Volume 15, Number 1
our Winter/Spring 2010 issue
featuring the winners of the COR Annual Literary Prizes

(more information on the prizes)

(return to Vol. 15, No. 1 web page)

Return to the Crab Orchard Review PDF Archive of Past Issues Page

Crab Orchard Review is supported, in part, by a grant from the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency.
“Hidden everywhere, a myriad
leather seed-cases lie in wait…”
—“Crab Orchard Sanctuary: Late October”
Thomas Kinsella

Editor & Poetry Editor
Allison Joseph

Prose Editor
Carolyn Alessio

Editorial Interns
Jessica Eslinger
Charlie Lemmink
Dalton McGee
Shawn Mitchell
Richard Pechous
Luke Skoza
Derand Wright

Special Projects Assistants
Mark Brewin
Tim Shea

SIU Press Interns
Sarah McCartt-Jackson
Hannah New
Amie Whittemore

Founding Editor
Richard Peterson

Managing Editor
Jon Tribble

Assistant Editors
Janelle Blasdel
Mark Brewin
Azizat Danmole
Sarah McCartt-Jackson
Travis Mossotti
James Scoles
A.K. Thompson
Amie Whittemore
Melissa Scholes Young

Board of Advisors
Ellen Gilchrist
Charles Johnson
Rodney Jones
Thomas Kinsella
Richard Russo

Winter/Spring 2010
The Department of English
ISSN 1083-5571
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
Crab Orchard Review and its staff wish to thank these supporters for their generous contributions, aid, expertise, and encouragement:


Robin Adams, Jackie McFadden, Patty Norris, and Joyce Schemonia

Amy Mckenzie, Samuel Holley, and Mary Meadows

Division of Continuing Education

SIU Alumni Association

The Graduate School

College of Liberal Arts

The Office of the Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs and Provost

The Southern Illinois Writers Guild
Crab Orchard Review wishes to express its special thanks to our generous Charter Members/Benefactors, Patrons, Donors, and Supporting Subscribers listed on the following page whose contributions make the publication of this journal possible.

We invite new Benefactors ($300 or more), Patrons ($100), Donors ($70), and Supporting Subscribers ($35) to join us. Supporting Subscribers receive a one-year subscription; Donors receive a two-year subscription; Patrons receive a three-year subscription; and Benefactors receive a lifetime subscription.

Address all contributions to:

Crab Orchard Review
Department of English
Faner Hall 2380 - Mail Code 4503
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
1000 Faner Drive
Carbondale, Illinois 62901
CHARTER MEMBERS*/BENEFACTORS

Carolyn Alessio & Jeremy Manier
Pinckney & Laura Benedict
Edward Brunner & Jane Cogie*
   Linda L. Casebeer
Dwayne Dickerson*
   Jack Dyer*
   Joan Ferrell*
   John Guyon*
   John M. Howell*
   Richard Jurek
   Joseph A. Like
   Greg & Peggy Legan*
   Beth L. Mohlenbrock*
   Jane I. Montgomery*
   Ruth E. Oleson*
   Richard “Pete” Peterson
   Peggy Shumaker

PATRONS

Alejandro Cáceres
Kent Haruf
Chris Kelsey
Jesse Lee Kercheval
Lisa J. McClure
   Anita Peterson
   Eugenie & Roger Robinson
   Betty & Ray Tribble
   David & Laura Tribble
   Clarisse Zimra

DONORS

Lorna Blake
Tawanna R. Brown
Charles Fanning
Jewell A. Friend
John & Nancy Jackson
Reamy Jansen
Rob & Melissa Jensen
Jon Luther
   Elisabeth Luther
   Charlotte and Gabriel Manier
   Lee Newton
   Lisa Ortiz
   Lucia Perillo
   Angela Rubin
   Hans H. Rudnick
   William E. Simeone

SUPPORTING SUBSCRIBERS

Serge & Joan Alessio
Erik C. Campbell
Joanna Christopher
K.K. Collins
 Jeremiah K. Durick
Corrine Frisch
John & Robin Haller
Zdena Heller
Karen Hunsaker
   Lee Lever
   Jessica Maich
   Charlotte McLeod
   Peggy & Albert Melone
   Nadia Reimer
   Lee Robinson
   Catherine Rudnick
   Peter Rutkoff
   Victoria Weisfeld
The editors and staff of Crab Orchard Review dedicate Volume 15, Number 1, and Volume 15, Number 2, to the memory of a scientist, scholar, educator, and administrator who enriched our lives and without whom Crab Orchard Review would not exist:

In Memoriam

Dr. John C. Guyon

Chancellor from 1987 to 1996, Southern Illinois University Carbondale
CRAB ORCHARD REVIEW

Winter/Spring 2010       Volume 15, Number 1

FICTION

Tabaré Alvarez  The Names of Bamboo  1
Jamey Genna  Goat Herder  13
Dionne Irving  Canal  37
Janet McNally  Find Me an Animal with Four Legs and Wings  50
Rachel Meier  Call Number  77
Sarah Nance  Pineapple  91
James Nolan  An Excerpt from Higher Ground, a Novel  118
Shannon Sweetnam  Migration  129

NONFICTION PROSE

Brian M. Biggs  Lessons from Vietnam  165
Barrie Jean Borich  On a Clear Day, Catalina  196
Ira Sukrungruang  Noisy Neighbor  209
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dick Allen</td>
<td>Small Hometown</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeffrey Bean</td>
<td>Alfred Sisley: <em>Snow at Louveciennes</em></td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bruce Bond</td>
<td>Lamp</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Girl Who Feared the Wind</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Milk</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heidi Czerwiec</td>
<td>Spiral Jetty, Great Salt Lake</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.K. Fischer</td>
<td>Maternity Bathing Suit</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Highchair</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carrie Green</td>
<td>Cross-Pollination</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Lue Gim Gong Grape/Currant Hybrid</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Lue Gim Gong Seven-Colored Hybrid Rose</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lue Gim Gong’s Seedlings</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth Hazen</td>
<td>Burning Trash</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luke Johnson</td>
<td>Survey Photograph</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The View from Faulkner’s Balcony, Pirate’s Alley</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Widows Peak</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter Kline</td>
<td>Sometime Before Dawn</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael Levan</td>
<td>Stopped on a Train from Chicago</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Walking through the Weeds off</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number Ten</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandy Longhorn</td>
<td>Glacial Elegy III</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angie Macri</td>
<td>Axils</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The March Down, Arkansas Peace Society</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Adrian Matejka  Fisticuffs  113
Tara McDaniel  My Stepmother, Having Returned to This Earth, Becomes Hannya  114
J. Jason Mitchell  Below the Falls  115
Aimee Nezhukumatathil  Inside a Diorama  116
Jonathan Rice  Columbia  144
Passover  146
The Least of Us  150
J. Allyn Rosser  Royal Dream, or Remington  152
Split Infinitives  154
Carrie Shipers  The Dollmaker’s Daughter  156
Anya Silver  At Skyline Caverns  157
The Boy-Shaped Puzzle  158
The Ninety-Third Name of God  160
Brian Simoneau  November: Almost New Moon  161
Elegy with a Chance of Rain  162
Theresa D. Smith  Nocturne in Gray-Blue  164
Ryan Teitman  Vespers  180
Compline  182
Vigils  184
Mary Van Denend  Camino de la Luz  186
Migrations  188
Watermarks  190
Ronald Wallace  Catching My Father  191
Lost and Found  192
Rhetorical Questions  193
A Note on Our Cover

The four photographs on the cover are by Allison Joseph and Jon Tribble. The photographs are from sites around Illinois, including the Illinois River at Pere Marquette State Park, the water tower at Giant City State Park, and the Ohio River at Metropolis, Illinois.

Announcements

We would like to congratulate one of our recent contributors, Kerry Neville Bakken. Kerry Neville Bakken’s essay “Not Waving but Drowning,” which appeared in Crab Orchard Review, Volume 13, Number 2 (Summer/Fall 2008), was listed as a Notable Essay of 2008 in The Best American Essays, edited by Mary Oliver.

We would also like to thank Robert Atwan, the series editor of The Best American Essays Series, for listing Crab Orchard Review, Volume 13, Number 2 (Summer/Fall 2008), our special issue “The In-Between Age: Writers on Adolescence,” as a Notable Special Issue of 2008.
Our Poetry, Fiction, & Literary Nonfiction Prizes & the Charles Johnson Student Fiction Award

2010 Richard Peterson
Poetry Prize Winner

Three Poems by Jonathan Rice
(Kalamazoo, Michigan)

2010 Jack Dyer
Fiction Prize Winner

“Migration” by Shannon Sweetnam
(Lake Forest, Illinois)

2010 John Guyon
Literary Nonfiction Prize Winner

“On a Clear Day, Catalina”
by Barrie Jean Borich
(Minneapolis, Minnesota)

2009 Charles Johnson
Student Fiction Award Winner

“Pineapple” by Sarah Nance
(University of Wisconsin–Madison)
The 2010 Richard Peterson Poetry Prize, Jack Dyer Fiction Prize, and John Guyon Literary Nonfiction Prize

We are pleased to announce the winners and finalists for the 2010 Richard Peterson Poetry Prize, Jack Dyer Fiction Prize, and John Guyon Literary Nonfiction Prize.

In poetry, the winning entry is three poems—“Columbia,” “Passover,” and “The Least of Us”—by Jonathan Rice of Kalamazoo, Michigan. In fiction, the winning entry is “Migration” by Shannon Sweetnam of Lake Forest, Illinois. In literary nonfiction, the winning entry is “On a Clear Day, Catalina” by Barrie Jean Borich of Minneapolis, Minnesota. The finalists in poetry are three poems—“Vespers,” “Compline,” and “Vigils”—by Ryan Teitman and three poems—“Watermarks,” “Camino de la Luz,” and “Migrations”—by Mary Van Denend. Finalists in fiction are “Canals” by Dionne Irving and “The Meaning of Red” by Kara Weiss. Finalists in literary nonfiction are “Opting Out” by Jacob M. Appel and “Lessons from Vietnam” by Brian M. Biggs.

The final judge for the poetry competition was Allison Joseph, Crab Orchard Review’s editor and poetry editor, and the final judge for the fiction and literary nonfiction competitions was Carolyn Alessio, Crab Orchard Review’s prose editor. All three winners received $1500 and their works are published in this issue. Four of the six finalists also chose to have their works published in this issue. Congratulations to the winners and finalists, and thanks to all the entrants for their interest in Crab Orchard Review.

Crab Orchard Review’s website has information on subscriptions, calls for submissions and guidelines, contest information and results, and past, current, and future issues. Results for the 2011 Literary Prizes (which are closed to entries) will be announced on September 1, 2010.

Visit us at:

CrabOrchardReview.siuc.edu
Crab Orchard Review is pleased to announce “Pineapple” by Sarah Nance (University of Wisconsin; Madison, Wisconsin) as the winner of the 2009 Charles Johnson Student Fiction Award. We would also like to congratulate the finalists for the award: “Start Anywhere” by Melissa A. Castillo-Garsow (Arizona State University; Tempe, Arizona), “Bitten” by Rachel Furey (Southern Illinois University Carbondale; Carbondale, Illinois) and “The Middle Seat” by Deborah Gardner (University of Washington; Seattle, Washington).

The Charles Johnson Student Fiction Award from Southern Illinois University Carbondale is an annual award competition intended to encourage increased artistic and intellectual growth among college and university students at the undergraduate and graduate levels, as well as reward excellence and diversity in creative writing. Each year, $1000 and a signed copy of a Charles Johnson book will be awarded to the winner. The winning entry will also be published in the Winter/Spring issue of Crab Orchard Review. The award is co-sponsored by Charles Johnson, Crab Orchard Review, and the SIUC Department of English and College of Liberal Arts.

The 2010 Charles Johnson Student Fiction Award competition is closed. The results will be announced on September 1, 2010, and complete guidelines for the 2011 award will be available at:

johnson.siuc.edu
Tabaré Alvarez

The Names of Bamboo

The old man knelt by the bamboo’s root base and twisted the delicate new shoots between his fingers. The girl, who carried the old man’s equipment in a backpack, shifted her feet.

Through the layers of fabric, he could feel the cold ground at his knees. The walking and the altitude left him a little winded, and his breath misted in the air: he was in a mountain valley in Chile, and the temperature was two or three degrees above freezing. From around the green shoots, he took some dirt—black, cold, and moist—and smelled it: old rain, fallen bamboo leaves, and a trace of salt. He was surrounded by bamboo plants, some dark green and taller than he was, others, the majority, five feet in height, their culms covered in a white, waxy powder. Beyond them rose treeless, white-capped peaks, and a few dozen miles west lay the Pacific. He wasn’t in Southeast Asia but in South America: once more he told himself that here he had found species of bamboo that no botanist had found outside China, though he couldn’t be sure until they flowered.

Some bamboo flower annually, but others do so at intervals as long as one hundred and twenty years, long enough for people to think they don’t bloom at all. No one at the village, which was simply called El Valle, not even the village alderman, who was sixty-nine or seventy according to his own reckoning, almost as old as the old man, and who worked wood and knew something of plants, believed that all bamboo flowered. Some of the strands and groves and clusters of bamboo in the valley had simply never flowered in his lifetime.

The old man began uprooting the bamboo shoots. This grove stretched from the creek’s source at the edge of the valley to the north rim of the village, behind the schoolhouse and the alderman’s house. He intended to classify the pale bamboo that grew there. He suspected this was either *Bashania altinprem* or *Bashania melvillepapa*, species of panda bamboo with long intervals between flowerings, sixty-eight and seventy-one years, respectively. Panda bamboo was thought to occur naturally only on the Asian mainland. This grove contained
at least eleven successive generations of bamboo; if the species were indeed *altinprem* or *melvillepapa*, with roughly seventy years between one generation and the next, then the oldest plant would predate Columbus’s arrival. This would disprove one of botany’s basic assumptions concerning the Americas, that all pre-Columbian flora is autochthonous.

The old man wasn’t dying, not particularly, but he knew that he hadn’t much time: in a few years, in five or six or even ten, he would be unable to trek through the valley in the cold. He felt he was close: it gave him hope that the alderman remembered no flowers. It was incredible, the old man thought, how much he relied on that single fact. He had been a botanist all his life; he had traveled (more than any of his colleagues, most of whom had married, and had children and grandchildren, and had still managed to get their names into the books) across temperate zones and along the tropical and subtropical belt: Asia, Africa, the Americas.

He placed the green shoots in his mouth. The girl made a weak noise. He closed his eyes and chewed. Bamboo plants often had several local common names, and the same name would often refer to several distinct species. The old man suspected that even some of the scientific names were duplicates, where two scientists had independently discovered the same plant growing in different places. Verification was made difficult by the long intervals between flowerings, by the seclusion of the locales, and by the number of names. In her backpack the girl carried a list of all the names the old man had collected over the years, and he could now turn to her and, in his fluent but heavily accented Spanish, ask her for the list. But there was no need: he had the names memorized. Bamboo shoots are edible, as are the seeds, and in his travels, at every opportunity he had had, he had tasted them. He used the standard methods of field identification, based on the flower, the leaf, the root structure, and the color, thickness, and node spacing of the culm, but he also kept a mental log of the taste of the shoots. He had described the tastes in writing, too, but many of these descriptions read like one another: there are variations in nature that the senses can perceive but for which language does not yet have a name. So the old man could trust only the memory of the taste, and daily, as he walked through the valley inspecting the bamboo, he spoke out the list, in his mind calling up the taste of each name.

The girl still stood there with the heavy backpack on. He knew she didn’t like it, his eating the shoots: the villagers did not use bamboo
in their cooking. The shoots were tender, sweet, and wet, with a slight alkaline aftertaste, salty as the earth had smelled. *Chusquea andina*, common almost up to elevations of perpetual snow. He hadn’t expected otherwise—bamboo of the same species flower and sprout at the same time, and he had been tasting *andina* for the past two days. There were many small clumps of bamboo other than the pale one within the large grove, and the old man included these in his daily circuit, even though from the leaves, culm, and root structure he was fairly certain of the species. He liked to be thorough, and he could be sure only once the plants bloomed.

He got up, leaning on the trunk of the mother-plant for support. The girl made to take his elbow. He wasn’t sure how it had turned out she and not one of the village boys carried his backpack, though the alderman had said that most of the boys either worked their family plot or had migrated to Santiago. Her name was Sofía; she was seventeen, thin, with dark, tightly-curled hair and a pale complexion, rouged—permanently, it seemed—at the cheeks from the mountain cold. She slept in the schoolhouse, he knew, and got her meals in a haphazard way from the neighbors, sometimes having breakfast three or four times, sometimes skipping a meal altogether. No one knew who her father was, and her mother had died last year. The alderman could have sent her to an orphanage in town, but she had wanted to stay. He was also the village teacher, and he let her stay in the schoolhouse, where she served as housekeeper, washing the slate blackboard, packing and sweeping the dirt floor, and keeping the alderman informed of any loosened joints—the leather strapping that held some of the bamboo beams together tended to rot—or leaks in the bamboo roofing. She wore many layers of clothing, all of different colors—brown and tan and green—and tattered at the edges, and there was a line of dirt at her neck. The old man wasn’t sure about the girl, whether she reminded him of his mother, now gone these thirty years, or of the wife or of the daughter he might have liked to have.

He nodded to her that he was fine and set off for the next cluster of bamboo in their daily circuit, knowing she would follow behind, and once more, without having to decide to do so, he began to recite the list of names.

That evening the old man set his chair on the patch of grass in front of the house, an unlit pipe and two clean cups next to him on a small side table. He sat down and leaned back in his chair, the one chair the house had. It was bamboo, of course, *Chusquea culeou,* and
made by the alderman himself. The pipe on the side table was bamboo, *Chusquea cumingii*; the two cups were bamboo, *Chusquea montana*. Behind him, he knew, the wind chimes and the half-beam rain gutters that ran along the eaves were bamboo, *Lithachne pauciflora* and *Chusquea palenae*; the mat by the door was bamboo, *Chusquea valdiviensis*; the step from the raised porch down to the ground was bamboo, *Chusquea macrostachya*. He liked this house and could sometimes imagine living the rest of his life here. If the pale bamboo flowered, and the flowers matched those of *altinprem* or *melvillepapa*, he would have to return to Albuquerque with his findings: with flower specimens, photographs of the locations, a record of dates and times; he would have to wait for UNM to compare his specimens to the Asian ones, and that would take some time. Though the flowers would be gone by then, the University would send a team back to the village to uproot several of the culms and take DNA samples from the rhizomes. There would be a surge in grants; botanists would flock to the Americas; Ph.D. students would once again write dissertations on trans-Pacific migration in the third millennium BCE; some observer looking for a headline would start easy talk about a Nobel. Perhaps textbooks would be updated.

He saw the alderman, lean and white-haired, crossing the small clearing at the center of the village. A young man next to him carried the alderman’s chair, and four other villagers also brought chairs and coffee with them. The girl trailed behind, by turns falling far behind and catching up in quick sprints: he interpreted this as the complication of her wish to arrive and her feeling of being outside the group. She had from the start been deferential to him, part natural kindness and part a natural impulse to attend someone who might help her. And in truth her prospects didn’t seem good: he sensed, for one, that no one in the village would consider marrying her. She had no land to farm, no specialized skill to earn her her livelihood. The classes at the schoolhouse were in the evenings, and she sat through all of them, every evening; she was by far the oldest student. The alderman had taught her, as he had most of the villagers, to read and write. Perhaps she could succeed the alderman as village teacher, the old man thought, but he knew that option was unlikely. The villagers would not send their children to her.

The alderman placed his chair on the other side of the table, and the two men sipped their coffee and filled their pipes with tobacco. The other villagers arranged their chairs in a loose semicircle facing the
two men and the house and drank coffee as well. The girl didn’t have a chair and sat on the dry grass off to one side, leaning against a leg of the long table that displayed the books and specimens.

The alderman had brought the old man a plate of food: at the alderman’s house they had meat—chicken or guinea fowl—every Friday. The alderman, who had overseen its construction, asked the old man about the house, whether the week’s rain had revealed any leaks in the roof. Then the alderman asked him about the work, whether there had been any progress, and the old man once more asked him about the flowers.

The alderman said, “I’ve never seen flowers on the white bamboo.” Then he shook his head. “That bamboo never flowers.”

After a while the old man invited the alderman over to the worktable, and the villagers stood up to follow the conversation. The table was lined with leaf, culm, sheath, and root specimens of the bamboo with the white, waxy powder. Behind the specimens were books opened to illustrations of the corresponding parts of \textit{altinprem} or \textit{melvillepapa}. The old man began to tell the story, very likely apocryphal, he knew, of the former: how a pair of scientists had discovered it together and had played rock-paper-scissors—two out of three—to see which of them it would be named after. That wasn’t quite how it worked, of course; after a discovery, there was, at the least, the formality of someone else suggesting the new species be named after you. All the same, the story quickened him, but he saw that the scientists’ concern held no interest for the villagers, and so he turned the conversation to the medicinal properties of the local plants.

Then the villagers went through the Friday routine of giving him the location of certain bamboo strands they had remembered or come across during the week—the plants were so common to them that it was difficult to think of them. The old man supposed, too, that some of the villagers followed the alderman on these Friday visits to him just to see the alderman talking with a foreign important man. He knew he should have chuckled at that, at being called an important man, but instead it made him sad. They had, too, he knew, some curiosity about the girl: the villagers—the young men, the mothers, the other unmarried girls—appeared to hold themselves above her in a matter-of-fact way. She had no father, no property. The villagers gave her food, but not once had the old man heard any of them call her over to include her in some activity, the walk to the creek to gather water or the peeling of the peas, or seen any of them touch her—in greeting or
to ask about her health—not the girls her age or even the old women. So they must wonder about this girl, who should be in an orphanage, and who the foreign doctor allowed to carry his books and camera.

In the beginning they had also tried to bring him their sick children, and he had had to explain many times that he wasn’t that type of doctor. He had been born in Albuquerque, in 1937; his parents were of Dutch descent. He had often told the villagers his name, William van Buren; his last name gave them difficulty, and they would not call him either William or Guillermo. The alderman simply called him Doctor; only the girl, really, ever used his name, and she called him Doctor van Buren.

He had overheard some children and knew that in the village he had a new name, perhaps because of his profession, perhaps because of the way his name sounded on the girl’s lips. And the house, which had been built for him and thus had no older name, was called by the children, in a tone of familiarity that retained only a trace of awe, the house of Doctor Bambú.

Forty-nine weeks had passed, and it was again the beginning of summer. That Friday morning they were to start at sunrise, which came early in the December summers, and follow their usual route from the village, into the grove, and to the creek’s source by the foothills. He rose about an hour before dawn, lit a candle, and walked to the outhouse.

In a second outbuilding, a charcoal kitchen, he buttered some bread and boiled an egg and, as was his custom, ate them there in the kitchen, standing, warming himself by the charcoal fire. Then he returned inside, relit the charcoal brazier in his room with the coals from the kitchen, and got back under the covers. Shortly before dawn he heard a rap on the door. The entire interior of his house except for the small partitioned bedroom served as a lab. He hurried toward the door, past the bookcase-like structure with labeled pigeonholes, the numbered photographs and marked maps of the valley, the microscope and trays of slides, expecting a sick child, a fever or diarrhea, or that perhaps one of the two pregnant women in the village, Luisa and Dolores, had gone into premature labor. With the girl’s help he had learned all the villagers’ names. But the voice whispering “Doctor van Buren” was the girl’s. He stopped. He didn’t know what this was. She might be in trouble. She might be about to leave town. She might need money. She might want to talk to him. With his hand on the bamboo
handle he realized what else her knocking could mean, and he felt his breath returning: the bamboo could have flowered.

“The bamboo plants have flowered,” she said. “The pale bamboo behind the schoolhouse. Your bamboo.”

He gave a brisk nod there in the doorway then took his coat and glasses and hurried outside, but he could see nothing in the dark. The girl’s eyesight was better than his. She took his arm and led him across the clearing toward the schoolhouse. In that darkness he heard only human breath and the trilling of the crickets, which always remained distant, ahead of them; he smelled the dew on the earth, the mineral taste of the air; and he felt the surprising warmth that came from her. A dull blue glow began to spread over the clearing, and he felt a sharp, sudden resentment toward it, toward the moment when the world would be light enough, and there would no longer be a reason for her to hold his arm. The sun edged over the eastern peaks, but the two of them continued as they were toward the schoolhouse. He could see the color on the plants from here, between the houses, touches of yellow on the pale trunks. They went between the schoolhouse and the alderman’s house and stopped at the edge of the grove. The culms drooped with the weight of dense clusters of small yellow flowers. The girl let go so he could work. He put his nose to the closest flowers and smelled them: the heavy, sour smell of spoiled milk. He imagined how the smell could have woken her. He touched the petals: rough and hairy. Much hairier, he thought, than Bashania usually are. “Odd flowers,” he said, almost to himself, “for altinprem or melvillepapa.”

They went back for the books and the equipment: the camera, the containers for the specimens. They took pictures and samples from the first plants and continued into the grove. The flowers would not stay long on the bamboo, and he had to confirm that all the powder-covered plants were in flower and gather evidence from each cluster. He was sure: the dusty bamboo couldn’t be altinprem or melvillepapa.

Strangely, he found himself thinking of the air he displaced by being there—he held, at the edges of his focus, an image of that air back in place: if the species turned out to be one of the common American ones, then all the past months would have been wasted, but he didn’t recognize the flower, so perhaps it would still turn out to be an Asian species, or even an African one; maybe he was less familiar with African bamboo than he was with American or Asian, but he doubted this. As they walked, the old man, now used to the walk but always a little out of breath from the altitude, called out the list, trying
to find a name that fit. The shoots would not appear for a few days, but he went through the list anyway, bringing to mind the shape, colors, texture, and smell of each of the flowers. The girl, though she had no image or scent to remember, sometimes spoke a name with him.

“Weaver’s bamboo: *Bambusa textilis*.”

“Buddha’s belly: *Bambusa ventricosa*.”

Out of habit he interrupted the list when they passed one of the bamboo he had identified. “Sofía?”

And she would say the name. “*Chusquea macrostachya*.”

Then he continued the list, and she spoke some of the scientific names with him.

“Common bamboo: *Bambusa vulgaris*.”

So far, all the pale plants on their circuit were in bloom, and still the old man could not find the right name. He called a rest and went quickly through the books, but it was no use: he was a little tired, he thought; he couldn’t focus his eyes.

They continued through the grove, taking photographs of the flowers and samples, and labeling them, then reciting the list as they walked. It became increasingly hard for the old man to keep his voice from sounding strange.

As they neared the creek’s source, the end of the grove, the image of air reclaiming the space he occupied came again, more forcefully, and with it now the fear that there would be little difference; perhaps he had forgotten some of the names, simply skipped them in the list. He went through the list from the beginning, counting the names, and the girl sensed the strangeness in his voice and spoke all the names she knew, to let him know that the list was intact, that he hadn’t changed it. At the end, when the number was confirmed, he felt panic. Maybe he had made a mistake at the very beginning, and the list had been incomplete all this time. Who knows what he had missed—and he couldn’t do it all again, he didn’t have time, he would never see Africa again or even Southeast Asia, he had wasted his life. He stopped where he was, a few dozen paces from the creek’s source, and sat down carefully on the ground.

The girl came around so she could see his face. His eyes were open and occasionally blinked, but she could not get him to tell her what was wrong. Her voice rose, and she began to call for the other villagers. The old man heard her words hit and finally blend into the rustling of the bamboo leaves. The villagers did not respond. She paced in front of him, seemingly unsure whether to stay with him or leave him to go for
help. In the end she sat down in front of him; it seemed as if she wanted to shake him but didn’t dare.

After a while the old man rose slowly from the ground. “I’ll be okay. Let’s do the last ones.”

They took the photographs and cut a half-dozen of the flowers and labeled everything. They should probably get back, he thought; the village might be in something of a commotion: the alderman would have seen the flowered bamboo and be excited for the old man’s sake.

On the walk back he could hear that the girl followed behind him more closely than usual, as if ready to catch him. There was no point, he felt, but he went through the list again anyway, calling the names aloud, and again she spoke the ones she knew with him, and he thought that she sounded relieved. For the old man the memories came effortlessly, the images of the flowers and even the taste of shoots. He was surprised at the ease, and when he got to the end of the list, as an experiment, he tried to think of all the names of the villagers, expecting, for a reason he didn’t know, to either find the same ease there or that he had forgotten them all, but he remembered them normally, as he did other things, with a little effort, not in the easy, almost magical way he now found himself going through the names of bamboo. It made him happy, that there was something he knew.

He listened to the girl’s steps behind him. He didn’t know her, not really, but there were worse ways to spend the last years of one’s life than in this village. The rhythm of her footfalls began to lull him. He felt calm.

Yet he defined himself by his scientist’s practice of looking squarely at the facts and their implications. What about the girl? He was old enough that she was relatively safe from rumor in his presence, but he wasn’t sure how long that would last once he had no more pressing business in the village, and the bamboo had very evidently flowered. He couldn’t adopt her, have her live in his house as a daughter or a niece; she was too old. But she was also too young. Marrying her would make no sense, since he would die in a few years—and in this village no one would marry a widow: they would say she had killed him. If he became an invalid, broke a femur, say, she could be his nurse, he supposed. And he knew she wanted to stay: he couldn’t simply give her money and let them think what they may: she would have to live with the villagers’ odd looks for the rest of her life.

He would hire her as his assistant, on the strength of the flowering, which he would describe to the alderman and the rest of the village as
a discovery, and leave, saying he had to present his findings. She would stay at the lab, and a Santiago bank would send her her wages. It could be arranged. She would explore the valley, collecting samples and mailing them to him; he would make sure they were never returned, even after he died. She was young; she could watch the valley, the bamboo, and perhaps even be there when the next generation flowered.

He settled on this scheme as he walked, not liking the deceit but not minding it very much either. He liked the idea of doing something—of doing something for her, of having her inherit the house of Doctor Bambú.

That evening, in preparation for the alderman’s Friday visit, the old man arranged on the worktable outside some of the flower, culm, leaf, and root samples of the common bamboo plants he had identified in the valley over the past year, twelve of them, and fresh flower samples of the unidentified pale bamboo.

He made coffee, poured it into a metal pot kept over the fire, and filled the percolator again. Over the months the number of his visitors had dwindled, so that it was often only the alderman and the girl, but today, with the flowering, he was expecting a group almost as large as that which had greeted him the first week, maybe twenty-five or thirty people. He only had six cups, so he took some fallen bamboo culms, *Chusquea andina*, and with a machete cut them just below each node, so that the node’s diaphragm served as the cup’s bottom and liquid could be poured into the exposed hollow. If he aimed too high, a cup came out bottomless or the machete became stuck in the node; if he aimed too low, a cup came out too short, barely a cup at all. When he had thirty cups, he stopped, and he found that he wasn’t as out of breath as he would have expected.

He went to the front of the house, brought out the charcoal brazier from his bedroom and placed it on the porch, blew on the live coals, got the metal pot with the coffee from the kitchen, and set it on the brazier. Then he made several trips to the back until he had all the new bamboo cups on the porch.

“All right,” he said. “Please, sit here.” He pointed to the porch step. “When the others come, offer them coffee.”

She looked at him. “Maybe you should lie down.”

“I’m okay,” he said, smiling.

The visit was for the old man a performance, and he gave himself to it fully. Once the twenty-six villagers who came with the alderman had sat down in the chairs they had brought and all held cups of coffee
in their hands, sipping cautiously from the sharp rims, he filled the alderman’s pipe and his own and spoke cheerfully about the flowering. He intended to show off the girl’s knowledge in front of the villagers, so he stayed in his seat, cleared his throat, and called to her.

“Sofía: could you please pass me that bamboo we identified the other day?”

She saw all the heads swivel toward her. She stood up hesitantly from the porch step and walked over to the worktable. “The *pauciflora*?” she said, pointing at a dried-up piece of bark.

“No, the other one,” the old man said happily. I’ll do three, he thought.

“The *valdiviensis*?” she said, picking up a thin branch with two leaves.

“No, the other one,” the old man said, waving vaguely.

“The *macrostachya*?” she said, indicating a green root cluster. “That one,” he said, nodding.

He was enjoying the crowd’s surprised silence. And the girl was looking at him as though he had lost his senses. When she offered him the root, he’d forgotten he had asked for it. “Ah yes, thank you. Thank you, Sofía.”

After that, it was easy to tell them that he was appointing her his assistant, and that in his absence she would be in charge of the lab.

The alderman had some men bring food from his house to celebrate the flowering of the bamboo. The villagers ate and sipped from their cups. The sun went down, and the adults sent their children for shawls, candles, and more coffee. When the fresh coffee arrived and was served, the alderman toasted to the flowering. The old man happened to turn and saw that one of the young men, Marco, was sitting on the grass talking to the girl. The old man quickly turned away.

A few days later, he headed out on an old, tame burro the alderman had lent him. He had left most of the equipment in the lab, for the girl, and taken with him only a few flower samples and the Polaroids of the dusty-culmed bamboo and one Polaroid of the girl and him in front of the house. Once he reached the outskirts of Santiago, he dismounted gingerly and watched the alderman’s burro until it was out of sight, back toward the village. Then he took a taxi to the airport. The return to Albuquerque took more than a day, and he had time to think of the girl and of the pale bamboo, and the taste of
those new shoots, and a few times he thought to turn around and go back to the village.

He didn’t know how he wanted to spend the years ahead. He would try for a simple life. Maybe he would try new things. As for his bid for immortality, for the moment he would stand back. After all, upon discovery of a new species, it was bad form to do the naming oneself.
Aileen was trying to get home fast the day she became the goat herder. They had started closing the school gates by four o’clock, and she was forever getting trapped inside the high school grounds. She liked to stay after, grade papers, check for cheating or giftedness. But the last time she stayed late, the principal had ordered all the gates, with their thick yellow bars, pushed shut early because of some special event taking place over on the field later that night. She and four or five other late-stayers, teachers who were afternoon workers, not morning people, dedicated maybe, hadn’t known about the gates. She was trapped in like some stupid animal—the new principal was always implementing some new rule. Aileen didn’t think she herself was really all that dedicated; she just didn’t like to take her work home with her. To be fair to herself, she had to admit—it had only been recently that she’d gotten this attitude. She had never minded staying late or taking home work before this past year. It was just that time had become a limited resource.

The last time she’d gotten locked in, she had had to drive around to every exit, and then she had to ask the janitors to let her out.

“Oh, are you trapped in the school?” Chuckling at her, while she waited in her car. They’d yakked back and forth on their walkie-talkies for ten minutes. Finally, she just drove back over to the middle school gate again, got out and checked the padlock, which was on but unlocked.

She had wanted to yell at the janitors. Tell them she had to get home—she had a teenage daughter who needed to go to treatment three times a week. But she didn’t want them to know her business—a teacher whose kid had problems with drugs and alcohol. She knew better than to try to get any sympathy, and she knew better than to lose her temper with the maintenance crew. Some of them could make your life hell if you let it show how annoying their slow, lazy attitudes were. Administration acted like maintenance crew should be given a medal because they had to work so hard for a living—because they
had to sweep and throw out the garbage from the classrooms and pick up the garbage around the perimeter. Aileen gave them exactly the respect they were due. Her parents had worked hard all their lives, and so had she. She’d already done her share of hard labor. Growing up on a farm in the Midwest, she’d walked beans and baled hay, washed ten thousand dishes, and had to pay her own way through college, was still paying, in fact.

She didn’t have to take Josie to treatment today, but she did want to get home, it was her free day. Josie was basically finished with treatment, had graduated, only had to go once a week to her talk group. Today was Aileen’s day to go home, sit down, read a new book, and relax.

The meetings at Kaiser: an endless diatribe from a bunch of unhappy spoiled teenagers. One day, a girl’s mother stopped at the mall with her daughter before coming in a half-hour late to the meeting. Then Josie and she had to sit through the girl pulling neck-scarves and sweaters out of the Abercrombie and Fitch bag. Another kid in the group didn’t even have a bike. Aileen, who had an extra bike at home, offered to bring it in. But that kid never made it. They put him down in some hell-hole of a rehab place, where kids tried to jump the wall, get on BART, and run away. Aileen and her husband worried that Josie would relapse and get put in Diamond Ranch. Or that she, too, would run away.

**Today on the way home, in the middle of the traffic circle** there was a pale yellow dog with black spots on his forehead, lying flat on his belly, ready to pounce, holding a short, slant-eyed billygoat in its place. Aileen knew the goats were shipped in for a couple of weeks a year to crop the tall grasses on the high steep hillsides next to the middle/high school campus. She liked seeing them there in the middle of the suburban city while waiting in traffic on her way to work in the mornings—a herd of a hundred or so goats munching away on the grass that grew on the hillsides leading into the valley where her school was located.

While Aileen was growing up, her father had raised cattle and milk cows on their farm in Iowa, but during the past few years, he owned a small herd of goats. There was a market for them back in her hometown where the packing plant had re-opened.

Aileen had taken Josie to visit her father’s farm in Iowa a couple of times, the last time when Josie was eight. She was already fourteen
now—only fourteen, Aileen thought—too young to have all the troubles she had. Josie had fed her grandpa’s calves and the goats he raised. She had loved the farm.

A car or two ahead of her—it was a black car with some white paneling, an old police car with a banged up side, the kind people bought at auction—a black man, well, a kid or a man driving it, saw the dog and the goat, and he revved his engine, waiting to get by. Then he squealed out his tires. Aileen saw the dog and the goat then.

The goat in the street disregarded the revving car and charged at the dog. Head down, the dog whipped his rear end out of the way of the black and white car, then maneuvered his body back into his space in the street in front of the goat.

Kids were lined up on the curve of the circular sidewalk behind the goat, shouting, yelling, laughing. Some kind of refuse came flying out into the street. Garbage.

Shit! Aileen thought. She hated that. She was worried the dog would get run over. She drove carefully through the traffic circle around the outside, pulled past the dog and the goat. Then she parked her car alongside one of the four exiting streets of the turnaround.

Getting out, slamming her door, she yelled at the kids, “What’s going on?” The thing was to get the goat out of the street, and the kids were blocking the sidewalk. They started shouting at Aileen. “Oh, yeah, you’re going to help!” They were laughing at her.

She stepped into the street with the dog and heard, “Oh, you think you’re goin’ to get that goat.”

And, “That goat’s gonna kill you.”

She shouted at the kids in disgust, “That goat ain’t gonna kill nobody. Either help or get lost!”

It was her Midwestern voice, come back in an instant, but they thought she was repeating their dialect. They laughed at her slang, laughing their belief in her ineptitude, the ridiculousness of this short woman in high clogs and dress slacks and a navy pea coat helping chase a goat out of the street.

One of them yelled, “Bitch!” at her, and even as she knew how ridiculous she looked, she pulled her ID up and said, “I’m a teacher, come say it to my face!” But they only laughed and hoo-hooed her. They knew there was safety in her not knowing their names.

The line of cars was starting to back up all the way down the street, a quarter mile back to the school’s main entrance. She could hear horns honking, drivers who couldn’t see what the holdup was.
She came up on the goat’s head and shouted, “Git.”

Someone threw more garbage into the street, remnants of a lunch, a paper bag. The goat had some kind of bugaboo about the dog, though. He clip-clopped a short ways from Aileen, sideways into the traffic circle, but then he put his head down and charged again at the dog. The dog turned to avoid the goat and ran toward the group of boys, middle-school age, twenty, maybe thirty kids gathered by then. Right away the goat checked his charge forward into the traffic circle, veered, following the dog up the hill and toward the crowd of middle-school children.

The circle of boys, running with fear and delight away from the goat, moved up the hillside. Aileen sneered inside herself. Chickenshit city kids all of them. They were still yelling at her about how she should go home, but two of the boys stayed behind. One a tall boy, the other a smaller kid. With the dog and the goat out of the turnaround, the backup of cars rushed into the traffic circle.

Aileen thought, at least they’re out of the way. But where were the other goats?

Just then, the dog ran back down the hill, the goat following him slowly, wary and stubborn, dog and goat parrying back and forth. Then, oop, back into the traffic circle they went.

Aileen and the two boys moved together, making a fence behind the dog and goat, where the crowd of kids had been a moment ago.

“Where are the other goats?” she asked the tall boy who had stayed behind. “The dog wants him to go back with the other goats.”

“Way over there,” the tall one said, pointing across the traffic circle to a faraway hillside on the opposite side of the street.

The shorter boy said, “We were trying to help, but nobody would stop.”

Traffic was log-jamming up again in the turnaround, some motorists stopping and laughing, others whirring by as soon as they saw a break, disregarding Aileen and the animals.

“Well,” she told the two boys, “let’s get the goat up onto the grass anyway.” And she and the two boys walked around the goat to the right, into the traffic circle. They stood in the goat’s way, with the dog to the left of them, all moving toward the goat to push it backward off the street. But the goat had other ideas: still in the street, it simply put its head down and charged at the dog again.

Suddenly, the two of them, dog and goat ran around to the front of Aileen’s car. Aileen circled around the passenger side, running and cutting with the dog, trapping the goat alongside the curb. But the goat would not back up onto the grass. The two boys stood away, giving up.
Jamey Genna

The damn goat was so stubborn. The kids Josie and her husband had encountered in treatment got chips for time in sobriety, and when they ended up using again, the chips were taken away. One kid hid in his parents’ closet and sniffed glue. Wanting to get caught, Aileen thought. Josie had written in her journal and Aileen, knowing something was wrong had read it. The words there—wasted...out of it...so stoned I couldn’t understand a word she was saying—times Aileen had been talking to Josie and didn’t know.

Then when they’d taken her to see the therapist, Josie screaming, spitting, “Why’d you read my journal, Mom!”

Aileen had felt guilty.

But the therapist said, “You wouldn’t have written it down, Josie, if you didn’t want your mom to know.”

A woman in an SUV rolled her window down, laughing at Aileen, “What are you doing? Ha ha ha. You helping that dog!”

Aileen recognized the high school daughter in the passenger seat.

“Mrs. Donovan, ha ha, you the goat herder?”

Aileen flashed a quick smile at both of them.

This was fun. She was busy. Physically. For the first time in a long time. No sitting around in a circle with a bunch of parents and their teenage kids in a square room up at Kaiser, waiting for the kids to embarrass everyone, including themselves—you never come home, you’re always working, and her daughter’s favorite—you never listen. Well, they’d taught Aileen how to sit down and listen. And she’d been doing plenty of it for six long months. Driving a half hour over there in the car, hardly a word said all the way. Then, boom, once they got there, taking a hit every time.

The kids on the upper hillside were starting to come down toward them again. They should stay out of it, she thought. They were shouting and laughing at her. She could feel their happy animosity, knew they thought she was ludicrous, but god she felt invigorated. This was something, to chase this goat with the dog’s help, show it who was boss.

A fellow teacher, the dance teacher, pulled up in front of Aileen’s car, and said the goat herder had been called, probably the cops, too. Maybe five, ten minutes had gone by with Aileen and the sandy-colored dog, circling and chasing the goat in small rhythmical parries, keeping it out of the traffic. The goat kept putting its stubborn head down and taking little runs at the dog, the dog would run away a bit, then flatten
to the pavement, and circle in on the goat, its tongue lolling happily and yet frankly, as if saying, “Keep it up, goat.”

Finally, two policemen showed up in a patrol car.

One of them came over, stupidly asked Aileen, “Are you the goat herder?”

She laughed dryly and answered, “No, but I know how to herd cattle. I grew up on a farm.”

The cop pulled out his bullhorn, “All traffic come to a stop,” he barked, which quite frankly, thought Aileen, was pretty much at a standstill by then anyway. People had stopped to watch. Others, trying to whiz by, got caught in the goat and dog’s game of parrying and had had to stop their automobiles dead.

The goat chose that moment of the cop’s announcement to make a dash back up the hill again toward the schoolboys. The other cop had gone to flag traffic coming down the north exit.

The first time Josie really got into trouble, the police had been called. Josie was at the homecoming game, drunk. They got a phone call. Went over to her high school and looked all over town for her. The cops told her, “If we call in a missing person’s report…we have to arrest her.”

