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**Contributors’ Notes**

**A Note on Our Cover**

The seven photographs on the cover were taken in a variety of locations by former and current staff of *Crab Orchard Review*—Sean Chapman, Maggie Graber, Lena Mörsch, Allison Joseph, and Jon Tribble. Those locations include: New York (Sean Chapman), Michigan (Maggie Graber), Massachusetts (Lena Mörsch), New Jersey and Vermont (Allison Joseph), Ohio and Washington, D.C. (Jon Tribble).
Editor’s Prologue: Defining the Undefined

When we at Crab Orchard Review proposed “Due North” as a follow-up to our special issue on the American South, we initially had a hard time defining the region. Everyone has ideas of what the American South consists of—accurate notions or not—but what of the American North? Is it frigid, snowy New England, or the bustling cities we all think of (New York, Boston, Philadelphia, D.C.)? Is it the Midwestern rust belt, with its haunting visions of abandoned manufacturing plants, vacant small towns, and large, empty cities? Does Michigan have anything in common with Maine, Massachusetts with Minnesota? Where does West Virginia go?

All these questions are perplexing, and this issue of Crab Orchard Review does not purport to answer them. Instead, we wanted to see what resonated among writers who were thinking and writing about this region—what concerns and issues did they address? Are they “freer” as writers and thinkers than so-called “Southern” writers?

Like many of the writers in this issue, I am a product of this undefined region. After my very early years in London and Toronto, my Caribbean-immigrant family moved to the Bronx, New York. I grew up playing games of freeze tag in the streets, eating slices of pizza from corner pizzerias, buying penny candy from bodegas that also sold my favorite soda (never a Coke, but a Malta soda that fizzed up my nose and tickled my sinuses), attending Yankees games and going to public schools, culminating in enrolling in the Bronx High School of Science, admittedly a strange place for a budding poet. Attending that high school allowed me to have friends from all over the five boroughs. Many of my friends were immigrant kids like me, often with parents at home who spoke a language other than English. Thoughts of New Jersey and Connecticut were rare (I went to Mystic, Connecticut, once on a grade-school trip, but New Jersey was a wilderness we seldom dared tame, except for rare trips to Great Adventure, the best theme park ever—Coney Island, in my estimation then, was just a neighborhood with a
couple of rides). At that time, my teenage vision of the North included lots of Spanish speakers, fairly reliable public transportation (I lived at the end of the number BX22 route and Bronx Science was at the other end), and Chinese food that came in big white cartons from tiny hole-in-the-wall joints (unless I took the train down to Chinatown).

But I was a cagey kid—I thought that my best chance of college admission was to get out of my own geographical region. So I wound up in rural Gambier, Ohio, at a college of fourteen hundred students, Kenyon College. Was this my North? Certainly not! The only Spanish speakers I could find were in the foreign language department, the closest Chinese restaurant to campus served crackers, not fried noodles, with their wonton soup (abomination), and the college seemed to have just as many students, if not more, from Massachusetts than Ohio. My vision of the North expanded to include people who dressed straight out of the L.L. Bean and Eddie Bauer catalogs—those were days of *The Official Preppy Handbook* being a bestseller. My head swirled with culture shock all four years, but I managed to graduate.

Now I live in a Northern state—Illinois—but so far south in it that waitresses in restaurants ask if I want my tea “sweet or unsweet.” My head feels that same swirly sensation these days when I board a train in small-town Carbondale and get off, hours later, in Chicago. Chicago and New York both resonate as “the North” for me now, though often, Chicago feels a whole lot colder (with a lot more wind).

Perhaps my personal story illustrates there is no “true North,” which is why this issue is titled “Due North” instead. We wanted to go beyond placid snowy New England landscapes to see what else writers had on their minds.

Just as we found there was no one “American South,” there is no one “American North,” despite the cheap stereotypes forced on us by TV (*Jersey Shore* with its “guidos” and “guidettes,” makes me cringe as much as any overheated antebellum soap opera, though I will admit affection for *The Sopranos*). It’s a confusing world: one of today’s best blues rock bands, The Black Keys, is from Ohio—Akron, to be exact. One of country music’s reigning princesses, Taylor Swift, is originally from Pennsylvania. Everyone everywhere seems to sing along when Jay-Z and Alicia Keys’s “Empire State of Mind” comes on (except for Red Sox fans, who prefer “Sweet Caroline”). I wonder how many of those who are singing along with Jay (real name: Shawn Carter) know that his stage name comes from the J and Z trains in Brooklyn?
Out of the confusion, though, rises a region fascinatingly filled with contradictions: urban and rural, flat and mountainous, populated and barren, rich and poor and every class in-between. We hope this issue can serve as just the start of a conversation about what this region means to each of us and to the nation.
Liz Ahl

After the Fog

Herring Cove Beach, Provincetown, MA

The fog’s retreat is slower than the tide’s which—each wave one step forward, two steps back—lays bare the sand’s blank page in an hour or so.

The fog’s more fickle—it gradually thins to let enough sun strain through to cast a tepid shadow or dry the misted face of a wristwatch

before contracting again, withdrawing the skimpy handful of sparkle from the skin of the waves. We set up our chairs inside

this gauzy curtain, hungry for the salt, the quiet, the hushing of the muffled waters against sand, the washed-out squawks of gulls.

Pelicans and cormorants cruise, fade into the gray behind which the early boats sound their horns and ring their bells.

By noon, the beach has thrown off for good both tide and fog, and the blunt dunes shift into focus, the green scrub of horizon

is sharpened by sun and the blue widens its eye. We read our summer books, eat our snacks, make small and cozy talk, as the beach starts to fill

with the latecomers. How did we wash up here? This comfortable quiet, this piece of shore? Our shared years unfold sturdy chairs beneath us
and we lean in, occasionally reading aloud amusing passages. Later, the mad dash to the car across heated sand and broiling asphalt. Later, the cool of our rented room, wet hair, soap on clean skin. Now, under this sun, I find the solid shape of us, our substance, just another revelation, another daily wonder pulled from the ocean’s misted sleeve.
She slips out past the steaming kettle, her mother turning bacon that sizzles in the pan. Snatches an extra jacket from the porch’s hook, the woolen lining iced with cold. Yesterday’s rake leans on a pile of leaves that Amanda races past, anxious to escape her family’s view. She works the gate latch until it opens, snags her sleeve and hears it rip but she runs on, hefty in her layers, which are getting too warm. In the orchard, the last shriveled apples. Amanda stuffs her pockets full. She wishes for summer, raspberries, her sister’s hands braiding her hair: wild thoughts meant to still her shaking. She opens her mouth to sing but words won’t come, counts backward silently from one hundred instead as she hurries to help the Negro hiding in the woods. She has promised, could do no less after finding him starved and shivering a day ago. She leans against a Winesap to catch her breath, adjusts her father’s worn boots clutched under her coat, the sack of bread-heels stolen from the pie safe. She coughs into her elbow, sniffs the air, smells apples and a hint of snow.
Rebecca Baggett

Andrew Wyeth’s *Cornflowers*

Bits of sky have fallen,  
dotting the hayfield  
here and there with sparks  
of deep blue light.

The old woman—Anna Kuerner,  
86—who rakes the hay  
does not pause  
to look at flowers.  
Blue sky means a chance  
to clear the field  
before the rain she knows  
will come. The work  
eeds doing when the chance  
appears. There’s always  
work, of one kind or another.  
She’s grateful for clear days,  
a chance to make the hay;  
she’s grateful when rain comes  
and she can piece a blanket  
for the winter looming.  
Something blue.  
And warm.  

That’s the thing, not  
all this staring at sky  
and fields and people working.  
Work goes on, no matter  
whose or where. When she  
is gone, and the man  
painting her, there’ll be another  
Kuerner in this field. Same  
blue sky. Same field.
Samiya Bashir

Planck’s Law

What else made sense but
The push to climb one another

Hand over hand and grab at
Whoever was near enough?

The season groaned on
Into November; crows bled

Branch to sky; stone upon
Stone upon stone towered

Toward a heaven that flushed
Its three-day-old lie of bruise.

Snowflakes threatened war
The moon split town and

Swore not to return for days.
Your flicker and turn, a lighthouse

And a storm. At quarter to six
The sun went down forever, so

What else made sense but to
Climb one another hand over

Hand and cleave to whoever was
Left and near enough and would?
Mary Biddinger

Pick-Your-Own

Thousands of abandoned fruit stands across Michigan, but you had to lose your steel bracelet in mine, or the one I loved to pretend was mine, its vacancies so much more tragic than the others, which still had crêpe-paper birds in rafters.

I thought there would be an endless supply of choppy water, inferior rowboats still predictable enough to rock more than recommended.

Every town with its own hills and houses like witch teeth. Some day we would be the people sitting inside restaurants, not standing outside them. We’d give our charity ham to another family.

Buy tickets to something annual. When the apple pickers finished we’d reclaim the stands.

You would take the rails apart with an ax and a little anger. You always had the jaw for that kind of work.

I was born in the state that invented its own name, then flooded it with a hundred miles of lake.
The way a passing day sounds almost orphan, like a calf so cold and wet in the open air, stumbling towards anything warm.

Gone now, and who would have thought the days would leave with a taste of burning on the tongue? Youth a wick that eventually needs to be cut below the charred line, and the world listens now to the lot of us swallowing hard together—the cut, the slop sound like a thousand hounds’ jowls, hounds in dream again of the hunt, of still something new, even in the primal clip of the fox’s sleek legs. Hunger is no resting place.

Nor is a quiet house on the ridge, its windows edged with empty jars, each catching dark as it falls. Nor is the road to the old trout farm, lined at night with a thousand glowing beads, bugs that gather and burn out in quickly dimming constellations. If sleep is any death at all, or the opposite of lust, may we all be deathless, may our bodies rise noisily and take the night like a hacksaw, a howl, a creaky bridge hung over the shallow river beyond the troughs cut through the hatchery.
You have come here to a town that isn’t real. An unmapped expanse of tamaracks, willows, and prairie grass. It’s scattered farmsteads, hidden trailer homes, rough fence posts curled round with rusted wire—a place not to be found in, a place that doesn’t beg a body, a place to sleep away the city and everything you ever knew under skies that curve clear round your whole world. It’s where the lowing of cows floats for miles and a windy night will slam your windows and doors around as if the season is running in and out, undecided if it will stay, if it wants you, if it needs you.

Named for two brothers; Arthur and Clyde. Few people know the name; by county rule, your mailing address will be McGrath, Minnesota. That’s another squatty town half an hour away. There’s a gas station, a bar, and a church. In McGrath you can fill up your Datsun, have a few too many, peel out on the gravel roads, careen down an embankment in the middle of the night into a copse of birches. Then you may ask forgiveness. But you are not in McGrath; you are in Arthyde.

You must have a reason for coming here. You’ve been wanting for a long time to wander away. From everything. Now that you’re here, you should know this:

Your road is called Kestrel Avenue. You can see this is not an avenue—it’s a choppy dirt road that used to be called “Route Two” or “County Road Something.” Someone thought you needed some classing up. Another, unnamed road cuts through—this is, if you like to walk, where you’ll wander.

If you collected agates as a child, you may want to do so again. Though puny, and few and far between, once licked clean of dirt, they shine just like you remember, like jellied candy, like muted light. You may want to put them in your pocket, and once you have accumulated ten or twelve, toss them back into the road. You have no use for them. Once your pockets are empty, you will pick up agates again. Next time you come this way, you’ll discover your agate piles and think you’ve stumbled across a treasure trove. Then you’ll remember, but you’ll pretend.
Here, at the crossroads, before you come to Allen Stream, take a left or a right. This is where the Soo Line ran. “Soo” is how you say “Sault.” This is what locals came to call the St. Paul, Minneapolis, and Sault Ste. Marie Railroad. Say it: “Sooooo...line.” Can you hear the whistle, and how speed bends the sound behind the caboose?

The Soo began on the Canadian side of North Dakota, cut through the heart of Minnesota—that’s where you are—shot its iron and wooden fingers south and east through the left ear of Wisconsin, dipped across Lower Michigan and expelled its last steam-puff breath in Chicago. But this section—these capillaries, were pulled up in the mid-eighties, leaving only a quiet path flanked by stagnant cattail ponds. Cicadas and woodpeckers attempt to recreate the click-clack of the train with their high frenetic buzz and pattering knock, in remembrance of the big black animal that once dissected their woods.

Heading back, you will turn at some faraway noise, half-expecting a locomotive to rumble around the corner between the poplars, cow-catcher gleaming, but nothing is there. Nothing will ever be there, but you keep looking. Scrabble the toe of your shoe into the ground before you, and a splintered bit of plank shows just under the sand. Trace its perimeters with a pointed rock. “You couldn’t kill all of it,” you might shout to the air, as if those who stopped the train had tried to stop your heart. You remember trains. When the Soo ran through, the kids would roll down these steep, tangled ditches out of harm’s way at the first tell-tale tremble of the track. Take a look at that decline—it’s not that gradual. You’re impressed with their agility and guts, how they clung to the earth under shaking grass.

Walking ahead, you spot a shine—reflections off the headlamp of an All-Terrain-Vehicle, never a bicycle, because boys stopped riding bikes to Allen Stream to fish years ago. No more sun-bleached kids pumping along with rods and buckets, kicking up dust clouds. The last one left in the early nineties. He may be found one summer, wading through the tall reeds at the drainage culvert, wishing he was ten years old. Six or seven years might go by before you see him again.

You stop to watch Monarchs and White Admirals swoop in the milkweed and goldenrod. A grouse stirs in the wood, beats its breast, drums you awake. The longer you stand there, the more you dissolve. The logo on your T-shirt, your plastic and wire sunglasses—they melt, and you melt. The smell of shampoo in your hair and soap on your skin fades. You smell of the forest, and of stone. If you leaned into the trees you might disappear into bark and branch. The tracks may
lace through your bones, and re-emerge as your spine. You are depot, transfer, and junction.

For groceries, go to Moose Lake. There’s a bakery. You can do your banking here. If you are hurt, Moose Lake has a hospital. It’s a forty-five minute drive. Consider your injuries carefully.

For little things—candy bars, cigarettes, it’s a half hour to Malmo. Until the late nineties, you could drive twenty minutes to Dad’s Corner Store. It’s since burned, leaving a black skeleton to this day. Drive past and you will see the charred sign hanging down sideways off the façade, nearly touching the ground.

You’ve been walking for what seems like hours. The sun in your face will give you a headache. Take some expired aspirin—you bought a big bottle at the pharmacy years ago in Moose Lake and haven’t made it back—how long have you been out here now?—and lie in the front room with the lace curtains drawn. Houses like yours have lace curtains—you don’t mess with the aesthetics of country living—and the sun will still slide in and lay a path across your face. You will pull a quilt over your head, though it’s too warm.

If you are bored, you might want a TV set, but keep in mind that after a few viewings of any sitcom, reality show, or sporting event, you’ll realize how removed you are from what you’re seeing. You might not care who wins anymore because it’s only a game. You might find picking at your grandmother’s doily holds your attention just as well. You are intrigued with the way it droops over the arm of the chair like a defeated snowflake.

Go to Brainerd to stock up for winter—that’s just over an hour away. Longer before the roads were paved. Don’t underestimate your needs. The winter is long. The county might plow Kestrel Avenue and they might not—you might wait for days to know. Even when they have, you might make it down to the turnoff to Moose Lake only to find that unplowed. You may have to back-track, and head to Mora, some place you hardly ever go. You’re not familiar with the stores there and the school kids behind the counters don’t know you. Everything has gone up in price since you were last here. Once you finally make it home, you will feel like you’ve been gone for days—your lungs are sore from breathing in the chill, your hands ache from keeping your vehicle on the icy road. Bumping over the frozen gravel has left a pain in your thighs. When you lay down to sleep, exhausted, you will pull the blankets over you as the wind lays down another sheet of white across the landscape outside.
If you are living alone you might have forgotten your name. If you forget your dog’s name, just stand on the stoop and whistle. He’s chasing after foxes or cornering a bear. This is his instinct, no matter how small he may be. Give him time; he will come, and the thaw will find him if you don’t.

You think you’ve been hearing the train. You went to Allen Stream to cut some cattails and, on the way back, ran your fingers over them. As a child you thought they looked like over-fried corndogs, and imagined biting into them for a mouthful of choking fluff. You laugh now—how could you have thought such a thing? These are tight, sunbaked seed packs, smelling of the marsh, nothing more. But that was in the summer, wasn’t it? Your first summer here. It seems so long ago now—things run together. Days and months and years. This is why you’ve come—to blend out the stark borders of time that have sliced and quartered your life into digestible chunks: your childhood, adolescence. Wild years. School. Marriage. Your job. Wake up, eat breakfast, go to work, go home, go to sleep. Eat sometimes. See people. Grow old.

Out here it’s a long expanse. Grass in the open wind. Coyotes lank their skinny way round the corn stalks, unaware of hours as numbers—they know only dark and light. Hunt and rest. This is why you’ve come.

You don’t fret the weather. You enjoy the long drive into town. You pay what they ask, and you take what they have. You don’t much turn on the TV. You stretch and yawn on the old beaten sofa under the open window, close your eyes. Moths pick their way into the house through tears in the screen. The paint on the walls is peeling, dust gathers on the bookshelves. The clock battery has run out and the hands lie still. The dog sleeps under the big wheel of the tractor, curled into its own dirty fur. You sleep, you dream. The Soo chugs through the nettles. It builds steam, holds its breath, cries and exhales, heavy and sweet over the land. It’s decided. You will stay, and the moths and the dust and the quilt will cover you in a fine, threadbare sigh.
Pilgrims

Nicola held up her umbrella and squinted at the creased paper in her hand. The directions were written in her sloppy, loopy cursive so it was hard to tell if the bar she was looking for was O’Neil’s, O’Brady’s or another “O” entirely. Here, on Main Street in Old Town Plymouth, three blocks from where the Mayflower had sunk anchor at that famed boulder, for some reason there were twelve different Irish bars made to look like pubs from the old country. Why they were Irish and not English was a puzzle, but right now Nicola was too cold and wet to care.

From the square of sidewalk where she hunched under her black umbrella she could see two pubs across the street, Sean O’Toole’s and The Flying Leprechaun. And here, lined up in front of her, were O’Dell’s, O’Kelly’s, McNally’s and McNeer’s, and on the next block, Patrick McGreedy’s. The rain had smudged the paper beyond all readability. Nicola considered allowing herself to be pelted by freezing rain until she froze to death on the sidewalk. Another option was driving back down rain-slick Route 3 and over the Sagamore Bridge to the house on Cotuit Road where Nicola had grown up, and so recently, unexpectedly, returned.

There was also a third option. Nicola dug around in one of the deep pockets of her coat for the brick of a cell phone she’d had since high school. The phone was as thick and long as a graphing calculator, a relic from another age with an antenna that scratched the underside of the umbrella when she pulled it out. She dialed Evelyn’s number. It didn’t even ring once before Evelyn squealed a greeting into her ear. In the background, Nicola heard raucous laughter, a cacophony of horns and strings and percussion, and above the music, a man’s high lilting voice.

“Where are you?” Nicola shivered and held the phone against her shoulder so she could shove the hand not holding the umbrella into a silk-lined pocket. It was a Navy pea coat, and had once belonged to her father. She’d worn it everywhere ever since she’d been tall enough to keep it from dragging on the ground and it still looked new. She kept it looking like new—dry-cleaning it, having rips or tears tailored,
de-linting after each wearing—like she kept everything of her father’s. The rain came down in tiny stinging pinpricks of ice.

“Seamus Inn,” came Evelyn’s voice, fighting against the storm and the music.

Nicola threw up her free hand into the cold. “No ‘O’?”

“What?”

“Forget it,” Nicola said, picking a direction and walking. “What are the cross streets?”

Two years of living with Cal in San Diego had given her that phrase. In Massachusetts, the roads had once been paths that led from a family’s weetu to fresh water springs, quiet ocean bays for fishing, or clearings populated by ginger-hoofed deer. Tourists always commented on the town names, a mix of Old England—Plymouth, Dartmouth, Boston—and Native American—Mashpee, Acushnet, Pocasset, Mattapoisett. Nicola’s world, growing up, had been delineated into these categories: Pilgrims and Indians. Tourists and Locals. She’d learned new categories in San Diego: Nice Guys and Dicks being one she could have done without.

“I’m coming outside,” Evelyn said. “Just look for me on the sidewalk.”

Nicola spun around, flinging water from the dripping edges of her large black umbrella. Like her phone, the umbrella had come from another era and its polished oak handle was heavy.

Main Street was a mix of antique shops, restaurants, souvenir stores, and cramped third floor apartments, one of which belonged to Evelyn and made for a convenient commute to Plimoth Plantation, the re-created “Pilgrim” village where she impersonated an actual member of the colony according to a town register dated 1621. Evelyn had majored in Theatre at Mount Holyoke and was saving to move to New York, but for now, she daily lived the life of a woman named Mary Allerton who would succumb to a chest cold in 1622, leaving behind three children and a husband whose saddles and purses, belts and sturdy-soled shoes would bring thousands of dollars now at auction. Thankfully for Mary Allerton, and for Evelyn, “The Plant” remained frozen always in 1621, and relived only the same births and deaths, the same familiar history.

“Nicky,” Evelyn’s voice came from behind her, and Nicola whirled around, spraying freezing rain in a glittering circle like a curtain of glass beads.

“Ev,” Nicola said, drawing her friend under the nylon roof of her umbrella for a hug. Evelyn wore a strapless sundress despite the rain that Nicola recognized from high school.
“So?” Evelyn said, hands on her hips, and turning in her dress as if modeling it.

“Too easy,” Nicola said. “That’s the dress you wore to Horseneck Beach when Ashley got stung by the jellyfish. I still can’t believe Mark had to pee on her.”

Evelyn laughed, delighted. “Same old Nicky,” she said, hugging her again. It was their favorite game to test Nicola’s memory, which was nearly photographic. Names, dates, cars, clothes, snippets of conversation—it was as if Nicola kept everything in a tall file cabinet and could slide open a drawer to find any incident on command. She didn’t know why her brain was wired that way, but prided herself on being a student of history, both recent and ancient. She wanted to go to grad school for it, but Cal wanted her to wait until he got out of the Navy.

*Just be patient,* he’d said when she brought it up after he proposed her sophomore year at San Diego State, *when I get out, we’ll go anywhere you want.* They’d been married the summer after her junior year in a Lutheran Church by the beach. All of Nicola’s family, her mother, her brother, grandparents and her scattered-to-the-winds aunts and uncles had flown in for the wedding. She and Cal made a lot of plans for when he’d be out. They’d talked about going up to Alaska and living in a cabin. They’d talked about traveling across Europe, about kids.

Nicola and Evelyn were walking now, passing pubs fronted by yellowed antique glass windows. Evelyn listed people and Pilgrims on her fingers; every finger stood for two names. “You have to meet Joe. He’s William Bradford,” Evelyn was saying. “He has thirty-three tattoos, and has to cover the Yosemite Sam on his neck with makeup when he’s working.”

“Yosemite Sam?” Nicola asked, but Ev was already onto Sarah, i.e. Piety Martinson.

“Piety,” Evelyn said, choking on her laugh until it was a snort. “Sarah’s totally into Wicca. Poor Piety Martinson’s probably rolling in her grave.”

Nicola was happy to listen. She hadn’t seen Ev since last summer when Nicola and Cal spent a week having fried scallops at The Clam Shack, lounging on striped towels by a different ocean, and walking the Freedom Trail around Boston. During that trip, Nicola’s mother had taken her aside and said, in a meaningful tone, *I’m so glad you two are happy.* Nicola had felt smug then. She’d proven everyone wrong, including her mother, a former military wife herself who had suffered the loneliness of long deployments, the exhaustion of moving every
couple of years, and endless worry for her husband’s safety. It was not an easy lifestyle, she had cautioned, forgetting Nicola had endured all of that and more as the child of a Navy man.

It wasn’t just her mother, Nicola’s friends had warned her against marrying young, citing statistics of divorce rates that were higher in the Navy than in any other military branch. But Nicola knew what she was up against. Her father had been a Commander and her brother was a Petty Officer Second Class. She was prepared for Cal’s long Westpac deployments and frequent training retreats, and grew used to saying goodbye to friends who filtered in and out of his base. Cal knew her rules: one time cheating or one time hitting would send her packing. She did not intend to become a statistic. That all changed when she found Cal tangled up with Julie’s eighteen-year-old cousin at the last party she ever went to in California. The image was as crisp as a movie still when she closed her eyes, and thinking about it gave her the sense of falling endlessly like Alice down a rabbit hole into a hell she had never expected to see.

Almost to the Inn, Nicola felt the pressure of tears. “It’s just so good to see you, Ev.”

Evelyn closed Nicola’s giant umbrella and winked. “You don’t need ID,” she said. “They know me here.”

Both bouncers had a crock of some dark soup and spoons they were trying to balance on their noses. The one to the right had tight red curls. All the features of his face were oversized: the large nose, on which the spoon refused to stick, was crowded between large, doorknob cheeks; his laughing mouth was a cavern where strange rocks crowded before a rolling red wave.

Evelyn let go of Nicola’s arm. While she moved toward the thin bouncer, trying through practical demonstration to help him achieve the perfect balance between nose and spoon, the red-headed bouncer spoke to Nicola with a true, honest-to-God Irish accent.

“Is that thing real?” he said, tapping her wedding band with his spoon. “You look too young to buy a pack of fags in this backwards country of yours.”

Nicola closed her left hand into a loose fist. “I have ID,” she said, feeling for her wallet.

The bouncer raised the hand with the soup bowl. “I’m just having you on,” he said.

“Oh,” Nicola flushed red. She liked his open face, his bigness, his softness so different from Cal’s boxer’s build. “Yes,” she said. “I’m married.”
It was still true, for now. She wondered about the months ahead, though, and felt suddenly unmoored, her knees gone weak and watery.

Her mother said Nicola was regrouping. According to her brother, she was being lazy. Cal called it hiding. The incident had only happened two weeks ago, but every time she thought of Cal and Julie’s cousin clinched among the coats in that dark room, she longed for the thick, final ream of official documents that would dissolve all their promises. She wanted her palms to sting from the sharp edges of all that glossy paper. But every time she thought of Cal alone, of his nasal rendition of “Friends in Low Places,” the funny tufts of hair on his two big toes, the moles arranged like Pisces on his left shoulder, those things made her want to sit down and put her hands over her ears until it was quiet enough to think.

The bouncer tapped his spoon against one knee like a doctor’s hammer and Nicola twisted her ring in its rut on her fourth finger before reaching for the spoon, releasing a stream of hot air into its round bowl and going up on tiptoe to position it on his nose. His arm was warm through his shirt sleeve. “Don’t move,” she said, stepping back. The spoon stayed put for a few seconds before splashing handle-down into his soup. “Oh well,” she said, through their laughter.

Cal was even now closing the distance between them in her blue Saab packed with the items she’d described over the phone, trash bags stuffed with jeans and sweaters, photo albums, a box of favorite books. His fingers would be drumming out a Kenny Chesney song on the steering wheel. He’d called before the rain started to say he made it to his folks’ place outside Dallas. *Nicky,* he’d asked, *how long you think you’ll be gone.* She hadn’t said maybe forever.

Next to her, Evelyn sighed in mock exasperation. “It’s hopeless,” she said, walking toward a low doorway into a room full of music and spinning dancers. Nicola followed, waving goodbye to her bouncer, deciding he belonged firmly in the Nice Guy category. In the bar proper, Nicola tried to take everything in at once: the packed dance floor, the smell of beer, and a low stage crowded to its edges with drums, standing basses, fiddlers, flutes, guitars, mics, and three singers bellowing an Irish drinking song littered with colorful swears.

“That’s Clusterfolk up there,” Evelyn said, nodding to the band. “The lead singer and the drummer are Pilgrims. He’s Tarrytown’s drummer, too.”

Tarrytown was the band Ev had wanted her to see. She was dating the lead singer.
“They’re mostly Pilgrims,” Evelyn said, indicating the crowd around the tall table, and the twirling, jumping sea of bodies on the dance floor. Some dancers were younger than Nicola, college kids, but some were closer to Nicola’s mother’s age, and some as old as Grams and Poppa. Everywhere Nicola turned, bearded young men jigged with octogenarians in peasant skirts, and mothers with sun-flecked faces twirled boys who were young enough to be their sons.

“We always have a shortage of men,” Evelyn said, low. “What else is new, right?”

Nicola had the opposite problem in San Diego where every bar was packed with military guys, while girls flitted among them like elusive sprites. And still Cal had managed to screw up. But she didn’t want to think about that now, and tried to focus on remembering names and faces as Evelyn drew her through the room, introducing her as her “oldest, bestest friend.” They danced through the crowd, sinuous as the melody issuing from Clusterfolk’s slinky flautist.

Ordering beers at the bar, Nicola asked if any band members weren’t Pilgrims.

Evelyn considered it, tilting her head to one side. “Well, some are ex-Pilgrims, or the mothers of Pilgrims, or boyfriends.” She grinned. “We keep it in the family.”

Nicola leaned back against the bar. It was an old building, made of gleaming, smoke-blackened mahogany. If Cal was here, Nicola thought, he’d be in the middle of that dance floor. He wouldn’t know one word of one song but that wouldn’t stop him from singing along.

Life with Cal had been a constant adventure. With him, she’d tried sushi for the first time, rollerbladed, climbed a rock wall to the top, and rappelled down. And no matter what new place he’d led her to, she’d always felt safe. Last night he’d called from a Motel 6 in Arizona. At the end of their conversation she’d wanted to say I love you, had almost said it, but there, again, were the paper cuts, on her tongue this time, searing, and in her stomach, white hot. He’d said, I’m so sorry. So, so sorry. You know that, right? And she had wanted to believe him.

Especially now, in this bar, watching the men slosh beer over the rims of their pints and sweat into their collars, she wanted to believe she could go home to their place in Pacific Beach. He’d be out of the Navy in six months. Then they could come back up here, or live near his family in Texas. She could see about applying for a Master’s. She was twenty-three and didn’t want to start over again, no matter how
much life everyone said she still had in front of her. But he’d cheated, and she didn’t know how to scrub that image from her mind.

“I’m starting a girl band, too,” Evelyn said, pocketing change from the bartender.

“You play an instrument now?” Nicola sipped her Sam Adams, trying to let herself relax.

Evelyn blushed, caught off guard for the first time. “Zeke’s teaching me the guitar.”

Zeke was Tarrytown’s lead singer. Nicola sipped her beer again. “Point him out to me.”

Evelyn stood on her tiptoes to see over the crowd. “Come on, we’re missing the dancing,” she said, then swigged her beer, spinning and hopping onto the dance floor. Nicola joined her, making it her main goal to spin and hop until she was dizzy as hell. Dancing, Nicola stopped thinking about Cal and the girl. It was only in the brief gaps between songs that she remembered again in snatches. The girl had been dark-haired and thin, there to visit her cousin Julie, the wife of another E-3. Besides Cal’s straining, naked back, Nicola remembered the sound of coins hitting the floor. She’d opened the door of a dark bedroom to show a friend where to leave her coat and found Julie’s cousin and Cal denting the pile of windbreakers and jean jackets and fleeces, shaking the bed so that every time it moved, more change fell to the hardwood with a cheerful jingle. When the light snapped on, the jingling stopped.

Nicola had never fainted before. On waking, before the anger, she felt thanks for the cool linoleum under the backs of her hands, for the soft yellow bathmat she could feel on the bare skin of her legs. She was grateful to be back in the world. Some of the girls at the party had dragged her into the bathroom for privacy and she had let them lay cool washcloths on her forehead and fan her with back issues of Men’s Health while Cal banged on the locked door.

That night, riding home in a cab, having left Cal passed out on a stained blue couch, she’d pulled out her ancient cell phone and booked a flight to the place she’d grown up. In the terminal the next morning, she’d had her school district take her off the subbing list indefinitely.

She didn’t have a thing for military men like some of her friends, but in San Diego it was hard to avoid them. The first guy she’d dated was a handsome Marine. They had chemistry, but no connection. When they broke up, she cited his misogyny and he called her an incurable snob. I’ve never been good enough for you, he’d said bitterly. She’d hated that he was right.
But Cal had surprising depths. He’d traveled with a rodeo. Kicked her butt at Scrabble. Was certified to scuba dive. Had shown her how to shoot the black, malignant handgun he was so proud of—and she’d let herself like the feel of wielding that strange lightning in her hand. Instead of blowing off her tastes the way her Marine had, Cal had gone to the ballet with her, and to the art theater to watch foreign films, crying at the end of *The Chorus* right along with her. They’d had problems, still. She didn’t like all his friends. He drank too much. She’d known the E-4 was a Dick almost right away, but Cal had managed to fool her for two years of marriage.

Nicola didn’t realize she’d stopped dancing until Evelyn came out of the crowd to place both hands on her shoulders and shake her. “Wake up, sleepyhead,” Ev cried. Her face was flushed and framed by wisps of hair that stood out like a mane. “You need another drink.”

“I miss Cal,” Nicola said, swallowing against the pin-cushion in her throat. “I have to go home.”

“Don’t leave yet. Zeke really wants to meet you,” Ev said, sitting Nicola down on an empty bar stool. Evelyn was trying hard. Nicola had, after all, been home for two weeks and this was the first time she’d agreed to meet instead of holding Evelyn at a distance on the phone.

Clusterfolk announced their final number amid the protests of the crowd. “We’ve got to make room for Tarrytown,” the main singer called out, prompting whistles and applause.

“Nicky,” Evelyn said, drinking from her beer. “Did I tell you how old Zeke is?”

Nicola had to shout over the singer’s hearty wail. “Don’t tell me—it’s a statutory thing.”

“No,” Evelyn said, without even nodding to the joke. “But you’re not going to like it.”

Nicola drew a thumb over the condensation on her pint with a high squeak. “How old?”

Evelyn gulped at her beer. “I never said a thing against you and Cal,” she says. “Did I?”

And Nicola shook her head no. Also, unlike Nicola’s mother and brother and college friends, Evelyn had not said I Told You So. “You don’t have to tell me,” Nicola said.

“Forty-nine. He’s forty-nine,” Evelyn said.

Nicola scanned the men at the bar. What did forty-nine look like? She couldn’t think of anyone that exact age, except of course, that was roughly how old her father had been when she’d last seen him alive.
He’d been fifty-three and about to retire, but a stroke had ended his life while he watched the Red Sox in Game 3 of the 2004 World Series. They’d been set to lose the series, again, and he died without seeing them break the curse. Nicola had been sixteen. A month after the funeral, her older brother had withdrawn all his college applications in order to enlist.

Nicola was seized by the need to see him. “Which one is he?” she said, twisting around, hoping to find him by radar or by scent.

“Sh,” Evelyn put her beer down. “Sometimes his wife comes to his shows.”

Nicola gripped her empty glass tightly, trying to remember to breathe. “He’s married?”

“No,” Evelyn said. “No. Separated, practically divorced. He was going to leave before we met. I just gave him the courage. And there’s no strings. We’re not going to elope or anything.”

Nicola’s head felt light, as if it was floating free of her body. “Where’s the bathroom?”

“Let me pay for these and I’ll come with you.” Evelyn slid off her stool, too.

“I just have to pee,” Nicola said, forcing a smile. Cal was back in his childhood home tonight. After driving her car across country, he was going to fly back home. Nicola didn’t know what she’d do when she saw him. Run into his arms. Slap at his unmoving bulk. Feel nothing.

“It’s down the hallway. You have to cut through the dance floor.”

Nicola spun around and pushed through the fringe of spectators screaming along with Clusterfolk. The dancers, Pilgrims all of them—Priscilla Mullens, Myles Standish, William Brewster, William Bradford—grinned in jeans and sheepskin vests and lace-up boots and oxford shirts, and Nicola wasn’t sure if she was in this era or a former one. The bathroom was down a long narrow hallway lit by fluorescent lights. She locked herself in and cried into her fists.

While the cold porcelain of the toilet lid chilled the backs of her legs, Nicola thought of the Pilgrims and their rigid, demanding religion. They’d been too busy trying to survive in the new world to be merciful with sins or sinners. They had the stocks and solitary confinement, hellfire and damnation, and later, a sister colony, Salem, had its hangings, its burnings, its drownings. They enforced their rules and still they found more sinners. It didn’t help them any. They named their children Prudence and Remembrance, Temperance and Perseverance, Charity and Sobriety and it didn’t help them any. Nicola had rules, too.
One time hitting, one time cheating. She’d left, just as she’d promised, but was at a loss as to what came next.

What she needed, Nicola thought, was an equation, something neat and mathematical to describe the relationship between forgiveness and lovability. Right now, she couldn’t tell whether they should equal each other or cancel each other out. If one of her friends—her oldest, bestest—could fall in love with someone taken then Nicola had to have miscalculated somehow.

On the way back to the dance floor, Nicola encountered Evelyn coming down the hallway with a man in a black T-shirt and dark blue jeans. His age only showed in the fine lines at the corners of his eyes. He’d been holding Evelyn’s elbow but stretched out his ringless hand.

“You must be Nicola,” he said, smiling easily. “I’ve heard so much about you.”

When Nicola took his palm she found it callused and strong. “Zeke,” she said.

He plucked out the cigarette tucked above his ear and rolled it between thumb and finger. “I hope you’ll come out with us later,” he said. “I’d love it if we could talk.” Then he slipped out the unmarked door at the end of the hall. Like the red-headed bouncer, this one was a no-brainer.

“He’s really nice,” Nicola said, looking after him, but Evelyn was shaking her head.

“It just happened,” she said, handing Nicola a fresh pint. “Like lightning. I can’t explain.”

“Do you love him?” Nicola asked, because this was the true test. What happened between Cal and Julie’s cousin was nothing like love. She didn’t need to be convinced of that. And she couldn’t help loving Cal still. But she couldn’t stand to go through this a second time. They stood listening to the knocks and squeals of the bands trading equipment and tuning up.

“They don’t have kids,” Evelyn said. “And she’s had a boyfriend of her own for a while.”

“Ev, do you?” Nicola said, thinking not of Zeke and his wife, or of Cal and how she’d feel when his eyes fell on hers. She thought, instead, how good it was to see her friend, to stand next to someone who would love her no matter what, unconditionally, no exceptions to the rule.

“Maybe it doesn’t make sense,” Evelyn was saying, “but I do love him. It’s real.”

Nicola nodded. “I need you with me when I meet Cal. Can you come with me?”
“Okay,” she said, hiccupping, which let them both laugh. “It’s a date.”

On the stage, Tarrytown was tuning up, waiting for Zeke to take the mic. Nicola counted the Pilgrims she could pick out on sight, each one with two names. As Zeke came bounding down the hallway, launching himself up onto the stage, Nicola tried to guess, beginning with herself, how many selves everyone had and how often they went back and forth between them.

Cal had said he could do it in two days, driving straight, but Nicola had asked him to take four or five. It was his safety she was worried about—falling asleep at the wheel was as dangerous as drinking and driving—but it would also give her more time to decide. And he really was sorry, deep down sorry. She did believe him about that, whether or not she should.

The big block of a cell phone was in the pocket of her coat. Nicola wanted to slip her hand in there and grab it. She wanted to call Cal, to wake him up and hear his voice, blurred with sleep. She wanted to tell him where to meet, and what the weather was like, and how much noise there was in this bar, how much static, and how much fun he would be having if he was here.
Lost in Brooklyn with My Grandmother

It is not just this peninsula left by the confluence of St. Jude and Canarsie that has become significant—this could be any corner cut by the borough’s silent lines of stone and glass. Instead, something I cannot see has appeared to her and frozen us at the flashing Walk.

And if the streets have in fact changed—picked themselves up wholesale from the ancient bedrock some night years ago, blacktop and cobble spilling onto patient stoops, lead tangle of pipes dangling from the dirt like wasp’s legs—what can we do? At least the trees have stayed, taller but still here—this one Tupelo, that Norwegian Maple, and here the unexpected admission that only the rolling upstate hills could have taught her these names.

It has been so many years, but this corner is somehow familiar. The light has changed but no cars are here to wait so early on a Sunday morning in March.
Matthew Burns

Down that way is the pier,
the one where they’d go dancing
during the war, the one where she learned
to love double Manhattans
and the smell of ten-cent Dutch Masters.
The light turns red again
while pigeons fly from the curb.

She touches the tight white crop of ringlets
on her head, holds my elbow tight
to step into the street, and insists
I simply would not believe
how long and dark her hair was back then.
Ephemerrata

Walden Pond State Reservation

Light thimbles over gold decay each fold
and stray crisp rip of leaf
as the weather turns and tips one branch to tremble.

Afternoon, we walk the pond’s circumference
past the hot-dog cart
in the auxiliary parking lot on a path fenced-in
to prevent erosion. I drown in one last drink while sunfall starts
its touch-and-go as if my heart’s been fed
into a paper-shredder.

Middle-aged swimmers in wetsuits slap and belly
over the fluvio-glacial sump for
a good shiver. A tour-guide points out the riddled erasures
on the rubble while we read the decomposing litter-lumps: direct
mail letters, stumps of Styrofoam, wrinkled
cellophane….Ear-buds on a woman in a lotus-pose coach her

breathe in    breathe out

More careless shaking in my hand, and
the bitmap’s blurred to chafed leaf-matter. The touchscreen
on your cellphone asks me if I want it saved.

Across the waters’ doubled reverie,
small patchwork cloud-lace severs and coheres: almost
November—shutter-lag decrypts the shadowed over-
cast and redder under-stitch
below those ragged white
flags of surrender.
Our address: one sun-parched, purple starfish
that’s nailed up by the steps, past tiny toads
who drink rust-colored water from the well.
Carom the ridgeline’s slantwise dusty road,
then curl inward, earward as a sea-snail’s shell
to our front porch. Here, trash dangles overhead
like thought-balloons, to keep it from the mouse.
Daylong, waves slap and hiss beyond the crest;
hawks tilt the thermals; vireos and warblers
veer or scissor out the caramel dunes.
Our clapboard’s tucked in next to spider’s nests
tethered to the huckleberry. Truckled beds’
spring bottom-feeders squelch up afternoons:
dead squid, forest of earth-stars, lady’s slippers;
a mermaid’s purse not too far from the house,
gray seals this side gray silhouettes of ships.…
A fluke of breaching humpbacks break the smoky
summer haze, stunned heat that hazards sun,
and shatter on the ocean’s sizzled shards
the plural of all blues—as one red kite
now jukes above the slope.

Through tide’s discard,
old cargo warps and sprawls; flotsam soaks
then dries to brittle driftwood in the grass.
We shuffle home before the sundown’s done
and pause before each spume-tossed spine we pass
as mosquitos thrum the blood-decaying light.
Colleen Coyne

Charm City

When the city speaks, untranslatable tongues lap the pier. The pause in a slinking widow’s walk—she cups her small pink ear. In the church next door, a bell’s neat tongue licks the copper green. Her pupils flashing out to sea: streetlights eclipsed by trees. When the sound shines through, *divine the source*: a tinny tincture for what bleeds. The city settles into disease—the patron saints corrupt its speech. Grit in her skin, embedded deep, her left hand traces the nacreous creep. In this city of half-flown souls, this city of oily kink—a coat of slime sticks harbor-side (*toss out those stained pleats*).

