CRAB ORCHARD REVIEW

Volume 12, Number 2
our special Summer/Fall 2007 issue
“Come Together ~ Occasions, Ceremonies, & Celebrations”
(return to Vol. 12, No. 2 web page)

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“Hidden everywhere, a myriad leather seed-cases lie in wait . . .”
—“Crab Orchard Sanctuary: Late October”
Thomas Kinsella
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A Note on Our Cover

The six photographs on the cover of this issue are the work of Jason Lee Brown, a second-year student in the MFA Program in creative writing at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, and of Jon Tribble, the managing editor of Crab Orchard Review.
Come Together
~
Occasions,
Ceremonies,
& Celebrations
Brinkmanship

The family gathers at my sister Jane’s house to celebrate her fiftieth birthday. My parents are telling the same tale they tell every year. I should say that Mom is marshalling the story through a minefield of Dad’s interruptions. It’s the story of Jane’s gestation. It’s the tale of Mom’s aborted suicide.

Except for Kennedy Marie, the newest great-grandchild, we’ve all heard some version of the story before. The digressions are of most interest in a story this well-worn. No one in this family expects linear development from anyone else, least of all my parents.

“You were five. You were barely four. You weren’t even three.” Mom looks from adult child to adult child, giving each of us an accusatory smirk. As if the fact that we are close in age got Mom pregnant. This is the way the tale always goes. Everyone in the family except Mom seems to have been responsible for Jane’s conception.

“The nerve of me.” We answer the accusation individually, in descending order. Except Dad who pulls rank, “The nerve of me,” he says last, and as always, gets the biggest laugh.

“Well,” Mom settles in deeper on Jane’s sofa. “I was beside myself.”

“I was beside you,” Dad says. “And you were a mess.”

“I was a mess,” Mom asserts, as though Dad had not stolen her line. “You don’t know how hard it was in those days. I was twenty-two years old.” She shakes her head. “The rhythm method, huh.” This is the most interesting part for her adult children. How will our eighty-year-old Mom maneuver the religious and logistical quagmire of remaining a good Catholic and disparaging Church doctrine at the same time, this time?

“Priests.” Dad offers the safe ground of our culture’s latest maligned authority figure. “In those days we weren’t smart enough to shop around until we found one who would tell us what we wanted to hear.”

“He’s talking about The Pill.” Mom raises her eyebrows at Cora, Jane’s twenty-year-old daughter. Mom is making a distinction she doesn’t want overlooked between abortion and the Pill. She’s all for
the Pill. She’s all for condoms too, but would never use the word in front of the grandchildren. “But the Pill wasn’t around then. Anyway, I would have listened to them.” Mom nods toward the kitchen as if the crew from the Vatican is in there, tripping over their robes while they frost Jane’s cake.

“The Pill.” Jacob, one of Jane’s eighteen-year-old twins, elongates the words as if he’s announcing a horror film. Like Mom, he directs this phrase at his sister. Cora has a boyfriend who is not present. There is, no doubt, a juicy tangential story here, but, thankfully, I haven’t heard it, so I can’t interject it into the main tale, which as a reminder is Mom’s alleged attempt at suicide during her pregnancy with baby sister Jane.

You might wonder about Jane’s emotional health. How does a person who has grown up hearing, often on the very day of her birth, that she is the result of an extremely unwanted pregnancy, manage to reach adulthood with her self-esteem intact? Not to worry. Jane is Mom’s favorite. Jane is the baby. She’s a sweet woman, nicer than any of her siblings. She’s pretty much everyone’s favorite.

It’s Jane who says, “Tell the story so we can cut the cake,” when Mom wanders too far afield with a commentary on the muumuu as maternity wear in the fifties.

A good call on Jane’s part because Dad is drifting off to sleep in his overstuffed armchair.

Our sister Kathy pats his leg. “Mom needs you to help her tell the Mueller Bridge story, Dad.”

His memory often holds up for old stories, the older the better.

“It’s Jane’s birthday,” he informs Kathy. “Ah, your mother was a mess. What can you do when a woman gets something like that in her head?”

“I was mad at you,” Mom says.

Dad shrugs, grinning, rotating his head, playing the room. “I wasn’t too thrilled with her either.”

“Did you know where he was taking you, Gram?” My son, Brian asks. I, for one, listen carefully for this year’s answer.

“Oh, I kept saying, ‘I can’t take it. I’m going to jump off the bridge if I have to have another one.’ We said things like that in those days. How many times did I tell you kids, ‘I’m going to kill you if I find out you’ve been stealing apples again,’ or ‘I’ll crack your heads together?’ That was another one we used to say. Nobody thought anything about saying something like that back then.”
Sally Bellerose

“Get us to the bridge, Mom,” Tom, the oldest sibling, says. “I gotta meet a guy.” There hasn’t been a family event in forty years when Tom hasn’t had to “meet a guy.”


“We were on our way to Quabbin.” Dad jumps in. “And she says,” he nods at Mom in case any of us have forgotten the main characters, “I’m going to jump off the bridge,’ one time too many. So I said, ‘Okay.’ Made a U-turn right there on Route 202.”

“That’s right,” Mom agrees. “You kids were with Memere.” (That’s what we called our grandmother.) “Memere wasn’t so happy I was pregnant again either. Your father was just going home.” She waves in his direction, dismissing his lack of initiative. “I told him, ‘Take me to the bridge.’”

“An order’s an order.” Dad smiles. He spent eight years in the army. “I parked on the bridge.” His eyebrows shoot up. “Illegally.”

“Oh, there was so little traffic in those days. He walked around the car and opened the door for me.” Now Mom’s eyebrows shoot up. She pauses, as if this was the main action in the story.

“All the men in this family are gentlemen,” Tom says.

“People really have died jumping off the Mueller,” Kathy says.

Now it’s time for my big line. “The Mueller Bridge wasn’t built until 1958.” Jane was born in ’54.

“Sh,” Tom says. “I want to hear whether or not she jumps.”

“Oh, go meet a guy,” Kathy says.

Jane prompts Mom again, “So he helps you out of the car and tells you you have beautiful legs.”

“Told her if she jumped she was going to break her beautiful legs. That’s what we did in the service. A guy got squirrelly, wanted to do himself in, why, we’d just remind him of his best attributes.”

“Tough guy,” Mom chides. “He was holding my hand, looking into the water, calm as you please one minute, telling me he was going to miss me, telling me how much you kids were going to miss me, then like a water faucet, he’s crying like a baby.”

Dad winks at the twins and taps his head. “They can’t stand to see a man cry.”

“Never saw a man cry like that,” Mom smirks.

“You were crying, too.” Dad leans back, tired but satisfied. “Crying like babies, both of us.”

“Of course,” Mom says. “We needed sleep.”

“Money,” Dad says with closed eyes. “We needed money.”
“He had the jumpy legs.” Mom carries her own storyline forward. “Woke us both up every night. You kids were up at dawn.”

“Ohay.” Jane gets off a chair that’s been dragged in from the kitchen. “Time to cut the cake. Somebody give me a present.”
Sita Bhaskar

Swayamvaram

The paper in Gaja’s hand was limp with perspiration. He unfolded the sheet as if to allow it to breathe, as if being clutched in Gaja’s palm was suffocating the paper and choking the message it held. Surely it was important—to Madras, to Tamil Nadu, maybe even to all of India—important enough for the Chief Minister’s henchmen to have plucked Gaja off the street like he was a chicken that had escaped the coop and herded him into a police jeep to be brought to the Chief Minister’s residence. No, not the Chief Minister’s residence—he was getting carried away. Being so close to the center of power had turned his brain to mush—he’d been brought to the street where he could get a glimpse of the crowd that thronged the enclosure which housed the sycophantic Ministers seeking an audience with the Chief Minister.

Gaja worried about his fate as he jostled for space in the packed line of forty-five men on the barricaded road, clutching the sheet of paper that had been thrust into his hand as he took his place in line. Just an hour ago he had been pushing his freshly-painted newly-remodeled bright-yellow cart on the road, admiring some new features added during remodeling: a small prayer niche that held pictures of God Ganesha, the elephant God after whom Gaja—short for Gajendra, the Lord of Elephants—had been named; a mirror in a red, green, and yellow frame as a prop for Gaja’s thick, black, wavy hair and soft mustache; a closed shelf under the cart for his supplies—charcoal, an orange comb, a clean cotton shirt with a frayed collar, and a pair of blue flip-flop slippers. He should have stayed close to the sidewalk, but it had been dug up for repairs. With construction debris overflowing onto the road, Gaja’s cart had encroached onto the path of the kings of the road—buses, cars and trucks. Surely his traffic offense had not been so serious that he had to be hauled before the Chief Minister?

Initially he hung back in line like a shy bride, apprehensive of what a trip to the Chief Minister’s residence meant to him, but as rumors snaked their way through the line, they brought with them the same allure of a snake charmer.
“Chief Minister’s forty-fifth birthday.”
“She will give jobs to forty-five deserving men—one for each year of her life.”
“Big jobs. Office jobs.”
Gaja looked at the number imprinted on the paper. Thirteen—in bold numerals. What did it mean? Was he thirteenth in line for a job, a big job, an office job? He didn’t need a job. He already had a job. A profession, in fact. He looked at his damp palms as if they had betrayed him. On a normal day he had dry palms. Palms that made him a success in his profession—the iron man, the laundry wallah, as his customers called him. Palms that never dripped perspiration onto the clothes of his customers as he ran a heavy iron powered by the heat of hot coals over their clothes. It was his duty to see that his customers were attired in well-ironed clothes—men with lightly starched shirts and smartly creased pants; women with off-the-shelf salwar-kameezes who even insisted on getting their diaphanous dupattas ironed; women with prim and proper cotton saris draped over matching blouses tailored in the latest fashions.
Gaja had feared for his livelihood when colleges and offices relaxed their dress rules, and college girls and young professional women adopted western fashions and started wearing pants—pants made of thick blue material that remained rough and heavy even after several washes, pants that did not appear to need the discipline of a heavy iron. But a strange conspiracy between Gaja and the mothers of the blue-pant-clad female population had saved his livelihood. While the young ladies were away at college or office, the blue pants—jeans or denims as they were called—were washed post-haste by housemaids and given to Gaja to iron. It was only then that he realized that each person owned several pairs in the same color. What was the point in spending money to buy clothes that looked the same and would make people think one did not change one’s clothes? Even Gaja washed his clothes every evening at the communal water pump. But he never ironed them on his wooden cart. That would not be fitting.

Sweat trickled down from Nirmala’s tightly-braided hair, winding a lazy path behind her ear, sprouting limp, damp tendrils brushing the nape of her neck before pooling together as heavy, salty drops. She wiped the back of her neck with the edge of her sari pallu, an action she disliked. Ever since she had started working as a maid at the big bungalow, she had taken to using handkerchiefs. Though
not embroidered or lace-trimmed wisps of white like Akka’s (as she called her mistress), Nirmala’s handkerchiefs were made of discarded pieces of cloth sewn together in eye-catching patterns. But an hour ago, in the confusion of being coaxed into a jeep by official-looking men, she had lost her handkerchief. It was only by a stroke of good luck that she had saved her new slippers. The left slipper had slipped out when Nirmala was trying to climb into the jeep without showing her legs to the goons gathered on the roadside. But as she scrambled for a foothold someone flung the slipper into the jeep and she was able to reclaim it. Slippers—new to her but discarded by her mistress because of broken heels. Nirmala had taken them to her neighbor, the cobbler, and he replaced the heels with matching ones from another pair worn out at the toes.

Nirmala straightened her pallu and stood upright in her maroon slippers held in place by four thin straps running across her feet. She did not question why she was being brought to the Chief Minister’s residence. If it was because she had been walking on the road instead of the sidewalk, she was prepared with her defense. The Chief Minister was a woman; she would understand that a sidewalk under repair was not the best place to walk with newly-repaired maroon slippers with four thin straps.

Though the hot and humid morning air hung heavy over the crowd, rumors—like a lover’s cool breath—drifted down the line of forty-five women who had been brought to the Chief Minister’s residence. Even though they couldn’t see the residence from where they stood, the women were proud that they had been summoned so urgently. “See those Ministers sitting in the enclosure? She is going to send them all to jail and make us her Ministers.”

“What?”

“Stands to reason. We know how to manage money. See how we keep our brothers and sisters fed and clothed with the pittance we earn.”

“We know how to hide our money from drunken good-for-nothing fathers or husbands.”

“What? Hide money? Where? A pouch made out of your sari pallu? Do you know how much money Tamil Nadu has? All these white people coming from America and begging our country to take their money. It will weigh down your pouch. In fact there is no pouch big enough—six yards of your sari won’t be enough for that much money.”
“We will all be walking like this.” A woman bent down and hunched her shoulders, shuffling under the imagined weight of the state’s coffers, flush with money from the white people.

A policeman shouted at her from the head of the line. “Stand straight. Do you think this is a circus?”

The women muttered among themselves. “Wait and see your fate by the end of day, you circus ringmaster.”

Nirmala stood aloof from the other women, though the promise of a Minister’s job piqued her interest. At first she wanted to work in an export tailoring unit surrounded by sleek imported machines that spewed out mass-produced clothing for Americans. But when her neighbor’s daughter complained of constant eye-strain after working in poorly lit tailoring units, Nirmala decided to become a housemaid instead. She had learned a lot during her employment with Akka including how to organize a dinner party. Nirmala was entranced by fruits and vegetables carved in creative shapes in an arrangement elaborately constructed on delicate glass platters. While she never saw who engaged in the demolition of this arrangement during the party since she was busy supervising the children, she viewed the vegetable debris with great pain after the party.

Best of all, she had learned to dress like Akka. Only saris, not pants and skirts. Good Heavens, imagine pants and skirts! Wolf whistles would reverberate through the narrow hallways of her government-subsidized building and the paper-thin walls already endangered by peeling plaster and faulty plumbing would collapse under the weight of this noisy assault. Only saris. Akka grew tired of her clothes and gave them away to Nirmala, not realizing that Nirmala’s entire wardrobe was hung across a clothesline that crisscrossed her narrow one-room tenement. When the clothesline sagged under the weight of Akka’s discarded clothes, Nirmala gave some of the clothes to her neighbors. Of course, Akka never asked her what she did with the clothes. It was as if she forgot about them as soon as they left her closet. But she wouldn’t forget Nirmala’s absence today. Just like the Chief Minister had to take care of the state, Nirmala had to take care of Akka’s big bungalow so that Akka could go to her important office job. If Nirmala did not get appointed as a Minister this morning, she would have to hurry back at least before Akka’s children returned from school, so that her absence in the morning would be forgiven.

Everybody had a job to do—even the men in the truck that pulled up to the head of the line. Nirmala could not see what was unloaded from
the truck. At first she waited for the dust raised by the truck’s entrance to settle, but she realized that this was the road where the Chief Minister lived. In the midst of a city rife with exhaust fumes from buses, dust from dug-up roads, and debris from ongoing construction, the Chief Minister lived on a heavily-barricaded, perfectly-paved road where there was no dust. Even the blare of bus horns and drilling of heavy-duty construction equipment seemed muffled on this road. Soon the truck backed out of the street and sped off, leaving in its wake a display fit for a wedding reception. But unlike a wedding reception where the backdrop was woven with seasonal flowers, a picture of the Chief Minister formed the entire backdrop of this stage. And unlike a wedding reception, only one chair was placed at the center of the stage, a chair that seemed too large even for the ample bulk of the Chief Minister. Two tables stood at either end of the stage, piled high with boxes from Co-optex, the Tamil Nadu Handloom Emporium.

Gaja lost interest in the stage when he saw the boxes from Co-optex. He knew about clothes. He ironed them for a living, didn’t he? Saris and dhotis for special occasions were bought at Nalli Silks or Kumaran Silks, not Co-optex. He remembered when saris from Co-optex had run color on the bedsheet that he used in his cart while ironing. Whoever had decided to cut corners and buy the Chief Minister not one but forty-five saris from Co-optex for her forty-fifth birthday would probably be in jail by sundown.

The arrival of another truck at the back of the line broke his reverie. It was clearly time for something to happen. Band instruments were unloaded and band players scrambled out of the truck and took up their positions amidst much confusion. They wore ornate suits in red, black and white—the colors of the Chief Minister’s political party. Tasseled hats were tethered on their heads with cheap elastic bands secured under their chins. Walkie-talkies stuttered with indecipherable jargon as policemen donned their white gloves and took their place in line. Gaja and his friends—for they were friends by now, they had shared perspiration and aspirations—peered over the heads of the policemen to get a glimpse of the action. They nudged each other and pointed to the positions of the Black Cat commandos—the Chief Minister’s security detail. At least that’s what they thought they were pointing to, it could just be the crows that dared to sit on trees in the Chief Minister’s compound.
The Chief Minister walked out of her house. The crowd began to clap and cheer. The Ministers tried to get out of the enclosure to prostrate themselves at the Chief Minister’s feet. They tried to keep pace behind her, looking like penguins in their well-oiled hair and dark swarthy complexions wearing spotless-white silk dhotis and jubbas, tripping over the life-size garlands they had hoped to present to her on her birthday. But she ignored the Ministers and walked towards the stage. Forty-five women behind the barricade perked up. Maybe the Ministers were really going to jail. “What did I tell you?” said one of the women.

Suddenly the band filled the air with music, incongruous in its rendering of “Happy Birthday to You.” Even the Chief Minister missed a step. Was there no Indian version of this popular English birthday song? Flustered, the bandmaster switched to a Hindi rendering of the song. But the lyrics were still “Happy Birthday to you” except that it ended with “Happy Birthday to Sunita,” which wasn’t the Chief Minister’s name at all. Sweat streamed down the faces of the band players from under their tasseled hats, but they continued playing. The policemen stood at attention, their arms raised in salute as if the national anthem was being played. The band played on until the Chief Minister reached the stage. The other Ministers aligned themselves around her, panting visibly from the weight of the garlands they carried.

“Why don’t they put them in jail before they appoint us?” the women asked, nervous at the proximity of the Ministers from whom they were to wrest power.

The Chief Minister sat down on the chair and turned to the Ministers with a sigh of exasperation. They surged forward to present garlands to her. Since she was unmarried, it was not appropriate for them to put the garland around her neck. So she took it from them and garlanded herself.

“See those garlands?” Gaja’s neighbor asked.
“See them? You’d have to be blind not to,” Gaja said.
“The cost of each garland can clothe and feed a poor family of four for one year,” his neighbor said.
“That’s nothing. Did you know they are checked for bombs before they are allowed in here?” Gaja’s other neighbor gestured to the barricaded road.

Gaja looked at the garlands with renewed interest. When the Chief
Minister was in danger of being buried in garlands, the policemen hung them on the backdrop. Soon the Chief Minister’s picture that made up the entire backdrop began to sag, unlike the real-life model who continued to sit upright, albeit with a bored look on her face.

Finally the Chief Minister began her speech. “On my forty-fifth birthday, I think of the people of Tamil Nadu and what I may do to serve them, what I may do to better their lives. That is why I invited forty-five men and women that I can share my birthday with. I invited hard-working men and women, people who work for the soil, just like I work for the common man.”

“What is she saying?” the women asked each other.

“She says we are like her.”

“See, I told you. She doesn’t trust her Ministers anymore.”

“Shhh… she says she called us because we work in the soil.”

Nirmala looked down at her hands. The only time she worked in the soil was when she made mud pies with Akka’s children. Also when she took them to the beach and they played in the sand. And she almost forgot—when Akka wanted to change the soil in her potted plants. Why didn’t the officials ask her that this morning instead of hustling her into the jeep? She thought they were arresting her for walking on the road, which in her opinion was the only choice she had because the sidewalks had been dug up for repairs and she was wearing her newly-repaired maroon slippers. If only they had asked her, “Do you work with the soil?” she would’ve pointed to the concrete maze of buildings around her and said, ”I would have to buy soil if I want to work with it.” What a waste of a day! They had brought her and all these other hard-working women here to stand in line for hours to watch the sullen Chief Minister being garlanded on her birthday? Even Akka would be skeptical when she heard the reason for Nirmala’s absence.

Nirmala shuffled forward automatically, and suddenly she was at the front of the line. “Pick a number,” she was instructed. Nirmala’s hand trembled as she picked a piece of paper and gave it to the policewoman. “Number 13,” the policewoman shouted across the barricade to the policeman guarding the men. The Chief Minister sat on the dais with a distant look in her eyes as if the problems of the world weighed heavily on her shoulders. Her gray silk sari shimmered at the pleats and rippled across her shoulders. Her stern face was only marginally softened by two distinctive streaks of gray in her hair.
Nirmala’s legs, thus far held in place by firm feet in maroon slippers, began to wobble. Was it all a ploy? What would the Chief Minister do with Number 13?

Gaja fanned his face with the folded paper. He was not a son of the soil. He was born and raised in Madras, a city by all accounts, a haphazard concrete jungle if one wanted the complete picture. The only soil he saw was the soil dug up during sidewalk repairs. The closest he came to the soil was when a hot coal piece fell out of his iron, even though he had clamped it shut, and Gaja had to scramble to shove the coal piece from the blouse he was ironing so that it did not burn the blouse. It crumbled into ash in his hands and felt like soft, light mud. If the officers had asked him before bullying him on the road this morning he would’ve told them. Now he’d lost wages for a whole day and all for nothing. About this time, he would be taking his mid-morning break and sipping a glass of weak tea while smoking his beedi. His customers didn’t care if the Chief Minister was celebrating her forty-fifth birthday or even eightieth. Some of them might even have sent their clothes to the big stores with noisy shutters that came clattering down every night—stores that used machines to do what Gaja did with his heavy coal iron.

“Number 13, number 13. Who has number 13?” the policeman shouted at the men, as if summoning them before a firing squad.

Gaja broke out of his reverie. “Saar, Saar.” He raised his hand.

“Come on, come on.” The policeman ushered him in front of the Chief Minister. From the garish giant-size cutouts of the Chief Minister mounted at vantage spots in the city where the glittering sari and expansive shawls overshadowed the heavily-jowled serene face to the imperious woman in a bulletproof vest who filled the green and red lacquer chair with carved peacocks highlighted in gold set on four black curved legs was a dizzying journey for Gaja. He did what the sycophantic Ministers did in the Chief Minister’s presence—he instantly prostrated before her, not daring to raise his face.

In a synchronized movement, Nirmala, who’d been ushered into the Chief Minister’s presence, also fell at her feet.

When Gaja and Nirmala raised themselves, they were given small garlands made of marigold flowers. Surely such anemic garlands were not meant to adorn the exalted neck before them, so they turned
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to each other and thrust the garlands at each other—Gaja’s garland landing around Nirmala’s left shoulder and slipping off her right, Nirmala’s garland not making it past Gajendra’s ears—elephant ears which was why he was named Gajendra, the Lord of Elephants. The next person stepped up to the top of the line. Gaja and Nirmala stumbled backwards off the stage carrying the boxes that were given to them by the Chief Minister’s lackey, seeing them and yet not seeing them. Seeing them as part of a political gimmick and not seeing them as human beings.

When the last number was called and dispensed with, the Chief Minister’s car drove up to the stage. She ignored the forty-five men and women who were mere political props for her birthday celebration and climbed into her car. The doors were closed behind her and she sped off towards the Secretariat. The Ministers jostled each other in their hurry to scramble into their cars. Soon they all sped behind her.

Without the Chief Minister’s massive bulk and presence to ground them to the soil, Gaja and Nirmala wandered like orphans. What had just happened? What were they supposed to do next? Finally Gaja picked up courage to approach a policeman—not the one who had picked him up that morning, in case he remembered Gaja. “Saar, can I go now?”

With the departure of the Chief Minister, everyone had become cheerful and full of bonhomie. “No, no, enjoy the banquet before you go.”

“For the Chief Minister’s forty-fifth birthday?”
“No, a wedding banquet.”
“Did the Chief Minister get married?”
“What? Don’t even say that as a joke. Just handling her is enough. Can you imagine a husband, another joker added to the mix?” The policeman shuddered in response. Recollecting himself, he said, “No, not the Chief Minister. You got married. Didn’t you know?”

Gaja gaped at him.
“Didn’t you know she performs a Swayamvaram every year on her birthday?”
“Not every year—only the years when her political party is in power,” another policeman said.

“Yes, number of couples married equals age of Chief Minister. Where can we produce so many couples on such short notice? So we do what we did this morning. Now we are off the hook until next year.”

Gaja and Nirmala looked at each other for the first time. They took a step back. They were a couple now?
“Go on, go on, enjoy your wedding banquet!” said the policeman. He ushered Nirmala and Gaja into the tent set up for the banquet where a spirit of camaraderie prevailed. They opened their package and examined the contents: a silk dhoti and jubba for Gaja, a silk sari for Nirmala, a gold chain with sacred fertility symbols, one thousand rupees, ten kilograms of rice, and a box of condoms—mass-produced, government-sponsored, bright-yellow box of condoms. Gaja dropped his garland of yellow marigolds in an attempt to hide the condoms, while Nirmala turned away. The Chief Minister was an unmarried woman. It was not appropriate for her to be handing out boxes of condoms to single men.

“See, the morning hasn’t been a waste after all.” The policeman had come up behind them.

“But what if the people you picked are already married?” Nirmala asked.

“See for yourself,” the policeman said.

Inside the tent packages had been opened and their contents bartered. “I’m already married. Just give me the money and take all the rest,” said one man to his new “wife.”

“Me, too. But I have a good-for-nothing husband,” said another woman, sizing up her new “husband,” who looked like a deer trapped in a car’s headlights.

Again in a synchronized movement, Nirmala and Gaja turned to each other. “Are you…?” she asked.

“No. You?” he asked.

“No,” Nirmala said.

Gaja reached out and straightened the garland around her neck. Nirmala picked up his garland from where it was hiding the box of condoms and put it around his neck, lightly brushing her fingers over his thick wavy hair. After all, it was a Swayamvaram—an ancient practice where a royal bride chooses her partner from a list of warrior suitors—and she had chosen Number 13.

“Wait here,” Nirmala said, and plunged into the crowd. Soon Gaja lost sight of her. Even though it had been less than an hour since he met her, he felt strangely empty. If she disappeared, he would never be able to find her. He didn’t even know her name. What kind of a fool was he? She had taken the silk sari and gold chain, but left the condoms with him. An even exchange, he supposed, in the event that she had fled. He should put a condom over his brain since it seemed like his brain cells were oozing out today. After fifteen minutes, he sat down on the floor.
of the tent and decided to at least enjoy the banquet before he made his way home. She had probably taken a look at his elephant ears and rejected him.

The sounds of dismantling the stage and removing the barricades reached him from outside the tent—the clang of metal barricades echoed through the vast tent. Soon he would hear the band instruments being loaded in the truck and taking their rendition of “Happy Birthday” with them. A familiar tune reached his ears and soon the tent was filled with traditional wedding musical notes accompanied by the rhythmic beats of a traditional drum. Would this farcical day never end? Gaja raised his eyes. And blinked. His new bride, dressed in a maroon silk sari with intricate patterns woven in gold thread, was walking towards him. She even had maroon slippers to match! She took him by the hand. He pulled back, amazed that his brain was actually working. “Before you disappear again, tell me your name,” Gaja said.

“Nirmala Rani. And yours?”

“Gajendra Kumar.”

Nirmala led Gaja to the green and red lacquer chair that had been moved to the center of the tent. Nirmala sat on it, flanked by the two carved peacocks highlighted in gold. She gave the gold chain to Gaja.

“Wait a minute,” he said. He turned his back to the crowd and quickly changed into the white silk dhoti, discarding his everyday gray-and-black-checked sarong. He peeled off his brown T-shirt and slid the white silk jubba over his lean, muscled torso. The cool silk sent a shiver of anticipation down his back. He strode to the chair and clasped the chain around Nirmala’s neck. Wolf whistles from the spectators threatened to drown the melody of the wedding tunes. Since there was only one chair, Gaja perched on the carved arm of the chair. Since there was no vermillion powder for Gaja to adorn Nirmala’s forehead and parting of her hair—the sign of a married woman—, they improvised with turmeric powder from the banquet kitchen. The cooks also provided some firewood for an impromptu sacred fire, and Gaja took Nirmala by her right hand and led her around the fire in keeping with tradition. The other couples and even the policemen and women blessed them by throwing flower petals and rice mixed with turmeric on their heads.

Nirmala’s idea gathered momentum. Soon all the genuine couples followed suit. Couples who were already married outside of the Chief Minister’s jurisdiction and had been re-married at random by the Chief Minister refrained from joining this serious occasion. As they dispersed for the wedding banquet, an older policewoman
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patted Gaja on the head. “You have nothing to worry about. Fate has given you a wife who can turn a political farce into an auspicious occasion. What more can a man ask for?”
We tour the bone church, first, as the sun breaks out of its earthly grave. The sanctuary named after a medievalist who stripped plague victims to their indecent whites and decorated sacred with his artistic fetish. A half-blind Cistercian monk used the newborn church as his palette; the walls clean as light, he rummaged the cemetery for supplies, antique bones washed of flesh: a yard fertile long before the church, the ground a pilgrimage for death, we are told: an abbot sprinkled earth from Golgotha unto his land, and soon the plots grew into religious fashion. The craze of late fourteenth century. I walk the moss-rugged burial path as Matt, a near seven-foot man, dangles his spidery legs over the wall, having taken a piss on its other side, his back to a playground slide. I repeat how the church was erected after the rolling death counts, in the heart of headstones: what was quarried for the foundation was mixed like a bucket of chicken with fresh refugee bones; sculpted into pinnacles, monstrances. For the first time I light a candle in church, donate money, stare up at the chandelier, deadened, and count all two hundred and six bones in the human body.

Our next place of worship, in the hazy afternoon, is gated. Its original fence circles the hill, is holding better than the wall-scaling snails, their shells hollowed by light hitting the open land. Only a fist of people fit inside to see the never-used tomb upfront in a barren room. Outside two sweat bees rest stiffly on their backs in yellow
weed-flowers, their bodies like emptied jars. Three men kick a soccer ball back and forth over a tennis net on the clay court downhill. Somehow there’s more life in their feet, the sun hanging like a lantern over a distant village, while all of us complain we’re tired of the countryside’s heat.
Outside the dance hall, as the fiddlers played,
I came upon him prostrate in the dark:
a wretched drunk, in an ugly lifeless stupor.
Then seeing that he was a distant cousin,
I knew I’d have to go inside again,
amid the Highland songs and quadrille tunes,
amid the fiddles and the dance, to tell
his older brother, who once was a drunk himself.

But then, as if from nowhere, the brother appeared,
coming through the cool, Cape Breton night.
Without a word, I helped him prop the drunken
figure up against a tree, before
he said, to no one in particular,
“I gave him his first drink.” So I left them alone,
alone within that calm ancestral dark,
where patient generations stalk the night.
Anniversary

This time last year—or was it years ago—

summer floated, belly-up, in the green bowl

of the lake with us, our eyes closed under a white sky,

white sun staring down through clouds

like a lidded eye, like the film between us now.

I want to believe this separation

is like drifting past each other in water, almost touching.

I want to believe summer is your heat

haloed in the lake, that I could reach out or open my eyes

to find your face. Already, my memory drifts

over it, like swans over the face of the lake; my eyes

are closed to wherever you are,

and I would keep them closed if I could still reach out,

if I could feel you throwing heat

beyond my skin like a fire I can never, no, never touch.
The Funeral

Little flags flap on the hoods of cars like butterflies
in some exotic locale, plotting ruin, like a stone
gathering itself into an avalanche.

Years away, the dust rising from this transit will whirr
through summer lilacs, the bellwether of a storm
boiling up across the mountains.

The air careening through the street will lick at the dark hem
of a girl’s skirt; it will begin to unravel.
By the time the storm breaks,

she is naked. When she screams from the back porch,
er her voice comes back to her like a needle breaking
through miles and miles of cloth,

dragging the scent of lilies and a dark thread
of time behind it.
New Mother, First Picture Show

The unmarked skin of your baby’s face
is a screen and your face

is a projector shining on the smooth blank:
a reflection of your own face,

or a slide show of your beloved’s,
the still frames clicking and clicking

into a movie-like time-lapse.
Only this is in reverse,

like an old black-and-white, filmed
slow and played back breakneck,

frantic piano rumbling as a train careens
into a dark Parisian theatre.

The audience shrieks and scatters.
Though the train is old and familiar,

its motion through time terrifies them:
it speeds toward them unchecked,

like the reel of your father, long dead,
flickering across your baby’s face,

his hard bones and knife-edge eyes
digging in. The terrible face
of the past, which the future wears
like a mask as it crashes forward,
arriving without arriving.
Jeanne Marie Beaumont

Broken Dolls Day

June 3, Japan

The stitched would never heal. Nor could the smallest finger missing of a hand be glued to a pudgy plastic palm. She lies on her back—bye-bye.

It is over. Around her those of the lost screws, stuck eyes, detached wires, burnt hair, punctured torso, brother work, dog work, left out in the rain. Played out. Over the wood, wax, plastic, porcelain, papier mâché, straw, leather, resin & cloth, the four-foot hunchbacked monk bows his ancient bald head. O broken ones, we are the careless world—forgive us for we wore you as ourselves.
Mama pours raw, salty yolk over steaming rice scooped from rice cooker to my blue and white bowl. Today, an ancient celebration in a country that still chokes on the aftertaste of the mushroom cloud. We receive chalky sweets, our pink tongues sticky. We, who have survived three years, five years, seven—small and breakable bodies still breathing in a world where the ground moves without warning, upright buildings crashing to rubble in the space of an exhale. Where an afternoon of play in slanted sunlight shatters with a misstep—bruised flesh, cracked femur, blood. Where noisy, trapped flies bang against the window until exhaustion leaves them belly-up on the sill. I watch them wave delicate legs in the air while our neighbor bundles me into a pink silk kimono with its whisper of cherry blossom print and mothball scent. She fastens layers and layers of fabric with hidden strings, pulls the obi across my baby belly, blooming the bow. Pink flowers pinned tight against my scalp and white socks pulled over my five toes and five toes.

Right hand in Mama’s, left hand in Papa’s, I clatter in shiny geta towards the shrine. At the corner three Jizo statues with old-man
faces—god of dead babies—gaze
at me with half-closed eyes. Patient,
impenetrable. I loosen from my parents’ grip, stare

back at their tattered red bibs and faded toy
offerings scattered at their feet like brittle-legged flies. My fingers press down

on worn stone in wordless
prayer, begging for what
I can’t yet name—the right to hold

this sky, this day against my ear, to hear
my mother’s voice in the lengthening
of my bones, to keep the wonder of my skin whole.

Note: Shichi-Go-San (Seven-Five-Three) is a holiday celebrated by families across Japan whose children are seven, five, and three years old.
Michelle Bitting

Remains

Out of the ashes of the morning after, we rose to find you gone, truly gone, your body already a glacier mottled gray and blue in a mortuary drawer across town, your frozen lip-pond fixed in the shape of whatever last word skated past: final message that flamed a synaptic sky before hurtling down the neural chute, limping into cheek muscles, tongue, fainting at the mouth’s doorstep, mandible a window releasing the death note like a dove as the flesh shut its house down room by room, forever.

Yes, we woke to the questions “why” and “what if,” to the sweet, slick chowders that appeared in the kitchen, clogging our throats, to turbid answers we’d regurgitate for months and still know less than the friends who flocked in their mourning cloaks needed—crows perching themselves on sofa, sill—the word suicide a rank carcass there in the middle of everything and all of us silent, feeding on it, hungrily.
See-Saw

“Back home,” my mother’s favorite opener, “in the old days, girls were not allowed to go outside the family compound.”

“What about boys?” She ignores me, peeling an endless scarlet ribbon from an apple. “Such thick, high walls.” She slices. We picture it.

My sister sees Rapunzel. I see Sing Sing. My father sees Goldie Hawn dancing in a bikini on Laugh-In.

Handing us crescents of skinned fruit, she’d laugh, “Girls jumped up high on see-saws just to glimpse the outside world.”

Black braids saluting kimchi pots perched on heavy, stone walls. Full silk skirts and muslin slips filling up with free air.

Now she prefers a gated community, sleeps alone in father’s track suit, the one she wouldn’t let him wear. “Too good for every day.”
“Today is Korean New Year,”

she informs my answering machine.

“Back home,” she nods,

“we make soup.”
Day of Commemoration

August 29, 2006

When I stand outside the Souvenir Mart on Canal Street, I can still smell water through the cracked storefront window.

When one year later mold’s dull black edge could choke you.

When the woman from St. Bernard who sells T-shirts in the Quarter told me she was evacuated to the parish prison.

When she says, “if we leave we take the city with us.”

*

When the first pastor at the Convention Center Ceremony insists: the city has a body.

When he stands before the blue serge curtain on stage and explains the storm: a birth gone wrong.

When we now wait in the “Delivery Room of Opportunity,” he says and the audience says Amen, Amen.

When the storm was a cesarean birth, he says. The storm was a surgeon’s scalpel cutting open the city’s body.

*

When we walk through the bright hot afternoon down Poydras to the Superdome, shelter where I begged my parents to go.

When I walk behind The Black Men of Labor and Popular Ladies Social Aid and Pleasure Club, behind the Tremé Brass Band.
When I finally understand
how little it matters—my lost childhood world—
—beside the Creole Wild West Mardi Gras Indians in feathers and sequins, beside the man who has wrapped his body in the flag to show New Orleans should not be forgotten.
Melissa Crowe

Labor Aubade

Here is the cold I have crawled into,
out of the damp warren of the bed
where you and our daughter lie.

I’m without your skin’s warmth,
breath-music, hands and feet reaching
each other’s bodies, all that accidental

collection before you take the day’s
polite positions. I have promised to return
bearing gifts, story of how light

wakes slow and blue, anticipation
of yellow. The way night’s
dissolving belly holds

morning with its long shadow, its surge
of traffic and coffee smell. At nine
I’ll call home, where there will have been

only absolutes, black and then light
striping into our rooms, silence
then the metallic exhalation

of a school bus at the curb.
Aware I have traded each detail
of your waking in order to witness

another becoming, I will grip
the hand of a woman as she releases
the sun from where it swelled
Melissa Crowe

inside her for a whole sleepless night.
The others will, hours from now, line up
at the glass and visit the child

already bathed and dressed, but I’ll see
it break out, blood-polished, and in its first burning
eclipse everything we could lose.
They watch the last dance

—evening pomp turned into ragged romp—then shuffle out toward clumsy coats, the bride and groom long gone, the dj packing up. In the dim hallway they help each other into slack sleeves.

They’re still visible amid the singular shadows of their quiet street—the groom, their neighbors’ youngest, the last boy on the entire block—and still in love nights like this, their backs leaning into each other as they laugh at someone else’s jokes.

He opens the door for her as they step out into the dirty snow of the floodlit parking lot. No, they won’t make love tonight, nor snuggle like spoons, nor rattle like forks.

Perhaps they will kiss before heading for their separate rooms. Exhausted from the long public night, they may forget. They danced one song—held each other’s hands as they spun like wobbly planets. Others made room for them as they had once made room for others.

In the silence of their vows, the car drifts.
Chad Davidson

Advent

There’s a savageness to your sadness, as I’m sure there was for a scribe who loved illumination enough to suffer each flourish. December’s clockwork interlocks around a bookish sun as I watch you tend to the marginalia your hair makes around you. And though I’d like one to, no leaf throughout recorded history has ever rejoined its tree. The trees, for their part, shake their nightmares to the ground. True, the finality of calendars still startles us, caught in our own largesse. And it’s too easy to say language loves the most meager of feudal riches, December’s needles a compass mortuary. It would be the same to say each button on your down jacket is a rune waiting to be discovered, ruined, rediscovered, which to some scribe was reason enough for the opulence of a fossil moon. We might reinvent the moon as what our tragic fire aspires to be: a hole in all this sullied constancy. Because no fire can cleanse itself without first dying, which is why we utter warmth: not fire but the end of fire.
Amador reaches into his pocket and finds a bright primary feather he makes into a pen.

He sits by the light of a kerosene lamp and writes: *He was a fine bird.*

The long scars of his hands ache where beak-jabs once broke his palm for grain…

where a talon dragged its cursive over the knuckle of his index finger.

His grip on the quill weakens when he remembers this claw:

it held the throats of other roosters and won its life doing this.

But like Amador, it was getting old, its neck a tired rubber band.

The once proud beak now swallows grasses, the mouth too weak to crow.

Now the man’s head points ground-ward, his back, heavy with knots and stooping.

When red combs once straight like a man’s back fold, balling into a fist, it is a sign.

Dawn now without the call of dawn blossoms into moss.
Now, Amador walks watching the ground.  
He drags his sandals like rakes,

leaving furrows through handfuls of seed  
the way a boat’s wake trails like a cassock

where once, he remembers,  
a bird’s feet left a path of asterisks.
Armistice Day

He was twelve then, living in a two-story house at the foot of a long, steep hill in Cincinnati. Though I live far from there now, he took us to that house once when we were visiting. Its owners at the time allowed us—him and my wife and me—into the front hall, but no farther. Standing there I marveled that it was those walls and hardwood floor, that burnished banister, that high ceiling that had defined his youth. From the look on his upturned face, I gathered he marveled too, in his way.

There were also two sisters, and two parents, mother a college graduate, which was unusual in that era, and father a postal worker, sorting mail on the night train to Chicago and thus avoiding war. And there were friends, too, of course, chums like Dick and Clifford to “hang out with,” kids call it now, or “hack around with,” we called it in my day; but this was 1918, and he never mentioned their expression for passing the time. Never thought they were doing it, more likely.

He kept a diary—quaint-seeming now, but perhaps commonplace for a twelve-year-old in pre-electronics America—an old lined Record book I still love to read because, like the frame of his childhood home, it housed some essence of his growing up and hence, I’ve always imagined, of my own genesis. Weather is there in those penciled pages, especially temperature and rainfall, and school with its classes in spelling and geography, arithmetic and grammar, manual training. Movies that he saw, too, like The Legion of Death, about a women’s battalion fighting Germans, and Hearts of the World, in which French children confront world war; a special issue of St. Nicholas magazine; books brought home from the library—Careers of Danger and Death, Huckleberry Finn, The Prince and the Pauper, Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come, Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm. His jobs, the fading script reveals, included beating rugs, washing the bathroom, chopping wood, mowing grass, going up the hill to the store for groceries with a “sugar card” in his hand, filling out his father’s time sheet; but “all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy” that generation always said.
(though I never heard him say it himself), and he recorded as well how he roller skated, played football, climbed on a railroad trestle, collected cigar boxes, kept nighttime vigils in his backyard for lightning bugs and shooting stars, dug trenches and built model tanks and “aeroplanes” with Dick and Clifford. Occasionally on a Saturday, he packed a backpack and took the Anderson Ferry across the Ohio to Kentucky to explore and picnic in the woods.

