Crab Orchard Review and its staff wish to thank these supporters for their generous contributions, aid, expertise, and encouragement:

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of Southern Illinois University Press

Heidi Estel, Patty Norris, Joyce Schemonia, and Kelly Spencer

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Judy Jordan, and the rest of the faculty in
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The editors and staff of *Crab Orchard Review* dedicate Volume 18, Number 1, and Volume 18, Number 2, to the memory of a poet, scholar, teacher, editor, and friend who enriched our lives and who made a tremendous contribution to American letters and the cause of social justice through his work:

*In Memoriam*

**Jake Adam York**

(August 10, 1972 – December 16, 2012)
# CRAB ORCHARD REVIEW

## Winter/Spring 2013

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A Note on Our Cover

The six photographs on the cover are by Jon Tribble. The photographs are of public art created by sculptor Alvin Meyer, an Illinois artist. The six sculptures were commissioned by the Board of Trustees of Southern Illinois University in 1950, and they were originally placed beside the door opening to the nursery, kindergarten, and younger grade classrooms in the former University School. The castings are now on display in Pulliam Hall at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

Announcements

We would like to congratulate two of our recent contributors, T.R. Hummer and Kat Meads. T.R. Hummer’s nonfiction piece “A Length of Hemp Rope” and Kat Meads’ nonfiction piece “Neighbor Trim, Also Awake,” which both appeared in Crab Orchard Review, Volume 16, Number 2 (Summer/Fall 2011), our special issue, “Old & New ~ Re-Visions of the American South,” were selected as Notable Essays of 2011 for The Best American Essays 2012, by series editor Robert Atwan.
We are pleased to announce the winners and finalists for the 2013 Richard Peterson Poetry Prize, Jack Dyer Fiction Prize, and John Guyon Literary Nonfiction Prize.

In poetry, the winning entry of three poems—“In Only, Tennessee,” “Infants of the Field,” and “Some Oz”—is by Rochelle Hurt of Chapel Hill, North Carolina. The finalists in poetry are three poems—“Choreomania,” “The Tree of Forgetting,” and “Widows of the Atacama Desert” by Bruce Bond of Denton, Texas; and three poems—“The Bosque Burns on the Feast of John the Baptist,” “Fetal Pig,” and “Honky”—by Anna Marie Craighead-Kintis of Wilmette, Illinois. In fiction, the winning entry is “Ten Thousand Dollars” by Dale Gregory Anderson of Minneapolis, Minnesota. Finalists in fiction are “Fisher of Men” by Margarite Landry of Southborough, Massachusetts; and “An Act of Concealment” by Anne Leigh Parrish of Seattle, Washington. In literary nonfiction, the winning entry is “Compound, Fracture” by Natalie Vestin of Saint Paul, Minnesota. Finalists in literary nonfiction are “Without Sanctuary” by Yona Harvey of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; and “Women Who Know” by Daisy Hernández of Hialeah, Florida.

The final judge for the poetry competition was Allison Joseph, Crab Orchard Review’s editor and poetry editor, and the final judge for the fiction and literary nonfiction competitions was Carolyn Alessio, Crab Orchard Review’s prose editor. All three winners received $2000 and their works are published in this issue. Several of the finalists also chose to have their works published in this issue. Congratulations to the winners and finalists, and thanks to all the entrants for their interest in Crab Orchard Review.

Crab Orchard Review’s website has information on subscriptions, calls for submissions and guidelines, contest information and results, and past, current, and future issues:

CrabOrchardReview.siu.edu
The Winners of the 2013 Richard Peterson Poetry Prize, Jack Dyer Fiction Prize, and John Guyon Literary Nonfiction Prize

2013 Richard Peterson Poetry Prize Winner

Three Poems by Rochelle Hurt
(Chapel Hill, North Carolina)

2013 Jack Dyer Fiction Prize Winner

“Ten Thousand Dollars” by Dale Gregory Anderson
(Minneapolis, Minnesota)

2013 John Guyon Literary Nonfiction Prize Winner

“Compound, Fracture” by Natalie Vestin
(Saint Paul, Minnesota)
The 2012 COR Student Writing Awards in Poetry, Fiction, and Literary Nonfiction

The COR Student Writing Awards in Fiction, Nonfiction, and Poetry honor the exceptional creative work of undergraduate and graduate students who are enrolled at least part-time in a U.S. college or university. Each winner receives $500.00 and publication in *Crab Orchard Review*.

The 2012 Allison Joseph Poetry Award winner is “[I do not want to say anything about that April]” by Jennifer Luebbers, Indiana University (Bloomington, Indiana). We would also like to congratulate the finalists for the 2012 award: “Homegrown” by Ruth Awad, Southern Illinois University (Carbondale, Illinois); “Jerusalem” by Sunu P. Chandy, Queens College - CUNY (Queens, New York City, New York); and “And As the Shiver from My Neck Down to My Spine Ignited Me” by Bradley Harrison, Michener Center for Writers at the University of Texas (Austin, Texas).

The 2012 Charles Johnson Fiction Award winner is “Costume” by Jamilee Gerzon, Roosevelt University (Chicago, Illinois). We would also like to congratulate the finalists for the 2012 award: “Lifesavers” by Jacob Andra, University of Utah (Salt Lake City, Utah); “Cull, ’27 Break” by Emily J. Stinson, Western Michigan University (Kalamazoo, Michigan); and “Arson Woman” by Thomas Courtney Vance, Michener Center for Writers at the University of Texas (Austin, Texas).

The 2012 Rafael Torch Literary Nonfiction Award winner is “Vertigo in Elmwood Park, NJ” by Jung Hae Chae, Southern Illinois University (Carbondale, Illinois). We would also like to congratulate the finalists for the 2012 award: “Imperfect Love” by Sarah Golin, Manhattanville College (Purchase, New York); “Sacred Objects of Memory” by Sherri H. Hoffman, Pacific University (Forest Grove, Oregon); “Fire Wood Warmth” by Sharon A. Murphy, Pacific University; (Forest Grove, Oregon); and “The Name of the Game” by Max Schleicher, Southern Illinois University (Carbondale, Illinois).

For more information about the COR Student Writing Awards and the past winners, and about Allison Joseph, Charles Johnson, and Rafael Torch, visit:

CORStudentWritingAwards.siu.edu
The 2012 COR Student Writing Award Winners

2012 Allison Joseph Award Winner

“[I do not want to say anything about that April]”
by Jennifer Luebbers
Indiana University
(Bloomington, Indiana)

2012 Charles Johnson Fiction Award Winner

“Costume”
by Jamilee Gerzon
Roosevelt University
(Chicago, Illinois)

2012 Rafael Torch Literary Nonfiction Award Winner

“Vertigo in Elmwood Park, NJ”
by Jung Hae Chae
Southern Illinois University
(Carbondale, Illinois)
Dale Gregory Anderson

Ten Thousand Dollars

Keith was zipping up when he saw the money. It was probably just junk mail—trash was scattered across the vacant lot—but he wanted to take a closer look. He got down on his knees, in his good pants, and strained forward until he had it. His chest tightened when he saw the pair of zeros. It was a hundred dollars. Good thing he hadn't pissed on it. The bill was stiff and dirty from having been trapped under the snow all winter, but it had the new design with Franklin’s head enlarged and off-center. He studied the man’s dour, fleshy face and wondered how a hundred-dollar bill had ended up here. Maybe it was fake. Or maybe it was the remains of a drug deal gone bad. He shoved the bill into his pocket and looked around. A sagging chain-link fence surrounded the lot. He was in Savage, Minnesota, a sleepy suburb on the outskirts of Minneapolis. There was nothing savage-like about this town. It was just low buildings and manufactured houses standing in a flat, treeless landscape dominated by power lines. The vacant lot was as wild as it got around here. Everything seemed drab beneath the dim, overcast sky. But for the first time in months the air felt warm on his skin. The snow had melted down to nothing. Every time he took a breath, the smell of thawing earth filled his head.

He was about to get back into his car when he saw the rest of it. Hundred-dollar bills were scattered through the undergrowth. It was like something from a weird dream. He started grabbing money by the handful, shoving it into his pockets.

His heart was pounding so hard that he could feel it in his neck. When his pockets were full, he hustled over to his car and tried to pop the trunk, but it was stuck. Something was wrong with the lock. The trick was to turn the key hard while pressing down on it. After a few tries, he managed to open the trunk, and he stashed the money inside. Then he went back for more.

A semi drove by. His car must’ve looked out of place, parked at an angle in the empty lot. It was an old Honda Civic that had been
red at one time, but was now a rusted piece of junk. His ex, Monica, used to tell him cars reflected their owners. In his case, she might have been right.

In the back corner of the lot, he found a blue vinyl cash bag. He was working up a sweat. When he saw that it was stuffed with more bills, his breath caught. Back at the trunk, he did a quick calculation. All together, there had to be about ten thousand dollars. That was half of what he’d made last year.

Something was happening. His luck had changed. He had served his time and was being released.

The money smelled like the inside of an old suitcase. The odor was coming from the vinyl bag. He emptied it into the trunk and tossed the bag into the ditch, poking it down into the weeds with a stick.

This all had to be a prank. One of his buddies had probably made the money on a color printer and was recording the whole thing for YouTube. Watch this idiot make a fool of himself. Rate it. Share it. Like it.

But nobody knew he was here. And he didn’t see a camera.

He got into his car. He would definitely have to report this. His phone was sitting on the dashboard. If he called the cops, they would think he had stolen the money. They would haul him to the station—in fucking Savage—and he would end up spending the afternoon answering questions. He was thirty-four years old. Single, never married. A history of crap jobs. It all looked suspicious. They would search their records. And then they would find out about him.

His tires left a spray of gravel as he peeled out of the lot. He needed to get the hell out of Savage. Gripping the wheel with both hands, he pressed the pedal to the floor. It was exhilarating. But it was stupid. He lifted his foot until the speedometer needle fell back to sixty. That was when he saw the lights in his rearview mirror. They were flashing, but there was no siren. So this was it. His luck had already run out. He pulled over and rolled down the window. His armpits were soaked. The cop sped past without stopping.

Keith pulled back onto the road and tried to blend into the light traffic. He was starting to calm down, though he had no idea what to do with the money. A new car would be nice—a new used car—but first he needed to figure out if it was real. He stopped at a gas station and filled his tank. Usually, he just put in ten bucks.

Inside the tiny station, a girl with a pierced face and raven-black hair sat behind the counter staring into her phone. The spike in her
eyebrow was infected. The place had an oily, mechanical smell. Keith pulled two Slim Jims from a canister and set them on the counter, along with a hundred-dollar bill.

“Anything else?” she said.

“Just the gas.” He nodded over his shoulder.

He expected her to check the bill with a counterfeit pen, but she just dropped it into the bottom of her drawer and gave him a wad of change. It must’ve been real. She probably handled large bills every day. With his damp palms and thick fingers, it was hard to fit the change into his wallet. A surveillance camera was mounted on the ceiling behind the register. They had him now.

The girl spoke without looking up from her phone. “You need to use the restroom or something?”

He wondered if she was someone’s sister. He wanted to tell her to take good care of herself, but it would sound creepy coming from a guy like him.

Back in his car, he headed for the highway. He might have had ten thousand dollars in the trunk, but he was on his way home to a cramped, filthy apartment, where he would spend another night by himself, drinking beer and playing video games. He decided to head south instead. He hadn’t visited his parents since Thanksgiving. They still lived in Mankato, in the house where he had grown up. It was a mystery why they had never moved. Most people would’ve moved. But his parents had stayed, despite what had happened there.

That was what he needed, a little road trip to celebrate his good fortune. And to think, an hour ago he had been sitting in an office, interviewing for a job for which he was spectacularly unqualified. They never should have called him in the first place. The hiring manager—a redhead who looked like she was still in high school—kept asking him absurd things. Describe a time when you were unable to achieve a goal. He fumbled his answers. The ceiling in the office was too low. Foam tiles and fluorescent light panels were arranged into a grid. He was a big man, and he imagined that if he stood up, his head would crash straight through the roof.

What’s the most difficult decision you’ve made in the past year?

He wouldn’t be getting the job, but that was fine with him. No serious company had their world headquarters in Savage, Minnesota. The only reason he had applied was that Monica had been pressuring him to find something better. They were no longer together, but she
still liked to tell him what to do. She worked for a small foundation that promoted early childhood education; he stocked shelves in a liquor store. She didn’t respect what he did. But he had learned one thing: Liquor store shelves always needed to be restocked. This was a product for which there was a never-ending demand. He had gotten the job when he first moved to Minneapolis. It was supposed to have been temporary. He had a degree in sociology, but five years later he was still there. Most people would have quit long ago. He wasn’t trapped. There were ways out of his situation—he just needed to take the first step.

Keith pulled into the driveway and turned off the engine. He’d been on the road for an hour and a half, but now that he was here he couldn’t bring himself to get out of the car. The house was just a brick rambler with a picture window and a chimney jutting through the roof, but it was home. White wrought iron railings framed two short steps that led to a front door inset with a diamond of heavy glass. The house number was as familiar as his name.

He tried to check his messages, but his phone had died. His parents had come to the window, two silhouettes standing in the blue flickering light of a TV. They lived on a quiet street; there had never been any need for drapes. They would stay in this house until they died.

Keith walked up the front steps and pressed the doorbell, but didn’t hear it ring. It was as if he were a stranger, as if he hadn’t lived here half his life.

His mom opened the door and shook her head. “Keith,” she said. “I hardly recognize you with short hair.” Monica had convinced him to cut it for the interview.

“You look good,” his mom said. She had lost an alarming amount of weight.

“Son.” His dad shook his hand. His palm was soft and smooth. He was thinner, too.

“I would’ve called,” Keith said, “but my phone died.”

“Where’s Monica?” His mom peered over his shoulder. Her blouse was rumpled, and there were marks from where she had dragged a comb through her limp, grey hair.

“We broke up,” Keith said. “After Thanksgiving.”

His mom blinked several times. Her eyes were the color of worn nickels. He stepped inside, and she closed the door. The smell of chili hotdish lingered in the air.
“What happened?” his mom said.
“She wanted out,” Keith said.
“Oh, I’m sure she’ll come around.”
He sighed. It was hard to see anything. “Don’t you guys ever turn on the lights?”
“We really like her,” his mom said as they went into the kitchen, where it was brighter. “She’s real good for you.”
“She deserves better,” he said.
“Not true, not true.” His mom was shaking her head. The loose skin around her chin jiggled in an unpleasant way.
His dad didn’t say anything.
“Anyway.” Keith ran his hand across his chin. He had shaved for his interview, but stubble was starting to come in.
“Did you eat?” His mom raised her eyebrows. She had to crane her neck to look at him.
“Didn’t have time.” He was standing with one foot in the kitchen and the other in the family room. The kitchen floor was vinyl; the family room was carpeted in beige berber. Matching recliners were angled in front of the TV, which had been turned off. A picture of Tina hung on the wall, a little freckled girl in pigtails, four years old, smiling into the camera. It hadn’t been there at Thanksgiving. His mom must have taken it down because she knew he was coming.
“How’s the car running?” his dad said.
“Fine.”
“I’ll warm up some leftovers.” His mom put a CorningWare dish into the microwave. The blue flower pattern reminded Keith of home. They all stood there, watching it rotate under the lethal rays.
He hardly remembered Tina. All that was left were a few random details—her obsession with horses, the milky smell of her breath, her fear of escalators. She was running through the kitchen in her pink polka dot swimsuit on a hot day. That was twenty years ago, the summer she drowned. Keith was fourteen. His dad had installed a pool that sat above ground in the backyard, bright blue PVC plastic, fifteen feet across. Keith was supposed to watch Tina that day. As soon as his parents left, he got stoned.
His mom pulled a plate from the cupboard and set a place for him at the table, next to a beanbag ashtray filled with cigarette butts.
“I found some money,” Keith said.
His mom wiped her hands on a towel. “You need money?”
Keith leaned back against the wall. The pile of mail on the counter
near the phone was covered with dust. There had always been a pile of mail in that spot, catalogues and bills.

“I found some money in a lot up in Savage.”

His parents stared at him.

“Haven’t counted it yet,” he said, “but it’s got to be at least ten thousand dollars.”

“It was just sitting there?” his mom said. “In broad daylight?” Her eyes darted back and forth. His dad’s face was blank.

Keith knew what they were thinking. “I didn’t steal it.”

His mom reached for her cigarettes.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “The cops aren’t looking for me.”

After Tina drowned, that had been his greatest fear—that the cops would throw him in jail. But he was never charged with anything. No one was. That didn’t seem right to Keith. His parents made him see a counselor, a young man with a wandering eye and a patchy mustache who tried to convince him that Tina’s death had been an accident. But Keith knew there was no such thing as an accident. It was always somebody’s fault. If he had been paying attention—if he hadn’t gotten stoned—Tina would be alive.

The microwave stopped and beeped three times. The food was ready.

“We better go have a look at this money,” his dad said. He rummaged through a drawer and found his flashlight, an enormous old thing that ran on a battery the size of a brick.

Outside, it was cooling down, though the air still held the fresh scent of spring. Keith’s rusted car sat low in the driveway. They went around to the trunk, but it was stuck again. His dad gave him a hand, and eventually they got it open. It was too dark to see anything until his dad switched on the flashlight. The money was scattered everywhere. His dad reached in and picked up one of the bills.

The rotten smell wafted from the trunk. “Good, old legal tender,” Keith said.

“Is it real?” his mom said.

“Did you report this?” His dad dropped the bill back into the trunk and wiped his hand on his leg.

“I told you, my phone died.”

“What about a pay phone?”

Keith laughed. “When was the last time you saw a pay phone, Dad?”

“You should’ve called the police.”

Keith stepped away from the car. “Maybe I should’ve sent a telegram.”

“All I’m saying is that this money belongs to someone.” His dad
rested his hand on the edge of the trunk. “If you lost ten thousand dollars, you would want it returned to you.”

Keith hadn’t thought of it that way. High above the house, something was moving across the sky—a plane, a spaceship.

“It’s not too late to call the police,” his dad said.

“Is that really necessary?” His mom was getting hoarse.

Keith ran his hand over his chin again. Driving down to Mankato had been a mistake. Grown children didn’t just drop in on their parents after eight o’clock on a Wednesday night. His parents had their own lives. They were retired and would be in bed by ten. He was interrupting their routine and causing all kinds of problems. Only a guy like him could turn ten thousand dollars into a disaster.

“He should’ve called the police as soon as he found the money,” his dad said again.

“With what? You heard him.”

They were talking like he was no longer here.

“It’s the right thing to do,” his dad said.

“We don’t even know where this money came from.”

“The police will be able to sort it all out.” His dad switched off the flashlight, plunging them into the dark.

“There’s no reason to involve the police,” his mom said. “What’s done is done.”

Keith’s dad turned to him. “What do you think?”

“It’s a lot of money.” Keith took a deep breath and peered into the house. Everything was there—the recliners, the dark kitchen cabinets, the oil painting of a lake that had hung in the family room for as long as he could remember.

He would sleep here tonight, in his old bedroom, the walls still covered with soft velvet blacklight posters. Here he was, back in Mankato where he’d started. There was no way out of this place. He would carry it with him for the rest of his life.

They went into the house. The microwave chirped.

“I can’t tell you what to do,” Keith’s dad said. “You’re old enough to make your own decisions.” With that, he opened the door to the basement and disappeared.

Keith glanced at the phone, a pea green rotary dial apparatus that hung on the wall. The coiled cord was tangled into a knot.

Tell me about a situation where you failed to solve a difficult problem.

In his interview that afternoon, he had sat there, his mind blank except for the one searing thought that he was wasting everybody’s
time. He needed to take a piss, but couldn’t bring himself to ask to use the restroom. It was better if he suffered. As he shifted in his chair, the hiring manager could see that something was wrong with him. She had understood this as soon as he had walked into the room. People were more perceptive than he wanted to admit.

What would you have done differently?

After Tina disappeared that day, he had searched everywhere for her. He got on his bike and raced around the neighborhood, screaming her name, demanding that she stop hiding. It was a bright, hot summer day. The sunlight burned his eyes. By the time he got back home, he was drenched with sweat. Only then did it occur to him where she was. He peered over the edge of the pool, not sure what he was seeing. She was floating facedown in the water in her pink polka dot swimsuit. Her body was limp. She was gone. The sound in his head was like fire roaring deep in the earth.

He called 911. Then he went out into the backyard and waited for the ambulance, though it was already too late. There wasn’t a thing anyone could do to save his sister.

Sometimes he wished he had been punished. At least that way, he would’ve paid his price. But he hadn’t, and that was wrong.

He picked up the phone and lifted it to his ear. The sound of the dial tone was startling. It had been years since he had used an old-fashioned phone. He lowered the switchhook, and everything went silent. His mom stood across the kitchen, smiling, her teeth long and yellow. The color had drained from her face.

“Time to eat.” She brought the hotdish to the table and filled his plate.

He hung up the phone and sat down. He hadn’t had anything to eat all day. His mom’s chili hotdish had always been his favorite—a tangy mixture of macaroni, ground beef, chopped onions, and cheese—but he saw now that it was overcooked and greasy.

“I’ll get you some milk.” His mom opened the refrigerator and reached in. For a moment, he could see right through her, but it was just a trick of the light.

He pushed the plate away and leaned down. His head was pounding. He rubbed his temples with his fingers.

His mom set a glass of milk on the table. “Honey, what’s wrong?”

Maybe he was coming down with something. “I don’t feel so good.”

She pressed the back of her hand against his forehead. “You’re warm,” she said, “but you always were.”
He closed his eyes. He didn’t want to get sick.
“You’re just upset about Monica,” she said.
He wasn’t even thinking about her.
“Give her a call,” his mom said. “I’m sure she’ll take you back.”
He drank his milk, finishing the glass without stopping. A surge
of cold spread through his brain, giving him a different kind of
headache. Monica had told him something once. She said it wasn’t
right that his parents had let him take the blame. At least he had tried
to save Tina. If anyone was at fault, it was his parents. They should’ve
covered the pool. They shouldn’t have left a teenager in charge of a
little girl.
Keith turned to his mom. “Why do you always take her picture
down when I visit?”
She took a cigarette from a pack that was almost empty and lit it. She
didn’t say anything for a full minute. “You haven’t touched your food.”
“I can’t even remember her,” he said.
“It all happened such a long time ago,” she said.
“It doesn’t feel that way.”
She sat down. “You need to live your own life.”
He didn’t see how she expected him to do that. Even if it wasn’t his
fault, his parents still blamed him for what had happened. And yet, he
was all they had left.
“Maybe Dad’s right,” Keith said. “I should just call the police and
report the money.” The more he thought about it, the more it made
sense. The money was all there, except for what he had used to buy gas.
He could pay that back and make everything whole.
“Your father is a smart man,” she said, “but he doesn’t know
everything.”
Keith thought about all of that cash sitting in the trunk of his car.
A dark feeling came over him. Of course he could use the money, but
nothing good would come of it.
He pushed his chair back and got up.
“Where are you going?” His mom tapped her cigarette above the
beanbag ashtray. “You need to eat.”
“I should call the police.”
“Wait,” she said. “Let’s not make any rash decisions.”
“I don’t want the money.”
“Think about what it could do for you.” She raised her chin until she
was looking straight into his eyes. “Opportunities like this don’t come
around often.”
His resolve was draining away. She had a gift for throwing everything into doubt.

“Life presents us with opportunities,” she said. “We just have to learn how to take advantage of them.” She exhaled two streams of smoke through her nostrils. “Your father was never very good at recognizing opportunities,” she said. “I’m not complaining. I’m just stating a fact.”

Keith knew that anything he bought with the money would be tainted. If he put it in the bank, it would sit there, festering, until it ate a hole in his stomach.

“Maybe we should just burn it,” he said.

She emitted a humorless laugh. “No one in their right mind burns money,” she said. “Life is hard enough. You don’t have to go around deliberately trying to make it harder.”

Keith had a better idea. “I’ll just throw it away. Bundle it up and toss it into a dumpster.”

“Millions of people live on less than a dollar a day,” she said. “Do you really think it would be right to throw all that money away?”

“Well, what do you want me to do?” The pain in Keith’s head had spread down into his back.

She sat there, turning things over in her mind.

“Why don’t you take it,” he said.

She shook her head. “You should keep it. Put it somewhere safe until you come to your senses.”

“I told you, I don’t want it,” he said. “If it’s still in my trunk when I leave tomorrow, I swear I’ll throw it away.” He looked at her. “Unless you want it.”

“I couldn’t take it,” she said. “It belongs to you.”

“I’ll give it to you,” he said. “No strings attached.”

She pressed the butt of her cigarette into the ashtray. “It would be foolish to throw it away.”

“Where do you want me to put it?”

“I guess I could keep it for you,” she said. “For the time being.”

“No.” He stepped back. “It’s yours. Spend it any way you like.”

He lowered his voice. “Dad doesn’t have to know about it. This is just between you and me.”

“Would you really throw away ten thousand dollars?”

“Yes.” He didn’t hesitate. He wasn’t going to let doubt creep back into the situation.

“I thought we raised you right,” she said.

“Do you want it or not?”
His mom glanced at the door to the basement. “Your father’s old rucksack is in the front hall closet,” she said. “He hasn’t used it in years. I suppose we could stash it in there for now.”

Keith didn’t waste any time. He hurried to the closet and found the rucksack, a heavy-grade green canvas bag with sturdy bronze buckles. When he returned to the kitchen, his mom was standing near the door to the basement. In all the years he had lived in this house, he had never seen her in that spot.

“I’m going to do it right now,” he said.

“I’ll go downstairs and distract your father,” she said. “We can’t let him find out about this.” She opened the door and disappeared.

Keith dug around in his pocket for his keys. He didn’t have to do this. He could still change his mind and keep the money—drive away and never come back. The butt of his mom’s cigarette smoldered in the ashtray. He knew what he had to do. He grabbed the flashlight and headed outside, wondering if he was making the right decision. There was no way to tell. All that mattered was that it was almost over.
What is this flaps its wings across
    the windscreen? What is this stirs
out of the fuchsia by the verge?
We were driving to Sligo to visit
    Yeats’s grave. No, we were driving
to Shannon to see the cousins
on their grave of an estate. When
    it came, it seemed to choke away
the light—sable angel, feathers
like mackerel scales, wings
    like a cape. When it came,
my slack-jawed father hit the brakes
as the glass shattered the shape
    of a spider’s web—dewed, let’s say,
and glimmering as the sun peeks
out of cloud after a shower.
    The Chrysler pulled out of the stream
of cars, he fished the stunned bird
from the ditch and wrung its neck.
    He did this in one slick movement
from the door opening to the snap
of vertebrae. Now that I think of it, we
    must have been going the other way.
We could not have brought that corpse
to my aunt’s two-up, two-down,
    shag rugs on the bathroom floor
and the landing. Now that I think
of it, I try to keep the words straight
    between the lines, peering ahead,
using my wing mirror to look
behind. Splayed out in the trunk,
    we carried the bird home. Plucked
and stuffed, my mother rubbed it
with butter from a neighbor’s churn,
    a sprig of thyme. I serve it to you
on a bed of Cyprus Champions,
the bone that stuck in her throat
    now caught in mine.
Connemara Donkeys

Migrant workers, they toiled all through summer
bearing baskets of blackness cut out of the earth, footed to dry,
their turned up hooves clacking off sandstone paths
in days of sunburn and warm tea from coke bottles.
Winter would see them hobbled in the fields,
or grazing the grass verge of the main road they wandered,
cut loose, cut off, bones sticking through their damp,
teddy bear fur. Each one had a mouthful of yellow
and black teeth, a way of chewing that sounded
like chewing gum. Each one had a cross across its back,
a starling settled to the clothesline of its spine.
My mother, too, was making crosses around that time,
offerings to the gods of explosives she shaped
from masking tape and fixed over each window pane
while, down the lane, men sank sticks of gelignite
into the holes they’d drilled in stubborn stone.
Nothing was fixed those days, nothing was sure.
The hours slipped like a steel hook in the mouth
of the mullet our neighbor shot out of the estuary
and carried off strung through the gills and slung
over his back. In Scoil Mhuire, Marie Folan
pissed herself again and had to be driven home
scarlet in her shame. We’d been reciting the names
of U.S. states. Mississippi, Connecticut, Massachusetts,
which we imagined as a massive set of teeth,
as Alaska was ice cream baked in a blanket of meringue.
Tonight, driving through New Haven, all this seems clear
as the lights strung out between the other cars, or
the boy caught at the center of the lines I’ve been trying
to learn by heart, where the saw snarls and spits
out sticks before it leaps up hungry at his hand.
I want to know what it looks like to him when the soul
packs up its things and leaves, runaway teenager
who tiptoes down the backstairs, jester in the court
of the dethroned king, or a hobbled donkey biting
through the rope that chaffs against its shins
before it canters onto common land or into myth.
I want to know because sometimes I’m just eyes
hovering above the dash, a foot caught in the space
between accelerate and brake, and because sometimes I forget
even my name, speak in a voice that’s not my own,
or at least not the voice of the boy who tries his tongue
round South Dakota, Minnesota, Michigan,
chewing on each sweet mouthful of vowels.
Soon he’ll stand with the others in the playground
as the school photographer bends into his lens
and counts down towards the shot that will attempt
to explain this new geography we are
before the contours of the landscape change again,
before we take our coats down from their hooks
and step toward the space beyond the stile.
Three, two, one, and the shutters close and open,
so that we’re trapped in our faces and names
below the sycamores and a statue of the virgin,
between who we are and who we will become.
Three, two, one, like the little, less, nothing Frost
writes down, because even he can’t keep alive
the boy trapped at the center of his poem, who, already,
has cried out for his sister and his lost limb
while the day stands still and silent before him.
Why is it that I see his face as mine, the salt waters
of his blood pooling until, little, less, nothing,
he’s gone from those five mountain ranges
in Vermont? Why is it that, soon, in the fog
shrouding Highway 91, I’ll see a donkey step out
onto the macadam so that I brake and swerve
blind into the next lane, saying Ohio, Florida, Wyoming?
All through that year, black cars meandered
the back roads, their roof-racks stacked with loudspeakers
calling the voters out to put an X beside a name.
The rock worked loose like a carious tooth, all through
that year, bald tires rode the suddenly singed air,
so that, even now, somewhere glass shatters
and the view becomes more clear: this life goes by
on hooves, a swarm of flies about its bloodshot eyes.
Those were days a plague of flies swept the village and the quarantined slipped into obscurity or worse, when there was only so much a gravedigger could do to keep up with demand, to load and unload what he managed, before he parked his shovel at the door. Only so much we all could take before it came, the news of yet another epidemic, a contagion of mania, of joy, or the appropriated look of joy, mobs of dancers who, without warning, broke out in furious rituals that went on for days, that swept up ever more indigents and kids, more lookers on, and ended in collapse.

Death even, by exhaustion mostly, or by drowning, as when the bridge gave way over the River Meuse and those who danced above the water went down en masse.

Call it belief as disbelief, the power that comes from faith in the others, or in the individual the crowd sets free like the wingspan of a scream.

If some folks stooped to rude displays, copulations in the street, obscenities screamed at the great stained glass, blame what you will, it changes nothing.

Little is more infectious than cruel laughter when the time is cruel, the mother tongue infected. But that is not the whole story. The extremities
know what it is to feel the sluggish heart grow distant. They know it takes an exercise of will to want to will again, to raise the curtain, and sometimes you fake it to get things started, to move a little blood around. These gestures in the air are a kind of waving to one another, to the relish in a stranger’s face.

Your hands know they have no future in them, and still we read something there. A trick, and yet a sweet pretense to take up one another’s palms, searching for fates that get more hopeful as we go. The love line deepens, the life line grows. Longest in our dotage. The dance of death is one of those old movies full of folks who don’t exist, save in a theater’s dark age, the living dead recalled to the stage to do a bit of damage, break a lantern here and there, shock the elders, beat their goatskin drums. They do what madness compels a body to do, to feel the heart grow larger, more imperially afflicted, like eyes that see a lover’s nakedness for the first time. A team of horses will tell you if a storm is coming, heads high, nostrils flared. A mountain shadow falls across the village, and the makeshift pyres rise. From nameless corners of the woods, the stench sweeps one soul of blasphemy, another of contrition.

Or darkens to a cloud that blows the children home. You know the feeling. The heartbeat stamps in its stable, among the carts and blunted shovels, the grappling hooks.

It could go forever forgetting what it’s made of, the legs that would move it, as it in turn moves them, doing the long hard work of a necessary trade.
Bruce Bond

The mass graves are damp with life. A dervish of limbs. There is a better world, says the bell that batters the sky it hangs in. And then it shudders for a while.

And sometimes when the death cloth slips, when the flies ignite and lift a little higher, the heart stops to watch, to listen. And sometimes it gallops on and on.
Poem for Record Players

For their clever launching
of the needle’s secrets skyward,
for their relentless luring of
the needle to the hiccupping
end, for the red record player
by the low beveled window
with hollyhocks outside and
Rusty in Orchestraville turning
and Markie drooling and reaching
his hand to stop the turning,
drawing it back, remembering.
For Markie with his scratched brain,
his flinging seizures, who would
bump the needle and jump from
the part of The Swan, by Sasson
to the talking oboe, Markie
dancing, the needle floating
hardtily along its new groove.

And for the gray living-room player,
for my father’s Tchaikovsky
and Beethoven, my mother’s
Oklahoma! and South Pacific. For
my silly nostalgia, even then,
the sweet hopeless longing,
the absence necessary to turn
the world, for the needle of
disharmony that presses against it:
Oh, no such bright golden haze
on the meadow, no such corn
high as an elephant’s eye.
My father is singing and my mother
Fleda Brown

is singing in her fragile harmony,
the one phonograph speaker
pouring directly into the palpitating
rooms of our hearts.
After a Winter Bereft

Snow starts at last, breathy ignorance again, not exactly piety, more a deft release from what seemed to be holding things down. An ease, trees and cars done up in absence. I thought it would never come, that we would have leaves and daylilies, their dark remains, nothing fully erased. Imagine what piles up in the mind where there’s no snow—those picky questions about God when the truth’s never able to demonstrate how lightly to take things, and how—oh I know but forget—how it can grow unquestionably heavy after the oohs and aahs, after the shovel, the plow, the sadly broken limbs.
The Glassed World

Wood tearing interrupted
the night, branches ripping
through branches, the splitting
of a trunk, its loud split-

second halving,
the rough, splintered
dividing of its strong
body. Then, the echoing:

ice falling on ice;
glass sheets slipping
off the needles, wind-
loosened from the branches—

a tempest of shattering,
an orchestra of crashing.
In the morning, the blinding:
the dazzling white arches

of the birches, the sharp,
sun-white blades
of their broken switches; slick,
glaring casements windowing

red berries; thorns and torn
stalks stuck in their vestments.
Then the melting, the inevitable
unsheathing—the slow
drop-letting of what the trees 
carried, what their bent 
branches bore, the streaming of it 
down the knotted bark of their dark

trunks, across the thawing moss, 
the still-green grass, into ponds 
and gutter-pools, rock-lined 
streams, into the small river

of the ice-glistening street. 
Later, the dampness hardened. 
Night stopped the singing, stopped 
the moving water in the very shape

of its flowing. Now, the white face 
of the moon is rising, glaring 
at the wind-riddled trees. Ice-laced, 
illuminated, they stare back, rattling.
Even then, I knew it was the wrong word.
Not like the tapeworm, ribbed and pitifully
woven in a jar, unlike the suspended arachnid
pinned by its joints or the skinned mice, ours
lay sloshing in a bag. We slid our infant
onto the jellyhroll pan because love
is an incessant thing despite its innocuous bird call.
We arranged its legs and tucked its snout to look as if
he was sleeping. By diagram, we peeled back skin,
cut open the chest, plucked stray hairs from our
young one’s nearly hairless face.

Oh tender, oh unwanted belly—some part of me
remembers you. The toe, the parceled organs, the solitary
sponge we never saw beat.
There is a reason it is called longhand.
Writing takes time to winnow out
the artifice in blue-black script.
You write each other page after page,
month upon month, year after year;
your cursive cross-stitching the Atlantic,
soaring over slate rooftops
through the open windows
of each other’s lives, entwining
yourselves as Chagall’s lovers.

You learn patience in narrow beds,
the ache of missing someone
you’ve never met. Standing near
the water’s edge, you watch fireworks
burst and fade, a snowfall of hot stars
dissolving on separate oceans.

And then, nothing more
can be said with ink and paper.

