic handle twisting the circulation out of her fingers. She was thirsty but the box was waiting behind the sun-bleached door.

"Do you want a drink?" she asked.

He didn't answer, maybe giving her a chance to rethink her reckless offer. Annie imagined him standing there until morning, unmoving except for his fingers rippling like the breeze that didn't touch the heat. Finally he shrugged, pushed his battered frame up, and followed her into the room.

He nodded at the box.

"What's that?"

"My husband."

"What? All of him?"

Annie laughed so hard she collapsed on the rough, industrial carpet, dragging her knees up to rest her head on while her body shook.

"Sorry," Jones said.

Annie looked up, "I had him cremated."

"You couldn't buy the poor bastard an urn?"

"I'm not keeping them...him. The ashes."

"I had a wife. Didn't keep me either."

Jones sat on the edge of the bed. Annie twisted her neck to look at him, but the angle made her dizzy. She busied herself opening a beer.

"What was his send-off song?" Jones asked.

Annie swallowed, shifting around to face him better.

"I always liked *The Clash* for my funeral," Jones said.

“That doesn’t seem appropriate.”

“Should I Stay, Or Should I Go.”

He nodded toward the bag. Annie extracted another bottle. He didn’t reach for it, so she put it on the floor by the scuffed Doc Martins anchoring his skinny legs.

“Well?” Jones said. “What was it?”

“Amazing Grace.” She concentrated on the cool liquid fizzing down her throat. The box seemed to be taking over her vision, bending the room into weird proportions. “I couldn’t think of anything else. I was sitting in the funeral director’s office and I couldn’t even remember our wedding song.”

Outside the door, tattered voices trailed a child’s combative laughter. Annie smelled the strident chlorine leaking in with the wet flop of sandals. Earlier, she’d glimpsed a pool in a rough concrete bed with a clutter of grimy white chairs like felled seagulls, and a single child buoyed by an oversized alligator innertube.

Nick hadn’t wanted kids. Annie had figured husbands always said that at the start, and that she had time. It was just as well now. Another guilty thought that made her stomach balk.

“Don’t like kids?” Jones asked.

“Thinking about the last time that pool was cleaned.”

He laughed.

Annie bit her lip. “What about you?”

“Kids?” he shook his head, dark hair disheveling. “No. She said I was too unsettled. I was in a band. We toured a lot. She thought that’d be a bad influence.”

“I guess you’ve been stuck in lots of motels, then.”

108 The more she looked, the less appealing the room became. She had an urge to grab the box and drive through the night. To get the whole thing over with. Or turn around, start saving for an urn, and let Nick dominate the living room for the rest of her life.

“You don’t like it?” Jones leaned back on his elbows, squinting at the ceiling fan thumping unsuccessfully at the thick air. “No leaks. No rodents. It’s not so bad.”

Annie glanced sideways at the box. Nick would’ve found the room appalling.

“I’ll tell you a secret. I used to steal the Bibles,” Jones waved at the nightstand, his lean body tilting up unsteadily. He seemed to have forgotten his drink. “They always looked so lonely, banging around those drawers and no one reading them.”

Annie pictured a bookcase packed with the uncracked spines of motel Bibles. Row after row of dusty covers and peeling gold lettering. Jones coming home to a silent apartment with another book weighing down his bag.

She drained her sweating bottle, set it down and wiped the condensation from her palms.

“Do you read them?” she asked.

“Once or twice.”

Annie crawled over to the drawer, jeans rasping on the beaten-down carpet. The blandness of the nightstand with its nailed down lamp looked sinister. She could imagine the knob snarling to life and snapping her fingers off, like a miniature Marley knocker. Her hand slipped as she yanked it open. The drawer rattled to the end of its runners and dangled there; contents spilled on the floor.

Annie was surprised to see more than the clumsy Bible sprawled on its belly. She picked up a smooth, steel lighter that had also fallen free. She held it up to Jones and flinched back. His eyes seemed darker than they had in the late sunlight. Dark and solid, the rest of his face so washed out, she could barely see it.

“What?” Jones said. “Not yours?”

Annie shook her head. His face didn’t seem strange anymore. She was just exhausted.

She ran a thumb over the lighter, it felt substantial and icy against her warm skin. The metal was tarnished but it was no shoddy gas station purchase. Someone must’ve missed it when they realized it had been left behind. Suddenly, she remembered Jones slouched outside, his last cigarette dying and his long fingers never moving to relight it, letting it go instead.

Alcohol sloshed in her empty stomach. It was time to tell him to leave, she needed sleep. She needed to get on the road early.

Already, Annie had turned a two-day drive into seven, zig-zagging after tourist traps manned by droopy-eyed proprietors in

cheap, plastic riddled giftshops. Because it was better than thinking about what happened when the road reached the water. When there was nowhere left to go but back.

“If we started now, we could be on Bourbon Street by sunrise.” Annie spoke in a rush, focusing over his head at the hazy print of a lighthouse clashing with the wallpaper.

“That’s true,” he said.

But Jones didn’t stand up. Instead, Annie climbed onto the bed beside him, abandoning the Bible and the lighter on the floor. The dull claustrophobia of the room tightened around her. The box seemed to swell, Nick clamoring through the cardboard.

A chill ran through her. Maybe Nick was angry at being reduced to a jar of gray nothingness. Maybe he wanted to be buried, forcing her to make regular pilgrimages to his side. They should’ve talked about it.

“Don’t cry,” Jones said. Annie felt his breath on her cheek, surprisingly cold. She hadn’t realized she’d been crying. She raised a hand to brush away the tears.

Jones’s long fingers rested on the wilted flowers of the bedspread, right where her own had been. She hadn’t felt his touch. Acid tinged her throat. She fled to the bathroom, sure she would be sick. Unsure if the cheap beer was the only culprit.