One experience he noted in particular detail, as if in anticipation of a career still fifteen years off, was a week he was sick. Spanish flu he called it. Many people, of course, had viral influenza at that time—for six weeks school was closed, public gatherings were restricted, as they would no doubt be today if the bird flu threat materializes—and from his symptoms of fever, muscle aches, sore throat and cough, and poor appetite, I would have to agree with his diagnosis. A bed was made for him in the front room, he wrote, where he took sweat treatments and castor oil, Seidlitz Powder, a pink pill and a white pill, magnesia water and quinine capsules. For his throat pain he gargled and took sprays. When he had the energy he read his library books, but much of the time he only napped. The doctor came, nearly every day according to the entries, to probe and listen and conclude that his young patient was getting better.

The entry for November 11 is a long one. It tells, after dutiful recording of weather and symptoms, how church bells rang out, how guns were fired in the air, how flags waved as crowds of people passed up the hill outside his window heading for town. From that day on, as if it had been the virus in a front room in Cincinnati, Ohio, rather than the Germans in a railroad car in Compiègne, France, that had surrendered, he began to get better, just as the doctor said he would, and within a week was back in school, back on the trestle with Dick and Clifford and the rest of the gang.

In college, before I ever thought of emulating my father and going into medicine myself, and for no good reason I can remember now, I majored in French. To improve my speaking and sense of Gallic culture, I thought it would be beneficial to spend a summer there. My parents, cautious and patriotic citizens that they were, witness to many of the early twentieth century’s dangers, including not only the First but the Second World War, in which my father served, the Depression, and the scourge of polio as well as influenza, had reservations about my plan. It was 1959; Algerian terrorists were on the loose in France. That meant little to me at the time, though in...
Daniel C. Bryant

the world of 9/11, and as a parent and grandparent myself now, I can sympathize with how they must have felt.

In any event, my father did finally give me money for the trip, and for two months I walked and fait l’autostop from Paris down through the Loire Valley, across the Pyrenees to the Cote d’Azur and up to Lyon, stopping at villages along the way, sleeping on beaches, in fields or chapels, or at the occasional pension. The only time I stayed in a pension for more than an overnight was in Biarritz, and that was because I fell ill there and lost track of time. A flu-like illness it must have been, with fever, myalgias, and a profound malaise. I’m sure I hallucinated as well, my memories of that stay being mainly of foxes with huge ears running on the beach under Van Gogh-starry skies, and of children in long white tunics wandering in and out through my four walls as if they—the walls, or maybe the children—were no more substantial than the memories they would become.

In my backpack I carried a change of clothes, ground cloth, toiletries, the odd apple or heel of pain-au-chocolat, and, to remind me I was a student of French, a copy of the works of the surrealist poet Guillaume Apollinaire. Whenever I stopped in my travels for a rest, leaning back against a tree or the post of some farmer’s fence, I would take out the book and read a page out loud. Though I understood little of what I read, probably not much more than did my audience of cows and crows, I loved the music of the words, the look of the text on the page, the hints at the nature of the man responsible.

It was many years later, after I had retired from medical practice and long after my father’s death, that I read something Hemingway wrote about Apollinaire, how, still a young man, he had taken ill with influenza in the fall of 1918, and died on, or maybe it was shortly before, Armistice Day. The longer one lives, I thought, recalling among other things how my father disparaged “writers,” the more connections one is privileged to make. It might take eternity, though, to make them all.
Recipe for Giblets

It’s better that you’re divorced, estranged, not sociopathic necessarily, but no one’s mailing you get well cards with your grandkids’ snapshots and crayon art. Your name isn’t hand copied into anyone’s personal address book. It’s Thanksgiving, so you’re on your own again. McDonald’s is closed. IHOP is closed. Red Lobster, with its giant pus-filled offspring-eating insects, is closed. Unless you can stomach re-simmered Chinese buffet, you have your freezer to forage, packages of cheap meats that have been diced, compacted, and submerged in crumbs and boiling oil. There’s also a Heineken Dark crusted to the bottom shelf of your fridge, a made-to-export dye-doctored lager left from the six pack you bought yourself last Christmas—which is to say that your faults do not include a biological dependency on alcohol, a non-inheritance your grandson will cherish more than the $7,400 in your savings account. He’s two. You’ve not met him.

Some men would make excuses: your father burning alive in a tenement fire, your mother cooking you horse meat, brains, cow blood, while starving herself. It was the thirties. You gurneyed corpses in Korea, matched limbs to heaps of intestines. You had an appetite for younger women and so walked out on your wife and kids. Now you’re reconciled to these leftover years. You woke this morning with Mylanta crusted on your lips, the non-metaphorical holes in your stomach burning.

After showering and fingering the expanding mole on your right shoulder, you dress with your back to the mirror and heat a mug of instant coffee in the microwave. Whiffs of sausage grease seep under the apartment door. You breathe through your mouth. You have nowhere to go so you go for a ride, windows down, radio up, seat belt loose. There’s a news segment about relief workers handing out free turkeys on an Indian reservation. You spin the dial, settle for classical, something Bach-like, a requiem maybe. You don’t see the tractor trailer. The driver is hungover, the front of his skull pulsing as he jams the wheel into the turn too hard. Empty poultry cages skip across the
intersection and into the unmowed median ditch. Pedestrians dial 911 on cell phones.

The first organ recipient will be another grandfather, two years your senior, yellow with hepatitis. His own liver will be sliced into one inch cubes, individually wrapped in aluminum foil and arranged in a 4 x 6 cardboard box in a tier of a university ultra-freezer purchased through government grants. Your doctor once said that you had the heart of a man half your age, which now will be true. Your lungs will go to a Romanian immigrant in New Jersey, mother of three, the eldest entering Rutgers on full scholarship. Among blood types, yours is neither common nor exotic. You will inflate a generous mound of donor bags. Your other tissues are worthless. You will retain them until your remains are converted to ash and disposed of by strangers in violation of your will. You stipulated embalming, the slow burn of rot. To this day, your last, barbecue makes you gag. You once spent a week docked in Calcutta inhaling the savory breeze that blew from an open pit crematorium.

When the paramedics pry open your wallet, they need to find that yellowed donor card with the check in the yes box and your faded scribble at the bottom. You picked it up at a church blood drive almost forty years ago, when you lied to the pretty girl you’d spotted in line, and then asked her to dinner and, months later, to marry you. You will be a vegetable for the last hours of your life, time enough for the on-call surgeon to arrive for extraction and return home for the generous plate of turkey and helpings his wife kept under cellophane in the fridge. Coolers of dry ice await your organs. They will leave the city by helicopter, while you travel in a zippered bag to a basement refrigerator larger than your apartment.

In that last instant of consciousness before your skull is opened against the steering column, you will not see images of your dead wife or scattered offspring or the God whose body you haven’t felt against the roof of your mouth since you dropped out of high school and falsified your age to a Navy recruiter. Instead, you will see that Muslim buddy of yours fried by a microwave radio dish while painting the bridge exterior on your first aircraft carrier. You had eaten with his family, his mom, dad and sister, the month before, all vegetarians, which you needled him about mercilessly. You hear the clump of his body on the grate, the sound of metal crumpling toward you.

A law enforcement officer will locate your daughter who will dial my wife’s parents’ number in Florida. My stricken mother-in-law will
try to hand me her phone, but I’m mired in bird grease, my forearm inside the carcass, nails raking at the sack of organ meats clinging to the rib cage, the pink ice burning. The neck, hard and long as the handle of a hammer, is thawing in the garbage under the sink. I wriggled and tore it from the hole, while I thought of you, fleetingly, as I do every holiday, imagining soup kitchens or penitentiary cafeterias, gray gravy coagulating on powdered potatoes. I will forget to feed the organs to the cat in the turmoil that follows. Each would fill the hollow of a spoon.

Chris Gavaler
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Turtle Soup

The snapper, hissing and spitting, claws slashing the air, smells like meat left in the sun. His stench stabs at me, as smells so often do now. My mouth waters, and I swallow back the rising nausea. “Come on. I gotta get this sucker in the drum.” Will leads the way, pausing to better handle the turtle as big as a garbage can lid. His mud-covered jeans cling to his lean legs, and his back strains in the setting sun; sharp shoulder blades and tendons stand out at his neck. I admire his jagged angles and feel my own expanded weight low in front of me. I scratch at the tightness that set in during my fifth month and envy the turtle’s talons.

We watch the snapper as it bangs and cusses the fifty-five gallon drum Dad keeps for this purpose. Kept. The turtle stands on his back legs and rips at the metal sides, chipping rust shards on top of the shell still covered in rotting mud and neon duck weed. “Best get the water in there,” Will says. We fill the drum halfway with water and then sit on the steps, listening to the peepers. I covet Will’s beer and kiss his thin lips just to taste his breath, avoid looking into his blooming moss eyes. “Thank you for this.”

“In the morning, with steaming cups of coffee, we check the turtle. The moment we emerge from the cabin, I smell it in the thick haze. Usually we keep turtles a week and continue to change the water so the intestines are cleaner: sweeter meat, less funk. But we need the meat for tomorrow. We meant to catch a turtle days ago. Everything happens fast now.

The snapper floats in the drum, and I wonder what happens to a turtle when it dies of natural causes. Not that any turtle in our swamp ever had the chance to die naturally.
“Snapper soup—worst to make, best to eat,” Dad said, when his buddies came over for his annual party dubbed the Feast of Washaw. Even when we were kids, most of the women stayed away, but Mom drank with the boys and told just as many skinning and fishing stories as the rest of them. Charged with keeping an eye on my younger brother Jared, I steered him to our tree fort where we spied on the adults. We laughed hardest when Mom outdid the men with her tale of chasing a real estate developer with a maggot-filled squirrel.

Mom always prepared snapper soup with Dad. They butchered turtles, toasted beer cans, gave Jared and me turtle claws to string as pendants. We drove thin nails through them to make holes, then guided string through the claws and wore them around our necks.

When Mom and Dad finished cleaning the meat from the shell, she took my hand, and just the two of us walked past the swamp. She laid the shell in a nest of dried leaves under a few walnut and oak trees, pulled me to her and told me the shell would be immaculate white, a bowl to eat from. Over the years, I checked the progress of the shells less frequently, but always she and I went together to take it from its place. The feast long over, we were left with a pristine bowl, gritty and sun bleached. We filled it with walnuts from the ground, Mom a constant provider.

This year, Dad had hoped to be well enough so we could carry him out on a chair for the feast. Instead, on his last night, he asked us to honor him by hosting the feast one last time. All of the old-timers from the mill will be here tomorrow, a week since Dad died.

Will and I brought Dad home from the hospital when the doctors couldn’t do anything else. They thought he’d have a week, but it was two days. Just two last days at the swamp together. He slept, barely ate. We didn’t talk when I washed him or helped him with the bed pan.

When I carried him outside to watch the birds on the reeds, he was so light I thought he would slip through my arms, sawdust. My body bulged against his. My skin, tight, his, a cobweb hanging.

“Might need your help with the feast this year,” he said, following the flight of a red-winged blackbird.

“Of course.” I looked at him and thought of his first body, the one from my childhood. I remembered being terrified of the black snake, thicker than my arm and longer than a fishing pole, that moved in under the cabin. He had caught the snake, held it over his head, legs spread wide, and yelped.
“You don’t mind?” he asked.
“Daddy, anything. Anything.”

He motioned for my hand, and I put mine in his. He took the back of it to his lips, brittle leaves, kissed it, just like when I was little.

Will and I had asked my brother Jared to stay for the feast after the funeral, but he needed to get back to the company in the city, and it was clear even during the funeral that he no longer belonged at the swamp with us. His suit put the rest of us to shame, and he didn’t even sip on Earl’s lightning we passed in the mason jar afterwards. I watched him sniff it, sniff all of us.

“Lou, you’re pregnant now. You need to get out of Washaw. For the baby.”

Will responded before I could. “We’ll do just fine. We don’t need shiny cars.”

“No, but you need jobs with health care and insurance.”

I had laughed, surprised Jared thought that would work on us. I tried to catch Will’s eye for a wink, but he dragged his boot across the dirt. Later, we all hugged goodbye, and Jared laid his hand on my belly and said he loved me, just wanted what was best.

I stepped back from his hand. He didn’t know. He figured I wanted the baby, wanted a belly that made my back ache and my stomach roil. He loves his little girl.

Will builds the fire, and we dump the turtle’s barrel. The water spills dark and murky into the leaves and stinks to high hell. I can’t tell what’s turtle shit and what is the dank sludge of the watershed. The smell is sulfur and slate, burning. I swallow my saliva. We guide the turtle to the empty garbage can.

“You all right?” Will asks. He watches me, and I know I’ve gone pale again.

I nod.

“Sure?”

I remember Mom, sun catching the grey streaks in her hair, knuckles bulging with arthritis, nearly sixty and hauling turtles. “Yes.” I give this to him grudgingly.

We don’t talk again until after the fire is built and the water in the drum is boiling. I lay the garbage can down and wait for the turtle to think it’s free.

“I got it.”
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“I can do it,” I say.

Will sighs. “You’re not supposed to lift.” He snatches the turtle’s tail, and lugs it toward the plywood mounted on two saw horses. The plywood is splattered with thirty years of splotches and smears.

He hauls the snapper up to the table, and it bounces with the weight. The turtle attempts to swim its way off. Its nails carve gashes into the plywood.

“Can you stoke the fire?” Will coaxes me with his eyes, both hands keeping the lumpy turtle from scrambling away.

“I can handle this.”

“Christ, Louise, I know you can. But there’s no reason you have to.”

In a huff, I walk toward the fire, but out of the corner of my eye I glimpse Will uncover the machete, and I have to watch as I hear Dad’s rasping voice. I see him again, hunched up in a foreign room with tubes and bright lights, and he’s telling Will how to clean the snapper. Not me, his own daughter, but Will, whom he loves more than even his own son because Will is “a man of the woods, a survivor.”

Dad picked at one of the numerous scabs that had appeared all over his body and gave curt directions, “Jam a fork through its head, and then—bam—hack its head off.” That was the last I’d heard of the snapper soup recipe until this morning. Without making an excuse, I had walked out of the hospital room. By the time I came back again, I could see from the door Dad sleeping, as Will, my survivor, held his hand, his forehead tucked against Dad’s yellowed fingernails.

Will married Dad as much as he married me at the church last year. Will and I met at the community center during a career fair just after Mom’s death. That day we both landed jobs, Will a chef at the only decent restaurant in town, and me a clerk at the post office. We were both unguarded and relieved, and when we walked out of the center, instead of saying goodbye, we celebrated with a beer at The Joint. When I brought Will home to meet Dad the following month, I couldn’t get a word in. It was the first time Dad came back to life after Mom died.

We fell in love quickly. He called each day after the lunch rush, and on my way home I visited the restaurant, enveloped in his broths and sauces, oregano, onions, wine. At the swamp, he told Dad his own butchering stories of venison and pheasant. We watched silhouettes of songbirds transform into silhouettes of bats at dusk. Sitting on the steps with my back against Will’s chest, tracing his forearm tendons, we talked about how wrong people had gotten things, and we planned a quiet life away from them in our own swamp. He cried
over his mom’s cancer, washing her thin skin, dressing her in the dark, demurring to her modesty. He whispered about the guilt of loving his gained freedom when he no longer had to care for her and said he would never sacrifice his life again for someone else’s. Later, when we did nearly the same for Dad, Will’s words came back to me. By then it was too late; my belly grew, as did our sacrifices.

**Will is steady. With an instrument in each arm, he pierces the turtle’s neck.** I hear the meat fork sink into the plywood and the turtle goes crazy, legs scratching, neck frozen. Will raises the knife high overhead and slams it down, harder than he has to. Blood is oozing, and the smell makes the humid air a foul oil. Will grasps the body by its sides and turns it neck down over the trash can, letting the blood spill into it. He has to be careful of the turtle’s legs, still violently swimming as the blood drains from it. I can hear the drops hit the bottom of the can with a dull ping, and I turn away.

But what I see is the turtle’s head, bodyless, pinned to the table and snapping at the air, eyes bugged. It is desperate, and I am reminded of the nights I sat with Dad as he choked on his lungs, working to breathe.

The turtle stretches its neck, gnashes its jaw, fights. I hear Dad. “Turtles don’t die right away. Live long after you kill them.”

Tears bite at my eyes. My stomach turns over and kicks.

I check the fire. The coals glow hot, and I try to stand back from the fire pit’s heat. I’m already sweating through my T-shirt and the cut-offs I borrowed from Will since mine no longer fit. It has never been so stinking hot. The fire smells like beers after hunting and Dad’s stories, but everything is wrong and there’s no hunting season or Dad, though a beer would be a damn good idea.

Will is busy tying the rope that hangs over the oak branch around the turtle’s shell. With the other end of the rope, he raises the turtle above the trash can to let the rest of the blood drain from its body. Hanging, the body slowly twists, a child’s spinning top. There is no breeze, and once the branch stills from Will’s movements, the carcass only drips.

The head of the turtle is still at last, but now staring. I take a deep breath and march to it, yank the steak fork from the plywood and choke when I end up with turtle head on a stick. The neck drips blood on me, and now it’s funny, a fancy cocktail party gone horribly wrong. Behind Will, I extend the fork, “Lunch?”

He doesn’t flinch, instead studies the turtle’s eyes already hazing
over. Coolly, he holds the fork and grabs the turtle’s head, so big he barely gets his whole hand around it and pulls it off. A little bit of the innards fall to the ground. It’s not funny again.

“I’ll start a gut bucket,” he says and goes to the shed, still holding the turtle head.

When he returns, he says, “We need to wait while the body drains.”

I nod and stoop, looking at the head against the white plastic bucket. I use my shirt to wipe the sweat from my face and am surprised to see the dirt smudges that cling. I reach down and touch the turtle head with a finger. It is cool, scaly. Its beak is tucked into the edge of the bucket. Gingerly, with thumb and forefinger, I lift the head. The beak is chipped on the left side, but it is hard, steel. A turtle this size could take an adult duck. I study its nostrils, oddly dainty. It reeks.

“You getting to be your dad?” Will smiles teasingly.

I stand and stretch, reach to my belly and scratch. I’m relieved to have this part over with. I head into the house for water. “Need a beer?”

Will shakes his head, but I know that’s for me. We always had beers with Dad at this point—a toast to the end of a prehistoric life.

I walk into the cool of Dad’s house and smell his pipe and wonder how much longer it will last. Nearly a week, and it doesn’t seem to have faded a bit. When it does, I’ll open the tobacco pouch and breathe in the sweet cherry bark smell, just the way he used to before he filled his pipe. I go to the fridge and open it, letting the cool air escape to my skin and chill the sweat there. I grab a can of beer and press it to my cheek, look out the window at the tree branches wilting in the sun.

Church light filters through the canopy of trees into the simple cabin. There are only a few purple wisteria petals strewn about now. Every morning the dripping flower smell rode in on the breeze, I was forced out of bed, barely having slept, worrying about Dad, and then puked my guts out in the outhouse, if I could make it that far. Morning sickness. Mourning sickness. Either way it should have been over at three months, and still now into my sixth month, new, sharp smells, make me vomit.

One of the first mornings after I told Will I was pregnant, he reached over to my stomach, flat but stirring. Operating of its own accord, without my permission. “What’s it feel like?”

“Nothing. I don’t feel anything.”

“Is that bad?”

“I don’t know.”
“Don’t you wonder?”
“No.”
He waited for me to say something else. I rolled over onto my side, turning my back to him.
“Lou?”
I didn’t answer. My belly was waking up; soon I would have to puke. I was sick of throwing up.
“Lulu?”
“What?”
“I was thinking I would make a crib. Make it since we can’t afford one?”
More talk of preparation for the baby, only six days since I told him. Seven weeks since the condom broke.
“I don’t care.”
“You don’t care?”
I didn’t answer. I didn’t know why he was doing this. Talking about keeping the baby.
He reached again for my belly, and this time I picked up his wrist and set it back on his side of the bed. “I don’t want you to touch my stomach.”
“What? Why not?”
“Because I don’t like it.”
“But I want to know what it’s like.”
“It’s not like anything. It’s nothing.”
He pulled my shoulder, twisting me to look at him. “It’s not nothing.”
“Well it’s not anything I wanted. And I thought it wasn’t anything you wanted. We didn’t want one.”
He looked at me, trying to figure me out. “But now it’s different.”
As if that was an explanation. I rolled back to face the wall. “Just don’t touch me there.”

I dawdle, run my fingers on the wood walls, and rub the hammer imprint left over one of the nails. The cabin is sparse, Dad having moved here when Mom died, selling the trailer we grew up in, and keeping this shack we escaped to in summer and on weekends. The first weeks after Mom’s death, he insulated the walls and put up knotty pine boards. He fixed the leak under the sink and dug a new hole for the outhouse. When Will and I visited the first time, he looked drunk but didn’t smell it, and the cabin was torn apart. When
we visited the second time, two weeks later, the house was spotless and he was clean shaven.

“I worked her death out,” he said.
Will nodded, but that wasn’t enough for me.
“What do you mean?”

“By doing all the things she wanted me to do, I made it up to her. She sees I love her. Always will.”

“Oh, Daddy.” I hugged him hard. I thought he meant he had figured out why she was the one who had to die when the drunk driver hit her car. When Dad got sick three years later, I was tempted to ask him if he had worked out her death my way, but it didn’t seem fair to ask about Mom when Dad had just been told he had only a few months left. We moved in to help him, and though we were together all day, every day, I never asked.

“You all right?” Will yells from outside.

“Coming.”
I step back out into the oppressive sun, and Will checks the turtle. It’s barely dripping.

“I got it from here,” he says.

“I told you I want to do it. He was my dad.” I grab the fishing net. The turtle is so heavy I have to prop the handle under my armpit. I lumber, trying to adjust to the turtle’s weight in addition to my own new weight.

“Half hour?”
I nod and squint through the steam blowing in our eyes as I lower the turtle into the boiling water. The hum of the bubbles is replaced with spitting and hissing, and then the water stills. I want this to be over. This part and the next part. I want the turtle not to look like a turtle anymore. I want it to be neat cubes of unrecognizable meat.

I want Daddy to be a box of ashes we can spread on his land and in his swamp. Tomorrow, in honor of the feast.

Will feeds the fire again, and we watch as tripping bubbles move slowly around the edge of the rusting barrel. We sweat from the heat and the fire and the work.

At noon, we claw through the humid air and are surprised, but shouldn’t be, at how the turtle stench, gamey and fishy, tunnels its way into our nostrils, the back of our throats, our bellies.

When I lift the snapper out of the boiling water with the fishing
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net, it steams. I hump it back to the board, and while it cools, Will eats an egg salad sandwich. I pick at the crusts and stare at the swamp. The blackbirds call and deep frog gulps echo them.

“You aren’t hungry?”
I shake my head. “Think of the money we’re saving.”
“We need you to eat, Lou.”
I pick a splinter of wood from the steps.
“So Jared’s okay with you keeping the place?”
“He certainly doesn’t want it.”
“Do you?”
I turn to Will and wipe a dab of egg salad from the corner of his mouth. “You know I do.”
“And the baby?”
I suck in my breath. “I don’t know what the baby wants, Will.”
We’re quiet for a while. He follows a bittern with his eyes. Even after all these years here, the bittern makes me hold my breath too. The bird points its beak to the sky, and I know if I look away, I won’t be able to find it again, blending in with the grasses.

“It’s beautiful.” I mean it too. Swamp is an ugly word for the cattails growing tall and proud and the flycatchers flipping their feathers. It doesn’t reveal the dragonflies, frogs escaping their trapped tadpole selves, secret moss, and peepers that sing us to sleep. The word is only right for the mosquitoes and the pungent, heady smell that mixes with our breath.

“Let’s do it,” I say and heft myself up. I take the other knife from the board. The turtle’s skin feels like a toad’s.
I think of Mom, all the times I watched her. I jam the knife in between the two halves, and twist it just like she did. The shell cracks. “Jesus, Lou.”
I use the knife like a lever. A tight ripping sound, popping of bone and tendon.
Will holds the bottom shell, and I turn and twist the carapace as it pulls from the skin, a tooth barely loose.
“Hold this?” I give the knife to Will and yank on the two frames. He slices through the sinew still holding top to bottom.
He works the blade back and forth, and we rip the shells from one another. The smell, before implied and needling, is now immediate and violent. Sick, bubbled flesh, and I’m only able to run three steps before gripping a beech tree and retching. They are wracking spasms,
and in between rounds, I sink to my knees. Will is rubbing my back slowly, and this motion makes me retch again so quickly I can’t tell him to stop. I shrug him off, and when finally I’m spent, I spit a few times, wipe my mouth with my shirt, and turn to see him sitting on his knees, looking lost.

“I’m sorry,” he says.

“It’s okay.” I drop my head.

“I’ll get you water.”

I nod and move to the other side of the tree and put my back against the smooth bark of the beech. I close my eyes and open them again when the screen door scrapes. Will brings a tall water and a clean shirt for me. He helps me out of my dirty shirt, and I catch him peeping at my belly. He looks to me and sees I’ve seen him.

“Sorry.”

I take the water from him, wanting it to be a calm pool I can lie down in. The glass is heavy.

“I really am sorry, Lou.”

“Okay.”

“Okay?” His voice is tight.

I don’t have the energy for this. “Yes, okay.”

“Can I help you inside?”

“I’m staying to help.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Louise. You just puked your guts out. You need to rest.”

“I don’t need to rest. There’s no one else to help.”

Will starts to say something, stops. “I know, but it’s okay to let me do this. It’s the one thing I can do.”

I know he’s right. I know this would make him feel better, which is why I won’t let him do it. I stand up, feel my head spin, and walk back to the plywood table, where pieces of turtle are strewn about. I bite the side of my cheeks and yank globs of fat from the carcass and toss them into the gut bucket. The globs make a sick sliding noise as they thud against the plastic; they cover the turtle’s head.

“Lou.” Will, across the crude table, puts his hands on mine. “Please let me do this.”

“You’ve done quite enough already.” I pull my hands away, gesture at my belly, and tear at turtle entrails and organs. I can feel him staring at me. I look up.

“I thought we decided together.”

“No, Will, you decided.”
He waits, not moving. I wipe hair out of my face with the back of my hand. With the knife, I saw at turtle bones. Jumbled, they face wrong directions.

I pounce. “You said it would make Dad happy. You knew the moment….My dad was dying.”

I turn my attention back to the turtle, tackling the top shell. I hold it upright with one hand, blinking tears back so I can see clearly enough to start chunking meat. Bones overlap. They are puzzles; I have to pick meat with my fingers. Will reaches for me again, and with the shell in my hands, stringy and ragged, I turn to face him, the shell a shield.

“Lulu, I’m sorry.”
“You should be. I don’t want it.”

I slam the shell down and it cracks. I stab the knife into the wood, furious. It stands upright.

Will looks at me.
I struggle for air.
“Lou?”
I grab the table, needing something to hold onto.
“Lou?”
“I got Jared when Grandpa died, you when Mom died. Now this,” I jab at my belly, wanting to hurt it, “when Dad dies. I don’t want it. I want Dad.”

Will nods. As if I’m making sense. As if any of this makes any sense. He reaches toward me, and I step back.

“I’m sorry.” He clenches his jaw, works his hand hard across his day old scruff, pulling at the skin at his throat.

I breathe in the moldy, wet air. My own smell rises from my armpits, biting acid. Saliva collects in the back of my mouth.

“I’m sorry you got pregnant. We got pregnant. I shouldn’t have said what I did.” He looks miserable, sick, defeated.

I want to sink down in the swamp, sleep in the mud.

His chest heaves. A drip of sweat runs down his temple.

I look at our mess. The board is soaked. Beyond that, the bucket is full of stringy entrails. Dull pops come from the fire. There is no wind, so the wood smoke hangs over the swamp.

The cracked shell is nearly free of meat, nearly ready for the woods. I step back to the table but keep my head down. “I just want it to be the way it used to be, but with you.” He says nothing. I look at him.

He nods, waits.

“I want you to know Mom. I want the four of us to talk about
anything over beers and a fire. Even a baby. I want Mom to sing her song to me, and I want you and Daddy to hear her.” I drop my hands to my side, kick at the dry dirt and a withering dandelion.

Will reaches across the table and takes my hand stinking with guts. He puts it on his chest, palm and fingers splayed. “Can you sing it to me?”

He knows the song. I sing it when it’s quiet, when it’s happy, and the night we told Daddy we were pregnant. It did make him happy. He hugged me hard, forgetting his pain, and clapped Will on the back. They toasted beer cans in celebration. We sat huddled on his bed, listening to the peepers in the swamp.

Across the table, Will nods to me, a signal. He covers my hand with his. I feel the thud of his heart. His skin is slick with sweat. It smells sweet, cut grass. I start the lullaby; he finishes it with me.

The baby kicks. I take my hand from his chest and place his hand, for the first time, on my belly.
Mitchell L. H. Douglas

Inhabit

for Debra Kang Dean

At the podium, your fingers
find the page, flatten one’s back
to another’s stomach. The heel
of your hand stands north,

reverses the Great Migration.
Sometimes, you say, women poets—
poets of color—are called
to be spokespeople; I can’t
even speak for myself.
One month prior,
a day of bloom & warmth,
you sign your first book—

a surprise—hand your words across
a congregation of emptied plates.
I mouth the inscription:
a silent sermon. Today,

the microphone
raises your slow breeze timbre,
praises the beat of your heart.
You are a patient ventriloquist:

your lips move & the lyrics
float, bounce from speakers
hiding in the walls. Your hand
moves again, an opening
to another room.
Heel of hand to page: rest,
slide, read, turn. Heel of hand
to page. Rest, slide. Read.
We roast a duck with forty toes of garlic, 
drink champagne while the bird sizzles in its fat. 
Seven stories below, the pitch-black rattle 
of coconut palms shivering on the cusp 
of being no longer new. A toast 
to learning how to be never again new. 
Something beyond the recipe, a magic I need 
to understand, which is this: 
Garlic, when roasted in its skin, 
forced close and slow to the heat, 
will lose its bite, turn to sugar and pulp. 
And the duck—yes tender— 
but when carved up, 
what a fretwork of bones, 
what a revelation 
of so little meat.
Shawn Fawson

In the Bathhouse

You kept her things as she had arranged them on the sill: the *kakisubata* iris in the bronze vase, the tortoise-shell hairpin fallen out of reach.

I imagine her sidelong glance, the weight of rain along her eyelashes never intending a blink.

While waiting for the water to become warm, the coals in the brazier sift through the sooty darkness. Stirring the crooked light to steam beneath my hand, I want to forget the silence she has brought, but stirring with the ladle, I hear the water walk on itself.

If I so much as breathe,

the lightness of silk will drop onto you.
This is the privilege of being discreet—to know the solitary rain against the wooden slats and at your back where the only apology is to take myself apart with my own hands, the touch of water strips our world to its bones.
First-Snow Festival, 1806

My lips are a small red bonfire. Other nights they frost the color of cricket wings.

I move with the alleyway’s chill seeping under purple clouds in the soft smoke of people using whatever paper is left to float fires down the river. A hand reaches from the shadows. The entire time it does not lift from my breast.

Six months have passed since you’ve seen me not as I am now but as I most desire to remember myself—wearing a white obi over a violet kimono, speaking of Hokusai, reciting Buson.

My ears adjust to the first snow like a depth of erasures. The final notes of the temple bell cling like ash on my tongue.

My arms fall with the darkness. My sleeves are empty. I have only these stumps to ask alms of the daimyo, and he tries to give me his daughter.

Clouds scroll over thatched roofs. The sky is not clear of the white faces thawing. When the hushed wind across the river leans closer to speak, memory undoes my burning hair.
Chanda Feldman

Immersion

In Judaism, the mikvah is a pool of living waters for ritual immersion.

To enter the mikvah, a woman exits the day. At twilight, she undresses—scrapes away dirt from beneath her nails, scrubs the skin’s crevices. She puts aside her wedding ring. Her body’s rich bed emptied of the month’s possibility. A woman dismantles her braided hair so she may yield to the fluid drape, her eyes open, lips parted, her feet raised from earth. The uninhibited touch of water—as at the start when water was all—seals her from air, cradles her flesh’s weight, so she may whisper her prayers wholly into God’s mouth.
Making Challah for the Sabbath

We have in us deeply planted instructions— the ways I’ve learned
to measure ingredients from my palm,
set dough aside for a slow rise.
I like to think of the many women
uncovering bowls in kitchens
on Fridays—mixtures doubled,
fingers managing what’s whole,
unformed—the week’s end in yeast,
flour, salt, and the worn days
left behind like wind-dragged leaves
outside our kitchen door—the door
you enter just in time to portion
and piece a braid, careful not to worry
the dough. A good bread depends on
a firm touch, care in the work—
what a lover’s hands can do.
It’s in this way God plaited Eve’s
hair, blessed her marriage
to Adam in the Garden. You arrange
the thick braid as I whisk a yolk-glaze.
I’ll sprinkle poppy seeds over the loaves
to recall the forty years manna fell—
a miracle. The golden swell in oven-heat,
tending to our hunger.
Yahya Frederickson

Strolling in Béja, the Eve of Al-Maulid

for Nabil

Béja, Tunisia

People are buying up raisins and salted seeds.  
Your father sits at a café table behind the market, the end of the alley  
with a cigarette, a cup of crème, and a newspaper creased into quarters.

At the government mercantile,  
I buy my mother a ceramic hand decorated with henna flowers.  
When I bring it home in a year, rings that no longer fit her atrophied hand will slip onto its fingers, dormant watches will rest for eternity across its palm.

We walk on, to the sweet shop lined with mirrors. On every plate, a cube of cake soaked with orange-blossom syrup.  
Slice it carefully, for if you look in any direction, you’ll find eyes, everywhere possibility. Our quandary, mon ami,

is that life is a birdcage of glances.  
If we escape, we escape on clipped wings that carom us back to the gate bougainvillea cascades over, a house of cool tile. 
Your mother gave you her whiteness.  
When I leave the guest room

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for the house’s more private stations,
I see her sitting at the table with coffee
while her prayer rug faces the uncluttered corner.
Her accent still scurries past me,
but her smile always stops to drink.

Tomorrow, the Prophet Muhammad’s birthday.
The daughters of your aunt will visit, wearing pastel dresses.
In the hall, your mother hints to you one of them
for marriage. Which one, I can only dream.
A month from now we will be in a foreign land
where eyes flicker at us on the horizon,
and this holiday is branded as innovation.
Rite

_Sana’a, Yemen_

From the grand _diwan_ of Al-Ahmar
where women beat tambourines
and ululate with mouths I’ll never see,

you float down the dark stairs,
filling the corridor with layer
upon layer of veil, an apparition

moving toward me without word
or touch. Sheikh Abdullah’s Land Cruiser
will whisk us along the belt

of streetlights around this city,
in whose heart I pulse, in whose mouth
my tongue has learned a new language.

Our convoy of cars honks
with the promise of migrating geese.
In the seats behind us, the shadows

of your best friends and their daughters
hold whispered conversations.
Tonight, I know you less than ever.

But in the crevice between us, our hands
have found one another. We will learn
that love means what we have begun.
San Fernando Cathedral, San Antonio de Bejar, Día de los Muertos

In the theater of the Mass, the obligatory Señoras of Guadalupe stand in the front pews, fingers on rosary beads, clicking. They are caustic to outsiders who come to see the marble encasings of Bowie and that lawless Kentuckian fortunate enough to die at the Alamo. In front of these tombs, brown hands reach to pin a milagro, a miracle of thanks, on the robe of the Black Christ. Ana’s thanks for her escape from the death squads of Guatemala. San Antonio is a safe place where the Hispanic brush says we all look alike.

Once a year the Rabbi comes and cries to God without his minyans. A Protestant female priest joins him and forgets the Pope does not like women in charge of God. They stand next to our little Father David and pray for the dead. Día de los Muertos, All Souls Day, we gather to remember the politics of the moment, the barbed wire of borders and the names of all those bodies who have no families here to grieve. A daughter of El Salvador carries a child in a rebozo and places a white rose at the altar of the Virgin de Guadalupe, Patroness of the Américas, tied with a red ribbon, the name of her dead father scrawled on its shiny side.

The Señoras of Guadalupe adjust the lace they still wear on their heads and, with the rest of us, are asked to remember what it’s like to come home and be unwanted. We all sing.
together, the lawyer passes the basket and the retired colonel helps with communion. Jews, Christians, tourists, frightened immigrants and me knowing death has its eye on our sockets and will hook us home, heart or no heart, hero or no hero, gold marigolds, *cempásuchil*, to guide our way.
Ramón García

Passion Play

Christ is a teenage Mexican boy in a wig, thin, unshaven, in a faux crown of thorns. Surrounding him, the women of Judea are girls from the church’s youth group; they wear Technicolor biblical dresses and turban-like shawls à la Hollywood Mary Magdalene. Pontius Pilate, in a white bed-sheet toga and Gap sandals, orders Jesus’ death. The parking lot of St. Jude Church becomes the streets of Jerusalem, the Via Dolorosa where Roman soldiers—puberty-stricken boys in skirts—flog Jesus with black leather whips. The Son of God, fake blood running from fake wounds, falls in anguish once again as he’s lead to Golgotha, a mound of dirt beyond the parking lot. The girls follow, simulating grief; they kneel to recite New Testament passages, hiding girlish giggles behind their colorful shawls of sorrow. Then the soldiers rope Christ’s wrists to his wooden cross and hoist him up under the skies of the suburbs. “Lord, why hast thou forsaken me?” the boy mutters. Mary, Martha, and Magdalene lift woeful eyes at the martyred brown boy in a loosened loincloth revealing the toned limbs of a soccer player: Oh, symbol of salvation! The girls’ theatrics stop and pose into tableau—the audience claps.
Mother of the Bride

The bridesmaids flock and volunteer, veer out on their errands, approve the jewelry, discuss push-up bras. Their hair smoothed or curled or long, their heels high. I don’t have to figure out how the train snaps up, tuck an errant curl in place. My eyes agog at the makeup, the face like a work of art (but I made it first). I won’t say husk, won’t think relict, relegate. It is not yet late. And my dress has spaghetti straps though the underarm swings a little. I don’t have to be the bad fairy in the corner or the queen at her mirror checking the line of her chin. I trek up and down the top of the hill digging my heels in for purchase, smile till the muscles stop. Snapping pictures, snapping pictures (everyone dressed as the best self). When we stand as the old family group, my heart drops a little. But I trust them to be happy. White white white with no adornment but line and the flowers in her hair. They can’t take their eyes off each other. They cry while the sun shines and the breeze flaps the huppah. He steps on the glass because the past is over, because only they may share this drink, and we waltz down the aisle to where orchards
of appletinis wait. Processional, refrains familiar. In the open air, the music seems never to stop. I lift a festive, open-mouthed glass.
Dolores Hayden

**Sweet Disorder**

*Methodist camp meeting,*  
*Oak Bluffs, Martha’s Vineyard, 1880s*

Sawn with bright, ingenious blades,  
wooden lilies bounding porches  
open petals summer wide.  
Gothic windows. Late nights. Torches.  
Bandsaw pistils rise inside.  
Men and women writhe in hay,  
seek to burn, blow trumpets, howl,  
underneath the pulpit’s sway,  
speak in wondrous tongues. And foul.  
Methodist madness cuts two ways,  
jigsaws sweethearts, souls enslaved,  
meeting lasts for thirty days,  
saved, I’m saved, I’m saved, I’m saved.
Randall Horton

14th and Park Road, Washington, DC: A Day of Observance

Five days straight through wind and snow we have hidden in the umbra of gray clouds—inhale crisp air only when a slow wheeling hoopty enters the block from 14th, windows rolled down and a split second to exchange product for dollar bills, and back to the storefront crevices we return. Last week Dirty Reds got popped, his left testicle exploding from the compression of a .44 long. Sunshine and Pudding stopped breathing in a drive-by. Big Foots served an undercover and was immediately escorted to mandatory jail time in Lorton. Still, this is our life profession—but today there is a moratorium on our block, a stand fast on shell casings and turf ownership. Instead, we huddle in Ms. Trudy’s apartment, watch black-and-white footage of King while she remembers being thumbtacked to a wall by a jet stream of water as German shepherds reared their ugly fangs. You boys don’t know shit ’bout the ’60s, she says. On her television we see the roped-off yellow tape in a Memphis motel conceived by an assassin’s rifle. We know this jaundice color of death. And this man offered and executed the ultimate sacrifice: life. His vision is not ours, but we give dap, mad love—knowing we are willing to die for much less.
A Honeymoon in the Hotel Rufolo, Ravello

He didn’t turn on the light.
I fell to the bed
To watch his silhouette unbuttoning,
Open the window to the misted hill,
Monastery, lemon grove.

I needed the window open for air,
Glass of water, slice of lemon,
To be dressed in something the weight of moonlight.
He said, Take that off, it makes you look innocent.
I didn’t know.
The bells that woke us up at dawn
Had called the monks to mass.

Do they smile to themselves whenever they hear
The unmistakable moans of lovers?
Do they try to drown the sounds as they pass,
Tapping their staffs on the cobblestone
Below the hotel windows?

I held the sill with both of my hands.
He wanted me to watch their slow procession.
His hands on my waist, I swayed above him,
A woman wanting to be two things.
If this is our first ritual, what will be our last?

Airport terminal ticket counter,
We’ve already checked our bags.
The housekeeper is busy untangling
A nightgown from the ruins of our bed.
Kelly Houle

Touching the sleeves to her shoulders, she admires
The weight of the silk, the glow.
She likes it, sets it aside for herself
For the way it makes her look.
Late winter light trickles
from an open window, thin
milk I reconstitute, powder
taken from a tin where things
are kept, to keep from spoiling—

I remember how we stood in line
on a cold sidewalk, schoolgirls
in skirts of somber blue, blouses
crisp white, walking forward to receive
monthly rations of flour and milk from
charitable souls overseas. We were
not poor, nor rich. My mother sniffed
at the taped paper sack and turned it in
her hand, looking for an expiration date.
She threw it in the trash, pronouncing
not everything we’re given free is grace.