The principal said, “I told her to come here and she just ran away.”

The whole town was looking for her kid—parents, police, other kids. October—it was cold. Finally, they’d found her. Josie said she hid behind a bush and something, a raccoon, was staring at her. Scared her to death, Josie said.

“Mom,” she said, drunk, “it had a mask on.”

The cop on the hill reached out and grabbed the goat by the horns with both hands as it ran past, but it simply whipped its chunky triangular head and yanked free of the man’s grip.

Aileen laughed to herself. That was no way to take down a goat. She walked in her clogs up the hill.

She told the cop, “The dog wants to take the goat back that way,” and pointed across the traffic. “If you’d just keep the traffic stopped and…” but the cop wasn’t listening to her.

“If I gave you a leash, do you think you could hold that goat?” he said.

Aileen smiled, “No way that goat’s gonna let me hang onto it!” The goat was standing still then, up high on the northern street, out of the
traffic circle, and the other cop below was waving people through. Things were quiet for a moment, but then a kid in the crowd threw a small-sized football at the goat and the goat took off down the hill again.

“Who threw that?!?” the hillside cop shouted into the bullhorn. Aileen ran with the goat and the dog in their brief run down the hill. She stepped into the street again in front of them.

“He just wants the goat to go back to the herd,” she told this cop, and she pointed again across traffic to the southern hillside.

“We just want it to stay over there…to let the traffic through,” the cop said.

All right, officer, she thought, and she and the dog walked up on the goat, cornering it behind her vehicle against the curb. It was just a matter of time before the goat would rush the dog again, she thought. The goat and the dog don’t care what you want, officer.

_Damn,_ she thought, watching the dog flatten and eye the goat happily, _that is the smartest dog. I wish I had a dog like that._ It wasn’t about to let the goat get away. She liked that the dog knew how to hold his ground—knew his duty and did it—faithfully. No, being faithful was for humans. This dog was dedicated. This was something Aileen wished she could see in her own kid, in the kids she taught at school. Why didn’t they know what it meant? To work? To play happily at something that took work? Aileen had lost her dedication, too.

Just then a young man, slender, in a jean jacket came up behind her. He had an open undisturbed expression.

“You’re the goat herder?” she asked him.

“Yes.”

“I tried to get it out of the street,” she said, “I don’t know that I was much help, though. That’s a good dog.”

The goat herder began calling out the goat or the dog’s name, “Zofi, Zofi…” clicking his teeth. The goat looked idly at him over his shoulder, but then back at the dog. Aileen held her ground, as did the dog, and then while the goat put his head down, getting ready to charge again, the goat herder simply and quickly reached down and yanked the goat’s back leg out from under him, pulled him out of the street, grabbed the other leg, and turned him on his side.

_Damn,_ Aileen thought, I wish I’d have thought of that—just like chickens, hook their legs out from under them. She had had to lie on top of a calf once in a field to keep it from running back to its mother, but she couldn’t remember how she’d gotten it on its side. She remembered telling Josie about it. “Maybe my dad did it for me.” She told Josie how she’d lain
on top of the calf, waiting for her dad to come back. She didn’t think she could’ve pulled that goat over like that, though, she had to admit.

The policeman on the hillside was yelling something at the traffic and at the kids, who were dispersing now, disappointed, she thought, that there had not been any bloodshed. They would’ve liked it if she’d fallen on her face, or if the goat had hurt her. How ridiculous. She would never have fallen. These city kids, she thought again as she got in her car. They didn’t know anything.

She felt the emptiness of her disgust. They knew nothing about it. Nothing. She would always be this way, she thought. A farm girl, someone who knew how to herd animals, how to milk cows. Could stand in front of an animal and tell it which direction to go. She could remember all her years of teaching, the times she’d given discipline referrals to these kids, heard them call her bitch because she wanted them to get an education.

Most of the kids liked her, but there was always the one who had a hard head, had something against her, maybe because she was white, maybe because she didn’t know who they were or where they came from. It wasn’t for lack of trying, though.

In the traffic circle, she was faceless to them. There were some in her class too, who didn’t want to be told what to do. They knew nothing about her—she knew about poverty, knew what it did to people, but they couldn’t see. Sometimes it wasn’t even about that. She hated the time she gave to them when it was time she could’ve spent with Josie.

“Everyone has to make a living” is what the counselor told the teenagers in the circle. But some moms didn’t have to go to work—could stop at a mall on their way to therapy. Aileen remembered—Josie seemed to change that day, to give in a little; she looked at Aileen when the daughter whined to the group that she and her mother hadn’t had time to try things on. Then fifteen minutes later, the girl admitted she’d been drinking all night at a party the weekend before. Aileen looked across at Josie and Josie had looked back at her. Who are these people? the look said.

When Aileen got home that afternoon, Josie was sitting in the living room snuggled up in the corner of the couch, watching TV—some show about what not to wear. For the past year, it had been Josie’s m.o. to simply go hide out in the basement after school. Now she was finally venturing back up the stairs, making dinner in the microwave, staying upstairs to eat in the living room.
Aileen and Josie were just now starting to watch TV together again. They used to watch it late on Friday nights back when Josie was in elementary school, shows like *Sabrina, the Teenage Witch*, long before they had ever ended up sitting in the circle, looking at each other across a carpeted hospital room.

For a while Aileen stood next to the couch, watching the program with Josie. During the commercial, she told Josie what happened with the goat. Josie grinned in amazement.

When Aileen complained about some of the kids, the ones calling her a bitch, not helping, Josie sneered, “Those kids. I bet I could’ve got that goat out of the street, huh, Mom. Do you think?”

Then Aileen remembered the time when they’d been home to Iowa, a goat had jumped over the fence and Josie had run to get her grandpa. When they went back down to the yard, Josie hadn’t run away or even seemed scared. Aileen’s father had lifted the goat up in one fell swoop and tossed it back over the electric fence into the pen. Josie had a look on her face—a mixture of admiration and desire. She had the same look now, listening to and answering to her mom’s story.

“Maybe,” Aileen said. “Yeah, I bet you could.”
Dick Allen

Small Hometown

I knew it end to end, from lake to hills, from donkey-baseball field to farm and small pine wood. I knew each house, each street, the fountain in the park, library, post office, wooden war memorial, Gorsline’s grocery store, our school, our school’s maypole, swing, and slide, porches, paths, and shortcuts, Mrs. Oates looking from her window, Mr. Meager’s car, Miss Walker’s shame. I knew tarred roads, how Mrs. Morris stayed up reading until dawn, the Coshburns grew their huge sunflowers, Mr. Winters cleaned his guns, young Mrs. Hawkes refused all medicine and died. I walked and ran and rode my bicycle continually. Raspberries were mine from thorny hedges. I chased after squirrels, listened to crows flocking into corn and played beneath dim streetlights. When December came, I dragged my sled up Crescent Road and then slid down. I was a kid, I had a dog, I owned the morning paper route. I talked Brooklyn Dodgers with the best. One night I caught a hundred blue and green fireflies on my lawn. On Halloween, I dressed up in a devil’s suit, my brother was a Christmas box, our friends were ghosts….Someone was always cutting down an elm, or sweeping sidewalks clear,
gossiping or gardening. I loved
Gail Torjusson and April rain,
Milton Berle Sundays at the Cheshire’s,
Sharon Sanders’ loneliness, leaf piles,
movies at the Auditorium,
lying on my back and looking up
along the steeple of the church
and with a flashlight and my Boy Scout manual,
giving names to stars. All this
was years before computers, superhighways,
Neil Armstrong clambering upon the moon,
heart transplants, microwaves,
in a tiny village in war’s aftermath
of lilac bushes, when America
seemed to catch its breath and sigh,
I sighing with it—the last ’50s child.
Alfred Sisley: *Snow at Louveciennes*

Alfred, the wind in your world
lopes, snow-drunk.
A lone woman walks in it,
her apron scattering salt

brought from her bright kitchen, its white
joining white the way your canvas
leaks through the tops of clouds,
clumps up where snow clumps, in branches,

on the fence. Her face is itself a clump
of color, featureless beneath her black
umbrella bowing to three bare trees,
the only bending thing here despite

the white weight. You have made everything
upright but unanchored, houses foundationless,
trees with no roots, fences sliding
in place, even her shoes floating

somehow over the snow-vague ground.
What has she come for, out of the warmth
of her house? Does she walk toward
me, carrying some message?

I have read about your throat cancer,
the shame your father felt
losing his money, your life of penury.
I have come here to your street, your fences, your trees,
to this place where nothing touches the ground,
where a woman moves against the cold
with what looks to me like joy. I, too,
have come to watch smoke drift out of houses.
We all look so deadly when we dream, brimming with a kind of afterlife, not unlike the grace the lamplight sheds above the sill, how even in stillness it continues to fall. Take the reader who moves inside a motionless body. She travels far into the smallest hours, the solitude of the book in her hands white and opened upward like an eye. And afterward, if she descends, the fortune of a cool bed that takes her in, to find inside it the bitter, the child, the sky of burning things. There is always room in the unlit spaces, in the arms of a god I talked of once, huddled near a fire in the woods, a cluster of sister stars shivering in the distance. Nights like this I am a book beneath the lamp of God, though something leaves the word as I say it like the wind that knocks you out of sleep. Such rising to meet the kiss that wakes you. Or the burst of anger that relieves
the man of his unbearable quiet.
How vast the world we would entrust to night:

the heart we bear with the broken lock,
the branch of prayer scratching at the sky.

Greater still what skies in turn entrust
to us. The sister star, the dead, the lamp—

all owe the dark their clarities, as if lost
in thought, in how the nearness of the night

is its invisibility, the smoke
in our jackets we carry to our beds.
The Girl Who Feared the Wind

The trees know. And the leaves that flee them.
No root is deep enough to still their panic,
much less the girl who refuses to speak,
who breathes that much harder with the wind.

A mother’s coat flares its woolen sail.
She kneels to ask, *what is it, Girl, why.*

Some nights the girl listens to the branches,
how they scratch the sky in black chalk.

What is it to touch everything, being
nothing. Like the thing you almost think.

There’s a questioning in the rise of weather,
so old now the words are worn away.

And over and over, the sigh that answers.
She watches a boy from her window,
running with his kite. He too is a wind,
a joy so quick he slips the thought of joy.

Not that no one holds her coat for her,
or coaxes her arms in the woolen sleeves.

But what does she see as her mother’s
lips move, talking to no one. What does
she understand of unspeakable worry, where like wind it begins, it ends. To see

a kite is to feel a kite. It pulls her up like the hand of some enormous child.
Milk

Ask any star, flame to flame, any infant mouth that tugs the long and twisted rope of light, that pulls a tether to the world.

We drink and so ignite the word for what we drink, what consumes us in its music. The mere mention is its own erasure.

And soon it arrives, this breakfast table, these words we lay against our tongues like forks. The pitcher tilts. The fire flashes as it braids.

We think of and about, and so the bridge and the barrier of how we think, the want that sets our thinking into motion.

When our mother tongue was just a child, desire too fell from the night sky, from the stars, says the book of tongues.

And since the brain was one enormous cloud that came between us and the universe we would conceive, one was never here there.

Stars looked down their rifles in the fog. All we want would kill us, surely, our eyes awash in the blood of the human heart.

And yet to want to be wanted, to flee our skin like music from a radio, it speaks of certain liberties, yours, mine.
Where there is power, there is no love.
I read that once. Can it also be true
how strong the solitude that overpowers
its own illusion, our breath repeating against
the shore. A surge peaks above the child
before it buckles beneath its weight, and gives.

To give, to relent, to wake each time
to a heart so quick you swear it isn’t yours.
Which is to say you can, in some measure,
long for what you have, as if the trembling
of one body broke you into two.
Take the man who walks the streets at night
to remind himself, yes, he has arms, legs,
that he wants these things, that he moves
forever toward his lifetime in the distance.

Men like that talk to themselves. They wonder
aloud for the company of strangers,
unsure what it was that snipped the braid,
the face of sleep descending like an anchor.
Those who never dream are always dreaming.
The earth tilts. The clouds spill from north to south.

That sound you hear. Where would you put it.
Where to lay our heads like some luminous
breakfast at the end of our journey.

When, I ask, will the moment linger
long enough to share this meal, to talk
of the departed with a distant music
in its voice. Does it create suffering,
the light we drink to mend our suffering. I know
I talk to no one when I ask the dead.
Behind these leaves are holes the shapes of leaves.
I hear them crackle in the trees like milk.
Still I keep returning to my friends
swallowed up in that surge of fire.
Come out, night replies, and so the names
come spilling over in a trickle of jewels.

No star is one word I use for all the stars.
Come out, says the sky to the planet,
says friend to friend, mother to the dire

thirst that eyes the sister stars of nipples,
that puts its mouth to the future and so
draws the great white silk, as if to drain
the lamp that way, to dim the source that is
this cloud, this breast, this small ghost voice
as it darkly whispers, there there, there there.
Heidi Czerwiec

Spiral Jetty, Great Salt Lake

After seven years of drought it has arisen: concrete casements sunk into the lake’s shore and spiraling in on itself, fiddlehead, golden mean glittering with salt.

You must go out to see it, this your last year here, and when else will you have a chance?

Driving south from a dirt road off the highway you spy it, dividing the waters, pink from gray.

The shore’s awash with stench, gulls and pipers plucking at brine shrimp, brackish foam blown about like tumbleweeds. Your jean cuffs rolled, you step out onto the jetty—the water washing over your river sandals much colder than June would have you imagine, the salt crystals more slippery. The salt alerts your toes they’ve been split open, despite the water’s conspiracy of pink and cold to keep the fact of your blood from you.

You are far from shore and it is slow going. Out of her element, her tail divided,

Andersen’s Little Mermaid felt every step a sword. What women do for love. For lack of love
Heidi Czerwiec

you are leaving this home of sunburnt saints
and blooming deserts, leaving these shores

where art is reborn more beautiful and bladed.
Where salt keeps the wound fresh, the pain
a knife you will go nowhere without.
Maternity Bathing Suit

Niki de Saint-Phalle, Yellow Nana, 1993, painted polyester on steel base

Forget those gilded mamas,
she’s a magic marker Venus de Milo

at the open swim, a cellulite bird
of blub and doodles full of words,

A-E-I-O-U and growing
a varicose cosmos

of pantihoseless possibility,
up to her anatomy in irregular stars,

her daisy-decal polka-dot
pliant bingo bottom buoyant enough

to balance an elephantine arabesque
off the ladder, smile

at mister-smug-one shrunk
in his trunks in front of

her flagrant magenta bellyful
of flutter kicks—O shaky bravura—

and drop, splashless,
into water over her head.
Highchair

Bruce Conner, THE CHILD, 1959–60, wax figure with nylon, cloth, metal, and twine in a high chair

A child of wax, nylon, and twine in a highchair, his charred head tossed back in tantrum,

limbs stumped and sticky with cobweb. No doubt someone tried to spoon offending mashes

into those decay-pocked cheeks. You’ve done it yourself. Just one more bite.

Just sit there until you stop screaming. He was having one of his rages,

the woman told 20/20, so she put him in a highchair in an unfinished part of the basement,

but the chair, top-heavy, flipped from his thrashing. The investigation later found

she had fixed him there with duct-tape, that he died from suffocation, not the blow

to the head. She sits, touching fingertips, and the kitchen wallpaper behind her head repeats:

checks and roosters, alternating squares of blue and gold that frame each bird, reverse.
There has been dizziness and blurry vision for weeks, before Pilar’s doctor diagnoses her with glaucoma. He attributes her condition to long term exposure to tear gas during the 1964 riots in Panama. “But that was over thirty-five years ago.”

He leans back against the countertop and takes out his pen, scribbling onto his prescription pad. “It happens that way, sometimes. Things have a way of festering inside you and creeping up you when you least expect them. It’s just the way we age.”

He rips the prescription from his pad in a way that feels like he is done with the subject. The National Health Service hasn’t trained him well in his bedside manner.

“Just fill the prescription,” her husband says when she tells him about the doctor that evening over dinner. “Men don’t think about these things sometimes.”

She thinks about them all the time—the small lines around her eyes, the folds at the corners of her mouth, the way that each time she looks into the mirror it is her mother she sees staring back at her.

“There’s a message for you on the machine,” her husband says. “At least I think it’s for you. It’s in Spanish.”

The message is for her, and when she returns the overseas call, to the Colón Senior Citizens Home, the nurse has to repeat the woman’s name twice before Pilar recognizes it as the name of the abuelita.

“How did you find my name and number?” she asks the intake nurse.

“Señora Stiebel had it written in a little book next to her bed.”

She hasn’t spoken to the abuelita in nearly twenty years. Pilar had lost touch with her after losing her mother and father within a year of each other. Alone in Canada and feeling so far away, Pilar had tried to cut ties with everything and everyone from Panama. Apparently the abuelita had kept track of her.

“Someone needs to settle her affairs, and you’re the only one we could find.”
“And what does that mean? ‘Settle her affairs.’”
“There are fees to be paid and the body needs to be…handled.”
Pilar grips the receiver tightly, sees the room go blurry. “One moment,” she says holding her hand over the receiver. “Can you fill that prescription for me?” she calls out to her husband in the kitchen. She waits a moment until she hears the front door slam.
“And how does the handling work?”
“Someone needs to sign for her in person or else she becomes a ward of the state and we send her to the medical students.”
Pilar pictures the abuelita lying small and gray on a slab while students in lab coats mill around her and poke at her with a scalpel. Pilar tries to rub the blurriness out of her eyes. She looks around her den, the cozy wood paneling, the loveseat they’d bought during the first year they were married, the framed pictures of their children on the mantlepiece.
“So are you coming, Señora?”
“Yes, I’ll be there in a few days.”

Her husband drives her to Pearson Airport at 6 a.m. He waits with her in line while she checks in, and holds her hand until they get to the security gate.
“Call me if you need anything and don’t forget to take the beta blockers.”
She pats her purse and they kiss briefly. “I’ll see you in a couple of days.”
She hasn’t been to Colón since 1965. They’d left that year, after the riots, after burying her brother Marco. Then they’d moved to Canada. Starting all over again, leaving behind her cousins, aunts, uncles and friends. But there was no one left there anymore. They’d gone to England, Belize, Jamaica, Trinidad. Like her they’d married men and women in those countries, started over, tried to forget Panama, Colón, and the Americans.
She flies from Toronto to JFK. JFK to Miami. The plane ride from Miami takes two hours. The moment she steps off the plane the linen blouse she put on sixteen hours ago sticks to her back and feels as though it has melted into her body. She feels the jungle in the air, even though she can’t see it.
The nursing home is in a part of Colón that she remembers as bustling. The last time there were shops, life, crowds; she’d even seen a monkey once. The taxi takes her down streets that looks like the
end of days. There are boarded up and abandoned buildings, garbage and rats. She understands then why she has never come back. But now she’d been forced back for this woman who wasn’t even her abuelita. But she hasn’t been forced, she’s chosen to come. She has to keep telling herself that.

She introduces herself at the front desk and she sees the looks exchanged at her Spanish, which is shaky at best.

“There are some forms you’ll need to fill out,” the intake nurse says. “Have a seat.”

Pilar sits in a cracked plastic chair. A salamander scuttles across the floor and underneath a potted plant. No one minds. The heat makes her whole body throb and she reaches into her purse and drops two drops of the beta blockers into her eyes.

By the time the nurse returns with the forms she is feeling better, but she is dismayed to see all the forms are in Spanish. She realizes how rusty she is and it takes her hours to get through the complex questions.

When she finishes, she takes the forms to the window where she hands them over.

“Do you want to see the body?” one of the nurses asks, shuffling the papers.

“The body?”

Her knees nearly buckle and she wracks her brain trying to figure out the right words.

“I can tell you how to get to the morgue.”

“No, burn her,” she says quickly before she can think of the word for cremate.

“Cremation?” the nurse asks gently.

“Yes,” she says, “exactly.”

It is all about the money after all. The home won’t take credit cards and Pilar reaches into her purse and peels $200 in American money off a roll. She slides the bills across the counter. “Is it enough?”

There is a pause, glances are exchanged.

“Yes, Señora,” the nurse says, and picks up the money. It is so easy. Only $200 to settle the abuelita’s life entirely.

“There are some things in her room, Señora. Would you like to take a look at them?”

“Yes,” Pilar says. An orderly is called and leads her down a small, poorly-lit hall. They pass open doorways of rooms, cast shadows across gray people. People hooked to machines, people slumped in
wheelchairs, men and women in dirty clothes staring at the ceiling or out fly-specked windows.

The abuelita’s room is at the end of the hall. It is small and neat, and has a dresser like a wooden box with dresses inside it so light and thin they feel like sheets of paper when Pilar lifts them out. She puts them in a plastic grocery bag the orderly has given her.

In the next drawer are letters, in what she thinks is German. She shifts through them trying to figure out what they say, then presses them into the pocket of her purse.

The box on top of the dresser is filled with pictures, worn at the edges and posed in a stiff, formal way. She sits on the small, hard bed and sifts through them. None of them are of anyone she recognizes. They are nothing like the snapshots of her kids Pilar carries around. They are grown now and in her bag are the birthday parties, graduations, bright smiles and happy eyes. Pilar doesn’t remember being quite so contented at their age.

Many of the pictures are of a little girl and a woman who it takes her a moment to realize is the abuelita. Pilar sits on the thin metal-frame bed and traces the outline of the abuelita’s face. The woman is young and pretty. Thick strands of dark hair are pulled back from her face to reveal a large smile. How can this be the same woman with the musty smell, this pretty young woman with a Star of David stitched on the arm of the wool suit? Her arms gripping a chubby-cheeked baby. Pilar is startled to see her own face in the next photograph. Her hair pulled into tight pigtails. It is the El Día De Los Reyes Magos, their last one in Panama.

Mama made them call her abuelita, little granny, even though she was just the hired help. In the winter of 1964 when Pilar was eleven, there was already trouble brewing with the Americans in the Canal Zone, they all knew that. The day before El Día De Los Reyes Magos she stood with her best friend Mariquita at the edges of the locks and threw pebbles into the canal. They watched the sailors on the big boats and tried to guess what was inside. Mariquita guessed sweets, pounds of ribbon candy, condensed milk to pour on ice cream, all the things her family couldn’t afford to have. Going through the locks, the sailors on the decks stared at them. They yelled “banditos!” and ran away laughing and imagining that the sailors would chase them into the streets of Colón.

The abuelita was in the kitchen sweeping that afternoon in slow,
and practiced strokes. She’d come months earlier when Pilar’s mother had taken to her bed. It was what her Papa described as “the sickness.” So far all she could see was that meant a lot of lying around in bed with the curtains drawn.

The nurse stared at Pilar for a second and Pilar waited, as she fumbled trying to find the right words. “Something you eat?” she said. She pointed at the refrigerator, her head cocked to the side.

Pilar shook her head no and went into the living room where she spread her books and papers out on the living room floor, next to the Christmas tree Papa hadn’t taken down yet. The branches were starting to brown and bristle. On the onionskin paper the teacher had given her in class that day, she traced out the shape of the country, colored the borders east and west a bright blue, and with her favorite purple pencil she drew in the canal. She drew the line deep and dark, almost tearing the onion skin.

She pictured the canal the way she’d seen it, a long snaky path surrounded by green on both sides and imagined it colored purple, and the big ships moving slowly through purple tides.

She started on the mountains with her brown pencil. In the kitchen, the shuffling broom made syncopated sounds on the floor as the abuelita hummed a tune she didn’t recognize. The sound was annoying, made her pencil slip into the margins.

She left her books and wandered into her mother’s room. The curtains were pulled and Pilar wanted so badly to touch her, to get in her bed and find that warm place against her. Instead she scratched lightly in the doorway until her mother pulled the damp washcloth off her face and looked at her.

“Pilar?”

She seemed surprised to see her standing there scuffing her shoes against the door. One time, but not recently, her mother had threatened bodily harm should they become scuffed.

“It’s abuelita,” Pilar said. “She’s singing, and I’m trying to do my homework.”

Her mother’s eyes were glassy as she squinted and cocked her head as though she was trying to see someone far away in the distance.

“Pilar,” she said again in that same flat voice.

Pilar moved to the bed. Her mother’s unwashed smell was thick on the sheets and in the air of the room. Her hair, matted and worn, lay on the pillow, and the depths of her eyes matched the purple color of her imaginary Panama Canal.
“Be nice to her,” her mother said, in the voice she used when company was coming—formal but hushed. “I need her help right now. I’m not well.”

Pilar reached for her mother.
“No,” she said, pushing Pilar away gently.

Her mother put the washcloth back over her face and sighed.
“Call the abuelita for me,” she said, muffled underneath the cloth.
“But Mama, she’s busy. She’s sweeping.”
“Call her.”

Pilar went to the top of the stairs and called out in her quietest voice, “Abuelita, Mama would like to see you.”

She waited a minute. She could hear the birds outside and the Riveras boys running down the block chasing their dog Pablito. But the Abuelita didn’t come.
“She won’t come, Mama,” Pilar called over her shoulder.
“Then go get her.”

Pilar went slowly down each stair, counting to ten before she would take the next step, trying to avoid going to the kitchen and seeing the abuelita’s accusing eyes.
“Stop dawdling Pilar, I can hear you.”

In the kitchen, the abuelita was still sweeping. She was constantly cleaning the kitchen floor; even though it was rarely dirty, she swept and mopped it each day.
“Mama,” Pilar said, pointing upstairs. “She wants to see you.”

The abuelita leaned against the stove and sighed. She wiped her hands in the lap of her dress and followed behind Pilar as she darted up the steps taking them two and three at a time, wanting to reach her mother’s bedside before the abuelita could damn her.

“Ah, Señora Ana,” her mother said when the abuelita finally appeared in the door. “It’s good to see you again; thank you so much for all your help.”

Pilar’s mother explained that she would need the abuelita’s help, especially with Pilar’s father busy at the store and El Día De Los Reyes Magos tomorrow. There was a lot of work to be done; there were cakes to be made, food to be cooked, and clothes to be washed for the feasts and the parties.

Pilar edged toward the door, thinking about the mountains she needed to finish. She wanted to turn on the television to watch some of the American TV shows before her Papa got home.

Pilar felt the abuelita’s thin fingers close around her wrist before
she got to the door. The abuelita wasn’t very strong, but her spindly fingers held tight and tugged hard.

“Help me,” she said. “My Spanish isn’t good enough for the market.”

“That is a wonderful idea,” Mama said as they walked toward the door. “Pilar is an excellent helper, Señora, excellent.”

She shook off the abuelita’s touch.

They took the bus downtown, the abuelita tucking the folds of her oversized dress around her legs and staring down at her hands. Her hands looked much younger than her face, pale and smooth. Pilar could see the light blue veins underneath the surface almost like she could touch them. Sitting next to the abuelita on the bus, Pilar could smell the abuelita’s milky, sour sweat.

They got off near the market and made their way in and out of the stalls. The abuelita picked up fruit and vegetables and studied them close to her face. She squeezed and stroked the skin, shook things next to her ear and inhaled their scent deeply. Unlike Mama, she didn’t haggle with the vendors and paid whatever they asked, as though each price was fair, even when it wasn’t. It was as though she had all the money in the world to spend. She would take the money out of the little coin purse, keeping her eyes on the ground and murmuring “Gracias, Señor,” so softly they could barely hear her. Pilar watched and trailed behind dutifully, rolling her eyes and watching the abuelita overpay. Pilar thought about stopping the abuelita, holding her hand back when the fishmonger and the butcher charged nearly two-thirds more than they would charge Pilar’s mother. But she didn’t.

They ran out of money before they’d bought everything that was needed. There wasn’t even enough money to take the bus back. They lugged everything from the market in the heavy baskets back through the streets of Colón.

After dinner they turned off all the lights, cooling the house down, and they opened the big rolling shutters, letting in the cool evening breeze and hearing the city quiet down to almost a whisper. In the flickering half-dark, Pilar stretched out on the floor and watched El Llanero Solitario. Marco put up his feet, sprawling across the nubby fabric of the couch. Papa watched for a few minutes before he went upstairs into the bedroom and shut the door. When he came out, he motioned for Pilar to meet him at the base of the staircase.

“I won’t tell you again,” he said. “Be good to abuelita.”

She twisted one thick plait around her hand and made a face. “I will.”
“Did you let her overspend at the market today?”
Pilar shrugged her shoulders.
“When you do things like that you aren’t just hurting yourself, you’re hurting your Mama, me, your brother, our family.”
“Sorry.”
“I don’t want to have to speak to you about this again. And don’t you bother your Mama about her. You understand?”
“Yes, Papa”
He went back up the stairs into his room and closed the door.
Marco shut off the TV.
“It’s late,” he said. “You should get to bed, too.”
She imagined the abuelita in the room they shared taking off her tattered old dress, talking in her weird language, crying softly like she’d seen her do sometimes, or even worse, singing.
“Can I hang out in your room for a little while?” she asked Marco.
“I guess,” he said.
She followed him into his bedroom under the staircase. He sat at his desk under the sloped wall reading a book and humming “Love Me Do” under his breath.
Pilar sat cross-legged on his bed looking through his magazines. He had lots of National Geographies that Papa got him for his birthday. On some pages the women wore no clothing, most were as skinny as the abuelita, but not as scary looking. Pilar stared at their bodies trying to figure out if they’d once looked like her and if she would eventually look like them.
All of the naked-pages were dog-eared and she flipped to them in each issue.
One woman had spherical necklaces laced tightly around her neck and her entire body was bare except for a thin strip of leather around her waist.
“Hey!” Marcos said, snatching the magazine from her. “Don’t look at that, it isn’t for little girls.”
“Check this out.”
He handed her another glossy magazine from inside his desk.
“The Beach Boys,” he said tapping the picture of four boys posed on a beach holding surfboards. “A new American band. They’re amazing.”
Pilar reached out to touch the magazine’s glossy surface, to feel what was going on in that bright sunny place, boys in crisp shirts, girls in brightly colored bathing suits smiling broad, clean smiles.
“Don’t touch,” Marco said. “It’s Elmer’s.”
He was trying hard to grow a mustache and the facial hair came in patchy and light, so that his face looked more dirty than unshaven.

“How was school today?” he asked.

“Fine,” she said. “Why weren’t you there?”

“We were over near the Canal Zone. It’s totally different over there, a whole different world. It doesn’t look anything like Colón.”

“Does it look like America on TV?” she asked excitedly.

“Kind of,” he said, “but different.”

“Different how?”

“I don’t know, Pilar,” he said, shaking his head. “Not like anything I’ve ever seen. Everything seems too straight, so planned, almost like it isn’t real, almost like it doesn’t belong in Colón.”

He folded his arms over his chest. For a second she thought he was going to kick her out of his room, and she would be forced to watch the abuelita get ready for bed.

Marco opened his desk drawer and pulled out a small map.

“Here,” he said, pointing with the tip of his pencil to an almost invisible sliver. “This is Panama.”

“I can hardly see it.”

“But see how important we are,” Marco said. “We connect this ocean,” he pointed to another large blue space, “to this one. No wonder the Americans want to be here. We’re probably the most important country in the whole world.”

He drew an arrow connecting the Pacific to the Atlantic using Panama as the center point.

He took out another pencil and drew another line from Panama to a pink country across the ocean.

“And this is Germany, where abuelita is from.”

“How do you know that?” she asked. Marco never offered up information that easily. Like any good older brother, he always brought her to the brink of tears before he confessed a secret or bit of gossip, torturing her with the fact that he knew something that she didn’t.

“Papa told me,” he said.

“But how did she end up here,” Pilar asked.

Marco shrugged. “Who knows? Maybe she was Nazi.” He held out his arm like some of the actors in the movies they’d seen on TV. “Hiding out from her comrades.”

“Yeah, right,” she said. “Besides, Nazis aren’t girls.”

“Well let’s hope not. Those Nazis sound pretty scary from everything I’ve heard,” he said.
There were about fifteen people in the living room the night of El Día De Los Reyes Magos. Papa pushed the couch back against the wall even though there wasn’t any dancing yet. There was music playing, 45s on the record player that Tío Sergio sent from Brazil.

Mama stood in the corner, supporting herself on the edge of the pushed away couch, her red linen dress hung on her like it was for sale in a store instead of on a person. She had combed her hair, but her eyes were still the color of Pilar’s imaginary canal and her cheek bones jutted out scarily. She sent Pilar back and forth between the kitchen and the living room for trays of tajadas and canastitas filled with ceviche. The abuelita was in the kitchen washing and drying glasses, refilling trays and checking on food in the oven.

More and more people filled the house. Pilar stopped once during one of her trips back and forth and did a little shimmy to “El Tamborito” in the center of the floor, flipping up the stiff crinoline underneath her pink cotton dress as all the grownups laughed.

Once her trays were empty, she looked for Marco and found him sitting on the back steps petting Pablito. She sat down next to him, stuffing sticky and sweet tajadas into her mouth.

“What are you doing out here?” she asked with her mouth full.

“Just looking at the stars,” he said.

He got up from the stoop. In the backlight, Pilar saw the cut on his face.

“What happened?”

“Nothing,” Marco said. “Get back inside before Mama catches you making yourself sick with tajadas.”

Pilar went back into the kitchen and the abuelita filled up another tray. She was about to head back into the living room when she heard the needle yanked violently off the record player.

When she went out into the living room, Señor Delgado stood in the middle of the room panting and red-faced.

“There those damned Americans have used our flag to wipe their asses,” he said.

Señor Delgado taught English at the Instituto, and Marco was in his class. Señor Delgado was a good friend of her parents and had been at their house many times, but Pilar had never seen him like this. Papa wrapped his arm around the Señor.

“It’s okay. Sit down, have something to drink.”

Her father motioned to her mother who ducked into the kitchen. Señor Delgado sat down in a chair and her mother returned an
instant later with a glass of water. He took a long drink and his Adam’s apple bobbed as the water slid down his throat.

“They ripped down our flag, we must retaliate.”

There were murmurs in the room.

“What happened, hermano?” Señor Riveras finally called out.

“The American students…they tore the Panamanian flag and used it to wipe their asses and then threw it on the ground. We’re good enough for them to steal from, but not to fly our flag,” he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

Again he repeated what he’d said: “They ripped down our flag, we must retaliate.”

His voice got louder, becoming a chant, and then the room erupted with clapping. Her father slid his arm around her shoulders.

“Get to bed,” he said. “This isn’t talk for little girls.”

Pilar kissed her mother then her father and went to her room.

She listened to the noise of the party as she lay in her thin bed. She liked the way the grownups’ voices would crest high and then dip into softer conversation. She tried to pick out her mother’s laugh; it was usually the loudest in the room. High pitched and tinny, it was equal parts charming and grating. It was something people knew her for, the way the laugh that came out of her tiny mouth seemed to overwhelm her entirely. Pilar waited for it, listened for the peaks and valley in conversation; she could almost tell the moments before the laughs came, but she never managed to pick out her mother’s.

She must have fallen asleep waiting, but it felt like only minutes had passed when she heard the abuelita slide open the door. By then the house was quiet. She heard the abuelita turn over and sigh deeply, she heard the low rhythms of her parents talking in the next room, and the hum of the new Frigidaire.

Pilar fell asleep again, but woke up suddenly when the lights flashed outside her window and the abuelita sat up in bed faster than Pilar had seen her get up before. She heard the crash of glass and she clutched the sheets around her and curled into a corner of the cot.

“No,” the abuelita murmured. “No, no.”

It seemed like she heard the glass shatter at almost the same moment that her Papa came into the room.

“Get dressed and do it quickly.”

Pilar pulled on the party dress still on the floor of her room but couldn’t find her shoes.

“I can’t find my shoes, Papa,” she called.
“Leave them,” he said, “just come.”

She and the abuelita ran into the living room, which was dark and shadowy, but the bright lights coming from outside the windows created shifting and scary patterns on the walls that made her feel like she’d never been there before. Her mama and papa and Marco were already there, waiting.

“Let’s go,” Papa said.

She wanted to ask where and why, but she knew better. Instead, she reached for her mother’s hand as they burst into the streets.

“No,” her mother said. “Not now Pilar, not now.”

She pushed her back again and Pilar looked for someone to hold on to. She felt someone take her hand and looked up to see the abuelita’s spindly fingers laced through her own, her face wan and her eyes frightened.

Other homes up and down the block were already aflame and the flames got closer and closer to their house. The night sky glowed brightly with the heat. She heard screams and billows of smoke encircled her. She tried to find her mother’s red dress in the chaos, her father’s white shirt, her brother’s shiny brylcreemed head, and all the while the abuelita held on tightly.

She finally saw her parents, two feet in front of her. Papa held Mama with one hand and his Bible with the other. She moved toward them, dragging the abuelita along with her as the streets were suddenly flooded with light.

As she reached her father’s side, Pilar saw her friend Mariquita running, holding her hand to her eye. When she stopped and moved the hand, there was blood. So much blood. All she could say over and over again was, “Mi hermano, mi hermano.” She put her hand back to her eye and took off running down the street.

Behind her were the U.S. soldiers in helmets, with guns. Again Pilar reached for her mother, but she turned away, burying her face in her husband’s chest while Pilar’s father clutched his Bible to his chest and sang “Himno Istmeño” loudly. When the soldiers got so close that their marching made Pilar’s teeth chatter, the abuelita pulled her close, her scarred and shadowy forearm like a talisman.

The soldiers broke roughly through the crowd and Pilar’s face scrunched in reaction to the tear gas before she knew what it was. She felt the abuelita’s arms wrapped tightly around her shoulders. She clutched Pilar and sang in her funny Spanish, “Alcanzamos por fin la victoria. En el campo feliz de la unión.”
Her eyes blurry, Pilar watched her brother, his hand balled into a fist, rush forward half-blind into the wall of green uniforms, a speck against the wall of green, of guns, of gas. And then the abuelita was screaming. Clutching her and screaming and screaming and screaming.

**Once the abuelita’s affairs are settled, Pilar finds a bodega where she drinks a cup of coffee, standing up in the back of the shop. She buys a packet of pivas and asks the shop owner to call a taxi to the airport.**

The lavatory in the bodega is small and dirty. She takes off her shirt and washes it in the sink. She puts on the cool wet linen and her skin feels clammy underneath.

Instead of going to the airport, she asks the taxi driver to take her to Amador Guerrero Cemetery. The whole place is a mess. Most of the graves are covered in weeds, and the grass is so high in some parts only a faint strip of gray peeking out at the top indicates that anyone is buried there.

She hasn’t been in the cemetery since the funeral, but she remembers that Marco’s grave is at the back, and like many of the plots that surround it, is untended. Next to him is his best friend Elmer, Mariquita’s brother, both their families all but gone now.

She pulls up a handful of weeds from both graves and brushes some of the dirt from the headstones. Her shirt is already dry and she traces out Marco’s name with her fingers, pressing down each thirty-five-year-old groove, wanting—even now—for it not to be true. She sits down cross-legged on the grave and wonders if she’s done right by the abuelita. And she realizes she doesn’t know.

She’d had both her mama and papa cremated in Canada, ashes spread by undertakers. Blown away. This stone, this place feels more real. She sees a monkey dart from the headstones and she throws him some of the pivas she has in her purse from the bodega and clicks her tongue. Soon she will have to get up, leave her brother once again and go back to Canada. But for now she sits here, feeding pivas to the monkey, waiting for the sun to set, trying very hard to stay cool. It is hard to be the last one left.
Find Me an Animal with Four Legs and Wings

There is a bat called the Little Brown Bat, or *myotis lucifugus*, that can live thirty-four years or more. This is a long life for a bat, as most live only ten, fifteen years if they’re lucky. These bats grow quickly; they’re adult-sized before they’re three weeks old, and they can fly a week before that. They have cylindrical bodies crowned with small black ears, and a wingspan between nine and eleven inches. I know this, all of it, because I’ve been listening.

I have been listening, Robert, and I remember that these bats mate in late fall, but the female doesn’t become pregnant until spring. She carries the sperm in her body for all those months, waiting for the right time, and then gives birth to a furless, closed-eyed pup. But you’ll never see the babies unless you venture into the caves where they live. The only thing to do is to imagine them, latched tightly to the stone ceilings, cradled by air and gravity.

I’m thinking about bats because I have one in my house. Robert’s gone and she appears in my bedroom as if she’s been created out of dust in the air. I do not scream, and she leaves the room neatly through the doorway and heads downstairs, matching the angle of the staircase as if she’s seen one before. I follow her slowly with my right hand tracing the railing.

In the living room she continues to flap her wings slowly, flying in circles. I’ve had birds in the house before, but this time I’m not afraid. With a bird, you cringe and wait for it to crash into the window—expecting empty space—and break its neck. I know—and I knew even before Robert told me—that bats aren’t fooled by the transparence of glass. They plan their movements with echoes. Echolocation, it’s called. This bat orbits around me, showing no particular interest in the window or the world beyond it. She is strangely silent, as far as I can hear. I stand in the center of the room and can see her ears, triangular and pricked, settled in the fur of her oval-shaped body, her spindly arm-bones caught in the gray parchment webbing of her wings.

My dog, Ella, stands straight up when she catches sight of her. She barks twice and looks at me.
“I know,” I say. “I see her.” Ella sits down slowly and watches, waiting to see what I’ll do. To be honest, I’m waiting too. I know that the reaction of most people would be to reach for the straw-edged broom, or an old wooden tennis racquet (does everyone have one?), but I can’t imagine wanting to crush this bat’s flight. So instead I just watch her.

The cats are watching too. They perch next to each other on the back of the sofa, tails keeping balance, their wide amber eyes following the bat. I pick them up and carry them to Robert’s office, one under each arm. Charlie is quiet and content with being transferred to a location not of his choosing, but Athena lets out a scream of protest, her feet flailing in the air.

When I come back the bat is still flying, and this surprises me a little. I half expect her to alight on the mantel or hang upside-down from the cheap glass chandelier in the dining room. Instead, she keeps moving, her wings beating silently, and I don’t know why but I sit down right on the floor in the center of the room. I am the axis of her rotation, the central point that stays the same. It is comforting to be so constant, so I close my eyes and fold my hands over my belly. Ella comes over and tries to climb into my lap the way she used to do when she was a puppy, only she’s big and I am too and she doesn’t fit. The bat continues, her movements a sort of meditation. On the floor, I swear I can feel the air from her wings.

I am pregnant, and this is not the right time. I wish I could have told my body to wait like the Little Brown Bat, the secret a seed in her belly. Instead, my body is expanding slowly, imperceptibly, and I feel as if soon I’ll break apart like a star. Robert seems happy, but he’s in the rainforests of New Guinea right now so it’s hard to tell. He left even though I couldn’t go, because looking for undiscovered species is what he lives for. He loves the sticky, muddy-shoed detective work, the short-lived victory of knowing a creature no one else on the planet has noticed.

This—a husband exploring the rainforest—sounds romantic, but it is the wrong kind of romance. I find myself surprised to admit it but I prefer the boring Robert, who’s a teacher of zoology and co-author of the most popular set of field guides in the country. Whose natural habitat is a close network of sprawling classrooms, their walls covered in charts depicting the strangely embarrassing sex lives of animals. Common name: Robert of the Piles of Un-Graded Papers, of the Students Who Call to Ask About Sloths While We’re Eating Dinner.
Of late, he is the Robert who thinks it’s too dangerous for me to go with him on his trips, even though I came along on the last four. He has become the Robert who agrees with my mother.

But only about certain things, since he, unlike my mother, does not think he’s too old for me. He has admitted that from a biological standpoint we are unique, but he says it as if it’s something that makes him proud. Most species, he says, do not couple with such great differences in age. For us, it’s nearly a quarter-life difference, taking into account the lifespan of the modern human. Twenty years. Enough to make my mother more wary of Robert than she’s been of any of my boyfriends since grade school, and my father, ten years older than Robert, more shy and quiet around him than normal. Enough to make the wives of Robert’s colleagues (though not the husbands) look at me with suspicion, because I am young and they are, mostly, not.

Robert is a zoologist and I am a writer. A perfect symbiotic relationship, he jokes, when I manage to turn a pile of yellow legal pad notes into a coherent journal article. I don’t point out that for our relationship to be symbiotic we’d have to be of different species, because maybe that’s the point.