Jones didn’t tap on the door and ask if she was okay. She didn’t hear him leave, either. Annie clutched the vanity and retched. Her stomach refused to empty or settle. Above the mirror, a fluorescent bar clicked and hissed, stuttering awake. The streaked glass was permanently fogged at the edges. Her reflection stared at her from far away.

110

This was where talking to strangers had gotten her. Nick never liked how she spoke to people in bars, at airports, in winding coffee shop lines. She saw little moments of shared exasperation as opportunities for connection. Nick insisted people just wanted to be left alone.

“That’s not true,” she would say, reminding him that they had been strangers once.

An end of summer party, toes dug in the sand and driftwood

flames popping. She was with a clump of girlfriends in bikini tops and cut-offs. Their carefully curated tans invisible in the firelight. Nick sat alone, poking at the broken shell of a horseshoe crab, ignoring a football tossed at his head by his college roommate.

Annie picked the ball up and threw a precise spiral out into the surf.

“Boys,” she said, turning her back on the water.

Nick laughed.

He told her later that he asked her out because the whole thing seemed like a scene from a '50s surfer flick. And that was how Annie came to think of their first year together; an old film that made her smile, but one with falsely tinted colors and artificial actors.

Annie opened the bathroom door. Jones hadn't moved. She went over to the bed for another beer to wash out the taste of warm, murky air.

It was probably a bad idea. The beer had to be why her stomach was so unsettled. Jones was still on his first. In the bad light, she couldn't tell how full the bottle by his foot was. He sat motionless, long spine curved, matchstick arms propped on his knees.

Dim shouting from the next room broke the stillness. Jones looked over the headboard as if he could see more than worn-out wallpaper.

“What do you think?” he said and grinned. “She told him he uses too much salt?”

Annie's laugh rang flat. Her last fight with Nick was over the angle of the flimsy blinds in his hospital room. She used to think good marriages were marked by a focus on the trivial in all disagreements. If you were arguing about the little things, it meant you had the big things all figured out. 111

“Motels are never boring,” Jones said.

“I never thought there was anything wrong with boring.”

“That's not boring,” Jones pointed at the box.

“There's nothing more predictable than erratic behavior after the death of a loved one,” Annie said, not looking at it. “The counselor told me so.”

“If you really wanted to be shocking, you’d have cleaned out his closet and downsized to a sensible apartment already.”

Annie closed her left hand, feeling the guilty emptiness on her ring finger.

Nick had told her shocking things near the end. He said he liked the way she cried, “with concentration, like it’s a serious business.” She tried not to be hurt. Nick always liked plenty of noise. The thought of eternal peace reaching out for him must’ve seemed menacing.

“What did for him, anyway?” Jones asked.

She ought to have bristled at his irreverent tone, but Annie wasn’t feeling very charitable toward the box anymore. It seemed to be the reason the room was so small and stifling and filled with the outrageous personality of this stranger.

“Cancer,” she said, checking the box as if she expected to find an IV running into its wasted arm. “Took its time. Four years.”

Nick felt funny after their honeymoon. He blamed it on the sun and rich food. But it went on for months, Annie learning to recognize one of his bad days and tip-toe through it. When she finally goaded him into the doctor’s visit, she knew he’d never forgive her for everything that came after.

“I think it was my fault,” Annie said. “I should’ve tried harder.”

“Are you a doctor or something?”

“No.”

“So, you weren’t going to cure cancer, were you?”

The tape on the box seemed to glare and say otherwise.

“Mine was my fault,” Jones said.

“Your divorce?”

“My death. I did it myself in that bathroom in 1986. Was that a long time ago?”

“It’s been a bit.”

It was all Annie could think to say. She shouldn’t have let him in. He was high or crazy or both. She wondered if she could bludgeon him with the Bible.

“It’s hard to tell,” he watched her discreetly scanning the room for weapons. “I thought you figured it out in the bathroom.”

She tried to laugh. It was a joke. It had to be. But Jones watched her with his slow, steady eyes. For once he didn't smile.

"You don't believe in ghosts?" he asked.

She didn't want to.

He looked lean and hard now, his eyes deeper than ever. Ghost or no, he could shake the teeth right out of her skull.

"I'm going to sleep in my car."

His shoulders sagged as if she'd disappointed him.

When her fingers were on the doorknob he said, "You're forgetting your husband."

Annie leaned her forehead against the tacky plastic covering the rules notice and sobbed. She felt Jones standing just behind her. He didn't touch her. Couldn't touch her.

He was dead. Like Nick.

"I'm alright," Annie said, after a while. She straightened, peeling hair away from her sticky cheeks. "It's just a lot. You know?"

"I know."

Annie had often imagined Nick as a ghost in recent weeks. The support group leader said many people found it helpful to visualize their loved ones as still being with them. Annie pictured a pale, everlasting Nick frowning at her profile in mirrors and wrinkling his nose as he leaned over the stove to investigate dinner. He haunted her with snickering laughter when she talked nonsense to the cat. If she caught her jacket in the car door, it was Nick's phantom hand that slammed it prematurely.

Somehow, Jones in his faded clothes seemed more real than Nick had in those final, never-ending days. The motel room with its uncleaned corners appeared in sharper relief than her own bedroom. 113

"You should go." Jones sat again. The bed didn't sag under his weight and the arthritic springs didn't voice a protest.

His fingers moved in their odd pattern. This time Annie saw the shapes for what they were. Chords. As if he could still make music. As if he could still hold an instrument.

"You never got to New Orleans?" Annie said.

B.B. Garin

“You know, I’d forgotten where I was going until you asked.”

“What was in New Orleans?”

“My stepmom,” he swallowed. “She still is, I think.”

Annie hoped he wouldn’t ask her to find the poor woman. She didn’t see how she could convince anybody she wasn’t crazy. She hadn’t entirely convinced herself.