She paces the thick, unwavering rails where stagnant puddles sink, and there, beside the rusty alley bin—a bony beast grits its teeth and leaps in.
Jim Daniels

The Wave, Tiger Stadium, 1984

My brother and I took my grandfather to a game—we’d win it all that year, a gritty team a man who watched Ty Cobb could appreciate. Six months after his heart attack, thin old man wobbled down the ramp between us to our left field seats. He looked like a cigarette, though he’d never smoked. If you called him a simple man, he would not disagree, a mechanic at Packard’s who lost two kids when they were still kids, lost his job when he still needed to work, lost his wife over and over though still she sat strapped to a chair in a sour antiseptic room.

The Wave was new then, and Detroit embraced its odd magic, how you could both stay in one place and move, how you could counter the ritualized machinery of the game. The tang of anarchy sweet to anyone who worked an assembly line and knew about standing in one place, as we all had done. So we helped him to his feet each time the wave passed, watched him flap his hands into the air and smile his random crooked teeth. We never saw him raise his hands, before or after. Before mascots and Jumbotrons and piped-in rock music, orchestrated fan instructions. The Wave. He died at 96 without drama or complaint. He never stood out, shied from drama, tears or hearty laughter. We never knew about our dead aunt and uncle—not from him, not ever. But once he stood and raised his hands to the sky. 50,000 others doing the same. He shouted our names
when he saw it circling toward us so we would be ready to lift him up. Now, I call it testifying or joy. I’m not sure what our father would have called it, he who worked nights, hands tying brake cables on the line, who paid his father’s bills, weighed down with the unspoken, he who knew their names and ours, who could not wave back.
Abandoned School in the Rain, Detroit

At the end of the 2007 school year, Jane Cooper Elementary (built in 1920) was left unsecured in the middle of the wasteland where a middle-class neighborhood once stood. It took “scrapers” only a few months to strip the building of every last ounce of metal and leave it looking as though it hadn’t been occupied for decades

—“School’s Out Forever,” VICE magazine

Rain blew in through busted glass,
shredded blinds flapping then slamming
in wind’s erratic rhythm. A sludge of books
mounded on the floor, pages pasted
into a permanent flurry of wilted flowers.
And the papers, and their ink, grades smeared
into a blue-red bruise. Junked computers morphed
into boulders that glaciers of hope left behind.
A spray of white barbed wire scrawled across
the blackboard, one permanent lesson, indecipherable.

I who have not worshipped here have no sermon.
I imagine a child’s song slowed to dirge, a child waving
a hand in the air, believing in the answer.
Open any book to read the story of rain.
Sarah McCraw Crow

Take Back Vermont

Her first morning on the job, Claire stored up details to use in her next argument with Martin. Martin had tried to talk her out of this new job—he’d accused her of turning religious. But that wasn’t it; she just liked the feeling of the diocesan office, in a creaky Federal-style house that some ancient Episcopalian matron had long ago given to the diocese. She liked the way the office smelled, of old wood and warm dust, and the way her new boss, Alison, looked: vaguely artsy, her gray hair cropped, her black sweater long and drapey. Also, Alison sounded like every other editor Claire had worked for, just a little less brusque. That first morning, she handed Claire a stack of folders; Procedures for Protests was printed on the top folder.

“Protests?” Claire said. She saw herself standing outside the capitol building, holding hands with a stranger and singing an old Pete Seeger song.

“Sometimes we get these demonstrators who come here—” Alison stopped and shook her head. “They’re kind of bothersome, that’s all.”

“Of course, right,” Claire said. She remembered the protests now, though she’d never covered them for the newspaper. People from some crazy church in Kansas came here to insist that the Episcopalians change their ways.

“Why do they keep coming back?” What she meant was: Why would one church go to all that trouble to complain about the policies of another church?

“New Hampshire,” Alison said. “We’re just a pit-stop on the way there.” New Hampshire’s Episcopal bishop was gay, and his ordination had caused such a ruckus that a number of parishes in other states had broken away, choosing to follow the bishop of Nigeria, she said.

The whole dispute sounded ridiculous, Claire started to say, but Alison had changed the subject and was printing out the newsletter’s editorial calendar. She got up to show Claire the supply closet, with its boxes of newsletter back issues and printer paper. On a high shelf were three men’s hats, the kind Claire’s grandfather used to wear. Claire asked about the hats, and Alison squinted up at them, as if she’d never seen them before.
“Maybe Bishop Morrill’s,” she said. “Two bishops ago, before my time. No idea what they’re doing in there.”

Claire was charmed by the incongruous leftover hats, and she tried to picture the old bishop setting his hat on the shelf every morning. Probably he wore thick-framed black glasses like her grandfather had worn. She imagined the old bishop smelling of mothballs and Bay Rum like her grandfather.

Except for his paunch, the current bishop, Andrew, didn’t seem very bishop-like. At her final interview, Bishop Andrew had worn a fleece sweatshirt over his clerical collar. The old office was drafty, and they kept the heat low to save money, he’d said.

“Please stop saying you lost a baby,” Martin said that night at home, after Claire got off the phone with her sister. The two lines between his eyebrows made Claire think of angry punctuation marks. “We had a miscarriage,” he said, more softly. He was an internist, only two years out of residency, and too often he stated things baldly.

“You didn’t have a miscarriage, I did,” Claire said. “And you’re minimizing. Three, Martin, not one.” Furthermore, she could call a miscarriage a lost baby if she felt like it, though she didn’t say that—they’d had this discussion already. She looked away, out the window over the sink. Their neighborhood had taken over a sloping old dairy farm, and behind their house a leftover field remained. Beyond the field, the river and the interstate separated them from town, but Claire could see the top of the lit-up capitol dome on the other side. If she had some binoculars, she could probably get a glimpse of her new office, up on the second floor of the farmhouse.

She left the kitchen before Martin could say anything more. There were too many words these days, words that Martin batted around because he was a physician, but that had started to drive her crazy: Habitual abortion, the medical term for her miscarriages, as if she had somehow slipped into the habit of losing babies. Also, possible overactive immune response; possible antiphospholipid antibody syndrome. Also, pre-implantation testing for chromosomal disorders, followed by in vitro fertilization. Cervical stitching; bed rest. Adoption. Perfectly ordinary problems that lots of women, lots of couples, went through, Martin kept saying, but she was pretty sure he was wrong about that.

At work, Claire started to recognize the volunteers and the clergy who filtered in and out of the diocesan office. The volunteers
tended to be older, like Tom, who’d retired from the prep school down in Brattleboro, and who led leadership workshops for other volunteers. Tom’s hair was all gone, except for a wispy tonsure-like ring, but his bushy eyebrows made her think of thunderclouds when he frowned at the office computer, unable to get his text into the brochure template.

“Need some help?” she asked. He nodded, rubbing at his shiny forehead. As she pasted text into the template, he talked about that last March snowstorm, and how beautiful the skiing had been this winter. He had a senior pass at Sugarbush, and twice now he’d taken his little granddaughters to ski, he said.

“They don’t even care about falling, they just want to go fast,” he said.

She asked whether the little granddaughters lived nearby. “New Hampshire,” he said, and man, was his daughter strict with those little girls. Those little girls had never gone to McDonald’s, not once.

Tom’s chatter washed over her, but didn’t give her that constricted, blank feeling she got when her old co-workers in the newsroom had compared notes on babies and kids. And he seemed to think she was so smart just for doing the most ordinary tasks. “You’re a good egg, Claire,” he said one day, his old-fashioned phrase making her laugh. Another day he asked her opinion on whether he could break his daughter’s no-TV rule when the little granddaughters visited, and what he might say to his daughter about the rule. “I knew you’d have a good answer for me,” he said. Claire began to look forward to Wednesdays, when he came into the office, and getting to talk to him.

“Okay, I think I get it,” Martin said, one Sunday afternoon. He’d stacked his medical journals on the kitchen table, and he divided them into two piles—good ones to keep, bad ones to toss. “It’s like some kind of penance thing you’re doing, working with those people.”

“Penance,” Claire said.

“I mean that some part of you thinks this job, this hanging around with those religious people, will help you to get...to stay...that is, to not—” he stopped before he got to those words, pregnancy or miscarriage or habitual abortion.

“It’s just a job, Martin,” she said. “You make it sound like I’m going off to seminary.”

“I heard you, the other night, talking with what’s-his-name, the bishop,” he said. “Since when are you even interested in that stuff?”

“What stuff?” She’d brought Martin to the early-Lent staff and volunteer dinner at Bishop Andrew’s house, and it seemed like he’d had
a good enough time, talking about college hockey with Tom and the diocese’s part-time CFO.

“I don’t know, something theological, something Greek and—”

“So you’re saying it’s wrong for me to learn something new.” At the dinner, she and Alison and Andrew got to talking about the Greek word pneuma, the theme of an essay that she was copy-editing. Pneuma could mean either breath or spirit, and since then Claire had considered how easily things got muddled through translation and time, even changed beyond recognition. What if the ancient writers had meant one thing, and two or three thousand years later, everybody thought they’d meant something else? It was a startling concept, but also depressing. She hadn’t bothered to tell Martin any of this—he’d only nod, eyes elsewhere, pretending to listen.

“No,” Martin said. “I’m saying that you might want to think about your motivation for working there.”

“Oh, for God’s sake.” She wanted to push his stacks of journals off the table. He hardly even read those journals, just paged through them now and then, letting the stacks grow bigger.

But lying in bed that night, she thought about what Martin had said. Her new job didn’t feel like punishment, it just felt like a change. Her new co-workers were much older than her co-workers from the newsroom, so she didn’t have to listen to so much painful talk about toddler gymnastics and Montessori and the Disney Channel. And no one looked at her with big, fearful eyes, sorry yet again for having said the wrong thing to her, but not apologizing, because it wasn’t anyone else’s fault that she kept having those miscarriages. And another thing, her phantom babies didn’t plague her so much as she fell asleep anymore—for months after the third miscarriage, she kept seeing babies going from big to small, from fat to thin, from three dimensions to two. Slipping away, slipping out of her body like pieces of paper and then fluttering away, flying off above her head and into the night. But if part of her was trying to do some awkward kind of penance, well, so be it.

On Wednesday, Claire was proofreading an Easter fundraising letter when she heard a sustained car honk. She looked out the window, and as predicted—the police called first thing when the Kansas demonstrators registered—a cluster of men and women stood outside, down on the sidewalk. Some huddled around a duffel bag, fitting handles onto posters, and one man stood on the corner, a sign in each hand. One sign said “God Hates Fags,” in thick black letters; the other, “Honk If You
Support Us.” Three little boys sat on the grass, eating Triscuits from a box in front of them.

A bearded man in a fleece vest seemed in charge, directing the other protesters to start a circuit on the sidewalk. His breath spiraled up in the cold air as he talked and gestured.

A little later, Claire went downstairs to peer out the front hall window. The three boys had joined the protesters’ loop, carrying smaller signs that read “Families Valuing Families.” Maybe the boys filled in for marchers who had to go to the bathroom, but where did they even go to the bathroom? And did they break for lunch, she wondered.

A Subaru wagon pulled into a metered space on the street, and Tom—her friend Tom, as she thought of him now—slid out. He stood watching the protesters, hands on his hips, eyebrows like thunderclouds again. Tom shouted something at the protesters—she could hear the strident sounds but not the words—and he bent to pick up a stray sign lying on the ground. He approached the protesters, swinging the sign by its handle. The fleece-vested leader spun around, grabbing for Tom’s swinging sign. He missed, but now he and Tom stood too close, chest to chest, like schoolboys about to fight. Claire opened the door, but then hesitated. She wasn’t supposed to engage with the demonstrators, she knew. But surely Tom knew that, too.

“And you’re not wanted here,” Tom was shouting, “so just go on back to whatever crazy place you came from, and leave us alone!”

Inside the building, Bishop Andrew was coming down the stairs, drawn by the noise. He looked out the door.

“It’s Tom,” she said, stupidly.

“Good Lord,” he said, and tossed her his phone. “Go ahead and call 911.” He went out the door and down the sidewalk.

After the police arrived a few minutes later, they conferred with Bishop Andrew. One policeman—he looked ridiculously young, Claire thought—led the fleece-vested leader, a woman protester, and Tom inside the building, with Andrew following them. The other policeman stayed with the rest of the protesters, who seated themselves in a half-circle on the wet brown lawn, while the policeman perched on a granite post nearby. One of the other women said something, and all the protesters bowed their heads for a minute.

Claire stood at the front door, half-in, half-out, until Andrew called to her. “Can you get us some water?” he said, from the conference room door. “Everyone’s a little worked up.”

Claire shook her head to clear it, and went to the kitchen, returning
with a pitcher of water. In the conference room, Andrew sat at the far end of the table, answering the policeman’s questions. Closer to her, Tom clasped his hands on the table, his freckled head shining with sweat. As she set down the water glasses, Tom looked up at her.

“Sorry,” he said, giving a tiny shrug and a half-smile.

She smiled back, wanting to tell him how glad she was to see him.

“It’s okay,” she said.

The lead protester sat across from Tom. He was talking to the woman sitting next to him, and then he smacked both his palms down on the table, making the woman jump in her seat. “But you know what, Lily, no one’s forcing you,” he said, in a low voice.

The woman, Lily, blinked and sipped at her water. “Thank you,” Lily said to Claire. “Look, Matthew,” she whispered. “All I meant was that particular sign might have been a little much.” With her hair in its long braid, she looked like a Vermont back-to-the-land mom, the kind whohomeschooled, grew all their own food, smoked pot for medicinal reasons. That was a subculture Claire and Martin used to joke about, imagining themselves barefoot and dirty all summer, doing naked yoga poses at dawn on some mountaintop.

“This nation is awash in sin,” Matthew said to Lily. “You know that.”

“Oh, course. I just—”

The policeman leaned forward and shushed them both, and Matthew closed his eyes, in prayer or maybe just exasperation.

A little later, Claire and Alison watched from the hallway as the policeman took the three—Tom, Lily, and Matthew—out to the police car. Claire wanted to say something encouraging to Tom, that she hoped he’d be okay, or just “see you next week,” but he kept his head tucked, eyes cast down. When Lily the protester passed by, she lifted her hand to wave at Claire, as if she weren’t getting arrested but just heading out for a bit. Claire waved back, uncertainly.

“Poor Tom,” Bishop Andrew said, from the conference-room doorway. “He knows better.”

“It’s that temper,” Alison said.

“But he’s so—he seems so mild,” Claire said.

“Remember those Take Back Vermont signs a few years ago?” Alison said. “Tom used to go around grabbing them up, and making a bonfire out of them back at his farm.” She saw Claire’s questioning look. “One of his daughters is gay.”

You didn’t see those angry signs anymore, Claire thought, except
for occasional homemade versions outside ramshackle old farmhouses up in the Northeast Kingdom. She tried to picture Tom leaping out of his car, plucking a *Take Back Vermont* sign out of the muddy ground, then darting away, tires squealing—but even after all she’d seen today, it seemed out of character. He was still a good egg, trying to do the right thing.

“At any rate, the whole Kansas group is getting ticketed,” Andrew said.

“They broke the ring, huh?” Alison said.

“What ring?” Claire asked.

“The ring of safety. The rule is they stay on the city sidewalk out there, not on our property.” Andrew pointed out the window to the decorative brick walk that ran alongside and then turned away from the city’s cement sidewalk. The “God Hates Fags” and “Real Marriage, Real Families” signs still lay in a messy stack out on the city sidewalk.

“That’s not much help,” Claire said.

“It’s the best we could get,” Alison said. “It’s their right to come here and act like evil morons, but they have to stay outside our ring of safety.”

“The ring of safety,” Claire repeated, as Andrew chastised Alison for her name-calling. The ring of safety sounded like something from one of the fantasy novels Claire had loved as a kid. You could slip the ring of safety onto your finger, then jump into the magic pond, emerging into another, better world.

**At the end of the workday, Claire met Martin at the car dealer to drop off her car for an oil change.** In the passenger seat of his car, she told him about the demonstrators, the “God Hates Fags” signs, the way Tom had gotten involved, the police. She wondered aloud whether Tom’s gay daughter was the same daughter he’d talked so much about, the overly strict mother of the little skiing girls.

“Jesus Christ,” Martin said. “What the hell is wrong with those people?” They were on the bridge now, and in the stop-and-start traffic, he drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. He’d scrunched down his eyebrows, deepening the lines between his eyes. “You don’t have to put up with that kind of weirdness.”

“It’s not usually like that,” she said. “Usually it’s peaceful, and everyone’s kind.” And just think of how much Tom cared; he cared so much that he’d lost his temper, created his own little protest, tried to attack the protesters. Tom would have punched that lead protester, Matthew, or at least shoved him, if Andrew hadn’t run out there. And then what?
“Claire, sweetie. You don’t have to keep working with those people,” Martin said. “Why not just take some time off? Relax and recharge.”

“Relax and recharge?” She couldn’t help smiling—he sounded like a women’s magazine article, not like himself.

“Why not?” He reached over and patted her thigh, resting his hand there.

She lifted his hand and squeezed it in her own, then let go. Through her window, she looked downriver at the old mill buildings, reborn now as restaurants and bike shops, and the rest of her life telescoped in front of her: Fifty more years of sitting next to Martin in the car, or standing too close in a tiny kitchen. In the life she’d pictured until now, there had been children, a bunch of them, thundering through a rambling picturesque house that had secret back stairs and a laundry chute. And a big backyard with woods all around. It was all going to unfold magically, until now. And Martin didn’t even care about her friend Tom, or what was going to happen to that protest-woman, Lily, after the way she and Matthew had hissed at one another. Wherever Lily and Matthew were tonight, they were probably fighting, like her and Martin or any other couple.

Claire woke up from a nap on Saturday and found Martin sitting on the living-room floor, his stacks of medical journals nearby. He seemed to be studying a worn-looking book that lay open on his lap. She needed to be kinder; she needed to let him in. “What are you working on?” she asked, trying hard to keep the sharp edges out of her voice.

“Oh, just the usual stuff,” he said, and he shut the book and turned it face down, looking at her and not at the book.

_The Developing Human_, the book’s spine said. One of his old med-school textbooks. “Can I see?” she asked.

He shook his head. “I really don’t think—”

“Please?” She sank down next to him, the two of them leaning against the couch, and she pulled the book partway onto her lap. One section bristled with yellow post-its: page after page of broken and wrongly developed little humans—Trisomy-18. Down syndrome. Spina bifida. Names of other congenital ailments she’d never heard of. For some reason Martin had marked these particular pages, with their awful black-and-white photos and bold-faced words, to return to again and again.

She turned to face him, and he looked at her with such shiny, sad eyes. “It made me feel better,” he said. “I mean, to think that there might be a good reason for all the”—he took a breath, let it out—“for all our losses.”

It should have made her feel better, too, that he was trying.
The next protest came three weeks after Easter. When Claire looked out her office window, she saw Lily, the woman who’d had the argument with Matthew last time. Today Lily wore a long skirt and woolly cardigan, and with her dark braid down her back, she looked like a woman out of the nineteenth century. Claire could see the signs’ harsh red circles and slashes: an anti-abortion demonstration. “God Is Disappointed In These People,” one sign read.

Downstairs, Claire opened the creaky front door and leaned outside. No one noticed her. “Support life, all life,” the marchers chanted. She thought of how comfortable she’d felt, how sane, sitting and just talking with Tom on Wednesdays. Maybe Lily needed that, too, someone sane to talk to. Claire stepped out onto the lawn, waving both hands to get Lily’s attention.

Lily smiled at her and moved away from the protesters; up close Claire could see fine wrinkles and patches of sun damage around her eyes. “It’s Lily, right?” Claire said, over the chanting. “You’re making a mistake. I mean, I admire your dedication, I noticed how you kind of stood up to Matthew last time, that’s his name, right? But—”

“Matthew.” Lily squinted, but nodded slowly. “Matt has big ideas. Sometimes his big ideas get in the way.”

In some other world, they could meet at the bagel shop down the block, and lean across the table, trading complaints about Martin’s and Matthew’s most annoying quirks. Thinking of Martin reminded her of his old med-school fetal development book, with all its sad photographs, and now those photos hung there in her mind. “God makes mistakes, too many to count,” she said. “I think you should know that.”

“How would you say something like that?” Lily stepped closer and tilted her head. “Are you trying to test me?”

Claire shook her head.

“Listen, if you’re feeling regret, you can join us,” Lily said. She smoothed the stray hairs that had come loose from her braid, and held out her hands. “Every woman who’s had an abortion ends up grieving.”

Claire started to laugh at Lily’s misunderstanding, and then she felt her face getting hot and blotchy, underarms and groin prickling, eyes stinging. “Grieving,” she said. The phantom babies, thinner than paper, fluttered around her head again. She wanted to tell Lily how much she missed Tom, who didn’t get to lead his workshops anymore, and who’d probably been banned from the office. She remembered the old Take Back Vermont signs—the way Tom had plucked them up and burned them—and his skiing granddaughters and his gay daughter.
Lily nodded, hands still outstretched, utterly misinformed. Behind her, a few of the protesters stood in a cluster, their eyes on Claire.

Claire took a step closer. “These—these—babies sometimes just fall out of my body, okay? We’re going to do something about it, but it’s been—.” But those weren’t the right words, words that would show Lily how little she knew about Claire’s life, or how screwed up she and Martin had gotten.

Lily backed away from Claire, frowning now.

Lily had everything wrong; she would have read her Bible, read those ancient texts, all those mistranslations, and misunderstood. The world wasn’t what Lily thought it was. “You’re not wanted here,” Claire said. “You’re hurting people and you don’t even bother to notice. Go on back where you came from.”

“Claire!” Alison called from the front door. “You know the procedures, we’re not supposed to engage.”

Claire stayed put, waiting for Lily, who hadn’t answered her yet. A moment later, she felt a hand on her back—Bishop Andrew had snuck up behind her somehow. “Let’s go, Claire.” He put his arm over her shoulder, bending his head closer. “We’re not going to change their minds today,” he whispered.

Claire started to turn with him, but she stopped and pulled away. She wanted to stay here a little longer, even though she could hear Andrew and Alison conferring behind her. Sooner or later she’d find the right words.
In the Spirit Room

After the funeral, Jolene and I went back to our mother’s house. We had grown up in these same rooms, though the place was somewhat altered now—our mother, who believed in plants the way other people believed in God, had turned our old playroom and study into greenhouses over the years. Jolene and I let ourselves in and stood for a few minutes on the threshold, unwilling to take off our coats and face the rest of the afternoon. The air was scented by orchids. The silence was absolute. Jolene, as the only daughter of the house, was the receptacle of family traditions, and in her old-fashioned way she had coped with our mother’s death by covering all the mirrors and stopping the clocks. For two days we had lived like that, glancing above the bathroom sink to find a handkerchief staring back, startled by the blanket draped over a six-foot frame in the corner. Now, with a sigh, my sister set about undoing the damage, folding up the sheets she had used, winding the grandfather clock again, returning the house to the realm of the living.

Eventually I slipped away and went upstairs. During Mom’s illness, I had moved back into my old bedroom, now handsomely remade into a guest room—although my mother, not normally one for nostalgia, had kept the little sign that had hung on the door in my youth: Maxwell, carved into a wooden panel shaped like a train. I sat on the bed, still holding my jacket. Even here, Mom had kept plants. The very air in the house seemed rarified, freshened continually by so many open green leaves.

My mother’s Alzheimer’s had come on with astonishing rapidity. One day she was absolutely fine—the next I had given up my apartment to come and care for her—and at last Jolene had moved back from Texas, the three of us under one roof again. As the months passed, we had turned the house into a careful prison. Jolene brought in a locksmith to fix the doors so that Mom couldn’t get out when we weren’t looking. I took the knobs off the burners on the stove to keep her from starting fires. Once Jolene found her leaning out of a window on the second floor,
waving to a startled child in the street; now the windows were nailed shut too. The fridge had been an issue in itself. Jolene thought that it might be best to chain the handle, since Mom had a weakness for dairy products and tended to carry them around the house, abandoning her glasses of milk and dishes of yogurt in secret places, so that we could only locate them, several days too late, by the sour smell. But I did not like denying our mother her afternoon snack. In the end, we had to pick our battles.

Her death had come about as the result of a fall. It seemed such a mundane event, too small to claim a person’s life; Mom simply lost her balance on the stairs. I was at work, Jolene catching a few hours’ sleep in an upstairs bedroom. Mom had landed hard, and her head struck the banister, causing the subdural hematoma that proved fatal over the next few days. The mailman had spotted her lying prone on the floor. I received a call at work and arrived home in time to meet the ambulance.

Jolene had been inconsolable, her face buried in her arms. My mother, strapped onto the stretcher, had temporarily regained consciousness and seemed merely annoyed, as though the whole matter was a huge inconvenience. She put out a hand to me as I approached.

“What happened?” she asked.
“You fell,” I said.
“And so?” she snapped. “People fall all over the world.”

The day after the funeral, compelled by forces beyond my control, I brought a sleeping bag with me to work. I did not mention this to Jolene. My sister was handling the situation by going into a kind of walking coma, subsisting on daytime television and cups of black tea. I patted her shoulder as I left, my satchel weighted down with enough food to see me through the evening. I was planning to spend the night in the museum.

The day was clear and cold, and as always I approached the Museum of Natural History from the front, striding up the sweeping marble steps like an ordinary visitor, eschewing the more private employee entrance at the side. It was autumn in D.C., the wind damp, the pavement speckled with dried leaves. Children raced each other down the stairs. An austere guard nodded to me as I passed through the doors. For twenty years I had worked there, in the rooms behind the scenes, cataloguing insects, now and then publishing a paper to commemorate a new species of Carabus.

For most of my career, my mother and I had been colleagues, of a kind. Many people found it a hoot when they learned about us, a mother and son duo, slaving away together in the back rooms of the museum.
I’m sure they imagined us working side by side as we catalogued our slides, looked up Latin names, and wrote our papers, destined to go unread by all but a select few.

The truth, however, was that Mom and I never had much to do with each other. Her province had been the Botany Department. She was a legend in the field—at the time of her retirement, there were no less than sixty species of plant named after her. My specialty, on the other hand, was beetles. I knew little about the day-to-day reality of Mom’s work. She knew less about mine; she had always been squeamish about bugs. (I had once presented her with that pie chart—ubiquitous in biology classrooms—which showed all forms of animal life laid out by relative quantity. Beetles comprised one-fifth of the pie, by far the largest chunk, while mammals, human beings included, were relegated to a tiny golden slice, barely visible beside the invertebrates. Mom had been unimpressed by my logic.) Now and then she and I would bump into each other in the hallways. Once a week we had made it a habit to go out for lunch. Occasionally I would visit her office, or she would stop by mine, but we were both usually too busy, too engrossed in the task at hand, to welcome this sort of interruption. That much we did share—a passion for the work itself.

Today I took my time roaming past my favorite exhibits. The stuffed lion, its lips pulled back in a snarl. The dinosaur bones, guaranteed to awaken my inner ten-year-old boy. It never failed to give me a jolt of pride, stepping through the portal into the back rooms of the museum. The visitors could not penetrate this inner sanctum. I set my sleeping bag out of sight in the corner of my office and spent the afternoon trying to name a new species of beetle. The specimen was gorgeous, the size of my knuckle, with wings as burnished and bright as a fresh penny. Finding a new name was a pleasantly exhaustive business. *Carabus arvensis* was taken—I could not christen the beetle after the meadows it preferred to live in. *Carabus monilis*, too, had been used before—I could not name the beetle after the funny frill on its pronotum that so resembled a gentleman’s collar. *Carabus mirabilis*—“the wonderful beetle”—was a possibility, but I thought I remembered seeing something similar in a list of species discovered by the Germans. This required a search among the ancient tomes of Latin names in the library. So the time passed. My peace was broken only by a few well-intentioned, if misguided, calls of consolation from my co-workers. The fact of my mother’s death had apparently passed around the museum like wildfire.

Eventually the lights began to go out in the offices along the hallway.
I heard footsteps in the corridor, and cheerful voices. The sky, through my office window, dimmed. The janitor knocked on my door and informed me in a mock-solemn voice that it was getting late.

“What?” I asked, with every appearance of surprise, gazing blearily over my glasses. “Is it that time already?”

He laughed and went away again, whistling. I turned off my lamp and unrolled the sleeping bag. There, on the hard tile floor, I spent the night. It was uncomfortable, and slightly ridiculous; but whatever compulsion had gripped me that morning had not yet lessened its hold, and I knew with terrible certainty that I was not ready to go back to my mother’s house.

I awoke with my brain already whirling. It was early, the smoky light filtering through the blinds. Jolene and I had planned to put Mom’s house on the market and divide the spoils. My sister did not want any of the furniture, having a well-stocked home of her own in Houston, not to mention a husband with very particular taste. I would not be able to take anything of Mom’s either. As a poorly-paid museum grunt, I tended to get by in tiny studio apartments as near as possible to the National Mall. Jolene was planning to hold a yard sale and just auction everything off. She had spoken of it with relish, not being of a sentimental turn of mind. But to me it called up a feeling of nausea, of loss. I was more familiar with the house than Jolene was. Though we had spent our childhood there together, my sister’s home was in Texas now, while I had lived with Mom for over a year, ever since she had succumbed to Alzheimer’s—and even before that I had been a frequent visitor. I knew those auburn couches and clunky bookshelves well. The thought of them going away in the hands of strangers made me feel as though we were parceling off bits of our mother—her eye for color, her dislike of varnish, her addiction to Tiffany lamps. “What will we do with her plants?” I had asked, and even practical Jolene didn’t have an answer for that one.

The morning was pale and golden. As I stood on the front steps of the museum, stretching in the light, it occurred to me that I did not have to go back to the house just yet. I had meant to shower, but I could get by another day without. I needed a change of clothes, but I had been planning to do a little shopping for months now. Perhaps I would buy a few shirts and keep them in my office, just in case. I would stock up on snacks, too. There was a great deal of work to be done, after all. I still had not named my beetle. (I had thought briefly of calling it after Mom, half in respect of her passing, half as a little inside joke, since she
had treated most insects as something to be promptly flushed down the toilet. But since our surnames were the same, it would have looked like I was honoring myself instead—and in my field, you didn’t do that. It showed far more humility to wait and let others name a new specimen after you, rather than to arrogantly do it yourself.) I set off up the hill, toward G Street, where I knew there were clothing stores.

When I returned to the office, laden with a few bags of shirts and underwear, there was a message on my machine. Jolene sounded half-awake and gruffly affectionate.

“Sorry I missed you last night, doll. I fell asleep at the kitchen table, if you can believe it.” She gave her wet, early-morning cough and continued, “We’ll have that yard sale today. I hired some moving men to take all the furniture onto the lawn. As Mom was so fond of reminding us, we are middle-aged coots now—no point in giving ourselves a hernia. Just make sure you’re home by four to help me. Okay?”

My mother’s Alzheimer’s had taken away her ability to organize the world. First her words began to disappear. When I came by for dinner, she announced that there were three radios in the living room, and she didn’t know how to use any of them. After a while I figured out that she was referring to the many remote controls, all speckled with incomprehensible buttons, that had proliferated as she purchased a cable box, a DVD player, and a new TV. Then she forgot the word for her calendar. She wanted me to buy her one of those things that showed the date and let her tear off a page each day.

“A calendar?” I asked warily.

“No, Max,” she said, slapping me fondly on the arm. “Not that. I mean those doodads that tell you what day it is. Jolene always knew where to buy them for me.”

Presently time itself began to elude her. I stopped by once to take her out for a walk, and she informed me that it might be Tuesday upstairs, but here, in the living room, it was definitely Wednesday. “What day is it out there?” she asked, waving vaguely at the window as I helped her on with her coat. She forgot how time progressed. She forgot that each hour was a specific amount, measured and immutable, and that the time of day repeated, once in the morning, once in the evening. I reduced her to tears during a long and cyclical discussion about how she needed to take her medicine every twelve hours. At this point I thought it prudent to give up my studio apartment and move in with her for a while. She could no longer tell time, but she was fascinated by it, aware that it must
be something profound. I would come in from work and find her on the sofa, a beady-eyed woman wrapped in a knitted shawl, eyeing the clock on the mantle as though it might explode at any minute.

Then came the day I found policemen in the living room. There were two of them, a man and a woman, huddled beside the couch and muttering together. I rushed past them, flinging my briefcase against the wall, agonized, already preparing for the worst—but Mom was perfectly all right. She was sitting on a stool in the kitchen, apparently in the process of giving a report to a third police officer, a young man holding a clipboard. The boy looked up at me in some relief. It transpired that Mom had found a few of her plants missing. Two orchids, a ficus, and a four-foot cactus had been stolen. Since no one had been in or out of the house except for me—whom, Mom insisted, she trusted completely—she was absolutely certain that ghosts had taken her plants. That was the substance of her police report: thieving ghosts.

I apologized and sent the policemen on their way. I went upstairs and verified that Mom’s plants weren’t missing, that she had just moved them to another room and forgotten. Then I went into my childhood bedroom and called Jolene in Texas.

As it turned out, I did not help with the yard sale. I didn’t go home at all. In fact, I spent the next four nights in the museum. I didn’t feel too guilty about this. The yard sale had been Jolene’s idea. She was the one with the head for numbers, and she had always been better with people. She was the elder sibling, too, and there existed between us an age-old dynamic: I was the golden boy, following proudly in our mother’s footsteps, while Jolene was the odd duck, shipping off to parts unknown, marrying a man Mom had never liked. (Not that Mom had ever particularly taken to any of my girlfriends, either. She could be possessive, believing that no one was smart enough for me, or perhaps smart enough for our family.) It was not the first time I had left Jolene stranded, high and dry, with an unpleasant task to accomplish. I spent the days advising on a specimen of larva that a colleague of mine had discovered in Bolivia. Jolene left an irate message on my machine, calling me a coward and a prick. But it was clear that she felt the satisfaction of a job well done, watching Mom’s new kitchen table being carried down the street, our old bureaus and black-and-white TV handed out as curiosities to the next generation.

On my fourth night in the office, I was plagued by insomnia. It was a strange place to rest—the ceaseless rumble of cars in the street,
the unfamiliar rattle of the heater, the tap of branches against the windowpane. At home I would have meandered down and watched a little soporific television, or at the very least clicked on the light and read for a while. But here I could not risk it. I was aware that what I was doing did not make a whole lot of sense—grown men did not curl up under a desk with a pile of dirty clothes for a pillow—but by some mysterious process, it was getting me through the dangerous aftermath of the funeral. If I were discovered, however, people would be concerned. I might be forced to take a leave of absence, to meet with a therapist. At the very least, I would have to go back to my mother’s house, which I was not prepared to do. Fretful and uncomfortable, I tossed and turned. Mom’s best cure for sleeplessness had always been to change position: she would urge me to spend the night on the couch or to flip the arrangement of my bed upside-down, so that my head lay where my feet used to be. Usually this had worked. I hefted myself off the floor, rolling my sleeping bag under one arm.

The long hallways looked different in the gloom. I had never really explored the wings beyond Entomology. It was my tendency to stay focused on my own area of expertise; I was methodical (“a plodder,” Jolene always said, with a mixture of sympathy and exasperation). My work revolved around details. The plating of a beetle’s thorax—the shape of the antennae—even the number of hairs on the leg might be the only distinction between separate species.

In the rooms behind the scenes at the museum, the world was strictly divided into categories: Zoology, Botany, Mineralogy. The exhibits for the public were not like this, of course; they were laid out in a kind of cheerful chaos, stuffed birds alongside monkeys alongside zebras, geodes beside flowers beside petrified wood. Each exhibit was created as much to entertain and excite as to educate. But the back rooms had another purpose. Here, our job was nothing less than to discover and label absolutely everything. To that end, there were elephant, trilobite, and robin experts, each shut away in his own office, peering at butterfly wings or fossils beneath a microscope. I had always enjoyed the idea of all of us researchers cloistered together, the fungus men, the soapstone women, the gnat specialists, carefully cataloguing the thousands of varieties in our particular disciplines that might be out there.

But I had never bothered to visit the rooms of these colleagues. Now, treading cautiously through the darkened hallways, I began my exploration. Many doors were locked, of course, and I moved quietly, trying not to scuff my feet. Paleontology was not far off. I knew by sight
the people who worked there: the man with the snowy beard, the woman
with the spattering of freckles, and that fellow who was terrifically
handsome, the sort who might play one of us in a movie but seemed
oddly out of place in real life. I found my way through a side door into
a room of filing cabinets—ancient mahogany things, lovingly crafted.
Inside there were bones. There were fossilized teeth, half-sunk in sheets
of limestone. There were vertebrae and tiny fingers. In the murkiness of
the great office, the fossils seemed eerily portentous, colored in flickering
gold by the streetlamp beyond the window. At last I took my sleeping bag
into the corner and settled behind a bookcase, where my mother’s advice
was once again proven right. I fell asleep quite easily.

On the fifth night I found a room in the Zoology Department,
one I knew of by hearsay but had never seen. Mom had referred to it as
“Get Pickled,” though officially it was the Spirit Room, also known as
the wet collections. Normally, to preserve living things indefinitely, you
must dry them and treat them carefully with chemicals. In my mother’s
department, there were pressed plants kept under glass that might be
several hundred years old. In Entomology, we relied on naphtha, an
effective if pungent solvent, to keep bacteria from getting at our beloved
bugs. In the Spirit Room, however, the specimens were suspended in
glass jars of alcohol or formaldehyde.

On the shelves were a thousand gleaming containers, arranged
importantly by kind: fish, amphibians, lizards, crustaceans. I moved in a
daze between them. There were frogs, splayed in a half-human posture,
their bulbous eyes frosted over by time. There were snakes whose coils
echoed the curve of the jar. The chemicals bleached out all the colors,
so that each mussel and anemone, goanna and flounder, was as pale,
clammy and luminous as an albino. It made the differences between
them seem slighter—the wan monkfish appeared to be related to the ice-
colored lobster several shelves away. It would have been a bizarre place
even in the daytime, but at night it was positively otherworldly. Around
each corner another ghostly oddity glared at me from within its glass
Miniature jellies ringed by feathery tentacles. I slept against the bank of
windows, shielded beneath a table, and suffered feverish dreams.

In the morning there was another message from Jolene. She sounded
grumpy this time.

“I’ve spoken to your boss,” she said. “He claims you’ve been at work, so
apparently I can’t file a Missing Persons Report.” There was a pause—she
might have sniffled. “And since there isn’t such a thing as an Insane

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Little Brothers Report, I’m not really sure what options I have.” She paused again. “Anyway, I’ve been on the hunt to sell Mom’s house. I’ve been meeting with real estate agents, and I think I found one I might actually trust, so— Look, Max, this is ridiculous. Just call me back, all right?”

Toward the end, Jolene had borne the brunt of our mother’s care. This was in part because she had no job in D.C., as I did; in part because it was as much her nature to assume command as it was mine to relinquish it; and in part because they were both women. When Jolene and I discovered, for example, that our mother had been forgetting to bathe, there was no other recourse but for my sister to roll up her sleeves and dive in, while I discreetly retired with a book. I knew what it cost her. She had to abandon indefinitely her powerhouse career—and her tetchy, nervous husband, whom she quietly adored—and come back to her hometown to be an underappreciated and unpaid nurse.

Yet it was lifesaving to have her there. There were days when Mom began singing to herself at the dinner table. There were days when the anti-psychotic medicine, which the doctors had prescribed to keep her from believing in ghosts, made her sick to her stomach, and she threw up every half an hour until it left her system. There were days when she was obsessed with milligrams. She would squint at her pill bottles, counting out how many milligrams there were in each, and then refuse to swallow them, insisting that 200 was all right, but 500 was just too many. In vain did we try to tell her that the concentrations were relative, that it was meaningless to compare each dose. There were days when Mom kept trying to make us understand that her legs were too big—no one could possibly understand how big her legs were. She complained that they were too big to fit into her bed, and Jolene and I would simply have to find her a larger mattress somewhere.

During these times it was essential to have another sane adult there in the room, someone to lock eyes with, someone to stay up late with, clinking your beer bottles together and laughing until you cried.

“You know, there’s nothing as contagious as Alzheimer’s,” Jolene told me once.

“Hm?”

“We spent the whole morning talking about the telephone today.” She made a grimace. “Mom picked it up and dialed a few numbers, but the line was always busy. She was trying to figure out how to call some of her old friends. Finally I realized that she was just dialing her own
number over and over, since we wrote it right there on the phone for her.” Jolene passed a hand over her eyes. “So she went to take a nap, and after three hours with her, my brain wasn’t working anymore. I sat up thinking, ‘How do we find out what somebody’s number is? How the hell does a telephone work?’”

**Most men, during a midlife crisis, will try to return to the age of their greatest sexual potency.** They buy sports cars, take trips to the wilderness, daydream about quitting their jobs. A colleague of mine explained that what triggers this behavior isn’t usually the aging of the man, but the aging of his wife. Once he no longer has a fertile partner—once there’s no chance, within his marriage, for him to pass on his genes to new offspring—he is biologically driven to try and attract a younger mate. This happens regardless of whether he has any conscious urge to stray. Suddenly he finds himself needing to flaunt his income and visit bars where young women congregate. Suddenly he’s shopping around for toupees.

After two weeks of sleeping at the museum, to my great chagrin, I realized that I was undergoing a midlife crisis of my own. I still had not been back to my mother’s house. I had not gone to meet with the real estate agents. I had not even found the nerve to return any of Jolene’s increasingly frantic messages. Each night I brought my bedroll to a new room, a new wing. I was becoming expert at washing myself, section by section, in the sinks of the men’s bathrooms, changing into a brand-new starched shirt, noshing on trail mix and restaurant food. Perhaps because I had no wife, my midlife crisis had caused me to retrogress far beyond my sexual peak. Instead I seemed to have moved right back into my childhood.

When I was a boy, Mom had already begun her career at the Museum of Natural History. She did not want me going home after school to an empty house. (My father had died years before—I could barely remember him, an earthy smell, the feel of a bristly beard.) Jolene was old enough to be a latchkey kid, but not quite old enough to care for me. And so I would head to the museum instead. Every afternoon I marched up the marble steps, stuffed my backpack into one of the lockers, and, in an important voice, told the woman at the information desk that she should let my mother know I had arrived. Usually Mom was too busy to leave just then. She had enjoyed a meteoric rise through the ranks, becoming in record time the Keeper of the Herbarium, a post she had always coveted. At meetings, she was referred to simply as the Keeper, a title that never
failed to amuse and impress me; it evoked images of an Amazonian warrior, guarding the door to some hidden, coveted garden.