As he approaches your shore—brace yourself.
There is no turning back
from this desire, a quickening
like rivulets of water gliding

off the blades of a swimmer’s shoulders
when he steps from the sea.
The church was built of fieldstone on a narrow corner of clipped grass and frost-worn sidewalks. Its true height and depth were difficult to apprehend because of the two perpendicular-running streets with their cars and taxi cabs and buses, the nearness of other buildings, and the small portion of land that held the church, giving one a feeling of vertigo on looking skyward or a false idea of one-dimensionality when standing before it. The grounds had great beauty because of the two yellowwood trees that grew on either side of the walkway from which one approached the church. Their trunks were knotted and gnarled. They bloomed in June with flowers that were like hanging white bouquets. The trees were almost the height of the church, and so, even from the common across the street, one saw only the dense branches and leaves. Above the trees was a rectangular steeple, also made of fieldstone, crowned with a gold weathervane in the likeness of a bantam cock with a feathered tail.

Patricia knew these things, paid attention to them. How the grass grew poorly under the yellowwood trees. How, on a Sunday, passing under the trees, crossing the loosely fitted slate walk and a brief set of steps and opening the massive wooden doors one found oneself in a vestibule and one could see, beyond it, the sanctuary and its pews and the altar and the stained-glass windows. There someone gave Patricia a bulletin and it was mostly someone she didn’t know. Another walkway was on the near side of the church, longer, more recently tended and repaired, and it led to another door where, on stepping through it, one was in a small hallway with a bench, as if for waiting or resting, and beyond it was another door to the sanctuary, nearer to the altar, and to the right of the hallway were the church offices. Patricia knew all these things and she often saw the church in her mind, its heavy proportions occupying the land. She carried the church with her, a beautiful thing made of stone and wood and glass.

The sidewalk was patched with ice. Patricia walked carefully toward the intersecting streets, carrying the evening’s reading in her
gloved hand. In the early dark the church seemed to be slumbering. The great windows were as if turned away, the figures in them without form. All the lights were off, even the spotlight that lit the face of the church. Only the window in the minister’s office was lit. Other days, other evenings there were services and meetings of committees and coffee hour after church and lunch in the meeting hall, served the second Sunday of each month, and Saturday breakfast for men and Bible readings and people making sandwiches in the kitchen after services to give to homeless men and women on the common. Then there were the organizations that used the church to give concerts of chamber music in the sanctuary and hold Al-Anon and AA meetings in the upstairs, paneled rooms, the oak there darkened with age and neglect. Patricia sometimes used to see the men and women from those meetings standing on the side walkway in the early evening, smoking cigarettes, trying to think or not think their way from pain, crushing the tooth-marked, stained filters under their heels and lighting another, until the stewards, having been approached by aggrieved church members, told them they couldn’t smoke there anymore.

Patricia didn’t know all that the church did, all that occurred in its many rooms, some lushly furnished with drapes and wing chairs, some bare except for a stack of folding chairs. She was a peripheral person in the church. She had once walked the half-mile there almost every Sunday and heard the choir and the minister and looked at the stained-glass windows, struck by the sun, and at the fans in the high ceiling, the blades turning in the summer heat. When she stopped attending church with any predictability people had understood something about her and stopped calling to ask her to sit on a committee or to bring cookies for the coffee hour. When she did attend services she sat in a pew in the back of the sanctuary and took the hands of a few people during the greeting of peace and held the hymnal and lifted her voice upward, seeking to join the others in song. But Tom, their new minister, had called to invite her to a group that was to meet each week during Lent, and so she had put on her boots to walk to the church to join them.

The minister’s office was arrived at after opening a door to the suite of offices, the outer two rooms for a few staff and for storage and copying. Tom’s office was small and crowded with furniture and books; Patricia wondered on entering it whether he had inherited all the paraphernalia of the other two ministers—Tom being the third to have led the congregation since Patricia had started going there—and perhaps the paraphernalia of all the ministers before them. There were voices in his office and the smell
of wool coats hung in the overheated room. An old radiator clicked and hissed in a corner. There were only two places to sit, at a chair pulled up, facing Tom’s desk, or around a low glass-topped wooden table that was shaped like a wheel, with the carved figures of people and small flags like prayer flags all moving outward as if on spokes. Patricia took off her coat and gloves and sat in a chair in a circle with the others. She shook the hand of the woman next to her, who had offered it to her. There were eight people in the room, including Patricia. They were all talking in low voices among themselves. The group had missed the first meeting because of the weather and Patricia had missed the following week, having had the flu or some distress she couldn’t name; and so they were already into the middle of March, Easter coming that year on the second Sunday of April. Patricia, to prepare, had spent a number of evenings reading chapters from the book they had been assigned.

People stopped talking when Tom arrived and sat with them. He was dressed informally in trousers and a V-neck sweater, and under it an open-collared shirt. He was a man in his mid-thirties, with a large frame, and so he filled up spaces like chairs and altars and small rooms. He said, in his trained, pleasant voice, “Hello and welcome. Welcome to the third week of the Lenten season.” They greeted him with respectful silence. He said, “Patricia is new to our group tonight. Patricia, would you like to introduce yourself?”

Patricia looked down, then across the wooden table, and addressed the group. She said, “Hello, I’m Patricia Waring.” Waring was her married name. She used it more and more easily now. She paused and thought about how she would introduce herself to the people in the room, whom she didn’t know, who looked at her with mild expectancy. Her life seemed suddenly complicated and unclear, like a trail looping back on itself. She wished she had a story, a simple, clear story: this is what I bring to you. She said, “I’ve been coming to church for a number of years. Though not with any regularity. As I had so hoped. I’m glad to be here with you and I look forward to sharing this Lenten season.” The group looked away from her and turned to Tom. He asked them to introduce themselves to Patricia and she began to hear their names, and she nodded and repeated, “Bill,” and “Ethel,” and “Fiona,” to each. Everyone seemed to be about the same age, within a range; she thought Tom must have planned that, he must have had some idea about how he wanted the group to be composed.

There were a few small white stones clustered on the glass tabletop and a small metal bar and a hammer with a triangle-shaped head beside it. A
honey-colored candle had already been lit. The burning wick illuminated the rim of the candle and the flame flickered within it. Patricia imagined that Tom had lit the candle the first evening; the wick seemed to have burned that far. Tom struck the hammer to the bar and asked for a moment of silence and prayer. Patricia closed her eyes and bowed her head. The one, high note of the bar seemed to linger in the air. She heard breathing and the shuffling of boots on the worn wooden floor, and she saw where the office door was, in her mind, and the door leading to the hallway, and the door leading outside, and she breathed once deeply and told herself where she was, in a room with people of the church.

They continued to bow their heads. Tom had led them not into prayer but a prolonged silence. Patricia wondered what she was to do. She was to pray. But how to arrive at a prayer. Hers were usually so brief. For help, or guidance, or gladness. She did not know what to do with the silence. It seemed as if a cloth, a loosely woven cloth, covered her eyes. She began to think about the weather and the walk home in a deeper darkness, and she remembered how the minister, the one who had died, had walked her home after a meeting. He had asked her to join a committee and afterward, after the meeting was done, he walked her home. The season cool, early spring; the smell of hyacinths. The setting of the sun had brought a mild, intermittent wind, and at the street corners there was a sharpness to it, as if it carried with it the end of the harshness of winter.

He walked her home through the spring darkness and talked about the oak tree across the street that was over two hundred years old, its bark that turned the color of metal in the dying light, and how old and drafty the parsonage was, and how he wrote his sermons by hand at a small hard desk in a cramped room that overlooked the flowering chestnut tree, should it ever bloom again, while he wore a heavy sweater and blew into his hands. She knew from a plaque on a wall in the church the year he had started his ministry; he had been there almost twenty years. She had come to the church out of loneliness, the kind of loneliness one can only have in New England, and there was her minister walking beside her in the spring night. She listened to his voice in the darkness, with only the faint contained light from a streetlight on each corner, and she thought she could walk with him into the night and the next. She went home and tried to understand how she was to think of that walk, with her minister speaking to her as they slowly pursued the evening under the trees.

Tom struck the metal bar again and the people in the room opened
their eyes and raised their heads. He said, to Patricia, “As you know, we’re reading week by week as we move through the Lenten season. We should now be reading from the third week of Lent, but if there’s anything else you want to look at from the earlier chapters, we can do so. We will continue to prayerfully contemplate Jesus’ forty days and nights in the wilderness as we continue our journey.”

People crossed their legs. They opened their books. Patricia said, “If I may say. I just wondered about Lent. How it came to be something we participate in at this time, in the days leading to Good Friday and Easter.” She had placed her book on the glass-topped table. “In that,” she said, “first Jesus was baptized by his cousin John, then he went into the wilderness, then he returned and called his disciples and preached and healed the sick. Then he was crucified. He was in the wilderness for forty days and forty nights, after his baptism, it seems to me as a way to prepare for his ministry, not later, not to prepare for his death. After his baptism, see here, our book quotes Mark, ‘The spirit driveth him into the wilderness.’” Patricia looked at Tom. He had shut his book and held it on his knee. She wondered if she sounded to him like one of the impertinent Pharisees, trying to trip up Jesus. “Because,” she continued, “he came to Jerusalem quite deliberately, from Jericho and Bethany and the Mount of Olives, and then he was betrayed. Before that, he went from a city, like Capernaum, say, or the coasts of Judea or the shore of the Sea of Galilee, he withdrew to the desert or a mountain to be alone and pray, but people followed him, the multitudes followed him, and brought him back to them.”

Patricia was aware of the people in the room, that their attention was elsewhere; they probably were eager to speak, to discuss the book they held in their hands. Lent was a figment, she knew, it was a Catholic invention that some Protestant churches, at least her church, had decided to imitate. Perhaps the Catholics could get away with it, because at one time their congregants were forbidden or unable to read the Bible; it was left to the priests to interpret it for them. But anyone who read the Gospels could see that Christ was baptized, he went into the wilderness, he preached and healed the sick, he celebrated Passover with his disciples in Jerusalem, he was betrayed and tried and crucified. Anyone who could read could see that. After his baptism Jesus relinquished the world and went into the wilderness alone. He prayed and fasted. He had been sent to learn, Patricia thought, to be who he already was. She remembered the Catholic girls in her high school, their foreheads marked with the thumb of the priest,
discussing what they had decided to give up—chocolates or sneaking cigarettes or chewing gum in class. They skipped breakfast as a way of fasting and by mid-morning were sullen and petulant and often on the verge of tears. She did not know what people did now, even the people of her own church, what prayer was like, or penance, and if fasting brought on the hardships that Jesus knew, and then the revelation. She had been excluded by her own ignorance, her own disbelief.

Tom returned his book to the table with deliberation. He picked up one of the stones, moved it an inch along the surface of the glass, then moved it back again. He looked at Patricia sternly, as if she were some reckless woman who had arrived invited to the table but now had placed herself outside the circle of believers.

Patricia adjusted her shoulders. She was trying to find a posture from which to speak. She did not look at Tom. “It seems the struggle Jesus had,” she said, “was with something more, something we don’t know about. He always seemed to know that he would be betrayed, that he would be abandoned by his disciples, that he would die. So perhaps in a way he was already preparing himself for his death. Maybe he was sent to the wilderness to learn how to be the beloved Son of God.”

Patricia wondered if her church had celebrated Lent under the minister who died. She attended church irregularly, even then. She wondered if she would have questioned it, if she would have questioned the minister who died. But she believed everything then; she believed the minister who died as he gave readings from the Bible and spoke with formality and love to the people listening in the pews and led them in communion and lifted his robed arms and blessed them at the end of the service. But now she needed to know why the church would celebrate Lent whose premise was an event that had not occurred in the weeks before Jesus’ crucifixion. It had something to do with the minister’s death, she knew. Nothing had been right since then.

Around the glass-topped table, a few people had pressed their fingertips against their foreheads. Tom, it seemed, had simply been waiting for her to finish. She looked at him now, her mouth slightly open.

He said, “We have entered a time of prayer and introspection with the advent of Lent. It is a time to make room for God.” He was not speaking to her. Nevertheless, he seemed to be rebuking her, as if she had transgressed the agreed-upon, shared belief about the story of Jesus in the wilderness. To prepare for their meetings, she had read the Gospels again, to know again how the people who witnessed Jesus preach and
heal the sick and cast out unclean spirits and perform miracles were amazed and astonished, they marveled, they were full of wonder, they trembled and were afraid. Shepherds saw angels and Jesus’ disciples saw him walk on water and the multitudes saw him touch a person and make him whole. People were hungry and were fed. Lazarus rose from the dead. The priests were offended. Jesus wanted his followers to be silent about what they had witnessed, but they rejoiced and spread his fame. The people who had lived beyond the reach of hope or comfort wore robes and rags and wept in Jesus’ presence.

“As we begin,” Tom said, “I want to remind you that this is a place of safety, where we are free to speak our hearts.” The old radiator banged. The room was hot and close. Patricia’s mouth was dry. She gripped the underside of her chair with her fingers.

“I read here,” the woman next to Patricia said, opening her book, “in the reading for Tuesday, about desire, and passion, and the promise of ecstasy, and I thought about my husband. He’s been gone now for three years, and it’s just occurring to me that we had a relationship of great distance, though he was always kind. We raised three children together. But now, thinking about him, I remember his courtesy and his carefulness, as if we were playing out an idea of marriage as a kind of obedience to God. Though something was always between us. A veil was always between us.”

Patricia looked at the woman beside her, at her lowered eyes. She seemed to be looking at the space in front of the burning candle. Patricia thought that this was what was being sought by her, in Tom’s office, some way to acknowledge absence, or an understanding of disappointment, and to share it. But no one made a reply to the woman who had spoken about her husband.

Tom struck the hammer softly to the bar and it returned a low, muffled note. They all bowed their heads. The radiator released a burst of steam. Patricia closed her eyes and held her fingers lightly to the underside of her chair. The minister who died had walked into a meeting after church. It was being held in a room with drapes and good chairs. He wore a light wool suit. She didn’t know who he was. His skin was clear, almost radiant. After he died someone said to her that his radiant skin was a sign that he was a man of God. But she didn’t know him then. No one acknowledged him and he sat quietly and listened to the progress of the meeting. A man with a bony face and rough-knuckled hands was proposing a protest against the limits imposed on their committee to give money to causes, to worthy causes; he wanted to march on the church in
The way protestors did against the Vietnam War. Patricia was new to the church, she didn’t understand its history and its loyalties and its factions, but she said, “I can’t protest against a church I have just come to.” The man who had made the proposal looked like an old warrior, familiar to protest, but Patricia didn’t want to be part of an estrangement. The man in the light wool suit stayed a few more minutes and left. Afterward, an hour or so later, he called her at home. So it was he. He was just ending his sabbatical, he said. He was spending the day in meetings. He said, “People in the church are too intimidated by that man to oppose him, but you had the courage to do so.” She said, “I’m perhaps too new to know any better.” Then he had to go away, to another meeting. She heard someone speak to him, respectfully, as if from across a room. After he said good-bye to her she sat in her living room and held the receiver in her open hand and then put it back in its cradle.

Another woman spoke. People raised their heads. The woman said, “I remember the birth of each of my daughters. They’re both married now, but I remember their births so vividly.” She looked at the woman next to her and they smiled at each other deeply. “I know that isn’t what our book discusses, exactly, but in reading it I thought about my daughters. I had asked for love and found my husband. Then I had my two daughters. I was glad to have that, to know the love of a child.”

Dan struck the metal bar. The note seemed to enter the room in waves. Patricia looked at the carved prayer flags under the sheet of glass. She did not know what to call what had happened between herself and the minister who died. He telephoned her sometimes in the morning, on a Saturday. She was always surprised. He said, “How are you?” and she felt buoyant, and she understood happiness as a physical thing. She said, “My grandmother left me a book of recipes when she died. I’ve begun to read it. It’s written in a beautiful hand.” The minister had the flat accent of the Plains. He told her that when he first came to the church, the women wore elaborate fur coats and looked at him reproachfully from their pews, as if to say, What can you do for me? He was a young man then, not even forty, called to the church that was set back from the frost-broken sidewalks, with its old ways and its politics and its patrician congregants. He kept the liturgical calendar, he had them sing the old hymns. He read to them from Paul’s letters and from the Gospel according to John.

People were looking at Patricia. They seemed to be waiting for her to speak. Had she said something? She picked up her book. She had read the chapters, but she couldn’t remember any of them. She thought
about Jesus’ ministry, how he often retreated to a mountain or the desert. That was surely what he did after he was baptized, he retreated to the desert in prayer. Although none of the Gospels described what Jesus had done there, what had really brought him to the desert. In John, Patricia had read about Jesus admonishing a Pharisee, “Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again. The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit.” So the Spirit was like a wind, Patricia had thought, closing her Bible, that one surrenders to. It comes from somewhere and it takes one somewhere, and it is impossible to know. It was the breath of God that drove Jesus into the desert to confront himself.

In the overheated room, she fumbled with the book. She searched for a passage she had marked. “I was moved by this chapter,” she said, “this brief chapter, for Monday, on prayer, where it is described as meditation, as entering into an awareness of God.” She thought when reading the passage she had understood what Jesus had done in the desert. The desert brought hunger and hardship and temptation and, finally, surrender to God. And afterward Jesus was able to return and begin his ministry. She ran her finger along the page in the book, touching the black letters and the margins and the spaces between the lines of print.

“Let us do so then,” Tom said. He sounded the metal bar and they closed their eyes. All was blankness and darkness. Patricia felt the small living heat of the candle lit on the glass-topped table. The cloth in front of her eyes was loosely woven and its color was brown, like dirt or sand.

The minister who died hardly ever talked about himself. He called her in the morning when she imagined he thought she would be at home. He called her on a Saturday. He said, “Hello, Patricia.” She thought him very kind. She loved him. This was what she could not say to him. She wasn’t sure what he wanted to know about her. But he was, she thought, asking her to talk to him. She was going in the afternoon, she told him, to visit the shore. She would go to a clam shack on the water and order steamers and French fries. She ran her hand down the cord to the telephone. She heard him breathing lightly. “The shore,” he said. He waited for her to go on. In the evening, after a meeting, when he walked her home, the shadows of the leaves were on the brick walls and the shadows made the bushes in the small yards rise above themselves, their own doubles. The minister who died listened to her. She told him about picking strawberries on a farm to the west and how they had stained her fingertips red and the hard seeds on the new berries had made small...
MaryEllen Beveridge

cuts on her hands. She had made a compote of the strawberries and stalks of rhubarb from a recipe she had found among her grandmother’s papers. The minister who died walked beside her as the shadows of the leaves rose along on the brick walls. She knew he was waiting for her to tell him something, but she didn’t know what it was. When they got to where she lived sometimes she wrapped her sweater around herself or felt the long flow of her scarf, and in doing so turned slightly away, and he was gone, into the evening, and she couldn’t hear his footsteps, all was quiet and still, and she felt alone and bereft.

“I wanted to return to Wednesday,” a younger man said, speaking forcefully into the room. “The Wednesday of this week, the third week. I think it’s especially appropriate. In that we are all wounded. You see, I’ve been estranged from my father almost all of my adult life. I can’t begin to tell you why; it’s too painful. And so that estrangement has led to an uncomfortable relationship with my mother, as you can imagine. So you could say that I am estranged from them both. And that has been difficult because often there has been no one. But I don’t really see a way back, because the wounds are too deep.” The younger man sat back heavily in his chair. His posture did not seem to invite comment. The room felt close, the air somehow fogged and tainted, as if the younger man had discharged something material into the room.

Tom said, “We have discussed a lot of important topics this evening, many to do with our own needs, our own fallibility. And trying to live in the spirit of God. We will end our evening with a moment of silence.” The people around the table folded their hands and bowed their heads. Patricia shut her eyes. She shifted slightly in her chair. They had been sitting now for over an hour. She was no longer afraid of the room, its closeness. There were so many wounded people in the Gospels. With leprosy, palsy, blindness; the lame and those inhabited by devils. A woman who bled for twelve years and people who died and caused great sorrow to those who loved them. People who were ill followed Jesus and he healed them. There were so many; almost everyone who came to Jesus seemed to be ill. Patricia thought they must have suffered in a different way, with some anguish of the spirit made into another anguish which Jesus healed.

Tom reminded them of the reading for the following week, and everyone, standing finally, complained about the weather and buttoned their coats and laughed as if expelling something out of their bodies, as if the evening had brought this about. Patricia walked toward home. The parsonage was a few blocks up the street from the church.
Its windows were lit. Tom’s wife was keeping the windows lit for him. Patricia had been to the parsonage only twice, more recently when its interior was painted after a wait of two years following the death of the minister before finding another, a man who did not follow the liturgical calendar as the minister who died had done, and Patricia felt lost within her own life. She had gone to the open house to see the parsonage again, to remember it as she had known it when the minister who died had invited her to Thanksgiving dinner. She had known him all told not even a year and he had become ill suddenly with cancer; and when he became too ill to preach and then to walk, he removed himself from the church, its building and its congregation, as if preparing himself for death. He had died in the parsonage, but she didn’t think of that when she walked through the rooms to see them again.

This time she was able to see the whole house, upstairs and down, not just the few rooms the minister who died and his wife and their guests inhabited over the course of Thanksgiving day, and the foyer where he took her coat and hung it in a closet and put his hand out lightly, briefly, as if to touch her back, and guided her into the house. The rooms were different now, the walls painted in bright primary colors. Patricia had liked the house so much better in its somber New England colors, the rooms with their marble fireplaces and the old rugs before them. She walked up the lovely curving staircase and found her way into the room where the minister who died had written his sermons, as if he had given her directions for finding it. The room was empty of furniture or drapes, a stark, small room with wide floorboards marred where the minister who died had thrust back his chair. Outside the chestnut tree was in bloom, the clusters of yellow flowers upright as if displayed with scores of candles.

That Thanksgiving, Patricia had brought a sweet pea salad to the parsonage. She had tossed it in sage. She had been reading her grandmother’s recipe book and it turned out it was not a recipe book, though there were some of the old recipes for stuffed tomatoes in aspic, apple coleslaw, and cranberry mold written in a careful, upright hand. It was a book, that is, a number of sheets of paper and note cards held loosely between moleskin covers, containing recipes mostly for healing illnesses. For coughs, nervous complaints, indigestion, headaches; burns and insect bites; feverish colds, female complaints, insomnia, anxiety, muscle cramps; to purify the blood and to boost the immune system. Some were written in hands other than her grandmother’s on yellowed onionskin paper. On quite a lot of them,
in her grandmother’s hand, was printed a woman’s name and a date above the name of the recipe, and Patricia recognized some of the surnames as belonging to her grandmother’s mother and her sisters and aunts. Each recipe was for a tea or a compress, a sachet or a salve. Patricia had tossed the sweet pea salad in a sprinkle of sage because it was once cultivated, she learned, in monastery gardens, and its Latin name, salvia officinalis, was derived from the Latin salvere, to save.

The dining room table in the parsonage seated twelve and it was fitted with a linen tablecloth, and Patricia and the minister’s wife and the other women brought out the food and set it on the table. The minister who died said a prayer and Patricia bowed her head and listened deeply. A number of people from the congregation had been invited, and Patricia sat at the table and was glad. Afterward they sang hymns in the living room with its high ceiling and oak woodwork and a fireplace fire burning. Later the minister’s wife put together a plate for her, and Patricia walked home with it held out in her hands. That was before she was married, and she was lonely and full of sorrow and rage and she loved the minister who died but she didn’t know, would never know, if that is what he had wanted of her.

A thin sheet of ice on her front steps splintered under her heel. She unlocked the door and took off her boots on the mat inside the door. Fred was asleep on the couch. He had seemed to come to her out of nowhere, as if in a dream, and married her. They could have lived anyplace, within reason, but he moved into her small house in the neighborhood full of old trees and vines that crawled across the roofs of houses because he noticed the way everything was familiar to her, the front-door lock that had to be jiggled and the squirrels that ran across the telephone wires like trapeze artists and the dips and ruts in the road. Patricia sat on the couch so they were hip to hip and leaned over him and kissed him. He put his arms around her and she crawled onto the couch with him. He was still in his work clothes, a blue shirt and black trousers and a Jerry Garcia tie flung wildly across his shoulder.

“I thought you were going to call me,” Fred said. His voice was arriving from the end of sleep.

“The walk was good, even in this weather.” She had put the book down on the coffee table.

“So,” Fred said.

Patricia sighed.

“No?” He looked at her closely. “I thought it might be good, you know, good to be with a group of people at the church, have a conversation.”
Patricia lifted the book and put it down again. “Do you think that a way to talk about Jesus’ suffering in the wilderness is that we must talk about our own?” she said. “The evening was like a confessional. I found it embarrassing. I think Tom encourages it. He has a candle and a bell; there were a lot of silences for prayer. We may as well have all been lying on horsehair couches draped in Oriental rugs.”

“I would think not,” Fred said. He had sat up. He was fully awake now. They were sitting together on the couch. He had smoothed his tie down his chest. “I would think we’re supposed to try to replicate Jesus’ experience in the wilderness, as if that were even possible, in terms of prayer.” Fred was raised as a Baptist, and he had read the Bible, really studied it, but he had lost his belief in God. That continued to confuse Patricia. “And where did prayer lead him?” Fred went on. “That’s the question. People seem to miss the point. Maybe it’s too difficult. Who is able to forgive, for example? Maybe it’s all beyond us.”

“I wish we could just talk about Lent, whatever it’s supposed to be, and not bring our own lives into it,” Patricia said. “I felt that I couldn’t really join in without confessing something. As if that would have made me a true part of the group. One man spoke about his father and it was somehow very disturbing. Although a woman spoke about the birth of her daughters, it was from the part of the reading about having the courage to ask for love.”

“That sounds like it,” Fred said. He kissed her hair. He watched her go into the kitchen. He was too tired to follow her. She turned to look at him. He had brought her love. She had cried a lot in the beginning, when she was alone again, after he drove her home from a dinner or a film. She didn’t know why she cried so. Already they had known they would marry each other. In the kitchen she prepared a plate with slices of apple and almond cake and brought it to the dining room table. She set down dessert plates and forks and they sat next to each other and she filled his plate.

They ate irregularly together; Fred often worked at his office into the evening. She had tried the old recipes her grandmother had left her but most of them were too heavy to eat at the late hour they often had dinner. Her grandmother had a recipe for corned beef and carrots and turnips and potatoes, another for a lamb stew in a thin broth, its ingredients finely chopped then simmered, which Patricia remembered with complete clarity but could never replicate. Her grandmother’s pies stood cooling on the kitchen table. She made a thin, delicious applesauce from fall McIntosh apples, and purple beets
cut almost to paper thinness and drowned in clarified butter. Patricia had been able to approximate her grandmother’s beef stew, which she made with cuts of Angus beef, and she and Fred ate it on winter evenings and soaked up the gravy with crusts of bread.

Fred placed another slice of almond cake on her plate. He said, “Are you going to talk to your minister?”

“I will,” she said, “tomorrow.”

They lay together under a woolen blanket. Patricia heard Fred’s breath in sleep; it was like a ragged purr. Sometimes, when she first knew him, he would play a bit of music for her, to entertain her, and she would cry. She was embarrassed and ashamed. He would hold her and pet her back. She learned how not to cry with him, for how then could he marry her? He brought her a bouquet of wildflowers. He held her hand. She no longer cried. It was as if she was one of those with some terrible affliction of the spirit, who had wept and cried and was saved.

The last time she saw the minister who died he was sitting among the congregants, listening to the service. From her seat in a pew at the back of the sanctuary Patricia saw him stand when a guest minister, who was leading the service because the congregation didn’t know what to do about being left so suddenly lost, said something about fear. He had finished reading a passage in Matthew about Jesus’ disciples. Jesus had said to them, Be not afraid. The minister had asked anyone to stand who had known fear. A lot of people also stood. Then they sat down. Patricia strained to see the face of the minister who died. His skin was pale. He no longer called her on a Saturday morning. He had stopped coming to meetings; he no longer walked with her in the evening past the wisteria vines heavy with flowers, their petals falling on the wind. She had learned of his illness, the quick-growing cancer, at a special meeting called by the church, and she had felt the blood drain from her limbs and she was ill and she tried not to show that she was bereft. She learned later that he had endured one round of chemotherapy and then refused any more. He had retreated to the parsonage. The hospice people took care of him. His wife refused all visitors. Patricia sent him, through an emissary who was allowed to the parsonage, a recording of the Brandenburg concertos. She hoped he listened to it. She wanted to think of him listening to it. She thought about her grandmother’s recipes and the cures the Indians used and the enslaved women brought from Africa and the West Indies. But there was nothing for an illness like that. She thought about the quality of the world we inhabited and what we breathed and that there must
be something about the age that had begun to harm us in these ways. That if you could just walk together you would be cured of all sadness and longing, you would find God in the night, the breath of God in the sharp winds where the vines and the shadows of the bushes on the brick walls tossed and sighed.

Patricia was sleeping heavily when Fred sat on the bed and ran his hand down her back. She turned and looked at him. It was very early. He was already in his dress shirt and tie. He lifted her up, she was like a thing of lightness, without form or will, and he held her in his arms. She clung to him. He was saying something to her, murmuring in her ear. It was like a song, something in the far distance one strains to hear, some melody known all along.

“Are you going to stay?” he said.

He meant the group at church. “I’ll call Tom this morning,” she said. She was up, walking him to the front door. She didn’t like him thinking of her still lying in bed, to have that as his image of her as he left the house. He kissed her and held her, and the thin fabric of her nightgown slipped against his clothes.

She sat on the bed holding a cup of tea, then phoned her office with a vague complaint, a cold perhaps, some trouble with the respiratory system, some inability to breathe deeply into the lungs, and then she put down the receiver and was free. She ate a slice of toast and a black plum and then got into her car, the one she had owned before she married Fred that belonged to her in the way that one takes a car to places that belong to one. She headed north, to the turnpike, and drove for almost an hour and turned off an exit and drove north again. On the narrow roads there were old stone walls and old houses with pitched roofs and high granite steps leading to doors with wrought-iron hinges. There was always the idea of the sea. The land seemed to fall toward it, arrived at finally by river or estuary or creek or marsh. At a certain point on the river one could glimpse it in the far distance, a strip of deep blue, moving swiftly, dangerously, the water buffeted by whitecaps, and the horizon framed with climbing white clouds. After the minster had died she had driven there, on the narrow roads with the scent of the sea at the open windows. She had gone to the memorial service attended by it seemed generations of the same congregation. The seats were filled in the pews and the balcony, and a trumpeter stood near the altar and played, the notes sharp and clear, and the bishops came as if out of the Middle Ages, wearing green damask robes and mitres trimmed with gold thread and carrying their scepters down the center aisle like staffs.
Once, driving north, she took the car through a break in a stone wall and drove down a dirt road and saw in the distance a farmhouse and beyond it the river. The house was surrounded by fields. It was shuttered, its curtains drawn; it did not seem to be occupied. On a path near the house a smoke tree was in bloom. Patricia had brought with her a thermos of tea and a sandwich of sliced cheese and mustard. She sat under the smoke tree with her lunch. There was a mild wind off the river, and it rolled over the sea grasses on the estuary. The dusky purple panicles on the smoke tree rustled and sighed.

Once she took a turn onto a farm with a handsome brick house and pastures marked by split-rail fences. There was a circular drive in front of the house and massive oak trees that shaded it. The farm, she realized, was a preserved version of itself in that it was now a place for parents to bring their children, a place to learn about the past. Patricia saw guides with blue T-shirts and children leaning over the fences petting horses and goats and sheep, and parents closely monitoring their children, and a big turkey strutting near the children’s legs, its feathers in full display. Patricia walked along the fence line and then behind the house she discovered another pasture, and beyond it a ruined barn. Farther on was another house, newer, probably even grander, alone in a field, a wrecked gravel drive leading into the distance, the house’s windows without glass and the floors damaged from rain and snow and a chandelier still hanging in the foyer, its few remaining crystals catching the afternoon light.

Patricia drove farther north. On either side of the one-lane highway there were the old stone walls, the old houses, and fences marking pastures where horses switched their tails and cows sat low to the ground on their huge bellies. A sign read Hay for Sale, though it was too early in the season for hay. She had brought a thermos of tea and she stopped on the side of the highway and drank it. The tea was sassafras tea, and she remembered walking through the woods near her grandmother’s house and bringing home the roots for her, and her grandmother looked troubled and alarmed, as she did in the least variation in the cycles she had entered into of meals and church and family and sleep; this was the prerogative of her advancing age. Her grandmother put the roots in a glass of water, but they browned and died. Her grandmother had a kitchen garden where she grew thyme and mint and rosemary and dill. Oil of thyme, Patricia had read in her grandmother’s recipe book, was used as an antibiotic. Women medicated bandages with it for binding wounds. The ancient Greeks
sprinkled its flowers in their bath water, believing it was a source of courage. Her grandmother pressed the leaves between her palms to flavor chicken breasts arranged in a glass baking pan. There were pills to take now from the pharmacy and medicines from the drug store. One used a glass of water or a teaspoon. To treat insomnia one stirred a splash of whiskey in a cup of warm milk. Patricia knew from reading the old recipes that the women would go with baskets and long-handled spoons into woodlands and fields, to shorelines, wetlands, and the banks of streams; under many of the recipes there were directions by foot and dirt road. She liked to imagine the women harvesting the leaves and roots, flowers and fruits. She wondered if her grandmother had accompanied them, perhaps as a child. But she didn’t know about the recipe book until after her grandmother’s death, and so she couldn’t ask her, and she wondered often why this book had come to her, and what her grandmother would have her do with it.

Patricia put away the thermos of tea and brought the car back onto the old highway. True spring wouldn’t arrive for a number of weeks, but the trees already were turning, and faint streams of color, yellow and green, were rising into their branches.

Just above a stoplight, Patricia saw a dirt road. She turned onto it. The road led down a mild incline, and it curved to the right and the left, and Patricia braked lightly. She had entered a woodland. Then the road became flat and ended in a small lot made of packed sand. She parked and got out of the car. She had entered a marsh. She could see three horizons: to the right, where the marsh opened to an estuary; to the left, where it became denser and was bordered by brush; and ahead, where a narrow gravel causeway led to an island in the river signaled by a cluster of trees. Somewhere beyond was the sea. In the early season, not yet spring, the water of the marsh was like a mist, and the sky was pale blue, and along the horizon the water seemed to rise and dissipate like tendrils of steam. An egret flew low across the marsh, its long wings a flash of white against the shallow water and the pale grasses, and landed, its legs delicately outstretched, and folded its wings to its body. Patricia walked along the causeway. The shallow water on either side of it was brown, and in it was vegetation, brown also and spongy looking and filled with holes as if the homes of hidden creatures. In the water, where it was pierced by light, she could see minnows swimming. Across the marsh were the reeds and grasses from the previous year, leached of color and brittle, and along the borders the cattail flowers were spent,
wisps of the cottony fruit still clinging to them. Patricia thought that other eyes, older eyes, would be able to look across the marsh and see a remedy to any ailment, a cure for any heartache.

After the minister’s death, his wife brought with her all of his sermons in a number of paper bags and shook them out on a table in the meeting room during the coffee hour after the service and announced that anyone could have them, to take as many as desired. She walked around the room while people were sipping coffee from Styrofoam cups and eating lemon cookies, and she pointed to the heap of papers on the table and people looked at her in surprise. Then they put down their refreshments and went to the table. By the time the coffee hour was over, all of the minister’s sermons were gone. People examined them carefully, pointing out to a companion the typed pages annotated in the minister’s hand; and Patricia thought they were taking a sermon that held particular meaning for them, placing it into a pocketbook or a jacket pocket. Patricia watched from a distance. It seemed as if the sermons were the minister’s body, and by the time the morning was over nothing was left of it. She watched the minister’s wife fold the empty paper bags against her knee and leave the meeting room with them.