“You shouldn’t have stopped,” he said.

“It’s a long drive.”

“I shouldn’t have, either.”

His fingers fell slack. They looked unnatural like that, all long bones and dry skin.

“What would you be doing right now?” Jones waved at the box. “If it weren’t for that?”

“Grading theme papers,” she managed.

“Boring,” he laughed. “You can do better.”

“Maybe trivia night.” It had been so long since she’d had time, and her friends had stopped asking. “What would you be doing if 1986 hadn’t happened?”

“Drinking in a motel room.”

He grinned and she knew he had had a wonderful stage presence.

“Is that why you’re still here?” Annie asked. “Death isn’t interesting enough?”

She thought of Nick idle in his hospital bed. He was particularly spiteful to the nurses when he was bored. Annie did her best to find books to occupy him, true crime and thrillers. He said he liked stories that made him feel normal by comparison.

117

“Or is everyone...is my husband?” Annie bit her lip, her stomach twisting. She wasn’t sure she wanted to know.

Jones shrugged. “I don’t know. Do you want him to be?”

Her eyes blurred. But only for a moment.

“No.”

The word sounded big in the small, junky room, overcrowded with the two of them and the box.

“What if I left him?” Annie didn’t recognize the steel in her voice. “We could just go.”

Last Night at the Morrison Hotel

Jones shuffled his feet, even his heavy shoes looked lighter.

“I can’t.”

“You said, you shouldn’t have stopped here.”

“I can’t go with you.”

Annie bent to retrieve the lighter. She flicked it open harder than she meant to, the pinpoint heat startling her.

“Careful,” Jones said.

The tiny flame cast deep shadows around the room, ballooning their bodies to alarming proportions. Annie clicked it shut, afraid to catch sight of the box’s hard angles carved on the walls. She shivered, though the room still held the day’s heat captive.

“Why?” she asked.

“I don’t remember.” He shrugged. The motion went on too long, shuddering more of him away. “I’m sorry.”

“I’m glad you were here. Is that horrible?”

“Probably. But I’m glad too.”

They went on talking, until colorless daylight slanted through the dirty blinds. Until quiet came down and he was gone. Annie said his name a few times, but she knew. Just like when she woke from a cramped nap in the hard hospital chair, and knew she hadn’t even been holding Nick’s hand in the end.

Annie didn’t feel tired anymore. The box was just cardboard and ashes now. She put it back in the car. She took the lighter from the nightstand, but she left the Bible stranded on the bed. She reached the gulf before sunset, and the next day she headed home. After all, she had a life to get back to.

The Gynecologist, My Confessor

CHRISTA FAIRBROTHER

I came for the gargoyles, their lustful little whispers filled my ears. Rainful gurgles from mouths stuffed, over-sloshed with hot moisture. Squat low, hover over the peak of the cathedral, limbs spread in supplication. Hard bodies waiting to be pierced. Inside, the gothic arches muffle their moans. The stained glass hues the hushed interior womb red, bathes the labyrinth on the floor.

I try to walk the straight and narrow path, spiraling out of France into the conversation I'm supposed to have with you now. The hard part isn't spreading my legs, wait for your cold steel, it's looking you in the eyes, confess what I've done. Choke down what I want to do.

Mother Shipton

BEX HAINSWORTH

Knaresborough, North Yorkshire

The tour guide leads our class
 past the skull-shaped pool:
 a mineral soup that slowly drips
 things into stone. Teddy bears,
 strange fossils, hang from
 the cave mouth like trolls
 in sunlight, a string of ashy pearls,
 their button eyes deathless
 and milky grey. A small family
 has brought another offering,
 ready for hardened immortality.

Ursula Southeil, you were born here.
 Your mother Agatha, teenager, terrified,
 braced her back against the walls
 like a petroglyph. Alone, anti-Mary,
 her cries were smothered by thunder.
 The whole night was lightning-lit,
 Act 1, Scene 1; a desert place.
 You arrived with a crash, crackling
 with blood, the cold world curved
 around your immaculate gravity.

We gather beneath a chandelier
of stalactites, are told you spent
your first two years here, a cub
curled in a double womb. Then, schism:
Church-separated, you were fostered
in the nearby village, and never saw
Agatha again. From strange soil
you grew stranger still, spine
a shepherd's crook, nose a crag,
the whispers started with the winter chill.

When you married Toby Shipton,
they said he was bewitched.
It bothered you more than him:
he whistled, wound an arm
around your waist, made you
feel cave-safe. His death was a blade,
a blight. Tired of dragging your heart
behind you in a plague cart, you decided
to withdraw from human court.
The woods welcomed you,
ready for tending, wise woman.

You gathered hawthorn and wild garlic,
dried nettles with chapped hands,
savouring their bite, felt alive again.
Approached by the desperate, the unafraid;
118 you soothed before you became soothsayer.
Now the guide pauses with practised
theatricality. Of course, you are
most famous for your prophecies.
Your life a lesson in foreshadowing.
With murmurs of cows and bulls,
you predicted the Reformation,
the downfall of Anne Boleyn:
a sister similarly-accused.

Mother Shipton

It was the High Bridge that haunted me.
You said that when it fell for a third time,
the world would end. Straddling the Ouse,
arches like panting mouths, it was Atlas,
carrying the weight of your words.
The tour finished with the news
that the bridge had already crumbled
twice. I had nightmares for weeks.
Dreamt myself into the cave corner
where you died, the perfect circle
of your life flickering behind my eyes.
My soles grew hot, I felt an umbilical
cord around my neck, my first period
brewing in my tiny womb like a storm.
I sensed our sacred inheritance.

Twenty years later, and sometimes,
in the quiet, I hear a creak, a crunch,
a groan of stones. Somewhere,
beside your bones, a bridge
is swaying, and I think:
it won't be long now.