While I waited for her to be done, I would wander among the exhibits. Back then, I had never gone behind the veil, into the rooms beyond. I knew that Mom did something with plants, but in truth I wasn’t much interested. I loved the museum for itself. I loved the wild animals, stuffed and posed so that you could catch a hint of how they had moved in life. I loved the gem room, the glittering Hope Diamond and the enormous crystal ball, larger than my head, that had been carved hundreds of years ago by unknown means. I discovered out-of-the-way staircases. I counted the rings on the cross-section of a monstrous sequoia, which was mounted on the wall to chart the passage of time, its girth marked to show when major human events had occurred during its long life. I learned that there were bathrooms hidden at the end of the hallway of giant sloth and woolly mammoth bones. And without fail, I visited the insects, so firm and well-armored, mounted in rows like soldiers. Even the pins that stuck their bodies to the backing seemed wonderful to me.

When my mother finished with her work, she would bustle out between the glass cases, drawing on her coat—and when, invariably, she could not find me, she would page me. This was the most delicious moment of the afternoon. The loudspeaker would crackle, and Mom’s warm voice would float through every hallway, every room: “Max, to the front. Max, to the front.” The fact that the whole museum heard her calling me seemed like the most precious token of maternal love.

Jolene went back to Texas. She had settled on an asking price with a real estate agent, and there was nothing left to do but wait for a buyer. Her husband was pining for her. She herself was pining for her home and her career. I knew all of this not because I spoke to Jolene, but because she left the information in a series of teary, half-crazed messages on my machine.

The first few were rather kind. “I know you’re suffering over there, but give me a call—I have some numbers to throw at you.” Or else, “Listen, let’s meet for coffee. I can come to you. Just let me know where.”

Presently, though, she began to lose her temper. “It’s Jolene, your sister,” she would shout. “I don’t know if you remember me. What the hell has gotten into you?” And once: “I came by the damn museum today. But guess what? They wouldn’t let me in to see you. It’s restricted.”

Her last message was broken by sobs. She was calling from the airport, a last-ditch effort to reach me before leaving town. “Fine, fine,”
she wept. “I don’t have a brother. When the house sells I’ll just send you a check for half the money, and I’ll never speak to you again.”

I did not call her back. I did not find an apartment. I was frozen, no more, no less. It seemed that there was an initial stage of grieving, one that came before even denial and bargaining—a stage that kept me floating helplessly in space, unable to move forward. I kept returning to the Spirit Room on my nightly vigils, touching the glass of the captured specimens. I grew familiar with the grouchy faces of the fish, their plump lips invariably settled in a pout. I pored through a few of the books, reading up on the newt, the horned lizard, and the anaconda. (The latter hung in a massive glass container, captured in its full, impossible length, and even its ashy pallor could not diminish the power of those muscled curves.) While there, I discovered the existence of a species of crab that survived by digging holes in the rock. It then would systematically shut itself in, sealing off the aperture with secretions from its own body, until it had only a tiny window left and was trapped there forever, feeding on the plankton and scraps carried passively into its cave by the tide. Its view of the world was limited to whatever it could glimpse through the window it had made. I felt a certain kinship with this crab as I peered out at the street, between the blinds. A strong breeze from the river blew a torrent of leaves across the road. Tourists marched to and fro. Squirrels buried and unearthed their acorns. Once there was an ice storm, and in the nightly glow of the streetlamp the sidewalks glittered as though they had been transmuted into something other than simple concrete.

At last I got up enough courage to visit my mother’s department. Entomology and Botany were separated by two floors and a veritable warren of corridors. By the time I made my way there, I had slept almost everywhere else in the museum. I had probed the cabinets of Mineralogy, examining blocks of quartz infused with coils of a foreign crystal, as yet unidentified. I had looked through the drawers in Zoology, coming across bat teeth, rodent skulls, and leopard claws. I had laid out my bedroll beneath a table upon which stood a variety of zebra heads, all of different sizes. I had found storage rooms in which a strange arrangement of leftovers could be found—old dinosaur exhibits, now outdated; a portrayal of human evolution that flirted with creationism; and a half-finished exhibit on the mating rituals of different species, apparently rejected as being too risqué for the younger set.

On my first night in the Botany Department, I broke into someone’s office and camped out there, unwilling to brave the rooms that had been my mother’s jurisdiction. Gradually, though, I grew more comfortable. I
examined the pressed flower petals. The ferns had been Mom’s favorite—so ancient!—each leaf and root precisely arranged to stand out crisply from the stem. Some of the labels had not yet been remade in the printed font that was now standard issue. Some of them were still handwritten in my mother’s own curly script.

In her department, I came across the simple fact that time washed the color out of things. We might be able to preserve the shape and size, but the hue was invariably lessened. Only the insects seemed to be impervious. Butterflies, fire ants, cockroaches—pinned to the backing, they all blazed as brightly as they had done in life, their knobby shells and segmented wings invulnerable to the years. Elsewhere in the museum, however, I found each leaf and petal faded. Each bone was the same bland ivory as every other. Even the glossy pelts of the animals had lost their luster.

My mother had been similarly diminished by her illness. She had set aside her patterned clothes and allowed her hair to turn its natural silver, giving up the glamorous echo of youth. She left off her makeup, so that I was always surprised by the chapped pallor of her mouth. During the last few months of her life, she began to unravel completely. Dressed in habitual gray, her skin seemed as colorless as a snowflake, her features undistinguished and uncertain.

Our last conversation had taken place the day she died. After hitting her head, she was brought by ambulance to the hospital and sequestered in a private room. I met her there, feeling nothing but the calm delirium of shock as I sat beside the bed and watched her sleep. Mom moved in and out of consciousness. Her hands twitched on top of the quilt. Jolene was out in the hall, haranguing one of the doctors, when my mother opened her eyes and looked at me.

“Where’s Max?” she asked.
“Right here, Mom,” I said.
She stared at me for a moment, then smiled, as though deciding I must be joking.
“No, no,” she said. “The other Max. You know, my son.”

After three months, her house sold. Just like that, the spell was broken. For three months I had lived at the museum, creeping from room to room, never staying too long in one place, bathing in the bathrooms like a homeless man. There had been several near misses—once the janitor had banged open the door of the office in which I was nestled on the floor; perhaps he had heard me snoring, for he shone the
beam of his flashlight around the room, frowning. The glow fell on my shoes, but he appeared to see nothing odd in a pair of old Oxfords beneath the desk, and he missed the rest of me, huddled in my sleeping bag behind the closet door. Another time I overslept, waking to the sound of voices. I was in my mother’s department then, stretched out beneath a table in the Herbarium. The room was ablaze with fluorescent light, and a few young women had come in and were collating slides. Slowly I crawled out from beneath the table, balling up my bedroll. They were intent on their work and paid no attention to me as I made my way to the door.

Then one day I received a copy of the housing contract, signed by the new owners. My sister had mailed it to me from Houston, without comment. Suddenly all things became possible again. Within the week I rented a furnished studio apartment, only a few blocks away from the museum. I threw away my sleeping bag, which had reached a rather alarming degree of filthiness. The drawers of my filing cabinet were crammed with dirty clothes—these, too, I had washed in the bathroom, inexpertly, and now I tossed them all in the bin. I even telephoned my sister, who evidently screened my call and did not return it. (It would be a few months before she would speak to me.) Finally, I emerged from inside the museum, like a beetle larva rising out of water, ready for the next phase of its existence, blinking in the light.

It is a strange thing to lose a parent. When, at the hospital, I had told Jolene about Mom’s last words to me—her wish to see her other son—my sister had rolled her eyes and muttered something that sounded like Alzheimer-tastic. But I wondered if Mom was trying to say something else. Her illness had taken from her the deepest core of her nature, her desire for discovery and order; it had taken away the place at which we came together, the part of us that was the same. Perhaps she was wishing for herself back. My mother would have hated to succumb to Alzheimer’s, the vanishing of her renowned and formidable intellect. And yet, of course, she never really grasped that she was ill. Most sufferers of Alzheimer’s are unaware, by and large, that they are suffering. Indeed—in strange, wild, illuminating moments—I had the odd sensation that her illness was a gift, rather than a burden. It allowed her to die unafraid. She had misplaced her awareness of time passing, of the possibility of loss. And perhaps it was a gift for Jolene and me as well. Our father had died suddenly—he went to work one day, and the next day we buried him. With our mother, we had a long duration in which to understand that she was disappearing, to move into her house and care for her, to use the last months that were given to us.
Abby Geni

There are times when I still find her in my dreams. Through the back halls of the Museum of Natural History I follow her stocky, linen-clad form. My mother is young again—as young as she was when I was a boy, her hair tarnished by just a few locks of gray. Sometimes I catch her, grabbing her by the hand and earning myself an affectionate, if absent, pat on the head, but more often than not I never find her. She is always just ahead of me, the trail of her perfume leading me into the open, high-ceilinged rooms of the Botany Department, past Mineralogy and Entomology, through closets where discontinued exhibits of whale bones and gemstones gather dust. In these dreams, there are moments when I understand that the rooms of the museum are in fact the compartments of my own mind—or perhaps the collective mind of the human race itself—cluttered up with all the lists of things we have insisted upon learning. Here we have the carefully identified drawers, each animal consigned to its own species, each pebble categorized in bright, bold letters. Room upon room details our obsession to know and name everything, as though by labeling it we can come to own it, its nature no longer mysterious at all. And yet I am certain—for it brings me a steady rejoicing—that the task will never be finished, that we are up against nothing less than the full, chaotic measure of a limitless world.
Nehassaiu deGannes

Boston Bridge Works, 1927

On our left we have Narragansett Station
   See how red dominates the horizon?
      Brick   Lights   Sky

Consider the three  upright  substantial
      our Moses  Nicholas  John  Notice at dusk
      only the far one blinks (first) a warning

for birds or the dead  Slip off your shoes  Feel
      yourself rotting  wood  exhausted iron,  oh that
      saxophone sound  Well it’s not worth repeating

but wind takes up residence
      with power  You know gates latching  unlatching
      shiver of light on rainsoaked wire.

Folks whisper it’s steam riding these towers.  Me
      I’ve been walking this tour since 1763  The year Mary
      Wamsley slipped a white-picket child into boiling water

Believe her blood lines the sky?  I know what’s not
      Escaped  Free  & her own children too.  Not negro-
      mancy  Girl worked that case in high court

See for yourself  Step out one morning
      with just enough light  Red wanes
      Axe ceases & Mary’s sweeping back concrete

broom like a cenotaph (semaphore you’d say)
      whisking saltwater  warning arrivals keep moving
      No future at POINT ST. LANDING.
Wonder what that is? Well the meaning’s as clear as
  clear as gold in a benefit window Funny how
  sun’s a ventriloquist tricks you into hearing

life where there isn’t any
  Now that wall’s like my friend
  Has a house in Riverside

From her deck you can see
  one catalpa tree clear out to crippling water
  (Front St.’s downriver, hotels and all)

Still she can’t fathom her neighbors:
  whole lot grown wild heads with wings
  barring acquaintance with

hurricane swells
  Wonder did Columbus make of this place?
  This is India Point softly now

hindsight blesses land Tri-ni-dad
  Land See there Our own power st. Trinity
  Now what brings you to Providence?

Tracking one family’s greed.
  Pardon, you’re tracing your family tree?
  so sorry Wind’s got my ear
December in the Bronx

For Jeremiah

When eased from the understory of nitrogen and humus

like contorted planets orbited by tiny dark moons

that cling then fall to earth, rutabaga and celery root

carry the cellular syntax for mercy, a tastes-like-dirt epiphany

unloved by the fast-food set. What’s necessary, they say,

isn’t necessarily palatable. So, too, the Bronx.

Atop the rich, narrow island like an axe blade on the handle,

it swings and slices with the heaves and hoes

of the thin polished handle held in the stormy fingers of Wall.

There’s little choice, we know, between housed and colonized

and the coming blizzard’s feat of surrender. The winter,
Michael Dowdy

like our hairlines, is unfair.
But not for us. We taste the dust

that scratches our throats
like words necessary but unspoken.

What will suffice in these years
of unknowing? A quick wave,

a glance? To pass through them
like long-haul truckers who see

nothing but stenciled letters
white as the north face of Pluto?

Before the blizzard draped
the Bronx’s gray-brick giants

in rented gowns, our soup
of celery root and rutabaga

completed its chemistry of mercy.
The blender’s quick puree,

we know, works for now,
the blade’s understory quiet

beneath the white gown
only until scored shovels rise

and bitter winds roll in
from you-know-where.
Iris Jamahl Dunkle

Last Evening Only the Color Gold Could Keep Me

1

The train moved smooth across the landscape as if the whole universe were covered in black ice. When he greeted me at the station I could smell deceit. It breathed through his skin. We took a wagon up the steep hill to the town, if you could call it that. A muddy hill sheathed in newly rutted streets. We got out at a place on First, not a hotel as I’d been told, but a brothel. I could smell the sweat and sin. It oozed into the dark mud. When I screamed he looked me in the eye and said, you’ll either fuck the men I bring to you or starve.

2

When he threw me in, the attic was lit with the gold lace of sun shining through beams. Only the gold can keep me I think, my mind swelling with hunger behind the locked door.

3

At first light, the room illumes: a dusty box of hats, a dirty mattress curled into the corner, a few sheets of crumbled paper, a pen.

And so I begin the letter to my mother. It was a lie. Please save me. I am locked in an attic on First Street in Pithole, PA.

I fold it carefully, slip it between the slats of the wooden room that contains me, and watch it flutter down to the dark, dark mud.
How the letter was found and mailed is beyond me. But one afternoon I awoke still blurred in sleep and muted by hunger to hear a thunder of men in the downstairs. I was carved in golden light—like each piece of me would break off into tiny wings, when the door was kicked in.

She walked in tear-streaked. She gathered me up.
Swear by It

Swear by this shallow sand town—this wish cloud—this poor farmland dug up, deforested and carved into muddy streets and leased lots. Swear by the farmers who sold off little and stayed on in their tiny log cabins at the quick built luxury of velvet carpeted hotels. Who swerve through drunken, rutted streets on sleds carried by oxen. Swear you will not thirst. Swear the shadow that carried you—that plucked you from your small town with the lure of OIL! RICHES! will not cover you like a shroud. When the town burns (and it will burn) don’t run. Instead, look for the quiet lamp, far off, steady on the Copeland farm. Know that star, walk to its stubborn, steady light until the greed burns off.
Brendan Egan

Confession: How I Drowned on the Long Island Sound

Some summers I slaughtered lobsters. The sounds were crisp: claws, tail, snap. Bubbles seeped through my hair, each capsule cradling specks of shattered jewels—the silver cheeks of mussel shells, the quahogs’ ridged chalk, fossil teeth, a spine of rock, crucifix fish bones, green kelp, soft glass, and the jellies’ softer flesh. My lips in saline swelled till my mouth was bound—a skate-skin book.

I learned quick culls from chicks. I valued rubberbands, hammers, latex gloves. The lobster has a stubborn soul. Some wrenching was required and strong hands were an asset. Slow—my fingers merged into claws, joints tight as the fittings of a rusted machine. I sighed and stretched the sac in my chest. The ocean filled me and emptied out again in a simple flow through the throat.

As eaters sat plucking pink morsels at picnic tables gawking at the river mouth, I hid behind my gut-spattered fence and split squirming crustaceans, kept safe the tasty bits of meat encased in claw and tail and tossed niggling bodies into black plastic bags. In my summer dreams, sea flames
bubbled up the ruins around my stem-set eyes—
angelic, empty flecks of history.

They say a pulse flicks out from every death
and snatches up the witness.
If my murders released such fatal throbs,
each was covered by the splash of insides and cold smell—
at least as strong as any karmic bullshit.
Realize: it all boils down to price per pound.
The precious parts are cooked and picked,
buttered on rolls. The rest will rot
ammoniating the air, little legs still ticking
like a Whaler’s motor just cut.

And still, the greedy eaters
munch their seafood platters.
Nobody cares to know where the bodies go.
I have tried to last, to swim, to breathe
the salt, to float away,
but the exchange was magnetic.
I flex now my chitinous armors
switch my antennae in the back eddies
of our Thames, and rest there
like the silence that marks a shift of tide.
Oconto County Highway V

Fast and inky under the bridge,
the river where, on summer days
that simmered us between its sweaty palms,
we’d go to shrug heat from our shoulders
and skip stones, smooth ones
skimming water like black beetles.

Where water shoaled, the sun spread out
a lazy honey slick, and where it eddied,
light leaped, shimmering fish-silver.
But underneath, the cool shade held
echo deep as drop-off, and the river
was a bowstring, plucked and humming.

Above our heads, trucks clumbered,
trailing dust and pea vines. The hot
rubber of fast cars screamed around the curve.
Now they’ve straightened out the road,
run it through dark woods, and built
a new bridge over. But you can still go
down the old way, past the tavern
where men tip sweaty glasses of pale beer,
yell “Schmear” and slap down dog-eared
Jacks on a worn bar. You can still be blinded
by the dazzle of your memory and belief
the river will take you where you want to go.
The train for the Jersey shore pulled out of Newark half-full, children squirming against the cracked leather seats and the hot, humid morning, mothers passing out snacks, and Ouida, car in the shop, her light-brown skin as tanned as her hectic hours at the newspaper allowed. Once the train left Elizabeth and Rahway all the seats were taken, and it picked up mostly white passengers from the towns and boroughs-Woodbridge, the Amboys, Matawan, and Hazlet.

At Middletown, a family boarded, the children in crisp white shorts, tees and sneakers, the husky father’s hand firm on the shoulder of the mother half his size. Ouida thought, they’re intact, they eat together, the mommy and daddy sleep together side by side. The father looked at her as if sensing her disdain. Ouida pursed her lips and waited for the train to cross the Navesink River.

Behind the smile, she delved again into the vivid nightmare that had disturbed her when she tried to leave Mickey. They had fallen asleep after an unpleasant exchange of threats at dinner. When Ouida saw a huge hand in the sky reach out as if to stop her, she had tumbled out of bed screaming, scaring the life out of Mickey. They’d held each other like two scared children. Mickey said their hearts thumping loudly sounded like “don’t leave/don’t leave/don’t leave.” The Hand, they’d called it after she told him the dream. She had interpreted it as an ominous sign to stay put.

When Ouida got up as the train approached Red Bank, the husky father unfolded his arms and fixed his eye on her seat, motioning his wife to take it. From the platform, with its big sign WELCOME TO RED BANK, BIRTHPLACE OF COUNT BASIE, Ouida watched as he motioned the children to the seat. He looked like a big white duck to her, the wife and kids his ducklings. Ouida stared at them until the train pulled away, recognizing that she would never see them again and had seen enough already. She began the eight-block walk to her parents’ house, talking to herself as she passed the dairy factory and the Catholic school.

“So this is what summer is. It’s white, that’s what it is. White, as in
white cotton, white duck, white tickets to a concert in the park, white clouds, white, white, white. Blindingly white.”

She knew her summer would not be happy. Last summer had been horrid, so horrid even in retrospect that, after it, when the first heavy snow came and trapped tri-state commuters in the Holland Tunnel and on the bridges for five hours, she felt, Good, now everybody’s in distress, not just me. Snow was her kind of white, cold white.

She tested the front door to see if her mother had locked it. The door was double-locked which meant her mother had gone to bridge club. She went in the unlocked back door and set her bag down. Methodically she walked to the front of the house, opening curtains as if she lived there now and not fifteen years ago. The simple saltbox that had marked her horizon years ago looked different now. She appreciated how its few details dressed it up, the central chimney, the raised first story, the clapboard siding. Her parents had bought it when her father, a postman, saw it on his old route. She looked at the sunlight streaming in on the piano, with the hymnal open to “The Old Rugged Cross,” the Tiffany lamp she and her father had chosen for her mother’s 60th birthday, the year before he died. Ouida’s great-grandmother on her mother’s side had made the quilt on the wall at the turn of the century. They were her touchstones.

Two summers before Ouida had seen a lawyer, a woman and a post-radical type who was neither high-priced nor high-powered. They had established a rapport, both having attended Rutgers as undergrads. Since Mickey didn’t want the divorce, the lawyer’s advice had been for Ouida to follow Mickey one time and confirm her suspicions that he was spending the night with another woman.

Ouida had followed Mickey’s Mercedes, the purchase they had argued over bitterly before and after he bought it. He headed straight for the apartment building—no zigzag, no subterfuge—parked, got out with his overnight bag, whistling and jaunty. The doorman greeted him like he lived there.

She was supposed to sit all night or until he came back out. But she had felt such rage when she heard him whistling that she felt like smashing the windows of his prized possession with a sledgehammer. She knew she would hurt herself most if she did anything rash.

She drove home and abandoned the idea of divorce. Instead, she determined to save her money so she could simply leave. But it wasn’t simple.
Ouida knew who the woman was and where she lived. Looking back, she realized her attorney had been testing her, to see if she really wanted the divorce.

Ouida found reason after reason to stay. They had a child, Rodney. He would tire of this affair. They had just bought the house and had no equity in it. How would she function with someone else? Maybe worse. Could it be worse?

Mickey had told her bluntly, “I don’t want a divorce. I don’t need the white man in my business. If you don’t like it here, get out.”

Rodney spent every summer in Willingboro with Mickey’s people. Once when Ouida and Mickey drove down to see him, he told her, “If you go, you go alone.”

Reason after reason.

Ouida fixed herself a dish of sliced Jersey pear tomatoes and went upstairs to her old room, which her mother had converted to a sewing room/guest room. Ouida sat on the day bed, taking in the wide expanse of green lawn that began outside the house and ran through the back field of the Catholic school, eyeing the shrubbery that separated the properties. It needed the trimming her father had always done.

As she ate, Ouida heard the New York to D.C. Metroliner whiz past Red Bank. She thought of all the vacationing passengers. They’re happy and I’m not. Every single one of them. Stretching out, she thought of how much she had to feign happiness, grace under pressure every holiday, vacation, and summer since the marriage had gone bad. Springtime a year before, buoyed in part by the blooming trees and flowers on the Garden State Parkway, she had decided to tell her parents. Then her father—Mr. Postal Administrator of the Year, Mr. Work-Work-Work—had a stroke and died on Memorial Day.

Things change, shit happens, Ouida had thought, and as the good daughter, she pushed her own plans to the back. Her brother Claude, looking stately and preoccupied, flew in for the funeral from Nairobi where he worked for the State Department and flew back out. At one point that summer, she found herself yearning for the dark of winter and its burrowed under, hunkered down feeling, for the time when she could hurt and cry for what was dying in her own life. But she was stronger than she wanted to be, strong enough to carry her burden rather than put it down, as if the toxins in her marriage might leak and harm those around her.
She woke up to the smell of frying chicken, her favorite dish in her mother’s wide repertoire. Ouida washed up and went down.

Marietta Carmichael, at sixty-three, standing at the stove, looked as if someone had brushed her lightly with age. Her hair was mingled gray, her complexion the brown of an overripe peach, dotted with black moles, her small frame beginning to stoop.

All her life she had struggled to stand erect and stretch, standing beside her tall husband as if she was taller than her five feet. Since he had died, Ouida noticed the stoop. It was as if he had held up her mother’s aging process. Ouida’s father had given both children height and something else, the standard by which they measured themselves.

Ouida bent to kiss her mother and Bal à Versailles caught in her nostrils. She knew also that her mother wore a girdle underneath her creased jeans.

“Let’s have real potatoes,” Ouida said, “Give Betty Crocker a break.”

They fixed summer salad and potatoes topped with Ouida’s yogurt, cucumber and dill curry instead of butter.

Between bites Ouida said, “It’s been worse than ever between Mickey and me.”

“Don’t talk with food in your mouth, sweetheart. That stops the digestive process.”

Ouida finished chewing. “I’m afraid for Rodney now, mother.”

“Oh, Mickey loves his boy. You still haven’t forgiven, have you?”

“It goes beyond forgiving, mother. He hurts me. I can’t sustain it anymore.”

“It’s ego with the two of you.” Marietta dipped the last of the salad in her bowl in the dressing. “You have yet to realize a man’s ego is a balloon. If you don’t keep it puffed up, you’ve got a problem on your hands. You let the air out and this girl gets him. He goes right over to her and she puffs it up.”

Marietta wiped the napkin over her lips in a delicate movement. “He hurt me.” Ouida’s voice changed pitch and her mother looked at her sharply. “I can survive hurt and go on, not damage.”

“Did Mickey hit you with his fist?”

“Mother, what if he didn’t? Does that mean you won’t be on my side?” They began to wash and rinse the dishes.

“All men have a vice, Ouida. If it’s not drinking, it’s alcohol. Women, something.”

“Daddy didn’t.”

“It wasn’t so much that your father didn’t have a vice. He didn’t have
time. In my day, men had their vices but just getting a job for Negroes was so hard. Men have always done what Mickey’s doing.” Marietta wiped the stove and shut the broiler door firmly. “Does it bother you what he’s doing or that he’s flaunting it in your face?”

“Mickey comes home on the weekends and brings his dirty laundry. And expects me to wash it.”

“You should. Somebody has to be the peacemaker. You can’t have two troublemakers. That’s war.”

“It’s insanity for me to wash his dirty drawers that have been between her funky sheets.”

Ouida hung dishtowels and looked around. They had done everything. “Mother, I’m getting a divorce.”

Ouida had practiced how she would react when her mother responded. But when she saw the distress on her mother’s face when she said divorce, all it pulled up was the white family from the train with the husky father, their crisp white clothes and clean white sneakers. Even as overbearing as the father was, she wanted what they had. When her mother flinched, Ouida knew why the father on the train irked her, and that it had nothing to do with his being white. He reminded her of Mickey.

“Think of Rodney, Ouida. You don’t want some other woman raising your child.”

“I got another lawyer, Mother. He can’t take Rodney from me.”

“Think about your grandchildren, sweetheart,” Marietta’s eyes were tearing. “If you can hang in there with Mickey and work it out, you might even have a little girl. He’s going through a stage.”

“He’s over and done with it, Mother. I’m over and done with it. I’m going ahead this time.”

“Just try, sweetheart, to endure.” Marietta began crying softly.

“I have, Mother, as much as I could.” The bitterness that had built up seemed solid and hard when she was in bed, alone, but the anguish in her mother’s tears washed over her.

“Mums,” Ouida used Rodney’s name for Marietta. “If we don’t divorce, one of us is going to kill the other.”

They held each other, Marietta holding hardest, Ouida dry-eyed until they let go. Then she felt her own tears.

Marietta stood and poured herself a glass of water from the tap. Ouida watched her try to swallow before she let out a gasp.

“Are you alright, Mother?”

“Yes, dear, I’m fine.” She set the glass on the counter. “Ouida, is that why you came this weekend? To tell me this?”
“Yes, Mother. I couldn’t keep it bottled inside any longer. I filed for divorce. Mickey’s going to get the papers either Monday or Tuesday.”

“Poor Rodney. That poor baby.” Marietta washed the tears from her hands.

Ouida remembered when her mother’s knuckles were dimpled and smooth instead of slightly swollen. Watching her mother fix potato salad, dice celery, and pour salt straight from the box into her palm and rub her palms over the potatoes, she had wondered as a girl how her mother knew how much salt was enough, how much mustard. How much is enough?

“I’m going to the Blakes’ this weekend too.”

“Tonight? You’re going all the way to Willingboro tonight?” Marietta looked out the window.

“No, Mother, I’ll go over tomorrow.”

“On Sunday. What a day to hear bad news.”

In bed that night, listening to the crickets, Ouida thought back to her first days at the Daily Review in Hackensack, when she had to fight for her survival in the newsroom because she was a black woman. On her first weekend shift in the newsroom, during the dinner break, the news broke about the mass suicides in Guyana. First reports, thirty suicides; an hour later, the figure tripled; then into the hundreds; and so on through the night; the staff watched stunned. Nearly a thousand people dead, their lives sacrificed for somebody’s blurred vision, their relatives left to explain why and how. She felt the clarifying immediacy of history, of life and death that night in the newsroom and knew why she was a reporter, why she had to fight for that job.

She was fighting again to quell the unease she felt facing tomorrow. Mickey’s family had been like family to her. Raucous, earthy, plainspoken, they had taken to her, particularly Mickey’s favorite, his Aunt Regina. Regina had nicknamed Ouida “giraffe” from the start because of her light skin and long neck. Though self-conscious about her height and thinness, she’d recognized the affection.

From them, even more than her own parents, she had concealed what had been developing. Lied. (“We’re fine up here. How’re things in the sticks? Mickey’s not home.” “Where is my nephew? It’s past time for your husband to be home. Don’t tell me he’s working late on Sunday evening!”)

She had thought of a dozen ways to tell them knowing in her heart there was no way to avoid it. The continuous, unrelenting, unrelieved
infidelity had damaged her. Ending her marriage felt like surviving Guyana. She and Mickey and now their kin, like all the relatives of the dead in Jonestown, would bury the marriage, grieve it, be forced to revisit it on holidays and special occasions. She turned on her side to face the thought in the darkness.

**Sunday morning, driving her dad’s Delta 88, Ouida took her mother to church and then got on the highway to Willingboro. Ouida had made this forty-five-minute trip often either taking Rodney or bringing him back. The Blakes’ meant children, fun and games, Dan and Regina’s Grand Central Station of a house, umpteen relatives within walking distance. There was no way the staid, quiet, bookish atmosphere at the Carmichaels’ could compete.**

Ouida drove up to Dan and Regina’s and marveled at the windows—as usual uncurtained—the living room, kitchen, and dining room open to scrutiny. Even in the basement, Dan’s tools hung from the walls, and nails, cans, ratchets, screws, and old motors lined the shelves, visible from the street.

Dan was Regina’s second husband. Nobody called him uncle, just Dan. Regina told everybody she had made sure her second husband would be a man, “not a pretty boy Floyd.” Dan was balding, squat, muscular, not pretty, and not boyish.

Dan came out to greet her. He gave her a big hug. “City girl,” he said. “Is this gonna be one of those wham-bam visits?”

Ouida heard the noise of children in the backyard. She walked to the side of the house where children splashed across the yard, playing baseball.

“Looking for your little husband, huh?” Dan had kidded her that way since he and Regina knew Mickey was out fooling around. It was a gruff kindness that Ouida never missed until she heard it again. “There he is on third. Hey, Rod,” he yelled, “your mother’s here.”

She spotted Rodney and waved, but he was watching the pitch. The struck ball bounced into left field and Rodney ran home. As soon as he touched base and stopped, he turned and waved to her.

Dan looked at the two of them, waving and grinning. “Ouida, blow him a kiss. That’ll really blow his cool.”

She was happy that Rodney was outside and not penned in a day-care center or a babysitter’s apartment. Once, when he was five and had heard Mickey and Ouida arguing, Rodney had come to her in the bedroom. He had tried to put on fingernail polish and lipstick but had spilled the
polish on the bathroom floor. She could hear his voice, as clear as if he was still five, “I’m your friend, Mommy.”

Mickey hadn’t heard that but saw her washing the make-up off and told her angrily, “I’m not letting you turn my son into a she-boy.”

Ouida walked inside where Regina was fixing Sunday dinner.

“Need me to help?”

“Oh, no, Ouida. You know this was done early.” Regina motioned for her to sit. “I’m not one to stay in some hot kitchen in the summer. I gets in and out early in this kind of weather.”

Ouida began running water for the dishes.

“Get out of there, girl. We haven’t seen you in weeks. Or is it months?” Regina asked, her wide set smile opening up her pretty, diamond-shaped face. She always wore her hair in a bun, a remarkable feat because from birth Regina had one arm. Ouida had noticed the missing limb when they met, but it simply wasn’t an issue with Regina, who had no use for self-pity.

The living room was cool from the tree shade and Ouida sat down in a re-upholstered club chair. Dan and Regina wanted to talk about the Presidential campaign. They loved to talk politics.

“Could Reagan win again?” Regina asked with a trace of scorn in her voice.

Dan laughed heartily. “She thinks Jesse Jackson’s going to the White House….Ain’t no cotton-picking black man winning for President in this country.” Ouida, who had covered Jackson for the Review, spoke of his symbolic importance to blacks and other downtrodden groups. Even as she spoke, she listened for Rodney, a part of her monitoring the tone of her own voice. Above all, she wanted to be calm and not cry.

But Regina said, “Let it out, Ouida.”

For the second time in two days, Ouida felt a wave wash over her bitterness. She tried to talk calmly and deliberately, but it didn’t work. The minute she said Mickey’s name, Ouida was overcome with emotion and blurted out almost everything she had told her mother.

Dan sat quietly while Regina put her arm around Ouida. Dan’s twelve-year-old son, Arturo, came in from the back. He looked at Ouida, then at his father, then at his stepmother.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Nothing. Go back out,” Dan said.

“I’m tired of playing with them. They won’t go by the rules,” Arturo said to his father, turning then to Ouida. “Hi, Aunt Ouida.”
The sweetness in his voice broke the last barrier. Ouida muffled the sound coming from her throat with her hands over her mouth. Arturo went back outside.

“Let it out, sweet Sadie,” Regina stubbed her cigarette and pulled Ouida’s hands from her face. “Go on, let it all out. Cry your little heart out.”

When Ouida finished, Regina said quietly, “I guess the Hand isn’t going to scare them two together anymore.”

Ouida shook her head.

“I guess,” Regina said, “it served its purpose.”

“I was afraid to tell you.”

“We already knew,” Regina said, putting a cigarette in her mouth. Dan lit it.

“Mickey told you?”

“Mr. Bigmouth.”

Ouida looked astonished. “Rodney? How could he know? I never talk to the lawyer when he’s around.”

Regina shook her head. “Children are not dummies. If he could find where you hid The Illustrated Kama Sutra when he was six and come down here and tell us about it, what makes you think he wouldn’t listen on your calls?”

“What has Rodney been saying, Regina?”


“I filed for divorce last week.”

Dan moved to the edge of the sofa. “Ouida, do you know how many black women without no man and no job like what you got want to be in your shoes?”

“Yes, I’ve thought about that long and hard, Dan.”

Regina looked stoic. “What about my baby?” she asked.

They walked to the window and looked at the children playing.

“Are you going to take Rodney away from us?”

“You know I could never do that. Rodney has roots here.”

“Divorce is a nasty business,” Regina said, still looking out the window. “I’m gonna say this to you once. I said it when you all got married. You’re one of the family as long as you’re breathing. I know full well what Mickey’s been doing. You two grown people ain’t accountable to nobody but God. Can’t nobody tell you how to live your life. But that boy is a child, and we do for our children no matter if the momma and daddy both turn up devil dogs. And that’s my last word.”
After dinner, Ouida drove back to her mother’s with Rodney, taking the back road to Levitt Parkway.

“Auntie Regina tells me you know a lot about the divorce,” Ouida said, keeping her eye peeled to the road for the Walgreens where she had to turn left. He just nodded and remained silent.

Rodney sat in a zone of quiet as she navigated toward I–195 and drove through the dark for twenty minutes. She glanced at him in the rearview window and knew he was thinking about what he was going to say.

Finally he spoke. “I asked Daddy why you had to be divorced. And Daddy said you both want to be the boss. Is that the truth?”

“Kind of.” She was watching for the Garden State Parkway exit.

“What’s going to happen to me?” The alarm in his voice caused her to tremble.

“Nothing will change. Daddy is going to move out, that’s all.” Rodney let out a shriek that so unnerved her she had to pull onto the shoulder before the approach to the tollbooth.

“No! I don’t want Daddy to leave,” Rodney cried out.

“I know, sweetheart, I know.” As she turned to him, she thought about what she had accomplished. She had left the marriage and told everyone.

The pieces of her heart felt strong, but she knew that in bed she felt as fragile as an egg. Maybe a bad marriage is like an egg, she posited. But what was spilling right then from the cracked egg was Rodney.

She reached across the seat and pulled Rodney’s head to her and caressed it with her hands. “Sweetheart, we love you. You know that, don’t you?”

He was crying. “But you hate each other.”

“No, baby, we can’t get along. It’s too much fighting.”

She let go and strapped him in tightly. She pulled back onto the highway.

“We have to get to Mum’s, Rodney. Let’s count to ten and do-re-mi.” They counted, and then went up and down the scale until their voices cracked. Ouida tossed quarters into the gaping steel mouth at each tollbooth and Rodney kept doing do-re-mi until he fell asleep. So this is destruction, she thought: the minute it’s over, rebuilding begins.
“My life is a sham,” the girl said quietly, almost to herself as she shifted tortilla chips around a cardboard dish. They reminded her of communion wafers, and she hadn’t attended mass in months.

“What’re you talking about?” the boy asked. He crunched a hard-shelled taco and lettuce fell from his mouth. He chased the food with a long drag of soda.

She looked around, waved her hand to encompass the purple and orange Taco Bell dining room where they ate a late night snack. “I’m always nice,” she said. “Or I pretend to be. But I’m not really, not nice.”

In the booth beside the girl was a worn, cardboard sign with the words “God is Good” scrawled across it in black permanent marker. Earlier in the evening, before the girl and boy had decided to patronize the Mexi-American restaurant so favored by college students, she stole the sign from a homeless man sleeping on Woodward Avenue in downtown Detroit. “What a bum,” she’d laughed as they ran north on the broken sidewalk, their feet quickly sidestepping cracks and weeds.

Although it was July in Michigan, and the temperature hovered near seventy-five degrees, the man wore a faded blue parka and snow boots. A fleece hat cradled his head, providing some cushion from the concrete sidewalk. In front of the man, beside his makeshift placard, sat a tin cup with three nickels and a dime. A slow night for Woodward pedestrians. Though Metro-Detroiters still cruised sections of Woodward north of 12 Mile during summer nights, the classic cars and spectators they attracted did not often venture into the Detroit city limits.

The boy laughed too, chasing the girl, enthralled by her daring. In his experience, the homeless were to be ignored and avoided, lest they spread some intangible disease. Even their hopelessness was contagious. As a student at Wayne State University in the heart of Detroit, the boy had grown accustomed to living near homeless men and women, seeing them daily. And because of his ability to overlook their presence, the boy didn’t observe the numbers growing or realize that Michigan’s sunken economy had flooded the Detroit streets.
“Last week,” the girl said between nacho bites, “I gave Emily from our English class a ride to Lansing, even though I can’t stand how she grinds her teeth, and I didn’t even let her pay me gas money.” Cheese dripped from the girl’s chin. She dabbed at it with a napkin. “She kept thanking me over and over. How pathetic.”

“So you’re living a lie because you’re nice to people?” The boy peeled the wrapper of a beef burrito. With his mouth full, he continued, “Is that really a problem?”

“I don’t know. It feels bad or something. Dishonest. Fake.” The girl looked around the restaurant once more. It was just before midnight, and theirs were the only white faces. She crossed her arms, feeling cold in a tank top and shorts. “Maybe I should get a tattoo. Or a piercing.”

The boy chewed, considering her words. He hoped she would let him kiss her if he listened. Maybe he could feel her breasts.

Both freshmen from northern parts of the state, from segregated parts where very few minority families wished to live, the two had become quick friends at Wayne State and were often seen on campus together. They’d stated openly their desire for more diversity in their lives, one of the main reasons they chose Wayne. Still, he was extremely attracted to her Anglo-Saxon nose and pale blond hair, her hazel eyes and thin lips.

“I could get one too. How’d I look with my tongue pierced?” The boy stuck out his tongue. The girl wanted to look away from the large red organ, slimy with cheese and salsa, but instead, she chomped a nacho chip.

The boy slurped his Coke. “But are you really being dishonest?” he asked. “What would happen if you told people how you actually feel about them or about whatever situation you’re in? The shit would happen, that’s what.”

She returned his smile and nodded. She liked that he could wax philosophical. It was one of the reasons she was his friend, even though she knew he desired more. Duplicity, she thought, remembering a vocabulary word from Psychology 101. The girl looked at the half-eaten container of nachos before her. The cheese congealed on the cardboard edges. He wanted to be a couple, yet she preferred him as a pal, despite his shaggy blond hair and narrow knees. But if she had to, she’d let him kiss her.

“Are you done with that?” a large, black woman asked the girl.

“Sure,” the girl said quickly, even though she wasn’t. The politically correct response meant remaining hungry rather than appear rude.
The woman walked away, the girl’s tray resting on her hip, but then she stopped to wipe a nearby table with a soiled cloth. She took the girl’s scraps to the garbage and shook the tray until everything, including Taco Bell’s paper placemat, escaped inside the square container.

“Almost thirty dollars an hour,” the woman told another patron. She shook her head and put an elbow on top of the trash bin. “Worked for GM ’till they closed the plant.”

The man repositioned his faded Tigers baseball cap, and replied, “And now you’re here.” He cut into his soft taco with a plastic fork and knife.

“Now I’m here,” the woman echoed before stepping through a door and disappearing into the bowels of the restaurant.

“Did you see the size of her ass?” the girl whispered to the boy. “She should lay off the sour cream.”

“I guess it’s true what they say,” the boy continued, his hand inching toward the girl’s fingers, flat on the table-top.

“What?” she asked, moving her hand beneath the table to her bare thigh.

“Baby’s got back,” he finished, barely containing his laughter. They giggled easily together, enjoying their wit.

Finally, the boy looked at his watch. It was almost twelve-thirty. Though their off-campus forays into the city had helped them grow braver and feel less alien amongst darker skin than theirs, the boy and girl remembered their parents’ warning about common sense. They tried to be securely in their dormitories as the clock swayed toward morning.

“Ready?” he asked.

She stood, but since the woman took her tray, she didn’t know what to do with her hands. The girl buried them in her pockets. “Maybe I should dye my hair,” she said.

The boy pushed back from the table, leaving behind the blue plastic tray covered in crumpled wrappers and half-empty hot sauce packets. He squinted at the girl, imagining her pale hair shaded blue. “I like it the way it is, personally.” Standing up, he turned from the table.

“You’re not going to throw that away?” she asked, pointing at his leftovers.

“Remember that honesty thing?” He shrugged. “I don’t feel like taking care of it, I don’t want to be nice, and besides, that’s her job isn’t it?”

The two grinned at each other and walked toward the exit.

“Wait,” the girl said. She stepped quickly to the table and grabbed the homeless man’s sign. “Can’t forget this. It’s going to look great on my wall.”
As the girl and boy passed the other patrons, they imagined stares and mumbled comments. Their skin was so pale it pulsed. Together they were glowing invaders of a dark-skinned planet. Yet, when they looked, no one had moved. The people in Taco Bell in the middle of the night enjoyed their burritos and gorditas, chalupas and quesadillas with little to no thought of the college students disrupting the quiet relief of fast food.

Outside, the air hung balmy and moist; a breeze carried hints of the nearby Detroit River. They were about five miles from campus, farther away than they had ever walked before. The warm, summer evening invited them outside earlier, and they hadn’t realized the distance. In their tight little unit, the girl and boy did not feel afraid. They were taught to believe there was safety in numbers.

The pastel duo continued on Woodward, heading south toward campus. As they walked, the boy casually put his arm around the girl. She pointed at a vacant lot, Amtrak’s railway, or a three-story house with boarded windows, nonchalant movements that shrugged his arm off and away.