In December, the year of our First
Communion, we made an advent calendar
with windows that could lift, to show
the stages in the journey to miraculous
birth. Brightly wrapped crayons rolled
across our desks from a brand-new box:
lime green, watermelon red, carnation,
spicy orange, saffron yellow.

In the next row, Brigit assured a trusting
Conchita they could be eaten. She foamed
at the mouth a little, the way we imagined
epileptics or saints at the point of rapture.
We thought she’d surely die, but she joined the rest of us a week later, heads bowed under frothy white veils we’d sewn ourselves.

Where are those girls now? One is a doctor, somewhere in Boston or Manhattan. One had a son out of wedlock, though for a few years she denied this was true. I heard that faithless Brigit left her husband, and that Conchita is in drug therapy, but this could be just a story.

When we walked to the altar to receive the wafer that was the Body of Christ, I strained to hear the voice we were told would be radiant like a bell in our hearts, a flood of knowledge or mystical feeling. I closed my eyes and lifted my head, secretly afraid my canines would tear into the flesh of the sacred Body.
It comes from Brazil or Argentina, nowadays even Taiwan or the United Arab Emirates, far-off kingdoms where expatriates like us with the occasional hankering for some taste of home, hunker over bowls of garlic fried rice topped with a spoonful of sauteed carne norte and onions (a little goes a long way). We like best how you can take off the rectangular roofs and their quarter-inch rims with a little key. We scroll round and round, tearing off a bit of the red label where the black and white cow stands in a too-green meadow. No one is put off by the lining of lard, the pink striations in the compressed faux side of beef. Did I say home? Tin roof, hard rain, noisy dining room, all hands talking at the same time. The slowest get the drippings from the pan.
My mother has become an icon of sorts. A Jamaican woman, a nurse, she has learned to fly a plane late in her life, and in her first solo attempt, the tiny plane she was flying developed the sort of mechanical difficulties that would scare even an experienced pilot. But my mother brought the plane down smoothly, landed it on a highway cleared of traffic, and walked out into the midst of television crews and newspaper and wire service reporters ready to cast the day’s latest hero onto the world. She held her head down, modest in that moment of glory.

My mother, who wiped her hands of mothering the day I turned eighteen, is the new shadow on my life. On my eighteenth birthday, my mother turned to me and said she was done mothering. “I raised two self-sufficient children,” she said. “I don’t expect to be bailing you out for the rest of your lives.” We had dinner, and then she went to fly a plane, her first solo flight. Those who know me are now expecting me to exhibit my mother’s bravado, as if that brand of heroism is excreted in breast milk and lies latent until an appropriate future moment. What seeped into me is her manner of speaking, the milk of the mother permanently imprinted on the child. Try as I did to sound like American children, I couldn’t. Somewhere in my childhood in this very same America where I was born, my mother implanted the idea that we, my brother and I, were not fully Americans, and would never, ever be truly African-American, no matter which slang we picked up, no matter which style of clothes we wore, no matter what letters or numbers or designs my brother tried to shave into his hair, so we should just as well accept that we were Jamaican and she would be raising Jamaican children even this far away from the Caribbean island. By way of explaining all this, she said that when growing up she was never allowed to speak Jamaican patois in her parents’ presence, so she grew up speaking the King’s English (which king, I don’t know), and sounding sometimes like a foreigner in her own country. Foreigner as she was, taunted as she was, that is what she expected of us.

Anyhow, my mother’s reincarnation from nurse and wife and
mother to pilot and former wife and nurse had its beginnings some two years ago when she began, I now believe, preparing my brother and me to learn to live without her. She was at the time, mother to the two children she birthed, mother to the husband she married some twenty years earlier, mother to her siblings, mother to her parents. She was tired, worn out, depressed, and certain her soon-to-be-adult children were not going to become as dependent as her family had become.

The same mother who told her children in no uncertain terms that she was raising Jamaican children sheltered us from the island. It wasn’t until I was sixteen and my brother seventeen that we visited Jamaica for the first time, and even then we saw so little of the island that we might as well not have gone.

Back then, my mother had a way of saying, “You children are lucky. Born lucky.” We were flying over Cuba, some ninety miles from Montego Bay, nearly two-and-a-half hours from JFK, before she said those first words of the flight. She looked at the plates of Air Jamaica breakfast—pancakes and congealed syrup, a half-eaten yogurt, ice melting in plastic cups—and said again, “Born lucky.” Thousands of miles behind us, we’d left the stink of the New York City subway, its combined smell of piss and perfume, sweat and engine oil, garlic and onions, and a myriad of things in between. Thousands of miles behind us we’d left what my mother called the unchecked manners of American children spilling from school buildings and crowding onto the Flatbush Avenue B44 bus; the chill of a fall morning; a house mostly silent when the children were absent.

Brad looked at her once, continued bobbing his head to the reggae coursing through the armrest, piping through black headphones squashed on his ears like two oversized spiders. I was in the middle, between my brother’s long legs and my mother’s shaved and oiled ones. My father wasn’t with us on that trip. He had never traveled with us, for he said someone had to watch the house. But even so, I couldn’t picture him standing guard, gun in hand, taking shots at anyone who stood or stared at the house too long. I had long become accustomed to Mom’s restlessness. It was when she was still that I worried. We’re lucky, I guessed. Brad and I should have been in school, but she pulled us for five school days. Neither of us complained.

Sometimes when my mother said we were lucky she meant we were lucky to be the children of immigrants rather than immigrants ourselves. We children of immigrants belonged to America. Even though she told us we would never be fully American, we still belonged
Donna Hemans

in a way she didn’t. She was only a squatter here, she said. If you ask me, they’re both still squatters. They belong to nothing—not the cricket club Uncle Sammy belongs to; not the cricket clubs my friends’ parents belong to; no old boys’ or old girls’ association formed by past students from a high school back home; no social clubs; no West Indian association, with its annual picnics or Christmas dinners; no church full of West Indian immigrants. Back then, my parents belonged to each other (barely) and to us (barely).

Brad and I were then and are surely now squatters in her life. She expected us to leave, reminded us almost daily that soon we would be gone. “Remember that in this house you are a squatter,” she told Brad once. “Until you own this house, you are a squatter here. This is my house and you will do what I tell you.”

It is better to belong to yourself. Own no one. Own nothing.

Islands are almost always prettiest when viewed from above, and Jamaica, on that trip two years ago, was no different. From the air, the sea was a postcard blue, the vegetation a deep-green, and the resorts a sparkling white with mostly red-shingled roofs. Culture, (“commercialized for display,” my mother said) greeted us at Sangsters International Airport. Seven women in red-checkered skirts (Native woman cloth, my mother called it) and white blouses, matching red-checkered head scarves knotted in front, sang a welcome song. “Welcome to Jamaica,” they sang. My mother dismissed them with a wave of her hand. There was a man too, but his voice was as high-pitched as the women’s. Behind the group was something I hadn’t expected to see: a charcoal blanket in the shape of a body, a shape I’d seen countless times in the subway and over street grates. It shouldn’t be here, I thought. Although that was my first visit to the place Mom and Dad always referred to as home, I knew by the way my parents always talked about the proper way things are done on the island that the body shouldn’t have been there.

“Somebody died over there.” A woman whispered conspiratorially to my mother. “Man just come off the plane and drop down dead.”

“You serious?” my mother said. She turned her head slowly, wanting to hide her curiosity, but she was and we were a little too fascinated with the suddenness of death.

“Yes. Just come off the plane and drop down dead. Prob’ly was feeling bad on the plane. See the body over there now under that blanket. See?”

We looked at the charcoal lump, the off-white tile on which
the body lay. I imagined a man coming through the doors, hearing “Welcome to Jamaica,” his spirit hovering then over his body and singing too. Welcome to Jamaica, all right.

My mother, the nurse, was accustomed to death but she looked back with frequency at the charcoal blanket, the group proudly and fiercely serenading the travelers waiting in line to complete the immigration process. Customs officials and airline representatives came and went, looking too at the blanketed body. An airline representative walked slowly by with a twenty-something woman holding a traveler’s carry-on bag. They stood near the body, the twenty-something woman bending forward in a moment of weakness, the airline representative bracing to offer support. I imagined the phone call the young woman would make to relatives in America, “Yes, Papa reach, but him dead.”

Where’s the luck, I thought.

The driver took us up a long hill that he called Long Hill. I like names of places that offer no pretense. They are what they are and no more. Ocho Rios: Eight Rivers. Wait-a-bit, Alligator Pond, Long Bay, all places my father talks about.

It seemed we were climbing into a mountain of sorts. Brad watched the way the driver’s fingers gripped the steering wheel, the way he eased forward and slouched to the right to peer around the vehicles ahead for an opening to pass. My mother was quiet still, her hands clasped at her waist. I didn’t know whether to fear more the driver, the gully to the right, the sharp corners, the van behind that seemed to be only inches away from us, the truck ahead stubbornly pushing over the hill. It seemed the truck would roll backwards at any minute. We drove from coast to coast, through towns that grew smaller and smaller still, through Black River, a town built practically in the sea and which had no more room to expand, on through farms with red-brown dirt, over potholes patched with marl and cement and potholes never patched at all. We were sometimes near the sea, a low concrete wall the only barrier between the water and the road. The wall couldn’t do much to hold back the waves in a violent storm. Two hours later when the driver slowed, we were on a rugged road, the sea no longer visible. The driver was telling Brad that we were in Treasure Beach, a fishing village in St. Elizabeth.

St. Elizabeth Parish should have been familiar to us because it’s the parish where my father was born. But it wasn’t. We had been to England and its cities, which my mother learned about in her colonial
girlhood. We’d been to Rome, São Paulo, Paris, Panama. My mother always said one should learn new things and stop relearning the old, so we’d visited new places instead of the old one she grew up knowing. My father used to come here to Jamaica now and then, but Mom said her family was long gone. She sent barrels upon barrels though. Brad and I never fully believed her, though there certainly are lots of cousins in England. As teenagers we made up stories of what must have happened to create such ambivalence. On the one hand, she was raising us in New York as if we were Jamaican children, but never allowing us to see for ourselves the island on which the rules we lived by originated. Even though Jamaica isn’t like Haiti with its coups or Cuba with a long-term dictator, we lived as if we were exiled in America. So we made up our own stories with reasons deeply personal rather than political. We imagined our parents were first cousins who married against family wishes, both at first deliriously happy and then guilty because of what they’d both lost. We imagined Mom as a young girl stealing her sister’s lover, or Mom running off to marry the son of her older lover. None of this we knew could be true, but still we imagined.

And nothing explained my mother saying always, “You’re squatters in this house,” and her expectation that we would abandon her. Yes, children leave their parents and start lives on their own. But that wasn’t what she meant. It was as if she expected us to forsake her for some reason or other.

Marriage completes you, they say; yet my mother then was so alone.

“Are we still near the water?” Brad asked.

“Yes, man, the sea right over there. You can walk. Three, four minutes and you’re at the beach.”

Brad nodded then carried the bags across the grass, bending to avoid the branch of a coconut tree, skirting two children playing in the yard.

The man who greeted us said we could have any room we wanted for no other visitors had yet arrived. The cabins were similar wood buildings with balconies on both the upper and lower levels, hammocks on the two upper levels.

“That one looks good,” my mother said. “You and your brother can sleep upstairs. I’ll stay downstairs.”

I’d expected a hotel, of course. Perhaps a villa. Brad and I looked around. There were candles on bookshelves, on the night stand, and boxes of matches next to the candles. A delicate mosquito net hung suspended from the thatch roof. A breeze flowed from the rear balcony.
to the one in front, through the windows that were slightly open, through the holes built into the wall just below the thatch. Wasps were building nests on the thatch.

Brad dropped his bag. “Cool,” he said. “I always wanted to stay in a rustic cabin.”

I wondered where the Brad I’d known had gone. Perhaps he hadn’t realized yet that there was no switch by the door that would magically pipe current into the room, no bulbs hanging overhead, no television in a corner below a window, no refrigerator, no microwave, no stove.

“Cool,” I said too, and turned to look at the bathroom, just outside the door. “Simply cool.”

Inside the bathroom, the concrete floor was painted red. Even the shower stall, concrete as well, was painted red. The pipes worked. The toilet looked fairly new. Mom had long threatened to send us from our Hempstead, Long Island home to a country house in Jamaica so we could learn what life was really like. For a while her threats worked. We behaved. We turned off lights and wasted nothing. We were still young then. But the nearly bare cabin was more than I expected. We hadn’t turned wasteful again and there was no sin I could think of that would have prompted this retreat. Mom didn’t know, for instance, of Brad’s girlfriend or the things they did in the early morning after Dad left for work and before she returned from the overnight shift. I wouldn’t be the one to tell of Brad’s senior class slide.

My mother was moving around downstairs, and, when I looked, her room was as bare as ours.

“There’s a kitchen next door,” she said. “I’ll have to show you how to use the stove.”

I didn’t want to see a stove that my mother had to show me how to use. I’d seen kitchens. I’d seen stoves, but never any that required lessons.

“Mom, why are we here?” I tried to keep the whine out of my voice. “What did we do?”

“What do you mean?”

“This place…it’s not a hotel. There’s no electricity, not even a phone.”

“You children are lucky,” she said again. “Anyhow sometimes we all need a change.”

I heard Brad outside asking about the beach and before she said anymore about how little we understood of the hardships of life, I said, “I think I’ll go to the beach, Mom.”

“Okay,” she said.
As I left, she was taking out one of her tranquility candles, lavender scent, I believed. Once the flame was lit, she shook the lit match, breathed deeply, the outtake as heavy as a sigh.

Brad led us through a footpath bordered by grass and prickly shrubs. The beach was a small cove with naked reefs jutting out into the sea. The water was surprisingly warm but a little dark because the sun was no longer directly overhead, and the sand carried a tinge of black. It wasn’t until after I sat, my legs stretched out, the waves crashing over my body, that I noticed the small crabs being carried as well by the waves. Once the wave retreated, the crabs buried themselves quickly. There were small, almost translucent fish darting around, inspecting my dark brown legs and unable to resist the pull of the waves.

“This is awesome,” Brad said and whooped, plunging into the water.

I imagined him as someone else, a television character who says words like cool and dude and awesome, the type of American son my mother didn’t want to raise. In that moment he was not the brother I had known, not the brother who always stood back from baseball or softball games and who would dribble a basketball if there was only one other person on court, never with a full team. Independent thinker, my father said because he hadn’t yet learned Brad’s thinking. Brad wants no broken bones; he wants to remain as complete as the day he was born.

Brad swam a bit, coming up for air and yelling back, “Aren’t you coming in?”

I didn’t swim at all but sat at the water’s edge rubbing sand onto my skin. A free body scrub.

Two boys came loping down. They were accustomed to the cove. They waved hello, dropped their towels on the rocks and waded out towards Brad. Brad settled for a bit to shake hands. Later, I learned one was seventeen, one twenty. The seventeen-year-old, Shane, spoke softly as if all conversations were private or it pained him to talk. The other, who called himself Red, spoke with a different accent. He told us his mother was from Germantown, a descendant of a group of Germans who came to the island years and years earlier and never resettled back home. He pointed west as if we should know where. Germantown, another name I love. Simple. Straightforward.

Once we headed back to the cabins, the boys pointed out their respective homes on the compound. All the houses were occupied by siblings, uncles and aunts of the two boys. I couldn’t help but think of my parents who could barely live together, but here was one tribe on the same compound. I couldn’t imagine an entire family of adult
siblings living on the same compound, the distance between the houses measured by yards and not miles.

Mom got some fresh fish, which she cooked on the burners in the kitchen. There was a lizard above the stove, tiny reddish-brown ants running over the dishes in the dish drain.

“This is almost like camping,” Brad said, “except we don’t have to build a fire or sleep outside in a tent.”

I half expected Mom to say we were lucky to have had those experiences, camping, hiking, vacations. Instead she said, “I got some calling cards so you can call your father. We’ll borrow a phone next door.”

I told her we should have called as soon as we got there. But she dismissed me with, “Call him now if you want.”

The first night we ate together. An empty drink bottle served as a vase between Brad, Mom and me. We sat on picnic-style benches around a picnic-style table, each with a candle in front of us. It was too early still to light the candles. I didn’t imagine Mom expected us to sit there longer than it took us to eat. I, for one, was still unhappy with the arrangement. The food had a smoky taste to it, not quite like the smoky taste of a barbecue, not quite like the smoky taste of burnt food. But I didn’t tell Mom her rice tasted different.

Night came swiftly. Brad and I, sitting in our small room with every candle lit, couldn’t imagine what to do. Mom lit her candles and retreated. Our entertainment wasn’t her concern.

“Let’s go,” Brad said. He grabbed a candleholder that looked like a saucer with a teacup handle, cupped his hand around the flame, and headed to the door. I grabbed another candle holder, shielding my flame the way Brad did. The night was blacker than anything I’d ever imagined. The twinkling and hissing and chirping weren’t sounds I recognized.

“Well’re we going?”

“Just come.”

Unlike the cabins, the other houses were ablaze with electricity. White television characters gazed out of grainy scenes. Red was outside when we approached. He looked my body over, shifted his eyes to our candles and asked if we didn’t bring flashlights.

“Forgot to pack them,” Brad said, instead of saying simply that we had no idea we were headed to cabins so rustic.

“Natural sunlight and candlelight,” Red said. “Anyone who stays in the cabins should know before they come.”
“What’s there to do around here?” I asked.
Red looked at me as if surprised I could speak. And I wanted to say, yes, I talk, I cry, I laugh.
“Nights we play dominoes, cards, Ludo. Going over by Shane to watch a movie. Come nuh.”

We watched the end of a program that ran in America as a daytime soap opera; the characters, mostly white, seeming more vindictive and selfish than ever before. Shane took out a stack of movies and the guys chose one with no thought about what I might or might not like. I tuned out as the first car blew up and the muscled hero emerged without a scratch.

I imagined we would spend the remainder of our nights there like that, yards away from our deserted cabin, watching American movies. This couldn’t be what Mom expected, but who could tell. We retreated to basic cabins with the bare comforts only to find within a few yards that which we retreated from. We didn’t tell her of course how we spent our evenings, and she didn’t ask.

We saw less and less of Mom. Perhaps that was what she wanted. She told us in the evenings, when she was preparing dinner, of the places she had been: Accompong, the only remaining Maroon town on the west of the island, Lover’s Leap, YS Waterfalls. She didn’t invite us to come along. She was rediscovering on her own the land she left behind some twenty-something years ago. Still, she was shielding it from us.

There at The Cove, those secluded rustic cabins, my mother became a single, independent woman, not saddled by children, or husband, or chaos. In the evenings when she returned from her outings, she made dinner, fish with mushy rice or with a sweetened fried dumpling she called festival. We didn’t have the heart to tell her we’d already eaten with the families of our newfound friends. Perhaps we should have told her. Instead, we saved her food for breakfast, knowing she wouldn’t be making a meal that early, knowing too that we would be sharing with the tiny ants that came to carry away even the tiniest crumb.

Brad and I were also living lives independent of her. We came and went from our cabins, not bothering to check if Mom was awake or gone, swimming in the private cove and wandering Treasure Beach as if we were born there. Mom made no attempt to contact family, hers or Dad’s, so that side of the island is all we saw. We marveled at the
houses and villas, some sheltered by concrete walls that are buffeted by the sea, some elegant, others less so. Brad lamented only once that he wished he could have gone snorkeling or taken a jet ski out on the water. But he didn’t go on for long. He accepted as I had that the trip wasn’t meant for us to enjoy. We hadn’t figured out if we were being punished for some misunderstood deed or what Mom was searching for. No other trip had ever been quite like that. We were younger then, of course, less sure of ourselves and the world, more dependent on our mother for everything—entertainment, money, food, clothes, homework help, solace in our father’s absences. Now though, I think she was weaning us, preparing us for lives without her present.

On our fourth night there, Mom disappeared for an overnight stay. Her note was in the kitchen, partly beneath a bunch of mint leaves and a plate with Monday’s fish and festival. She had already left for Milk River Baths in Clarendon, her note said, and she was staying overnight.

Shane pointed east when we asked of Milk River Baths. “That way.” He said it as if we should know. “Mineral bath,” he said with something like amusement. “She gone for some healing. The water there can cure anything.”

“Yes? I asked.

“Yeah, man. Radioactive water.” He sounded as if he knew what he was talking about and I didn’t press for more. I didn’t ask for examples of what the water could cure. After all how can water cure a faltering marriage or a lonely heart? My father was not a faithful husband and my mother was not then the brave woman who landed a plane on her own. But my father wasn’t the only burden in her life. There were also the other relatives, both in Jamaica and New York, who she had to contend with. The relatives in New York treated our house like their personal shopping mall and my mother as their personal lender. Sheets and towels bought on sale and stored for later use were property open for their taking, as was bulk rice or flour or sugar. When school terms started in Jamaica, it was my mother who seemed to support all the children. Come August, the phone calls would come or the letters complete with shoe and dress sizes. My mother didn’t bother to attend funerals and weddings in Jamaica. She simply shipped a barrel, filled with disposable plates and cups, enough rice and flour to feed at least a hundred people and a myriad of other things. She was the privileged American with riches the others lacked, a mother to all.

Those burdens were not my own and I thought only of us, her two
children, from whom she was withdrawing. Brad would be off to college in less than a year. I would follow shortly. Back home the house was nearly always silent. We lived as if we were tiptoeing around so as not to disturb each other. Perhaps it might have been better if someone quarreled. There in Jamaica, we were doing the same thing, only Mom parted ways with us so as not to be disturbed. It should have been us, Brad and me, the seventeen- and sixteen-year-olds parting ways, if only for brief shifts, from the adult left at home. At that time, I kept thinking she was setting herself up for our departure and perhaps that of my Dad. It was only later that I realized I had things the wrong way around.

Red drove us to the other side of Treasure Beach. He pointed us to a large seaside hotel and we settled ourselves on a larger beach amid a few tourists who braved the mid-morning sun. Before long Brad was restless, no longer wanting the pampered tourist experience.

“Who can sit around in the sun all day?”

“The waiters bring you drinks,” I said.

A waiter pointed us to the restaurant where Red said his aunt worked. We walked along the beach, Brad kicking the sand with his bare feet. We found two fishermen preparing their boats for the night. One took us out for a choppy ride. I hated the little boat, the spray of water, the unanchored feeling. Brad loved it. He asked to go fishing that night but the fisherman shook his head no. He didn’t want the responsibility. We were children still. Idle children. We spent the remainder of the afternoon cleaning fish, forgetting, of course, Red’s aunt at the nearby restaurant. We walked the mile or so back to the cabins and when we got back in the evening we fried the fish on the stove my mother had wanted to teach me how to use. We were idle children no more.

Barbara, the woman who ran the cabins, came to see after us. We were family now and she treated us as she would her nieces and nephews who lived on the compound. The families shared without question, the children eating wherever there was a ready meal.

“You can come sleep at my house,” she said.

“We’ll be okay,” Brad said before I could say I’d like that. She offered us a salad, bread if we wanted it. But I had committed to making a meal and I did.

Brad said little. He opted not to go to Shane’s or Red’s to watch TV or play a game of Ludo. As much as I wanted to spend the evening with Red or Shane, I didn’t want to walk in the dark alone, so I sat on the balcony with four candles around me and tried to count the stars. I thought that perhaps we should call Dad, but I didn’t want to be the one
to tell him Mom left us alone for the night. We were not really alone. We were in a family compound, yards away from other adults, one of whom came to see after us. We were nearly adults ourselves. Brad was seventeen nearing eighteen, and I was sixteen nearing seventeen.

Night came quickly but lasted a long time. I woke several times, listening for the rooster’s crow. It was too dark to see my watch and too much trouble to light a candle.

Shane’s mother offered us cornmeal porridge for breakfast and we slurped it greedily, though at home we wouldn’t have touched it at all. Dad was the one to make it, and his idea of sweet is several degrees below that of the average person. Red promised to take us to Mandeville. We weren’t there when Mom returned, and in the morning when we saw her she told us nothing of Milk River Baths, nothing about the pain she’d hoped to cure.

“No, I said. “We were waiting for you to come back.”
“He must be worried. Call him.”
“If he was worried, he would have come.”
“You might be sixteen, but as long as you’re under my care you’ll speak about your father with respect. You heard me?”
“Yes, Mom.” It wasn’t my father that I was mad at. But how could I tell my mother she was retreating from her children instead of the one who caused her pain?

Brad dialed. He talked first, briefly. I talked for just as long. Mom took the phone, hurrying away from the kitchen to her room to complete the call. When she returned she was not at all the independent woman of yesterday. She was a mother again, offering to take us on our last full day to Negril. She was still quiet. Respectfully silent, I thought.

Brad said Mom seemed guilty. We speculated at first that she must have spent the night with a man. But Brad decided no. “It’s something else,” he said but we didn’t have the energy to figure out what. I settled with thoughts of another man. After all my father was never without his girlfriends, and my mother could remain righteous for only so long.

We were packed and ready for the day’s outing. Brad was trampling little plants whose leaves closed up when the plant was touched. He bent to blow gently on the leaves, watching the slow closing with the amazement of a little child. We were waiting for the driver who was taking us. “How was Milk River?” I asked.

“Wonderful,” she said as if distracted. “The water there is just perfect.”
“What did you do?”
“Spent the day in the water. In and out, in and out. You can’t stay in too long. Fifteen, twenty minutes at a time. The water is radioactive. Someday I’ll take you.”
“You flew us all the way down here and just abandoned us so,” Brad said. He was angrier than I had imagined.
Before Mom answered I felt the trip to Negril sliding away.
“Boy, watch yourself.”
“Don’t pity us now,” he said. “We’ve done all right on our own.”
I realized then how much his deep bass voice was like Dad’s. Brad had the same halting speech and my father’s way of saying exactly what he meant without hesitation. There was silence where I expected my mother’s outburst. The silence lasted a long time. But I didn’t think she was angry. I thought she was hearing my father once again, saying, “Don’t pity me,” his lips curling up, a whiff of air coming through the cracked door just before he stepped out.
She opened her room door without saying anything and when the driver came we said simply that she had changed her mind. The shutters in her room clicked closed. I heard a match rubbing against a box and imagined her hand moving the small flame closer to the aromatherapy candle. I thought again of how alone my mother was and how easily she could withdraw from us. Brad wasn’t disappointed. He headed to the cove, returning only when the shadows had grown long and the water had long shifted from blue to gray.

Brad and I had packed for our afternoon flight but Mom was missing still. We had four hours—two hours to get to Montego Bay and another two to check in. Red, Shane, their fathers and uncles huddled by the bar, which had seen no customers in the time we’d been there. Brad and I were on the red stone steps outside the kitchen. We couldn’t hear what they were saying.
Shane came to speak to us in his conspiratorial whisper. “We think she’s at the beach,” he said. “We have to search.”
“Search?” Brad asked. “What do you mean search?”
“We going to look now.”
The men were dressed for swimming and I thought that Brad and I should be also. I thought of how Mom had withdrawn her life from ours. Search had new meaning. And I realized then that she hadn’t been preparing herself to live without Brad and me but that she had been preparing us to live without her.
Her gold wrap, her glasses, her purple-faced watch were bunched together on a rock. Water flowed in between the rocks, and a hard shell crab clawed its way back up a rock. Except for the crabs and those of us who’d just arrived, the beach was solitary.

I stripped down to my underwear and took my first real dive of the six days we’d been there. With the sun high overhead the water was clearer. There was a school of the translucent fish, a plastic bottle wedged in moss. I didn’t think of what I was looking for, concentrating instead on the translucent fish, my body slicing the water as if I were born to be there. There were other bodies around me, Brad, Shane, the other men whose names I never learned. I came up for air, once, twice, three times, until I stopped counting, and headed back to the sand. I checked her watch. It was nearly 1 p.m., not enough time to make our 4:50 p.m. flight.

My cotton bra and panties, neither made for swimming, were clinging to my body. I covered once again, waiting for the others to come back in. They were staying longer than I could have, going under water and coming up for air, one after another, after another. Red, who was to drive us to Montego Bay, came back next. He too checked the watch. He was about to say something and I walked away toward the coral reef bare of the sand that covered it before a recent hurricane. My slippers weren’t meant for walking on such rocks, but I continued stepping over trees rooted from the rocks by the hurricane’s waves, over rocks that looked like they were embedded with bones, over plastic debris washed ashore from another beach. There was water in some small holes, the shells of smashed crabs. I thought of Dad waiting at home, Mom who wasn’t always so lonely.

And then I saw my mother’s orange bathing suit. She was lying at the edge of the reef facing the water crashing violently against the rocks. There was no way to tell if her eyes were staring or not. I waited a minute to slow my breathing. There was movement. She lifted a hand as if to catch a sprinkling of sea water. I thought again that it was her stillness that I had always feared. There was no more land, no place left to run. She seemed at peace as if this hard rugged rock, and not the bottom of the sea as we had feared, was where she belonged.

Lucky, I thought. Born lucky.

We returned to Long Island and my mother began flying lessons. The lessons I believed saved her from pulling out of our lives entirely. When I see her bringing down a plane in these difficult
circumstances, I don’t think of my mother’s bravado filtering into my life. I see her life in balance, a woman carrying burdens as heavy as the plane she pilots, but always, always coming out above the clouds.
Melanie Jennings

I Saw the Light

SIN WAS ON MY MIND THAT SUMMER, ALWAYS IN CONJUNCTION WITH my older cousin, Jerry, his brown eyes somehow connected to the very word, sin. It was before his baptism that things between us had started to shift, but it was certainly after it that, finally, things began taking the sinful and desperate turn I prayed for.

We had all waded into the Hekatchipac Creek where it gets waist-deep, behind my Aunt Vena’s long, sloping yard, past where the barbed wire runs across the water from Casper Redeye’s land. It was hot and desert-dry that morning and we all wore shorts, but we were mentally in the church state of mind. The water made swirls around our waists and soaked into our T-shirts and Vena’s white dress. Everyone was there, the entire family, and even step-gramma-Erma managed to waddle her water-tower figure into the current somehow. We gathered around solemnly, moving against the pressure of the water to form a circle, each congregant reaching for his neighbor’s hand when Pastor James commanded, so the praying could begin. Pastor, in his shorts and Hekatchipac Youth Troop T-shirt smiled broadly, clearly excited by the prospect of showing a young soldier-of-the-Lord the light and the way through his baptism. Pastor began in his booming voice by giving us all his Entering-the-Kingdom-of-the-Lord business with some holy-holys and mercy-mercys thrown in here and there. For the dunking, Jerry got new loose cotton shorts, a new white Hanes, and he wore his usual turquoise ring shaped like a cross but which was actually some kind of Indian symbol.

Pastor stood behind Jerry, his hands resting on Jerry’s shoulders. “It is indeed a blessing of God, brothers and sisters, to be with you this blessed, heavenly day, amongst the crusaders, and to offer up yet another marcher to the Kingdom of the Lord,” Pastor began. Jerry looked up to the summer sky in a gesture only I recognized as desperation, as if the sun might save him. But it simply continued to blaze down, too bright for the morning. The bamboo branches that lined the shore cracked under the heat. Jerry squinted, trying to
Melanie Jennings

make sense of it all, watching Pastor’s arms now on his arms, as he moved Jerry through the water and into the middle of our large circle. I thought of the half-dead, slippery fish Jerry and I hooked weekend mornings that fought the fishing line threaded in their mouths. Jerry, in his desperation, looked like them. I could see he was tired and scared he was going under any second now. I had a split-second fantasy of him lifting his legs up fast enough to let the water pull him out of our circle and down the river toward the barbed wire. But we both knew he wasn’t going anywhere, stuck in this circle of everyone we knew. He wasn’t getting out even if the Lord Jesus appeared above us all right now mingled in the leaves and branches of the sprawling oak tree. Jerry was going under that water to be saved all right—there was no stopping these people, and I knew for sure there wasn’t no stopping Pastor James with his arms around Jerry moving him with the sureness and strength of an army commander, ready to bring his youngest soldier into the wonder of a new life. I was afraid for Jerry crossing over and getting dunked and all. He was just thirteen and that seemed to be the bad-luck year for getting baptized in our family. My own time was soon coming and I watched this event with an attention I had only previously shown at church funerals, shelving the details in my mind so I could pour over them later.

At the very peak of Pastor’s frenzied speech, down Jerry went under the clear water. His dark hair swam around his head like loose water snakes. We could see his face scrunch up and ugly as his legs kicked. He had been pushed down suddenly, off balance and backwards. A few bubbles swam out his mouth and wiggled to the surface. Pastor’s voice and our mumbled prayers hung interrupted in the air, still as an empty church around us. Jerry opened his mouth and eyes wide under the cool water, looking up like a scream and then suddenly breaking the water’s surface and sucking in a loud, deep breath. Vena gasped, then shouted, “Hallelujah!”

I stood in the water for that moment before the testifying began around the circle, and as the oak leaves from the overhanging tree fell and sped around my arms in the chest-high water, I remembered the time I had almost gone under, or over, never to rise again. Hekatchipac Injun Slide. My Uncle Lloyd, Jerry’s father, who wore lots of turquoise and collected buffalo pennies, told me that every weekend Injuns from the Hekatchipac reservation got drunk and drove off the edge of Hekatchipac Injun Slide. So every Sunday as my crazy aunt, Nippy, Lloyd’s wife and Jerry’s mother, who had the shakes and an enormous
red afro, drove me to church in her big red Buick, I peered over the side of Hekatchipac Injun Slide. My aunt said people went to Heaven when they died. I knew all about Heaven. I was going there someday to be with my mother. Me, Daddy, and her, like it was supposed to be.

I must have been at least six when I asked Nippy, “But what if you’re drunk and drive off the side of Hekatchipac Injun Slide?” To me there was a big difference because my uncles got away with a lot more on Friday and Saturday nights than my aunts would ever allow during the week, and I wondered if Jesus showed mercy this way too. I tugged at my seat belt until it snapped securely. “Oh, Baby...” Nippy laughed, but then gave no response as we traced over the dark skid marks. I’d often seen snakes squirm over the mirrored asphalt and into small holes in the cliffs and I looked for them while I thought of the rusted heaps of cars at the bottom of the Slide.

Nippy kept laughing as if the idea had really tickled her and then talked about drunkenness like she’d gotten the Spirit at church. Her shaky talk made me dizzy and I imagined us shooting over the cliff edge like marbles. I pretended my seat belt was my warrior mark of bravery, my church bonnet my eagle feathers. My aunt was laughing, shaking, talking about being drunk and what a sin it was. But in my mind we had skated over the edge of the Slide, slid past the deep indentations of endless skid marks, and hung floating like so many souls of Injuns over the dry cliff. I left the Buick and fell slowly with the other spirits drifting in and out of me like breathing water in a dream. I called my mother’s name but heard it echo back to me from the dry cliff. Ruth. Then I heard the histories of lives unfolding like the sound of clapping hands, and the shouting of names—Running Fawn, Clear Water, White Cloud. My aunt was a great bird screaming out a signal in tongues for their retreat. It began to rain, a beautiful mist infusing every one of us, there, above the cliff. Nippy banked a sharp curve. I looked down again at my seat belt, safe and sound in the Buick, Nippy’s shaky talk droning on and on.

In the river, I watched as Jerry’s eyes hit the sun, unblinking, as if he’d never seen it before, watching it reveal some great mystery, a mystery which couldn’t possibly be exchanged from person to person, a connection he’d made with something greater than himself. I’d looked for this connection at church, where I was told I could find it. Nippy had a bright yellow bumper sticker with the bold, black letters I FOUND IT! I always felt “it” eluding me, like the too quick snakes gliding across the black asphalt, just out of reach. It, it, it. The Spirit.
From the carsick road where Hekatchipac Injun Slide pitched itself over the edge, we’d arrive at the Second Pentecostal Church of Hekatchipac, on B Street. We used to go to the First Pentecostal Church of Hekatchipac, but my aunts switched when Nippy didn’t make it into the choir there. Church was Sunday morning till noon and Wednesday evenings. In between those, several social functions as deemed necessary by Pastor James’s wife kept us all holy.

The building was a one-story, pre-fabricated affair, high-noon white against the backdrop of the dry, yellow hills, where all the pink-freckled children ran around inside, and the older folks sang their hey-heys and ho-hos to the Lord Jesus and Amen Brother Johnson. Use your Sword in your time of need, Sister. Amen.

The church didn’t hold sound too well, and I sometimes got the feeling sitting on those plastic-metal chairs or the few scattered pews lining the front rows that the rocking and singing could be seen outside, swinging and moving the walls to the rhythm of the tambourine and heavy thump of the drumbeat. Are you washed? Are you washed? Are you washed in the blood of the lamb? Traditional hymns were only occasionally sung, with even “Amazing Grace” getting a lively rendition. When I was real little, I’d see girls from my third-grade class driving past with their parents on their way to church, crisp bows in their taut blonde braids. The good church, the quiet church, the nice church, the better church. They were Episcopalian. They didn’t have to go to church anymore.

But our church meant songs with the congregants’ hands in the air rocking back and forth and one person singing a harmony, usually my Aunt Vena, over the rest of the high and low vowels, drawn out long and melodious like the angels themselves were slipping from their mouths, floating their way to Heaven. Are your garments spotless? Are they white as snow? Are you washed in the blood of the lamb? I watched my uncles and my father play in the band, banjo or guitar, just rhythm at church and nothing like the train-and-twang honky-tonk songs they played at home. My father wore old-fashioned bolo ties on Sunday, and their stones would sway and catch the light as his foot tapped out rhythm. The band hunched over their instruments, still enjoying themselves in the music for God and the sermon. My big Aunt Vena stood near the piano and jiggled and hollered her songs at the congregation. I wanted to be just like her.

Jerry and I sat next to each other in the cramped pews side by side with our aunts and played hand tricks in the closed space between our
touching legs, where no one could see. The feel of Jerry’s hands against my legs made my skin flush and I’d get so sweaty behind my knees and thighs that I’d have to lift up my legs every now and then from the vinyl pew cushions to get some relief, while my eyes darted around making sure no one watched us. Jerry wound his pinkie finger in mine or sometimes dug his nail into my flesh during Pastor’s bad, bad sinner sermons. The waves of nerves in my stomach made me think about the time I was the flower girl in my cousin Arlyn’s wedding, and all the other weddings with my cousins walking up the aisle in their white gowns and shiny new graduation rings. I’d think to when it would be me, and Daddy giving me away, and how my mother Ruth was once given away, and then taken away by a cancer in her neck, leaving just one memory of her silence in a hospital room with bandages choking her throat, and how I was Baby Ruth, like the candy bar.

The adults had their own Bible study groups in one of the smaller cubicle rooms where my father said they studied the more confusing lines of Scripture. He once asked me, “Baby, you think the words of Jesus are symbolic or literal?”

I had known the difference between those words since before I could remember because those were the kinds of things Pastor or his wife taught us in Sunday school. And I was known for my large vocabulary, which gave me the occasional privilege of telling the toddlers Bible stories during quiet time, which was during Pastor’s sermons. I really couldn’t say for sure about symbolic or literal interpretations, although I’d certainly given it a lot of thought, but I always tried making things up that sounded good for Daddy, to make him think I was smart.

“I think they’re both,” I said.

That seemed to amuse him since we knew for sure Pastor James said the Bible was absolutely literal, no doubt about it. But I thought what my aunts thought—that Jesus would take my hand someday and lead me straight to my mother, standing under the Tree of Life, and maybe eating a Baby Ruth bar.

Jerry’s and my group was mixed with the four-year-olds and up. So we were stuck in there discussing our spirituality with kids who, in our minds, were still learning to walk. Once Pastor James asked me if I’d said my prayers the night before. “And then why don’t you give us a brief description of the things you thanked Him for,” Pastor said, calmly clasping his hands together on the table we all sat huddled around.
I had stayed over with Jerry, as I did every other Saturday, and according to our ritual, we had walked the property with the dogs at midnight and stroked the standing, sleeping horses in the dim light. We could hear the far off music of our uncles and the other farmhands echoing through the dry hills of the small valley and sometimes we sang along to the tunes as we roamed. Finally, real late, in the TV-blue shadows of the cramped living room, amongst Nippy’s gold-velveted organs and two rickety pianos, we talked until we had nothing left to say. Side by side in our sleeping bags, we fell asleep.

“Well, Baby? Did you say your prayers? Speak up,” Pastor said, nodding at me as if his bowing head might bring forth my answer.

“Yes,” I said, lying.

“Liar,” Jerry snorted next to me, just under his breath.

My eyes twitched and I thought I might see God like Judgment Day. Trumpets rang out behind my head as I turned to Jerry and blurted, “Prayers’re in my head and only God can hear them.” I knew instantly that later he’d call me a whiner-baby and I turned red from the thought.

“That’s exactly right,” Pastor said, smiling calmly. But it was Jerry who made me feel guilty. He had this strange way of drawing me to him like sugar and then spitting me back out like a sour grape.

In the middle of our circle of river, Jerry stood dripping and shaking like his mother. We gathered around him and began laying our hands on him, and amongst the fingers and skin, my hand found an open space at the base of his neck. I could feel the sharp bone of his spine nudging between his boy shoulders. New hair began where my fingers touched and I realized he was really more like a grown-up now and not on-the-verge anymore like me. Shouting, shaking, our mass moved the river around us under the morning sun. Bible stories flashed in my brain until I finally settled on my own saving story and my Aunt Vena’s peach-cobbler-fat face looking into mine as she brought me into the family of the Lord.

I was much younger then. Eight. “But eight’s old enough to know right from wrong,” Vena had said. And so, old enough to be saved in case you get bucked off a horse and killed, you can still go to Heaven. I don’t remember what started it all exactly. I know it was early Sunday morning before we left for church. It had been Vena’s turn to take Jerry and me since the aunts rotated because our fathers arrived early to practice with the band. It was scary, no doubt about that. Worse than lying to Pastor any day. Judgment Day’s got nothing on Vena and
her chunky cheeks wiggling hard, all bunched up red with tears and hollering. And this sin, and that sin, and what you done, and what you ain’t done. The whole time I could feel Jerry snickering in a back bedroom playing with another cousin’s beat-up train set, blowing the wooden whistle he knew was my favorite toy. He was already saved so he could be as bad as he wanted.