There are a few notebooks on the dining room table that I’ve been meaning to go through, but I haven’t picked them up in days. They belong to a paper Robert’s writing on ducks who have stopped migrating for the winter. The birds prefer to stay on the frozen ponds of parks and corporate campuses, where they’re fed popcorn and sandwich crusts and the ends of loaves of bread by people who do not know that they are, in effect, encouraging the animals to stop using their wings. But lately, that story makes me sad (my friend Cherie cried for hours a day when she was pregnant, so I’m afraid to start) so instead I just wait for Robert to come back.

When he returns, I’ll help him catalogue and explain the new species, if he finds any. He will travel with small and possibly slimy things he’ll have stored in clear plastic buckets—amphibians or reptiles, probably. It seems to me that all of the good animals have already been discovered, though I don’t tell Robert this. There are plenty of secret insects out there, but he’s not interested in anything with more than four legs. He’ll readily admit that he prefers four legs, or two and wings.

I used to write stories of my own, but now it seems that all the stories I know are Robert’s. And really, even those are just facts. Just now, a monarch butterfly lands on the astilbe underneath my window and I remember: male Grayling butterflies start their courtship by following
the females in flight. Robert told me that. He thought it was sexy, that he was pursuing me, that I was flying, twenty-five, high-heeled shoes on the warm New York sidewalk. What he didn’t tell me then—what he might have forgotten—is that the Graylings don’t limit their pursuit to females of their own species. They follow anything that possesses the power to leave the ground: other butterflies, beetles and bees, tiny birds, falling leaves. This is what courtship does to them: it is a kind of heat, a kind of fervor. You’d question the abilities of their little butterfly brains, but they’ve even been known to chase their own shadows on the earth below them.

I eat dinner in the kitchen while the bat flies around the first floor. She repeats her circuit as I watch, as if she’s learning the positions of the doorways and the sharp edges of furniture. I’ve left the front door open for her, but she ignores it. She prefers the path she’s practiced.

I never saw a bat in New York, but since we moved to Virginia six months ago I’ve become familiar with their way of flying. I’ve watched them overhead at twilight when the trees glow silver and the bats are shadows on the ceiling of the sky. When we first got here last summer, Robert and I sat on the porch at night, the air vibrating with cicada hum, and he explained why they fly higher and higher to hunt for insects. He said they’re obsessive, fanatical even, in their need to check each layer of the near atmosphere. They need to eat half their body weight each night. He reminded me that bats are the only mammals with the ability to fly, and I remember thinking that they must be lonely in their singularity. I must have said it out loud because Robert reminded me that they’re just hungry.

Now, my bat checks the layers of air in the dining room, and then the kitchen. Ella looks at me and whines, certain that I should be more alarmed, then goes to sleep under the table. After I eat, I do all the dishes while standing at the sink. The bat is somewhere in the rooms behind me, but instead I watch our neighbor, whom I’ve never met. She is out in her backyard as usual, visible in the illuminated circle her floodlight casts on the lawn. She’s a botanist, Robert says, a colleague of his at the university. I’ve watched her from our kitchen window before, doing mysterious things like grafting branches onto rosebushes with what looks like pink yarn. I haven’t meant to stare at her, but her movements are fascinating, at least when you don’t know anyone else and you’re elbow deep in soapy water. Tonight, she taps
the huge, pale pink blossoms of her peony bushes onto a card table, scoops their seeds into her palm and drops them in a box.

I can smell the peonies even though the window is open only a crack, their scent coming in with the air, chilly and thin. Since I became pregnant, my sense of smell has become hyper-acute. I feel as if I’m being graced with a superpower or a new species-trait, and because of this I am waiting for more to follow. I’m hoping for the ability to land on my feet if I jump out of a second story window, or to see the pinpricks of light made by stars too far away to be seen by the human eye. I am waiting for the ability to fly, to become the second mammal able to do so. That way, the bats will no longer be lonely in their warm-blooded flights.

While I wait (because everything I do is while waiting), I go back to Robert’s field guides for answers about the Little Brown Bat. I’m hoping the book will tell me how to get her to go, as it seems that Robert would have included such useful knowledge.

He published the guides eight years ago, and they are named, mostly, for him: *The Forton Guides to the Natural World*. He is one Forton, and his ex-wife, Joan, is the other. The guides are all the same rectangle shape, wider than they are tall. The paper is glossy and dark with colored inks, and each page is arranged in the same way. There are seventeen separate books.

I knew the guides before I knew him, before I was hired as his writing assistant. I know that there’s something tawdry about working for a man and then marrying him, but my only excuse is that it isn’t what I meant to do. I was finishing my MFA and running out of money, desperately searching the university job boards to find something to hold me over until I could finish my book. Robert’s secretary sent me off with a box of field guides and science journals before my interview, so I carried them over to the fountain in Washington Square Park, my favorite place in the city then. I immediately loved the neatly bound piles of glossy paper, heavy in my hands, and the photos of animals mostly going about their daily business, unaware that the Forton’s photographer was capturing them. I remember now that it was really only the bats who seemed to shrink from the photographer’s lens, lifting their heads, upside down, and baring their tiny canine teeth.

I sat on the edge of the fountain until the late summer sunlight faded and the last dogs and children left the water. I studied the picture of Robert and Joan on the back cover, smiling in similar knitted caps, with sleek-looking binoculars around their necks. The prose was good,
and I wondered what reason he had for my help. It was later that I found out that most of the words were Joan’s.

The term “field guide” implies being out in an empty, sprawling, actual field, lost, or trying to find one’s way through a swamp. There is an urgency in the term that is not shared by “dictionary” or “encyclopedia.” But so often, I open the field guides just because I’m wondering about something, not out of necessity. After all, under what circumstances would one absolutely need to find a certain bird? What would make it life or death? Perhaps if the bird held the cure to cancer, in its feathers, maybe, or its bones. Or that it had knowledge to give, something essential that it could tell you in its little bird-voice. You would walk around, book open in your hands, searching the trees and the air for a “jumble of short notes and trills” or a “sound like a low whit-wheet.”

This is a joke I told at our wedding: Robert hired me because of my gorgeous prose, and married me because of my gorgeous… prose. I had perfect comic timing and a glass of champagne in my hand, but my mother didn’t laugh. She smiled, thinly, in her mouth and not in her eyes. I had toyed with the idea of not telling her that Robert had been married before, but I knew she’d find her way to the field guides and the back-cover biography that still lists the Fortons as husband and wife.

I met Joan only once, before Robert and I were married, at a party in New York. I thought I looked like Audrey Hepburn in a black sheath dress with my dark hair in a knot at the nape of my neck, but my dress was off the rack at the Limited (thirty dollars on sale after Christmas) and my pearl necklace was glass. I teetered on my too-tall heels, steadying myself against Robert or the wall, and observed the party as an ornithologist would a flock of loud and spindly-legged cranes.

Mostly, I watched Joan mingling with the biologists, mostly men. She looked at once lovely and practical, in a black dress of her own that I’m sure wasn’t bought in the mall. Tiny jeweled beads were sewn like a field of stars under the neckline, and her big square diamond earrings glittered symmetrically. I wondered if Robert had bought them for her. She knew the equivalent of books and books of information, and the only thing I could think of, out of everything Robert had told me, was that moths smell with their antennas. Somehow, I managed to prevent myself from sharing that fact.

I had my own diamond-square on my finger, Robert-bought, and it was the only real piece of jewelry I owned. She was gracious, shook
my hand and admired the ring, still taller than me in her practical yet elegant low heels. I half-wished she’d yell at me instead. *You little piece of predictability,* she’d say, *short skirt and faux pearls, nearly adolescent.* She’d shake her head at me and say, *Do you really think it will be different for you?*

I read too much into it, I know, but I was always writing dialogue for people then. Recovering from the MFA. But I knew even then that there was a reason that I was there, twenty-five year-old fiction writer that I was. He was done with field guides and cataloging, done with the short categories: *longevity, feeding, area of territory.* He planned to find new species, to detail their characteristics and behaviors in the types of magazines his colleagues would read. He needed creativity, not information. It’s my knowledge of the paragraph that was valued, my ability to break a block of text into smaller and smaller pieces, to work a sentence until its gloss comes to the surface like a stone in a rock tumbler.

It was nearly seven months ago that we moved from New York to Virginia when he took a job at the university. The forests of Virginia are another jungle, so verdant in the summer and early fall that you can forget there is any color other than green. Sometimes, I’ll admit, I miss the colors of the city: the grays and browns of streets and buildings, the yellow of taxi cabs. I have been taken from my natural habitat, but I think I am adapting.

I’ve gone on his last three trips with him: Ecuador, Brazil, Jamaica. All tropical, lush and lovely. This time he said it would be too hot, and there wouldn’t be any hospitals should I need one. He said my mother would kill me if I even considered leaving the country while pregnant. He said—and I suppose he had a point—that I didn’t have to go since all I have to do is fix his words.

The news from New Guinea is a new species of amphibian, a tiny golden frog. Robert called earlier, but I didn’t tell him about the bat. He emailed me photos, close-ups taken with his new lens. In the pictures the frog’s head is cocked, its eyes large and shiny. It appears to be smirking.

I narrow my eyes at it, this stupid, slimy little creature. I smirk back.

On the only phone within fifty miles of where he is, a government outpost, Robert told me that they scoop the frogs out of crystalline ponds, really just glorified puddles on the forest floor. This is the difference between there and here, he said, *here* being a jungle, *there* being our
home. Even the puddles are clean, and the air, and the rain that falls from the clean, white clouds. His voice sounded tinny and far away, echoing against itself. I wondered as he spoke if they still use underwater lines for international calls. While he was talking, I pictured a shark or maybe a large turtle chewing on parts of our conversation, Robert’s words getting stuck on their way to me in some sea creature’s sharp teeth.

I asked the wrong questions, and he didn’t get my Heart of Darkness joke. He wanted to tell me about the frog’s breeding habits and its nearest relatives, speaking species-wise. I wanted to know what else lives in the puddles and what he will name the frog.

I told him that he should write a guidebook on amphibians. He could publish a brand-new edition, I said, with the little smirking golden guy. He didn’t answer, or maybe the line cut out over his words. The thing is, Robert considers the books a silly thing he did when he needed money. He is annoyed that it has become the thing for which he is known best. I like it, though: the exhaustive cataloguing of species, the assembling of facts. Reading them, you might feel like someone preparing for a great flood, making sure every different kind of animal is covered and none is left behind.

Robert said goodbye like we were in the military, signing off with an “over and out, Meadowlark.” All his nicknames for me are animal-related, and not predictable things like Kitten or Birdie. Sometimes I have to look up the animal names he calls me in the field guides, just to make sure the animal doesn’t have any unfortunate behaviors or characteristics.

I’ve taken to flipping through the books at night, under just the sheet in the center of our king-sized bed. I rest them on my expanding belly and look at the shorebirds, with their long beaks and longer legs; the small, round-bodied Western-region songbirds; the bats, fuzzy and rodent-like, some with fierce expressions and bared teeth. There are books about bluebirds and hummingbirds, orioles and purple martins, even one about small North American mammals.

It often makes me think of my childhood neighbor Mrs. Arnold, who had two dogs and six cats (two by two) and loved the story of Noah and his Ark. Even at ten, I knew the story was a myth, but Mrs. Arnold swore that Noah’s wife accidentally left the female unicorn behind. There was only the male, she said, lonely on the deck of the enormous boat, watching the water rise higher and higher over the land, his mate somewhere below and submerged to her knees.

“He died of a broken heart,” Mrs. Arnold said, “and Eve…” Here,
she would stop for a moment, remember. She’d grown confused in her later years, and merged the stories of creation and destruction. “Eve tried to convince him to eat some hay they’d taken on board, but the unicorn wouldn’t even open his mouth.” At this point in the story, Mrs. Arnold would often tear up, and I would too, picturing an increasingly gaunt, silver-coated unicorn looking out at the consequences of an implacable god.

“And Eve was so sad when he died,” Mrs. Arnold told me. “She had named them all, you know.”

I dream of the guides sometimes. I’m a little ashamed to admit that I’ve imagined my own entry, the Emily-bird. In my dream it’s Joan who writes the entry, and she forgets all my good qualities.

It turns out that Robert’s bat guide does offer advice about getting a bat to leave your house. It says that you should not stand in the center of the room, yelling and waving your arms. It says you should open a window, then sit quietly and wait for it to leave. It says that if you discover bats living in your house, roosting in your attic, for example, you should watch your house around sunset to see if they will go to hunt for food. That way, you will discover where they are able to enter and leave.

I have been sitting quietly all day, and my bat has not left. I have only one, and it seems as if she cannot remember how she got in. She has been resting on the mantel for hours, her wings folded around her.

My mother calls while I’m eating ice cream for dessert, and I tell her about the bat. She is not happy about it, or even neutral.

“Bats are dangerous,” she says. She is always like this, certain of everything she says. She offers evidence. “They’ll get in your hair.”

Instinctively, I touch my hair, which is in a tangled knot on top of my head. “Why would it want to be in my hair?” I ask her. It’s a logical question.

“I don’t know, but I’ve heard that.” She thinks for a moment. “They’re blind. They get confused.”

“Actually, Mom, they aren’t blind. That’s a myth.”

“Why do people say ‘blind as a bat,’ then?”

“I don’t know.” I let the spoon fall against the side of the bowl.

“Why do people think stepping on a rusty nail causes tetanus?”

“It doesn’t?”

“Apparently it’s the nail, not the rust.” Here we are, breaking down myths. Perhaps we can debunk all the things my mother is afraid of.
She sighs; I always exasperate her. “Did you open the door?”

“And the windows,” I tell her. “It’s a mosquito free-for-all in here. Good thing they never bite me.” It’s true; my skin is unblemished but I can see them hovering by the light over the sink.

“Well, you have to get it out. Call someone. Bats carry rabies.” Things are always simple for my mother. Her sentences are short and to the point, something that has gotten worse since I married Robert. Our phone calls are like Morse code, more dots and less dash. She is disappointed in me, I know, for living in Virginia with a man nearly twice my age and ghostwriting scientific articles instead of stories. I’ve showed her the bylines in the magazines, my name following Robert’s, but she remains unimpressed.

“You were always so creative,” she told me, months ago. “So good at making things up.” I repeated this to Robert later, because at the time I thought it was funny. I thought then of the lies I had told as a child and a teenager: when I had skipped school or gone somewhere I wasn’t supposed to go. There weren’t many of them, and I knew my mother was referring to my fiction and not my lies, but still I marveled at having a mother who would encourage me to abandon the truth.

My mother has tried to talk to me about what it’s like to have a child. She’s tried to tell me that it is something that won’t go away, that won’t be finished, ever, and wonders how I’ll manage with Robert gone all of the time in sultry, beautiful locales. Certainly I won’t be bringing a baby along to the land of malaria and typhoid? No, no, I tell her, over and over again.

I don’t tell my mother this, but I am not worried about it, yet. Secretly, absurdly, I half-believe that Ella will take on some of the mothering duties much like the nanny dog in Peter Pan. I have even considered naming the baby—a girl, I know it—Wendy, if only to be sure of this. My mother wants me to name her for my grandmother, Lucy. With Robert, I haven’t talked seriously about names. He seems willing to leave it up to me. Even with the only two species he has helped to discover—a tiny rodent that looks like a miniature guinea pig and some sort of finch that looks the same as another species but is, apparently, different—he left the naming to his colleagues.

My mother has offered to come out and stay with me. She is afraid, I think, that I’ll have the baby two-and-a-half months early, that Robert will be gone and I’ll have no one. She is worried that I don’t have any friends here, that I don’t know anyone my “own age.” That last part is a not-so-subtle jab at Robert, but she’s right. If my mother were here she’d
Janet McNally

be trying to make friends for me, she’d march across our back lawn waving to my botanist neighbor, calling out as she walked.

Now, my mother is continuing with the rabies discussion largely without my help. She says that bat bites are so tiny there’s no way to know if you’ve been bitten.

“No, not unless you notice the little thing is attached to you by its teeth,” I say, and despite her worry, her constant worry, my mother smiles through the phone. I hear it, a little expulsion of air. I can always make her laugh.

“I think you have a point, though,” I tell her.

She pauses and I can hear the static on the line. “Well, I do,” she says. She’s often surprised when I finally agree with her, as if she expects me to be still sixteen and a rebel.

“I’ll get her out,” I tell her, and before my mother can ask who will help me or how I know the bat is a girl, I say, “I’ll call you later,” and hang up.

Once I do this, I realize that, of course, I have no one to call. I wonder, stupidly, if it is the sort of thing campus security can handle. We live just a few blocks from campus and I often see their cars driving slowly out on the road in front of our house, headlight beams heavy in the thick, humid air. I think then of my only non-friend, the botanist.

I leave the kitchen and when I pass Robert’s office, there’s the surprisingly loud sound of cat feet hitting the floor from some height, possibly the bookcase. I stop for a moment to listen, and Charlie sticks his paw, pads up, under the door, asking to be freed. Charlie has never killed anything that I know of, not even a bug. He’s much too meek. Athena, on the other hand, headstrong like her namesake, has murdered mice and sparrows, laying their bodies out on the floor and sitting silently next to them, watching me to see what I’ll do. It seems clear that the felines cannot be released.

I leave by the front door, shutting it after me but leaving it unlocked. Ella follows me across the lawn and up the driveway, wagging her Irish Setter tail, her German shepherd ears pricked. She knows we’re on a mission. It’s humid in the singularly Virginian way, in which you would swear there’s a thick, invisible fog of moisture in the air. The sky is almost dark except for a feathery silver light at the edges of the trees.

As I walk my pregnant woman’s walk, I imagine the conversation we could have, this botanist and I. As I mentioned before, I am good at creating dialogue. I’d try to make small talk and mention the scary mushrooms that have sprouted in my backyard and grown tall in the
last day or two, and she would remind me that mushrooms are not, in fact, plants. It will be something like the moth antennas all over again. Proof: the only information I can offer about peonies is that my mother wouldn’t let me bring them indoors when I was a kid because she said there were always ants in them.

I’m halfway up her driveway when I realize that this is ridiculous, that she will not be able to help me and that I wouldn’t know what to say to her anyway. I know this is a failure, but I’m not Robert, with his innate ability to communicate with new species. The botanist is caught within a habitat of plants and not animals: the clematis vines that twist around her chain link fence, the heavy roses that tip their scent toward the ground.

As I return to the house, I imagine what it would be like if Robert was here. He would ask me how I know the bat is a female, and I wouldn’t be able to tell him. It is the same way I know my baby is a girl, as if I’ve figured it out from the feeling of her heartbeat so close to my own. I would point out to Robert how you might mistake a bat for a swallow in the sky if you look quickly enough. I’d say the word “fly” applies to them both.

But they have a completely different flight pattern than birds, he’d say, and the swallows are sleeping already. He’d say, weren’t you listening? And I wouldn’t tell him what I know: that he doesn’t listen. He misses all the similarities in language because the only words that interest him fall into the categories of phylum, genus and species. Or the common names, given to the animals by some scientist like himself, someone who thought he understood the creature enough to attach a moniker for the little thing to carry around.

I, however, am one who understands language. I could rename all of the animals, like Noah when he stumbled off his ark onto the spongy new wet earth, having forgotten what Eve had called them so many years before. That is, if I believed that any of that was more than a story.

I never told Robert Mrs. Arnold’s tale of Eve and Noah’s Ark, but that’s because he doesn’t have any use for false animals: dragons and winged horses and unicorns. He doesn’t care about stories unless they are true. He would just point out that for all the stories about winged animals like dragons and Pegasus-type horses, there doesn’t exist an animal with four legs and separate wings. He’s right; even the bat’s order is called *Chiroptera*, or hand-wing, since the two are attached. It belongs only to fairy tales and not to evolutionary biology. So before I hung up with Robert on our undersea international call, I asked him to find me an animal with four legs and wings.
When I return to my house and open the door, I expect the bat to be there waiting for me, hovering in the air. Ella bounds in before me, but the bat has left the mantel and is nowhere to be seen.

We stand in the center of the living room, my dog and I, casting shadows in the light that spills in from the porch. I’m afraid to breathe, listening, but I hear nothing.

I’m not certain how I spot her, but as my eyes scan the corners of the room near the ceiling, I notice a dark smudge at the top of my sheer blue curtains. When I peer underneath, holding the fabric away from the window, I see that the smudge is my bat, tucked in at the top between fabric and rod.

I look at her for a moment, and she is still. It is impossible to believe that something that small could scare people.

Robert has mentioned on more than one occasion that love is just a combination of hormones. Everything is chemical, he says, and what I want to say is, you’re a zoologist, not a chemist. Right now, the love I feel is for this tiny folded-winged bat; for Ella, ears pricked and eyes watching; for my baby curled like a snail inside of me.

Robert would say the bat is nesting, that she is making due in an artificial environment like the tiny hermit crabs in one of his classroom examples. They built their homes in plastic thimbles, which for some reason (hormones? chemicals?) makes me want to cry. Animals will make do with what they have, Robert says. He likes everything to have a reason, but it is my opinion that all species do things that do not make sense. I call as my evidence Charlie the cat, who is certain that the cat food still lives under the kitchen sink, even though we haven’t kept it there since we moved to the new house in Virginia. I offer Ella the dog, who is terrified of the vacuum cleaner but runs right by it when it’s on, over and over, because she is convinced that a near-miss is safer than staying away. And me, who married a man and moved to Virginia and thought it would be easy because I was in love.

It occurs to me that the bat just might want to be by herself.

I can hear the insects of summer night, rubbing their spindly legs against each other and vibrating the air. It’s eight o’clock and has been dark for hours. She should want to hunt now; it’s late enough for her to leave.

“Time for you to go and eat half your body weight in insects,” I say, softly like a song. I open the window and the screen beneath her all the way, but the bat doesn’t budge. She doesn’t even seem to notice. I stand on the smooth cherry-wood seat of a dining room chair,
Janet McNally

stretch up above the window and try to unfasten the curtain rod from the wall. I pause a second to imagine what my mother will say if I topple off the chair and give myself amnesia. Instead, it’s the bat who falls, tumbling down to my feet.

I’m disappointed in myself afterward, but I scream, and Ella, who had lost interest, runs in from the kitchen. I wonder if the botanist will hear me too, if she’ll leave her peonies to see what her strange pregnant neighbor is doing. I climb down off the chair, a little shaky, and my dog and I watch as the bat climbs slowly up the curtain, holding on with her perfect, tiny hands, raising one wing after the other slowly as if what she’s doing is very difficult. In the center of the fabric she stops, facing the outdoors and the cool breeze. I’m close enough to see it ruffle her fur.

“You should go,” I say to her, this tiny little bat. After all, I think, though she would not understand, sometimes home is just a plastic thimble.

She looks through the open window space, talking to herself or to us in soft, high-pitched tones. I know that it’s possible to identify bats by the frequency of their echolocation, but the Emily-bird does not have hearing sophisticated enough for that. Not yet. I listen, but her sounds mean nothing to me. It is nonsense in the pitch of tin foil, but she keeps talking. She waits, her tiny fingers grasping the curtain, deciding what to do.

It’s then that I imagine Eve, her fingers absentmindedly resting on her borrowed rib. She is exhausted merely from the newness of everything. Her eyes are still hungry, tracing the shape of all those things she’s just seen for the first time. She’s named them all—her job—as Adam watched, lazy in the dew-damp grass. There are no words left, no words she doesn’t yet know. The last animal comes to receive her surname, fluttering for a moment, almost birdlike, then straightening herself and rising upward. She circles as if she’s attached to the sky with string, swinging out as if she’s just discovered centrifugal force. Even fastened to the earth, as Eve is, she notices the bat is little and brown.
Carrie Green

Cross-Pollination

—DeLand, Florida, 1888

And of course one of the skills Lue [Gim Gong]'s mother had taught him [in China] was cross-pollination to make new kinds of oranges on their own trees.
—Marian Murray, Plant Wizard: The Life of Lue Gim Gong

My mother knew the promises
that hide inside white blossoms.
She peeled off inner petals
and teased stamens
until they released gold secrets
onto the tip of her brush.
She carried pollen farther
than butterfly or bee
and placed the yellow powder
onto the pistil of another tree’s flower.
She sheltered blooms
inside paper caves
where wind and wings
could not scatter
her work. She waited
for tiny grains
to mingle leaves and fruits,
to combine seeds and roots.

My mother understood my need
to peek inside clay jars
and watch the oranges rot
away from seeds. She knew
I yearned to see the peels melt
into black pools, to smell sweetness
sour as flesh fermented.
When my own brush
blends buds and stems,
I think of my mother,
how she sieved the seeds clean
and poured them in my palm,
teaching me that trees can spring
from twelve hard tears.
The Lue Gim Gong Grape/Currant Hybrid
—Described by his mentor, Fannie Burlingame, 1893

i. Stem

Currant’s straight spine prevails
over grape’s twining vine,
though here and there
tea-colored tendrils curl,
tightening when touched.

ii. Leaves

Grape’s rounded lobes blur
currant’s spade-shaped blades,
while currant’s tender fibers
soften grape’s stiff paper texture.
Grape’s downy pale under
hides beneath
its glossy green upper
like a velvet lining
concealed inside a silk robe.

iii. Flowers

Painted with grape’s white-green,
currant’s blossoms suspend
from common stems
to form garlands of open skirts
tipping toward the sun,
waiting, wavering.
iv. *Fruit*

Arranged not in grape’s heavy clusters
but in Wordsworth’s *choicest strings*
of currants. Grape’s dusky blue
blends with currant’s bright cherry
to color berries purple-red
as veins buried deep
beneath the skin.

The mouth cannot cradle
the plump fruit for long—
the teeth want to break
the crisp skin,
the tongue wants
to feel the juice burst,
to savor currant’s tartness
enclosed within
grape’s musky sweetness.
The Lue Gim Gong Seven-Colored Hybrid Rose

—Described by his mentor, Fannie Burlingame, 1896

Among the unusual plant combinations Lue produced were a rosebush with 17 varieties of roses in 7 colors from a single root.
—E. Lynne Wright, It Happened in Florida

i. Habit and constitution

What begat such vigorous growth?
Surely not the Hybrid Teas:
you cannot contain this rose
in urns, nor expect it to obey
a garden’s brick borders.
Even the climbing Chinas
decline to overstep the trellis.
But this rose rambles over fences,
coppery leaves and bright hips
trespassing
onto neighbors’ lawns.

ii. Form

Too large for a gentleman’s lapel,
too disheveled for a lady’s Sunday hat,
these flowers fail
to guard their sex
with the Tea’s high wall
of petals. Nor do they invite the bee
with the wild Gallica’s single, open blooms.
A loose ruff of outer petals
crumples like silk. Inner petals
curl like lashes. They wink
around a pale green eye.
iii. **Color**

Do your eyes deceive?
Are you buried
beneath a laudanum dream?
Pink blooms lit by yellow centers
share roots with butter-colored blossoms
streaked with blush.
Jumbled colors obscure lineage
as coral petals swirl to cinnabar,
nodding beside lavender buds
and silvery pink blooms.
Carmine flowers fringed with white,
as if dipped in milk, mingle
with clusters the color
of dried blood.

iv. **Scent**

Here, fragrance condenses
beyond sweetness, unmasking
undertones you cannot cover:
the smell of Roman bodies,
the stink of chamber pots
beneath beds ripe with love,
the suffocating stench of the grave.

v. **Freedom, constancy, and duration of flowering**

You may expect a rose
of such extravagant hues
and riotous blooms
to focus on one bright fling
of flowers, to avoid
exhausting stem and root
with the China’s trait
of flush after flush of blossoms.
Yes, these flowers unfurl

*Carrie Green*
and wither, petals falling
after three short days.
But all season, new buds appear,
the sudden pulse of blooms.
Lue Gim Gong’s Seedlings

—Described by his mentor, Fannie Burlingame, 1894

The diseased are the first to go, menaces
to the garden: the plants afflicted
with black spot or dusted with white mold.
Next I cull the early bloomers who commit
the sin of ugliness. We’ve no need
for five-petaled roses, for azaleas
blemished with muddy stains, or camellias
that bruise at our touch. We cannot cultivate
berries so sweet they cloy against the tongue.
The fragrant sisters of scentless orchids
need room to root, and I spare no mercy
for lemon trees that wilt with first frost.
We await roses with blue blossoms
and oranges that ripen late in August.
Elizabeth Hazen

Burning Trash

Boys start fires all the time—it’s a rite of passage—so when your father gives you the task of setting fire to the family’s trash, you don’t mind, and when the flames ignite inside the old dishwasher he heaved into the woods behind the house, you smoke a cigarette, glancing up the path, and stoke the flames with a stick. Above you sneaky leaves let through a glimpse of tomorrow, but today is still consumed with the past: yesterday’s news, junk mail, cardboard boxes, empty bottles. The fumes of crackling plastic make you sick, but you stay until the week reduces itself to ash. You’re a little let down that the fire doesn’t last, doesn’t leap from the dishwasher, spreading past the forest’s edge; all that burns is trash.

My love, be patient—you who are so taken by the promise of destruction, so watchful for what lies beyond your father’s woods: the pull of future like a girl waiting, naked and certain. Soon enough you will learn that not all fires can be contained, not all traces of the things we throw away can be erased with a single match, and even as you yearn
Elizabeth Hazen

for new fire to burn a path away from here,
the old flames smolder, and the steely walls
buckle, and from the distance your father calls;
his voice grows louder with each passing year.
Luke Johnson

Survey Photograph

Icicles teeth eaves. The chimney rages.
It must’ve been late winter, when curb-snow
sludged brown and the easy smell of woodstoves—
lost along with all the smaller changes—
followed cold wind through the willow catkins,
leaves moving like whitecaps seen from distance.
The fire-pit glows white with garbage ashes
or snow. Our birchwood-pile, dwindling, glistens.

How much we burned there: between attic junk
and rotten lumber, my mother’s letters
twined in piles, dated. I watched her script curl
in blue heat, flames catching the basement dank.
There are no ashes to stamp out here, just
old drifts melting to cinders and sawdust.
Luke Johnson

The View from Faulkner’s Balcony, Pirate’s Alley

Nuns looked for converts outside the convent. Anderson and Faulkner, armed with pellet guns and bourbon, trained bull’s-eyes on sisters ministering. Crosshatch. Trigger. Each shot bounced to the ground off of the thick habits. They took patient aim, easing pen-blistered fingers across the muzzles and pulling. BB’s the size of rosary beads, pills.

My mother’s nightstand had a place for pills (lithium bottles, a congregation of her illness stacked against worn hymnals) my father would hide. He drank Sauvignon Blanc on Sundays, cursed nights after preaching. At baptisms, I watched his hands: pale, reaching.
The man may never again fix the rocker
lilting back and forth on paint-peeled porch boards
two blocks from the shore, but he’ll call out birds
gliding past: *pelican, cormorant, hawk*,
as if hearing their names might stop them.
He knows this long wind, how it can carry
a cold breath or sound out beyond the brim.
Empty, the rain-beaten chair looks stable.

It all has been broken before, clearly
faded planks on the landing and cable
hanging slack off the deck, but our man lives
for a hammer in his hand, salt on skin.
On his rooftop, he’s waiting for the waves
to move out, the beach’s constant beginning.
She has taken up residence at the university library, amidst nine million eight hundred and fifty thousand books, and seventy thousand serial titles. Approximately ten million bound volumes and Emma.

It’s not nearly as crowded as it sounds.

When she was young, her parents would bring her with them while they did their research. She would sit under the table and scribble pictures or nap, cocooned in a nest of blankets, while they worked above.

During Emma’s search for a carrel, it was evident that the fourth floor—designated the “Quiet Floor”—would best suit her. She knew, from time spent there doing her own research or grading her students’ papers, that because it called for the most stair climbing and the least socializing it would be practically devoid of people in an already barren library.

She was drawn first to a desk wedged between two large windows but found that, once seated, she was directly in the line of sight of anyone entering or exiting the restrooms. Next, she tried a carrel tucked almost invisibly in the midst of the stacks, but upon sitting down, realized that the absence of any walls to moor the desk had an unsettling effect. The third carrel she was inclined toward, nestled in a corner against the back wall of the library, was already occupied by a gentleman who looked surprised and perturbed in equal measure that she had stumbled into his burrow.

Feeling disheartened, she sat down on a small metal stool to regroup. The stool was situated in the middle of an aisle that extended for what felt like miles in each direction. It disturbed her senses now in the same way it had when she was a child. The repeating landscape at the library had made her afraid that she would simply be absorbed by the stacks, never to be seen again. She began refusing to go. Her obstinacy persisted for three weeks before her father was
able to convince her to return. He explained that while the library was homogenous in appearance, each book, each shelf, was as different from one another as she was from her sister, Ava. She would not, he assured her, disappear. On the contrary, he insisted, it was here that she could find anything she wanted.

She began walking along the outermost portion of the fourth floor, staying as close to the windows as impeding furniture and bookshelves would allow. It was in this way that she found her carrel, for it was almost completely concealed, tucked between the outer wall and what appeared to be a freestanding office or closet. It was further blocked by the stacks, and the result was a lone desk in a tiny alcove. Ecstatic, she removed and draped her sweater across the desk, and went immediately back to the third floor to retrieve her belongings.

It was only later in the day that she realized her proximity to the archive of the world’s periodicals. This was a pleasant coincidence, for she has a bit of a news fetish. She reads two or three papers a day; she likes to know what’s happening. She was closest to The New Yorker. Physically, that is.

After Emma unpacked her various personal items—books, toothbrush, extra blouse, underwear—onto a shelving cart, which she placed next to her desk, she read a Vanity Fair from December 1974, just because she could.

Other things she did that first afternoon include: touching all the windows on the fourth floor, reading the graffiti written on the grout between the tiles of the women’s bathroom—The Grout Gatsby, Oscar the Grout, Grout Expectations—and purchasing a copy card. She wanted to firmly establish herself at the library before settling down to work.

While preparing to take up residence, Emma had been disproportionately concerned with the practicalities surrounding the storage of her personal belongings. In hindsight, that was, of course, a ridiculous detail to become preoccupied with, considering the overabundance of shelf space that libraries provide.

The last time Emma spoke to her family they were on the island of Crete, packing for their return journey home. They had made the trip because of her sister’s work. Ava, an archaeologist, was asked out to Knossos to do a short consultation regarding an inaccuracy in a previous carbon dating. Her excursion was originally to be both short and solo—she had anticipated the work being completed in the span of a few days. Their mother, though, had always loved Greece,
and expressed interest in going along. Their father, not wanting to miss any fun, should fun arise, signed up. Emma was the only family member who had to decline, due to the timing of the semester—it was the final week of classes.

Emma is different from the rest of her family in three ways: she is not an -ologist, of any variety—she’s an associate English professor. She does not study the past—her field of expertise is contemporary American Literature. And she is here, now, in this library—not at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean, decomposing.

Ava had been anxious about the trip back because both of her parents were attempting to bring a number of unauthorized samples home. Since she had gone over on a dig-permit, Emma suggested that Ava label and pack everything in her luggage, simply passing it off as part of her work.

“But I’ve never studied a fish bone in my life,” Ava exclaimed.

“Well, neither has the gate agent,” Emma pointed out.

“How do you know?” she asked.

Ava was the type of person who took it on faith that the man operating the metal detector was also an aquatic osteopath.

Since learning of the plane crash from the airline representative, Emma has not been able to stop thinking about her parents’ unauthorized samples. Unlike Ava’s which were documented electronically, her parents—due, Emma assumed, to the covert nature of their samplings—had made no such record. What, Emma could not help wondering, had they wanted to bring home so badly?

Emma has carefully cut out each newspaper article referencing the plane crash that she was able to find. She undertook internet searches for articles in papers that she didn’t have physical access to—foreign and otherwise. She recorded or purchased television news clips on the subject. Additionally, she was in frequent contact with various airline representatives regarding both any documentation and flight transcripts that they were willing to give her, as well as, of course, the retrieval of any personal belongings that have or may still surface. The airline generously—appropriately—offered to transport the relatives of those deceased to the crash site. While the idea holds some appeal, she is not inclined to fly just now.

In the time leading up to her relocation to the library, Emma found herself unable to sleep. She lay in bed, thinking about beetles and cupcakes on Monday. About Mount Vesuvius and Shakespeare on Tuesday. Avian flight patterns and Persia on Wednesday.
On Thursday, she thought: There’s a lot you don’t know—like practically anything about China. She thought: You’re not getting any younger.

She thought: Well, if you want to get some sleep.

During her explorations, Emma was displeased to discover one of her students on the second floor. Like herself, he seemed fairly well-established in his carrel. His voluminous books were stacked neatly on the upper shelf, and he seemed to have some sort of color-coding system involving a wide array of post-it notes. She waved at him but did not approach and made a mental note to avoid this corner of the building.

It is not difficult, in any way, to overnight at the library. You do not need a pass, or a key-card, or some five-digit combination. No. You simply open the front door, walk through the senso-matic detector, and past the circulation desk. Good university libraries are open all night. And good university students know this.

So her first night spent there was not, by any stretch of the imagination, her first night spent there. But it was her first night in a number of years. Her first night with neither papers to write nor grade. Her first night with a toothbrush and a change of underwear. And that is what counts.

Another thing that counts is that she didn’t sleep; instead, like a bibliophilic poltergeist, she paced the silent stacks.

Normally, sleep is not a problem for Emma. She went through a short period of recurrent night terrors as a child. A flock of feral chickens would chase after her, attempting to gnaw at her legs. She would wake and lie silently in her bed for the remaining hours of darkness.

It was after a handful of such nights that her mother—a keenly observant biologist—noticed the scabbed scratches on her legs, cuts she was giving herself during the nightmares, and inquired about them. Once clear on the problem, she turned it over to her husband’s gentle, pragmatic geologist’s mind, and went back to cataloguing fish bones on the kitchen table.

“Well, Pebble,” her father said to her from his chair in the study, after a few moment’s thought. “Either we could get you some medicine to help you fall asleep, or we could establish some routines that would make it easier for you to do so on your own.”
Rachel Meier

Emma’s father was a firm believer in presenting all the options. She pursued the latter.

“It’s simple,” her father assured her, “By creating a steady bedtime rhythm out of things like getting into bed at the same time each night, you’ll habituate your mind for sleep.”

At promptly 10:15 that night, Emma retired to her bed. Unable to sleep, she lay there awaiting her ground-bogged avian nemeses. It was in this state of anticipation that her mother, arriving to check on her progress, found her. Making room for herself on the floor amidst the piles of children’s books surrounding Emma’s bed, she opened the palm of her hand and placed into it a heap of stones, fossilized seeds, and time-hardened sea coral.

“Ammonition,” she said.

Emma crooked her fingers around a blue rock and settled down between the sheets. Her mother was a wonderful orator, though she never thought of herself as such; and Emma, a rapt listener, more attentive than her mother’s best student.

“Picture an empty field,” her mother said to her that night, stroking Emma’s snarled brown hair, “barren except for a cave at one end. Just inside the cave’s entrance you can see glowing eyes, peeking out from the darkness. Squinting from the sunlight, the wolves come out, one by one, onto the dry, brown grass.”

Beneath the lulling weight of her mother’s voice, she felt her limbs grow heavy, as though the words were supplying her body with the density it required to sink down toward sleep.

“Can you see them?” her mother asked.

She shook her head, cheeks rubbing against the pillow.

“The first is the biggest, the alpha male. The second is a bit smaller and a cloudy shade of gray. The third has a slight limp, which you can see when she runs.”

With the weight each word amassed, Emma’s body grew heavier, pressing downward, toward sleep.

And so she began counting wolves.

It is only very recently, in the last week or so, before her move to the library, that neither her father’s temporal rhythms nor her mother’s predator-cataloguing methods have successfully lulled her to sleep.

Never inclined toward stuffed animals, she would occasionally, after the chickens, bed down with rocks. Usually something five to ten pounds and smooth.

She has tried taking a variety of stones to bed over the course of
the last insomniatic week. She has counted hundreds upon hundreds of wolves. And still, the universe keeps her up.

**Her second day at the library, she learned that there is a coffee shop in the atrium outside the south entrance. And that they have good blueberry danish. She learned that there is a wheelchair-accessible stall in the third floor women’s bathroom—but not the fourth—and that it is good for washing up and changing one’s clothes.**

And she learned, thanks to the morning’s exacting light, just how filthy her desk was. A thorough cleaning was called for. She had, while packing, thought to include a modest first aid kit, and it was from this kit that she was able to cull the alcohol pads necessary to give the desk a vigorous scouring. Wiping in a gridded pattern, horizontally from end to end, and then vertically in the same fashion, she was able to guarantee full-coverage disinfection. She used seven of the nine individually-wrapped pads—thinking it best to save the last two for potential medical needs—and still the carrel was not as clean as she would have liked.

**In a stroke of bad luck, her student appears to have discovered her fourth floor location. He sidled over to her while she was immersed in an archaeology journal. It is lucky that she saw him coming in enough time to roll the shelving cart with her personals closer to the wall, and thus out of view.**

“How’s it going, professor?” he asked her.

“Quietly, George. It is going quietly,” she said, gesturing her hands at the library around them. “And how is your summer?”

She thought an offensive position would be best.

“It’s alright. My Asian history class is killing me. I’ve got, like, two hundred more pages of reading to do for a paper that’s due at the end of the week.”

“I have full confidence in your ability.” George had been a very devoted and diligent student.

“Hey, do you think, maybe, if you’re still around, you could take a look at a few pages of this paper I’ve been working on? Just tell me generally what you think?”

Intending, fully, to say no, she was surprised to hear, coming out of her mouth, “If you leave the paper on my desk, I will make general comments and return it to you.”

He, like the well-mannered student he was, thanked her profusely.
and rushed off to continue work on his forthcoming paper. After his departure, she ran through her options. She could leave the library altogether, something she was not prepared to do. She could change locales. But should she happen into him again—and given the circumstances, that was likely—she risked offending him both personally and academically, something she did not feel was appropriate given the nature of their relationship. In the end, she decided, there was nothing left for her to do but press on.

**After morning ablutions and breakfast, she drew up an exercise regimen for herself.** As someone who was accustomed to getting from place to place on foot, she was habituated to a fairly high level of physical activity. Her regimen consists mostly of power walking—a type of exercise that she formerly scorned, likening it to a dachshund trying to keep up with a standard poodle—and of repeatedly lifting and retrieving a weighty book from a shelf just above her head. She concluded it best to perform these calisthenics early in the day, while the library is quietest, lest someone see and have his or her curiosities unnecessarily aroused.

After completing these introductory tasks, she was able to shift her mind completely to the books. In her studies that day she learned that a giraffe’s hooves are the size of dinner plates—twelve inches across, and round. And that kicking is a giraffe’s first line of defense against a predator.

She learned that if an airplane is forced to crash-land in water—the Atlantic Ocean, say—and the plane breaks apart, the entire thing could be consumed by the sea in fifteen minutes. If the plane remains intact, however, it could take days, weeks, to sink—if it sinks at all.

She learned that in Hebrew, numbers have corresponding letters. And that the number eighteen, 1-8, is chet-yud—life.

She also learned that the coffee shop closes earlier in the summer than it does during the rest of the year, and that if she wanted dinner that isn’t obtained by keying in a single letter/single number combination, she had better make her way to the atrium eatery by six-thirty.

And yet. Despite the steady buzz of the fluorescent lights, and the quiet drone of the occasional copy machine; despite the vaguely sweaty smell of books being handled, that night she was unable to sleep. Instead, she rearranged four shelves’ worth of books in the Asian-American aisle of the contemporary culture section, seriating them by color. It was
exhilarating and guilt-inducing, in equal measure, and though she felt certain she will be caught and expelled from the library, she is not.

The next morning, as she was looking through her bag for her toothbrush, she finds, toward the bottom, an assignment she gave her writing students a few months ago. In February, she thinks. A close reading of a number of poems, and then a paper—three to four pages—examining the ways the poet’s use of form were effective.

How, she wanted to know, was the poem constructed? And how did these choices affect you, the reader?

