

red rock review

Spring 2022 • Issue Forty-Eight



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JESSICA FREEMAN

February

No surprise when a bird crashes
into my bedroom window
in the folded crease of morning,
after night has bled enough
and wrinkled away against moon
light. The animals own this house,
with all its fractured
ghosts and brokenness.
The crack of a bird's beak,
the particles of her broken neb,
stick to glass like a child's
splintered fingernails. Gray
and black feathers swirl above
mud and frost. Outside in pajamas
I paw through leaves and rocks,
searching for her dead body
that seems to have disappeared.
I don't trust that I haven't imagined
this all. That it is nothingness and absence,
and nothing else that awoke me. A racoon
hammers his tail in the gutters above. His
needle-like hairs matted together. His cheeks
scraping against cracked shingles. Now,
I am thinking about love. How we can't love
the same after we touch fading
flesh. How we are nursed into bareness
by the bleating call of catastrophe
on short winter days. How minute
or small it all seems. How tenderness matters.

L A I N E D E R R

Olympia

She knew things
like lips heal fast,
hearts are tethered
by afternoon light,

how much a ring
finger costs, your
body clean and sober
for seven months,

right leg missing
pain bathed, dead
sea surrendering
to the coming tide,

how love is used
and sold, kicked
like a can, dented,
its shadow split

open so it may
be beautiful, held.

DANIEL KENITZ

A Hand to the Plow

NO ONE CAME TO MY GRANDFATHER'S WAKE. Moriah wasn't a big place—*unincorporated*, the county roads screamed, like some sailor's warning—but even so, I had never been in St. Mark's when it was empty. Only Grandpa could keep the faithful away, the way he used to set fires in the backyard to keep out mosquitoes. But there was no one at all. No greeter, no minister, no organist. Not even my grandfather's body. Just candles melted to nubs, giving creamy winks of light.

My brother, Noah, told me over the phone there would be no eulogies. It was one of the few things Grandpa wrote in his will: *no eulogies*, knowing full well he'd lived a life of damning post-mortems. But I intended to make one all the same. I'd even slicked up my throat with tea and honey that morning, whispering to the waitress at the highway diner, saving my voice for forgiveness. Making sure I sounded real sweet.

A janitor knocked, then wheeled in a mop bucket. "Ope," he said. "Bible study?"

"I came here for the wake. Ezra Sanders?"

He gave me a funny look, like I'd asked a ten-dollar question.

"I'm Adrienne Sanders," I said. "Adie."

He eyed me, drinking in the incongruity of me in this place, my black tats, my thigh-highs. If he lived here all his life, he'd only seen someone who looked like me on TV. He reminded me of Grandpa in the eyes, the way they crowned under his eyelids like eggs trying not to be laid. I expected them to go big, or maybe tighten as he recognized me. I was *the* Adrienne Sanders, yes, one of the few who got out of Moriah. I got my first credit card when I was still technically seventeen, and I learned the mailman's routine so I could run to the box before Grandpa saw any of my envelopes from Mastercard. Grandpa never let me get a job, so on my eighteenth birthday, I ran to the train station and started my life seventy-four dollars in the hole, plus two for a whoopie pie from a convenience store. I ate it on

the train and didn't make a wish. There was nothing left to wish for.

But the janitor only looked at me and stretched his back. "Welp. Sorry for your loss, ma'am."

"I ain't."

"Oh?"

"He wasn't a good man," I said.

"It might be he didn't want no wake—"

"I hope they didn't cremate him. I wanted a proper funeral, to forgive him with. Send him off. Isn't that what funerals are for?" I thought of the ancient Egyptians and the trinkets they'd leave their pharaohs for the after-life, onyx statues and mummified dogs, to keep the dead company. Or the Greeks, with coins on the eyes for the ferryman.

The janitor gave a shrug. "I don't think the dead care too much."

He let the mop slap the floor and got to soaping tile.

GRANDPA DIED IN THE OLD HOUSE ON FOX DEN LANE. By the looks of the place, he had taken the easy way out. It was a shotgun house, and I remembered it being strong and vibrant, robin's-egg blue. Now that blue had yellowed a shade towards jaundice and half the roof sunk in, cupping a puddle that stewed in the sun. Wasn't much of a lawn either, except overgrown spots of ryegrass, with no flowers to speak of except ones that didn't belong, those purple Kudzu blossoms. "Not much in there," came a voice. "My boys already picked the meat off."

I'd stared so long into the living room I never heard Noah pull up in his truck. He stood with his hands in his jeans, his way of warding off hugs. His goatee was half gray-blond now. It added twenty good years on him, instead of the ten it had been.

"I'm not here for any of his things," I said.

"Wasn't much anyway. Pots and pans. Coupla army things the boys liked."

"He leave you enough for a funeral?"

"Funeral? He's already cremated. Didn't say where he wants himself scattered. Don't think he cared."

"Well, we gotta have a funeral, right?"

"Naw. People don't gotta do anything."

"I do." My tongue thickened, turning my *Is* into *Ahs*. Every time I talked to Noah, it was the same way, slipping right back into Moriah. "I'm here."

“And you drove that ole scrapper all this way?” Noah clicked his tongue at my Ford Pinto. “Anyhow, *you* being here makes one who wants it. D’you need money?”

The Pinto needed new struts, but that wasn’t worth blushing over. “No.”

“Drugs? You’re skinny.”

“No!”

“Then why’re you here, Ade?”

“Real nice. If I were callin’, you’d ask when I was gonna visit. Now I’m here, I might as well be a bug.”

“Didn’t mean it like that. Thought maybe now Grandpa’s not here, you might be thinkin’ of movin’ back. Diner’s hirin’.”

I walked up the porch. A tube-style TV sat in the corner of the living room. It was the same one Grandpa used to watch every night before he came up to my room, frying himself in the wan glow of the TV. Noah said that’s how he died, a widower while watching TV. Was it a violent thing? A struggle, him collapsing to the floor, fingers clutching his chest? Or was it like falling asleep? I wondered how afraid he was. If he had time to beg God not to take him, to fold his hands and plead for forgiveness.

“I’ll bet you don’t feel better, seein’ it again. People think lookin’ at the past washes it. But that ain’t no mop for the soul. You want to know what forgiveness is? It’s burnin’ things down. That’s the only way people forgive.” Noah fancied himself a poet-philosopher and spoke in axioms. Maybe one out of ten made sense.

“Maybe we should have a proper funeral,” I said.

“The man’s already ashes.” Noah shrugged. “You want those? It creeps Maeva out, having an urn in the house. Like a pair of eyes.”

“I just want a—boundary.” The word sounded wrong. “Between that life and this one. Something. Thought there’d be a wake today at St. Mark’s. The janitor looked at me like some mental patient.”

“Fine. But you do the arrangin’. And it’s comin’ outta your end. You got a place to stay? We got a room.”

“I ain’t poor, Noah, so don’t ask.”

“Whatta they pay you at that pet shop?”

“That’s the same as askin’ if I’m poor.”

“You ever think maybe I was askin’?”

“Either way, I think I’ll stay here tonight.”

“We got a nice bed. This place is a shithole.” He threw his head to the side and spat. “And you might see Caleb here. Is that what this is about?”

“Would that be so wrong, seein’ Caleb?”

“Wrong for him. Wrong for you. Wrong for everythin’. He don’t like you, to say it plain.”

“Why?” *Wah.*

“Just don’t complain if you end up carin’ for him. I’m checkin’ outta that.”

“If you say so. I’ve been going to this church group, and all they talk about is forgiveness. Forgiveness this, forgiveness that, oh, the power of forgiveness. And, I don’t know. They seem happy, like they know what they’re doing. Like it puts a bow on things.”

Noah chuckled. “Your life here was such a gift, you wanna wrap it up in a bow?”

“It’s the ugly things need bows.”

“I don’t get you.”

“That’s fine,” I said. *Fahn.*

He left me to stew in that same sun. I dragged myself to the mirror in the bathroom. Grandpa didn’t allow any other mirrors in the house except that one, which he kept for shaving, though he only did that when he felt chipper, which meant most days he had a beard. I rinsed my hands. The faucet coughed out yellow muck before clearing to water. That was one reason my boyfriend stayed behind. But his real reason, Rick said, was that it would be like picking a scab. It heals if you let it alone, but if you go on scratching, it goes on bleeding. And besides, Rick said, women already bleed enough.

THE PHONE SHOOK ON THE NIGHTSTAND THAT NIGHT. Rick. When was I coming home? A year or two ago, I would have made a joke of it—oh, don’t wait up, Rick, I’m going on to the Golden Isles to take up with a cabana boy—but now the thought stirred up something like vinegar in my belly. *Two nights plus the drive*, I replied. *Tryin to convince Noah to have a proper funeral.*

Get your ass home, he said.

I found a box in the living room and started throwing junk in it, but Grandpa didn’t keep much. A pile of chipped paint, some old TV dinner trays. It had been different in my head. I was going to rent a dumpster, don some latex gloves, and scour the place. All night, if I had to. But aside from some old phone books and stacks of porno mags from the 90s, there wasn’t much to scour. I’d brought a box all the way from New Orleans. I’d

marked it SENTIMENTAL. There had to be something worth taking, a photograph somewhere, a refrigerator magnet from before Grandma died and Grandpa became what he became. I could find a fossil of it somewhere like one of those dinosaur diggers, brushing away the forgotten earth. But there was nothing.

At the very least, I'd hoped for a memento I could bring back to Sadie. She was Rick's daughter by a woman he no longer knew. Sadie—*rhymes with Adie*, I liked to say—was who kept me moored to New Orleans. By itself, leaving Rick wouldn't be so hard. I thought of that often. Leaving Rick would be as simple as changing my address on the credit card and driving the Pinto up to Baton Rouge or Mobile, somewhere on rivers or gulfs where I could still be connected to the blue veins of the world. But Sadie. On the nights Rick didn't come home, which was most, Sadie and I stayed up on the couch watching documentaries. Sadie liked baby orangutans and their stringy troll-doll hair. I showed her the adult orangutans and asked if she liked them too, but Sadie rolled her eyes and said—with that certainty in being wrong that only children have—*no, that's another species*. I preferred the Apollo missions. I liked the idea of controlled burns. When your rocket needs to get right, you aim the tip, align it just so, and fire up the engines. It only takes a moment or two of gas, but that's all you need. That's how you get where you're going, I would think on those nights, Sadie's head resting under my chin. Moriah would be a controlled burn. Long as I aimed myself right, maybe I'd get happier, and maybe me getting happier would make Rick happier. I used to think that with Grandpa, too, but I told myself Rick was another species. Like the orangutans.

It was about midnight when a *tap-tap* on the front window woke me up. I'd fallen asleep on the beat-up old sofa in the living room.

Tap-tap.

A tall, slender figure approached, uncertain under the staticky street-light. Caleb had one last growth spurt since I saw him last, but there he was, stretched out, a few extra frown lines at his lips.

"Ah, shit," he said when I opened the door. "What're you doin' here?"

"Go home, Caleb."

"Ain't never been nowhere else. You were sleepin'? That house is haunted, hope you know."

There was more meat under his skin, at least more than he had as the scrawny teenager of ten years ago. He was the family looker, more so than me, but he looked puffy and pink and snotty, like maybe he was allergic to

the world. Some people are like that. Even moonlight stings them.

"Lemme in," Caleb said. "I sleep here now."

"What do you do all day?"

"Never you mind."

"You been drinkin'?"

"A guy needs money to drink." Caleb splayed out on the front stoop and rubbed his belly with a fingertip. "Nah. Nah, not a drop. Six months."

"Where you been, then?"

He pointed at the sky. "I seen a meteorite."

"Just now?"

"Not in Moriah. I don't think stars fall here. Anyway, I'm just rememberin'. I forgot to make a wish."

"God," I said. "It's like talkin' to a wind-up doll."

"I woulda wished you back. I woulda wished you never left. Now I woulda wished you never came back, so I'd have a house to sleep in."

"How many drinks you had tonight, Caleb?"

"You gonna let me in or not?"

"If you're sober."

"I *been* sober. I told you. Six months. Why you care, anyway?"

"I came back for you," I said. "You can come to New Orleans, with me. Rick won't mind, we'll put you up a while. There's jobs there, odd jobs too, so you don't have to work for anybody you don't want."

His brow furrowed. "I'm a country boy."

"I was a country girl. The city changes you. Changes everything." I wondered if he saw my eye twitch.

"You'd take me there?"

I closed the door and pulled the chain through. His face was half in shadow as he walked through. He was half a foot taller than me, but bowed, his spine worn and curved like steamed wood.

"The city treatin' you right?"

"Of course." I twitched. "Glad I went there."

"Noah says he wonders about Rick. Says he's a big strong guy, stronger than Grandpa ever was."

"I look beaten to you?"

"I can't tell. Been a while since I seen you otherwise."

"Well, I'm healthy now."

Caleb finally smiled. "Tell me about Nawlins."

When I left Moriah, Caleb was just sixteen, the next one up to the

plate. I hadn't thought of that. I had been so fixated on my Greyhound ticket, squeezing it like it was a pass to heaven, I couldn't see anything else. I used to wonder how some mothers could leave their infant children in front of firehouses, not knowing what would become of the baby. But then I knew. A person can do almost anything if the flames are hot enough. Those first few years in New Orleans, I remembered going to payphones and dialing up the old number, letting my finger rest above the nine at the end, dreaming of all the wonderful apologies I would make. I never pressed it. I was too afraid maybe Caleb would really pick up. So I said nothing and let him hate me.

Now, with him looking at me with a smile in his eyes, I finally told him about New Orleans. Told him everything people had told me, how life in a city changes you, how cities don't have memories like these small country towns where people chip your sins into stone. Told him about Rick, made him sound as gentle as I could. Told him about Sadie, the little red-haired angel, and how Sadie would love Caleb. And I told him everything that wasn't true, how I hadn't been fired from the pet store for stealing cash right out of the register for Rick's poker money.

Funny how Caleb looked at me. Eyes glinty and shiny, pinpoint pupils. Like my words were so bright.

"I like the way you talk about it," he said. "Why didn't you take me with you?"

"I'll take you now. Tomorrow, I mean. If you'll come."

"But why didn't you take me *then*?"

"I don't know. I was eighteen. All I could think about was gettin' out myself. And you were strong. I didn't think he'd—"

"You was wrong, Adie. You wasn't just wrong. You was way off."

"That's why I'm back. I want to—I don't know—fix things."

"Some things ain't fixable."

"Don't say that," I said, feeling my voice weaken. "You said you been sober six months. That true?"

"Almost seven."

"I'm so happy."

"Why do you care?" he asked.

"Because it means I didn't ruin you."

"You couldn't ruin me," he said. "Some people are just dead souls."

Now that he was inside I could see the face I recognized, the way the shadows cut across his cheekbones as he frowned, dicing the years away.

I watched that face without listening for a while, and when I came to he was asking about tool and die jobs in New Orleans—surely those big city factories were better than the seasonal work he got an hour up the road from Moriah. I didn't know. I only knew how kindly he looked at me now, how hopefully. So I found myself responding as if I did know, smiling and nodding and making up stories about people I had met, important people or spouses of important people. People who could help him get set up. It didn't matter who I knew or didn't. Once he was there, we could find someone, and all would be forgiven. "It's New Orleans," I said. "Dead souls are our chief import."

He laughed with that ravenous energy of people who usually laugh alone.

Later, we sat on the couch together, watching local TV on the antenna. I thought Caleb slept, so I put one of Grandpa's old blankets on him. He stirred without opening his eyes.

"You don't sleep too good?" he asked.

"Can't remember the last time I slept through the night," I said. "I thought bein' here would help. But it just makes it worse."

"Grandpa ever beat you?" he asked. "That's why you left, right?"

"Sure," I shrugged. "Same as Noah."

"He ever rape you?"

I said nothing.

"The fact I gotta ask—"

"It's nothin' worth askin' about," I said. "It's done."

"A rape ain't never done, Adie. It goes on and on."

The house was so silent I could hear the air whispering through the vents. "Moving changes a person. You get to have a whole new story. In New Orleans, I'm Adie at the pet shop. I smile a lot. Smilin', sometimes, if you force it, it's as good as the real thing. People think I never met an unkind person."

"Those scars on your wrists. They still there."

I looked at them in the half-light, cobwebs of puffy skin. "I tell people a cat scratched me up. Had to put him down. It was real sad."

He still hadn't opened his eyes. "Why is it when you get to pick your own stories, they're still sad ones?"

THE NEXT MORNING, I gave myself a long look in the mirror. It had been a few weeks and all the fluid under my eyes had drained away. There was

no way for Caleb to know about Rick. And maybe having Caleb around would settle Rick some. Rick was always better when Sadie was around, or when I brought some friend from the church group to eat my famous mac and cheese, which was really just the boxed stuff plus onion powder. Rick would bristle at having Caleb on the pull-out couch, but so what? I'd say it was only for a day or two, and we'd stretch it a few weeks. A few weeks of daylight. That might last me until a new month.

There were a few texts on my phone, all from Rick. *When you comin home? Sadie's a pain in the ass.*

I started punching in a long paragraph about Caleb—he's coming home with me, but he'll just be on our sofa a few weeks, I promise—but I thought better of it. Rick might let him stay if Caleb were a surprise I brought with me. And with Caleb already there, Rick would be on his best behavior.

We drove along the skinny road to Noah's house. It was the dry season. Power lines shouldered over the big sky like giant sentinels and the land was scattered with horseweed. It reminded me of our childhood trips out west when we would sit in the back with bare feet hanging out of Grandma's '94 Roadmaster wagon, clean air washing through our toes. Grandpa would go on about how we had to be quiet, or else we'd waste his favorite thing in the world, *a perfectly good afternoon*. Every lost opportunity was *a perfectly good afternoon* to him. Nothing ever lived up to the potential of a perfectly good afternoon—either you were wasting it by running around outside or spending too much time indoors. Eventually we would kick the seats, and then each other, so Grandpa would play the only tape they had in the car, Beach Boys. Summer Days and Summer Nights. I still remembered some of the words. "I wish I could see outside / but he tacked up boards on my window." Even Grandma would sing along, so out of tune she was closer to singing harmony than getting the pitch right, but the effect seemed to please her. I liked the Beach Boys. I liked how they could sing about tough things and still fill up the car up happy.