Pieces of gravel on the causeway were held by small clumps of ice. In the open, with the marsh on either side, Patricia became aware of a wind, a constant wind, bringing with it another season, and the sharp asides where the currents pitched against each other. It blew her hair. She unbuttoned her coat and let the wind blow her clothing. The wind caressed the old grasses and ruffled the surface of the water. She walked further into the wind. In the distance was the island with its cluster of trees. On the far side would be the river, then the sea. She walked toward it. The wind was on her face like breath.
Local Attraction

The bear will not come down—
claws clamped around the tall pine’s trunk,
the one tree thick enough to hold him,
overlooked until a nest of grackles
claimed the high, first branch.
He wants them, shifting upward,
scratching at the bark, while on the ground
his keeper shouts here, bear! her voice
a dove call, melting into air.
The park is closing: ravenous, blank-eyed goats
retire to straw beds, sheep slow
their grazing, and on the far side, white-tailed deer
fade back into the man-made thicket.
But the children with their fingers wound
into the chain-link outer fence
refuse to leave. They want to stay until the bear
comes down. I reach for your hand,
light breath of skin to skin, the way geese
settle on a lake, find only air—
you’ve wandered, drawn into the scene.
The bear sniffs upward, tree wrapped
in embrace. The woman offers steak,
raw red bricks held level in her
outstretched hands. She’ll wait this way
for hours, the vigil silent now, till finally,
finally the bear looks down
and sees her, his black fur disappearing in the dark.
Adam Day

Dead Holstein in Winter

Far from the cusp of the tractor path, beside an empty creek, propped against a pin oak like a fireplace aslant to the chimney of a toppled house. Still steaming, the nose firm, glistening, the hips going. Gray tongue thick, purple in morning darkness, where needles of light strike the bulk of the wrenched head, reaching its knees to disappear in a moving mist. The grass a frozen crust, corn arched and angled into a field’s naked girders and beams, a stone wall in wet snow where blackbirds argue.
John Drury

Sea Level Rising

Water that threatens every place I love
is what I love about those lowland places
with rowboats moored to pilings in a cove
enclosed by loblolly pines, spartina grasses.

Inland, I sense it when I’m happiest,
a salt breeze blowing past the empty fields.
But nothing oceanic surges past
dark roads, the stubbly acres of dull golds.

I miss the rising tides that bash the docks
and spatter brackish water in my face,
reflections of bungalows and crab shacks
quaking in waves and almost breaking loose.

Sometimes, when fog wells up in the ravine
and overwhelms the valley’s railroad tracks,
I feel at home, giddy until the sun
scatters the city’s temporary lakes.

Then everything burns off. Sun glares. I miss
the fluent surface, the ever-shifting shore.
The shallowest lagoon would do! I’d bless
the moving waters, ripples everywhere.
The Gizzard Eaters

We fought over it like the gluttons
we were, that tough tether

a chewy umbilicus to some other
creature’s world. And we fought

for the heart. If lucky, the giblet bag
contained two, “a two-hearted chicken,”

“a two-hearted chicken heart” we joked,
our family of six. Mother fed us for three days

on one scrawny fryer. Stuffed. Baked. Then,
bones boiled. By then we were not poor,

not anymore. She was practiced in the art
of getting by—her minister father paid in full

in fallen fruit, softly browning. They lived
the cliché—shoes worn through, lined in cardboard.

Their Depression-era house marked “safe,”
boxcar hobos stopped by for meager handouts.

We chewed on that tough past, the gristle
of the deprived. Some things you swallow

stick. We call it being frugal, we spurn
waste. We still live the comedian’s joke:

someone tries to throw out a broken iron,
someone else shouts, “Not the cord!”
Without Past Lovers

If we were ten again, we’d believe the floor oozed lava in shades of ketchup and carrot purée
like volcanoes in claymation movies—dashing
from mattress to settee to tile, we’d knock our heads together and laugh in peals reverberating
like kindergardeners clanging steel triangles,
but we’re no longer ten and you’re here next to me, cupping my breasts as you sleep. Instead, I’d rather
lie in a field, grassy and damp, only our hands
touching, clasped in the tight, sweaty grip of childhood. If you could have seen me, could remember beyond
the flesh grabbed, arch and pull, the rush into
each other. I want you to find the dimes buried in the sand of our playgrounds, roll down hills until
the trees stand root-up, but more than that, I want you
to know me then, before I let men run their hands up my thighs, unclasp my bra, encircle my waist
as they press me up against the wall—unsanded

by their friction, I might be able to believe
you love me, might find the paper boats I set sail,

finally returned, heavy but still buoyant.
Sherry Horowitz

Western Wall

They break, marching over—spilling
Like salve for a ruined mountain. They come.

Up and down the twisted roads, flooding,
Rising through the narrow alleys, they come.

Like song, cresting decrepit balustrade,
In swelling waves along the valley—

They come. With nerve and cut,
Through jumbled village, pulsing, helter-skelter.

They come alive, with bone-call, and banded,
Screw notes into the bleached pock and jamb—

They come with nothing. With scraps of paper,
Scrawled and scratching. Without spice. Whitened—

O God, they come. A shambles heaped
On the heart, rising, stone on stone.

On the stony heart. For the stoned. They come.
In Only, Tennessee

Tell me how he held his gun, girl—the only
grip steady enough to lift your skirt
by the same angle your stepfather worked
the day he pointed your mother’s face to the sky,
anchored you on his back, and left her
neck craned in prayer, mouth cocked,
their only baby suckling the bullet inside.

The only conclusion you could come to
about Tennessee men: don’t let them
touch you, a lesson learned only after
that first pretty boy pushed through—
he like an auger, and you with that hole

in your icy chest, from which any number
of slippery dreams could be pulled, gutted,
and slapped in the skillet to hiss beneath
the wooden spoons of your mother, despairing
in their pitcher on your lonely stove—your only
son born like a beautiful scab on the wound.
Infants of the Field

Stories of rescuers finding small children alive after tornadoes have carted them off have become so common as to seem apocryphal.

—Patrik Jonsson, Christian Science Monitor

The wind has wanted to keep you as promised things, captured and slung from the trees like gifting skins

on the hunting rack in the yard, your fathers’ animal anger for all to see, a heap of sour evenings—

mothers trapped like starlings, wanting the world through a window, and how a creek behind a house

always looks cheap like cellophane with the knowledge that it dries up a mile down. No one has loved you

like the earth in its lupine fits, its precious jaw, steel hinge of wind, the vapor tongue, only wanting to raise you

by the neck from your mire of too-soft flesh, a miracle cub, pawing at death. No one has swaddled you

tight enough to keep it out, but now the wind wills its song from your paralytic mouth—

the catch-all caw of child-fright the neighbors hear at night, mistaken in thinking you were gone.

They remember it into the throats of their dinners the first time it took more than one bullet, the echo rattling in the walls as dusk puckered into evening. They sing along, layering their animal calls
into a bunting of sun-dried pelts, waving
over the morning when they find you in the grass, arms

gravel-scrubbed, cheeks rough as salt licks, tiny
rain clouds of warm breath still suspended above

your pied heads. Storm orphans, they make a home in you
who escaped the grip of your fathers’ disappointment,

you who were spit back like words into the named world,
the chosen changelings, only a little death-bitten, only a little

wild, those snarl-cries like a hymn half-recognized.
Some Oz

for my father

We stand at the top of the Miamisburg Mound overlooking the steel plant, a stacked complex

of glistening roofs and chain-link stapled onto the plains. You want photos

of the funnel clouds as they birth themselves. You want to finally be close

enough to grab the tail of one like a bridle and ride it into another life. You are dreaming

of The Wizard of Oz cyclone scene—the lunatic chickens blind-weaving through the dirt,

the tumbleweed limbs of uncles blowing into the cellar as the mares bolt for one lick of life unsaddled

before the end, and the twister bends like a finger in the distance, beckoning.

I’ve been thinking of a postcard you sent me from the Aviation Museum in Kansas: You know

how they flew those crazy planes?
Big as boats, but it was all in the slope

of the wing, aerodynamics. Aluminum, tin, lead, or granite, there’s a way to lift it.
Carve yourself a wing from the shale,  
you wrote—something to fly you

out of the black basin of old age.  
You sent that one from the road, a runaway,

storm-chasing. I’ve been thinking it wasn’t the rush  
so much as your love for them—

from the first time you scooped the wind  
onto your tongue and swallowed as much

as your tiny body could hold: that sweet smelling air  
that parents a stillness you knew in the womb,  
the murky drown and dazzle of debris  
among the astral billows, swimming  
flecks of metal trailer roofs like confetti,  
the faceted glare like an infant memory  
of the world before it settled in your eyes.  
You were mesmerized by its blind anger and promises  
of a change in the boot-scraped landscape  
of western Ohio. Where else could it take you?  

Even before you saw one, you dreamt  
its hollow center—a self you would recognize  
a lifetime later, when you watched your wife divide  
her teeth into those inside and outside  
her mouth, let the difference determine  
how many counties away the next storm  
could fly her from you. But you beat her to it,  
your cement-dipped shoes left on the porch
for years, sequined with mill rust—
our sad-pageant shrine, reminder

to wake into our lives, lest we lost ourselves
to the dream of a sparkling city, or a heart

still clanging inside a steel man.
You might have remained on the ground only

as a shadow in spin, dropping the occasional postcard
from that far funnel you lived in, hoping

to be tossed into some Oz, where your sisters were
all thin stalks of beautiful skin, yet unhusked

by men, your father alive, your mother unbruised.
Some Oz where the clock of your life could unwind.

But you’ve returned to us now, your hands
full of years like salvage. And how could you

have known what you’d wake to—a home
inescappable, and you wearing your father’s face.

Here on the mound, I understand you
feel impossibly heavy, your mind a foundry of regrets

as you search for a word like an opening
into some storm strong enough to drop us both

in a place where your daughters can forgive you.
Costume

When we exit the freeway at Detroit I’ve forgotten that the sun rising on the horizon is really about to set. We didn’t print maps before we left of the exact locations of the hotel and the concert. The only maps we have are two pages he tore from the atlas, one of the whole country and one of Michigan with two inset boxes, Detroit and downtown Detroit. We left New Mexico and all the other states behind. When you’re in a certain place all the others are only lines on a map.

Downtown Detroit is small so if you drive enough circles you’ll find what you’re looking for. The map shows U-shaped roads that curve around and straight roads from the center that intersect those. Stopped at some intersections we can turn every way but directly left or right. Our circles begin and end at I-96. But circles aren’t about beginnings or endings, they’re about the loops in between. How many times can you go around, stomp out the point at beginning and end until it disappears?

To begin with I’m white and he’s native; for Halloween he’s a Wicked Clown and I’m a Squaw.

We’re here for Hallowicked, an Insane Clown Posse concert. Violent J and Shaggy and everyone else on Psychopathic Records are from Detroit. I had to see the place where it all started, the murder rap, hatchetman, clown paint and Faygo. It had to be bad to breed that.

He was a Juggalo when I met him and had been for years. He’d moved to Albuquerque from the reservation and never wanted to go back. I didn’t know who ICP was and I only knew a handful of Indians. I’ve always thought of myself as white, nonspecific. My mixed European ancestry has been watered down for generations and all I’ve got now is American. I was searching for culture when I met him.

I’ve been fascinated but I never told him I wanted to be an Indian.

Detroit feels claustrophobic. The hotel is on a one-way street and we can only get to it from the wrong way. I get out, walk around, find the right way. I get back in the car but we still can’t seem to get there. We drive more circles, finally park blocks from the hotel and
walk. The sky has gone fully black and illumination from buildings
and light poles hovers false on the street.

At the hotel the room we reserved isn’t available. Each person we
talk to offers a different excuse. They gave it to someone else, it needs
maintenance, or they just don’t want to give it up. We sit in the lobby
and wait for them to find us a room.

When you’re on vacation you lose your sense of time; the minutes
don’t crawl the same as in real life. These are vacation minutes and
they belong to this place. We’re renting time.

They give us a room and the bed is cracked down the middle. The
next room hasn’t been cleaned and in the next the shower is broken
and in the next the windows are sealed shut. We sleep in the room
with the broken shower and they give us keys to the room with sealed
windows to shower in.

We’re here for three days and spend hours watching cable at
the hotel. When the same loop of shows starts to play we go outside
and drive circles. This city is literally falling apart. The windows of all
the abandoned buildings are broken, boarded up, hazy. A building is
occupied only if all its windows are intact. I wonder where everybody
has gone.

At the center of all this is the mirrored GM building, rounded and
shiny like a new car that never left the lot. It’s all glass and the small
buildings that circle it are round and shiny too, shadows. They reflect
off the center structure so all you see in the GM tower are the smaller
buildings around it. While these buildings stand the city stands. It’s
like this gleaming cluster cancels out the broken everything else.

While new houses and stores always go up in Albuquerque,
most of the people I know are poor or barely making it. The streets
there are logical and run perpendicular to each other. Facing the
mountains you’re driving east and with the mountains to your right
you’re headed north. Central, formerly part of Route 66 and the main
street downtown, runs east and west the length of the city. There’s a fair
share of parolees, prostitutes, and homeless people on Central, but for the
most part downtown is well kept and clean. Empty buildings get filled
quickly and everything looks cleaner when the sun is always shining.

At home we have a lot more natives and a lot more rocks. They
just go together, the Navajos and the red towering rocks of Monument
Valley. Albuquerque is surrounded by mountains and reservations.
He can tell what tribe a man belongs to by looking at his face. I can’t.
Then there’s the past. It’s not that we don’t talk about it, it’s just that it’s not here anymore. We’re not there. I do feel guilty for what the whites did to the natives. We took lives and land and language. We? Me?

The next morning, Halloween, I take a bath in the other room. My yoga teacher’s instructions seem to have followed me here: Exhale, empty yourself completely. In bed: Arch through your upper spine, breathe through your entire front body. Driving circles: Return to mountain, feel how strong your mountain has become. When I wake up: Remember this place of peace whenever your life is stressful or hectic.

Another opportunity for honesty.
I don’t know when I first wanted to be native or if I ever did but this Halloween I’m a Native American Princess. I got the Pocahottie dress at a Halloween store before we left home. He suggested the costume himself and Detroit seemed like the right place to wear it. It’s only a costume when it’s in the bag and it’s only a costume when I put it on. But he smiles when I come out of the bathroom in it and I curtsy and twirl. Is this where I cross the line?
I take the costume too far. I wear my best Navajo jewelry—a silver cuff bracelet studded with turquoise, molded turquoise feather earrings, a necklace of turquoise rocks. Am I native if I wear my weight in turquoise? I had him make the purse so it’s Indian authentic, leather strips and super glue and fringy at the edges.
I’m someone else but he’s someone else too. He paints his face to match Shaggy’s clown paint, white with thick black designs around the eyes and mouth. He always paints his face for concerts. We take pictures of ourselves in costume and look at them right away. Laughing at the woman in the picture helps me forget that she’s me.

As a joke my mom sent out my birth announcements with a picture of an Indian baby on a cradleboard. She reminded me of the native baby I’d been when she found out we were dating. Mom has a collection of Indianbabydolls with moccasins, broad round cheeks and excessive black hair. I was still bald at one year old.

On Halloween my braids are frizzy and golden brown. My knees blare white above my boots. I’m the wrong proportions, wide hips and narrow chest. I’m in costume but I’m still the same. Not that I
would change anything. Just wondering though, how would I shed the white? Would I peel off a layer of myself or add a layer of someone else?

Exhale. Empty yourself completely.

At the hotel and the gas station and the concert people call me Pocahontas but I’m more real than that. I’m a Native American Princess, I say, but they don’t hear me. A girl strokes one of my braids, tickles the fringe at my waist and giggles. What, exactly, is so funny?

At the concert when Anybody Killa performs we get as close to the front as we can. ABK is a native rapper and we’ve been to every concert of his we could, even the times he came to the reservation. We met him once and he thought both of us were Navajo. I didn’t correct him. He said Navajos are everywhere and he sounded surprised. He raps about peace pipes and tomahawks: In this moment, as in every moment together, we will practice nonviolence.

When the song “I’m Just Me” starts I know ABK has spotted us because he keeps looking at me in my Native American Princess costume. He and I, the Wicked Clown and the Squaw, are jostled by people from all sides but we never lose each other. For a moment as I’m singing the chorus, I’m just me, it feels like it’s just the three of us Natives. Where did everybody go?

After the concert I’ve lost the keys to the hotel rooms. At the front desk they can’t find an extra key and I’m not surprised. I demand another room for the night and they say there are no more rooms, they say they can’t open the door til tomorrow.

So we drive circles but we’re running low on gas. We go to Belle Isle where you can see Canada and Detroit and the bridge in between. We drive slowly on the one way street that makes a big loop around the island. The signs say no standing after 11, and we’re not sure if we’re supposed to be here. There is only one way on and one way off and when we exit the island we get back on. We park the car: Return to mountain. Feel how strong your mountain has become. I think of the Sandia Mountains at home, how they blink watermelon pink at sunset. It feels like the first time we’ve stopped since we got here.

At the end of the night some of his clown paint has rubbed off on me. I like to think of it as my war paint, I like to think we’re somehow combined. Just before we fall asleep I ask him if he likes me better this way and he says no.
The native women I know are confident and comfortable in their bodies. But don’t most women seem that way when from the inside we’re always putting ourselves back together? I can do Indian things. I can make fry bread. I can count to ten in Navajo, introduce myself, ask for the time of day. I wear turquoise and my hair is long but there’s still something else. Skin? No, deeper. Blood?

Wait. I never said I wanted to be Indian. I’m happy with who I am. Who am I if not a White Woman and he an Indian Man?

I dream about the women in his family and in my dream I’m nowhere to be found. I ask for me but nobody knows where I am.

In the morning I’m here on Belle Isle. The sun shines brilliant but it’s cold. Now isn’t the beginning or the end; here we are at the center. We look at ourselves in the rearview mirror and I notice our lips are the same shade of pink. We go back to the hotel, collect our things, get our money back so it’s like we were never here at all.
Fisher of Men

The sun dapples the early summer woods of Maine. The trees are lace made of light, Beth thinks. Like Impressionist painting. Monet, possibly. Or Seurat, where all the little blotches come out like a picture. The trout stream, where she and her stepfather are fishing, tumbles noisily over the rocks, the water cold as ice cubes. Beth’s sitting on damp earth that’s made an impression on the back of her shorts, and will probably show up like a black hand when she stands up. She’s already given up on the fishing, as she can’t cast well, the hook gets tangled in the bushes, and that’s discouraging. Her stepfather is up to his thighs in the cold stream, in waders, cursing because he’s tangled his fishing line for the third time on some invisible claw located underneath the water. No one else is around them. They’ve driven miles through the back woods.

His U.S. Army Retired baseball cap is green. His legs are long and straight, and he moves stiffly because he’s got arthritis. “God damn it!” he yells, yanking the line and sloshing forward. “God damn you sonofabitch!” Yank. If there were trout around here, they’re miles away by this time.

She’s trying to get into the Zen of the surface of the water, which her boyfriend (who is not reliable) has said makes him love to fish. Jordan, her boyfriend, is far away, in the city, but he haunts her all the time, like a dormant virus that erupts occasionally, ruining her chances at being present in her real life. She’s dreamy. She understands that fishing is a chance to be silent, it’s all about the surface of the water. Silence and water. Can anyone as sensitive and poetic as Jordan stay loyal to one woman? Apparently not. “There it is, you little bastard,” her stepfather says, as he reels in his line with no fly left on it. She squints at the surface of the stream, the dazzling light, and tries to see what Jordan’s talking about. Zen. Zen.

Once she’d gone over to his apartment (he’d given her the keys, first mistake) and found some woman there taking a shower. Beth had stormed out of the building onto the street, and he’d run after in his boxer shorts, telling her she didn’t understand, it wasn’t what it looked
like. Beth had flung his keys down hard on the pavement, so that they bounced, and told him never to bother her again. A group of junkies lounging on the stoop across the street had cheered. “You give it to him, sister!” “You tell him what up!” “You go, girl!” They’d laughed.

He’d waited two months and then called, wanting to know if she’d come over for dinner; he’d really missed her.

“Bethie,” her stepfather says, “are you going to fish, or what?”

“I mess it up,” she says.

On the side of the stream, her stepfather sits on a log. The tackle box is open, and scattered across the sand are packages of flies, lures, the drawers from the box. He’s trying a different fly, a red and yellow one. The May flies are gone, he tells her; the June flies have arrived. The back of his neck is red. His hair is white; his army cap is now floating in the water, bobbing against a piece of whitened driftwood.

She sloshes out to get it, with her sneakers on, the sun pure and hot on her face. She says, “Hey, Ted, you mind if I take a walk?”

His hearing aid is off, or broken, and he doesn’t answer. She tugs at his sleeve. “I’m going for a walk,” she pantomimes, walking her fingers in the air like little legs.

“You sure?” he says, the fierce blue eyes totally seeing her, totally focused. “You be careful out there.”

“There’s nobody for forty miles,” she tells him. She lives in Manhattan, how bad can the Maine woods be?

He frowns and returns to the feathery hook that’s defeating his arthritic fingers and his fine motor movements. She feels the urge to tie the fly on for him, but refrains, and sets off past the oversized SUV Ted likes because it reminds him of the Army, and she wanders down the dirt road, which is really just two ruts.

The road passes through dense firs, and then fluffy birches, and then a dark patch of stunted junipers. It’s magical. She thinks about Jordan, and how he said only last week before she left, “If I could marry anyone, Beth, I’d marry you.” Surely that was a good sign. Well, actually, no it wasn’t, but it made her feel better. In the future, which is a magical place, as lovely as these woods—all things are possible. She stops at a cluster of white Indian pipes poking out of the moss, waxy and fragile. She wants to tell Jordan about them.

Once when she and Jordan went hiking, they had sex on the bank of a stream because he wanted to. Talk about getting yourself
muddy from the earth. They’d been surprised by a bunch of hikers, who fortunately were talking loudly as they approached. One woman had a little bear bell tied to her pack, which had jingled a warning. You could tell by their expressions that they knew exactly what she and Jordan—hastily buttoned and zipped—had been doing. Pine needles on their shirts. Mud on her legs. She’d gotten the giggles. Pretended to be interested in something in her pack, and not even said Hello, as the hikers smirked and crossed to the other side of the stream. “Why do you care, Beth?” Jordan said. He’d been nosing her back down onto the ground.

It was his favorite thing, sex in risky places. The laundry room of her apartment building. His car overlooking the Palisades at night. Sleeping bags in campgrounds full of people (there always seemed to be a root). It wasn’t always with her, obviously. There’d been the woman in his apartment taking a shower. She got angry again, thinking about that. Another time, cigarette butts in his ashtray, with somebody else’s lipstick on them.

The sun goes in behind a cloud. Ted’s probably still fishing. She suddenly recalls how Ted came to pick her up at the airport a week ago, and he’d been an hour late. She’d stewed and steamed at the arrivals gate, waiting for him, almost in tears of rage, having gone through her repertoire of curses and imprecations, compared him to a stone, called him dumb as a bag of doorknobs, and then spotted him far away, limping toward her, coming closer and closer, leaning on two canes, forcing himself along with his gangly legs because he’d just had knee surgery. Which she’d forgotten. Her mother told her later how he’d bullied his way out of the rehab so he could pick her up. Her mother beside him at the airport holding a Mylar balloon that said “WELCOME,” and looking aggrieved, as if Ted was going to destroy his knee repair. His face constricted with determination and pain, and then lighting up when he spotted her. Her heart had gone into her throat with happiness and guilt as she hugged him. Then he’d hobbled along the lengthy corridors of the airport, the escalators, across the parking garage. It was what you did. You picked your stepdaughter up at the airport.

I am a shit, she thought. Could she take back a curse about wanting him to turn into a stone? Or that he was a doorknob? This was how heartless you could be, and then you had to live with it. When you failed to understand that you were important.
Margarite Landry

That night after dinner she’d made him an elaborate ice cream sundae, with Oreo cookies, whipped cream, jelly beans, sprinkles, hot fudge. Everything he liked. Easy reparations.

Overhead, a small, sweet-sounding bird calls somewhere in the birch trees that now line the road. She must be a mile from Ted. In her shirt pocket she finds half an old energy bar, with a bit of lint, which she picks off. She nibbles dreamily, walking down the road. A frizzle of grass grows in the middle, and the dirt tracks dwindle ahead in perfect diminishing perspective along a straight stretch.

Jordan is actually very generous. He’s given her a necklace made with lapis lazuli; an antique desk he saw in a window, which he didn’t have room for in his own apartment; numerous CDs of Bach and Handel (especially the Pro Musica recordings with the original instruments); and a Caucasian rug.

Right before she’d left on this vacation, they’d just done it on his queen-sized bed and he was having an anxiety attack because he couldn’t sleep, he said, if there was anyone else sleeping beside him. He’d tried, but he couldn’t do it. She’d just told him their relationship wasn’t going anywhere, and so he’d asked her to stay over, but then he got too anxious. “This isn’t easy for me, either,” he’d said, as she wriggled out of his bed, stomped across his jogging clothes (still in a pile on the floor) and found her jeans. “Think about me, Beth,” he said. “I want to, but I just can’t.”

Somewhere, deep in her heart, she knows he’ll outgrow this diffidence and she’ll be there waiting. His soul mate. Earlier she’d washed her face in his bathroom and noticed the bottle of Xanax in the medicine cabinet. He was having a hard time. Of course just then she’d noticed the hairbrush on the edge of the sink. Bathrooms have too many secrets. Bathrooms are dangerous places. She’d looked for hair in the hairbrush and thought the hairbrush could be his sister-in-law’s, with whom they’d gone out to dinner the week before. That same long, black hair.

Jordan was smiling when she came out of the bathroom, and he hugged her with that dreadful patting on the back that meant he was dying for her to go. His apartment, as always, reminded her of a stage set: the tall Victorian windows draped by heavy velvet curtains. The German clock with the pewter shepherd and shepherdess who came out of little doors every hour, their arms raised like hostages. As Jordan patted her, the clock chimed. She felt a little tug of sorrow as she left. A little stab of separation.
Next time she came over for dinner, the hairbrush, which she’d been obsessing about for four days, was gone. She even looked through the drawers next to the sink.

“Of all things,” he said to her at dinner, “I maintain the worst suffering is the inability to love.” He’d made a really great shad roe and asparagus. He was quoting Schiller, she guessed, or some other nineteenth-century poet. Goethe, he said. And she thought, Poor Jordan. From across the table, he told her about the new first chapter of his novel he was working on and the research he had done on German romantic poetry and transcendentalism. It was easy to pay attention when Jordan talked.

The sun has gone in. Beth’s footsteps fall like whispers on the sandy road. Her calves are beginning to ache. She stops and folds up the energy-bar wrapper into a nameless origami and tucks it into her shirt pocket. Behind her a small animal rustles through the bushes. Then she hears a car, or possibly a pick-up, very far away, and then there’s silence again, only the call of the birds.

“What does this situation with Jordan remind you of?” her University Health Services therapist asked her one time.

“I don’t know.”

“What about your father?”

“I don’t know him,” Beth said. “He left ages ago.”

“You don’t remember him?”

“I never think about it,” Beth said. “He remarried. He lives somewhere in California.”

“You don’t remember him at all?”

“I think he went away when I was two. I stood at the door and cried for him all day. That’s what they told me. Then I didn’t talk about it.”

“You were two?”

“It’s way buried,” Beth had said. “It’s down in the permafrost.”

Ted, of course, has never liked Jordan. “He’s all right in his way,” Ted said once, “but he doesn’t weigh much.” This was after an uncomfortable dinner at a French restaurant on West 53rd Street. Maybe it’s not being able to hear Jordan talk without his hearing aid, missing all the nuances and wit. Maybe Ted reads the body English: Jordan’s hands gracefully illustrating his point; the spine that bends, without aggression, and without the military posture Ted maintains
in spite of his legs. Maybe it was because Jordan kept quoting *The New Yorker*, a habit that Ted viewed suspiciously. He’s noticed Beth’s dreary smiles on this trip. It boils down to Jordan’s inability to say, “This is what I want.” Because Jordan doesn’t stand for anything that Ted understands.

It’s true that Jordan is always wanting to be where he is not, and with whomever he isn’t with. Even Beth can see that. Although possibly, you never know, Jordan will move in with her in a couple of years. She thinks about living in his apartment and how she could fix up the kitchen. The dust-bunnies stuck in the grease under the stove. Yuck. She and Jordan could buy those fabulous dishes at Pottery Barn, a really lovely Japanese design that Jordan came across independently and said he liked, too. Which she took as a good sign.

There was of course the time he slept with her ex-friend, in the name of experimentation. (Who knows how many of his students? What is the payback with this?) She’d been sobbing quietly in her bed that empty weekend when Jordan was busy “working on his novel,” and her roommate had walked by her bedroom and asked her what was wrong. When Beth told her, the roommate said, “It isn’t worth it!” Really? Beth thought. But it just felt like he was the one for her. It was hard to explain. He just felt real.

When Ted married Beth’s mother, the bride had carried stephanotis. Then Beth was eleven, far too old to feel like she had a real father and far too young to appreciate his affection for her. He had no children of his own. He’d begun his career in the Army in the cavalry. At first it struck her as creepy that her mother was sleeping in the same bed with a grown man, but during arguments he often took Beth’s side, which was gratifying. At Christmas, and for his birthday, she liked to give him presents that made his face light up when he opened them. A wooden Balinese horse puppet, which he hung from a rafter in the kitchen. A snow-globe from Lone Prairie, Nebraska, where he’d grown up. A 1:12 scale red metal John Deere tractor, because he’d come from a farm. A red flannel night shirt from L.L. Bean that he’d pretended to like, but had actually been too small for him, so he’d passed it on to her mother. An aluminum painted owl to hang over his garden to drive away birds; a deck of cards with horse pictures; wind chimes he swore he could hear. When he had an actual correction to give her—such as the time she’d come home two hours after her high-
school curfew and driven her mother frantic—he managed to phrase it tactfully. “Bethie,” he’d said with a little laugh, “you’re acting terrible!” And she never did it again.

On the dirt road, the trees ahead of Beth are swamp dead. She is startled that suddenly behind her an engine in third gear rumbles, and a large black pickup, an old rusted-out Ford, is suddenly approaching, going fast enough to ping rocks and kick up dust. It’s too late to dive into the bushes so she won’t be seen. Which would be stupid anyway. The truck hits a dip in the road that scrapes the bottom with a bang as it roars and bounces forward. She steps aside, into the bushes. A slight depression in the grassy bank causes her to stumble for a moment. The pickup gets close and the driver slows, and stops, and stares at her out his open window. The truck has rusted out around the wheel wells. The man is alone and has eyes black as ink. His long hair falls in strands around his face.

He says in accented English, “You coming from where?”

“Down the road,” she says. He glances back. Forward, as if calculating. Still dreamy, she is not afraid of him. He’s scowling and silent, and probably, she thinks, can’t even read English. Then something strange happens. To her he suddenly seems absolutely primeval, as ancient as the woods, as if she has stepped through a door to where there is no time and not a written word to be seen. She is struck with a deep, gut-pulling sense she can’t even label as desire. There is only forest sound, forest light, the trees, the slant of light on this man with his dark eyes and beard. He glances up and down the road again, obviously thinking. He says, “You walked here?”

“Yes,” she says. She feels recklessly unafraid, and he looks at her with such a sense of mastery, of complete dominance, that she wants to give him anything he wants. It’s as if he’s come from a foreign, ancient country that doesn’t exist any more. His body seems utterly powerful, the shoulders, the neck, the arm resting on the window.

“You want to take a ride?” he says.
“I came fishing with my father.”
“He down the road?”
She nods. He glances behind him and then drops the truck in gear.
“Wait!” she says. She wants him with every cell and glandular system in her body. The woods echo with the noise of the truck. He’s waiting. Okay, suppose this could be some horrible rape, she could catch some disease, but that won’t happen here. She leans her
hip against the fender of the truck, knowing that her censors aren’t working. He jerks his head toward the empty passenger seat, and she walks across the grassy middle strip of the road around to the passenger’s side and pulls open the door. Inside smells like raw pine lumber. Recently smoked cigarettes and musky sweat. She sits.

He lights a Marlboro and offers her one.

“You work around here?” she says.

“I cut the trees. I do them here and in Canada.”

“You like it?”

“It’s okay.”

She lights it off his disposable lighter, with the logo for the Montreal Canadiens. “I was fishing,” she says between exhales. She is fiery with desire for him; his bare, muscled arm rests across the back of the seat, behind her. The air is electric. He says, “We come down from Calais. This morning. Me and my friends.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“My wife is up there. My kids.”

“You got kids?”

“Yeah,” he says, and points the cigarette at two dark-haired children in a vinyl envelope on the sun visor.

“They’re beautiful,” she says. And then suddenly, far away in the distance, comes the sound of Ted’s horn, three long blasts. A space. Three long blasts.

He says, “Your father?”

She nods.

She gets out of the cab and slams the door, and he drives off noisily in the truck, which disappears in the distance, remote and suddenly shabby seeming, with its tailgate rusted out to metal lace. The woods become silent; her ears are still echoing with the noise. Wow, she thinks. This is probably what it felt like to be a hominid, a cave woman. You didn’t have all this marital concern wrapped around your dating. No one needed to worry about buying your dishes at Pottery Barn. This father of children, this lumberjack. God. Jeez. She trudges along back toward Ted, between the birch trees, her heart pounding. She knows the dark-haired man won’t come back, and eventually she sits on the dry roadside, near the birch trees, and catches her breath.

When she gets back to the stream, Ted has finished fishing. He’s peeling off his intractably clumsy waders and cursing the buckles.

“Where’ve you been?” he says irritably.
“Sorry,” she says. She offers to undo the buckles in the back, and he accepts. He stands as patiently as a horse waiting for someone to take off his saddle. When they are picking up the tackle, Beth realizes her morning coffee has made its way through her kidneys and yells loudly that she needs to make a pit stop. He points over the rushing stream to the other bank and offers his hand to help her walk across a fallen log. Her sneakers get wet again, and he laughs, and so does she. The other side of the stream is mossy shadows, and she heads into the fir trees. Soon she’s deep enough in the woods that he’s out of sight.

She bushwhacks and finds an old roadway, only two ruts; a tiny stream, and she follows it until she comes to a clearing under balsam fir. The glen is cool.

The firs fold their long branches almost to the ground, as if she’s come to a wild shelter, with a sense of primeval comfort and closeness. There’s no need for a path over the moss. She’s still carrying the feeling of the man in the truck with her, as if he’s touched her genitals, her back. She feels exalted as her feet press into the thick moss, temporarily depressing its careful growth. Here is a place, a quiet grove, out of hearing of the stream.

This is what it’s like to be a cave woman, she thinks. The sense of the lumber man’s presence strong on her flesh. Primal and clear. She goes to loosen her shorts, and as she crouches down, realizes she is looking at a six-foot-long rectangular depression. She feels the breeze on her buttocks and knows she is doing something terribly weird, even if it’s accidental. She straightens up, surprised. Next to that depression is a second long one. Clearly, they are buried wooden coffins. Their tops have collapsed. She kneels, alarmed, knowing they must be family graves, side-by-side like married people—wouldn’t they be married, to lie like that?—from some abandoned farm. Some hamlet that no longer exists.

She imagines them lying there next to each other under the moss. Their faces, fallen aside to stare at one another, even out here, underground, lovers, she is sure of it, here in a final place, where no one will ever see. The moss dampens her legs, her thighs, her buttocks. They’ve been sleeping out here together for a hundred years. Maybe even longer, in the damp earth. Our time is over, they seem to say. Our time is always here, in this place where we spent our lives. Her eyes fill with tears; she’s deeply grateful that they’ve shown themselves to her. It’s as if they’ve given her a pep talk, or someone has put an arm around her shoulder, in reassurance. Simple peace. This is so far from what she and Jordan will ever have, she thinks. We would never be like this.
In the distance, like a lodestar, Ted is blowing the car horn, whose sound crosses the air like a predatory bird, a raptor of civilized family behavior.

When she finds him, he’s sitting in the front seat of the SUV, ready to go, eating a salami sandwich. He offers her a beer, and they chew together, watching the noontime sun and the stream which now has tangled nylon filament in wads dangling on the shrubs around it. His hearing aids are drying on the dashboard, like mildly disturbing little pink animals.

“You doing all right?” he says. He speaks loudly because he can’t hear, probably not even the distant muttering of the stream on its rock bed.

“Sure,” she tells him. Vigorously nodding her head. He offers her another sandwich, and his eyes are kind. She will never tell anyone about the place in the woods. The lovers, lying with each other.

“You’re awful quiet, Bethie.”

“I think I’m finished with Jordan,” she hears herself say.

“Oh?”

“Yeah.”

He nods, looking secretly pleased, as if he doesn’t want his approval to show. “You won’t break my heart over that,” he says.

“It isn’t going anywhere,” she says. Somebody else will have to save him, she thinks. It isn’t going to be me.

“Sometimes you just have to get up off your knees, honey pot,” he says. There’s a dab of mustard by the side of his mouth, and she points to her own cheek with her finger to indicate he should wipe it off. He scowls and does. Then he brightens up. “I can’t believe we didn’t get a single goddam fish,” he says. “Not a single goddam one.”