On either side of the vast thoroughfare, they saw small shops with bars and gates across their windows and doors, long closed for the evening. A hair-braiding salon boasted natural extensions, and a Coney, Detroit’s staple restaurant seen on more street corners than the boy and girl could count, advertised $1.99 steak, eggs, and hashbrowns. The two laughed, imagining the oil used in both establishments.

As they neared a stretch of abandoned homes with bricks looming dark and large against the night, they heard someone call, “Hey. Come on over here.”

With one hand, the girl gripped the boy’s wrist, and with the other, she held the cardboard proclamation. Heat hurled up his arm at the girl’s touch. The boy swelled with a masculine urge to protect.

They continued on. Their heads tucked. Their feet marched. It was dark, late, and the voice sounded foreign, somehow menacing and strange to their northern Michigan ears.

“Hey,” the voice called again, but this time, a figure emerged from the shadow of a tall home. In its youth, the home’s brick was as yellow as the noon sun and its windows were thickly paned. A large family filled its many high-ceilinged rooms with children who played baseball in the street and chased each other down side alleys, laughing. Now, the windows gaped bare and black; its copper adornments long ago stripped and sold for scrap.
“Come on. Use your heads now.”
The girl and boy stopped as the timbre grew grandfatherly.
An old man with baggy pants owned the voice. His face, earnest and wrinkled, he shuffled down the sidewalk, palms out.
Ever so slowly, with the girl’s hand in his, the boy stepped toward the stranger.
“Come on,” the man said when they were close enough to smell scotch. “I’ll es-cort you. Those two behind are fixing to rob ya.” He jutted his chin in the direction they had come. Then he buttoned his brown cardigan, skipping the missing third button. “Now,” he insisted, shuffling forward two paces before looking back to the girl and boy.
The boy laced his fingers through the girl’s. She felt his heartbeat in her palm. She nestled the cardboard sign under her other arm and touched her nose to her shoulder as she peered behind.
Several houses up the street, beside a crumbling stone porch, stood two men in dark clothing. The blinking streetlight caught something silver in one of their hands. The boy believed it must be a knife; the girl thought gun. As they stared, the two men grinned, white teeth iridescent against dark faces, and began to saunter down Woodward ever closer. Once again, the girl saw the silver object though this time it floated between the men and grew in size.
Instantly, the girl and boy moved, following the old man who stood watching them. They were too shocked to disbelieve him and too well-mannered to scream for help. Besides, they realized, who would hear them? They’d found themselves in exactly the situation they believed impossible: one of vulnerability. Detroit was a city they did not really know, a cousin or distant aunt, someone they’d always heard about but never really understood, not a sibling who had shared their oatmeal or breathed their air during long, dreamless nights.
Their shepherd walked with a staccato gait, quick little steps, jitterbugging forward. The girl and boy guessed his age near eighty, though they did not know for sure so ageless were the African Americans they’d met. From what they saw of the man’s hair, it was dark and short to his head.
“345 murders last year,” the man grunted. “Almost one a day. This city used to be great.”
The man turned to the boy and girl. They stopped, drew in their breaths. “We used to have music every night in Hart Plaza. Place hummed,” he said, his eyes staring over the girl’s head. “No more Motown.”
Their Taco Bell joy disappeared as the stranger continued his shuffle step down Woodward Avenue, its late night sounds exaggerated by their dark thoughts. An occasional car drove by but it was not a wealthy patron headed to the suburbs after an evening at the struggling Detroit Symphony Orchestra; instead, the girl and boy saw late-model Chevrolets or Buicks with rust-covered doors and engines drumming rat-ta-tat-tat. Each blackened doorstep emitted harsh coughs and grunts from figures they could only imagine, not distinguish. The weather, which earlier seemed so welcoming, turned sticky and humid, soaking their skin with sweat and stench from greasy chicken wrappers, stubbed cigarettes, and empty beer and pop bottles, soon to be collected by the many homeless wandering the streets, eager for the 10-cent deposit.

When this unlikely trio reached the manicured flowerbeds fronting the Detroit Historical Museum, the man stopped again. He had delivered them into Detroit’s Cultural Center, home to museums, theaters, and a semblance of thriving city life, though barren in the dark of midnight.

The old man bent over, his hands clasping his knees, and coughed three times. With each hack, the girl expected pieces of him to splash on the pavement. She turned into the boy, shielding herself from the man’s filth.

Nothing exited his mouth, and when he stood again, the man smiled. “Always needed a good cough after a hike,” he said. “Used to fish down Jefferson, but lived on Outer Drive.”

The girl straightened and returned his smile, grateful he hadn’t unleashed anything bloody or contagious into the night.

“You two stand out like sore thumbs,” the man rasped, nodding at them. “You shouldn’t be so far out.” In the dark, his eyes were brown and vast, with no white visible. His remaining upper teeth scraped his lower lip as he readjusted his cardigan.

The girl elbowed the boy and he startled. When their eyes met, she released his hand and mouthed the word ‘cash.’ A service rendered deserved a tip. The boy reached behind for his wallet. He ushered it forward and sped through several bills. He landed on what looked like a five in the dim light of the streetlamp, and hoped the girl would approve. He stretched the bill toward their guide.

The man grimaced at the money. In a movement of grace and jazz, his hands clapped and faded, their pale palms forcing the boy and girl to remain rooted on the sidewalk. Very quickly, faster than they thought possible, the man disappeared into the shadows of Woodward.
Shame colored the girl’s cheeks. She clasped the cardboard sign with both hands. The boy returned his wallet to his back pocket. They stood there, scent of yellow lupine and evening primrose sneaking about from the Historical Museum.

“Good move,” the girl said. She was afraid to speak, but then the words flowed forth. “Why’d you try to tip him? How insulting.”

“It was your idea,” the boy replied, wounded.

“Prove it,” she challenged. “Anyway, why’d he help us? He didn’t have to. We’re white. He’s not. He could have let us get robbed and mugged and raped and everything else.” She looked up Woodward in the direction the man shuffled. “Don’t tell me he’s a guardian angel. I don’t believe in that.”

The boy followed her gaze but didn’t speak. The girl’s words were thumbtacks, but he still hoped for a kiss.

“We didn’t even say thanks,” the girl whispered. Her shoulders slumped, trying remorse. She wanted to feel it but there was nothing. She stared at the boy until he looked away.

Finally, as if on cue, the girl and boy turned and walked again, covering the remaining blocks to campus. As they neared the Wayne State Welcome Center, the girl noticed the same homeless man she had harassed earlier in the night. The sign in her hands quivered.

She stopped and turned around, looking in the direction of their nameless guide. Of course, she didn’t see him. Yet his goodness, his humanity, reverberated like a low bass note. He had so easily been nice. Genuine, she acknowledged.

While she stood there, shifting her gaze between northbound Woodward and the homeless man tucked quietly in his parka, the boy put both hands on her shoulders and drew her closer. She dropped the sign and put her hands up. They landed on his chest and the boy kissed her, sweetly, gently. His shaggy hair caressed her forehead.

When he finished, she stared at him. “Why’d you do that?” she asked. “Wait, I know of course.” The girl leaned down and grabbed the cardboard from the sidewalk. Once more, she stood, holding the sign across her stomach. She took a deep breath before continuing, “Honestly, I’m not into you, as a boyfriend. You’re always gawking at my boobs.”

The boy didn’t speak. He stared at the girl, at the blond hair he longed to run his hands through, the hazel eyes darkened by the night, and the thin lips, so soft yet closed to him when he kissed her. Eventually, he laughed.
“Okay,” he said, his palms extending forward, the same gesture the old man used both to win their confidence and escape them.

The girl stepped away from the boy, toward the entryway where the homeless man slept. Long ago, the building had housed a Baptist congregation, but now it gathered newspapers and provided illusive shelter to those world-weary folk who traversed Detroit’s streets.

The girl crouched and leaned the sign against the chipped redbrick wall. Besides some indentations from her fingers where she had gripped it so tightly, the cardboard proclamation looked exactly as it had earlier in the night. She added the change from her Taco Bell meal to the man’s tin cup and stood, surprised by generosity.

As she and the boy walked away, the homeless man sang, his voice quiet and strained as if coming from a long forgotten place: “Halleluiah.” The word hummed along the breeze, across the Ambassador Bridge into Canada.
When the Teacher asks what got you into real estate, you tell him that you were raised to value money and security. Your father instilled in you a need to make your bed every morning, crisp hospital corners and fresh sheets, and that was just the beginning. You were only seventeen when you got your realtor license and eighteen when you sold your first house. The Teacher teases you about your tailored suits and pearl earrings. He calls you corporate and the Man, which is his way of letting you know that even though you are a woman, you are more of a man than he’s ever wanted to be. He doesn’t understand where you came from or know about the dirt underneath your nails every autumn of your childhood.

His house is your oldest listing. Seven months and still it won’t sell. You tell him it would have sold ten times over if the lawn were neat. All the house needs is some curbside appeal and a fresh coat of paint, but you don’t push it. You know that the Teacher is delicate and that he doesn’t do any of this lightly: let you stay the night, let you keep a bottle of shampoo on the shower sill. He always keeps his eyes on you when you’re in the house. He doesn’t trust you.

There’s a rusted mower out on the far edge of the lawn where the crabgrass turns to dunegrass, abandoned there who knows how many years ago. Every morning after you stay over, when you’re sitting on the edge of the bed combing your hair and pushing the backs onto your earrings, you stare at that old lawn mower. You figure it’s been sitting there since his ex-wife packed up and left town three years ago. He once used the phrase “memento mori” to describe a box of old photo albums. Ghosts mean something to him.

On your way out the door, you tell the Teacher to teach his students well and he slaps your ass hard and tells you to go sell some houses.

Rumors still hover over him in this small island town. It’s been three years but still the scandal is what the Teacher’s best known for. You’ve heard the stories of the teenage girl—she was a lobsterman’s daughter, the Teacher made her his pet student, and depending on who you ask,
he either raped her or he loved her. In the end, she left town when it all came out, her father sent her away to some far off relative in the Midwest, and the Teacher’s wife left soon after. Nothing was confirmed, police were never called, but that doesn’t stop any of it from being true.

You try not to listen. Three years ago you were working the big market in Boston and sleeping with your boss, every day packing a clean pair of underwear in your purse. Everyone has past lives. You’ve always tried your best to ignore them.

The girl was in the house—that’s what the stories say. This house is where he had her, in his bed, the same bed where he’s had you. In the moments when you let yourself believe the girl existed, you imagine her easily: skinny with long arms and painted nails, always with your own teenage face, acne, and caterpillar eyebrows. What you can’t imagine is the Teacher having the passion for a girl like that. Committing that kind of crime takes incentive. This is a man who falls asleep in front of the television, a plate of Brown ’N Serve sausage links balanced in his lap, a man who spills marijuana ash on his student papers. If he’s too lazy to mow the lawn, he’s too lazy to fuck a teenager.

Your mother hates him. She tells you he’s un chien and that she’s heard the story about him all the way up in Madawaska. “Tous sont des chiens,” she says, “bow-wow hounds.” She’s bitter from your father and all his meanness. He’s been dead for ten years but still he haunts her in the spotless house. He’s in the neat beds and fresh laundry. His ghost isn’t going anywhere.

It’s a five-and-a-half hour drive to your mother’s house in the County. Already there’s four feet of snow and it’s only November. The snowbanks tower above your car and turn the roads to tunnels. This is Madawaska, the top of the County and the top of Maine, the hometown of loggers and potato farms and four thousand people with nothing to do but drink coffee brandy and then speed around drunk on four wheelers through the woods. As a kid you started the school year early to make room for the three-week harvest vacation where you’d rise with the sun and head to the fields to pick potatoes with the rest of the town. Out-of-town workers didn’t come that far north in those days. It was just your classmates and their parents. Your parents, too. Your father manned one of the harvester machines, his arms smeared with grease, and your mother taught the youngest children how to pick the potatoes from the fresh-plowed earth. In the fifteen years since you left high school, things have drastically
changed. The harvest break is long gone. Migrant workers pick the potatoes now.

You take your mother to Mass and she speaks to you in Franglais. Her pride of you and the money you make has faded through the years. These days she is disappointed in your failures: no husband, no children, no home of your own.

“He will never marry you,” she says of the Teacher.

“I don’t want him to, Maman,” you say.

“Eh.” She waves her hand at you.

After Mass you take her to the Eagle’s Nest Restaurant where the people in the kitchen have dirty hands but the food is so good nobody cares. You order a piece of chocolate cream pie like you did when you were a kid and your mother gossips with Mrs. St. Laurent in the next booth. You look out the window at the frozen St. John River and New Brunswick on its other side. When the town was first settled, no one knew if they were in Canada or Maine and the lumberjacks on either side fought so much they declared a war. Militia came up from Bangor and they built a fort from stolen Canadian timber. You tried to explain this to the Teacher one night when he asked where you were born, but he just laughed and you ended up in frustrated tears, insisting it was an important piece of history. You told him he should teach it in school. He didn’t grow up in Maine and sometimes you hate him because of it. “Oh, come on, Aroostook,” he said, using the nickname he bestowed to you before he even kissed you, and you got so mad you stormed out of the house and sat in your car for a half hour.

While the Teacher’s at school, you show the house to a prospective buyer from New York. The Buyer is looking for a summer home and he likes the location of the Teacher’s house: right on the main drag, the ocean in the backyard. While you show the Buyer the rooms—the beautiful kitchen with granite countertops and porcelain sinks, the living room with the fireplace and enormous mantle—you feel the Buyer eye you. Even as he frowns at the water stains in the corners of the ceiling, he watches you. He wants you to flirt, but you clam up and don’t look him in the eye. He gives you his business card and you make a point to leave it on the kitchen counter.

For the first time since you were seventeen years old, you’re not doing your job. You don’t want to sell the house because if you do, you’ll lose the Teacher. Your boss is on you about it and you’ve used every excuse in the book. The price is too high, the yard is a mess, the
roof is bad. If she knew you were sleeping with the owner, you’d be fired and you’re running out of smaller markets to run to.

You played basketball in high school. You were a solid woman even then, six feet in your socks with large feet, broad shoulders, and small breasts. Every February you’d travel down to Bangor for the tournaments, and your family and your teammates’ families followed the bus in a caravan. People up in Madawaska still remember you as the basketball star, and when you first started selling up there, you used a basketball in your logo, the ball soaring over your name. Join my team! I will help you meet your goals. It was embarrassing, but it worked. In just two years out of high school, you sold enough houses to move south. You were destined for great things.

On your nights alone, you take your phone off the hook to keep yourself from calling the Teacher. You drink bourbon in bed and wake in the morning to the yellow light from your bedside lamp. On the days you know you’re going to see him, you watch the clock and check your face in the mirror every chance you get, piling your hair on top of your head and letting it fall to your shoulders again and again. On those days, you wear plain cotton underwear for him. You make sure your bra doesn’t match. He kissed a pimple on your chin one night, smiling sadly at it, all misty-eyed over a zit. He once cried out in delight when he found chipped polish on your toes. “My god,” he said, as though he were seeing a sacred thing.

He turns you into someone you don’t like. You thought you were over this obsessive lust, the hateful love into which you fell with the wrong men, always the wrong ones, the ones who hurt you in ways you still don’t completely understand, but here you are, bad as ever because you know the Teacher, this chien, likes it best when it’s filthy, when you’re howling through his haunted house with your hair pulled from its pins, long and loose. In the middle of the night, when the Teacher’s house is at its emptiest, the ghost of his teenage girl cries and moans from somewhere downstairs, from somewhere down inside you, and the Teacher fucks you so hard he says another woman’s name. Every time it happens, you tell yourself it’s the last but maybe that’s only your excuse to give up yourself in this way: pinned on your stomach, head pulled back by a fistful of hair, the Teacher digging his fingers into your mouth and scratching his nails across the ridges of your teeth. He calls you a little girl and, in the end, that’s what makes you come.

When you were sleeping with your old boss in Boston, you were small. He made you delicate, the way he called you into his office and slipped you notes to let you know where to meet him after work. When it went sour,
you couldn’t face it. You packed up and headed north, leaving your notice on your desk. He was supposed to be the last one that made you feel small. It wasn’t supposed to happen again, especially not with the Teacher, a man four inches shorter than you, a man whose pants don’t quite fit, who spends his nights getting stoned and crying over a teenager who broke his heart. But with him, you are out of control. His hands are hard and they mold you into someone unfamiliar: a woman who clings and a woman who cries. You cry all the time, every chance you get.

Sitting at a stoplight two miles away from your office and two blocks away from the Teacher’s house, you watch the aftermath of tragedy. Across the street, past the pier, out in the harbor, one lobster boat tows another through the calm gray water, and a group of fishermen watch with their hats in their hands. In your car, you sit at the corner of Main and West even after the light turns green, your blinker clicking. When you get to the Teacher’s house, you ask him if he’d heard what happened.

“I think a fisherman might’ve died,” you say and the Teacher is uneasy all night, silent with a clouded face. For the first time, you go to bed with him without sex and you are stunned by how much it hurts.

The phone calls that came in the middle of the night stopped months ago. You never asked questions when the calls did come, not even when he bolted awake and reached over your body for the telephone, answering with an alarmed, “Hello?” and then nothing else even though he kept the phone to his ear. He’d stay frozen for minutes that felt like hours at that time of night, hardly breathing, cradling the telephone with both hands. That was back when you two first started and you were too nervous to make him explain. But at three in the morning, a call comes and the Teacher lunges over you for the phone.

“Hello?” he says. “Hello?” Not fast enough; you hear the dial tone drone. Cursing under his breath, he throws the phone and somewhere across the room it hits the hardwood floor, plastic pieces breaking apart.

You wake in the morning to the Teacher gone. He’s folded your clothes and laid them at the foot of the bed, a polite request for you to leave. You learn later from talk around town what you already realized—that it was the teenage girl’s father who drowned. It was his boat you saw towed back to shore. His body was dragged into the ocean by his foot caught in his own traps. He was fishing alone, they said, and he should have known better.
The Buyer from New York wants to put in an offer, despite your best attempts to dissuade him. Your heart still leaps out of your chest the way it always does when you know you’re about to make a big sale. The commission on this one will give you an egg to nest for months to come. The Buyer from New York comes to your office and he watches you the same way he did in the Teacher’s house. You set out the paperwork and he asks you personal questions that are flattering and invasive. You answer him and smile and you ask for his business card again because you misplaced the other one.

You call the Teacher with the good news but there’s no answer. Driving through town toward his house, you see a small crowd leaving the church and you remember the lobsterman’s funeral was today. The story was covered by the local newspaper. It’s big news for a tiny town. Craning your head around, you look for the girl in the crowd, but it’s nothing but fishermen with hunched shoulders and a few sad-eyed wives. At the Teacher’s house, you try the front door but it’s locked and for a moment you are sure she’s in there with him, that once again they’re waiting to get caught, this time by you and the plain cotton you wear under your suit.

A horn honks lightly behind you and you see he’s in his car, sitting slumped in the driver’s seat, looking worse than you’ve ever seen him—hair unwashed and uncombed, shirt unbuttoned down his chest. When you open the passenger side door and get in, he asks what you’re doing. “Looking for you,” you say and hand him the papers. He thumbs through them helplessly, as though he can’t read.

Even though you feel the girl everywhere, even right there in the car with you, as though she were curled up on the floor behind your seat, holding her breath until you leave, you don’t let it show. “Sign here,” you say to the Teacher, pointing gently to the tabbed lines.

The Teacher shakes his head. “This isn’t a good time,” he says.

“Fine,” you say. “You’ll sign later.”

“No,” the Teacher says. “No, I can’t sell it right now.”

“You won’t get another offer this good,” you say. The Teacher runs his hands over the steering wheel and doesn’t respond. “I worked hard for this,” you add, because you did. You told the Buyer you might be free for dinner.

“This isn’t the right time to sell,” the Teacher says.

“Then you need to take it off the market,” you say. “This isn’t how selling a house works.”

The Teacher puts his keys in the ignition and says he has to go. You have to move your car. It’s blocking him in.
“Did you see her today?” you ask.

The Teacher looks at you as though he can’t tell whether or not you’re playing a game.

“Young girl,” you said. “The one whose father died. Did you see her?”

There was a time, when you first started sleeping together, when you wanted to ask the Teacher if you were his girlfriend. You wanted to know how he thought of you. You worked up the courage to ask him if he’d go up to Madawaska with you so he could meet your mother. He said no in a way that almost made you believe he’d said yes. You almost had him. You just had to work a little bit harder.

“Get out,” the Teacher says, and you throw open the car door to storm away, but he says it again: “Get out now,” and his voice cracks and wavers. Too shocked to move, you watch him rest his forehead on the steering wheel and begin to cry. He cries so hard your own eyes water. He weeps heaving sobs, his entire face wet as though the tears don’t come from his eyes but rather seep from his skin like a sponge. When he hyperventilates, you scramble around, looking for a paper bag but in the end offer him your purse to breathe into. As soon as he breathes calmly again, you don’t say goodbye, you don’t say a word, you just let yourself out of his station wagon and walk back to your own car, back out of his driveway, and head home.

You give him up. You leave him sniffling and bleary-eyed in his station wagon and give his listing to a colleague who is ecstatic to have it. The Teacher calls you one night and begins to break it off, but you interrupt and tell him it’s been fun but you’ve met someone else. He doesn’t hide his sigh of relief and your eyes smart with tears. You take a vacation. You get in your car and drive off the island, across the bridge to Trenton, then to Ellsworth where you get on Route 1A, then on I–95 all the way north to Houlton where you catch Route 1 to Madawaska. You drive these five hours in your sleep.

Your mother’s house key is under the mat. The single-paned windows are iced over. The cold runs so deep it hits your bones. The kerosene heater roars away in the living room, its tiny flame flickering in the dark. Your mother sleeps upstairs. She’ll see your car from her bedroom windows in the morning and she’ll make you toast with croton. She’ll ask if you’re back for good, but knows you’ll go back down south. This is just a recharge. You prodigal child, you floundering fool.

You follow the Teacher the way you follow all the men you once loved. Even in the County, it’s hard not to hear the stories that
circulate about him until the day he dies, which happens far too soon from a slow cancer. He loved the girl until the end. She came back to the island a few years after you left and their reunion sparked a scandal that rippled all the way up north. She was with him when he died. They say he left her his station wagon, the only thing that his ex-wife didn’t have claim to. A lousy inheritance, they say, but you understand. He gave her an escape, a chance to get out, and even if it didn’t work, at least she was able to try.

Somewhere the girl slowly opens the driver’s side door of her dead teacher’s station wagon and runs her hands along the steering wheel. Somewhere your teenage self sits at the wheel of a twenty-year-old station wagon, driving south just as fast as she can.
Toledo, half past one, I board the eastbound train for Pittsburgh, points beyond.
An unseen coast turns to morning,
moving west under cover
except for office parks’
eternal lamps, reflections sent
like flares to the Cuyahoga—
ablaze again, this time with age.
It carries a lit, dark, cake
to the ocean on its birthday.
Which ocean is its home?

On the coach’s upper deck,
after coming all this way,
how many empty seats. The lightning-
bolt upholstery, over footlights,
is a film star trapped inside
her own portfolio. But cast
in darkness, men and women
at the windows, making rain
with their breath on the glass, faces
thick with having slept through
Chicago, half the country past.
They’ve left the oceans’ openings behind,

ahead, will live on condensation.
They flutter like newspapers
when new riders arrange themselves
on aisle seats. Their eye-whites’ flash
finds no conductor, nothing worth
the taking. When real morning
comes, mouth full of sand,
Leah Falk

we will gently touch our own
shoulders to wake ourselves,
shredding tickets in our hands,
whispering, *Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh!*
“Of Thee I Sing”

What does it mean to wait for a song
to sit and wait for a story?
—Peter Gizzi

Rubes in the city, farm dirt on their shoes.
They came for steel. Think I Remember Mama
without the Norwegian braids, everyone putting
their money in the tin box, the family
like a great battleship staying afloat
on stormy seas. Later, breaking apart raft by raft.
How does the last one float alone? We forgot
to ask for the story, eating halupki or breakfast
of fried mush, marching towards our futures.
No need to wait for a song. They were all around—
tubas that blared and banjos chinking like coin.

I have heard the story of the sisters, fourth
and ninth. Think Caddie Woodlawn and Wildfire
by Zane Grey. They went to school and lied
about when was she born. What year was it?
Later, the records were gone, burned
in the Harrisburg courthouse. How could they
sign up for defense work, their brothers
all away like Clark Gable in the submarine
movie or maybe Cary Grant? So lunch counters,
secretarial, Ohio Bell. Buttering their toast
and saving their bus fare, pin-curling
their hair at night. We forgot to ask what
they were thinking. What did they long for
in that full house—“out of hopeful green stuff
woven,” someone always dropping by.
Once, they came across the ocean. 1902. It was only the beginning so they changed their name. They didn’t want a story but a home. They opened a store, a saloon—all day and all the long night—they fed boarders and milked cows. She was baking twelve loaves when he leaned on his pitchfork, hand at his back, tired of waiting—it might have been morning—disappearing into America, fading into its song. Later, everyone came to Cleveland and smiled all the time and went to church. Is there a movie like that? Not *Peyton Place* or *Casablanca*, maybe something with Doris Day?

We forgot to ask for the story, and now it’s too late—“the doors close in an hour.” They left the hay, walked out of the fields planning never to be cold again. It’s always morning or Monday or the first of the year. Then something eats part of the stomach, a breast, the roof of the mouth, the bowels come undone. “One if by land, and two if by sea”—there was no warning. And it’s raining in the suburbs with a liquid whisper and shush like song. But memory’s windows are still dirty—no, memory’s eyes are closed, a coin keeping each lid down.
The Bottom Stones

Pocono Mountains, PA

The Natives say that stones hold the history of a place,
they say you can hold a stone in your hand
and discern its mystery

that your palm will read it,
that your palm too can be read, like rivulets
its lines go outward in meaningful phrases, like tributaries
they drain into the knowing sea of your hand.

If all can be known by touch all has a message
even the tiniest pebble, even today
standing beside an untamed brook
as I peer through its clear look
down to its gravel bed

I understand how the current takes to it things
like my own path on land
and its sudden events

I notice the bottom stones
who hear laps of water and remember them right,
are constantly talked to by current.

Today while the brook announces itself, my hand
skims its surface before sinking
down to these small bodies of rock, back
to the clarity our fingers first had
before time.
Stephen Haven

Tashtego Drowning

The oiled perch of the main-yard-arm is where you might see
The slippery edge of commerce and industry,
The decapitated head of all Nature hoisted, opened,

All humanity tapping, tapping to get in:
A single man held in the balance, with a sharp spade
Like a shaman on a board on a barrel

Calling his brothers to pray,
But high on a platform, above the ocean, searching out
The sweet spot, the momentary equilibrium

That keeps on shifting. As a man might bring
A woman to her full glass
That swells beyond the rim and only then

Spills the honey, this Wampanoag probing.
Then the hard edge of his bucket
Rammed down into the whale head,

Eighty, ninety gallons full, such a prodigious gift
Slid into tubs on deck, the colored clay
Of his home Aquinnah cliffs

Somewhere in the balance. Then something lets go,
Full immersion into that La Brea Tar Pit,
Like some human sacrifice, doomed fundamentalist:

A deep insuck of breath, wheeze of an asthmatic,
And in the flesh the gaping cranium animates
One last passing thought,
Stephen Haven

The life throb of a man, the world he knows,
Square knots, mizzen tops, tackles and blocks.
Then the ballasts slip, fizzing under water

Man, spent mammal, and lines that once held.
Tattooed Polynesian dives in, the crew urging him.
He bobs for a moment or two

Then gathers himself like a great warrior or orator
In some penultimate moment.
From the submerged dead, slit fountainhead

By the hair the obstetrician
Of that darker Asian draws the Aquinnah living
To the squeeze of The Pequod’s hands—

African, Persian, the blood brotherhood of one
Native son of Albany, who once called him honey.
This is Tashtego drowning.
Circle

Just beyond the Mackinac Bridge, right before the I–75 freeway signs pointing north to Sault Ste. Marie lies the silver border of toll booths that guard and give passage to the Upper Peninsula

State of Michigan toll agents behind their windows take fares and wave cars through, uniformed gatekeepers pointing the way to a quieter, ancient world

The agent who signals me forward and takes my money looks like a living display from an exhibit of Michigan’s indigenous people, yet what portion of Ojibwa, Ottawa or Huron running through his blood brightening his bronze skin is neither my knowing nor my concern

I glance instead at his polished stone necklace, admire how the smooth onyx and jasper mirrors the glinting black of his eyes,
and in the seconds after the agent
flashes me the peace sign
and waves me on,
I see a green route marker
signaling the start
of the Lake Huron Circle Tour
and think of the living circle
I have just seen,
how right it is
that a descendant of the first people
to live off this lake and its fertile land
would be the one to welcome me
and lift the gate to its wonders
Spring in Bemidji

Spring clears its throat with a cough and a hack, whispers wet drops from eaves, and lilts from gutters. Months ago snow wrapped this town, and now it recedes—grass, butts, a cup, a plastic sack. I’ll miss the way snow swaddles my mind’s clutter.

March 1st and the lake’s cleared of the last shack before ice cracks, melts, and motorboats putter—more motion and noise than I want to allow. This is the season sound gets its lungs back. I’ll miss the way snow muffles what I say.

It’s sugaring time—give spiles a light whack; maples loosen their buckles and mutter. Bring buckets of sap to the sugar shack. Soon grouse will drum—a troubled engine’s sputter. I’ll miss the snow globe; flakes tumble a quiet row.

Crows chuckle before ducks return and quack, weeks till butterflies suckle and flutter. Flurries next week—spring attire takes a knack here. Spring’s return—not a shout but stutter.
The Quarry

Feathers scatter across the backyard, remnants of a mourning dove that flew into the kitchen window. The neighborhood dog, Freckles, runs through the ice-crusted snow, biting at the feathers the wind picks up, gnawing at the air. I pound on the glass and she stops to give me a blank stare.

I step away from the counter. Beneath me a death rattle comes up from the vent, a sort of labored breathing. My father’s profanities echo up the duct. He’s down there fighting off the cold, wrench in hand, trying to fix the furnace, trying to keep the black ash powder from his red and teary eyes. This furnace will not make it to spring.

Outside it grows colder. At five, the streetlights go on and the evening creeps in. I stand near the door, zipped, gloved, hat over my ears ready, watching the streetlights turn on one-by-one. I see my brother Wesley’s girlfriend, Katie, coming down the street in her father’s plow truck that she calls Babe, the Blue Truck, and when I see her turn into our driveway, I yell down the vent that I’m leaving.

My father’s banging stops. I wonder if he thinks the furnace just spoke to him. I don’t wait for him to figure it out.

The driveway is slick from last night’s ice storm. I wave to Katie, carefully walking toward the truck as if the ice beneath me could steal the ground out from underneath my feet and knock me down. Everything in front of Katie shines within the headlight’s glow, a blanket of ice, the power lines sagging under their new coating. I hear Freckles bark as she comes across the yard. I shuffle faster.

“Freckles, no.” But she leaps anyway, grabs my forearm and starts shaking.


She doesn’t. She loves this game. The sleeve of my coat begins to rip in her mouth. I’d like one day to find her like that mourning dove, crumpled up and frozen, only this time there wouldn’t be anything to pull her from the trash bin and drag her across the yard.

Katie honks the horn and Freckles stops and looks around as if
someone has called her name. I make my break for it, reaching the door as Katie leans over to unlock it.

“Thanks,” I say, climbing in.

“Wesley used to shoot bottle rockets at that dog,” Katie says. “I think it wants revenge.”

I can see Katie smiling back at me. I say, “I know it does.”

The cab reeks of cigarettes drowned in coffee. It is large inside Babe, like the belly of an iron beast. Heat pours from the vents and the man on the radio says it doesn’t look like the temperature will get out of the teens before Christmas.

“You still want a Christmas tree?” she says.

I pat my chest, poofing down the jacket, the layers I’m buried in. Leaving the house in this weather takes commitment: it’s like dressing to walk on the moon.

“Okay,” she says, “We’ll make it happen.”

I think it would go a long way to helping my father with the season after all that has happened with Wesley. I think Katie knows this too. She likes these kinds of adventures. Before Wesley died, they did things like this together. She told me about the time they plowed the quarry so they could go ice-skating at night. The ice so thick they even built a bonfire, she said. She told me stories like this on our way to school as we passed places that reminded her of him.

“Where do you want to go?” I ask. The only place I can think of is the Pamida Grocery, but they don’t even bother to stand them up in rows, instead they just leave them stacked in the parking lot.

It’s been years since I’ve gone to get a Christmas tree, probably back when my mother was still around. She always reminded us about that sort of thing.

The sound of Freckles’ barking fades as Katie pulls away. I think of my brother taking aim at Freckles with those bottle rockets, and I know it’s true, that’s something he would’ve done. Not because he was cruel—he wasn’t—but because that damn dog might as well be our own the way it roams our yard.

“The trees are shitty around here,” she says. “Let’s head over to Traverse.”

She takes off her gloves and removes her stocking cap. She asks if I’m warm enough, wiggling back and forth like a bird getting comfortable in its nest, and reaching for the controls. She has a way about the things she does, a kindness. I wonder if this is something my brother noticed about her. It could be easy to miss with that hair, that smile. I hope he didn’t.
“I’m good,” I say, unzipping my jacket and tossing my gloves on the floor with the Biggie Burger wrappers. Her thin fingers barely seem to touch the dial, but the heat stops pouring out on us. The cold coming off the window is a relief. That’s how it is here in Michigan: you’re either freezing or sweating your ass off.

We pass the Indian casino. The tarps covering the new expansion flap in the wind. It’s the only thing here getting bigger.

“Who can afford to still go there?” Katie says.

Instead of seeing if she looks for her mom’s car in the lot, I look at the stuffing leaking out of my torn sleeve.

“Freckles got you good,” Katie says.

“Yeah, I’ll have to figure something else out,” I say. I think about Freckles eating that bird. That window must’ve surprised the hell out of that mourning dove. I tell Katie about it.

“That’s a tough way to go.”

“I tried putting it in the trash,” I say. “But Freckles is always getting in there. My father needs to buy a strap for the bins.”

“How’s your father doing?” she says.

I think of my father banging on the furnace or wandering the house, looking in each room, checking to see if it is still there. He lingers in the doorways.

“He’s good,” I say, “but the furnace is in trouble.”

Katie’s father is alone too, but for different reasons. He sleeps during the day, plows the roads all night; he calls it the plowman’s hours, and it works for their family. My brother told me about the kettle of water on the stove and a shaker full of instant coffee Katie puts out for him before bed. Katie’s mother isn’t much better. She’s a bingo hall junkie; her claim to fame is the two grand she won and the write-up in the paper that went along with it. Avoidance keeps them together, Katie said once while driving me home from school.

“I can stitch that jacket up for you,” she says.

We drive around the bay to Traverse City, passing the fudge and curio shops. Rows of hotels with their empty parking lots wait for the return of spring and the tourists that follow. The dark void beyond them is the large body of water that pours into Lake Michigan. I think about the streams that feed the bay and how things lost in its water drift away toward the big lake.

The night my brother died, they had to pull him from the quarry. He wasn’t a good swimmer or drinker before it happened. Katie was cheering him on as he tried racing some other kid to the shore. After
the funeral, she said it didn’t feel real. “By the time I realized he wasn’t playing it was too late.”

We pull into the school parking lot full of Christmas trees. There’s a banner announcing a charity drive for the volunteer firefighters. Portable floodlights beam down on us like the light box my brother bought Katie last winter for her seasonal depression. The lack of sun around here is a problem, like the opposite of skin cancer. He said the box would keep Katie from wilting like a flower.

“One time, we bought a tree from Pamida, and all the needles fell off three days later,” she says. I picture it bare like bones, lights and ornaments strung through a skeleton. We put on our hats and gloves and climb out into the cold. The lot is empty, except for the lady and the firefighter taking money behind the card table. He is in full costume, ready if the need arises with his fireman’s jacket and helmet on. He doesn’t look brave enough to go into any burning buildings or bottomless quarries, not with that gut and jowls. They are both warming themselves near a space heater. Neither of them greets us.

Babe’s blue doors snap shut and we begin shopping. Katie picks the needles off branches, measuring with her eyes and reaching into trees to grip their trunks.

“Do you even know what to look for?” I say.

She keeps walking down the rows, like she’s searching for a book on a shelf. I follow her. There’s Christmas music coming from somewhere, at least that’s how it always feels this time of year. I rub my gloves together; even they aren’t enough to keep the cold out. Katie walks up ahead of me.

“What about this one?” she says, pointing at one of the tallest ones in the row. “It has a good place to put the angel.”

“Sure we shouldn’t go with a Charlie Brown tree?”

“You sound like your brother.”

I do sound like my brother, but then she looks at me and is reminded that I’m not him.

“I’m freezing,” she says. “Do you see prices anywhere?”

“I do not.”

“What’s their deal, anyway?” she says while they dodge our helpless glances at the checkout table.

“Hey, can we get a little help over here?” she says, her cheeks red from the cold. We walk toward the checkout. I start digging for my tree money as the lady greets us.

“How much are the trees?” Katie says.
“Forty-five for the smaller Douglas firs—the one you were looking at is sixty-five,” the lady says. “We have some spruces too. Those are anywhere between fifty and sixty dollars.” She tilts her head and smiles. The man sitting next to her nods, but doesn’t make a move to help us.

Katie turns to me, “How much do you have?”

“Not enough for any of these trees,” I say. In my pocket there’s three fives and a few ones, maybe some change. I had no idea they cost so much. I felt so warm with embarrassment standing there that I didn’t need my gloves anymore.

“They do have a selection of trees at the Pamida by the highway,” the lady says.

“Come on,” I say, grabbing at her arm. “Let’s just go.”

Katie walks back toward Babe with me. Glancing over her shoulder, she says, “It’s almost Christmas, you know—what are they going to do with all these trees then?”

The drive back is quiet. The snow and ice that made travel dangerous yesterday is pushed back to the edges, piled in the ditches, stained yellow like teeth. We pass a car buried up to the driver-side door in one of the drifts. I hope wherever they were trying to go was worth it.

Ahead of us, two kids clear the end of a driveway. My brother used to fling shovelfuls of snow at me when we would do it. He’d talk my ear off while I did all the shoveling.

“They don’t want you to ask—only dumbshits do that,” he said. He told me every girl wants to be kissed. “Just catch their eyes with yours and give them the look,” he said. When I asked him what look, he said the confident kind. “You just got to lock eyes with them, let them know what’s coming,” he said.

I’ve never tried. Most of the freshman girls in my class are dating seniors and no one wants to kiss the ones who aren’t, even for practice sake. That was his theory, anyway. I do not know how many girls Wesley kissed, how many times he tested this, but it worked on Katie.

I wonder if she regrets kissing my brother—if she thinks twice, wishing she had been spared this tragedy. I know I do. But I didn’t have a choice.

After Wesley died, Katie came over to apologize to my father. The liquor Katie and my brother stole was Dad’s. They were just horsing around at the quarry, preparing for their last year of high school. Even I knew that.

The words she meant to say never made it out. She dropped to her knees, sobbing as my father met her at the door. She cried so hard her
whole body shook, and he stood there watching. Not once did he try helping her up. I saw her there on our doorstep; everything in me wanting to collect her in my arms so I could hold her and tell her it would be all right. He stood there between us watching her as she cried so loud I thought the screen door would snap off its hinges, the windows would break, and the whole world would stand still in the silence that followed.

“We still need a tree,” she says, pulling into a long driveway. Beyond the headlights a row of small pines nod in the wind. Thirty yards behind them the lights from the stranger’s house twinkle in the cold night. She kills Babe’s headlights, “We’ll have to be quiet.”

Katie lifts her door handle and tugs on my jacket so I’ll follow her out her side. I pull at my stocking cap as Katie checks Babe’s truckbox for a saw. This is like a story my brother would tell me in the driveway, leaning on his shovel, while I kept at it. Katie taps me on the shoulder with a handsaw. “We are in business.”

We push through the snow up to our thighs like wading into a lake. We start digging out the snow from under the tree. Katie shoots the house glances while we fling the snow behind us.

“Don’t stop digging,” she says.

We throw the snow away from the trunk of the tree in no time. Katie crawls down there. A soft music shortly begins rising up as the teeth of the saw start cutting.

“Keep your eyes out for trouble,” she says.

“We are the trouble.” I see her smile up at me in the dim moonlight. We are so exposed. I can see into the house, a TV light washing over the snow. If we were any closer, I could tell Katie what show’s on.

“Tip it over,” she says sliding out from under the tree. The tree falls over with a nudge. We admire our work. I grab the trunk and begin dragging it to the car when the porch light snaps on, a voice from inside yelling at us.

“What the hell?” he says. “Hey!”

Katie grabs the other end and we begin running through the deep snow, dragging the tree.

I look back and see the man jamming boots on, the light from his porch casting shadows across the lawn. His wife tries to put his jacket on him while talking into a cordless phone.

We pitch the tree into the bed of the truck and dive into the cab. The wheels slide and we go sideways before jerking forward. I feel good for the first time since the funeral as Katie checks the rearview mirror then shouts for joy. Her hair has slipped out of her stocking cap and down
the side of her face. The heater blasts warm air on us and we shake loose the snow clinging to our coats. My jeans are soaked. Wet snow is up my shirt and around my waist, and I don’t care. Katie smiles.

“We just stole that guy’s tree from his front yard,” she says, tapping the steering wheel with the palm of her hand. “We just did that.”

I will miss her when she graduates this spring. I will miss riding to school with her, seeing her in the hall, asking how her day is going. She’s the only person around that place who doesn’t talk to me like she’s expecting me to melt down at any moment. I know she will leave then. She has to leave because there are those of us who are supposed to stay here—like our fathers with their reasons—and those who are not. Her reason for staying is gone. She’ll go far enough away that people won’t know her as the girlfriend of that guy who drowned in the quarry. Never again having to read the sad expressions on their faces.

The kitchen light is the only one on as we pull into my driveway. We unload the tree from the bed and haul it up the back steps to the kitchen. Halfway through the door with it, I see my father wiping his hands at the sink. Most of the soot gone from his face and eyes. His mouth is weathered and tight like straps. I stand inside the doorway holding the tree by its trunk.

“Don’t bring that in my house,” he says, stepping in front of the doorway.

“But it’s Christmas, Dad,” I say. Katie and I stand there holding the tree sideways in our arms, like a battering ram.

“Christmas isn’t here yet,” he says. “Someone can still make good use of it—put it by the curb.”

“No, I want a tree this year.” I try to push past him, pulling the tree and Katie inside. Katie tries to hold on as she carries the other end. He grabs me underneath my arms and sends me back through the doorway. The tree, Katie and I spill out into the driveway. He turns the porch light on so he can see our faces. My jeans are torn at the knee. Katie is slow to stand up.

“Who’s that with you?” he says.

I help Katie up. We stand there staring at him. I can’t deny him, he is my father, but in this moment I struggle to find one thing about him that I love or would miss if he were gone. I say, “You know goddamn well who it is.”