Noah was already waiting for us at his porch. Or maybe he just stayed out like that most mornings, half-hanging on his front stoop with a steaming mug in his hand, proud to scan his whole acre. Truth be told, if I had an acre, I'd probably stand out like that, too.

"Golly," he said when we got out. "Look at this. Sanders family reunion."

"I was wondering if we could take the urn up to the park," I said. "Bury it someplace decent."

"Well, it ain't like we want it."

"I was thinking maybe you'd come with, to say your goodbyes."

"Caleb," Noah said, "funny seeing you ridin' with her."

"Adie says she's gonna get me situated in New Orleans," Caleb said.

"Situating. Ha. She ever tell you how well-situated *she* is?"

"I'm well-situated," I lied.

"You ran away from Moriah just to go to the same place, only you can't see it." Noah spat. "Now Grandpa's dead, only reason you're back here is because you got an itch to scratch. Itchin' gets at you no matter where you're livin'. I don't call that well-situated. If you was *well-situated*, you'd be gone forever and you'd forget about us because you'd have so much goin' in your own life. You know how I know when someone's really moved away someplace? When I ain't see them again. My buddy Jack Beauregard got a job in Silicon Valley, and look at him. He's got six figures now, and we never hear a peep outta him. But look, here y'all are."

"Well, we're goin' now," Caleb said. "This place is a trap. I'm like a mouse, pinned in a trap."

"Yeah, real trap. You and Adie, y'all's the same. Thinkin' everything's about the place you are. You know she only takin' you home because she feels guilty about you, right? There ain't nothin' for you there you can't find here. Meanwhile I got a house and two kids, right here in Moriah. Y'all even have a bank account?"

"Fuck you, Noah."

"Fuck you."

Same as last time I'd seen them. *Fuck you* might as well have been *good-bye, see you tomorrow*.

I waited by the porch.

"You're still here," Noah said.

"Grandpa's ashes. I'll take 'em, even if you ain't comin'."

He called inside for Maeva, then turned back to me with his mouth open, loosening a cramp out of his jaw. "You want him, you can have him. Just don't dump him in the sewer or anything like that. It's bad luck. Even on Grandpa."

"No. A park or somethin', or if I can't do that, someplace nice."

"Why?"

"Never you mind."

"That Bible group's got you all twisted, Adie. There's too much voodoo in that town. Too much humanity. How many problems people ever solve by people thinkin' about 'em? Usually makes it worse, far as I figure."

“Let me process it in my own way.”

“That’s that city talk.” He turned and spat again. “You avoided home so much, but now you’re here, that fix anythin’? That itch been scratched yet, or what?”

“Fuck you, Noah.”

“That’s more like it.” He smiled and went inside.

Maeva set the urn in my hands without a *hello*. The urn felt heavy in my fingers, like it wasn’t full of ashes but blood. I looked at Maeva. After ten years, her hard frown-lines were like chipped marble, sculpted into the reality of her face now. “He’s all yours,” she said.

I tried to tell her it was nice seeing her, but she’d turned back into the house.

I DROVE UP TO A ROW OF DEAD GRASS and gnarled old oak trees next to the diner lot. It wasn’t a *park* exactly, at least not with any name, but it was the closest thing in Moriah. I got out and Caleb rolled his window down, saying he didn’t want to come. I told him I understood, and if he wanted to go to the gas station and get something to eat, he could have my credit card. Fifty-fifty it’d get declined, but that I didn’t say.

Want anything? he asked. We ain’t eat breakfast.

No, I said. I looked at the urn. My belly was still burning.

I took the urn in two hands—it wasn’t heavy as all that, but I couldn’t shake the feeling of dragging a body—and found a dried-up creek bed somewhere out of sight. The puckering dirt made me think of Grandpa’s funeral all those years ago. It had been dry then too, and we all walked home in the wordless, rainless air, all of us tranquil and silent like on a Sunday. Noah asked Grandpa if we could go for ice cream and Grandpa threw a dime at him. I asked Noah if I could have it, and of course Noah couldn’t do anything with just a dime, so I took it and stuffed it in a sock. I started collecting the change he threw at us. I bought all sorts of ice creams.

I dug a little bit into the earth, but the dirt was hard and ungiving. I felt Caleb’s absence behind me, so I brought the urn back to the car. The sun was straight above now, hot on my hair and shadowless. But Caleb wasn’t in the diner. The waitress crooked a painted eyebrow at me and said he’d never come in.

So I drove around looking. Funny how a place like Moriah suddenly feels big when you’re looking for someone. The bar at the big corner—which wouldn’t be more than a dive in New Orleans—seemed to stand

over me now. It was the obvious place, but Caleb wasn't there, either.

Maybe an hour later, I pulled into the gas station. Grandpa was in the urn. I'd packed him in with a seatbelt and told him *don't you fidget back there* like he used to with us. I filled up half a tank, then thought better of it when I patted the back of my jeans. Caleb had my wallet.

Then there he was, just around the corner of that gas station, a wet paper bag in his hand. He threw it back and leaned against the wall, brazen as you like, like he thought he was invisible. Last night's same allergic look was already puffing up in his cheeks. It was nine o'clock.

When he finally saw me, he cringed into a palm. "Ahh, shit. Busted. I wanted a lil' goodbye-somethin'-somethin'."

"Six months dry, Caleb?"

"Almost seven."

"Real funny. You lied to me. Did you even want to come to New Orleans? Or were you just anglin' for cash?"

"I'll come to New Orleans if you want. If it makes you feel better."

"This ain't about me."

"It's all about you, Adie, you and your goddamn conscience. That's why you came back, right? What's all this shit about burying Grandpa? The man didn't even wanna burial. And now, what, you gon' fix me? I'm a beater, Adie." He laughed at his own thoughts. "One of those un-fixies they crumple into cubes."

"You don't *wanna* be fixed."

"Same thing, ain't it?"

I went to the front seat, pulled out the seat belt, then took the urn over to Caleb. He had saddled down next to the wall of the gas station, halfway to nodding off. A fresh plume of Grandpa's ashes woke him up well enough, though. He kicked awake, patted at the dust like he was used to it, maybe thinking it was another dusty morning for Caleb Sanders. But when he saw me standing over him with the urn, his skin went white.

"Adie? What the hell you doin'?"

"You already dead, right? Be with your own."

THE PINTO COUGHED A START, but that was all it needed. A half tank of gas could last me as far as Louisiana. That had been the idea, but as I drove out of Moriah, turning the mirror away so I wouldn't see Caleb, I knew I was driving to Georgia instead.

Soon it was afternoon, the air going crisp and salt-scrubbed. I liked

the humid tang of it, the way you could taste Moriah so thick under the tongue that you could tell when you were free of it because the air got clean again. I felt good, like I could drive all the way to the Atlantic Ocean. My name wasn't on Rick's lease. It wasn't anywhere in Moriah. And the pet shop wasn't the only minimum wage job in Christendom.

By the time I needed a stretch that evening, I'd made it all the way to Dothan. My card didn't work at the pump so I used up the last of my cash for the gas money, but that meant counting my change at the counter just to get myself a bottle of Coke. The clerk emptied out the take-a-penny tray, and even then I didn't get to one-twenty-five.

"Here." He slapped a quarter down for me. "Call it even."

"All right," I said. "Even."

By the time it got dark I had crossed into Georgia and I knew there would be no motel for me, so I pulled into a park 'n' ride where there were always other cars, then grabbed the space blanket and curled up in the back seat. It wasn't so bad, not like people say. It killed my neck and I had to use a sweatshirt as a pillow, sure, but even so, I slept straight through till dawn.

KRIS FALCON

Moving On

Staying in. A new sink. Letting leftover
smells lint to grime. The body's warm hollows.
Who can say who unscrewed the blinds
but I keep all that can be crawled through shut.
Until most day is down and a mailbox,
driveway, the nearest elm mark a road, that much
accord. Until a rush of wind let in is like
a gasp, like enough, if this is all I will know.
It is just before dark when I shed my clothes.
Do some washing while bathing, a faint
conscience reminds. The shutters frame
me, lab mouse in a bungalow,
yet those vague shadows in the loop do not
slam me obscene. With their hunched
shoulders, what could they want they would
not guess, mint skates in my closet?
I sewed long ago my diamond
in the belly of milkfish. *It's harder to keep it simple*
or I dare you to show how much more you ache
they whisper, trying to read me right as they head
home for sour soups, not more enlightened.
Tomorrow another sight unseen. Tomorrow
my cousin who stirs stock, vaccinates pets, just won't
phone. I will give it courtesy minutes by the curb
with a bucket. Any piece of fabric can look like
a body after a storm. A leather slip-on
drunken off a motorbike. An undershirt
whipped from a ledge. Garden gloves slit

KRIS FALCON

from rinsing a child's fork.
I pour into my last crystal my nth kick.
Pull one more sound, no stranger to me,
a curtain through a rod.

HOLLIE DUGAS

Lily Tomlin
Washing Dishes
Without a Sponge

Yesterday, My Love sliced
a tomato open and asked me
what it looked like
on the inside. *Vagina*.
I was supposed to say angel
wings. This won't be
the last time I get
something wrong. Let's talk
about what I really am—
a woman with big books
who doesn't know a thing
about dishes, a woman
scratching at a spot to
get at newness, a woman
willing to bare
her cracked skin to seed,
an awkward woman
with missings who has
managed to prevail in this
little life. Let me be more
clear, specific as sink-water.
I am thinking about power
today as I get up close
and personal with the cutting
board, bathing remnants

HOLLIE DUGAS

of fruit off the wooden slab
with a naked hand. And if
it wasn't for sisterhood
or Jane, I would never
endure the frenzy of
an ordinary Tuesday.

ANTHONY D'ARIES

Body Double

THE HOUSE WAS HIS. He went through the whole stupid act—dropping hints the night before about a bellyache, coughing loudly in the middle of the night, ignoring his mother's call for breakfast. Her heels click-clacking up the stairs. Two knuckles knocking on his door. *I don't feel so good.* Her sigh. Vanilla perfume and hairspray and cigarette smoke. She knew her next line, but hesitated. She had to be the one to say it. No matter how long she lingered in the doorway in silence, they both knew he'd have the last word. *Jimmy, do you want to stay home?*

If she ever noticed that he usually faked sick when she worked doubles, she never mentioned it. Once, they sent a letter home saying he'd missed fifteen days in three months. He found the letter in the little wicker basket by the telephone. She never said anything to him about it. That's how easy it was. That's how he learned. All he had to do was never admit the truth and the lie became his life.

Jimmy lay in bed and listened to her back out of the driveway. Tires crunching gravel, then quiet on the pavement. She accelerated quickly and the engine squealed until she was halfway down the block. If he stayed very still and held his breath, he could hear her make the turn at the end of their street.

The house hummed. His ears picked up an electrical buzz that always made him wonder if it was going into him or coming out of him. Creaks and pops, like someone walking on a loose floorboard. If he listened very closely, he swore he heard scratching in the walls.

He turned onto his stomach, rested his chin on his pillow, and looked out the window. Next door, Mitch stood in the cement stairwell leading to his basement apartment, smoking a cigarette and sipping from a white coffee mug. Jimmy's mother told him Mitch worked on movies. Not an actor or director—one of the crew guys who built the sets. But whenever Jimmy saw him, he imagined Mitch strutting around like Evil Knievel, pre-

paring for a stunt scene. Building imaginary worlds seemed pretty cool, too, even though the man Jimmy saw out his window each morning looked like a regular guy. Mitch often breathed like he was exhaling through a burp. He coughed and spat a lot. And he lived with his mother, which Jimmy's mother would always mention whenever she talked about Mitch, except she'd say *still* lived with his mother. How old is too old to live with your mother, Jimmy wondered? Mitch was way older than twelve, so Jimmy figured he still had plenty of time.

He lay in bed a bit longer, listening to passing cars. Long, slow waves rushing by, fading into distant airplanes. There was a short window of time between 8:30 and 9:00 when the cars kept coming and coming. Then nothing.

Jimmy went downstairs and grabbed a box of crackers, a jar of peanut butter, and a knife. He sat on the couch, spread a dish towel on his lap, and flipped on the TV. A man with a long skinny microphone walked through the audience. On stage, a few grown-ups sat in chairs yelling at each other. The crowd cheered. Something about who cheated on who and who was the biological father. Jimmy worked his way through half a sleeve of crackers, slowly spreading peanut butter on each one. He chewed and chewed, pausing once in a while to scrape the sticky mush off the roof of his mouth with his finger.

Another show with screaming grown-ups. But this one had a sparkly wheel with numbers and on stage were brand new cars and shiny washing machines and women with big boobs in fancy dresses. Jimmy finished the sleeve. He stretched out on the couch and watched the people guess how much everything cost.

After a while, he turned off the TV. The house had a magnetic energy on sick days. Mostly his mother's room. He knew what he was going to do the second he woke up. He could delay it all he wanted with crackers and TV, but eventually he gave in and let the room pull him.

First, her closet. Hat boxes and shoe boxes. A row of dresses, mostly black. A few soft and puffy hangers, like they were wrapped in long, round pillows, held special clothes his mother only wore at weddings or funerals. Jimmy opened one of the hat boxes and inside was a small round black hat with a piece of lace hanging off it. He stood in front of the mirror and put the hat on. The light through the lace cast a spider-web shadow on his face and he pretended he was an evil villain or a cat burglar. Jimmy put the hat back in the box and covered it.

In a shoebox at the back of the closet was a collection of old photographs, a pair of cuff links, and a gold watch with no band that Jimmy pretended was a compass. The photographs were mostly Polaroids, some curled at the edges. Jimmy stacked them like playing cards and flipped through them. His mother in dark blue bell-bottoms leaning on a car, a half-shadowed man in the driver's seat. His mother at the beach in a sunflower bikini, neck stretched back and sunglasses aimed at the sky. His mother and the man standing in front of Jimmy's house, keys in her hand and a For Sale sign held high in his, dirt still caked to the post. But the house was different. The bushes were much smaller. The pine tree on the front lawn was missing. And the porch hadn't been built yet, so the front door was the only way in and the only way out.

A woodpecker drilled a tree in the backyard. Jimmy tried to see it out his mother's window but couldn't. He looked back at the pictures. On the white tabs, black, chicken-scratch handwriting: *Me and Betsy. In my Roadrunner. '71. Me and Betsy at Willow Beach. '78.* The picture of them in front of Jimmy's house just said *Sold!*

Jimmy spun the dial on the watch a few times, then placed everything back in the shoebox and put the lid on it. His mother's top dresser drawer smelled like lavender and was full of small fuzzy earring boxes. Jimmy liked the way they snapped shut. He opened and closed a few, then reached into the back of the drawer for her carton of Marlboro Lights. He was lucky—the carton was more than half full, which meant he could steal a pack, and slide the rest to the front, and maybe she wouldn't notice. Maybe she would. Didn't matter.

He slipped the firm pack wrapped in cellophane into his front pocket. He turned toward the mirror and stared at himself, his thumbs hooked in his belt loops. He didn't smile.

Right now, he'd be in math. Mr. Bosworth rolling the chalk between his boney hands and pacing in front of the board like some creature guarding its cave. He imagined there was another version of himself sitting in class right now. His double, wearing his clothes, slumped in his seat, scribbling in his notebook. The double went from class to class and ate lunch with his friends, while the real Jimmy trespassed through his house. No one could tell the difference.

Jimmy grabbed a can of Dr. Pepper and put on his sneakers. He took the long lighter his mother used to light the stove. He crunched through the dead leaves, then crouched behind the garage. The air smelled like Hal-

loween. The pack formed a perfect hard square in his pocket. He leaned to one side and took it out. Mike Rothman taught him how to pack it—you flip it upside down and knock the end of the pack against the heel of your hand, so all the tobacco smashes down tight against the filter. Mike would snag a pack from his parents and spend fifteen minutes in the woods packing it before opening it. It was his tick, a ritual. When he finally tapped out a cigarette, he held it up to show off the excess paper at the tip. The paper crackled when he lit it.

As Jimmy started packing his pack, the woodpecker knocked again. Where the hell was it? The half-bare trees above him were empty. Somewhere, the woodpecker had found a hidden dead spot and drilled it relentlessly. Jimmy kept packing.

“That don’t do shit. You know that, right?”

Mitch plucked a cigarette from behind his ear and lit it. He exhaled, then took a long sip from a red plastic cup, the kind Jimmy’s mother bought for barbecues.

“It’s a myth.” Mitch grinned. His face looked puffy up close, like he’d been stung by bees.

They stood in silence for a couple drags, then Mitch looked down at Jimmy’s pack, then back to Jimmy’s face. Jimmy slid one out, put it between his lips, and before he could bring the lighter to the tip, Mitch’s flame flickered in front of Jimmy’s face. Jimmy leaned forward, stretching his neck like a baby bird.

“Why aren’t you at school?”

“I’m sick.”

Mitch nodded. “Uh huh.”

“Why aren’t you at work?”

“Disability.”

“What’s that mean?”

“Means sick. Permanently.”

Jimmy liked how a cigarette protected him. The little clouds around his face, rising above his head, were like a force field, made him brave. And the way smoking made time disappear, took him to a place *between*, where he was no longer himself. The Jimmy talking to Mitch was not the Jimmy watching game shows, was not the Jimmy in Mr. Bosworth’s class. This Jimmy, the Jimmy he was now, was the best one.

“So you just jacking off all day? Watching TV?”

Jimmy shrugged.

“Not a bad thing,” Mitch said. He took a sip and sucked his teeth. “You need those days every once in a while. When you grow up, they call ‘em ‘mental health days.’”

The front of Mitch’s t-shirt advertised an auto parts store in a town Jimmy had never heard of.

“My mom says you work on movies.”

Mitch nodded. “Used to.”

“Whadja do?”

“Set crew.”

Mitch looked like he was waiting for Jimmy to ask another question.