It was the noise, she wants to tell him. Or the fate of the fish to be saved. Or you can’t even hear that you sound like a tractor trailer. It was only true. He pats her arm and limps down to the shore to collect his tackle boxes. Together by the water’s edge, they pick their clusters of tangled line off the bushes to leave the stream pristine. She is thinking about the man in the truck, who still hovers around her like some electric communication that will not go away. Some gift of possibility. She does not dwell on the two mossy places in the woods, the lovers who smile at each other underground. That is some other message she will take up later.
The fog in these hills
made us liars. You know
how it comes rolling in
just after supper, cold
and sweet, scarving
round our shoulders, slipping
past calves, porch
rails, like those steel blue
lizards you boys used to
catch. Wisps of
cotton, we meet at the
courthouse tracks,
of all places. Makes me
chuckle. I am not old
enough to be your mother
but I suppose I could be
something better than
your queen, the white
eyes in the dark watching
you lie. I wish we
drove coal like Washington
and Richmond think. It
looks like a stone. What
was it they said, boys—
bouts the company
you keep? Still,
you work. Teen-aged

biceps like glowing turnips
in a basement bin, fresh
and bitter already. I profit

only because your
daddies didn’t. But I
profit. And the truth is

that I love each
of you, that even as I hold
my jar—our jar—to

your lips, I imagine
each of you
on a separate train,

the sweet ball-tops
of your baby heads cocked
against glass, leaving

this county like the finest
we make.
Jacqueline Jones LaMon

The Fallacy of Thought

for Trayvon Martin

Objects in this mirror appear
larger than they ever could have been,
appear hooded and menacing
in this labrynithed perfect world.
Let us define an object. Yes.
Let us define the reflection
of what we believe is there.
Let us dissect the meaning
of hood—location, covering,
that which protects and serves.
Let us deconstruct the fallacy
of size—how distance yields
distortion while embodiment
harbors the truth. Let us
walk around our streets
and identify our steps as home-ward bound. We claim to fear
the other, the images of prime
time, brand names and swagger,
angles and arc, our fleeting
control, the creation of all we fear.
Let us define the size of our hearts
in direct proportion to our hatreds,
our coolness, our triggered
reflex. Let us turn around,
see the world that we created,
distortions removed as excuse,
our shattered selves in focus.
That night, light snow left an aura
on the landscape. My father’s
moon, mathematical, rises
and pulls tide beneath the ice, groans
past late December’s dusk.

My father’s head
washes up on the pillow, his skin
glints in the hospital heat, the neck
of the cold river bronchial and narrowing.
The hiss of his chest, snarled in knots along
a taut tinsel of oxygen. He was
no longer talking to us on the hoarse
side where more and more nothingness
gathered about his bed.

Right in front
of us, he must have floated out
to the Damariscotta River, tidal
and glacial, at the shore of spruce fir
the phosphorous blurred edge
all we had left
just before the cold green line
flattened his lungs and froze him shut.
Jennifer Luebbers

[I do not want to say anything about that April]

or how, in the month after, the Gallagher boy’s thumb snapped off when the rope wrapped around it in a game of Tug-of-War—when he dug his heels in and pulled. I do not want to speak of the newspapers piled up on your parents’ porch, or of the details our mothers whispered over fences: a dorm room closet, a rope. Our mothers took the papers away, left casseroles baked with Panko crumbs in their place. Now, they say your mother swallows little pills to sleep. I can see your father’s car back down the drive in the morning and pull into the garage at night. It’s been a year, Jake, and since you’ve left, the Gallagher boy’s learned a new way to hold a pencil. He’s learned to deliver papers: roll, rubber band, launch them across lawns. They slap our porches in the morning. Evenings, new parents circle the block with strollers, and at night, rain scrolls off rooftops, along the gutters and into the garden. I do not know what to say about grief, or how to make it go, but I do know a few things worth reporting: how, for instance, the grass in the backyard where we ran seems lit from inside, or how a hose’s arc of water recalls the corona of piss you sprayed, one summer, from the shed roof into the afternoon heat. Jake, your parents have left your fort in the ash tree. Other neighbor kids will come climb in it, swing again from its knotted rope. Our garage doors will always go up and they will always go down. Sometimes, it’s no one’s fault.
Applause for the boy, when he’s stolen home, how sliding in, the tines of his fingertips brush the plate in the same fine furrows
dusking the face of his mother, who he notices, gets no applause,
nor the boy for his daily drills, doubling down—dressing the father, tucking his chin,
quilted batting, all of his free-swinging whims—holding out, in place
on his father’s side of the bed, the boy hugs the line of his mother’s spine. Unmanned,
she sighs from the base of her back, the boy crowds close, his gangly knees
still pulling their raspberried plates, still growing—applause for the boy,
given his position: a wonder he does not think, but leans his father’s twin frame

back. Once settled, the boy breathes slow with his mother beside him,

his father’s bedside—he sees them beside themselves, for they are not able to touch, nor the father to clap—can’t touch on the laud they want

for this boy, no applause is enough
Al Maginnes

Elegy for a Name

those wings

might cough from scarred wood
and write themselves back into history.
—“Homochitto,” Jake Adam York

Because we are far enough south that birds linger all winter, chancing weather’s random furies,
we keep the bird feeder filled. If I walk outside, they slap into sudden flight, wings patting soft
and sudden as golf course applause. From clawed limbs of neighbor trees, they chorus raw protest,
one-note songs bitter enough to shred the gray shirt afternoon wears, to razor the clouds and drop the rain
that has threatened all day. Somehow I believe your poems could name each bird’s different song.

But you aren’t here. I never got to tell you about the AA meetings in the city’s oldest AME church,
a building you could place into the history that runs under brick and glass, that reaches back
further than the year a cornerstone was set to demand we know what stands before us.

That history is built with words from gravestones, radios grinding white static, from dust,
moon-glisten of scales on a fisherman’s arm,
from vellum and hot grease, King James and acres

of sky where our infinite questions land. History may
find language for the absence, still unhealed,

where a billboard once proclaimed,
“KKKK Welcomes You to Smithfield.”

Outside town, roads divide like veins, force you slower,
the CD on repeat warbling the lonesome woes

of the backdoor man or the chest-thumping brag
of a true-to-the-game player. And in the dark note

of a song’s ending, birds rise, shift in brief clouds
of their own making, then tremble and vanish

in sky where no history stays written, where
your not-quite-forgotten name still echoes.


Note: “KKKK” stood for “Knights of the Ku Klux Klan” and was at the bottom
of a sign on U.S. Route 70 at the city limits of Smithfield, North Carolina,
which read, “Join & Support United Klans of America Inc.”
Ashley Anna McHugh

Memento

for my sister

Not everything was buried with the dead, and here, all that we salvaged, then forgot, lies under a hornet’s nest, in a windy shed:

Baskets of silk hydrangeas, weak with rot, beside her china; his pressed and folded flag; a sun-withered landscape in an ornate frame; our stuffed toys bulging from a plastic bag—.

Once, all of this was loved, before it became a reminder of love, but now, beside the creek, where swarms of tiger lilies toss in the wind, mosquitoes walk the still, the stagnant waters—

and locked in this shed, of which we hardly speak, are all the fears of two reluctant daughters who found no comfort mattered in the end.
Omen

We who once were promised grand French doors
would fall, for us, wide open to a garden—
who would have plucked the hyacinths and roses,
who would have been forgiven all our losses—.

We who were left to these long corridors—
and although every knob we tried was golden,
no latch lifted. We to whom the evening comes,
and we who watch rats swallow all our crumbs.

Should we forgive ourselves, these long years later?
Who drift like dust in the violet light, who loiter
in the only unlocked room and have not spoken,
who cower among wallpaper posies, caged
in the owl-light shadow of a crib?

    Moon-edged,
    our mobile darkly stirs—bereft, but unbroken.
Aubade in Winter

Clouds heavy the horizon, deep and cold,
but another birdless dawn, its dark fool’s gold,

falls over my leaden eyes. My skin feels tight.
Black pins dance against an egg-shell white

in the wincing air—a thin knife sharpening—
and the whetstone bones of me scrape metal, sing.

Sweat-salted, you breathe the dark. *Come here,* you say.
But red horses rear, their hooves ash-grey, and day

drops like a blade, and I’m cut down by fear—.
Deep in this bone-bleak room, beside me: *Here,*

and turning, you lay your mouth against me, hot.
You bear the world’s dead weight when I cannot.
Richard Newman

Ode to the Urban Mulberry

Our mothers told us you were poisonous
so we might not come home stained with summer.
Junk tree. Weed grown thick as an old man’s wrist.
We yank you from our gutters, gardens, lawns,
and sidewalk cracks you widen into grins
and toothless yawns.

Mutt plant—genitals dangling purple, black,
red, pink, and white. You sticky the very ground
from which you sprang. Slut fruit. Jackberry,
prized only by the innocent,
your leaves like mittens in the lost and found.
You seed, you burst—even between our bricks
you feed on air and mortar and won’t relent.

A galaxy of gnats twists in your shade.
Birds love to scattershit you on our cars.
We hose you off as Kool-Aid rinse. Craptree.
One neighbor exorcised a hard life’s worth
of hate on you with saw and axe.
Your white strain crossed both oceans, took up root
to feed your leaves to fussy Chinese silkworms,
then spread through shit of rats, raccoons, and possums
and bumbled up with native reds and blacks.

While walking home, we check that no one’s watching,
reach over a neighbor’s fence or through the bars,
and pluck your ripest, darkest fruit—sweet,
insipid—so little taste for all your stains
on fingers, tongues, then gone, a moment
of summer, sweet poisons pushing through our veins.
An Act of Concealment

In August, 1920, two newlyweds descended the stairs of the railroad car that had brought them to Huron, South Dakota. They took in the hot, flat landscape, and realized at once that there was no lake. The husband, Paul Emile, had accepted the teaching position there because of the presence of a wide body of water which he would later learn was one of the Great Lakes, and considerably to the north and east of where he then stood with his wife, Anna. He had grown up on the shores of Lake Geneva. Living by water was necessary for serenity of spirit, he believed. Waiting for their taxi to take them into town, breathing the dry, dusty air, he thought the place he looked at was nothing like home. He was disappointed.

Anna wasn’t. She was safe. What happened to her five years before would never happen here. The Turks had removed her family from their villa in Constantinople. They were not forced out into the countryside to die, as so many others were, because her father was a jeweler by trade, and not considered any sort of political threat, but into a far poorer neighborhood than they’d enjoyed before. The house they came to occupy was much smaller than the first, which had had a long stone balcony overlooking the Bosporus where Anna played as a child and later sat as a young woman dreaming of lands that lay beyond her line of sight. In time the only land she dreamed of was America, and she’d arrived. Now all there was to do was make the best of it.

They’d secured a cottage near the campus of Huron College. Whoever had lived there before had had a fondness for drink. Empty bottles were set neatly on the dusty windowsill. One bore the label Uncle Oscar’s Pick Me Up—A Tonic For Well Bred Ladies. Anna removed the cork and brought the open vessel to her nose. All she got was a faintly floral smell. The bottle was nicely shaped—slender at the neck, wider in the middle, and then tapering again to the base on which it sat.

As she turned the bottle over in her hands, the tiny diamond in her wedding band flashed in the light. Theirs had been a Catholic ceremony, in a church on a narrow, quiet street. Paul so handsome in
his long coat and combed-down hair. Only one of his five sisters, Marie, made the trip south from Le Lac, the Swiss village of his birth. Unlike her brother, she was short and thick, with a stubborn, sullen gleam in her brown eyes. Like a cow’s, those eyes, Anna thought. Marie came to serve as Anna’s maid-of-honor. It was not up to the bridegroom to choose who would fill that role, but Anna let him, to the pain and quiet sighs of her own two sisters. She let him do anything. She had waited a long time for a proposal. She was thirty years old.

She brought the bottle into the kitchen and put it by the sink. She lifted and pumped the iron handle until a stream of brown water flowed from the faucet. There was nothing to stop the sink with, so Anna released the pump. A list formed in her mind of things to buy in town, things she hoped the college would reimburse them for.

Paul had the same thought. He believed in counting pennies. The coat he’d worn at his wedding had been borrowed. Anna’s ring belonged to his dead aunt, a fact he didn’t share with her, though Marie obviously knew. He’d sworn her to silence. He told her she was such a big help to him growing up, though in fact she hadn’t been. Marie was five years older than he, unmarried, generally lazy. She served tea in a small establishment with pink and gold wallpaper that catered to better-off women in Geneva. She was also gullible and susceptible to flattery. Anna wasn’t. His praise and kind words were accepted without so much as a flicker in her black eyes. He loved those eyes. Her steel core made other means of persuasion necessary. Sex had proven to be the answer. He hoped she would soon be pregnant.

Anna continued her inspection of the house. There were two bedrooms, the one in front faced east, the one in back faced west. There were no curtains in either room. The bathroom was next to the kitchen. The tile floor was missing here and there, and the mirror above the sink was cracked. Anna examined her reflection in the mismatched glass. Her face split just above her mouth, so that above the line she was herself, with no way to speak, and below, she was only words. I’ll have to figure out what that means later, she thought, and then forgot all about it.

Paul went to campus every morning promptly at nine, although courses wouldn’t begin for another week. He wanted to become well acquainted with everyone in the French Department. The Chairman had taken particular interest in Paul’s doctoral thesis, written while he was an instructor at the American University in Constantinople where Anna was a secretary. The topic of Paul’s dissertation was Denis Diderot and his philosophy of enlightenment. The Chairman, Donald Plake, had never
been to France. His son had died during the Battle of the Somme. In Paul Emile he saw a second son, someone his own might have become given time and opportunity. Professor Emile was no doubt highly cultured, Professor Plake said during the staff meeting he’d held just hours before Professor Emile arrived in Huron. In person, Professor Emile exceeded Professor Plake’s expectations. All that old world charm! The slight bow of greeting. The heels of his polished shoes always lined up side-by-side as he stood, absolutely straight. He’d won a medal for marksmanship, Professor Plake told his wife. And it was so easy to see him, his hand steady, nerves calm, not a drop of sweat on his brow.

In truth, Paul was given to bouts of melancholy that left him anything but steady and calm. He was a fearful man. He suffered from unnamed slights and insults, and took his misery out on Anna, sometimes refusing to speak, other times flying into a childish rage. Her own father had had an uneasy temperament. Anna tolerated Paul’s bad humor. She was willing to bide her time, and wait for the episode to pass, which it always did, most quickly after a soothing cup of tea and a little story she shared from her own past.

Her most recent tale was of a lost button. A small pearl button on her favorite blouse, held in place with fine silk thread. After leaving the house on the Bosporus, with their money all but gone, replacing that button was impossible. The finery she once enjoyed glimmered for a moment in her eyes, though Paul, sunk in despair over the sudden laughter from one his students—and on his first day in the lecture hall, no less—didn’t notice.

Anna’s only choice was to find a fake pearl button, easy to come by in any notions store. The man who sold it to her said it matched the others perfectly. Anna, with her damaged shirt in hand, agreed.

*It’ll be your secret,* he said, as he put the button in a paper bag. But Anna wasn’t sure. Her mother had sharp eyes. So she removed all the buttons and sewed the fake pearl at the bottom, where the shirt was usually tucked into the waistband of her ankle-length skirt.

Paul’s spirits lifted a bit, as Anna said her mother never knew a thing. He liked the idea of concealment. He lived on it, in fact.

He was nearly found out the first week in Huron, when their neighbor marched in, pie in hand, to welcome them. Paul and Anna were unpacking, the afternoon quite warm, hence the open front door. The neighbor stopped by the sideboard and said she’d never seen a candelabra quite like that. Paul explained what it was used for.

*It belongs to my wife,* he added.
Anna thought he was silly. It might have been important in Switzerland, or even in Constantinople, but out there, in the American West, who would care? Paul didn’t relent. It had to be this way. He couldn’t risk the College learning the truth and taking issue with it. He said that his family had always practiced in secret. To their friends and neighbors they were strict Calvinists, which is what he’d indicated on his application for employment at the College.

So, the menorah became hers, and she the Jewess.

She passed on her deep olive complexion, black hair, and knowledge of Middle Eastern cuisine.

Sometimes she requested items from Mr. Norquist, the green grocer, that he didn’t stock or even know. One such item was eggplant. She described it at length. Mr. Norquist turned red when she gave its size and the texture of its skin. He recovered himself by saying he didn’t have goods just yet for the chosen people but would see what he could do.

Another time she wanted grape leaves. Must be another Jewish delicacy, he told her. Anna didn’t mention that grape leaves were, in fact, used in a Greek dish called dolmas, because he wasn’t being unkind, only ignorant. She wasn’t mistreated, but regarded with curiosity, as an alien being.

She wasn’t alone. There was a family, a husband, wife, and two boys. The husband repaired musical instruments. The wife painted miniature landscapes. One of their boys recited poetry, the other had a flair for baseball. She was often asked, Do you know the Greenbergs? When she said no, she was occasionally given directions to their home, as if she wanted nothing more than to connect with other Jews.

Her neighbor, Britta Lund, lived one block over. Their back yards faced off across an alley. After the pie, they met again while hanging laundry. Britta’s red hair lay in a long braid down her broad back. She stood well over a head taller than Anna, but then everyone did. Anna barely topped five feet tall. She wore a size three shoe. These facts were later shared over a cup of strong coffee, after Britta called her a “tiny little thing.” They were in Britta’s spotless, stuffy kitchen. Britta explained that the window sash was broken.

“My husband got no time to fix it,” she said, with pride. Her husband, Lars, owned the town’s hardware store. He’d just bought the property next door and was expanding. Anna patted the perspiration from her forehead with a lovely linen handkerchief she’d embroidered herself. Britta admired it.
“I’d ask my son, but he’s under the weather,” Britta said.
“I’m sorry to hear that.”
“He needs his rest, Olaf does.”

Britta’s gaze wandered when she said this. She took in her entire kitchen, it seemed, and settled on her plump, red hands, folded in her lap. She sniffed. Anna suspected that there were tears in her eyes. Her son must be quite ill, she thought. But no, because he was walking through the house just then, with a firm, strong tread. The front door opened and closed. Britta lifted her head. Her eyes were clear. She sighed. She looked relieved.

Anna was quick to deduce from what she overheard around town that Olaf, who’d been in the war, just wasn’t the same since coming home. Once a lively, cheerful young man, he kept to himself. Before enlisting, he was often seen behind the counter of the family store, in a crisp white apron, weighing out nails and giving advice on saw blades. Now he was seldom there. He walked, instead. Hours and hours of walking, followed by hours and hours of lying in bed. Britta wanted him to talk to Pastor Mueller. Olaf refused. Anna knew Pastor Mueller. Paul attended his Lutheran church. Paul had chosen it because the Calvinists weren’t represented in Huron. He was a bit sorry about that. He’d gotten so used to the Calvinists’ ways but thought the Lutherans were just as good, really. Sometimes Anna went along. People said it was strange for a Jew to attend a Christian service and speculated that perhaps Anna’s husband was hoping she’d convert. When Anna heard that, she found it rich. She had begun to develop a cynical edge about the arrangement she’d had no choice but to accept, the edge made sharper after learning about Olaf and the war, since Paul had sat out that same war, on account of Switzerland’s neutrality.

Olaf suffered from shell shock, but those words were not used. Like his mother’s suggestion that he needed rest, other people spoke of him in terms of being overworked, exhausted, run thin. Anna couldn’t believe that he was the only young war veteran in Huron who suffered thus, and in fact, he wasn’t. The difference was that other soldiers had someone pulling them along—a sweetheart, for instance, a wife, sister, or mother. Always a female, Anna noticed. And since Olaf was unmarried and an only child, the only one who could fill that role for him was his own mother. Britta didn’t want to interfere with his life, she said, in a moment of surprising candor once again over a laundry line.

“He will find his own way,” she said firmly, pulling a pair of men’s flannel underwear from the line and throwing them into her basket.
She and Anna hadn’t been talking about Olaf but about the weather. Britta said that with the first cold snap they now felt on their cheeks, it wouldn’t be long before the men would want to get out their cross country skis and make sure they were ready for winter. When the snow fell hard, as it quite often did, Britta assured her, the only way to get around town was on skis. Olaf was a fine skier, she said. Once, as a young boy, he’d made his way all alone to a neighbor’s out in the country to check on them after a blizzard. The family hadn’t been seen in town and had no telephone. So, off Olaf went, before anyone could gear up and come along, too. The family needed medicine for their daughter, down with fever. They were in Olaf’s debt to that day.

Olaf crept into whatever conversation his mother had sooner or later, Anna noticed. The husband, Lars, whom Anna had spoken to only at his hardware store when she’d gone first to buy picture wire to hang a portrait of her mother, then a new broom and dust pan, and lastly a rolling pin, didn’t mention him at all, as if embarrassed—even disgusted—by his son’s frailty.

Soon Paul earned a reputation at the college for his teaching style and skill. He walked back and forth before the chalkboard, hands behind his back, head down, gazing at the dusty floor. His boots made tracks in that dust. His talk of man’s rational mind made tracks in the heart of those green farm boys—and a few farm girls.

Religion—and the fear of religion—is put aside!

Man must think for himself and find a reasoned balance, informed by the necessity of doing good—not for selfish motives, but only for practical gain.

The mind holds sway over all.

If they only knew that their professor was not himself a rational man! Anna couldn’t help being bitter. She was lonely, there in Huron. She missed her family. Her father had died some years before, and her mother sent imploring letters, begging her to come back. Anna replied that no return was possible and told her mother to have faith in the Virgin Mary. Anna’s own faith was no stronger than before, yet sometimes she removed her rosary from the green alabaster box that had been her wedding gift from an uncle she’d never met, and she said a few Hail Marys. There was comfort in ritual, she discovered once more. Something Paul knew, too, given the peace, however temporary, that descended upon him after reading the Torah.

Professor Plake invited Paul and Anna to his home to celebrate
Halloween. They had never celebrated Halloween. In Constantinople, the American University hosted a party every year, so they were familiar with the wearing of costumes. They recalled one young man who dressed as a bear and carried the head of his outfit under one arm when he got overheated. A woman in the style of Marie Antoinette lost her fancy wig in the fountain. Paul was nervous about attending the party. Groups made him uneasy. There were that many more chances to make a fool of oneself, he thought. He did so much better one-on-one. Anna said he should relax. He was doing very well. His students adored him. She’d heard nice things as she went about her errands in town. More smiles came her way, just for being his wife. She could see him trying to believe her.

On the day of the party, Paul took to his bed. He was sick, he said, though his forehead was cool. He refused to eat. Anna tempted him with roast chicken, his favorite. Finally he consented to take a bite. He propped himself up in bed and worried what would be thought of him for not coming to the party. Anna said she’d already called Professor Plake on the telephone.

“I told him you were indisposed. He was very sympathetic,” she said.
“You shouldn’t have done that.”
“Why not?”

Paul didn’t answer. Anna watched him struggle with himself over the lie she’d told on his behalf. Part of him was afraid of being found out. Another part was ashamed. He would not resolve the conflict, nor make peace with it. He would allow it to torment him until it was replaced by the next crisis.

But did one allow oneself to be tormented by guilt, she wondered? Or was it the case that one simply couldn’t avoid it? She never felt guilty, herself. She merely regretted certain deeds and circumstances. And hardness of the heart. Intractability. That was not one of Paul’s character traits. It was one of hers, and she was sorry she possessed it. She hadn’t always. She began life as tender-hearted as anyone. Yet at some point she became less kind. As a teenager, she saw the emotional cruelty her father inflicted on her mother. Then she saw what happened to her countrymen. Now she understood that her husband was a child, and rather than making her want to soothe and comfort him, she wanted to give him the back of her hand.

It’s all right to get annoyed, she told herself. You’re still a good wife.

She washed the dishes. A light was on in the Lunds’ kitchen. Olaf stood before the window gazing into the night. Anna shut her own
light so he wouldn’t see her there, gazing back. He poured himself a
glass of water and didn’t drink it. He gripped the counter. Anna could
see how hard he was holding it from the way his shoulders pulled
forward. He hung his head for a moment, as if it had become too
heavy to bear. Then he released the counter, stood straight, and left the
kitchen. A moment later Britta appeared to wash out the glass, dry it,
and put it in a cupboard. Her expression was grim. Anna knew how
she felt. She also lived with an invalid.

“But you must come. We always have the neighbors for a small
celebration,” Britta said. The Christmas season was upon them. Candles
burned in windows. Wreaths were nailed to doors—including Paul and
Anna’s—and a tree lot stood behind the courthouse with evergreens
from as far away as Wisconsin. Neither Paul nor Anna had had a
Christmas tree before. The idea was thrilling.

“I understand if you might feel out of place. But believe me, no one
will care that you’re not Christian,” Britta said, in a low voice, though
they were alone in Anna’s dining room, where the menorah sat on the
sideboard, with its burned down candles. Each night of Hanukkah,
Paul had made sure to have Anna draw the heavy curtains she’d made
herself before he lit the first candle and prayed.

“I can’t imagine how I’ll talk to them.” Anna sipped her coffee.
She was being wicked, and enjoyed it.

“My dear! You mustn’t worry. You get on quite well with me, now
don’t you?” Britta wore a pin with a blue stone that complemented her
round eyes nicely.

“All right then, I’ll be glad to. I can’t speak for my husband. He’s
often quite tired from teaching.”

“But the college isn’t in session? Surely, he could rest up before-
hand.”

Britta was keen for a closer look at this fine professor. Word of him
had spread. He was easily recognized in town, and sometimes people
approached him to say how much their son or daughter was enjoying
his course. Their words always brought his hand to the brim of his hat
in recognition of the honor paid him. Women, especially, watched him
as he came and went from campus to home on foot. He was a dashing,
handsome man, there was no doubt. Anna wondered if she might find
herself with a rival for his affection, then dismissed the idea at once.

As she had anticipated, Paul took to his bed again on the evening
that they were due at the Lunds’. She knew it was her duty to stay with
him, yet she refused. He sulked. She said she couldn’t let their neighbor down, that Britta was counting on her. Paul turned his face to the wall. Anna knew that she would pay later. He would refuse to speak to her for several days, communicating his needs only in writing. Then he would be contrite and buy her a little gift. These small (inexpensive) tokens of apology were collected on her bureau. A white vase, a silver pendant, a paper fan. Buying so often, and always for his wife, further enhanced his stature in the town. What a wonderful husband! How kind and loving! Some speculated, not always in private, that Anna was demanding and required frequent presents to keep her satisfied. One woman, the baker’s wife, not Scandinavian like so much of the town, but a bulky Russian whose apron was always dirty, whispered to her husband that Jews were often that way.

Anna wore a red velvet dress she’d sewn herself with material she bought with leftover housekeeping money. Paul hadn’t noticed her skimping; she was that skilled in the kitchen. She often bought day-old bread and used it as a crust over a pot of roasted chicken and vegetables the green grocery put on sale after two or three days. She spent a bit of money on dried spices, oregano and thyme, considered quite a luxury, but necessary to disguise the bland taste of food on the edge of going bad. It was worth the risk. She’d known luxury once long ago, and sometimes she just had to have it.

She pinned her luscious black hair with two large mother-of-pearl clips. She draped her amber bead necklace, strung on sturdy wire, not string, around her neck. Lastly, she fastened her mother’s cameo to her left shoulder. She was elegant, and knew it. She didn’t care if she put anyone to shame that night.

During her short walk, the falling snow collected on her hair. She found the snow exhilarating. She had never seen it before, and stopped to observe how it floated and swirled around her.

Britta took Anna’s coat quickly, almost roughly. There was trouble in the kitchen, she said. The dinner wasn’t coming out quite right.

“I hate to do this to you, on a night like this, but I don’t know who else I can ask,” she said.

Olaf stood at Britta’s stove, mournfully basting a tired-looking turkey which sat in an oval pan. He lifted the ladle slowly and poured a greasy broth over its pimply skin. He was dressed for the evening in a black coat and gray wool slacks. His blond hair was combed down flat. When Britta said his name, he turned and looked down at Anna with piercing blue eyes.
“Olaf, leave that thing alone, and let Mrs. Emile have a look.”

Anna felt the color rise in her cheeks. Olaf put out his hand for Anna to shake. His palm was dry and rough. He held Anna’s hand hard, almost painfully, crushing the band she wore on her right hand, designed from seven connected ovals, each inscribed with the symbols of the Greek Islands. The ring had been a gift from a man who’d once been interested in her, but eventually found her intellect too challenging, though the way he put it was that Anna thought she “was a little above herself.”

“Now go on and talk to the neighbors. Your father can’t do that all on his own,” Britta said.

Olaf released Anna’s hand. When he passed by her, she detected a clear scent of lavender soap. Anna turned her attention to the turkey. It had at least another hour to roast. She put it back in the oven, using two spotless white dishtowels to grab the handles of the pan.

“What else are you serving?” Anna asked.

Britta directed her to a bowl of puréed spinach. There was a platter of dried apricots and figs. Those were expensive, Anna knew. Britta had baked two pies and a cake for dessert. She had put out a plate of crackers and a very bland-tasting cheese which her guests had ignored, she said.

“Olaf can’t tolerate the smell of strong cheese in the house,” she explained.

“I see.”

Probably reminded him of rotting flesh, Anna thought.

“Do you think the turkey will turn out all right?” Britta asked.

“Oh, yes. There won’t be a problem.”

Britta drew in closer and said that she was overly nervous because Olaf had had a particularly bad day. One of the battles he’d been in had taken place on Christmas Eve, and the memories were pulling him down hard.

“Of course. I understand,” Anna said.

She could see Olaf, standing in the dining room alone, with a glass of something in his hand. He caught Anna’s eye. Then he was in the kitchen.

“Would you care for a glass of sherry?” he asked her. “We had it before the Volstead Act, don’t worry.”

“That would be lovely.”

“For you, Mother?”

Britta looked stunned.

“Thank you, son. Yes, I would.”

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When he’d gone, Britta said, “I never saw him be so chivalrous with anyone. I think he’s taken a little fancy to you.” Britta giggled. “Let him down gently, won’t you?”

“Of course.”

That might be hard, Anna thought. She thought Olaf was the most handsome man she’d ever seen. The way he looked at her made her feel like a gorgeous creature.

Which is what he took to calling her, when he slipped over to her house. His mother had to be out, or upstairs napping, for him to come. Otherwise, she might ask where he was going and why, he was that closely watched.

Anna served him coffee and biscuits, and she listened to him talk. He didn’t ramble. His thinking followed clear lines. While the war had changed everything for him, he wasn’t ready to give up on life. He was tired of despair. He had decided that even before meeting Anna. She tried to discourage his affection for her, without success. He was clearly smitten and said so.

“Maybe because it’s, you know,” he said.

“What?”

“That you’re a Jew. I never met one before.”

Anna stirred her coffee slowly with a small silver spoon—one of a set she had brought over with her.

“Drawn to the exotic then, are you?” she asked.

“If the exotic looks like you.”

He lifted her free hand and kissed it.

“You mustn’t do that. I’m a married woman.”

Olaf’s eyes grew dark.

“I’ve seen him, you know. Your husband,” he said.

“And?”

“And nothing. I don’t know what all the big talk is about.”

“He’s a hard worker.”

“Do you love him?”

Anna went on stirring her coffee.

“Do you?”

“You are guilty of impertinence.”

Paul’s mood was splendid. He’d received his first evaluation from Professor Plake, and couldn’t be more pleased.

“I think come fall, you’ll be married to an associate professor,”
Paul said. Anna watched him spoon out more of her lamb stew onto his plate. He sipped his cider. She noticed a small stain on his shirtfront. She didn’t mention it.

Anna pushed the food around on her plate. She set her fork down. She reflected on the New Year’s resolution she’d made.

Be steadfast.

Paul watched her.
“You’ve got quite a glow to you this evening, Anna,” he said.
“Have I?”
“Are you in the family way?”
Anna’s heart beat loudly in her ears, like the tide of an angry sea.
“I shouldn’t think so,” she said.
“Oh.”
She watched his mood darken.
“Are you sure you’re really trying?” he asked.
“Trying?”
“You know.”
“Yes, Paul, I’m trying.”

Another time, Olaf talked about the war. He’d killed men, that was to be expected, that’s what one was trained to do. He described stabbing a number of soldiers through the stomach with his bayonet. He’d witnessed terrible deaths and terrible injuries. Amputations done right there, in the trenches, out of necessity. He wouldn’t have minded losing a limb, he said. Not as bad as being left blind. He’d known many who lost their sight to explosions and shrapnel. It always struck him as odd that those men—all the men—needed their blindness before the war, not after.

They were in Olaf’s kitchen that time. Britta and Lars were away for the day. They’d taken the train to Sioux Falls to meet with a different hardware wholesaler. Better saw blades, Britta had said. Cheaper nails, too.

“Sometimes marriage is like war,” Anna said.
“How?”
“It can cause a sort of blindness.”
Olaf drank his coffee.
“I’d suggest that being married might alter one’s vision,” he said.
“What do you mean?”
He looked amused, highly pleased with himself, in fact.
“He doesn’t see you well enough, and you see him too clearly.”
That Olaf had learned her secret without her telling it outright made her adore him even more.

No note was left as to where they’d gone, nor why, but the town knew soon enough. Olaf cabled his folks and said not to worry. They were in Chicago, where he planned to go into the restaurant business. He’d told Anna in confidence that he’d made a little money on the black market during the war. It would see them through until they made money of their own. The restaurant would serve Greek and Armenian food, something Anna was naturally well-versed in. Olaf had been shocked to learn that she was an Armenian, for they were a Christian people. Anna told him the truth. She hoped he wasn’t disappointed. He wasn’t. He didn’t care what god, if any, she prayed to.

She took little away with her. Her jewelry, of course, and the prized alabaster box. A mixing bowl she particularly liked, decorated with blue stripes. A book into which she’d pressed flowers years before in Constantinople for luck.

She left her wedding band, which she’d known all along had belonged to Paul’s aunt, on the base of the menorah.
Grief is probably the reason,
but maybe details are so thin
because everybody knows what isn’t said
and the writeup is only tradition.

Our beloved son and brother
has gone to be with his Lord.
He was happiest driving a truck at harvest.

He was known to let the farmers’ children
ride along in the fields,
three at once sometimes, and share
his licorice vines and lemonade.

He knew that hauling other people’s
corn and wheat from field to co-op
kept him free from what he saw
his parents and brother sinking under.

He liked collecting guns
repeating rifles, military sidearms
from the world wars, and a few shotguns
although he didn’t care to hunt
and tinkering with his old cars
a whole fleet of turquoise lacquer,
fins and chrome, nothing newer
than 1965.

Any one of them, he said,
could take him anywhere he wanted
even if he never went.

He is survived by loving parents,
his brother, niece, and nephews
and will be missed by all.

Even the neighbor who forgave him
years ago for cracking a water line
when he got too close to the well house
William Notter

with a loaded truck. Still
he felt guilty every summer
when he saw the seep it made.

He looked forward every year to marching
in the veterans’ parade, and would appreciate
donations to the VFW post instead of flowers.

He used his favorite pistol,
the .45 he’d carried in Korea,
to go on his own terms, making sure
the cancer that was killing him would not.

He was cheerful to the end.
Derek Otsuji

White

An irruption of snowy owls this far south in Iowa this year has birders and biologists flocking to open fields, watchers wistful

in the dust-flown corners intent on learning what it might be that this apparition of soft sudden white is witness to—our

imperiled link to the arctic pristine. Tumbled from the tundra to the plains, keel of breastbone buffeted by hunger’s gusts,

the predator birds prowl highways, scouring mice-ridden ditches for what likeness of lemmings, their accustomed food, can be found.