What ridiculous questions she has asked her students. As if form and content are inherently separate beasts. As if the meaning and the shape can, in any way, be separated.

While she was washing up, George’s paper appeared on her desk. The introduction of this object was startling and at first she loathed its intrusion. After a moment, though, she grew accustomed to its presence. She decided she would put it aside, and look at it only when she was in the mood. But as soon as she lifted the essay, she could not help but begin to scan the sentences. And once she had begun, well, she had begun, and so reached for her pen and began to edit. From there the familiar motions took over and she did not think again about what she was doing until she reached the end of the paper, to the handwritten note scrawled in the white space, below the text. “Professor,” it read, “Thanks again. You’re a life saver.”

Emma and her sister Ava were similar in many ways. They both, for instance, liked taking things apart: their father’s electric razor, a Casio calculator, the dishwasher. Both despised carbonated drinks. Both had only one dimple, each on their left cheeks. Their anxieties, though, were quite different, particularly as children.

While Emma was afraid of disappearing, Ava was afraid of the opposite. To Emma’s child-mind, the library was an infinitely unvaried landscape, capable of absorbing anything and everything that entered its labyrinth. Ava, alternatively, had become unnerved by the prospect that she was the same as no one. Not either of her parents, nor Emma, nor any of her friends. And for every one of the people Ava encountered the same held true. She felt herself adrift in a sea of variables—each different, distinct from one another. She felt, Emma thought, lonely.

It was Emma who ultimately squelched this fear of Ava’s. She
had been in 7th grade science class with Mrs. Jameson when Emma discerned what to tell Ava.

“Do you know how many vertebrae a person has in their neck?” Emma asked. They were sitting together in their mother’s camping tent that they’d set up in the middle of the living room.

“What’s a vertebrae?” Ava asked.

“It’s a bone that’s connected to another bone, all in a row, connected by tissues, that make up your spine.”

She shook her head. “Don’t know.”

“Seven,” Emma told her. “Now guess how many vertebrae does a giraffe have in its neck?”

Ava loved giraffes. They were, by far, her favorite animal. Expecting a huge number or a trick, she waited for the punch line.

“Seven,” Emma whispered.

“Really?” she asked, surprised.

“Yup. All mammals have seven vertebrae in their necks, no matter what kind they are, or how big.”

“Seven? Each seven?”

“Mm hmm. Do you want to count mine?” Emma asked her.

Of course she did. So Emma lay down on her stomach while her sister straddled her back, feeling gently the various knobs, juts, and valleys of Emma’s spine. “Now I’ll do you,” Emma said, once Ava was finished. And she did, just to be sure.

In the ensuing years they would save each other information—facts and tidbits that were particularly flavorful or, in some way, pertinent.

When Emma’s partner in college, Jamie, left her, Ava called and said, “Take heart. Eventually, maggots will chew through the palate of her mouth and eat her brain. And it will liquefy and drain out her ears and nose.”

“But she’ll be dead, Av,” Emma replied, stunned, revolted and fascinated in equal measure.

“So.”

When Ava relocated to Manhattan to get her Ph.D., she moved into what she claimed—and Emma, on a later visit, confirmed—was the smallest apartment in the world. Emma told her it could be worse, she could be living in an abandoned subway tunnel, something a community of people had done for nearly five years in the late ’90s.

“People will live in the craziest places,” Ava had remarked. Emma had concurred.
To Emma’s complete dismay, George returned. She found him seated at her desk upon finishing her research for the evening. To her further dismay, there appeared to be a small bouquet of flowers—clearly handpicked from the foliage in front of the library—reposing in a disposable cup.

“To what,” she asked, “do I owe this pleasure?” She stood over him with her hands on her hips.

“Well, I just, you know, wanted to say thank you for the help on my paper.” He stood and offered her her chair.

“You’re quite welcome.” She remained standing, waiting for him to leave but he did not. He sensed the awkwardness of the moment, both of them standing there, but instead of departing, he grabbed another chair from nearby and dragged it over.

“George, I need to get back to work,” she told him.

He nodded and then sat down. “Could I just talk to you for, like, five minutes?” he asked.

Caving, once again, to her sense of duty, she relented.

“You know that Sara and I broke up, right? Actually, she broke up with me.”

“I do not,” she replied, “take any interest in the personal affairs of students. In fact, just the opposite.”

“I know, I know.” As though sensing her desire to turn and run, George stood and reached for her arm. “But it’s just that since she left me at the beginning of the summer, I’ve been sort of falling apart.”

Emma pulled her arm away sharply. “While I am sorry to hear of your personal woes, this conversation is entirely outside of the scope of our relationship. If you need someone to talk to, I suggest you utilize the counseling center at Student Health Services.”

“Please, Professor,” he began, taking a step toward her.

“I am afraid, on this matter, I have to stand firm.”

After she ushered George away, she took the flowers and deposited them in the women’s restroom. It had been her intention to throw them in the trash but she decided, instead, to merely abandon them on one of the sinks.

As she was power-walking through the 19th century American History section at 6:45 in the morning, Emma noticed a series of blue buttons placed intermittently on the edge of various shelves in aisle BG 12: 63.19. Her first thought was that it was some sort of performance art piece, and she looked around to see if there was a video camera, or an
undergraduate student rending their clothing. Seeing no one, she kept on.

It was only later that she thought of Ava, who, when she was young, would bury things in an attempt to attract the attention of the archaeologists of the future. Her earliest efforts were rather transparent—pots from the kitchen cabinets, her blocks, and once, the cat’s water dish. But as she got older she grew more proficient. Fingernail clippings, sorted into Ziplocs and labeled according to family member; coins intermingled with mom’s discarded fish bone samples; Tupperware smeared with blood from a picked scab.

Emma’s third day at the library, she learned that since 1942, 74,607 people have been killed in airplane crashes.

She learned that the average depth of the Atlantic Ocean is 12,800 feet, and that while warmer surface waters are moving in one direction, deep below them, the colder currents are moving in the opposite.

Late at night, after washing her hair in the sink of the women’s bathroom, Emma walked back to the 19th century American History section to see if she could find the blue buttons. It took her fifteen minutes but she managed to locate them, and when she did she realized, with satisfaction, that they were in precisely the same place as when she had first seen them. The buttons were directly in front of an unusually small book with a bright pink spine, which she remembered only when she saw it for the second time.

She was very glad to find them there, unmolested. She did not touch them, only looked.

After a few minutes she went back to her carrel. But as she neared her area, she was appalled to see George sitting beneath her desk. His back was to her and he appeared to be crying. She retreated behind a shelf and continued to watch him. To her horror, he removed one of her shirts from the shelving cart and clutched it to him, like some sort of security blanket or keepsake. Luckily, he did not see her and she scuttled off to regroup.

She decided her only viable option was to wait and hope he departed on his own. She returned to the second floor and attempted to read but found that she couldn’t concentrate. After twenty minutes of unfruitful reading attempts she went, once again, back to the 19th century American History section. This time, taking careful note of the call number of the pink book, she carried the buttons away with her, and walked back to the armchair where she had settled temporarily. She placed the buttons on the small end table, beside the chair.

Now able to watch over them, or perhaps they over her, surprisingly,
she read easily and without worry until dawn. On her way to the coffee shop for breakfast, she returned the buttons to their proper location in the stacks. By the time she arrived back at her carrel, George had departed, and with him, her green shirt.

Her fourth day at her carrel, she learned that on any given night 88,720,540 Americans are unable to sleep; and that at some point in their lives, thirty percent of people have insomnia which lasts at least a year. She learned that a rising number of people are opting to have their bodies composted after their deaths. She learned that the cupcake was invented, or at least made enormously popular, by Hostess in 1919.

Other things she did that day included: picking all the dried gum off of the bottom of her carrel, counting the number of chairs on the fourth floor (forty-seven green, twenty-three yellow, six red), and printing out a lovely color photograph of a sunrise over the ocean to hang on the wall next to her desk.

After the previous night’s incident, she considered changing her location. But why, she concluded, should her routines be disturbed? She had imposed an order, of sorts, and was loathe to once again start over. And besides, no matter her locale, the library is only so big; George would find her if he so desired.

Late in the afternoon, while reading about the arctic ground squirrel—the only known mammal that can lower its body temperature below freezing to aid in hibernation—she startled upon an article in the same journal written by her mother. Emma stood, looking at her mother’s name on the first page of the article for quite some time. Minutes. Then, pressing her left index finger firmly against the spine, Emma tore the article out, a page at a time.

After closing the bound book of journals and returning it to a sweeps cart, she retreated immediately to her carrel, whereupon she folded the article up into a small square.

She placed it in her mouth, and bit down. She kept it there only briefly. Just long enough to feel the pulpy grit of the paper saturating, and then she removed it. She did not, however, unfold it. She only looked at it—wet with her saliva, imprinted with her teeth marks, sitting unaccompanied on the surface of her desk.

A convenient thing about her family’s deaths: there are no bodies to contend with. This absence of corporeal matter has allowed
her to forestall any immediate arrangements for a funeral or memorial service, further forestalling imminent interactions with concerned relatives and friends.

Also, she is comforted by how fitting the grave is. Though it is admittedly difficult to visit.

The incursion of her mother’s article made her glaringly aware of the likelihood that she was surrounded by a potentially sizeable collection of her family’s writings. It was likely, that were she to look, she would find photographs. Dedications.

This realization left her with simultaneously opposing desires. She was tempted, in equal measure, to walk immediately out of the library, and to gather up all the books, magazines, and journal articles written by her mother, her father, and her sister and to place them, one by one, around her, on the floor.

She settled on the compromise of seeking out every piece of her family’s writing at its proper location in the stacks, with the stipulation that she would leave each volume where it belonged.

The irony does not escape her that all three of her family members—Mom, Dad, Ava—spent their time trying to resolve the problems associated with life on this planet, but that it is she who is ultimately left to solve the problem of being alive.

Emma had hoped that in the absence of the framework of her life—in this library, away from the structures that have defined her—the content would somehow fall away. This has not proved to be the case. She has found, instead, that the two are inseparable—like nesting dolls, stacked neatly inside one another, and carried with her, across her back.

As her students have probably long known, the content is, in fact, the form.

Her pilgrimage took her to the following sections in the library: biology, marine life, oceanography, anthropology, ancient history, contemporary history, archaeology, world culture, periodicals, and scholarly journals; where she visited one hundred and thirty-seven articles, and nine books.

It took her six hours.

At the end, she was tired. She rested beneath her desk.

That night, unfortunately, she was visited once again by her student. She returned from her evening meal, only to hear the
unmistakable hum of a man snoring. Sure enough, beside her carrel was
George. Sleeping soundly. She shook him awake and sent him, once
again, on his way.

The question of how long she will stay here—away from her
patterns, her circumstances, her grief—is not one that she intends to
leave unanswered. Its resolution, she suspects, is more circumstantial
than circadian. Perhaps she will leave when she has gathered enough
information to contend with the vastness of the universe. Or when she
expects the unremitting phone calls to her home have ceased. Perhaps
she will leave when she grows tired of a dietary regimen consisting
only of coffee shop and vending machine provisions. Or when she has
somehow left enough behind. Perhaps she will leave—most simply, most
probably—when she can get some sleep. And as of yet, she is unable.
Sarah Nance

Pineapple

We get the news the day after Caroline’s funeral. A month before, June had put her business card in the raffle box at the pineapple-themed vendor booth in the west wing of the East Side Mall.

Everything at the booth was either made from pineapple or looked like pineapple. June bought some body lotion in a tiny pineapple-shaped plastic container; it was made from pureed pineapple but smelled like Thousand Island dressing. She bought one for her sister April, too, and one for our daughter Caroline. One business card pulled from the overflowing plastic pineapple would win a trip to Maui. June’s cards for the chiropractor where she works part-time are heavy cardstock, edged in brown. It must have floated up from the depths of the pineapple into the hand of the selector, maybe the day Caroline died.

A gruff voice with a hint of southern twang leaves a message with the news on our answering machine, while we are at April’s house.

“Do you want to go?” I say to June. She says no. I call the next day to book flights; the only ones that qualify are on FlyHawaiian, Tuesday or Thursday red-eyes.

“Ten days in Hawaii for twenty-five dollars!” I tell June. She says she isn’t going. That’s just June, though. It is hard to force excitement into my voice, to be honest.

But this is only May now, anyway. Time seems stuck here, a calendar page that can’t quite turn over. I book for the first week in November.

FlyHawaiian isn’t as bad as we had imagined. The stewardess serves pineapple daiquiris and the captain wears an oversized tropical-print shirt over his uniform. Everything smells like flowered leis and sunscreen and sticky swimsuits. The airport is crowded with pale retired couples with sunhats and socks pulled up high over their ankles. June and I stand out, part of the mid-forties set, but without children dragging rolling suitcases behind us. We wait for the taxi in silence.
The sheets at our hotel are gritty with sand even after laundering. I sit on the edge of the bed and June unpacks her small suitcase into the oak bureau. She carefully refolds each item and places neat piles inside the drawer while I walk around the bed and out to the attached balcony. The room is a small suite, with a table in the corner and kitchenette with a miniature dishwasher and four-cup coffeemaker.

June loves the ocean. She tells me this the first morning when we sit on the balcony and drink the packaged coffee the staff leaves on our kitchen counter. It is November 7. I think of our house, far away in Lansing. The rain was falling in frozen gray sheets when we left Michigan, and June was banging around the house, packing things into boxes and cleaning the bathrooms, adjusting the realtor sign in our front yard.

“Moving is more tiring than I thought it would be,” June says, pushing open the slider door on the balcony after she puts creamer in her coffee. I nod; I called the realtor this morning while June was in the shower. She sits in the other folding deck chair and swirls her coffee with one finger.

“It’s nice to take a break,” she says. “Did the office call yet?”

I think of my corner desk in the engineering firm where I work, where the piles of projects disappeared in May after the accident and have only slowly grown in height. There are a lot of whispers and positive “just checking in” e-mails.

“No,” I say. “Not yet.”

During the first day, we stroll the shoreline, tour a pineapple farm, visit local shops. Mostly we drift about, not looking at our watches. June buys magnets and postcards for her sister, for her nieces, my mother, the mailman. The walking tires me; we rest at outdoor picnic tables near walk-up food vendors, or sit with drinks on the hotel’s terrace. I walk with a limp now, after the car accident that fractured my right leg.

The weather is not painfully hot but muggy: our clothes stick to our backs. June’s purse leaves a strap-shaped sweat line on her shoulder.

“I’m happy to be here,” June says at least once a day. I always agree. The phone bill will drive us into the poorhouse, though. June calls her sister April daily, sometimes more, and the grief counselor every other day. Sometimes she makes me talk to the counselor, who uses phrases like “controlled coping” and “finding a new normal.” I smile and nod and sometimes shrug, coloring in the letters on the hotel’s stationery.

After the funeral, the car had been an easy decision. We got the quote back from the insurance company and told Rick from Rick’s
Towing Co. that we never wanted to see it again. He brought it to the junkyard or sold it or scrapped it, no questions asked. We bought a shiny pewter Honda to replace it, never thought twice.

Other decisions were harder. What would we do with the house? June kept Caroline’s bedroom quarantined, sectioned off, going in once a week to dust and press her nose into the clothes in Caroline's closet. For her last birthday—fifteen—we gave Caroline her own cordless phone to use in her room. It was for our second line, which I had used for business calls back when I ran an engineering consulting business from our basement. Now no one rang, except the occasional telephone solicitor. It was eerie to hear the phone quietly dinging from Caroline’s empty room. Sometimes I would wake late at night, surprised to find myself in her room with the phone in my hands.

“Hello?” I would say, again and again, unsure if it rang or not. “Hello?”

The second night in Maui, June and I sit at the end of our bed, feet hanging over the edge, flowered coverlet crumpled around us.

“I miss Ruby,” June says, as she did earlier today when we saw dogs on the beach, running next to joggers in sports bras and headphones. Ruby, our own overweight black lab who is staying with June's sister April. She could never run for very far, especially not now. She mopes around, sitting under Caroline’s chair at the dinner table. Whenever we put her up for the weekend at the kennel, while June and I get out of town for a breather, she’ll whimper when we pick her up, then bark and bark all the way home, jumping from the backseat to the front while I shout at June to hold her back out of my way. That’s why we left her with April this time.

Often, on sunny afternoons, I have found Ruby upstairs, nose pressed against the base of Caroline’s closed bedroom door. Each time, for a moment, I was completely certain that if I opened the door, Caroline would be inside, sitting on her bed and talking on the phone. I could tell her to clean her room or to come down for dinner. I could rub my hand across the back of her head and hold her to my chest and rock her back and forth until we both have forgotten what has happened.

I never go in her room, though. Instead, I usually bring Ruby outside, where she chases the leaves and barks at the air.

“Yeah, I miss her a little,” I admit now, leaning back on my elbows on the bed.
“I miss the house too,” June says, “but not the packing.”

We don’t ever talk about missing Caroline. Instead, we think of missing anything as missing Caroline. June sighs a little.

“What should we do tonight?”

I shrug.

We do what people do to forget. After dinner, we sit at the hotel bar, talking and drinking cocktails. When it gets late and our glasses are empty and refilled and empty and refilled and empty until we can hardly recall what we have been drinking, we sit on the porch outside and split a pack of cigarettes until our clothes and our hair and our eyes burn with the smoke.

When I bring June back upstairs to our room, she leans heavily against my chest while I pull out the room key. She gets into bed with her clothes on and tucks herself up against me.

“I miss Hillside,” I think I hear her say, but I can hardly hear her whisper.

“What?” I ask, but a moment later, her breathing lengthens and she brings one arm up across my chest and stays there for the rest of the night.

After the funeral, the cemetery plot at Hillside was bare, freshly seeded and strewn with straw to keep the birds away. A little pink flag alerted caregivers to the presence of a new grave, and Caroline’s name was entered into the directory at the small brick welcome hut outside the curved driveway.

After the headstone was completed, June and I drove out every day for weeks on end, lost ourselves in the turns, read the tombstone maps and found ourselves again, parked the car on the side of the narrow drive on the west side of Hillside, where the graves are for the newly dead, and stared at the cold trueness of Caroline’s name in black granite.

Standing there, June did not cry. I did not hold her hand. We did not shake our fists at God and demand a sign, demand a replacement, ask for an answer. June would note the condition of the grass over the grave; by late summer it was matured, though a more tender shade of green than the graves nearby. I would note the names on those nearby graves: Michael James Anton; Sheila Ames Parker; Elizabeth Marie Fosalt. I pulled them into my memory like lost dear friends, as the neighbors of my daughter, people we said hello to when we visited, running a hand over the smoothness of their headstones, adjusting their bouquets.

June developed a strange fit of anxiety whenever we were about to leave the cemetery. As the summer faded then folded to a soft close,
the sun would be setting and the dusk washing up upon us from the back reaches of the cemetery as we returned to our car. She would stand, hand hovering above the door handle, unable to turn her back and leave Caroline in the dark.

**On our third day at the hotel, June begins to see things.** Not Caroline, not even a person, but Max, the cat she had as a girl when her family lived in New Jersey. When she tells me, I laugh.

“Like a ghost?” I ask. June shrugs, her eyes big.

“I know what I saw,” she says. “I would know him anywhere. And why would he be running across the bathroom floor, here, and then disappearing if it weren’t him?”

“So it was a ghost,” I say, to clarify. “Could you see through it?”

“I think that’s only in movies,” June says. “It was more like a highway mirage, like if I looked at it too straight-on, it might dissolve.”

I tell the grief counselor during our afternoon phone conversation.

“Some people see what they need to see,” she says in her practiced monotone.

“You mean what they want to see,” I say.

“No. What they need to see.”

“I see.”

The next day, June comes out on the patio where I am reading last Sunday’s newspaper to tell me she saw Max again.

“How do you know?” I ask. “Wasn’t the last time you saw him under the front tires of some guy’s pickup truck?”

“I know it’s him,” June says. “It’s the markings. We had him for ten years. I’m positive.”

I telephone the counselor. She tells me there’s no need to worry until June starts seeing people.

“Do you think June’s crazy?” I ask the counselor. She pauses and sighs.

“You know,” she said. “I actually charge extra for phone consultation.”

The next day, June sees her Uncle Ralph.

**I begin to walk the shoreline early in the morning, before the families crowd it with their umbrellas and sand toys.** I watch the runners, the same dogs that June saw the first day in Hawaii. I walk on the packed sand by the surf, picking up round shells to throw back to the sea and pieces of broken sea glass to take back and place in a line on the hotel nightstand.
For three mornings in a row I see the same brunette woman jogging on the beach with a brown mixed-breed in the early morning mist. She’s middle-aged and wears cropped pants and a sleeveless running top. The dog lopes beside her, slowing down and speeding up, pushing ahead and then doubling back.

For some reason, she reminds me of Caroline’s 4th grade teacher whose name I can’t remember, who I used to see on Saturday mornings when I drove to get a newspaper and fill up the car at the gas station. She’d be out early, power walking with her dog, arms pumping and headphones on, always looking over to give a little wave when I drove by.

I think again of Ruby and how sometimes, when we get home late from dinner or April’s house, she’ll be barking alone inside the house. June and I usually sit with the car turned off in the drive, listening to the echoes of her barking. When June finally unclips her seatbelt and goes in the house to shush her, Ruby always looks confused for a moment, like we are not the people who raised her from a stray at the shelter. Sometimes, when we get home late, the touchlight in Caroline’s room is on.

It’s not the first loss for either of us. These things happen. June’s older sister May died before I ever met her, at twenty-eight of a rare form of blood disease. Now there is a month missing between June and April.

I lost Caroline, not my Caroline but the other Caroline, my sister Caroline, who died as an infant. Her grave is in the same cemetery as my Caroline’s, bookended by my parents’ graves: my father’s, which is filled, and my mother’s, empty.

When Caroline was born, June was worried about naming her for my dead sister.

“It’s morbid,” she said. “It’s like a curse.” She was nervous for the first two weeks, until our Caroline had outlived my sister.

Uncle Ralph becomes an obsession for June. After she glimpses an old man who is certainly her deceased uncle walking though the hotel lobby, she can’t get him off her mind. She begins to see him in the periphery of large crowds on the beach, at our tiny breakfast-nook table before she turns on the lights, in TV ads for local Maui antique shops.

“Does he talk to you?” I ask while we unload the room’s tiny dishwasher. “Does he even see you?”

June shakes her head. “It’s like that feeling you get when you think
you recognize someone, then do a double-take and he’s gone,” she says, lifting a stack of plates. “Except I know it’s him. It’s him every time.”

“Why him, though?” I ask, sorting out the silverware. Knife, fork, spoon, spoon, fork, spoon. “Why not your sister?”

I let the next question hang unsaid. Why not Caroline?

June grows silent. I look up at her, standing in the middle of the kitchen, measuring cups in hand, cupboard door open above her head.

“When did he die?” I prompt. “Do you even remember?”

June puts the measuring cups in place.

“Actually, I do,” she says. “I was eight or nine, I think. We stopped by his house to visit with Aunt Margaret. He was sitting at the table with all of us, then just slumped over his water and pills.” June adjusts the edge of her shirt, clears her throat.


She shrugs. “I hardly remember it, really. I mostly know him from all the pictures they put up at Aunt Margaret’s funeral.” She closes the cupboard door with a smack as my phone rings with our realtor.

“Any bites on the house?” I say. None.

“We’re doing another open house on Sunday,” he offers. “It’s been mostly couples who haven’t started families.”

“Right.”

There’s a pause and I can hear him flipping through papers. “They’re not sure what to do with that extra bedroom,” he says after a moment.

“Oh,” I say. I don’t mention that to June.

The month after the funeral, we had decided that we must sell the house. First, it was too large. We didn’t need so much space and we didn’t need a room that was full of things and yet still empty. Also, we needed something to do. The grief counselor told us to stay busy, warned us that problems arise when people let the spaces open up in their lives, let the time that their child once filled be filled with the realization that, without their child, their time is meaningless.

Putting the house up for sale gave us a goal. We made lists. We organized the garage. We labeled boxes. For the first time, June began taking clothes out of Caroline’s closet, gingerly placing them into garbage bags for Goodwill. We found a dress shirt that I thought had been lost, in a laundry basket of folded clothes in a corner of Caroline’s room, untouched for a month.

We found some of Caroline’s schoolwork: history notes, copies of a Dickinson poem, an assignment about who she would endorse if America
adopted a monarchy. June and I read, fascinated. We did not know she thought about such things. There are many things I didn’t know about Caroline: her political leanings, her thoughts on marriage, the person she would have dinner with if she could. June had pulled out a shoebox full of folded notes from under the bed. She looked at me, caught her bottom lip with her front teeth, then carefully unfolded one.

*Caroline, it said, you’re so beautiful. I think about you all the time.*

June and I looked at each other. She smiled a little. The note was signed with a heart and *Nick*. June fell silent, reading over the loopy cursive on the looseleaf sheets. I shifted my weight, stood up. We usually had a great deal to say about Caroline—we just didn’t know what to say to each other. I thought I should apologize for what happened to our daughter. I went outside, instead, to wash our gray sedan and reflect: June and I were dolls, posed and posing, placed within a highly ordered and detailed world. Dolls do not kill their daughters in automobile accidents. Dolls do not remember, or look for lost things.

**That night, in Hawaii, I stare at the moving shadows on the ceiling, as the curtains on the patio door move slightly in the cross breeze. The moon out here is as bright as any Michigan porch light. I keep one eye out for Uncle Ralph. June’s mind is always too heavy for her own good, so she falls asleep quickly. It is the one benefit of carrying so much grief.**

The cool night air gives me time to think. The room at night smells of pineapple. I remember what the realtor said, about the extra room. We didn’t know what to do with it either. No parent would. A sewing room? A guest bedroom? Sadness is almost impossible to cover. Moving is easier.

**Three months after the funeral, the grief counselor recommended a group for parents who had lost children. It was terrifying. I had not realized that there were so many ways for a child to die. Tom and Sharon Martin had lost two children, one to leukemia and one in a swimming accident. June and I had looked at each other; I could see the panic in the edges of her eyes. We had not considered these scenarios.**

Kate and Peter Hartinger were beside themselves, still crazy with the choking sensation that accompanies a fresh loss. Their daughter Jennifer died after a drug overdose.

“Here? At Eastern?” June leaned over to whisper, surprise in her voice. Jennifer went to school with Caroline.
Rebecca Philips lost her son, Nolan, in a high-impact, single-car crash. He had been drinking: blurred vision, delayed reflexes. He crossed a highway, hit the barrier. June squeezed Rebecca’s hand. After the session, the car-accident parents huddled together, exchanging stories. I hung back, loitered near the exit. I couldn’t hear about the crash again, couldn’t hear my name linked to it in a cause-and-effect way.

The group leader saw me standing alone and came by to introduce himself. He lost both his children over a decade ago to the same disease that took his wife. He pointed to a man standing next to the large window across the room, whose wife wouldn’t even get out of bed. I inquired about their child: suicide, said the group leader in a low hush. He studied me for a long moment.

“It doesn’t matter how they die,” he said, glancing over at the group of automobile-accident parents, where June was watching me. “You always feel responsible.”

I thought about this on the way home. I wondered why June was not afraid to drive with me.

After three days of Ralph sightings, mixed with the occasional phantom cat crossing June’s bewildered path, she sees a new face—white-haired, thin powdered skin, fingers twisted with arthritis.

“What do you mean you don’t recognize her?” I ask while we browse the hotel’s gift shop for postcards for June’s nieces.

“I know it’s someone,” she says, “but I can’t quite place her.”

“Maybe she’s not dead at all,” I say. “Did you ever think of that? Maybe people you don’t recognize are not dead after all, but just people you don’t know.”

June shakes her head and raises her eyebrows.

By that evening, she’s figured it out.

“When I was in college,” June continues, “my roommate Molly’s grandma was in and out of the hospital constantly. When they knew she was going to go, Molly needed a ride out to the hospital and I took her in my car.”

“So that’s her grandma?” I ask.

June nods. “I just saw her for a second, but I can still picture her. I remember she looked too healthy to be dying. She had a flowered scarf on over her head.”
“Why are you seeing her now?” I ask, eyeing the space between us, the navy suede of the couch cushion making two small hills with a deep valley between.

June doesn’t answer my question. “It’s not who I want to see,” she says.

I push my hand across one hill. June does the same and our fingers touch in the suede valley.

That night, lying next to June, my arm crooked around her head and her face pressed into my side, I think of our 20th anniversary three years ago. June’s sister April and her husband Phil threw us that surprise party, and they played a slideshow and music while June and I danced and cut a layered chocolate cake. I wish that moment were a recipe I could make over and over again; we sat in our metal folding chairs, Caroline and June on either side of me, my two best girls as I told everyone. Everyone clinked their knives against their wineglasses and June kissed me once, quickly, then long and hard. When I turned back around, Caroline was blushing and laughing like a twelve-year-old would. I made a speech that night slightly drunk from the gin and tonic I held in my hand, threw my arm out toward June and declared that losing her would be the worst thing that could ever happen to me.

I take that back.

The next morning, June is certain she has spotted Sadie Johnson, the elderly widow who lived next door to us at our first house in Grand Rapids. June sees her around the corner of the hotel lobby in her faded floral housedress and crocheted wrap while she waits for me to come downstairs for the Saturday Aloha Continental Breakfast.

“You just missed it,” June tells me when the elevator doors open, me still fastening the last few buttons on my shirt.

“Missed what?” I ask as we walk toward the smell of coffee and grilled pineapple.

She fills me in while searching near the laundry room and pool doors where Sadie disappeared.

My stomach is tight with hunger and my head aches from being awake for the past hour without coffee. I pull June’s arm into the breakfast room and she stares out the window into the late morning light with her hand propping up her chin. A waiter brings juice and coffee, and two plates with croissants and homemade pineapple jam. When I direct her toward the buffet line, I lose sight of June when she follows an elderly woman in a flowered muumuu until she turns around and confronts June at the exit.
I watch June put up her hands in apology and return to her cold coffee at our table. I remember that it was June who arrived at Sadie’s tiny yellow house right after the hospice nurse, during her weekly delivery of magazines and muffins. Sadie was still warm in her bed, forehead finally free of the tight line between her eyes.

Later, June sees the housedress out of the corner of her eye yet again, while we stroll the boardwalk connecting the hotel to the outdoor pool and spa lounge. When she turns, straining her hand in mine to look behind her, I tug her forward just in time for her to see a man with a cane like her Uncle Ralph tap his way into the lounge.

June has to lie down for the rest of the afternoon with the curtains drawn. She won’t even talk to the counselor. For once, it is me who sits on the phone with her, answering her questions: Yes; No; She has a headache; Better every day, I suppose.

“Why am I being followed?” June asks in the dark while we lie in bed that night. “What does it mean?”

I tuck my arms under my head, turning a bit to look at the clock. 1:07 A.M.

“Do you think that’s what’s happening?” I ask.

June turns over on her side to face me, propping her body up on her elbow.

“I think so,” she says. “And it’s too much. I am constantly looking everywhere for the slightest glimpse of someone. I can’t take it.”

We fall silent and the breeze blowing off the beach through the open deck door smells like suntan lotion.

I can hear June inhale to speak again.

“I guess I just keep waiting for—for Caroline. I know she wants to come. I don’t know why she won’t. Maybe she can’t?”

I’m unsure of what to say; grief does strange things to people. I sound like the counselor now. June’s breathing slows down. A long expanse of dark, after-midnight time passes. I imagine Caroline standing at the foot of our bed, June waking up, happy finally.

It’s a strange thing to see someone die, June whispers after a long while, or maybe in a dream. I squeeze my eyes tightly and breathe deeper into sleep.

I don’t think June understands what it was like for me to live my childhood with a tiny baby-sized phantom following me, what it was like to see a sister that could have been, an almost-sister who never
aged, even though my mother made a special dinner each year on her birthday. These things give a person pause.

When I married June, when I stood at the altar of that old church on Washington Street with the birch slats, I could almost see my mother holding a tiny baby Caroline in the crook of her arm, her other hand pressing a crumpled tissue delicately to the corners of her eye. My father was dead by then, too, but there is something about the unlived that leaves a smudge on time like lung cancer cannot.

When Caroline was born, our Caroline, I suddenly understood what to do about the almost-sister phantom. I didn’t want to get rid of her, to erase that Caroline, but as I watched the nurse place our blue-tinged Caroline, damp and wriggling, on June’s hospital-gown chest, I felt the almost-sister loosen her hold on the hard outlines of the world and a new figure slide into her shadowy space. Her name had to be Caroline because she had always been Caroline; June didn’t quite understand but we gave her May’s name for a second name. Our new daughter, with the names of two other daughters, long gone from this world, as if daring the fates to let this child live like the others could not.

I don’t believe in divine bargains, but I wish I could make one now.

On our second-to-last morning of vacation, I stroll the water’s edge like usual, but the beach is empty, tourists and families and runners with dogs—gone. I kick at shells with my curled toes, press my heels into the soft sand and brush my fingertips across sea grass near the boardwalk. When I loop around back to the hotel, I keep walking, toward the pier.

Here are the island’s people: fishermen and vendors crowd the ancient wood planks, turning reels, tying lines, drinking coffee from thermoses and beer out of coolers. Groups of children sit along the pier’s edge, some with stick-and-string lines, others with plastic bags of Cheerios or candy. One man with a week’s growth of beard leans against a support column and pulls fish after fish out of the water and into a red Rubbermaid cooler. A small girl with braids sits near his feet, wearing a yellow jacket against the muggy chill of the morning air. I turn away; some things I don’t want to remember.

On her last day, Caroline wore her yellow school sweater, the one with the academy’s name embroidered over the left side. I know this because I kept seeing the soft buttery knit of it out of the corner of my eye when I checked my mirrors turning corners. Even though it was May,
the weather was unseasonably cool. That’s all I remember; I can’t picture Caroline’s face that day, or her hair, or her backpack filled with her reading book and math homework and retro Beatles lunchtin. It could have been someone else in my front seat, anyone else, wearing a yellow cardigan and looking out the window. For a while, I hoped this.

There is no mystery, no confusion about what happened. I wish there were. The Suburban turned into the passenger side of our green Camry. I didn’t see it coming. I couldn’t see it coming. In the moment after the crash, before blackness bled into my peripherals, I felt a hatred that burned up my skin, pushing out against my mouth, turning my words and arms to cinder. I didn’t think it was possible to hate so much, all the way through my stomach, acid burning in the back of my throat and behind my eyes.

When I woke, June was there, sitting on my left side, across the bed from my fragmented leg. I reached instinctively to my right but the bed and room were empty. I stared at the expanse of white sheets and I could see the last moment suddenly, remembering my right arm thrown out, too late, across Caroline’s chest. I turned back toward June; the second our eyes met, we both began to cry and couldn’t stop.

On our last full day at the hotel, June begins to pack our things, placing shells and souvenirs and hotel lotions into her overnight bag. I think of Michigan, now a hazy formation in my mind, billowing up like steam on a cold winter morning. It is mid-November now, the season of salt trucks and icy freeway pileups.

I want time to have the flexibility of a Slinky so that I can condense the parts I’d rather not think about and stretch out the periods I wish could endure, like our time here.

“Why don’t we stay here?” I ask June impulsively.

She laughs. “I wish. Aren’t you sick of all the pineapple yet? Or the heat?”

I shrug. She pauses. “Besides. Caroline is back there.”

Not really, I think.

June sees another long-dead neighbor at lunch. She barely mentions him, just turns her head toward me with a worried smile.

“I’m glad we’re leaving tomorrow,” she says.

“Maybe the hotel is haunted,” I suggest. June swats at my arm.

We hold hands on the room’s porch while we watch our final Maui sunset. The sunlight on my eyes makes it hurt to look, but I do anyway, the salty sea air ruffling my short hair and lifting the edge...
of June’s skirt. I look at June and her face is pink with the light of the dying day and something else, perhaps—happiness? I squeeze her hand tighter in mine. She leans in close to my chest and her hair smells like pineapple.

When the darkness finally falls, we go back into the room and June turns the radio on low, soft jazz while she finishes packing. At one point, she looks up from her pile of folded towels and swimsuits to say, “I think something is going to happen.”

“What?” I say, looking up from the TV.

“I just have a feeling.”

“What does that mean?”

She doesn’t answer.

There is one folded photo of Caroline that I carry in my wallet, tucked behind old credit cards where I won’t see it unless I mean to. After I’ve folded my jeans on the stiff hotel chair and pulled the cotton sheets over me in bed, June pulls the photo out of my wallet, placing it next to her head on the nightstand, in front of the line of colored sea glass I’ve been picking up all week.

“You might be crazy,” I tell her.

She nods. “I hope so.”
Peter Kline

Sometime Before Dawn

Walking drunk along the highway at night, lightstrafed, shadow-fooled, anonymous, I can’t make out the angles of your face or match your footsteps. So it must be words that carry us across a cattle guard into barbed-wire meadows. This is the place—between the windrows and the dumping fosse, we must reveal ourselves. The only light straggles from a lamppost over a street six years in our past—a stranger’s voice descended from a dark window, hailing us: Marry her! You’re in love! We thought we heard our hearts’ commandment echoed by the world. Tonight, again, we listen. Engines trace a desultory cursive on the silence, unspellable, but still articulate:

We need to get back home to bed. It’s late.
Michael Levan

Stopped on a Train from Chicago

Night refuses to give way
    when you most want each
    grayed thought to come close,

closer than the smudged fingerprints,
    impressions of children’s
    foreheads left on the window

as they died for one last glance
    of the Sears Tower,
    the Chicago River, the water tower

in Watervliet that signals you’re almost
    home. Home, like that first autumn
    draft corkscrewing leaves

in tiny cyclones, like who stands
    alone on the platform, in the rain,
    lighting your heart’s one sad room

for a moment. You are moving again.
    You are driving darker and darker
    into the night with each turn

of the train’s wheels. Gary’s furnaces
    remind you cities are always dying.
    A lone horse cropping grass eyes you,

glints what light the ghosted moon
    can offer, and you turn away
    from that eye, still and real.
You catch your face
    in the glass sideways
    because it’s too much to look

    at yourself when the reflection’s transparent,
    so much like mist it isn’t even rain.
    When you finally arrive,

    each drop is a fist or stone coming
    ever equal and fair from the gray
    line of clouds blotting out stars.
Walking through the Weeds off Number Ten

Walking through the weeds off number ten
I found my ball, a shanked drive, nestled
under the chin of a dead deer. Judging by size,
it couldn’t have been much older than a fawn—
or maybe it was, and I couldn’t tell the difference.
I’ve never been familiar with animals,
how they graduate to adulthood.
These matters have never had easy explanations.

I reached out the head of my three-iron,
tried to retrieve what I’d lost there,
but I poked too far, jammed the steel edge
into the dark mass at the deer’s throat.

Then, like a daisy’s first petals
after a long winter, maggots sprouted
from the wound, writhed in the red-caked down,
squirmed for cover in the untrampled grass.

My father called to me. We had to play on.
I looked into the deer’s eye, imagined it still
clear and brooding, knew what I had to do:
I left the ball, scuffed and stained green, a sign

someone had lost, and walked to the first cut of rough.
I dropped another, perfectly white, on the grass,
played it for three holes until one angry swing cut
the dimpled shell, made it common and unclean.
Glacial Elegy III

We bury our dead where the prairie sleeps
under invasive crops and subdivisions.
Ghostroots of the big bluestem mingle
with the ghosts of men determined
to plow it under. At the cemetery’s center
a boulder slouches to the north,

a glacial erratic brought south by a frozen
sea. The grass and graves give way
before it. These men were born

of ice and stone, while the women
knew the give and take of good dirt
and a forgiving rain. We’ve long since

learned that some things won’t be moved
and the dead never forget an open wound.
Axils

From Bee Branch
to Choctaw, Damascus
to Dennard, dogwoods
curl into themselves.
Dragonflies light
past spray-painted
burn-ban signs,
where a tornado
once pushed through,
where gas is drilled
from the ground.
The pastures have turned
to bobcat fur,
and the core is as dry

as apricot stone.
August rolls of dogs
and the shadow of an ear,
of inner curling pieces
that listen to leaves
dry on axes, churning.
A roadrunner flies
over the pavement,
over crimson stains
of roadkill that haven’t
washed away, not
even weeks after sinew
is gone into crows’
mouths. Deer reach

into an abandoned orchard
to eat from black apples.
A field gate rusts with shrunken fern. The mountains in the distance blur to blue, their names not commonly learned, roots pulling with rigor for water that is no longer there, like reflections then, indigo, of obsolete sea, from the Red, Black, White Rivers, from the Left to Right Hands.
The March Down, Arkansas Peace Society

The moon across Big Flat, Locust Grove, Cove, the Sylamore called owl to wolf with a face full of men’s oaths. Calico or yellow ribbon gave the society away.

Confederates came and took them to Little Rock in December, to step down as traitors off the mountains of bent earth.

Every piece of the walk crushed a word in snow, as ice and flakes were pressed into two types of man. Dawns stepped slowly on soles in the ends of nights that slid around twisting stone, and nights fell down with cluttered heaven, stars rough as frost. Hearts beat with the march that moved all forward to judgment, away from families hidden with what was left, a broken clock, a rocking chair, Bibles full of names. Sometimes a gun fired on the edge of earshot, jayhawks or bushwackers, they didn’t know, or a voice busted an afternoon of ice from far away, a simple laugh. Stars, names, stones stood from thousands of years before, in stories handed down. Adam’s apples sweated in the march, down into the delta where rain swelled from the south, away from mountain creeks filling tacitly with bobcat prints and junco scattering.
Adrian Matejka

Fisticuffs

Jack Johnson

Some reporters say I fight yellow, but I don’t need to use the dirty tricks. I don’t rabbit punch a man’s manhood like Mexican Pete or try to gouge an eye like Klondike. That kind of fighting isn’t fighting.

It’s like trying to sell a man with no teeth a gum shield. Instead, I wait for the punch, move to one side, then punch back: a left hook directly to the temple. I named that back punch Clara. No man has ever met my Clara & was still standing to talk about it. The woman herself quit me, carried the gift jewels & my roll with her. I took a train all the way to St. Louis to get her back just so she could take the rest of my money & leave again. Clara’s the reason I don’t deal with colored women any more. I never had a colored girl that didn’t two-time me.
Tara McDaniel

My Stepmother, Having Returned to This Earth, Becomes Hanny

When my stepmother unzips her body bag and snaps The rubber tag from her toe, I know She’ll creep into the kitchen and slake her immortal Thirst with 6 bottles of beer. She’ll sucker at the glass Greedily to get at its yeasty fizz, remembering—quite Exactly—where the keys to my gate are. Down Into the basement she’ll trundle, her tail Growing long beneath her pile of dressings, Making a hollow sound Where her serpent-belly slaps at the stone. A likely darkness: Black cabinet, squeaky doors, stale air, and Hanny On a bed of velvet. A little key behind one eye. Her claw will lift this wooden mask To her face: slavering jaw, hard-boiled egg eyes, Cheekbones shaped like mallets, Crescent horns rising from the wild hair Weeping over her forehead and shoulders Like spilled Japanese ink. She’ll put the key Deep inside her throat, for safekeeping. Tomorrow, When the sun rises again over my back garden, She’ll wait out the morning till I’ve returned dozing To cough up the key, graze her claw over my door.