“You know the backgrounds and shit you see in movies? Two assholes kickboxing in a warehouse or some shit, and in the back you see boxes and wood, walls with tools hanging on them or something? I put all that together. I build that.”

“Cool.”

“Behind the scenes shit too. Scaffolding. Shit you can’t see.”

Mitch took a long sip.

“Weren’t for guys like me, there’d be no place for those sweaty, shirtless fucks to prance around.”

Jimmy laughed.

“That’s the truth. Most of them are dancers. Believe that? Covered in fake blood, pretending to beat the hell out of each other, but all they’re doing is dancing.”

Jimmy looked down at his cigarette, the cherry less than an inch from the filter. It was like his life meter in a video game.

Mitch pinched the filter between his thumb and pointer finger, took a long hard drag, then threw it into the grass like he was pissed off at it.

“You sick tomorrow?”

Jimmy shrugged.

“If you are, come by my place. I’ll show you some shit I stole from work.”

JIMMY’S MOTHER STOOD IN THE DOORWAY. He lay curled on his side, his nose almost touching the wall. If he didn’t roll over, if he didn’t look at her, was she even there?

“Maybe I should call the doctor.”

“I just need another day to rest, Mom.”

She might be checking her make-up in the hallway mirror. She might

be looking at her watch. Or maybe she was just standing there, wondering how long she had to wait before leaving.

"This is it, Jimmy. Tomorrow. School."

He made a noise in his throat. She waited a few more seconds, then shut the door.

Second sick days felt a little different. The same electrical charge as the day before, but now a hint of *déjà vu*. The feeling that he was settling into an alternate universe and the world outside could go on without him and it wouldn't really matter. How easy it was to step out of his life. How quickly everything disappeared—the books with brown paper bag covers, the gym that reeked of floor polish and sweat, the clocks ticking behind wire cages. All gone.

The grass was still wet when he stepped outside. Jimmy followed the fence to the front of his house. The latch dangled from the rotten gate like a loose tooth. He pushed it open. As he stepped onto Mitch's property, he could almost feel a hand hovering over his shoulder, ready to clamp down if he moved any further. It was the dark-dash-to-his-bed-after-turning-out-the-light feeling he'd had every night as a little kid and still felt now and then. It was a reminder that, just because he grew older and smoked cigarettes and played cool, his fears were very much alive and patient.

But nothing stopped him. He walked across Mitch's backyard to his cement stairwell. The door at the bottom was open. Jimmy looked around, took one step down, and when he looked up, Mitch was in the doorway.

"Well, whaddya know. Still sick, kiddo?"

Jimmy smiled.

"Yeah, a little better, but not 100%"

Mitch nodded. "Oh, sure. Don't want to push it."

A woman coughed. Again. Again. Each cough grew louder, wetter, until the final cough sounded like she puked. Jimmy looked up at Mitch's house.

"My ma," he said. "Come on, I'll show you the stuff"

The smell hit Jimmy first. Old sweat and cigarettes and something else, something sweet and rotten, like sour bacon grease. He wasn't sure what room he was in. The stove, a short countertop, and refrigerator along one wall, a small round table in the middle of the room, and a ripped green couch sagging along the opposite side. The walls covered in square picture frames, mostly black and white photos of a much younger Mitch, his face slimmer, his eyes bright, with his arm around a pretty woman or shaking

hands with a handsome man. A short note and a curly signature scrawled across the bottom left corners.

“That’s me and Brando,” Mitch said. “One of his last movies. Fucking nut case.”

Jimmy looked at one of the photos and nodded.

“No,” Mitch said. “Over there.”

Jimmy followed Mitch’s finger and nodded again. Mitch exhaled sharply through his nose. “Take a seat.”

Mitch walked down the short hallway to another room. The bedroom, Jimmy guessed. Sometimes when he went to Mike Rothman’s house, Mike would leave him in the kitchen with his parents for a few agonizing minutes while Mike took a shit or grabbed something from his room. It was terrible being alone with adults Jimmy barely knew. In those moments, Jimmy always felt like he was pressed between two glass slides and pinched under a microscope, like when they examined a layer of an onion in science class. Adults always asked questions Jimmy could never answer. What he liked best about school. What sports he played. What his parents did for a living. They always said “parents” and that always made Jimmy picture his mother in her white t-shirt tucked into black jeans, standing alone by the kitchen sink, the limp bow of her waitressing apron hanging from her waist, smoke and steam curling above her.

Something fell in the backroom. Mitch cursed and kept rummaging through what sounded like cardboard boxes full of plastic toys. A clock with a bent second hand spun on the wall above the stove. The room itself seemed to peer into Jimmy, giving him that sideways stare he got from teachers and parents. The couch’s sagging grin and three, square green eyes watched him like a kid might watch a bug he’s half-heartedly torturing.

Mitch came back carrying a box, two unlit cigarettes in his mouth. He sat down, dropped the box on the table, lit both cigarettes and handed one to Jimmy. There were teeth marks in the filter. Jimmy thought of the blue Bic pens he gnawed on at school. He took Mitch’s cigarette, pressed his lips around the filter, and breathed deeply.

Mitch pulled out a grenade.

“Took this from *The Dirty Dozen* set.”

Jimmy leaned through the smoke and stared.

“You seen it, right?”

Jimmy shook his head.

“Jesus Christ.” Mitch stuck his hand back in the box, then held up a

shark's tooth.

"Now this is cool. This you gotta know. Ripped it from Bruce's mouth the last day of shooting."

"Yeah?"

"You know, from *Jaws*? The mechanical shark. That thing was nothing but problems, man. It was a like a big stubborn kid who didn't want to do anything."

Jimmy inhaled, exhaled. "Why do you have all this stuff?"

The coughing started again. A steady three-beat rhythm. *Cough-cough-cough*. Pause. *Cough-cough-cough*. Mitch cocked his head like he was picking up a secret message.

"Hang on," he said, walking quickly up the basement steps. Jimmy heard footsteps above him. The bass of Mitch's voice. More coughing. Mitch saying "...easy...breathe." More coughing, but softer, muffled. "...back to check on you..." Mitch hacked and spat at the top of the stairs.

"She ok?" Jimmy asked.

"Good now."

"What's wrong with her?"

Mitch squinted. "Nothing's *wrong* with her. She's a fuckin' old lady. She's dying."

Jimmy stared at the couch.

"Just the way it is. I'm next. Then your ma. Then you. And that's the best-case scenario."

Their smoke swirled above them, trapped beneath the water-stained ceiling tiles.

"Here's what I really wanted to show you."

Mitch pulled out a shiny metal Roadrunner. The bird's face stabbed forward, grinning, its legs and claws lost in circles of dust. Pink Panther and Roadrunner were Jimmy's favorite cartoons when he was little because they never talked and they never got caught.

"After your old man took off, your ma threw out a lot of his stuff from the garage. This emblem was just laying on top of a box of junk. These things are hard to find, man. You ever see your dad's Roadrunner?"

"Not in real life."

Mitch nodded. "That fuckin' thing was sweet, man. I 'member the day they bought the house and he pulled that baby into the driveway. We started bullshittin' about cars and movies."

He handed the emblem to Jimmy. It was heavier than it looked.

“Your pop was a Steve McQueen *fiend*, man. When he found out I worked on *Bullitt*, he flipped out. Didn’t have the heart to tell him McQueen was a fuckin’ asshole, but so what, right? Gotta be part asshole to drive like that. To *live* like that. Ya know we only used two GT 390’s for that flick? I got one of the license plates around here somewhere.”

Mitch started to get up and search for it, then stopped. Jimmy stared at the emblem. If he concentrated on the shiny metal, if he looked at nothing else, he could almost forget where he was.

“You ever meet him?” Mitch asked.

“Steve McQueen?”

Mitch let out a chopped-meat-and-gravel laugh. “No, you dope, your pop. I know you never met McQueen. Unless you’re a fuckin’ time traveler now. A little Marty McFly.”

Jimmy smiled. Finally a reference he understood. Mitch was starting to sound like Jimmy’s mother or some of his teachers who talked about people and places, songs and movies that might as well have been in another language, on another planet. Teachers especially would say something about a TV show no one in thirty years had seen and Jimmy and the rest of the class would drift off even farther, waiting for the minute hand to slice its way to lunch time.

“No, I never met him,” Jimmy said. “I got some pictures, but never met him.”

Mitch nodded. “My old man, same thing. McQueen’s, too, come to think of it. You ain’t the only one, kid.”

Mitch knocked two more cigarettes out of his pack. Jimmy didn’t want another—there was an itch in his throat and when that happened he’d get freaked out about cancer and those stories about guys smoking through holes in their necks. But he took the cigarette anyway.

“McQueen looked like a pregnant woman before he died,” Mitch said, not really to Jimmy. “No shit. Doc took a five-pound tumor out of his gut and there was *still* more inside.”

The smoke hit the itchy part of Jimmy’s throat and was a good kind of pain, like pressing his thumb into a bruise.

“Now I don’t know if this was your pop’s last time at the house, but one day I heard the Roadrunner tear ass out the driveway, and I can’t remember ever seeing him again. That’s a better way to go, I’m tellin’ ya. Better to be gone. Roll credits. Sayonara.”

Mitch’s mother started coughing again, but he ignored it. Or maybe he

was just so used to it that he knew the difference between a serious cough and a regular one, the way Jimmy's mother said he had different kinds of cries when he was a baby, and she could always tell which was which, which was hunger and which was pain.

"I should get back," Jimmy said.

"Why?" Mitch said. He sounded insulted. Maybe disgusted. Jimmy couldn't tell which.

"I dunno. My mom might be home soon."

The smoke rushing below Mitch's top teeth made a long "F" sound like he might say "fuck." His thick fingers stubbed out the cigarette on a little plate.

"Ok then," he said. "Be seeing ya."

Jimmy nodded and tried to smile. He looked down at the Roadrunner.

"Thanks for this."

"Anytime, kid," Mitch said. Then grinned. "Get well soon."

At the top of the cement steps, Jimmy heard Mitch's mother hacking. He stepped closer to the window. Now he could hear a TV, that guy with the long skinny microphone, saying something about "out of control teens." The audience boo'd and groaned. She was quiet now. Maybe she died, Jimmy thought. Then like a dripping faucet, the chirping of an almost-dead smoke detector, her coughs started up again. A few low, deep and closed-mouthed, the ones that blow your cheeks out like a trumpet player. The audience erupted in shouts and applause. Jimmy put his hands on the windowsill, lifted himself up on his toes. The coughs grew louder, sharper, again and again, until something like a wet branch snapped, then silence. Through the lace curtain, the profile of a woman in a chair, the shadow of her nose long and round like Toucan Sam from a Fruit Loops box, a long tube snaking behind her back. She tried to stand up. Jimmy ran.

THE GREEN CLOCK ON THE STOVE SHOWN 12:16. Two hours? He'd been in Mitch's basement for two hours? Maybe he really was a time traveler. Maybe the emblem in his pocket disrupted the space-time continuum, and now he was in an alternate world. Maybe he'd step into the garage and see the man from the Polaroids half-buried beneath the Roadrunner, and he'd slide out and stare at Jimmy. Not with that blank, far-away look. Softer. Expectant. Like they'd done this before.

Then all of them—every clone, every copy, every double—would wash up and sit at the dining room table. It was set for Thanksgiving, the shaky

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card table tacked onto one end, metal folding chairs tucked in beside the wooden benches. Napkin rings and white unlit candles and a gourd-choked cornucopia. In the center, a bronze, glistening bird sliced open. Mothers and fathers and sons sitting down, raising glasses, toasting to fortune and to health.

ELIZABETH WING

Poem Peeled From Birch

The fields spill with this
Viridian as arsenic, absinthe, envy

As seagrass

That you slip like a pill

Under your tongue

There is a boldness in resting here
Where the basalt yields to the ripped edge of woods

Your sweat-streaked face

a salt lick for the deer

WENDI WHITE

What islands teach:

Be kind.
Kind as in kindred,
aware of your breath
conveyed on east winds
coming crazed to cool
and coil the cliffs.
Coming into your mouth
gaped like a cave
at Makapu'u, open
like lips chanting kinship
with the Red Capped Coot,
'Alae ke'oke'o. She broods
the stream stones
where waters wash
small songs to the sea.
Where nets cast by hand
snare mullet, but only
enough for tomorrow,
only enough to share.

QUINN GROVER

A Different Kind of Funny

1

TAD AND MCKAY TOOK A BUNCH OF METADATE and drove to the Fort Hall Reservation with a couple cans of black spray paint tossed onto the backseat of Tad's Jetta. They sprayed the word "injuns" onto a sign that spelled out travel restrictions for the roads on the rez—running out of room at the end so that the "s" was shoehorned into the sign's lower right. They thought it was damn funny because the word was so outdated and ridiculous—no one really pronounced the word "indians" that way and maybe never had—and so to graffiti the reservation sign with "injuns" was a kind of irony. They couldn't articulate this exactly, but they had a vague sense of it. They would claim, if anyone were to ask, that it wasn't a slur so much as a joke.

Tad knew the rez a little because his dad bought a reservation fishing license every year and he sometimes brought Tad with him. Earlier that spring during a windy squall, Tad had caught the largest brown trout of his life from Big Fall Creek, one of a dozen small streams webbed through the rounded landscape that bottomed out at the Portneuf River. When Tad snapped a series of photos of the fish, his dad laughed and slapped his back like they were old drinking pals and then leaned close and spoke into his son's ear through the rain and wind.

"Take a picture of that fish, boy, and post it or whatever, but if you tell anybody where you caught it, I'll cut a hole in your sack."

Tad could smell cheap beer on his old man's breathe and he felt a sick mix of pride and fear and sensed that he had unwittingly become a member of a fraternal organization whose rules were shadowy and complicated and deadly serious. But that fear had waned in the subsequent months and the fright that was left had been converted to exhilaration by the stimulant crackling his synapses. So, when he and McKay were done with the sign,

he remembered that he had a spinning rod in the trunk and probably a spoon or a jig or something and didn't his dad always say that the biggest brown trout came out in the black of night? He thought he could find the exact bend of the creek where he had taken the big brown. This was a false sense of confidence brought on by the Metadate. Instead, the Jetta wandered the bottomland for thirty minutes, never encountering a river or even the fingered water of a spring, choosing roads and two-tracks that became sketchier and sketchier until the back passenger tire erupted from the bite of a jagged rock. When they got out and looked, Tad and McKay felt the narcotic edge of the pills dissipating into a cloud of black fatigue made wearier by the realization that Tad's jack was back at the house, propping up the corner of the chicken coop he had hit with the four-wheeler last September. Even though he feared for his sack, Tad tried to call his dad, but his phone had only an apparition of service and the call kept dropping before even a ring. The boys decided to sleep in the car.

By the time sleep arrived, the wind had begun to blow and, each time Tad found himself pulled from slumber to coherence by his uncomfortable posture or the foreign night sounds or the vague sense of dread that had replaced the Metadate, the wind seemed louder, more formidable. Finally, he managed a solid hour or three and woke up with an almost painful pressure on his bladder brought on by the Red Bulls they had used to ramp up the stimulants. After rolling out into the night and sending a forceful piss onto the dry land, he noticed that the wind had stopped, and he marveled at the full moon that lit up the river bottom like a monochrome dusk. Sober and awake, he walked around the car and stared at the white sphere hovering over the high desert and thought about how angry his father would be. Then he heard a snort.

Somewhere to his right was an animal. He could hear it breathing and chewing and grunting and he crept toward it. His dread should have stopped him, but he must have pissed it out or maybe the moon had replaced it with a kind of wonder.

It was a horse. A paint. It was grazing in the moonlight and it didn't move on his approach like he expected it to. He stopped a dozen feet away, staring. Maybe it was the last traces of the Metadate or the incoherence of sleeping in a car on the rez, but the horse looked as though it had arrived from an alternate plain, some mythical version of this country that existed outside of time and space. He stood mute and the world matched him for a perfect moment until a ragged howl rose up far to the west and then

another closer and then a host of howls and barks sounded behind him, around him almost, close enough to panic him. His fear spooked the horse and the moonlight showed Tad the white of the animal's uncomprehending eye and the flare of one nostril, and he stepped back as the beast looked certain to raise up and stomp him bloody and dead with its forelegs. Instead, it bolted into the night and Tad was left with a chorus of howls and barks that seemed terribly near and he half ran back to the car and waited out the daylight.

2

DAVID HERNANDEZ SAW THE JETTA on his way home from a graveyard shift at the meatpacking plant in Pocatello. It was stranded at the bottom of a rise on a nearly imaginary two-track. It wasn't unusual for a car to end up in such a place, but he didn't know anybody with a cherry red Jetta. He was driving to the river for his after-work ritual: a dozen casts with a perch-pattern Rapala, maybe the tug of a trout or a bass, while he watched the sun climb and let the smell of butchered cattle—and the buzz of energy drinks that got him through the night shift—fade before he went home and ate scrambled eggs smothered in cheese and Tabasco with his mother.

He parked his pickup at the top of the rise and walked to the car. He could see right off that it was sitting on a flat. He was only a little startled when two white kids tumbled out, blinking hard in the low brutal sun, and asked him if he had a jack.

"Sure," he said.

They got the car up and then had to drop it again because Tad forgot to break loose the lug nuts. Tad was jacking it up again when McKay asked David if he had a cigarette.

"Nope."

"You got anything else?" McKay said.

David looked at him but didn't speak. The sun was beginning to cook the land while it blinded any eastward gaze.

"Like weed or something? Or booze?" McKay was half smiling and Tad was starting to get nervous. "I need something to cut down this bright, you know," McKay said. "It's too bright out here. I don't know how you guys stand it."

David looked at him hard for a moment and said, "I got nothing."

"Not even peyote?" McKay smiled like a real shiteater, and David ignored him and walked over to see how the tire was coming, wishing he

was fishing or eating eggs or punching this smug kid in his throat.

“Hey, are there horses out here?” Tad asked David. “I woke up to take a piss last night and I saw this horse that was like, I don’t know, from another dimension or something. I wondered where it came from.”