And yet for all their raptor’s knowing, the lance of amber eyes, how they immolate themselves on altars of the modern world,

colliding with semi-tractors, and against power lines vulgarly flung, as if lifted on the crucifix of their decrying wings.
Sasha Pimentel

Bodies, and Other Natural Disasters

Six Jewish women are entering a bath, their breasts the only parts of their bodies fat enough to rise, and the cameraman, head down, remembers: the old woman was chanting a prayer. Cut scene. Now the men have been forced to bathe, and for lack of breasts we can see the hooked ribs, the canyoned stomachs, each shank delicate as a cockerel’s, and their beards curling down like the hair spilling above their soft, compliant penises. Each scene has been well-scripted: bathing, funerals, circumcisions, each practice of life in the ghetto commissioned for documentation, and it would seem like a movie, if only there weren’t corpses being walked over, that same group of people asked to cross the camera tiredly over the dead. The point is for the people to look heartless. Never mind who laid the bodies down, or who is directing the living behind the camera’s eye. They are faceless, free of noise as the women and men walking now, or washing and weeping, the Wehrmacht inked only in their wet eyes each time these unpracticed actors look, accidentally, right into the lens. It’s night. My dog has screwed his body into my husband’s foot. Here, the untouchable blue of sifted light rises, like skin straining to a church’s windows. I am watching each fragment of film silently, the captions black tags of context, though the two-pound boy (the cameraman calls him an actor) held quietly, his skin marbled like a ham, is context enough. The quick neat blade, blood dark as chocolate after. I never learn if the boy lives, though I really should.
ask, lives after what? Survive the circumcision, suffer working the graves: your uncle, brother, the girl who hid crackers in her waistband whom you could have loved, if only her jaw wasn’t cymbaling her teeth now, her face in the skull barely visible. Ashes still fall in the Philippines from Pinatubo, sinking to desks like dandruff. We watched the powder drifting above us, thought at last we were witnessing snow. We were kids, what did we know. We only held our palms open, crying for our mothers to look, look. In Miyagi, the tide arches like the eyebrow of an angry woman. Walls break, people run, and in the middle of this, I imagine a girl, also baring her expectant palms, her life line, love line, crevices seeking water. I have woken without the sun, only these fragments of film strobing to light the edges of our room: dog here, tail of a cat cresting like a wave before it drops, with the rest of its body, off the bed. I cannot see the entirety of my husband’s shape, only the rising and falling of his rest. What passes above me, I cannot name, though I recognize it partly as grief, partly as thirst, and in my soreness, I remember my mother stitched secret pockets in my pants. She hid coins, notes, pressed the paper and cold circles to my skin. My mother practiced safety, taught me to fear each dark sedan pulling near the sidewalk, so when my brother dropped with fever once, I laid his head on my lap, refused every neighbor who tried to lift him up. Memories jolt us in the marrow of night like thirst. Take care, we say, be aware and wary, tug the latex tightly down the tip, and in Chartres I traced the impossible spirals, for how could such builders have taken care? My mother walks the emptied rooms in the house of my puberty, dragging her fallen leg. Her husband and children have left. It’s just your dad works so much, she says, Easters, Christmases,
Sasha Pimentel

Saturdays and Sundays. She whispers to me the few times I call, pressing her cell to her mouth, those lips which dripped syllables to ease my bruises, and the odor of VapoRub weighting the dark, my mother snuck from her husband’s bed. We call now to mix stories of cooking and cats, our throats soft to talk at all, and when I travel out of country, she knows not to listen for my ring. The last time I saw her, I was taking her home to bury her brother. Our women wailed like the ocean, though we never saw the water beyond the plane. Bodies stack upon bodies, the tide withdraws its claim. She says, mag-ingat ka, anak, the Wall Street Journal says the drug war’s crossing El Paso, don’t you know minimahal pa rin kita?, and I keep my borderland from her, say nothing of our yielding necks. She must see the mounding dead here like a movie as I screen now these fragments: the fingers shucked their whorls, the slow collection of teeth. She turns the gas knob off, twelve times. Then each light switch, a mother’s dozen. She has learned to take care so carefully, her eye twitches with each winding danger. And there should be danger, for all we’ve done.

Cut back to the women bathing: the old woman’s lips, two bees. Their breasts, still beautiful, are sickled as waning moons, and the grays of their bodies shift as they sink, deeper, their skin. In the middle of night and rising water, all we have is prayer.
Wesley Rothman

Oyster Elegy

I shucked dozens of oysters
    the day I learned to shuck.

    The palm is engineered
    for the contour of an oyster
to clutch so firmly
    its circumference, to wedge
delicately. The blade splits
    its meat and your finger’s.

When shimmying wider
    the gap, I thought divorce
forcibly separating one
    half from its other

slicing some artery
    lifeline of flesh or cartilage
from the hull like birth
    when death may have

fit more snugly. Embarkation
    from the familiar—town,

    lover, value, smell—
carries a miniature death
like large hands
tombing the lost sparrow.

The oyster’s severance
package: eviction and exile
to gnashing teeth,
a cave and constant tunnel,
such turbulent seas
mashing, crushing it
like discarded shells, fragments,
stones ground to grain
found pearling, locked
in a chamber of muscle.

When tissue goes
through the chipper,
grains dissolve
and nothing becomes
nothing while something
drifts away on a raft
slung together, a raft
of ratty memory, digesting
the past, ingesting
grief and meat.

An oyster opens wide
her mouth, offering
you her tongue.
Lucinda Roy

At the Aberdeen West African Fistula Center, Freetown

The young woman with the fingerprint-whorl braids sits on the bed under the window. She does not speak much but she is happy. Now men in her village will know her again. Infants will hold her hand.

The girl with the fingerprint-whorl braids woven by a woman’s dexterous fingers sits on the bed under the window, barefoot but dressed in her best clothes. She does not know what to say to these women visitors who come and go speaking of the unnatural flow of urine and feces, nodding when the doctor describes the operation. But the girl is happy not to be a leper. She will not stink anymore. Men in her village will call her name. Children will call her “Mother.”

The child with the fingerprint-whorl braids woven by a mother’s weary, dexterous fingers (which moved across her daughter’s pretty head with more tenderness than other fingers, making her daughter believe she can be happy) this child sits on a bed and speaks shyly to the female visitors who talk of obstetric fistula as if it weren’t a clawing fist but instead a thing domestic—these wrist-watched, unencumbered women who move on with the doctor have seen what they came to see: you—a mended mother,

Note: Obstetric fistula (a hole between the birth canal and other organs) is common in many parts of Africa where women give birth without access to medical care. The resulting discharge often leads to sufferers being ostracized by their communities. The condition is readily treatable with surgery.
Lucinda Roy

sewn up and ready for the next round of birthing,
going back to your village whole, your stench no longer taunting you,
the foul hole closed, the leak plugged, the plumbing as good as new.
As a child-mother of stillborns, all you have left to focus on now
is this repaired flesh, sutured and pink, healthy and healing and muscular.

The glorious absence of effluence, the eagerness to tell the boys no.
He walks into the sky. He carries a basket of earth on his back. He follows the basket on the back before him. Second trip of the day and they don’t speak. Heat rises with them. Time for ten trips today. Up and down the ramp. Back and forth across the plaza, from borrow pit to Sun’s Mound, rising. At least the engineer didn’t say today was a day to carry the red clay. Or the flagstone. It’s too early to wish he were a digger in the pit filling baskets instead of bloodying his feet. Shredding his shoulders. For now, before the hotter heat and the higher sun, he is strong. He is chosen, along with those before and behind and those lighter and empty, descending. They are chosen to raise earth to sky and their people to the Sun by doing what cannot be done and rising and rising and rising. He stands atop the mound where he could not stand without a basket of earth. He stands where the holiest stand and sees what the holiest see—the day expanding westward across the mighty river, the hunters hunting in the flat woods, the hot eye of morning rising over half-day bluff, and past the old low southern burial mounds and the borrow pit sinking and the ever-buzzing marsh to where he can’t see. He empties his basket of black earth on top of the black earth of other emptied baskets and his earth makes no difference in the height of the earthen mound and yet day-by-day, basket-by-basket, the mound grows higher. The mound they build is the highest and they build it higher. A home for the Sun to bless them from. The heat is good. As he turns he tries to pick out his hut among the huts or his wife among the corn but he can’t because he is too high and not holy enough and sweat is in his eyes and he is not yet a grandfather dead in the sky. He climbs down basket-empty to climb up earth-full and do it again, more tired than before.

He climbs up the steps. Fifth time today. If he makes twenty, he’ll have done 2000 feet. Or some-odd. Maybe he’ll do twenty-five.
If the mound were as tall as they say it was once, twenty times’d net him 3000 some-odd feet and he wouldn’t have to think on twenty-five. Though then he might just do fourteen. All conjecture. Doctor told him to get some blessed exercise, and he figures that is about the one thing he can do in this swamp of not-knowing and being done-to and undone, so he is doing it, his own way.

First plateau again. Bit of flat before another up.

None of the tourists know he goes up-down up-down up-down all morning and afternoon if he feels like it everyday. Or they know the up-down, but then they go. He passes them while they climb, while they read signs, while they stand at the top looking for something to look at, while they descend. They smile and nod and go—when there is any they. This isn’t the pyramids. Rangers know of him. Must, here daily, like it’s their job. It’s their job. So what if they know. So what if they have a job. He has exercise. He had a stroke.

Did the ancients use walking sticks when climbing the mound? He’s not sure what kind of man needs a walking stick to walk. You just move your feet one front of the other. An old man might need a walking stick. But he is not old. He is old, compared to how old people used to get. Maybe are designed to get. He wishes he were old.

Doctor said to use the hiking poles. That they’d give him a more thorough workout. Okay. That they’d save his knees on the way down that blessed mound however many times a day if that’s the way he had to do it. Okay. He didn’t need to pay for knee trouble too. That they’d ensure he doesn’t fall. He doesn’t believe in insurance and what kind of man falls climbing a hill? But okay. He does the hiking poles. Pansy, but that doesn’t stop him.

His tremors don’t stop him.

Thirty-five some-odd degree rain blowing horizontal in his face doesn’t stop him. Climbing in a monumental refrigerator he built back when he built refrigerators doesn’t stop him. Won’t see nobody up here today, which the opposite of stops him. Can’t see nothing from the top. Doesn’t stop him.

He walks away from the eternal fire and his council chiefs always hanging on the word he has yet to say like dogs begging a bone so he can stand atop his mound and look to where the chieftom’s sway ceases and be unable to see such a distance and hear the ancients if

Nick Stokes
they happen to have anything to say if they happen to speak. Which they might; it is windy. The sun setting behind him as he looks east. Cornfields. Last of the corn on the stalks. Women bent under sacks. Unable to carry more. Will it last? Many mouths for many months. Red corn, white corn, yellow corn, blue corn for private storage pits and public granaries. For him. For the Sun. Sun first and last. Squash in the fields yet. They must clear more fields this winter and plant more come spring. First chill of fall in the wind. Feels good. Except it blows his hair into his eyes. He turns into the wind, walks past the coyote-eyed council to the western edge of the mound, and faces the setting sun. The new bigger sky circle a mile away below him, new bigger posts in a new bigger circle blessed today by the new bigger sky reader. Equinox two days away and its celebration and the preparations consuming them. The wasting of food they’ll wish they had come spring equinox. Let them eat too much and throw the refuse to the dogs, let the dogs get fat, let them forget themselves and remember Sun. Eat it before it rots. Not all the harvest will last the winter. They’ll need their dogs’ fat. Maybe it’ll be a short winter. Maybe they’ll smoke more than they eat. Later they will smoke until they are not hungry. Wind rushes in his ears pulsing like blood from a neck. Not steady like water in the river. Men and women carry firewood on their backs. Going farther and farther to get it. More people return at the end of the day than left in the morning and this is supposed to invigorate him. A day’s trip to collect a load of firewood. Collecting firewood has become a trade, not a task. And so many. The men doing it. They dwell on winter. Or do they not have other tasks to do? What to do with all of them? They come offering themselves to the Sun. How to keep them busy: Doing, harvesting, building, offering. A dozen work through sunset building the west council chief’s new house. He knows they use the lumber of the simple homes razed to make space for the new house. He knows what needs knowing. The west council chief does not. The west council chief would not be happy. The west council chief is a fool with big ears and stunted children and ugly wives. But his grandfather. His home is built of better quality lumber by reusing the old than if they hauled in new. Children haul water from the creek in thick clay pots. The water keeps coming, always more water. People, streaming, pooling, flooding. His eyes are orange from the sun and dry from the wind. He shuts them. Dig a channel to direct their flow. Drain the swamps for planting. Equinox comes. They will be busy enough living through winter. And then the first star. Red. The first grandfather who stood on a hill in the sky. Almost close enough to touch. His
grandfather’s father completed Sun’s Mound. He will complete it again. They will build higher. Another level, on his mound. He will be higher. They will build themselves a mound and lift themselves higher and offer themselves. The land is flat; they will rise. He will rise. He is the Sun. He sees beyond his sway. He opens his eyes. The sun is set.

Can see plenty from the top. It’s no mountain with its head in a cloud. Can see the same as atop a ten-some-odd-story silo. Better than if it was a ten-story office building planted in the middle of other office buildings. Can see about as if it was a ten-story hill carved in relief by some god or glacier from the surrounding land it plowed flat by yoking itself to an unthinkable plow and lowering its shoulder and rendering the tractor obsolete long before there were tractors, flattening all other relief in a hundred-and-fifty some-odd square mile swath to cultivate some holy crop like corn or soybeans.

Except this is a monument made by men in the American Bottom and though he can’t see the Arch today he can see a few miles to the outer bank of the dump, the largest modern earthenwork structure in the county embarrassing the largest prehistoric earthenwork structure in the two American continents. Or maybe just one. Maybe just the one he’s on. Maybe it’s not called a bank. A levee. A shoulder. He knows nothing. He’s supposed to be walking. They don’t let you walk up the landfill, even though it’s filled, even though it’s where he belongs. So he walks up Monk’s Mound at Cahokia Mounds State Historic and World Heritage Site. He walks east along the northern lip of the topmost terrace to where there was once another terrace and a temple and perhaps a bit of the sun’s eternal fire long extinguished. Or so they say. He turns west and walks over his steps, which walked over his previous steps. He parallels the interstate below roaring in his ears louder than the wind blowing cold rain in his face so he sees nothing, he wishes as he walks, the cold wind and rain blinding him to the thousands of harnessed explosions a second hurtling and the muddy river of freight lumbering and the toy tires screaming on pavement. The rain blinding him, he wishes, leaving silence.

But still what lies to the west is not silence but the dump. The new monument. Full, overflowing, no space for another plastic bag. Shredded tires and dead automobiles and plastic blister tomato packaging buried and raised toward the sun. Full fill but in the rain in
his eyes they build it taller to exemplify their commitment, so someone else gets laid off; they are more inspired and faithful, so someone else gets laid off; they add to the monument, piling more and more spent goods, above all refrigerators and freezers and air conditioners, appliances that make cold, so someone else gets laid off. Appliances he used to make tower into the sky and fall and crash and pile in the bottoms along their angle of repose at the foot of the landfill tower. And so many of those appliances still work or could be fixed—he would gut and sacrifice a fifth for salvageable parts if someone asked him and perhaps paid him or just asked his hands to hold still. They make the air colder. The appliances of refrigeration rise, millions of rectangular mostly white or off-white or cream or occasionally night black or shit-yourself brown or catheter yellow or seashell green boxes stacked and rising and sometimes falling and still rising. The dump’s summit is now in cloud. The crests of its foothills climb the steps of his mound and lap metallically at his terrace, sheet metal clanking, power cords twining, sparks flying, compressors chugging, air chilling. He shivers warmly.

He could climb higher than the highest terrace, but he is cold and he’s supposed to be walking and he should be working and it’s warmer down among the refrigerators and this is such an honor, to be offered the chance to be holy, to become a refrigerator or air conditioner or freezer, to make of himself a salable convenience unavailable to people a hundred years ago when everything was hot all the time and spoiled like lightning and life was miserable but dreaming of betterment was a life skill, a technological convenience now discarded like pottery shards. Now it is hotter but cold can be bought, if you have a job, or at least money like any privileged minor god or CEO. He better seize the bull by the horns and finally make something of himself: an offering of refrigeration. It’s what he worked his whole life for, to be a relief to the masses and eternal cold storage for the sun. A stroke of luck: the opportunity to be a refrigerator. He will be such a small warm part compressed into this large cold monument that he descends the steps, leaning on his poles to save his knees, and enters the cold sea of appliances.

The water carrier carries a jar of water up the ramp before and behind other carriers of water, behind the carriers of the daily corn offering, white for north, yellow for east, red for west, blue for south,
before the carriers of goods for the Sun: fine tri-notched arrowheads, shell beads, fertility figurines, delicate pottery, and gifts from faraway chiefdoms, and before the bearers of wood for the eternal fire. Every time her brother returns home he asks, Is the eternal fire still burning? and every time she says, It’s the eternal fire. He says, It’s the eternal fire because they feed it wood hauled by me from clear up on the bluff and offered from all four directions to the end of this world. She doesn’t see the difference. She says, Yes, if we didn’t offer the Sun wood, we would live forever or not forever but as long as we live in cold black darkness. He says, We’d be dead. She says, Yes, we’d be in the Land of the Dead. He says, The mound is growing shorter. Is not, she says. Perhaps the Earth is rising, he says. You have more breath than on most days, she says, you should’ve hauled more wood today. She thinks he is tired from the two-night trips to haul back wood and not used to working and disappointed he himself is not already hauling wood up Sun’s Mound for the Sun’s offering. He hasn’t worked a full season yet, but he wants to work closer to the Sun and bring home a more prestigious portion of goods, which is what he should want. He is hungry. But he has to do his time. She has hauled water and hauled water and hauled water, first for their house, then for their Raven clan, then for their Eastern Chief, and she never tripped or spilled and they saw the reverence and humility with which she carried water and she moved up into vacated water carrier positions until she carried water for the Sun. 

A pot drops in front of her, shatters, splashes. The offering line pauses. A young woman steps out of line, faces her last sunrise, waits, and the line continues past her. The water carrier steps over the shards of a bird man in a puddle as she passes the ex-water carrier, who does not shiver in her wet feet. She stands with head up, with dignity, with empty hands, not shedding tears for this life or the spilt water or the pot that was worth more than she. She will be sent to the sky and serve the Sun well. There will be a new water carrier for the Sun on the mound tomorrow.

Anyone ever skied down Monk’s Mound? Maybe the monks. Oh fuck it, he doesn’t say because his mouth doesn’t work as well as once upon a time and he doesn’t want to be the guy who talks to himself with a half-limp mouth, them monks were deader than dust back when kids used to sled down it. Aloud, he would have said
those monks, but in his head he has a dialect. He sledged down it, hundred some-odd feet of hurtle and scream, back when there was a subdivision just across Collinsville Road, when they were building the interstate, when the porno drive-in flickered with lightning bugs on hot nights. Maybe that was later. He doesn’t remember. All in the past. He doesn’t remember anybody skiing down. Nobody he knew would’ve had skis. Let alone poles. They weren’t upper middle class and they lived in the god-blessed American Bottom of Illinois. People then didn’t need fiberglass poles to walk. He could be the first to ski down this mound. If he had skis. If he had money to buy skis. If he believed he could be the first to do anything on this mound. Summer sex among the mosquitoes: nothing. Thousands of people’d had sex on this mound, himself included, he thinks, and his wife isn’t one for sex. Not anymore.

All a long time ago.

Anyone killed themselves on top? Course they had. Best place for miles. Next best option’s jumping into the river from maybe Eads Bridge or Chain of Rocks. The Arch would be nice, but he doesn’t figure the windows open.

This figuring your jonesing for a monumental structure, which you are, it’s why they’re there. He doesn’t know why you’d be killing yourself if not from a monumental structure.

He laughs before he knows it.

There’s the giant Amoco sign off Skinker by Forest Park.

Indians would’ve done it. Might not have called it suicide. Did the Indians who lived here commit suicides they considered suicides? Sacrifice on a monument’s something else entirely.

He’s sacrificed enough. Declaring bankruptcy and giving up their home of twenty-five some-odd years to the bank for nothing, for the good of the country, and moving into a one-bedroom shitbox in the nice part of East St. Louis, for example. He can’t tell if his mouth is smiling or not, damn thing. One side yes and the other no, he figures.

Sacrifice is a word used to acquire meaning. But lots of reasons for sacrifice don’t have to do with meaning. Or they do, but in the opposite direction.

He’s at the bottom of the mound. He turns around and goes back up because he doesn’t have anything else to do. Sure as shit not going back to that apartment yet. And this is good for him. What he’s supposed to be doing. For his cholesterol and blood pressure and his heart. Even though strokes are in your head.
They pack the plaza inside the palisade. The palisade logs gleam. Logs not long peeled. Not yet weathered gray. The thousands undulate, push, flow like the mighty river against the mound and eddy off. He incorporates their energy until he is not himself but South.

North chants under his breath. East trembles like a child. West sways, eyes closed, a tree in the wind jostling East. He, South, floats.

Spring. Warm breeze. Time to plant. Air thick with pollen and the murmur of people below. Two baskets behind him, one with flint from the south, one with blue corn. A raven painted on his face in blue and black. The mound to where they will be borne then buried gleams white across the plaza beyond the chief’s burial mound and the southern palisade. They will lie in the southern mound between below and above, in the middle, holding the directions together.

Flames fly behind him and the people go silent. Red-winged blackbirds swarm above. Four ravens perch on the ridge of the council house on the eastern mound.

A great cry from the crowd and a yell from the Sun and North kneels and lays his hands on the block and the Sun chops off the hands of North who still chants unchanging as the Sun cuts off his head. West collapses. He is lifted and held by medicine men. East tries to run away but to where and why—they are on the mound halfway to the sky, the sea of hungry people below and the Sun above and all need sated and all deserve honor. East is held by medicine men and his hands and head chopped off by the Sun and his screams cease. West’s limp body is dragged to the block. His arms stretched out and his hands chopped off with the polished flint ax. His blood flows red and wet as the others’ no matter that he already vacated his body. Three medicine men lay West’s head on the chopping block. Two hold his torso so it doesn’t drag the head to the ground and one pulls his hair to expose and stretch the neck for a clean cut. The latter holds the head up after it is chopped off. The head’s neck drips but it looks not much different than before except dispossessed. The crowd’s chant strengthens. West’s other two medicine men lay the body on the litter for the procession to the burial mound.

He, South, steps forward with no assistance from the medicine men and lays his hands on the wet block. He flies in the sky. He is pure. He is chosen. To give his hands to the ground and his head to the sky and his blood to his people and his life to the Sun. The chanting swells and he
looks at the Sun and he sees the sun in the Sun and the axe falls and his hands aren’t his—they won’t move or tremble or twitch and there is his blood all over the block mixing with the others’ running on the ground and the pain where his hands were, his arms in the air, his hands still on the block until a medicine man puts them on a platter to deliver to the southern border. South holds his right arm up to the sun and his left out to his people and connects them through his pain, all the pain flowing into him from the ends of his arms. Birds have no hands. He flies. The eastern sun fills his eyes and his peoples’ cries fill his ears and his hands’ blood fills his nose as he lays his head on the red puddled block and leaves it there.

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He steps onto the top terrace breathing hard heart pounding sweating secret December secretions under his layers, and looks at the trees at his level and the fields at his level and the parking lot at his level. He is no higher than he began. He brought the land up with him. He’s not so tired. He is strong and ingenious and unprecedented. He leveled the mound, flattened it, graded it, and without a plow, like those called Cahokians, like they leveled their land that appeared flat but was not truly until they leveled a grand plaza on which to build hills. True level is not natural. True level is an achievement. From where he stands, the mound never existed. Each of his steps pushed the mound a step underground. He’d been climbing an ancient step machine. With the pole things you move back and forth. He redecides that he pulled the land up with him, even if that doesn’t rid him of the poles in his hands or their tremble. He buried Monk’s Mound, all the Cahokia Mounds and whatever was buried in them, even the interstate overpass and the abandoned Venture and the forgotten trailer park of the unemployed or unwanted or disposable and made a level place with nowhere higher to go. The land bears no relief. There is nowhere higher to go. He is no bird, no ever-present raven. No bald eagle wintering on the Mississippi. He descends from ground level to ground level and turns around to climb back up to ground level.

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She descends the mound slowly in the pouring rain, the Sun’s trash in a basket on her back and in other baskets on other backs before and behind her. She looks through the rain to what mounds
she can see to the south: those in the plaza bordering the palisade and just barely the burial temples on the mound built by the Sun at the beginning of time when they were great and strong and the gods rewarded them with the knowledge of how to build mounds, when not just the Sun walked among them but all the ancestors, and then she takes another step. They descend slowly. Slowly not because of the heaviness of the Sun’s trash—it is heavy: fine cracked pottery and broken shell bead jewelry and chipped flint arrowheads and barely worn deerskin shirts and foreign ceremonial totems that mean nothing to her and jars of mildewed offering corn and meat bones with bits of meat on them and still edible if soft squash and fertility figurines trashed because of the gift of new figurines that to her eye, admittedly a trash hauler’s eye, are not as well made—she and the other trash girls will pick through their baskets before they dump them in the pit and trade their findings with each other if it is mutually beneficial and say nothing to each other or anyone else about it to not offend the Sun and get their hands chopped off, though everyone knows it’s why their role is so prized, the enriching of their families form the Sun’s trash—even those coals, this ash, the bits of black they send down because the fire pit is ever filling, to clean the fire pit for wood sent in from distant settlements, will fill her fire pit and burn down yet further to cook whatever there is to cook and warm their hands even if it’s not enough to sweat in the lodge—what they will talk about is the word that today’s the day the cornfields along the creek began to flood, again, and how that doesn’t mean the fields’ productivity will go to the other fields, for yield is not something constant like sun or transferable like trash but something falling like rain. The trash is as heavy as she’s used to. She descends slowly to kill time. They descend slowly to make their task last and be considered a full job’s worth. Slowly to not finish early and be told to do something else to justify themselves. She shuffles slowly through the mud, pausing to look into the driving rain, the Sun nowhere to be seen, to bring the end of the day faster.

The sun wherever it is descends. The clouds stop spitting. The cars and trucks on the interstate roar west into the wind and roar east with the wind, pulling their rising then falling roar with them. They leave nothing behind but the wind and a dull monotonous
self-cancelling roar, like the wind. The sky is gray, the road gray, the
grass gray, the wind gray and he has nothing to say but what the fuck
but he doesn’t say it. Not in this place. Not with his mouth. He turns
to cross the terrace and descend the steps—maybe done for the day,
or maybe the day done with him. Time to be dead to the world and
rise again tomorrow, or not.

Over the top step bounds a red stocking hat and orange jacket
and blue snow pants running. There is a boy in that fuck you of color
somewhere. He stands with the poles, waiting, the boy approaching
then blowing by him to the lip of the mound and asking no one in
particular, the air maybe—

This is it?
In his head he answers without his thick tongue mangling—
Yes.
Sorry. You blend in.
I’m carrying poles.
Where’s your skis?
How you hope to hold a job disrespectin’ your elders?
My dad said there used to be a church up here. Lousy location for
church. No handicap access. You made it though, huh?
Not a church.
The poles help?
A living to be made.
You okay mister?
A temple. The seat of government, the house of the chief, the home
of the sun.
Least the sun’s in the sky, huh?
We are in the sky.
Sun’s not even in the sky today. But that’s winter I guess.
He won’t slur the boy or shame the dead or deform his thoughts
with his mouth. He dumps words into the necrosis in his head, the
lobe or whatever starved for blood—
I only know what’s told me. One thousand some-odd years ago,
one of the biggest cities in the world was here. Its peak was short and
remarkable, like a hill in the middle of nothing. Like cursing the sky.
Built this mound, biggest in the Americas, for the sun—
Cold up here, huh?
Words are clay and loam and topsoil and sand and gravel and
stone and refrigerators and garbage in his head. Words rise without
his slack jaw. Words pile basket-by-basket, mounding—
Platform mounds had buildings on top, government or homes of the rich and powerful. Cones and ridge mounds were for burying. Mounds were covered in white clay to shed rain. A plaza at center for play and work and ceremony. Suburbs in every direction. To the north across the interstate and creek was an industrial center—made fine pottery and arrowheads and shell beads. Skilled labor jobs. Good jobs. Made hoes using flint for the blade, big technological advancement. Flint came from the south somewhere, near the river. Lots of trade, lots of offerings to the sun, lots of economy. The city and the sun grew till they shrunk.

You don’t have to not talk. Your words aren’t any harder than the museum’s.

His words are cement. They clog his mouth. The boy wants to build with them. They squirm out of his head, hot cicadas crawling out of his skin, abandoning their shell and buzzing prehistorically—

Grew corn.
Like now.

Except more colorful, like you. Red, white, blue, whatever. Smaller. A color for each direction maybe. City and houses and lives were mapped on north south east west and sky above and earth below. Sun holding it together. Built a circle of poles four hundred feet across out west there to track sun’s passing and keep time. Built it and rebuilt it and rebuilt it. With precision. Was a feat of engineering, like this mound. Don’t make a mound this big by just piling dirt. Ain’t a sand castle. Been here a thousand years.

And then what?
The boy thinks him slow. The boy hasn’t broken down a drop of his spewed toxic refrigerant. The boy repeats himself but slower—

And then what?
Nothing.
What happened?

Nothing happened. They died or they lived and died or they moved away and died. Probably didn’t have enough to eat. If they had more, more people would have come and then they wouldn’t have had enough. Cut down all the timber. Soil eroded. Sun eroded. People gave up on the religion or the religion gave up on them. Could’ve been weather got colder or could’ve been they had too much. Built a palisade. Whites showed up a hundred years later and it was all gone but mounds.

Who was the last Cahokian standing up here, looking out?
There’s your parents. You run on back. Don’t want them seeing
you talking like some archeology of youth to a trembly stroke museum with a limp lip.

Who was the last sun?

Same sun’s still around somewhere, gone to set. Cahokia’s just some name somebody gave ’em. Go on. There were no Cahokians. You’re not here and I’m not talking.

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He stands alone among the stars. Is this the night the sun won’t rise? There is no corn. They move away by all four directions and without them he is weaker. He will not be able to hold the sky and ground apart, to keep the spirits separate from the rotten bodies, to create the space for his people to live and plant and eat and dance. The sky is heavy and the ground swells up and he is cold and the fire is low because he doesn’t have wood to build it up and inspire. The Sun is cold and hungry. He has taken all there is to offer. There are those who want his head, who think that will change anything, who think he is a false Sun, that he no longer has the faculties to perform his function, that he is diseased, his brain worm-holed, his hand unsteady, his words slurred, that he needs to be relieved of his duties, that he needs to be the one who sacrifices, that he needs to be laid off in a bog unburied. His head, he imagines, they will have. His duties and his head. Perhaps tonight is the night the Sun will not rise. He stirs the coals until he finds a bit of orange. He is in the sky with the stars, but he is not. He is on a swollen bit of dirt, lifted up, made an example of. Nothing but a mosquito bite, an irritation on the land. There are stars, but he is not sure what it matters. The problem is there is not enough, and if there were, they’d want more.

***

He lets the boy and his parents go down before him because he’s decided to go down and come up one last time and he doesn’t need the awkwardness of saying hello and goodbye to them again, and them staring at him, wondering if he works here, but no, not with those poles, not with that lip, afraid to ask anyway, who he is, this soaked man who appears to have been here all day and who has nothing better to do than limp around this mound and talk to little boys as if they were adults working together building refrigerators and assorted appliances
and drinking coffee and who doesn’t go home to the house he doesn’t have and who watches them for what he knows is too long until they reach the parking lot and turn on their headlights and drive off.

He leans on his poles as he descends step-by-step. He got his exercise today, too blessed much, always too much or too little, that’s the way. Legs ache. Good steps though. Not slippery, well constructed by someone. The park or the state or researchers. People. He reaches the bottom and it’s gray and he shouldn’t be here but there isn’t anywhere he should be and this monument’s stood the test of time so far and he’s never been good at tests and so he goes up one last time step-by-step a hundred some-odd feet, air chilling as he ascends and he wondering if he can go till the sun rises again. Then wondering nothing. Feeling no cold. Climbing, with poles. An occupation, doing, building a mound under his feet, rising by refrigerator by freezer by cold box under his feet—no, no, no history and the mound is already here—someone else built it, it’s someone else’s life. He just steps, climbs, rises. He gets to the top. He doesn’t stop. There is no more mound only dim sky and clouds underlit by headlights and street lamps and the cold electric glow of industry and commerce and sprawl but he doesn’t stop. He keeps going up. One foot front of the other he rises.
Aisha Sharif

The Fitting Room

When the saleswoman hands me
a camisole over the fitting room door
and asks, Why do you cover?
I give my usual speech:
Because it is an act of faith,
a sign, an ayah, of modesty; my body—
a gift I unwrap for whom I please.
She responds, Oh, how beautiful!

But as she leaves, I face myself
half-dressed, struggling to pull the garment
over chest. I want to open that door
and call after her: The truth is
I cover because I always have,
afraid of what I will see—skin
& doubt. I cover so I don’t have to think
about whether I truly believe.

I stand in reflection. Hourglass curves
entice me to dream: a little black dress,
summer wind through hair.
In the honesty of day, I could turn heads
or be overlooked still.
I could risk it, step out
of this faith—Oh, God,
what would my husband say?
A knock on the door brings me back.  
*Does the garment not fit?* the saleswoman asks.  
*It fits fine,* I say. *But too much for me to pay.*  
I lay it away, slip into my jacket  
and reach for my *hijab,* this habit.  
I pull it off the hook and drape it  
over head, pinning the performance in place.
To the White Boy Who Pulled Off
My Hijab in 7th Grade Gym

Every morning you sat on those bleachers,
dirty brown hair, Green Day T-shirt,
ripped jeans, so desperate to screw
your parents’ money. Poor thing.
You couldn’t accept Coach Bell yelling at you—
change into gym shorts, bare your pretty pale legs,
get in line, run faster, shoot straighter,
stop being a wimp—while I got to run
in long sleeves, jump hurdles
in sweat pants, sit out of flag football
the whole month of Ramadan,
got to pray in the principal’s office,
read my Qur’an during study hall.
I defied rules in plain sight. In Latin class,
I emerged as Artemis, virgin goddess
of the hunt, sacred guard of chastity,
bow and arrow in hand.
I couldn’t be grasped. Sometimes,
I’d catch you leaning on the goal post,
arms folded, staring green-eyed right at me.

That Thursday, you decided to figure me out.
Strolled past me and my girlfriends on the mats
and smiled. You had a chipped tooth.
I smiled back. A white boy. Never knew
a white boy. At the Islamic School, boys were black.
They prayed in front, never talked to girls
unless they were their sisters, and became men
we’d grow to marry. But not you—
so MTV. I laid my weapons down.
You walked behind me, kneeled,
and set your trap. Pretended to tie your shoe,
rose, then grabbed my shoulder. I was caught.
Placed your other hand on my head,
snatched my hijab and ran. I screamed
as if someone had just cut me,
placed my hands on my head
to stop the bleeding.

Turned to find you standing stiff,
grin slowly leaving your face: my hair,
pulled into a simple ponytail, bare
to all—black boys, white boys. They were pointing,
_o00-ing_ at what you revealed. Me.
Naked. I couldn’t breathe.

I ran for the locker room, ashamed,
collapsed on the shower floor, crying.
How could I leave
when everyone had just seen me?
The Qur’an says, _Believers should lower their gaze._
They should turn from the desire to see
what shouldn’t be seen.
I had wanted to see myself
that entire year, turned away imaginings
of my hair in your hand, skin
a shade lighter than my own—
a white boy, never knew a white boy.
I tried to keep it under wraps.
You couldn’t let me, could you?

I wanted revenge like in the Prophet’s day:
chase you down, grab you
from behind, tear out your tongue,
cut off your hands, blind your fucking eyes.
But what would my father say?
Away on pilgrimage, he was begging
forgiveness for what he had seen, pleading God
forgive those men who, months before,
let their rage blow up a tower in Manhattan.
How could I be a believer
and wish to see that kind of rage?
I had to forgive you.

After class, I walked out of the locker room
arms over my head, make-shift scarf.
Coach Bell handed me my hijab
and sent us to the Vice Principal's office
where you confessed, said you didn't know
it was such a big deal. You were suspended
then paddled—repeatedly. I didn't stay to watch
but heard you scream through the door,
grasping hard your punishment.
I wanted to turn and scream back,
*Stop! He didn't know what he was doing.*
But the door's hard lines reminded me
this was out of my control. I couldn't keep you
from justice.
Michael Shewmaker

The Pastor’s Wife

_By night on my bed I sought him whom my soul loveth: I sought him but I found him not._

Lord—since he has forgotten how to love Your faithful servant, whom You gave to share the burden of his work, to sweat, to prove the glory of Your word—and since I’m sure by now he has forgotten the sweet tongues of our private Pentecost, the narrow bed abandoned in our rapture, the arched rungs of my back, “Jacob’s ladder,” the sacred bread we broke and ate together—since our marriage rots like a carcass without honey—since You say I shouldn’t blame him for this bondage, despite my will to please, my constant hints—and since I couldn’t lie to You—it’s true: because I can’t blame him, Lord, I blame You.
Finding the Future

It’s hard to notice the small building at first. Boarded up, a smear of soot licking the corners, isn’t it a waste, the cop says, punks who burned the bathroom dribbling away their days on this spit of shore. Now the waste goes inland, and this is a shell, a relic of spark the body couldn’t contain. An old story—a band of men too young to sleep and never enough room, money, sex; they don’t know why the back knots, a window breaks, something has to burn. Then one turns cop himself, or fireman, or fixes cars, and one’s locked up for years: wasted.