“Don’t you think you’ve done enough?” he says to Katie.

I step between them.

“Let’s go, Katie,” I say, grabbing her hand.
The blinds move in the neighbor’s window. Christmas lights hanging from their gutters dance. My father watches me drag the tree down the driveway and toss it in Babe’s bed. I look back and he’s gone, the door shut behind him.

Katie doesn’t say anything as we get into the truck, just sits there with the keys in the ignition. I’m warm and the heater isn’t even on. Katie sobs and she removes her glove to dab at her eyes.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “I don’t know what’s wrong with him.”

I know this is a lie as soon as I say it—we both know what’s wrong with him. He’ll probably never be all right again, but that’s his own fault. The least he could do is try. We all miss Wesley. The silence covers us again like the condensation fogging over the windows.

We sit in the driveway while snow begins to cover the windshield. In the distance, I hear a dog bark and wonder if it’s Freckles.

“What do you want for Christmas?” I say.

She looks at me, those heavy brown eyes fill with tears, and she says, “You know what I want.”

I remember waking up when the cruiser’s lights came through the window the night Wesley died—I’ve heard they leave the lights on to notify the family of their presence before they knock. Is it better to know bad news is coming up the driveway or to wait to find out when you answer the door?

What I do know is this: Katie would stay if my brother hadn’t died.

I want more than ever for my brother to still be here, so he could marry Katie and bring her into our family. She could remind us to buy gifts and wrapping paper, to put up a tree, to let us know when Christmas is. I do not tell her this. I do not tell her enough how much I miss my brother. I do not tell anyone I miss them enough.

“Screw this holiday,” she says as she turns the key and pulls out of the driveway.

At first she drives the back roads until we pass the quarry. There aren’t enough roads in this town to avoid it. Neither of us says anything, even when she turns around to go back to it. Katie drives down the gravel road and pulls up to the edge of the water. She looks over at me and I just nod.

We drive across the ice like an empty parking lot, the fresh snowfall covering the lines. She punches the gas and the tires spin first, then the back end, then the world. She works the gas and brake pedals with both feet, spinning the steering wheel then letting it run through her fingers.
In our laughter we drown out the holidays, forgetting for a moment everything, and just slide across the ice.

Eventually we come to a stop and sit idling over the water that has claimed so much. I roll my window down so I can climb out and sit on its edge, arms resting on the roof of the cab. I am alone out here, except for the moon, the stars, and the lines we have cut into the snow that look like cursive. It’s only cold at first; it tastes fresh and clean, like mint on my tongue.

Katie turns off the headlights and joins me. The only sound for miles is our breathing. The snow glows blue and bright under the winter moon. I look over at her across the roof of Babe. Our eyes meet for a moment before she goes back to searching the stars. I know this is as close as I will ever come to kissing her.
When I first met Karl Zander he was wearing a freshly-pressed
dress shirt, even though his job involved sticky syrups, inky extracts,
and bottle washing without end. His shirtsleeves were rolled up to reveal
forearms pickled baby pink by years of exposure to macerated ginger.
Above his apron I could glimpse a tie, selected from a collection of more
than eighty in silk and rayon and wool. I counted them, later, after I took
ownership of Zander Beverages and, with it, Karl’s apartment perched
atop the bottling plant like the cupola on a caboose.

Karl had been mixing birch beer the day I showed up, and the
invigorating chewing gum scent greeted me as I got out of my car. I
found him doing invoices in the office at the front of the plant. It was a
cozy workplace, with oak filing cabinets and old-fashioned green roller
shades. Karl sat at a Remington typewriter, next to a needle-sharp
spindle on which he impaled orders. Framed above his head was a
sepia-toned photograph of a man with a toddler balanced on one knee.

“You’re looking at my father, Karl Junior, age maybe two,” Karl said.
“And his father, founder of this place. “You’ll be doing them proud.”

I’d seen a human-interest item in the Wall Street Journal reporting
that Karl had no heirs to take over his family bottling works in
Weymeier, a down-on-its-luck Pennsylvania coal town, and that he
would be open to offers. Now, as I stood there in the office, my head
began spinning with the thought that my lone bid was about to send my
life on an uncharted tangent.

The vertigo persisted as Karl led me on a tour of the syrup
room and bottling line. There was a Pfaudler mixer, a Magic Junior
carbonator, and a Red Diamond filler. He introduced each device by
describing its personality—cranky or obliging or stalwart—before
going on to explain its function. At the rear of the building, Karl put
his shoulder to a freight door suspended from above and slid it back
with some difficulty. It opened onto a loading dock, paralleled by the
overgrown rails of a long-abandoned railroad siding. Sweet-scented
air blew in from a meadow across the tracks.
“Used to be the Reading Railroad brought in your sugar and CO$_2$ tanks every four weeks,” Karl said. “My dad and me would watch the locomotive snooker out the empties and bring in our shipment. Nowadays, I only come out here for sunshine and a cigar. That’s a pretty chunk of land across the way, and it goes with the plant. Granddad would grow mint, strawberries, and blueberries for making syrup but now it’s just grass. You’d want to take a scythe to it now and then.”

Karl went back inside and I helped close the door behind us. “Oh, and I almost forgot,” he said. I followed him to a flight of wooden steps. “Up here would be your quarters, although of course you might not want to live right above your workplace. You knock off after a hard day and the ginger and rooty smells follow you home like a stray dog.”

We entered an apartment as clean and well-organized as the office, simple and almost monkish. I expected to be introduced to the woman he’d not yet mentioned, Mrs. Zander. But the bedroom had a single pipe-framed bed. There was just one chair pulled up to the little table in the bay window, with its view of Kalmbach Street and the Zander panel truck parked below. Nothing suggested a feminine presence.

“Yessir, it’s been many years since the wife passed,” Karl said. Apologetically, it seemed, as if that fact might disappoint me.

Scaling, mixing, bottling, labeling, shipping. Keeping accounts in an old ledger book. Dealing with the cranky auger that fed pea coal to the boiler at the heart of the operation. Karl had agreed to spend a month taking me through each step, and he showed no impatience with the bungling of a man who had long ago become estranged from the mechanical world. My hands felt like a pair of balky tools. And yet they seemed to catch on to the various tasks more quickly than I myself, as if they were a couple of precocious children under the eye of a slow-witted teacher.

“It’s happening,” Karl would say to reassure me. “Sure enough, we’re coming along.”

When I told him I intended to keep most of the product line, he encouraged me to drop such slow-selling relics as Pepsin Tonic, Spruce Ade, and Don’t Care, a curious mixture of strawberry, pineapple, vanilla, and port wine syrups. I assured him the bottles would continue to bear the engraved labels featuring a dewlapped moose in profile. And I said I’d be happy to take over the apartment upstairs if he was intent on moving to the new seniors’ high-rise in Pottsville, the county seat.
Evenings, after Karl and I knocked off, I’d have dinner at the counter of the only eatery in Weymeier, then take a stroll rather than go straight back to my rooming house. The balmy spring weather seemed at odds with the grid of tired rowhouses, slapped together for employees by the region’s coal barons and now leaning on each other for support. The homes weren’t much wider than the span of my arms, as if entire blocks had been compressed in a vise.

You couldn’t see the black rivers of anthracite that ran below the town, but they made themselves known to the nose. Mine fires had been burning out of control for generations, and they broadcast a brimstone reek that found its way along streets and into buildings. As the coal was devoured, a home or two would plop down into the hollowed vein, so that the town had come to look like the target of aerial bombing.

The mines continued to burn, but the coal was now too inaccessible to bother with. The railroad tracks that once crisscrossed Weymeier had been ripped out, and most of the businesses were boarded up—save for the neighborhood taprooms. I soon settled on a favorite, Ruth’s Uptown. Ruth didn’t have much to say to me, but the regulars gradually came to acknowledge my presence. It might have been my tenth night there that Ruth placed two poker chips in front of me, one white and one blue.

“Why, thank you,” I said, reluctant to ask what was up.

“Don’t thank me, thank him,” she said, gesturing with an elbow to a thin, bearded man with an engineer’s cap pulled down to his ears. White was for a draft beer, he explained, and blue for a shot of rock and rye. We toasted each other. So went the initiation to what was to become the hub of my modest social life in Weymeier.

Just before my apprenticeship was due to be over, Karl Zander slipped into an insulin coma and died in the night, at the hospital in Pottsville. The evening funeral service was short, perfunctory, and oddly impersonal for a man who had spent all but his World War II enlistment in town.

Leaving the church, I decided to walk to the plant. Karl had finished moving out of his apartment a couple of days before and I wanted to have a look at my new quarters. I fished for the key to let myself in and continued upstairs, feeling the walls for light switches as I went. I saw that he had left only the bed and, in the bay window, the small table on which he’d placed a mayonnaise jar with a clutch of wildflowers. The refrigerator was stocked with a couple of items he knew I liked—a six-pack of Yuengling Porter and a ring of kielbasy from Kowalonek’s in
Shenandoah. And there were the ties, too, hanging from racks on the back of a closet door and sorted by color. A bouquet, local beer, a tube of meat, and ties: housewarming presents, these were, from a man who seemed to know he not only was leaving the apartment but soon would pass from the scene.

One morning, half-blinded by a session of grinding ginger, I staggered out the freight door for fresh air. The sunny loading dock had become my favorite place to take a break. I sat down and was slipping the apron straps off my shoulders when I heard a wolf whistle from up the tracks. I blinked, trying to clear my vision. A woman of indeterminate age and attractiveness was headed my way, goosestepping along the ties.

“You must be Karl’s successor,” she said as she came near.

She appeared to be slightly less than average height. Slim, possibly a runner, although I’d never seen anyone jog in Weymeier. Auburn hair in a ponytail, topped by a beret. I closed my eyes a moment, then helped myself to another look. She was wearing blue jeans that fit well and a pair of high-tech sandals. “I guess I am,” I said, reaching out a hand to the woman. “That would make me Karl the Fourth.”

“You need help standing up?” she asked. “Or is this a handshake?”

“Handshake. Most days I’m reasonably ambulatory. Eliot’s the name. Pleased.”

“Pleased as well. Jana. Sometimes I helped here when Karl’s back went out, the past couple of years. How’s business?”

“Business is good. The product sells itself.”

I could see now that the woman before me was lovely. Lovely with an asterisk. There was a curious drift to her features, as if she were photographed in the act of turning away. Full lips, greenish eyes so large and rounded that she seemed astonished at something I’d just said. Sensing she was being assessed, Jana looked away, plucked a weed, and gave it a tentative sniff. “You’re liking it here?” she asked, following the question with a dismissive laugh as if she assumed I was not.

“I like the work.”

“And the people?”

“Given the chance, they’ll warm up to me I suppose.”

“Don’t take it personally. By now you’ve probably discovered that Weymeier isn’t so much a town as it is a remote island. A landlocked Galapagos. Only instead of exotic life forms you get weird behaviors. Warped perspectives. And a hate crime or two—but no need to get
into all that.” Jana again looked away, abruptly, as if to cut off this flow of unsolicited information.

“I guess I’ve been too preoccupied to notice,” I said. “And I really do like the routines of mixing and bottling, now that I’m getting the hang of things. Deliveries, picking up empties. Did Karl teach you how to work the line?”

“I pretty much helped with the heavy lifting. Like working freeweights, you know, only with a practical purpose.” Jana did appear to be toned, to have held onto the body of her younger self. For a third time, she seemed to regret having spoken too freely. With a murmured “Better be on my way” she brandished the weed stalk as if using a magic wand to make herself disappear. Then she headed back up the tracks with a loose-jointed, idling sort of gait, like a schoolgirl dawdling on the way home.

After ten or twelve hours of steam and clatter along the bottling line, it was my habit to shower, put on better clothes, make a quick dinner, and walk to Ruth’s Uptown. I was seated alone at the bar on a humid July night, trying to avoid making eye contact with my reflection in the back bar mirror, when someone tapped me on the shoulder.

Jana, viewed in the mirror with makeup and a somber business outfit, was all but unrecognizable. I turned to face her. Now, at close range, she looked like a freckled girl playing dress-up with a trunk full of clothes and mom’s lipstick and mascara. It was only then that I realized I’d seen her at Karl’s funeral.


Ruth brought her a bottle of Lord Chesterfield Ale, no glass, without being asked. “And, Ruthie,” Jana said, “a round for my friend, please.”

“Seems like you’re something of a regular,” I said after Ruth had placed a white chip in front of me and walked off to serve another customer.

“Ruthie has known me since I was a kid, coming in here for mugs of Postie’s birch beer. The woman is delusional. Insists that I’m too good for this town. And too good for any man, so don’t expect her to as much as glance your way tonight.”

“You live nearby?”

“I’ve been out of town lately. Took on something I shouldn’t have touched.”
“And that would be—.”

Jana took a sip of beer and looked around the room before answering. “You ever heard of the Mollies? The Molly Maguires?”

“Some sort of secret society, weren’t they? Irish-American.”

Jana nodded. “They were big around here after the Civil War. Banded together to defend themselves against the mine owners who ran these towns like fiefdoms. You dicked with a Molly, and the group would find a way to get even. I guess there was some justice in that, of the do-it-yourself sort. Anyway, the mine bosses and railroad brass rounded up suspects, threw together some circumstantial evidence, delivered it with impressive oratory. And, bang. Easy convictions.”

“There were executions, I seem to remember from the Molly Maquire movie. If that had any basis in fact.”

“It did. Twenty Mollies were hanged, and that pretty much took the stuffing out of the group.” Jana took a sip of beer. “Until recently, when—.”

She paused, waiting for Ruth to pull me a draft and then shuffle out of earshot. “A few local louts got it in their heads that they’re, like, neo-Mollies. Meting out their own brand of justice. Back then it was sticking it to the established order. Now it’s racially motivated. They’re after the Latinos who’ve moved into the area. At first you just heard this adolescent tough talk. Then we had the beating. You didn’t know about that?”

I shook my head. Another couple had come in and they were standing at the bar, looking at the felt board menu with its modest offering of halupki, smoked kielbasy, and something called blind pigeons. They took a table and Jana continued.

“All right, so four locals beat up this guy who’d moved from Mexico. Perez, Bobby Perez. He was here illegally, no papers. But a clean record, spotless. He worked around town as a handyman and was getting into carpentry. Well, they clubbed him to death, plain and simple. Over on Walnut Street.”

“And what’s your involvement?”

“I’m helping gather eye-witness accounts.”

“This happened recently?”

“Maybe a couple of months before you arrived. Three guys are in the county prison without bail. Charged with second-degree murder. Word has it that the fourth is hiding out in a mineshaft, with relatives sneaking down food.”

“Then you’re with law enforcement?”

Jana shook her head. “Like I said, just lending a hand. The DA in Pottsville is doing what he can with a couple of detectives, but it’s
going to be a tough case. Anyway, enough of that. How about your line of work?”

“Bottler.”

Jana looked skyward in a show of impatience. “Before, I mean.”

“I was a high school music teacher who found himself becoming a principal. Unhappily. The prospect of early retirement looked enticing, and then an uncle died and left me some money. I bought a ketch, a thirty-five footer. She’s moored about a stone’s throw from my house in Connecticut. The plan was to live aboard, sail south. And then I saw a newspaper item about Zander’s.”

“That’s pretty cryptic,” Jana said.

“There was a separation, a divorce.”

“Yours, I presume.”

I nodded. “She moved all of two streets over. By some freak chance, her bedroom window was visible from my place.”

“Silhouettes on the shade?”

“I took care not to look.”

“So what brought you here? For sure not just soda.”

“That’s ninety-five percent of it. As for the rest, I’m still sorting through things.”

Jana did a double take. “My god, I just noticed. You’re wearing a tie. One of Karl’s, isn’t it? You look spiffy.”

“Not half so spiffy as you. Pinstripes. Seems you have to dress like a grownup for whatever you do.”

Jana pulled out a man’s wallet and put some bills on the bar. “I’d feel freer to talk about that if you stopped in at my place. I’m four doors down. The B and B.”

“The Victorian with the gingerbread? Nice abode. How’s business for you?”

“Nonexistent. Tourists don’t come to Weymeier except by accident. And visiting relatives always stay with family. So it’s just me and my four little furry guys.”

“I’m guessing you don’t mean three felines and a hairy husband.”

Jana acknowledged the snappy line with a smile. “That’s correct. So, Eliot— it’s Eliot? Now you know where I am, if not who. And I know where you are, if not who. It shouldn’t be long before we run into each other again.”

It’s true that I wouldn’t have come to Weymeier if I hadn’t chanced to read about Zander Beverages in the paper. As for the other
five percent behind my decision to move, the name of the town jumped off the page because I’d been to Weymeier before, back when I was in college. Of these visits I had the gauziest of memories, but they’d stayed with me with some force, and as I put down the paper the town began to reconstitute itself in my mind. There was Skrepsie’s, a three-story hotel and bar on the main drag. Another was a cramped apartment above a plumbing supply store just down the street.

I was a senior, a month short of graduating, when I spotted a notice on the music department’s bulletin board saying that a rock band was auditioning for a keyboard player at Skrepsie’s. I loaded my equipment in a borrowed station wagon and headed for Weymeier, maybe thirty miles distant. Pennsylvania’s anthracite region was unlike any place I’d ever seen, outside of Walker Evans photographs of the Depression years. The tiny rawboned towns seemed to be scattered randomly about the nightmarish landscape. Conical black mountains of mine waste were fringed with freakish coronas of spindly white birches.

I ran through a few top-forty numbers with the band. Everything went without a hitch. I assumed I was more than qualified for the gig and didn’t hang around to see who else might try out. But when I didn’t hear back, I became irritated. My irritation gave way to maddening curiosity, and I drove to Skrepsie’s one evening to check out who’d gotten the job.

The dance floor was packed and I had to stand on my tiptoes to glimpse the band. A group of five or six women motioned that I should climb on their table for a better look. All appeared to be in their thirties, a good ten years older than I was. “Oh, come on and hop up,” one of them called out in a taunting voice. “We’ll hold you steady.” They all were laughing, except for a good-looking redhead with her hair up in a matronly looking bun. She seemed to be embarrassed by the fuss and began to edge away. I took her by the hand and asked her to dance.

We moved closer to the stage. Over the woman’s shoulder I saw that the keyboardist was stout and gray-haired, struggling mightily with the changes of a simple blues. There were at least a half-dozen Rolling Rock empties on his Hammond B-3, so I guessed he might have had decent chops when sober. Having put that matter out of my mind, I danced the rest of the set with the woman. During the break, she said she needed to leave because her daughter’s babysitter couldn’t stay out late.

I walked with her to the Schmoyer Block, a long brick building that constituted most of Weymeier’s business district. Her name was Ginny, I learned. A door to one side of the plumbing supply store opened onto stairs that disappeared up into the darkness. At the landing we took off
our shoes and tiptoed past the closet-sized alcove where the child was sleeping. Once the sitter had left, Ginny and I sat on the only upholstered surface in the one-room apartment, her bed, and we made out, sitting upright and remaining clothed all the while. I was awed by the woman’s reserve. There was dignity in the way she deftly kept things from going very far, without making me feel wolfish or silly.

Somehow, not saying as much, she indicated that it was time for me to leave.

We kissed at the top of the stairs. I asked her about the next night and she said that the child’s father would be around and that he could be trouble. *Trouble.* At the age of twenty-one, I was thrilled by the word, with its suggestion of impossibly tangled relationships, thwarted passion, and deftly handled knives and firearms. I’d entered a territory that shared no border with the pampered life I’d known growing up. So far as I can recall, the notion of a class system hadn’t occurred to me until that moment. And here it was, like a pervasive scent, acrid but not unpleasantly so and as haunting as a tang of wood smoke in the air.

I phoned later in the week, several times. There was no answer and I let it go at that, satisfied that Ginny Priester and I had shared a few unflawed hours, without losers or bruised feelings. But that evening proved to have a legacy, one that generated another kind of trouble. I went into my marriage thinking that a relationship might remain sweet and uncompromised—an expectation that, looking back now, was as frilly and fragile as a Victorian valentine.

I was on my way to the Uptown when I paused outside of Jana’s rather grand house. Twin towers bracketed the place like cat’s ears. There were stained glass panels here and there, including a clerestory above the double front doors picturing a mule-drawn coal car. As I lingered, the setting sun pierced the tall windows, setting the interior afire with an orangey glow.

Jana answered the bell wearing Bermuda shorts and a sleeveless blouse, her hair constrained in a scarf of stretchy fabric. The outfit and the domestic setting added years to her appearance, as well as placing her in an earlier decade, and I must have betrayed my surprise.

“So here we have Jana modeling her other costume,” she said, spinning around and adding a little curtsey. “Come on in and have a look. At the house, I mean. Watch you don’t trip over the vacuum cleaner.”

Bold trapezoids of buttery sunlight reached across the oak floors of high-ceilinged rooms. The furniture was mix of Modern pieces rather
than the upholstered Victorian battleships I’d envisioned from the street. I caught sight of a row of gray filing cabinets and a pair of battered office desks and wanted to ask about them, but Jana was leading the way to the second floor. The bedrooms there were cottage cozy, with beaded-board wainscoting below boldly patterned wallpaper. Each room had its own bath with vintage fixtures in marble and brass.

“I don’t know what I was thinking,” Jana said, slapping her thigh in a show of exasperation. “Sticking in all that plumbing for guests who never showed up.” She stood with a hand on her hip, leaning on a dust mop in a way that brought her breasts into relief. Apparently sensing that the pose might be provocative, she snapped upright and straightened her scarf. “So, anyway,” she began.

I rocked on my heels, waiting for her to continue. When she didn’t, I asked how the evidence gathering had been going.

“Slowly. What you hear around town is, Bobby Perez incited an argument. There’s shoving. He stumbles and falls. And somehow manages to crease his skull, deep, in three places. Highly improbable, but most of the people I talk to are buying it. And a few have helpfully suggested that aiding the prosecuting team could be bad for my health.”

“You’ve told the police—.”

“No help there.”

“So, you’ve been threatened?”

“Not to my face. You see, I enjoy a bit of immunity, being descended from coal crackers on both sides. Worst that’s happened, my windows were soaped with racial epithets. The spelling was atrocious. But, what’s up with you?”

“Nothing quite so dramatic. I saw where Karl kept a bit of a garden across the tracks, and I put in some tomatoes and peppers. I’m getting acquainted with my customers and a few neighbors. I was thinking I might run into an old friend, Ginny Priester.”

Jana nodded as if I’d just confirmed a private guess. “So that’s it.”

“How do you mean?”

“The other five percent. The other reason you’re plunking down in this tortured little burgh. And, sorry, Eliot, but you’re too late. By twenty years, it must be.”

“I guessed she’d left town. There was no listing for her in the phone book. And surfing the Internet, I found some old newspaper item about a criminal assault—.”

“Criminal assault? Ha. That used to be code for rape, remember? And rape stigmatized Ginny Priester, got her a one-way ticket out of
Weymeier. Which is pathetic, considering the way this town looks up to guys who’ve been in stir for big-time stuff. And now I’m a pariah for going around trying to get witnesses to spill what happened to Bobby Perez. I mean, people are afraid to be seen with me. I stopped going to Ruthie’s because I walk in and clear the bar.” Jana undid the scarf with a yank, allowing her hair to fall halfway down her back.

“Wow,” I said.

“Ignore the roots. Like I said, I’ve been hellishly busy and ‘hairdresser’ is way down on my list. So, you knew Ginny?”

I stood there a moment, picking up the musky animal scent unleashed by Jana’s hair. “Barely. We dated, sort of. Back just before I graduated from college. A single night. Evening, I mean. But it was on that evening that I first felt like an adult.”

“I guess I don’t need to hear the clinical details, thank you.”

“Not adult in a sexual way. It was more of an introduction to a wider world. Like going to Rome for the first time.”

The words sounded pretentious to my own ears, and Jana’s face tightened to prevent a laugh from escaping. “Anyhow,” she said, “what you’re telling me sounds a little—voyeuristic?”

“I’m not following.”

“Well, the only difference is that you’re looking back through the years instead of through a misty bathroom window. And maybe that kind of distance is a turn-on. Enough so that you pulled up stakes and moved here.”

“No, it was a whim, really. I was rudderless. No job, no wife, our son moving to the West Coast. Then the inheritance dropped in my lap. Money doesn’t give you a direction in life, but it can be this powerful propellant.”

“Rudder, propellant. Sounds like you think of yourself as a little boat, Eliot. Adrift in the stream of life. I don’t know why it is that men start to reveal something about themselves and pretty soon they’re talking about camshafts and differentials and rudders. Can you explain that to me?”

Her words might have been intended to encourage me to open up. But they had an edge. I felt an ache in my throat— the childhood ache that forecasts schoolyard tears. I walked over to a window with a view along a string of treeless yards, battered American cars, pinched houses, and a lawn sign advertising nightcrawlers for sale, all of it bathed in a peachy late-day glow that had the hardening effect of rouge on a collapsing face.

I went to the Uptown every evening the following week, half-hoping to see Jana and half relieved that I did not. Walking back home one night, I headed down a dark alley and heard footsepts echoing
between old warehouses on either side. Not just my footsteps, it seemed, and I stopped to listen. Turning, I saw three men closing in, fast. They were young, wearing sneakers and jeans, watch caps pulled low. They circled me, saying nothing, kicking at my knees to drop me to the ground. Then there was a terrific blow to the back of my head, and it was as if I’d been launched. I sprinted on down the alley, the wind and my breath roaring in my ears, my cheeks shaking with each stride. I didn’t stop running until I reached a well-lit street, where a couple of people were walking their dogs and I felt I was safe.

Back at the plant, I pulled the roller shades over the office windows, double-checked the locks, and continued upstairs to the apartment. I took a ginger ale from the refrigerator, poured it into a mug, then stood by the bathroom mirror, taking sips between deep breaths and tentatively feeling the lump forming on top of my head. My fingertips showed there was a slow ooze of blood.

I began dialing the town police when I recalled that Jana had mentioned they weren’t sympathetic to her problems, and I hung up the phone.

I called Jana the next morning and she jogged over to the plant. “Sorry about this,” she said as she ran in. “Seems I’ve gotten you in dutch with Weymeier’s underworld. Now, find me some scissors and we’ll go out onto the platform so I can get a good look at the damage.”

We sat in a patch of sunlight. Jana clipped away some crusted hair from around the bump, then went back inside for a washcloth and a bowl of warm water. “I’m guessing you don’t need stitches,” she said, “but that’s just a guess. By the way, the Perez thing is getting some attention from the outside world. Day before yesterday, two investigators showed up from Justice’s Civil Rights Division.”

“How do you mean?”

“I’m a lawyer, Eliot. Sorry if I was coy about that. As was my husband. We ran our practice out of our home.”

“I guess I should have guessed as much,” I said. “I mean, the business suit, that row of filing cabinets in the front room—.”

“I do my best to forget being a lawyer and act like a normal human when I’m out and about. Funny, but there’s something about being a
loud-mouthed, uncompromising, holier-than-thou champion of the legal system turns people off. Anyhow, I hope you’ll be careful, Eliot. For starters, promise me you won’t go on foot to Ruthie’s. Not after dark.”

“You haven’t been lately.”

“No, I’m caught up in preparations for the trial. And then once the proceedings are underway, I’ll be shoving off. That’s a nautical term, isn’t it? I’ll man the rudder and haul on the bowline and head for a distant shore—.”

There were tears in Jana’s eyes, and as if on cue we both pivoted where we sat to look off in opposite directions, back to back, like a pair of bookends. When she next spoke, I could feel the vibration of her voice run through me. “I’ve been doing my best to hold off these couple of weeks.”

“Hold off?”

“Not seeing you, I mean. I’m toughening myself up for the move.”

“Where to? And why?”

“I don’t think I’ll get into all that. And I shouldn’t, not after slamming you for having come to Weymeier without a completely logical plan. It’s no different with me. I actually tossed a coin the other day. Heads I stay, tails I go.”

“And—.”

“And I stuck the thing in my pocket without looking. I have to go, Eliot. There’s this big-time responsibility pulling me away. Still, it was fun imagining coming over here and occasionally giving you a hand. The physical work would be like a purge. And being around you might be good for me, too, might be curative, but—. Oh crap, I’m sounding completely dizzy. I meant to rehearse my parting words, but when you called I rushed over.”

I was squinting against the morning sun, my eyelashes breaking up the light like a thousand prisms. “Yeah, I’m punchy, too,” I said.

“From your head wound?”

“More because for breakfast I chugged two bottles of Don’t Care.”

“Mighty peculiar stuff. You know, the labels used to say something about it being an aid to mental digestion, which was like begging the FDA to bug you. What a hoot.”

To myself, I counted to ten, then said, “We could split.”

“Seems that’s exactly what’s happening to us.”

“I mean split together, Jana. Leave this town. Move someplace. As one possibility, there’s this boat of mine.”

“My god, you’re serious?” Jana slid away so that she could turn and look at me. “You’ve thought this through?”
“Well, no. It just came to me. Stonington is a cute town. Kind of
too cute, if you know what I mean. We could knock around on the
boat until we found a place to stay.”
“I can’t say I’m not tempted.”
“You’d consider it?”
Jana kicked her legs out and back, disturbing a cluster of weeds
topped by what looked like teased hair. “Sorry, Eliot, but I’m afraid
you came to Weymeier too late for this hometown girl, too.”
“I had the idea you were divorced.”
“A bit of paperwork and I will be. But it’s more complicated than
that. You know those pretty bedrooms with the attached baths? Well,
I should have mentioned that we didn’t do all that remodeling for a B
and B. We have three daughters, Eliot. Adopted. My husband and I
separated when circumstances became impossible.”
“Circumstances, meaning—.”
The two oldest, Dahnu and Padma, are from India. Beautiful,
accomplished, kind, fascinated by life. And dark skinned. Things were
okay at first. But they got to the junior high here in town and there were
racial insults, ugly stuff on our answering machine. Gary and I were
furious, we got to hating this place. And somehow that led us to tearing
each other apart. We arranged for a separation. Gary took the girls to his
hometown in Virginia, just outside of Roanoke. I stayed behind, telling
him, telling anyone who’d listen, telling far too many people that I wasn’t
going to cut and run from the bias in this town. I’d stay behind and
defend the region’s poor and dispossessed from the bigoted assholes who
breed here like mold. Brave talk. But I knew I had to move close to the
kids. I contacted a real estate agent about selling the house. Then things
got complicated. First, the Perez thing blows up. And one morning I’m
walking along the tracks, see this stranger sitting outside Zander’s, from
a hundred yards out I can sense that there are—possibilities, let’s say. But
I’m leaving. Abandoning you, Eliot.”
“I don’t know what to say, Jana. ‘Oh, hell’ sums it up, I guess.”
Something in me sank, with the simple physics of a big stone dropped
down a well. But then I looked out over the sun-raked meadow and my
garden plot, and I sensed I’d be okay. Parting would be manageable,
if I could keep the language cool and light. “We both are driven by our
particular missions,” I said. “Yours has been protecting human rights, and
soon you’ll resume raising your children. Mine are a bit simpler. Bottling
pop. Mowing Karl’s field. Trying not to get gravy stains on his ties.”
“You know, Eliot, if it seems cramped upstairs here, the asking
price on my place is astonishingly affordable. The for-sale sign goes up soon."

“A great house. But with all those empty rooms, I’d feel haunted. By a woman in Bermudas and this stretchy thing keeping her hair in control.”

Face to face now with Jana, I gave into the impulse to touch her freckles with my finger, one by one. Freckles that had become more pronounced in the weeks I’d been in town, like constellations emerging with the deepening dusk.

Jana took my hand in hers and kissed it. “Ginger,” she said. “I can tell you’ve been grating ginger. Although by now the stuff’s probably circulating in your veins.”

“Yep, and I guess I’d better get back at it.” I began to stand up but Jana put her hand on my shoulder.

“How about a farewell smooch?” she said. She gave me a lingering kiss on the lips.

“That didn’t feel like a farewell gesture,” I said.

“It has to be. Although, don’t think it’s going to be easy for me to leave all this—.” Jana gestured at the little field, at the mountains of mine tailings with their ridiculous fringe of birches.

We both laughed, wanly. At the meagerness of the landscape. And also, I had to suppose, at the meagerness of a relationship that never had a chance.

**During the trial I occasionally glimpsed Jana around town, dressed up and with other people. She would smile and wave, a block away or at the far end of a grocery store aisle. I’d smile back. And then one of us would turn away, the warmth of the moment dissipating within seconds.**

As the trial wound down, with convictions all but assured, the windows of Jana’s house remained dark. Four doors away at the Uptown, Ruth wasn’t talking. Some evenings I’d mention Jana, fishing for information. Each time I got a shrug for my effort.

Until, that is, I let drop the news that we’d be neighbors, Ruth and I.

“So, I just closed on the house,” I told her one evening as I took a seat at the bar. Ruth scowled, not understanding. “*Her* house,” I said.

Ruth’s eyes brimmed over. A low-sounding sob escaped her. She blindly put two small piles of chips, white and blue, in front of me, then went off to wait on a table.
1838: The Caulker Courts the Laundress

I had a number of warm-hearted friends in Baltimore, —friends that I loved almost as I did my life…
—Frederick Douglass

The world had turned to peaches one early summer evening as we walked Fell Street; in its taste and air, I felt an orchard rise and fill the streets. What was rare about that day’s signature? Since boyhood, I had seen a good few splendid suns melt down. But in that glaze I felt myself man of the hour; I wished that I could climb something, overlook the harbor, and make my moment known. Miss Anna Murray caused all this. Can I call it beauty? Gladness so aware, the quiet happy twitch that her eyes slipped around her shoulders? Pulling back the curtain of her lips, she shared with me that dark, sun-dusted power, brief and shining out of perfect teeth. I was composed of it; I was only capable because of what she gave, with every answer to my torrents: ease.

I sensed it, settling in myself, walking beside a woman who was free; even this imagined life stoked up a pride bound men might kill to know. But how could it play out? With hope, she counseled. With words she turned from rags to twigs, that woman built a frame. Hope, she repeated. I listened to her, fitting stillborn bones to live ideas. From will to wood, a boat began to form. What could I offer? Only light and water. Any growing word might need these two; at six o’clock,
we faced a wealth of both. I turned her face
toward the honeyed waves and sky;
I took her arm. We drank the fruited
air. Finding our mouths dripping with a mood
yet to be named, we stood awhile at Ann Street: easier
to smile and call it sunlight. I’d done
some work that mattered, in that scene, so we
walked on. Way on down the pier,
among ships that murmured, ships that slept
in place, with the bay their cradle,
we came alongside the St. Bernard. She knew
its cheerful captain and his liking
for crisp shirts. I brought her close. I drew
her open palm against the blackened
seams, wanting her to know my hands had worth
and understand my days.

There, I believe, began our bond:
tied to a common daring, common labors,
common pains and hungers—
we felt ourselves two vessels of His beauty, facing God.
Standing at the edge of the bluff, the lady with the raised parasol looks down at the beach below. Her dress is a song in white, its several flounces like a rhythmic dance. Does the lady in the grey frock lean on her parasol to savor ocean air or simply to spy on bathers and beach-walkers? It’s not easy being a lady in America in 1869, one’s existence devoted to offset the chirping crowd, to being above it all. Skirts puffing in the wind cast an almond shadow on the grass.

The green swath on which they stand thrives in defiance of the wind-eroded bluff, the continent’s edge slipping into the sea. “I regret very much that I have painted a picture that requires any description,” Homer replied to a request. What could be simpler than this blue sky, this summer beach? Behind him, the hammering of his Civil War assignments—battlefields, snipers, the cruelly dead. None of that at Long Branch, the ladies like doves of peace.

A small white dog forever pounces towards his mistress, the waves far below humming their impatience to meet the shore. How brilliant the bustle on the sands—children, men—the sun in full summer bloom. With an abundance of clouds, this beach day may resolve in some hasty departures. For now, no darkness allowed, sadness banished in summer’s bright sheen.
Aviya Kushner

Eighties Music

For a brief period in the eighties
I’d wake before sunlight,
I’d run in the dark to a bus
That would take me to Manhattan,
And sometimes as we crossed
The swaggering, swearing pre-dawn Hudson,
A river which only rages before
All the people truly come to look at it,
A river which is nothing
Like the city it cradles,
Well, sometimes at that moment
Of crossing the river
Eighties music would blare from the bus
Radio system—
Don’t you forget about me,
And back then, thirteen, fourteen,
I had no idea
It was possible to intentionally forget
To let a memory of a boy
Float down the river.
And now I hear it, hear
Don’t you forget about me
Blaring at the strangest times,
And I hear it and hope
I won’t forget that girl
Who ran, ran, ran,
Who ran to the bus and to the world,
That girl who was still
Willing to get up at five A.M.
For something, a dream she couldn’t
Name, a want as vast and furious
And watery as the Hudson, a girl who didn’t
Know it was possible for a boy, a man, a brother,
To give her no choice but to forget.
Gerry LaFemina

Riding the 1 Train, I Consider the Nature of Time

Downtown local. I can’t recall how many stations have passed or are yet to come—South Ferry as final a destination as any. Who knew the subways might be so metaphoric? Not the former gang-banger who covers the ink on his left wrist with his right hand, not the two guys still arguing the Knicks or Nets above the bold-faced New York Post, not the lady who spoke of meteors all the way to Times Square. How often have I managed this ride? If you were to ask Didn’t I see you on this train, on this date 1985? I would say yes. 1989? Most likely. ’94? Probably. 2002? So it goes: my list of affirmatives. Sometimes it’s hard to decide if time is linear (start in the Bronx, end at Manhattan’s chin) or circular (& head back uptown). I’ve waited long minutes with nothing but my own longing or my own remorse—on the 49th Street platform some roughneck Charlie Parker wannabe clamoring for my attention in 5/4 time. Who keeps such metronome? In wanting or despair each beat can seem elastic until the minutes themselves snap….The subway rocks & rattles southbound, each passed signal light moving at light speed—that measure of time (or is it vice versa). Thus all of us careen toward whatever inevitable awaits, & we rise later into what should be the City’s humid July breath only to discover that in our time below ground it’s begun to rain.
Non-duality

A day after cloudburst, power crews
repair the lines while yellow police
ribbon warns people away from certain
streets still. The sky seemingly limitless
with only feathery cirrus in the distance.
It’s been years since
I’ve walked this shore; how easy to forget
Staten Island is just that—an island—

& today the ocean keeps time
as it always has. I can see the wreckage
storm surge left behind:
jagged edge of driftwood & plastic

bottles, some rusty hook washed off
a ship just like the ones
distantly bobbing. They look
no bigger than the great black-backed gulls

that caw & occasionally ascend
with wingspans wide as I am tall.
I’m 41. After maelstrom & deluge
what’s washed up remains &

what’s been swept away…well,
how might I identify it?
Two young girls walk a dog that looks
like a man in a dog suit. They seem happy.
In the distance the open
flower of the Parachute Jump
guards Coney Island, & somewhere closer,
in Manhattan, some ghost of myself
continues to scour record stores & dark bars
& subway cars. After torrent & thunder
there’s debris & the picking up.
“We can never live here again,” someone said
earlier, maybe even today. That dog barks.
Some gulls make a sound like laughter,
then one makes its own
plaintiff: Oh! Oh! Oh!
No one understands why the limit is so low, thirty with no lights in sight, just Call-a-Head, the portables place on the right. And no one wants to go there, unless that is where they have to go. In a quarter mile, it will shift to forty. It seems so far away. But everyone knows you add nine to the limit—ten might yield a ticket, if you’re no native to this no man’s land. Even with the added nine, they zoom zippy at the stretch—Jamaica Bay before you, wildlife preserve flanking your sides—fast lane taken away to have a designated place to sweep all this carnage—seagulls fallen from the sky, a random raccoon flattened, a cyclist who couldn’t survive an eighteen-wheeler’s passing, nipped in the bike lane and propelled into spin. On summer nights, they flash cheesy neon skeletons, say there’s reason for the numbers, for why they’re so dang low. Some driver hit a utility pole, downed a sturdy shade tree at least two stories tall. They say that guy was twenty-three, in a hurry to get from here to there, in a hurry to cross the bridge and get to the other side. Kid made a choice we’d never make. Probably sang to stolen music, took yellows urine stale. Or dude was noticing an unmarked while scoping out his rearview—driving drunk while texting, but hell, no one knows for sure.
Lincoln’s Doctor’s Dog

The dog lounges everywhere, bored.  
His master doesn’t do a thing, says few words.  
Daylight hours stretch out so long  
the dog, the stupid dog, knows something’s wrong.  
The master mutters about a mass, a gray mass  
small as this room’s corner’s points. The dog asks,  
whining the way dogs do, for food. It whines, then hides  
in this room’s corner. The master decides  
at odd times to call the maid to let the dog out.  
Midnight, the doctor, sleeping, cries out  
about the soft white substance now without  
its noble case, its rigid shell, now mere clay  
upon which the nation’s hopes perched yesterday.

The maid, a small black lady in gray  
scratches the dog’s ears each morning. There’s little pay  
in her work but the pleasure of a friend,  
the dog whose shed fur gives her no end  
of sweeping work. The doctor waves her in;  
she takes away his tray of food, not eaten—  
he hasn’t eaten a whole meal in days.  
She’d tell him but she never stays  
in the same room as him. She didn’t before  
and hasn’t since he came in, late, shut the door  
and told her the news: Much has come to its end—  
the only time he spoke as if she were his friend.

The dog curls at his feet while he sleeps  
at his desk, hunched over letters in a heap  
he means to shovel through the way history  
digs ditches through our lives, its mysteries  
eroding rivulets into rivers. The dog twitches
as it dreams, yelps gently. The doctor is bewitched
by dreams of the autopsy, the heft
of his patient’s organs in his hands as Death,
as an attendant nurse bearing knives,
shows the doctors the futility of human lives.
The doctor wakes and reads the last words he wrote,
the curlicued letters beating on the page, little boats
swirling in a mighty river’s eddies,
tiny things sinking, the ink holding them steady.

At night, after the maid goes home,
when the dog gives up on his dry, week-old bone
and paws at a spot in front of the door, waiting
to go out, the doctor gives in, hating
the walk in the District’s misty rain, his small
but noble street, stony, curving here like a wheel,
ahead, curving like one wrinkle on the brain
he weighed a week ago. Then he thought, and does again,
now, about the country, the many men he failed
to help in the war’s five years, and of one jailed,
and of his patient and friend, the man who lies
entombed. The doctor held his brain, noted its size,
its weight, then took it from the scale’s teetering pan:
it weighed as much as the brain of an ordinary man.
The Endangered

Thus were the Massachusetts Bay colonists provided the one to hunt: visible from shore as they migrated in winter along the coast. Only fifty feet long. Slow. When dead, their bodies floated. Each could yield a hundred barrels of oil, fifteen hundred pounds of whalebone. What else name it but Right Whale?

Just right! To be safely home on my father’s lap, his deep, powerful voice making things just so for someone my size—Baby Bear’s chair, his bed.