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Knuckle Bruises

C. SCHNEIDER

Winnie holds the back of her hand to her cheek. Her puffy red knuckles thrum with little beats in time with her heart. Her skin is cool and absorbs some of the heat, but she can't make it stop hurting.

"Come on Winnie, why did you quit?" her brother says.

The waiting room chairs in the police station are made of slippery hard orange plastic—barf orange, Sebastian had said. Probably trying to make her laugh. The chairs aren't bolted down, so when they swing their feet hard enough, the chairs scuff along the floor. Inch by inch, they race each other to an imaginary finish line. There really isn't anything else to do, and they don't know how long they have to wait. Except for the racket they make, the station is night-time quiet.

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The officer who took them from home and brought them here so many hours ago left without telling them how the night would end. Whenever the lobby door opens, Winnie hunches down into her chair, expecting their parents to walk in. It's a cycle that repeats again and again, and now her stomach hurts.

Sebastian has won the race twice—says it's because he's ten and she's only nine. But besides watching the door, she also watches the officer behind the sliding window who sits at a metal desk, under a

smiling picture of President Reagan. Also, Winnie can't play as well with one hand. The officer looks up from his paperback and glares, his eyebrows scrunched until they meet in the middle and make a long angry V. When he scrapes his chair back and stands, Winnie sucks in her breath.

"I win!" Sebastian says again.

The officer tromps right past Winnie, his breeze smelling like burnt coffee and sweat. In the corner with the snack machines, he pounds and tilts one, using cuss words that scare her, until it gives up M&Ms, Skittles, and potato chips. He does it all over again at the soda machine, then comes over to her and Sebastian with an armful of stuff they don't get even on Easter.

"Here," he says. "Eat this and shut up." Sebastian holds up his hand for a high five, and the night watch officer rolls his eyes, then half of his mouth curls up into a smile. He smacks Sebastian's hand and goes back to his book.

Winnie is looking for something she can eat that won't make her throw up when the door opens again. Hunched, heart racing, she puts her swollen knuckles to her cheek again, feeling the warmth of her bruises. She gently moves her knuckles back and forth across her lips' soft skin, comforting and shushing herself at the same time.

A pool of morning light enters first. Then, Uncle Gordon. He looks at Winnie and her brother, nods slowly like they've just said something very wise, and goes over to the desk.

Winnie doesn't know Uncle Gordon very well. When her grandfather died, he left some money for her father, but Uncle Gordon inherited the family farm on the lake. Instead of a farm, Winnie and Sebastian live on a street with lots of other families, where the mothers swap bags of hand-me-downs. Their mother sews them new clothes for church on Easter and Christmas.

Winnie saw the farm once and loved it immediately, but her father calls Uncle Gordon a selfish man for living alone there with all that space, instead of marrying and raising a family. "Abomination," her mother says in response. Winnie doesn't know what that

word means, but it reminds her of the “Amens” her father gets at church when he gives the sermon. They don’t visit Uncle Gordon.

Uncle Gordon is filthy, like a farmer should be. His pickup truck smells like engine oil and hay, and they scoot up onto the front seat with Winnie in the middle. Uncle Gordon’s hands work the steering wheel, the blinker wand, the hand crank for the window. His fingernails are black. Next to the door, Sebastian wears the shoulder seatbelt like a grownup, sitting on his knees with his elbows and head out the window. The wind mats back his hair as he airplanes his hand.

The breeze chills Winnie’s cheeks, and she lets her hair fly in her face. The wind moving the trees makes the sunlight shine through in sparks and flashes. She squints against it, then just closes her eyes. The bumpy gravel driveway wakes her and the old white farmhouse comes toward her through the trees.

Uncle Gordon tells them to go on up and get some sleep. They’ve been up all night, but from the upstairs windows they see the whole farm—the big barn and a green tractor in the half-mown field of wavy grass, the lake and the dock, a pontoon boat tilted in the mud.

Uncle Gordon flinches when he turns from the kitchen counter to see them standing right behind him. His coffee sloshes a little over the side of his cup.

“May we please have permission to go see the dock?” Winnie asks.

He blinks. He gives a little shake of his head, which she learns he does a lot, but it doesn’t mean no. He holds his coffee-cup toward the door. “Go on. Don’t fall in.”

Winnie runs out of the house, the kitchen’s screen door banging behind her. It’s Saturday, and by now they’ve learned to wear sneakers on the splintery old dock.

“Is it still there?” she yells, as she flies down the sloping grass to the lake edge. She hears her own voice, how loud it is, and she wants to laugh.

Sebastian kneels on the dock, staring into the water. A fishing

rod lies next to him, hook dangling over the surface. He puts his finger to his mouth, waving an arm to shush her. She claps a hand to her mouth to stifle her giggle and comes to a stop next to him on the shaky dock.

They have never been fishing, but after exploring the barn and finding the old fishing pole, they thought all they needed to do next was find some worms. As soon as they'd come to the muddy shore, ready to start digging, they spied an enormous fish wiggling slowly just a few feet away, in water barely deep enough to cover its smooth, speckled back.

Winnie has a fistful of Cheez-Its, mostly broken now from her run, and she holds her palm out to Sebastian, her skin bright orange from the dust. Sebastian picks the biggest piece, and tries to put it on the hook through the hole in the middle. The cracker breaks apart, so he puts the rod down, holds the broken bits over the water, and drops them carefully near the fish.

The fish doesn't seem interested in the cracker pieces, but it's all they have, so they drop more. Winnie just has crumbs now, and she tips her palm and clap-brushes the dust over the water. It floats down and makes a little patch that slowly dissolves. A breeze makes little white waves on the lake surface, and the early morning sun reflects off the wave tops. Standing up, Winnie and Sebastian make hand-visors and stare until the fish disappears into the muddy water.