But there was Vena, with her hand pressed against my forehead so I felt like I had to push with my head back at that hand until it was a struggle between us, telling me to repeat after her, “Jesus come into my heart and guide me. Bless me with all your glory and protect me.” That’s the abridged version of what she said and what I repeated, like how they highlight Jesus’s words in those red-line Bibles. She cried and so I repeated her crying and sobbing. God was a power too strong for me and even too strong for big old Vena. It made me choked up and dizzy and I couldn’t hear the whistle blowing anymore, couldn’t smell the biscuits rising that I’d helped mix earlier, couldn’t see nothing but Vena and tears falling and her shaking and her shaking me with her. When I could breathe again and Vena got off the couch and down on her knees in front of me, the TV was playing H.R. Pufnstuf and Jimmy and his magic flute danced together across the screen. Vena bowed her head and wiped her eyes. She prayed real quiet and collected then, like you do when church is all over and you know you can take a deep breath because if you go outside and get hit by a train you’re going to Heaven and ain’t nobody gonna tell you no different. No-ah. You’re going. And that’s peace. I held her hand and wiped my eyes, took a deep breath and imagined blowing Jerry’s whistle long and loud till I could breathe back in again, deep and easy.

In our circle, as Pastor James began to quiet his voice and rest the tightness in his eyes, my granddaddy began the singing. *I saw the light, I saw the light, no more darkness, no more night.* Jerry, perhaps moved by the Spirit or just trying to get the wet hair out of his eyes, flipped his head back like a hooked bass. Water sprayed across my face. Nippy had been on him to cut his hair before the dunking but he had refused. Slowly, the rest of the circle began to sing and I raised my tentative voice with them. This was my favorite song because my granddaddy had the same kind of scratchy and old-time singing voice Hank Williams had. I also loved it because Granddaddy harmonized so well with his daughter, my Aunt Vena. Her album with the Velvet Crystals, a gospel group that gave our family some fame in the Pentecostal circuit, was just about to be released. Watching them singing, just a
little louder than the rest of us, I thought I could see It surrounding
them both like a halo. *I wandered so endless, life filled with sin, I wouldn’t let my dear Savior in. Then Jesus came like a stranger in the night. Praise the Lord! I saw the light!* Granddaddy had a gift for making up words to songs, like how some people could interpret what others said in tongues, and he would ad lib at the best parts. Sometimes they were funny at church and Jerry and I would look straight ahead at fire-and-brimstone Pastor James to keep from laughing, but other times the things Granddaddy sang shamed and haunted me and later I would sing them in my head like refrains. *Then like the blind man that God gave back his sight, praise the Lord, I saw the light.*

Baptism was your ticket through Heaven’s gates, everybody knew that, and as the oak leaves flowed between us on top of the water, I could see Peter standing at the shiny gates, writing Jerry’s name in the Book of Life. By the time I was ten I had so many stories of what Heaven was like that I practically lived there already. *No cracks breaking your mama’s back, no grit in your gravy, no rocks in your beans.* That’s what Granddaddy said. Streets were paved with gold and Jesus would walk among us. I once asked Granddaddy what work there was in Heaven and he told me we’d work the land as farmers, our own land, not the big man’s land anymore, and Jesus would watch over our cotton and we’d grow oranges made of gold. Gold would have no value except for its beauty, like the glow in our hearts that Jesus gave us. *Crops of gold, a valueless metal except for the love in our hearts it represents.* That’s how Granddaddy talked. Sometimes it embarrassed me if other people heard, but I loved when he told me Heaven stories, mostly because they always mentioned my mother, who was so ghostly a figure in my life I could think of her only as an angel, something I heard my aunts often refer to her as. *And after you get to Heaven, my dear, you gonna see your real grandmommy, your mother, and all the kinfolk that’s come before us.* I knew we might know each other, we might not. Every person I asked had a different story about this particular matter. I chose to believe my mother would be there and that she’d know me. She’d have her long hair back and be able to talk again, to sing even.

I wondered what would happen after today now that Jerry was saved, since he’d got *It* now and I hadn’t. I was still working on all the questions I had to answer and figure out between me and God before I could get baptized. I knew things were changing as if I was getting a message from above and it all had to do with water and singing and
those little nape hairs of Jerry’s. My aunts were all the time telling me to put some clothes on and fiddling with my hair and buying me ribbons and things I would never in a million years wear. It was a fact that I was like my mother and everyone knew there was no sense trying to change Ruth’s Baby, that I’d be hard-headed and stubborn as the day is long. And proud as a bitch, my Uncle Lloyd always said, something I loved repeating to myself. He wasn’t a church-goer.

Lloyd was part of the things I was supposed to stay away from, but which Jerry and I were learning made life worth living. It was the battle of good and evil being played out in every one of us each minute of every day, just like Pastor preached, and it was so hard being so good all the time that every once in a while you felt like you deserved a reward for all the good you’d been doing. And bad things felt so good it was hard telling the Devil no. But things were shifting lately and I could tell. Bad things that felt good had escalated from lining step-gramma-Erma’s dentures with Tabasco sauce when she’d leave them sitting out on the kitchen sink, to letting Jerry fall asleep against my sleeping bag on Saturday nights and then pushing him off in the morning. Today seemed to be marking the biggest shift, outlining clearly our different territories—Jerry’s with his baptism and being thirteen, and mine with being twelve and not-yet-baptized. And yet I so wanted to join him in everything he did. I think Uncle Lloyd was the only one who saw it coming and he suddenly started giving me hair ribbons too and bellowing at Jerry to “Stop horsing around so hard with your cousin! And Baby get your ass over here!”

I was constantly comparing myself to the ladies in Uncle Lloyd’s magazines which he kept by the toilet at Jerry’s house. Nippy had a long time ago given up trying to throw them out and so had a little doll with a long pink crocheted dress that draped over a rectangular box to hide what she called “the nasty girls.” After I’d sneak off the doll’s dress and the box that smelled of Nippy’s talcum powder, I’d get the goods. They were like nothing I’d ever seen before and they kept me coming back for more every other Saturday evening after dinner. Once I’d even lain on the linoleum and hiked up my shorts as far as they could go and felt my chest and between my legs. I thought about Jerry and Uncle Lloyd and even Jesus. I knew I was going to hell then. But I prayed for mercy while my hands slid up my legs. I’d promise to never do it again. At least not until next Saturday, since there was always church on Sunday to beg for forgiveness.

All the singing had stopped and the shouting dispersed into tired
laughter and the gurgling sounds of the water. It was done. Pastor took off his glasses and wiped his forearm across his eyes. He often got carried away by his emotions and his own talking. He said one last word about welcoming the new brother into the fold, and we knew that was our cue to slowly drop our hands to our sides and bow our heads, as if to rest a moment in silence and respect before stampeding up the slope to the waiting barbecue Uncle Lloyd had been stoking all morning. I had a terror for water snakes and I was antsy with looking here and there for the shiny suckers. Vena was the first to start moving toward the shore. The light freckled her white dress as she passed beneath the oak tree. We could all see her drawers but kept it to ourself. The few men in attendance went to Jerry and shook his hand. He stood still in the same spot he’d just got dunked, a wide grin on his face.

Like Jerry, I stood mesmerized. I had been to baptisms before, but there was something about the way it was so hot out and how each color and sensation seemed to sting with clarity. Everyone moved toward the shore in a crooked line with wet shirts and shorts clinging to legs and bodies, and I remembered the pilgrims trekking through the parted Red Sea. I watched the crowd ease out of the river and stood smelling the barbecue and the wet roots that lined the shore.

“Hey.”

It was Jerry. I didn’t want to turn to see his face. He would be different from me now, good and pure. I turned and faced him where he still hadn’t moved from his dunking spot. His hand spread out and covered his eyes from the sun and I thought about the water snakes again.

“Let’s go back,” I said, looking up toward the shore and Vena’s yard. “You know the water snakes is all the time on me.” I could see everyone in the yard moving into Vena’s house to help with the food and the borrowed church tables.

“Uh-huh, okay,” he said.

I turned then and could hear him swishing behind me as I moved my heavy legs under the water. Then I felt his hand on my shoulder and suddenly he was hugging me from behind. I could feel everything as if he’d gotten a gift for touch from being baptized. All my senses rang out like the stroke of noontime bells.

“You gonna do it?” he asked.

“Uh-huh,” I said, standing stock still, thinking about my baptism questions for God, my spiritual inventory.
“Ooooh, Baby, it feels sooo good.” And then I felt it. It. A pressure easing up between my tightened thighs, our bodies still locked together as if we were just enjoying an after-church hug with our neighbor, except my neighbor was behind me, and he was Jerry. The singing, the water, the snakes, the hollering, the nape hairs, they were all swimming together in my mind, but I was feeling It, and my head fell forward onto Jerry’s forearm beneath my neck as he pressed harder against me.

“Baby! Jerry! You two get the hell up here now!” It was my Uncle Lloyd out of nowhere, a fire poker in his hand stabbing the lawn as he barked out the word hell. We shot our heads up to where Lloyd stood on the edge of Vena’s yard, his turquoise and silver belt buckle flicking shards of light out onto the water. Jerry backed away from me like an outlaw and moved to my side.

“I was just spreading my new spirit around, Dad,” Jerry called, his voice constricted.

“Uh-huh, sure,” Lloyd said, unmoving.

We moved toward the shore where my eyes tried hard to focus on the colors and the people that had begun to blur. I felt the warmth of Jerry’s hand under the water grab onto mine then, and his familiar nail digging into the side of my pinkie flesh.
Rituals on the Day of Po-Po’s Funeral

I.

Incense suffuses this offering of fruit and bao
as we learn this practice of bow, kneel, kou tou.

Like a cricket, the shaved nun beats a gourd drum.
Covered in burlap,

we send grandmother on,
accompanied by the chant of our tongues.

The words fumble like children
as they follow a brass bell.

II.

Her eyelids drawn shut
by the touch of the embalmer,
my eyes were struck

by a trail of silk, woven elms.
Pink buds on her sandals graced her feet.
Words, to not remain because of worry,

birthed between the caul of our lips.
Dusted with ochre, her hands
were ringed with gold for her journey.

Our hands spread, the broken wings of doves:
my grandfather’s, mother’s, uncle’s, cousins’,
my own warm fingers touched
her forehead, her heart, her feet, 
her still hand. 
Her fingers were cold like the lungs of caves. 

III. 

In robes embroidered with peonies, 
she sat matriarchal 
at a small table with three other women. 
In this dream, I watched as the four 

turned to their game of _mah jong_, 
the tiles clacked like fate is shuffled 
face down. 
Starting with the East player, 

rows were set like ivory teeth. 
Carved dragon and phoenix latticed in a dance; 
a tiger prowled on rising mountain 
spotted with tufts of bamboo grove. 

I wanted to run up, a little boy 
crying _Po-po, wo ai ni_, 
to reconcile years of being the grandson 
who did not understand 

every word when she spoke. 
She looked in my direction once. 
Her gaze embraced me in the language 
only a grandson understands. 

IV. 

As the pit fire’s ghost tongues swallowed 
the yellow money, paper house, 
the servants who would offer sweet buns and tea, 
I watched the smoke form a pillar of chalk.
Her bones were placed carefully in the urn, set in the provincial-room with the others; where in the quiet hours, their spirits could converse in dialect.

There would be talk about their pains, of those who would take their place next to them as they watched their descendents behave like the living do.

Outside the temple, the grounds were overrun with ancestral graves. Unkept, the grass had sprung thick as elephants. Each stone a green prison for those left forgotten.
On Qing Ming, When the Boy Cannot Visit
His Grandmother’s Ashes

These halls carry the resonance of your voice.
Dressed in rings, their gold could not rescue your voice;

neither could the bells nor chant of saffron monk.
Through the day we prostrated—restless. Your voice,

Matriarch, was one I embraced as a child.
Buried in a grave were lessons in that voice;

a tongue, as grandson, I could not understand.
I bear them, but they do not lessen your voice

as I pass old women in the grocery.
Their talk lengthens each second without your voice;

this my sadness, my praise, Po-po, for young days.
Old child who listens to what is left—your voice.
Colette Jonopulos

Her Boy

…it is good luck to be the one who bites into the plastic toy skeleton hidden by the baker in each rounded loaf.  
—Ricardo J. Salvador

Day of the Angels

She’s woven a shawl of white; egg-batter bread and marigolds ride her hip in a basket saved for today. A cousin offers her beer as she spreads a cloth between the graves, careful not to step too close—her grandmother’s presence thick in this field of headstones, the crow-like caw of the old woman shrill above chatter, a gnarled finger used to remove curses, now a breathless tap-tap on her shoulder. Bread is portioned out; her boy bites through thick crust, his teeth caught on the plastic skeleton, talisman that brings luck, toy that might save him from her emptiness. She tells him of his father, the sister he never met, props photos against candles, flat images like ghosts caught in between worlds. It is like this, she says, the stubborn ones stay behind. He thinks her words come from the beer, those sleepless nights rocking in front of her altar, hair spread like wings over the ground. He shoves the skeleton into his pocket; tomorrow he will remember little, except the flavor of plastic and how a candle melts onto paper, the wax slow like remembrance.
Midnight Christmas Eve, here’s Luciano—
stuffed in white tie and tails, any hint of gray
dyed out of his wispy Abe Lincoln beard—
croaking and belting Adeste Fidelis;
 it’s the Saturday before the Lord’s birth
and my mother-in-law is dying,
my family has fled to Arkansas;
this year, change has not been for the good.

Even Luciano looks sick, or old,
maybe both, his starched waistcoat too big
even for him. Tomorrow, I’ll stuff two pounds
of lobster inside a six-pound tenderloin,
go through another pound or two
of butter making sauces and sweets.
I’ll have help, but the table is for eight,
and making the grocery lists, I’ll realize
this Christmas means a shortage of time,
no one to buy thoughtful gifts, no one singing
even the most ordinary hymns of praise.
Letter on Another Occasion

for Arline Raab (1936–1999)

Christmas Eve, the forecast seventy-nine and sunny,
no hope for snow, your daughter and I drove

in from Miami, instead of across town. Near water,
in a rented apartment, we hatched a memory

narrow as the kitchen that required perfect choreography
to fit three cooks, each of us assigned specific duties,

so that when the day finally gave in, the table where we sat
might look the same as the table from any other year.

In those quarters, your daughters diced and nipped. Cooking,
you explained, was passion, practice. The secret to the sauce—

the temperature of the butter before I set in the whisk.
We were all older, and that Christmas you were sick.

On another occasion, there might not have been leftovers,
but Christmas morning, I brought you eggs with béarnaise,

angels on toast. In bed, you shared Ted’s letters asking
your parents for your hand in marriage, though I am sure

you would have run off with him anyway. On the bed,
we talked about absent, dead brothers. And today, here, now,

I am afraid, and I cannot remember who exactly was there,
so for these purposes, I have decided that everyone was.
This Song Is Made of Ideas

Holding your fingers, I make them a song not of words, but ideas. You are against this unnaming, but nothing speaks better: rough scrub on my palm, turns through my hair, arches of flight down my back and this, your third finger, now naked, still wearing its ring of light shadow against your summer-tanned skin. Where are the words for this? There are none. We have been our own unnaming, we have done it like this: the idea speaks first (Shall we go on inside) and the words not at all, but with their hard grip and coax hold it hot to the bed by slim wrists, tickle its ears with bare breath. Surely, this you believe in: that was the bed where all lexis failed me, it was the song written before we had language. And after? Real speech
Elizabeth Langemak

wears both bands at once. The ring
under ring once removed by your hand:

that was the idea. We’ll replace it,
you said, and those were the words.
In Memoriam

Not Memorial Day, but the day after the day after
when potted mums in every shade of sadness go on sale.

Why not carry home an unmatched pair and mourn
in advance? Soon enough I’ll be forced to convert

my father into past tense, my mother into a detective
novel written under the skin. Place him on the table

for awe, wisps of cumulus whipped into shaded questions.
And her by the window, so I can breathe tart perfume

each time I wash a cup or bless the sun. Colors?
Whites to calm, shivering purples to wound like rain.
Donna J. Gelagotis Lee

From the 21st Floor

As the elevator lurched upward
against gravity, the seconds tumbled
like small pieces of fruit. In
the hallway, as polished as a hospital,
the dominoes of common doors. And over yours
your abbreviated name. We teeter
above Brooklyn—the Verrazano to the left,
the Empire State: center, Sheepshead Bay
to the right—high over Brighton Beach, in a building
of Russians and Jews. In the lobby,
a sign doubles in Russian. Residents each know
the wait for the lift
as it pulls upward—up over a city.
From here, we can see
the mouth of the country—used
to change. We no longer speak
of the missing Twin Towers as we watch
the July fireworks drop starbursts
along the water. The long ride up.
The long ride down. The long streets
you walked as a boy now dim
with block-like buildings.
The lights inside point
to each detached life, at night,
when the streets fill with darkness,
and with no accent of any kind,
except on this holiday, with popping sounds.
We look for gunshots. But the streets
are empty. They are far
beneath us.
At the Bridal Shop

The gowns and dresses hang
like fleece in their glaring
whiteness, sheepskin-softness,
the ruffled matrimonial love in which the brides-
in-waiting dance around, expectantly,
hummingbirds to tulips. I was dragged here:
David’s Bridal, off the concrete-gray arterial
highways of a naval town. I sink into the flush
bachelors’ couch, along with other men sprinkled
throughout the shop, as my friend and her female compatriots parade
taffeta dresses in monstrous shades of pastels—persimmons,
lilacs, periwinkles—the colors of weddings and religious
holidays. Trains drag on the floor, sleeves drape
like limp, pressed sheets of candied fruits,
ribbons fluttering like pale leaves. I watch
families gathered together: the women, like worshippers,
circling around the smiling brides-to-be, as if they were
the anointed ones. The men, in turn, submerge
deeper into couches, into sleep, while the haloed,
veiled women cannot contain their joy,
they flash their winning smiles, and they are beautiful.
I found her at the Pottery Barn in the Atrium Mall on Route 9. She was working the register, and she caught my attention when a slip of hair slid from the barrette that held it off her face. I felt a sudden, maternal impulse to tuck the hair behind her ear.

Her name is Julie, and she’s a college student in Boston, working through the holidays. I asked her how her day was going—entering into the type of conversation I usually try to avoid—and the next thing I knew, I’d invited her to spend the holidays with me, my husband, and our two prickly teenagers. Moments later, as the elevator sank down to the parking garage, I wondered how I’d explain to Bill and the kids what I’d just done. Impulsivity is not something they recognize in me.

If they balk at spending the holidays with a stranger, it’s my own fault, I remind myself as I jerk through rush hour traffic. The kids take Christmas seriously because I’d always insisted on reserving the day for family, an attempt to assuage my guilt for working so much the rest of the year. My office closes for the week between Christmas and New Year’s, and I often wonder what would become of our holidays if it didn’t.

At home, I see light glowing from the windows, a warm yellow that softens the winter landscape, buttering the dead trees and icicles outside. The kids are home already, maybe Bill too. I turn off the engine and sit in the quiet of our detached garage, thinking of what I’ll say to them.

In my early twenties, I interned at an advertising agency, and I’ve always remembered a story I heard there: It was about a creative director who used to insert an image of his own thumb somewhere on the mock-ups of his ads. Clients would notice it immediately and demand that it be changed, usually neglecting to suggest any other changes. A client always finds something wrong with a project, he believed, and if you can control what it is, you get to keep the stuff you love.
Twenty years later, as a book editor, I find myself using his trick a lot. I instruct our designers to add a random yellow box to a prototype; I ask our copywriters to add a random line of text. And it works.

I try the trick at home sometimes, when I need to distract my family from something they may not like. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn’t. Tonight, I’m hoping it will.

“You what?” Cate says.

“Who?” Justin says.

Bill looks up from his food.

My earlier suggestion of taking a trip is forgotten as soon as I mention Julie. I regard my family, all of them now looking at me expectantly. Justin is thirteen, sarcastic, a vegetarian, obsessed with the environment. Cate is fifteen, melodramatic, a carnivore, obsessed with her cleavage. Bill, my husband of sixteen years, is intense, eats whatever I put in front of him, and is obsessed with his law practice.

I explain. “She has nowhere else to go. She’s a college student and can’t afford to go home.”

“You should have asked us first, Mom,” Justin says.

“Well, I’ve already invited her, and I’d like you both to treat her like part of the family.”

“She’s not my sister,” Cate says. She folds her arms and looks at me. Justin rolls his eyes.

“It’s very generous of you, honey,” Bill says to me. “I think it’ll be fun.”

“Fun for who?” Justin says.

Despite his protests, Justin can hardly take his eyes off Julie as she tries to get comfortable in our living room. I’d neglected to rearrange the furniture, and Julie ends up sitting on an ottoman she’s too tall for. She balances a glass of wine in her hand, keeping her legs together under Justin’s relentless gaze. He takes in her long legs, her chestnut hair, her high cheekbones.

Julie asks Bill about his work, and I’m grateful that she’s keeping him from getting on his cell phone and somehow turning Christmas into billable hours. Cate darts poisonous stares from across the room, where she’s curled up in Bill’s favorite chair, arms crossed under her Wonderbra. She and Justin look so much alike—both tall, fair-skinned. Justin is skinny while Cate is curvy, but their heads tilt at the same angle as they watch Julie, though they wear different
expressions. I find myself watching them, as I often do, looking for parts of myself in their faces or gestures, but the resemblance is never obvious to me.

I have an hour before my twin sister, Bee, will arrive with her husband and daughter, about two hours before dinner. I’ve done most of the work already—getting food prepared, setting the table. I added Julie’s place setting that morning, feeling thankful that this year I won’t have to stare at an empty seat.

In the kitchen, I unwrap a wheel of brie and pull out the sliced almonds and the bourbon. There’s more to the recipe, but I can’t find the card, which I’d last seen yesterday as I double-checked the ingredients. I open the fridge, hoping that some item will jump out at me and tell me what its role is.

Domesticity doesn’t come naturally to me; everything I cook comes from a recipe of Bee’s or our mother’s, and it’s usually hastily thrown together, though not entirely inedible. I often think that if I could do it all over again, I’d forego work in favor of family; I’d feed my children better, spend more time with them, make the house more of a home. The real reason I spend so much time peering into their faces, looking for recognition, is because they are growing more unfamiliar to me every day.

It would be easy enough to call Bee and ask her to read me the recipe, but I can’t pick up the phone. I dread the fact that she’ll fix my mistake, that she has an answer for everything. Usually, when I see someone who has her act together, I can tell myself that this woman possesses something elusive to me—she’s independently wealthy; her husband stays home with the kids; she’s got a good plastic surgeon. But with Bee, I feel as if it’s me who’s doing something wrong. After all, we’re identical.

I’ve probably read a dozen books about twins (all of which were gifts—when you’re a twin, people assume that’s all you like to read about), and most emphasize the bond twins share rather than the competitiveness. I’ve always remembered one story in particular, about twin girls separated at birth. They were adopted into different homes as infants and finally met as adults. The women had never seen each other before, not even a photograph, and they showed up wearing exactly the same outfit—same blouse, skirt, jacket, shoes—right down to the color and fabric. They wore their hair parted on the same side. They worked in the same profession. They each had a German shepherd named Molly.
It doesn’t surprise me that Bee and I often meet wearing similar clothing, or that several times we’ve gotten the same haircut, or that we’re both artistic. But deep down, I feel something lacking in our connection, and it has frayed more and more over the years.

The small oven bleeps at me, heated and ready. The recipe, I remember, involved creating a paste to spread across the top of the brie, some special concoction that would brown nicely on top and sink in to suffuse the cheese with flavor. But without the other ingredients, I’m at a loss. So I sprinkle the almonds on top, pour the bourbon directly over it, then shove the whole thing in the oven. I straighten the kitchen and check the big oven, where the turkey is cooking. I trace a finger down the list of what still needs to be done. Everything is running smoothly, right on schedule. It’s the one day of the year I actually have time to cook, the one day I have no excuse for things not turning out the way they should.

I flip on the light in the small oven and kneel down to watch the brie. After only a few minutes, it’s not looking good—the bourbon has run right off the top of the rind and is pooling in the dish. Maybe it will burn off in the heat, I think hopefully.

I wander toward the living room and stand in the hallway, listening. The words that meet my ears are barely decipherable, but Julie’s voice stands out. She’s talking about her major at college—Asian studies—and I hear Cate’s voice rise into a question. She must be warming up, finally.

When I hear the buzz of the timer, I return to the kitchen to take out the brie. The almonds are nicely toasted but the bourbon is still runny. It also smells strange.

I put the dish on the range and try to sop up some of the liquid with a paper towel, which helps only a little. I want to drown it in the sink and run the disposal, but I don’t have anything else to serve. Finally, I take it into the living room, where Justin is ranting about an oil spill off the Spanish coast. I hand out cocktail napkins and warn, “It got a little burned on top. But otherwise it seems okay.”

“Yeah, it looks great, Mom,” Justin says.

As they spread the melted brie on crackers, they don’t notice the slippery almonds, the bourbon dripping from the serving knife. Like a roomful of good clients, they see what I want them to see.

I excuse myself and head upstairs, toward the master bathroom. For the past few months, I’ve been carrying an extra seven pounds,
and it’s been especially hard to lose them during the holidays. Putting on fresh lipstick keeps me from eating too much.

It doesn’t surprise me that after years of practice, I need to trick even myself.

At the top of the stairs, I turn and walk down the hall, noticing that Justin’s bedroom door is open. I step toward it to pull it closed—not that Julie or Bee would venture up here, but I don’t need them to see the hidden idiosyncrasies of my family. I don’t need them to see the blue recycle bins Justin keeps in his room, to house his empty soda cans. I don’t need them to see the rolls of recycled toilet paper, or the stack of dirty clothes he lets pile up so as not to waste a drop of water on laundry.

Cate’s door is also ajar. Her room is neat and clean, brimming with lace, imitation Victorian furniture, and dried roses, but I close the door anyway.

Over the sink in the bathroom, I reapply my lipstick, then step on the scale. Those seven pounds. My pregnancy had been too brief to have sprouted more than a couple of them, but the number is misleading. Cate had been seven pounds at birth, Justin a half-pound shy of seven. Strong, healthy babies.

Bill and I had been planning to tell them today, on Christmas. We both thought the idea of a new baby needed some positive spin, and it seemed fitting to present the news as a gift. I never imagined I’d be pregnant again, not at this stage of my life.

You can’t lose what you never had, my father told me once, early in my career, when I’d narrowly lost a job offer to someone else. I try to tell myself this now, that I never had this baby, but the extra weight reminds me. The evidence clings stubbornly to my belly, my butt, my thighs.

As I walk back downstairs, I think back to losing out on that job. Afterward, I’d switched from advertising to publishing. I gave up everything but the trick.

Back in the living room, I see that the brie has disappeared, and Bill has replenished the drinks. Julie still has everyone’s attention; now she’s speaking in a foreign language.

“Julie knows Japanese, Mom,” says Justin.

“Just a few words,” Julie explains. “I spent the summer in Tokyo, taking classes.”

The doorbell rings—it’s Bee, with her husband, five-year-old
daughter, two vegetable dishes, and more wine. I can tell she’s surprised to see Julie in the living room; she’s gracious, as always, but I notice the telltale twitch at the corner of her lips that means she’s confused, or irritated, or both.

In the kitchen, Bee whispers, “You met her at the mall? And you invited her, just like that?”

“You wouldn’t want Linnie stranded at college with no place to go for Christmas, would you?”

“It’s not that,” Bee says. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I did.”

“No, you didn’t. You never mentioned it.”

Bee turns away. She opens the large oven and bastes the turkey, then puts her vegetables in the small oven. She pours herself a glass of water and looks at me expectantly.

“What’s going on?” she says.

I’ve also read that twins vie for space in the womb, that though created equal, one twin eventually becomes dominant, nudging the other one out of space and food. As the older and bigger child, Bee would have been the one pushing me aside.

“Nothing’s going on,” I tell Bee, remembering how Julie’s hair had fallen into her face, how much I’d wanted to smooth it back. I haven’t known that feeling for a while; Cate bristles nearly every time I go near her. “What’s the problem?” I continue. “She’s having fun—the kids think she’s great.”

She shrugs. “I just wonder why you don’t tell me these things.”

“I forgot, that’s all.”

I was born twenty minutes after Bee. Though only minutes apart, I have always felt like a younger sibling, with that innate desire to do everything differently, to set myself apart. When Bee decided she would become a full-time artist, a painter, I chose a “real” career. When she had tumultuous love affairs with sculptors and musicians and her graduate students at the art institute, I married a lawyer and had two children.

Much later, Bee settled down. She married a businessman and had Linnie. She is a full-time mom, but she paints when she can. Her work, represented by galleries in Boston and New York, sells for thousands of dollars. And I still feel that we’re floating around in the same primordial place, breathing the same liquid air, battling for space despite having outgrown our environment.
As we enter the living room, I’m taken aback to hear Justin say he’ll never have children.

“Have we set such a poor example?” I ask, sitting next to him on the sofa.

“It’s not that,” he says. “The world’s overpopulated. It doesn’t need me to bring more kids into it.”

“All the better,” Cate says. “If you don’t procreate, it’ll strengthen the gene pool.”

Justin throws a crumpled cocktail napkin at her.

“What if you change your mind?” I ask him.

“Then I’ll adopt,” he says. “It’s not like there aren’t enough unwanted babies in the world.”

“Speaking of unwanted babies,” Cate says, “Amanda Whistler had an abortion last week.”

“How do you know that?” I ask. Amanda Whistler is a girl at Cate’s school, a junior. I’ve heard her name emerge from the sea of gossip seeping out from under Cate’s bedroom door.

“Everyone knows. Besides, she missed three days of school.”

Before I can say anything, Julie breaks in. “In Japan,” she says, “women pray to a deity called Jizo, who looks over aborted children.”

“Really?” Cate looks at her, interested.

Julie nods. “That’s what Buddhists believe, that Jizo looks after the mizuko in the afterlife.”

“The what?” Justin says.

“It means water child—a child who is aborted or miscarried. I went to a temple outside Tokyo,” Julie continues, “where women bring food, toys, and clothes. They say prayers and light candles.”

“Why are they called water children?” Justin asks.

“Because of the womb,” Cate says.

“Actually, it’s because Buddhists believe that life is fluid, like water,” Julie tells her.

“Do pro-lifers picket the temple?” Justin asked.

She laughs. “No. It’s not like that at all. It’s a sacred place. They also believe in reincarnation, you know. So offerings to Jizo are supposed to help calm the babies who are angry at being sent back so soon.”

“I should tell Amanda about this,” Cate says. “I wouldn’t want her to be haunted by her water child.”

“Don’t you think she might want to keep this private?” I say.

“Take it easy, Mom,” Cate said. “I was only joking.”

I look away and catch sight of Bee on the other side of the room.
She looks shaken; holding Linnie in her lap, she’s staring out a window, appearing unaware of the conversation around her.

Then she turns back and sees me watching her. “It’s a shame, isn’t it,” she says, “that we don’t have anything like that?”

**Back in the kitchen, Bee and I put the finishing touches on dinner.** I find myself wondering, for a strange, surreal moment, whether she does have some sort of innate, twin-related sixth sense, whether she knows, somehow, about the miscarriage.

But she doesn’t say anything; she is too busy making the food pretty and instructing our spouses on what else needs doing.

I light the candles on the table. We sit down in the same seats we occupy each year. I glance at Julie, who sits directly across from me. Her place setting fills the usually vacant spot, though in past years the bread basket and the wine have ended up there. The table will be more crowded this year because of that, one more thing I neglected to plan for, and it’s then that I realize what I’ve done: I’ve made Julie the thumb in my family portrait, to distract myself from the empty place I’d otherwise be facing through dinner.

After we begin eating, Bee announces, “I have some news.”

We turn to her expectantly.

“We’re having another baby,” she says, smiling as she looks around the table. “Due next June.”

**What surprises me the most are the reactions from Justin and Cate.** They seem thrilled with the news; Cate even asked if she could feel Bee’s stomach, even though she hasn’t begun to show yet. It should have been my stomach, I couldn’t help thinking—my daughter’s hand on my own belly, my daughter sharing this moment with me, not you.

Bee joins me as I’m scraping plates and loading them into the dishwasher. “Let me help,” she says.

“No, you’re the mother-to-be,” I say. “Go rest.”

“I’m pregnant, not sick,” she says.

“I’ve got it. Go, enjoy.”

But she lingers, leaning against the counter and nibbling on a green bean. “I can’t believe I’m going to pull this off,” she says. “I mean, at our age.”

I can only nod.

“I’ve never told you this,” she says, “but we’ve been trying for a
long time. It was amazing, listening to Julie talk about Japan, how women have a place to mourn their lost children.”

She hadn’t been thinking about me at all.

“I don’t know why I never told you,” she says, “but I’ve had two miscarriages since Linnie was born.” She picks up a tea towel and begins to dry the clean wineglasses I set on the counter. “I feel sort of guilty about it now. I always envied that you had two kids because I wanted another one so badly. I didn’t think you’d understand—isn’t that silly?”

I turn off the faucet. “Yes,” I say, watching her thin, freckled hands on the delicate glasses. “It’s sillier than you can imagine.”

“Well,” she says. “Now you know.”

I can’t bring myself to reciprocate her secret with mine, not now. I feel I should wait until later, much later, when her baby is safely on this side of the world.

Bee folds the damp towel carefully and lays it on the counter.

“Oh, I almost forgot,” she says. “How’d the brie turn out?”

At the door, laden with bags of leftovers, Julie thanks us and hugs everyone, much to Justin’s delight.

Bee puts her arms around me. “Sorry I gave you a hard time about Julie,” she whispers. “I thought I wanted to have just the family today. But it’s almost as if she was meant to be here, isn’t it?”

As soon as the front door closes, the kids go to their respective rooms, and the house feels oddly quiet.

When Bill joins me in bed, I slide close to him. We talk about Bee’s news. He wants to know if I think we should try again.

“No,” I say. “It wasn’t meant to be, for us.”

We lie silent for a few minutes. I’m thinking about Bee’s pregnancy again, and suddenly I sit up.

“What is it?” Bill murmurs sleepily.

“Nothing,” I tell him. “Go to sleep.”

I realized just then that Bee and I got pregnant at almost the same time. In the same month, give or take a week, with neither of us telling the other.

I settle back down. I hear Bill’s breathing grow steady as I lie next to him. For all the things I try to control, it still amazes me how little I actually can—how one egg can grow while another slips away, how a piece of hair falls from a barrette at a certain moment in time—how despite my trying to set myself apart from my sister, we keep showing up wearing nearly the same life.
Bill snores softly, and I ease myself out of bed. The kids’ doors are closed, and I hear the normal, comforting sounds of Cate on the phone in her room, of Justin’s music playing softly in his. Downstairs, I wander through the kitchen and into the dining room. The table has been completely cleared, with only the setting remaining in the middle. Remembering Julie’s story, I light one of the candles. I sit at the table, watching the candle burn down, and let the shadows play tricks with my eyes.
No Home for the Holidays

It doesn’t take long for Kate to decide the Gabonese driver of the beer truck delivering her to Lambaréné is a madman. He races the lumbering vehicle down the narrow, unpaved African roads, swerving wildly to avoid crater-sized potholes that punctuate the washboard ruts. Chickens flutter and goats scatter in panic as the driver thunders through villages. Ascending hills, the weight of the truck slows to a crawl. The driver makes up time on the descent, giving the term “break-neck speed” new significance. He glances over at Kate after an hour. “The last white woman who traveled with me begged to be let out,” he comments in French. She unclenches her jaw long enough to tell him she can handle it. Visiting Carmen, a fellow American, is as close to home for the holidays as she is going to get this year. Not a chance she’ll back out now. “Peace Corpse?” he asks in English. When she tells him yes, he nods as if that explains it all.

They crest one particularly steep hill and begin rocketing downward. She glances sidelong at the driver’s face. He is grinning, his expression filled with the kind of rapt glee you find on the faces of ten-year old boys playing arcade games, the type with steering wheels and virtual roads displayed on the screen. The difference, of course, is that with the game, when you make a bad turn and your vehicle rolls and explodes into a churning inferno, you simply shrug and put in a few more quarters. But the constraints of the real world and the laws of physics don’t seem to deter the driver. Nor any other driver, judging from the trucks that come barreling toward them from the other direction, veering off only at the last moment to avoid head-on collisions.

The life expectancy for the average Gabonese man is fifty-one years. One in every ten Gabonese children will die before their first birthday. That’s how it is here. But statistics don’t concern this man. He only knows that the sooner he gets to Lambaréné, the sooner he will return home to family. He lives for the moment, like most Africans do. It’s a safer bet. And besides, Mom—American and not Gabonese—was only fifty-one.
Lambaréné is one of Gabon’s main cities, a large inland island that bisects the Ogooué River. The smell of waterlogged foliage battles with the diesel fumes of rumbling trucks and overripe odors from the market, a noisy place choked with people, dust, chickens and produce. Upon descending from the beer truck with rubbery legs, Kate heads to the meeting spot that Carmen proposed: a restaurant-bar, located in a bright blue house on the periphery of the marketplace. She walks hesitantly toward the bar and then spies Carmen, a welcoming smile on her face, arms open to embrace Kate. Home. Or close enough.

They have three months of teaching adventures to catch up on. They find seats in the yard under the protection of a giant coconut palm. Inside the house, pots clang in dinner preparation. Outside, a goat snuffles through nearby weeds. The afternoon light is growing soft, the golden rays mingled with wood smoke that curls up from neighborhood cooking fires. The smell is sweet and comforting.

They toast each other with cold beers and laugh over the way the months in Africa have tempered the idealism they’d arrived in the country with, six months earlier. If it wasn’t the heat and staggering humidity, they agreed, it was the feeling of always being an object of curiosity. Kate, a ballet dancer back home, complains how the kids will follow her every move, checking out her purchases in the store, tagging behind her to her house and peering into her shuttered windows every time she plays her classical music and tries to stretch. People stop her in town to ask if they can touch her long, wavy blonde hair; they gawk at her pale blue eyes. Carmen complains about the language challenges, the cultural gaffes. They lower their voices to discuss the spooky mysticism that hovers over daily life like an invisible fog; the way the drums played at gatherings seem to embody the secrets of Africa they have yet to learn.

“How’s teaching going for you?” Carmen tips her beer back to catch the last drops.

Kate sighs. “Getting tougher—the kids are growing restless. And then I had this weird occurrence just last week.”

“What?”

“You got any problem students?”

“Of course. No class is complete without the little angels.”

“Well, this one student was getting too disruptive, so I marched down the aisle and in a loud voice asked him in English if he was too busy to listen to me. And the students just went wild.”

“Okay, the joke’s on me, and clearly everyone gets it but me. Do you mind telling me where the grand faux pas is?”

“No, busy.”

“Yes, but it sounds like the French word, ‘baiser.’”

“Which means?”

“In the old literary sense, it means to kiss. But in current slang, basically…”

“Basically what?”

“Well, it means ‘to fuck.’”

Kate buries her face in her hands. “Lovely.”

“So, how did they react?”

“Oh God, they just screamed with delight. Or shock. I don’t know. The whole class was ruined. Even the next day, the students were giggling and asking each other ‘Are you busy today?’” Carmen begins to chuckle. Kate scowls. “It’s not funny, dammit.”

“Yes it is. It’s hysterical. And you’re probably the hundredth English-speaking teacher to make the same mistake. It’s almost a rite of passage.”

“Oh, so you’re saying you did it?”

“No, but the Volunteer before me did. I got the scoop from the other English teacher at my school. But I did try to explain to all my colleagues that I was a happy person. I described myself as une fille de joie.”

“A girl of joy? They had a problem with that?”

“Ah, but une fille de joie means something different in French slang. I pretty much announced to the entire school administration that I was a lady of the night.”

The beer Kate has just sipped sprays out of her mouth. This sets the two of them laughing. “Have to tell you,” Carmen wheezes a minute later, “I’ve had no trouble making friends here since then, that’s for sure.” They sit and howl with laughter, ignoring the small crowd that has gathered to watch the two eccentric white women lose control of themselves.

The following day is Christmas Eve. Henry, another fellow American, shows up to spend the holiday with Carmen and Kate. They drive back to the marketplace, squeezed into the cab of Henry’s rattling, dust-encrusted Toyota. While he searches for a car part, Carmen takes Kate to Score, a supermarket that caters to the French expatriate community. Kate discovers caviar, foie gras, cheeses by the
dozen and produce she hadn’t seen since leaving her native Nebraska. The prices are shocking—the equivalent of fifteen dollars for a stalk of limp broccoli, but it is broccoli, nonetheless. Chocolate fills an entire row. Wine comprises another. Kate wanders the aisles in a happy reverie.

Holiday music plays through the tinny overhead speakers, as out of place as a dusty village woman at an English tea party. Bing Crosby should be dreaming of a White Christmas on another continent, Kate muses, wiping the sweat off her face. She is perusing the spice rack when, to her shocked surprise, she hears Tchaikovsky’s “Waltz of the Flowers” from The Nutcracker coming from above. The music invades her senses like a drug injected into the bloodstream. Something in her body leaps to life, while another part freezes in dismay. It’s like seeing an old boyfriend she isn’t yet over.

She performed in The Nutcracker every year for the past fifteen Christmas seasons. She’s purposely avoided playing her tape recordings in her dusty little town to keep from feeling the nostalgia that now sweeps over her. But like an alcoholic holding a drink, she has little choice but to succumb to its seductive power. She shuts her eyes and she is there, lights blazing down as she leaps across the stage, every muscle and nerve in her body tuned in, focused single-mindedly on the dance. Listening to the store’s muffled music, she can almost feel the high again, the surge of power coursing through her arms in the finishing pose. That intoxicating, otherworldly feeling—it is why she craves dance.

“Kate?” Her eyes fly open. Carmen has rounded the corner with the shopping cart and now stands in front of her. “Anything wrong?”

She shakes herself free of the music’s spell. Her head begins to pound. She dumps her purchases into Carmen’s cart and tries to steady her voice. “I just need to get out of here for a minute—it’s really stuffy. I’ll wait for you outside.”

Home—the place she has successfully avoided thinking about, until the Nutcracker music brought it back. Following dinner with Henry and Carmen, she steps outside Carmen’s house to look up at the stars. The memories, along with the pain, slide back into place.

On Christmas Eve last year, the entire family gathered at the house, the way they did every year. The usual Christmas tree filled one corner of the living room, bloated with decorations, gifts spilling out from underneath. Kate had just finished a run of ten Nutcracker performances, leaving her physically and emotionally depleted.
all over—the glitter, stage lights and euphoria. She felt like Cinderella the morning after the ball. Except that her mother wasn’t a stepmother and she wasn’t wicked. Mom was looking good, in fact. Her hair was growing back, beyond the peach fuzz of the past few months, and her spirits were high.