And there followed such a bounty, a Golden Age of transport—whale oil, whalebone. Goldilocks sure made herself at home. Her mother hadn’t told her to knock first, wait to be asked in?

In no time at all, less than a hundred fifty years—among the vanishing. Now my state sells license plates to save them.

Golden Books he read me, re-read, and again. If only there were something to sell to bring him back.

Note:
Another Cracked Plaster Virgin

In South Bend the taxi passes
Don’s Liquor Oasis, the driver a slush of musk
and clove cigarette, she tries to contain
herself when Michael comes on the radio
singing just like he did back in 1979, back in the sixth grade,
“Rock with You,” she has to keep from tapping and crying
while thinking back to when Michael was still alive and all the girls
stared at the album cover—girl, close your eyes—Tammy Zaso
brought in—feel that beat—
all of this, low and sweet,
as they pass another cracked plaster virgin on Marquette Street.

All this, before the airport, where a man from Ithaca talked about hope,
his research on the subject, whether its opposite is despair,
whether it’s more blessing or curse. Most days, she says, it’s all the same,
hope and despair, blessings and curses, and he straightens his glasses
transfixed by a tiny blonde three rows ahead exercising the muscle
of her new body—girl when you dance—stretching into all night
everyone in Zone Four, her sex a brand new thing—
so we can rock forever—the girl, putting on a show with the pompom
of her hair—don’t try to fight it—how tight it was, the sixth grade,
and the little flames of hope dancing behind the glasses on Ithaca’s
face and how smooth he was, Michael Jackson, and how many virgins
there were back in 1979, in South Bend—you know that love survives—
everyone looking forward, waiting for spring
to come to the Great Lakes.
Angie Macri

Peach Boom

Directed by Illinois Central conductors to this valley, a safe space, escaped slaves built cabins without floors. Descendants were born in Makanda and learned to harvest apples from the trees, to see how cedar rust leaves no buds, to know the timing of the trains. Their homes are the first to go when the road to the new park is built (the south way floods too much, city fathers say). Girls wear swimsuits, then evening gowns to be crowned the Peach Queen. We walk through this August’s carnival, sweat collecting. Hundreds of years, we have loved the sweet juice that drips on our knees.
When I lived in Washington, D.C., as a child, I didn’t think much of Maryland, which was only a few blocks from our house. It was the suburbs, not quite within the castle gates of the capitol. My father was a Foreign Service officer; we had lived in Paris while I was a baby, and my parents had artifacts from their years in Algeria and Pakistan, long before I was born. I felt important, living in an international city and was even more excited when I learned my father was scheduled to go overseas again.

But my mother refused to go. She didn’t even want to stay in Washington, where she was worried crime and drugs would harm my three siblings and me. My father acquiesced. So, in 1973, not long after my ninth birthday, we moved from our large, four-bedroom twin near Chevy Chase Circle in D.C., out to a small farm in western Maryland, near where the Appalachian Trail crosses the state.

After driving up a steep, thin road, you turned down a dirt lane edged by a stone fence and overgrown blackberry brambles, and after crossing a culvert and a ford, at the very end of the lane, you reached our place, Weasel Ranch. The land was mostly wooded, rocky, mountainside abutting the state forest, but on a few cleared acres sat an antebellum log cabin, a barn, and a several outbuildings, including a chicken coop, pig sty, and outhouse.

Though I was only nine, I had already identified with a cosmopolitan life and with the post-’60s counter-culture my older brother belonged to in D.C. He managed to get out of the family plan, spending his last year of high school in Washington, then moving out to Colorado to go to college. Because I could not escape as my brother had, I was committed to hating our new home. And although the farm seemed idyllic to my mother—reminiscent of her tranquil childhood summers at camp in the Shenandoah—in my eyes, there was much to hate.

Weasel Ranch—named by the previous owners; we never saw a weasel on the land—had been turned into a hunting lodge in the ’40s.
When we got it, so much trash and debris filled the cabin, we thought the floors were made of dirt. The place had electricity—an old, 97-watt bulb still worked on the front porch—and a small Franklin wood stove which burned a single log at a time, but no running water, no bathroom, no shower.

My parents did what they could to make Weasel Ranch livable. They cleaned and painted the outhouse, rigged up a pipe from the stream to a sink, and installed a trash can upstairs as a water barrel, so we’d have enough pressure to take a shower in a wash tub in the downstairs room. They bought propane for the range, cleaned out the old fridge, and crammed five single beds and dressers into the two small rooms upstairs. My parents slept in one room, and my two sisters and I slept in the other.

Besides living in a crowded cabin, there was little to do in rural Maryland. We had no TV and the radio picked up only a few stations. My sisters and I fought over whose record would play next on our stereo, a gold plastic record player. Though it was cheap and small, the player’s tiny plastic speakers filling the whole cabin with sound: Elton John, Cat Stevens, Jesus Christ Superstar. But we had to get our music in early, before Dad came home; after working eight hours and commuting one and a half each way, he wanted silence. (I now understand, how imperfect that silence must have been in that small wooden box with three teenagers, stir-crazy by evening.)

Weasel Ranch sat above the tiny town of Harmony—with its ninety-nine people, five churches, and one Coke machine. Harmony was nothing like our D.C. neighborhood, where I could walk to several stores or easily find kids on the block to play with. Here, our neighbors, the Stottlemyers, raised pigs and chickens and hunted for food. Their kids went barefoot in summer and wore unwashed clothes year-round. The parents drank Pabst from noon to night, their teeth brown from decay, as though they’d grown up on sugar water.

The highlight of the town’s social calendar was bingo every Saturday night in the old stone church built in the 1700s. The downstairs hall was always packed, and though our family played a few Saturdays over the years, I felt uneasy among the farmers and their wives and kids. It was not my game or my community, and I was glad I never had a winning card.

In the countryside around Harmony, we often saw Confederate flags on trucks or houses, and a few years after we moved in, the Klan set fire to a cross behind the only black family’s house in a near-by town. I felt light years from Washington, or even the wealthy exurbia.
thirty minutes away, towns like Rockville or Gaithersburg, which were soon to be linked to Washington by the space-age Metro. If I had to live in Maryland, I at least wanted to live there. Instead, I was stuck in what seemed a land that time forgot.

In D.C., I had attended a progressive and diverse city school—my closest friends were Greek and Indian, my teachers of all races. In Maryland, I started fourth grade at an all-white elementary school in Myersville, a town about twice the size of Harmony.

Before moving, I decided to follow in my brother’s footsteps and not let anyone cut my hair—I would not even allow a trim. By sixth grade, my height and long hair made me stand out, but no more than being a well-read ‘foreigner’ (that is, anyone not from Frederick County). By high school, my hair was beyond my shoulder blades, and I sometimes was mistaken for a girl, despite being six foot four. Even the kids who knew my name made up girl names for me—Bertha, Martha, Margaret—and their most creative: Mop.

They once circled me in the cafeteria with a pair of scissors, threatening to cut off my hair, as the vice principal looked on with disinterest. Only my size and perhaps a kind of fear-drenched dignity akin to what a caged animal exhibits kept my attackers at bay. I prayed every day that we would return to the city.

For years, my parents talked of building an addition to the cabin or a completely new house on the land, but plans never seemed to materialize. And as I grew, the cabin seemed to shrink, like something out of Alice in Wonderland. When we moved in, I could just stand under the thick Chestnut rafters of the downstairs room. Within a couple years, I could only stand in the space between the ceiling beams, and, a year after that, when I had reached over six feet tall, I had to perpetually duck in any part of the house.

My two older sisters and I all trudged through puberty in our cramped, little, shared bedroom. We would change our clothes under the sheets, take turns bathing in the tub downstairs, with a makeshift curtain around us, and otherwise hide our secret lives in the tiny nooks and crevices of the only space we could claim as ours—a bed, a dresser, and later, a desk.

Still, when we turned off the lights each night, we jokingly said, “Goodnight John-boy,” to each other, though the Waltons’ house seemed modern and palatial compared to our cabin, our three bodies breathing just feet away from each other in our beds.
Winter was the hardest. Just going to the toilet meant bundling up and walking through the cold to the outhouse, which lay across a sunken field. By late fall, the field became a marsh, soaking our shoes and boots the instant we stepped into it. Our Dad built a small raised path of planks across it, but sometimes, especially at night, we’d slip off the path and have to tromp to the outhouse and back with a foot, soaking cold.

The three of us had to chop wood, and after heavy snows, we brought our food and supplies down the dirt lane by sled or backpack. Our water supply pipes would freeze a third of the year, and one of us would have to walk to the stream each day, axe a hole in the ice, and dip a bucket in the freezing water. Carrying it back up to the cabin, the full buckets sloshed against my pants and splashed onto my boots. Even in our sleep, we felt like we were working, swatting mosquitoes in the summer and tugging against the pounds and pounds of blankets in winter, whenever we tried to roll over.

The good thing about the cabin’s size was that it heated up fast, but once the final log for the night burned out in the stove, the temperature inside dropped just as fast. By morning, we could see our breath. Our mother would always rise first to start the fire. We’d burrow our faces under the covers, to warm our ears and breathe air that didn’t chill our lungs, waiting for the common room to warm before we ran downstairs to breakfast.

Now, whenever I read Robert Hayden’s poem, “Those Winter Sundays,” which describes his father rising in the “blueblack cold” to bank the morning fire, I think of my parents’ sacrifices during those years, of their love’s “austere and lonely offices.” I can only recall my own frustration, but I know that everyone in the family was challenged by the ascetic life we had come to live.

Living so close to nature, however, let us witness many of its secret and strange wonders. One summer night, not long after the lights were out, we heard a strange thwapping sound in our room—something was moving quickly, slapping against the four walls. My sister screamed, and when our father came in and turned on the light, we all screamed: a bat was ricocheting off the walls, just above our heads. We sunk beneath our thin summer sheets and waited for our Dad to catch the thing in a paper bag, then take it outside to free it.

One cold winter night, we all said our goodnights and settled under our wool blankets, our bodies kept warm by several layers of clothes, topped by a wool sweater. It was so dark, I could not distinguish the wall from the window, though they were inches from
my face. Years later, a high school friend’s father discovered a nickel alloy which proved to be the blackest substance known to man, and I always associated that material with the darkest nights in our cabin. In that kind of dark, beneath my blankets, I felt—finally—alone, even though my sisters were an arm’s length away. I sensed my skin against the covers, pressed my cold toes against my warm calf. I let my mind relax and my thoughts expand into the edgeless night. Then, as I moved my arm to scratch my head, I saw a flash of green-blue light, trailing above the blankets. Too bright and long to be a firefly, it seemed rather to be a thought that had taken on color and shape. I moved my arm back, and again the flash! Slowly, I figured it out: it was static electricity, made by rubbing my wool sweater against the wool blanket, visible only by the blackest night.

Despite momentary distractions, there were few places for any of us to escape, to be alone. Fortunately, I found two, both of which saved me from myself, both of which still rescue me at times.

The first was writing. I wrote miserable, indecipherable poems and lyrics, as well as a draft of an ambitious but simplistic science fiction novel inspired by the film 2001: A Space Odyssey. Yet, writing helped carve a sense of myself out of a world that offered little time or space for reflection. Still, even it proved vulnerable in the confines of our tiny home.

Several times in late fall or early spring, my father would set a hose in the upstairs water barrel, to fill it before the ground froze, so we would have water in the night. But he would then go off on some other task and forget about the barrel, which rested atop my desk. The barrel would overflow, filling my desk drawers with water, then pour out onto the floor, through the floorboards, and down into the common room below. Whenever I came inside and heard that sound—water dripping onto the stove and floor from the upstairs—my heart would stop. I would often scream. Then I would run upstairs and fish out my writing from the water-logged drawers. But the ink had already run, the pages already stuck together like papier-mâché. Even if I could retrieve the words, my papers felt stained, as if tattooed by someone else’s fingerprints.

What really rescued me during those years was the land itself. A small, nearly invisible trail off the dirt road led up into the wooded mountainside. I found myself wandering up it nearly every day, staying until the last thread of light left the sky.

Giant rock formations, larger than our cabin, were staggered up the mountain; we unimaginatively called them First Rock, Second Rock,
and Third Rock. If you walked beneath Third Rock, along a small ledge, you came to a cave, no taller or wider than a car, but nearly twenty feet deep. It was cool and wet; water dripped along the veil of quartz that cut through the ceiling. The floor was muddy and littered with leaves and seeds left by animals, but I didn’t mind the wet or the dirt. The cave offered a solitude I had craved, even before our move, for as long as I could remember. As I grew into adolescence, I only craved it more. But there was something beyond solitude in the cave. Sitting inside the belly of a mountain, surrounded by rock, I felt some raw knowledge, almost too silent and personal to bear.

Though I loved the cave, I rarely stayed long, pestered by mosquitoes and growing fidgety in its stark silence. Instead, I spent my hours sitting on a stone at the top of the waterfall, staring into the clear rush of water, lost in its soft roar. That spot, at the edge of a twenty foot drop—the stone, the water, those woods and leaves and rocks—saved me from my own edge. It was there I learned to meditate, to simply sit and take in the world, to watch my thoughts go by, to cry and shake, to laugh and imagine—shedding each emotion and letting the water take it over the ledge and into the pool below. It was there I let myself experience a privacy I’d glimpsed in the dark before sleep, where I confessed my deepest fears—Was I attracted to men? Was I insane? Was I unable to live in this world?

Fortunately, only the first proved to be true, though, as Roethke says, “What’s madness but nobility of soul / At odd with circumstance?…” I don’t know if I had a noble soul, but I did feel at odds with my circumstance. And what teenager, who feels that searing loneliness, that dread of not being understood, doesn’t gather some nobility, and some madness, simply by staying alive?

I don’t know why neither of my sisters spent much time in the woods, but I couldn’t have imagined sharing it with them, as spacious and accommodating as it was. I felt, selfishly, that it was mine alone, and whenever I saw someone there, it seemed as though they had entered my room without knocking.

Gradually, I learned to tune out the names the rednecks called me, and I made friends in high school with fellow misfits. My family eventually built a larger house on the land—with bathrooms, central heating, and our own private rooms. The Stottlemyers moved out and a young couple from Washington bought their place to use as a weekend retreat. I befriended the man, who co-owned a bicycle shop
in D.C., and he hooked me up with my first ten-speed. Suddenly, with my own “wheels,” I felt wildly independent.

In summer, I would bike fifteen miles over the Appalachian Mountains to my friends’ houses—they all lived close to the city of Frederick, a growing bedroom community of Washington on the other side of the ridge. And while the relative civilization of their houses—cable TV, microwaves, walking distance from each other—was a comfort, the bike ride there and back is what I remember most. The roads to their houses were still flanked by fields back then, flush with corn and soy and hay. I soared through the countryside, liberated from both my family and the isolation of our farm, awakened by the idea that my body, with this bicycle, could take me anywhere I wanted to go.

Often I didn’t ride home until two or three in the morning, taking the long, empty highway back. I felt the cool, grass-scented breeze against my body as I rushed down one hill, sunk into the wet valley, then coasted up to the crest of the next hill.

I would not have admitted it then, but at those moments, I was as deeply content, in love with—or at least at peace with—who I was and the place where I lived. Whatever poison I had made of our new home, it proved to also be the antidote, teaching me to be in my body, to be still in nature, and to understand how—as when I sat a in a damp quiet cave with water dripping onto my head—those two things were the same.

Author’s Note:
“As this journal goes to press, my parents prepare to sell Weasel Ranch after living there almost forty years and to move to a retirement home. We’ve all come to love the farm and will miss it, though perhaps no one more than my parents. Though we owned it nearly my whole lifetime, I see how short of a time it is, relative to some of the local families who have lived on their land for generations. It gives me greater respect now for the locals I once disdained, for the work it takes to commit to community and simply stay put.”

—Nathan Alling Long
Corey Morris

Carp River

I walk the snowy banks fly-fishing the Carp River backward, downstream rather than upstream, in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula. On my left, a steep bank leads to the hiking trails now patted down by cross-country ski tracks and my boot prints that mark a thirty-minute hike back to my car, which will all melt by the end of the month—first the snow on the ground, and then the tracks that are packed so tightly they insulate themselves, eventually becoming thin lines of snow on dirt that will drip into the earth until the first days of summer. The snow is wet from the warmth of the sun and deep enough to make walking difficult and exhausting. My boots slip with every step as they slide through the melting layers before getting a purchase on the muddy forest floor. Under my many layers—under the beige vest heavy with gear, under the thick and suffocating brown waders, under the brown crocheted hat, under my fluorescent-orange, Thinsulate hooded sweatshirt, under the wool-lined, black-and-red flannel shirt, under the long-sleeve T-shirt, beneath the blue jeans, beneath the long underwear, beneath the insulated socks, and beneath the tube socks—my body sweats. I feel a drip roll between my shoulder blades before it reaches the puddle forming at the small of my back. I reach around my creel, below my backpack, and press my clothes against the sweat to absorb it. And still, with all this sweating, the tip of my nose is numb, and, as I exhale, my breath turns into minute drops of water that cling to my beard. To the right of the river is a fence that surrounds the prison property. The river, like another fence, separates the woods and trail on the left from the prison on the right, and I wade into the water to cast from the middle.

I tie an all-purpose nymph to my tippet, bite down with my teeth to clasp a steel split-shot sinker just above the nymph pattern, and roll-cast toward a drop-in—a pool in a river, usually behind rocks and logs where the current slows enough to create a deep pocket of water—that lies on the prison side of the river. The sinker drags the pattern down toward the rocky river bottom. There should be steelhead, but
Corey Morris

steelhead fishing is rarely productive, always cold, and I’m really fishing to get out of the house. My wife, Katelyn, is pregnant and today I need to breathe fresh air. I need to feel the mucus in my nose stiffen as I inhale the cold, clean wind through my nostrils. I need the open sky above my head, and the emptiness that surrounds me in the winter forest. I need to be alone. I had hoped, when leaving the house this morning, to stop thinking about it for a few hours, but as I roll-cast into the drop-in again, the situation repeats in my head.

We took the test around one in the morning. I had just finished my shift at Walmart, and we drove back to get the kit. Aside from the squeaking of the folded backseats in my truck, the ride was silent until we got to the parking lot.

“We’re still leaving,” I said.

In the short few months I had been working there, my co-workers had already decided so much about me: I was the guy who talked about “Always having a five-year plan”; I was the guy who graduated from college; I was the guy accepted to graduate programs across the United States; I was the pudgy guy who wore cardigans over dress shirts and nice khakis to work, but didn’t shave or comb my hair; but most important, I was the guy who was actually leaving Walmart and not merely talking about it. At the register, Katelyn took my hand, squeezed it, and pulled herself closer to me so our bodies touched. She didn’t make eye contact with the cashier; her concern forced wrinkles upon her forehead, and under the fluorescent lights her eyes no longer glimmered but looked dull in the dark shadows beneath the brow of her worried face.

The cashier slid the package over the scanner, and I attempted to discern her eyebrows or the corners of her lips furrowing or slanting, any look of judgment on her tired, gray face. She placed the box into a white, plastic bag that said “Always” on it, and gave us the receipt. It was as expensive as the monthly refill of my wife’s birth control pills when she still had insurance, when we still bought birth control pills, and when she still took them.

I wade into the cold water of the river continuing downstream, where there is no monthly refill and no judgment—only trees, the trail back to my car on the left, and the fence around the field and emptiness that surrounds the prison on the right. It’s impossible to coax a fish to take a pattern; the potamodromous fish that swim up the river from
Lake Superior—the salmon in the fall, and the steelhead of spring—will only eat when they are angry, and the browns and brooks not caught during the summer either die or will only eat what is directly in front of them.

In the summer, unproductive fly-fishing will leave the fisherman with serene surroundings, and a sense of how little mankind participates in nature through the sounds and smells of the river churning alone and the wildlife flourishing—fauna and flora—all without human intervention. But the winter forest is an empty world. It’s a world where the rustling of leaves is replaced with the clacking of tree limbs and the creaking of tree trunks bending in the wind. The river is a whisper, rather than a roar, in the winter; the ice accumulates along the banks, slowing the current, and the leaves of fall have not yet been carried away by the spring-thaw rush of melting snow. This cut of the river is more barren than others; the fence around the prison property impedes the migration of wildlife. The buildings, cold and silent, rise above the forest canopy in the distance. The gray gun-towers cast long shadows across the white, empty field that surrounds the main building. There is no movement.

Like the rest of the forest and the prison property, the river is still and lifeless. During the summer, the fish rise, snapping an insect from the surface and splashing the water into the air in quick bursts, but in the winter there is so little movement that the river seems to have no current at all. I roll-cast downstream of a log and let the all-purpose nymph drag the bottom, bounce on rocks, and then rise to the surface on the swing. Twigs and limbs of fallen trees partially submerged are encased in a thick layer of clear ice where the water sprays the exposed bark and freezes solid and clear within an hour. My boots slip on the frozen, rocky river bottom.

My toes move in the several layers of socks. As the cold water swirls around my feet, the temperature inside the boots drops. For the first few minutes in the water, the toes are cold, but then they get colder and feel as if they’re on fire. As the burning subsides, a numb sensation throbs toward the heel. It takes ten minutes of roll-casting at the log before the foot is completely numb, and I wait another ten minutes before I wade back to the bank. When the feet are out of the water, they seem to warm up only enough to burn again. Some other winter fly-fishermen can withstand the water longer, maybe thirty minutes, but I haven’t been taking care of myself lately, and my circulatory system is suffering from recent abuse. I drink alone at night and smoke cigarettes at a desk in our basement after Katelyn has fallen asleep.
The night we found out she was pregnant, after Katelyn had stopped crying and closed her dim, green eyes, I left her alone in bed. I cradled four or five beers between my arm and my chest from the kitchen fridge to the basement. I lit a cigarette, opened a can, and drank until it was half empty. A black spider crawled across the white, cracking cement wall behind my desk. The yellow incandescent bulb of the ceiling light above my chair illuminated the graduate school acceptance letters on my desk, but left the cobwebbed corners of the room in shadows. I drank in the dank, molding room, and filled it with smoke.

My drinking developed gradually enough when college ended and the only job I could find in Marquette had been at Walmart. I worked the second shift most nights—the shift where stock is no longer placed on the shelf and the employees are told to focus on customer assistance and “zoning”—a Walmart term for organizing and pulling the merchandise to the edge of the shelves. Zoning is a depressing job performed alone, and after I’d completed an aisle, customers made selections from the shelves and it looked as if I had done nothing at all. To mitigate the loneliness of zoning, I whistled arias from Gilbert and Sullivan, or recited poems I had memorized at one time or another. The Canterbury Prologue in Middle English was fun for dramatics, but William Carlos Williams seemed fitting for my situation.

I had a five-year plan. I had wanted to graduate as quickly as possible, but I hadn’t considered that graduation in December would leave nine months of waiting for graduate school. I had not considered when marrying Katelyn that I would be compelled to stay in Marquette during the months between undergraduate and graduate school, the consequence being employment part-time at Walmart. I had eaten the plums, but I hadn’t thought that someone had been saving them. I had accomplished everything I had wanted, but the sting of the unrecognized consequences of my accomplishments were staring me in the face like the holes on the Walmart shelves, much like the sting of having to write an apology note, or the folding of the receipt for a pregnancy test before placing it in my pocket.

While zoning alone in grocery, the fluorescent lights that paled my skin glowed from the high, metal ceiling and reflected on the polished, tiled ground. I reached into a gap on the shelf, behind gathered bottles of apple juice, and pulled a few of the heavy, brown jugs into the empty space. It rumbled like thunder and boomed like a drum as I dragged and bounced the bottles to the front of the shelves which were warped from years of being carelessly dropped and shining with silver lines.
of glowing metal exposed by scratches in the paint. I lined the bottles into rows of two, turning them so the front of the packaging could glare from the shelf into the eyes of future undecided customers. The picture on the packaging was of a sweating glass of amber liquid with ice cubes falling into it. The cubes splashed the juice above and over the sides of the rim. I swallowed hard, my spit becoming thick, and rubbed my tongue against the inside of my dry lower lip. After zoning only two or three five-foot sections of shelves, out of a whole aisle, the pictures on the packaging always made me thirsty. The cereal aisle is easy with its smiling cartoon characters on vividly colored, rectangular boxes that stand and stack neatly into specific sections marked by bar-coded, quantity-numbered, priced shelf-tags, but the juice bottles never seem to fit as described in the zoning plans. They don’t stack, and the manufacturers add handles and change the bottle shapes so often that the predetermined positioning from corporate is no longer possible.

I worked until eleven or midnight most nights and didn’t get home until a half hour later. Katelyn would already be sleeping. I would have liked to have gone out with my friends, but I didn’t think it fair to leave Katelyn alone at night, and I never drank slowly enough to eventually drive home, so if I went out I wouldn’t be safe to drive until morning. I drank alone. The only difference between my drinking the night we found out Katelyn was pregnant and my normal drinking was that I drank faster and wanted more than any other night to be out of the house.

And now I am out of the house roll-casting into water that churns rather than flows as each water molecule struggles to maintain its balance between solid and liquid. The fish are not biting, or I’m not finding them, so I strip the line in with my left hand, allowing the slack to spill into loops and tangles by my knees. The pale green line is pulled by the churn of the river and unravels into a long arc that at the peak reaches the drop-ins to which I’ve been casting, and at the other end is grasped by my numb right hand that fights the slight tug of the current. The tippet is covered in beads of ice, like jewels on a necklace. I squeeze the beads off the line in three-inch segments with my mittens before I put the pattern to my mouth and bite the tippet at the eye. A Brassie (a copper wire pattern) might attract or anger a fish.

I began hand-making my patterns when the first snowstorm smothered the forest and the salmon stopped running. I made this Brassie at my desk in the smoke-filled basement with empty cans around the
shimmering metal fly vise that protrudes from a desk drawer filled with feathers and hooks. It was my plan to make as many patterns as possible in the winter so I wouldn’t need to buy any during the active season. The Brassie is the simplest of patterns—black thread wrapped up the shaft to the eye-hole where a peacock herl is twisted around like a halo and tied in. Then the thread is looped in the other direction back down the shaft toward the hook and a four-inch segment of copper wire is tied in. The thread is wrapped back up the shaft to the eye-hole where the bobbin is left to hang, its weight keeping the thread in place. Finally, the copper wire is tightly twirled up the shaft to meet the thread where it is knotted in and everything is clipped. A few drops of glue are dripped off the bodkin onto the halo of herl and knot near the eye-hole. Though the Brassie is one of the simplest patterns, I had been drinking while tying and now as I attempt to thread the tippet through, I realize I was careless with the glue and had covered the eye-hole. I use the sharp tip of another pattern to dig it out.

As the pattern is tied on, I forget about the rod and let the reel dip into the cold water. I wipe the superficial wetness from the reel and fly-rod handle with a rag in my vest pocket. The mittens and hands must stay dry to fight the cold of winter, or frostbite will set in before the thirty-minute walk back to the car through the trees and fields surrounding the river. The trees on either side of the river prevent any false-casting or full-casting, so I roll-cast again toward the pool downstream of the log. Again I let the pattern drag through the pool, bounce off the rocks, and rise on the swing, and again I receive no bites. It’s all wishful thinking, but that is my new motivation.

**During my first shift at Walmart, when I zoned shelves in electronics, I felt a rise in my stomach, as if I were driving too fast over a hill.** After I picked up, for the third time, a wireless router that wouldn’t stay upright on the edge of a shelf—though the packaging was rectangular like the cereal boxes—the feeling erupted with the thought, “So, this is my life.” I tried to take small breaths, something I learned from the many times when I’ve had too much to drink, but the small breaths didn’t work. I slammed the dull blue and black box against the shelf trying to flatten the bottom of the package, but it fell to the floor again. My breaths shortened, and I felt as if I were sinking inside my own body—the world stayed the same and my body remained the same size, but the me that thinks, feels, and writes shriveled.

I walked away from the shelf, through the clearance section
(stacked with dusty, dented boxes with torn, curling cellophane wrapping that await gullible customers not realizing that Walmart is still making a twenty-five percent profit on a first-generation, five-year-old MP3 player) past the wall of LCD televisions that repeat blaring advertisements posed as entertainment programming (Josh Turner playing thirty seconds of a mediocre, uninspired, pop-country song in an effort to interest customers in the new Walmart “Sound Check” promotion) and to the bathroom, where for several minutes I spit into a toilet in a stall that had “FUCK WALMART” written in black marker on the pale green wall. My breathing intensified the shriveling feeling and spitting didn’t help.

I couldn’t think about work if I wanted the feeling to pass; I knew that. Instead, I thought about publishing and writing. I had applied to a publishing house in New York City and my essay was submitted to a few publishers, and, with any luck, good news could arrive within the week. With those thoughts in the chilly bathroom my breaths deepened and the me inside my body stopped shrinking. I wiped the spit off my mouth and glanced in the mirror as I left the bathroom.

On the river I wipe my lips and swallow the saliva that builds in my mouth as I think about it while scanning the water for other places to cast. Another drop-in—behind a few large rocks and upstream of a gravel bed—lies beyond the log toward which I have been casting. It’s ten yards further than the log, but I choose to not wade closer. I want to cast at both pools and if I move any further downstream, I might scare any fish present upstream. A few large clouds have moved in front of the sun and the water now looks like rippling steel—dark, and gray—and the shadows from the prison gun-towers have faded into the overall darkness of the prison field. I pull my fly-line with my left hand to spin slack from the reel, but the line doesn’t spin out. The line, still floating on the swing, is pulled closer to the bank of ice and branches by the churning water. I raise the rod-tip, allow the line to come in enough to lie limp on the surface behind my casting-shoulder, and apply a stiff chopping motion toward the water with the rod. The tip of the rod bends back from the pressure, and, as I stop my hand at waist-level, the tip snaps forward and the kinetic energy transfers from the rod to the fly-line. The line behind the casting shoulder lifts, creating a lump of a loop that pushes through the line on the surface before it straightens out, lifting the tippet and setting the pattern on the second pool in the direction of the prison fence.
With the line safely above a pool, the reel is quickly inspected—ice has formed within it like lumps of snow and the spool has stiffened. I pull at the line again, but it won’t move. I bump the base of the rod with my palm several times, hoping to jar the ice loose. I tug again to find the spool is still frozen. I need a solution, but now that the line is wet if I somehow thaw my spool it will freeze again within minutes no matter what I do. I roll-cast my line away from the bank again as the winter wind blows my orange hood against the brown hat Katelyn crocheted for me.

My hobby is fly-fishing and Katelyn’s hobby is crocheting, and as I tie flies at my desk in the basement, she crochets in the living room. From time to time, I will fasten my fly vise to the coffee table and tie flies on the couch next to her while she crochets. When we’re working on our hobbies we don’t say much; she’s counting and I’m doing my best to wrap a one-inch feather around a quarter-inch hook while making it look like the picture and without the fibers pulling out. But the silence gives us time to think, and often when we take breaks from our hobbies we have important conversations.

Katelyn makes crocheting seem effortless. The ball of yarn waits on the couch to the left of her lap and a long length of it extends from the ball into her left hand. Her right hand grasps a metallic-teal crochet hook and her index finger is extended along the shaft with her fingertip pressed against the hook tip and the yarn. Her left hand holds a matted combination of previous loops that gradually becomes a flat piece of fabric and then an article of clothing—possibly mittens or maybe a new hat. She turns and angles the forming project to point old loops at the hook and yarn around the crochet hook in the right hand that drives the new loop through the gaps and holes. When one loop is connected to another, a new loop is already half-created around the hook in her right hand and ready to go.

She’s efficient and calculated when she crochets, keeping pages of directions and stitch counts near her and stopping often to count how many loops she has already made. After beginning a project, she usually cannot start another until it is complete. But she’s generally efficient and calculated: she wakes up for work at five-thirty in the morning every day, packs a lunch to save money, works until around five, and finally comes home where she crochets on the couch for several hours before bed.

A few days after we found out Katelyn was pregnant we sat on the couch silently creating, and when the hackle-pliers had torn
my third piece of partridge soft-hackle I sat my bobbin on the table and misquoted Hemingway, “I can always fish that swamp later.” Katelyn held up her left index finger to me, not looking up from her current crochet project, with her right hand pinching at the project, and her lips moving as she counted. She said the last number aloud, set down the yarn, picked up a pen, and wrote the number on a small pad of paper.

“I’ve been thinking,” she said. “What if instead of going straight to New York, we wait for a year?” She waited for me to speak, but after a few moments of silence she said, “Just until the baby is born, and we can save some money.”

She waited again for me to speak, but I didn’t. I reached into my jeans pocket for my pack of cigarettes and my lighter. As I left the room Katelyn said, “Corey, stop,” but I had already closed the kitchen door and began walking down the steps in the mudroom that led to the basement. We’ve had the talk before; I’m worried that this is where my life will end, and Walmart will be my future, zoning and struggling to remember poems that I had once known by heart, and Katelyn is worried that we’re leaving the inexpensive, yet quality, large 1890s farm house behind for shaky possibilities. I tried to take deep breaths and wanted to spit somewhere for a few minutes. I lit the cigarette in the unheated mudroom that was as cold as the winter wind whipping the peeling blue shingles of the house.

I feel the same winter wind permeating the many layers of my clothing, and stinging the sides of my stomach, as I exhaust the few solutions I can think of for my iced spool. “I can always fish that swamp later,” I say aloud to nobody.

I pull the line back to the reel with my left hand and wrap it into small loops. After the rod, reel, and spool sit overnight in the living room, they will thaw, but for now I must carry the unwound line in my hand. I keep my feet in a wide stance and make deliberate steps toward the bank, thoroughly shaking my foot on the river-bottom to ensure it will not slip as I move my other foot into position. A ten-foot walk takes several minutes, but if I fall into the water I have very little chance of making it to the car, and I am alone, so I do not worry about my pace, but rather concentrate on every step.

At the bank, the snow has drifted into the river throughout winter and the current has cut the underside out, leaving a shelf of ice and snow overhanging before the physical bank begins. I climb onto the shelf by first placing my knee on it, and then applying pressure with
both of my arms to lift my body. As my other leg, the one still in the river, is lifted from the water, the shelf cracks in the middle and my knee slides toward the river. I grab at the snow through my mittens, trying to slow the slide of my body, and wait to feel the rocks of the river-bottom with my feet. My boots touch the bottom and grip the rocks. I push my knee into the ice shelf that now slants into the water to test the strength. It does not break, so I reach my mittens into the crack and pull my body onto the fallen shelf, sliding across the ice and snow to the shore. I realize that death from falling in is not what scares me; it’s the embarrassment of being found dead, probably naked like most freezing victims—shedding my clothes thinking I’m too hot because of the burning feeling brought on by the freezing skin and the delirium of panic—with my limbs huddled to my body that lies under branches that I have furiously cut from Blue Spruce and Jack pines in my last moments to lay across my red skin, which eventually turns blue, and then pale. As emergency crews look at my body they will wonder why I hadn’t planned ahead. They will say I could have survived had somebody known where I was. I shake the thought knowing I’m safe on the shore.

After removing the mittens and a pack of cigarettes from my fly vest, I smoke on the bank, looking across the river to the prison property. A few miles outside of Escanaba when the season changes, I will limit out every time I fish. The first brown trout I catch, fifteen inches with dark color, will pull the line from my reel as it fights the tension upstream. I will net the trout in a wooden landing net, wet my hands, and cradle the fish as I use the forceps to remove the pattern. After the fish is unhooked, I will delicately submerge it. It will pull away from my hands. It will be a ceremony, and though I will try not to, I will smile, and my cheeks will redden with warmth. Today, on the icy Carp River where there are no fish or pride, but only overwhelming thoughts of monthly refills, judgment, zoning, and defective patterns, I will say aloud to nobody while staring at the gray prison walls and the barren tree limbs, “I wish I could’ve had a few more years.”
First Night, New Bedford, MA

On the street, young men with blowtorches carve huge blocks of ice into birds.

Standing at the front of the church, a black lace shawl tied over her black dress,

she looks like any middle-aged woman until she raises her head to sing

in the old sorrowing tradition, fado, which means destiny, means fate,

means lost at sea, means the nets came up empty, all empty again. New Year's Eve

in a city of lost nineteenth-century glories, the city of my childhood, of fireworks seen

from the back porch in blankets and pajamas, the explosions visible only through

bare trees in winter. That's all gone now, and I don't even know

Portuguese, but I believed her when she brought herself to tears, just a few at the end.
Sheep Meadow, Central Park, 1999

In the shade at the southern edge, you pause for a minute: that green, that sunshine, extending ahead, ahead, it sort of knocks the wind right out of you to suddenly be in such a space, and there

is the old Russian, making balsawood glider planes with nothing but a knife, and giving them all away to kids who toss them inexpertly up, then watch—and you watch too—as they catch a current of air and rise high above the trees, beside the skyscrapers, becoming indistinct against the bright summer sky, our eyes watering with the effort of keeping track of where they go, until they’re indistinguishable from real planes, until they fade into blue, into memory. He builds them perfectly. They never come down.
Evan McGarvey

Tweet Balzano’s Restaurant

In the lone quiet corner
    past the main dining room,
past the lines of weekenders on safari from
    Newton and Cranston,
Frank, my nanny’s common-law husband,
    wrenched halves of Sicilian lemon
over, what, at a lisping eight years old, I saw
    as a shield filled with hoops and stars:
Glistening calamari.

He pulled me close,
    tucked my body
under his hairy, bronze forearms.
    Our table had a private view of the dock:
Two workers lit cigars near open engines.
    Smelling of Campari and playing cards,
Frank found a hoop of squid free of pepper flakes,
    lifted it to my Yankee mouth
and whispered, “donna.”

Frank’s fingers glided back into the calamari
    after he fed
me and wiped my lips. But his hand lingered
    inside the pool
of oil and pepper, as that private
    benediction
still clings to my throat’s arches:
    Salute
the sea of tribes, the tribe of the seas.
I came only for a fried chicken dinner, not to talk politics with the local farmers cooling the bar, talking Monsanto, talking share prices as though they wore pinstripe Valentinos instead of faded denim Dickies.

The Stag beer sign said: It’s not for beginners, which is why I ordered two, told the young waitress to bring my meal outside where I’d be cooling twilight with two gold sweating cans, where I could be alone with her piece of land given over to what it was: floodplain. Mississippi lapping against the roadside gravel in wind-blown fits, limestone idling the bluffs, and it occurred to me that land like theirs had a history that got washed away seasonally. Its people were the ghosts of river gar, catfish, walleye, drum and sauger, and its sky was the reflected color of mud—but I staked nothing in making these observations. I ate my dinner quickly because two of three roads out of town
were impassible, lost to flood
for the time being, and because
I could see what it meant to be stuck

here—in her eyes, the waitress
who set my plate down and saw California
in university stencil on the cover
of my folder, asked me why I’d come.
Because of the chicken, I told her,
but also because, as she agreed, it was

beautiful this time of year,
a lull between storms, fields of water
stretching out for miles in all directions,
evening breezing their island village with the same delicate attention
of a Caribbean sunset.

I was already on my way out of town
before I thought of her back there
collecting empties, dishing fresh ones,
the word California hidden
like a gold coin under her tongue,
its taste almost too bitter to stand;

and those farmers betting
Monsanto shares would tank?
I hoped this time they were right,
hoped later that night on the drive home
they couldn’t help but see the beauty
in the posture of those cranes

salting the roadside, asleep in what could be
the edge of a darkened ocean, could be
any place, any home, any life, could be.
Andrea O’Brien

The Summer before the Biewer Farm Sold

A handful of cows dipped their heads into grasses, each sloped neck seductive as a woman’s.

I stumbled like a trespasser in a field I had rarely walked before

and I knew I would not walk again, but I felt a pain in my hands anyway,

the pain that crucified my mother’s palms soon after her mother died.

The Holsteins, startled by my presence, stood close together, swaying into one another.

I trembled too, faced with one of the matrons, her nose soft and wet, the hot breath cool on my arms.

No longer bound to sunflowers or corn stalks, to the milking parlor or silage,

to oil paintings of the Virgin Mary or my mother’s side of the family,

I recognized each parting as a darkness as swift as the loss of the season’s fireflies

when their electric glow fades. Now when I detour through Sullivan, I drive by land

divided and developed, to hesitate among the headstones of St. Mary’s, learning to pronounce the word goodbye.
Rehoboth Beach, DE

You’ve come for absolution, but
the beach town has more pressing matters
to attend to. The beach town is busy
playing Journey from pink-lit cantinas,
busy scattering stars haphazard. You’ve come
for answers, but the beach town is absorbed
in perfecting the racket of Skee-Ball,

that old wooden clack-and-slam, and can’t
be distracted. It’s brutal, the way the beach town
won’t cooperate: everything here is ripe
for construing—your parents did ride these same
carousel horses, the dragon kite is dipping
in a most interpretable way—but then
the beach town interrupts the shoreline

with a dump truck and a dead flounder
and what do you do with that? Haven’t you
earned a sunset that reads as redemption?
Haven’t you earned driftwood curved like a Y
for yes? You want the wind to be a firm hand
on your shoulder. You want the biplanes dragging ads
for all-you-can-eat crabs to mean your life

will be a bounty of plenty, the found
conch shell to mean you’ve done everything right.
But the beach town, sorry, is not in the business
of metaphor. The biplane is a biplane.
The shell is a shell. You stand on the sand
in early evening, the sky shading to violet,
the gulls shrieking over their pilfered French fries,
and you say, *Come on, just give me something.* So
the beach town sighs, and places in your open hands
a cigarette butt, the metal detector man, a translucent
whelk egg case, a cargo ship rupturing
the horizon. You stare. *This is what I have for you,*
the beach town says finally. *Everything.*
From Troy to Utica to Rome,
Rome to Syracuse to Ithaca,
Ithaca to Geneva to Attica,
you ask yourself who you are,
and all you ever really know
between the gold coin moon
and the wrinkled sheets of road
is how the route always leads
home—without maps, magnetic
needles of a clock-shaped compass,
or the polestar winking in the dark—
always home, something warm
carried like a coal in a pocket,
not an address that grounds you
to one time and place in space,
but dust in the eyes, mouth, lap
you cannot cough out or do not want to,
a moment that is beyond words,
the precise instant when fear
lifts suddenly like birds flushed
from hidden nests into the harbor
of the clear, cold, startling air.
The cast-concrete landing
where Day Liners tied up
at the end of the trail
and road. A few bloated shad
bob at its side—
the Hudson eases by.
A stick-thin man dips string
tied to chicken necks
in brown water.
The air smells of fish—
not unpleasant—
and summer forest.

Our daughter runs
up and down the ramp,
hears scrabbling
against plastic, races
to the white painter’s bucket
full of tiny crabs,
peers inside. A knife
lies at her feet. I
reach for her hand,
the fisherman scrambles over,
whisper-screams as if
gripped by the throat.

Later, Lindley asks
why the man screamed—
maybe because
his crabs were
too small—and why
he whispered—*he might be sick*. Why did he have the knife—*to cut up his bait*. For a minute, gripped in her car seat behind us, she is silent.
View from the Eastland Hotel

in Portland, Maine

Stars like pinholes
fill the window—a lighthouse
calls to the sea.