Winnie runs back to the house while Sebastian returns the fishing rod. The screen door slams again behind her, and she pants, out of breath. She grins when she sees Uncle Gordon leaning against the counter, holding his coffee-cup.

"Good morning," she says, louder than usual.

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Uncle Gordon scratches his gray neck frizzle. "You know about weekends, I can see."

"Yes, sir."

"That Saturday is a day you don't have to go to school."

She isn't sure if he wants her to keep agreeing with him, and she doesn't want to be scolded for being impatient, so she says nothing.

"It occurs to me that maybe you don't know that normal folks

like myself also have Saturdays and Sundays off. You don't go to school, we don't go to work." Uncle Gordon teaches high school math.

"Yes, sir," she says. A tingle of dread spreads over her skin. Truly, she forgot that he works somewhere else. After school all week, she had walked out the big doors to see Uncle Gordon's old red truck sitting across the street waiting for them. She still thinks of him as a farmer.

"And that folks who don't have to go to work may like to enjoy a little extra sleep of a Saturday morning."

Her face gets hot and she covers her mouth with her hand. Scorching shame pulses in her cheeks as the echo of her yelling voice loops in her head. Uncle Gordon frowns as he fixes his eyes on the back of her hand.

Winnie jumps when the screen door slams behind Sebastian. He looks at Winnie, the Cheez-It box on the floor, Uncle Gordon.

"I told her to do it, sir," says Sebastian.

"No, Seb—"

"Yes, I did, Win.?"

"No, it's not that—"

Uncle Gordon's gaze ping-pongs between them, then he reaches out to take Winnie's hand from her mouth. He looks at her greening bruises, then into her eyes as she whips her hand away behind her back. Uncle Gordon shakes his head, slower than usual this time. To Sebastian he says, "Just keep it down now. I'm going back to bed."

127 Winnie is the last one to get up on Sunday, and she comes down to the kitchen to find Sebastian and Uncle Gordon hunched together at the table, a green plastic box open next to them. It reminds her of her mother's sewing box, with hinged drawers that unfold when you open it. They do not look ready for church.

Sebastian shouts, "We're going fishing!"

"Now pay attention to what you're doing, son, or you'll end up with a finger full of hook," says Uncle Gordon.

Winnie's throat tightens. It's not fair, but she nods. Nobody sees it.

Uncle Gordon looks up at her. She is furious to feel tears on her cheek.

“You don’t want to go fishing?” Uncle Gordon’s eyebrows pinch and point up in the middle.

She nods again because of course she does.

Uncle Gordon makes that not-a-no shake of his head.

Sebastian says, “All of us Winnie. Girls can do it too.”

They pile into Uncle Gordon’s truck and bump along down a gravel road, until he chooses a spot and parks off to the side in the middle of the woods. When he shuts off the engine the sound of rushing water mingles with the hushing noise of brittle leaves in the trees all around. It’s just a few steps to a shallow, rocky stream. Standing on the bank, Winnie sees a cascade of shelf-like waterfalls. It’s beautiful, like being inside a postcard picture.

They pull on big rubber boots, all sized for Uncle Gordon’s enormous feet, and tromp up the middle of the stream. The slippery rocks move under their feet, so Winnie is soaked through and freezing, her boots full of water, by the time Uncle Gordon stops to ready his fishing rod. They stand still in the middle of a large pool and stare into the water long enough to see a few little trout in the darker area under a low pine branch. Winnie watches Uncle Gordon’s fancy moves whipping the rod around like he’s lassoing a runaway horse. She lasts long enough to try it twice, then decides to sit on the bank and read her book. She’d picked it from an old box in the barn, noticing how well-worn it was—like someone had read and re-read it.

Unslinging her backpack, she wrestles off her wet socks, lays them in a sunny spot and uncuffs her jeans—too long because they’re Sebastian’s—to cover her feet. It’s so quiet, she thinks, but really the air is alive with sound all around her. Birds chatter above the burble of the stream, and she hears as much as sees all the things jostled by the fall wind, including the pages of her book. It is her mind that is quiet. 125

Sebastian is just as wet as Winnie is—she can tell he’s freezing because his teeth chatter when he comes closer to untangle the hook from the pine branch, but all he wants to do is keep trying to

work the long fishing rod like Uncle Gordon does. Over and over and over, like fishing is the best idea anyone ever had.

Back at the farmhouse, they stand the rod in the kitchen corner, and Winnie and Sebastian run upstairs to put on dry clothes. They're starving, and it's pitch-black outside. She has no idea what time it is, and the day feels like it was a week long, like the way it feels when they get home after a trip to the beach. Alone in the bathroom, as she struggles to pull her nightgown over her wet hair, Winnie giggles. She's shivering, but the struggle is so funny she can't stop laughing.

She runs down the stairs singing "Let us rejoice and be glaaaaaad!"

Uncle Gordon gives her a head shake, but he smiles.

"Well, since you two didn't catch us any dinner, I guess it's pancakes and bacon," he says.

"Sometimes Mom makes breakfast for dinner," Winnie says loudly, grinning.

"Well, I expect your Mom's pancakes are much prettier than mine," he says as he flips one.

"Why don't you have a wife?" Sebastian says. Winnie elbows him hard.

"Ha!" Uncle Gordon cackles. "I can make my own damn pancakes, that's why."

He puts a platter piled high on the table, and uses his fingers to flop pancakes onto the plates. They've already eaten all their bacon, but there's more. He sits down and picks up his fork.

126 "Who is Christopher?" Winnie asks. She doesn't even know she is wondering this until she says it, but she is still replaying the day. The stream, the breeze, and the book in her lap under the tree, this name written in pencil at the top of the first page.