Kate’s siblings, Russell and Rebecca, had both established lucrative careers and moved out on their own. Russell had flown in earlier from Cleveland, where he worked as an aerospace engineer. Kate hadn’t seen Rebecca, a lawyer, for weeks, even though they both lived in Omaha. She arrived at the house finally, looking as beautiful and sophisticated as ever. “So, how was Nutcracker this year?” she inquired as she popped open a diet Coke. Kate recounted the highlights. “And what else is new?” Rebecca asked afterwards.

This, too, followed the annual tradition, where Kate was made to feel her decision to practice art and not law meant she didn’t rank in the family. She herself didn’t mind that she’d never made it to professional level ballet—it was enough to teach ballet and perform with the local dance company. But recently Dad had put his foot down, telling her to find a job that used her college degree. Kate now threw the results at Rebecca. “Actually, I just applied for the Peace Corps.”

Rebecca’s face was puzzled and expectant, as if waiting for the punchline. “The Peace Corps? What on earth would you do?” Rebecca turned to Russell, who was pouring himself a Glenfiddich on the rocks. “Teach ballet to starving children?” They both chuckled.

“Teach English.” Defensiveness crept into Kate’s voice.

After a moment of perplexed silence, Russell shook his head. “Where on earth do you come up with these half-baked ideas, Kate?”

Russell’s comments held no intentional barb, but tonight it was more than Kate could handle. Still grieving the end of The Nutcracker and jittery about Mom, she exploded. “Oh, I’m so sorry I’m not as accomplished as you, with offers lining up for me to choose from. And maybe I’m not ready to work in an office anyway. So screw you.” She looked wildly from Russell to Rebecca. Her voice rose to a screech. “Screw both of you.”

A shocked hush fell over the room. Kate’s two aunts regarded her with alarm. Mom, resting on the couch nearby, sighed. “Oh Katie, let’s not start this again and ruin another holiday gathering. Why do you let the other kids get under your skin? Now come on, it’s Christmas Eve. Let’s enjoy ourselves.”

Again, Mom had said. That was how even Mom saw her. The party
continued, faces growing flushed with wine and good cheer. No one noticed when Kate grabbed her jacket and escaped outside.

Silent night, black night. The frigid air hurt her lungs when she breathed in. Frozen puffs of rage rose and dissipated. Inside, Rebecca began playing “O Little Town of Bethlehem” on the piano and the others joined in singing. Kate’s chest heaved as if she’d been running a race. “I’m getting out of here,” she said out loud.

She thought back to Dad’s words, a few weeks earlier when she’d first mentioned the Peace Corps teaching job. “I’ve thought of applying,” she’d said. “But the thought of leaving, with Mom and all…”

“The assignment would begin six months from now?”
“Yes. In June.”

A flash of pain, then something akin to impatience crossed his face. His voice, when he spoke, was brusque. “If you’re offered it, take it.”

Carmen’s back door creaks open and Kate hastily wipes her face. Henry joins her. He is silent for a moment, hands tucked into pockets as he glances up at the studded sky. “So Minneapolis is freezing as always,” he says. “I hear they had thirty days below zero and for seven days straight it didn’t get above fifteen below. My Aunt Bess probably has ice on the brain, so I’ll forgive her, but you know what she sent me for Christmas?” He looks over at Kate and she shakes her head. “A scarf, she sent me a goddamned scarf.”

It is impossible to be in a gloomy mood around Henry. A snort of laughter escapes her and then they are exchanging “can’t beat this one” Midwestern winter stories. By the time they return to the living room, she feels better. Homesickness has its advantages, she reflects. She is away from family and she misses them. Easier than being with them and hating them. And easier than being there this year, acknowledging the one other person missing.

“Anyone game for midnight mass at the Catholic mission?” Carmen calls out.

“Sure,” Kate says, “let’s do it.”

Christmas Eve Midnight Mass at the mission turns out to be nothing short of theater. By eleven-thirty, every bench in the church—a dignified, airy, wooden structure—is occupied and an overflow crowd spills out into the humid night. Glossy palm fronds
and homemade batiks decorate the walls. Candles line the aisles, their smoke mingling with the smell of incense and cheap perfume. People continue to mill about, not the least bit shy about demanding that the bench occupants squeeze in even closer to make room. Even goats and chickens play a part in the festivities, a handful of each penned up next to the nativity scene.

Gabonese Christmas mass, Kate soon discovers, is a far more interactive affair than the Christmas services of her youth. Everyone here sings with gusto, sways to the music, and gives the priest their undivided attention. During the sermon, they lean forward on their benches so as to not miss a single word. The Gabonese seem to throw themselves into worshipping the way life has thrown them into living—wholeheartedly.

Catholics call the mass a liturgical celebration, which Kate could never figure out growing up. It never felt like celebrating. The adults around her always looked as bored and disconnected as she felt. But here in Gabon, she finally gets it. The offertory procession, in particular, is spectacular. Sixteen women accompanied by the music of a dozen drums and several balafons—wooden xylophone instruments—dance and sing their way down the aisle, gifts in their hands, their hips sashaying to the beat. The women, in their attire of identical dresses of scarlet, green and gold with matching headdresses, look like tribal princesses. The drums are deafening, intoxicating. At the foot of the altar, the women lay down their treasures—a wicker basket full of collected monetary offerings, an earthen jug of wine, a giant bowl filled with bread. The offerings grow creative from there: a régime of bananas, the cluster of thirty still clinging together upside-down; six spiny pineapples; a dozen baguettes; ceramic dishes filled with rice, with stew; an enormous bolt of colorful fabric. There is even a wicker basket of beers.

The last woman carries herself like a queen, moving with broad, sweeping, theatrical steps. As she dances, she lifts a doll over her head. It is handmade, with baguette arms, a five-pound rice bag for the body, topped by a hairy coconut head. A string of colorful beads cinches the lumpy waist. The woman whirls and sways with it before setting it down gently atop the bananas. Kate’s heart contracts. Surely, she decides, this is how it must have felt when Jesus was born, with the palms and animals and the locals heralding his arrival with what they could: their music and organic pageantry, their hearts and the fruits of their labors. Every member of the congregation is swept up
in the moment, singing and swaying with the music. The thunderous drumbeats echoes off the walls and fills the building, resonating in her head. She feels far from home right then. And she’s glad.

The next morning, over Christmas muffins, scrambled eggs, and coffee, Kate can’t stop raving about the pageantry of the mass. “I know dance,” she tells Carmen and Henry. “Those women were as good as professionals. They had such incredible energy, such finesse.”

“You think that was great,” says Henry as he butters his third muffin, “you should check out my village on New Year’s Eve. They throw a hell of a party. There’s a troupe of women—priestesses, actually—who come to the village every year and perform in a special dance ceremony to usher in the new year.”

“Oh, I’d love it. And your village is on the way back to my town.” She turns to Carmen. “You game to check it out?”

“Count me in.”

They arrive at Henry’s on New Year’s Eve day. Henry’s village is a roadside clearing of mud and wattle huts with rusting corrugated tin roofs, surrounded by dusty, open yards. Henry comes out of the corps de garde, an open-sided thatched structure in the center of the village, to greet the two women. He brings them over and introduces them to the village chief and some of the elders. Kate and Carmen join them in the corps de garde and sit back to drink beer.

The village feels like the Africa of the Peace Corps brochures. Gone is traffic, commerce, stress. Children band together and race around in yards kept scrupulously free of foliage. Hens peck at the dirt. The peaceful silence is periodically broken by a burst of scolding coming from one of the cuisines, a structure adjacent to the house that serves as its kitchen. The children skitter away from the women and resume their play. They creep up closer to the corps de garde and when Kate twists around to look at them, they run away shrieking. When she turns her back, they repeat the exercise.

After they finish their beers, Henry shows Kate and Carmen his home, a mud and wattle structure like the other dwellings in the village. Inside the dim living room, a woman sweeps the dirt floor, nodding her greeting. “Living room, bedroom,” Henry calls out, pointing to the sparsely furnished rooms with crumbling walls that allow light to peek in through cracks. “Cuisine to the right of the house, latrine out back.”
The women of the village appear to have adopted Henry. Several hover nearby, in village attire of a *pagne*—a swath of colorful fabric wrapped around the waist, accompanied by a blouse or T-shirt. Henry takes Kate and Carmen into the smoky cuisine to meet the woman who is preparing for the New Year’s Eve feast. She is small, almost pygmy-sized, neither young nor old. When she stands, Kate sees that one of her legs is hideously twisted in a way that makes her limp when walking. She beams and shakes their hands with a surprisingly strong grip. She pauses after shaking Kate’s. Peering closer into Kate’s face, the woman crows and says something in the local language. The other women exclaim and nod. One of them propels Kate toward the door where the daylight spills in. They all study her face. Finally, one of the women explains in French. “It’s your eyes. She says you have spirit eyes.”

Kate’s pale blue eyes, like her pale hair, draw constant attention here. She has learned to simply nod and smile. “*Merci, mama,*” she says to the lame woman. “*Merci,*” she keeps repeating. Finally the women return to the cooking fire, chattering among themselves.

The darkness that falls in a region with no electricity seems that much more dramatic. The inky blackness on New Year’s Eve, however, does nothing to dispel the festive air in the village.

The food for the celebration, set out on a table inside Henry’s house, varies little in color and texture. Bowls of rice sit next to dishes of stewed pangolin, stewed river rat, stewed monkey, all cooked in a fiery tomato sauce. *Piment*, the local fiery pepper, helps disguise the gamey flavor of the river rat, which, a woman assures Kate, lives in the jungle, not in a sewer or latrine. *Feuille de manioc*, a dish of chopped manioc leaves, tastes a bit like spicy creamed spinach with smoky, earthy undertones.

“Not bad,” Kate says to Carmen as they sit on benches set up outside. “Except that I just pulled this thing out of my mouth.” She points to a grayish curl of skin on the edge of her tin plate. “It was furry against my tongue—I think it’s monkey skin.”

Henry holds up his plate of stewed pangolin. “Tastes just like chicken, doesn’t it?”

Music blares from Henry’s battery-operated cassette player. Two men light an enormous bonfire. The group swells in size and the villagers eat every last bite of food. Once the women clear away the dishes, the cassette player is turned off.
The drummers begin to play, at first just a few musicians and then more, so that thirty minutes later, a half-dozen of them have finally developed a full-sounding rhythm. People, mostly the women, begin to dance as well. This is nothing like the dancing Kate has performed. It is a subtle movement originating from the hips, knees bent to support the side-to-side shimmying. The dancers shuffle and step, letting the arms move loosely in tandem. When the women invite Carmen and Kate to join them, Kate finds their moves easy to follow. It is dancing at its most organic—simply the body’s reply to the drum’s call.

Carmen gives up after a few minutes, throwing up her hands and laughing as she walks back to her seat. But Kate stays, even as the moves grow more complicated. She rediscovers little dance secrets, such as the way she can use the other dancers’ movements to assist her in hers. No step is too hard because she simply mirrors the others, borrowing from the energy they’ve tapped into. The women in the dancing circle laugh and applaud. Even Kate’s explanation that she was a ballet dancer back home doesn’t lessen their amazement.

She finally leaves the circle thirty minutes later to sit next to Carmen and sip palm wine. While Carmen chats with Henry’s friends, Kate leans her head back and watches the sparks rise from the crackling fire and disappear into the sky like reverse shooting stars. The dark sky seems endless and omnipotent, an upside-down ocean that soon makes her dizzy. When she straightens, she sees the lame woman from Henry’s cuisine watching her. Again.

The woman has been tracking her since their afternoon meeting. Whenever Kate glances around, the woman is there, studying her. Now, seeing she has Kate’s attention, the woman hobbles over. She is wearing a red dress that looks like it belongs in a 1950s New York ballroom. Judging from its faded condition, Kate decides, it was manufactured back then as well.

The woman clasps Kate’s hand again. Nodding and beaming, she begins to speak in fractured French. “You, la blanche—you have seen them. With your spirit eyes.” Kate has to ask her to repeat this several times. “They visit you,” she says next, stabbing a finger at Kate’s chest. “Through your dance.”

Was the woman drunk, or just crazy? “You are not like the others,” she continued. “This, you know.” Kate finds herself nodding, not even sure why.

The woman’s unflinching gaze makes Kate increasingly uneasy.
Although she has grown used to stares, they haven’t been like this—the appraising scrutiny of a juror who knows far more about the defendant than the defendant does. This, she decides, is why Africa makes her uncomfortable. There is too much mystery lurking in the shadows, the trees. Late at night like this, it scares her. And the lame woman somehow knows it.

When Carmen turns her attention back to them, the woman steps back from Kate. “They will come back to you,” she says to Kate with a decisive nod before turning around and limping away.

Kate stares at her retreating figure. “What was that all about?” Carmen asks.

“I don’t have a clue. Something about how I’ve seen her friends and they’re going to visit.”

Before Carmen can reply, a more forceful drum cadence begins and a frisson of anticipation sweeps through the crowd. The dancers in the center clear a path. Clearly the New Year’s Eve show has just begun.

Four women stride to the center, attired in traditional dresses, white slashes painted on their faces, and begin to dance. Their practiced moves, more incisive and energetic than those of the other women, tell Kate they are professionals at this kind of dancing. The fifth woman, arriving last, is in a category of her own—a prima ballerina of tribal dancing. She is huge, solid like a mountain, her hair braided in tiny tresses that poke out in all directions. She has protruding cheekbones and a wide mouth that draws focus to her face. Her eyes are dramatically outlined with black liner. The fierce light shining from them and the authority in her movements make Kate take a respectful step back.

Henry comes to stand between Carmen and Kate. He tells them the women have spent the past twelve hours fasting and meditating, to assist them in their communication during the ceremony. Kate doesn’t ask Henry with whom they’ll be communicating. She isn’t sure she wants to know. Just watching the leader’s movements makes Kate’s skin prickle. The woman, as she dances, nods periodically to herself as if in agreement with an invisible guide, before launching into another sweeping movement. She is like a cyclone, commanding everyone’s attention, sucking up the energy around her only to fling it back out to the spectators.

The drummers increase their intensity. The dancers grow more frenzied. Some start trembling like epileptics. Another dancer arches back, eyes shut, an ecstatic glow on her face. She begins to spin in
circles. One woman slows down, moving to a rhythm only she seems to hear.

The villagers crowd in closer, making everything seem too warm, too noisy to Kate. She looks around. Everyone else is enjoying the performance. Kate tells herself it is just that—a show, a New Year’s Eve performance. She enjoys performances as well. She loves getting swept up in other dancers’ power and talent. Watching these women however, is another story. The looks on their faces tell her in no uncertain terms that they have gone Somewhere Else. Where, she wonders? Where, precisely, is Somewhere Else?

“This is getting interesting,” Carmen murmurs, and the leader swings around to face them. Through the crowd of women dancing, she catches Kate’s eye. She feels the force of the woman’s gaze pulling her in like an undertow. She clutches Carmen’s arm.

“Kate? What is it?” Carmen asks.
Her words come out choked. “She’s looking at me.”

“Who?”

“The woman in charge.”
Carmen pats Kate’s arm. “She’s in a trance. She’s not looking at you—she doesn’t even see you.”

“No, she’s looking right at me.” Kate’s voice rises. “She won’t let me go.”

Carmen cocks her head. “Maybe you should sit down for a few minutes. Go sip some water, or something.”

Without replying, Kate staggers back from the circle. She can still feel the leader’s eyes on her. She pushes past spectators clapping and jiggling to the music. Once she clears the group, she runs, past the corps de garde and onto the path that leads toward Henry’s house. The drums recede, replaced by the slap-slap of her sandals on the dirt path and her ragged breath. Invisible branches scratch at her arms, snag her hair.

But the path soon narrows and grows obscured by brush. Even with the moonlight, Kate can go no further without a flashlight. She will have to return. She sinks to the ground and resorts to a more primal solution—she cries.

Happy New Year. Last year, on New Year’s Day, Mom had to be rushed to the hospital after vomiting blood and collapsing. Everyone tried to play it down, but that relapse signaled the return of the battle. The leukemia was too tenacious. Mom finally lost the war one sunny, warm day in late February. The very same day Kate received her
acceptance letter from the Peace Corps. An easy choice, by then. A convenient vessel on which to transfer the loss she longed to keep at bay. Instead, she could focus on grieving the loss of her dance practice. That, at least, she would return to some day. Her mother, however, was gone.

Gone forever.

The tears flow harder, her sobs like retches determined to unearth what lies festering deep inside her. Finally, they subside.

“Kate? Where are you?”

She hears Henry’s worried voice in the distance. She draws a shuddering gulp of air and rises. “Henry? I’m right here.”

“Where is here?”

She wipes her face, then retraces her steps down the path. “Um, here is here.”

He pivots around in the pale moonlight and sees her. “Well, then. That path would have taken you for a nice long walk. To the next village.”

“Oh. Whoops.”

“Why’d you run off like that? Are you okay?”

Once she assures him she is fine, she composes herself and tries to explain the panic she felt. But what troubled her ten minutes earlier now seems hazy and unsubstantial. A woman stared at her and it frightened her? Enough to run away sobbing? She offers Henry a self-conscious laugh. “Too much beer and palm wine, I guess. And the crowd started getting to me.”

“Those dancers, they were really going at it, weren’t they? It’s mellowing out now, though. You feel like going back? Or, if you prefer, I can get you over to my house for some quiet.”

Quiet meant peace. But peace meant space for the memories to come rushing in. They will need to be addressed, of course. She can’t let them hide in the shadows forever. But not tonight, she decides. Not while so much of Africa awaits.
Riverside Wedding of the Recovering Addicts

Silver gleams from the bride’s lip,
and the groom tongues it away, tenderly, hungrily,

his hands cupping another man’s name
tattooed across her back.

Hard to believe weariness
unfolds from this kind of astonishment.

That flowering is an undertow.

Hard to believe we are not endless
beside the judgeless water.

Already summer’s appetite
picks clean spring’s bare shoulders.

Crows fly out of the fluttercloth,
low-throated, barking,

flocks of night herons
settling in.

Already the not-yet is bridge
and eventual river

and the newlyweds wade in,
heads bent to a hard rain of rice,
while the wedding of every evening
slips on its foxgloves

and touches the widening,
difficult now.
Angie Macri

Wholeness

All is silver here, streets and stoops, linoleum on the laundry floor, bare lots where boys play stickball. Even the spires of St. Bernadette’s slip like needles into this New York winter sky, and nights, ice sticks its pins into sidewalks.

Calabria was gold, with figs and prickly pear. Home had the gold number thirteens that children wore as charms on necklaces, the bold sashes and tan skin at Carnavale. There we pricked each other’s fingers, borrowing pins and needles so we wouldn’t turn enemies if we lost them.

Now my sleeve is empty. No one knows which finger the dirty needle stuck. The old song says pricking the thumb brings pleasure, but not here where American confetti is paper string, not candy-coated almonds, and there’s no fresh sanguinaccio—pig blood, figs, cocoa—cooling under January’s waxing moon.

It wasn’t my ring finger, for that means love, and Vincenzo no longer builds townhouses but sits in our basement, rubbing his leather hands over the foundation and kicking my cats up the stairs. He’s gone from Savuto and Vino Santo to gin, rum, and scotch.

No one comes to me on Christmas Eve to learn the prayer to cure mall’occhio. I remember myself young with old Catanuz, her whispering of St. Nicola and her hand signing the cross over a plate of water.
Then I had that lifting feeling, like I slid
as a sterling dolphin through the silk of the sea,
or as fast water threading the Sila and the Aspromonte,
thinking I’d always be so smooth and whole.

Angie Macri
Melanie Martin

Winter Solstice at Newgrange

Seventeen minutes of sunlight
in this burial mound of stone and turf.
We shuffle down a passageway
sixty feet long and even in the crisp April air
I feel the walls narrow, a breath on my neck.

Layered limestone and quartz,
corbelled roof and Neolithic spirals,
zigzags carved into walls
could be maps of the stars,
maps of the afterworld

or the changing of seasons,
an understanding even then
that new life follows death.
Here is the chamber, three side alcoves,
stone basin of granite or sandstone

to hold the dead’s remains.
Offerings were pendants
or polished stone balls,
beads made from bone.

A votive offered coins and jewels
on the mound’s top.
No arrow shafts or axes of jadeite,
no tools for the afterlife.
This passage grave, house for the dead, was a peaceful place of ritual, a link between this and the other world. 

*Dolmen*, Welsh for “table,” a slab of limestone laid across two standing stones. Here, the dead could be left for days in open air on these platforms of stone. Remains were gathered, a ritual washing in the River Boyne.

This cleansing a symbol for rebirth, so their souls would lift, rise in that beam of sunlight, to leave this world of bones and flesh.
They’ve got the old year stuffed
like an effigy of you, blue jeans, flannel shirt

filled with sawdust, straw hat shading
a withered face. They’ve propped

the sackdoll body in a chair on the porch
where bunches of bananas hang

from giant metal hooks, casting
sea-urchin shadows. I mix three Cuba libres

at the side table. *Hard to end
like this?* I ask. *Not at all,*

the doll says, uninflected. One drink
for me and one for him. One offered

with two cigarettes and a tissue-paper
flower to the patron saint

of this last day: (not you): Our Lady
Virgin of the Milk and Happy Delivery,

infant mouth to breast as if something new
could grow here. The old year nurses

his drink, but is eight hours dead
across the ocean.


Christopher Matthews

Christmas Postage Stamp

Reduction has made it
a wonder of precision: mother & child

the size of a microchip
exact enough to smuggle on the tongue.

Giotto’s Madonna’s
monumental hands—jointless, immobile, robust,

hypnotist hands
teasing out will through the eyes—don’t grip: they keep,

they weld to their orbit
the child & imitation laurel branch

through some invisible
magnetic demand the high voltage master switch

of which is her smile.
Meanwhile, the boy, brand new old man, held out

like a hand grenade,
grabs a miraculous finger & aims it

at the branch & the
textbook little leaf he reaches out to pinch

as though to demonstrate
how to lift the hem of a skirt, or squeeze

the flame from a wick.
Behind them looms a golden gong
Christopher Matthews

from which they could beat
the wow of their holiness, if not for the fact

that they seem more holy
not beating it. It must be this declaration

of silence, & her son’s
imperious pinch, & her hunch that she

has become precise
& governmental, that makes the mother’s eyes

narrow with glory.
This, & the way she can almost see you

almost literally
reaching out to receive the gift of her

fleshy ticking boy.
Karyna McGlynn

After My Fifth Birthday Party, 1982

My mother and I walk through the wet neon
of the pizza palace parking lot—we wear garbage bags
and carry stacks of presents draped in clear plastic.
It feels somehow dangerous to be awake this late.

In the car, my mother unbuttons the top of her jeans.
She groans. “I’m never eating again,” she says.
She turns the key in the ignition. Her tape picks up
mid-strain: the Carpenters’ “Rainy Days and Mondays.”

She reaches across my lap, fastens my seat belt,
and then, suddenly, she clutches me fast against
the flat of her breasts, her moon face pressed
to mine; she is all fouled breath and desperation.

She shakes me by the shoulders and says, “Oh, god,
baby, don’t ever get like Karen Carpenter, okay?
Promise me.” I’m ready to promise her anything.
“Ok,” I say, nails clenched in a sticky fist.
Erika Meitner

The Bar Code of Love

I brandished the wand & pushed
scanner buttons with both thumbs,
but nothing happened.

I osterized & registered the symbols
of our union, & it wasn’t a harbinger,
but, my love, I couldn’t erase anything—

not the cast-iron griddle, too heavy to lift;
not the lovesick goblets bent at the waist
as if they performed some important task

other than holding household liquids.
In the next-stop mattress outlet, you pressed
every quilted pillowtop, then suggested we lie

with our shoes still on to check filling
& resilience, skin when we slid each slick
blue surface converging—chrome flush

that spread my chest like a walnut, as if
we hadn’t already been living in sin for years,
that bed of pictures (dirty? family?),

a future tucked into your wallet, spilling
folded laminates that accordion out like
shrugged hands. What’s in the center

of your palm besides one ring & a lifeline
dug into your skin with a grapefruit spoon?
My heart is a domed cakeplate,
nested glass bubble. Sweet
Something of Mine—before they say sanctify, let’s skip town, hock

the registry gifts for cash, jettison
the material outline of a life which reduces everything to crime-scene chalk dust, to streamlined stories with deceptively simple arcs: a blender, a stand mixer, service for twelve with matched

open stock vegetable platter. We are a seven-walled restaurant tangled in an Alphabet City snapshot, broken plate at our feet. I can’t remember who tossed it, but if you dig in my coat pocket you’ll find encrypted desire of lint & matchbooks,

free signs in this lush & burgeoning world of someone’s love for us aching to be tested—that floor-model mattress before we slipped from the store empty-handed, your body dashing & suspended next to mine.
Man Among Boy Among Man

All day long they extolled the virtue of the ceremony, the Torah and prayers, tradition—like your Father and your Father’s Father. So I stood up there bemused and sang from memory, took my praise, accepted my talis and kissed it when I was told to.

The word man swam through the air that day like sperm headed for an infertile egg—from everyone’s mouth to my feet. I knew nothing about men, what one was or what it would take to become one.

I still say, eighteen years later, it wasn’t to be found in that temple.

And to this day I might have ruled out God and prayer, the idea of religion, if not for that night, in a room full of thirteen-year-olds, a miracle hadn’t occurred,

if Emily Eskow hadn’t lain so still beside me with her bra off, her full C tits below only a thin layer of cotton, calmly waiting for my hand, the same one that had scrolled along the cursive lines
of Hebrew earlier that day, to feel what it had never felt before, God’s gift to man, man that I was, man among boys.
Mihaela Moscaliuc

Good Friday

We wake to find two trout huddling in the sink.
The olive green flashing polka dots and stripes of steel pink
plume and cloud father’s blue threadbare handkerchief,
—jagged anemone wedged snug under the plug.
Soon, they lose all interest in the forefingers
my brother and I dip and wiggle, perched on stools.

By noon, we assemble scales into necklaces and fingernails.
Mother layers our roe jar with a fresh film of heather pink.
Garlic and parslied lard melt upwards and pelt
kitchen walls dressed top to bottom in magazine brides
—Gone with the Wind sweeping gowns, cascades of tulle,
pearl-beaded bodices, smoked crinolines perfectly flounced.

We hardly talk when we have fish—
the meticulous defleshing, a supplicant’s work.
Mother presses her lips to father’s cheek,
then smudges the deep coral with her wrist.

Father cuts the coarse corn porridge, round heap,
—mamaliga—with a butter-combed string,
brushes Mother’s fingers in the lemon and garlic dip,
parts the crisped sheath to let the succulent flesh cool.

Mother kneads each morsel between her lips,
enticing us with the boneless bits
—For good luck, she says, which I take to mean
being first to spot the ration truck,
take the ninety stairs in double strides,
grab my brother, and hurtle to the thickening line.
I try to read my brother’s eyes:
He dreams the next truck will haul not
bread, fish, or flour, but oranges—
hard sweet foreign fruit brighter than our full moon.
I cannot ask him if I’ve guessed:
We never say our wishes aloud,
ever name our fish.
Old World

The summer I tend the derelict graveyard, 
cherry trees wrench me in and out of sleep 
as dreams rename themselves—

*Damiana, Orris Root, Red Sandalwood,* 
*Belladonna, Monkshood,* 
kinked petaled patrons of unmarked tombs.

Comets tinsel the night, flaming like coils 
on Danaë’s pale belly and my unseasoned lips, 
dressing our musky swill in summer’s darkest reds.

*Don’t touch the cherries,* grandma counsels. 
*Sweep them off the graves and let them rot there.* 
*Don’t play at cherry-pit with Satan,* grandpa warns.

I don’t worry. 
All the pruning and weeding 
will surely keep my mind off such sweetness wasting.

But the graveyard has grown restless and I love cherries. 
Tongue-cradling each luscious morsel till it bursts, 
I vow to remember the damage I am still to incur,

then spit the stone on the freshest grave. 
Old souls may have claimed my own, 
but I can tell these cherries are the best I’ll ever know.
Lisa Ortiz

Easter Poem

That sunset of eggs in a carton—
they blaze in your fridge now, you grown-up woman,
and it will be in this oven that you picked out
from a warehouse of ovens that the ham is cooked,
the green bean casserole, the dough

rising on your counter.
And it is your children who search
the plastic grass of their baskets
for foiled chocolate and jelly eggs—though it is still Christ
who rises again and again from the dead,

who ascends in a mist of clouds above a congregation:
still to His service they rush, and you hear
through the window songs and prayers, the rustle of younger legs
in pale dresses—yet in the cathedral of your kitchen
you blow steam from the sweet rolls,

lick the sugar from your fingers and hum
not a hymn but a pop song from your high school days
about summer love and sunglasses, swing
your dusty hips and count again—for all those who will arrive—
a tidy row of forks and spoons.
Krishna Pattisapu

For the Little Girl at the Diwali Festival

Her bangled ankles trail behind her father
as he parts an ocean of Indians
toward the ballroom stage, lavani voices
crawling staccato through speakers.
Unlike me, she understands Hindi—
the foreign music of their words,
gold hoops tugging her earlobes thin.

In my childhood, Father told me
girls without jewelry are not beautiful,
weighted my wrists with bracelets
heavier than my hands. Her fingers
crocheted in silence take me back
to that girl of seven, tongue gliding over my lips
at the mention of gulabjamun.
On visits to family, I ate only rice
and chapattis, swallowed each slice of dough
hoping I would not taste it. I ran barefoot
with Indian cousins, Punjabi ripping
with the damp of sprinklers, my pale face
like a spoiled spot on the lawn.

I have the only white face tonight
at my table, bindi clunging to the half-caste arc
of my forehead. I have forgotten to wear
the gold chain that strangles my neck,
my father’s brow raised in disapproval.

This is my daughter, he says.
She is American.
Prayer for the End of Thanksgiving Dinner

Lord, it’s 5:30, the slat-backs are empty
save a napkin or two. The gravy boat—
that larded lamp, that empty ciborium—

looks lost. It points at the ghost of someone
seated here, chewing. Wax is tempered
on the tablecloth. On the chop tray,

that little killing floor, colonies
of fat clot on the porcelain.
Lord, let evening take its dusty turn

at this table, though it hasn’t yet been cleared.
Let the opulent paten bear a few
cold dinner rolls. Let the cruet breathe

its last inch of wine. Let the weather
be warmer than we’d like. I won’t even talk
about the turkey, my obedient bird!
The cloudy sky over Elmina hints at rain, an anomaly in a long-awaited dry season. It’s the first Thursday of January 2003, and my mood is dampened by more than weather. For one, I have no clothes that are black and white, now the preferred colors for celebrations or funerals in southern Ghana.

Mr. Sikayefi, my research assistant, navigates his car through Elmina’s narrow, winding streets. He reaches over to rub my shoulder and asks if I’m okay. I flash him a grimace. The first time I met him, before the Christmas season began, he promised to have a family for me to interview during the annual Edina Bronya festival—Elmina’s new year celebration. Without a family’s permission, we’ll be unable to witness the first half of the ceremony, where families gather at the ancestral home to remember relatives who died the previous year. After being away from Mr. Sikayefi for Christmas with friends in Accra, he claims to have found no one.

We stop to pick up Mr. Mensah, who Mr. Sikayefi tells me is a local historian. With his salt-and-pepper hair, squinty eyes, and spunky attitude, Mr. Mensah reminds me of my grandfather.

Seeing my glum face, Mr. Mensah assures me that we’ll have no trouble locating a family. When we reach a street full of people wearing black-and-white, Mr. Sikayefi parks alongside the gutter. Mr. Mensah hops out to chat with a woman in a dress of black-and-white kente cloth. Her hair is covered with a shiny black scarf. She suddenly claps her hands and looks toward the car, nodding. Mr. Mensah beckons to us.

Mr. Sikayefi smiles at me and rubs my shoulder. “You see, Yaa?”

But will we see slave artifacts is the question. Ever since I arrived in Ghana a few months earlier, I’ve been anticipating Bronya. My goal in the country has been to research slave history at Elmina, the Dutch West India Company’s headquarters during the trans-Atlantic slave trade. In Ghana, where it is taboo to refer to anyone’s slave ancestry, I’ve been hoping to become familiar enough to some families for them to do just that. More importantly, I’ve heard that Bronya might be
the only time each year that families owning slavery artifacts might display them.

The only families who observe this rite are those whose ancestors were amongst the town’s original settlers or who were prominent citizens. On Thursday and Saturday, libations are performed for relatives who’ve died a “normal” death, whereas Friday and Sunday are for deaths considered unnatural, like from suicide or AIDS. When one’s close relative dies, he or she must provide food and drinks for three successive Bronya. This proves to be too expensive for some people, and they’re barred from participating until they can afford it.

Mr. Sikayefi and I follow Mr. Mensah and the woman up an alley that turns into a courtyard. On the ground, a raised cement square with a hole in it catches my attention. Mr. Mensah explains that it’s an altar. Sprinkled around the hole are offerings for the ancestors: a piece of chicken cooked in a red stew, white mashed yam, and *eto*—mashed yam made red from palm oil.

Several family members stand on a narrow porch beyond the altar. They hold hands and bow their heads in prayer. I’m surprised to hear them emit a soft chorus of “Amen” instead of an indigenous Akan spiritual term. Mr. Mensah, looking none too pleased, tells me that they were praying to the Christian God for blessings during the libation pouring.

Christianity is no new concept in southern Ghana. It was introduced to Elmina in the 1400s with the arrival of the Portuguese, but there are some, like Mr. Mensah, who prefer to retain the indigenous spiritual concepts.

Mr. Sikayefi announces our presence and purpose for visiting. The family consents and we shake their hands from right to left, as tradition dictates. Mr. Mensah and I get seats next to each other, near an altar in the corner. He tells me to take pictures, but I can’t. I feel like I’ll be intruding. Moreover, I know how sensitive some Ghanaians are about getting photographed, especially when they end up on postcards or in advertisements and don’t receive compensation.

Mr. Mensah passes my camera to Mr. Sikayefi, who snaps away while I take mental photos. Most of the attendees are over fifty and female, and mostly all wear black-and-white cloth. Some of the men wear theirs traditionally wrapped, almost like togas, including the tall, thin elder with bright white hair sitting in front of the altar. Mr. Mensah points out the parrot carved into the elder’s stool. It’s the emblem for the Anona clan, to which the family belongs.
A man in a green shirt and slacks stands by the altar, serving as a kyeame, or linguist. He announces that libations haven’t been poured here for a few years because of an unresolved family conflict. A young man who looks like a brown Brad Pitt with small vertical cut marks on his cheeks helps another man lead a black, straight-haired sheep to the altar. Mr. Mensah tells me that though the family ended the dispute long ago they must sacrifice the sheep and sprinkle its blood on the altar to settle it spiritually. I draw back from the animal.

“Are you afraid?” he asks me, with a chuckle.

I’m not a “save the animals” advocate, but I don’t want to see the thing get its throat slit two inches away from me! I was traumatized enough visiting the meat shed of the outdoor market in nearby Cape Coast. The stench of old blood was discernable long before I’d reached it. Half of a dead goat greeted me at the entrance. Inside the shed, shirtless, muscular, sweating men swung butcher knives at animal parts atop humongous tree stumps. Some of it splattered onto waiting customers. The whole ordeal was almost enough to make me a vegetarian.

I breathe with relief when I learn that the sheep will be sacrificed elsewhere. Brown Brad Pitt winks at me as he and his partner lift the sheep and tap it to the ground three times. Mr. Mensah leans over to say that this symbolizes that they’re offering it to the ancestors.

As the elder begins to pray in Fante and pour libations, I notice that he uses a glass mug instead of the traditional coconut-shell cone. I’m also surprised to see him pouring orange-flavored Fanta soda instead of the usual Schnapps or gin. I nudge Mr. Mensah and ask if it’s because a particular ancestor liked to drink Fanta.

Mr. Mensah grumbles, “Because some Ghanaians are Christians, they are completely altering our traditions.”

I glance at one of the relatives, who appears to be Western-educated. His rigid posture, frown, and eyes that dart around behind thick glasses strikes me that he’s here out of obligation. Mr. Mensah follows my gaze and sucks his teeth. He whispers, “Okay, so perhaps we need to adapt some of our traditions to fit the times.”

I nod eagerly because I’ve just thought the same thing: with increasing scientific and spiritual knowledge, as well as advances in development, change is inevitable.

“But if Christians do not agree with the way we do things,” Mr. Mensah continues, “they should not even involve themselves.”

After the Fanta, the elder pours what looks to be rum and gin. The kyeame comes around with a cup to give everyone a sip of the
gin. When it’s my turn, the family members and Mr. Mensah seem to stiffen. I know that it would be rude to refuse it. Before traveling to Ghana, I read about the indigenous spiritual and cultural traditions of Elmina, thinking that I’d participate in some ceremonies. I pour a drop of the gin on the ground, which I’ve been told is acceptable in lieu of drinking an offering. Everyone seems to breathe at once and nod. For good measure, I take a quick sip from the cup. The sudden burning of the gin startles me, and I cough. Some of the elders cheer.

A woman wearing sunglasses and a small straw hat bounces onto the porch, giving everyone high-fives. The smell of liquor is heavy on her breath. She shouts, “Afehyia paal!” and everyone echoes her. Mr. Mensah tells me that it’s the New Year greeting. A few women grab shekeres—bead-covered gourds—and beat a rhythm. The elder man across from me takes out a metal instrument and drums away drunkenly. The women with the shekeres frown at him and raise their voices at him in Fante. He shakes a fist back at them and keeps on playing his rhythm. Mr. Mensah catches me giggling at them and asks if I’ve understood their Fante. I haven’t, but no words are required for me to know he’s beating the wrong rhythm.

An elder woman busies herself with something at the altar, and I grab Mr. Mensah’s arm and ask if she might be bringing out family heirlooms.

“Oh, I don’t think so,” he says. “In fact, the ceremony is almost ended and we shall leave soon.”

There’s no time to brood, because the woman at the altar asks everyone to stand and approach her. I see that she’s spread a wet, terracotta-colored substance on the altar. Using two fingers of her right hand, she applies two short stripes of it to everyone’s forearm. Mr. Mensah tells me that this is done to grant blessings: hopes of marriage and childbirth for women, and good fortune in general. As she paints my arm, I pray for successful research in Elmina.

I return to my seat, careful not to smear the cool, shiny stripes against my dress. Following me is Brown Brad Pitt. He gives me a dazzling smile and tells me something in Fante, pointing from my stripes to his eyes. The woman behind him grabs his sleeve and says with a laugh, “ennte Twi.”

Yes I do understand Twi, I feel like responding to her, in Fante. Even with my limited grasp of both languages, I’ve discerned, “wo ho...kɔkɔ...munnhu,” and got the gist of what Brown Brad said: “Since your skin is already red, I can’t see the marking.”
I don’t know how I should take his comment. I’m not sure if he’s making fun of my color. In Ghana, some people have been quick to laugh when I call myself “black.” It’s a label that would never be questioned back in the United States, my birth country. But for Ghanaians, “black” is a color. To them, my cinnamon complexion makes me “red.”

When Mr. Mensah announces our intent to leave, there’s some bustle. The family doesn’t want us to go without eating. The woman who painted our arms places pots on the floor. I’m amazed as always as this seventy-plus-year-old woman bends over at the waist and keeps her legs straight. She dishes out food and passes a bowl of *fufu* and light soup with chicken to the elder at the altar. As he eats with his right hand, he stares at the altar and speaks inaudibly, as though communicating with the ancestors whose memory he’s evoked.

She next gives sodas and some of the chicken and stew to Mr. Mensah, Mr. Sikayefi, and me. I chew slowly, hoping that one of the family members will miraculously satisfy my wish to see artifacts. But before long, they’re collecting our dishes and showering us with “Afeyia paa! Afeyia poo!”

As we stand to leave, I realize I’m feeling little disappointment over not having seen anything related to slaves. Besides it being an entertaining morning, I’ve gotten a chance to witness how Christianity rubs shoulders with Elmina’s indigenous beliefs. As unholy as symbolically feeding one’s ancestors might seem to some, the occasion has served as a family reunion, which even the most secular of holidays can do where I come from. Anyway, in the end, I’m too shy to take pictures, let alone ask the family if they have any slave artifacts to show me. And besides, I still might get a chance that Saturday during the second half of the ceremony, which consists of a parade and a *durbar*—an outdoor gathering for political speeches and traditional dancing and drumming.

On our way off the porch, Mr. Sikayefi hands my camera back. The elder at the altar stops eating and glares at it. I go to shove it in my bag, but to my shock, he wipes his hand and picks up the cup he used to pour libations. I watch open-mouthed as he poses for me in libation-pouring position. I snap a picture, hoping some ancestor won’t rise up and thump me over the head.

_Dressed in white-and-black cloth, the Nananom—royal families—of Edina Traditional Area gather at the palace of the_
Omanhen—state leader. A group of young men dance and play drums covered with black-and-red checkered cloth. GTV reporters and their cameramen mill about, recording them.

Mr. Sikayefi has left me in the care of Mr. Mensah, who points out the Omanhen, one of the last to arrive for the parade. He wears amulets tied around his arms and a small straw cap, in addition to his kente and royal sandals. One of his attendants bounces and twirls a giant, velvety king’s umbrella above his head.

Having seen traditional entourages before, it doesn’t seem all that spectacular to me. What catches my attention is the grey-haired white couple who emerge from an air-conditioned SUV, along with a Ghanaian man. They greet the Nananom.

I whisper to Mr. Mensah, “Who’re they?”

He tells me it’s the Dutch ambassador to Ghana and his wife. The man accompanying them is the Komenda-Edina-Eguafo-Abrem District Assemblyman. He tells me that the Dutch ambassador has participated in Bronya for a long time. I ask him why.

“It is a testimony to the three hundred-year friendship between Elmina and the Netherlands.”

I’m so taken aback that I can’t respond. Friendship? But why would Elminans call it that? To me, the Dutch are less friends and more a reminder of my enslaved African ancestors’ suffering.