Shades of tall-masted clippers
could crowd this dark harbor—
or steel ships such as brought
the one remembered tomorrow
to this far place.

Inside, where it’s warm, waiters—
imported from the former
Soviet Union—hover. A man
and woman drink together,
lean close, his hand on her skirt.

Alone, I sit and watch
another Russian, with
three men, uncrossing and
re-crossing smooth, shaped legs.

The beacon flares again, as
I plan the next day
of this windward visit,
tempting shoals in this
port of the dead.
Francis tells a story about when he slept in a church and was discovered by a priest—a priest with whom he is still friends—without affect. He does not flaunt the past; he ignores it. Most of the stories people hear about him come from his wife and he amends corrections here and there. But much of his life before the church discovery, of life in Nigeria, is formed from details plucked from history books, tiny paragraphs or footnotes at the end of the section entitled, “The History of Africa” that most classes never study.

Francis appeared in New York, thinking the streets were paved with gold and then realized that the United States was like anyplace else: you need to know people. Along with moments from the rest of his life, preparation and opportunity came through for him when he needed it. Because of the priest, he made it to school, went to undergrad, did well, and moved onto graduate school, where his focus was mining.

When Francis talks about mining, he first offers a disclaimer. He could not be a doctor because he cannot stand the sight of blood; he was angry about the wars.

“What wars?” his children start to ask, but instead they dig through drawers in the cold winters, when the plummeting wind chill keeps them from playing outside. They find a light blue piece of rectangular plastic with his name on it and trepidatiously ask him about it. Francis laughs and explains it is a West Virginia driver’s license from the ’70s. The thin plastic has no picture, but his race is emblazoned on the card.

From West Virginia, he moves to Ohio, meets and marries Karen, and they move to Michigan. The Upper Peninsula is filled with abandoned copper mines, so Francis’s mining engineering background proves useful. He soon finds that this place, the UP, is also called the Copper Country and that gives him hope for his research. He visits Michigan Technological University in Houghton during the summer, also known as the month of July. MTU promises he will get some time to visit the Quincy Mine Hoist and poke around inside. Francis says, years later, if someone had brought him to this place in the winter, he never would have moved.
“All this snow! It’s impossible.”

Residents joke the UP has two seasons—Mild and Damn Cold. Francis and his wife soon find that a typical winter runs from October until May. They watch eager children flash around Halloween photos during November, as if the whole town had not seen them on their doorsteps. Most children bundle up in snowsuits under their Halloween costumes and trudge through the fresh snow that sticks to the ground. The various costumes—Pocahontas, Barbie, Power Rangers, the ghost, the ninja—all look bloated and distorted in pictures, as if the camera’s wide view stretched them to the limit.

Francis and his wife do not know how long they mean to stay. One painful winter melts into another, then another in a small apartment on Hancock Street in Hancock, Houghton’s sister city. Francis and his wife have their first son, a fat brown, cheerful baby; then a year later, a second son, a peppy troublemaker with a mischievous smile. Two years after that, they plan on moving to a new house on the hill and find they are due to have a third child in the summertime.

While the contractor builds the house, Francis goes to visit it often. On one occasion, he lets out his customary, “Hello, sir!” when he hears footsteps on the second floor. A man around his age, balding a bit on top, peers out of the skeleton of Francis’s sons’ bedroom.

“Oh, uh, contractor’s not here. Dan,” he says. He holds out a hand. “I guess I’m gonna be your neighbor.”

Silence.

“Big house for just you?”

“I have a wife and two sons. My wife is pregnant.”

“How old are your sons?” Dan asks. “I have two myself.” He gestures out the hole that would later be a window and points at his sons, in their own room in the blue house not one hundred feet away. One is two, the other six.

“Oh, hello!” Francis calls out the window and then he smiles, then he laughs. He oozes a Sidney Poitier charm that urges older white women to stop him in airports and ask for an autograph. He plays it off like the sweet glaze his mother-in-law drizzles onto the pound cakes she makes for the family. His family thinks he looks nothing like Poitier, but he always obliges the women as they gush about To Sir, with Love.

“When is she due?” Dan asks.

“May, but my children are always early. Sorrio, you know? They like to surprise me.” He shrugs when he says, “Sorrio,” his way of saying, “That’s life.”
May comes and goes and Francis looks at his wife and her round belly as if she keeps a secret from him. They go to see Dr. Huang together and he only smiles.

“The baby is fine. Go for a walk. The baby will come.”
“But she is already a week late.”
“Walk! The baby will come.”

His wife walks up and down the streets, still bundled in a winter coat. It is maroon with dark brown toggles and arches over her belly and down past her knees. Two weeks pass and her parents arrive and wait with her. The whole family goes back to the doctor, but she leaves the boys with their godparents. Francis calls Dr. Huang and when they arrive, he is ready to go. She is not pushing, not huffing, but distress is written all over her face. Dr. Huang’s face falls.

“Still no baby?”

She moves her arms as if to say, “Obviously.”

“Come, come. The baby is just lazy,” he says. He induces labor and soon there squirms another crying, pink child, a girl. The godparents bring the boys over and Francis takes a picture of the four on the bed. The oldest dutifully sits on one side of his mother and their newly-minted middle child bounces on the bed on his knees as he plays with an operating mask.

Francis navigates this tiny city deftly. Most streets in their neighborhood are named after trees—Poplar, Maple, Fir, Willow, Evergreen—names his children will soon memorize on their paper routes. Printed underneath the downtown street names are Finnish translations—head-scratchers, he calls them. Stores and some homes have welcome mats with Willkommen in large white letters inside a green outline of the UP. People run out of steaming saunas into the half-frozen canal in the dead of winter. They eat Nissu bread or Pannukakku, Finnish pancakes, and go to the Kaleva Café to eat pasties.

Traditionally, a pasty is a handheld pot pie filled with ground beef, rutabaga, onions, potatoes and carrots, but people make them with whatever they can find. Local stores make chicken and venison pasties, a cheesy sausage version that’s essentially a calzone; and various vegetable versions for people referred to as “those meat-aversives.” The dough is made from lard, but most don’t know about that until it’s too late.

Francis carries the Nigerian flag in the countywide Parade of Nations. His kids know little about Nigeria, other than a few tidbits
they pick up from semi-comprehensible phone conversations. Their mother cleans the house every Saturday morning and she alternates between Earth, Wind and Fire and Francis’s Nigerian CDs. From the stereo in the living room, bongos echo from speakers alighted next to couches, surreptitiously hidden in the corners. Francis grabs a few scarves from the laundry basket and ties one around his daughter’s mass of hair. They each take hold of another scarf and he shows her African dance steps as they twirl around the house.

The whole family scoffs with the rest of the city when Suomi College upgrades and changes its name to Finlandia University. Their main colors may be white, navy blue and Finnish blue, but they neglect to release possible names to the public. A child could have told them that FU is probably not the best nickname for an institution of higher education.

“These Finns, man,” Francis says. Sometimes, he catches his lazy slip into an old, forgotten accent. His children turn their heads toward him, wondering when their father lived in Brooklyn. He is afraid his children, with their deep brown skin tone, will not fit in, where most of their friends are blond-haired and blue-eyed. One evening, his daughter helps her mother with the dishes—her only job is to wipe down the silverware. After, she sits next to him on the couch and plays with her pruny fingers.

“During recess, someone asked me if they could call me colored.” Before Francis can respond, she adds, “I said no.” He nods, dismissive of the moment and then she continues in her elementary ramble.

“I’m only one color.” She engrosses her tiny head in a 96-count box of Crayola and settles on “mahogany.” He has nothing to say.

Later though, he makes it an issue and warns his children periodically. He calls the three of them downstairs and they stand in a line, shoulders touching. They elbow and pinch each other while they wait for Francis to form his words. He glances over them as if he does not notice the movement.

“If anything goes wrong, you will be the first one they will remember.”

He points a worn and calloused finger.

“The very first.”

He directs this especially at the middle child, who reaches behind his sister and tugs at her braids.

The local schools dedicate their social studies and civics classes to teaching children about the mine. The students gather around their teacher, like they do in the library during story time, and
talk about the miners—review their lives, talk about the accidents and the deaths. Francis’s children are familiar with the Quincy Mine. The three hop on their bikes and ride around town with their friends. One afternoon, they ride toward the Lookout. Before the road is finished, the kids stand up on their pedals through the rocky path, hover in the grooves left by heavy hunters’ trucks packed with three-point bucks. They bounce over the bumps and bruises in the fallen and discarded trees, freshly freed and decayed structures, past signs that announce grand developments on the way. The trio crosses the street toward a small clearing, an extended shoulder at the side of US 41. They drop their bikes and lean over the metal railing at the Lookout. They are used to coming here, for the best view of the Portage Lake Lift Bridge when the Ranger III floats through the canal during 4th of July fireworks.

Up US 41, past bunches of old brick houses, revered but ignored like most decaying structures in small towns, remnants of the mine sit roofless and unexplored. Yoopers are best at placing the past in the past and keeping it there to make it seem as if they could forget their own history, but little by little, its placement fades from their memory, as if they never knew it was there at all. Tiny signs shaped like the hoist announce in white letters, “QMCo. No. 6.” The mine store, right next to the hoist, sells an overabundance of copper and fool’s gold. Years ago, the mining company thought they’d struck it rich before someone informed them of their mistake and set them straight. Most town residents, the kids especially, do their part, purchase everything from large chunks of fool’s gold to copper nuggets, earrings and postcards, to put up respectable bids for the dying store. Francis’s daughter buys a heavy pair of earrings: pennies with tiny copper feathers dangling from them. She irks her mother as she tosses her head from side to side.

“You’re a constant windchime,” Karen says.

Grainy photos of Finnish immigrants line the back of the store. Eyes stained with dust and lungs filled with copper, they squint with furrowed brows in the twilight at the end of a long, dark day. The UP isn’t a comfy place in the wintertime. Some of the mining photos show the snow drifts surrounding the opening to the mine shaft. The expressions on the men’s faces—braced and rotting teeth, frostbitten ears—betray the extent of the cold.

Francis’s children make their own mine. In the depth of winter, snowbanks on either side of their driveway reach twenty feet. The snowplow whirs and beeps as it roams down Evergreen Street before
dawn. It clears the road, but pushes the excess snow in the driveways and builds up the snowbanks. Every morning, Francis clears the driveway in a full-body black snowsuit. The kids’ job is to smooth out the area between the road and the driveway so their mother can roll her minivan down the street. The three do their after-school duty, smooth out the driveway again, dig out the mailbox and, with identical orange shovels, carve rough steps into the side of the snowbank.

Once on top, they dig. First straight down, a few feet. The little sister is the measuring stick for the appropriate depth of a tunnel. From that point, they tunnel outwards, to the street, to the driveway, toward the backyard. In an attempt at great ingenuity, they tunnel to the neighbor’s driveway. They slick it down with spit and water and have a nice slide for a few days. Blizzards rush through and the next heavy snowfall comes and ruins their efforts.

Francis prays every morning, sometimes at unexpected moments in the middle of the afternoon. Catholicism was gifted to his children. He stands with his head slightly bowed, eyes closed. His lips move, reticent. After a summer soccer practice, he looks out on the field as his sons pack up the orange cones. As he wiggles his toes around in his shoes, he feels the place where his big toenail used to be. He lost it years ago, playing soccer. The skin rubs against the tough cotton in the worn work shoes. Francis has his hands cupped and folded in front of him as if to receive communion, yet all he does is let the sun alight on his palms.

He teaches his daughter and sons soccer the way he was taught, in the front yard. Drills send them dribbling around his wife’s planters and edging around the clothing lines. Spotted by the neighbors, he is now one of the county’s de facto coaches. He ties their shoes tight before practice, the special cleats his wife insists they need to run back and forth over grass. They practice on the upper level of the elementary school playground. It allows them to play without traveling to one of the other towns; Ishpeming, Ontonagon, Baraga, L’Anse, Calumet, South Range. He lost his toenail on a field like this, before the war, before there was more blood on their impromptu field than could be explained away by an accidental collision. Francis shivers with remembrance and calls, “Orya!” to the boys. Soccer balls whip past him and the pair runs down the hill toward home. Lucky for them, the field is close by. The Volvo he bought years ago has trouble making it up the hills.

Francis drives the same car for twenty years. He buys it new, flies
to Chicago to pick it up and drives it home. He takes pictures next to the tawny beige trim, sits sprightly in someone’s driveway and beams. After fifteen years, the engine pushes so hard the seats shake like a massage chair set on high. It develops a rumble, a roar, as it makes its way from city to city. The mine sat atop the hill in Hancock, while MTU was in Houghton, a five-minute jaunt across the bridge. Francis occasionally comes home directly from the mine, holding a hard hat and a miner’s jacket. He hangs it up in the closet and his daughter inspects the pockets for candy.

After a few years, the Volvo is more trouble than it is worth. Elevation Street is the main drag up the hill, the steepest, the one his kids aren’t allowed to speed down on their way to their friends’ houses. The Volvo, now christened “The Tank” by Francis’s children, loses the battle against Elevation. Francis often takes the side way home, but a few times the Volvo stalls halfway up Evergreen. His daughter hears it coming, wipes the frost off the downstairs window to make sure, and yells for her brothers.

They throw on thermals, boots, hats, scarves and rush outside. Their little sister takes her time with her boots. She hums to coach her lace-tying along, and then steps gingerly on the front porch with unsteady feet. She watches as one revs the engine and two others push. Francis is usually the last to come home, and so the other husbands on the street hear the commotion and come out to help. Once the Tank is stored safely in the garage, the neighbors return home and the daughter has water boiling for hot chocolate or tea.

“Whooo!” Francis’s exhausted but happy bellow fills the small space in the laundry room. They all stamp the snow off their boots, peel off the freezing, sweaty clothes and wipe their noses on scarves thrown directly in the washer. His children hope this new molting of their crustaceous father lasts. But there is always work to be done.

When the temperature hovers above freezing, the kids wash the Tank and their mother’s minivan. The city laces the streets with salt in the wintertime to keep everyone’s snow tires from careening them down the hill. The salt also corrodes the cars, rusts them until the finish and then pieces of the actual vehicles fall off. The kids wash it and rinse out the oxidation-covered sponges in a soap bucket. Inside, they play with the remnants of rust on their fingertips until their mother yells at them. She hands them each a small ball of steel wool and sends them back outside, where they alternate washing their stained fingers with poking the oily orange trail that snakes down their driveway into the street.
This orange substance, the rust, is a sign for change. Anything old rusts, the community decides, and in this spirit, MTU takes the Quincy Mine Hoist and updates it for tours. The mining department cleans out part of a shaft, installs brighter lights, hauls in a chalkboard and a few dozen chairs and teaches classes. Eventually, the county allows elementary school students to go down as well and Francis makes it a point to be there while his children are.

One afternoon, his kids spend some time digging in the roll-top desk in the corner of their parents’ bedroom. Here are receipts, blank Christmas cards, bills, stamps, discarded pens and business cards. The checkbook.

“What’re you looking for?”
“I don’t know.” A banned phrase. The trio exchanges a quick series of facial expressions.

Don’t tell.
I won’t.

Once Francis gets home from work, his daughter dinks around in the room, poking the pad of an awkwardly long finger into one of the slats on the desk. He grunts disapproval and she stops. A creased white envelope invites her on top of the desk and she opens it. In the envelope is money, heavily embossed, fancy Monopoly money. He sits in a worn recliner, looking over a small red notebook with gridlines, a tiny green felt pen clutched in his mouth, so she knows he is already thinking about money. She hands it over.

“What’s this?”
“Naira.” He counts out a wad and places it in her hands. She flips through each different colored note with care, highlighted with people who look like them.

“How much is this in dollars?”
“One.”
“A hundred dollars! Can I keep it?”
“Sorrio! No, girl.” He reaches out a hand and takes it back. “One dollar.”

The adults debate whether or not it is negligent to not only put trained adults in a mine, but children, for educational purposes. The point is to make them hang onto something tangible about the miners, something beyond picking up a few pasties from the IGA on their way home from school. The pictures in the back of the mine store, the descriptions, the documentaries they watch, cannot compare to the
experience. For a moment in the trolley everyone has on an excited, brave face—faces that hide notions to break through the glass, arch themselves from the painfully slow trajectory of the trolley and be free. If they manage to land in one of the few grassy spots on the rocky, treed hill, they could watch as everyone else goes down past the first opening, then the second. Past that, was all darkness.

The darkness of the mine reminds kids of their snow tunnels, the way they burrow through feet of snow during recess to make impromptu igloos. Mining is a great equalizer. The children, warm in tiny snow hollows, allow cool condensation to drip and land on their jackets, as the snow sucks up their body heat and melts to water.

The atmosphere changes quickly in a mine—one might think a flash flood was on its way. In the videos children watch, the tram clunks and thuds on its slow descent. It stops at each opening and deposits miners, tourists, the curious. They step out from whatever UP weather inundates them—ice cold, the kind you feel on the inside; the hot, hot sun on what otherwise might be a comfortable day; rain that turns into teeny hail stones threatening to compile and grow larger and leave dents in salt-ridden cars. It is either cold or hot in the mines. No one visits when it will be hot, on the rare days when one can jump in the canal without steeling themselves against the icy needles of cold. But when it’s freezing, they whip on their jackets, adjust the clunky yellow hard hats, eager to be inside, even if this inside is below ground. A few people carry metal lunch tins with a pasty tucked inside—for authenticity.

“How can we make mining safer?” a tour guide asks. Francis waits for someone to say something profound. The kids shrug. At their age, they do not particularly care. People make their pasties themselves and try to bake some joy in with the sorrowful memories, the ghosts of those encouraging them to do better. People remember the past in the most superficial terms and forget why it was so important to remember in the first place.

Sometimes during recess, when the kids play outside in the winter, they spend time in their tunnels, their afternoon fifteen-minute homes. Then, the burrows start to fall apart. First the walls no longer glisten, usually because the kids eat at their holes when they get thirsty. Then the walls sag as a sled dashes across the latest drift, ten feet above their heads. Next, the walls melt and the kids shiver and see tiny puffs of breath. The whole hollow collapses in a large white poof and all of that white envelopes them and turns the world black. Children burst out of the snow face first, with coughs and sputters. Flakes glitter on their
eyelashes, coat their scarves, seep inside their gloves trickle underneath their shirts, and they jump and writhe to melt the snow quickly.

By April, the snow turns to slush and reveals all the dirt and pebbles and toys long forgotten the past October. Francis is torn, because once the snow melts, he doesn’t have to climb out of the second-story window to shovel the roof so it doesn’t collapse. Now, he has to shovel the dirt smashed into his driveway and the never-ending yardwork begins again. Spring in the UP is a brown and gray wasteland, where children yell, “Slushy!” and place a compact ball of snow, dirt, and ice down the back of a victim’s windbreaker.

Finally out of the hoist and on the tour, students climb in the trolley, some with heavy modern miners’ jackets, hard hats on as they peer out the glass windows and make their way down to the depths. Once off the tram, the students gaze up at the large opening.

The tour guide uses words meant to reassure, but only provokes fear: reinforced, cement, stability, safe, cautious, sturdy, firm, resistant. This man has a thesaurus for the menacing. The kids mutter amongst themselves.

“They called the Titanic unsinkable,” someone from the group calls. The teachers turn on their heels; they emit stony faces and the murmuring subsides. One student gazes into the darkness and is petrified. A teacher, not his own, comes up next to him and he says, “Curiosity killed the cat.”

“We’re learning,” she says and drags him along.

The children squeal and giggle, gawk at each other as the trolley descends. Once in the mine shaft, all gathered in the tiny cavern, the teachers take a moment for a demonstration to connect with the miners’ lives. They turn off the lights and students grab for each other in the darkness, high little voices screech, “Who’s that? You grabbed my arm!”

Thoughts of escape cross students’ faces; fright travels telepathically down the row like a yawn. They fight the idea that their teachers and parents, who’d scribbled swift signatures on permission slips, were losing their minds. Past the age where bears hide in closets and monsters growl from behind the cover of bed skirts, children have new fears. Inundated with all the horrors that miners face, they think: that could be us. Whenever they hear of another mining disaster, the students will think of those few afternoons they spent in the mines, those few moments when they squealed and tiny hands searched along the walls. Their ears open to the adults’ comfortable amusement across the way.
and Francis’s energetic laugh nearly fills the cavern. The children know even in this darkness, in the end, they are safe.

When Francis finally hands his eldest the keys to the Tank, no one recognizes him anymore. He drives a silver-spruce Camry to and from work, church, the IGA, and no one ever hears him coming.

“Francis! That’s a new car.”

“Oh, these kids, though. They get the best of everything.”

His three kids, now in high school, take care of the Tank. It is now the extra vehicle and the Tank has to stay outside like an untrained dog. Morning arguments involve whose turn it is to turn the Tank on, warm it up so it doesn’t stall on the three blocks to school.

“Kids, did you start the car?” Karen asks.

“Oh, it’s fine.”

“Someone. Go start the car.”

One of kids loses the daily battle after a quick game of rock-paper-scissors. They run outside half-dressed, start the defroster and scrape the ice and snow from the windshield. The Tank’s rumble grows louder; so, many mornings, the principal knows when the three rush in late and find a sympathetic teacher to write their tardy notes. He smirks at these hastily written signatures and throws the notes away.

MTU’s mining department downsizes, one of the reasons many leave when it looks like it is close to the end. The town itself declines. Beanie Babies are no longer in style and the florist stops stocking them in her fragrant windows. There aren’t enough parking spaces at the local bars, so people often amble down Quincy Street at quitting time. Francis—who used to try to find ways out of his job—enjoys his Saturdays before it all ends. He sits gleefully in the middle of the living room floor, blots student papers with red pen, a great big smile on his face and a full-bodied laugh every few minutes.

Francis is a cautious man. Though he has a new job and is eager to leave the crumbling town behind with its potholes and struggle for upkeep, nothing is for sure. So he packs up and moves alone, as a trial year. He manages to make a trip back to visit his family every month or so, but all the traveling makes him unhappy. The time spent in an airplane could be used for more productive purposes.

Before the entire family moves the next summer, Francis puts his sons in charge of selling the Tank. His wife and daughter ridicule the idea. But the boys are charming and ambitious. They manage to pawn off the dying engine and rusted-out shell to an unsuspecting grad
student, who will learn the Tank has no traction and will need a push up slippery hills in the wintertime. Their sister beams as her brothers present a check to their mother. The thin paper is heavy with pride. The family tries not to think about the people who will help this student push the Volvo around town when it stalls. The people who will rush to the ice-caked windows and then stop in shock at an unfamiliar face.

As the family drives out of town, they take the long way. Francis turns up the finished road by the new high school and the hospital, toward the Lookout, and then the minivan winds down US 41. They pass their church and the pizza places, the theatre, the post office, the old high school and the bank. They make a quick stop at the waterfront to wave at a few friends who idle backwards on jetskis, before the annual Bridgefest activities. Then the family crosses the bridge, and moves onward toward Houghton. Once they reach the next town, then the next county, it’s almost as if they never lived there at all.

Francis still gets a chance to work with mining, but it is administrative. He rarely gets to disappear into the darkness anymore. At home, he sits in front of proposals filled with charts and figures. Online, his university posts photos of him in a hardhat speaking to students in the depth of a mine. He doesn’t like when his children tell stories, when they dig up the past, so all of their family photos sit in three hefty boxes on a closet shelf. His children recognize the earnest, assiduous face, the insistence on reaching correct conclusions and file this picture away with the rest.

His attitude changes to cheerful regret, and he patches things up here and there. Adds tidbits of information like mounds of dirt to cover up the holes. Offers fool’s gold like it is real gold. And they are not fools, but they accept it anyway.

During the World Cup, he sits with his daughter in their living room in a new house. They watch the United States play Ghana and he subscribes fully to the Pan-African ideal. The Americans lose, as expected.

“We beat them soundly!” he cheers. Age sixty; and he gets up and does a little dance, pumps his arms in front of him as he sways from side to side.

“Dad…”
“What?”
“We?”
“Oh, I’m sorry! Are you sad?”
A cackle. More dancing. He rests as the commentators start their post-match analysis.

“Well, the best team won,” he says.

Francis slaps a happy palm on the leather armrest, gets up again and smacks a kiss on his daughter’s cheek. She giggles as he dances out of the room; his feet patter out a new story. As his soulful voice honeycombs the air, he calls out, “Sorrio!”
A quiet toast to what no longer exists
and the world that moves under us.

As the whole world held its breath,
as the whole world watched the smoke and ash—

my first call was to Daniel Simko,
safe at work—and then, the telephones stopped.

It took days to get back to him.
In what’s left of the world, I think of my first

and last visit to the Towers:
Simko’s graduation from Columbia and the celebration

was Daniel, his parents, my fiancé and I,
together for dinner at the Tower restaurant.

Immensity for his immense moment.
I remember the huge elevator’s G-force, the evening’s company.

I remember, level to us, the gold and red circling lights
of airplanes landing toward Kennedy Airport.

It was a brief night of owning the world.
And now it’s another twilight

for a quiet salute to the lives lost and the lives
we graduated from, checking up on each other, brothers
who once stood at the windows of the tallest restaurant
and toasted with parents and wife

to our shared futures,
in the world we survive.
The North Shore

In the first pure snowfall of November, we drove over disappearing roads—for dinner, for nothing, for hours of our company. We let contentment sing into weather, stopping to walk the air. We clove together through decades of winters. Snow flurried around our bodies and swirled like longcoats in motion. A white breeze erased the world before us, portions of our breath mingling where we stood in no hurry. It was a landscape made perfect by snow. Of all evenings, both of us wanted that moment to stay, the snowy evening we spoke of for years after. On the North Shore, we entered the white hereafter. Though the drifts eventually shrank and rilled away, think of me each year with the first pure snowfall.
Brittney Scott

On the Edge of Tornado Alley

When I was small
I hid behind my body’s many locks.
My dead father breaks through doors.
My dead brother sets the fires.
Boot marks busied my back,
forcing me to sleep stomach down. Downed wire shocked
heat into the ground I buried myself under.
I buried myself under

childhood’s rusted hammer,
bludgeoned as a casualty and survivor.
The eternal past trains its cycloptic eye inland.
The eternal past

revolves inward. Driven up by flood,
as bodies sometimes resurrect
when water dips its little feet
into our soil-tossed cemeteries,
our lawn used to fill with shit, used condoms, and tampons.
Filthy, we stood on the front porch
unable to leave unless we waded.
Ringworm’s beauty mark
shamed me with its wandering itch.
The whole house, all of southern Indiana, surrendered to rot run riot.
Surrendered to

roaches and blind-drinking when the power was cut.
The pale-mouthed possum, the childhood mother,
unrolls her pink tongue. She tries to kill herself still,
the pill bottle bottomless, the notes
her half-gone hand formed
come through waiflike static,
an ethereal hiss—remember.
   Remember

in those early days it rained upward, as if I’m recalling
earth’s volatile birth, violent tectonics,
vapor, devastating comets,
all in a mute providence to form something livable someday.
But sometimes it’s hard enduring, isn’t it,
sometimes it’s hard

to keep separate the life which delivered me,
miraculously, to adulthood’s wide sheltered streets of silver and oak.
The staggering trunk of the neighbor’s tree
never waivers. I am in my future, I will not fall though.
   In my future,

no one strikes me, no swirling metal chain
busts my teeth, wind, the words, from my mouth,
no one smokes crystal,
the lighted pipe’s color crackling
like an oil slick rainbow. All the dangerous shadows
barely dance along the wall.
Those that tried to shoot me are dead now, at last, I can love them
from a safe distance.
The summer my mother cut her hair, 
four mothers gathered each week for sewing circle—
“stitch and bitch,” my mother joked, brandishing her needle.

Their gossip slipping from Russian to German to English
as easily as I slid out of my wet bathing suits—
tossing them like ice cream wrappers on the bathroom floor—
so easily did the four mothers pick up one language
and drop another, stitches in their endless mending.

Passing around fresh apple fritters, the spiced fruit still hot
under fried dough, my mother stuck to lettuce or yogurt,
eyeing her bottom in the mirror while Princess Diana
waved and smiled in her carriage, billowy as meringue.
My sister and I licked the sugary icing from our thumbs,
the mothers’ conversations—Russian, English, German—
whirring around us like the fans propped in open windows,
or the blue flies that found all the tears in the ragged screens.

That summer, one of her friends scissored off my mother’s bun.
“It’s too hot for long hair,” my mother said. “It’s too heavy.”
She shook her head like the women in shampoo commercials,
like the before and after faces I drew on scrap paper,
my elbows gumming to linoleum in the heat.

And the mothers brushed her hair for her and cooed,
tent dresses as loose and fluid over their soft bellies
as my own body underwater, when I let my muscles go
and floated, open-eyed, in the misty chlorinated green,
water suspending me, weightless, in its sling.
Mill Town: Variations

1.

A desert of commerce, flash floods
of financial focus (textiles,
computers, commuter condos)
forever receding, washed out
devastated homes, cobblestones
crumbled, miles of boarded-up glass,
mirror-windowed high rise empty,
no one to take in its vistas:
the mills grainy cold in shadow
despite the sunlight stretched along
each length of smokestack, cracks opened
where mortar begins, has begun,
began when the first stone was laid
to come apart, collapsing mote
by falling mote into redbrick
canyons, canals carving channels
to the river, Boston, beyond.
2.

A roadside attraction, wayside
makeshift memorial, commons
growing gardens where factory
carcasses crumbled, new museums
around the brick and rafter bones
of boardinghouses, markets, mills,
monuments made from waterwheels,
a national park, concert hall,
baseball stadium, all of it
advertised on highways that skirt
this place like streams working their way
past storm-wreck: urban renewal,
decay reclaimed, oasis of
smokestack and brick, bridges spanning
windowed canyons and the river
sliding along, its constant rise
and fall, a future in its wake.
3.

A working ghost town, endless rows of dim windows, cemetery of factory stacks reflected in quiet canals, Merrimack making its constant exodus to sea, names engraved in granite lintels (Appleton, Boott, Lawrence, Wannalancit) no longer signs of progress, promises of work for all, families and immigrants and girls who abandoned themselves to the boardinghouse from the farm, each street sign telling forgotten tales (Pawtucket, Market, Moody, Dutton), stretches of cobblestone coming apart: each tattered thread a phantom on a fading map.
4.

A marketplace constellation, pattern of pinpricks stitched along riverbanks, clusters of redbrick mills revisioned as malls, condos, companies coming like comets, every revolution brighter than before, the flash and fizzle amounting to nothing but more of the same: darkness, vacant space and darkness, history tracing its path, the past spinning into place, edges frayed, every city consuming itself, collapsing under the weight—a galaxy given over to gravity’s pull, all of it gathered around an inevitable black hole.
Blackout

The lie is that we will ever know what to do. And the fools are just the ones who believe it. The lie is that Delaware even exists. Delaware is a myth.

And now we are running out of neon. Las Vegas you can believe in, pyramids, prostitutes, the streets littered and lit with ephemera, glittering, gilt. In Las Vegas it is never night. But Dover disappears at twilight.

They say everything that’s there in the dark is there in the light, everything except Delaware. It was never there. The ottoman, the untied shoe, the edge of the bed, they’re somewhere, waiting. The first state—like the first man, or the first planet, like the first mirage—is instructional. An origin story, left to point us to the new. Follow the myth of Delaware to Las Vegas.

The soft sweep of batteries across the sky remind you: you are never alone. But when the neon runs out, our signs will blink once and be gone.
We’ll go back to the old ways
of Delaware, catch
fireflies in glass jars and spell out
our names in wide letters to remind
ourselves everyone else is out
there in the dark too. It’s all we can do.
Six Tornadoes

One found us in the basement, parents, dogs, and I was struck for talking over the radio. One flipped a trailer like an animal cracker box down the road; all the bones inside were broken. One I crouched in the stairwell to the cellar, waiting it out on a step because the landlord had locked the door that led down. One killed a fireman’s daughters. One I spent beneath a theatre; Hollywood booms above were nothing. One came behind me as I drove away, pregnant, the country station too high to hear the sirens, high enough for the baby to flip along. Later, we heard it destroyed our favorite restaurant. Later, we saw the tree umbrella on the roof. Now he’s afraid and it’s my fault. I carried him to Ohio—wind-swept, plain. Wind wanted him back. Wind hinge-flipped a limb over the driveway. Wind serrated the leaves like flat stamps. Wind bade us to run and we ran.
Kate Sweeney

An Education in Steel, Cleveland 1969

She wipes away the soot from stacks of paper, the seats of chairs. She slips the gray chalk through the pore-less paper towel, bringing it again into the world of oxidation and bleach, the sum of all colors, and sets it back down in the ashen tray, marveling at how the smut finds its way in, even with the windows closed, and the streets a riptide of snow all else struggles through.

If the classroom next to hers was left unlocked—as this happens when the hands and mind are too full for keys or anything else that bullies or fucks its way into a glimmer of vacancy—she repeats the ritual, twisting the ancient faucet until it whines and gutters like Isaac beneath the knife of God’s most infamous indecision.

This is the cobalt hour: the moment to wonder who will arrive today missing a lunch or socks or teeth, or whose mother left for a walk in The Flats and used a bullet to clear her head. The hour where the peepshow curtain of the east begins to rise and the buildings in the distance, like a line-up of headless mannequins, drop their cheap, sequined gowns.

The students arrive and shed their jackets as if slipping out of the memory of the cold morning’s walk, the cold breakfast, the silhouettes of their fathers heading toward the bruised knuckle of dawn, out to where cranes arch overhead like disapproving gods and ships angle their rusty grins into dry docks. How well these children know the march of resilience,
which by mid-morning melts into puddles beneath their feet. For now, the brass hooks of index fingers in the coatroom are all that beckon them.
Wally Swist

Black-Eyed Susan

for Susan Gage Tyler

Butter-yellow inflorescence, ballerina’s skirt ruffled in the wind, common sweetheart

of wildflowers, who eschews the solitary for a throng of other Susans; the brown,

dark-purplish center one of summer’s most obvious, most subtle of baubles.

Double Gold, Indian Summer, Marmalade, your various shades reveal your inimitable humor. Juice from your roots heals earaches; an Ojibwa poultice for snakebite.

Leaning wildly windward, rising in a stand, resting together in the sun,

the summer’s lushness no longer lush without your strong-stemmed, unconstrained bounty—

solstice celebrant, resplendent Susan among so many Susans.
Maria Terrone

A Bronx Story

Paralyzed under blankets of steel,  
I was pinned to a mattress slab, gray miasma  
seeping into my noontime dreams—  
the-Bronx-is-burning-to-ashes  
light. City-bankrupt-shot-to-hell, always-waning  
light. My blank, unemployed mind  
slowly woke to awareness, its daily de-enlightenment:  
Still out of work. Out of work. Still.

While New York imploded, I baked baguettes,  
punched down dough until my fists ached,  
watched it rise on a radiator that clanged  
victory like a Wall Street bell in better times,  
dough doubling and tripling like a wise investment.

Refusing to read a newspaper,  
I chopped potatoes for vichysoise;  
keeping down opaque shades, I spooned lightest  
crème anglaise into the craters of éclairs I’d beaten  
into being with a wooden spoon, pretending  
to remember Paris.
Moored on the glittering fabric of the waves
the boats endure each omnipresent fold
that caves on itself to become the waves
I'm watching now, improvisational waves,
meticulous ripples endlessly unwound,
it seems, from the spool of themselves. These waves
awash in their opulent world of waves
luff the hulls and bound sails stayed by knots
against the wind, though it's mild, and not
one of the gales that sometimes hurls the waves
onto the wharf that I will call my home
for now, as though I had no other home.

The wind and light that make this seascape home
magnetize distance. They also move in waves,
they also travel from some farther home
(if one can call the roiling infinite home),
not outer-ward but deeper in the folds,
the inner amplitudes of bodies—home
apportioned into Timbuktus of home.
Gazing at the bay one could feel enwound
with such similitudes, but for the wound,
an emptiness in the idea of home.
It's the thinking of it makes the knot
inside the mind, the gut, the mind the knot
unraveling—You are what this is not,
though this is all you'll know to be your home.
If swimming through space I saw the blue knot
of the planet floating in what it's not
I might feel like I'd been furled in waves,
myself unfurling from the fixed knot
of what I know myself to be, this knot
of particular matter. In the folds
of myself—emergent, aqueous folds—
I tack toward the offing of what I’m not
where everything that is unwinds to be wound
into new signatures that, too, will be unwound.

Knowing this seals the gravity of the wound
one feels—a black hole’s all-imploding knot
would be the outward figure of this wound
if somehow the scales could be wound and wound
into a gold intricacy of home
that, by naming it, could cicatrize the wound.
Scale down. Follow to where the strings are wound,
no, wind what is, was, what will be in waves,
the melisma in which the worlds are wound.
Let light’s leitmotif in-wind you in its folds.
There is only this extravagance as it unfolds.

Along the shore the sand grains wash in folds.
Micron by micron they rose, will be wound
down by forces that keep all in their fold.
I feel like Thel on the brink beyond her fold—
How is it all things are what they are not?
And clod and spirit run back to the fold
of Blake’s imagined world. The beach unfolds
in broken symmetries—an expanse of home—
shattered shells, shattered stones. Away from home
families tour the wharf; invisible folds
from Wood End ruffle the air in waves.
A young girl kneels along the lulling waves.

Why do we come at dusk to worship waves
when night makes plain its penchant to enfold?
I’d know the name in which all things are wound.
I wish I knew this vastness I am not,
its everlasting flow. Light is always home.
Elizabeth Klise von Zerneck

Rainforests of Illinois

My children have studied them for years: built dioramas with pocket-mirror pools and bright green tissue-paper vegetation, divided diagrams into under-story, canopy, and forest floor, written term papers on global warming and deforestation. In all my years of schooling, the subject never once came up. Only just now, in the produce aisle of the supermarket, has the concept of rainforest ever occurred to me unprompted, when my face suddenly received the cool misty spray intended for the green hills of endive and the purple mountains of cabbage. A reminder I suppose, that this day too is a forest, an unknown place where every minute vanishes, where every hour dies off and becomes as extinct as the greater short-tailed bat, the golden toad, and Dieffenbach’s rail. So much is going here, and so much is already gone. Even now, this wet and unnamed species of morning has begun to slip away as I slowly make my way toward checkout.
The Flexibility of Definition
That Comes with Travel

Maine :: Maine. A place up to be down and then east
where my old man said the industries are tourism,
marijuana and welfare—I lived in Maine
for only months, reclaimed the birthright each summer,
waving the state flag: red splash of lobster
on a plastic bib. Maine never meets the sea,
for its shore is Boston, a mile wide and state-long.
The Appalachians end there, and deposit lives thusly.
In Connecticut, such a thing as countryside does not exist
and there are two types of people: New Yorkers and the men
who drive pick-up trucks to do things for them.
Connecticut mutters its underbite blur of gas stations hidden
behind tree baffles and windscreens until Hartford,
where we wave at the sobriety that invented insurance.
Oh risk, how lovely that we manage you, and chortle
on account of the irony as we pass and pass and pass
in cars barely able to handle you. Connecticut
is a fiction, a billboard you never forget.
Maine is a cottage, run-down, owned by someone
in Massachusetts who inherited from a relative
who fished and never lived there. Maine’s only
non-transients deliver firewood and make pancakes.
It’s like the joke everyone knows: West Virginia
with snow and seafood. I live now
in Pennsylvania, a state named for trees
and a religious zealot, and there is drilling at night,
lights jangling behind farmhouse and factory.
The state mood is brown when winter melts into brown
akimbo-armed and skating the turnpike’s frozen potholes.
Reticence is thirteen months long in Pennsylvania.
Where are the damned deer is a holiday cheer.
In May humidity slides over the mountains
like the reek of asphalt everywhere, and the new snow
is limestone dust, shaken over their earth.
There’s always something underground here,
among your friends in Pennsylvania,
where we dig until we find fire. How we want back
the heat of our forges, our foundries, our fathers.
How we want our place. We will not sell it.
We will let it be neither Maine nor Connecticut,
even at the cost of making it West Virginia.
In 2005, Sarah Jones and R. Mackswell Sherman moved from Olympia, Washington, to New York City. The couple launched their own clothing line in 2004, and in Sherman’s words, they “blew up in Seattle in less than a year.” For any ambitious fashion designer, New York City is the ultimate place to be, and since Jones and Sherman had gotten an invitation they couldn’t turn down, they headed east. They relocated their business to a huge shared workspace on the Brooklyn waterfront, in a neighborhood called Red Hook. They’d soon be charmed by the 9,000 square foot space, located in a restored Civil War-era maritime shipping warehouse. Every day they’d look out onto cobblestone streets, glorious sunsets, tugboats and barges shuttling back and forth, and a clear view—the city’s best, in fact—of the Statue of Liberty.

If anyone in the 1980s or ’90s had told a Red Hook resident that two twenty-something white hipsters from the Pacific Northwest with greasy cropped mullets and oversized glasses would voluntarily relocate to the Beard Street Stores at the end of Van Brunt Street a decade or two later, they would have laughed in disbelief. Residents only knew the warehouses by the water, remnants of Red Hook’s heyday as a maritime industrial center, as abandoned properties where trash carried by the wind piled up along barbed wire-topped fences.

Red Hook in the ’90s was named the worst neighborhood in the country by Life magazine. The “crack capital of America,” as Life called it, was home to rampant crime and unemployment and one of Brooklyn’s largest housing projects, the Red Hook Houses. Despite its location, most residents were landlocked, since only employees of the few remaining industries could access the waterfront. Red Hook’s poverty-stricken people of color residents were surrounded by shuttered storefronts and crime. They couldn’t imagine their neighborhood would soon become desirable.

But this is not the typical story of New York City gentrification. This is different because Red Hook never went the way of hipster Williamsburg, of the Lower East Side, the Meatpacking District, or Chelsea (the list goes on). Jones and Sherman came in during a wave of
revitalization that was never fully realized; Red Hook feels somewhat like an unfinished project.

The peninsula that bulges out from the northwest side of Brooklyn was a bustling nineteenth-century port, and New York’s harbors rivaled other cities like Boston and Baltimore, some of the country’s most populous cities at the time. From here, cargo was shipped to the rest of the East Coast and the world.

Red Hook is always several degrees colder and much more windy and blustery than other parts of Brooklyn because the neighborhood is surrounded by water on three sides: the Gowanus Bay to the south (which encloses the calmer waters of the North Atlantic Ocean), the Buttermilk Channel to the west (which runs between Brooklyn and Governor’s Island), and the Gowanus Canal (now a polluted Superfund site) to the east.

A wealthy investor, William Beard, built the Van Brunt, Red Hook, and Beard Street Stores in the mid-1860s, a string of identical five-story brick warehouses with huge iron-shuttered doors like hundreds of eyes. On a man-made harbor where there used to be nothing but marshes and swamps, men hoisted bales of tobacco, sugar, cotton, hemp, cocoa beans, and coffee into storage spaces stretched out along the shores of the Erie Basin.