“Probably came from Pocatello or Blackfoot, so yeah, another dimension, I guess,” David said. “People come here to turn out their horses, the ones they can’t afford to feed or the old sorrels that make them heartsick. They don’t have the cojones to shoot them and they don’t want to watch them shrivel and die, so they turn them loose out here and pretend they’re doing something good. There’s a heard of half-wild horses out in these bottomlands, breeding and making entirely wild horses and making the heard that much wilder. All those horses eat the grass along the river that some people use to feed their cattle.”

Nobody talked for a minute and Tad thought about the paint turned gray in the moonlight and how it had seemed almost tame and wild at the same time.

“Hey, man,” McKay said, “did you see that sign by the entrance?”

David helped Tad lift the tire onto the exposed lugs. “Which sign?”

“The one that somebody tagged. It says ‘injuns’ with a ‘j’. That’s funny, right?”

“Is it?”

“I mean, I think it is.” McKay was shielding his eyes with his hand as the sun cut across them. He licked his lips. “Are you an Indian, man?”

David turned to look at him. “Are you?”

McKay laughed. “No, man.”

“Then what are you doing out here?”

Another beat of quiet and then Tad said, “We wanted to go fishing, but we got lost. Then the tire happened.”

They were quiet again before David said, “Screw it. Let’s tighten up that spare.”

They finished with the tire and when David leaned down to pick up the jack, he saw the paint cans in the back seat of the Jetta. He stared for a second and then walked to the front of the car and knocked on the window.

“What’s up, man?” McKay said, lowering the window and squinting up at him through the sun.

“You guys are lucky, you know. Lucky I found you and not someone else. Where’s your jack anyway?”

Tad blushed a little and told him about the chicken coop and the

four-wheeler.

“You guys got chickens at your place? You must be out in the country.” David gave them his least threatening smile.

“I guess,” Tad said. “It’s Firth. It’s all country out there.”

“Oh yeah, Firth. I know that little town. You guys hate those bastards from Shelley, right?”

McKay laughed and Tad smiled wondering where this was leading.

“I was just thinking,” David said, “about that sign. It *is* pretty funny, you know?”

Tad said, “What’s that?”

“That sign. Injuns, with a ‘j’. Like somebody didn’t know how to spell it. I mean if you’re going to come out here and pull that shit at least bring a dictionary, right? Get the spelling correct. Whoever tagged that sign must be one stupid son of a bitch.”

Tad gripped the steering wheel and tried to fashion a look that just agreed with this guy who had helped them out, not wanting to dwell on it or start anything, not thinking it was as funny now as he had thought it was last night when he and McKay were both ripping high, but McKay spoke up.

“No, man. I think it’s, like, maybe on purpose.”

“Really?” David said. “So, when you say ‘funny’, you don’t mean dumb funny.”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“So maybe a different kind of funny, huh?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“So maybe, I’m the dumb one then because I don’t get it.”

McKay didn’t say anything and David just stared down at them with the sun behind him throwing his face into shadow.

“It’s not really that funny,” Tad said and McKay looked at him as if he had betrayed something sacred.

“Still,” David said, “I wish I understood it, you know. I enjoy a joke just as much as the next guy and I hate to miss out on this one.”

No one knew how to respond to that and so after another moment’s silence Tad said, “Hey man, thanks for the jack. We gotta get going. My dad is a real hard case and he’s going to be waiting with a gun if I don’t get home soon. He’s probably loading ammo right now.”

David laughed. “No problem, I get it. Short-tempered dad with a gun is no kind of funny at all. Hey, you know, you don’t need to worry about those

horses if you see them. They won't bother you. I'd be a little worried about the dogs, though. You see, those Pocatello folks and the Blackfoot folks, they turn their dogs out here as well. Dozens of them. And they're a sizable pack now. Lead dog is big rottweiler that tries to howl like a wolf. My buddy Walter said that ol' rott had a thing for a lady husky but then he killed her and ate her and now that she is inside of him he howls like she did except for its kind of garbled and terrible sounding, like the sound of murdered love, I guess. That's probably bullshit, but those dogs are the real thing. Last year they attacked a little family out here. A mother and her kids. They wanted the kids, I think. Small kids. Bite size. Mom got in the way and they chewed her up pretty good. Somebody with a shotgun happened on them and fired into the air and those dogs kind of lost interest. Lady went to the hospital but her hair hasn't ever really grown back and you can see the bite marks on her skull. Pretty gruesome."

David Hernandez put his sunglasses on and looked down at McKay, who was looking up as if seeing him for the first time.

"You boys have a nice day," he said. "And watch out for those injuns, huh? Let me know if you see any."

3

TWO NIGHTS AFTER HE FOUND THE JETTA stranded in the river bottoms David Hernandez parked his truck in front of his pal Walter Farmer's trailer and headed inside to begin the festivities that would end with the death of Walter's dog, a stubby black and white sheep dog who was also named Walter. Walter the dog was named after Walter Sobchak, John Goodman's character in *The Big Lebowski*, and so they were going to watch the movie and drink beer and take an intermission for a long game of tennis-ball keep away because that was Walter the dog's favorite pastime. Once the movie was over and Walter the man was passed out drunk, David had agreed to lead Walter the dog to the far corner of the yard and shoot him behind the ear using the twenty-two pistol he had inherited from his Aunt Tamara. Then he would place the animal in the grave his friend had dug that afternoon.

Walter the man could no longer afford to keep Walter the dog. The dog's teeth were falling out, which meant that he needed softer dog food, which was more expensive than the hardass stuff with the brand name "Doug's Dog Chow" he had been eating. On top of this, Walter the dog was experiencing irritable bowel syndrome on account of his age and a steady

diet that consisted of nothing but Doug's Dog Chow and field mice. Walter the dog had been shitting all over the house since April. The only way to end these deposits, according to the cheapest vet in Pocatello, was to move him outside or give him some pills that cost twenty-five dollars a week. Walter the man was convinced that Walter the dog would be unhappy sleeping outside and that he would probably die during the winter. He also knew that twenty-five dollars a week was beyond his financial means given the slightly more expensive dog food and the fact that Walter the man was recently divorced and now had to pay child support in addition to the monthly pad fee and utilities for the trailer and all the other expenses that seemed as immeasurable and certain as the endless wind.

So Walter the man figured he had to say goodbye to Walter the dog. Clean break via the twenty-two in the back of the head and then he was going to get a new job and maybe buy a new trailer on a pad closer to the river and start saving money for his kid to go to college. And if things went really well he might buy a jet boat to take out on the South Fork.

But he couldn't do the killing; that was too much. He'd bought the dog as a puppy, a puppy that was a wedding present for his now ex-wife, Miranda. The dog had immediately and consistently hated Miranda, had eaten one of her favorite high-heeled shoes and had an uncanny habit of peeing on the shower mat while Miranda was in the bedroom getting ready to bathe. Miranda had responded by refusing to name the dog, thinking that, if she left him nameless, her husband would get the message and sell the puppy or give it away. Instead, Walter named the dog, gave the dog his own name, in fact, which (he knew when he was being honest with himself) hadn't made any sense and actually contributed to moments of confusion and heightened anger and the dog's unreasonable hatred of her because whenever Miranda was yelling at the dog, it seemed that she was yelling at her husband and when she *was* yelling at her husband the dog thought she was also yelling at him. The dog and Walter bonded over this. They became brothers in arms. This bond and the constant yelling at entities named Walter convinced the two of them that they had survived the marriage together, primarily because there were two Walters around to share the misery and commiserate in the pain.

So David had reluctantly agreed to be the trigger man because he and Walter had been friends since the fourth grade and he was worried about Walter and thought that this decision, as painful as it was, showed a man who was trying to climb out of the misery pit his friend had been mired in

since the divorce.

“Why don’t you just let him, go? Let him join the big pack of strays?” David asked during the tennis-ball-keep-away marathon.

“He won’t leave, he’ll keep coming back here. I’d need to find some pack of strays off the rez. Find me a pack of manicured, obedience school graduates in the richest suburb of Pocatello and I’ll drop him there. Let him mate with a thousand perfectly manicured lady labradoodles until he dies of happiness.”

They laughed at this for a long time and Walter the dog yelped and got bored when they stopped throwing the ball because they were laughing so hard and threatened to lay down and go to sleep. David thought that Walter the man was handling it pretty well, really. He was showing a kind of maturity that David admired.

That impression lasted until they got to the part of the film where Steve Buscemi’s character, Donny, dies of a heart attack during a fight with a group of nihilists in a bowling alley parking lot. Then Walter the man broke down sobbing and told David that it wasn’t going to work, that they needed a new plan because Walter the man had already started to kind of hold it against David, that he was actually beginning to hate David for killing Walter the dog even though David hadn’t done it yet.

“I don’t want to lose my best friend and my dog on the same night,” Walter said, embarrassed but earnest.

This sobered them both up and they sat watching the movie in silence while Walter the man scratched Walter the dog’s belly and fed him the occasional Cheeto.

During the final scenes of *The Big Lebowski*, David came up with an idea for Walter the dog’s demise that would preserve the friendship and let Walter the dog die happy with a full belly. It was a strange idea and, when he explained it to his friend, he had to qualify it with the disclaimer that it probably wouldn’t work, that it might go south pretty hard. But if it did work it would be a perfect send off. Walter the man was duly skeptical. It sounded crazy, and they might end up getting shot. But it was a fitting tribute, he had to admit, and before they could think better of it the two men loaded the dog into the back of David’s pickup and headed to Firth.

They circled the town without spotting the cherry red Jetta, and David realized that his plan hinged on a white high school kid being home on a Saturday night. Walter knew a little subdivision where he had done construction the previous summer and David thought it was worth a shot

because someone might call the police if they went through town again. They found the car in the third cul-de-sac, parked on the curb. David wasn't sure it was the same Jetta because the spare was no longer on it. So they parked down the street and put the muzzle and the leash on the dog and snuck up the well-lit road until they got to the car and David saw the paint cans still sitting on the back seat.

It took David two tries to hoist himself up and over the white vinyl fence into the backyard because of the beer and the fact that he was getting too old to be throwing himself over fences. He unlocked the gate for the two Walters. A motion light came on and they huddled in a shadowy corner for five full minutes.

After the third minute, David located the chicken coop in the opposite corner of the yard and Walter the dog laid down on the concrete, bored and ready for sleep. When the light flicked itself off they decided that no one was coming. They skirted the motion sensor and hugged the perimeter of the yard until they reached the coop.

It was a surprisingly tall coop with a ramp for the chickens that led to a miniature barn-like structure held up by three wooden legs and one Volkswagen-brand tire jack. To get at the chickens, Walter the dog would have to go through a kind of anteroom of chicken wire and climb the ramp. They couldn't see the hens, but Walter the dog must have smelled them because he began to whine and his tail started thumping and Walter the man had to make him sit.

The two men whispered a getaway plan: let the dog in the coop, take off the muzzle, and hop the back fence—which looked like it would put them in a potato field—then run like hell. The dog would tear up the chickens in a gluttonous frenzy that would double as a last meal because, if that kid had been telling it straight about his dad, the chicken panic in the coop would bring the guy out the back door armed for an invasion and he would put an end to Walter the dog that the two men felt was worthy of the animal. Most importantly, Walter the man could go on hating the guy that had killed his dog without any guilt or ambivalence whatsoever. David thought there was a kind of brutal elegance to his plan and, as a bonus, it was funny. Damn funny. Not the kind of funny those kids had in mind when they tagged their racist shit on the rez sign. No, this was actual funny. Clever funny. Getting a white guy to shoot your dog while the dog is eating his chickens because you can no longer afford to feed the dog kind of funny.

He searched for a door in the chicken wire, but it was tough to as-

certain the entrance in the dark. Walter the dog was getting noisier and more excited with each sniff of the chicken-scented air, low-growling and moaning through the muzzle. From within the coop they heard a nervous flapping.

David found the latch to the entrance at almost the exact moment that Walter the dog pulled free. He ran around the coop ducking under the barn-like section at the first corner. Walter the man held onto the leash, a long thick rope that pulled tight between the two Walters and clotheslined the jack that was serving as the missing corner leg. The rope knocked the jack clear. The coop dropped onto the dog, making a crunching sound and a hell of a racket that brought a light on in the house.

David grabbed at Walter's arm.

"We gotta go," he said, "over the fence."

They could hear the dog whining under the weight of the coop and Walter was on his knees staring at the wreckage.

"Goddamnit," he said. "I should have known. This is what always happens."

"C'mon!" said David and then the back door opened and David saw more or less what he had expected when he dreamt up the plan: a broad man with a sleep-deranged mullet in a Ric Flair t-shirt and boxers carrying an AR-15 and shouting obscenities.

David put his hands up and dropped to his knees. "Don't shoot," he yelled at the Ric Flair t-shirt. "This is a misunderstanding, man. I swear it."

The guy stopped and pointed the rifle at him. "A misunderstanding? What in the hell are you doing in my backyard and what in the hell did you do to my chicken coop?"

David looked over at Walter who was still staring at the downed structure. They could hear the dog whining.

"I can't really explain it," David said. "It was a joke, I guess. Call the cops, man. Just don't shoot us."

"A joke? A joke? You think this is funny? It don't seem funny to me."

David could feel laughter coiling up in him and he looked hard at the gun's barrel to keep it from spilling out. But he couldn't keep from smiling and he heard Walter muffling some mix of laughter and tears in the darkness next to him.

"These kooks are high, Janice," the man said to his wife. "Go call the cops. There gonna find some shit in these bloodstreams, I guarantee it."

Behind the fury of the man and his gun David could see the kid

from the other morning standing in the doorway, the kid who—unlike his friend—hadn't been a total dick. The kid had a look of confusion and wonder on his face, exactly as he must have looked when he saw that horse in the moonlight on the rez, as if he were witnessing some visitation from beyond his own dimensional experience.

David smiled at the kid and winked.

PROBAL MAZUMDAR

Clothes on the Clothesline in a Pandemic

With the morning news turned off, the world feels
more bearable. Even if it's not. Through the window
I see shops open and imagine the worst is over. Even

if it's not. I look at the neighbor's house to see
signs of movement, like a brush over a canvas,
or breaths like smoke rings, knowing I may not.

On her terrace, a palette, an ashtray, an old teapot.
A painting of her clothes that are still on the washing
line. As if struggling to see someone dear but cannot.

Who knows when things will cease to be of use?
A heart or a home. A cot. Or colors draining from
clothes or the skin till it's a shade of soil or rot.

The partings are too recent to feel like one.
The strangeness of what truly was, insisting to be
not. Like a magician's trick. Or an erased spot.

While the viral mouth of darkness feeds on the flesh
of light, its lungs, and eyes and what not.
Spitting bones into rivers like a politician's failed plot.

At night, I try not to remember the ones who have
left. Their thoughts. The ones left behind. Love
knots. The life lived and the life they had sought.

PROBAL MAZUMDAR

And the wind smells like memories walking out
of the burning ghats or battles fought, to slip inside
clothes left behind and remind me of faces I forgot.

GRACE SLEEMAN

Self-Portrait of Two Women Wrestling with the Moon

Look at the moon! we say to each other,
like we don't see it every night,
like we're not talking in circles, forever. We say we'll delete
our Instagrams, block
our own numbers, throw our phones
into the ocean at our favorite lighthouse, but in reality
we'll keep calling each other to say hi, I'm walking home now,
where are you? want
to walk home with me?
It's a keys between the fingers kind of night, since
I have to walk home from work in the
dark; boots double-knotted so they don't come
untied, so I don't have to kneel to tie them again.
Sometimes I feel like
a large white horse is following me home,
endless. Its edges are smudged and it's not real
but it's in the corners
of my vision and it's getting closer.
I look in every mirror, glass, window I walk by because
what if somehow my face has changed, no longer
recognizable to me or anyone else but a stranger looking back
at me from the bike shop window, the Starbucks,
the foggy bathroom mirror? I look over my reflection's left shoulder
to make sure nothing's there, sure
the horse hasn't pressed its face against the edges of my life,

GRACE SLEEMAN

its blind white eyes staring like the plates you'll wash
after I make dinner, the cups with circles of wine
in the bottom, the lipstick on the rims. We have
broken glass for
lips tonight and tangerines for cheeks; look, look! and
maybe we're prettier like this,
girls girls girls waiting for the daylight to fade
so we can go dancing through the dark streets, howling, joyous.
The only way we can imagine not living together is
if one of us dies unexpectedly and anyway, we bought
the couch together so what would we do then?

JANE SNYDER

Indiana Wants Me

MY FATHER LOCKED HIS GUNS IN A CABINET of thickly varnished pinewood. Through the glass front you could see the boxes of shells stacked on the shelf above the rifles in their racks and the one pistol in its holster.

The glass was loose. I'd slipped it out once, held it in one hand as I reached into the cabinet with the other, wriggled my fingers in front of the guns but didn't touch them, before sliding the glass back in place.

My father taught me to load, to aim, and to fire.

I didn't want to learn, but it was the sort of instruction he enjoyed giving.

I was fifteen and miserable, wallowing in self-pity, according to my father. I told myself Amanda, our new little sister, was the only thing keeping me from killing him in his sleep.

She was ten months old, a happy baby, liked everybody, including me.

It was me I was thinking of killing, not my father.

The day this changed, a bright day in early November, a song I liked, "Indiana Wants Me" was on my clock radio when I woke. Everything that happened to me then I took as a sign on whether I should live or not, and I interpreted the song to mean I'd have a good day.

The speaker in the song is on the run after killing a man for insulting his wife, the mother of "our little baby." The song starts with police sirens, my favorite part, and them closing in on the guy: *This is the police. You are surrounded. Give yourself up. This is the police.*

There was a flat, mechanical feel to this I admired.

If a man ever needed dying he did. No one had the right to say what he said about you.

I didn't agree with this. The guy was a jerk, sure, but the consequences for killing him were too serious. I'd have just keyed his car.