The drumming picks up, and the queen mothers of the royal entourages lead the procession. They’re accompanied by women wearing colored kente and dancing the subtle movements of adowa. At the middle of the parade is the Omanhen, surrounded by three or four divisional rulers. They walk beneath the dancing umbrella. Long talking drums—carried on the heads of young boys—rear up the procession. I vaguely wonder how their heads must feel. The drummers pound so hard that muscles bulge in their arms. A young boy follows them with a pile of spare sticks, which he continuously passes to the drummers as theirs break.

I’m still puzzling over the Elmina-Dutch friendship as Mr. Mensah and I join the parade along with a few Ghanaian guests of the Nananom. Elminans wave and cheer from the roadside and from their windows and balconies. We pass the home of the family we observed Bronya with, and the elder who I photographed waves his handkerchief cheerfully when he spots me.

Groups of young men join the parade to dance and sing ecstatically near the drummers. Mr. Mensah tells me they’re songs of the asafo,
Elmina’s traditional military defense units. Occasionally, everyone pauses for the Omanhen to dance a circle around his umbrella twirler and the drummers.

The procession files into the Dutch cemetery at the center of Elmina and gathers at the large, central mausoleum. Dr. Annan-Prah, a University of Cape Coast professor from Elmina, makes a speech about Bronya’s origins, which explains why its name is curiously similar to what Ghanaians love to call me: oburonyi—the foreigner, the stranger.

In the mid-1600s, after the Dutch ousted the Portuguese from São Jorge da Mina Castle, their Elmina trading post, the Portuguese officially relinquished the castle keys on the first Thursday of January. Each year thereafter on that day, the Dutch invited Elmina’s rulers to the castle to settle disputes and misunderstandings to ensure a productive trading partnership. The day fell not long after the Dutch men’s Christmas, which involved sharing of gifts and drinks. Elminans took to saying, “Buronyi enya (‘the white man has an abundance,’ corrupted to “Bronya”), womma yenkedzi (‘so let’s go and enjoy it’).”

Dr. Annan-Prah concludes, “And so we are here today to lay wreaths as a sign of unity for our own ancestors of Elmina who are dead, for the Dutch ancestors and governors who are dead, for the missionaries who have come here, and for all people of Elmina who make it what it is today.”

The Omanhen, Dutch ambassador, and KEEA District Assemblyman each lay a wreath at the base of the mausoleum. Mr. Mensah huffs and tells me that the Netherlands now provides financial assistance for various projects and causes in Elmina and Ghana. How generous, I think sarcastically. Having helped depopulate the land by buying and exporting slaves for over two centuries, it’s the least they can do.

The procession continues to the durbar by the Elmina castle, but I linger in the cemetery and take a good look at the whitewashed cement tombs. Most of them contain the remains of Dutch men who orchestrated the forced exodus of people, some who were possibly my ancestors. Yet, here it is, 2003, and homage is still paid to their friendship.

My book research on the slave trade floods back, filling in the essential piece: the Dutch inhabited the Elmina castle for over two hundred and thirty years, but they didn’t imprison masses of Elminans in the castle’s dungeons to take to the Americas. If they had, there’d be no Elmina to speak of today. Those local rulers who visited the castle
Kim Foote

yearly in the name of peace and renewal were trading partners of the Dutch. If not for their cooperation—and if not for the Dutch treating them with at least the semblance of diplomacy—the Dutch couldn’t have secured most of their trade goods, which included slaves.

As I leave the cemetery and head to the durbar, I remember Mr. Mensah telling me something that I now find ironic in light of how Elminia and the Netherlands view their historical relationship: the Dutch didn’t want blacks to be buried in their cemetery. A few Ghanaians were eventually granted burials there, but for some of them, their families had to petition for it.

In a way, I’m now glad that the family who invited us to share Bronya with them didn’t display any artifacts like chains or branding irons. These objects might have suggested their ancestors’ involvement in the enslavement of mine.

I’ve attended Bronya hoping to witness age-old secrets, but I’ve come away with a more important message. I’m reminded of the complexity of history—the slave trade and its aftermath. Though some Elminans today are struggling financially, their ancestors might have grown wealthy because of trading with the Dutch. It’s no wonder, then, that Elminans were irate when their Dutch “friends” abandoned slave trading in the 1800s—when it had stopped earning a profit for them—and sold their West African castles and forts to the British, all without first informing the Elminans. And now, almost one hundred and fifty years after the Dutch have left, Elminans continue the tradition of inviting them back each January—to once again receive buronyi’s gifts.
**Debra Gwartney**

**My Grandfather’s Body**

It’s a summer’s day in the mid-1960s and I’m next to Grandpa Ron in his scratchy brown reclining chair in the living room of their tidy house in Salmon, Idaho. The recliner’s arm presses hard on my ribs, squeezed as I am by my grandfather’s belly, which reminds me of a sun-hardened mound of sand at the beach. Mamie, my grandmother, is in the kitchen making dinner (I smell floured cube steaks on her hot fry pan, onions and potatoes), as Grandpa Ron has just come home from the newspaper where he’s the owner of each inky station and of the giant press that churns out the twice-weekly Recorder-Herald. Owner of the clickity-clack linotype machines, where two women key in strings of words that emerge from the side on thin lead strips. Sometimes one of them types my name and out pops a warm sliver of metal. I press the rectangle into an inkpad and stamp my childhood name on scraps of newsprint that litter the floor. Debbie, Debbie, Debbie.

At the end of each workday at the paper, Grandpa Ron plunges his hands into a barrel of orange flakes at the back of the shop and lathers up in the sink, soaping his black fingers and palms. When I’m there with him—and after he pulls the rubber apron from his chest—he reaches up to the box on the shelf above the percolator and I close my eyes and open my mouth as he instructs. I hear the sizzle of sugar on my tongue as he lays a sugar cube on it. I close my mouth around the crackle of sweetness against my teeth.

Here in his house, with my skinny self against his belly in the scratchy brown chair, I keep still like Grandpa tells me to while he sips his after-work drink, one jigger of Jim Beam to one jigger of water poured over ice. A pile of dark brown shells, split and broken, sit on the edge of his napkin. He calls these nuts “nigger toes,” which won’t cause a ripple in me for another decade, and even then I won’t know how to connect the word with the man who once said it. Beyond the pile of shells are four crackers and four slices of cheddar, too tangy for me, yet years later this mingled taste—whisky and a hint of crisp wheat and sharp cheese—can nearly make me cry.
In November of 1974, I stood in my family’s kitchen in Boise making a ham and iceberg lettuce sandwich on Wonder Bread. I was thinking about the things that once surrounded my grandfather, the splintered nutshell, the evening cocktail, a box of sugar cubes on a high shelf, the hum and whir of his press. My mind tried to stay on Grandpa Ron, but my mother on the other side of the kitchen counter was making too much noise, telling me to hurry up, hurry up. It was time to go see her father’s body at the funeral home. I was to put away the bread and screw the top on the Miracle Whip and right this minute; I was making everyone late to Grandpa’s viewing.

I shut my sandwich, the top milky slice pressed on crunchy lettuce until dressing squeezed out the sides like toothpaste, and didn’t glance up at her, didn’t answer—though surely my mother saw me flinch at the irritation in her voice. It wasn’t exactly annoyance I aimed back at her insistence, but something close to that. I’d already cancelled plans with my high school friends, our night out replaced by all this talk of funeral and graves and already the thick smell of mums in the house, not to mention neighbors dropping by with green bean and hamburger casseroles and my white-haired Mamie frail on the edge of the sofa, raising and lowering her coffee cup to her lips like a pump.

From this vantage of many years, I can say it wasn’t entirely teenage callousness, myself as center of the world, that made me wish my grandfather wasn’t dead that day, so I could call my friends to come get me for hours of aimless driving while we searched for boys and a rumored kegger in the hills above town. I also simply didn’t want him to be gone and had no other way to cope with his absence than to hold a desire to keep things plodding along as usual. I hadn’t sat in his chair with him or visited his newspaper for a long time, many years, but I still needed Grandpa Ron to be the fixture he’d been. I needed to know that he and Mamie were in Arizona golfing and drinking Jim Beam cocktails on the stroke of five, walking down to the country club for steaks and dancing once the saguaro they’d planted out front got silhouetted against a black sky. It seemed to me at the time that nothing was safe unless my grandparents were going about their normal lives, and, up here in Idaho, we were going about ours.

My mother told me again to put the meat back in the refrigerator, her fists balled up now, and to go down to my room to put on a dress and good shoes. I picked up my sandwich and headed toward the stairs, ignoring her determination that I stare at a dead and casketed
man who’d had a heart attack down in Mesa two days earlier. I took a bite and turned to throw her a line, spoken with my mouth full to the lips: I wasn’t going. My mother stepped back, shocked, I think, by a willfulness that was unlike me, her obedient oldest kid. She was about to respond, to yell or cry, but I ducked into the stairwell to get away. I didn’t understand my own refusal to do this part of the burying, this last look before he went under for good. And I wasn’t sure why I was shaky and hot with rage just thinking about it. Who was I mad at? Death? My grandfather for leaving me? Or was I smart enough back then to be mad at my grandfather for leaving my mother?

My grandmother Mamie, in a space of five years, had watched four of her own babies die at birth. I’ve heard that for a long time she rarely spoke and refused to sign her name to a letter or a check or, later, to a school form for my mom. She buttoned herself tight as a cardigan sweater. As the only child of that distant mother, my own mom had attached herself to Grandpa Ron when she was a toddler. She’d stayed attached. He was her protector and the even keel of his uneven family. If Grandpa Ron lost faith in my mother when she got pregnant at seventeen, I—the result of that high school tryst—never detected it. He was steady for her, and for me, until he was gone.

Grandpa Ron was a different kind of man than the men of my father’s family, who also lived in the same little town tucked in the eastern side of Idaho. The Gwartneys were livelier and adventurous, quicker to fury. A horse, a Scout truck, or a broken faucet was a stupid son-of-a-bitch when Grandpa Bob got fed up. My father’s son-of-a-bitch was even louder than his father’s and often came with a kick or a whack, though my sisters and I were usually just dummies. Sometimes we were ding-a-lings.

At Mamie and Grandpa Ron’s house, we were either pixies or pills when we got in the way, but mostly we were invited in and fussed over, Mamie proclaiming that my brother needed a haircut and pulling him up on a stool next to the sink, already reaching for razor-sharp scissors, or sterilizing a needle because my sister’s thumb had gone red and full of pus around an old splinter. These grandparents barely got by like everyone else, but they had an aura of the economic well-to-do, a kind of gentility respected by most everyone in town. Owning the newspaper got them in with the social crowd, I suppose, but they also had a charm and generosity toward others. When they’d moved to Salmon as a young couple with their one surviving child
(my grandmother’s air of gloom quickly drawing in women who’d take care of her, soothe her), they were invited to join the Thursday picnic group and monthly dinner club and church societies and philanthropies. My more raucous paternal grandparents were not. When my father mentioned recently that Grandpa Ron could “put away the liquor like nobody else,” I refused to believe it. Grandpa Bob is the one I remember coming in stumbling loud from the bars late at night (though at age forty-five he quit and hasn’t had a drink since). Over on the other side of the river, the whiskey on Grandpa Ron’s breath was faint and reassuring.

When I was around, Grandpa Ron asked about my friends and school like he meant it, an inquiry that wouldn’t have happened at the Gwartney house. That family instead had reassuringly ordinary conversations about things like hunting, basketball scores, and how much potato salad to order from the IGA before the delivery boy went home. My father and his father took my brother into the hills to shoot at cans, and down to the shop to measure horse trailers and wheel wells. Grandpa Ron took me, as well as my brother and sisters, for rides in his motorboat, trout fishing, and let me sit on the press as he single-fed the latest issue of the newspaper through giant rollers. I also noticed how he avoided my father—the dispute between them was long and, to me, mysterious. A mystery, that is, until I could do the math and figure out that my dad was a sophomore in high school when he got my mom pregnant, a boy too stubborn to let his new wife’s father help or advise. No interference, even of the kindest variety, was allowed in my father’s house. So I found it was best not to bring up how comforted I felt by my maternal grandfather, especially around my dad.

And my mom—she quietly counted on her father in a way she couldn’t have explained to anyone, not before she became a teenage mother and not after. Nor could she have explained to me that day of our standoff over Grandpa’s viewing that grief comes out looking exactly like anger. In the first days after his death, she was a cannon about to blow and, without discussion, she and I worked out what to do with her rage. She needed someone to be mad at and there I was, willing to make her mad. I’d refused to go along to the viewing both because I truly didn’t want to see my grandfather dead, but also so she could distract herself from his death by becoming thoroughly pissed about how I’d let her down.

“This is the hardest day of my life,” she yelled down the stairs. She
was, by then, on the verge of leaving for the funeral home. I was still huddled on the last dark step, looking up at this thirty-four-year-old mother who had one of my sisters in each hand. In front of her, my brother pulled at his tie, and, outside, my dad honked the horn of the car. “Can’t you do this one thing for me on the hardest day of my life?”

In Salmon, Idaho, exactly at noon, there’s a minute-long siren. It starts off as a moan, and then wails upward. The sound meant fire when a blaze sparked in the dry hills anywhere within county limits. In the town of Salmon at noon it signified a break in the day, a time to eat and rest. Great-Granddad at the hardware store flipped the closed sign at the door so he could walk up the street for his bowl of cod stew or a bacon sandwich. In the back of the shop, Grandpa Bob lay down his welding tools and took off his mask, wiping the black smear around his eyes, and made his way to the City News Stand to drink coffee and eat at the counter while his wife, my Grandma Lois, sat at the teacher’s table over at the high school cafeteria for her meal. Down the street, tucked in between the Crescent Club and Wally’s Cafe, Mamie and Grandpa Ron shut down the linotype machines and the press while the newspaper’s employees slipped out of their heavy aprons for an hour’s break.

On the days I was at the newspaper when the whistle blew, I went to lunch with my grandparents. Particularly fine were the times I was without brother or sisters, an only child again for the briefest of moments. I hopped in the back seat of the tan Wagoneer and rode along to the sagebrush-covered bench that rimmed the town, up to their green house surrounded by greener lawn to eat hamburger patties and cold cottage cheese, tomato and cucumber slices, and slippery canned peaches.

I often spent the night at their house, as well, in my mother’s old bedroom. I remember one of those evenings when I was six or seven and sick, my throat burning into my ears each time I inhaled. A cold had been coming on all day, and the sticky ache of a fever deepened as I lay in the dark wishing for Mamie. I’d rolled into a ball, half-awake, so somehow it made sense when the alarm went off not at high noon but in the dead of night. At last, I thought, a sound to wake my grandparents and bring them to me.

Mamie and Grandpa, in their room across the hall, rose and shuffled across the floor. They spoke softly, though I heard urgency in my grandpa’s growled whisper. I snuggled into the bedcovers that had been my mother’s and waited. Grandpa Ron left the house, the
Debra Gwartney

screen door slamming, then Mamie in her nervous way inched to the side of my bed to see if I were awake. “There’s a fire,” she said after she saw my eyes open. She sat near me and touched my arm. “Grandpa went to help.”

By the time Mamie had brought me a steaming cup of hot lemonade—her cure for cold symptoms—and baby aspirin, the siren had stopped. We sat together with the light glowing on the bedside table, and she pushed back my hair, staring out the window with a weary expression. The phone had rung while she was in the kitchen and now, in staccato sentences that weren’t aimed at me but at the ceiling, she said that the operator had called to say the Crescent Club was on fire, a bar on Main Street next to the Recorder-Herald. Mamie fretted, their livelihood on the line, her husband in danger. I didn’t know about the many layers of her anxiety back then, but I do remember thinking I should stay awake with her. Except sleep pushed against me, the specks of orange aspirin melted now on my tongue and the cup of hot liquid in my belly. My eyes shut as the stinging in my throat eased. I was sure my grandfather would stop the fire, and I knew he, along with Grandpa Bob and other men in town, would do it quickly. I opened my eyes briefly to see Mamie stare out the window, unblinking, but the sight didn’t unsettle me. My grandmother was coated with a sadness I’d become accustomed to. Like the wax around some kinds of cheese, it was compact around her, bending to her shape, so that I knew her sadness as well as I knew her.

At some point in my life I began to wonder if Grandpa Ron had purged his grief over their four dead children in a sudden burst—the first heart attack he’d had several years before I was born. As if the sorrow he felt came out in one anguished crack, leaving him tired and spent, but able to push on. He smiled more than my grandmother did, and seemed easier with himself and with the world. His hands weren’t jittery like Mamie’s. No one knew why their perfect, plump babies had slipped away moments after birth, and I think now that even if Mamie had understood the reason for their deaths—the Rh factor in her blood discovered by scientists a few years later—she would have been sunk. But Grandpa Ron had managed—at least in my mind he had—to turn his full attention to the one child they had left, and to the newspaper he made from scratch twice a week.

The night of the fire I was far into sleep by the time my grandfather returned. The next morning, after he ate a plate of sourdough pancakes
topped with Mamie’s chokecherry syrup, he let me drive downtown with him, where he set me on his shoulders to walk through the charred remains of the bar and into the *Recorder-Herald* offices. Although the newspaper production room smelled smoky and made my eyes sting, nothing had burned, not the press, not the cardboard bucket of flaky soap. Grandpa put me on the floor, popped a sugar cube in my mouth before he plunked one in his coffee, then he set the headline that would announce the fire.

After he died, my mother and I (again without discussion) both knew Mamie wouldn’t recover. Grandpa Ron had kept her together with a practicality he’d learned growing up on his Swedish family’s Idaho potato farm along with three beefy brothers and two sisters named Betty and Jo, sturdy women who had large hands for kneading dough and pitching hay. The brothers were gone, one after another, my grandfather the last. Each had a fatal heart attack at age sixty-four.

Grandpa was dead and Mamie was lost and my mother looked every minute as if no one could understand what had disappeared from her. She’d traveled every spring to the cemetery in Southern Idaho to tend the wild rose bushes planted on the humped soil of her sister’s and brothers’ grave, near the headstone that said “Budded on earth to bloom in heaven.” My mom pressed tulip and daffodil bulbs in the dirt and spread lobelia seed, but no matter how many got planted, they never drew out the smallest sign from a sibling. And now it would be worse, her father gone silent, too. Who would my mother lean on when she was exhausted by loneliness and grief?

One fall when I was maybe ten years old, my grandparents stopped to visit us, as they normally did, on their way to Arizona for the winter. Sometime during that week, Mamie decided to make her family’s Dutch recipe for chicken and noodles. She spent the afternoon with her hands in flour and egg, mixing dough the color of butter. Rolling it out, a neat rectangle, she cut long ribbons that she dunked into boiling water before adding their wilted lengths to a steaming pot of chicken and vegetables. The hair around her face curled and absorbed the scent of rosemary that she’d rubbed together in her palms.

My brothers and sisters and I were products of the 1970s—accustomed to SpaghettiOs out of the can and frozen corn dogs; my mother was a woman of the same era, eager to try out the latest flavors
of Rice-A-Roni or Hamburger Helper that appeared at the grocery store. The scent of this meal, the fat and oily homemade noodles, made my stomach hurt. I avoided the kitchen most of the afternoon, dreading dinnertime. When we finally sat down, my sisters and I got away with nibbling the edges of the stew, but my brother Ron couldn’t try even a bite. His fork was poised over the bowl, but it didn’t move. “Eat,” my father said to him. Ron’s thin lips tightened. “Eat it,” my father said louder. Ron lowered his fork to the dish, raised it empty again.

Long before, my siblings and I had cast my dad as the mean man and Grandpa Ron as the kind man, and this night’s dynamic played out as we would have predicted: The next time my father ordered my brother to eat the noodles, my mom objected and Mamie pleaded with my father to let it go, that it didn’t matter. Dad said nothing, but his glare deepened, as did his resolve that my brother wouldn’t move until the stew was gone.

That’s when my grandfather came in from the kitchen where he’d been pouring himself a cup of coffee.

“Why don’t you leave the boy be?” Grandpa said to my silent father.

The three of them sat at the table, Mike at one end, Big Ron at the other, Little Ron in the middle, not speaking. The only sound, my grandfather’s sips against the hot edge of the cup. My sister and I had retreated to our room and watched through a crack in the door, leaning against each other, tangled in our long flannel nightgowns. Mamie had slipped downstairs to fret, and my mother folded towels in the nearby laundry room, her hands now and then thumping the top of the metal dryer.

I don’t remember who ended it, but eventually my father muttered through the darkness, “Go to bed,” and Ron ran to his room. My sister and I scurried to get under our own covers before anyone came in to check on us. And as usual, we fell asleep giving my grandfather the credit for easing the storm that was our father.

So now that this adversary was dead, what was churning in my dad? The father-in-law who’d fought with him over the smallest things, who often disapproved of him, who at times tempered him at just the right moment, wouldn’t be coming back to our house. Grandpa Ron wouldn’t sit at my dad’s table to challenge him about anything. That afternoon of the viewing, my father had driven my mother and Mamie and my brother and sisters to the funeral home. They’d walked to the edge of the casket to look in together. What did they see there? What did they need to see in order to reconfigure as a family and go on?
The funeral home and its adjacent cemetery were out on the edge of Boise on a road where rabbits lived and alfalfa grew. I drove there in my blue VW bug at twilight; it was raining hard, water splashing off the bare branches of the cottonwood trees towering over the graves. The next day a hearse would transport my grandfather’s body to the Southern Idaho cemetery a hundred miles away where the babies were buried. We’d meet it there. But this late afternoon of the viewing day his body was still in this building. I pulled into the parking lot, turned off the car, and sat in front of the Cloverdale Funeral Home.

The large front door swung open and a woman made a quick sweep of the porch with a long-handled broom. After she went in, I dashed to the entrance myself. She looked up, frightened, when I came through the door she’d just shut. When the fright fell from her face, she just looked exhausted, wondering what a wet teenage girl would want at this time of the evening.

I asked her if I could see my grandfather.

“Of course,” she said then, a little too fast, standing up to lead me to the dim room at the front of the building where a casket was set up on a shiny metal perch and surrounded by folding chairs. “Take your time. Take all the time you need.”

I wished she hadn’t given me so much permission. I’d hoped, instead, that she’d say there was time for a quick glance and no more; or better yet, would remind me that my other family members had left hours ago and that I was too late. But she swept a curtain closed behind me, and left me alone. The scent from two sprays of flowers at the head of Grandpa’s wood casket wafted across the room. I picked up a chair and moved it closer. I didn’t sit, but held the chair’s metal back. I had to look in soon, to examine the space for what my mother had wanted me to see, even while I realized I’d never tell her I’d seen it. I wouldn’t tell her so she could keep on being furious with me if she needed to. I had my own reasons, too: I had changed my mind abruptly about seeing my grandfather’s body, and I wanted to make this last moment with him about me and not about her—not about the ache and hurt in my mother that was suffocating and scaring me more than I’d ever been scared where she was concerned.

I’d thought I wanted to remember him alive, with whiskey and sharp cheese on his breath. The small grunt he’d make when he lifted the heavy apron over his head. The way he’d hold my hand when we walked down the street to Wally’s Cafe, where he’d buy me a cake donut and a frothy glass of milk. Yet something more powerful than
I could name had compelled me out to the funeral home on this rainy night, and pushed me now to step to the edge of his last bed, to look down on his waxen face and sealed eyes.

To gaze into a hole that would not again be filled.
We’d been wringing our hands
for decades, it seemed,
squinting toward that noisy year. We’d hoarded
all the best words: “Horology”
for instance, and “the universal whorl,”
“the ratcheting racket,”
“nothing but flit and husk.”
Those little Lazaruses made us born-again
believers.
    We couldn’t help but want the Resurrection.
We couldn’t help but want to swarm.
We were growing sick
of visual imagery: so much sepia tone & moon glow,
so many skeins of hand-spun yarn.
    We’d been wanting the infinite
ticks and shrieks, the cacophonous shirring, the whirring.
Most of us barely heard a thing.
    Most of us heard
only the usual orchestra, jack-dawed over the rhythm
of the house band.
    Half of us were praising Brood Ex,
the other half insisting “Brood Ten rocks!”
    Either way,
no one was really listening. Either way, we wanted to press
our bodies together; we couldn’t help
    but get up and dance.
Mike Puican

Good Friday

Procession through Peñalolén in Santiago,
Chile, reenacting the Stations of the Cross

Santiago, the pigeons fly through our forgetfulness. The prayers release us from our intentions; release us from the body falling to the street, the stain of blood by the bus stand. Santiago, heart crazy with hope, unfilled as an empty coffin, your men once stood with bound hands in the soccer stadium. They knew who they were. They knew what their future was. They could say anything.

Today we say the Stations of the Cross: Pigeon, Stick, Fire, Water, Butcher, Unmoving chest of the deacon’s wife, Children hiding under cars waiting for soldiers to leave, Corpses with ancient chambers still thudding inside their hearts, Smoke rising from students splayed across the playing field.

Black smoke gathers inside our mouths. A man is strapped to a cross and raised above the crowd. We gather around him. Our prayers are said loud and open-throated. They are the same prayers of the rising ghosts. As the procession moves through the neighborhood, the white lips on corpses begin to open. Now that heaven’s been destroyed, we can say anything.
When the doorbell rang, your hand reached out from sleep, as if to stop the door from opening, even the air. Please, don’t, your palm begged. A line of ghosts—Abraham, Isaac and Sarah—followed the mohel. When he lifted his prayer shawl, wrapping it over his shoulders, they sat beside me, wobbling on the couch.

The man came to us with a satchel full of God and named you Noah—to live to study Torah and stand under the canopy, to wail your way back to Abraham’s tent. As I was witness, three men held you: the sandek kept you on his lap, Elijah beheld you from his chair, your father carried you all the hours after.

It is said that God punished an evil world, all but Noah, who was good, and for forty days and nights, floods—forgive us your tears. You were only eight days old, you hadn’t even laughed yet. Your strong legs kicked and fought. Wine on your tongue would not console, could never dull such loneliness. Our ancient book wailed under your hands: Have mercy, show mercy, mercy.
Shana Ritter

Rosh Hashanah

Apples and honey
dipped once, twice,
three times. We can make it a rhyme
a dance with our hands
a movement of mouths and lips
to embrace sweetness.

Honey spilled on hair and fingertips
honey lingering thick
on our tongues
sweet and substantial
drained from work.

Honey, salt and bread
when you move to a new home,
honey and apples for a new year,
dip once and twice and three times
we submerge in the sticky sweetness,
lick it down to the core.

Later at dusk
we walk to the stream,
take a smooth stone
rub it round in our palms
and toss it to the current.

We empty our pockets
into water and air
setting the old year loose
honey still tasting in our mouths.
Shane Seely

First Anniversary

for Sonia

I will bring you paper—

by the sheaf, by the ream, by the leaf,
onionskin, acid-free, oak tag, construction,
wax paper, parchment, archival quality,
wallpaper, cigarette paper, toilet paper, paper towels,
old calendars, memoranda,
maps and cash, charts and books,
certificates, treatises, dissertations, magazines,
translated poems with scribbled annotations,
newspaper clippings about life-saving dogs
and whimsical contests in foreign countries,
bags of shredded documents from medical and insurance offices,
origami, credit card bills, place markers from fancy dinners,
syllabi, junk mail, comic books, business cards,
name tags saying Hi My Name Is on which the wearers
have written false names,
this notebook, the Bill of Rights, a grocery bag,
my Earth Science lab notebook from junior high
covered with artful renderings of rock band names,
a note someone left me once for parking too close to his car
that said next time leave a can opener, asshole—
by the leaf, by the sheaf, by the ream
I will leave it at your feet
on our first anniversary (that remembrance
thinner than paper, translucent
but with a cumulative gravity,
the first page of a long mystery
thrillingly unsolved).
Leslie St. John

After Epithalamia

Empty the hope chest of its dishes.
Leave Christmas ornaments wrapped
in newspaper. Close the wedding album.
No, keep it in the corner of the crawl
space in the attic. Rubber-band the cards
that say how to love and for how long.

If the toaster makes you cry—silliest
birthday gift—its blink-on red light
and tray of burnt bread crumbs,
eat cereal for breakfast instead.

Spend an afternoon on the phone
with your bridesmaids,
the one with new breasts, the one
with a farm and kids and pigs,
the one who dances and doesn’t talk
to you anymore, the one getting married.
Admit that you can’t be in her wedding.
Hang up the phone before she answers.

Tell the groom you love him like
birds love iced-over powerlines.

And it’s okay if you both keep
looking to the accompanist,
surprised by the piano’s flatness,
handful of stones falling into sand.
Sylvia’s Wedding Reception

Once inside the Chinese box,
a sedan chair heavily curtained
so the bride won’t see a widow,
the groomsmen hoist her into the air.

Gold ribbons dovetailing in the wind,
red fabric a river upon the sidewalk;
they carefully step over cracks, heel-ball-toe, heel-ball-toe.

Perhaps she is a story
painted on a plate
with a single light stroke,
a gossamer sack of lotus seeds
and nutmeg, a ribbon wound
into her mother’s waist-length braid.

Everyone, restaurant patrons and relatives
of relatives, pretends surprise as she steps out, one beaded slipper at a time.
Bowing before her husband, part-owner
of China Buffet and Putt-Putt Time,
her back is straight as legs bend
to a ‘less than’ sign.

I can see in her white knuckles
that she’s trying to get it right—
this ceremony her aunts talk-storied
while stuffing dumplings with crab
or hanging mirrors in the new house.
This morning while it was still dark, we got ready in the yoke-yellow baby room. Sylvia leaned over the rail of the crib, flattened her hand on the empty mattress.

Fresh paint and two mimosas made me slightly sick. I grin/grimaced while Sylvia watched me shove a second stick through my taut blond bun.

During three years of college dance performances, she had shown me how the pointed end enters first through the bottom, then twists tightly at the top. But I still don’t have the art of piling and pinning. Such efficiency in the graceful sweep, the functional bind.

Marriage—a synonym for “taking a daughter-in-law”—to a restaurant, a Candy Land golf course, a two-bedroom house in Cabot, Arkansas.

Carrying my plain white plate down the buffet line, I imagine dipping asparagus in soy sauce, brushing it across the ceramic surface: a long thinning S for Sylvia’s arabesques, a small knot for this day, a large bough for her ancestors, a faint ring around the rim for the baby warm under her dress, carved within her.
Foot Washing

I draw bath water, stir in essential lavender and mint, place violets, roses, and peonies face up—they float like straw hats. I’ve wanted to do this, to wash someone’s feet, a sign of humility and adoration. And I hate feet, their eyelash cracks along toe creases, heels rough as chapped pig hide, how they look older than any part of the body. But Eva is leaving the country soon, so I choose this gift. She slips one foot in, then the other as she sits on edge of the tub. The corners of her mouth turn up slightly, her fingers curl under the towel. I would be embarrassed too. I lean over the tub and lift her foot from behind the ankle. This muscular arch, formed like the raised cobblestones she will walk upon. Sandal tan lines from our summer, already fading. I pour water from my cupped hand; both of us try not to laugh because we know this is singular, something to keep inside a jewelry box like the polished rock she took from her grandfather’s collection or the sand dollar I still keep wrapped in folds of toilet paper. The mint feels like cool tongues
on my fingers. Is Eva wondering how she’ll tell it in French? *Pied-Laver… Bain de Pieds.* Rose hips break apart in the water.
Adrienne Su

In Labor

Those who’ve been there understand
the choice of preposition: not at or on,
not through or under. Labor’s a stanza,
room into which no one follows entirely.
A good midwife gets to the doorjamb;
exceptional nurses hang behind her, calmly
assessing your voice. The father, however
sensitive or kind, turns instantly inept,
a gesturing fool locked out forever.

Looking back from the side of the cliff,
you wonder how you ever trusted this
mortal whose cheerful ovations are rife
with presumptuous ignorance. How
would he be able to tell if you were
doing great? Pain, like Charon, rows
you across into hell; as labor’s language
translates into curses in your own,
you take all names in vain, then engage
with the only person here who’s having
as tough a time as you, the one who wants
to exit the stanza. Labor’s the hardest-working
working vacation, last unequivocal getaway
in a long line of days. Once upon a time
you could be bought with nifty sayings


Adrienne Su

like **mind over matter** or **love conquers all**—but love turns out sometimes to be helpless, and mind to be made out of matter.
Alison Townsend

Unexpected Harvest

Jefferson County resident Jim Reu found an unusual item while combining his field recently: a wedding gown, likely from the August 15th tornado that hit Stoughton [Wisconsin]....The wedding gown is muddy and has a few tears in it, but Reu is hoping it can be returned to its owner.

—Stoughton Courier-Hub, November 3, 2005

Of course it’s from the tornado.
That’s what we want to believe, as much as we hope the photograph will help the dress find its way back to the woman it belongs to.
But as the fields around town hum, rumbling with the sound of combines harvesting the last soybeans and corn, trucks piled high with beds of tumbled gold, it’s hard not to think it might be Persephone’s, dropped or torn off as someone whose face she couldn’t see dragged her under, the lacy overdress ripping, its medallion pattern—visible where the farmer and his son hold it up in the photo—printed with mud where he pushed her down, dark in her eyes, dark in her mouth, dark the earth that entered her body. Hard not to think she might have been out there, walking the green fields when the whirlwind hit, her body slender as an ear of corn, braid like a tassel coming undone.
And innocent too, girl trying on her mother’s wedding dress without knowing what it means, marriage a cave lit by fires that burn bright then dark, so close together it’s sometimes hard to tell the difference, or understand why joy cradles sadness in its palm, dropping it into the ground that it may sprout from blackness.
Years after my mother died, my aunt sent me
her wedding gown, still stored in its satin-ribboned,
Wanamaker’s box, labeled “Mary’s Dress” with peacock
blue ink in my grandmother’s spiky hand.
I remember how I knelt before the box that evening,
one candle burning, making a ritual of the opening,
scared of what might fly out, afraid the dress
(which I’d seen only in pictures) might have crumbled
into dust, all its pleats and ruffles dissolving.

And how surprised I was to find it,
intact in its tissue shroud, virginal
(though I’m not sure she was), along
with the veil she’d made herself, rosettes
of lace stitched across its gauzy surface,
and the white kid slippers (a size too small
for me), still stained with dirt—
from when she’d walked across the garden
at my grandmother’s farm to where my father
waited, her face radiant, exactly the way
a bride’s is supposed to be, neither of them
guessing what lay ahead, cancer already drowsing
in her breast, and further down, like hidden treasure,
three eggs that would become her children.
Ruby Slippers

in memory of Richard Hunt

I’m not looking for ruby slippers
when I dart into The Stolen Heart—the only
decent gift and home decor shop in our small
midwest town—searching for a valentine
to send a friend in England. But there
they are, perched on the padded edge
of a vintage jewel box, their rhinestone
bows sparkling with stars the size of sequins.
They are shiny and red as apples on the outside,
red as I imagine rubies must really be, painted
with the kind of enamel that shimmers
underneath, as if glitter were frozen
then polished to a sheen. And they’re gold
inside, as if made for fairies’ feet, not
some girl from Kansas. Or a woman like me,
stuck somewhere in the middle of my life
and worn down this gray January day
by the effort of holding melancholy at bay.
But there they are, real as my own hand,
picking them up and turning them over.
No price, so I walk to the front of the shop
to ask, not meaning to tell the owner
the story of you, my dead writer friend—
how I was Dorothy and you were Oz, my words
and secrets safer with you than God, the work
of finding a way back home our perennial subject—
my public reserve broken by these small shoes
that seem to have tumbled from the sky to my hand,
which the shopkeeper folds my fingers around,
explaining that the shoes were once really a pin,
whose tiny clasp has broken. And I think,
she says, smiling, you should have them for free,
getting out a small velvet bag to pack
the shoes more safely. We’d just mark them down
for our “broken box.” I believe they’re meant
for you. If you ever get that clasp
fixed, come back and show us.

Which is how I’ve come away with one valentine
and a pair of red shoes I look at in the car, washing
them with my tears, thinking about the kind of things
one does not say in poems: how I believed
in angels as a child, how I will never
have another friend like you, how the world
opens its arms to us when least expected,
making a path, lighting a fire at the cottage
hearth, creating a home where love may enter,
its small heels clicking toward us over
the flagstones, its rhinestone bows shining.

Alison Townsend
R. A. Villanueva

Mine will be a beautiful service

1.

When you bury me, fold
my arms, neat

over the plateau
of a double-breasted suit,

the angle of the lapel
matching my now

permanent expression.
Pressed, chemical,

I will look content,
but confused

as when you watched me turn
in my sleep, dreaming:

   of a Golgotha
in beeswax, a coffin

for swallows, a toothless augur
reading the flights and cries

of owls. You
will hear the cadence

of my voice, the snapping
oblique of my laugh. Among the votives
and canticles, you will mark,
with the tips of your thumbs,

lines of demarcation
between the fallow of my scalp

and the dunes of my forehead.
Quiet, you will paste

stray hairs back
into their place.

2. Memento Mori

All sod and taproot now, all bulb
and tuber and stemshoot Mulch throb,
lush with worms and slugs—we are never worth
more than this

Thrum of the earth, clatter-bulge of cicada shells
along a coffin’s hinges Teak and scented cedar
flushed with compost An elegy
of rot, this counterfeit reliquary

If you each day clutch
our pillows, press them to your face, pray
to take in some atom of me all
into the hollows of your chest, yes

I promise my ghost will find you
should you want someone else to love
All Souls’ Day

_Cemetario del Norte, Pagasa_

Here see the city of makeshift things:
ramshackle balustrades, stopgap pipes,
clotheslines of staples and twine.
What surer proof of the risen Christ
than this tomb-stacked city,
its lungs of bamboo. Gravestone town of scaffolds
and cellophane. Smoke-heft of burnt plastic,
of tin, match-lit ranges of ash. Where bouquets
we once tied to your name, tight
with ribboned silks and rubber bands,
now wilt on their shopfronts, soak
in rainwater and lime. Where blushed with dusts
they tag wintergreen chiclets, pat ricecakes
glazed with syrup, pour Coke
into Ziploc bags all to hawk at the gates.
_Lola,_ how warm their altars are. How their
noon-carved chancels rust in the sun and your
rosary-necked Pietà, _narra_-husk and polish
brushed smooth by their palms and kisses, rests
as we left it: bathed in novenas, an incense of coughs.
Davi Walders

Making Light

I collect menorahs. I can’t resist them. I love their eight eager holders, the high shammas waiting for light. I want all kinds—the little tin ones; the play-dough religious school ones; the elegant glass and ornate silver ones; the wick and oil ones; the ones I can’t leave behind at estate sales and markets.

I don’t trust miracles alone. I want to make my own light in the long dark nights. I want to see the blaze of oil, the blue sparks of fine candles—hand-dipped, rainbow colors, decorated with flowers and birds. Lighting takes time. The first bright candles gutter as I light the last, saying the prayers, but it doesn’t matter. I do not focus on

Greek tyrants or Maccabean bravery. I do not remember the Hasmonean line. I do not worry whether this is a celebration of a miracle, a rededication, or a military victory. All the long ago seasons and reasons deserve their light. Wicks, wax, and menorahs for family, friends, strangers, for moments of praising life in glowing circles of light.
On Honduran Airwaves: Saturday

It’s election time in Honduras. This morning I am awakened by gunshots and colonial music—blaring. I can’t decide exactly where the gunshots come from. I am pretty sure most of the shots come from my neighbor; but at dark o’clock in the morning, they seem to come from a solid heavy cannon sitting in my bathroom. At times the noise is so powerful that it sets off the car alarms of the two trucks on the street. All of this noise is backed by music with piccolos and drumming. I imagine men wearing knickers and bright red coats marching down the street. I think of the bullets being fired by my neighbor, and remember stories of riots in Asia—guns fired into the air, and men killed by gunshot wounds to the top of the head. The bullets have to land somewhere. I consider the physics of a speeding bullet. At the right height, a bullet can be dropped from a hand and another shot from a gun, and they will land in the same instant. It’s too early to be mulling over physics.

I climb from my rickety bed and stumble to the window. My watch says 5:45. I don’t see anything but the sky easing its way into the day. The mountains are loosening themselves of the clouds that swallowed them overnight. This could be a gentle scene to start the morning, but a car alarm is still ringing out like a siren. The music is no longer. There are no marching redcoats in the street, but I am standing in my boxers when I wish I were sleeping. The wake of the music and the guns has welcomed me to Saturday, ready or not.

Saturdays are strange days for me. During the week I feel like I live here. I feel I am part of this place, and that, in many ways, this place needs me. I teach fourth grade at one of the two elementary schools in town. On weekday mornings I wake up to an alarm. I go to a job, a purpose. I turn up the same streets, see the same people. I am like everyone else because I contribute and eat and sleep and have a place. On Saturdays I feel like an outsider, an observer. More often than not I wake up to noise, not an alarm. If I go out, people are on their way to the market. Even if I too am on my way to the market; even if I know
almost everyone along the way; even if I am going to buy something specific, I still feel like this—Saturday—is something that I can’t really be a part of. It is thoroughly Honduran. I am the gringo looking in.

The music came from a passing-by truck. There is music every Saturday morning; though, normally it starts later. Normally it doesn’t sound like a marching song from the 18th century—a snare drum rolling. Most Saturdays battered pickup trucks drive slowly up and down the cobblestone streets with old silver speakers on top. The speakers look like gramophones, and the music is crinkly with static. They play Latin music or American eighties songs. There was an entire month earlier this year when every Saturday morning I woke up to Bryan Adams asking me if I have ever really loved a woman. I have, Bryan, and she is sleeping somewhere too.

A half an hour later, the colonial music is coming again. When I look out the window I see a nicer pickup truck. The paint isn’t chipped; the windows aren’t cracked. It has speakers on top, but they don’t look nearly as rusty as the speakers I am used to. I catch a few words of the song and realize that this is political music. The truck passes as quickly as it approached. The sound’s waves slam together until it passes, and they chase the truck down the road—the pitch lowering.

At 8:00, the normal Saturday morning trucks start their rounds. The town is coming alive. Women from the villages around town have come in for the market. Other women with bright aprons carry huge baskets of bread on their head door to door. They yell through the closed door, ¿va a querer pan? Will you want bread? Horses clatter down the street. An old man leads a mule loaded down with sticks—he’s selling firewood for ovens.