Uncle Gordon's sideways fork hiccups a little on its way down through his stack of pancakes. "Old friend," he says. "Pass the maple syrup, son." Syrup has one syllable, the way he says it. *Sirp*. Just like their father does. She and her brother say it like their mother, *seer-up*.

When he's done eating, Uncle Gordon sits back in his chair, sipping his coffee and watching them. Winnie eats the last piece of

bacon and Sebastian pours more syrup on his second stack.

“Christopher was a good friend of mine who killed himself a few years back,” Uncle Gordon says. “Your daddy tell you about him?”

“No,” they both say.

Winnie feels Uncle Gordon’s question, even though he doesn’t ask it. “I found a book in the barn with his name in it,” she says.

“What book?”

“*Mrs. Dalloway.*”

He nods. “You reading that?” He cocks his head a little sideways.

“Yes.” She is trying to, anyway. So far, it is a story about a faraway place, a busy city where everything is different.

He scratches his neck and inhales deeply through his nose. “Yeah, Christopher loved that book. Carried it around with him everywhere for a while.” He smiles at the ceiling. Then, he says quietly, “Christopher was a wonderful man.”

Winnie is mightily relieved that Sebastian doesn’t ask why Christopher killed himself, although she is also burning to know. Especially because he was wonderful.

Monday is Columbus Day, and Winnie comes in from the dock holding a hand behind her so that the kitchen door closes noiselessly. Uncle Gordon isn’t sleeping, but she wants to show him she has learned her lesson from Saturday. Her mother says that Winnie gets her father’s lickings because she never learns the first time. She knows now this isn’t true. She has learned many things the first time here, and Uncle Gordon hasn’t punished them so far.

Just as she is about to go back out with the pail they use for digging up worms, Winnie hears her mother’s voice in the living room.

Peeking around the corner she sees her mother step into the room slowly. Uncle Gordon’s back is to Winnie, and he says something she can’t hear.

Her mother blinks quickly, like she does when she is surprised-angry. “How dare you” angry. She tips her head up to look at him.

“They might seem happy,” she says. “They probably think they’re on some kind of vacation. They need discipline. Have you given them any structure? Chores?” She shakes her head. It always means no when her mother does it. “I am not looking forward to all the correction we’ll have to make when they get home.” She says this to the curtains, not to Uncle Gordon.

Then her mother spies *Mrs. Dalloway* on the side table, next to the big reading chair Winnie loves, and makes a sharp cluck with her tongue. “I don’t like the example you provide for our children, Gordon.”

He stands with his arms folded, and pivots as her mother walks to the middle of the room, but doesn’t say anything. His face is frozen and unfriendly, a look she has not seen on him before. Winnie can’t tell what he’s thinking, but it might not be very nice.

“You didn’t bring them to church yesterday as we asked you. It’s important for us to all be seen there as a family.” Winnie wonders what people thought, seeing her mother sitting there in the front row all by herself while her father gave the sermon. Wonders if anyone there would take Winnie’s side, or if they’re all as afraid of her mother as she is.

Her mother fishes for something in her purse. “Here is our chart for their usual responsibilities at home. There’s a system of stars and checks for...”

She holds the paper out to him, but trails off when he doesn’t move to take it.

128 “We’d really like you to make an effort.” These are words she borrows from Winnie’s father. What he says right before the lickings, while the dread builds. The lickings make the skin on her bare behind sting so bad that she cries in bursts that feel like dog barks, gulping in big gobs of air to try to fill her lungs back up. Winnie hears her heartbeat in her ears.

Her mother’s arm flops to her side, and she crumples the paper into her bag. “Maybe the social worker needs to hear about this for the investigation.” This is her mother’s “last chance” tone, and Winnie is a little afraid for Uncle Gordon.

Finally, he unfolds his arms, opens the front door with one

hand, and sweeps the air with the other to show her mother where to go.

Through the living room window, Winnie sees clouds of dust kicked up by the family station wagon driving away.

“Was that mom?” Sebastian’s voice comes from far away. “Didn’t she want to see me?”

Winnie shakes her head. “Me either,” she whispers.

She rubs the knuckle bruises from her last licking, when she’d screwed the whole thing up by trying to cover her behind. Flashes from that night come back, of her father with the stick in his hand, the hard cracking sound when it hit her knuckles, the way she screamed at the new kind of pain. While her parents argued about whether he should finish the licking, Winnie stood, pants around her ankles, holding her hot knuckles to her cheek. It seemed just a minute later that her mother shouted at the police officers carrying Winnie and Sebastian out of the house. Her father, silent and still holding the stick, watched them go.

Their mother will be back, Winnie knows, to take them home. This thought squeezes her lungs until she can’t breathe.

When Winnie opens her eyes, she sees a window sideways across a room. Sunlight is pouring in, and her brain makes it into the living room window at home. She sits up quickly.

“Okay, okay, take it easy,” says Uncle Gordon. “We don’t want any more fainting spells.” He smiles at Winnie from the big reading chair. “Your brother tells me this comes on from time to time, so I thought we’d watch over you for a bit before calling in the cavalry.” He watches her, eyebrows pinched up again, but he keeps the smile. 129

“Was it the storm again?” Sebastian sits at her feet at the end of the sofa. He puts his hand on her ankle.

She nods, although she doesn’t remember much of it this time. Usually, when the storm comes, it takes a few minutes to grow while her heart beats faster and faster and the world zooms away. Like looking through the wrong end of a telescope. Sometimes it helps to take deep breaths, and if she sits down, it goes away. This time, all she remembers is watching the station wagon drive away. Then here.

She lies back down and they're all quiet for a while. Uncle Gordon fiddles with a Rubik's Cube. He solves it completely once, then hands it to Sebastian. Her brother mixes it up as much as he can, and then Uncle Gordon rolls and twists it, setting everything right again. He has big knuckley hands and the cube shrinks into them. He smiles and flicks his eyebrows at Sebastian to show off.