I'll never feel the morning sun. The song implies he'll be facing the death penalty but I was sure he wouldn't. This was in 1971, two years before *Furman vs. Georgia*, so the death penalty was still on the books, but Indiana hadn't had an execution since 1961; a first time offender who'd killed defending his wife's honor would probably do no more than twelve years. He'd still feel the morning sun, see her and the baby too, if they had the bus fare to visit him in prison.

If I shared this with my classmates, they'd complain I'd spoiled the song for them. Why did I have to pick everything apart, they'd ask, did I think I knew everything?

When I went upstairs my father said he'd had a restless night, had stayed in bed a little longer this morning, hoping to sleep, but then my radio had come on with that awful bass.

I wanted to tell him the song was shooting up the charts, an expression DJs used, to number one. People liked it.

If everyone else was jumping off a cliff, he'd have asked, did that mean I should too?

"You can bring me your radio when you've finished eating."

He'd given Suzie and me each a radio when Amanda was born, saying we could set our own alarm now, be responsible for getting ourselves up in the morning.

My classmates, I couldn't claim them as friends, all listened to the same station, talked about the jokes the DJs made and the songs they played.

I needed that radio.

I couldn't explain this to my father, any more than I could complain about how unfair this was because my sister Suzie, sitting across the table from me, eating her eggs, keeping her head down, could play her music as loud as she wanted. Her room, unlike mine, was not directly under my parents' bedroom.

I offered to feed Amanda. "So you can eat," I told my mother.

"Well don't you sound important," my father said.

Thanks, my mother said. That would be helpful.

My father said it would have been more helpful if I'd suggested this earlier when my mother had been truly busy with breakfast and getting Amanda ready. I wasted too much time in the morning, putting on make-up.

I was glad to turn my back on him.

Amanda liked sitting in her high chair, being on a level with us. When I

put a spoonful of rice cereal mixed with baby food peaches into her mouth, she let it rest on her tongue for a moment, looked at me and smiled before she swallowed.

“Slow down,” my father said. “You’re just shoveling it in.”

I didn’t think I was, but she opened her mouth then, laughed when a blob of cereal rolled down her chin. My father told me to use the spoon to scrape it off her face, stick it back in. “Don’t waste it.”

SOCIAL STUDIES WAS MY FIRST CLASS. That is, Mr. Hedlund was the teacher and social studies was what he taught so it must have been social studies. At the beginning of every class he’d say we were caught up. “So I hope you brought something to read.” He’d go down the hall to the civics teacher’s room and get her to leave her class to stand out there, talking with him.

We sat two to a table, me next to Sandy Carroll. Not by choice. I didn’t like being saddled with big, sweet Sandy, a figure of fun because, besides being fat, she prayed all the time, prayers of thanksgiving to God, our Blessed Lord, for bringing her father, an NCO in the Air Force, home from his last tour of duty in Vietnam, to Sandy, her mother, and her four little brothers. That had happened in May but Sandy was still thanking God.

I’d have been over it by then.

I wasn’t fat. The week before a boy named Dan had announced I looked good from the back.

“Yes, but her face makes me want to vomit,” another boy, Eric, said, watching me, making sure I was listening, suggesting Dan take me from behind. “That way you don’t have to look at her.”

So I was sitting with Sandy, helping her write the ten compound sentences she needed for Modified English, the dummy class.

I wanted to be with Eric and Dan. They could be nasty, but they were nasty to most of the girls, off and on. Big kidders, we said. So funny. Eric was cuter but Dan, Eric’s great friend then, was marginally nicer, especially when Eric wasn’t around. I would have liked either as a boyfriend, was glad when they let me hang out with them.

“Exactly right,” I was telling Sandy. She wanted things explained but didn’t try to get me to do her homework for her as some of the others did. “You’ve got two ideas there, separate but related.”

I looked up when she gasped. Eric and Dan were standing in front of me and they’d moved in close. If I’d attempted to run from the room, I’d have had to step around them. “We have something for you, Cathy,” Eric

said. "Something we know you like."

He dropped a life-sized model of a penis and testicles made from bright green slime into my open geometry book.

"Go ahead," Dan said, looking at Eric, "Suck it."

I looked look away from the penis, from Eric and Dan, and the others, smiled.

Eric's lookout, an undersized boy named Marc, announced Mr. Hedlund and the civics teacher were winding it down.

Eric picked up the slime, thrust it towards me, tried to get me to kiss it, before sticking it in a baggie, where it began losing its shape.

The baggie was in his pocket when Mr. Hedlund came, asked him what he was doing out of his seat.

"Helping Cathy with her problem."

This amused the other students.

Sandy began waving her right arm wildly. I guessed why, knew telling would make things worse, but before I could get her attention, Mr. Hedlund, though he'd told us at the beginning of the year to speak up if we had something to say, raising your hand was for first graders, turned to her with the air of elaborate courtesy he reserved for girls he didn't think were cute.

"Yes, Sandra?"

Privately, she said, she wanted to talk to him privately. Mr. Hedlund made a show of opening the door for her when they went out into the hall. We couldn't hear what they were saying, but we knew Sandy was doing most of the talking by the throb from her high-pitched voice.

Dan looked scared.

The slime was something new then, for little kids, sold in miniature plastic garbage cans. They'd have needed at least two cans to make it. I wondered how much it cost.

Sandy and Mr. Hedlund came back, Sandy holding her head up.

The bell rang. Mr. Hedlund jerked his thumb at Eric and Dan, told them to stay after class.

There was no more talk that day about how you could just see the guy in "Indiana," feel what he was feeling, as he waited in the cold and dark for the cops, what a good song.

They talked about me instead. The other girls said I should have cried, should have barricaded myself, crying, in the girls' room. When I was persuaded to come out, still crying, I should slap Eric, cry, slap Dan, cry, allow myself to be escorted to the office, demand my parents be called, surround

myself with other girls to protect me from Dan and Eric, cry. There was something wrong with someone who smiled, all day till three o'clock.

IT WAS QUIET IN OUR HOUSE. Amanda and my mother were asleep on my parents' bed, Amanda nestled in the crook of her arm.

I'd wake them if I got in beside them. I left a note, said I was going to the library to work on a report for social studies.

I went downstairs to the bathroom Suzie and I shared, put on some of the pink eye shadow she had that I liked, pulled my sweater more snugly over my breasts, looked into my father's den, where he kept the gun cabinet, hoped my mother would blame my father if I shot myself. When I shot myself.

I went to the library at the college where my father taught.

I'd done that before, liked to read the magazines in the periodical section, buy soda or candy with my lunch money from the vending machines in the basement in front of the tutoring center.

I wanted to talk to college boys. Boys at my school were childish, I told myself. College boys would be more sophisticated, better able to appreciate me, but the students seemed to have already formed their friendships, and, until last month, when I met Hal, I hadn't had any luck.

I'd been sitting at one of the tables in front of the vending machines. I'd just bought some M&Ms and I was dividing them by color: black, brown, red, orange, yellow, green. I'd eat the smallest color group first, one candy at a time, the black ones last because there were always more black ones than any other kind.

A man with a beard came out of the tutoring center, shutting the door behind him, asked me if M&M's tasted better eaten my way. I invited him to try some himself.

He swept a bunch into his palm, jumbling the colors together. He popped one handful into his mouth, then another, and that was the end of that.

"Delicious."

"You didn't eat the colors separately."

"I didn't need to. You'd already separated them for me."

Hal was his name and he was in his first year of graduate school.

He didn't respond to my invitation to sit down, said he had to keep an eye on the tutoring center in case any students showed up, but he was in no hurry to get back there, and stayed, talking nonsense with me.

I wanted to make something up, something extravagant to impress him, keep him talking to me, but I believed Hal liked me and might want to see me again, so I told him the truth.

“Ah, high school. Another country.”

“*Thou has committed fornication but that was in another country and besides the wench is dead.*” I said. “Christopher Marlowe.”

He'd laughed and I thought things were going well, not everybody could have come up with *that*. I was disappointed the next time I went to the library and looked through the open door to the tutoring center and saw a girl behind the desk. Not pretty, I thought. Deep acne scarring along her cheekbones for one thing. I didn't speak to her, not wanting Hal to know I was looking for him.

The day of the slime penis, though, Hal was there. I couldn't tell, by the way he looked up from his book, if he was glad to see me, but I pressed on, handed him the M&Ms I'd just bought.

“I got you something.”

“Oh.” He was wearing a tweed sports jacket like one Mr. Dixon wore on Room 222, and he stuck the candy in one of its patch pockets. “Thanks. Well, I should get back to work.”

I leaned across the desk, moving my breasts in close, smiled at him in a way I thought was sexy. “Oh, I wouldn't want to interrupt that. In fact, I'd like to be with you someplace where there'd be no interruptions at all.”

The crudeness of this still embarrasses me and perhaps Hal was embarrassed too but he said I could come to his apartment that night, after his shift at the tutoring center was over.

“You've done this before, haven't you? I don't want you to do anything you're uncomfortable with.”

“I'll be very comfortable. You'll see.”

He gave me his address, told me not to expect clean sheets.

I was a little disappointed he didn't want me to stay longer, to talk.

Hal wouldn't be a boyfriend like some of the girls had, not the kind who'd take me to the prom, but I told myself that stuff was silly.

My mother was making something special for dinner, wanted me to watch Amanda, so she could concentrate on cooking.

Amanda, no fan of the playpen, was excited when I took her out, let her crawl on the living room rug, built block towers for her to knock over.

I waited till my mother was working on the sauce that required her full attention because, she said, it absolutely must not be allowed to boil, before

I told her I needed to go back to the library that night to finish my report.

It's different now, but we lived in a small town and were allowed to go places on our own after dark. She agreed, didn't ask questions.

My father came home, as sour as he'd been in the morning, said he hoped I hadn't done the crossword puzzle, as many mistakes as I'd made the last time.

The paper ran two crosswords. What was wrong with me doing the one he said was too easy for him?

"I haven't touched your paper. I said I wouldn't."

Amanda whimpered.

The week before I'd used mane for main in the puzzle, or maybe it was the other way around, and he screamed at me for so long and so loud Beppo, Suzie's Siamese cat, ran away, wasn't found till the next morning.

I got my feelings hurt too easily, he said now. He didn't mind if I did the puzzle. "Just use a pencil. You mess up the whole page when you use ink."

My mother emerged from the kitchen then. "You should hear yourself, Francis."

This could mean a fight but he laughed. "A little petty, you think? God, Elaine, what is that wonderful smell?"

He went into the kitchen with her and I could hear them opening a bottle of wine, joking about getting the cork out in one piece.

I hadn't had lunch and I'd given Hal my candy, so anything would taste good to me, but it was a nice dinner.

My dad made us laugh, talking about another professor who monopolized the only stall in the men's room at work, closing himself in there to read and poop. "You can tell he's the king," he said. "He's on the throne."

For a moment, I thought of not going to Hal, of staying home.

HIS APARTMENT, IN A CINDER BLOCK BUILDING, in front of a parking lot, was half a mile from our house. The library was a mile, and I told myself that would mean more time with him.

I sat with him at the kitchen counter, while he ate his frozen tamales. His freezer compartment was full of them, he said. Cheap and tasty.

He was just finishing a can of Oly, said he'd offer me one but it wouldn't be good, would it, if my dad smelled beer on my breath.

No, I agreed. I knew he wanted his beer for himself.

It was a studio apartment and the hide-a-bed was pulled down. When I turned from the kitchen counter, what I saw was bed.

We perched at the end of the mattress and he kissed me. The hair in his beard was soft. I moved my own tongue to the side, the way you do at the dentist, when he thrust his tongue into my mouth.

He moved his hands down to my breasts then, rubbing them. I'd done that myself, would have liked to guide him to the areas I knew to be most responsive.

He stuck a hand down my panties, pulling the labial folds apart.

"Are you sure you've done this before, Cathy?"

"Yes."

It would feel thick to him. Thick and stiff and sticky.

So many clothes, he said, giving my neck a perfunctory nuzzle, *what do you need with all those clothes*. "Won't you take them off for me, honey?"

I'd have liked to undress in the bathroom but he said he was using it for a darkroom and it was crowded. I turned my back to him, removed my shoes, socks, jeans, shirt, bra, panty girdle, and panties, got between the stale sheets.

"Let me look at you," he said, pulling the top sheet off.

The panty girdle left red creases just over my navel and the tops of my thighs.

Hal laid down beside me, put his fingers up and in. I thought he might kiss me or stroke my breasts some more and I tried not to squirm, reached over to touch his penis.

I'd heard men liked this. I took hold of his around the middle, gently, because I was afraid of hurting him.

"Nice. But put some English in it." I'd remember him saying that. We both would, I told myself. It would be something we shared.

It felt more like regular skin than I expected, and I enjoyed batting it a little, watching it spring up.

He opened a little foil wrapped packet. I'd seen the packets before but never an actual condom.

"Want to put it on for me, Cathy?" That was considered sexy, I knew, supposed to heighten the boy's excitement while making him feel better about wearing the condom, but it was so thin I was sure it would tear and I'd have wasted it.

"I'll watch you," I said, hoping that was sexy too, but he turned on his side to do it, then lowered himself on me.

He was heavier than I'd expected.

In our last house, my bedroom had been next to my parent's and I

remember the grunting noises my father made but the sounds Hal made were different, lower and longer. I realized it wasn't pleasure; it was from the effort of pushing his penis inside me. I made myself hold my legs apart.

Like a bowel movement when you're constipated, I thought. In reverse.

After he'd rolled off, he said he could tell I was inexperienced, because I was so tight.

Like every adult I'd ever known, he liked putting me in my place.

I got dressed, said I really did need to use the bathroom. I felt damp, thought I might be bleeding, didn't want to stain my jeans, planned to wad up toilet paper to use as a sanitary napkin.

He said he wasn't developing anything now so I could turn on the overhead light, just don't knock anything over.

I'd never been in a darkroom before, wasn't prepared for the smell from the chemicals. I've since heard it described as metallic but my father's guns smelled metallic to me. The dark room stink wasn't like that, seemed dangerous in itself.

When I got out Hal said I could stay a little longer. He'd wanted to show me some of his photos, ask what I thought of them.

I was pleased, thought it meant I'd see him again.

He spread the pictures on the bed.

They were nudes, crotch shots. The model's face was turned away from the camera but I recognized the girl from the tutoring center. She wasn't big but, perhaps because the pictures were black and white, they gave a sense of large areas of exposed flesh.

"She's good, isn't she? She's very good."

I didn't know. We all wanted to be models then, but for magazines, and the girls in magazines were cute, looked to be having a good time. This girl seemed to have gathered her own thoughts and gone elsewhere, leaving her body behind, and the body itself no longer seemed whole but a collection of separate entities: the splayed vulva, the slope of a shoulder, the kneecaps white and hard atop the bent knees.

"Is she your girlfriend?"

"Janice. We're not together now." He asked if I'd like to have my pictures taken. He'd give me my own copies, he said. If I wanted to pursue it professionally, I was sure to be successful.

He didn't say I could be his girlfriend if I let him take my picture but I thought it was a possibility.

"No."

He was surprised by my refusal and I tried to explain, said I was afraid the pictures might fall into the wrong hands. Anyone's hands, I could have said.

"Well," he said, slowly.

Go home, he meant.

"Hey!" He was picking the pictures off the bed and I was at the door. "Can I have your number?"

"It's in the book." We were the only Slopers listed, I didn't say.

HE WAS GIVING ME MY RADIO BACK, my father told me when I got home. My mother had talked to him about how much help I was with Amanda. "I'm giving you another chance." The radio was on his dresser if I wanted to get it.

I knew thanks were called for. Thanks, and a promise to do better.

"Okay."

My mother was sitting up in their bed, reading *Nicholas and Alexandra*. She'd changed into one of her pretty nightgowns and Beppo was curled in her lap. She could light a cigarette with one hand and she was doing that when I came in.

"If the cycle's done on the dishwasher could you put away the dishes?"

She doesn't have a clue, I told Suzie afterwards. Mom doesn't have a clue about what was going on with me. It was nice sitting in Suzie's room, listening to her *Bridge Over Troubled Water* album and joking about how she was going to sue our mother for alienation of Beppo's affection.

I was already sore, sore and stiff, had to remind myself to walk normally and the problem with that was, when I had to think about it, I'd forget what normal walking looked like. I'd have liked to tell Suzie that, make her laugh, but I didn't. If she got scared, she'd tattle, had done it before.

The next morning Mr. Hedlund marched Eric and Dan to the front of the table where Sandy and I sat.

They were out of line, they said, they'd never do it again. Eric screwed his neck around to observe his audience.

"Don't do me no favors," I said, using a favorite expression of my father's. Someone snickered.

Eric stuck out his lower lip, baby talked. "We *said* we was sowwee."

You can still go to the office Mr. Hedlund told him, before leaving to visit the civics teacher. If that's what you want.

Sandy thanked me for helping her with her homework. Her parents

were really happy with her midterm grade, she said. She'd told them I explained things so she could understand them. "Better than Mrs. Conley! My dad says you should be a teacher yourself!"

Two things I could be: a nude model or a teacher. One as unappealing as the other.

I love praise, but I told Sandy she'd done well because she was a hard worker, smart enough to learn anything she needed to know.

Sandy was regularly humbled by teachers as well as the other students, but she recognized the truth in what I said, looked happy.

Dan and Eric were composing a song about me, using the word cunt.

Dan hadn't been as cocky yesterday, after Sandy told. I'd thought he was afraid he'd hurt me. I believed he liked me, hadn't intended for things to get out of hand.

Another explanation occurred to me. Dan's father, like Sandy's, was an NCO at the Air Force Base. Sandy was a deeply loved child, as even I could see, but the airmen had a reputation for being brutal with their kids, for beating them, even when you'd think they'd be past the age for it.

That may have been why he was afraid.

I walked to where Dan and Eric sat, *cunt, cunt, cunt, cunt, cunt*, looked from one to the other.

"Sorry," Dan said, after a while.

I STAYED AWAY FROM THE COLLEGE, avoiding Hal, but in December, on Pearl Harbor Day, I turned down the frozen food aisle at the Safeway and there he was.

I noticed he was branching out. There was a stack of frozen chicken pot pies in his cart, next to a ten-pound box of frozen tamales.