The trucks with the speakers are selling fruit from the back. The music crackles and wails, and then a man comes over it and says, recuerden que hay sandía fresca (remember that we have fresh watermelon). He pokes along the street as men bounce by on their bikes. With the microphone in one hand and the steering wheel in the other, he interrupts the music like a DJ on the radio. A short sentence, music, a few more words, music, talking. Adolescent boys sit on the sides of the truck bed, with their feet hanging into the street. When a door opens and a large woman emerges into its frame holding a small wad of money, a boy drops down, grabs a watermelon with two hands, jogs it across the street, and makes the exchange. The driver/emcee releases the button on the microphone (which looks more like a CB receiver), and the fuzzy music starts up again.
Something has come alive in the park. Above all of the Saturday morning clamor, I hear a voice. I am rinsing socks in my pila (a giant cement sink) when I hear him start talking about a new time. I do laundry every Saturday morning. I try to remind myself that I do live here. I have dirty clothes here that I clean only to dirty again. The park is four blocks away, but I hear him clearly. This is no cheap sound system, and with it, he is trying to convince me to vote for Miguel.

I have seen Miguel’s face on the TV and on posters for the past few months. He is an unlikely-looking presidential candidate. He is big for a Honduran. 6’2” at least, and a little heavy. He slicks his black hair straight back and wears his pants a little higher than he should. When he smiles, which he does often on TV, there is a very noticeable gap between his front teeth. He has big, clumsy-looking hands. I’ve been rereading All the King’s Men for the past few weeks, and I think I have visualized Miguel’s hands for Willie Talos’s.

One of my students, Carlos, talks about Miguel all of the time. Miguel is a superhero in Carlos’s world. He’s the only one in the class who feels that way. Carlos’s dad is a congressman—his tenure (as well as the large house he is building) depends on Miguel’s future. Everyone else’s parents have informed them that Miguel isn’t good for the country. He is the mayor of the capital, and he has an authoritarian reputation. Despite all of his public smiling, he is implementing a zero-tolerance policy against gangs, and I have even heard subtle rumors that death squads may not be too far off. He is very public about his wish to establish a death penalty. Honduran jails are overflowing.

The man’s voice is heated for only a moment. Music then backs his voice. It is happy and rhythmic, and he is asking for volunteers to compete for prizes. I imagine a concert-like audience, volunteers jumping up and down. He says a comedian will come up soon. Just under the voice and the noise, I can hear a different style of music. An evangelical church is singing. A group of voices are strewn together while a louder but a bit-off-key voice rings through the microphone. I imagine everyone standing. Hands are raised.

As a teacher I have to be the middle ground. I have to be an objective voice of reason. Six months ago when I was preparing to move to Honduras, I never would have expected the need to deflect so many political arguments in a class of ten-year-olds. I was trying to form a curriculum based on ecology—the school’s mission—not investigate effective ways to keep my students from partisan bickering. It’s not
just politics. It’s also religion. Some of my students are evangélicos while others are Catholic. They argue about the role of the Virgin Mary, about the saints. Today, though, is Saturday. I don’t have to be the objective teacher. I’m not even a resident today—I’m an observer, and I woke up tired of all the noise.

Advertising in Honduras equates to shouting. The louder the better. As I walk out my door to investigate the happenings in the park, I am hit full force by the noise that had been somewhat dampened by my walls. The man in the park shouts about Miguel, the evangelical church builds to a chorus, the fruit truck says there are also strawberries, and a woman further up the street yells that she has empanadas. I don’t know why I would want to leave my apartment when I clearly have all I could need: politics, religion, and food.

On my way to the park I have a hard time finding the exact building that houses the evangelical singing. Most evangelical churches here don’t have signs or church-like buildings. They aren’t concerned with aesthetics, only with worship. I am on my way to the main park, where a two-hundred-and-fifty-year-old Catholic church stands sturdily. It is white with an intricately designed arch preceding the door. This is the “youngest” Catholic church in town. The church beside the school where I teach is dated mid-17th century. Catholicism had a rocky beginning in this region of Honduras. The majority of people in the state of Lempira, where I live, were Lenca, and they fled or fought or superficially accepted the religion. Now, though, this is a Catholic world, and all that’s left of the Lenca are festivals and people deep in the mountains. Here people will crawl on their knees up the aisle in the Catholic church; children are named Jesús and María.

In the midst of the profoundly Catholic place, a new religion has come. Evangelical churches are growing at rates that are unimaginable. This new religion hasn’t come with a sword as Catholicism came, but it often does come with a sharp tongue. Of the Protestant growth in the country, most is Pentecostal, and their services tend to be emotional and fiery. People may speak in tongues or fall on the floor. It certainly allows the same vigor that would cause someone to crawl up the aisle of a Catholic church. The friction between this up-and-coming religion and Catholicism is more drastic than the arguments I get in my class. Much of the time, this new evangelical growth will tell people of the “faults” of Catholicism. They call it idolatry. They smirk at the “un-biblical” way Mary is portrayed and worshipped.
They even critique other evangelical churches and speak about the opportunity to create a better church. A better denomination. A righteous church. This is an intensely American idea—the search for the new, pure church. America has more denominations than it can count, and they’re almost all sending missionaries to Latin America.

As a Protestant Christian, I am a little offended by many of these forming churches, by their aggression toward Catholicism. This isn’t my country, but often it is my countrymen bringing such a message/tactic. Usually American missionaries bring the word. They start the churches—usually in someone’s house, and when more money is raised they seek a building. Then more money for guitars and amps and speakers. There are two wealthy churches in town, and they are loud. They are so loud that the people within a block are able to experience the service without even going. There is a young American missionary named Marshall living in a small community higher in the mountains. He comes into town every week or so to check his email. He’s growing a beard, I’ve noticed. Last week he had a conversation about salvation with the twenty-something-year-old guys that run the internet café. They seemed mostly interested, considering Marshall’s Spanish is elementary at best. He tended to say the same things over and over, and eventually the internet guys asked if he thought the world would end soon. He did.

I’ve never had a conversation with Marshall. I don’t know why. Partly I am resistant to him as another American in town. It’s irrational, but I feel like he is infringing on my campo. Once we were both in the post office, and he, in Spanish, told me to have a good day. I could never pass for Latino, and he knows that I am American. Why didn’t he just address me in English? Maybe he thinks he’ll pass for Honduran. It’s clear that this isn’t his country (or his language), but I am curious about his motivations. Part of me wants to sit down with Marshall. I studied theology in college, and I am interested in his story.

At the same time, I am offended by the manner in which he has come to Honduras. He has come to change it. He has come to meddle in what isn’t his. Of course, I have too. I am here to teach students; I am trying to spread education; I think I have something of use to give. It’s all so bothersome on a psychological level. In some way, it seems that any form of help is condescension—a reaching down. I have been very conscious of this since I came. I try to lend a hand rather than giving one. I have tried to be a part rather than an international influence.
have been learning as much as I have been teaching. Marshall and I proselytize in subtle ways: I take my class on field trips to the botanical garden; he chats about religion in internet cafés.

This subtlety isn’t part of Honduran marketing. It’s not so covert or subversive. The Honduran tactic is invasive only in its racket. In America, advertising is just as loud, but visually so. Even personally loud—*if you don’t wear this you’re not thin*. The ice cream truck that is on the opposite side of town is audible to me here, beside the park, blocks and blocks away. It plays childish music at an eardrum-breaking level. On top of the music the flavors repeat: *vainilla, banano, chocolate, ron con pasas, y arco iris*!! A child can be plenty prepared, as he can hear the truck coming twenty minutes before it arrives.

There are other trucks moving through town. One is selling cheese. It doesn’t play any music from its speakers, but the driver repeats the same mantra over and over about fresh, farm cheese. There is no expiration date on cheese that is cut with a machete out of the back of a truck. Another truck is selling fish, even shrimp, the speaker broadcasts. There is so much noise that I can’t think straight.

Everyone around me is immune to all of the noise. No one seems annoyed. No one seems to notice; though, I know they do. People are casually making their way toward the stage with the music and the games and the free posters. A storeowner has come out to buy some cheese. Kids are lobbying for money for ice cream. These Hondurans have seemingly developed the ability to hear only what they need. Or at least it seems that way. No one turns to see what is making the noise; no ears perk up. If it’s important, they hear it and nonchalantly act. If not, it floats on in the air—and drives me crazy. I can tune out commercials in the States. I can drive hours without consciously noticing a billboard, but this noise rattles my head. Just another Saturday reminder that I am not Honduran.

The nicer trucks with the political speakers head into the small *aldeas* around the town. They drive the rugged roads, cross water, and take the music of Miguel into the small villages. The *aldeas* in the mountains vary in size. La Campa has five hundred people, but others have only a handful. The lucky ones get electricity for part of the day and pipes carrying water from the river. The not-so-lucky ones get beans.

**The trucks come back with twenty campesinos standing in the bed.** It’s like a parade and the campesinos are in it—they are guests to the president’s dinner. Miguel’s camp is giving away food, and
when I pass the park, it is full, and people are waving blue flags. There are long lines to plates with meat on them. When you eat beans for breakfast, lunch, and supper, meat is reason enough to climb in the back of a truck and curve down the mountain road with the dust and wind wetting your eyes to tears. I don’t get in line for food; I am an observer after all. I have no vote.

There are games and comedians and prizes. Everyone gets a flag and banner with Miguel’s name or face on it. Then the man comes back on stage, and I recognize his voice from my laundry this morning. He talks about running water and roads. He talks about poverty. He talks about this nuevo tiempo that Miguel will bring. He says remember this on February 20th. He smiles; a gold tooth flickers.

The people turn away, full. The stage starts closing down, and the political “party” will load up on its bus and head to another town tomorrow. I wonder how effective the day was for Miguel. Many people have dropped their flags; plastic plates are all over the ground and street. Tomorrow morning Miguel’s name will line the road, as his banners and flags and trash are left, and I wonder how much money was spent to bring all of this equipment and food. For all of the empty promises politicians leave hanging in the air, the people seem savvy to it all. They’ve eaten, and now they’re waiting for a ride back home. They’ll come into town again in a few weeks when Pepe’s crew comes through. They’ll take his poster and food and egg him on. They’ll cheer. For today they will get a little richer and the politician will get a little poorer.

It’s almost dark, and the trucks have mostly stopped with the noise. I walk further south to a pulpería—a corner store—where I plan to buy my supper. I see one of my students and her mother. They are going my direction—or, I am going their direction; I am an outsider today. We talk about the day’s events, and I tell them that I am trying to sell my guitar and that I put up some fliers around town, but I haven’t found too much interest. I’ve thought about borrowing a truck and driving around town screaming that I am selling a TAKAMINE ELECTRIC/ACOUSTIC GUITAR! I don’t make that joke with Raquel and her mom, Melani. Melani tells me that her church may be interested in buying it. They are on their way there now, and she will ask one of the guitarists. I say that would be great. We turn the corner, and I hear their church. It has started, and the music is loud and exciting. The building looks like a warehouse. This is probably the wealthiest evangelical church in town. Good news for
my guitar. I say goodbye and move onward with my tortilla mission.

The Catholic bell starts ringing. My watch says 6:37. Every night, the Catholic bell begins sometime after 6:30. It starts slow but speeds up to the point that it is hard to differentiate the individual claps. Then there is always a point when the ringing slows, almost stops, and works its way back up to speed. It is a job for two boys. I imagine one of them swinging his entire body until he just can’t anymore. Then the other younger boy grabs the rope and works himself into a steady but frenzied sway.

The bell speeds up and I can hear it over the evangelical music. I wonder if those inside the evangelical service can hear the ringing of the bell. Somewhere there is an impassioned church full of evangélicos. They are singing and rocking their bodies to an inaudible rhythm. I picture the boy ringing the bell. His body moves left to right, as though he has become the rope. The air is filled with a mixture of Christianity, and for a moment the dissonance consolidates itself into a unified gradient of sound. The bell slows then speeds again. I step over the gulley to enter the pulpería and see Miguel’s face floating in the gutter water. Below his slick-backed hair and gapped smile it reads, somos más—we are more. I wonder if I need cheese or just the tortillas—maybe even some meat.
Playing the Goddess

I remember that we gathered in the basement of a church to worship the goddess. At the time, I didn’t think to wonder why Southern Baptists were permitting a bunch of Hindus to use their congregational space for decidedly un-Christian rituals. Whether it was one of the many quiet examples of small-town tolerance or a simple financial bargain, I can’t say. I never thought to question it as a child because Jesus and my religion were never mutually exclusive. I was born into Hinduism, yes, but raised in the Episcopalian church.

My parents sent me to St. Mary’s Episcopal School because it was the best girls’ education money could buy in Memphis, Tennessee. Unlike some immigrant parents, they were unconcerned by the school’s religious affiliation; my mother herself was educated by Roman Catholic nuns and taught at a parochial school before she was married. And both my parents appreciated the incredibly diverse and tolerant religious landscape of India. Their friends, festivals, school holidays, symbols, and rituals ran the gamut from Hindu to Buddhist to Sikh to Christian; the lines of observance between these faiths were blurry. As my parents had discovered, so they passed on to me: Hinduism is a big umbrella; there’s a lot of room underneath.

So I was free to delve into the cool, quiet landscape of Anglican Christianity. Ever the eager student, I paid close attention in Mrs. Williams’ third-grade Bible class, sitting right in the front and peering up at her through my thick glasses. She would sit in the “teacher’s chair,” with us on the floor, and place her soft, framed felt board up against the chalkboard. Felt figures of Moses or Jesus appeared, with baskets of fish or the burning bush. Naturally, I had more questions than anyone else. Each story was new to me, and I was hooked. An avid reader, I discovered that the Bible was full of wild, fascinating stories that seemed more grownup than anything else I was allowed to read. The heartbreak and suffering of Jesus held me tight. In my mind’s eye, I saw him as a kindly, loving, sad man. And I began to notice that all the girls around me wore crosses around their necks, connected to him in
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a way that I wasn’t. While I sat behind, they walked up to the altar to receive communion. These were the limits of my belonging.

At the same time, I relished being different. Christianity was my exotic, but I was exotic to everyone else. My friends and classmates started asking me questions about what I believed, how my religion was different. I stopped taking for granted the Sanskrit prayers my family and I said and started asking about their meaning. My parents found books in English that retold the stories of the Rāmāyana and the Mahābārata, Hinduism’s great epics, full of murder, intrigue, sex, and miracles to rival the most fantastic parts of the Old Testament. As my connection to my own religion grew, so did my fondness for high-church worship, the pomp and circumstance, traditional liturgy, and booming organ. The sensory onslaught of an Episcopalian church service is somewhat tamed-down in comparison to that of my birth religion, but both know how to put on a good show.

At times, I struggled with just how far to join in, whether it was all right to say “in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” when I didn’t actually believe in him. No doubt, many of my fellow classmates were also skeptical or uncertain in their beliefs, but they had the luxury of habit and belonging. If their internal landscape didn’t match the external, no one was the wiser. But from the outset, I looked like a non-believer and I weighed my participation very carefully. As a Hindu, I was frustrated by the way my culture and religious traditions were often appropriated and mishandled by outsiders. It was important to me not to commit the same crime against Christianity.

Of course, I felt like an outsider in Hinduism too. Connected through my parents and centuries worth of traditions, my own personal stake in Hinduism was never as grounded as I thought it should be. Church was more interesting than temple; at least I could understand what everyone was saying and singing. The guilt I felt over my half-hearted engagement was tempered by a desire to protect and uphold my heritage, a duty which was important to me. Some first-generation kids push as far away from the “home country” as possible; I didn’t want to be one of them. Still, I knew that my main tie to Hinduism was nostalgic, not immediate. And as was the case with Christianity, my personal affiliation had everything to do with the group in which I wanted to belong. In both religions, I felt equally at home—that is to say, halfway like an intruder in each case.

Over time, the splitting of theological hairs became less important to me, and the power of community, worship, and tradition took over.
Whether I believed in the stories or not, they were good stories, powerful ones which had lasted for thousands of years. The cost of separating myself out from either group seemed too big a price to pay. So I bowed my head and heard myself repeating the same words as a church full of people, the Apostles’ Creed, which I learned by heart. After I was asked to speak in chapel during Religious Diversity Week, I became known as the “Indian Oprah” for the way I had weaved my way through the pews with a cordless mike, answering students’ questions about my religion. At home, I enacted and absorbed what my parents placed before me—no eating meat on Tuesdays, wearing new clothes on Diwali—trusting that it was all somehow important for continuity’s sake. I felt to myself like a believer, if a loosely defined one. And there were always two creeds which I never had a problem saying, or meaning: the first from the Bhagavad Gītā, modern Hinduism’s most sacred text, the second from St. Mary’s daily chapel service. In the first, Lord Krishna is instructing one of his faithful, Arjuna, about the proper way to live one’s life: Any man who acts with honor cannot go the wrong way, my friend. The second ended each chapel service at St. Mary’s, Monday through Friday, from my fifth grade to my twelfth grade year. Our chaplain said, Go in peace, to love and to serve the Lord. And we responded, Thanks be to God.

St. Mary’s has many long-standing traditions (they’ve been educating young women since 1847), but my favorite has always been the Christmas pageant. This event has two sets of participants: little girls and big girls. The little girls are the second-and-third graders, who dress in red cassocks and white cottas and stand on risers to sing the evening’s program of Christmas hymns. The big girls are the seniors, who are grouped to form living tableaux, displayed while the little girls sing their songs. Each tableau is modeled after a painting of the Annunciation, Nativity, or Adoration done by one of the French or Italian masters. A shadowbox, about the size of a walk-in closet, was built long ago for this purpose, and is placed at the top of the red velvet stairs which lead up to the altar of the church. Christmas trees, left plain, are brought in to block the rest of the altar from view, so that big girls can hide behind, getting ready for their turn.

For seniors at St. Mary’s, the Christmas Pageant is second in importance only to graduation. To be part of the tableaux, seniors have to have been at St. Mary’s since at least the first grade. That makes eleven or more years during which the little girls have grown into big ones, watching the pageant every year, sitting in the dark of the church,
watching the beautiful seniors sit very still against the bright lights of
the shadowbox. Each year, the senior class and high school faculty elect
six girls to play the part of Mary. It is an honor which carries weight.
The girls playing Mary should be worthy of their role, should have
demonstrated love and compassion and sacrifice during their time at
St. Mary’s. The school motto, “light and life,” should be exemplified in
them. I feel lucky to be able to say my class took that vote very seriously,
beyond a popularity contest. Even though we were big girls, there was
still something about the idea of Mary, full of grace. She who gave birth
to the Savior of Men. She who raised the Son of God.

With this in mind, we voted, and I became the first non-Caucasian,
non Judeo-Christian Mary in school history. Brown Mary, my friends
and classmates called me, lovingly. It felt like a victory, one in which
we all shared, injecting new life into an old tradition, scandalizing the
church ladies a little bit. “Your skin color is probably more historically
accurate than anyone else’s,” my high school history teacher said, and we
arranged for my fellow Hindu, Amrita, to be my Joseph. Behold the holy
family, dark-skinned and authentic. Me, the mother, vehicle, and proud.

I got very sick the night before the pageant, amidst the swirl of
exams and college applications which came with Christmas that year.
It was bronchitis, and the doctor at the minor medical clinic warned
me that it could get worse. “You need to rest, young lady,” he told me. “I
know you won’t mind if I make you stay home from school tomorrow,”
winking, thinking he was doing me a favor. “You don’t understand,” I
protested. “I have to go.” We went back and forth like this for a while;
I think he thought I was crazy. It isn’t easy to explain in five minutes
what twelve years has built inside you. “Okay,” he relented. “I’ll give
you a strong antibiotic and a painkiller. You’re going to have to try to
break your fever—otherwise, you’re still contagious, so no go.”

I slept that night, exhausted and upset. The next morning, I hovered
around 100 degrees, but was adamant that the fever would break. I had
to be at school by noon—that much leeway my principal would give—
the pageant started at two-thirty. My mother wrapped me in blankets,
brought me warm liquids, lemon and honey for my aching throat. She
chanted for me in Sanskrit from the prayer room down the hall and
took my temperature every half-hour. “I know better than to argue,”
she sighed. But we were both surprised at how hard I was trying. This
ritual, this honor I had earned, this seeming contradiction, I wasn’t
about to let go. Goddess, mother, Mary, someone. Please. Make me the
vessel, give me your strength. I want to do this.
At eleven-fifteen my fever broke. 
My mom walked me into the church where twenty-nine other girls were rehearsing their scenes and posing for photographs. The handful of girls standing in the shadowbox at the time caught collective sight of me and called out. “Nishta!” The room turned and I was flooded, overwhelmed with gladness, their gladness; that I was okay, that I was there. “You are supposed to be here,” they said. “You have to be our Brown Mary.”

Immediately, girls went to work on my transformation. It’s all a bit of a medicated blur—I felt woozy and weepy and wholly grateful. I sat on a hard pew in the bright and sunny side-chapel while they took care of me. Sarah, da Vinci’s Mary, dashed out in her silver Volvo to buy me chicken noodle, tomato, and cream of mushroom soups, because she wasn’t sure which one I would like. Kemper, da Vinci’s angel Gabriel, took charge of my makeup. “Now close your eyes, sweetie,” she said in her sweet, round, Southern voice. I felt the cool, black pencil against the edge of my warm eyelid, heard the second- and-third graders rehearsing in the background.

When it was time for my tableaux, I scrambled into place along with Amrita and our three friends playing shepherds. We had a few moments in the dark before the next song began, and I remember being afraid that I was going to accidentally move; blink my eyes too much, scratch my nose, or, worst of all, pass out. I still didn’t feel very well, and I was afraid it might show. But then I felt Amrita’s hand on my shoulder from behind, where she stood as my Joseph. And that blue velvet curtain opened, and the lights came on, from either side of the box, incredibly bright and incredibly hot. The whole thing felt a little bit ridiculous, sitting in a pine box, dressed up like an unwed Jewish mother from two thousand years ago.

I tried to quiet my mind and focus on the rows of hushed and darkened heads that watched me in the distance. Out of the corner of my eye, the little girls, standing oh-so-politely on metal risers, their stocking feet tucked into pair after pair of black Mary Janes. I heard their baby gasps for breath as they tried to make it all the way through the “Gloo-ooo-oooria” and into “excelsis Deo.” In that moment, I realized that thin line between the ridiculous and the magical is governed by belief. An opera is only successful if its audience is willing to suspend its cynicism for a little while and dive in. Ritual works the same way.

After my turn, I joined my friends, huddled down in the darkness, hidden behind the strategically placed Christmas greenery. The cool,
plush carpet was a relief; the girls had even sneaked a ginger ale onto the altar for me. Eyes sparkled all around as we, with muted voices, began to sing along with the little ones, who, in a handful of years, would take our place.

_The holly bears a berry as red as any blood; and Mary bore sweet Jesus Christ To do poor sinners good. O the rising of the sun, the running of the deer, The playing of the merry organ, Sweet singing in the choir, Sweet singing in the choir._

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**One of the most famous females in Hinduism is Durga, known not for her powers of creation, like Mary, but for her ability to destroy.** As the story goes, long, long ago, the demon Mahishasur roamed the land in the form of a giant bull, destroying everything in his path. Try as they might, all the (male) gods in the Hindu pantheon could not overcome the greedy demon. So the three most powerful—Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva—came together and each contributed a piece of their personal power in order to create an entity greater than themselves. In a Frankenstein kind of twist, the gods ended up with something they hadn’t bargained for: a woman. Not just any woman, but Durga, the Divine Mother, protector of the universe, embodiment of *shakti*, female energy of creation and destruction. Fierce and beautiful, she had eighteen arms and as many weapons. With the lion, king of beasts, as her companion, she set off to fulfill her purpose. After battling the demon Mahishasur for nine days, she smote him and sliced off his rotten bull’s head for her lion’s dinner.

This victory is celebrated every year by Hindus on Vijyadashami, a day devoted entirely to the goddess Durga. It is the day in which Hindus acknowledge all that they owe to the Mother. To do this, they employ the body of a young girl, premenstrual, pure. She becomes the vessel, the incarnation of Durga, who can then be worshipped and honored. Wrapped in red, the goddess’s color, her face left unadorned with makeup, earrings removed to show that she is pure, undefiled, and therefore a worthy offering. Nothing allowed to distinguish an individual, an ego. I was that girl twelve years ago, several months away from my first period, the only girl in our community who met...
the criteria. Unlike my turn playing Mary, this wasn’t a day I spent years anticipating—it was a duty, the significance of which I only vaguely understood and also resented.

I remember myself standing in the ladies’ room of that church basement, in a pool of light cast by the small rectangular window cut into the top of the wall. My mother stood in front of me with two opened safety pins in her mouth and a pile of bright red fabric curled onto the floor in front of her. Holding one end of the slippery stuff, she pleated it lengthwise, a familiar motion I have inherited, a game I play with scarves and blankets. She worked the fabric into even folds like an accordion, pinned it all together, then tucked the top part into the waistband of my petticoat. The remaining length was wrapped around the back of my waist and brought up over my shoulder, where it fanned out over my right shoulder to cover the front of the cropped, half-sleeved blouse I wore. That was my first sari. I did not think it looked right on me, all that red.

The conch shell blew, a hard gust of effort by the small woman who coaxed out its sound. My mother took me by the hand and led me past the men, women, and children who sat cross-legged on the ground, where colorful cloth was draped to cushion the impact of smooth, cold concrete. I felt everyone watching me; felt the heat from their bodies and the fire my mother and I were walking toward. The priest prepared this *havan* in a makeshift fire pit of concrete blocks, feeding its swirling flames in accordance with Vedic ritual. Agni, the god of fire, must be invoked and appeased at the start of any *puja*, or ceremony, and kept alive the entire way through.

Momma came to a stop at the head of the crowd. The priest, sweat running down his bare chest, walked over to meet us. He is the father of Amrita, the same girl who will stand next to me as Joseph in a handful of years. The man is an obstetrician by trade, but a priest by birth. For centuries, families like his, from the Brahmin or priestly caste, have kept alive the rituals and beliefs of my religion, just as Dr. Dirghangi was doing then in the fellowship hall of a Baptist church in Memphis. He brought his palms together in front of his chest and inclined his head in my mother’s direction to acknowledge the gift she was giving in the form of her child. She reciprocated the gesture, then nudged me forward.

But I was reluctant, scared of doing something wrong, of messing it up. I felt foolish for not asking beforehand what the ceremony would entail, for not paying better attention in years past. Amrita’s father took his seat right next to the *havan* and indicated a space directly across
the fire where I was to sit, the only patch of ground which hadn’t been covered by offerings for the puja. Whole coconuts in brown husks, ripe, fleshy mangoes, little dishes of almonds and crystals of rock candy, silver platters piled high with grapes, bananas, oranges. Trays of flowers, too, from family gardens—orange marigolds, pink cornflowers, the first, sharp-smelling chrysanthemums of autumn. The blooms had been separated from their stems and some of the more delicate petals had come apart and were scattered through the mixture like confetti. Hinduism is a sensory feast, sometimes assaultingly so.

I sat face-to-face with the fire, the whole crowd of believers perpendicular to me, on my left-hand side. I was glad not to have to look into their faces and watch them watching me. I watched instead the fire, focused on it, following the leap and tangle of colors and light. Its smell was heavy and dark; comforting, mixed with the smoky trails of incense and sharp scent of lit camphor, both of which burned from brass holders among the offerings. After another jagged, trumpet-like blast from the conch, the chanting began in Sanskrit, with Dr. Dirghangi stopping periodically to explain the meaning of each previous passage in English. The verses told the story of Durga’s conception and victory, glorifying and praising her heroics. Chanting echoed around me for the good part of an hour. I followed the jumbles of Sanskrit, even though I did not understand, just to trace the dips and rises of each line, to catch the drawn-out vowels, make them reverberate in my own mouth under my breath. I tried to keep my mind still—I had practiced meditation before, at home, but I wasn’t very skilled at keeping my thoughts from wandering. My head ached from the smoke and the camphor; sweat trickled down the small of my back but I didn’t move. I was busy doing my best to be good, to do the duty which was expected of me, which would fulfill some kind of need for the grownups in the room.

In the background I could hear the sound of crinkling foil and paper bags. There would be food after the ceremony, of course—no gathering in our community would be complete without a potluck offering of rice, yogurt, vegetables, and lentils. And as an extension of the religious ceremony, a fruit salad would come last, made from the fruits which were spread out before me as offerings. Once peeled, seeded, chopped, and combined, they constituted a requirement. You cannot refuse any food which has been blessed by the goddess.

“Now you will all please stand, we will be performing the aarti,” said Dr. Dirghangi, which I knew signaled the beginning of the end. The crowd began its song, the combined voices so loud and rich in

Nishta J. Mehra
contrast to the solo we had been hearing. *Aarti* refers to two things—the devotional song itself, and the devotional act of lighting a lamp or lamps fueled with *ghee*, clarified butter. One by one, the women came forward to lift the sterling-silver lamp and circle it, clockwise, in the air as they sang. The words, though Sanskrit still, were familiar to me after years of repetition, though the meaning I only vaguely knew.

*Glory to You, O Divine Mother, glory to you who are so rich in maiden grace!*

*You attend the gods and men, whose grief you drive away.*

*You are mother of the universe, its sustainer, reliever of affliction, and bestower of happiness and prosperity.*

I was the only one still seated in the room during the song, and the women passing around the *aarti* lamp stood only about a foot away. Everything was so close; the bodies standing over me, the hot breath of the *havan*, the clashing pinks, yellows, and greens of the women’s saris, their husbands who stood next to them in blue jeans. The noise felt harsh, chaotic, grating, and I stood there waiting for the whole thing to be over. Then, very clearly, I heard my mother’s strong voice. She was standing right in front of me, the edge of her silk sari pulled up to cover her head in the traditional North Indian style. Her body was bent down in my direction, and her slender hands moved the lamp slowly, rhythmically, in keeping with the *aarti’s* pace. When I met her gaze, she gave me a look, one I could not recognize offhand. Her face was calm and insistent, mouth moving in accordance with the song. “You,” she seemed to be saying, “Pay attention, this is important.”

The *aarti* was halfway through its second repetition by then—the song is always continued as long as is necessary for all the women to have a turn. I closed my eyes for a moment. I was hot and hungry and uncomfortable and bored, but my mother’s face warned me against thinking of those things. I opened my eyes instead and looked around me, into the faces that stood a few dozen inches away. Their eyes, those that were opened, and voices were directed at me. Every face was serious, genuine, focused...on *me*. But it wasn’t about me, I realize, looking back. There was no need for me, Nishta, to feel self-conscious, because it was not me, Nishta, whom they saw when they looked. I was just the vessel, a vehicle for her presence to come into that place. I was not an individual that day, but a representation of all that is female and powerful and worthy of worship.
Nothing and Everything

There was neither non-existence nor existence then; there was neither the realm of space nor the sky which is beyond. What stirred? Where?

—The Rig Veda

One thousand yogis dressed in white sat on a mountaintop under the vast New Mexico sky. We are here to celebrate the Summer Solstice, to revel in this apogee of light. Heads draped, we chant the sacred syllables in unison, “Sat Nam, Wahe Guru”: Truth is my name; I am in ecstasy. Our reverberations fill the morning. The longer we chant, hour upon hour, the emptier we become, shedding layers of history until we are no longer separate from one another.

We become pure instrument, one clear channel for the mantra that pours from our collective throat. Yet this wall of sound is so easily pierced by the song of a lone pine siskin perched in the rafters, who raises its voice in counterpoint. Hearing this, we smile, and are emptier still.

At the point of zero, shuniya, we contain the potential for everything.

On this particular morning I am sitting with the teenagers, who are gracious enough about my interloping. They too are clad in white and turbaned, but their reverence is tempered by restlessness, by curiosity, by hormones. The boys struggle with their attention spans. With keeping their man-sized limbs contained, still, in a seated posture. One girl periodically thwacks an orange pillow at the boy sitting across from her. On breaks, they scarf corn chips and Luna bars. They curl into each other’s laps, unselﬁsh conscious as
kittens. Two white boys attempt to devise a rap about their spiritual practice.

The power of zero, the cosmic egg. Empty, one prepares to fill.

This meditation is done in pairs and, like many, I have come here alone and must find someone with whom to share the day. My partner, whom I only met this morning, is a lineman from Northern California. He climbs telephone poles and cell towers in the shadow of the redwoods. His face is creased with days in the sun; his eyes are clear. Had we not been brought together under this tent to share this practice, we would never have met. We sit knee to knee in this sea of meditators, our eyes locked during the sixty-two minutes of chanting. His are blue. Our gaze holds steady; we occasionally smile encouragement and help one another to hold focus. At the end of this session, his face lights up in a smile; he says, “Hooray! I found a good partner,” and I too am grateful for his steadiness and concentration. We don’t expect to see one another again after this day.

“It was not absolute nothingness. It was a kind of formlessness without any definition…”
— St. Augustine, Confessions

At lunchtime I leave the sheltering tent, seek the unforgiving New Mexico summer sun. Although we have been warned of its intensity, I open myself to its rays, invite them to burn clear through to some buried core of me. We are all here to slough unnecessary layers—identities, samsāras—to reach the infinite within.

Zero holds the power to shatter the framework of logic.
In the afternoon, we are led out onto the mountaintop. In lines of ten, we join hands and close our eyes and chant aloud the ancient syllables. Voluntarily blind, we walk dusty paths, guided by only our grip on the stranger’s hand we clasp and the sound current rising from our parched throats. Blind, we are each completely alone and yet utterly inseparable from this organism, these one thousand white-clad yogis, chanting and making our way over unfamiliar terrain. Blind, we feel ourselves to be nothing and at the same time limitless. Blind, we do not see the clouds roll in, and are surprised to feel the cool baptism of raindrops on our skin. How can emptiness contain so much sensation?

Zero is powerful because it is infinity’s twin.

Today is the day before the last day of this gathering, when each of us will climb into cars or board airplanes to return to our other, separate worlds. We will remember some of what we knew here—the siskin’s song, the sun, the splash of rain on unsuspecting skin; we will forget most of it. We will quit our jobs or find new love affairs or embark on a new practice of meditation. These things will mean nothing and everything in the scheme of our lives. We will feel full, or we will feel empty, and much of the time we will forget that these states are indistinguishable.

God is found within the void and the infinite.

Kelly Magee’s *Body Language*, the 2006 winner of the Katherine Anne Porter Prize in Short Fiction, contains stories about a wide range of characters, most of whom are lower-class and marginalized Americans whose voices go unheard amongst the louder majority voices of society, and who, for that reason, rely more on their actions than their words to communicate their deepest feelings.

This theme is most evident in the title story, in which the ten-year-old protagonist, Lucha, the daughter of Hispanic migrant farm workers, struggles to fit in at school due to her inability to speak English clearly and her propensity for hitting her classmates, which she does “because it is the one language in which she can make herself perfectly understood.” Indeed, the character’s name (which is a conjugated form of the Spanish verb *luchar*, “to fight”) sums this up, almost too neatly. And while such neatness might make the character seem overly reductive or allegorical in some authors’ hands, Magee’s rich depiction of Lucha as a young girl struggling to define her place within her family, her peer group, and her often-changing communities moves the character beyond mere symbolism and makes her a living person with whom most readers will be able to identify and sympathize.

Lucha isn’t the only character in this collection who resorts to violence as a form of communication. In “All the America You Want,” a group of Hispanic youths who find themselves and their families displaced by South Tampa’s urban renewal efforts futilely communicates their frustration via arson. In “The Business of Souls,” the nine-year-old narrator, Matt, lives with his sister and his ex-paratrooper father, who teaches his children to land on their feet—both figuratively and literally—by regularly requiring them to jump off the roof of their trailer. Matt survives as one of the smallest members of his class by taking his sister’s advice: “hit first.” And in “As Human as You Are Standing Here,” Leo, a pre-operative transgendered male who can’t afford the medical treatment that will fully transform him into a woman, and Gypsy, a
lesbian confused by her romantic feelings for Leo, share not only a friendship, but also “a long history of beating the shit out of people.”

In one of the collection’s strongest stories, “Not People, Not This,” two more main characters share a proclivity for hitting. Trooper, a bar-owner in Opelika, Alabama, and Ames, a high school drop-out who had been Trooper’s neighbor when they were children, “both dealt with fear the same way: they hit,” although Trooper had learned to control this reaction after marrying and having a child, while Ames “couldn’t keep his hands out of trouble.” In the story, an omniscient plural narrator, perhaps the collective consciousness of the town itself, describes the events on the day a tornado touched down and a woman disappeared—an event in which Ames may or may not have been involved. The story is told as a set of converging narratives, with seemingly unrelated characters introduced in separated sections only to come together later. In this particular story, that structure is effective, as the speculative look at the ways in which the narratives may have converged allows for an exploration of the possibilities of human behavior and the idea that people are “more willing to believe the impossible than the tragic.”

Magee uses a converging narrative structure in two other stories, but with less success. “Vertical Mile” begins with great promise as three narratives are introduced. First is the story of Marcus, an obese gay man who despairs that he can never be loved as anything other than a fetish and who consequently embarks on a mission to kill himself via an arduous trek down the Grand Canyon’s Bright Angel Path, without any gear and with a body in no shape to make the climb. Next we meet Ella, a fit, seventy-two-year-old widow who is hiking the same path as Marcus in a kind of homage to her recently deceased friend, for whom she harbors romantic feelings, although both women have lived as heterosexuals all their lives. And finally we meet the AZK crew, a gang of teenagers that hikes into the canyon at night in order to paint elaborate graffiti on its walls.

And while each of these narratives is introduced with great care and well-paced exposition, their convergence and the subsequent events feel rushed and the ending abortive, a disappointment given the richness of the story’s beginning components. Similarly, “Straitjacket” introduces multiple potentially interesting characters, but their convergence feels jumbled and relies on too many convenient coincidences to make for an effectively convincing story.

Magee is most successful in the linear stories in which she portrays empathetically a variety of inner struggles that people go through in
their lives. In the final line of the opening story, “Not People, Not This,” she writes about the way people “understand more about each other than, maybe, we ever want to admit,” which may well serve as a thesis for her entire collection. More often than not, Kelly Magee’s stories live up to the promise of that thesis.

—Reviewed by Shanie Latham


In her first collection of poetry, *Blue-Tail Fly*, Vievee Francis takes her readers on a journey down cobbled roads and dirt paths of the past, successfully transporting us to the days from slavery to manumission and the immense hardships of the Civil War era. She breathes life into what are often thought of as simpler yet conflicted times, resurrecting the authenticity of attitudes and language which echo through to the present. Her choir of voices captures personas from slave to politician, soldier to mother, none of whom were left untouched by the volatile events of the day.

Francis presents arguments and motivations from both sides of war. She details pro-war sentiments in “Ample Cause of War,” written from the point of view of President Polk, and “General Taylor Convinces Himself That He Is For War.” Non-violent desires are expressed in a plea for protests against atrocities in “Fredrick Douglass Speaks before the Anti-Mexican War Abolitionists.”

One of the most compelling works is “The Binding Tie,” a series of seven sonnets inspired by stories told to the author by her grandmother depicting actual recollections of her great-great-grandmother, an exslave who illegally married an Irishman. The couple fled Mississippi for the forests of eastern Texas, and the poems are a call and response between Callie’s point of view and Andrew’s. The following lines explore a sense of Callie’s newfound freedom within her relationship to Andrew, illustrating a stark contrast between forced possession of a woman in bondage to the willing possession of a wife in love:

I’m free—I’m his. We find ourselves rolled up like good corn biscuits come daybreak. He smells sweet and sour as buttermilk—a scent my woolen plaits seem made to sop.
The title of the collection, *Blue-Tail Fly*, comes from an old slave song of the same name, or “Jimmy Crack Corn”:

The pony run, he jump, he pitch.  
He threw my master in a ditch.  
He died and the jury wondered why.  
The verdict was the blue-tail fly.

The metaphor of the blue-tail fly who ultimately killed the master represents a David and Goliath scenario, the overtaking of the strong and powerful by the weak and the small. Section III is devoted to these images in the form of poems of soldiers in the Colored Infantry. One of the most powerful works is “Drummer Boy”:

The other boy being dead, they let me drum—  
the sticks  
were the stakes  
I struck straight  
into my master’s heart, I  
drummed  
to free him  
from his  
taut skin,  
I drummed  
myself free  
of his cotton-stuffed head,…

Francis reaches beyond stereotype and folklore to pluck honesty of emotion from each of her speakers, allowing the reader an intimate look into the secret pain and fear that dwells within each one, as in these lines from “A Singular Dispersion over Franklin, Tennessee”:

She has been convinced  
the cannibals are on their way  
south. She has seen signs of disaster:  
bulls mating out of season, bloody cream in the churn, a congregation of buzzards in the tall stick-needles.
The author’s talent for poignant expression, which runs throughout Blue-Tail Fly, is evident in “Walt Whitman Reads to the Limbless, Dying,” a tribute to poetry’s ability to serve as a salve for the wounded. Francis applies her own love of words to ease pain and heal distress. The plea of the wounded to Whitman mirrors the desire of the reader for more of Vievee Francis’ words in the final lines of this poem:

    a poem rolls as a song across his lips,  
    familiar as the clop of a horse upon brick.  
    Piece by piece a life is reinvented, as the song  
    cobbles over closed eyes.

Write for me.

—Reviewed by Patty Dickson Pieczka


Matthew Graham’s third collection, A World Without End, is a book of loss and lamentation, a book that acknowledges life’s difficult terrain by looking backward into childhood and forward into mortality. It’s also a book of history and family, one that chronicles how unsettling and tenuous the connections between them can be. In these poems, Graham depicts the details of both small towns and big cities, of the uncertain negotiations between men and women, and reminds us how slight the line between human fragility and success is.

The book’s opening section returns readers to Graham’s upstate New York beginnings, a childhood full of “atomic air raid drills” and “the wet wool of cloakrooms.” In poems such as “Still Life with School Bus” and “First Dance,” we encounter a speaker whose surroundings are bewildering and fraught with the perils of growing up—“the Shalimar and taffeta of girl” being chief among them. The most striking poem in this section is “Two Grandfathers Fighting,” an ode to a certain stoic male sensibility that is no longer prevalent in our current media-saturated culture of reality television and confessional talk shows:

    ...One grandfather was a dark and silent man,  
    The other a nasty drunk.
Yet he carries them with him
With a certain affection. Some nights,
Dark and drunk, he smiles to think of his grandfathers
Arm wrestling within him. The farmer wins, of course,
But the banker has foreclosure capped
Inside his fountain pen.

For the poem’s speaker, becoming like these men is an inevitability.
“What’s good about getting older?” he asks, “You turn into men you
thought you’d never know / While the world yammers on around
you / Hilarious and hysterical.” It’s a tough burden to carry, one that
imbues Graham’s poems with their significant and turbulent heft.