Note: Hanny is a mythological Japanese character, a vengeful and jealous female demon. She is represented in traditional Noh theater by a horned mask.
J. Jason Mitchell

Below the Falls

Look for the first of Niagara’s great bends,
far below the Falls, where the currents
erowave themselves into a skein of loose eddies,
the waters boil, foam and flush from green
to dark to piceous ink. Look for the ribbon,
the clothstring, the half-fleshed blemish of cerise,
where even the locals cast weighted lures
and bait deep from the shoreline.
Ask the guides, they will tell you the true stories,
the ones that begin downriver and in bankside wash
away from the lights and tourists. They are the ones
that never find their way in the papers,
lost in the mythology of these great cataracts.
Look for that point where the rapids list
in hushed groupings, sometimes for days,
one of its undercurrents wrapped like a tongue
around the lozenge of a body, finally retching,
releasing body, bilge and silt to the surface.
Guides will tell you there’re no means of prevention,
that they drive for miles following this line of desire,
the shortest path. And they walk as tourists by night
to the railing to disappear, sometimes for days.
Inside a Diorama

After being kidnapped in the middle of the night from her bedroom window, Toronto police found Cecilia Zhang’s body two days before her tenth birthday.—The Toronto Star

Hundreds of paper cranes
dangle in your school lobby.
All your friends and teachers
folded thin paper, even the boy

who pushed you off the swing
last year. His crane is orange,
the loudest color to call you home.
When I was nine, I made dioramas

too: neat shoebox packages full
of silver-painted rocks to represent
Mt. Olympus. There was a mini-Zeus,
complete with a mini-Athena doll

climbing out of his scalp,
a fantastic birth. Other boxes
showed mighty Stegosaurus
in his natural habitat—happy—

eating weeds plucked from
my yard in Phoenix. A dollop
of clay held a tiny yellow-bell plant,
hopelessly out of place, out of proportion

to the dinosaur—but cheery nonetheless.
I imagine you like the yellow-bell—
ringing sun into a darkened room.
Your heart is smaller than my fist, wild
and thrumming to be found. When you look inside a diorama, everything comes to life, even the sand tamped down with glue shimmers. Every wispy curtain seems to blow aside, revealing a spectacular sun.
An Excerpt from *Higher Ground*, a Novel

Chapter One

The afternoon that Nicole rammed her navy-blue Saturn into the FEMA trailer, she was driving on new meds with a tombstone in the back of the car.

That morning, on her Saturday off, she’d borrowed a dolly from Tony’s Superette at the corner and hired Hunter, the tattooed delivery boy, to meet her at the cemetery to help load the damn thing into her car. Naquin. Hers was a common New Orleans surname, and six generations of almost illegible inscriptions were crowded onto the cracked marble tablet, now stained nicotine-yellow by the floodwaters. Her father’s name and dates were carved in the second-to-last space. Nicole had mentally reserved the next place on the tombstone for her seventy-six-year-old mother. At the moment, Nicole couldn’t imagine who else could possibly take that last slot.

Before the end of the day, she would find out.

But now, on top of everything else that would go wrong today, she was stranded with a flat at the only gas station left open in Lakeview. The lone attendant was rolling the punctured tire toward her, holding up a squat silver nail. Stoop-shouldered, he dragged his feet like someone working on a chain gang.

“Lady, you picked up a roofing nail,” he crowed, as if he’d discovered a tumor. “Another little present from FEMA.”

Nicole grimaced. She never told people where she worked, unless she had time for an hour-long tirade against the government. She felt like someone in the French Resistance secretly working for the Nazis, or a Creole collaborating with the Union army in occupied New Orleans. But the job with FEMA was the only one she could get. “How long will it take to fix it?” She glanced at his name badge. “Hewitt.”

Hewitt spat, pink gums flashing in his tire-blackened face, then gestured to a mountain of rubber in the corner of the garage, next to the Pepsi machine. “You see all them other tires what got roofing nails? They lying all over the road now. Use ‘em to tack up the blue tarps so
it don’t rain in people’s houses.” He eyeballed her Texas license plate. “This city is a crying shame.”

“You don’t have to tell me, Hewitt.” She was relearning how to get things done in her torpid hometown: mention your mother, tell an interesting story, and call the person by name. “During the storm my momma lost her house in Lakeview where she’d lived for fifty years and now she’s camping out in the French Quarter and driving me up the wall, as if my crazy brother weren’t enough with all his mystical hallucinations. Now if I don’t get this tombstone back to her—”

“Tombstone?” He shaded his eyes with stubby fingers covered with grime to peek into the back of the SUV.

“During the storm the slab fell off our tomb in Lafayette Cemetery like a broken oven door.” She pointed through the tinted hatchback window. “My daddy is buried in there.”

He stared farther into the car. “Look, lady—”

“Call me Nicole,” she said. “I grew up here in Lakeview. My momma has been coming to this station since Bienville landed. You must know Gertie Naquin, a sweet, yacky old lady with gray corkscrew curls.” Nicole belonged, one of the few pleasures left to her in this town. She had a past here, if not a present. So fix the damn tire already.

“Miss Gertie. Sure I know her.” He screwed up his face, catching Nicole’s eye. “So how’d you do?”

This was the question on the tips of everyone’s tongues. She had figured out that it didn’t mean how are you? but rather how much of your life did you lose in the hurricane? “Momma’s house got eight feet of water,” she said, taking a deep breath, “and the day after the levees broke, the Coast Guard rescued her from the second floor, then they bused her to the Astrodome in Houston, and she came to stay with me in Austin while I was breaking up with my husband. So then three months ago we both moved into this shotgun double in the Quarter, you know, her on one side, me on the other—”

“Mean you moved here after the storm. For what?” He rolled his eyes. “Kicks?”

She let out a shrill laugh and turned red, shaking her head like a ragdoll. “Yeah, after twenty-eight years away, I picked now to come home. Smart, wouldn’t you say? And if you don’t fix my tire I’m going to break down crying and won’t stop until I rust every scrap of metal in this place.”

“Okay, I’ll put the spare on, and you can come back next week for this thing.” He bounced the flat tire. “Only don’t run over no more
roofing nails, hear?” With a weary whistle, he swung open the hatchback, yanked out the spare, and crouched next to it.

“Hewitt?” Nicole couldn’t stop herself. When she was little, that was just how Uncle Alfonse, a tug boat mechanic, used to whistle whenever he’d come over to fix an air conditioner, and while he worked he’d let her hand him the tools. She knew her question might take all afternoon, but she really wanted to know.

“Yeah?” Hewitt’s sky-blue eyes blinked up at her from a smudged face.

“How’d you do?”

He blinked again, shaking his head.

“In the storm, I mean,” she said. “Did you get much water?”

“Lemme show you something.” He hoisted up his turnip-shaped body.

Without uttering a word, he led her to the back lot of the gas station, where a rusted Impala was parked on a weedy patch of cracked asphalt. When he popped open the door, Nicole peered inside. The back seat was made into a bed, piled with pillows and blankets, and the front seat was a nest of dirty clothes. From the dashboard he retrieved a violet velveteen slipper caked with mud, resting next to a toothbrush and tube of Crest.

“My mama was in that nursing home over in Chalmette they didn’t bother to evacuate,” he said, handing Nicole the slipper. “She was tied into her wheelchair account of her bum back, so she wouldn’t slide out. The night before the storm I told her, ‘Mama, come with me, we’ll drive to Picayune to stay by cousin Ferrel’s,’ but she was worried about her dialysis. When the National Guard let me in that place two weeks later, this was all I could find of her. Still have nightmares about brown water inching up over her face.”

Nicole looked at the moldy slipper in her hand, and then back at Hewitt. Tears welled in her eyes. “I don’t know what—”

“That’s okay,” he said, taking the slipper and placing it back on the dashboard. “Not much anyone can say at this point. Tell Miss Gertie that Hewitt over by the gas station is still kicking. Told me she had a daughter somewhere off in Texas. Welcome home.”

As Nicole swerved onto West End Boulevard, the crumbling tombstone shifted behind her, and she reached back to steady it. Barreling along past a thicket of picket signs advertising “roof repair” and “house gutting” and “mold abatement,” she felt giddy and light-
headed. She wasn’t sure if it was because the tire was changed, or because the Zoloft was finally kicking in.

Surely she never thought she’d need antidepressants here in festive New Orleans. But the divorce had been like flossing her teeth compared to coping with this broken city, an ashen expanse of dark, abandoned streets lined with boarded-up houses and patrolled by Humvees filled with National Guardsmen shouldering M-16s. Most of these decaying shells still had the ominous red X of the rescuers spray-painted next to their doors, as if the biblical Angel of Death had passed over them, marking the number of the living and the dead. Only a third of the former residents had returned, mostly to the historic neighborhoods perched along the sliver of higher ground that banked the Mississippi River. The bowl of reclaimed swampland that made up the modern city was now a tundra of phantasmal ruins. It was as if Nicole’s blue Saturn were spinning around inside the grainy black-and-white war footage of bombed-out Dresden. Suddenly turning a corner, the sight could make her heart stop.

Leave it to her gynecologist ex-husband to demand a divorce the day after the most destructive storm in world history slammed into New Orleans, precisely at that moment when she’d had one eye glued on the CNN coverage while with the other she was searching the Internet for her mother’s name posted among the thousands on refugee lists.

“Can’t you see I’m busy, Buster?” That was the only response she could muster at the moment. After she located her mother and flew her to their house, what Buster had told her sank in. In a nutshell, he was kicking her out. While her mother spent the morning in the bathroom soaking her weary old bones in all the hot water the state of Texas had on tap, the couple had it out.

“So who is this skanky twat you’ve been seeing?” Nicole sputtered, slamming down the coffee pot. “Don’t you get enough of that during office exams?”

“Becky and I are going to be married as soon as I can disentangle myself from—”

“And how long have you been sneaking around screwing Miss Cuntley?”

“About as long as you and I snuck around while I was married to my first wife.”

That did it.

Nicole had blamed herself. She just didn’t feel sexy or pretty
James Nolan

anymore. When she studied herself at the full-length mirror in her Austin bathroom, what she saw was Mrs. Frump, no matter how much she moisturized or waxed or spun like a manic hamster on the stationary bicycle in the garage. Her spiky hair was tinted bronze—she could never get the color right—and her porcelain complexion webbed with fine lines like antique china. Sure, her plump, wide-hipped friends told her she was the original “Heroin Chic” model, so gaunt, wispy, and flat-chested. But look at them. She felt most herself dressed in teenage boy’s clothes from off the rack at the Gap, like a ragamuffin David Bowie with Orphan Annie eyes. Now there she was, forty-six, childless, and snake-bit, just another middle-aged ex-Mrs. Doctor from the Texas burbs.

“Boy, I thought I had problems,” her mother had said, toweling the hair that hadn’t been washed since the day her kitchen had flooded up to her second chin. “Sorry, but I couldn’t help but overhear.” Nicole and Buster had been screaming at each other in the breakfast nook for an hour.

“Momma, don’t…” Nicole was melting into a puddle, sobbing from every pore.

“Just throw out the no good bum and redecorate.” Gertie Naquin dried her daughter’s face with the damp bath towel.

“It’s his house. And I signed a pre-nup, remember? According to which, even the goddamn Cuisinart is his.” Her wheezing sobs turned into a screech. “After fifteen years, all I’ve got is the clothes on my back.”

“That makes two of us.”

All Nicole kept from her marriage was the Saturn, in which she was now bowling along past the mounds of fetid debris on Mouton Street on a final Saturday errand, to look for Momma’s potting trowel and watering can. Her mother had discovered these rusted treasures in the wash shed the last time she went to visit the ruins of her house. Of all things, her momma was starting a garden. Mrs. Naquin had lost all of her antique furniture and, what was worse, the albums with family pictures going back to the 1880s.

“If I can’t have my old memories back, looks like I’ll have to grow me some new ones,” her mother had told her this morning, trellising a potato vine up a post on her side gallery. She was dressed in Salvation Army clothes, camping out alone in three sparsely furnished rooms with her crippled dachshund, Schnitzel. Never ever, during Nicole’s booze-fueled daydreams while ratting the Quarter as a gangly teenager,
could she have pictured that one day she would live next door to her mother on Dauphine Street. That some day she might live close to her older brother Marky, maybe.

But poor Marky, now that was another story.

So far, hardly anyone in her mother's Lakeview neighborhood had come back, although occasionally Nicole spotted the white breadbox of a FEMA trailer squatting in a driveway or in front of a house, mounted on six cinderblock pillars. If you asked her, the Federal Emergency Management Agency was a government bureau dreamed up in some lost chapter of *Alice in Wonderland*. But the job was all she could scrounge up in a city where few businesses had reopened. So from 8 A.M. until 4 P.M. every weekday, she was now a Debris Removal Monitor. That meant she counted the dump trucks hauling the mountains of trash from the sites where people were gutting their houses. Bored out of her gourd, watching the parade of trucks lumber by heaped with bulging plastic sacks, she dubbed herself Miss Glad Bag.

What a perfect job for somebody thrown away.

She was suddenly grateful to be back on four solid wheels, and couldn't wait to get home to her mother's oil-cloth covered kitchen table. She didn't know what to say to Hewitt or to anyone else in this city. When she heard their hurricane sagas, she'd fight back tears, her mouth would flap open, but no words would come out. And the stories were everywhere. Hewitt's was now roiling around in her mind with Momma's and her own Job-like tales of tribulation. You worked hard, paid your bills, ate plenty of fiber, drank eight glasses of water a day, and then in a flash, everything you once recognized as your life was gone.

Vanished.

*That makes two of us.*

A whole city of us.

As her car lurched though the open crater of a pothole, the dolly rattled in the back of the SUV and the marble slab shifted again, sliding from its position propped between two boxes. Then the massive stone toppled, crushing the boxes and crashing against the dolly. At that moment, she was sucking from a plastic water bottle in her right hand. These new pills made her so thirsty. And when she lifted her other hand from the steering wheel to reach back and steady the stone—for just one second—she felt the jagged edges of the two splintered fragments. Her mother would throw a fit.
Then before she knew it, the car veered toward a FEMA trailer parked at the curb, slamming to a sudden halt with a resounding crash.

**Kelly Cannon used to have a great sense of humor. He really did. Everybody said so. That is, until his Lakeview house flooded with five feet of water, and his wife Lena decided to stay put in their FEMA apartment in Houston. Now he only communicated with her by cell phone and had just moved into the FEMA trailer parked in front of what was left of his house.**

“Yeah, Lena, the trailer is finally set up,” he barked into the cell. “Even have the key. Call the Pope, it’s a miracle.”

While Kelly wrestled with crumbling sections of Sheetrock, he shouted into the cell cradled in his shoulder. “I finally moved out of the Star Lite Motel, and in a few minutes I’ll take my first shower in the trailer. Now I’m not gonna try and fool you, babe. Place is a stinking mess. But you know something? Boy, it’s good to be home.”

Lena now had a part-time job in Houston, and showed no signs of wanting to help Kelly claw his way through the muck. “Get a grip,” was all she had to say. “New Orleans is over.”

Kelly was dressed in a smudged orange T-shirt and black cargo pants, yellow rubber gloves rolled up to his elbows. With his graying carrot top, freckled pumpkin face, and gauze mask yanked over his forehead so he could talk on the cell, he looked like an overgrown trick-or-treater dressed up as a septic-tank cleaner. Moving through the house, he crunched underfoot what had once been the layer of slime covering the carpeting, now dried and cracked into a surface resembling elephant skin. It was the end of January and the weather had stayed cool, but the leaf-mold stink was more suffocating than ever. Several times this afternoon he gagged and ran coughing outside for gulps of fresh air. With its blackened walls and moldering furniture, the house was a seething compost heap, a sty of bacterial sludge and rampant fungi blooming in jazzy pastel patterns. Jackson Pollack couldn’t have done a better job with the kitchen. But Kelly was adamant about rebuilding. This was their home, for Christ’s sake, where they had raised their two kids. He couldn’t just leave it to rot. That would be like letting his mama die of gangrene in a ditch.

“The trailer really is comfortable,” he said, dragging a mound of Sheetrock shards toward the door on a plastic tarp. “It has a built-in double bed, and the cutest kitchenette, like a doll house. I feel like the Jolly Green Giant knocking around inside, but—”
A crash resonated from outside, as if a truckload of empty steel drums had hit the pavement all at once.

“Gotta go,” Kelly spit into the cell. “Something just collapsed.”

He spun around and raced out the front door.

And then couldn’t believe his eyes.

The front end of his trailer had been knocked off its cinderblock pilings and was now jutting at a forty-five degree angle into the air, one whole side wrinkled like cellophane. The hood of a blue Saturn was buried halfway into the buckled wall of what was going to be his bedroom.

Kelly stood there paralyzed, his mouth hanging open in a cavernous O.

“Holy shit,” he muttered.

A skinny woman with a blondish pixie cut stood frozen next to the SUV, shaking her head back and forth and rubbing her slumped shoulders as if she were freezing. Slowly a stark paraffin face, melted into a mime-like grimace, turned to meet his glare.

Then the two figures began floating toward each other like dissonant dancers.

“That your car?” Kelly demanded.

“No. I mean yes. Actually, it belonged to—”

“May I fucking inquire why it’s rammed into my trailer?”

The woman slid down onto the sidewalk next to a heap of mildewed carpeting, and then curled up on her side into a ball like a doodle bug.

“What kind of nut case? Look, I just got that trailer set up, and was about to take my first shower, and….”

Kelly dropped to the sidewalk beside her and swiped his eyes with gloved hands, as if trying to wipe away the vision of the wreck in front of him. When he looked up, the crumpled trailer was still there. The loopy dame was still there. And he felt as if he were back under the flood waters, a primordial ooze against which it seemed pointless to fight. I’m going under, he admitted to himself.

Big sink hole ahead.

For five minutes they said nothing.

Early evening shadows thickened around the two figures facing each other on the sidewalk, a bird twittered in the weeping willow overhead, and the air grew close and humid as low clouds rolled in. Nothing and no one stirred on the ghost-town street, except for a cockroach scampering across the sidewalk, disappearing under the foul pile of carpeting.
“If one more thing goes wrong,” the woman moaned, coming up for air, peering out of her trance through red-rimmed eyes. She jerked her head from the pavement with a decisive nod and sat up.

“You telling me, sister.”

“I just reached back for one split second to steady the tombstone—”

“The tombstone?”

“—but it broke and now my mother is going to kill me.”

“I waited three months to get this trailer from FEMA,” Kelly said, peeling off his rubber gloves, finger by finger. “And another month to get the key. The government shithheads brought me three different trailers without keys, can you believe it? I just got this one connected, I’m gutting the house where my family lived for twenty-two years, and I’m about to settle into my cozy little toaster oven, make myself a cup of goddamn joe and finally feel at home for the first moment since the storm, and along come you and your tombstone, and splat, back to square one.” He slapped the gloves down on the sidewalk. “Goddamn.”

“I work for FEMA so maybe I can—”

“Oh, ain’t that cute.” He jumped up, flailing his arms. “You work for FEMA. Do they pay you by the hour to go around knocking down the trailers soon as people get them set up? Wouldn’t want the locals to get too comfy now, would we?”

A plaintive bird trilled above in the weeping willow.

“You look familiar.” She knitted her brows, studying him hard.

“So do you.” He squinted, trying to place the face of the woman who had just upended his life. “Don’t sound like you from here.”

“I went away for a long time.” A bit of color came back into her cheeks. “Where did you go to school?”

“Warren Easton.” Of course, he knew she meant high school. This was the inevitable question that popped out when natives first met and tried to identify each other.

“Did you know Marky? He’s about your age, maybe a few years older.” She actually smiled. “Marky Naquin?”

“Know him? I dated his sister.”

“Wait a minute, I am his sister.”

“You Nicole Naquin?”

“I don’t believe it,” she squealed. “Are you…Kelly, Kelly Cannon?”

“Can’t believe running into you like this.”

“Don’t forget,” she said, “I’m the one who ran into you.”

For the first time in six months, Kelly threw back his head and laughed.
During the next twenty minutes, it was 1975 and they were both teenagers again. There he was on the dance floor in his shiny wide-collared shirt cranking his elbows to Linda Ronstadt’s “Heat Wave,” Nicole with her hair poufed up into a perfumed nimbus, shaky as a newborn colt in strappy platform shoes. All of the old crushes, jokes, embarrassments, gossip, hopes and dreams came hurling back to him from that lush, distant planet, along with Miss Violet, the eleventh-grade art teacher who had inspired him to paint, and the football fight song. He could smell the crushed peanut shells on the floor of the beer dive in the Quarter where they hung on weekends, hear Bob Dylan wailing about being “Tangled Up in Blue,” feel pert nipples under tight bras, see the waves of bright, acned faces filing up and down the pea-green staircases while bells shrilled mercilessly and something deep inside of him stretched its wings and soared for the first time.

How, in the meantime, had he managed to get so old?

God, it was Nicole after all, restored to her pubescent splendor, a fresh-faced girl crawling out of the shriveled cocoon of that ditzy old bitch who crashed into his trailer. Kelly had lost touch with crazy Marky, and had last heard—was it twenty years ago?—that he needed to be hospitalized again. Marky, a savvy senior when Kelly was an impressionable sophomore, had been the first guy to bring him to the Quarter and turn him on to pot, Salvador Dalí, and art galleries. But when Kelly brought up her brother, Nicole stared into the distance and then changed the subject.

“So,” Nicole asked with a sigh, “what have you done for the past thirty years?”

With a sweeping gesture, Kelly pointed to the brick ranch house, its blown-out windows gaping like skull sockets. “A wife, two kids, a job, a life.” He caught sight of the faux Doric pillars he had attached to the carport, a twentieth-wedding-anniversary surprise for Lena, who bragged about being from an old plantation family in St. Francisville. “Gone with the wind.”

Nicole nodded. He saw that she understood exactly what he meant.

“What about you?”

“I worked as a secretary in New York, did the whole stupid glam scene at Studio 54, then ran off with a divorced Texan. Actually, he wasn’t divorced when I met him.” Nicole stared down at her cuticles. “That should have taught me what to expect. Now I’m the one who’s divorced.”
“Any kids?”

“His,” Nicole murmured. “To them, I was Nicky the babysitter. Do you still paint?”

“Mostly on weekends. Funny, but accounting and cubism don’t seem to mix. But I carry my sketchbook everywhere.” Kelly was too embarrassed to admit that he hadn’t finished a single painting during the past ten years.

“I was always in awe of your talent.”

“Well, what Picasso needs now is a shower.” Kelly stood up, flapping the armpits of his rank T-shirt. “Back to the No-Tell Motel.”

“You can take a shower at my place if you give me a ride home. Just try to get a taxi these days. I’ll have to call a tow truck in the morning. As it is, I was driving on the spare. Thank goodness I kept up with the car insurance.”

“Deal. Where you live?”

“The Quarter.”

“First time I ever went to the French Quarter to get clean.”

Kelly finally managed to put Nicole’s car in reverse, and after he backed out his own car, they pushed the Saturn into his driveway. He decided not to chance crawling into the wobbly trailer to get a change of clothes—the whole damn thing might topple over with him inside. Besides, he remembered, he still had that one canvas bag stuffed with clean clothes stashed in the trunk of his car. Wait, one last thing. He patted the endless pockets of his dusty cargo pants, looking for the house keys. Then he burst out laughing.

“What’s so funny?” Nicole asked.

“Was just going to lock up the house,” he said, cracking open the driver’s door of his car. “Force of habit. But after twenty-two years of working my ass off, I don’t have a damn thing left to steal.”
At 5 a.m., Kate wakes to Andrej Rymut’s husky voice blurring out snippets of news in Polish on Dla Ciebie. “Pavel? Pavel?”

She clambers over him, reaches for the radio, presses the “alarm off” button three times, but Andrej Rymut continues to gab.

“Why you need waste fifty dollars?” Pavel had asked when she’d showed him the Sony alarm radio she’d wanted at the electronics store in the mall. “I get you one at Wal-Mart, $4.99, much good quality,” he’d told her, kissing her on the crown of her head, “for my spoiled wife.”

She grabs her favorite black pants off the hook in her closet and frees a blouse from underneath the dry cleaner’s plastic protection. If it weren’t for all the money she made, they wouldn’t be in their three-bedroom ranch with its expansive lawn that backed up to one hell of a forest preserve. If she hadn’t married him, immigration would have shipped his sorry ass back to his homeland. He’d be in Torun right now, lucky to be driving a beat up taxi or selling gingerbread on the cobblestone streets of the town square, pigeons crapping on his cart.

She goes over and unplugs the radio, plugs it back in and places it on the night stand on her side of the bed, resets the clock. Andrej Rymut is done talking. Contemporary Polish Rock blares from the tinny speaker. She slides her finger across the tuning wheel until she reaches the country station, then tries again to shut off the radio but it will not turn off. She yanks the cord and unplugs the radio again, leaving it there for Pavel to discover later that morning.

Money’s been tight, but it’s not her fault. How much longer could it take for him to find a job? It’s not like there aren’t dozens of cell-phone kiosks in malls all over Chicago’s suburbs. The economy is strong and there are ads every day in the newspaper for cell-phone salesmen.

Since he lost his job, Pavel hasn’t let Kate buy anything, even the new electric toothbrush her dentist urged her to try. She heads to the bathroom to brush her teeth with the brush he bought her at the drugstore because it was “free after rebate.” It’s not even an adult
toothbrush. It’s a toddler brush with a dancing bear on the handle. It’s like brushing with a Q-tip.

Kate pulls her clean hair into a ponytail down low at the nape of her neck, glides on lip gloss. As she hurries downstairs, the bedsheets whisper and snap, her husband shifting underneath them, drawing them up like a cape around his neck.

“Ja Cię kocham,” he calls from the bed.

“Love you too,” she says, rolling her eyes up into her forehead.

She gets off the train at Northwestern Station and searches on foot in the languid, pre-dawn darkness, working east of the river for six blocks, turning south (again for six), turning west back to the river, going in smaller and smaller squares in order to cover her designated area. It’s the ides of March, pre-daylight savings time, a few days shy of the vernal equinox. At this hour, downtown remains quiet, but soon, each building’s custodian will be out sweeping his share of the sidewalk. Seagulls will leap from their lakeside posts to scavenge. Office workers will flood the area. And the migrating birds will be in danger of being taken for dead and swept up with the night’s trash.

A cold spring rain falls steadily on the pavement and a thin stream of cars and city buses rush down State, wipers battling the rain. Kate keeps an eye out for cars inching along. On any given day, at least half a dozen rescuers drive around the loop. She is afraid one of them may recognize her and report her to Marjorie.

She assured Marjorie she would be driving the route, but Pavel takes the Honda. “We can’t have women wandering solo on foot that early,” Marjorie had explained. “Something could happen.”

The streetlights are on, but the rain makes it hard to see. Kate walks briskly, her eyes scanning the sidewalk and the edges of buildings, where an injured bird might most likely lay.

She is on her third loop, walking north, when she sees one. He flutters ineffectively as she nears, hopping closer to the building’s concrete edge. She pushes the bird into a small cardboard box with her gloved hand, weaves the flaps shut. The bird hits against the box once, twice, then quiets down.

Across the river, in her office, she opens the box to study the bird’s markings, searches for him in her *Field Guide to North American Birds*. He is small, round, his dark beak a long black knitting needle, his feathers, cream-splashed coffee: a male woodcock.

Kate lifts the box into her lap and the bird’s head swivels like a
well-oiled barber’s chair as he hops back farther into the corner. He reminds her of the short, fat birds she’s seen in Dutch paintings at the Art Institute on Michigan Avenue, of all the make-believe animals she read about as a child, of the elaborate puppets she watched at the outdoor festivals back in Stuttgart where her parents sent her to stay with her grandmother almost every summer.

She gets up and clicks her door shut, but she doesn’t turn on the lights. Nearing eight already. Across from her office, the elevator doors open. The receptionist has arrived, next come the accountants, then her boss, the editors and designers, the people in membership and event planning. She puts the box in the server’s dark, windowless room next to her office, where the bird can rest to the chirp of the computer, the whirl and hum of the server’s fan switching on and off. Outside her window, the sun rises, the streetlights crackle off. A mass of gray rainclouds stretches across the sky, filtering the sunlight. She leaves a message with Marjorie at the rehab center and gets to work.

The only person at the office who knows about the birds is Rita, and only because they share an office. The rest of them can mir den Buckel runterrutschen, as her mother would say. Already, they know enough about her, the gossip in the office heavy as strudel. When she doesn’t talk enough about Pavel, people wonder if they are having difficulties. When she doesn’t sign up for a part in the office’s spring talent contest, they wonder if she is looking for other jobs, if she is clinically depressed. Daniel, the office’s official talent scout, took her aside last week and asked if there was anything she wanted to talk about. Then Angela asked her outright if she was the one who tipped off human resources that certain people were using the photocopier for personal use.

She doesn’t understand why she can’t just do her work and go home, something Pavel warns her against frequently. She’s the best employee they’ve got, but Pavel laughs when she tells him this.

“Smile and ask people to take lunch with you,” he advises. “Let your work slip. Make the jokes. Play some Mozart in contest. You will rise forward, Kate!”

She has tried, but she cannot do it. She cannot pretend to like people she doesn’t. She cannot let anything come out of her office that isn’t perfect, even if it means staying late and redoing all of Rita’s faulty programming.

“Guten Morgen, Frau Katherine!” Rita sings, using her expansive hind side to keep the door open. She’s carrying two or three briefcases,
her purse, a duffel bag, a lunch bag, a thermos, and her jacket—way too
many things for someone who only works until two o’clock.

“Going to the gym again today?” Kate asks.

look over this report for me? I’ve got to hand it in by the end of the day.
Something looks fishy, I’m telling you. I don’t think I did this right. I’ll
just put it in your inbox so you don’t forget about it.”

“Rita,” Kate says.

“Yeah?”

“Be quiet in the server room.”

Rita looks up from where she is bent down, organizing her gear
around her desk. She grins at Kate and opens her mouth wide in
surprise, the way a little kid or a disabled person would do, the way
you might fake excitement to make fun of something.

“You got a bird again, Kate? Can I see it? Can I see it?”

“I’ve got work to do right now, Rita,” Kate says, turning back to
her computer.

“Oh, I know. I meant later, you know. Jesus, who put all this crap
in my inbox? There’s like a month’s worth of work stacked in here!”
Rita gets up from her desk and walks back toward the door. “Want
some coffee? I’m going downstairs to heat up breakfast.”

“You’re already late, Rita.”

“I know, but I didn’t have time for breakfast. I sooo could not
get up this morning! And I’m exercising during my lunch hour,” she
explains, shoving her shoulder against the door and almost falling
down the step into the hallway.

“Half-hour,” Kate corrects. “Lunch is only half an hour,” but Rita
is already gone.

The door clicks loudly as it closes, then the phone rings.

“It’s me. What you are doing?” asks Pavel.

“Working,” she says, trying to keep the edge out of her voice.

“Don’t get mad at me because you want to go bird hunting in
middle of night. You shouldn’t do this thing, Kate. It’s too tiring and
dangerous. What if you are pregnant?” he asks, lowering his voice, as
if he, too, could be overheard by someone.

“Stop checking up on me. It makes me feel like I am twelve.”

“You act twelve years old, I treat you like you have twelve years.”

“Listen,” she returns, “I really have to get to work. See you tonight?”

“You need sleep for the baby,” he says, “not just you I am worried
about.”
Mid-morning, Rita leaves for a meeting and Kate checks on the bird, her eighth in the three weeks since she started. The first week, she found two black-and-white warblers and an American redstart, all suffering head trauma. The next week, she brought in a chipping sparrow, two fox sparrows, and a yellow-rumped warbler, and now she’d found this young kamerad.

She slowly unweaves the cardboard and finds the bird still backed into one corner, facing out, motionless on his squat legs, quiet as a breadloaf. “You smacked yourself good, didn’t you?” she tells him. “Don’t worry, little one. Marjorie will be here soon.”

Marjorie surprises Kate around 11:30, sitting at her desk waiting for her. Kate spies Marjorie’s red, spiked hair first, through the square window in the office door, so bright Kate would bet Jesus Marjorie had a string of Christmas lights somewhere in there. She guides Marjorie through the tangle of black and red wires in the server room to where the bird rests in his box, silent among the computer’s friendly chirps.

“What a beaut,” Marjorie comments, sweeping him up in her curved hand. “Shouldn’t take more than a day or two to get him up and flying.”

“Nothing broken, then?” Kate asks.

“Not on this little fella.” Marjorie smiles. “Come by Saturday 10-ish and you can release him yourself,” she tells Kate as she fills a syringe from a vial in her pocket, pushes a dose of dexamethasone sodium phosphate into the skin underneath the bird’s right wing.

The phone on her desk lets out two quick rings. “I’m sorry,” Pavel tells her. “I’m sorry to be overbearing, but it’s my fault if anything happen to you. How about we make deal, yes. I let you keep bird hunting, you not pregnant. You pregnant, you cannot take the chances.”

“I don’t know, Pavel.”

“No, really, this good plan. I have tests already. Mother bought six of these on sale, Walgreens, good brand test.”

“Your mother?” she asks. Her face is flushed with anger. He wasn’t supposed to tell his mother yet.

Kate looks up from her desk and Marjorie is standing there looking at her with a crazy grin on her face. “Earth to Kate. You coming to lunch?”

“The bird…” says Kate. “My husband…”

“After lunch,” Marjorie tells her. “They’ll both be fine until then.” Kate hangs up the phone on Pavel without saying goodbye. It rings and rings as she walks out the door with Marjorie.
At home, that evening, Kate goes online to check the area’s migration through radar, finds large pink and purple splotches over Kentucky headed north twenty to thirty miles an hour. Those birds will begin to make it downtown by early morning. She brings her field guide up to bed with her, places it next to her water on the nightstand, thumbs through it while the weatherman paces back and forth on the television in their room, while Pavel rifles through the dresser, crosses back and forth in front of her meandering in and out of the bathroom and up the stairs and down the stairs and up and down again and again in his nighttime preparations. The American tree sparrow is due this week, as is the Harris sparrow, the dark-eyed junco, the pied-billed grebe. She’s on the lookout for a dozen warbler species, notes their approximate arrival and departure dates in the margins of her guide, tunes the television out and studies the markings of each bird with anticipation.

“Got a bird today, Pavel.” He has settled down beside her.
“Pavel…” she begins.
“What?”
“Can you hear me?”
“I’m watching this,” he tells her.

The weatherman vanishes and an awkward woman with manicured nails and messy, over-dyed hair appears in front of a sign in the shape of a rainbow that ends in a pot of gold labeled “Illinois Lottery.” She lifts a clear plastic lid off what looks like a giant hamster maze filled with popping balls. A ball pops out of the chute and the camera hones in on its number.


He glances down at the guide she has opened to a page of brown-speckled shorebirds profiled in colored pencil.

“Okay. So I see this bird,” he says, shaking his head.
“What is your problem?”

“Nothing. You’re just strange acting. It’s not like you to become activist,” he says. “Can I ask you not to do this one thing? What your father thinks, Kate? He isn’t rising his arms over this?”

“What’s my father have to do with anything?”

“And leaving an ear infection untreated isn’t dangerous? Remember your congenital cholesteatoma last month? Remember me having to sit in the waiting room with your parents all day hoping you made it through surgery? Four weeks ago, you could have died! You could have lost your hearing.”
“But I didn’t!” He breaks into a wide grin. “I am smarter than you realize, Kate. And lucky from God.”

“You mean the way I’d be lucky if I were Catholic?”

“The Pope would pray for you. He prays for the Catholic school football team and who you think won the last ten years in a row—St. Mary’s and St. Ignatius and….”

“You are so full of it,” she interrupts.

“Maybe yes, maybe no. But…you don’t care crap about the birds, Kate.” He smiles when he tells her this. She ignores him. He reaches to turn off the bedside lamp and the television illuminates the room.

“When are you going to start looking for another job?” she asks.

“Why?” he asks, simply.

“Because you need to work, Pavel! I’ve had to cancel our trip to Arizona this year because we don’t have any money. I want a vacation.”

He grabs her in his arms and pulls her toward him. “We skip vacation, save money for baby. How I go on vacation if I am looking for job? Why don’t you take this test from my mother. She has called today asking.”

Kate sits on the edge of the bed in the dark and thinks about what it would feel like to throw a pitcher of ice water over Pavel’s head. She stumbles out of the bedroom, her hands shaking with what they have not done.

She flicks on the kitchen light, gets out the nonstick omelet pan to make a grilled cheese, pours lemonade from a carton in the fridge. Something in her is changing, she can feel it the way she feels the springtime world slowly coming back to life. And it’s not because she’s pregnant. She’s been sneaking her pills for two months now. Maybe that’s what Pavel doesn’t like. That she’s changed just like he has, that they are both different people than they were six years ago when she first met him.

He is not the shy Polish boy she used to know, who lived at a distance from the world—in a still place outside the quick-moving current, in the sap-layered center of the wetland woods, in the pure wet air that rocked his hunting boat in the lakes and marshes of Illinois and Wisconsin. Pavel, the introspective outdoorsman, whom she thought was so different from everyone else, reminds her of her father now, ordering her around and expecting her to clean and cook the way her mother does, making decisions without telling her about them until afterwards.

The world seems to have rushed in on this man she married, this life in suburban Elk Wood eaten up by the distance between him and all the
things he used to care about. The hunting boat sits rusting behind the garage, his need to escape into the wilderness no longer surfacing. Even his need to escape in her seems gone, the way he used to rely on her for advice and whisper secrets to her that he told no one else. Probably his mother’s idea to have a baby. She presses down hard on the bread with her spatula, probably already told Pavel to name it Sebastian after his father, or Renya, the name of her mother-in-law’s favorite Polish singer.

She sits at the table to eat her grilled cheese while she flips through a grocery-store insert. She can hear the television in their room funneling its way downstairs through the vents and she wonders what would have happened if he had lost his hearing, how quiet the house would be without him watching television with the volume jacked up, not because he is hard of hearing but because he likes the way the sound washes over and around him, the way he can hear what is going on even if he steps away into the bathroom.

They weren’t even home from the hospital before Pavel made her stop the car at Best Buy. He adjusted himself in the bucket seat there in the parking lot and said, “Darling Kate, I want to start the family with you. Have baby now. Not wait for being selfish.”

He looked at her, waited for her to respond.

“You made me stop at Best Buy to tell me this?”

“Come, Kate. I am dying for the answer. I cannot wait,” he said, rushing toward her, embracing her in his arms, pressing his lips to hers.

An old man pulled his car up into the spot next to theirs and she began to cry. “Pavel, stop.”

It was everything she wanted, maybe, but it was all wrong. She pushed him away and turned the key in the ignition.

**The fourth week of migratory season she can’t take getting up at 4:30 anymore.** She carries a bag with her on the train Monday morning, catches a cab to her parents’ condo after work. It will give her an hour longer to sleep before she begins searching for birds. “Pavel doesn’t mind you camping out here?”

She shakes her head, annoyed that it is the first thing her mother asks.

Jean pulls a liter of Peppermint Schnapps from the bar and pours them both a shot.

“Peppermint Schnapps in March?” Kate asks. “You’re a little off season.”
“Great for allergies,” her mother answers.
“Vodka?” Kate asks, incredulous.
“No, silly mädchen.” Jean grabs ice for each of them with the silver tongs in the ice bucket and drops it into the drinks. “The peppermint. A toast to... to my wonderful daughter.”
“I can’t drink,” Kate confesses. She puts the glass down on the counter and reaches on the mirrored shelf for a new glass to fill with ice water. “I know it’s crazy, Mama, but I don’t drink anymore.”
“You had some sort of conversion?” Now it is Jean’s turn to feel incredulous. It’s as if her daughter told her she joined a nudist colony or just got back from a trip to the moon. A sense of betrayal rises within her. “Did that husband of yours do this to you?”
“Being Catholic wouldn’t change anything.”
“I’m going to be a grandmother?” Her jaw drops.
“No, you are not going to be a grandmother.”
“Kate the teetotaler,” her mother laughs, then gets serious again. “Is it the birds, darling? They did this to you, didn’t they, all those environmental hippie kids you hung out with at university?”
“Not at all,” Kate answers, walking over to the window to look out at the lakefront, to try and escape the conversation, but her mother continues.
“You used to be afraid of birds when you were little, remember that? After the neighbor’s parakeet bit you? It must have bit you a dozen times before you stopped putting your finger in that cage.”
“A toast to courage,” says Kate, without turning around. Her back to her mother, she raises her glass of water and taps it into the glass wall. “Ein prosit!”

That evening, she treats herself to a long run on the lakefront path, eats a hearty German dinner of schnitzel, sauerkraut and potatoes, then plays Skat with her parents, a game she hasn’t played with them since high school.
It’s her first time sleeping over at their new condo, a grown-up place full of brushed leather furniture and large, abstract sculpture. From the guest room window, she can see a slice of the Sears Tower off in the distance, rectangles and squares of golden light illuminating offices and hotel rooms, apartments and condos all around her, in every direction.
She pulls out her Indiana University T-shirt from her duffel bag, so worn out it’s coming apart at the collar, slips it over her head and crawls
into bed. She thinks back to her time in Bloomington, wishes now she hadn’t rushed through college in three years, wishes she had gone ahead and gotten a master’s degree, like her father had urged her to do.

The room is eerily quiet, the traffic silent from the forty-fifth floor. She misses the annoying chatter of the television in their bedroom, her husband wandering around the house, tearing it apart looking for the remote control.

Her mother has framed a square of rose wallpaper from her old room and hung it in the guestroom. It’s one of the few belongings that made the trip from their colonial in Edgewater. Kate falls asleep staring at this fragment of her past. With the bedside lamp burning, she dreams of a black-ringed killdeer smashing through the wallpaper’s frame and landing lifeless on the coverlet beside her leg.

On Friday, Kate takes two female dark-eyed juncos in the server room, one with typical head trauma and the other, an injured leg. Then she sits at her desk and checks her phone messages. There are eight of them, most likely all from Pavel. Rita walks in as Kate sits there, listening to and erasing her husband’s long, wandering monologues.

“I cannot stand missing you anymore,” he tells her when she calls him back. He sounds desperate, on the verge of some sort of anxiety attack.

“Come with me, then,” she says, surprising herself. “Stay with me in the city next week.”

“I pin you to the bed when I see you tonight,” he tells her. “I am burning for you, Kate. I cannot live any moment more without you.”

“I’ll leave early,” she tells him. “I am burning for you too,” she says calmly, as if she is ordering pizza or leaving a message for the bank.

Rita looks at her with a mixture of mirth and disgust.

“You are one weird chick,” she tells Kate.

“Not as weird as you,” Kate replies. They look at each other and both bust out laughing.

On Saturday, Pavel waits out in the driveway in the Accord drinking coffee and listening to Dla Ciebie while Kate searches the basement for binoculars.

It’s a quick twenty minutes to the rehab center, a converted ranch house on a few grassy acres spotted here and there with trees, mostly evergreens and crab apples. A small pond shimmers in the distance, a hundred yards or so behind the house.
There are rooms and rooms of caged birds in the rundown building, and it takes a while to find Marjorie. She’s out back taking a smoke, slouched in a metal folding chair overlooking the pond. The woodcock probes the grass with his beak, curls his feet around the metal floor of his cage next to her.

“Been getting him used to the fresh air.” Marjorie smiles at Kate.

Marjorie puts out her cigarette stub in the grass. “Let’s do it, shall we?” She grabs the cage and hands it to Kate, then starts walking down toward the pond.

Kate gets a rush seeing this bird again, knowing she is about to release him, let him fly into whatever the world has out there for him.

“Open the door from right here, and he’ll shoot straight out,” Marjorie says.

The woodcock prances inside the cage. His eyes dart everywhere at once, like balls in a pinball machine.

“Go ahead,” Marjorie tells Kate.

Pavel squats beside her, smiling, squinting his eyes in the sun when she lifts the cage door and the woodcock goes free. The bird shoots into the air, chirruping, then hovers high in the sky before descending, looping his way down until he lands somewhere on the other side of the pond, amid a patch of fir trees. They squat there awhile in the warm spring air and listen to the bird murmur, his calls swelling and dying away with the fluctuations of the breeze.

On the way home, Kate wonders where her woodcock will end up, if he’ll stick around or push on farther west into Iowa, head north into Wisconsin or Canada, or if he’ll decide to stay put for a while, to stick it out right here through the winter, dig a shelter in the snow and eat frozen insect eggs off branches until spring arrives. She wonders if birds ever do that, dissent from the others, change their behavior based on past experiences.

“This was good of you what you did,” Pavel tells her on the way home. They are stopped at a traffic light. She places her hand on his leg and he leans over to kiss her.

“Thanks,” she tells him. “I’m glad you came.”
dance near the stage, the beat of the drums, the vibration of the two accordions pulsing through them.