"Cathy," he said, "I've been looking for you."

"Really hard?"

He smiled. "I wanted to tell you Janice and I decided to get back together. That's why I haven't called."

Was he proud of this speech? I thought he was, turned away.

Your first time is special, they said when I was a girl, it changes everything. But I only stood up to Dan and Eric the one time. My classmates still despised me and my father's outbursts increased in ferocity and frequency.

What was different was my new belief that I could make things happen. Like Hal. That was my work. It hadn't gone as I'd hoped but I was impressed by my own audacity, for what I'd started. The next time would be better, I

JANE SNYDER

promised myself, and, even if it wasn't, I was no sitting duck.

My father's guns stayed where they were, twelve feet from the room where I slept, but I no longer saw myself taking the pistol from its holster.

Pooh, I'd say from then on, when the door to my father's study was open and I saw the guns. Like Madeline to the tiger in the zoo. Pooh.

STEPHEN KAMPA

The Bees

*My honey lost, and I, a drone-like bee,
Have no perfection of my summer left.*
-Shakespeare

Her head was everywhere—

*My chest is full, he'd said, of drowsy bees,
And she'd said, Let them out, could use the honey,
Not sure what either of them meant—*

So when she locked the keys

In the car (running, no thanks to the powers
That be), she knew they had to share the blame,
Texting sweet-mindedly for hours

Their summery metaphors

Like love-befuddled teens. With what intent?
Now she was staring at the car seat, kids
Beside her dragging on her sleeves

Because she'd promised them

A morning at the zoo. *Just look at me,*
She longed to holler, *if you want to see*
A real menagerie! Remorse

Kicked like a restless horse

STEPHEN KAMPA

Inside her chest. The keys hung snaggle-toothed
Inside the car she couldn't enter, hers
Yet not hers, inaccessible

As the new life she knew

She didn't want yet wanted all the more
Because she stood right there in front of it,
Pawing its softly purring door.

MARIA LUISA SPAZIANI

Chiusa

Lo so, lo so, inutilmente cerchi
nella nebbia d'autunno le violette.
Foglie brunite cadono, e ciascuna
è un foglio del vissuto calendario.

Se dovessi rivivere vorrei
essere papa, astronomo, o pirata.
Perché la sorte che mi fu concessa
rifiuterà di essere copiata.

MARIA LUISA SPAZIANI

Translated from Italian by Vincent Frontero

Closing

I know, I know, uselessly you search
in the autumn fog for violets.
Burnished leaves fall, and each one
a page from the calendar.

If I should live again, I would like
to be pope, an astronomer, or a pirate.
Because the fate that was given to me
will refuse to be copied.

MARIA LUISA SPAZIANI

Versi Materni

II

Ma io non potrò dire “riposa nella terra,
pioggia e terra la nutrono come un fiore.”
Perché tu sei prigioniera a tre metri d'altezza,
e davanti ti blocca una lapide.

Finisce nella terra solo il ricco
come per tutti per millenni è stato.
Oggi le leggi urbane ci trasformano
in merce ordinata in scaffali.

Da invisibile crepe il tuo spirito filtra
su di me in ginocchio ai tuoi piedi.
Io sono la tua terra irraggiungibile.
Tu il mio unico cielo.

MARIA LUISA SPAZIANI

Translated from Italian by Vincent Frontero

Maternal Verses

II

But I won't be able to say "she rests in the ground
rain and earth nourish her like a flower."
Because you're a prisoner at three meters,
blocked in front by a funerary stone.

Only the rich finish in the ground
how it has been for millennia.
Today, city laws transform us
into merchandise arranged on shelves.

Your spirit seeps from invisible cracks
to me kneeling at your feet.
I am the earth you can't reach.
You my only sky.

MARIA LUISA SPAZIANI

Giochi Col Tempo

III

Noi siamo i minatori di noi stessi.
Scendiamo dentro i visceri dell'anima
affrontando uno scavo crudele.
C'è il grisou, lo sappiamo. È la legge.

L'alternativa è sempre di non scendere,
andare lungo il bosco ruminando
ciuffi di menta, la coscienza sgombra.
Mucche e caprette, angeli di Dio.

MARIA LUISA SPAZIANI

Translated from Italian by Vincent Frontero

Games With Time

III

We're the miners of ourselves.
Descending into the depths of the soul,
faced with a ruthless excavation.
There is firedamp, we know. It's law.

The alternative is always to not descend.
To walk along the woods chewing
tufts of mint, the conscious clear.
Cows and little goats, angels of God.

MICHAEL HORTON

Building Blocks

GENE, THAT WAS HOW OLD HE WAS, his mother naming him after Gene Autry, Oklahoma's Yodeling Cowboy. He stopped in the hallway and stared into the living room. An abrupt smile spread all over his face. In the middle of the room on the floor sat a small boy with hair just asking to be touched. So gold and white it seemed to glow.

His name was Zachary and he was six years old. Six! He was playing with plastic blocks that clicked together. A shape was rising from the carpet. A fort, a spaceship? Whatever the boy was making, his attention was complete, on his face a look of determination. He hadn't heard the old man's approach or took no notice of him. His busy small hands selected and sorted blocks, adding them to the construction. He was making a noise, a soft off-key humming that he repeated over and over again. He didn't take time to consider but built with confidence. Gene guessed that in his mind's eye, the boy's creation was already complete, already a marvel. Gene watched a moment more before his smile dimmed and a furrow creased his forehead. He turned, disappearing down the hall.

In the kitchen, the morning light seeped in at the window over the sink. Gene looked around hesitant as if the arrangement was new. Then he crossed to the cabinets next to the sink and opened one of the cupboard doors. He studied the contents, made his selection, and lifted it down. It was a sugary kids' cereal in a rainbow of colors as bright as candy. The colors made Gene grin when he would pour himself a bowl late at night when sleep was nowhere to be found. He was slow to take the first bite, staring instead. The cereal was too sweet by half and never as satisfying as the bowlful of colors themselves. Raisin Bran was his morning go-to, that or oatmeal.

He picked a small white bowl from another cupboard, emptied a cupful of the cereal into it, and shook the bowl. The colors danced.

Gene carried the bowl into the front room where the boy worked in silent concentration. He placed the bowl down next to a pile of yet-to-be-used blocks. The boy glanced at Gene, then at the bowl of bright colored cereal. He studied the contents of the bowl, looked back at his grandfather, and smiled. Neither of them spoke.

Returning to the kitchen, Gene set about his morning ritual, his movements a habit. He opened the container of coarse ground coffee, grainy and dark as rich soil. At the smell he inhaled deeply, one of life's small good things. When the coffee began a steady trickle into the carafe, he went upstairs to his bedroom to dress; like the boy, he was still in his pajamas. He listened as he passed the bedroom where his daughter must still be sleeping, but heard no sounds.

IN THE LIVING ROOM, the form had grown and the boy reached out and swiveled a turret-like structure he'd assembled on one of its projecting wings. He made small chi-chi-chi sounds, sounds a deep-space laser might make. Then he glanced at the white bowl with the colored cereal. He pushed one of the red sugary O's around the barrel of his deep-space laser and drew his head back to look. Satisfied, he began constructing a similar turret on the other wing.

Dressed now, Gene entered the room, the red flannel lining of his slippers showing around his white socks. He looked at the cereal-bedecked turret, its four wing-like projections, the precarious tail section, and nodded. He lowered himself as if he was disassembling and reassembling himself on the carpet next to the boy. He puffed when he was all the way down.

"I like it," he said. "What is it?" At the boy's look, he amended, "What do you call it?"

"It's the Millennium Falcon." When that brought no reaction, Zachary's eyebrows drew down and he looked critically at his grandfather. "It's what Han Solo flies—in *Star Wars*. Him and Chewie."

"Right," his grandfather said quickly pushing his lips out in knowing fashion.

The boy paused, studying the blocks he'd stuck together. "Me and Billy watched it three times. Once twice in a row. Mom already saw it and said she didn't need to see it again." He gave a sudden yawn and rubbed his face. "Sometimes she called Billy, 'Chewie'. Before they got mad at each other."

"Um." Gene nodded seriously and put a piece of cereal in his mouth.

The boy followed his example, both making a satisfying crunching sound. The old man sucked on the cereal like a piece of candy before asking, "Is your mother still asleep?"

"She left to get a job." The boy chewed his piece of cereal up and went back to connecting blocks. Gene frowned.

"Do you need any help?" he asked after a moment.

Studying his ship, then studying his grandfather, the boy said, "You make yours and I'll make mine. OK?" Gene nodded and the boy scooted a handful of blocks his way. Gene picked up a block, put it down, picked up another, holding it, turning it so he could see all sides. They were made to lock together in various ways. He snapped two blocks together, glancing sideways at the boy. At the click the boy turned to check what he was doing. Gene clicked more blocks on, one shaped like a wheel.

"Are you building a motorcycle?" the boy asked. It sounded like a suggestion. "You'll need another wheel." Zachary sifted through the pile of parts beside him, passing a wheeled one over to Gene.

"A fast motorcycle," his grandfather agreed, accepting the wheel, the two of them settling to building.

"Did your mother say where she was going? When she'd be back?" Gene asked when a few minutes had gone by. He added a long block to the middle of his motorcycle before glancing at his grandson. "I didn't know she was going out today."

When they arrived yesterday, she said she needed to find a job, get organized, and put things together. It had been a day of the three of them finding their way around each other, getting used to their new proximity. She didn't say she was going out today, leaving him with the boy, alone, and in charge.

"I don't know," the boy said, focusing all his attention on his work. After a pause, he added, "She took the suitcase." Gene glanced over at the boy and cocked his head. "The suitcase?"

"Um hum."

Slowly, like he was rising block by block, Gene got to his feet. That the simple act of rising could be a process continually surprised him. He stared quietly at the top of the boy's head—his grandson, his daughter's boy—then straightened and walked off.

Upstairs in his daughter's old room, the boy's sleeping bag was twisted up on the floor next to his daughter's bed which looked hastily made up. In the closet were two pairs of boy-sized shoes, one sports' shoes, the other

rubber rain boots; downstairs the boy was barefoot. On hangers were two jackets and something gold and red and shapeless. He took a fold of the fabric and stretched it out. A cape, it looked like a cape for a comic book hero. In his daughter's old dresser were several pairs of boy's underwear, some with caped cartoon figures on them, a second pair of pajamas, a stack of t-shirts, and several pairs of socks. The next drawer down held three pairs of blue jeans, a pair of tan slacks, and two pairs of shorts. Nothing at all in the bottom drawer. There was only the one dresser.

He looked at the bed. There was no note, like a note on the pillow. He opened his eyes wide, raising his brows, and rubbed his hand back and forth across his mouth. He scratched his head.

"Hum," he exhaled.

He sat down heavily on the bed. "Hum."

Unchanged on the walls were his daughter's ballet photographs, a poster of a young woman climbing a mountain with a motivational slogan underneath, a framed Degas print of young girls in tutus, and pictures of dancers cut from magazines.

When his wife died unexpectedly—no prelude, no time to think, not a minute to prepare, leaving him and his daughter without a single word (a headache, she said she was going to lay down with a headache)—when she died ridiculously in minutes of an embolism, they both felt utterly abandoned. Mary should have outlived him twenty years—thirty years. No way was it supposed to happen like that. Coming out of the blue, it wasn't right.

He had been forty-one, Mary twenty-six, when he met her at the diner where he sometimes ate his dinner—meatloaf, he invariably ordered meatloaf. She was a new-hire he hadn't seen before but she fit right in with the grill cooks and the customers. Gene started eating his dinner there four nights a week, the nights she worked. He hated to cook, he'd told her, hated it, though he didn't really. He just didn't take any time with it. They struck up an acquaintanceship, with him coming in so regular. She began to suggest other things he might try for his dinner. Usually what she suggested was good. It made him feel good, her wanting him to try new things. He always tipped her twenty percent. He wanted to tip more, but he was careful not to because it might look funny and make things awkward.

After a few weeks when she asked about his life—a wife, family—he had flushed and struggled to swallow the bite of flounder he had put in his mouth. Nearly incoherent, he said something about it had just never happened to him—love. When he said *love*, he felt his ears grow hot.

Growing up, Gene read book after book about heroes, swords, battles, honor—and about how the hero always finds his one perfect, deathless love who he was destined to discover—a princess—no, a queen of the heart, instantly recognized, forever cherished. Just like his mother said the very first time she saw his father, “He’s the one.” This ideal had sunk deep and taken root. As he grew from boy to man it was what he expected and what he waited for, that instant, perfect love. He waited. He waited until waiting was all there was and grew accustomed to it, resigned if not reconciled.

When he asked if she would marry him, he couldn’t believe his audacity. He couldn’t believe it when she took his shaking hands and said yes.

He’d been dumbstruck. Afterward, he was continually amazed that they were so happy. Nothing outlandish, but happy—contented with the flow of their days. When Ella came along, it was more than he could ever have asked for. He would never have guessed. Not in a million years.

After Mary disappeared from their lives, pinched out like a candle without smoke, both of them felt like they had been thrown into an empty space that was too huge to fill and impossible to get out of. It became apparent that all it took to change one’s life forever was an endless absence, a sudden *nothingness*.

Day after day, month after month, Gene lived in a state of confusion, unable to make sense of things. He kept walking into invisible walls, banging up against them, coming to a standstill. He needed to be there for Ella but he felt lost, trapped at a distance. When the incomprehensible shock of Mary dying became one inevitable day after another—just the way it was—and him unable to change it, his daughter turned to him less and less. Came less often to be hugged, held, comforted. He wanted to do better, be better. He had been at a loss. Mary would have known what to do, knew her daughter to the bone, reading her moods, making her laugh, fixing any hurt. It should have been him that was gone; a girl needs her mother.

Not knowing what else to do, Gene enrolled Ella in dance classes.

The lessons turned out to be just the ticket. Ella plunged into them like a duck to water, or a person dying of thirst grabbing for a drink. The lessons were good for both of them. The lessons began with balancing before moving on to pirouetting.

Sitting on the bed surrounded by her pictures, Gene smiled, remembering how she had danced around the house, her expression fierce, at seven and eight, twirling across the living room, a regular sugar-plum fairy—her role in the annual dance recitals that her instructor, a woman

no longer young but not ungraceful, put on for the parents.

At these annual fêtes, the instructor served sweet red wine and small round cookies with a whole almond she had pressed into the center. Some of the girls were quite good, the ones who'd started at five, others caused the instructor to take longer sips of her wine. Over time his daughter had become one of the good ones, graduating from the sugar plums to roles more challenging. She wanted to be a star, she told him when he picked her up one evening after her class. Everyone would want to come see her. Everyone would be so proud. They'd all love her, she said, breathless from excitement and dancing. Her instructor had smiled, nodded, and told her only if she practiced with every ounce of her energy, only if she continued her lessons.

Now Ella was twenty-five (must be going on twenty-six Gene realized) and had been living in Seattle with boyfriend Billy until yesterday when she showed up on Gene's doorstep in New Jersey, son and suitcase in hand.

When he opened the door, Gene had frozen like a statue behind the screen. She stood on the other side wearing a half-broken smile. "Hi." The single syllable hung in the air like a small spinning planet. He saw that her face was changed, no longer a girl's. It showed the certain wear of womanhood.

She looked away from the expression on his face down to the boy beside her. He held a large cloth sack. "This is Zachary." Then she added, "Zachary, this is your grandfather."

Gene found his breath and yanked open the screen. "Come in!"

He began laughing and didn't know what to do with his body which had gone suddenly, clumsy. "Come in! Come in!" He forced his laughing to stop and lurched out of the way stumbling back into the room, not even thinking to grab the suitcase.

She said it all in a rush. Things had gone bad. "Very bad," she said. They needed a place to stay. Just until she found work. Would that be OK? Did he mind? They would get their own place as soon as they could. She didn't want to impose. She stopped abruptly as if her throat had closed. The crooked smile was gone. Her expression, filled with doubt, broke Gene's heart.

"Of course!" It was nearly a shout. "Of course! Of course!" he said. He looked back and forth from his daughter to his grandson, a grandson he had known he had but had never seen. His hands lifted on their own, opening as if to say *here you are*, as if to embrace.

His daughter set the suitcase down. She hesitated, then stepped forward and hugged him tentatively with one arm. She was still holding her son's hand with the other. Then both arms were around her father. Gene heard the catch in her breath, felt the tears behind his eyes.

She said nothing of the past; he said nothing. Their parting had been a second rending for Gene. Ella had been eighteen and pregnant, the father a skinny kid without a real job but with plans. They were going to go west where he had family and opportunity. They were going to do great things, exciting things. As soon as she had the baby, his daughter would get right back into her dancing. She would be a professional dancer. It would all work out. It would all be fine. His daughter and the boy left the next day.

Gene had been stunned, helpless—angry. And bereft. His daughter had walked away carrying the same suitcase she and the boy arrived with. He had seen his grandson only in pictures—in each one he seemed to leap in size. They came tucked in the letters. Regular at first, the letters were cheery. (They never spoke over the phone, though she had always had his number. He never knew hers.) When the letters became more sporadic, they grew less cheerful. They dwindled to only a couple of times a year, at Christmas and around her birthday, as if it made her think of him and home.

He wrote back, but the addresses changed so often he was never sure what letters she got. His letters had been stiff at first, because of the pain. But that passed quickly, and when he wrote he tried to sound excited and enthusiastic about what she was doing with her life, asking her when she might visit, inviting the skinny boy as well, and saying how much he wanted to see his grandson. "Soon," had always been her response. "Not just now, but soon." He suggested he'd visit, he'd come to them. Drive or maybe even fly. How nice that would be, she'd written. But not right now. Not just yet. Things were unsettled. She wasn't with the skinny boy anymore; she was with Matt—so much more mature. Then not Matt. Then fewer and fewer letters. It didn't seem like she was able to latch on to anything, stick to anyone. He refused to blame Mary, even if she was the one who had died. It was his fault or no one's.

He stared sightlessly at the pictures on the wall. *His daughter—oh, his daughter*, the thought was full of the pain of old anguish. Here one minute, appearing out of nowhere—like a miracle, like a magic trick—now gone again? His mind clamped down on the thought, allowing it go no further.