One illustration from this time shows a dozen or so smokestacks rising into the air from factories along the waterfront. This bustling activity lasted through the 1920s, when Brooklyn remained a major shipping port. In 1922, a massive silo was built so that grain coming through the Erie Canal could be stored for later use, often brewed into beer and distilled into other goods at New York City factories. The Red Hook Houses, the largest Projects in the borough to this day, were built in 1938 under the Works Progress Administration for the exploding ranks of dockworkers. During World War II, Red Hook’s ship repair facility was the busiest in the New York port, and Robert Moses, the notorious urban planner, had a huge pool built for residents and their families.

A number of factors led to the demise of Red Hook, eventually leaving structures to disintegrate into the water or be paved over, leaving longshoremen jobless and desperate.

In 1946, Moses led the construction of the Gowanus Expressway, which literally severed Red Hook from the rest of Brooklyn. Only a limited number of roads were left to get in and out of the neighborhood because streets now dead-ended into the highway. The isolation was
exacerbated by the lack of subway service to the area, a reality that persists today.

In the 1960s, with the growth of container shipping, much of the transportation of goods moved to the waterfront areas of New Jersey where there was more open space and cheaper rent. New York’s ports could no longer compete.

Unemployment in Red Hook rose to 30% and violence skyrocketed dramatically. Large swaths of Red Hook’s former industrial land lay unused. It began to feel like a ghost town and developed a stigma to match. While formerly blighted brownstone communities like Carroll Gardens and Park Slope slowly repopulated in the decades to come, few dared to give Red Hook a chance.

From the 1950s on, immigrants started moving in, and with the new influx of people of color, Red Hook became segregated by race and class. Black and Latino populations concentrated in the public housing projects, and the remaining white homeowners, dockworkers, and limited number of business owners lived closer to the waterfront, “the Back” as it was called.

A few maritime businesses remained: a ship repair facility with a dwindling number of clients, the Domino Sugar refinery, and one small shipping port, the Red Hook Container Terminal.

The crack epidemic hit Red Hook hard. According to current and former residents of Red Hook Houses in a 2006 article in the New York Times by Jennifer Bleyer, in the late 1980s and early ’90s, “…nightly, shootouts forced people in apartments to jump to the floor to dodge stray gunfire…vials of crack were sold out of an ice cream truck and neighborhood candy stores peddled drug paraphernalia.” Tenants of the Houses had no job prospects and their kids had nowhere to play. While black residents had been getting killed for years in unsolved murders, public attention only turned to Red Hook’s condition in 1992 when a white elementary school principal, Patrick Daly, was shot and killed in the Red Hook Houses while looking for one of his truant students.

It was only after the neighborhood hit bottom that a white, middle-class developer named Gregory O’Connell invested in Red Hook’s real estate—unlikely, since the area doesn’t have ornate brownstones but, rather, modest homes with vinyl siding. But he was betting on the commercial spaces and the potential draw of the waterfront.

A retired beat cop originally from a working-class family in Queens, O’Connell developed a philosophy about the way cities should and could work. He came to believe that in the heart of any good community, there
should be a reasonable mix of affordable housing, middle- and upper-class residences, and workspaces for industry and manufacturing. (He’s been called a “socialist developer” and a “closet liberal,” partly because he, unlike most of his colleagues, drives a silver pickup truck and wears boots and denim overalls, no suits.)

After retiring from the police force, he decided to get into real estate and wanted to buy in a community where he could really make a mark, turn things around, and help preserve blue-collar employment for the poorest sectors. In 1992, New York City’s Port Authority finally decided to sell the crumbling and neglected Beard Street warehouse at the end of Van Brunt Street. O’Connell bought the 330,000 square foot space for $500,000 and rehabilitated it into offices, warehouses, and spaces for manufacturing, having to clean out fifty-year-old garbage and debris. He worked with the Community Board to make sure the areas would not be zoned residential but commercial, because despite the prospects for earnings, he never wanted fancy high-rise condos on the Red Hook waterfront.

O’Connell kept those Civil War structures basically intact on the exterior, leaving five-story brick walls with the occasional star-shaped metal stud and rows of wide iron-arched doors on each floor. Many times he’d get a call about the listings from a potential renter; the other end of the line would go silent when he’d say where the property was located.

It took a while, but eventually artists in search of affordable rent bought in and settled into long-abandoned areas, much like in other parts of New York City. He sold spaces to people by telling them of the city’s only full-frontal view of Miss Liberty, of the waterfront seagulls, and hoping they wouldn’t mind the lack of train access or the high crime.

One person who became charmed by these contradictions was Robert Kalin, the young red-haired founder of Etsy, a multi-million dollar e-commerce company whose website allows individuals to sell handmade crafts and art. Kalin, who started Etsy at twenty-five with two friends, was the CEO of the famously successful company when he bought a house in Red Hook, his favorite Brooklyn neighborhood. In 2009, Kalin started a non-profit called Parachutes to encourage artisans and crafters to leave their day jobs and make art their full-time gig. Kalin dreamed of creating an incubator for artists to work together closely in order to make a living from selling their crafts.

It was O’Connell who provided heavily discounted space in the Beard Street Stores to make all this happen. What twenty-something green-eyed Kalin and sixty-something gray-haired O’Connell had in
common was not the Internet (O’Connell still doesn’t use email), but a shared vision of job creation. Kalin wanted affordable studio space and O’Connell wanted renewed energy in Red Hook.

Kalin began inviting his favorite Etsy sellers to relocate, and Jones and Sherman were part of the first class. Their clothing line, Ruffeo Hearts Little Snotty, or RHLS for short, is an indecisive hipster’s dream: small spandex triangles of every color sewn onto hoodies, body suits, and underwear. (A topless Sherman was recently featured in a magazine spread wearing one of his own designs: bright blue bike shorts with rays of lime green, pink, purple and orange shooting out of his crotch like a sunset.)

The Parachuters shared advice, machines, and supplies in a space way larger than anything they could have ever imagined inhabiting, thanks to O’Connell, their unlikely landlord. And they were initially charmed by the historic nineteenth-century structure they inhabited and with the views of a former industrial life they saw from its windows.

Indeed, at the waterfront end of any block, there was always something so untouched that they were inspired to believe that they were the first to see it since it fell to disuse: wooden piles poking out of the water like a bed of nails, rusted boat anchors, huge bolts, a steel beam with a shuttered business’s name in cracking paint, or the mangled remains of what appeared to be an old fence. It felt like their businesses were restoring the waterfront to its original use.

Desira Pesta, a clothing designer and Parachutes member, recalls seeing two cars stopped in the middle of the road, the drivers talking through their windows and catching up. No one honked at them. That’s when she knew Red Hook was a special place. She wanted it to stay this way, this slower pace of life in the middle of bustling New York City.

Other young newcomers followed and started living alongside the few remaining old-time longshoremen and having rooftop parties with million-dollar views. A small strip of Van Brunt Street west of the housing projects began gentrifying, and a few cutesy shops opened up, including a cupcake bakery, a coffee shop, a specialty whisky store, and an antique store.

In 2006, the New York Times ran an article about Red Hook with the headline “An Unlikely Paradise, Right Around the Corner” and Time Out New York declared “Red Hook Has Arrived.” Rents shot up because of anticipated popularity. Pesta recalled thinking that it was going to be “crazy when all these businesses come in and all these houses get bought up.” Capitalizing on this renewed interest, T.H.U.G. Angelz (Those
Humbled Under God), rappers affiliated with the Wu-Tang Clan, released *Welcome to Red Hook Houses*, a 2008 album paying homage to the housing projects’ significance in the development of hip-hop.

Some residents and newcomers worried that it would develop too quickly and conspicuously and lose the feel of a small town. It could go the way of other New York neighborhoods, all big-box and chain stores, crowds of tourists, nowhere to park, no green space, no infrastructure to support an overdeveloped neighborhood. But, in Pesta’s words, “It never really happened,” at least not in that way. Despite the projections, some of the Van Brunt businesses began shuttering (The Hook, La Bouillabaisse, Le’Nells). No brand new high-rise buildings were built anywhere in the neighborhood.

When I walked down the hallway of the Parachutes space in 2010, it felt like a cabinet of curiosities, with some amazing craft of one kind or another being made behind wide windows or wooden stalls. There were cutouts of clothing patterns hanging on a wire rack, messenger bags made out of recycled boat sails, and at least fifty rolls of neon vinyl that the group salvaged from a nearby abandoned belt factory.

What I didn’t immediately notice is that the old brick structures have zilch for insulation. Pesta said that the roof leaked constantly, that there were nights straight out of a Marx Brothers episode when all their supplies were soaked and they were running around with buckets. When it wasn’t raining, it was freezing inside and they had to work in hats, coats, and gloves. “A comedy of errors,” Pesta called it. (Gregory O’Connell Jr., who took over his father’s business, told me in an email: “With these buildings, maintenance is an ongoing process…I believe we’ve succeeded in creating usable space without compromising the building’s historic value.”)

In fact, the space was unbearable in the summer as well, forcing the Parachuters to work while practically naked. Pesta continued feeling unsafe walking to the bus late at night after work, worrying she’d end up in a crime scene. The space was broken into a number of times. One member couldn’t take it anymore and ditched despite the subsidized rent and other perks. Most tolerated it because there was no way they could get such a cheap and large space anywhere else in the city.

But after four years, Sherman and Jones decided that the real problem was *location, location, location*. By the time they—and many of the people they shared the workspace with—eventually moved their business out of Red Hook, they were disenchanted with the neighborhood. Red Hook was totally desolate, they said, it took an
hour to get to anywhere because of the limited transit options, and they could never get potential clients to come out when they told them their workspace was in Red Hook (wait, wasn’t this the story ten years ago?). Pesta noted that the road behind the Beard Street Stores, right up the Gowanus Canal, kept slowly falling into the water. “All they had to do was put in some really basic structures and no one has done a thing. It’s really sad, a beautiful old building and no one is taking care of it.”

RHLS relocated to Greenpoint, a more solidly gentrified North Brooklyn Polish neighborhood, and was more successful in the first month at the Greenpoint space than in the entirety of the time in Red Hook. Publicity stunts, as Sherman calls them, are necessary to be visible and survive in the crowded market of New York City. No one ever paid attention to what they were doing in Red Hook.

And so Parachutes’ first test run ended with only a few of the original participants continuing their business in New York City. The rest went home.

O’Connell Jr. tells me they are experiencing the highest vacancy rate of their Red Hook commercial spaces in recent memory. Is this a product of the recession or what a 2007 New York Magazine article, “The Embers of Gentrification” by Adam Sternbergh, called “the gentrification of Red Hook”?

One local real estate agent, Tina Fallon, rejects this “dead Hook” idea. Fallon says the “reverse gentrification” articles were written by people who never truly understood the neighborhood. Locals aren’t disappointed that Red Hook isn’t becoming more like Williamsburg—they knew that would never happen because of the lack of subway access. They’ve always wanted to preserve a laid-back atmosphere, she says, a working waterfront with local jobs, a more piecemeal development with manufacturers instead of housing on the water’s edge, something that’s unique in North Brooklyn.

A realtor’s recent online posting for a vacant apartment in Red Hook read: “watch the boats go by in this quiet neighborhood that feels like a New England fishing village.” From the end of Van Brunt Street, you can see the Staten Island Ferry, the New York Water Taxi, and the Queen Mary 2 cruise ship. Wandering around Red Hook serves as a potent reminder that New York City is, in fact, a city of islands, especially since there are no tall buildings to shield from the wind that bites at any exposed skin.

But what about the promises of lifting the quality of life for the poor? A majority of Red Hook residents, according to recent census
data, live in the housing projects and in poverty, so that balance hasn’t shifted. There is now an IKEA and a Fairway grocery store in Red Hook, which either positively employ locals or offer dead-end low-wage jobs that take away from the character of the area, depending on who you ask. There is also this weird internal tourism: New Yorkers come for the afternoon to get away (“it’s like a day trip for those who can’t afford to go upstate,” says one employee of a fancy retailer on Van Brunt). It has “vacation town cachet” inside city limits, but it still feels adventurous because of the waterfront urban decay and empty lots with trash and overgrown vines. People seem to like it just the way it is.

A developer who has been trying to build a luxury condominium since 2005 accuses O’Connell of land-banking, of buying land and holding onto it until inflation means you can sell it for more than you initially paid. Is O’Connell purposely under-renovating his spaces and waiting for Red Hook to really take off, only to resell? His commitment to the community makes me think not. And anyway, there are no signs that it’s poised to take off.

The businesses that have weathered the recession and harsh winds have tremendous local pride even as they’ve seen neighboring stores go out of business. Every hip place that remains on the main drag of Van Brunt Street has some maritime-themed name: Hope and Anchor (a diner), Erie Basin (a furniture shop), and Dry Dock (an upscale liquor store in a neighborhood that used to only have bulletproof bodegas). There are graffiti stencils of red anchors all over random walls and newspaper boxes.

On the waterfront edge of Louis Valentino Jr. Park, shores constantly licked by gray-green waves, there are dozens of moss-covered concrete cubes left behind from some unknown use. Someone painted them in primary colors to look like children’s blocks that spell out R-E-D-H-O-O-K.

There is pride for what it is, not for what newspaper articles thought it was poised to become, and O’Connell and his family are fiercely loved and hated. To some, they are synonymous with the revitalization of the neighborhood; to others, the keepers of broken promises.

During one interview, a disenchanted Jones notices my wistfulness: “I guess isolated, dead, and quiet is the charm of Red Hook. Of course it’s a magical place and I’d be sad to see it change, but you can’t succeed with a business here.” Charm isn’t enough if you can get people to come but not to stay, if you can’t sustain businesses and create jobs and improve the lot for the projects. Is it a moot point how charming it feels if it’s not working?
Conestoga

Although you can’t see the Susquehanna River when you stand on the hilltop that was once the Indian community of Conestoga, you sense its presence. The air is moist, the sky capacious, as it is in painter Thomas Cole’s epic views of the Hudson River valley. Compared to Cole’s gothic northeast, the land at Conestoga is tame—undulating cornfields and meadows dotted with Holsteins—but it’s also desolate, even menacing, in ways that startle. The one time I came here, a red fox streaked across a field, abruptly stopped and looked in my direction, then vanished into the woods. Some years back, an intruder came onto the property and tied up its owners, Betty and Lester Witmer, and briefly kidnapped their grandchildren. They survived the ordeal, but afterward Betty fashioned a gate from old car bumpers and chained it shut across her dirt driveway, and she bought a gun. A few years later, when a teenager snuck onto her land and shot and gutted five doe, she threatened to kill him.

Maybe it’s always felt like this up here—cut off from its neighbors, a tad wild. The woman who lives at the end of Betty’s driveway shakes her head when I ask if she knows the owner of the land where the Conestoga Indians once lived. No, she says, she knows nothing about her. Others in the neighborhood roll their eyes. Oh, her, they seem to say. Betty Witmer is a recluse, a local conundrum. For a while she was the town dogcatcher; some claim she used to collect road kill, too, and toss it unburied into a ravine on her property.

It’s hard to reach the Witmer farm, as I suppose it was hard to reach Conestoga back in the seventeenth- and early-eighteenth centuries, when provincial authorities turned the land into a de facto reservation for members of the Susquehannock and other northeastern tribes who’d been displaced by European immigrants. In 1700, William Penn himself made the bumpy seventy-mile trek from Philadelphia to meet with the Indians who resided here. A year later, the Conestogas, as they were collectively known, pledged their loyalty to Penn and his colonists and promised to live together with them “in true Friendship and Amity as one People.”
At the time, the village of Conestoga was the western frontier of British North America, the place where, had they been of another mindset, my European forebears might have stopped and said, enough. Here the genteel drawing rooms and churches of the colonies gave way to bark houses and unkempt fields, blankets and moccasins, tattooed skin. The Conestogas ate dog and bear meat and stored their tobacco in squirrel pouches. Their cabins reeked of smoke and curing deer hides. To the mostly British and German farmers who settled this stretch of Penn’s woods in the early 1700s, even the sounds of the Indian outpost must have been disconcerting: soft guttural cries, jangling beads. And yet for some sixty years they all got along. The Conestogas peddled baskets and brooms to the Europeans in exchange for food. The Indians grew so fond of some of their immigrant neighbors they named their children after them. Rhoda Barber, a Quaker resident of nearby Columbia, remembered that her older brother and sister “us’d to be whole days with them.”

To think back on these matters is to wonder what might have been had Penn’s vision survived. During his first trip to the land granted him in 1681 by Charles II, Penn reportedly met with representatives of the Delaware outside Philadelphia. He is said to have arrived by barge, dressed in breeches and a waistcoat with a sky-blue silk sash tied around his middle. With him he carried a parchment treaty in which he vowed to treat the colony’s indigenous people neither as children nor as brethren but as human beings equal to European Christians. It was the first of his treaties with Native Americans, and the elm tree under which Penn and the Delaware signed the document quickly took on mythical status.

In his six-volume history of the European colonies in America, published in 1770, the French priest Abbé Raynal said of this encounter, “Here the mind rests with pleasure upon modern history, and feels some indemnification for that disgust, melancholy, and horror, which the whole of it, particularly that of the European settlements in America, inspires.” Contemplating the same event, Voltaire wrote, “This was the only treaty between these people and the Christians that was not ratified by an oath, and which was never broken.”

The spot where the Conestogas met with Penn has no fabled elm, and the stories associated with this tract of Pennsylvania haven’t inspired any philosophers, so far as I know. I’m told the bulk of Betty Witmer’s sixty-five-acre property used to be covered in chestnut trees, but it’s hard to picture that kind of profusion on a humid June afternoon in the early twenty-first century, with trucks yammering in the distance...
and row after row of six-inch corn plants stretching from my feet to the horizon. I wonder if Penn showed up in a blue silk sash when he came here, too, or if by then both his attire and his optimism had dulled.

And the Indians themselves—the Conestogas who, after Penn’s visit, so dwindled in number that by the mid-eighteenth century they were fewer than fifty—had they already begun to sink into the poverty that would define their last years? “As we have always lived in Peace and Quietness with our Brethren and Neighbours round us during the last and present Indian Wars,” they wrote to Penn’s grandson and heir, John, in 1763, “we hope now, as we are deprived from supporting our families by hunting, as we formerly did, you will consider our distressed situation, and grant our women and children some cloathing [sic] to cover them this winter.” It was early December, and bitterly cold, and the Conestogas had less than a month to live.

Fifteen miles east of Betty Witmer’s farm, in the domesticated suburbs of Lancaster County where I grew up, the Little Conestoga Creek winds through the back yard of the property I called home for two decades and onto the golf course where my dad played on weekends. The creek is shallow and maybe five feet wide, and it snakes through fairways and greens toward the larger Conestoga River, which I crossed every time I walked to the country club to go swimming or play tennis. I knew nothing about how the larger Conestoga feeds into the Susquehanna, which then empties into the Chesapeake Bay, mapped in the early 1600s by Captain John Smith of Pocahontas fame. I knew nothing about the significance of the word “Conestoga,” except that it had lent itself to my high school, Conestoga Valley, and a century before that to the original huge red, white, and blue wagons that helped occupy the American West.

In second grade, we were asked to imagine what the first inhabitants of Lancaster County looked like, and I produced “My Indian Book,” an illustrated collection of one-sentence stories about Native Americans who pray for rain, sing songs, build birch-bark canoes, and await the end of “hungry time.” For its frontispiece, I crayoned a young girl with an oval face and long black braids who looked like my best friend, the daughter of Jewish shopkeepers. On the booklet’s orange cover, I drew what I took to be Indian symbols: a cloud fringed with lines of rain, a geometrical tree.

Shapes like these, it turns out, are etched in giant schist rocks in the middle of the Susquehanna River at the southern end of Lancaster County. Carved as much as a thousand years ago by ancestors of the
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Conestogas, they describe a universe a child might recognize. On one boulder, a makeshift solar system unspools in a series of concentric disks. On another, a writhing snake points to the spot where the first rays of the sun strike stone during the winter solstice. A few hundred yards away, on Big Indian Rock, hoofprints scatter. Altogether more than five hundred such images score the surface of seven rocks in the river’s shallow waters—thunderbirds, bear paws, circles, dots, an antlered deer, a human foot, shapes as crude as the arrowheads I hunted in vain when I was a kid, trawling the construction sites in our neighborhood for evidence of a past I longed to possess. A friend of mine had filled at least five cigar boxes with pieces of Indian flint and clay pipe, and I envied her skill. She’d found so many arrowheads I could sift them through my fingers. I used to scrutinize her collection for signs of blood—a child’s attraction to the grotesque, perhaps, but also, I’d like to think, an instinctive sense that I lived on ghosted land.

On the golf course behind our house, the Little Conestoga flowed past a small spring tucked under a brick arch. For years I plotted ways of turning this erstwhile cave into a private hideaway where I could live, like Thoreau, in a wilderness close to home. My plan was to install a pine floor over the base of the spring and then construct a door and furnish the interior with a table and chair. Because I never got past the initial problem of laying a floor, I never reached the point where I actually had to figure out what to do inside my golf-course getaway, but I spent many afternoons inside its mossy gloom, imagining possibilities.

Had I known more about the aboriginal beginnings of this stretch of fairway, I might have chiseled the outlines of shad and deer on its walls and turned the space into a modern-day Lascaux. I might have tried living like the Conestogas, weaving baskets and brooms in my tiny outpost at the edge of civilization; roughing it. Of course I had no idea what that meant. Native American life as I’d pictured it in “My Indian Book” was a mostly romantic enterprise. You slept in a teepee and strapped your baby into a papoose. You wore beaded moccasins and soft leather skirts. You paddled a canoe along the creek that ran through the golf course outside your dwelling in what was once Penn’s sylvan land. It wasn’t until I was in my forties, midway on life’s journey and at last drawn to examine the dark and tangled woods of my native state, that I learned otherwise. By then I’d left Pennsylvanina and settled in southeastern Michigan, just up the interstate from the spot where Pontiac launched his rebellion against the British in the spring of 1763.
I’m not alone in my curiosity. A friend in Lancaster recently published a book about the Conestogas and about the ways their story has been used and misused over the years. In the contemporary town of Conestoga, the local historical society maintains a display about “The People Before We Were Here,” as the society’s curators have, on occasion, referred to the Native Americans who inhabited the area in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Some years ago, I met a woman named Lanie Buckwalter who was convinced she had Indian blood and who often went to the Susquehanna River, as if to church, to pray beside a particular rock. She was at work on a book about a Conestoga named Peggy who had perished, along with the rest of her people, during Pontiac’s war. Lanie told me the Creator was channeling Peggy’s story through her. “The Creator is telling me I need to buckle down and work.”

Lanie and I spent a rainy afternoon together driving around the southwestern corner of Lancaster County, fruitlessly trying to pinpoint the site of the four-hundred-acre reservation where, by 1763, fewer than two-dozen Conestogas remained. William Penn had been dead for decades, and the men, women, and children who lived in Conestoga Town, as their community was known, subsisted mostly on corn. It was not unusual to see them wandering the countryside in rags or begging for alms in downtown Lancaster. Years earlier they had petitioned the governor of Pennsylvania to let them relocate. “Many of our old people are dead, so that we are now left as it were orphans in a destitute condition, which inclines us to leave our old habitations,” they wrote. But nothing came of it.

The Seven Years’ War, which ended in February of 1763 with the Peace of Paris, had stoked violence across the American colonies and deepened fissures between Europeans and Natives. Spurred in part by a government offer of $130 bounty a head for Indian scalps, vigilante groups sprang up throughout Pennsylvania province. Forty miles northwest of Lancaster, near Harrisburg, members of a Presbyterian church in the frontier town of Paxton formed a posse of armed rangers under the leadership of a militant clergyman named John Elder.

Five hundred miles away, under the slate gray skies of the state I would come to call home, a young Ottawa named Pontiac expressed his disdain for the victorious British by laying siege to their fort in Detroit and prodding Natives across the Northeast to join him in driving the English “into the sea.” Warriors in Ohio and Pennsylvania attacked forts, cut communication lines, and terrorized colonists. By the
The bucolic farmland around Conestoga gives no hint of the fury this piece of earth aroused in that desperate year. “In the immediate neighborhood, they were commonly regarded as harmless vagabonds,” Francis Parkman would write of the Conestogas in his 1851 history of Pontiac’s war, “but elsewhere, a more unfavorable opinion was entertained, and they were looked upon as secretly abetting the enemy, acting as spies, giving shelter to scalping-parties, and even aiding them in their depredations.” Rumors spread that a young Conestoga named Will Sock had “murder in his heart.” Aware of their peril, the Indians stopped traveling long distances to sell their goods.

In September, nearly four-dozen white settlers were murdered in eastern Pennsylvania. Paxton’s John Elder implored Governor John Penn to remove the Conestogas from Lancaster and replace their log huts with a garrison. Penn replied that the residents of Conestoga Town were “innocent, helpless, and dependent upon the Governor for support,” and he could not remove them “without adequate cause.” In October, Elder’s rangers discovered the mutilated corpses of nine colonists along the upper Susquehanna, and Elder again called for Lancaster to be cleared of its indigenous people.

His rangers struck at dawn on Wednesday, December 14. Armed with hatchets, swords, and flintlocks, between fifty and sixty men rode through the night from Paxton to reach Conestoga Town by daybreak. Deep snow covered the Indian settlement, and more snow was falling. Only seven Conestogas were home that morning; the rest had left to peddle wares to farmers in the immediate neighborhood. Elder’s men broke into the Indian cabins and murdered the people they found inside, then plundered the threadbare village and burned what was left of it to the ground.

The ratio of killer to victim was nearly ten to one, and the butchery must have been extreme. Benjamin Franklin, who was miles away in Philadelphia at the time of the massacre but later decried it, claimed the Paxton “boys” scalped and “otherwise horribly mangled” their victims. The killers rode off in the snow with their bloody weapons. When local officials arrived on the scene, they found a smoking ruin strewn with charred corpses. One of the dead was an old man named Sheehays, who had so trusted the descendants of William Penn he once declared, “The English will wrap me in their Matchcoat and secure me from all Danger.” Also dead was his son, Ess-canesh.
As they winnowed the debris at Conestoga, officials reportedly found a bag containing two wampum belts and several documents, one of them William Penn’s original treaty with the Conestogas. Drafted and signed some sixty years earlier, it promised unending “Friendship and Amity as one People.” Like so much else, this document too would disappear.

Nine miles away, in the borough of Columbia, the children of Quaker sheriff Robert Barber, who had spent whole days playing with their Conestoga friends, learned of the killings and were heartstricken. Seventy years later, Barber’s adult children were still unable to talk about the event.

The surviving Conestogas—fourteen men, women, and children—were rounded up and taken to downtown Lancaster and locked inside the city’s workhouse for their protection. Two weeks later, on December 27, 1763, while local authorities were gathered in church in a belated celebration of Christ’s birth, Elder’s rangers broke into the workhouse and massacred the fourteen Indians. Among the dead were Will Sock and his wife, and with them two children no older than three, whose heads were split open and scalps peeled off.

On their way out of town, Elder’s men rode around the Lancaster courthouse on horseback, “hooping and hallowing” and firing their guns into the air. In fewer than fifteen minutes, they had slaughtered the last collective body of indigenous people to inhabit Lancaster County while the land was still a wilderness. Their crime would go unpunished.

Residents of Lancaster buried the corpses of the Conestogas in a Mennonite cemetery a few blocks from the workhouse. The Indians’ bones were later unearthed, reburied, and ultimately lost in the city’s efforts to construct a downtown railroad line in the nineteenth century.

Lost, too, is the precise spot where Elder’s rangers began their terror. Lanie and I had been told the site of Conestoga Town lay somewhere on Betty Witmer’s property, but the directions we’d been given were vague, and no one seemed willing to help us—word had it Betty guarded her land with a rifle—so after a few hours we stopped searching. Besides, it was pouring rain. The best we could do was pull off the road at the place, deep in the hills near modern-day Conestoga, where, in 1924, county officials erected a stone marker in memory of the murdered Indians. During the unveiling of the marker, an Ojibway chief and World War I veteran spoke of the injustices his people had suffered over the centuries. He noted that despite having served his country in battle, he, like other Native Americans, lacked the right to vote, and he pleaded for the restoration of this and other basic rights.
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He prayed to the universe that when the people of the “four corners of the earth should step off into the happy hunting ground,” they should do so “with faith in each other and in thee.”

“When I lived here as a child,” Lanie told me as we got back into the car, “I always figured the history was so far back you couldn’t touch it.”

What’s left of the Conestoga Indians consists of items found on Betty Witmer’s property in a 1972 archaeological dig: coins, bottles, tools, combs, slivers of mirror, gun parts, spectacles, and crosses, at least one with a figure of Christ. The objects sit in acid-free containers inside a climate-controlled vault in the basement of the State Museum of Pennsylvania—formerly the William Penn Memorial Museum—in downtown Harrisburg. Archaeologist Barry Kent, who oversaw the excavation, believes the items predate the year 1740 and demonstrate the extent to which, even then, the Conestogas had come to rely on their English and German neighbors for material goods. I asked him what it was like to work on the Witmer farm, and Barry laughed. “Betty was a nuisance. Her son would steal our dump truck at night and use it to do road repairs.”

I finally met her a year after my expedition with Lanie, when a member of the Conestoga Historical Society, a middle-aged man named Jim Hiestand, offered to take me out to her place. My Virgil was tall and lanky, with a craggy face and a red beard salted white. He’d known Betty for years. “She talks like a sailor,” he warned me before we set off from his house for the short drive to her farm. He shoved a plug of tobacco in his cheek and grinned.

Betty was waiting for us at the bottom of her driveway in a rusted red pickup. She was in her eighties, short, and so far as I could tell, toothless. I half-expected her truck to have a gun rack or a snarling dog, or at the very least a garbage bag or two, but the only thing Betty was hauling that afternoon was a tangle of wilted petunias someone had given her at the farmer’s market earlier in the day. She wore a white T-shirt and gray stretch pants, and she’d wound a pale blue terrycloth turban around her head. I noticed a patch of bright red skin on her cheek. She caught me staring. “I’ve always had a blemish on my face, and I’ve finally figured out how to get rid of it—corn remover,” she said. “Yeah, it eats up my face, but what the hell.”

She led us in her truck over a series of twisting, barely visible dirt and grass roads, past heaps of trash, up a hill toward a pair of fields just beginning to sprout corn. We parked and got out. “That’s where
the Indians lived,” Betty said, and waved her hand in the direction of the horizon.

I could see thick rows of trees, and beyond them more fields pleated with corn, but nothing to suggest any kind of habitation, ancient or otherwise. I tried to picture the Indian settlement as it might have been on the morning Elder’s men attacked, but I couldn’t conjure a thing. The sky was too pretty, the air too warm; I’d come for elegy, and the sun was shining. Betty gestured toward a line of trees on our left and told us the Conestogas had built a set of stone steps over there, in a ravine next to a stream. Jim said he’d like to see them, and we set off. Betty led the way, batting at weeds with a long stick and talking nonstop about her husband, Lester, who’d died two years earlier. She dabbed at her eyes with her T-shirt. “Yeah, I miss him,” she grumbled.

The steps, a dozen blocks of dark gray stone wedged together beside a narrow stream, were largely hidden by brush and debris. They lacked the semiotic intrigue of the petroglyphs that sat a dozen miles away in the Susquehanna, or even the arrowheads I’d coveted as a child, and I wasn’t convinced they dated back to the Conestogas, but Jim, who’d amassed a collection of Native artifacts over the years, seemed sure, and he stooped low to finger them. Who knew to what private haunt this small stairway once led? Downstream, someone had dumped an old washer and a pair of corroded engines into the water. Betty muttered something about a neighbor. I wondered if the person who’d done it was ignorant of the history of this place or knew about it and simply didn’t care. Up here it was safe to assume everything was sacred ground, and so, in a sense, nothing was.

Betty confessed she was tired and needed a nap, so we followed her back to her truck. Before she climbed in, she gave me a few cursory instructions about where and how to look for traces of the Conestogas. “Walk in one of those gutters over there. You’ll for sure find something.” She bent down over a patch of white dust on the ground. “Look there,” she said giddily. “That might be Indian bones.”

And then she was off, a grieving widow in a rusted pickup packed with dying petunias she planned to revive.

Left to ourselves, Jim and I moved up and down the rows of corn, hunting relics. At one point, Jim spotted a bead, then realized it was plastic and laughed out loud. The sky clouded over, and a few raindrops spattered the ground. A pair of bluebirds darted past. I could hear a jet overhead, but mostly the place was as quiet and still as anything I’d seen in Lancaster County. Jim looked across the fields and said
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he believed the spot where the Conestogas were killed lay within a hundred yards of where we stood.

“But we’ll never know for sure,” he went on. “The Indians moved around a lot.”

Earlier in the afternoon, I’d asked Betty what it was like to live here, whether she and her husband had known it was Indian land before they bought the property.

“No, but we didn’t mind,” she said.

Over the years they’d found their share of mementos. One summer, she and her kids discovered a brass pot, but when Betty called the curator at a museum in Lancaster to tell him about it, he didn’t seem interested. “Stupid son of a bitch.” Eventually the state museum in Harrisburg took it.

I don’t know what I was hoping to find that day. Something more, I suspect, than the half-inch piece of clay pipe stem Jim eventually pulled from the cornfield and gave to me, and which I’ve kept ever since in a dish beside my computer. Something more than the two slivers of pipe bowl I found myself that afternoon, proof that I could, in fact, unearth a piece of this story with my own hands. The two bits of pipe bowl look like fingernails. Just the other day, as I was working on this essay, I placed one on my tongue, and it stuck. I imagined swallowing it, as if that might yield what I was after. The rules say to leave Native artifacts in situ, but I like having them beside me at my desk. They remind me that the Conestogas were real and not the fairy-tale creatures I envisioned in “My Indian Book,” back when I was young enough to believe you could outfit a cave by the Little Conestoga and live out your days in the wilderness, free from the tug of home.

The indigenous people of eastern North America believed that a violent death was agonizing in the afterlife to those who had suffered such an end. Only ritual could restore peace. But what ceremony could possibly soothe the ghosts of a people we sought to eradicate? The murder of the Conestogas was merely an early act in a tragedy that would play out across America. One by one—Delaware, Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Shawnee, Cheyenne, Sioux, Chippewa, Navajo, Apache, Modoc, Nez Percé, Comanche—were pushed off their land, bribed, duped, starved, shot, raped, jailed, tortured, killed, mutilated. Eyewitness accounts of the genocide read like descriptions of the Paxton killings. Elder’s men ignited an inferno.

In all of this, the Conestogas surface and plunge like deep-sea divers. Kyunqueagoah, known as Captain John, and his wife, Betty,
or Koweenasee. Tenseedaagua and his wife, Kanianguas. Saquies-hat-tah, and his wife, Chee-na-wan. Little John, Quaachow. The little boys Shae-e-kah, Ex-undas, Tong-quas, and Hy-ye-naes. The girls Ko-qoa-e-un-quas, Karen-do-uah, and Canu-kie-sung. Destroyed in the bitter cold of winter in that terrible year, at Christmas, a time of darkness kindled by hope, their corpses buried and later lost, the very idea of them scattered into the clouds like the ashes of the village they once inhabited in William Penn’s endless woods.

Author’s Note:
I am grateful to Jack Brubaker for his assistance with this essay.

—Leslie Stainton
Contributors’ Notes

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Pam Baggett is a freelance writer and the author/photographer of the garden book ¡Tropicalismo! Her poems appear in the Atlanta Review.

Rebecca Baggett’s most recent collections are Thalassa (Finishing Line Press) and God Puts on the Body of a Deer, winner of Main Street Rag’s 2010 chapbook competition. Her work appears or is forthcoming in the Southern Review, Atlanta Review, Poetry East, and Southern Poetry Review. She lives in Athens, Georgia.

Samiya Bashir’s second book of poems, Gospel (RedBone Press), was a finalist for the Hurston/Wright Legacy Award and, along with her first collection, Where the Apple Falls (RedBone Press), the Lambda Literary Award. Her poetry has appeared in Poet Lore, Michigan Quarterly Review, CURA, and The Rumpus, and has been honored with the Aquarius Press Legacy Award. An Ann Arbor, Michigan native and recent NEA Writer-in-Residence at the Virginia Center for Creative Arts, she teaches creative writing at Reed College.

Mary Biddinger is the author of the poetry collections Prairie Fever (Steel Toe Books), Saint Monica (Black Lawrence Press), O Holy Insurgency (Black Lawrence Press, 2012), and A Sunny Place with Adequate Water (Black Lawrence Press; forthcoming 2014). Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in Barrelhouse, Bat City Review, Blackbird, Forklift, Ohio, Gulf Coast, Pleiades, Redivider, and Quarterly West. She teaches literature and poetry writing at The University of Akron, where she edits Barn Owl Review, the Akron Series in Poetry, and the Akron Series in Contemporary Poetics.
Contributors’ Notes

Russell Brakefield received his MFA from the University of Michigan, where he now works as a lecturer in the English Department. His work appears or is forthcoming in the Michigan Quarterly Review, Drunken Boat, and New York Quarterly. He is the managing editor for Canarium Books and contributes to an ongoing folk music collective called winter/sessions.

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Sarah McCraw Crow’s short stories have appeared in So to Speak, Good Housekeeping, Waccamaw, Literal Latté, and Stanford alumni magazine, and have been honored as finalists in Stanford’s 2007 fiction contest, Yemassee’s 2008 short-story contest, and Press 53’s 2010 open awards. She lives with her family on a farm in New Hampshire.
Jim Daniels’s recent books include Having a Little Talk with Capital P Poetry (Carnegie Mellon University Press), All of the Above (Adastra Press), and Trigger Man (short fiction; Michigan State University Press), all published in 2011. His next book, Birth Marks, will be published by BOA Editions in 2013.

Nehassaiu deGannes won the 2011 Center For Book Arts Letterpress Prize for her chapbook Undressing The River. Her poem “Boston Bridge Works, 1927” was published in an earlier chapbook, Percussion, Salt & Honey, which won the 2001 Philbrick Poetry Award for New England Poets and was published in a limited edition run by The Providence Athenaeum, the country’s fourth oldest library. She is the recipient of the 2010 inaugural Cave Canem Fellowship to the Vermont Studio Center and the 2008 Rhode Island State Council on the Arts Poetry Fellowship. Her website is www.nehassaiu.com.

Michael Dowdy is a professor at Hunter College of the City University of New York, where he teaches American poetry and Latina/o literature. He has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and has published a chapbook, The Coriolis Effect, a book of poetry criticism, and poems and scholarly articles on poetry in numerous journals and anthologies.

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Susan Elbe is the author of Eden in the Rearview Mirror (Word Press) and two chapbooks, Light Made from Nothing (Parallel Press) and Where Good Swimmers Drown, which won the Concrete Wolf Press Chapbook Prize and is forthcoming in Fall 2012. Her poems appear or
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**Susan Grimm**’s book of poems, *Lake Erie Blue*, was published by BkMk Press. She also edited *Ordering the Storm: How to Put Together a Book of Poems* which was published by Cleveland State University Poetry Center. In 2010, she won the inaugural *Copper Nickel* Poetry Prize, and in 2011, she won the Hayden Carruth Poetry Prize. Her chapbook *Roughed Up by the Sun’s Mothering Tongue* was published by Finishing Line Press.

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Contributors' Notes


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**Claire Keyes** is the author of two books of poetry, Rising and Falling (Riverstone Press) and The Question of Rapture (Mayapple Press). Her poems and reviews have appeared in the Newport Review, Oberon, Rattle, and Prairie Schooner. She is Professor Emerita at Salem State University in Massachusetts and teaches poetry courses in their lifelong learning program.


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Contributors’ Notes

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Contributors’ Notes

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Anya Silver’s first book of poetry, The Ninety-Third Name of God, was published by Louisiana State University Press. She has poems published or forthcoming in Image, Southern Poetry Review, Crazyhorse, and The Christian Century. She teaches English at Mercer University and lives in downtown Macon, Georgia with her husband and son.

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Maria Terrone is the author of A Secret Room in Fall, co-winner of the McGovern Prize from Ashland Poetry Press; The Bodies We Were Loaned; and a chapbook, American Gothic, Take 2. Her poems have appeared in the Hudson Review, Poetry, and Poetry International and in twenty anthologies. In 2012, she was one of ten authors commissioned by the Guggenheim Museum to write a narrative about living in the multiethnic neighborhood of Jackson Heights, Queens, New York, where her work was performed.

Daniel Tobin is the author of six books of poems, Where the World is Made, Double Life, The Narrows, Second Things, Belated Heavens, which won the Massachusetts Book Award in Poetry, and The Net, due out in 2014. Other awards include “Discovery”/The Nation Award, the Robert Penn Warren Award, the Robert Frost Fellowship, the Katherine Bakeless Nason Prize, and fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation.

Gabriel Welsch’s books include *The Death of Flying Things*, *Dirt and All Its Dense Labor*, and *An Eye Fluent in Gray*, a chapbook. *Four Horsepersons of a Disappointing Apocalypse*, another book of poems, is due from Steel Toe Books in 2013. He also writes fiction, with work appearing in the *Southern Review*, *CutBank*, *PANK*, and *The Collagist*. He lives in Huntingdon, Pennsylvania, with his family, and works as vice president of advancement and marketing at Juniata College.

Roger Yepsen is a freelance writer and illustrator, with books for W.W. Norton, Artisan, Pantheon, and others. His stories have appeared in the *Southern Review*, *Shenandoah*, *Massachusetts Review*, *Pleiades*, *Cimarron*, and *Sycamore Review*. Forty years ago he played bass in a band that found work in Pennsylvania’s anthracite region, a curious demographic backwater that he still enjoys visiting.
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Crab Orchard Review and Southern Illinois University Press are pleased to announce the 2012 Crab Orchard Series in Poetry Open Competition selections.

Our final judge, Cynthia Huntington, selected Glaciology by Jeffrey Skinner and The Laughter of Adam and Eve by Jason Sommer as the winners. Both winners are awarded a $2000 prize and will receive $1500 as an honorarium for a reading at Southern Illinois University Carbondale as part of the 2013 Devil’s Kitchen Fall Literary Festival. Both readings will follow the publication of the poets’ collections by Southern Illinois University Press in August 2013.

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 (including online submission information) and results, and past, current, and future issues. Visit us at:

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A Call for Submissions

Special Issue: Prairies, Plains, Mountains, Deserts

Crab Orchard Review is seeking work for our Summer/Fall 2013 issue focusing on writing exploring the people, places, history, and changes shaping the states in the U.S. that make up the “Big Middle” of prairies, plains, mountains, and deserts that shape the middle and non-Pacific Coast West of the Lower 48 (Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, South Dakota, North Dakota, Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, Idaho, and Nevada).

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 27 through November 2, 2012. 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
Prairies, Plains, Mountains, Deserts 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.siu.edu/guid2.html
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