“I want to win a prize,” Pavel tells her between songs, leading her out of the dance tent into a building full of carnival games. He exchanges a red paper ticket for a cork gun, for three chances to shoot painted ducks into a plastic trough. The ducks are the same every year—beat up mallards that look like miniature decoys. The cork knocks the first two on the side of the head, hits the third on the tail, knocks each duck backwards off its pointed pedestal. The ducks ricochet against the booth’s particle board backdrop and fall into the trough where they land in the sky’s reflection, bobbing wildly before balancing themselves out on their flat bottoms. He picks out a large, indigo ceramic bowl from the prize table and places it on her head like a bowler hat.

“Well done,” the duck handler bellows. Pavel raises his hand, gives a quick nod of the head, the way cowboys do in old westerns. Kate stops a few feet away from the booth. She hands him the bowl to carry, and they shoot darts at balloons, throw bean bags through a cardboard clown’s toothy grin. He wins a giant pink teddy bear with big plastic eyes that their baby could choke on once it grows big enough to grab things. This is Kate’s observation, and she almost says something to Pavel, but stops.

Like everyone around them, their hands are full, and it’s difficult to talk. Although she is too old to ride them, she wants to see the ponies before they leave. She motions for him to follow her up the hill, behind the ring toss and fake tattoo parlor. Toddlers fidget in the long line by the pony tent, run back and forth to the small, fenced-in ring while parents and older siblings hold their places in line.

She’s wearing her German barmaid’s dress with its peasant blouse, her spring jacket unzipped. Her hair is done in twin braids ending in red, black and yellow-striped ribbon. It is, after all, a German spring festival, started once upon a time, when the Germans first came to this land to farm the rich Midwestern soil.

She trudges through the mud all the way to the fence, stands beside a small girl with sneakers that light up when she moves her feet. The ponies, tied up at a revolving pole, have dug a deep trench in the mud. Kate smells them, of course, but also the mud, the smell of things dead from the previous fall thawing out, of new life beginning.

She has forgotten Pavel, standing in the distance waiting for her, his arms full of prizes. For a moment she is caught up in the ponies, and she pictures herself as a young girl, pretends she has a chance to
ride and picks her favorite, a dark Welsh pony with its mane swept down over its eyes.

Kate yawns and turns around when she hears Pavel calling, follows him back down past the games and food tents. They are both getting tired and a cold wind is beginning to blow. They have been at the fair for hours, and the crowds are thickening, space diminishing around them. People cross in front of them unexpectedly, everyone heading in different directions. She taps Pavel on the shoulder so he’ll turn around.

The fair lights come on with a pop, their mustard-colored halos brightening and expanding as the sky darkens. Kate and Pavel serpentine in and out, through long lines of fairgoers crowded around the beer tent and food stalls, past groups of people camped out in circles in the middle of the path.

They walk toward the fair entrance and he looks at her to make sure she is ready to leave. “You cold?” he asks, and she nods, grabs his hand, lets him lead her through the exit turnstile, past the men with lightsticks directing traffic through the coned-off parking area.

“Carry me on your back,” she begs, but he holds her hand instead as they climb down the fairground hill, drenching their boots in the young spring grass, muddying the heels as they lean back, balancing. Tinsel-sky stars circle above their bare heads.

They move cautiously, adjusting to the darkness of the world outside the fair, to the uncertain terrain under their feet. The hill rises steeply. The soil is slippery underneath the sparse grass, full of air and water, gorged from the effort of absorbing its winter blanket of snow.

The hill ends abruptly at the edge of a busy country road, and lightning strikes behind them on the fairground’s grassy knoll. Everything moves and pours and stretches to twice its size. Cars race too quickly on the old curved road.

Pavel shuffles his feet on the asphalt before they continue, scraping off the excess mud. “Here,” he wraps his scarf around her neck. “It’s going to rain. Better hurry fast.”

There are no sidewalks; they use a makeshift gravel shoulder until they reach the gas station on the corner where they can cross over to the other side.

“We should have driven,” she complains as they stand under the gas station’s fluorescent lights.

“Maybe this is true,” he replies, holding down the crosswalk’s button until the light changes. “But we’re almost home.”

They reach the edge of their subdivision, a ten-acre compound of
Georgian, ranch and split-level homes. Sporadically, at major intersections, dim streetlights illuminate their way across the busy road and onto the sidewalk that leads to home.

"Only two more weeks of this birds?" he asks. She nods and pulls up the hood of her jacket.

The wind loops around them in short, uneven waves, lifts a plastic grocery bag into the branches of a burr oak. And then, dramatically, like some overused movie trick, the wind is gone. She feels heavier without it propelling her forward, and clammy from the heavy mist that has soaked her skin.

"It’s like we’re walking underwater," she comments, but he doesn’t hear.

AT NIGHT, PAVEL’S HANDS MOVE WHILE HE SLEEPS. SHE IGNORES THE way his hands fidget like small animals in front of her face. She puts the pink bear in the chair by the bed and covers it with a blanket. Then she lies down next to Pavel. The bathroom light has been left on and shines past her into the open bedroom closet. She cannot get comfortable. She cannot sleep. She watches the closet light’s string swing almost imperceptibly. She tries to let go, facing him, breathing in the warm air he breathes out. She imagines her heavy legs sinking into the mattress, the curve of her skull pressing into her pillow, flattening the middle and pushing the sides out like wings in flight. She imagines the bones in her own hands full of lead, dragging her down past the mattress and bed frame and onto the worn wooden floor underneath the bed, but her belly rises higher with each breath, lifts up, marching through the house in search of air.

MARCH HAS GIVEN WAY TO APRIL AND APRIL TO MAY. THE RUSH OF migratory birds is over. It is her last morning on the bird rescue team, and she has overslept. By the time she gets off the bus at Clark and Ontario, it’s too late to look for anything. She goes into a deli and orders breakfast, pulls out her migration list while she sits at the counter eating scrambled eggs and bacon. Under sparrows she’s written down Lincoln’s, Harris’ and clay-colored. She’s written chestnut-sided, Cape May, black-throated green, Blackburnian, and Kirtland’s under warblers. And she’s drawn a star by American redstart and common yellowthroat.

Kate finishes her coffee and checks the time. If she hurries, she can catch the 7:35 back to Elk Wood. She turns west toward the station.
Once she gets home she will call the office and tell them she is not coming in. She might even catch Pavel before he heads out to his new job, convince him to meet her later for lunch.

Even before the train leaves the city, she can see daffodils blooming in the small fenced-in yards along the rail line. She can’t remember the last time she saw anything so pretty.
Columbia

The shuttle, upside down and backward, 
trails across the atmosphere fast enough 
to circle past its strand of runway every 
ninety minutes. Say with me, controlled burn.

The tanks empty in a single burst, 
slowing them enough to drop from orbit.

Then a flip and subtle but immaculate reversal 
of direction. Locked and falling, they have 
only angle and trajectory to siphon heat—air 
becoming plasma all around. Say also, breach.

The windows blaze and glow. A monitor 
chirps warning: sensors lost along one wing.

It often happens. Terminal degrees and timing 
cause failures of all kinds which aren’t real, 
which are the panics of machines. But silence. 
The pilot stiffens in his seat, repeats himself 
to crew, Don’t worry about the camera. Put your 
gloves on. Check your gear. They’ve got 
six minutes before their capsule’s breached 
and breaks apart across three states. Here,

one may begin to think of mercy, and what it means 
if merciful begins its shape as silence
Jonathan Rice

and continues on as silence, because the mind cannot account for breath becoming fire

or lungs bursting with a light. Already they are trailing wingtip turned to cinder over Texas.

Already the young woman is saying, how very bright and beautiful is the burning at her window.
Passover

When I heard you’d returned in the bay of a C-130 as one in a row of other first ones lost to indescribable flashes of light, and that someone with your name tacked on to the remains of her own waited with family to receive you, I thought of your mother the afternoon she took us up to Stone Mountain to see the carving of horses and men—a fable in granite—and how, because we’d forgotten their names, she made us recite them verbatim—yours and your father’s among them—such urgency in her, as though he’d just been flown back from Da Nang—your birth long months in the future—and everything must be preserved. She was losing her mind on the long train of Percodan, Oxycodone and gin, too many pills and her breathing laborious. The photo depicts her lean to the left, exhaling to shutter that moment, shepherded off from the rest of that day— the haze of Atlanta hanging behind us—before the night show and lasers, Ray Charles
ten stories high, singing Georgia on his mind.
You made me swear then, I remember exactly,
the moment Tina took over, before her record
skipped and caught in the squawking loudspeakers,
rolling and rolling—that we’d sign up
when we could, ship off, be gone—on the river,
she exalted at last to finish the song. And our
uncle was somewhere over Syria by then,
the pins of his rank and patches of a skull bared
by lightning and ship swarmed round with stars,
removed from his flightsuit, the Apache unpainted,
skimming nape-of-the-earth above goatherds
in the desert, his orders, he said, a clear series of steps
leading him back and down to the deck, to a bunk
and locker with the burden of his name inside
and two or three pictures, one of an orchard
where he’d walk again through the cool of an evening
to say to me: Once or twice, I felt like the warrior they said I was.

~

Let me say to you, Colin Lee, that it was Davis
and Jackson there beside your namesake,
and they were forty-two feet deep in granite
and four hundred feet above us twenty years ago.
And still, your father’s name is as good as you left it.
Yesterday, in Richmond, I drove up one of the hills
of the city and waited for a sign out of the heat,
of how I should proceed—with no work, and our home
sold from under us—and thought of you, and knew you were close, was sure you were there, and I had nothing to say for myself. I left the car and walked out under the bearing sun and stood at the edge of such a small place—such a small city next to a bend in a river—just as you stood at the bend of the Shatt-al-Arab, staring out with Saddam’s ninety-nine officers all standing in bronze and pointing accusation—constant blame heating and reheating in constant sun, too hot to lay a hand on without burning—like the statues lining Monument Avenue, Lee staring toward another burning capital, which burns forever, I think, for him, remaining in rubble and smolder for those who march in his name every year, in the sad circles of heritage, of what is not anymore a remembrance for any one of them. I stood at the fall line of the James River, at the center place of the city’s beginning, which was the place of my beginning when I left home to not join up and fly, or to avoid joining up and having to fake sick to leave, like Stephen Mazel at Parris Island, after the trick seniors played on him—Yeah, let’s go; we’re all gonna sign on—and suddenly he was alone with sergeants, bootshine, dogtags and a rifle. I stood over my city as you must’ve stood over your assigned city in the desert, after the sudden drop, the straight-down landing under threat of ground fire, the C-130 disgorging live men and their gear, and the only way out receding, even that last time,
inevitably. It might have been you, some miles from here, saying by sign of the turkey vulture hovering in a hollow updraft, or the silence itself. That evening I snatched a moth from the air as it passed—the grease of its wings a silver scaling drifting from my fingertips like salt or ash. Then a memory of your only visit years ago, looking at school, staying the weekend before heading back. I wanted to show you the river and Belle Isle, the remains of the prison camp there from the war, where men froze and then more froze, and nothing’s left but trenches, a stone wall, a few signs that the city removes for months at a time to clean of graffiti. And maybe I meant it as a reminder or a warning to not sign yourself off overseas, ship out, get lost, but you ignored me and walked out to the ledge by the water, where the granite rose in an easy slope from the current to submerge into woodline and the current of roots and all else behind us, and pointed to a wide, crystalline streak in the stone and said to me, *This is a fault. This is a fault of the earth.*
The Least of Us

Lightning in the Eastern valley burned pampas grass and pines across the barren—everything scattering for cover, except a stubborn mare which burst apart beneath a great oak in your neighbor’s field. I was young and leaving, had already left—your nape-hair raised inside the living air through which we watched the horse fall within a flash, and then to fill a backhoe trench the morning after your uncle was shot—an argument over the only working quarter-gambler in the county, in a gas station open too late.

The other man—too drunk to give a name when asked who he thought he was—some mexican, an illegal with a chip there on his shoulder, fucking call him juan or jesus, I don’t care which, your mother said. He’ll be dead inside a year. No, it took ten—his name and story spit in the far back end of the obits, there this last time I was home and waiting for another one of us to pass—my grandfather’s lungs broke and filling—drowning as the hospice nurse pushed against the upraised portion of his breastbone. He was telling her—Help me up. Help me get up.
Because the waters, they had risen, and no way
to get a breath. I remember your father—leaning

into the officer’s shadow when they told him
his brother had walked fifteen, maybe twenty

feet after that first shot to the head—
how he was shrunken, bare-chested, mid-summer

brown, a stomach full of Miller and wanting to settle
with juan, said he’d take a pistol shoved down inside

his boot into the county lockup, after the police
had been dispatched elsewhere—the echo of a siren

barely present, whining past the highway and fruit
farms, the novelty of orchards near your neighbor’s

barn and the wide field beside it, which was almost
always empty, his stable failing and then falling apart

after word spread that the sparse dirt patch—
that troubled ground beneath the oak char-split

down to its roots—was full of someone’s horse.
Your father didn’t even own a gun, didn’t have a pair

of boots, could not approach someone for quarters,
for fucking quarters, hey man, for lined-up slots.
Royal Dream, or Remington

Some days I chant my purchases out loud
roaming the aisles: soap, juice, lettuce,
milk, soap, juice, lettuce, milk.
Only dweebs would write a list.
How can you forget what you need?
Unless you don’t know because
you never haven’t had it handy
the way the rest of us haven’t.
For you maybe need is not a constant,
like air, or like things to wish for, a chalet.
How sad to have the chalet already,
pond pre-stocked with sandbox-trained
swans and witty frogs. To have already
the excellent French hat that travels well!
Because who’d want to go away from her chalet?
The dream would eat the dream.
Like the time I tried to get an inkstain
off the sofa with some detergent
that ate a hole through the fabric.
You’re right, it’s not the same.
The real poem has been absorbed
into the one I always wind up writing
when I sit down with an old pen
whose cap is missing so it dries up just
as I’m writing the line that will strike
the hilltop with lightning and redeem me
for all the times I heard thunder too late,
and so distant it may as well have been
someone else’s thunder clapping over her chalet
and its cellars full of soap, juice, lettuce,
where other needs rise up to chant about,
where the feral poem shuts its singeing,
keen green eyes and as it types itself,
bites right through the page it makes.
Split Infinitives

It was the decision of a split second and I meant it to be only for that second: you or the birds. Now bear in mind those twenty-odd birds were beyond unusual: black, but with an odd helmetlike gray marking: elsewhere pure black. Certainly larger than ravens. Silent. Grouped. Immobile but for understated flapping here and there for deruffling or balance. Serious-looking, as if this were no typical tribunal. This wasn’t going to ever happen again, not in Ohio anyway, and I had to immediately get a better look. True, you were about to seriously say something, and out of context my act must certainly be deemed rude—to have suddenly braked, to have noisily ground into reverse for twenty-five feet on a back road (I did get my flashers going) to get a second look at those alien, cormorant-sized noncormorants. I assure you larger than ravens. Smaller than turkey vultures, though they do look smaller when not flying. No scrap of deadness anywhere around. So silent! Of course I wanted to hear what you had to say. But in order to really hear you, to fully focus and really hear the one thing out of the infinite number of possible things you might have decided to say at that moment to me, I absolutely
had to see them close up, or be distracted for the rest of the day! In fact, don’t you see? I’m still distracted. Besides, look, I had you there in the car, voluble, right beside me, strapped in. But the birds would be sure to soon fly away. Or stalk off. I really had no choice in making that one. Yet when a car approaching from behind slowed and honked and we moved on, though still without a definitive identification, I was ready to listen, and I looked at you, who chose to then be silent. And to remain so. All the things we might have said regrouped in the car such that your group now had its back to mine. And when we got where we were going in the car, you decided to far too quickly get out of it.
The Dollmaker’s Daughter

Headless bodies, necks slip-stitched like sacks, filled her workroom. I gave them names and stories, rocked them to sleep, dressed them for school or walks outside. Mama hated heads that looked like dolls instead of people—yarn-haired plastic, porcelain with matching hands—learned to cast and mold her own. The first ones had my face. Then she learned our mailman’s crooked lips and shell-shaped ears. Mama loves her dolls until the final stitch. She’ll never miss the ones I’ve sold. I need money for the road, a motel like the one we stayed in once. When she took a shower, I saw that nothing in our room—not the flowers on the curtains, the rocks and water in the print between the beds—had eyes to see what I might do. She tells me I’m her first, best doll. She doesn’t know what’s in my head.
At Skyline Caverns

Water has hollowed, like a well, the room through which a stream still flows, dissolving the weak and softer rock. We walk beneath the limestone vaults.

An ache in the earth has traced these pathways. Loss made possible the river in which the white trout swim. Its blind surface shivers as our guide throws fish food in.

“An erosional landscape,” he says, switching shut the lights above our heads. Hushed in the dark, unable to mark the shapes around us with our sight, we can hear the water that corrodes and builds. And in the final chambers, what tourists come down here to see: the white stone flowers that grow, no one knows how, in high and buried spaces. From these scarred roofs, bone blossoms hang like brittle stars. Drip by drip they radiate. One inch in seven thousand years, they grow each tear by chalky tear, as if the air drew milk from these bare walls.

We pause beneath their shimmering weight. If I could, I’d pluck them like a bridal spray, a bouquet of lacquered shells. I’d press to my breastbone the luster of the cleft and damaged earth.
The Boy-Shaped Puzzle

How easefully the ginkgo drops its leaves, while, down its silver ladder, runs the rain. The lawn is matted, drenched and gold. Forced inside by cold and wet, my son fits together the segments of his boy-shaped puzzle, a wooden map of his own young body.

Each piece snaps neatly in the small boy’s body. Though they’re scattered on the rug like leaves, they all have a place in the frame of the puzzle. Each arm, leg, each foot fits, the way the rain taps and rolls down the window, fitting into the smallest cracks, pouring down like gold on the heads of obedient girls, in the gold-dusted books I read as a child. I learned how the body could weep pearls, could shrink thumb-size to fit in the fissures of crystal mountains, wear leaves or goat skin to catch a rambling prince, and reign over kingdoms by solving a witch’s puzzle.

Already, my son is learning that the body’s a puzzle not easily solved: beneath the satin and gold threads of my bra, I’ve lost a breast. Sickness, like rain, can nibble off edges. While climbing, the body can slip from bars or branches. Metal cans leave scars, and his favorite shoes will cease to fit.
And yet, how marvelous that over bones, the bowels fit, then muscles, skin, all the layers of his clever puzzle. His favorite parts—the belly button and penis—he leaves for last, and then the painted child is done, his hair gold beneath a baseball cap, a clean-edged little body. My boy puts away his work, then looks out at the rain, kneeling before the glass as he sings: *rain, rain, come and play. Wash all of the dirt away.* As an infant, he fit in my hands: I had never held such an unmarred body. Now that he’s growing, his body’s a puzzle I’ll never master, this maleness strange to me as gold on a girl’s bare arms, in a fairy tale’s final leaves.

But what hands will stroke the head of this puzzle boy, what words will his fingers write? Spend the gold of your body, my son, let the rain change you like leaves.
The Ninety-Third Name of God

Ya Noor O Light

If I can breathe light into my nostrils, if breath can open my crown so that light pours downward and then outward, light drenching the brain and puddling in my sockets, light running down my throat straight into the cavity of my chest and then spreading, a light-slick, light-flurry, cracker snap, torrent of loosed light rushing through ventricles, winding through colon, light seeping into the slub of liver and stomach, threading through ribs and pooling in the pelvis and then, through the blood and lymph, causing muscles to shimmer from within, and the skeleton, too, a dancing lantern, a lattice filled with fireflies, light in the joints, the long and heavy bones, light forming sparkling runnels in the toes; and if the light didn’t remain in the body, but instead, depending again on the breath, flared through the skin and dispersed into a fog, a mist encasing the whole light-soaked body, what then of my body could be said to be separate from this light? And if the light were related to the light of stars (which it must be), as well as to the light of the sun, then what of me would not be star cloud, star stream? If I could immerse myself in the ninety-third name of God, I would fear no longer tumor or death. I would drink light, I would rinse my hair in light, I would rub my shoulders with its grains and seeds, I would anoint myself in lunar oil, I would make love with every wide-open, glowing, humming luminous cell of my body pulsing and aflame.
November: Almost New Moon

All day the clouds shrouded Windy Hill but seemed empty threats. Now the blacktop glistens. I can’t hear the rain, can’t see it dropping against white skies. The oaks unravel for winter. I watch them for hours, haven’t caught a single leaf falling. There’s so much to be missed, so much I’d give anything to have back. At Saint Joseph’s Cemetery, the ground’s starting to freeze; it won’t be long before my father’s name is lost under a mantle of snow. The last of the swallows have taken to flight, and smoke begins to wisp from houses, hovers over vacant lots. A world away, I shuffle through fallen leaves as the rain lets up. Twilight’s long gone and clouds, dissolving, reveal the stars spinning, indifferent as they always are, staggering through so much darkness.
Elegy with a Chance of Rain

for my father

There’s an owl overhead, beneath
my feet acorns cracking, ground.
Fog hides stars, dims what light persists
up there. Darkness, the cold undoing

of winter coming. Tomorrow’s six months
since he left us, even longer since
rain, a summer of utter sky, crows
wheeling in the endlessness.

I remember New Hampshire, his first
vacation since he was a kid. A week
of rain, day after gray day drumming
on the aluminum roof, the firewood

waterlogged. We sat by the lake, waited
for Whale Rock to go under, imagined
the socked-in mountains. He said it felt
like it was letting up. I said I was bored.

He swore it would stop soon. Next morning
I woke to silence above, yellow light, smell
of drying rain, puddles shrinking into
themselves, dandelions, tufts of grass

grown wild. Rain seemed suddenly absurd,
something I’d only heard about
in someone else’s dream. The unblinking
sun seemed to promise it had been there
all along, would stay put. Like so much else, 
the weather always seems to steal in 
under cover of dark and I’m never 
quite sure what is memory and what dream.

An owl’s overhead, and fog—tomorrow’s 
forecast calls for rain. Whatever’s left 
up there, let it come. Let another winter 
smuggle in its stars behind these passing clouds.
Nocturne in Gray-Blue

I didn’t know what she was doing when she reached for me across the dark, slipping her hands under my hair, cold-fingered, pacing the back of my neck. Searching for something?

I was afraid to speak. Gently, her fingertips pressed the base of my skull, and I felt two small, sharp pains. Does it hurt here? She moved her fingers a little, looked into my face, bending as if we would kiss. I moved my shoulder, shrugging away a distant dark crowd, the scents of plain candles, rum and Coke. Yes, I said, lifting my chin. Her hands dropped down under my hair, small length of my neck. I tilted my head toward her hands, and she cupped the back of my neck, absent, for a moment. Then pressed two more spots. Soft like the small feet of the parakeet I had let play in my hair as a child, cuddling my neck, pulling strands of hair for nesting. Small, very small pains. Here? she said. She hesitated. How much?

She slipped down my shoulder blades, on my back through my blouse. Her voice, low: Does this hurt? I held very still, then nodded. I couldn’t say.
Lessons from Vietnam

The Crabs of Vũng Tàu

On my first trip back to Vietnam in thirty-four years, the sun reflected off Vũng Tàu’s bathing beach of white sand with a mirror-like glare. In my haste for this ride to the beach, I left both my dark glasses and hat at the hotel. But Miss Xuân provided an umbrella to shade my eyes and protect my bald head.

I arranged this trip to visit Miss Xuân. She taught in the village of Hoà Mỹ, where during the war I worked as a civic action officer. But on my tour of duty as a Marine lieutenant, I never saw anything like what I was about to witness.

Miss Xuân (who was shorter than I remembered—only as high as my shirt pockets) stood next to me as we watched the young children dash into the South China Sea. They screamed when small ruffled waves chased them back to shore. They giggled and twirled around with outstretched arms and then, as if on command, each child stopped all movement; they stood frozen in midstride and stared at the wet sand.

Hundreds of crabs, no more than a half-inch across, appeared out of nowhere and scurried sideways indiscriminately all around us. The crabs were shaped, in all respects, like Dungeness crabs, with miniature crab legs and miniature claws.

When Miss Xuân’s niece stomped her foot all the crabs—literally hundreds of them—disappeared in an instant. I stared in disbelief at the flat and empty granules of sand.

In a moment, the crabs popped up and covered the sand with a jiggle-and-jerk dance movement as though nothing happened until I, too, stomped my foot. Once again, the crabs disappeared.

There was no time between seeing hundreds, maybe thousands, of tiny crabs crawling on the beach, and then seeing nothing but wet sand. There were no dimples, no remnant of an escape hole, no trace of life. Then, presto, the sand was covered with tiny crabs who marched down the beach in a jiggling mass, as if they were an army of miniature soldiers.
During the Vietnam War in late February 1967, the sound of explosions jerked me into my mosquito net at 3:00 in the morning. I jumped out of my bunk, slipped on trousers and boots, grabbed my pistol and web belt, and headed out the door. Dust, visible in the moonlight, floated in the air behind Marines who ran past my hooch. There was another explosion in the distance. And another one, louder and closer. And another. I followed the Marines to our last hooch where a crowd stood in the dark.

“The airbase is getting hit,” someone said.

From our hill we could see the Đà Nẵng airbase six kilometers away. Streams of white fire shot up from the airstrip, but it took a moment for the sound to reach our ears.

“The OD says there’s no action on our perimeter,” someone said. “It’s just the airbase getting hit.”

Most of the Marines walked back to their hooches, but a few of us stayed for the excitement. We brought out lawn chairs and sat down to watch the fireworks. More bursts of phosphorescent light were followed by the distant sound of an explosion. And then there was a large burst of flame, thirty or forty meters in the air, followed by an even louder explosion.

“They must have hit an ammo dump,” I said.

It didn’t last long. We put our lawn chairs away and went back into our hooches and tried to get some sleep. It was all the excitement we needed. Or wanted.

My experience as a Marine in Vietnam was not the experience one reads about. I was lucky on my tour of duty. I wasn’t bogged down in the jungle with a rifle platoon. I never fired a shot, and, to my knowledge, no one fired at me. What I told my family and friends for decades is that I had a positive experience in Vietnam because my additional duty allowed me to work with the Vietnamese people.

My primary job was to run the motor pool for a Marine Air Support Squadron known as MASS-2. Specifically, I had to make sure that the generators that powered radar equipment necessary to guide our planes on bombing missions were always up and running.

That attack on the Đà Nẵng airbase was executed on 27 February 1967 with precision by Viet Cong soldiers who were never seen. Twelve Americans and thirty-five Vietnamese were killed, seventeen U.S. aircraft were damaged, and a fire destroyed several structures in a Vietnamese village adjacent to the airbase.
Like the small crabs on the beach of Vũng Tàu, the Viet Cong could pop up from a camouflaged tunnel, set up their mortars, fire at an American position, and then disappear into the landscape.

Our laughing and whooping it up at those explosions wasn’t appropriate, but it was what we did. That evening I didn’t think about the injuries, damage, destruction, or deaths. I was twenty-five years old and the show was far away. Far away, like the planes that bombed enemy positions with MASS-2 radar equipment powered by my generators.

In my job as the MASS-2 Civic Action Officer, I taught English to the faculty at Hoà Mỹ School, organized a soccer program for the students, brought our Corpsman into the village, and arranged construction of two additional classrooms. I documented my work in Vietnam with Super-8 millimeter movies, and, during the course of my thirteen-month tour of duty, I developed friendships with Miss Xuân and Mr. Hoan, two teachers at Hoà Mỹ School. My return to Vietnam was to renew those friendships.

What I learned on my three return trips is that I needed to apologize to the Vietnamese people. During the war, I believed I was doing a great service for both America and Vietnam. But that wasn’t the case. Not because I played a part in bombing enemy targets, but because thousands of young, energetic, and productive lives were lost on both sides of the war. However, the Vietnamese don’t need me to apologize. They don’t even want me to apologize. They’ve moved on, forgotten about it. But I want to apologize and need to apologize, in my own way, at the time I choose. And I will.

Miss Cắm’s itinerary for my week-long visit with her aunt now took us away from the beaches of Vũng Tàu and down Highway 51 to the small village of Hắc Dịch where Miss Xuân owned a four-acre plot of cashew trees. The highways of Vietnam were maintained with revenue from countless tollbooths, and as we waited in a line of cars, trucks, and motorbikes, three women across the highway, swept an entrance that led back to Vũng Tàu.

Dirt and small rocks from dump trucks covered the highway and all its entrances. The three women, with conical hats, black pajama pants, tan jackets, and dirty brown masks that covered their noses and
mouths, stood a few meters apart. They bent low into a layer of dust and brushed the pavement with their long-handled brooms.

In carefully choreographed semi-circular motions, they brushed from the highway side of the entrance to the field side. Each broom had a three-foot band of straw that curved outward at the bottom. At the end of each stroke, they raised their plumes, one after another, like dancers in a Las Vegas revue.

When a truck drove onto the entrance, the three women hoisted their brooms and walked to the side of the road. The truck’s dust swirled around their masked faces while more dirt and rocks dropped to the pavement. After the truck merged onto the highway and disappeared, they walked back to their places, and slowly but deliberately, they began where they left off: 5 – 6 – 7 – 8 and pushhh.

We turned off Highway 51 and headed down a gravel road where unusual spires were clustered around the occasional farmhouse. Miss Xuân explained that the brick spires—each as tall as a barn—were built in that pointed shape to grow beans. To me, they looked like giant green upside-down ice cream cones squished into the soil.

In 1966, Vietnam was a magical land for me. The landscape and coastline was as beautiful as any place I had ever been and, at the same time, the most dangerous and deadly. But I knew when I left the country in May 1967 that I needed to return someday to visit both Miss Xuân and Mr. Hoan.

Miss Xuân and her niece chatted way too fast for me to understand their Vietnamese. But I could tell from a few phrases that once we passed another tollbooth, we were close to Miss Xuân’s farmhouse. I smiled at Miss Xuân and realized how lucky I was to be back in Vietnam, to have fulfilled the dream of returning and reuniting with my friend.

Our taxi stopped at a lean-to structure that provided just enough shade for three government employees. Miss Cảm rolled down her window and gave a seated gentleman some money. Another seated gentleman watched this transaction and a third seated gentleman slept. When Miss Cảm paid the first man some Vietnamese dong, he handed it to the supervisor, who put it in a wooden box and then poked the man who slept. The man who slept didn’t look up; he just tapped the butt-end of a eucalyptus trunk not much thicker than a baseball bat. The pole, hinged to a sawhorse, floated upright.

We drove past more groves of pointy spires that gave a green “Oz” look to the Hắc Dịch countryside. When we parked next to a one-story farmhouse, Miss Xuân turned to me and said, “My home is here.”
Miss Xuân’s two-room farmhouse consisted of a kitchen and an open space with a picnic table, china cabinet, bookcase, and a metal cot. The cot looked as if it came from a military squad bay; maybe it did. The mattress was covered with a frayed red blanket tucked, with hospital corners, into its wire springs.

The back wall of her home was concrete with small chipped-out holes scattered across the surface. There was a four-inch gap between the wall and roof that provided an open invitation to small animals.

Miss Xuân led me to a marble-topped table set for tea: two glass cups with a sprinkling of dry tea leaves and an ancient teapot that steamed from its spout. She picked up the pot by its wicker handle and poured hot water into the cups. The gnarled specks of tea in each glass tumbled in the whirlpool of water and rotated with the flow. Then the specks relaxed and opened up into flat reddish-green leaves that waved in the water like a flounder before settling to the bottom.

Miss Xuân pushed one of the glasses near me. “Your tea.” Her front teeth were missing and she had calloused fingers from working the soil with her hands. She brought her cup of tea to her nose and steam floated by her hair, still black at the age of sixty-two. “Tea is called chè in Vietnam. This is chè hoa nhài. Jasmine tea.” The tea water turned olive green.

“I brought a present for you, Miss Xuân.” I couldn’t contain myself anymore. The gift was her last assignment for my English class, a two-page paper written in April 1967 about a Vietnamese king. She didn’t attend my final class just before I returned to the States, so I took her paper home. It remained on my book shelf for thirty-four years, tucked into one of the Vietnamese/English language books given to me by Mr. Hoan.

When Miss Xuân and I began communicating through e-mails translated by her niece, Miss Cầm, we planned my October 2001 visit and I saw the opportunity to return her assignment. I don’t remember why I packed it with my gear in May 1967, but on occasion over the years, I slipped her assignment out of that language book and re-read her story about King Quang Trung and his victory in 1789 over a more powerful Chinese army. The other faculty members in that final class certainly would have returned her paper if I asked. But I didn’t ask. I kept it either as a record of the class or in hopes of returning it to Miss Xuân in person someday. Maybe that paper was meant to bring me back to Vietnam.
At our marble-topped table, Miss Xuân held her assignment in her hand and rubbed the delicate paper. “You saved this paper, my assignment, for a long time.”

“Yes. Do you remember missing my last English class?”

“No. I do not remember.” She started to read her work of long ago but stopped and looked at me. She said nothing, just smiled.

Miss Xuân took my empty cup, dumped the slushy remnants into a bowl, added a spoonful of dry leaves, and repeated the ritual of preparing my tea. “Jasmine tea,” she said again. She looked out her front window decorated with a wrought iron grate in the shape of five flowers. There was no screen, no glass, just open air. The breeze blew in a strong citrus smell from her lime trees.

There was a mahogany dresser against the back wall with glass doors and books inside. A Buddhist shrine sat on top with candles and a bunch of finger-length bananas called chuối cau. Plastic roses sat in one vase and live yellow-petaled Asiatic lilies sat in another. In the center sat a marble Buddha, fat and green.

During the summer of 1966, Miss Xuân invited me to her home for dinner. There are only a few moments I remember about the dinner, but one moment that still invokes a vivid image in my mind was Miss Xuân’s explanation of her Buddhist shrine. The shrine, placed on a small table, consisted of candles, a bowl of fruit, two sticks of burning incense, and sepia-toned photos in glass frames. The scene was muted, lit only by the candles and the orange glow of a nearby kerosene lamp.

Another moment I remember involved my .45 caliber pistol and web belt. I always carried a weapon, even into the home of a Vietnamese friend who invited me to dinner. This was, after all, a war in which one could not distinguish an enemy from an ally. After the introductions to Miss Xuân’s family, she suggested I take off my pistol belt and have a seat. She motioned to a bookshelf next to the shrine, but when I placed my holster on the shelf, the web belt flopped down onto the table. I did not want to disturb the shrine so I left the military belt coiled on the same table as the candles and picture frames. The image, still lodged in my brain, was awkward and out of place.

In 2001 in Hắc Dịch, right next to Miss Xuân’s Buddhist shrine with bananas and Asiatic lilies, a darkened television screen mirrored movement in the room and usurped the shrine’s stature, just like my .45 caliber pistol and web belt did in 1966.

Miss Xuân walked to her shrine and took a book from the shelf underneath, looked at its blue cover for a moment, then set it down. She
added three more books, all small, paperback books, and carried them
to our marble-topped table with both hands. “I want to give you these
books for your study of my country.”

One of the books was English Proverbs and Their Vietnamese
Equivalent. The musty smell of damp paper was strong when I opened
the book to a random page. My thumb landed on proverb #747, “Dục
tốc tắc bất đạt,” I said, and read the English translation: “Slow and
steady wins the race.”

“Yes,” Miss Xuân said.

“It’s ‘The Tortoise and the Hare,’” I said.
Miss Xuân looked at my bald head. “What happened to your hair?”

“No. The story. The phrase is from a fable called ‘The Tortoise and
the Hare.’ A hare is a rabbit.”

“Hair is on the rabbit.”

“The word ‘hare’ means ‘rabbit.’”

“What is means?”

“Means is ‘is the same as.’ ‘Hare’ is another name for the word ‘rabbit.’
Rabbit, hare. The same meaning.”

“You like this book?”


Miss Xuân smiled and covered her mouth. “My teeth were lost
because I live in the mountains a long time. I did not eat healthy at that
time and later,” she shook her head, “I lost my teeth.”

“When were you in the mountains?” I asked.

“I left Đà Nẵng City in February 1968 and went to Trường Sơn
Mountain. I stayed there with soldiers who fought for the revolution until
April 1975.”

“What did you do up there? Did you have a job?”

“I was a teacher to the young soldiers. I taught reading and writing
and the history of our country.” She looked at me a few moments. “It was
very difficult to live in the mountains. I jumped from a bridge one day
when I must escape.”

“Escape from the soldiers?”

“No. American planes.”

Miss Xuân taught young Communist soldiers in the mountains
at the same time I started to teach theatre students in high school.
And while she was there, American planes dropped bombs that nearly
killed her.

There was more to the story of her escape and I was interested in all
of it, but this was not the time to ask those questions. Our cultures are
separated by more than the miles. In order for our renewed friendship to evolve, I needed to be patient. There would be future visits to Vietnam and time to ask Miss Xuân about that incident.

As I sat across from Miss Xuân at the marble-topped table, a scenario flashed through my mind. She heard the planes in the distance and realized the bridge she stood on was the intended target. Those planes, with MASS-2 radar capabilities, could fly day or night in any kind of weather, and one of our missions was to wipe out bridges used as supply routes. Miss Xuân knew the planes were traveling in her direction. Maybe she couldn’t see them because of cloud cover, but the noise, the roar, was unmistakably coming her way. She looked around for help, but there was none. She didn’t have time to cross the bridge or return the way she came. Her only option was to jump into the swift current and try to miss the rocks. She threw her pack off the bridge, climbed onto the railing, and jumped.

Maybe that was the scenario; I don’t know. Our bombs that wiped out bridges also killed or wounded Vietnamese civilians—civilians involved with the Viet Cong, as my friend Miss Xuân was, and Vietnamese civilians who had no involvement in the war.

My work as a motor transport officer in Vietnam had its implications. There was a link between the American planes, their bombs, and me. When I began writing this memoir, the perception of my job as a Marine in Vietnam altered. No longer did I have the sense that my work in Vietnam was a positive experience. I provided the power for radar equipment to lock onto our aircraft, actually take control of the plane, and fly it on a precise course to the selected target. Our MASS-2 air controllers told the pilot exactly when to hit the bomb-release button with the standard set of words, “Stand-by, Stand-by, Mark, Mark.”

Miss Xuân had to jump off a bridge to escape the bombs of American planes—possibly flown by radar powered by MASS-2 generators. Was she injured when she jumped? Did she land in the water and swim to shore?

Her revelation that she worked with Communist soldiers during the war stifled my ability to ask these questions. She almost died because of our bombs, but there she sat across from me with no apparent scars or wounds other than her missing front teeth.

It is a misconception for me to think of my experience in Vietnam as a positive experience, unique because I worked with the Vietnamese people. My work in Vietnam was just as responsible for the killing and wounding as the work of any Marine who fought in the jungles or rice paddies. We all did our jobs.
**Miss Xuân and the PLAF**

Miss Xuân asked if I had photos of my wife and children, so I brought out a small album and opened it to a picture of my family. “Which is the son who was born while you were in Vietnam?” she said.

“This one. Charlie. I didn’t see my son until he was six months old. He’s named after my friend, Charlie Bond, who was with me in Vietnam.”

She pointed to the tall dark-haired man next to Charlie; “This one looks like you when you taught at Hoà Mỹ School. What is his name?”

“Andy. My second son, Andrew Eric. Yes, he does look like me. He’s named after another Marine friend who was with me in Vietnam, Eric Barnes.”

Eric Barnes and I went through Basic School together in Quantico, Virginia, and also spent six months together at Camp Lejeune before our tours in Vietnam. Eric visited me once while we were in Vietnam, right before he left for R&R in Hawai to visit his wife. We had steak and beer at my club, Club Vagabond, and then I took him to the Đà Nẵng airbase for his flight out.

At the air base, he stepped out of my jeep and jogged to the terminal with that long stride of his—head tilted back a bit, chest forward. His jungle boots splashed the rain-soaked tarmac, and his elbows were high on each determined stride. His jog, still in my memory, was so fluid it looked as if he was in slow motion. When he reached the door, he stopped and turned toward my jeep. He stood in the dim light and gave me a quick wave and smile. Then he opened the door and ducked out of sight.

That was the last time I saw Eric Barnes. In early April 1967, I received a letter from my wife that said, “On March 25th Eric was killed on a patrol.”

That sentence numbed my world. I sat in my hooch and stared at the letter until it was dark. The memories of our Basic School platoon and Camp Lejeune parties and our dinner and the songs at Club Vagabond just a few months earlier played over and over in my head.

In 1967, at twenty-five years of age, the only people I knew who had died were my grandfather and grandmother. None of my friends. No cousins, at least none of the ones I knew, no teachers, coaches or principals, and up to that point, no Marines. Eric Barnes was gone and I could not imagine all the implications.
Eric didn’t call or visit after he returned from Hawaii. There would be no visits from Eric Barnes. Not in Vietnam, not back in the States. Not in these early years of the 21st century when it was important to reminisce about our time in the Marines, to visit with other Marines at our Basic School reunions.

At our first reunion in 2004, we took two buses from Quantico to Washington, D.C., and visited the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. We found his name, Eric M Barnes, etched into the wall’s black mirrored surface. I could see myself. Not the tears, but my outline and the outline of other Marines who stood with me.

Miss Xuân brought an old photo album from the mahogany dresser. The pages creaked when she turned them. “This is the home in Đà Nẵng where you came to dinner in 1966.”

She turned another page that creaked. “My mother and my father.”

“Is that their photo on the wall?”

She looked at the wall above us. “Yes.” Then she turned a few pages and found the same two photos that were on the wall.

“In 1968, my father was suspect of being Viet Cong by the Saigon Government,” she said. “He was sent to an island prison where he was tortured. He became very ill and did not recover, even after he left prison.”

Miss Xuân touched her father’s picture on the page. “His mind was not good when he left the prison and he died in 1980. My mother died soon after.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

Her father and mother were a vague memory for me. Neither spoke English and the father mainly stared at me during that dinner in 1966, possibly because he was curious. He knew I was a U.S. Marine fighting to save Vietnam from Communism. He also knew, as I would find out during my visit in 2004, that his oldest daughter, Mrs. Nga, was an officer in the North Vietnamese Army, and Mr. Pháp, the youngest son, was a warrant officer in the South Vietnamese Army or ARVN, and worked for the American military during the war.

Miss Xuân looked up again at the picture of her father on the wall. She nodded her head to acknowledge him. “Maybe I will move back to Đà Nẵng one day, to the house of my brother, Mr. Pháp. But I must sell this farm before.”

“It would be nice to be with your family.”

She looked at me and smiled. “I am the only child in my family who is single. You are lucky to have an ideal helpmate.”
She paused and stared at her photo album a moment. Her fingers pressed at the plastic to flatten out the wrinkles on her father’s photo. Then she closed the cover.

“My love died in 1972. He was in the army of revolution. When I received the news of his sacrifice, I was sad only three days. Then the task of revolution attracted me to follow the tide of war so I forgot everything except our nation. War always has grief and loss. I hate war and love peace.”

Miss Xuân looked at me and cocked her head slightly to the right. Tears formed in her eyes. She must have loved this man, this Communist soldier, very much, even though she was sad only three days.

Miss Xuân wrote in an early e-mail that she joined the PLAF or People’s Liberation Armed Forces during the war. This was a surprise, but it didn’t bother me. When I worked at Hòa Mỹ School in 1966, there was never any indication that Miss Xuân was involved in Communist activities or was anti-American in any way.

I was curious if I was ever in danger when I worked at Hòa Mỹ Elementary School. There might have been some clandestine plot against me. I traveled at night, alone in my jeep, when invited for dinner at the homes of Miss Xuân and Mr. Hoan.

“Was I ever in any danger?” I asked Miss Xuân. I immediately wanted to take back the awkward question. I didn’t know why I asked it, or, more importantly, I didn’t know what I meant. What if she replied, “What do you mean danger?” What did I mean? She wasn’t assigned to kill me.

“No. You were never in any danger,” Miss Xuân said.