She had come home. His grandson played downstairs in the living

room. But the suitcase was gone, no note, just the boy's clothes arranged neatly in the dresser, and downstairs a big pile of plastic blocks. Gene shook his head, rubbing his hand back and forth across his mouth. He pushed himself up off the bed, absently touching the pillow with his hand, an image of his daughter in her dance costume, the fierceness of her dancing, arose out of nowhere.

It was a question—what was he going to do? If she had left?

The idea of raising a boy at sixty-five! When Zachary was sixteen, Gene would be seventy-five. Catch a football? Throw a Frisbee? It didn't seem likely. Zachary would grow up feeling cheated all around. Like his mother. It wasn't right. What to do about it was beyond him. But this time, whatever happened, he would be there. He would.

He went back downstairs where the boy had disassembled the old man's motorcycle incorporating the parts into his own construction. There were rings of colored cereal stuck on in different places making it look ornamented, Christmas-y almost. It didn't look as though the boy had eaten any more of the cereal.

"Time to get us some breakfast," Gene announced. He was thinking oatmeal, he was good at making oatmeal. The boy stood up and together they walked to the kitchen.

The boy sat at the table with his hands flat on top while his grandfather got out the cardboard cylinder of Old Fashioned Quaker Oats and a pan. He measured water and a pinch of salt into it. He switched on the gas burner; the flames slipped around the sides as bright and clear blue as his grandson's eyes.

"Do you like raisins," Gene asked. The boy nodded. "Cinnamon?"

"Sure." Zachary lay his head sideways on the table between his arms.

"What kind of things do you like to eat for breakfast?" The boy's shoulders jerked to his ears in an awkward reclining shrug.

"Eggs? Do you like eggs? I like soft-boiled eggs. But not too soft." Gene glanced at his grandson. "Do you like soft-boiled eggs?"

"No," the boy said. "I don't think I like them."

"You haven't tried them? With butter, some salt and pepper, a piece of toast—you'll like them. Guaranteed. Your mother liked them. And waffles, she was crazy about waffles." He had made no waffles in her absence, buying frozen. He watched the boy out of the corner of his eye while looking purposefully at the pot of water just getting ready to boil. "Maybe I'll make us soft-boiled eggs tomorrow." He stirred in the oats.

Gene busied himself around the kitchen, getting out bowls, spoons, napkins. When the oatmeal was ready, steam curling off it, he filled both bowls. The boy raised his head as Gene set one in front of him. The other he set at his place at the table; the ripped vinyl seat of his chair repaired with duct tape. He placed the sugar bowl and milk between them.

“There,” he said. “Breakfast.”

Staring at the oatmeal polka-dotted with big puffy raisins dark as flies, the boy said, “I’m not hungry.” The smell of cinnamon rose from the bowls.

Gene paused, then poured a little milk on top of his oatmeal and stirred in a spoonful of sugar. “You ought to try it with milk and sugar,” he said.

Zachery propped his head in his hands, letting it settle there as if it were unbelievably heavy, his elbows on the table. “OK.”

Gene added milk and sugar and stirred it up, pushing the bowl back between the boy’s elbows. “There you go. Give it a try.” The boy let go of his head and picked up his spoon. “It’s hot.”

“It’ll cool.” Gene ate steadily not knowing what to talk about, not knowing what he should do or how things were going to go. The boy took a bite, stirred it and took another. He seemed to like it. Gene was already thinking ahead to lunch, to dinner, thinking of his limited repertoire of recipes and cooking. He didn’t go to diners anymore, but neither did he cook much, not since Ella left, relying on sandwiches and microwave meals.

“I’m done,” the boy said pushing the half-empty bowl away and standing. “Can I go play?”

Gene washed the few dishes and stacked them in the drainboard, then returned to the living room. Standing in the middle of the floor, his grandson held his unwieldy structure at eye level with two fingers. He stared at it with an unfocused gaze. He opened his fingers. The creation fell to the floor, bursting into pieces.

When Zachary saw his grandfather watching, he said, “It crashed.”

They got through the day. To Gene, it felt unbelievably long and then was over before he knew it. The boy had eaten half of his peanut butter and jelly sandwich for lunch, and all of his grilled swiss cheese sandwich for dinner. They’d both shared a few black olives from the can.

“WHEN IS MY MOTHER COMING BACK?” the boy asked.

Gene was bent over the tub, running a bath for his grandson. He turned off the water, watching the spigot drip, and pursed his lips. His eyebrows rose. “Not sure,” he said.

He dipped his hand in testing the water like he had done when the boy's mother was a little girl and Mary would tell him to get her ready for bed. The boy was staring at him. "It can take a while to find a job." Gene shook the water from his hand. "Sometimes, quite a while." He stood.

"It should be just right," he said, facing the boy. "Not too hot, not too cold." Gene smiled widely like he'd told a joke because it was what Ella always used to say in their nightly rituals. The boy stared at the water and waited to be left alone. "Towel's on the bar. Toothpaste and toothbrush are beside the sink," Gene said and pulled the door closed.

Having folded away the sleeping bag, Gene tucked his grandson into his daughter's bed. "Just for tonight," he told him. "Just until your mother comes home." The boy settled down on his back.

"What do you and your mother do?" Gene asked his grandson. "For fun? What do the two of you do for fun?"

Zachary yawned. "We talk. She sings," he said. "We dance."

"You do?"

"Yeah." The boy scratched his cheek. "Sometimes she plays blocks with me." Gene smiled at that. "We have a game we play together on her phone." After a long pause, he closed his eyes, clenching them like that would force him to go to sleep. There was moisture at the edge of his eyelashes.

Gene stared. He wanted to touch the boy, pat his head, his hair, to comfort him—to comfort himself. But the boy's lips were clamped tight and Gene hesitated, afraid he might recoil at his touch.

"Tomorrow, how about we do something? Go somewhere." Gene sounded suddenly upbeat, enthusiastic. "Do you bowl?" Gene had bowled twice in his life, both times as a teenager. Bowling? He had no idea where it came from, similar to the boy himself. He persisted. "We can go to the store—get any food that you like. We can build something with your blocks."

"I'm sleepy," Zachary said and rolled away onto his side. Gene sat a moment longer. Then, without a thought, bent and kissed the boy's head, his hair still damp but feather-soft. The boy stayed very still and Gene patted his shoulder, gripping it the slightest bit, saying, "I'm really glad you're here." He took a minute to swallow. "Things are going to be just fine." He hurried from the room but left the door open a crack.

In his own bedroom, he sat on the edge of his bed and tried to think. If worse came to worst—no, he didn't mean that. If he needed to act the parent, he'd do that. He was sixty-five, only just retired, and still figuring

out what that meant. Maybe it meant this. If it came to it, he'd do it better this time. Make the best of it—the most of it. He knew things didn't always happen for a reason. They just happened. But he'd make the most of it while it lasted. He would have to plan.

He wondered about a puppy. Somewhere down the line, getting the boy a puppy. It hadn't occurred to him for Ella. Dance lessons were all that occurred. But for Zachary, a puppy. Every boy should have a puppy. And maybe they *would* bowl! Maybe bowling would become their thing. People his age bowled. Boys bowled. Why not? And then there was school and the sports programs and clubs. Gene would have to remember all that. He would go to all his events—and his baseball games. Maybe Zachary would play baseball! Gene would have to start cooking again. He'd definitely have to do better at that. He would keep the boy healthy, keep him strong, he would try to keep him happy. Gene frowned. He had come to the kitchen from his bedroom and he didn't know how or why. He drank a glass of water, sat in his chair, and stared at the floor. He thought of his daughter.

SHE RETURNED TWO DAYS LATER. It was mid-morning when she came in. Outside it was hot and sticky, the summer turning out to be a record-breaker. Her face was red and there was sweat on her upper lip and a piece of hair glued to her forehead. She didn't knock but came in like she meant it, closing the door sharply behind her, shutting the bald light and the heat outside. There was the suitcase in her hand. She dropped it with a thump.

Gene was perched on the couch watching the boy on the floor stick blocks together. Each day he clicked block after block together then took them apart, often before they ever became anything recognizable. Gene had suggested things he might make, or they might make together. The boy would appear to take an interest but quickly lose it. Then he would dismantle whatever he began and start clicking pieces together all over again, trying to put something together that matched up with something in his mind. Now Zachary stopped. He looked at his mother. His lips, which had parted at her entrance, closed in a line.

"I'm sorry," she said to the room at large. Then looking directly at her son, she said again, "I'm sorry it took so long." Her shoulders hiked up and she spread her hands out in front of her.

"I needed to sort things out," she started and stopped. Her mouth immediately twisted at what she had said and the bitter bubble of a laugh came out. She shook her head.

"I'm sorry." She dropped her hands and ran them down the front of her slacks. She took a step towards her son.

"I got a job," she said. She said it to both of them. The boy laid his blocks back in the pile and watched her.

"I got a job," she repeated, her voice overloud in the silence. "Here in town." She swung her head towards her father, but her eyes stayed on her son.

More quietly she said, "I came back."

Her expression changed. "You need to know that," she told her son. "Just know that." She raked a hand through her hair dragging it straight back, ungluing the hair across her forehead. "You need to know I'll come back,"

Her jaw jutted forward, almost belligerent, and her eyes slipped to her father.

Gene remembered how fierce, how focused, her bright broad face was when she danced, his little girl dancing. She looked back at her son, her face now opening, waiting.

The boy stared at his mother. He chewed at the inside of his cheek, his expression a question, His eyes considered her, eyes that were wide and blue and private. He looked at his mother looking at him. She kept looking at him. She was looking at him so hard that his face grew hot and his eyes grew bright. He looked down.

Gene beheld the scene, his daughter, his grandson. He thought about his wife, dead so long yet never that far from his thoughts. How he missed her. How they all had missed her.

"I don't always know what to do," his daughter said, her voice husky, barely above a whisper. "I do stupid things." It wasn't clear if she was talking to her son, Gene, or to herself. Her shoulders jerked up, then dropped. "Knowing what to do," she said, "—it's hard."

"I know," Gene said.

Sun from the front window shone on the floor in a large rectangle where Zachary knelt with his blocks.

"You do what you can," Gene said. He was leaning towards his daughter. "That's all." He raised his eyebrows, his shoulders rising as well. "You just do what you can."

Together Gene and his daughter looked at Zachary who continued to stare down at his blocks. One by one Gene's plans for the boy appeared, and one by one faded.

“Granddad is taking me bowling,” Zachary announced, his voice mixing with the sunlight, high, clear, and bright with excitement. When he got up and took his mother’s hand, her whole face trembled. He led her to the pile of blocks.

“We can all go bowling together,” he said. “Do you know how to bowl?” he asked his mother.

He tugged at her hand as he knelt down, pulling her down beside him. He didn’t let go of her hand, and though he was looking at his blocks, he smiled. Gene smiled too.

HEATHER BOURBEAU

Miss Atomic Blast

1951 Vegas was young, small, and ignorant,
if not innocent. Six hotels on the Strip, Sinatra debuted
at the Desert Inn, and the Nevada Test Site became a spectacle.
Calendars were given with detonation times, best places to watch.
Showgirls and singers, craps and blasts--who could ask for anything more?

Atomic cocktails and penthouse views, sunglasses and souvenirs,
toys and candies. "Dawn bomb parties" to revel in the lighting
of a night sky.
A Sands chorus girl danced on Angel's Peak as test cloud bloomed behind.
Her poses named "apprehension" and "impact," "awe" and "survival."
Tests were named Annie and Priscilla, Hornet and Bee.

At the El Rancho, a young dancer was crowned Miss Atomic Blast,
awarded 10 pounds of mushrooms.
In 1957, another showgirl won Miss Atomic Bomb.
Icon of blond curls, red lips,
white bikini with cotton mushroom from hips to chin.

Flash blinded sheep, Joshua trees smoldered, burns killed livestock,
but general said the worst was a "mouthful of dirt." The government said
no danger outside the bombing range. 12 years, 928 tests.
Soldiers who witnessed were more likely to die from leukemia,
prostrate and throat cancers.

And now, as fans of TV's Chernobyl rush to relish its devastation
the U.S. Department of Energy offers tours of the Nevada site,
calls Sedan Crater,

RED ROCK REVIEW

“The perfect place for a group photo.” The pit created by 104-kiloton device, 635 feet underground. Radiation signs hang from wire fences. The tour is booked out for a year.

KEVIN LANAHAN

Goodbye Blue Sky

WE'RE ALMOST THERE WHEN YOU TELL ME TO CUT THE LIGHTS. I ask how I'll be able to see and you say, "Just turn them off." So I reach over and do what you said and the road becomes this silver ribbon under the moon. We drive like that for a while, me gripping the wheel a little harder, concentrating so we don't crash, until you lean forward and peer hard out the windshield and say, "Here," pointing to where I should turn.

I slow the van and pull onto a section of dirt and matted grass in the front yard, cut the engine, and we sit there in the shadow of the house. It gets quiet and I wait for what's next. Listen to you breathing. Watch you watching for something. It's just us on this remote road outside of town but you're jumpy because we're here to steal the doors from this abandoned farmhouse. Take them off the hinges, stack them in our rickety van, and haul them away to our own house.

I get premonitions. Like Spiderman I sense the proximity of danger. Like Daredevil, I can sense your heartbeat. But right now everything's cool. No buzzing in my head. And I wish I could tell you this to calm your nerves but I don't talk about it and you wouldn't believe me anyway.

You get out and go to the back of the van, open the doors, and start collecting the tools. I get out too, the cold air sneaking inside my jean jacket, and look at the cornfields off in the distance washed in that weird blue light. Far beyond is the main road and every once in a while a car drifts across the horizon, the whisper of tires coming back to us, and I think about what you said. *It's not stealing. No one has lived in this house for a long time.*

When I got home last night you were already sitting at the kitchen table, one leg crossed over the other. You had a beer open on the table. The light outside was waning, the sky folding into a wash of red and you told me to sit down. You were still in your dark blue trousers and black oxfords, your tie undone, falling across your wrinkled white shirt. I was confused to see you in those clothes and wondered if you had your job back but was

afraid to ask. I was in my school uniform. The brass belt buckle and grey wool trousers with the black piping down the side. Navy tie, my own black oxfords we purchased from the Cohoes Army Navy store.

It has taken me a while, but, lately, more and more, I've been hanging with the boys from school. I'm afraid to make friends though. I expect that at any moment you're going to tell me you can no longer afford the tuition and I have to go back to the public school. La Salle Institute is an all-boys, catholic, military school in the City of Troy, a forlorn mill town. You said it would set me straight, give me direction. A school with discipline and a code of honor, which was exactly what I needed.

The school feels a million miles away from the suburbs where we live. Station wagons roaming the streets and cul-de-sacs with small circles of grass and sand. Red-stained picnic tables and above ground pools. The new shopping mall in the center of town where once there was a farmer's field.

We ride our bikes behind the mosquito fogger in summer, scale the fence at midnight and swim in the town pool. Log hours in the mall's arcade and, after dark, climb the water tower to spray paint our initials or the name of some girl. Hide in the pine woods behind the fertilized fields of the sprawling public school campus to smoke weed or drink our father's beer. But over time I've been doing less and less of these things, spending more and more time wandering the city streets.

In Troy, the kids live in drafty walk-up apartments or sagging, pre-war split family homes. They don't own cars, riding the bus everywhere instead. The more time I spend in Troy the more I find I have nothing in common with the kids here in the suburbs. They think I'm getting weird, and I've stopped talking about what I find, and what I'm finding of myself, in the city.

At the kitchen table last night you said you needed my help. You told me you found this old, empty farm house on the outskirts of town. Described how we could take the doors and the hinges and the iron handles and said that they were real antiques. We still have no doors on the bedrooms and you're excited about the prospect of what we can take from this empty farmhouse. I asked why we couldn't just buy some doors, and you said, *You like having no door on your bedroom?* I thought about my old room in the house we left a couple months ago before we moved. My room with the window that stepped out onto the garage roof where I would watch the sunset. The wall-to-wall carpet and my *Black Flag* poster above my desk. You lost your job a while back and I've heard you explain to Mom how

we're short on money, which is why we moved into the half-finished place we live in now, with wires hanging from the ceiling and drywall missing in places. A remote village near the muddy river with its radioactive dredge mounds, and the whining coydogs that run the ancient, rutted towpath at night keeping us all awake.

You come back around with your tool belt, blowing on your hands to warm them, and we stand and look at the farmhouse together. Long, sagging front porch. Tin roof and clapboard siding. A couple of the shutters have come loose and hang at sad angles.

You say you've driven by in the daytime a few times to do reconnaissance. Walked around the place. Looked through the dusty windows, and they're all locked. But you point out a second floor window that looks like it could be ajar. You couldn't climb up there yourself to check it out. Your knees are bad. You've had multiple operations dating back to when you were in the army jumping a ravine during basic training. The long red centipede scar that matches the one on my neck. "What do you think? Can you get up there?" you ask as if someone might be listening.

"Yeah, I think so," I whisper back.

I'm eager to do something to help you, something you feel is useful. But I also wonder about how this will go. I look at the hickory and oak trees in the yard, the trunks appearing rutted in the moonlight like old, weathered faces. Crooked branches stretch over the house like they're trying to protect it. Or maybe they're actually warning us away. Trying to tell us there's a voodoo curse if we go through with this.

Don't tell your mother, you said in the kitchen last night. *You know how she is*. Like me she thinks there seems to be a jinx of bad luck that follows the family around. Some of it is beyond our capability to control, I know. Like you getting fired, or the point drying up in the well of the half-finished house we live in now. Or, when we finally get water back, the pipes freezing at night. But some of it is of our own making, too. And that's the stuff I try and watch out for. That's the stuff I try and use my Spidey sense or my Daredevil radar.

But your sudden impulses are the things I don't have the power to stop. Like buying a house without insulation. Near the river where the water seeps in through the spaces of the field stone foundation. These ideas of yours come on suddenly like a heart attack and lead you to projects and hobbies that suck up money and turn us against one another. Self-inflicted calamities that usually end badly. Then you're taken away to some

remote place inside yourself where no one can reach. The weeks of solemn brooding.