But today’s news is good. A woman’s weak smile through anaesthetic haze reflects the word: benign. And the lump’s gone. Now we can eat again, complain about the snow, the nurses’ bad manners. She lives on. All the way home, winter darkens fast, a coda underneath the news; it’s the shortest day sure as snow, as the day we’ll sit in a closed room while a doctor shakes his head and turns away, or a phone rings and a night freezes.

We call it “progress.” In a million years, someone’s digging the shoreline. Another shard of bone falls from the silt, the pile grows, and one day, maybe it fits: a man, a woman. The last charred bones of a burned shelter. The city that stood on the shore. So we believe the sun turns north, warms the snow to water, and children splash in some new ocean. Or they huddle in caves, turning over the bright amulet
Barry Silesky

their fathers have carried longer than anyone knows.
One gurgles, gapes at the scrawled picture he’s just made
out: two faces, a third, a family. The charm that holds them
together. A man walking the icy shore, digging through the snow.
Jason Sommer

The One Who Knows All Language

To one who knows all languages
no human-authored sound means nothing

and even words that mean precisely
nothing in every tongue are laden

with an intent beneath intention—
are laden, and he lades beyond

the easy cognates of a near
relation, ears flitting him like a pair

of wings, Ur to Cochin, Sarawak
to Hang Zhou in a single sentence.

Here, with him, the false alarms
of homonym ring true elsewhere

or antonym with synonym
will fuse then part. Each phoneme is

like a germ is to disease full blown,
as twinge is to agony. He smiles

at something very like an “O”
of exhalation that at other
times has made him weep outright.
It never is a mistake, though, even

occasions when he sees the speakers’
faces and will take love for hate.
No one escapes his understanding.  
He knows the hand signs, and also how  
they may be pressed into the palm.  
For years he’d try to make them hear  
what he does so they’d admire his hearing.  
But no more explanations now.  

He eavesdrops only, deeper than  
the personal, the hackneyed seven  
secrets anyone might have,  
in favor of sororal and  
fraternal melody—he hears  
and overhears, attends and listens  

to the music of the common  
origin, past Babel into Eden.
Mostly we waited, playing cards or *Sorry!* in the basement, while the parents sipped tea above us, salted melon seeds, dried plums, and husks mounded up in the table’s center. They spoke both languages; we spoke one; we intended them to live forever.

That summer we’d biked up and down the neighborhood hills, earned permission to cross one highway, and come around to the normal contradictions, matters of age and location. We could say it now: what we shared was not as it appeared.

Dinner over, night coming on, we switched to Monopoly. It lasted too long; the frigid damp moved into our skinny frames. We went upstairs, nibbled the occasional plum, left the pit. The grownups sent us away, switched dialects, laughed at untranslatable anecdotes. That was the era when we felt like tagalongs, too old to run along and play, too young to go alone. Later, dragged to Oriental Provision, which smelled of fish and scallions, we tiptoed around the owners’ children,
Adrienne Su

who wandered the aisles with dirty feet, downcast faces, and nothing to read. We didn’t all associate at school but usually said hello. Only the parents were positioned to fall into the circle—mirthful, otherworldly—and seem to travel. We never made it in.
Making It Work

I knew we were depending on luck
to avert the ending both of us feared,
but one of us could be hit by a truck,

so it made no sense to run from what
might someday arrive. It wasn’t here.
Thus we continued depending on luck
to shield us from being crushed or struck
by storms or slides we chose not to hear.
Someone could always be hit by a truck,

so when I glimpsed the beast, neatly tucked
between angels, before its face disappeared,
I sent up a prayer, requesting luck,

then organized efforts to keep it in check.
We pulled it off for months, a year,
in which either of us could be hit by a truck,

especially if we forgot to look up,
bliss having made us easy as deer.
No eyes, no ears alert to the truck,
love could never defend us like luck.
Rosemary

Its name, compound of two, belies its spikiness, assertive oil, power to overtake. If it ever symbolized rule by woman, I didn’t know, even as I nurtured one in bonsai form while living like half a citizen;
of course it withered. It also carried odors of memory, loyalty; brides wore it in garlands; it was buried with certain dead. Having treated it as seasoning, I earned its desertion, snipping it literally, only to eat it (white beans, roast potatoes, lamb). Its mystique dissolved like a woman’s: neglected, turned colleague, custodian,
kitchen standby, bereft of desire, it first dropped leaves, then paled despite textbook care. I wrote off the failure as bonsai fussiness, my ungreen thumb, even as I moved from town to town, convinced the magical day would come when the journey would be over from story to myth, renter to owner, early to late, tentative to empowered.
Wanling Su

The Sergeant and the Comfort Woman

Rabaul, Papua New Guinea

September 23, 1943

I call you crow, karasu, the only bit of Japanese I care to remember from the men who come with no intentions, who enter me as daylight reveals the tops of their ears, still pale as sago. But you are too much. Let me blindfold you—hold these dark bird wings beating over your eyes.

October 23, 1943

Every day in my embrace you melt into soap-suds. This woman is air. By the time I’ve stepped outside nothing remains but the lye-rubbed skin on the back of my neck, which will grate, later, when my men and I march into the coarse Rabaul heat.

February 24, 1944

You polish yourself while I lie here, pinching moths. This one big as my thumbnail. The first time we met, you elbowed out the corporal in my bed, locked the doors against the line outside, then pulled a pair of hardwood chopsticks out of your boot,
sticking both into my other hole, the one
most of them don’t use.
Then you held a match to the tips
as if to light a cigarette. The flame
came closer, and when
my flesh seared bright as caramel,
you fed me the rest of the kit: red
sour pickled plums, dry cracked rice,
strips of fish, beads of sugar that come
before the salt.
Before I could faint you pulled out
the ashen roots, then sat there and watched me
just as you are now. Moths
have no mouths. Some drink nectar.
I will still bleed a little onto every man
who takes me.
Now, I’ve already let
all the wings in my hand
drop. Come here. And wipe off
your eyes—they’re so wet,
were you stung by the soap?

September 3, 1943

Sugar and cigar rumble in my throat—
tough turbinado crushed to ward off nausea.
The beads crunch into thirst
when I see you step into the tent
where officers chew you like smoke
all day long. There’s a tender tooth here,
der under my tongue, creaks
when I bite. I don’t know why.

September 3, 1997

In 1945, the Allied sent you
to the gallows of wood and metal.
You were the last man to burn me
before he loved me, or so
I had thought. 1994, another volcano
came to Rabaul—Vulcan, Tavurvur. Ash rose thirty km into the clouds then fell in drifts of over two feet all across town. Rain turned ash into mud, then cement, a burden that collapsed all the buildings, hiding everything, including your grave.

February 24, 1944

If you’re greedy for anything, let it be water. And you were, you who could not move yet still swallowed my saltwater as I kneeled over you. In your legend, during the year 2170 BC, ten suns rose in the sky, carried on the backs of crows living in a mulberry tree at the center of the world. Grass and roofs danced into dry flame, and even beneath rocks, the smallest snail could not keep its shell. When the archer Houyi shot all nine and left one sun, he restored order and water to the world. Your curly hair, strange in these parts—a thousand dark question marks. I cut them up before you could make me answer a single one.
Vertigo in Elmwood Park, NJ

In Memory of Mrs. Lee

The first time we met we were standing in her kitchen, the nicest part of the old Colonial, a sweet, small, two-story house with a rather distinguished-looking front door, colored a bright fire-engine red, though the paint had started to chip off a little. I hadn’t noticed this façade at first, of course—not the exacting brushwork that had gone into covering the years of detritus or the abuse the house must have been subjected to by its owners, not the awful calm that bellows thin in the air after a fire, the kind that leaves bodies longing.

“You look like Racquel Welch!” she said of me as my mother introduced us. She studied my face, piercingly, incredulously, admiringly, making some other off-remarks about my looks. I don’t remember if I knew who Racquel Welch was then; I was only sixteen. But I remember that neither my mother nor I took well to those comments, what were supposed to be compliments, I suppose. Mrs. Lee struck me as someone who liked to say shocking things to people to get their attention—an insecure person—my mother might have said of someone like her.

They had met at work, the big post office on County Road off of Highway Route 1 and 9, the largest sorting depot in the state of New Jersey. My mother had stayed up nights studying for the Civil Service exam that would at last get her the job with health benefits and pension plan and overtime and sick leave, all things that were important especially since her bout with cancer a few years earlier. And by the time she got called in for the sorter position, she could rattle off the zip codes for any town in America. My mother’s and Mrs. Lee’s workstations had been next to each other. They shared foods and stories together, talked over tea about their lives back home in Korea, and now in America, their failed lives, save for the larger-than-life dreams and hopes for their children. Soon enough they became close, close as they might have been as schoolchildren. They shared a love of literature including the Bible. My mother was really into the Bible then.
Some time after my mother died of complications from the cancer that had started in the middle of her and spread all over her body, one day the phone rang. It was Mrs. Lee. We hadn’t kept up in years, so it was odd to hear her say how sorry she was to have missed my mother’s funeral. She invited me over for dinner.

“You have to meet my sons!” she said, cheerfully.

Mrs. Lee sounded friendly but also kind of strange, though I couldn’t quite pin down what was off about her. At the time, I was living alone, shacked up in a one-room den in Staten Island, New York, a place I had come back to since leaving for college some years earlier. By then a drop-out, scraping by on temping or whatever other small jobs I could muster. A home-cooked meal was a rare treat. So despite hardly knowing Mrs. Lee, I said yes, accepting what I took to be a gesture of hospitality.

I inherited my mother’s good collarbones. That and her sensitivity—that is, both over- and under-sensitivity to all manners of people, things, and situations. I don’t want to use the clinical term, *Manic Depression*, but that is, in fact, what I have. I’ve always had it. The way to manage it is to find a middle between the two poles. It’s very hard.

During the years surrounding my mother’s illness, her struggles with it, my struggles with it, our struggles with it, and her eventual death, only the D part of the M-D seemed to take hold of me. It was the first time that that had happened.

To get to Mrs. Lee’s house from Staten Island, I had to first take the yellow S.I. Ferry that ferried both the daily commuters and tourists across the bay to Manhattan. I’d sit, usually, on the second-floor deck with the tourists, who had come on this free boat ride (the greatest of all free things worth doing in NYC) to catch a glimpse of the Lady Liberty. Then hop on the subway to W. 42nd, and at Port Authority Bus Terminal, I’d catch the New Jersey Transit bus #168, the large yawn of a vehicle that would first roll through the industrial gutter along the Interstate, littered with 29-bucks-a-night, truck-stop motels, making its way slowly through a pastiche of MacJersey towns, one indistinguishable from the next, to arrive at the much tonier township of Elmwood Park. The bus would drop me off at the corner of Main Street next to the post office, where I’d walk another twenty minutes to get to the pristine part of the neighborhood where
Mrs. Lee’s house stood. When I’d walk through it, I had the distinct feeling that I stood out like a town weirdo or hobo, because no one ever seemed to walk on those roads. But it didn’t bother me then. Nothing much bothered me back then—those long sleepy days stacked upon days of what felt like always winter, obstinately bland and grey.

When I arrived at the house with the wooden red door that had over the years taken on a more distressed look, Mrs. Lee was home alone. She hadn’t aged much. Not at all really, as though somehow intact and untouched by the moving debris of life around her. Unlike me, I thought, who had aged faster and more fiercely than I should have. Since it was mid-week, I hadn’t expected to see her husband or sons, though she’d mentioned something about her sons wanting to meet me. In fact she’d insisted on my meeting one of them who was of similar age as I. I’d brought a small plant, so I wouldn’t be empty-handed for our first meeting.

The house was quiet. It looked disheveled, with some boxes strewn across the living room floor as if its owners were getting ready to move. The only thing I recognized since my last visit was the kitchen. The warm-scented, friendly kitchen with a huge rustic country table that seemed to say ‘Welcome, have a seat,’ next to an old-fashioned, wood-burning, oval stove equipped with a funnel that led up to a make-shift “chimney” or a hole in the ceiling. The odd contraption reminded me of the decrepit and fire-hazardous furnaces of my childhood back in Korea.

Mrs. Lee offered me some tea from a green kettle warming atop a piping hot stove. We sat down and began talking over our brimming tea cups. Through the window, I could see the small flecks off the grey-white patches of snow from the storm a few days earlier.

“You look so weather-worn. What happened to you?” she put forward, peering down at me intently, like a detective questioning a suspect.

Weather-worn. An interesting phrase. As if the hand of falling snow is something to be worn as an amulet in the face of life’s vagaries, or as a badge of honor for the suffering soul.

But I knew what she meant. And I appreciated her candor. So I smiled and gave her a silly shrug. Soon she began talking about my mother. She described her as a devoted person, a person who seemed much stronger than she, and as a very intelligent and beautiful person. Mrs. Lee used words like “attractive,” “fragrant,” “magnanimous,” “faithful” and the like to describe my mother, words that surprised me either because of their largess, or because they just didn’t seem to
fit. Not quite anyway. Not that my mother wasn’t attractive. Or that she wasn’t faithful or generous or even fragrant. She was at times all of those things, in situations I could imagine. But something about the way Mrs. Lee used those words made them feel off-kilter, just as her comparing me to Racquel Welch or the way she peered into my soul with her curious and mercurial, if over-zealous, vibe, had.

“Ah ha,” I said.
“I miss her,” said Mrs. Lee.
“Me, too.”
“I could feel her, sometimes,” she said.
“Ah ha.”

We talked this way for hours over the months I visited Mrs. Lee at her home, exchanging comforting words, safe words, sweet words—sometimes too sweet as to feel unnatural even, sometimes absurd or bizarre for reasons hard to articulate. At times she slipped into a kind of ecstatic or rapturous state when recalling a particular memory. It wasn’t only about my mother but about her husband and two sons to whom she had devoted her life. Other times she flipped her head back, closed her eyes, and talked with faint melody, as if singing a last tune on her deathbed, ever so softly that I needed to come up close to her mouth to catch the words she murmured. Often she laced her stories with a kind of sleep-inducing drug, only to suddenly and violently wake me up to the wrong side of a drama. Like when she asked me to come and feel the tautness of her neck, while detailing the life-long suffering that her callous husband had made her endure. When I complied, she went on to reveal that she’d recently had a facelift and that she dreaded going back to work the next day. Or the time she asked me, mid-sentence, to suddenly look up and out the kitchen window to find a mysterious deck that had not been there some weeks before. When I asked her what it was, she stated she’d hired workers to custom-build it for my wedding, the wedding she will organize, she said, adding that she’d signed me up for the Asian American “Professional Network,” a kind of dating membership service. She mentioned, too, that her son had looked at my photo and decided I wasn’t “his type.”

It was at moments like these that I found myself looking down at the kitchen floor, my eyes zeroing in on its checkered pattern, admiring its geometry, while at a loss for words. Or was it something else, something more concrete and less capricious than words that I was at a loss for? When I expressed my lack of interest in marriage, she offered:
“A husband is like an eyebrow: though useless, you’d look funny without it.”

I listened carefully and openly to the many things Mrs. Lee had to say, often ridden with unforgettable metaphors and hidden wisdom, nodding from time to time, at times fighting back a kind of vertigo or queasiness, and a keen sense of thirst.

**ONE THING A DEPRESSIVE HAS GOT GOING FOR HER IS A CHRONIC LACK OF INHIBITION.** This along with a generalized lack of feeling—or that universal touchstone of human traits called ‘empathy.’ Those days I’d go around not being afraid of too many things. Of thugs, for example. Like the time on a subway platform in Manhattan, when I “stood up” for my male friend against some six-foot tall, thuggish man in baggy jeans with a toothpick hanging from the corner of his mouth who badgered my friend for supposedly bumping into him while getting on the train. As the inertia of the subway car pulled on the rows of passengers, their taught bodies drawing in tighter and closer until they closed in around me, my nerves calmed and stilled to a halt. As if I had been ordered to execute a prisoner with my own two hands, I walked, with singular purpose, up to the tall, young, thuggish man-child in baggy jeans with a toothpick sticking out of the corner of his mouth, and spat the words, “Go f--- yourself, you mother-f---ing scumbag!” As the subway cars opened with the sudden clang of the Union Square traffic, the kid clenched his teeth and said he was going to find me and kill me. I looked at him for a long wide second and didn’t flinch, as the subway doors shut behind him.

**BUT EVEN IN MY DEPRESSED STATE, THERE WERE SOME THINGS I STILL ENJOYED.** I enjoyed going on solitary “trips.” Since money was in short supply, I took short trips, day trips mostly, to places that didn’t hold any sentimental value or that lacked personal connection. Paterson, NJ. Beacon, NY. I’d go just to go. I liked riding buses and trains, stopping at random places, going into diners, ordering coffee and French fries, and chain-smoking through “dinner.”

My mind had become an inert metal, a heavy block, unable to be moved or its properties changed by the alchemical whims, by the flotsam and jetsam that life threw at it. There was no flow of energy or fluid or moving bodies or combustion. I didn’t feel sad. Or grief or anger or guilt or bitterness or fear. Or love. I didn’t feel.

I avoided people.
But I liked going to see Mrs. Lee. Even with her oddities. Because of her oddities. Even with her stretched-out face. Even the persistent tang of staleness that permeated that white elephantine house, its attic no doubt filled with bats and secrets, its basement smelling of yellowing bodies, all through the turpentine winter that refused to give way to spring. None of it bothered me.

Like me, Mrs. Lee inhabited an unsafe world, trapped in an unsound mind. We were alike, more than any two people in this world.

I saw her all of five or six times over a period of a year or so. Each time I visited, she cooked. Each time, the same dish: some type of seafood soup with rice, next to a medley of side dishes like seaweed and mung beans and apple salad. But the soup—the soup was unforgettable.

One day I asked Mrs. Lee, “How do you make this soup? It’s so delicious.”

She paused before answering. “There’s a trick, it’s simple. You just got to be patient.”

“Okay…” I said, wanting more.

“The trick is…” she paused again. “The trick to making a really special crab soup is…you must first chew the crab finely before putting it into the soup. One hundred times. Make sure to count to one hundred.”

During one of my visits, we sat in her green Camry in an empty parking lot in front of a 99-cent superstore that had gone out of business, and talked well into the night. Mostly she talked while I listened.

“I’m worried about my kids…” she began.

“Specially the first one. He’s so beautiful and he knows it. What could he do with that face though? Not much.” She seemed to answer her own question.

“But the other one…” she went on. “He’s special. It’s not easy being sweet and brilliant at the same time, but he’s like that, you know. My Joey, he’s going to be a doctor.”

She cut in before I could respond.

“I want to make sure he’s all set…they’re all set I mean…before I go,” she murmured, gazing out into the dark concrete lot.

“Where will you go?” I asked.

“To where your mother is…I’m going there soon. But first I want to make sure everything’s set. Because you know men are useless. You know that, don’t you?” Her question struck me as rhetorical.
Mrs. Lee had a way about her that often made me feel and think of something vile and beautiful at the same time. Everything she said, she said with an utter confidence; even the most implausible idea was irrefutable when she said it. This time was no different. Her conviction to sticking to “her plan” seemed absolute. When I wondered aloud how her children might react to losing their mother, she offered:

“Don’t worry...as far as that goes, they inherited their father’s gene, the indifference gene.”

I don’t remember what more I said to Mrs. Lee after hearing her plans to end her life. It must have been something along the lines of “Don’t worry too much about your sons. They’re going to be fine. And you’re going to be fine. Trust me.”

_I trust me._

The last time I saw Mrs. Lee was to go see a movie she suggested we go see together. It was a Korean film banned in Korea due to a lot of raw sex and nudity. It was playing at the Lincoln Plaza Cinemas, a fancy movie house, where she had arrived early to buy us both tickets. I thanked her and bought us coffee, in turn. When the movie was over, neither of us had much to say about it. It was the kind of film that made you feel awful and question everything about everything without offering any resolution: a Korean art film with its sensibilities of restraint in dialogue but with the French flair for sexual candor. Finally I broke our silence by asking if she’d read any good books lately. She said yes, then took out of her purse what looked like half a ream of _Anna Karenina_. She had clipped off the other half. Maybe it was too big to carry or she just liked cut portions.

She was a diminutive figure, and hunched over. Her darkened complexion betrayed her middle-age despite the taught skin that pulled toward her ears. Sitting across from me, with lean fingers arcing around a grey mug, and the evening falling onto the side of her face, she looked lovely, if a bit ill. She looked a little like my mother. I remembered then a time when I’d sat across from my mother like that just a few years before, at a modest little café near a job I’d held one summer. It was during my lunch break. She had come to see me after discovering that I’d stopped attending classes, to talk to me about possibly re-enrolling. She had come also to tell me that her cancer had come back; apparently she’d been wanting to tell me that for a long time but hadn’t had the chance since I had all but run away from home.
I recall the pain that I felt on hearing this news. It started in my legs, causing a near-twitch, a sharp thudding that traveled slowly up to my groin, then up to my chest, that then bloomed and clogged that whole cavity, as if that organ were no longer part of me.

Mrs. Lee was saying something. Her lips were moving but she seemed far away. I couldn’t tell what she was saying. Suddenly something sharp and pungent on my tongue, painful. Something I hadn’t tasted or felt in a long time.

I spoke to Mrs. Lee just once more. It happened a few years later. She called one day and asked if I wanted to go to a poetry reading. Though normally I would have enthusiastically said yes, I happened to have some company over then, so I felt rushed and couldn’t spend time on the phone as I would have liked. I remember saying something like “I’d love to go, I’d love to see you, but I can’t today.” She told me her younger son had just been accepted into medical school. I congratulated her on this news. Then we said “Goodbye” and hung up.

I hate labels of all kinds. I hated, too, the idea, and by extension, the label of “The grieving person.” This was especially so because it seemed for a time in my life, for a long time, that it was never going to end, that my grief was so deep and wide and permanent that I was to become the embodiment of this abstract but expansive idea. With my mother gone, it seemed that a whole identity of me was gone with it. So, too, was an era. So, too, was possibility. Possibility.

Of what? Of redemption? Of rekindling? Of a fire that had burned long ago?

My mother had not been the best mother. Nor did my mother and I have a good relationship. The talking or non-talking kind or whatever kind, we were not good at. She had been so big-headed, small-hearted. But also lovely and beautiful and fragrant to me. I had always been awe-struck by this lady whom I called Mom. Then she got sick. Just like that. It wasn’t just she who needed more time to get well. I needed time to get well myself, understand what had gone wrong, terribly wrong over the years. Maybe Mom hadn’t been so small-hearted, after all. No, not exactly. Maybe she had been troubled like me. I wanted to know the other side of her story that I’d so imagined. I needed more time.

People talk about the five stages of grief: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance. I don’t know what stage I was stuck in. I don’t know how I managed those long highway stretches of gloom
Jung Hae Chae

and haze for so long, miles upon miles clocked in under the radar of white oblivion. The worst part: the ability to feel and know what others are feeling—that essential human quality—was lost on me for an interminable time, as to render me useless as a human.

It was by coincidence that I heard about Mrs. Lee’s suicide, some months after it happened. I heard, too, about the fire that took her house afterwards, though no one got hurt. By then, I’d gone back to school and was working toward a bachelor’s degree in business management and making good headway toward it. And by then, my emotional faculties were back. The M of M-D had come back in full swing, to balance out the D. Back to my usual and manageable hyper-hypo self.

And on hearing about Mrs. Lee’s death, I was fully able to engage in the range of those very human emotions—of loss, grief, guilt, anger, confusion, and the anxiety over my own eventual fate, then more guilt—that another human in my situation might feel.

I was relieved. It was, in a way, my second chance. I had been so absent the first time around—the first time I permanently lost someone I had longed for and couldn’t have. I had not truly been able to grieve then. In my brief encounter with Mrs. Lee, she had taken on a form more real and human, though torn and wrong as she was, than the tragically and beautifully imagined muse that had left my life years earlier.

No more day trips to nowhere. No more side conversations with my other self. No more antics of Mrs. Lee. Alas, no more special crab soup.

I think about that time often, when I’m sitting alone somewhere, and the noise of daily living isn’t as fierce and my senses are keener—the queasiness, the vertigo.
There were more spiders in Denton this year than before. Webs covered everything on my enclosed porch: the sharp angles under chairs, the corners of windows, between forgotten coffee mugs and empty cigarette packs, even in the wind chimes. I began to notice them when I smoked outside. I’d find a baby spider or two crawling on my robe. A small spot, no larger than the mark left behind when a pencil crushes against paper. So small that the legs weren’t legs at all, rather, something seemingly absent of legs. And somehow the movement of that rounded black body across the valleys of a sea-foam fleece, too warm in the late hours of summer night. Intruders, those children.

I would crush those baby spiders between pieces of hesitantly wadded poetry; I never threw away my drafts. I always felt as if my poems could not be done. That they didn’t achieve the right understandings. Drafts took the shapes of post-it notes on paper, tiled and multi-hued; stapled pages of cramped cursive in pencil, stained with marks from when my red-coated nails grazed across them, half-abandoned moleskin notebooks, pages wavy from being left to the humidity. I always started a poem on paper. I needed the tangible, the feel of my hand moving in the rhythmic pattern of lines, the cramping of fingers when a pen is held too tight.

When I was brooding I would crumple the poems and leave them to gather ashes on the table, waiting to be unfolded in that moment of confusion when I wondered if that line break might have worked better before, if the image I cut might be used somewhere else. The cannibalism of poems became the cannibalism of tiny spiders as the pile of uncertain lives and words grew until it could have been its own entity.

I was at a poetry workshop in Houston a few weeks later. My mattress was the cheap dorm kind, covered in deep blue plastic, rustling in an unpleasant way every time I turned. Unable to sleep, at three A.M., I went outside to write and sat at the top of a concrete
staircase. I finally noticed the small, broken body of a baby bird to my left. It was so young that it was still smooth, running under the skin, blue-tinted veins. Bald, head too large. The ants had been at it already.

And beside both of us, between the tight spun metal chords of the railing that ran down the stairs, was a spider. Was it watching the already dead? Something too large to eat? Or was it watching me? I’ve seen the shows that mimic spider vision, the geometric prism of eyes. What was I to it? Was I even anything? People say they are more scared of us than we are of them, but in that moment where it was too still, it seemed to be terrifyingly predatory.

Four days in a poet, my professor, gave a lecture on craft. He read to us Brigit Pegeen Kelly’s “Song,” and the room was completely silent. A minute in, I realized that I’d heard the poem before, once. I’d been injured by it then and did not like it. The second time, I heard the rounded words like a song and realized that what the boys had done did make sense. I was more disturbed by the poem the second time when cruelty gave way to the simple understanding that those boys completed what they wanted to, that I had moved from mourning for the goat and the girl to the realization that sometimes it’s the disturbing other half of understanding that holds the weight.

There are a few poems I never tire of, that I have on my bedroom wall, anchored with double-sided tape, lined up at eye-level across from my bed. Hirsch’s “Dusk,” Milosz’s “Artificer,” Nikola Madzirov’s “When Time Ceases.” When I returned home from Houston, I added “Song” to the wall of words, and I thought, from the warped perspective of my bed, that the letters on the pages of the poems were the same size as the spiders on the porch.

I began to read these poems with ferocious repetition. I made copies of them for the porch; I wanted to read them in more than one place. One night, in the dark hours when even the owls slept, I remembered what Nikola had said to me once. What if the sunflowers in the field are not following the sun? What if the sun is following them? I felt like I finally understood what he was saying. That, I thought, is what it means to be a poet. You have to be willing to pay more attention to the world.

That week, for the first time, I found a sack full of eggs. I was used to seeing them, empty fine-spun clouds. Now though, there were things buried in them. Now they were full of baby spiders, white dots of semi-life yet to hatch. I would stare at the egg sacks, floating spheres like nebula, foggy with new birth inside, and I would imagine crushing
the tiny buds inside between my fingers. I imagined they would pop like roe on top of sushi. They would burst and my fingers would be wet and shining.

The porch that I hadn’t cleaned in over a year always seemed to be a humid echo of night, the windows fogged, glass caked with months of cigarette smoke, scarred with nicotine film. Ash collected in small piles in the corners, and touching the table ensured a coating of the hand—the grime and particles collecting even in the spider webs that hung from the yellowing siding. The grayness, sometimes blackness, would pull down the webs until the individual silk lines twisted together and would hang like thin, frayed ropes.

Some nights, I could imagine the porch as the ruins of an old castle. Something Lovecraftian, something speaking of a cosmic horror, made of stone and tumbling down over the years into the wild growth below. The outside becomes inside, spiders finding new places to breed in the cracks between mortar, in the carcasses of dinners so long abandoned that they’ve ceased to rot. The catacombs under arched hallways and rough wooden floors are lined the same way as the porch. Webs so thin they could be decayed cloth, moth eaten, partitioning the spaces inside.

Where are they hiding in that castle, in the dark with too many eyes, still, moving only with the shift of time? Where were they hiding now? How is their home so deserted at times, teeming at others? Where do they wait here?

The answer was that they waited everywhere. What seemed like webs forgotten were merely backyards to spiders that found safer places to hide during the day. The old pair of black running shoes that my boyfriend left outside his front door for too long was a home. I imagined spiders hiding in the toes of leather, at the very end of the tunnel where no matter the course of the sun, light never reached.

The webbing that stretched across the opening of the shoe somehow looked unreal in sunlight. It only became something tangible at night, when it was used, tread upon by jointed daggers, hairs too small to see, bristling with the promise of food.

The spider children continued to converge. Every cigarette, every poem, a spider. I found them hanging from the back of my chair. Too small to spin even a full web. They looked like they were floating. Once, I saw one of these children disappear into a hole in the iron railing of the chair I sat in. I taped the hole with duct tape. Found a new chair.
My eyes were always drawn to the same place when I went back into the house, at the left side of the door. A spider, small and black with white spots, unremarkable. It clung to its webbing, needle-like legs balancing on lines I could only half-see, and one night, I blew on it. Quickly, without hesitation, it scuttled to safety between the siding and the framing of the door. It disappeared into a crevice I had not known was there.

As I continued my forays onto the porch, I also continued to see the spider when it was dark. A miraculous thing, how fast something grows, how quickly the nothing becomes something. I hadn’t seen prey in its web, but the spider was there every night and its frame expanded in all directions until, over a period of two weeks, it went from the size of the top of a pin to perhaps the size of a split pea. I was simultaneously disgusted and fascinated by it, and because of this, developed the nasty and unkind habit of blowing harshly on its web to make it retreat each time I entered the house.

Why, if I disliked them so much, did I not clean off the table? Remove the breeding ground? Sweep the porch? Pull down the webs? I was too obsessed with trying to make my poems work. I continued to write.

A rock spider spun a web one night in the bend of the walkway in front of my house. The first night I felt the string across my face and then saw its hanging, jewel-like body. I rushed inside to find a flashlight and returned to catch it in my yellow beam, hanging from the un-pruned oak, wrapping with its legs some insect, already white in a miniature shroud. The spider dropped its cargo down along the line, then began to climb, climbed into the light again, taking its prey up to the edge of the leaves where it sat, motionless.

It returned the next night and sat in the middle of a web, perfect in its imperfections. The way the lines of the web didn’t meet perfectly, the way it mapped the sky behind it inaccurately. It didn’t move in the breeze. From the bottom, a single thin piece of wood, half an inch long, hung suspended, twirling.

This was the first time I thought to write about them. The rock spider made an appearance in the drafts of two poems, both short and lyric. Both unhealthy and closed.

The next week I was revising a poem one night when I moved my right arm across my keyboard to tap yet another cigarette on the ashtray. Two inches below that oval shaped mole at the crease in my elbow was a suspiciously red, raised circle of skin. A spider bite, and I scratched at it. It continued to irritate me and I pinched the skin between my nails and
ripped the red away. Another circle, even more upsetting. More white beneath. Through that circle ran a singular, tiny red vein. It was too disturbing to see the inside of my own body.

It took weeks for the spot to scab over, and days before the vein wasn’t visible. When I pulled the scab off too, there was a faint, indented pink circle. It was skin, shimmering and new, out of place.

I caught a spider in the house. Put it in a beaker so it couldn’t get out. It would perch, half its legs up against the glass, waiting for release. Waiting to die. My boyfriend said it was cruel to leave it as such. I didn’t argue. I also didn’t stop him when he set it free. But a part of me wanted to leave it, blow smoke into its cage late at night. Would it suffocate and curl up? I could see it trying to climb the glass walls, trying to escape my world in which it put itself, legs sliding unsuccessfully on the too smooth surface.

I began to use the spider poems to kill the spiders. In a twisted way I equated my action to the same fulfilling cruelty of the boys in “Song.” I claimed lives of spiders with spiders until the backsides of the pages were flecked with brown marks. I was angry that the spiders wouldn’t yield their secrets to me.

With observing the spiders, I finally began to think that they might be more a part of the world than me. Especially the rock spider, singular and strange. Why did it draw that splinter of wood to hang in the night? Did it need a reminder of the earth when lost in the sky? And its web, appearing only at night. Was the sunset too violent in its striation of the sky? Were the colors too startling for so many eyes? The ponderous autonomy of legs that carried them, or maybe instead the sharp, quick tapping. Either way, the spiders had a certainty about their world that came with instinct. That came with basic, primal belonging.

What happens if we remove the expectations of the earth? What happens when the architects of the ground become the masters of the sky? What more do they know than us? Do they see in fractals of kaleidoscope eyes? Do they see in patterns the way birds see magnetic lines? And what of us, tethered to thought? What more might I understand if I remove thought and simply exist like them?

But that was not an option. It never was. We are built to think, to rationalize, to enquire. I did not have the freedom to not do so. I did not have freedom to not understand.

I began to notice holes in the backyard where the grass had long since died. In the sections of rocky dirt that washed down into the
neighbor’s yard when it rained, round tunnels about half an inch across. The first time I saw one next to my foot I jumped away quickly, but then, when nothing came out at my interruption, I started looking for them.

I found five in the area around my back door. At first, I inspected a few for webbing at the entrance. Failing to find any, I stuck small twigs into the openings. Nothing. Then I went to get my shovel out of the garage. I dug them up maliciously, then rooted around in the earth with a spade, but whatever had been living inside was gone. I thought there would be spiders.

I don’t know what was more upsetting—the fact that they seemed to bury themselves in the earth right outside my door, or that they seemed to collect at my door, sneaking onto the porch in dark hours at night.

I imagined one of them coming out of those holes at darkness. First the legs, moving slowly, unevenly. Tentative steps out of earth and into the shallow stream of the porch light. And then the head, obscenely large and crowded with eyes. It would pull itself out and wait at the opening, judging. Then it would move, its body angling bizarrely over small rocks and clumps of dirt, moving towards my door. There, it would wait in the shadow of a brown and dead oak leaf.

Maybe I would be inside, asleep in my bed, dreaming of a house that was ever-changing. Maybe I would be on the porch, fingers tapping. It would see dozens of me, with more legs than it had itself. But it wouldn’t be afraid. No, the spider would wait until I wouldn’t notice and then it would come inside. Nature where it shouldn’t be. It would come inside that strange space that was my porch, half indoors, half out. It cared only that the lights attracted bugs.

I boiled a large pot of water on my stove and, in the three holes that I had not destroyed, poured scalding liquid into them. I did not like the way the spiders were abandoning their proper place for a more human existence, my house. Only later did my boyfriend suggest that cicadas had buried there instead.

I took to spraying the larger spiders with wasp spray, because it was the only thing I had under the kitchen sink. I kept the bottle next to my computer. The click of a cigarette lighter. The flick of ashing a cigarette. The spray killed them quickly, and I’d have to hold my breath not to inhale it.

I wrote.

The spider I had been watching for weeks produced an egg sack. It was a her, not an it, and she had overstepped herself in my mind by

Gwendolyn Edward

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mistaking my allowance of her life for acceptance of her natural desire to procreate.

I stood in the night and under two thin light bulbs sprayed her embryonic globe. I didn’t know spiders could care, but the first thing she did when the violent spray hit her webbing was rush towards it. I am not a mother, and thought that caring about children was a right reserved for mammals. For thinking, rational creatures. I was wrong.

If a spider could be frantic, she was this for a second, until she reached where the wrongness of manufactured death had touched her home and she retreated, higher up on the web next to a dead crane fly.

Then I sprayed her too. Watched her legs spasm until she fell to the concrete floor where she curled up on herself, two tiny white spots on her shiny black abdomen, facing towards me. The small guilt I had felt dissipated too quickly to be right. Malleable ethics for non-human lives. Still, a frightening thing, how quickly life goes from something to nothing.