That conversation ended. Thankfully it was brief. I never sensed any danger on my visits to Hòa Mỹ School or her home during the war, but that may have been naïve on my part. The People’s Liberation Armed Forces or PLAF—as I understood it from Miss Xuân’s perspective—was not the Viet Cong, which is what I thought when she wrote about her experiences. She felt they were a Southern opposition force whose goal was to bring about a unified Vietnam and send the Americans home.

She also told me that during the war she was almost arrested by police from the Saigon Government. In 1968, she had to escape through her backyard fence when officers were at her front door. She ran to the home of Mr. Hoan and asked him to drive her to the mountains. She had demonstrated at peace rallies for many years, and someone who took a picture of her at one of the rallies turned the photo over to the
Saigon Government. The Saigon Government, she explained, assumed she was Viet Cong and began to keep a file on her.

Miss Xuân’s father was suspected of being Viet Cong and arrested in 1968, the same year Miss Xuân was sought by the Saigon Government. Her father had children, as many Vietnamese parents did, on both sides of the war.

Miss Xuân escaped through her fence in 1968 while government officers searched her home. But this news, although interesting, was not significant to me when she told me since I left Vietnam in May 1967. However, later in Đà Nẵng on that same October 2001 trip, I learned from Mr. Hoan that he and Miss Xuân and, in fact, all the faculty and students of Hoà Mỹ School, suspected I was the one who gave her photo to the Saigon Government.

**Resolution**

On my 2004 visit to Vietnam for their Tết celebration, Miss Xuân was back in Đà Nẵng and now lived with her brother, Mr. Pháp. Near the end of my trip, the two of us sat at her kitchen table after dinner and her nephew, Mr. Phúc, joined us to help translate. There was a talk show on the kitchen television. A Vietnamese man, the host, sat with his guest. The fruit bowl on the table was filled with nhãn, a fruit similar to lychee. It is eaten by biting into its skin and sucking out the meat.

Miss Xuân wore a soft floppy hat and a tan cardigan sweater, which she buttoned to the top over a white turtleneck shirt. She said she was cold and didn’t like the weather in Đà Nẵng.

A large, dry-erase board hung on the wall next to our table. Its white surface filled the wall and there was nothing on it except a green dragonfly that Mr. Phúc’s five-year-old daughter drew before dinner. The dragonfly looked at us with buggly eyes.

“Miss Xuân, can you tell me why you left Đà Nẵng in February 1968?” She laughed and shook her head no. “That was a long time ago.” “I’m curious about that story,” I said. “I don’t know.” She smiled, took off her hat, folded it in half and pressed it flat to the table.

“In Hắc Dịch, you told me you left Đà Nẵng in February 1968,” I said. “Yes. In 1968, I was, what do you say?” She looked at her nephew and spoke in Vietnamese.
“Watched,” Mr. Phúc said.
“I was watched from CIA and SG.”
“SG. What is that?” I asked.
“My aunt said ‘SG,’ which means Saigon Government.”
“But I did not know I was watched,” Miss Xuân said, “until a friend of my family who worked for the CIA, informed me that I was watched through a photo that someone gave to the Saigon Government.” Miss Xuân raised her eyebrows to emphasize the point. “Two months after,” she said, “a confidential policemen of the SG came to arrest me at my home.”
“You were arrested?”
“Yes.” She sang the word and held the ‘s’ a long time. “I was, what do you call?” She looked at her nephew again, then without pause, said, “Lucky. I was lucky. I escaped from a fence in my backyard.”
She stood up and looked at the dry-erase board and paused for a moment, as if it was the first time she noticed the dragonfly. She walked to a sideboard and picked up a teapot, then looked at me. “I ran to Mr. Hoan’s home and asked him to take me to the mountains.”
She held the teapot next to her chest. “A decree from the SG Government about my,” she paused, “activity, my demonstration against the war, was spread through the whole central region, so I had to go to a mountain base to be sheltered. That’s the reason why I left Đà Nẵng City.”
She returned to our table with the teapot.
“Were you sad to leave Đà Nẵng?”
She set the teapot down and said nothing. The host on the television talk show stood to greet another guest. Mr. Phúc was interested and watched the show when he was not involved in our conversation. Miss Xuân walked back for three celadon cups that matched the teapot and put them on our table. She sat down in her chair and pulled the cups near the teapot.
“If I were arrested by SG Government,” she said. “They would think I was VC and I would be tortured. My life would be in danger of savage actions. My health was very weak, my friends were dead,” she said. “Dead.” She nodded her head and opened her eyes wide. “Or in prison. Or crippled.”
Her hair was short and thick and, after she took off her hat, it flew up in odd directions. She looked at me and tilted her head to the right. She was silent for a long time, then she poured tea into the three cups and pushed one to her nephew and one to me.
“Cám ơn,” I said. I remembered the story she told me in Hắc Dịch of her father’s torture in the island prison.
“Vietnamese people,” said Miss Xuân, “are good-natured, good-hearted, but can never accept to be a slave and never surrender. Many times I took to the street and demonstrated against the war. I love peace and I demonstrate against war.” She spoke to Mr. Phúc in Vietnamese and he left the room.

A few moments from my tour of duty in Vietnam are vivid memories locked in my brain. One of these moments came during the summer of 1966, the day Miss Xuân invited me to her home for dinner.

We stood in the schoolyard under the tall kiên kiền tree after my English class and talked. She wore the traditional Vietnamese dress, a white áo dài, and we waited for Mr. Hoan to draw a map so I could find Miss Xuân’s home the next evening.

A truck convoy rolled past Hòa Mỹ School on Highway 1. Miss Xuân watched the two-and-a-half ton trucks drive past her school. She was calm with a smile on her face, delicate and porcelain in her white áo dài.

Some of her students walked past us and onto Highway 1. Miss Xuân kept her eyes on her students, anxious about them being so near the big trucks on the narrow highway.

Miss Xuân was firm with her 3rd grade students, who were polite and showed their teacher respect. I took Super-8 movies in her classroom many times and edited each fifty-foot roll in my hooch. Her students were on my editing screen over and over and over: smiling happy eight-year-old boys and girls. They never looked scared on film, but Miss Xuân worried about their safety.

“What do you think of this war?” I asked on that summer day in 1966. “The war.” She paused and then shook her head. “I do not think, Lieutenant Brian.”

She looked out at Highway 1. The truck convoy sent dust into the schoolyard. “The war,” she repeated. “My country has been at war my entire life.”

I said nothing, just nodded my head. That question in 1966 was asked out of ignorance, the sort of question one asks to fill time, but I couldn’t take it back. Miss Xuân was twenty-seven years old and her country had been at war her entire life. That conversation has gone through my mind hundreds of times. Every time—every single time—I think about the struggles the Vietnamese people must have gone through just to survive their daily routine.
Her nephew came back and set a tray on the table. It was filled with narrow, white strips that looked like dried fruit. “This candy is ginger,” he said.

“Ginger is good for your digestions,” said Miss Xuân. “Thank you. Cám ơn.” The ginger was spicy, with the texture of a jellybean and weighed almost nothing. I took another piece.

“Miss Xuân,” I said. “Would you mind telling me about the time you had to jump off the bridge to escape the bombs of U.S. planes? I am curious about that incident.”

“Yes, I can tell you about that day. I was with women friends in the Quê Sơn Mountains. After we attended a conference, we crossed the Kỳ Lâm Bridge and heard planes that came closer and closer. We saw that they were American planes, and in just a quick burst, the bridge was covered with fire. Napalm fire came from the planes, so we had no choice but to jump off the bridge. When I landed in the river, my hat flew off my head and floated away in the current. A plane came toward the hat and shot many times. The bullets were meant for me but only my hat was destroyed. I was not scared because I must pull on some of my friends who could not swim. I dragged a friend to the bank and returned to the river for another friend. Then the planes were gone. We watched the fire destroy the bridge and soon it fell into the river.

Miss Xuân’s hands lay flat on the table. Her fingers were short and tawny and thick. I wrapped my hands around hers. “Thank you for sharing that story,” I said. “I’m sorry that happened to you, and happy you were able to escape and save your friends.”

Miss Xuân smiled at me. “We want you to enjoy the Tết celebration,” she said. “I hope the people all over the world understand and love one another. You and me and the people are ready to forgive and wipe out all enemies and resentment. To live ourselves in peace and the immense love.”

She slipped her hands out of mine and reached for my empty teacup. She filled it from the teapot and pushed it back across the table. “Cám ơn.” I held the small cup with both hands and warmed my fingers, then raised it to my mouth. The steam and spicy jasmine aroma washed over my face. I took a sip.
Peel an orange, set
a candle in the rind—

let the smoke melt
the pith into an oil

sweeter than palm.
Before we die,

we taste almonds;
we wake to a lover

slipping a tongue
in our ear;

we confess our sins
in hushed breath

to slats
of grated light.

Dab the oil on the forgotten
parts of yourself:

the eyelid’s creases,
the finger’s rungs,

the patch of jawbone
hidden by the earlobe.

Saints forget themselves
in their sufferings,
so we recite their names

to remind them

how pain can be pronounced:

oilfield, blood orange, watercress.

Nothing we believe in

mixes: it sifts

liquor from lime, deposits
drops of sweat

that slide like rosary beads:
a grease that washes everything

clean but us.

Take the candle wax—

spread it on

your lover’s lips. Faith

is tasting flesh

through all coverings—

though bitter heat,

though distance,

though our thin skin that keeps

all that we are from spilling out.
Compline

There were no rules before the moon—
when we forgot what made our fingers

peel, what made our mouths sweat
from a fever thick as pitch

smeared across stained glass.
We forgot how the spine sings

from its kaleidoscopic pin bones,
how the jaw moves like a lantern

flame blessing every onion-thin sliver
of night. We’ll forgive the night,

weigh it in our palms and leave it pared
and quartered like a hard, black plum.

Forget the stone inside, toss it behind
your shadow and your shadow’s misgivings.

We need a different night—a breach filled
with enough stars for a new color of blood.

We know that every bone is a prism; it parses
light into the heavy and familiar, antique

and vulgate, healthy and profane.
Forgive us our wanderings. Give us

the tools for a new incarnation
of the dark, and build us a lighthouse
Ryan Teitman

to tend the sea’s orphan prayers.
Teach us to love the weight of hunger

and the coyness of loss. Teach us to read
every star with the wet tips of our tongues.
Vigils

Here is a morning like a blood-soaked eye, like an old valve
aching under pressure, like the throat of a horse marked long with the white strokes of a surgeon’s chalk.
You say to us, open your eyes—

We say, prayer is a wedding band lost in the onion field.

We crave the night—its fleet of stars tacking drunkenly
across the sky, dropping anchor into the deepening sound of our open mouths.
The smallest hours are the time
for sacks of oysters hauled from the cove, for whittling
a cathedral from a cow’s horn, for mapping the forest edge
by dusting off the back-shelf bottle of bourbon.

I never want to remember the moment just before sunrise,
when sleeping lovers pull away from each other,

when libraries re-hide their secret books,

when the Jesuits finally finish their evening study.

You say to us, clasp your hands and rejoice—the day is newly risen.

We say, the most valuable statues in the world are small enough
to hide in the mouth. Here is a Bible hollowed and full

of crickets. Here is a map to the bones in a child’s foot.

Here is a list of theses written on a woman’s stocking.

Before the dawn, we pry open oysters to drink the meat

and anoint ourselves with their liquor. Each glassy

mouth of salt never fails to linger, speaking and shining

on our empty foreheads.
Camino de la Luz

Past dark green signs with names
like Acequia Madre, Camino Cruz Blanca,

beds of blue-purple lavender sun themselves
against thick adobe. Off to the left now a crooked alley—

its roadbed narrow and dry beside ripening apricots,
clusters of yarrow in a dusty yard.

A thin brown mutt wags its tail near a little girl
munching grapes on a shaded summer porch.

Camino de la Luz—catches the corner of your eye.
Who wouldn’t want to live on a street with such a name?

Not Church or Jefferson, Chestnut or Main,
but The Way of Light.

Would the faces of its neighbors look more radiant,
might their talk be more illumined?

Three hundred years into the Age of Reason
and still we’re bombing and burning....

The bus leaves us at the Plaza, where a crowd
gathers for Flamenco dancers who swirl

and stomp on the filigreed bandstand,
their dresses aflame. Under ancient porticos,

burnished people still come from the outlying villages,
selling silver, cut stones, the craft they’ve done for centuries.
Mary Van Denend

But the street names have all changed now to honor the rich and powerful of their day,

who for all the gilded coins and swords and prayer books, may have missed the luminous path along the way.
Migrations

Six days out of seven, the oyster dredge skims shallow furrows over tidal green, looking like a floating John Deere. Julio mans the creaky helm today, close by the dark shadow of his lab, Conmigo. Young brown men scrape a tenuous existence from this coastal river, steering so far from their familiar:

Oysterville, as the locals call it, where six miles of gravel road dead-end, where the Yaquina twists and bends into sloughs and saltmarsh,

finally an open bay on the wide Pacific. With binoculars, a woman watches them hoist and dump load upon load of shells on the deck. Some mornings,

they run the flat barge with a noisy outboard, shovel the juveniles, seedlings wrested from their wire cages, back to the river bottom for a new crop.

Sometimes when the wind is right, she hears their easy laughter or Julio shouting in muffled Spanish, directions reverberating bank to bank.
Sad to have missed the come-and-gone egrets with their snowy plumage, pillaging at the inlet’s entrance—already moved on to southern climes—

she spies just a lonely osprey circling. Now she grips a brush thick with deep red to cover over the tired blue-gray cottage, turn it into a Swedish *stuga*, like some ancestral dwelling in Malmö or Lund. Maybe she’ll plant geraniums in clay pots, fly the blue & gold flag when she’s done. Though no one’s watching, still she raises a timid paint-flecked hand to the newcomers, whose *novias* and *niños* longingly wait in Guadalajara or Jalisco, while they lift heavy shovels to the jagged white harvest.

The river washes now over the oysters, around the dredge, the docks, carries the old memories out with the tides, and settles at last on a boot, a brush, or a bird wing.
Watermarks

It is only with the heart that one can see rightly.
What is essential is invisible to the eye.
—Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, The Little Prince

The tides leave their stains for all to see
Seaweed drapes the rocks, and sand changes
Color as it shifts toward the dunes
Dark, fluid lines form a band across pilings
To show where the sea has been
These are marks a scientist could love,
Carefully measuring highs and lows,
The force of waves against the land

But on paper, you must search to find them
Like a blurred face in an old photograph,
Or forgotten names smudged into newsprint
Only in certain light do they reveal themselves
Otherwise hidden, like pressed flowers,
Flat and thin between sheets
Once I discovered a perfect crown
By lifting the paper toward light—
Overlooked, it was there all the time,
The secret seal, translucent word
Hey, you want to play catch?
he’d say. And though that was the last
thing I wanted to do, Sure, I’d reply,
and follow him and his wheelchair
out of the small apartment
into the courtyard, where,
self-conscious and embarrassed, I’d
throw him the wayward ball
as he strained to keep up the appearance
that he could somehow snag and return it.
I was eight, but both of us knew
we were just doing what we had to:
he was my father; I was his son.
And that’s what fathers and sons do.
But whenever the neighbor,
on his two good legs, would show up
to take over the fatherly duties,
throwing our world off-balance,
my father would wilt, and roll
slowly away on his two wheels
into the waiting dark, waving
me into the future, and I’d go.
How could I know I’d be sitting here, now,
in my own motionless chair, alone
in the extra innings, wanting only
to catch him with my best stuff,
as he brushes off all of my signs.
Lost and Found

Seventh grade. On the long walk home from school, through the shabby St. Louis suburbs, the run-down ones my mother wanted me to take the safety of the lumbering school bus through, stopping at the local radio station to pick up the Pookie Snackenberg button that King Richard, the rock disc jockey, had talked about all week, somehow I dropped it, and had to wend my slow way back through the shacks and abandoned storefronts of someone else’s unfamiliar past. What did I know of loss? I thought that if you just retraced your steps any lost thing could be found. And it was right there where I’d left it, waiting for me. How could I know that that would be the last lost thing I’d find by going back—my father stumbling toward his own sad ends, my first best love, as yet unmet, already racing toward her drunk demise? I had my Pookie Snackenberg button, my prize. I was twelve, and happy as I hummed on home, the whole wide world spread out before me, shiny as a button, unlikely as a lucky lost and found.
Rhetorical Questions

What’s the big idea? my father would say which was not a genuine question about how my limited intellect was growing or what new philosophy of life I’d come up with. What in God’s name were you thinking? Though he didn’t, of course, want, literally, to know, as he’d roll his eyes, toss his head back, throw his hands up in the air, as he sat there in his wheelchair, ostensibly stunned at my ignorance, my gross incompetence. Do you think money grows on trees? That I’ve got all the time in the world? Where was your head? Are you crazy? What did you think would happen? Are you listening to me? Do I have to come up there? Do you want a good whipping? Do I need to tell you this again? Do you think this doesn’t apply to you? That the whole world revolves around you? And, of course, I had my own question: Who needed him, anyway? And mainly I’d walk away on my own two good legs, knowing I had all the answers. Now he’s gone, and I’m here, in the future, that paltry currency, with all the time in the world, wishing he would come up here, would whip me into shape, would tell me again, and again, what I never wanted to hear, as I listen to all that’s left of him: Who do you think you are? And Where do you think you are going?
A blade of rust from the ocean
and from the air a rumor
that corrodes the earth in tongues,
lichen, moss, magnolia,
until each gossip’s true.
Things go this way,
each green repeating its fact
of sun and wind and rain,
its dialect, its blade,
while beneath each leaf
a quiet cuts between the veins.
Laced, pale wings open
to learn the particular weather,
the place or part of speech
that will darken
and give them a name.
So each sugar furls
to burn and bitter
against whatever mouths
might swallow,
each skin becomes
the history of its harbor,
another word for here.
This hatch of bark and shade
hangs like a photograph
of all it covers, so perfect,
so still, its edges
blur, then disappear.
When We Have Lived for Thirty Years in One Town

We drive home from dinner, usually a little too full, sometimes satisfied with our lives, sometimes not, the little vents in the dashboard offering their cold blessing, the murmur of air intoning You can change your lot, or sometimes Comfort is possible, and it seems for a moment to come to us like a present we ordered for ourselves online.

As we near the interstate, you ask, “Which way? East or west?” and I remind you that by the strange virtue of our geography home is always to the east.

Think of the Orient, orientation, of curled maps, those stories of ancient travelers, their camels snorting and spitting softly over moon-rinsed drifts, camels swaying under the weight of men drowsing on flea-knitted blankets, flasks of oil and leather pouches of coins, turmeric, and cardamom belted to their hips, men cloaked in the certainty of where they’re headed and what they’ll find there.
On a Clear Day, Catalina

[An itinerary map, with day trips.]

In San Pedro the trees dropped plum-colored petals into the streets. The industrial port of Los Angeles is better known for longshoreman dive bars, old-time European supper clubs and the seedy streets of 1970s TV detective show chase scenes than for the beauty of its blooming trees. Still, it was the outrageous flowering I noticed first when visiting my little brother that May, just in time to see the trees lit up with blossoms.

Triptik Los Angeles—Like most military families, my brother Paulie, his wife, and their two kids move every two or three years, their migrations perpetual, their memories shaped like maps. Paulie’s moves have led him around the world and back, through the neon commotion of Tokyo, across the cobbled fields and villages surrounding London, and into the mall-ways at the hem of Washington D.C.

Everyone’s maps stand in for something real, the city-like shape of some particular time of life, but no map shows the way Paulie and I remember the rumble and muck of Chicago, the city we both look for in all the other cities. This time the Air Force moved Paulie all the way west to L.A., but the L.A. where he lives is the port of San Pedro, which in terms of immigration history may be the most Chicago-like location in the West.

Still, California is, for our family, a new terrain. I visited Paulie this time at his home in an Air Force-owned neighborhood with an armed guard at the gate, an enclave hidden within the white fog of the Pacific Ocean. A fragment of the roiling sea was visible from the park up the hill from his block. On a clear day he could see Catalina.

I’d come to L.A. to see my then nine-year-old niece Adria, who had just decided to be a poet. She had one of those teachers that year—tall and well-tailored with hip eyeglasses and bolts of blond streaked through her hair, the type who had her mixed class of 4th and 5th graders
reciting Emily Dickinson and T.S. Eliot. Here was a teacher who asked the children questions like **which are the working words of this poem?** then cried and pressed her palm over her heart when she heard a lyric that moved her. I had come to hear Adria perform in her first poetry reading.

The morning of Adria’s reading was, according to my sister-in-law Mitsuko, like most mornings in San Pedro, cloudy and cool. My plane the night before had been crowded; once I arrived at my brother’s house I was too keyed up to sleep, and in the morning I realized I’d forgotten to pack my hairdryer. Whose idea was it to schedule a poetry reading for 8:30 a.m.? I showed up at the school headachy, out of sorts, at the start of a bad hair day.

I didn’t see Adria until I stepped into her classroom, just as the poetry was about to begin. It was not my idea to be her performance-day surprise. The kid had called me long distance, begged me to come. Once I’d worked out my travel plans, I was dying to call her back and tell her. Of course honey. I wouldn’t miss it. I wanted her to know she could depend on me; I didn’t want to play around with a little girl’s longing. But my brother wanted me to surprise her.

If I were Adria this kind of surprise would have misplaced me, disembodied me. But I had attended 4th grade in a three-story brownstone box within smelling distance of the South Chicago mills. We had no poetry-wielding teachers. I was unaware as a girl that real people wrote books. I didn’t meet a teacher who told me to write a poem until high school. What I learned as a girl, instead of the working-words-of-poems, was to tell myself scratchy whispering secrets, which might be why I was a drinker before I was a writer.

I don’t want to teach Adria to become the clouded and impossible-to-please girl I had been before I fled my home, but this wish may be more about me than her. She is already bilingual, no less at home in Kobe, Japan with her mother’s sisters as she is in her own living room. And Adria has teachers who ask her to read her poems in classrooms with doors hanging open to the Pacific fog, Catalina wavering on the horizon. In San Pedro, the kids see whales at recess. No wonder they write poems.

**DAY TRIP**  **The OLD Old Country.**

I’ve never been to our original family Old Country but Adria has. She was still a kindergartner then, but might remember some sliver of Dalmatian shoreline, some bank of white stone wall overlooking the sea.

Adria was conceived near the Adriatic, the sea featured on the map as an expanse of blue between the long finger of the Dalmatian Coast and
the outer shore of the Italian heel, extending all the way south to Greece. Adria may have retained some watery impression of her first return to her father’s family homeland, the payoff of my brother’s long drive from London, across Europe and down into the Dalmatian Coast, when she was just four, her little brother Sava still an infant. The drive south through Dalmatia to Dubrovnik is said to be one of the most gorgeous drives on earth. I envy her that trip, even if she barely remembers.

But what Adria actually recalls of the Adriatic is likely the sea depicted on a tourist’s postcard, a view from the Italian side of the water. Her papa sent me the same postcard, a year after their family vacation, when he was deployed. The scallop-edged photograph pictured an idyllic harbor, wood boats setting in the slanting sun, afternoon shadows fingerling the peeling bows. This was Cervia, where my brother prepared wills for NATO flyers before they set off to bomb Milošević’s Serbia. It would have been wrong for my brother to send his family postcards of decimated Belgrade TV stations and the demolished Chinese Embassy or any other image of detonation and debris, yet those safely anchored fishing boats don’t tell the whole story of their papa’s months away from home—nobody knew for how long.

I don’t have a photo of my brother as a wartime lawyer, although I did see him at work on TV once; a Chicago news crew visited his unit in Italy and ran a story that featured him standing on a windy runway waving off the planes. I wasn’t surprised they chose him as their human interest—Southside boy, at work, over there. He smiled and nodded in the wind of the tarmac when the reporter asked him questions. He’s the type the camera likes. Most people like him too. Paulie and my spouse, Linnea, are similar that way, something inviting about their faces or stance that inspires strangers on buses, trains, airplanes, and the streets of unfamiliar cities to spill their life stories.

Everyone in our family has stories about Eastern European immigrant strangers who ask us about our last name—airline baggage handlers or waiters or foreign language video store clerks who read the American spelling on a credit card or driver’s license and routinely ask: Serb or Croat? But if the guy—and it’s usually a guy—turns out to be a Croat himself? Paulie’s the only one of us likely to bring him home for dinner, which is why I find it so hard to picture: Paulie at work on that Italian airstrip in his combat greens, his long face smiling, scowling, waving off the flyers, hoping he got their wishes down right as they rocket off to bomb a city just a few hours drive from the village where our Grandfather Petey was born.
Adria is Paulie’s oldest, a bronze comma of a girl, named for a Mediterranean location halfway between her parents’ opposite continents. She is narrow and stands crookedly, like her mother, but is an extrovert like her father, getting bigger in front of an audience. My nephew, Sava, is the opposite, the shy one, a science whiz who never answers my questions and speaks to me only when he’s in the mood. Both children straddle a divide, their father a U.S. Air Force man, their mother a citizen of Japan, their most accurate hometown map a light-up globe.

Historians say the story of the world is a roll call of migrations. If that’s true then consciousness of world history is an awareness of the history of longing, a history of which my longing, Paulie’s longing, Adria’s longing, are all a part.

Longing has a way of moving the body forward, that lean toward, that palpitating chest ache, desire a wheel. As in every family story our great-grandparents’ longing set off a series of global reactions that have so far resulted in Adria and Sava, half Japanese, half Euro-American, residents of San Pedro, Los Angeles U.S.A.

And then we have those bombs, tying us, severing us from our pre-American past. Paulie’s hand is aloft in the blue Italian air, his knuckles tan against a background of white smoke, the gust of departing planes. The Dalmatian islands scatter below the bellies of the bombers as the already broken Balkan cities zoom into range.

Triptik Los Angeles—My brother picked me up at LAX late on the night before the poetry reading, so late the usually crammed freeways of L.A. were wide open, bleary with smog and the periodic shimmer of headlights. The landscape looked like the misty and dim-lit panoramas I remember from a movie my friends and I—high school literary magazine and theater types—loved when we were eighteen, an overwrought and arty Alan Rudolph flick called Welcome to L.A., a film about longing and sex, appetites never filled, and nasal Keith Carradine ballads that rhymed L.A. with decay. I’d been sleepy on the plane, but once I landed I felt buzzed, up, and cinematic, ready to ride into the lights. Welcome to these lost and smoky hills, L.A., the capital of location-based longing.

It took about twenty minutes to get to San Pedro, the drive taking us not toward the L.A. dream machinery but away, Hollywood at our backs, the huge Port of Los Angeles looming before us. San Pedro is a community of immigrants; people come here to work, at the port if they’re lucky, the largest container complex in the country. Three
thousand ships a year dock there, each one carrying as many as five thousand cargo containers, those long rectangular crates that might be transferred onto a train, might be loaded onto the back of a transport semi truck, might be unloaded right there, in full view of the Pacific. Most of Adria and Sava’s classmates, if they weren’t Air Force kids, were children of the men and women who worked the docks.

Most mornings, after dropping the kids at school, Mitsuko joins the other mothers at the coffee shop up the hill from the school. One mom who’s a regular at their morning coffee circle works the night shift at the docks, driving a forklift; she grew up in San Pedro, as did her husband, who works the docks too. The other mothers are from Mexico or Columbia, or Bosnia, their husbands the ones unloading those containers, or standing in line for an application in the hopes for a chance to unload those containers. Their children speak English at school and learn their parents’ home languages, Spanish or Serbo-Croatian or Japanese, at their dining room tables every afternoon. This is not the L.A. of 1970s art films populated by white people with too much money, too much time, and too much sex. This is more like the waterfront Brooklyn of Elia Kazan, a cleaned-up version, crowded with mothers mad at their husbands, with workers who remember their old country, with people who all know each other because their kids know each other, who all wanna be a contender.

And the morning I was there the kids wanna be contenders too. They wanna be in show biz. I filled up the door of Adria’s classroom and lingered there, looking for my niece. Adria sat on the floor with her classmates, some dressed as T.S. Eliot’s Jellicle cats, some in baseball hats for their roles in the reading of “Casey at the Bat.” Adria’s long hair grazed the classroom tile as she leaned forward to whisper in a classmate’s ear, the brown tips bleached blond by the California sun and grown longer in the year since I’d seen her last. She had new glasses, purple cat-eyes, the same shape as mine. When I’d visited the previous spring she’d asked me, Auntie, why do you wear those strange glasses? Now she had a pair of her own.

When she finally saw me, I noticed her blink. The purple specs accentuated her pretty eyes, wide and expressive, from the Croatian side but also recognizably Japanese, her mother’s daughter. When it sunk in that her Auntie had shown up for the show, just in time, Adria smiled secretly. She looked away, pretending to pay attention to the teacher, then looked back at me, grinning, Paulie hovering over my shoulder with the video camera running.
POINT OF DEPARTURE  Body and Water
LONGING FOR LANGUAGE. LONGING FOR LOCATIONS. THESE ARE TWIN longings. A single well-chosen word can cause us to rearrange ourselves. Cognition is a bloom that opens under the skin. We become what we come to know.

Linnea and I have a long-running joke when one of us can’t think of the word for something, a quotation from the film The Miracle Worker. The teacher, her hair and waistcoat tied up tight, her eyes obscured by tinted eyeglasses, spells out words into the open palm of young deaf, dumb, and blind Helen Keller, as water sputters out of a pump. W-A-T-E-R. It has a name, the teacher repeats. The fingers of Helen’s free hand listen to the movement of the teacher’s lips. It has a name. When she finally makes the connection—that this seemingly random collection of movements, of pulses in her palm, has a meaning, refers to this encounter between the body and water—young Helen is ecstatic. She leaps into the satisfaction language brings to longing, laughs, falls into the arms of her teacher because she knows now that IT has a NAME.

POINT OF DESTINATION  Geography of Corners
SOME FILMS HAVE A WAY OF MAKING UNHAPPINESS APPEALING AND AS A teenager I found the smog of Alan Rudolph’s L.A. a titillating haze. The characters, all of them bereft, navigated the city with endless talking, so many words, the wide, hilly spaces of language.

Just one character, played by the gap-toothed supermodel Lauren Hutton, was silent, a photographer obsessed with shooting pictures of architectural corners, her eye pulled to images of endpoint and entrapment. Her character was what led me, as a young woman, to wander around Chicago photographing strangers’ feet, obsessed, I would have said, with incompleteness. But what I really wanted was to step into Lauren Hutton’s celluloid body, so lean in her billowing white palazzo pants—so compellingly speechless, her beauty made strange and off-center by the gap in her smile.

Triptik Los Angeles—I sat in the corner of Adria’s classroom as the citizens of White Point Elementary’s 4th and 5th grade became dancing cats. They were Casey at the Bat. They were frowning or giggling poets reading their own poems that began with the word NEVER. Their tall teacher teared up when she read a few Emily Dickinson lines, one thin hand held over her heart as if she were pledging to the flag, and then it was Adria’s turn. Her poem surprised
me, about a spooky carriage with flailing horses that pulled her into
the pitch of midnight, their destination the middle of the sun. Adria’s
lips twitched when she read, the same way they’d twitched when she
was four and I watched her perform in her first ballet recital.

Is it unusual for California grade-schoolers to write poems about
death? One girl in Adria’s class read a sad poem about losing her
mother to cancer, but most of the kids were writing about dogs, sports,
family dinners. Was Adria’s poem what comes of mixing Harry Potter
with Emily Dickinson so early in the day? Adria was a good student,
swayed by the fascinations of her teachers. What she made was formed
by where she made it, her poems no exception.

Once during her year in a D.C. Catholic school, I asked Adria
what she wanted more than anything. She drew her face out long and
pressed her lips together. Peace in the Whole World, she said. She said
the word Peace, as if the word itself were a prayer, slick and round as
a rosary bead. But what did the word Peace mean then to a Catholic
grade-schooler who lived on the peripheries of American Air Force
bases, in Air Force officers’ neighborhoods with armed soldiers at the
gate, to a girl who had never seen an actual war, but had missed her
father when he left home to wave at the bellies of those bombers? She
couldn’t see the current war from where she lived, and the base where
her father worked had not been deployed to Iraq, not yet, though they
might go at any time. One of White Point Jellicle cats was the son of a
journalist who had not been back from Iraq in months.

Was Peace a place bordered by the low groan of the church organ
and the pitch and swoon of the choir, by a prairie of nuns mumbling
prayers, by cities of men who all dressed like her father, in green and
black military fatigues? Adria’s poem ended in an image of entering the
sun, suggesting arrival into the final peace, but where did she think that
was? In cinematic L.A.? In the belly of the solar system? On the shores
of Catalina?

\textit{DAY TRIP \hspace{5pt} Before Atlantis}

Catalina is a tourist destination, a day trip the moms of Adria’s
school talk about taking, but keep postponing. At coffee, after the
poetry reading, they will talk about it again, the boat cutting through
the churning current, the wind on their faces, blowing their hair free
from clips and bands, the green blur of the shoreline coming into focus.
No, they won’t really talk about the wind. They will talk about whether
they can trust their husbands to get the kids to school on time, whether
their mothers and fathers-in-law will still be in California, or back home in Mexico, in Columbia, in Sarajevo. They will take a ferry to get to Catalina. They will have lunch. The blue churning waters, the wind, is what I will see in their smiles, the fog that rolls into their eyes as they talk, a whole day with nothing to do but go to Catalina, no duties at school, away from their San Pedro kitchens, swept away to the hoochie-coochie island the swimsuits are named after. Catalina is their isle of joy, materializing out of their watery horizon like the lost city of Atlantis, speckled with sea salt.

**DAY TRIP After Atlantis**

Catalina is not the only island within view of San Pedro. The other island is artificial, originally a mudflat and now a perfect rectangle, located half-and-half across the harbors of L.A. and Long Beach. Now it’s an industrial warehouse zone, shipyards, and the Federal Penitentiary known for jailing both Al Capone and Timothy Leary, so a warehouse of organized vice and organized vision—but once, before, it was another place entirely, the immigrant village of Furusato.

First and second-generation Japanese once made their homes on Terminal Island, convenient to their work in fisheries and canneries. The people of the island village of Furusato formed a half-and-half culture, no longer fully Japanese, not quite American. They spoke a mixed English/Japanese dialect. Their island village was isolated and idyllic, a hybrid space where they celebrated both American and Japanese holidays. They named themselves Yogore, which meant dirty and ragged on the outside, but clean and pure within. Who knows what names they would have eventually made for themselves if the U.S., during World War II, had not issued Executive Order 9066, the rule of Japanese internment. The residents of Furusato were shipped to Manzanar in the California desert. While they were gone, the U.S. Navy bulldozed their homes.

Now Terminal Island is a vanished village, a memory city; yet on a clear day you might be able to see the ghost bustle of a neighborhood, the men leaving early to fish, the children screeching in the dusty streets, the Americanized teenagers coming home in threes and fours from their day at San Pedro High School. If they were like most American teenagers they were more interested in dance music and the right kind of shoes than the war looming on the other side of the sea fog, still too far away to see. If they were like my Grandfather Petey, born in one country, coming of age in another, they would have longed for little
more than to come into focus, their inner purity becoming outer, their new America begging them to stay.

**DAY TRIP  Forgotten City**

Paulie, like me, has never been an early riser, but in San Pedro he likes to breakfast before sunrise at the fish joint down by the pier. Where else in America would he find old Croat fishermen who come from the same region of Croatia where our grandfather was born? These are immigrant white guys in their 80s or 90s with wind-chapped faces and a store of dirty jokes, still working a few mornings a week, when the catch is promising and the sky is clear of storms.

The morning after Adria’s reading, Paulie will drag me out to the pier with him. Another too-early morning for me. Paulie wants me to meet his old Croat pal, some stand-in for our Grandfather Petey, or at least our Grandpa’s imaginary cousin. Ante or Goran or Nikola will be his name, this man with stiff white hair, the same texture as our father’s, but his face rougher, his pores bigger, his jaw looser. He will be a guy who spent his life with boats and bottles. He won’t be, like our dad, a college man, won’t have spent his life talking to rooms full of high school kids. He might be the kind of guy whose own kids no longer talk to him, a guy who will talk to anyone who will laugh at his jokes. He will love it when my brother comes in to see him, Captain Paulie with the Croatian surname, that Air Force guy from Chicago.

Ante will pat Paulie on the back. He is one of few remaining Old School Guys. A Classic Guy. So Paulie will say to Ante, *This is my sister. From Minneapolis.* Ante will shake my hand but won’t meet my eyes. These guys my brother befriends—they are always guys—are never the type who meet a woman’s eye, so right away I’ll have issues. These guys are also always the type to mispronounce the names of cities they have never seen. From Minnie-an-apolis you say? Ah, Minnie-an-apolis. *I knew a guy once from Minnie-an-apolis. Or was it Indiana-apopolis? Oh no, it was Doolooth. Is that near you?*

It won’t matter whether or not I try to explain. No no, Duluth is three hours drive north. Minneapolis is bigger, half of a double city; it shares the river with St. Paul, I’ll say. Ante will nod but he won’t be listening. He will go on to talk about how he lives alone. Downtown San Pedro. Next to the Italian store, across from the Croatian Supper Club. Did we know there are more Croats in San Pedro than anyplace else in the American West? Did we know the Chicago Cubs used to train on Catalina? He won’t mention all those Japanese who don’t live here
anymore. He won’t mention that all the new Croats and Slovenians and Bosnians who’d come here recently were escaping a war that was in some ways the same war Ante ran from when he came over, as a boy, in 1924, or ’34, or ’44. Then he’ll roll headfirst into a joke.

There was a Jew, a priest, and a limp-wristed fellow, he’ll say. I’ll wince and kick Paulie under the table, and Paulie will narrow his eyes at me as if to say, so what if Ante is some kind of jerk? Can’t you see he’s a friend of mine? Paulie’s an expert in befriending jerks. Paulie sees not so much a jerk as a foggy forgotten port. A lost city he longs to save. The shadows of a history that will fast lose form in the Catalina fog if Paulie doesn’t show up for these early morning breakfasts.

Ante, with his unfocused gaze and shaking hands, reminds Paulie, and me too, of some character from our south side of Chicago childhood, a black-and-white newsreel always playing at the back of our brains, a location Paulie’s kids will hear about but never step foot in, just as Paulie and I can travel back but never really step foot in Kata and Big Petar’s Croatia.

I wonder if jerks are nothing if not world-class longers. Those old-time jokes, as told by jerks might not even be about what they seem to be—hate for the queers, the Jews, the latest round of foreigners. Not entirely, even if I can’t help but experience them that way. They’re an old way of talking, see, an old way of laughing that’s lost in the fog.

To Paulie, Ante is the body the migrant loses by making the choice to move, and thus he is some part of Paulie’s body, some history Paulie longs for. And if Ante is my jerk, I might be his. Another woman who won’t laugh at his jokes. Paulie will squint because he’ll be thinking I’ve got no respect, this guy coulda been our grandpa, or if not then somebody’s grandpa, and what’s he got besides his stories? What’s it to me if this guy’s a jerk? Ante’s hands will hover over the table as he leans forward to deliver the punch line. His coffee will be cold, he’s been talking so long. When he leans into the table, the cold coffee will splash over the rim of the cup, spill out onto the saucer. I will sigh and lean forward to listen, even though I’m sure I’ll regret it.

POINT OF DESTINATION     Such a City
I never wanted to live within the city of Ante’s punch lines. I longed, as a young woman, for life in the better city where ambition leads.

Here’s a scene I daydream, not in the Rudolph film. The wide fabric of the photographer’s palazzo pants ripples in the wind off Catalina. She
stands on a dock, on a boat, on shoreline. When she smiles, the sun shines between her teeth. Her back is to the water. The city gathers in the lens of her camera. She leans forward to capture it all in the frame. The shutter clicks. Her hair twists back behind her. No words. Just destination.

Years after my adolescent obsession with celluloid Lauren Hutton, I sat, one table over, from the actual Lauren Hutton in a New York City restaurant. I recognized her with a start. She was older of course, but still oddly beautiful. She ate alone. When she noticed me noticing her, she smiled shyly and re-positioned herself in her seat, the way one who is used to being recognized but not all the time, and not as often as she had been once.

When the object of a long-held gaze catches your eye, gazes back, the gaze returned becomes a loop, a refrain, less migration than a circular route, no longer a progression toward, but instead a meditation of being. I will never again be the lean young woman with the camera, and neither will Lauren Hutton. And so we meet. In this corner.

**Triptik Los Angeles**—The thing about San Pedro is the air is damp and a little bit salty. The thing about San Pedro is the Japanese who used to live here are gone, and now Mitsuko and Adria and Sava are here instead, half-and-halves, as Mitsuko likes to call them, along with others like them, the children of both Japan and the U.S. Air Force, and this is southern California so they know they don’t have to drive far to find strip mall after strip mall selling foods or furniture, toys or kitchen utensils from Japan. The thing about Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, and Korean strip malls that ring suburban L.A. is so little English is spoken in the course of a day it’s hard to understand why anyone still thinks English is the first language of America. The thing about San Pedro is the port itself is a landing pad for goods that ship from companies called Hankyu or Hanjin or Maersk, steel containers lifted from the back of cargo ships, suspended from the arms of cranes, containers as long as house trailers piled up along flats of the Port of Los Angeles, little cities of unpacked goods. The thing about San Pedro is it’s not the same L.A. as the one I’ve seen in the movies, not the L.A. where the studio execs or wannabe actors or glam lesbians live. My gay friends in West Hollywood are not even sure where San Pedro is on the city grid.

On the map, San Pedro is part of the yellow spread of the city, but pastel passages of suburbia separate it from the rest of the metropolis.
San Pedro is not the part of L.A. that rioted, nor is it the part up the hills that routinely catches fire. San Pedro might be the L.A. of old episodes of The Rockford Files but it’s not the L.A. of Alan Rudolph films about too skinny, too sexually disaffected, too rootless people. It is the L.A. of an old kind of longing, the kind Paulie and my old relatives who worked the south side of Chicago mills and train yards used to know. The thing about San Pedro is that the goods flow in, the goods flow out, while most of the city doesn’t notice and the children show up for poetry readings, and the trees, the trees are crazy with blooming.

And what do I long for, here among the purple blooms of San Pedro, in the light of my niece’s poems, in sight of Catalina? I’ve come for more than Adria’s poetry. I’ve come to remember the feeling Adria doesn’t even notice she feels, that necessity of stepping into the breeze pushing toward us from Catalina, that need to be a wheel. Leaving home, forgetting home, waging war with home, remaking home might all be stops on the itinerary of the same migration tale, just as my need to show up to see Adria read her poetry might be as strong as her wish to see me there.

Adria relaxed after she finished reading, her moment of particular stardom passed, and then she was just another among the White Point Jellicle Cats, prancing on tiptoe across the polished classroom floor, stroking her pipe-cleaner whiskers. My mind drifted to my soon-to-be future, espresso and rolls with Mitsuko and the other Jellicle mothers, up a steep hill from the school. Outside the open classroom door a spring breeze stirred the trees and petals spun into the streets. The children of White Point Elementary leaned over their reading and arithmetic, as some of their parents worked the harbor, loading or unloading freight from Japan or Germany or Kuala Lumpur. As some of their parents—escaped from wars they didn’t make—bussed the tables of restaurants owned by the grandsons of the immigrants, the same immigrants who’d come here to escape wars they didn’t make. As some of their parents tightened bolts and polished wings of the wars none of them can see from here but which play in the background, walls falling, holes opening in somebody’s flowering streets.

Adria might see some, but not yet all of the wars when she looks out toward the sea from the hills of San Pedro. She sees the same wavering shore of land, green and inviting, as the first sailors arriving from Dalmatia must have seen, as well the first fishermen from Japan.
Barrie Jean Borich

She sees a city of stacked containers and a bridge to Long Beach and cruise ships and freight barges and she sees Catalina. Petals fill the San Pedro streets and later I will talk about the tree around the corner from the school that’s surrounded by mounds of purple petals the same color as Adria’s glasses, and Adria will say—Auntie, I saw that same tree today.