The old house you bought is drafty and far out of town and we have no doors on the bedrooms. There's a ladder in place of a staircase to get to the top floor. The floor joists are still exposed and laid over with loose sections of pressboard. There's just one toilet for the four of us with no walls around it yet. When you get up in the middle of the night to pee the noise echoes across the hollow spaces and wakes us up. I remember one night overhearing you and mom talking in the kitchen in low tones so I wouldn't hear, and she said, *Move in? We can't even get a certificate of occupancy.* And you said, *Well, we can't afford to stay here anymore.*

With the window waiting, you interlock your fingers to give me a boost, whisper, "C'mon, wasting time," and I place my full weight in your hands. You lift me to where I can grab hold of the porch eave, and then I pull myself up the rest of the way, press my chest onto the metal roof, and swing a leg over. When I stand up and look down your face is a mix of worry and excitement. "Can you get over there?" you ask, and I study the route, pick my footholds, use the chimney for some purchase to reach the first window. Then with that ledge, I get to the window you think is open and just like you thought, it slides up easy enough. I look down again and see you smiling before I crawl inside.

I find myself in an empty corner bedroom, the moon through the window casting rectangles of that bluish light across the wide floorboards. I go into the hallway and from the landing I glance into the rest of the rooms, but they're empty too. I want to linger, wait to see if spirits might step out of the walls, and make their presence known. I think how I would tell them I'm sorry. That we have no doors in our own haunted house and we'll take good care of them. That you chose these doors because they have antique handles and we'll appreciate them. But you're waiting on the porch out there and I hear you tapping on the front door's window impatiently. When I get down the stairs your face is pressed up against the glass and I work the stubborn lock and let you in.

"Wasting time."

"Sorry."

"Now, go on. Give me a couple hours."

"You need my help getting the doors into the van."

"When I'm done getting them down."

"I can help you get them down. It'll go faster."

“The van is out there. Someone could drive by.”

“I’ll pull it around the back.”

“Stick to the plan. Go find something to do.”

I TAKE THE VAN LIKE YOU SAID, drive into town thinking of where to go. In the distance toward the center of town is the skyglow of the high school football field’s lights. Half the town’s kids are there, I know. The other half at the new mall on the east side of town where more development is happening: shops, fast food, new construction, parking lots with fresh yellow-painted lines, and widened, glossy black roads.

I decide to stop at the outdated strip mall on the west side of town. Darker here. No new street lights being installed. There’s the old dollar movie theatre that shows second and third runs. *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* at midnight. An out of business Barkers department store. Mama’s pizzeria and Tiger’s pub. The closed-down disco roller rink across the road where there used to be a line to get in on a Friday night, weeds now sprouting from the creases and cracks in the foundation.

This is where you used to want to be on any weekend. The parking lot like a carnival. The crowd outside waiting for the movie, loud and electric. Always someone wandering around selling dope. Kids smoking it in cars or drinking beers out of white Styrofoam coolers in open trunks. My friends and I would run back and forth between the pizzeria and the roller rink, laughter and shouting and voices floating up into the night sky, stars still visible.

I would stand in front of the giant plate glass window of Tiger’s to watch the bands through that gloss of condensation. Bodies packed in there under the strobe lights, swaying and pulsing. Dancing with cigarettes and drinks in their hands. Big belt buckles and chambray shirts, or low-cut blouses and tight jeans. The thump of the kick drum in my chest. That window glass vibrating and shaking like it was going to shatter any second.

I sit in the van a while, look at the movie theatre marquee. The white plastic is cracked like someone threw rocks through it. Pink Floyd’s *The Wall* is playing but the A has come loose and is upside down. I get out, walk down the alleyway to the back of the theatre where there’s just some trash barrels and empty pallets.

But the muffled sounds of the film comes through the cinder block walls and I press my ear to the metal fire exit door. The dialogue transmits nice and clear this way, the English accents, lilting and sing-song. Then,

after a while, the sound of birds chirping and I know what's next. I wait for the child's voice, then the opening notes of the guitar and the synthesizer reverberating. I close my eyes and Gilmour's voice is wistful, bittersweet. I think of how many times I've listened to this song alone in my room in our house that's now gone. But something about it is different listening through the cold door. *Goodbye blue sky*, Gilmour sings. *The flames are all long gone but the pain lingers on*. The permanent imprint of war left on the boy. I picture the animation, although I haven't seen the film. Imagine birds flying into a flak-filled sky and bursting into sprays of blood.

I listen until the song is over, and then light a cigarette and go back to the front of the theatre wondering about how much work you have left. I wander up and down the sidewalk and stare into the abandoned department store. Naked mannequins, bare shelves, some racks askew with empty hangers. In my mind I see you working the screws and hinges, hear you struggling with the heavy two-panel doors with just the moonlight through the wrinkled window glass.

Before we moved, we hurried to finish as much of the repairs and renovations as we could. You would bring me there mornings and nights and weekends to work. Early on there was the demolition. The interior walls of ancient plaster and lathe that required sledgehammers and crowbars to break the planks and pull out the crooked, stubborn nails clawed deep into the studs. The dust we created was like a fog so dense we'd disappear to one another and I would daydream about slipping outside with you unaware, escaping into the woods where you wouldn't find me.

We piled up the debris and shoveled it into dented metal garbage cans, dragged them outside and up into the van. Then we'd drive to the town dump, the noisy seagulls hovering and diving at the rotting garbage piles. The stench of the place still thick through the bandanas we tied around our faces.

There was the summer day we laid the insulation in the attic. The heat so stifling I went shirtless, and then the prickly, bright pink rash that kept me up all night, like bugs crawling under my skin. And the old metal septic tank, rusted through and leaky. You had it pumped and told me to dig it out. I chopped around it all day, piling the dirt up in heaping mounds taller than me and when dusk fell, I started the kerosene lamp while you were working inside. The moths batted against the lamp glass and the mosquitoes came out but I was finally able to get into the hole and when I exposed the bottom I wrenched it loose in gnarled, corroded pieces, gagging from

the smell, worse than the dump.

The property is one hundred yards across and stretches all the way to the northern shores of the Mohawk. The backyard is an acre or so of grass and weeds before dense woods begin with twisted, tilted river trees like arthritic hands. Hiking back there I've found abandoned cars, piles of old tires, and the ancient bluestone canal walls hidden under humps of fallen leaves like Indian burial mounds.

At the end of summer the weeds in the yard had grown taller than both of us. Prehistoric looking things with odd flowers, and leaves like elephant ears, the stems big around as my arm. The rest of it this bushy razor grass with tan woolen hair. You rented a walk-behind brush hog and had me knock it all down, the big pincer blades like giant scissors opening and closing.

Cutting and razing it all, the pollen was like snow in the bands of sunlight and made my eyes swell. Another job that took most of the day, the machine struggling with the angry stalks that fought back. When I was done, you came out of the house and we stood and looked over the yard. The chewed and bloody remains of rabbits and snakes and chipmunks were everywhere, red splashes showing amongst the green.

"Good job," you said smiling, and patted me on the shoulder. The air had gone cool and the sky was different, like summer was giving up, the light bending at new angles to tell us something. The sweat had dried on my skin and I felt a chill so I folded my arms across my chest. "You cold?" you asked. "Ready to go home?"

Sometimes I would disappear just before we were supposed to leave to go work on the house. The thermoses and lunches Mom packed would be set out on the kitchen table and the van would be idling loudly in the driveway, the exhaust system gone, you yelling my name over the noise.

Usually a Saturday or Sunday morning. I wanted to do something with my friends. Flag football, waste time at the mall, or go fishing at the reservoir. We'd poach the big lumbering bass, see if we could get the crazy game warden to chase us around.

I would stow away somewhere. Wait for you to give up eventually and leave. I had hiding places I knew your adult imagination couldn't think of. I would fold myself inside the cabinet under the bathroom sink, curl up in the clothes dryer in the basement, pull the plastic kiddie pool over myself in the yard. And I could hear you stomping through the house, opening and closing closet doors, or pacing outside. *Where'd he go?* Hear

you getting angrier, calling my name over and over like I was a criminal, recruiting Mom to look too, her voice sounding more worried.

It made you feel stupid. That you couldn't find me. And eventually you'd get in the van and go without me, shouting *I'm gonna kill him*, and when I was certain you were gone I'd come out of my hiding place and Mom would look at me with sadness in her eyes. She would whisper my name, knowing what would happen when you got home. We could hear the van coming from a mile away at the end of the day, that horrible growl, and then you would be there in the driveway, your hands swollen and cut, jeans dirty, neck and face sunburned.

The first few times I tried to run. Eventually, though, I learned there was nowhere to go and nothing else to do but let it happen.

MONDAY MORNING AND I DRESS FOR SCHOOL IN THE DARK. I always iron my shirt and shine my shoes and belt buckle the night before. Pin my rank on my right shirt collar, and pin the silver insignia on the left collar. My nametag gets pinned to my shirt over my heart. A lot of the kids complain about the rigor and the discipline. But I feel comfort in the expectation, a sense of purpose and order. I'm glad to trade the chaos of the house and embrace the routine of school. At home, there are buckets of taping compound, lumber, boxes of screws, sheetrock and paint cans, stray light bulbs dangling from the ceiling, plastic sheeting hanging or bunched haphazardly on the floor, spare coils of coated wire. Nothing is done, nothing complete. A constant state of in-between.

I go outside with my bookbag, stand in our pockmarked driveway, wait for Mom to come out in her coat over her robe and drive me to where I will catch the city bus from Waterford that will take me across the river into Troy and to school. The stolen doors are stacked under blankets in the barn behind the house like contraband, among boxes of our belongings that we've stored since the move.

Eventually, years from now, after we've made real progress on the house, you'll turn attention to the barn. We'll raise it up, reinforce the weight-bearing beams, restore the frame. Pour a new foundation and replace the roof. But for now, its decrepit, leaning, the paint peeling. Bats congregate in the upper most eaves. And this winter I'll find a feral cat curled up with old newspapers in the hayloft, dead in the night from the subzero temperatures, a blot of frozen blood leaking from its mouth.

Once at school, we begin with a prayer before inspection. Brother

James Romond leads us over the loudspeaker with the call and response.

Saint John Baptiste de La Salle, he says.

Pray for us, we say in unison.

Live Jesus in our hearts.

Forever.

An officer appears in the doorway and shouts us to attention. We line up and he looks us over, one by one: our shoes, belt buckle, the gig line. If the name tag is askew or the rank is off center, we fail inspection. Sometimes we're told we have twenty-four hours to get a haircut. If a kid needs a shave, there's a warning. If another time he's caught with stubble it's a dry shave in the military office, which is in the basement, next to the boiler room. There are no windows and it smells of cigarettes and Aqua Velva. Sergeant Hamilton will take a plastic Bic from out of his metal desk and with a Marlboro dangling from his mouth, squinting from the threads of smoke, will run the blade over your chin and upper lip. When he's done you get a wad of toilet paper for the nicks and cuts.

In military science class we learn how to read and plot coordinates on a map. We study principles of war, military tactics, leadership philosophy. Our instructors are retired Army having served in Vietnam but we don't study those battles even though that's the stuff we want to hear about. Its 1983 and the war doesn't feel that far behind. Everyone seems to know the older brother of a friend who didn't come home.

We get bored in Military Science with drawing graphs, eight-digit coordinates and x and y axes. When Sergeant Brown talks about leadership command we ask him to tell us his war stories. He's tall and his chiseled black arms stretch the fabric of his green creased shirt. He tells us about Ke Sahn. Sergeant Dowgas, in his white crewcut and South Boston accent, tells us about the la Drang Valley.

But today Sergeant Nolan is our instructor. He's a short man with dark eyes, a sweep of thick and neatly combed black hair. He speaks slowly with an ease and calm like he knows something about us we haven't discovered yet ourselves. Something maybe even the other teachers don't know. If we get rowdy or out of line in class there's usually hell to pay. The brothers and sergeants pull us out of our seats by our ties and drag us into the hallway, crash us into lockers and slap us around.

But Nolan is a steady, straight line all the way. A confusing, uncomfortable mystery. He'll just sit down, fold one leg over another and cross his arms. Watching us, the clock ticking away. Eventually the room will

go quiet and something we can't describe takes over. Like he's cast a spell. We grow self-conscious, looking at one other with embarrassment. *Sorry Sarge*, someone will whisper. And eventually, after some more time, he'll answer: *All right then. Now, where was I.*

Today he stands behind the desk and tells us to open our manuals and there's a collective groan.

"Complaining? Whining?" he says, and we ask him to tell us about Vietnam. We say how boring military science is, and someone actually says *So fucking boring.*

He smiles a little, puts his hands in his trousers and looks out the window. Brother Stephen is puttering around on the front lawn in a madras jacket and khakis, white hair peeking from a tweed driving cap. He moves in slow motion, the arthritis eating his bones, raking leaves the best he still can before dumping them into a burn barrel. Behind him stands a jagged skyline of shuttered factories, warehouses and church spires. The Hudson with its barges and tugs hauling oil back and forth on the black river for the power plants to burn.

"Okay," Sarge says, and steps out from behind the desk, hands clasped behind him, nodding. "Okay."

He was just twenty years old, he says. And in country for only six months. Like so many of the guys, he didn't know anything yet. It was the Tet Offensive, although nothing was clear at the beginning. It was hard at first to understand what was happening. The sudden onset of fear and panic. Like the world had suddenly caught fire. There was a lot of confusion. You didn't know where to go, what to do. Communication wasn't clear across channels and throughout the command.

They were in buildings but you didn't know which ones, he says. Around corners and down alleyways. Suddenly you'd take fire but you couldn't tell where from. The roar of heavy caliber machine guns in the streets. Explosions echoing across the city. Women shouldering rocket propelled grenades even. Children with AK-47's. You had to remind yourself to fire back. You would hear of children running into crowds blowing themselves up.

We sit listening, our hearts racing. Sarge stops and pulls a brass cartridge shell from his pocket. Holds it up in front of him. There's a silver metal ring drilled delicately through the shell with a couple keys hanging from it. "See this here?" he says, and holds it up for us, like Father Frank with the host when he gives mass. "This is the round that jammed in the

rifle of a Vietcong when he had me sighted.”

There’s a pause where everything stops and we stare back at him. No one says anything. Like we’re all holding our breath at the same time. “Had me sighted. Trying to fire his weapon.” He makes these clicking noises, pretends to be firing a rifle. “So close I could see the sweat on his face.”

We don’t ask what happened next, how he ended up with the shell he’s holding now. Outside, the sky grows darker and Brother Stephen places more leaves into his barrel and orange flames swell and give way to brown wisps of smoke.

Sarge stares hard at the casing himself now, inspecting it like each time it reveals something new to him. The keys make this sound, a quiet chime, as he turns the casing over in his hand and we watch as a half-smile forms at the corner of his mouth, his black mustache upturned. “I’ll never forget that look in his eyes,” he says.

WHEN I GET HOME THE HOUSE ECHOES WITH THE EMPTINESS. Our furniture and a lot of our belongings still packed in boxes are stored in the barn. You are gone. No one here. When I climb the ladder to the top floor, I see the door is hung on my bedroom. You’ve taped a note there in your handwriting: *I left my torque wrench at the farmhouse. I’m worried. Can you get it?*

I hurry out of my uniform and into jeans, a sweatshirt, sneakers, go outside with night settling in and throw an empty taping compound bucket into the back of the van.

I drive the route we took the other night and even though I thought it was stupid, I cut the lights when I get close. Except this time there’s no moon, and suddenly I can’t see. In my panic the van jumps from the asphalt onto the gravel shoulder, stones banging on the undercarriage until I pull it back onto pavement and turn the lights back on. Soon I come upon the lot and park again on the grass, get out and take the bucket from the back and use it as a footstool to get up onto the porch roof. I climb my same route to the open window, pull it open and drop back into the same bedroom.

But you’re not with me. You’re not waiting impatiently at the front door. So this time I stand in the quiet. Listen for the house to tell me something. I go in and out of the rooms. Run my hands over the walls, open and close the doors. Look out each window. Try and feel what they felt. Imagine their lives, the days. See what they used to see. The fields as they rise and then fall towards the river. The trees set up in the distance.

Those days when I abandoned you. You would step from the van, ragged and tired and see me there. The anger on your face. *Where were you?* I was guiltless and you sensed it. *Tell me.*

I think I knew it wasn't anger so much as fear. Fear for the way things seemed to conspire against us. Terror disguised as anger. And maybe you just wanted me to comprehend it. To understand the way it behaves. So that someday, when I had to think about the kind of things that had taken you over, I wouldn't be captured the way you had.

Walking up the driveway toward me, your footsteps heavy in your boots, fists balled at your sides, your bloodshot eyes. In that moment, would I ever answer? Tell you my hiding places? Where I had gone? What I was thinking inside?

But I can tell you now. And it was this: up until the moment you reached me I was certain it would be different. I just knew you were going to put your arms around me instead. That smell of paint and sawdust and sweat. The weight of your body, the strength of your arms around me, the sun going down behind the trees. And I knew you would whisper something to me like, *It's okay, son. We are of the same blood.*

Contributors

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GRACE SLEEMAN is a writer who has fallen out of every tree she’s ever climbed. She is interested in intersections of the sacred, the profane, and the monstrous, and as is true of so many artists from Maine, her primary inspiration remains the sea. She lives in Portland with two cats and her best friend. Her work has been published by the *Stonecoast Review*, *Asterism*, and *Gyroscope Review*. You can find her online at @myrmiidons and by the sea.

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Since dropping out of Pratt Institute, **ELIZABETH WING** has worked as a popsicle vendor, trail builder, and woodland firefighter. Her writing has appeared in venues such as *Up North Lit*, *7x7*, *The Decadent Review*, *The West Marin Review*, *Breakwater Review*, and *Underground*. She didn't win a pushcart prize, but *Gordon Square Review* did nominate her short story "Leda's Daughters" for one.