Because of the impending invasion I felt was coming, I finally bombed the porch. I went to the grocery store and bought one item, a three pack of bug fogger. The illustration on the box showed cockroaches, ants, spiders. They looked more menacing on paper than in real life.

I went home and cleared off the table on my porch, putting the chessboard away, collecting coffee cups and beer bottles, empty cigarette packs and old fashion magazines. I crushed the folded pieces of poetry and finally threw it all in the trash. Then I laid newspaper down and slid the windows closed. Sometimes they stuck. I had to pry the carcasses of iridescent beetles and brown painted moths out of the corners with a stick.

I held my breath and pressed the flat button down to lock the fogger open. I placed it on the table and rushed inside, watching from behind the glass in the door. A stream like a volcano was erupting and the room filled in under a minute with a heavy mist that hung languidly. Texas summers are sometimes too still, too pervasive, too unwilling to give way. Like me.

Two hours later I opened the windows and the door to the backyard to let the porch air out. Another two hours later I was on the porch, and on my arm, a small, round spider, like a speck.

I bombed the room again, even though the product warned about square feet and repetition. That night, I sat on the porch writing. The faint smell of poison in the air made me nervous, but there were no spiders.

And then there were no more spiders at all. The absence of them was almost more unnerving than their presence. After months of
watching them, they had all disappeared. I wondered if, somehow, I had made my dislike of them clear enough that they had left me on purpose.

My writing became less frequent. I stopped using my computer. The porch was still amassed with paper, only I stopped opening what I’d rejected to see what I’d written there. When my cigarette caught the edge of one of my drafts on fire, I poured soda over the scalloped red line moving across the page and left it on the concrete ground to be trampled upon. I was both angry and scared. Angry that though I’d tried to pay attention, to craft lines with detail, I’d failed; and scared, irrationally, that killing the spiders had somehow made me less whole.

One night I was smoking on the porch, the weather humid and hot, fogging the windows on the inside and revealing the oils of my smeared fingerprints on the glass. The night was holding its breath for rain, and I decided that since there were no more spiders, I would bring them back through the poems. I started at drafts while the drops of water began to hit the metal roof, the sound like popping grease. I tried to capture the mingled awe and dread I felt when I’d seen the rock spider. The rain became too loud. I could not think or remember with the racket.

I carried the chair from the back porch, through the house, and to the front porch, where I sat with the lights off. Lightning arched across the sky, its afterimage visible for less than a second. My cigarette smoke hung in the air around me instead of being carried away. My skin was clammy with mist. I could hear the rain on the leaves. I knew I was wrong. My poetry shouldn’t be about paying closer attention to the details, it should be seeing the world differently and finding the language for the other understanding. My poetry wanted to be my reactions to “Song,” and the flowers that dictated the path of the sun. For months I had known this and been unable to accept it because it meant everything I had written before could not be saved.

Recognition. Then, understanding. There is a moment before killing, when no matter how small the death, any death is strangely large. In that waiting, seconds only, I began to think. Think about the action of raising my hand, of bringing it down, of the letting loose of blood and the spot of what used to be life left behind. At times, it seems more inhuman to obliterate a spider than to pull a trigger, or set a fire. At least, then there’s a victim left on the street or identifiable in the morgue. At least, then there’s a corpse, even if it’s charred, that can be buried.

**Killing a spider is leaving nothing left of it but a streak on the hard concrete or a reddish-brown paste between fingers.** That telling
line that’s not even death anymore, a brush stroke trailing off at the end when the paint wears thin. But unlike a painting, it is total annihilation not only of life, but of the history of existence.

I became increasingly troubled by my actions against the spiders. I began to seek them out in the old, loose webs that still hung from the ceiling. I got on the ground, knees coated in cigarette ashes and looked under chairs, under the table, around the metal garbage can. I hadn’t even realized that I still expected them to return somehow. I had failed to realize that it had always been about them.

What does it mean that in one hundred years I will be dead and buried? What does it mean that then, I will invade the earth with a casket that attempts to preserve what is already gone? What does it mean when the spiders I killed return, enter my private space again, and thrive? It means it is not that they don’t belong, but that they belong too perfectly.

I wanted them to come back. I wanted to restore the life of the mother spider I had taken. To tell her, even if she couldn’t understand, that I knew I had made a mistake. That I was sorry for my own selfishness and that I was ashamed that I didn’t understand myself better, and that I had wrongly assumed that I was rational and above them when, unlike them, I did not know myself at all.

I inspected the cracks in the siding and looked in the wind chimes. I left stacks of poems as offerings. Empty cigarette packs open and inviting. I even opened the glass door to the backyard at night. The egg sacks I had sprayed were still there, ghosts of what was, what could have been, white dots still inside.
It is bad luck, you say, to bring home the ashes. I had imagined coffins, jet planes, grease-smoke by the Ganges, but you say that would be yet another country, yet another pile of dense, translated forms.

Instead, we have raincoats over saris, seagulls dive-bombing garlands, a snowstorm picking up from the south-east.

It becomes a silent pilgrimage, this faltering down a booming pier, awkward and alone, like those half-lives lived out in London, fearing the call at midnight and deportation’s dawn.

Standing in the railings’ lee, we throw rice, grains, the last words of Sanskrit, into the endless water, into an English sea.
The Lindbergh Baby

for my sisters

I lied when I said no one feared.
Our mother, born three years after they took him,
grew up haunted, knowing we’d disappear

into ditches or skies or pools, uncleared
of winter algae girls couldn’t swim free from.
I lied when I said no one feared.

That ladder’s shadow: the angle of years
when we grew up safe inside chainlink and skin,
grew up to be haunted, knowing we’d disappear

like the ransom, the clatter too quiet to hear
of the window pried open, a man climbing in.
I lied when I said no one feared

the way houses and words reassembled—here
miles and years from the loss—daughters raised on
old hauntings, knowing we’d disappear

into mothering bodies, our children everywhere
but safe in their beds, and love’s window broken.
I lied when I said no one feared.
We who are haunted, who have not disappeared.
Pick a card, any card. The jack of diamonds
has always been a favorite. I’ve found this city
suits me—Las Vegas, with its searing, lava
towers of light, the games of dice and domino.

My kind of people. Sit for an age or two
on a glacier, you’ll learn to appreciate a fast ride,
neon strapped to buildings like threaded fire.
It was a gamble to come here, but what had I to lose?

The pale horse I bet on is a shoo-in, and you cry out
Swindle! Dirty pool! So sure you can see the strings
pulling together. My liaison with you has been,
shall we say, cursory. You were pawns on the board,
yet I marveled at the span of your hunger.
You have your moments. Who else would dare

a glittered city on such wastes as these? Your hope
is so unfounded. You come to the green felt, chancing
everything for a taste of larger life. I’ve found
fortune’s threadbare garments suit me, but you

who’ll lay blood on the dotted line, I’ve to salute—
headlong for abyss, bets placed on what’s to catch you.
Leslie Ullman

Temperate

Another venerable lake
pulls itself in, shore closing around it
like skin around a wound. Sand
presses up through the haze.
Handful of flowers—early bloom
then a vanishing. The wound
is mild Arctic air, its acres of ice

shrinking far north of our bodies—
bodies housed in skin
that lost its fur and thinned
through millennia of invention. Nylon,
plastic, rubber, steel. Our shod feet
no longer can bear the feel of real ground,
its stones, sticks, uneven design—

and now the quickened seasons—
dustbowl, wildfire, petals shrinking
over globes of apple or peach,
the trees force-fed, the fruit
stripped young, the rivers
fought over.

Long ago, the first
miraculous sliver of flame
softened the air and drew us close.
Then sowed roof and walls. Leather
and wool. Now coal and volatile fumes—
we built it up. We built to suit
the liquid heat of our bodies.
Ocean Vuong

Lazarus

He came into my room like a god stepping out of a painting.

Back from the wind, he called to me with a mouthful of crickets—

scent of rust & lilac rising from his hair. I waited

for the night to wane into decades before reaching for his face, broken lines in dust-worn cheeks.

How we danced without knowing it: father & son—

my shadow beneath his shadow across the hardwood. How the sun rose & shattered, like a zinnia, over the house.

A red petal, caught on his tongue, started to drain through the dark behind it. I reached into his mouth but my fingers stopped at my face, the mirror, its cracking, the crickets—oh god—spilling through.
Daily Bread

Cu Chi, Vietnam

Daybreak. The baker presses what’s left of the year into flour & water. He’s reshaping the curve of his wife’s white calf—blown off last month by a landmine left over from a war he can’t remember. Pale dough bubbling in the flames. When it’s done, he will tear apart the steaming wheat & salt only to discover his hands. He will climb the spiraling staircase while calling her name. He will sweep his palm through the sheets until he finds the phantom limb, raise it to his lips like an offering to the first—or final god. & he will not see the pleasure this brings to her face—because, in my hurry to make them decorous, I will forget to write a bit of light into the room. Because I can’t tell the dark from my own two hands. & it will start to rain. I won’t even think to put a roof over the house—her prosthetic leg on the table, the clack clack as it fills to the brim. The year is gone & I know nothing of my country. I stand here, beside you, in the book’s grayest hour. I am brushing the hair from your face as I tell you what you must’ve known all along: there is no baker, no legless wife, no landmine or even a language that could save us. As I write this my uncle is sitting in a $40 motel in Fresno, the cigar between his lips burning down to a spent shotgun shell as the needle empties into the last purple vein in his cock. I did this to prove I could live beyond the failure I wrote into fact. That the lovers could’ve been two crows swaying in a cage woven out of midnight & misery—
or a pair of glass tulips crushed into the dream
of a wingless butterfly shaking inside a pink sneaker
after the hurricane. That this, the bread which daily
enters your willing mouth, like any lie, is only as true
as your faith in hunger. So go ahead, show me
your hunger. Show me black ink on paper. Black ink
on the bone-white backs of angels face-down
in the blazing orchard. & all of us. All of us
looking up—as if darkness, seen through layers
of air & air & air & air could—suddenly—
be the bluest sky.
Anna Rose Welch

If There Is Grief

There is this—the movement of river settling
with cold and the weight of sulfur, a shivering expanse
pushing the riverbank farther from its other half.
In the strip mine, grackles land,
become kin to the layered remains
of coal left open-throated to the sky.

Between mineral and red cedar, crescendo of birdsong,
an impetus for all to rise and meld into a tempest.

Between each soot-colored wing, a shard
of light and tension, a holy place of unrequited energy
locked away between feathers,
relentlessly circular, never spent.

Something is always being kept: the sound
of an uprooting in the forest, the thrill
of earth long buried finally discovering sky,
a sound like the plucking of a string—first resonance
then steadied exhaustion;
the mines, once invisible, now translated
onto the horizon by dust-colored branches,
and the cult of birds circling, as if held in place
by a pair of invisible hands grown weary
of picking apart the earth.
L’Appel du Vide

Lately, I’ve been obsessed with the concept of men throwing themselves into the sea.

It’s been studied, proven that an excess of heat’s to blame. The sun begins and ends in water.

In Scandinavia, it’s rumored that groups of cows, perched on cliffs, catch sight of the ocean miles away,

and longing to cross it, fling themselves off the precipice to reach the other side.

When men discover the tropics, they are overwhelmed by natural light, lapis lazuli above and below.

For centuries the ocean has performed the ritornelle of bodies that recognize they’re three parts water.

Even Odysseus, claiming to hear women’s voices, tied himself to the mast of his boat to keep his body from being taken first by waves.
Lesley Wheeler

Art Film, 1985

Cue the Moog: alone in a cement-block dorm room where light fails early—state campus in winter, friends gone for the weekend. That mirror girl from California, another Leslie but blonde to my brown study, the one with weird left-coast passions for yogurt and yoga, invites me out. Her role’s too minor for such a lingering shot but the camera can’t help itself. It’s a Cronenberg situation.

The actual party a blur of football players raking fringes back from handsome profiles. Wardrobe gives me a red skirt—longish, to signify innocent hotness—and one prop, a giant gin and tonic. Warmer, louder, then the cuts get arty, vivid flashes pulsing against black: staggering toward my dorm with the quarterback; stockings gone; a jar of Vaseline; can’t move, speak, or tell if there’s a condom. Someone is crying and the noise sounds almost sexual. A trick of sound design. In another screenplay the poor actress would say, and then I realized the sobbing was me, but I still don’t know. Too drunk.

Jump to daylight.

Soon he calls on the hall phone for a date, persistent, petulant. See: Lynch’s ear in the grass.

Well, you were stupid, I direct myself, stupid, and diet with spring break in mind. The liquor mist lifts. Seven weeks weighing
abortion, but the day before the road trip:
blood. Stupid and lucky.

It’s a big school;
I see him only one more time. Halloween.
He’s Alex from *A Clockwork Orange* and doesn’t know me—too busy singin’ in the rain.
The story’s over, it’s pretty much over, lucky
and stupid. I don’t know why it took so long
to visualize the poem. Perfectionistic
Kubrick slowed down, each film’s egg-life more
protracted. Dark formations. I speed up,
trading art for looseness. Today’s light
is beautiful enough. Get the scene
and get out; the rest’s not worth grieving.
Jianqing Zheng

Homecoming

The man wanders in his hometown where he gets lost one way or the other because the roads are no longer the dirt ones that have remained like sepia pictures in his memory for one hundred and fifty years. The small river town of Canton is now a metropolitan city with lots of billboards presenting foreign models in fancy fashion. He wanders aimlessly. The trees on the roadsides stand like mourners. He feels like being carried back by an ox-cart hearse to his father’s loud laughter over liquor and mother’s broad smile at his big bite into the pancake she made, to his street fighting and tofu peddling, to his dating and wedding, to his days to son a father and father a son, to his young wife whom he never saw again after he sailed to America to build railroads, to the Pearl River where he once swam naked and caught shrimps with a small net and pieces of dried pigskin. He walks down the river shouting I'm home; he wants to hear an echo, but his shouting is like a stone thrown into water to produce only silent ripples. He looks hard at the river, his dream river: a horn blows, and then a barge looms in. It chugs along and looms out into the white sun rising over the river's bend, and its horn faints away like a dirge.

a rooster's crow
headstone
of a Chinese railroad builder
My father, a retired cop, stands by the toolshed watching the two pecking cardinals. He must feel annoyed by a squirrel that makes choking noise on a low pine branch. The old man takes off his yard gloves and claps his hands as loudly as he can, hoping to stop the squirrel’s noise. The little animal, which must be startled, stares down at the wrinkled face as if asking *What’s going on, man?* When my father bends his stiff body to pick up the gloves, the cardinals on the lawn are flying away. When I was a little boy, my father didn’t allow me to talk over dinner. He’d say *When you eat, don’t speak!* *Or you’ll be choked.* So, each dinner was like silence training under his watch. Sitting like a little stone Buddha beside him, I always gulped down the food fast; I never gave myself a little time to taste…

terrible match
hearing my father’s voice
in mine
Without Sanctuary

In Ms. Bowman’s fifth grade social studies class, we learned about the Quakers and their religious meetings. They sat in a circle, Ms. Bowman said, and waited for someone to shake, which meant the Lord had touched them, had moved them to speak. Those Quakers reminded me of the women in the Pentecostal church I attended every Sunday with my mother and sister. If an otherwise quiet or timid woman caught the Holy Ghost, she would shout and dance and clap, sometimes moving from her seat to the aisles where she could be free to wave her arms, pump her legs, and stomp her feet. I knew better than to share this information with Ms. Bowman, who was certain to ask more questions, as she did whenever the conditions of any child’s home life surfaced.

“Tell us again about your name. It’s Hebrew? It means love or dove? Well,” she’d say, her eyes lit up beneath the glow of her gray-white hair, cut short and straight, “well, that’s just wonderful.”

Her manner was a cross between Mister Rogers and maybe Barbara Walters; gentle and encouraging, but pointedly curious, walking right up to the line of nosy, but never crossing. Having regularly interviewed the class in one way or another about religion, Ms. Bowman knew I was the lone Pentecostal, while all of my other black classmates were Baptists. The white children were a quiet mix of Presbyterian, Episcopalian, Greek Orthodox, and Catholic. If there were Jewish children in the classroom, their identities were not made public.

I believe in intuition. I believe in signs. I believe there are people who sit still long enough to feel the oncoming tremble of the future. I feel this, too, sometimes. But I’m insecure and slow to act. I get my signals crossed. I doubt my own perceptions and power.

Some time during the George W. Bush presidential campaign and subsequent presidency, the word “evangelical” worked its way back into the American news lexicon. President Bush’s religious faith
had become a kind of badge of honor, and evangelicals, it seemed, were coming out of the woodwork, publicly affirming their devotion and joining forces with the White House. It was as if a secret sect of conservative Americans had been discovered. These evangelicals were typically described as white, middle class, Republican voters, credited for aiding in Bush’s ascension to the presidency. What struck me then, and recently, was the lack of complicated discussion about evangelicals, particularly evangelicals of color; though, in some regards, the omission shouldn’t have surprised me at all.

In a 2004 article published in *The Nation*, Randall Balmer had already discussed what he called “another of those bizarre and somewhat surreal moments when the media have ‘rediscovered’ America’s evangelicals.” Balmer went on to note the former rediscoveries of 1976, 1980, 1984, and 2000, each based upon a presidential candidate’s declaration of faith or being “born again” and the televangelist scandals of the mid-nineteen eighties. Balmer’s article urged then Democratic presidential candidate, John Kerry, and his campaign strategists to engage the diverse and ignored evangelical population of blacks and Hispanics. The heritage of nineteenth century evangelicals, Balmer wrote, was one of activism that included women’s rights, abolitionism, and prison reform. But, apparently, Balmer’s advice went unnoticed, as today’s popular perceptions of the evangelical community remain Republican and white.

Growing up in an evangelical church situated in the predominantly black Avondale neighborhood of Cincinnati, I knew it was customary during election season for our pastor to allow city candidates to speak a few short words before service. As far as I knew, no one ever reported these visitations. They just happened. Hearing more recent nightly news descriptions of evangelicals is often funny. It’s clear that the people referenced are not people of color. They’re not talking about my parents or the kind of home in which I was raised. Even my progressive friends who apparently had zero contact with evangelicals (or perhaps, were unaware of such contact), tended to accept the evening news as a credible source.

“I was terrified when I heard on NPR this morning that evangelicals were in Cuba,” my white American colleague Rebecca admitted at a party.

“I can see how that kind of cathartic outlet would have its appeal there,” I said to a stunned Rebecca, and managed to slip in, too, that my mother was an evangelical minister. I’d heard the same story that morning, I continued, and was more alarmed about one
interviewee’s decision to choose evangelical worship over Santería or anything connected to Africa. African retentions, a close friend once informed me, were evident in the Pentecostal church, and I’d observed and reflected on the idea ever since. The conversation now shifted quietly elsewhere. But that wasn’t the first instance of awkward silence. Early in the George W. Bush presidency, my husband’s friend—black, well educated, and well versed in academic and political topics—said something like, “Wow, you grew up Pentecostal? You all were holding rattlesnakes in revival tents, right?” Hmmm, I thought. Not exactly.

Growing up Pentecostal, or evangelical as the media labeled it, was kind of like growing up American or black or woman. Without even thinking about it, there were hundreds of ways to live and to work within, beneath, or around these categories, none of which were self-given. The church of my childhood, Zion Temple First Pentecostal Church, for instance, was not the church James Baldwin described in *Go Tell It On the Mountain*. The women did not wear all-white to service, though some “Saints,” as we were frequently addressed from the pulpit, may have led lives that appeared more devout than others: teaching Bible Study courses, leading testimony, singing in the choir, or volunteering for day care services in Children’s Church. The men mostly wore suits and ties. The women wore skirts or dresses, stockings, and, on some occasions, wide-rimmed hats that bent and twisted in the shapes of birds’ wings or tree branches. On more modest occasions, the hats were alternately subtle, little pillboxes held in place with stern, black, bobby pins. Having converted from Baptist to Pentecostal as a teenager, my mother held three core beliefs of the church: accepting Jesus Christ as her personal savior, accepting the Bible as “God’s word,” and acknowledging that everyone must be baptized or “born again” to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

It was no secret, though, that there was a secular world outside the sanctuary and that each church family had to make its way in it. At home, work, and school, many of us wore the shorts, pants, and fashions of the times. And many of the young people listened to popular radio. My mother was stubborn, a bit of a rebel, and very comfortable going her own way, which meant, for our family, at least, outside of the core principles, there was a great deal of wiggle room. My aunts tell me they used to call my mother “Red Devil” when she was little because of her temper. And until recently, I thought my mother would never admit to frowning upon Saints who seemed to be in church “all day, every day,” as people used to say, who spoke the language of “amen”
and “Praise the Lord,” a little too often. But when my mother and I sat and talked in my kitchen recently, she freely discussed her feelings. She’s been an ordained minister for about seven years now, but she struggles with thoughts of leaving the church that, in her words, “helped raise her.” The church, she says, should be more communal and progressive. The building, its bricks and structure? The people don’t need it. People can fellowship anywhere. Despite her teenage conversion, my mother remained a popular and social person. Unlike my father, whose high school listed him as a “missing alumnus,” my mother served for several years on her high school reunion committee. When my sister and I were in elementary school, one of our favorite weekend pastimes was to flip through our mother’s yearbooks, where our mother appeared on every other page in white-rimmed cat glasses, slim and slick with an outfit she’d stayed up all night sewing the night before with one of her five sisters. She was not an athlete, but she played violin in the school orchestra and was an office-holding member of every social club. She was extremely close with her high school friends, who were regular fixtures of our childhood—she talked for hours at a time on the phone with them, took weekend trips with them, organized reunion picnics, and hosted parties where we sometimes played with their children. Even now, whenever I leave my children with their grandmother in Cincinnati, my mother is very likely to have a “grandparents day” planned with her friends, who chat and gossip while their grandchildren have a round of video games at the mall arcade or wear out the equipment of indoor playgrounds and outdoor parks.

My mother was not, as my sister and I were, “born into The Church.” She had a life, a good life, before she converted, and she saw no reason to give that up. She was raised in the West End projects with her parents and grandmother, who migrated north from South Carolina for safety, the story goes. Granddaddy’s brother had been accused of shooting someone Down South and had to flee his hometown of Greenville in the middle of the night. According to family lore, Granddaddy hid his brother in a casket and accompanied him to Cincinnati. His other siblings—they totaled fourteen—and my grandmother joined him later. When they were teenagers, my mother’s two older sisters ministered to her, just as their friends had ministered to them. In my teenaged years, I had often wondered what my grandmother must have thought about three of her seven children leaving the Baptist church in which they were raised.
“Was she offended?” I ask my mother. And to my surprise, it turns out that the first person to convert was actually my grandfather. His conversion, my mother says, is the one that perplexed her own mother, who felt, suddenly, her lifestyle of drinking and smoking was under scrutiny or perceived as flawed. I find this ironic because my mother’s father was an alcoholic and his drinking and lifestyle bothered his wife; it was a constant source of fighting.

But then, my mother says, “When I was in middle school, Daddy came home with this certificate. It had his name on it, and he went around the neighborhood showing it off to people.” He had been baptized in the Ohio River. And for about three years, according to my mother, he stopped drinking, smoking, and hanging out late at night. Though the sobering effects of her father’s conversion did not last, my mother hasn’t forgotten his post-baptism pride and the brief period of change that followed. In a way, this so-called secular man who hid his brother in a coffin, smuggled his brother to the North, permanently damaged his leg in a work accident, and battled alcoholism, opened a spiritual window for his children—though not all of them followed. The church re-entry and exiting, or “backsliding” as it was called, would remain a familial pattern—the spiritual and the secular in a perennial, co-dependent dance.

Though we were raised in the suburbs, our mother taught us to respect our brothers and sisters in the city. On the Yard Sale Saturdays of summer, my mother would grab her rusty, metal fold-out tables and stuff them into her trunk along with her gently used clothes, my father’s electronics, and our old toys. We climbed in the back seat and drove the thirty minutes downtown to set up shop not far from my mother’s parents’ government housing apartment on Ezzard Charles Drive. We learned how to greet and speak to people by watching our mother. We learned the right inflections, the gold-toothed slang, and listened with great pleasure as the thin leather jackets and porkpie hats seemed to freeze these men and women from my mother’s youth in the very places she’d first met them. They were a whirlwind of delicious names like Junior, Snook, Princess, and Armenta. Many she identified as members of the such-and-such family who lived across the court from her. Everyone seemed to come from a large family back then. My mother introduced each person as my sister and I smiled wordlessly, shaking hands and taking in the faint smell of body oils, aftershave, and coolness. She seemed comfortable there, more comfortable than
she seemed in the lights of the sanctuary. She seemed genuinely charged by these old faces that came and went, she spoke with ease to them, she never mentioned where she worked or where she lived or what she had. She asked about people’s siblings and parents. She listened. And after they went on down the block she explained their connection to us, how they were an old hanging buddy, or boyfriend, or rival of one of our aunts.

Sometimes, if we’d cleaned our rooms beforehand and helped her with sales, my mother would let us pocket the money she made from our toys. She would advise us about what to sell for, gently telling us our prices were too high. We had our eyes on taffy and penny candies we hoped to buy at the end of the day with the money we made. As we sat on the lawn chairs and watched our mother, we agreed that Ma had no business sense, no money-making savvy. But the truth was, she had already traveled that entrepreneurial road with her sisters. They were the first to set up yard sales as a way to earn extra money and spend time together. There was a woman from church who used to watch my mother and her sisters from her window and threaten to “tell” what they were doing: wearing street clothes and carrying on. But my mother just ignored her. And, anyway, she said, this same woman would end up asking to buy some of the clothes; my mother would even carry selections to the woman’s window. Eventually, my mother and her sisters tried their hand at owning a real retail shop near Findlay Market. They rented the space for sixty-five dollars a month. But it didn’t work out, she says, because they all held full-time jobs and none of them could be there during the day to manage the shop. Furthermore, there was no place for the customers to park. After two months, they decided it wouldn’t work, and went back to their weekend yard sales. Eventually, my mother was the only sister who kept the yard sales going. And as my sister and I grew older each summer, we realized it wasn’t about the money at all. We watched her come down and down on the prices and countless times give purses and accessories we knew she loved away for free. She’d wrap the items carefully in old grocery bags, apologizing for a hole or mismatched button, and then place the package in people’s hands as if a million dollars had been spent.

When I listen for the sound of my sister’s voice at the yard sale, I can’t hear anything. I can see her, though, decked in pigtails and rainbow barrettes, a cotton blouse and jeans, skinny as all get
out. Maybe I can’t hear her because she is listening to me yap elder sister instructions. I never gave her much say in the matter. When she grew tired of my choices and became less accommodating, though, she challenged me in the back seat of the car where we bickered about whose elbow was touching whose, just like my son and daughter do now. The voice I can hear is the voice of late adolescence and adulthood, that critical voice that dissected our high school classmates and teachers, the voice that stayed up with me late at night, gossiping, debating, and trying to make sense of our sheltered life.

My sister was on her cell phone at the laundromat because of electrical problems in her condo—she couldn’t get the washer and dryer to work. She was clearly upset about the circumstances in her home, but wanted to talk first about her job, a frequent topic of conversation between us. I don’t know if it’s a Midwestern thing or a Cincinnati thing, but we relate to one another through venting. It’s a kind of exchange where each person lets off steam or anxieties before the sharing of any good news or recent events can take place. Perhaps these feelings are not expressed in other ways before this moment, as it would be impolite or too aggressive to “go off” at work or to confess certain irritations or annoyances with strangers. I came to recognize this phenomenon once when I ran into my friend Ella’s husband, Saul. Saul and I didn’t know one another before moving to Pittsburgh, but we both grew up in Cincinnati. For reasons I can’t fully explain, there’s always an instant trust or recognition between us. When I asked him how he was doing that day, he immediately began unpacking the details of a co-author he was working with on a book. To the uninitiated, it might seem as though Saul were very unhappy or dissatisfied with his job or with his book-writing experience. But that wasn’t the case. Everyone I know back home does this. It’s a way of unburdening the conversation before it begins.

Whenever my sister and I talked, my sister’s first order of business was to unpack the troubles of her job at Northern Trust. This unpacking could go on for at least an hour in some cases, especially if she was feeling stressed or if we hadn’t talked for a while. My unpacking usually involved teaching or taking care of my husband and children.

My sister said she thought she was going to get fired. When I asked why, she only replied that “they” didn’t “like” her, without clarifying who “they” were specifically. She thought she was making too many accounting errors at work, but I didn’t think minor errors at work
were unusual. I asked if she could describe what was happening. She said people at her job didn’t like the way she dressed. She said people at her job made fun of where she lived. She said, “They think my clothes are ghetto South Side clothes.”

I wasn’t sure what she meant by this. My sister dressed well—like a businesswoman. I was always secretly proud whenever I saw her in these grown-up clothes. She looked like a woman who worked in a huge Chicago bank, which she did. She enjoyed shopping, and I remembered the last time I saw her for her housewarming she teased me because I bought some of my clothes from Target. I told her that married mothers of two on a budget shop at Target. She laughed about that.

That night I said, “People don’t get fired for the way they dress. What do you mean? That doesn’t make sense. How do you know the people at your job don’t like you?”

She said, completely seriously, “God told me.”

I knew church and spirituality were very important to her. But there was no metaphor in her words, no biblical lyricism. God told her. And that was that.

“What does that mean?” I asked, not knowing this was the last Sunday of her life.

She didn’t answer.

My mother did not shun the secular world. To do so would have been to deny who she was, including that popular senior class officer in high school. As she grew and gained more confidence as a young woman and mother in the church, it was my mother who introduced and organized social programs and events with varying degrees of popularity and success. She wrote the script for the nativity play and sewed the wise men’s costumes from our old bed sheets, she organized fashion shows, she altered clothing for choir members, she started a scholarship fund for high school graduates, she taught Sunday School at the high school level, and organized a Bible trivia game that permitted students with the most points at the end of the year to win prizes. I was particularly fascinated with my mother’s work with high school students; they hugged my mother tightly and vied for her attention. They outwardly acknowledged my sister and me at least once a year, prodding us for hints about what the game prizes might be. This was before I was old enough to critique my mother. I didn’t have the language for that yet. This was when I only suspected her
shortcomings and quietly filed her eccentricities and inconsistencies away until I could understand better what they meant or how they made me feel. In the meantime, I was intrigued by these teens who were eager to attend my mother’s classes and admired the woman who purchased Frisch’s Big Boy coupon booklets and drove them in the church van for a cheeseburger and fries in celebration of Valentine’s Day.

My mother had a knack for floating back and forth between the sacred and the secular. She seemed to know exactly what lessons she was to take from each. Perhaps because she was born in the secular world, she did not proselytize or invite our neighbors or schoolmates to visit our church, something our pastor and the Saints frequently encouraged the congregation to do. She must have been aware of at least some negative or strange perceptions about evangelicals, too. I think she also understood and had heard many reasons why people weren’t interested in the church, and she respected their wishes. We didn’t drink alcohol, but that wasn’t necessarily specific to our faith. For a number of religious or health reasons, pretty much anyone could decline a drink without making much of a fuss.

One thing we did do as church members was say, “Praise the Lord,” upon greeting another Saint. Though I found the greeting silly as a child, I would say it back to anyone who said it to me in the sanctuary or in the church parking lot. My mother would greet other Saints this way if she saw them in the grocery store or elsewhere on the street, but I refused. On the playground, in school, and on errands I liked nothing more than being a regular girl, and I took issue with anyone—religious or not—who pulled me from this obscure and covert status. I was far less comfortable or inclined to move back and forth like my mother did. Both worlds baffled me in equal measure, and I lacked the skills and, perhaps, the knowledge that I could approach the subject with anyone. Until such wisdom arrived, invisibility seemed a perfectly acceptable option.

Once, in seventh grade, my teacher sent me on an errand to the main office where I ran into Brother Mitchell, dressed in his work uniform. He had come to fix the copier machine in the front lobby where I secretly hoped he wouldn’t see me. But when he inevitably did, I hoped—as he paused, thinking, it seemed, about how to greet me there—he wouldn’t go the sanctuary route. He had good energy, I thought he was handsome and kind of cool (he played the electric guitar at church), and if he didn’t out me right then and there, maybe
he was a true confidant, someone who understood the gravity of our predicament.

“Praise the Lord,” he said smiling. Maybe he thought I expected that. If he didn’t do it, what would I tell my parents about him when I got home? I felt more aware of every person in the office, all two or three of them. I was irritated, but also sympathetic to him, who had put himself out there with the greeting that marked us, that showed the world who we were. Shouldn’t I do it, too? I took a step forward.

“Hello,” I said sternly, and left whatever paper or envelope I was carrying on the secretary’s desk. Then I booked it out of there.
Compound, Fracture

When I was in high school, my mother spent nearly a week each month in the psychiatric hospital at the top of Mesaba Avenue. My father and I visited her nearly every night. We brought drawing paper, pencils, cigarettes, cappuccino from the gas station. She cried because she was homesick, holding her head in her bandaged arms. The nurses recognized us and buzzed us in and out.

It was a twenty-minute drive from the Duluth hospital to our house in the country. Lake Superior’s dark water was heavy and serious in the night air, rebuffing the light from phone towers and bars. Cold lake air meeting the atmosphere illuminated the stars over the freeway until we barely needed the lamps. I was shaken from the sight of my mother’s broken body, and my father told stories about the city and the land we sped past. In the car, he smelled like tobacco and the suede jacket he got from the paper mill on his anniversary. Always so quiet or stormy at home, in his car with his cigarettes and his coffee, he talked.

We drove past the taconite and limestone stacked against the shore, and he told stories about Mountain Iron. He received a physics degree during the Cold War and, due to a penchant for labor rights, had difficulty finding a job outside of Soviet deterrence. He worked as a miner at Mountain Iron, spending long days extracting his dinner from the brushed-red iron ridges. He spoke of the uncanny weather attracted by the barometric pressure in the mines, fog and mist that left the air opaque for minutes and dissipated as quickly as they fell. He spoke of timber wolves gathering along the ledges. He spoke of feeling their eyes with the nape of his neck. He spoke of miners’ strikes and miners’ coughs, ketchup soup for dinner, and the red dust of the excavated land that settled in the air and lungs like a storm on Mars.

We crept up the hill by the sewage plant, past the railyard, and around the curve where the lake met the harbor. Developers had built condos near the shore, blocking the view of the water from the freeway. The beachfront view up for purchase stretched gray and choppy into colder waters claimed by Canada. He sighed, and I knew he was
thinking of the sailors killed in those waters, the waters marketed by developers as a good view. I saw the sailors. They were his father’s friends, their bodies were strong, and the ore was still dark on their necks. He scoffed at the big, expensive houses on the hill, the old ones, the ones he claimed to own, the ones, he snarled, his ancestors bought with their blood.

My family’s farmhouse sat on the southern edge of Lake Superior. Fields and a row of pine trees flanked the vegetable garden. Every summer, my mother planted flowers of nearly every kind they sold in the greenhouse, but mostly peonies, so the way to the house exploded in three shades of pink. Each fall, my father lined pumpkins along the driveway, huddling two or three cozily under a tree. The deer smashed them with their hooves during the night, so that each morning, the driveway was marked with the last night’s hungry carnage. Before the frost settled for the first fall night, my father gathered the potatoes and onions from the garden and re-buried them in the basement’s root cellar.

Our basement was large and twisted, concrete and wood, and the root cellar opened from a narrow hallway. Food for the winter slept there in warmth, forestalling the rot. The main room at the bottom of the stairs held shelves of my grandparents’ things: glass fishermen’s weights and Swedish porcelain. Furnishings were sparse: the toilet surrounded by four unsteady walls where I would go to be sick so no one would hear; the sink, stained with iron; the furnace of which I was so scared.

Going further into the basement required lifting a heavy, cast-iron latch with the weight of my body, and it was best to find and flip a series of light switches before going further. A hallway housed a long, high work bench and stools with torn green fabric seats to the left. My father taught chemistry at the high school, and his chemicals and test tubes were stored here. His equipment was unthreatening, and what were left were mixtures to form artificial banana and liquid nitrogen, combinations to freeze and shatter a grape. The back room was my favorite. My mother painted with oils here, and the room smelled of solvent and linseed mixing with mildew. Easels and canvases were stacked along the wall, and a green metal desk housed her dried-up tubes of paint.

My mother broke her bones in the basement. She became angry or upset, or her world went dark, and she walked down the stairs to break her bones. She was an artist, and she broke her arms, her wrists, and her fingers most of all. She only broke her bones in the evening,
after dinner. I rarely saw her go into the basement, or maybe I ignored her. If I were sitting in the living room, I heard the low, repeating noise of her bones against the concrete walls or on the ceramic edge of the sink. When she hit her arm against the antique coffee table stored in the basement, the glass in its center rattled up through the heating vents into the living room. When she broke her fingers, I heard the object come down, and perhaps I could hear her fingers lying there. I never went down into the basement to stop it, but my father did, over and over, until he stopped running as urgently as the first times.