We all need to see the blooming trees, and when they are gone we need to lean forward, or back, and long for them. I will wish I knew what kinds of petals these were. I’d like to teach Adria the working words for all these trees, all this blossoming.
IN COLLEGE, WHEN MOST EIGHTEEN-YEAR-OLDS DISCOVER A PASSION for bass-thumping shrieks, 3-A.M. tripped fire-alarms and of course, gratuitous sighs of neighbors busily making love, I realized that I couldn’t tolerate noise. I wasn’t a prude, but I expected my neighbors to have the common courtesy to shut off their radios at night, to use what my second grade teacher commonly referred to as “our six-inch voices.”

When I lived with my roommate, in southern Illinois, our neighbors would wander in drunk at three in the morning, blast some bass-pumping music, and pass out. Meanwhile, our walls shook. The floor shook. On that flat terrain that once held desultory crops, our belongings toppled over because of seismic energy. In Carbondale, we weren’t on a fault line, and yet something always shattered. It would have been easy to walk over and knock on their door and tell them to turn it down. Instead, I waited, my muscles tight, for the moment my roommate would jump out of the bed and rage. He cussed, spit flying everywhere. And then the bare-knuckled punches on a wooden door or cement wall. Yes, the noise did bother me, but it was the waiting for the freak-out that was worse.

A year under those conditions made me a light sleeper. I became a person who waited for sound.

The apartment complex was comprised of several two-floor buildings. Each building had a total of eight units. The walls were thin, of course, and I heard conversations about the hottie in 7D or the unfair political science professor who thought he was in Harvard and not Saluki country where expectations were a little lower. One of my first neighbors, a sandy-haired blond guy named Keith—I accidently got his mail once—had a new girlfriend. Keith was the type of guy with the gas-guzzling SUV that took up two parking spots; the type of guy that when his friends were over for beers he played hardcore rap, but when he was alone, he preferred the soothing ballads of Air Supply or Chicago; the type of guy who dated girls with names like Brandi or Tammi or Candi, all spelled with an “i.”
Keith had acquired a new girlfriend, Misti probably, and it didn’t take long before they became connected in the biological sense. For a month, like clockwork, they had sex at least once a day. They preferred doing it before dinner, which was my dinner time, and though I was entertained by the cornucopia of sounds, like porn on the radio, it made me bitterly aware that I was single.

Through the wall, I felt like I knew Keith, even though we didn’t say a word to one another. He was from Peoria and worked in the mall part-time. He sang Madonna tunes in a beautiful falsetto voice. In the parking lot, if we bumped into each other, we nodded.

Sex came earlier one day, but something wasn’t right. Keith’s sounds I knew. He was a series of grunts, short burst of breaths, and at climax, a long throaty note of satisfaction. His partner usually sounded like a high-pitched hyperventilator, like she was not getting enough air and her breath was cut short. I thought, on several occasions, she was going to pass out from coital delight.

Keith’s partner that day was not his girlfriend.

This one was a hummer, a giggler, a gasper. She was a talker, too—not hot sex talk, but casual conversation talk, like, “When we’re done (gasp) maybe we can (giggle) go to Applebee’s (hum) for Happy Hour.”

Can I come too? I wanted to say. I love the Bourbon Street Steak.

The sex didn’t last long and they didn’t go to Applebee’s afterwards. All I heard was Keith weeping, and saying he had fucked up. I warmed up a frozen Lean Cuisine entreé in the microwave and huddled against the wall for story time.

Misti was not forgiving, and neither, it seemed, was the temptress. Poor Keith eventually moved out. This was the nature of living in this apartment complex. My neighbors came and went. Some graduated, some flunked out. Some were forcibly removed by the landlord for illegal substances on the premises—the smell of weed wafting from underneath apartment doors—or vomiting in the pool or drunken disorderly conduct. Keith was replaced by an Indian student who, in the afternoons, blared Bollywood music for the bewildered Illinoisans to hear. He lasted a semester and was replaced by a frazzled-looking woman with big bulky glasses. She knocked many times on my door, asking to borrow computer paper, looking as if she were on the verge of a breakdown. She talked to herself often, and I always heard the buzz of her printer. A philosophy major.

And finally: the woman with the dog.
I only knew of my new neighbor because of the barking. The first week was intolerable. The dog barked at my every sound. If I walked to the kitchen and the floor creaked, it barked. If I used the bathroom, it barked. Throughout the day, I sat as still as possible, not moving an inch in fear of the bark. The dog seemed constantly aware of me, directing its bark as I moved through my apartment. I barely had enough sleep because I stayed up late into the night, not because of the bark, but because of the prospects of the bark. I learned to anticipate every canine tremble. During the day, I tried to cover it up with music, turning the volume high so all I could hear was the hard alternative stuff I was currently into, but the bark penetrated the chaos of drums and screechy electric guitar solos.

I’d been reading poetry for my literature course, learning the rhythms of verse, and the barks were like alarming end-stopped lines to an unwritten poem of a single man’s life. In Billy Collins’s poem, “Another Reason I Don’t Keep a Gun in the House,” he writes about the neighbor dog’s endless bark:

I close all the windows in the house
and put on a Beethoven symphony full blast
but I can still hear him muffled under the music,
barking, barking, barking,

and now I can see him sitting in the orchestra,
his head raised confidently as if Beethoven
had included a part for barking dog.

This bark was not just part of the music. It was part of every sound of the day.

I thought I would go mad. I even considered wooing my roommate back, so he could rage and possibly terrify the dog into silence. I thought if the barking didn’t stop I would march over to the main office with my complaint.

I had it all planned out. Something melodramatic. When you live alone, you let your imagination run. I would take my cue from Tom Cruise in A Few Good Men. I would express my discontent with a bulging vein in my forehead. I would tell the landlord in a slick and coy and cocksure voice, “Miss Landlady, I have been paying good goddamn money”—I would say goddamn—“for over a year. Never late with the rent. Never a complaint about me.” I paused to allow for that serious silence to settle.
The landlord recoiled in her cheap office chair. She watched me with a frightened eye, watched how I knotted my jaw. Then I said, “Now tell me, what are we gonna do about that goddamn dog?”

I didn’t follow through.

Not just because it was never in me to do something like that, but because I received a note from my new neighbor. It was on a light blue index card. It smelled nice. *Sorry for all the barking*, it read. *She’s a pup. We’re in training. She’ll be quieter. I promise.*

**Living on your own you fall into a routine after a while.** You wake up at the exact same time every day, 7:35. You eat the same breakfast, a banana and vitamin supplements, and counteract it all with two-and-a-half cigarettes on the drive to school. You park in the same spot, cross the same railroad tracks, and get to your class about ten minutes early so you can smoke. After classes, you find a coffeehouse off the strip and sip on a cappuccino, reading. Sometimes a friend joins you and you gossip about the hot new English Lit professor from NYC or whether the hippie with endless hair is sleeping with that malnourished nerd who talks about literature in another language. But often you are alone with Virginia Woolf or Thomas Hardy or Jane Austen. Finishing your mid-afternoon break, you head to the gym, run on the treadmill, lift minimal weights, play an hour of tennis with a pro who is half the size of you but can hit the ball a ton. When you’re done, you think about your options for dinner: 1) frozen entée, 2) chicken wings and fried rice from the Chinese place, 3) cook something. It’s usually option 1 or 2, unless it’s a weekend, and you make the one recipe your mother has taught you, Thai chicken in the oven.

The dog had worked itself into my routine. When I climbed the stairs into my apartment, it would start to bark. The bark had changed in the last three weeks. No longer was it high-pitched and projected as if through a megaphone. It was calmer, less alarming, more like a greeting. No longer did it bark when I moved about. Instead, I listened to its collar jingling as it trotted from place to place, and it was like the small temple bells in Thailand, a sound that immediately soothed me.

I had not seen the dog, not once, but I knew the owner had her own routines. In the morning, up even before me, she took the dog out for a run, returning just as I began peeling my banana. She watched *Friends* and *ER* regularly—I heard Dr. Green question a diagnosis often—and Sarah McLachlan sang softly through the CD player at night. Like me, her mother called every day at the same time, but unlike me, she spent...
more than a few seconds talking to her. In the evening, around seven or eight, she took the dog out again. I sometimes hurried to the peephole to catch a glimpse of the dog, but it was too small to see. I only heard its clicky claws on the linoleum floors, and usually caught a glimpse of my neighbor, a streak of brown hair whizzing by.

As much as I was fascinated with the dog, I was as fascinated with its faceless owner. Sometimes I heard her through the wall. When the dog barked at an alien sound, she was quick to silence it with a delicate voice. *Hush now. Everything is OK. It was just the wind.* Her voice was like a gentle wind, and it immediately calmed the dog. Hearing it I imagined the kindest woman in the world; there was a princess-like etherealness to her voice, as if she was out to charm anyone in her proximity.

I began to imagine what she might look like. Her skin was white, so white that on winter days, only her cheeks and the tip of her cute nose turned pink. Her eyes were light blue, the same blue of the index card she left me, and she possessed long swirly hair like ripples in water. She wasn’t skinny like CK models, but athletic, sturdy, what the Commodores called a “Brick House.” I imagined she enjoyed ripped jeans and T-shirts and bandanas, and didn’t mind putting her hair into pigtails. She had a laissez-faire attitude about appearance, never wearing make-up, but who needed it when you had lips and cheeks as red as a cherry?

My imaginations went far beyond appearance. I went on dates with her: romantic dog walks in wide open meadows or horseback riding even though I was petrified of horses or classic English balls. She was accompanied by her dog. I was reading too much Austen and all I could think about was Darcy’s home in Pemberley and the scenic expanse of the Lake District. How odd would it have been to have an Asian man from Chicago like me wooing an elegant English woman in the early 1800s? No matter. Our love defied social boundaries. Who in their right mind would stop something so beautiful?

“Dude, you need to get the fuck out of the apartment.”

My friends from Chicago called often at night, especially Derek, my overly testosteroned Polish pal who worked in the lumber section at Home Depot. Though he was the crassest person I’d ever met, there was a sensitive side to him, a romantic comedy side he never showed anyone but me. Because of this, I told Derek about the neighbor and her dog and my strange imaginings.

“She could be the one,” I said. “You ever think of that?”

“You haven’t met her.”

“I have a feeling. More than a feeling.” I went on to sing a couple
bars of Boston’s hit song, off tune and obnoxious, then thought whether the woman heard my pitchy voice through the wall.

“Shut up,” Derek said, though I could hear him laughing. “For real, go knock on her door. Don’t be such a pussy.”

“You knock on her door.”

“You know I would. I’d be hitting that shit sideways and the dog could be licking my balls.”

“Appropriate.”

“Don’t get college on me.”

The dog barked once, and I thought it knew what Derek had said and was not happy.

“Listen,” Derek said. “Three things. One, you need to get the fuck out of that apartment. Stop reading those cheesy books you got. Two, go over there and say hi. That’s it. If she’s the one, you’ll know for sure. Three, I got a surprise for you. Should be arriving next week. You’ll love it.” He laughed and hung up.

Fuck.

In my Literature Appreciation class, taught by a graduate student whose name has slipped through the cracks of my memory, we read Chekov’s “The Lady with the Dog.” Most of the discussion centered on Chekov’s style. “In many ways,” the TA said, “he is the father of minimalism. He paved the way for Hemingway and Carver.” We examined closely the power of simplicity, how the smallest number of words created maximum effect. I enjoyed this class, enjoyed my teacher’s enthusiasm. He was one of those cool teachers with a goatee, spiked hair, and round wire-rimmed glasses. He spoke animatedly with his hands and either sat on the desk or flipped the chair around and straddled it. During the entire semester, I never saw him wear anything else but a suede patched sports coat and dress shirt. Often, we smoked together on the English building balcony.

“This is a blueprint, people, to the short story form as it is today.”

He opened it up for further discussion. One of the stupider ones in class said, “I hated the title. It’s called ‘The Lady with the Dog’ or whatever, and the dog was barely in there. It could’ve been called ‘The Lady.’” He nodded like he had said something profound. “Like, I don’t even remember what kind of dog it was.”

I rolled my eyes. Pomeranian, Moron, I wanted to say. I sat in the back, an observer, not much into participation yet. I was between majors and wasn’t sure I would commit to English.
The TA caught me. “You look like you want to say something.”
I shrugged.
“Come on,” he said.
“Well, the dog was the reason Dmitri and Anna met,” I said quietly.
“He paid attention to the dog. It was a Pomeranian. Without the dog, you wouldn’t have the affair. You wouldn’t have a story.” I felt semi-profound saying this, but I remembered I didn’t have a clue about the breed of my neighbor’s dog, the one I almost lived with. And despite our weeks together, I never heard its name.

I don’t remember what happened in class after that. I don’t remember much except for all the books and poems and stories we read in that class. That I could never forget. Afterwards, however, on the smokers’ balcony, my mind rounded back to the story. Two unhappy people stuck in unhappy marriages. Chekov’s story made me feel lonely all of a sudden. I puffed on a cigarette, my eighth one of the day, on schedule. I thought about having another one when my TA came out, an unlit cigarette already between his lips. He nodded at me, lit his stick, and said, “Thank you for not being stupid.”

On my door was a UPS delivery slip. A package for me was left with my neighbor. I shuddered. This was Derek’s plan all along. To make me knock on her door. To set eyes on her for the first time. To introduce myself.

I went into my apartment and hopped into the shower. When I was done, I coated myself with cologne, the good stuff. Putting on a sweater vest and jeans, I went over what I would say and how I would say it. Should I be like Fonzie, and act like I was too-cool-for-school? Should I be like James Dean, tortured and magnetic? Or how about cocky like Cary Grant? Before I could step out of my apartment, I heard her door open and the dog’s speedy trot. When I opened my door, they were gone, but a box was on the ground. I picked it up. I knew what was in it immediately. Porn. Derek’s favorite. It was addressed to Penis Head, and it was from the man who loves you the most.

In late spring, my mother called and said she wanted to spend the weekend with me. She would take the train and get in Friday evening. She hadn’t seen the apartment since she moved me in. I wanted to impress her; her only son was now an adult. I ditched Friday classes to clean the house and hide all of Derek’s porn. He was relentless. After the videos came magazines and then a porn CD-rom.
Every package was addressed to Penis Head, or sometimes Mr. Penis Head.

I tore down my posters of scantily clad women and replaced them with posters of my favorite tennis players. I dusted off my Buddha in my bedroom and sprayed the apartment with air freshener, hoping it would mask the stale smoke scent. I cleaned out the refrigerator, a gruesome task, and made sure to stock it with vegetables. That weekend, I planned to cook for my mother for the first time.

When she arrived, this adult persona I had planned to assume melted away. We reverted back to our roles. I was her son. She was my mother. We were comfortable with that.

In general, my mother was low maintenance. She didn’t need to go out. She liked sitting on the balcony of my apartment looking at the world and reading her Thai soap opera magazines. In the evenings, if there was a horror movie or animal documentary on television, she was content. I drove her to campus Saturday afternoon and I gave her a tour of all the buildings I had classes in. The hardest part of her visit was I couldn’t smoke. This remained a secret.

On the Sunday before she left, I cooked her dinner. I was clumsy with the knife, careless with my measurements. In truth, I was nervous and kept saying this was no way like Thai chicken in Thailand. The end result: the chicken was burnt and overly salted; the rice was too wet. My mother, however, ate without complaint. She said I was becoming a man. I told her to be quiet, but felt good inside.

When we were done, we sat at the dining table. I could hear the dog scratching itself on the other side of the wall. I imagined how confusing this weekend was for it. Suddenly there was a new alien voice next door to bark at. And this voice did not speak an understandable language. This voice sometimes laughed too loudly when an ax murderer killed a teenager on TV. This voice liked to sing the soundtrack to *The Sound of Music*, mispronouncing the lyrics.

“I don’t want to leave,” my mother said in Thai.

“Stay the week. I’ll cook every day.”

She smiled and shook her head. “Work.”

“Call in sick,” I suggested, but knew my mother would never do it. After working over thirty years as a nurse she had probably accrued enough sick days to last five years, yet, in my entire life, she never took a day off, even on those hard days during the divorce, where all her emotional energy was zapped out of her.

“I’d like to come more often,” she said. “Peaceful here.”
“I always need my laundry done.”
She smacked my hand. “Lazy.” Then, “Better find a good wife to do all this work.”
“Whatever.”
“Thai wife.”
“Whatever.”
“Not like the pictures I find in your closet.”
I nearly choked. She found my posters—blondes, brunettes, redheads in wet T-shirts.
She began to laugh, covering her mouth with her hand. I hadn’t seen her laugh this hard in a long time.
The dog barked, and she laughed harder, hitting the table.
In the middle of the night, I woke up to my mother singing softly to herself and the dog barking. She was usually up at this hour, working the night shift. Underneath the crack of my bedroom door, the light was on and I assumed she was reading. When she found a break in the song, she told the dog, “Good boy, good girl, good boy, good girl,” in a sing-song whisper. It didn’t take long. The dog stopped barking, and I fell back asleep.

In Dr. Ian Dunbar’s book *How To Teach a New Dog Old Tricks*, he writes:

No one would think of putting a shock collar on a canary, squirting lemon juice into a baby’s mouth or beating a husband with a rolled-up newspaper and having his vocal cords cut out for ‘singing’ in the shower. However, people think nothing of doing all of these and more to barking dogs.

I won’t lie. In that first week, any of these options seemed viable. But the barking became part of my day. It was something I learned to adjust to. In fact, I grew to love the sound of it.

One afternoon, I decided to do some studying at the library. I shut my door but left my keys inside the apartment. I tried to break in with a credit card, something I had always been gifted at, but the lock wasn’t friendly. I had no way of getting a hold of maintenance, and the main office was closed on Sundays.

I decided to finally do it. I knocked on my neighbor’s door.
The dog went into an excited fit of barking, as if it too had been waiting for this moment. I heard it leaping on the door, its little paws
pushing off the wood. Then I heard her voice. _Hush_, she said. _Quiet, baby_. When she opened up, the dog rushed out and started barking and sniffing. It went back and forth between my legs; it hopped up and pushed off my thighs.

“He doesn’t bite,” she said.

I knelt down and let him sniff my hand. “I locked myself out,” I said, more to the dog than her. The dog was black and tan with a clipped tail. He moved his body against my hands, wiggling and sniffing and barking. I stood up. When I did, he backed away and barked again.

“Mind if I use your phone to call maintenance?”

Finally, I took a good look at her. She was beautiful, but not the way I had imagined her. She did not have brown hair at all, but blond and short. She wore glasses that she pushed up her nose, giving her that cute nerdy appearance.

“Sure,” she said. “Come in.”

I was happy to see that her place was as nondescript as mine, minus the busty babes posters on my wall. It smelled nicer for sure, and I noticed a bowl of potpourri on top of her TV. Her couch was blue, while mine was a pink with swirly designs that made it look camouflage. She pointed to a phone. It resembled keys on a piano.

“Do you have the number?” I said.

“Yeah,” she said and disappeared into the bedroom. The dog stayed with me. I was mesmerized by his movements, how he curled into a C around my legs. He kept barking and barking. Wiggling and wiggling. He appeared to be saying, _At last! At last!_ She came out with a sheet of phone numbers management gave us when we moved in.

“He likes you,” she said.

“I like him.” I dialed, and as the phone rang, I asked her what kind of dog he was.

“Cocker spaniel.”

“He’s adorable.”

The maintenance guy picked up. I told him I was locked out. I told him my apartment number. He said he’d be over in ten minutes. I gave her back the sheet of phone numbers. “Thanks a lot.”

“No problem,” she said.

“I like your phone.”

“Silly isn’t it?”

“Pretty cool actually.”

“Does his barking ever bother you?”
The dog was sitting now, looking up at me, his tongue hanging out the side of his mouth. I knelt down again and offered him my hand. He came and licked it twice and forced his way closer. I patted him all over. “I don’t even notice it.”

We didn’t see much of each other after that. Sometimes I’d pass the two of them on the stairs and we’d say hi, the dog always happy to see me. After our meeting, he didn’t bark as much. Why would he when he knew the person on the other side of the wall?

Derek was right. I would know if she was the one if I knocked on her door. She wasn’t. Who would believe in such a silly notion anyway? I had. A boy who lived alone in an apartment. A boy sensitive to sound.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, which we covered not long before Chekov, Darcy spoke too rashly to his friend about Elizabeth Bennet. “She is tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt me.” Darcy and Elizabeth took hundreds of pages to realize they were in love and within those hundreds of pages they were understanding themselves before they could understand each other.

All I understood of that day was, yes, my neighbor was beautiful, and yes, she had a cool piano phone, and yes, her apartment smelled like flowers, but it was her dog I found of interest, and it was his voice that for months was my companion on lonely nights.
Contributors’ Notes


Tabaré Alvarez received his MFA from Southern Illinois University Carbondale in 2003. His fiction has appeared in Epiphany, Bewildering Stories, Like Water Burning, and Reflection’s Edge. He lives in the Dominican Republic.

Jeffrey Bean is an assistant professor of English at Central Michigan University. His first collection of poems, Diminished Fifth, was published by David Robert Books in 2009. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in FIELD, New York Quarterly, and Subtropics.

Brian M. Biggs is a retired theater teacher currently writing, gardening, and helping his wife tend to their four horses. In April 2009, he was selected by the Pacific Northwest Writers Association to read a piece from his memoir at Borders Bookstore in Olympia, Washington. Another piece from the memoir will be published later this year in a book from the Oregon Department of Veterans’ Affairs.

Bruce Bond’s most recent books include Peal (Etruscan Press) and Blind Rain (Louisiana State University Press), which was a finalist for The Poets’ Prize. He is Regents Professor of English at the University of North Texas and poetry editor for American Literary Review.

Barrie Jean Borich is the author of My Lesbian Husband (Graywolf Press), winner of an American Library Association GLBT Nonfiction Book Award. She has new work in recent and forthcoming issues of Ecotone, Hotel Amerika, New Ohio Review, and Seattle Review, and holds an MFA from the Rainier Writing Workshop. She is the nonfiction editor of Water~Stone Review and an assistant professor in Hamline University’s Graduate School of Liberal Studies MFA Program in St. Paul, Minnesota.
Contributors’ Notes

**Heidi Czerwiec** is an associate professor at the University of North Dakota, where she helps direct the annual Writers Conference. She is the author of *Hiking the Maze* (Finishing Line Press), the recipient of a 2009 Bush Foundation/Dakota Creative Connections artist grant, and the Howard Nemerov Scholar at the 2010 Sewanee Writers Conference. She has poems or translations published or forthcoming in *Connecticut Review, Measure, Nimrod,* and *International Poetry Review.*


**Jamey Genna** teaches fiction writing at the Writing Salon in Berkeley, California. She is a graduate of the Masters in Writing program at the University of San Francisco. Her short fiction has been published in *Cutthroat, dislocate, Georgetown Review, Iowa Review,* and *Vestal Review,* among others. Most recently, you can find her work online at *Eleven Eleven, Stone’s Throw Magazine,* and *You Must Be This Tall to Ride.*

**Carrie Green** was born and raised in DeLand, Florida, and lives in Lexington, Kentucky. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Gulf Stream, Kestrel, Saw Palm, ABZ: A Poetry Magazine, Georgetown Review,* and *Valparaiso Poetry Review.*

**Elizabeth Hazen**’s poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Bellevue Literary Review, Fourteen Hills, Nimrod, The Threepenny Review,* and elsewhere. She lives in Baltimore, Maryland.

**Dionne Irving** was selected the 2009 winner of the Hurston/Wright Award for College Writers. Her work has appeared in *Big Muddy, Carve Magazine,* and *Teacher as Writer.* She is a graduate of Florida State University and Rhode Island College, and she is currently earning her doctorate in creative writing at Georgia State University.

**Luke Johnson** is from Ithaca, New York. His poems are forthcoming in *32 Poems, Hayden’s Ferry Review, Nimrod,* and *Passages North.* The sonnets included in this issue are part of a sequence entitled “Aerials.”
Contributors’ Notes

Peter Kline’s recent work can be found in Lo-Ball, ZYZZYVA, Drunken Boat, Able Muse, Quiddity, and Poet Lore. He is a former Wallace Stegner Fellow, and currently lives in San Francisco, California, where he is a lecturer at Stanford University.

Michael Levan received his MFA in poetry from Western Michigan University and is currently a Ph.D. candidate in English at the University of Tennessee, where he serves as nonfiction editor of Grist: The Journal for Writers. His poems and reviews can be found in recent or forthcoming issues of New South, Harpur Palate, The Pinch, Cimarron Review, CutBank, Nimrod, and Third Coast. He lives in Knoxville, Tennessee, with his wife, Molly, and son, Atticus.

Sandy Longhorn is the author of Blood Almanac (Anhinga Press), which won the 2005 Anhinga Prize for Poetry. Her poems have appeared in The Collagist, American Poetry Journal, Connotation Press, and New Madrid. She is a recipient of an Individual Artist Fellowship from the Arkansas Arts Council.

Angie Macri’s recent work appears or is forthcoming in Quiddity, Redivider, roger, South Dakota Review, and Southern Indiana Review. She teaches at Pulaski Technical College and lives in Little Rock, Arkansas. She is a recipient of an Individual Artist Fellowship from the Arkansas Arts Council.

Adrian Matejka is the author of The Devil’s Garden (Alice James Books) and Mixology (Penguin USA), which was a winner of the 2008 National Poetry Series. “Fisticuffs” is from his manuscript-in-progress, The Big Smoke: Jack Johnson Tells It. He teaches at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

Tara McDaniel lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and she is currently a student at the Bennington Writing Seminars. Her previous work has featured in Cimarron Review, Marginalia: The Journal of Innovative Literature, Gloom Cupboard, and elsewhere.

Janet McNally has published fiction in New Madrid, Stone Canoe, Iron Horse Literary Review and others, and she has poetry forthcoming in Confrontation, Poet Lore and Bellingham Review. She is a graduate of the MFA program at the University of Notre Dame. In 2008, she was
Contributors’ Notes

awarded a fellowship in fiction by the New York Foundation for the Arts. She teaches creative writing and English at Canisius High School and Canisius College in Buffalo, New York.

Rachel Meier’s fiction has appeared in the Laurel Review and Switchback. Her story, “Causeway,” was a finalist in Glimmer Train’s open fiction contest. She is currently at work on her first novel.

J. Jason Mitchell currently lives in London, England, where he advises the government of the United Kingdom on alternative energy projects in Sub-Saharan Africa. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in Poetry East, Meridian, Stand (UK), Carolina Quarterly, Poet Lore, Nimrod, William and Mary Review, and Portland Review.

Sarah Nance has worked as a publicity intern at the University of Wisconsin Press. She received her B.A. in English from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 2010, and she was on the fiction staff of the Madison Review. In the Fall of 2010, she will be starting work toward a Ph.D. at the University of California, Los Angeles.

Aimee Nezhukumatathil is the author of two poetry collections: Miracle Fruit, winner of the Tupelo Press Prize, ForeWord Magazine’s Book of the Year Award, and the Global Filipino Award; and At the Drive-In Volcano, winner of the 2007 Balcones Prize. She was awarded an NEA Fellowship in Poetry, the Pushcart Prize, the Boatwright Prize from Shenandoah, the Richard Hugo Award from Poetry Northwest, and a Luschei Award from Prairie Schooner. She is an associate professor of English at the State University of New York-Fredonia, where she won the Hagan Young Scholar Award and the SUNY Chancellor’s Medal of Excellence for Scholarship and Creative Activities.

James Nolan’s unpublished novel Higher Ground, set in New Orleans, Louisiana, in the aftermath of a devastating hurricane, was awarded the 2008 William Faulkner-Wisdom Gold Medal. His latest book, Perpetual Care, won the 2009 Next-Generation Indie Book Award for Best Short Story Collection. His books of poetry include Why I Live in the Forest and What Moves Is Not the Wind (Wesleyan University Press). He is a frequent contributor to Boulevard, and his fiction has appeared in Shenandoah, Callaloo, and New Orleans Noir (Akashic Books).
Contributors’ Notes

Jonathan Rice’s poems have been published in AGNI Online, American Literary Review, Asheville Poetry Review, Colorado Review, Gulf Coast, Notre Dame Review, Passages North, Sycamore Review, Phoebe, and Witness, among others, and were included in the Best of the Web 2009 and Best New Poets 2008. His work was also selected for the 2008 Gulf Coast Poetry Prize, the 2008 Milton Kessler Memorial Prize from Harpur Palate, the 2008 Yellowwood Poetry Prize from Yalobusha Review, and the 2006 AWP Intro Journals Project. He received an MFA from Virginia Commonwealth University, and he is currently pursuing a Ph.D. at Western Michigan University, where he is an assistant to the editor at New Issues Press, and an assistant poetry editor for Third Coast.

J. Allyn Rosser’s third collection of poems, Foiled Again, won the New Criterion Poetry Prize in 2007. She has been the recipient of a 2010 Lannan Foundation Writing Residency and a 2010 Guggenheim Fellowship. She teaches at Ohio University, where she edits New Ohio Review.

Carrie Shipers has published poems in Connecticut Review, Hayden’s Ferry Review, North American Review, and other journals. She is the author of two chapbooks, Ghost-Writing and Rescue Conditions, and a full-length collection, Ordinary Mourning, the winner of 2009 ABZ First Book Poetry Contest.

Anya Silver’s first book of poetry, The Ninety-Third Name of God, will be published by the Louisiana State University Press in Fall 2010. She has published poetry in many journals, most recently in Image, Prairie Schooner, New Ohio Review, Witness, and Christianity and Literature. She teaches in the English Department of Mercer University and lives in Macon, Georgia, with her husband and son.

Brian Simoneau’s poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in Boxcar Poetry Review, Natural Bridge, Poet Lore, Poetry East, Red Rock Review, Smartish Pace, and others. He currently lives in Boston, Massachusetts, with his wife and daughter.

Theresa D. Smith received an Academy of American Poets Prize in a contest judged by Ely Shipley in April 2009. She received her MFA at Purdue University, where she also served as poetry editor of Sycamore
Contributors’ Notes

Review. Her poetry appears or is forthcoming in *Shenandoah* and *Harpur Palate*.

**Ira Sukrungruang**’s recent work has appeared in *Bellingham Review, Water~Stone*, and *Indiana Review*. He is the author of the memoir *Talk Thai: The Adventures of Buddhist Boy* (University of Missouri Press) and the creative nonfiction editor of *Sweet: A Literary Confection* (sweetlit.com). He is an assistant professor and teaches in the MFA program at the University of South Florida.

**Shannon Sweetnam** is president of Sweet Ink, a writing, editing and proofreading company specializing in writing for and about business. She is also communications director for the law firm Sweetnam LLC. A graduate of both Hollins University’s MA program in fiction and Washington University’s MFA program in fiction, her poetry and fiction have won numerous awards and appeared in numerous periodicals. Her most recent awards include honorable mentions in fiction contests from *New Millennium Writings, Dominion Review*, and *Glimmer Train*. She was also recipient of a 2004–2005 Illinois Arts Council grant. She lives in Lake Forest, Illinois, with her husband and three sons.

**Ryan Teitman** is completing his MFA in creative writing at Indiana University and will be a Wallace Stegner Fellow in poetry at Stanford University this Fall. New poems are forthcoming in *Copper Nickel, Sycamore Review*, and *Washington Square*.

**Mary Van Denend** has an essay on the theme of epiphany included in “The Epiphany Project” for the Thomas Merton Institute’s website. Kelly Cherry selected her poem “Great Blue” as a finalist for *The Sow’s Ear Review* annual poetry competition, forthcoming in 2011. Van Denend works in the field of Arts in Health Care and lives in Corvallis, Oregon.

**Ronald Wallace**’s twelve books of poetry, fiction, and criticism include, most recently, *Long for This World: New and Selected Poems* and *For a Limited Time Only*, both from the University of Pittsburgh Press. Co-Director of the University of Wisconsin-Madison’s Creative Writing Program, and poetry editor for the University of Wisconsin Press, he divides his time between Madison, and a forty-acre farm in Bear Valley, Wisconsin.
**Contributors’ Notes**

**Jake Adam York** is the author of three books of poems: *Murder Ballads*, winner of the Elixir Press Prize in Poetry; *A Murmuration of Starlings* (Southern Illinois University Press), winner of the Crab Orchard Open Competition and the 2008 Colorado Book Award; and *Persons Unknown* (forthcoming 2010, Southern Illinois University Press). He is also the author of a work of literary history, *The Architecture of Address: The Monument and Public Speech in American Poetry* (Routledge). Originally from Alabama, he now lives in Denver, Colorado, where he is an associate professor of English and Director of Creative Writing at the University of Colorado Denver. He edits *Copper Nickel* with his students and colleagues and serves as a contributing editor for *Shenandoah*.

**Josephine Yu** is a doctoral candidate at Florida State University. She is the poetry winner of *Meridian’s* 2010 Editors’ Prize, and her poems have appeared in the *Beloit Poetry Journal, 32 Poems, Kalliope, River City, Best New Poets 2008, Meridian,* and *TriQuarterly*. 
Crab Orchard Series
In Poetry
2009 First Book Award Announcement

Crab Orchard Review and Southern Illinois University Press are pleased to announce the winner of the 2009 Crab Orchard Series in Poetry First Book Award.

Our final judge, Michelle Boisseau, selected Traci Brimhall’s *Rookery* as the winner. She has been awarded a $1000 prize and will receive $1500 as an honorarium for a reading at Southern Illinois University Carbondale. Her reading will take place at the 2011 Little Grassy Spring Literary Festival and will follow the publication of her collection by Southern Illinois University Press in December 2010.

We want to thank all of the poets who entered manuscripts in our Crab Orchard Series in Poetry First Book Award Competition last year and this year. We will announce the winner of the 2010 Crab Orchard Series in Poetry First Book Award in October on Crab Orchard Review’s website:

CrabOrchardReview.siuc.edu/conpo1.html
Crab Orchard Review and Southern Illinois University Press are pleased to announce the 2010 Crab Orchard Series in Poetry Open Competition selections.

Our final judge, Michael Waters, selected *The Black Ocean* by Brian Barker and *Smith Blue* by Camille Dungy as the winners. Both winners have been awarded a $2000 prize and will receive $1500 as an honorarium for a reading at Southern Illinois University Carbondale as part of the 2011 Devil’s Kitchen Fall Literary Festival. Both readings will follow the publication of the poets’ collections by Southern Illinois University Press in June 2011.

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:

[CrabOrchardReview.siuc.edu](http://CrabOrchardReview.siuc.edu)
Two winners – $3500 and publication each

All unpublished, original collections of poems written in English by United States citizens and permanent residents are eligible* (individual poems may have been previously published). (*Current or former students, colleagues, and close friends of the final judge, Yusef Komunyakaa, and current students and employees of Southern Illinois University and authors published by Southern Illinois University Press are not eligible for the Open Competition.) Two volumes of poems will be selected from an open competition of manuscripts postmarked October 1 through November 16, 2010. The winners will each receive a publication contract with Southern Illinois University Press. In addition, both winners will be awarded a $2000 prize and $1500 as an honorarium for a reading at Southern Illinois University Carbondale. Both readings will follow the publication of the poets’ collections by Southern Illinois University Press.

All submissions must be accompanied by a $25 entry fee. 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
"Strange Land" by Todd Hearon

"Todd Hearon’s engaging, inventive language penetrates to what he calls ‘the dark of your memory,’ a region where dreamlife and language overlap, where occulted feelings find the chords and discords of speech....This is a first book of rare mastery.” —Robert Pinsky, former U.S. Poet Laureate

"These are beautiful uncompromising poems.”—David Ferry, author of Of No Country I Know: New and Selected Poems and Translations

"At once inventive and elegant, hungering and assured, immediate and literary, visceral and visionary, the poems of Strange Land range broadly across the idiomatic and the oracular with a lyric economy that is as deftly accomplished as it is exhilarating. Strange Land is an exceptional first book, ambitious and necessary.”—Daniel Tobin, author of Second Things

Copublished with Crab Orchard Review

88 pages, $14.95 paper
978-0-8093-2966-3

Available at major retailers and independent bookstores, or from

SOUTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY PRESS
Orders & Inquiries • TEL 800-621-2736 • FAX 800-621-8476
www.siupress.com
Threshold
Poems by
Jennifer Richter

“Threshold weaves domestic details—children, neighbors, ordinary moments—into an extraordinary account of pain and survival. But what appears to be, at first, a fractured narrative of turmoil, heals in the craft of these poems, into an account of a mind growing in and through language.”—Eavan Boland, author of Domestic Violence: Poems

“Throughout this lovely book, the music of survival and transcendence undergirds a song of the body in its changes.”—Natasha Trethewey, author of Native Guard

“Threshold sparkles with a shaped brilliance. Each poem is intensely believable because there isn’t a decorous flare of language here. To cross the threshold is to (pro)claim the metaphysical that resides in the everyday.”—Yusef Komunyakaa, author of Warhorses: Poems

Copublished with Crab Orchard Review

88 pages, $14.95 paper
ISBN 0-8093-2965-4
978-0-8093-2965-6

Available at major retailers and independent bookstores, or from

SOUTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY PRESS

Orders & Inquiries • TEL 800-621-2736 • FAX 800-621-8476
www.siupress.com
“Through a ceremony of language and song, A Murmuration of Starlings consecrates and memorializes the souls, blood, and bones of those black men and women slaughtered on the altar of hate and violence during the Civil Rights era. With a lucid, shrewd intelligence and a commanding vision of healing and atonement, Jake Adam York makes an offering of images and music that seems the foundation of a new understanding and remembrance.”—Major Jackson, author of Leaving Saturn and Hoops

“A Murmuration of Starlings is a fierce, beautiful, necessary book. Fearless in their reckoning, these poems resurrect contested histories and show us that the past—with its troubled beauty, its erasures, and its violence—weighs upon us all… a murmuration so that we don’t forget, so that no one disappears into history.”—Natasha Trethewey, author of Native Guard

Copublished with Crab Orchard Review

88 pages, $14.95 paper
978-0-8093-2837-2

Available at major retailers and independent bookstores, or from

SOUTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY PRESS
Orders & Inquiries • TEL 800-621-2736 • FAX 800-621-8476
www.siupress.com
**Persons Unknown**

Poems by Jake Adam York

“Elegiac and epic, these poems broaden the limits of the American imagination on the subject of Jim Crow, an era as worthy of mythologizing as the War of Independence or World War II. I am grateful that York is applying his prodigious talent to this history and I am profoundly shaken by the result.” —Anthony Grooms, author of Bombingham

“Jake Adam York’s beautiful poetry reclaims the voices of America’s disappeared. This elegant victory of memory offers us a map to justice and hope if we but heed the call.” —Susan M. Glisson, author of The Human Tradition in the Civil Rights Movement

“These poems are corrosive, blunt, historical as photographs we know from front-page news, but they have also the depth and tang of sweet dawn before anything has happened, before the lynchings, the blood…. Persons Unknown is bravely done work and Jake Adam York is, now, a necessary poet among us.” —Dave Smith, author of Little Boats, Unsaved: Poems, 1992–2004

**Persons Unknown**

104 pages, $14.95
paper, ISBN 0-8093-2998-0
978-0-8093-2998-4

Copublished with Crab Orchard Review

Available at major retailers and independent bookstores, or from

SOUTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY PRESS
Orders & Inquiries • TEL 800-621-2736 • FAX 800-621-8476
www.siupress.com
Rookery

Poems by

Traci Brimhall

“With a stunning mastery of metaphor, linguistic precision, and a soulful determined vision, Brimhall’s work reveals an artist tuned to the significance of everyday experience, from the panicking heartbeats of birds to the spiking pulse of mice.” —Dorianne Laux, author of Facts about the Moon

“This emotionally articulate, intense debut gives us the myth of self in its various incarnations: elegiac, surreal, meditative, erotic, dreamlike. I love [Brimhall’s] luscious verbal texturing and lyric slipperiness, an assertive voice, a sensuality, a glow. A beautiful book.” —Ilya Kaminsky, author of Dancing in Odessa

80 pages, $14.95 paper
978-0-8093-2997-7

Copublished with Crab Orchard Review

2009 Winner

Available at major retailers and independent bookstores, or from

SOUTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY PRESS
Orders & Inquiries • TEL 800-621-2736 • FAX 800-621-8476
www.siupress.com
MFA in Creative Writing

Southern Illinois University Carbondale

A 3-Year Program

in Fiction or Poetry

Financial Support Available for All Students Admitted to the MFA Program

Faculty in Fiction
Pinckney Benedict
Beth Lordan
Jacinda Townsend

Faculty in Poetry
Rodney Jones
Judy Jordan
Allison Joseph

For information and application packet, contact Director of Graduate Studies, English Department, Faner Hall 2380 – Mail Code 4503, Southern Illinois University Carbondale, 1000 Faner Drive, Carbondale, IL 62901, or call us at (618) 453-6894. E-mail: gradengl@siu.edu

Visit us at the SIUC Department of English Web site:
http://english.siuc.edu

Home to the award-winning national literary magazine Crab Orchard Review Internships available to students in the MFA program
Crab Orchard Review, the national literary magazine from Southern Illinois University Carbondale, has received awards from the Council of Literary Magazines and Presses and the Illinois Arts Council. A subscription to Crab Orchard Review is $20 for two issues. Subscribe now for some of today’s best new writing.

“A magazine writers admire and readers enjoy.”
**Subscription to Crab Orchard Review**

- ___ 1 year ($20)
- ___ 2 years ($30)
- ___ 3 years ($40)
- ___ Single copy ($12)
- ___ Single copy International ($22)
- ___ Supporting Subscriber ($35/yr)
- ___ Donor ($70/2 yrs)
- ___ Patron ($100/3 yrs)
- ___ Benefactor ($300/Lifetime)
- ___ 1 year Subscription Intl. ($35)

Name

Address

City/State/Zip

Please begin my subscription with Volume ____ Number ____

Send payment to: Crab Orchard Review, Jon Tribble, Managing Editor, Dept. of English, Mail Code 4503, Southern Illinois University, 1000 Faner Drive, Carbondale, IL 62901.

Phone: (618) 453-5321  Fax: (618) 453-8224

Crab Orchard Review is supported, in part, by a grant from the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency, in partnership with the National Endowment for the Arts.
A Call for Submissions

SPECIAL ISSUE: NEW & OLD ~ RE-VISIONS OF THE AMERICAN SOUTH

Crab Orchard Review is seeking work for our Summer/Fall 2011 issue focusing on writing exploring the people, places, history, and new directions that have shaped and are reshaping the American South.

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 through November 1, 2010. We will be reading submissions throughout this period and hope to complete the editorial work on the issue by the end of March 2011. Writers whose work is selected will receive $25 (US) per magazine page ($50 minimum for poetry; $100 minimum for prose) and two copies of the issue. Mail submissions to:

Crab Orchard Review
American South issue
Faner 2380, Mail Code 4503
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
1000 Faner Drive
Carbondale, IL 62901
USA

Address correspondence to:

Allison Joseph, Editor and Poetry Editor
Carolyn Alessio, Prose Editor
Jon Tribble, Managing Editor

For general guidelines, check our website at:

CrabOrchardReview.siuc.edu/guid2.html
In this volume:

Dick Allen
Tabaré Alvarez
Jeffrey Bean
Brian M. Biggs
Bruce Bond
Barrie Jean Borich
Heidi Czerwiec
B.K. Fischer
Jamey Genna
Carrie Green
Elizabeth Hazen
Dionne Irving
Luke Johnson
Peter Kline
Michael Levan
Sandy Longhorn
Angie Macri
Adrian Matejka
Tara McDaniel
Janet McNally
Rachel Meier
J. Jason Mitchell
Sarah Nance
Aimee Nezhukumatathil
James Nolan
Jonathan Rice
J. Allyn Rosser
Carrie Shipers
Anya Silver
Brian Simoneau
Theresa D. Smith
Ira Sukrungruang
Shannon Sweetnam
Ryan Tietman
Mary Van Denend
Ronald Wallace
Jake Adam York
Josephine Yu

Volume 15, Number 1  Winter/Spring 2010

Crab Orchard Review

published by the Department of English
Southern Illinois University Carbondale

$12.00  ISSN 1083-5571