Yet there is another side to A World Without End, a tender and elegiac
one. In the book’s second section, shorter lyrics provide testimony to
the delicate balance of a long-term relationship, demonstrating through
a curt and clipped diction how a couple can survive “the steaming
salvage yard of marriage.” There are no easy answers to this dilemma,
only small consolations, like in the poem “Anniversary”:

There are more stars than we remember and I rename
The constellations: Cadillac de Ville, Hoover Upright, Man
Reluctantly Losing All He Loves. She sighs
And leans into the rail, stars in her hair and I spill
Styrofoamed coffee all over my hands.
Just hold me, she says,
And I do.

The speaker’s romantic tendernesses are countered here by a weary
yet poetic cynicism—renaming stars after cars and appliances, then
admitting, albeit reluctantly, what he feels slipping away. These poems
are painful, but they ring true in their abrupt sparseness.

Poems in the book’s third and fourth sections take us further
afield from the poet’s personal history into a greater brand of American
history: unexplored small-town Indiana, Gettysburg, the after-effects
of Vietnam, Americans abroad in Ireland and Italy, and the dolor of
the classroom, where students in the poem “Offices,” unreachable and
unteachable, shrug off Robert Hayden’s “Those Winter Sundays”:

One kid suggests that maybe Robert
Didn’t like his father very much
And that seems to end the discussion
Though they are sure of anger and lonely,
They are not so sure of chronic or austere.

But Graham is. Plain-spoken, direct, and accessible, the poems of *A World Without End* will appeal to those readers who seek the unadorned truths of being a man in a world that will most definitely end, a world in which poems serve as one of the few means of establishing a voice that will survive beyond our flawed mortalities. It’s not a book of easy solace, but one of experiences coming back for Graham—and, by extension, us—with all their implications of joy and sorrow. “Let the past pour over the past,” Graham implores in “History: A Prayer,” and in the poems of *A World Without End*, the past most definitely does.

—Reviewed by Allison Joseph


Raza Ali Hasan’s collection of poems *Grieving Shias* crosses many geographical and historical boundaries in its explorations of what we lose, what we hold onto, and how we survive the public and personal costs both exact from us all. These poems seek to document the human price of the political upheavals which have shaped the world we live in. Hasan draws upon his own experiences as a resident at one time of Bangladesh, Indonesia, Pakistan, and, now, the United States to examine the dimensions of the pain coloring landscapes beyond their picturesque surfaces and to weigh the dignity of the human resolve to build, sustain, and—when necessary—revolt against such crushing forces.

*Grieving Shias* opens tellingly with the poem “Mourning and Other Activities”:

You take the Faith and a horse—reasonably Arab looking one—feed him rusgullas and and milk for a year. While you fatten him you terrorize him with different Asiatic techniques into mildness and meekness.
The rewards and punishments used here to train the horse are symbolic of the case Hasan makes throughout the collection that the world indoctrinates us in the same way. “Shia” is most often used to refer to the second largest denomination in Islam, but at its heart “shia” refers to “follower” or “partisan”; and in *Grieving Shias*, Hasan often defines people by what they believe and with whom they would stand or fall, as these lines at the end of “Mourning and Other Activities” indicate:

> You mourn and cry your heart out in the heat.  
> Those of us who have faith  
> then crawl under the belly of the horse  
> whenever it comes to a stop.

> Between the four brown hooves  
> take refuge from the sun.

In perhaps the collection’s most ambitious poem, “In That Part of the World,” Hasan writes poignantly of war-torn Afghanistan, where “The sky here is American like the blue of your eyes”; but Hasan never forgets the history and its consequences upon the land and its people, “…parched soil... / on which the primal play of progress comes to pass.” The nine sections of the poem explore the past and present through Noor Mohammad Taraki, the Bamiyan Buddhas, cluster bombs, and child martyrs. Hasan’s words are those of the “uncertain exile” who:

> …has nothing to do  
> with the divine or with any other kind of comedy,  

> but with what has remained or with what reminds:  
> with the trace of terror that persists.

So it is fitting—and powerfully disconcerting—when the final section of “In That Part of the World” leaves us with this image:

> If only Gandhi’s spinning wheel had spun  
> a million yards of cloth  

> we would have covered all our war dead.  
> And as for tents, we would have built
cities upon cities of tents to keep the rain out
for all our refugees...

Hasan transforms this past symbol of peace and hope into a grim reminder of the reality those living in the present continue to face.

At a time when there are often complaints that poetry is obscure, difficult, and self-indulgent, Hasan’s work is urgent and straightforward. Though often bleak, *Grieving Shias* is a reminder of the need to speak out loudly against the din and unrelenting forces of the past, present, and future, shaping the lives and lands of the world we live in.

—Reviewed by Jon Tribble


Kate Light’s poems in her third collection, *Gravity’s Dream*, the winner of the 2006 Donald Justice Award, are at times intensely personal, recalling Emily Dickinson’s playful scrutiny and intelligence. But unlike Dickinson’s poems, which some readers find cryptic, Light’s poems are at once concentrated and accessible, and invite communication. While Light writes a specific lyric of the self, to read her work is often to feel a pleasure of finding one’s own experience—of love, confusion, discovery—named.

The poems suggest that naming and puzzling over the naming of one’s world are lifelong tasks that began early. “Skipping” describes a grade-school promotion that results in a crestfallen introduction to a reductive world:

> What is a Yes / No test? What is Greater Than / Less Than?
> I used my thumb and first finger to measure each number over and over. *Weren’t they all the same size?* Yes. No.

> There hadn’t been desks, just tables in a square,
> and a teacher saying: *This is the letter A*
> while my heart sank.

> New readers, as well as with those familiar with Light’s use of the narrative sonnet sequence in her previous books, *The Law of Falling*
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*Bodies* and *Open Slowly*, will especially enjoy “Part III.” Here Light’s sequenced poems are a wry and sensitive journey through the riddles of existence—often, through that greatest of sphinxes, the heart. Here, too, Light’s deftness with the sonnet reminds one of Edna St. Vincent Millay, whose form-conscious poems remain free of the musty, stuffy air often associated with traditional metrics. Indeed, this air is breathable. “Seeing You Begin to Consider Loving” describes an old dilemma with refreshing and imaginative imagery:

> Sometimes I feel less like a lover than a mother—
> a mare watching the wobbling legs of a colt—
> seeing you begin to consider loving another;
> feeling those new joints quiver and unbolt.

Kate Light’s cleverness is not the kind that sidesteps emotional authenticity. “Zeug-O-Matic” plays with the grammar of clichés and yet is also a starkly haunting portrait of an ailing relationship:

> He hits home and the bottle.
> She wrote a poem and it off.
> He drinks heavily and her in.
> She went to bed and pieces.

Readers who balance the vocation of writing poetry with that of teaching may be especially interested in poems such as “Hazing (Or, in Any Other River): A Bus-Ride Poem.” In it, the speaker relates a dream in which her students exude, one guesses, most unlikely praise: “In class: *I love the yellow,* my students say. / *I love the voice. The repetition. The bare feet. I love I love I love.*” But while the students’ words bear the diction of a poetry class, they seem to capture the universal sense of the sweet impossibility of events realized only in dreams.

In “To You,” the book’s closing sonnet, the speaker notes being “Taken for stiff / by some, undisciplined by others”—perhaps referring to someone who has been more troubled than freed by Light’s looser metrical sensibility. Regardless, after “bowing” to “the judgment gods,” the poem returns to its real concern: not to please critics, but to connect to an unseen reader:

> ... & if now some small following lifts
> that head back up (as I have said) by the tip
of the chin, looks into the eyes, looks in, says, *I accept these things as gifts,*
then, okay, you're who I'm writing for,
far off, or near; who I'm here biting my lip
to be clear to. Yes, you. Yes, you.

—Reviewed by Elisabeth Meyer


One of the best qualities of *Shinemaster,* the follow-up volume for 2001 Roanoke-Chowan Award winner Michael McFee, is that it has a little something for everyone. *Shinemaster* is a collection of poems that demonstrates how mundane events can segue into universal, timeless themes. “Spitwads,” “Belching,” “Skin,” “Kissing,” “Sneezing,” “Vineswinging,” and “Tubs” are a few of the commonplace items and occurrences from which McFee launches his poetry. McFee’s volume surprises and rewards the reader at every turn; from formal facility to theoretical savvy, McFee is a poet worth listening to.

In this postmodern, anarchic age, McFee’s formal attention is particularly pleasing to see. While eschewing traditional form for the greater part of *Shinemaster,* his structural care is nonetheless evident. “The Tree Man,” for instance, is laid out in a series of couplets; laid lengthwise like logs, the formal arrangement evokes the wooden content well.

“The Culvert” is another example of McFee’s sensitivity to form. This poem is about a boyish dare and rite-of-passage that reinforces themes of risk, death, and birth upon which McFee continually riffs. The young speaker crawls through a “putrid tube / whose diameter was barely greater than your body.” McFee’s masterful touch is to emulate the claustrophobic moment with seventeen equally constricted lines. Without a stanza break, this poem effectively simulates the tight quarters of its semantic content. Here, as in many of the other poems, McFee opts for a single mark of punctuation at the end, a choice that leaves the reader as breathless and hurried as the boy in the poem who hauls his “filthy self back into reborn morning.”

In “Vineswinging,” McFee again relates a boyhood memory. Here, however, the focus is not on the form. In the poem, the speaker and
his cronies roam the Appalachians looking for vines by which they can swing across the valley. The boys pile on the end of the line to test the vine’s strength before the fateful flights, hanging “like so much bait.” Now confident, they take turns sky walking, “lording it over the valley…the planet spinning drunkenly under us.” Themes of strength and power resonate with lines like “moonstruck summer of ’69” and “an astronaut at apogee,” bringing to mind the lunar leaps of Aldrin and Armstrong. The poem moves in wider arcs still, bridging American aeronautics with ancient allegories. Soon, McFee continues, “the earth forgotten …something went very wrong in the canopy / far above and behind me: the vine had pulled free / my lifeline had gone slack.” It’s as if McFee is reminding us of the dangers of soaring too high, a caution echoing from the story of Icarus. Starting from his personal memory, then, McFee is able to comment on late twentieth-century hubris while simultaneously reinvigorating a timeworn myth. This ability to marry the ancient and modern within the poetry of his own history is one of the most satisfying qualities of McFee’s recent volume.

But perhaps my favorite aspect of Shinemaster is the way in which his poems reveal a writer in tune with not only the timeless, but also the timely; as such, readers interested in insights afforded by recent literary theory will find much to appreciate. In “The Nudists,” for instance, McFee mentions “emigrants from the Empire of the Clothed.” Moral and cultural colonization can be seen in “Mrs. Rembrandt,” a poem about a neighborhood “artsy lady” who would always complete the children’s neophyte sketches. Perhaps, McFee writes, she was afraid of the unwashed reality, preferring, instead, “an idealized version” of the “dull . . . subjects . . . [who were] like us, only better.”

The most direct connection with postcolonial theory is “Plenty,” a poem that explores the production of vegetables, history, memory, and illusion. McFee opens the volume with this poem and it is easy to see why. This poem moves from a “battered pickup’s bed” to “Spanish explorers, just home from the New World” to “Henry VIII gorging himself on sweet potatoes” because of their touted aphrodisiacal powers. The poem then follows the potato underground where it “banks its glowing coal” until harvest. The intricacy of produce, conquest, lineage, fertility, sterility, fable, and hunger reveal a poet who has not ignored the critical currents around him.

Shinemaster provides further evidence of a poet who plumbs the deeps of his history to tell us of our own. Themes of history, personal and public, are interwoven with sex, death, self-creation, and creation.
of the self. This tapestry of archetypes is all the more alluring as McFee is able to attach everyday items and experiences to it and thus bring heaven down to earth, or raise the earthly heavenward. Yet for all his high-flying allusiveness, McFee remains a poet attentive to the aesthetic demands of his poetry, maintaining a taut dialogue between form and content. For his intentionality and daring, Michael McFee is a poet who will reward repeated reading.

—Reviewed by Lance Farrell
Contributors’ Notes

Christopher Ankney was born and raised in Defiance, Ohio. His poetry has appeared in MARGIE and some conspicuous places. He lives in Chicago, Illinois, where he teaches writing to students and patience to his longtime girlfriend, Lynn.

William Baer, a recent Guggenheim recipient, is the author of twelve books, including The Ballad Rode into Town, “Borges” and Other Sonnets, Writing Metrical Poetry, Fourteen on Form: Conversations with Poets, and Luís de Camões: Selected Sonnets. He is also the director of the Richard Wilbur Poetry Series, the consulting editor at Measure, and the director of the Willis Barnstone Translation Prize.

Erinn Batykefer earned her MFA from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where she was the Martha Meier Renk Distinguished Poetry Fellow. She is currently the Stadler Poetry Fellow at Bucknell University. Her poetry and creative nonfiction appear in Gulf Coast, Denver Quarterly, and Maisonneuve Magazine.

Jeanne Marie Beaumont’s most recent book is Curious Conduct (BOA Editions). Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in Court Green, Jacket, Pool, Volt, RUNES, Natural Bridge, and The Year’s Best Fantasy and Horror anthology. She teaches in the Stonecoast MFA program, at the Unterberg Poetry Center of the 92nd Street Y, and is director of the Frost Place Seminar.

Sally Bellerose has received many awards, including a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship, the Barbara Deming Prize, and the Rick DeMartinis Award. Her work appears in current issues of Rock and Sling, The Journal of Humanistic Anthropology, Passager, Cutthroat, Cup of Comfort for Writers, and Saint Ann’s Review.

Tamiko Beyer’s work has appeared or will be forthcoming in numerous journals and anthologies, including Calyx, Boxcar Poetry Review, The Drunken Boat, WSQ (Women’s Studies Quarterly), and Cheers to
Muses: Contemporary Work by Asian American Women. She lives in Brooklyn, New York, and leads writing workshops for queer, homeless youth. In 2005, she was chosen as a Kundiman Asian American Poet Fellow.

Sita Bhaskar is the author of Shielding Her Modesty, which was published in February 2006 by Frog Books, India. Shielding Her Modesty is a collection of short stories set on both sides of the globe. Included in this collection is “Your Self Storage” which won an Honorable Mention in the Twenty-Four-Hour Writing Contest co-sponsored by the Capital Times and the Wisconsin Book Festival 2004. She is the winner of Desilit’s Rapid Writing Contest and her winning entry, “A Betrayal,” was published in Desilit Magazine. She is a finalist in GSU Review’s 2007 fiction contest and her short story “Grievance Cell” was published in the Spring/Summer 2007 issue.

Michelle Bitting has work forthcoming or published in Narrative, Swink, Prairie Schooner, Poetry Daily, Passages North, Comstock Review, Boxcar Poetry Review, Small Spiral Notebook, Nimrod, Southeast Review, Phoebe, Poetry Southeast, VOX, and RATTLE. She has won the Glimmer Train, Rock & Sling Virginia Brendemeuhl Award, and Poets On Parnassus poetry competitions. In January of 2007, she commenced work on an MFA in poetry through Pacific University, Oregon.

Daniel C. Bryant’s short fiction has appeared in Nimrod and Bellevue Literary Review, and is forthcoming in Hospital Drive and Madison Review. His unpublished novel, “May We Waken One by One,” took second place in the Fort Bend Writers Guild 2007 Novel Contest. Also, his poetry and nonfiction have been published in a variety of literary and medical magazines.

Helen Cho’s poetry has appeared in Field, Indiana Review, River Styx, ACM, Spoon River, and Nimrod. Her first book manuscript was chosen as a finalist by Ha Jin for AWP’s Donald Hall prize. This year, she was a semi-finalist for the “Discovery”/The Nation prize. She is also a peace activist, serves on the boards of the Feminist Majority and Ms. Magazine, and is a mother of twin toddlers.

Nicole Cooley grew up in New Orleans, Louisiana. She has published
two poetry collections from Louisiana State University Press, *Resurrection*, winner of the 1995 Walt Whitman Award, and *The Afflicted Girls*, and a novel from HarperCollins Publishers, *Judy Garland, Ginger Love*. She is an associate professor of English and creative writing at Queens College, the City University of New York, where she directs the new MFA program. She is working on a new collection of poems, “Breach.”

**Melissa Crowe** earned her MFA from Sarah Lawrence College and her Ph.D. in English from the University of Georgia. Her work has appeared in *Calyx, Atlanta Review,* and *Seneca Review,* and she reviews books of poetry for the *Georgia Review.* She recently received a grant from the Barbara Deming/Money for Women fund.


**Chad Davidson** is an associate professor of literature and creative writing at the University of West Georgia near Atlanta, and author of *Consolation Miracle* (Southern Illinois University Press). He has work recently appearing or forthcoming in *Barrow Street, DoubleTake, Prairie Schooner,* and *Virginia Quarterly Review.*

**Oliver de la Paz** was born in Manila, Philippines. He is a co-founder and a board member of Kundiman, a not-for-profit organization committed to the discovery and cultivation of emerging Asian-American poets. A recipient of a New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship, his work has appeared in *Quarterly West, Cream City Review, Third Coast,* and *North American Review.* *Names Above Houses,* a book of his prose and verse, was a winner of the 2000 Crab Orchard Award Series and was published by Southern Illinois University Press in 2001. *Furious Lullaby,* his second book, will be published by Southern Illinois University Press in September 2007.

**Mitchell L. H. Douglas** is an Assistant Professor of creative writing at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI), a
Contributors’ Notes

co-founder of the Affrilachian Poets, and a Cave Canem Fellow. His poetry appears in The Ringing Ear: Black Poets Lean South (University of Georgia Press), Callaloo, and Louisville Review, and is forthcoming in Zololand Poetry Volume II. Poetry editor for PLUCK: the Journal of Affrilachian Arts & Culture, he is a native of Louisville, Kentucky, and now resides in Indianapolis, Indiana.

**Jill M. Drumm** received her MFA in creative writing from Florida International University in Miami, and she teaches writing courses full time at Florida Gulf Coast University in Fort Myers, Florida. In 2006 she received an Academy of American Poets Prize, the Marjorie J. Wilson and RUNES Review poetry awards, and a University of New Orleans Creative Nonfiction Study Abroad Fellowship (Madrid). Her poems and essays have appeared or are forthcoming in MARGIE, TriQuarterly, RUNES, Florida English, and Creative Nonfiction.

**Shawn Fawson** is a current resident of Salt Lake City, Utah, where she works part time as a hospice chaplain and full time as a mother of three. Recently, her poems have appeared in Natural Bridge, Vallum, Tiger’s Eye, and Mid-American Review.

**Chanda Feldman** received an MFA from Cornell University. Her poems have most recently appeared or are forthcoming in The Journal, Northwest Review, and Poetry Northwest. She lives in San Francisco, California.

**Kim Foote,** originally from New Jersey, received a 2002–03 Fulbright Fellowship to Ghana. Her writing has appeared most recently in Homelands (Seal Press), TransitionsAbroad.com, and I’ve Known Rivers: The MoAD Stories Project, an online project of San Francisco’s Museum of the African Diaspora. She has an MFA in creative writing from Chicago State University and is the recipient of a 2007 Hedgebrook writing residency.

**Yahya Frederickson** teaches writing and literature at Minnesota State University Moorhead. A chapbook, Returning to Water, was recently published by Dacotah Territory Press. Other poems of his have appeared in Al-Masar, Flyway, Islamica Magazine, Quarter After Eight, Quarterly West, and River Styx.
Contributors’ Notes

Lisha Adela García is a bilingual, bicultural poet who has México, the United States, and that land in between (Spanglish) in her work. She has an MFA from Vermont College and currently resides in Arizona with her dog, Chiquita, and her cat, Nube. García is a simultaneous interpreter and translator and is influenced by the American Southwest, the ghosts that haunt her labyrinth, and border culture. *This Stone Will Speak*, a chapbook, is forthcoming from Pudding House Press, and she has publications in anthologies for Red Hen Press and Bluelightpress. She also has a Masters from Thunderbird School of Global Management.

Ramón García’s poetry has appeared in *Quarry West, Best American Poetry 1996*, *Poesída: Aids Poetry from Latin America, the United States and Spain*, *The Floating Borderlands: Twenty-Five Years of U.S.-Hispanic Literature*, *The Americas Review, Ambit* (UK), *MARGIE*, and *Poetry Salzburg Review* (Austria). He has forthcoming work in *Eclipse, Mandorla*, and the *Los Angeles Review*. He has been a recipient of two MacDowell Colony National Endowment for the Arts fellowships, a research grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, and a residency fellowship from the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts. He is Associate Professor in Chicano/Latino Studies at the California State University, Northridge.

Chris Gavaler’s fiction appears in *Prairie Schooner, Shenandoah, Boulevard*, and over a dozen other publications. He completed an MFA at the University of Virginia and now teaches at Washington and Lee University.

Heather E. Goodman’s fiction has been published in *Whistling Shade* and *Minnesota Monthly*, where her story “Skull” was a finalist for the Tamarack Award. In 2006–2007, she worked as a Loft Mentor Series award winner. Currently, she is completing her short story collection “Bones.” Originally from Pennsylvania, she lives in Minnesota with her husband, Paul, and their dog, Zane.

Susan Grimm is a native of Cleveland, Ohio. Her poems have appeared in *West Branch, Poetry East, Rattapallax*, and *The Journal*. In 1996, she was awarded an Individual Artists Fellowship from the Ohio Arts Council. Her chapbook, *Almost Home*, was published by the Cleveland State University Poetry Center. In 1999, she was named Ohio Poet of the Year by the Ohio Poetry Day Association. Her book of poems,
Lake Erie Blue, was published by BkMk Press. She edited Ordering the Storm: How to Put Together a Book of Poems, which was published by the Cleveland State University Poetry Center.

Debra Gwartney is a member of the nonfiction faculty at Portland State University. She has published fiction and nonfiction in Creative Nonfiction, Tampa Review, Prairie Schooner, Kenyon Review, and Salon. She is co-editor with Barry Lopez of Home Ground: Language for an American Landscape. Her memoir will be published by Houghton Mifflin next year.

Dolores Hayden is Professor of Architecture, Urbanism, and American Studies at Yale University. An urban historian and architect, she has written extensively about the history of American urban landscapes and the politics of design. Her poems can be found in the Yale Review, Southwest Review, Kenyon Review, Poetry Northwest, Verse Daily, Witness, and Michigan Quarterly Review. Her collection of poems American Yard was published by David Robert Books. Recently she has been a featured reader at the New Haven Festival of Arts and Ideas and on the radio program, Poetry Connecticut.


Randall Horton’s collection The Definition of Place was published in the Main Street Rag Publishing Company’s Editor’s Select Series. He is also co-editor of the anthology Fingernails Across the Chalkboard (Third World Press). He has an MFA from Chicago State University and is a Cave Canem Fellow.

Kelly Houle’s poems have appeared in Avocet, Red Rock Review, e: The Emily Dickinson Awards Anthology, and The Spring of Nine Hazels. She has an MFA from Arizona State University.
Contributors’ Notes

**Luisa A. Igloria** (previously published as Maria Luisa A. Cariño) is the author of nine books, most recently *Trill & Mordent* (WordTech Editions). She is an Associate Professor in the MFA Creative Writing Program at Old Dominion University. She is recipient of the 49th Parallel Poetry Prize from the *Bellingham Review*, the James Hearst Poetry Prize from the *North American Review*, and the 2006 National Writers Union Poetry Prize (selected by Adrienne Rich).

**Melanie Jennings** earned an MFA in fiction from Mills College and a doctorate in American Literature from UC San Diego. She has published short stories in *spelunker flophouse, Crab Creek Review, Oregon Literary Review*, and *Redwood Coast Review*. Her short story, “Spec of Love,” recently won the Ooligan Press Editor’s Choice Award. She makes a living as a technical writer in Portland, Oregon.

**Bryan Tso Jones** has been published in the *Minnesota Review, RUNES,* and *Crab Orchard Review*. He was a finalist for the 2006 Stan and Tom Wick Poetry Prize, and he attended the Napa Valley Writer’s Conference and Squaw Valley Writer’s Conference as a fellowship recipient. He lives in Chico, California.

**Jeremy B. Jones** is an MFA student in the Nonfiction Writing Program at the University of Iowa. He is originally from the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina. This is his first published piece, and he is currently at work on a collection of essays about Southern Appalachia—Southern loyalties and junk cars, fiddles and curb markets, grammar and land development.x

**Colette Jonopulos** lives, writes, and edits in Eugene, Oregon. Her chapbook, *The Burden of Wings*, was published by Rattlesnake Press in 2005. Her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in the *Clackamas Literary Review, cho, PMS, HeartLodge, In the Arms of Words: Poems for Disaster Relief,* and *In the Footsteps of a Shadow: North American Poetic Responses to Fernando Pessoa*. She currently co-eds and publishes *Tiger’s Eye: A Journal of Poetry*.

**Steve Kistulentz** is a doctoral candidate at Florida State University. His work in poetry and fiction has appeared in the *Antioch Review, Black Warrior Review, Crab Orchard Review, Mississippi Review, New England Review, New Letters,* and *Quarterly West*. He holds an MFA
from the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, where he was the Joseph and Ursil Callan Scholar, and he is a two-time winner of the John Mackay Shaw Academy of American Poets Prize.

Elizabeth Langemak lives in Columbia, Missouri. Her poems have been published or are forthcoming in *Gulf Coast, Meridian, MARGIE, Ninth Letter,* and *The Journal.*

Lance Larsen’s second poetry collection, *In All Their Animal Brilliance* (University of Tampa Press), won the *Tampa Review* Prize. Recent poems have appeared in *Antioch Review, Southwestern Review, Orion, Georgia Review,* and *The Pushcart Book of Poetry: the Best Poems from the First 30 Years.* A professor at Brigham Young University, he received a 2007 National Endowment for the Arts fellowship in poetry.

Donna J. Gelagotis Lee’s book, *On the Altar of Greece* (Gival Press), is the winner of the Seventh Annual Gival Press Poetry Award. The collection received a 2007 Eric Hoffer Book Award: Notable for Art Category. Her poems have appeared in *Calyx, Crab Orchard Review, Feminist Studies, Massachusetts Review,* and *Midwest Quarterly.* Her poetry has also been published in various anthologies, including *Cadence of Hooves: A Celebration of Horses* (Yarroway Mountain Press).

Joseph O. Legaspi was born in the Philippines and currently resides in New York, New York. *Imago,* his debut poetry collection, is forthcoming in fall 2007 from CavanKerry Press. A past recipient of a poetry fellowship from the New York Foundation for the Arts, he is a founding member of Kundiman, a non-profit organization serving Asian American poets.

Julia B. Levine’s third poetry collection, *Ditch-tender,* is forthcoming from University of Tampa Press this fall. She has won numerous awards, including the “Discovery”/*The Nation* award, the *Tampa Review* prize for her second collection, *Ask,* and the Anhinga Prize for her first collection, *Practicing for Heaven.* She works as a clinical psychologist in Northern California.

Angie Macri was born and raised in southern Illinois. In 1996 she received her MFA from the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville.
Contributors’ Notes

She lives in Little Rock, Arkansas, and teaches at Pulaski Technical College. Her poetry is forthcoming in *Connecticut Review* and *Spoon River Poetry Review*.

**Melanie Martin**’s work has appeared in the *Southeast Review* and *River Oak Review*. She will be *Pearl Magazine*’s featured poet for the Spring 2008 issue. She writes and teaches in California.

**Betsy Mitchell Martinez** is a first-year law student at the University of Michigan. While completing her MFA at the University of Michigan, she received the Hopwood Award Theodore Roethke Prize for a manuscript that included “Road to Puerto Escondido, December 31.” Her poems have appeared in the *Northwest Review*.

**Christopher Matthews** has published poems in the *Gettysburg Review, Quarterly West, Shenandoah*, and *Crazyhorse*. He lives in Lexington, Virginia, where he occasionally teaches at Washington and Lee University.

**Karyna McGlynn**’s poems have recently appeared in *Gulf Coast, Indiana Review, Octopus, Ninth Letter, Denver Quarterly, Willow Springs*, and *Fence*. She is the recipient of the Hopwood Award for poetry and the Helen Zell Post-MFA Writing Fellowship at the University of Michigan, where she recently completed her MFA. She is an editor for the online journal *Stirring*.

**Nishta J. Mehra** completed an MFA in creative writing, concentrating in creative nonfiction, at the University of Arizona in May 2007. Her essay “Accidental Summer Soundtrack” will be featured in *Terrain.org*’s summer issue, and her essay “Vehicles of Light” was selected as a finalist for the *Bellingham Review*’s 2007 Annie Dillard Award.

**Erika Meitner**’s poems have most recently appeared or are forthcoming in *Prairie Schooner, APR, Tampa Review*, and on *Slate.com*. She is an Assistant Professor of creative writing at Virginia Tech, and is also a doctoral student in religion at the University of Virginia.

**Sid Miller**’s poetry has recently appeared or is forthcoming in *Goodfoot, Poetry Southeast, Bateau*, and *Caffeine Destiny*. His second chapbook, *Sunbathing in the Ukraine*, was just published by Finishing...
Line Press and his first full length collection, *Nixon on the Piano*, will be published in 2009 by David Robert Books. He is the founding editor of *Burnside Review*.


**Lisa Ortiz** has had poems published in *Princeton Arts Review, Wolf Head Quarterly, Poesy,* and the anthology *Split Verse: Poems to Heal Your Heart*. Poems are forthcoming in the online magazines *Tryst* and *Literary Mama*. She lives in La Honda with a sad-eyed husband, two wild-haired daughters and a big red horse.

**Krishna Pattisapu** is an undergraduate studying English and speech communication at Southern Illinois University Carbondale. She is currently serving as Editor-in-Chief of the university’s undergraduate literary magazine, *Grassroots*.

**Laura Paul** is a graduate of the MFA program at the University of Florida. She lives in Pine, Colorado, and teaches composition at Red Rocks Community College. Her poems have appeared in *Sou’wester* and *PMS*, and she has new work in the upcoming winter issue of the *Cincinnati Review*.

**Sara Pennington** lives in Hindman, Kentucky, and is completing her Ph.D. in creative writing at Florida State University. She is the online editor of the *Chattahoochee Review*. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in the *Greensboro Review, Ecotone, Ninth Letter,* and *Arts & Letters*.

**Mike Puican** was a member of the 1996 Chicago Slam Team. He has had his poetry published in the U.S. and in Canada in *Rhino, Michigan Quarterly Review, Crab Orchard Review, Another Chicago Magazine,* and *Malahat Review*. He won the 2004 Tia Chucha Press Chapbook Contest for his chapbook, *30 Seconds*. 
Midge Raymond’s fiction has most recently appeared in the Ontario Review, Los Angeles Times, Bellevue Literary Review, and Passages North. Her work has won the Indiana Review Fiction Prize and the GSU Review Fiction Prize.


Shana Ritter is a poet, writer, and educator. A past recipient of the Indiana Arts Commission Individual Artist Project Grant, she has published work in Common Ground Review, Red Booth Review, A Linen Weave of Bloomington Poets, and Georgetown Review. She recently published a feature article on poetry in Bloom Magazine. She is a frequent participant in local readings in Bloomington, Indiana, both live and on the radio.

Terez Rose’s stories and essays have appeared in the Philadelphia Inquirer, Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel, Literary Mama, Espresso Fiction, and Unbound Press: An International Journal of Words and Images. Her anthology credits include Women Who Eat (Seal Press), A Woman’s Europe (Travelers’ Tales) and Italy, a Love Story (Seal Press). She is currently at work on a novel.

Shane Seely is a Senior Lecturer in the English Department at Washington University in St. Louis. His poems are forthcoming in the Bellingham Review, Cimarron Review, and Arts & Letters.

Leslie St. John is a native of Little Rock, Arkansas. She received her BA in English literature at the University of Arkansas and her MFA from Purdue University, where she served as poetry editor for Sycamore Review in 2005–2006. She has poems forthcoming in Cimarron Review, Arkansas Review, Florida Review, and Indiana Review. She recently won first prize in the 2007 Literature Competition of the National Society of Arts and Letters. Her manuscript “Beauty Like a Rope” was chosen as a finalist for the Cider Press Review Book Award. She is currently pursuing a Yoga Alliance certification, and in the fall she will teach writing at Cal Poly University and Cuesta College.
Contributors’ Notes

Adrienne Su is the author of two books of poems, Sanctuary (Manic D Press) and Middle Kingdom (Alice James Books). In 2007 she received a literature fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. She is an associate professor of English and poet-in-residence at Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

Alison Townsend is the author of two previous books of poetry, The Blue Dress (White Pine Press) and What the Body Knows (Parallel Press). Her poetry and creative nonfiction appear in the Southern Review, Arts & Letters, Fourth Genre, Gulf Coast, MARGIE, Michigan Quarterly Review, and in the anthologies Best American Poetry 2006, Flash Fiction Forward, Kiss Me Goodnight: Poems and Stories by Women Who Were Girls When Their Mothers Died, and Boomer Girls. She has won many awards, including a 2007 literary fellowship from the Wisconsin Arts Board and the 2007 Flume Press Chapbook Contest for And Still the Music. She teaches English and creative writing at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater and lives with her husband on four acres of prairie and oak savanna in the farm country outside Madison, Wisconsin.

R. A. Villanueva’s poetry has appeared in RATTLE and other journals. He holds graduate and undergraduate degrees from Rutgers University, and he is currently a MFA candidate at New York University, where he serves as poetry editor of Washington Square. A Kundiman fellow and a semi-finalist for the 2007 “Discovery”/The Nation prize, he has twice been awarded a Geraldine R. Dodge Educator Scholarship to the Fine Arts Work Center and he is involved with literary outreach programs throughout New York City.

Davi Walders developed and directs the Vital Signs Poetry Project at NIH (National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland), which was funded for three years by The Witter Bynner Foundation for Poetry. Her third collection of poetry, Gifts, was commissioned by the Milton Murray Foundation for Philanthropy and presented to the Andrew Carnegie Medal of Philanthropy recipients. Her awards include a Maryland State Artist’s Grant in Poetry, Hadassah of Greater Washington’s Myrtle Wreath Award, an Alden B. Dow Creativity Fellowship, and fellowships at Ragdale Foundation, Blue Mountain Center, and the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts.
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**Book Review Policy**

*Crab Orchard Review’s* staff considers for review collections and anthologies of poetry, short fiction, and literary nonfiction published by small independent and university presses. Please send titles for review consideration to:

Jon Tribble, Book Review Editor  
*Crab Orchard Review*  
Department of English, Mail Code 4503  
Southern Illinois University Carbondale  
1000 Faner Drive  
Carbondale, IL 62901

All reviews are written by *Crab Orchard Review* staff. In the past nine years, the following presses have had titles reviewed in *Crab Orchard Review*’s pages:

- Anhinga Press, Tallahassee, FL  
The Asian American Writers’ Workshop, New York, NY  
Bilingual Press/Editorial Bilingüe, Tempe, AZ  
BOA Editions, Rochester, NY  
Carnegie Mellon University Press, Pittsburgh, PA  
Cinco Puntos Press, El Paso, TX  
Cleveland State University Poetry Center, Cleveland, OH  
Coffee House Press, Minneapolis, MN  
Copper Canyon Press, Port Townsend, WA  
Curbstone Press, Willimantic, CT  
David R. Godine, Boston, MA  
Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh, PA  
FC2, Normal, IL  
FMSBW Press, San Francisco, CA  
The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, NY  
Graywolf Press, St. Paul, MN  
Green Integer, Los Angeles, CA  
Hanging Loose Press, Brooklyn, NY  
Interlink Books, Northampton, MA  
Ishmael Reed Publishing Company, Berkeley, CA  
Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, MD  
Kraft Books, Ibadan, Nigeria  
Limelight Editions, New York, NY  
Littoral Books, Los Angeles, CA  
Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, LA  
Lumen Editions/Brookline Books, Cambridge, MA  
Lyons & Burford, New York, NY  
Milkweed Editions, Minneapolis, MN
Michigan State University Press, East Lansing, MI
New Issues Press, Kalamazoo, MI
Ohio State University Press, Columbus, OH
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Wayne State University Press, Detroit, MI
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Word Press, Cincinnati, OH
Zoo Press, Lincoln, NE
Announcements

*Crab Orchard Review* is moving its indexes for all recent and future volumes—beginning with Volumes 11, Numbers 1 & 2—from the pages of the journal to our website:

http://www.siuc.edu/~crborchd/

We will begin by continuing our single volume year indexing, but we hope by December 2007 to have created complete Title, Author, and Book Review Indexes for the entire publication history of *Crab Orchard Review.*
Crab Orchard Review publishes a Winter/Spring general issue and a Summer/Fall special issue each year.

Please check the Crab Orchard Review website’s “General Guidelines for Submissions” for more information:

http://www.siu.edu/~crborchd/guid2.html

For writers interested in submitting work in 2007 and 2008:

Crab Orchard Review will be accepting submissions for our 2008 Summer/Fall special issue, “The In-Between Age ~ Writers on Adolescence,” until October 31, 2007 (postmark deadline). We hope to have editorial decisions made for that issue by mid-February. We will not consider submissions for the 2008 Winter/Spring general issue until February 1 through April 30, 2008.

Our two submission periods each year are February, March, and April for the Winter/Spring general issue and August, September, and October for the Summer/Fall special issue. During May through July and November through January, we will be working to complete the editorial work on each of the issues and would appreciate writers waiting until the beginning of the appropriate submission period before sending new work to Crab Orchard Review.

Thank you for your consideration and understanding.
Crab Orchard Review and Southern Illinois University Press are pleased to announce the 2007 Crab Orchard Series in Poetry Open Competition selections.

Our final judge, Cathy Song, selected *The Sphere of Birds* by Ciaran Berry as the first-prize winner. Ms. Song selected *Murmurations of Starlings* by Jake Adam York as the second-prize winner. Both collections will be published by Southern Illinois University Press in March 2008.

We want to thank all of the poets who entered manuscripts in our Crab Orchard Series in Poetry Open Competition.

*Crab Orchard Review*’s website has updated information on subscriptions, calls for submissions, contest information and results, and past, current and future issues. Visit us at:

http://www.siuc.edu/~crborchd/
First Prize – $3500 and publication
Second Prize – $2000 and publication

All unpublished, original collections of poems written in English by United States citizens and residents are eligible (individual poems may have been previously published). Two volumes of poems will be selected for publication from an open competition of manuscripts postmarked October 1 through November 16, 2007. The first-prize and second-prize winner will each receive a publication contract with Southern Illinois University Press. In addition, the first-prize winner will be awarded a $2000 prize and $1500 as an honorarium for a reading at Southern Illinois University Carbondale; also, the second-prize winner will receive a $500 prize and $1500 as an honorarium for a reading at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

All submissions must be accompanied by a $25 entry fee. All entrants will receive a one-year subscription to Crab Orchard Review. For complete guidelines, send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to:

Jon Tribble, Series Editor
Crab Orchard Open Competition Awards
Department of English
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
1000 Faner Drive
Carbondale, Illinois 62901.
Red Clay Suite
Poems by
Honorable Fanonne Jeffers

“Honorable Fanonne Jeffers drives her dark poetic vision through America, gathering what she can that will sustain, suffice. From the deep south of Georgia where peaches ‘liquor’ the air and ‘the clotted sounds of lament... / cling to the roots,’ to Oklahoma where she reflects on the Tulsa Riots, and on through to Ohio, ‘Underground Railroad country,’ looking for ‘the truth of this land...’ Red Clay Suite is a long perilous song: one woman’s confounding history, and the untold history of a nation vibrating on every page.” —Dorianne Laux, author of Facts About the Moon

“Honorable Jeffers leads with her ear and follows with her rigorous intellect, then adds an emotional depth and fearlessness that make her poems uniquely powerful. This brilliant third book is a thinking woman’s blues that continues to challenge, delight, and terrify.” —Elizabeth Alexander, author of the Pulitzer Prize-nominated American Sublime

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If No Moon
Poems by Moira Linehan

“What a welcome and brilliant debut is Moira Linehan’s superb If No Moon. This moving and luminous volume contains profound meditations on loss, on the rituals of mourning the beloved, and on the poet’s difficult pilgrimage from ‘grief’s labyrinth’ to an eventual willingness to embrace life again. Linehan’s lyrical and precise poems honestly enact and reveal our paradoxical natures, our mystery enshrouded lives —our human frailty, and our surprising strengths and resilience.”
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Dr. Charles Johnson, a 1998 MacArthur Fellow, received the National Book Award for his novel Middle Passage in 1990, and is a 2002 recipient of the Academy Award for Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. In 2003, he was elected to membership in the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He has published three other novels, including Dreamer, Oxherding Tale, and Faith and the Good Thing as well as three story collections, The Sorcerer’s Apprentice, Soulcatcher, and Dr. King’s Refrigerator and Other Bedtime Stories. Charles Johnson earned his bachelor’s and master’s degrees from Southern Illinois University Carbondale in 1971 and 1973, respectively. In 1995, he received an honorary doctorate in Humane Letters from Southern Illinois University, and in 1994 an honorary Doctor of Arts degree from Northwestern. A literary critic, screenwriter, philosopher, international lecturer and cartoonist with over 1,000 drawings published, he is the S. Wilson and Grace M. Pollock Endowed Professor of English at the University of Washington in Seattle. You may visit his author’s website at www.oxherdingtale.com, and additional information on his work can be found at these web pages, http://www.siu.edu/~johnson and http://charlesjohnson.wlu.edu.
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A Call for Submissions

Special Issue: The In-Between Age ~ Writers on Adolescence

Crab Orchard Review is seeking work for our Summer/Fall 2008 issue focusing on writing inspired or informed by the experiences, observations, and/or cultural and historical possibilities of the following topic: “The In-Between Age ~ Writers on Adolescence.” We are open to work that covers any of the multitude of ways that the transition from childhood to adulthood in the teenage years defines us and, in turn, defines the world we live in.

All submissions should be original, unpublished poetry, fiction, or literary nonfiction in English or unpublished translations in English (we do run bilingual, facing-page translations whenever possible). Please query before submitting any interview. The submission period for this issue is August 1, 2007 through October 31, 2007. We will be reading submissions throughout this period and hope to complete the editorial work on the issue by mid-February. Writers whose work is selected will receive $20 (US) per magazine page ($50 minimum for poetry; $100 minimum for prose), two copies of the issue, and a year’s subscription. Mail submissions to:

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Adolescence issue
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Address correspondence to:

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