After dinner, sometimes I ran outside, through the fields, to the shallow forest, where I could be invisible behind the trees and sit on my large boulder. I sat here until the air grew dark, reading my books, doing backbends over the rock, praying to the sky and watching the moon turn papaya from behind a veil of paper mill pollution. If I were inside, all I could do was stare at the lamp on the table until my eyes shut themselves. All I could do was listen and freeze, turn my own bones heavy and immobile in the sound of her breaking. Like a dog left out in the cold, my body comforted itself enough to breathe.

The story of this place is buried underground. Sheets of volcanic rock grind into each other like a car crash stretching thousands of square miles. Caches of minerals, metals, and ores hide from the whip of air gusting in from Canada. Lake Superior, grey and volatile as gunmetal, drives ice into the shoreline where it moans apart in spring.

The Minnesota Iron Range forms a vast, bitterly cold region that stretches north from the port of Duluth up until the state’s eastern arrowhead yields to Ontario. It is bordered by the Fond du Lac reservation to the south and the land of the Bois Forte band in the northeast. It curves westward into the small towns of Virginia and Hibbing, a crescent of fertility in its own right. The deep earth shelters iron ore, and closer to the surface lies ore’s unrefined sister, taconite. The earth marries its minerals with sulfides, and when exhumed, contact with the air results in a sulfuric acid run-off that can blight the surrounding water.

Billion-year-old rifts in the volcanic bedrock give up the goods on a daily basis. Here are the Mesabi, Vermilion, Gunflint, and Cuyuna ranges, although the Mesabi does most of the giving. The rifts break the surface in places, forming partially erupted pre-Cambrian teeth that sharpen the Misquah hills and the Boundary Waters between Minnesota and Canada. A topographic map paints the Range multiple
shades of red, a curving shoulder of inflammation along the shoreline of Lake Superior. Old settlements turned dubiously small towns dot the way, filled with descendants of Serbian miners who make the air smell like walnuts and coffee on holidays, and tall strong Swedes like my father.

Physical closeness to the land in such spare towns is necessary. We look at the land like we look at our bodies—awe at the near-frozen solidity, the muscular curvature that shelters and extends the cold, the red of miles of underground iron in our dirt and in our hair, the mines’ promises of income and cancers. The land is our insides. Where the industrial land meets the natural spaces—the fields, the forests, the mines, the reservations, the big box stores, the three bars for every church—is where our wilderness begins.

Along the shore of Lake Superior, where the curves of the road quickly funnel reckless drivers into the hospital, lie mountains of mined taconite, coal, and limestone. The rocks meld into one smooth hillside caught in undulation like the ice floes near the shore. Railcars circling the yard are nearly full. Some will journey a half-mile to the harbor and head to refinement in Cleveland or Detroit. When the ice thaws, taconite will join grain from the prairies heading out to ships entering the lake from the Hudson, from the Atlantic, from the Persian Gulf.

My father and I must have driven this route for the same reason dozens of times. As he drove, I listened to his stories and learned about this city and what it once was to him. He didn’t talk about my mother. He spoke about random things, his life as a miner and a telephone repairman. He told stories about his family of Swedish immigrants and the lives they built from the iron-rich dirt valued by two world wars.

He saw the landscape outside the window as a blessing and a curse. Faced with layoffs, pay cuts, waning economic interest in steel, and growing environmental concerns about where it came from, he was lucky to have a job in a sector that would poison him and break his back. The taconite had been part of the city, part of the people, for so long that its role in providing dinner was hard to ignore. Whether it was my father’s intention or not, his stories linked my mother’s broken bones with the landscape—a landscape that was home, torn and rendered, a landscape I loved and hated enough to recognize as part of myself.

When my mother came home from the hospital, she was so happy to have her own space, her own bed, that she was calm and
content for days. But this space surrounded only by woods and fields and a horizon that grew lower with the cold days could be defeating. She took her piles of medications, but she was still depressed, and she claimed to feel psychosis encroaching. I understood what she meant. Once you’ve experienced psychosis, I imagine it is easy to recall it buried inside you, always threatening, always available. I knew these words—psychosis, bipolar, all the words for medicines—only from movies that knew only the horror and otherness of mental illness. Here was what I knew at thirteen with my too-skinny body, at fifteen with my loads of eyeliner, at seventeen with my near-permanent headphones: my mother was sad.

One morning, she stood by her kitchen window and watched the birds tuck their fat bodies into the bare trees. My father gusted into the house, closing the big red door loudly. He untucked his shirt and tucked it back in, the deep red flannel someone had probably bought as a gift looking oddly formal next to his work pants and their built-in flame-retardant label.

My mother’s eyes had glazed, and she blinked and squeezed them shut. Her sleep had been interrupted the past few nights when she’d gotten up to sit at the window and stare out at the woods, her gaze caught by the white glare of the doghouse where once they’d found a pregnant cat. She wanted to ask my father for another sedative, but she was scared he’d sigh and look torn between responsibility and the need to keep her quiet and still.

My father sat in the living room, eating crackers off the small mound of his flannel-covered belly, the bit of loose fat that had only appeared in the past year, the fat the cat thought was hers. My mother began to cry, and she was barely noticeable, sitting on the loveseat, leaning into the cushions with her knees pulled up off the floor. She cried noiselessly, and her face grew darker and softer, so soft it looked about to fall off the bones. He had seen despair hit her face suddenly, in the night, when her body was seized with dread that could at least be medicated. He saw it frequently when the light fell at the end of the day and the world became still and worn, and she heard it hum something that put her on edge with a sadness she could never define.

Her face was open and wet, and the softness was something from which I wanted to run. I could see where her makeup had gathered to divert her tears, the medicated dilution of her eyes, the gold crown the dentist had done last year. She looked soft in her floral satin pajamas, and just out of the shower, she smelled like flowers and chemicals and something I could only identify as pink.
My father placed his palm on her hand and squeezed tightly, splitting his dry knuckles further across, looking suddenly down and swallowing hard across his clenched jaw. He was not like the dog, the dog who’d nearly broken down the door between the living room and kitchen when she’d heard my mother crying one night. He could not sit here, swallowed by this loss. If something were lost, he needed to find it, hold it, look in its face, touch it, listen to it, have it here, have it anywhere.

A wilderness of expression was opened on my mother’s body through the violent motion of giving substance to agony and dispelling grief that came from nowhere. Her flesh became a border between her emotions and the outside world. It was a way to escape the loneliness, the suffering she felt was inevitable when she woke up. She drew her pain to a wound, so that injury could be here and now, not everywhere and always. It was proof that she hadn’t been destroyed, that her slipping and drugged self could be replaced with injury and healing.

Winter drew in quickly on the Iron Range, and afternoons that crackled with fire on the dry earth dripped into overnight gusts through the house’s cracked siding. In these small towns that brave the Range, winter was hard. Our fields were made of metals, layered plate upon plate, and the cold stole across and entered these expanses like ice water on a carious tooth. Winter was silent outside the window without the howl of coyotes in Indian summer or the bullfrogs in the spring.

When snow came pushing from the Dakotas, the sun traced a red line across the horizon of our fields, and trees bent under the crush of ice storms that razored the air. The grasses that snagged the dog’s legs as he ran through the summer field lay beaten under the snow. My father’s old tractor lost a wheel, and the driveway, gullied and rough, was left unplowed. The tractor sat lopsided for days near the road collecting woodsmoke, the quick work of my father’s gloved and bloodless fingers, and the sharp edge of a passing snowplow. He was angry and worn after the first snowfall, and he sat silently, using his cracked fingers to push the migraine from his forehead. Only the dogs rushed excited across the fields, coats sparkling wet, seeing coyote eyes like Christmas tree lights in the dark.

My mother tried to break her skull that winter by hitting her head against the bathroom wall. Our bathroom locked, and we at first didn’t understand the noise. Or we did. But a head against a wall, especially my mother’s head of dark, frizzy curls, was no thing for
understanding. There was no meaning, no purpose, there was no such animal in the world as her head against a wall.

I ran from the house and stumbled onto the concrete sidewalk, uneven snow and ice in the cracks turning the soles of my boots as I gazed burning and wet-eyed out toward the icy trees. As I curled up in the hayloft of the barn, I watched the three lonely pines and the living snowy field through the cracks in the wood. My skin grew raw and alive with nerves protesting the cold, then numb, and I heard the car leave the driveway.

I sat in the kitchen later as my father chose the cleanser made of orange peel and scrubbed the bathroom wall. The little leather Bible and the Lenten cross had been placed on the kitchen table with each week’s piece displayed: the purple cloth, the crown of thorns, the four nails. Sitting still for so long, I could only see that slash of purple out of the corner of my eye. It was a king’s sash, and they had put it on him as a joke, as torture, and it was soft on his skin.

One afternoon, my father told me about the first years after I was born when he continued to work as a miner. He extracted taconite from the steely ridges, and, each evening, the foreman gave him two beef dinners and a bottle of milk to take home. Sometimes, it was manganese he pulled from the earth, metals he brought to the surface, and when it was manganese, they gave him six bottles of milk, six bottles to sit on the floor of his truck during the hour-long drive home. It was a payment, Iron Range health insurance, based on the idea that milk binds to manganese, rids the body of what is heavy and toxic.

He left it to my mother and me, the thick fatty liquid our nutrition in a hard time we barely remember, the earth’s metals latching onto his cells. He believed in principle over health, the fact of what he was not (a nursing calf) superseding a neurotoxic threat. He worked hard, melding his body with the minerals he exhumed, breathing in air thick with metals, accepting, then denying, the saving gesture of six white bottles at the day’s end.

Skin and bone is primitive communication. Listening is ingrained in us, when we mirror each other, the land, and the weather to feel a part of all of it. The body is a way of showing what can’t be said. My mother daily faced the truth of her self being whittled away by illness, hopelessness, and endless cocktails of drugs that never seemed to return anything worth what they stole. Her constant breaking was
Natalie Vestin

sacrifice to identify with the loss, to mourn what was draining away. It was a fight against helplessness, and her wounds were a way to own her body in privacy.

When speaking about something that tilts on the edge of what is supposed to be real, someone might say, “I was forbidden to talk about it” or “I wasn’t supposed to say anything.”

These statements are not entirely true, although they suffice in a way. They put the onus of responsibility or blame on a society, a surrounding world made of rules and norms and healthy ways of communicating. And it is an onus of blame much of the time, though perhaps undeserved. For here is how I think of my unwillingness to tell anyone what was happening during those years. A school, a church, an afternoon at the pool, a birthday party at a restaurant, solitude and a novel in a tree house. These were all round holes. And an evening spent listening to a woman break her arm on the edge of a sink. This was a square peg.

Breaking bones. This act must have meaning. All the ancient armies knew that destroying the walls, the vast buildings, the structures, left them without a town to overrun, but they did it anyway. Destroyed a structure. Left a mound of bruised, deformed flesh. Everyone understands red, comprehends the pleading nature of blood, how it draws the eye and begs for help. The message communicated by a broken bone, the sound of fracture, the pain that will awaken eternally when it gets cold or when the barometer falls—this is a new kind of language.

I tried to round off the corners of this peg, shaping it into the semblance of a circle, a distorted shape with no name that would at least fit into the puzzle. It was surprisingly hard to round off the edges, to use an understood word like “suicide” to stand in for an action committed by someone who desperately did not want to die. It made no sense to carve an explanatory shape of “mental illness” when the definitions and stories of other people bore no resemblance to the shape I held in my hand each day. It made no difference to me and my square peg how many mutant bits of wood I dropped into those worldly circles. I was still holding a shape that had no home.

As we returned home from visiting my mother in the hospital one night, my father pointed to the Bong Bridge connecting Duluth with Superior, Wisconsin. He claimed he couldn’t drive across it, opting always to take the vertiginous Blatnik Bridge as an alternative. My father was silent for a moment then spoke about a family friend unbalanced, lost, and killed in the wet poured cement of a pillar.
when the bridge was constructed. This stopped him, and for the rest of the drive, he chewed silently on the cheeseburgers he’d picked up as a treat.

My legs shook as I imagined this man swallowed by cement, a wet solidifying heaviness filling his nose, holding him without salvation in place for what he knew would be eternity. Years later, I asked my father about this story, and he looked at me like I was crazy. He didn’t remember. I wondered when and why he made it up.

When I tell people that my mother broke her bones in the basement, they inevitably ask the same question: Did I, as well? Did I break my bones? Did I ever try it? As if it were a sneaked cigarette in the bathroom. As if it is common knowledge that mitochondrial DNA transmits more than a few devastating diseases. As if traits between mother and daughter are not just written in the blood but etched on the changing surface of bone. As if it were expected to learn so fast, to absorb so much of another person. As if the landscape of body can be so easily mirrored, altered, and claimed.

I lied for years. Of course I lied. And people said, “Thank God. How fantastic that you were spared, at least, from that.” And I would think, yes. It is fantastic. I survived.

But in truth, my square peg grew too awkward to hold. It burned its way through my palm. I needed to find somewhere it would fit, somewhere it could finally call home. It was much easier to carve holes in the only thing I possessed than to deform a shape I knew to be true.

I broke my leg when I was thirteen. For years, I didn’t think of this. I tried to pretend it never happened. I searched for ways to make it right, throw the smallest bit of sense at it, but truly, there was nothing in the world for making sense. I was in my late twenties before I ever related my broken leg to my mother’s broken bones, a pathology distilled between generations.

I broke the tibia, the lower frontal bone. It was only a hairline fracture. I broke it because I was very skinny and couldn’t keep up with sports, and I was tired of my basketball coach making fun of my body. An injured body was easier than a weak body. I broke it on my bed, striking my leg over and over with the thick heel of a boot, taking breaks when the pain became too bad. There is nothing to make this not shameful. I wish that vague dent in the front of my right leg were there because of a dramatic childhood accident, something to do with a horse or monkey bars. The muscles and tendons and connective tissue
have formed a funny little knot around that dent, an encircling basket of protection, not caring about its origins, not needing a creation story, just doing their job and healing, forming a barrier against attack.

It was only a hairline, a hairline with dramatic bruises and skin puffed like vanilla cake over the top of my sock. I lay on the table at the urgent care, looking at the doctor with contempt as he accepted my story, explaining that the heavy bruising was the result of falling down the stairs. I wanted to hug him with gratitude, and I wanted to hit him. My mother was with me, listening to the doctor and nodding. I stared at him and thought the thoughts of an heiress. Do you know who I am? Don’t you know who I am?

In graduate school, one of my friends spent a great deal of time studying disasters, horrible accidents, careless moments when everything goes wrong. He studied the uglier disasters as well: bombings, shootings, things people do to each other when psychopathy needs a political excuse to be exercised. He said that to plan for surviving destruction, one had to think like a sadistic bastard.

The theory, of course, said that sadistic bastards tend to have a fairly clear and comprehensive understanding of human behavior. My friend claimed that when a building is taken over, during a raid or a hostage situation, a sadistic bastard will put the bombs or the gunmen where the frightened people will run. A sadistic bastard mines the exits, makes them points of great destruction. A survivor doesn’t escape. A survivor avoids the exits. A survivor runs the other way.

My father countered terror and loss with science and landscape. When I write about my mother, her body, my body, and what happened to these bodies over several years, I have to retell his driving stories about the mining land outside of Duluth, manganese, prehistoric rock, and taconite. But the first story during the first drive belonged to Hollywood. Over fifteen miles, my father told me about Soylent Green.

Soylent Green was a post-apocalyptic film released in the 1970s. The plot was simple: the world was in crisis, assisted suicide called “going home” was popular, food grew scarce, and the government began to manufacture nutritional wafers called Soylent Green. Charlton Heston played a detective investigating a murder. As he probed further into the crime, he found it connected to covert governmental activities. The detective finally learned the truth about
his world, became seriously wounded, and before his death, told the secret to a man standing nearby: “Soylent Green is people.”

At the time, I was just a scared teenager laughing and talking about bad horror movies with my father. Now, I think he saw the way I hid sorrow and fear, the wideness of my eyes when we entered the hospital, the way I laughed too much with my mom, how I looked too long out the window once we got back in the car. I think he saw everything, all the pieces of his family and his home breaking before him. I think his mouth was shut to everything he could not understand, but what he did understand was science and land and cheap movies the cable stations played after midnight.

With every lost piece of our family and our life, every lost piece of our changing landscape, he told stories, some true, some imagined. His first talk, before all the others about the little pieces of science and land, was a consent form. It was a scrap of courage, a story about the B-movie loneliness of knowing everything is wrong. When the world seemed not as it should be and heroism meant only making some vague sense of horror, my father wanted me to remember: “It’s people.”

Duluth is currently a hotbed of contention between mining companies, legislators, and environmental groups. The companies want a new mine, the advocates want a clean and healthy landscape, and the people who live there want it both ways. Duluth will always be torn between the need to keep the water pure and the need to put dinner on the table. It is the nature of red-dirt land. And all those caustic rocks piled along the railyard, all that vast metal piping carrying chemicals to wrench steel from earth, that is my damn heart. This is not romanticized pollution. This is blight. I came home to my mother’s broken body like I came home to this ancient, hard landscape. Love and brokenness mingled into a state of wildness, of cohabitation with the body of the land. This shared body was not beautiful by any stretch of the imagination. This shared body was beautiful. This shared body was the only home I knew, the only home I wished to know.

Drive along the stretch of I-35 North into Duluth some night. It has to be at night when an east wind blows from Lake Superior, when the ice floes are expanding with moans so loud you think the dark sky must have finally decided to bury its whole body deep inside the waves. Break the bodies of your family, break your own body. Find the words to describe why you love this torn place. See the healed ridges in your mother’s bones, the lazy stale bruising that hasn’t quite
disappeared. Feel the ache in your own healed leg. Hate yourself, your family, just a little. Be collapse, be piecemeal, be an angry fish run out of life. Look out the window. Love yourself, your family, just a little. Stare at the coal and taconite and manganese and poison and all the wrenched pieces of the earth. This is home. This is the body to which I come home.
Contributors’ Notes

Dale Gregory Anderson is the winner of the 2013 Jack Dyer Fiction Prize. He has published short fiction in North American Review, Alaska Quarterly Review, Indiana Review, Northwest Review, and elsewhere. He earned an MFA from the University of Arizona and has received a number of awards for his work, including a Minnesota State Arts Board fellowship, a Mentor Series award from the Loft Literary Center, and a Jerome Foundation travel grant. He lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota.


MaryEllen Beveridge, a graduate of the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, has published short stories in The Georgia Review, The South Carolina Review, Other Voices, and elsewhere. Her story “High Diving” was nominated by the editors of The Lindenwood Review for a Pushcart Prize. She teaches fiction writing and literature courses at Emerson College in Boston, Massachusetts.

Bruce Bond is the author of eight published books of poetry, most recently The Visible (Louisiana State University Press), Peal (Etruscan Books), and Blind Rain (Finalist, The Poet’s Prize, Louisiana State University). His tetralogy of new books entitled Choir of the Wells will be released from Etruscan Press in 2013. Presently he is a Regents Professor of English at the University of North Texas and Poetry Editor for American Literary Review.

Fleda Brown’s sixth collection of poems, Reunion, won the Felix Pollak Prize from the University of Wisconsin. She has co-edited two books, most recently On the Mason-Dixon Line: An Anthology of Contemporary Delaware Writers. Her collection of memoir-essays, Driving With Dvorak, was released in 2010 from the University of Nebraska Press. She served as poet laureate of Delaware from 2001–2007, when she retired from the University of Delaware and moved to Traverse City, Michigan.
Contributors’ Notes

Abigail Carroll’s first book, Three Squares: The Invention of the American Meal, will be published by Basic Books in September 2013. Her prose has appeared in the New York Times, and her poems in The Midwest Quarterly, Clapboard House, and Grey Sparrow Journal. She holds a PhD in American Studies from Boston University, where she has taught writing and food history. She lives in Vermont.

Jung Hae Chae is the winner of the 2012 Rafael Torch Literary Nonfiction Award. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in CALYX Journal, Georgetown Review, and Third Coast. Her poems have been selected as a runner-up for the Academy of American Poets Prize. She lives in northern New Jersey, with her daughter.

Anna Marie Craighead-Kintis’s poetry has appeared most recently in The Tusculum Review, Prairie Schooner, The Nebraska Review, Spoon River Poetry Review, and Alaska Quarterly Review. She was awarded the 2012 49th Parallel Award for Poetry from Bellingham Review and was chosen as a finalist for the Tusculum Poetry Prize, the Indiana Review Poetry Prize, and the Philip Levine Poetry Prize. She holds a PhD from the University of Illinois at Chicago and an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She lives in Wilmette, Illinois.

Kelly Cressio-Moeller’s poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in Poet Lore, Crab Creek Review, Rattle, Boxcar Poetry Review, Gargoyle, The Sand Hill Review, Southern Humanities Review, and Pirene’s Fountain among others. She lives in Northern California with her husband and two sons and is a reader on the editorial team of Cæsura.

Laura Davenport’s work has appeared in Best New Poets 2009, Delaware Poetry Review, Meridian, Boxcar Poetry Review, and elsewhere. She received an MFA from Virginia Commonwealth University in 2010.

Adam Day is the recipient of a PSA Chapbook Fellowship for Badger, Apocrypha, and of a PEN Emerging Writers Award. His work has appeared in the Boston Review, Lana Turner, APR, Poetry London, and elsewhere. He coordinates The Baltic Writing Residency in Latvia, Scotland, and Bernheim Arboretum & Research Forest.

John Drury teaches at the University of Cincinnati. His most recent book is The Refugee Camp (Turning Point Books). New poems appear
Contributors’ Notes


Gwendolyn Edward is an MA candidate in creative writing at the University of North Texas where she works with American Literary Review and North Texas Review. You can find her at gwendolynedward.com.

Jamilee Gerzon is the winner of the 2012 Charles Johnson Fiction Award. She lives in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and she received her MFA in creative writing from Roosevelt University in Chicago, Illinois. This is her first publication.

Mary Jo Firth Gillett’s poetry collection, Soluble Fish, won the Crab Orchard Series in Poetry First Book Award (Southern Illinois University Press). She’s also published three prize-winning chapbooks of poetry and a fourth, Dance Like a Flame, is forthcoming as winner of the Hill-Stead Sunken Gardens Poetry Award. Her poems have appeared in The Southern Review, The Gettysburg Review, Harvard Review, Michigan Quarterly Review, Green Mountains Review, Salamander, and on the Verse Daily website. She has received the N.Y. Open Voice Poetry Award and a Kresge Artist Fellowship in the Literary Arts.

Sarah Grieve is a PhD student studying 20th century American poetry at Arizona State University. She has an MFA from Florida State University, and an MA and BA from California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in Cimarron Review, Bayou, Missouri Review Online, Rattle, and New Madrid.

Yona Harvey is the author of the poetry collection Hemming the Water (Four Way Books). She is currently writing a collection of essays that explores, in part, religious upbringing and sibling birth order. Her website is www.yonaharvey.com.

Sherry Horowitz holds an MFA in poetry from New England College where she received the Joel Oppenheim Award. Her poems and book reviews have been published or are forthcoming in Jewish Action, Innisfree, Poems Niederngasse, Impulse, Prism: A Holocaust Journal, Midstream, OVS Magazine, Quest for God: An Anthology (UK), and Poetry International/Web del Sol Review. Her work has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. She lives in New York with her husband and five children.
Contributors’ Notes

Rochelle Hurt is the winner of the 2013 Richard Peterson Poetry Prize. She is the author of *The Rusted City*, forthcoming in the Marie Alexander Poetry Series from White Pine Press. She is the recipient of awards from *Hunger Mountain* , *Arts & Letters* , and *Poetry International*. More of her work can be found in recent issues of *The Kenyon Review Online*, *Versal*, and *RHINO*.

Lindsay Key lives in Blacksburg, Virginia, where she works as a science writer and communicator at Virginia Tech. She holds an MFA in creative writing from the University of North Carolina Wilmington. Her poetry has appeared in journals such as *Fourteen Hills* and *The Brush Mountain Review*.


Margarite Landry’s short stories have appeared in *Tampa Review*, *The Baltimore Review*, *Nimrod*, and numerous other journals, and have received multiple recognitions. Her novel-in-progress received the James Jones First Novel Fellowship in 2008. She holds an MFA from Vermont College of Fine Arts, and a PhD from Columbia. She is currently finishing a somewhat comic faux-Dickensian novel about rehabs.

Rosa Lane was a poetry finalist for the Poets & Writers California Writers Exchange Award, a finalist for A Room of Her Own Foundation’s Orlando Prize for Poetry, a finalist for the Arts & Writers/2013 Rumi Prize in Poetry, National Runner-Up for the Cultural Center of Cape Cod Poetry Competition, and a recipient of a scholarship from Bread Loaf Writers Conference. She is author of a chapbook of poems, *Roots and Reckonings*. Her work is forthcoming in *Ploughshares* and has appeared in *Milvia Street Journal*, *Passages North*, and *Sarah Lawrence Review*, among other publications.

Jennifer Luebbers is the winner of the 2012 Allison Joseph Poetry Award. She has work recently appearing or forthcoming in *Ninth Letter*, *Mid-American Review*, and *Washington Square Review*. She has held scholarships and fellowships at The Kenyon Review Writers
Workshop, Sewanee Writers’ Conference, New York State Summer Writers Institute, and Indiana University, where she received her MFA in poetry and served as Editor-in-Chief of *Indiana Review*. She will be the Diane Middlebrook Poetry Fellow at the Wisconsin Institute for Creative Writing for the 2013–2014 academic year.

**Cate Lycurgus** has work in *Crazyhorse, Washington Square Review, Best New Poets 2012*, and elsewhere. She is pursuing her MFA at Indiana University in Bloomington, where she served as poetry editor for *Indiana Review*.

**Al Maginnes** is the author of five full-length collections, most recently *Inventing Constellations* (Cherry Grove Edition) and *Ghost Alphabet* (White Pine Press), winner of the White Pine Poetry Prize. He has new or forthcoming poems in *The Georgia Review, American Literary Review, Cave Wall, Chautauqua*, and others. He lives with his family in Raleigh, North Carolina, and teaches composition, literature, and creative writing at Wake Technical Community College.

**Ashley Anna McHugh**’s debut poetry collection, *Into These Knots*, was the 2010 winner of The New Criterion Poetry Prize. More recently, *Become All Flame*, a limited-edition chapbook of her poetry, was published by LATR Editions. Her poems have appeared in *Nimrod, The New Criterion, DIAGRAM, Measure, Anti-, and The Hopkins Review*.

**Richard Newman** is the author of the poetry collections *Domestic Fugues* (Steel Toe Books) and *Borrowed Towns* (Word Press). He serves as editor of *River Styx* and co-director of the River Styx Reading Series.

**William Notter**’s collection *Holding Everything Down* (Southern Illinois University Press) won the High Plains Book Award for Poetry and was a finalist for the Colorado Book Award. His poems have been published in *Alaska Quarterly Review, Atlanta Review, High Desert Journal*, and *The Midwest Quarterly*, and in the anthologies *Manifest West: Contemporary Cowboy* (Western Press Books) and *Good Poems, American Places* (Viking Penguin). He has been awarded grants from the Nevada Arts Council and the National Endowment for the Arts.

**Derek Otsuji** teaches English at Honolulu Community College and works at Otsuji Farm, a family-run farmer’s market, on the weekends.
Contributors’ Notes


Anne Leigh Parrish’s new story collection, Our Love Could Light The World (She Writes Press, 2013) was declared a Finalist in the 2013 International Book Awards. Her first collection, All The Roads That Lead From Home (Press 53) won a silver medal in the 2012 Independent Publisher Book Awards. She has new work forthcoming in Nomos Review and Whiskey Paper.

Sasha Pimentel is a Filipina poet who was born in Manila and raised in the U.S. and Saudi Arabia. She is the author of Insides She Swallowed, winner of the 2011 American Book Award. Her work has been published or is forthcoming in APR, The Baffler, Callaloo, and Gulf Coast, among others. She directs the undergraduate studies in creative writing program at the University of Texas at El Paso, where she teaches in a bilingual MFA program on the border of Ciudad Juárez, Mexico.

Wesley Rothman has had poems and criticism in Bellingham Review, Salamander, Rattle, Harpur Palate, The Rumpus, On the Seawall, Paper Darts, Thrush, and the Los Angeles Review of Books, among others. He has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and was a finalist for the 49th Parallel Poetry Prize. He serves Ploughshares as senior poetry reader, and teaches writing and cultural literatures at Emerson College and the University of Massachusetts Boston.

Lucinda Roy’s work includes the novel Lady Moses (Harper Perennial), a Barnes & Noble Discover Great New Writers selection, and the poetry collection The Humming Birds, winner of the Eighth Mountain Poetry Prize. Her most recent book is No Right to Remain Silent: What We’ve Learned from the Tragedy at Virginia Tech, published by Three Rivers Press. She is an Alumni Distinguished Professor at Virginia Tech where she teaches poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction in the MFA program.

Aisha Sharif is a Cave Canem fellow who earned her MFA at Indiana University, Bloomington. Her poetry has appeared in Callaloo, Tidal Basin Review, PMS poemmemoirstory, Mythium, and CALYX Journal.
Contributors’ Notes

**Michael Shewmaker** is a PhD candidate in creative writing at Texas Tech University and an editor for *32 Poems*. His work appears or is forthcoming in *Yale Review, Southwest Review, Sewanee Theological Review, The New Criterion, The Journal, American Arts Quarterly,* and elsewhere. He will begin a Wallace Stegner Fellowship at Stanford University in Fall 2013.

**Barry Silesky**’s poems have appeared in more than eighty magazines and anthologies including *Poetry, Denver Quarterly, Notre Dame Review, Chelsea,* and *Fifth Wednesday*. His poetry collections include *This Disease* (Tampa University Press), *One Thing That Can Save Us* (Coffee House Press), and *The New Tenants* (Eye of the Comet Press); and he has also authored biographies of Lawrence Ferlinghetti (Warner Books) and John Gardner (Algonquin Books). All of this has been in the shadows of Wrigley Field, where he has lived for almost thirty years now with his wife, fiction writer Sharon Solwitz.

**Jason Sommer**’s latest collection of poems, *The Laughter of Adam and Eve*, was a winner of the 2012 Crab Orchard Series in Poetry Open Competition and will be published by Southern Illinois University Press in September 2013. He has published three previous collections of poetry: *Other People’s Troubles* (University of Chicago Press, Phoenix Poets Series), *Lifting the Stone* (Forest Books, London), and *The Man Who Sleeps in My Office* (University of Chicago Press). The Society of Midland Authors gave *Other People’s Troubles* its 1998 literary award for poetry. *The Man Who Sleeps in my Office* was the finalist for the 2005 William Rockhill Nelson Award sponsored by the *Kansas City Star*. He was awarded a 2001 Whiting Foundation Writer’s Fellowship.

**Nick Stokes**’s novel *Affair* appeared in serial publication online at the *Seattle Star*. His shortish prose and fictions and nothings have been published by *Mixer Publishing, Waccamaw, Prick of the Spindle, Word Riot*, and others, and his plays have been seen and heard around the Pacific Northwest and beyond. He lives with his burgeoning family in Tacoma; he packs mules in the backcountry of Montana; he’s virtually at nickstokes.net.

**Adrienne Su** is author of three books of poems, *Having None of It* (Manic D Press), *Sanctuary* (Manic D Press), and *Middle Kingdom* (Alice James Books). She teaches at Dickinson College in Pennsylvania.

**Wanling Su** is a student at Yale Law School. She received her MFA in Poetry from the University of Virginia, where she was the Poetry Editor of *Meridian*. Her work has appeared in *Prairie Schooner*, *Harpur Palate*, and *The Bitter Oleander: A Journal of Contemporary International Poetry and Short Fiction*. She is the recipient of the Glenna Luschei Prairie Schooner Award.

**Pireeni Sundaralingam**’s poetry has appeared in *Ploughshares*, *Hayden’s Ferry Review*, *World Literature Today*, and *The Guardian* (UK), among others. She is co-editor of *Indivisible: An Anthology of Contemporary South Asian American Poetry* (University of Arkansas Press), winner of the 2011 Northern California Book Award, and a former PEN USA Fellow. Born in Sri Lanka, and raised both there and in the UK, she currently lives in California.

**Alexandra Teague** is the author of *Mortal Geography*, winner of the 2009 Lexi Rudnitsky Prize and 2010 California Book Award, and *The Wise and Foolish Builders* (both collections from Persea Books). Her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *ZYZZYVA*, *Willow Springs*, *The Threepenny Review*, *The Southern Review*, and elsewhere. She is Assistant Professor of Poetry at University of Idaho and an editor for Broadsided Press.

**Bradford Tice** is a poet and fiction writer who currently teaches at Nebraska Wesleyan University. His first book of poems, *Rare Earth*, was awarded the 2011 Many Voices Project. His poem “Lucifer” is part of a series in his upcoming collection, *Rare Earth*, which will be published by New Rivers Press in October 2013.

**Leslie Ullman** is Professor Emerita at University of Texas-El Paso and currently teaches in the low-residency MFA Program at Vermont College of the Fine Arts. Her fourth poetry collection, *Progress on the Subject of Immensity*, will be published in August by University of New Mexico Press. Her awards include the Yale Series of Younger Poets Award, the Iowa Poetry Prize, and two National Endowment for the Arts Fellowships.
Contributors’ Notes

Natalie Vestin is the winner of the 2013 John Guyon Literary Nonfiction Prize. She is a writer and health researcher from Saint Paul, Minnesota. Her essays have been published or are forthcoming in The Iowa Review, Bellingham Review, Puerto del Sol, Chautauqua, and elsewhere. She is the winner of the Prairie Schooner 2012 Creative Nonfiction Prize and the 2012 Sonora Review Essay Prize.

Ocean Vuong was born in Saigon, Vietnam. He is the author of two chapbooks: No (YesYes Books, 2013) and Burnings (Sibling Rivalry Press), which was selected by the American Library Association’s “Over The Rainbow” recommended reading list. A recipient of a 2013 Pushcart Prize, other honors include fellowships from Kundiman, Poets House, and the Saltonstall Foundation for the Arts, as well as the 2012 Stanley Kunitz Prize for Younger Poets and an Academy of American Poets Prize. His poems appear in American Poetry Review, Verse Daily, Quarterly West, Guernica, Poetry Northwest, Beloit Poetry Journal, and The Normal School, among others. He lives in Queens, New York.

Anna Rose Welch earned her MFA in poetry at Bowling Green State University. Her work has also appeared or is forthcoming in Linebreak, Water~Stone Review, Rufous City Review, and Red Lightbulbs.

Lesley Wheeler’s latest collection, The Receptionist and Other Tales, was recently named to the Tiptree Award Honor List. Her other books include Heterotopia, winner of the Barrow Street Press Poetry Prize, and Heathen. She is the Henry S. Fox Professor of English at Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Virginia, and blogs about poetry at lesleywheeler.org.

Jianqing Zheng is editor of Poetry South and the Journal of Ethnic American Literature. His poems have recently appeared in Poetry East, The Southern Quarterly, Big Muddy, and Blip. He was a recipient of the Literary Arts Fellowship for Excellence in Poetry from the Mississippi Arts Commission.
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All submissions should be original, unpublished poetry, fiction, or literary nonfiction in English. Please query before submitting translations. 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. All editorial decisions for the issue will be made by the end of February 2014.

The submission period by postal mail for this issue is August 15 through October 1, 2013. (There will be later dates for online submissions to our Special Issue Feature Awards.) Mail submissions to:

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Poetry entries should consist of one poem up to five pages in length. Prose entry length: up to 6000 words for fiction and up to 6500 words for literary nonfiction. One poetry entry, one story entry in fiction, or one essay entry in literary nonfiction per $22.50 online entry fee; a writer may send up to three entries in one genre or a total of three entries if entering all competitions. One winner in each genre category—Poetry, Fiction, and Literary Nonfiction—will be selected by the editors of Crab Orchard Review to be published in the issue and receive a $1500.00 award. The editors are looking for the work in each genre that best embodies the topic of the special issue.

All entries will also be considered for publication in the Summer/Fall 2014 special issue, “The West Coast and Beyond.” Regular Crab Orchard Review contributor’s payment rates ($25 (US) per magazine page. $50 minimum for poetry; $100 minimum for prose) apply to any accepted work that is not a genre winner. All editorial decisions for the issue will be made by the end of February 2014.
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