"How can you do that?" Sebastian asks.

"Aw, just practice," Uncle Gordon says. "There's a bunch of tricks that work every time if you do them in the right order."

"Did you figure it out yourself?" Sebastian says.

"Yep."

After nobody has said anything for a little while, without looking up from the Rubik's Cube, Uncle Gordon asks, "Which one of you was it called the cops on your parents?"

"I did." Sebastian says.

Uncle Gordon smiles. "Son, I think you'd say that whether it was true or not."

"Sebastian doesn't lie!" Winnie says, sitting up again.

"Easy, love, I expect he's telling the truth. I think your brother does things to protect you is all I'm saying."

Winnie sinks into the sofa pillow, the needlepoint gently scratching her cheek. She closes her eyes, and lets the room, the house, the farm, wrap around her like a blanket.

Sebastian puts words to the deepest wish she can make, "I want to stay here."

130 After school on Thursday, Winnie leaves the house quietly and walks through the side yard to the barn. Just a short ways from the house, the barn sits on the edge of a wide stretch of waving wheat grass. Uncle Gordon says the field used to be for corn and soy, back when he had more time to tend the farm. On the field's far end, there's a line of trees that dead ends at the lake's shoreline, where someone on the big green tractor zigzags slowly toward the house. The tractor sound seems very far away, like a buzzing bee.

Winnie enters the barn through the big sliding doors at the front, heaving against one of them until there is a crack big enough

for her to slip through. Boxes of family history lean stacked along the walls, and a ladder leads up to the loft. The loft door is propped open to get summer breezes, Uncle Gordon says, but the two-by-four barring the opening reminds you not to keep walking straight on out. The view is of the field and the orange-gold line of oak trees that will be bare soon. The lake stretches up to the left, long and skinny, ending out of sight. You can see all the way across, to lake houses—camps Uncle Gordon calls them—and to other trees, where the sunset finishes every day.

In the week since they came here, Winnie has scavenged through all of the boxes, especially the ones labeled with her father's or uncle's names and things like "magazines," "books," "clothes" and "winter boots." After finding *Mrs. Dalloway*, she made a stack of books for herself to read, calculating in days and weeks how long the pile could last. If she could stay. In the middle of the floor is an old sleigh with iron runners and a red velvet bench. The harness sits on the wood-plank floor, like it's waiting to be hitched to the horses that used to pull it. Winnie pulls a handful of *National Geographics* from a box and climbs into the sleigh, curling up on the soft, musty-smelling seat. She flips through dreamy photographs of faraway places, colorful people, and unfamiliar animals, imagining lives she might have had but doesn't. For a while, she sits like time is paused. The past is erased and the future won't come. There is nothing but now.

When she wakes, the map of *The Islands of the South Pacific Ocean* is still unfolded across her lap like a blanket. Uncle Gordon has opened the big doors, and comes to sit on the bench next to her, making it creak under his weight. He slings an arm across the back of the seat like they're going for a ride and looks out the open doorway to the lake. 131

"You know I think this sleigh has been here for thirty years and I've never thought to sit right here and watch the sunset," he says.

His voice is quiet. Winnie knows why he is here, and her throat muscles strangle her voice. He is letting her put the moment off, letting her choose when to unpause. Winnie's tears splash down, tap-tapping on the map. They soak in, making new atolls to escape to far away. Someday.

They watch the sky across the lake. As the sun leaves behind lovely colors to remember it by, Winnie feels safety slipping away. She presses the side of her face into his armpit.

“What’s a bomb-nation?” She remembers the way her mother spat the word out, but she still needs to know. And needs it to not be true.

He chuckles quietly. “That one of your Daddy’s words?” he says. Shrinking the power of it already, like the Rubik’s Cube in his hands.

“Mom says it too,” she says without saying why.

“Well, I don’t know how your Mom would define it...” he says slowly. He scratches his neck, the way he does when he tries to put the right words to a thing. “I’d say an abomination is when something that should be good turns out to be bad.”

“Or a person?”

“Or a person.” He nods, his stubbly chin scratching her forehead.

Winnie swipes her knuckles with a finger from the other hand. The bruises are faded to golden-brown. Uncle Gordon is good, not an abomination. She is certain of this now, even if it means her mother is wrong.

In a whisper she says, “Is it bad for them to hit us with a stick?” She knows there is betrayal in her words. Good and bad are twisting, flip-flopping, turning upside-down in her head.

Uncle Gordon grunts like he did when he closed the door after her mother, and wipes his face from top to bottom with his free hand. He squishes her into his side with his other hand.

132 “Aw, Winnie,” he sighs. “I’d be lying if I told you I think everything’s gonna be okay. Truth is, you’re getting a raw deal, you and your brother, and there’s not much either one of you can do about it.” She feels him turn to look at her but she stares at her hands, and at the word Micronesia in all capital letters. “I feel like I should have seen all this sooner, and I’m mighty sorry I didn’t. But I’ll be keeping an eye out from now on, in case that means something to you.”

She throws herself into his arms, to feel his safety for one last moment before time starts up again.

Contributors



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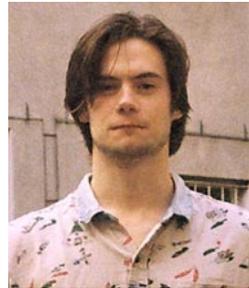
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Canadian settler poet **Steve McOrmond** is the author of four collections of poetry, most recently *Reckon* (Brick Books, 2018) and *The Good News about Armageddon* (Brick Books 2010). His work has appeared in *Poetry Daily* and been anthologized in *Best Canadian Poetry in English*. He lives in Toronto. www.stevemcormond.com.

Katie Mora's fiction has appeared in *Blue Earth Review*, *Terrain.org*, *Willows Wept Review*, *Fatal Flaw*, and *Gone Lawn*. Her poetry has appeared in *Third Wednesday*, *The Shore*, and *Progenitor*. She lives in the Capital Region of New York.



C. Schneider lives in the Shenandoah Valley. She writes flash fiction and short stories. When she isn't writing, she is stomping around in the Appalachian wilderness or getting lost in the stacks at a local bookstore.

¹³⁸ **Siamak Vossoughi** is an Iranian-American writer living in Seattle. He has had stories published in *Kenyon Review*, *Missouri Review*, *Bennington Review*, *Columbia Journal*, *Gulf Coast*, and *Orca*. He is the author of two short story collections, *Better Than War* and *A Sense of the Whole*.



Stephanie Yorke writes poetry, fiction, and essays. She has published one poetry book, *Both Boys Climb Trees They Can't Climb Down* (Signature Editions, Winnipeg) as well as a fair variety of different things in literary magazines.



The Orcans

Publisher/Senior Editor Joe Ponepinto is the author of the novels *Mr. Neutron* and *Curtain Calls*, as well as dozens of short stories published in the U.S., Europe, and Australia. His major literary influences include Zadie Smith (whose novels somehow convinced him he could become a writer), Jorge Luis Borges, Roberto Bolaño, James Joyce, Bernard Malamud, Ted Chiang, Yasunari Kawabata, Margaret Atwood, Tobias Wolff, and dozens of others. Best book on writing: *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain*, by George Saunders.

Publisher/Senior Editor Zachary Kellian, a widely published author of flash fiction and short stories, is finishing up his first novel. He is also the co-host of the podcast *Literary Guise*, encouraging men to use literature as a way to discuss their thoughts and emotions. His major literary influences include Dylan Thomas, Toni Morrison, Cormac McCarthy, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Yukio Mishima, Anne Proulx, and John O'Brien. You can find him online at zacharykellian.com

Editor Renee Jackson is a multi-disciplinary artist currently splitting time between the U.S. and Argentina. She has a passion for new work and a background in theatre where she has had the pleasure of 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

Rebecca L. Jensen is a writer and professor of English currently residing in South Florida. She holds an MFA in creative nonfiction from Florida Atlantic University but focuses most of her writing time on her literary novel-in-progress. Her work has most recently appeared at *Musing Publications*, *The Moving Force Journal*, and *HAD*, among others. She can be found online at www.rebeccaljensen.com.

Kilmeny MacMichael resides in small town British Columbia, Canada. Primarily a writer of speculative and historical short fictions, she sometimes makes poetry. As a reader she gravitates toward mystery, as a viewer of film she falls back to classic noir, and as a podcast and radio drama listener she's a sucker for a good baritone. Her favourite authors include Miriam Toews, Terry Pratchett, Hilary Mantel, Dorothy B. Hughes, and Guy Gavriel Kay.

Anne McGouran's essays and short fiction have appeared in *Gargoyle*, *The Account*, *Cut Bank*, *The Smart Set*, *Mslxia*, *Notre Dame Magazine*, *Queen's Quarterly*. Her hybrid essay on the 1850s Irish Workhouse was cited in *Best Canadian Essays 2019*. In her work she's explored cultural displacement, generational trauma, ageism, the rural/urban divide.

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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.

Aurora Ohr is a young writer from Gig Harbor. She is currently working on her first novel, and enjoys writing about self discovery, psychological horror, fantasy worlds, and dystopias. Her major literary influences include Simone King, James Patterson, Stephanie Garber, and Nora Sakavic.

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.

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?!"

¹⁴² **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.

René Zadoorian is an Armenian writer finishing up his undergraduate degree in creative writing at California State University, Northridge. He was born in Tehran, Iran, and now resides in Los Angeles. His short stories lean toward themes of queerness, SWANA culture, and bugs! His literary influences include Ocean Vuong, Khashayar Khabushani, Sabrina Imbler and Kiese Laymon.

Robert McDonald is a young writer from Chicago working toward a bachelor's degree in English at Aurora University. He has long had a love for writing and explores this through both poetry and prose forms that explore issues of the human experience ranging from loss and grief to love and acceptance. His eventual goal is to one day fully write and publish his own novels, the first of which is currently in progress.

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A LITERARY JOURNAL

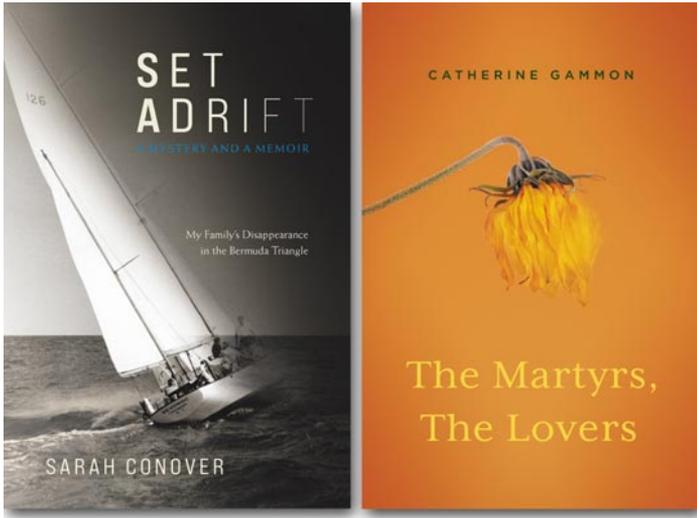
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¹⁷⁶ Work published in *Orca* may be nominated for anthologies such as *Best American Short Stories*, *Best Small Fictions*, the Pushcart Prize, and others. Work published in our pages has been selected for *Best Canadian Short Stories* and regularly appears in *Best Small Fictions*.

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